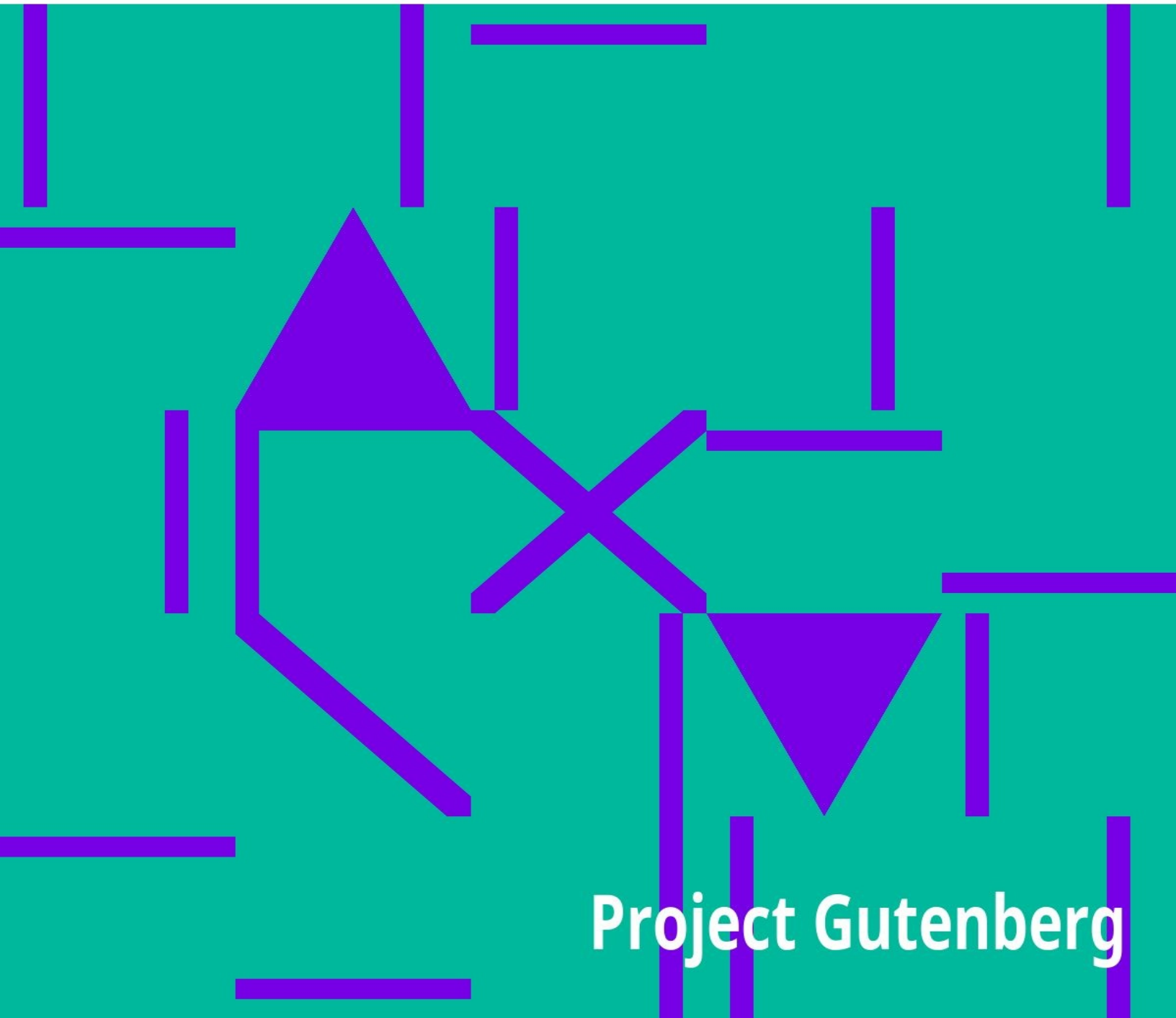
The Heath Hover Mystery

Bertram Mitford



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"The Heath Hover Mystery"

Chapter One.

The Door in the Corner.

John Seward Mervyn lay back in his accustomed armchair, and—looked.

The room was of medium size, partly panelled, and partly hung with dark red papering. It was low ceiled, and the bending beams between the strips of whitewash were almost black. This added to the gloominess of the apartment whether by day or night; and now it was night. To be precise it was the stroke of midnight.

A bright fire glowed and flared in the wide, old-world chimney grate, but even this failed altogether to dispel a certain suggestion of the hauntings of vague, shadowy evil influences that seemed to be in the atmosphere. The lamplight too, was cheerful enough, and yet not. It would have been, anywhere else, but here it seemed that any element of cheerfulness must somehow infallibly miss its way.

The moan of the winter wind surged around the gables of the old house, rising now and then to a most doleful howling, and within, beams and rafters cracked, breaking out loudly in new and unexpected places. Also in a manner somewhat nerve-trying to one who sat there in the ghostly midnight solitude—as this one sat, and he in the full consciousness that for years and years past nobody had been found to inhabit this house even rent free and for the sole consideration of residing within the same. And he was trying the experiment.

John Seward Mervyn was a man who prided himself on being an absolute and cynical sceptic with regard to the supernatural, and he was poor. Dreadful tales were afloat with regard to this particular tenement, but at such he laughed. Nobody had been able to inhabit it even for weeks. Several had made the attempt, allured by the inducement of rent free. They had remained just long enough to begin to congratulate themselves upon such a find—and then—out they had gone, bag and baggage, without so much as a day’s notice. Several in succession; and what they had seen—or heard—somehow or other none had been willing—or able—to disclose. But the present occupant had been in possession

for some months, to the marvel of the neighbourhood.

Now he sat there at dead midnight in absolute solitude. Not a soul was within call; the nearest habitations were two or three labourers' cottages on the further side of a wooded hill. His thoughts were of the past, and they were not pleasant, those of the past seldom are. A couple of pipes were on the table at his elbow, and a tobacco jar—likewise a square whisky bottle, a syphon and a tumbler, but of this he had partaken but little. But somehow he felt his solitude to-night as he had never felt it since he had entered on possession. To-night he felt he would have given something for human companionship in almost any shape. The winter wind howled without, not loud but inexpressibly dismal. And he sat, and—looked.

Looked! At what?

In a corner of the room was a door—a massive door. It had a curious old-world, wrought-iron handle. And at this he was looking—gazing, in fact, more than intently. Was it slowly turning?

He could have sworn that it was. Well, what, then? The door was securely locked, the key was in a very safe place. And the door led nowhere and from nowhere. It led, in fact, to a vault-like underground cellar whose solid walls were totally devoid of outlet. When he had entered on possession he had exhaustively verified this, and having thus satisfied himself had laughed all the startling and shadowy possibilities which popular report ascribed to the place to utter scorn. And yet, now to-night, he could have sworn that the handle of this door was slowly turning.

To anybody less sceptical—less unaffectedly and wholesouledly sceptical—there was that in the conviction which would have set up a blood-chilling, hair-raising effect. The utter loneliness of the place, the midnight sounds, the moaning of the doleful winter wind, the crackings and creakings of the ghostly old house, the dreadful legends that centred round that very vault, of which the movement of this very door handle was a preliminary incident—would have been sufficient to have driven out such into the pitiless winter night rather than remain sitting there—on the watch.

On the watch—for what? Could a spectral hand undo that lock? Then the watcher rubbed his eyes and looked again. Certainly the handle had turned. Its broad iron loop had been horizontal before, now it was at an angle of forty-five. Of that he was as sure as that he was alive and sitting there. And then he remembered that—this was the night.

It doesn't matter what day of the month it was. Manifestations were liable to occur at any time, and sporadically, but there were two nights in the year when—Well he had obtained a vague inkling as to what might be expected, but the last of these two dates had befallen prior to his occupation. This was the second of them within the year. This was the night.

"Now this is all unutterable bosh," Mervyn said to himself. "I'll have another drink anyhow. Then I'll turn in."

He reached for the whisky bottle, and filled up. Yet he was conscious of a feeling as though a chill were running down him from head to foot, notwithstanding that the fire was glowing with a heat that was almost fierce; and with the hissing squirt of the syphon into the tumbler there mingled a sound as though something or somebody were shuffling or groping behind that heavily locked door. He took a long pull at his tumbler, almost emptying it. Then he looked again at the broad iron loop handle. Its straight lower end, which before had stood at an angle of forty five, was now vertical.

His eyes dilated upon the phenomenon. The cold chill that ran through his system seemed to intensify. Mervyn, though by no means a total abstainer was a temperate man—so it was not that. Well, the obvious thing was to go and get the key, and open the door and satisfy himself. But, for the life of him he—could not.

No. He could not. He sat staring more and more wildly with dilated eyes. He was even horribly conscious of a slow pallor creeping over his face. What did it mean? The whole atmosphere of the room seemed charged with some evil influence. An owl hooted melodiously outside. It was answered by another. This seemed in a measure to break the spell, for he loved birds and bird voices, and the hooting of owls in the dark woods overhanging the long lake-like pond behind his dwelling was a sound that

often drew him forth on moonlight nights to stand on the sluice and listen for an hour at a time. There was to him nothing boding or sinister in the voices of the night birds, any more than there was in the jubilant shout of the cuckoo by day, or the twanging of the nightingale.

He looked again. Certainly that door handle was moving, and it could be moved by no mortal hand. Yet to make sure, he found his voice.

“Any one there?” he called, and as he did so he was conscious of a suspicion of a quake in his voice.

For answer only a soft drive of sleet against the curtained window, and through it he could swear that the door handle slowly creaked. The door itself stood shadowy in the gloom of the corner where the light only half reached.

Then something moved. For the life of him the watcher could not repress a start, a thrill of the nerves. But the sound, the movement, did not come from the corner whereon his tense gaze was fixed. There was a little black kitten curled up asleep in an armchair opposite the one in which he was seated—a tiny ball of woolly fluff, which during its short life had been the regular companion of his lonely evenings, and of which he was almost humanly fond. It, now, was uncurling itself with a sudden celerity totally foreign to the usual deliberation of its kind on awakening from sleep. Its round eyes were wide open, and a crescendo fire of shrill growls were proceeding from its little throat. Its back was arched, and its fur all standing up, and—its gaze too, was fixed upon that door in the shadowy corner. Then it spat, retreating further and further till it was against the back of the chair, for all the world as though to repel the onslaught of its natural and hereditary enemy—dog.

“The fact is,” thought Mervyn, noting this, “I have been too much shut up with myself, and the utter, infernal loneliness of life here is eating into my nerves.” But the sensible side of this sceptical reflection was undermined by another—that there are occasions when animals can see what we cannot. And this tiny creature was showing unmistakable and increasing signs of perturbation and alarm.

He spoke to it—softly, caressingly—then went over and picked it up. As

he returned with it to his own chair it struggled violently as though to escape—a thing it had never done—growling the while with redoubled intensity. And his own chair was nearer to that door.

“Now Poogie, don’t be a little fool,” he apostrophised, holding it tighter. But the tiny creature became almost frantic, striking its claws into his hand. He released it, and it darted like lightning into the far corner of the room, where it crouched, still growling.

For all his scepticism the man was conscious of a chill feeling in the region of the spine. He reached out a hand for the square bottle. The hand shook, and glass clinked against glass more than once as he filled out a liberal measure. This he tossed off, and as he glanced again towards the centre of attention the glass fell from his hand on to the table. *The door had opened*.

Had opened—was opening. As yet but a few inches of dense black slit, but it seemed to be gaining in width. Mervyn gazed at it with dilated eyes, and as he did so he realised that the blood had receded from his face, leaving it cold—clammy. What on earth—or beyond the earth—could have opened that door, secured as it was with a solid lock, the key of which was at that moment safe within one of the drawers of his writing table? What on earth—or from beyond the earth—was he going to behold when that door should be opened to its full width? Moved by a natural instinct of material defence, he backed towards the fireplace—still without taking his gaze from that slowly opening door—and bent down as though to seize the poker, but refrained, as the conviction flooded his mind that whatever it might be that he was about to meet certainly no material weapon would be available against it. Again he found his voice.

“Any one there?” he repeated, this time conscious of very much more than a suspicion of a quaver in his voice.

As if in answer, the door noiselessly opened further. The black gap now occupied half the doorway. And then, while he was meditating a frantic rush forward to make one desperate effort at clearing up the mystery whatever it might be, something occurred to divert the awful tensity of apprehension which had about reached its climax.

Through the doleful, long drawn howling of the winter wind and the rattle of sleet, came a cry. A cry—ever so faint—distant—but just audible; a cry, as of distress, of utter, dire, and hopeless extremity—and it came from without. And it was clearly and unmistakably human.

Chapter Two.

The Cry from the Ice.

Every nerve rigid and tense Mervyn listened again. Yes—it was repeated. It echoed forth more distinctly now upon the dismal night, and it came from far up the great pond above. Quickly he rose and threw on a warm cloak, and as quickly reached the front door, turned the key, and went out. Somebody was in imminent peril—and then he remembered. The ice!

He sprang up the path stairway which led to the sluice, and even as he did so the thought flashed through his mind that he had been on the eve of falling asleep in his chair when the phenomenon of the door handle had befallen to start him wide awake. No more thought however did he give to this, as he reached the level of the sluice and looked out.

The long triangle of the pond narrowing away between its overhanging woods, shone in the moonlight a gleaming sheet of ice, whose silver surface the drive of sleet was already whitening, and the firs in the dark woods which flowed down the banks were scintillating with hoarfrost. Now again, from far up that long gleaming triangle, came the raucous, agonised appeal for aid, this time quite distinctly audible.

“Some one’s got stuck there in the ice,” said Mervyn to himself. “But what the devil is he doing there at this time of night? Some poacher I suppose. Well, poaching isn’t a capital crime.” And raising his voice he answered the shout with a vigorous and reassuring halloo.

The sleet had suddenly ceased, and the clouds parting somewhat, showed glimpses of a rushing moon. Far up the frozen surface a dark interruption was just discernible. Here it was that the ice had parted, and from here now came a responsive, but weakening shout of hopeless human extremity.

“Keep up—keep up,” bellowed Mervyn through his hands. “I’m coming.”

He did not stop to think, he did his thinking while he moved. He went

quickly down the sluice path to his house, all superstitious midnight imaginings thrown to the winds. To have started straight for the spot would have been to render no earthly service to the submerged man. He would have been powerless for anything save to stand on the bank and encourage him drowning, wherefore the additional few minutes sacrificed to returning to the house and procuring a ladder might mean the difference in any case between life and death.

The ladder was not found quite so easily as he had reckoned on, and when found, it proved a trifle heavier than he had expected. In spite of the biting cold he was streaming with perspiration by the time he had dragged it up the steep path to the level of the sluice again, and by the time he had brought it to the gate which opened into the path through the wood which skirted the length of the long triangle of ice he was wondering if he could get any further with it. But he sent forth a loud, encouraging shout, and without waiting for an answer, held on his way.

Fortunately every inch of the latter was known to him, and shafts of moonlight, darting through the leafless wood aided him appreciably. Still the way seemed interminable, and his progress, weighted as it was, was perforce slow. He knew exactly where to find the spot, and, lo—there it was.

“Are you there?” he cried, parting some elder stems, to reach the edge, and thrusting out the ladder along the smooth, shining surface. No answer came, but in the glint of moonlight he could see the shattered, heaving ice slabs, and wedged in between these, supported by both arms extended, he made out the head and shoulders of a man.

The latter, obviously, was not more than half conscious, indeed it was little short of a miracle that he had not, in a state of relaxed muscular power, lost all hold and slid down to his frozen death in the black water. Obviously, too, he was in a state of collapse, and incapable of helping himself. The helping would all devolve upon his would-be rescuer. The latter, in cold blood, would not in the least have relished the job.

It is curious how the glow of a life-saving attempt will warm the coldest blood. John Seward Mervyn was a complete and genuine cynic; yet to effect the rescue of this totally unknown stranger, and that at great peril to

himself, here in the biting freezing midnight, seemed to him at that moment the one thing worth living for.

At great peril to himself. Yes, for he knew the water here to be a matter of four fathoms in depth—it might as well have been four hundred for the result would be the same. It was likely enough that in attempting single-handed to get the stranger out he would share the stranger's fate.

The ice cracked and bent as he pushed out the ladder along its surface; and cautiously, and lying flat in order to distribute his weight, made his way along it. Then it broke, with a glass-like splintering, and jets of water spurted through. Then the moon was again obscured, and a wild drive of sleet whirled down.

"Here, buck up, man, and lay hold of the ladder," he panted, having attained within grasp of his objective. The latter, whose staring eyes and blue lips showed the very last stage of exhaustion, made a wild attempt to comply, but his hand just missed its grasp, and the supporting ice slabs, loosened by the effort, would have let him through and in another moment would have closed over his head, when his wrist was seized in a tolerably firm grip.

"Now—you're all right," gasped Mervyn. "Grab hold with the other hand, and work your way along the rungs of the ladder. Come on. Buck up."

The nearly drowned, and wholly frozen man seemed to understand, for although powerless for speech he did just what he was told. There was a mingling of splashing and glassy splintering as the ice gave way beneath this double weight, but Mervyn's head was clear, and he distributed his own weight while piloting the other along the half submerged ladder. At last slowly and laboriously, foot by foot, they regained the bank.

"Here. You get outside a great toothful of this," said Mervyn, producing the square whisky bottle which he had shoved hastily into his side pocket with an eye to just such a contingency, and had hurriedly deposited under a tree, when starting to venture upon the ice. "Then we'll sprint as hard as we can for my diggings. Do as I say," he added, sharply, as the other hesitated. "It may mean the difference between life and death."

The stranger, who had seemed to hesitate, now obeyed, and took a

liberal pull at the potent spirit. His rescuer followed his example.

“Here, take another pull,” urged the latter. “Nothing like it, on top of a freezing soak. Go ahead. It can’t hurt you under the circumstances.”

The stranger complied, and the effect was nearly instantaneous. His chattering teeth were stilled, and the awful numbness that held his frame, relaxed, as the generous warmth of the spirit ran through his veins. Still he did not speak. Mervyn eyed him critically.

“Come along,” he said. “My crib’s just handy. Sooner we get there the better, for I’m in as risky a state as you are. Man, but I’m just steaming with perspiration, and a chill upon that on an icy night like this—at my age—no thank you! Here—I’ll give you an arm. You must be clean played out.”

“I am,” said the other, speaking for the first time. But that was all he said. No words of thanks, of explanation. Mervyn passed a tolerably strong arm through that of his guest, and piloted him along the path beneath the trees, athwart whose frosted boughs the moon was networking in fitful strands of light. The ladder he did not trouble his head further about. It would be there in the morning. Two owls, floating over the tree-tops, hooted sepulchrally but melodiously to each other.

“That’s how I heard them when I was in there. They sounded like the voices of devils.”

Mervyn looked at the speaker curiously. They had nearly gained the gate which opened out of the sombre woods on to the sluice. The voice was rather deep, not unpleasing, but strained. Lord! what if a touch of brain fever followed on the strain of the long immersion? What on earth was he going to do with a raving delirious man, in his lonely, haunted abode? thought Mervyn.

“Oh, that’s how they struck you!” he answered, bluffly. “No ‘devil’ about them. They’re jolly beggars and I like to hear them. I dare say, though, when you’re hanging on for dear life in a freezing ice hole at midnight anything strikes you as all distorted—eh? Well, here we are—that’s my crib. Hold up, go easy down this path. It’s really a flight of steps, you know. By the way, as you see, I’m yards below the level of the pond. If

that sluice were to give way it'd sweep me and my shack to Kingdom Come before you could say knife. I shouldn't like to say how many million gallons of water there are in that pond. It's about half a mile long, and fills what is really the bottom of a valley, so you can imagine it's astonishingly deep."

Thus chatting, he had piloted the man he had rescued safely down the staircase-like path and had gained the front door, which had been left half open in his hurried exit. The lamp in the inner room was still burning, and into this he led the stranger.

"Now, peel off all your wet clothes," he went on. "This is the only decent fire in the house—the one in my bedroom has burnt low. But—lose no time about it. I'll get you a couple of rough towels for a glowing rub down—then you'll be none the worse."

Mervyn stirred up the fire and piled on it several great billets. In a moment they were roaring up the chimney. But as he did so his glance quickly sought the mysterious door in the shadowy corner. It was tight shut—moreover the long loop handle was in its normal position—at the horizontal.

"I must have been dreaming," he said to himself, as he went upstairs to rummage out the towels aforesaid, and anything else that his new-found guest would be likely to need. "And yet—if that devilish rum optical delusion hadn't come off—why I should have dozed on comfortably, and never have heard that chump's shout for help. Well I've read of that sort of thing, but here's a first-class case in point."

But at this decision his meditations stopped short, and that uncomfortably. For the dread legends that hung around his lonely abode invariably had it that any manifestations within the same boded ill—were productive of ill—to the witness or witnesses thereof; certainly not good, to any living soul. Yet this manifestation—if manifestation it were—had been directly instrumental in the saving of a human life. And with this came another uncomfortable reflection—to wit, the proverb that if you save anybody's life, he—or she—is bound to do you an injury.

"All bosh," he decided, next minute, as he proceeded to get out a suit of

clothes, in fact a complete outfit, for his guest. Both were tall men, and much of the same build. The things would fit admirably. But this sudden acquisition of human companionship had made all the difference in Mervyn. An imaginative man when alone, he was as hard-headed and matter of fact as could be in the society of his fellows. He did not disguise from himself that the society of this one, whoever he might be, had come right opportunely just now.

“Here you are,” he cried, flinging the bundle of things down on the table. “Get into these while I go and rummage out some supper. You can do with some I expect after your ‘dip.’ But I warn you it’s all cold, and there’s no kitchen fire. There isn’t a soul on the premises but myself.”

The stranger protested that he really required nothing. His voice was rather a pleasing one, with ever so slight a foreign intonation and accent. He had a well-shaped head, straight features, and a short dark beard trimmed to a point. On the whole, rather a striking looking man.

While he was changing Mervyn made several expeditions to the back premises, and by the time these were completed the table looked alluring by reason of the adornment of a cold silverside, half a Stilton cheese—and the usual appurtenances thereto.

“Rough and ready,” declared Mervyn, “but all good of its kind. I thought we could dispense with laying a cloth.”

The other bowed a smiling assent. If his dark eyes flashed round the room in a quick appraising glance when his host was not, looking he evinced no appreciable curiosity otherwise, either by look or speech. The latter, for his part, was equally contained. He detested being cross-questioned himself, consequently forebore, as second nature, to subject other people to that process. If his guest chose to volunteer information about himself he would do so, if not—well, he needn’t.

A renewed whirl of dismal wind round the gables of the house, and a fine clatter of sleet against the windowpanes as they began their meal. The stranger looked up.

“I am fortunate indeed,” he said, “to have fallen upon such hospitality as yours to-night, Mr—?”

“Mervyn,” supplied his host. But hardly had he uttered his own name, than a very strange and unaccountable misgiving struck root within his mind. Was it some long-forgotten brain wave that suggested to him that he had seen this man somewhere or other before—and that under circumstances which would in no way render it desirable that he should see him again? Yet, like a long-forgotten dream which locates us in similar place or circumstances, it was an impression to vanish as completely and as bafflingly as recalled.

“Hark! That is not the wind,” went on the stranger, looking up.

“No, it isn’t,” said Mervyn, on whose ears the sound of a scratching on the windowpane and a plaintive little cry at the same time struck.

He raised the sash, admitting a whirl of icy sleet, also the little black kitten, its fur plentifully powdered with the white particles. It had slipped out of the door when he had started upon his rescue quest, and he had been too much occupied with this and the sequel to give it another thought just then.

“Why, Poogie, you little fool, what did you want to leave a snug fire for at all on a night like this?” he apostrophised as the tiny creature sprang lightly to his shoulder, and sat there purring and rubbing its head against his cheek. He sat down with it at the table, and began feeding it with scraps from his plate. The stranger looked on with a slightly amused smile.

“I see you are a lover of cats, Mr Mervyn,” he remarked.

“Why, rather. They’re such jolly, chummy little beasts. Look at this one,” holding it up. “Isn’t it a picture, with its little tufted ears and round, woolly face?”

But somehow the object of this eulogy did not seem appreciative. It struggled, and half struck its claws into its owner’s hand, which held it up under the armpits. But its said owner realised that its resentment was not directed upon him. It was viewing the stranger with much the same manifestations of disapproval and distrust as when gazing at the weirdly opening door, earlier in the night. And to its owner was borne in the consciousness that it had never displayed hostility towards anybody

before—stranger or not. This, however, he kept to himself. He replaced the kitten on his lap, but even then it seemed restive and uneasy.

“Are you fond of dogs too?” said the other. “I suppose you are, but I didn’t see or hear one when we came in.”

“Yes. But I haven’t got one just now. The fact is this is a difficult place to keep a dog in. They get roaming off into the coverts and get trapped or shot. The last one I had disappeared—suddenly.”

There was a curious hesitation about this explanation. Perhaps the stranger noticed it—perhaps not.

“Now we’ll have a smoke,” said Mervyn, when they had finished, producing a cigar box. “These are pretty well matured—Unless you’d prefer to turn in?”

But the other declared he preferred nothing of the kind. The comfort of this delightful room after the experience he had gone through was idyllic. So Mervyn, by no means averse to this opportunity of conviviality so unexpectedly thrown in his way, fell in, and for upwards of an hour they sat on, before the blazing roaring log-fire, chatting easily, but always on indifferent subjects. And all the time the stranger, while an ideal conversationalist, had vouchsafed no information about himself—not even as to his name.

But when bedtime came he flatly and absolutely refused to avail himself of his host’s bedroom. He could not think of entailing that inconvenience, he declared. Here was a roomy and comfortable couch, and a blazing fire. A couple of pillows and a blanket was all he needed. And Mervyn perforce had to acquiesce. The latter smiled queerly to himself at his own thoughts while doing so. If the mysterious one were a burglar—only he did not look like it—why the most professional of burglars would hardly burgle a man who had just pulled him out of the jaws of death, and—more potent argument still perhaps to the hardened cynic—here was nothing worth burgling.

But—when he was in his own room, and was disposing himself comfortably to sleep, with the little black kitten as usual curled up on his feet outside the counterpane, he reflected complacently that the door of

his room owned a very strong lock, and that a Browning pistol reposed beside his watch under his pillow.

But these precautions—especially in this instance—had nothing to do with burglars or burgling.

Chapter Three.

The House by the Pond.

Heath Hover was a long, two-storeyed house built in the shape of the letter E with the centre bar left out. Nobody knew exactly how it had ever come to be built at all. The property on which it stood had changed hands several times right up to date, and tradition on the subject was obscure. It could never have been intended for a farmstead, if only that it was situated right in the middle of woods, nor were there any traces of yard or outbuildings in the very limited and sloping space immediately behind it. Some were of opinion that it had been built as a dower house to one or other of the succeeding owners of Sotherby Hall, others that it had been a separate demesne altogether.

As we have said, it stood low—the chimneys being below the level of the sluice which regulated the custody of the great mass of water pent within the long triangular pond which was the scene of the midnight incident. It was situated at the open end of the V formed by this and by a sweep of oakwoods on either side, flowing down to the water's edge. In summer it was a delightfully picturesque and inviting retreat, nestling in the heart of its sylvan surroundings, and never failed to catch the attention of the users of the not very good public road which ran along the sluice, whether motorists or cycle riders. In the darker months, when the cloud-murk hung grey and gloomy, and no sound broke the awful stillness of the moist air but that of the dripping woods, why then the impression conveyed to the onlookers was dismal and desolate to the last degree. Then it seemed to live up to its sinister reputation, for in the opinion of the countryside Heath Hover was a very badly haunted house indeed.

Its present occupant awoke the next morning later than usual, and feeling by no means best pleased with himself and the world at large. To begin with he had passed a bad night. Whether it was owing to the excitement of the strange midnight adventure which might so easily have culminated in tragedy, or that he had been wrought up by the weird phenomenon of the opening door—which, try as he would, he could not altogether persuade himself was a sheer optical delusion—certain it was that hour

followed upon hour before sleep would come. When it did it brought with it strange dreams, or rather imaginings. Once he could have sworn that his own bedroom door was opening, then that the mysterious stranger whom he had so opportunely rescued, was standing by his bedside, bending over him with stealthy enquiring gaze; and his fingers had closed round the butt of the deadly weapon which reposed beneath his pillow. But no; there was nothing. The moon tempered the darkness of the room sufficiently to render visible anything moving within the same. Still, when he did doze off there was always that haunting apprehension of some impending peril and something which he had thought buried, and which had suddenly started to life to dog him down and threaten him in this out-of-the-world retreat. And it, somehow or other, was closely connected with his unexpected guest, sleeping peacefully in the room below.

Stay. As to the latter, was he sleeping so peacefully? Moved by an unaccountable impulse Mervyn decided that he would make sure of that, and was in the act of rising with that intent when a sudden wake of drowsiness swept over him, and he fell back and slept hard until morning.

The late sun was just rising, a red ball above the tree-tops. The ground lay shrouded in whiteness, and the dark firs and naked oak boughs were picked out in snow patterns, and the window panes were crusted with the delicate lacework of a hard frost. Mervyn shivered, and wondered apprehensively if he had caught cold in his undertaking of the night. He dressed quickly and went downstairs.

He opened the door noiselessly and looked in. The room was in semi-darkness, for the blinds were still down. His guest was still asleep apparently, for there on the couch he lay, the rug drawn over his head. Noiselessly still, Mervyn closed the door, and went out. Then, through the back kitchen—for he would not open the front door lest the grating of the bolts should disturb the sleeper—he passed into the open air.

The exhilaration of it in a measure braced him. The sun, mounting higher and higher, had emerged from the red ball stage into radiating beams, which touched the frosty particles on ground and tree alike into myriads of faceted diamonds. Mechanically he mounted the staircase-like path which led up to the sluice. The ice lay, a pure white triangle, narrowing away to the distantly converging woods; the break, now frozen over and

newly coated with snow, hardly showing. But to this he took his way.

Heavens! it was a mystery the man had escaped the frozen death—a marvel that he himself should have been aroused just in the very nick of time to rescue him—he now told himself standing on the bank and contemplating the spot in broad daylight. The ladder lay where it had been left, but now frozen fast into the ice. It resisted his efforts to move it. Well, it could stay where it was for the present. When old Joe turned up—by the way, the old rascal was late this morning—they would be able to move it between them, and the ice was thicker for the night's frost, and would bear easily.

He retraced his steps along the woodland path. The leaves crackled crisply under his tread, and hungry blackbirds shot out swiftly from the hollies, uttering alarmed cachinnations. A little red squirrel clawed itself up a tree bole, and squatting in a fork chirked angrily and impudently at him from its place of safety. But as he walked, he was puzzling hard over the strange and sinister impression which the advent of his unknown guest had instilled within his mind. In the cheery and bracing morning light and air, this seemed to strike him as sheer fancy, sheer unreasonable imagining. The man was probably quite all right; his appearance and manner were certainly not unprepossessing. He would persuade him to stay on a few days and relieve his loneliness. Why not? He was becoming altogether too self-centred, as he had told himself the night before.

Thus musing he gained the sluice and looked down at his dwelling. The blinds of the living-room were still down. Clearly his guest was "taking it out," and small blame to him, after his experiences of the night before. At the bottom of the stair path, the unit previously referred to as old Joe came round the end of the house.

Old Joe, surnamed Sayers, was his outdoor male factotum—gardener—though there wasn't much of a garden—make-himself-generally-useful, and so on. Old Judy—otherwise Christian-named Judith—was his indoor and female factotum; cook, general-do-everything there was to be done. Joe Sayers was an ancient rustic, normally towards crisp surliness inclined, except when full of extra ale—and Joe could carry a great deal of extra ale—and then he would wax confidential, not to say friendly. On

him his master now opened.

“Hard morning, Joe?”

“Sure-ly,” came the laconic assent.

“Is the gentleman in the sitting-room awake yet?”

“Gemmun in settin’ room? I see nought o’ he.”

“Well, the blinds are still down. I thought Judy might have disturbed him, not knowing he was here.”

“She’s t’whoäm. Got roomatics. Tarr’ble hard marnin’ t’is.”

This ancient couple only gave their services during the hours of daylight; no consideration on earth would have availed to keep them within the precincts of Heath Hover during those of darkness. They inhabited one of the labourers’ cottages referred to on the other side of the wooded hill and half a mile distant by road.

“Can’t she come to-day then, Joe?”

“Not to-day,” was the answer, with a very decided shake of the head. “May-be not to-marrer neither.”

Mervyn felt vexed. How could he ask the stranger to prolong his stay when there was nobody on the premises to so much as boil a potato. And he had rather reckoned that the other would prolong his stay. In fact he wanted him to, and that, paradoxically, on all fours with that vague, undefinable instinct of apprehension which had been upon him during those sleepless night hours.

“Look up the pond, Joe,” he said. “See that break in the ice, away there, by the two hanging ash trees. Well, I got him out of there in the middle of the night. I had to lug the ladder along to do it—we’ll have to haul it back again presently, by the way. He’d have been drowned but for it.”

“That he would, sure-ly.” Then the intense rustic suspicion of everything and everybody unknown asserted itself—“What be he a doing there—on

the ice—middle of the night? Poachin' may be?" Mervyn laughed.

"No—no. He's no poacher whatever he is?"

"And what might he be? Tell me that," and the old countryman's little eyes blinked with satisfaction over what he considered his own shrewdness.

"Don't know, I didn't ask him and he hasn't told me—yet. It's a bad habit to get into—asking people questions about themselves and their private affairs, Joe. It's a thing I don't do."

The ancient slowly shook his head—pityingly, contemptuously. He thought his master little removed from a fool.

"Folks as gets on the ice, middle of Plane Pond—middle of the night, and don't say nothin' as to how they gets there and what they be after, bean't up to no good. That's what *I* say, muster." And the speaker nodded profoundly.

"You're a rare clever 'un, Joe," and Mervyn laughed banteringly. "Now there'd be no great difficulty in any one, especially a stranger, losing his way in country like this, and that in the teeth of a howling sleet storm. Taking a short cut, you know, and thinking to cross the ice instead of taking all the way round? That needn't prove he was up to no good. Eh?"

But to this the old fellow condescended no reply. He didn't take kindly to banter, slow witted people don't as a rule. He spat on his palms, picked up the handles of the barrow he had come to fetch and moved off with it. His master followed him, chatting desultorily. Three or four pigs in a stye grunted shrilly as the human clement suggested morning aliment. To this was added the cacklings and flutterings of the occupants of a fowl roost, expectant of like solid advantage.

"Mus' Reynolds he bin around sure-ly," chuckled old Joe, looking down on the numerous pad marks of a fox indented in the fresh snow. "Well, well, that there wire cageing's too tough for his milk teeth. He'll ha' gone away wi' an empty belly I rackon."

"That reminds me, Joe, that I could peck a bit myself," laughed Mervyn, turning towards the house. It was getting quite late too, he decided,

looking at his watch. It would do no harm now to awaken his guest.

He passed in through the back, listened a moment, then softly turned the handle of the living-room door. The room was still in semi-darkness. On the couch lay the long, shadowy figure of the stranger.

“Feel like turning out?” said Mervyn genially, but not in so loud a tone as to startle the other. But no answer came. Then stepping to the window, he raised the blind.

The room was now flooded with light—the light of a radiant, cloudless, frosty winter day. Still the recumbent form never moved. Bending over it Mervyn dropped a hand on one shoulder. But—still no response.

With a quick, strange impulse that accelerated his own heartbeats he turned down the blanket and rug, which had been drawn over the head of the sleeper. The latter had removed his coat and waistcoat, otherwise he was fully dressed. But his face wore a half-startled, half-puzzled expression, and the lips were slightly parted—and then, bending down for a closer glance, Mervyn’s countenance became if possible more white—certainly more ghastly—than the one lying there beneath his gaze, as well it might.

For his unknown and unexpected guest, the man whom he had rescued from the frozen death in the black midnight depths of Plane Pond, was now lying there in front of him stone dead.

Chapter Four.

The Pentacle.

Yes—stone dead. There could be no possible mistake about it. Mervyn touched the face. It was icy cold. But how on earth could this have befallen? The man had seemed as well as any one could be when he had bidden him good-night and retired to his own room. Certainly he had appeared none the worse for his immersion. Quite himself after his hearty supper and generous liquid refreshment, he had sat and chatted and smoked in the enjoyment of perfect comfort for an hour or so. The room was still warm, the ashes of the glowing fire not yet dead in the grate. Heavens, what a thing to happen! Well, it had happened, and the next thing was to send Joe with the pony and cart into Clancehurst—incidentally five miles distant—for a doctor.

To that end he moved towards the door. But before he reached it something caused him to turn. Ever so faint a sound had fallen upon his ear. Something had fallen—had fallen from the couch where the dead man lay—had fallen with ever so faint a clink. It lay on the ground—a small object—and it shone. He picked it up—and then as he stood there in the winter sunlight holding it in his fingers, John Seward Mervyn felt the hair upon him rise, and his flesh creep, and his face grow rather more ghastly and livid than that of the dead man lying there. For one dazed moment he stood gazing at the thing, then went over to the mantelpiece and dropped it into one of the queer old vases of quaint ware that stood thereon.

“Good God!” he ejaculated. “That—and now!”

Outside he could hear the movements of his old retainer. The latter had come into the kitchen, which adjoined this room, and could be heard fussing about and grumbling in very audible tones.

“Why, what be it, Mus’ Mervyn?” he exclaimed, startled at the perturbed apparition presented by his master. “Look as if you’d seed a ghoäst, surely.”

“Well, I’ve seen the next thing to it, and that’s a dead man,” was the answer; and even amid his own perturbation, the speaker’s sense of humour could not resist watching the effect the announcement was bound to have upon his ancient servitor. But upon the mind of the stolid countryman the statement had just no effect at all.

“Thass better,” came the almost unconcerned reply. “We’m all bound to die come the day; but them things what goes a-creepin’ about at night, and what you can’t always see, like in this ’ere ’ouse some nights—why they’re a deal wuss. And—who’s the dead ’un, sir?”

“Why the stranger I pulled out of the pond last night. I left him comfortably tucked up on the couch in the room there, and now this morning he’s as dead as a stone.”

“Talking o’ he,” said the countryman, whom the tragical side seemed to impress not in the least. “I bin over to th’ ice to get that ladder out, but it’s that hard froze in, and that heavy I can’t move it. You’ll have to lend a hand, Muster.”

“And a devilish good thing you can’t move it, Joe. Why don’t you see, lying just where it was it’ll furnish a very important item of evidence.”

Now old Joe’s stolidity did undergo a shock. That last word conveyed an unpleasant suggestiveness of the atmosphere of courts, and of the atmosphere of courts the rustic mind stands in holy terror.

“There’ll be an inquess then, a crowner’s inquess?” he said, with sudden awe. “Lor sakes, Mus’ Mervyn they can’t bring in as *we* had to do with it?”

“Of course not, you old juggins. But don’t you see—the first thing they’ll ask was how he got here and where he came from, and all that. Well, the position of the ladder—left exactly where it was, you understand—will confirm my explanation as to how he got here. So it’s devilish important that it should be left there. Now, do you see?”

Joe did see—and saw something else, or thought he did. For now his little rustic cunning suggested to his little rustic mind that his master seemed rather over anxious to supply material for explanation.

“Well, *I* didn’t see the gemmun,” he answered, with a note of sulkiness underlying his tone. “You’ll mind I said so, Mus’ Mervyn. I didn’t see he.”

“No, but you’ve got to now, so come along and look at him. After that you must hitch up the pony and cart, and get along to Clancehurst, and tell Dr Sandys and the Police Inspector to come along here at once. And—look. There are the strange gentleman’s clothes, hanging up on that clothes-horse to dry. I didn’t change mine—wasn’t wet enough.”

The clothes were hung in front of the kitchen fire now roaring and crackling merrily. Joe eyed them with surly disgust. He was becoming more and more imbued with a horrid suspicion that he would be involved in a charge of murdering the stranger—whom as yet he had not even seen—and in the result, duly hanged in Clancehurst gaol; incidentally that edifice was not of sufficient county importance to be used for capital executions, but of this, of course, he was ignorant.

“Well, come along,” said his master, turning. But Joe didn’t move.

“Beggin’ pardon, sur,” he said, “but I’d rather not. I said I didn’t see he, and I don’t want to now.”

“Oh, that’s it is it? Well you’d better. They’ll be asking all sorts of questions—and we are the only two people in the house. You’ll have to give evidence in any case, and you’ll do it all the better for having seen all there is to be seen. So, don’t be a fool. I only want you to see just how the man was when I found him. Of course he won’t be touched or moved or anything until the doctor comes.”

The old man gave way, although reluctantly, and followed his master into the chamber of death.

“Who be he, sur, do you know?” he asked in lowered voice, as he stood gazing, awed, upon the still features. “’E be a middlin’ likely sort of gent, for sure.”

“I know just as much about him as you do, Joe. As I told you this morning—I never ask people about themselves, and he didn’t tell me anything. No doubt he would have done so this morning, poor chap, but—there he is. Well, get away now and fetch the doctor and the police, and the

sooner we get all the bother over and done with the better."

Mervyn went out, and superintended the harnessing of the pony, and saw his old retainer start. It would take the latter well over the hour to jog along the hilly road, between Heath Hover and Clancehurst.

"Straight on and straight back, Joe," was his parting injunction. "You don't want to wet your whistle at any pubs this journey you know. The business is too important. And keep your tongue in your head about it, too. The only people you've got to wag it to are the doctor and the inspector. To any one else might make things unpleasant to you. See?"

Having, as he thought, effectually frightened his ancient servitor into discretion, and duly seen him start, Mervyn went back to the house, but did not enter. Instead, he took his way up to the sluice and stood gazing out over the ice-bound pond. There was nothing to be done until the representatives of medicine and the law should arrive, and meanwhile he felt a sort of disinclination to enter the house. But for its rather thick coating of snow he would have put on his skates and amused himself upon the said ice, cutting a few figures. Then he remembered he had had no breakfast, and suddenly felt the want of it.

Accordingly he descended the path, and entering began to get out the requisite materials. He was accustomed largely to doing for himself, so in a trice he had brewed his tea in the kitchen and got out other things needed. But some of the said other things were in the living-room, left there from the night before. He did not care to breakfast there with the dead man lying on the couch in the same room.

The latter seemed unusually, supernaturally still. He glanced at the couch. It was just as he had left it. There was nothing particularly repellant in the dead man's aspect. On the whole it was rather peaceful—still, he preferred to have his breakfast somewhere else. And then, while collecting what he required, his thoughts went again to the thing he had deposited within the vase on the mantelpiece.

This he now extracted. Had there been any one to witness the process, they would have seen that it was effected with extraordinary care. For instance, he did not touch the object, he turned it out upon the table, and

when he moved it at all it was with a bit of stick which he took from the remains of what had been used to make the fire with. Yet it was a harmless looking thing enough—a small, shining disk not more than an inch and a half in diameter, and it had five points like those of a star.

What an extraordinary thing was that which had happened, he said to himself. The omen of the door handle and the open door; and involuntarily now he glanced at the latter. But it was fast shut, and the handle at its usual angle. It had been the means of saving the stranger's life—for what a very short time, as events had proved—and he remembered how he had marvelled that contrary to all report the manifestation had been effected in bringing any *good* to anybody. Well the "good" had not been effectual enough to last, so that far the grimness of the tradition did not belie itself. It was indeed extraordinary, and here in the broad daylight he could afford to contemplate it from a purely speculative point of view. Yet as he looked more and more at the little disk a good deal of an uneasy fascination was upon him, and well it might be—none knew this better than himself.

Then he did a strange thing. He went out of the room, returning immediately wearing a thick pair of fur-lined gloves. He took up the trinket, even then holding it gingerly. He looked round for something to wrap it in, then thought better of it. He rose, and carried the thing out, holding it behind him, and ascended again to the sluice. There was a small hole in the ice, where the overflow ran out over an iron door. That would do. No, it would not. He paused—just in time, as he realised he had been on the point of making a most fatal mistake.

He looked around, not furtively, not pointedly, just casually. Not a soul was in sight, but he knew, none better, that it does not follow that because you cannot see a soul therefore not a soul can see you. A cloud of blue titmice was twittering in a leafless alder, glancing from twig to twig. Overhead a little red kestrel was hovering against the cloudless blue of the dazzling winter sky, and two squirrels gambolled and chirked among the feathering boughs of a dark yew tree which still had a few berries left. Blackbirds clucked and flickered over the ice surface. All Nature was joyous and at peace this bracing, invigorating winter morning, and within the room down yonder the dead man lay.

Mervyn turned to regain the house. The little black kitten, its bushy tail erect, came bounding up the path stairway to meet him, but he did not take it up, as it rubbed against his legs, purring a greeting.

Halfway down the earth stairway a large stone lay, partly embedded in the soil. Mervyn bent down as though to tie up his bootlace. When he rose again that stone was the custodian of something. It was the tombstone of the strange small disk he had held in his hand.

Mervyn went into the kitchen, where he had left his breakfast all ready; and then he did another strange thing. He took off the big fur gloves he had been wearing, and put both well to the back of the red, roaring, kitchen fire. In an instant they were absorbed in the furnace-like heat. Then he sat down to his breakfast, but, in view of the proceedings just detailed he thought he could in a degree estimate the sensations of a murderer, who has carefully and effectually—as he thinks—disposed of every item of evidence.

Chapter Five.

The Enquiry.

About lunch-time a smart dogcart came bowling along the snow covered road, and from it descended the doctor and the police inspector, likewise a constable: old Joe, with his slower conveyance, had been left to follow on. Dr Sandys was a good representative of the prosperous G.P. in practice in a prosperous market town; genial, hearty, and prepared to be surprised at nothing which came in his way professionally. The inspector likewise was a good type of his kind; tall, alert, rather soldierly in countenance and bearing.

“Well, Mr Mervyn, this is a strange sort of happening, isn’t it?” began the former. “However, the first thing to do is to get to work.”

“Will you look at the—er—the body first, or the locality?” said Mervyn.

“The locality?”

“Yes. I mean where I first picked him up. I suppose Joe told you all about it, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he told us all about it—after a fashion,” said the inspector with a slight smile. “But I needn’t remind you Mr Mervyn, what sort of a ‘telling all about it,’ one would be likely to get from a man of old Joe’s stamp. So the first thing to do is for you to give us your account of what happened,” and the speaker’s hand instinctively dived for his notebook.

“I rather think I had better inspect the ‘subject’ the first thing, Nashby,” struck in the doctor.

“Of course. This way.”

Mervyn showed them into the room and raised the blinds, which he had lowered again after the first discovery. The constable was left in charge of the dogcart. The doctor bent over the dead man and proceeded to make his first examination. The bystanders could not but notice that he looked

more than a little puzzled.

“We shall have to strip him,” he said, looking up. This was done, the police inspector giving his aid. Mervyn stood and looked on.

The body was that of a well-knit, well-proportioned man, probably on the right side of forty.

“No sign of injury, none whatever,” pronounced the doctor, “and his heart is as sound as a bell. Here is something, but it seems of no importance. At one time or other, he was addicted to the drug habit,” pointing to the left arm, which he had raised. “But—not lately.”

“Not lately?” echoed the inspector, whose notebook was in full swing. “Now to be precise, doctor, up to how lately should you say?”

“It’s impossible to be precise,” was the answer, “if by that you mean exactly how many years ago he discontinued the habit—and from all appearances he needn’t have been very greatly addicted to it even then. Certainly not less than five or six years ago, possibly longer; indeed, I should say longer.”

The inspector nodded, and for a minute or two his stylo was very busy indeed. The puzzled frown on the surgeon’s face grew deeper and deeper, and well it might. Here was a strong, well-built, healthy man in the prime of life, dying in his sleep, and no sign whatever to guide Science towards the discovery of the cause.

“We shall have to make an exhaustive postmortem,” said the doctor at last, covering the dead man again, “and to this end I must take steps for having the body removed to Clancehurst, for I propose to call in first-rate expert assistance.”

“Very good, sir,” assented the inspector briskly, relieved that he was now going to get his own innings, and also all his professional keenness to the fore over the prospect of being put in charge of a very out-of-the-way case. “And now, with Mr Mervyn’s permission, I will take his statement as to the whole of last night’s occurrence.”

“You shall have it to the full,” was the answer. “But first of all had you not

better go through the poor chap's clothes—they are hanging up in the kitchen where I put them to dry, those he has on now are mine, which I rigged him out with as a change. Needless to say I haven't touched a thing of his, pending your arrival. You may find some clue to identification there."

"We'll do so at once," said the police officer, and they adjourned forthwith to the kitchen.

The clothes were hanging where they had been placed the night before, and were now quite dry. But mystery seemed likely to be piled on mystery. Except some sovereigns and silver change amounting to something over five pounds in all, the pockets were absolutely empty. Not a scrap of paper, no card-case or pocket-book, not even a purse. Besides the money, an old Waterbury watch, attached to a leather guard, made up the entire contents.

Furthermore the clothes themselves afforded no clue. The buttons were plain horn ones, and bore the name of no tailor, nor was there any shop mark upon any article of hosiery; and now the police inspector warmed to his work, for he could see that all such indications had been carefully and deliberately removed. But by whom, and with what object? That was his business to find out.

"Now Mr Mervyn, if you please. I should like your statement."

"Certainly. Let's go back into the other room and I'll get you some foolscap to take it down on. It'll ease your notebook—eh, inspector?"

Mervyn told his story, plainly and concisely, as we know it—not omitting any detail. Any detail? Yes. He omitted just one—the finding of the metal disk. But at that part of the narrative which related to the apparition—or hallucination—of the opening door, both his auditors looked up keenly. For they were acquainted with the weird legends which popular belief hung around Heath Hover.

"As sure as I sit here," went on the narrator, "that manifestation—delusion, if you like—was the means of saving the man's life, for if I hadn't seen it I should have finished dropping off to sleep in my chair, and had I done so, why he might have shouted till doomsday without my

hearing him. However, it didn’t seem much good, as things turned out.”

The inspector laid down his stylo.

“Now, Mr Mervyn, if you will be so good. We will examine that door, and what lies beyond it.”

“Certainly,” and Mervyn, unlocking a drawer in his writing table produced a long, brown, heavy key.

“See,” he went on, “it was under this pile of papers. I always keep it there. Yet that door opened of itself, just as I have described. I’d swear to that as positively as I could swear to anything in my life.”

“You have strong nerves, Mr Mervyn,” said the inspector, a thought drily, perhaps, as he took the key which the other tendered to him.

The lock, though a trifle stiff, turned without difficulty. A black gap yawned in front, and a close yet chilly, fungus-laden air greeted their faces.

“Hold hard now till I get some candles,” went on Mervyn. In a moment these were obtained and lighted, each carrying one. “I’d better lead,” he appended, perhaps anticipating the thought that flitted through the mind of the police officer. It would be so easy otherwise to spring back, and locking the pair securely in that vault, thus obtain for himself a start of several hours. Such things had happened.

A good bit of a shiver ran through the trio as they descended into the dank mustiness of the vault. The walls glistened with moisture, so did the stone floor. But there was no break in the solid masonry, save for one hole, barely four inches across, which admitted air from the outside but no light. The inspector made a minute and exhaustive examination of both walls and flooring, but there was no sign of either having been disturbed, perhaps for centuries.

“My belief is that this place was nothing more than a common or homely wine cellar,” said Mervyn, as having found nothing whatever to reward their investigation they took their way up the stone steps again. “The fact of the existence of a disused empty vault like this under a house is enough to give rise to all sorts of weird beliefs centring round it. But yet—

that door business of last night—well, if that was an optical delusion I'll never believe in my own eyesight again. And now," as they regained the outer day, "before we start to look at the hole in the ice, how about a little something stimulating after your drive. Eh?"

The doctor was agreeable, in fact quite willing, but the cautious police officer declined. Mervyn, seeing through this thought too, got out a new bottle with the seal intact, and drew the cork. Likewise he placed an unbroken syphon on the table, perhaps rather ostentatiously. While thus engaged, the pony-cart rumbled up, bringing the returning Joe.

He, too, now the inspector desired to question. Possibly because disregarding his master's parting injunction, the old rustic had been imbibing some Dutch courage in the shape of a couple of "goes" of square Hollands on the way back at the *Dog and Partridge*, the same number of miles distant upon the road, he was able to answer these questions in a straight and fairly lucid manner, though he would more than once revert—as his mind misgave him—to his stock declaration! "I didn't see no strange gemmun 'ere last night. You'll mind I said so, Mus' Mervyn. I didn't see he."

"Nobody said you did, Joe," reassured the inspector. "You only saw him this morning, after he was dead."

"That's Gawd's truth, I reckon, Mr Nashby, zur," was the fervent rejoinder.

"One thing more, if you'll excuse me, Mr Mervyn," said Nashby. "I'll just examine this room a little."

He looked on the floor, under the couch, in cupboards, and drawers; not omitting the old vases of quaint ware that stood on the mantelpiece. The owner, watching with outward indifference, had his own thoughts. So had the inspector. Whoever had been the cause of this unknown stranger's death, it had been no one entering the house from outside, determined the latter.

Then they adjourned to view the scene of the rescue. Along the path through the wood Mervyn pointed out the footprints—half obliterated by subsequent snow—left by himself and the rescued stranger, likewise those quite fresh, made by himself and old Joe that morning on their

respective and independent progresses to the spot. Of these Nashby took careful measurements.

“There you are,” went on Mervyn, as they arrived at the place. “You’ll see the hole is newly frozen over, but the ladder’s just where I left it. The water’s over twenty feet deep there, but what the deuce started the poor chap on the ice at all is what bangs me. Seems to me we’re up against a very tall thing in mysteries.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if we were, Mr Mervyn,” rejoined the inspector, again rather drily.

“Couldn’t we trace his footmarks back?” suggested the doctor. “It would show the direction he had come from, and then we could make enquiries. Eh, Nashby?”

“The very thing I was going to do,” answered the latter.

But the plan, though good, was difficult of execution. The footmarks were almost obliterated by the more recent snowfall, in places quite so. And they led from nowhere direct. They zigzagged and twisted, as though their perpetrator were wandering at random and round and round, then lost themselves altogether in a sort of small ravine. But the very incoherency of their course suggested a reason for the stranger plunging into the peril he had done. Clearly he had got lost in the thick woods and had welcomed this long, broad stretch of open, and apparently strong ice, as a way out.

“Now I would suggest an adjournment for lunch,” said Mervyn. “We can take up the trail afterwards where we left it.”

“That’s not half a bad idea,” assented the doctor heartily. “Thanks very much, Mr Mervyn. I’d been about a bit before I started for here, and after a drive through this invigorating air, it seems a long while ago since breakfast time.”

Inspector Nashby raised no objection. A stalwart police officer, even though on an interesting case, and prospectively a case for advancement, is not proof against the pangs of deferred appetite on a crisp, keen, frosty day. But even while discussing good cheer in an

impromptu way in Mervyn's kitchen—for they left the living-room in silent possession of the dead—Nashby kept his eyes about him and his perceptions at full cock. For Nashby had his theories already forming. The doctor as yet had formed none.

While thus engaged, they missed the fact that the sun-bright day had overclouded. They were awakened to it, however, by the discovery that it had begun to snow again. More than begun indeed, for the snow was coming down, not merely in flakes, but almost in slabs. A little more of it and they would hardly be able to get back to Clancehurst. The Inspector jumped to his feet.

"Heavens!" he ejaculated, going to the window. "Why, this'll cover up all and any footprints there may be to find beyond where we left off."

"Shouldn't wonder if it did. Well, it can't be helped," said Mervyn coolly. He had by now quite got behind the policeman's suspicions, and was taking rather a half-hearted delight in teasing that worthy. "Have another whisky and soda, inspector?"

"Thanks, no. I'll go and take up the track where we left it."

"If you'll take my advice you won't," said Mervyn. "In fact you'll get back to Clancehurst as soon as possible, and come back here when all's clear again. Why, you've seen how even a moderate snowdrift can pile up. If you get caught in the middle of this deluge of it, right out in the thick of the woods, why I shouldn't wonder if you're as stiff as our poor friend there, before many hours are gone. What do you say, doctor?"

"What do I say? Why that I can't afford to get snowed up right away in the country for days. What price my practice? So if it's all the same to you, Mr Mervyn, I'll ask you to have my cart hitched up and start before it gets worse."

Nashby had not waited to hear this decision. He had gone outside to see if it really was impracticable to pursue the search. But even before he had reached the top of the path which led to the sluice, the rush of the blinding cold flakes into his eyes drove him back.

"No, it'd be quite useless," he said, by no means pleased. "Couldn't do

anything in the teeth of this. But it won't be dead against us going back, rather behind us, that's one thing."

So they started, the inspector very dissatisfied and very suspicious. He questioned the doctor all the way along the road, under difficulties certainly, because of the blinding sheets of snow which drove in upon them, rendering breathing—let alone conversation—difficult—as to Mervyn, his circumstances and his antecedents—above all, his antecedents. But on this point the doctor was able to give no information—only that he knew no more on the subject than did his questioner.

And Mervyn was left alone with the dead, in solitary, haunted Heath Hover—yet not quite alone, for the police constable was left too; and perhaps he was not sorry for the man's companionship. For the snow whirled down in masses for the best part of the night, blocking the road in huge drifts, and the wind howled dirgefully round the gables of the house, where lay the living and the man who had come there to meet his strange, mysterious death.

Chapter Six.

“The Key of the Street.”

“For the third and last time, I say—will you hand me that letter or will you not?”

“No, I will not.” And the speaker’s lips tightened, and her blue eyes met the angry red brown ones calm and full, and the coronal of golden hair shone upon a very erect head indeed.

The parties to this dialogue were a girl and a woman, the latter middle-aged, not to say elderly. She had a hooked, commandeering nose and a hard mouth turning down at the corners. Now they were turning down very much indeed. It may be hardly necessary to explain that these two occupied the position of employer and employed.

“Now mark my words, Miss Seward,” went on the first speaker, fast getting into the tremulous stage of white anger. “I’ll give you just one more chance, and only one. Hand me over that letter, or—out of my house you go. Without references mind—and this very day at that. Now—take your choice.”

There was some excuse for the irritation displayed by the older woman, in that she had surprised the other in the act of reading a letter—a fairly closely written one too, and that in the handwriting of her only son, a young subaltern not long gazetted, and only recently gone out to India. She had suspected something between them prior to his departure; and this girl was a mere paid teacher of French and music to her own two—then in the “flapper” stage. As a matter of fact there had been, but it was all on one side—on that of the boy.

“There’s really nothing in it,” was the answer, “I didn’t want him to write to me, and told him so more than once. But as he has, well I can’t show private correspondence to a third person, even though it be the correspondent’s mother.”

In hard reality the speaker was more than half inclined to comply—more

to put an end to the whole bother than anything. But there were two obstacles in the way of such a safe and easy course; first her own pride, of which she had all her share—in spite of her dependent position—not that she considered it a dependent one as long as she gave *quid pro quo*, and who shall say that she was altogether wrong? And Mrs Carstairs had put on a tone that was raspingly dictatorial and commandeering. The second lay in the fact that the writer had particularly requested that all knowledge of her having received the letter should be withheld from his mother. Equally, as a matter of fact, even as she had said—there was nothing in it. It was a very harmless effusion. It contained vehement declarations of devotion, but such were merely unsophisticated and doglike. When at home the boy had fallen violently in love with her, but though kind to him in a sisterly way, she had not reciprocated, and while sorry for him had pointed out plainly to him more than once that this was so. She was older than him too, and could not look upon him from the point of view he wanted—and this she also pointed out to him plainly.

In view of all this it seemed rather hard lines now that his mother should swoop down upon her in this fashion as though she were a mere designing intriguing adventuress, instead of being, as it happened, of considerably older descent than this family of two generations of worthy and successful manufacturers, among whom perforce for the time being, she was earning her daily bread, and perhaps it was a little of this sense of contrast that raised that gold-crowned, well-poised, thoroughbred head somewhat higher in the air during the gathering storm of the interview. But here were two angry women, rapidly becoming more angry still—the one steadfastly refusing what the other as equally steadfastly imagined she had every right in the world to demand. What sort of outcome was this likely to yield?

The elder woman’s normally rubicund cheeks had now gone nearly white.

“So that’s your last word?” she panted.

“I’m afraid so.”

“Then go. D’you hear. Go upstairs and pack, and leave this house at once. That is the return I get for my kindness—my charity—in ever taking

you into it at all."

Melian Mervyn Seward threw back her head, and straightened herself still more at the ugly word.

"Excuse me, Mrs Carstairs," she said, a small red circle coming into each of her likewise paled cheeks, "but I think you used the wrong word. You have had your full money value from me, fair work for fair wage. So I don't see where the word 'charity' comes in at all."

The other could only sputter, she was simply speechless with wrath. The girl went on:

"Not only that, but I am entitled to some notice. I refuse to be thrown out in the street without any at all. Remember, I have to make my own arrangements as to my next plans. So I will take your notice now if you like."

You see there was the element of a capable business woman about this thoroughbred, self possessed orphan girl, who had hardly a friend in the world and that not capable of being of any use to her in a stress like the present. She, calm, because with the power to control her white anger, held the other at a disadvantage, who had not.

"Oh, well," the latter managed to stutter. "I will pay you your month's wages, and—"

"Quarter's," corrected the girl quietly. "I am not a servant, let me remind you, but teacher of French and music to your children. Therefore I am entitled to a quarter's notice."

"Why, this is blackmailing," blared the woman furiously. "Sheer blackmailing."

"Don't keep on using ugly words. You know it's nothing of the kind—only a sheer matter of business." And then somehow the mere mention of the word seemed to be effectual in calming the speaker's restrained math. "I have got to take care of myself, you know. There's no one else in this wide world to do it for me. So I must have my contract carried out, or take steps to enforce it if necessary. There is no blackmailing in that."

“Oh, that’s a threat, is it?”

“Not a bit. I am merely putting the situation before you from both sides.”

“You shall have your quarter, then,” said the other, after a moment of silence. “But—leave this house by to-night.”

“If I can, I will,” answered the girl. “But I must first make sure that I have somewhere to go to. So if you will kindly have a telegram dispatched for me, and the reply is satisfactory, I shall be prepared to do as you wish. *If* it is not, I fear I shall have to burden you until to-morrow morning.”

The other gasped in speechless amazement. But she knew what was in the speaker’s mind. If the latter were to go out herself with the object of sending the telegram, who knew but that she might not find herself refused re-admission? In justice it is only fair to say that such an extreme measure would not have been adopted. Still, as the girl had said, she had got to take care of herself.

“Very well, write your telegram then,” she snapped, and rustled out.

Melian went over to a writing table, found a telegraph form, and having filled it in, rang the bell and dispatched it. Then she went up to her room.

So she had lost her means of livelihood. It was not a very congenial means of livelihood, still it might have been worse—infinitely worse—and this she candidly acknowledged. There was little sympathy between herself and her employer. The latter had treated her with a certain courtesy, but she was a hard, dictatorial, narrow minded type of woman, and utterly intolerant of contradiction in any shape or form. As for the nominal head of the house he was a mere nonentity, a mere cipher. Outside its limits he was a fairly prosperous stockbroker, and only returned home to dine and sleep, and seldom speak. Her charges were not particularly interesting or engaging children; empty-headed, selfish, and thoroughly spoilt. Still she managed to get on with them—and what was more—to get them on. And now she had to leave; to lose her means of livelihood for the time being—and Heaven only knew where and how she was going to obtain another—and all because a silly boy now at the other end of the world had chosen to fall in love with her at this.

Yet as she caught her three parts length reflection in the glass, Melian Mervyn Seward would have been no woman had she not known that upon that account the boy was not so silly after all. For it framed a really exquisite picture—that of a beautifully proportioned figure, neither tall nor short, in fact exactly the right height for a woman. The well-poised head, gleaming gold under the electric light was set upon a full, rounded throat. The blue eyes, beneath their well marked brows were steadfast, and full of character, and even more so if possible the set of the mouth. But the contour of cheeks and chin was perfect, and now that the reaction after the strife had brought an unusual glow of colour to the former the face was absolutely lovely. Here was a girl who well and tastefully dressed would have created more than a sensation in any big ballroom, and now she stood there realising more and more how utterly helpless and alone in the world she was, with her only means of livelihood taken from her, and with very precarious chances of finding another.

“Little fool!” she muttered with a stamp of the foot against the fender bar; the exclamation not being directed against herself but against her absent adorer. “Little fool! I expect he’ll feel pretty sick when he hears what he’s been the means of doing—if he ever does hear. Still—he couldn’t help it, I suppose.”

Looking up, the blue eyes suddenly filled, then overflowed, for they had encountered a portrait of her dead father. She caught up the frame from the mantelpiece, and pressed her red warm lips passionately against the cold glass, murmuring words of love and tenderness. Then she sank into a low chair and sobbed unrestrainedly—it may be that the reaction of the nervous system after her late passage of arms had something to do with the breakdown. There came a knock at the door. Instantly she sprang to her feet, dashing the tears away. Heavens! they would be attributed to grief and fear over her dismissal. That would not do—no not for anything. It was difficult, however, to regain her self command at a brace of seconds’ notice, and the maid who now entered with a telegram, subsequently and as a matter of course did set them down to that very cause.

The wire was a reply from her friend, a girl who made a living as a typist, and hardly comes within the scope of our story except in so far that now she wired that she could take Melian into her modest quarters for a night

or two while the latter “looked about her.” This was so far satisfactory. Melian wrote out another telegram in reply, saying she was coming on in a couple of hours, and gave it to the maid, which message of course supplied that young person with something to talk about, and conjecture about, below stairs. Then she set to work to pack in earnest.

Mrs Carstairs was not quite happy in her mind, while sitting in her morning-room waiting for her discharged *employée* to come and take her leave—and her salary. She was not a bad hearted woman *au fond*, only there were times when the “*fond*” took a good deal of getting at. Now she had qualms. Miss Seward had not been wrong in saying she had given her good money’s worth. She certainly had done that, and now the woman was already consumed with misgivings as to how she was going to supply her place. But as Miss Seward entered, this misgiving merged into a feeling of vague self-gratulation that it had turned out for the best. The girl was looking lovely. Quietly but tastefully dressed, her patrician blood and bearing was never so manifest. She wore a large black hat—large without exaggeration—which framed and set off the beautiful refined face, and the velvety blue eyes. No, assuredly she was too dangerously pretty to keep; otherwise there is no telling that she would not have climbed down even at the eleventh hour.

“Here is your cheque, Miss Seward,” she said, “and there is the receipt form.” Then having seen this duly signed, she added stiffly—“And now, good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Mrs Carstairs. I’ll just repeat to you. There was no harm whatever in that letter. I did not feel justified in showing you—only on principle, mind. Good-bye, children.”

For the two girls had just come in. There was, as we said, nothing engaging about them. They were gawky plain girls, sallow faced and inclined to be hook-nosed too, with a skimpy black pigtail hanging down each of their backs. They showed no more feeling on parting with Melian than if she were just getting up from an afternoon call. They each stuck a limp bony paw into her palm, and there was an end of it.

She went downstairs. Her luggage—by no means the traditional, and feminine, “mountain of luggage”—was being stowed in and on a cab. A

door on the ground floor opened into the hall. Within this stood the—nominal—master of the house.

“I hear you’re leaving us, Miss Seward. I’m sorry,” he began rather jerkily. “Will you kindly step in here for a moment?”

Melian wondered, but complied. Seen in the full light, he was a quiet looking, keen faced man, keen as to the upper part of his face—that represented his moderate success on the Stock Exchange—falling away in the lower—that represented his subsidiary position as merely nominal master in his own house.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “You’re very young, and I understand, alone in the world. This fuss, whatever it’s about, is clean outside my department, but remember, if ever you want a friend—either to speak a good word for you—or what not—remember me. Good-bye, child.”

She flashed a bright smile at him as she took the hand which jerkily shot forth at her. Then she went out.

“By gad, she’s lovely!” exclaimed Carstairs, staring after her, “and the very perfection of a lady too. What a fool Adelina is to have got rid of one like that.”

And Adelina, who from the upper landing was privily assisting auricularly at this scene, was for once, inclined to agree with the submissive one. Certainly it would not be easy to find an adequate substitute.

“Still—she’s too pretty,” she told herself with something of a sigh. “Too pretty, and—too proud. Yes—far too proud.”

And this reflection seemed to carry something of consolation as her mind went back to that scene in the forenoon, and how the girl had uncompromisingly declined to capitulate, while she herself had come out of it with far from flying colours.

Chapter Seven.

Interim—“Flu.”

The Carstairs abode was a large, dull, ugly villa in a large, dull, ugly suburb—one of those depressing suburbs that is neither town nor country but has the disadvantages of both and the advantages of neither. But it was cheerfulness itself compared with the locality through which Melian’s cab was now slowly jogging. The squalor of the greasy streets; the dank, thick atmosphere; the hoarse, scarcely human yells and the incessant rumble and clatter attendant on that sort of locality are too well known to need any describing.

Leaning back in the mouldy vehicle, she set her mind to go over the events of the last few hours. Had she been ill advised, hasty—she asked herself? Their behaviour at the very last had seemed to show they were not such ill-meaning people. Yet, as she looked back she knew that relations between them had been getting more and more strained. For some reason or other Mrs Carstairs had been growing more and more short in her manner towards her, and now she knew that reason. The old woman had had her suspicions all along, but the discovery of the climax brought things to a head. But the whole thing was ludicrous, and all about a little booby like that—Melian’s lip curled as she thus rather unjustly characterised the distant cause of all the bother.

The drive was long and the cab slow. She had time to let her thoughts go further back from her present troubles—the future was not a welcome subject, looked at sitting alone there in that mouldy box on wheels, and in the dark at that. Her earlier life had been a sufficiently happy one. She had seen a great deal of the world and developed her artistic instincts. Then had come losses; and speculations, instead of mending things, made them worse. Her father was lacking in the business capacity, while her other parent was under the impression that one pound sterling was endowed with the purchasing power of three, and acted consistently upon that conviction. So means dwindled till there was very little left.

Things had reached this point when one day her father started off on a railway journey to a place some hours distant. He was mysterious as to

the object of it, but declared that they would none of them be the worse if it failed, whereas if it succeeded, they would be considerably the better. He seemed in a hopeful mood, and in fairly good spirits, and when at the big, dingy terminus, where she was seeing him off, he handed her a couple of accident insurance tickets, which he had just purchased; he seemed fairly bubbling over with fun.

“See these?” he had said. “All right. They cost a shilling apiece, and represent 1,000 pounds apiece if I’m—er—totally smashed up. So, you see, I’m more valuable to you dead than alive. I used to think it was the other way about. But take care of them, I’ve signed them, and all, so it’d be quite safe. Put them away carefully. Two thousand pounds, remember.”

“I’ve a great mind to tear them across and throw them on to the line,” the girl had answered, looking at him with filling eyes and quivering lips. But he laughed gaily.

“Don’t do that, little one. They cover minor injuries too, only those mean less dibs. You know. So much a leg, so much an arm, so much a finger—and so on. It’s a rum world—and you never can tell. So stick to those tickets till I come back. Now, good-bye, my darling little one. Here, let go—the train’s moving, by George!”

She was very nearly tightening her hold, so that it would be physically impossible for him to free himself until the train had gone, but she did not. With eyes blinded with tears she waved to him from the platform as he leaned half out of the window watching to see the last of her, and he was gone. Yet he would be back the day after to-morrow at the latest. She had often seen him off on such journeys before.

“I *am* a little fool,” she said to herself as she walked away.

About two hours later, when in the middle of its longest non-stop run, Marston Seward fell from the train.

There were headlines in the evening paper posters, but somehow or other Melian did not notice these. It was not until the next day, when they opened their morning paper, that the tragedy rose up and hit them between the eyes—name, description, everything, for by this time

identification had been easily obtained. Melian hardly knew how she lived through that stunning blow—perhaps because it was a stunning one. But the shock was too much for her mother—the shock only, for there was little if any affection between her and the dead man. Brain fever supervened and she died.

Her illness made an alarming inroad into the scanty resources remaining to them. Hard material necessities had to be met. Hitherto the girl had shrunk with shuddering horror from turning to account those fatal insurance tickets, the price of her father's blood. She could not claim it. Oh God! the thought of it? But she might have spared herself any qualms on this head. The railway company flatly and uncompromisingly repudiated all liability. The insurance was against *accident* not suicide. They were in a position to prove, and to prove indisputably that for any one to have fallen from the particular coach of which Seward was an occupant, and that by accident, was a sheer impossibility. The door handles were all in good order; if anything, rather stiff to turn than otherwise. They could prove too, that the said door handles were properly secured at the last station the train had passed through. And worst of all, they were in a position to produce a platform inspector who had passed the pair at the moment of the utterance of those fatal words: "You see, I'm more valuable to you dead than alive. I used to think it was the other way about." The official had heard the words distinctly, and after the tragedy had himself voluntarily come forward with the information. At the time they had struck him as uttered jokingly, but in the light of the subsequent event they took on a far different aspect. In short, Seward had bungled the whole business. He died as he had lived, and his last act was one of perfectly inexcusable bungle. "More valuable to you dead than alive," had been his words, and in the result his daughter was left alone in the world, as nearly as possible penniless.

Alone! Yes—for she had no relations, except one, away in India, and for certain reasons the last person on earth to whom she would apply under any circumstances whatever. She had no real friends, only acquaintances who could be of no great service to her, but eventually, thanks to the inherent spirit and pluck which buoyed her up, she managed to find means of supporting herself. And all this had befallen rather more than two years previously to when we first see her, being, more or less politely, shown the door at the Villa Carstairs.

Now, shut up in the mouldy darkness of the slow, Jolting vehicle, it all came back to her again, and she had to hurriedly brush away the warm tears which the recollection—always vivid—had evoked, as the cab drew up with a jolt at her friend's lodgings. But she met with what she most needed, a cordial welcome. Even the cabman, a rubicund old fellow with a bulbous nose and a rumbling voice, forebore to claim so much as a penny over his legal fare when he caught a full view of her face under the street lamp, and a gratuity of threepence, smilingly tendered, was met by a hearty "Thankee kindly, missie."

Cumnor Lodge, the Carstairs villa, though dull and heavy outside, within was characterised by a considerable degree of solid comfort. But this narrow hallway and the nondescript combination of smells of sink-cum-cabbage, with a slatternly landlady and a still more slatternly servant, waiting to give a hand upstairs with the luggage as well as to satisfy a natural curiosity as to what the visitor would be like, struck her with a very real chill. Would it be her lot to inhabit such a place, was the thought that instinctively shot through her mind? But the impression was partly neutralised when she found herself within her friend's tiny but snug sitting-room, with its bright fire, and hissing kettle, and tea and its appurtenances all so dear to the feminine eye. Violet Clinock was a bright, pleasing type of girl, with dark hair, and honest grey eyes, not exactly pretty, but rather near being so. But with all her natural cheerfulness, there was intertwined an impression of one who was perfectly well able to take care of herself. In fact she rather prided herself upon this, and upon being an independent bachelor girl who could always make her own way. She was a country parson's daughter—one of many—under which circumstances she flattered herself she had done the right thing in striking out on her own.

"This shop's rather dingy in the daytime, dear," she explained as the two were seated comfortably in the really cosy little room, and the tea and muffins and other things dear to the feminine appetite were in full force. "But I'm not much here in the daytime, and at night, once I get inside it doesn't matter. The main thing is it's cheap—very. Not nasty either, for I do every mortal thing for myself. Heaven help me if I left it to anybody else. Well, I've been saving up, with an eye to running a typing shop on my own. It isn't my ambition to remain for ever in a position to take orders from other people, I can tell you. Well, and why did you leave your last

crowd? Had a row?"

"Sort of. It takes two to make a row, and there wasn't much of that on my side," answered Melian. "I just let the old woman talk, but she didn't get what she wanted. I got the key of the street instead—so, here I am. By the way," she added, waxing grave. "I don't know where I'm going to be. That's a pair of shoes of another pattern."

"Oh, with all your high accomplishments," laughed the other. "Why any one would jump at you."

"Would they? They're welcome to skip, then. But even 'high accomplishments' are no good without references."

"Without references? But you can get—Oh, I see. The old cat won't give you any."

Melian nodded.

"The beastly old cat!" pronounced Violet. "She ought to be compelled to."

"Well, she can't be, and that's all I've got to do with it. So there you are."

"Let's see. You're no good at our job, are you, Melian?" said the other, drumming the tips of her fingers together meditatively.

"Unfortunately I've never learned it."

"That's a pity." In her romantic little soul she was beginning to weave a web of destiny for Melian, and the meshes thereof were glittering. A secretarial post in some flourishing office, and if her beautiful friend did not promptly enslave an opulent junior partner, why then it was her own fault. But then, unfortunately, her said "beautiful friend" had never learned typing.

They chatted on, about everything and nothing, and bedtime came.

"I turn in early," explained Violet, "because I have to turn out early, and get to my job. You'll have to turn in with me, dear, to-night at any rate. To-morrow, if you want a room to yourself, I dare say Mrs Seals can fix you

up. But they're all rather kennels I'm afraid. I've got the pick of the basket."

"Don't you worry about me, Violet. It's something to have some one to come to when you get the key of the street door given you, I can tell you," answered Melian, seriously. And then they went to bed and talked each other to sleep.

There followed then, sad, disappointing, heart weary days for poor Melian. She answered advertisements in person, and by letter. She went to all sorts of places, in and around London, in course of such answers. Sometimes she was sympathetically received, twice she was insulted, but that was where she found the dominant male had been advertiser under cover of what looked like one of her own sex. But in the genuine cases disappointment awaited—and but that she was free from vanity or self-consciousness she might easily have read the real nature of the verdict—"Far too pretty."

Oh, the weariness of those daily tramps, and bus and tram journeys, through more or less hideous, drab, depressing streets in the dull, deadly depressing winter murk invariably characteristic of London during the young end of the year! Oh, the weight of it upon the mind, as she realised, instinctively, that it was not a case of try again, but that for some reason or other her case seemed utterly hopeless. She put it to her friend. But the latter, though she shrewdly suspected the reason, shrank from saying so.

Of her, Melian saw little or nothing during the daytime, Violet Clinock was thorough, and stuck to her job, with an eye to material improvement. But in the evening they would foregather, and the daily tale of worn out disappointment would unfold itself, and after the wretched, soul-wearying effort of the day Melian could not but realise the warmth and comfort and companionship which it ended up with; and this in a measure heartened her for the next.

She had taken a small bedroom at the top of the squalid house—a mere attic, but the two girls "chummed" together for the rest of their arrangements. But a fortnight went by, then three weeks, and still with the

same result. Melian Seward was just where she was at the time of leaving Cumnor Lodge. There seemed to be no room in the world for her. Her slender savings, in spite of every possible economy, were dwindling. When they had done dwindling—what then?

And then the result of the cold, dank, and often wet, questings around after a means of livelihood, combined with lowness of spirits, and a sorely disturbed mind, came. She was laid low with a bad bout of influenza. The hydra-headed fiend was hard on the ramp, seeking whom he might devour, and finding it too in plenty. And among his countless victims was Melian Mervyn Seward.

And she could not afford to be ill; for is not illness a luxury for the rich?

But through it all her friend tended her with wholehearted and loyal camaraderie. Of course she suggested a doctor.

“A doctor? Heavens, Violet! I can’t afford such luxuries,” Melian burst forth fiercely. “The only thing I can afford is to die—and the sooner the better.” And then she became delirious, and imagined she was standing on the platform of the gloomy, dingy terminus, amid its vibration of hissing, shrieking engines, discussing those hateful, fateful railway insurance tickets with her dead father. But whether she would have a doctor or not, Violet was determined she should, and sent for one accordingly.

He, on arrival, looked grave.

“Has she any relations, Miss Clinock?”

“Oh, good Heavens! You don’t say it means that?” And the business girl was startled for the moment out of her normal take-things-as-they-come attitude.

“No, no, no. But—they ought to know. She’s in a very low state, I’m bound to inform you. There’s something on her mind—something hard and heavy on her mind—and that’s all against her—all against everything.”

“Lord! I wish I knew what to do. But she’s very ‘close.’ Between

ourselves, doctor—of course, strictly between ourselves—" The other nodded. "I believe she has one or two. But she must have quarrelled with them, or they with her, for if ever I got on to the subject she takes me up mighty sharp, I can tell you. And I don't believe in forcing people's confidences or prying into their affairs."

"No, no. Of—course not. Still, do all you can in that direction. You may find opportunities, you know—or make them. Good-evening, I am very busy just now, there's a record lot of 'flu' about, as I dare say you know. I'll look round in the morning."

Chapter Eight.

Violet’s Discovery.

“In the morning,” the doctor had said. What a deal of difference those three words can cover. In this instance Melian had passed a quiet night, thanks to his prescription, but was very down and listless. Violet Clinock had decided to take a day off on purpose to look after her, and with that intent had “expressed” a note down to her place of business to intimate that fact. Now she sat at breakfast, alone, with the morning paper propped up against her coffee pot.

As she read, a name caught her eye. “Seward Mervyn.” She stared. “Seward Mervyn” again. Yes it was. And then running her glance down the paragraph and up again, she saw that it was headed: “Clancehurst—The Heath Hover Mystery.” Thus it ran:

“The remains of the unidentified stranger, who met his death so mysteriously at Heath Hover, the residence of Mr Seward Mervyn, were buried yesterday afternoon in Clancehurst churchyard. No friends or relatives were forthcoming, but Mr Mervyn, unwilling that one who had been a guest of his—though from first to last unknown to himself—should be buried by the parish, generously came forward, and together with Dr Sandys and a few other generous leading townspeople, raised sufficient to cover all expenses, and also attended the funeral. Up till now no light whatever has been thrown upon this strange occurrence which has baffled alike all the researches of medical science and the exhaustive investigations of the police. Inspector Nashby of Clancehurst, together with an official from Scotland Yard are in charge of the case from the latter point of view.”

Violet stared at the paragraph and read it through again. Now it all came back. She had read about it before, but it had not fixed itself upon her memory. Even the name had failed to effect this then for she had not seen Melian for some time, and in the busy life she led, “out of sight out of mind” could not but hold good to a certain extent. But now the name seized her attention at once. “Seward Mervyn?” And she knew that Melian’s second name was Mervyn, Clearly this must be a relation. And

the doctor had asked her about Melian's relations.

She read no more of the paper. Her shrewd, busy little brain was at work. This must be a relation, probably an uncle or a cousin. Clearly her duty was to communicate with him. Clancehurst was only about an hour and a half from London. The day was young—should she go down herself and interview him personally? But against that she did not care to leave her friend alone at this stage. Should she write? Perhaps that would be the best course. But she had better question Melian first as to her relative, while saying nothing about any intention on her part to communicate with him. Having thus decided, she went up to her friend's room, taking the paper with her.

Melian was awake, but drowsily so. Her blue eyes were wide open, but had a pathetic and lack-lustre look, and her hair, partly loosened, made a tumbled halo of gold against the pillow. Yes, she had slept well—she said—only rather wished she could go on sleeping for ever.

"By the way," went on Violet, casually, after having talked a little about things in general. "Have you got a relation named Seward Mervyn?"

"Oh yes! He's my uncle. He's out in India."

"Is he? Well have you any other relation of the name?"

"No. Not that I know of. In fact I can't have—or I should have known it."

"Well then, this one isn't out in India at all. He's in England, and not very far from London at that. In fact, only about an hour and a half by rail, if as much."

Melian stared, then raised herself on one elbow.

"What on earth are you talking about, Violet?" she said. "I tell you he's in India."

"Well, people come back from India sometimes, don't they?"

"Yes. But I've no interest in this one, nor he in me. He has never shown any at any rate. I don't want him to either. He wasn't at all nice to my

father. He disapproved of his sister marrying him, and, in fact, he disapproved of him entirely. No. I couldn't bring myself to be civil even if I were to see him."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"No."

The word jerked out fiercely. Violet Clinock could see that her friend was getting excited, and that was bad.

"Then don't be in too great a hurry to pass judgment. Life is—I'm not going to say, 'too short,' as the silly old chestnut runs, when if anything it's long enough—but too busy, too hard, to keep grinding away at ancient grievances, even if they are not entirely or partly imaginary. It's just possible that this relation of yours may have been a bit misunderstood. Anyway give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Where did you say he is?" said Melian listlessly.

"Clancehurst—or near it, rather," glancing again at the newspaper. "Heath Hover, they call his place."

"That sounds rather nice," murmured the invalid.

"It's a jolly part of the country I can tell you," went on Violet, emphatically. Her plot seemed somehow to look hopeful. "I've been near that part, and I'd give something for a week or two down there now with my bike, even though it is winter. The glow of the heather, and the green and gold of the waving woods is something to see, I tell you."

"In winter?" smiled Melian artlessly.

"No, you goose. I'm talking about summer and autumn."

"Oh!"

"Shall I read you the paragraph?"

"Yes, do."

The other did so, and then went on to tell her all about the original mystery, which now came back to her memory. Melian listened, and grew more and more interested.

“It’s funny how the thing should have escaped my attention,” she said. “But I didn’t see the papers regularly at the Carstairs’. Sometimes a day or two would go by—or even longer.”

Melian grew no better. Violet could not stay in to look after her every day, for she was entirely dependent upon her work, and were she to lose this, why then they would both be in the same boat. So during the day she was dependent on the slatternly landlady—who though well meaning and kind according to her lights, was yet slatternly, and very vulgar in her ideas. So the girl would lie there by the hour, feeling too weak and listless even to read, with no more cheering a prospect to look out upon than a vista of black chimney stacks and chimney cowls, taking weird shapes against the grey murk of the London sky. And what was there to cheer her? Nothing. Even when she did get well her small savings would have vanished, or dwindled to vanishing point, in the incidental expenses of her illness alone, apart from the liquidation of her medical attendant’s claim. The girl felt very wretched, very despairing, as she lay there day after day in her loneliness. And in the evening when her friend returned and tried to cheer her, the process grew more and more difficult.

“This won’t do,” said the doctor, one morning, coming into Violet’s little sitting-room with a very grave face. “Is there nowhere that Miss Seward could go to for a complete change of air and scene?”

Violet shook her head sadly. She thought of the dwindling purse, and of her friend’s sinking despondency. She thought also of her friend’s pride. And then an idea came to her.

“There is only one thing I can think of, doctor,” she said suddenly, “and even that may bring forth nothing. But if I tell you, it is entirely in confidence you understand.”

“Why that of course,” answered the doctor. He was a youngish man, very hardworking, in a hard-worked and poorly paying practice, and like most

members of his profession had more than an ordinary share of intelligent human sympathy. He guessed pretty accurately at one of the causes for worry which kept back his patient upstairs—in fact the main cause—and had been puzzling how to hint, delicately, that so far as he was concerned, that cause need not count.

Then Violet told him of the existence of Melian's unknown relative and how the girl refused to communicate with him, through some notion of—probably mistaken—pride. At the mention of the name and locality Dr Barnes brightened up at once.

"By George, so that's her relative!" he said. "I should think I had heard of that case. Why it was a puzzler—baffled all our people most effectually. It isn't likely to be forgotten either in the profession. Here is a man who dies suddenly and mysteriously, and even our experts can find no definite cause of death. But, there. I'm talking 'shop.' Let's get back to Miss Seward. She ought certainly to make herself known to this relative of hers—he seems a kind sort of man if only by the way he has interested himself in the burial of this unknown stranger. Her uncle too. That's near enough. Make her write to him. I tell you in all seriousness that she is getting into a very critical state. The only thing for her is a thorough change of air and scene. You know what a hydra-headed beast 'flu' is, and its Protean after effects. Well, a splendid type of girl like Miss Seward is far too scarce to spare any effort to save from possible week of that sort. You must make her write to him."

"But if she won't? She's got a pretty strong will of her own, I can tell you."

The doctor looked at her for a moment in silence. Then he said:

"In that case write yourself."

Violet clapped her hands.

"Good—and good again?" she cried. "Just the very thing I'd thought of doing, and now I've got your authority behind me, why, I will."

Again the doctor looked at her in silence for a moment. Then he said:

"I will take upon myself to advise you further, Miss Clinock. Do so at

once, on your own responsibility. Say nothing to our patient—and so spare her the worry of argument and counter-argument, which would be in the last degree bad for her at this stage. She will thank you for it afterwards, believe me; and then, if the answer should not be satisfactory, which I can hardly think—she will be spared that additional disappointment too. But I tell you, purely professionally, that a change to a quiet country place like Clancehurst, and its pure, splendid air, would be the saving of her. Good-bye. I needn't look round to-morrow unless you send for me."

"I'll do it at once, this very night," answered Violet briskly. "Good-bye, doctor. You have taken something of a weight off my mind."

The next day Violet Clinock took "off," though not without some qualms of trepidation. She had been taking several "off" of late, and her employers were getting a bit short. They were rather "fed up" with her sick friend and the absences entailed, and half hinted that a typing secretary unburdened with sick friends was more in their line, and in fact plenty were there ready and waiting. But Violet was shrewd enough to know her own value, which was really considerably beyond that of salary received. However, she fingered the reins delicately.

That day she devoted to Melian, and the general cheering of her up. The next or the one after that, at the furthest, should bring a reply to her diplomatically, but at the same time very humanly, expressed missive to a perfect stranger.

"You must buck up, Melian," she would say. "Why, if the worst came to the worst didn't old Carstairs say that he would be a friend to you if ever you were in want of one?"

"Pooh! He didn't mean it. It was only something to say—a sort of well rounded figure of speech to get rid of me comfortably," announced Melian cynically—her illness and growing straits had rendered her cynical. "And even if he did, that old cat of his would soon want to know the reason why, I can tell you."

"I don't know. Very likely she has come round, since she's had time to think things over."

“Come round! Let her come round—or square. Turning one out like that—at an hour’s notice and all about nothing. They’re a cad crowd anyhow, and as the old chestnut says—you can’t look for anything from a pig but a grunt. But even they may find their own turn come next. Old Carstairs’ job isn’t such a cocksure business, but very much ‘up to-day down to-morrow.’ I’ve heard him say so himself many a time, and give instances of it too.”

“Well dear, it’s a rum world, and to quote another moss-grown chestnut—you never know your luck. Now I’ve got a notion things are going to turn for you, and in a little while you’ll be all on the up grade.”

Melian did not answer. Even the up grade indicated meant a dreary vista of unceasing drudgery, giving the best of her life—her young life—to the totally unappreciated service of other people, and that for a mere living wage. Surely she was cut out for something rather different. But her friend would not allow her to get into a despondent vein. She switched the topic of conversation off to other matters, and her efforts were rewarded, for the invalid forgot the standing woes and grievances, and being of an imaginative temperament, soon found herself talking brightly, and even laughing. Decidedly here was a marked improvement, concluded the watcher, thankfully.

In due course, and exactly to the time Violet had calculated, came a letter. The girl’s eyes brightened as they lit upon the Clancehurst postmark on the large square envelope, and she could only just restrain herself from rushing into her friend’s room, after the early morning postal delivery.

“Melian, here’s a letter for you,”—throwing it down on the bed.

“Letter? What? I’ve no one to get letters from—unless it’s another from that silly little booby, Dicky Carstairs,” she added bitterly. “Only, how should he write to me here? Oh, I suppose it’s only one of the deferred answers to one of my applications. ‘Will write and let you know.’ You know the rigmarole—‘Mrs Stick-in-the-mud is exceedingly sorry’—and all that sort of thing. Well, let’s see.”

The while Violet had been on tenter-hooks lest the other should spot the

Clancehurst postmark, and perhaps decline, in her absurd pride, to open the letter at all. But Melian tore open the envelope leisurely and listlessly, and then her brows contracted as she took in the contents of the large square sheet—and the excited watcher saw a flush of red suffuse the sweet, delicate face. This was what she read.

“Heath Hover, Near Clancehurst.

“My dear Melian,—

“I am deeply distressed, and more than glad at what I hear about you; the first that you have been so ill, the second that it has given me the opportunity of coming into touch with you at all. I had no idea where you were—I have not been very long back from India, remember—and neither you nor anybody else has ever communicated with me, or given me any information at all with regard to you. But I am only too thankful that now—though late in the day—I have such.

“Now I am losing no time in writing to say that you must pack up and come to me here, at once, and make this your home for as long as ever you like to make it so. I am getting an old man and am quite alone, so it may be dull for you, but at present, anyhow, a whiff of pure, fresh, country air, on top of that beastly London fog in winter, may well set you up after your illness. Although winter, you will enjoy it as a contrast to town smoke, I should think. So wire or write the train I shall expect you by at Clancehurst, and I will be there to meet you. There are reasons why I cannot leave home at present, so am unable to come up to town personally to fetch you, as I should otherwise have been glad to do.

“Believe me, my dear child,—

“Your affectionate uncle,—

“John Seward Mervyn.

“PS. Illness involves expense. You will accept a trifle towards such.”

Two five pound notes remained in the envelope. The long white fingers took them out, and even in the act the girl appreciated the delicacy which should have placed them there until the letter should first have been

read. She handed the letter to Violet, while the tears began to well forth from her wearied blue eyes.

“Hurrah!” cried the latter, having read it. “This uncle of yours is a brick, Melian—a real hard, cemented brick.” Then growing serious. “Such a sweet letter too. There, I told you better times were coming, didn’t I?”

“You had no business to have written to him. I never told you you might,” was the weakly reproachful reply.

And then the two girls, the ill one and the well—the ill one because she was ill—the well one out of sympathy, had a good cry together, and there was much hugging and they were happy.

Chapter Nine.

The Arrival.

John Seward Mervyn was seated within the same armchair in which we first saw him gazing at the mysterious and shadowy door in the corner—but now it was the middle of a brilliant winter forenoon—and he was occupied in the reperusal of two letters, not bearing even date, for one was that of Violet Clinock informing him of his niece's existence and illness, while the other was from his niece herself.

Comparing this with the former epistle he smiled to himself. Violet's glowing description of her friend, and her multifold attractions, both physical and mental, amused him. He was gratified, too, that his niece should prove neither unattractive nor a fool. Melian's missive, on the other hand, struck him as rather strained and stiff as to style, but then, she had been ill, and likewise was he not a perfect stranger to her?

How would the experiment work, he was speculating? If satisfactorily, why should she not make her home with him altogether? He was not so young as he used to be, but there was plenty of "go" in him yet, and he was not deficient in ideas; perhaps she might not find him quite such an old bore as she probably expected to find. He gathered from her friend's letter that she had gone through no particularly glowing times, nor were there any likely to be in store for her; and life here, quietly, and at any rate for a while, might be the very thing to make the girl happy, dull under ordinary circumstances as such life might be.

There was one point, however, as to which he was not without secret misgiving. By this time no doubt was left in his own mind as to there being something about this house that was not about other houses; and which, for want of a better word, he described to himself as an "influence." He had experienced it himself, when sitting alone of an evening, and even in broad daylight. Sounds, too, shadowy, vague, and explicable by no natural or material cause—again as to such there could be no two opinions. And this girl who was coming had been ill, and naturally her nerves would not be at their best. It would be ghastly if she were to undergo the shock of some sudden fright.

With this in view he himself occupied the room he had destined for her, until she should arrive. But absolutely nothing untoward occurred to disturb him, either waking or sleeping. Further, he got hold of old Joe and his ancient spouse, and charged them by every consideration likely to carry weight, that they were on no account—by word, nod or wink—to let fall the slightest hint to the visitor as to there being any stories afloat about Heath Hover at all.

“I’ll not nabble, b’lieve me, Mus’ Mervyn,” old Judy had said, clicking her Punch-like profile together, “I don’t b’lieve in nabbling on things like they. Folkses finds ’em out soon enough—”

“If there’s anything to be found,” supplied the master. “Here there isn’t, you understand, Judy?” And the old woman declared that she did, and Joe emphasised the statement by a brace of emphatic nods.

The fact was that strict fealty to their employer came entirely within this old couple’s interests, for he remunerated them at rather more than double the rate of earnings they could have obtained from any other source or sources. John Seward Mervyn was shrewd, though poor. When he had to lay out money he did so to the best of advantage, and in the proper quarter.

The mysterious end of the mysterious stranger had been very much of a nine days’ wonder. It had puzzled the police, and, more important still, perhaps, it had puzzled the doctors. There had been an inquest of course, and a great deal of disagreement among doctors. Mervyn’s evidence was perfectly straight and to the point; given so straightforwardly too, that none who heard entertained the slightest doubt as to its thorough exhaustiveness; and his narrative of the rescue of the stranger in the freezing midnight, only for the latter to meet his death so mysteriously but a few hours later, created something of a sensation. But the official mind listened to it all with some reserve and the official mind, as represented by Inspector Nashby and the expert from Scotland Yard, resolved to keep a continuous but furtive eye—and that for sometime to come—upon the goings out and comings in of Mr John Seward Mervyn.

Old Joe Sayers, too, gave his evidence with straightforwardness, but that

he was constantly harking back, with the suspicious persistency of the countryman, to the fact that he had never seen the deceased when alive. Likewise when he began to “feel his feet,” he volunteered again the opinion which we heard him enunciate to his master, that “folks as gets on the ice, middle of Plane Pond, middle of the night, etc, bean’t up to no good;” a remark whose *naïveté* drew forth a great laugh, and likewise an admonition from the coroner that the witness should not volunteer opinions containing an imputation of motive until he was asked for it—which admonition for the most part was sheer Sanscrit to old Joe.

Not the least strange side of the investigation lay in the fact that no amount of enquiry was able to elicit any information whatever as to the previous movements of the stranger. The heavy snowfall which had supervened upon the arrival of the doctor and the police inspector at Heath Hover had lasted a couple of days, and had utterly obliterated all and every trace. Further, none of the dwellers in the neighbourhood—whether in village or scattered cottages—could be found to speak as to having noticed any stranger at all, let alone one bearing the slightest resemblance to the circulated descriptions. The man might have appeared out of nowhere. So the verdict was an open one, and the man was buried at the expense of Mervyn and a few more who came forward with subscriptions toward that end—as we have said.

Mervyn sat scanning the two letters, as though to make the utmost he could out of every word and line of each. In his heart of hearts he felt rather impatient. His was not such an eventful life but that the impending arrival of a girl relative—and that an attractive one, he had reason to believe—should not inspire some modicum of pleasurable anticipation. What would she be like, all round, he found himself, for the fiftieth time, wondering?

There was a slight movement beside him. The little black kitten had leaped on to the table, and sat there purring softly, its green gold eyes staring roundly out of a little ball of fluffiness. Then, with one light, scarcely perceptible, movement it transferred itself to his shoulder and sat there, purring louder and more contentedly than ever.

“Ah, poogie?” he said, pressing the little fluffy ball against his ear. “You’ll

have some one else to love now. I wonder if she will though. Yes, of course she must."

The light waggonette, which, with the cart, constituted the sole wheel motive power at Heath Hover, swung easily over the hardened snow; but once under way, Mervyn felt himself beset with misgivings. What on earth had he been thinking about—or rather not been thinking about—to bring an open conveyance to meet a girl who was just recovering from an attack of "flu" and a fairly hard one at that? In the cloudless sunniness of the day this was a side of things he had entirely overlooked. Well, he would leave his own conveyance at Clancehurst and charter a closed fly.

But when he reached the station, the 2:57 from Victoria was just signalled. The station was busy and bustling as usual, and he did not care to risk not being there when his niece arrived. So he left the trap in charge of a hanger-on and went on to the platform.

Quite a number were getting out of the train as it drew up, nearly punctual to time. For a moment he felt bewildered, and was moving rapidly among the alighting passengers, scanning each face. But none seemed to answer the description given by Violet Clinock's glowing pen, as to her friend's outward appearance.

Then he became aware of being himself a centre of interest. A girl was standing there, looking intently at him—a girl, plainly dressed, with a pale face and golden hair framed in a wide black hat, and her straight carriage and erectly held head made her look taller than she actually was. As he turned, an exclamation escaped her, and the colour suffused her cheeks, leaving them paler than before. And the look in her eyes was positively a startled one. Small wonder that it was so, for, standing there in the hurrying throng, Melian Seward almost thought she was looking at her dead father.

The likeness was extraordinary. The same face, the same features, even the cut of the grizzling, pointed beard; the same height, the same set of the shoulders. Good Heavens! The farewell on the terminus platform, the joke about the insurance ticket—small wonder that she should have reeled unsteadily as though beneath a shock. Mervyn made a hasty step forward, both hands extended.

“My dear child, there is no mistaking you,” he said warmly. “You have the regular Mervyn stamp. But you are not looking at all the thing,” with a glance of very great concern. “Well, well, we’ll soon put that right here. Come along now. Porter, take this lady’s things. Come and show him what you’ve got in the van, dear.”

He took her arm, and Melian, who had not expected anything like so affectionate a welcome, felt in her present tottery state inclined to break down utterly. This he saw, and kept her answering questions about herself, and other things, the while the luggage was being got out and taken across.

“You will have to get outside of a hot cup of tea, dear, while they are loading up the things,” he said, leading the way to the refreshment room. “Oh, and by the by—” For the idea had come back to him, and now he put it to her that she would not be up to a five mile drive in an open trap, so it would only mean a little longer to wait while he went across to the inn opposite and ordered a closed one. But opposition met him at once.

“Why, Uncle Seward,” she exclaimed, “that’s the very thing I’ve been looking forward to—a glorious open air drive through the lovely country, and it’s such a ripping afternoon. Do let’s have it. Why, it’ll do me all the world of good. Fancy being shut up in a close, fusty fly! And there’s going to be such a ripping sunset too, I could see there was coming along in the train. No. Do let’s drive in the open.”

“Certainly, dear. I was only thinking that after a bad bout of ‘flu’ you have to be careful—very careful.”

“Yes—yes. But this air—why, it has done me good already; it’s doing me good every minute. And I’ve plenty of wraps. The drive will be ripping.”

He looked at her admiringly. The colour had come back to her cheeks and the blue eyes danced with delighted anticipation.

“Very well,” he said. “Here’s your tea. Is it all as you like it? Yes? Well, I’ll just go and see that all your things are aboard.”

He went into the bar department, drank a glass of brandy and water, then went out to the waggonette. Everything was stowed safe and snug. There

was certainly not a “mountain of luggage” he noticed, but it struck him that Melian’s “plenty of wraps” was a bit of imagination. He shed his fur coat and threw a French cloak over his shoulders. Then he went back to her.

She was ready, and the blue eyes had taken on quite a new light—very different eyes now, to when their sole look out was bounded by a patch of grey murk as a background to bizarre and hideous patterns in chimney pots.

“Here’s the shandradan, dear. Now are you absolutely dead cert you’re equal to a five mile open drive. Here—put on this.”

“This” was the fur coat—and she objected.

“Tut-tut, I’m skipper of this ship, and I won’t have opposition. So—in you get.”

He had hoisted it on to her, and now enveloped in it she climbed to the front seat beside him. He arranged a corresponding thickness of double rug over her knees.

“Thank you, sir,” said the porter, catching what was thrown to him. “Beg pardon, Mr Mervyn,” he went on, sinking his voice, “but has anything more been ’eard about—”

But Mervyn drew his whip across the pony’s hind quarters with a sharpness that that long suffering quadruped had certainly never merited, and the vehicle sprang into lively motion, which was all the answer the ill-advised querist obtained.

“Wasn’t he asking you something?” said Melian, as they spun over the railway bridge above the station. The town lay beneath and behind; an old church tower just glimpsed above tall bare elms.

“I dare say. But if we are going to get home before you get chilly, we can’t stop to answer all sorts of idiotic questions.”

Even then the reply struck Melian as odd, less so perhaps than the change in her kinsman’s manner while making it. But she said:

“Before I get chilly. Why I’m wrapped up like—Shackleton, or Peary, or any of them. In your coat too. It was quite wrong of you to have insisted upon my wearing it, and I had plenty of wraps.”

“Had you? As a prologue to our time together child, I may as well tell you I am a man of fads. One is that of being skipper in my own ship. You obeyed orders, so there’s no more to be said.”

It was put so kindly, so pleasantly. The tone was everything, and again the girl felt a lump rise to her throat, for it reminded her all of her dead father. Just the sort of thing he would have said; just the sort of tone in which he would have said it.

Chapter Ten.

Of the Brightening of Heath Hover.

They had left the outskirts of the town behind, and were bowling along a tree-hung road, which in summer would have been a green tunnel. The brown woods stood out above the whitened landscape, sombre in their winter nakedness, but always beautiful, over beyond an open, snow powdered stubble. Then between coverts of dark firs, where pheasants crowed, flapping their way up to their nightly roost. Past a hamlet embedded in tall, naked trees, then more dark firwoods interstudded with birch where the heathery openings broke the uniform evergreen—then out again for a space—on a bit of heathery upland which would be glowing crimson in golden August.

“You can see around here for a bit,” said Mervyn, pointing with his whip. “Away there on the ridge, that tower is Lower Gidding, so called, presumably because Upper Gidding, ten miles away, is about two hundred feet lower down to the sea level. Beyond that last wooded ridge but one, is my shop—our shop I mean.”

“It’s lovely,” replied the girl looking round with animation, and taking in the whole landscape.

“Yes, perfectly lovely. And look. Here’s the sunset I told you we were going to get.”

On the north eastern sky line, an opaque bank of clouds had heaved up—a bank of clouds that seemed to bode another snowfall. The sun, sinking in a fiery bed, away in the cloudless west, was touching this—and lo, in a trice, the mountainous masses of the rising cloud-tier were first tinged, than bathed in a flood of glowing copper red. Between, the long tongues of dark woodland stood out from the whitened ground. The bark of a dog, from this or that distant farmhouse, came up clear on the silent distance, and then from this or that covert, arose the melodious hoot of owls, answering each other.

“What a picture!” cried the girl, turning an animated face upon her new

guardian. “Heavens, what a picture! And to think that this time yesterday I was staring at a row of hideous black chimney pots under a hideous murky sky. Not only yesterday, but day after day before! And—Uncle Seward, you *live* in the midst of *this*!”

Mervyn smiled to himself, then at her, and his smile was a very good one to behold.

“Yes, dear, I do,” he answered gently. “And now you are going to as well.”

Down a steep road between dark woods, then an opening. A long reach of ice cleft their depth; then a sudden quacking as several wild duck sprang upwards from an open hole by the sluice, and swished high above their heads.

“Wild duck, aren’t they?” cried the girl, turning her head to watch them, then looking up the frozen expanse. “Why it might be some lake in the middle of the backwoods of Canada, such as one reads about.”

“Yes, so it might. I can tell you you haven’t come into exactly a tame part, even in our southern counties, which reminds me that I didn’t sufficiently rub it into you that you would have to—well—er—rough it a bit.”

“If you had, that would have made it better still,” was the answer. “I prefer country places that are not too civilised.”

“That’s fortunate,” rejoined Mervyn with a pleased smile, “for you’ll be exactly suited as far as that goes, in my shack.”

Up another steep bit of road at a foot’s pace. It was quite dusk now, but a golden moon, at half, rising over the tree-tops, threw a glitter upon the frosty banks. Quite close by an owl hooted.

“Oh, but this is too lovely for anything,” cried Melian. “By the way, what on earth are people talking about when they talk about the hoot of an owl being dismal. Why, it’s melodious to a degree.”

“Great minds skip together, dear. That’s just what I think.”

In his own mind the speaker was thinking something else; thinking it too,

with a great glow of satisfaction. They would get on splendidly together. All her ideas, so far expressed, were the exact counterpart of his own. What a gold mine he had lighted on when he had opened Violet Clinock's letter but a couple of days back. Then he became aware that Melian had turned, with a quick movement, and was gazing at him with a curious—he even fancied half-startled—look.

"That was exactly one of father's expressions," she said slowly. "And—do you know, Uncle Seward, you *are* so like him."

"Am I, dear?" was the answer, made very gently. "All the better, because then I shall be all the more able, as far as possible, to replace him. But—here we are—at home."

The waggonette had topped the rise, and was now descending a similarly wood-fringed road. On the left front extended another long, narrow, triangular expanse of ice; set in its sombre, tree-framed encasing. Below the broad end of this a light or two gleamed.

Old Joe and his ancient spouse were there to receive them, and did so with alacrity. It was a tacit part of the bond that they were not to be required to remain at Heath Hover after dark, but on this occasion they were stretching a point; partly through motives of curiosity in that they were anxious to see what the new arrival was like; partly, that with the house well lighted up, and the bustle and stir of preparation, and the advent of some one young, and therefore presumably lively, on the scene, the idea of shadowy manifestations didn't seem in keeping somehow.

"Why, this is ripping," cried Melian as she obtained her first view of the old living-room. The deep, old-fashioned grate with its wide chimney was piled high with roaring logs, and a bright lamp on the table lighted up the low-beamed, whitewashed ceiling, and even the dark, red-papered walls. "Why, it's a typical old-world sort of place. Ought to have a ghost, and all that kind of thing."

At this remark the venerable Judy, who was hobbling about putting some finishing touches to the table, stopped and stared. Then, shaking her head, she hobbled out again.

“What’s the matter with the old party, Uncle Seward?” said Melian, whom this behaviour struck. But she looked up too soon—just in time to catch her uncle’s frown in fact. “Is there one?” she added suddenly, and pointedly.

“Good Heavens, child. Every blessed house that wasn’t built the day before yesterday, that isn’t reeking with raw plaster and new cement, is supposed to carry a ghost, especially in the country, and standing in lonely solitude in the middle of woods like this. Throw in a deep old-fashioned fireplace and some oak panelling and there—you’ve got your Christmas number at once.”

Telepathy may be bosh or it may not. At any rate, to Melian Seward, the lightness of her uncle’s tone, together with the annoyed look she had caught upon his face, and the sudden perturbation of the old woman at her remark, did not carry conviction. She felt certain that there was some story attaching to the place.

“What a jolly old door,” she remarked, catching sight of the one in the corner, half hidden as it was, behind a curtain. “Why it looks quite old. Oh, but it is good,” going over to it with her quick, rapid habit of movement. “And the lock! Why it’s splendid. What is it, Uncle Seward? Sixteenth century, at least?”

Mervyn looked at her, and strove not to look at her queerly.

“I don’t know what date it is,” he said. “It leads down to an old vault-like cellar, which probably was used for storing wine. It isn’t now, because I’m too poor to have any wine to store. At least, I mean, darling,”—catching the expression with which she looked up—“I can’t afford to run wine cellars, but,”—and then came in a little embarrassment—“I’m not quite too poor to be able to offer a home to my—stranded little niece, shall we say?”

The additional term of endearment had struck her. She looked at him in the lamplight, standing erect and beautiful.

“Dear Uncle Seward,” she said. “I can’t say anything—except that—I don’t know how it is—there seems to have come something since I met you—since I heard from you. Why, you bring back my dear old father to

me at every turn. You are so like him. You have the same expressions—everything. And yet—you were not even brothers."

"Cousins, though. Nearly the same thing. Kiss me, child. You haven't yet. You know—all the public squash on the station platform."

She did, and in the act it seemed as if her dead father—dead under the impression that he could serve her interests best by so dying—were alive and speaking within this room. Even in the quiet, contained voice, she seemed to recognise his.

It may have been imagination, but Mervyn seemed to think she could not withdraw her attention from the old nail-studded, shaded door in the corner. She kept looking at it even while they were talking. He remembered his vigil on the night of the rescue. Heavens! was this beastly, deluding mesmeristic effect going to hold her too, now at the first few minutes of her arrival? Then a diversion occurred. A cry from Melian suddenly drew his attention.

"What's this? Oh you little sweet. Here come to me, little pooge-pooge!"

The little black kitten had suddenly landed itself, without notice, upon the white tablecloth, where it squatted, purring.

"Oh, you sweet little woolly ball—where did you come from?" cried Melian, picking up the tiny creature and stuffing it into the hollow of her cheek and neck. "Uncle Seward, did you get this on purpose for me? Tell me."

Her cheeks were pink with animation, and her blue eyes shone.

"No, dear. That's a special child of my own, since it's little life began. It is with me always. I'm glad you've taken to it."

"Taken to it? I should think so. Now you're going to be jealous, Uncle Seward. I'm going to appropriate it. Oh, what a sweet little beast!" holding it up under the armpits. But the kitten growled expostulatingly.

"'Beast'? But it's human," laughed Mervyn. "Well, you shall have it, dear. Poogie—there's your new owner. See? My nose is clean out of joint. I

can take a back seat."

Again Melian started, and momentarily grew grave.

"Poogie." That too was one of her father's expressions. She looked again at her uncle. Bright as the lamplight was, still it was artificial light, and under it the likenesss was more and more emphasised, in fact, startling.

"Come upstairs, child, and I'll show you your room. It's right next to mine, so you've only to bang on the wall—if you want—I mean—er—if you were to get nervous in the middle of the night, in a strange place."

"But what on earth should I get nervous about?" exclaimed the girl, in round-eyed wonderment.

"Oh, nothing. But the sex is given that way, so I only thought I'd tell you, that's all. Now, you can find your way down, and we'll have dinner when you're ready."

Left alone, Melian proceeded to look round the room. It was small but cosy, with two cupboards let into the wall. A bright fire burned in the grate, and four lighted candles made a full and cheerful glow. The window she noticed was rather small, and looking out of this, under the light of the moon, she again took stock of the house. The windows at the projecting ends, unoccupied, seemed to stare lifelessly. The house was too much below the level of the sluice to allow a view of the pond, but the outline of the woods towered up against the frosty stars, and the hoot of owls and the high up quacking of flighting duck, sounded upon the stillness. A feeling of intense peace, of intense thankfulness came over her. She had found a very haven of rest she felt already, and her newly acquired relative—well—she was sure she was going to get very fond of him indeed.

Soon she betook herself downstairs, and cosy and bright indeed the room looked. A roast fowl lay temptingly upturned and surrounded by shreds of bacon, and the potatoes were beautifully white and flowery. The little black kitten was playing riotously with a cork tied to the end of a string which always hung from the back of one of the armchairs.

"Well, child, I hope you've brought an appetite with you," said Mervyn, as

they sat down. “You’ll have to be fed up. ‘Plain but wholesome,’ you know, as the school prospectuses used to say.”

“Yes, I’ve brought one. I feel miles better already.” And then she talked on—telling him about her life of late, and its ups and downs. But of her earlier life she seemed to avoid mention.

And Mervyn, encouraging her to talk, was furtively watching her. The animation which lit up her face, bringing with it a tinge of colour, the gleam of the golden hair in the lamplight, the movement of the long, white, artistic fingers—there was no point in the entrancing picture that escaped him. Indeed, he had been lucky beyond compare, he decided, when Violet Clinock’s letter had found him; and again and again as he looked at Melian, he made up his mind that she was there for good, unless she got tired of it and of him and insisted on leaving. But he would not think of that to-night.

They got up at last, and Mervyn drew two big chairs to the fire. Then he lighted his pipe. The kitten in the most matter of course way jumped upon Melian’s lap and curled up there.

“There you are,” laughed her uncle. “My nose is out of joint the first thing. It used to prefer me for a couch, but I don’t quarrel with its taste.”

So they sat on and chatted cosily. At last, bedtime came. Then Melian remarked on the circumstance that the table hadn’t been cleared.

“No. It won’t be, till to-morrow morning,” was the reply. “Old Judy has taken herself off long ago. I told you you’d have to rough it—eh? You see she and old Joe are the only people I can get to do my outlying work, and they hang out in a cottage the other side of the hill—beyond the first pond we passed. The young ones won’t stay on the place—find it too lonely, they say. So there you are.”

“Yes. I’m going to turn to and do things,” answered Melian decisively.

“Well, never mind about beginning now,” he said, lighting her candle and preceding her to her room. “Look, here’s a handbell. If you want anything, or are feeling lonely or ‘nervy’ in the night, ring it like the mischief—and I’ll be there. Good-night, dear.”

“Good-night, Uncle Seward,” and she kissed him affectionately.

Mervyn returned to the living-room and re-lighted his pipe. His gaze wandered to the shadowy door in the corner. Was its tradition really and completely upset? That strange manifestation, as to which he was hardly yet prepared to swear to as entirely an optical delusion—had presaged good to somebody, in that by keeping him awake he had been able to save the life of the stranger. But then the stranger had died immediately afterwards, under mysterious circumstances, and had this not befallen why then he, John Seward Mervyn would never have become aware of the existence or propinquity of his niece. And what a find that was—a young, bright, beautiful presence to irradiate the shadows of this gloomy old haunted grange. No room for any melancholic, fanciful imaginings with that about.

And yet—and yet—it may be that he was not quite easy in his mind. Not for nothing had he shown her that clearly ringing handbell, and laid emphasis on the unhesitating use of it.

Chapter Eleven.

A Slip on a Stone.

The morning broke, bright and clear, one of those rare winter mornings without a cloud in the blue, and the sun making additional patterns through the frost facets on the window pane. And the said sun had not very long since risen.

Mervyn looked out of the window; the house faced due east and caught the first glory of the morning sun—when there was any to catch, and to-day there was. The frosted pines glistened and gleamed with it, so too did the earth, with its newly laid coating of crystals. But in the midst of this setting was a picture.

Melian was coming down the path. A large hooded cloak was wrapped round her, but she had nothing on her head, and the glory of her golden hair shone like fire in the new born, clear rays. The kitten, a woolly ball of black fluffiness, was squatted upon her shoulder, and she was singing to herself in a full, clear voice. He noted her straight carriage, and the swing of her young, joyous, elastic gait. A picture indeed! And this bright, beautiful, joyous child, was going to belong to him henceforward—to him, all alone. No one else in the wide world had the shadow of a claim upon her. She had come to him out of sordid surrounding of depression and want—yes, it would soon have come to that, judging from the account she had given of herself. Well, she had fallen upon the right place, and at the right time.

He dressed quickly. He heard her enter the house, and old Judy's harsh croaky tones mingling with the clear melodious ones. Then a silvery rippling laugh, then another. He remembered old Judy could be funny at times in her dry, cautious old rustic way. John Seward Mervyn felt the times had indeed changed for him. He felt years and years younger, under the bright spell of this youthful influence in the gloomy and shunned old house.

"Well dear!" he cried gaily, coming into the room. "You don't look much of the 'flu' patient slowly convalescing. What sort of an ungodly early time

did you get up?”

“Oh Uncle Seward, I’ve had such fun. I’ve been out all up the pond, and this little poogie had a romp all over the ice. Then it rushed up a tree after a squirrel, and they sat snarling at each other at the end of a thin bough, and the squirrel jumped to another tree, but the poogie wasn’t taking any. Were you, pooge-pooge?” And she squeezed the little woolly ball into her face and neck.

“Well, it won’t take you long to get on your legs again,” said Mervyn, looking admiringly at the perfect picture she presented. “What shall we do with you to-day? Go for a long drive—or what? Well, I don’t know. The old shandradan I brought you here in isn’t too snug for a convalescing invalid, and it’s the best I’ve got. But first we’ll have breakfast.” And he hailed Judy, with an order to hurry on that repast.

“Oh, that be hanged for a yarn, Uncle Seward. I’m not a convalescing anything. I’ve convalesced already, in this splendid air and surroundings. Let’s go out somewhere. Do let’s.”

She had clasped both hands round his arm and the blue eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

“All right. You shall be Queen of the May, to-day at any rate. But I think we mustn’t overdo it at the start. We’ll lunch early, and then start on a rambling round of exploration—equipped with plenty of wraps.”

“And we may get another ripping sunset like yesterday,” she exclaimed.

“You are extraordinarily fond of Nature’s effects, child. What else appeals to you?”

“Old stones?”

“What?”

“Old stones. Ruined castles—churches—Roman remains—everything of that kind.”

Mervyn emitted a long and expressive whistle.

“Good Lord! but you’ve come to the right shop for that,” he said. “Why this countryside just grows them. All sorts of old mouldy monuments, in musty places, just choking with dry rot. Eh? That what you mean?”

“That’s just what I do mean.”

“Oh Lord?”

He was looking at her, quizzically ruthful. He foresaw himself being dragged into all sorts of weird places; hoary old churches, whose interiors would suggest the last purpose on earth to that for which they had been constructed, and reeking of dry rot—half an ancient arch in the middle of a field which would require wading through a swamp to get at—and so on. But while he looked at her he was conscious that if she had expressed a wish to get a relic chipped out of the moon, he would probably have given serious thought to the feasibility of that achievement.

“But that sort of thing’s all so infernally ugly,” he said.

“Is it? Ugly? Old Norman architecture ugly! What next?”

Mervyn whistled again.

“I don’t know anything about Norman, or any other architecture,” he said, with a laugh. “I only know that when I run into any Johnnies who do, or think they do—they fight like the devil over it, and vote each other crass ignoramuses. How’s that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Let’s go and look at something of the kind this afternoon. Shall we?”

“No, my child. Not if I know it. You wait till you’re clean through this ailment of yours before I sanction you going into any damp old vault to look at gargoyles.”

Melian went off into a rippling peal.

“Gargoyles don’t live in vaults, Uncle Seward. They live on roofs, and towers.”

“Do they? Well, wherever they live, God’s good open English country is going to be the thing for you to-day, anyhow.”

“All safe. The other will keep.”

Mervyn dawdled over breakfast, absolutely contrary to his wont. His wont was to play with it; now he ate it. This bright presence turned a normally gloomy necessity into a fairy feast.

“Come and let’s potter round a bit,” he said, soon after they had done.

“Rather.”

Melian swung on her large hooded cloak, and they went up the step path to the sluice. The sheen of ice lay before them, running up in a far triangle to the distance of the woods.

“By the way, do you know how to skate?” said Mervyn.

“Yes, but I’m not great at it, and it makes my ankles horribly stiff.”

“Well, I sometimes take a turn or two, just to keep in practice. But it’s awful slow work all alone. If you like, dear, I’ll get you a pair from Clancehurst and you can take a turn with me.”

“It wouldn’t be worth while I think,” she answered. “In point of fact I’m feeling rather too much of a worm for hard exercise just now, and the ice will probably vanish any day.”

They wandered on, over the crisp frozen woodland path, and then he pointed out the scene of the stranger’s immersion and rescue. Melian looked at it with vivid interest.

“It must have been a lively undertaking, Uncle Seward,” she commented. “And that you should only just have heard his call for help? And then—him dying afterwards. Poor man, I wonder who he was.”

“So do I—did rather—for you can’t go on wondering for ever. But that idiot, Nashby, has still more than a suspicion that I murdered him. By the way, Melian, you remember I said there were reasons why I couldn’t

come up to Town to fetch you; well, there it is. I've been practically under police supervision ever since. If I had gone up to London they'd have concluded I'd bolted, and started all Scotland Yard on the spot. How's that?"

"How's that? They must be idiots."

"Yes. That's near the 'bull.' But Nashby, though an excellent county police inspector, imagines himself a very real Sherlock Holmes whose light is hidden in a bushel called Clancehurst; consequently there being no earthly motive for me making away with the stranger, therefore I must have made away with him—according to Nashby."

"But, Uncle Seward. Do you really mean to say you're suspected of murdering the man?"

"Well, more than half—by Nashby. I don't know that any one else shares his opinion. In fact, I don't think they do. Look. Here's the place where I hauled him out."

They had come near the head of the pond. In the weeks of frost that had supervened there were still traces in the ice of that midnight tragedy. Melian looked at them with wide eyed wonderment.

"Come along," said Mervyn extending a hand. "It's quite safe—from seven to nine inches thick. We can walk all over it now, can even walk back on it instead of through the wood."

And they did; but first they went up it to where it narrowed to its head, where the feeding stream trickled in. Two wild ducks rose with alarmed quacking, and winnowed away at a surprising velocity over the tree-tops.

"There'd have been a good chance if I'd got a gun," remarked Mervyn. "I come along at dusk sometimes and bag a brace. Old Sir John Tullibard up at the Hall gave me a sort of carte blanche to shoot anything in that line, and told the keeper to cut me in when the pheasants wanted thinning down. He's a decent old chap, but isn't at home much. To put it nakedly he's a regular absentee landlord, but his people seem snug enough."

“The Hall? What sort of place is it? What’s it called?”

Mervyn laughed.

“Why I do believe you’re scenting old stones already. Well, it’s rather a jolly old place, Plane House it’s called. Old Tullibard’s my landlord.”

“Good. We must have a look over Plane House.”

“Easy enough. If the old man comes over we’ll go and dine there. I do that when he is here, but that’s not often. He’s an old Indian too, though we weren’t in the same part. Now he prefers hanging out on the Riviera. I don’t. Old England’s good enough for me. Look at this for instance.”

She did look, and thoroughly agreed. They were walking down the frozen surface of the pond as on a broad highway. The gossamer branches of the leafless trees shone in the sunlight, picked out in myriad frosted, scintillating patterns of indescribable delicacy against the cloudless blue of the winter sky, and, in between, the dark foliage of firs. Now and then a slide of snow from these, dislodged by the focussed rays of the midday sun, thudded to the ground, with a ghostly break upon the silence of the woodland. But the air—crisp, invigorating—Melian’s cheeks were aglow with it, and the blue eyes, thus framed, shone forth in all the animation begotten of the scene and surroundings. Mervyn stared, in whole-souled admiration, likewise wonderment.

“Well done, my ‘flu’ convalescent,” he cried, dropping an arm round her shoulders. “You’ve come to the right sort of hospital and no mistake.”

“Yes, I have indeed,” she answered, becoming suddenly grave, as she thought of the all pervading murk and the blackened vista of chimney stacks. Then, as they gained the broad end of the pond, and she climbed lightly over the fence on to the road that ran along the top of the sluice —“What an awfully picturesque old place Heath Hover looks from here, Uncle Seward. By the way, it’s a curious name. What does it come from?”

“Ah—ah! An enquiring mind? I suppose that goes on all fours with the love of old stones—eh? Heath I take it is after the surroundings. When you get up beyond these woods you’re on heathery slopes, which glow red in summer, so I suppose they called it after that; the other in local

parlance is something coldish or damp, and this house is situated that way in all conscience. So there you are."

"How ripping, I would like to see that same red glow."

"Well, and you will," he answered. "But you'll have to wait for it, like for everything else. And summer's none too near just now."

They were halfway down the path from the sluice by now. Melian had halted to take in the view, her eyes wide open and fairly revelling in it. Mervyn did not fail to notice that one foot rested on the largish round stone which covered something—which constituted the tombstone of —*something*. And then, whether it was that the stone was slippery with the frost, her footing suddenly failed, and she would have fallen, had he not caught her in a firm grasp.

"Steady up, child," he laughed, as he set her on her feet again. "Why you haven't got your ice legs even yet, although we've walked down that long frozen pond."

She laughed too. But the coincidence struck him. Why on earth should that have been the one stone of all those around, on which she should have chanced to trip? It was significant. Further, as they resumed their way, he noticed that the stone had been displaced, though ever so little. Even that circumstance sent an uneasy chill through him. It had been firm enough before. Could the frost have loosened it? Or—could any other agency? And then came the sound of approaching footsteps on the road above.

"Good-day, sir," and the passing man saluted, respectfully enough. "Sharp, middlin' weather, this, sir?"

"It is," he answered, with a genial nod, and the man passed on.

"You remember what I told you about being under police surveillance," he said as they entered the house—old Judy could be dimly heard grumbling at her ancient proprietor through the back of the kitchen door.

"Yes," answered the girl wonderingly.

“Well that was one of Nashby’s pickets.”

“What? That old yokel who just passed?”

Mervyn nodded, with a whimsical smile on his face.

“But what in the world does he think he’s going to discover?”

“Ah, exactly. Well, that’s his job, not mine. Only he’s wasting a precious lot of valuable time.”

All the same the speaker was just a trifle—and unaccountably—disposed to uneasiness. What a curious coincidence it was, for instance, that his niece should have suddenly slipped and so nearly fallen, headlong, on that very stone that custodied this infernal thing! Then again, that the plain clothes man, with his unmistakable imprint of Scotland Yard, and his transparent affectation of local speech and dialect, should have happened upon the spot at the very moment of that coincidence! There was nothing in coincidence. Coincidence spelt accident:—sheer accident. Still, this one set John Seward Mervyn thinking—thinking more than a bit.

Chapter Twelve.

The Shadow in the Place.

A fortnight had gone since Melian's arrival at Heath Hover, and she had picked up to such an extent that both she and her uncle found it difficult to realise that she had been seriously ill at all. He took her for drives, always carefully wrapped up, and she had revelled in the beauties of the surrounding country, winter as it was—the wide vistas of field and wood, and the line of downs, sometimes near, sometimes far, stretching east and west as far as the eye could travel. But he absolutely refused, with a bracing sturdiness, to allow any practical incursions into the domain of archaeology.

"That will keep," he declared. "Old stones spell damp. You've got to steer clear of that for some time to come."

Then, as she got stronger, they had walked too, and the breezy, open uplands, contrasting with fragrant wood, did their share of the tonic. But this was not to last. A damp, muggy thaw set in, and the trees and hedges wept, the day through, under the unbroken murk of a wholly depressing sky; and you wanted very thick boots for underfoot purposes. Mervyn began to look anxiously at his charge.

"I'm afraid you'll be getting awfully fed up with this, dear," he said one morning, when the thin drizzle and the drip-drip from bare, leafless bough and twig seemed rather more depressing than ordinarily. "What can be done for you? Frankly I'm too poor to take you away to a more sunshiny climate—or I would, like a shot. For my part I'm used to this sort of thing, and it doesn't 'get upon' me any. There was a time when it would have, but that time's gone. But for you—why it's devilish rough."

Then Melian had reassured him—had abundantly reassured him. She didn't find it heavy, she declared—not she. Why, on top of her experience of bearleading a brace of utterly uninteresting and unengaging children—and being at the beck and call of their detestable underbred mother, this was ideal. And she somehow or other managed to convey that her sense of the improvement was not merely a material one. Did they not get on

splendidly together? Had they not any number of ideas in common—those they had not, only serving to create variety by giving rise to more or less spirited but always jocose arguments? Rough on her? Dull for her? It was nothing of the sort, she declared with unambiguous emphasis. And the fascination of the open country, even with the weeping woodlands and soggy, miry underfoot, was coming more and more over her, she further declared. And her uncle was hugely gratified, more so than he cared to realise. This bright young presence lightening his lonely existence from morn till night—how on earth would he be able to do without it again? Those long rambles, not by himself now, beset as they had been with uncheering thoughts of the past and a less cheering vista of the future; the now cosy snug evenings by his own fireside, with the after-dinner pipe, listening to the girl's bright talk and entering into her ideas while the lamplight gleamed upon her golden head and animated eyes—and she herself made up such a picture sitting framed in the big armchair opposite—the little black fluffy kitten curled up on her lap. Of a truth life held something yet for him after all, if only this were going to last. But now he said:

"How about getting that nice girl you were chumming with—and she must be a nice girl from the way she wrote about you—down here to stop with you a bit, dear? Make a kind of relief from me, you know. Always stewed up from morning till night with an old fogey—the same old fogey at that—can't be altogether lively."

"Violet? She couldn't come, if she wanted to ever so," was the answer. "She's entirely dependent on her job—and, as it was, her people cut up rusty if she chucked it for a day or two when I was ill. What beasts people are—aren't they. Uncle Seward?"

"We shan't quarrel on that question," answered Mervyn, sending out a long puff of smoke, and meditatively watching it resolve itself into very perfect rings in mid air. "A very large proportion are, and that just the proportion which could best afford not to be. Doesn't she ever get any time off then? Holidays?"

"She'll get about four days off at Easter time. It would be jolly to get her down here then, poor old Violet. She does work, and she's a good sort. It's precious lucky I had her to go to when I did."

“Precious lucky for me too.”

“Look here, Uncle Seward,” said the girl, gravely. “Don’t talk any more about old fogeys and it being heavy and slow for me, and all that. I don’t want to be disrespectful, but it’s—er—it’s bosh.”

Mervyn burst into a wholehearted laugh. The answer, and, above all, the look which accompanied it, the tone in which it was made, relieved him beyond measure.

“Is it? Very well, little one. We won’t talk any more—bosh. How’s that?”

“‘That’ is. So we won’t. Yes, we’ll get her down here at Easter,”—and then the girl broke off suddenly and looked graver still.

“Listen to me, Uncle Seward, and how I am running on,” she said. “Any one would think I had come here to live, instead of for a rest until I can find another job. And Easter is a long way off, and—”

“And? What then?” he interrupted. “Of course you have come here to live. Do you think I’m going to let you go wasting your young life bearleading a lot of abominable brats while I’ve got a shack that’ll hold the two of us? Well, I’m not, then. How’s *that*?”

Melian looked embarrassed, and felt it.

“Uncle Seward,” she urged at last. “You said you were—poor—more than once. Well, is it likely I’m going to sponge on you for all time? It’s delightful to be here with you, while I’m picking up again, but—”

“‘But’,”—and again he interrupted. “My dear child, I see through it all. You are going on the tack of the up-to-date girl, wanting to be independent. There’s a sort of grandiloquent, comforting smack about that good old word ‘independent,’ isn’t there? Well, you can be just as independent as you like here. You can take entire charge. You can order me about as you want to—I don’t say I shall obey, mind—but I shan’t complain. Well, if you go bearleading some woman’s cubs they won’t do the first, and they’ll do the last *ad lib*. Now then. Which is the lesser evil?”

Melian laughed outright. That was so exactly his brusque and to the point

way of putting things. He went on, now very gently.

“I am getting an old man now, child, and I have led a very lonely life. In my old age it promises to be lonelier still. You are alone too. Is it mere chance that brings us together? But if you think you have a mission, may it not conceivably be one to look after the old instead of the young. So now—there you are.”

The voice was even, matter-of-fact sounding. But underlying it was a note of feeling—of real pathos.

“When I emphasised the fact of being poor,” the speaker went on, “I meant that I was in no position to indulge in luxuries, or outside jollification, like going abroad, for instance, to escape English winters, and so on. But you can see for yourself how this show is run, and that there’s plenty of everything and no stint, and what’s warm and snug and comfy for one is for two. That’s where the ‘poverty’ begins and ends.”

The girl got up and came over to him.

“Uncle Seward, I will stay with you as long as ever you want me,” she said gravely, placing her hands upon his shoulders.

“Hurrah! This old shack’s going to look up now,” he cried. “I’ll see if I can’t beat up some one young about the country side, to make things livelier for you, dear. And then, when it gets warmer and springlike, we’ll have such romps all over the country. Why these rotten old gargoyles with their noses rubbed off—you’ll soon know them all by heart, be able to write a book about them, and all that sort of thing. Can you ride a bicycle, child?”

“Rather, but—”

“Oh well, I’ll get one for you. I’ve got mine stowed away. I never use it in winter, but at other times it’s handy forgetting about. Now we’ll have rare romps around together.”

She looked at him in something of astonishment. He was talking quite excitedly, quite loudly in fact, for him.

“Why, you’re scaring the poogie,” she cried, with a laugh. “Look. It has

gone under the table."

The little black kitten had dived under the table, and thence now began to emit a series of growls. Melian was puzzled.

"What's the matter with it?" she said. "Oh, I suppose it hears another poogie out in front, and resents it. But it's generally so placid, even then."

But to Mervyn's mind came an uncomfortable chill. He had known just such a demonstration before, but on one occasion only. And now it was behaving in exactly the same way. Its shrill growlings even increased. Melian dived into the shadow to coax it out, then reappeared, holding the tiny creature aloft.

"Poogie. What's the matter with you?" she cried. "Be quiet now, and go seeps again."

But though it curled itself on her lap, it showed no intention of going to sleep. Instead, it lifted its little fluffy head and growled again, though not so furiously as it had done when alone.

"I do believe it's afraid of something," said the girl, wonderingly. "It must be something outside. Look. It's staring towards the window."

Mervyn could not for the life of him account for it, but that a cold shiver was running through his whole being, there could be no doubt. His back was to the window, the blinds were down and there was no draught. But right under this window, and against the wall, was the couch upon which the dead man had fallen asleep—never to wake again. And in this direction the kitten was now staring—and growling; growling just as it had growled on that night of the opening of the door. And, more marvellous still, a feeling was upon him that he dare not look round, dare not turn his head and follow the little creature's set, unquiet glance—and that in the thoroughly warmed and now cheerful room. But Melian's voice and movement broke the spell.

"What is it, poogie," she was saying, advancing to the window, and incidentally to the couch. "Another poogie outside or a dog—Oh, you little beast!"

She had broken off suddenly, dropping the kitten on to the table, under which it promptly dived and crouched, growling again. For it had grown perfectly frantic as she was carrying it to the window and had struck its claws into her hand, drawing blood.

Mervyn sprang to his feet.

“What? It has scratched you?” he cried, taking the long white hand and examining it concernedly.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” laughed the girl.

“Nothing or not, we’ll bathe it a bit,” he said, going over to the sideboard, and dashing some water into a tumbler. “Any sort of wound should be bathed at once, just in case there might be something left in it,” and he proceeded to perform that process then and there.

“Oh, it’s all safe,” laughed the girl. “Poor little poogie! I suppose it was scared over something and had to get away at any price. I’m dead cert, it didn’t mean it.”

“No—no,” assented Mervyn. “Cats are extraordinarily ‘nervy’ things. I believe they’ve a sight more imagination than they’re given credit for. It’s quite likely it was aware of something outside to which it had an objection, a stoat perhaps or even a badger. Now a dog would have barked the house down, but there’d have been no scare.”

“Of course. By the way, Uncle Seward, I wonder you don’t keep a dog or two. They are such jolly beasts to have—especially in a place like this.”

“I’ve tried it, and they’ve disappeared. They get into the coverts you know, and then—! I don’t care to keep one always on a chain. It’s beastly rough luck on them.”

He had tried it, and the dogs had disappeared, even as he had said. They had done so, however, on their own initiative. But he did not tell her this.

Yet it struck him that she must instinctively have grasped—or been affected by—something of the “influence” which at times seemed to

haunt the place. She, too, now kept looking towards the blind-drawn window, and that not in her natural way. So far he had guarded her from any rumours from outside as to its sinister repute; and, as we have said, had threatened the old couple with the last extremity if they should let go anything. And now, just as he was congratulating himself that she would settle down quite happily and contentedly, comes this untoward mysterious making towards upset. And now, all at once, she had grown quite grave, quite subdued.

“Uncle Seward,” she said, suddenly. “Do you remember what I said the night I arrived—that this place ought to be haunted?”

“Yes, dear, and I remember my answer—that every place not screechingly new, etc, etc, is supposed to be.”

“Well, is it?”

The directness of the question was a trifle staggering, coming just when it did.

“Well, I’ve been in it some months—all alone too, mind you,” he answered, “and I’ve never seen anything. All alone, mind,” he reiterated, “through long, dark winter evenings and nights. Of course, that poor chap coming to grief here so mysteriously, might give rise to all sorts of yarns among the yokels. But then, where is the house—built longer ago than last year—in which some one or other hasn’t died? No, child; you mustn’t bother your little gold head over such boshy ideas as that. And if you listen to all the old women of both sexes round the country side, why half of them are afraid to cross their village street after dark, unless some one invites them to the pub.”

She laughed; yet somehow or other her laugh did not ring quite spontaneous.

“Of course,” she said. “But—”

“But—what?”

“Oh, nothing. As you say, it’s astonishing how one’s imagination can play the fool with one. Tell me, Uncle Seward, do you believe in that sort of

thing?”

“What? In imagination? Of course I do.”

“No—no. I mean in places being haunted, and apparitions and all that?”

“No. Certainly not. The Christmas numbers have a great deal to answer for in that line. Surroundings, solitude, the state of your nerves—the weather, even—all do the rest. You can get yourself into a state which I believe theologians call ‘the dispositions’—which done into plain English means that if you want to see a thing, you can, in the long run, bring yourself to see it—in imagination.”

“Only in imagination. You’re sure you mean that, Uncle Seward?”

“I should rather think I was sure. Go to bed now, child,”—she had lighted her candle—“and chuck out all that sort of disquieting bosh. Why, we are as jolly here together as we can be, and we are going to be ever so much jollier. So chuck these imaginings—by the way, just because the little poogie starts growling at nothing in particular. Eh? Sounds rather absurd doesn’t it?”

“It does rather,” she said, with a laugh as they bade each other good-night. But there was just a subtle something about her laugh, about her tone of voice, even about the expression of her eyes, that left her uncle in a state of vague uneasiness. Something must have occurred to alarm her; but then women were “skeery” creatures—especially where the imaginative element came in. But for all that he didn’t want even this to come in where Melian was concerned.

He sat on, after she had gone, sat on over the cosy fire, thinking. He could hear her footsteps overhead as she crossed and recrossed her room—could hear her sweet young voice trilling forth snatches of all sorts of melodies, and again he blessed the chance that had sent her here to him in his loneliness.

He lighted another pipe, and tilted a final “nightcap” out of the square bottle at his elbow. The little black kitten jumped lightly up on to his shoulder and rubbed its soft little woolly shape against his cheek, then dropped down on to his knees and sat purring.

What could have occurred to set up a scare in the child, he wondered? Something had—obviously—but he had purposely evaded pressing the point for fear of making it too important. Well, if it came to getting on her nerves, he would, by hook or by crook get her away—at any rate for a time. As a matter of hard fact he had grown attached to Heath Hover—strangely so—and he occupied it practically rent free, that was for the sheer keeping of it up; and this was a consideration. Also he enjoyed a fair modicum of sport—likewise free. But if it were to come to making a choice between this and his niece—why by now he knew that there would be no sort of difficulty in deciding.

He dropped more and more into the dreamy—and rather contented—stage. He was looking forward to a very pleasurable time before him when the year should grow and mellow into glorious spring and golden summer. The sound of footsteps overhead had ceased now, and that for some time. She was asleep, and had forgotten her uncanny imaginings. He found himself looking forward to the morrow when she would be with him again—her sweet, quick, animated face, and the golden hair shining in the sunlight.

And then?—What was this? A sudden pounding of feet overhead—a strange, half stifled cry—a rush down the old creaky stairs. In a fraction of a second he was at the door, and as he opened it, framed against the dark background of passage and staircase, Melian was standing, her face set with a strange horror that seemed to turn the spectator’s blood to ice, the blue eyes dilating in a wild stare, as though they saw—or had seen—something not of the earth earthly.

Chapter Thirteen.

The Stone again.

“Well? What is it, dear? Forgotten something?”

With an effort he had put on a light, matter-of-fact tone. He pretended not to notice her perturbation.

“No. But—”

She looked genuinely distressed, worse still—genuinely frightened. She almost pushed past him in her anxiety to get into the full light, and he noticed a quick movement of half turning the head as though to look behind her.

“But—what? I think it’s that bit of fried plum pudding; still, the touch of burnt brandy on it should have counteracted its effects,” he went on, keeping up the rôle. “Nightmare of course. And our solemn discussion before you turned in would make that way.”

“No, no,” and she shook her head, decisively. “I wish it was. As sure as I sit here, Uncle Seward, there was a Something in the room. I heard it—first—heard it moving, but for the life of me I dared not move myself, not even to light the candle. It was the sound of steps—of light steps—coming towards the bed. Oh, it was horrible—awful?” she broke off, with a quick, scared glance around as though still expecting to see something. “And then—wait a bit,” seizing him by the wrists. “Something cold and clammy touched my face, just touched it—like the feel of dead fingers. I could see something shadowy too in the light of the fire—and then I just dashed out of bed and came straight down here.”

“Melian, pull yourself together child,” he said gently. “You’ve had a bad dream, coming on top of what we were talking about.” But the look on her face was that of one who had had a very bad scare indeed, and somehow Mervyn had been under the impression that his niece was the sort of girl who would take a great deal of scaring. “Here, put this down. It’ll pull you together.”

“This” was a glass of port, which he had got out of the sideboard. She sipped a little, and looked as if she didn’t like it, then a little more, and felt better.

“That’s right,” he went on. “Now, look here, you’ve been using that room for over a fortnight, and have never thought of bothering about anything of the kind. Why I slept in it myself for several nights before you came.”

He had meant the assurance to be reassuring, but hardly had he made it than Mervyn saw he had made a false step.

“But why did you sleep in it, Uncle Seward?” said the girl, quickly.

“Eh? Why to see that it was comfortable—not damp and all that sort of thing.”

He wondered if she accepted this explanation. In his heart he doubted it.

“The cold touch on your face was probably a bat,” he went on. “Do you sleep with your window open?”

“Oh yes, always.”

“There you are then. I think we’ve got at the solution. Now let’s go straight up and look for the bat.”

He had as yet not gauged the extent of his niece’s knowledge of natural history, and would have given much to have had a real live bat in his possession at that moment, that he might privily have set it loose when they gained the room. She, however, seemed not inclined to question the probability of bats hawking around at large in what was nearly mid-winter!

“Now,” he said, holding up the light, and making a careful inspection of the room, “we’ll find him probably, hanging on somewhere in the corner. No,” after an exhaustive search. “Oh well, he’s probably gone out by the way he came. Better keep the window nearly up to the top—then he can’t get back again.”

“Do you think it was really that, Uncle Seward?” Melian asked.

“Why of course,” he answered with the uneasy consciousness of skating on thin ice. “Unless it was a common or house mouse which had found its way in through somewhere. But now you go to bed again, child, and I’ll come up and turn in too. Then you’ll know there’s some one right near you, and all you’ve got to do is to knock on the partition in case you get another scare. It’s not a very thick one, and I shall hear at once. But you mustn’t get another scare, if only that there’s nothing on earth to get scared at. Look—you can see all over the room now. It’s just an ordinary room—old, but with no secret panels or anything of that kind, and I’m only just the other side of that partition. You’ll sleep like a humming top now, I should think.”

“I believe I will,” she answered, feeling more reassured by his tone of decisive confidence, the recent glass of port, to one unaccustomed, contributing largely to that end. “Tell me, Uncle Seward, do you think me an awful fool? I wouldn’t like that?”

“My dear child, of course I don’t. All women get nervy at times—not only women either—for the rest the plum pudding, *and* the subject of conversation. Now good-night, darling, you’ll be as jolly as Punch in the morning. And remember, there’s only the partition between us.”

Even as her uncle had predicted, the girl laid her head on the pillow perfectly reassured and calmed, and in no time was breathing softly and evenly in a dreamless sleep. But this did not fall to Mervyn’s lot. The incident had banished all sleep from his mind. He had laughed off the situation, and effectually soothed Melian—in fact he was surprised to think how completely he had succeeded. But what if something of the sort recurred, and he found that it got too much upon the girl’s nerves, and that, too, just as he flattered himself that everything was going on so well? There were reasons why he did not want to leave Heath Hover; reasons over and above his undoubted attachment to the place—and they were very vital reasons indeed; perhaps not wholly unconnected with Inspector Nashby.

He put up the window sash and leaned out. The night, was wild and rather heavy, and a moist earthy odour came up from the saturation of the fallen leaves in the wet woodland. Away on the bank, up towards the head of the long pond, a fox barked several times. He liked the sound, he

liked all the sounds of the lonely night, and when an owl floated out on noiseless pinions and hooted beneath the murky sky—he could just make out its shadowy shape—that too, fitted in with his mood. There was a moon, a feeble one, and concealed behind the prevailing mistiness, but in such light as it afforded he could pick out the boardings which held up the steps of the footpath leading up to the sluice. And on one of these the round stone stood out just discernible.

Just discernible! To his gaze—to his then mood—it seemed the one thing discernible—it and the thing that it held—the thing that it entombed. And the pointed roundness of that thing seemed to rise from the earth and gleam dull white in the lack-lustre of the night.

There it had lain for weeks, and for weeks, almost nightly, as now, he had gazed out upon the tomb of it—just as he was doing now—with a strange, uneasy, but wholly compelling fascination. Why had he left it there all this time? Any chance movement, on anybody's part, might dislodge the stone. Why, his niece had slipped on it, the first day she had been at Heath Hover! The time had come to bury this thing—this accursed thing—far away from any possibility of it being unearthed—at any rate in his lifetime. After that it would not matter.

A stout bag, a stone or two, and the deepest centre of Plane Pond would custody it until the crack of doom. And yet—and yet—somehow he had never been able to bring himself to touch it again. Was it that some instinct moved him to decide that the best hiding place for anything—or anybody—was the least likely hiding place? If so, the middle of that path stairway assuredly was that.

The observation, of which he had spoken laughingly, contemptuously to his niece, was another factor in the situation. All shut in as the place was, Mervyn knew that he could never absolutely count upon a single moment when he could safely declare himself free from such observation. In the day time he certainly could not. In the hanging woods, on the road, anywhere, there was always the possibility of the presence of those who could see him while he could not see them.

But what about the dark—the night time?

Simple enough—doesn't it seem? But there was that about the thing that he wanted—or might have wanted—to remove—that rendered the effecting of that process in the dark out of the question. Yet, all things considered, as he told himself here, to-night, not for the first time—why should he trouble his head about it at all? Why should he not let well alone?

A life of solitude and self-concentration breeds a—well, a not altogether satisfactory state of mind; which for present purposes may be taken to mean that this thing had got upon Mervyn's mind. It was too close—too near to him altogether. He would fain have known it farther away. Furthermore, there were all sorts of possibilities shrouding around the fateful thing which were wholly outside of such considerations as Inspector Nashby, and other people—up to date. And since the advent of his niece, with her youth and brightness, and above all, affection—which he had seen growing day by day to irradiate his life—the necessity of getting rid entirely and completely of this fateful horror had been growing upon him more and more.

He listened. No sound came from the other side of the partition. The girl had gone to sleep then, comfortably, calmly, as he thought she would. Some impulse now drew him to effect what he had long been contemplating, to remove that sinister thing beyond all chance of human eye ever falling upon it again. Everything favoured this. The night was here, and the night was not too dark, while just dark enough. Another instinct told him that now was the time, now was his chance.

He pulled out a drawer—noiselessly, then another drawer. Yes—here was what he sought—a pair of thick gloves; but—it was an old pair, and the ends of some of the fingers were in holes. He looked at them dubiously. There was a great deal underlying the fact of those gloves being in holes, it seemed. Then he put them on.

He listened again—intently. Still no sound on the dead, soundless night. He fancied he could hear the girl's soft, regular breathing, in tranquil slumber, through the partition. That was just what he wanted. He had told her he would be there, if she had occasion to call him; but now, what he wanted to effect would take some time, nearly half an hour perhaps. What if she were to awake suddenly, in an agony of fear, and to call for

him, and he were away in the dark woodland path up towards the pond head! Well, there were chances in everything.

He listened again—then opened the door silently, and went down the stairs, keeping to the end of each step to minimise the chances of it creaking. As noiselessly as possible he opened the hall door, then listened again.

All was still. He could hear the ticking of the clock in the living-room, and to him it sounded loud. But for the rest nothing was audible. He went out, and the faint puff of the night air wafted round his face. All was still. Not even the ululating voice of an owl, in or over the dark woods, floated out to break it. Mervyn realised that his nerves were somewhat athrill as he placed his first step on the path stairway. And yet—and yet—at his age, and with his experience, why should they be? It was ridiculous.

There was the stone. One wrench, and what he wanted would be in his hand. He looked around, not quickly nor directly, but in a casual manner; taking fully a minute over the process. But as he turned to the stone again a kind of influence seemed to spring from it, almost assuming the tones of a voice. “You cannot. You dare not,” it seemed to say. Then came reaction.

“Oh, can’t I? Daren’t I?” he repeated scornfully to himself. “We’ll see.”

He bent over the stone now, at the same time drawing the finger ends of his holed gloves as far forward as possible, as though to cover as far as might be, the defects of those same holes. Then he stood upright again, and continued his stroll up towards the sluice. For ever so faint a sound had caught his ear.

“Good evenin’ Mr Mervyn, good evenin’ sur. Fine evenin’ to get the air, sure-ly.”

“Ah, good-evening, Pierce. Yes. A breath of air makes you sleep better in this February weather, eh?”

Sir John Tullibard’s head keeper had been looking up the pond. Now he turned, the glow of the bowl of his short clay pipe showing dull red in the gloom.

“That it do, sur. But I could sleep middlin’ without that,” answered the man, with a grin.

“I’d say something about a pint of ale, Pierce,” went on Mervyn, “but I don’t want to risk disturbing Miss Seward. She sleeps light, and—well, do you know, I’m afraid she’s getting a bit of a scare on about the old place. I only hope no one has been chattering over all the old silly yarns about it to her, eh?”

“That haven’t I, sur,” answered the man.

“Well, get the pint to-morrow instead of to-night,” said Mervyn, and something changed hands. “Still, I believe she must have overheard some one chattering; yet I’ve rubbed the fear of the Lord into old Joe about it.”

“Thank’ee sur. No, I don’t know as how anything of the sort could have been nabbled around. Folks have been mighty careful since the strange gent’s affair, sur. They won’t talk—not they. Think maybe they’ll be ‘pulled’ over that.”

“Do they. Well, long may they go on thinking so at that rate. But, do you know, I’m rather getting fed up with that business myself, and am always wishing to Heaven the poor chap had picked out some one else’s hospitable roof to go and end up under, or that I hadn’t heard, and had left him where he was in the first instance. It would have come to the same thing in the long run—or rather the very short run—and would have saved me no end of bother.”

“Why, yes, sur, it would have done that sure-ly. Thank’ee again, sur, and good-night.”

Mervyn had judged it time to go in. And as he walked back over the fateful stone again he found himself wondering whether the keeper’s presence there was really accidental after all. Was Nashby privily employing the whole countryside—or such of it as was trustworthy—to keep watch on him—tireless watch by night as well as by day? Further, had Pierce actually seen him stop and bend over the stone? That would finish things. Mervyn’s head and forehead were not quite dry as he noiselessly re-entered his front door, and that in spite of the now chilly

atmosphere of the night.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Coming of Helston Varne.

“I’m thinking we can about decide to give up the Heath Hover business as a bad job,” said Inspector Nashby to his auxiliary, one night as they sat over whisky and water and pipes, in the inspector’s snug private quarters in Clancehurst.

“Are you?” said the other, in a matter of fact way.

“Why, yes. There’s nothing in it, absolutely no clue whatever. So far, no one has come forward to make even so much as an enquiry as to the identity of the dead man, and, if you remember, he looked foreign. Mervyn, too, said he talked with a slightly foreign accent. Now all that goes to show the thing couldn’t well have concerned Mervyn. Where’s the motive? That’s what I want to locate. I’m all for motive. Show motive, and it won’t be long before you get your case right home. That’s what I say—always have said.”

“Motive—eh?”

“Yes. Motive. Now what the deuce motive could Mervyn have had for doing away with this chap? First he fishes him out of the ice, in the middle of a dead cold snow-stormy night, at some risk to himself; then he takes him in and does for him in the most hospitable manner.”

“‘Does for him’—Is that a joke, Nashby?”

“Well, no. But what I’m getting at is—supposing Mervyn had a motive for wanting this fellow in Kingdom Come, all he had to do was to leave him in the water. See? He needn’t have gone to the bother of hauling him out at all.”

“So Stewart seemed to think,” was the answer. Stewart had been the speaker’s predecessor in the private investigation of the case, but had come pretty much to the same conclusion that the local police official had, that it was hardly worth while going on with. This man had then

appeared on the scene to take it up, rather to Nashby's astonishment. To the latter he was an "outside" man, but he had come properly accredited. To tell the truth, he had come as rather a nuisance. Nashby wanted the discovery of whatever there was to discover to his own credit. He did not relish any one from outside coming in to benefit by his gleanings.

"I don't want to say anything against Stewart," went on the last speaker. "I expect he's an excellent man, in his line. In fact, from what I hear, I'm sure he is—in his line."

"Well, but—what the devil good are any one of us if it isn't in his line?" said the inspector, feeling rather nettled, but pushing the cut glass decanter—an ingredient of an appreciative public testimonial Tantalus—towards the other as though to cover it. The said other might have smiled pityingly—he felt like it—but did not.

"That sounds conclusive," he answered. "But—it's just when you get off your 'line' that you make discoveries. Now you know I'm not talking through my hat. I've had experiences—not in this country—that most of you here never get. I don't say it to brag, mind, but as a bald statement of fact."

"I know that, Mr Varne," said Nashby, deferentially. "Well, we don't get 'em, and it's not our fault if we don't."

"Of course it isn't. It's all a question of opportunity. There are at least ten men in the world who would stretch a point to get me put out of the way, and at least four more who are vowed to do it. Out of these at least one will succeed sooner or later. But in that case it will puzzle you, and all the Yard, to find the motive."

"You don't say so!" said the inspector, gazing at the speaker, with a new access of veneration. "As we're alone I don't mind admitting I'm only a plain man who's worked his way up, but—sink me if I wouldn't rather be out of the force than have so many desperate scoundrels sworn to do me down some time or other. Here, you see, we run some one to earth—he does his stretch and there's an end of it. No malice borne—and all that."

The man who had been named as Varne could not repress the smile this time, at what to him was the simple grooviness of this country policeman,

as he defined him in his own mind. But he managed to make the smile a good-natured one.

“Ah, well, there are shaggier parts of the world than this, Nashby,” he said, mixing his glass again. “Here’s to the Heath Hover mystery.”

“And its unravelling,” answered Nashby, raising his own glass.

“I’ve been here—let’s see, how long have I been here? Three days—and a half, to be strictly accurate, and I’ve made one discovery, but only one.”

“What’s that?” said the inspector, brisking up.

“Well, it’s what I came in to tell you about. But—don’t let it go to the rest of the Force.”

“Not me,” was the emphatic reply.

“Well then, Mervyn is hiding something.”

“Hiding something? Not the thing that did the job? Why there was no trace of any injury about the man.”

“No doubt. But Mervyn is hiding something. When I find that something we shall have the key to the whole mystery.”

“Well, we didn’t search the whole house,” said Nashby. “It would take about a week to do that, and only three or four rooms were used at all. We searched that weird old family vault of a cellar though. There’s nothing loose there. It’s firm everywhere. He showed us over it himself.”

“Of course he did. He’d have been a fool if he hadn’t. But what he’s hiding isn’t in the house at all. It’s outside.”

“Outside?”

Helston Varne nodded.

“Has a smack of that Moat Farm affair,” said Nashby, “only there they had something definite to find—a body. Here we’ve nothing. But how did you

get at that for a clue?”

“I’ve been down here three days—and a half, to be strictly accurate; there’s nothing like accuracy. Yet I’ve hit upon that much. The other day I thought I’d hit upon everything, but I hadn’t quite. It was just one of those exciting moments when you miss a thing just by a hairsbreadth, as it were. But it’s getting very warm—very warm indeed.”

Nashby filled a fresh pipe and said nothing. He was looking at the other enviously. Helston Varne’s reputation, among the secret few, was prodigious. If the scent was really getting very warm from his point of view, why then the mystery was as good as solved. But then, Nashby wanted the credit of solving it to be his own.

He wondered if Varne would manage things so that it might be. There was a good deal of the amateur about Helston Varne he had been given to understand, clever, marvellously clever as he had proved himself. At any rate, he was independent of material emolument, or at any rate seemed so. He seemed good-natured too. Perhaps whatever discovery he made he would contrive to let him—Nashby—get the benefit of some appreciable share in it.

The other smoked on in silence, the lamplight full on his strong, sun-browned, clear-cut face—a sun-brown that showed he had won his reputation in tougher climates than this—as he had hinted to the inspector. Moreover, there was a marked difference between the two men which defined class distinction at a glance.

“Anything more known about this young lady who’s stopping at Heath Hover, Nashby, beyond what you told me?” said Varne suddenly.

“Why, yes. I got at something fresh to-day, only to-day.” And the inspector began to bristle up with a sense, as it were, of renewed importance. “Yes, only to-day, and I was going to tell you, but I was waiting to hear what you had to say first, Mr Varne,” he added deferentially. “She’s Mervyn’s niece right enough, on her mother’s side. Her father suicided. Jumped off a train, after taking a couple of thousand pound accident insurance tickets, which he handed to her, with a joking remark, overheard unfortunately for him—for them—by a station inspector on the platform.

Railway company repudiated liability, and there you are."

"Clumsy—very," pronounced the other, musingly. "Lord, what fools there are in the world, Nashby. Why, there were half-a-dozen ways of working that trick, perfectly successfully and carrying far more money with them too."

"Then she went as a music teacher in a suburban villa, and got cleared out; I suppose she was too pretty, and the old woman got jealous."

"I don't know about that part of it, but she certainly is pretty," said Varne. "She's more. She's lovely; and so absolutely uncommon looking. Well?"

"Then she went to stay with a girl friend—and got ill. Her uncle heard of her, and got her down to keep house for him. So there you are again. I heard the particulars only this morning. The Yard can find out everything, you see."

Whether the other saw or not, he smiled, enigmatically. Perhaps he was wondering whether "The Yard" knew as much about what his then colleague had been telling him as he did himself.

"She wasn't there at the time of the—happening," he said. "No, not till—what? Nearly a month afterwards? And now she has been there over a fortnight. No, Nashby. Whatever the Yard can find out—or can't,"—again that smile came forward, "you can rule Miss—er—Seward out of this business altogether."

The inspector felt a trifle disappointed. He thought he had found a new, and complicating, and rather interesting element in the case. He was a little inclined to feel rebellious against Helston Varne's opinion, but then he had a very considerable respect for Helston Varne.

"The tale about Heath Hover—it's rather interesting," went on the latter. "I might have said extraordinary, but then, I don't know. I've met with just such extraordinary cases in the course of my experience, and have been the means of unravelling at least two of them. Now I'm going to try and see if this one will hang up at all on the same peg as our mystery, but—I don't know, I don't know."

He had subsided into a meditative, almost dreamy tone, gazing into the fire, and emitting slow puffs of smoke. Nashby was eyeing him with a touch of increased veneration—likewise expectation. He was hoping to get those narratives before their evening had closed.

“Have another whisky,” he said, jumping up with alacrity. “I’m sorry, I’m sure. I ought to have seen you were empty.”

“Thanks. By the way, do you mind telling me again what is precisely the source of scare that hangs round Heath Hover?”

Inspector Nashby looked as if he rather did mind, for he seemed to hesitate.

“Oh, it’s only a lot of countryside superstition,” he said. “But no one who took the place has ever been able to stick it long. I don’t know either, that any one has ever *seen* anything. I think they only *hear*.”

The other nodded.

“Just so. Reminds me of one of the cases I was just now referring to, one I was instrumental in clearing up. That was a matter of sound. I think I shall really have to obtain entrance to Heath Hover. You say this man gets it rent free?”

“At a nominal rent, yes.”

“Well, why doesn’t the owner pull it down, and run up another house on another site?”

“Because—to put the matter nakedly—he’s afraid to.”

“Afraid to?”

“Yes. Afraid it would bring him bad luck—fatally bad luck. Old Sir John Tullibard’s a bit of a crank, and believes in that sort of thing. What’s more, he’s rather proud of owning a place with that kind of reputation.”

“And that door—what did you say it does?”

“Why, it opens of itself, when something is going to happen. It’s a curious thing that Mervyn should have sworn it did this very thing the night of this double barrelled event. But he did—and stuck to it.”

“Yes. It’s certainly curious. Mervyn doesn’t strike me as the sort of man who’d decline to believe his eyesight. He’s rather a hard-headed looking chap I should say, and I can’t get anything out of the surrounding yokels about it. I’ve expended—let me see—at least two half crowns in the neighbouring pubs during the three days—and a half—since I came, trying to make them talk. But they shut up like steel traps when you try and get them on the subject of Heath Hover.”

“So they would,” said Nashby, “and for the reason that they hold it to be dead unlucky even to talk about the yarns that hang around the place.”

“Oh,” and Varne smiled. He had noticed that very reluctance about Nashby himself.

“Do you believe there’s anything in all that?” he said, facing the other with a very direct look. “You, yourself?”

“Well, the fact is, Varne—and there’s no denying it—very curious things do happen in some places. Things that there’s no explaining or clearing up.”

“I agree with you, Nashby—as to the first. Very curious things do happen in some places—yes, very curious things. But as to there being no explaining them, or clearing them up—why I don’t go with you there. Now look here—I don’t say it to brag—but given time, and no interference, *and* it being made worth my while, I undertake to dis-ghost every haunted house in England.”

His keen face had lighted up. Nashby looked at him rather admiringly. The latter was an ordinary square-headed, broad-built policeman, who, unarmed, would have advanced to arrest an armed criminal without the smallest hesitation or wavering. But he was country born and bred, and country superstition is an ingrained thing.

“Well, Mr Varne, at that rate there’s a new line in front of you, and no mistake, and it ought to be a paying one,” he rejoined. “Why not begin on

Heath Hover for one?”

“Because none of my conditions would apply to it. Time—that might—no interference, that certainly would not, for I should have to stay in the house for a while. And—making it worth it, would apply less still, since this Mervyn is only a tenant, doesn’t seem to care a damn about the haunting part, and is poor into the bargain you say?”

“Yes. He’s hasn’t got too much rhino. He was something in India and retired on a pension. He commuted about half of it to run an invention which he thought would make his fortune, and it didn’t.”

“Of course not. Inventions have been known to make fortunes, but practically never for the inventor. Now how could I get a look in at Heath Hover? It wouldn’t do as being concerned in this case, you know.”

“Oh Lord, no,” said the other, with some alacrity. “Why, it’s supposed to be dead and forgotten, and that’s just the stage at which we expect to be able to get something out of it—if we ever do at all, that is.”

“Hasn’t he got any old oak in the place? Panelling, doors—that sort of thing? Might work in on the connoisseur, scientific lay, don’t you see?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. Yes, now I think of it there’s rather a rum old fireplace. It’s in the room where the door is, too, and, now I think of it again, the door itself is rather a quaint affair, with a curious handle, and lock, and all that. You could ‘make up’ a bit. You know—look like a sort of scientific professor, and all that.”

“No. I don’t think I’ll make up. I’ll just chance it as I am. And I think, Nashby, that within the next day or two I shall have found out all about the inside of Heath Hover—as far as it concerns our case.”

Chapter Fifteen.

Overreachings.

It might have been somewhere in the middle of the morning, or a trifle earlier, that Mervyn, from his bedroom window descried a well-looking, comfortably-dressed stranger leisurely descending the stair-like path which led down from the sluice, and him he eyed with curiosity, for visitors were scarce.

He himself, being unseen, was able to take in every detail of the new arrival's outward appearance with all the more ease and accuracy. He noted for instance that the other had a keen, clear, sunburnt face, and a light, firm, easy step, that showed the very pink of condition, that he was tall, and carried himself well, and then he fell to wondering who the devil he was and what he wanted. Some friend of Melian's perhaps, possibly a former admirer—and somehow the idea of such a contingency seemed unpalatable. Here they were—the two of them—as jolly as possible together; he, at any rate, didn't want any interloping nuisance from outside.

But from that his mind flew off to another conjecture—one less palatable still. He had had about enough of mysterious strangers, he told himself. What if this one had come on the same sort of errand, and with the thought he slipped his Browning pistol into a handy pocket, and made up his mind to keep the other man carefully in front of him. Likewise he took his time about admitting the said other man.

"I'm afraid I'm taking rather a liberty," began the latter. "The fact is, Mr Mervyn, I'm particularly interested in old houses, old furniture, old panelling, and such like, and I have heard a good deal about Heath Hover in that line. Allow me to introduce myself,"—tendering a card.

"Yes? Come in, Mr—Helston Varne," said the other, having glanced at it. "There are odds and ends of old sticks, but they are for the most part stowed away in unused rooms that would take about a week's dusting to render fit for entrance. That's a quaint old fireplace, if you notice."

“I should think it was,” answered Varne, vividly interested. And then he expatiated in technical terms, which increasingly bored his host and made the latter wish him at the devil more heartily than ever. That was the worst of these collectors and antiquarians and people, they were always ramming their jargon down unappreciative throats. It was a pity Melian was not on hand, he began to think. She had an eye to all that sort of thing, and could answer with knowledge. And then he suddenly decided that his own boredom was the lesser evil. The stranger was a well-looking man—a fine looking man—and spoke with a pleasant voice and refined accent. Her uncle preferred Melian fancy free, at any rate for some time to come. Were she here, these two would be finding out tastes in common. Yes, on the whole, he was glad she had driven into Clancehurst with old Joe after breakfast. Up till then he had not been glad; in fact, hardly was she out of sight than he had regretted not having accompanied her. It was rare indeed that he failed to accompany her anywhere; but that morning he had felt somewhat out of sorts.

The stranger passed from one thing to another, admiring the panelling and discanting thereon. Then he said:

“I should like to take another view of the house from outside, Mr Mervyn. It’s marvellously picturesque as seen from the road, and now I’ve seen the interior I shall be able to read new beauties into it.”

“Certainly,” assented Mervyn, beginning to think the speaker was a little over enthusiastic, or a little cracked—only he didn’t look the last. “We’ll go up to the road. The path you came down is the shortest.”

They went up, Mervyn contriving that the other should lead. When they gained the sluice, Varne stood expatiating afresh, on gables and old chimney stacks. His host was more bored than ever, and was wishing to this and to that he would straightway take himself off as he had come. Would he?

“That’s a curious old door I noticed in the corner of your room, Mr Mervyn,” he said, when he had exhausted his instructive technicalities, which Mervyn had defined to himself as a damned boring prosy lecture. “If I might venture to trespass upon your kindness for a minute or two further I should so greatly like to examine it. The fact is,” he went on, “I’m

quite a stranger in these parts, I found a homely little pub quite by the merest chance, *The Woodcock*, at Upper Gidding, homely but clean—you know it, I dare say—and I concluded to rest there for a day or two, and look around this lovely bit of country. I've got a bicycle with me, but I walked over here to-day."

"Oh," groaned Mervyn to himself. "That means I shall have to ask the fool to stay lunch, I suppose."

"The fool" had turned, and was looking up the pond.

"Is this—excuse me, Mr Mervyn, it must be. Is this the place they were telling me about where an unknown man was bravely rescued from drowning under the ice in the middle of the night, by—by, I am sure, yourself?" And he turned to his host with a pleasant suggestion of admiration in his eyes.

"This is the place you mean, Mr—Varne. But I don't know there's anything particularly 'brave' in shoving out a ladder for the other fool to claw hold of."

He spoke shortly—almost rudely. This he recognised in time.

"I'm afraid I'm rather abrupt, Mr Varne," he explained. "If so, excuse me. The fact is, I've been more than 'fed-up' with that particular episode, and, not to put too fine a point upon it, I'm dead sick of the barest references to it. It was fairly unpleasant to me having the poor devil dying in my house, and all the nuisance of inquest and police investigations, and the rest of it—as you can imagine. Now the whole thing's a thing of the past, and I want to forget all about it."

"Quite so, Mr Mervyn, quite so. It is I who must apologise."

"Oh, no need for that. If you're ready I shall be happy to show you that door."

"That will be very good of you."

They went down the path again, Mervyn still contriving that his visitor should lead the way. Halfway down, the latter stopped short.

“Here is another point that hitherto has escaped me,” he said. “That foreground of chimney stack, thrown out by the background of tree-masses, leafless now, but even with a characteristic beauty at that —‘wine-coloured woods’ some one called it—I forget who—now there’s a picture for you, one that a Yeend King for instance, would be at his best with, and still more so when it’s a soaring wall of foliage.”

“No doubt,” agreed Mervyn. And then he felt glad that the stranger had his back turned full towards him, for even he could hardly restrain a sudden, if ever so slight change of colour caused by that which now set all his pulses humming. For the said stranger’s right foot as he stood, was planted, firmly planted, on a stone, a rounded stone half embedded in the earth, and that foot was obviously, though stealthily, trying whether that stone was easily movable, or not movable at all. And with this consciousness a sudden resolve had come upon Mervyn.

“Yes, it’s all you say,” he went on, in an equable tone. “Are you an artist, may I ask, as well as a connoisseur in antiquities?”

“Oh well, only as amateur. I have done a little with the brush—but, only as an amateur.”

They had re-entered the house, chatting lightly, easily. Then the visitor made a set at the door in the corner.

“Yes. That’s something of a bit of old work,” he pronounced admiringly. “Why there are connoisseurs who would give tall prices for that bit of wood, I can tell you, Mr Mervyn.”

“Then I wish to the devil ‘that bit of wood’ belonged to me,” returned Mervyn, with something of a sour grin. “They could have it and welcome. One door’s as good as another to me, as long as it shuts tight and keeps draughts out. I’d much rather have the ‘tall prices.’ Will you take a whisky and soda?”

“No thanks. I rarely touch spirits in the daytime. A ‘nightcap’ before turning in is a very good thing. But—you’re very kind.”

He was feeling the graining of the door with his finger nails, then he turned the handle. This he held admiringly.

“Why, what a splendid piece of antique. This handle is worth a lot. And, what’s on the other side?”

“Only a black hole of a cellar, where I don’t keep anything. It’s too damp, for one thing. Like to see it?”

“Immensely.”

“Right. I’ll get a bit of candle and the key.”

Having done both, Mervyn opened the door.

“Mind the steps,” he said, holding the candle over the head of the other and still contriving that he should be in advance. “There are ten of them.”

“All right. I can see—What the—?”

He broke off, turning to rush back. But it was too late. With the soft but quick closing of the door above and behind him, Helston Varne realised that he had made a fool of himself—as Nashby had not done; but this he did not know, for Nashby had not told him quite everything. Now he stood in dense, impenetrable pitchy blackness—and feeling very damp and chill at that.

“Well I’m damned?” he ejaculated to himself. “Well I *am* damned.” And sitting down on a cold stone step he began to think the matter out.

His gaoler the while, saying nothing, calmly withdrew the key from the lock and put it in his pocket. Then he went leisurely to the front door and looked out. There was no sign of anybody moving on the strip of lonely road above. He stood apparently unconcerned on the sluice, but in reality, listening intently. There were twitterings of small birds and the sweet singing of an early thrush, but of human footsteps or voices, or of wheels, there was no sound. Then he descended, equally leisurely. On one of the earth steps he paused; then, drawing out his handkerchief, blew his nose. The handkerchief dropped, by accident. He stooped to pick it up; was equally leisurely over the process too. Finally, when he did pick it up, he stood for a moment, stamping as though in the most natural way in the world to warm his feet—or one foot—upon a stone. Then he returned to the house, but he had forgotten to return his handkerchief to

his pocket. He was carrying it—in a somewhat absent minded manner—in his hand. Incidentally, he was thinking that it was not an unmixed evil that old Judy should be suffering from a return of her “roomatics” that day, and should have remained “to whoäm.” There was no one at Heath Hover but himself—and his prisoner.

The latter, meanwhile, was beginning to experience what the expression “outer darkness” meant, for assuredly he was now in it. No glimmer of light—not the very faintest, was there to relieve it. Black as impenetrable pitch. He waited till his eyesight should have been accustomed to the change to see if any stray dim thread came in from anywhere; a grating, a ventilator, what not? But none came. The door itself might have been cemented into the wall for any thread of light that came from it. But Varne felt no alarm. He was unarmed, but on that account felt no misgiving; “What was the game?” was the thought that held possession of his mind.

He struck a wax vesta and looked around. He was about halfway down the flight of stone steps. The walls of the vault glistened with slime and damp in the flickering light. Nashby had described the place exactly. He struck another. Yes. It was all solid, massive masonry—hard, unyielding. But here he was—at about twelve midday—entombed in a dungeon of blackest night. He began to feel interested. But, meanwhile, it was cold—devilish cold.

Then, being there, he thought he might as well take a look round this—cellar, Mervyn had called it—on his own, and to this end he cautiously descended to the bottom of the stone stairs. But of wax vestas he had only a limited supply, and it behoved him to be careful with them. Still he managed to obtain a good reconnaissance of the floor and walls, enough to bear out Nashby’s description of the place.

He returned up the steps. The door, he noticed, was quite smooth on this side, with no handle, and—no key hole; so that any one shut in, as he was, might shout or call till the crack of doom. It fitted its aperture like a slab.

For the first time Varne began to feel a little uneasy. He was also feeling more than a little cold. The place had almost the temperature of an ice-

vault. What if Mervyn had purposely shut him in and proposed to leave him here until cold and starvation had done their work? After all, he could pretend he had done the thing for a practical joke, and it would be difficult to prove the contrary. And the worst of it was he—Varne—had given nobody the slightest idea as to where he intended going. Even Nashby would not have occasion to miss him—not for some days at any rate. But it certainly was getting most confoundedly cold.

He thought he would try the effect of knocking, and to this end got out the hardest thing about him, a substantial pocket knife to wit. Surely the rat-tat-tat would carry through the door. He also called out several times. But—no answer.

He began to feel resentful—grim. Had he carried a pistol he would have felt himself justified in blowing the lock of the door away—if he could locate it, that is. But he had not. Really, this was past a joke. And—the cold!

A very unpleasant idea now struck Varne. What if this vault really were a secret refrigerating chamber, in which, for purposes of his own, his “host” now intended to reduce him to frozen meat? He had taken pretty accurate stock of Mervyn during their brief intercourse, and had formed the conclusion that he was a man who would be quite capable of such a thing, given an adequate motive. It was a rotten way of ending a startlingly successful, though not much blazoned career, decided Helston Varne, sitting there in the inky blackness, his teeth now chattering like the proverbial castanets. But he almost told himself that he deserved it for being such a poisonous fool as to allow himself to be entrapped in so transparently callow a fashion.

The shadowless ink of the atmosphere weighed him down more and more, and strong man as he was, he felt that it was affecting his nerve. And the cold! His theory of the refrigerating chamber had now become a fixed idea. Oh, for light—for warmth! He must have been hours in that dreadful vault.

He would make another trial. With the handle of the pocket knife he hammered again and again upon the door with all his might. Also he shouted, but his ordinarily strong voice sounded in his now appalled ears

a mere quavering rumble. A moment’s pause to listen, and—the door opened.

Mervyn was standing looking at him with a faintly enquiring, half-amused expression on his face, Helston Varne almost staggered into the blessed light of day.

Chapter Sixteen.

Another Light.

The two men stood looking at each other, and their expressions of countenance would have furnished a study.

“Well, Mr Varne?” began Mervyn: “I hope you’ve effected a thoroughly exhaustive and satisfactory investigation.”

“Fairly, thanks,” said the other, pretending to enter into the humour of the thing, while in reality feeling grim and resentful. “But it’s rather cold in there, you know.”

“Yes, I do know. I was admiring your scientific enthusiasm in the cause of ‘old stones,’ as my niece calls them, that induced you to stick it all that time.”

“Induced me? Why I couldn’t get out,” was the short reply.

“No. You can’t open that door from the inside. It’d be the most deadly place to get shut up in if no one knew you were there. Rather.”

There seemed a latent meaning in the words, at least, so Helston Varne found himself reading them.

“Well, you’d better have a whisky and soda now, or at any rate a copious mouthful of three star—that’ll warm you up more,” went on Mervyn in the most matter of fact way, and diving into a sideboard he produced both. This time Varne did not decline. The revivifying warmth, the blessed light of day, were fast counteracting his resentment. Still, not altogether, for he said in a half amazed, half joking manner:

“I suppose I must congratulate you on carrying out a practical joke thoroughly when you do undertake one, Mr Mervyn. But at the same time it might prove dangerous with some people. According to British law turning a key on an independent fellow-subject is a ground for action for false imprisonment.”

“Law—did you say?” returned Mervyn, in a gouty, gusty sort of way. “Why, I was administering law what time you were being smacked in the nursery—or ought to have been.”

This was a pretty nasty one for Helston Varne, somewhat famed clearer-up of mysteries. But he took it equably. The other eyed him not in the least kindly.

“Who turned any key on you?” he said abruptly.

“Well, I was locked in there, wasn’t I?”

“Not by me—and certainly no one has been in here since,” answered Mervyn. “Just try that door handle, will you?”

“I don’t know that I will,” laughed the other, again becoming alive to the importance of keeping up his character of artistic—and unprofessional stranger. “I think I’ve had about enough of it. There’s something uncanny about it. I’d better keep away from it.”

“All right then. Look here,” Mervyn went to the door and turned the handle—there was no key in the lock—then opened it slightly.

“That’s all right, Mr Mervyn,” answered the other, with a jolly laugh. “I wasn’t serious in what I said. Besides, I can take a joke as well as anybody. Don’t you worry about that.”

“I thought it only the thing to leave you undisturbed while you made your investigations,” rejoined Mervyn, “but seem to have left you too long. And now, if you’re ready for lunch—so am I. It’s later than usual, but there’s no point in waiting any longer.”

Varne glanced at the clock opposite. It was nearly two. When he had entered his recent prison it was just half past twelve. He had spent an hour and a half nearly, down there in the cold and darkness. Heavens! and it seemed eight times that period. His resentment partially revived with the recollection, and he was about to refuse, when a sound struck upon his ears, the sweet, clear, full voice of a girl. That decided him.

“Well, thanks, Mr Mervyn, I think I am too, after my morning’s

experiences," and he laughed again.

"We're late, Joe. I told you we should be," the voice was saying. "You'd much better have let me drive. Now bring in the things—you can put up the trap afterwards."

The visitor, listening, thought he had never heard quite such a voice. And then its owner appeared.

She came into the room mapped in large warm furs. The day, though bright, carried a sharp tinge in the wind, and had imparted a delightful pink glow to her cheeks, and the blue eyes were dancing. The visitor did not miss the effect of the straight firm walk, the erect carriage of the golden head, crowned with an exceedingly becoming toque.

"Just fancy, Uncle Seward," she began—and then stopped short as she became alive to the presence of a stranger. Her uncle introduced them. No stiff or conventional bow, but out went a long, gloved hand, in frank, easy fashion, and the straight glance of the blue eyes met those of the other, in which surprise and admiration would hardly be dissembled. Helston Varne remembered his pronouncement upon her when talking with Nashby. "She's lovely, and so uncommon looking." Now it came home to him, that if possible, he had even then hardly done her justice. A new light seemed likely to lead away from the Heath Hover mystery.

"I suppose you've been into Clancehurst, Miss Seward," he said. "Do you find the shops there fairly satisfactory?"

"Oh yes—on the whole. It's a jolly little place and has a ripping old church."

"'Old stones,'" thought the guest to himself, with a smile. Then aloud, "I hear you're a great antiquarian, Miss Seward."

"I don't know about that, but I'm awfully keen on old architecture, and old art in general."

"You've got a kindred spirit then, dear," said Mervyn. "Mr Varne has come over to look at some of our antiquities. He went into ecstasies over the door," with a nod behind him in that direction, and a very humorous look

crinkling round the corners of his eyes.

“Did you?” turning to the stranger, in her bright, brisk, natural manner. “Yes, it’s awfully quaint—but—there’s a something about it. Did you go into the old cellar? You did?” as she read the affirmative on the faces of both men. “Well, didn’t it give you the cold shivers? I can tell you it did me, the two or three times I’ve been into it. There must be a spook hidden away down there, but thank goodness that door is thick enough and heavy enough to keep it there.”

“But I thought spooks were traditionally independent of such trifles as bolts and bars, Miss Seward,” said Varne with an amused smile.

“Of course. It’s the moral effect, I suppose, for it’s difficult to imagine anything being able to get through such a solid mass of oak as that. But it’s a splendid old door.”

She had shed her outer furs and had sat down to table. Helston Varne was watching her keenly, though of course not seeming to do so. Whatever mystery Mervyn was mixed up in, this girl was entirely outside it, even as he had imparted to Nashby, and more than ever now was that opinion confirmed. And with that sop to professionalism he dismissed the same, and fell to giving himself up to studying the rare, fascinating personality, thus unexpectedly unfolded before him. But he turned the conversation on to what he saw was a very congenial topic with her, and soon she got launching Ruskin at him; and, glowing with her subject, talked not a bit as though she had never known of his existence half an hour ago. Mervyn, the while, his sense of humour thoroughly tickled—although somewhat grimly so—was observing the pair, with an inward twinge of dissatisfaction, which, as his said sense of humour entirely enabled him to realise, was essentially selfish. For his guest was an exceptionally good-looking man, who talked with knowledge, and well, moreover; and had—what for want of a better definition he defined as—a way about him. And thinking thus, the side of the other’s visit which had been with him all the morning and up till now, seemed to slide into a back seat. What had ousted it was the consciousness of how Melian seemed to be “cottoning” to the engaging stranger.

Then in the glow of a discussion which she was thoroughly enjoying, she

got up suddenly to move some of the things.

“The old woman who usually looks after us is shamming again, Mr Varne. At least, she isn’t really shamming, but I always tease her by telling her she is,” Melian explained. “So I’m afraid it’s a case of taking things as they are.”

Helston Varne at once scented a chance of further insight. Now he could get, at first hand, what was rumoured at second—the reason why Mervyn never kept indoor servants. But immediately he felt ashamed of the thought. Professionalism under these circumstances could go hang; under them, if he couldn’t sink the “shop,” when could he? In fact, if it came to that he would.

Just then, taking advantage of the door being open, the little black kitten made its way in and jumped up on Melian’s lap as she sat down again.

“No, no, pooge-pooge, not *on* the table,” she said decisively, restraining a move on the part of the little thing to jump up there. “Uncle Seward has got you into bad ways—in fact, thoroughly spoiled you—and now you’ll have to get out of them.”

“What a jolly little fluffy ball,” said Helston Varne, thinking what a picture was here before him, these two graceful creatures, the human and the animal, every movement on the part of either one that of perfect prettiness and grace.

“Do you like them, then?” Melian asked, flashing her bright glance at him.

“Yes, if only they would stay small.”

“I’m so glad. But I think this one will, there are kinds, you know, that never grow large, and I like them best that way myself.” And then she launched forth into another favourite topic, and here again Varne met her on her own ground, and with knowledge. And here again Mervyn was observant, and had misgivings.

Now all of a sudden something he had been puzzling over took light, and it was caused by a casual remark on the part of this somewhat strangely formed acquaintance.

“Have you been in India?” he interrupted, abruptly.

“Yes, a little.”

“Where?”

“In the North West Provinces, and the Northern border.”

“Strange how things come back,” went on Mervyn. “Now your name is a bit uncommon, and I’ve been racking my brain box over it. Do you happen to be related to Varne Coates, who was Commissioner at Baghnagar?”

“Yes. He’s rather a near cousin of mine.”

“Look at that now. He used to be one of my greatest friends. Small world this after all.”

“Yes, isn’t it? Well, Mr Mervyn, that only adds to the pleasure of making your acquaintance—in such an accidental manner.”

For the life of him Mervyn could not restrain the ghost of a queer smile, for he knew there was nothing at all accidental about the matter, and the worst of it was the other knew that he knew it. As for that other he greatly rejoiced over this discovery, for he owned to himself that Melian Seward’s personality was almost unique in his experience; and, in short, and done into plain English, he wanted to see her again. As regarded the matter to clear up which he had come there, why it could go hang, or if he went on with it at all it would be simply and solely for his own satisfaction and in nowise to help Nashby or any of his kind. As to which he was in nowise bound—for as we have said before, he had come there in the light of an “outside” man, and was responsible to nobody.

And then, in the light of this newly discovered mutual acquaintance, a new sense of good fellowship, of cordiality seemed to spring up between the two men—likewise the conversation was now transferred to them. Mervyn warmed up with old recollections of places and people; most of the former and some of the latter of which were known to his guest, and Melian perforce had to do listener, which she did not in the least mind. It was not until the fading of the afternoon light that Varne suddenly awoke

to the fact that in the capacity of unknown stranger he might have been there quite long enough.

“Oh no. Make your mind easy of that head,” Mervyn answered, as he said as much. “Look in again if you’re prolonging your stay. Have another ‘peg’ before you start. No? A weed then?”

Helston Varne lighted a cigar, and they went with him as far as the sluice. Mervyn, walking behind, did not fail to observe that this time no notice was taken of that one stone. The other did not even step on it. This, to his mind, suggested two solutions. Either his guest was off the scent, or, in the capacity of a new friend he did not intend to follow up his investigations. Whichever solution it was that held good it was equally satisfactory to Mervyn.

“Well, what do you think of that for a specimen?” he said, as Melian and he turned back to the house.

“He’s rather a good sort, and miles out of the ordinary,” answered the girl. “He *can* talk.”

“Yes. You’ve met your match in that accomplishment, certainly.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean in that way. I mean he can talk sense. Talk about things, and all that, and it’s more than can be said for most people one runs against. I wonder if he’ll come over again.”

“I don’t.”

The dry meaning of the tone, the quizzical look, earned for the speaker a playful pinch on the arm.

“Don’t be prophetic, Uncle Seward, especially with regard to a perfect stranger.”

“Perfect—eh? H’m—ha! Still I think we haven’t seen the last of—Perfection. Good name that. Meanwhile, I shall have to find out something about him over and above his relationship with my old pal Varne Coates, before asking his intentions.”

This earned for the speaker another pinch—a harder one this time, and the chaff and raillery flowed on. And John Seward Mervyn was conscious of feeling very happy, very contented. This element of youthfulness and bright spirits was just that in which his solitary life had been lacking. Then it had been supplied; and again and again, every hour of late he had blessed the chance which had supplied it.

But with this complacent consciousness, there was this evening ever so slight a misgiving, and—while he candidly owned to himself his motive was a selfish one—he hoped their newly found acquaintance would, for any reason or none, come no more.

Chapter Seventeen.

Of some Talk on a Road.

The year had dawned more and more into daylight if not correspondingly into warmth, and for Melian life had become more of a settled thing at Heath Hover. So far she was content, but a dreadful suspicion was coming upon her that she might not be always content. She had a sort of instinctive longing for work again, and that for its own sake—to be doing. And in this quiet, rather lonely life, there was no scope for such.

She had no friends of her own age or sex. Two or three of both had called, on learning of her presence at Heath Hover, but with the best intentions there was nothing about them to appeal to the girl from any point of view. They were just well-meaning, commonplace people of the most ordinary and commonplace type.

To a certain extent—a large extent—her uncle made up for the want of such companionship. He was a companionable man, given intelligent and sympathetic company, and this he found to the full in her. There was hardly a subject under the sun that they did not thresh out together, and grim old haunted Heath Hover seemed to shake its dry bones into new life with the constant stream of talk and laughter which now echoed from its walls.

“Why, you’ve put back the clock a quarter of a century for me, dear,” he declared. “I feel that much younger. Isn’t that something for you to have done?”

And she had agreed, wholesouledly; and yet, there would obtrude that thought, of late, that she was doing nothing with her life.

By this time her uncle had come to regard her with a sort of idolatry. His capacity for affection had become utterly atrophied for want of an object upon which to expend any of it. Such few acquaintances or relatives as he had he cared nothing about. If he had been well off they would have discovered fast enough that they cared about him, he used to tell himself cynically; and who shall say untruly. He had become self-centred, even

morose at times—just content to groove on through life to the end; thankful—if he ever thought of being thankful for anything at all—that there was nobody to worry him. He had allowed himself to be worried at times in his life, and looked back to such times with a mental shudder, which was when the spirit of thankfulness was evolved.

But now here was such an object, and it had promptly captured the whole of his capacity for affection and was expanding it every day. There was everything in it that appealed—the sweet, refined beauty of the child, the sunny lightheadedness, the naïve untrammelled appreciation of all that appealed to him—the sheer youthful enjoyment of life—well, he had not lived in vain. And he made an idol of her more and more every day.

So they rambled together, drove long drives together, talked together; indeed, not a wish of hers was left ungratified where it lay within his power to gratify it, and she, knowing the extent of such power, never dreamed of looking beyond it. And the curious part it of was that he, watching her with furtive and solicitous jealousy, found that she was by no means tiring of this mode of life.

Once or twice he had suggested she should ask some girl friend to come and pay her a visit, as a relief from one incessant old fogey, but she had not been in the least responsive. There was no such “relief” required, she had answered spontaneously. She was quite happy as they were. She would like to get Violet Clinock, when the latter could come, but that would not be yet. Meanwhile she was quite jolly as they were.

To Mervyn this reply came with an undashed feeling of relief. Stay—not altogether undashed perhaps, for he was old enough to know that a year or two at the outside in the ordinary course of things would be all that should remain to him of this idyllic time. Why, only to look at the child! Were all the best years of her life to be wasted, mewed up in a lonely old country corner! And with this idea came one that had just hooked itself, not altogether pleasantly, on to his mind—and it spelt Helston Varne.

For the latter had availed himself of his invitation to “come again.” He had “come again,” only to the extent of three times, but Mervyn had not been slow to mark a certain very complete sympathy, as of ideas in common, that had sprung up between him and Melian, and that from the very first.

They talked animatedly on every subject, several outside his own sphere of knowledge, and in short, seemed thoroughly to have taken to each other. And Helston Varne was a remarkably fine looking man.

Mervyn had set afoot enquiries with regard to Helston Varne, and in the result had elicited that whatever line the latter was pursuing at the present moment—and he very much more than supposed the nature of that line—at any rate he was not dependent upon its results in any way. He was, in fact, well off—almost wealthy. The inducement to take it up at all was probably the sheer sporting instinct. So far, this conclusion was, from a certain point of view, satisfactory. And Helston Varne was a near relation of his old and intimate friend, Varne Coates of Baghnagar.

Personally, he liked the man. John Seward Mervyn was a shrewd, keen judge of character, and studying this one closely, his verdict was “quite all right.” He noted too with a modicum of dry amusement that the “investigation” element was entirely absent during his subsequent visits. Incidentally, what Inspector Nashby thought of it was quite another matter, as to which Mervyn did not give two thoughts. And after those three visits, Helston Varne had left the neighbourhood, now some three weeks ago.

This afternoon, Melian was walking up the hilly road in the direction of that which, crossing it at right angles, led to the hamlet of Lower Gidding. There was a sharp north easterly wind blowing, which brought the colour to her cheeks, tingeing them with the glow of health, and lending an unusually clear brightness to the blue eyes. She revelled in the exercise, walking straight from the hips with a firm elastic step. On her left was a sombre oak-wood, its gnarled leafless boughs showing a hundred fantastic—almost threatening shapes in its twilight depths. On the right a high hedge showed through its bare leaflessness and gaps here and there, a wide sweep of view over the valley beneath. Even that far inland a sea mist was creeping up from beyond the distant downs, partially blotting the fast setting sun into a blood red disc. A cottage with its low eaves and picturesque chimney stacks stood out against the murk. Then the sudden loud ting of a bicycle bell made her look up with something of a start, for she was deep in her own thoughts.

The rider was coming down the hill on the free wheel. At sight of her he

clapped the brakes on sharp; so sharp, as well nigh to earn catastrophe —for himself. In a moment he was standing in the road.

“Miss Seward! Why this is an unexpected and delightful meeting, I was on my way to look up your uncle.”

“Were you? He’ll be glad. Well, we can walk back together, Mr Varne—unless, of course, you’d sooner ride,” she added, mischievously.

“Why of course I would,” he answered, in the same vein.

“Where are you from now. The usual *Woodcock*, Lower Gidding?”

“No. The *Queen’s Head*, Clancehurst, this time. You know how we used to wrangle over the shortest way out. Well, I’m still inclined to think there isn’t a hundred yards to choose between them. The one you always use *seems* the straightest.”

“All serene, I still stick to my opinion. The Cholgate way *is* the shortest,” she answered, merrily mischievous.

“Then the Cholgate way *is* the shortest, and there’s no more to be said,” answered Varne in the same spirit, and as he looked down into the dancing blue eyes, he came to the conclusion that he was looking upon the sweetest, most entrancing vision of girl loveliness he had ever looked upon in his life.

“Well, and what have you been doing with yourself all this time?” she said as they walked down the steep, rather stony hill.

“H’m! Various things,” he answered, unconsciously shading off his lightness of tone a little, as the ugliness of a particularly grim affair which he had been engaged upon investigating, obtruded unpleasantly at such a moment.

She sent a quick look at him, and did not pursue the subject.

“Look. There’s old Broceliande—still in the same place.”

This was a reference to the dark oak-wood, now on their right as they

retraced their way. Melian was a great reader of Mallory, and during one of Helston Varne's previous visits she had taken him for a walk through this wood, pointing out its imaginary resemblances to that legendary forest.

"Yes. It wouldn't have moved in between, and the British Isles don't come within the zone of seismic disturbance," he answered. "And you haven't discovered the ghost of old Merlin plodding about it yet?"

"No. I've tried to—in the dusk of a dismal evening. But that old crowd seem to have lived in sunshine and moonlight for the most part. What on earth they did with their armour and silken pavilions when it rained is a puzzler."

Helston laughed. "Oh, one got rusty and the other draggle-tailed, I suppose," he said. "Now, if I had made that remark you'd have been down on me like a hammer as a Goth and a Vandal, and a profane person who'd sold his birthright—for a plate of porridge, incidentally." Then, more seriously, "And how have *you* been getting on?"

"Fine. This country is too perfect for anything. I just revel in it." But then, that misgiving which had been tugging at her mind on the way out somehow recurred, and the bright, animated, speaking face was bound to show something of it. Equally, her then companion was bound to see it, and he—even he—of course was bound to put it down to the wrong cause. Had there been any further development in the mystery—in its latest form—which overhung Heath Hover, he thought? However, he answered:

"That's right. Why you are looking twice the girl you were the first time I saw you. You have put on colour, and look in altogether splendid form."

"Thanks. Glad to hear I've improved," she answered, with a laugh. "That's always a satisfactory item of knowledge." Then she subsided into silence. She was thinking of two or three strange things which had happened since she saw him last—occurrences which had frightened her, utterly intangible, even more so than on that night when she had rushed downstairs in a state of scare to her uncle. But with an effort she had refrained from saying anything to the latter about them. He would only

laugh at the whole thing as he had done before and suggest bats or rats, or something of the kind as an explanation. But this man somehow she felt a longing to confide in. There was something about him that seemed to render him in her eyes a very tower of strength and reliability. Had she known what his real line was she would not have hesitated—let alone could she have heard his light, easy, confident boast, when talking with Nashby: “Given time, and make it worth my while, and I’d undertake to dis-ghost every haunted house in England.”

The twilight was merging into darkness now. From the sombre oak-wood with its gnarled branches which had led her to christen it Broceliande, came the crow of a belated pheasant fluttering up to roost, and the surface of Plane Pond, coming into view beneath, stared white, a long, slit-shaped eye. More than ever she felt moved to confide in him. And as if to strengthen her towards this course he suddenly said:

“Something is troubling you. I wouldn’t obtude for the world, but—you have something on your mind.”

“Why do you—why should you think that?” And the half-startled look in the wide-opened eyes, meeting his in their straight glance, confirmed him in his theory.

“Never mind,” he replied, and she was quick to notice the world of sympathetic reassurance in his tone. “I won’t press you for confidence. But remember—if at any time you feel like making it—and I don’t say it to brag, but those who know me would be able to tell you that you might make it to plenty of people who could be of less use to you. Well, if at any time you should want a friend, no matter what the nature of the worry is, you won’t hesitate to apply to me. Will you promise me that much?”

She darted a quick look up at him in the gloaming. More than ever did he seem as a very tower of strength. And then the sheer contrast seemed to suggest bathos. How absurd her shadowy imaginative fears must appear to a man of this stamp. Why, he would smile them down as a mere girlish scare of bogydom. Of course. And yet—why not chance it?

“Well? Won’t you promise that little?”

“Yes. I promise. But—”

She was on the point of keeping that promise then and there, of telling him all, the haunting fear that hung over her in the lonely old house down yonder, at times. At times—not always—that was where the strange part of it came in; and, stranger still, not only during the hours of darkness. Sometimes in broad daylight, when she was alone, would come the chill, shuddering consciousness that there was another Presence beside her, even the stealthy sound of steps, the whisper of voices. But it would come so sporadically, with long intervals between, and otherwise life was so good, that such a strange manifestation did not avail to effect a lasting impression.

“But what?” he said.

She hesitated a moment, then the opportunity was gone. There was a clink of stones on the roadway just in front and below, then a cough, followed by another.

“Hallo, Uncle Seward!” cried the girl, as a figure loomed in sight in the fast deepening gloom. “You oughtn’t to have come out at the very dampest part of the whole day.”

“Oh don’t blow me up, child,” chuckled Mervyn, “I came to meet you. Why—who’s this? Varne, by George. You’re quite a stranger, Varne. Come along down and take pot-luck. Eh?”

“Delighted, I’m sure. I nearly collided with Miss Seward free wheeling down that abominably stony hill. I was coming over to look you up but I’ve got to catch the last train up from Clancehurst. Got something important to attend to.”

Mervyn emitted a half chuckle and turned it off into a cough. What affair was Varne on to now, he wondered? At any rate he hoped it would turn out more satisfactory than the one which had brought him down here, his own to wit.

“Oh well, Business is—biz,” he answered, “only I can’t send you over in the trap because there’s no one to drive. But there’ll be a moon. What if you get punctured, though? Eh?”

“Can’t. I’ve got unpuncturable tyres. I never take risks.”

“Quite right. Quite right. Well, here we are, I’d got a touch of sciatica, and a bit of a choke thrown in,” he went on, “and have been sticking in all day on the strength of it.”

“And then coming out at the coldest, dampest end of it,” supplied Melian severely.

Every temptation to the contrary the guest was as good as his word, and it needed some strength of mind to tear himself away, comparatively early, from that cosy lighted room with its great fire roaring up the width of the wide chimney—more so still, indeed, from the entrancing vision of that bright presence with the mass of gold-crowned hair gleaming in the lamplight. But Helston Varne was nothing if not strong.

Yet as he wheeled along under a clear moon, heading for Clancehurst, now darting through a gap of road between the blackness of sombre woods, now skimming over high, open heath, with the dimming vista of wide country spreading out beneath and beyond—of a truth he was thinking a great deal more of that same bright presence than of the important matter before him which he was hurrying back to unravel, and whereon hung tragedy. But he promised himself that it would not be long before he revisited Heath Hover.

Wherein becomes manifest the strange discrepancy that the astute never failing unraveller of mysteries, known as Helston Varne, forgot to take count of the greatest mystery of all—that of the Future.

Chapter Eighteen.

Shock—All Round.

The master of Heath Hover had just drawn up the blind of his bedroom window, and was gazing out upon a morning of unrivalled and cloudless beauty, for the year had grown apace, and now the tender green of the spring leafage gladdened the eye in every direction. Through the open window floated the scents of spring—late spring—likewise its sounds, the hum of winged insects, the cry of coots from up yonder on the pond, the carolling of innumerable thrushes and the ever welcome call of the cuckoo. It was a morning on which, all things being even, it was good to be alive.

Came also to his ears another sound, sweeter than even the sweet sounds of spring—the sound of girl voices, the high, clear notes of Melian's voice rising above that of Violet Clinock, who had arrived the evening before on a few days' visit. Nearer and nearer drew the voices, and then their owners came in sight, and began leisurely to descend the path leading from the sluice. A delightful picture they made, in their youth and freshness—thought the onlooker, whom as yet they had not seen.

They had paused about halfway down, and Melian was descanting volubly on some favourite subject—and then the said onlooker's face went white and clammy, and he thought he could hardly keep his footing, for something bright and shining had caught his glance, and it was in Melian's hand.

The whole outlook seemed to sway and rock before Mervyn's eyes. Was it real or was he dreaming? This dreadful thing, this hateful thing, held carelessly in the long white fingers! Why, he would about as soon have found her caressing a hooded snake. What should he do, what should he say—and would she unhesitatingly obey him? In the horror of the moment even the power of speech seemed to fail him. But some sort of an exclamation must have escaped him, for now they looked up.

"Drop—that—thing—instantly," he managed to jerk out, and his voice seemed far away and raucous. "Obey me—without—question, Melian."

If ever two startled girls stood staring, it was these two in the middle of the sluice path. The ghastliness of the face up there at the window, the fearful, unnatural voice. That her uncle had suddenly gone mad was the solution which first presented itself to Melian's perplexed mind. But she obeyed. An immense sigh of relief escaped the onlooker.

"Don't move," he said, "until I come down."

His hands trembled so that he could hardly tie the tasselled cord which girded his dressing gown, and he almost stumbled down the stairs in his haste to arrive. Even in that flash of time, he was thinking—What if they should take advantage of his momentary disappearance from sight to pick up that thing again? But he must pull himself together, and even as he emerged he felt partially relieved to notice that they were standing just as he had seen them last, but staring at him in round-eyed amazement.

"Why, Uncle Seward, whatever is it? You look as if you had seen all the ghosts in the world."

"Here, child, show me your hands—quick!"

Still marvelling, she extended them. He seized them in his, and subjected them to a long, close scrutiny, first with the palms upward, then all over. The colour returned to his ghastly face as he emitted a long deep sigh of relief.

"Yours now, Miss Clinock."

Violet extended hers, feeling in secret rather frightened. What strange mystery was this which had been effective so violently to upset her ordinarily so equable and self-contained host—this was not her first visit to Heath Hover. She could not but notice, while the same process was repeated, that it seemed to be slightly less prolonged in her case than in that of Melian.

"What does it mean, Mr Mervyn?" she asked.

"Any one would think that that rum little shining thing would bite," said Melian, mischievously.

The two pairs of bright eyes, the dark and the blue, brimming with mischief—eke curiosity—fixed upon his face, served to brace Mervyn. He was himself again, or very nearly. And then to him came the thought as to how he should account for his agitation. It had been so palpably real that he was at his wits' end to think how he should explain it away; and it must be explained away. Women were gifted with such singularly clear-sighted instinct—and, worse still, perhaps—with such a fund of curiosity. A forestalment of this promptly came out.

"But—what *is* the thing, Uncle Seward?" went on Melian.

He looked at her for a moment, wondering what answer to make.

"Perhaps I was upset about nothing," he said, regaining his equability with an effort. "The fact is it brought back to my mind a very curious and uncanny experience—not in this country, but I've been among strange scenes and people in other parts of the world, you know. There's a great deal in association of ideas, and there are strange happenings all the world over, as you two children may—or may not—find out by the time you get to my time of life. Where did you find—that—by the way?—No—leave it where it is."

This last quickly, as Melian stooped over the thing as though to pick it up again.

"Why, just where the path begins to come down from the road," she answered, wondering.

"On your way *back*?"

The question came out abrupt, staccato. Some of the first agitation seemed to show itself again. And then, with the affirmative answer, both girls noticed that he looked greatly relieved.

"Well, I suppose you're both ready for breakfast," he went on in quite a normal tone. "I'm not, but you're not obliged to wait for me. That would be too great a tax on your ravening young appetites, wouldn't it? Eh, Miss Clinock?"

Violet, thus appealed to, laughingly disclaimed impatience on that head,

but Melian thoroughly and emphatically disagreed with her.

“Well, you’d better go and hurry old Judy up,” said Mervyn. “I shall have to go and get dressed first.”

But he did not re-enter the house with them, nor, indeed, did he hurry to re-enter it at all. Both girls were rather silent and wondering, and in the minds of both was the same thought, though neither cared to voice it to the other, and the thought was a disquieting one; perhaps to Melian the more disquieting of the two. For to her clearer insight, and with the knowledge of her uncle’s character, which she had had some months of opportunity to gain, his explanation of the incident did not somehow carry conviction. There was more, far more beneath it than a mere matter of evolved recollection; of that she felt fully convinced. He was not the stamp of man who would be upset by such, and the practical side had come out in the very real fear—the agony of fear almost—which he had manifested over the discovery of that harmless looking star-shaped trinket. Trinket? Well, that for want of a better word. The thing, after all, might have been a trade mark of sorts which had come detached from a biscuit box or a tin of specially boomed blacking. No. There was more in this than met the eye.

Then she remembered that her uncle had spent his life in strange, out of the way parts of the world, mostly among strange people. What if there was nothing accidental about this shining pointed thing being left just where he could find it. What if it were some sort of a sign, some sort of a manifesto? What if some danger were overhanging him? And by a curious back twist in her mind the thought of Helston Varne came back to her. A tower of strength seemed that thought—and then came that which seemed to cut under its foundations.

They were both halfway through breakfast by then, when Mervyn entered—clothed and ready for the day before him. All trace of agitation seemed to have disappeared. He was even in unusual good spirits.

“By the way,” he said, in the course of conversation, which he had somewhat cleverly led up to, “I suppose you two children are old enough to know how not to talk. For instance—your find this morning. I particularly wish no word to be said about it to anybody—anybody. Not

only round here, but anywhere. Perhaps some day—though I don't absolutely promise that—I may give you an explanation; but only on condition nothing is said about it now."

Both pairs of eyes sparked up. But Melian's dropped. She could not take Helston Varne into confidence now.

"Why, Mr Mervyn," answered Violet, readily, "of course we shan't say anything about it."

"You'll greatly oblige me if you don't," he said, somewhat earnestly. "The fact is that there are quite enough 'old wives' fables' hanging about this place. We don't want to pile on to them. By the by, there's another thing, which is perhaps a harder thing to ask. Don't talk it over with each other—in short, don't *dwell* upon it. Forget it."

"Aren't you rather asking us impossibilities, dear?" said Melian. "Two mere women! And our curiosity screwed up to boiling over point."

"Why, it smacks of a magazine yarn," declared Violet. "Never mind, Mr Mervyn, I'll promise to remember your wishes."

Both fancied he looked relieved, though not entirely at ease.

"That's perfectly all right, then," he returned. "Anybody who was such a friend to this little one when she was in straits as you were, is safe on a promise, I'll swear."

"Steady on, Mr Mervyn, and spare my blushes," protested the girl, looking pleased all the same. "I did no more for Melian than she'd have done for me, and we people who have to work have to stick by each other when a pinch comes."

"And very much to the good that is," said Mervyn. "Knocks a lot of the essentially feminine nonsense out of women and develops the good."

"Well said, Mr Mervyn. That's capital, isn't it, Melian?"

"Not bad," was the reply, with a dash of affectionate impudence underlying it.

“Not only that, but it was owing to you entirely that I became aware—almost of the existence, I was going to say—of this child here,” he went on. “That counts on the credit side of obligation.”

“Oh, go it, Uncle Seward. Butter seems to be getting cheap,” said Melian, equably. “We are getting more than we can do with, Violet. Eh—what?”

“Now what would you children like to do with yourselves this morning?” asked Mervyn, when the laugh had subsided.

“We were going to show Violet how to catch some fish. Old Joe has been digging out worms, and he’s coming with us to bait. You know, Violet, the part I can’t stick about this bait fishing is the worm part of it, so I take Joe to do that, and look the other way while he does it. There are some good perch in Plane Pond, but the big ones will hardly ever bite. The smaller ones you can get plenty of, but the pounders won’t come to the scratch, like the ‘oldest oyster’ in the Walrus and the Carpenter.”

“All right, then,” said her uncle. “You two will be quite happy on your own, and I’ve got some letters to write. I haven’t often, which is one of the compensating advantages of being a lonely man. So shout up Joe when you want him.”

He saw them start off presently; bright, happy, laughing. He did not go with them as far as the boat house, which nestled in the thick, wooded bank of the great pond near the further end of the same. John Seward Mervyn had a good deal on his mind that radiant cloudless morning of late spring, while all the woods were ringing with birdsong, and the sweet, young, clear voices of his niece and guest died fainter and fainter away among the solemn tree boles.

Two cyclists skimmed along the sluice-road, taking the next steep acclivity with all the rush they could get out of their headlong free wheel down the steeper, and somewhat dangerously winding, hill before. They looked to the right at the pond, and to the left at Heath Hover. One seemed half inclined to stop and dismount to take in the picturesque effect of it, but did not. Then a waggon loaded up with floury millsacks rumbled by, and then another cyclist, a motor one this time, and the spitting throb of his abominable engine and the reek of petrol seemed to

hang on the glorious, radiant, spring air like a corroding cloud, long after their producer was out of sight. But there seemed an unusual amount of traffic on that not much used road to-day, thought Mervyn—and then he fell to wondering what if the shine of that mysterious disc deposited at the top of the sluice path, had caught the eye of any of these? Well, that was not his affair, he thought, grimly, but—something more might have been heard of it. And the thought brought back something of that awful heart-numbed blood-freezing moment, when he had descried Melian coming down the path, holding that symbol in her bare hand.

How had it got there—there where she had found it? *It*? Yes, but—had *it*? To set this doubt at rest—not much "rest" about it, he told himself with a mirthless ironical laugh—he had been glad to see the last of these bright young presences for an hour or two. Old Judy he could hear now clattering about with pots and pans and firestoking implements in the kitchen. He was entirely alone—at last.

He went upstairs. The landings, uneven and cranky with age, gave and creaked beneath his tread. The long narrow passage which led to the disused part of the house was darkened with dust and cobwebs on the neglected casements, and as he went along, he was drawing on that same old pair of gloves. He passed several doors, then turned the handle of one. It opened into a mouldy room, partly stacked with ancient and worm-eaten furniture. He moved aside an old sideboard, which seemed to manifest an inclination to fall to pieces in the process. Between it and the wall something gleamed at him, something white and shining. He bent down as though to touch it, then changed his mind.

"Good! That's there," he said to himself. "Now for the other, if *it* is there?"

He went out again and shut the door, removing the gloves as he threaded the passage; and putting them in his pocket, he went to the front door and out. The fresh open air—yes, that was life—the pure sweet breath of wood and water, the joyous song of birds. Afar down the long pond, came another joyous sound, that of rippling laughter. It came from the boat, wafted over the water—wondrous sound conductor—and although nearly half a mile away he could distinguish Melian's clear note from that of her friend. Lightheartedness, silvery lightheadedness, running side by side, parallel with tragedy! A strange world! Then he dived into a close

woodland path which led down at a steep angle below the house.

Soon he stopped, listening—looked around without seeming to do either. A runnel of water trickled down a stony course, partly under the stones; in hot weather it was dry. He moved aside two stones, casually as though thinking of something else. In the solemn silence of the gnarled oak-wood he could see nobody, but it did not follow that nobody could see him.

But—*something* could—*something* did. The round, white, eye-like disc, with its five star points, stared up at him—stared with baleful—almost human, or rather demoniacal glance, from its damp bed, where he himself had placed it months before. It should have been red with rust—yet it was not. This too struck him, and he began to feel himself hopelessly enmeshed. That other, its counterpart, who had placed it there? He had been cherishing a faint and utterly unreasonable thought that in a moment of aberration, he himself might have removed it from the original hiding place to which he had consigned it during Helston Varne's temporary imprisonment. But no. There was the other, in the disused part of his house. He had just put it there, and he had just left it there. He could not get away from that.

The beauties of the glorious woodland were around him as he retraced his steps, the networking of the sunlight through the tree-tops, the cool, moist fragrance of underfoot moss, the tap-tap of a woodpecker coming in chastened echo through the columns of tree trunks, then the gurgling trill of a thrush. Everywhere peace, the sweet English woodland peace of a cloudless late spring or early summer day. Yet John Seward Mervyn went up that woodland path wearing a grey, ashen face, and carrying something very like utter despair in his heart.

As he arrived at the house, the two girls were coming down the path. A clear, laughing hail of welcome greeted him.

"We've been in luck, dear," cried Melian, taking a fishing basket from old Joe, who was walking behind. "Look at this."

She displayed eight or nine perch—two quite big ones.

"Violet caught those," she went on. "I've never caught any as big. I don't believe there are any bigger ones in Plane Pond; eh, Joe."

“They be middlin’ fish, Miss Melun—they be middlin’ fish, sure-ly,” answered the old rustic.

“Why, I’m sure the big ’un must be over a pound,” rattled on the girl joyously. “And didn’t Violet just prick her fingers over his spines.”

Here again Mervyn conjured up another picture as he contemplated the great spiny dorsal fin and black stripes of a really finely conditioned perch. She had pricked her fingers with something very harmless that time, he thought, grimly.

“We have had such a jolly time, Mr Mervyn,” said Violet, animatedly. “I’ve enjoyed it no end.”

He felt that she was looking curiously at him. Her delighted tone seemed to tail off suddenly.

“I’m very glad to hear it,” he said, throwing off his mood and striving to join in theirs.

“Over a pound. I’m certain it is,” went on Melian, who was still wrapped up in contemplation of the “take”. “Come along and let’s weigh him.”

And the two, aglow with life and spirits, headed for the kitchen and the weighing scales.

“Contrast—again?” thought Mervyn, as he followed.

So did another person, who, unseen, had witnessed the whole of the morning’s doings from their very commencement.

Chapter Nineteen.

Interim—Quiet.

Even as Violet had said, to put such a superhuman strain upon the curiosity of two mere women seemed scarcely fair, and perhaps the hardest strain of all was Mervyn's injunction not to talk about the matter between themselves even; however, they followed it out with a tolerable show of loyalty; in fact, as great a one as could be expected of their sex.

On Melian, of course, the strain fell the hardest. She was quick to recognise that the finding of that strange object had affected her uncle far more than he would allow to appear. Not only that, but as day followed upon day, there was no lessening of the effect. Then, too, what had he done with the thing when they had gone inside leaving him alone. Buried it—thrown it into the pond, or what? She, too, began to feel as though living under the spell of a fear. Perhaps it had been an error of judgment on her uncle's part, to enjoin so strict a silence upon them, she more than once thought—and the worst of this was that it precluded her from consulting Helston Varne.

She had been impressed by the promise that he had exacted from her that she would so consult him in the event of finding herself in any difficulty; in fact, under just such a contingency as had occurred; but she was debarred by her subsequent promise. There were other mysterious happenings she had considered the expediency of laying before him; more even than when we last saw her on the point of doing so; for she had since gained more than an inkling as to his real line in life and the discovery increased her interest in him well nigh to the pitch of vividness.

There was another matter as to which she had gained more than an inkling, and that, the ill-repute which was said to surround Heath Hover. She remembered how on her first arrival she had suggested that it looked like a haunted house, and the way in which her uncle had scoffed at the idea and turned away the question, struck her in subsequent lights as a trifle overdoing the part. One circumstance, however, seemed more suspicious still.

She was chatting with old Joe one day, and enjoining upon him the necessity of fixing a board over a pane of glass she had broken in her bedroom window, until it could be properly mended.

“I don’t want any more bats coming in and flicking me in the face, Joe,” she appended, “like that night just after I got here.”

The old man dropped the handles of the barrow which he was just about to trundle, and stared at her queerly.

“What time might that ha’ been, Missie?” he said.

“Why, a few days after I came.”

“That warn’t no flittermaouse,” he said. “Yew won’t see none o’ they for—come weeks and weeks. They be all asleep they be.”

“But it might have been a stray one.”

The old rustic grinned pityingly and shook his head.

“That warn’t no flittermaouse,” he repeated.

Melian’s eyes opened wider.

“What was it, then?” she said.

But the old rustic seemed suddenly to become alive to the fact that he had said too much; in short, had been betrayed into overstepping his employer’s explicitly imposed injunctions.

“What war it? Narthen. You’d been dreamin’, Missie, for sure. That’s what it war.” And old Joe had picked up the wheelbarrow handles and trundled off then and there with an energy which bade fair to put a stop to any further questioning.

But his statement had rendered Melian decidedly uncomfortable. If her acquaintance with natural history was defective, she had had ample opportunity of discovering that that of her uncle was not; in fact, eminently the reverse, and that he of all people should have been so

hard put to it as to invent a bat flying about on a mid-winter night, showed something loose somewhere. Should she tax him with it under the form of chaff? But she decided not to. He might not like it, and again, he would almost certainly be angry with old Joe. On the other hand it looked as if he himself were not so sceptical as he made out.

She had also become aware that nobody had been able to inhabit Heath Hover for a long time past until her uncle had come; that is to say, do more than give it a very brief trial, perhaps one of fewer weeks than he had given it months. Well, as to that, he seemed quite comfortable there, and since her arrived, happy. She was letting her imagination run riot too much, she told herself—and certainly, she had never *seen* anything since her arrival. Strange sounds might be produced by any cause, and as for "influences"—well, imagination might be a factor again.

Helston Varne had not been near them since that visit when they had met unexpectedly on the dusking road, and as a matter of hard fact Melian felt just a little sore with him for not having been. He had sent her a few lines—short, straight, and to the point—reminding her of his willingness to assist her at any time or at any moment, reminding her also of her promise not to be behindhand in claiming such aid. This note she had carefully kept. But he had not been near them again, and she had found herself very much wishing that he would come. There was something so refreshingly out of the ordinary about his personality—about his conversation—and then, too, the high intellectual talent which must go to make him such a success in the line of life he had adopted; the suggestion of mystery blended with power was just the element to appeal strongly to a girl of her character and temperament. The fact is, that during the intervening time—getting on for three months as it was—Melian had been thinking a great deal about Helston Varne.

Everything was favourable to introspection of the sort. The life she led, amid free, open, congenial surroundings, into the charm of which she had entered from the very first, and which had grown upon her more and more with every change of the advancing season—and yet the personality of the man seemed subtly to pervade it all. There were spots they had visited—a casual stroll along a woodland path, or a breezy, uphill climb to this or that point whence rolling views of some of the loveliest rural expanse in England swept away on either hand; and she

could remember all that was said, and exactly where it was said, during their exchange of ideas, which were, for the most part, thoroughly in sympathy. And then, too, in her moments of shadowy fears in the mysterious ill-omened old house—small wonder that taking all things together she should have thought a good deal about Helston Varne during that intervening time.

It was the last day of Violet Clinock's visit, and on the morrow she would be returning to town and work. She was a cheerful contented soul, but the contrast between this glorious early June day, paradisical in its cloudless beauty, the air fragrant with spring flowers and melodious with the song of soaring larks; every meadow a golden sea of buttercups; and soft masses of new leafage on high, irregular hedges, or towering hugely heavenwards from this or that noble wood—the contrast between this and the stuffy air and blackened chimney stacks which formed the sole and shut-in outlook from her own modest dwelling of all the year round was too marked even for her. She felt anything but lighthearted.

"You are in luck, Melian, dear," she could not restrain herself from saying, wistfully. "Look at all this, and then think of me this time to-morrow."

Melian was in the mood thoroughly to sympathise. This was one of those days which she appreciated every hour, every minute of—and on which she felt she could not get up too early or see the last of too late.

"Couldn't you anyway manage to stretch it out even a day or two longer?" she said. "Surely you can?"

But the other shook a desponding head.

"No fear. I've pulled it out to its very utmost limits," she said. "I can't afford to play cat and banjo with my billet—certainly not yet."

There was that in the answer which seemed to remind Melian that the speaker had done that very thing on her behalf, what time she had been ill, and friendless, and nearly destitute.

"It's too bad," she declared. "Yes, I am lucky, Violet, dear, and I owe my luck entirely to you. But of course, when you have your long holiday—in August or September—you are to put in every day of it here. Just think—

all those glorious heather slopes above Plane Pond—right away back—will be blazing with crimson, and—what times we'll have. It isn't so far off either, so buck up. It's of no use talking about week-ends I suppose."

"You know I can't run to it, dear."

"I know you're altogether too beastly proud," was the answer. "If we gave you a birthday present of a new hat you wouldn't be too proud to take that, and a return ticket here runs to far less. It's an absurd distinction."

But the other's head shake was quite decided.

"We've hammered all that out before," she said. "Look, your uncle has finished his siesta. Here he comes."

The two girls had been picking wild flowers and had wandered away from the spot where they had been picnicking on sandwiches and ginger-beer—and something stronger for the only male of the party. It was a lovely spot, an intermingling of heath and woodland, and the white stems of birches supporting their new feathery foliage, stood out in relief from a background of dark firs. Just glimpsed in the distance beyond stood a venerable wooden windmill raised on piles—one of its sails missing and another falling in half through sheer old age, like teeth. The whole made for that combination of charm and the picturesque so characteristic of, if not unique, as a sample of English rural scenery.

"Well," said Mervyn, knocking the ashes out of his pipe as he joined them, and looking very placid and contented. "Isn't it time to saddle up? We've come a precious long way, remember, and you have to allow a margin for punctures."

But Melian overruled him.

"We needn't hurry, you know, dear," she urged. "And it's Violet's last day."

"I know it is, worse luck," he answered, kindly, "I wish it needn't be. Then again, we must also allow for that inspection of 'old stones' you threatened to deflect us from our way to go and adore."

"Oh, Chiltingford? You must see that, Violet. And there's a ripping old pair

of stocks too. By Jove, but that's good enough!"

"Don't know whether the misdemeanants who were clamped up in them thought them good enough?" said her uncle with a laugh, and lighting a fresh pipe. "Well, you shall both do just what you like to-day."

And they did; and the long, bright golden afternoon went all too quickly by, as they skimmed along the well-kept roads, skirting greenwoods resonant with thrush voices; down long hills between spangled meadows; past cottages nestling in trees—every one a picture in itself—and snug farms bulging with the suggestion of solid comfort; old grey church towers, at which Melian looked wistfully and had to be reminded that the cultus of every pile of "old stones" they saw would not come within the compass of their time limit—and here and there one of those old country seats whose exact counterpart is to be found in no other country in the world. Yes, it was one of those days that would stand out, to elderly and young alike, of those comprising that trio. To two of them at least it might be that it would come back with all the more marked contrast—perchance of deadly peril and fear—but that was within the potentialities of the Future.

The stars were already bright in the summer sky as they descended the last steep and stony hill, the quality of the latter calling forth more than one half stifled malediction from the elderly unit of the trio aforesaid. But to another unit of the said trio, the darkness, the spot, conjured up a recollection, albeit the "tang-tang" of a jubilant nightingale sounded from the dark and now leafy depths of "Broceliande," and the little brown owls, hawking over the adjoining fields, were sending forth their harsh, fierce cries. Here was where she had accidentally met Helston Varne for the last time, and they had not met since. She was wondering again whether they ever would. And yet—it was of no use to keep on dwelling upon it, she decided.

Chapter Twenty.

The Influence.

It was a glowing, beautiful summer, and as each radiant day succeeded another, it seemed to Melian a difficult thing to realise her former life, so completely had that passed away. It seemed to have been the life of somebody else. She thought of Violet Clinock with pity and real concern —stewed up in horrible dusty streets, in all the roar and bustle of them— while she herself was revelling in the glory of the unclouded sunlight, and the dim holiness of leafy wood-depths, or the roll of open champaign stretching away softened into far distance; a fresh vista of joy whichever way the eye might turn; breathing the free and fragrant air of Heaven itself. Yet her concern was to a certain extent wasted, so differently are humans constituted; for, as a matter of fact, though thoroughly enjoying every moment of the few days which constituted her visit, the same number of months would have bored Violet Clinock to death. She was temperamentally of the stirring, bustling order, and the very elements of the town life, which to Melian, looking back upon, gained in repulsion, were to her without knowing it, part of the essentials of well being.

For the misgivings which had beset Melian as to whether she was not wasting her life had lulled, if not died, as the joyous spring rushed on into glorious summer, and she noted and appreciated every shade and harmony of such change; the deepening of the leafage, and the blooming of this or that new variety of wild flower life; the song chorus of innumerable thrushes, in all its varying liquid notes, from early morn till late eve; and the “tang-tang” of nightingales through the fast shortening hours of darkness. And then, when the dawn pearled upon the awakening world, what a carolling of sweetness as countless larks sprang upwards and soared higher and higher into the liquid blue.

And then those delightful rambles, whether short or long, by field paths or along leafy hedges where the honeysuckle was beginning to hang its creamy petals, or in shaded woods, the sunlight networking here and there on the feathery tops of the green bracken, a rest at some quaint little roadside inn for tea, then home again in the dewiness of rich

meadows, where young lambs skipped and shrilly bleated. Or again, a long round on the bicycle, exploring this or that old ruin, or massive and picturesque ancient church. By this time she knew the whole countryside by heart. And it is doubtful whether this brought more enjoyment to her than to her uncle—her invariable companion on such wanderings.

As for Mervyn himself, it is safe to say perhaps that he had never been so happy in his life. All that appealed to the girl here, appealed to him, but he had not been capable of enjoying it in solitude. Now this was all changed, and at every moment of the day he found himself revelling in her happiness, whether it was watching her gathering wild flowers in a sunbath of greenery and radiance, or seated smoking the pipe of placidity and peace upon some churchyard wall what time she was assimilating the interior of the mouldering structure, to come forth presently, with animated eyes to descant upon the wondrous fret of some grisly old Norman arch which it comprised. And he revelled in it with the deeper intensity because, with the experience of age, he knew that it was not destined to last.

And then, indeed, as though to bear out the soundness of this reasoning, there came a change—a cloud, a shadow—but of this he divined nothing as yet. As the summer drew near its zenith something seemed to come over Melian. Throughout the radiancy of the glowing summer day—or even when clouds from seaward brought some hours of soft warm rain to keep the full sapped leafage from succumbing to a too long unbroken glow of sun heat, she rejoiced with the joy of living. But at night, in the solitude of her room, all her elation would leave her. An influence seemed to creep over her, substituting depression; not depression merely, but conveying a suspicion of fear—of dread. Of dread she knew not of what. Yet it was there. Happy, joyous, in the long hours of light and open, yet when the night shut down, this feeling would come over her—and come over her suddenly—directly she found herself in the solitude of her own room. And it grew upon her more and more until she began to dread the time of retiring for the night—for the life of her she could not have told why. Yet she kept it to herself. It seemed absurd to worry her uncle over what after all was a mere fancy. It would pass. For months now, nothing had occurred to alarm her, as on that other night—and surely in this paradise of a country there could be no room for depression or haunting imaginings. But at such times her thoughts flew unaccountably to Helston

Varne.

For by this time she had arrived at the conviction that some influence, sinister and terrifying, was really hanging about Heath Hover. She had even tried drawing old Joe Sayers on the subject again, but that astute rustic, remembering his former slip, had shut up like an oyster. With old Judy she met no better success.

“We be wold folks,” had answered that ancient, when deftly sounded as to why they should not take up their quarters altogether at Heath Hover on the ground of convenience to her—Melian. “We likes our own chimbley corner o’ nights,—Miss Melun. The master, he’s allus been middlin’ cumferble o’ nights without we. And now you’m here and he’s more cumferble nor ever—sure-lye.”

This, with the deft invocation of “the master,” was unanswerable, as old Judy had intended. That these two were not to be drawn was obvious, and Melian had no idea in the world of looking for information outside. Her uncle too, had distinctly discouraged her taking any interest in the surrounding cottages, and there were few enough of these. She began to think she saw through the reason.

But, after all, here she was, and life was happy, she would tell herself; and she had found it so after some experience of it of which this by no means held good. She must make the best of it, and, after all, the best, even by force of contrast, was very good indeed. Yet still, that weird, uncanny oppression—yes, that was the word for it, oppression—came upon her more and more as sure as the hours of darkness set in. And more and more her thoughts reverted to Helston Varne.

Why had he not been again to see them after all this time? It could be through no want of cordiality in repeating their invite either on her uncle’s part or upon hers. He was a skilled clearer-up of mysteries. He had told her—with some earnestness—that if ever she were in a difficulty, and stood in need of a friend—she was to communicate with him at once.

And more than once she had thought of doing so—had been on the point of doing so—when another consideration would obtrude. Would she not, in a way, be working behind her uncle? For instance, the mystery of that

queer, shining thing, with several points, the mere sight of which had turned him ashy pale and evoked a peremptory command to her to drop it—at once, and where she stood. That had never been explained. What if in some way it were bound up with the mystery which overhung this eerie, creepy old dwelling? What if in some way it affected him—were in some way, patient of evil results to him? And if Helston Varne were to give his wonderful faculty towards discovery at Heath Hover, he must do so wholly. He would never stop halfway—and then, what about that incident upon which her uncle seemed to set such store of secrecy? No, it wouldn't do, she decided. It was one thing to let loose that sort of thing, it was another to know where it was going to end. Yet, apart from it, she owned to herself she would be glad, very glad, to see Helston Varne again. And then, all unexpectedly, she obtained her wish.

She was standing in front of the house one morning. The black kitten was on her left shoulder and she was playing with it with a bit of string, which it was striving to seize without falling from its perch. Clad in cool white, she stood erect against a background of Virginia creeper and one of the window frames of the old house; and the gleaming waves of her gold hair changed their lights with every movement of the head. A perfect picture, a most exquisite picture, thought the one spectator, who had arrived on the scene unobserved, such a picture indeed as he would carry in his mind, and which he was wholly loth to disturb all at once. Then a low, lighthearted laugh escaped her as the kitten, missing its stroke, overbalanced and dropped lightly to the ground. Then looking up, she discovered she was not alone.

Helston Varne raised his hat and came down the path from the sluice. She made a step forward to meet him.

"How long were you standing there?" she said, in her bright, quick, animated way, when the first greetings had been exchanged.

"Well, not long—unfortunately. But I hope I have too much of an artistic eye to be in a hurry to break up that picture. Is your uncle in?"

"No. He had to run up to London on business. He wanted to take me, although he always says London is the worst place in the world to take a girl to for the day, unless she's got a lot of things of her own to attend to—

which I haven't. Says he doesn't know what to do with her. He more than half wanted me to go—and chance it, but I wouldn't. I should only have been in the way, of course."

"That's a pity. I didn't want to see him about anything in particular, only as I shall have to be away from England some time, I thought I should just like to see how you were all getting on first."

If Melian's face had fallen just a shade over the announcement, the change, it is certain, did not escape the keen perception of the other, nor could he tell why the fact should have afforded him a modicum of gratification.

"I suppose I mustn't ask, as a matter of innocent and feminine curiosity, what part of the world you are bound for next?" she ventured.

Even that smile as she looked up at him was not sufficient to let down his guard. He shook a deprecating head.

"I'm afraid not. The element of secrecy in my movements is one of the very first essentials."

"Why, of course. By the way, here am I keeping you standing. Do come inside. But—where's your bicycle? You didn't walk?"

"I left my bike up there on the sluice, till I'd found out whether anybody was at home. Save the bother of lugging it up again if nobody was."

"Oh, do go and fetch it. Some one might bag it."

"They'd wish they hadn't—before they had ridden it a hundred yards," he answered with a laugh. "They'd come about the most complete spill they'd ever come in their lives."

"Why? How?" she asked, mystified.

"There's a dodge in it that would produce that result with any other than myself mounting it. Incidentally, there have been two attempts made at annexing it—with the effect described."

“That’s a very wonderful machine of yours,” she said. “The other day—only it was months ago—you told us it was unpuncturable—now it seems it’s unrideable, for any one but its owner.”

“Yes—it is rather wonderful, isn’t it—Hallo?” as he became alive to the greetings of the kitten, which was rubbing against his legs and purring. “Why, this little beauty is hardly any bigger than it was, and it ought to be nearly full grown by this time.”

“Yes, and aren’t I just glad too, that it’s always going to stay small. I was afraid it wouldn’t,” she answered, picking it up and replacing it upon her shoulder. “But you’re not pressed for time, are you? Uncle Seward will be back by quite an early afternoon train, and he’d he awfully disgusted if he missed you—especially as you’re going away.”

To Helston Varne this invitation was wholly alluring—he wondered that it should prove so much so. And what a strange turn the situation had taken. He had originally come to these parts with—professionally—hostile intent towards the occupier of Heath Hover; now, any discoveries that he might make—whatever their nature—and this he would repeat to himself with emphasis, he would certainly use to the aid and advantage of that individual, if possible. He would have been only too glad to arrive at a solution, as a matter of purely professional interest only—but with no intention of using it by a hair’s breadth against his new-found friend, as to which he had already begun to put Nashby off the scent by such modicum of suspicion as we heard him express to that painstaking officer. Now he answered:

“If you can do with me for all that time, Miss Seward, I shall be only too delighted. What a lovely day it is. Won’t you get on your bicycle and show me some of the country I haven’t seen? We could pick up lunch at some wayside inn, and get back in time to meet your uncle.”

“I’d be delighted, but my bike happens to be out of commission. It wants a thorough overhauling in fact. Let’s have a walk instead. It’s no end jolly just meandering on, winding in and out, now in a jolly wood—now through a field, or by a pond—in fact, just anywhere you like to go. We can get back here by lunch-time. Yes, that’ll be the very thing. I’ll go up and get a hat—I won’t be a sec.”

She vanished upstairs, and Helston Varne, left momentarily alone, was conscious of a mixed train of thought. First of all was the certainty of a very delightful day before him: then, as he sat opposite the creeper-shaded window, his glance fell upon the couch which stood beneath it. There, then, was where the stranger had been found dead. Instinctively he rose from his seat and went over to the couch. It was the first time he had been alone in the room, and now his professional instincts moved him in that direction. Yet there was nothing on earth to reward them in the aspect of this very plain and innocent looking article of furniture. He looked at it long and earnestly—up and down, but no. It suggested nothing. Then the sound of Melian's footsteps, coming down the stairs recalled him to the ordinary ways of life, and he simply stood where he was—looking out of the window.

"Which way shall we go?" she said. "I know. We'll go up through Broceliande and out on to the heath, then we'll wander round the wood on the other side, and down again by the head of Plane Pond."

"Anywhere you like," he said. "And your programme sounds delightful."

Chapter Twenty One.

The Disused Room.

If ever a country ramble was a success, a grand success, that one was. In the gnarled oak-wood dim in cool gloom, comparative, as regarded the flood of sunshine outside, the girl would let imagination run riot, and as she rattled on—fitting this and that vista into the scenes of her favourite romance—her companion listened, enjoying the extraordinary naturalness of her. And he entered into it all, adding here and there an apposite suggestion, which thoroughly appealed. Then, too, when they got out upon open heathland, though the time of its crimsoning had not yet come—and a wide sweep of rolling valley, and dark belts of firwoods contrasting with the brighter, richer green of oak, she would point him out this or that old church tower in the distance, and expatiate upon the archaeological treasures contained within the same, and her wide eyes would go bright with love of her subject, and her cheeks glow with the soft sun-kiss and the bracing upland air—even her words would trip each other up in her anxiety to get out a description. And then Helston Varne would decide to himself that it was just as well he was strong-headed beyond the ordinary, for anything approaching the perfect charm of this girl at his side, he, with a large and varied experience of every conceivable shade and phase of life, had certainly never encountered.

She was so natural, so intensely and confidingly natural—and therein lay a large measure of her charm. There was not a grain of self-consciousness about her, and she talked to him throughout as though she had known him all her life. It was not often he had struck anything approaching such an experience. So the morning wore on—fled, rather—all too quickly for him at any rate; for he was enjoying this experience as he could not quite remember ever having enjoyed an experience before.

They were near home now, threading a narrow keeper’s path, through the thick covert. Once she laid a light hand on his sleeve to stop him, as a cuckoo suddenly gurgled forth his joyous call right overhead, so near, in fact, as to be almost startling.

“Look. There he is. You can see him,” she whispered, gazing upward.

“Ah, he’s gone,” as the bird dashed away. “But, did you notice—he’s got the treble note. I don’t like that. When they get on the treble note it means that we’ll soon hear no more of them.”

“Well, now you’ve told me something I didn’t know. Yes—I noticed the treble call, but I’ll be hanged if I’ve ever noticed it before.”

Melian laughed—that clear, rich, joyous laugh of hers. Incidentally he had noticed that before.

“And I’ve actually been able to tell you some thing you never knew before. You! Well, Mr Varne, I do feel proud.—Wait—look.”

Again she laid a restraining hand upon his sleeve. They had reached the pond head, and on the long expanse of glowing surface the perfect reflection of the tossing greenery overhanging it lay outlined as though cut in silver. A waterhen with her brood was swimming across, and at the shrill, grating croak of the parent bird, alarmed by human proximity, a dozen tiny black specks rushed with hysteric flappings through the surface to bunch around her.

“Aren’t they sweet?” whispered Melian. “Such jolly little black things! I’ve caught them two or three times when we’ve been out in the boat fishing, but they get so horribly scared that I’ve never done it again. I’m so fond of all these birds and beasts, you know, that I hate to think I am bothering any of them.”

Helston Varne merely bent his head in assent. Curiously enough, just then he did not feel as if he could say anything. A wave of thought—or was it a consciousness—such as he never remembered to have experienced before, had come over him. He just let her talk, and was content to watch her. He wanted to absorb this picture and carry it away with him in his mind’s eye; and somehow the idea of having to go away at all, for a long period at any rate, had suddenly become utterly distasteful to him.

He watched her, radiant, animated, lighthearted. He remembered their talk on the road in the evening’s dusk, on the last occasion of his visit. He had intended to revert to it, to find out whether he could do anything to help in relieving her mind. But now, looking at her, the idea seemed out of

place. She seemed so utterly happy, lighthearted, and without a care.

And she? She had wished for his presence so that she could put to him the matters that were troubling her, yet now that it was here, somehow or other she could not. But as they wandered homeward through the shaded woodland path, she told him something about her past experiences, and he listened sympathetically, careful not to betray that he already knew all that she was telling him. Then—for the path skirted the pond—they came to the scene of the midnight rescue in the ice; and suddenly Melian stopped, for an idea had struck her.

“Mr Varne,” she said, her eyes fixed full upon his face. “Do you know that the police suspected my uncle of killing the man he had just saved?”

“Yes. I know.”

“I ask you—*you*—had they the slightest reason for that suspicion?”

“Why do you ask it?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I suppose it’s because you are you; and if any one can see through a thing, you can.”

“Thanks greatly for that compliment. I shall treasure it,” he answered, glad of the pretext for turning a lighter vein on to what was becoming somewhat tense. “Wait now,”—seeing a spasm of disappointment begin to flit over her face, at the fancied consciousness that she was not being taken seriously. “What I was going to say is this: All tragical happenings of this nature, involving mystery, are bound to convey a certain element of suspicion. Very well then. This affair answers exactly to these conditions. The local police, therefore, did no more than their duty in watching it. But they have now realised the futility of doing so any longer.”

Melian looked up quickly.

“Have they?” she said.

“Yes. You may take it from me.”

A breath of relief escaped her, but it was not wholehearted relief. This

assuredly did not escape her companion's keen perception.

"Tell me another thing," she said swiftly, and again looking him full in the face. "I hardly like to ask it, but I will. Was it not the investigation of this—mystery, that brought you down here in the first instance?"

This was hitting straight out and no mistake. But Helston Varne did not for a moment hesitate.

"Yes. It was," he said.

"Ah!"

For a moment neither spoke. She was still looking him straight in the face, but what she read there was hardly disquieting.

"And—what conclusion have you arrived at?" she went on, slowly.

"The conclusion that I might just as well have remained away—but for one thing."

The relief which had sprung to her animated, speaking face, died down suddenly.

"And—that one thing?"

"That one thing? Why, then I should never have met you; should never have known such a delightful time as I have enjoyed this morning for instance."

That killed the tragic element in the atmosphere. Melian broke into a peal of clear, wholehearted laughter, not more than a third due to reaction, for she had a very complete sense of humour. Her companion was smiling too, perfectly at ease and natural, as though he had stated a mere obvious fact. There was no consciousness of having paid a pointed compliment about his manner, nor any manifestation of a desire to carry it further.

"Well—it's very nice of you to say so," answered the girl, all her easy lightheadedness apparently restored, "because I thought I'd been talking

your head off all the time we've been out; and if it wasn't that we seem to have a lot of ideas in common, should have thought I'd been boring you to death. But, here we are at home again, and—I don't care how soon old Judy turns on lunch. Do you?"

"Candidly, I don't. This gorgeous country air makes all that way."

It is not strange that, seated opposite each other at table, in the cool, old-world room, the June sunlight slanting through the creepers which partly shaded the wide open window, Helston Varne should have let his imagination run riot. In fact, he was picturing to himself this girl, in her uncommon beauty, her complete naturalness, her quick, unfeigned interest in everything, her grace of movement even in the smallest of things—seated thus with him—always. Albeit those who knew him—even the very few who really knew him—would have reckoned it strange. For since his salad days he could not call to mind any woman he had ever been acquainted with who could be capable of calling up such a suggestion. And the two of them were there alone together; the glow of sunlight outside, the fragrant breaths of glorious summer wafting in from without. Even a straggling wasp or two winnowing down over the table, was not unwelcome, as a sure guarantee that summer was here: rich, glowing, vernal, English summer.

He talked to her—easy, very contented with the hour—and interested her more and more. He told her a few strange, out of the way, bizarre experiences—and the girl listened, almost entranced. This was the sort of thing that appealed, and she contrasted it with the boredom of commonplace, which she was as capable of appreciating—on the wrong side—as she was of appreciating these cullings from a life of action; of keen, intricate, intellectual unravellings of strange occurrences almost unimaginable in their surroundings of weird mystery. Yet he so talked in no wise for the sake of talking, or to glorify himself, but simply and solely because it interested her; and to see that face lit up with vivid interest was sheer enjoyment to Helston Varne at that stage. And the little black fluffy kitten, as though cunningly appreciating the situation, was taking its toll, jumping up first upon one, then upon the other, nibbling daintily at this or that tidbit bestowed upon it, quite unrestrained by Melian, who had always set her face against spoiling it.

“What a life you must have had,” she said. “But—what made you take to it?”

“I don’t know. The sheer sporting instinct, I suppose,” he answered. But he did not tell her as much as he had told Nashby, as to its perils—its continuing perils. Then he deftly switched the conversation on to her own particular interests, in the result of which, when they got up from table, Melian said:

“There’s some queer old oak stuff in one of the lumber rooms upstairs if you’d like to look at it. It’s all jolly dusty though.”

“Certainly I would,” he answered. “I really do like that sort of thing.” And with the remark came the thought of how cheaply he had purchased his hour and a half’s imprisonment in that ghastly ice-house of a vault, what time he had introduced himself here—under false pretences.

“Come along then.”

She led the way upstairs. Now by some curious instinct, Helston Varne’s professional faculties became on the alert. It was as though some mysterious instrument string had suddenly been tuned in his ear.

She opened a door, and the atmosphere, albeit it was nearly midsummer, struck a chill through them both. The one window was clouded up with cobwebs, and the dust lay thick upon everything.

“We don’t use this part of the house,” she explained, “and we’ve only enough hands to take care of the part we do use. Look, this is the best thing in the room,” putting a hand upon an old sideboard of well nigh black oak, and then withdrawing it. “Wait a bit. I’ll go down and get a duster. This isn’t fit to be touched as it is, and I want to open it and show you.”

She turned and went out of the room. Left alone, Helston Varne set to while away the time by examining the old oak sideboard, and his all round mind at once convinced him that it would fetch a fabulous sum if put upon the market. Then he went round to examine it from behind, and with this intent, pushed it a little away from the wall. What was this?

Something gleamed at him from the dust beneath—something bright, staring like an eye. He bent down. It was a small, star-shaped disc—a pentacle in fact—but on one of the points a small, triangular piece had been, as it were, cut out. It was a strange object, and gazing at it, somehow, all sorts of queer ideas began to chase each other more or less confusedly through his brain. He forgot where he was, forgot about the impending immediate return of Melian. All he could do was to stare at the thing, and it—seemed to stare at him.

What was this? Again those ideas seemed to rush and rampage, and the worst of it was he could not marshal them—could not docket them. He reached down to pick the thing up, and then—something seemed to hold him back from touching it. Yes, there was no mistake about it. It was as if a voice—a very distinct voice—were whispering in his ear. “Unless you are tired of life—leave it.”

This would never do. With an effort of will he pulled himself together. Again he reached out his hand—and again more forcibly came that chill feeling of an unmistakable warning, and again he withdrew it. And then, as though breaking the spell, the clear, sweet, fluty voice of Melian, returning along the passage, came to his ears.

Helston Varne was conscious that a clammy perspiration had broken out upon his forehead. Brushing a hand rapidly over this, he turned to face the door. Then he was conscious that another voice was mingling with that of the girl—a male voice. Again acting under some strange instinct, he moved the heavy sideboard back to its place against the wall, and had just done so when Melian entered, followed by her uncle.

The latter, he thought, looked perturbed, nor did he fail to notice the swift, furtive, enquiring glance, which lighted upon the heavy piece of furniture.

“Ah, how are you, Varne? Been looking at musty old oak things this little girl tells me. Yes, well—I dare say they’re worth a lot of money, only they ain’t mine, worse luck. I’d jolly well send them to Christie’s if they were, I can tell you. I don’t care for dismal old stuff about me. Give me something cheerful and up-to-date and comfortable. The other thing gives you the holy blues. So does this room by the way,”—and he shivered. “So if you’ve seen what you want, come down and join me in a

whisky and soda."

"Delighted. Yes, that certainly must be very valuable old stuff," answered the other. "I thought it was yours."

"No. It's old Tullibard's, but it's left here to save the trouble of moving it anywhere else. Well, and so you're off on another of your mysterious expeditions, the child tells me. Look out, Varne. The bucket that goes down the well too often—you know the old copybook chestnut."

"Yes, and like all others of its kind, there's a fallacy behind it," laughed Varne.

"Perhaps. Come along then. This infernal room's giving me the cold shivers. I believe I got a touch of the sun on the way back. Anyhow, I'm not feeling at all the thing."

After their guest had left, the remainder of the day, radiant, golden, cloudless as it was, seemed to take on a gloom to one of them. What a very perfect companion he was, thought Melian. She wished he were a near neighbour instead of putting in sporadic appearances, and then vanishing for ever so long. She had refrained from telling him her troubles, not wanting to spoil their splendid morning ramble; now he was gone, for a long time perhaps, she regretted her reticence. Later she had reason to regret it more.

They were seated at supper. The blinds were down and the lamp burned cheerfully. Outside, a sudden gust swirled round the corner of the house, setting the woodland trees rustling.

"Ah—ah!" said Melian. "That spells change. I thought it was too perfectly clear to last."

Another gust stronger than the first, followed upon her words.

"Why, it is coming on to blow," she went on. "And look; it has blown the old cellar door open."

She was sitting so as to face this. Mervyn with his back to it. She could

not fail to notice the sudden, almost startled look as he turned quickly to follow the direction of her glance.

The door was open.

About one quarter open it stood, framing a black gash, whence the cold chill of a draught came pouring into the room—open, just as it had stood six months ago. And now, as then, it had been fast locked.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The Sniper.

Overhead the gloomy rock walls reared up on either side for many hundred feet, seeming in places well nigh to meet, in others, leaning outward so as completely to obliterate the narrow blue thread of sky. Loose stones, round stones, every conceivable shape of stone, large and small, constituted the natural paving of the natural roadway, and slipped and rattled under the tired, stumbling hoofs of the two horsemen; the three rather, for the rear was brought up at a respectful distance by a mounted syce.

It was cool in the depths of the great chasm, cool but strangely stuffy. Both Europeans were in khaki suits, quite looking like having seen service, and wore Terai hats. Each carried a business-like magazine rifle —and, incidentally, knew thoroughly well how to use it when occasion demanded. And each had been so using it, but for peaceful purpose, for they were returning from a fairly successful markhôr stalk in the craggy range, of which this chasm, cleaving the heart of an otherwise unbroken mass of rock, formed a natural roadway.

“I tell you what it is, Helston,” the older of the two men was saying. “This is no sort of place to go through during the rainy season. The water rushes down it as through a spout. I’ve had a narrow squeak or two in just such a tube as this before.”

“Yes. You can see that. There’s high watermark.”

The other followed his upward glance. Just a few scarcely perceptible bits of stick and dry grass quite twenty feet overhead.

“By Jove, Helston, but what an eye you’ve got. And you’re new to this end of the country too.”

“Yes. I’ve got an eye—for trifles—as you say, Coates,” returned Helston Varne. “But I only wish some of the things I’ve got to—I’ve had to—clear up, were as easy to deduce as that—only I don’t, because it would

eliminate the sporting element altogether. By the way, there's some one coming from the opposite direction. We shall meet directly, but I hope it isn't a lot of beastly loaded camels, or Heaven only knows how we are going to pass each other."

"What? Why you've got an ear as well as an eye. Blest if *I* can hear anything."

"Not, eh?" Then, after a moment of listening—"By Jingo, yes—it is camels."

Now the sound grew audible to all, that of deep toned voices and the roll and rattle of loose stones, and soon, round a bend of the rock wall appeared a characteristic and extremely picturesque group.

There might have been ten or a dozen men. The one who led was mounted on a fine camel, but the rest were afoot. Another camel brought up the rear, loaded with baggage. They were tall, hook-nosed, copper coloured men, with jetty beards and an equally jetty tress flowing down in front over each shoulder. They were clad in loose white garments, and their heads surmounted by the ample turban wound round the conical *kulla*—and all were armed with the inevitable and razor-edged tulwar, three or four indeed carrying rifles besides. At sight of the Europeans they halted, and their looks were not friendly. In point of fact these expressed distinct suspiciousness, partly dashed with a restrained combination of fanatical and racial hatred. But the whole group was splendidly in keeping with the stern wildness of its background.

"Now how the devil are we going to pass each other, and who's going to give way?" mused Varne Coates in an undertone. Helston said nothing. His mind was absorbed entirely with taking in and thoroughly appreciating the effect of the picture.

"Salaam, brothers," began Coates, speaking Hindustani: "This *tangi* is over narrow for two parties to pass each other. Is it not wider a little back, the way you have come?"

The look of hostility on the dark faces seemed to deepen ever so slightly. To Helston's acute observation it deepened more than slightly.

“Or the way *you* have come,” came the answer from more than one voice. But the man on the camel said nothing, perhaps because he did not understand—or as a freeborn mountaineer, did not choose to understand—the language of servants—of slaves. But he did not look friendly. Things were at a decided deadlock.

There was just barely room to pass, but only then by floundering up the most rugged part of the dry watercourse. But Varne Coates, Commissioner of Baghnagar, and temporarily quartered on leave at the frontier station of Mazaran for the purposes chiefly of markhôr stalking, was temperamentally a peppery man, and traditionally entirely opposed to the idea of giving way to natives whoever they might be. And it looked uncommonly as though he would have to do so now.

“Here, Gholam Ali,” he called back over his shoulder to the syce. “You talk to these people. They don’t seem to understand *me*.”

The man came forward, and Helston was not slow to notice that his tones, as he talked, were respectful, not to say deferential. The face of the camel rider the while was that of a mask. He uttered a few laconic words in a deep toned voice, and in Pushtu.

“*Hazûr*, it is a sirdar of the Gularzai,” translated the syce, “His name Allah-din Khan. He does not know the *Hazûr*, and this is his country. *Hazûr*, he says, does not belong to the *Sirkar* here (the Government, or administration), but is a stranger. Further down the *tangi* is a wide space where all can pass one another. ‘Let those who come *up* then make way for those who come *down*.’ Those are the words of the sirdar.”

Here was an *impasse*. Helston Varne noticed on his kinsman’s face a sort of apoplectic tendency to grow purple. He realised that the situation was critical—very. He noticed likewise that the expression on the faces of the opposite party was one of scowling determination, but he further noticed that there was nothing insolent or provocative in it. This seemed to save the situation. His keen brain saw a way out. It was rather a funny one, but it might answer.

“See now, Gholam Ali,” he said, in Hindustani, of which he had a thorough knowledge. “When we sportsmen have a difference we throw

up a coin, and decide according to choice whether the King's head is uppermost or not. The Gularzai are sportsmen like ourselves. So we can toss up for who shall give way."

He produced a rupee, and watched the face of the chief while this was put to him. The latter gave a slight nod, and said a word or two to his followers. They crowded forward.

"What does the sirdar say?" went on Helston. "The King's head or the other side?"

"The King's head," was the answer.

"Good. Let one of them throw up the rupee," said Helston, handing it over.

A tall, hook-nosed barbarian came forward, and taking the coin, sent it spinning high in the air. It came down with a clink, rebounded, and settled. The King's head was undermost.

"'Tails.' We've won," said Helston, looking up. "But if they'd like two out of three, we can call again."

But the sirdar shook his head.

"It is child's play," he said. "Still—a test is a test—and a game a game. We keep to it."

And to the intense relief of at any rate two of them, he turned his camel round, and retraced his way up the *tangi*, followed by his retinue.

"Well I'm damned!" was all that Coates could muster.

"No you're not. We've got round that hobble," answered his kinsman placidly. "It was rather a funny situation though, wasn't it. Fancy tossing for priority of way, bang, so to speak, in the heart of the earth. Well, Allah-din Khan is a sportsman anyhow."

"Is he? Wait a bit. We haven't *passed* him yet." And the answer carried a potential suggestiveness, which, under the circumstances, was

unpleasant.

However, such was not borne out by events. A few hundred yards higher up, the *tangi* widened out considerably, and here they found the sirdar and his following awaiting them. Helston said a few pleasant and courteous words as they passed, which were gravely but not sullenly, received. But the hostile stare on the faces of the chief's following, there was no mistaking.

"That's what comes of sending the escort on ahead," said Varne Coates. "If they'd been along we needn't have stood any nonsense from Mr Allah-din Khan. It would have been man for man then, or very nearly, and a good deal more than rifle for rifle."

"Don't know it isn't a good thing that we did," answered the other with some conviction. "The evenness of numbers would probably have brought on a row. And I'm perfectly certain any one of those chaps is equal to any two of ours, if not three."

"But the rifles?"

"Even then, they wouldn't have given us time to use them. No. I think we're well out of that racket, Coates."

"All right. I shall be glad to see camp anyhow. I'm yearning for a long, stiff, cool peg. Wrangling and getting into a wax is very dry work. Well, we're not far off now, thank the Lord."

The *tangi* was widening out considerably. The cliffs no longer rose sheer and facing each other, but had changed into tumbling crags and pinnacles, and terraced ledges, while beyond lay a glimpse of more open country. But on one hand the mouth of the pass was dominated by a huge, magnificent cliff wall.

"Look there," cried Coates, glancing at a point halfway up this where some objects were moving. "Markhôr—three of them! But they are wild. At that height they ought to be standing calmly staring at us, and they're off already as if the devil was after them."

And as the words left his mouth, the answer—the explanation—came,

startlingly, unpleasantly.

For an echoing roar broke from the cliff front just below the point they had been scanning, and something heavy and vicious and convincing thudded hard with a “klopf” against a boulder just to the right of Helston. The rock face was marked as with the splatter of blue lead.

“We’re being sniped, by God?” exclaimed Coates, reining in. The syce had instinctively drawn behind the nearest boulder, and had dismounted.

Again came the crash, together with a score of bellowing reverberations as the echoes tossed from crag to crag. This time the missile shaved the neck of Helston’s horse so close as to set that noble animal snorting and curvetting in such wise that the rider was put to some trouble to keep his seat.

“This is damn silly,” growled Coates. “Well, there’s nothing for it but to take cover and think it out. If we could only get a glimpse of the *soor*.”

There were many loose boulders at the entrance to the chasm, and only in the nick of time did they get behind two of these. For a third bullet hummed over the very spot, now in empty air, a fraction of a second ago occupied by Helston and his horse.

“He’s getting our range now, and no mistake,” went on Coates. “Now we must try and get his. Just about halfway up the *khud* there, below where we sighted the markhôr.”

For some minutes there was no further sign. The sniper seeing now nothing to snipe at, did not snipe. Meanwhile he was enjoying the fun of keeping two of the ruling race crouching behind rocks for their lives. He had the best part of the day before him to enjoy it in, for it was quite early afternoon, and his time was all his own. When they came out into the open, as sooner or later they would be sure to do—for they were but scantily endowed with the saving grace of patience, these infidels—then he would have them; the whole three, with good fortune; only he would spare the syce perhaps, because he was a believer.

“This is a nice cheerful country, Coates, and a fairly eventful day of it,” remarked Helston. “First, we as nearly as possible have a hand to hand

scrap for the right to pass an exceedingly cut-throat looking gang of ruffians, then no sooner are we clear of that than we have to slink behind stones like scared rabbits, because some sportsman unknown takes it into his head that we make very good moving targets at a given distance. And I don't quite see the way out, that's the worst of it. Do you?"

"Not unless we can get a sight on the *budmash*," was the reply. "I've put mine at four hundred yards."

"Yes. That would do it," agreed Helston. "Stop. I've got an idea—give me a leg up to the top of this boulder. There are several loose stones there that I can get behind, and use as sort of loopholes."

"Better not. He'll have you there to a dead cert," warned the other.

"I'll chance that. So. That's it."

Whether the sniper had seen this move, or whether he himself was tired of inaction, another bullet now pinged hard and viciously against the boulder itself. This just suited Helston Varne. He was able in that moment's flash to locate the lurking place of their enemy, and himself, lying flat, was able to get his piece forward, and cover it. With the aid of a loophole-like formation of the stones he felt that he could not miss.

"Work the dummy trick, Coates," he called back, in a low voice. "Draw his fire somehow. I've got the spot exactly covered, and—I think we shall soon be on our road again."

"All right," came back the answer. "I'll give a cough when I'm all ready to show the lure."

It was a strange drama this duel between hidden foes, and for its setting one of the wildest scenes of wild Nature. The mountain side opposite, rising in huge terraced cliffs, the ledges affording sparse hold for a scanty growth of pistachio shrub. Beneath, the stones and boulders of the now dry watercourse, and behind, the craggy entrance to the great *tangi*. No vegetation either, save coarse dry grass, no sign of life, unless a cloud of kites, wheeling in circles high overhead, against the blue. And, facing each other, unseen, two units of humanity lay there, each bent on relieving the human race of one. Then Varne Coates coughed.

But simultaneously, with the echoing roar from the cliff face, Helston pressed trigger. The sound from opposite was not that of a missile striking a hard substance.

“Got him,” he said, quietly. “Yes. He’s done. I could see it plainly. He got it just under the chin, as he was watching the effect of his pull-off.”

“The effect of his pull-off,” said Coates, “is that he’s got the range plumb by now, and if anything had been inside the boot I stuck out, its owner would have gone very lame for life. Look hereat it.” And he held it up showing a hole neatly drilled just above the ankle. “Sure you’ve got him though?”

“So sure that—Well, look.”

Helston had slid down from his coign of vantage, and now deliberately walked forth into the open. Here he stood for a few moments, gazing up at the cliff.

“That’s practical faith at any rate,” said Coates, grimly. “Yes, you certainly must have ‘got him,’ or he’d have got you by this. Still, it’s risky. There might have been two of them.”

“There might, but there weren’t.”

“How the deuce could you tell that?”

“By the systematic way the *one* was getting the range.”

“Oh, good old Sherlock Holmes again!” laughed Coates. “Now we can head for that ‘peg’ I was yearning for just now, and in dry fact—devilish *dry*—have been ever since.”

“What are we going to do about—that?” said Helston, with a nod in the direction of their late menace.

“Do? Why, not say a damn thing about it to anybody. Gholam Ali won’t for his own sake. He’s half a Pathan himself and knows better than to advertise trouble. Yes, as you were saying—it’s a nice cheerful country this, not dull by any means.”

The other laughed significantly.

“No,” he said. “But this time it’s a case of the sniper sniped.”

And then they both laughed.

Chapter Twenty Three.

Camp—and a Conversation.

The camp was pitched in open ground, and had the drawback of that—for there were no shading trees or sheltering heights, as to which Varne Coates remarked that it didn't matter a curse about shading trees if only that any moment a swarm of locusts might happen along and feed off all the "shade" within half an hour or so, leaving them as bare as Hyde Park in January; while as for the sheltering heights, well they had just seen what those could "shelter"—and it was better to be out of range of such.

The point on which the camp was pitched could certainly boast no charm of picturesqueness. It stared out upon open plains destitute of foliage, and rendered here and there even more ugly by low humps of hill, whose mud coloured domes were relieved here and there by white streaks of gypsum. Bounding it on both sides, but at some little distance, rose craggy mountain ridges, good stalking ground for *markhôr* and *gadh*, and, from another side of the operation, the same, as we have seen, for the Gularzai sniper. But the big living tent was roomy, and as replete with such travelling comfort as only comfort-loving India somehow, seemed ever able to run to: and the sleeping tents, too, were not wanting in that much to be appreciated advantage. These, and the tents of the various servants, the khansamah tent, and those of the Levy sowars who formed the escort, made up quite a respectable sized nomad village.

"Wonder if Ford'll turn up to-morrow," remarked Coates, as they sat smoking their after-dinner cheroots under the stars in front of the big tent. Ford was the Conservator of Forests for the district of Mazaran—incidentally there were no "forests" worthy of the name in the said district, but Ford was Forest Officer nevertheless, and drew his pay as such all the same.

"Ford? Oh, yes, of course," answered Helston, shooting out a big trail of smoke and pulling himself out of a big meditation in which he had been wrapped. "Yes. He'll do. He's all right."

"Yes. And on this infernal frontier it's not a bad thing to have another hard

man around who can shoot straight. These *soors* don't love us any too well—as you've seen to-day."

It might be asked under the circumstances why the devil two men should be such fools as to go putting their heads into the lion's mouth, by camping around here and there right in the heart of a wild country peopled by hostile and fanatical barbarians, just for the sake of shooting a few wild goats. But—there you are. They were Englishmen, and this, we suppose, is an all sufficing answer.

"What a rum thing it is, Helston," went on Coates, jumping to another subject, "that you should have run into my old pal Seward Mervyn. I've often thought about it, do you know?"

"Yes, but the world's very small. Yet, I'm not sure that England, that little bit of an island on the map, isn't the largest section of it—as far as running into people goes."

"Why it must be some years since I saw him. He must be ageing."

"I should say not. He struck me as a remarkably wiry and energetic sort of man."

"Energetic? Yes. He was too much that," said the other. "He was always wanting to know everything. In point of fact, strictly between ourselves—he got to know too much."

"Did he? In what direction?"

The tone was even, languid; the tone, in short, of a man who is enjoying his after-dinner smoke in the open air after a day of hard healthful exercise. But in reality the speaker suddenly found himself all athrill.

"Oh, he wanted to find out everything about the people—and there are about fifty different sorts and phases of people on the Northern border alone. Not content with getting behind their different character and manners and customs—and this is between ourselves, mind," and the speaker instinctively lowered his voice—"he got himself mixed up in their secret societies."

“The deuce he did!”

“Yes. Said he wanted to know the whole thing thoroughly, and everything about it, and that was the only way of getting to do so. But he ended by biting off rather more than he could chew.”

“How?”

“How? Well now you’re getting rather beyond me, old chap. I can only tell you that he retired suddenly, but not a day too soon. The climate of India became no longer healthy for him, you understand.”

There was no misunderstanding the significance of the speaker’s tone. Helston Varne was becoming more and more vividly interested.

“So? Did he turn the knowledge he’d gained to official account then?” he said. “Go back on them, for instance?”

“There again I can’t tell you anything definite. But some of us—very few of us—know that he didn’t retire a day too soon.”

“H’m,” and Helston Varne selected another cheroot from the box and lighted it slowly and deliberately. “But I thought these secret societies were far reaching, indeed world-wide reaching. Would he be much safer—or any safer at all—anywhere he went?”

“That too, is more than I can say. But you saw something of him at home. Did he seem all right there? You say he’s buried in some out of the way country place. Well, did it strike you he might be—what shall we say—sort of in hiding?”

“N-no. I can’t say it did, exactly. He told me he’d lost a lot of dibs over some damn silly invention he’d thought to make a pot over, and was glad to live in a shack which he got for nothing because it was supposed to be haunted.”

Outwardly cool, the speaker was conscious of a stirring awakening. He began to see light—vivid light, but he was not going to give things away. His kinsman clearly had never heard of the Heath Hover mystery, and now to him, Helston Varne, the Heath Hover mystery began to take on an

interest which had been dropping of late to expiring point.

It is strange how a long sought solution will suddenly come as in a flash. The Heath Hover mystery had so far baffled this man to whom the unravelling of mysteries was as the breath of life, baffled him because there had been absolutely nothing to go upon. Once he had thought there was, and that was the day he had been an unwilling prisoner in the Heath Hover cellar. But that had evaded him, and since then he had owned himself puzzled. And now just a few casual conversational remarks let fall by his kinsman, here, away on the Indian frontier, seemed to let a whole flood of light in upon it. At that moment indeed he was very nearly piecing together the whole puzzle. His said kinsman's voice broke the absorption of his thoughts.

"Hand the cheroot box across, Helston—Thanks—By the way you were saying, if I remember right, that Mervyn had got a niece stopping with him. What's she like?"

"Lovely."

The other whistled.

"Fact. I don't often wax superlative, Coates, but nothing short of superlative will define her appearance."

"Oh-h!" said Coates, significantly. But Helston took absolutely no notice.

"And the strange part is that she doesn't even know it," he went on, "which constitutes not the least part of the charm."

"Doesn't she? That's rather a tall story to swallow, Helston."

"I agree. But it happens to be true."

"What's her name?"

"Seward. She's his sister's child. But she might just as well be his own as far as their relationship goes. In fact there are precious few to whom their own children are as much."

“Yes, I remember. Mervyn used to talk of that affair. He always objected to his brother-in-law, said he was a cross between a waster and a jackass, but mostly jackass. He objected too, on the ground of near relationship, for I believe they were first or second cousins.”

“Well I can tell you, Miss Seward forms a very complete exception to the generally received opinion on that subject. She’s all there, and no mistake.”

His kinsman was relighting his cheroot, which was burning badly, and in the flare of the vesta Helston could see the significant grin which was wreathing his lined, bronzed features; understood its burden too. But he said nothing—except:

“What sort of man was Mervyn when he was over here, Coates?”

“Sort? Oh he was a man of—bouts, for want of a definition. He had his equable bouts, and his gloomy bouts, his peppery bouts and his gusty bouts, and sometimes downright nasty and cynical bouts. They didn’t overlap either, but were as hard and fast apart by rule and line as the watertight compartments of a ship. Still, all round, he was all right. I could stick him better than most people, and we were very ‘pal-ly’ he and I. He was a fine sportsman too.”

“Didn’t he ever marry?”

“Now you ask, he did make—that mistake. But it didn’t last long—not more than a year or two. Bad egg you know. Did a bunk—I forget whether it was a Police wallah or a civilian. They didn’t get far though, for they were both lost in the *Tara*, when she foundered with nearly all on board going home, you’ll remember. Mervyn was rather relieved, as it saved him the bother and expense and scandal of taking proceedings. But he didn’t repeat the mistake. Well, now—that’s Mervyn.”

“Yes. That’s Mervyn,” repeated Helston. “It seems to form a whole epitome of him.”

His mind reverted to Heath Hover, and his mind’s eye seemed to form a picture—of the lonely, self-contained man—dry, gruff in manner and biting in conversation—that of course before the arrival of Melian, for he was

judge enough to deduce that Mervyn had sloughed a great deal of those characteristics since that sunny presence had been there to irradiate the solitary and secluded habitation, and to melt the sour hardness of an atrophied life.

“What do you think will be the end of Mervyn?” he went on, after a pause. The other started.

“The end of—Eh—what? The end of Mervyn? Good Lord! I hadn’t given it a thought. But why? What on earth should have put that into your head, Helston?”

“Perhaps it’s been in my head for some time—almost from the moment I first saw the man. He’s remarkably outside the ordinary, and I’m always genuinely interested in such.”

“Quite sure you’re not ‘genuinely interested’ in some one else, old chap?” said Coates, slily.

“I’m quite sure that I am—and that very much so,” came the perfectly unperturbed reply. “But to come back to Mervyn, you haven’t answered my question.”

“Well, how the blazes can I? I’ve never given it a thought I tell you.”

“Well, I have. Do you think for instance, he’ll ever come out here again?”

“Not if he’s wise,” came the decided answer.

“I should say he was that—from what I saw of him. Still I have an idea—and a strong one—that he will come out here again.”

“Did he talk about doing so, then?”

“Never. But, don’t be surprised if ever he does.”

“I’ll try not. But—look here, old Sherlock Holmes. What are you getting at? Eh?”

“Nothing wonderful. Only I’m interested in—Mervyn.”

The other stared—then began to put two and two together. His kinsman had been “superlative” on the subject of the girl—not effusively so, but quietly, and therefore all the more forcibly so, and being superlative on the subject of anybody spelt a great deal as coming from Helston Varne. Could it be that Mervyn was in opposition and he would gladly see Mervyn removed? Yet that hardly seemed to hang, for he gathered that the two men were on the friendliest of terms.

“If he comes out here again,” he now answered, “I’m afraid the end of him won’t be far off. It may not be lingering, but it’ll be sudden.”

“That’d be a pity. Yet—do you know. I have it somewhere down, Coates—somewhere down—that it mightn’t be the worst thing for him—for Mervyn—to come out here again. I can’t tell you where I have it, but it’s there.”

Varne Coates began to feel really interested. He had an immense respect for the acumen of his younger relative, and for the almost superhuman judgment and skill wherewith the latter had probed some of the most delicate and baffling mysteries whose enlightenment had ever startled the world—no less than for the intrepidity and dash which had secured his individual safety in perilous crises involved in such. Be it remembered that he knew nothing of the connexion of Mervyn with any such mystery as the one in question, yet now for the first time he began to scent something of the kind. He also began to scent underlying romance.

“Well I give it up, old chap,” he answered with a laugh. “Give it up clean. You’ve always got something mysterious up your sleeve, but I suppose it’ll all come out in God’s good time—and yours. Though if Mervyn did come out I’d be jolly glad to see him, and have a cheery old *bukh* together again—and a little *shikar. Kwai-hai*!”

The bearer padded up in answer to the resounding call, and salaamed.

“*Peg lao*, Bolaki Ram,” said his master, and in obedience a bottle and a syphon and two tall tumblers were set out on the camp table before them.

Helston Varne, lying on his charpoy in his sleeping tent, felt very far removed indeed from going to sleep. To begin with, his relative’s information with regard to Mervyn had given him abundant food for

thought. It had pieced together a great deal that had been wanting, and it had also carried him back largely to Heath Hover and that which Heath Hover contained. Strong-headed as strong framed, this man in the very zenith of his prime, had found out his weak spot—and, why should he not—so he now told himself? Nothing—nobody—within the ordinary had ever touched him. Now he had found something—somebody—outside the ordinary—clean outside the ordinary. He recalled vividly that last meeting at the head of Plane Pond, under the sprouting green leafage of early spring in the Plane woods. He had decided it should not be the last, and when Helston Varne decided anything, it was strange if that contingency should fail to befall. He remembered vividly those trustful blue eyes, so clear and straight, and withal appealing in their glance. And now he was effecting the substance of their appeal, for he had not come to this wild and turbulent end of the earth, either by accident or for his own amusement—and then a short, wholly mirthful laugh escaped him as he remembered how he had gone down to help Nashby over the unravelling of the Heath Hover mystery. Heavens, how that worthy rural police inspector would have stared could he have so much as guessed at what that real unravelling would lead up to! But the situation was changed now, for in such unravelling Nashby was clean counted out. He, the unraveller, was wholly in the interest of the other side.

Far out over the plain a wolf howled, and was answered by another. Something in the sound brought back that of the owls hooting in the Plane woods, and “Broceliande,” and the contrast to the present surroundings came out sharply defined. Why their adventures of that very day seemed to make the other remote and commonplace—though there was one element about it which reflected the very reverse of commonplace. Even his well regulated system seemed to stir uneasily at the thought, and stretched upon his charpoy here at midnight in one of the wildest tracts of wilderness in the world, Helston Varne felt as if sleep would never visit him again.

The wolves howled, this time nearer. He could hear the half alarmed snort of one or two of the picketted horses, and a restless camel indulge in its characteristic, swearing snarl. He got up and mixed himself another peg, lit a fresh cheroot, then lay down again, staring at the tent roof and thinking—thinking back.

Chapter Twenty Four.

A Startler for Helston Varne.

High up amid the soaring pinnacles of the craggy world Helston Varne and his shikari were worming their way in stealthy silence, now round a corner where every hand and foothold had to be carefully tested before trusted, now along a rock ledge whose crannies alone supplied both—or again along a steep slope of scaly slag, hardly less slippery than ice. But on either or any of these delectable samples of *terra firma* a single slip would carry the same result—an abrupt descent of hundreds of feet, with not an unbroken bone on arrival at the bottom. It required an iron nerve, and the perfection of muscular, and generally physical, condition. Furthermore, having regard to the object of its undertaking, it must be accomplished in the most perfect silence. And all this for the sake of shooting a wild goat—or at any rate making a sporting attempt at the achievement of that feat! For this particular point was one of the best places for markhôr in the whole range.

Like master like man. The shikari, Hussein Khan, was a hard mountaineer, all muscle and keenness. He was a Pathan of the Kakhar tribe and had an immense respect for his master, primarily because the latter was his equal in both these attributes, and also for another reason which may or may not appear.

The time was the middle of the forenoon. They should have arrived at this point earlier, but the climb had proved more difficult and dangerous than either had anticipated, and both were sufficiently experienced to know that it was one that no amount of keenness would enable them to rush. But for hours they had clambered thus, and now, mere specks against the brown, craggy mountain side, they paused for a blow; for you cannot take a steady aim when winded after real hard exertion. Incidentally to one of them the pause was due to another motive, for Hussein Khan was a true believer, and was not this the hour of prayer? So cramped on the ledge, with barely enough space for the prescribed prostrations, the follower of the Prophet, his face turned in the direction of the Holy City—as to which he was able to judge by the hang of the sun,

and that with marvellous accuracy—having put off his shoes and spread his *chudda*—went to work at the same, as entirely absorbed from the world as though kneeling on the even flooring of some cool, dim mosque. The “infidel” meanwhile, took the opportunity of a bite from a sandwich and a pull at his flask.

But the creed of Islam is a very work-a-day one, so the shikari’s devotions did not take long, a few minutes at the outside. He rose again, rested in body and satisfied in conscience, and the pair resumed their way. A very short bout of additional clambering, and they looked out from among a jumble of pinnacles and crags upon the world beyond and beneath.

Beyond, a grand crescent of rock terrace and crag, akin to that on which they lay. On the one hand a great peak, towering skyward, a roll of dark juniper forest in waves around its base, then a marvellous formation of dome-like rock surface all interseamed with dark fissures, like the crevasses on a glacier, and beneath, nearer still, a valley bottom, through which a mountain torrent coursed. But between this and themselves, sloping down from the foot of the ragged cliff immediately below where they lay, was an open, grassy strip. Helston brought the rifle to his shoulder.

Too late. Four markhôr were bounding and scampering away, as though for dear life. They had been browsing on this open slope, just where the stalkers had expected to find them.

“Don’t shoot, *Hazûr*,” whispered the shikari. “It would only panic them, and lose us our chance of getting round them, for I think they will not go very far.”

Helston recognised the force of this advice, and forebore to risk a long, flying shot. Yet the result of hours of toil was vanishing from sight at the rate of many miles per hour.

“It is written,” he answered. “Yet, I think, Hussein Khan, the ram that led those three was the father of all markhôr in these mountains, for never did I see a larger one, nor even so large a one. Assuredly the eye of Shaitan is upon our luck to-day.”

“Who may say, *Hazûr*? Yonder, perhaps, he is.”

The man’s face broadened in a whimsical smile, displaying magnificent white teeth. Helston followed his glance. A splendid eagle, black as jet, was soaring in majestic circles over the valley. It alone, set in the surroundings, formed a sight that it was almost worth their toil and trouble to obtain, he thought.

“Shaitan or not, Hussein Khan,” he answered, “that is not enough to frighten four full grown markhôr, especially with such a leader as that ram, for he is the king of all markhôr I have ever seen. And now—what?”

But the other made no reply. He gave a peremptory sign for silence, the while he himself was listening intently. Instinctively Helston followed his example, and crouched lower still upon the slab of rock whereto he had wormed himself, to obtain, as he thought, a most effective shot. But his nerves tingled and his blood fired up. The shikari, with his fine sense of hearing, had detected the sound of other markhôr approaching. That was it. He would get his chance after all.

His faculties of hearing stretched to their utmost tension he listened. Most men would have been conscious of a tingling of the nerves, but the nerves of Helston Varne were as hard and as well in hand as those of the Pathan shikari himself. Yet he would soon have reason to congratulate himself that they were so.

Now the rattle of a dislodged stone came to his hearing, then a sound of hoof-strokes, but to that practised sense of hearing it conveyed no presage of the approach of mountain game. With the recollection of the sniping episode fresh in his memory, he appreciated his attendant’s emphatic injunction for silence, for caution. In this wild and shaggy land, the hand of everybody was against the intruder, the infidel. And as he gazed, the turbaned heads of a band of horsemen came into view above the rocks below.

They were advancing up the valley. They were as yet too distant for detail. Helston made a move to get out his powerful binocular. But Hussein Khan laid a warning hand upon his arm.

“Leave that, *Hazûr*,” he breathed. “Those who go yonder have eyes—like

those of the eagle we sighted just now. One glint of the sun upon the glasses, and—”

The gap was significant. Knowing the state of the country and the temper of its people, Helston could supply it very well. And, indeed, his sight was not less keen than that of his shikari. He lay still and watched with interested expectation.

The band was now defiling into full view, but still advancing, head on; he could not quite distinguish the figures apart; but that they were all armed he could see plainly. Some had rifles, others the native sickle-stocked *jezail*, and all wore the universal fulwar, hung by a broad sabretasche from the right shoulder.

“Who—what are they?” he whispered.

“Gularzai,” breathed Hussein Khan, in reply. “See, at the head rides the Sirdar, Allah-din Khan.”

With something of a start of interest Helston recognised the man named. Now, mounted on a fine horse, looking very warrior-like and martial at the head of his wild band, was the man with whom he had tossed for right of way in the *tangi* but a week or two since. And then—he saw something else, and the sight sent all the blood back to his heart.

He stared, then stared again. No. It could not be.

The band, amounting to some score of horsemen, was nearly abreast of them now, riding at a foot’s pace, as indeed the rocky nature of the ground demanded. But in the midst of it rode two figures which belonged certainly not to the Gularzai, or to any known tribe or race within our Indian possessions. They were unmistakably Europeans and represented both sexes. And then Helston Varne got the surprise of his life. Indeed, he began to wonder whether he were dreaming or delirious, for there—now immediately beneath him, in the midst of this wild band of predatory mountaineers rode John Seward Mervyn and his niece.

Heavens! what did it mean—what could it mean? These two, whom he had left safe in quiet, peaceful, rural England, not so very long since—here now, in this shaggy, perilous wilderness, and for escort an armed

band of savage, fanatical tribesmen. What could it mean? At all risks he would get out his binocular and scan them more closely. Yes, at all risks. And this he put to his shikari. The latter slightly shrugged one shoulder, impassively.

Under the powerful lens, Melian was brought within thirty yards, and with the sight, his heart seemed to stand still within him. The beautiful face, though calm, had a set, troubled look, even a frightened look, he told himself. But her splendid pluck was evidently standing her in good stead. Then he turned the glasses upon her uncle. Mervyn's face was impassive, and betrayed no emotion whatever. And then, like a flash, there ran through his own mind the whole gist of his talk with Coates on the night of their arrival in the new camp—his prediction that at some time or other Mervyn would return to this strange, dim, mysterious land, and the other's reply—ready reply at that—that if he were wise he would not. And now here he was—manifestly a prisoner, and, for what purpose? And with him, Melian.

If ever Helston Varne had run against difficulty in his life—and that he had run against and surmounted many, we have already said—he realised that he was running against the greatest—here and now. He knew enough of this wild Northern border, with its labyrinthine impenetrable chasms and fastnesses, and the fierce fanatical treachery of its indomitable tribesmen, to recognise that sheer forcible rescue was clean out of the question. If for some special reason like that hinted at by Coates, they had managed to get Mervyn into their power, it was with a long brooded upon, and settled purpose, one which involved no mere matter of ransom. And Melian? Here one ray of hope did dawn. She could have had no part in, or knowledge of, her uncle's dealings with their inner and mysterious affairs, and as strict Mahomedans, they would not offer active insult to a woman. Here the question of ransom might come in, and if it did, he himself would find it—find it promptly and cheerfully.

In a whirl of mingled feelings the ordinarily cool-headed, hard nerved man watched the band as it receded now, for it had already passed their point of outlook, and would disappear directly round the upper bend of the valley. Then he turned to Hussein Khan.

"What does this mean?"

Again the other shrugged a shoulder.

“Who may say, *Hazûr*? The Gularzai are ever restless, and they love money as—Ya Allah, who does not! If they have *persuaded*, yonder *Hazûr*, and the Miss Sahib, to go with them, it is because they are worth many rupees.”

Helston looked fixedly at him, even meaningly.

“And that is all their motive—all?” he added, with emphasised meaning.

But the man’s fine face was mask-like in its lack of response. If its owner knew—suspected—any other—well, he was an Oriental.

“Allah-din Khan too, loves money,” he answered. “We are alone *Hazûr*, so—there are some who would be alive to-day had they been able to give him what he asked.”

An immense relief would have swept across Helston’s mind had the shikari’s answer carried conviction. For it would have cut the knot of the difficulty on the spot. He knew that Mervyn was a poor man, and realised with intense satisfaction then that he himself was not. Whatever this freebooting chieftain might ask to set his captives free should be paid. It would be a mere matter for negotiation. But, unfortunately, in the light of his talk with Coates, the answer did not carry conviction—not entirely, though he tried to buoy himself up with the hope that it did.

“Where is Allah-din Khan’s village?” he said.

“His village? It is more like a fort, *Hazûr*. It is away among the mountains, nearly two days journey from here. They are heading straight for it now.”

Helston’s heart sank. A fort—a hill fort! Why, it would require an expedition to reduce such, and meanwhile, what would become of the captives? The only solution he saw was that of ransom, and that was, under the circumstances, by no means a reassuring one.

“Can you guide me to it, Hussein Khan?”

The man looked strangely troubled.

“I can do so,” he said, after a pause. “But it is putting the head between the tiger’s jaws, for then will not Allah-din Khan demand the price of three instead of the price of two? And the price he will name will not be small, *Hazûr*.”

The matter of price would have been nothing. But more and more did Helston conjecture a deeper motive to underly. One redeeming side of it, however, was that he did not think they would be in any immediate danger, and it would be hard if he could not find some way out of the *impasse*.

“This needs some planning out, Hussein Khan. Meanwhile we will return to the camp.”

“*Ha, Hazûr*.”

“Any luck?” asked Varne Coates, coming out of the tent to meet him. He had remained at home, not feeling very fit. Then, as if the negative shake of the head constituted a matter of no importance, he went on eagerly: “You certainly have the gift of prophecy, Helston, or you must be the devil himself. Remember, when we were talking about Mervyn the other night, you predicted he’d be turning up here again?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he has. I’ve just got a ‘chit’ from him saying he’ll be here with us this evening, and he’s bringing his niece. They left Mazaran three days ago on purpose to join us. We’ll have a rare old *bukh*, over old times, but,”—with a shake of the head—“you remember what I was saying—that he’d be a damn fool if he did come out here again. Well, I only hope I was wrong.”

“I wish you were, but I’m afraid you’re not. Come into the tent here, and see that no one’s about who can understand us.”

Varne Coates stared at his kinsman. The concerned gravity in the latter’s tone affected him, taken in conjunction with his superhuman gift of finding out everything. He led the way into the tent in silence.

And then Helston put him into possession of the morning's discovery. At the conclusion of the narrative Coates shook a very doleful head indeed.

"They weren't with Allah-din Khan's crowd of their own free will," he declared. "Did Mervyn show any signs of having been in a scrap?"

"No. My glasses are extra powerful. He looked—normal. Well? What do you think of it—of the chances?"

"Chances? I think the chances for Mervyn are worth just that,"—with a snap of the fingers. "For the girl, it's just possible that this *budmash* may give her up, at the price of lakhs of rupees, but who the devil's going to pay it?"

"The Government?"

"No fear, Government may send an expedition, but that won't help anybody, but it isn't going to pay up."

"Then I am."

"You are?" with a stare of amazement.

"Certainly. Only too glad to get her back safe at any price, even if it costs me every damn shilling I've got in the world."

Varne Coates looked at his kinsman and whistled.

"So that's how the cat jumps, is it?"

"That's how."

Chapter Twenty Five.

Mervyn's Dilemma.

We must glance back.

Mervyn's camp was pitched not very far from the mouth of the Duran Tangi; that is, not very far from the scene of the sniping episode of a week or two previously, of which, of course, he was in ignorance, but far enough from the great overhanging wall of terraced cliff, to be beyond the possibility of a repetition of the same. He had been warned at Mazaran that the country was extra restless just then, and that moving about in it, in the happy-go-lucky way he proposed, was positively unsafe; but with his usual gustiness, he pooh-poohed every suggestion of the kind. No one was good enough to teach *him* his India, he declared. If it suited the military element to get up and foment a chronic scare, well that wasn't going to interfere with him. It was of no use representing to him that this wasn't India precisely, but the Northern border—whose inhabitants were a fierce, predatory set of fanatics caring for no show of authority, and that even now these were in a state of unrest—well, he knew them too. When he heard that his old friend Varne Coates—and especially the latter's relative, and his friend, were on a shikar expedition two or three days out, that was sufficient. He only spent long enough at Mazaran to collect camp necessaries and hire servants, and at once set out to join them.

He had even demurred to the escort of four Levy sowars, which was pressed upon him. These damned Catch-em-alive-ohs, he declared, were of no—ditto—use. They couldn't hit a haystack if it came to shooting, and even then they'd either clear or make common cause with the enemy, to whom, tribally, they as likely as not belonged. So—here he was.

They had made a very early start from their last camp, and the morning was yet young. They had not long finished breakfast, and were seated in camp chairs under the shade of a canvas awning.

"Oh, this is perfectly glorious," Melian was saying, her eyes seeming to feed upon the sunlit wildness of the surroundings. "What a contrast to

dear old Heath Hover, too. Look at that splendid mountain face, all terraced, as it were, with great cliffs; and even the openness of it all has a marvellous charm."

Her uncle puffed meditatively at his cheroot, then looked at her, and in the result felt not unsatisfied. She had taken, with characteristic readiness, to this strange wild country and its life—and every phase of it afforded her a fresh delight. And its people, too, of every shade and type, but that which attracted her most, was the tall, turbaned, often scowling, mountaineer, with his primitive *jezail* and never absent and wicked looking tulwar—a very Ishmaelite in deed and in appearance.

They had come up the *tangi* in the early morning and she had been entranced with the vastness of the huge narrow chasm, the first of its kind she had ever seen. And now, as Mervyn contemplated the eager animated face, tinged with the golden glow of an open air life, the blue eyes clear and large in contrast, he found himself thinking satirically that it was small wonder if Mazaran had sought to throw stumbling blocks in the way of their leaving it. And then as though the mention of Heath Hover evoked a recollection she suddenly said:

"I do hope old Joe and Judy will take real care of our little black poogie, and not let it out at night to get shot, or get into a trap in the coverts—dear little pooge-pooge?"

"Oh, I'm sure they will. But—we couldn't have done with it here, could we?"

"No, but I would like to have it all the same. Why, what's this?"

A whirl of dust was coming down the road, and as it drew nearer, they could make out a band of horsemen, clad in the loose white garments of the mountain tribes. Through it, too, as the gleam of weapons.

"Oh, it's some of these picturesque people, and they are so fascinating," cried the girl. "It'll be quite a sight to see them ride past."

The road ran about a hundred yards below the site of the camp. For the first time some qualm of misgiving came into Mervyn's self-sufficient mind, and he found himself actually hoping that they really would ride

past. They looked a formidable gang enough, some two score strong, and armed to the teeth. It was not lessened as he saw that they were not on the road at all, and were heading straight for the camp.

Came another sight, which caused his face to pale and stiffen strangely.

“Melian, go inside the tent, and stay there till I tell you to come out,” he said sharply.

“Why? Mayn’t I see?”

“Do as I say—at once,” he repeated, with a stamp of the foot. “They may be a bit rough, but—I’ll settle them.”

She obeyed, greatly wondering. “Mayn’t I see?” she had said. Good! Then she had not seen—what he had, and he felt thankful.

Out on the plain two of his camp natives were herding the camels. He had seen several of the horsemen dart out upon these from the main body, and cut them down with their keen edged tulwars without giving them time so much as to utter a shriek. At that moment John Seward Mervyn realised that if ever he had been in a tight place in his life he was in one now, and if he did not, when too late, curse his own foolhardiness for bringing him into it, why it was only because he had not time.

The whole band rode down like a whirlwind upon the camp. The bearer and khitmutghar, and the cook, Punjabi natives, scared out of their lives, had crept into one of the tents and crouched trembling. The Levy sowars alone showed fight, and pointed their rifles, but it was plain they would have welcomed any chance offered to surrender.

“Melian, don’t move outside, do you hear,” said her uncle over his shoulder. He had risen, and stood confronting the wild array. These had now reined up, and were facing him, in a crescent formation.

“Salaam!” he said. “This is a strange welcome to a stranger in a strange land, brothers.”

A grunt broke from the fierce shaggy faces; and the gleaming, hostile eyes seemed to take on a further deepening of hate and greed.

“This is the Sirdar, Allah-din Khan,” said one, designating the man on his right.

“That is good to hear,” answered Mervyn, speaking in the Pushtu, “Salaam, Sirdar Allah-din Khan. I repeat this is a strange way of paying a friendly visit.”

“A friendly visit?” repeated the chief, in deep tones. “But what if this is not a friendly visit?”

The fierce eyes of the fanatical predatory Asiatic, and the hard, determined blue gleam in those of the European met, and there was no yielding in the glance of either.

“In that case,” replied the latter, “I invite the Sirdar to withdraw. It is not safe to stay—for him, for as the life of the Sirdar Allah-din Khan must be worth the lives of all his followers put together, it is not good policy to throw away so valuable a life.”

The tone was perfectly even, in itself containing no threat. Mervyn was at his best now, cool, desperate, therefore deadly dangerous. At his words a gasp of amazement escaped from the other side. The first thought was of a trap. Were there soldiers concealed in the tent, with rifles trained upon them through the canvas? And meanwhile Mervyn stood confronting them, calmly; one hand, however, always behind him.

“The life of so important a chief as the Sirdar Allah-din Khan must be of great value,” he went on in the same unconcerned tone. “And—he has but one.”

“And thou hast two, Feringhi,” answered the chief, darkly. “Two, and that means two deaths instead of one, lingering and painful deaths at that. One of thy ‘lives’ is behind in the tent. Good! I may fall or I may not, but I swear on the tomb of the Prophet that if thou so much as drawest the weapon now held behind thee, thou and thy daughter,”—this was a figure of speech—“shall be burnt alive. She first.”

Mervyn felt desperate. He tried not to pale as he gazed at the speaker. But his hand did not move from behind him. In that fierce, hard, set countenance, in the very words of the oath uttered, he knew there would

be no going back from that sentence. He might shoot the chief dead, but no power on earth would turn the whirlwind rush of his followers. And they would be as good as their leader's word, as to that he entertained no doubt whatever. Melian—writhing in a death of fiery torment—the bare idea was as a pictured glimpse into hell itself. A great roll of time swept over his mind in that moment or two, as he stood, confronting the man in whose power he was.

"She first," this barbarian had said. There was a full refinement of diabolical cruelty in the words. God! the thing was unthinkable!

"I draw no weapon," he answered. "What does the Sirdar Allah-din Khan require. Money?"

"Thyself."

The answer was curt, deep toned, uncompromising.

"Myself?"

"Nothing else."

"And what of my 'daughter'—who however is not my daughter, but my sister's daughter?" went on Mervyn, who was puzzling hard over what took on more and more the look of a very hopeless and dreadful situation. "As believers you dare not harm a woman, the holy Koran itself forbids it. But how shall she find her way back to her people alone, she who has never before been in this land?"

"We want nothing of her," said the chief. "She may go in peace. Two of my people here shall escort her safely to within view of the camp of yonder Feringhi," with a nod over his shoulder in the direction of Varne Coates' camp. "But for thyself thou must go with us."

To say that Mervyn felt as if more than half the cloud had lifted would be to put it mildly. The awful deadly weight that had been crushing him, the consciousness to wit, that by his own foolhardy obstinacy, he had brought Melian into ghastly peril—was that which afflicted him most. He himself and his own potential fate was a matter of utterly secondary importance—and, here was a way out.

But could he trust the chief's promises? He knew that in this instance he could. So he made answer, and that very earnestly.

"You will keep faith with me, Sirdar Sahib? My sister's child shall be escorted to yonder camp by two of your people, and delivered there safe and unharmed either by word or deed, on condition that I go with you now? Do you swear that solemnly on the holy Koran and the tomb of the Prophet?"

"I swear it," answered Allah-din Khan, "on the holy Koran, by the tomb of the Prophet, and on the holy Kaba." And he raised his sword hilt to the level of his forehead. Mervyn knew that the oath would be kept.

"I would fain bid farewell to the child, and prepare her for the journey," he said. "I, too, make oath, that nothing will be done inside the tent but that."

It seemed strange, but to this the chief made no objection, nor did he require that one of his followers should be present. He merely bent his head in assent.

"Well, what has happened? You have been talking long enough, dear," said the girl, as he entered the tent.

"Melian darling, you will have to go on to Coates' camp a little ahead of me. The fact is—I must go with these people for a bit—but I'll rejoin you soon. The chief is going to tell off two of his men as an escort for you, and you will be quite safe—quite safe. Tell Coates I'll join him later."

He tried to speak jauntily—to force a smile. But Melian was not to be taken in—not for a moment. She shook her head.

"I am not going to Mr Coates' camp," she said, "at least, not without you. If you have got to go with these people I go too."

Mervyn had not reckoned upon this. He tried to reason with her, pointing out that a forced march with a gang of wild tribesmen and a sojourn in their more or less uncomfortable villages, was no fit experience for her. Of any clement of peril he purposely said nothing, knowing full well that to do so would be simply to rivet her opposition the closer. But he might as well have argued with the tent walls, or have tried to turn the Gularzai

chieftain from his fixed purpose.

“Now be reasonable, my little one,” he concluded. “Say good-bye to me here, and I’ll see you started off all comfortably.”

But Melian set her lips, and those very pretty lips of hers could set very firmly indeed on occasion.

“I shall do no such thing,” she answered. “I’m going with you. We came here together, and I’m not going to leave you.”

She was clinging to him now, firmly, and kissing him.

“You won’t go to Coates’ then?” he said helplessly.

“No. I’m going with you. So now, let’s go out and tell them so.”

The chief might have been excused if he had grown impatient, but he had not. With true Oriental impassiveness he and his wild followers sat their horses, waiting—incidentally the camp servants crouching in their tent, went through the bitterness of death many times over during that period of waiting. Then Mervyn came out and announced that they would have to take two with them instead of one. But Allah-din Khan received the statement without great demur; it may have been that he scented advantage to himself in this addition to his own programme.

In not much longer space of time than it took them to bring in the two horses, and hurriedly put together a few necessaries, were they ready to start. The syce, who was ordered out on the first errand, showed no great concern. He was a Pathan and a believer, and stood in no fear of the scowling horsemen. But the bearer, who had perforce been convened for purposes of the latter, had wilted and cowered before the lowering glances darted at him from under fierce shaggy brows, as a Hindu dog and an idolater. But it did not suit their purpose to shed more blood on that occasion, else would he and the others have felt the tulwar’s edge there and then. The two already slain had been victims to a sudden, unthinking blood lust.

Again we must glance back.

Since the last visit of Helston Varne to Heath Hover, and the boding manifestation that same evening, of the opening door, an unaccountable and evil influence seemed to pervade the place. There was no gripping it, but it was there, and on Melian especially, it seemed to take a firm hold. All her bright sunny spirits, her joyousness in life, seemed to leave her, and that with a suddenness and rapidity that was little short of alarming. She grew pallid, and lost her appetite. She grew nervous, too, and would start at any and every sound; and when night time came, and with it solitude, she shrank from it with a very horror of shrinking. Nothing had happened, according to the tradition of that boding presage, but the fit grew upon her, and it affected Mervyn too, though differently. At last he took her to task about it, and she owned up to the whole thing.

“This’ll never do, little one,” he had said, looking at her with very grave concern. “We must go away for a change.”

The relief which sprang into her face confirmed her former revelation. Still she made protest.

“Why should I break up your peace and quiet, Uncle Seward?” trying to smile, but the smile was a wan one. “You have given me a home, when I had none—such a happy home, too—but somehow now, I don’t know what it is that has come over me. I seem to be always frightened—of something—or nothing.”

Yes, he had noticed that, but had hoped it would pass. But it had not.

“Where shall we go then? Where would you like?” he said.

“Anywhere *you* like, dear. It’s all the same to me.”

“H’m! How should you like to go to—India?”

“To—India? Oh, Uncle Seward, I should just love it,” and all the old animation returned, as if by magic.

“Very well. Pack up to-morrow and we’ll start the day after,” he had answered, with characteristic promptitude.

And so—here they were.

Chapter Twenty Six.

The Dim, Mysterious East.

The way in which the two accepted the situation was characteristic of both. Mervyn took it apparently as all in the day's work, though he had reason to believe that his days were surely numbered. He conversed equably with his captors—or escort, as though he were accompanying them of his own free will, to pay a visit to their village for instance, for any other pacific purpose. Yet he knew that in coming to this country again he had deliberately—as Hussein Khan had put it—placed his head between the tiger's jaws.

Even this, strange to say, did not perturb him, perhaps he had imbibed a large proportion of Oriental fatalism during his lifelong acquaintance with the strange peoples of the East. If his time had come—it had, and there was no more to be said. It had nearly come, he knew full well, when the cry through the winter midnight had led him to drag the perishing man forth from the icy death. Now, if it really had come, why—"it was written;" and in that case that he had returned to this land at all, and of his own free will—was part of the scheme. Thus he looked at it.

But—what of Melian? Had he not drawn her into peril? No—for he did not believe they would harm her. For himself, if what he suspected should prove true—why then his hours were certainly numbered. Well, what then? Until she had come to Heath Hover he had not been in love with life. He was often, in fact, honestly and genuinely sick of it. The brightening which her coming had shed upon it could not be other than temporary. In the due and ordinary course of things she was bound to leave him again sooner or later—and then, how could he return to the old solitude, the old depression of day in, night out? There was nothing to look forward to, and precious little to look back upon. So it mattered little enough now whatever happened to himself. All of which of course, he did not impart to Melian.

She for her part, seemed infected with his unconcern, and looked upon the whole affair as a decidedly interesting adventure. It had its inconvenient side—for instance the commissariat department was to her

civilised tastes, abominable, and sleeping out among the rocks was chilly of a night. But she was allowed to come and go as she liked. No watch was set upon her, for in the first place she had volunteered to go with them rather than separate from her relative, and in the next where would she be in the midst of this craggy, and, to her, entirely unknown wilderness, even if she did change her mind, and take it into her head to try and escape. At night they would make her up a couch of mats in some cleft or hollow among the rocks and shelter off the entrance, and she would declare laughingly to her uncle that it was only an experience of camping out, after all.

Yet there were times when her efforts at keeping up her spirits would sorely fail her. Mervyn himself could not consistently find comfort in cold fatalism, and she would read in the gloom of his knitted brows that he was by no means so easy in his mind as he would have had her believe. And as they journeyed on, through the awful wildness of this savage, rock built region; threading gloomy gorges where the very light of the sun would not penetrate, or traversing a drear waste of desert where the friable soil rose and gyrated in “dust devils” and the sun blazed down as from the reflection of an opened furnace; wending the while, whither they knew not—her spirits began to droop. In short the situation was getting upon her nerves—and that badly.

The shaggy, turbaned horsemen, whom at first she had found fascinating in their picturesqueness, began to appear in her eyes more and more the predatory, merciless beings they really were. The wild savagery of the surroundings—which at first she had pronounced absolutely faultless in their fantastic chaos of rock and crag and chasm, now took on a Dantesque and hope-chilling aspect. Where would it all end?

Either Hussein Khan’s estimate of the distance to be travelled to arrive at the Gularzai chieftain’s stronghold had been very much under-rated, or they were bound for some other destination, for two nights had passed, and they seemed no nearer to any fixed ending of their journeyings. And then when her spirits had reached their lowest ebb, came a thought to Melian’s mind like the breaking of sunlight through a thick mist.

Helston Varne was at Coates’ camp, which had been their objective when their plans had been thus roughly and suddenly deflected. She would

hardly own to herself how greatly she had been looking forward to meeting him again, and now it seemed to her that he, of all human agencies, would be the one to come to their aid and bring matters right. How on earth he was going to do it she had not the ghost of an idea, but that he would contrive to do it somehow, she felt assured—almost. For the very name of Helston Varne seemed to her now as before, a tower of refuge. And something of this she imparted to her uncle.

But he shook a gloomy head. A network was around him—around them both—which even Helston Varne's acumen and infinite resource would be powerless to rend asunder. This he knew, but she did not, and—he could not tell her.

He had been very careful in his conversations with her, and had enjoined upon her like caution. It was highly probable, but still not absolutely safe to assume, that no one amid their captors understood English. She suggested French, but then Mervyn's education, though excellent for purposes of passing through a crammer's hands in his salad days, comprised no working knowledge of that courtly and useful tongue, so that fell through, and unless now and again, and then by dark hints, they were compelled to avoid any reference to the motive of their capture, and the ultimate chances of its satisfactory termination. And then it befell that the merest chance—a piece of overheard conversation—sufficed to throw him into the last stage of gloomy, hopeless despair.

It was during one of their noontide halts. The routine of prayer and prostration—which Melian had at first found so picturesque, even admirable, but now had wearied of—was over, and the men were scattered about in twos or threes, looking after the horses and other things. Two of them were chatting together in a drowsy undertone, and Mervyn, unnoticed by them, was just within earshot, and the substance of what they were saying was this. He himself must die, his time had come. That night they would reach the place—*the place*. Well, this as a personal consideration troubled him not much, he had only expected it. But the woman with the sun-tinged hair, they went on to say, she, unless the *Sirkar* at Mazaran paid the lakh of rupees which would be asked for her restoration—or made any move against them because of what had been done—why there were those over the Persian border who would give nearly if not quite as much for such an addition to their *harîm*.

In frozen horror he took in this, but it was essential to show no sign that he had heard. Would such a sum be paid, and if it were, would not official delay and official bungling be such as to render even compliance of none effect? Moreover, could the authorities responsible for the peace of the border allow so flagrant an act of dacoity to pass without retaliative measures? In either case—Good Heavens! He knew enough about the conditions of a vast tract of hardly penetrated country, and its inscrutable inhabitants, to realise that once Melian disappeared entirely she would be as completely swallowed up, as though the whole Indian army, and the official mechanism, from the Viceroy downwards, were not in existence. And this was the fate to which his own foolhardiness had consigned her. And she was as much to him as ever child of his own could have been!

He knew the two speakers as near kinsmen of Allah-din Khan, and that as such that they were not talking at random. He himself was to die that night, that was settled. That was nothing. “It was written.” But how to save Melian from the unutterable ghastliness of the fate mapped out for her? That was everything. No amount of fatalism would come to his aid there. In the hot swelter of noontide—for with all the keen chill of the nights on these high lands, the sun at noonday threw off from the rocks and arid ground in waves of glowing heat—his brain seemed to bubble. One weltering thought seethed through it—that of taking her life and his own at the same time, but as against this he remembered that he was unarmed. They had insisted upon his giving up everything in the shape of a weapon at the time of his surrender. Then again, she had the one chance in her favour, what right had he to deprive her of it? Well, there remained still some hours—*some hours only*—which he had left to him, and yet his reason told him that they could bring nothing. Of his own death, or even the manner of it, he did not think—so wrapped up was he in the desperation of extremity as the situation affected her.

“Why, Uncle Seward, buck up. You are looking dreadfully down,” she remarked, as they resumed their journey. “And you were the one who was always trying to hearten me.”

“Yes darling, I was, but—perhaps I am not quite the thing. Got a touch of the sun, or something. But I’ll be all right when it gets cooler. A tough old campaigner like me is never affected that way for long.”

He noticed that she herself was far from cheerful, and that her spirits were forced. But—great God! if she only knew what he had learned. In sheer desperation he ranged his horse alongside that of Allah-din Khan, and began to talk, haply in hope that the other might let fall some hint which should give him an idea. It even seemed to him that he himself was talking wildly and at random, for he surprised the chief looking at him more than once in a restrained and curious manner. Yet they had often talked together during their enforced march.

“I should not have consented to the Miss Sahib accompanying me,” he ventured. “I fear it has been too much for her. Could you not return her to her people, brother? It would be of great advantage to all concerned?”

He made the remark in sheer desperation, and emphasising the last words. But nothing came of it.

“We have come far,” replied Allah-din Khan, tranquilly, “but in time she will return. The teachings of the Prophet enjoin patience, but women—Feringhi women especially—have none of it. Let this one learn to acquire it.”

This was uncompromising, but Mervyn thought to see a loophole.

“In time she will return,” he repeated. “That is the word of a Sirdar of the Gularzai?”

To this the chief made no reply. He was looking straight in front of him as he rode, and his dark, clear-cut face was as impassive as a mask. He might, indeed, not have heard for all the sign he gave.

In the light of what he had overheard it was significant to Mervyn that a glance at the sun showed that they were travelling due west. What curious dash of wild hope was it that caused him to recall that this had brought them a great deal nearer to Mazaran than they were when at the point of their start? And yet, even if chance offered, there were ranges of craggy, tooth-like crests between them and the garrison station, and he himself was totally unacquainted with this part of the country. But what chance could offer? None. Absolutely none.

An hour before sundown they halted at a small, squalid looking village—

and then the regulation performances of prayer were gone through. He did notice that several strangers had joined with Allah-din Khan's band in this—presumably people from the squalid, mud-walled village. That one of them was a man of extra fine stature and presence, he also noticed, but barely so. For instance he overlooked the fact that this one was bowing down, and repeating the prescribed words with extra fervour, and a fanatical ecstasy in his dark eyes and swarthy countenance, and that the others were stealing at him glances of furtive veneration.

As they resumed their march he ranged his horse alongside that of Melian. No restriction was put upon such movements as this. The band was riding anyhow and in open order now—straggling order would be the better term for it, for some were quite far behind. In the first place their captives were mounted on inferior steeds, in the next the Gularzai were perfectly well aware that in such country as they now were in, any attempt at escape would meet with not the ghost of a chance.

"My child, I have brought you into a dreadful corner," he said, and the dead note of hopelessness in his tone struck a chill into his hearer. "I ought never to have consented to your accompanying me, but now it's too late. Listen. If anything should happen to me, you will still be set free on a ransom. The Government will pay it, I have very little in the world, but such as it is I have left it to you—and now but for me being such a fool as to bring you here we might have gone on in our old quiet, happy life; not necessarily at Heath Hover. Well, what I wanted to say, and I must say it quickly, is this, If anything should happen to me, ask to be taken to the Nawab Shere Dil Khan. He is the head chief of the Gularzai, and this one is under him. I'll write the words down for you in Hindustani, and you can learn them by heart—and keep on asking—keep on asking." He felt in his pocket, and even wrote in his pocket, on an envelope he found there. "And don't show any fear, keep on steadfastly requiring the Nawab Shere Dil Khan—have you got the name, well, I've put it down here, only it's not very distinct. Well now, take the bit of paper—That was well done. And—there's another thing."

Melian looked at the speaker and her eyes filled. Her nerves had begun to go, and she was feeling utterly helpless and overwrought. Now this strong foreboding of danger aggravated this.

“Darling Uncle Seward, what should be going to happen to you?” she urged. “There now, you have been trying to keep me up; now I must try and keep you up. Surely they won’t harm you—us—if they expect to be paid for letting us go?”

“Yes. That’s right, little one. They won’t harm—us,” he answered. “Still, it’s best to be on the safe side. Once you get to the Nawab you’re safe. He’s a straight and square man, but unfortunately, these sub-tribal chiefs are virtually almost independent of the head, or it’s certain we should not be here.”

“I’ll remember,” she answered. “But,”—as though a sudden and illuminating idea had struck her. “Why don’t *you* appeal to him—now, before we go any further. Why leave it to what—isn’t going to happen—and me?”

Here was a question which it was impossible for him to answer, though to all appearances, nothing could have been more pertinent. He could not tell her that in his case the head sirdar of the Gularzai would be every whit as merciless as would Allah-din Khan and his followers. But her case was different. And that ghastly plan which he had overheard had resolved him to an even more hazardous course on her behalf—hazardous because one of sheer sink or swim.

“‘Why?’” he repeated. “‘Why?’ Always a woman’s query—Why?” And he looked at her with a very loving but very sad smile. “I can only tell you this, child, that you must leave that part of it to me, and do exactly as I tell you I *know*—and you don’t. That must be sufficient. This is the dim, mysterious East, remember, and I’ve spent the best years of my life in it.”

The sun was drooping now to the craggy, serrated ridge beyond the valley, flaming in red gold upon the cliffs beneath which they were riding. The figures of the wild, turbaned horsemen were picked out in the clear glow—the strange, fierce East indeed. Melian thought it was a picture that would remain stamped in her memory until her dying day. There were signs too, that the said figures showed an inclination to abandon their straggling order and to close up. Mervyn saw this—and at the same time came the thought that this was the last sun whose setting he would ever see.

“Quick, now, Melian,” he said. “Take this, but carefully. Watch your chance. No one must see. When you have it, hide it upon you. Don’t even look at it again. If you do, it must be at the very last extremity. You are more than ordinarily quick witted, and will be able to follow. If anything happens to me—no, don’t interrupt—and after a reasonable time has gone, say a month, and you are not restored, and especially if Allah-din Khan should attempt to pass you on to strangers—then produce it. Do you follow?”

“Yes—but—what—where—is *it*?” said the girl, her wide open, serious eyes upon his face.

“Take my pouch and pipe, and fill it, as they have often seen you do,” and he handed it to her. Wondering, she obeyed. Then as he reached forth his hand to take it, he slipped something into hers. One look at this, and she almost let it fall, but refrained, just in time.

For what she held in her hand was a tiny facsimile of the strange, star-shaped disc, which she had picked up on the sluice path at Heath Hover that lovely cloudless June morning, and the sight of which, in her grasp, had struck her uncle with such a terror of trepidation.

And he knew that she was possessed of that which upon production would entail upon her two alternatives—restoration, to liberty or death—the latter, swift, painless, unconscious. But the other ghastly fate, to which he had overheard allusion made, could now never be hers.

“Only in the very last extremity,” he reminded her, in an earnest undertone, for the band was now closing up around them. And she bent her head in grave, silent comprehension, and assent.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The Vault of Doom.

The red fires shot up against shining rock reflection, throwing out exaggerations or silhouettes of the shaggy figures moving about. Wild, fantastic, as the surrounding crags were, thus thrown out into fitful light, yet the place was an ideal one for a snug and sheltered camp, where the keen mountain air struck chill at night, for it was sheltered on three sides by rock and cliff, while the fourth gave out on a steep drop into the valley beneath. To one, at any rate, the topographical situation did not fail in significance. Not by sheer accident, not for mere purposes of shelter had the situation been chosen.

In hanging clusters the stars shone brightly in the clear sky, but there was no moon. The two Europeans, seated in their own camp a little apart, had finished their evening meal—Mervyn incidentally, had been allowed to go out, under escort, and shoot a few *chikor* (the large red-legged hill partridge), early that morning, so they had fared better than heretofore. Now he had lighted a pipe, and was striving to conjure up all the stoicism of the dim mysterious East to his aid, the while keeping up the conversation with Melian, and doing so in such wise as to convey no apprehension to her mind. And the keeping up of ordinary conversation within an hour or so of one's own death is not an easy undertaking; but then, John Seward Mervyn was not quite an ordinary man.

A few months ago, he would not greatly have concerned himself over this situation. But within that time, life had changed and brightened for him. It was more valuable up to date than it had been then. He turned the talk on to Heath Hover and their time together there, and for a little, the girl forgot their precarious and now depressing situation and surroundings, and was responsive, brightening up with this and that homely touch.

"Why, the heather must be flaming out in perfectly gorgeous crimson up above the Plane woods," she said, "and we are not getting the benefit of it this time. And that bit, down below Chiltingford, where we took Violet the day before she left—that must be too ripping for anything. And the jolly old battered mill, standing out on the open—I wish we were there

again, don’t you, dear? Say you do.”

The eager, retrospective tone had lapsed into seriousness. There was no difficulty in replying as she wanted, and that with perfect truth and candour. Mervyn, looking back on those fair scenes, spent with this child; marking and treasuring all her golden joyousness and appreciation of every sound and sight around her; thought that for a repetition of just that time alone he would have faced the fate in front of him a hundred times over. It was little enough of such sweet wholesome happiness he had known in the course of a hard, rugged, bizarre life, and that time about comprised it all.

Two wolves howled at responsive intervals away down in the valley beneath, and the red glow of the camp fires played upon the bronzed, hook-nosed faces, and fierce eyes, of the wild marauders of the desert, squatted around, smoking their hookahs, and conversing in a deep rumbling undertone. The owls would be softly hooting in the woods which dipped their edges into Plane Pond at this moment, and the bell-like plash of rising fish ring out on its starlit surface. Contrast indeed! Here in this savage wilderness death was to be his at any hour, at any moment. And now and thus, for the first time in his life, death seemed hard to face.

“You have—what I gave you—safe, child?” he broke in, as though moved by a sudden impulse. “Recollect, it is only to be produced in the very last extremity, if the appeal to Shere Dil Khan should fail.”

“Don’t,” she answered, startled by the solemnly spoken irrelevance of the remark, and thrusting a hand into his. “You must really shake off these dismal forebodings, dear—and yet, how can I undertake to lecture you—*you*—on things that this weird country may hold out?”

And then, as if to give point to her words, a tall figure seemed to grow out of the earth beside them. A murmured sentence or two, and as in response to it he rose.

“Sit still, darling, and wait for me,” he said. “I have to go and talk with some of them, and it will be wearisome—especially as it interrupts our talk about good old times.” He rested one hand lovingly upon the gold-crowned head, and then passed out with the man who had come to

summon him. He would not even take a real, long farewell of her, if only that it might prove the reverse of advantageous to her, for he must still keep up the pretence of ignorance, and yet it was the last time he should behold her in this world, and he had but a shadowy belief in any other. For John Seward Mervyn knew as well as did the man he was accompanying that he was going to his doom.

It was a strange place, that in which he found himself but two or three minutes later—a cavernous hall, yet walled around by solid rock, and of some vastness. And yet, it seemed somehow as though it were not entirely the work of Nature, even here, where Nature ran riot in the production of wild freaks of her own masonry. It bore a look as though ages and ages of gradual working had wrought it to such a pitch of symmetry. In the centre a fire burned, the smoke escaping upwards somehow and somewhere, for the atmosphere of the place was quite clear of it.

Seated about this were some half dozen figures. Only one did Mervyn recognise as that of Allah-din Khan. The others all looked strangers to him. Stay. Only one? No, there was another; for in the one seated on the right of the chief Mervyn recognised the tall, somewhat remarkable looking man who had joined the rest at prayer. This one sat eyeing him, an embodiment of Eastern stateliness, in snowy flowing garments, the folds of his turban arranged round the conical *kulla* which just peeped above it, with an almost mathematical nicety. Mervyn took note of something else. Behind him, two tall, ferocious looking Gularzai had drawn up, standing so as to bar effectually the way by which he had been ushered in. So this was to be his death chamber, he thought? Well, the sooner it was over the better.

“Salaam, brothers,” he began, but only by way of saying something.

“It is not ‘salaam,’” (“salaam”—Peace) answered the distinguished looking stranger, speaking in a very deep chested tone. “You joined the Brethren of the Night whose sign is the Five Pointed Star—were made blood-brother with them, and—were false to them.”

“Therein is not truth,” answered Mervyn, who had expected this as an

opening of the proceedings.

“Not truth?” went on the speaker. “In thine English home the Sign was delivered to thee; in thine English home—the long house with the cornering wings which shelter the centre, and which stands beneath the broad end of the water.”

But that Mervyn had learned to be astonished at nothing, he might well have felt surprised. Here was an exact description of Heath Hover, and yet the only man who had seen it, and who bore the terrible and mysterious Sign, had died within its walls, and the method of his death he alone in all England knew. And now here in this far Eastern wilderness was another—were others—who knew.

“The Sign was not delivered to me,” he answered.

“Not delivered?” repeated the other slowly, and fixing upon his face a glance that seemed to burn, so glowing was it with fell, vengeful intent. “Not delivered? It was delivered not once only, but twice.”

Now, indeed, the listener’s self possession all but betrayed the shock this announcement could not but cause him. How well he recalled that lovely summer morning when he had looked out to behold the two girls coming down the sluice path and Melian carrying the deadly shining thing in her white, unsuspecting fingers—and his own frost of horror at the sight. So all that time he had been shadowed, his every movement keenly watched from the recesses of those hanging woods—not as he had thought by honest English Nashby and his random, all-at-sea suspicions, but by this deadly Brotherhood, whose ranks, in an ill-starred moment, and moved chiefly by curiosity, he had joined. Yet how on earth could their emissary or emissaries have hung about the Plane woods all that time undetected by keepers, or unseen and uncommented on by the surrounding rustic population? Of a truth the problem was a record one for stiffness of solution. But he answered:

“It was not delivered once, nor yet twice. It was not delivered at all.”

The fierce, copper-hued, shaggy faces, the gleaming eyes reflected in the firelight, were bent still more threateningly upon the speaker. The latter, in sheer hopeless desperation, was probing behind his very brain

to try and make out a case for himself, and at the same time realising its utter hopelessness; His remorseless indicter went on.

“The first who delivered thee the sign thou didst kill.”

“That did I not. On the very contrary, I saved him—saved him from the icy death. Listen brothers.” And then Mervyn went on to give the narrative of the events of that wild, sleet-tossed winter night, when we first saw him. He told it graphically and well, speaking in the Pushtu with, as had happened throughout all the dialogue, an odd word here and there of a coined language peculiar to the Brotherhood, thrown in.

“Now? Did I not save him from certain death?” he concluded, looking with an anxiety which he hoped did not appear, into the fierce faces that ringed him round. But his heart sank within him, as he realised that any hopes he might have entertained on that score were doomed; for no sign of softening could he trace. On the contrary, the set grimness on every countenance seemed to deepen.

“Not knowing him—then,” supplied the stranger, who seemed to have constituted himself—or been constituted—judge in chief, or president of the proceedings. “Afterwards—that was made good.” And his eyes again seemed fixed with a deeper, more compelling glow, upon those of the Englishman.

Mervyn stood as though petrified. The words, the mesmeric glance seemed to take him out of himself—to take him back; back to—something. Mechanically he raised a nerveless hand, and passed it over his eyes. He saw—yes, assuredly he saw himself in dreamland, as it were. The next words aroused him—brought him to himself—thoroughly, completely. And they were spoken by Allah-din Khan.

“Thou double traitor,” said the chief, in deep, growling tones. “For the act of disobedience thine end should have been sure—sure but swift—the Point of the Star. For this it shall be long, and lingering. Look.”

Following the out-darted finger, Mervyn did look, and—

For the first time he became aware of a curious object which stood within the grisly vault, and that not far behind him. It was a long, coffin-shaped

thing, and now, as two of those who had been seated there arose, and, kindling torches from the fire, approached it, he saw that it took on another shape, that of a long, lounge bath in fact. It was raised from the floor on metal feet, and the thing itself was made of metal, but of such ancient and strange manufacture that the British Museum, say, would probably have given a very large sum to possess. As the flare of the torches gleamed upon this he could see something else. The fronting side of the structure was engraved with subjects of a hideous and revolting nature—that of human beings in process of being done to death under every circumstance of prolonged torment, and one of them, and the most prominent, by means of just such an implement as this. For there reproduced, was an exact facsimile of it. A fire was represented as burning underneath, and out of it the head and shoulders of a man appeared—the open mouthed, staring expression on the face conveying the indescribable and ghastly agony which the sufferer was undergoing.

Mervyn stared at the thing, and his blood froze. Here was his own fate represented. To lie for hours in that dreadful bath undergoing a process of slow boiling, this was what it meant. He had heard of this being done, knew that it actually was done. The cold sweat poured from his forehead, and he looked wildly in front for a means of putting a quick end to his existence. He had expected the quick, painless death, which his guest had died under his own roof at Heath Hover—but this! Allah-din Khan's deep voice broke through the terror of the spell that was on him.

"Use no art to avoid this, double traitor, for it is thee or another. If not thee, then the sun-crowned woman who is with thee shall lie yonder. By the tomb of the Prophet it shall be so."

A mist rose before his eyes and he swayed. The very fiend from Hell was speaking, of a surety. He wondered whether he could overcome his momentary faintness, lest they should think he had eluded them, and proceed to put their hellish threat into immediate execution. Great Heaven! was this some awful, shocking nightmare from which he should presently wake? Was ever any one confronted with such an alternative? Death he had expected, but these hours perhaps of fiendish torture? But it was himself or Melian. These devils were not to be balked.

Now he saw that there were piles of kindling wood standing beside the

horrid implement. The ring of diabolical faces confronting him looked terrific in the fell, ruthless purpose, which he read therein. But for the alternative he would have made a frenzied dash at the nearest weapon and died fighting. Now, the alternative utterly disarmed him. He would make one appeal.

“Give me the Star, that I may die by it,” he said. “I have a right to.”

“Thou art no longer of its Brotherhood, double traitor,” answered Allah-din Khan. “For thee, the boiling fat.”

At a sign from him one of the two who had been mounting guard over the entrance advanced, and tearing out handfuls from the stacks of kindling wood, began to arrange them beneath the grim receptacle. The victim watched the process with a sort of dazed, numbed attention.

And then, as he looked again at the ring of his tormentors, something he saw made him wonder whether his head was going round with him, or whether his reeling brain had actually and indeed given way beneath the shock.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

At Fault.

The hitherto glowering, menacing countenances, had all of a sudden taken on a heavy, vacuous expression. The stare of the fierce eyes had become dull and lack-lustre. Even the forms were swaying. And then—what marvel was this? The whole group seemed to collapse as one man, subsiding to the ground. There they lay, breathing with a heavy, stertorous kind of snore. All save one.

This was the stranger who had taken so vindictive and ruthless a part in the questioning. He still kept his upright seat, and over his face had come no change. Now he arose, and strode over to the man who kept the entrance, deftly manoeuvring between him and the latter.

The Gularzai stared at the towering, authoritative form, but said nothing.

“Take this, brother, and swallow it,” said the stranger. “Have no fear. It is not death, only short sleep. But to hesitate will be death.” And the speaker produced a Browning pistol in one hand, and something quite small in the other.

This particular believer was in no hurry to taste the joys of Paradise just yet, possibly through some misgiving as to whether he had sufficiently earned them. He glanced at the weapon, then at his unconscious tribesmen. Without a word he reached forth his hand, took what was placed therein and—did as directed. But the effect upon him was well nigh instantaneous. He swayed, staggered, then collapsed upon the ground. There remained now only the man who was engaged in the preparation of the bath of torment. To him, too, were the same instructions given. And he, too, with Oriental stoicism, succumbed to the inevitable. There remained now, in full possession of their faculties, only two—Mervyn and the tall sirdar.

“I think, on the whole, I’ve managed that rather well—so far,” said the latter, in excellent and refined English.

More than ever did Mervyn think his brain was clean gone.

“Good God!” he ejaculated, giving a violent start and staring at the other in the wildest, blankest amazement.

“I don’t wonder you’ve got—er—something of a shock,” said Helston Varne, looking at him with a touch of concern. “It was a beastly ordeal, but it had to be gone through with.”

“But—why didn’t you contrive to let me know—to tip me the wink somehow?” asked Mervyn helplessly.

“It’d never have done. It’d have bungled the whole show. These worthies’ faculties are much too keen to take any risks with. But now there’s no time to talk. We must get along, and every blessed yard of start we steal is worth a lot. The effect of what I’ve given them may last three hours, but not many minutes longer. But it was the only chance. Come now. We shall find your niece all ready—Hussein Khan will have taken care of that—also of the residue of the Gularzai.”

“Well, Varne! Of all the geniuses this world ever produced,”—began Mervyn, as they got outside—“you’re that one. But, I had no idea you could patter the lingo, let alone so faultlessly.”

“I was caught young, you see. Born in this country. Now let’s lose no time.”

When Melian, seated in her sleeping quarters, eagerly and with a deepening anxiety, listening for the return of her uncle, heard herself softly hailed by an English voice which was not his—and stepped forth to find herself confronted by a tall Gularzai, her astonishment was not much less than that of Mervyn had been. Him, too, she promptly descried, standing behind the other.

“What on earth does it all mean?” she began. “Why—Mr Varne!”

“Quite right, Miss Seward. And now, are you ready to start?”

“Perfectly.”

“Come along then, and we’ll go and get the horses. It’ll save time, and Hussein Khan has his hands pretty full as it is.”

The girl drew back in instinctive alarm as they literally stepped over the slumbering forms of their fierce enemies. Arrived at the picket ropes, their horses were promptly bitted and saddled. To Mervyn’s suggestion that the Gularzai steeds should be cut loose and turned adrift, Helston objected that it would do more harm than good to set them stampeding in all directions, would raise the countryside on them perhaps even sooner than it would take their captors to recover from the effects of the drug. But already, in obedience to his direction, Hussein Khan had secured as much ammunition as he could find, and was hurling it over the *khud*. The Pathan was thoroughly enjoying himself now; would have enjoyed himself more, had he been allowed to send a few of these his fellow believers to Paradise—or Jehanum—but this he was not.

And as they fared forth beneath the stars, which fortunately shone with sufficient brilliancy to enable them to distinguish the narrow, treacherous, ledgelike paths which they mostly had to thread—conversing only in whispers, and that sparingly—the three Europeans at any rate, had food for thought. Mervyn was marvelling at the superhuman, and consummate cleverness of this friend in need. Why, the make-up alone was a work of genius, and he said as much.

“It was the easier,” answered Helston, “because of the beard. That’s genuine. I let it grow when I started to come out here—not altogether by accident either, but because I foresaw circumstances under which I might want to ‘make up’—not your case, incidentally. A sham one you know, would never have humbugged these people for a moment.”

“Well, you’re a miracle all the same,” said the other.

Helston Varne felt justified in being rather pleased with himself. His unexpected and startling discovery that these two were being carried away prisoners into the fastnesses of this wild and lawless band, had entailed upon him such a shock as he had seldom, if ever quite, experienced. And with it had come the chilling, stunning thought as to how he, with all his infinite and practised resource, was going to rescue them, and at first it certainly seemed almost hopeless. But born and bred

in the East, he had made an especial study of all its dark and undercurrent systems. And he held an important clue.

That find he had made in the old lumber room at Heath Hover he had by no means dismissed from his thoughts. He had pondered over it long and deeply, and had not failed to connect it with some episode of Mervyn's earlier life. And the missing link in the chain had been, half unconsciously, placed within his grasp by his shikari, Hussein Khan, for the latter himself belonged to the Brotherhood of the Star.

But if Hussein Khan was bound to the Brotherhood of the Star, he was bound to his European master by an even stronger tie still. The former might take his life, and indeed sooner or later, under the existing circumstances would. For that he cared nothing. But should he fail the latter, in any point, at any crisis, why then his eternal weal, was not merely at stake—but doomed. For who shall explain the mysterious ravellings of the dim unfathomable East? Given these conditions, and Helston Varne's unlimited powers of resource and unfailing intrepidity availed to do the rest.

Now, under the starlight, he looked at the figure of the girl riding next in front of him along the single-file, narrow path. This was the prize for which he had thrown the stake—and he had won. His nerves thrilled exultantly within him at the thought. It was a trifle unsteadying even to him. There had been no hesitation in his reply when his kinsman had put the matter to him point blank. The time for that had gone by. Now he had saved her—from a fate of which she was in blissful ignorance, fortunately, but whose purport he had gleaned during his brief sojourn with Allah-din Khan—and his own mind was telling him that he had saved her for himself.

From their first meeting on the day when he had been imprisoned in the chill mysterious vault at Heath Hover, her image had remained fixed upon his mind. He had not striven to resist the growing fascination; he preferred to watch its development—or the reverse—as a matter of psychological study; for as we have seen, he did not err on the side of coming to Heath Hover too often. And now, would he win? He thought he would.

Was it by a subtle telepathy that as they fared thus forward through the night, and in silence, that she should be thinking exclusively of him? Yet she was. She recalled how she had been looking forward to meeting him again—out here, in this wild, strange, and to her, new land. How, too, during the startling, then alarming occurrence of their captivity, her thoughts had flown at once to his propinquity as to a tower of refuge—she liked that simile and it would often recur. How, too, she had tried to impart that element of hope to her uncle, only to be told that their entanglement was even beyond Helston Varne's powers of unravelment. Yet the reverse had befallen. She had proved right, and Helston Varne had come to the rescue, and brought them forth triumphantly. Indeed, that everything was bound to come right if he had the settling of it had now become an article of faith with her.

A short halt was made to rest the horses, then on again. It will be remembered that the course of the freebooters had been set so as to bring them much nearer to Mazaran, and now with luck, they hoped to reach that station in about twenty-four hours' journeying. Why, Coates himself, who had started thither simultaneously with his kinsman's venture, would hardly have arrived by then, even if he did not decide to wait at Fort Shabâl, a small post which lay between his camp and Mazaran—for safety's sake.

But with the small hours of the morning came a change, and with it anxiety. For a mist was arising, blotting out the stars; whose light indeed they required in that labyrinthine winding through chaotic rocks, or along this or that steep mountain side with a precipitous drop not far down the slope. Hussein Khan, the hard, lifelong mountaineer, who was guiding, shook a gloomy head as he looked upward and around. None knew better than he what it might portend. None knew better than he that the most practised mountaineer might become helpless as a child when plunged in thick mist. And this mist, though not yet thick, showed every tendency to become so. Added to which a slight drizzle began to fall, and none knew better than Hussein Khan the perilous effect, on their none too safe paths, of slimy moisture. And they direly needed all the start they could obtain.

But the occurrence would equally check the pursuit of their enemies, for there was no doubt but that they would be pursued, and hotly, at the

earliest available moment? No, it would not—that is, not necessarily—for these knew their way, and would take a line which would have the effect of cutting the fugitives off from Mazaran, did the latter lose much of the start they had obtained. For to Hussein Khan, practised mountaineer that he was, this was after all more or less strange country, and he was shaping his course only by reckoning.

The small hours passed into daybreak, but with the lightening of the atmosphere there came no light from without. The fugitives were swathed within dank, heavy, bewildering mist. They could hardly see each other at further than a horse's length apart. Helston Varne and the shikari conferred hurriedly together, and in the result decided that there was nothing for it but to call a halt and wait until chance should enable them to obtain their bearings.

But chance seemed not inclined to befriend them. An hour had gone—a whole precious hour—and, if anything, the cloud seemed to settle down thicker than ever. There was no wind either, not enough stirring in the air to enable those experienced men to form the slightest idea of the lay of their course, by that not always reliable method of feeling on which side of their face the wind stirred. Mervyn had more than begun to feel gloomy—and looked it. Helston Varne was feeling nearly as gloomy, and did not show it. But Melian, looking from one to the other, felt—well, confident. Where Helston Varne was taking a hand there was no room for failure, had become part of her creed, as we have said.

Another hour went by—two precious hours—eating into the none too wide margin of the start they had attained—and that alarmingly. And then—relief showed in their quickly exchanged glances. The mist had begun to roll away.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

The Valley of the Mud-Slide.

A puff of damp air came down the slope, driving the vapour before it, and bringing a hard, unpleasant downpour. But this mattered little now. The great thing was to be able to distinguish their way. Girths were tightened, and in a moment they were prepared to resume the march.

Even yet they had to move slowly. The paths, for one thing, were extremely slippery, for another, the further side of the valley had not begun to show at all. Then, when it did, and that suddenly, there lay a couple of low, mud-walled villages, below, but not very far from their way.

Could they pass unseen? It was in the highest degree important that they should. But as if to put this hope to flight, several dogs, great fierce brutes, such as were used by the native herdsmen to protect their flocks, came rushing forth, yelling and baying with frantic clamour.

Their owners were not long in following. But they stopped suddenly. The sight of Hussein Khan, and Helston, whose disguise made him look every inch a sirdar of the Gularzai—in which capacity, by the way, Melian had greatly admired him—allayed their natural suspiciousness. Under such escort these Feringhi could not be interfered with, and they came no nearer. But the discovery was untoward, if only on account of information these could supply to eventual pursuers.

The villages were left behind, but travelling became perforce slow—deadly slow. The path along the well nigh precipitous slope had become so slippery and dangerous, that more than once it was deemed expedient to dismount and proceed on foot. And then, as they rounded the spur in front, an exclamation escaped Hussein Khan and his tone took on a note of blank dismay.

“Now I see where we have come,” he said. “*Hazûr*, it was written that we should stray from our course in yonder accursed cloud, which assuredly was the breath of Shaitan himself. Here before us lies the Valley of the Mud-slide. And we must cross that, for there is no turning back.”

“It is written,” was the answer. “Therefore we will cross it, since there is no other way.”

In front lay the same steep gigantic slope, sheering upward to a great height, and along this they were threading, like flies upon a wall. The other side of this long and narrow gorge was precipitous, being composed of tier upon tier of terraced cliff. And the rain, beating pitilessly down, lent huge vastness to the serrated crags rearing black against an unbroken murk of sky. In front, right across their way, sweeping down the slope from the high *kotal* to its base, spreading like a gigantic peacock’s tail, was the result of a former mud-slide. It was as though the whole mountain side had at one time—and that not so very long since, fallen away, bringing millions of tons of blue grey soil with it. The base of it filled the bottom of the gorge, though a watercourse had drilled its way through, and the sombre thunder of this they could now hear, far down between its perpendicular walls of solidified mud.

There was misgiving in the hearts of all three men as they reached the edge of this. Would they be able to cross it. They were familiar with similar freaks in the wild mountain country, but this one was of gigantic proportions. In the regular wet season they might as well try to cross a quaking morass, but there had been little rain of late, still even that little was enough to turn such a place into a slough. But there was nothing for it. It was the only way through. The alternative was to retrace their steps right into the teeth of their enemies. And one consolation was theirs. Once on the other side they knew where they were now, and could make up for lost time.

There was no path. Selecting what to his practised eye seemed the firmer ground, Hussein Khan led the way. Soon the horses were laboriously dragging their weighted fetlocks out of the stiff, clinging stuff—only to plunge them in deeper with the next step. Then it became manifest that the right course was to dismount, and proceed on foot. Helston Varne looked at Melian, so too, did Mervyn.

“I should think Miss Seward could keep the saddle,” said the former. “She’s lighter than we are, and it’s infernally laborious going for a lady on foot and hampered with skirts.”

“Of course she can,” came the answer, gustily. “Lord, I’d like to get Mr Allah-din Khan over the sights of this rifle. I’d drill his parchment hide for him. Ya Mahomed! I would.”

And then, as if in answer to the invocation, something happened. The gloomy, Dantesque valley bellowed to the echoes of a resounding roar, the reverberations of two *jezail* shots behind. The missiles hummed by, rather wide, and sploshed into the ooze of the mud-slide. Every head turned.

Coming along the way they had fled, strung out like hounds, were a number of mounted figures. The dirty white flowing garments, the reckless rush of their advance proclaimed their unmistakable identity. The time lost in the mist, the deflection from the right track, possibly that Helston Varne had miscalculated the duration of the effects of the drug which his shikari had deftly inserted into so many hookahs and other things—had handicapped the fugitives—and now here was Allah-din Khan, and all his cut-throats hot foot behind them, fired, too, with baffled hate and the disgrace which had been put upon them. The *malik* of the villages they had passed had not only supplied the chief with information, but had turned out his own men—and they very willing—to aid in the pursuit. Two of these indeed, had slipped on in advance, and had discharged their jezails, with the result foregiven.

The bulk of the pursuers were still some way behind. Quickly Helston Varne’s mind had framed a plan, but it, he saw was but a shadow of a one. Once they were through this slough of despond he would send the others on, and himself remaining behind would take cover on its edge, and deliberately pick off every one of them as they struggled through the semi-morass. But even he knew that in view of the state of fiery exaltation to which they were worked up, his chances of success were not great. They would rush it somehow, just as his own party had themselves done, and—there were too many of them. He sent one look back.

“Hurry on,” he urged. “Mount now, and push the horses for all they’re worth. It’s our only chance.”

And it was done. How—they knew not. Perhaps the animals themselves

caught some of the fever heat excitement of being chased, but floundering, plunging, snorting, they found safe, firm foothold at last on the other side, and stood panting, and streaming, and utterly blown. Here was no safety. It would take half an hour at least before they had sufficient go in them to resume a race for life, and the pursuers had time to cross the mud-slide at their leisure.

Mervyn's heart was filled with black, gloomy despair. It was fated they were not to escape. Well, at the last it would be soon over. With the recollection of that hellish cavern of torture, and the words spoken therein, he had made up his mind that Melian should not fall into their hands. They had shown him what they were capable of, and that was enough. One quick merciful shot for her, and the next for himself, and that the moment he realised that all hope and chances were gone.

"Now," said Helston Varne. "You press on to the *kotal*, Mervyn. I'm going to take cover here and keep them back—and directly they get into the mud-slide I'm going to massacre them like holy Shaitan. *Jao* Hussein Khan. Go on Mervyn," he added, more peremptorily, seeing him hesitate. "You've got to take Miss Seward out of this, and I've got plenty of ammunition. I'll catch you up, by and by."

"Well, don't be long," said the other queerly, as he obeyed.

Now two or three more shots straggled across from beyond. The main body of the pursuers came racing up, urging their steeds mercilessly over the cruel, stony ground. Now they were on the edge of the mud-slide. Wild, yelling, threatening shouts went up from them, as they drew their tulwars and flashed them furiously in the direction of the fugitives. Helston looked back. The result was not unsatisfactory. If only he could hold up these. He would try parley. It would gain a modicum of time.

"Brothers," he shouted. "Go back. I would not shed your blood, for we have eaten together. But no man reaches this side of the mud-slide alive."

For answer, a fierce, blood-thrilling yell of vengeance, as they discovered his presence, for they had missed his manoeuvre. And shouting out the torments of hell to which he, and all with him, were destined when once

more in their hands, they pushed their steeds furiously into the slough.

In the chaotic splashing and floundering that ensued, Helston's rifle spoke. The man who rode beside the chief toppled from his saddle. Again came the roaring detonation, tossing to and fro from crag to crag. Another saddle was emptied, but so far, for reasons of his own, the marksman had spared Allah-din Khan. In the sudden confusion, he poured another shot into "the brown," but nothing seemed available to stop that rush. They were mad with revenge and fanaticism. As a sheer matter of time he would not be able to destroy anything like all of them before they should cross. Well, this time the chief must go. He had been given every chance, and the stake being contested was too great.

"Once more go back!" he shouted. But only a renewed and fiend-like scream came in reply, and horses, floundering fetlock deep, were making surprising headway, and the wild savage faces were alarmingly nearer. He put up the rifle again, and—it swayed in his hands. He could not get the sighting. The earth under his feet was swaying. What did it mean, in Heaven's name?

There came a deep, growling, rumbling roar. He looked upward. Heavens! Was the whole world falling over upon him? In the flash of a moment, abandoning all thought of human enemies—of human forces, Helston had wrenched his horse from behind the great hump of earth where he had sheltered it, and mounting, spurred with hot haste onward and upward in the track of those who had gone before. At the end of a couple of hundred yards or so he alighted from his saddle just in time to avoid being hurled therefrom in the rocking swaying horror of a moving world, and looked back. A cracking roar, painful to the drums of his ears, split the air. He took in the enormous mass curling over, the volume of mud and earth and stones, at least two score of feet high, pouring like a gigantic flood down the face of the slide. He took in the frantic struggling crowd of horsemen right in the centre of its road, and then, the whole slope took on a new formation as half a mountain side poured down it, roaring up stones and mud masses high in the air. And—of the three score and odd Gularzai—pressing on in hate and vengeance to destruction—there remained no more trace than there had been before their arrival there at all. That gigantic mud-slide had in a moment found a common sepulchre for the lot.

“Well, Miss Seward,” Helston remarked, as somewhat shaken by the stupendous awesomeness of the phenomenon, he rejoined the fugitive group, higher up. “Allah is on our side this time anyhow.”

“Yes,” she said in an awed tone. “What a sight! But what was it? An earthquake?”

“Another mud-slide, like the one which formed the first—or a little of both. Maybe a touch of earthquake that started it off. But we were through just in time, and—good-bye to Allah-din Khan and Co.”

“Whom I hope are grilling in their Jehanum,” growled Mervyn, with the recollection of his own ordeal fresh upon him.

“Well, there’s nothing between us and Mazaran now,” pronounced Helston Varne, “and the sooner we get there the better. No, Miss Seward. You’d better not look back. Get it out of your mind.”

For Melian’s gaze seemed riveted on the gloomy Dantesque gorge, now half barred up by the tremendous convulsion of Nature which had taken effect right under her very eyes, and the thought of the buried men lying there—even though they were fierce barbarians and fanatical enemies, still they had been engulfed in the horrible cataclysm right under her eyes. But she recognised the other’s advice was sound, and laid herself out to follow it. And the reaction of feeling that they were all in comparative safety largely helped.

Chapter Thirty.

Envoi.

John Seward Mervyn lay back in his accustomed armchair and puffed very contentedly at his pipe. The fire burned clearly in the deep, old-fashioned fireplace, and the room looked exactly the same as when we first discovered him in it. Even the wind, swirling boisterously around the gables of Heath Hover, seemed to sound the same note, but it was not snow-laden this time, for autumn had not yet fairly gone out. The same little black kitten, though it was no longer a kitten now, still it had grown not much larger, and was as fluffy and almost as playful as ever, had jumped up on to his knee and sat there purring.

“Fill up, Varne,” he said, pushing the square bottle over to his companion—the glow of glasses and syphons between them shone merrily in the cheerful lamplight. “And now—we can talk. No, it’s all right. She can’t hear,” following an almost imperceptible lift of the other’s eyebrows toward the ceiling, the sound of footsteps on the upper side of this betokening that Melian was undergoing the intricate and protracted process of feminine turning in.

Helston Varne, ensconced in the opposite chair, mixed himself a deliberate peg and relit his pipe. He was, in fact, more interested than—from force of habit—he allowed to appear, for now he was going to learn at first hand what he had pieced together in theory.

“First of all, tell me,” went on Mervyn. “I haven’t asked you yet, was purposely waiting until we got back here—on the very scene of it all, so to say. How did you get your cue to play up to on that Star business, when you were doing inquisitor-in-chief in that damnable hell-cave?”

“Mainly from deduction, I found the confirmation—here.”

“Here? How—when?” And remembering various manoeuvres of his own—here—Mervyn might well give way to amazement.

“You remember that day you came back from Clancehurst, and found me

in the old lumber room. I had just discovered it then, and shoved back the old sideboard barely in time when you came in."

"Good God!"

The other nodded.

"I'll astonish you still further, Mervyn," he said. "Before it got there it reposed under a roundish topped stone on the sluice path. You transhipped it while you had me locked up in the cellar yonder."

"Wrong there, Varne," said Mervyn, with something of a chuckle, "but not altogether though. I did transfer that one, but it wasn't the one you found. That was kindly delivered here since, and it was the one I stowed away upstairs temporarily. By the way I take it you have some inkling of what those things represent?"

"Perhaps I have."

"Well, then—they are charged with a most deadly, subtle, and hitherto unknown poison. The touch of a hidden spring in the centre releases this, and then the merest invisible pin-prick from any one of the points—good-night! Well just imagine my feelings when I looked out of the window to see Melian airily coming down the path with that infernal thing in her hand. I wonder I didn't faint. Well, that was the one you found."

The other started at the mention of Melian in this connexion, and his face took on something of the look of horror which had come over that of his host, evolved by the bare recollection.

"Yes, indeed. I can imagine them," he said. "Then the man you pulled out of the water—and who incidentally was instrumental in setting up the great Heath Hover mystery, brought the first?"

"That's right."

"What have you done with these two infernal things up to date, Mervyn?" asked Helston Varne, not without some shade of anxiety.

"They're both snug and safe till the Day of Judgment at the bottom of the

deepest part of Plane Pond. Thickly rolled up, well weighted, and by this time under six feet of mud and twenty of water. If they drained the pond they'd never find them."

Helston Varne nodded approvingly.

"It's an interesting case, Mervyn—very. But—do you know, I was very much getting on to the hang of it when—well, when we began to know each other."

"The devil you were? I knew you were—trying to."

"I know you did. Well, we've been through a strange experience together since then haven't we? But it's an infernally inconsequent world. For instance why should I have predicted to Coates that you would be sure to turn up over there again, and he have predicted that it would be bad for you if you did? And—we were both right."

"Yes, indeed."

There was silence for a few moments. Both lay back in their chairs puffing out contented clouds of smoke, and gazing into the red-hot wood cavern. Without the wind howled.

"Do you know, Varne," resumed Mervyn, meditatively. "It's a deuced odd thing, but that chap I got out of the pond, you know—to this day I can't make out whether I killed him or whether he killed himself. He died from a prick from the Star anyhow, because none of the doctors could make head or tail of it, and by an inspiration of luck I had been careful to hide away the thing."

"If you only knew what sleepless nights you've entailed upon Nashby. He's just as suspicious as ever, you know. When I saw him in Clancehurst the other day he looked at *me* suspiciously. Thinks I've deserted to the other side."

"Oh damn Nashby. He's a fool," came the gusty reply. "Well Varne, you know all about the finding of the chap dead, and the inquest, and all that. Very well. I had a sort of instinct against him from the moment I saw him in the full light. After I had left him to turn in on that sofa, I took

precautions against him—I mean against him getting near me during the night. Now,"—lowering his voice to what was almost a whisper, and an impressive one, "I am almost certain I went down—in my sleep—and—turned the Star upon him. In my sleep, mind, and unconsciously. For, I give you my word that when the thing dropped off him in the morning the discovery came upon me as a wild and entire surprise. But it seemed to bring back a lot, and that with a rush."

The other emitted two deliberate puffs of smoke.

"If it's as you say, Mervyn, you are not responsible, but whether it is or not—or whether the chap was careless over handling the infernal machine, and so did for himself—and I don't see why you shouldn't give yourself the benefit of the doubt—the result's the same, and a good one for you, in that we shouldn't be here talking to-night, if he had lived another day. Had you any reason, by the way, to expect the attentions of this amiable confraternity?"

Mervyn knitted his brows and hesitated.

"Well, yes. I had," he said at length. "I had received signs to put myself under its orders again. I had chucked it—clean, altogether—for years, in fact I thought that the very act of coming to this out of the way place would—well, blot out the trail. But I took no notice of them, and—this was the consequence. There's no mistake about it, mind. I've no idea as to the man's identity, but I recognised him, not at first, but the next morning, as one of those light coloured Afghans. He was Europeanised and talked English perfectly. Then, of course, I had the key to the whole situation."

"Well, as I said, if he had lived, you would not have," said the other.

"I've sometimes thought," rejoined Mervyn, "and that's the only thing that has bothered me—that is supposing I really did—you know—that after saving his life, he might have backed out of his errand."

But Helston Varne shook his head slowly.

"I can't presume to teach *you* your East, Mervyn. But—I think you are mistaken there."

“Perhaps I am—most likely I am,” came the answer. “Anyway, Varne, I’m not going to stick on here any more, so if they plant another of those little reminders on me they’ll have to find out where I’ve got to.”

“They won’t,” said the other. “And when you’re in that jolly little cottage inside my park that you’ve promised me to inhabit, for—well, as long as it suits you—I think it’ll be a risky matter for any one to come fooling round you on that sort of errand.”

And then the two men talked on—on this topic and others—far into the night.

Since her return to Heath Hover Melian had experienced none of the fears and misgivings which had hung over her before. The “influence” what ever it was, seemed to have ceased, or was it in abeyance? Anyway, with Helston Varne under the same roof nothing mattered. It seemed as if nothing could matter.

For here he was, installed at Heath Hover as a guest, he who had first come there as a spy, and that in a hostile interest to his now host. He had not returned from the East in their company. With marvellous self denial—or self control—or both, he had waited a week later, and then returned alone. Characteristically he had reckoned that just that period of time without him would deepen Melian’s interest in him, would cause her to miss him, in short—or not. If so, and he felt justified in feeling sanguine—why there were all their lives before them to make up for it in. If not—well, he refused to contemplate such a contingency.

They had stayed at Mazaran just long enough for a rest after their hard, perilous experiences, but Mervyn had seemed as eager to get away from the country as before he had been to return to it. Helston had seen them off at Karachi, himself taking a passage which brought him home nearly as soon as themselves. And now he had arrived at Heath Hover the evening before, and certainly had found no cause to complain of the nature of his welcome.

The clear, brisk, bracing air lay upon Plane Pond, and upon the reddening woods which flowed down to it, in the early morning, and the

voices of birds lifted in their late autumn song, ere silencing for drear winter, made music in “Broceliande.” The girl, tripping lightly up the sluice path, felt all the invigorating influence of it go through her system like a stimulant.

“Good morning, Sirdar.”

Helston Varne turned. He had been leaning on the rail gazing out over the expanse of water, thinking; and what he was thinking about was embodied in this vision of youth and bright sweetness which now stood before him in the early freshness of morning. Melian had taken to calling him “Sirdar” since she had seen him in his wonderful Eastern make-up. But neither of the two men had ever told her the extent of the ghastly peril which the wonderful success of that make-up had been instrumental in delivering them from.

She put out both hands and he took them—both. He held them for quite a moment, gazing into the sweet blue eyes.

“Come,” he said, still holding them. “We’ll stroll a little through ‘Broceliande,’ the enchanted forest.”

She looked at him, and said nothing; and they went, and as they went he drew one of the long white hands over his arm and covered it with one of his brown ones. And what they said in “Broceliande,” the enchanted forest, under the old gnarled oaks—why, reader, that is no earthly concern of yours or mine. What may be, however, is that they emerged eventually therefrom perfectly happy, and at peace with all the world.

The End.

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