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THE COWARD BEHIND THE CURTAIN

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

**THE GIRL AND THE MIRACLE
IN THE SERVICE OF LOVE**

A DUEL
THE MARQUIS OF PUTNEY
THE TWICKENHAM PEERAGE
A METAMORPHOSIS
BOTH SIDES OF THE VEIL
MARVELS AND MYSTERIES
THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN
THE GODDESS: A DEMON
THE JOSS: A REVERSION
THE ROMANCE OF A MAID OF HONOUR
THE BEETLE: A MYSTERY
A WOMAN PERFECTED

THE COWARD BEHIND THE CURTAIN

BY

RICHARD MARSH

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THE COWARD BEHIND THE CURTAIN

CHAPTER I

[DOROTHY SETS OFF WITH HER GUARDIAN](#)

The girls were in the convent garden, when word came that Dorothy Gilbert was wanted. Dorothy was walking with Frances Vernon. Ever since she could remember her world had been that garden, with its shaded walks and its high walls; never before had a visitor come to her. The moment she was told that someone desired her presence she turned to Frances, exclaiming:

"It is he!"

With characteristic impetuosity Frances threw her arms about her, remarking as she did so:

"Just as we were speaking of him!"

As if there were anything strange in that. The strangeness would have been if he had come when they had not been speaking of him; for, of late, they had spoken of little else. Elsie Farquhar, who had brought the message, pressed it home.

"You had better be quick, Dorothy. Sister Celestine said you were to hurry."

So Dorothy hurried, her tall slender figure held very straight, her pretty head a little in the air, in her eyes a gleaming light. She believed herself to be passing from a world she knew into one of which she had dreamed. But she was mistaken; she was going into a world of which she had not dreamed. Sister Celestine met her at the door.

"It is Mr Emmett?" she inquired.

"Yes," replied the Sister, "it is Mr Emmett."

Something in her tone; on her face; in her glance; struck quick-witted Dorothy.

"What is the matter? Why do you look at me like that? What is he like?"

"Who am I that I should be able to tell you what he is like, when I have seen him for scarcely five minutes?"

The Sister smiled, it seemed to Dorothy, not with that brightness which she knew so well. The young lady's mental processes were rapid. She divined, on the instant, that Sister Celestine was disappointed with Mr Emmett. As she went with the Sister from the garden to the guest-room she wondered why. Would she be disappointed also?--after all her talks with Frances?--her communings with herself? She had fashioned the unknown Mr Emmett in so many shapes that she could not have told which of them she expected to see; certainly it was not the person she actually saw. Her knowledge of men had practically been restricted to the personages in the storybooks which found their way into the convent precincts. These had to undergo a severe examination before being admitted, as one bad character was enough to damn them; and, as the conventual standard of masculine morals was peculiar, even if the individuals who figured in the tales were not drawn from imagination they certainly were not taken from life. One requirement all the men in the books had to satisfy: they all had to be gentlemen, or what the convent censor took to be gentlemen. Dorothy Gilbert might have had more or less vague doubts, but it never had been brought clearly home to her that a man could be anything but a gentleman till she entered that guest-room and was introduced to Mr Emmett. When she saw him, any illusions she may have had upon that point were shattered at once and for ever.

A big, burly man was sitting on the edge of the table. One foot rested on the floor, the other dangled in the air. He did not move when she entered; he merely looked round at her and stared. His great bald head had a narrow fringe of sandy hair which was just turning grey. He wore a huge sandy moustache, whose hue was more than matched by his head and face. A large, angry-looking spot was on the left of his big nose, a smaller one was on his right cheek near the ear. His eyes were so bloodshot that it was not easy to tell what colour they really were; they reminded her of the eyes of a wicked giant who had played a prominent, and disreputable, part in a fairy tale she had once read. Indeed, the whole man recalled that giant; she had an uncomfortable feeling that he might, at any moment, set about the--to him--agreeable business of devouring her. Sister Celestine performed the ceremony of introduction.

"This, Mr Emmett, is Dorothy Gilbert."

Still he kept his seat on the edge of the table, and his hands in the pockets of the huge overcoat which he wore, although the weather was so warm. Only he stared at Dorothy a little harder.

"No! You don't say! Well I'm damned!"

There was that in his voice, his words, and his manner which affected Dorothy almost as if he had struck her. Sister Celestine was shocked nearly into speechlessness.

"Sir!" was all she could say.

"Beg pardon, I'm sure, forgetting where I was; I suppose you ladies don't do much of that sort of thing in here." He addressed himself to Dorothy, with what apparently was meant to be

jocosity. "So you're Bully Gilbert's girl? I shouldn't have thought it; it only shows that you never can tell. I don't know where you get your looks from--not from him. Why, you really are---- Do you know who I am?"

"Sister Celestine says you are Mr Emmett."

"Georgie Emmett, your father's best friend--in fact, his only friend, because he was not the kind of person who gathers them round. When, some nine months ago, he departed this life, he left it owing me a hatful of money; and I'm damned--beg pardon, I'm blessed if he hadn't the cheek and impudence, by way of wiping off his owings, to appoint me your one and only guardian; as if you were a little bit of something which could be turned into cash. I'd have come and looked at you before if I'd known you were so well worth looking at; but who would have guessed that your father would have had a girl with a face like yours. However, here I am at last; and I daresay you won't be sorry to say good-bye to this queer old shanty, and to come with me to have a peep at what the world looks like outside. I rather think there aren't many men who can show you more of it than I can. Anyhow, I've come to take you along; so run upstairs and put your hat and jacket on, and your things in your box. My car's outside, a 60 F.I.A.T.--if there's anything on earth can move it's her: but that's no reason why she should be kept waiting, so if you can manage to do your packing inside ten minutes I'll be obliged."

Sister Celestine and Dorothy looked at each other, as if both were at a loss for words; as, indeed, they were. It seemed incredible that Dorothy should be expected to quit, at a moment's notice, the place which had sheltered her her whole life long; to go, with this uncouth stranger, she knew not where. The Sister asked where he proposed so take her; his reply could scarcely have been vaguer. "Oh, for a bit of a run round; just now I'm rather at a loose end; my future movements depend upon circs."

To the Sister's orderly mind the prospect seemed uncomfortably nebulous; yet there seemed nothing to do but to let the girl go. The man was her lawful guardian. In his method of paying the convent dues the late Mr Gilbert had been erratic. Quite a considerable sum had been owing when he died. During the intervening months that sum had become still larger. Taking out a fat pocket-book, Mr Emmett paid all demands with bank-notes: in that respect nothing could have been more satisfactory. The convent, which could ill afford to lose the money, had become anxious; the sight of those bank-notes removed a burden from the Sister's mind and Dorothy was sent upstairs, to put her hat and jacket on, and her things into her box. The process was not a lengthy one. She still had the small wooden box which she had brought to the convent as a tiny child. But her stock of clothes had not grown much larger; those which would not go into the box were wrapped in a sheet of brown paper. As, theoretically, Frances Vernon assisted in the business of packing, she plied Dorothy with questions. The answers she received were very short; gradually Frances became conscious that some subtle change had taken place in her friend during the last few minutes.

"What is he like?" she demanded; as Dorothy had done of Sister Celestine. In her answer Dorothy paraphrased the Sister.

"How can I tell you, when I have been acquainted with him only ten minutes?"

Frances leaped to conclusions as she herself had done.

"I know what that means--it means that he's horrid. Is he very horrid?"

"I didn't say he was horrid."

"No, but you didn't say he wasn't. You might at least tell me what he looks like. Dolly, do!"

And Dolly did. She painted Mr Emmett exactly as he had appeared to her. She had a pretty knack of description; by the time the portrait was finished Miss Vernon was gazing with wide-open eyes.

"Why," she cried, "he must be perfectly hideous!"

"He is not," admitted Dorothy, "what some people would call good-looking."

"Fancy going you don't know where with such a man as that!--you who have always said that in a man you must have beauty of mind, and soul, and form!"

Dorothy bent over the frock she was folding.

"We have been taught that a plain casket may contain a priceless jewel."

She might have been taught it; yet she doubted if Mr Emmett was a casket of that kind. Before long she was sure that he was not. Her box, whose appearance produced uncomplimentary remarks from her guardian, was fastened on the top of the car; presently she had quitted the convent, with all her worldly possessions. Mr Emmett was his own driver. She sat beside him, on the front seat, while the chauffeur sat behind. She would have preferred to have had it the other way round, but it was settled for her without her having a voice in the matter. A big coat was slipped over her shoulders; she was on the seat; a rug was wrapped round her knees; they were

off; before she clearly realised what had happened; certainly before she had said all the adieux she would have liked to say. It was all like some strange dream; whose strangeness was accentuated by the subsequent flight of the throbbing monster through the air.

What was the name of the town at which they stayed that first night she never knew. She had not curiosity enough to ask; no one volunteered the information. After dinner, which was to her a wholly unaccustomed feast, at which she ate scarcely anything, in spite of Mr Emmett's well-meant gibes and jeers, she stole up to bed as soon as she could; to a big bed; in a big room, in the old inn, there she lay, a lonely, forlorn maiden; thinking, puzzling, doubting, wishing, with all her heart, that she was back again in the safe shelter of the convent. She wished it often during the days and weeks which followed. She was a young girl, and, like a young girl, all agog to stand on tiptoe, if needs be, and open the windows which would enable her to look into the house of life. Under normal circumstances, that motor cruise might have been to her one long delight; but the circumstances were abnormal; so that for long afterwards a motor car stood for her as a sort of synonym for a nightmare.

Everything was spoilt by Mr Emmett's presence. From the first moment he had impressed her disagreeably; that impression grew with each hour that she spent in his near neighbourhood. The trouble was that it was so hard to get away from him. He would have her sit beside him on that front seat; ignoring utterly her reiterated requests to be allowed to sit behind. During the first days they motored continually; stopping in the daytime only to eat and drink--principally, so it seemed to Dorothy, where Mr Emmett was concerned, for the latter. The quantity he drank amazed and frightened her; always, when night fell, he had drunk too much. During the day the liquor he consumed had an unhappy effect upon his driving. He was quick enough to perceive that he had not inspired the girl with sentiments of affection; and this he resented. But, instead of setting himself to get the better of any distaste she might have for him, he seemed to take a malicious pleasure in paying her out for entertaining a feeling of the kind. Discovering that she felt a not unnatural girlish timidity in her new position as passenger on a motor car, he went out of his way to increase instead of lessen it, so that, before long, her timidity became actual terror. Nearly always he took the car along at what appeared to her to be a dangerous speed; as the day advanced, and the drinks multiplied, the speed grew more. At first she remonstrated, feebly enough; but he only laughed, and pressed the car still faster. Afterwards she sat silent; but she could not prevent her cheeks from turning white, or her mouth from shutting tighter. When he saw these signs he delighted in taking risks which made her heart stand still. One afternoon he knocked down a child in a village street on the other side of Blois. At first, in her agony, she thought it was killed; but it appeared that only its arm was broken. When the people came flocking round he gave the parents two thousand francs in bank-notes; one could not but feel that they would have been willing to have their own arms broken on those terms. He was lavish enough with his money. They spent that night in Tours. The next day he offered her a wad of notes, and suggested that she should go into the town and provide herself with a sufficient wardrobe. She had not realised till lately how scanty it really was; continual travelling made drains on her resources which she found it hard to meet. But he offered her cash in a way which jarred on her every nerve; she would not buy herself clothes with money which came from him. When she made this clear to him he called her an adjectived fool; and broke into a torrent of language from which she fled in terror.

At Lyons he tried to kiss her; whereat she burst into a frenzy of rage which surprised herself, and startled him. It was in the hall of the hotel after dinner, just as she was going up to bed; always, so soon as dinner was over, she went straight to her room. Billson, the chauffeur, happened to enter at the moment, to get orders for the morrow. Emmett, turning, saw him grinning at his discomfiture.

"By----!" he cried, eager to vent his fury on someone. "If you don't take care I'll kill you!"

But Billson never flinched; and he continued to grin. He was a shortish, youngish man, with a white, clean-shaven face, and black hair, which he wore parted in the middle. He seemed to have a gift for silence; Dorothy had hardly heard him speak a dozen times. She had a feeling that, for some cause, his master stood in awe of him. Although he went on grinning, Mr Emmett made no attempt to carry out his threat--at least, while she was flying up the stairs.

They spent some days at Aix-les-Bains. There he made to her his first proposal of marriage; he was in his cups at the time. To say that she refused him is to say little. When she gained the sanctum of her own apartment she was in an agony of shame and distress. Her dilemma was not a pleasant one. It seemed to her that it was just as impossible to remain in this man's company as it was to escape from it. She was penniless, friendless. How was she to get away from him? To whom was she to turn? Her ignorance was pitiable. For all she knew, his position as her guardian gave him powers over her against which it was vain to struggle. If she ran away from him, she thought it very probable that he could compel her to return; in which case her last plight would be worse than her first. Besides, with no money in her pocket, where could she run? Despite her horror of the man, to her, in her childlike ignorance, it seemed as if he had gripped her to him with bonds of steel.

CHAPTER II

THE CURTAIN

When they landed in England it was to her as if she had been for years with Mr Emmett, and Billson, and the car; though, in reality, they had only been associated for a very few weeks. She felt as if, during those interminable weeks, the best of her life had gone from her, and already she had grown old, before she was eighteen. She had forgotten how to smile; at night she could not sleep; her head was always aching; her nerves were in such a state of tension that she was beginning to be afraid of the sound of her own voice; the world had become to her a prison from which there was no way out. She had not been to England since she was a small child; returning to it was like coming a strange country. She would have forgotten her own tongue had not so many of the girls in the convent been English. They went up to town on the inevitable motor; on the way she kept looking about her with eyes which, in spite of herself, would grow dim. She had often dreamed of the journey she would make, one day, to London; she had never dreamed that it would be like this. They put up that night in a huge railway station hotel. On the morrow, for once, they parted company with the motor; Mr Emmett took her with him to a midland town by rail. Some race meeting was on; Dorothy had a hazy notion that her guardian had something to do with horses and with racing; it was a subject of which she had heard him speaking more than once. Some horsey acquaintances travelled with him in the same compartment; they played bridge all the way, to Dorothy's relief; she was glad that they should do anything which would keep them from speaking to her.

Mr Emmett took apartments at the principal hotel. There, in the private sitting-room, after a *tête-à-tête* dinner, he proposed to her again. He was more sober than he sometimes was at that hour; perhaps, on that account, he expressed himself with a clearness which she found appalling. In various fashions he had asked her again and again to marry him since that first time at Aix-les-Bains. She had begun to understand that not only was he a man who would not take No for an answer, but also that he was not likely to stick at anything which would enable him to gain an end he had in view. If she had had any doubts upon that latter point they were dissipated then. He did not so much ask her to be his wife, as tell her that she would have to be his wife; informing her, with complete candour, that if she was not an utter fool she would grasp that fact without any further fuss and nonsense. He added that, when she was his wife, he would give her a good time--an A1 time. There wasn't a better-natured fellow going, if you rubbed him the right way, nor a more generous one--he would give his wife all she wanted, and more, if she was only nice to him--that was all he wanted her to be--nice to him. He had sacks full of money--ask anyone who knew George Emmett if he was a poor man. Why, he thought nothing of lending anyone twenty or thirty thousand pounds, if the security was decent--that was all he asked, decent security; and, he went on with a grin, a chance of making cent. per cent. He might tell her, in confidence, that he had his fingers round the throats of more people than anyone had an idea of--all sorts of people, some of them the highest in the land. He never talked; even when he was drunk he kept his tongue off delicate subjects; but if he were to talk he could mention names, male and female, which would make her sit up straight. There was scarcely a man or woman who had anything to do with horses who did not sometimes find himself, or herself, in a tight corner about settling day. Those were the times they came to him. The number of services he had rendered of that kind--well, they'd fill a book. Everybody knew Georgie Emmett was a friend in need when a bad settlement had to be faced. He winked, and Dorothy shuddered.

Knocking off the ash from his cigar he filled himself another glass of champagne. If she had only had the courage she would have sprung from her chair and rushed from the room; but just then all her courage seemed to have deserted her. This man seemed to have for her the fascination which a snake is said to have for the victim it proposes to swallow. The worst of it was that, despite herself, his influence over her seemed to be momentarily increasing, as if he were weaving a spell which, as it proceeded, placed her more and more at his mercy.

It was not, he went on, as if her father was anything, or anyone. He was not one to say a word to a child against her father, but she had only to think of how he had treated her to know what sort he was. What kind of a parent had he been to her? How often had he written to her? How many times had he been to see her? What had he ever given her? What had he ever done for her? He dare bet that the bills he had paid for her keep in the convent had been paid with other people's money. There was no disguising the fact that Bully Gilbert was a regular rip--and there it was. Not only had she not got a penny of her own, but she had no right to the clothes she stood up in--and pretty things they were to call clothes. Let her say the word, and she should have the run of the Rue de la Paix; then she'd know what clothes were. Why, as things stood, there wasn't a chambermaid in that hotel who wasn't in a better position than she was ever likely to be, if she was left to herself. And yet here he was, ready and willing to marry her. He'd get a special licence tomorrow; or, if she liked, he'd have the banns put up in church--any church she chose to name; though, for his part, he never could see what was the pull in going to church to be

married. She might take a long day's walk without meeting one woman who wouldn't snatch at the chance of getting him; women of birth, and with money in their pockets too. What he saw in her, hanged if he knew himself; but he did see something. The first moment he set eyes on her he'd made up his mind he'd marry her--that's why he took her away from that adjectived convent--and marry her he would. So what was the use of talking? Men and women were curious creatures. The sooner she said Yes the more comfortable it would be for everyone. So she wasn't to be silly, but was to come and kiss him, and sit on his knee, and he'd put a prettier ring on her finger than she had ever dreamed of seeing there. Here it was--what did she think of it?

From a small leather case he took a ring which was set with diamonds; holding it out, moving it so that as the lights fell on it from different angles the stones sparkled and gleamed; luring her with it as an angler tries to lure a fish with the bait which hides the hooks. She sat, her slender body pressed against the back of her chair, gripping the sides of it with both hands, looking at him with staring, hopeless eyes. All the strength seemed to have gone from her, as if this man had drawn it all out of her, as out of a well, and left her dry. His vitality was crushing hers; in the fight to hold her own she was beaten; she knew it, and the knowledge was agony. She felt that presently he would only have to hold up his finger, and what he bade her do, that she would have to do. He continued to twiddle the diamond ring between his great fingers; dilating on its various beauties; dwelling on all that it would mean when it was in its place upon her hand; and each moment she expected that he would order her to go to him, and let him brand her with it as with a stigma which might never be effaced. What would happen if such an order were given she could not, dared not, think. While she still awaited it there came a tapping at the door; a waiter entered.

"A gentleman, sir, to see you."

Mr Emmett turned towards him angrily.

"A gentleman? What gentleman? I'm not going to see anyone to-night--whoever it is, tell him to go to the devil."

The waiter held out to him an envelope which was on a silver tray.

"Gentleman told me to give you that, sir."

Tearing the envelope open Mr Emmett read what was on a half-sheet of paper which was within; then he crumpled it up, and swore.

"Confound him! What's the hurry? Why won't the morning do? Tell him I'm coming down to him."

The waiter went. Mr Emmett looked again at Dorothy, still sitting as if she were glued to the back of her chair; replacing the ring in its leather case, he made as if to return it to his waistcoat pocket; then, suddenly changing his mind, he called out: "Come here!" She did not move; but clung tighter to her seat. He laughed, as if amused by her obvious fear of him. "You little idiot! Of what are you afraid? There'll come a time when you'll not need any calling; and you'll come uninvited, and perhaps when I don't want you. I know you women; you're like badly trained dogs. When you're whistled to heel you'll not come; but when you're not whistled you keep messing about a man till he feels like giving you a dose of prussic acid. Very well, don't come; I'll come to you." He went to her, at the other end of the table. "Give me your hand!" He took it, her left; she offering no resistance, but looking up at him with a great terror in her eyes. On the third finger he slipped the ring. "There!--that's in token that you're mine; you're as much my property now as if we'd been together to church; and don't you forget it. There's a fool downstairs who wants to see me; and, as he is a fool, he shall; but I'm not going to let him keep me; I shall probably be back inside ten minutes, and mind I find you here when I do come back. None of your games--going to bed, or any of that rot; if you do I'll fetch you down again. There are all sorts of things I want to talk to you about, before you think of bed; I want you to show that you can be nice to me; and that you can treat me as a girl ought to treat the man who's going to be her husband--especially a husband who's going to give her the best time a girl ever did have. So you understand?--I'm to find you here when I return." He moved a step or two away; then halted. "I ought to have a kiss--a man ought to have a kiss from his girl, when he gives her the ring; but that sort of thing won't spoil with keeping--there'll be interest to collect--I'll take a couple when I come back."

He went. She sat staring at the door through which he had passed, his last horrid threat ringing in her ears. He would take a couple when he came back; and she was to stay there till he came to take them, with that dreadful ring scarring the flesh on her finger. She felt sure that it was being scarred; it certainly burned. Yet she did not dare to take it off; although he was gone she was still afraid of him. A curious paralysis seemed to have attacked her limbs. She remained motionless for some seconds after he had left her, her hand stretched out, staring at his ring. When she moved it was with an effort; when she gained her feet she had to hold on to the back of the chair, to aid her to stand.

What was she to do? She tried to think; as she had tried so often of late; her brain, like her muscles, played her false; clear thought was beyond her. One thing she realised--that she must not be there when he came back; in spite--because--of what he had said. Yet how was she to avoid

being there? He had told her that if she went to bed he would fetch her back again; and she believed him. Once, at a hotel in France, he had made a great clatter at her room door; and was only prevented by practically the entire staff of the establishment from breaking it down. Somehow she felt that that night nothing would keep him from having her out of her room again, if she disobeyed his command, and fled to it. But, if she did not, what was she to do, where was she to go, so that she might not be there when he came back? Again and again, in France, had she meditated flight; only the conviction that the result would be fiasco had restrained her. Was she more likely to succeed, here, in England? Even through her mental haze a feeling was borne in upon her that in that direction lay her only hope. If she could only put a descent distance between herself and him she might escape him altogether. The point was, could she? An idea occurred to her--the railway. The first time in her life, so far as she remembered, she had, that day, been in a train. She had, of course, read about trains; she had even seen them; the probability was that she had been brought in one to the convent. But, in those days, she was a toddling child; she had certainly not been in one since. Mr Emmett had brought her in one from London. Then why should she not go alone in one, if not back to London, then at least to some place, a long way off, where she would be beyond his reach.

No sooner had the notion occurred to her than she started to put it into practice; and was already moving towards the door when a second reflection held her back. Mr Emmett had bought a ticket, with money. She was not so ignorant as not to be aware that railways were not public highways; that one could not travel in a train without a ticket; which had to be paid for, in advance with cash. She had seen Mr Emmett pay for two tickets--one for her, and one for himself. They would not let her get into a train without a ticket; how was she to pay for it? She was confronted, as before, in the midst of her wild desire to flee, by her eternal lack of pence--that insuperable barrier. She had had no regular pocket-money at the convent like the other girls; their parents either sent them cash direct, or made arrangements with the Sisters. Occasionally, on saints' days, she was given a sou to put into the box; but, as a rule, she was without even that humble coin. Never having known what it was to have money she did not miss it; there were no temptations to spend; her modest wants were supplied. It was only when she set out through the world with her guardian that it began to dawn upon her what an important part money played in the affairs of men, and women. She had no idea how much cash would be required to purchase a ticket; she took it for granted that the more she paid the farther the ticket would take her; the mischief was that she had no money at all--not even a paltry *sou*.

How was she to get money? From where? She looked about her. Dessert was still upon the table; there were knives and forks; other articles which were possibly of silver; but they were not coin of the realm; though she had a vague idea that they might be turned into it. How the transformation might be effected was a problem which was beyond her altogether. She had sense enough to know that it would be no use proffering a handful of silver ware in exchange for a ticket.

In that moment of her desperation, if she had only known where money was to be had, she would have made free with it, if the thing were possible, even without the owner's sanction, oblivious of any consequences which her action might entail; being persuaded that no worse fate could befall her than that that man should find her still in the room when he came back. Spurred by this conviction she was about to rush forth and seek for money, she knew not where nor how; already her fingers were near the handle, when she heard footsteps approaching on the other side. He was coming back. In the frenzy of her terror it was all she could do to keep herself from screaming. She glanced behind her, as a mouse might do which is caught in a trap, and knows that its doom is approaching. There was a recessed window on one side of the room. She had watched the waiter draw the heavy curtains across the recess as he lit the lights. She went flying towards it; gained it; had just slipped behind the curtain as the door of the room was opened.

CHAPTER III

THE COWARD

The curtains were so thick, and were drawn so close, that in the recess it was nearly pitch dark. Only in one place did the lights of the room shine through. That was where the stuff had worn so thin that only a few threads remained. But for some seconds Dorothy was unconscious both of the darkness and the light; she was conscious of nothing. She scarcely dared to breathe; she did not dare to move; though she trembled so that she had to lean against the side of the recess to keep herself from collapsing in a heap upon the floor. Each moment she expected that the curtains would be drawn aside and her hiding-place discovered. She felt sure that Mr Emmett's sharp eyes must have seen them moving as he entered the room. As the moments

passed and the curtains remained untouched, she began to wonder. Was he playing with her? Knowing well where she was, had he seated himself at the table; proposing to sit there drinking, till she was tired of pretending to hide, or till it pleased him to drag her out? She was sufficiently acquainted with his disposition to be aware that that kind of sport amused him. If he thought that she was shivering behind those curtains, he would let her go on shivering, ever more and more, until it suited him to play some sudden trick which might cause her to tumble in a nerveless heap on the floor. If he could succeed in bringing her to that pitch, his sense of humour would be tickled; he would enjoy the joke.

Thinking that might be the meaning of his non-interference she had half made up her mind to reveal herself, and so spoil his sport, when, on a sudden, she became conscious that a voice was speaking--a strange voice, which was not Mr Emmett's. Then Mr Emmett spoke. Then the voice again. What did it mean? She listened. It is a sufficient commentary upon her mental and physical condition to state that until that instant she had heard nothing. Yet, so soon as she began to listen, it became obvious that the speakers must have been talking together for, at anyrate, some little time; and that in tones which, to say the least, were audible.

Dorothy presumed that, after all, Mr Emmett had not noticed the quivering curtains, and had taken her disappearance for granted. If he had made a remark on it, it had been a passing one; clearly she was not the subject of the conversation which he was carrying on with the stranger. What they were talking about she did not know, but it became each second plainer that it was a matter on which they were both of them very much in earnest. If they were not actually quarrelling they were very near to it. The language which was being used on both sides was warm; the stranger was addressing Mr Emmett in terms which were the reverse of complimentary, and which Mr Emmett was vigorously resenting. His resentment seemed to add flame to the stranger's anger.

All at once there came something into his tone which struck the unseen listener's ear. She had become conscious of the ray of light which penetrated her hiding-place. Moving gingerly, so as to avoid coming into contact with the hangings, she approached her face to the worn place in the curtains. It was worn so bare that the few threads which remained formed scarcely any obstruction to the view; she could see through quite easily. The scene on the other side was clearly revealed; she saw the two actors in it as well as if the curtain had not been there. The stranger was a young man, possibly a year or two on the shady side of forty. He was tall, and held himself straighter than some tall men are apt to do. His chest was broad; he held his shoulders well back; about the whole man there was a suggestion of strength. His head was square, and was poised easily upon a rounded throat. He had an odd, clever-looking face, a fine, open brow. His eyes, which were rather small, were wide apart. His mouth was large, but his lips were thin, and shut so closely that when, in silence, he looked at Mr Emmett, only a slender red line was visible to show that a mouth was there. His black hair, parted on one side, was a little in disorder, some of it straggled over his forehead. Disorder, indeed, was the dominant note of the man. As she watched him the girl had a feeling that he was too much moved by some inward excitement to be over-particular about the small niceties of his attire. His tie was a little crooked; his jacket had a lopsided air.

Ordinarily the expression of his queer-looking face was probably a pleasant one; there was that about it which hinted that, in a general way, the man's outlook on to life was that of a humorist. But there was little pleasant about it then, or humorous either. It was not likely that his complexion ever was his strongest feature--at that moment it had a peculiar pallor which was singularly unattractive. Like many dark men, evidently nature had meant him to have a strong beard. His cheeks and chin and upper lip were shaven, but apparently that day they had not known the razor. In consequence they were of a bluish tint, which was in ghastly harmony with the almost unnatural colour of his skin. The appearance of the man fascinated the girl who was peeping at him from behind the curtain, as if he realised some picture which, in some occult fashion, had unwittingly been present in her mind, of a man in a rage. His pose; his attitude; his disordered attire; something which looked out of his eyes; the obvious mental agitation which caused his countenance to wear that singular hue; the gleam of scarlet which was all that marked his tightly closed mouth; the ominous fashion in which, while standing perfectly still, he never took his glance from off the man in front of him--although she might not have been able to put the thing into words, everything about him spoke to the sensitive imagination of the girl of one who, for a very little, would throw everything aside in the fullness of his desire to gratify the lust of his rage.

The man in front of him was angry too; but with him anger took a different form: his was rather bad temper than genuine passion. It had about it a suggestion of bluster, of effort; as if he would have liked to be more angry than he actually was. Beyond doubt he was sufficiently annoyed with the stranger; so annoyed that he was quite willing to do him a mischief; to knock him down, for instance; even to throw him from the room. Yet, disposed as he evidently was to be as disagreeable as he could be, his rage altogether lacked that quality of intensity, of white heat, which marked the other; the something which caused the girl, when she appreciated, though only vaguely, the scene which was being enacted before her, to feel that it would be well that, at the earliest possible moment, she should make her presence known, for Mr Emmett's protection.

There, in those last four words, was the barrier which held her back. Had it been borne in upon her, in even the faintest degree, that, for the stranger's sake, it would be well that she should step out from behind that screen, she might have done it on the instant. But for Mr

Emmett--no! In some odd way the stranger's rage communicated itself to her. The terror with which her guardian had imbued her began to change into resentment. As she observed the stranger his fury fired hers. As surely as she believed herself to have a just cause for anger, so surely was she persuaded of the justice of the stranger's anger also. She was convinced that Emmett was in the wrong. That she arrived at this conclusion from very inadequate premises was nothing; from what she had seen of Mr Emmett she was prepared to assert, offhand, without knowing anything of the facts, that in nine disputes out of ten he was in the wrong--that this was one of those nine she did not for an instant doubt.

What they were talking about she did not understand. When she began really to listen there was nothing in their conversation to give her a definite clue; they had reached that stage when, like two dogs, they were disposed to do little but bark at each other. The stranger informed Mr Emmett, after a brief pause, as if for reflection, that he was a thief. Mr Emmett paused, in his turn; then assailed the stranger with a flood of vituperation which was characteristic of the man--there was such a redundancy of offensive suggestions. Dorothy felt as if each one of them had been aimed at her; with each her choler rose; just, as she was sure, the stranger's rose also. An uncanny desire came to the tips of her fingers to grip the speaker by the throat and choke an apology out of him. She would have liked to see the stranger do it; with all her might she longed to inspire him with her feeling. Presently she realised that he had it on his own account, without any urging from her. When Emmett had finished he remained still, motionless; never once removing his eyes from the other's inflamed features. Then he said, more quietly than he had spoken before--there was something in his lowered tone which pleased the girl behind the curtain--

"Would you mind repeating those observations?--or, if that is not convenient, the substance of them?"

Dorothy heard the threat which the words conveyed more clearly than if he had yelled it out. It is possible, since he was not dull-witted, that Mr Emmett heard it too. If such was the case then it seemed that, at least, he was no coward; for, with complete sincerity, he treated the other with contempt which was even more galling than his words. Thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets; holding his great head a little on one side; looking at the other as if he were something altogether beneath his notice; laughing that brutal laugh of his, which had hurt the girl more than speech could do; he began at him again. He poured forth on him a stream of abusive epithets, with a lavish copiousness which showed how truly great was the wealth of his resources; he surpassed himself. There was not a vice which he did not attribute both to him and to his progenitors; if the tenth of what he said was true then this man was a wretch indeed. When he had finished, at least for the moment, he laughed--a second time. The laugh did what his insults had failed to do--it moved the other to action. He remained quiescent before the opprobrious torrent; but that laughter surpassed the limit of his endurance. Still with his eyes fixed on the other's face he reached out towards the champagne bottle which stood beside him on the table. Mr Emmett, perceiving his intention, made haste to intercept it. He too moved towards the table.

"No, you don't!" he cried. But already the other's fingers were round the bottle's neck. "By----, you'll be sorry if you try that, you----!"

While he still was vomiting adjectives the bottle swung into the air; Dorothy saw that as it was turned upside down some of its contents went down the stranger's sleeve. Mr Emmett tried to stop it, and did, with his head. As he endeavoured to grab the other's arm, the stranger, swerving, brought the heavy bottle down upon his unprotected head with murderous force. The head and the bottle were smashed together; even then Dorothy was struck by the difference there was between the two sounds, the breaking of the bottle, and the breaking of the head. Mr Emmett and the bottle vanished together, with something of the effect of a conjuring trick. Mr Emmett disappeared behind the table; all that was left of the bottle was an inch or two of splintered glass, which the stranger still gripped. The result appeared to surprise him. He looked down at the floor on the side of the table which was hidden from Dorothy, and continued to look, as if he saw something there which was beyond his comprehension. Then he looked at the splinter of glass, which was all that was left of the bottle; approaching it to his face, as if to enable him to see it better. As he looked at it he smiled; and he said, as if he were speaking to himself, though his words were distinctly audible to Dorothy:

"My word! if it hadn't smashed!" His glance returned to the floor. He spoke again. "Emmett!" None replied. Something in the silence seemed to tickle him, because he both smiled and spoke again. "It seems it held out long enough." He observed the broken splinter with what appeared to be amused curiosity. After seeming to hesitate what to do with it he placed it carefully on the table, splintered end upwards. Then again he spoke. "Emmett!" When there was still no answer he bent over what he saw lying on the floor. Presently he kneeled. Dorothy could not see what he was doing with his hands; she did not need to see; she knew. When he rose it was with difficulty; his arms were about Mr Emmett; he raised him with them. As Mr Emmett did nothing to raise himself, since he was such a heavy man, the stranger had not an easy task. When he had regained his own feet he was holding his burden closer to him than could have been quite convenient. It was with curious sensations that the unseen witness observed how limp her guardian was; his head waggled with the stranger's every movement, as if the muscles of the neck refused to hold it up. Staggering forward, the stranger deposited Mr Emmett on the chair on which he had been seated at dinner. The effect was singular. It was an old wooden arm-chair,

with a capacious seat, and a high back. Mr Emmett could not be induced to sit up straight. The stranger made one or two well-meaning efforts; but the results were not so satisfactory as his labours deserved. Mr Emmett would persist in assuming a lop-sided attitude: his chin on his chest, his body in a variety of curves, his arms hanging anyhow. Realising that it was futile to try to induce him to take up a more dignified position, apparently the stranger decided to let him stop as he was. He drew back a little, as if the better to observe the effect. The spectacle he offered seemed to move him to reflection, and reflection to speech. He said, out loud: "If ever there was a scoundrel----" and then stopped, leaving the sentence unfinished; possibly recalling the old school tag, which recommends us to say objectionable things of our friends only while they are living. A cloth cap, a cane, and a pair of gloves were lying on a side table. Turning away, taking up these three articles, the stranger moved briskly towards the door, and out of the room, never once looking back at what was on the chair.

And Dorothy was left alone with her guardian.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN IN THE CHAIR

It was only then that the full meaning of what had taken place began to dawn upon Dorothy. It was only when the door had been opened and shut, and the stranger was gone, that she commenced to realise what kind of a drama this was which had been enacted before her eyes; that it was not a comedy, but a tragedy; in which the most tragic part was probably still to come. It was odd how silent it was when the stranger had gone. Unconsciously she had found comfort in his neighbourhood, his presence. When that was withdrawn, only the unspeakable remained.

Not the least terrible part of it was that, so soon as it became clear to her that she really was alone, she could not take her eyes off the figure in the chair. She would have given more than she had ever had if Mr Emmett would only have moved; if only he would make some effort to alter what must be a position of such obvious discomfort. Though she had come to regard him almost as if he were the bad ogre of some fairy tale, at that moment she would rather he should do anything than keep so still; she was more afraid of him dead than alive; especially as each instant the feeling oppressed her more and more that he was dead because of her. Actually--practically--it was she who had killed him. If she had only made her presence known; if she had only moved; if she had only uttered a sound--the thing would not have been done which had been done; of that she was assured. That, morally, she was an accomplice in this man's killing, she knew, if no one else did. From the moment in which she had discovered the stranger in the room, and had begun to watch, and to listen, she had seen the coming event casting its shadow before; she knew that now, as she had known it then. Some instinct had told her that the fury which possessed the stranger was of the sort which, to use a phrase, makes a man "see red"; that because of him Mr Emmett was in danger--although Mr Emmett himself had not suspected it, she knew. She had seen it in the stranger's face, in his manner; she had felt it in the air.

Not only had she had, in a sense, the prophetic vision, she had rejoiced to have it. She herself had had such a loathing for the man, had stood in such terror of him, that when that queer instinct began to tell her that it was quite within the range of possibility that the stranger might act as executioner the blood began to run pleasurable faster through her veins. Expectation became desire; she waited eagerly for him to strike the blow; knowing, before it came, that it was coming. Was that not to be his accomplice? Her hope had been that he would do what she felt he was about to do; although she might have stayed him with the movement of a finger she had given no sign. It was useless for her to tell herself that she had not expected that he would actually kill him: perhaps the stranger himself had not meant actually to kill him. She had foreseen that he would probably assail him with violence; and had been willing that he should use what violence he chose. A little more--a little less--what did it matter? Only in the event of the stranger getting the worst of it would she have interposed; she would not have cared how much worsted Mr Emmett might have been. The proof that he had been worsted was there before her, in the chair. The result being, so far as she herself was concerned, that, as has been said, she was more afraid of him dead than alive.

How long, after she was left alone with her guardian, she remained motionless behind that curtain, she never knew. Before, while the drama was being acted, she would not have revealed herself on any account, lest she should balk the principal player; now her capacity to do so seemed to have left her. It was so still in the room that she dared not disturb the silence. She kept her eyes fastened to that bare place, looking at what she could not help but look; motionless, scarcely breathing; as if some form of paralysis had riveted her in that one position. But, by

degrees, in spite of the horror which held her, there did come to her some dim appreciation of the fact that she could not stay there all night; for ever. She would have to leave her hiding-place some time, and show herself to the figure in the chair. The necessity was a terrible one; but it was a necessity; therefore, the sooner she came out from behind that curtain the sooner the ordeal would be over; only let her be sure to go as softly as she could; so that, making no noise, none might hear her. With this idea of moving quietly she lifted her hand to part the curtains, and had just insinuated her fingers between them when the door was opened, and her hand fell back.

Her first impression was, as she saw the door swinging back upon its hinges, that it was probably the stranger, who had come back to do she knew not what. But the person who actually entered was the waiter. His appearance made her conscious of a sense of shock; she began to shiver all over; though the strange thing was, not that he should come in when he did, but that he should not have come before.

This was not one of your foreign waiters; plainly he was English to the core--an elderly man, with grey hair, slight side-whiskers, a stoop, and that air of deprecation which comes to some waiters, possibly because they spend so much of their time in considering the wishes of others without reference to their own. A decorous person; possibly one of the institutions of the house. His professional attire was in better condition than it is apt to be; there was a suggestion about him of unusual cleanliness, even his hands seemed decently kept; the napkin which he carried over his arm was spotless. Apparently he had taken it for granted that, since the meal must have been long since over, the diners had departed, and that therefore it was not necessary to knock. He paused at the door for a moment to look about him. Mr Emmett was hidden by the broad high back of the chair on which he was sitting. After his momentary hesitation, seeing no one, the waiter moved forward with the peculiar gait which comes to waiters after performing, for many years, balancing feats with plates and dishes. He had not only reached the table, he had begun to gather together the dessert plates, before he saw Mr Emmett--in his surprise he nearly dropped a plate.

"I beg your pardon, sir, for not noticing you before, but I'd no idea----" He stopped short, as if struck by the singularity of the gentleman's attitude. "I hope, sir, that nothing's happened----" Again he stopped, perceiving that something indeed had happened. His bearing changed, his voice dropped. "I do believe----" Leaving his sentences unfinished appeared, with him, to amount to a habit; he stopped again. Raising his left hand, with his fingers he rubbed his bristly chin, delivering himself of a complete sentence at last: "Well, I never did!" To an outsider the words might not have conveyed much meaning; they seemed to convey enough meaning to him. Then came the half of a query. "Whatever is----"

He got no further; seeming to be in a state of such perturbation that, for the time, he had lost his wits. He stood staring at the man in the chair as an anxious rabbit might look at a fox which it is not sure is dead. Suddenly he seemed to make up his mind what was the best thing for him to do. He went hustling towards the door; when he reached it he checked himself as if seized with an idea. What the idea was was made plain when he took the key out of the lock, opened the door, and, as Dorothy could hear, locked it again on the outside. And again she was left alone with her guardian.

This time her sensations were worse than before: she was being punished for her share in what had been done. She became awake to the fact that with that door locked--and egress, therefore, rendered impossible--her position had become a most unpleasant one. No doubt the waiter, declining, wisely enough, to accept more responsibility than he could help, had gone to tell the news to someone. Soon that someone would come back with the waiter; the news would be passed on, sooner or later, to the police. The girl had, of course, no actual knowledge of the procedure in such cases; she knew more about French methods than English, but she had sufficient intelligence to be aware that, ultimately, the police would appear upon the scene. If she was unable to escape before they came, as, if each time someone went out of the room, the door was locked, would be the case--and the police found her there behind the curtain--what would happen to her then? What conclusions would they draw?

The terror of such a prospect moved her to action--or, at least, to attempted action. Was there no other way of getting out of the room except by the door? She turned to the window which was behind her. Drawing aside the blind she found that it was set with small panes of coloured glass. She was quick-witted enough to guess that that was probably because it looked out upon a stable or a yard, or something equally agreeable; and therefore a good view was a thing not to be desired. If that were the case then to attempt to escape that way would be to court discovery. Besides, she remembered that the room was on the first floor, that the approach from the hall was up a flight of several stairs; whatever might be on the other side of that window, it was not likely that it would be easy to reach the ground. Was there no other way out of the room? She thrust the curtains aside to look--and heard the key being put into the lock of the door.

She was back again behind the curtain when the door reopened, and the waiter reappeared, with, at his heels, somebody who was evidently a personage. A short, cobby man, middle-aged, wearing a gloire de Dijon rose in the buttonhole of his frock-coat, about him a general air of being well groomed. The waiter moved quickly towards the table, the other following close behind him. When they reached the chair the waiter said nothing; it was unnecessary; the other saw. What he saw seemed to impress him with a sense of having been subjected to a personal affront. He asked pettishly:

"What's the meaning of this?" Receiving no answer--the waiter was again stroking his bristly chin with the fingers of his left hand, with about him still that suggestion of the anxious rabbit--he addressed himself to the figure in the chair. "Mr Emmett! Sir!" No notice being taken he repeated his former futile inquiry: "What the deuce does this mean?" Then he added, as if the notion had all at once occurred to him: "He's dead!"

"I'm afraid he is, sir."

The personage went on from discovery to discovery.

"He couldn't have done it himself--look at his head--he couldn't have smashed it like that--someone must have done it for him."

"Looks as if that were the case, sir."

"Then who can have done it?--in my hotel; with the house full of people; in a private sitting-room; seated at his own dinner-table! What have you been doing?"

"Several things; there have been a great many things, sir, to do, with the house so busy. I've seen and heard nothing of what was taking place in this room since I came to say there was a gentleman wished to see him."

"A gentleman? What gentleman?"

"That I couldn't say, sir. A message and a note were brought to me; which I brought in to Mr Emmett; and he went out to see the gentleman."

"Went out, did he? He didn't bring the gentleman in here?"

"Not so far as I am aware, sir. They ought to be able to tell you better about that downstairs."

The personage was looking about him.

"What's all this broken glass?--and what's that?"

He was pointing to the splintered neck of the bottle which the stranger had left on the table.

"Seems, sir, as if a bottle had been broken."

"A champagne bottle--perhaps----" The personage looked at the waiter; the waiter looked at him. Possibly it was because of what each saw in the other's eyes that the speaker left his sentence unfinished. He broke into petulant anger. "Nice thing this is to happen in my house right at the beginning of the race week, about the only time in the year when one does have a chance of making a little money--goodness only knows what mischief it may do me when it gets known. Who's that at the door? Shut it at once! You can't come in here!"

It seemed that someone could come in, because someone did--a woman. She was what is sometimes described as a fine woman, still in the prime of life; big and well covered, she would probably have turned the scale at sixteen stone. She wore a black silk dress, which had a generous train; her ample bust glittered with chains and gewgaws. Unmistakably this was the hostess, the personage's wife. She stood in the doorway.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"First of all, Mrs Elsey, be so good as to shut that door. Then, when you've done that, if you'll take the trouble to walk as far as this, you will see what is the matter for yourself."

Shutting the door, she walked to the table--and saw.

"Why, whatever! Good gracious! Who's done it?"

"Seems as if someone had--by the looks of him."

"Bob!--what a sight he is! Goodness knows he never was much in the way of looks, but who'd have thought he ever could have looked like that? Don't you know who did it?"

"I'd make it hot for him if I did--doing a thing like this in my house, in my busiest season!"

"There's plenty who might have done it--plenty. No one ever had much love for him--and small blame to them. Why I only heard, with my own ears, a man say to him this afternoon: 'By God, Emmett, for two pins, I'd have your life'--sounded as if he meant it too."

"Perhaps someone gave him the two pins."

This was the waiter. Whether the remark was meant to be humorous, or merely a suggestion, was not clear. No one heeded him. The personage went on:

"What man was that? Be careful what you say, Mrs Elsey."

"No need for you to tell me to be careful; I can be that without your telling me--as careful as anyone. What I say I heard I did hear--I'm ready to swear to it anywhere, though who the man was I don't know; he was a stranger to me--but I should know him again among a hundred. He was a smallish man, with a sharp, clean-shaven face, and a brown suit, and a white billycock, which he wore a little on one side--he'd something to do with horses, of that I'm sure. But he's not the only one who had a grudge against George Emmett. Who, who had anything to do with him, hadn't? Why, if it comes to that, we'd no cause to love him."

"Now, Mrs Elsey, none of that sort of talk, if you please; that's a sort of talk I won't have. It doesn't follow that because a man has a grudge against another man he wants to kill him."

"Doesn't it? It depends on the man. But whatever did he do it with? I never saw such a sight as he has made of him!"

"Seems as if he did it with a bottle--a champagne bottle."

"He must have hit him a crack, to make a sight of him like that--why, his head's all smashed to pulp."

"You can hit a man a crack with a champagne bottle, if you mean business, and know how to. But this sort of thing won't do--the first thing we've got to do is to send for the doctor and the police; and, till they've been, nothing's to be touched; let them find things just as we did, then they'll be able to draw their own conclusions, and blame no one. So out you go, Mrs Elsey, and you too, Timmins, and I'll lock the door, and keep it locked, and, Timmins, you hang about and see that no one comes near; and, if you want to keep your place, mind you don't say so much as a syllable to anyone about what's in here, till I give you leave."

It was not such an easy business as, possibly, the personage would have wished, to induce his wife to leave the room: she evinced an uncomfortable curiosity in the details of the scene of which the man in the chair was such a gruesome centre; had she been left alone, she might have pushed her curiosity beyond desirable limits. As it was, her husband had to put his arm through hers, and positively lead her from the room, she remonstrating as she went. So soon as she was out the door was slammed, and the key turned on the other side. And once more, for the third time, Dorothy Gilbert was left alone with her guardian, from whom there seemed to be as little chance as ever of escaping. It was by some ironical stroke of fate that he appeared to guard her better dead than living.

CHAPTER V

DOROTHY IS LEFT ALONE WITH HER GUARDIAN FOR THE NIGHT

With the passing minutes the girl's plight took a different shape. When she had first rushed behind that curtain it had been with a childish desire to hide; to avoid the man who had threatened her with kisses; and perhaps worse--for her maiden soul had warned her that he was one who, if opportunity offered, would not stop at a little. In sheer childish terror she had fled to the first refuge she could think of; as if it were a refuge; as if, after an instant's search, he was not sure to discover her hiding-place, and have her out. The advent of the stranger if, in a way, it had saved her, had also complicated the situation; it was not, then, so much discovery she had to fear, as something it was not good to think of. Indeed, the situation was reversed; because, had she then taken the initiative and discovered herself, not only would she have been saved; but also Mr Emmett, and the stranger. Too late she was beginning to realise that all three were destroyed: the two living, and the one dead. Practically, in killing Mr Emmett, the stranger had killed himself, and her. It might turn out that he had done it actually. And in his action she was aware that she had been an aider and abettor. So in remaining hidden she had thrown away her own salvation.

The position now, however, wore a different aspect. Her mental faculties were more on the alert than they had been; as it seemed to her, they kept coming and going; so that now she saw clearly, and now not at all. So far as they enabled her to judge, now, again, her only hope of immunity rested on her continuing undiscovered. If they found her all sorts of dreadful consequences would immediately result. For one thing they would quite probably accuse her of having had at least a hand in her guardian's death, if she were not the actual assassin; not unnaturally taking it for granted that her persistent concealment could only have a criminal meaning. She could only disprove the charge, if it could be disproved, by shifting the onus of guilt

on to the vanished stranger's shoulders. Already--though, as yet, the thing might not be acknowledged to herself--in her heart she had arrived at a final resolution that under no conceivable circumstances would she bear witness against him. Happen what might; where, in this matter, he was concerned she would be dumb. Although she had not formulated it in so many words, she felt that, in what had been done, they had been partners, even friends; that, though unwittingly, it had been done for her. Therefore, if to prove her innocence, it should become necessary to prove his guilt, her doom was sealed. In that case, so soon as they drew aside the curtain, and found her behind it, her fate was sealed.

It amazed her to think that she had not been discovered already. She herself was so conscious of her imminent proximity to what had taken place; was so well aware of how slender a protection that screen of hanging drapery really was; that it bewildered her that she should have played, with complete impunity, for so long the part of a spy--and more. But the continuance of such impunity could not be counted on. When the police came--and, possibly, they were already on the threshold--the room would be searched for evidence. Then, in a moment, her hiding-place would be revealed. She could not wait for that; she must get away out of the room, before they came. But how?--since the door was locked.

Parting the curtains, she stepped out from between them, looking about her eagerly for a key to the riddle. The wildest notions came into her head. There was a sideboard at one end of the room, with a cupboard beneath. It might not occur to them to look inside that cupboard; might there not be room in it for her? A moment's consideration made her doubt it. She might be able to squeeze herself into a small space; but, compress herself as she might, she doubted if there would be room for her inside that cupboard; even if it was empty, which was by no means sure. Then there was the fireplace; but, though it was old-fashioned, it was not a large one; she was pretty certain that she would not be able to force herself up the chimney. But though she crammed herself into the cupboard, or rammed herself up the flue, she would still be little better off. That was not at all the sort of thing she wanted. She would still be in the room: what she wanted was to get out of the room. Plainly there were only two ways out of it--the door, and the window. Since the door was locked, only the window remained.

Drawing back into the recess she turned towards the window; it would have to be that way, since there was no other--though she threw herself out of it. Getting inside the blind she tried to raise the sash; it was immovable; obviously, it was fastened. She knew nothing of English windows; this was the first she had seen, but she presumed that it was meant to open. She searched for the fastening, above, below, on either side; so far as she could learn, there was none; apparently this window was a fraud--it was not meant to open. Examining it more closely she saw that there was nothing on either side to show that it was intended to be moved up and down; the paint was unbroken; the thing was a fixture.

The discovery startled her; was it an English custom to have no practicable window in a room? Nothing which would admit fresh air? If that were so, then, since the door was secured against her, beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt, she was caught like a rat in a trap, and only God could help her. She noticed that what looked like two wooden handles were hung on the ends of cords on either side of this dummy window, near the top of the sash. Did they mean anything? If they did, what was it? She gripped the two on the right, and pulled; then the two on the left, and pulled at them; nothing happened. Then she perceived that one handle on either side was of dark, and the other of light, wood; perhaps that might mean something. She took hold of the lighter handle on either side, and was about to tug, when she heard the key turned in the lock. Instantly the handles slipped from between her fingers; but before she could get from behind the blind she heard the door open, and footsteps come into the room.

This time she was indeed at a disadvantage. To all intents and purposes she was pinned between the blind and the window; she dared not move, since the slightest movement caused the stiffened blind to make an ominous rustling; if she tried to get away from under it she would be certain to make a noise which would ensure discovery. The only thing she could do was to stay where she was, and to refrain, if the thing were possible, from moving even so much as a muscle. She could see nothing. At first, in the shock of being taken unawares, her limbs trembled so; her brain was in such a tumult; there was such a singing in her ears, that she could not even hear. It was only by degrees that the sounds resolved themselves into distinct voices; and she became conscious of what was being said.

The personage, who was the landlord, and whose name was Elsey, had entered the room; and his wife, who declined to be kept out; and a fair-haired, spectacled young man, who was a doctor; and a policeman, who chanced to be the nearest at hand. The procession of four moved towards the table. The landlord spoke; his manner suggested a sense both of importance and of resentment.

"Here, Dr Nichols, and officer, is Mr Emmett, as you can see for yourselves. You see him exactly as he was found by Timmins, one of my waiters; Timmins is outside the door, and can give testimony to that effect, if required. He has not been touched; and nothing has been touched; each thing is just as it was when discovered, as Timmins can testify; and as, for that matter, I can testify; because I know it to be a fact. As regards this unfortunate man the question now is, is life extinct?"

He spoke as a showman might have done, who wished to call attention to the special features

of his show. The doctor was bending over the figure in the chair.

"How long is it since he was found in this condition?"

"It might be ten minutes; it might be a quarter of an hour; it might be more. Timmins is outside, and will corroborate me, if required. At the earliest possible moment I sent for you, you happening to be the medical gentleman who lived nearest."

"I should say that there can be little doubt but that, as you put it, life's extinct; but it's not easy to examine him properly in this chair." He looked round the room, his glance passing over the curtained recess--if he had only known of the girl who shivered within it! "That couch wouldn't be convenient either: it's not long enough. Couldn't you have a mattress, or something, placed upon that table? We might lay him on it, or, for the matter of that, we might manage without."

"Certainly you can have a mattress. I wish to do everything for Mr Emmett, who is an old customer of mine, which possibly can be done, though nothing can be more serious than the inconvenience, to say nothing of the positive loss, which he is likely to occasion me. Timmins!" The waiter came just inside the door, rubbing his chin. "Fetch me a mattress--at once!"

"Yes, sir; where from, sir?"

"Anywhere! Don't be a fool, sir, and stand gaping there; do as you're told!"

His wife interposed.

"It's you who's the fool, Mr Elsey! Where do you suppose Timmins is going to get a mattress from? Who do you suppose is going to give it him?--without my sanction! Come with me, Timmins; I'll see that a mattress is got."

When she reappeared the waiter was carrying one doubled up on his shoulder. A space had been cleared on the table, on which the mattress was placed. Then the landlord, the waiter, the doctor, and the policeman lifted Mr Emmett between them; the united four seemed to find him no easier burden than the stranger, singlehanded, had done. While the doctor was still conducting his gruesome examination someone else came into the room, an inspector of police. Him the landlord greeted with bustling cordiality.

"Most dreadful thing has happened, Mr Tinney; so unfortunate for me that it should have occurred in my house, at this, my busiest season; one of my oldest customers too, Mr Emmett; I daresay you know him."

"George Emmett? Oh yes, I know him; who doesn't? How did it happen?"

"That's what we don't know--what nobody seems to know--that's the mystery; the whole affair is most mysterious, and--and lamentable. To put it at its lowest, with every desire to put self on one side, one can't help feeling that someone has been guilty of a very unfriendly act to me. In my business one never knows how this sort of thing may be taken, especially by one's best customers. At this moment every bedroom's full; yet directly this becomes known I may have my house empty on my hands, my race week spoilt!"

"What's the cause of death?" The inspector put this question to the doctor.

"A blow with some blunt instrument, which must have been delivered with tremendous force. Some of the frontal cranium bones seem to be broken in two or three places. Of course my examination has at present only been superficial, but that appears to be the case."

The landlord proffered an addition of his own:

"It looks as if the blow had been delivered with a champagne bottle." He held up the broken neck. "We found this on the table, and the remaining pieces are here upon the floor."

The inspector again addressed the doctor.

"Could it have been done with a champagne bottle?"

The doctor settled his spectacles on his nose. Being a young man, a sense of responsibility seemed to weigh upon him. His reply was guarded:

"It might. Of course you understand that I am not prepared to give a definite opinion, but, to some extent, my present impression is, that it might have been."

The inspector turned to the landlord.

"Don't you know who was in the room with him?"

"That's the point--we don't; that's to say, not so that we can speak with certainty. You see, this is a private sitting-room, and occupants of private sitting-rooms have visitors of whom we know nothing. We can't keep an eye upon them as if they were public rooms--it stands to reason. But one of my waiters, named Timmins--this is Timmins--informs me that he brought a message and a

note to Mr Emmett, who was enjoying his wine after dinner, to the effect that a gentleman wished to see him; and that he went out to see the gentleman; but whether the gentleman returned with him Timmins cannot say."

The inspector addressed the waiter.

"When you brought that message was he alone?"

"Yes, sir, he was alone; except for the young lady."

The landlord exclaimed.

"Young lady!--What young lady?"

"Why, sir, the young lady he dined with; he and she dined together."

"This is the first time you've mentioned a young lady."

"Well, sir, he and the young lady had dinner together--dinner was ordered for two. I thought you knew that."

"I knew nothing about it--this is the first I've heard about it; this is the first time I've heard about any young lady. Did you know about it?" This last question was put to his wife. "I knew a lady came with him; he took two bedrooms, one for himself and one for her; his was No. 238, hers was No. 49, on the floor above. He wanted her next to him, they tell me in the office; but the rooms on either side of his were engaged."

"What was the lady's name?"

"That I don't know; I find he entered himself in the book as 'George Emmett and Lady.' When I asked Miss Wilson, who was there when he came, why she let him do it, she said that she asked him what was the lady's name; and he said it was all right and didn't matter."

"Did you see her?"

"No; I can't say that I did. I'm told she's quite young. She seems to have brought precious little luggage. There's only a small battered old tin box in her room."

"I can only say that this is the first mention I've heard of any young lady; I'd no idea that anyone came with him. I can't understand, Timmins, why you didn't speak of her before."

"Well, sir, I thought you knew."

"Don't I tell you I didn't know? What do you mean by persisting in thinking I knew? I understood you to say that when you brought the message he was alone."

"So he was, sir--except for the young lady."

"Except for the young lady! What the devil do you mean by 'except for the young lady'? He wasn't alone if she was there--was he?"

The inspector interposed.

"That's all right, Mr Elsey; you leave this to me--this is more in my line than yours." He tackled the waiter, whose expression, as they worried him, became more and more rabbitlike. "You say that Mr Emmett and this young lady dined together?"

"Yes, sir, they did--I waited on them."

"Did she strike you as being young? How old would you have set her down as?"

"Well, sir, not more than seventeen or eighteen, at the outside--though perhaps she might have been a little more or less--it's not easy to tell a young lady's age."

"Did she strike you as being a lady? You know what I mean."

"Yes, sir, I do. Well, sir, I daresay--I should say, sir, she was quite a lady; most certainly a lady; though plainly dressed; in fact, for a lady, almost shabby."

"Did she and Mr Emmett appear to be upon good terms?"

"Well, sir, I couldn't exactly say that they did."

"What do you mean by that? On what sort of terms were they? Explain yourself, man."

"Well, sir--for one thing she never uttered so much as a single word while I was in the room, neither to me nor to Mr Emmett; not even so much as yes or no when I handed her a dish. And she scarcely ate anything; and she never drank anything neither. Mr Emmett told me to fill her glass with champagne; but I don't believe she ever so much as put her lips to it--in fact, when I

came in and found him there was her glass just as it was when I filled it. Mr Emmett, he did all the talking. From the way in which she sat right back in her chair--that's the chair in which she sat, sir--and never spoke or moved, it seemed as if she were frightened half out of her life of him."

"Why should she be frightened? Did you hear him say anything to frighten her?"

"No, sir, nothing I could swear to; but he kept speaking to her in a chaffing sort of way, which I could see she didn't like."

"Did she seem to be angry?--in a bad temper?"

"No, sir, not so much that as afraid of him."

"When he went out to see this gentleman, did he leave her behind?"

"Yes, sir, he did, on that chair; and I couldn't help noticing how queer she looked--so white that I couldn't help wondering if she was feeling ill."

"Was she here when you found him?"

"No, sir; the room was empty."

"Did anyone see her go out of the room?--did you?"

"No, sir; I haven't seen her since I saw her sitting in that chair."

"Then where is she now? Where is she, Mr Elsey?"

"I've no more idea than you have, Mr Tinney. As I've already tried to explain, till a moment or two ago I hadn't the faintest notion that there was a lady in the case."

"Mrs Elsey, where is this interesting young lady?"

Dorothy, behind the blind and the curtain, could scarcely refrain from shrieking: "Here!"

Mrs Elsey shook her head.

"That's more than I can tell you, Mr Tinney. Beyond knowing that a young lady came with Mr Emmett, I don't know anything. What Timmins has been telling you is all news to me."

"Someone must know where she is, if she's in the house. I don't want to make any statement, but it seems to me that she's a most important witness, and the sooner she's produced the better. If, as Mr Timmins hints, she was feeling ill, she may have retired to her room. Perhaps, Mrs Elsey, you won't mind making inquiries. If she isn't in her room, wherever she is, she must be found, so don't let there be any mistake about it. I must have an interview with this very interesting young lady before we are either of us very much older--you understand?"

"No, Mr Tinney, I can't say I do understand; not as you put it. I will have inquiries made; in fact, I'll make them myself; but as for finding her, wherever she is, that's another question altogether, and one for which I decline to be held responsible. Things are coming to a pretty pass if I'm to be held responsible for the comings and goings of anyone who chooses to take a room in my house."

The lady sailed out of the room, with her head in the air. The inspector looked at her husband.

"I'm afraid I've trodden on Mrs Elsey's toes."

"She's very sensitive, Mrs Elsey is--very sensitive. I'm far from saying that you mean anything; but, as you must see for yourself, she has enough to bear already, without having more put upon her."

"I'm putting nothing on her. I simply say that that young woman must be found, and, if your good lady can't find her, someone else will have to, because found she's got to be--and pretty soon."

"Quite so, Mr Tinney, quite so; no one denies it for a single instant. I only wish that I had known of her existence sooner; much trouble might have been saved."

How that was, was not quite clear. The inspector made no comment. He turned to the waiter.

"Now, Mr Timmins, about this gentleman whom you say Mr Emmett went out to see. Did you know him? Was he a stranger? What did he look like?"

"That, sir, is more than I can tell you, seeing that I never saw him. The message and the note were both brought to me by one of the coffee-room waiters, of the name of Dowling--he may be able to tell you more than I can."

"Then fetch Mr Dowling here."

The landlord interposed.

"Excuse me!--one moment, Mr Tinney! At present no one knows what has occurred except ourselves; and, if it is possible, I should like as few persons as possible to know, till the morning."

"I don't see how you're going to prevent people knowing; you can't cover a murder with a napkin."

"Exactly; still, at the same time, if you wouldn't mind interviewing Dowling in my room, instead of here, I shall be only too glad to place it at your service; and to ensure you all possible privacy."

"Very well; there need be no difficulty about that. Have you finished, Dr Nichols?"

"I think I may say that, for the present, I have. Of course, a further examination will be necessary; but I think, under the circumstances, that that may be postponed till the morning; when, perhaps, I may be able to have the assistance of one of my colleagues."

"Have the assistance of whoever you like. Have his pockets been touched, Mr Elsey?"

"Certainly not, Mr Tinney: nothing has been touched--nothing; at least, not by anyone in my employ. I took care of that."

"Then I'll go through them, in your presence. It's just as well to have witnesses in cases of this sort." Mr Tinney "went through" the pockets of the man on the table; subjecting him to a process to which he would probably have strongly objected had it been in his power to object. A heterogeneous collection they produced.

"I'll put these things in my handkerchief, Mr Elsey; and, if you don't mind, I'll draw up a list of them, in your presence, in your room downstairs. In these cases you can't be too particular; and, as it's quite within the bounds of possibility that circumstances might arise in which someone may wish to hold you responsible for the property which he had in his possession when he came to your hotel, it's only right and proper that you should know exactly what I have got of his in my keeping. Now there's one other thing, before we go downstairs; about this room. If the corpse is to be left here--and I think it'll just be as well that it should be--then I must lock the door, and take the key. Have you a pass-key?"

"I believe I have one, somewhere."

"Then you must let me have it; you must let me have any keys which fit that lock. And you must give me your undertaking that no one, neither you nor Mrs Elsey, nor anyone, shall come into this room until I unlock it in the morning. If you won't, or can't, give me such an undertaking, then I shall have to leave one of my men outside there all night, to keep an eye on the door, to see that no one does come in."

"I will certainly give you such an undertaking--certainly I will! I promise you that no one shall come near the room; no one! You need have no fears upon that score."

"Then that's all right. Now, I think, we can go downstairs; and I'll hear what Mr Dowling has to say, about that mysterious gentleman, who, maybe, wasn't so very mysterious after all. And perhaps Mrs Elsey may have some news for us of that very interesting young lady; though it doesn't seem as if she's found her, or we should have heard. I'm not giving away any official secret when I say that I shouldn't be surprised if that young lady turns out to be the key of the situation, and on that account it's just possible that she may not be so easy to find as we should like her to be. But found she'll have to be; and found she will be; if our good hostess can't do it, then I will. I always was reckoned pretty good at hide-and-seek; I generally knew as well as another whether I was hot or cold. Now, gentlemen, if you please."

The party passed to the door. The inspector switched off the lights; drew the door to after him; locked it, and drew out the key; and Dorothy was left alone, in the darkness, to spend the night with her guardian.

CHAPTER VI

HOW DOROTHY MADE HER EXIT

In the darkness--that was the worst. When she realised that they indeed had gone, and that she was alone, she came out from behind the blind, parted the curtains, and found that the room was all dark. That was the worst. She could see so much better in the darkness, for though she might not be able to use the eye of sense she was at the mercy of the more vivid eye of the imagination--at its mercy. It made her see what she never would, what she never could, have seen in the light. Within sixty seconds of her having been left alone in the darkness she had already begun to have a vision of horrors. Yet she dared not switch on the electric lights; although she knew how to--there were none in the convent, but she had learnt all about them since--she did not dare. The inspector had spoken of leaving one of his men outside to keep an eye on the door; if he had not done so it was only because the landlord had promised that he would make it his especial charge; which meant that he would see that a watch was kept on it. Therefore, if she switched on the light, it would be seen at once; you could always tell from the outside if there was a light inside a room. If it was seen, they would know that she was there. Beyond a doubt that woman had not found her; probably the hue-and-cry was already out. Quite possibly it might dawn upon them ere long, that, since no one had seen her go out, she might have been in the room all the while and no one had had the sense to look. The danger of their repairing the omission, and coming back to look, was quite great enough, without the added danger of a light being seen inside the room.

And yet, to be left alone with her guardian lying on the table--that was much worse than seeing him huddled upon the chair. What might he not be doing, lying stretched out on the table at which she herself had such a little while ago been seated? Was he turning round to look at her? Turning what was left him of his head? It was so still. How loudly she breathed. She could hear her own respirations. Could he hear them too? She caught at the curtains with tightened fingers. Was that not someone trying to speak in a whisper?

All at once there was a sound. Someone was in the room. She felt herself trembling from head to foot; she clung to the curtains as for dear life. It was only after some consideration that she understood that the visitor was probably a mouse. She had been used to mice at the convent. There they had scampered about all over the place; sometimes about the room in which she had slept. The convent was old; the hotel was old; evidently the small marauders had taken up their quarters in the one building as they had done in the other.

The new-comer was joined by others. She had an impression that, after a while, numbers of mice were in the room. If they were conscious of her presence they ignored it. Certainly they cared nothing for the dead. She wondered if they were attracted by the smell of the champagne which had been spilt upon the floor when the stranger broke the bottle. Suddenly there were sounds quite close to her feet; she felt as if something ran over one of them; as if a fresh detachment were coming out of some crevice in the wood panelling of the recess in which she was standing. Was she to be shut up all night--alone with the dead, while the mice held festival? Was she to remain there, upright? Or should she seek rest on the floor? On the floor the mice might run to and fro across her body. She did not mind that so much as the thought that her guardian might be peering down at her from his place upon the table. There was a couch on her left; should she take refuge on that? To what purpose? Even suppose she slept, when they came in the morning would she rather that they should find her on it asleep or waking? If they were to find her at all, then it would be better, on all accounts, that she should turn on the lights at once, ring the bell, and bid them do with her what they would. Besides, she would be afraid to go to sleep with that in the room. The whole place was full of it. Each time her glance strayed, on this side or that, seeking, in the darkness, for she knew not what, with, as it were, an irresistible jerk, her head was brought right round again, so that she had to look towards where she knew the table was, with its burden. She could not remain standing through the night; she dare not lie upon the floor; she dare not take refuge on the couch; she was unwilling to venture out from the sheltering curtains into the room; for all she could tell he might have got off the table, and be waiting for her just on the other side of them.

As she realised, more and more clearly, the disagreeable nature of her position, her thoughts recurred to the window, to the handles which hung on either side of the lower sash. It seemed incredible that a window, even a silly English window, should be made not to open at all, either at the top or bottom. After an interval of she knew not how long, she summoned up resolution enough to make another effort. Moving very softly, being anxious to be heard by no one, most of all by what was on the table, turning towards the window, she felt for the handles, and, finding them, began to pull. It was impossible to discriminate between the colours: she could only learn from experiment if she had the right ones. Apparently, to commence with, she had not: pull as she might, nothing happened. When, however, after one or two fumbling changes she tugged again something yielded: the handles came down towards her with a run. She did not doubt that she had succeeded in opening the upper portion of the window, at least in part. Not only was the movement so unexpected as to occasion her a sensation of shock, it was accompanied by a noise which made the sensation greater still. Either she had not tugged just as she should have done, or else the sash, or something which actuated it, stood much in need of oiling: it moved with a creaking sound which seemed to Dorothy to be one of the most frightful sounds she had ever heard. In her agitation she did not improve matters. So completely was she taken unawares that she loosed the handles as if they had been hot coals; swinging back they hit the window and the woodwork a series of raps as with a pair of hammers. To the girl's excited imagination it seemed very much as if pandemonium had all at once broken loose. That such a tumult could have remained unheard seemed to her incredible. If it had not actually called attention to the

experiments she was trying on the window, beyond a doubt it had roused suspicion; which was already sufficiently on the alert, owing to the significant fact--with which, probably, the entire establishment had been made acquainted before now--that the mysterious young lady who had accompanied Mr Emmett had disappeared. She clearly realised how general a theme of conversation her inexplicable evanishment had probably become. How the men were asking the maids if they had seen anything of her; and how the maids were replying by putting the same question to the men. If anyone had heard the clatter she had caused--and someone must have heard it--he or she would promptly report the fact; inquiries into its origin would at once be set on foot; before many minutes had passed it would be traced to its source.

The girl crouched against the side of the recess, every nerve on edge, quivering with apprehension, expecting each moment to hear the key being inserted in the lock of the door, the click of the turning lock, the opening of the door, the steps of those who had decided, at last, to leave no nook or cranny of the room unvisited in which she might, by any possibility, be hidden. But as the minutes went, and no one came, her immediate fears grew less. Perhaps, after all, she had been unheard. In which case it might be wise, and safe, to endeavour to find out what had really been the fruit of all her tugging.

Drawing aside the blind, she looked up. The window was open, but the blind prevented her seeing how much. It was in the way; it would be difficult, in any event, to take advantage of the open window while it was there. With anxious fingers she began to draw it up. It rose more smoothly than she had feared. It was only when it was half way up that it struck her that if anyone's eyes were on the window they could hardly fail to see the mounting blind. The tardy appreciating of the fact occasioned her another touch of panic. Pausing, she had a mind to let it stay where it was; then, with sudden recklessness, drew it right to the top, holding her breath, when it was up, fearful of the result. She still seemed to have attracted no one's attention. It seemed to be a clear night, she could see the stars in the sky. By their light she saw that she had drawn the top sash down some nine or ten inches, so that it was plain that at least part of the window was meant to open. She had only to draw it down as far as she could; it might mean for her a way of escape. Again she gripped the handles--it was easy now to grip the right ones; in the dim light she could see that they hung down below the others; again she tugged; again the sash came down, with that horrid creaking noise. In desperate recognition of the truth that hers was a case in which she might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb she went on tugging, in spite of the persistent creaking, till she could tug no more. Apparently she had opened the window to its widest extent.

When she ceased to tug she strained her ears to listen. This time she heard a sound which seemed to make her feel that all which had gone before had been as nothing. It came from within the room. At first she had not the vaguest notion what it was; what it meant. Yet, the instant it reached her ear, she was oppressed as by the consciousness of something strange. It came, and went, so quickly that it left her in terrified doubt as to whether it had not been born of her imagination.

Then after an interval, which seemed to her of grimly portentous length, it came again--the sound. There was no mistake that that was real. Equally certain was it that it came from the other side of the curtains, from the room which was empty, save for the mice and the man stretched out upon the table. No mouse, no gathering of mice, could have produced that sound; and the man on the table was dead. Was it possible that anyone could have come into the room without her knowledge? Surely she must have heard the opening of the door if it had been opened. She had noticed that the key turned in the lock with a grating noise, as if either the lock or the key were rusty. She was convinced that if the door had been opened she must have heard it; there was no other way into the room, yet she had heard that sound.

It came a third time. Was it not someone breathing, or trying to breathe? It sounded like it. As if someone were gasping, struggling for breath, as if some too heavy sleeper were making a stertorous effort to wake out of slumber. If no one had come into the room--and how could anyone have come without her knowing it--who could it be? There was another point: such a noise could hardly come from a person who was in a normal condition. It had gone again; all was still, though she listened with all her ears, with every sense she had. Just as she was wondering if it had gone for good, hoping that it had, it came again--louder, more obvious, more terrible, than before. For there was a terrible quality in the noise itself, quite apart from the circumstances under which it was audible. A sensitive soul, hearing it in broad daylight, anywhere, would have shuddered; it had about it such a suggestion of physical discomfort: as though someone, spellbound in unwholesome sleep, strove to regain consciousness, in order to escape from some agonising nightmare, and strove in vain. Had Dorothy had any experience of modern medicine she would have recognised its likeness to the noise some surgical patients make as they gradually come back to life from the stupefying effects of some powerful anæsthetic.

What Dorothy did realise was that, after all, her guardian might not be so dead as everyone had supposed. How that might be she did not understand; she did not try to understand. The appreciation of the fact was enough for her; indeed, it was too much, though her appreciation was imperfect. She did not wish to make sure if her guardian really had still in him the spark of life, however dim the spark might be; she desired nothing less. It did not occur to her to think that the spark might be indeed so dim that only instant, expert aid could succeed in fanning it back to flame. She did not stay to consider that if the man was not entirely dead; that if prompt attention might bring him back to a hold on life, however precarious that hold might be; then it

was her business, and her duty, to use every available means to procure for him that assistance with the least possible delay; and that if she neglected, wittingly, to do so and, in consequence, he met that fate which, but for her, he might, at least temporarily, have been snatched from, then the actual responsibility for his death lay at her door, as something for which, one day, she might be called to account. Believing that he was struggling back to life, her one wish was to escape before he succeeded; it was his success she feared, not his failure. Failing to recognise the fact that, if he did succeed, the burden of blood-guiltiness would be lifted from the stranger's shoulders, and from hers; all she cared for was that he should not find her there.

Panic made her callous. Plainly his struggles increased; each second he fought harder and harder for his life. It never occurred to her that if she did escape he would probably be left alone till the morning, when the odds were that assistance would come too late. She gave no heed to the thought of the strong man contending, in the pitch-black room, helplessly, with death, with help, willing help, so close at hand; that was a picture which was to occur to her later. By standing on tiptoe she could just get hold of the top of the open window. Pulling herself up; getting her feet on to the sill; leaning out of the open upper half, she tried to see what was beyond. It was not easy to decide. The light was puzzling. Although the stars were visible overhead they were not sufficiently bright to enable her to make out, with certainty, what was below. She seemed to be looking down into some sort of yard, in which dark objects were dimly visible. She supposed it was probably the stable yard; what the dark objects were she could not determine. There were no lights; no one appeared to be moving about; they could hardly be vehicles which, at that hour, had been left out in the open. She seemed to be higher than she expected. Although the ground was invisible it seemed to be very far below. How she was to reach it from the window she had not a notion; her heart failed at the thought of trying to do so. The only way would be to scramble, somehow, over the top sash; then to descend, also somehow, to the sill without; then to lower herself, for the third time, somehow, till she hung from the sill by her hands; and drop, she did not know how far through space, nor did she know into, or on to, what. The prospect was not an alluring one.

At the convent there had been a girl, a refractory young lady, who, finding herself ill at ease in her surroundings, essayed to elude them by way of a window which looked out, over the wall, on to the road. That it was unnecessary to take such an unusual route, since she had only to give utterance to her desire to leave to find herself outside as quickly as she could wish, was nothing to her. She was a young lady of a romantic turn of mind. Possibly she wished to make an impression, not only on her schoolfellows and the Sisters, but also on her parents. She knotted together the sheets which she took from her bed; it was presumed that she tied one end to a bar which ran across the window, and, squeezing past it, began to descend by means of the sheets to which she clung. If she did tie one end of the sheet to the bar, then, apparently, it was not tied very securely; because, seemingly, before she got very far, it came unfastened, with the result that she descended with a degree of rapidity which exceeded her expectations. She struck her head, it seemed, with great force against the wall; so that by the time she reached the ground, on which they found her, some twelve feet below, she was, in all human probability, already dead.

That young lady's tragic fate was the one event which marked the fifteen years Dorothy had spent in the convent. Now, as she leaned out of the open upper half of the window, peering down at the impenetrable darkness which masked whatever might be below, the story came back to her with a vividness which was most unwelcome. Dorothy's plight was worse than hers. She had made elaborate preparations for what she well knew was in front of her; yet she had come to utter dire grief. How much more likely, Dorothy felt, was disaster to overtake her, if she plunged, practically blindfold, through unknown depths into unknown perils? She turned giddy at the thought of trying to climb on to the top of that open sash. Almost involuntarily she drew her head back into the room. Better, almost, anything rather than that she should risk being dashed to pieces by flinging herself blindly into space. She would give up her mad attempt.

Moved by this new impulse to observe discretion, she had begun to lower herself on to the floor of the room, when, again, there came that sound--louder, more insistent, as if someone were bursting his lungs in the violence of his gasps for breath. Then there was a crash, which shook the room, as someone, something, fell from the table on to the floor. All was still. In that ominous silence, the girl, seized with a sudden frenzy of panic, was on to the top of the sash probably before she clearly realised what it was that she was doing; over on the other side; standing on the sill; from which she began to lower herself with a swiftness and an agility of which she would scarcely have been capable had the conditions been normal. For some seconds she clung with her small hands to the rough edge of the sill. She was conscious that she had brought her leg into unpleasant contact with the wall, and inflicted on herself various contusions. Even in that eleventh hour, as she hung between earth and heaven, conviction came to her of the madness of what she was doing. Had it been possible she would have drawn herself back into the room even then, but it was not possible. From where she was there was no way back. Her slender arms were incapable of raising even her slight body. Such muscles as she had become relaxed; she seemed to be dragging her arms out of their sockets; her hands were slipping. Though she gripped the sill till she felt the rough stone cutting her fingers she could get no hold. The question as to whether she would risk death by dropping into space was no longer one for her decision; with all the unwillingness in the world to let herself go, she could not keep from falling. She made an effort to stay where she was for yet another breathing space; so that, at least, she might collect her thoughts before she went, perhaps, into eternity. The effort had the contrary effect to that which she intended. Instead of delaying it, it hastened the end. Her hands could grip the sill no

longer. Her finger-tips were on the very edge. In another instant they would be over, and then--- Of what might happen then she dared not think.

That instant came. The slip came quickly at the last; the sill seemed suddenly to be jerked away. She tried to catch at something, and could not. She closed her eyes; convulsively rather than of intention; as if she would shut out the sight of what was about to happen; she held her breath, and fell. As she fell strange noises were in her ears, which seemed to come from the room from which, at last, she had escaped.

CHAPTER VII

THE CARAVAN

How long she had been there she did not know. She looked about her, wondering where she was; how she had come there. She was in the open air; above her were the stars in the sky. She seemed to be lying on some rubbish; but something hard was underneath. How her head ached; it made her feel so stupid. Putting up her hand to soothe it, she found that it hurt her almost as much as her head. Staring at it, in the dim light she could just make out that it was covered with something wet. All at once she remembered, hazily; and sat up straighter. She had dropped from the window--it must be somewhere above her; she could not see it from where she was. This rough surface which she touched when she put out her poor, hurt hand must be the outer wall of the hotel.

One thing was plain: she was not dead; and so it behoved her not to stay where she was a moment longer than she could help; she had not dropped from the window to spend the night on the ground immediately beneath. She raised herself to her feet; the process occasioning her more pain than she had expected. It was all she could do to stand. One ankle showed a disposition to double up; her left leg smarted so that the pain of it brought the tears into her eyes. Indeed, there were smarts and aches all over her; her arms seemed limp and her hands nerveless; her whole body felt hurt, and bruised, and shaken. Her first impulse, when she learnt the plight she was in, was to sink back on to the ground, from which she had with such difficulty raised herself, and cry. But, even in the half-dazed condition in which she was, she recognised that such a mode of procedure would be worse than futile. Since she had risked so much to get so far she might at least try to get a little farther. Now, in all probability, only a little courage was needed to enable her to get at least clear away from that immediate neighbourhood.

Which way should she go? She looked about her. The light, if dim, was sufficient to enable her to make out something of her surroundings. Seemingly the place in which she was had nothing to do with the hotel. It was apparently a yard which was associated with the adjoining house. What kind of house it was she could not see; she could see windows, but behind them no lights were visible; the whole place seemed to be in darkness. There were buildings on three sides of the yard. She could just see what seemed to be a door which led into the house; it was hardly likely to be of much use to her--she would be little better off in the adjoining house than in the hotel which she had just now quitted. She looked for another door; and saw that there was one in the wall which bounded the yard on the fourth side. She moved towards it, stumbling over unseen obstacles as she went. Reaching it, she raised the latch; the door was open. Passing through she found herself in a narrow alley, which ran between two walls. Since, to her, direction mattered nothing, she turned to the left; then, when she had gone some little distance, to the left again; and presently came to what was apparently the principal street of the town. Conscious of the singularity of her appearance: dressed, as she was, for indoors; hatless; with her attire in disorder; being unwilling to attract notice, she peered anxiously about her alley. At that hour of the night even the town's chief thoroughfare was nearly deserted. Gaining courage from the fact, passing into it, she pressed forward with hurrying footsteps, leaving the hotel more and more behind her as she went.

Occasionally she met both pedestrians and vehicles; but no one seemed to take any special heed of her. Either they were too occupied with their own affairs; or else they saw nothing about her to rouse their interest. On and on she went; always along the same broad street; the farther she went the fewer people she encountered. At last it seemed to her that she had gone some distance without meeting a soul. Looking round she perceived that she seemed to have left the town behind; the high street seemed to have become a country road. Here and there by the roadside were detached villas and houses; but the long unbroken line of buildings had come to an end. Pressing on she found that the villas and the houses were becoming fewer and farther between; she was in the open country. On a sudden even the fertile country, with its fields and trees and hedges, seemed to have gone; the road seemed to be passing over an illimitable

expanse of open heath.

She was so tired; so stiff; and in such pain. Her ankle hurt her so that she could hardly put her foot to the ground. The leg which she had grazed against the wall, as she had lowered herself from the sill, smarted almost beyond endurance. Her bruised body ached all over; her head ached worse than her body. As she paused to take her bearings all these things forced themselves on her at once. She became conscious that, however great the need, she could not go on much farther without a rest. Where was she to rest? Out here the world seemed brighter; the stars brighter. Certainly the air was clearer. She could see on all sides of her, by the light of the stars, ever so far; little enough there seemed to see. Here and there, the way she had come, were the outlines of houses; but in front, and on either hand, was nothing but the open moor; broken by what probably were clumps of furze and bushes. Should she lie down by the side of one of those clumps, to rest? The turf ought to be dry; there was promise of fair weather; she would be better there than alone in a room with Mr Emmett, be he alive or dead. The thing to be desired was to get at some distance from the road, so that she might escape observation from passers-by. She began to pick her way, as best she could, across the grass. Her objective was a patch of brushwood which, so far as she was able to judge, was at a distance of perhaps a couple of hundred yards; far enough from the road to ensure her privacy. Gaining the edge of the patch, she began to thread her way among the bushes; determined, if she could, to reach the centre, so that they might stand up round about her, and so serve as an effective screen. She had just decided that she had got as far in among them as she need, and was about to allow herself the luxury of sinking down upon the turf, when there was a rustling sound, and, looking up, a man seemed to rise out of the solid earth, within a few feet of where she was standing.

Which of the twain was more surprised there was nothing to show; the man was the first to speak; which he did in a voice which at least hinted at cultivation:

"Who are you?"

The girl, taken wholly unawares, replied, in faltering tones, as a child might have done:

"I'm--I'm Dorothy."

"Oh, you are Dorothy; that's good hearing. And pray, Dorothy, from where did you happen to have sprung?"

She echoed his word.

"Sprung?"

"Yes; literally and correctly, sprung; for since a minute ago there was no one within a mile, one only can conclude that you have sprung clean out of mother earth. If you haven't, how do you come to be there?--from where have you come?"

"I've come--from the road."

"From the road. That's very illuminating. Did you come to this particular spot because you knew that I was here?"

"Knew--that you were here!"

Her manner seemed to strike him. There was an interval before he spoke again.

"I think, if you don't mind, I'll come and have a better look at you."

He came striding towards her through the bushes. Her impulse was to turn and flee. But, partly because she was no longer capable of flight, partly because there was something in his tone which spoke pleasantly to her ear, she stayed quite still, without making an effort to move. He advanced until he was within a yard of her; then he stopped. She had watched him coming with sensations which she would have found it hard to define; when he stopped she trembled. In silence he stood and looked at her; while she, on her side, looked at him. She realised, with a distinct sense of relief, that there seemed to be nothing to offend her in his appearance. So far as she could judge, in that uncertain light, he was not old, nor very young. He had a small beard and moustache. His head, like her own, was uncovered. He seemed to be decently attired--though he wore no waistcoat, and his shirt was open at the neck. In his left hand he had a pipe, which, as he continued to inspect her, he placed in his mouth. She could see the smoke issuing from between his lips.

When he spoke, the question which he put to her was as unconventional as their meeting:

"How old are you?"

Without hesitation she replied:

"I'm nearly eighteen."

"Nearly eighteen? That's a great age. Aren't you a lady?"

"I--I don't know."

"Don't you? Then you're wise. Very few women do know if they are or are not ladies; they only think they know; and how often they think wrong. However, as a matter of simple fact, I think we may take it for granted that, for present purposes, you approach as near to the accepted definition of what a lady is as needs be; and, therefore, I should very much like to know why, at this hour of the night, you're here."

"I came to rest."

"You came to rest?--where?"

"Here."

"What do you mean by here?"

"Here, among the bushes, where--where they won't be able to see me from the road. I didn't know that you were here. If I am in your way I'll--I'll go."

"It isn't that you're in my way that's the trouble. The difficulty which presents itself to my mind is, why do you want to rest among the bushes?"

"Because I'm tired."

"That's a good reason, so far as it goes; and you both look and sound as if you were tired; but why the bushes, when you might be safe and snug at home in bed? Where is your home?"

"I have no home."

"Is that true?"

"Quite true. I never have had a home."

He seemed to be considering her words.

"There's a quibble about that statement somewhere. Girls like you don't attain to the ripe age of nearly eighteen years without ever having had a home; you're not a product of a vagabond life. However, I'll feign to believe you, if I don't; since, just now, the point seems to be that you do propose to spend at least this one night with no canopy above you but the sky. Is that so?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Then you're dull; my meaning's not opaque. Am I to understand that you seriously propose to spend the night out in the open?"

"I am tired; I want to rest; I must rest somewhere; I--I can't keep walking all night."

"No; you certainly can't; and, since that is the case, you had better come with me."

He turned, as if to go. She drew back.

"Where to?"

He noted the gesture.

"Not far; only a few steps. Are you afraid of me?"

"No; I don't think I am."

"Be sure, please. Doesn't your instinct tell you that there's nothing about me which you need fear? It's hard on me if it doesn't, since my one prayer is that no one who is helpless, hopeless, and in trouble shall ever be afraid of me. So please be sure that you are not afraid; and come." He moved off; this time she followed; though still a little doubtfully. He led her, between the bushes, to where the ground began to fall away; pausing on the crest of the slope, he pointed to a caravan which was immediately in front, at the bottom of a little hollow, which was just deep enough to hide it from view till one was right upon it. "You say that you've no home; that's mine--*pro tem*--for this summer time, which flies all too quickly. And, while it's summer, it's a home fit for a lord; a king need want no better; and, for this night, it's yours." He stopped; then, seeing that she looked at him askance, went on: "By that I mean that if, instead of spending the night in the open, resting beneath the bushes, you will accept the hospitality of my caravan, and take up your quarters in it till the morning, I shall be honoured, flattered, and obliged."

She was staring at him with wide-open eyes.

"Do you mean that you wish me to sleep in there?"

She pointed to the structure down below.

"If you will so far honour me--if you will be so very good."

"But--where are you to sleep?--if that's your home?"

"I'll show you." She went beside him down the slope till they came to where some things were lying on the ground. "That's my bed; my sleeping-place. There's a waterproof sheet stretched out upon the grass, pegged down at each of the four corners. On it are all the wraps I need for covering. On a night like this I'd sooner lie under those"--he pointed upward to the stars--"than under a painted ceiling. So, since my house is empty, it'll be glad to have a tenant. You'll find in it all the bed and bedding you require. I'll be out here, sleeping, like a watchdog, at your door. You've only to bolt and bar it, and you'll be as safe from molestation as you could be in any hotel that ever yet was built." He ascended the two or three steps which mounted to the door of the caravan, and went inside. "If you'll wait till I've lighted the lamp I'll show you what excellent accommodation my establishment has to offer." Presently she found herself standing with him in the queerest room she had seen. Tired though she was, she could not help noticing its spotless cleanliness; and, in spite of its small size, how dexterously its contents were arranged, so that not only was nothing in the way, but there were conveniences of many kinds which one would not expect to find in such cramped quarters. On a sort of shelf on one side a bed was made. "That's your couch for to-night. I always get it ready for immediate occupation when the shades of evening fall. In this dear English climate prophecy is vain; one never knows what may happen between sunset and sunrise. You go to bed under a cloudless sky, to wake, an hour later, because you are being pelted by the rain. Since my education has not yet gone far enough to enable me to enjoy sleeping in the rain, under those circumstances I pick up my bed, and beat a hasty retreat in here. And as one generally wants to get to sleep again with the least possible delay, I make a point of having this in readiness, so that I may tumble in upon the instant. See; here's a bolt, and here's a bar; push them home, when I am gone, and you'll be as safe as if you were in the Tower of London."

When he had gone she acted on his advice. Apparently he was listening without; because, when the door was made fast, he called to her.

"Good-night!--sleep well!--may the angels touch your eyelids if you dream!"

She bade him good-night, in her turn; though hers was spoken scarcely above a whisper. Her desire was to look about her; to take some stock of her new and strange surroundings; but her weariness was greater than her desire. Half unconsciously she sank down on the bed upon the shelf, just as she was. As she touched it, she sighed; and was asleep.

She was roused by the sound of knocking. She was vaguely aware that someone was making a noise for some little time before she succeeded in waking sufficiently to make quite sure. Lifting her head she perceived that though the lamp still burned its light was quite superfluous, since the sun was streaming in through the narrow window which ran along one side of the caravan. There was no mistake about that noise. Rat-tat-tat! Someone was keeping up a sustained and vigorous rapping against the door.

"Who's there?" she asked.

"No one in particular; only me. I was beginning to wonder if you were going to sleep the clock right round. You must forgive me for disturbing you; I wouldn't have done it only I've a sort of feeling that it's nearly breakfast-time; especially as, in a general way, I've had my breakfast, washed up, and put away the things, a couple of hours ago. The trouble is that all the cooking utensils of which my establishment boasts are inside with you; so, if you're awake wide enough, if, at your convenience, you could manage to come outside, I could come in, and start upon that morning meal." For some seconds, in her drowsy state, she could not conceive who it could be who was talking. When she remembered, although she was alone, she put her hands up to her face to hide her blushes. In that convent of hers maidens were taught to be maidenly; it burst upon her, with some force, that there was that about her situation which was scarcely conventual. The voice without went on: "There's a can of water just outside the door; if you put two fingers out you'll be able to get it in. If you'll open the cupboard above your head you'll find a looking-glass--which you'll be able to hang on any one of a dozen different hooks--a basin, and, I believe, all the essentials necessary for an elementary toilet."

Getting off the bed, she was conscious, although she still ached, of feeling distinctly rested; and that though she had slept with all her clothes on. Unbarring the door she drew in the can of water; saying, as she did so:

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting; but I--I did sleep so soundly. I won't be a moment longer than I can help."

Nor was it long before she threw the door wide open, and came out on to the ledge at the top of the little flight of steps. He was lying on the turf, with a pipe in his mouth, a newspaper in his hands. She was conscious, as she came out into the open, of the glory of the morning. He seemed to be conscious only of her. Jumping up he saluted her with his hand.

"Why," he exclaimed, "you're a living advertisement of the excellence of my domestic arrangements; you look as fresh as a new pin. If you had been able to indulge in the luxury of a marble bath, and a barber, you could look no fresher. Good-morning--I need not ask you how you've slept--and here's the sun in a cloudless sky to greet you."

She came down the steps, all blushes; smiling as she had not done since she left the convent. The process of preparing breakfast began. She was conscious that she ought to intrude no longer on this stranger's hospitality. But, in the first place, her shyness kept her from giving expression to that consciousness; and, in the second, something told her that, say what she might, he would not let her go till she had shared with him his morning meal. So, making a virtue of what really was necessity, she held her peace upon the subject of her going; and helped him with his preparations for the meal.

Girl-like, she found those preparations most amusing; she had not been so entertained for many a day. There were eggs and bacon to be fried; the kettle to be boiled; bread and butter to be cut; the table to be laid. Acting on instructions, this latter she made her special business. The table was the ground. On it she spread a tablecloth; on the white cloth were placed the necessary cups and saucers, plates and spoons, knives and forks. The cooking was done on an oil-stove inside the caravan.

"Read the advertisements," exclaimed the stranger, "and an oil-stove can do anything that the most unreasonable camper-out can possibly require--up to cooking a dinner for any number, anywhere, in a torrent of rain and a storm of wind. As a matter of plain fact it won't really cook out-of-doors at all; that's the one advantage of a house on wheels: you can keep it under cover, though it smells the place out. Humour an oil-stove; coddle it; and it may cook something, sometimes, which a hardy stomach may be able to digest. Subject it to any one of the ten million conditions it dislikes, fight as you will, it will beat you out of sight; and, in spite of all your struggles, you'll go hungry in the end. I know! I've tried every sort that's made; each is worse than the other. Now where's that dish? I've a constitutional objection to eating my food out of a frying-pan, if it can possibly be avoided; so if you'll be so good as to take the dish out of the oven, where it's supposed to be getting hot, I'll turn these eggs and this bacon out upon it, and we'll start on them while we still have strength enough to do it."

Presently the girl and the man were seated on opposite sides of that impromptu table.

CHAPTER VIII

MR FRAZER GOES SHOPPING

The morning was bright and clear; the air was sweet and buoyant; the food was good, the man and the girl were hungry, they both made an excellent meal. And, while they ate and drank, and, between whiles, talked, each, more or less furtively, took stock of the other. Dorothy found that the hazy impression she had formed of the stranger overnight was not in the least bit like him. He was younger than she had thought. She was not much of a judge of men's years; since her experience of them was so extremely limited, it was hardly likely that she would be. In the darkness she had set him down as somewhere in the forties; now, in the bright sunshine, which ages some of us, she supposed him to be somewhere in the early thirties. There was about him an appearance of vigour--the vigour which goes with youth--for which she was unprepared. Then, too, he was so much better-looking than she had taken him to be--perhaps in thinking so she was influenced by the accident that she was dark and he was fair. His eyes were very blue, and very bright; the skin of his face and neck, though slightly tanned, was delicate as any girl's; his hair and beard were flaxen. He was taller, too, than she had imagined--when he stood up she saw that he must be at least six feet; his shoulders were so broad, he held himself so straight, there was about him such a glow of health and strength, that it did her good to look at him. And his attire suited him well; or she thought it did--certainly there could scarcely have been less of it. He wore no cap or coat or waistcoat; his canvas shirt was open at the neck; his grey flannel trousers had as belt a handkerchief of scarlet silk; he was shod with stout brown shoes. It was a costume suited to fine weather out-of-doors; and, free and easy as it was, both it and the wearer pleased the lady's undoubtedly inexperienced eyes.

What impression she made on him it was not easy to determine; not impossibly the morning light had brought a surprise also to him. One felt, not only that she puzzled him, but that the puzzle continually grew. In his speech he owned as much. When the dish and the plates were empty he regarded her with a whimsical smile.

"It's good to eat when you're hungry."

"Yes," she agreed; "it is."

"Do you know that it's past eleven o'clock; and that when I'm abroad in this house of mine I

make it a rule to have all signs of breakfast cleared away before the clock strikes eight."

She began to stammer.

"I beg your pardon; I am so sorry; it's all my fault; but I--I did sleep so late. Now I--I won't hinder you any longer; I'll go." She stood up. "I--don't quite know where; I--I don't know this part of the country very well--I am very much obliged for all you've done for me; you--you've been very kind. I have no money; but when I have I'll--I'll pay you for what you've done, if you'll let me know to what address to send."

"I think you're very stupid."

She crimsoned.

"Good-bye."

"I also think that you're ill-mannered."

She had turned to go; but there was something in the quiet finality of his tone which caused her to turn to him again.

"Why?"

"I think you're the first because you speak of paying for what, you ought to know, I'm only too glad to give; as if I were the sort of person to accept money from a lady who has been my guest!"

"I beg your pardon; I--I'm so stupid."

"I said you were. I think that you're the second because, no sooner are you through your own meal than you rush off, before your host has finished."

"I thought you had; I did not mean to be ill-mannered; I thought you wanted me to go."

"You are mistaken. It is another rule of mine--and this is a rule which I don't propose to break--when I am done with the actual eating and drinking, to smoke a pipe; I regard that pipe as an integral part of my breakfast. I don't know why you should wish to deprive me of it."

"I don't; I didn't know you wanted another; I saw you smoking one just now, before we began."

"That was because breakfast was unwontedly delayed; also that is no reason why now I shouldn't have another. When I am enjoying my breakfast pipe I like, when opportunity offers, to have a chat. You spoke of payment. I suggest that your payment takes the form of sitting down and talking to me till I have smoked my pipe right out. Have you any particular objection?"

"I don't mind staying, if you want me to, till you--you've done your pipe."

"Thank you; then will you have the goodness to resume your seat while I load up? One can't talk to a person who will persist in standing."

She sank down again upon the turf. As he crammed the tobacco into the bowl of his briar she regarded the tablecloth with doubtful eyes.

"Can I--can I clear away the things, and wash up for you?"

"No, you can't; all you can do is sit still, and talk. Let me begin by introducing myself; my name is Frazer--Eric Frazer. You were so kind as to tell me last night that yours was Dorothy. As it is unusual for a man to address a woman by her Christian name after such a short acquaintance as ours hath been, may I ask you to tell me what your surname is, so that we can start fair?"

She hesitated; then told him a falsehood; she herself could not have said why.

"My name is Greenwood."

Somehow, the instant she had spoken, she felt he doubted. He looked at her, over the lighted match which he was holding to the bowl of his pipe; and, though she did not try to meet his glance, she knew that in it there was something sceptical.

"Greenwood?--your name is Greenwood? Dorothy Greenwood--Miss Greenwood. Thank you; I am flattered by the confidence in me which your telling me your name implies." Having completed the operation of lighting his pipe, folding his arms across his chest, he observed her with a steady attention which made her feel curiously uncomfortable. She began to wish that, ill-mannered or not, she had gone when she said she would. Nor were matters improved when he began to ask her questions; which he did in a cool, level voice which, for some cause, jarred upon her nerves. "You were so good as to inform me, also last night, when I inquired how it was that I was so fortunate as to be favoured with your society, that you came from the road. Now the road runs both ways; which one did you come from?"

Summoning her courage she looked at him with what she meant to be defiance.

"I would rather not tell you, if you don't mind."

"That's better; much better." What he meant she did not know; yet she felt that it was something which she would rather he did not mean. He went on: "Do I understand that, not knowing this country very well, you are journeying you don't know where--without money, without luggage, without even a hat on your head?"

Again she tried to defy him.

"I can't help your asking questions; but I'm not forced to answer them if I'd rather not; and I would rather not."

His manner, if anything, was blander than ever; her attitude did not seem to wound his sensibilities one bit.

"Quite right; you are perfectly right; if you don't want to answer, don't; never be coerced into answering a question which you don't want to answer. Impertinent curiosity is not to be encouraged. There is so much interest taken in our goings and our comings, merely because some people deem them peculiar, that the liberty of the subject threatens to become seriously abridged. I know what I am speaking of; I have suffered from that kind of thing myself. By the way, this morning, while you were still fast asleep in bed I--went shopping."

He laid a stress on the last two words which caused her to prick up her ears; she herself did not know why.

"Shopping? Where?"

She looked about her, as if she expected to find a shop, or shops, in sight. He shook his head.

"No, not here; there are no shops upon the heath that I am aware of; and I know it pretty well. I ought to. Where I went shopping was to a town called Newcaster. Have you ever heard of it?" Newcaster was the town from which she had fled the night before. So soon as he spoke of it a dreadful feeling began to come over her that she knew what was the point which he was approaching. She tried to shake the feeling off; but it would not be shaken. With beating pulses she sat and watched him drawing closer and closer. "Newcaster," he explained, speaking with what seemed to her to be hideous deliberation, "is a town not far from here; an old town; a racing town; it is to horse racing that, in all human probability, it owes its continued flourishing condition--for it continues to flourish. One of its numerous meetings is taking place now; there is to be racing on this heath to-day. You hear that humming and buzzing sound which comes and goes, so that now it fills all the air, and now seems completely to die away." She had heard it, and had vaguely wondered what it was. "If you were to go to the top of that bank you would understand--it is the noise made by the people who are going to the races; on foot, in motor cars, in vehicles of all sorts and kinds, and by the people who are already there. The race-course is over yonder, about two miles from where we are. A great crowd will be there to-day; and, though it's early, probably thousands are there already. It's all open country between it and us; and, on a day like this, with what breeze there is blowing from it towards us, sound travels. You'll know when a race begins by the noise the people make; and when it ends, by the comparative silence which follows." He paused to puff at his pipe. As he did so the humming and buzzing sound of which he had spoken grew distinctly louder. He pointed upwards with the stem of his pipe. "You hear?"

"Yes," she said; "I hear."

He stayed still a little longer, as if to listen.

"It dies away; perhaps the wind has changed a point or two; these light breezes seldom blow from exactly the same quarter many minutes together." He returned to the subject from which he had diverged. "In Newcaster I made one or two small purchases--even my larder must be occasionally restocked, especially when I've a guest whom I desire to honour--and, having made them, I paid a call--at a hotel." Again he paused; then added: "A hotel called 'The Bolton Arms'--perhaps, if you have any knowledge of Newcaster, you may be acquainted with 'The Bolton Arms.'" She was; that was the name of the hotel to which her guardian had taken her yesterday; in which so much had happened. A sort of paralysis seemed to be settling about her heart, so that she could scarcely breathe, or move. She wished that he would get on faster; come quicker to the point to which some instinct told her he was coming. His drawling speech was bad enough, but each time he paused it was as if he had given a tug at the hook which he had got in her throat. "It's a hotel which I know very well, 'The Bolton Arms'--very well indeed, considering. The landlord is a man named Elsey; of him also I have some personal knowledge, and of his wife. Not a bad fellow, in his way, is Elsey, though of late years he has grown so much that, metaphorically, he has to take a larger size in boots, and in hats. His wife has also grown. It's odd how people do grow when, as they suppose, they become people of importance. When I last saw John Elsey I should have said that his consciousness of his own dignity had put him on a perch which it would not be easy to get him off. Yet when I saw him this morning he was off it with a vengeance. I have seldom seen a man mentally, morally, physically, in a more lamentable state than he was. Poor Elsey!" Once more there was one of those pauses which so distressed her. He seemed to be in an introspective mood; as if he were contemplating a picture which was present to his mind's eye.

Yet--the feeling was growing in her, that, all the while, he watched her as a cat might watch a mouse. She avoided his glance; keeping her eyes fixed on the sugar-basin which was on the tablecloth in front. In some indefinable way, though with all her faculties she hung upon his words, she noticed how the flies were making free with the sugar; she soon began to count them as they came and went. And, all the while, she was trying to brace herself, so that she might maintain an unruffled front when the blow fell, which she knew was coming. If only her heart would not play such fantastic tricks, and he would get on faster! His drawl seemed to be getting more pronounced. "On such a day as this one finds it hard to credit that in the world there's tragedy. In the winter it is different; winter is itself a tragedy. But, when nature's radiant, and the sun's in a cloudless heaven, surely all's right with the world, and comedy's the only fare. When I reached 'The Bolton Arms Hotel,' in Newcaster, the world was even more--*riant*--it's a word which the French use, for which I can't hit on an exact translation. Do you know French?" She nodded. "Then you'll know what I mean--than it is now; for, to my thinking, there's nothing like the first sweetness of a summer morning. Then, again, there are persons whom one does not find it easy to associate with tragedy; God seems to have intended them to strut through life as unconscious comedians; and the unconscious comedian's the finest of all. Elsey's such a one. Have you, by any chance ever seen the man?" She was silent; he went on. "Although I daresay that the possession on which he most prides himself is his dignity, in reality he's the most undignified of men. Surely there's no tragedy where there's no dignity. Tragedy's austere; Elsey never could be that. Yet, last night, there was a tragedy at 'The Bolton Arms'; and it seems that Elsey played a leading part in it. And the strangest thing was that, as he told me all there was to tell, the inherent comicality of the man made him the most tragic figure imaginable. Here's the story as it was told to me by Elsey; with addenda by other hands." She had known, all along, that it was coming. With clenched fists, and tightly closed lips, she waited for him to tell her what she knew so much better than he did. In the tale as he had it, however, she found that there were variants which to her were strange. "Among the guests at 'The Bolton Arms' was a man named Emmett, of whom I know a thing or two. Last evening, after dinner, he was found in his chair, seated at the table, dead. Someone had killed him. It seems that his head had been smashed in with a champagne bottle, the broken fragments of which were found upon the floor. The irony of it!--because, of all the things in this world there were few which George Emmett loved better than champagne. They laid him on the table, at which he had just done himself so well; and, a doctor having certified that he was dead, they left him there, alone, in the room in which he had dined and died." She knew, although she did not look at him, that he had taken the pipe out of his mouth, to press the tobacco closer; and she felt his eyes upon her face. She wondered what was coming next. It proved to be hardly what she had expected. Nothing could have been more casual than his tone and manner. To her, the very indifference with which he spoke seemed to heighten the effect of what he said. "There was the dead man on the table in the room. Some time after they had left him there there came a crash from within the room which, according to my informant, shook the house. That might have been an exaggeration, about shaking the house; because 'The Bolton Arms' is a substantial, solidly built, old-time structure, which, I should say, is not easily shaken. At anyrate there came a noise from within that room which was so loud, and so curious, that all the people in the hotel seem to have heard it, and most of them went rushing off to learn what it was. Elsey was among the first. When he got to the door he was confronted by an unexpected difficulty; he, the landlord, couldn't get into the room. The inspector of police had taken away, not only the ordinary key, but the pass-key also; to make sure that, in his absence, no one should get in. So the only thing, if they wanted to get in, was to send for the inspector, and the key. They sent for him. While he was coming they hung about outside the room. They must have been an odd sight--Elsey, his wife, his guests, and his servants, as they stood there listening. It seems that, considering there was nothing in the room but a corpse, some amazing sounds issued from it. Elsey says he never heard anything like them; they were indescribable. He knocked, he even says he hammered, at the door again and again, demanding to be told who was inside; and what whoever it was was doing; and similar cognate questions; but both his hammerings and his questions went unanswered; and apparently unheeded. The noises had ceased before the inspector came; he pooh-poohed the notion that there ever had been any. But he stopped pooh-poohing when he entered the room. They had left the dead man stretched out on his back on the table; they found him on his face on the floor, with his knees drawn up beneath him. The natural presumption would have been, since he was dead, that somebody must have pushed him off the table on to the floor; but when the doctor came he knocked that theory on the head. He declared that, in the first place, he had not been really dead; that when they left him alone he had returned to some sort of consciousness; that, probably, in his struggles to attract attention he had tumbled from the table on to the floor; to a man in his condition a serious matter; and that fall had finished him; for this time he certainly was dead. Isn't that an odd story?" Although he paused, as if for her to answer, she said nothing; she was waiting for what was yet to come. And, presently, it came; as she knew it would do.

"The tale has a postscript; and, as they say is sometimes the case with a lady's, it seems to me to be the most pregnant part of it. When they got into the room, and found the dead man lying on his face upon the floor, they also found that the blind before the only window was drawn right up, and the window itself was open at its widest, which seems a trifle; but then trifles are often of such importance. The man who waited on George Emmett at dinner declared that the blind was down and the window shut before dinner began; and more, much more, Elsey, his wife, and the inspector, are all three convinced that the blind was down, and the window shut, when they left the dead man alone in the room. Had the window been open it would have attracted their attention; because the wind was on that side of the house, and, apart from the draught, they could not help noticing the curtains being blown about--as they were being blown about when

they found it open then. But if the window had been closed then, it must have been opened since, in which case the question arises--by whom. And here comes what seems to me to be the queerest part of this really queer story. Doesn't it strike you as being a rather curious tale?" Again he paused, as if for her to answer, but still she held her peace--she still waited. It was like the game the cat plays with the mouse; he was coming nearer and nearer, presently he would pounce. The problem she had to consider--though it was still unshaped--was, could she elude him when he did? It seemed to her that his eyes observed her more and more keenly as he continued. "George Emmett had a lady with him when he arrived at 'The Bolton Arms Hotel'--an elderly lady; well advanced in years, stout and unwieldy; with grey hair and a false front; the sort of person one who knew the man would expect to find in his society." She winced at this description, she felt that he was speaking with malice prepense. "In spite of her grey hairs she seems to have been a mysterious sort of person. She dined with him; she was in the room with him when the waiter last saw him alive, but when, some little while after, he came in and found him dead, she had vanished: and she has remained vanished ever since. It hasn't been for want of looking for her. They looked for her, not only in her own bedroom, but in everybody else's bedroom also; it seems that they looked in every room in the house; in every nook and cranny of it to boot: nowhere was a trace or her to be seen. They were puzzled; but that open window with the blind drawn up set them thinking; when they found on a splinter of wood, at the top of the window, a small piece of material, which looked as if it had been torn out of a woman's dress, they thought still harder; and came to a conclusion which was hardly flattering to themselves. It had not occurred to them to look for her in the room itself; nor what an excellent hiding-place was a recess and a curtained window. While they hunted for her upstairs and down, high and low, all the time she was in the room itself--the room in which George Emmett was done to death; she had never left it. She was there when the waiter discovered him, as he supposed, dead on his seat, she was still there when they left him, as they thought, dead on the table. Whether she was there when he came back to life; and, if so, what took place between them, she only knows. She had gone when they returned and found the dead man on the floor; she had opened the window, and made her exit through it; and, in going, had, unknowingly, left behind that pattern of her frock which may prove to be a very awkward piece of evidence against her, when, one day, she's found. She possibly supposes that she's done rather a smart thing in getting away, as she thinks, scot-free. But has she? She's covered herself, in consequence, with more than a suspicion of murder. They're reasoning this way. They say that it was she who used that champagne bottle to so much purpose; and that was why she hid, like a coward, behind the curtains, when the waiter came into the room; and why she stayed hidden; and when the coast, as she thought, was clear, dropped, at the peril of her life, from the window. And because they're accounting, in that way, for her singular behaviour, all Newcaster is hot-foot after her; and, so I'm told, they're having placards printed, describing her, and offering a reward for her apprehension." He knocked the ashes out of his pipe with his boot; blew down the stem to make sure that it was clear; then went on. "There's one item I may add to make the tale complete. They've not only her description, they've her name. It appears that, for some reason, George Emmett did not enter her name in the register when he entered his own; but when it dawned on them that she was missing they opened the box in which her clothes were, and found that all, or nearly all of them, were marked--'D. Gilbert.' 'D' might stand for Dorothy, mightn't it?--which is by way of being a coincidence, but, of course, Gilbert has no affinity with Greenwood. Miss Gilbert seems to be rather a remarkable old lady; isn't that how she strikes you?"

CHAPTER IX

WHAT THE GIRL TOLD THE MAN

The question remained so long unanswered that one was disposed to wonder if the girl had heard it; and this time Mr Frazer persisted in waiting for the reply which did not come. He showed no inclination to press her. Picking up his pouch from the turf, he began, leisurely, to refill his pipe; and, for the first time since he had begun his story, he withdrew his glance from Dorothy; using his eyes to observe the tobacco as he pressed it home. She sat motionless; her hands in front of her; her gaze fixed on the sugar, which the flies still harried; a slight slip of a girl, with black hair, drawn tightly back from her temples, and twisted in a knot behind. That was how they had taught her to do it when, in the convent, she had put it up; she knew no other way, and had no notion of the wonders which an artist in hairdressing could perform with her luxuriant tresses. Although her face was so white and thin that one doubted if she had had enough to eat, it was good to look at. When she raised the long lashes which veiled her eyes, one seemed to see right through the violet orbs which were beneath into her very soul. But the man on the other side of the tablecloth had known many varieties of women's eyes; he was aware how apt they are to look one thing and mean another; he had little faith in that imponderable essence,

the feminine soul; he merely thought what curious eyes the girl had got; quite out of the common. And as, with practised fingers, he packed his pipe, he waited, patiently, for her to speak.

At last she did speak; and, when she did, her words were not an answer to his question.

"You know she's not an old lady."

The attribution of such knowledge seemed to surprise him; he seemed, for a moment, to be in doubt as to what, exactly, her words referred. Then when he understood he smiled.

"Is that so?"

He continued to fill his pipe; and she to look at the sugar. Then she asked:

"What are you going to do?"

"I am going to light a match."

He did so as he spoke, holding the flickering flame to the bowl of his pipe.

"You know that's not what I mean."

"Do I?" The tobacco was becoming ignited; he sent a puff of smoke into the air. "What do you mean?"

She looked round at him.

"I am Dorothy Gilbert."

"Of course you are."

Nothing could have been more matter-of-fact than the air with which he said it. She spoke with a catching of her breath; as if she resented his coolness.

"Did you--know it?"

"Of course I did."

"Did you--know it all along?"

"Certainly--that is, let me be exact; it's as well to be exact--now and then. When I heard that story at 'The Bolton Arms' I would have bet that you were; when you came out of my house, and I saw you standing on the ledge, I was sure that you were. They have your description so pat, over at Newcaster, that it was impossible not to recognise you."

"Then--then why did you give me my breakfast?"

"Why shouldn't I? You were my guest."

"When--when you knew that I was Dorothy Gilbert!"

"Well? What follows? Even so you were my guest."

"When--when you believed I'd done that thing?"

"I didn't say that I did believe it; you jump at conclusions."

"Do you believe it?"

"I am not sure that I do."

"You are not sure!" She twisted herself round towards him, heat in her voice, fire in her eyes. "You are not sure! How dare you--how dare you say----" She stopped; as if suddenly conscious that her warmth was uncalled for; continuing, with downcast eyes, in a different tone: "What do you mean, when you say, you are not sure?"

"I mean that I don't believe you did do it. Still, in order that we may have all things shipshape and aboveboard, I confess that I should like to have your assurance that you didn't." She was silent. "Won't you give it?"

"I'm not sure that I can."

"Can?--or will?"

"I--I'm not sure if I did do it, or if I didn't."

She put her hands up before her face; he could see her shivering. He eyed her with what seemed to be growing curiosity.

"What was George Emmett to you?"

"Nothing! Nothing! I hated him!"

"That would seem to suggest that he might have been something to you once; or--you would hardly hate him."

"I don't know what you mean; he never was anything to me--never--except my guardian; at least, he said he was my guardian; and I suppose he was; but from the first moment I saw him I hated him."

"Isn't that, under the circumstances, rather a dangerous admission to make?"

"Why?"

"Mayn't some people think that your feeling towards him may have furnished a motive for--what happened?"

"Do you mean that some people may think that because I hated him I killed him? I hadn't the courage; I shouldn't have dared, I'm such a coward; it's because I'm such a coward that I'm here--it's all my cowardice!"

She sat with clenched fists staring in front of her; there was something in her expression which suggested to her companion that she was not quite such a coward as she asserted. When he spoke again it was as if a note of sympathy had, unawares, crept into his voice.

"You observed, Miss Gilbert, that George Emmett was your guardian, which seems to point to your having lost at least one of your parents. Is it your mother?"

"I never knew my mother--never; so far as I know, I never even saw her. I suppose I must have had a mother, but I don't know who she was, or anything at all about her."

"And your father?"

"I believe I was three years old when I saw him last, and now Mr Emmett says he is dead."

"Mr Emmett says? I presume you have some proof of the fact beyond Mr Emmett's bare word."

"I daresay the Sisters have."

"What Sisters?"

"At the convent."

"At the convent? Were you in a convent?"

"Of course; I was at the Convent of the Sacré Cœur at Vannes--Vannes is in Brittany, if you know where that is."

"I do happen to know where that is; indeed, I happen to have some knowledge of Vannes. Were there any other girls there besides you?"

"Lots and lots, at different times."

"Could you give me the names of any of them?"

"Why, if I were to think, I could give you a list as long as that." She stretched out her arms. "I was there for more than fourteen years."

"I don't think I'll trouble you for quite so long a list as that, but could you give me the name of, say, one, who's been there within the last twelve months?"

"Rather!--for one thing, there was my special friend, Frances Vernon."

"Did you know Frances Vernon?"

"I should think I did, and--- Do you know Frances Vernon?"

"It's odd, but I do chance to know something about Miss Frances Vernon."

"She was there when Mr Emmett took me away."

"Was she? Then, in that case, I rather fancy she's left since."

"I shouldn't be surprised. She said she shouldn't stop a moment longer after I had gone than she could help."

"I fancy she has a knack of getting her own way--at times."

"Isn't she lovely?"

"That's scarcely the word I should have applied to her. I should have said she was a handful."

"If that's all you can say then you don't know much about her. I say she's lovely, because I know all about her, and I know she's lovely. But--what did you say your name was?"

"Frazer; Eric Frazer." Presently she shook her head. "What," he inquired, "are you doing that for?"

"I don't remember it; nor one in the least like, and I should have done if she had mentioned it."

"If who had mentioned what?"

"You see, Frances and I were tremendous friends; we had no secrets from each other. She used to tell me about everyone she knew; hes and shes; their names, you know, and all about them. And she used to make a list of their names, on a sheet of paper; so that she might be able to check them, and find out if anyone had been left out; and I don't believe she ever so much as even breathed your name, Eric Frazer; or I feel sure I should remember."

"Such an omission on Miss Vernon's part was unkind; it shows how little I was in her thoughts. I gather from what you say, Miss Gilbert, that you have a large number of friends."

"I!" The girl's eyes were suddenly opened wide. "Why, I haven't a friend in the whole world, except Frances, whom I may never see again; and, perhaps, Sister Celestine; who, I daresay, never wants to see me again--at the convent they found it so hard to get money from father. I don't believe they'd have let Mr Emmett take me away if it hadn't been that he paid all that father owed. Whatever made you think I'd lots of friends?"

"Then, if you haven't, you might give me a trial. It seems to me that, at this particular moment, a friend's an article you're rather in want of."

"I am; but--when you think what you do--I couldn't!"

"Miss Gilbert, if you could see my thoughts, I doubt if you'd object to them; only, I'm older than you are, and I just feel that, if you're not careful, you're likely to be in a tighter place than you have any notion of; and, being so much older, if you were to tell me just what happened last night at 'The Bolton Arms,' I might be of some slight use in getting you out of it. That's all there is at the back of my mind, as regards you. So, if you can bring yourself to make of me a confidant, I'll respect your confidence, and whatever kind of trouble it is you're in I'll be all the service to you I can."

She looked at him, carefully; as if considering what kind of person he really was; and then she told him, everything there was to tell. She did not seem to find it easy to start; but, when she once had started, she poured out all that was in her heart, as a child might have done. As he listened, strange though her story was, he knew she was telling the truth. The pathos of it, of which she herself seemed to be so oddly unconscious, touched him more than he would have cared to own. And, manlike, because that was so, his outward manner put on an additional shade of gruffness. Suddenly she startled him by putting a leading question.

"Now do you think that I killed him, or that I didn't?"

He tried to fence.

"That's not altogether an easy question to answer."

"Oh yes, it is; it's perfectly simple and perfectly easy; either I did or I didn't: there can only be one answer."

"Pardon me, but, from what I can gather, it's a point on which you yourself seem to have some doubts."

"I know I have. Of course I know I never actually touched him; but--perhaps I might have prevented him being touched; and--when he began to make those noises I might have got him help; and so--I don't quite know how it is. What I want to know is what you think; if you have the slightest atom of a doubt you had better take me over to Newcaster, and hand me over to a policeman."

"In any case I certainly sha'n't do that."

"Then I'll give myself up. I--I daresay that I--I sha'n't be so very much afraid when I--I've quite made up my mind I ought to."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, if I can help it."

"If you can help it?--why, would you try to stop me?"

"I shouldn't only try. Let me disabuse your mind on one point; putting casuistry on one side, you're no more to blame for what took place than I am."

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure."

"It's very sudden."

"What's sudden?"

"Your being so sure. You weren't sure just now; you were anything but sure. I wonder if, for some cause, you want me to believe that I am better than you believe I am."

"Nothing of the kind. However, I don't want to discuss the matter with you. I am going immediately to tell you what I do propose to do. But, before I get to that, there is one question which I should like to put to you, in order that we may know exactly where we are. You saw the man who made use of that champagne bottle? You had a distinct view of him?"

"I saw him as distinctly as I see you."

"You would know him again?"

"Anywhere; always."

"Did you ever see him before?"

"Never."

"Of that you are certain?"

"Quite."

"Did he remind you of anyone you had seen before? Think!"

"I am thinking; but--I can think of no one. Why are you asking me these questions? Do you--do you know him? And--are you thinking of giving him up to the police? If you are--if you are, nothing will make me say that I ever saw him before--nothing!--nothing! He sha'n't come to harm because of me!"

"My dear child----"

"I'm not a child--and anyhow I'm not yours!--nor am I dear! Are you--are you daring to think of playing the traitor?--of taking advantage of what I've told you to--to get him punished? Are you?"

"I am doing nothing of the kind--how you do jump to conclusions! I don't know the man from Adam. Why do you credit me with such sinister intentions?"

"Why did you ask me those questions--like that?"

"I've half a mind to tell you; then perhaps we shall begin to understand each other."

"Perhaps it is just as well that we shouldn't understand each other; but you will please to tell me."

"Miss Gilbert, you're a young lady with a temper."

"If you wish to speak to me like that----"

She half rose from the ground; he checked her.

"I don't--pray stay where you are! What times you and Frances Vernon must have had together!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing--I suppose you must have had a good time with her in the convent, if she was such a friend of yours."

"Are you going to tell me why you asked those questions?"

"I am; then I think you will be sorry you have taken up such a tone towards me. I asked those questions because the person whom you saw strike George Emmett informed the waiter that his name was Gilbert."

"Gilbert!--Mr Frazer! But--I heard the waiter tell Mr Emmett that the gentleman wouldn't give his name."

"What seems to have occurred is this. Someone came to one of the coffee-room waiters and told him that he wished to see Mr George Emmett. The waiter asked him his name; he said 'Gilbert'; then immediately added: 'Never mind my name; you need mention no name; give him this.' He scribbled a line or two on a sheet of paper, in pencil; put the sheet into an envelope, which he fastened, and gave to the waiter. So it came about that the waiter who delivered the note supposed the stranger to have given no name; while the original waiter is prepared to swear

that, in the first instance, he said his name was Gilbert--which is why I asked if you had seen him, or anyone at all like him, before."

"But I haven't--ever! Who can he be? I haven't any relatives."

"Your acquaintance with your family history seems to be so nebulous that I scarcely see how you can say that of your own knowledge. Do you remember what your father looked like?"

"Only very dimly."

"Try your hand at a description."

"I seem to remember him as very tall, and dark, and----" She stopped; the fashion of her countenance was changed, as if by a sudden access of fear; then, as if because she realised how closely he was watching her, she broke into what seemed to be a fit of pettish temper. "But what does it matter what he looked like? What does it matter? My father is dead."

"According to George Emmett."

Something in his tone caused her to look swiftly round at him.

"What do you mean by 'according to George Emmett'? Don't you believe that my father is dead?"

"I merely mean that I had sufficient acquaintance with Mr George Emmett to be disinclined to accept any statement of fact on his mere *ipse dixit*. It is possible--if you like, it is probable--that he gave the Sisters at the convent proof of his assertion; but I rather fancy that their ideas of proof would be their own. You certainly seem to have had nothing in the shape of proof. The fact that he paid money on your account makes his tale--well, we'll say, peculiar; that he should have done this if, as he told you, your father died owing him money, makes it--well, very nearly incredible. It doesn't sound at all like what is generally known of George Emmett's character. If he had come and dunned you, or done worse, because your father died in his debt, there I should have recognised the man; but that, having lost money by your father, he should be willing also to lose money by you--George Emmett must have had very odd reasons of his own for doing that. You can't remember what the stranger said to Emmett?--what they were disputing about?"

"I can't; I may do later, but I can't now. My brain was so stupefied, I was in such a state of cowardice, that I heard--without hearing; certainly without understanding."

"You can't recall even a single phrase?"

"No, I can't; I tell you I can't! Why will you persist in asking?"

"Please don't suppose, Miss Gilbert, that I wish to worry you; to cause you pain; nothing can be farther from my wish; but I do want you to appreciate the situation; to put you on your guard. If by any diabolical mischance this stranger who gave your name should turn out to be some more or less distant relative of your own it's as well that you should be prepared for such an eventuality. Circumstanced as you are, and may be, the one thing you don't want is to be taken unawares." Twisting himself round, he drew towards himself a large brown paper parcel which had been reposing on the turf at his back. "Now to business. You have no money?" She shook her head. "Not any?"

"I haven't a penny."

"And--forgive me if I seem intrusive; but, if you will bear with me, you will see that mine is not a merely impertinent intention--your wardrobe is limited?"

"I have no other clothes except those I have on."

"And--forgive me again--those are not fresh from the dressmaker?"

"Indeed they are not. I have had this dress---- At the convent I had one dress a year; this is my last year's frock."

"What has become of your hat? Don't you generally wear one?"

"Oh yes, I wear one, but I left the one hat I had behind at the hotel."

"I told you that I went into Newcaster to do some shopping; and among other things I bought the contents of this parcel. If you'll take it to the room in which you spent the night I think it possible that you'll find it contains some articles which may be of use to you. While you're trying them on to see if they're any sort of a fit I'll be putting things to rights; and harnessing that horse of mine, who's very much mistaken if he thinks that he's in for a whole day's holiday."

She stared at him in amaze.

"Why should you buy things for me?"

"Why shouldn't I? You are Frances Vernon's friend; and she's a young lady whom I happen to know rather a deal about."

"But that's no reason why you should buy things for me!--you know it's no reason!--you know it's not!"

"Pray don't imagine that I'm offering to give you these things; I've expressed myself ill if I've conveyed that impression. An exact account of their cost will be rendered to you, for which I shall receive payment in due course."

"From whom will you receive payment?--from me? How can you imagine that I shall be able to pay you; when, as I tell you, I haven't a penny; and don't suppose I ever shall have one."

"As a man, Miss Gilbert, you must allow me to understand commercial matters better than you do--as a business man I know I shall be paid, in full; so please make your mind easy on that score. When you have changed your clothes--and I think that, considering all things, the sooner you do change them the better--and I have stuck my steed between the shafts, I will drive you, at the rate of about four miles an hour, to a railway station; then, with your permission, acting as your personal conductor, I will take you, with the help of a train, to Mrs Vernon's house. Mrs Vernon is Frances Vernon's mother; and is by way of being some sort of a kind of a relation of my own. She will be delighted to give you house room, until inquiries have been made into the truth of Mr Emmett's statements, as to your father being dead and his having left no money--I feel sure he did leave money, or Emmett would never have paid that bill at the convent; to say nothing of his having expressed a wish to marry you--and in short, till your affairs are placed upon a regular footing."

"Which may be never. Why should Mrs Vernon give me what you call house room?"

"You are full of whys. I tell you that she will be delighted--for your sake; for her own sake; for Frances' sake; and, perhaps, a little for mine."

"For your sake!--it's perfectly ridiculous to suppose that you can care either one way or the other."

"Quite so; it's very good of you to say so."

"Mr Frazer, are you deceiving me? Are you sure that you know Frances Vernon--and her mother?"

"Extraordinary though it may seem, facts are facts; and I not only know Frances Vernon and her mother, but also her father and her brother."

"That's Jim."

"Yes, that's Jim; I perceive that you are acquainted with the young scoundrel's name."

"He's not a young scoundrel. Frances told me he was a darling. She showed me his photograph; I could see for myself that he's very good-looking."

"You said Frances was lovely; I am therefore not surprised to hear that you think her brother's good-looking. My word! However, on a question of taste there is no disputing." He stood up; the brown paper parcel in his hands. "Shall I place this inside that private apartment of yours? And will you be so good as to make your toilet with all possible expedition? I should like to start from here well inside thirty minutes--if you could manage to be ready?"

"I'm very sorry to intrude; or to interfere with what seems to be a very nice little arrangement; but it isn't only a question of what the young lady can manage--what price me?"

This question came from a figure which all at once rose from a clump of furze which was at the back of Mr Frazer.

CHAPTER X

WHAT THE CARAVAN LEFT BEHIND

Swinging round in the direction from which the voice came, Mr Frazer stood still to stare. The girl, rising to her feet, stared also; with her pale cheeks a little paler, and her eyes wide open.

The speaker was one of those shambling, half-grown youths who are generally found attached to gipsy caravans, as hangers-on. That he had gipsy blood in his veins, his hair and eyes and skin suggested; but that he was as much Cockney as gipsy his tongue betrayed. With a ragged cloth cap on the back of his head; the remains of a black-and-white checked woollen scarf about his sinewy neck; a faded old red flannel shirt plainly visible under an unbuttoned sleeved waistcoat; his fingers thrust into the band of his trousers: he grinned first at the man, and then at the woman, in evident enjoyment of their something more than surprise. He showed no inclination to break the silence which followed his wholly unexpected, and undesired, appearance on the scene; from his point of view the joke was apparently too good a one to spoil. It was Mr Frazer who spoke next.

"Who are you?--and what business have you to be here?"

The stranger's grin grew more pronounced, so that he showed a set of perfect white teeth; which again suggested the gipsy.

"I'm General Lord Kitchener, that's who I am--don't you know me from the photographs? And as to what business I have to be here, I always thought that Newcaster Heath was common grazing ground, and that people could go about all over it just exactly as they please."

"What have you been doing behind those bushes?"

"What have I been doing?--that's it, what have I?"

"Have you been listening?"

The stranger looked his questioner straight in the face, with a grin in his eyes and on his lips; then he winked. The action was more significant than any words could have been; it moved the man to sudden anger.

"You young hound!"

"Steady on! I'm no more a hound than you. No names; if it comes to that perhaps I'm as good at chucking names about as you are--Mr Frazer."

"You know my name?"

"I heard you tell her what it was; and very nice it was of you to tell her."

There was an insinuation in the grin with which the words were accompanied which stung the man again.

"My lad, I've a mind to break your neck."

"Have you? Then you take my tip, and keep your mind to yourself. I've some friends not far from here, and if you try to come any of your games with me I'll give them a call, and they'll be here in double quick time; then you'll find that breaking necks is a game that more than one can play at."

Mr Frazer regarded the speaker as if he were considering whether or not to take him at his word, and let him give his friends a call. Then he turned to the girl, his tone as easy and courteous as ever:

"I think I'll put this parcel inside there, and then, while you're changing, I can have a talk with this young gentleman."

The girl seemed uncomfortable, undecided.

"What does he want?"

It was the younger man who replied:

"That's it, miss--what does he want? I wouldn't mind having what he thinks he's going to get; you can take that from me."

Mr Frazer ignored the other's words. Going to the caravan with the parcel in his hand he placed it just inside the door. Then he turned to the girl again, beckoning to her with his hand.

"If you please! You remember what I said about half-an-hour? I shall be so glad if you can make it convenient to be ready."

She hesitated; looking sideways at the stranger. Then she moved to Mr Frazer, who was by the steps which led into the caravan.

"Why won't you tell me what he wants?"

"Because I don't know--but I soon shall; and all the sooner if you'll leave us alone together."

The young man called out from among the gorse:

"He thinks he's going to bounce me as soon as your back's turned, miss--oh, he's a deep 'un!"

Mr Frazer, still ignoring him, said to the girl:

"Please will you try to be ready inside those thirty minutes?"

"Will you be ready?"

"I think I shall--I don't think you'll find I'll keep you waiting." She looked into his blue eyes, as if she were trying to decipher what was in them; then, glancing half affrightedly over her shoulder, she went up the steps into the caravan. She paused on the ledge to give a flying look at Mr Frazer, and another at the lad among the bushes, then passed inside, drawing the door to behind her. Mr Frazer said: "I think that, if I were you, I should bolt the door, and close the window."

The lad called out:

"That won't keep the cops out, miss, don't you think it!" Mr Frazer waited, as if to ascertain that his hint had been acted on. Then he crossed the little hollow, towards the bushes on the slope among which the lad was standing. "Don't you come too close," observed the lad.

"I don't intend to; I only wish to come close enough to enable you to hear what I have to say without making it necessary for me to raise my voice."

He ascended the slope until he was within a few feet of the other.

"That's near enough; none of your games."

"There's a bush between us; that is something. Now, sir, what is it you want?"

"What do I want? Why, I want five and twenty pounds, that's what I want."

"What for?"

"You know what for."

"Since, from your appearance, you never had so much money in your life, I suppose, in a general way, I do know what for. But do you expect me to give you five and twenty pounds?"

"That's for you to say. If you don't I can get it from someone else--that all."

"From whom?"

"From the police over at Newcaster."

"Indeed; why should they give you five and twenty pounds?"

"Oh, come off of it!--what do you think you're playing at? You know very well why they'll give me five and twenty pound, and if you don't I'll tell you--I'm not afraid."

"Why?"

"Why!--for putting them on to Miss Dorothy Gilbert, what's wanted for that little job last night at 'The Bolton Arms.' Now do you understand?"

"I hope I don't."

"Then you needn't hope; because you do. I speak plainly enough, Mr Frazer."

"From your post of vantage, behind these bushes, did you hear all that was said?"

"I did; every blessed word; and I'm not going to forget one either, so don't you make any blooming error."

"Then, in that case, you are aware that this lady is guiltless."

"If she didn't, her father did, or one of her lot--you told her yourself his name was Gilbert--so what's the odds? She can explain all about that to them when they've got her, and I hope she'll like the job. Anyhow, it's no business of mine, all that; it's the pieces I'm after. I lay they offer more than twenty-five, and I'm going to have it. All the same, I'll take twenty-five from you, if I lose by it. You give me five and twenty pounds, where I'm standing now, and I'll keep my mouth shut--I don't wish no harm to no one; I can't say nothing fairer."

"Till when will you keep it shut?"

"Why, till----"

The youth seemed to hesitate; Mr Frazer finished his sentence for him.

"Till the money's spent: or till you get within hail of a policeman."

"Now, governor, you didn't ought to talk to me like that; you really oughtn't--I'm not that kind at all--I give you my word I'm not. When I say I'll do a thing, I do it; I'm not like some of them. You can trust me--straight, you can." Apparently he was endeavouring to train his countenance to wear an expression which would inspire confidence. All at once he seemed to see something in the steadfast gaze with which the other was regarding him which filled him with uncomfortable qualms. "Now then, stow it--I'll call!"

Shaping his lips to whistle, he moved back. But before he could utter a sound, or get out of reach, or make an effort to defend himself, Mr Frazer had sprung at him over the intervening bush. With one hand he gripped his throat, with the other his arm; with a sudden, curious twisting movement he spun him round, and flung him face downwards, with a force which seemed amazing. Where the lad fell he lay, motionless. Mr Frazer looked down at him.

"One doesn't always spend money in acquiring the art of ju-jitsu for nothing, after all. I always had a feeling that that fall might come in useful one day; and it has. For the present, you young blackguard, I can trust you; but the point is, for how long. I sent him down with a little more vigour than was perhaps absolutely necessary; there wasn't time to be particular; so it'll probably be a good twenty minutes before he comes back to consciousness; but I'm afraid that's not quite long enough. Better make sure." He took the woollen scarf off the young man's neck. "There's not very much strength about it; but I think it'll serve." He drew the young man's arms behind his back, and with his own scarf he tied his hands together, being careful about the sort of knot he used. Taking off the belt with which the lad held up his trousers, placing his ankles close together, he passed it round, then drew it as tight as he could, with the buckle behind. Turning him over on to his back, tearing off a handful of grass, he crammed it between the young man's jaws. Then he regarded the result of his labour with what seemed to be a smile of satisfaction. "When he does come to I don't think he'll be able to make much noise; he certainly won't be able to make enough to attract the attention of those friends of whom he spoke; and I doubt if he'll be able to move much either. By the time a friend does come and find him we ought to have reached a port of comparative safety; and if it's some time before a friend does come, it'll serve him right--and that'll pay him anyhow; it's more money than he ever had in his life." He took a piece of crinkly paper out of his own hip pocket which he placed in the inside pocket of the young man's jacket. "Still, lest a friend should come too soon, we'll place him a little more under the shade of the bushes; which will also serve to protect him from the heat of the sun." Lifting the unconscious lad, he placed him right among the gorse, in such a position that, as he put it, not only was he sheltered from the glow and glare of the sun, but also from the observation of any stray passer-by; indeed, so long as he kept still it would be necessary for such a one to look for him in exactly the proper place before he would become aware that he was there. "He remains quiet; with luck he may continue quiet for quite a considerable number of minutes. When he finds out what has happened to him, and where he is, he'll find it difficult to make much noise, for a time. He'll have to chew, and swallow, a good deal of that green stuff before he'll be able to make much use of his lungs. Before then we ought to be--some distance from this." Leaving the lad under the gorse, moving to where they had had their morning meal, gathering together the breakfast things, Mr Frazer deposited them, together with the bundle which contained what had served him as a bed, on one side of the broad ledge which was outside the caravan door. In a few more minutes he had the horse harnessed between the shafts, and was ready to start. He rapped at the door.

"Are you all right in there? Don't worry if you've not quite finished; only look out for yourself, because we're starting."

A question came from within:

"What's become of that man?"

"Man!--boy, you mean. I soon disposed of him. Are those things a decent fit?"

The girl's voice seemed tremulous:

"They're--they're not at all a bad fit, thank you. What did that boy want?"

"What I gave him."

"What did you give him?"

"Just enough to keep him quiet. Don't you bother about that boy. How's that hat do?"

Again the tremor in the voice.

"I--I haven't put it on yet; but it's a very nice one; it must have cost a great deal of money; I don't know how I shall ever pay you back again."

"I'll see that I'm paid; you'll be surprised when you know how little it did cost--I'm an expert in the art of shopping. You'll notice there's a window at the end inside there, which looks out over the horse's head. When you've quite finished, if you open it you'll find me sitting on the shelf immediately beneath, ready to be entertained by any remark which you may deign to address to me--for making the miles seem less there's nothing like a little intellectual conversation."

He had taken his place on the shelf to which he had referred, and had gathered the reins in his hand, when he was hailed by a woman who appeared on the crest of the slope behind him.

"I say, mister!--one moment, if you please!"

He looked round.

"Two, madam, if you desire it."

"Have you seen a young chap anywhere about here?"

"I believe I did see one, some time ago."

"Did you notice what he looked like?"

"I fancy he had on a red shirt."

"That him--he's my husband, he is--I thought he came this way, he said he wouldn't be gone more than five minutes, but he's been gone a good deal more than an hour--I can't make out what he's up to, because he knows we're in a hurry. Did you notice which way he was going?"

"I rather think he was going over there."

He motioned with his whip towards the horizon on his right.

"Was he? That's very nice of him, I don't think, as he knows very well I'm over here. I should like to know what he's thinking of. If you come across him, mister, I wish you'd ask him if he's Ben Hitchings; and if he says he is you tell him that I've had about enough of waiting, and that I've gone on to the course, and if he wants me he'd better come and look for me there--see?"

"Yes, madam, I think I see; and if I do come across Mr Hitchings I'll make a point of giving him your message."

Mr Frazer gave a jerk to the reins; the horse moved; the caravan was off.

CHAPTER XI

DANGER AHEAD

They had got on to the road, and the hollow was already left some little distance behind, when the window over the driver's seat was opened, and Dorothy asked a question.

"Which way did he really go--that young man in the red shirt?"

"Frankly, between ourselves, I don't believe he went very far from the spot at which he introduced himself to us--the young scamp!"

"He can't be so very young if he has a wife."

"Gentlemen in his class of life marry while they're in their teens; and the ladies, some of them, apparently as soon as they're out of their cradles. How's that hat?"

"Thank you, it's--it's very nice. It's odd, if he didn't go far from where we were, that she shouldn't have seen him."

"Perhaps the young gentleman is lying low. I say. This establishment of mine doesn't need much driving. I can do all the driving that's required standing up; and if I were to stand up I could see inside that window, and be able to judge for myself what that hat really does look like. Do you think I might?"

"You--you can stand up if you like; only--take care of the horse."

"The horse will take care of us--never fear; she's a remarkable animal, this mare of mine." His face appeared on one side of the window, and the girl's on the other. "I say. I had a sort of feeling that that hat would suit you, but I never guessed it would suit you quite so well as that."

"Do you--do you think it does suit me--really?"

"If you were to ransack all Newcaster I doubt if you'd find another which, artistically, would be such a success."

"I am glad you like it; it was very good of you to buy it." There was a pause; then she added: "Would you mind sitting down again, so that I might see the country--it seems to be rather pretty."

He glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes, whimsically.

"It is rather pleasant hereabouts--am I so much in your way? Can't you see the country with me here?"

Her answer was decisive:

"Not so well as I should if you were sitting down."

So he sat down, where he could not see her: and the caravan went on.

Although for a vehicle of its sort it was of light construction, it still was cumbersome. The rate of progression was not fast; evidently the mare had her own idea of how fast it ought to be. Perhaps it was because she was such a sleek and well-fed animal that she objected to being pressed. One could not but feel that, when she hauled that house on wheels, with Mr Frazer at the reins, she was used to going as she pleased; that it was she who set the pace, not the driver and that the pace she preferred was a walking pace, of about five miles an hour. When she discovered, as she presently did, that, on that occasion, she was desired to go a little faster, she evinced her resentment in a fashion which was unmistakable. Occasionally Mr Frazer induced her to break into what was really a bad imitation of a trot; at the end of perhaps a hundred yards she would relapse into a walk, with an air which suggested that she had been forced to gallop a mile; and as it was plain that, where she was concerned, her driver could not bring himself to use strong measures and equally plain that the creature knew it, before they had gone very far the vehicle was being drawn along the highroad at a rate which suited the mare, if it suited no one else.

They had been moving a good hour, and had covered perhaps six or seven miles, when a man, who was again of the gipsy class, came trotting towards them, sitting on a bare-backed beast, which, although it might have been exhibited as a living skeleton, could have given the well-fed mare many points in the matter of speed. He glanced keenly at the caravan; as soon as he had passed on one side he stopped, turned his horse, and came back on the other, until he found himself abreast with Mr Frazer. Stooping over he addressed him in a husky undertone.

"I say, governor, are you going to Timberham?"

"It is possible that I may get there, in time."

"Is your name Frazer?"

"Right; what's yours?"

"Never mind what mine is. If you take my advice you'll give Timberham as wide a berth as ever you can."

"Why?"

The husky undertone became still huskier:

"The cops are looking out for you. Don't ask me how I know--ask no questions and you'll hear no lies--but I do know. I don't know what they want you for--I don't want to know--but they've got the office to look out for a yellow van, with black stripes and red wheels, driven by a party named Frazer, who's got a girl with him; I expect that's her looking out of the window."

Mr Frazer glanced over his shoulder. For some time conversation with his passenger had languished. He had told her where he kept his little store of books, and she had withdrawn into the van, nominally to read one; but that she was doing more thinking than reading was a fact which she would not have cared to deny. Now, attracted by the appearance of the stranger, she had drawn close to the open casement. Stopping the van, Mr Frazer descended to the ground. He spoke to the man on the bareribbed horse.

"Would you mind coming on one side for a moment?" They moved to where the grass fringed the road, and where, if they spoke in lowered tones, they were out of earshot of the girl at the window. "Are you sure of what you say?"

The two men looked each other in the face. Frazer saw that this man was a wild-looking fellow, whose experience of the police and their methods was probably of a practical kind. So far as he could judge he seemed to be sufficiently in earnest.

"Dead sure. I tell you they're looking out for you for all they're worth. I shouldn't be surprised but what they're looking out for you over the whole countryside. I know 'em?" He both sounded and looked as if he did. "Just this side the town, about a couple of miles from where we are, there's one of 'em coming along the road; I dare lay he's coming to meet you."

"That's kind of him."

"I don't say he is, mind; I'm only telling you to look out."

"Thank you; I'm obliged by your doing so."

He slipped a coin into the other's long, thin, brown hand. The man looked at it.

"Here, what's this? It ain't this I'm after; I told you the cops was on the watch same as I'd tell anyone, no matter what they'd done. However, if you have got this half-sovereign to give away, I don't mind taking it; and I thank you. It may make all the difference to me. Sorry I can't stop to lend you a hand, in case one's wanted; but, the fact is, some of them wouldn't mind seeing me as well as you, and, as I'm not the only one that's in it, time's precious."

What might have been meant for a smile passed over the man's saturnine visage. Mr Frazer stood watching him, as he urged his bony steed along the road. It seemed as if Ben Hitchings, having come back to sense, had found a friend sooner than was quite desirable; or perhaps his wife had found him, and this was his revenge. He wondered how the lad had managed to set the machinery of the law in action so quickly. Moving towards the van he was met with the question he had expected.

"What did that man want?" asked Dorothy.

She had her head half out of the window. Stooping, he passed his hand up and down the mare's leg. Then, lifting her foot, he asked a question of his own:

"Would you mind getting out and walking a little?"

"Why don't you tell me what that man wanted?"

"What! that fellow who's gone down the road? He brought me a message."

"What message? From whom? I heard what he said."

"Then, if you heard, you won't need me to tell you."

"I only heard part--you know I only heard part. Tell me what he said! Tell me at once!"

Mr Frazer was passing the fingers of his left hand through his hair. He seemed to be in a quandary, which caused him to be oblivious of the young lady's peremptory tone.

"I don't fancy it's anything serious; but--I don't think I ought to make her go much farther, with that great thing at her back. Poor old girl!"

He patted the mare on the shoulder, as if in sympathy. She looked round at him, as if she wondered what he meant. An inquiry came from the window:

"Is there anything the matter with the horse?"

"I'm not sure that there is--I'm not sure, that's the point. I don't take any risks, with an old friend.--she and I have been friends too long. That's why I asked you if you'd mind walking a little way."

"Of course I wouldn't--you know I wouldn't."

"Then in that case I think I'll take her into the field, and leave her there."

He was leading the mare through a gate in a hedge, which opened into a field on the right.

"Whose field is it?" asked the face at the window.

"No doubt it belongs to someone who wouldn't wish to cause a horse needless suffering."

"But is it suffering? It seems to me to walk all right, and to be all right."

"Now it does--now! She's not one to make a fuss about a trifle. Besides, it may be spasmodic."

"What may be spasmodic?"

"I am not a veterinary surgeon, so I can hardly pose as an authority on the ailments of horses; I can only hope for the best." He was fastening a nosebag round the creature's neck. "I don't want her to eat a stranger's grass, however soft a heart he may have for a suffering beast. If that door's still bolted, would you mind unbolting it? I'm coming round to the back." When he did get round the door was open, and the girl was standing on the ledge, in her new attire. He exclaimed at sight of her: "Why, that frock might have been built for you; you look as if you had been melted into it."

Her pallor had gone; she was rosy red.

"It does fit rather well."

"And that hat's a stunner; no one who saw you last night would know you now. If you wouldn't mind coming down, I'll come up; I want to do a little changing."

When she had descended he climbed into the van; he drew the door to in his turn; she heard him bolt it. She moved to the horse at the other end. The sagacious quadruped seemed as if she did not quite know what to make of the situation. The presence of the nosebag seemed to puzzle her. She had recently eaten her fill of grass; there was grass again all round her; nice, luscious grass--then why the nosebag? She really did not seem to feel as if she needed it, amid all that grass. She regarded the girl as if, while wondering who she was, she desired to convey to her her feelings on the subject.

When Mr Frazer reappeared, for a second Dorothy scarcely knew him--the metamorphosis he had wrought in his appearance in such a short space of time was so complete. He had on a pair of buttoned boots; coat and trousers of dark blue serge; a white waistcoat; a stiff white collar; a neat green necktie; a dark green soft felt hat; and, to crown all, he had shaved off his beard. His chin was as innocent of hair as a baby's; his moustache was his only hirsute adornment. She stared at him in amazement.

"Why, whatever have you been doing?"

He smiled.

"I've only been cleaning up. Please don't glare at me like that. Am I such an ogre?"

"No, you're not an ogre; at least, you don't look as if you were; only--it's difficult to believe that the person who went in is the one who's come out."

"That's the idea. Now, if you're ready, hadn't we better start?"

"Are you really going to leave the horse and van in here?"

He was locking the door of the van; the windows were already shut.

"Why not? They'll be all right; trust me to take care of that."

"I don't believe there's anything the matter with the horse; it seems perfectly all right, and I believe you know it. You're doing this because of what that man said--that man on the horse. What did he say? I insist on your telling me! I--I wish you wouldn't be so mysterious! What became of that young man in the red shirt? I believe you knew where he was all the while, though you pretended to his wife that you didn't. You may mean to be kind, but it isn't kind to treat me as if I were a doll, and tell me nothing. It is I who am chiefly concerned, not you."

The girl spoke warmly, but the man seemed to be unaware of the fact. Having finished locking the door, he was contemplating the vehicle with an air of careful consideration.

"I think that everything's shipshape--it's hardly likely that thieves will break in and steal; especially as I've left nothing worth stealing; if the owner of the field turns up all he can do is to run the whole thing into what serves as the local pound, and that'll do no harm to anyone." He turned to Dorothy. "Now, if you are ready, I'll answer all your questions as we go along. Hollo! what's that?" He listened. "Sounds as if it were a car." He went hurrying to the gate. "It is--with only the chauffeur on board--I wonder----" He did not finish his sentence out loud, but he moved into the middle of the road. As the car came closer he held up his hand; it stopped. He said to the driver, who was obviously the mechanic: "Would you like to earn a couple of five-pound notes?"

The man grinned.

"I shouldn't have any particular objection."

"Drive me and this young lady over to Ashington, and you shall have a couple."

"Ashington's fifteen miles from here--I've just set my governor down at the races--I have to fetch him again in a couple of hours."

"What's fifteen miles to a good car?--or thirty? Without pressing you ought to be there and back with nearly an hour to spare. Here are the fivers; you might as well earn them as do nothing."

The man, who had pushed his goggles up on to his forehead, was regarding the pieces of paper with greedy eyes.

"That's true--and there's nothing special I've got to do."

Mr Frazer advanced the notes closer to the man.

"Is it a deal? It won't hurt the car."

"No; it won't hurt the car."

"Then put the pair into your pocket; why not?"

"All right; I'm on."

The man subjected the notes to an attentive scrutiny. Apparently he knew a good note when he saw one, because, lifting up his poncho, he put them into his jacket pocket with an air of satisfaction.

"There's a good deal of dust about," observed Mr Frazer, in that casual way of his. "Have you anything in the way of a cloak which the lady might slip on while you're pushing through it?--and a pair of goggles, which will keep it out of her eyes?"

"There's the missus' dust cloak in the back there--she might put that on, and there are some goggles in here."

He unbuttoned a leather flap.

"Make it two pairs, if it runs to it--I could do with some as well." He was shrouding the girl in a long, tan-coloured garment, with a hood to it. She drew the hood well over her hat, and, under his directions, buttoned it under her chin. There was a mutinous glint in her eyes; one felt that she would have dearly liked to express strong disapproval of the whole proceeding; but, somehow, the matter-of-fact, take-it-for-granted air with which he bore himself, seemed to have on her a mesmeric influence which kept her dumb. Having inducted her into the back seat of the car, and arranged a rug about her knees, he handed her some goggles. When they were in their place her identity was concealed beyond all likelihood of recognition. He used a second pair, which the driver produced from the leather flap, for himself, slipped on a sort of oilskin coat, and a cloth cap--both of which articles, it seemed, belonged to the "governor"--and, seating himself beside the chauffeur, said: "Now, let her whiz!"

And they were off, at a pace which was in striking contrast to that at which they had so recently been moving; that they were not, however, going at anything like the rate at which the car could travel was suggested by a remark which the chauffeur presently made:

"It's all very well for you to say whiz, and if I were to let her whiz she'd startle you; she's a 60, she is, and it's all I can do to keep her slow enough; but the police aren't fond of motor cars round these parts. Nice I should look if they were to trap me with you on board! The governor wouldn't say anything--he can't say anything--oh no! That would be about the end of me."

"Are the police hereabouts an active lot?"

"Active? I should think so! I seem to have seen more of them about to-day than I've ever seen. I thought it was the racing; but a chap I was talking to back there said there was something special up; he didn't quite know what it was, but he did know there was something. Like ferrets, the police are round here; I'd be sorry for anyone that they were after--they'd have him."

CHAPTER XII

HEADLINES

They were entering the outskirts of a country town. The easy-going vehicles which characterise country towns occasionally took up more than their fair share of the road. The chauffeur reduced speed.

"This is Timberham; slow as you can's the best game here--never know when you may run up against a peeler; seems to me they've nothing else to do except pounce on you if you're moving above a crawl; some of them would like to make out that you're doing twenty miles when you're hardly doing two." Suddenly the chauffeur spoke in a half whisper. "What did I tell you?" They had come along a narrow, winding street, where discreet driving was certainly a matter of necessity; it had suddenly widened out into a broad, open space, from which streets branched off in all directions. In the centre a constable was standing with a superior officer. At sight of the car the latter raised an authoritative hand. "Now, what's he want?" growled the mechanic, under his breath. "Drat them fellers!"

The officer approached.

"You leave him to me," said Mr Frazer. "I'll talk to him. What is it, officer?"

"Sorry to stop you, sir, but have you passed a caravan on the road?--a primrose-coloured van, with black stripes, and red wheels--something rather unusual in the way of vans; you could hardly help noticing it."

"I'm afraid I haven't been paying much attention. Whereabouts would it be?"

"Somewhere between here and Newcaster Heath. Which way did you come?"

"We've come from the Heath. Why do you ask?"

"Well--we're rather anxious to get news of that caravan."

"Why?--been stolen?--or anything of that sort?"

"No, it's not been stolen--no, nothing of that sort; only--there's someone with it with whom we should very much like to have a little conversation."

There was a significant twinkle in the speaker's eyes. Mr Frazer smiled, as if with perfect comprehension.

"In that case I hope it won't be long before your wish is gratified. There'll be plenty of people on that road to-day--I don't suppose I need tell you that it's race day--if it's anywhere about you ought to have news of it soon."

"As I said, if anyone does see that caravan they can hardly help noticing it. Thank you, sir; sorry to have kept you waiting."

Stepping on one side the officer saluted; the car went on.

Until the town was left behind the chauffeur said nothing; but when they began to bowl along the open road beyond he smiled, with much meaning.

"I saw that van he was asking about in the field which you came out of."

"Did you? That shows that you've the faculty of observation--odd how many people are without it."

"And as it was in the same field in which you were you must have seen it too; in fact, you couldn't help it."

"I never said I hadn't."

The chauffeur considered this statement.

"No, I suppose you didn't, if it comes to that--very artful the way you put him off. He thought you said you hadn't seen it."

"Some of those policemen do think at times."

When he had duly pondered this cryptic saying the chauffeur chuckled.

"I can see that you're a deep one."

"I am not sure that I quite deserve that compliment. What are we doing now? Thirty? At this rate we ought to be in Ashington in under half-an-hour."

"We're doing all of thirty--we ought to be in Ashington in less than twenty minutes. That peeler was looking for you."

"Short-sighted mortal--surely I was near enough for him to see me."

"What have you been doing? I hope it's nothing--you know; I don't want to be mixed up with anything fishy."

"I assure you there's nothing fishy about me. It is not only you gentlemen who drive motor cars who have differences with the police; lesser folk have them also--especially when there's a lady in the case, and a stony-hearted guardian."

"A lady is it? Ah!--I might have thought of that--now I see what the caravan was for--and she sitting behind there all the time saying nothing. Well, you're a couple of cool ones. But when there's a lady about you never know what's about. Not long ago one of my governor's daughters ran off with a young chap what was a riding master. Wasn't there a rumpus! Every policeman in the county was looking out for them--but they were married before they got them--and she only turned seventeen; sandy hair she had."

"It's a dangerous age, seventeen."

"Where a woman's concerned all ages are dangerous."

"That's true. I perceive that you also are a deep one."

"When you've got to drive a motor car, and keep her properly tuned up, you've got to be about all there. By the way, would you mind giving me ten sovereigns instead of those two fivers?"

The change of subject was rather sudden; Mr Frazer glanced round, as if a trifle startled.

"With pleasure--if I have them. But what's wrong with the notes?"

"There's nothing wrong with them--as notes; I know that well enough, only--their numbers might be known, and, if they're traced, it wouldn't suit me to be asked how they came to be in my possession--not by a long chalk."

"I catch your meaning--you're a far-sighted man. However, I give you my word that the numbers of those notes are not known, in the sense you mean--thanking you very much for the insinuation."

"I daresay; still--I'd rather have the sovereigns. I sha'n't forget how artful you were in putting that peeler off the scent. Whereabouts in Ashington do you want me to put you down?"

"I don't care, so long as it is in Ashington. Aren't we nearly there?"

"That's Ashington, round the bend--that square tower's the town hall. It's new, the town hall is; they think more of it than I do--I call it a common-looking building."

"If you'll slow down I'll see if I can find the ten sovereigns you would rather have." He took several gold coins from a pocket in his trousers. "I've got them--here they are. If you'll give me those two notes, I sha'n't mind their being found in my possession. Now if you'll take us, say, a quarter of a mile farther, and then set us down, I'll be obliged."

"I'll set you down by the town hall--I know the chap who built it--he's a sort of cousin of my old mother's. It's the biggest job he's ever had, and he thinks no end of it. I tell him opinions differ--it does make him so wild."

When they had alighted in front of the edifice in question, and had divested themselves of their wraps, the car drove off--possibly to fetch the "governor" from the races. The girl turned on her companion with flashing eyes.

"Why did you tell that policeman such a lie?" Nothing could have been better done than Mr Frazer's air of deprecation.

"Did I tell him a lie? I was not aware of it."

"You as good as told him a lie; you prevaricated--you meant to deceive him, and you did. If I hadn't been such a contemptible coward I should have jumped up and told him the truth--that it was me he was looking for. I believe that every policeman is looking for me everywhere--I feel sure they are. Every fresh lie you tell to screen me makes me feel more ashamed--especially as I know they're certain to find me in the end. There's a policeman over there; I'll go and tell him who I am--now!--and then at least you need tell no more falsehoods for me."

Fortunately, Mr Frazer seemed to think, as he looked about him, there was no one within earshot to notice her wild words and manner, and the constable to whom she referred was some little distance off, on the other side of the way, with his back towards them. He laid his hand upon her arm, speaking with that matter-of-fact coolness which the girl seemed to find herself powerless to resist.

"I shouldn't do that, just now, especially as a train will soon be starting which I am rather anxious to catch. Let's get into this cab, and see if we can't catch it."

Feeling as if she were doing none of these things of her own volition--which, indeed, was the case--the girl suffered him to hand her into it. Presently she found herself entering a railway station at his side; then, a little later, seated alone with him in a first-class compartment--a passenger in a train for the second time in her life. The rate at which it moved; the noise it made; the occasional oscillation; the strangeness of it all--served to increase her mental confusion. She caught herself wondering, with what seemed to be some remote lobe of her brain, if her mind ever would be clear again. He held out towards her a cigar which he had taken from a case.

"May I smoke?" She said yes; and he did, talking as he smoked, in that clear, gentle, musical voice, which made itself audible above the roar of the train, affecting her as nothing had ever done before.

"This is an express, which runs through to town without a stop; we are lucky to have caught it. You look tired."

"I am; I don't know why: I have done nothing; but I feel as if I shall never again be anything but tired."

"You wait--till you're not tired." He was silent; examining his cigar, which did not seem to be lighted quite to his satisfaction. She thought, hazily, how handsome he looked; handsomer in what seemed, to her, to be his smart attire, even than he had looked in his shirt sleeves on the heath. He went on, speaking rather as if he were soliloquising than addressing himself to her: "Queer world! Yesterday you were non-existent; yet to-day your life has become so intertwined with mine that I feel sure that we must have been associated in some prior state of existence."

"That's absurd! My horrid troubles have nothing to do with you--nothing! To you I am only a stranger--a disreputable stranger too."

"You're a foolish child."

"I may be foolish, but I am not a child--and I wish you wouldn't persist in treating me as if I were a child! I believe you have been doing all the things you have been doing--and ever so many of them you ought not to have done--simply and solely because you think I'm a child. Do get that idea out of your head, I beg of you; I'm quite old enough to be able to take care of myself--and if I'm not able I ought to be. Please, when we reach London, leave me, when we get out of the train, and I'll go to the first policeman I see, and tell him everything there is to tell--I feel sure that if you keep going on as you have been I shall get you into trouble as well as myself, and--and I'd rather anything than that. Why should you suffer because of me?"

"When we reach town I'm going to take you to the Vernons'--Frances' father and mother."

"Why should you do that? Why should you try to thrust me on people who know nothing about me, and who wouldn't wish to have anything to do with me if they did? Why should they take me in?"

"All those whys in one sentence! I never knew such a child for whys. Your fondness for asking questions shows you are a child."

"You won't tell me anything unless I do; I have to keep on asking you questions--and even then you don't answer them--I don't know why, but you won't--it's not kind of you!"

"The Vernons have a house on the river, not far from Hampton Court; it's a decentish place; you'll find yourself comfortable there."

"Shall I--that's all you know! In a stranger's house!--where I know I've no right to be, and feel I'm not wanted!--with that nightmare haunting me!--afraid to look a policeman in the face!--comfortable! Thank you; you don't understand!"

"Have you any sense at all?"

"You think I haven't; or you wouldn't treat me as you are doing--but I'm not an utter idiot."

"Then prove it, by acting on my advice. Forget all that it is better to forget; all unpleasant things are best forgotten; and, at your age, forgetting is so easy. Leave the conduct of things in more experienced hands; meaning mine. I'm pretty idle; I expect to find, in the process of putting your affairs in order, congenial amusement. A little bird whispers in my ear that I sha'n't find it nearly such a difficult job as you imagine. You don't seem to have had a very good time up to now; you shall have a better in the days which are coming; you'll find that your worries will vanish, and it will be roses, roses, all the way."

"Why should you do all this for me?--if it can be done; which I doubt."

He sighed.

"Mild remonstrance is plainly useless; you'll have to keep on whying! Did Frances Vernon know that George Emmett took you away from the convent?"

"Of course she did--besides, I told her all about it. She was there when he came--she saw us start."

"Then, in that case, I shall tell Mrs Vernon that Mr Emmett is not so well as he might be, which is a fact, and that, since, therefore, he is not able to take so much care of you as is desirable, which is, again, the fact, I have assumed the charge of you, *pro tem*. You understand? It may not be necessary for you to say anything--I will endeavour to make it unnecessary--but if you must, you must support my story."

"Your lie, you mean--another!"

"I hardly think that ugly word is called for. What I shall say will be the truth."

"Part of it, you mean. If you were to tell them the whole truth, those people wouldn't let me inside their door--that's what I understand. And yet you say that, knowing that, I shall be comfortable."

"Permit me to observe, since you persist in assailing me, that you speak with that merciless severity which marks the ignorant child, or the green girl who flatters herself that she is just

ceasing to be a child. I am as good a judge of what is improper as most people of my acquaintance; if I thought that you were an improper person to introduce into Mrs Vernon's household you would not be introduced by me. I feel, strongly, that you are an inexperienced child; that you have had many things against you; that you are at a period in your career in which you need, above all else, an experienced hand, to keep you from coming to eternal grief. I am going to play the part of the experienced hand, for quixotic reasons, if you choose. Don Quixote didn't have such a bad time of it, first and last; he was a gentleman. If I were to tell Mrs Vernon what you would perhaps call all that occurred last night at 'The Bolton Arms' I should still be telling her what, from your childish point of view, would be a lie; because you don't know all the truth, nor I either; there's much about the affair which needs a great deal of explanation, and I'm going to see that it is explained. In the meanwhile, if there is anything about your connection with the business which you have concealed, and which is not to your credit, now's the time to get it off your mind."

Her manner was much meeker.

"There isn't; I've told you all there is to tell, at least, I--I've told you all I can think of."

"Very good; having weighed what you have told me, holding you innocent, I am going to stand surety for your innocence to Mrs Vernon. Now, do you understand the position I am taking up?"

"But why----"

"No more whys, please; I've had enough of them. Don't you, out of the fulness of your ignorance, presume to set yourself up to judge me, because I, out of the fulness of my knowledge, do or say certain things, which may be beyond your limited comprehension, but which I know to be right--in other words, don't set yourself up to be a censorious little prig--I had almost rather you had broken Emmett's head. I am going to do nothing for you that I ought not to do, but I am going to do for you everything I can. You hear?"

"Yes; I hear."

"Then don't you play me false."

"Play you false? As if----"

"You'll be playing me false if you don't endorse what I tell Mrs Vernon, and if you're not as comfortable in her house as everybody about it will unite in trying to make you. Here are some picture papers for you to look at."

He handed her half-a-dozen, while he unfolded, for his own perusal, a journal of the day. If his intention was to close the discussion he had taken a drastic means of doing it. Ominous headlines stared at him from the open sheet: "Extraordinary Occurrence at Newcaster.--Murder of Mr George Emmett.--Mysterious Disappearance of a Young Lady.--Reward Offered for Dorothy Gilbert." As he read, reflections passed through his mind. "Vernon has often boasted to me that he never reads the police news, or any of his family either. This is a local rag; perhaps they won't make such a fuss of the thing in town. Anyhow, let's hope that on this occasion he's as good as his word, or I shall have to tell a longer story than I intended."

CHAPTER XIII

THE VERNONS--PARTICULARLY FRANCES

Dorothy had never seen a prospect which pleased her better. There was grass beneath her feet--the exquisite grass which one seems to find only on an English lawn--thick and soft and springy, of such a restful green. There was croquet on one side; two tennis courts were beyond; with a well-shorn piece of grass, with big numbers on it, whose use she did not understand, which was really a clock for putting at golf; flowers were in beds and borders, on banks, and everywhere; there were great trees and smaller ones, shrubs and clustered bushes; behind was the long, low, old house, with its rose and creeper covered walls; in front was the river, sparkling, laughing in the sunshine, already alive with a greater variety of small pleasure craft than she had ever heard of. She had read of such places in English books at the convent; but she had scarcely even hoped ever to see one. Yet, here she was, transported, as if by the touch of a magician's wand, into what seemed to her to be a more perfect paradise than any of those she had read of, which she had been told she might regard, at least for some little time to come, almost as if it were her own home. After fourteen years spent within one set of walls, where nothing ever

happened, events had crowded on her, all at once, so quickly; she had been so passed, as it were, from hand to hand; so hurried from scene to scene, that it was not strange if this final transformation almost seemed to her as if it were part and parcel of some long-continued dream, and that as she stood there, inhaling the pleasant air, the smell of the flowers, the sunshine, the indescribable aroma of the whole delightful scene, she was conscious, amid all the charm and sweetness, of a sense of shivering fear, lest this, the only pleasant phase of that drawn-out dream, should pass, as the rest of it had done, and its terror should return.

It was in an effort to escape this haunting fear that she moved quickly down to the river's brink. There was a sloping bank at the foot of the lawn; the stream ran just beneath; the grass growing almost down to the water's edge--there was nothing whatever to prevent your stepping from the bank into the river if you felt disposed. She stood on the slope to take in new aspects of what seemed to her to be the ever-changing scene. How nice some of the boats looked--and how pretty were some of their occupants--and what pretty clothes they wore! Dorothy was wearing the frock and the hat which Mr Frazer had brought with him in the parcel from Newcaster; yesterday they had seemed to her to be in the height of fashion--and compared to the garments which she discarded for them they were. Now she felt how out of harmony they were with her surroundings. The frock was of dark blue serge, the hat of dark grey felt; both good in their way--she did not doubt that they had cost more money than any two garments of hers had ever done before. But then the men in the boats were all in white flannels, and the girls and women in gossamer fabrics of the airiest kind, with hats which were radiant visions. They were in accord with the spirit of the scene. The longer Dorothy stood to watch the stronger her conviction grew that she was not. As far as appearance went she was nothing but a blot on the landscape. Ashamed though she was of such a feeling it was there, and would not away. She knew, none better, how indebted she was to the generosity of a stranger for being able to look as well as she did. She called herself a little pig for wishing that her clothes went better with that fairylike garden, those radiant skies, the silver stream; were more in the vein of poetry which marked the costume of the girl in the boat with the two men, an old and a young one, which was crossing from the opposite bank towards the lawn on which she stood. She was a study in the palest of pale blues; Dorothy thought what a charming bit of colour she made, in the smart boat; in which the two oarsmen, of such contrasting ages, were evidently so much at home. What a good-looking pair they were, in their different styles! The fact became plainer as the boat drew near; the one with the silvery hair and moustache, the other with the light brown curls, and smooth cheeks on which was the glow of youth and health.

It had just dawned on Dorothy that the boat was being steered, by the vision in blue, towards the spot on which she was standing; when, on a sudden, the young lady in question, rising in her seat, began to exclaim aloud, in a state of unmistakable agitation:

"Why, if it isn't Dorothy Gilbert! Dorothy Gilbert, where have you come from?"

The white-haired gentleman seemed to find in the steerswoman's conduct cause of complaint.

"If," he observed, in quite audible tones, "you do want to have us over, would you mind letting us have a little notice of what to expect?"

The expression of this seemingly reasonable wish the young lady treated with scorn.

"Don't be silly, dad! What does it matter? Especially when there's Dorothy Gilbert actually standing on our lawn! Dorothy Gilbert, where have you tumbled from?"

"Excuse me, sir, if we've taken much paint off your boat; but if you'll kindly have it put right, and will send the bill to my daughter, who's at present suffering from one of her periodical attacks, I've no doubt she'll be glad to see it settled--she's supposed to be steering us, and this is the way she does it."

"Dad!--how can you?" The young lady had all at once discovered, to her confusion, that these remarks were addressed to two young men who were in a skiff with which their own craft had nearly come into collision. "If you or Jim will row I'll take you in." Presently the boat was brought along to some steps which Dorothy had not previously noticed, but which she now saw led to the lawn. The young man stepped ashore, with the painter in his hand; and was followed by the young lady, who sprang up the steps, two at a time, and rushed to where Dorothy was standing, exclaiming as she went: "Dorothy! Dorothy! my darling child, have you tumbled from the skies?"

And, almost before she knew it, Dorothy found herself in the arms, and submitting to the caresses, of the vision in blue.

"Why," she said, when at last she had a chance to speak, "do you know, I didn't know you; you look so different."

"Different from what?"

"Different--from what you looked at the convent."

"The convent? My dear!--I should hope I do! How we all looked at that silly old convent! But, tell me, how do I look?--really?--that miserable Jim just said I looked a perfect fright."

"I was just thinking how lovely that girl in the boat did look; and--she turned out to be you."

"My dear, you're an angel! I always was fond of you, but if you keep on saying darling things to me like that----! What's become of your guardian? Where is Mr Emmett?"

"I--" Dorothy was about to say, "I left him behind in Newcaster"; but she changed the form of her sentence to--"I haven't brought him with me."

"Brought him with you! I should think you hadn't! The idea of bringing him! The great thing is, you've brought yourself. Honestly, I'd sooner see you than that the Fates should buy a motor car; and if you knew how set I am on that--you mayn't believe it, but we only go driving about behind frumpy old horses--you'd understand how glad I am--especially to-day. My dear, to-day's our regatta, and our garden-party--it's our day of days! You couldn't have dropped on us at a better time; you little schemer, I believe you planned it! Father, if you will kindly come here I will present you to my friend, Miss Dorothy Gilbert, of whom, in my moments of emotion, you have heard me speak. Dorothy, this is my father; a more desirable parent you could not ask for; though I regret to say that he treats his daughter with a lack of respect which I fear is one of the signs of the day. Fathers did not treat their daughters like that when I was young."

"No, Miss Gilbert, nor when I was young either; in those days daughters stood in awe of their fathers--but we've changed all that. I trust you know my daughter sufficiently well to be aware that she has her moments of sanity."

"Dad!--you shouldn't speak like that!--the child will misunderstand you. Fortunately Dorothy does know me. James!--Jim!--when you've finished trying to tie that boat up might I ask you to step this way? Dorothy, this is Mr James Harold Arbuthnot Vernon, better known as Jim--he is my brother; which is the only complimentary thing I can say of him. Jim, I believe you can be almost nice if you try very hard--do try your very hardest to be nice to Miss Gilbert."

"Miss Gilbert, I assure you I can be very nice to you, as this little object puts it, without trying in the least; in fact, I don't believe I could be anything else."

"Jim! Dorothy, did you ever hear anything like him? Please try to bear with him, for a time, for my sake."

The father of the pair managed to get in a word.

"I trust, Miss Gilbert, that this is not a flying visit you are paying us, but that you have come to stay some time."

Dorothy's was a stammering answer.

"I--I hardly know; my--my movements are uncertain."

Miss Vernon echoed her last word.

"Uncertain!--but, my dear child, what I'm dying to know is what favouring wind of providence it was which blew you here. When did you come?"

"Last night."

"Last night!--at what ever time?"

"It was very late."

"It must have been. You see that houseboat by the paddock there?--that's ours; sometimes some of us sleep in it, and sometimes none of us do--last night we three did--but we never started till quite late, and you weren't here then. Why ever didn't you let me know that you were coming? I'd never have gone to that silly old houseboat if I had."

"I didn't know that I was coming till--till I'd almost come."

"My dear child!--what do you mean? You must have made up your mind in a hurry, or--did your guardian make it up for you? Did Mr Emmett bring you?"

"No; I came with Mr Frazer."

"Mr who?--Frazer?--and who's Mr Frazer?"

"He says he knows you--and your mother seems to know him very well."

"Says he knows me!--and mother knows him very well?--what Frazer can it be? I know no Mr Frazer."

Her brother offered a suggestion.

"Perhaps he's one of Billy Frazer's lot--Miss Gilbert, do you know Billy Frazer? He's up at Magdalen; stroked their boats in the torpids; Bones they call him because--well, because he's bony. Perhaps your man's a relative of his."

"I don't know; I don't know any of his relations--his name is Eric."

Miss Vernon turned to her father.

"Dad, who is Mr Eric Frazer?"

"I daresay, if you put Miss Gilbert on the witness-stand, and bombard her long enough, you may get from her the information you require; though in my time it was not supposed to be the thing to cross-examine one's guest the moment one met her--however, we have also changed all that. I am going into the house to speak to your mother. I am very glad to see you, Miss Gilbert; I don't care how you came, or with whom; I am only sorry that I was not here to welcome you. I trust now you have come you'll keep on staying."

The old gentleman moved towards the house; with a figure as erect as if nothing had ever happened to bow his head or bend his back. His daughter looked after him with smiling eyes; then turned to the visitor with a question which took the girl rather aback.

"Well, Dorothy, what do you think of my father?"

"Frances!--what a thing to ask me!--when I've seen him for scarcely five minutes!"

"Well?--isn't that long enough to enable you to form an opinion? I've summed up most people inside two seconds."

"Yes--all wrong. Frances, you are an idiot; I never did know anyone talk quite such drivel as you do."

"Thank you, James; I am obliged to you. Would you mind going away to play? I have something which I wish to say to my friend, Miss Gilbert, which I would rather not have overheard by boys. And please remember how easily a bad impression is formed--don't let Miss Gilbert find out your true character in the first two minutes."

"All right, ducky; don't you worry. I give you my word I've no wish to listen to the sort of stuff I know you are fond of talking. Miss Gilbert, you have my sympathy."

The young gentleman strolled off, his hands in his pockets, whistling a popular air. Miss Vernon regarded his back with the same smiling eyes with which she had followed her father; and put almost the same question to her friend.

"Dorothy, what do you think of Jim?"

"Frances!--how can you?--when you know very well that I think nothing."

"You are quite right, my dear; I am glad you show such penetration. All the same, you can't deny that he is good-looking."

"Is he? I didn't notice."

"You didn't notice! Child!--you're not in the convent now."

"No; sometimes I wish I were."

"That's a flattering thing to say!--considering where you are!--and that I am here!"

"Frances! I didn't mean that! You don't understand."

"You are wrong; I do. I've a feeling that there's something mysterious about you, about your presence here; and, Dorothy Gilbert, if there's anything I do love, it's mystery. I suppose it's too much to hope that it's one of those frightful mysteries, of which one only speaks with bated breath--that sort of blood-curdler never crosses my path. But, whatever it may be, I foresee a perfectly delightful time ahead, while I am engaged in wriggling out from you the secret. However insinuating I may be, baffle my curiosity; and for goodness sake don't let it burst on me too soon. Let it dawn on me by degrees; in instalments, my dear; and let me have a shock with each instalment; each one greater than the last; so that the full comprehension of the mystery comes with a culminating shock which turns my hair almost grey--almost, my pet, not quite, if you please. I've heard that grey hair suits some girls; but I don't believe I'm one of them. By the way of beginning my insinuating, let me remark that you have changed since I saw you."

"So have you--and you must have changed more than I have, because I didn't know you, and you did know me."

"That's true. Now, Dorothy, no flummery, and no fibs--in what respect do you consider I have altered?"

"Well--for one thing you seem to be so much more of a woman."

"Do I? Isn't that natural?"

"I don't know; it isn't so very long since I saw you last."

"A great many things may happen in a very short time."

"That's true."

Dorothy sighed; but Miss Vernon was smiling. Then she said, with an air which would be grave, but was not:

"There are women and women. I have heard people say that when one becomes a woman one should show a consciousness of the responsibilities of womanhood. I hope I don't show too much of that kind of thing."

"I don't think you ever will do that."

"Sha'n't I? You never can tell. A man I danced with last week--he was quite old, over thirty--said that it bursts upon you all at once, what it means to be a woman. I don't know what he knows about it, as he's only a man; but I've noticed that some men, when they're old, do seem to know a good deal about women--or they pretend to. What do you think of this dress?"

"It's a perfect dream!"

"Really?"

"I never saw anything so lovely."

"I fancy it is rather--too-too; and I believe that's what Jim thinks; that's why he keeps calling me a perfect fright. Oh, those brothers! they have such ways of paying a compliment. What do you think of the hat?"

Again Dorothy sighed; but this time it was a sigh of admiration.

"Frances, it's simply sweet!"

"Notice the hair?"

"Rather; and I believe it's the hair which is more responsible for the change which I see in you than anything else. Of course the clothes have something to do with it--you didn't wear frocks and hats like that in the convent."

"My dear! what are you talking about? Fancy the sensation I'd have made! Can't you see the Mother's face?"

"No; and I'd rather not, thank you. But it's the hair which has changed you more than the clothes. I can't think how it's done. I wonder----"

Dorothy stopped; the other finished the sentence for her.

"If I will do yours for you? Come into the house, and then I'll show you. I've discovered I've quite a genius for dressing hair. I'll make a perfect picture of you--you won't know yourself when I've finished. Which room have you got? You don't know? You think that's the window? That's the pink room--we call it the pink room because once upon a time its decorations were pink; and we still call it the pink room, though now they're what I call a symphony in chaste French-grey. Talk about this frock! You wait till you see me this afternoon! I say, you were lucky to drop on us on our day of days! There'll be tons of people here; and, among them, one or two nice ones. Honestly, did you know what day it was?"

"Of course I didn't; and, if you don't mind, I'd--I'd just as soon stay in the house while all those people are here. I--I don't feel in a mood for that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing? Stuff! You don't know what you're talking about; shyness is what's the matter with you; and that's a complaint of which little convent-bred girls have got to be cured. Wait till I've tried my hand upon your hair! Come along, I'll start on it at once. Why," she had taken Dorothy's hand in her own, "I say!--whatever's this?--a ring!--on her engagement finger!--diamonds!--and such a beauty! Dorothy, what is the matter with the child? She's staring at her own finger as if she were staring at a ghost!"

Dorothy was staring at Mr Emmett's ring, which gleamed at her on the third finger of her left hand. Until that moment she had been unconscious of its presence--a fact which was a sufficient commentary on her mental state during the last several hours. She could not think how it had got there; to her it was something worse than a ghost; it brought back to her, on the instant, all that she would have been so willing to forget.

CHAPTER XIV

STRATHMOIRA

Mr Vernon found Mrs Vernon in the morning-room, engaged with what seemed to be household accounts. As is apt to be the case when people have been married to each other for more years than they sometimes care to remember, morning greetings were with them a minus quantity. He began without any preface:

"Everything all right for this afternoon?"

She looked up from a bill.

"Yes, I think so; as far as I know." She looked back at the bill. "I am confident Barnes has made a mistake, he is always doing it." She looked up again, turning half round in her chair. "But, Harold, have you seen her?"

"You mean Miss Gilbert? I have; and--I'm rather prepossessed with her. I confess that Frances' ecstasies made me a trifle nervous; but so far as appearance and manner go she strikes me as being distinctly good style, as girls run nowadays. But she--or someone--might have let us know that she was coming, considering, so far as we're concerned, that she's a perfect stranger. She seems to have dropped from the clouds; she doesn't seem as if she were the kind of girl who'd do it. Who's the Mr Frazer she speaks of?"

"Mr Frazer?"

"She says she came with Mr Frazer--Eric Frazer?"

"Eric Frazer? She must mean Strathmoira."

"Strathmoira?"

"Of course, his name is Frazer--Eric Frazer."

"But, why should she speak of the Earl of Strathmoira as Mr Frazer?"

"My dear Harold, it's no use putting questions to me, because I keep putting questions to myself, and I get no answers. Directly I begin to think I feel I am getting out of my depth, so I try not to think. I console myself with the reflection that I always have known that Strathmoira's stark, staring mad."

"But, do you mean to say that Strathmoira brought Miss Gilbert to this house without letting us have the least hint that he was coming, at goodness knows what hour of the night?"

"You may well say goodness only knows. You had been gone what seemed to me hours, and I was just getting into bed, when I heard a vehicle coming up the drive. I called to Parkes not to open the door till he had asked who it was through the window; but I suppose I must have spoken louder than I meant, and of course the windows in my room were wide open; and, as you know, it's right over the hall door, which for the moment I'd forgotten; anyhow, a voice answered from without: 'It's all right, Adela, don't you let me be the cause of Parkes straining his vocal chords; it isn't burglars, it's yours to command.' When I realised that the voice was Strathmoira's you might have knocked me down with a feather."

"I daresay. Why, how long is it since we've seen or heard anything of the fellow?"

"As you put it, goodness only knows. I replied to him through the window: 'I'm alone in the house, I don't know if you're aware what time it is; I'm just going to bed--couldn't you come round in the morning?'"

"He answered: 'No, I couldn't; I've got Miss Gilbert here, Frances' friend, so perhaps you won't mind hurrying down to let us in!'"

"Pretty cool, upon my word."

"Cool! When Parkes had opened the door, and I went down, looking I don't know how, he was as much at his ease as if he'd dropped in to pay an afternoon call; and there was a tall slip of a girl, with black hair, big grey eyes, and a white face, whom I took to at once."

"So did I, when I saw her just now."

"He introduced her; and said she had come to make a long stay; and asked if I'd mind her going to bed at once, as she'd had a very tiring day, and was tired out. She looked it, to me she seemed unnaturally pale. As she stood there, without speaking a word, I felt quite sorry for the

child. So I took her upstairs and lent her Frances' things to go to bed with--she hadn't even so much as an extra pocket-handkerchief of her own."

"I thought you said she'd come to stay."

"So he said--but she hadn't so much as a handbag in the way of luggage."

"I suppose it's coming--or has it come?"

"It is not coming; nor has it come. If you'll allow me I'll try to make you understand as much as I understand--which is very little. The whole thing seems to me to be mysterious; however, by this time I ought to know Strathmoira. When I came downstairs again he told me a story of which I did not find it easy to make head or tail. It seems that Miss Gilbert has a guardian, in whose charge she appears to have been."

"You remember Frances said she'd left the convent with her guardian; and that was why she didn't want to stop."

"I do remember. It seems that the guardian is not in a state of health to take proper care of his ward, though what ails him I couldn't make out; so Strathmoira brought her to me."

"Of course we are very glad to see her; but--what has Strathmoira got to do with Miss Gilbert? And why as a matter of course has he brought her to you?--without giving you any notice, in that unceremonious fashion? Hasn't she any friends of her own?"

"My dear Harold, you are sufficiently acquainted with Strathmoira to be aware that you can rain questions at him, and that, without refusing to answer one, he can evade them all, and do it in such a way that you are not sure if he knows that you ever put them. I asked him everything I could think of in the short time he stayed; but all that he told me amounted to this--that he hopes I'll treat Miss Gilbert as a daughter."

"Upon my word!--and she a stranger!"

"He also hoped that I'll see her properly fitted up with clothes from top to toe!"

"With whose money?"

"With his--or hers--I don't know whose; I only know that he gave me a hundred pounds in notes, and here they are. When he wondered if that would be enough to start with, I said it depended on the circumstances of the girl, and I asked if she had any means; and he replied: 'Ample! ample!' twice over; and he added that no expense was to be spared in fitting her up with all that a girl of her age ought to have. Now you know how Frances told us she was neglected by her people, and continually left without a penny of pocket-money; and how that man who took her away informed her that her father had died and left her penniless; and how sorry I was for her; and, because I was so sorry, I gave Frances permission to ask her to spend the summer with us--and Frances couldn't, because she didn't know her address. I believe I am not a person to judge hastily and harshly; but I cannot reconcile those facts with Strathmoira's statement that her means are ample."

"You've got the money; you needn't spend all of it; what's it matter?"

"Harold, it does matter. I should like to know whose money it is; and if more is coming when it's spent."

"Strathmoira will give you all the explanations you want before very long; you're sure to hear from him--what's his address?"

"Harold, I haven't a notion--I asked, but he didn't say. When he'd gone I found that he'd left me with a general impression that I might hear from him--I didn't know when."

"Well, that's something. Anyhow, here's the girl; we know of nothing against her even if she did make an informal entry; she's Frances' friend; the child will be delighted to have her; you felt drawn to her."

"I did, and I do; what I've seen of her I like, there's something about the girl which appeals to me."

"Very well, then--as I'm prepossessed we sha'n't do much harm if we give her house-room for her own sake. As for Strathmoira--although he is stark mad, he's an excellent fellow, and long-headed, in his way. Whatever the connection may be between this girl and him I'm quite sure that there's nothing discreditable about it to either side."

"Harold, I never for an instant thought there was. I quite agree with you in thinking that Strathmoira's one fault is that he's stark mad."

"Then all we have to do, for the present, is to make the girl comfortable and happy. Did I understand you to say that she has nothing with her but the clothes she is wearing?"

"She hasn't another rag--not so much as a toothbrush.

"In which case you'll have to expend a part of that hundred in buying her a toothbrush--and other odds and ends."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do. I've drawn up a list of some of the things she must have; I've ordered the landau, and I'm going to drive the two girls over to Ringtown as soon as I have my hat on. Here are the girls." As she spoke, the two girls appeared at the open French window. She spoke to her daughter. "Good morning, Frances; you see your fairy godmother has sent you a present--the visitor you so much wanted."

"Isn't it lovely? I've just been telling her that I'd sooner see her than that father should buy a motor car--and you know what that means. But I don't understand--she says she's brought no luggage."

"That's all right; I'm going to drive the pair of you over to Ringtown, and there I'm going to buy Dorothy what she wants. The other day I saw some pretty model gowns at Wingham's; if only one of them fits her it might do for this afternoon. What do you say, Dorothy?"

The girl, who had been standing by the window, came a little farther into the room; she spoke with painful hesitation.

"Mrs Vernon, I--I have no money."

"My dear child, I have some money of yours."

"Of mine?--money of mine?" The girl looked as if she did not understand, then flushed--as if with sudden comprehension. "Did he--give it you?"

"By 'he' do you mean the Earl of Strathmoira?"

Mrs Vernon smiled; but the girl looked as if she understood less than ever.

"The Earl of Strathmoira?--no; I mean Mr Frazer."

Miss Vernon broke in:

"Mother, what Mr Frazer does she mean? She says she came with Mr Eric Frazer. Who is Eric Frazer?"

"Mr Frazer is Dorothy's quaint way of speaking of the Earl of Strathmoira."

Miss Vernon stared at her mother, then at her friend; a look of puzzlement was on her pretty face.

"Dorothy, do you know Strathmoira?"

Dorothy's look of bewilderment more than matched her own.

"Strathmoira?--no; is it a place or a thing?"

"Dorothy, are you joking?"

"Joking?--Frances!--what makes you think I'm joking?--I haven't the faintest notion what you mean."

Miss Vernon turned to her mother.

"Mother, what is this mystery?--because it seems to me that there is a mystery somewhere. I hope that you and Dorothy understand each other better than I do either of you."

"My dear Frances, I'm bound to say that I don't understand; especially if, as she says, she isn't joking. Dorothy, do you seriously wish to tell us that you don't know that the gentleman who brought you to this house last night was the Earl of Strathmoira?"

The girl's eyes opened wider and wider; no one who saw the look almost of fear which came on her face could think that she was jesting.

"He--he told me that his name was Frazer--Eric Frazer."

"And so his family name is Frazer, and his Christian name Eric; but his style and title is the Earl of Strathmoira; by that style and title he is generally known; indeed I, who have known him all his life, and am his cousin once removed, was not aware that he was ever known as anything else. How long have you known him, my dear?--and who introduced him to you as Mr Frazer?"

The girl shrank back. Inchoate thoughts were pressing on her harassed mind. She remembered what he had said about her endorsing his story; but what story had he told? Was it true that he was who these people said he was? If so, then--perhaps she had betrayed him already; with a word she might betray him further. She recalled his words about playing him

false. If she did, what would he think--after all he had done for her? How they all three were looking at her! She wished she could think what to say without--without committing any one. But--she could not think.

While she was still struggling within herself for the words which would not come, Frances went flitting towards her across the room; drawn to her by the anguish which was in her eyes, and on her face.

"Dorothy! my darling! what is the matter? Don't look like that! Mother didn't mean to hurt you! You poor thing, how you're trembling! Mother, tell her that you didn't mean anything!"

In her turn the elder woman, crossing the room, came and stood by the still speechless girl, into whose eyes, for some cause which she could not fathom, there had come a pain which was too great for tears. Her voice was very soft and gentle.

"I assure you, my dear Dorothy, that nothing was further from my wish than a desire to pry into what, after all, is no business of mine. If my cousin is Mr Frazer to you then he is Mr Frazer. He's one of the most eccentric creatures breathing; but he is also one of the best. I'm sure, from the way in which he spoke to me of you last night, that he regards you with the utmost respect and reverence. He commended you to me as a very precious charge. He told me that you had never known your own mother; and he asked me to try to be a mother to you." The speaker paused to smile, whimsically. "You know, Dorothy, I don't think that one can be quite like one's mother if one isn't one's mother, but, if you'll let me, I'd like to play the part, as well as a substitute can."

Mr Vernon's interposition prevented a reply from Dorothy, if she was capable of one. Perhaps he saw that she was not; and his words were dictated by a masculine desire to cut short what was very like a scene.

"Now, Adela, if you're going to put your hat on, you'd better put it on--I heard the carriage come ten minutes ago. And, you girls, if you're not ready, perhaps you will be ready inside a brace of shakes. Frances, do you hear?"

The young lady took the hint.

"All right, dad; we'll both of us be ready in ever so much less than a brace of shakes!"

Slipping her arm through Dorothy's she led her from the room. When the two girls had gone husband and wife looked at each other. The man was the first to speak.

"It's odd that she shouldn't know him as the Earl of Strathmoira--it strikes me that my gentleman's a queerer fish even than I thought."

His wife eyed him for a moment, as if quizzically; then she turned aside, ostensibly to collect the papers on which she had been engaged.

"Harold, have you ever heard of blindfold chess?"

Under the circumstances it seemed a curious question--so it seemed to strike him.

"Adela, what on earth do you mean?"

"It occurs to me that we are about to act as pawns in a game of chess without even knowing who are the players."

Her husband stared at her, as if with a total lack of comprehension. When he spoke his tone was irascible.

"Adela, there seem to be puzzles enough in the air without your making them worse. Perhaps you'll be so good as to tell me what you may happen to mean."

"I am not so sure that I know myself; only, as I looked at that girl's face, I had the queerest feeling."

"Of what kind?"

"I'm not fanciful--am I?"

"I can't say you are--as a rule."

"Which makes it all the queerer."

"I wish you'd be more explicit. To hear you take on this tone of mystery--you know how I hate mysteries--makes me conscious of a feeling which it would be mild to describe as queer. It didn't strike me that there was anything remarkable about the girl's looks, except that she looked pale and worried. You don't know what she may have had to go through lately."

"No, I don't; and--I don't think I'd care to."

"Adela! Now you're at it again! Will you go and put your hat on? I don't know if you're aware that the time's going; I suppose you don't want to keep that carriage waiting all day." Mrs Vernon went out of the room without another word. At the door she turned and favoured him with a look which he instinctively resented. He gave vent to his feelings as soon as she had gone. "Now what did she mean by looking at me like that? There's something about the best of women which is--trying. She's got some notion into her head about that girl; and--I wonder what it is? When I do get within reach of Strathmoira I'll speak a few plain words to him. The idea of his treating me, in my own house, as if I were a pawn--Adela's too absurd!--I should like to see him try it!"

On Mr Vernon's face there was a smile which, if the Earl of Strathmoira had been there, he might have been excused if he regarded as a challenge.

CHAPTER XV

DOROTHY GILBERT OF NEWCASTER

Mrs Vernon was standing looking out on to the lawn, pinning some flowers in her blouse. Her daughter, coming on her from behind, laid her hands upon her shoulders, and then her cheek against her mother's. The mother, continuing to arrange her flowers, suffered the soft cheek to remain against her own, for some seconds, in silence.

"Well, are we ready? The people will be coming directly--we told them four. Some of Jim's friends appear to have come early, judging from the group of what seem to be boys he has with him at the end of the lawn."

"So I see. Jim's friends have hours of their own--they don't care what time people put on cards. Mother, I'm worried about Dorothy."

"Doesn't the dress fit?"

"Perfectly!--and the hat; and the hairdressing is a complete success. She looks lovely, as I told her she would do--she's certain to cut me out."

"I don't think you're afraid of that."

Frances sighed.

"I'm not--if only for the simple reason that she won't even try."

"Doesn't she want to come down?"

"It's so provoking; she's not a bit like my Dorothy--at least, in a way she isn't. I can't think what's the matter with her. She seems to be a bundle of nerves. I hardly dare open my mouth for fear of saying something which will make her jump."

"She does seem to be more sensitive than, from your description of her, I expected; I've noticed it myself."

"My darling mumkins, she's not the same girl. Something's wrong with her--I can't think what--and I daren't ask."

"She doesn't seem to be an easy person to ask questions of."

"She used to be; we used to tell each other every single thing; we used to delight in answering each other's questions; but now---- I believe she's bewitched, I really do!"

"What do you mean by she's bewitched?"

"Why, she's--she's so strange; she gives me the feeling that only her body's here, while she is somewhere else; it--it really is uncanny. She never speaks unless you speak to her, and when you speak to her she doesn't listen. You can see she tries to listen; then, when you're in the middle of a sentence, you find that she's paying not the slightest attention to you, and that she's staring at something in such a way that you turn, with a start, to see whatever it can be; and you have quite an uncomfortable feeling when you discover that, whatever it is she's looking at, it's something which you can't see."

"Did you say she doesn't want to come down?"

"I didn't say so; but she doesn't. She makes me really cross; it is so annoying! There she is, looking a perfect picture: she has only to show herself to take the people by storm. I had no idea she was so pretty! And she says she would rather stay indoors, after all the trouble I have taken with her, because she doesn't feel like seeing anyone."

"My dear Frances, she is your guest; it is her feelings you must consult, not yours."

"Of course! All the same, if we were at the convent I should pick her up and plank her down right in the very middle of the lawn; I shouldn't care for her tantrums; she'd get the fresh air if she got nothing else. As it is, I don't mean to let her have all her own way, if I can help it."

"I don't doubt that, or it wouldn't be you."

"Well, mother, I believe that, at the bottom, it's just shyness; she's ridiculously afraid of meeting strangers; after the first plunge she'd be cured. So, after a while, I'm going up to see how she is, and to ask if she wouldn't like to come down; and I'm going to keep on asking if she wouldn't like to come down till she comes; then you'll see if she'll be any the worse for coming."

On this programme Miss Vernon acted. But the people, when they did begin to appear, arrived so fast, by land and water, and occupied her so completely, that it was some time before she was able to pay a first visit to her friend; and then, so far as inducing her to put in an appearance on the lawn was concerned, it was paid in vain. A second and a third time she tried; and it was only on the fourth occasion she prevailed; then the girl yielded less to her importunity than to her assurance that many of the people had already gone, and the rest were presently going. The consciousness of the false position she was in weighed on Dorothy so heavily that again and again that afternoon she had wished, with all her heart, that she had never allowed the individual she had known as Eric Frazer to inflict her on these good people. If she had held out against him, as she ought to have done, he never could have brought her there. But she had not understood; it seemed to her that he had taken advantage of her ignorance.

The worst of it was she did not understand yet; exactly how false her position was still she did not know. For instance, was he really the Earl of Strathmoira? Her simplicity, on such points, was pristine. To her, an earl was a person so far above her that he was, practically, a being of a superior world. If he was such an effulgent creature why had he passed himself off to her as a common man?--a plain mister? Why had he condescended to notice her at all?--to give her shelter?--to feign interest in her sordid story?--it could only have been feigned. Why had he lied and played the trickster to save such an one as she from the fate which he, so superior a being, must have known that she deserved? His whole attitude in the matter was incomprehensible to her; it added to that confusion of her mental faculties which had been great enough before.

It would have been something if she had been able to ask questions; to glean information from those who knew him so much better than she did--if she could have gained some insight into the kind of man he actually was. But she dare not ask a question. One thing she did see clearly--too clearly--and that was the impression she had made upon the Vernons by what had struck them as her amazing statement that she had only known him as Mr Eric Frazer. Another word or two and, for all she could tell, she would have done what he had warned her not to do--she would have played him false. That he had played her false, in a sense, seemed true; but then, what he had done he had done for her; it behoved her to be careful that what she did was done for him.

So it came about that, for his sake, she was tongue-tied. Wholly in the dark as to his actual identity, as to the real part which he was playing; not knowing, even, what was the story he had told on her account, she had to walk warily lest, by some chance expression, she should do him a disservice. This was one of those girls who, when forced by circumstances into situations of the most extreme discomfort, are indifferent for themselves, and anxious only for others. She had taken that diamond ring off her engagement finger; but there was a tingling feeling where it had been, as if it still were there; and that tingling caused her, now and then, as it were, against her will, to glance at it; and, as she glanced, all that the ring stood for to her came back to her--she saw it all. She saw the room in 'The Bolton Arms,' in the light, and in the dark; and, in the dark, what was on the table. She saw herself, the coward behind the curtain, with quivering flesh, as that grisly something glowered at her through the silence of the darkened room. She heard--the awful sound--in the pitch blackness; and she fled headlong through the window, like a thing possessed, and dropped through the unknown depths below--she had only to shut her eyes to feel herself dropping. She saw people looking for her--everywhere she saw them looking; and when she saw what was in their eyes--that was the worst of it all--she was as one frozen with fear. Yet, could she have had her way, she would have gone straight off and given herself up to those who sought her, to let them do with her as they would--because she was afraid of what would come, of her not doing so, to others--to him whom she had known as Eric Frazer; to the good people of this house. That would be the worst drop of bitterness, in her bitter cup, if hurt came to others because of her. She had a feeling that, at that moment, the owner of the caravan, whatever his name might be, was plunging deeper and deeper into the mire, in a frantic, hopeless effort to get her clear of it. If he were to get in so deep that there would be no getting out of it again, for him, so that they were both of them engulfed in it, for ever? And these Vernons--what right had she to bring her sordid story into their pleasant lives? Would they not suffer when it became known that they had harboured, though unwittingly, one on whose head was set the price of blood? What would be their judgment on her when they knew?

These were the thoughts which racked her as, in the pink room, she sat, burning with shame, in the pretty frock, and hat, which Mrs Vernon had bought her with money which she had supposed to be Dorothy's, but which Dorothy herself knew was Mr Frazer's. Yesterday he himself had bought her clothes across the counter; to-day he had done it by deputy--yet she had not dared to tell his deputy the truth, lest she should play him false. Looked at from any point of view, could anything be more hideously false than her position? And without, in the sunshine, on the grass, amid the flowers, were crowds of happy people, with light hearts, clear consciences, who could look the whole world in the face, knowing they had done no wrong; and Frances--the friend whom she was using so ill--wanted to take her--a leper--into that unsuspecting throng. And in the end she yielded, and went--because that seemed to her to be the lesser evil. Frances made it so clear that if she did not go she should think that Dorothy no longer looked upon her as a friend. Rather than she should think that; since many of the people had gone, and the rest were about to go; with a sigh, whose meaning Frances wholly misunderstood, against her better judgment, she suffered herself to be persuaded to show herself outside.

"All I want you to do," Frances had reiterated, over and over again, "is just to show yourself--if you love me, dear. No harm can possibly come of that."

Which was all she knew. Dorothy was to learn that, in suffering herself to be persuaded--because she loved, she had played the coward again--more harm was to come of her just showing herself than she might ever be able to undo.

Before quitting the pink room, Frances looked her over, as if she had been a picture, and, as an artist might have done, gave her here and there a finishing touch; expressing herself as only half satisfied with the ultimate result.

"I've half-a-mind, do you know, young woman, to put a touch of colour on your cheeks--a dab on each of them; because, though I won't deny that pallor suits you, and even makes you fascinatingly interesting, I don't want folks to think that you've met with a tragic fate beneath this roof; or I shall have them nudging each other in the side; and wondering to what cruel treatment you've been subjected; and eyeing me askance, as if I must be the wretch. Don't you think you might manage to wear, when you notice that people are looking at you, what I have seen described, in print, as the ghost of a smile? It will anyhow let them know that you've as much as the ghost of a smile left in you."

It was with curious sensations that Dorothy found herself, in what she felt were borrowed plumes, moving, on Frances' arm, amid a gaily attired crowd of persons, not one of whom seemed to have a care in the world. If, as Frances had said, many had already gone, then the lawns must have been inconveniently thronged, for certainly enough people for comfort still remained; and if, as Frances had also said, those who stayed, proposed, immediately, to depart, then they managed to mask their intentions with considerable skill. It seemed to Dorothy that not only had many of them no present intention of leaving, but that they intended to stop where they were as long as they possibly could.

As the two girls passed together, arm-in-arm, across the lawns, they were the subjects of general attention. As Frances had prophesied, Dorothy made a sensation. People asked each other who she was, giving to their inquiries different forms: one wondering who the "curious-looking," and another who the "striking-looking," girl might be. A lady who was standing by Mrs Vernon gave her question a shape which was still more flattering to its object.

"My dear!" she exclaimed, "who is that lovely girl with Frances?"

"What lovely girl?" Up to that moment Mrs Vernon had been unaware that her pertinacious daughter had, at last, succeeded in her avowed design; and when, on turning, she beheld proof of the fact, she smiled. She replied to the question with another. "Do you think she's lovely?"

"Don't you? My dear! she's such good style!"

"Yes, she is good style; and, now, she does look lovely."

"Why do you say 'now'--in that tone?" Mrs Vernon was thinking what a difference the frock made, and the artist's hand in the treatment of the hair, and suffered the words to go unheeded. The speaker pressed her former query: "Who is she?"

"She's a school friend of my daughter's." The girls came towards them. Mrs Vernon spoke to Dorothy. "I am glad to see that this insistent child of mine has managed to persuade you to come among us. In such weather as this it seems almost wicked to stay indoors, even if one's head is bad. I think that here, also, is someone who is glad to see you."

She referred, smilingly, to the lady who was standing by her--who said:

"One always does like to see decent-looking people; but I especially like to see pretty girls at such times as these, if only because they fit in with the sunshine, and the flowers, and the decorations. I was asking Mrs Vernon who you were, but she hasn't told me."

The hostess went through the ceremony of introduction--with mock formality.

"Mrs Purchas, permit me to have the honour to present to you--Miss Gilbert."

Falling into Mrs Vernon's vein Mrs Purchas favoured Dorothy with an exaggerated curtsy.

"Delighted to have the pleasure, Miss Gilbert. No connection, I presume, of Miss Dorothy Gilbert, of Newcaster--are you?"

Dorothy had flushed a little at the compliment which Mrs Purchas had paid her; she even showed some faint sign of being amused at her laughing pretence of treating her as if she were a person of importance; but when she asked her that last question all signs of amusement faded. Was she connected with Dorothy Gilbert of Newcaster? No doubt the question was asked in jest; though, as a jest, it was scarcely in the very best taste. It struck Dorothy dumb. It was such a bolt out of the blue, so unexpected, that, for the first moment, she did not clearly realise what was meant; but, when she did, any humour which the thing might have had was lost on her. In that first moment of shock she could not have spoken to save her life. And, when the first force of the blow--for it was as if she had been struck a blow--had begun to pass, and the significance of the lightly uttered words commenced to dawn on her, she would have liked to be able to sink into the ground, if only to escape the woman's eyes.

That the singularity of her bearing had impressed those about her was plain. Mrs Vernon and her daughter had already grown accustomed, in a measure, to the strange effect chance words were apt to have upon their guest; so that they were not so altogether taken by surprise as was the unintentional cause of the girl's visible emotion. Her amazement was not mirrored in Mrs Purchas' face; it was in her bungling attempt to offer an apology for having done she knew not what.

"I--I'm sure, my dear, I--I beg your pardon." The girl looked so very queer that the lady burst out in sudden alarm: "My dear!--what have I done?"

Frances came to the rescue.

"It's all right, Mrs Purchas--Miss Gilbert is not very well; it's my fault for making her come out."

She drew the girl away, intending to lead her back to the house, which she inwardly realised that she had been foolish to induce her to leave. Dorothy certainly was exasperatingly trying. But there was worse to follow--they were waylaid on the road; this time by Mr Jim Vernon, who escorted a masculine acquaintance, the tale of whose years was eloquently suggested by a question which he had addressed to Jim:

"I say, Jim, who's that ripping-looking girl who's with your sister?"

And Jim had responded:

"She's a topper, my boy--a fair topper. But, as I'm in a generous mood, if you'll come along with me I'll do the needful." So they went along together, and they came to Miss Vernon and her friend; and Jim immediately observed, in that free-and-easy way which is popular with latter-day youth: "Awfully glad to see you, Miss Gilbert--frightful blow when I was told you weren't showing. Mr Denman--Miss Gilbert."

Mr Denman acknowledged the introduction with the remark:

"Gilbert!--that name's rather in the air just now. Ever been to Newcaster, Miss Gilbert?"

Jim asked:

"Why Newcaster?"

"Why, old chap, haven't you seen the papers? I expect Miss Gilbert has--there's a lot in them about the doings of Dorothy Gilbert at Newcaster--is there a Dorothy in your family, Miss Gilbert?"

It seemed that Mr Denman was a humorist of Mrs Purchas' type--only more so; with the bump of obtuseness unduly developed. Had he fired a revolver at the girl he could hardly have produced a greater effect; coming after the question which she had just had aimed at her every word he uttered seemed to hit her on a tender spot. Frances could feel her trembling. She flared up in the astonished young gentleman's face.

"Boys, nowadays, are the stupidest and rudest creatures--or else Jim has some most unfortunate specimens of them among his acquaintance."

Before either Mr Denman or her brother could get out a word in excuse or self-defence she was bearing Dorothy Gilbert off as fast as she could induce her to move. In her heart she was fearful lest Dorothy should collapse, or do something undesirable in the way of making a scene upon the lawn; she was only too painfully conscious of how incapable the girl seemed to be to keep herself from shivering; but Dorothy still had sufficient control over herself to be able to reach the house without making of herself a public exhibition. Frances accompanied her up to her room; but at the door the girl said, speaking with an effort which it was painful to witness:

"Leave me--please do--do leave me!"

Frances left her; going downstairs with a fixed determination in her mind.

"Now where's to-day's paper? I don't care--it isn't often that I do look at a newspaper; there's so seldom anything in a newspaper to interest me that it's not generally necessary for dad to forbid me to look at one; but I am going to see what there is in to-day's paper about Dorothy Gilbert of Newcaster."

CHAPTER XVI

THE SPREADING OF THE NEWS

There are still young women who do not read newspapers; and of these Frances Vernon was one. Her father and mother belonged to that lessening section of society to whom the crudities of the modern press do not appeal. Mr Vernon held that even to the pure some things are impure; and that it was not necessary that everyone should become acquainted with all the vice and sin that is in the world. He admitted that this point of view was perhaps old-fashioned; but he was an old-fashioned man and--it was his. He did not like to read the records of the police and the divorce courts; he hoped those who were near and dear to him would not like them either. So not only did he not encourage his children, and especially his daughter, to read the daily papers; but, also, he took care that such journals as he admitted to his house were not those which made a feature of topics of the kind. So it came about that the only journal of that day's issue which Miss Vernon could discover was *The Times*.

The Times is an excellent paper; it does not make a feature of "dreadful tragedies"; but, unless one is acquainted with its methods, it is not a paper in which one can put one's finger on any particular item of news after an instant's search--even with the aid of the index. So far as Miss Vernon was concerned, it never occurred to her to glance at the "Contents of this Day's Paper"; and, possibly, she would have been little benefited if she had. She turned over page after page, advertisements and all, and went up and down column after column, without seeing anything about Dorothy Gilbert of Newcaster; as a result, she jumped at some very hasty, and very unfair, conclusions on the subject of the value of *The Times*.

"Silly old paper! I've heard lots of people say there never is anything in it--and there isn't!"

However, so anxious was she to find what she sought, that she travelled up and down the columns a second time; and, before she had got to the end, was forced to admit that there did seem to be something in *The Times*; even though there might be nothing which would throw light on the subject she had at heart.

"I wonder what paper he saw it in?" The reference was to the youth, Denman. "He said 'papers'; and as Mrs Purchas saw it too, whatever it was, I suppose it was in more than one; but there doesn't seem to be anything about it here. Silly old paper! I wonder what Mrs Purchas meant by talking about Dorothy Gilbert of Newcaster--and why Dorothy looked as if she were going to have a fit when she did." Thus wondering, holding the paper in front of her, her eye was caught by something which she had not observed before--"Racing at Newcaster." "Why, of course, that's where the races are. I thought I'd heard the name before;--how stupid I am! But what can Dorothy have had to do----"

She stopped, her eye caught by something else--a name in a sentence.

"Few men were better known on Newcaster Heath than George Emmett. His tragic fate, on the eve of the meeting at which he had been such a prominent figure for so many years, was the theme of general conversation." Then the writer proceeded to give some facts about George Emmett. Miss Vernon took them in with her eye without at all appreciating their meaning. One fact she did grasp--that the man seemed dead.

"George Emmett?--I am sure her guardian's name was Emmett; but Strathmoira told mother that he'd brought her here because her guardian wasn't very well; but this Emmett's dead, according to the paper--it talks about his 'tragic fate'--I wonder in what way his fate was tragic. It can't be the same man; why did Mrs Purchas associate Dorothy with Newcaster?"

Miss Vernon's glance passed down the racing columns, to be arrested by a paragraph at the foot.

"The historic inn, 'The Bolton Arms,' at Newcaster," it began, "was on Monday night the scene of an occurrence which will probably hold a prominent place in the future annals of the house." Then it proceeded to give, in brief outline, and in the baldest possible language, the story with which we already are familiar. It said that suspicion pointed at the lady by whom Mr Emmett had been accompanied; that her mysterious disappearance was certainly difficult to reconcile with entire innocence; concluding with the pregnant sentence--"The police are offering a reward for Dorothy Gilbert's apprehension." It was on those words that Frances Vernon's eyes fastened. She read the paragraph again and again, reading into it a deeper meaning with each perusal; each time, the part of it which held her, whether she would or would not, was the sentence at the end.

When at last she lowered the paper, such understanding as had come to her had brought bewilderment; although she had the printed words nearly by heart, they were beyond her comprehension. Mr Emmett had been murdered, and Dorothy--her Dorothy!--was suspected of having killed him; was that what it meant? It was impossible--out of the question--absurd. Yet--there were those last words--"The police are offering a reward for Dorothy Gilbert's apprehension." Was that what Mrs Purchas had meant by her reference to Dorothy Gilbert of Newcaster? Was it why Dorothy had behaved so strangely?

As she put to herself these questions, which she dared not answer, it seemed to Frances Vernon that the world had changed all at once; as if, as a child would have put it, something had gone wrong with the works, so that it had suddenly got jarred, and was no longer just as it was a few moments ago. For the first time in her short life she was brought into contact with the tragedy of crime; so that, as it seemed, she had to inhale its atmosphere into her lungs. It is a result of such a training as she had received that, when crime did come to have a personal application, the revelation of the existence of the thing, from the knowledge of which she had been carefully screened, stunned as it never would have done had she been brought up with her eyes wide open. Murder? All she knew of murder she had learnt from the commandments. Her guardian? Dorothy? She could have screamed aloud because of the agony which came to her with the thought that there could be any association between Dorothy's guardian, and Dorothy, and murder.

She stayed there, in a sort of stupor, longer than she knew; and was only roused from it by her mother's coming into the room through the open French window.

"Frances! Where have you been? Do you know that all the people have gone? If Dorothy has been keeping you, you ought not to have let her; you ought to have been there to say good-bye." She perceived that there was something unusual in her daughter's attitude. "Frances! What is the matter with you? Why are you staring at me like that? What is that you have in your hand? *The Times!* Do you mean to say that you have been reading the newspaper and forgetting what you owe to your friends? What will your father say? Frances, speak to me! What is the matter with the girl?"

Frances did speak; or, rather, she tried to speak; seeming to find as much difficulty in producing articulate sounds as Dorothy Gilbert had done a little time before.

"Mother, look--look at the paper!"

She held it out stiffly, as some lay figure might have done. Not unnaturally her mother observed her with surprise.

"Frances, I insist upon your telling me what is the matter with you; why should I look at the paper? You know very well that your father doesn't like you to read newspapers."

Frances said her four words over again:

"Look at the paper!"

"Why do you wish me to do so? What am I to look at?" She took the paper from her daughter's outstretched hand. Frances pointed to a part of it. Mrs Vernon began to read aloud: "'The historic inn, 'The Bolton Arms,' at Newcaster, was on Monday night----' What stuff is this?"

"Go on!"

Mrs Vernon did read on; but to herself. Presently there broke from her what seemed to be an involuntary exclamation; then another; then she lowered the paper, with a face which was almost as white as her daughter's.

"Frances! It's--it's not true!" The girl said nothing; she went on: "Emmett? Wasn't that the name of Dorothy's guardian? Frances! You--you don't think that--that this--means Dorothy?"

"How can I tell? You heard what Mrs Purchas said about Dorothy Gilbert of Newcaster?"

"Did she--do you think--she referred to this? If she did, then--others may have known."

"I believe they did--I believe Mr Denman knew--Jim's friend."

"That boy! Do--do you think--Strathmoira knew?" The girl said nothing. Mother and daughter

were still staring at each other, in silence, when Mr Vernon entered by the same route as his wife had come. Mrs Vernon turned towards him. "Harold, read this in *The Times*; tell me what it means."

Mr Vernon put on his glasses with an air of deliberation for which his wife, in her new state of nervous tension, could almost have shaken him. By the time he had got the glasses to his liking he had lost the place.

"What is it I'm to read? Is it anything remarkable? Show me where it is." She showed him again. "Races? What have I to do with races? Oh, there!--I see!" He read the paragraph conscientiously through; then looked over the top of the paper at his womenfolk. "Well? It's a commonplace and disagreeable story; what special interest is it supposed to have for me? You know I don't care to read about such things. What is there about this that you should thrust it on my attention?"

His mental processes never were of the quickest. On occasions his family had a feeling that his wits needed oiling; they seemed to be moving slower than ever just then. His wife exclaimed:

"Don't you see the names?"

"Names? Emmett?--Emmett? I seem to have heard the name before; now in what connection have I heard it?"

"It's the name of Dorothy's guardian. Harold, read that paragraph again, and then say if nothing about it strikes you as being of interest to you."

Mr Vernon did as he was told. On a second reading it dawned on him what his wife alluded to--dawned on him with a sense of shock.

"God bless my soul! You--you don't mean to say that you for one moment imagine that anything about this painful story refers to Miss Gilbert?--to our Miss Gilbert?--to Frances' Miss Gilbert?"

Before his wife could answer, there came rushing into the room, with that unceremonious haste with which some young men will rush into rooms, his son--excitement writ large all over him; and a paper--which was not *The Times*--in his hand.

"I say, mater!--and dad!--this is a jolly pretty state of things! Have you heard about it?--everybody else has!--it seems we're the only people who haven't! I don't know what Strathmoira's thinking about! I call it pretty thick!"

Agitation made his meaning less clear than he appeared to think.

"James," observed his father, "if you will cease bounding about the room as if you were possessed; and will not bawl; and will be a little less idiomatic, it is possible that your mother and I will get some idea of what it is you are talking about."

"But, dad, Dorothy Gilbert--Miss Gilbert's wanted for murder!"

His meaning was clear enough then.

"Jim!"

His name came from his mother and sister in practically the same instant.

"It's no good you two looking at me like that! there's no getting away from the truth!--look at this!" He pointed to a staring headline which ran across two columns of the paper which he held in front of them: "Where Is Dorothy Gilbert?" "That's a nice thing for me to find glaring at me when I buy an evening paper to look at the cricket! I never felt anything like what I felt when I saw that! Yes, where is she? I can tell you this, there's scarcely a person who was here this afternoon who doesn't know! I expect it's all over the place by now!--at any moment you may have half-a-dozen policemen coming up the drive!"

"Jim, if--if you don't take care what you are saying I'll never speak to you again."

"Now, Frances, it's no use your putting on frills!--you simply don't know what you're talking about. Here's her description--read it for yourself; no one can read it and possibly mistake her. You told me yourself her guardian's name was Emmett; well, he was murdered the night before last--murdered, mind!--read about it yourself! the story's a curdler!--and they say she did it!--I don't say she did it----"

"You'd better not!"

"But they do; and they'll lock her up for it as sure as we are standing here! Anyway you look at it. We've nothing to thank Strathmoira for for getting us mixed up with a thing like this. My hat! I'd like to talk to him!"

"You talk to him! You don't know what you are talking about now! You've not the slightest

right to take it for granted that--that my Dorothy has anything to do with the person in the papers."

"Don't talk stuff and nonsense!--it's you who're talking through your hat!--the whole thing's as plain as a pikestaff; do you suppose I don't wish it wasn't?--that I want us to be dragged into a mess of this sort? Oh yes, it's just the sort of thing I would like! Why, it tells you here how Strathmoira came across her; and how it is that she only knew him as Eric Frazer. He's been cruising about in that van of his--you know, mater, that rotten old caravan of his?"

"It's a rotten old caravan, is it, now? You were anxious enough to 'cruise about' with him in it!"

"I daresay!--never again!--no thank you! When she--or someone--had done for that poor beggar, Emmett, she bolted; she came on him in his van on Newcaster Heath; he gave her shelter for the night."

"Why shouldn't he? He's the most chivalrous of men!"

"All right; who said he wasn't? He seems to have been more chivalrous still next day, when he seems to have nearly killed a chap on his own account."

"My son, you let your tongue run away with you!"

"My dear mater, here it is in black and white! The chap, who seems to be something in the gipsy line, and rejoices in the name of Benjamin Hitchings, overheard her--that's Miss Gilbert--telling him the whole jolly tale--giving herself completely away in fact. Strathmoira--whom the paper calls Frazer--caught him listening, and seems to have as nearly as possible broken his neck for him--you know what a dab he is at those ju-jitsu tricks; I expect he played one of those pretty little capers off on Mr Hitchings. Anyhow, the police are after him as well as her; warrants are out for both of them. No wonder he preferred the middle of the night to dump her at our front door; goodness knows I don't set up to be a prophet, but I should like to know what the betting is that it's a good long time before we see or hear anything more of the Earl of Strathmoira."

"James, are you forgetting that the Earl of Strathmoira is a relative of mine and of your own?"

"That's what makes it too utterly too-too!--and Miss Gilbert is Frances' particular friend! Oh, we're quite in the thick of it!"

"Will you let me see the paper which you say contains that dreadful story?"

"Here it is, mater; you'll find it cheerful reading; there's a lot more to it than I've told you. There's one thing I haven't told you, and that is that unless we're uncommonly careful before very long there'll be warrants out for us."

"James, are you insane?"

"For aiding and abetting, which is what harbouring amounts to! People have been sent to penal servitude for covering a murderer."

A modest tapping was heard; the room door was opened; Parkes, the butler, entering, closed it softly behind him; there was perturbation on his face and in his bearing.

"Excuse me, sir; excuse me, madam; but there's a dreadful kettle of fish in the servants' hall. I felt I had to come to you. Taylor brought in an evening paper to look at the cricket; and in it there's all about the Newcaster murder; and the servants will have it that, from the description in the paper, Miss Gilbert upstairs is the young woman who did it; and I must say myself that the description is surprisingly like. I am very sorry, sir, and madam, and Miss Frances, but they are going on so, and there's even some talk of some of them not staying in the house. According to the paper there's a reward of a hundred pounds offered for her capture; and West, who's talking of getting married, says that if she had the hundred pounds she might get married at once, and that she doesn't see, if anyone is to have it, why it shouldn't be her; and, sir, and madam, and Miss Frances, I don't know what will happen if something isn't done to stop her."

CHAPTER XVII

A FRIEND'S ADVICE

One of those sudden changes had taken place in the weather to which we in England are so

accustomed. With the day the glory had departed. Evening was ushered in by leaden skies. Dorothy became conscious how, all at once, shadows seemed to have gathered. She had no means of telling what the time was; she had never possessed a watch, and in the pink room there was no clock. The regatta seemed over; the garden had emptied; the hum of people's voices, of laughter, which had floated in to her through the open window, had ceased; silence reigned. To her excited fancy there was something ominous in the sudden stillness, the growing darkness. What was going on downstairs? It was odd that they should have left her so long alone--with the ghosts which would press on her even in the sunshine, but which pressed still closer with the advent of the night. Why had she seen nothing, heard nothing, of Frances? The people had gone. Was she forgotten?--or what? It was very hard to sit there waiting, watching, listening. Why did not something happen? She was so unnerved that, of her own volition, she seemed incapable of doing anything. When she was a very small child, whenever there was trouble in the air, if opportunity offered, she would undress herself and get into bed, as if bed were sanctuary. She would have liked to insinuate herself between the sheets then, though it was scarcely night, but she was afraid; and she had a feeling that, for her, the days when bed was sanctuary had gone. Why did not someone come, if it was only to tap at the door and ask how she was?

Someone did tap. The sound was so unexpected that it started her trembling. It was such a curious tap; not at all the firm, pronounced tap Frances might have given, but faint, furtive; almost as if the tapper were anxious not to be heard. Indeed, in the silence which followed, Dorothy was not sure that it was a tap--until it came again, no louder, as if someone touched the panel of the door lightly, with the tip of a single finger. Dorothy vouchsafed no invitation to enter. She did not ask who was there. She felt sure it was not Frances, nor a message from her; it was not the sort of tap which would be given by a bearer of good tidings.

The tap was not repeated. Instead, after an interval, the door was opened, softly, slowly, with about its movement the same furtive something which had characterised the tapping; a few inches, then a pause; a few more inches, another pause; there was an appreciable space of time before it was opened wide enough to permit of a person entering. Then there slipped, rather than came, into the room, a young woman, a servant, of about Dorothy's own age; in appearance her antipodes--short, squat, with a square head and face, high cheek-bones, skin the colour of old port when held up to a strong light. Closing the door as stealthily as she had opened it she tiptoed towards the centre of the room. Twisted half round on her seat, Dorothy had sat and watched her in silence; now, as she approached, she rose from her chair.

"What do you want? Who are you?"

The girl answered, speaking in a husky whisper, as if she feared that the walls had ears:

"Never mind who I am; don't ask me to tell you my name; then, if anyone asks you, you can't tell them--see? You don't want to get me into trouble, do you? Of course you don't." She put a stubby red finger, in which the dirt was engrained, to her lips, with an air of the utmost mystery. "I am a friend, that's who I am; and, placed as you are, that's all you want to know about me, and as a friend I've come to give you a word of advice, which is--bolt!"

"I don't know what you mean! Why--why have you come to me like this? Who has sent you?"

"No one hasn't sent me--not much! Only they've found out all about you in the kitchen; and West, she's the parlourmaid, she's after that hundred pounds."

"Which hundred pounds? What--what do you mean?"

"Mean to say you don't know they've offered a hundred pounds for you?"

"Who--has offered a hundred pounds?"

"Why, over at Newcaster--I suppose it's them police--it generally is the police what offers rewards, isn't it? Mean to say you didn't know there was a reward out for you?"

Dorothy shrank back. A sound came from her lips which might have been "No."

"Why, it's in all the papers; I expect there's thousands looking out for it by now. That's what West says: someone's sure to get it, so it might as well be her. So she went to put her hat on; meaning to start off to them police; and if she didn't leave the key outside her room--so I gave it a turn, and here it is." She produced a door-key from a pocket in her skirt. "And there she is, locked in. Won't she be in a tear when she finds out!" The girl grinned, as if enjoying the mental picture she called up of the parlourmaid's rage when she discovered she was prisoned. "They won't be so eager to let her out, neither; there's none of them loves her. So if you're sharp you ought to get clear off before she's even started after that reward."

Dorothy made no attempt to deny the terrible imputation which the speaker's words conveyed. The thing was so continually present to her own mind that the idea did not occur to her of even pretending not to understand. The question she put tacitly admitted the truth of the whole tale of horror at which the other only remotely hinted.

"Do--do the others know?"

"You mean--the family? I should think by now they do; I know Mr Parkes started off to tell 'em."

"Perhaps--perhaps that's--why no one's been near me.

"I daresay. I shouldn't be surprised if I was the only friend you'd got in the house, truly! The truth is--though, mind you, there's no one in the place so much as guesses at it--the truth is, I have had trouble in my own family, so that gives me a sort of fellow-feeling--I know from bitter experience what them police are; no one sha'n't get into trouble if I can help it, I don't care who it is; so, if you take my advice, off you go as far as ever you can; because it's no use waiting till them police come before you start--not much it's not!"

"Why--why should I go?"

"Why? Well, if you don't know, I don't!--why!"

"Mrs Vernon herself may have sent for the police."

"Of course she may; I expect a hundred pounds is a hundred pounds to her as well as to anybody else."

"Then, if you think so, why shouldn't I let them come and find me here? I'm tired of--of running away--of hiding!"

"Don't be so silly. It makes me feel as if I'd got the rope round my own neck to hear you talk. You don't know what hanging is--I do! My--a relative of mine was hanged, he was; and my mother, she's told me, often and often, that the last three months she was carrying me she used to wake every night feeling that the rope was round her neck, and she used to have to get it off quick for fear it choked her. It happened just before I came--see? And before I was born she used to wonder if I should feel it because she did--and I have; ever since I was a small kid I have; and I shall again to-night. I lay I shall; I shall be as nearly hanged to-night as I can be without being quite. And that's why I say to you, don't be silly--you don't know what it feels like to be hanged." The speaker paused; she would have laid her hand on the other's arm, only Dorothy shrank back, shivering. She noted the action, commenting on it in a fashion of her own. "You needn't be afraid of me, miss; you needn't really. There's no harm about me; not a morsel. I couldn't help what happened, it was before my time; and I can't help feeling like that--can I?" She waited, as if for an answer; when none came she went on: "What I was going to say is--I'm told that Miss Frances is a friend of yours!"

"We--we were at school together."

"Were you now? Well, don't you think that by waiting for the police to take you here you'll be doing her a good turn, or her mother, or her father, nor yet none of them. You did 'em a bad enough turn by coming here at all; you don't want to make it worse, as you would do if the police was to take you in this house. It'll be all about it in the papers--how you was staying here, and how they was friends of yours, and no end; and gentlefolks don't like to have it known that they're friends of such as you; it gives the place a bad name; I shouldn't be surprised if nobody never came near it again--see?"

Dorothy did see. The idea had been in her head from the first; the speaker expressed it in a form which added to its force.

"You're quite right; that's what I've felt all along; I'll go at once."

She moved towards the door, as if with the intention of putting her words into instant execution. The girl caught her by the arm, this time before Dorothy had a chance to prevent her.

"Where are you going? What do you think you're doing?"

"I am going to leave the house. Please--please let go of my arm."

The girl only tightened her grip, until the pressure hurt.

"What, down the stairs and through the front door--is that the way you're going? Why, you might as well stay where you are as do that."

"Which other way can I go? Please--please release my arm; you're hurting me."

The girl paid no heed to her request.

"Why, if you was to go down the stairs someone would be sure to see you, and as likely as not they'd stop you; it isn't many as would throw away a hundred pounds like I'm a-doing. And if they was to let you go out of the house it would be almost the same; if them police was to ask them if they'd seen you they'd be bound to say they had. Cause why? They might get into trouble themselves if they was to say they hadn't; it's not easy to deal with them police in a job like this; you don't know the risk I'm running in acting as your friend. What you want is not to do the family a worse turn than you've done 'em already; so what you've got to do is to get off the place without their knowing anything about it, nor anyone else neither; because, of course, I don't

count. Very well, then; the stairs is no good for that, nor yet the front door; the only way's the window." Dorothy thought of the window in that private sitting-room in "The Bolton Arms." She shut her eyes, and shivered. The girl mistook the cause of the other's evident disturbance. "Don't you be afraid, there's no call for you to go shivering; why, I felt you right up my arm. It's no distance from this window to the ground; why, it's nothing of a drop, to say nothing of there being a flower bed, what's pretty nearly as soft as a feather bed, for you to drop upon. If you haven't noticed come here and I'll show you."

She made as if she proposed to drag Dorothy to the window, *nolens volens*, for she still retained her grasp on her arm. But Dorothy stood fast.

"Will you please to take your hand away? I don't like you to hold me. I've already told you that you hurt." The girl looked at her a moment, then withdrew her hand. Dorothy held out her arm. "Look at the marks you have made."

Although in the room it was nearly dark there was light enough to enable them to see the imprints of the other's fingers on Dorothy's white arm.

"Sorry, miss, I'm sure. You must mark easy."

"You are stronger than you think."

"I am strong; I know I am stronger than some; still, I never should have thought that I was hurting you. I was only going to show you that the window's no distance from the ground."

"I'm not afraid of dropping from the window; I am not such a coward as that. Only what am I to do, and where am I to go, when I am down?"

"That's what I'm a-going to tell you. You see if you was to bend down, and keep as close to the hedge as you can, as likely as not you'll get to the water without anyone seeing you; though, of course, that frock you've got on does show up----"

"I can change it; I'd rather."

"No, there ain't no time for you to do that--you've wasted too much time already. You do as I tell you and you won't be seen, not in this light, especially as I expect they're all on the lookout for the police on the other side of the house. When you come to the river bend down again, and go along the bank till you come to where the boat's tied up to the steps. You get into the boat and row yourself across to the other side. The other side of the river's in another county. The police what belongs to this county they can't touch you in another county; so if you can get there you're safe as far as they're concerned; and the family here--Miss Frances and that, you know--they can't be made out to have anything to do with you if you are took in another county--see?"

Dorothy did see; or she thought she did--possibly her grasp of the situation was as clear as the other's exposition. Rejecting the other's offer of assistance she climbed, unaided, on to the sill; and, without the slightest hesitation, dropped on to the bed of flowers which was immediately below. The girl above, as if to assure herself that no harm was done, waited for her to stand up straight; then, as, in accordance with her directions, Dorothy, bent nearly double, began to move quickly along in the shadow of the hedge, towards the river, she withdrew her head; and, as stealthily as she had entered, she passed from the room.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN WHO DID IT

It was darker than it was wont to be at that season of the year. Black, heavy clouds hung low in the heavens. The air was motionless, hot, oppressive. One needed no keen perception to tell that a storm was brewing. As Dorothy gained the river bank, in the distance was the loud muttering of thunder. She stopped to look about her, still keeping well in the shadow of the hedge. Apparently her flight had been unnoticed. It struck her that, if she had liked, she might have gone long ago, and been far away, ere this, without anyone being one penny the wiser; and so have lessened the chance of "the family" being associated with her ill-fame. As she looked back it seemed to her that the house was badly lighted. There was light in one room on the ground floor; with that exception the whole house was in darkness. Surely it was not the Vernon custom to keep the whole house unlighted when the night came on. There were lights in the windows of houses on the other side of the stream, and there were lights on the river. Tinted lights picked

out the outlines of houseboats, making them orgies of colour. Dorothy, who had never seen anything of the sort before, stared at them in amaze, wondering what they were. Small craft, moving here and there, carried Chinese lanterns, slung on cords, which swayed mysteriously in the silent air. In the distance were many lights. The regatta was to be followed by what dwellers by the river call a Venetian Fête: there was to be a procession of illuminated boats, which already was forming afar off. If they wished to keep their procession dry they would be wise to start it soon.

By degrees, as her eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, Dorothy became aware that the river seemed to be alive with boats of all sorts and kinds. She had expected to find it deserted; she was surprised to find that it seemed to be more crowded even than it had been in the daytime. Remembering the servant's recommendation to stoop, so that her figure might not be too clearly visible against the skyline, she made the best of her way to the steps, up which Frances had hurried, out of the boat, when she first saw her on the lawn. For one to whom the place was not familiar, in that light they were not easy to find. She stumbled on them more by chance than anything else. She began, cautiously, to descend them. She could not make out how many there were; and had gone down six when, feeling for the seventh, she touched the surface of the water with the sole of her shoe. Starting back just in time to save herself from stepping into the stream, she sat down, unintentionally, and with more force than was quite pleasant, on one of the steps at her back. The unexpected nearness of the water startled her; she did not know what she had escaped. Had she completed that step she might have gone head foremost into the river. She tried to make out where the boat was of which the servant girl had spoken, and presently could see it dimly. It seemed to be a long way off, how was she to get at it? Wholly unacquainted with riverine methods it did not occur to her to look for the cord by which it was tied, and so draw it towards her. Which was perhaps well; for, though she had never been in a small boat in her life, how she was going to navigate one in the darkness, all alone, was a problem she did not stay to contemplate.

As she still sat on the step of which she had so unwillingly made a seat, dubious, fearful, the whole dark world was lit up by a vivid flash of lightning; and in what seemed to her to be its sudden, unearthly glow she saw, right in front of her, the face of the man who had killed George Emmett; saw it for one astounding moment, with more than normal plainness. Then, as suddenly as it came, it went, blotted out by the returning darkness. Whether she had seen a vision, or been the victim of an optical delusion, she had not a notion. For a moment or two all was still. Then a voice came to her through the blackness.

"Can you tell me whereabouts I shall find Mr Vernon's house?"

It was the voice of the man. As she heard it every muscle in Dorothy's body seemed to be attacked by a sort of tetanus. Whatever doubt she might have had about the face, as to whether or not it was an optical delusion, she had none whatever about the voice. She had heard it too recently--under circumstances of too much import--not to be sure of its identity when she heard it again. In it was a tone which had not been in it when she heard it in that sitting-room in "The Bolton Arms"; none the less was she sure that it was the same voice.

She could not have answered the question if she had tried; she did not try. She sat silent, rigid, waiting for the voice to come again. Presently it came.

"You must forgive me if I startled you, but that flash of lightning revealed you so clearly that I was asking myself if you could have been sent by Providence to help me in a difficulty I am in. I am trying to make out which is the garden of Mr Vernon's house. The directions I received were most explicit; but, in this light, for a stranger, even the most explicit directions are hard to follow. Can you tell me if I have nearly hit it?"

As she listened, Dorothy began to realise that the speaker was in a boat which was within a foot or two of where she was sitting. The boat showed an inclination to move with the stream; he backed it with a gentle movement of his scull. His face was turned towards her; but she only saw it very vaguely. He seemed to be waiting for her to reply; when she continued silent he spoke again.

"Do I make myself clear? It is Mr Vernon's house I am looking for--the Weir House, I believe it is called."

With an effort she managed to speak, her voice sounding strange even to herself.

"Why--why do you want Mr Vernon's house?"

There was a sound which might have been a chuckle; as if the man was tickled, either by the girl's caution or by her curiosity.

"Well, if you must know, I want to pay a call."

"You!"

"Yes, me; why not? Why do you say 'You' with such an accent?"

Although she knew what this man had done she was not afraid of him at all; even alone with

him here in the darkness she was never for an instant conscious of the least alarm. That sensation which had held her rigid had had nothing in common with fear. And, although she could hardly help being surprised at his unexpected sudden neighbourhood, surprise soon passed; her dominant feeling was one of wonder as to what he could want at Mr Vernon's house. Regardless of the hint conveyed by his rejoinder she questioned him again.

"Are--are you a friend of Mr Vernon's?"

"May I ask why you inquire? Unless, indeed, this is the garden of Mr Vernon's house, and you are a friend of his." A thought seemed to strike him. "What an ass I am! Perhaps you're Miss Vernon. In which case, Miss Vernon, pray pardon my stupidity, and let me assure you that, though I am not a friend of Mr Vernon's, nor even an acquaintance, I am given to understand that there is someone in his house whom I am rather anxious to see; and, perhaps, if you are Miss Vernon, you could help me."

"Who is it you wish to see?"

She had neither admitted nor denied that she was the person he had suggested; but he seemed to have taken it for granted that her avoidance of the point was tantamount to an admission.

"The person I wish to see is a lady, a young one, Miss Gilbert--Miss Dorothy Gilbert." The listener's heart stood still; she was overwhelmed by that curious feeling of vertigo to which she seemed to have grown subject of late. Probably the man in the boat misinterpreted her silence; he went on to explain himself further. "I have just been informed, Miss Vernon, that Miss Dorothy Gilbert is a friend of yours, and that, at present, she is a guest of yours; I hope my information is correct."

The girl on the steps found her voice again; at anyrate, in part.

"Do--do you know Miss Gilbert?"

"It may sound odd, considering, but I don't; any more than I know Miss Vernon. But I hope to find an open sesame to her acquaintance in the fact that I did know her father intimately; to all intents and purposes he and I were lifelong friends."

"My father!--you knew my father!"

The girl on the steps stood up. The full strength of her voice had all at once come back. She spoke in tones which might have been audible on the other side of the river. The man in the boat seemed to be as startled by her words, and by her instant change of manner, as she had been by the discovery of his identity. There was a sudden splashing, as if, in his surprise, he had let the blades of his oars drop into the water; then an exclamation, as he woke to the fact that the boat had drifted from its original place. Presently he brought it back.

"Your father?--did you say your father? Then, in that case, I suppose you are Dorothy Gilbert--Harry Gilbert's daughter."

"I am."

"Are you sure. Why did you give me to understand that you were Miss Vernon?"

"I wanted to find out who it was you wanted to see; it was you who said I was Miss Vernon; I didn't. Did you say you knew my father?"

"Rather; no man knew him better. Then if you are Dorothy Gilbert, perhaps it's just as well that I've come upon you in this queer fashion; if you don't mind, I'll step ashore. I suppose this is Mr Vernon's garden?" She told him that it was. "I can't quite make out what kind of landing this is, but if you'll catch hold of the painter, so as to make sure of the boat, I'll do the rest." She did not know what the painter was, but she took the cord which he held out, and kept it till she was able to transfer it to him when he also was standing on the steps by her side.

"The accommodation seems limited down here; suppose we get up higher."

She ascended the steps; he followed; the cord was long enough to permit of his retaining it in his grasp even when he stood on the lawn. The moment they had reached the lawn she fired at him a question.

"What is your name?"

"Arnecliffe--Leonard Arnecliffe."

"Then why did you say it was Gilbert?"

"Gilbert?--I said my name was Gilbert?--What on earth do you mean?"

"To the waiter at 'The Bolton Arms.'"

"To the waiter--what the devil do you know about what I said to the waiter at 'The Bolton Arms'?" She was still; not this time because she could not have spoken, but because words surged up to her lips which she had the greatest difficulty in keeping back. Whether he misconstrued her silence as egregiously this time was not clear. His words, when he spoke again, were odd ones. "I've been looking for you all over Europe, and now that I've found you I'm hanged if I know how to begin what I've got to say." She looked up at him, as he towered above her in the gloom; she not only knew what she wished to say, but how she wished to say it, only she was afraid. "Miss Gilbert, your father and I were friends in quite an exceptional sense."

"Wasn't he like you?"

"In appearance? No; except that we both of us were tallish, and that once he was dark, like me; but when he died his hair was as white as snow. His was a strange story--did you know it?"

"How could I? I scarcely remember having seen him; he never wrote me a letter in his life; I don't think I ever saw my mother; I know nothing about either my father or my mother."

"So I gathered. I've been looking for you in order to tell you all about both; only--luck, and a certain gentleman, has been against me."

"How did you know that I was here?"

"By one of those greatest flukes in the world, which are the commonplaces of existence. I was at a friend's house on the other side of the river when two youngsters came in who said that they had seen a Dorothy Gilbert this afternoon at Mrs Vernon's garden-party; so, on the off-chance of your being my Dorothy Gilbert, I came. I take it that there is no doubt that you are my Dorothy Gilbert."

"I am Dorothy Gilbert of Newcaster."

She uttered the words in a tone of defiance which seemed to startle him. For a moment he was still. When he spoke again his voice was lower.

"That's what I don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"The stories which the papers tell about you."

"I don't know what they may be, but I think it's very possible that I should understand them if you were to tell me what they are."

"But you had no hand in--in what took place at Newcaster."

"Oh yes, I had."

"Miss Gilbert! It's impossible!"

"I saw you do it."

"You saw me----" The man stopped; as if unwilling to complete the sentence; then asked: "What do you mean--by you saw me?"

"I saw--what you did to him."

"Miss Gilbert!"

"It was because--I saw you do it that I ran away; I didn't want them to make me tell them what I'd seen."

"Good God! what--what an extraordinary thing!"

"Yes, you may well call it an extraordinary thing. Dorothy Gilbert, you're my prisoner; I arrest you for murdering George Emmett. And you, my lad, I don't know what your name is, but I arrest you too. You're both of you my prisoners; and, if you take my advice, you won't make any fuss, but you'll just come quietly; and to make sure you'll put these on--there's a bracelet for each of you."

The speaker was a policeman, in unmistakable policeman's clothes. So engrossed had they been in their own affairs that to them it was as if he had sprung out of the ground; but the explanation of his appearance on the scene was sufficiently simple. West, the parlourmaid, having succeeded in releasing herself from the trap in which Dorothy's quick-witted sympathiser had temporarily secured her, had rushed off to the police station the moment she was free; more set than ever on effecting her purpose because of the trick of which she had been made the victim. Not only had she given information at the station-house itself; but on her homeward way she had encountered the individual to whom she was engaged to be married, and who was himself a constable. The hope of hastening her wedding-day by earning the hundred pounds which was offered as a reward was the motive which had caused her to act as informant; but in

what seemed to her to be the fortunate meeting with the object of her affections, she saw an opportunity of enabling him to bring about his own advancement by managing so that he should effect the arrest in person. Explaining her purpose, she induced him to accompany her. As she was leading him to the servants' entrance she saw what she jumped to the conclusion was the dim outline of Dorothy's figure at the end of the lawn. On the instant she started him on the chase. Doing as Dorothy had done, keeping under the shadow of the hedge, taking advantage of their preoccupation, he was on them before either of the pair had suspected his propinquity; and, with a grin, was holding out a pair of handcuffs.

"Now, my lad, your right hand, and, Miss Dorothy Gilbert, your left--sorry to inconvenience you, but business is business."

The speaker, however, was taking too much for granted in supposing that, having surprised his prey, the rest would be perfectly easy; and the way in which he learnt his error probably took him at least as much by surprise as he had taken them. It took but an instant for Dorothy's companion to grasp the situation; and even less for him to decide upon a course of action. As the unsuspecting constable was suggesting, with a grin, that they should hold out their hands to permit of his handcuffing them together, the man took him by the shoulder, whirled him round, and sent him spinning down the steep bank, on the verge of which he had been standing, into the river. Ere the noise of the splash which he had made as he entered the water had died away someone came running towards them across the lawn. It was Frances Vernon. She called out as she came:

"Dorothy! Dorothy! some policemen are at the front door! Oh, Dorothy!"

Nor was Miss Vernon alone. Behind her came another figure, also feminine. It was the indignant and law-respecting West; who, as was immediately made evident, had seen the treatment which had been accorded her lover with feelings which were not too deep for words.

"And there's been a policeman here!--and he's took her prisoner!--and he was the first to do it!--she's his prisoner, that's what she is!--only that great brute shoved him into the river. I saw him do it!--and there he's drowning now for all he cares!--'Gustus! 'Gustus! You great coward, why don't you jump in and pull him out!--he was only doing his duty!--do you want to have him drowned before your eyes? 'Gustus! Is that you, 'Gustus?"

Descending the bank with all possible care, the agitated West got as near to the water's edge as she dared, peering into the murky stream for some signs of the being she loved. There were sounds on the lawn behind them. The man laid his hand on Dorothy's shoulder.

"Down the steps!--into the boat! I don't mean to let them take us like this; there's something which I must say to you first--quick!" How she had got there she scarcely knew; but all at once the girl found herself seated in a small boat, which wobbled portentously as the man followed her into it. "Steady!" she heard him say. Whether he was speaking to himself, to her, or to the boat, she was not sure. "Don't move; keep perfectly still; we shall be all right. Damn the sculls! Where the devil is that rowlock? I've got it!" The boat moved forward; then stopped, with a jar. It seemed they had run into another boat--the presence of which moved her companion to wrath. "Hollo!--who are you?--what the deuce are you doing there? Get out of the way, if you don't want me to run you down!"

A voice replied--a voice which Dorothy knew well:

"Gently! gently! Listen to me! Hug the shore for about two hundred yards and you'll find a cut; go down it and, made fast to the opposite bank, under the trees, you'll find a houseboat. It belongs to old Vernon; it's empty now; go aboard; for the present you'll be safer there than anywhere, I'll see to that; I'll put them off the scent. I'll come as soon as ever I can; wait for me there till I come. Off you go!"

And off they went, just as burly figures began to appear on the edge of the lawn. As they moved, almost noiselessly, through the water, the man asked Dorothy:

"Who was that spoke to us, and talked about a cut, and a houseboat? I couldn't get a proper sight of him. Did you know him?"

"I think," said Dorothy--as if she were not sure--"that it was Mr Frazer."

As if she had not recognised his voice with just as much certainty as she had done her companion's!

CHAPTER XIX

AN INTERLUDE

With sensations which she would not have found it easy to describe, Miss Frances Vernon felt a great hand grip her by the shoulder with a degree of roughness to which she was unaccustomed, and heard a coarse voice exclaim:

"I arrest you! You're my prisoner?" The speaker seemed to be a little short of breath; she realised that he had been running towards her across the lawn; but shortness of breath did not prevent his tightening his grip upon her shoulder until it was all she could do to keep herself from crying out with pain. But she managed to keep still. It dawned on her that she had been mistaken for Dorothy; and that the longer the mistake continued the better start the girl would have. Her captor was joined by someone else--evidently his superior officer. "I've got her, sir--here she is."

The new-comer seemed also to be having some trouble with his breathing apparatus; words came from him in gasps.

"What's--your name--young woman?"

Frances hesitated; then, turning, as far as her captor would permit her to do, she looked at as much of her questioner's face as she could see in the darkness.

"What business is it of yours what my name is? How dare you ask me such a question?"

But the officer was not to be put off like that.

"It's no use your trying that tone with me. I've a right to ask you that question, and I do ask it. Are you Dorothy Gilbert? If you decline to answer I shall conclude that you are, and you're a prisoner."

"You may conclude what you like. While this coward keeps on hurting me, as he is doing now, I'll answer no questions; if he removes his hand from my shoulder I may, but while he continues torturing me I certainly won't."

"Are you hurting her, Jenkins?"

"No, sir; I've just got hold of her tight enough to keep her from getting away."

"Let go of her shoulder! Take her by the arm. Now, young woman, no nonsense. Are you Dorothy Gilbert?"

A voice came from the bank below them; the agitated West had suddenly woke to some consciousness of what was going on behind her.

"Dorothy Gilbert! Who's Dorothy Gilbert? That's not her! You great stupids, that's not her! That's not her!"

West appeared at the top of the steps--if anything, more agitated than ever.

"Who are you?" asked the officer.

"Is that you, Sergeant Batters? Mr Batters, you know very well who I am--I'm Eliza West, that's who I am. It was me who came to the station and told you where Dorothy Gilbert was, and that hundred pounds reward is mine. I've fairly earned it, I have; I call everyone to witness! If you chaps hadn't been such slowcoaches you'd have her safe enough: it's hardly a minute since she went off with another chap. My 'Gustus--his name's Carter, and his number 294--he took her prisoner, she's his lawful prisoner, that's what she is; only the chap she's gone off with he chucked my 'Gustus into the river, and there he is at this moment, drowned for all I know."

West's strident voice rose almost to a wail; but no sooner had she ceased than another voice was heard, coming again from the bank below them.

"Easy, Eliza, easy!--it's not so bad as that! I've got as much water inside me as I care to swallow, and my uniform's about done for; but that's about the worst. Let alone that I can swim, he didn't throw me in so deep; if it hadn't been for the weeds I'd have been ashore before this, only I couldn't speak a word because of the water that had got in my throat." A hatless figure came up the bank, whose owner seemed conscious that, in his then condition, in that light, he might be unrecognisable. "It's me, sergeant--Carter, two, nine, four. I have to report that I arrested the girl, Dorothy Gilbert----"

"That you did, 'Gustus, I saw you do it; and that hundred pounds is mine--fairly earned!"

"Now, Eliza, I'm talking; you mind your own business, and leave that hundred pounds alone. I also arrested the chap who was with her; only, just as I was going to put the handcuffs on the pair of them, he chucked me into the river and that's how it is, sergeant."

Still a third voice joined in the conference; in spite of its easy suavity it was obviously one which was used to command.

"Policemen here? What is the meaning of this?"

The speaker came up the steps, on to the lawn.

"Is this the man," inquired Mr Batters of Mr Carter, "whom you arrested and who assaulted you?"

Mr Carter shook his head.

"No, sergeant, that's not the man; nothing like him."

The new-comer approached.

"Are you a sergeant of police? As Mr Vernon is a relative of mine, I should like to know what you, and your men, are doing on his grounds. I am the Earl of Strathmoira."

"Beg pardon, my lord, but I've come here to arrest the young woman who's wanted for the Newcaster murder, of which perhaps your lordship may have heard."

"Gracious! Are you looking for a person of that description on Mr Vernon's premises?"

"Fact is, my lord, I'm given to understand that she's a friend of the people here, and that she was here hardly two minutes ago. This man says he arrested her, together with a person who appears to have been in collusion with her; whereupon her accomplice threw this man into the river, and got off with her in a boat. If your lordship came by the river they may have passed you; you may have noticed them."

"My good sir, do you suppose that, on a night like this, when a big storm is evidently very close at hand, and one's sole aim is to reach shelter before it comes, that one has nothing better to do than notice strangers who may happen to pass you on the river? There's a flash for you! Why, if it's not my cousin, Miss Vernon. My dear Frances, I was wondering who you were when that flash of lightning kindly showed me; it has grown so dark that I doubt if I ever should have known you without its aid. Pray tell me what these persons are doing here."

Advancing to Frances, he took her hand in his, with a warmth of greeting which she seemed scarcely inclined to reciprocate. She seemed to find his presence not only unexpected, but something else as well; as if in his calm, easy bearing, and soft, plausible speech, she saw something which half-puzzled, half-frightened her. As, as if tongue-tied, she stood before him as he continued to hold her hand, the woman West said, speaking in tones which suggested that she was possessed by an inward excitement which rendered her almost inarticulate:

"Gustus--sergeant--he's diddling you--sure as you're standing there, he's diddling you! Pretending that he don't know anything about Dorothy Gilbert, or what you're here for! Why, he's her special friend!--it was he who brought her here last night. I saw him with her--with my own eyes I saw him! And I tell you something else about him, sergeant: although it's true enough that he's the Earl of Strathmoira, all the same for that his private name is Eric Frazer, and he's wanted as well as her. There's a warrant out against him--I see it in the paper--for half killing that young gipsy on Newcaster Heath, who wanted to give her away to you chaps; and it's through him that she got clean off, and it was he who brought her straight from Newcaster here. So you take him prisoner, sergeant, before he does a bolt like she's done; but, whether you do or whether you don't, I call everyone to witness that I've given you the information, and that hundred pounds is fairly mine--yes, and it's fairly mine twice over!--twice over it's mine!"

By the time she had finished, the woman had raised her voice to a hysteric screech. Plainly the sergeant did not know what to make of her.

"What is the woman talking about? Carter, you seem to understand her better than I do; what's she mean?"

Mr Carter addressed the lady who loved him.

"If you take my tip, Eliza, you won't let us hear so much about the hundred pounds; it's all you can talk about."

"Well!--what else have I got to talk about? If it hadn't been for the hundred pounds, do you think I'd have said a word?--not me! And now, because you policemen are such blockheads, it looks as likely as not that I'm going to be done out of it after all; first you let the girl go, and now you won't take the man who's hand and glove with her; all the lot of you will let him fool you if he likes!--a pack of idiots you policemen are!--you're all the same!"

There was a diversion from the constable who had put his hand on Frances Vernon's shoulder.

"Excuse me, sergeant, but I think I know what she means; I saw about it in the paper, what she says; it's right enough that there is a warrant out for Eric Frazer, according to the paper."

"But I can't act on a mere statement which you say you saw in a paper, which may or may not be true. In the absence of official instructions I can't accept responsibility for what a newspaper says."

The Earl of Strathmoira applauded this explanation of the speaker's point of view.

"Precisely, sergeant; I am glad to find that there is one sensible person present. This woman, who, I fancy, is one of Mr Vernon's servants, is probably not quite right in her head; she is certainly not worthy either of your attention or mine. Come, Frances, this unpleasant scene has upset you; never mind! Let's go up to the house; possibly they'll be able to tell us there what all this pother is about."

West laid her hand on Mr Carter's arm.

"Gustus, don't you let him fool you; don't you let him go--don't you let him! If Mr Batters won't arrest him, you arrest him on your own; you'll be blamed if you don't! You know I'm no fool--what I tell you's gospel truth; he's wanted as much as she is--take him on your own."

The faithful Carter hesitated. Drawing the woman close to him, he looked her steadily in the face; apparently on the strength of what he saw there he made the plunge, moving towards the object of the discussion with the simple statement:

"You're my prisoner, my lord."

The earl eyed him; then laughed.

"Your prisoner, my good man--are you joking?"

"No, my lord, I am not joking, I must ask you to consider yourself under arrest."

"On what charge?"

The woman cried out:

"I charge him, if it comes to that! I charge him with aiding and abetting Dorothy Gilbert to escape, and also with being her accomplice--if you take him to the station, 'Gustus, you'll find that you've done right."

The earl turned to Mr Batters.

"Sergeant, will you be so good as to recommend this man to be careful what he say and does, before he has cause for serious regret."

Instead, however, of doing as he was requested, the sergeant threw in his lot with his subordinate.

"I am sorry, my lord, to subject you to any inconvenience; but I am afraid I must ask you to accompany us to the station till this matter has been cleared up."

"Accompany you to the station! But suppose I decline?"

"I regret, my lord, that I cannot allow you to decline. This matter is more serious than you appear to think. I myself say nothing either one way or the other; but I notice that you have not attempted to deny the statements which have been made against you; and I have no option but to request you to come with me to the station to permit of their being properly gone into."

The earl addressed Mr Carter.

"My man! take care! Let me strongly advise you not to presume to touch me!"

The sergeant interposed.

"If your lordship will give me your word that you will accompany us quietly to the station I, on my side, will undertake that you shall be subjected to no personal indignity; only in so grave a matter we can't take any risks; you must give me your word, my lord. Do you do so?"

"Does he! No, he doesn't. Look out, 'Gustus--he's going to give you the slip."

This was West, in whom the instinct of the huntress seemed to be preternaturally keen. The sergeant exclaimed:

"None of that, my lord! Hold him, Carter!" But the sergeant's warning came too late--to hold his prisoner was more that Carter could do, since, before the warning came, he was already out of his sight. A second time that evening he was to be disappointed of his prey. West was right; his lordship gave him the slip. Running down the bank, he had leapt into the water before they could stop him--indeed, so far were they from stopping him it was all the sergeant and Mr Carter could do to keep themselves from--quite unintentionally--going after him.

CHAPTER XX

THE HOUSEBOAT

The boat hugged the shore as closely as Eric Frazer had advised; being propelled with a skill, and swiftness, considering the difficulties with which he had to contend, which at least showed that the person who had stated that his name was Arnecliffe was engaged in a task with which he was familiar. Presently its progress become slower; the sculler was endeavouring, as best he could, to make out his surroundings.

"Curious how deceptive this light--if you can call it light--is; and the lightning makes it worse. Have you any knowledge of this country?"

"None; I saw it for the first time this morning."

"There seems to be an opening here, which might be a cut, or backwater--I believe it is. We'll try it. Look out! The trees hang over the water, and the branches are low. What is that over there? It's a houseboat; I wonder if it's the one to which your mysterious friend referred. It's dark enough. Do you know what the name of Vernon's houseboat is?" Dorothy knew nothing, and said so. "Anyhow we'll pay a call. If it's the wrong one we can only apologise." He brought the skiff alongside the sombre craft, which seemed to soar above them into the darkness. The girl landed first. "Try that door," he said. "That's it--right in front of you."

She turned the handle.

"It's open," she announced.

"Good! Gross carelessness on somebody's part, to leave a houseboat's front door unlocked, but good for us." Tying up the skiff, he landed also. "Wait a minute: let me go in first, in case there's anyone inside." He passed through the door which she had opened. "Hollo! Anyone here?" None answered. "Seems empty; I think you may come in without running much risk of intruding on somebody's privacy." She went in after him. "I'll strike a match, so that we can see what sort of place it is we're in." He held the flickering flame above his head. "Seems to be a decent sort of apartment--living-room, I presume. If this is his property it strikes me that Mr Vernon is a gentleman who is possessed both of taste and money."

The match went out.

"Hollo! this won't do; we must have some light upon the subject. I can't say to you what I want to say unless I see your face--not comfortably, I can't; and I should like you to see mine as I'm saying it."

"I should like to see it too."

"Should you? Then you shall; there's a hanging lamp in the centre here; we'll see each other by its light. Now we'll pull down the blinds--capital blinds these are; well fitting. If there should be any suspicious characters about, they won't see us through these blinds; they're pretty nearly as good as shutters. Now, Miss Gilbert, with your very kind permission, I should like to see what you look like." By the lamp's glow the man and the girl surveyed each other; she standing very straight, and he stooping a little forward. He smiled; the smile giving his mouth an odd effect of being twisted. "You're like your father."

"Am I? Am I like my mother?"

"No; I don't think you are; not as I remember her."

"Did you know her well?"

"Very; once. But your resemblance to your father's weird. It isn't only features; it's the altogether--the way you have of looking at me--they might be your father's eyes; the way you have of holding yourself--just a little stiffly; the way your head's poised on your neck--as if it wouldn't bend; why, you've even got your father's hands--I noticed it as you pulled down the blind. You're his feminine replica."

"I'm glad of that."

"If he could only have heard you say that, before it was too late, what a difference it would have made! What--what a curious chap he was. If he could only come and see you now, he would

see himself in you; he could not help it; and any lingering doubts he had would have gone for ever."

"Why do you say that? What doubts had he?"

He hesitated; as if he searched for words; then again came that wry smile of his.

"Miss Gilbert, it's not a pretty story I have to tell you; and it may sound uglier than it might be made because, circumstanced as we are, I am hardly in a position to pick and choose my phrases. Time is short; I must get to the end of my tale by the shortest way. I don't know who your mysterious friend who sent us here may be; but if, as he said he was, he is coming here, he may come soon. And since, when he does come, circumstances may arise which will render it difficult for me to communicate with you on confidential matters, it would be well if what I have to say to you were said quickly. So, if my story sounds even less pleasant than it need do, will you forgive me--since time presses?"

"Of course I will forgive you--you know I will."

"Thank you; I believe I do know it. I wondered what sort of person I should find you; but now, I think that, if the Fates had been more propitious, I might have been your friend, as I was your father's." She said nothing, but her lips quivered; something flashed from her eyes to his. "Won't you sit down? Compress it as I may, my story will take some minutes; as I said, it's not a very pretty one; and--you look tired."

"I would rather stand; I couldn't sit still; I find it so hard to sit still. Tell me about my mother."

"Your mother? I'm afraid I haven't much to tell you about your mother; my story is chiefly about your father. You see, there's disappointment number one. I take it that your knowledge of this funny world is not a very wide one; I fancy you don't see much of it in a convent; so what I'm going to tell you may sound very strange--to you; but it isn't: it's quite commonplace. It's a story which will be told over and over again, with variations--and even the variations are not new--until the crack of doom. Your mother and father were very much in love with each other, before they were married, and when they married; but soon after they were married they quarrelled. Not long before you were born they separated, never to meet again."

"Poor mother!"

"Yes; you may well say it--Fortune used her ill. She died in giving you birth."

"Mother!" This time there was no prefix; the superlative was expressed without it. Then she added: "What father must have felt!"

Again the wry smile.

"No doubt, when he heard of your mother's death, he felt many things; but if among them were any feelings of sorrow he kept them hid. He wouldn't go to your mother's funeral; he refused to see you."

"What a wicked man he must have been; I am sorry I am like him."

"There's the tragedy; because, you see, he doubted if you were his child." The girl said nothing; but there came into her face an eloquence which was beyond any form of words. The sight of it seemed to occasion him pain; he went hurrying on: "You were brought up by nurses. So far as I know the only time you ever saw him was when he took you to that Brittany convent, where he left you till the other day."

"And you say he was my father?"

"There again's the tragedy: he was. Your mother wasn't the wisest of women--few people are altogether wise--but she was not the kind of person he, in his haste, thought she was; in that sense, she was a true wife to him. In very truth, and very deed, if ever a child was her father's child, you are his. I never doubted it; not once; and now it is as if the finger of God had written the truth all over you. If he had only seen you, he would have seen God's finger--have known what a foolish man he'd been."

"But why did he never come to see me--or write to me--once?"

"He was, as I have said, a curious man; and having made up his mind finally, though on the most imperfect premises; he would have died rather than unmake it; indeed, he did die. But although, as I have told you, when your mother died he made no pretence at sorrow, her death, the whole tragedy of his marriage, changed the whole aspect of the world for him: he was never the same man again; his whole life was spoiled. He did many foolish things, and very few wise ones--he did nearly all the foolish things a man could do. He lost money; he made it; he lost it again. There were times when he had scarcely a shilling; there were others when he had thousands of pounds. Did he ever send you money?"

"Never; not so much as a franc. I believe that often he didn't pay my bills at the convent; I think that sometimes the Sisters were afraid that he never would pay."

"Those, I apprehend, were the times when he was without a shilling. As years went on, I have a theory that he began to be haunted--haunted by thoughts of what might have been. I believe that he grew to love your mother more and more."

"Love her! When he had treated her like that! What did he understand by love?"

"This is a curious world, and men contain, in themselves, the most singular contradictions. I doubt if he had ever ceased to love her, even when he was most bitter against her; more, I believe that it was because he loved her so much that he was so bitter. Can't you understand how that might be?"

"I think--I think I can."

"It was for love of her he died."

"How--how can that be?"

"It was so. He was an old man before his time. Each year his constitution failed more and more. During one of his periodic attacks of bad health, when his strength was at its lowest ebb, he came upon some papers, of whose very existence, by one of those diabolical mischances which Fortune loves to deal us, he had been ignorant, through all those years. They were some letters of your mother's; and they proved, even to him, what an injustice he had done her. The shock killed him. They found him dead, with her letters in his hand. Had he cared nothing for her he would have been little moved by the discovery of her written words; but his heart had been breaking for years; the revelation of how unjust he had been to her broke it altogether. That is why I say that, for love of her, he died."

"Poor father!"

"Yes; you may well say that also; it was 'poor father' as well as 'poor mother'--life's little ironies! His history was one of the strangest with which I have been personally acquainted. Not the least strange part of it is the fact that, not long before he died, he would persist in embarking in what seemed to me to be some wild-cat speculations, which, by an astounding series of accidents, turned out amazingly well; with the result that, though he had been a needy man for years, at the moment of his death he was actually rich. His will was found written on one side of a sheet of notepaper. It was dated only a few weeks before the end; so that he must have drawn it up as soon as he learnt that a turn of Fortune's wheel had brought him wealth. By it he left every farthing he possessed to you, absolutely, to do with it what you choose. So that--you're an heiress."

The girl's glance had never once left his face; it was as if she had been trying to read on it more than his words conveyed. Now she stared at him with amazement in her eyes.

"But--I don't understand. When Mr Emmett came to the convent he said that my father had not left a penny; that he had died owing him a large sum of money, and that it was only out of charity he paid what the Sisters were owed."

Once more his lips were twisted by that wry smile.

"Mr Emmett? Oh yes, I'm coming to Mr Emmett now; and--there's the rub."

CHAPTER XXI

WHY HE KILLED HIM

Something in the speaker's face, in his voice, his air, prompted the girl to make a suggestion.

"You are tired. Won't you act on the advice which you gave me. Won't you sit down and rest?"

He shook his head.

"I admit I'm tired; I've been tired for quite a while, yet, I can manage to keep on, and, like you, I doubt if I'd be rested by trying to sit still. How the storm has come up; we were lucky to get here in time. I'm afraid it's spoilt the procession of boats; they were forming just as I was starting in search of you. What with the noise the rain makes clattering on the roof--I hope there's nothing on it to spoil; and the wind among the trees, and the rending thunder-claps, I shall soon have to speak louder if I want you to hear me."

"You need not. I shall hear every word you say, even though the noise grows greater."

Throughout they had been standing by the table, which occupied the centre of the cabin, almost within a foot of each other. Her girlish figure erect, and, as he put it, a little stiff; her hands at her sides, her head erect upon her pretty neck, her eyes fixed on his face. He, with his broad shoulders, and a trick of stooping which detracted from his unusual height; his right hand resting on the table, his left used now and then to point his words; his queer face, with its suggestion of whimsical humour blended with what she now saw was a look of pain. The man had appealed to her when, from behind the sheltering draperies, she had seen him first; now he appealed to her still more. Although he was so much the elder, she had an odd feeling that she would like to comfort him. At the moment he appeared to be unconscious of her gaze, but held his head a little on one side, as if he were listening for something, in the hurly-burly of the storm. Then, with a gesture which suggested weariness more than ever, he turned and looked her again in the face, drawing himself, with what seemed to be an effort, a little straighter.

"George Emmett? Oh yes, I was coming to George Emmett." He did not seem to be in any hurry to go on with him; she waiting in silence with what seemed understanding of his mood. When he went on it was more slowly than before; as if his thoughts were hardly in sympathy with his words; as if, indeed, he were deliberately trying to find words which only gave imperfect expression to his thoughts. "George Emmett was not a person whom one would care to offer as a fair example of humanity. It's easy to say that we should speak no ill of the dead; but it's not easy to speak well of George Emmett; and I have to speak of him. His lines ran more or less parallel with mine for a good many years; and I never knew him forget himself sufficiently to do anything of which he had any cause to be proud. Miss Gilbert, he was not a nice man."

"I know he wasn't."

"Then you did know him?"

"Of course I knew him; you know I did."

"Do I? I'm not sure what I know on that point; later, I may come to you for information. At least, it seems, you knew him well enough to be aware that he was not, in all respects, a nice man."

"Indeed! He was like a nightmare to me from the first moment I saw him. As I grew to know him better I don't know if I hated or feared him more."

"You seem to have reproduced your mother's feelings towards George Emmett."

"Did my mother know him?"

"To her sorrow. He chose to think himself in love with her--he did choose, now and then, to think himself in love." Dorothy recalled the fashion of his wooing her; and shuddered. "Because she preferred your father--who, compared to him, was as Hyperion to a satyr--he chose to consider himself aggrieved; and when George Emmett had a grievance he invested it, and drew the interest, and waited for a time when he could realise at a thumping profit. He was a bad friend; but a worse enemy. When your mother declined his advances he promised her that he would make her smart for it; she herself told me of his promise. He kept his word. He spoilt her life, and your father's also."

"But how? You told me just now it was because they quarrelled."

"He was the provocative influence. When your father was a young man he owed George Emmett money; nearly everyone who came in contact with Emmett did owe him money; even your mother. He used his influence with your father to breed in his mind suspicion of your mother; which would not have been an easy thing to do had not your mother, in her hatred of the man, actually gone out of her way to help him. It was a case of two simpletons and a blackguard--they were like putty in his hands. It's a long and a tangled tale; but the end was as I've told you. Emmett's grievance against your mother didn't die with her. It lived on. For years, financially, your father was always more or less in his toils; and Emmett never lost an opportunity of fostering in him the feeling of resentment at what he supposed was your mother's treachery; it was as if someone had been continually dropping an irritant on an open sore; the result was a festering horror. At last, even your father realised that the thing had become past bearing. He did what, if he had been another man, he might have done years before: he strained every nerve--such nerves as he had left--to rid himself of the incubus. And he succeeded. And though, when all was done, he was practically a beggar, his freedom was cheap even at the price which he had paid. The odd thing was that, scarcely was he beggared, when Fortune, in one of her most fantastic moods, tossed wealth into his hands--so that he was a rich man when he died. I was abroad at the time of his death; but, as soon as I heard the news, I hurried home. I found his will; I found his fortune; I found that he had left the whole conduct of affairs in my hands; and, also, for the first time I learned your address. I had never known it before; he was the only person who had known it. I believe it was the only secret he ever kept; and, for keeping it, I find it hard to forgive him even now. Had I only been acquainted with your whereabouts I should have communicated with you, both at regular and irregular intervals. I should have asked you to regard me as a deputy father."

"I could not have done that, ever."

"No; I suppose you couldn't." But he meant one thing; and, in her heart, she meant another. He went on: "So soon as I did know your address I tore off by the very next boat and train to see you. I can give you no idea of what were my feelings of amazement when the good ladies at the convent told me that you had gone."

"But didn't you know that I had gone?"

"Didn't I know that you had gone! Did I know that the heavens had fallen! I have had some curious moments in my life; but I verily believe that the one in which I learnt that you had left the convent with Mr George Emmett was the most singular of them all."

"But had he no right to take me away?"

"Right! That--that--we must not speak ill of the dead, so I will say--that gentleman!"

"But he said he was my guardian."

"So those ladies told me. If the dead have any knowledge of what takes place in this world, I wonder what your father's feelings were when he became informed of his assumption of that delicate office; I should think he nearly jumped out of his grave. Especially as he must have been conscious that the fault was again his own. Emmett was within easy distance of the place at which your father died. He got there before I did; and he gained access to your father's papers. Fortunately he was interrupted before, as was supposed, he had an opportunity to work any material mischief; but not, apparently, before he had obtained at least two pieces of information. I have no doubt that he found out how much money your father had left; obviously, also, your address; and on that information he promptly acted. He never lacked audacity; but when he carried you off in that fashion his courage must surely have been at its highest." For the first time the speaker showed signs of restlessness; beginning to move about the cabin as if constrained to find relief for his feelings in motion of some sort. "The most astounding part of it was, that he had duped those innocent females with a completeness which was bewildering; no one had the dimmest notion where he had gone, with you; he had left no tracks behind him. A man with an unknown motor car, who knows the highways and byways of Europe better than some people know their back gardens, is not always an easy object to trace. I got wind of him again and again; but I believe some occult sense warned him of my pursuit; more than once it was as if he had slipped through my fingers; till at last I could get no news of him at all. It was as if he had vanished into space. So far I had chased him singlehanded; feeling that this was an account which I should like to settle with him singlehanded; but, in the end, I retired, beaten; resolved to employ those resources of civilisation which, hitherto, I had slighted; and, on the very day on which I had finally so resolved, I found him." The man was working himself into a state of excitement which was communicating itself to his listener; as was plain from the strained eagerness with which she was hanging on his every word. "You remember Billson?"

"Oh yes, I remember Billson; I shall not easily forget him."

"I also remembered Billson--luckily. I had been visiting a friend when I saw, outside a tavern door, a motor car, with a chauffeur standing by it whom I seemed to recognise. For a second I hesitated; then I had it; it was Billson, Emmett's chauffeur. At the same instant he recognised me and, scrambling into the car, would have been off if I hadn't stopped him. The fellow had been drinking."

"It seemed to me that he always had."

"Like his master."

"The master used to get more horribly drunk than the man."

"Pleasant society for you to be alone in."

"It wasn't--nice."

The word came from her with a little gasp; which, as he noticed it, seemed to increase Arnecliffe's restlessness.

"I couldn't get anything out of him at first. It was only when I made it quite clear that if he didn't tell me what I wanted to know I should hand him over to the nearest policeman that he began to tell me things, for some of which I could have twisted his neck off his shoulders, then and there, only I refrained. Finally, he informed me that his master's address, for at least that night, was 'The Bolton Arms Hotel,' Newcaster. As to whether or not you were in his company he professed ignorance, and, possibly, he did not know. Within half-an-hour I was being borne as fast as an express could carry me to Newcaster. It was latish in the evening when I got there. When I reached 'The Bolton Arms' they told me Mr Emmett was dining. I said to the waiter that my name was Gilbert. I hardly know why; I had a sort of hazy idea that he would come rushing down to see what Gilbert it could possibly be. Then I called the waiter back, and, scribbling 'A messenger from Harry Gilbert' on a scrap of paper, sent him up with that instead. When Emmett came down he was inclined to bluster, but the house was crowded. Many of those who were there

I fancy knew him, either by sight or reputation. He was quick enough at appreciating the odds on any given event; he saw that here was a case in which bluster wouldn't pay. He took me upstairs to his private sitting-room; we found it empty. I had a notion that finding it empty was a surprise to him. The dinner-table was laid for two; I had a strong feeling that he had expected to find whoever it was he had been dining with still at table; that the discovery of his, or her, absence came upon him with something of a shock. I asked him with whom he had been dining. He said with his wife. 'Your wife!' I cried. He laughed, and said that he was perhaps a little in front of events in speaking of her as his wife; but that she ought to be his wife; and that, if she behaved herself, before long she should be. She came of a bad stock, he added, and his treatment of her entirely depended on her own behaviour. Knowing that he had been tearing about Europe with you; thinking of what Billson had told me; his suggestiveness, his words, his tone, his manner, these things were pretty hard to bear. Oh, I'll go into a court of justice, and admit that I'd have liked to have taken him by the throat and have choked the life out of him then and there. I asked him where you were. He looked me up and down, evidently inquiring of himself how much I knew, and then said that you were in safe-keeping hundreds of miles from Newcaster."

"But I was there, in the room!"

Mr Arnecliffe stared.

"There, in the room? But how could that have been possible?"

She explained. He stared still more.

"Did he know?"

"I couldn't say; it was not easy to tell what he knew. I wondered then, and I've wondered since."

"Then you heard all that was said?"

"I heard, without understanding. You've no idea what a state of mind I was in; I was more than half out of my wits. I don't remember a single word either of you said; you might have been talking in a foreign tongue. I didn't seem to hear your words then. You see, I didn't know who you were; I didn't even know who he was, except that he said he was my guardian; that I seemed wholly at his mercy; and that I was in mortal terror of him. All that you have said about my father, and mother, and everything is strange to me. In that room at 'The Bolton Arms' I was the most ignorant, helpless, friendless, miserable creature in the world!"

"What had taken place between you?"

"He wanted me to marry him; he had wanted to before. He said I should have to marry him, and it seemed to me I should, and I would rather have died."

"You saw what took place, if you didn't hear?"

"Oh yes, I saw; and--and----"

"That was the worst?"

"No, no; that is not what I was going to say; nor was that what I felt. I didn't know who you were; I didn't know what your quarrelling with him was about; yet, I felt that you were my friend."

"By what instinct?"

"I can hardly tell you; I suppose it was an instinct of self-preservation. You see, I was half paralysed with fear; all my remaining senses were bound up in the desire to escape from him--that was the only thing for which I cared--to escape."

"Then you did not hear what was the actual provocation?"

"No; I think I heard you say he was a thief; but I am not sure; even that may have been only in imagination."

"I did say he was a thief. He was trying to steal your money; he had stolen you; he had stolen many things in his time; he was a thief many times over. But I said more than that." He paused; again his mouth was twisted by that whimsical smile. "All these things which I am saying to you I should not say--at least, in such a shape--were it not that, placed as I am, I must take the fullest advantage of the only opportunity which is ever likely to offer. You and I are meeting for the first time and the last; we shall never see each other again."

"Why?"

Again the pause, and the smile.

"In courts of justice, out of England, sentimental reasons sometimes prevail; but, in England, no. The stronger the motive, the greater the crime. As when you and I bid each other, presently,

good-bye I shall entrust myself to the safe-keeping of our excellent police, it is not unlikely that, in the book which contains my story, the last page is practically finished, and that the colophon is all that remains to be added." She was still; but not with the stillness which signifies acquiescence. He went on: "I say this in order that you may understand why it is that I think it desirable that you should be placed in possession of certain facts which you ought to know; even though I may have to do it with what seems brutal brusqueness. That, also, is why I'm anxious to take advantage of the only chance which I am ever likely to have to assure you that I did not do what I did without what seemed to me then, and seems to me still, to be sufficient provocation. He made a certain definite, hideous statement regarding your mother, and regarding you; and when I warned him to be careful, and withdraw it, he said that, so far from withdrawing it, he would proclaim it publicly wherever he went; and because, knowing the man, I believed that he would do so I killed him."

"I should not have blamed you if you had done so; I think I would have done it myself if I had dared; but--you didn't kill him."

CHAPTER XXII

THE TELEGRAM

Mr Arnecliffe regarded the girl, in silence, for a second or two, as if puzzled; when he did speak it seemed, from the question he put, that he had not grasped her meaning.

"Then, from your post of vantage, you did not see all that occurred?"

"I saw you hit him."

"And with that blow I killed him. If, by your words, you mean that this was a case in which killing was no murder--that's another story. Should I be asked, in the dock, if my intent were homicidal, I doubt if, even with the rope dangling in front of me, I should be able to say that it was not. With a clear conscience I could not confidently assert that the design to kill him did not come into my heart the moment Billson told me that he was at 'The Bolton Arms Hotel.'"

"All the same, you did not kill him."

"You say that, having seen me? I am not afraid to bear the consequences of what I did; I am even not ashamed of what I did. I will certainly not seek salvation by attempting to conceal plain facts."

"But you have your facts all wrong. You know only half the story; I know it all. I doubt if I'm not as much responsible for his death as you are."

"Child, you're dreaming. How can that be, since, when I found him he was alive, and when I left him he was dead?"

"In the first place, I believe I knew, all along, that you were going to kill him; I had, in a way I can't describe, a premonition of what was going to happen."

"So, even from behind your curtain, you perceived, from the first, my homicidal intention--which makes it bad for me."

"But still worse for me; because I might have saved him had I chose; but I didn't choose. My one feeling was that you were going to help me to escape; and--I was glad."

"Is that what you meant when you said that part of the responsibility was yours, you fantastic child?"

"No; I will tell you what I meant, if you will listen--and you will see that I'm not fantastic."

She told him what had happened after he left the sitting-room, having propped George Emmett up in his chair. Of how the supposed dead man had been laid on the table; of how, when she was left alone with him in the darkness, she had heard sounds which unmistakably showed that he was coming back to life; and of how, in his struggles, he had fallen from the table on to the floor. He heard her with growing amazement; interrupting her now and then with exclamations. When she had finished he was silent; as if he were turning over what she had said in his mind; then, looking her very straight in the face, he asked her, with that queer smile of his:

"Are you quite sure that imagination played no part in this strange story; and that you've not told it me in the hope that it might do me a service?"

As she answered him her manner was disdainful.

"In other words, you are asking if I have not deliberately told you what I know to be false. It is no use your pretending that is not what you asked; because, as you're very well aware, that's what your question comes to. It so happens that there's a sequel to what you call my strange story which may perhaps convince even you. That person in the boat who just now advised us to take refuge here was the one who took me from Newcaster to Mrs Vernon's house. It was he who gave me shelter when at last I escaped from 'The Bolton Arms.'"

"Then in that case he's a man I should very much like to know. What is his name?"

"He told me, Eric Frazer; but it seems that, really and truly, he's the Earl of Strathmoira."

She spoke as if she felt that such a style and title only ought to be uttered in tones of reverential awe--but it was not with any show of reverence that he heard it.

"Strathmoira? I know something of the man. He's an eccentric."

"Pray what do you mean by that?"

This sterner manner suggested something very like indignation; as if she resented what she suspected might be an imputation. He laughed at her.

"I assure you that I mean nothing to his disadvantage; only that he's a person who has ideas of his own, and who puts them into practice."

"Well, and why shouldn't he? If the ideas are not bad ones?"

"Why shouldn't he--indeed! If more of us followed his example we might be both happier and wiser. But--what's that sequel you were speaking of?"

She eyed him as if she were still in doubt as to whether or not he hinted depreciation of the absent Mr Frazer.

"I'm coming to it, if you'll have a second's patience. Yesterday morning, early, he went into Newcaster, and there he learnt not only that Mr Emmett had fallen from the table to the floor--in fact, and not in my imagination only--but also that it was the fall which had actually killed him, and not your blow at all."

"How came Strathmoira to discuss the subject with you?"

"He knew all; and I told him everything."

"Wasn't that rather a risky thing to do?"

"I didn't tell him anything till he had found out for himself all that I had to tell. Besides, are you hinting that he might have betrayed me? You say you know something of him; you can't know much! So far from betraying me he nearly got himself into the most frightful trouble through trying to keep me what he thought safe. I don't know what he wouldn't have done rather than let any what he would have called harm come to me. It frightens me when I think of it now."

"Lucky man!"

"I don't know why you say that. It seems to me that he was very unlucky ever to have come across me--I bring ill-luck to everyone! It is I who am lucky altogether beyond anything I deserve. However, I didn't mean to discuss Mr Frazer--I mean the Earl of Strathmoira--it seems such an extraordinary thing that an actual earl should have done all that he did for me."

"It does!"

"Yes, it does! I don't know what you mean, but it is an extraordinary thing! You can laugh at me."

"But I wasn't!"

"You were very nearly--however, I don't care. I was about to say that the point is that you can see for yourself that, since it was the fall from the table which was the cause of Mr Emmett's death, it's quite plain that, as I said, you didn't kill him."

"Miss Gilbert, you would make an excellent lawyer."

"You are laughing at me again. Pray why now?"

"I assure you that I am not doing so in any opprobrious sense. Only, while I quite see your point, it seems to me that it's one rather for lawyers than for a plain man."

"Why? It is a plain statement of a plain fact!"

"Still, the fact remains--doesn't it?--that if it had not been for the blow I struck him he would not have died?"

"It doesn't follow; if they hadn't put him on the table he might have been alive now."

"Who might have been alive now? Excuse me if I startle you; but you were so interested in each other's conversation that, in the din of this orchestral display with which the elements are favouring us, my modest knocking went unnoticed. I knocked even twice; then, as I was a little damp, I thought it possible that you might forgive me if I came in out of the wet."

The speaker was the *soi-disant* Eric Frazer, whose tapping, in the heat of their discussion, had gone unnoticed. Not alone was he, as he put it, a little damp; he was obviously soaking wet. His clothes stuck to him as if they were glued to his skin; looking the more remarkable because, originally, they had been very nice clothes indeed--the cherished productions of a fashionable tailor. His hair and moustache were plastered to his head and face. Water trickled from him in rivulets on to the pretty carpet which covered the cabin floor. At sight of the spectacle which he presented Dorothy gave a cry of dismay.

"Oh, what has happened?"

The new-comer looked at her with that twinkle in his eyes which she had already found it so difficult to meet. In spite of the singularity of his appearance, his manner was as imperturbable as ever.

"My dear Miss Gilbert, the greatest joke. I have always wondered what it would feel like to swim in your best Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes, and now I've had such a chance of finding out. Only you can take it from me that, in the water, patent-leather buttoned boots are a mistake. I had to take mine off. And as I'm not quite sure where I left them, I must beg you to forgive me if, for the moment, my feet are only concealed from your sight by socks. May I ask you to do me the honour of making me known to this gentleman, and this gentleman to me."

Dorothy looked as if she did not know what to make of him; one had a notion that she had not once known what to make of him, since the moment of their first meeting.

"But you--you look as if you had been nearly drowned."

"Not at all; merely moistened. Between ourselves, I am not sure whether, on a night like this, it is drier in the river, or out of it. What did you say was this gentleman's name?"

"This is Mr Arnecliffe."

"And I am the Earl of Strathmoira. May I take it, Mr Arnecliffe, that you are an old friend of Miss Gilbert's?"

"I am an old friend of her father's; and I should have hoped, if time had permitted, to have become also a friend of his daughter's; but--time doesn't permit."

"Doesn't it? Is that so? Why doesn't time permit?"

Dorothy burst out, with sudden warmth: "I wish you wouldn't talk like that! I wish you wouldn't!"

Strathmoira glanced from one to the other. "If Miss Gilbert wishes you wouldn't talk like that, why do you, Mr Arnecliffe? And what might be the meaning of your cryptic observation, anyhow?"

"Referring to what I see the papers speak of as 'the Newcaster tragedy'; Miss Gilbert informs me that you are already acquainted with part of the story; her part. If I supplement it with my part, you will find that my observation at once ceases to be cryptic."

Strathmoira regarded the speaker as if he were endeavouring to find out what kind of man he was; then he shook his head.

"A cryptogram is so often spoilt by the solution; it ceases to be mysterious directly you know what it means; and it generally means so little. With your sanction, Miss Gilbert, I think I will hang my coat over the back of a chair; I fancy it may dry more quickly off me than on. I imagine, Mr Arnecliffe, that your supplement merely amounts to the fact that you're the bottle man."

"Practically; so you will perceive for yourself in what sense time, for me, is limited."

"I'm dull, Mr Arnecliffe, dull. I don't see."

"Then I will try to make myself more explicit. As I propose, presently, to hand myself over to the custody of the police, I am not likely to be able to do much more in the way of making friends."

Dorothy made as if to speak; but the earl stopped her.

"Pardon me, Miss Gilbert, but--may I conduct what promises to be this pleasant little discussion with Mr Arnecliffe? Why, sir, do you show this predilection for the society of the police? And as I am rather disposed to put myself, at the earliest possible moment, into some of the garments which I am hopeful Mr Vernon, or his son, keeps somewhere on the premises, will you be so good as to make your answer brief, and to the point?"

"You know what is the charge against me; why should I run away?--why shouldn't I face it?"

"You take something for granted; because, it so happens, that I don't know there is a charge against you. I know that there is a charge against Miss Gilbert; and also another, rather a droll one, against me."

"Against you!" cried the girl. "What is the charge against you?"

His lordship waved his hand airily.

"My dear Miss Gilbert, the police, on occasion, are such humorists, it is not a matter of the slightest consequence. Rest easy in your mind; I am in danger neither of penal servitude nor of execution. What I wish to explain is, I am not aware that Mr Arnecliffe has been explicitly mentioned in the matter at all; therefore, as I have already remarked, it appears to me that he takes a good deal for granted."

"Doesn't what you have yourself said more than justify the course I propose to pursue?"

"How? Pray how? Do, sir, explain!"

"You admit that a charge of complicity is being made against Miss Gilbert, of which she is entirely innocent."

"I am not entirely innocent! I am not!"

"Ssh, Miss Gilbert, 'ssh! please permit the gentleman to continue; and we'll take the lady's innocence for granted, sir."

"But that's just what you sha'n't do--that's just what I won't have--I know that I'm not innocent!"

"Very good; since the young lady apparently prefers it, we will take her guilt for granted, Mr Arnecliffe. I don't suppose that a little trifle of that sort will seriously affect the line of reasoning you were about to follow. Pray, Miss Gilbert, suffer the gentleman to make his meaning clear--I do so want to get into a suit of somebody else's clothes. Now, Mr Arnecliffe, you were saying?"

"If I go to the nearest policeman, and say, as I intend to do, I am the man who murdered George Emmett, so far as Miss Gilbert is concerned, the matter will be at an end."

"Your reason is based upon more than one fallacy, really. Consider--a warrant has been issued for Miss Gilbert's arrest--good! or, if you prefer it, bad. Do you suppose the police won't execute that warrant, if they get a chance, merely because you say she's innocent? They'll keep her under lock and key until there is some more substantial proof of her innocence than your bare word; if it can be avoided you surely don't wish to subject her to the inconvenience of spending even a few hours in jail. There is another point. From what I can gather she is the only material witness of your guilt; yet she assured me that, though they put her in the witness-box, she wouldn't give evidence against you."

"I wouldn't--I'd die first!"

"You hear? There's a refractory position to take up! From what I have seen of the young lady I shouldn't be surprised if she kept her word, to the extent of defying judge and jury--conceive the pains and penalties which your inconsiderate action would bring down on her devoted head."

"What do you suggest? You know that she has already been arrested once, and that she only escaped----"

"Through your dropping the unfortunate policeman into the river--I know."

"He is hardly likely to let the matter rest where it is in consequence."

"Poor man! he was so wet! I've a sort of idea that I'm beginning to get dry."

"The probability is that the whole countryside is looking out for her at this moment; if she manages to evade pursuit to-night the odds are that she will be taken again in the morning. Do you suggest that I shall stand by, and suffer her to be taken, and keep silent?"

"Mr Arnecliffe, I have not yet touched on the point which tells most against the course of action you are proposing to pursue. You say you are going to tell the first policeman you are so fortunate as to encounter that you're the man who murdered George Emmett. Let me tell you, sir, that in making that statement you will be incurring a very grave responsibility; since it is by no means certain that you did murder George Emmett."

"That's what I said! That's what I told him! That's what I was trying to explain to him when you came in!"

"Am I to understand that you hesitated to give Miss Gilbert's statement the weight it deserved?"

Arnecliffe laughed.

"You surely don't propose to associate yourself with Miss Gilbert in splitting hairs!"

"Splitting hairs, sir? No! That is a process in which I propose to associate myself with no one. If you will have the goodness to permit me to finish what I have to say it will shortly become quite clear that nothing is farther from my mind than any species of equivocation. You will probably have heard that that genius of a local doctor was prepared to certify that the man was dead when he wasn't."

"Of course he heard; I told him--I suppose that's what he calls my hair-splitting."

"Then, Miss Gilbert, in that case he is a singular person; unless we can put it down to mere ignorance of the meaning of his own language--because, sir, the man was not dead. On the contrary, he was so much alive that he contrived, shortly afterwards, to throw himself off a table on to the floor. There, face downwards, on the floor they found him; whereupon, it seems, a second local genius decided that he had been killed by the fall--in spite of which pronouncement, let me assure you, quite between ourselves, that it is by no means sure that he is dead even yet."

"Mr Frazer! I mean----"

What the girl did mean she did not herself seem to be certain. Arnecliffe eyed the speaker as if he were searching for outward and visible signs that he was indulging in some recondite jest; then asked:

"Are you serious?"

"When I was in Newcaster yesterday morning I made all possible inquiries; I was in Newcaster again to-day, and inquired still further. I honestly believe, without being, I think, unduly conceited, that I have nearly as much medical knowledge as the local sawbones. I put two and two together. I returned to town; then, this afternoon, I saw the man who, so far as I know, is the greatest surgeon living. I told him the whole story, as I knew it; and, also, as I suspected it. Without pledging himself in any way, he agreed with me in thinking that it was at least possible that the last diagnosis was as defective as the first--he has gone down to Newcaster to find out. I meant to say nothing till I had heard from him, one way or the other; but my hand has been forced. He has promised to let me have a telegram, directed to Mr Vernon's house, so soon as he himself is certain. It may come at any moment; it may have come already. I would suggest to you, Mr Arnecliffe, that you do nothing, except sit tight, until we know what the contents of that promised telegram are. It was with that idea in my mind that I sent you here; and, before starting to join you, I managed to convey a hint that, if a telegram did arrive for me, it was to be brought to me here, with the least possible delay." As he finished speaking the door was opened--to admit Jim Vernon. "Why," exclaimed Strathmoira, "I shouldn't be surprised if this is the bearer of tidings. Jim, you're kindly welcome to the family houseboat; especially as I'm hopeful that, somewhere on board, you've some sort of a suit which you can lend me."

The new-comer stared at the speaker in undisguised amazement.

"My hat, what a sight you are! Why ever have you been trying to drown yourself, rigged out like that?"

"My dear Jim, suit first; questions afterwards. What is that I see in your hand?"

"You've been and let us in for no end of a jolly nice thing--they're in a pretty state of fluster round at our place--the police seem to have taken the whole house into custody--I'd no end of a job to get away, I can tell you that. I left the mater in hysterics on the couch; the pater waltzing about like a tiger in a fit; and Frances using language hot enough to singe your hair--you can bet your life there's no place like home to-night!"

"I think I asked you what that is you're holding in your hand."

"This? So far as I know it's a telegram; but as it's addressed to you I haven't opened the envelope to inquire, so you can look for yourself."

Jim handed the yellow envelope to Strathmoira, who promptly tore it open, glanced at its contents, then held the slip of pink paper above his head, with the somewhat singular exclamation, which suggested--if it suggested nothing else--that, at last, even his imperturbability was moved:

"What ho, she bumps!"

"Hollo!" observed Jim. "Does she? What's up now?"

"Nothing's up, my dear Jim, nothing whatever." He turned to Arnecliffe and the girl. "This is the telegram which, as I told you, I expected to receive from that famous surgeon. It's brief, and to the point. This is what he says; and it's all he says: 'The dead man is still alive.' As you will notice, he seems to be a man who economises words."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SURGEON AND THE LAWYER

A room in a house not a hundred miles from Newcaster. In it Mr and Mrs Vernon, looking as if they were somewhat in doubt as to what they were doing there; their son, Jim, who was manifestly enjoying himself much more than he had any notion of; their daughter Frances, who, obviously, had no doubt whatever that this was an occasion on which she was a young lady of importance. Also present, Dorothy Gilbert--very white, very anxious, and much prettier than she suspected. Miss Gilbert was Miss Vernon's especial and particular charge--it was that fact which made her conscious that she was a person of importance. She kept quite close to her, as if desirous of giving her the comfort and assurance of her near neighbourhood; sometimes holding her hand, sometimes with her arm about her waist--and in that position a pleasanter picture than those two girls presented it would not be easy to imagine. There also was the Earl of Strathmoira, in a dark grey suit, which became him; and with that calm air of positively graceful assurance, which became him even better. And Mr Leonard Arnecliffe was there, offering such a complete contrast to the handsome earl--carelessly dressed; with about him such an appearance of having been buffeted by life's tempests; and with, on his queer face, that humorous, tender something which made it almost beautiful.

These are the persons of our drama, with whom we already are familiar; but there were still two other persons in that room, whose acquaintance we have yet to make. One was Sir Derwent Dewsnap, whose surgical fame, one hardly need remark, was world-wide. Few men have performed more operations than Derwent Dewsnap; few have done more cutting and carving on the outside and inside of the human frame--and, as a cynic once observed, he looked it. But, while his knowledge and experience of general surgery was great, his skill in dealing with the human cranium, and especially that part we call the brain, it has been stated, was almost superhuman. Nowadays every great surgeon is a specialist, and Dewsnap's speciality was brain. Not, of course, in a mental sense; he was not a mental pathologist at all; but in operations on the brain he was *facile princeps*.

He was shortly going to perform one of the most delicate operations on the cranium which even he had ever undertaken; and these persons were gathered together to receive from him an expression of opinion as to his probabilities of success.

The other person to whom we have yet to be introduced was Plashett--Alexander Plashett; a name which has only to be mentioned in order to conjure up a vision of one of the greatest criminologists who ever made a practical study of the law. What Plashett did not know about crime and criminals was not worth knowing. He had caused so many scoundrels to reap the just reward of their ill-doings, and so many more to get off scot free, that it was actually whispered, where those things are whispered, that on whichever side Plashett was the gentlemen of the jury were. Of course that was not a whisper which was to be taken precisely at the foot of the letter; but it undoubtedly was a fact that counsel would rather be briefed by Plashett than against him.

He was there in that room to represent the interests of certain persons who might find themselves in a very uncomfortable position indeed if there was an unfortunate termination to the operation on which Sir Derwent was so shortly to be engaged. Thus, while no one cared a button for the person on whom the operation was about to be performed, everybody hoped that he would come well out of it--which seeming paradox is explained by the fact that the person in question was Mr George Emmett; and that if he died in Sir Derwent Dewsnap's hands one of the individuals in that room would quite possibly be hanged for him. Therefore, when the Earl of Strathmoira put a question to the great surgeon his reply was anxiously awaited.

"So it seems, Sir Derwent, that, to perpetrate what sounds like a bull, the odds are even?"

Sir Derwent was a precisian even in words, as he immediately made plain.

"Odds, my lord, are never even; nor does a wise surgeon express a positive opinion as to the result of even the simplest operation: so many considerations enter into the matter of which a layman has no idea. As regards the case of Mr Emmett, I have only to mention that the operation

which I am about to attempt has, so far as I am aware, never hitherto been performed to show how worse than futile, and also, how unprofessional, it would be for me to pose as a prophet."

"Hear, hear! Exactly."

This encouragement came from Mr Plashett, to whom the word "unprofessional" apparently appealed. Thus supported, Sir Derwent went on, with that pedagogic air for which he was renowned:

"I should not wish, on such an occasion, and before such an audience, to enter into those details which could only be properly touched on in an operating theatre; but I may remind you that the subject has already been twice given over as dead, and I can assure you that that is not so strange as to the lay mind it may seem. The conditions were all compatible with death: the motionless pulse and heart; the absence of any movement of the lungs, of any signs of respiration. But it so happens that, in the course of my wide experience, once, and only once, I encountered a similar case, and the knowledge I obtained then I was able to apply now. It was the case of a man who, falling from a fourth-floor window on to the pavement below, fractured the cranial bones almost precisely as Mr Emmett's had been fractured." There were those among his auditors who were disposed to feel that, in spite of what he had said, he was entering into details which were a trifle too technical. But Sir Derwent, having warmed to the subject, went heedlessly on: "In that case also the patient was pronounced to be dead, and he was actually placed in his coffin before it was learned that he wasn't. To put it shortly and popularly, pressure on the *medulla oblongata*, caused by contact of a minute fraction of bone with one of the cranial arteries, had produced that extraordinary simulation of death. Had that state of things been discovered in time an operation might have been possible; but it wasn't. The coffin was placed in the hearse, and the hearse was on the road to the cemetery, when one of the undertaker's men, who was walking beside it, heard a sound proceeding from within, which so startled him that the hearse was driven straight back to the house, and the coffin opened, when it was found that its occupant had turned right over on his side, and had killed himself in doing so. There was no mistake about his being dead that time; and it was only dissection which showed what the cause of death had been, and how he might possibly have been saved. So you see how nearly on all fours the two cases are: Emmett pronounced dead, and, as was supposed, really killing himself by a fall off a table. Found, after all, to be alive, I am now about to attempt the operation which might have been attempted in what I will call Case No. 1. Under such circumstances I can hardly be expected to offer a confident prognostication either on its success or failure. I will, however, go so far as to say that, if it fails, Mr Emmett will hardly be any worse off than he is already; while, if it succeeds, he may be restored not only to life, but to long life, and almost, in a degree, to his primal vigour. Beyond that purposely vague statement I must beg you, my lord, not to press me to go."

No one did press him. It was possibly felt that he had said quite enough, without pressure; and that, if they were not heedful of their ways, he might pile horror on to horror. The earl transferred his attention to the lawyer.

"And if Sir Derwent meets with the success which we all anticipate, knowing his superlative skill, how will the matter stand then, Mr Plashett? That is, should George Emmett be restored to the health which he doesn't deserve, what action will the police be able to take against anyone with whom he may have had, say, a little difference of opinion?"

"I should say none. With Emmett dead, or nearly dead, then the police, representing the Crown, are compelled to act. But with Emmett alive and kicking, then the onus lies with him; it is only on his initiative that action can be taken, since it is only on his sworn statement that it can be alleged that an offence has been committed. If a man has his head broken, say, for argument's sake, with a bottle, he may have reasons of his own for not wishing to say anything at all about it; and there is no power vested in the police to make him say anything if he doesn't want to. Emmett dead is to be feared; but alive, not at all--that is, if I apprehend the statements which have been made to me correctly. I know something of the gentleman, and I am quite sure--I am not often sure of anything, but I am quite sure of what I am about to say--I repeat that I am quite sure that he will not be disposed to go into the witness-box and complain to a magistrate, or to a judge, that his head was broken under the circumstances under which it was broken; since, if he were so foolish, the verdict would undoubtedly be--And serve you right!"

CHAPTER XXIV

TIDINGS

There was a garden to that house. Jim Vernon and Dorothy Gilbert were walking side by side down one of the paths. Sir Derwent Dewsnap had gone over to Newcaster, to perform that operation; and Mr Plashett had gone with him, in order that he might be close at hand, and ready for any eventuality. It was an hour which seemed big with fate to Dorothy; and the youth would whistle. She bore with the sound till it could be borne no longer. Had he been an observant youth he would have seen what she was suffering; but observation of that kind was not his strongest point. So at last she was constrained to drop him a hint.

"I should be so much obliged if you wouldn't make that noise."

"Noise? What noise?"

"I suppose you call it whistling."

"Suppose I call it whistling? It is whistling, isn't it?"

"Then, if it is, please don't. If you only knew how I keep thinking of what that man is doing."

"What man?"

"Sir Derwent Dewsnap."

"Isn't he a freak? My hat, I shouldn't care to have him cut chunks off me; it gave me the creeps only to hear him chatter."

"If his hand were to slip; if anything were to happen; if he were to make the least mistake; life would be all over for me; and I'm only just beginning to understand what it means."

"Tuppence!"

She looked at him in righteous indignation.

"Pray what do you mean by saying that?"

"That's about the value of the remark you made; if it's worth as much. It won't make one farthing's worth of difference to you if Dewsnap cuts him into six good-sized pieces. Why should it?"

"You don't understand."

"That's where you're wrong--you don't understand; I do. The only person it might affect is Arnecliffe--and I wouldn't mind getting three months myself if I had a chance of doing what he did."

"I am sorry to hear you talk like this."

"You're not--really? Why, robbing a bank is nothing compared to what Emmett did. He stole a nice, clean, simple little girl; all because of her money--and, all because of her money, he tried to jockey her into marrying him--and all he got for it was a crack on the head with a bottle. If he chooses to croak in consequence that's his fault, nobody else's. Don't you see that yourself?"

"I certainly do not see what you pretend to."

"I say, are you liverish?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Then, take my tip, and don't feign a vice if you haven't got it. Strikes me that you take yourself, and every other jolly thing, too seriously. You mayn't guess it, but I'm betting that in about five years' time you'll be looking back at this episode as if it were a regular rare old spree. People do have so few real adventures nowadays. Look at me! I haven't had one in the whole of my life--and you've had one already!--a tip-topper, too! It's an asset--mind you, it's an asset; something you can put in the bank and draw upon. Why, I consider that little tiddley-bit, when you were behind the curtain, and saw the whole jolly show, was worth no end."

"It only proves that you haven't the least idea what you're talking about."

"That remark only proves that you don't know where you are. Why, you're only--I don't know what your age is."

"Never mind my age."

"Well, there can't be much of it to mind. I believe Frances is older than you, and she's only a kid."

"Mr Vernon----"

"You needn't call me Mr Vernon; you can call me Jim."

"Thank you; I prefer to call you Mr Vernon."

"Very well, Miss Gilbert. I was about to observe, when you interrupted me, that, already, at your age, you're set up with a stock of A1 stories which will last you the rest of your life; you'll only be able to appreciate what that means when you arrive at years of discretion. When you've married--if you ever do marry; and a girl with your money is pretty nearly sure to find someone who'll have her--you'll be able to tell your grandchildren----

"My grandchildren!"

"Or someone else's, it makes no odds--you'll be able to tell them tale after tale, and they'll love you for it; children always love grandmothers who tell them stories; and yours needn't be lies either, because they're such first-class ones in themselves that they'll need no embroidering. What an advantage that will be in your declining years you've no conception, or you'd be more truly grateful for what has lately happened to you than at present you are."

"I think you're the most ridiculous person I ever met; and the rudest. Are all boys like you?"

"Boys? Well! You're younger than I am."

"I shouldn't have thought it possible that anyone could be that."

"My dear Miss Gilbert, in knowledge of the world, compared to you, I'm a grandfather. You ought to treat me with respect."

"Ought I? Do the other boys with whom you associate?"

"Miss Gilbert, you misunderstand the situation. I am at the university; and so are most of the men of my acquaintance."

"Is that so? I didn't know they took them so young."

He looked at her as if he could have said a great deal; but he said nothing--he drew a long breath instead. Presently he began again to whistle. She bore it in silence for a second or two; then she asked innocently:

"Do all the other boys you know make a noise like that, and call it whistling?"

He looked at her again, but he attempted no reply; he continued to whistle. Presently Frances came towards them, down one of the side paths. Dorothy waited for her; Jim strolled on, whistling as he went. When she came to Dorothy, Frances glanced at his back, as he went whistling on.

"Has Jim been entertaining you?"

"Very much--more even than he meant."

"Isn't he droll?"

"Extremely--I never thought anyone could have been so droll."

Frances surveyed her friend with doubt in her eye.

"Have you and he been having a discussion?"

"I don't know that it can be called a discussion; he's so droll. Frances, are all boys like Jim?"

Frances looked round as if she were afraid of eavesdroppers; then said, in lowered tones, as if she were delivering herself of an announcement of the most mysterious and amazing significance:

"Dorothy, I'm beginning to think that they are."

"How odd! and at the convent we used to think that they were such heroes."

"I'm inclined to think that they assume more heroic proportions when they're at a distance."

"But when do they cease to be boys?"

"I'm commencing to wonder. None of Jim's friends are as old as that."

"Your cousin's not a boy."

Frances glanced at Dorothy; but Dorothy happened at that moment to be looking in an entirely different direction, so their glances didn't meet.

"You mean Strathmoira? No, he's a dear."

"What do you mean by 'he's a dear'?"

"Well--hasn't he been a dear to you?"

"If you mean that he's been kind, no one could have been kinder. What would have happened to me if it hadn't been for him I dare not think. I don't know how I ever shall repay him."

"Oh, you'll find it easy, with all that money. Fancy your being a millionairess after all!"

"I'm not a millionairess."

"You've got heaps and heaps of money--because Mr Arnecliffe as good as told me so; and as he really and truly is your guardian he ought to know."

"I suppose your cousin's very rich."

"Lord Strathmoira, my dear, is my mother's cousin; not mine. He's not poor; but then earls, my dear, are not like common people. You need such a deal of money if you want to play the part properly, if you are an earl; and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he could do with more. Is Mr Arnecliffe rich?"

"I haven't a notion."

"There's been a story in his life."

"How do you know?"

"I can see it in his face."

"Oh! How can you see it in his face?"

"Dorothy?"

"Yes."

"How are you going to repay him?"

"He doesn't want repaying."

"Doesn't he?"

"He's not that kind."

"Isn't he? He seems to have done a good deal for your family."

"Oh yes; a good deal."

"I wonder how old he is. He must be pretty old if he was your mother's friend. His hair is turning grey."

"He doesn't seem old to me. I like hair--that shade."

There was silence for some seconds; then Frances said:

"Do you know, Dorothy, I've come to the conclusion that you're going to be a beautiful woman."

"Frances! How can you be so absurd? Please don't be silly!"

"And do you know, at the convent I never even guessed you were going to be pretty. It never dawned on me till that morning when I saw you standing on our lawn. Then I said to myself: 'I do believe that girl's going to be beautiful'; and now I'm sure of it."

"If I'm going to be--I notice you use the future tense--pray what are you now?"

"Oh, I'm pretty; I know exactly what I am; I've no delusions. I once heard mother say to an aunt of mine--she didn't know I heard, but I did--'Frances is the sort of girl to make a good man happy'--and that's exactly what I am: prettiness of my kind runs in the family; Jim's a pretty boy. But you--yours is going to be the kind of beauty men rave about; and I don't call it fair."

"I never imagined you could be so ridiculous. What don't you call fair?"

"That a girl should have both beauty and gold. One or the other, but not both. Think of the quantities of quite respectable girls who have neither. Why, I myself know heaps--plain and penniless. Dorothy, it's tragic for a girl to be like that; you mayn't know it, but it is. Fortune ought to share out her gifts with a more equal hand: she shouldn't give one person so much more than her proper share."

"I'm not in a mood for jesting. Your brother said I was a simple girl."

"He did! How dare he! That Jim!"

"But I assure you I'm not quite simple enough to credit the kind of stuff you're talking. I didn't know you thought I was a positive imbecile."

"Very well. Would you like me to ask Strathmoira what he thinks of your appearance?"

"Frances! How dare you! Do you mean to say that it was because he thought--- I won't say it."

"You needn't. And I don't mean to say that it was because he saw you were going to be beautiful that he showed himself a friend in need, in the first instance. He's the sort of person who would help a lame dog over a stile, no matter how ugly it was. But, having helped you over, he, so to speak, walked across the field with you because--well, because he did think so; and I haven't the slightest doubt that he would be willing to walk round this garden now because he thinks so more than ever. I've heard mother say that Strathmoira is a connoisseur where a woman's concerned. If you'd had freckles and a red nose he'd never have bought you a hat to shade them. My dear Dorothy, it's not the slightest use your being annoyed with me because you're going to be lovely. It's not my fault. For all I've had to do with it you might have been a quite ordinary-looking girl. Still, one is bound to admit that, from the merely ornamental point of view, a lovely girl is more interesting than the other sort; and I've a vague suspicion that some men are of that opinion to quite an appreciable extent. I believe you're like your mother."

"Frances! What makes you think so? Mr Arnecliffe says I'm like my father."

"Yes, I daresay; possibly you are. A child may resemble both its parents. Anyhow, I believe you're like your mother."

"But what makes you think it?"

"Well, for one thing I can see it in Mr Arnecliffe's eyes."

"Frances! What a provoking person you are! How can you possibly see a thing like that in--in anybody's eyes?"

"Perhaps you can't; I can."

"How can you?"

"I've a theory, which amounts to conviction, that Mr Arnecliffe regarded your mother as if she were a goddess, and that he adored her; so, when you happen to be within his line of vision, I can see from the look which comes in his eyes that he thinks you're like her."

"Frances!"

It seemed that that was all Miss Gilbert could say. She stood still; her cheeks crimsoned; for some cause she seemed to have all at once grown tremulous. Miss Vernon went glibly on, as if she saw nothing unusual in her friend's demeanour:

"Of course I may be wrong; I'm not always right; but as I understand, from one or two observations which Mr Arnecliffe has let drop, that your mother was something quite superior to look at, I thought you might care to know that I believe you're like her. You might ask Mr Arnecliffe; I daresay he'd tell you if you did. Here is Mr Arnecliffe; you'll have a chance of asking him at once. And Strathmoira! I shouldn't be surprised if a message has come from Newcaster."

The Earl of Strathmoira and Mr Arnecliffe were walking together down the centre path which led from the house. The two girls stood still to await their coming. The crimson had gone from Dorothy's cheeks as suddenly as it had come--embarrassment had given place to anxiety.

"If--if it's bad news!" she said.

"If I were in your position I don't know what I should call bad news."

"Frances! I--I wish you wouldn't talk like that!"

"But I don't. If he's dead it'll be no loss, the world will be well rid of such a creature; and if he's not dead, it's just as well that he should keep on living, in order that he may be punished as he deserves."

There was no mistaking, from Lord Strathmoira's manner as he came up, what was the nature of the tidings which he brought.

"Dewsnap's done it!" he exclaimed. "He's snatched that unhallowed scoundrel from the grave. The operation's been successful beyond his most sanguine expectations. Five minutes after it was over the patient turned round, and, looking at him, was heard to mutter: 'Who the devil are you?'-which sounds as if George Emmett were himself again. Dewsnap says that there's no reason, if the most elementary precautions are taken, why, so far as that tap on the head is concerned, George Emmett shouldn't live for ever. So the tragedy's a comedy after all." He was looking at Dorothy, but her glances were all for Arnecliffe; who, on his part, seemed to have eyes for nothing and no one but her. When they began to move she fell in, as of course, at Arnecliffe's side; presently, when they came to a bypath, they turned into it together; while Miss Vernon and

Strathmoira went straight on. When they had gone a little way his lordship smiled, as if in the enjoyment of some private jest, and he said: "I congratulate you, Frances, on the taste you have shown in choosing your friend; she is one of whose friendship anyone, under any circumstances, might be proud."

Miss Vernon's tone, as she replied, was demure:

"Thank you very much."

After an interval he continued:

"You're not to tell your mother, and you're not to tell her or anyone; I daresay you'll laugh, but I don't mind telling you that I'd ideas about her myself. They came to me when I saw her standing bareheaded in the morning sunshine, outside my caravan door--from nowhere, there and then. But this fellow's put them out of joint. It seems to me that theirs is a case of Kismet."

They had gone several more steps when she put to him a question which seemed to have very little to do with what he had just been saying:

"You are a good man--aren't you?"

"I don't know why you ask; have you any particular reason for supposing that I am worse than the crowd?"

"No; none at all. Only--I was wondering if it wasn't possible that you might find another girl who could be--trusted to make a good man happy."

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