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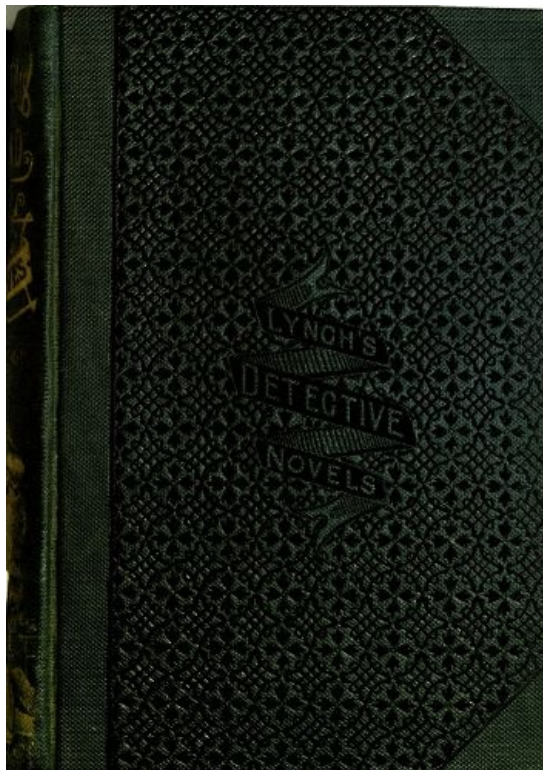
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DANGEROUS GROUND; OR, THE RIVAL
DETECTIVES ***

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"Not just yet; I ain't quite ready!"—[page 410](#).

THE GREAT DETECTIVE SERIES.

DANGEROUS GROUND;

OR,

THE RIVAL DETECTIVES.

BY

LAWRENCE L. LYNCH,

(OF THE SECRET SERVICE.)

Author of "Madeline Payne, the Detective's Daughter;" "Out of a Labyrinth;" "Shadowed by Three;" "The Diamond Coterie," etc., etc.

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Dangerous Ground.



"Mamma brings the candle very near to the closed eyes, waving it to and fro, rapidly."—[page 309](#).

DANGEROUS GROUND.

[9]

PROLOGUE.

TIME: The month of May. The year, 1859; when the West was new, and the life of the Pioneer difficult and dangerous.

SCENE: A tiny belt of timber, not far from the spot where not long before, the Marais des Cygnes massacre awoke the people of south-eastern Kansas, and kindled among them the flames of civil war.

I.

It is a night of storm and darkness. Huge trees are bending their might, and branches, strong or slender, are swaying and snapping under a fierce blast from the northward.

Night has closed in, but the ghostly light of a reluctant camp fire reveals a small group of men gathered about its blaze; and back of them, more in the shelter of the timber, a few wagons,—prairie schooners of the staunchest type—from which, now and then, the anxious countenance of a woman, or the eager, curious face of a child, peers out.

There has been rain, and fierce lightning, and loud-rolling thunder; but the clouds are breaking away, the rain has ceased: only the strong gusts of wind remain to make more restless the wakeful travellers, and rob the weary, nervous ones of their much needed sleep.

[10]

"Where's Pearson?" queries a tall, strong man, who speaks as one having authority. "I have not seen him since the storm began."

"Pearson?" says another, who is crouching over the flickering fire in the effort to light a stubby pipe. "By ginger! I haven't thought of the fellow; why, he took his blanket and went up yonder," indicating the direction by a jerk of the short pipe over a brawny shoulder—"before the storm, you know; said he was going to take a doze up there; he took a fancy to the place when we crossed here before."

"But he has been down since?"

"Hain't seen him. Good Lord, you don't suppose the fellow's been sleepin' through all this?"

Parks, the captain of the party, stirs uneasily, and turns his face towards the wagons.

"There's been some fearful lightnin', sir," breaks in another of the group. "'Tain't likely a man would sleep through all this, but—"

He stops to stare after Parks, who, with a swift impulsive movement of the right hand, has turned

upon his heel, and is moving toward the wagons.

"Mrs. Krutzer," he calls, halting beside the one most remote from the camp fire.

"What is wanted?" answers a shrill, feminine voice.

"Is the little one with you?"

"Yes." This time there is a ring of impatience in the voice.

[11]

"Have you seen Pearson since the storm?"

"My gracious! No."

"How is Krutzer?"

"No better; the storm has doubled him up like a snake. Do you want him?"

"Not if he can't walk."

"Well he can't; not a step."

"Then good-night, Mrs. Krutzer." And Parks returns to the men at the fire.

"There's something wrong," he says, with quiet gravity.

"Pearson has not been near the child since the storm. Get your lanterns, boys; we will go up the hill."

It is only a slight elevation, with a pyramid of rocks, one or two wide-spreading trees; and a fringe of lesser growth at the summit.

A moment the lanterns flash about, while the men converse in low tones. Then one of them exclaims:

"Here he is! Pearson; Heavens, man, wake up!"

But the still form outstretched upon the water-soaked blanket, and doubly sheltered by the great rocks and bending branches, moves not in response to his call.

They crowd about him, and Walter Parks bends closer and lets the full light of the lantern he carries, fall upon the still face.

"Good God!"

He sinks upon one knee beside the prostrate form; he touches the face, the hands; looks closer yet, and says in a husky voice, as he puts the lantern down:

"He's *dead*, boys!"

They cluster about that silent, central figure. One by one they touch it; curiously, reverently, tenderly or timidly, according as their various natures are.

[12]

Then a chorus of exclamations, low, fierce, excited.

"How was it?"

"Was he killed?"

"The storm—"

"More likely, Injuns."

"No, Bob, it wasn't Indians," says Parks mournfully, "for here's his scalp."

And he tenderly lays a brown hand upon the abundant locks of his dead comrade, sweeping them back from the forehead with a caressing movement.

Then suddenly, with a sharp exclamation that is almost a shriek, the hand drops to his side; he recoils, he bounds to his feet; then, turning his face to the rocks, he lets the darkness hide the look of unutterable horror that for a moment overspread it, changing at length to an expression of sternness and fixed resolve.

Meantime the others press closer about the dead man, and one of them, taking the place Parks has just vacated, bends down to peer into the still, set face.

"Boys, look!" he cries eagerly; "look here!" and he points to a tiny seared spot just above the left temple. "That's a burn, and here, just above it, the hair is singed away. It's lightning, boys."

Again they peer into the dead face, and utter fresh exclamations of horror. Then Walter Parks, whose emotion they have scarcely noticed, turns toward them and looks closely at the seared spot upon the temple.

"Boys," he asks, in slow, set tones, "did you, any of you, ever see a man killed by lightning?"

They all stare up at him, and no one answers.



"They cluster about that silent, central figure. One by one they touch it; curiously, reverently."—page 12.

"Because," he proceeds, after a moment's silence, "I never saw the effects of a lightning stroke, and don't feel qualified to judge." [14]

"It's lightnin'," says the man called Bob, in a positive voice; "I've never seen a case, but I've read of 'em. It's lightnin', sure."

"Of course it is," breaks in another. "What else can it be? There ain't an Injun about and besides —"

A sharp flash of lightning, instantly followed by a loud peal of thunder, interrupts this speech, and, when they can hear his voice, Parks says, quietly:

"I suppose you are right, Menard. Now, let's take him down to the wagons; quick, the rain is coming again."

Slowly they move down the hill with their burden, Walter Parks supporting the head and shoulders of the dead. And as they go, one of them says:

"Shall I run ahead and tell the Krutzers?"

"No," replies Parks, sternly; "we will take him to my wagon. I will inform Mrs. Krutzer."

So they lay him in the wagon belonging to their leader, and before they leave him there Parks does a strange thing. He takes off the oil-skin cap from his own head and pulls it tight upon the head of the dead man. Then he strides over to the wagon occupied by the Krutzers.

II.

A flickering, sputtering candle, lights up the interior of a large canvas-covered wagon. On a narrow pallet across one side of the vehicle, a man tosses and groans, now and then turning his haggard face, and staring, blood-shot eyes, upon a woman who crouches near him, holding upon her knees a child of two summers, who slumbers peacefully through the storm, with its fair baby face upturned to the flickering candle. In the corner, opposite the woman, lies a boy of perhaps ten years, ragged, unkempt, and fast asleep. [15]

A blaze of lightning and a rush of wind cause the man to cry out nervously, and then to exclaim, peevishly:

"Oh, I wish the morning would come; this is horrible!"

"Hush, Krutzer," says the woman, in a low, hissing whisper; "you act like a fool."

She bends forward and lays the sleeping child beside the dirty boy in the corner. Then she lifts her head and listens.

"Hush!" she whispers again; "they are astir outside; I hear them talking. Ah! some one is coming."

"Mrs. Krutzer."

It is the voice of Walter Parks, and this time the woman parts the tent flap and looks out.

"Is that you, Mr. Parks? I thought I heard voices out there. Is the storm doing any damage?"

"Not at present. Is Krutzer awake?"

She glances toward the form upon the pallet; it is shivering as with an ague. Then she says, unhesitatingly:

"Krutzer has been in such misery since this storm came up, that I've just given him morphine. He ain't exactly asleep, but he's stupid and flighty; get into the wagon, Mr. Parks, and see how he is for yourself. Poor man; this is the fifth day of his rheumatism, and he has not stood on his feet once in that time."

The visitor hesitates for a moment, then drawing nearer and lowering his tone somewhat, he says: [16]

"If Krutzer is in a bad state now, he had better not know what I have come to tell. Can he hear me as I speak?"

"No; not if you don't raise your voice."

"Pearson is dead, Mrs. Krutzer."

She starts, gasps, and then, with her head protruding from the canvas, asks, huskily:

"How? when? who?—"

"We found him up by the rocks, lying on his blanket—"

"Killed?"

"Killed; yes."

"How—how?" she almost gasps.

"There is a burn upon his head. Menard says it was a stroke of lightning."

"Oh," she sighs, and sinks back in the wagon, turning her head to look at the form upon the pallet.

"Mrs. Krutzer."

She leans toward him again and listens mutely.

"We—Menard, Joe Blakesly, and myself—will watch to-night with the body. We know very little about Pearson, and the little one; what can you tell us?"

"Not much;" clasping and unclasping her hands nervously. "It was like this: Pearson joined our train just before we crossed Bear Creek—beyond the reserve, you know. That was three weeks before we left the others, to join your train. The child was ailing at the time, and so Pearson put it in my charge, most of the other women having more children than I to take care of. I liked the little thing, and it did not seem a trouble to me; so after a while Pearson offered to pay me, if I would look after it until we struck God's country. But I would not let him pay me, for the baby seems like my own." [17]

"And *now*, Mrs. Krutzer?"

"I am coming to that. Pearson told us, at the first, that the little girl was not his; that its father was a miner back among the mountains. Its mother was dead, and the father, who was an old friend of Pearson's, had put it in his care, to be taken to New York, where its relatives live. Pearson was obliged to quit mining, you know, on account of his health."

"Yes; do you know the address of the child's friends?"

"Yes; it's an aunt, her father's sister. About two weeks ago—I think Pearson must have had a presentiment or something of the kind—he came to me, and gave me a letter and a package, saying that if anything happened to him during the trip, he wanted me to see the little girl safely in the hands of her relatives. The letter was from the baby's father, and the packet contained the address of the New York people, and enough money to pay my expenses after I leave the wagon train. I promised Pearson that I would take care of the child and put her safe in her aunt's hands, and so I will—but, Oh, dear! I never expected to be obliged to do it."

A hollow groan breaks upon her speech; the man upon the pallet is writhing as if in intensest agony. The woman makes a signal of dismissal, and drops the canvas curtain.

Walter Parks hesitates a moment, and then, as a second groan greets his ear, turns and strides away.

III.

The clouds hang overhead like a murky canopy. The wind is sighing itself to sleep. The rain has ceased, but large drops drip dismally from the great branches that lately sheltered Arthur Pearson's death-bed.

Beside the rocks, three men are standing. It is three o'clock in the morning. Two of the three men bend down to examine something which the third, lighted by a lantern, has just taken from the wet ground at his feet.

It is a small thing to excite so much earnest scrutiny; only the half burned fragment of a lucifer match.

"Boys," says Walter Parks, solemnly, swinging the lantern upon his arm and carefully wrapping the bit of match in a paper as he speaks, "poor Pearson was never killed by lightning. That sear upon his forehead was made by the simple application of a burning match. *I've* seen men killed by lightning."

"But you said—"

"No matter what I said *then*, Joe; what I *now* say to you and Menard is *the truth*. You have promised to keep what I am about to tell you a secret, and to act according to my advice. Menard, Blakesly, *Arthur Pearson has been foully murdered!*"

"No!"

"Parks, you are mad!"

"You will believe the evidence of your own senses, boys. I am going to prove what I assert."

"But who? how?—"

"Who?—ah, that's the question! There are ten men of us; if the guilty party belongs to our train, we will ferret him out if possible. If we were to gather all our party here, and show them how poor Pearson met his death, the assassin, if he is among us, would be warned, and perhaps escape." [19]

"True."

"Boys, I believe that the assassin *is* among us; but I have not the faintest suspicion as to his identity. We are ten men brought together by circumstances. We three have known each other back there in the mining camps. The others are acquaintances of the road; good fellows so far as we know them: but nine of us ten are innocent men; *one is a murderer!* Come, now, and let me prove what I am saying."

As men who feel themselves dreaming; silently, slowly, with anxious faces, they follow their leader to the wagon where the dead man lies alone.

"Get into the wagon, boys; here, at this end, and move softly."

It is done and the three men crouch close together about the body of the dead.

"Hold the lantern, Joe. There, Menard lift his head."

Silently, wonderingly, they obey him.

Then Walter Parks removes the cap from the lifeless head, and shudderingly parts away the thick hair from about the crown.

"Hold the lantern closer, Joe. Look, both of you; do you see *that?*"

They bend closer; the lantern's ray strikes upon something tiny and bright.

"My God!" cries Joe Blakesly, letting the lantern fall and turning away his face.

"Parks, what—*what* is it?"

"A *nail!* Touch it, boys; see the hellish cleverness of the crime; think what the criminal must be, to drive that nail home with one blow while poor Pearson lay sleeping, and then to rearrange the thick hair so skillfully. That was before the storm, I feel sure. If we had found him sooner, there might have been no mark upon his forehead. Then we, in our ignorance, would have called it heart disease, and poor Pearson would have had no avenger. After the storm, the cunning villain crept back, struck a match, and applied it to his victim's temple. And but for an accident, we would all have agreed that he was killed by a lightning-stroke." [20]

Menard lays the head gently back upon the damp hay and asks, shudderingly:

"How did you discover it, Parks?"

"In examining the sear, you may remember, I brushed the hair away from the temple. As I ran my fingers through it, I touched—that."

They look from one to the other silently for a moment, and then Joe Blakesly says:

"Has he been robbed?"

"Let us see;" Menard says, "he wore a money-belt, I know. Look for it, Parks."

Parks examines the body, and shakes his head.

"It's gone; has been cut away. The belt was worn next the flesh; the print of it is here plainly visible. The belt has been taken, and the clothing replaced!"

"What coolness! what cunning! Shall we ever run the fellow down, Parks?"



"Hold the lantern closer, Joe. Look both of you; do you see *that*?"—[page 19.](#)

"Yes! Boys, you know why I am leaving the mountains. I am going home to England, to be near my father who must die soon. I am not a poor man; I shall some day be richer still. If *we* fail to find this murderer, I shall put the matter in the hands of the detectives, *and I will never give it up.* Arthur Pearson met his death while traveling for safety with a party which calls me its leader, and *I will be his avenger!* It may be in one year, or two, or twenty; it may take a fortune, and a lifetime; *but Arthur Pearson shall be avenged!*" [22]

CHAPTER I.

"STARS OF THE FORCE."

"Yes, sir," said Policeman No. 46, with an air of condescending courtesy, "this *is* the office."

It is characteristic of the metropolitan policeman; he is not a man to occupy middle ground. If he is not gruffly discourteous, he is pretty certain to be found patronizingly polite.

Number 46 had just breakfasted heartily, and had swallowed a large schooner of beer at the expense of the bar keeper, so he beamed benignly upon the tall, brown-faced, grey-bearded stranger who had just asked, "Is this the office of the City Detective Agency?"

"This *is* the office, sir; up two flights and turn to your left."



"Is this the office of the City Detective Agency?"—[page 22.](#)

[23]

The stranger shifted his position slightly, glanced up and down the street, drew a step nearer the policeman, and asked: [24]

"Is it a large force?"

"Well, I should say!"

"I suppose you know some of them pretty well?"

"Yes, *sir*; I know some of the best men of the lot."

The stranger jingled some loose coin in his pocket, and seemed to have forgotten his interest in the detective force.

"Officer, where does a man go to get a good brandy cocktail?"

Policemen are not over bashful, and No. 46 smiled anew as he replied.

"Just wait a few minutes, and I'll show you. I must stop that con—"

The last syllable was lost to the stranger as 46 dashed off to wave his club before the eyes of an express-man, who was occupying too much space on the wrong side of the street. In a moment he was back again, and, as he approached, the stranger said:

"I'm a new-comer in the city, and want to see things. I take a sort of interest in the doings of the police, and in detectives especially. I'd like to have you point me out some of these chaps, officer. Oh, about that brandy cock-tail; you'll join me, I hope?"

No. 46 consulted his watch.

"I'll join you, *sir*. Yes *sir*; in ten minutes, if you'll wait. There's a capital place right here handy. And if you want to see *detectives*, just you stand here with me a while. Vernet and Stanhope went down to breakfast half an hour ago."

"Vernet and Stanhope?"

"The Stars of the force, *sir*; a perfect matched team. Splendid fellows, too. They always spend their mornings at the office, when not 'on the lay.' They've been back in the city four or five days; hard workers, those boys." [25]

"Young men, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, they're young, but you can't fool them much. A little under thirty, I should call Vernet; Stanhope is the younger of the two."

"Americans?"

"Stanhope is, an out-and-outer. Vernet's got some French in him."

"Um, yes; well, I'd like to take a look at them, after we refresh ourselves."

"They won't be back for a good half hour; there's no fear of missing them."

Half an hour, and a brandy cock-tail, makes some men firm friends. When that period of time had elapsed, No. 46, more affable than ever, and the tall stranger, looking quite at his ease, stood again near the entrance to the office of the City Detective Agency.

Two men were coming down the street, walking and talking with the air of men on good terms with themselves and each other.

Both were young, well dressed, well-looking; but a more marked contrast never was seen.

One, the taller of the two, was dark and decidedly handsome, with black waving hair, dusky eyes, that were by turns solemn, tender, severe, and pathetic; "faultily faultless" features, that wore an habitual look of gravity and meditation; an erect, graceful carriage, and a demeanor dignified and somewhat reserved. Slow of speech and punctillious in the use of words, he was a man of tact and discretion; a man fitted to lead, and capable of ruling in stormy times. At first sight, people pronounced him "a handsome fellow;" after long acquaintance, they named him "a perfect gentleman." [26]

His companion was not quite so tall, of medium height, in fact, but muscular and well built. He walked with a springy, careless stride, carrying his head erect, and keeping his observant, twinkling, laughing brown eyes constantly employed noting everything around and about him, but noting all with an expression of careless unconcern that seemed to say, "all this is nothing to me, why should it be?" His hair, brown, soft, and silky, was cropped close to his head, displaying thus a well developed crown, and brow broad, high and full. The nose was too prominent for beauty, but the mouth and chin were magnificent features, of which a physiognomist would say: Here are courage and tenderness, firmness and loyalty. He was easy of manner—"off-hand," would better express it; careless, and sometimes brusque in speech. At first sight one would call him decidedly plain; after a time spent in his society you voted him "a good looking fellow," and "a queer fish." And those who had thoroughly tested the quality of his friendship, vowed him a man to trust and to "tie to."

"Here they come," whispered No. 46; "those two fellows in grey."

"Which is which?"

"To be sure. The taller is Van Vernet; the other Dick Stanhope."



[27]

"Here they come," whispered No. 46;
"those two fellows in grey."—[page 26](#).

As they approached, Van Vernet touched his hat with a glance of courteous recognition. But Richard Stanhope merely nodded, with a careless, "how are you, Charlie?" And neither noted the eager, scrutinizing glance bent upon them, as they passed the grey-bearded stranger and ran lightly up the stairs. "You're wanted in the Chief's office, Mr. Vernet," said the office boy as they entered; "And you too, I think, Mr. Stanhope."

[28]

"Not both at once, stupid?"

"Um, ah; of course not. Now look here, Mr. Dick—"

And Stanhope and the office boy promptly fell into pugilistic attitudes, the former saying, with a gay laugh:

"You first, Van, if the old man won't let us 'hunt in couples.'"

With the shadow of a smile upon his face, Van Vernet turned his back upon the two belligerents and entered the inner office.

"Ah, Vernet, good morning," said his affable chieftain. "Are you ready for a bit of business?"

"Certainly, sir."

"I don't think it will be anything very deep, but the young fellow insisted upon having one of my best men; one who could be courteous, discreet, and a gentleman."

Van Vernet, who had remained standing, hat in hand, before his chief, bowed deferentially, and continued silent.

"There are no instructions," continued the Chief. "You are to go to this address—it's a very aristocratic locality—and act under the gentleman's orders. He wants to deal with you direct; the case is more delicate than difficult, I fancy. I am only interested in the success or failure of your work."

Taking the card from his outstretched hand, Vernet read the address.

[29]

"A. WARBURTON.
No. 31 B— Place."

"When shall I wait upon Mr. Warburton?"

"At once. Your entire time is at his disposal until the case is finished; then report to me."

Vernet bowed again, turned to go, hesitated, turned back, and said:

"And the Raid?"

"Oh, that—I shall give Stanhope charge of that affair. Of course he would like your assistance, but he knows the ground, and I think will make the haul. However, if you are not occupied tomorrow night, you might join them here."

"Thank you. I will do so if possible," turning again to go.

"Send Stanhope in, Vernet. I must settle this business about the Raid."

Opening the door softly, and closing it gently after him, Vernet approached his comrade, and laid a light hand upon his arm.

"Richard, you are wanted."

"All right; are you off, Van?"

"Yes;" putting his hat upon his head.

"On a lay?"

"Yes."

"Wish you good luck, old man; tra la."

And Dick Stanhope bounced into the presence of his Chief with considerable noise and scant ceremony.

Number 46, who, with the stranger beside him, was slowly pacing his beat, lifted his eyes as Vernet emerged from the stairway. [30]

"There comes Vernet, and alone. I'll bet something he's off on a case," he said.

"Looks like it."

"He looks more serious than usual; wonder if he's got to work it without Stanhope."

"Do they always pull together?"

"Not always; but they've done their biggest work together. When there's a very knotty case, it's given to Vernet *and* Stanhope; and they seldom fail."

"Which acts as leader and is the best man of the two?"

"Well, sir, that's a conundrum that no man can guess, not even the Chief. And I don't believe any body ever will know, unless they fall out, and set up an opposition to each other. As for who leads, they both pull together; there's no leader. I tell you what I don't want to see two such splendid fellows fall out; they've worked in double harness a good while. But if the Chief up there wants to see what detectives *can* do, let him put those two fellows on opposite sides of a case; then he'd see a war of wits that would beat horse-racing."

"Um!" said the stranger, consulting an English repeater, "it's time for me to move on. Is this your regular beat, my friend? Ah! then we may meet again. Good morning, sir."

"That's a queer jockey," muttered No. 46. "When he first came up, I made sure he was looking for the Agency—looking just for curiosity, I reckon."

And the stranger, as he strolled down the street, communed thus with himself:

"So these two star detectives have never been rivals yet. The Chief has never been anxious to see what detectives *can* do, I suppose. This looks like *my* opportunity. Messrs. Vernet and Stanhope, *you shall have a chance to try your skill against each other*, and upon a desperate case: and the wit that wins need never work another." [31]

CHAPTER II.

ODDLY EMPLOYED.

While the stranger was thus communing with himself, and while Van Vernet was striding toward that fashionable quarter of the city which contained the splendid Warburton mansion, Richard Stanhope, perched upon one corner of a baize covered table, his hands clasped about one knee, his hat pushed far back upon his head, his whole air that of a man in the presence of a familiar spirit, and perfectly at his ease, was saying to his Chief:

"So you want me to put this business through *alone*? I don't half like it."

"You are equal to it, Dick."

"I know that," with a proud curve of the firm lips, "but I'm sure Van expected to be in this thing, and—"

"Vernet has another case in hand. I have given him all his time until it is finished, with the privilege of joining you here and assisting in the Raid to-morrow night, if he can do so without interfering with his other duties. You seem to fear to offend Vernet, Dick?" [32]

"I *fear* no one, sir. But Van and I have pulled well together, and divided the honors equally. This Raid, if it succeeds, will be a big thing for the man, or men, engineering it. I know that Van has counted upon at least a share of the glory. I hate to see him lose the chance for it."

"You are a generous friend, Dick, and Van may rejoice that you *are* his friend instead of his rival. Now, leaving friendship to take care of itself, do you feel that the *success* of the Raid depends

upon Vernet's assistance?"

"Perdition! *No.*"

"You know the ground?"

"Every inch of it!"

"And Van does not."

"One pilot is enough."

"You know the people?"

"Well, rather!"

"Do you doubt the success of the undertaking?"

"No, sir. I see only one chance for failure."

"And that?"

"I have made this Raid a study. If anything occurs to prevent my leading the expedition, and you put another man at the head, it will fail."

"Even if it be Vernet?"

"Even Vernet. Satan himself would fail in those alleys, unless he knew the ground."

"And yet you would share your honors with Vernet for friendship's sake? Dick, you are a queer fish! But why do you suggest a possibility of your absence?"

"Because," sliding off the table and pulling his hat low over his eyes, "The Raid is thirty-six hours distant, and one never knows what may happen in thirty-six hours. Is there any thing else, sir?" [33]

"Yes; I've a dainty bit of mystery for you. No blind alleys and thieves dens in *this*; it's for to-morrow evening, too."

Stanhope resumed his former position upon the corner of the table, pushed back his hat, and turned an attentive face to his Chief.

"Your Raid will not move until a little after midnight; this other business is for ten o'clock. You can be at liberty by eleven. You know Follingsbee, the lawyer?"

"By reputation; yes. Is *he* in the mystery?"

"He's negotiating for a client; a lady."

"A lady!" with a stare of dismay. "Why didn't you turn her over to Van; you know he is just the man to deal with women, and I—"

"You are afraid of a petticoat! I know; and I might have chosen Vernet, if the choice had been given me. But the lawyer asked for *you*."

Stanhope groaned dismally.

"Besides, it's best for you; you are better than Vernet at a feminine make up."

"A feminine make up!"

"Yes. Here is the business: Mr. Follingsbee desires your services for a lady client; he took care to impress upon me that she *was* a lady in every sense of the word. This lady had desired the services of a detective, and he had recommended you."

"Why I?"

"Never mind why; you are sufficiently vain at present, You have nothing on hand after the Raid, so I promised you to Follingsbee; he is an old friend of mine. To-morrow evening, at ten o'clock, you are to drive to Mr. Follingsbee's residence in masquerade costume." [34]

"Good Lord!"

"In a feminine disguise of some sort. Mr. Follingsbee, also in costume, will join you, and together you will attend an up-town masquerade, you personating Mrs. Follingsbee, who will remain at home."

"Phew! I'm getting interested."

"At the masquerade you will meet your client, who will be introduced by Follingsbee. Now about your disguise: he wants to know your costume beforehand, in order to avoid any mistakes."

"Let me think," said Stanhope, musingly. "What's Mrs. Follingsbee's style?"

"A little above the medium. Follingsbee thinks, that, with considerable drapery, you can make up to look sufficiently like her."

"Considerable drapery; then I have it. Last season, when Van and I were abroad, we attended a

masquerade in Vienna, and I wore the costume of the Goddess of Liberty, in order to furnish a partner for Van. In hiring the costume, I, of course, deposited the price of it, and the next day we left the city so hurriedly that I had no opportunity to return it, so I brought it home with me. It's a bang-up dress, and no one has seen it on this side of the water, except Van. How will it do?"

"Capitally; then I will tell Follingsbee to look for the Goddess of Liberty."

"All right, sir. You are sure I won't be detained later than eleven?"



[35]

"Yes; I've a dainty bit of mystery for you.
No blind alleys and thieves' dens in
this"—[page 33](#).

"You have only to meet the lady, receive her instructions, and come away."

[36]

"I hope I shall live through the ordeal," rising once more and shaking himself like a water-spaniel, "but I'd rather face all the hosts of Rag Alley."

And Richard Stanhope left the Agency to "overhaul" the innocent masquerade costume that held, in its white and crimson folds, the fate of its owner.

Leaving him thus employed, let us follow the footsteps of Van Vernet, and enter with him the stately portals of the home of the Warburtons.

Crossing a hall that is a marvel of antique richness, with its walls of russet, old gold, and Venetian red tints; its big claw-footed tables; its massive, open-faced clock, with huge weights a-swing below; its statuettes and its bass-reliefs, we pass under a rich *portierie*, and hear the liveried footman say, evidently having been instructed:

"This is Mr. Warburton's study, sir; I will take up your name."

Van Vernet gazes about him, marking the gorgeous richness of the room. A study! There are massive book-cases filled with choicest lore; cabinets containing all that is curious, antique, rare, beautiful, and costly; there are plaques and bronzes; there is a mantle laden with costly bric-a-brac; a grand old-fashioned fire-place and fender; there are divans and easy chairs; rich draperies on wall and at windows, and all in the rarest tints of olive, crimson, and bronze.

Van Vernet looks about him and says to himself:

"This is a room after my own heart. Mr. Warburton, of Warburton Place, must be a sybarite, and should be a happy man. Ah, he is coming."

[37]

But it is not Mr. Warburton who enters. It is a colored valet, sleek, smiling, obsequious, who bears in his hand a gilded salver, with a letter upon it, and upon his arm a parcel wrapped in black silk.

"You are Mr. Vernet?" queries this personage, as if in doubt.

"Yes."

"Then this letter is for you."

And the valet bows low, and extends the salver, adding softly:

"I am Mr. Warburton's body servant."

Looking somewhat surprised, as well as annoyed, Van Vernet takes up the letter, breaks the seal and reads:

SIR:

My business with you is of so delicate a nature that it is best, for all concerned, to keep our identity a secret, for a time at least. Your investigation involves the fair fame of a lady and the honor of a stainless name.

Come to this house to-morrow night, in the costume which I shall send for your use. The enclosed card will admit you. My valet will show you the domino by which you will recognize me. This will enable me to instruct you fully, and to point out to you the persons in whom you are to take an interest. This letter you will please destroy in the presence of my valet.

A. W.

After reading this strange note, Van Vernet stands so long, silently pondering, that the servant makes a restless movement. Then the detective says, with a touch of imperiousness.

"Give me a match."

It is proffered him in silence, and in silence he turns to the grate, applies the match to the letter, and lets it fall from his fingers to the fire-place, where it lies a charred fragment that crumbles to ashes at a touch. [38]

The dark servant watches the proceeding in grave silence until Vernet turns to him, saying:

"Now, the domino."

Then he rapidly takes from the sable wrapper a domino of black and scarlet, and exhibits it to the detective, who examines it critically for a moment and then says brusquely:

"That will do; tell your master that I will follow his instructions—to *the letter*."

As the stately door swings shut after his exit, Van Vernet turns and glances up at the name upon the door-plate, and, as he sets his foot upon the pavement, he mutters:

"A. Warburton is my employer; A. Warburton is the name upon the door: I see! My services are wanted by the master of this mansion: he asks to deal with a *gentleman*, and—leaves him to negotiate with a colored servant! There's a lady in the case, and 'an honorable name at stake;' Ah! Mr. A. Warburton, the day may come when you will wear no domino in my presence; when you will send no servant to negotiate with Van Vernet!"

CHAPTER III.

THE EFFECT OF AN ADVERTISEMENT.

A rickety two-story frame building, in one of the worst quarters of the city.



[39]

"He applies the match to the letter, and lets it fall from his fingers to the fire-place."—[page 38](#).

It is black with age, and guiltless of paint, but a careful observer would note that the door is newer than the dwelling, and that it is remarkably solid, considering the tumble-down aspect of [40]

the structure it guards. The windows of the lower story are also new and substantial, such of them as serve for windows; but one would note that the two immediately facing the street are boarded up, and so tightly that not one ray of light can penetrate from without, nor shine from within.

The upper portion of the dwelling, however, has nothing of newness about it. The windows are almost without glass, but they bristle with rags and straw, while the dilapidated appearance of the roof indicates that this floor is given over to the rats and the rain.

Entering at the stout front door, we find a large room, bare and comfortless. There is a small stove, the most battered and rusty of its kind; two rickety chairs, and a high wooden stool; a shelf that supports a tin cup, a black bottle, and a tallow candle; a sturdy legged deal table, and a scrap of rag carpet, carefully outspread in the middle of the floor.

An open door, in one corner, discloses the way to the rat-haunted second floor. There are some dirty bundles and a pile of rags just behind the door; some pieces of rusty old iron are lying near a rear entrance, and a dismal-looking old man is seated on a pallet in one corner.

This is what would be noted by the casual observer, and this is all. But the old man and his dwelling are worthy of closer inspection.

He is small and lean, with narrow, stooping shoulders; a sallow, pinched face, upon which rests, by turns, a fawning leer, which is intended, doubtless, for the blandest of smiles, a look of craftiness and greed, a scowl, or a sneer. His hair, which has been in past years of a decided carrot color, is now plentifully streaked with gray, and evidently there is little affinity between the stubby locks and a comb. He is dirty, ragged, unshaven; and his age may be any where between fifty and seventy. [41]

At the sound of a knock upon the outer door, he sits erect upon his pallet, a look of wild terror in his face: then, recovering himself, he rises slowly and creeps softly toward the door. Wearing now his look of cunning, he removes from a side panel a small pin, that is nicely fitted and comes out noiselessly, and peeps through the aperture thus made.

Then, with an exclamation of annoyance, he replaces the pin and hurriedly opens the door.

The woman who enters is a fitting mate for him, save that in height and breadth, she is his superior; old and ugly, unkempt and dirty, with a face expressive of quite as much of cunning and greed, and more of boldness and resolution, than his possesses.

"It's you, is it?" says the man, testily. "What has brought you back? and empty-handed I'll be bound."

The old woman crossed the floor, seated herself in the most reliable chair, and turning her face toward her companion said, sharply:

"You're an old fool!"

Not at all discomposed by this familiar announcement, the man closed and barred the door, and then approached the woman, who was taking from her pocket a crumpled newspaper.

"What have you got there?"

"You wait," significantly, "and don't tell *me* that I come empty-handed."

"Ah! you don't mean—"

Again the look of terror crossed his face, and he left the sentence unfinished. [42]

"Old man, you *are* a fool! Now, listen: Nance and I had got our bags nearly filled, when I found this," striking the paper with her forefinger. "It blew right under my feet, around a corner. It's the morning paper."

"Well, well!"

"Oh, you'll hear it soon enough. It's the morning paper, and you know *I* always read the papers, when I can find 'em, although, since you lost the few brains you was born with, you never look at one."

"Umph!"

"Well, I looked at this paper, and see what I found!"

She held the paper toward him, and pointed to a paragraph among the advertisements.

Wanted. information of any sort concerning one Arthur Pearson, who left the mining country with a child in his charge, twenty years ago. Information concerning said child, Lea Ainsworth, or any of her relatives. Compensation for any trouble or time. Address,

O. E. MEARS, Atty,

Melbourne, Australia.

The paper fluttered from the man's nerveless fingers, but the woman caught it as it fell.

"Oh, Lord!" he gasped, the drops of perspiration standing out upon his brow, "oh, Lord! it has

come at last."

"What has come, you old fool!"

"Everything; ruin! ruin!"

"We're a pretty looking pair to talk of *ruin*," giving a contemptuous glance at her surroundings. "Stop looking so like a scared idiot, and listen to me."

"Oh, I'm listening!" sinking down upon the pallet in a dismal huddle; "go on."



[43]

"Oh, Lord!" he gasped; "oh, Lord, it has come at last!"—[page 42](#).

The woman crossed over and sat down beside him.

[44]

"Now, look here; suppose the worst comes, how far away is it? How long will it take to get a letter to Australia, and an answer or a journey back?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Well, it'll take all the time *we* want. But who is there to answer that advertisement?"

"Oh, dear!"

"You miserable coward! *She* wouldn't know what it meant if she saw it."

"No."

"Arthur Pearson—"

"Oh, *don't!*"

"Arthur Pearson has not been heard of in twenty years."

The old man shuddered, and drew a long sighing breath.

"Walter Parks, after all his big talk, never came back from England," she hurried on. "Menard is dead; and Joe Blakesley is in California. The rest are dead, or scattered south and west. There are none of the train to be found here, except—except the Krutzers; and who can identify *them* after twenty years?"

"I shall never feel safe again."

"Yes, you will. You always feel safe when the dollars jingle in your pockets, although it's precious little good they bring you."

"But *her* money is already gone."

"Her husband has a full purse."

"But how—"

"Oh, I see the way clear enough. It's only half the work of the other job, and double the money."

"The money! Ah! how do you think to get it?"

"Honestly, this time; honestly, old man. It shall come to us *as a reward!*"

[45]

Drawing nearer still to her hesitating partner, the woman began to whisper rapidly, gesticulating fiercely now and then, while the old man listened in amazement, admiration, doubt, and fear;

asking eager questions, and feeling his way cautiously toward conviction.

When the argument was ended, he said, slowly:

"I shall never feel safe until it's over, and we are away from this place. When can you do—the job?"

"To-morrow night."

"To-morrow night!"

"Yes; it's the very time of times. To-morrow night it shall be."

"It's a big risk! We will have to bluff the detectives, old woman."

"A fig for the detectives! They will have a cold scent; besides—we have dodged detectives before."

CHAPTER IV.

ENLISTED AGAINST EACH OTHER.

It is early in the evening of the day that has witnessed the events recorded in the preceding chapters, and the Chief of the detectives is sitting in his easiest office chair, listening attentively to the words that fall from the lips of a tall, bronzed, gray-bearded man who sits opposite him, talking fast and earnestly.

He has been thus talking, and the Chief thus listening, for more than an hour, and the story is just reaching its conclusion when the stranger says: [46]

"There, sir, you have the entire case, so far as I know it. What I ask is something unusual, but what I offer, in compensation, is something unusual too."

"A queer case, I should say," returns the Chief, half to himself; "and a difficult one. Twenty years ago a man was murdered—killed by a nail driven into his skull. Detectives have hunted for the murderer, singly, in twos and threes. English experts have crossed the ocean to unravel the mystery and it remains a mystery still. And now, when the secret is twenty years old, and the assassin dead and buried, perhaps, you come and ask me for my two best men,—men who have worked together as brothers—and ask me to set their skill *against each other*, in a struggle, which, if it ends as you desire, will mean victory and fortune for the one, defeat and loss of prestige for the other."

"There is no such thing as loss of prestige. A man may bow to a superior and yet retain his own skill. Plainly, I have come to you as an honorable man should. I wish to deal with these men through you, if possible. But they are free agents. What you refuse to do for me, I must do for myself; and I tell you plainly, that if money can purchase their services, I will have Van Vernet and Richard Stanhope to work this case."

"You are frank, sir! But I have observed that, in relating your story, you have been careful to avoid giving either your own name or the name of the murdered man."

"As I shall continue to do until I state the case to the two detectives, *after* they have enlisted in my service."

The Chief ponders for a time and then says:

"Now, hear my proposition: you are justified in believing that, if there *is* a bottom to this ancient mystery, Vernet and Stanhope, singly or together, are the men to find it. That is my belief also. As for your idea of putting them on their mettle, by offering so magnificent a reward to the man who succeeds, *that* is not bad—for you and the man who wins. Vernet and Stanhope have, this very day, taken in hand two cases,—working separately, understand. If you will wait in patience until these cases are finished, you shall have the men from this office,—if they will accept the case." [47]

"Put my proposition before the two men at once. When I know that I shall have their services, I can wait in patience until their duty of the present is done."

"Then," said the Chief rising, "the question can soon be settled; Vernet is in the outer office; Stanhope will soon be here. You will find the evening papers upon that desk; try and entertain yourself while I put your case before Vernet."

Ten minutes later, Van Vernet was standing before his Chief, listening with bent head, compressed lip, and glowing cheek, to the story of the man who was murdered twenty years before, and to the splendid proposal of the tall stranger. When it was all told, and the Chief paused for a reply, the young detective moved a pace nearer and said with decision:

"Tell him that I accept the proposition. A man can't afford to lose so splendid a chance for friendship's sake. Besides," his eyes darkening and his mouth twitching convulsively, "it's time for Dick and I to find out *who is the better man!*"

Returning to the inner office, the Chief of the force found his strange patron walking fiercely up and down the room, with a newspaper grasped firmly in his hand, and on his countenance traces of agitation. [48]

"Look!" he cried, approaching and forcing the paper upon the astonished Chief; "see what a moment of waiting has brought me!"

And he pointed to a paragraph beginning:

WANTED. INFORMATION OF ANY SORT CONCERNING one Arthur Pearson, etc. etc.

"An advertisement, I see;" said the Chief. "But I fail to understand why it should thus excite you."

"A moment ago it was my intention to keep the identity of the murdered man a secret. This," indicating the paper by a quick gesture, "changes the face of affairs. After twenty years, some one inquires after Arthur Pearson—"

"Then Arthur Pearson is—"

"The man who was murdered near the Marais des Cygnes!"

"And the child?"

"I never knew her name until now. No doubt it is the little girl that was in Pearson's care."

"What became of the child?"

"I never knew."

"And how does this discovery affect your movements?"

"I will tell you; but, first, you saw Vernet?"

"Yes; and he accepts."

"Good! That notice was inserted either by some friend of Pearson's, or by the child's father, John Ainsworth."

"What do you know of him?"

"Nothing; I never met him. But, as soon as you have seen Stanhope, and I am sure that these two sharp fellows are prepared to hunt down poor Pearson's assassins, I *will* meet him, if the notice is his, for I am going to Australia." [49]

"Ah!"

"Yes; I can do no good here. To-morrow morning, business will take me out of the city. When I return, in two days, let me have Stanhope's answer."

When Richard Stanhope appeared at the office that night a little later than usual, the story of Arthur Pearson and his mysterious death was related for the third time that day, and the strange and munificent offer of the stranger, for the second time rehearsed by the Chief.

"What do you think of it, my boy? Are you anxious to try for a fortune?"

"No, thank you."

It was said as coolly as if he were declining a bad cigar.

"Consider, Dick."

"There is no need. Van and I have pulled together too long to let a mere matter of money come between us. *He* would never accept such a proposition."

The Chief bit his lip and remained silent.

"Or if he did," went on Stanhope, "he would not work against me. Tell your patron that *with* Van Vernet I will undertake the case. He may make Van his chief, and I will gladly assist. *Without* Van as my rival, I will work it alone; but *against* him, as his rival for honors and lucre, *never!*"

The Chief slowly arose, and resting his hands upon the shoulders of the younger man, looked in his face with fatherly pride.

"Dick, you're a splendid fellow, and a shrewd detective," he said, "but you have a weakness. You study strangers, but you trust your friends with absolute blindness. Van is ambitious." [50]

"So am I."

"He loves money."

"A little too well, I admit."

"If he should accept this offer?"

"But he won't."

"If he *should*;" persisted the Chief.

"If such a thing were possible,—if, without a friendly consultation, and a fair and square send off, he should take up the cudgel against me, then—"

"Then, Dick?"

Richard Stanhope's eyes flashed, and his mouth set itself in firm lines.

"Then," he said, "I would measure my strength against his as a detective; but always as a friend, and never to his injury!"

"And, Dick, if, in the thick of the strife, Van forgets his friendship for you and becomes your enemy?"

"Then, as I am only human, I should be his enemy too. But that will not happen."

"I hope not; I hope not, my boy. But—Van Vernet has already accepted the stranger's proposition."

Stanhope leaped to his feet.

"What!" he cried, "has Van *agreed* to work against me—without a word to me—and so soon!"

His lips trembled now, and his eyes searched those of his Chief with the eager, inquiring look of a grieved child.

"It is as I say, Stanhope."



"What, has Van *agreed* to work against me—without a word to me—and so soon!"—[page 50](#).

"Then," and he threw back his head and instantly resumed his usual look of careless indifference, "tell your patron, whoever he may be, that *I am his man*, for one year, or for twenty!"

CHAPTER V.

"STANHOPE'S FIRST TRICK."

Van Vernet and Richard Stanhope had been brother detectives during the entire term of their professional career.

Entering the Agency when mere striplings, they had at once formed a friendship that had been strong and lasting. Their very differences of disposition and habits made them the better fellow-workmen, and the *role* most difficult for one was sure to be found the easier part for the other to play.

They had been a strong combination, and the Chief of the detectives wasted some time in pondering the question: what would be the result, when their skill and courage stood arrayed against each other?

Meantime, Richard Stanhope, wasting no thought upon the matter, hastened from the presence of his Chief to his own quarters.

"It's my last night," he muttered, as he inserted his key in the lock, "and I'll just take one more

look at the slums. I don't want to lose one bird from that flock."

Half an hour later, there sallied forth from the door where Stanhope had entered, a roughly-dressed, swaggering, villainous-looking fellow, who bore about with him the strongly defined odors of tobacco and bad whiskey. [53]

This individual, armed with a black liquor flask, two revolvers, a blood-thirsty-looking dirk, a pair of brass knuckles, and a quantity of plug tobacco, took his way through the streets, avoiding the more popular and respectable thoroughfares, and gradually approaching that portion of the city almost entirely given over to the worst of the bad,—a network of short streets and narrow alleys, as intricate as the maze, and as dangerous to the unwary as an African jungle.

But the man who now entered these dismal streets walked with the manner of one familiar with their sights and sounds. Moving along with an air of stolid indifference to what was before and about him, he arrived at a rickety building, somewhat larger than those surrounding it, the entrance to which was reached by going down, instead of up, a flight of stone steps. This entrance was feebly illuminated by a lantern hung against the doorway, and by a few stray gleams of light that shone out from the rents in the ragged curtains.

Pushing open the door, our visitor found himself in a large room with sanded floor, a counter or bar, and five or six tables, about which a number of men were lounging,—some at cards, some drinking, and some conversing in the queer jargon called thieves' slang, and which is as Greek to the unenlightened.

The buzz of conversation almost ceased as the door opened, but was immediately resumed when the new comer came forward toward the light.

"Is that you, Cull?" called the man behind the bar. "You've been keepin' scarce of late."

The man addressed as "Cull" laughed discordantly.

"I've been visitin' in the country," he returned, with a knowing wink. "It's good for my health this time o' year. How's business? You've got the hull deck on hand, I should say." [54]

"You better say! Things is boomin'; nearly all of the old uns are in."

"Well, spread out the drinks, Pap, I'm tolerably flush. Boys, come up, and if I don't know any of ye we'll be interduced."

Almost instantly a dozen men were flocking about the bar, some eager to grasp the hand of the liberal last arrival, and others paying their undivided attention to the bar keeper's cheerful command:

"Nominate yer dose, gentlemen."

While the party, glasses in hand, were putting themselves *en rapport*, the door again opened, and now the hush that fell upon the assembled "gentlemen" was deeper and more lasting.

Evidently, the person who entered was a stranger to all in the Thieves' Tavern, for such the building was.

He was a young man, with a countenance half fierce, half desperate, wholly depraved. He was haggard, dirty, and ragged, having the look and the gait of a man who has travelled far and is footsore and weary. As he approached the group about the bar it was also evident that he was half intoxicated.

"Good evenin', sirs," he said with surly indifference. Then to the man behind the bar: "Mix us a cocktail, old Top, and strong."

While the bar keeper was deftly shaking up the desired drink, the men before the counter drew further away from the stranger, and some of them began a whispered conversation.

The last arrival eyed them with a sneer of contempt, and said to the bar keeper, as he gulped down his drink: "Your coves act like scared kites. Probably they ain't used to good society." [55]

"See here, my friend," spoke a blustering fellow, advancing toward him, "you made a little mistake. This 'ere ain't a tramps' lodgin' house."

"Ain't it?" queried the stranger; "then what the Moses are *you* doin' here?"

"You'll swallow *that*, my hearty!"

"When?"

The stranger threw himself into an attitude of defence and glared defiance at his opponent.

"Wax him, Charley!"

"Let's fire him out!"

"Hold on gentlemen; fair play!"

"I'll give you one more chance," said the blusterer. "Ask my pardon and then mizzle instantly, or I'll have ye cut up in sections as sure as my name's Rummey Joe."

The half intoxicated man was no coward. Evidently he was ripe for a quarrel.

"I intend to stop here!" he cried, bringing his fist down upon the counter with a force that made it creak. "I'm goin' to stay right here till the old Nick comes to fetch me. And I'm goin' ter send your teeth down your big throat in three minutes."

There was a chorus of exclamations, a drawing of weapons, and a forward rush. Then sudden silence.

The man who had lately ordered drinks for the crowd, was standing between the combatants, one hand upon the breast of the last comer, the other grasping a pistol levelled just under the nose of Rummey Joe.

"Drop yer fist, boy! Put up that knife, Joe! Let's understand each other."

[56]

Then addressing the stranger, but keeping an eye upon Rummey Joe, he said:

"See here, my hearty, you don't quite take in the siteration. This is a sort of club house, not open to the general public. If you want to hang out here, you must show your credentials."

The stranger hesitated a moment, and then, without so much as a glance at his antagonist, said:

"*Your* racket is fair enough. I know where I am, and ye've all got a right to see my colors. I'll show ye my hand, and then"—with a baleful glare at Rummey Joe—"I'll settle with *that* blackguard."

Advancing to one of the tables, he deliberately lifted his foot and, resting it upon the table top, rolled up the leg of his trousers, and pulled down a dirty stocking over his low shoe.

"There's my passport, gentlemen."

They crowded about him and gazed upon the naked ankle, that bore the imprint of a broad band, sure indication that the limb had recently been decorated with a ball and chain.

"And now," said the ex-convict, turning fiercely, "I'll teach you the kind of a tramp I am, Mr. Rummey Joe!"

Before a hand or voice could be raised to prevent it, the two men had grappled, and were struggling fiercely for the mastery.

"Give them a show, boys!" some one said.



[57]

"There's my passport, gentlemen."—[page 56](#).

The crowd drew back and watched the combat; watched with unconcern until they saw their comrade, Rummey Joe, weakening in the grasp of his antagonist; until knives flashed in the hand of each, and fierce blows were struck on both sides. Then, when Rummey Joe, uttering a shriek of pain, went down underneath the knife of the victor, there was a roar and a rush, and the man who had conquered their favorite was borne down by half a dozen strong arms, menaced by as many sharp, glittering knives.

[58]

But again the scene shifted.

An agile form was bounding about among them; blows fell swift as rain; there was a lull in the combat, and when the wildly struggling figures, some scattered upon the floor, some thrown back upon each other, recovered from their consternation, they saw that the convict had struggled up upon one elbow, while, directly astride of his prostrate body, stood the man who had asked for

his credentials, fierce contempt in his face, and, in either hand, a heavy six shooter.

"Don't pull, boys, I've got the drop on ye! Cowards, to tackle a single man, six of ye!"

"By Heavens, he's killed Rummey!"

"No matter; it was a fair fight, and Rummey at the bottom of the blame."

"All the same he'll never kill a pal of ours, and live to tell it! Stand off, Cully Devens!"

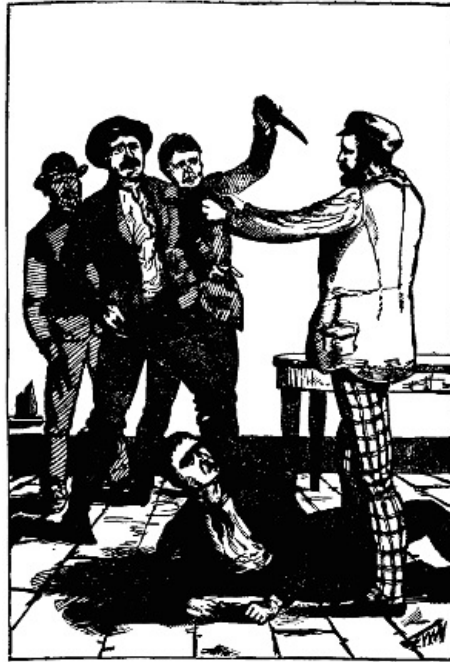
"*No, sir!* I am going to take this wounded man out of this without another scratch, if I have to send every mother's son of you to perdition."

His voice rang out clear and commanding. In the might of his wrath, he had forgotten the language of Cully Devens and spoken as a man to cowards.

The effect was electrical.

From among the men standing at bay, one sprang forward, crying:

"Boys, here's a traitor amongst us! Who are ye, ye sneak, that has played yerself fer Cully Devens?"



"Don't pull, boys, I've got the drop on ye!"—[page 58](#).

[59]

The lithe body bent slightly forward, a low laugh crossed the lips of the bogus Cully, the brown eyes lighted up, and flashed in the eyes of the men arrayed against him. Then came the answer, coolly, as if the announcement were scarcely worth making:

[60]

"Richard Stanhope is my name, and I've got a trump here for every trick you can show me. Step up, boys, don't be bashful!"

CHAPTER VI.

STANHOPE'S HUMANITY.

"Richard Stanhope is my name, and I've got a trump here for every trick you can show me. Step up, boys, don't be bashful!"

Momentous silence followed this announcement, while the *habitués* of the Thieves' Tavern glanced into each others' faces in consternation.

An ordinary meddler, however much his courage and skill, would have met with summary chastisement; but *Dick Stanhope!*

Not a man among them but knew the result of an attack upon him. Bullets swift and sure, in the brains or hearts of some; certain vengeance, sooner or later, upon all.

To avoid, on all possible occasions, an open encounter with an officer of the law, is the natural instinct of the crook. Besides, Stanhope was never off his guard; his presence, alone among them, was sure indication that *they* were in more danger than he.

[61]

So reasoned the astonished scoundrels, instantly, instinctively.

"Look here, boys," Stanhope's cool voice broke in upon their silence; "I'm here on a little private business which need not concern you, unless you make me trouble. This man," nodding down at the prostrate ex-convict, "is my game. I'm going to take him out of this, and if you raise a hand to prevent it, or take a step to follow me, you'll find yourselves detained for a long stretch."

He threw back his head and gave a long, low whistle.

"Hear that, my good sirs. That's a note of preparation. One more such will bring you into close quarters. If you are not back at those tables, every man of you, inside of two minutes, I'll give the second call."

Some moved with agility, some reluctantly, some sullenly; but they all obeyed him.

"Now, Pap, come out and help me lift this fellow. Are you badly hurt, my man?"

The wounded man groaned and permitted them to lift him to his feet.

"He can walk, I think," went on Stanhope, in a brisk, business-like way. "Lean on me, my lad." Then, turning to the bar keeper and thrusting some money into his hand: "Give these fellows another round of drinks, Pap. Boys, enjoy yourselves; ta-ta."

And without once glancing back at them he half led, half supported, the wounded man out from the bar-room, up the dirty stone steps, and into the dirtier street.

"Boys," said the bar keeper as he distributed the drinks at Stanhope's expense, "you done a sensible thing when you let up on Dick Stanhope. He's got the alley lined with peelers and don't you forget it." [62]

For a little way Stanhope led his man in silence. Then the rescued ex-convict made a sudden convulsive movement, gathered himself for a mighty effort, broke from the supporting grasp of the detective, and fled away down the dark street.

Down one block and half across the next he ran manfully. Then he reeled, staggered wildly from side to side, threw up his arms, and fell heavily upon his face.

"I knew you'd bring yourself down," said Stanhope, coming up behind him. "You should not treat a man as an enemy, sir, until he's proven himself such."

He lifted the prostrate man, turning him easily, and rested the fallen head upon his knee.

"Can you swallow a little?" pressing a flask of brandy to the lips of the ex-convict.

The man gasped and feebly swallowed a little of the liquor.

"There," laying down the flask, "are your wounds bleeding?"

The wounded man groaned, and then whispered feebly:

"I'm done for—I think—are you—an officer?"

"Yes."

"Af—after me?"

"No."

"Do—do you—know—"

"Do I know who you are? Not exactly, but I take you to be one of the convicts who broke jail last week."

The man made a convulsive movement, and then, battling for breath as he spoke, wailed out:

"Listen—you want to take me back to prison—there is a reward—of course. If you only knew—when I was a boy—on the western prairies—free, free. Then here in the city—driven to beg—to steal to—. Oh! *don't* take me back to die in prison! You don't know the horror of it!" [63]

A look of pitying tenderness lighted the face bent above the dying man.

"Poor fellow!" said Stanhope softly. "I am an officer of the law, but I am also human. If you recover, I must do my duty: if you must die, you shall not die in prison."

"I shall die," said the man, in a hoarse whisper; "I know I shall die—die."

His head pressed more heavily against Stanhope's knee; he seemed a heavier weight upon his arm. Bending still lower, the detective listened for his breathing, passed his hand over the limp fingers and clammy face. Then he gathered the form, that was more than his own weight, in his muscular arms, and bore it away through the darkness, muttering, as he went:

"That *was* a splendid stand-off! What would those fellows say, if they knew that Dick Stanhope, single-handed and alone, had walked their alleys in safety, and bluffed their entire gang!"

CHAPTER VII.

HOW A MASQUERADE BEGAN.

A crush of carriages about a stately doorway; a flitting of gorgeous, mysterious, grotesque and dainty figures through the broad, open portal; a glow of lights; a gleaming of vivid color; a glory of rich blossoms; a crash of music; a bubble of joyous voices; beauty, hilarity, luxury everywhere. [64]

It is the night of the great Warburton masquerade, the event of events in the social world. Archibald Warburton, the invalid millionaire, has opened his splendid doors, for the pleasure of his young and lovely wife, to receive the friendly five hundred who adore her, and have crowned her queen of society.

He will neither receive, nor mingle with his wife's guests; he is too much an invalid, too confirmed a recluse for that. But his brother, Alan Warburton, younger by ten years, handsomer by all that constitutes manly beauty, will play the host in his stead—and do it royally, too, for Alan is a man of the world, a man of society, a refined, talented, aristocratic young man of leisure. Quite a Lion as well, for he has but recently returned from an extended European tour and is the "newest man" in town. And society dearly loves that which is new, especially when, with the newness, there is combined manly beauty—and wealth.

With such a host as handsome Alan Warburton, such a hostess as his brother's beautiful wife, and such an assistant as her sparkling, piquant little companion, Winnifred French, who could predict for this masquerade anything but the most joyous ending, the most pronounced success? Ah! our social riddles are hard to read.

Into this scene of revelry, while it is yet early, before the music has reached its wildest strains, and the dancing its giddiest whirl, comes a smart servant girl, leading by the hand a child of four or five summers, a dainty fair-haired creature. In her fairy costume of white satin with its silvery frost work and gleaming pearls; with her gossamer wings and glittering aureole of spun gold; her dainty wand and childish grace, she is the loveliest sight in the midst of all that loveliness, for no disfiguring mask hides the beautiful, eager face that gazes down the long vista of decorated drawing rooms, library, music room, boudoir, in wondering, half frightened expectation. [65]

"They're beginning to dance down there," says the maid, drawing the child toward a lofty archway, through which they can watch the swiftly whirling figures of the dancers. "Why, *do* come along, Miss Daisy; one would think your Pa's house was full of bears and wild-cats, to see your actions."

But the child draws back and grasps fearfully at the skirts of her attendant.

"What makes 'em look so queer, Millie? Isn't you afraid?"

"Why no, Miss Daisy. There's nothing to be afraid of. See; all these funny-looking people are your papa's friends, and your new mamma's, and your uncle Alan's. Look, now,"—drawing the reluctant child forward,—"just look at them! There goes a—a *Turk*, I guess, and—"

"What makes they all have black things on their faces, Millie?"

"Why, child, that's the fun of it all. If it wasn't for them masks everybody would know everybody else, and there wouldn't be no masquerade."

"No what?"

"No *masquerade*, child. Now look at that; there goes a pope, or a cardinal; and there, oh my! that must be a Gipsy—or an Injun."

"A Gipsy or an Indian; well done, Millie, ha ha ha!"

At the sound of these words they turn swiftly. A tall masker, in a black and scarlet domino, is standing just behind them, and little Daisy utters one frightened cry and buries her face in Millie's drapery.

"Why, Daisy;" laughs the masker; "little Daisy, are you frightened? Come, this will never do." [66]

With a quick gesture he flings off the domino and removes the mask from his face, thus revealing a picturesque sailor's costume, and a handsome face that bears, upon one cheek, the representation of a tattooed anchor.

While he is thus transforming himself, the outer door opens and admits a figure clad in soft flowing robes of scarlet and blue and white, with a mantle of stars about the stately shoulders, and the cap of Liberty upon the well-poised head. The entrance of the Goddess of Liberty is unnoticed by the group about the archway, and, after a swift glance at them, that august lady glides behind a screen which stands invitingly near the door, and, sinking upon a divan in the corner, seems intent upon the classic arrangement of her white and crimson draperies.

"Now look," says Alan Warburton, flinging the discarded domino upon a chair; "look, Daisy, darling. Why, pet, you were afraid of your own uncle Alan."

The little one peers at him from behind Millie's skirts and then comes slowly forward.

"Why, uncle Alan, how funny you look, and—your face is dirty!"

"Oh! Daisy," taking her up in his arms and smiling into her eyes; "you are a sadly uncultivated young person. My face is tattooed, for 'I'm a sailor bold.'"



[67]

"See all those funny-looking people are your papa's friends."—[page 65](#)

While uncle and niece are thus engaged in playful talk, and Millie is intently watching the dancers, they are again approached; this time by two ladies,—one in the flowing, glittering, gorgeous robes of Sunlight, the other in a dainty Carmen costume of scarlet and black and gold. Both ladies are masked, and, as they enter from an alcove in the rear of the room, they, too, approach unperceived. Seeing the group about the archway, one of them makes a signal of silence. They stop, and standing close together, wait.

[68]

"It just occurs to me, Millie," says Alan Warburton, turning suddenly to the maid; "it just occurs to me to inquire how you came in charge of Miss Daisy here. Where is Miss Daisy's maid?"

The girl throws back her head, with a gesture that causes every ribbon upon her cap to flutter, as she replies, with a look of defiance and an indignant sniff:

"Mrs. Warburton put Miss Daisy in my care, sir, and I don't know *where* Miss Daisy's maid may be."

"Umph! well it seems to me that—" He stops and looks at the child.

"That I ain't the properest person to look after Miss Daisy, I 'spose you mean—"

"Millie, you are growing impertinent."

"Because I'm a poor girl that the *mistress* of this house took in out of kindness—"

"Millie; *will* you stop!" and he puts little Daisy down with a gesture of impatience.

"I'm trying to do my duty," goes on the irate damsel; "and Mrs. Warburton, *my* mistress, has given me my orders, sir, *consequently*—"

"Oh! if Mrs. Warburton has issued such judicious orders," and he takes up his mask and domino, "I retire from the field."

"It's time to stop them, Winnie," says the lady in the garments of Sunlight, taking off her mask hastily. "Alan never could get on with a raw servant. I see war in Millie's eyes."

Then she comes forward, mask in hand, and followed by the laughing Carmen.

[69]

"Alan, you are in difficulty, I see," laughing, in spite of her attempt at gravity. "Millie, I fear, is not quite up to your standard of silent perfection."

"May I ask, Mrs. Warburton, if she is your ideal of a companion for this child?"

The tone is faintly tinged with scorn and sternness, and Leslie Warburton's eyes cease to smile as she replies, with dignity:

"She is my servant, Mr. Warburton. We will not discuss her merits in her presence. I will relieve you of any further trouble on her account."

"Where, may I ask, is Daisy's own maid?"

"In her room, with a headache that unfits her for duty. Come here, Daisy."

Up to this moment Alan Warburton has kept the hand of the child clasped in his own. He now releases it with evident reluctance, and the little fairy bounds toward her stepmother.

"Mamma, how lovely you look!" reaching up her arms to caress the head that bends toward her. "Mamma, take me with you where the music is."

"Have you been to Papa's room, Daisy? You know we must not let him feel lonely to-night."

"Exceeding thoughtfulness," mutters Alan Warburton to himself, as he turns to resume his domino. Then aloud, to his sister-in-law, he says:

"I have just visited my brother's room, Mrs. Warburton; he wished to see you for a moment, I believe. Daisy, will you come with me?"

He extends his hand to the child, who gives a willful toss of the head as she replies, clinging closer to her stepmother the while: [70]

"No; I going to stay with my new mamma."

As Alan Warburton turns away, with a shade of annoyance upon his face, he meets the mirthful eyes of Carmen, and is greeted by a saucy sally.

"What a bear you can be, Alan, when you try your hand at domestic discipline. Put on your domino and your dignity once more. You look like a school boy who has just been whipped."

"Ah, Winnie," he says seriously, coming close to her side and seeking to look into the blue, mocking eyes, "no need for me to see *your* face, your sweet voice and your saucy words both betray you."

"Just as your bad temper has betrayed you! It's a pity you can't appreciate Millie, sir; but then your sense of the ridiculous is shockingly deficient. There goes a waltz," starting forward hastily.

"It's my waltz; wait, Winnie."

But the laughing girl is half way down the long drawing-room, and he hurries after, replacing his mask and pulling on his domino as he goes.

Then Leslie Warburton, with a sigh upon her lips, draws the child again toward her and says:

"You may wait here, Millie; I will take care of Daisy for a short time. And, Millie, remember in future when Mr. Warburton addresses you, that you are to answer him respectfully. Come, darling."

She turns toward the entrance, the child's hand clasped tightly in her own, and there, directly before her, stands a figure which she has longed, yet dreaded, to meet—the Goddess of Liberty. [71]

With a gasp of surprise, and a heart throbbing with agitation, Leslie Warburton hurriedly replaces her mask and turns to Millie.

"Millie, on second thought, you may take Daisy to her papa's room, and tell him I will be there soon. Daisy, darling, go with Millie."

"But, Mamma,—"

"There, there, dear, go to papa now; mamma will come."

With many a reluctant, backward glance, Daisy suffers herself to be led away, and then the Goddess of Liberty advances and bows before the lady of the mansion.

"I am not mistaken," whispers that lady, glancing about her as if fearing an eavesdropper; "you are—"

"First," interrupts a mellow voice from behind the starry mask, "are *you* Mrs. Warburton?"

"Yes."

"Then I am Richard Stanhope."

CHAPTER VIII.

VERNET "CALLS A TURN."

Leslie Warburton had replaced her mask, but the face she concealed was engraven upon the memory of her *vis-a-vis*.

A pure pale face, with a firm chin; a rare red mouth, proud yet sensitive; a pair of brown tender eyes, with a touch of sadness in their depths; and a broad low brow, over which clustered thick waves of sunny auburn. She is slender and graceful, carrying her head proudly, and with inherent self-poise in gait and manner. [72]

She glances about her once more, and then says, drawing still nearer the disguised detective:

"I have been looking for you, Mr. Stanhope, and we have met at a fortunate moment. Nearly all the guests have arrived, and everybody is dancing; we may hope for a few undisturbed moments now. You—you have no reason for thinking yourself watched, or your identity suspected, I hope?"

"None whatever, madam. Have *you* any fears of that sort?"

"No; none that are well grounded; I dislike secrecy, and the necessity for it; I suppose I am nervous. Mr. Stanhope," with sudden appeal in her voice, "how much do you know concerning me, and my present business with you?"

"Very little. During my drive hither with Mr. Follingsbee, he told me something like this: He esteemed you very highly; he had known you for years; you desired the services of a detective; he had named me as available, and been authorized by you to secure my services. He said that he knew very little concerning the nature of your business with me, but believed that all that you did would be done wisely, discreetly, and from the best of motives. He pointed you out to me when we entered the house. That is all, madam."

"Thank you. Mr. Follingsbee is, or was, the tried friend, as well as legal adviser, of my adopted father, Thomas Ulman, and I know him to be trustworthy. When he spoke of you, Mr. Stanhope, he knew that I desired, not only a skillful detective, but a true-hearted man; one who would hold a promise sacred, who would go no further than is required in the matter in hand, and who would respect an unhappy woman's secret—should it become known to him."

[73]

Her voice died in her throat, and Stanhope rustled his garments uneasily. Then she rallied and went on bravely:

"Mr. Follingsbee assured me that you were all I could desire."

"Mr. Follingsbee does me an honor which I appreciate."

"And so, Mr. Stanhope, I am about to trust you. Let us sit here, where we shall be unobserved, and tolerably secure from interruption."

She turns toward the divan behind the screen and seats herself thereon, brushing aside her glittering drapery to afford the disguised detective a place beside her.

He hesitates a moment, then takes the proffered seat and says, almost brusquely:

"Madam, give me my instructions as rapidly as possible; the very walls have eyes sometimes, and—I must be away from here before midnight."

"My instructions will be brief. I will state my case, and then answer any questions you find it necessary to ask."

"I shall ask no needless questions, madam."

"Then listen." She nerves herself for a brave effort, and hurries on, her voice somewhat agitated in spite of herself. "For three months past I have been conscious that I am watched, followed, spied upon. I have been much annoyed by this *espionage*. I never drive or walk alone, without feeling that my shadow is not far away. I begin to fear to trust my servants, and to realize that I have an enemy. Mr. Stanhope, I want you to find out who my enemy is."

Behind his starchy mask, her listener smiled at this woman-like statement of the case. Then he said, tersely:

"You say that you are being spied upon. How do you know this?"

[74]

"At first by intuition, I think; a certain vague, uneasy consciousness of a strange, inharmonious presence near me. Being thus put on my guard and roused to watchfulness, I have contrived to see, on various occasions, the same figure dogging my steps."

"Um! Did you know this figure?"

"No; it was strange to me, but always the same."

"Then your spy is a blunderer. Let us try and sift this matter: A lady may be shadowed for numerous reasons; do you know why you are watched?"

"N—no," hesitatingly.

"So," thought the detective, "she is not quite frank, with me." Then aloud: "Do you suspect any one?"

"No."

"Madam, I must ask some personal questions. Please answer them frankly and truly, or not at all, and be sure that every question is necessary, every answer important."

The lady bows her head, and he proceeds:

"First, then, have you a secret?"

She starts, turns her head away, and is silent.

The detective notes the movement, smiles again, and goes on:

"Let us advance a step; you *have* a secret."

"Why—do you—say that?"

"Because you have yourself told me as much. We never feel that uneasy sense of *espionage*, so well described by you, madam, until we have something to conceal—the man who carries no purse, fears no robber. You have a secret. This has made you watchful, and, being watchful, you discover that you have—what? An enemy, or only a tormentor?"

[75]

"Both, perhaps," she says sadly.

"My task, then, is to find this enemy. Mrs. Warburton, I shall not touch your secret; at the same time I warn you in this search it is likely to discover itself to me without my seeking. Rest assured that I shall respect it. First, then, you have a secret. Second, you have an enemy. Mrs. Warburton, I should ask fewer questions if I could see your face."

Springing up suddenly, she tears off her mask, and standing before him says with proud fierceness:

"And why may you not see my face! There is no shame for my mask to conceal! I *have* a secret, true; but it is not of *my* making. It has been forced upon me. I am not an *intriguante*: I am a persecuted woman. I am not seeking it to conceal wrong doing, but to protect myself from those that wrong me."

The words that begin so proudly, end in a sob, and, covering her face with her white, jeweled hands, Leslie Warburton turns and rests her head against the screen beside her.

Then impulsive, unconventional Dick Stanhope springs up, and, as if he were administering comfort to a sorrowing child, takes the two hands away from the tear-wet face, and holding them fast in his own, looks straight down into the brown eyes as he says:

"Dear lady, trust me! Even as I believe you, believe *me*, when I say that your confidence shall not be violated. Your secret shall be safe; shall remain yours. Your enemy shall become mine. If you cannot trust me, I cannot help you."

"Oh! I do trust you, Mr. Stanhope; I *must*. Ask of me nothing, for I can tell you no more. To send for you was unwise, perhaps, but I have been so tormented by this spy upon my movements ... and I cannot fight in the dark. It was imprudent to bring you here to-night, but I dared not meet you elsewhere."

[76]

There is a lull in the music and a hum of approaching voices. She hastily resumes her mask, and Stanhope says:

"We had better separate now, madam. Trust your case to me. I cannot remain here much longer, otherwise I might find a clue to-night,—important business calls me. After to-night my time is all yours, and be sure I shall find out your enemy."

People are flocking in from the dancing-room. With a gesture of farewell, "Sunlight" flits out through the door just beside the screen, and a moment later, the Goddess of Liberty is sailing through the long drawing-rooms on the arm of a personage in the guise of Uncle Sam.

"What success, my friend?"

"It's all right," replies the Goddess of Liberty; "I have seen the lady."

A moment more and her satin skirts trail across the toes of a tall fellow in the dress of a British officer, who is leaning against a vine-wreathed pillar, intently watching the crowd through his yellow mask. At sight of the Goddess of Liberty, he starts forward and a sharp exclamation crosses his lips.

"Shades of Moses," he mutters to himself, "I can't be mistaken; that *is* Dick Stanhope's Vienna costume! Is that Dick inside it? It is! it must be! What is he doing? On a lay, or on a lark? Dick Stanhope is not given to this sort of frolic; I must find out what it means!"

And Van Vernet leaves his post of observation and follows slowly, keeping the unconscious Goddess of Liberty always in sight.

[77]



"Dear lady, trust me! Your secret shall be safe; your enemy shall become mine!"—[page 75](#).

Passing through a net-work of vines, the British officer comes upon two people in earnest conversation. The one wears a scarlet and black domino, the other a coquettish Carmen costume. [78]

"That black and red domino is my patron," mutters the officer as he glides by unnoticed. "He does not see me and I do not wish to see *him* just at present." A few steps farther and the British officer comes to a sudden halt.

"By Heavens!" he ejaculates, half aloud; "what a chance I see before me! It would be worth something to know what brought Dick Stanhope here to-night; it would be worth yet more to *keep* him here *until after midnight*. If I had an accomplice to detain *him* while I, myself, appear at the Agency in time, then the C— street Raid would move without him, the lead would be given to *me*. It's worth trying for. It *shall* be done, and my patron in black and red shall help me."

He turns, and only looks back to mutter:

"Go on, Dick Stanhope; this night shall begin the trial that, when ended, shall decide which of the two is the better man!"

And the British officer hurries straight on until he stands beside the black and scarlet domino.

CHAPTER IX.

"A FALSE MOVE IN THE GAME."

Pretty, piquant Winnifred French was the staunch friend of Leslie Warburton.

When Winnie was the petted only daughter of "French, the rich merchant," she and Leslie Uliman had been firm friends. When Leslie Uliman, the adopted daughter of the aristocratic Uliman's, gave her hand in marriage to Archibald Warburton, a wealthy invalid and a widower with one child, Winnie was her first bridesmaid. [79]

Time had swept away the fortune of French, the merchant, and death had robbed Leslie of her adopted parents, and then Winnifred French gladly accepted the position of salaried companion to her dearest friend.

Not long after, Alan Warburton had returned from abroad, and then had begun a queer complication.

For some reason known only to himself, Alan Warburton had chosen to dislike his beautiful sister-in-law, and he had conceived a violent admiration for Winnie,—an admiration which might have been returned, perhaps, had Winnie been less loyal in her friendship for Leslie. But, perceiving Alan's dislike for her dearest friend, Winnie lost no opportunity for annoying him, and lavishing upon him her stinging sarcasms.

On her part, Leslie Warburton loved her companion with a strong sisterly affection. As for her feelings toward Alan Warburton, it would have been impossible to guess, from her manner, whether he was to her an object of love, hatred, or simple indifference.

When Winnie and Alan turned their backs upon the scene in the anteroom, and entered the

dancing hall, the girl was in a particularly perverse mood.

"I shall not dance," she said petulantly. "It's too early and too warm," and she entered a flowery alcove, and seated herself upon a couch overhung with vines.

"May I sit down, Winnie?"

"No."

"Just for a moment's chat." And he seated himself as calmly as if he had received a gracious permission. [80]

"You are angry with me again, Winnie. Is my sister-in-law always to come between us?"

She turned and her blue eyes flashed upon him.

"Once and for all," she said sharply, "tell me why you hate Leslie so?"

"Tell *me* why she has poisoned your mind against me?" he retorted.

"*She!* Leslie Warburton! This goes beyond a joke, sir. Leslie Warburton *is* what Leslie Uliman was, a *lady*, in thought, word, and deed. Oh, I can read you, sir! Her crime, in your eyes, is that she has married your brother. Is she not a good and faithful wife; a tender, loving mother to little Daisy? You have hinted that she does not love her husband—by what right do you make the assertion? You believe that she has married for money,—at least these are *fashionable* sins! Humph! In all probability I shall marry for money myself."

"Winnifred!"

"I *shall*; I am sure of it. It's an admirable feature of our best society. If we are heiresses, we are surrounded with lovers who are fascinated by our bank account. If we are poor, we are all in search of a bank account; and many of us have to do some sharp angling."

"My sister-in-law angled very successfully."

"So she did, if you *will* put it so. And she did not land her last chance; she might have married as wealthy a man as Mr. Warburton, or as handsome a man as his *brother*. But then," with a provoking little gesture of disdain, "Leslie and I never did admire handsome men."

There was just a shade of annoyance in the voice that answered her: [81]

"Pray go on, Miss French; doubtless yourself and Mrs. Warburton have other tastes in common."

"So we have," retorted the girl, rising and standing directly before him, "but I won't favor you with a list of them. You don't like Leslie, and I do; but let me tell you, Mr. Alan Warburton, if the day ever comes when you know Leslie Warburton *as I know her*, you will go down into the dust, ashamed that you have so misjudged, so wronged, so slandered one who is as high as the stars above you. And now I am going to join the dancers; you can come—or stay."

The last words were flung at him over her shoulder, and before he could rise to follow, she had vanished in the throng that was surging to and fro without the alcove.

He starts forward as if about to pursue her, and then sinks back upon the couch.

"I won't be a greater fool than nature made me," he mutters in scornful self-contempt. "If I go, she'll flirt outrageously under my very nose; if I stay—she'll flirt all the same, of course. Ah! if a man would have a foretaste of purgatory let him live under the same roof with the woman he loves and the woman he hates!"

A shadow comes between his vision and the gleam of light from without, and, lifting his eyes, he encounters two steady orbs gazing out from behind a yellow mask.

"Ah!" He half rises again, then sinks back and motions the mask to the seat beside him.

"I recognize your costume," he says, as the British officer seats himself. "How long since you came?"

"Only a few moments. I have been waiting for your interview with the lady to end." [82]

"Ah!" with an air of abstraction; then, recalling himself: "Do you know the nature of the work required of you?"

Under his mask, Van Vernet's face flamed and he bit his lip with vexation. This man in black and scarlet, this aristocrat, addressed him, not as one man to another, but loftily as a king to a subject. But there was no sign of annoyance in his voice as he replied:

"Um—I suppose so. Delicate bit of a shadowing, I was told; no particulars given."

"There need be no particulars. I will point you out the person to be shadowed. I want you to see her, and be yourself unseen. You are simply to discover,—find out where she goes, who she sees, what she does. Don't disturb yourself about motives; I only want the *facts*."

"Ah!" thought Van Vernet; "it's a *she*, then." Aloud, he said: "You have not given the lady's name?"

"You would find it out, of course?"

"Of course; necessarily."

"The lady is my—is Mrs. Warburton, the mistress of the house."

"Ah!" thought the detective; "the old Turk wants me to shadow his wife!"

By a very natural blunder he had fancied himself in communication with Archibald, instead of Alan, Warburton.

"Have you any suspicions? Can you give me any hint upon which to act?" he asked.

"I might say this much," ventured Alan, after a moment's hesitation: "The lady has made, I believe, a mercenary marriage and she is hiding something from her husband and friends."

"I see," said Vernet. And then, laughing inwardly, he thought: "A case of jealousy!"

[83]

In a few words Alan Warburton described to Vernet the "Sunlight," costume worn by Leslie, and then they separated, Vernet going, not in search of "Sunlight," but of the Goddess of Liberty.

What he found was this:

In the almost deserted music room stood the Goddess of Liberty, gazing down into the face of a woman in the robes of Sunlight, and both of them engaged in earnest conversation.

He watched them until he saw the Goddess lift the hand of Sunlight with a gesture of graceful reverence, bow over it, and turn away. Then he went back to the place where he had left his patron. He found the object of his quest still seated in the alcove, alone and absorbed in thought.

"I beg your pardon for intruding upon your solitude," began the detective hastily, at the same time seating himself close beside Alan; "but there is a *lady* here whose conduct is, to say the least, mysterious. As a detective, it becomes my duty to look after her a little, to see that she does not leave this house *until I can follow her*."

"Well?" with marked indifference in his tone.

"If she could be detained," went on Vernet, "by—say, by keeping some one constantly beside her, so that she cannot leave the house without being observed—"

Alan Warburton threw back his head.

"Pardon me," he said, "but I object to thus persecuting a lady, and a guest."

"But if I tell you that this *lady* is a man in silken petticoats?"

"What!"

"And that he seems on very free and friendly terms with *your wife*."

[84]

"With my wi—"

Alan Warburton stopped short and looked sharply at the eyes gazing out from behind the yellow mask.

Did this detective think himself conversing with Archibald? If so—well, what then? He shrank from anything like familiarity with this man before him. Why not leave the mistake as it stood? There could be no harm in it, and he, Alan, would thus be free from future annoyance.

"I will not remove my mask," thought Alan. "He is not likely to see Archibald, and no harm can come of it. In fact it will be better so. It would seem more natural for him to be investigating his wife's secrets than for *me*."

So the mistake was not corrected—the mistake that was almost providential for Alan Warburton, but that proved a very false move in the game that Van Vernet was about to play.

There was but one flaw in the plan of the proposed incognito.

Alan's voice was a peculiarly mellow tenor, and Van Vernet never forgot a voice once heard.

"Did you say that this disguised person knows—Mrs. Warburton?"

"I did."

"Who is the fellow, and what disguise does he wear?"

"I am unable to give his name. He is costumed as the Goddess of Liberty."

"Oh!"

Van Vernet had his own reasons for withholding Richard Stanhope's name.

"So!" he thought, while he waited for Alan's next words. "I'll spoil your plans for this night, Dick Stanhope! I wonder how our Chief will like to hear that 'Stanhope the reliable,' neglects his duty to go masquerading in petticoats, the better to make love to another man's wife."

[85]

For Van Vernet, judging Stanhope as a man of the world judges men, had leaped to the hasty, but

natural, conclusion, that his masquerade in the garb of the mother of his country, was in the character of a lover.

"Vernet," said Alan at last, "you are a clever fellow! Let me see; there are half a dozen young men here who are ripe for novelty—set the whisper afloat that behind that blue and white mask is concealed a beautiful and mysterious intruder, and they will hang like leeches about her, hoping to discover her identity, or see her unmask."

"It's a capital plan!" cried Vernet, "and it can't be put into execution too soon."

CHAPTER X.

"I AM YOUR SHADOW."

It is not a pleasing task to Alan Warburton, but, spurred on by Vernet, and acting according to his suggestions, it is undertaken and accomplished. Within twenty minutes, two gay, fun-loving young fellows, one habited in the garb of a Celestial, the other dressed as a Troubador, are hastening from room to room in search of the mysterious Goddess of Liberty.

"Who was the Mask that posted us about this mysterious lady?" queries the Celestial, as he lifts a *portierie* for his comrade to pass. [86]

"If I am not mistaken, it was Warburton."

"Isn't that a queer move for His Dignity?"

"Well, I don't know. Presuming the fair Mystery to be an intruder, he may think it the easiest way of putting her to rout. At any rate there's a little spice in it."

And there is spice in it. Before the evening closes, the festive Celestial is willing to vote this meeting with a veiled mystery an occasion full of flavor, and worthy to be remembered.

Leaving the pair in full chase after the luckless, petticoat-encumbered Stanhope, we follow Van Vernet, who, having set this trap for the feet of his unconscious comrade, is about to play his next card.

Gliding among the maskers, he makes his way to a side entrance, and passing the liveried servant on guard at the door with a careless jest, he leaves the house, and hastens where, a few rods distant, a solitary figure is standing.

"How long have you been here, Harvey?" he asks hurriedly, but with noticeable affability.

"About half an hour."

"Good; now listen, for you are to begin your business. Throw on that domino and follow me; the servants have seen me in conversation with the master of the house and they will not require your credentials. Keep near me, and follow me to the dressing-rooms; by-and-by we will exchange costumes there, after which, you will personate me."

"But,—"

"There will be no trouble; just mingle with the throng, saying nothing to anyone. No one will address you who could doubt your identity; I will arrange all that. You comprehend?" [87]

"I think so. You are wanted, or you want to be, in two places at once. This being the least important, you place me here as figure-head, while you fill the bill at the other place."

"You have grasped the situation, Harvey. Let us go in, and be sure you do justice, in my stead, to the banquet—and the Warburton champagne."

Van Vernet had planned well. Knowing the importance of the Raid in hand for that night, he had determined to be present and share with Stanhope the honors of the occasion, while he seemed to be devoting all his energies to the solution of the mystery that was evidently troubling his wealthy patron, the master of Warburton Place.

Vernet was a man of many resources, and trying, indeed, must be the situation which his fertile brain could not master.

Having successfully introduced his double into the house, he made his way, once more, to the side of his patron, and, drawing him away from the vicinity of possible listeners, said:

"Mr. Warburton, if you have anything further to say to me, please make use of the present moment. After this it will be best for us to hold no further conversation to-night."

Alan Warburton turned his eyes toward the detective with a cold, scrutinizing stare.

"Why such caution?"

"Because it seems to me necessary; and, if I may be permitted to suggest, you may make some slight discoveries by keeping an eye, more or less, upon Mrs. Warburton."

With these words Van Vernet turns upon his heel, and strides away with the air of a man who can do all that he essays.

"He is cool to the verge of impudence!" mutters Alan, as he gazes after the receding figure in the British uniform. "But I will act upon his advice; I *will* watch Mrs. Warburton." [88]

It is some moments before he catches sight of her glimmering robes, and then he sees them receding, gliding swiftly, and, as he thinks, with a nervous, hurried movement unusual to his stately sister-in-law.

She is going through the drawing-room, away from the dancers, and he hastens after, wondering a little as to her destination.

From a flower-adorned recess, a fairy form springs out, interrupting the lady in the glimmering robes.

"Mamma!" cries little Daisy, "oh Mamma, I have found Mother Goose—*real, live* Mother Goose!"

And she points with childish delight to a quaintly dressed personation of that old woman of nursery fame, who sits within the alcove, leaning upon her oaken staff, and peering out from beneath the broad frill of her cap, her gaze eagerly following the movements of the animated child.

"Oh Mamma!" continues the little one, "can't I stay with Mother Goose? Millie says I must go to bed."

At another time Leslie Warburton would have listened more attentively, have answered more thoughtfully, and have noted more closely the manner of guest that was thus absorbing the attention of the little one. Now she only says hurriedly:

"Yes, yes, Daisy; you may stay a little longer,—only," with a hasty glance toward the alcove, "you must not trouble the lady too much."

"The lady wants me, mamma."

"Then go, dear."

And Leslie gathers up her glimmering train and hastens on without once glancing backward. [89]

Pausing a few paces behind her, Alan Warburton has noted each word that has passed between the lady and the child. And now, as the little one bounds back to Mother Goose, who receives her with evident pleasure, he moves on, still following Leslie.

She glides past the dancers, through the drawing rooms, across the music room, and then, giving a hasty glance at the few who linger there, she pulls aside a silken curtain, and looks into the library. The lights are toned to the softness of moonlight; there is silence there, and solitude.

With a long, weary sigh, Leslie enters the library and lets the curtain fall behind her.

Alan Warburton pauses, hesitates for a moment, and then, seeing that the little group of maskers near him seem wholly absorbed in their own merriment, he moves boldly forward, parts the curtain a little way, and peers within.

He sees a woman wearing the garments of Sunlight and the face of despair. She has torn off her mask, and it lies on the floor at her feet. In her hand is a crumpled scrap of paper, and, as she holds it nearer the light and reads what is written thereon, a low moan escapes her lips.

"Again!" she murmurs; "how can I obey them?—and yet I *must* go." Then, suddenly, a light of fierce resolve flames in her eyes. "I *will* go," she says, speaking aloud in her self-forgetfulness; "I will go,—but it shall be *for the last time!*"

She thrusts the crumpled bit of paper into her bosom, goes to the window and looks out. Then she crosses to a door opposite the curtained entrance, opens it softly, and glides away.

In another moment, Alan Warburton is in the library. Tearing off the black and scarlet domino he flings it into a corner, and, glancing down at his nautical costume mutters: [90]

"Sailors of this description are not uncommon. Wherever she goes, I can follow her—in this."

Ten minutes later, while Leslie Warburton's guests are dancing and making merry, Leslie Warburton, with sombre garments replacing the robes of Sunlight, glides stealthily out from her stately home, and creeps like a hunted creature through the darkness and away!

But not alone. Silently, with the tread of an Indian, a man follows after; a man in the garments of a sailor, who pulls a glazed cap low down across his eyes, and mutters as he goes:

"So, Madam Intrigue, Van Vernet advised me well. Glide on, plotter; from this moment until I shall have unmasked you, *I am your shadow!*"

CHAPTER XI.

"DEAR MRS FOLLINGSBEE."

While the previously related scenes of this fateful night are transpiring Richard Stanhope finds his silken-trained disguise a snare in which his own feet become entangled, both literally and figuratively.



[91]

"Silently, with the tread of an Indian, a man follows after; a man in the garments of a sailor."—page 90.

Moving with slow and stately steps through the vista of splendid rooms, taking note of all that he sees from behind his white and blue mask, he suddenly becomes the object of too much attention. A dashing Troubador presents himself, and will not be denied the pleasure of a waltz with "the stately and graceful Miss Columbia."

[92]

The detective's feet are encased in satin shoes that, if not small, are at least shapely. He has yet nearly an hour to spare to the masquerade, and his actual business is done. Why not yield to the temptation? He dances with the grace and abandon of the true music worshipper; he loves brightness and gayety, laughter and all sweet sounds; above all, he takes such delight in a jest as only healthy natures can.

"It would be a pity to disappoint such a pretty Troubador," muses Richard while he seems to hesitate; "he may never have another opportunity to dance with a lady like me."

And then, bowing a stately consent, he moves away on the arm of the Troubador, who, chuckling at his success, mentally resolves to make a good impression on this mysterious uninvited lady.

Van Vernet's plot works famously. The Troubador is enchanted with the dancing of the mysterious Goddess, who looks at him with the handsomest, most languid and melting of brown, brown eyes, letting these orbs speak volumes, but saying never a word. And when his fellow-plotter claims the next dance, he yields his place reluctantly, and sees the waist of the Goddess encircled by the arm of the Celestial, with a sigh of regret.

Richard Stanhope, now fully given over to the spirit of mischief, leans confidently upon the arm of this second admirer, looking unutterable things with his big brown eyes.

They hover about him after this second dance, and he dances again with each. If the Troubador is overflowing with flattery, the Celestial is more obsequious still. Stanhope finds the moments flying, and the attention of the two gallants cease to amuse, and begin to annoy. In vain he tries to shake them off. If one goes, the other remains.

[93]

After many futile efforts to free himself from his tormentors, he sees Mr. Follingsbee approach, and beckons him forward with a sigh of relief.

The two maskers, recognizing Uncle Sam as a fitting companion for Miss Columbia, reluctantly yield their ground and withdraw.

"Have those fellows been pestering you?" queries the lawyer, with a laugh.

"Only as they bade fair to prove a hindrance," with an answering chuckle. "They're such nice little lady killers: but I must get away from this in a very few minutes. My disguise has been very successful."

"I should think so! Why, my boy, half the people here, at least those who have recognized me through my costume, think you are—ha! ha!—my wife!"

"So much the better."

"Why, little Winnie French—she found me out at once—has been looking all through the card rooms for "Dear Mrs. Follingsbee."" And the jolly lawyer laughs anew.

"Mr. Follingsbee,"—Stanhope has ceased to jest, and speaks with his usual business brusqueness—"Mrs. Warburton, I don't know for what reason, wished to be informed when I left the house. Will you tell her I am about to go, and that I will let her hear from me further through you? I will go up to the dressing room floor, and wait in the boudoir until you have seen her."

The boudoir opening upon the ladies' dressing rooms, is untenanted. But from the inner room, Stanhope catches the hum of feminine voices, and in a moment a quartette of ladies come forth, adjusting their masks as they move toward the stairway.

[94]

Suddenly there is a little exclamation of delight, and our detective, standing near the open window, with his face turned from the group, feels himself clasped by a pair of pretty dimpled arms, while a gay voice says in his ear:

"Oh! you dear old thing! Have I found you at last? Follingsbee, you look stunning in that costume. Oh!—" as Stanhope draws back with a deprecating gesture—"you needn't deny your identity: isn't Mr. Follingsbee here as Uncle Sam? I found him out at once, and didn't Leslie and I see you enter together?"

Stanhope quakes inwardly, and the perspiration starts out under his mask. It is very delightful, under most circumstances, to be embraced by a pair of soft feminine arms, but just now it is very embarrassing and—very ridiculous.

Divided between his desire to laugh and his wish to run away, the detective stands hesitating, while Winnie French, for she it is, begins a critical examination of his costume.

"Don't you think the dress muffles your figure a little too much, Follingsbee? If it were snugger here,"—giving him a little poke underneath his elbows,— "and not so straight from the shoulders. Why didn't you shorten it in front, and wear pointed shoes?"

And she seizes the flowing drapery, and draws it back to illustrate her suggestion.

Again Stanhope recoils with a gesture which the gay girl misinterprets, and, quite ignoring the persistent silence of the supposed Mrs. Follingsbee, she chatters on:



[95]

"Don't you think your dress muffles your figure a little too much, Follingsbee?"—[page 94](#).

"I hope you don't resent *my* criticisms, Follingsbee; you've picked *me* to pieces often enough. Or are you still vexed because I *won't* fall in love with your favorite Alan? There, now,"—as Stanhope, grown desperate, seems about to speak,— "I know just what you want to say, and you need not say it. Follingsbee," lowering her voice to a more confidential tone, "if I ever *had* a scrap of a notion of that sort, I have been cured of it since I came into this house to live. Oh! I know he's your prime favorite, but you can't tell *me* anything about Alan; I've got him all catalogued on my ten fingers. Here he is pro and con; pro's *your* idea of him, you know. You say he is rich. Well, that's something in these days! He's handsome. Bah! a man has no business with beauty; it's woman's special prerogative. He came of a splendid blue-blooded family. Fudge! American aristocracy is American *rubbish*. He's talented. Well, that's only an accident for which *he* deserves no credit. He's thoroughly upright and honorable. Well, he's *too* bolt upright for me."

[96]

"So," murmurs Stanhope to his inner consciousness, "I am making a point in personal history, but—it's a tight place for me!" And as Winnie's arms give him a little hug, while she pauses to take breath, he feels tempted to retort in kind.

"Now, then," resumes Winnie, absorbed in her topic; and releasing her victim to check off her "cons" on the pretty right hand; "here's *my* opinion of Mr. Warburton. He's *proud*, ridiculously proud. He worships his *name*, if not himself. He is suspicious, uncharitable, unforgiving. He's *hard-hearted*. If Leslie were not an angel she would hate him utterly. He treats her with a lofty politeness, a polished indifference, impossible to resent and horrible to endure,—and all because he chooses to believe that she has tarnished the great Warburton name, by taking it for love of the Warburton fortune instead of the race."

Up from the ball-room floats the first strains of a delicious waltz. Winnie stops, starts, and turns toward the door. [97]

"That's my favorite waltz, and I'm engaged to Charlie Furbish—he dances like an angel. Follingsbee, bye, bye!"

She flits to the mirror, gives two or three dainty touches to her coquettish costume, tosses a kiss from her finger tips, and is gone.

"Thank Heaven," mutters Stanhope. "I consider *that* the narrowest escape of my life! What a little witch it is, and pretty, I'll wager."

He draws from beneath his flowing robe a tiny watch such as ladies carry, and consults its jewelled face.

"My time is up!" he ejaculates. "Twenty minutes delay, now, will ruin my Raid. Ah! here's Follingsbee." And he moves forward at the sound of an approaching step.

But it is not Follingsbee who appears upon the threshold. It is, instead, Stanhope's too-obsequious, too-attentive admirer, the Celestial, who has voted the prospect of a flirtation with a mysterious mask, a thing of spice.

CHAPTER XII.

A "MELLICAN LADY'S" LITTLE TRICK.

In such an emergency, when every moment has its value, to think is to act with Richard Stanhope. And time just now is very precious to him.

This importunate fellow is determined to solve the mystery of his identity, to see him unmask. Ten minutes spent in an attempt to evade him will be moments of fate for the ambitious detective. [98]

And, for the sake of his patroness, he cannot leave the house at the risk of being followed. This difficulty must be overcome and at once.

These thoughts flash through his mind as if by electricity; and then, as the Celestial approaches, he turns languidly toward the open window and rests his head against the casement, as if in utter weariness.

"Mellican lady slick?" queries the masker solicitously; "Mellican lady walm? Ching Ling flannee, flannee."

And raising his Japanese fan, he begins to ply it vigorously.

Mentally confiding "Ching Ling," to a region where fans are needed and are not, Stanhope sways, as if about to faint, and motions toward a reclining chair.

The mask propels it close to the window, and the detective sinks into it, with a long drawn sigh.

Then, plying his fan with renewed vigor, the Celestial murmurs tenderly:

"Mellican lady slick?"

"Confound you," thinks Stanhope; "I will try and be too *slick* for you." Then, for the first time, he utters a word for the Celestial's hearing. Moving his head restlessly he articulates, feebly:

"The heat—I feel—faint!" Then, half rising from the chair, seeming to make a last effort, he reels and murmuring: "Water—water," sinks back presenting the appearance of utter lifelessness.

"Water!" The Celestial, utterly deceived, drops the fan and his dialect at the same moment, and muttering: "She has fainted!" springs to the door. [99]

It is just what Stanhope had hoped for. When the Celestial returns with the water, the fainting lady will have disappeared.

But Fate seems to have set her face against Stanhope. The Celestial does not go. At the very door he encounters a servant, none other than the girl, Millie, who, having for some time lost sight of little Daisy, is now wandering from room to room in quest of the child.

"Girl," calls the masker authoritatively, "get some water quick; a lady has fainted."

Uttering a startled: "Oh, my!" Millie skurries away, and the Celestial returns to the side of the detective, who seems just now to be playing a losing game.

But it is only seeming. The case, grown desperate, requires a desperate remedy, and the Goddess of Liberty resolves to do what, probably, no "Mellican Lady" ever did before.

Through his drooping eyelids he notes the approach of the Celestial, sees him fling aside his fan to bend above him, and realizes the fact that he is about to be unmasked.

The Celestial bends nearer still. His hands touch the draped head, searching for the secret that releases the tightly secured mask. It is a sentimental picture, but suddenly the scene changes. Sentiment is put to rout, and absurdity reigns.

With indescribable swiftness, the body of the Goddess darts forward, and the head comes in sudden contact with the stomach of the too-devoted Celestial, who goes down upon the floor in a state of collapse, while Stanhope, bounding to his feet and gathering up his trailing draperies, springs through the open window!

When Millie returns with water and other restoratives, she finds only a disarranged masker sitting dolefully upon the floor, with one hand pressed against his stomach and the other supporting his head; still too much dazed and bewildered to know just how he came there. [100]

When he has finally recovered sufficiently to be able to give a shrewd guess as to the nature of the calamity that so suddenly overcame him, he is wise enough to see that the victory sits perched on the banner of the vanished Goddess, and to retire from the field permanently silent upon the subject of "spicy flirtations" and mysterious ladies.

Meantime, Stanhope having alighted, with no particular damage to himself or his drapery, upon a balcony which runs half the length of the house, is creeping silently along that convenient causeway toward the gentlemen's dressing-room, situated at its extreme end.

Foreseeing some possible difficulty in leaving the house unnoticed while attired in so conspicuous a costume, the Goddess had come prepared with a long black domino, which had been confided to Mr. Follingsbee, who, at the proper moment, was to fetch it from the gentlemen's dressing-room, array Stanhope in its sombre folds, and then see him from the house, and safely established in the carriage which the detective had arranged to have in waiting to convey him to the scene of the Raid.

Owing to his little encounter with the Celestial, Stanhope knows himself cut off from communication with Mr. Follingsbee, and he now creeps toward the dressing-room wholly intent upon securing the domino and quitting the house in the quickest manner possible.

As he approaches the window, however, he realizes that there is another lion in his path.



"Stanhope, bounding to his feet, springs through the open window"—page 99. [101]

The room is already occupied; he hears two voices speaking in guarded tones. [102]

"Be quick, Harvey; some one may come in a moment."

"I have locked the door."

"But it must be opened at the first knock. There must be no appearance of mystery, no room for suspicion, Harvey."

At the sound of a most familiar voice, Richard Stanhope starts, and flushes with excitement

underneath his mask. Then he presses close against the window and peers in.

Two men are rapidly exchanging garments there; the one doffing a uniform such as is worn by an officer of Her Majesty's troops, the other passing over, in exchange for said uniform, the suit of a common policeman.

With astonished eyes and bated breath, Stanhope recognizes the two. Van Vernet, his friend, and Harvey, a member of the police force, who is Vernet's staunch admirer and chosen assistant when such assistance can be of use.

How came Vernet at this masquerade, of all others? And what are they about to do?

He is soon enlightened, for Van Vernet, flushed with his success, present and prospective, utters a low triumphant laugh as he dons the policeman's coat, and turns to readjust his mask.

"Ah! Harvey," he says gayly; "if you ever live to execute as fine a bit of strategy as I did to-night, you may yet be Captain of police. Ha! ha! this most recent battle between America and England has turned out badly for America—all because she *will* wear petticoats!"

America! England! petticoats! Stanhope can scarcely suppress an exclamation as suddenly light flashes upon his mental horizon.

"I've done a good thing to-night, Harvey," continues Vernet with unusual animation, "and I've got the lead on a sharp man. If I can hold my own to-night, you'll never again hear of Van Vernet as only '*one* of our best detectives.' Is your mask adjusted? All right, then. Now, Harvey, time presses; there's a big night's work before me. You are sure you understand everything?" [103]

"Oh, perfectly; *my* work's easy enough."

"And mine begins to be difficult. Unlock the door, Harvey, I must be off." Then turning sharply he adds, as if it were an after-thought: "By the way, if you happen to set your eye on a Goddess of Liberty, just note her movements; I would give something to know when she contrives to leave the house and," with a dry laugh, "and *how*."

In another moment the dressing-room is deserted.

And then Richard Stanhope steps lightly through the window. With rapid movements he singles out his own dark domino, gathers his colored draperies close about him, and flings it over them, drawing the hood down about his head, and the long folds around his person. Then he goes out from the dressing-rooms, hurries down the great stairway, and passing boldly out by the main entrance, glances up and down the street.

Only a few paces away, a dark form is hurrying toward a group of carriages standing opposite the mansion, and Stanhope, in an instant, is gliding in the same direction. As the man places a foot upon the step of a carriage that has evidently awaited his coming, Stanhope glides so near that he distinctly hears the order, given in Vernet's low voice:

"To the X—street police station. Drive fast."

A trifle farther away another carriage, its driver very alert and expectant, stands waiting.

Having heard Vernet's order, Stanhope hurries to this carriage, springs within, and whispers to the driver: [104]

"The old place, Jim; and your quickest time!"

Then, as the wheels rattle over the pavement, the horses speeding away from this fashionable quarter of the city, a strange transformation scene goes on within the carriage, which, evidently, has been prepared for this purpose. The Goddess of Liberty is casting her robes, and long before the carriage has reached its destination, she has disappeared, there remaining, in her stead, a personage of fantastic appearance. He is literally clothed in rags, and plentifully smeared with dirt; his tattered garments are decorated with bits of tinsel, and scraps of bright color flutter from his ragged hat, and flaunt upon his breast; there is a monstrous patch over his left eye and a mass of disfiguring blotches covers his left cheek; a shock of unkempt tow-colored hair bristles upon his head, and his forehead and eyes are half hidden by thick dangling elf-locks.

If this absurd apparition bears not the slightest resemblance to the Goddess of Liberty, it resembles still less our friend, Richard Stanhope.

Suddenly, and in an obscure street, the carriage comes to a halt, and as its fantastically-attired occupant descends to the ground, the first stroke of midnight sounds out upon the air.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CRY IN THE DARK.

One more scene in this night's fateful masquerade remains to be described, and then the seemingly separate threads of our plot unite, and twine about our central figures a chain of Fate. [105]

While Van Vernet is setting snares for the feet of his rival, and while that young man of many resources is actively engaged in disentangling himself therefrom,—while Leslie Warburton, tortured by a secret which she cannot reveal, and dominated by a power she dare not disobey, steals away from her stately home—and while Alan Warburton, soured by suspicion, made unjust by his own false pride, follows like a shadow behind her—a cloud is descending upon the house of Warburton.

Sitting apart from the mirthful crowd, quite unobserved and seemingly wholly engrossed in themselves, are little Daisy Warburton and the quaintly-attired Mother Goose, before mentioned.

It is long past the child's latest bedtime, but her step-mamma has been so entirely preoccupied, and Millie so carelessly absorbed in watching the gayeties of the evening, that the little one has been overlooked, and feels now quite like her own mistress.

"Ha! ha!" she laughs merrily, leaning, much at her ease, upon the knee of Mother Goose; "ha! ha! what nice funny stories you tell; almost as nice as my new mamma's stories. Only," looking up with exquisite frankness, "your voice is not half so nice as my new mamma's."

"Because I'm an old woman, dearie," replies Mother Goose, a shade of something like disapproval in her tone. "Do you really want to see Mother Hubbard's dog, little girl?"

"Old Mother Hubbard—she went to the cupboard," sings Daisy gleefully. "Of course I do, Mrs. Goose. Does Mother Hubbard look like you?"

"A little."

"And—you said Cinderella's coach was down near my papa's gate?"

[106]

"So it is, dearie." Then looking cautiously about her, and lowering her voice to a whisper: "How would you like to ride to see Mother Hubbard in Cinderella's coach, and come right back, you know, before it turns into a pumpkin again?"

The fair child clasps two tiny hands, and utters a cry of delight.

"Oh! *could* we?" she asks, breathlessly.

"Of course we can, if you are very quiet and do as I bid you, and if you don't get afraid."

"I don't get afraid—not often," replies the child, drawing still closer to Mother Goose, and speaking with hushed gravity. "When I used to be afraid at night, my mamma, my new mamma, you know, taught me to say like this."

Clasping her hands, she sinks upon her knees and lifts her face to that which, behind its grotesque mask, is distorted by some unpleasant emotion. And then the childish voice lisps reverently:

"Dear God, please take care of a little girl whose mamma has gone to Heaven. Keep her from sin, and sickness, and danger. Make the dark as safe as the day, and don't let her be afraid, for Jesus' sake. Amen."

Something like a smothered imprecation dies away in the throat of the listener, and then she says, in honeyed accents:

"That's a very nice little prayer, and your new mamma is a very fine lady. When you come back from your ride in Cinderella's carriage, you can tell your new mamma all about it."

"Oh! how nice!"

"It will be charming. Come into the conservatory, dearie. I think we can see Cinderella's lamps from there."

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With the confidence born of childish innocence, the little one places her hand in that of Mother Goose, and is led away.

The conservatory is all aglow with light and color and rich perfume, and it is almost tenantless. The broad low windows are open, and a narrow balcony, adorned with tall vases and hung with drooping vines, projects from them scarce three feet from the ground.

Out upon this balcony, and close to the railing, the child follows the old woman confidently. Then, as she peers out into the night, she draws back.

"It's—very—dark," she whispers.

"It's the light inside that makes it seem so dark, dearie. Ah! I see a glimmer of Cinderella's lamp now; look, child!"

Stooping quickly, she lifts the little one and seats her upon the railing of the balcony. Then, as the child, shading her eyes with a tiny hand, attempts to peer out into the darkness, something damp and sickening is pressed to her face; there is an odor in the air not born of the flowers within, and Daisy Warburton, limp and unconscious, lies back in the arms of her enemy.

In another moment, the woman in the garb of Mother Goose has dropped from the balcony to the ground beneath, and, bearing her still burden in her arms, disappeared in the darkness.

And as her form vanishes from the balcony, a city clock, far away, tolls out the hour: *midnight*.

At this same hour, with the same strokes sounding in their ears, a party of men sally forth from the X—street Police station, and take their way toward the river. [108]

They are policemen, mostly dressed in plain clothes, and heavily armed, every man. They move away silently like men obeying the will of one master, and presently they separate, dropping off by twos and threes into different by-ways and obscure streets, to meet again at a certain rendezvous.

It is the Raiding Party on its way to the slums, and, contrary to the hopes of the Chief of the detectives and the Captain of the police, it is led, not by Dick Stanhope, but by Van Vernet.

Contrary to all precedent, and greatly to the surprise of all save Vernet, Richard Stanhope has failed to appear at the time appointed; and so, after many doubts, much hesitation, and some delay, Van Vernet is made leader of the expedition.

"I shall send Stanhope as soon as he reports here," the Chief had said as a last word to Vernet. "His absence to-night is most reprehensible, but his assistance is too valuable to be dispensed with."

Mentally hoping that Stanhope's coming may be delayed indefinitely, Van Vernet bites his lip and goes on his way, while the Chief sits down to speculate as to Stanhope's absence, and to await his coming.

But he waits in vain. The long night passes, and day dawns, and Richard Stanhope does not appear.

Meanwhile, Van Vernet and the two men who accompany him, arrive first of the party at their rendezvous.

It is at the mouth or entrance to a dark, narrow street, the beginning of that labyrinth of crooked by-ways, and blind alleys, from the maze of which Richard Stanhope had rescued himself and the wounded convict, on the night previous. [109]

Halting here Van Vernet waits the arrival of his men, and meditates. He is tolerably familiar with this labyrinth; knows it as well, perhaps, as most men on such a mission would deem necessary, but he has not given the locality and its denizens the close study and keen investigation that Stanhope has considered essential to success. And now, as he peers down the dark street, thinking of the maze beyond, and the desperate character of the people who inhabit it, he involuntarily wishes for that closer knowledge that only Stanhope possesses.

He knows that Stanhope, in various disguises, has passed days and nights among these haunts of iniquity; that he can thread these intricate alleys in the darkest night, and identify every rogue by name and profession.

He thinks of these things, and then shrugs his shoulder with characteristic inconsequence. He has, and with good reason, unbounded confidence in himself. He has tact, skill, courage; what man may do, *he* can do.

What are these miserable outlaws that they should baffle Van Vernet the skillful, the successful, the daring?

Some one is coming toward them from out the dark alley. They hear the fragment of an idiotic street song, trolled out in a maudlin voice, and then feet running, skipping, seeming now and then to prance and pirouette absurdly.

"What the—"

The exclamation of the policeman is cut short by the sudden collision of his stationary figure with a rapidly moving body. Then he grapples with his unintentional assailant only to release him suddenly, as Van Vernet throws up the slide of his dark lantern and turns its rays upon the new-comer.

Involuntarily all three utter sharp exclamations as they gather around the apparition. [110]

What a figure! Ragged, unkempt, fantastic; the same which a short time ago we saw descending from a carriage only a few rods distant from this very spot.

It is the same figure; the same rags and tinsel and dirt; the same disfigured face, with its black patch and its fringe of frowzy hair; the same, yet worse to look upon; for now the under jaw is dropped, the mouth drivels, the eye not concealed by the patch leers stupidly.

Unmistakably, it is the face of an idiot.

"How!" ejaculates this being, peering curiously at the three. "How do? Where ye goin'?"

Van Vernet gazes curiously for a moment, then utters a sound expressive of satisfaction. He has heard of a fool that inhabits these alleys; Stanhope has mentioned him on one or two occasions. "A modernized Barnaby Rudge," Stanhope had called him. Surely this must be him.

Turning to one of his men he says, in an undertone:

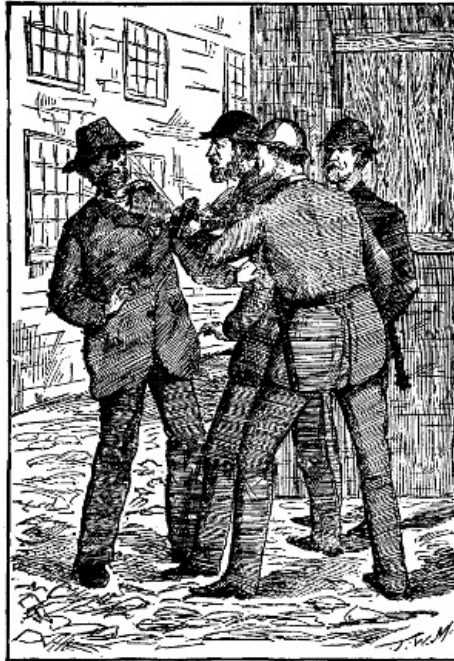
"If I'm not mistaken this fellow is a fool who grew up in these slums, and knows them by heart. 'Silly Charlie,' I think, they call him. I believe we can make him useful."

Then turning to the intruder he says suavely:

"How are you, my man? How are you?"

But a change has come over the mood of the seeming idiot. Striking his breast majestically, and pointing to a huge tin star which decorates it, he waves his hand toward them, and says with absurd dignity:

"G'way—*g'way!* Charlie big p'liceman. Gittin' late; *g'way!*"



[111]

"G'way—*g'way!* Charlie big p'liceman.
Gittin' late; *g'way!*"—[page 110](#).

"We must humor him, boys," says Vernet aside. Then to Charlie—"So you're a policeman? Well, so am I; look." [112]

And turning back the lapel of his coat he displays, on the inner side, the badge of an officer.

Silly Charlie comes close, peers eagerly at the badge, fingers it curiously, then, grasping it firmly, gives a tug at the lapel, saying:

"Gimme it. Gimme it."

Van Vernet laughs good-naturedly.

"Don't pull so hard, Charlie, or you'll have off my entire uniform. Do you want to do a little police duty to-night?"

Silly Charlie nods violently.

"And you want my star, or one like it?"

"*Um hum!*" with sudden emphasis.

Van Vernet lays a hand on the shoulder of the idiot, and then says:

"Listen, Charlie. I want you to help me to-night. Wait," for Charlie has doubled himself up in a convulsion of laughter. "Now, if you'll stand right by me, and tell me what I want to know, you and I will do some splendid work, and both get promoted. You will get a new star, big and bright, and a uniform all covered with bright buttons. Hold on," for Charlie is dancing in an ecstasy of delight. "What do you say? Will you come with me, and work for your star and uniform?"

Charlie's enthusiastic gestures testify to his delight at this proposition.

"Um hum," he cries gleefully; "Charlie go; Charlie be big p'liceman."

And as if suddenly realizing the dignity of his new employment, he ceases his antics and struts sedately up and down before Vernet and his assistants. Then turning to the detective, with a doleful whine, he extends his hand, saying; [113]

"Gimme star *now!*"

"Not now, Charlie; you must earn it first. I had to earn mine. Do you know the way to Devil's alley?"

"Um hum!"

"Good: do you know where Black Nathan lives!"

"Um hum!"

"Can you take me to Nancy Kaiser's lushing ken?"

"Um hum; Charlie knows."

"Then, Charlie, you shall have that star soon."

And Vernet turns to his men. "I will take this fellow for guide, and look up these places: they are most important," he says rapidly. "I shall be less noticed in company with this fellow than if alone. Riley, I leave you in command until I return. Remain here, and keep the fellows all together; some of them are coming now."

Riley's quick ear detects the approach of stealthy feet, and as Vernet shuts his lantern, and utters a low "Come, Charlie," the first installment of the Raiders appears, a few paces away.

Seizing Vernet by the arm, Silly Charlie lowers his head and glides down the alley, as stealthily as an Indian.

"Charlie," whispers Vernet, imperatively, "you must be very cautious. I want you to take me first to where Black Nathan lives."

"Hoop la!" replies Charlie in subdued staccato; "I'm takin' ye; commalong."

Cautiously they wend their way down the dark, narrow street, into a filthy alley, and through it to an open space laid bare by some recent fire.

Here they halt for a moment, Charlie peering curiously around him, and stooping to search for something among the loose stones. [114]

Suddenly a shriek pierces the silence about them—a woman's shriek, thrice repeated, its tones fraught with agony and terror!

Silly Charlie lifts himself suddenly erect, and turns his face toward a dark building just across the open space. Then, as the third cry sounds upon the air, both men, as by one humane instinct, bound across the waste regardless of stones and bruises, Silly Charlie flying on before, as if acquainted with every inch of the ground, straight toward the dark and isolated building.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PRETTY PLOT.

In order to comprehend the cause of the alarm which stimulated to sudden action both the wise man and the fool, Van Vernet and Silly Charlie, let us turn back a little and enter the dark house at the foot of the alley.

It is an hour before midnight. The place is dark and silent; no light gleams through the tightly boarded windows, there is no sign of life about the dwelling. But within, as on a previous occasion, there is light, life, and a measure of activity. The light is furnished by a solitary tallow candle, and the life supplied by the same little old man who, on a former occasion, was thrown into a state of unreasonable terror at sight of a certain newspaper advertisement.

It is the same room, its appointments unchanged; the same squalor and dirt, the same bottle upon the same shelf, the same heap of rags in the corner, the same fragments of iron and copper on the floor. The same deal table and scrap of carpet are there, but not arranged as on a former occasion, for now the table is pushed back against the wall, the piece of carpet is flung in a wrinkled heap away from the place which it covered, exposing to view a dark gap in the floor, with a dangling trap-door opening downward. Beside this opening squats the little old man, his eyes as ferret-like and restless as usual, but his features more complacent and less apprehensive than when last we saw him. [115]

By his side is the sputtering tallow candle, and in his hand a long hooked stick, with which he is lowering sundry bags and bundles down the trap, lifting the candle from time to time to peer into the opening, then resuming his work and muttering meanwhile.

"What's *this*?" he soliloquizes, lifting a huge bundle and scrutinizing it carefully. "Ah-h! a gentleman's fine overcoat; *that* must have a nice, safe corner. Ah-h! there you go," lowering the bundle down the aperture and poking it into position with his stick. "It's amazin' what valuables my people finds about the streets," he chuckles facetiously. "'Ere's a—a little silver tea-pot; some rich woman must a-throwed that out. I will put it on the shelf."

Evidently the shelf mentioned is in the cellar below, for this parcel, like the first, is lowered and carefully placed by means of the stick. Other bundles of various sizes follow, and then the old man rests from his labor.

"What a nice little hole that is," he mutters. "Full of rags—nothin' else. Suppose a cop comes in here and looks down, what 'ud he see? Just rags. S'pose he went down, ha! ha! he'd go waist-deep in a bed of old rags, and he wouldn't like the smell overmuch; such a *nice* smell—for cops. He couldn't *see* anything, couldn't *feel* anything but rags, just rags."

[116]

A low tap at the street-door causes the old man to drop his stick and his soliloquy at once. He starts nervously, listens intently for a moment, and then rises cautiously. A long, low whistle evidently reassures him, for with suddenly acquired self-possession he begins to move about.

Swiftly and noiselessly he closes the trap, spreads down the bit of carpet, and replaces the table. Then he shuffles toward the entrance, pulls out the pin from the hole in the door, and peeps out. Nothing is visible but the darkness, and this, somehow; seems to reassure him, for with a snort of impatience he calls out:

"Who knocks?"

"It's Siebel," replies a voice from without. "Open up, old Top."

Instantly the door is unbarred and swung open, admitting a burly ruffian, who fairly staggers under the weight of a monstrous sack which he carries upon his shoulders.

At sight of this bulky burden the old man smiles and rubs his palms together.

"Ah! Josef," he says, reaching out to relieve the new-comer, "a nice load that; a very nice load!"

But the man addressed as Josef retains his hold upon his burden, and, resting himself against it, looks distrustfully at his host.

"It's been a fine evening, Josef," insinuates the old man, his eyes still fixed upon the bag.

"Fair enough," replies Josef gruffly, as he unties the bag and pushes it toward the old man. "Take a look at the stuff, Papa Francoise, and make a bid. I'm dead thirsty."

[117]

Eagerly seizing the bag, Papa Francoise drags it toward the table, closely followed by Josef, and begins a hasty examination of its contents, saying:

"Rags is rags, you know, Josef Siebel. It's not much use to look into 'em; there's nothing here but rags, of course."

"No, course not," with a satirical laugh.

"That's right, Josef; I won't buy nothing but rags,—*never*. I don't want no ill-gotten gains brought to me."

Josef Siebel utters another short, derisive laugh, and discreetly turns his gaze toward the smoky ceiling while Papa begins his investigations. From out the capacious bag he draws a rich shawl, hurriedly examines it, and thrusts it back again.

"The rag-picker can be an honest man as well as another, Josef," continues this virtuous old gentleman, drawing forth a silver soup-ladle and thrusting it back. "These are very good rags, Josef," and he draws out a switch of blonde hair, and gazes upon it admiringly. Then he brings out a handful of rags, examines them ostentatiously by the light of the candle, smells them, and ties up the bag, seeing which Josef withdraws his eyes from the cobwebs overhead and fixes them on the black bottle upon the shelf.

Noting the direction of his gaze, Papa Francoise rests the bag against the table-leg, trots to the shelf, pours a scanty measure from the black bottle into a tin cup, and presents it to Josef with what is meant for an air of gracious hospitality.

"You spoke of thirst, Josef; drink, my friend."

"Umph," mutters the fellow, draining off the liquor at a draught. Then setting the cup hastily down; "Now, old Top, wot's your bid?"

[118]

"Well," replies Papa Francoise, trying to look as if he had not already settled that question with his own mind; "well, Josef I'll give you—I'll give you a dollar and a half."

"The dickens you will!"

Josef makes a stride toward the bag, and lifts it upon his shoulder.

"Stop, Josef!" cries Papa, laying eager hands upon the treasure. "What do you want? That's a good price for rags."

"Bah!" snarls the burly ruffian, turning toward the door, "wot d'ye take me for, ye blasted old fence?"

But Papa has a firm clutch upon the bag.

"Stop, Josef!" he cries eagerly; "let me see," pulling it down from his shoulder and lifting it carefully. "Why, it's *heavier* than I thought. Josef, I'll give you two dollars and a half,—*no more*."

The "no more" is sharply uttered, and evidently Siebel comprehends the meaning behind the words, for he reseats himself sullenly, muttering:

"It ain't enough, ye cursed cantin' old skinflint, but fork it out; I've got to have money."

At this instant there comes a short, sharp, single knock upon the street-door, and Papa hastens to open it, admitting a squalid, blear-eyed girl, or woman, who enters with reluctant step, and sullen demeanor.

"Oh, it's *you*, Nance," says Papa, going back to the table and beginning to count out some money, eyeing the girl keenly meanwhile. "One dollar,—sit down, Nance,—two dollars, fifty; there! Now, Nance," turning sharply toward the girl, "what have you got, eh?"



[119]

"The rag picker can be an honest man as well as another, Josef."—page 117.

"Nothin'," replies Nance sullenly; "nothin' that will suit you. I ain't had no luck."

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"Nobody left nothin' lyin' round loose, I s'pose," says Siebel with a coarse laugh, as he pockets the price of his day's labor. "Wal, ye've come ter a poor place for sympathy, gal." And he rises slowly and shuffles toward the door.

But Papa makes a gesture to stay him.

"Hold on, Josef!" he cries; "wait Nance!"

He seizes the bag, hurries it away into an inner room, and returns panting for breath. Drawing a stool toward the table, he perches himself thereon and leers across at the two sneak thieves.

"So ye ain't had any luck, girl?" he says, in a wheedling tone, "and Josef, here, wants money. Do ye want more than ye've got Josef?"

"Ha ha! *Do I?*" And Josef slaps his pockets suggestively.

"Now listen, both of you. Suppose, I could help you two to earn some money easy and honest, what then?"

"Easy and *honest!*" repeats Siebel, with a snort of derision; "Oh, Lord!"

But the girl leans forward with hungry eyes, saying eagerly: "How? tell us how."

"I'll tell you. Suppose, just suppose, a certain rich lady—*very* rich, mind—being a little in my debt, should come here to-night to see me. And suppose she is very anxious not to be seen by any body—on account of her high position, you know—"

"Oh, lip it livelier!" cries Siebel impatiently. "Stow yer swash."

"Well; suppose you and Nance, here, was to come in sudden and see the lady face to face, why, for fear she might be called on by—say by Nance, she might pay a little, don't you see—"

[121]

But Siebel breaks in impatiently:

"Oh, skip the rubbish! Is there any body to bleed?"

"Is it a safe lay?" queries Nance.

"Yes, yes; it's safe, of course," cries Papa, thus compelled to come down to plain facts.

"Then let's get down to business. Do you expect an angel's visit here to-night?"

"Yes."

"Well, what's yer plan? Out with it: Nance and I are with ye, if ye divvy fair."

Beckoning them to come closer, Papa Francoise leans across the table, and sinking his voice to a harsh whisper, unfolds the plan by which, without danger to themselves, they are to become richer.

It is a pretty plan but—"Man sows; a whirlwind reaps."

CHAPTER XV.

A COUNTERPLOT.

It is a half hour later. The light in the room is increased by a sputtering additional candle, and Papa Francoise, sitting by the deal table, is gazing toward the door, an eager expectant look upon his face.

"If that old woman were here!" he mutters, and then starts forward at the sound of a low hesitating tap.

Hurrying to the door he unbars it with eager haste, and a smile of blandest delight overspreads his yellow face as the new-comer enters. [122]

It is a woman, slender and graceful; a *lady*, who holds up her trailing black garments daintily as she steps across the threshold, repulsing the proffered hand-clasp with a haughty gesture, and gliding away from him while she says in a tone of distressful remonstrance:

"Man, *why* have you sent for me? Don't you know that there is such a thing as a last straw?"

"A last straw!" His voice is a doleful whine, his manner obsequious to servility. "Ah, my child, I wanted to see you so much; your poor mother wanted to see you so much!"

The woman throws back her veil with a gesture of fierce defiance, disclosing the face of Leslie Warburton pale and woe-stricken, but quite as lovely as when it shone upon Stanhope, surrounded by the halo of "Sunlight."

"You hypocrite!" she exclaims scornfully. "Parents do not persecute their children as you and the woman you call my mother have persecuted me. You gave me to the Ulimans when I was but an infant,—that I know,—but the papers signed by you do not speak of me as *your child*. Besides, does human instinct go for nothing? If you were my father would I loathe these meetings? Would I shudder at your touch? Would my whole soul rise in rebellion against your persecutions?"

Her eyes flash upon him and the red blood mounts to her cheeks. In the excitement of the moment she has forgotten her fear. Her voice rises clear and ringing; and Papa Francoise, thinking of two possible listeners concealed not far away, utters a low "sh-h-h-h!"

"Not so loud, my child," he says in an undertone; "not so loud. Ah! you ungrateful girl, we wanted to see you rich and happy, and this is how you thank us," affecting profound grief. "These rich people have taught you to loathe your poor old father!" [123]

He sinks upon the stool as if in utter dejection, wipes away an imaginary tear, and then resumes, in the same guarded tone:

"My dear child, when we gave you to the Ulimans we were very poor, and they were very rich,—a great deal richer than when they died, leaving you only a few thousands."

"Which *you* have already extorted from me! I have given you every dollar I possess and yet you live like beggars."

"And we *are* beggars, my child. Some unfortunate speculations have swept away all our little gains, and now—"

"And now you want more money,—the old story. Listen: you have called me to-night from my husband's home, forced me to steal away from my guests like the veriest criminal, threatening to appear among them if I failed to come. At this moment you, who call yourself my father, stand there gloating and triumphant because of the power you hold over me. I knew you were capable of keeping your word, and rather than have my husband's home desecrated by such presence as yours, I am here. But I have come for the last time—"

"No, my child, oh!—"

But she pays no heed to his expostulations.

"I have come *for the last time!*" she says with fierce decision. "I have come to tell you that from this moment I defy you!"

"Softly, my dear; sh-h-h!"

His face, in spite of his efforts to retain its benign expression, is growing vindictive and cruel. He comes toward her with slow cat-like movements. [124]

But she glides backward as he advances, and, putting the table between herself and him, she

hurries on, never heeding that she has, by this movement, increased the distance from the outer door—and safety.

“You have carried your game too far!” she says. “When you first appeared before me, so soon after the loss of my adopted parents that it would seem you were waiting for that event—”

“So we were, my child,” he interrupts, “for we had promised not to come near you during their lifetime.”

“You had promised *never* to approach me, *never* to claim me, as the documents I found among my mother’s—among Mrs. Uliman’s papers prove. Oh,” she cries, wringing her hands and lifting her fair face heavenward; “oh, my mother! my dear, sweet, gentle mother! Oh, my father! the truest, the tenderest a wretched orphan ever had on earth! that Death should take *you*, and Life bring me such creatures to fill your places! But they cannot, they never shall!”

“Oh, good Lord!” mutters Papa under his breath, “those fools upstairs will hear too much!”

But Leslie’s indignation has swallowed up all thought of caution, and her words pour out torrent-like.

“Oh, if I had but denounced you at the first!” she cries; “or forced you to prove your claim! Oh, if you had shown yourselves *then* in all your greed and heartlessness! But while I was Leslie Uliman, with only a moderate fortune, you were content to take what I could give, and not press what you are pleased to term your *claim* upon my affections. Affections! The word is mockery from your lips! In consideration of the large sums I paid you, you promised never to approach me in the future, and I, fool that I was, believing myself free from you, married David Warburton, only to find myself again your victim, to know you at last in all your baseness.”

[125]

Papa Francoise, unable to stem the tide of her eloquence, shows signs of anger, but she never heeds him.

“Since I became the wife of a rich man, you have been my constant torment and terror. Threatening and wheedling by turns, black-mailing constantly, you have drained my purse, you have made my life a burden. And I came here to-night to say, I will have no more of your persecution! All of *my* money has been paid into your hands, but not one dollar of my *husband’s* wealth shall ever come to you from me. I swear it!”

The old man again moves nearer.

“Ah, ungrateful girl!” he cries, feigning the utmost grief; “ah, unkind girl!”

And his affectation of sorrow causes two unseen observers to grin with delight, and brings to Leslie’s countenance an expression of intense disgust.

Moving back as he approaches, she throws up her head with an impatient gesture, and the veil which has covered it falls to her shoulders, revealing even by that dim light, the glisten of jewels in her ears—great, gleaming diamonds, which she, in her haste and agitation, has forgotten to remove before setting out upon this unsafe errand.

It is a most unfortunate movement, for two pair of eyes are peering down from directly above her, and two pair of avaricious hands itch to clutch the shining treasures.

Obedying Papa’s instructions, Josef Siebel and the girl Nance, had mounted the rickety stairway which they reached through a closet-like ante-room opening from the large one occupied by Papa and Leslie. And having stationed themselves near the top of the stairs they awaited there the coming of the lady who, surprised by their presence, was to proffer them hush-money with a liberal hand; but—

[126]

“The best-laid plans of men and mice gang aft a’leg.”

And Papa Francoise has not anticipated the spirited outbreak with which Leslie has astonished him. Startled by this, and fearful that, by a false move, he should entirely lose his power over her, he has made feeble efforts to stay the flow of her speech and neglected to give the signal for which the concealed sneak thieves have waited, until it was too late.

Crouched on the floor near the stairway, the two thieves have heard the entrance of Leslie, heard the hum of conversation, low and indistinct at first, until the voice of Leslie, rising high and clear, startled Siebel into a listening attitude. Touching Nance on the arm, he begins slowly to drag himself along the floor to where a faint ray of light tells him there is a place of observation.

The floor is exceedingly dilapidated, and the ceiling below warped and sieve-like; and, having reached the chink in the floor, Siebel finds himself able to look directly down upon Leslie as she stands near the table.

In another moment Nance is beside him, and then the two faces are glued to the floor, their eyes taking in the scene below, their ears listening greedily.

At first they listen with simple curiosity; then with astonished interest; then with intense satisfaction at Papa’s evident discomfiture, for they hate him as the slave ever hates his tyrant.

When the veil falls from Leslie’s head, Siebel’s quick eye is the first to catch the shine of the diamonds in her ears. He stifles an exclamation, looks again, and then grasps the arm of his

[127]

confederate:

"Nance," he whispers eagerly, "Nance, look—in her ears."

The girl peers down, and fairly gasps.

"Shiners!" she whispers; "ah, they make my eyes water!"

"They make my fingers itch," he returns; "d'ye twig, gal?"

"Eh?"

Drawing her away from the aperture, he says, in a hoarse whisper:

"Gal, I've got a plan that'll lay over old Beelzebub's down there, if we kin only git the chance ter play it. See here, Nance, are ye willin' to make a bold stroke fer them shiners?"

"How?"

"By surprisin' 'em. If I'll floor the old man, can't you tackle the gal?"

Nance takes a moment for consideration; they exchange a few more whispered words and then begin to creep stealthily toward the stairway.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DETECTIVE TRAPPED.

While the thieves are gazing upon her from above, Leslie Warburton, unconscious of this new danger that threatens her, replaces her veil and continues to address the old man.

"Once more, and for the last time," she pleads, "I ask you to tell me the truth. Give up this claim of kinship. If you were my father, something in my heart would tell me so; God has not created me lower than the brutes. What do you know of my parentage? You must possess some knowledge. Man, I would go upon my knees to you to learn the truth!"

[128]

Papa is silent a moment, then he begins to cough violently. It is the signal for the two thieves to enter, but they do not respond as promptly as Papa could wish.

"My child," he begins feebly, but leaves the sentence unfinished at the sound of a double knock upon the door.

"Ah-h-h!" he cries with evident relief, "here comes your mother; she can tell you how wrong you are."

And he hastens to admit an old woman, literally lost in an ample old-fashioned cloak, and bearing in her arms a long and apparently heavy bundle.

"Ah," says the old hypocrite, "here you are at last, after being at the toil of the poor. Come in, old woman, here is our proud girl come to see us." Then as his eyes rest upon the bundle, he grasps her wrist and hisses in her ear: "You old fool! to bring *that* here."

"I had to do it," she retorts in a whisper; "there are cops in the alleys."

With a fierce gesture toward the rear door, Papa seizes the bundle, saying:

"Why, it is very heavy; old iron, I suppose; and how horrid those old rags smell. We must take them away, old woman."

And with a jerk of the head which, evidently, she understands, he turns toward the aforementioned door, and they bear the big bundle out between them.

Perhaps it is the flickering light, perhaps it is her disordered fancy, but as they bear their burden through the doorway, Leslie Warburton half believes that she sees it move. A moment later she starts forward, her face blanched, her eyes distended.

[129]

"Oh, am I losing my senses?" she cries, "or *did* I hear a child's voice, a voice like my little Daisy's, calling 'mamma?'"

A moment she listens, but no child's voice breaks the stillness; even Papa and Mamma Francoise are silent in the room without.

A sudden feeling of terror possesses Leslie.

"Oh, these wicked people are driving me mad!" she murmurs brokenly. "*Anything* is better than this. I will go home and confess all to my husband. I will brave the worst, rather than be so tortured!"

Drawing her cloak about her, she makes a step toward the door.

Only a single step, for strong hands seize her from behind, and, uttering a shriek of terror, she

sees a ferocious face close to her own, feels a clutch upon her throat, and is struggling between two fierce assailants.

"Get on to the shiners, gal," commands Siebel, as he pinions her arms with his powerful hands.

Again Leslie utters a cry for help, and what follows is the work of a moment.

The outer door, left unbarred after the entrance of Mamma Francoise, is dashed open and a man attired as a sailor bounds into the room. At the same moment Papa and Mamma Francoise rush upon the scene.

"Stop, Josef, you demon, stop!" cries Papa wildly, and scarce noticing the stranger in their midst; while the sailor, without uttering a word, hurls himself upon Leslie's assailants.

Then follows a moment of confusion, a wild struggle for the mastery, which ends soon in a horrible tableau. [130]

Near the door stands Papa Francoise, his face livid, his teeth chattering, his foot poised for instant flight. In the corner, borne down by the force and fury of Mamma Francoise, the girl, Nance, lies prostrate, her throat still in the clutch of the virago, whose face bears bloody evidence that Nance has not succumbed without a struggle. In the center of the room stands Alan Warburton, one arm supporting the half fainting form of Leslie, the other hanging limp by his side; and at his feet, ghastly and horrible, lies the form of Josef Siebel, his skull crushed out of all semblance to humanity, and a bar of rusty iron lying close beside him.

There is a moment of awful stillness in the room.

Then Leslie Warburton's strong nature asserts itself. Withdrawing from Alan's supporting arm, she fixes her eyes upon his face.

"Oh, Alan," she says, "you followed—"

"I followed you? Yes," he answers sternly. "Hush!" as she is about to speak, "this is no time for words."

There is a shout from the street, and the sound of approaching footsteps. Papa Francoise seems galvanized into new life.

"The police!" he cries, springing through the door by which he has lately entered. Mamma Francoise, releasing her hold upon the girl, Nance, bounds up in affright, and hurries after her partner in iniquity; while Nance, who evidently fears her less than she dreads the police, loses no time in following the pair, leaving Alan and Leslie alone, with the dead man at their feet.



"There is a moment of awful stillness in the room."—page 130. [131]

The approaching footsteps come nearer, and Alan, seizing Leslie by the arm, drags her toward the door by which the others have escaped. [132]

"Go!" he says fiercely, "the police are coming; go, for the sake of the name you bear, for your husband's sake, go! go!"

As he forces her resisting form across the threshold she turns upon him a face of piteous appeal.

"Alan! And you—"

His lip curls scornfully.

"I am not a *woman*," he says impatiently; "*go, or—*"

Some one is entering at the outer doorway. He pushes her fiercely out into the rear room, from which he knows there is a means of exit, closes the door, and turns swiftly to face the intruders.

Silly Charlie has crossed the threshold just in time to see Leslie as she disappears through the opposite door. He has one swift glimpse of the fair vanishing face, and then turns suddenly, and with a sound indicative of extreme terror, brings himself into violent contact with Van Vernet who is close behind.

Before he has so much as obtained a glimpse of the scene, Vernet finds his legs flying from under him, and in another moment is rolling upon the floor, closely locked in the embrace of Silly Charlie, who, in his terror, seems to mistake him for an enemy.

When he has finally released himself from the grasp of the seeming idiot, and is able to look about him, Van Vernet sees only a dead man upon the floor, and a living one standing at bay, with his back against a closed door, a deal table before him serving as barricade, and, in his hand, a bar of rusty iron. There is no trace of the Francoises, and nothing to indicate the recent presence of Leslie Warburton.

Struggling away from the embrace of Silly Charlie, and bringing himself slowly to his feet, Vernet says angrily: [133]

"You confounded idiot, what do you mean?"

But the "idiot" only sits upon the floor and stares stupidly, and Vernet turns from him to glance about the room. At sight of the dead man he starts eagerly forward.

"What's this?" he queries sharply, glancing down at the body and drawing a pistol with a quick movement. "A murder!" And he levels the weapon at Alan, dropping upon one knee, at the same instant, and with the unoccupied hand touching the face of the dead man. "A murder! yes; and just committed. Don't you stir, my man," as Alan makes a slight movement, "I'm a dead shot. This is your work, and it seems that we heard this poor fellow's death-cry. Skull crushed in. Done by that bar of iron in your hand, of course. Well, you won't crack any more skulls with *that*."

While Vernet delivers himself thus, Alan Warburton is thinking vigorously, his eyes, meanwhile, roving about the room in search of some avenue of escape other than the door over which he stands guard, and through which, he is resolved, the detective shall not pass, at least until Leslie has made good her escape from the vicinity. He is unarmed, save for the bar of iron, but he is no coward, and he resolves to make a fight for Leslie's honor and his own liberty.

Gazing thus about him he sees the seeming idiot rise from his crouching posture and creep behind Vernet, beginning, over that officer's shoulder, a series of strange gestures.

Shaking his fist defiantly behind Vernet's left ear, in token, Alan conjectures, of his opposition to that gentleman, he makes a conciliatory gesture towards Alan. And then, placing his fingers upon his lips, he shakes his head, and points again to Vernet, who now rises from his examination of the body, and calls over his shoulder: [134]

"Charlie, come here."

Leering and laughing, Charlie comes promptly forward.

"Ugh!" he says, making a detour around the body of Siebel, "Charlie was scared. Charlie don't like dead folks." And he plants himself squarely before Vernet, grinning and staring at Alan the while.

"Out of my range, fool!" cries Vernet angrily. And then, as Charlie springs aside with absurd alacrity, he says to Alan: "Fellow, throw down that iron."

But Alan Warburton gives no sign that he hears the command. He has not recognized the voice of Vernet, and is not aware of the man's identity, but he has an instinctive notion that his address will not be in keeping with his nautical costume, and he is not an adept at dissimulation.

"You won't eh?" pursues Vernet mockingly. "You are very mum? and no wonder."

"Mum, mum," chants Silly Charlie, approaching Alan with gingerly steps, and peering curiously into his face.

Then bending suddenly forward he whispers quickly: "*Keep mum!*" and bursting into an idiotic laugh, *pirouettes* back to the side of Vernet.

"Charlie," says Vernet suddenly, and without once removing his eyes from Alan's face, "put your hand in my side pocket—no, no! the other one," as Charlie makes a sudden dive into the pocket nearest him. "That's right; now pull out the handcuffs, and take out the rope."

Charlie obeys eagerly, and examines the handcuffs with evident delight.

"Charlie" says Vernet, "you and I have got to make this man a prisoner. If we do, you will get your star and uniform." [135]

"Hooray!" cries Charlie, fairly dancing with delight. "Gimme, gum—gimme knife!"

"Why, the blood-thirsty fool!" exclaims Vernet. "No, no, Charlie; we must put on these handcuffs, and rope his feet."

"Hoop la!" cries Charlie; "gimme rope."

Seizing the rope from Vernet's hand, he advances toward Alan, gesticulating savagely. Suddenly Alan raises the iron bar and menaces him. Charlie stops a moment, then flinging aside the rope he makes a swift spring, hurling himself upon Alan with such sudden force that the latter loses his guard for a moment, and then Van Vernet is upon him. He makes such resistance as a brave man may, when he has a single hand for defence and two against him, but he is borne down, handcuffed, and bound.

As he lies fettered and helpless, in close proximity to the murdered sneak thief, Alan Warburton's eyes rest wonderingly upon Silly Charlie, for during the struggle that strange genius has contrived to whisper in his ear these words:

"Don't resist—keep silence—we are gaining time for her!"

"Charlie," says Vernet, "that's a good bit of work, and I'm proud of you. Now, let's make our prisoner more comfortable."

Together they lift Alan, and place him in a chair near the centre of the room. Then, finding it impossible to make him open his lips, Van Vernet begins a survey of the premises.

"We must get one or two of my men here," he says, after a few moments of silent investigation. "Charlie, can I trust you to go back to the place where we left them?"

Charlie nods confidently, and makes a prompt movement toward the door. Then suddenly he stops and points upward with a half terrified air. [136]

"Some one's up there," he whispers.

"What's that, Charlie?"

"Somebody's there. Charlie heard 'em."

Van Vernet hesitates a moment, looks first at the prisoner, then at Charlie, and slowly draws forth his dark lantern.

"I'll go up and see," he says half reluctantly, and making his pistol ready for use. "Watch the prisoner, Charlie."

But Silly Charlie follows Vernet's movements with his eyes until he has passed through the low door leading to the stairway. Then, gliding stealthily to the door, he assures himself that Vernet is already half-way up the stairs. The next moment he is standing beside the prisoner.

"Hist, Mr. Warburton!"

"Ah! who—," Alan Warburton checks himself suddenly.

"Hush!" says this strangest of all simpletons, in a low whisper, at the same moment beginning to work rapidly at the rope which binds Alan's feet. "Be silent and act as I bid you; I intend to help you out of this. There," rising and searching about his person, "the ropes are loosened, you can shake them off in a moment. Now, the darbies."

He produces a key which unlocks the handcuffs.

"Now, you are free, but remain as you are till I give you the signal,—ah!"

The tiny key has slipped through his fingers and fallen to the floor. It is just upon the edge of the scrap of dirty carpet; as he stoops to take it up, it catches in a fringe, and in extricating it the carpet becomes a trifle displaced.

Something underneath it strikes the eye of the seeming idiot. He bends closer, and then drags the carpet quite away, seizes the candle, and springs the trap which he has just discovered. Holding the candle above the opening, he looks down, and then, with a low chuckle, spreads the carpet smoothly over it, rises to his feet, and listens. [137]

He hears footsteps crossing the rickety floor above. Van Vernet, having failed to find what he sought for aloft, is about to descend.

Stepping quickly to Alan's side, Silly Charlie whispers:

"Fortune favors us. We have got Vernet trapped."

"*Vernet!*" Alan Warburton starts and the perspiration comes out on his forehead.

Is this man who is his captor, Van Vernet? Heavens! what a complication, what a misfortune! And this other,—this wisest of all idiots, who calls him by name; who knows the reason for his presence, then, perhaps, knows Leslie herself; who, without any motive apparent, is acting so strange a part, who is *he*?

Mentally thanking the inspiration which led him to retain his incognito while negotiating with Van Vernet, Alan's eyes still follow the movements of Silly Charlie.

As he gazes, Vernet enters the room, a look of disappointment and disgust upon his face.

"Charlie, you were scared at the rats," he says; "there's nothing else there."

The trap is directly between him and the prisoner, and as he walks toward it, Silly Charlie fairly laughs with delight.

"What are you—"

The sentence is never finished. Vernet's foot has pressed the yielding carpet; he clutches the air wildly, and disappears like a clown in a pantomime.

"Now," whispers Silly Charlie, "off with your fetters, Warburton, and I will guide you out of this place. You are not entirely safe yet." [138]

Up from the trap comes a yell loud enough to waken the seven sleepers, and suddenly, from without, comes an answering cry.

"It's Vernet's men," says Silly Charlie. "Now, Warburton, your safety depends upon your wind and speed. Come!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A PROMISE TO THE DEAD.

Guided by Silly Charlie, Alan Warburton finds himself hurrying through crooked streets and dismal alleys, for what seems to him an interminable distance. Now they run forward swiftly; now halt suddenly, while Charlie creeps ahead to reconnoiter the ground over which they must go. At last they have passed the Rubicon, and halting at the corner of a wider street than any they have as yet traversed, Alan's strange guide says,

"You are tolerably safe now, Mr. Warburton; at least you are not likely to be overtaken by Vernet or his men. You are still a long distance from home, however, and possibly the way is unfamiliar. I would pilot you further, but must hurry back to see how Vernet is coming out."



"Vernet's foot has pressed the yielding carpet; he clutches the air wildly, and disappears."—page 137.

For the first time Alan Warburton, the self-possessed, polished man of society, is at a loss for words. Society has given him no training, taught him no lessons applicable to such emergencies as this. [140]

"Of one thing you must be warned," continues the guide. "Van Vernet is a sleuth-hound on a criminal secret, and he considers you a criminal. He has seen you standing above that dead man with a bar of iron in your hand—did you know that bar of iron was smeared with blood, and that wisps of human hair clung to its surface? Never mind; I do not accuse you. I do not ask you to explain your presence there. You have escaped from Van Vernet, and he will never forgive you for it. He will hunt you down, if possible. You know the man?"

"I never saw his face until to-night."

"What! and yet, two hours ago, he was at your brother's house, a guest!"

"True. My dear sir, I am deeply indebted to you, but just now my gratitude is swallowed up in amazement. In Heaven's name, who are you, that you know so much?"

"'Silly Charlie' is what they call me in these alleys, and I pass for an idiot."

"But you are anything but what you 'pass for.' You have puzzled me, and outwitted Van Vernet. Tell me who you are. Tell me how I can reward your services."

"In serving you to-night, Mr. Warburton, I have also served myself. As to who I am, it cannot matter to you."

"That must be as you will,"—Alan is beginning to recover his conventional courtesy—"but at least tell me how I may discharge my obligations to you. *That* does concern me."

Alan's companion ponders a moment, and then says:

"Perhaps we had better be frank, Mr. Warburton. You are a gentleman, and, I trust, so am I. If you owe me anything, you can discharge your debt by answering a single question." [141]

"Ask it."

"Van Vernet was a guest at your masquerade—why was he there?"

The question startles Alan Warburton, but he answers after a moment's reflection:

"He came at my invitation, and on a matter of business."

"And yet you say that you never saw his face before?"

"True; our business was arranged through third parties, and by correspondence. He came into my presence, for the first time, masked. Until I saw his face in that hovel yonder, I had never seen it."

"And you?"

"A kind fortune has favored me. This dress I wore as a masquerade costume; over it I threw a black and scarlet domino. Van Vernet saw me in that domino, and with a mask before my face."

"You may thank your stars for that, and for your silence at the hovel. If you had opened your lips then, your voice might have betrayed you."

"It would have betrayed the fact that I was no seaman, at the least, and that is why I had resolved upon silence as the safest course."

"You have come out of this night's business most fortunately. But you still have reason to fear Vernet. Your very silence may cause him to suspect you of playing a part. Your features are photographed upon his memory; alter the cut of your whiskers or, better still, give your face a clean shave; crop your hair, and above all leave the city until this affair blows over." [142]

"Thank you," Alan replies; "I feel that your advice is good." Then, after a struggle with his pride, he adds:

"I could easily clear myself of so monstrous a charge as that which Vernet would prefer against me, but, for certain reasons, I would prefer not to make a statement of the case."

"I comprehend."

Again Alan is startled out of his dignity. "You were the first to arrive in response to that cry for help to-night?" he begins.

"The first, after you."

"You saw those who fled?"

"I saw only one fugitive. Mr. Warburton, I know what you would ask. I saw and recognized your brother's wife. I understood your actions; you were guarding her retreat at the risk of your own life or honor. You are a brave man!"

Alan's tone is a trifle haughty as he answers:

"In knowing Mrs. Warburton and myself, you have us at a disadvantage. In having seen us as you saw us to-night, we are absolutely in your power, should you choose to be unscrupulous. Under these circumstances, I have a right to demand the name of a man who knows *me* so intimately. I have a right to know why you followed us, or me, to that house to-night?"

His companion laughs good-naturedly.

"In spite of your airs, Mr. Warburton," he says candidly, "you would be a fine fellow if you were not—such a prig. So you demand an explanation. Well, here it is, at least as much as you will need to enlighten you. Who am I? I am a friend to all honest men. Why did I follow you? Neither Vernet nor myself followed you or the lady. Vernet was there as the leader of an organized Raid. I was there—ahem! as a pilot for Vernet. *You* were there as a spy upon the lady. Mrs. Warburton's presence remains to be accounted for. And now, Mr. Warburton, adieu. You are out of present danger; if I find that Mrs. Warburton has not fared so well, you will hear from me again. If otherwise, you look your last upon Silly Charlie." [143]

With a mocking laugh he turns, and pausing at the corner to wave his hand in farewell, he darts away in the direction whence he came.

Puzzled, chagrined, his brain teeming with strange thoughts, Alan Warburton turns homeward.

What is it that has come upon him this night? Less than two hours ago, an aristocrat, proud to a fault, with an unblemished name, and with nothing to fear or to conceal. Now, stealing through the dark streets like an outcast, his pride humbled to the dust, his breast burdened with a double secret, accused of murder, creeping from the police, a hunted man! To-morrow the town will be flooded with descriptions of this escaped sailor. To-morrow he must change his appearance, must flee the city.

And all because of his zeal for the family honor; all because of his brother's wife, and her horrible secret! To-night charity hath no place in Alan Warburton's heart.

Meanwhile, Van Vernet, covered with rags and dust, sickened by the foul smell of the vault into which he has been precipitated, and boiling over with wrath, is being rescued from his absurd and uncomfortable position by three policemen, who, being sent forward to ascertain if possible the cause of their leader's prolonged absence, have stumbled upon him in the very nick of time.

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As he emerges from the trap, by the aid of the same rope with which not long before he had secured Alan Warburton's feet, he presents a most ludicrous appearance. His hat has been lost in the darkness of the cellar, and his head is plentifully decorated with rags and feathers, which have adhered tenaciously to his disarranged locks. He is smeared with dirt, pallid from the stench, nauseated, chagrined, wrathful.

Instinctively he comprehends the situation. The simpleton has played him false, the prisoner has escaped.

On the floor lie the handcuffs which Alan Warburton has shaken off as he fled. He picks them up and examines them eagerly. Then an imprecation breaks from his lips. They have been *unlocked!* And by whom? Not by the man who wore them; that was impossible.

Suddenly, flinging down the handcuffs, he turns to the policemen.

"Two men have escaped from this house, after throwing me into that cellar," he says rapidly. "They must be overtaken—a sailor and a pretended simpleton tricked out in rags and tinsel. After them, boys; out by that door. They can't be far away. Capture them *alive or dead!*"

The door by which Alan and his rescuer made their exit stands invitingly open, and the three officers, promptly obeying their leader, set off in pursuit of the sailor and the simpleton.

Left alone, Van Vernet plucks the extempore adornments from his head and person, and meditates ruefully, almost forgetting the original Raid in the chagrin of his present failure.

He goes to the side of the murdered man, who still lies as he had fallen, and looks down upon him.

"Ah, my fine fellow," he mutters, "you give me a chance to redeem myself. If I have been outwitted to-night by a sailor and a fool, you and I will have fine revenge. A sailor! Ah, it was no common sailor, if I may trust my eyes and my senses. The hands were too white and soft; the feet too small and daintily clad; the face, in spite of the low-drawn cap and the tattooing, was too aristocratic and too *clean*. And the fool! Ah, it is no common fool who carries keys that unlock our new patent handcuffs, and who managed this rescue so cleverly. For once, Van Vernet has found his match! But the scales shall turn. The man who killed *you*, my lad, and the man who outwitted *me*, shall be found and punished, or Van Vernet will have lost his skill!"

[145]

CHAPTER XVIII.

VERNET DISCOMFITED.

While the discomfited Vernet kept watch alone with the dead, his men were running up and down the alleys, listening, peering, searching in by-places, in the hope of finding the hiding-place, or to overtake the flight, of the fugitive sailor and his idiot guide.

More than an hour they consumed in this search, and then they returned to their superior officer to report their utter failure.

"It is what I expected," said Vernet, with severe philosophy. "Those fellows are no common rascals. They have spoiled our Raid; before this, every rogue in the vicinity has been warned. I would not give a copper for all we can capture now."

[146]

And Vernet was right, the Raid was a failure. Mustering his men, he made the tour of the streets and alleys, but everywhere an unnatural silence reigned. The Thieves' Tavern was fast shut and

quite silent; the drinking dens, the streets and cellars, where riot and infamy reigned, were under the influence of a silent spell.

It was only the yelp of a dog, heard here and there as Silly Charlie and Alan Warburton sped through the streets and lanes, but its effect was magical. It told the rioters, the crooks and outlaws in hiding, that there was danger abroad,—that the police were among them. And their orgies were hushed, their haunts became silent and tenantless; while every man who had anything to fear from the hands of justice—and what man among them had not?—slunk away to his secret hiding-place, and laid a fierce clutch upon revolver or knife.

The Raid was an utter failure; and Van Vernet, as he led his men ruefully homeward, little dreamed of the cause of the failure.

This night's work, which had been pre-supposed a sure success, had been spoiled by a fool. A most unusual fool,—of that Vernet was fully aware; only a fool as he played his part. But he had played it successfully.

Vernet had been duped by this seeming idiot, and foiled by the sailor-assassin. Of this he savagely assured himself, in the depths of his chagrin.

But, shrewd man as he was, he never once imagined that under the rags and tinsel, the dirt and disfigurement of the fool, the strong will and active brain of *Richard Stanhope* were arrayed against him; nor dreamed that "Warburton, the aristocrat," the man who had wounded his pride and looked down upon him as an inferior, had escaped from his clutches in the garb of a common sailor. [147]

Arrived at head-quarters, Vernet laid before his Chief a full report of the night's misadventures, and concluded his narrative thus:

"It has never before been my misfortune to report so complete a failure. But the affair shall not end here. I have my theory; I intend to run down these two men, and I believe they will be worth the trouble I shall take on their account. They were both shams, I am sure. The sailor never saw a masthead; he could not even act his part. The other—well, he played the fool to perfection, and—he outwitted *me*."

One thing troubled Vernet not a little. Richard Stanhope did not make a late appearance at the Agency. He did not come at all that night, or rather that morning. And Vernet speculated much as to the possible cause of this long delay.

It was late in the day when Stanhope finally presented himself, and then he entered the outer office alert, careless, *debonnaire* as usual; looking like a man with an untroubled conscience, who has passed the long night in peaceful repose.

Vernet, who had arrived at the office but a moment before, lifted his face from the newspaper he held and cast upon his *confreere* an inquiring glance.

But Dick Stanhope was blind to its meaning. With his usual easy morning salutation to all in the room, he passed them, and applied for admittance at the door of his Chief's private office. It was promptly opened to him, and he walked into the presence of his superior as jauntily as if he had not, by his unaccountable absence, spoiled the most important Raid of the season.

It was a long interview, and as toward its close the sounds of uproarious laughter penetrated to the ears of the loungers in the outer room, Van Vernet bit his lip with vexation. Evidently the Chief was not visiting his displeasure too severely upon his dilatory favorite. [148]

Vernet's cheeks burned as he realized how utterly he had failed. Not only had he heaped confusion upon himself, but he had not succeeded in lessening Stanhope's claim to favoritism by bringing upon him the displeasure of the Agency.

While he sat, still tormented by this bitter thought, Stanhope re-entered the room, and walking straight up to Vernet brought his hand down upon the shoulder of that gentleman with emphatic heartiness, while he said, his eyes fairly dancing with mischief, and every other feature preternaturally solemn:

"I say, Van, old fellow, how do you like conducting a Raid?"

It was a moment of humiliation for Van Vernet. But he, like Stanhope, was a skilled actor, and he lifted his eyes to the face of his inquisitor and answered with a careless jest, while he realized that in this game against Richard Stanhope he had played his first hand, and had lost.

"It shall not remain thus," he assured himself fiercely; "I'll play as many trumps as Dick Stanhope, before our little game ends!"

When Walter Parks returned from his two days' absence, and called at the office to receive the decisions of the two detectives, the Chief said:

"You may consider yourself sure of both men, after a little. Dick Stanhope, whose case promised to be a very short one, has asked for more time. And Van Vernet is in hot chase after two sly fellows, and won't give up until they are trapped. You may be sure of them both, however. And in [149]

order that they may start fair, after their present work is done, I have arranged that you meet them here to-night, and let them listen together to your statement."

"I like the idea," said Walter Parks earnestly, "and I will be here at the appointed time."

That evening, Vernet and Stanhope,—the former grave, courteous, and attentive; the latter cool, careless, and inconsequent as usual,—sat listening to the story of Arthur Pearson's mysterious death, told with all its details.

As the tale progressed, Van Vernet became more attentive, more eager, his eyes, flashing with excitement, following every gesture, noting every look that crossed the face of the narrator. But Dick Stanhope sat in the most careless of lounging attitudes; his eyes half closed or wandering idly about the room; his whole manner that of an individual rather more bored than interested.

"It's a difficult case," said Van Vernet, when the story was done. "It will be long and tedious. But as soon as I have found the man or men I am looking for, I will undertake it. And if the murderer is above ground, I do not anticipate failure."

But Stanhope only said:

"I don't know when I shall be at your disposal. The affair I have in hand is not progressing. Your case looks to me like a dubious one,—the chances are ninety to one against you. But when I am at liberty, if Van here has not already solved the mystery, I'll do my level best for you."

CHAPTER XIX.

[150]

CALLED TO ACCOUNT.

It was a long road for a woman to travel at that unconventional hour, but Leslie Warburton was fleet-footed, and fear and excitement lent her strength.

Necessity had taught her how to enter and escape from the dangerous maze where the people who claimed a right in her existence dwelt. And on being forced to flee by her haughty brother-in-law, she bowed her head and wrapping herself in her dark cloak sped away through the night.

She had little fear of being missed by her guests,—a masquerade affords latitude impossible to any other gathering, and contrary to the usual custom, the maskers were to continue their *incognito* until the cotillion began. If her guests missed her, she would be supposed to be in some other apartment. If she were missed by Winnie, that little lady would say: "She is with Archibald, of course."

Nevertheless, it was an unsafe journey. But she accomplished it, and arrived, panting, weary, and filled with a terrible dread at the thought of the exposure that must follow her encounter with Alan.

They were dancing still, her light-hearted guests, and Leslie resumed her Sunlight robes, and going back to her place among them forced herself to smile and seem to be gay, while her heart grew every moment heavier with its burden of fear and dire foreboding.

Anxiously she watched the throng, hoping, yet dreading, to see the sailor costume of Alan, fearing lest, in spite of his high courage, disaster had overtaken him.

[151]

It was in the grey of morning, and her guests were dispersing, when Alan Warburton reappeared. He was muffled as at first, in the black and scarlet domino, and he moved with the slow languor of one utterly exhausted or worn with pain.

At length it was over; the last guest had departed, the house was silent, and Leslie and Alan stood face to face under the soft light of the library chandelier.

During the ceremonies of departure, he had remained constantly near her. And when they were left, at last, with only Winnie French beside them, Leslie, seeing that the interview was inevitable, had asked Winnie to look in upon little Daisy, adding, as the girl, with a gay jest, turned to go:

"I will join you there soon, Winnie, dear; just now Alan and I have a little to say about some things that have occurred to-night."

Tossing a kiss to Leslie, and bestowing a grimace upon Alan as he held open the door for her exit, Winnie had *pirouetted* out of the room, and sped up the broad stairway as fleetly as if her little feet were not weary with five hours' dancing.

Then Leslie, with a stately gesture, had led the way to the library.

Silently, and as if by one accord, they paused under the chandelier, and each gazed into the face of the other.

His eyes met hers, stern, accusing, and darkened with pain; while she—her bearing was proud as his, her face mournful, her eyes resolute, her lips set in firm lines. She looked neither criminal

nor penitent; she was a woman driven to bay, and she would fight rather than flee.

Looking him full in the face, she made no effort to break the silence. Seeing which, Alan Warburton said: [152]

"Madam, you play your part well. You are not now the nocturnal wanderer menaced by a danger—"

"From which you rescued me," she interrupts, her face softening. "Alan, it was a brave deed, and I thank you a thousand times!"

"I do not desire your gratitude, Madam. I could have done no less, and would do yet more to save from disgrace the name we bear in common. Was your absence noted? Did you return safely and secretly?"

"I have not been missed, and I returned as safely and as secretly as I went."

Her voice was calm, her countenance had hardened as at first.

"Madam, let us understand each other. One year ago the name of Warburton had never known a stain; now—"

He let the wrath in his eyes, the scorn in his face, finish what his lips left unsaid.

But the eyes of his beautiful opponent flashed him back scorn for scorn.

"Now," she said, with calm contempt in her voice, "now, the proudest man of the Warburton race has stepped down from his pedestal to play the spy, and upon a woman! I thank you for rescuing me, Alan Warburton, but I have no thanks to offer for *that!*"

"A spy!" He winced as his lips framed the word. "We are calling hard names, Mrs. Warburton. If I was a spy in that house, *what* were you! I *have* been a spy upon your actions, and I have seen that which has caused me to blush for my brother's wife, and tremble for my brother's honor. More than once I have seen you leave this house, and return to it, clandestinely. It was one of these secret expeditions, which I discovered by the merest chance, that aroused my watchfulness. More than once have letters passed to and fro through some disreputable-looking messenger. To-night, for the first time, I discovered *where* you paid your visits, but not to *whom*. To-night I traced you to the vilest den in all the city. Madam, this mystery must be cleared up. What wretched secret have you brought into my brother's house? What sin or shame are you hiding under his name? What is this disgrace that is likely to burst upon us at any moment?" [153]

Slowly she moved toward him, looking straight into his angry, scornful face. Slowly she answered:

"Alan Warburton, you have appointed yourself my accuser; you shall not be my judge. I am answerable to you for nothing. From this moment I owe you neither courtesy nor gratitude. I *have* a secret, but it shall be told to my husband, not to you. If I have done wrong, I have wronged him, not you. You have insulted me under my own roof to-night, for the last time. I will tell my story to Archibald now; he shall judge between us."

She turned away, but he laid a detaining hand upon her arm.

"Stop!" he said, "you must not go to Archibald with this; you shall not!"

"Shall not!" she exclaimed scornfully; "and who will prevent it?"

"I will prevent it. Woman, have you neither heart nor conscience? Would you add murder to your list of transgressions?"

"Let me go, Alan Warburton," she answered impatiently; "I have done with you."

"But I have not done with you! Oh, you know my brother well; he is trusting, confiding, blind where you are concerned. He believes in your truth, and he must continue so to believe. He must not hear of this night's work." [154]

"But he shall; every word of it."

"Every word! Take care, Mrs. Warburton. Will you tell him of the lover who was here to-night, disguised as a woman, the better to hover about you?"

"You wretch!" She threw off his restraining hand and turned upon him, her eyes blazing. Then, after a moment, the fierce look of indignation gave place to a smile of contempt.

"Yes," she said, turning again toward the door, "I shall tell him of that too."

"Then you will give him his death-blow; understand that! Yesterday, when his physician visited him, he told us the truth. Archibald's life is short at best; any shock, any strong emotion or undue excitement, will cause his death. Quiet and rest are indispensable. To-morrow—to-day, you were to be told these things. By Archibald's wish they were withheld from you until now, lest they should spoil your pleasure in the masquerade."

The last words were mockingly uttered, but Leslie paid no heed to the tone.

"Are you telling me the truth?" she demanded. "Must I play my part still?"

"I am telling you the truth. You must continue to play your part, so far as he is concerned. For his sake I ask you to trust me. You bear our name, our honor is in your keeping. Whatever your faults, your misdeeds, have been, they must be kept secrets still. I ask you to trust me,—not that I may denounce you, but to enable me to protect us all from the consequences of your follies."

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If the words were conciliatory, the tone was hard and stern. Alan Warburton could ill play the role he had undertaken.

The look she now turned upon him was one of mingled wonder and scorn.

"You are incomprehensible," she said. "I am gratified to know that it was not my life nor my honor, but your own name, that you saved to-night,—it lessens my obligation. Being a woman, I am nothing; being a Warburton, disgrace must not touch me! So be it. If I may not confide in my husband, I will keep my own counsel still. And if I cannot master my trouble alone, then, perhaps, as a last resort, and for the sake of the Warburton honor, I will call upon you for aid."

There was no time for a reply. While the last words were yet on her lips, the heavy curtains were thrust hastily aside and Winnie French, pallid and trembling, stood in the doorway.

"Leslie! Alan!" she cried, coming toward them with a sob in her throat, "we have lost little Daisy!"

"Lost her!"

Alan Warburton uttered the two words as one who does not comprehend their meaning. But Leslie stood transfixed, like one stunned, yet not startled, by an anticipated blow.

"We have hunted everywhere," Winnie continued wildly. "She is not in the house, she is not—"

She catches her breath at the cry that breaks from Leslie's lips, and for a moment those three, their festive garments in startling contrast with their woe-stricken faces, regard each other silently.

Then Leslie, overcome at last by the accumulating horrors of this terrible night, sways, gasps, and falls forward, pallid and senseless, at Alan Warburton's feet.

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CHAPTER XX.

BETRAYED BY A PICTURE.

Little Daisy Warburton was missing. The blow that had prostrated Leslie at its first announcement, struck Archibald Warburton with still heavier force. It was impossible to keep the truth from him, and when it became known, his feeble frame would not support the shock. At day-dawn, he lay in a death-like lethargy. At night, he was raving with delirium. And on the second day, the physicians said:

"There is no hope. His life is only a thing of days."

Leslie and Alan were faithful at his bedside,—she, the tenderest of nurses; he, the most sleepless of watchers. But they avoided an interchange of word or glance. To all appearance, they had lost sight of themselves in the presence of these new calamities—Archibald's hopeless condition, and the loss of little Daisy.

No time had been wasted in prosecuting the search for the missing child. When all had been done that could be done,—when monstrous rewards had been offered, when the police were scouring the city, and private detectives were making careful investigations,—Leslie and Alan took their places at the bedside of the stricken father, and waited, the heart of each heavy with a burden of unspoken fear and a new, terrible suspicion.

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"Leslie! Alan!" she cried, coming toward them with a sob in her throat, "we have lost little Daisy!"—page 155.

So two long, dreary days passed away, with no tidings from the lost and no hope for the dying. [158]

During these two days, Van Vernet and Richard Stanhope were not idle.

The struggle between them had commenced on the night of the masquerade, and now there would be no turning back until the one became victor, the other vanquished.

Having fully convinced himself that Vernet had deliberately ignored all their past friendship, and taken up the cudgel against him, for reward and honor, Stanhope resolved at least to vindicate himself; while Vernet, dominated by his ambition, had for his watchword, "success! success!"

Fully convinced that behind that which was visible at the Francoise hovel, lay a mystery, Vernet resolved upon fathoming that mystery, and he set to work with rare vigor.

Having first aroused the interest of the authorities in the case, Vernet caused three rewards to be offered. One for the apprehension of the murderer of the man who had been identified as one Josef Siebel, professional rag-picker, and of Jewish extraction, having a sister who ran a thieving "old clo'" business, and a brother who kept a disreputable pawn shop.

The second and third rewards were for the arrest of, or information concerning, the fellow calling himself "Silly Charlie," and the parties who had occupied the hovel up to the night of the murder.

These last "rewards" were accompanied by such descriptions of Papa and Mamma Francoise as Vernet could obtain at second-hand, and by more accurate descriptions of the Sailor, and Silly Charlie.

Rightly judging that sooner or later Papa Francoise, or some of his confederates, would attempt to remove the concealed booty from the deserted hovel,—which, upon being searched, furnished conclusive proof that buying rags at a bargain was not Papa's sole occupation,—Van Vernet set a constant watch upon the house, hoping thus to discover the new hiding-place of the two Francoise's. Having accomplished thus much, he next turned his attention to his affairs with the aristocrat of Warburton Place. [159]

This matter he now looked upon as of secondary importance, and on the second day of Archibald Warburton's illness he turned his steps toward the mansion, intent upon bringing his "simple bit of shadowing" to a summary termination.

He had gathered no new information concerning Mrs. Warburton and her mysterious movements, nevertheless he knew how to utilize scant items, and the time had come when he proposed to make Richard Stanhope's presence at the masquerade play a more conspicuous part in the investigation which he was supposed to be vigorously conducting.

The silence and gloom that hung over the mansion was too marked to pass unnoticed by so keen an observer.

Wondering as to the cause, Vernet pulled the bell, and boldly handed his professional card to the serious-faced footman who opened the door.

In obedience to instructions, the servant glanced at the card, and reading thereon the name and profession of the applicant, promptly admitted him, naturally supposing him to be connected with the search for little Daisy.

"Tell your master," said Vernet, as he was ushered into the library, "tell your master that I must

see him at once. My business is urgent, and my time limited."

The servant turned upon him a look of surprise.

"Do you mean Mr. Archibald Warburton, sir?"

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"Yes."

"Then it will be impossible. Mr. Warburton has been dangerously sick since yesterday. The shock—Mr. Alan receives all who have business."

Mentally wondering what the servant could mean, for in the intensity of his interest in his new search, he had not informed himself as to the late happenings that usually attract the attention of all connected with the police, and was not aware of the disappearance of Archibald Warburton's little daughter, Vernet said briefly, and as if he perfectly understood it all:

"Nevertheless, you may deliver my message."

Somewhat overawed by the presence of this representative of justice, the servant went as bidden, and in another moment stood before Alan Warburton, presenting the card of the detective and delivering his message.

Alan Warburton started at sight of the name upon the card, and involuntarily turned his gaze toward the mirror. The face reflected there was not the face we saw unmasked, for a moment, at the masquerade. The brown moustache and glossy beard, the abundant waving hair, were gone. To the wonder and disapproval of all in the house, Alan had appeared among them, on the morning following the masquerade, with smooth-shaven face and close-cropped hair, looking like a boy-graduate rather than the distinguished man of the world he had appeared on the previous day.

Van Vernet had seen his bearded face but once, and there was little cause to fear a recognition; nevertheless, recalling Stanhope's warning, Alan chose the better part of valor, and said calmly:

"Tell the person that Mr. Warburton is so ill that his life is despaired of, and that he is quite incapable of transacting business. He cannot see him at present."

[161]

Wondering somewhat at this cavalier message, the servant retraced his steps, and Alan returned to the sick-room, murmuring as he went:

"It seems the only way. I dare not trust my voice in conversation with that man. For our honor's sake, my dying brother must be my representative still."

And then, as his eye rested upon Leslie, sitting by the bedside pale and weary, a thrill of aversion swept over him as he thought:

"But for her, and her wretched intrigue, I should have no cause to deceive, and no man's scrutiny to fear."

Alas for us who have secrets to keep; we should be "as wise as serpents," and as farseeing as veritable seers.

While Alan Warburton, above stairs, was congratulating himself, believing that he had neglected nothing of prudence or precaution, Van Vernet, below stairs, was grasping a clue by which Alan Warburton might yet be undone.

Reentering the library, the servant found Vernet, his cheeks flushed, his eyes ablaze with excitement, standing before an easel which upheld a life-sized portrait—a new portrait, recently finished and just sent home, and as like the original, as he had appeared on yesterday, as a picture could be like life.

When the servant had delivered his message, and without paying the slightest heed to its purport, Vernet demanded, almost fiercely:

"Who is the original of that portrait?"

"That, sir," said the servant, "is Mr. Alan Warburton."

CHAPTER XXI.

[162]

A PROMISE TO THE DYING.

Paying no further heed to the servant, and much to the surprise of that functionary, Van Vernet turned his gaze back upon the picture, and looked long and intently, shifting his position once or twice to obtain a different view. Then taking up his hat, he silently left the house, a look of mingled elation and perplexity upon his face.

"It's the same!" he thought, as he hurried away; "it's the same face, or a most wonderful resemblance. Allow for the difference made by the glazed cap, the tattoo marks and the rough dress, and it's the very same face! It seems incredible, but I know that such impossibilities often

exist. What is there in common between Mr. Alan Warburton, aristocrat, and a nameless sailor, with scars upon his face and blood upon his hands? The same face, certainly, and—perhaps the same delicate hands and dainty feet. It may be only a resemblance, but I'll see this Alan Warburton, and I'll solve the mystery of that Francoise hovel yet."

While Van Vernet thus soliloquizes over his startling discovery, we will follow the footsteps of Richard Stanhope.

He is walking away from the more bustling portion of the city, and turning into a quiet, home-like street, pauses before a long, trim-looking building, turns a moment to gaze about him in quest of possible observers, and then enters.

It is a hospital, watched over by an order of noble women, and affording every relief and comfort to the suffering ones within its walls. [163]

Passing the offices and long wards, he goes on until he has reached a private room in the rear of the building. Here coolness and quiet reign, and a calm-faced woman is sitting beside a cot, upon which a sick man tosses and mutters feverishly. It is the ex-convict who was rescued from the Thieves' Tavern by Stanhope, only a few nights ago.

"How is your patient?" queries the detective, approaching the bed and gazing down upon the man whom he has befriended.

"He has not long to live," replies the nurse. "I am glad you are here, sir. In his lucid moments he asks for you constantly. His delirium will pass soon, I think, and he will have a quiet interval. I hope you will remain."

"I will stay as long as possible," Stanhope says, seating himself by the bed. "But I have not much time to spare to-night."

The dying man is living his childhood over again. He mutters of rolling prairies, waving trees, sweeping storms, and pealing thunder. He laughs at the review of some pleasing scene, and then cries out in terror as some vision of horror comes before his memory.

And while he mutters, Richard Stanhope listens—at first idly, then curiously, and at last with eager intensity, bending forward to catch every word.

Finally he rises, and crossing the room deposits his hat upon a table, and removes his light outer coat.

"I shall stay," he says briefly. "How long will he live?"

"He cannot last until morning, the surgeon says."

"I will stay until the end."

He resumes his seat and his listening attitude. It is sunset when his watch begins; the evening passes away, and still the patient mutters and moans. [164]

It is almost midnight when his mutterings cease, and he falls into a slumber that looks like death.

At last there comes an end to the solemn stillness of the room. The dying man murmurs brokenly, opens his eyes with the light of reason in them once more, and recognizes his benefactor.

"You see—I was—right," he whispers, a wan smile upon his face; "I am going to die."

He labors a moment for breath, and then says:

"You have been so good—will—will you do one thing—more?"

"If I can."

"I want my—mother to know—I am dead. She was not always good—but she was—my mother."

"Tell me her name, and where to find her?"

The voice of the dying man sinks lower. Stanhope bends to catch the whispered reply, and then asks:

"Can you answer a few questions that I am anxious to put to you?"

"Y—yes."

"Now that you know yourself dying, are you willing to tell me anything I may wish to know?"

"You are the—only man—who was ever—merciful to me," said the dying man. "I will tell you—anything."

Turning to the nurse, Stanhope makes a sign which she understands, and, nodding a reply, she goes softly from the room.

When Richard Stanhope and the dying man are left alone, the detective bends his head close to

the pillows, and the questions asked, and the answers given, are few and brief.

Suddenly the form upon the bed becomes convulsed, the eyes roll wildly and then fix themselves upon Stanhope's face.

"You promise," gasps the death-stricken man, "you will tell them—"

The writhing form becomes limp and lifeless, the eyes take on a glassy stare, and there is a last fluttering breath.

Richard Stanhope closes the staring eyes, and speaks his answer in the ears of the dead.

"I will tell them, poor fellow, at the right time, but—before my duty to the dead, comes a duty to the living!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A BUSINESS CALL.

It was grey dawn when Stanhope left the hospital and turned his face homeward, and then it was not to sleep, but to pass the two hours that preceded his breakfast-time in profound meditation.

Seated in a lounging-chair, with a fragrant cigar between his lips, he looked the most care-free fellow in the world. But his active brain was absorbed in the study of a profound problem, and he was quite oblivious to all save that problem's solution.

Whatever the result of his meditation, he ate his breakfast with a keen relish, and a countenance of serene content, and then set off for a morning call upon Mr. Follingsbee.

He found that legal gentleman preparing to walk down to his office; and after an interchange of salutations, the two turned their faces townward together. [166]

"Well, Stanhope," said the lawyer, linking his arm in that of the detective with friendly familiarity, "how do you prosper?"

"Very well; but I must have an interview with Mrs. Warburton this morning."

"Phew! and you want me to manage it?"

"Yes."

The lawyer considered a moment.

"You know that the Warburtons are overwhelmed with calamity?" he said.

Stanhope glanced sharply from under his lashes, and then asked carelessly:

"Of what nature?"

"Archibald Warburton lies dying; his little daughter has been stolen."

"What!" The detective started, then mastering his surprise, said quietly: "Tell me about it."

Briefly the lawyer related the story as he knew it, and then utter silence fell between them, while Richard Stanhope lost himself in meditation. At last he said:

"It's a strange state of affairs, but it makes an immediate interview with the lady doubly necessary. Will you arrange it at once?"

"You are clever at a disguise: can you make yourself look like a gentleman of my cloth?"

"Easily," replied Stanhope, with a laugh.

"Then I'll send Leslie—Mrs. Warburton, a note at once, and announce the coming of myself and a friend, on a matter of business."

An hour later, a carriage stopped before the Warburton doorway, and two gentlemen alighted. [167]

The first was Mr. Follingsbee, who carried in his hand a packet of legal-looking papers. The other was a trim, prim, middle-aged gentleman, tightly buttoned-up in a spotless frock coat, and looking preternaturally grave and severe.

They entered the house together, and the servant took up to Leslie the cards of Mr. Follingsbee and "S. Richards, attorney."

With pale, anxious face, heavy eyes, and slow, dragging steps, Leslie appeared before them, and extended her hand to Mr. Follingsbee, while she cast a glance of anxious inquiry toward the seeming stranger.

"How is Archibald?" asked the lawyer, briskly.

"Sinking; failing every moment," replied Leslie, sadly.

"And there is no news of the little one?"

"Not a word."

There was a sob in her throat, and Mr. Follingsbee, who hated a scene, turned abruptly toward his companion, saying:

"Ours is a business call, Leslie, and as the business is Mr. Stanhope's not mine, I will retire to the library while it is being transacted."

And without regarding her stare of surprise, he walked coolly from the room, leaving Leslie and the disguised detective face to face.

"Is it possible!" she said, after a moment's silence; "is this Mr. Stanhope?"

The middle-aged gentleman smiled and came toward her.

"It is I, Mrs. Warburton. An interview with you seemed to me quite necessary, and I considered this the safest disguise, and Mr. Follingsbee's company the surest protection."

She bowed her head and looked inquiringly into his face. [168]

"Mrs. Warburton, are you still desirous to discover the identity of the person who has been a spy upon you?" he asked gravely.

"I know—" she checked herself and turned a shade paler. "I mean I—" again she paused. What should she say to this man whose eyes seemed looking into her very soul? What did he know?

"Let me speak for you, madam," he said, coming close to her side, his look and manner full of respect, his voice low and gentle. "You do not need my information; you have, yourself, discovered the man."

Then, seeing the look of distress and indecision upon her face, he continued:

"On the night of our first interview, I pledged my word to respect any secret of yours which I might discover. At the same time I warned you that such discovery was more than possible. If, in saying what it becomes my duty to say, I touch upon a subject offensive to you, or upon which you are sensitive, pardon me. Under other circumstances I might have said: Mrs. Warburton, it is your brother-in-law who has constituted himself your shadow. But the events that followed that masquerade have made what would have been a simple discovery, a most complicated affair. Can we be sure of no interruption while you listen?"

She sank into a chair, with a weary sigh.

"There will be no interruption. Miss French and my brother-in-law are watching in the sick-room; the servants are all at their posts. Be seated, Mr. Stanhope."

He drew a chair near that which she occupied, and plunged at once into his unpleasant narrative, talking fast, and in low, guarded tones. [169]

Beginning with a description of the Raid as it was planned, he told how he had been detained at the masquerade—how he had discovered the presence of Vernet, and suspected his agency in the matter—how, without any thought other than to be present at the Raid, to note Vernet's generalship, and satisfy himself, if possible, as to the exact meaning of his unfriendly conduct, he, Stanhope, had assumed the disguise of "Silly Charlie", had encountered Vernet and been seized upon by that gentleman as a suitable guide,—and how, while convoying his false friend through the dark alleys, they were startled by a cry for help.

As she listened, Leslie's face took on a look of terror, and she buried it in her hands.

"I need not dwell upon what followed," concluded Stanhope. "Not knowing what was occurring, I managed to enter first at the door. I heard Alan Warburton bid you fly for your husband's sake. I saw your face as he forced you through the door, and then I contrived to throw Vernet off his feet before he, too, should catch a glimpse of you."

Leslie shuddered, and as he paused, she asked, from behind her hands:

"And then—oh, tell me what happened after that!"

"Your brother-in-law closed and barred the door, and turned upon us like a lion at bay, risking his own safety to insure your retreat. What! has he not told you?"

"He has told me nothing."

"There is little more to tell. I knew him for your brother-in-law, because, here at the masquerade, I was a witness to a little scene in which he threw off his mask and domino. It was when he met and frightened the little girl, and then reproved the servant." [170]

"I remember."

"I recognized him at once, and fearing lest, by arresting him, we might do harm to you, or bring to light the secret I had promised to help you keep, I connived at his escape."

She lifted her head suddenly.

"Arrest!" she exclaimed; "why should you arrest *him*?"

Stanhope fixed his eyes upon her face; then sinking his voice still lower, he said:

"Something had occurred before we came upon the scene; what that something was, you probably know. What we found in that room, after your flitting, was Alan Warburton, standing against the door with a table before him as a breast-work, in his hand a blood-stained bar of iron, and almost at his feet, a dead body."

"What!"

"It was the body of a dead rag-picker. Before you left that room, a fatal blow was struck."

"Yes—I—I don't know—I can't tell—it was all confused."

She sank back in her chair, her face fairly livid, her eyes looking unutterable horror.

"Some one had committed a murder," went on Stanhope, keeping his eyes fixed upon her pallid face; "and the instrument that dealt the blow was in your brother-in-law's hand. To arrest him would have been to compromise you, and I had promised you safety and protection."

She bent forward, looking eagerly into his face.

"And you rescued him?" she said, eagerly.

"You could scarcely call it that. He resisted grandly, and was brave enough to effect his own rescue. I guided him away from that unsafe locality, and warned him of the danger which menaced him." [171]

"And is that danger now past?"

"Is it past!" He took from his pocket a folded placard, opened it, and put it into her hands.

It was the handbill containing the description of the escaped Sailor, and offering a reward for his capture.

With a cry of remorse and terror, Leslie Warburton flung it from her, and rose to her feet.

"My God!" she cried, wringing her hands wildly, "my cowardice, my folly, has brought this upon him, upon us all!"

Then turning toward the detective, a sudden resolve replacing the terror in her eye, a resolute ring in her voice, she said:

"Listen; you have proved yourself worthy of all confidence; you shall hear all I have to tell; you shall judge between my enemies and me."

"But, madam—"

"Wait; I want your advice, too, your aid, perhaps. Mr. Follingsbee also shall hear me."

She started toward the library, but the detective put out a detaining hand.

"Stop!" he said, firmly. "If what you are about to say includes anything concerning Alan Warburton, or the story of that night, we must have no confidants while his liberty and life are menaced. His identity with that missing Sailor must never be known, even by Mr. Follingsbee."

She breathed a shuddering sigh, and returned to her seat.

"You are right," she said hurriedly; "and until you shall advise me otherwise, I will tell my story to none but you."

CHAPTER XXIII.

[172]

LESLIE'S STORY.

"I shall not weary you with a long story," began Leslie Warburton; "this is not the time for it, and I am not in the mood. My husband lies above us, hopelessly ill. My little step-daughter is lost, and in Heaven only knows what danger. My brother-in-law is a hunted man, accused of the most atrocious of crimes. And I feel that I am the unhappy cause of all these calamities. If I have erred, I am doubly punished. Let me give you the bare facts, Mr. Stanhope; such details as you may wish can be supplied hereafter.

"I am, as you have been told, the adopted child of Thomas Uliman, of the late firm of Uliman & French. Until his death, I had supposed myself to be his own child. During the last year of my adopted father's life, it was his dearest wish that I should marry his friend, Archibald Warburton, and we became affianced. After the death of my adopted father, Mr. Warburton urged a speedy marriage, and we fixed a day for the ceremony.

"Less than a week later, it became necessary to overlook my father's papers, in the search for some missing document. After looking through his secretary, and examining a great many papers

without finding the one for which I searched, I remembered that my mother's desk contained many papers. As the missing document referred to some property held by them jointly, I made a search there. She had been dead for more than a year, and all her keys were in my possession, but until that day I had never had the courage to approach her desk. [173]

"Searching among her papers, I found one which had never been intended for my eyes. It was folded tightly, and crowded into a tiny space behind a little drawer. My mother's death was quite sudden; had she died of a lingering sickness, the paper would doubtless have been destroyed, for it furnished proof that I was not the child of Thomas Uliman and his wife, Mathilde, but an adopted daughter, while I was represented in the will as their only child. The paper I found was in my father's writing, and by it, Franz Francoise and his wife, Martha—"

"What!" The exclamation fell involuntarily from Stanhope's lips. Then checking himself, he said quietly: "I beg your pardon; proceed."

"Franz Francoise and his wife, Martha, by this paper resigned all claim to the child, Leschen, for a pecuniary consideration. The child was to be rechristened Leslie Uliman, and legally adopted by the Ulimans, the two Francoises agreeing never to approach or claim her.

"Imagine my consternation and grief! With this paper in my hand, I went straight to Mr. Follingsbee. He had known the truth from the first, but assured me that the Ulimans had never intended that I should learn it. I had been legally adopted, and the little fortune they had left me was lawfully mine.

"Then I told the story to my intended husband, and, knowing his pride, offered him a release. He only laughed at my Quixotism, and hastened the marriage preparations, bidding me never, under any circumstances, allude to the subject again. Soon after that, I was approached by the Francoises—you have seen them?" lifting her eyes to his face. [174]

"Yes."

"Then I need not tell you the miseries of my various interviews with them. They had learned that I was alone in the world, and they came to claim me; I was their child. Holding, as I did, the proofs of adoption, many women would have accepted their claim; I could not. My soul arose in revolt; every throb of my heart beat against them. If nature's voice ever speaks, it spoke in me against their claim. Not against their age, their poverty, or their ignorance; but against the greed, the selfishness, the vileness that was too much a part of them to remain hidden. Sooner than acknowledge their claim, I would have died by my own hand. They wanted money, and with that I purchased a respite. Then my great temptation came.

"Archibald Warburton had bidden me never to speak again on the subject of my parentage—why not take him at his word? If I broke off my marriage with him, I must give a reason; and the true reason I would never give. Not even to Mr. Follingsbee would I tell the truth. I kept my secret; and after much hesitation, the Francoises accepted the larger share of my little fortune, and swore never to approach me again,—to leave the city forever. I believed myself safe then, and married Mr. Warburton.

"The rest you can guess. Finding that I had married a wealthy man, disregarding their oaths, the Francoises came back, and renewed their persecutions. And I was more than ever in their power. They forced me to visit them when they would. Their demands for money increased. I grew desperate at last, and on the night of the masquerade, I went in obedience to an imperative summons, resolved that it should be the last time." [175]

She paused here and looked, for the first time since the beginning of her recital, straight into the face of the detective, who, sitting with his body bent forward and his eyes fixed upon her, seemed yet to be listening after her words had ceased, so intent was his gaze, so absorbed his manner.

Thus a moment of silence passed. Then Stanhope, withdrawing his eyes, and leaning back in his seat, asked suddenly:

"Is that all?"

"It is not all, Mr. Stanhope. On the night of the masquerade, while I was absent from the house no doubt, my little step-daughter disappeared."

"I know."

"You have heard it, of course. I believe that I know why, and by whom, she was abducted."

"Ah!"

"I suspect the Francoises."

"Why?"

"I love the child, and they know it. She will be another weapon in their hands. Besides, if I cannot, or will not reclaim her, there is the reward."

Richard Stanhope leaned forward, and slightly lifted his right hand.

"Is there any one else who would be benefited by the death or disappearance of the child?" he asked.

Leslie started, and the hot blood rushed to her face.

"I—I don't understand," she faltered.

"Do you know the purport of your husband's will."

"Yes."

"How does he dispose of his large property?"

"One third to me; the rest to little Daisy."

[176]

"And his brother?"

"Alan possesses an independent fortune."

"Are there no contingencies?"

"In case of my death, all comes to Daisy, Alan becoming her guardian. In case of Daisy's death, Alan and I share equally."

"Then by the loss of this child, both you and the young man become richer."

"Ah!" she gasped, "I had never thought of *that!*"

"Mrs. Warburton, beginning at the moment when you left this house to visit the Francoises, will you tell me all that transpired, up to the time of your escape from their house?"

With cheeks flushing and paling, and voice tremulous with the excitement of some new, strange thought, she described to him the scene in the Francoises' house.

"So," thought Stanhope, when all was told, "Mr. Alan Warburton's presence at that special moment was strangely opportune. Why was he there? What does he know of the Francoises? The plot thickens, and I would not be in Alan Warburton's shoes for all the Warburton wealth."

But, aloud, he only said:

"Thanks, Mrs. Warburton. If you are correct in your suspicions, and the Francoises have stolen the child, they will approach you sooner or later. Should they do so, make no terms with them, but communicate with me at once."

"By letter?"

"No; through the morning papers. Use this form."

Taking from his pocket a note-book, he wrote upon a leaf a few words, tore it from the book, and put it into her hand.

"That is safer than a letter," he said, rising. "One word more, madam. Tell Alan Warburton to be doubly guarded against Van Vernet. His danger increases at every step. Now we will call Mr. Follingsbee."

[177]

"One moment, Mr. Stanhope. Alan has employed detectives to search for Daisy, but none of them know what you know. Will *you* find her for me?" She held out her hands appealingly.

The detective looked at her in silence for a moment, then, striding forward, he took the outstretched hands in both his own, and gazing down into her face said, gently:

"I will serve you to the extent of my power, dear lady. I will find the little one, if I can."

Mr. Follingsbee had passed his hour of waiting in the most comfortable manner possible, fast asleep in a big lounging-chair. Being aroused, he departed with Stanhope, manifesting no curiosity concerning the outcome of the detective's visit.

While their footsteps yet lingered on the outer threshold, Winnie French came flying down the stairway.

"Come quick!" she cried to Leslie. "Archibald is worse; he is dying!"

"I will serve you to the extent of my power," Richard Stanhope had said, holding Leslie Warburton's hands in his, and looking straight into her appealing eyes. "I will find the little one, if I can."

Nevertheless he went straight to the Agency, and, standing before his Chief, said:

"I am ready to begin work for Mr. Parks, sir. I shall quit the Agency to-day. Give Vernet my compliments, and tell him I wish him success. It may be a matter of days, weeks, or months, but you will not see me here again until I can tell you *who killed Arthur Pearson.*"

[178]

CHAPTER XXIV.

VERNET ON THE TRAIL.

The discovery made by Van Vernet, on the day of his visit to the Warburton mansion, aroused him to wonderful activity, and made him more than ever eager to ferret out the hiding-place of Papa Françoise, who, he felt assured, could throw much light upon the mystery surrounding the midnight murder.

He set a constant watch upon the deserted Françoise house, and kept the dwelling of the Warburtons under surveillance, while he, in person, gravitated between these two points of interest, during the time when he was not employed in collecting items of information concerning the Warburton family. Little by little he gathered his bits of family history, and was now familiar with many facts concerning the invalid master of the house and his second marriage, and the travelled and aristocratic brother, who, so rumor said, was proud as a crown-prince, and blameless as Sir Galahad.

"These immaculate fellows are not to my taste," muttered Van Vernet, on the morning following the day when Stanhope held his last interview with Leslie, as he took his station at a convenient point of observation, prepared to pass the forenoon in watching the Warburton mansion.

His first glance toward the massive street-door caused him to start and mutter an imprecation. The bell was muffled, and the door-plate hidden beneath heavy folds of crape. [179]

Archibald Warburton was dead. The hand that stole his little one had struck his death-blow, as surely as if by a dagger thrust. His feeble frame, unable to endure those long days of suspense, had given his soul back to its origin, his body back to nature.

Within was a household doubly stricken; without, a two-fold danger menaced.

"So," muttered Van Vernet, as he gazed upon this insignia of death; "so my patron is dead; that stately, haughty aristocrat has lost all interest in his wife's secrets. Well, so have I—but I have transferred my interest to his brother, Alan Warburton. Death caused by shock following loss of his little daughter, no doubt. That tall, straight seigneur looked like a man able to outlive a shock, too."

He was not at all ruffled by the sudden taking-off of the man he supposed to be his patron. He had not made a single step toward the clearing-up of the mystery surrounding the goings and comings of Mrs. Archibald Warburton. His discovery of Stanhope at the masked ball, and his machinations consequent upon that discovery, together with the fiasco of the Raid and all its after-results, had made it impossible that he could interest himself in what he considered "merely a bit of domestic intrigue."

He was not sorry that Archibald Warburton was dead, and he resolved to profit by that death.

Since the discovery of Alan Warburton's picture, Van Vernet's mind had been drifting toward dangerous conclusions.

Suppose this wealthy aristocrat and the Sailor assassin should prove the same, what would follow? Might he not naturally conclude that a secret existed between Alan Warburton and the Françoises, and, if so, what was the nature of that secret? Why was Alan Warburton, if it were he, absent from his house on a night of festivity, a night when he should have been making merry with his brother's guests? [180]

If he were in league with those outlaws of the slums, it was not for plunder; surely the Warburtons were rich enough. What, then, was the secret which that stately mansion concealed?

"A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," quoted Vernet, grimly. "That Sailor assassin first—the Warburton skeleton first. They are almost under my hand, and once I grasp them, my clutch is upon the Warburton millions, too."

The morning was yet early, there was quiet in the street and Van Vernet, wearing for convenience sake the uniform of a policeman, paced slowly down toward the house of mourning. As he neared the street-corner, two women, beggars evidently, came hurrying around the corner straight toward him.

At sight of his uniform the larger and elder of the two, a stout woman with a vicious face, a sharp eye, and head closely muffled in a ragged shawl, started slightly. Then with a furtive glance and a fawning obeisance, she hurried her companion past him, and down the street.

This companion, a younger woman, her face covered with bruises and red with dissipation, walked with a painful limp, and the hesitating air of the blind, her eyes tightly shut and the lids quivering.

"Playing blind," muttered Vernet, as they hastened past him. "If I were the regular officer here, I'd have them out of this; as it is—"

He gave a shrug of indifference and glanced back over his shoulder. [181]

The two women had halted before the Warburton mansion, and the elder one was looking up at

the crape-adorned door.

Then she glanced backward toward the officer, who seemed busy contemplating the antics of a pair of restive horses that were coming down the street. Seeing him thus employed, she darted down the basement-stairs, dragging her stumbling companion after her.

Suddenly losing his interest in the prancing horses, Van Vernet turned and hastily approached the mansion, screened from the view of the two women by the massive stone steps.

Even a beggar, of the ordinary type, respects the house of mourning. And as he drew near them, Vernet mentally assured himself that these were no ordinary mendicants.

They were standing close to the basement-entrance. And as he stealthily approached, he saw that the elder woman put into the hand of the servant, who had opened the door, a folded paper which she took reluctantly, glanced down at, and with a sullen nod put into the pocket of her apron. Then, without a word to the two beggars, she closed and locked the door, while they, seeming not in the least disconcerted, turned and moved leisurely up the basement-stairs.

They would have passed Vernet hurriedly, but he put out his hand and said:

“Look here, my good souls, don’t you know that this is no place for beggars? You can’t be very old in the business or you’d never trouble a house where you see *that* on the door.” And pointing to the badge of mourning, he concluded his oration: “Be off, now, and thank fortune that I’m a good-natured fellow.”

The woman muttered something after the usual mendicant fashion, and hastened away down the street. [182]

At the same moment the prancing horses, held to a walk by the firm hand of their stout driver, came opposite the mansion, and a face muffled in folds of crape looked out from the carriage.

But Van Vernet had now no eyes for the horses, the carriage, or its occupant.

Noting, with a hasty glance, the direction taken by the two women, he sprang down the basement-steps and rang the bell.

The servant who had opened to the women, again appeared at the door.

“What do *you* want?” she asked, crossly; for being an honest servant she had no fear of the blue coat and brass buttons of the law.

The bogus policeman touched his hat and greeted her with an affable smile.

“I beg your pardon,” he said; “I thought you might be annoyed by those beggars. I can remove them if you enter a complaint. I saw that they gave you some kind of a paper; a begging letter, probably. Just give it to me, and I will see that they don’t intrude again upon people who are in trouble enough.”

He extended his hand for the letter; but the servant drew back, and answered hastily:

“Don’t bother yourself. I’ve had my orders, and I guess when I don’t want beggars around, I know how to send them to the right-about.”

And without waiting to note the effect of her speech, she shut the door in his face, leaving him to retreat as the two beggars had done.



[183]

“Be off, now, and thank fortune that I am a good-natured fellow.”—page 181.

Hastening up the steps he looked after the women, who were already nearly two blocks away. Then, with one backward glance, he started off in the same direction, keeping at a safe distance, but always in sight of them. [184]

"So," he mused, as he walked along, "the Warburton servant has had her orders. That was precisely the information I wanted. These women were not beggars, but messengers, and they brought no message of the ordinary kind."

Suddenly he uttered a sharp ejaculation, and quickened his pace.

"That old woman—why, she answers perfectly the description given of Mother Françoise! And if it *is* Mother Françoise, she has undoubtedly brought a message to Alan Warburton. If it is that old woman, I will soon know it, for I shall not take my two eyes off her until I have tracked her home."

CHAPTER XXV.

WHO KILLED JOSEF SIEBEL.

While Van Vernet was following after the two women, the carriage with the restless horses moved slowly past the Warburton dwelling.

An observer might have noted that the face of the crape-draped occupant was pressed close against the oval window, in the rear of the vehicle, watching the direction taken by Van Vernet. Then, suddenly, this individual leaned forward and said to the driver:

"Around the corner, Jim, and turn."

The order was promptly obeyed. [185]

"Now back, Jim," said this fickle-minded person. Then as the carriage again rounded the corner: "You see that fellow in policeman's uniform, Jim?"

"Yes, sir."

"Follow him."

Slowly the carriage moved along, picking its way across crowded thoroughfares, for many blocks, the occupant keeping a close watch upon the movements of Van Vernet, this time through the window in front.

Finally, leaning back in the carriage with a muttered, "That settles it; he's going to track them home," he again addressed the driver:

"Turn back, Jim."

"All right, sir."

"Drive to Warburton Place, side entrance."

Leslie Warburton, her vigil being over, was alone in her room, pacing restlessly up and down, a look of dire foreboding on her face, and in her hand a crumpled note.

At the sound of an opening door she turned to confront her maid, who proffered her a card.

Leslie took it mechanically and then started as she read thereon:

MADAM STANHOPE,
Modeste.

And written in the corner of the card, the underlined word, *Imperative*.

There was a look of relief upon the face she turned to the servant.

"Where is the—lady?"

"In the little drawing-room, madam."

Holding the card in her hand, Leslie hastened to the little drawing-room. [186]

A tall, veiled woman advanced to meet her; it was the occupant of the carriage.

Leslie came close to this sombre-robed figure and said, almost in a whisper: "Mr. Stanhope?"

"It is I, Mrs. Warburton. Need I say that only the most urgent necessity could have brought me here at such a time?"

"It is the right time, sir."

She held up before him the crumpled note.

"It is from *them*?" he asked.

Leslie nodded.

"It contains the secret of their present whereabouts, and bids you come to them?"

"Yes."

"You will not go?"

"How can I, now?"—her voice almost a wail—"and yet—"

"You are safe to refuse, Mrs. Warburton. You need not comply with any instructions they may give you henceforth. Let me have that note."

"But—"

"I must have it, in order to save you. I must know where to find these people."

She looked at him inquiringly, and put the note into his hand.

"Thank you," he said. "Has Van Vernet visited this house, to your knowledge?"

"He has."

"And he saw—"

"No one. I obtained my information from a servant. He sent up his card to Alan, who refused to meet him."

"Ah!" Stanhope turned toward the door, putting the note in his pocket as he did so. Suddenly he paused, his eyes resting upon the portrait of Alan Warburton. [187]

"That is very imprudent," he said.

"I—I don't understand."

"That picture. It must be removed." Then turning sharply toward her: "Are there other pictures of Mr. Alan Warburton in this house?"

"No; this is the only recent portrait."

He sat down and looked at the picture intently.

"Van Vernet has been here, you tell me. Can he have seen *that*?"

Fully alive now to the delicacy and danger of the situation, Leslie lifted her hand and turned toward the door. "Wait," she said, and went swiftly out.

"So," muttered Stanhope, as he again contemplated the picture, "a square foot of canvas can spoil all my plans. If Van has seen *this*, my work becomes doubly hard, and Warburton's case a desperate one."

While he pondered, Leslie came softly back, and stood before him.

"It is as bad as you feared," she said, tremulously. "Van Vernet was received in this very room, the servant tells me. He saw the picture, examined it closely, and asked the name of the original."

"Then," said Stanhope, rising, "the picture need not be removed. It has done all the mischief it can. To remove it now would only make a suspicion a certainty. Listen, madam, and as soon as possible report what I tell you to Alan Warburton. A short time ago, Mamma Francoise and one of her tools left the note I hold, at your basement-door. Van Vernet, who was watching near here, saw them and followed them." [188]

"Oh!"

"He has seen that picture. Tell your brother-in-law that Van Vernet has seen it and, doubtless, has traced the resemblance between it and the fugitive Sailor; tell him that Vernet is now on the track of the Francoises, who, if found, will be used to convict him of murder."

"But—Alan is not guilty."

"Are you *sure* of that?"

"I—I—" She faltered and was silent.

"Mrs. Warburton," he asked, slowly, "do you know *who* struck that blow?"

She trembled violently, and her face turned ashen white.

"I can't tell! I don't know!" she cried wildly. "It was a moment of confusion, but—it was not—oh, no, no, it was *not* Alan!"

Not a little surprised at this incoherent outburst, Stanhope looked her keenly in the face, a new thought taking possession of his mind.

Could it be that she, in the desperation of the moment, in her struggle for safety, had stricken that cruel blow? Such things had been. Women as frail, in the strength born of desperation, had wielded still more savage weapons with fatal effect.

The question, who killed Josef Siebel? was becoming a riddle.

"Let that subject drop," said Stanhope, withdrawing his eyes from her face. "Tell your brother-in-law of his danger, but do not make use of my name. He knows nothing about me. For yourself, obey no summons like this you have just received. You need not make use of my newspaper-telegraph now. What I saw this morning, showed me the necessity for instant action. There is one thing more: tell Alan Warburton that now, with Vernet's eye upon him, there will be no safety in flight. Let him remain here, but tell him, above all, to shun interviews with strangers, be their errand what it will. Let no one approach him whom he does not know to be a friend. After your husband's funeral, you too had better observe this same caution. Admit *no strangers* to your presence."

[189]

"But you—"

"I shall not apply for admittance; I am going away. Before you see me again, I trust your troubles will have ended."

"And little Daisy?"

"We shall find her, I hope. Mrs. Warburton, time presses; remember my instructions and my warning. Good-morning."

He moved toward the door, turned again, and said:

"One thing more; see that you and your household avoid any movement that might seem, to a watcher, suspicious. Vernet keeps this house under surveillance, night and day. He is a foe to fear. Once more, good-by."

It was long past noon when Van Vernet, weary but triumphant, reappeared upon the fashionable street where stood the Warburton mansion.

He had been successful beyond his utmost expectations. Not only had he succeeded in tracking the two women to their hiding-place, for it could scarcely be called their home, but he had also satisfied himself that the elder woman was indeed and in truth Mamma Francoise; and that Papa Francoise was also sheltered by the tumble-down roof under which the old woman and her companion had passed from his sight.

[190]

Vernet was tired with his long promenade at the heels of the two sham beggars, and he resolved to give the mansion a brief reconnoitring glance and then to turn the watch over to a subordinate.

Accordingly he sauntered down the street, noting as he walked the unchanged aspect of the shut-up house. He was still a few paces away, when a vehicle came swiftly down the street, rolling on noiseless wheels.

It was an undertaker's van, and it came to a halt before the door of the Warburton mansion. Two men were seated upon the van, and as one of them dismounted and ascended the stately steps, the other, getting down in more leisurely fashion, opened the door in the end of the vehicle, disclosing to the view of Vernet, who by this time was near enough to see, a magnificent casket.

In another moment, the man who had gone to announce their arrival came down the steps, accompanied by a servant, and together the three carefully drew the casket from the van.

Vernet's quick eye detected the fact that it was heavy, and his quicker brain caught at an opportunity. Stepping to the side of the man who seemed to hold the heaviest weight, he proffered his assistance. It was promptly accepted, and, together, the four lifted the splendid casket, and carried it into the wide hall.

What is it that causes Van Vernet's eyes to gleam, and his lips to twitch with some new, strange excitement, as they put the casket down? His gaze rests upon it as if fascinated.

Archibald Warburton, the man in the black and scarlet domino, the man who had employed him to watch the movements of Leslie Warburton, was six-foot tall. And this casket—it was made for a much shorter, a much smaller man!

[191]

If *this* were intended for Archibald Warburton, who, then, was the six-foot masker?

With eyes aglow, and firmly-compressed lips, Van Vernet cast a last glance at the casket and the name, Archibald Warburton, on the plate. Then turning away, he followed the two undertakers from the house.

At the foot of the steps he paused, and looked up at the closed windows with the face of a man who saw long-looked-for daylight through a cloud of mist.

"Ah, Alan Warburton," he muttered, "*I have you now!*"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL.

In every city where splendor abounds and wealth rolls in carriages, can be found, also, squalor and wretchedness. If the rich have their avenues, and the good and virtuous their sanctuaries, so have the poor their by-ways and alleys, and the vicious their haunts. In a great city there is room for all, and a place for everything.

Papa and Mamma Francoise had left their abiding-place in the slums for a refuge even more secure.

Van Vernet had followed the two women to a narrow street, long since left behind by the march of progress; a street where the huts and tumble-down frame buildings had once been reputable dwellings and stores, scattered promiscuously along on either side of a thoroughfare that had once been clean, and inhabited by modest industry. But that was many years ago: it had long been given over to dirt and disorder without, and to rags, poverty, rats and filth within. Here dwelt many foreigners, and the sound of numerous tongues speaking in many languages, might always be heard. [192]

On this street, in the upper rooms of a rickety two-story house, Papa and Mamma Francoise had set up their household gods after their flight from the scene of Josef Siebel's murder; the lower floor being inhabited by a family of Italians, who possessed an unlimited number of children and a limited knowledge of English.

It is evening, the evening of the day that has witnessed Van Vernet's most recent discovery, and Papa and Mamma are at home.

The room is even more squalid than that recently occupied by them, for, besides a three-legged table, two rickety chairs, a horribly-dilapidated stove and two dirty, ragged pallets at opposite sides of the room, furniture there is none.

Perched upon one of the two rickety chairs, his thin legs extended underneath the table and his elbows resting upon it, sits Papa Francoise, lost in the contemplation of a broken glass containing a small quantity of the worst whiskey; and near him, Mamma squats upon the floor before the rusty stove, in which a brisk fire is burning, stirring vigorously at a strong-smelling decoction which is simmering over the coals.

"Come, old woman," growls Papa, with a self-assertion probably borrowed from the broken glass under his eye, "get that stuff brewed before the gal comes in. And then try and answer my question: what's to be done with her?"

Mamma Francoise stirs the liquid more vigorously, and takes a careful sip from the iron spoon.

"Ah," she murmurs, "that's the stuff. It's a pity to spoil it." [193]

She rises slowly, and drawing a bottle from her pocket, pours into the basin a few drops of brown liquid, stirs it again, and then removing the decoction from the fire, pours it into a battered cup, which she sets upon the floor at a distance from the stove.

If one may judge from Mamma's abstinence, the liquor *has* been spoiled, for she does not taste it again.

Having thus completed her task, she turns toward one of the pallets, and seating herself thereon lifts her eyes toward Papa.

"What's to be done with the girl?" she repeats. "That's the question I've asked *you* often enough, and I never got an answer yet."

Papa withdraws his gaze from her face, and fixes it once more upon the broken tumbler.

"She ain't no good to us," resumes Mamma, "and we can't have her tied to us always."

"Nor we can't turn her adrift," says Papa, significantly.

"No; we can't turn her adrift," replies Mamma. "We can't afford to keep her, and we can't afford to let her go."

"Consequently—" says Papa.

And then they look at one another in silence.

"We may have to get out of this place at a minute's warning," resumes Mamma, after a time, "and how can we expect to dodge the cops with that gal tied to us? You and I can alter our looks, but we can't alter hers."

"No," says Papa, shaking his head, "we can't alter hers—not now."

"And if we could, we can't alter her actions."

"No; we can't alter her actions," agrees Papa, with a cunning leer, "except to make 'em worse." [194]

And he casts a suggestive glance toward the tin cup on the floor.

"It won't do," said Mamma, noting the direction of his glance; "it won't do to increase the drams. If she got worse, we couldn't manage her at all. It won't do to give her any more."

"And it won't do to give her any less. Old woman, we've just got back to the place we started from."

Mamma Francoise rests her chin in her ample palm and ponders.

"I think I can see a way," she begins. Then, at the sound of an uncertain footstep on the rickety stairs, she stops to listen. "That's her," she says, a frown darkening her face. "She's got to be kept off the street."

She goes to the door, opens it with an angry movement, and peers out into the dark hall.

"Nance, you torment!"

But the head that appears above the stair-railing is not the head of a female, and it is a masculine voice that says, in an undertone:

"Sh-h! Old woman, let me in, and don't make a fuss."

The woman starts back and is about to close the door, when something in the appearance of the man arrests her attention.

As he halts at the top of the stairway, the light from the door reveals to her a shock of close-curling, carrot-red hair.

In another moment he stands with a hand on either door-post.



[195]

"How are ye, old uns? Governor, how are ye?"—[page 194](#).

"How are ye' old uns?" he says, with a grin. "Governor, how are ye?" And then, with a leer, and a lurch which betrays the fact that he is half intoxicated, he adds, in a voice indicative of stupid astonishment: "Why, I'm blowed, the blessed old fakers don't know their own young un!"

[196]

"Franzy!" Mamma Francoise starts forward, a look of mingled doubt and anxiety upon her face. "Franzy! No, it can't be Franzy!"

"Why can't it be? Ain't ten years in limbo enough? Or ain't I growed as handsome as ye expected to see me?" Then coming into the room, and peering closely into the faces of the two: "I'm blessed if I don't resemble the rest of the family, anyhow."

The two Francoises drew close together, and scrutinized the new-comer keenly, doubtfully, with suspicion.

Ten years ago, their son, Franzy, then a beardless boy of seventeen, and a worthy child of his parents, had reluctantly turned his back upon the outer world and assumed a prison garb, to serve out a twenty years' sentence for the crime of manslaughter.

Ten years had elapsed and this man, just such a man as their boy must have become, stands before them and claims them for his parents.

There is little trace of the old Franz, save the carrot-red hair, the color of the eyes, the devil-may-care manner, and the reckless speech. And after a prolonged gaze, Papa says, still hesitatingly:

"Franzy! is it really Franzy?"

The new claimant to parental affection flings out his hand with a fierce gesture, and a horrible oath breaks from his lips.

"Is it *really* Franzy?" he cries, derisively. "Who else do ye think would be likely to claim *yer* kinship? I've put in ten years in the stripes, an' I'm about as proud of ye as I was of my ball and chain. I've taken the trouble ter hunt ye up, with the police hot on my trail; maybe ye don't want ter own the son as might a-been a decent man but for yer teachin'. Well, I ain't partikeler; I'll take myself out of yer quarters." [197]

He turns about with a firm, resentful movement, and Mamma Francoise springs forward with a look of conviction on her hard face.

"Anybody'd know ye after *that* blow out," she says with a grin. "Ye're the same old sixpence, Franzy; let's have a look at ye."

She lays a hand upon his arm, and he turns back half reluctantly.

"Wot's struck ye?" he asks, resentfully. "Maybe it's occurred to ye that I may have got a bit o' money about me. If that's yer lay, ye're left. An' I may as well tell ye that if ye can't help a fellow to a little of the necessary, there's no good o' my stoppin' here."

And shaking her hand from his arm, this affectionate Prodigal strides past her, and peers eagerly into the broken glass upon the table.

"Empty, of course," he mutters; "I might a-known it."

Then his eyes fix upon the tin cup containing Mamma's choice brew. Striding forward, he seizes it, smells its contents, and with a grunt of satisfaction raises it to his lips.

In an instant Mamma Francoise springs forward, and seizing the cup with both hands, holds it away from his mouth.

"Stop, Franz! you mustn't drink that."

A string of oaths rolls from his lips, and he wrests the cup from her hand, spilling half its contents in the act.

"Stop, Franzy!" calls Papa, excitedly; "that stuff won't be good for you." [198]

And hurrying to one of the pallets he draws from under it a bottle, which, together with the broken tumbler, he presents to the angry young man.

"Here, Franzy, drink this."

But the Prodigal shakes off his father's persuasive touch, and again seizes upon the cup of warm liquor.

"Franzy!" cries Papa, in a tremor of fear, "drop that; *it's doctored*."

The Prodigal moves a step backward, and slowly lowers the cup.

"Oh!" he ejaculates, musingly, "it's doctored! Wot are ye up to, old uns? If it's a doctored dose, I don't want it—not yet. Come, sit down and let's talk matters over."

Taking the bottle from the old man's hand, he goes back to the table, seats himself on the chair recently occupied by the elder Francoise, motioning that worthy to occupy the only remaining chair. And courtesy being an unknown quality among the Francoises, the three are soon grouped about the table, Mamma accommodating herself as best she can.

"Franzy," says Mamma, after refreshing herself from the bottle, which goes from hand to hand; "before you worry any more about that medicine, an' who it's for, tell us how came yer out?"

"How came I out? Easy enough. There was three of us; we worked for it five months ahead, and one of us had a pal outside. Pass up the bottle, old top, while I explain."

Having refreshed himself from the bottle, he begins his story, interluding it with innumerable oaths, and allotting to himself a full share of the daring and dangerous feats accompanying the escape. [199]

"It's plain that ye ain't read the papers," he concludes. "Ye'd know all about it, if ye had."

CHAPTER XXVII.

FRANZY FRANCOISE'S GALLANTRY.

While this reunited family, warmed to cordiality by the contents of the aforementioned bottle, exchanged confidences, the evening wore on.

Franz had related the story of his escape and his subsequent adventures, and finished by telling them how, by the merest accident, he had espied Mamma and Nance upon their return from the

Warburton mansion; and how, at the risk of being detained by a too-zealous "cop," he had followed them, and so discovered their present abode.

In exchange for this interesting story, Papa had briefly sketched the outline of the career run by himself and Mamma during the ten years of their son's absence, up to the time of their retreat from the scene of the Siebel tragedy.

"We were doing a good business," sighed Papa, dolefully, "a very good business, in that house. But one night there were two or three there with—goods, and while the old woman and I were attending to business, the others got into a fuss—ah. We had no hand in it, the old woman and me, but there was a man killed, and it wasn't safe to stay there, Franzy."

"Umph!" muttered the hopeful son; "who did the killin'?"

[200]

Papa glanced uneasily at the old woman, and then replied:

"We don't know, Franzy. The fight began when we were out of the room, and—we don't know."

"That's a pity; wasn't there any reward?"

"Yes, boy," said Mamma, eagerly; "a big reward. An' if we could tell who did the thing, we would be rich."

"Somebody got arrested, of course?"

"N—no, Franzy; nobody's been arrested—not yet."

"Oh, they're a-lookin' fer somebody on suspicion? I say, old top, if nobody knows who struck the blow, seems to me ye're runnin' a little risk yerself. S'pose they should run yer to earth, eh?"

"We've been careful, Franzy."

"S'pose ye have—look here, old un, don't ye see yer chance?"

"How, Franzy?"

"How! If I was you, I'd clear my own skirts, and git that reward."

"How? how?"

"I'd know who did the killin'."

And he leaned forward, took the bottle from Mamma's reluctant hand, and drained it to the last drop, while Papa and Mamma looked into each other's eyes, some new thought sending a flush of excitement to the face of each.

"Ah, Franzy," murmured Mamma, casting upon him a look of pride, such as a tiger might bestow upon her cub, "ye'll be a blessin' to yer old mother yet!"

Then she turns her head and listens, while Franz, casting a wistful look at the now empty bottle, rises to his feet the movement betraying the fact that he is physically intoxicated, although his head as yet seems so clear.

[201]

Again footsteps approach, and Mamma hastens to the door, listens a moment, opens it cautiously, and peers out.

"It's that gal," she mutters, setting the door wide open. "Come in, you Nance! Where have you been, making yourself a nuisance?"

Then she falls back a pace, staring stupidly at the strangely-assorted couple who stand in the doorway.

A girl, a woman, young or old you can hardly tell which; with a face scarcely human, so bleared are the eyes, so sodden, besotted and maudlin the entire countenance; clad in foul rags and smeared with dirt, she reels as she advances, and clings to the supporting arm of a black-robed Sister of Mercy, who towers above her tall and slender, and who looks upon them all with sweet, brave eyes, and speaks with sorrowful dignity:

"My duty called me into your street, madam, and I found this poor creature surrounded by boisterous children, and striving to free herself from them. They tell me that this is her home; is she your daughter?"

A look of anger gleams in Mamma's eyes, but she suppresses her wrath and answers:

"No; she's not our daughter, but she's a fine trouble to us, just the same. Nance, let go the lady, and git out of the way."

With a whine of fear, the girl drops the arm of the Sister, and turns away. But her new-found friend restrains her, and with a hand resting upon her arm, again addresses Mamma:

"They tell me that this girl's mind has been destroyed by liquor, and that still you permit her to drink. This cannot be overlooked. She is not your child, you say; may I not take her to our hospital?"

[202]

These are charitable words, but they bring Papa Franchoise suddenly to his feet, and cause

Mamma's true nature to assert itself.

Springing forward with a cry of rage, she seizes the arm of the girl, Nance, drags her from the Sister's side, and pushes her toward the nearest pallet with such violence that the reeling girl falls to the floor, where she lies trembling with fear and whimpering piteously.

"This comes of letting you wander around, eh?" hisses Mamma, with a fierce glance at the prostrate girl. Then turning to the Sister of Mercy, she cries: "That gal is *my* charge, and I'm able to take care of her. Your hospital prayers wouldn't do her any good."

As she speaks, Papa moves stealthily forward and touches her elbow.

"Hold your tongue, you old fool," he whispers sharply.

Then to the Sister he says, with fawning obsequiousness:

"You see, lady, the poor girl is my wife's niece, and she was born with a drunkard's appetite. We have to give her drink, but we couldn't hear of sending the poor child to a hospital; oh, no!"

Since the entrance of the Sister and Nance, Franz has apparently been engaged in steadying both his legs and his intellect. He now comes forward with a lurch, and inquires with tipsy gravity:

"Wot's the row? Anythin' as I kin help out?"

"Only a little word about our Nance, my boy," replies Mamma, who has mastered, outwardly, her fit of rage. "The charitable lady wants our Nance."

"The lady is very kind," chimes in Papa; "but we can't spare Nance, poor girl." [203]

"Can't we?" queries Franz, aggressively, turning to look at the prostrate girl. "Now, why can't we spare her? I kin spare her; who's she, anyhow? Here you, Nance, git up."

"Now, Franzy,"—begins Mamma.

"S'h-h, my boy,"—whispers Papa, appealingly.

But he roughly repulses Mamma's extended hand.

"Let up, old woman," he says, coarsely; and then, pushing her aside, he addresses the Sister:

"I say, what—er—ye want—er—her for, any'ow?"

The Sister turns away, and addresses herself once more to Mamma.

"I cannot understand why that girl may not have proper care," she says, sternly. "If her intellect has been shattered by the use of liquor, this is not the place for her," pointing her remark by a glance at Franz and the empty bottle. "Body and soul will both be sacrificed here. I shall not let this matter rest, and if I find that you have no legal authority—"

But again fury overmasters prudence. Mamma springs toward her with a yell of rage.

"Ah, you cat-o'-the-world," she cries, "go home with yer pious cant! The gal's—"

The words die away in a gurgle; the hand of Franz, roughly pressed against her mouth, has stopped her utterance.

"Oh, get out, old woman!" he exclaims, pushing her away and steadying himself after the effort. "Ye're gittin' too familiar, ye air."

Then seeing that the Sister, convinced of her inability to reason with the unreasonable, had turned to go, he cried out:

"Hold on, mum; if ye want that gal, ye kin have her. *I'm* runnin' this." [204]

"I shall not forget that poor creature," says the Sister, still addressing Mamma and ignoring Franz; "and if I find that she is not—"

She leaves the sentence unfinished, for Mamma darts toward her with extended clutches, and is only restrained by Papa's stoutest efforts, aided by the hand of Franz, which once more comes forcibly in contact with the virago's mouth, just as it opens to pour forth fresh imprecations.

To linger is worse than folly, and the Sister, casting a pitying glance toward the girl, who is now slowly struggling up, turns away and goes sadly out from the horrible place.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FRANZ FRANCOISE BELLIGERENT.

After the departure of the Sister of Mercy, an unnatural silence brooded over the room; a silence, not a stillness, for Mamma Francoise, uttering no word, dragged the unfortunate Nance to one of

the pallets, forced the remainder of the warm liquor down her throat, and then pushed her back upon the pallet, where she lay a dirty, moveless, stupid heap of wretched humanity.

Then Mamma seated herself upon the one unoccupied stool, and glared alternately at the two men.

Papa Francoise was evidently both disturbed and alarmed at this visit from the Sister of Mercy, and he seemed intent upon solving some new problem propounded to him by the scene just ended. [205]

Franz leered and lounged, with seeming indifference to all his surroundings. His recent potations were evidently taking effect, for after a few moments, during which he made very visible efforts to look alert, and interested in the discussion which, as he seemed vaguely to realize, was impending, he brought himself unsteadily to his feet, staggered across the room, and flinging himself upon the unoccupied pallet, muttered some incoherent words and subsided into stillness and slumber.

The eyes of the old woman followed his movements with anxious interest, and when he seemed at last lost to all ordinary sound, she arose and carried her stool across to where Papa, leaning against the table, still meditated.

"Sit down," she said, in low, peremptory tones, and pushing the stool lately vacated by Franz toward her spouse; "sit down. We're in a pretty mess, ain't we?"

Papa seated himself and favored her with a vacant stare.

"Eh!" he said, absently; "what's to be done?"

Mamma cast a quick look toward her recumbent Prodigal, and leaned forward until her lips touched the old man's ear.

"Mind this," she hissed; "*he* ain't to know too much. He's got the devil in him; it won't do to put ourselves under his thumb."

"Don't you worry," retorted Papa, in the same sharp whisper, "I ain't anxious to be rode by the two of ye; Franzy's too much like his ma. It won't do to let him know everything."

Mamma gave a derisive sniff, a sort of acknowledgment of the compliment—one of the only kind ever paid her by her worser half,—and then said: [206]

"Franzy'll be a big help to us, if we can keep him away from the cops. But you an' me has planned too long to let him step in now an' take things out of our hands. He's too reckless; we wouldn't move fast enough to suit him, an'—he'd make us trouble."

"Yes," assented the old man, "he'd have things his own way, or he'd make us trouble; he always did."

Mamma arose, stirred the smouldering fire, and resuming her seat, began afresh:

"Now, then, we've got to decide about that gal. She can't go to no hospital?"

"No; she can't."

"And she can't stay with us. It was a big risk before; now that Franzy is back, it's a bigger risk."

"That's so." Papa wrinkled his brows for a moment and then said: "See here, old woman, Franz'll be bound ter know something about that gal when he gits his head clear."

"I s'pose so."

"Well, s'pose we tell him about her."

"What for?"

"Ter satisfy him, an' ter git his help."

"His help?" muttered Mamma. "That might do."

Suddenly Papa lifted a warning finger. "Hush," he whispered; "there's somebody outside o' that door."

A low, firm knock put a period to his sentence. Mamma made a sign which meant caution, and then creeping noiselessly to the door, listened. No sound could be heard from without, and after another moment of waiting she called sharply:

"Who's there?"

"Open de do'; I's got a message fo' yo'." [207]

The voice, and the unmistakable African dialect, reassured the pair, whose only dread was the police; and to barricade their doors against chance visitors was no part of the Francoise policy.

Mamma glided toward the pallet where lay her returned Prodigal, and bent above him.

His face was turned outward toward the door, and putting two strong hands beneath his shoulders, she applied her strength to the task of rolling him over, drew a ragged blanket well up

about him, and left him lying thus, his face to the wall and completely hidden from whoever might enter.

Then she went boldly to the door, and opening it wide, stood face to face with a tall African, black as ebony, and wearing a fine suit of broadcloth, poorly concealed underneath a shabby outer garment. He bowed to Mamma as obsequiously as if she were a duchess, and this garret her drawing-room, and stepping inside, closed the door behind him.

"You will excuse me," he said, politely, "but my business is private, and some one might come up the stairs."

"What do you want?"

The incautious words were uttered by Papa Francoise, who, noting the entire absence of his negro accent, arose hastily, his face full of alarm.

The African smiled blandly.

"I assumed my accent in order to reassure you, sir," he said, coolly. "You might not have admitted me if you had thought me a white man, and I am sent by your patron."

"By our patron!" Mamma echoed his words in skeptical surprise.

"Yes; I am his servant."

Papa and Mamma gazed at each other blankly and drew nearer together.

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"He has sent you this note," pursued the nonchalant fellow, keeping his eyes fixed upon Mamma's face while he drew from his pocket a folded paper. "And I am to take your answer."

Papa took the proffered note reluctantly, glanced at the superscription, and suddenly changed his manner.

"That is not directed to me," he cried, sharply. "You have made a mistake."

"It is directed to Papa Francoise."

Papa peered closer at the superscription. "Yes; I think that's it. It's not my name; it's not for me."

"My dear sir, I know you too well. You need not fear me; I am Mr. Warburton's body servant."

"Oh!" Mamma uttered the syllable sharply, then suddenly restrained herself, and coming toward the messenger with cat-like tread, she said, coaxingly: "And who may this Mr. War—war, this master of yours be?"

The man looked from one to the other, and then turned his gaze upon the occupants of the two pallets. "Who are these?" he asked, briefly.

Mamma's answer came very promptly.

"Only two poor people we knew in another part of the city. They have been turned out by their landlord, poor things, and last night they slept in the street."

A smile crossed the face of the wily African, and he turned toward Papa.

"Read my master's note, if you please," he said. "It was written to *you*."

Slowly Papa unfolded the note, and his eyes seemed bursting from their sockets as he read.

Name your price, but keep your whereabouts from the police. If you are called upon to identify me, *you do not know me*.

[209]

While Papa reads, the slumbering Franz begins to move and to mutter.

"Give me the file, Jim," he says, in a low, cautious tone. "Curse the darbies—I—"

The sudden overturning of a stool, caused by a quick backward movement on the part of Mamma, drowns the rest of this muttered speech.

But the words have caught the ear of the colored gentleman, who moves a pace nearer the sleeper, and seems anxious to hear more.

While Papa still stares at the note in his hand, Mamma stoops and restores the stool to its upright position, making even more noise than in the overturning. And Franz turns, yawns, stretches, and slowly brings himself to a sitting posture.

Something like a frown crosses the dark face of Papa Francoise's visitor. To bring himself face to face with Papa, and to satisfy himself on certain doubtful points, he has paused for neither food nor rest, but has followed up his discovery of the morning, by an evening's visit to the new lurking-place of the Francoises,—for the sable gentleman, who would fain win the confidence of Papa in the character of body servant to Alan Warburton, is none other than Van Vernet.

Fertile in construction, daring in execution, he has hoped by a bold stroke to make a most

important discovery. Viewing the events of the morning from a perfectly natural standpoint, he has rapidly reached the following conclusion:

If the fugitive Sailor and Alan Warburton are one and the same, then, undoubtedly, the message left by Mamma at the door of the Warburtons was intended for Alan. What was the purport of that message, he may find it difficult to discover,—but may he not be able to surprise from Papa an acknowledgment of his connection with the aristocrat of Warburton place? [210]

To arrest the Francoises was, at present, no part of his plan. This would be to alarm Alan Warburton, and to lessen his own chances for making discoveries. He had found Papa Francoise, and it would be strange if he again escaped from his surveillance.

He had not counted upon the presence of a third, and even a fourth party, in paying his visit to the Francoises. And now, as the recumbent Franz began to move and to mutter, Van Vernet turned toward the pallet a keen and suspicious glance.

But never was there a more manifest combination of drowsiness and drunken stupidity than that displayed upon the face of Franz, as he raised himself upon the pallet and stared stupidly at the ebonied stranger.

Then a look of abject terror crept into his face, and he seemed making a powerful effort to rouse his drunken faculties. Slowly he rose from the pallet, and staggered to his feet, muttering some unintelligible words. Then, after a stealthy glance about the room, he turned and reeled toward the door.

As he approached, Van Vernet, still gazing steadfastly into his face, stepped aside, and at the instant Franz made a lurch in the same direction.

In another moment,—neither Papa nor Mamma could have told how it came about,—the two were upon the floor, Franz Francoise uppermost, his knees upon the breast of his antagonist! [211]

As Van Vernet, who had fallen with one arm underneath him, made his first movement in self-defence, his ears were greeted by a warning hiss, and he felt the pressure of a keen-edged knife against his throat!

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN DURANCE VILE.

This onslaught, so swift and unexpected, took Papa and Mamma completely by surprise, and, for the moment, threw even Vernet off his guard.

“Scoundrel!” he exclaimed, while the menacing knife pressed against his throat; “what does this mean?”

For answer, Franz shot a glance toward the two elder Francoises, and said in a hoarse, unnatural whisper:

“Deek the cove;^[1] he’s no dark lantern!”

[1] Look at him.

“Eh!” from Papa, in a frightened gasp.

“Done!” from Mamma, in an angry hiss.

And then, as the two started forward, Vernet, realizing that this shrewd ruffian had somehow penetrated his disguise, gathered all his strength and began a fierce struggle for liberty.

As they writhed together upon the floor, Franz shot out another sentence, this time without turning his head.

“A dead act,” he hissed; “we’re copped to rights!”

Which, being rendered into English, meant: “Combine the attack; we are in danger of arrest.” [212]

And then the struggle became a question of three to one.

Vernet fought valiantly, but he lay at last captive under the combined clutch of Papa and Franz, and menaced by the knife which Mamma, having snatched it from the hand of her hopeful son, held above his head.

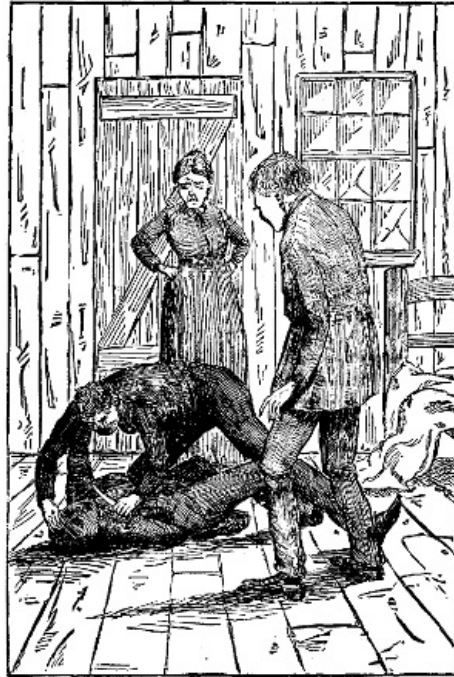
Instinctively the two elder outlaws obeyed the few words of command that fell from the lips of their returned Prodigal; and in spite of his splendid resistance, Van Vernet was bound hand and foot, a prisoner in the power of the Francoises.

His clothing was torn and disarranged; his wig was all awry; and large patches of his sable complexion had transferred themselves from his countenance to the hands and garments of his captors.

"No dark lantern," indeed. The natural white shone in spots through its ebony coating, and three people less fiercely in earnest than the Francoises would have gone wild with merriment, so ludicrous was the plight of the hapless detective.

"Now then," began Franz, in a low guttural that caused Mamma to start, and Papa to favor him with a stare of surprise; "now then, no tricks, my cornered cop. You may talk, but—" and he glanced significantly from the knife in Mamma's hand to the pistol now in his own,— "be careful about raising yer voice; you've got pals in the street, maybe. You *may* pipe to them, but,—" with a click of the pistol,— "ye're a dead man before they can lift a hoof!"

Vernet's eyes blazed with wrath, but he maintained a scornful silence.



"In another moment, the two were upon the floor, Franz Francoise uppermost!"—page 210.

The three Francoises, without withdrawing their gaze from their prisoner, consulted in harsh whispers. It was a brief consultation, but it was long enough for Van Vernet to decide upon his course of action.

"Now then, my bogus dark lantern," began Franz, who had evidently been chosen spokesman for the trio, "what's yer business here?"

"Why don't you begin at the beginning?" retorted Vernet, scornfully. "You have not asked who I am."

"Umph; we'll find out who ye air—when we want to. We know *what* ye air, and that's enough for us just at present."

"Might I be allowed to ask what you take me for?"

"Yes; a cop," retorted Franz, decidedly. "Enough said on that score; now, what's yer lay?"

"I suppose," began Vernet, mockingly, "that you didn't hear the little conversation between that nice old gent there and myself?"

"Look here," said Franz, with an angry gesture, "don't fool with *me*. Ef you've got any business with me, say so."

"Don't bully," retorted Vernet, contemptuously. "You were not asleep when I entered this room."

Franz seemed to hesitate and then said: "S'posin' I wasn't, wot's that got to do with it?"

"If you were awake, you know my errand."

"Look here, Mister Cop,—" Franz handled his pistol as if strongly tempted to use it,— "we'd better come to an understandin' pretty quick. I am kinder lookin' for visits from chaps of your cloth. I come in here tired, and a little muddled maybe, and flop down to get a snooze. Somethin' wakes me and I get up, to see—you. I'm on the lay for a 'spot,' an' I've seen too many nigs to be fooled by yer git-up. So I floor ye, an'—here ye air. Now, what d'ye want with me?"

"My good fellow," said Vernet, with an inconsequent laugh, "since you have defined your position, I may, perhaps, enable you to comprehend mine. Frankness for candor: First, then, I am not exactly a cop, as the word goes, but I am a—a sort of private enquirer."

"A *detective!*" hissed Mamma; while Papa turned livid at the thought the word "detective" always suggested to his mind.

"A detective, if you like," responded Vernet, coolly. "A *private* detective, be it understood. My belligerent friend, you may be badly wanted for something, and I hope you'll be found by the right parties, but you're not in my line. Just now you would be an elephant on my hands. You might be an ornament to Sing Sing or Auburn, if I had time to properly introduce you there, but I've no use for you. My business is with Papa Francoise here."

Perhaps it was the address itself, or may be the incongruity of the haughty tone and the grotesque face of the speaker, that caused Franz Francoise to give rein to a sudden burst of merriment, the signs of which he seemed unable to suppress although no audible laughter escaped his lips. He turned, at last, toward Papa and gasped, as if fairly strangled with his own mirth:

"This kind and accommodatin' gent, wot I've so misunderstood, has got business with ye, old top."

Papa came slowly forward, his face expressive of fear rather than curiosity, followed by Mamma, fierce and watchful.

"You—you wanted *me*?" began Papa, hesitatingly.

"I have business with you, Papa Francoise. I want to talk with you privately, for your interest and mine, ahem." He looked toward Franz, and seeing the stolidity of this individual, inquired: "Who is that gentleman?"

His enunciation of the last word probably excited the wrath of Franz, for he came a step nearer, with an aggressive sneer. [216]

"My name's Jimson, Mr. Cop, an' I'm a friend of the family. Anything else ye want ter know?"

With a shrug of the shoulder, Vernet turned toward Papa once more.

"I'd like to speak with you alone, Papa Francoise," he said significantly.

The mood of mocking insolence seemed deserting Franz, and a wrathful surliness manifested itself in the tone with which he addressed Papa.

"He'd like ter see ye alone, old Beelzebub, d'ye hear?"

Papa glanced hesitatingly from one to the other. He seemed to fear both the bound detective at his feet and the surly son who stood near him, with the menacing weapon in his hand, and growing rage and suspicion in his countenance.

Mamma's quick eye noted the look of suspicion and she interposed.

"Ye can speak afore this gentleman, Mr. Cop; he's a *very* intimate friend."

A look of annoyance flashed in the eyes of Van Vernet. He hesitated a moment, and then said slowly:

"Does your intimate friend know anything about the affair that happened at your late residence near Rag alley, Papa Francoise?"

It was probably owing to the fact that the fumes of his recent potations were working still, with a secondary effect, and that from sleepy inertness he was passing to a state of unreasoning disputatiousness, that Franz, evidently by no means relieved at the transfer of Vernet's attention from himself to Papa, seemed lashed into fury by the manner of the former.

"May be I know about that affair, and may be I don't," he retorted angrily. "Look here, cobby, you want to fly kind of light round me; I don't like yer style." [217]

"I didn't come here especially to fascinate you, so I am not inconsolable. I might mention, however, by way of continuing our charming frankness, that *your* style has not commended itself to me." And Vernet emphasized his statement by a jerk of his fetters. "Now listen, my friends; I did not come here alone—half a dozen stout fellows are near at hand. If I do not return to them in five minutes more, you will see them here. If I call, you will see them sooner."

Franz raised the revolver to his eye and squinted along the barrel.

"Why don't you call, then?" he inquired.

"I don't want to make a fuss. My errand is a peaceable one. Unbind me; give me ten minutes alone with Papa here, and I leave you,—you have nothing to fear from me."

Franz shifted his position and seemed to hesitate.

"You can't keep me, and you dare not kill me," continued Vernet, noting the impression he had made. "All of you are in hiding from the police, and to kill an officer is conspicuous business—not like cracking the skull of a rag-picker, Papa Francoise. As for you, my lad, you've got a sort of State's-prison air about you. I could almost fancy you a chap I saw behind the bars not long ago, serving out a long sentence."

He paused to note the effect of his words, and was somewhat surprised to see Franz rest the revolver upon his knee, while he continued to gaze at him curiously.

Vernet had made, or intended to make, a sharp home thrust. In searching out the history of the Francoises, he had stumbled upon the fact that they had a son in prison; and the mutterings of Franz, while he lay upon the pallet, coupled with the fact that Franz and Papa wore upon their heads locks of the same fiery hue, had awakened in his mind a strong suspicion.

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"Maybe ye might take a fancy ter think I'm that same feller," suggested Franz, after a moment's silence. "What then?"

"Then," replied Vernet, "every moment that you detain me here increases your own danger."

"Humph!" grunted Franz, as he rose and crossing to Mamma's side, began with her a whispered conversation.

Vernet watched them curiously for a moment, and then turned his face toward Papa.

"Look here, Francoise," he began, somewhat sternly, considering his position; "I've been looking for you ever since you left the old place, and I'm disposed to be friendly. Now, I may as well tell you that there is a rumor afloat, to the effect that your son, who was 'sent up' years ago, has lately broke jail, and that you harbor him. That does not concern me, however. This insolent fellow, if he is or is not your son, may go, so far as I am concerned, and no harm shall come to him or you through me. What I want of you, is a bit of information."

From the moment of his capture, Vernet had believed himself equal to the situation. Even now he scarcely felt that these people would dare to do him bodily injury. As may readily be surmised, his talk of confederates near at hand was all fiction. He had sought out Papa Francoise hoping to win from him something that would criminate Alan Warburton, and to use him as a tool. To arrest Papa might frustrate his own schemes, and, in the double game he was playing, Van Vernet was too wise to call upon the police for assistance or protection.

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"You want—information?" queried Papa; "what about?"

Vernet hesitated, and then said slowly:

"I want to know all that you can tell me about the Sailor who killed Josef Siebel."

Papa gasped, stammered, and turned his face toward Franz, who now came forward, saying fiercely:

"Look here, my fly cop, afore ye ask any more important questions, just answer a few."

"Take care, jail bird!" cried Vernet, enraged at his persistent interference, "or I may give the police a chance to ask you a question too many!"

"Ye've got to git out of my clutches first," hissed Franz Francoise, "and yer chances fer that are slim!"

As the young ruffian bent close to him, Vernet, for the first time, fully realized his danger. But his cry for help was smothered by the hands of his captor, and in another moment he was gagged by the expeditious fingers of the old woman, and his head and face closely muffled in a dirty cloth from the nearest pallet.

"There," said Mamma, rising from her knees with a grin of triumph, "we've got him fast. Open the door, old man, he's going into the closet for—"

"For a little while," put in Franz, significantly.

Into a rear room, across this, and into the dark hole, which Mamma had dignified by the name of closet, they carried their luckless prisoner, bound beyond hope of self-deliverance, gagged almost to suffocation, his eyes blinded to any ray of light, his ears muffled to any sound that might penetrate his dungeon.

CHAPTER XXX.

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FRANZ FRANCOISE'S GENERALSHIP.

When the three had returned to the outer room, Papa turned anxiously toward his hopeful son.

"Franz, my boy," he began, in a quavering voice, "if there should be cops outside—"

"Ye're the same whinin' old coward, ain't ye?" commented Franz, as he favored his father with a contemptuous glance. "I've seen a good many bad eggs, but blow me if I ever seed one like ye! Why, in the name o' blazes, air ye more afraid of a cop than you'd be o' the hangman?"

The mention of this last-named public benefactor, caused Papa to shiver violently, and Mamma bent upon him a look of scorn.

"Don't be an idiot, Francoise," she said, sharply. "We've got somethin' to do besides shakin' an' shiverin'?"

"Time enough ter shiver when the hangman gits ye," added Franz, reassuringly. "But ye needn't fret about cops—I ain't no baby; there ain't no backers outside."

"But, Franzy,—" began Papa.

"Shet up; I'm runnin' this. If there'd a-been any help outside, we wouldn't a-had it so easy, you old fool! That cove in there ain't no coward; he'd a taken the chances with us, and blowed his horn when we first tackled him, if there'd been help handy."

"Ah, what a brain the boy has got!" murmured Mamma, with rapturous pride.

"Look a-here," said Franz, after a moment's consideration, "I'm satisfied that there *ain't* no cops about; but to set yer mind at rest, old un, so that you kin use it ter help git to the bottom of this business, I'll go and take a look around, and I'll be back in jest five minutes." And he made a quick stride toward the door. [221]

"Now, Franzy,—" began Mamma, coaxingly.

But he waved her back, saying: "Shut up, old woman; I'm runnin' this," and went swiftly out.

When the sound of his retreating footsteps was lost to their ears, Papa and Mamma drew close together, and looked into each others' faces—he anxiously, she with a leer of shrewd significance.

"Old man," she said, impressively, "that boy'll be the makin' of us—if we don't let him git us down."

"Eh! what?"

"He's got your cunnin' an' mine together, and he's got all the grit you lack."

"Well," impatiently.

"But he'll want to run us. An' when he knows all *we* know, he'd put his foot on us if we git in his way."

"Yes," assented the old man, with a cunning wink, "he's like his ma—considerable."

"On account o' this here cop business," went on Mamma, ignoring the thrust, "he'll have to be told a little about that Siebel affair. But about the rest—not a word. We kin run the other business without his assistance. Franzy's a fine boy, an' I'm proud of him, but 'twon't do, as I told you afore, to give him too much power. I know the lad."

"Yes," insinuated Papa, with a dry cough, "I reckon you do."

"Ye kin see by the way he took the lead to-night, that he won't play no second part. We'll have to tell him about Siebel—" [222]

"An' about Nance."

"It's the same thing; an' ye'll see what he does when we give him an idea about it."

"I know what he'll do;" with a crafty wink. "I'll tell him *all* about Nance."

"Yes," muttered the old woman, "ye're good at lyin', and all the sneakin' dodges."

And she turned upon her heel, and went over to the pallet where Nance, undisturbed by the events transpiring around her, still lay as she had fallen in her drunken stupor.

"There's another thing," said Mamma, apparently satisfied with her survey of the unconscious girl, and returning to Papa as she spoke. "We've got to git out of here, of course, as soon as we've settled that spy in there."

"We'd a-had to git out anyhow," muttered Papa, "on account of that charity minx. Yes, we will; an' we hain't heard from *her*. You'll have to visit her agin."

"I s'pose so. An' when I do—that cop's comin' has given me an idea—I'll bring her to time."

"How?"

Mamma leaned toward him, and touched his shoulder with her bony forefinger.

"Just as that cop 'ud have brought *you* to time, if it hadn't been for Franzy's comin'."

Over Papa's wizened face a look of startled intelligence slowly spread itself.

"Old woman," he ejaculated, "Satan himself wouldn't a-thought of *that!* The devil will be proud of ye, someday. But Franzy mustn't see the gal."

"I'll manage that," said Mamma. "It's risky, but it's the only way; I'll manage it." [223]

They had heard no sound, although as they talked they also listened, but while the last words yet lingered on the old woman's lips, the door suddenly opened and Franz entered.

"There's no danger," he said, closing the door and securing it carefully. "Ye kin breathe easy, old top; we're a good deal safer jest now than our 'dark lantern' in there," and he nodded toward the inner room.

"Then," put in Mamma, "while we're safe, we'd better make *him* safe."

"Don't git in a hurry, old un; we want a better understandin' afore we tackle his case. Come, old rook, git up here, an' let's take our bearings."

He perched himself upon the rickety table, and Papa and Mamma drew the stools up close and seated themselves thereon.

"Now then," began Franz, "who did yon nipped cove come here to see, you or me, old un? He 'pears to know a little about us both."

"Yes," assented Papa, "so he does."

"What he knows about me, I reckon he told," resumed Franz. "Now, what's the killin' affair mentioned?"

Papa seemed to ponder a moment, and then lifted his eyes to his son's face with a look of bland ingenuousness.

"It's a kind of delicate affair, my boy," he began, in a tone of confidential frankness, "but 'twon't do for *us* to have secrets from each other—will it, old woman?"

"No," said Mamma; "Franzy's our right hand now. You ort to tell him all about it."

"Oh, git along," burst in Franz. "Give us the racket, an' cut it mighty short—time enough for pertikelers later." [224]

"Quite right, my boy," said Papa, briskly. "Well, here it is: I—I'm wanted, for a witness, in a—a murder case."

"Oh," groaned Franz, in tones of exaggerated grief, "my heart is broke!"

"You needn't laugh, Franzy," remonstrated Papa, aggrieved. "It's the business I was tellin' you about—at the other place, you know."

"Well, see here, old un, my head's been considerable mixed to-night; seems to me ye did tell me a yarn, but tell it agin."

"Why, there's not much of it. We was doing well; I bought rags an'—an' things."

"Rags an' things—oh, yes!"

"An' we was very comfortable. But one night—" and Papa turned his eyes toward Mamma, as if expecting her to confirm all that he said—"one night, when there was a number there, a fight broke out. We was in another room, the old woman an' me,—"

"Yes," interjected Mamma, "we was."

"An' we ran in, an' tried to stop the fight."

Mamma nodded approvingly.

"But we wasn't strong enough. Before we could see who did it, a man was killed. And in a minute we heard the police coming. Before they got there, we had all left, and they found no one but the dead man to arrest. Ever since, they've been tryin' to find out who did the killin'."

"Um!" grunted Franz, "and did you tell me they had arrested somebody?"

"No, my boy. They caught one fellow, a sailor, but he got away."

"Oh, he got away. How many was there, at the time of the killin'?" [225]

"There were three in the room, besides the man that was killed, and there was the old woman and me in the next room."

"You forgit," interrupts Mamma, "there was Nance."

"Oh, yes," rejoined Papa, as if grateful for the correction, "there was Nance."

Franz glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping girl, and then asked sharply: "And what was Nance doin'?"

"Nance was layin' on a pile o' rags in a corner," broke in Mamma, "an' I had to drag her out."

Franz gave utterance to something between a grunt and a chuckle.

"So you dragged her out, did ye? 'Tain't exactly in your line neither, doin' that sort o' thing. Ye must a-thought that gal worth savin'."

"She ain't worth savin' now," broke in Papa, hastily. "She's a stone around our necks."

"That's a fact," said Mamma. "An' it's all in consequence of that white-faced charity tramp's meddlin' we've got to get out of here, an' we'll be tracked wherever we go by that drunken gal's bein' along."

"Well, ye ain't obliged ter take her, are ye?" queried Franz, as if this part of the subject rather bored him. "Your keepin' *her* looks all rot to me. She ain't good for nothin' that I kin see, only to

spoil good whiskey."

Papa and Mamma exchanged glances, and then Papa said:

"Jest so, my boy; she spoils good whiskey, but she's safer so than without it. We kin afford to keep her better than we kin afford to turn her loose."

"D'ye mean ter say," queried Franz, "that if that gal knew anything, she'd know too much?"

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"That's about it, my boy."

Franz gave vent to a low whistle. "So," he said; "an' *that's* why ye keep her full o' drugged liquor, eh? I'll lay a pipe that's the old woman's scheme. Have I hit the mark, say?"

"Yes, Franzy."

"Yes, my boy."

"Then what the dickens are ye mincin' about? Why don't ye settle the gal afore we pad?"

"Easy, my boy, easy," remonstrates Papa.

"Just wot *I* say, Franz," puts in Mamma. "When we leave here, it won't be safe for us to take her—nor for you, either."

"Safe!" cried Franz, springing from the table with excited manner; "safe! It 'ud be ruination! Afore to-morrow we must be out o' this. I ain't goin' to run no chances. If 'twas safe to turn her loose, I'd say do it. I don't believe in extinguishin' anybody when 'tain't necessary; but when '*tis*, why—" He finishes the sentence with a significant gesture.

"But, Franz—" begins Mamma, making a feint at remonstrance.

"You shet up!" he exclaims; "I'm runnin' this. The gal's been tried an' condemned—jest leave her to me, an' pass on to the next pint. Have ye got a hen-roost handy?"

"D'ye think we're in our dotage, Franzy," said Papa plaintively, "that ye ask us such a question? Did ye ever know us to be without two perches?"

"Well, is it *safe*, then?"

"If we kin git there without bein' tracked, it's safe enough."

"Well," said Franz, "we kin do that ef we git an early start, afore our prisoner is missed. As soon as it's still enough, an' late enough, we'll mizzle."

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"Wot's yer plan, Franzy?"

"Easy as a, b, c. You an' the old woman lead the way, ter make sure that there won't be nobody ter bother me, when I come after with the gal."

"With the gal?"

"Yes; ye don't want ter leave a dead gal here, do ye? Ye might be wanted agin, *fer a witness*."

Papa winced and was silent.

"But, Franz,—" expostulated Mamma.

"You shet up! I'm no chicken." And Franz drew his dirk and ran his finger along the keen edge. "Here's my plan: You two give me the bearings of the new hen-roost, an' then start out, keepin' a little ahead, an' goin' toward the drink. I'll rouse up the gal an' boost her along, keepin' close enough to ye to have ye on hand, to prove that I'm takin' home my drunken sister if any one asks questions. When we get near the drink, you'll be likely to miss me."

"Oh!"

"An' after a while I may overtake ye, somewhere about hen-roost, *alone!*"

"Oh," said Mamma, "you'll finish the job in the drink?"

"I'll finish *with* the drink but I'll *begin* with this." And he poised the naked dagger above Mamma's head with a gesture full of significance.

"But the other," said Papa, with nervous eagerness; "what shall we do with him?"

"The other," replied Franz, slowly putting away his knife, "we will leave here."

"What!" screamed Mamma.

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"But—" objected Papa.

"Are ye a pack o' fools after all?" snarled Franz. "A dead cop'll make us more trouble than a livin' one. Ye kin kill ten ordinary mortals an' be safer than if ye kill one cop. Kill ten men, they detail a squad to hunt ye up mebby. Kill one peeler, an' you've got the whole police force agin ye. No, sir; we bring him out o' that closet, and leave him ter take his chances. Before morning, we'll be where he can't track us; and somebody'll let him loose by to-morrow. He'll have plenty o' time to meditate, and mebby it'll do him good."

There was a look of dissatisfaction in Mamma's eyes; and Papa's assent was feeble. But already this strong-willed ruffian had gained an ascendancy over them, and his promptitude in taking Nance so completely off their hands, assured them that it would not be well to cross him.

Nevertheless, as they made their preparations for a midnight flitting, Papa and Mamma, unseen by Franz, exchanged more than one significant glance.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FLAMES.

It was past midnight when the muffled figures of Papa and Mamma Franchoise emerged stealthily from the tenement house, and took their way toward the river. Now and then they looked anxiously back, and constantly kept watch to the right and left.



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"Franz and Nance, poor Nance, going—
whither?"—[page 230](#).

A little way behind them, two other figures followed; the man half supporting, half dragging, a reeling, stupefied girl, and urging her along by alternate coaxing and threats. [230]

Franz and Nance, poor Nance, going—whither?

Keeping the same path, and always the same brief space between them, the four moved onward until they were almost at the river. Then, in obedience to a low whistle, Papa and Mamma turned, passed the other two, and retraced their steps swiftly and silently.

When they had gone by, Franz Franchoise turned and looked after them until their figures had vanished in the darkness.

Then he seized the arm of his companion, and hurried her around the nearest corner and on through the gloom; on till the river was full in sight.

Meanwhile Van Vernet, having been brought out from his closet-prison, lay upon the floor of the inner room at the lately-deserted Franchoise abode, still bound, and gagged almost to suffocation, while, to make his isolation yet more impressive, Mamma had tied a dirty rag tightly about his eyes.

Left in doubt as to the fate that awaited him—unable to move, to see, or to use his voice,—Van Vernet lay as helplessly ensnared as if he were the veriest dullard and bungler, instead of the shrewdest and most daring member of the force.

They had transferred him from the closet to his present position in profound silence. He knew that they were moving about stealthily—he could guess, from the fact that but one door had been opened, and from the short distance they had borne him, that he was in the inner instead of the outer room—he had heard them moving about in the next room, and had caught the murmur of their voices as they engaged in what seemed a sharp dispute, carried on in guarded tones—then slower movements, sharp whispers, and finally retreating footsteps, and the careful opening and closing of a door. [231]

After this, only silence.

Surrounded by the silence and darkness, Van Vernet could only think. What were their intentions? Where had they gone? Would they come back?

Bound and helpless as he was, and menaced by what form of danger he knew not, his heart still beat regularly, his head was cool, his brain clear.

"They dare not kill me," he thought, "for they can't bury me handily, and are too far from the river. They'd have to leave my body here and decamp, and they're too shrewd thus to fasten the crime upon themselves. I wish I knew their plans."

By and by, as the silence continued, he began to struggle; not with his bonds, for he knew that to be useless, but in an effort to propel himself about the room.

Slowly, with cautious feeling of his way, by bringing his head or feet first into contact with the new space to be explored, he made the circuit of the room; rolling from side to side across the dusty floor, bringing himself up sharply against the walls on either side, in the hope of finding anything—a hook, a nail, a projecting bit of wood—against which he might rub his head, hoping thus to remove the bandage from his eyes, perhaps the gag from his mouth.

But his efforts were without reward. The room was bare. Not a box, not a bit of wood, not a projecting hook or nail; only a few scattering rags which, as he rolled among them, baptized him with a cloud of dust and reminded him, by their offensive odor, of the foul cellar in Papa Françoise's deserted K—street abode. [232]

There was nothing in the room to help him. It was useless to try to liberate himself. And he lay supine once more, cursing the Fate that had led him into such a trap; and cursing more than all the officious, presumptuous meddler, the jail-bird and ruffian, who had thus entrapped *him*, Van Vernet.

"If I escape," he assured himself, "and I *will* escape, I'll hunt that man down! I'll put him behind the bars again if, to do it, I have to renounce the prospect of a double fortune! But I won't renounce it," thought this hopeful prisoner. "When I find them again, and I will find them, I'll first capture this convict son, and then use him to extort the truth from those old pirates—the truth concerning their connection with Alan Warburton, aristocrat. And when I have that truth, the high and mighty Warburton will learn what it costs him to send a black servant to dictate to Van Vernet!"

Easily conceived, this pretty scheme for the future, but its execution depends upon the liberation of Van Vernet and, just now, that seems an improbable thing.

Moments pass away. They seem like hours to the helpless prisoner; they have fitted themselves into one long hour before the silence is broken.

Then he hears, for all his shut-up faculties seemed to have merged themselves into hearing, a slight, a very slight sound in the outer room. The door has opened, some one is entering. More muffled sounds, and Vernet knows that some one is creeping toward the inner room. Slowly, with the least possible noise, that door also opens. He hears low whispering, and then realizes that two persons approach him. Are they foes or friends? Oh, for the use of his eyes—for the power to speak! [233]

Presently hands touch him. Ah, they are about to liberate him; but why so silent?

They are dexterous, swift-moving hands; but his fetters remain, while the swift hands work on.

They are robbing him. First his watch; his pocket-book next; then shirt studs, sleeve buttons, even his handkerchief.

And still no word is spoken.

He writhes in impotent anger. His brain seems seized with a sudden madness. These swift, despoiling hands, the darkness, the horrible silence, appall him—fill him with a sort of supernatural terror.

The hands have ceased their search, and he knows that the two robbers have risen. He feels the near presence of one; the footsteps of the other go from him, toward the street.

A scraping sound; a soft rustle. They are gathering up the rags from the floor. The closet again: this time it is opened, entered. A moment's stillness; then a sharp sound, which he knows to be the striking of a match. Another long silent moment. *What* are they doing?

Ah! the footsteps retreat. They go toward the outer room; creeping, creeping stealthily.

Now they have crossed the outer room. They go out, and the door is softly closed.

What does this mystery mean? Have they returned to rob him, and then to leave him? Will they come back yet again?

A moment passes; another, and another. Then a sickening odor penetrates to his nostrils, like the burning of some foul-smelling thing.

Crackle, crackle, crackle!

Ah! he comprehends now! The fiends have fired the closet! They have left him there to perish in the flames—the hungry flames that will wipe out all traces of their guilt! [234]

Oh, the unutterable horror that sweeps over him! To die thus: fettered, blinded, powerless to cry for aid! A frenzied madness courses through his veins.

Crackle, hiss, roar!

The flames rise and spread. The door of the closet has fallen in, and now he feels their hot breath. They are closing around him; he is suffocating. He tugs at his fetters with the strength of despair. All is in vain.

Hiss! hiss! hiss!

His brain reels. He is falling, falling, falling. There is a horrible sound in his ears; his eyes see hideous visions; his breath is strangled; he shudders convulsively, and resigns his hold upon life!

CHAPTER XXXII.

“A BRAND FROM THE BURNING.”

There is a cry of alarm in the street below. The fire has broken through the roof, and so revealed itself to some late passer-by.

“Fire! fire! fire!”

Soon the space before the doomed building is swarming with people running, vociferating, cursing, jesting. Drunken men are there, haggard women, dirty, ragged children, who clap their hands and shout excitedly at this splendid spectacle.



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“The flames rise and spread; the door of the closet has fallen in, and now he feels their hot breath.”—[page 234](#).

It is useless to attempt to save the old tenement; they realize that. But its occupants—They have heard the alarm, and they come out hurriedly, *en deshabelle*, pushing and dragging the children, screaming, and cursing each other and the world. [236]

All on the lower floor are then safe. But the upper floor, and its occupants?

“Fire! fire! fire!”

No signs of life above stairs. No terrified faces at the windows. No flying forms down the rickety stairway. No cries for help from among the fast-spreading flames.

“Fire! fire! fire!”

They hear the tinkle of bells, the gallop of speeding hoofs upon the pavement.

“Ah!” cries an on-looker, “the fire boys are coming!”

“Too late, they are,” growls another; “too late, as usual.”

The engine approaches; and from the opposite direction comes a man, running swiftly, panting

heavily, almost breathless.

The roof is all ablaze now; in a moment the rafters will have fallen in.

The panting new-comer stops suddenly before the door of the burning tenement, and glances sharply about. Near him is a half-dazed woman who has rushed to the rescue, as frightened women will, with a pail of water in her unsteady hand. The man leaps toward her, seizes the pail, dashes its contents over his head and shoulders, and plunging through the doorway, disappears up the stairs.

"Stop! Come back!"

"What a fool!"

"That's the end of *him!*"

The on-lookers shout and scream. Exclamations, remonstrance, pity, ridicule—all find voice, and are all lost upon the daring adventurer among the flames. [237]

The engine rushes up; the firemen spring to their work: useless effort. Nobody thinks of them, or what they do; all eyes are on the blazing upper story, all thoughts for the man who is braving the flames.

A crash from aloft; a cry from the multitude. The roof is falling in, and the gallant rescuer—ah! he is doomed.

But no; a form comes reeling out from among the smoke and fire tongues, comes staggering and swaying beneath a burden which is almost too much for his strength.

Then a triumphant yell rises from the multitude. They seize upon rescued and rescuer, and bear them away from the heat and danger. How they scream and crowd; how they elbow and curse; how they exclaim, as they bend over these two refugees from a fiery death!

The rescuer has sunk upon the ground, half suffocated and almost insensible; but all eyes are fixed upon the rescued, for he is bound, gagged and blindfolded!

What is he? Who is he? Why is he thus? They are filled with curiosity; here is a mystery to solve. For the moment the gallant rescuer is forgotten, or only remembered as they seek to avoid trampling upon him in their eagerness to obtain a view of the greater curiosity.

They tear off the fetters of the late prisoner. They wrest the bandage from his eyes. They remove the gag from his mouth. Then curiosity receives a fresh stimulus; exclamations break out anew.

"It's a nigger!"

"No; look here!"

"Hello, he's been playin' moke!"

"He's been blacked!"

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"Look at his clothes, boys."

"Jerusalem! he's been robbed."

Then they begin their efforts to bring him to his senses; partly for humanity's sake, quite as much that they may gratify their curiosity.

"He's dead, I reckon."

"No; only smothered."

"Stand back there; give us air."

"Let's have some water."

"No, brandy."

"Look; he's coming to."

He is "coming to". He shudders convulsively, gropes about with his hands and feebly raises his head. Then respiration becomes freer; he draws in a deep breath, sits up and looks about him. He is bewildered at first; then memory reasserts herself. He sees the now almost-demolished tenement, the crowd of eager faces, and notes the fact that he is free, unfettered. He rises to his feet, and unmindful of the questions eagerly poured upon him, gazes slowly about him.

At last two or three policemen have appeared upon the scene. He shakes himself loose from the people about him, and strides toward one of these functionaries; Van Vernet is himself again.

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"A form comes reeling out from among the smoke and fire-tongues, staggering beneath a burden."—page 237.

The eyes of the crowd follow his movements in amazement. They see him speak a few words in the ear of one of the officers; see that worthy beckon to a second, and whisper to him in turn. And then, leaning upon the arm of officer number one, and following in the wake of officer number two, who clears the way with authoritative waves of his magic club, he passes them by without a word or glance, and soon, with his double escort, is lost in the darkness, leaving the throng baffled, dissatisfied and, more than all, astounded. [240]

"And he never stops to ask who saved him!" cries a woman's shrill voice.

"Oh, the wretch!"

"What shameful ingratitude!"

And now their thoughts return to the rescuer, the gallant fellow who has risked his life to save an ingrate.

But he, too, is gone. In the moment when their eyes and their thoughts were following Vernet, he has disappeared.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

IN THE CONSERVATORY.

Several days have passed since the visit of Mamma Francoise to the Warburton mansion, with all its attendant circumstances; since the flight from the Francoise tenement, and Van Vernet's rescue from a fiery death.

The Warburton Mansion is closed and gloomy. The splendid drawing-rooms are darkened and tenantless. The music-room is silent and shut from any ray of light. The library, where a dull fire glows in the grate, looks stately and somber. Only in the conservatory—where the flowers bloom and send out breaths of fragrance, and where the birds chirp and carol as if there were no sorrow nor death in the world—is there any light and look of cheer.

Yesterday, the stately doors opened for the last exit of the master of all that splendor. He went out in state, and was followed by an imposing cortege. There was all the solemn pomp, all the grandeur of an aristocratic funeral. But when it was over, what was Archibald Warburton more than the poorest pauper who dies in a hospital and is buried by the coroner? [241]

To-day the doors are closed, the house is silent. The servants go about with solemn faces and hushed voices. Alan Warburton has kept his own room since early morning, and Leslie has been visible only to her maid and to Winnie French.

She is alone in her dressing-room, at this moment, standing erect before the daintily-tiled fireplace, a look of hopeless despair upon her countenance.

A moment since, she was sitting before the fire, so sad, so weary, that it seemed to her that death had left the taint of his presence over everything. Now, that which she held in her hand had brought her back to life, and face to face with her future, with fearful suddenness.

It was a note coarsely written and odorous of tobacco, and it contained these words:

We have waited for you five days. If you do not come to us before two more, they shall know at police headquarters that you can tell them who killed Josef Siebel. You see we have changed our residence.

Then followed the street and number of the Francoises' new abode. There was no date, no address, no signature. But Leslie knew too well all that it did not say; comprehended to the full its hidden meaning.

She had not anticipated this blow; had never dreamed that they would dare so much. Standing there, with her lips compressed and her fingers clutching the dirty bit of paper, she looked the future full in the face.

Stanhope had bidden her ignore their commands and fear nothing. But then he never could have anticipated *this*. If she could see him; could consult him once again. But that was impossible; he had told her so. [242]

For many moments she stood moveless and silent, her brow contracted, the desperate look in her eyes growing deeper, her lips compressing themselves into fixed firm lines.

Then she thrust the note into her pocket, and turned from the grate.

"It is the last straw!" she muttered, in a low monotone. "But there shall be no more hesitation; we have had enough of that. They may do their worst now, and—" she shut her teeth with a sharp sound—"and I will frustrate them, at the cost of my honor or my life!"

There was no timidity, no tremor of hesitation in her movements, as she crossed the room and opened the door. Her hand was firm, her step steady, her face as fixed as marble; but it looked, in its white immobility, like a face that was dead.

She crossed the hall and entered the chamber occupied by her friend. A maid was there, engaged in sewing.

Miss French had just left the room, she said. Miss French felt oppressed by the loneliness and gloom. She had gone below, probably to the conservatory.

Winnie was in the conservatory, holding a book in one listless hand, idly fingering a trailing vine with the other. Her eyes, usually so merry and sparkling, were tear-dimmed and fixed on vacancy. Her pretty face was unnaturally woeful; her piquant mouth, sad and drooping.

She sprang up, however, with a quick exclamation, when Leslie's hand parted the clustering vines, and Leslie's self glided in among the exotics.

"Sit where you are, Winnie," said Leslie, in a voice which struck her listener as strangely chill and monotonous. "Let me sit beside you. It's not quite so dreary here, and I've something to say to you." [243]

Casting a look of startled inquiry upon her, Winnie resumed her seat among the flowery vines, and Leslie sank down beside her, resuming, as she did so, and in the same even, icy tone:

"Dear, I want you to promise me, first of all, to keep what I am about to say a secret."

Winnie lifted two inquiring eyes to the face of her friend, but said no word.

"I know, Winnie, that you have ever been my truest, dearest friend," pursued Leslie. "But now—ah! I must put your friendship to a new, strange test. I feel as if my secret would be less a burden if shared by a true friend, and you are that friend. Winnie, I have a sad, sad secret."

The young girl turned her face slowly away from Leslie's gaze, and when it was completely hidden among the leaves and blossoms, she breathed, in a scarcely audible whisper:

"I know it, Leslie; I guessed."

"What!" queried Leslie, a look of sad surprise crossing her face, "you, too, have guessed it? And I thought it so closely hidden! Oh," with a sudden burst of passion, "did my husband suspect it, too, then?"

"No, dear," replied Winnie, turning her face toward Leslie but keeping her eyes averted; "no, I do not believe that Archibald guessed. He was too true and frank himself to suspect any form of falsity in another."

"*Falsity!*" Leslie rose slowly to her feet, her face fairly livid.

Winnie also arose, and seizing one of Leslie's hands began, in a broken voice: [244]

"Leslie, forgive the word! Oh, from the very first, I have known your secret, and pitied you. I knew it because—because I, too, am a woman, and can read a woman's heart. But Archibald never guessed it, and Alan—"

She broke off abruptly, wringing her hands as if tortured by her own words.

But Leslie coldly completed the sentence. "Alan! He knows it?"

"Oh, yes. It began by his doubting your love for his brother, and then—the knowledge—that you

cared—for him—”

Across Leslie’s pallid face the red blood came surging, and a bitter cry broke from her lips; a cry that bore with it all her constrained calmness.

“*That I cared!*” she repeated wildly. “Winnifred French, what are you saying! God of Heaven! is *that* madness known, too?”

She flung herself upon the divan, her form shaken by a passion of voiceless sobs.

“Oh, Leslie, don’t!” cried Winnie, flinging herself down beside her friend. “We cannot always control our hearts; and indeed, dear, *I* do not blame you for loving him. Leslie,” lowering her voice softly, “it is no sin for you to love him, now.”

“No sin!” Leslie’s voice was regaining its calmness, but not its icy tone. “Winnie, *you* can say that? Ah! a woman *can* read a woman’s heart, and I have read yours: you love Alan Warburton.”

“I? no, no!”

“I say yes; and but for your Quixotic notions of loyalty and friendship, you would be his promised wife to-day. Winnie, listen; having begun another confession I will make my confidence entire. I never dreamed that you or—or Alan, guessed my horrible folly. I did not come to intrust to your keeping that dead secret. You tell me that it is no sin to love Alan now. Winnie, the greatest sin of my life has been that I promised to marry Archibald Warburton without loving him. But, at least, I was heart-free then; I cared for no other. We were betrothed three months before Alan came home, and I—. But let that pass; it is the crowning-point of my humiliation. I did love Alan Warburton. If I loved him still, I could not say this so calmly. Winnie, believe me; that madness is over. To-day Alan Warburton is to me—my husband’s brother, nothing more; just as I am nothing, in his eyes, save a woman who wears with ill grace the proud name of Warburton. This may seem strange to you. It will not appear so strange when you hear what I am about to tell. Alan Warburton’s egotism has cured me effectually. I am free from that folly, thank Heaven, but I shall never cease to hate myself for it. And my humiliation is now complete, since you tell me that Alan knew of my madness. But, Winnie, this is not what I came to tell you. I have another secret, dear, but this one is not like the other, a sin of my own making. It is a story of the craftiness of others, and of my weakness—yes, wickedness.”

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“Hush, Leslie,” said Winnie impetuously, “I won’t hear you talk of wickedness. I am glad you no longer care for Alan; and as for me, I just hate him; the detestable, stiff-necked—pshaw, don’t talk as if you had wronged *him!*”

There is a movement of the heavy curtains that separate this bower from the library. Some one is approaching, but Leslie, unaware of this near presence, answers sadly:

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“Ah, Winnie, you don’t know all. I have dared to unite myself to the haughty house of Warburton; to take upon myself a name old, honored and unsullied, and to drag that name—”

A sound close at hand causes them both to start. They lift their eyes to see, pale and erect among the roses and lilies and trailing vines, wearing upon his handsome face a look of mingled sadness and scorn—Alan Warburton.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FLINT TO STEEL.

There was a long moment of silence, and then Alan Warburton spoke.

“Much as I desire to hear that sentence completed, Mrs. Warburton, I could do no less than interrupt.”

Leslie dropped Winnie’s hand and rose slowly, moving with a stately grace toward the entrance before which Alan stood. And Winnie, with a wrathful glance at the intruder, flung aside a handful of loose leaves with an impatient motion, and followed her friend.

But Alan, making no effort to conceal his hostile feelings, still stood before the entrance, and again addressed Leslie.

“May I detain you for a moment, Mrs. Warburton?”

Leslie paused before him with a face as haughty as his own, and bowed her assent. Then she drew back and looked at Winnie, who, with a gesture meant to be imperious, commanded Alan to stand aside.

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“Will you remain, Miss French?” asked Alan, but moving aside with a courtly bow.

“No; I won’t,” retorted the irate little lady. “I don’t like the change of climate. I’m going up stairs for my furs and a foot-warmer—ugh!”

And casting upon him a final glance of scorn, she dashed aside the curtains, and they heard the

door of the library close sharply behind her.

For a moment they regarded each other silently. Since the night of that fateful masquerade they had not exchanged words, except such commonplaces as were made necessary by the presence of a third person. Now they were both prepared for a final reckoning; he with stern resolve stamped upon every feature; she with desperate defiance in look and manner.

"I think," she said, with a movement toward the *portierie*, "that our conversation had better be continued there."

He bowed a stately assent, and held back the curtains while she passed into the library.

She crossed the room with slow, graceful movements, and pausing before the hearth, turned her face toward him.

Feeling to her heart's core the humiliation brought by the knowledge that this man, her accuser, had fathomed the secret of her past love for him; with the thought of the Francoises' threat ever before her—Leslie Warburton stood there hopeless, desolate, desperate. She had ceased to struggle with her fate. She had resolved to meet the worst, and to brave it. She was the woman without hope, but she was every inch a queen, her head haughtily poised, her face once more frozen into pallid tranquility. [248]

Standing thus, she was calm, believing that she had drained her bitter cup to its very dregs; that Fate could have no more poisoned arrows in store for her.

Ah, if she had known that her bitterest draught was yet to be quaffed; that the deadliest wound was yet to be inflicted!

She made no effort to break the silence that fell between them; she would not aid him by a word.

Comprehending this, after a moment of waiting, he said:

"Madam, believe me, I have no desire to do you an injustice. I have purposely avoided this interview, wishing, while my dead brother remained among us, to spare you for his sake. Now, however, it is my duty to fathom the mystery in which you have chosen to envelop yourself. What have you to say?"

"That, knowing his duty so well, Mr. Alan Warburton will do it, undoubtedly." And she bowed with ironical courtesy.

"And you still persist in your refusal to explain?"

"On the contrary, I am quite at your service."

She smiled as she said these words. At least she could humble the pride of this superior being, and she would have this small morsel of revenge. Her answer astonished him. His surprise was manifest. And she favored him with a frosty smile as she asked:

"What is it that my brother-in-law desires to know?"

"The truth," he replied sternly. "What took you to that vile den on the night of your masquerade? Are those Francoises the people you have so frequently visited by stealth? Are they your clandestine correspondents?"

"Your questions come too fast," she retorted calmly. "I will reverse the order of my answers. The Francoises *are* my clandestine correspondents. My visits by stealth, have all been paid to them. It was a threat that took me there that eventful night." [249]

"A threat?"

"Yes."

"Then you are in their power?"

"I was."

"And their sway has ceased?"

"It has ceased."

"Since when?"

"Since the receipt of this."

She took from her pocket the crumpled note, and held it out to him.

He read it with his face blanching.

"Then it was *you!*" he gasped, with a recoil of horror.

"It was a blow in my defence," she said, with a glance full of meaning. "It would not become me to save myself at the expense of the one who dealt it."

His eyes flashed, but she looked at him steadily. "Do you *know* who struck that blow?" he asked.

"To tell you would not add to your store of knowledge," she retorted. "Have you more to say, Mr.

Warburton?"

"More? yes. Who are these Francoises? What are they to you?"

Her answer came with slow deliberation. "They call themselves my father and mother."

"My God!"

"It is true. I was adopted by the Ulimans. My husband and Mr. Follingsbee were aware of this. It seems that I was given to the Ulimans by these people."

She had aimed this blow at his pride, but that pride was swallowed up by his consternation. As she watched his countenance, the surprise changed to incredulity, the incredulity to contempt. Then he said, dryly: [250]

"Your story is excellent, but too improbable. Will you answer a few more questions?"

"Ask them."

"On the night of the masquerade you received here, in your husband's house, by appointment, a man disguised in woman's apparel."

"Well?"

"You admit it? Do you know how I effected my escape that night?"

"I do. A brave man came to your rescue."

"Precisely; and this 'brave man', is the same who was present at the masquerade; is it not so?"

"It is."

"Who is this man?"

"I decline to answer."

"What is he to you, then?"

"What he is to all who know him: a brave, true man; a gentleman."

"Hem! You have an exalted opinion of this—this *gentleman*."

"And so should you have, since he saved your life, and what you value more, your reputation. And now listen: this same man has bidden me tell you, has bidden me warn you, that dangers surround you on every hand; that Van Vernet has traced the resemblance between you and the Sailor of that night; that he will hunt you down if possible. Your safety depends upon your success in baffling his efforts to identify you with that Sailor."

"Your *friend* is very thoughtful," he sneered. [251]

She turned toward the door with an air of weariness.

"This is our last interview," she said coldly; "have you more to say?"

He made a quick stride toward the door, and placing himself before it, let his enforced calmness fall from him like a mantle of snow from a statue of fire, with all his hatred and disgust concentrated in the low, metallic tones in which he addressed her.

"I have only this to say: Your plans, which as yet I only half comprehend, will fail utterly. You fancy, perhaps, that this snare, into which I have fallen, will fetter my hands and prevent me from undoing your work. I cannot give life to the victim whose death lies at your door, the husband who was slain by your sin, but I can rescue your later victim, if her life, too, has not been sacrificed. As for these two wretches, whose parental claim is a figment of your own imagination, and this *lover*, who is the abettor, possibly the instigator, of your crimes, I shall find him out—"

"Stop," she cried wildly, "I command you, *stop!*"

"Ah, that touches you! I repeat, I shall find him out. To succeed, you should have concealed his existence as effectually as you have concealed poor little Daisy."

A death-like pallor overspreads the face of the woman before him. She stretches out her arms imploringly, her form sways as if she were about to fall, and she utters a wailing cry.

"As I have concealed Daisy? Oh, my God; my God! I see! I understand! My weakness, my folly, has done its work. I *have* killed my husband! I *have* brought a curse upon little Daisy! I *have* endangered your life and honor! I conceal our Daisy? Hear me, Heaven; henceforth I am nameless, homeless, friendless, until I have found Daisy Warburton and restored her to you!" [252]

Her voice died in a low wail. She makes a forward movement, and then falls headlong at the feet of her stern accuser. For the second time in all her life, Leslie Warburton has fainted.

One moment Alan Warburton stands looking down upon her, a cynical half smile upon his lips. Then he turns and pulls the bell.

"Mrs. Warburton is in a swoon," he says to the servant who appears. "Call some one to her assistance."

And without once glancing backward, he strides from the library.

CHAPTER XXXV.

ALAN "EVOLVES" A PLAN OF ACTION.

Kind hands brought Leslie back to life, and to a new sense of pain, for even the hands that love us must sometimes hurt, when they hope to heal.

Every servant of the household loved its fair mistress. And while those who could, bustled to and fro, commanded by Winnie, each eager to minister to so kind a mistress, and those who were superfluous went about with anxious, sympathetic faces, Alan Warburton, the one unpitying soul in all that household, paced his room restlessly, troubled and anxious—not because of Leslie's illness, but because of the revelation just received from her lips.



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"I cannot give life to the victim whose death lies at your door."—page 251.

Could this thing be true? Had his brother Archibald, a Warburton of the Warburton's—that family so old, so proud, so pure; that family whose men had always been gentlemen whom the world had delighted to honor; whose women had been queens of society, stately, high-bred, above reproach—*could* Archibald Warburton have made a *mesalliance*? And such a *mesalliance*! The daughter of a pair of street mendicants, social outlaws; an adventuress with no name, no lineage, no heritage save that of shame.

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"Of all the notable things of earth
The queerest one is pride of birth."

For the moment it outweighed his grief for Archibald, his anxiety for Daisy, his very humanity. Later on, he might be Warburton the friend, and the truest of friends; Warburton the lover, and the tenderest, the most chivalrous of lovers; Warburton the champion, as on the night when he rescued Leslie; but now he is only Warburton the aristocrat; the aristocrat, insulted, defied, betrayed; brought into contact with mystery, *intrigue*, base blood, and in his own household. Could he ever forgive Leslie Warburton? Would he, if he could?

He had accused her as the cause of his brother's death, as the source of the mystery which overhung the fate of little Daisy; and in his heart of hearts he believed her guilty. And now, her daring, her cool effrontery, had made some hitherto mysterious movements plain. Her father and mother, those wretches who lived in a hovel, and smelled of the gutter! But she had betrayed herself. These people must be found at whatever hazard.

Thus meditating, he paced up and down, up and down. And before he finally ceased his restless journeyings to and fro, he had evolved a theory and a plan of action. A very natural theory it was, and a very magnanimous plan.

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Having first catalogued Leslie as an adventuress, he endowed her, in his theory, with all the attributes of the adventuress of the orthodox school—cunning, crafty, avaricious, scheming for a fortune; unscrupulous, of course, and only differing from the average adventuress in that she was the cleverest and the most beautiful, as she had been the most successful of her kind.

"Granted that these two old wretches are her parents," he reasoned, "the rest explains itself. They incite her to plot for their mutual welfare. She marries Archibald, and even I discern that

she does not love him; but he is wealthy, and an invalid. Only one thing stands between her and an eventual fortune, and that is poor little Daisy. Possibly she may have still some tenderness of heart, and for a time Daisy is spared. But after a while, the mysterious goings and comings begin; the arrival of notes by strange messengers; and a new look dawns upon my sister-in-law's fair face. Then comes the masquerade. A man is here, in this house, by appointment with her. He follows her to the abode of the Francoises and so do I. Who is this man? A gentleman, she tells me. Her lover, doubtless, and all is explained. With Archibald removed, what would stand between her lover and herself? With Daisy removed, she would possess both lover and fortune. And to remove Daisy was to remove Archibald. The shock would suffice. She planned all this deliberately; and on the night of the masquerade the Francoises aided her, and Daisy was stolen."

Thus reasoned Alan. And then he formed his plans. He would spare Leslie all public disgrace, but she must cease to call herself a Warburton of the Warburtons. She must give up the family name, and go away from the city; far away, where no gossiping tongue could guess at her history, or connect her with the Warburtons. For Daisy's sake, for his brother's sake, for the honor of the name, she must go. She might take her fortune, left her by her deceived husband, but she *must* go.

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"I will institute a search for the Francoises," he muttered. "Everything must be done privately; there must be no scandal. If I require assistance, I can trust Follingsbee. I will see Leslie again, in the morning. I will make terms with her, haughty as she is, and—first of all she *shall* tell me the truth concerning Daisy."

He was not unmindful of his own peril, not regardless for his own safety, but he was determined to know the truth concerning the disappearance of Daisy Warburton, and if need be, to face the attendant risk.

"I will write to the Chief of Police again," he mused. "I must have additional help. But first, before writing, I will see *her* once more."

And then he ceased his promenade for a moment, to strike his hands together and stare contemptuously at his image reflected from the mirror directly before him.

"Fool!" he muttered half aloud; "that letter, that scrawl which I gave back to her so stupidly! It contained their address. It would tell me where to find them, if I had it; and I will have it."

In the anger and astonishment of the moment, he had returned the threatening note to Leslie, mechanically and without once glancing at the directions scrawled at the foot of the sheet.

While Alan paced and pondered, Leslie, having recovered from her swoon, went weakly and wearily to her own room, tenderly escorted by Winnie and the good-hearted, blundering Millie.

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When she was comfortably established upon a couch, and the too solicitous Millie had been dismissed, Winnie's indignation burst out in language exceedingly forcible, and by no means complimentary to Alan Warburton.

But Leslie stopped the flow of her eloquence by a nervous appealing gesture.

"Let us not discuss these things now, dear; I think I have been overtasked. I cannot talk; I must have quiet; I must rest."

And then Winnie—denouncing herself for a selfish, careless creature with the same unsparing bitterness that, a moment before, she had lavished upon Alan,—assured herself that the curtains produced the proper degree of restful shadow, that the pillows were comfortably adjusted, that all Leslie could require was close at her hand, kissed her softly on either cheek, and tripped from the room.

Left alone, Leslie lay for many moments moveless and silent, but not sleeping. The softly-shaded stillness of the room acted upon her over-wrought nerves like a soothing spell. She had passed the boundaries of uncertainty. She had writhed, and wept, and shuddered under the torturing hands of Doubt and Fear, Terror, and Surprise. She had bowed down before Despair. But all that was past; and now she was calm and tearless, a brave soul that, having abandoned Hope, stands face to face with its Fate.

After a time she moved languidly, and then lifted herself slowly from among the pillows.

"Not to-night," she murmured, lifting her hand to her head with a sigh of weariness. "I must have rest first."

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But she did not return to her pillows. Instead, she arose slowly, crossed the room, and drawing back the curtains let in, in a glowing flood, the last brightness of the afternoon sunshine. Then seating herself at a dainty writing-desk, she penned three notes, with a hand that moved slowly but with no unsteadiness.

The first was addressed to Mr. Follingsbee; the second to Mrs. French, the mother of Winnie; and the third to Winnie herself.

When the notes were done, she still sat before the desk, watching the fading-out of the golden sunlight with a far away look in her eyes. She sat thus until the last ray had died in the West, and the twilight came creeping on grey and shadowy.

Some one was knocking at the drawing-room door. She arose slowly to admit the visitor. It was Alan's valet, with a twisted note in his hand.

Leslie took the note, and bidding the servant wait, she returned to the inner room.

MADAM:

As you manifested no hesitation in exhibiting to me the note received by you this morning, you will, I trust, not object to my giving it a second perusal. Please send it me by bearer of this. I will return it promptly.

ALAN WARBURTON.

This is what Leslie read, and when she had finished, she took from her pocket the crumpled note of the Francoises. Over this she bent her head for a moment, murmured something half aloud, as if to impress it on her memory, and went back to the dressing-room with the two papers in her hand.

Going slowly toward the grate, she stirred the smouldering fire until it sent up a bright blaze, and with another glance at the crumpled note, she dropped it upon the glowing coals, and watched it crumble to ashes. Then she turned toward the valet, folding and twisting his master's note back into its original shape as she advanced.

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"Return this to your master," she said, "and tell him that the paper he asks for has been destroyed."

As the valet turned away, she closed the door and went back to the grate.

"Alan Warburton has canceled my debt to him with an insult," she murmured, with a cold smile upon her lips. "From this moment he has no part in my existence."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ALAN BEGINS HIS GAME.

Baffled in this first attempt to obtain the desired information, Alan sets his lips firmly, and plans a new mode of attack. And in the morning he made a second effort.

Going down to his lately-deserted study, shuddering with a little fastidious chill as he made his way across the darkened room and noted the stale atmosphere; frowning, too, when he drew back a heavy curtain and observed that there was dust upon his cabinets, and that motes were swimming in the streak of light that came through the parted curtains he rang his bell and sent for Millie.

She came promptly, courtesying demurely, and seemingly keeping in her mind Leslie's instructions, "to listen, to obey, and to keep silence."

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"Millie," said Alan, with just a shade of patronage in his tone, "go to Mrs. Warburton, and ask her if she will receive me for a few moments this morning. Tell her that it is a matter of business."

Millie dropped another courtesy, and silently departed with her message, proudly conscious that she had, on this occasion at least, deported herself like a proper servant. And Alan returned to the window, where the light streamed in, and the motes drifted lazily up and down in its rays.

This study was situated at the end of a wing, the front windows opening upon a well-kept lawn, but the side window, at which Alan stood, directly overlooking a by-street, quite narrow and lined with rows of shade trees.

For a few moments Alan stood looking down into this quiet street. Then with an impatient movement, he turned his gaze inward. It fell first upon a tall cabinet which stood near the window, and was partially lighted up by it.

Again he noted the dust upon its panels with a frown of discontent, and then he moved toward it, opening one of the doors with a sort of aimless restlessness peculiar to people who wait impatiently, yet delude themselves with the belief that they are models of calm deliberation.

It was a deep cabinet, richly lined with embossed velvet of a glowing crimson hue, and studded with hooks and brazen brackets, which supported a splendid collection of arms that gleamed at you in cold, cruel, brilliant relief from their gorgeous background.

There were highly polished, elegantly finished modern rifles, rare pieces of home and foreign workmanship; there were blood-thirsty duelling pistols; Damascus blades; light, jaunty French foils; Italian stilettoes; German student-swords; and a heavy, piratical-looking cutlass. In the midst of them all, a group of splendid Toledo swords, beautiful in design and workmanship, were suspended.

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As his eye rested upon this group, Alan's face lost its frown of annoyance and took on a look of profound sorrow, while a heavy sigh escaped his lips. They had been gifts from Archibald, years before, when the two had made a foreign tour—Alan's first and Archibald's last—together.

Gazing upon these *souvenirs*, his mind went back to the old days of his student-life, and his brother's companionship. At the sound of approaching footsteps, he recalled himself with a start, pushed the door of the cabinet from him with a hasty movement which left it half unclosed, and turned toward Millie, who entered as demurely as before, closely followed by a footman, who presented to Alan an official-looking letter.

Taking the missive from the salver, Alan dismissed the man and then turned to the girl.

"Well, Millie?"

"Mrs. Warburton says, sir, that she can not leave her room this morning, but hopes to be able to do so this afternoon."

"Very well, Millie;"—the frown returning to his face—"you may go." And he muttered: "I suppose that means that she will condescend to receive me this afternoon. Well, I must bide my time."

He returned to the window, and standing near it, looked curiously at the envelope in his hand. It was addressed in bold, scrawling characters that were, spite of their boldness, almost illegible. Slowly he opened it, and slowly removed the sheet it enclosed. [262]

"What a wretched scrawl!" he muttered. And then, with a glance at the printed letter-head, "Office of the Chief of Police:" "That's legible, at all events. It's from—from—hum, strange that a man can't write his own name—B—B—C— of course, it's from the Chief of Police."

Slowly and laboriously, he deciphered the letter.

A. WARBURTON. etc.

Dear Sir:—We have just secured, for your case, a very valuable man, Mr. Augustus Grip, late of Scotland Yards. He is an able and most successful detective; we hope much from him. Have already instructed him to extent of our ability, and he will wait upon you personally this P. M., between, say, three and four o'clock. You will do well to give Mr. G— full latitude in the case.

Very respectfully, etc.

This much Alan slowly deciphered, and this gave the key to the unreadable signature. It was from the Chief of Police, evidently.

Alan reperused the letter, and slowly returned it to its envelope.

"This comes at the right moment," he soliloquized. "If this Grip is what he is said to be, he may save me in more ways than one."

And once more he summoned a servant, and gave these instructions:

"See that this room is thoroughly aired and set in order before three o'clock;" adding, as the servant was turning away: "Show a person who will call here after that hour, into this room, and then bring me his name."

In the arrival of such a message, at that precise moment, there was, to Alan Warburton, no occasion for surprise. From the first he had communicated with the officers of the law by letter, or by quiet interviews held in his own apartments. [263]

He was fully alive to the fact that, in dealing with the police, he was himself in momentary danger. But having resolved, from the beginning, to make his own safety and welfare secondary to that of little Daisy, he had been strengthened and confirmed in this resolve by his recent interview with Leslie. And now, in his dogged determination to find the Francoises, he vowed to sacrifice, if need be, his entire fortune, and accept any attendant danger, in prosecuting a vigorous search for these old wretches, and the missing child.

His brother's illness and death had furnished him with a sufficient reason for living secluded, and for receiving such business callers as he chose to admit, in his own apartments. Only this morning he had dispatched a missive to police headquarters, desiring the Chief to secure the services of the best detectives at any cost, and to send to him for instructions or consultation, representing himself as confined to the house by slight indisposition.

He hated a falsehood, but, as he penned this fabrication, he had thrown the moral responsibility of the act upon the already heavily burdened shoulders of his sister-in-law.

And now, as he went slowly from the study, he looked forward anxiously, but not apprehensively, to the two coming interviews: the first, with Leslie; the second, with Mr. Grip, of Scotland Yards.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A VERY PATHETIC MUTE.

In spite of the fact that the Warburton servants were a thoroughly disciplined corps, and that domestic affairs, above stairs and below, usually moved with mechanical regularity, it was nearly two o'clock before Millie, armed with dusters and brushes, entered Alan's study to do battle with a small quantity of slowly-accumulated dust.

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[264]

"Ah!" she exclaimed as she flung open the windows, "how gloomy the house is! I s'pose Mr. Alan will set himself up as master now, and then, Millie, you'll get *your* walking papers. Well, who cares; I don't like him, anyhow." And she made a vigorous dash at the fireless grate.

Millie Davis was the joint protegee of Leslie and Winnie, a rustic with a pretty face, and scant knowledge of the world and its ways.

Up and down the study flitted Millie, dusting, arranging, and pausing very often to admire some costly fabric, or bit of vivid color.

Almost the last article to come under her brush was Alan's cabinet-arsenal, and her feminine curiosity prompted her to peep in at the door, which Alan had left ajar; and then Millie gasped and stood aghast.

"Guns and pistols, and all manner of cuttin' and shootin' things," she soliloquized, as she drew back and prepared to close the door of the cabinet. "Well, it takes a good while to find *some folks* out!" And then, as a tuneful sound smote her ears, she turned swiftly from the open cabinet to the window. [265]

A hand organ grinding out the "Sweet By-and-by", is a thing most of us fail to appreciate. But Millie both appreciated and understood. It was music, familiar music, and sweet; at least so thought Millie, and she hurried to the window nearest the cabinet, and looked out.

"My," she said, half aloud, "but that sounds cheerful!"

She leaned over the window-ledge and looked up and down the quiet side street. Ah, there he was; quite near the window, resting his organ against the iron railings, and playing, with his eyes turned toward her. Such beseeching eyes; such a good-looking, picturesque, sad-faced organ-grinder!

Catching sight of Millie, he lifted his organ quickly, and without a break in the "Sweet By-and-by", came directly under the window, gazing up at her with a look that was a wondrous mixture of admiration and pathos. Poor fellow; how sorrowful, how distressed, and how respectful, was his look and attitude!

"What a mournful-looking chap it is!" murmured Millie, drawing back a little when the tune came to an end.

As the organ struck up a more cheerful strain, a new thought seized her, and she leaned out again over the sill.

"Look here, my man," she began, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, "you shouldn't play, come to think of it, quite so near the house. It won't do; stop, stop." And, as the man stared, hesitated, and then ground away more vigorously than before, she indulged in a series of frantic gestures, seeing which the organ-grinder paused and stared wonderingly. Then, with a sudden gleam of comprehension, he smiled up at her, touched a stop in his organ, and complacently began a different tune.

"*No! no! no!*" cried Millie; "not *that*; stop!" And she shook her head so violently that the little blue bow atop of her brown locks, flew off and fell at the feet of the minstrel, who, in obedience to the movement of her head and hand, stopped his instrument once more, stooped down, and picking up the blue bow, began to clamber up the iron railings, with his organ still strapped to his side, evidently intent upon restoring the bow in the most gallant manner. [266]

"My! you shouldn't climb onto the railings like that," remonstrated Millie, as she put out her hand to receive the bit of ribbon.

But the minstrel, bracing one knee against the brick and mortar, thus steadying himself and giving his hands full play, began a series of pantomines so strange that Millie involuntarily exclaimed:

"Why, what in the world ails the man!" And then, struck once more by the pitiful appeal in his eyes, she cried: "Look here, are you sick?"

Only renewed pantomines from the minstrel.

"Are you hungry?" Then, in a tone of discouragement: "What is he at, anyhow?"

But as the man's hand went from his lips to his ear, even Millie's dull comprehension was awakened.

"Gracious goodness!" she exclaimed, "he's deaf and dumb."

Faster still flew the fingers of the minstrel, sadder and more pitiful grew his face, and Millie watched his movements with renewed interest.

"He's talking with his fingers," muttered Millie. "I wonder—"

She stopped suddenly; he was doing something new in the way of pantomime, and Millie guessed its meaning.

"A baby!" she gasped; "it's something about a baby. One, two, three, ah! five fingers; five babies, five years—oh, say, say, man; *say man!*"—and Millie's face was white with agitation, and she [267]

barely saved herself from tumbling out of the window, in the intensity and eagerness of her excitement—"you don't mean—you don't know anything about our Daisy—you don't—"

But Millie's breath failed her, for even as she spoke, the sad-eyed organ-grinder took from his pocket a dirty bit of paper, unfolded it, and displayed to the eager girl a tiny tress of yellow hair—just such a tress as might have grown on little Daisy's head.

"Oh," she cried, "I'll bet that's it! I'll bet, oh,—” And with this last interjection, any such small stock of prudence as Millie may naturally have possessed, was scattered to the four winds.

"Wait here," she cried, utterly disregarding the fact that she was addressing a deaf man, but by a natural instinct suiting her gestures to her word. "Just you wait a minute. I know who can talk finger talk."

In another moment she had rushed from the room, shutting the door behind her with a sudden emphasis that must have been a surprise to those stately panels, and the noiseless, slow-moving hinges on which they swung.

Scarcely has Millie turned away from the window when the man outside, with two quick turns of the neck, has assured himself that for a moment at least, the window is not under the scrutiny of any passer-by. No sooner has the study door closed, than the mute, without one shade of pathos in look or action, grasps the window-sill, swings himself up, and drops into the room, organ and all.

"So far, good," mutters this pathetic mute, under his breath. "This is Alan Warburton's study; not a doubt of that. Now, if I can continue to stay in it until he comes—" [268]

He broke off abruptly, with his eyes fixed upon the half-open cabinet; moved briskly toward it, peeped in, and then, with a satisfied chuckle, stepped inside, and depositing his organ upon the floor of his hiding-place, drew the door shut, softly and slowly.

In another moment the study door opened quickly, and there was a rustle, and the patter of light feet, as Winnie French crossed the room rapidly, and leaned out of the window.

"Why, Millie," she said, looking back over her shoulder, "there's no one here."

"Perhaps—" began Millie; then, catching her breath sharply, she too leaned over the sill.

"Where is your pathetic mute, Millie?"

"Well, I never!" declared the girl, still gazing incredulously up and down the street. "He *was* here."

Winnie smiled as she turned from the window.

"Some one has imposed upon you, Millie," she said; "and you did a very careless thing when you left such a stranger at an open window."

And a certain listener near by added to this exordium a mental amen.

"He might have entered—" continued Winnie.

"Oh, my!"

"And robbed the house."

"Bless me; I never thought of that!"

"Try and be more thoughtful in future, Millie. Close the window and let us go; ah!"

This last exclamation, uttered in a tone of unmistakable annoyance, caused Millie to turn swiftly. [269]

Alan Warburton, having entered noiselessly at the door left ajar by Millie's reckless hand, was standing in the centre of the room, his well-bred face expressive of nothing in particular, his eyes slightly smiling.

At sight of him, Millie shrank back, but Winnie came forward haughtily.

"You are doubtless surprised at seeing me here, sir," she said, with freezing politeness, bent only upon screening Millie and beating an orderly retreat. "I came—in search of Millie; and, being here, had a desire to take a view of Elm street. You will pardon the intrusion, I trust." And she moved toward the door.

"Winnie," said Alan gently, "you entered to please yourself, and you are very welcome here. Will you remain just five minutes, to please me?"

Winnie frowned visibly, but after a moment's hesitation, said:

"I think I may spare you five minutes. You may go, Millie."

And Millie, only too thankful to escape thus, went with absurd alacrity.

When the door had closed behind her,—for, retreating under Alan's eye, the fluttered damsel *had* remembered to close the door properly—Winnie stood very erect and silent before her host, and waited.

"Winnie," began Alan, consulting his watch as he spoke, "it is now almost three o'clock, and I expect a visitor soon; that is why I asked for only a few moments."

"I am not anxious to remain," observed Winnie, glancing carelessly from the timepiece in Alan's hand to a *placque* on the wall above his head. [270]

"But I am most anxious that you should."

"Excuse me, Mr. Warburton, but you have such a peculiar way of making yourself agreeable."

"Winnie!"

"Your interviews with ladies are liable to such dramatic endings: I seriously object to fainting, and I remained here, as you must know, not because I cared to listen to you, but because of Millie's presence. I think it took you half an hour to talk Leslie into a dead faint yesterday, and as nearly as I can guess at time, one of your minutes must be gone. You have just four minutes in which to reduce me to silence."

"You are very bitter, Winnie," he said sadly. "I am bowed down with grief—that you know. I am also burdened with such a weight of trouble as I pray Heaven you may never suffer. Will you let me tell you all the truth; will you listen and judge between Leslie Warburton and me?"

She drew herself very erect, and turned to face him fully, thus shutting from her view the door behind Alan.

"No," she answered, "I will listen to nothing from you concerning Leslie. Without knowing the cause, I know you are her enemy. If I ever learn why you hate her so, I will hear it from her, not from you. Leslie is not a child; and you must have said bitterly cruel words before you left her in a dead faint on that library floor last night—"

A very distinct cough interrupted her speech, and they both turned, to meet the respectful gaze of a jaunty-looking stranger, who said, as he advanced into the room:

"Pardon me; the servant showed me in somewhat unceremoniously, supposing the room unoccupied. I was instructed to wait here for Mr. Warburton." [271]

Winnie was first to recover herself. Turning to Alan, she murmured politely:

"I think my time has expired; good evening, Mr. Warburton."

As she swept from the room, the stranger approached Alan, saying:

"This, then, is Mr. Warburton. My name is Grip, sir; Augustus Grip."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

MR. GRIP FINDS A "SKELETON".

This sudden appearance of Mr. Grip was not precisely to Alan Warburton's taste, and he eyed his visitor with a somewhat haughty air, while he said:

"Mr. Grip is prompt, to say the least. I believe that the hour—"

"Hour appointed, between three and four—precisely, sir; *precisely*. But my time's valuable, Mr. Warburton; *valuable*, sir! And it's better too early than too late. Everything's cut and dried, and nothing else on hand for this hour; couldn't afford to waste it."

Mr. Grip's words fell from his lips like hailstones from a November sky—rap, rap, rap; patter, patter; swift, sharp, decisive. And Alan was not slow to realize that all the combined dignity of all the combined Warburtons, would be utterly lost upon this plebeian.

Plebeian, Mr. Grip evidently was, from the crown of his head to the tips of his too highly polished, creaking boots. Vulgarity reveled in the plaid of his jaunty business suit, flaunted in the links of his glittering watch guard, and gleamed in the folds of his gorgeous neck gear. You smelled it in his ambrosial locks; you saw it in his self-satisfied face, and heard it in his inharmonious voice. [272]

And this was Augustus Grip, of Scotland Yards! Well, one might be a good detective and yet not be a gentleman. So mused Alan; and then, seeing that Mr. Grip, while waiting for him to speak, was utilizing the seconds by making a survey of the premises, he said:

"Will you be seated, Mr. Grip?"

Mr. Grip dropped comfortably into the nearest lounging-chair, crossed one knee over the other, and resting a hand on either arm of the chair, began to talk rapidly.

"I've got your business down fine, sir; *fine*," emphasizing with both hands upon the chair arms. "Saves time; always do it when possible. Posted at Agency—less to learn here." And Mr. Grip begins to fumble in the breast-pocket of his startling plaid coat. "Was informed by—um—um—" producing a packet of folded papers and running them over rapidly; "oh, here we are."

He restores the packet to his pocket, having selected the proper memoranda, and then without rising, but with a jerking movement of the knees and elbows, he propels his chair toward the table near which Alan is still standing. Putting the memoranda on the table before him, he unfolds them rapidly, and looks up at his host.

"Sit down, Warburton."

A look of displeasure flits across Alan's face. He remains standing, seeming to grow more haughtily erect.

"My instructions," continues Mr. Grip, who has not lifted his eyes from the documents before him, "are, take entire charge of case; investigate in own way. That's what I like." [273]

If Alan had ventured a comment just then, it would have been, "*you* are not what *I* like." But he did not speak; and Mr. Grip, having paused for a remark and hearing none, now glanced up.

"Is that your pleasure, Mr. Warburton?"

A certain touch of acidity in the tone, recalls Alan to a sense of his position. This man before him is a man of business, a detective highly recommended by the Chief of Police, and he needs his services. He moves a step nearer the table and begins.

"That is what I—"

"Precisely," breaks in Mr. Grip. "Now, then," referring to papers, "first—sit down, won't you? it's more sociable."

And Alan puts his aristocracy in his pocket and sits down opposite the dazzling necktie.

"Now then," recommences Mr. Grip, "I've got the *facts* in the case."

"You have?"

"Facts in case; yes." And he takes up the memoranda, reading therefrom:

"Lost child; daughter of Archibald Warburton; only daughter." Then, turning his eyes upon Alan: "Father killed by shock, I'm told; sad—very."

And he resumes his reading. "Relatives: Alan Warburton, uncle; fond of niece, eh—ahem; step-mother—um—a little mysterious; *little* under suspicion."

"Stop!" interrupts Alan sternly. "On what authority dare you make such assertions?"

"Mr. Grip permits the hand which holds the papers to rest upon one knee, and lifts his eyes to the face of his interrogator." [274]

"I've reconnoitred," he says tersely. "It's a detective's business to reconnoitre. I'm familiar with the facts in the case."

Alan feels the perspiration start upon his brow, while he utters a mental, "Heaven forbid!"

"Now then," resumes Mr. Grip, throwing himself back in his chair and stretching his legs underneath the table; "now then, *here* we go. Daisy Warburton is her father's heiress. Remove her, the bulk of property probably goes to second wife—*step mother*, d'ye see? Remove *her*, property comes down to *you*."

"Stop, sir! How dare you—preposterous!" And Alan Warburton pushes back his chair and rises, an angry flush upon his face.

Mr. Grip rises also. Stepping nimbly out from between the big chair and the table before it, he inserts his two hands underneath his two coat tails, bends his head forward, raising himself from time to time on the tips of his toes as he talks, and replies suavely:

"Ta ta; I'm *reasoning*. They have *not* both disappeared, have they? The lady in question is in the house at this present moment, is she not?"

"She is," replied Alan, beginning to feel most uncomfortable.

"She is. Well, now, if *she* should disappear, *then* suspicion might point to you. As it is—ahem—" Here Alan fancies that Mr. Grip is watching him furtively. "As it is—we will begin to investigate."



“Stop, sir! How dare you—
preposterous!”—[page 274](#).

Mr. Grip reseats himself, folds away his memoranda, and, reclining once more at his ease, looks up at Alan coolly. [276]

“First, Mr. Warburton, I must see your sister-in-law.”

Alan cannot restrain his start of surprise, nor the look of anxiety that crosses his face.

“Not at present,” he says, after a moment’s hesitation. “She is ill; it would—”

“So much the better,” interrupts the detective. “Worn out, no doubt; nervous. May surprise something. *I must see her*, and every other member of this household, myself unseen.”

“Ah!” thinks Alan, his hands clenching themselves involuntarily, “if I dared throw you out of the window!”

And then, with a shade more of haughtiness than he had as yet used in addressing this man, who was fast becoming his tormentor, he asks:

“Mr. Grip, is this so very necessary?”

Slowly the detective leans forward; slowly he raises a warning forefinger.

“My *dear* sir,” he says impressively, “if you want to catch a thief will you say, ‘come here, my dear, and be arrested?’ *No, sir*; you catch her *unawares*. Tell that fine lady that she is to be interviewed by a detective, and, presto! she shuts her secrets up behind a mantle of smiles or sneers. Call her in, and lead her to talk; I’ll employ my eyes and ears. Use the cues set down here—” he extends to Alan a folded slip of paper. “Put her at her ease, and leave the rest to me. Now then—”

Again he rises, and this time he begins a slow survey of the room.

Alan, thoroughly alarmed for Leslie’s safety as well as for his own, begins to wonder how this strange interview is to end. Even if he should summon Leslie, would she come at his call? Yes; he feels sure that she would, remembering her message of the morning. And what may she not say? If he could give her a word, a sign of warning. But those eyes, that are even now bestowing questioning glances upon him, are too keen. He would only bungle. He will try again. [277]

“Mr. Grip,” he says, “my sister-in-law is already ill from excitement. If we could spare her this interview—”

“Sir!” Augustus Grip wheels suddenly, and looks straight into his face while he continues sharply: “My *good* sir; for your *own* sake, don’t! *You* should have no reason for keeping a witness in the background.”

The hot angry Warburton blood surges up to Alan’s brow. Realizing his danger more than ever, and recognizing in the man before him a force that might, perhaps, be bought or baffled, but never evaded, he lets his eyes rest for a moment, in haughty defiance, upon the detective’s face. And then he turns and walks to the door.

“Where do you purpose to conceal yourself?” he asks coldly, as he lays his hand upon the bell-rope.

Again Grip looks about him, and then steps toward the cabinet near the window.

“What’s this,” he asks, with his hand upon the closed door. “Will it hold me?”

"Yes," replies Alan; "that will hold you." And he pulls the bell.

"There's no resisting Fate," he mutters to himself. "At least that fellow shall not see me flinch again, let Leslie entangle me as she may, and as she doubtless will."

And then there tingled in his veins a new sensation—a burning desire to seize that most impertinent, vulgar trail-hunter, who was now tugging away at his cabinet door, and send him crashing headlong through the window into the street below. [278]

"Ask Mrs. Warburton if she will grant me a few moments of her time," he said to the servant who appeared at the door, which Alan did not permit him to open more than half way. And then he turned his attention to Mr. Grip.

That individual, still tugging unsuccessfully at the door of the cabinet, has grown impatient.

"It's locked!" he says, with an angry snap.

"No,"—Alan strides toward him—"it is not locked." And he adds his strength to that of Mr. Grip.

A moment the door hesitates; then it yields with a suddenness which causes Alan to reel, and flies open.

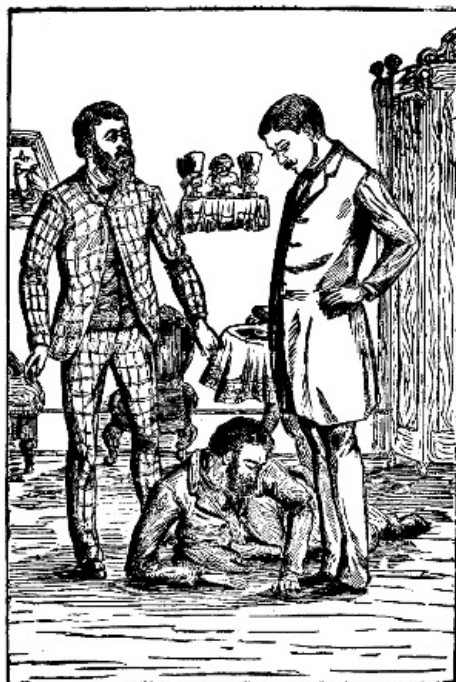
In another instant, Grip has pounced upon the luckless organ-grinder, and dragged him into the centre of the room, where he crouches at Alan's feet, the very image of terrified misery, limp and unresisting.

"That's a pretty thing to keep hid away!" snarled the now thoroughly angry detective. "I've heard of skeletons in closets, but this thing looks more like a monkey."

"More like a sneak thief, I should say," remarks Alan, with aggravating coolness. "And a very cowardly one at that."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"WE TWO WILL MEET AGAIN."



[279]

"That's a pretty thing to keep hid away!" snarls the now thoroughly angry detective.—[page 278](#).

There may have been times in Alan Warburton's life—such times come to most fastidious city-bred people—when he doubted the wisdom of Providence in permitting the "street musician" to inherit the earth, and, especially to transport so much of his "heritage," wheresoever he might go, upon his person. But to-day, for the first time, he fancies that he sees some reason for the existence of the species, and he finds himself looking down almost complacently upon the crouching minstrel who has lawlessly invaded the sanctity of his splendid cabinet. [280]

This strange intruder has brought him at least a respite; and he breathes a sigh of relief even as he asks sternly:

"Fellow, how long have you been hiding in that cabinet?"

But the culprit is once more a mute; again the pathetic look is in his eyes, and with Grip's hand

still clutching his shoulder, he begins a terrified pantomime.

"Bah!" says Mr. Grip, pushing his prisoner away contemptuously, "that won't wash. You ain't deaf—not much; nor dumb, neither. Answer me," giving him a rough shake, "how came you here?"

There is no sign that the fellow hears or understands; he continues to gesticulate wildly.

Mr. Grip releases his hold, and bends upon Alan a look of impatience. In a moment, the organ-grinder bounds to the cabinet and, dragging forth his organ, turns back, displaying it and slinging it across his shoulder with grimaces of triumph.

"That won't go down, either," snarls Mr. Grip. "Put that thing on the floor, *presto!*"

But the minstrel only grins with delight, and throwing himself into an attitude, begins to grind out a doleful air. With an angry growl, Mr. Grip makes a movement toward him. But the organist retreats as he advances, and the doleful tune goes on.

It is a ludicrous picture, and Alan smiles in spite of himself, even while he wishes that Leslie would come now,—now, while he might warn her; now, while Mr. Augustus Grip, in his pursuit of the intruding musician, has put the width of the room between himself and his chosen place of concealment. [281]

But Leslie does not come. And Mr. Grip's next remark shows that he has not forgotten himself. With a sudden movement, he wrests the organ from the hands of its manipulator, and converting the strap of the instrument into a very serviceable lasso, brings the fellow down upon his knees with a quick, dexterous throw, and holding him firmly thus, says over his shoulder, to Alan:

"This is a fine thing to happen just now! The fellow must be got out of the way, and kept safe until I have time to discover his racket. He's not such a fool as he looks. Can't you get in a policeman quietly? We don't want any servants to gossip over it, or to see me."

Alan turns his face toward the closet. "Can't we lock him up again?" he suggests.

"My dear sir," says Grip coolly, "this fellow is probably a *spy*."

"What!" Alan starts, and turns a sharp glance upon the organ-grinder. Then he seems to recover all his calmness and says quietly, "nonsense; look at that stolid countenance."

"Umph!" mutters Grip; "too much hair and dirt." Then turning toward the side window: "I intend to satisfy myself about this fellow later. Get in a policeman somehow; try the window."

As Alan goes toward the window, the organ-grinder seeming in a state of utter collapse, and making no effort to free himself from the grasp of Mr. Grip, still crouches beside his organ, and begins anew his pleading, terrified pantomime. [282]

"Ah," says Alan, as the window yields to his touch, "this window must have been the place where he entered." Then, after a prolonged look up and down the street: "I don't see an officer anywhere."

"No; I presume not. Try the other windows."

"The other windows, Mr. Grip, look out upon the grounds."

"Perdition! Keep quiet, you fellow. Then shut that window, sir, and come and guard this door; the lady may present herself at any moment."

Alan turns again, and looks down into the street.

"I think," he says, quietly, "that we will just drop him back into the street whence he came."

"You seem to want this fellow to escape," snarls the detective, casting upon Alan a glance of suspicion. "He shall not escape; I'll take care of him!"

At this moment the door of the study flies suddenly open, and Millie, breathless and with eyes distended, precipitates herself into the room.

"Mr. Alan," she pants, without pausing to note the other occupants of the room; "we can't find Mrs. Warburton; she is not in the house!"

"What!" Alan strides toward her in unfeigned astonishment.

"Ah-h-h!" Mr. Grip turns swiftly, and his single syllable is as full of meaning as is his face of derision, and suspicion confirmed.

"Impossible, Millie," says Alan sharply; "go to Miss French—"

"I did, sir, and she is—"

She pauses abruptly, for there in the doorway is Winnie French, pale and tearful, an open letter in her hand. [283]

"Read that, sir," she says, going straight up to Alan and extending to him the letter. "See what your cruelty has done. Leslie Warburton is gone!"

"Gone!"

This time Grip and Alan both utter the word, both start forward.

For just one moment the hand that clutches the collar of the organ-grinder relaxes its hold, but that moment is enough. With amazing agility, and seemingly by one movement, the prisoner has freed himself and is on his feet. In another second, by a clever wrestler's manoeuvre, he has thrown Mr. Grip headlong upon the floor. And then, before the others can realize his intentions, he has bounded to the open window, and flung himself out, as easily and as carelessly as would a cat.

But Mr. Grip, discomfited for the moment, is not wanting in alertness. He is on his feet before the man has cleared the window. He bounds toward it, and drawing a small revolver, fires after the fugitive—once—twice.

"Stop!" It is Alan Warburton's voice, stern and ringing. He has seized the pistol arm, and holds it in a grasp that Mr. Grip finds difficult to release.

"Hands off!" cries Grip, now hoarse with rage. "That man's a *spy!*"

"No matter; we will have no more shooting."

"*We!*" struggling to release his arm from Alan's firm grasp; "who are you that—"

"I am master here, sir."

With an angry hiss, the detective from Scotland Yards throws himself upon Alan, and they engage in a fierce struggle. But Alan Warburton is something more than a ball-room hero; he is an adept in the manly sports, and fully a match for Mr. Grip. [284]

Panting and terrified, Winnie and Millie stand together near the door; and the eyes of the latter damsel wander from the combatants near the window, to something that has fallen close at her feet, and that lies half hidden by the folds of her dress.

But disaster has befallen Mr. Grip. While they wrestle, Alan's quick eye has detected something that looks like a displacement of Mr. Grip's cranium, and with a sudden, dexterous, upward movement, he solves the mystery. There is an exclamation of surprise, another of anger, and the two combatants stand apart, both gazing down at the thing lying on the floor between them.

It is a wig of curling auburn hair, and it leaves the head of Mr. Grip quite a different head in shape, in size, in height of forehead, and in general expression!

"So," sneers Alan, "Mr. Grip, of Scotland Yards, saw fit to visit me in disguise. Is your name as easily altered as your face, sir?"

The discomfited wrestler stoops down, and picking up his wig adjusts it carefully on his head once more; bends again to take up his fallen pistol; lifts his hat from a chair, and returns to the window.

"My name is not Augustus Grip," he says coolly. "Neither will you find me by inquiring at police headquarters. But you and I will meet again, Mr. Warburton."



"Drawing a small revolver, he fires after the fugitive—once—twice!" [page 283](#).

And without unseemly haste, he places his hand upon the window-sill, swings himself over the ledge, resting his feet upon the iron railings, and drops down upon the pavement. [286]

By this time some people have collected outside, attracted by the pistol-shots. Two laggard policemen are hastening down the street. A group of servants are whispering and consulting anxiously in the hall, and cautiously peeping in at the study door.

The coolness of the false Mr. Grip takes him safely past the group of inquiring ones.

"It was a sneak thief," he explains, as he leaps down among them. "Don't detain me, friends; I must report this affair at police headquarters."

A few quick strides take him across the street to where a carriage stands in waiting. He enters it, and in a moment more, Mr. Grip and carriage have whirled out of sight.

"I'd give a hundred dollars to know what that fellow was in hiding for," he mused, as the carriage rolled swiftly along. "Could he have been put there by Warburton? But no—Confound that Warburton, I'll humble his pride before we cry quits, or my name is not *Van Vernet!*"

But Vernet little dreamed that he had that day aimed a bullet at the life of a brother detective; that his disguise had been penetrated and his plans frustrated, by *Richard Stanhope!*

CHAPTER XL.

AN ARMISTICE.

If Van Vernet had been thwarted, in a measure, Richard Stanhope had been no less baffled.

Each had succeeded partially, and each had beaten a too hasty and altogether unsatisfactory retreat.

Van Vernet had planned well. By keeping himself informed as to the doings at police headquarters, he had been aware of all the efforts there being made in the search for the missing child. He found it quite easy to possess himself of a sheet and envelope bearing the official stamp; and by writing his spurious letter in a most unreadable scrawl, and ending with a signature positively undecipherable, he had guarded himself against dangerous consequences should a charge of forgery, by any mischance, be preferred against him. The disguise was a mere bit of child's play to Van Vernet, and the rest "went by itself". [287]

His object in thus entering the Warburton house was, first, to see Alan Warburton; study his face and hear his voice; to satisfy himself, as far as possible, as to the feud, or seeming feud, between Alan and his brother's wife—for since the day on which he had discovered, and he had taken pains since to confirm this discovery, that the six-foot masker who had personated Archibald Warburton was not Archibald Warburton, but his brother Alan, Van Vernet had harbored many vague suspicions concerning the family and its mysteries. He had also hoped to see Leslie, and to surprise from one or both of them some word, or look, or tone, that would furnish him with a clue, if ever so slight.

Well, he had surprised several things, so he assured himself, but he had not seen Leslie. And the *denouement* of his visit had rendered it impossible for him ever to reenter that house, in the character of Mr. Augustus Grip.

True, he had learned something. He had heard Winnie's words: "Leslie is not a child; and you must have said bitterly cruel words before you left her in a dead faint on that library floor last night." And he had coupled these with those other words uttered by Winnie as she confronted Alan, with that farewell note in her hand: "Read that; see what your cruelty has done." [288]

Was this girl a plotter, too? If he could have seen that note! And then the organ-grinder—. On the whole, he was not even half satisfied with the result of his expedition, especially when he remembered that organ-grinder, and how he had let his temper escape its leash and rage itself into that cold white heat, his most intense expression of wrath, in which he had openly defied Alan Warburton, and flung his own colors boldly forth.

Another thing puzzled Vernet exceedingly. He had discovered Richard Stanhope at the Warburton masquerade, and had bestowed upon him the character of lover. Was he there in that character? Was he, in any way, mixed up with their family secrets? Where had he spent the remainder of that eventful night? Since the morning when Stanhope had reported to his Chief, after his night of adventure beginning with the masquerade, Vernet had heard no word from that Chief concerning Stanhope's unaccountable conduct, or the abandoned Raid.

The whole affair was to Vernet, vague, unsatisfactory, mysterious. But the more unsatisfactory, the more mysterious it became, the more doggedly determined became he.

He had not forgotten, nor was he neglecting, the Arthur Pearson murder. He was pursuing that investigation after a manner quite satisfactory—to himself at least.

There are in most cities, and connected with many detective forces, and more individual members of forces, a class of men, mongrels, we might say,—a cross between the lawyer and the detective but actually neither, and sometimes fitted for both. They are called, by those initiated, "private enquirers," "trackers," "bloodhounds." [289]

These gentry are often employed by lawyers, as well as by detectives and the police. They trace out titles, run down witnesses, hunt up pedigrees, unearth long-forgotten family secrets. They are searchers of records, burrowers into the past. Their work is slow, laborious, pains-taking, tedious. But it is not dangerous; the unsafe tracks are left to the detective proper.

Into the careful hands of some of these gentry, Van Vernet had entrusted certain threads from the woof of the "Arthur Pearson murder case," as they styled it. And these tireless searchers were burrowing away while Vernet was busying himself with other matters, waiting for the time when the "tracker" should find his occupation gone, and the detective's efforts be called in play.

Vernet had not been aware of the close proximity of his sometime friend and present rival. He had felt sure, from the first, that the pretended mute was other than he seemed; that he was a spy and marplot. But Richard Stanhope's disguise was perfect, and Vernet had not scrutinized him closely, being in such haste to dispose of him, and expecting to investigate his case later. Then, too, Richard Stanhope was absent; he had not been seen, or heard of, at the Agency for many days.

As for Stanhope, he had not been slow to recognize Van Vernet, and if he had not succeeded in all that he had hoped to accomplish, he had at least discovered Vernet's exact position. And he had left a slip of paper where, he felt very sure, it would fall into the right hands. For the rest, he came and went like a comet, and was seen no more for many weeks.

Meanwhile, quiet had been restored in Alan Warburton's study, and Alan himself now sat with a crumpled bit of paper in his hand. [290]

This bit of paper had been given him by Millie, who, acting upon Winnie's advice, had made to Alan a very meek confession of the part she had unwittingly played in the drama just enacted.

"Of course, sir, he came in when I went to call Miss Winnie," she had said contritely. "But oh, he did look so sorrowful, and then that curl of hair! I was so sure it was something about Miss Daisy."

Alan had listened gravely, had glanced at the bit of paper, and then dismissed her with a kind word and a smile, and without a reprimand.

When this unexpected escape had been joyfully reported to Winnie French, that stony-hearted damsel elevated her nose and said:

"Umph! so the man has a grain of something besides pride in him somewhere. Well, I'm glad to hear it."

To which Millie had replied, warmly:

"Why, Miss Winnie! Think how he fought to protect that poor organ man, who had come to rob him, maybe, though I can't think it. *That* was splendid in him, anyhow."

And this had reminded Winnie that she was not indulging in a soliloquy. So, having charged Millie to say nothing about the events of the afternoon, she dismissed her, and sat sadly down to peruse Leslie's farewell note once more.

DEAREST WINNIE.

I am going away to-night; I must go. Yesterday I was about to tell you my story; if you had heard it then, you would understand now why I go. Since yesterday, I have decided to keep my burden still strapped to my own shoulders.

In fact, to make you my confidante now would look to others, perhaps to you, like an attempt to justify my acts. One favor I ask, Winnie; when I return, if I do return, let me find you here. Continue to call my house, for it is my house, your home. I have asked your mother to share it with you, and to be in every sense of the word its mistress, until Daisy is found, or I return. Mr. Follingsbee will regulate all business matters. Trust me still, and don't desert me. Winnie, for time or for eternity, farewell.

LESLIE [291]

Filled with wonder and sorrow, Winnie sat musing over this strange note, when she received a message from Alan: would she come to him in the library; it was a matter of importance.

Rightly guessing that he wished to talk of Leslie, Winnie arose and went slowly down to the library, a gleam of resentment shining through the tears that would fill her eyes.

Not long before she had refused to talk or to listen. But now she must know why Leslie had gone. She was anxious to face Alan Warburton.

His manner, as he came forward to receive her, had undergone a change, and his first words were so startlingly like those last words of Leslie's, that Winnie's tongue failed to furnish the prompt sarcasm usually ready to meet whatever he might choose to utter.

He was standing by a large chair as she entered the library, and moving this a trifle forward, he said simply, and with just such a gravely courteous tone as he might use in addressing a stranger:

"Be seated, Miss French."

Winnie sank into the proffered chair, and he draws back a few paces, and standing thus before

her, began:

"Not long since I asked you to listen to me, and then to decide between another and myself. I do not repeat this request, for I cannot stand before you and accuse a woman who is not here to speak in her own defence. Although I did not read that note you proffered me, I have satisfied myself that Mrs. Warburton has gone." [292]

"Yes," sighed Winnie.

"She planned her flight, if flight it can be called, very skilfully. Everything in her apartments indicates deliberate preparation. She took no baggage; no one knows how or when she quitted the house. But she left two letters—two besides that written to you. One is addressed to Mr. Follingsbee; the other is for your mother."

"Yes," sighed Winnie once more.

"These letters," continued Alan, "must be delivered at once, and they should not be entrusted to the hands of servants. And now, Miss French, that letter, your letter, which you proffered me in a moment of excitement, I will not ask to see. But tell me, does it give you any idea of her destination? Does it contain anything that I may know?"

A leaden weight seemed fastened upon Winnie's facile tongue. Something in her throat threatened to choke her. She put her hand in her pocket, slowly drew out Leslie's letter, and silently proffered it to Alan.

"Do you wish me to read it?"

She nodded, and lifted her hand to brush two big tears from her cheeks with a petulant motion.

A moment he stood looking at her intently, an expression of tenderness creeping into his face. Then he drew back a pace, and his lips settled again into firm lines as he began the perusal of Leslie's letter.

Having read the missive slowly through for the second time, Alan refolded it and gravely returned it to Winnie. [293]

"Thank you," he said, in a subdued tone. "I am quite well aware, Miss French, that no word of mine can influence you in the slightest degree. Were this not so, I would beg most earnestly that you would comply, in every respect, with the wishes Mrs. Warburton has expressed."

While he perused the letter, Winnie had somewhat recovered herself, and she now looked up quickly.

"In every respect? Mr. Warburton, that note says—'trust me; do not desert me.'"

"And I say the same. To-day Leslie Warburton needs a true friend as much—as much as ever woman did."

He was about to say, "as much as I do," but pride stepped in and stopped the words ere they could pass his lips.

There was silence for a moment, and then he said:

"We must find Leslie if possible, of course, but not until we have seen her lawyer and consulted him. It is growing late, but time is precious. Will you let me take you to your mother's at once? You can give her Leslie's letter, and consult together. Meantime, I will drive to see Follingsbee, and call for you on my return. Of course your mother will accompany you; at least I trust so. And, Miss French, let me assure you, here and now, that should you continue to honor this house with your presence, you will not be further annoyed by my importunities. To-night, for the first time, I fully realize that I have no right to ask any woman to share a fate that is, to say the least, under a cloud; or to take upon herself a name that may be at any moment dishonored before the world. Shall I order the carriage? Will you go, Miss French?"

There was something masterful in his stern self-command his ability to think and act with such promptitude and forethought, and it had its effect upon Winnie. [294]

"I will go," she said, rising and turning toward the door.

"Thank you," he said, then hastened to open it.

When she had passed out, he returned to his old position, and once more glanced down at the piece of paper which all the while he had retained in his hand. It was the note flung at Millie's feet by the fleeing organ-grinder, and it contained these words:

If Alan Warburton will call on Mr. Follingsbee as soon as possible, he will find there a communication from a friend. It is important that he should receive this at once.

No name, no date, no signature, but it explains why Millie escaped without a reprimand.

CHAPTER XLI.

LESLIE GOES "HOME."

While Alan and Winnie, protected by their temporary armistice, were hurrying toward the modest abode of Mrs. French, each intent upon solving as soon as possible the riddle of Leslie's flight, the Francoises were holding high council in the kitchen of their most recent habitation.

In all the lists of professional criminals, there were not two who had been, from their very earliest adventure, more successful in evading the police than Papa and Mamma Francoise.

Papa, although in the face of actual, present danger he was the greater coward of the two, possessed a rare talent for scheming, and laying cunning plans to baffle the too curious. And Mamma's executive ability was very strong, of its kind. In the face of danger, Mamma's furious temper and animal courage stood them in good stead. When a new scheme was on foot, Papa took the lead. [295]

As for Franz, he, as we have seen, had not been so successful in evading the representatives of law and order. And he had returned, having escaped from duress vile, bringing with him a strangely developed stock of his Mother's fierceness and his Father's cunning.

It was a part of Papa's policy to be, at all times, provided with a "retreat." Not content with an abiding-place for the present, the pair had always, somewhere within an easy distance from their present abode, a second haven, fitted with the commonest necessities of life, but seldom anything more, and always ready to receive them. Hence, in fleeing from the scene of the Siebel affray, they had gone to the attic which stood ready to shelter them, where they had been traced by Vernet, and followed by Franz. And on the night when they had left Van Vernet to a fiery death, they had flown straight to another ready refuge.

This time it was a cottage, old and shabby, but in a respectable quarter on the remotest outskirts of the city. This cottage, like the B—street tenement, stood quite isolated from its neighbors, for it was one of Papa's fine points to choose ever a solitary location, or else lose himself in a locality where humanity swarmed thickest, and where each was too eager in his own struggle for existence to be anxious or curious about the affairs of his neighbors.

This cottage, then, was shabby enough, but not so shabby as their former dwelling, either within or without. Neither did Papa and Mamma present quite so uncanny an appearance as before. They were somewhat cleaner, a trifle better clad, and somewhat changed in their general aspect, for here they were presuming themselves to be "poor but honest" working people, like their neighbors. [296]

In this pretence they were ably supported by Franz, when he was sober. And drunkenness not being strictly confined to the wealthier classes, he cast no discredit upon the honesty of his parents by being frequently drunk.

Papa and Mamma were regaling themselves with a late supper, consisting principally of beer and "Dutch bread," and as usual, when *tête-à-tête*, they were engaged in a lively discussion.

"I don't like the way that boy goes on," remarks Mamma, as she cuts for herself a slice of the bread.

Papa sets down his empty beer glass, and tilts back his chair.

"Don't ye?" he queries carelessly.

"No, I don't," retorts Mamma with increasing energy. "He's getting too reckless, and he swigs too much."

"That's a fact," murmurs Papa, glancing affectionately at the beer pitcher.

"He'd ought ter lay low for a good while yet," goes on Mamma, "instead of prowling off at all hours of the day and night. Why, he's gone more'n he's here."

Papa Francoise brought his chair back into regular position with a slow movement, and leaning his two elbows upon the table, leered across at Mamma.

"Look here, old un," he said slowly, "that fellow's just knocked off eight or ten years in limbo, and don't you s'pose he prizes his liberty? If he can't keep clear o' cops and beaks after *his* experience, he ain't no son of mine. Don't you worry about our Franzy; he's got more brains than you an' me put together. I'm blest if I know how he come by such a stock. I'm beginning to take pride in the lad." [297]

"Well," rejoins Mamma viciously, "he ain't much like *you*; if he was, there wouldn't be so much to be proud of."

"That's a fact," assented Papa cheerfully. "He ain't like me; he sort o' generally resembles both of us. And I'm blest if he ain't better lookin' than we two together."

"Franzy's changed," sighs Mamma; "he ain't the same boy he uste to be. If it wa'n't fer his drinkin' and swearin', I wouldn't hardly know him."

"Course not; nor ye didn't know him till he interduced himself. No more did I. When a feller gets sent up fer fifteen years, and spends ten out of the fifteen tryin' to contrive a way to get back to his old Pappy and Mammy, it's apt to change him some. Franzy's improved, he is. He's cut some

eye-teeth. Ah, what a help he'd be, if I could only git past these snags and back to my old business!"

"Yes," sighed Mamma, and then suddenly suspended her speech as a lively, and not unmusical, whistle sounded near at hand.

"That's him," she said, pushing back her chair and rising. "He seems to be comin' good-natured." And she hastened to admit the Prodigal, who, if he had returned in good spirits, had not brought them all on the outside, for as he entered the room with a cheerful smirk and unsteady step, Papa murmured aside:

"Our dear boy's drunk agin."

Unmindful of Mamma's anxious questions concerning his whereabouts, Franzy took the chair she had just vacated, and began a survey of the table. [298]

"Beer!" he said contemptuously. "I wouldn't drink beer, not—"

"Not when you have drank too much fire-water already, Franzy," supplemented Papa, with a grin, at the same time drawing the pitcher nearer to himself. "No, my boy, I wouldn't if—if I were you."

Franz utters a half maudlin laugh, and turns to the old woman.

"Is this all yer eatables?" he asks thickly. "Bring us somethin' else."

"Yes," chimes in Papa, "Franzy's used ter first-class fare, old un; bring him something good."

Mamma moves about, placing before her Prodigal the best food at hand, and presently the three are gathered about the table again, a very social family group.

But by-and-by Mamma's quick ear catches a sound outside.

"Some one's coming," she says in a sharp whisper. "I wonder—"

She stops short and goes to a window, followed by Franz, who peers curiously over her shoulder.

"It's a woman," he says, a moment later.

"Hush, Franzy," says Mamma sharply. And then she goes quickly to the door.

It is a woman who enters; a woman draped in black. She throws back her shrouding veil and the pure pale face of Leslie Warburton is revealed.

Franz Francoise utters a sharp ejaculation, and then as Papa's hand presses upon his arm, he relapses into silence and draws back step by step.

"Ah!" cries Mamma, starting with extended hands to seize upon the new-comer; "ah! it's our own dear girl!" [299]

But Leslie repulses the proffered embrace, and moves aside.

"Wait," she says coldly; "wait." And she looks inquiringly at Franz. "You do not know how and why I come."

"No matter why you come, dear child,"—it is Papa, speaking in his oiliest accents—"we are glad to see you; very glad."

Again Leslie's eyes rest upon Franz, and Mamma says:

"Oh, speak out, my dear. This is our boy, Franz; your brother, my child."

"Yes," Papa chimes in blithely, "how beautiful this is; how delightful!"

Leslie favors Franz with a steady look, and turns to Mamma.

"Then I am not your only child," she says, with a proud curl of the lip.

And Mamma, seeing the look on her face, regrets, for the once, the presence of her beloved Prodigal.

But Franz has quite recovered himself, and moving a trifle nearer the group by the door, he mutters, seemingly for his own benefit, "well, this let's me out!"

Hearing which, Mamma glances from Franz to Leslie, and spreading out her two bony palms in a sort of "bless-you-my-children" gesture, says theatrically:

"Ah-h, you were too young to remember each other; at least *you* were too young to remember Franzy. But *he* don't forget you; do you, Franzy, my boy? You don't forget Leschen—little Leschen?"

"Don't I though?" mutters Franz under his breath, and then he moves forward with an unsteady lurch, saying aloud: "Eh? oh, Leschen: little Leschen. Why in course I—I remember." [300]

"Ah!" cries Mamma with enthusiasm, "many's the time you've rocked her, when she wasn't two years old."

"Franzy was allers good 'bout sech things," chimes in Papa.

"Umph!" grunts Franz, turning to Papa, "where's she been?"

"My boy," replies Papa impressively, "Leschen's been living like a lady ever since she was adopted away from us. Of course you can't remember each other much, but ye ort to be civil to yer sister."

"That's a fact," assents Franz, coming quite close to Leslie. "Say, Leschen, don't ye be afraid o' me; I kin see that ye don't like my looks much. Say, can't ye remember me at all?"

A full moment Leslie scans him from head to foot, with a look of proud disdain. Then turning towards Mamma, she says bitterly:

"I am more fortunate than I hoped to be."

"Ain't ye, now?" chimes in Franz cheerfully. "Say, ye look awful peaked." And he hastens to fetch a chair, his feet almost tripping in the act. "There," he says, placing it beside her, "sit down, do, an' tell us the news."

She sinks wearily upon the proffered seat, and again turns her face toward Mamma.

"Yes," she says coldly, "let me tell my news, since this is a *family* gathering. You have deplored my loss so often that I have returned. I have come to live with you."

The consternation that sits upon two of three faces turned toward her, is indeed ludicrous, and Franz Francoise utters an audible chuckle. Then the elders find their tongues.

"Ah," groans Papa, "she's jokin' at the poor old folks."

[301]

"Ah," sighs Mamma, "there's no such luck for poor people."

"Reassure yourselves," says Leslie calmly. "I have given you all my money; my husband is dead; my little step-daughter has been stolen, or worse, and I have been accused of the crime."

She pauses to note the effect of her words, but strangely enough, Franz Francoise is the only one who gives the least sign of surprise.

"I am disinherited," continues Leslie, "cast out from my home, friendless and penniless. You have claimed me as your child, and I have come to you."

Still she is closely studying the faces of the elder Francoises, and she does not note the intent eyes that are, in turn, studying her own countenance: the eyes of Franz Francoise.

The two old plotters look at each other, and then turn away. Rage, chagrin, baffled expectation, speak in the looks they interchange. Franz is the first to relapse into indifference and stolidity.

"But, my girl," Papa begins, excitedly, "this can't be! You are a widow—ah, yes, poor child, we know that. But, my dear, a widow has rights. The law, my child, the law—"

"You mistake," says Leslie coldly, "the law will do nothing for me."

"But it must," argues Papa. "They can't keep you out o' your rights. The law—"

Leslie rises and turns to face him, cutting short his speech by a gesture.

"There is a higher law than that made by man," she says sternly; "the law that God has implanted in heart and conscience. That law bids me renounce all claims to my husband's wealth. Understand this: I am penniless. There is but one thing that could induce me to claim and use what the law will give me."

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"And what is that?" asks Papa, in a wheedling tone, while Mamma catches her breath to listen.

"That," says Leslie slowly, "is the restoration of little Daisy Warburton."

CHAPTER XLII.

AN AFFECTIONATE FAMILY.

A sudden silence has fallen upon the group, and as Leslie's clear, sad eyes rest upon first one face and then the other, Papa begins to fidget nervously.

"Oh, yes," he sighs, "we heard about that."

And then Mamma comes nearer, saying in a cat-like, purring tone: "The poor little dear! And you can't find her?"

As she speaks, Franz Francoise shifts his position carelessly, placing himself where he can note the expressions of the two old faces.

But Leslie's enforced calmness is fast deserting her.

"Woman!" she cries passionately, "drop your mask of hypocrisy! Let us understand each other. I

believe that you were in my house on the night of that wretched masquerade. I have reasons for so believing. Ah, I recall many words that have fallen from your lips, now that it is too late; words that condemn you. You believed that with Daisy removed, I would become my husband's sole heiress; and you knew that at best his life would be short. The more the money in my possession, the more you could extort from me. But I can thwart you here, and I will. You never reckoned upon my throwing away my claim to wealth, for you were never human; you never loved anything but money, or you would have pity on that poor little child. Give me back little Daisy, and every dollar I can claim shall become yours!"

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Oh, the greed, the avarice, that shines from Mamma's eyes! But Papa makes her a sign, and she remains silent, while he says, with his best imitation of gentleness:

"But, my child; but, Leschen, how can *we* find the little girl?"

Leslie turns upon him a look of contempt, and then a swift spasm of fear crosses her face.

"Oh," she cries, clasping her hands wildly, "surely, *surely* you have not killed her!"

And now Mamma has resumed her mask. "My child," she says, coming close to Leslie, "you're excited. We don't know where to find that child. What can *we* do?"

Back to Leslie's face comes that look of set calm, and she sinks upon the chair she had lately occupied.

"Do your worst!" she says between tightly clenched teeth. "You know that I do not, that I never shall, believe you. You say you are my mother," flashing two blazing eyes upon Mamma, "take care of your child, then. Make of me a rag-picker, if you like. Henceforth I am nothing, nobody, save the daughter of the Francoises!"

Again, for a moment, the faces that regard her present a study. And this time it is Franz who is the first to speak, Coming forward somewhat unsteadily, he doffs his ragged old cap, and extends to her a hand not overclean.

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"Partner, shake!" he says in tones of marked admiration. "Ye're clean grit! If ye're my sister, I'm proud of ye. If ye ain't, and ye 'pear to think ye ain't, then it's my loss, an'," with a leer at the old pair, "yer gain. Anyhow, I'm yer second in this young-un business. Ye kin stay right here, ef ye want ter, and, by thunder, ef the old uns have got yer little gal, ye shall have her back agin—ye hear me! Ain't ye goin' ter shake? I wish yer would. I'm a rough feller, Missy; I've allers been a hard case, and I've just got over a penitentiary stretch—ye'll hear o' that soon enough, ef ye stay here. The old un likes to remind me of it when she ain't amiable. Never mind that; maybe I ain't all bad. Anyway, I'm goin' to stand by ye, and don't ye feel oneasy."

Again he extends his hand, and Leslie looks at it, and then up into his face.

"Oh, if I could trust you!" she murmurs. "If you would help me!"

"I *kin*," says Franz promptly, "an' I *will*!"

Again she hesitates, looking upon the uncouth figure and the unwashed hand. Then she lifts her eyes to his face.

Two eyes are looking into her own, eagerly, intently, full of pitying anxiety.

She rises slowly, looks again into the eager eyes, and extends her hand.

"Gracious!" he exclaims, as he releases it, "how nervous yer are: must be awful tired."

"Tired, yes. I have walked all the way."

"An' say, no jokin' now, *have* ye come ter live with us?"

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"Partner, shake. Ye're clean
grit!"—[page 304](#).

"I have," she replies firmly; "unless," turning a contemptuous glance toward Mamma and Papa, "my *parents* refuse me a shelter." [306]

It is probable that these overtures from Franz would have been promptly interrupted, had not Papa and Mamma, seeing the necessity of exchanging a few words, improved this opportunity to understand each other, and as they exchanged hasty whispers, any vagueness or hiatus in their speech was fully supplied by meaning glances. And now quite up in her role, Mamma again advances.

"My child," she begins, in a dolorous voice, "when ye know us better, ye'll think better of yer poor old folks. As fer Franz here, he's been drinkin' a little to-night, but he's a good-hearted boy; don't mind him."

"No," interrupts Franz, with a maudlin chuckle; "don't mind *me*."

"It's a poor home yer come to, Leschen," continues Mamma, "and a poor bed I can give ye. But we want to be good to ye, dear, an' if ye're really goin' to stay with us, we'll try an' make ye as comfortable as we can."

Leslie's head droops lower and lower; she pays no heed to the old woman's words.

"Poor child, she is tired out."

Saying this, Mamma takes the candle from the table, and goes from the room quickly, thus leaving the three in darkness.

In another moment, the voice of Franz breaks out:

"Ain't there another glim somewhere?"

By the time Mamma returns, a feeble light is sputtering upon the table, and Franz is awkwardly trying to force upon Leslie some refreshments from the choice supply left from their late repast. But she refuses all, and wearily follows Mamma from the room. [307]

"Git yer rest now," says Franz as she goes; "to-morrow we'll talk over this young-un business."

But when the morrow comes, and for many days after, Leslie Warburton is oblivious to all things earthly.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE PRODIGAL BECOMES OBSTINATE.

When the door had closed behind Leslie and the old woman, Franz Francoise dropped his chin upon his breast, and leaning his broad shoulders against the door-frame, stood thinking, or half asleep, it would have been difficult to guess which; while Papa began a slow, cat-like promenade up and down the room, paying no heed to Franz or his occupation, and thinking, beyond a doubt.

After a little, Franz, arousing himself with a yawn, staggered to the nearest chair, and dropped once more into a listless attitude. In another moment, Mamma reëntered the room.

As she passed him, Franz laid a detaining hand upon her arm, and leering up into her face, whispered thickly:

"I say, old un, ye seem ter be troubled with gals. Don't ye want me to git rid o' *this* one fer ye?"

A moment the old woman pauses, and looks down at her Prodigal in silence. Then she brings her hideous face close to his and whispers:

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"My boy, that other un, ef we'd a-kept her, ud a-done us hurt. This un, ef we kin keep her, will make all our fortunes."

"Honor bright?" drawls Franz, looking up at her sleepily, and suppressing a yawn.

"Honor bright, my boy."

"Then," and he rises and stretches out his arms, "we'd better keep her."

Mamma favors him with a nod and a grin of approval, and then goes over to where Papa has halted and stands eyeing the whisperers.

The household belongings here are, as we have said, somewhat more respectable and extensive than those of the former nests occupied by these birds of passage. There were several chairs; a quantity of crockery and cooking utensils; some decent curtains at the windows; and a couch, somewhat the worse for wear and not remarkable for cleanliness, in this room.

Toward this couch Franz moves with a shuffling gait, and flinging himself heavily down upon it, he settles himself to enjoy a quiet nap, paying no heed to Papa and Mamma, who, standing near together, are watching him furtively. It is some time before Franz becomes lost in dreamland. He fidgets and mumbles for so many minutes that Mamma becomes impatient. But he is quiet at last.

And then the two old plotters, withdrawing themselves to the remotest corner of the room, enter into a conversation or discussion, which, judging from their rapid gesticulations, their facial expression, and the occasional sharp hiss, which is all that could have been heard by the occupant of the couch were he ever so broad awake, must be a question of considerable importance, and one that admits of two opinions.

For more than an hour this warm discussion continues. Then it seems to have reached an amicable adjustment, for they both wear a look of relief, and conversation flags. Presently Mamma turns her face toward the couch.

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"I wonder ef he is asleep," she whispers. "Somehow, that boy bothers me."

"There's nothin' ails him," replies the old man, in the same guarded whisper, "only what he come honestly by. He's lookin' out fer number one, same as we are; an' he won't trust *all* his secrets to nobody's keepin', no more'n we won't. He's our own boy—only he's a leetle too sharp fer my likin'. Hows'ever, he's a lad to be proud of, an' it won't do to fall out with him."

"Nobody wants to fall out with him," retorts Mamma. "He's going to be the makin' of us, only—mind this—he ain't to know too much, unless we want him to be our master. Look at the scamp, a-layin' there! I'm goin' to see ef he is asleep."

She takes the candle from the table, snuffs the wick into a brighter blaze, and moves softly toward the couch. The Prodigal's face is turned upward. Mamma scans it closely, and then brings the candle very near to the closed eyes, waving it to and fro rapidly.

There is no slow awakening here. The two hands of the sleeper, which have rested in seeming carelessness loosely at his sides, move swiftly and simultaneously with his body. And Mamma's only consciousness is that of more meteors than could by any possibility emanate from one candle, and a sudden shock to her whole frame. She is sitting upon the floor, clutching wildly at the candle, while Franz, a dangerous-looking revolver in either hand, is glaring fiercely about him.

And all this in scarce ten seconds!

"Wot's up?" queries Franz shortly, "wot the dickens—"

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Papa comes forward, chuckling softly, but keeping cautiously out of range of the two weapons. And Mamma begins to scramble to her feet.

"Hullo!" says Franz, as he seems to notice Mamma's position for the first time; "wot ails *you*?"

Papa is so amused that he giggles audibly; he was never heard to laugh an honest laugh.

"Git up, old lady," commands Franz, withdrawing his eyes from Mamma; and he stands as at first, until she has risen.

Then he glances sharply about the room, and asks impatiently: "Come, now, what have ye been up to?"

"Ye see, Franzy," begins Mamma in a conciliating tone, "I went ter take a look at ye—"

"Oh, ye did!"

"With the candle in my hand."

"Jest so; an' to get a good look, ye stuck it pretty close to my eyes. Wanted to see ef I was asleep, or playin' possum, eh? Wall," replacing one revolver in a hip-pocket, and trifling carelessly with the other, while he seats himself upon the couch, "what did ye find out?"

Though his tone was one of quiet mockery, there was an angry gleam in his eyes, and neither Papa nor Mamma ventured a reply.



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"Mamma brings the candle very near to the closed eyes, waving it to and fro, rapidly."—[page 309](#).

"I'll tell ye what ye discovered, an' it may be a good lesson fer ye," he goes on in a low tone that was full of fierce intensity. "Ye have discovered that Franz Franchoise asleep, and the same feller awake, are pretty much alike. It's jest as onsafe to trifle with one as with the other. I've slept nearly ten years o' my life with every nerve in me waitin' fer a sign to wake quick and active. I've taught myself to go to sleep always with the same idea runnin' in my head. An' since I got out o' that pen down there, I'm always armed, and I'm always ready. The brush of a fly'll wake me, and it'll take me just five seconds to shoot. So when ye experiment 'round me agin, ye want to fly kinder light. And, old woman, ye may thank yer stars that ye was so close ter me that ye didn't come in for nothin' more'n a tumble."

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He sits quite still for a few moments, and then rising slowly, goes over and seats himself on the edge of the table near which Papa stands.

"When I stowed myself away over there," resumes Franz, "I was more or less muddled. But I'm straight enough now, an' my head's clear. I've just recklected about that gal's comin', an'—I say, old woman, can she hear us if she happens to be awake?"

"No," replies Mamma, "she can't—not unless we talk louder than we're likely to."

"Then haul up yer stool. We're goin' ter settle about her."

The look which Mamma casts toward her worser half says, as plainly as looks can speak: "It's coming." And then she compresses her lips, and draws a chair near the table, while Papa occupies another, and Franz looks down upon the pair from his more elevated perch.

"Now, then," begins Franz, "Who's that 'ere gal?"

No answer from the two on the witness-stand. They exchange glances, and remain mute.

"Next," goes on Franz, as if quite content with their silence, "wot's all this talk about child-stealin'?"

Still no answer. Franz remains tranquil as before, and by way of diversion probably, squints along the shining barrel of his six shooter, and snaps the trigger playfully.

"Have ye got that gal's young un?" he asks, still seeming to find the revolver an object of interest, "or hain't ye?" Down comes the dangerous weapon upon the knee of its owner, and quite by accident, of course, it has Papa's head directly in range.

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Seeing which, that worthy moves quickly aside with an exclamation of remonstrance. But Mamma is made of other stuff. She leans forward and leers up into the face of her Prodigal.

"It seems ter me, youngster," she sneers, "that gal's took a strong hold on yer sympathies. Ain't ye gettin' terrible curious?"

"Maybe," retorts Franz, returning her gaze with interest; "an' maybe, now, 'tain't so much

sympathy as ye may suppose. I don't think sympathy runs in this 'ere family. The pint's right here, and this is a good time to settle it. You two's hung ont'er me ter stay by yer, an' strike together fer luck, but I'm blessed ef I'm goin' ter strike in ther dark. *I'm* goin' ter see ter the bottom o' things, er let 'em alone. An' afore we drop this, I want these 'ere questions answered: Who is that gal, an' why does she talk about bein' your gal? Who is the young-un she talks of, an' have you got it? I'm goin' ter know yer lay afore *I* move."

"Franz," breaks in Papa deprecatingly, "jest give yer mother a chance. Maybe ye won't ride sich a high horse when ye hear her plans fer yer good."

And then, as if she has just received her cue, Mamma breaks in:

"Ah-h, Franz," she says contemptuously, "I'm disappointed in ye! Wot were ye thinkin' on, ter go an' weaken afore a slip of a gal like that, talkin' such chicken talk, an' goin' back on yer old mother!"

"I thought ye said ye'd got ter hang onto that gal, an' she'd make all our fortin's," comments Franz. [314]

"An' so I did."

"Well," and he favors her with a knowing leer, "if that's a fact, somebody needs ter git inter her good books, an' she don't 'pear to take much stock in you two."

He points this sentence with a wink at Papa. And this gentleman, seeming to see his son's gallantry in a new light, indulges in one of his giggles. Even Mamma grins visibly as she leans forward and pats him on his knee.

"Ah, you sly dog, ah-h! Look what luck's throwed in our way, my boy! Ye're bound ter be rich, if ye jest listen to yer mother."

"It'll take a power o' listenin' unless yer git down ter business. An' now, once more, wot does the gal mean by talkin' about a child that's stole?"

"Never mind the young un, boy," replies Mamma, her face hardening again; "how do ye like the gal?"

"Like the gal? Wot's that got ter do with it?"

"Listen, Franz," and Mamma bends forward with uplifted forefinger; "I'll explain all that needs explainin' by an by. S'pose it should turn out as that gal, that's come here and throwed herself into our hands, should fall heir to—well, to a pile o' money. What would you be willin' to do ter git the heft of it?"

"Most anything," replies Franz coolly, and letting his eyes drop to the weapon in his hand. "I shouldn't 'weaken,' nor play 'chicken,' old un. But I'd want ter see the fortin' ahead."

"Hear the boy!" chuckles Mamma in delight. "But we don't want none o' *that*," nodding toward the revolver. "It's a live gal ye want." Then leaning forward, she whispers sharply: "*You have got ter marry the gal!*" [315]

Franz stares at his mother for full ten seconds. Then slowly lowering first one leg and next the other, he stands upon his feet, and embracing himself with both arms, he indulges in what appears to be a violent fit of noiseless laughter.

"Marry the gal!" he articulates between these spasms. "Oh, gimmini! won't she be delighted!"

"Delighted or not," snarls Mamma, considerably annoyed by this levity on the part of her Prodigal, "she'll be brought to consent."

But the spasm has passed. Franz resumes his position on the table, and looks at Mamma, this time with the utmost gravity, while he says:

"Look here, old woman, that's a gal as can't be drove. Ye can't force her ter marry yer han'some son. An' ye can't force yer han'some son ter marry her—not unless he sees some strong inducements. An' then, ye don't expect ter make a prisoner o' that gal, do yer? That racket's played out, 'cept in the theatres. I don't know what sent her here, but I'm pretty sure she'll be satisfied with a short visit."

"Franz," remonstrates Mamma, "listen to me. That gal, the minit we step for'ard an' prove her identity, is goin' to come into a fortin' as big as a silver mine. And we shan't prove her identity—till she's married ter you."

Suddenly the manner of the Prodigal, which has presented thus far a mixture of incredulity and indifference, changes to fierce anger. Again he comes down upon his feet, this time with a quick spring that causes Papa to start and tremble once more.

"Now, you listen," he says sharply. "The quicker yer stop this fool business, the better it'll be fer yer plans. Who's that gal, I say? How did she git inter yer clutches? What's this fortin', and where's it comin' from? When ye've answered these 'ere questions, ye kin talk ter *me*; not afore." [316]

"Jest trust us fer that, Franzy," says Papa softly.

"Not any! Then here's another thing: how are ye goin' ter git that gal's consent?"

"Trust us fer that, too," says Mamma, in a tone betokening rising anger. "We know how ter manage her."

"An' that means that ye've got her young un! Now look here, both on ye. Do you take me fer a stool-pigeon, to go into such a deal with my eyes blinded? Satisfy me about the gal, an' her right to a fortin', an' let me in to the young un deal, an' I'm with ye. I don't go it blind."

And now it is Mamma's turn. She bounds up, confronting her Prodigal, with wrath blazing in her wicked eyes.

Papa turns away and groans dismally: "Oh, Lord, they're goin' to quarrel!"

"Look here, Franz Francoise," begins Mamma, in a shrill half whisper, "ye don't want ter go too fur! I ain't a-goin' ter put all the power inter yer hands. If this business ain't worth somethin' to me, it shan't be to you. I kin soon satisfy ye on one pint: the gal ain't my gal, but she came honest into my hands. I'm willin' ter tell ye all about the gal, an' her fortune, but ye kin let out the young-un business. That's my affair, and I'll attend to it in my own way. Now, then, if I'll tell ye about the gal, prove that there's money in it, and git her consent, will ye marry her an'—"



"Look here, Franz Francoise, ye don't want to go too far!"—[page 316](#).

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"Whack up with ye afterwards?" drawls Franz, all trace of anger having disappeared from his face and manner. "Old woman, I'll put it in my pipe an' smoke it. Ye kin consider this confab ended."

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Turning upon his heel he goes back to the couch, drops down upon it with a yawn, and composes himself to sleep.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MR. FOLLINGSBEE'S VICTORY.

When Alan Warburton reached the residence of Mr. Follingsbee, he found that legal gentleman sitting alone in his cosy library, very much, so Alan thought, as if expecting him. And the first words that the lawyer uttered confirmed this opinion.

Rising quickly, Mr. Follingsbee came forward to meet his guest, saying briskly:

"Ah, Warburton, good evening. I've been expecting you; sit down, sit down."

As Alan placed his hat upon the table beside him, and took the seat indicated, he said, with a well-bred stare of surprise:

"You expected me, Mr. Follingsbee? Then possibly you know my errand?"

"Well, yes; in part, at least." The lawyer took up a folded note, and passed it across the table to his visitor, saying: "It was left in my care about two hours ago."

Alan glanced up at him quickly, and then turned his attention to the perusal of the note. It ran thus:

The time has come, or will soon come, when Mrs. W— will find it necessary to confide her troubles to Mr. Follingsbee. The time is also near when you will have to fight Van Vernet face to face. You will do well to trust your case to Mr. Follingsbee, relying upon him in every particular. You will have to meet strategy with strategy, if you would outwit Vernet.

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A FRIEND.

Alan perused this slowly, noting that the handwriting was identical with that of the scrap left by the “organ-grinder,” and then he refolded it, saying:

“I am the bearer of a missive for you, Mr. Follingsbee; but first, let me ask if I may know who sent me this message?”

“It was left in my hands,” replied the lawyer, smiling slightly, “by—by a person with ragged garments, and a dirty face. He appeared to be a deaf mute, and looked like—”

“Like an organ-grinder minus his organ?” finished Alan.

“Just so.”

“I trust that *this* will explain itself,” said Alan, drawing forth from an inner pocket Leslie’s letter, and giving it into the lawyer’s hand. “Read it, Mr. Follingsbee. This day has been steeped in mystery; let us clear away such clouds as we can.”

“From Leslie!” Mr. Follingsbee said, elevating his eyebrows. “This is an unexpected part of the programme.”

“Indeed? And yet this,—” and Alan tapped the note he had just received, with one long, white forefinger,—“this foretells it.”

“Ah!” Only this monosyllable; then Mr. Follingsbee broke the seal of Leslie’s letter and began its perusal, his face growing graver and more troubled as he read.

It was a long letter, and he read it slowly, turning back a page sometimes to re-read a certain passage. Finally he laid the letter upon his knee, and sat quite still, with his hands working together nervously and his brow wrinkled in thought. At last he lifted his eyes toward Alan.

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“Do you know what this letter contains?” he asked slowly.

“I know that my sister-in-law has left her home,” Alan replied gravely; “nothing more.”

“Nothing more?”

“Nothing; really. She left three letters: one for Mrs. French, another for Miss French, and the third for yourself.”

“And you.... She left you some message?”

“Not a word, verbal or written.”

“Strange,” mused the lawyer, taking up his letter and again glancing through its pages. “I can’t understand it. Mr. Warburton—pardon the question—was there any difference, any misunderstanding, between you and Leslie?”

“Does not the letter itself explain?”

“That is what puzzles me. The letter tells her own story—a story that I knew before, in part at least; a sad story, proving to me that the girl has been made to suffer bitterly; but it does not, from first to last, mention your name.”

Alan sat silent for a moment. Then he turned his face toward the lawyer, as if acting upon some resolve.

“Yesterday,” he began quietly, “I held an interview with my sister-in-law. It was not an amicable interview; we have been on unfriendly terms since—since the night of the masquerade.”

“Since the masquerade?”

“During that interview,” continued Alan, “Mrs. Warburton gave me the brief outline of what seemed to me a very improbable story.”

“Ah!” There was a new shade in the lawyer’s voice.

“And I am wondering,” Alan goes on, “if your letter contains that same story.”

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“Possibly,” said Mr. Follingsbee dryly.

“This note which you have given me, and which bears no signature, seems to indicate as much. Are you acquainted with its contents, sir?”

“I am not.” There is a growing crispness in the lawyer’s tone, which Alan is not slow to note.

“Then oblige me by reading it.”

Mr. Follingsbee took the note and read it slowly.

"Don't you think," he said, looking up from its perusal, "that we had better begin by understanding each other?"

"I do."

"Very good: this note was left with me by—by such a man as I described to you."

"By a man in disguise?"

"Just so. This—this man in disguise, came to me in your behalf."

"In my behalf!" exclaimed Alan, in amazement.

"In your behalf. He told me you were in danger, and that the man you had most cause to fear was a certain detective: Van Vernet."

Alan Warburton stirred uneasily in his chair, and the old haughty look came slowly into his face.

"He said," went on the lawyer slowly, "that because of your pride, and your obstinacy, you were involving not only yourself but others, in a net that might, if your present course continued, ruin you utterly, and bring upon your cherished family honor a disagreeable blot, if not absolute disgrace. He did not give me an idea of the nature of the difference between yourself and this Vernet, but he laid out a very pretty plan by which to baffle him. And he said, as he went away: 'If Alan Warburton, under all his pride and obstinate clinging to a wrong idea, possesses the sound judgment that I believe him to have—and it's a pity he has not made better use of it,—he will confide in you, and act upon your advice, if not upon mine. Let him do this and we will baffle Vernet, and his precious secret will not be dragged to the light. Let him continue in his present course, and Van Vernet will have his hand upon him within a week; the affair of this afternoon should convince him of this.'" [322]

During this remarkable speech, Alan's face had taken on a variety of expressions. At the closing sentence he gave a quick start, and then sat perfectly still, with his profile toward his companion. After a time he turned his face toward the lawyer; and that personage, looking anxiously for a reply or comment, could read upon the handsome countenance only calm resolve and perfect self-control.

"Mr. Follingsbee," he began gravely, "do you understand this allusion to the events of the afternoon?"

"I do not."

"And yet you have confidence in this disguised stranger?"

"Have I alluded to him as a *stranger*, sir?"

Alan passed his hand across his brow, and said slowly:

"He is not a stranger to you and, evidently, he knows me remarkably well; I might say too well."

"Ahem! You would be likely to recall your words, if you did."

"Mr. Follingsbee, *who* is this man?"

"I am not at liberty to speak his name."

"*What* is he, then?"

"First of all, a gentleman; a man whose championship does you honor, for it proves that he believes in you, in spite of this Van Vernet." [323]

"Was it not a strange freak for this *gentleman*, disguised just as he afterward came to you, to enter my study window, and conceal himself in my cabinet?"

Mr. Follingsbee looked up with lively interest. "Did he do that?" he asked quickly.

"He did that."

"Well," said Mr. Follingsbee slowly, "I should say that it was quite like him. He did not talk of his own exploits when he came to me; I fancy his time was limited."

"Probably; now, Mr. Follingsbee, I think I see things, some things, in a clearer light. This organ-grinder of mine, this gentleman of yours, this anonymous friend, is a *detective!*"

"Umph!" mutters the lawyer, half to himself, "we are beginning to use our wits." Then in a louder tone: "Ah, so we are no longer lawyer and witness?"

"No," with a quiet smile; "we are two lawyers. Let us remain such."

"With all my heart," cries Mr. Follingsbee, extending his hand; "let us remain such."

Alan takes the proffered hand, and begins again.

"This champion of mine, then, is a detective; you admit that?"

"Well—yes."

"In espousing my cause, he is making active war upon Van Vernet?"

"So it appears."

"Then it is safe to say that aside from the interest he has seen fit to take in—in my family and family affairs, he has some personal issue with Mr. Vernet."

"Possibly."

"Then,—how fast we progress—our detective friend must be a remarkably clever fellow, or our chances are very slender. Mr. Vernet is called one of the ablest detectives on the city force." [324]

"True."

"Mr. Follingsbee, have you faith in the ability of this champion-detective to cope with such a man as Vernet?"

"Well," says the elder gentleman slowly, "if you play your part, I'll vouch for my friend. He is at least a match for Vernet."

"Then I think it would not be a difficult matter to identify him."

"Don't waste your time," interrupts Mr. Follingsbee quickly; "I have told you all that I am at liberty to tell."

"As you please; but before I begin my story, I must be sure that it is *the* story. Yesterday, as I told you, I had an interview with my sister-in-law."

"Yes."

"I had observed some things that puzzled me, and—does that letter of Leslie's contain any statements concerning her early life?" He breaks off abruptly.

"It does; many statements."

"Do you know anything of her early history?"

"Yes."

"Is she the daughter of Thomas Uliman?"

"His adopted daughter; yes."

"And are her parents living?"

"Two people who claim to be her parents are in this city. I may as well say to you now, Mr. Warburton, that Leslie never knew herself to be an adopted child until shortly before her marriage; that she discovered it by accident, and came straight to me with the news, which I had known all along. Then she told the truth to your brother, and knowing the height, depth, and absurdity of the Warburton pride, offered to release him from his engagement. He refused this release and bade her never mention the subject again." [325]

He paused a moment, and seeing that Alan was regarding him with steadfast earnestness, resumed:

"I supposed that the end of the affair, and from that day to this have never heard a word on the subject from Leslie, or from any one, until you brought me this letter. And now, as I have gone thus far into the matter, let me tell you what I have learned from this letter—not as Leslie has written it, but briefly as possible. Shortly before her marriage, two people, asserting themselves to be the two who gave Leslie to the Ulimans, came and claimed her as their child. They were so repulsive, clamorous, and so evidently greedy for money, that Leslie could not, would not, credit their story. Here she made her first mistake. She bribed these old wretches with a good slice of her little fortune, instead of turning them and their claim over to me. They promised to go away, of course, and never trouble her again, and also of course, they did not keep their word. As soon as she was married to your brother, they became bolder; and she was more than ever in their power. She dared not confide in her husband; first, because of his pride, which was only a little less than yours, and next, because she feared the effect of such a revelation upon a constitution so frail, and a mind so sensitive. It was too late, she thought, to come to me; and so it went on. They drained her private purse to the last dollar; they compelled her to come at their summons at any time, and she had to creep from her home like a guilty thing to carry hush-money to these wretches. And so things continued until, in order to satisfy their greed, she must begin to fee them with her husband's money. Think of *that*, sir," casting an ironical glance at his *vis-a-vis*; "feeing those common clods with the Warburton gold." [326]

But Alan never noted this home-thrust. He sat quite still, with a troubled look upon his face; seeing which, Mr. Follingsbee continued:

"This she firmly resolved that she would never do; and then came that masquerade."

"Ah!" Alan starts as he involuntarily utters the ejaculation, but controls himself instantly, and says: "Go on, please."

"That night they sent her a note," continues Mr. Follingsbee. "It came when she was in the midst of her guests; and it was so urgent in its demands that she grew desperate, threw off her festive

garments, and went, alone, in the night, to the hovel where these old impostors lived. She went to defy them, and she found herself entrapped."

"Entrapped?"

"Yes; while she talked, she was seized by two persons who crept upon her from behind. She does not understand their actual object; they seemed trying to secure the jewels which she had forgotten to remove from her ears. Just here she is not very definite; I will read the passage to you."

He takes up the letter, searches out the lines referred to, and reads:

I can scarcely describe the rest. It is sufficient that a brave man rescued me—at what a fearful cost to himself, I only learned afterward. I escaped from the hovel, and reached my home. You know the rest: how Daisy vanished, and all the sorrow since. And now I tell you that I believe these two have stolen Daisy.

Here he breaks off abruptly. "The rest is a mixture of business affairs and hurried directions how to dispose of her property should she be long absent, or should she never return, etc. At the close she says, that on the night of her adventure at the hovel, and during the affray, a man was killed; and that either herself or her brave rescuer, she is informed, is likely to be arrested for that crime; and in case of the arrest of either, the other will be compelled to testify *for or against*." [327]

"And her motive for now quitting her home so suddenly?"

"Of that she says very little; merely that she is leaving, and that she hopes I will continue my confidence in her."

"Which you do?"

"Which I do."

For many moments Alan Warburton sat with his head bowed, and his face pale and troubled, saying nothing. Then he roused himself, and turned towards his companion.

"Mr. Follingsbee," he said, very gravely, "if this story—a part of which you have told me, the rest being contained in that letter—is true; if Leslie Warburton has been a martyr throughout this affair, then I am a most contemptible scoundrel!"

"You!" ejaculated the old gentleman testily; "you a scoundrel! Good heavens, has everybody gone into high dramatics? What have you done?"

"I have accused Leslie of receiving a lover in her own house; of going from her home to meet him; I have heaped upon her insult after insult; I have driven her from her home by my cruel accusations!"

A moment Mr. Follingsbee sat looking as if about to pour forth a volume of wrath, upon the head of his self-accusing visitor; then he said, as if controlling himself by an effort:

"You had better tell the whole story, young man, having begun it." [328]

And Alan did tell the whole story; honestly, frankly and without sparing himself. He began at the beginning, telling how, at the first, Leslie's youth, beauty and vivacity, together with a certain disparity of years between herself and husband, had caused him to doubt her affection for his brother, and to suspect a mercenary marriage; how he had discovered her sending away notes by stealth; how his suspicions had grown and strengthened until, on the night of the masquerade, he had set Van Vernet to watch her movements; and how Vernet had discovered, or claimed to discover, a lover in the person of a certain Goddess of Liberty.

At this point in his narrative, Alan was surprised to note certain unmistakable signs of levity in the face and manner of Mr. Follingsbee; and presently that gentleman broke in:

"Wait; just wait. Let's clear up that point, once and for all. That 'Goddess' was introduced into your house by me, and for a purpose which, to me, seemed good. Until that night he had never seen Leslie Warburton."

"He! then it was a man?"

"It was; and Van Vernet, as I have since learned, knew him and laid a trap for him. Their feud dates from that night."

"Ah, then our detective and the 'Goddess of Liberty'—"

"Are the same. Now resume, please."

Going back to his story, Alan tells how he had followed Leslie; how he had rushed in, in answer to her cry for aid; how he had rescued her, and had himself been rescued in turn by a pretended idiot. He told of his return home; his interview with Leslie after the masquerade, and their last interview; ending with the scene with Vernet and the organ-grinder. [329]

"That fellow is the mischief!" said Mr. Follingsbee, rubbing his palms softly together. "He's the very mischief!"

"By which I infer that my 'Organ-grinder,' my 'Idiot,' and the 'Goddess of Liberty,' are one and

the same?"

"Precisely; I haven't a doubt of it."

"And that the three are identical with this 'gentleman detective,' who, in making war upon Van Vernet, has espoused my cause, or rather that of my sister-in-law."

"Just so."

Alan leans back in his chair, and clutches his two hands upon its either arm, fixing his eyes on vacancy. Seeming to forget the presence of his *vis-a-vis*, he loses himself in a maze of thoughts. Evidently they are not pleasant thoughts, for his face expresses much of perplexity, doubt and disgust, finally settling into a look of stern resolve.

He is silent so long that Mr. Follingsbee grows impatient, and by and by this uneasiness manifests itself in a series of restless movements. At last Alan turns his face toward the lawyer, and then that gentleman bursts out:

"Well, are you going to sit there all night? What shall you do next?"

Alan Warburton rises from his chair and faces his questioner. "First," he says slowly, "I am going to find Leslie, and bring her back."

"Oh!"

"You look incredulous; very well. Still, I intend, from this moment, to take an active part in this mysterious complication which has woven itself about me."

"Have you forgotten Vernet?"

"Not at all; yet it is my duty to make active search for Leslie. Be the consequences to myself what they may, I can remain passive no longer." [330]

"Alan, you are talking nonsense. Do you suppose Vernet will let you slip now? Don't you realize that if you are to be found twenty-four hours from this moment, you will be under arrest."

"Nevertheless—"

"Nevertheless, you will persist in being a fool! Sit down there, young man, and tell me, haven't you been playing that *role* long enough?"

A hot flush rises to Alan's brow, and an angry light leaps for a moment to his eyes; but he resumes his seat in silence, and turns an expectant gaze upon Mr. Follingsbee.

"Now, Warburton," resumes the little lawyer in a more kindly tone, "listen to reason. I had a long talk with our unknown friend to-day; not so long as I could have wished, but enough to convince me that he knows what he is about, and that if you follow his advice, he will pull you through. Twice he has saved you from the clutches of this Vernet; leave all to him, and he will rescue you again, and finally."

"He has, then, mapped out my course for me?" queries Alan haughtily.

"He has, if it suits you to put it so. Good heavens! man, it needed somebody to plan for you. *You* have done nothing but blunder, blunder, blunder. And your stupid mistakes have recoiled upon others. I tell you, sir—" bringing his fist down upon the table with noisy emphasis—"that unless you accept the advice and assistance of this man, whom you seem to dislike without cause, you are lost, ruined, at least in your own estimation. Confound your Warburton pride! It has brought you into a pretty scrape; and all your Warburton wit won't extricate you from it. Confound *you!* I'm sick of you, sir! If it were not for Leslie, and little Daisy, Van Vernet might have you, and the Warburton honor might go to the dogs, for all my interference!" [331]

The mention of little Daisy had its effect upon Alan. As his companion waxed wrathful, his own mind became calmer; for a moment he seemed to see himself through Mr. Follingsbee's spectacles. And then he said:

"I accept your rebuke, for I may have deserved it; certainly I have sufficient reason to feel humble. My unknown champion took pains to inform me that he did not serve me for my own sake; and now you proffer me the same assurance. I have blundered fearfully, but I fail to see what influence my conduct could have upon poor Daisy's fate."

"Oh, you do!" Mr. Follingsbee is not quite mollified. "Then you don't see that Leslie was sorely in need of a friend in whom she could confide—just such a friend as she might have found in you, had you been, or tried to be, a brother to her, instead of a suspicious, egotistical enemy. She could not take her troubles to Archibald, but she might have trusted you—she would have trusted you, had your conduct been what it should."

"I had not thought of that." Alan becomes more humble as his accuser continues to ply the lash. "What you say may be true. Be sure, sir, if we ever find Daisy and Leslie, I shall try to make amends."

"Umph! Then you had better begin now, by taking good advice when it is offered."

"What do you advise, then?"

"I? nothing, except at second hand. It is this champion of yours who advises."

"Then what is his advice?"

"He says that you must quit the country at once."

"Impossible!"

"Nothing of the sort. The *Clytie* sails for Liverpool to-morrow. You and Leslie have taken passage —"

"Taken passage! Leslie!"

"Just so; everything has been arranged by—" He pauses, then says: "The 'Organ-grinder.'"

"I repeat, it is impossible. Do you think I will leave the country while little Daisy's fate remains—"

"Oh, stop! *stop!* STOP! Man, are you determined to be an idiot? Will you hold your tongue and listen?"

"I will listen, yes; but—"

"But—bosh! Listen, then, and don't interrupt."

He lowers his voice, not from fear of an eavesdropper but because, having gained this point, his impatience begins to subside. And Alan listens, while for more than an hour the little lawyer talks and gesticulates, smiles and frowns. He listens intently, with growing interest, until at last Mr. Follingsbee leans back in his chair, seeming to relax every muscle in so doing, and says:

"Well, what do you think of it?"

Then Alan Warburton rises and extends his hand impulsively.

"I thank you with all my heart, sir, and I will be guided by you, and by our unknown friend. From this moment, I am at your disposal."

"Umph!" grunts the lawyer, as he grasps the proffered hand, "I thought your senses would come back."

CHAPTER XLV.

[333]

A TRIP TO EUROPE.

While Alan Warburton, closeted with Mr. Follingsbee, was slowly lowering the crest of the Warburton pride, and reluctantly submitting himself to the mysterious guidance of an unseen hand,—Winnie French, sitting beside her mother, was perusing Leslie's note.

It was brief and pathetic, beseeching Mrs. French to go at once to Warburton Place; to dwell there as its mistress; to look upon it as her home, and Winnie's, until such time as Leslie should return, or Mr. Follingsbee should indicate to her a change of plan. Would Mrs. French forgive this appearance of mystery, and believe and trust in her still? Would she keep her home open for Alan, and a welcome ever ready for the lost Daisy, who must surely return some day? Everything could be arranged with Mr. Follingsbee; and Leslie's love and gratitude would be always hers.

This note was somewhat incoherent, for it was the last written by Leslie, and her nerves had been taxed, perhaps, in the writing of the longer epistle to Mr. Follingsbee.

Brief and fragmentary as it was, it furnished to Winnie and her mother food for much wonderment, long discussion, and sincere sorrow.

"Oh, Mamma!" cried Winnie, choking back a sob, "some terrible trouble has come upon Leslie; and Alan Warburton is at the bottom of it!"

"My child!"

"I tell you he *is!*" vehemently. "And only yesterday Leslie would have told me all, but for him." [334]

"Winnie, compose yourself; try and be calm," said Mrs. French soothingly.

"I *can't* compose myself! I *won't* be calm! I *want* to be so angry when Alan Warburton returns for me, that I can fairly scorch him with my contempt! I want to *annihilate* him!" And Winnie flung herself upon her mother's breast, and burst into a fit of hysterical sobbing.

Sorely puzzled, and very anxious, Mrs. French soothed her daughter with gentle, motherly words, and gradually drew from her an account of the events of the past two days, as they were known to Winnie.

"And so, between his interruption and your refusal to listen to him afterward, you are quite in the dark as to this strange misunderstanding between Leslie and Mr. Warburton?" said Mrs. French musingly.

"Misunderstanding! You give it a mild name, Mamma. Would a mere misunderstanding with any one, bring such a look to Leslie's face as I saw there when I left her alone with him? Would it leave her in a deathly faint at its close? Would it drive her from her home, secretly, like a fugitive? Would it cause Alan Warburton to address such words to me as those he uttered in his study? Because of a simple misunderstanding, would he implore me to judge between them? Mamma, there is more than a *misunderstanding* at the bottom of all this mystery. Somewhere, there is a monstrous *wrong!*"

But discuss the mystery as they would, there seemed no satisfactory, no rational explanation. The evening wore on, and the ringing of the door-bell suddenly apprised them of the lateness of the hour.

"It's Alan!" exclaimed Winnie, starting nervously. "Mamma, we can't, we won't, go with him." [335]

But it was not Alan. It was a servant, bearing a message from Mr. Follingsbee. A matter of importance had suddenly called Mr. Warburton away. Mr. Follingsbee would wait upon the ladies in the morning.

It was very unsatisfactory, but it was all. And Winnie and her mother, after exhausting for a second time their stock of conjectures, were constrained to lay their puzzled heads upon their pillows, and to await in restlessness and sleepless anxiety the coming of morning and Mr. Follingsbee.

It comes at last, the morning, as morning in this world or another surely will come to all weary, restless watchers. And just as it is approaching that point of time when we cease to say "this morning," and supply its place with "to-day," Mr. Follingsbee comes also.

He comes looking demure, unhurried, without anxiety; just as he always does look whenever he has occasion to withhold more than he chooses to tell.

"I hope you have not been anxious, ladies," he says, serenely, as he deposits his hat upon a table and extends a hand to each in turn.

But Winnie's impatience can no longer be held in check. "Oh, Mr. Follingsbee!" she cries, seizing his hand in both her own, "where is Leslie?"

Mr. Follingsbee smiles reassuringly, places a chair for Mrs. French with old-time gallantry, leads Winnie to a sofa, and seating himself beside her, says his say.

To begin with, the ladies must not expect a revelation; not yet. It will come, of course; but Mrs. Warburton, for reasons that seemed to her good, and that he therefore accepted, desired to keep her movements, for a time, a secret. There had been a slight misunderstanding between Mrs. Warburton and her brother-in-law; but, fortunately, that was now, in a measure at least, adjusted. It was, in part, this misunderstanding, and in part, some facts which Mrs. Warburton thought she had discovered concerning the unaccountable absence of Daisy Warburton, that had caused her to adopt her present seemingly strange course. It was owing to these same causes that Mr. Warburton had suddenly determined to absent himself from the city—in fact from the country. Mr. Warburton had taken passage in the Steamer *Clytie*, for Europe. This movement might seem abrupt, even out of place at this particular time, but it was not an unwarrantable action; indeed, it was a thing of necessity. [336]

Mr. Follingsbee said much more than this, and ended his discourse thus:

"And now, ladies, I solicit, on behalf of my clients, your friendship, your aid, and your confidence. While I am not at liberty to explain matters fully, I promise you that you will not regret having given your confidence blindly. I, who know whereof I speak, assure you of this. Alan Warburton, while at this moment he is an innocent man, is menaced by serious danger. Leslie has gone on a Quixotic mission. The trouble will soon end, I trust, and we shall all rejoice together. In the meantime—" He paused abruptly and turned an enquiring gaze upon Mrs. French.

"In the meantime, sir," said that lady, with quiet decision, "you desire our passive coöperation. You have it."

"Oh, Mamma!" cried Winnie exultantly, "I was sure you would say that. I was sure you would not desert poor Leslie!"

"It will be an equal favor to Mr. Warburton," interposed the lawyer, with the shadow of a twinkle in his grey eye. [337]

To which Winnie responded only by her heightened color, and a half perceptible shrug.

And so Mrs. French and Winnie were escorted by Mr. Follingsbee to the bereaved and deserted mansion: were fully instructed in the small part they were to play; and were left there in possession,—knowing only that Leslie and Alan were both in danger, and menaced by enemies, that their absence was necessary to their safety, and might also result in the restoration of little Daisy.

In the face of this mystery their faith remained unshaken. They accepted Mr. Follingsbee's assurances, and also the part allotted to them, the part which so commonly falls to women, of inactive waiting.

Meantime, Van Vernet, in a state of exceeding self-content, was perfecting his latest plan.

He had failed in overtaking and identifying the troublesome Organ-grinder, who, he was more than ever convinced, was a spy, though in what interest, or in whose behalf, he could not even guess. But he had failed in nothing else. His ruse had been most successful. He had been admitted to the sanctum of Alan Warburton; had seen his face, heard his voice, noted his movements. And his last doubt was removed; rather, the last shade of uncertainty, for he could scarcely be said to have been in doubt at any time.

Alan Warburton, and not Archibald, had been his patron on the night of the masquerade. It was Alan Warburton who, in the guise of a Sailor, had killed Josef Siebel on that selfsame night. There was much that was still a mystery, but that could now be sifted out.

Why had Alan Warburton secured his services to shadow his sister-in-law? He could not answer this question; but it was now plain to him that he had been summarily dismissed from the case, on the following morning, because Alan Warburton, having recognized him in the hovel, had feared to meet him again. [338]

Why had he sought the Françoise abode on that especial night? And why had he killed Josef Siebel? These were problems to the solution of which he could now turn his attention—after he had secured his prisoner.

He had consumed some time in his hot chase after the Organ-grinder, and then he had hastened to set a fresh guard upon the Warburton house. And this guard had just reported.

No one had left, no one had arrived, until this morning, when two ladies, escorted by an elderly gentleman, had driven to the door. The ladies had remained; the gentleman had departed almost immediately.

Vernet was more than satisfied. He sent a messenger to summon to his aid his favorite assistants, made some other necessary preparations, and sat down to scan the morning paper while he waited.

His quick eye noted everything of a personal nature, births, deaths, marriages, arrivals, departures, social items. Suddenly he flung the paper from him and bounded to his feet, uttering a passionate imprecation.

Then he snatched up the paper, and, as if for once he doubted his own eyes, reperused the startling paragraph. Yes, it was there; it was no optical illusion.

Alan Warburton, and his sister-in-law, Mrs. Archibald Warburton had taken passage for Liverpool, on board the *Clytie*. And the *Clytie* was to sail that morning!

In one moment, Vernet was in the street. In five, he was driving furiously through the city. In half an hour, he had reached his destination. [339]

Too late! The *Clytie* had cleared the harbor, and was already a mere speck in the distance.

"So," he muttered, turning sullenly away, "he thinks he has outwitted me. God bless the Atlantic cable! When my aristocratic friend arrives in Liverpool, he shall receive an ovation—from Scotland Yards!"

While Vernet thus comforted himself, Mr. Follingsbee, seated in a cosy upper room of his own dwelling, addressed himself to a gentleman very closely resembling Mr. Alan Warburton.

"So here we are," he said, with a chuckle. "The *Clytie* has sailed before now; you are on your way to Europe. Mr. Vernet will head you off, of course. In the meantime, we gain all that we wanted, *time*."

CHAPTER XLVI.

DR. BAYLESS

All the long night that followed Leslie's appearance among the Françoises, Mamma was alert and watchful.

Often she crept to the door of the inner room, where Leslie slumbered heavily. Often she glanced, with a grin of satisfaction, toward the couch where Franz lay breathing regularly, and scarcely stirring the whole night through. Often she turned her face, with varying expressions, toward the corner where Papa slumbered uneasily, muttering vaguely from time to time. But never once did her eyes close. All the night she watched and listened, pondered and planned. [340]

As morning dawned, the stillness of the inner room was pierced by a burst of shrill laughter, followed by words swiftly uttered but indistinct. Mamma hastened at once to the bedside of her new charge.

Leslie had broken her heavy slumber, but the fire of fever burned in her cheeks, the light of insanity blazed from her eyes; and for many days it mattered little to her that she was a fugitive from home, a woman under suspicion, and helpless in the hands of her enemies. Nature, indulging in a kindly freak, had taken her back to her girlhood's days, before her first trouble came. She was Leslie Uliman again; watched over by loving parents, care-free and happy.

It was a crushing blow to Mamma's hopes and ambitions, and she faced a difficult problem, there by that couch in the grey of morning. Leslie was very ill. This she saw at a glance, and then came the thought: What if she were to die, and just at a time when so much depended upon her? It roused Mamma to instant action. Leslie must not die—not yet.

Papa and Franz were at once awakened, and the situation made known to them. Whereupon Papa fell into a state of helpless, hopeless dejection, and Franz flew into a fury.

"It's all up with us now," moaned Papa. "Luck's turned against us."

"It's up, sure enough, with your fine plans," sneered Franz. "*I'm goin' ter take myself out of yer muddle, while my way's clear.*"

"If I wasn't dealin' with a pair of fools," snapped Mamma, "I'd come out all right. The gal ain't dead yet, is she?" [341]

And then, while Leslie laughed and chattered, alone in the inner room, the three resolved themselves into a council, wrangled and disputed, and at last compromised and settled upon a plan—Papa yielding sullenly, Franz protesting to the last and making sundry reservations, and Mamma carrying the day.

Leslie must have a physician; it would never do to trust her fever to unskilled hands; she must have a physician, and a good one. So said Mamma.

"It ain't so risky as you might think," she argued. "A good doctor's what we want—one whose time's valuable. Then he won't be running here when he ain't wanted. He'll come an' see the gal, an' then he'll be satisfied to take my reports and send her the medicine. Oh, I know these city doctors. They come every day if you've got a marble door-step, but they won't be any too anxious about poor folks. A doctor can't make nothin' out of the kind of talk she is at now, and by the time she gits her senses, we'll hit on somethin' new."

This plan was opposed stoutly by Franz, feebly by Papa; but the old woman carried the point at last.

"I know who we want," said Mamma confidently. "It's Doctor Bayless. He's a good doctor, an' he don't live any too near."

At the mention of Doctor Bayless, Papa's countenance took on an expression of relief, which was noted by Franz, who turned away, saying:

"Wal, git your doctor, then, an' the quicker the better. But mind this: *I don't appear till I'm sure it's safe. Ye kin git yer doctor, but when he's here, I'll happen ter be out.*" [342]

It was Mamma who summoned Doctor Bayless, and he came once, twice, and again.

His patient passed, under his care, from delirium to stupor, from fever to coolness and calm, and then to returning consciousness. As he turned from her bedside, at the termination of his third visit, he said:

"I think she will get on, now. Keep her quiet, avoid excitement, and if she does not improve steadily, let me know."

He had verified Mamma's good opinion of him by manifesting not the slightest concern in the personality of his patient. If he were, for the moment, interested in Leslie, it was as a fever patient, not as a woman strangely superior to her surroundings. And on this occasion he dropped his interest in her case at the very door of the sick-room.

At the corner of the dingy street, a voice close behind him arrested his footsteps: "Doctor Bayless."

The man of medicine turned quickly to face the speaker.

"This is Doctor Bayless?" the owner of the intrusive voice queried.

Doctor Bayless bowed stiffly.

"Bayless, formerly of the R— street Insane Asylum?" persisted the questioner.

The doctor reddened and a startled look crossed his face, but he said, after a moment's silence: "The same."

"I want a few words with you, sir."

"Excuse me;"—the doctor was growing haughty;—"my time is not my own."

"Neither is mine, sir. I am a public benefactor, same as yourself."

"Ah, a physician?"

"Oh, not at all; a detective."

"A detective!" Doctor Bayless did not look reassured. He glanced at the detective, and then up and down the street, his uneasiness evident. [343]

"I am a detective; yes, sir," said the stranger cheerily, "and you are in a position to do me a favor without in any way discommoding yourself. Don't be alarmed, sir; its nothing that affects you or touches upon that asylum business. You are safe with me, my word for it, and here's my card. Now, sir, just take my arm and come this way."

Doctor Bayless glanced down at the card, and then up at the speaker; and a look of relief crossed his face as he accepted the proffered arm, and walked slowly along at the side of his new acquaintance.

CHAPTER XLVII.

DELAYS ARE DANGEROUS.

Doctor Bayless had predicted aright. Leslie continued to gain slowly, and in the third week of her illness, she could sit erect in her bed for an hour or two each day, listening to Mamma's congratulations, and recalling, one by one, her woes of the past. Not recalling them poignantly, with the sharp pain that would torture her when she should have gained fuller strength, but vaguely, with a haunting pang, as one remembers an unhappy dream.

Day by day, as strength came back, her listlessness gave place to painful thought. One day, sitting for the first time in a lounging-chair, procured at second-hand for her comfort, she felt that the time had come to break the silence which, since her first full awakening to consciousness, she had imposed upon herself. [344]

Mamma was bustling about the room, inwardly longing to begin the passage-at-arms which she knew must soon ensue, and outwardly seeming solicitous for nothing save the comfort of her "dear girl." As Leslie's eyes followed her about, each seemed suddenly to have formed a like resolve.

"How many days have I been ill?" asked Leslie slowly, and languidly resting her head upon her hand.

Mamma turned toward her and seemed to meditate.

"How many days, my child? Ah, let us see. Why, it's weeks since you came to us—two, yes, three weeks; three weeks and a day."

Leslie was silent for a moment. Then she asked:

"And you have nursed me through my illness; you alone?"

"Surely; who else would there be?" replied Mamma in an injured tone.

"Who, indeed!" repeated Leslie bitterly. "Sit down, Madam; I want to talk with you."

Mamma drew forward a chair, and sank upon it with a gratified sigh. It had come at last, the opportunity for which she had planned and waited. She could scarcely conceal her satisfaction.

"You have nursed me," began Leslie slowly, "through a tedious illness, and I have learned that you do nothing gratuitously. What do you expect of me?"

"Oh, my child—"

"Stop!" lifting her head, and fixing her eyes upon the old woman; "no evasions; I want the plain truth. I have no money. My husband's fortune I will never claim. I have told you this; I repeat it. So *what* do you expect of me? Why was I not permitted to die in my delirium?" [345]

Among her other talents, Mamma Francoise numbered that power, as useful off the stage as it is profitable behind the footlights—the power to play a part. And now, bringing this power into active use, she bowed her head upon her breast and sighed heavily.

"Ah, Leschen, you break my heart. We wanted you to live; we thought you had something to live for."

The acting was excellent, but the words were ill-chosen.

"Something to live for!" Leslie's hands met in a passionate clasp. "Something to live for! Right, woman; I have. Tell me, since you have brought me back to myself, how, *how* can I ransom Daisy Warburton?"

Mamma's time has come. Slowly she wipes away an imaginary tear, softly she draws her chair yet nearer Leslie, gently she begins.

"Leschen, my poor girl, don't think *us* guilty of stealing your little one; don't. When you came

here that night, I thought you were wild. But now,—since you have been sick—something has happened.”

She paused to note the effect of her words, but Leslie sat quite still, with her hands tightly locked together.

“Something has happened?” she echoed coldly. “I felt sure it would; go on.”

“It isn’t what you think, my girl. We haven’t found your little dear; but there is a person—”

“Go on,” commanded Leslie: “straight to the point. *Go on!*”

“A person who *might* find the child, if—”

“If he or she were sufficiently rewarded,” supplied Leslie. “Quick; tell me, what must Daisy’s ransom be?” [346]

Mamma’s pulse beats high, her breath comes fast and loud. It is not in her nature to trifle with words now. She leans forward and breathes one word into Leslie’s ear.

“*Yourself.*”

“Myself!” Leslie gasps and her brain reels. “*Myself!*” she controls her agitation, and asks fiercely: “Woman, what do you dare to say?”

“Only this,” Mamma continues, very firmly and with the tiger look dawning in her eye. “You have no money, but you have beauty, and that is much to a man. Will you marry the man who will find your little girl?”

In spite of her weakness, Leslie springs up and stands above Mamma, a fierce light blazing in her eyes.

“Woman, *answer me!*” she cries fiercely; “do you know where that child is?”

“I? Oh, no, my dear.”

“Is there another, a man, who knows?”

Slowly Mamma rises, and the two face each other with set features.

“There is a man,” says Mamma, swaying her body slightly as she speaks, and almost intoning her words—“There is a man who swears he can find the child, but he will not make any other terms than these. He will not see you at all until you have agreed to his demands. You will marry him, and sign a paper giving him a right to a portion of your fortune, in case you should make up your mind to claim it. You may leave him after the ceremony, if you will; you need not see him again; but you must swear never to betray him or us, and never to tell how you found the child.”

Into Leslie’s face creeps a look of intense loathing. All her courageous soul seems aroused into fearless action. Her scornful eyes fairly burn into the old woman’s face. [347]

“So,” she says, low and slowly, “I have found you out at last.” And then the weak body refuses to support the dauntless spirit.

She sinks back upon her chair, her form shaking, her face ghastly, her hands falling weakly as they will. But as Mamma comes forward, the strong spirit for a moment masters the weak body.

“Don’t touch me,” she almost hisses, “or, weak as I am, I might murder you! wait.”

And Mamma stands aloof, waiting. Not while Leslie thinks—there is no confusion of mind—only until the bodily tremor ceases, until the nerves grow calmer, until she has herself once more under control. She does not attempt to rise again. She reclines in her easy chair, and looks at her adversary unflinchingly.

“At last,” she says, after favoring Mamma with a long look of scorn; “at last you show yourself in your true character. Your own hand pulls off your hypocrite’s mask. Woman, you were never so acceptable to me as at this moment. It simplifies everything.”

“You must not think—” begins Mamma. But Leslie checks her.

“Stop!” she says imperiously. “Don’t waste words. We have wasted too many, and too much time. I desire you to repeat your proposition, to name your terms again. No more whining, no more lies, if you want me to listen. You are my enemy; speak as my enemy. Once more, your terms for Daisy’s ransom.”

And Mamma, too wise to err in this particular, abandons her *role* of injured affection. Dropping her mantle of hypocrisy, not without a sense of relief, she repeats her former proposal, clearly, curtly, brutally, leaving no room for doubt as to her precise meaning. [348]

Leslie listens in cold silence and desperate calm. Then, as Mamma ceases, she sits, still calm, cold and silent, looking straight before her. At last she speaks.

“This person,” she says slowly; “this man who can find Daisy if he will—may I not see him?”

“When you have given your promise; not before.”

"He will accept no other terms?"

"Never."

"And this transaction, this infamy—he leaves all details to you?"

"Just so."

"Then there is no more to be said. I might hope for mercy from the beasts of the field, but not from you."

"You consent?"

"If I refuse, what will be the consequences to Daisy?"

"You had better not refuse!" retorts Mamma, with a glare of rage.

Before Leslie's mind comes the picture of little Daisy, and following it a panorama of horrors. Again she feels her strength deserting her.

"Wait," she whispers with her last fragment of self-command. "Leave me to myself. Before sunset you shall have my answer."

Further words are useless. Mamma, seeing this, turns slowly away, saying only, as she pauses at the door:

"Don't waste your time; *delays are dangerous.*"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

[349]

A PROMISE RETRACTED.

Left alone, Leslie Warburton faced her problem, and found herself mastered by it. She had believed herself already overwhelmed with misery—had fancied that in coming among these people who claimed her, she had taken the last step down into the valley of humiliation, of shame, of utter wretchedness. But they had shown her a lower depth still, and bidden her descend into it.

Should she obey them? Her pulses were throbbing violently, a fierce flame burned in either cheek, a shade of the old delirium lurked in her eye. Should she crown her list of miseries with this culminating horror? Why should she not? What had she to lose? She, who had already lost husband, home and happiness; she, who was already an outcast, accused of treachery, of child-stealing, of murder; she, who was only a waif at best, and who could claim no kindred unless she accepted those whose roof then sheltered her? What had she to lose? Only her life, and that must end soon. Why not make this last sacrifice, then let it end.

Her calmness, that before had been at best but the calmness of despair, had forsaken her; had changed to the recklessness of desperation. Faster and faster throbbed her pulses, hotter surged the blood through her fevered veins, wilder gleamed the light of her eyes.

Born of her weakness, her misery, her growing delirium, came a fierce, unreasoning rebellion; a longing to thrust upon the shoulders of Alan Warburton, who, more than any other, had been the cause of her present woe, a portion of this weight that dragged her down. Had she not suffered enough for the "Warburton honor?" Why not force him to tread with her this valley of humiliation?

[350]

Then followed other thoughts—better thoughts, humbler thoughts, but all morbid, all tinged by her half delirious fancy, all reckless of self.

And now every moment adds to her torture, increases the fever in her blood, the frenzy of her brain.

"I *must* end it!" she cries wildly. "I *must* save Daisy! And after that what matter how my day goes out?"

She walks swiftly to the door and attempts to open it. Useless; it is fastened from the outer side. She seizes the handle and shakes it fiercely. It seems an hour, it is really a moment, when Mamma unlocks the door and appears before her.

"You—"

"I have decided," breaks in Leslie. "I shall make the sacrifice."

"You will marry this worthy man?"

"I will save Daisy from your clutches, and his."

"In his own way?"

"In his own way, and yours. Let it be over as soon as possible. Where is this man?"

"Gently, gently; he is not far away."

"So much the better. I cannot rest now till all is done. I must take Daisy back to her home; the rest is nothing."

Mamma looks at her craftily.

"You agree to *all* the terms?" she asks. "Will you swear to keep your word?"

"I will do anything, when I am assured that I shall have Daisy safely back."

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"Ah!" ejaculates Mamma, indulging in a long sigh of relieved anxiety, "I will go tell Franz. He is as anxious to have the business settled as you are."

"*Franz!*"

"Yes; it is Franz that you will marry."

"Franz!" the word comes in a breathless whisper. "*Your son—the convict?*"

"You needn't put so much force upon that. Yes; Franz's the man."

A new look dawns upon Leslie's face. A new light gleams from her eyes. She presses her palms to her forehead, then slowly approaches Mamma, with the uncertain movements of one groping in the dark.

"You told—" she articulates, as if struggling for self-mastery. "Woman, you told me that Franz Francoise was *your* son."

"So he is. *I* ain't ashamed of him," Mamma answers sullenly.

"Then,"—Leslie clutches at the nearest support and fairly gasps the words—"then—*who am I?*"

"Well, it can't be kept back any longer, it seems. You are—"

"Not your child?" cries Leslie. "Not yours?"

"No; you ain't ours by birth, but you're ours by adoption. We've reared ye, and we've made ye what ye are."

But Leslie pays no heed to this latter statement. She has fallen upon her knees with hands uplifted, and streaming eyes.

"Not her child; not hers! Oh, God, I thank thee! Oh, God, forgive me for what I was about to do!"

Long, shivering sighs follow this outburst; then moments of silence, during which Mamma stands irresolute, puzzled as to Leslie's manner, uncertain how to act.

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A sound behind her breaks the uncomfortable stillness, and Mamma turns quickly, to see Franz standing in the open doorway.

"Franz,—" begins the old woman.

The word arouses Leslie, she rises to her feet so swiftly, with such sudden strength of movement, and such a new light upon her face, that Mamma breaks off abruptly and stands staring from one to the other.

"Woman," says Leslie slowly and with strange calm, "those are the first welcome words you ever uttered for my hearing. Say them again. Say that I am not your child."

"I don't see what it matters," mutters Mamma sullenly. "You will be our'n fast enough when you're married to Franz."

"Eh!" Franz utters only this syllable, and advances step by step into the room.

A moment Leslie stands gazing from one to the other. Then her form grows more erect, the new hope brighter in her eyes, she seems growing stronger each moment.

"Half an hour ago," she says, "I had not one thing to hope for, or to live for, save the restoration of Daisy Warburton, for I believed myself accursed. Rebel as my soul would, while your lips repeated your claim upon me I could not escape you. While you persisted in your lies, I was helpless. Now—"

Mamma's hands work convulsively; her eyes glitter dangerously; she looks like a cat about to spring upon its prey. As Leslie pauses thus abruptly, her lips emit a sharp hiss, but before words can follow, a heavy hand grasps her arm.

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"Go on," says Franz coolly; "now?"

"Do you know the proposition that woman has just made me?" asks Leslie abruptly.

"'Twon't be good for her, if she has made ye a proposition I don't know on," says Franz grimly, and tightening his clutch upon Mamma's arm. "An' fer fear of any hocus-pocus, suppose you jest go over it fer my benefit."

"She has told me that you can, if you will, restore Daisy Warburton to her home."

"No? has she?"

"That you, and you only, know where to look for the child."

"Umph!"

"And that you will restore the child only on one condition."

"And wot's that?"

"That I consent to marry you."

"Wal," says Franz, turning a facetious look upon Mamma, and giving her arm a gentle shake; "the old un may have trifled with the truth, here and there, but she's right in the main. How did the proposition strike ye?"

Leslie turns from him and fixes her gaze upon the old woman.

"And this," she says, "is the man you would mate me with! Woman, you have overreached yourself. Believing, or fearing, myself to be *your* child, I might have been driven to any act of desperation. You have lifted that burden of horror from off my heart. I am *not* your child! No blood of yours poisons my veins! Do you think in the moment when I find the taint removed, I would doubly defile myself by taking the step you have proposed? Never! Your power over me is gone!"

"Do ye mean," queries Franz quite coolly, "that you won't take up with the old woman's bargain?" [354]

"She *has* done it!" cries Mamma fiercely. "She's given her promise!"

"And I now retract it!"

"What!" Mamma suddenly wrenches herself free and springs toward Leslie. "You won't marry Franz?"

"Never! The fear which has made me a coward is gone. I shall go back to my own. I will tell my story far and wide. I feared nothing so much as the shame of being pointed out as the child of such parents. You will not dare repeat that imposture; I defy you. As for little Daisy, I will find her; I will punish you—"

"You will find her!" Mamma's voice is horrible in its hoarse rage. "Now mark my words: You will *never* find her. She will never see daylight again. As for *you*, you will marry Franz Francoise tomorrow, or you will go out of this place between two officers, arrested as the murderess of Josef Siebel!"

It is more than she can bear. The strength born of her strong excitement deserts her. Mamma's eyes burn into her own; she feels her hot, baleful breath upon her cheek; hears the horrible words hissed so close to her ear; and with a low moan falls forward, to be caught in the arms of Franz Francoise, where she lies pallid and senseless.

"Git out!" says Franz, as he lifts her and turns toward Mamma. "You've done it now, you old cat. Let me lay her down."

He carries Leslie to the bed, and places her upon it so gently that Mamma sneers and glares upon him scornfully.

"Ye're a fool, Franz Francoise."



"Shet up, you! Ye've got somethin' to do besides talk. D'ye mean to have her die on our hands?" [356]

"'Twon't matter much, it seems."

"I tell ye 'twill matter. Do ye think this thing's settled? Not much. We're goin' ter bring her to terms yet, but she's got ter be alive first."

She turns upon him a look in which anger and admiration are curiously mingled.

"'Tain't no use, Franzy; that gal won't give in now."

"I tell ye she will. You've tried your hand; now I'll try mine. Bring the girl out o' this faint, an' I'll manage her. Do what ye can, then git yer doctor. Ye'd better not have him come here ef ye kin manage without him; but go see him, git what she needs, an'," with a significant wink, "ye might say that she don't rest well and git a few sleepin' powders."

"Franz," chuckles Mamma, beginning her work of restoration with bustling activity, "ye ought to be a general. I'm proud of ye."

CHAPTER XLIX.

A WELCOME PRESCRIPTION.

Savage Mamma Francoise was not an unskillful nurse, and Leslie was soon restored to consciousness. But not to strength; the little that she had gained was spent by that long interview, with all its attendant conflicting emotions, and Leslie lay, strengthless once more, at the mercy of her enemies.

After much thinking, Mamma had decided that Franz had offered sound advice, and having exhausted her own resources, she set out to consult Doctor Bayless. [357]

Her visit was in every way satisfactory. Doctor Bayless manifested no undue curiosity; seemed to comprehend the case as Mamma put it; prepared the necessary remedies, and spoke encouragingly of the patient.

"These relapses occur often after fevers," he said; "the result of too much ambition. You understand about the drops, yes? These powders you will administer properly; not too often, remember. Careful nursing will do the rest. Ah, good-day."

"Ye needn't be afraid to take yer medicine," said Mamma to her patient, coming to the bedside with a dose of the aforesaid "drops." "'Tain't no part of my plans to let ye die. I intend to nurse ye through, but I tell ye plain that when ye're better ye'll have to settle this business with Franzy. When ye're on yer feet agin, I'm goin' to wash my hands of ye. But ye may not find Franz so easily got rid of, mind that."

Realizing her helplessness, Leslie swallowed the drops and then lay back, pale and panting, upon her pillow. As the moments passed, she could feel the liquid coursing its way through her veins; her nerves ceased to quiver, a strange calm crept over her, her pulses throbbed quite steadily. She was very weak, but found herself able to think clearly.

Half an hour later, Doctor Bayless appeared upon the Francoise threshold, a small vial in his hand, a look of anxiety upon his countenance.

He pushed his way into the room, in spite of the less than half opened door, and Mamma's lukewarm welcome. He seemed to notice neither. Still less did he concern himself with Papa and Franz, partaking of luncheon in the opposite corner of the room. [358]

He addressed Mamma almost breathlessly.

Had the drops been administered?

Mamma replied in the affirmative.

Then he must see the patient at once. There had been a dangerous mistake. By some inadvertence he had exchanged two similar vials; he had given Mamma the wrong medicine. The result *might* prove fatal.

It was no time for parley or hesitation. Mamma promptly led the way to the inner room.

As Leslie greeted her visitor with a look of inquiry, Doctor Bayless, standing by the bedside, with his back to Mamma, put a warning forefinger upon his lips, his eyes meeting Leslie's with a glance full of meaning.

"Keep perfectly quiet, young woman," he said in his best professional tone. And as Mamma presented a chair, he seated himself close beside the bed and bent over his patient, seemingly intent upon her symptoms.

Presently he turned toward Mamma.

"I must have warm water; prepare it at once." Then rising, he followed Mamma to the door, saying in a low tone: "Your patient must have perfect quiet; let there be no loud noise about the house. Now the water, if you please, and make haste."

He turned and went back to the bedside, seated himself as before, and taking one of the patient's hands, seemed intently marking every pulse-beat. A look of deep concern rested upon his face; and Mamma closed the door softly and went about her task.

"Old un," began Franz, "ye're gittin' careless—"

"Sh!" whispered Mamma; "no noise."

But Franz, with a crafty leer, left his place at the table and tiptoed to the door, where he crouched, applying alternately his eye and his ear to the keyhole, while Mamma busied herself at the fire. [359]

But Franz caught no word from the inner room, for Doctor Bayless never once opened his lips. The watcher could see his large form bending over the bed, with one hand slightly upraised as if holding a watch, the other resting upon the wrist of the patient.

But Leslie saw more than this. Locked in that strange calm, she saw the doctor's hand go to his side, and take from a pocket a card which quite filled his palm.

Holding this card so that Leslie could easily scan its contents, he sat mutely watching her face.

The card contained these words, closely written in a fine, firm hand:

Seem to submit to their plans. We can conquer in no other way. At the right time I shall be at hand, and no harm shall befall you. Let them play their game to the very last; it shall not go too far. Feign a continual stupor; they will believe it the result of drugs. Trust all to me, and believe your troubles almost over.

STANHOPE.

Three times did Leslie's eyes peruse these words, and in spite of that powerful soothing draught, her composure almost forsook her. But she controlled herself bravely, and only by a long look of hopeful intelligence, and a very slight gesture, did she respond to this written message so sorely needed, so welcome, so fraught with hope.

When Mamma returned with the water, Leslie lay quiet among the pillows, her eyes half closed, and no trace of emotion in her face. But her heart was beating with a new impulse. That message had brought with it a comforting sense of protection, and of help near at hand. [360]

The last instructions of Doctor Bayless, too, fell upon her ear with hopeful meaning, although they were spoken, apparently, for Mamma's sole benefit.

"She is a trifle dull," he said, turning from the bed and confronting Mamma. "It's the result of that mistaken dose, in part. In part, it's the natural outcome of her fever. It's better for her; she will gain strength faster so. These powders"—depositing a packet of paper folds in Mamma's hand,—“are to strengthen and to soothe. She must take them regularly. She will be a little dull under their influence, very docile and easy to manage, but she will gain strength quite rapidly. In a week, if she is not unnerved or excited, she should be able to be up, to be out.”

Once more he turned toward Leslie, and took her hand in his.

What Mamma saw, was a careful physician going through with a last professional formula. What Leslie felt, was a warm, reassuring hand-clasp, friendly rather than professional.

When he had gone, Leslie lay quiet, repeating over and over in her mind the words of Stanhope's note, and feeling throughout her entire being a strong, new desire to live.

CHAPTER I.

MR. FOLLINGSBEE'S SOCIAL CALL.



"Holding this card so Leslie could easily scan its contents, he sat mutely watching her face."—page 359.

Five weeks have passed since the fateful masquerade. Five weeks since Vernet and Stanhope entered, in rivalry, the service of Walter Parks, the bearded Englishman. Five weeks since that last named and eccentric individual set sail for far-off Australia. [362]

Matters are moving slowly at the Agency. Van Vernet is seldom seen there now, and Stanhope is not seen at all.

In his private office the Chief of the detectives sits musing; not placidly, as is usual with him, but with a growing restlessness, and a dark frown upon his broad, high brow.

The thing which has caused the disquiet and the frown, lies upon the desk beside him, just under his uneasy right hand. A letter; a letter from California, from Walter Parks.

It was brief and business-like; it explained nothing; and it puzzled the astute Chief not a little.

John Ainsworth is better; so much better that we shall start in two days for your city. His interests are identical with mine, and he may be able, in some way, to throw a little light upon the Arthur Pearson mystery.

Walter Parks had set out for Australia, drawn thither by an advertisement mentioning the name of Arthur Pearson. It had also contained the name of John Ainsworth; but this had seemed of secondary interest to the queer Englishman. He had distinctly stated that he knew nothing of John Ainsworth; had never seen him.

And yet here he was, if this letter were not a hoax, journeying eastward at that very moment, in company with this then unknown man.

Evidently, he had not visited Australia; that he could have done so was scarcely possible. And he was coming back with this John Ainsworth to urge on the search for the murderer of Arthur Pearson.

They would hope much, expect much, from Vernet and Stanhope. And what had been done?

Since the day when Stanhope had suddenly appeared in his presence, to announce his readiness to begin work upon the Arthur Pearson case, nothing had been heard from him. [363]

"You will not see me again," he had said, "until I can tell who killed Arthur Pearson." And he was keeping his word.

Four weeks had passed since Stanhope had made his farewell announcement, and nothing was known of his whereabouts. Where was he? What was he doing? What had he done?

It was not like Stanhope to make sweeping statements. In proffering his services to Walter Parks, he had said: "I'll do my level best for you." But he had not promised to succeed. Why, then, had he said, scarce five days later: "I shall not return until I have found the criminal."

What had he done, or discovered, or guessed at, during those intervening days?

Something, it must have been, or else—perhaps, after all, it was a mere defiance to Van Vernet; his way of announcing a reckless resolve to succeed or never return to own his failure. Dick Stanhope was a queer fellow, and he *had* been sadly cut up by Vernet's falling off.

The Chief gave up the riddle, and turned to his desk.

"I may as well leave Dick to his own devices," he muttered, "but I'll send for Vernet. He has kept shy enough of the office of late, but I know where to put my hand on him."

As he reached out to touch the bell, some one tapped upon the door.

"Come in," he called, somewhat impatiently.

It was the office-boy who entered and presented a card to the Chief.

"The gentleman is waiting?" queried the Chief, glancing at the name upon the bit of pasteboard. [364]

"Yes, sir."

"Admit him."

Then he rose and stood to receive his visitor.

"Ah, Follingsbee, I'm glad it's you," extending his hand cordially. "Sit down, sit down."

And he pushed his guest toward a big easy chair just opposite his own.

The little lawyer responded warmly to his friendly greeting, established himself comfortably in the chair indicated, and resting a hand upon either knee, smiled as he glanced about him.

"You seem pretty comfortable here," he said, as his eye roved about the well-equipped private office. "Are you particularly busy just now?"

"I can be quite idle," smiling slightly, "if you want a little of my leisure."

The attorney gave a short, dry laugh.

"Do you talk at everybody over the top rail of a fence?" he asked. "I thought that belonged to us lawyers. The fact is that although this is not strictly a social call, it's a call of minor importance. If you have business on hand, I can wait your leisure."

The Chief leaned back in his chair and smiled across at his visitor.

"I don't suppose you or I can ever be said to be free from business," he responded. "I was just growing weary of my bit of mental labor; your interruption is quite welcome, even if it is not 'strictly social.' You are anxious to make an informal inquiry about the search for the lost child, I presume?"

"I should be glad to hear anything upon that subject, but that is not my errand." [365]

"Ah!" The Chief rested his head upon his hand, and looked inquiringly at his *vis-a-vis*.

"I wanted," said Mr. Follingsbee, taking out a huge pocket-book and deftly abstracting from it a folded envelope, "to show you a document, and ask you a question. This," unfolding the envelope, "is the document."

He smoothed it carefully and handed it to the other, who glanced over it blankly at first, then looked closer and with an expression of surprise.

"Did you write that letter?" queried Mr. Follingsbee.

"N-no." He said it hesitatingly, and with the surprise fast turning to perplexity.

"Did you cause it to be written?"

The Chief spread the letter out before him on the desk, and slowly deciphered it.

"It's my paper, and my envelope," he said at last; "but it was never sent from this office."

"Then you disown it?"

"Entirely. I hope you intend to tell me how it came into your possession."

"It is written, as you see, to Mr. Warburton—"

"To Mr. Alan Warburton; yes."

"Introducing one Mr. Grip, late of Scotland Yards."

"I see."

"Well, sir, Mr. Warburton received this note the day on which it was dated."

The Chief glanced sharply at the date.

"And on that same day, Mr. Augustus Grip presented himself, stating that he was sent from this Agency, with full authority to take such measures as he saw fit in prosecuting the search for the lost child." [366]

"Well?"

"The fellow began by being impertinent, ended by being insulting—and made his exit through the study window, his case closed."

The Chief smiled slightly, then relapsed into meditation. After a brief silence, he said:

"Mr. Follingsbee, can't you give me a fuller account of that interview between Mr. Warburton and this—this Mr. Grip?"

"No," returns the lawyer, "no; I can't—at present. There were some things said that made the visit a purely personal affair. The fellow gained access to the house through making use of your name, rather by seeming to. You see by that scrawl he was too clever to actually commit forgery."

The Chief looked closely at the illegible signature and said:

"I see; sharp rascal."

"I thought," pursued the lawyer, "that it might interest you to hear of this affair. The fellow may try the trick again, and—"

"It does interest me, sir," interrupts the other. "It interests me very much. May I keep this letter?"

"For the present, yes."

"Thanks. I'll undertake to find out who wrote it—very soon. And, having identified this impostor, I shall hope to hear more of his doings at Warburton Place."

"For further information," said Mr. Follingsbee, rising and taking up his hat, "I must refer you to Mr. Grip, or Mr. Warburton."



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"The Chief looked closely at the illegible signature, and said: "I see; sharp rascal.""[—page 366.](#)

And having finished his errand, Mr. Follingsbee made his adieu and withdrew.

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When he was gone, the Chief sat gazing at the chair just vacated, and a curious smile crossed his lips.

"Follingsbee's a clever lawyer," he muttered; "maybe that's why he is so poor a witness. There's a stronger motive behind his friendly desire to warn me of poachers abroad. He was in a greater hurry to finish his errand than to begin it, and he was relieved when it was done. I wonder, now, why he didn't ask me if there *really was such a person as Augustus Grip!*"

CHAPTER LI.

VERNET AT HEADQUARTERS.

After Mr. Follingsbee's departure, the Chief of the detectives took up his work just where he had laid it down to receive his visitor.

Ringing the bell he summoned the bright-eyed boy who waited without, and said, as soon as the lad appeared in the doorway:

"You know where to look for Vernet, George?"

"Yes, sir."

"Go to him as soon as possible; tell him I wish to see him at his earliest leisure; and you may wait a reasonable time, if he is out."

When George had bowed and departed on his mission, the Chief opened his door and entered the outer office.

"Has Carnegie been in to-day?" he asked of a man seated at a desk between two tall windows. [369]

"Not yet, sir."

"Ah, then he will probably come soon. Send him in to me, Sanford."

"Very well, sir."

Others were seated about the room. He nodded silently to these, and went over to one of the windows near the desk occupied by the man he had addressed as Sanford.

For a few moments he seemed engaged with something going on in the street below, then he moved a step nearer, and leaned over Sanford's desk.

"Find a pretext for coming to my room presently," he said in a low tone. Then he took a careless survey of the letters and papers upon the desk, glanced out of the window once more, and went back to his den.

One or two of the loungers made some slight comment upon this quiet entrance and exit of their Chief.

But Sanford wrote on diligently for many minutes, folding and unfolding his letters and deeply absorbed in his task. Then something seemed to disturb him. He uttered an impatient syllable midway between a word and a grunt; read and re-read the contents of a sheet spread out before him; referred once and again to his book; and then, seemingly, gave it up, for he laid down his pen—at a less serious interruption, he would have stuck it behind his ear. He slid reluctantly off his stool, glanced once more over the troublesome sheet, and then, folding it carefully, carried it with a rueful face to the inner office.

Once within this apartment, the look of rueful reluctance vanished. He slipped the troublesome document into his breast-pocket, and smiled as he seated himself in the chair indicated by his superior. [370]

"Sanford," began the latter, "I want to ask about your office regulations, rather your habits. Our boys do much of their letter writing there, eh?"

"They do some of it; yes sir."

"There is always stationery at the desk for their use?"

"Certainly, sir." Sanford's none too expressive face began to lengthen a trifle.

"Does any one not connected with the office, but who happens in upon some errand or some matter of business, ever find it convenient to write at the table or the desks?"

"I don't think any one ever did so, except in cases where the writing was done at our requests, or in some way in the interests of business."

"That is what I thought. Now, Sanford, our paper, that which is intended solely for business purposes and which has our letter head—is that accessible to any one in the office?"

"No, sir," said Sanford, a trifle coldly; "your orders were otherwise."

"Very good, Sanford. I am not about to find fault with you, my boy, but tell me if any one—any one connected with the office, I mean, who is there habitually, and is not supposed to need watching—could not one of our own people get possession of a sheet or two of our business tablets, if he tried?"

"If you mean our own fellows," said Sanford slowly, "I suppose there are half a dozen of our boys who could steal that paper from under my very nose, if they liked, even if I stood on guard. But no stranger has access to my desk, and there's no other way of getting it from *that* office."

"Well," responded his Chief, "it's also the only way of getting it from mine. Nevertheless, Sanford, somebody has possessed himself of a sheet or two, and used it for fraudulent purposes." [371]

Sanford stared, but said nothing.

"Now,"—the chief grew involuntarily more brisk and business-like—"we must clear this matter up. You can give me samples of the handwriting of every one of our men, can't you?"

"I suppose I can, sir, of one sort or another; letters, reports—"

"Samples of any sort will do, Sanford. Let me have them as soon as possible."

Sanford arose, hesitated, and then said:

"If you would trust me, sir, I might—but you have sent for Carnegie?"

"Yes; it's about this business. What were you going to say, Sanford?"

"I know all their hands so well, sir, I was about to offer my services, but—"

"It's a good idea; thank you, thank you. I think I'll give you both a chance at it. Now, bring me the specimens, Sanford. We will talk this over again."

In half an hour, Carnegie presented himself. He was a small, old man, with a shrewd face and keen, intelligent eye.

"I've got some work for you, Carnegie," began the Chief, waiving all ceremony. "It's of the kind you like, too."

"Ah!" Carnegie dropped his hat upon a chair, rubbed his hands softly together and smiled upon his patron, looking as if at that instant ready and anxious to pounce upon any piece of work that was "of the kind he liked."

"It's a forgery on this office," went on the Chief, as quietly as if he had said, it's an invitation to tea. "And you'll have a variety of handwritings to gloat over; Sanford is looking them up." [372]

"Ah!" said Carnegie, and that was all. Some men could not have said more in a folio.

As Carnegie passed out of the Chief's office, the boy, George, entered it. He had found Mr. Vernet, and that gentleman would present himself right away.

And he did, almost at the heels of his herald; scrupulously dressed, upright, handsome, and courteous as usual.

Perfectly aware as he was that his Chief had not summoned him there without a motive, and tolerably sure that this motive was out of the regular business routine, his countenance was as serene as if he were entering a ball-room, his manner just as calm and courtly.

"I hope I have not interfered with any manoeuvre of yours, Van," said the Chief, smiling as he proffered his hand.

"Not at all, sir. I was just in and preparing for an hour or two of rest." And Vernet pressed the outstretched hand. "I am glad of this opportunity, sir."

"The fact is—" began the Chief, after Vernet had ensconced himself in the chair opposite his own—"the fact is, I want to talk over this Englishman's business a little, in a confidential way."

"Yes?" The change that crossed Vernet's face was scarcely perceptible.

"You see, just between us, I have no report from Stanhope, and none from you. And I want, very much, to get some new idea on the subject, soon."

Vernet scanned his face for a moment, then:

"You have heard something," he said, withdrawing his gaze slowly. [373]

The Chief laughed. This answer, put not as a question, but as a statement of a fact, pleased him.

"Yes," he said, "I have heard something. The Englishman is coming back. I have a letter from him. It is somewhat mysterious, but it says that he is on his way here, accompanied by one John Ainsworth."

"John Ainsworth?"

"Supposed to be the father of the child mentioned in the advertisement from Australia,"

"Yes; I see."

"Well, I *don't* see anything clearly, except this: These two men will come down upon us presently; they will want to hear something new—"

"Their affair is twenty years old; do they expect us to get to the bottom of it in five weeks?"

"Well, not that exactly, but I think they will expect us to have organized—to have hit upon some theory and plan of action."

"Oh," said Vernet, "as to that, I have my theory—but it is for my private benefit as yet. As to what I have done, it is not much, but it is—"

"Something? a step?"

"Yes; it is a step. I have found, or I know where to find, one of the ten men who composed that Marais des Cygnes party."

"Good! I call that more than a step."

"I may as well tell you that I have worked through a 'tracker.' You know how much I am interested in that other affair."

"The Sailor business? yes."

"It seemed to me," continued Vernet, "that I might succeed there by doing the hard work myself, [374]

and that this other matter, in its present stage, might be worked out by an intelligent 'inquirer.' So I adopted this plan. I think my murder case is almost closed. I hope to have my hand upon the fellow soon. Then I can give all my time to this other case."

"So!" gazing admiringly at the handsome face opposite him. "I'm glad of your success, Van. I suppose, at the right time, you will let me into the 'true inwardness' of the Sailor business?"

"I should have been under obligation to do that long ago, if you had not been so good as to leave it all to my discretion."

"True. Well, I find that it's not unsafe to leave these things to you and Stanhope. You both work best untrammelled. Has this fellow given you much trouble?"

Vernet smiled. "Plenty of it," he said. "But in playing his last trick, he bungled. He had dodged me beautifully, and had left me under the impression that he had sailed for Europe."

"Ah!"

"Of course I wired to the other side. He had sailed in company with a lady, handsome and young. He was also good-looking and a young man."

"Well?"

"When the two arrived on the other side, they turned out to be—an old man aged sixty-five, and a child, aged ten."

"Oh!" said the Chief, as though he enjoyed the situation; "a clever rascal!"

"Well, I know where to look for him now—when I need him. I want to run down an important witness; then I shall make the arrest."

"Good! We will have the particulars at that time. And now about this Englishman's case; put what your 'tracker' has done into a report—or do you intend to work in the dark, like Stanhope?" [375]

"Ah, what is Stanhope about?"

"I don't know. He took his time; has not been seen or heard of here for four weeks."

Vernet tapped the desk beside him, and looked thoughtfully at his *vis-a-vis*.

"Stanhope's a queer fish," he said abstractedly; "a queer fish." Then, rising, he added: "I will send my report to-morrow."

"Very good."

"And I shall not follow Stanhope's example. Once I am fairly entered into the case, I shall send my reports regularly."

"I'm glad of that," said his Chief, rising and following him to the door. "Under the circumstances, I'm glad of that."

CHAPTER LII.

THE VERDICT OF AN EXPERT.

Late in the afternoon of the day following that on which Carnegie the Expert had received his commission from the Chief of the detectives, he appeared again in the presence of that personage.

He carried his "documents" in a small packet, which he laid upon the desk, and he turned upon the Chief a face as cheerful and as full of suppressed activity as usual.

"Well?" queried the Chief, glancing down at the packet, "have you done?" [376]

"Yes;" beginning to open the packet with quick, nervous fingers.

"And you found—" He paused and looked up at the Expert.

Carnegie took from the packet the letter addressed to Alan Warburton, and written in the scrawling, unreadable hand. This he spread open upon the desk. Then he took another letter, written in an elegant hand, and with various vigorous ornamental flourishes. This he laid beside the first, pushing the remaining letters carelessly aside as if they were of no importance.

"I find—" he said, looking hard at the Chief, and putting one forefinger upon the elegant bit of penmanship, the other upon the unreadable scrawl;—"I find that these two were written by the same hand."

The Chief leaned forward; he had not been able to see the writing from the place in which he sat. He leaned closer and fixed his eyes upon the two signatures. The one he had seen before; the other was signed—*Vernet*.

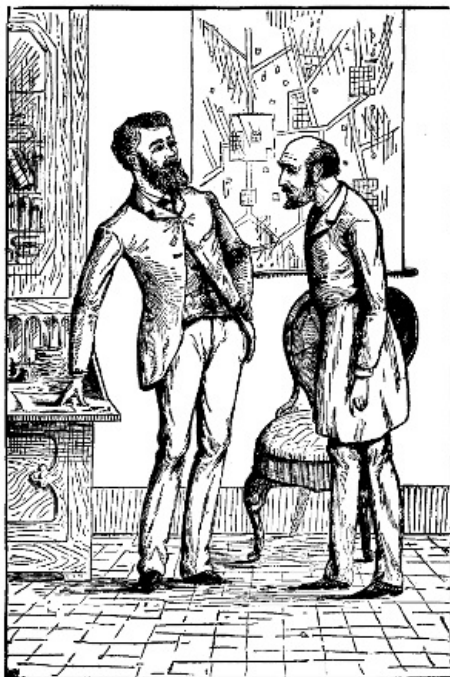
Slowly he withdrew his eyes from the signature, and turned them upon the face of the Expert.

"Carnegie," he asked, "do you ever make a mistake?"

"I?" Carnegie's look said the rest.

"Because," went on the Chief, scarcely noticing Carnegie's indignant exclamation, "if you *ever* made a mistake, I should say, I should wish to believe, that this was one."

"It's no mistake," replied the Expert grimly. "I never saw a clearer case."



[377]

"Carnegie, do you ever make a mistake?"—page 376.

The Chief passed his hand across his brow, and seemed to meditate, while the Expert gathered up the heap of letters and arranged them once more into a neat packet. [378]

"If you are still in doubt," he said tartly, "you might try—somebody else."

"No, no, Carnegie," replied the Chief, rousing himself, "you are right, no doubt. You must be right."

Carnegie snapped a rubber band about the newly-arranged packet, and tossed it down beside the two letters.

"Then," he said, taking up his hat, "I suppose you have no further use for me?"

"Not at present, Carnegie."

The Expert turned sharply, and without further ceremony whisked out of the room.

For some moments the Chief sat wrinkling his brow and gazing upon the two letters outspread before him.

Then he took up the elegantly-written epistle, folded it carefully, and thrust it in among those in the rubber-bound packet. This done he rang his bell, and called for Sanford.

The latter came promptly, and stood mutely before his Chief.

"Sanford," said that gentleman, pointing to the packet upon the table, "you may try your hand as an Expert."

"How, sir?"

"Take those letters, and this," pushing forward the outspread scrawl, "and see if you can figure out who wrote it."

Sanford took up the packet, looked earnestly at his superior, and hesitated.

"Carnegie has given his opinion," said the Chief, in answer to this look. "I want to see how you agree."

Sanford took up the scrawl, scanned it slowly, folded it and slipped it underneath the rubber of the packet. [379]

"Is that all, sir?" he asked quietly.

"That is all. Take your time, Sanford; take your time."

Sanford bowed and went slowly from the room.

A few moments longer the Chief sat thinking, a look of annoyance upon his face. Then he slowly arose, unlocked a drawer, and taking from it a small, thick diary, reseated himself.

"I must review this business," he muttered. "There's something about it that I don't—quite—understand."

He turned the leaves of the diary quickly, running the pages backward, until he reached those containing an account of the events of one or two days five weeks old upon the calendar. Here he singled out the notes concerning the Raid and its results, following which were the outlines of the accounts of that night as given him by Vernet and Stanhope.

Now, in giving his account of that night, Van Vernet had said little of his experience with Alan Warburton, and at the masquerade. And in giving his account of the Raid and its failure, he had omitted the fact that he had accepted and used "Silly Charlie" as a guide, speaking of him only as a spy and rescuer. Hence the Chief had gained anything but a correct idea of the part actually played by this bogus idiot.

On the other hand, Stanhope had described at length the events of the masquerade, as they related to himself, but had said little concerning Leslie and the nature of the service she required of him, referring to her only as Mr. Follingsbee's client. He had related his misadventures with the Troubadour and the Chinaman, leaving upon their shoulders the entire blame of his failure and non-appearance at the Raid. And he had never once mentioned Vernet's presence, nor the part the latter had played to gain the precedence with his Chief. [380]

In thus omitting important facts, each had his motive; and the omissions had not, at the time, been noted by the Chief. Now, however, as he read and re-read his memoranda—recalling to mind how he had shared with Vernet his chagrin at the failure of the Raid, and laughed with Stanhope over his comical mishaps—he seemed to read something between the lines, and his face grew more and more perplexed as he closed the diary, and sat intently thinking.

"There's a mystery here that courts investigation," he muttered, as he arose at last and put away the diary. "I'd give something, now, for twenty minutes' talk with Dick Stanhope."

Early on the following morning, Sanford presented himself before his Chief, the bundle of letters in his hand, and a troubled look upon his face.

"Well, Sanford, is it done?"

"I wish," said Sanford, as he placed the packet upon the table, "I wish it had never been begun—at least by me."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to believe the evidence of my senses."

"There's a sentiment for a detective! Out with it man; what have you found?"

Sanford took two papers from his pocket and held them in his hand irresolutely.

"I hope I am wrong," he said; "if I am—"

"If you are, it will rest between us two. Out with it, now."

"There's only one man among us that I can trace this letter to," beginning to unfold the troublesome scrawl, "and he—" He opened the second paper and laid it before his Chief.

The latter dropped his eyes to the vexatious paper and said, mechanically: "Vernet!" [381]

"I'm sorry," began Sanford, regretfully. "I tried—"

"You need not be," interrupted the Chief. "It's Carnegie's verdict too."

Sanford sat down in the nearest seat, and looked earnestly at his Chief, saying nothing.

After a moment of silence, the latter said:

"Sanford, I want Vernet shadowed."

Sanford started and looked as if he doubted his own ears.

"I don't want him interfered with," went on the Chief slowly, "and watching him will be a delicate job; but I wish it done. I want to be informed of every move he makes. You must manage this business. I shall depend upon you."

CHAPTER LIII.

JOHN AINSWORTH'S STORY.

The Chief of the detectives was now furnished with ample food for thought, but the opportunity for meditation seemed remote.

While he sat pondering over the discovery of Carnegie and Sanford, two visitors were announced: Walter Parks, the English patron of Stanhope and Vernet, and John Ainsworth, the returned Australian.

An accident of travel had thrown these two together, almost at the moment when one was landing from, and the other about to embark for, Australia. And the name of John Ainsworth, boldly displayed upon some baggage just set on shore, had put Walter Parks on the scent of its owner. The two men were not slow in understanding each other. [382]

As they now sat in the presence of the Chief, these two men with faces full of earnestness and strength, he mentally pronounced them fine specimens of bronzed and bearded middle age.

Walter Parks was tall and athletic, without one ounce of flesh to spare: with dark features, habitually stern in their expression; a firm chin, and well-developed upper cranium, that made it easy for one to comprehend how naturally and obstinately the man might cling to an idea, or continue a search, for more than twice twenty years; and how impossible it would be for him to abandon the one or lose his enthusiasm for the other.

John Ainsworth was cast in a different mould. Less tall than the Englishman, and of fuller proportions, his face was not wanting in strength, but it lacked the rugged outlines that distinguished the face of the other; his once fair hair was almost white, and his regular features wore a look of habitual melancholy. It was the face of a man who, having lost some great good out of his life, can never forget what that life might have been, had this good gift remained.

"I received your letter," the Chief said, after a brief exchange of formalities, "but I failed to understand it, Mr. Parks, and was finally forced to conclude that you may have written a previous one—"

"I did," interrupted the Englishman.

"Which I never received," finished the Chief. "I supposed you voyaging toward Australia, if not already there."

"I wrote first," said Walter Parks, "to notify you of our accidental meeting, and that we would set out immediately for this city. And I wrote again to tell you of Mr. Ainsworth's sudden illness, and our necessary delay." [383]

"Those two letters I never saw."

"I shall be sorry for that," broke in John Ainsworth, "if their loss will cause us delay, or you inconvenience."

"The non-arrival of those two letters has made the third something of a riddle to me," said the Chief. "But that being now solved, I think no further mischief has been or will be done."

Then followed further explanations concerning the meeting of the two, and John Ainsworth's fever, which, following his ocean voyage, made a delay in San Francisco necessary.

"It was a tedious illness to me;" said the Australian. "Short as it was, it seemed never-ending."

And then, at the request of the Chief, John Ainsworth told his story: briefly, but with sufficient clearness.

"I was a young man," he said, "and filled with the spirit of adventure, when I went West, taking my youthful wife with me. It was a hard life for a woman; but it was her wish to go and, indeed, I would have left her behind me very unwillingly. We prospered in the mining country. My wife enjoyed the novelty of our new life, and we began to gather about us the comforts of a home. Then little Lea was born."

He paused a moment and sighed heavily.

"My wife was never well again. She drooped and faded. When Lea was six months old, she died, and I buried her at the foot of her favorite mountain. I put my baby into the care of one of the women of the settlement—it was the best I could do,—and I lived on as I might. But the place grew hateful to me. There was one man among the rest whose friendship I prized, and after the loss of my wife I clung to him as if he were of my own blood. His name was Arthur Pearson." [384]

Again the narrator paused, and the eyes of the two listeners instinctively sought each other.

"Pearson was younger than I, and was never rugged like most of the men who lived that wild life. And after a time I saw that he, too, was failing. He grew thin and began to cough dismally. Pearson was very fond of my baby girl; and sometimes we would sit and talk of her future, and wish her away from that place, where she must grow up without the knowledge and graces of refined civilization.

"As Pearson became worse, he began to talk of going back to the States, and much as I would miss him, I strongly advised him to go. At last when he had fully decided to do so, he made me a proposition: If I would trust my baby to him, he would take her back and put her in the care of my sister, who had no children of her own, and who was just the one to make of little Lea all that a woman should be. I knew how gladly she would watch over my daughter, and after I had thought upon the matter, I decided to send Lea to her, under the guardianship of Pearson. As I look back, I can see my selfishness. I should have gone with Arthur and the child. But my grief was too

fresh; I could not bear to turn my face homeward alone. I wanted change and absorbing occupation, and I had already decided to dispose of my mining interest, and go to Australia.

"I found a nurse for my baby girl; a woman in our little community, who had lost her husband in a mine explosion a few months before. She was glad of an opportunity to return to her friends, and I felt sure that I could trust her with Lea. So they set out for the East, and I made preparations for my journey, while waiting to hear that Pearson and the train were safely beyond the mountains and most dangerous passes. [385]"

"They had been gone some two weeks when a train came in from the East, and among them was Mrs. Marsh, the nurse. The two trains had met just beyond the range, and Mrs. Marsh had found among the emigrants some of her friends and towns-people. The attraction was strong enough to cause her to turn about, and I may as well dispose of her at once by saying that she shortly after married one of her new-found friends.

"She told me that Pearson had joined a train which crossed their trail the morning after the meeting of the first two parties, and before they had broken camp. This train was going through by the shortest route, as fast as possible; and Pearson had found among the women one who would take charge of little Lea. She brought me a letter from him."

"Did you preserve the letter?" interrupted the Chief.

"I did; it has never been out of my possession, for it was the last I ever heard of Pearson or my little Lea, until—" He paused and glanced toward the Englishman.

"Until you met Mr. Parks?" supplemented the Chief.

"Yes."

"I should like to see that letter," said the Chief.

The Australian took from his breast an ample packet, and from its contents extracted a worn and faded paper. As he handed it to the Chief there was a touch of pathos in his voice.

"It is more than twenty years old," he said.

The writing was in a delicate, scholarly hand, much faded, yet legible. [386]

DEAR AINSWORTH

I suppose Mrs. Marsh has made you acquainted with her reasons for changing her plans. It remains for me to inform you of mine.

Our train, as you know, is not precisely select, and as we advance towards "God's Country" the roystering ones become a little too reckless for my quiet taste. The train from the North is led by one Walter Parks, an Englishman, of whom I know a little, and that little all in his favor. The others are quiet, sturdy fellows, of the sort I like. The woman who will care for little Lea is a Mrs. Krutzer; a very good woman she seems. She is going East with her husband, who has the rheumatism and, so they tell me, a decided objection to hard labor. She has a little boy, some six years older than Lea, and she seems glad to earn something by watching over our pet.

We are almost out of the "Danger Country." There is little to dread between this and the Marais des Cygnes, and once we have crossed that, there will be nothing to fear from the Indians. Still, to make little Lea's safety doubly sure, I shall at once tell Mrs. Krutzer her history, and give her instructions how to find Lea's relatives should some calamity overtake me before the journey ends.

I will at once put into Mrs. Krutzer's hands your letter to your sister, together with the packet, and money enough to carry her to her destination. Having done this, I can only watch over the little one as you would, were you here, and trust the rest to a merciful Providence.

May your Australian venture prosper! I will write you there; and may the good God have us all in his keeping!

Yours as ever,

A. PEARSON.

This was the letter that the Chief perused with a face of unusual gravity; and then he asked, as he laid it down:

"And your child: you have never heard of her since?"

"Never. I was always a poor correspondent, but I wrote many letters to my sister, to her husband, and to Pearson. They were not answered. The Ulimans were rising people, and they had left their old residence, no doubt. So I reasoned, and I worked on. After a time I was sick—a long tedious illness. When I recovered, and asked for letters, they told me that during my illness some had arrived, and had been lost or mislaid. Then I assured myself that these were from Pearson and my sister; that my little one was safe; and I settled down to my new life. Every year I planned a return, and every year I waited until the next, in order to take with me a larger fortune for little Lea. I became selfishly absorbed in money-getting. Then, as years went by, and I knew my girl was budding into womanhood, I longed anew for tidings of her. I wrote again, and again; and then I set my lawyer at the task. He wrote, and he advertised; and at last I settled my affairs out there and started for the United States. An advertisement, asking news of Pearson or Lea Ainsworth, was sent to a city paper only a week before I sailed, and it was this that caught the eye of Mr. Parks here." [387]

Again the Chief and Walter Parks exchanged glances, and John Ainsworth rose slowly to his feet.

"Sir," he said in a husky voice, "Mr. Parks has offered a fortune to the man who discovers the slayer of Arthur Pearson. I offer no less for the recovery of my child."

The Chief shook his head.

"That search," he said, "like the other, must cover twenty years."

"To begin," said the Australian, "we must find the Ulimans."

"Who?"

"The Ulimans; my sister was the wife of Thomas Uliman."

"Oh!" said the Chief, and then he leaned forward and touched the bell.

"Send Sanford in," he said to the boy who appeared in the doorway.

[388]

In another moment Sanford stood before them.

"Sanford," said his Chief, "Thomas Uliman and wife, residents here twenty years ago, are to be found. Have the records searched, and if necessary take other steps. Stop: what was the calling of this Thomas Uliman?"

"Merchant," said John Ainsworth.

Sanford started suddenly, and lifted one hand to his mouth.

"I wonder—" he began, and then checked himself, bowed, and turned toward the door. "Had this gentleman a middle name?" he asked, with his hand upon the latch.

"Yes; it was R., I believe; Thomas R. Uliman," replied the Australian.

Sanford bowed again and went out quietly. Then Mr. Ainsworth turned toward the Chief.

"You have a system?" he queried.

"Yes; a very simple and effectual one. We keep the census reports, the directories, and a death record. When these fail, we have other resources; but we usually get at least a clue from these books. This part of the work is simple enough. By to-morrow I think we can give you some information about Thomas Uliman."

There was a moment's silence, then Walter Parks leaned forward:

"Have you anything to tell me concerning my two detectives?" he asked.

"Stanhope and Vernet? Well, not much; but I expect a report from Vernet at any moment. We will have that also to-morrow."

CHAPTER LIV.

[389]

A CHIEF'S PERPLEXITIES.

On Wednesday, the day following that which witnessed the arrival of Walter Parks and John Ainsworth, Mr. Follingsbee, seated at a late breakfast, perused a letter, which, judging from the manner of its reception, must have contained something unusual and interesting.

He read it, re-read it, and read it again. Then pushing back his chair, and leaving his repast half finished, he hurried from the breakfast-room, and up stairs, straight to that cosey room which, for many days, had been occupied by a guest never visible below. This guest had also recently turned away from a dainty breakfast, the fragments of which yet remained upon the small table at his elbow, and he was now perusing the morning paper with the bored look of a man who reads only to kill time.

He glanced up as the lawyer entered, but did not rise.

"Well," began his visitor, "at last I have something to wake you up with: orders to march."

He held in his hand the open letter, and standing directly in front of the other, read out its contents with the tone and manner of a man pronouncing his own vindication after a long-suffering silence:

DEAR SIR:

At last you may release your voluntary prisoner. It is best that he return at once to W— place. Let him go quietly and without fear. By afternoon there may be other arrivals, whom he will be glad to welcome. For yourself, be at the Chief's office this day at 4. P.M.

[390]

STANHOPE.

The reader paused and looked triumphantly at his audience of one.

"So," commented this audience, "his name is Stanhope."

Mr. Follingsbee started and then laughed.

"I don't think he cared to keep his identity from you longer," he said, "otherwise he would not have signed his name. I think this means that the play is about to end"—tapping the letter lightly with his two fingers. "You have heard of Dick Stanhope, I take it?"

"Stanhope, the detective? Yes; and I am somewhat puzzled. I have always heard of Stanhope in connection with Van Vernet."

"Umph! so has everybody. They're on opposite sides of *this* case, however. Well, shall you follow Mr. Stanhope's advice?"

"I shall, although his advice reads much like a command. I shall take him at his word, and go at once."

"Now?"

"This very hour, if your carriage is at my disposal."

"That, of course."

"I feel like a puppet in invisible hands"—rising and moving nervously about—"but, having pledged myself to accept the guidance of this eccentric detective, I will do my part."

"Well," said the lawyer dryly, "you seem in a desperate hurry. Be sure you don't overdo it."

"I won't; I'll go home and wait for what is to happen in the afternoon."

Half an hour thereafter, a carriage drew up at the side entrance of the Warburton mansion, and a gentleman leaped out, ran lightly up the steps, opened the door with a latch-key held ready in his hand, and disappeared within. The carriage rolled away the moment its occupant had alighted. [391]

In another moment, a man, who had been lounging on the opposite side of the street, faced about slowly, and sauntered along until he reached the street corner. Turning here he quickened his pace, increasing his speed as he went, until his rapid walk became a swift run just as he turned the second corner.

At ten o'clock of this same morning, the Chief of the detectives is sitting again in his sanctum, his brow knit and frowning, his hands tapping nervously upon the arms of his easy chair, his whole mind absorbed in intensest thought. Usually he meets the problems that come to him with imperturbable calm, and looks them down and through; but to-day the thought that he faces is so disagreeable, so perplexing, so baffling,—and it will not be looked down, nor thought down.

Up to the date of this present perplexity, he has found himself equal to all the emergencies of his profession. Living in a domain of Mysteries, he has been himself King of them all; has held in his hand the clue to each. His men may have worked in the dark, or with only a fragment of light, a glimmer of the truth, to guide them. But he, their Chief, has overlooked their work, seeing beyond their range of vision, and through it, to the end.

Always this had been the case until—yes, he would acknowledge the truth—until this all-demanding Englishman had swooped down upon him with his old, old mystery, and taken from the Agency, for his own eccentric uses, its two best men. Always, until Van Vernet and Richard Stanhope had arrayed themselves as antagonists, in seeking a solution of the same problem. [392]

Following up the train of thought suggested by the re-reading of his diary, the Chief has been suddenly confronted with some unpleasant suspicions and possibilities.

He has pondered everything pertaining to the mystery surrounding Vernet's improper use of his business letter-heads, and his visit to the Warburton mansion in the guise of Augustus Grip. And he has vainly tried to trace the connection between these manoeuvres and some of Stanhope's inconsistencies.

In the search, he has made a discovery: Alan Warburton, the uncle of the lost child for whom his men have been vainly searching, and Leslie Warburton, the widow of the late Archibald Warburton, have both sailed for Europe. Business connected with the search has been transacted through Mr. Follingsbee; and this voyage across the sea, at so inopportune a time, has been treated by the lawyer with singular reticence, not to say secrecy.

What could have caused these two to make such a journey at such a time? Why did Van Vernet enter their house in disguise? Who were the two that had sailed to Europe by proxy? What was this mystery which, he instinctively felt, had taken root on the night of the fruitless Raid?

"It was young Warburton who had secured Vernet's services, and afterwards dismissed him in such summary fashion. It was Mr. Follingsbee who had engaged Stanhope, for that self-same night, *for a masquerade*. If I could question Stanhope," he muttered. "Oh! I need not wait for that; I'll interview Follingsbee."

He dashed off a note, asking the lawyer to wait upon him that afternoon, and having dispatched it, was about to resume the study of his new problem, when Sanford entered with a memorandum in his hand. [393]

"Beale has come in," he said in a low tone. "He has been the rounds, and gives a full report of Vernet's movements."

"Has Beale been out alone?"

"Not since the first two hours; he has three men out now."

"Phew! Well, read your minutes, Sanford; I see you have taken them down from word of mouth."

"Yes, it was the shortest way. Vernet is watching three localities."

"Oh!"

"Beale shadowed him, first, to the residence of Mr. Follingsbee, the lawyer."

"Umph!" The Chief started, then checked himself, and sank back in his chair.

"Here," continued Sanford, "he had a man on guard. They exchanged a few words, and Vernet went away, the shadower staying near the lawyer's house. From there Vernet went direct to Warburton Place."

The Chief bit his lips and stirred uneasily.

"Here he had another shadower. They also conferred together. Then Vernet took a carriage and went East to the suburbs; out to the very edge of the city, where the houses are scattering and inhabited by poor laborers. At the end of K. street, he left his carriage, and went on foot to a little saloon, the farthest out of any in that vicinity. There he had a long talk with a fellow who seemed to be personating a bricklayer. He left the saloon and went back to his carriage, seemingly in high spirits, and the bricklayer departed in the opposite direction." [394]

"Away from the city?"

"Yes; toward the furthestmost houses."

The Chief bent his head and meditated.

"This happened, when?" he asked.

"Yesterday."

"And Beale; what did he do?"

"Set three men to watch three men. One at Follingsbee's, one at Warburton Place, and one at the foot of K. street."

"Good; and these shadowers of Vernet's—could Beale identify either of them?"

"No; he is sure they do not belong to us, and were never among our men."

"Very well. Beale has done famously. Let him keep a strict watch until further orders."

Once more the Chief knits his brow and ponders. The mystery grows deeper, and he finds in it ample food for meditation.

But he is doomed to interruption. This time it is Vernet's report.

He eyes it askance, and lays it upon the desk beside him. Just now it is less interesting, less important, than his own thoughts.

But again his door opens. He lifts his head with a trace of annoyance. It is George, the office boy. He comes forward and proffers a note to his Chief.

The latter takes it slowly, looks languidly at the superscription, then breaks the seal.

One glance, and the expression of annoyance and languor is gone; the eyes brighten, and the whole man is alive with interest.

And yet the note contains only these two lines:

Send three good men, in plain clothes, to the last saloon at the foot of K. street, 2 P. M. sharp.

DICK S.

"Oh!" ejaculates the Chief, "Dick at last! Something is going to happen."

And then he calls the office boy back.

"Go to this address," he says, hastily writing upon a card; "ask for Mr. Parks, and say to him that I am obliged to beg himself and friend to put off their interview with me until this afternoon, say three o'clock."

When the boy had departed, he turned to the desk and took up Vernet's report. As he opened it, he frowned and muttered:

"Vernet's doing some queer work. If it were any one else, I should say he was in a muddle. As it is, I shall not feel sure that all is right until I know what his manœuvres mean. I'll have no more interviews until I have seen Follingsbee, and studied this matter out."

CHAPTER LV.

THE LAST MOMENT.

At two P. M. of the same day, the day that witnessed Alan Warburton's return to his own, and the Chief's perplexity, there is an ominous stillness brooding about the Francoise dwelling.

In the outer room, Papa Francoise is alone, and, if one may judge from his restlessness, not much relishing his solitude. [396]

The room is cleaner than usual. All about it an awkward attempt at tidiness is visible. Papa, too, is less unkempt than common, seeming to have made a stout effort at old-time respectability. But he cannot assume a virtuous and respectable calm, a comfortable repose.

He goes to the window and peers anxiously into the street. Sometimes he opens the outer door, and thrusts his head half out to gaze along the thoroughfare cityward. And then he goes across the room, and opens the door of a big dingy closet: looks within, closes the door quietly, and tiptoes back to the window.

There is nothing remarkable in that closet. It is dark and dirty. A few shabby garments are hanging on the wall, and a pallet occupies the floor, looking as if it had been carelessly flung there and not yet prepared for its occupant.

Papa seems to note this. Stooping down, he smoothens out the ragged blanket and straightens the dirty mattress, cocking his head on one side to note the improvement thus made. Then he goes back to the window, and again looks out. With every passing moment he grows more and more disquieted.

In the inner room, Leslie Warburton sits alone. Her arms are crossed upon the rough table beside her; her head is bowed upon her arms; her attitude betokens weariness and dejection. By and by she lifts her face, and it is very pale, very sad, very weary. But above all, it is very calm.

Since the day when Stanhope's message brought her new hope, she has played her part bravely. Weak in body, harassed in mind, filled with constantly-increasing loathing for the people who are her only companions, utterly unable to guess at the meaning of Stanhope's message—she has battled with illness, and fought off despair, fully realizing that in him was her last hope, her only chance for succor; and fully resolved to cling to this last hope, and to aid her helper in the only way she could—by doing his bidding. [397]

"Seem to submit," he said. She had submitted. "Let them play their game to the very last." She had made no resistance.

And now the end had come. She had obeyed in all things. And to-day the Francoises were jubilant. To-day Leslie Warburton, by her own consent, was to marry Franz Francoise.

It was the last day, the last hour; and Leslie's strength and courage are sorely tried.

"Trust all to me," he had said. "When the right time comes, I will be at hand."

Leslie arose, and paced slowly up and down her narrow room, feeling her heart almost stop its beating. Had she not trusted to him? trusted blindly; and now—had not the right time come? Was it not the only time? And where was Stanhope? "If he should fail me!" she moaned, "if he should fail me after all!"

And her heart leaps suddenly; its tumultuous throbbings nearly suffocate her. She sits down again and her breath comes hard and fast.

"If he should fail me," she says again, "then—that would be the end."

For she has made a fearful resolve. She would play her part, as it was the only way. *She* would not fail in the task he had assigned her, and if, at the last, *he* failed, then—before she became the wife of Franz Francoise, she would die!

And Daisy—what, then, would become of her?

Leslie puts back the thought with a passionate moan. She must not think now. [398]

Mamma has sworn to produce the child within the hour that sees Leslie the wife of Franz. And Leslie has vowed, when the child's hand is in hers, to sign a paper which Mamma shall place before her—anything; she cares not what.

She has agreed to all this, suffered her martyrdom, sustained by the promise: "At the right time I shall be at hand. I will not fail you."

And the last moments are passing.

She can hear Papa shuffling about the outer room, and she knows that Franz has gone to bring

the Priest. The right time is very near; but Stanhope—

She has not seen Mamma since morning. She has not heard her rasping voice, nor her heavy step in the outer room. But the minutes are going fast; Franz will be back soon.

And Stanhope—O, God, *where* is Stanhope?

Again she bows her head upon her arms and utters a low moan.

“Oh, if he should fail me! If he *should* fail me!”

In the outer room, Papa’s restlessness increases. He vibrates constantly now between the window and the door.

The curtain is drawn up to the low ceiling; the entire window is bare and stares out upon the street like a watchful eye.

And now Papa turns suddenly from the door, closes it, and hastens to the window; looks out once again to reassure himself, and then, rising on tiptoe, draws down the dark curtain. He measures the window with a glance, lowering the curtain slowly and stopping it half way down.

It is a signal, prearranged by Mamma, and it tells that approaching personage that the way is clear, that Franz is absent.



“Again she bows her head upon her arms and utters a low moan.”—[page 398](#).

Another moment of waiting and he hears shuffling footsteps, and the sound of receding wheels. Then he opens the door, opens it wide this time, and admits Mamma.

Mamma, and something else. This something she carries in her arms. It is carefully wrapped in a huge shawl, and is quite silent and moveless.

“You are sure it’s all right?” whispers Papa nervously, as in obedience to a movement of Mamma’s head he opens the closet-door.

Mamma lays down her still burden, covers it carefully with the ragged blanket, closes the door of the closet, and then turns to face Papa.

“Yes,” she says, in a hoarse whisper; “my part of the business is right enough. Ye needn’t be uneasy about that. I told ye I wouldn’t bring her into the house while Franz was here; and as for my being followed, I ain’t afraid; I’ve doubled on my track too often. If any one started to follow me, they’re watching the wrong door this minute. How long has Franz been away?”

“Not half an hour.”

“How’s *she* been behaving?”

“Quiet; very quiet.”

Mamma seats herself, removes her hideous bonnet, and draws a heavy breath.

“Well, I’ve done my part,” she says grimly. “Now, let Franzy do his’n.”

She goes to a shelf, takes therefrom a bottle of ink and a rusty pen.

“I wish,”—she begins, then pauses and slowly draws a folded paper from her pocket; “I wish we could git this signed *first*.”

Papa coughs slightly, and turns an anxious look toward the door.

[401]

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be safe," he says. Then he starts and turns toward the closet. "You're sure she won't wake up?" he whispers.

Mamma turns upon him angrily.

"D'ye s'pose I'd run any risk now?" she hisses. "She's got a powerful dose of Nance's quietin' stuff. Don't you be afeared about *her*. All we want is to git this business over, and that little paper signed."

"I'm dreadful uneasy," sighs Papa. "I wish I was sure how this thing would come out."

"Wall, I kin tell ye. When the gal gits hold of her little one, she'll turn her back on us all. Married or not, she'll never own Franz. And I don't s'pose the boy'll care much; it's the money he's after. She'll give him *that* fast enough, and he'll always know where to look for more. As for us, this marrying makes us safe. She'd die before she'd have it known, and she can't make us any trouble without its coming out. She'll be glad to take her young un, and let us alone. Don't you see that even after she's got the young un, we shall have her in a tighter grip than ever, once she's married to Franz? As fer the paper she's to sign, it won't hold good in law, but it will hold with *her*. And she won't go to a lawyer with it; be sure of that."

"Hark!" ejaculates Papa.

And in another instant, there is a stumbling step outside, and a heavy thump upon the door.

"It's Franz," whispers Mamma. And she hastens to admit her Prodigal.

As he enters, Mamma's sharp eye notes his flushed face and exaggerated swagger, and she greets him with an indignant sniff. [402]

"Couldn't ye keep sober jist once?" she grumbles, as he pauses before her. "Where's the Preach?"

"Oh, I'm sober enough," grins Franz. "And the Preach is coming. He's bringin' a witness."

Papa and Mamma exchange swift glances. Franz, sober, is not the most agreeable and dutiful of sons; Franz, in liquor, is liable to sudden violent outbreaks, if not delicately handled.

Papa makes a signal which Mamma interprets: "Don't irritate him." And the two continue to eye him anxiously as he crosses the room and attempts to open the door of the inner apartment.

"Locked!" he mutters, and turns toward Mamma. "Out with your key, old un," he says quite amiably; "the Preach 'ull be here in five minutes, and what ye've got to say, all round, had better be said afore he comes. Open this."

"The boy's right enough," mutters Papa. "Open the door, old woman."

Silently Mamma obeys, and Franz is the first to enter the room. He goes straight over to the table where Leslie sits, scarcely stirring at their entrance, and he looks down at her intently.

"See here, Leschen," he says, "don't think that this lockin' ye in is my doin's, or that it's goin' to be continued. It's the old woman as is takin' such precious care of ye."

Mamma is at his elbow, glancing sharply at him, while she places upon the table pen, ink, and a folded paper.

"We've kept our word, gal," she says harshly, "and we know that after to-day ye may take some queer fancies. Now, this paper is ter signify that we have acted fairly by ye, and ter bind ye not ter make us any trouble hereafter." [403]

Leslie's eyes rove slowly from one to the other. She feels that the end has come, and with the last remnant of her courage she keeps back the despairing cry that rises to her lips.

As she gazes, Franz Francoise makes a sudden movement as if to snatch up the paper, then as suddenly withdraws his hand.

"Wot's in that paper?" he asks, turning to Mamma.

"Ye know well enough," retorts the old woman tartly. "We've promised her the gal, and she's promised not to inform agin us. We're goin' to stick to our bargain, and we want her to stick to hers."

And she pushes the pen and ink toward Leslie. But the latter does not heed the motion.

"Oh," she cries, half rising and clasping her hands in intense appeal, "is it true? Is she indeed so near me? Shall I have her back?"

"Yes, yes." Mamma grows impatient, "Sign this and then—"

Franz leans forward and puts one finger upon the folded paper.

"Once agin," says he sharply, "what's that?"

"It's a simple little paper, Franz," breaks in Papa reassuringly, "jest to 'stablish our innocence,

in case your new wife should happen to forgit her promise. It's nothing that'll affect you."

"Umph," grunts Franz, eyeing the pair suspiciously, "that's it, is it." Then, turning to Leslie: "Read that paper, gal."

But Papa puts out his hand.

"It's only a little form, my dear boy."

"Wal," with growing aggressiveness, "let her read the little form." [404]

"It's only a waste o' time," breaks in Mamma impatiently, "an' the sooner it's signed, the sooner she'll—"

"Only a waste of time." The words awaken Leslie's almost benumbed senses. Time; that is just what this discussion is gaining for her, for Stanhope! Since their entrance, she has not opened her lips; now she interrupts Mamma's discourse.

"Let me read the paper," she says.

By a quick movement, Papa extracts the paper from beneath the finger of his Prodigal, and holding it tightly, steps back from the table.

"It's wasting time," he says, "an' it's only a little form."

Then Leslie draws herself up to her fullest height, and stepping back from the table says:

"I will sign no paper that I have not read."

With a sudden movement Franz springs upon Papa, wrests the paper from his grasp, and passes it over Mamma's shoulder to Leslie. Then he turns fiercely upon the pair.

"If ye could read, Franz Francoise," shrieks Mamma, in a burst of incautious rage, "ye'd never a-done that thing!"

"Kerrect!" retorts Franz, with a malicious grin, "I'd a-read it myself. Not bein' able to do that, I'd sooner take her word fer it than your'n."

Again Papa comes forward and lays a hand upon the arm of his son.

"Franzy," he says deprecatingly, "ye don't know what ye are doin'."

"Don't I?" sneers Franz. "Wal I'm goin' ter find out shortly."

A sudden exclamation from Leslie causes him to turn quickly. She is gazing at the paper with a bewildered face. [405]

"What is it?" he asked peremptorily.

"This paper," exclaims Leslie, "would bind me to make over one third of any property I am or may become possessed of to those two and—"

"What!" Again Franz makes a movement as if about to seize the paper, then, dropping his hand, he repeats: "To those two?" pointing to Papa and Mamma; "and don't it make no mention o' *me*?"

"Now Franz—" remonstrates Mamma.

"You shut up! Say, gal, does that document leave *me* out?"

Leslie's eyes scan the page. "It does not name you," she falters.

"Oh, it don't! Wal," stepping to her side and taking the paper from her, "wal, then, we won't sign it."

As he crumples it in his hand, Leslie moves toward Mamma Francoise, seeming in one moment to have mastered all her fears.

"This paper," she says, turning her clear eyes upon Mamma, "confirms what I have suspected, ever since you proposed this marriage with your son, as the price of little Daisy's deliverance. You know the secret of my birth and believe me to be an heiress. You stole little Daisy to compel me to *this*,"—pointing at the paper in the hand of Franz—"and since your son has returned, you would strengthen your own position while you enrich him. It was a clever plot, but overdone. Give me the pen, give me the paper. Rather than leave little Daisy longer at your mercy, I would resign to you an hundred fortunes were they mine."

She moves toward the table, but Franz is before her.

"Oh, no!" he says, quietly; "I guess not! I don't seem to cut much of a figure in that little transaction on paper, but I'm blessed if I don't hold my own in this business. Ye can't sign that paper; not yet." [406]

Leslie turns from him and again addresses Mamma.

"Listen to me," she says. "I know your scheme now, and I know how to deal with you. I never meant to marry this man. I never will. You want money; give me back little Daisy, and I will sign this paper, or any other you may frame. And I will swear never to complain against you, never to

molest you, never to reveal the secret of these awful weeks. There let it end: I will *never* marry your son!"

With a sudden motion, Mamma turns upon Franz, and attempts to snatch the paper from his hand.

"Give me that paper, boy!" she fairly hisses.

But he repulses her savagely, and thrusts the paper into his breast.

"Take care, old woman!" he exclaims hotly. "I ain't your son for nothing; what do ye take me for?"

His words are interrupted by a loud knock on the door.

"Do ye hear that?" he hisses. "Now, that parson's coming in to finish this marryin' business, or I'm goin' right out of here, and the gal along with me, if I have to cut my way straight through ye! The gal can sign the paper if she likes, but she'll sign it Leschen Francoise, or she'll never sign it at all!"

And before they can guess his intentions, he has caught Leslie up and fairly carried her to the outer room. In a flutter of fear and rage, Mamma follows, and Papa hovers in the open doorway.

"Franz Francoise!" shrieks Mamma, the tiger now fairly awake in her eyes.



"Give me that paper, boy!" she fairly hisses.—[page 406](#).

But he pays no heed to her rage. He releases his hold upon Leslie, and flings open the door.

"I don't know as we will have any funeral, after all," he says cheerfully, to the two who enter. "There's a kind of a hitch in the arrangements."

The new-comers, the foremost in the garb of a Priest, and the other evidently a very humble citizen, stop near the open door and glance curiously around. And then a third citizen appears, and fairly fills up the doorway.

Even as they enter, Mamma, stealing close to Leslie, whispers in her ear:

"If ye ever want to see yer gal agin, *marry him*."

Leslie Warburton looks into the wolfish face beside her; looks across at Franz, and then at the three new-comers. What stolid faces! She sees no hope there. And then, as Mamma's words repeat themselves in her ear, she leans against the rickety closet-door and utters a despairing moan.

"Quick!" whispers Mamma, "it's yer last chance!"

CHAPTER LVI.

AT THE RIGHT TIME.

"Ye see," explains Franz, glancing toward Leslie, "the lady's kind o' hesitatin'. We'll give her a minute or two ter make up her mind." And he goes over and takes his stand beside her.

In the moment of silence that follows, Leslie can hear her heart beat, then—

What is it that breaks that strange stillness, that startles so differently every occupant of that dingy room? [409]

Only a voice, sweet, clear, pitiful; a child's voice, uplifted in prayer:

"Dear God, please take care of a little girl whose Mamma has gone to Heaven—"

The rest is drowned in the shriek which bursts from Leslie's lips; in the sudden bound made by Mamma; and the quick counter movement of Franz.

Then Leslie's hands are beating wildly against the closet-door. Mamma, forcibly hurled back by Franz, is sprawling upon the floor, and the escaped convict is pressing against the rickety timbers.

As they yield to his onslaught, he stoops down, catches up the little crouching figure within, and turns to Leslie, who receives it with outstretched arms.

"Oh, Daisy! *Daisy!* DAISY!"

Sobbing wildly, she is down upon her knees, the little one tightly clasped to her bosom.

"Oh, Daisy, my darling!"

"Git out!" commands Franz, as Mamma, scrambling up, approaches with glaring eyes. "Stand back, old un. This is a new deal."

And he places himself as a barricade before Leslie and the child, waving back the infuriated old woman with a gesture of menace.

And then heavy feet come trampling across the threshold. Men in police uniform fill up the doorway, and the foremost of them says, as he approaches the Prodigal:

"Franz Francoise, I arrest you in the name of the law!"

The priest and his two witnesses start perceptibly, and turn their faces toward Franz. Papa and Mamma slink back toward the inner room. Leslie lifts her head and looks wonderingly at the newcomers. [410]

Only Franz remains undisturbed. With a swift movement, he whisks out a pair of revolvers and presents them, muzzle foremost, to the speaker.

"Not just yet!" he says coolly; "I ain't quite ready. Ye've interrupted me, and ye'll have to wait."

One of his hands is slightly uplifted and, for just an instant, his head turns toward the inner room.

The two witnesses, making way for the police, lounge nearer to Papa and Mamma.

"You had better not resist, Franz Francoise," says the leader once more. "You can't escape us now."

"No; I s'pose not," assents Franz. "Oh, I know I'm cornered, but wait."

He moves aside and looks down upon Leslie.

"This lady," he says quietly, "and her little gal, are here by accident, and they ain't to be mixed up in this business o' mine. Look here, Mr. Preach—"

The Priest comes forward, and glances at him inquiringly.

"Ye can't afford to lose yer time altogether, I s'pose, and I'll give ye a new contract. Ye see this lady and the little gal are being scared by these cops. I want you to take 'em away. The lady'll tell ye where to go, and don't ye leave 'em till ye've seen 'em safe home."

Without a word of comment, the Priest moves toward Leslie.

At the same instant, and with a howl of rage, Mamma rushes forward.

"Stop her!" says Franz; and one of the two witnesses lays a strong hand upon Mamma's shoulder.



"Not just yet; I ain't quite ready!"—[page 410](#).

Then the Prodigal turns to Leslie, who, with the child in her arms, has risen to her feet.

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"Go," he says gently; "you are free and safe. Go at once. That old woman will harm you if she can."

With a start and a sudden bounding of her pulses, Leslie looks into the face of the Prodigal, only an instant, for he turns it away. And all bewildered, pallid and trembling, she yields to the gentle force by which the Priest compels her to move, mechanically, almost blindly, from the room.

The officers step back to let her pass. And as she reaches the outer air, she has a shadowy vision of Franz Francoise, with pistols in hand, standing at bay; of Mamma struggling in the grasp of the humble citizen, and uttering yells of impotent rage.

She feels the cool air upon her brow, and clasps the child closer in her arms, believing herself to be moving in a dream. Then the voice of the Priest assures her.

"Give me the child, Mrs. Warburton," he says respectfully, "and lean on my arm. We have a carriage near."

When Leslie had disappeared beyond the doorway, Franz Francoise throws down his pistols.

"Now then, boys," he says quietly, "you can come and take me."

With a yell of rage, Mamma hurls herself upon her captor.

"Let me go!" she shrieks. "Ah, ye brute, let me get at him! Let me kill the sneakin' coward! Ah," kicking viciously, and gnashing her teeth as she struggles to reach the Prodigal, "that I should have to own such a chicken-hearted son!"

The leader of the officers, handcuffs in hand, has approached Franz, and the others are closing about him.

As Mamma utters her fierce anathema, he turns upon her suddenly, making at the same time a swift gesture of impatience.

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"Gray," he says sternly, "bring out that old man."

It is not the voice of Franz Francoise; it is not his manner. And as the man addressed as Gray lays a hand upon Papa Francoise, the old woman catches her breath with a hissing sound, and stares blankly.

Struggling and whimpering, Papa is dragged from the inner room, and when he stands before the group, the Prodigal says:

"Now, Harvey, make the proper use of your handcuffs. Put them on this precious pair."

"What!"

The leader of the arresting party starts forward, and stares at the speaker, who makes a sudden movement and then faces the officers, holding in his hand a carrotty wig and moustache!

Papa's face is ashen. Mamma writhes and gurgles, staring wildly at this sudden transformation. The officers instinctively group themselves together, and the handcuffs fall from the leader's grasp, clanking dolefully as they strike the bare floor.

"Stanhope!" gasps the officer, starting forward, and then drawing back.

And the two aids instinctively echo the word:

"Stanhope!"

"Stanhope!"

Then the man who has so long masqueraded as Franz Franchoise flings aside the carrotty wig and fixes a stern eye upon Mamma Franchoise.

"Woman," he says slowly; "let me set your mind at rest. You need never again call me your son. Franz Franchoise is dead, and before he died he told me his story, and yours, as he knew it. If for weeks I have lived among you in his likeness, you know now why it was necessary. Oh, you are a clever pair! Almost too clever, but you are outwitted. Harvey," turning once more to the officer, "you shall not go back without a prisoner; you shall have two. Put your bracelets on this rascally pair; and see them safely in separate cells. Holt and Drake will go with you."

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The two humble citizens glance up, and confirm by a look their leader's assurance.

"Drake! Holt!" The man addressed as Harvey utters the names mechanically. Drake and Holt are two efficient detectives, and Harvey knows them as such. "Mr. Stanhope, I—I cannot understand."

"And I cannot explain now." He is actively assisting Drake to put the manacles on Mamma's wrists. "Old woman, it will be policy for you to keep quiet; or do you want me to gag you?"

Then turning:

"One thing, Harvey; you were sent here by Van Vernet. I know that much. Now, tell me why did not Van make this attempt himself? Don't hesitate. Van has well-nigh led you and these fellows into a scrape; he has certainly made trouble for himself. Where is he now?"

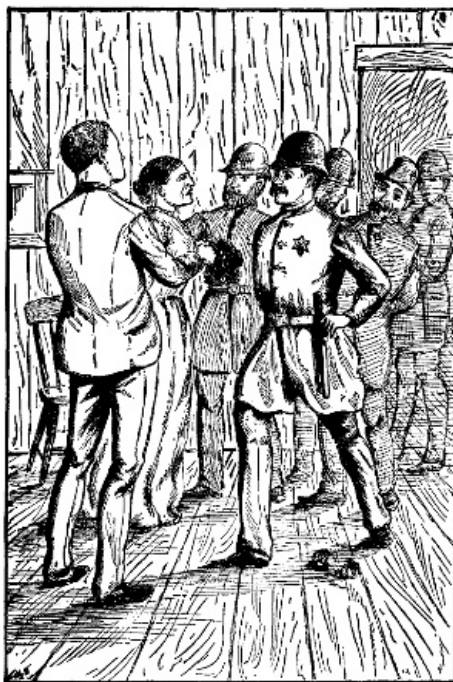
A moment Harvey hesitates. Then he says:

"I don't know where he is, but he has gone to make another arrest."

"Another! who?"

"A sailor; the fellow who killed the Jew, Siebel."

Richard Stanhope swings himself around and points to Papa Franchoise, as with the finger of fate.



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"Stanhope!" gasps the officer, starting forward.—[page 413](#).

"The man who killed the Jew, Siebel, is *there*!" he says sternly.

[416]

Then snatching up the wig, he readjusts it upon his head, saying, as he does it:

"Drake, Holt, look after these people; and Harvey, you may do well to ignore Vernet's instructions for the present. He has done mischief enough already. I must prevent this last blunder."

The carrotty moustache has once more resumed its place. "Holt, you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

As the detective is once more transformed into Franz Franchoise, Mamma becomes fairly livid.

She makes a final frantic effort to free herself and howls out:

"Let me go; what have I done? for what am I arrested? Let me go, you impostor!"

"You will learn in good time, woman," retorts Stanhope. "You may have to answer to several small charges: blackmail, abduction, theft, murder."

He goes to the door; then turns and looks back at the handcuffed pair:

"Holt," he says impressively, "watch that woman closely, and search them both at the Jail. You will find upon the woman a belt, which you will take charge of until I come."

Mamma Françoise yells with rage. She writhes, she curses; her fear and fury are horrible to behold. As Richard Stanhope crosses the threshold, her curses are shrieked after him, and her captors shudder as they listen.

Papa is abject enough. He has been shivering, quaking, cowardly, from the first; but Stanhope's last words have crushed him utterly. His knees refuse to support him, his eyes stare glassily, his jaw drops weakly. [417]

And as they bear them away, the one helpless from fear, the other resisting with tiger-like fierceness, a distant clock strikes one, two, three!

CHAPTER LVII.

WHAT HAPPENED AT WARBURTON PLACE.

There is unusual stir and life in the Warburton Mansion, for Alan Warburton has returned, as suddenly and strangely as he went away.

He has made Mrs. French and Winnie such explanations as he could, and has promised them one more full and complete when he shall be able, himself, to understand, in all its details, the mystery which surrounds him.

After listening to the little that Alan has to tell—of course that part of his story which concerns Leslie is entirely ignored, as being another's secret rather than his—Mrs. French and Winnie are more than ever mystified, and they hold a long consultation in their private sitting-room.

Acting upon Alan's suggestion—he refuses to issue an order—Mrs. French has bidden the servants throw open the closed drawing-rooms, and give to the house a more cheerful aspect.

Wonderingly, the servants go about their task, and at noon all is done. Warburton Place stands open to the sunlight, a cheerful, tasteful, luxurious home once more.

"I don't see what it's all about," Winnie French says petulantly. "One would think Alan were giving himself an ovation." [418]

They lunched together, Alan, Mrs. French and Winnie. It was a silent meal, and very unsatisfactory to Alan. When they rose from the table, Mrs. French desired a few words with him, and Winnie favored him with a chilling salute and withdrew.

When she had gone, Mrs. French came straight to the point. She was a serious, practical woman, and she wasted no words.

They had discussed the situation, her daughter and herself, and they had decided. Winnie was feeling more and more the embarrassment of their present position. They had complied with the wishes expressed in Leslie's farewell note, as well as by himself and Mr. Follingsbee. But this strangeness and air of mystery by which they were surrounded was wearing upon Winnie. She went out so seldom, and she grieved and pined for Leslie and the little one so constantly, that Mrs. French had decided to send her away.

She had talked of this before, but Winnie had been reluctant to go. To-day, however, she had admitted that she wished to go; that she needed and must have the change.

It was not their intention to withdraw their confidence from Leslie, or from him, or to desert their friends. Mrs. French would stay at her post, but Winnie, for a time at least, should go away. Her relatives in the country were anxious to receive her, and Winnie was ready and impatient to set out.

And what could Alan say? While his heart rebelled against this decision, his reason endorsed it, and his pride held all protestation in check.

He offered a few courteous commonplaces in a constrained and embarrassed manner. [419]

He was aware that their unhappy complications must place himself and his sister-in-law in an unfavorable light. He realized that they had already overtaxed the friendship and endurance of Mrs. French and her daughter. In his present situation, he dared not remonstrate against this decision; he was already too deeply their debtor. He should regret the departure of Miss French, and he should be deeply grateful to Mrs. French for the sacrifice she must make in remaining.

All the same, he felt an inward pang as he left Mrs. French, and went slowly down to the drawing-room. Winnie had gone in that direction, and he was now in search of her, for, in spite of her scorn and his own pride, he felt that he must speak with her once more before she went away. She had decided to go this day, the day of his home-coming. That meant simply that she was leaving because of him.

Winnie was seated in a cavernous chair, looking extremely comfortable, and, apparently, occupied with a late magazine. She glanced up as Alan entered, then hastily resumed her reading.

Seeing her so deeply absorbed, he crossed the room, and looked out upon the street for a moment, then slowly turned his back upon the window and began a steady march up and down the drawing-room, keeping to the end farthest from that occupied by Winnie, and casting upon her, when his march brought her within view, long, earnest glances.

That she was wilfully feigning unconsciousness of his presence, he felt assured. That she should finally recognize that presence, he was obstinately determined.

But Winnie is not as composed as she seems, and his steady march up and down becomes very irritating. Lowering her book suddenly, she turns sharply in her chair. [420]

"Mr. Warburton, allow me to mention that your boots creak," she says tartly.

"I beg your pardon, Winnie."

"No, you do not! I can't see why you must needs choose this room for your tramping, when all the house is quite at your disposal."

Alan stops and stands directly before her.

"I came, Winnie, because you were here," he says gently.

"Well," taking up her book and turning her shoulder towards him, "if you can't make yourself less disagreeable, I shall leave, presently, because *you* are here."

Paying no heed to her petulant words, he draws forward a chair and seats himself before her.

"Winnie," he says gravely, "what is this that I hear from your mother: you wish to leave Warburton Place?"

"I intend to leave Warburton Place."

"Why, Winnie?"

"Pray don't make my name the introduction or climax to all your sentences, Mr. Warburton; I quite comprehend that you are addressing me. Why do I leave Warburton Place? Because I have staid long enough. I have staid on, for Leslie's sake, until I'm discouraged with waiting." There is a flush upon her cheeks and a hysterical quiver in her voice. "I have remained because it was *her* home, and at *her* request. Now that her absence makes you master here, I will stay no longer. It was you who drove her away with your base, false suspicions. I will never forgive you; I will never —"

There is a sound behind her. She has risen to her feet, and she sees that Alan is not heeding her words; his eyes are turned toward the door; they light up strangely, and as he springs forward, Winnie hastily turns. [421]

Standing in the doorway, pale and careworn but slightly smiling, is Leslie Warburton, and she holds little Daisy tightly clasped in her arms; Daisy Warburton surely, though so pallid, and clad in rags!

As Alan springs forward, she holds out the child.

"Alan, I have kept my word," she says gently, wearily; "I have brought back little Daisy."

It is the end of her wonderful endurance. As Alan snatches the child to his breast, she sinks forward and again, as on that last day of her presence here, she lies senseless at his feet.

But now his looks are not cold; he does not call a servant; but turning swiftly he puts the child in Winnie's arms, and kneels beside Leslie.

As he kneels, he notes the presence of a man in sombre attire, and behind him, the peering face of a servant.

"Call Mrs. French," he says, chafing the lifeless hands. "Bring restoratives—quick!"

And he lifts her tenderly, and carries her to a divan.

Then for a time all is confusion. There is talking, laughing, crying; Mrs. French is here, and Millie, and presently every other servant of the household.

For a moment, Winnie seems about to drop her clinging burden. Then suddenly her face lights up; she clasps Daisy closer, and drawing near, she watches those who minister to the unconscious one.

Leslie revives slowly and looks about her, making a weak effort to rise.

"Be quiet," says the stranger in the priestly garments, who has "kept his head" while all the others seem dazed; "be quiet, madam. Let me explain to your friends." [422]

As he speaks, Alan stoops over Winnie, and kisses the little one tenderly, but he does not offer to take her from Winnie's clasp. He turns instead and bends over Leslie.

"Obey him, Leslie," he says softly. "We will tell you how glad we are by and by."

She looks wonderingly into his face, then closes her eyes wearily.

"He can tell you," she whispers; "I—I cannot."

And then there is silence, while Alan, in compliance with a hint from the seeming Priest, motions the servants out of the room, all but Millie. Daisy has seized her hand and clings to it obstinately.

"Let her stay," whispers Winnie. And of course Millie stays.

When they have filed out, Alan moves forward, his hand extended to close the door, and then he stops short, his attitude unchanged, and listens.

There are voices outside, and approaching feet. He hears the remonstrance of a servant, and an impatient tone of command. And then a man strides into their presence, closely followed by two officers.

It is Van Vernet, his eyes flashing, his face triumphant; Van Vernet in *propia personne*, and wearing the dress of a gentleman.

He pauses before Alan, and delivers a mocking salute.

"Alan Warburton, you are my prisoner!"

With a cry of alarm, Leslie lifts herself from the couch. *She* knows what these words mean.

Alan starts as he hears this cry, and moving a pace nearer Vernet, says, in a low tone:



"Alan, I have kept my word; I have brought back little Daisy."—[page 421](#).

"I will go with you, sir; but withdraw yourself and men from this room; I—" [424]

Something touches his arm.

He turns to see Winnie close beside him, her face flushing and paling, her breath coming in quick gasps.

"Alan," she whispers, "what does he mean?"

Alan takes her quivering hand in his, and tenderly seeks to draw her back.

"He means what he says, Winnie. He is an officer of the law."

"A prisoner! *you!* Oh, Alan, why, why?"

The tone of anguish, and the look in Alan's eyes, reveal to Vernet the situation. This is the woman beloved by Alan Warburton; now his triumph over the haughty aristocrat will be sweet indeed. Now he can strike through her. Stepping forward, he lays a hand upon Alan's arm.

"Mr. Warburton," he says sternly, "I must do my duty. Bob, bring the handcuffs."

As the officer thus addressed moves forward, Winnie French utters a cry of anguish, and flings herself before Alan.

"You shall not!" she cries wildly. "You dare not! What has he done?"

Vernet looks straight at his prisoner, and smiles triumphantly.

"Mr. Warburton is accused of murder," he says impressively.

"Murder!" Winnie turns and looks up into Alan's face. "Alan, oh, Alan, it is not true?"

"I am accused of murder, Winnie, but it is *not* true."

"Oh, Alan! Alan! Alan!" She flings her arms about him clinging with passionate despair, sobbing and moaning pitifully.

And Alan clasps her close and a glad light leaps into his eyes. For one moment he remembers nothing, save that, after all her assumed coldness, Winnie French loves him. [425]

Still folding her in his arms, he half leads, half carries her to the divan where Leslie sits trembling and wringing her hands.

"Winnie, darling," he whispers, "do you really care?"

Then as Mrs. French extends her arms, he withdrew his clasp and turns once more toward Vernet.

"End this scene at once," he says haughtily. "I ask nothing at your hands, Van Vernet. Secure me at once; I am dangerous to you."

He extends his hands, and casts upon Vernet a look full of contempt. It causes the latter to feel that, somehow, his triumph is not quite complete after all. But he will not lose one single privilege, not abate one jot of his power. He takes the manacles from the hands of his assistant, and steps forward. No one else shall adjust them upon these white, slender wrists.

At that instant, as Leslie rises to her feet, uttering a cry of terror, there is a sudden commotion at the door; one of the officers is flung out of the way, and a strong hand strikes the handcuffs from Vernet's grasp.

He utters an imprecation and turning swiftly is face to face with Franz Francoise!

"You!" he exclaims hoarsely. "How came you here? Boys—"

The two officers move forward. But the seeming Priest, who has stood in the back ground a silent spectator, now steps before them.

"Hold on!" he says; "don't burn your fingers, boys.

"Answer me," vociferates Vernet; "who brought you here, fellow? What—" [426]

"Oh, it ain't the first time I've slipped through your fingers, Van Vernet," the new-comer says mockingly.

Then seeing the terror in Leslie's eyes, he snatches the wig and moustache from his head and face, and turns toward Alan.

"Mr. Warburton," he says courteously, "I see that I am here in time. I trust that you have suffered nothing at the hands of my colleague, save his impertinence. Van, your game is ended. You've played it like a man, but you were in the wrong and you have failed. Thank your stars that your final blunder has been nipped in the bud. Alan Warburton is an innocent man. The murderer, if you choose to call him such, is safely lodged in jail by now."

But Van Vernet says never a word. He only gazes at the transformed ex-convict as if fascinated.

Another gaze is riveted upon him also. Leslie Warburton leans forward, her lips parted, her face eager; she seems listening rather than seeing. Slowly a look of relieved intelligence creeps into her face, and swiftly the red blood suffuses cheek and brow. Then she comes forward, her hands extended.

"Mr. Stanhope, is it—was it *you*?"

"It is and was myself, Mrs. Warburton. There is no other Franz Francoise in existence. The part I assumed was a hideous one, but it was necessary."

"Stanhope!" At the name, Alan Warburton starts forward. "Are you Richard Stanhope?"



"Vernet utters an imprecation, and turning swiftly, is face to face with Franz Franchoise!"—page 425.

"I am." And then, as he catches the reflection of his half disguised self in a mirror, he gives vent to a short laugh. "We form quite a contrast, my friend Vernet and I," he says with a downward glance at his uncouth garments. "Mr. Warburton, we—for your brother's wife has done more than I—have brought back your little one. And I have managed to keep you out of the clutches of this mistaken Expert, or at least to prevent his 'grip' from doing you any serious damage. Of course you are anxious to hear all about it, but I am waited for at head-quarters; my story, to make it comprehensible, must needs be a long one, and I have asked Mr. Follingsbee to meet me there. He can soon put you in possession of the facts. Now a word of suggestion: This lady," glancing towards Leslie, "has been very ill; she is still weak. She has fought a brave fight, and but for her your little girl might still be missing. She needs rest. Do not press her to tell her story now. When you have heard my report from Mr. Follingsbee, you will comprehend everything."

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Leslie sinks back upon the divan, for she is indeed weak. Her face flushes and pales, her hands tremble, and her eyes follow the movements of the detective with strange fixedness. Then she catches little Daisy in her arms, and holding her thus, looks again at their rescuer.

Meantime, Van Vernet has seemed like a man dazed; has stood gazing from one to the other, listening, wondering, gnawing his thin under lip. But now he turns slowly and makes a signal to his two assistants, who, like himself, have been stunned into automatons by the sudden change of events.

"Stop, Vernet!" says Stanhope, noting the sign. "Just one word with you: Our difference, not to call it by a harsher name, our active difference began in this house, when, on the night of a certain masquerade, you contrived to delay me here while you stepped into my shoes. I discovered your scheme that night, and since then I have not scrupled to thwart you in every way; how, and by what means, it will give me pleasure to explain later. For the present, here, where our feud began, let it end. I shall give a full history of our exploits, yours and mine, to our Chief, to Mr. Follingsbee, and of course to these now present. This much is in justice to myself, and to you. I think that I have influence enough at head-quarters to keep the story from going further, and—don't fancy me too magnanimous—I shall do this for the sake of Mrs. Warburton, and of Mr. Alan Warburton, whom you have persecuted so persistently and mistakenly. As you have not succeeded in dragging their names into a public scandal, I shall withhold yours from public derision; and believe me when I say that our feud ends here. In the beginning, you took up the cudgel against me, to decide which is the better man. Put on the defensive, I have done my level best, and stand ready to be judged by my works. For the rest; I am saying too much here. I do not wish nor intend to humiliate you unnecessarily. If you will wait for me outside, I can suggest something which you may profit by, if you choose."

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There is nothing that Van Vernet can say in reply. He is conquered, and he knows it well. No scornful retort rises to his tongue, and there is little of his accustomed haughty grace in his step, as he turns silently and leaves the room, followed by his overawed, astounded and silent assistants.

At least he has the merit of knowing when he is defeated, and he accepts the inevitable in sullen silence.

Then Richard Stanhope turns again to Leslie.

"Madam," he says, with hesitating deference, "I have kept my word as best I could, and I leave you in the hands of your friends. Forgive me for any rudeness of mine, for any unpleasant

moments I may have caused you, while I was playing the part of Franz Françoise. We could have won our battle in no other way. To-morrow, I will place in your hands, through Mr. Follingsbee, some papers which will, I believe, prove most valuable. I trust that you will never again have need of the aid of a detective. Still, should you ever require a service which I can render, I am always at your command."

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With a hasty movement, as if in defiance of that which sought to hold her back, Leslie rises and extends both her hands.

"I cannot thank you," she says earnestly; "words are too weak. But no man will ever stand above you in my esteem. In time of trouble or danger, I could turn to you with fullest trust, not as a detective only, but as a friend, as a man; the truest of men, the bravest of the brave!"

Something in her voice vibrated pitifully, then choked her utterance. She trembled violently, and all the life went out of her face.

As she sank back, Stanhope gently released her hands, and stepping aside to make way for Mrs. French and Winnie, said in a low tone to Alan:

"She has been terribly tried; do not let her talk until she is stronger. She needs a physician's care."

"She shall have it," returned Alan, moving with Stanhope toward the door. "Mr. Stanhope, I—I know, through Mr. Follingsbee, of the interest you have taken in my welfare, but I realize to-day, as I could not before, how much your protection has been worth. I see what would have been the result of my remaining here. Vernet would have dragged me before the public, as a felon. But you are eager to go. I will not attempt to express my gratitude now; I expect and intend to see you again, here and elsewhere."

He extended his hand and clasped that of Stanhope with a hearty pressure.

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And then, with a sign to the sham Priest who had been his silent abettor, Stanhope hurried from the room and from the house.

Vernet was standing alone on the pavement. His two assistants, having been dismissed, were already some distance away.

"I have waited," he said, turning his face at Stanhope's approach, but without changing his position of body, "because I would not gratify you by running away. Have you anything further to add to your triumph?"

For a moment Stanhope's eyes seemed piercing him through and through. Then he smiled.

"When our Chief told me, Van," he said slowly, "that you had determined to try your strength against mine, I felt hurt, but not angry. That was a disappointment; it was the game you played at the masquerade which has cost you this present humiliation. But for that night, I swear to you, I should never have interfered, never laid a straw in your way. Let us move on, Van, and talk as we go."

He made a signal to the disguised officer standing near him, and that individual, accepting his dismissal by a quick nod, moved down the street with an alacrity quite unbecoming to his clerical garb.

Then Stanhope and Vernet, Victor and Vanquished, turned their steps in the opposite direction.

For some moments Vernet paced on in silence, savagely gnawing at his under lip. Then professional curiosity broke through his chagrin.

"I should like to know how you did it," he said, his face flushing.

Stanhope shrugged his shoulders and favored his interlocutor with an uncouth grimace.

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"Easy 'nuff," he said; "Hoop la!"

Vernet started and stared. "Silly Charlie!" he ejaculated.

"That's the ticket; how did I do the *role*?"

Vernet ground his teeth, and pondered over this startling bit of intelligence. At last:

"I understand why the Raid failed," he said, "but I don't comprehend—"

"Let me clear it up," broke in Stanhope. "You see, I had often explored those alleys, disguised as Silly Charlie; the character was one that admitted me everywhere. Before going to the masquerade, I had prepared for the night's work by putting my toilet articles in a carriage, and stationing it near the festive mansion. This I did to insure myself against possible delay, my programme being to drive to the agency, start my men, and then go on ahead of them, assuming my disguise as I went, for the purpose of reconnoitring the grounds for the last time, before leading the men into the alleys. You delayed me a little, and I had to deal with your 'Chinaman' in such a way as to leave in his mind a very unfavorable opinion of 'Hail Columbia.' But I was there ahead of you after all; for particulars—ahem! consult your memory."

His eyes twinkled merrily at the recollection of Vernet in the cellar trap, and he suppressed a

laugh with difficulty.

Again Vernet reddened and bit his under lip.

"Oh, you have outwitted me," he said bitterly, "but you will never be able to prove it was not Warburton who personated the Sailor that night."

"I won't try, for it was Warburton. I shall not explain his presence there, however; it was a mistake on his part, but he meant well. It was not he who did the killing."

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"You are bent on clearing Warburton, but how will you prove his innocence?"

"By a witness who saw Papa Francoise strike the blow."

"Who?"

"A girl known as Rag-picker Nance. She was in the custody of the Francoises when I made my appearance among them, in the character of Franz. They were afraid of her and kept her drugged and drunk constantly. They wanted to be rid of her, and I took her off their hands one dark night—the same night, by the by, that came so near being your last, in that burning tenement. Heavens! but that old woman is a tigress! In spite of me, she managed to fire the building. It came near being the end of you."

Vernet turned and eyed him sharply.

"Was it you," he asked, "who brought me out?"

Stanhope blushed, and then laughed carelessly to conceal his embarrassment.

"Well, yes," he admitted; "I'm sorry to say that it was. It was a great piece of impertinence on my part; but, you see, I had the advantage over the others of knowing that you were up there."

Vernet wore the look of a man who sees what he cannot comprehend.

"You're a riddle to me," he said. "You upset a man's plans and boast of it openly. You do him a monstrous favor, you save his life, and admit it with the sheepishness of a chicken-thief."

"Well, you see, I feel sheepish," confessed Stanhope flippantly. "I blush for so such Sunday-school sentiment. This habit of putting in my oar to interfere with the designs of Providence, is a weakness in a man of my cloth. Don't give me away, Van; *I'll* never tell of it."

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Light as were the words, Vernet well understood their meaning. The episode of the blazing tenement—his burnt-cork essay, with its ludicrous beginning and its almost tragical end—was to be kept a secret between them. When he could, in justice to others, Stanhope would spare his defeated rival.

Vernet's is not the only mind that would find it difficult to comprehend this generous nature, turning, for the sake of a less fortunate companion, his own brave deeds into a jest.

For some moments they walked on in silence. Then Vernet said:

"Of course, I see that there is a mystery between Alan Warburton and these Francoises, and that you intend to keep the mystery from publicity. But I don't see how you can prosecute this case without bringing Warburton into court."

"What case?"

"Papa Francoise, for the murder of the Jew."

"Say, the killing of the Jew; it was only manslaughter. We shall not press that case."

"What!"

"There is an older charge against Papa Francoise, and a weightier one."

"What is that?"

"It's the end of your search and mine, Van. When I arrested Papa Francoise to-day, I arrested *the murderer of Arthur Pearson!*"

"What!"

Van Vernet stopped short and faced his companion, his face growing ashen white.

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"When I arrested Papa Francoise to-day, I arrested *the murderer of Arthur Pearson!*"—[page 434](#).

"It's true, Van. In trying to relieve the sufferings of a dying man, I stumbled upon the clue I might have sought after, and failed to find, for an hundred years." [436]

They had halted at a street corner, and Van Vernet wheeled sharply about and made a step forward.

"Vernet, where are you going?"

"Nowhere; never mind me; we part here."

"Not yet, Van, I want to say—"

"Not now," broke in Vernet huskily. "You—have said enough—for once."

And he strode hurriedly down the side street.

"Poor Van," soliloquized Stanhope, as he gazed after the retreating figure. "Poor fellow; defeat and loss of fortune are too much for him."

And he turned and went thoughtfully on toward his own abode.

CHAPTER LVIII.

HOW STANHOPE CAME BACK.

Again we are in the office of the Chief of the detectives; in his private office, where he sits alone, looking bored and uncomfortable.

"Everybody late," he mutters, "and I hoped Follingsbee would come first."

He consults his watch, and finds that it is four o'clock. Four o'clock, and his interviews with the lawyer, the Australian, and the Englishman, yet to come.

Ten minutes more of waiting. Then the boy enters to announce Messrs. Parks and Ainsworth.

The Chief rises to receive them, and accepts their excuses in silence. [437]

"We drove about the city," says Walter Parks, "to pass away a portion of the time. An accident to our vehicle detained us."

Then the two men sit down and look expectantly at the Chief.

"Mr. Ainsworth," he says gravely, "I have news for you of Thomas Uliman and his wife; bad news, I regret to say."

"Bad news!" The Australian's face pales as he speaks. "Tell it at once, sir."

"Thomas Uliman and his wife are both dead."

The Australian bows his head upon his hand and remains silent.

"I can furnish you with dates and addresses that will enable you to make personal investigation.

In fact, I am every moment expecting a visit from the gentleman who was Mr. Uliman's legal adviser."

"Ah," sighs the Australian, "he may tell me where to find my little daughter."

"I have also," resumes the Chief, "a brief report from Mr. Vernet."

At these words Walter Parks leans forward.

"May we hear it?" he asks anxiously.

"Mr. Follingsbee, sir," says the office-boy at the door, in obedience to orders. And then Mr. Follingsbee enters.

"I think," says the Chief, after performing the ceremony of introduction, "I think that we may waive all other business until Mr. Ainsworth's anxiety has been, in a measure, relieved."

"By all means," acquiesced Walter Parks, suppressing his own feelings and withdrawing his chair a little into the background. [438]

Then John Ainsworth turns to the lawyer an anxious face.

"I am told that you knew Thomas Uliman and his wife," he begins abruptly.

"The late Thomas Uliman," corrects the lawyer; "yes, sir."

"How long have they been dead?"

"More than three years. They died in the same year."

"Allow me"—the Chief interrupts. "This gentleman, Mr. Follingsbee, is the only brother of the late Mrs. Uliman. He has just been informed of her death."

"Indeed!" Mr. Follingsbee rises and extends his hand. "I have heard her speak of her brother John," he says. "She grew to believe that you were dead."

"And my daughter, my little girl—did *she* think that, too?"

"Your daughter?" Mr. Follingsbee turns an inquiring look upon the Chief. "Pardon me, I—I don't understand."

"My child—I sent my child to her aunt—twenty years ago."

Again Mr. Follingsbee looks from one face to the other inquiringly, and an expression of apprehension crosses the face of the Chief.

"Mr. Ainsworth's daughter was less than three years old when she was sent to Mr. Uliman's care. In searching out the history of this family, I learn that they left an adopted daughter," the Chief explained.

Mr. Follingsbee coughs nervously.

"They left such a daughter," he says, hesitatingly, "but—she *was* an adopted daughter—the child of unknown parents."

Slowly John Ainsworth rises to his feet, his eyes turning appealingly from one to the other. [439]

"My God!" he exclaims hoarsely, "where then is my child?"

In silence the three who sympathize with this father, look at one another helplessly. And as they sit thus silent, from the outer office comes the sound of a clear, ringing, buoyant laugh.

Instantly the Chief starts forward, but the door flies open in his face, and Richard Stanhope stands upon the threshold.

"Stanhope!" exclaims the Chief; "why, Dick!"

"It's me," says Stanhope, seizing the proffered hand and giving it a hearty pressure. "Oh, and here's Mr. Follingsbee. Glad you are here, sir."

As he grasps the hand of the lawyer he notes, with a start of surprise the presence of Walter Parks.

"Mr. Parks!" he exclaims, "this is better than I hoped for."

And then his eyes rest upon John Ainsworth's disturbed countenance.

"Mr. Stanhope," the Chief says gravely, "this is Mr. Ainsworth, late of Australia. He is interested in your search almost equally with Mr. Parks."

The detective starts, and scans the face of the Australian with strange eagerness. Evidently his impressions are satisfactory for his face lights up as he asks:

"Not—not Mr. John Ainsworth, once the friend of Arthur Pearson?"

"The same," replies Walter Parks, for John Ainsworth seems unable to speak.

"Then," and he extends his hand to Mr. Ainsworth. "this is indeed a most opportune meeting. My [440]
lack of knowledge concerning you, sir, was my one anxiety this morning."

The four office-chairs being occupied, Stanhope perches himself upon the corner of the desk, saying, as the Chief makes a movement toward the bell:

"Don't ring, sir; I'm quite at home here."

And he looks "quite at home;" as cool, careless, and inconsequent as on the day when, in that same room, he had accepted with reluctance his commission for the masquerade.

He had, on leaving Vernet, taken time to wash the stains and pencilings from his face, and to don an easy-fitting business-suit. Stanhope is himself again: a frank, cheery, confidence-inspiring presence.

"It seems to me," he says, gazing from one to the other, "that there must be a special Providence in this meeting together, at the right time, of the very men I most wish to see. Of course, your presence is not mysterious," nodding toward his Chief, "and Mr. Follingsbee—"

"Is here at my request," interposed the Chief.

"Is he?" queries Stanhope. "I thought he was here at mine."

"I believe," says the lawyer, smiling slightly, "that your invitation did come first, Mr. Stanhope."

"I had a reason for desiring Mr. Follingsbee to be present at this interview," explains Stanhope. "And as I don't want to be unnecessarily dramatic, nor to prolong painful anxiety, let me leave my explanations to the last. Mr. Parks, I believe I have found Arthur Pearson's murderer."

"Oh!"



"Mr. Parks, I believe I have found Arthur Pearson's murderer!"—page 440.

Walter Parks springs up with a hoarse cry. John Ainsworth leans back in his chair, pale and panting. The Chief clutches at Stanhope's knee in excited eagerness, and waits breathlessly for his next words. [442]

Only Mr. Follingsbee, who has never heard of Arthur Pearson, remains unmoved.

"Are you sure?" articulates the excited Englishman. "Where is he? Who is he?"

"He is in a good, strong cell by this time, in the city jail."

"Oh!" gasps John Ainsworth.

"And his name is Franz Krutzer, although for many years he has been known as Papa Francoise."

"Good heavens!" cries Walter Parks. "Franz Krutzer! why, Stanhope—why, Ainsworth, it was that man's wife who had the care of your little girl!"

"Precisely," confirms Stanhope.

John Ainsworth leans forward and extends two trembling hands.

"You know," he whispers, "what do you know of my child?"

And then as Stanhope hesitates, he cries piteously: "Oh, tell me, is she alive?"

"I have not a doubt of it," says Stanhope, smiling. "She was alive half an hour ago."

"And safe and well?"

"And safe and well."

"Thank God! Oh, thank God!"

A moment he bows his head upon his hands, then lifts it and exclaims eagerly:

"Half an hour, you said; then—she must be near?"

"Yes; she is very near."

"Take me to her—tell me where to find her—at once."

"Mr. Ainsworth—" Stanhope drops from the desk and extends his hand to the anxious father —"your daughter is near and safe, but she has lately passed through a terrible ordeal. She is exhausted in body and mind. More excitement just now might do her serious harm. I beg you to be patient. When you have heard what I am about to tell these gentlemen and yourself, you will feel assured that you have a daughter to be proud of."

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With a sign of assent, the Australian sinks back upon his chair, making a visible effort to control his impatience. And Stanhope resumes his perch upon the desk.

"I must begin," he said, "with Mr. Follingsbee; and I must recall some things that may seem out of place or unnecessary. It was nearly six weeks ago," addressing himself to his Chief, "that you gave me a commission from Mr. Follingsbee."

The Chief nodded; and the lawyer stared as if wondering why that business need be recalled.

"I was to attend a masquerade," resumes Stanhope, "and to meet there the lady who desired my services. I was to be escorted by Mr. Follingsbee, and I decided to wear, for the sake of convenience, a dress I bought in Europe, and which I had there worn at a masquerade that I attended in company with Van Vernet. After accepting this commission, and receiving my instructions, I put on a rough disguise, and went to a certain locality which we had selected as the place for a Raid that would move the following night. I was to leave the ball at a very early hour, in order to conduct this Raid. And to make sure that none of my birds should slip through my fingers, I went, as I have said, on the night before, to reconnoitre the grounds. In a sort of Thieves' Tavern, where the worst of criminals assembled, I found a young fellow, evidently an escaped convict, in a hot fight with some of the roughs. I brought him out of the place, and as he seemed dying, I took him to a hospital, and left him in the care of the Sisters. The next day I prepared for the Raid, and the Masquerade."

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He pauses for a moment, and then resumes his history, telling first, how in company with Mr. Follingsbee, he had entered the Warburton Mansion; had been presented to Leslie and learned from her lips that she had a secret to keep; how Van Vernet had discovered his presence there, and the means the latter had taken to detain him, and to secure the leadership of the Raid.

Through the scenes of that night he led his amazed listeners; telling of Leslie's advent among the Françoise gang; of Alan's pursuit; the killing of Siebel; and the manner in which he had outwitted Vernet. Then on through the days that followed; relating how, disguised as Franz Françoise, he had appeared before the two old plotters; been accepted by them as the real Franz, and so dwelt among them.

"It was an odd part to play, and oddly suggested," he said. "It was just after Vernet's discovery of Alan Warburton's picture, when I was at a loss how to make my next move, that I went to visit my wounded ex-convict—the one, you will remember, whom I rescued from the Thieves' Tavern. I found him very low; indeed dying. He was in a stupor when I came, but soon passed into delirium, and his ravings attracted my attention, for he repeated over and over again the name of Krutzer, Franz Krutzer. Now, I had obtained from Mr. Parks here, a list of the names of all who composed that wagon-train, and I remembered the name of Franz Krutzer. And as he raved on, I gathered material enough to arouse my suspicions. He talked of a child whom they wished to keep; of money hoarded and strangely gotten; of beatings because of his eavesdropping. One moment he defied them in wild, boyish bravado, and babbled gleefully of what he had overheard. The next, he writhed in imaginary torture under the lash, vowing that he did not listen; that he would never tell. Then he was frightened by an approaching thunder-storm; he was crouching beneath his blankets, and crying out: 'Oh, don't make me go out—don't; I'm afraid. I won't! I won't!' Then he seemed to have returned from somewhere. 'Let me in!' he cried. 'I'm wet and cold; let me in, quick! Yes, he's there; up by the big rock. He's fast asleep and I didn't wake him.' Then, 'where is dad going?' he said. 'Oh, I don't, I don't; I didn't have the hammer.' Then, after more random talk: 'I won't tell; don't beat me. I'll never tell that I saw him there asleep. Oh, maybe he was dead then!'

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"I had not intended to remain, but I did. I never left him until his ravings ceased; until the end came. In his last moments, consciousness returned. For a time he was strong, as the dying sometimes are. He was very grateful to me because I had not taken him back to the prison to die, and he willingly answered a few questions concerning himself and his parents. I had entered him at the hospital under a false name, and under that name he was buried.

"Immediately after his death, I came and announced my readiness to devote myself exclusively to the Arthur Pearson case. And as soon as he was buried, I notified the prison-officials of his death,

and asked them to keep my information a secret for a time. I then made minute inquiries into the character and history of Franz Francoise, and learned enough from the penitentiary-officials, and from his imprisoned comrades—some of them, not knowing of his death, were very anxious to have him recaptured—to enable me to personate him as I did.

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“When I presented myself to the Francoises, it was with the double purpose of solving the Pearson mystery and finding Daisy Warburton, for I agreed with Mrs. Warburton in thinking that they had stolen the child. I could not then foresee the complications which would arise, nor did I dream of the formidable and fox-like enemy I was to encounter in Mamma Francoise. It had been my intentions to draw them into my net by letting them see that I knew, or remembered, too much about that Marais des Cygnes affair. But a few days of the old woman’s society convinced me that this would be a false move, and so I never once alluded to the days so far gone by. But the girl, Nance, was there, and although they would have concealed it if they could, they were obliged to tell me what I guessed before, that she was dangerous to them. Then I grew blood-thirsty, and professed a dislike for the girl. She was an encumbrance, and I offered to remove her. I took her away one night, and they imagined her at the bottom of the river, when in reality she was in the hands of merciful women, who brought back her senses, and who still have charge of her, until such time as I may want her to testify against Papa. My investigation was progressing slowly, when Mrs. Warburton appeared among us one night, and announced her purpose to remain until they gave back little Daisy. I had not planned for this; and during the night I thought the matter out and resolved in some way to make myself known to her, and to persuade her to return home and leave the rest to me. But in the morning she was in a raving delirium.”

He paused for a moment and then resumed, drawing a graphic picture of Leslie’s life among the Francoises; telling how Mamma had suddenly conceived her famous scheme of marrying Leslie to her son; of Leslie’s illness, and how he had contrived to make Dr. Bayless—who was really a good physician, albeit he had been implicated in some very crooked business—useful, and his abettor; giving a full account of all that had transpired.

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“Mrs. Warburton’s condition,” he concluded, “was such that I dared not confide in her, as I had intended. She was too ill and weak to exercise self-control, and we had too much at stake to run any risk. Indeed, I had begun to realize what an enemy we had to deal with, and to fear that we could only succeed by playing our desperate game to the end. In fact, there seemed no alternative. From the moment of Mrs. Warburton’s coming among us, Mamma’s watch was lynx-like. I could not have removed the lady or interposed to save her one moment’s uneasiness, without being myself betrayed. And then our situation would have been worse than ever; Mamma would have revenged herself upon us through the little girl. At every point, that vile old woman was a match for me. When she proposed the marriage, I pretended to withhold my consent until she should tell everything concerning the lady’s prospective fortune. For two long weeks I enacted the part of a blustering, drunken ruffian; cursing, quarrelling, threatening; before I extorted the truth from her. Some papers, that had accidentally fallen into her hands, had informed her that Mrs. Warburton—or the child, Leschen, she called her—was the daughter of one John Ainsworth. These same papers—they were those confided to her by Arthur Pearson—gave a specific account of the fortune John Ainsworth possessed at the time he left the mines.”

Again he paused, and the Australian lifted his head, speaking quickly.

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“I comprehend,” he said; “I sent such memoranda in a letter to my sister, and also told her of investments I proposed to make in Australia. I wanted her to understand my business affairs for little Lea’s sake.”

“And through these documents,” resumed Stanhope, “the shrewd old woman traced your Australian career, and knew that your fortune, in the twenty years of your exile, had swollen immensely. When she saw the advertisement of your lawyer, she took alarm. She must act promptly or, perhaps, lose her game. So she stole the little girl, hoping to use her as a means by which to compel Mrs. Warburton to yield up a large slice of her prospective wealth. And had her first plan been carried out, she would not have hesitated to find means to remove from her path the greatest obstacle to her ambition—yourself, Mr. Ainsworth.”

“I see,” said the Australian gravely. “Yes, it is quite probable.”

“The unexpected coming of myself, as Franz Francoise, and of Mrs. Warburton so soon after, caused them, or rather Mamma, to reconstruct her plan, as I have told you. And she reached the height and depth of her cunning by effectually concealing, from first to last, the hiding-place of the little girl. Nothing could wring this secret from her; on that subject she was absolutely dangerous. She never visited the child, so nothing was learned by shadowing her. Indeed, when she brought the child to the house to-day, she eluded the two men whom I had set to watch her, and did it so cleverly that they could not even guess, after her first feint, which way she went. And I was playing my last card without knowing that the child was in the house, when her pitiful prayer betrayed her presence.

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“Until then I had not intended to reveal myself; the men were to arrest Papa Francoise, and to try and make terms through him for the ransom of the child. One of my men was disguised as a Priest, and of course we had arranged to make Papa’s arrest cut short the wedding ceremony. Holt, Beale and the others have aided me wonderfully, though they do not yet know what it was all about.”

"They shall be generously rewarded," breaks in Walter Parks; "every man of them who has in any way assisted you."

Let the reader imagine all that followed: the praises showered upon Stanhope; the congratulations of each to all; the eager questions of Walter Parks; the desire of John Ainsworth to hear of his daughter's courage and devotion over and over again; the general jubilation of the Chief.

CHAPTER LIX.

AND LAST.

"But," queried Walter Parks, when question and comment had been exhausted, "are you sure that we have, even now, evidence enough to convict Krutzer, or Francoise, as you call him?"

"He has called himself Francoise from the day he and his worthy wife left the wagon-train," rejoined Stanhope. "He has never been Krutzer since. As for proof, we shall not lack that; but I think the old villain, if he lives to come to trial, will plead guilty. His wife possesses all the courage; he is cunning enough, but cowardly. He will not be allowed to see or consult with her; and free from her influence, he can be made to confess. Besides, the old woman has been wearing about her person a belt, which, if I am not mistaken, is the one stolen from the body of Arthur Pearson. It is of peculiar workmanship, and evidently very old. It contains papers and money."

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"If it is Pearson's belt," interposed Walter Parks, "I can identify it, and so could some others of the party if—"

"Was a certain Joe Blakesley a member of your band?" asked the Chief quickly.

"Yes."

"And could he identify this belt?"

"He could."

"Then Vernet has done something; he has found this Blakesley."

"Where?" asked the Englishman, eagerly.

"In California."

"Good!" cried Stanhope; "Van shall have the full benefit of his discovery."

And in the final summing-up, he did have the benefit, not only of this, his one useful exploit, but of all Stanhope's magnanimity. Through his intercession, Vernet was retained in the service he had abused; but he was never again admitted to the full confidence of his Chief, nor trusted with unlimited power, as of old. The question of supremacy was decided, and to all who knew the true inwardness of their drawn battle Richard Stanhope was "the Star of the force."

In regard to Papa Francoise, as we will still call him, Stanhope had judged aright.

He was possessed of wondrous cunning, and all his instincts were evil, but he lacked the one element that, sometimes, makes a successful villain: he was an utter coward. Deprived of the stimulus of the old woman's fierce temper and piercing tongue, he cowered in his cell, and fell an easy victim to his inquisitors. He was wild with terror when confronted by the girl Nance, risen, as it seemed to him, from the grave to denounce him. And when, after Nance had withdrawn, he faced Stanhope and his Chief, Walter Parks and John Ainsworth, he was as wax in their hands.

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Up to that moment the name of Arthur Pearson, and that long-ago tragedy of the prairies, had not been mentioned, and Papa believed that the killing of Siebel, with, perhaps, the stealing of little Daisy, were, in the eyes of the law, his only crimes. But when Walter Parks stood forth and pierced him through and through with his searching eyes, Papa recognized him at once, and fairly shrieked with fear.

And when he learned from Richard Stanhope, how Franz Francoise met his death, and that it was his son's dying words which condemned him, he threw himself before his accusers in a paroxysm of abject terror, and confessed himself the murderer they already knew him to be.

But Mamma was made of other timber. When consigned to her cell, she was silent and sullen until, in compliance with Stanhope's instructions, they attempted to take from her the belt she wore. Then her rage was terrible, and her resistance damaging to the countenances and garments of those who sought to control her.

She received Richard Stanhope with such a burst of fury, that restraint became necessary; and even when she sat bound and helpless before her accusers, her struggles were furious, and her imprecations, shrieked out between frothing lips, were horrible to hear.

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When she saw Walter Parks, she seemed to guess why he was there. And when she knew all: that Franz Francoise was surely dead, and how he died; that Papa had confessed everything; that John

Ainsworth had come back to claim his daughter, and lavish upon her his love and fortune—her ravings broke out afresh. She was frightful to see, and dangerous to all who ventured to approach. So they treated her as a mad woman, and for many days Mamma hurled unheard imprecations at her cowardly spouse, and cursed Richard Stanhope, arrayed in a strait-jacket.

But she was non-committal, baffling, from first to last. She would admit nothing, explain nothing, confess nothing. She defied them all.

On the following morning, at the Warburton Mansion, a happy group assembled to hear, from Mr. Follingsbee, all that was not already known to them of Stanhope's story.

How it was told, let the reader, who knows all, and knows Mr. Follingsbee, imagine.

Leslie was there, fair and pale, robed once more in the soft, rich garments that so well became her. Alan was there, handsome and humble. He had made, so far as he could in words, manly amends to Leslie, and she had forgiven him freely at last. Winnie too, was there, obstinately avoiding Alan's glance, and keeping close to Leslie. Mrs. French was there, smiling and motherly. And little Daisy was there, the centre of their loving glances.

In her childish way, the little one had told all that she could of her captivity.

She had gone to sleep upon the balcony of her Papa's house and in the arms of "Mother Goose." She had awakened in a big, dark room, whose windows were tightly shuttered, and where she could see nothing but a tiny bit of sky. A negress, who frightened her very much, had brought her food, and sat in the room sometimes. She had been lonely, terrified, desolate. [453]

The little that she could tell threw no light upon the mystery of her hiding-place, but it was all that they ever knew.

"I used to pray and pray," said Daisy, "but God didn't seem to hear me at all. And when I woke in that little room that smelled so bad—it was worse than the other—I just felt I must *make* God hear, so I prayed, oh, so loud, and then the door broke in, and that nice, funny man picked me up, and there was Mamma; and only think! God might have let me out long before if I had only prayed loud enough."

When Leslie learned her own story, and was brought face to face with her father, her cup of joy was full indeed. She was at anchor at last, with some one to love her beyond all others; with some one to love and to render happy.

"Oh," she said, "to know that my dear adopted parents were after all my own kindred; my uncle and my aunt! What caprice of their evil natures prompted those wretches to do me this one kindness?"

"They knew where to find the Ulimans," said her father, "and knew that they were wealthy. It was the easiest way to dispose of you."

"I suppose so," she assented, sighing as she thought of those dear ones dead; smiling again as she looked in the face of her new-found father.

In the present confidence, the happiness and peace, that surrounded her, Winnie French could not continue her perverse *role*, nor, indeed, was Alan the man to permit it. She had let him see into her heart, in that moment when he had seemed in such deadly peril, and he smiled down her pretty after-defiance. [454]

"You shall not recant," he said laughingly; "for your own sake, I dare not allow it. A young woman who so rashly espouses the cause of a swain, simply because he has the prospect of a pair of handcuffs staring him in the face, is unreliable, sadly out of balance. She needs a guardian and I —"

"Need an occupation," retorted Winnie, maliciously. "Don't doom yourself to gray hairs, sir; repent."

"It's too late," he declared; and they ceased to argue the question.

They would have *feted* Stanhope and made much of him at Warburton Place, for Alan did not hesitate to pronounce such a man the peer of any. But the young detective was perversely shy.

He came one day, and received Leslie's thanks and praises, blushing furiously the while, and conducting himself in anything but a courageous manner. Once he accepted Alan's invitation to a dinner, in which the Follingsbees, Mr. Parks and Mr. Ainsworth participated. But he took no further advantages of their cordially-extended hospitality, and he went about his duties, not quite the same Dick Stanhope as of yore.

On her part, Leslie was very reticent when Stanhope and his exploits were the subject of discussion, although, when she spoke of him, it was always as the best and bravest of men.

"Parks talks of returning to England," said her father one day at luncheon, "and he wants Stanhope to go with him." [455]

"Will he go?" asked Alan, in a tone of interest.

"I hope not; at least not until I have time to bring him to his senses."

"Why, Papa!" ejaculates Leslie.

"Has our Mr. Stanhope lost his senses, uncle?" queries little Daisy anxiously.

"You shall judge, my dear. He has refused, with unyielding firmness, to accept from me anything in token of my gratitude for the magnificent service he has rendered us."

"And," added Alan, "he has refused my overtures with equal stubbornness."

"But he has accepted the splendid reward promise by Mr. Parks, has he not?" queries Mrs. French.

"That, of course; he was bound to do that," said Mr. Ainsworth, discontentedly. "And in some way I must make him accept something from me. Leslie, my dear, can't you manage him?"

"I fear not, Papa." And Leslie blushed as she caught Winnie's laughing eye fixed upon her. "I don't think Mr. Stanhope is a man to be managed."

"Nonsense, Leslie," cries Winnie. "He's afraid of a woman; he blushes when you speak to him."

"Did he blush," queried Leslie maliciously, "when you embraced him that night of the masquerade?"

In the midst of their laughter, Winnie was mute.

One day, some weeks after the *denouement*, Stanhope, sauntering down a quiet street, met Van Vernet.

"Stop, Van," he said, as the other was about to pass; "don't go by me in this unfriendly fashion, if only for appearance's sake. How do you get on?" [456]

"As usual," replied Vernet indifferently, and looking Stanhope steadily in the face. "And you? somehow you look too sober for a man who holds all the winning-cards."

"I don't hold all the winning-cards, Van. Indeed, I'm inclined to think that I've lost more than I've won."

Vernet continued to regard him steadily and after a moment of silence, he said quietly:

"Look here, Dick, I'm not prepared to say that I quite forgive you for outwitting me—I don't forgive myself for being beaten—but one good turn deserves another, and you did me a very good turn at the end. You've won a great game, but I'm afraid you are going to close it with a blunder."

"A blunder, Van?"

"Yes, a blunder. You have devoted yourself, heart and soul, to a pretty woman, and you are just the man to fall in love with her."

"Take care, Van."

"Oh, I know what I am saying. On the day of our meeting at Warburton Place—the last meeting, I mean, when you figured as Franz Françoise—I saw what you missed. You may think that I was hardly in a state of mind for taking observations, but, in truth, my senses were never more intensely alert than while I stood there dumbly realizing the overthrow of all my plans. And I saw love, unmistakable love, shining upon you from a woman's eyes."

"Van, you are mad!"

"Not at all. It's a natural termination to such an affair. Why, man, you are deservedly a hero in her eyes. Don't be overmodest, Dick. If you care for this woman, you can win her."

He turned with these words, passed his amazed listener, and walked on. And Stanhope resumed his saunter, looking like a man in a dream. [457]

That evening he made his first voluntary call at Warburton place.

Alan and Winnie, two months later, were married, and Stanhope was among the wedding-guests.

"Warburton Place will have a new mistress, Mr. Stanhope," Leslie said to him. "I am going to abdicate in Winnie's favor."

"Entirely, Mrs. Warburton?"

"Entirely; I have fought it out, and I have conquered, after a hard struggle. Alan and Winnie, when they return, will reign here. Papa and I are already preparing our new home. We shall not be far away, and we will divide Daisy between us."

Later in the evening, Mrs. Follingsbee captured him and inquired:

"Have you heard Leslie's last bit of Quixotism?"

"No, madam."

"She has made this house over to Winnie as a bridal gift. And every dollar of her husband's legacy she has set aside for Daisy Warburton."

"I'm glad of it," blurted out Stanhope; and then he colored hotly and bit his lips.

When Alan and his fair little bride were installed as master and mistress of Warburton Place, Leslie and her father received their friends in a new home. It was not so large as the mansion Leslie had "abdicated;" not so grand and stately; but it was elegant, dainty, homelike.

"It suits me better," said Leslie to Stanhope. "The other was too grand. Winnie can throw upon her mother the burden of its stateliness, and Mrs. French will make a charming dowager. I am going to leave my past behind in the old home; and begin a new life in this."

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"Are you going to leave me behind, with the rest of your past?" he asked.

"No," she said smilingly, "you have not lost your value; and if I should turn you out, fresh troubles would arise. I should have to contend with Daisy, and Papa too."

And indeed Daisy had given him a prominent place in her affections.

"Some of my friends," he said after a pause, "are advising me to abandon the Agency, and embark in some quieter enterprise."

"Do you mean that they wish you to give up your profession? to cease to be a detective?"

"Yes."

"And what did you answer?"

"I am seeking advice; give it me."

"Any man may be a tradesman," she said slowly. "Nine tenths of mankind can be or are doctors, lawyers, clergymen. The men who possess the skill, the sagacity, and the courage to do what you have done, what you can do again, are very few. To restore lost little ones; to reunite families; to bring criminals to justice, and to defeat injustice,—what occupation can be nobler! If I were such a detective as you, I would never cease to exercise my best gifts."

"I never will," he said, taking her hand in his.



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"A man of your calling should have guessed that long ago!"—[page 461](#).

Months passed on; winter went and summer came. Walter Parks lingered in America, his society dearly valued by John Ainsworth and Mr. Follingsbee, his presence always a welcome one in Leslie's dainty parlors, and at Warburton Place. Winnie, who had been a saucy sweetheart and

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piquant bride, had become a sweetly winsome wife. John Ainsworth was renewing his youth; and Leslie, having passed the period of her widowhood, once more opened her doors to society.

Richard Stanhope had become a frequent and welcome guest at Leslie's home, and all his visits little Daisy appropriated at once to herself. Indeed she and Stanhope stood upon a wondrously confidential footing.

"Next month comes Mamma's birthday," said Daisy to him one day, when she sat upon his knee in Leslie's pretty flower-decked room. "We're going to have a festival, and give her lots of presents. Are you going to give her a present, Mr. Stanhope?"

"I don't know," he said, looking over at Leslie; "your Mamma is such a very particular lady, Daisy, that she might be too proud to accept my offering."

"Why," cried the child, "that's just what Uncle Ainsworth says about you: that you are too proud to take a gift from him, and it vexes him, too."

"Daisy, Daisy!" cried Leslie, holding up a warning finger.

"Your uncle is a very unreasonable man, Daisy," laughed Stanhope. "Now tell me, do you think I had better offer your Mamma a birthday present?"

"Why"—and Daisy opened wide her blue eyes—"Uncle Alan says that everybody who loves Mamma will remember her birthday. Don't you love my Mamma?"

"Yes," said Stanhope slowly, and fixing his eyes upon Leslie's face, "I love her very much."

Leslie's cheeks were suffused with blushes, and she sat quite silent, with downcast eyes. [461]

"Daisy," said Stanhope, putting the child down quickly, "go to your uncle Ainsworth, and tell him that I have changed my mind; that I want the best part of his fortune. Run, dear."

And as the child flew from the room, he rose and stood before Leslie.

"If your father yields to my demand," he said softly, "what will be your verdict?"

A moment of stillness. Then she lifts her brown eyes to his, a smile breaking through her blushes.

"A man of your calling," she said, "should have guessed that long ago!"

Papa Françoise never came to trial. His terror overcame his reason, and in his insanity he did what he never would have found the courage to do had he retained his senses. He hanged himself in his prison cell.

But Mamma lived on. Through her trial she raved and cursed; and she went to a life-long imprisonment raving and cursing still. Her viciousness increased with her length of days. She was the black sheep of the prison. Nothing could break her temper or curb her tongue. She was feared and hated even there. Hard labor, solitary confinement, severe punishment, all failed, and she was at last confined in a solitary cell, to rave out her life there and fret the walls with her impotent rage.

Millie, the faithful incompetent, remained in Leslie's service until she went to a home of her own, bestowed upon her by a good-looking and industrious young mechanic.

Nance, the one-time drunkard, became the object of Leslie's pitying care, and did not relapse into her former poverty and evil habits. [462]

The Follingsbees, the Warburtons—all these who had been drawn together by trials and afflictions—remained an unbroken coterie of friends, who never ceased to chant Stanhope's praises.

And little Daisy passed the years of her childhood in the firm belief that,

"God will do anything you want him to, if you only pray loud enough."

THE END.

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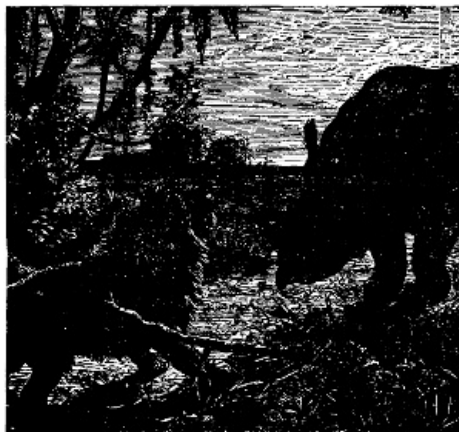
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"God's greatness shines around our incompleteness,
Round our restlessness His rest!"

A SLAVER'S ADVENTURES

ON SEA AND LAND.



"We saw many species of wild animals."
Page 89.

By **WM. H. THOMES,**

Author of "THE GOLD HUNTERS' ADVENTURES IN AUSTRALIA," "THE BUSHRANGERS," "RUNNING THE BLOCKADE,"
etc., etc.

ILLUSTRATED WITH FORTY ELEGANT ENGRAVINGS.

THE BUSHRANGERS

as I turned, I managed to keep my eyes on the shelf overhead, so that I could note all the movements that took place. I was repaid for my trouble, for as I fell back and pressed my hand on my side, as though fatally wounded, I had the satisfaction of hearing a triumphant laugh issue from the thicket overhead; and the next instant the repulsive features of Moloch were thrust through the branches of the trees, and he seemed to enjoy the appearance which I presented.

"Bah! you fools!" cried the rascal, in a mocking tone, "do yer think that yer can take me? I vos too quick for yer. Had yer come an hour sooner, yer might have caught me nappin'. But now I jist spits at yer. Ah, fools, I has the voman, and I means to keep her."

I seldom miss with a revolver, especially when the object at which I aim is within reasonable distance; but I must confess that I was nervous and full of revengeful feelings, or perhaps I was too hasty; for I suddenly raised my pistol and fired at the fiend who was grinning at me from amid the branches of the balsam trees. I missed the scoundrel, and yet I would have given a thousand dollars to have sent a bullet crushing through his brain, and killed him on the spot.

"Ho, ho! yer didn't come it," laughed the fiend. "Vait a minute and I'll make yer see somethin' that'll open yer eyes."

He disappeared, and while he was gone I changed position, so that he could not single me out for another shot, in case he desired to test his old horse-pistols.

"You ain't hit, is you?" whispered Hackett and Hopeful in anxious tones.

"No," I answered.

Before they could congratulate me, Moloch, the devil, appeared, bearing in his arms the almost lifeless form of poor, dear Amelia Copey, whose dress was torn and soiled, and whose hair was hanging down in tangled masses, neglected and uncared for.

"Look!" yelled the fiend, in a triumphant tone; "'ere's the girl vot I loves, and she vill love me afore long, or I'll know the reason vy."

As he spoke he held the fair form in such a manner that

THE BUSHRANGERS.

A Yankee's Adventures During His Second Visit to Australia.

BY WM. H. THOMES,

Author of "The Gold Hunters in Australia," "The Bushrangers," "Running the Blockade," etc., etc.



Moloch appeared, bearing the almost lifeless form. "Look," yelled the fiend, in a triumphant tone.

sides would be equally well guarded, then glanced over the excited crowd, in hopes that Dan would array himself on our side—but that enterprising gentleman had suddenly disappeared, and left us to our fate.

“Stand back,” shouted the inspector; “it will be the worse for you. There’s many of you present who know me, and know that I have a large force of policemen on hand. If you strike a blow, not one of you shall escape justice.

“Unbar the door as quickly as possible,” whispered the inspector, after getting through with his threatening speech.

I lifted the heavy gum wood bar from its place, and then raised the latch, expecting that it would yield, but to my surprise it did not—it was locked, and the key in the pocket of the doorkeeper, who had made his escape from the room in company with Dan.

I almost uttered a groan of agony when I made the discovery, and to add to the perplexity of our situation, the ruffians must have understood our case, and known that the key was never left in the lock, for they uttered a discordant and ironical hoot, and then a shout of sardonic laughter.

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t be all night in getting that door open,” cried Fred, nervously, and I will confess that I also partook of the same complaint.

“Now for a rush—cut them to pieces,” exclaimed many voices; but I observed that the cries came from those who were farthest from us, and out of the reach of our pistols, which we were forced to display, in hope of keeping the robbers at a respectful distance.

“Is the door unbarred?” asked Mr. Brown, turning half round, and exposing his side to the knives of the crowd, and quick as thought, a man sprang forward to begin the work of bloodshed; but sudden as were his movements, they were anticipated, for I raised the heavy bar, which I had not relinquished, and let it fall upon his head with crushing force.

The poor devil fell at our feet without uttering a groan, although many spasmodic twitchings of his nerves showed that he was not killed outright. His long knife narrowly missed the side of the inspector, and for the first attempt at our annihilation, it was not to be despised.

The wretches uttered yells of rage when they saw their comrade fall, but none seemed inclined to assume the leadership and begin the attack in earnest.

Not one of their motions escaped us, and as long as they were disposed to brandish their knives at a distance, we did not choose to carry matters to extremities; but change of tactics was suddenly resorted to on the part of our opponents, that placed us in no little peril.

All the tumblers, bottles, and decanters of the bar were taken possession of by the savage scoundrels, and the first intimation that we had of the fact was the crushing of a bottle (empty, of course—they were not the sort of men to throw away liquor of any kind) against the door just above our heads.

The fragments were showered upon our faces and shoulders, before we had time to consider on the matter another bottle flew past my head, and hit our prisoner upon one of his shoulders, injuring

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By WM. H. THOMES, author of “The Bushrangers,” “The Gold Hunters in Europe,” “A Whaleman’s Adventures,” “Life in the East Indies,” “Adventures on a Slaver,” “Running the Blockade,” etc., etc.



"Now for a rush.—Cut them to pieces!"

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A Whaleman's Adventures

AT SEA, IN THE SANDWICH ISLANDS AND CALIFORNIA.



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ELEGANTLY AND PROFUSELY ILLUSTRATED.



"For de Lord's sake, don't do dat. Dis nig
is almost cut to pieces now. Him legs
is one mass of rings."

The Gold Hunters in Europe

—OR—

THE DEAD ALIVE.



"Do you give yourselves in custody?"

By WM. H. THOMES,

Author of "THE GOLD HUNTERS' ADVENTURES IN AUSTRALIA," "THE BUSHRANGERS," "RUNNING THE BLOCKADE,"
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Transcriber's Notes:

Inconsistencies in spelling and hyphenation have only been corrected where one variant was clearly used more often than the other (*aint* was changed to *ain't*, etc.). *Warburton place* has been changed to *Warburton Place*. Note that both *Joe Blakesly* and *Joe Blakesley* occur in the text.

Minor typographical errors have been corrected silently. More important changes made to the text:
page 90: *Mrs. Follinsbee* changed to *Mrs. Follingsbee*;
page 173: *Lerchen* changed to *Leschen*;
page 194: *And won't do* changed to *And it won't do*;
page 220: *CHAPTER XX* changed to *CHAPTER XXX*;
CHAPTER LXVI and *CHAPTER LXVIII* changed to *CHAPTER XLVI* and *XLVIII*, respectively;
page 449: *Beal* changed to *Beale*.

Some pages had poorly printed parts; here a 'best guess' has been used to complete the text (page 159, some parts of the advertisements at the end of the book).

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