On the Night Express

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

Published: 1930
in »The Townsville Bulletin«, Australia

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Chapter I

Constance Wakefield flashed a challenging glance across the library table at the big man with the hard mouth and the menacing eyes, at the same time wondering subconsciously why she both feared and mistrusted Rupert Bascoe in spite of the decided fact that she owed the very bread she ate to him.

To begin with, she was to all practical purposes, the mistress of that fine establishment known as Uppertons, which was a very haven of rest after the stormy years that followed after the cataclysm of 1914 and a Europe on the verge of collapse with ruin and starvation, especially in Eastern Europe where Connie had passed her early childhood with the now dead Countess Inez Matua, her second mother, for she had no recollection of her real one and, strange to say, no knowledge of her father at all. But then little girls in their early teens—as Connie was when the tempest burst and Serbia was swept by the flood—do not trouble much about such things so long as they are happy, as Connie was in the Countess's castle with the love of in the gracious lady to protect her.

Then out of the blue the flood of invasion. Death and peril on every hand and the flight into the unseen. The bursting of shells round the old castle and the awful death of the only friend Connie knew to the world and after that, misery unspeakable for the affrighted Serbians and Connie—then in her 14th year—picked up by the grace of God and attached to the Red Cross in the role of a bewildered but willing worker.

And so on to the end by which time she had become a competent nurse and, for her own protection, an accomplished revolver shot. She still was an expert by the way, and kept it up, even though in her present peaceful and refined surroundings, it was no more than a pastime. About the only one she had in that quiet house. So that she generally carried that silver mounted weapon in her pocket much as most people carry a watch. She had it with her now, for she intended to go out into the grounds of Uppertons presently and indulge in an hour's practice.

Meanwhile she was looking into the menacing eyes of her guardian, Rupert Bascoe and striving out of loyalty for past favours to shake off that mistrust of the man which had possessed her ever since the day when he had sought her out in a London hospital and told her that he was a distant relative of her mother's and that he had something more than an ordinary name to offer her. And Connie, with no friends and poor prospects, had gladly accepted on the understanding that she was to ask no questions.

"Better not," Bascoe had suggested at the time. "The story is a sad one and none too creditable to your father, so it is just as well to let sleeping dogs lie. Uppertons, my property in Kent, is a fine one and there is a fine income behind it. You can be practically mistress of it, and when I die it will be yours. There is only one condition and when you hear what I have to say you will see the necessity of complying with it."

We shall see all in good time what that condition implied and the dramatic consequences that it entailed.

Meanwhile Connie stood there in the library that perfect morning with Bascoe on the other side of the big table, pointing down at some documents which he has curtly ordered Connie to sign. And that without a single word of explanation. And, once more, that wave of mistrust and dislike and fear swept over the girl as she flushed before the almost brutal demand. She knew already that Bascoe could be sinister and cruel when crossed—a year or two under the same roof had taught her that.

"I am not quite a child," she said coldly. "Why should I sign those papers without knowing their contents? I hate these mysteries. There have been too many of them since I came here. At any rate I demand the right to read them first."

Bascoe's thin lips hardened under his short, black beard. There was a cruel gleam in his eyes that set Connie's heart beating faster. She was glad that the little revolver lay in the pocket of her sports coat. The man meant mischief.

"Sign," he said hoarsely, "sign and be damned to you."

"Not till I have read them," Connie challenged.

A second later and her wrist was in Bascoe's grip. Connie's right hand slipped down to her coat pocket. Then the door of the library was flung open without ceremony and a young man came into the room bringing an air of mirth and cheerfulness with him.

"Hullo, hullo," he cried. "Why this assumption of the tragic muse? Let dogs delight to bark and bite, what? Come, Bascoe, old chap, you really can't spiflicate Desdemona on a lovely morning like this. It isn't done."

"You'd joke at your mother's funeral, Marrable," Bascoe said with a growl. "What the devil do you want?"

The young man called Marrable laughed. He belonged to the enviable class that always finds life a comedy. An artist by instinct and inclination, Jimmy Marrable, without a penny in the world, was content to take life as he found it without a murmur until fate chose to smile on him. Meanwhile he obtained a living of sorts by acting as comedian to any travelling concert party in need of his services. And it was during a disastrous tour of one of these that Bascoe had found him stranded in a Northern watering place trying in vain to raise the price of his lodgings by selling some of his sketches. And Bascoe, whose one weakness was to pose as a painter, could see the outstanding merit of these drawings in water colour and had promptly invited the volatile Jimmy down to Uppertons.

Jimmy knew exactly what the invitation meant after Bascoe had shown part of his hand. He was to make a long stay at Uppertons and paint pictures which Bascoe could pass off as his own. Or, at best, touch up Bascoe's work until it might pass as something brilliant and original. And Jimmy agreed, despite the fact that he was an old public school boy with good connexions. Anyway, he was on the rocks for the moment and his humorous philosophy saw nothing wrong in the innocent imposture.

"Oh, very well," he said. "If I am de trop I will remove my hated presence. But if you want that new sketch completed—"

Bascoe hastened to interrupt. That weak vanity of his must not be exposed to anyone, least of all Connie.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll come along to the studio now. I think I told you last night—”

The sentence trailed off outside the library door and Connie was left alone. In a haste that she failed to understand, Bascoe had forgotten those papers lying on the table—the papers he had been trying to force the girl to sign.

Connie wondered why. The sudden change from Bascoe’s almost Berserk manner to that of a schoolboy detected in some act of meanness puzzled, and at the same time alarmed her. It was all in keeping with that air of mystery that had come to Uppertons in the last few months. And then another thought struck Connie, and she moved across to the table where Bascoe had placed the papers and bent over them eagerly. If there was any sort of a secret here she was going to find it, but beyond a name or two, which was utterly unfamiliar, she could see nothing until there came the words ‘Le Forest,’ that seemed to strike a cord of memory somewhere.

For a moment or two Connie pondered over this until recollection came like a flood. The old, bad days were back again—the days of deadly peril and the crashing of shells on the old castle in Serbia, and the memory of the last few words she had heard from the woman who had acted as a second mother to her. It all came back now.

The box, the little box that the Countess had placed into her hands, and which she had never lost during all that dreadful time when she had drifted backwards with the Serbian army. The tiny gold box she carried on a thin chain round her neck, until she reached England, and which was now somewhere upstairs amongst her other treasures.

Strange that she had forgotten it so entirely all this long time. And now she remembered that the box contained no more than an address of some bank in Paris, and a tiny steel key with a gold stem, and, on it, in blue enamel, the words ‘Le Forest.’ And the Countess had told her she was never to part with it.

All this was a matter of a few seconds, and then Bascoe was back again with a threatening cloud on his brow. He pointed to the papers, on the table and took up a pen.

“Now, then,” he said roughly. “Your signature.”

“Never,” Connie said. “Never, until you explain to me what those papers mean and what the allusion to Le Forest stands for. Oh, yes, I have glanced at those papers in your absence. There is something underhanded here that I don’t understand.”

“Don’t you?” Bascoe sneered. “Do you forget I could turn you out of this house at a moment’s notice? Do you forget that a certain action of mine made it possible for you to pass as an English subject and saved you from being deported as an alien? Now, then, are you going to sign?”

Connie shook her head resolutely. With his teeth set and violence in his eyes, Bascoe dashed round the table, only to find himself facing Connie’s little revolver.

“Go back!” she said. “If you touch me I shall shoot. I swear I will. Go back, you coward!”

Just for a moment, Bascoe hesitated, then with a contemptuous laugh, flung himself down into a chair.

Chapter II

With her head high in the air, Connie walked out of the library into the hall, where she came almost in contact with a tall and graceful girl, who looked at her with a question in her rather magnetic eyes.

"Well, my dear," the parlourmaid asked, with what might have been termed flippant familiarity. "Oh, I couldn't help hearing. So you have found him out at last, have you? Actually threatened you, didn't he?"

Connie laid her finger to her lip and beckoned the pretty parlourmaid to follow her into the morning room. As a matter of fact, Nita Keene was not precisely a maid-servant in the ordinary sense of the word. She was a lady by birth and education who, in her fierce independence, preferred to get her own living to marrying the man whom her father had endeavored to foist upon her. She had been at Uppertons for some considerable time, and had confided her story to Connie, feeling sure that the latter would understand and sympathise. And so the two had become something more than mistress and servant, though Bascoe had not the slightest idea of this.

"Now, tell me all about it," Nita said, as she closed the door of the morning room behind her. "I always told you that Rupert Bascoe was a real bad lot. Ah, my dear, I have seen more of the world than you have, though perhaps from a different angle. Oh, I know men—I ought to, after my experiences when my mother died. And that is why I spotted Bascoe for what he is directly I came here. And I remained because I took a fancy to you, feeling that sooner or later you would want a friend. Now, tell me what it was that the quarrel was all about."

Connie told her story, to which Nita listened with almost flattering attention.

"Ah," the latter said presently. "I thought it was something of the sort. There was a time when you regarded Rupert Bascoe as the best friend you had in the world. It seemed to you really splendid that he should seek you out in the hospital where you were working and bring down here as mistress of this grand establishment with a prospect of it all belonging to you some day, together with a large fortune. And all that because Bascoe claimed to be a distant relative of your mother's. Lies, my dear, all lies. That was not the reason at all. He brought you under his roof because there is a secret behind your identity from which he hopes to profit, and that is why he asked you to sign those papers this morning. I feel it in my bones that he wants you to sell your birthright for a mess of pottage."

"Yes," Connie said thoughtfully. "I am afraid there is something in what you suggest. Mr. Bascoe has been so different lately. Somehow, I have always been a bit afraid of him, but I laughed at my fears, until the last month or two. You needn't be afraid, Nita, I am not going to sign anything. I am going to try and find out where the allusion to somebody called Le Forest comes in. I am going to do my best to get in touch with a man friend, if I can find one, who will look at that address in the gold box I have just told you about and help me to solve the mystery. Unless you can suggest some other way."

“I am afraid I can’t,” Nita said, after a long pause. “There is only one man close at hand, and that is Jimmy Marrable. He is a dear boy, is Jimmy, and I am very fond of him.”

“So I noticed.” Connie said with a little smile. “But then Jimmy is so dreadfully inconsequent and featherheaded. I don’t think that a lighthearted artist like Jimmy could be at all the sort of man to handle a situation like mine.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Nita said thoughtfully. “There are hidden depths in Jimmy. I know, because we were brought up together, and he was my little hero in the days when I wore socks and he ran about in grey flannel shorts. Rather a strange coincidence that we should come together again down here. However, that is nothing to do with it. You must have a friend you can rely upon and I will do my best to find you one. Perhaps Jimmy can put us on to somebody. Oh, I know poor Jimmy hasn’t any influence or money, though before the war his people had more than enough. But Jimmy was always popular at Eton and he knows heaps of the right sort of men. Besides, I thought it was extremely plucky of him to join a concert party as comedian to get his living in that way whilst he was waiting for his chance as an artist. And Jimmy is a great artist as the world will know one of these days. I dare say you regard him as an easy going individual, quite content to remain here as Bascoe’s guest and helping the latter to paint his pictures, but there are ambitions in Jimmy, as I have reason to know. It I were you, I should not say anything about the contents of the gold box. In fact, I shouldn’t say anything at all. I think you had better leave it to me. Let me tell him that Bascoe is trying to force you to take a line you decline to adopt and that he is acting like a thorough blackguard. I am perfectly sure if you will allow me to do this, Jimmy will be able to find somebody who can advise you as to the right course to adopt. Now let me tell you something you don’t know. You would hardly believe it, but during the war Jimmy was a trusted servant of our Secret Service. You see, he speaks two or three languages, and as he had been all over Europe with a travelling company, he had picked up a lot of information which was most useful. Mind you, he used to do that sort of thing just for his own amusement long before he ever expected to have to get his living thereby. But he has known what it is to go in peril of his life in an enemy country with nothing but that cheerful laugh and vacuous comedian expression of his to save him from any peril. Mind you, this is absolutely between ourselves. I have only told you to show that Jimmy is a man to be trusted implicitly to control his tongue and hide his feelings when a crisis arises. Now, if you will let me explain the situation to him, I am quite sure that he will be able to help you in what I feel is a moment of dire peril.”

A minute or two later, Connie strolled out into the grounds. She was still astonished and bewildered at the change in the attitude of her benefactor, though for some time past she had noticed that things were drifting towards what might be at any time a crisis. There was a sinister atmosphere about Uppertons of late—so sinister that more than once she had half decided to throw her present position up and return to hospital work.

But there was a reason against this—a reason that Connie had not discussed with anyone nor dared she do so, because if that secret became public property then she might have to leave the country for good. She was English to her finger tips; every instinct she had told her that she came from British stock. And yet she

knew nothing of her parentage, not even how she came to find herself, as a child, under the guardian ship of Countess Inez Matua in that old grim castle in Serbia.

And the trouble was this—it only needed some busybody or some enemy to ask a question or two, and Connie might be faced with an accusation of being an alien actually residing in England without a passport or a permit. Because D.O.R.A. was not yet dead, and Connie had read of more than one Englishwoman married to a German who had been forced to quit her native soil simply because she was held to have forfeited her nationality. True, Bascoe had taken steps to obviate such a catastrophe, but, at the same time, it gave him a power over the girl that made her tremble to think of it. And she trembled all the more now in the face of that scene in the library only a few minutes ago. Never was a girl more awkwardly placed, and never was one in greater need of a true friend than Connie just now.

She wandered on through the grounds into the woods beyond turning her troubles over in her mind. Gradually, as the beauty of the morning began to impress itself upon her, she grew more calm and tranquil and more disposed to shake off the fears that oppressed her so strangely. Then she looked up and saw that a man was coming down the narrow path between the avenue of high beech, and her heart began to flutter at the sight of him.

"Strange!" she thought. How like Hugh Gaskell was the figure who came leisurely swinging along in her direction. The man she had not seen since that stirring day in 1917 when the Serbians fell back for a final effort and—

The stranger looked up. A light flashed into his eyes, and he came forward eagerly with hands outstretched. "Connie!" he cried. "Dear little Connie! Don't you know me, darling? I have been searching the wide world for you for the last seven years. What became of you? You must have known that I should want to see you again."

"Hugh!" Connie gasped. "Hugh! What—where did you come from? Just at the very moment when—oh, Hugh, it wasn't my fault. You remember how we were pushed back and all the dreadful things that happened afterwards. I saw you in the thick of it, and I thought you were killed. Ah, if you only knew."

She looked at him with her heart in her eyes, and, almost before she realised it, the man's arms were about her, and his lips were warm and loving on her. Just for a moment she lay there, then broke away like a frightened animal.

"Ah, no, I mustn't!" she cried. "I dare not. For the moment I had forgotten. Oh, Hugh, this is dreadful!—dreadful! You must let me go and never try to see me again!"

She broke away from him and literally fled down the path, leaving the man she called Hugh Gaskell staring after her with perplexity and amazement written on his face.

Chapter III

It was not Connie Wakefield and a confident Nita Keene who alone sensed the sinister atmosphere that hung like a cloud over Uppertons. Jimmy Marrable had

seen and heard enough to convince him that there was something utterly wrong about the man in whose house he was at present living.

He had never been quite comfortable there, and by the use of an ingenious excuse, had managed to get away from Uppertons and establish himself in a small old-fashioned house at the far end of the village. This he had done a day or two after the scene in the library, though he had no intention of severing his artistic connexion with Bascoe, who was more or less essential to him at the moment for more reasons than one.

"But why the change, Jimmy?" Nita asked him at the first possible opportunity. "Why didn't you stay in the house?"

"Oh, well, my dear," Jimmy said in his most casual way. "You see, always like to be as independent as I can. I prefer not to eat the bread of a man I mistrust. It is all very well to work for a chap like Bascoe, but when you don't like him there is no necessity to partake of his salt at the same time."

"Then you don't trust him?" Nita asked.

"Well, between ourselves, my dear, I don't. I believe he is a thoroughly bad lot. You told me what happened in the library the other morning, and, indeed, I did not fail to see signs of trouble myself. Of course, this is entirely between you and me, and not likely to go any further. I suppose that poor child was not bullied into signing those papers?"

"No," Nita said. "There is a sort of armed neutrality at present, but my esteemed employer is not going to let things slide much longer. He is not that type."

"Ah, so I guessed," Jimmy grinned. "Now, I am going to tell you something. You know something of Hugh Gaskell."

"Of course I do. An old schoolfellow of yours, wasn't he? Didn't you work together during the war?"

"That's right. Well, it may come as a surprise to you to hear that Hugh fell in love with our Connie years ago. In the fog of war he lost sight of her, and, until a few days ago, had not the remotest idea where she was. Mind you, I heard all about this one night in the autumn of 1918, when we were with the Italians during the final push. And when I came down here and began to see my way about, it struck me that Connie Wakefield was the very girl that old Hugh was looking for. So I wrote him a long letter telling him what I was doing and the sort of people I was with, and he reacted without delay. Funny thing, isn't it, that he should find the girl of his heart living within ten miles of his own property. But then, those sort of things will happen in real life, though we call them coincidences."

"Do you mean that they have met?" Nita asked eagerly. "Connie didn't say anything about it."

"Perhaps not. But they have met, all the same. Met and parted in a few minutes in a most dramatic way. Hugh told me all about it. He came down to my lodgings the night before last, and we had a long and confidential chat."

Jimmy went on to tell Nita of the meeting between Connie and Hugh Gaskell in the woods at the back of Uppertons, and the strange way in which it had ended.

"There is something very wrong here," Jimmy said gravely. "If we are not careful there will be a tragedy. Why should Connie turn her back upon a man whom she still cares for? What is it that is preventing her from throwing herself into the arms

of a man who can protect her from Bascoe and give her a beautiful home with an income to match? It must be very serious, or she would certainly have confided in you, Nita."

"I don't like it a bit," Nita said simply. "Of course, I can't speak to Connie on the matter unless she opens the subject herself. But don't you think it would have been better if you had stayed at Uppertons where you could watch things from hour to hour instead of taking rooms with that queer old man, Andrew Wimpole, who lives in the cottage down the lane?"

"I don't know," Jimmy said. "I don't want Bascoe to think that I am watching him. That is why I persuaded Wimpole to let me share his cottage. He is a queer old chap and seems to bear a bitter grudge against somebody or another, but there is no harm in the man. Clever, too, in his way. He has only got a small garden and greenhouse, and yet he is doing absolute wonders in the way of fertilization of flowers, especially daffodils. He came down here about a year ago and will probably remain till he dies. A bit of a mystery, perhaps, because, in spite of his old clothes and queer ways, he is a gentleman in every sense of the word. But I should say a bitter enemy if he was once aroused. I know the village looks upon him as more or less of a lunatic, but Andrew Wimpole is a long way from being that."

Jimmy went his way presently and Nita returned to the house. It was only at odd times that she could get a few minutes' quiet conversation with her lover, and above all things, she wanted to hide this understanding from Bascoe. Sooner or later, she knew that Jimmy would establish himself as an artist of repute and then she would be able to turn her back upon Uppertons and the domestic service that she loathed from the bottom of her heart. But much as she despised the uncongenial occupation, it was far better than returning home to that scoundrel of a father of hers and allowing herself to be forced into a hated marriage.

Meanwhile, Jimmy strolled thoughtfully in the direction of the cottage down the lane, where he had established himself in a small sitting-room and bedroom under the roof of the eccentric and somewhat mysterious Andrew Wimpole.

The queer, little old man with the strangely magnetic eyes and straggling grey beard, looked up with a smile of welcome as Jimmy came whistling into the cottage. Their acquaintance had been a chance one in connection with an admiration on the artists part of some of Wimpole's flowers. And this admiration, artistically expressed, had quite won the old man's heart, so when Jimmy put out feelers with a view to a pied-a-terre in that picturesque cottage, Wimpole had responded with alacrity. And none the less so when he heard that Jimmy was working at Uppertons on some sort of artistic business.

"Well, my boy," the old man piped in his shrill treble, "and how are things going with you?"

"Oh, so-so," Jimmy said casually. "I have got a few hours off, so I thought I would come back and watch the experiment you are making with those new Dutch bulbs. But, say, my potent, grave and reverend senor, what's wrong?"

"Wrong with me?" Wimpole said. "Wrong. Nothing."

"Well, you don't look up to the mark," Jimmy said. "I should say that you were in some sort of pain."

“Perhaps you are right,” Wimpole admitted. “It is sort of nervous asthma I get that isn’t altogether free from a queer type of dyspepsia. Something that I picked up years ago when I was hunting new flowers in the tropics. I only get it now and then. When it comes on I am practically paralyzed for a day or two. The only thing that relieves me is to go to bed.”

As Wimpole spoke, a spasm of pain gripped him and he bent forward with his features twisted in agony.

“Look here, old chap,” Jimmy said. “You go to bed now and I will look after you. Never mind about the old woman who is supposed to run the house in the daytime. She can go when she has had her tea, and, if necessary, I can sit up with you. It is a jolly good thing that I am here, what?”

“You are very good,” Wimpole said, speaking as if in pain. “Yes, I think I will take your advice and get into bed. I am always easier when I am lying down and I shan’t want much looking after—I never touch food when these attacks are on me. All I want every three or four hours is a tablespoonful of brandy or a stimulant of some sort.”

With Jimmy’s help, the old man was made comfortable and rather late the same evening professed himself to be ever so much better. “You might have been a trained nurse by the way you looked after me,” he said. “I shall be all right now. Put the brandy where I can reach it if there is any need in the night, then you can retire yourself, knowing that I shall be about in the morning again. There is really nothing to worry about.”

It was just eleven when Jimmy put out the lights and sought his own room after satisfying himself that his queer old landlord was fast asleep. And when Jimmy came downstairs the following morning to let in the elderly woman who was supposed to look after Wimpole he satisfied himself the old gentleman was still sleeping as peacefully as a child.

It was shortly after Jimmy had finished his breakfast and was on his way upstairs to see how the invalid was faring that the little wicket gate of the garden was flung violently open and Nita Keene came running up the path, breathless and white of face and showing signs of extreme agitation.

Jimmy rushed out into the garden to meet her.

“What on earth’s the matter?” he demanded.

“Mr. Bascoe,” Nita gasped, laying her hand on her heart. “Mr. Bascoe is lying dead in the library.”

“Good lor’,” Jimmy cried. “Heart failure.”

“Oh, I wish it were,” Nita cried. “But it is far worse than that, Jimmy. Far, far worse. There is not the slightest doubt that Mr. Bascoe has been murdered.”

Chapter IV

Short as was the time before Jimmy reached Uppertons, he found when he got there that the police were on the spot before him. One of the servants, more sensible than the rest, had telephoned the local constable and he had sent at once

for a superintendent from the nearest town. Already the officers had begun to ask questions pending the arrival of a doctor, who might reach the scene of the crime at any moment.

It appeared that Bascoe had been working very late in his library the night before, which was in accordance with his usual custom. The rest of the household had retired shortly after ten, leaving the master of Uppertons in the library, where he frequently remained till one or two o'clock in the morning. It was when a housemaid had entered the library shortly after eight o'clock that she had discovered the body of her employer on the floor and noted that all the lights were fully on. She had rushed out of the room, screaming for assistance, and the butler who entered the room at once confirmed all that the girl had said. His master was lying dead by the side of the writing table, and the witness did not fail to notice that one of the French windows leading to the garden was wide open. And there was something more than this. A few feet away from the dead man lay a revolver with one chamber discharged, and this the butler had picked up and handed to the superintendent who did not fail to speak sharply on the subject of handling anything in a room where such a crime as a murder had taken place.

The inquiry had just reached this stage when Jimmy Marrable came into the room. The police officer, with the revolver lying on the palm of his hands, asked if anybody had ever seen it before. The butler hesitated and stammered.

"Why—why, yes," he said. "It belongs to Miss Constance."

"And who may she be?" the officer demanded sharply.

The butler went on to explain. The superintendent listened grimly, and intimated that the servants could leave for the moment, but that he would like to see Miss Wakefield at once.

"You don't mean to say you suspect her," Jimmy broke out.

"And who might you be?" the officer asked. "Any relation to the dead man? No! Then would you kindly oblige me by going outside and staying there."

Jimmy retired, fuming. It was best, perhaps in the circumstances that he should remain in the background. As he went through the hall, he saw Connie come out of the breakfast room and enter the library. There she stood, white and silent, waiting for the man in blue to speak.

"You are Miss Constance Wakefield, I think," the superintendent asked. "You are an inmate of the house, I understand, and, in fact, Mr. Bascoe is, or was your guardian. Now, I must warn you that everything you say will be taken down. You know that Mr. Bascoe has been found dead with a bullet wound in his chest. If you would like to look at him—"

Connie shuddered as she turned half away from the silent form lying there, under cover of a sheet.

"I will tell you all I can," she said unsteadily.

"Perhaps I had better speak first," the superintendent went on. "Mr. Bascoe was shot through the chest with a revolver, the weapon you see on the table there. No doubt we shall be able to establish that beyond all question when the post mortem takes place. Now have a look at that weapon and tell me if you ever seen anything like it before."

"There is no occasion," Connie said coldly. "I can see from here it is my own. Revolver shooting is a favorite pastime of mine—I learnt to use that weapon during

the Great War, I must have lost it, it must have dropped out of my pocket; indeed I have missed it for the past few days."

"Indeed," the officer asked drily. "Now you have lived under this roof for some considerable time, and must know Bascoe more or less intimately. Have you had any sort or dispute or quarrel with him in the course of the last few days?"

It was not exactly a trap that the speaker was laying for Connie, but she could see it in no other light. There had been a quarrel, and a bitter one. Others were aware of it and prevarication would have been worse than useless.

"Perhaps I had better say nothing," Connie contrived to whisper. "You were good enough to warn me just now, and I thank you. All I can say is that I lost that weapon, and that I have no more to do with the crime than you have."

"Very well," the Inspector replied. "For the moment, I have no more to say. Ah, here is the doctor. If you would not mind leaving us Miss Wakefield, I shall be obliged."

Connie dragged herself slowly out of the room whilst the doctor bent over the body of Bascoe and proceeded to examine it with the most meticulous care. Then he looked up suddenly, and his eyes lighted with excitement.

"God bless my soul!" he cried. "The man isn't dead. He is within a fraction of it, but life is still there. He has been shot clean through the chest. Handle him very carefully, and there is just one chance in a thousand that he may pull round. I saw cases like this during the war. Ah, here it is. The bullet entered by the chest and came out by the back. I daresay you will find it somewhere. But this unfortunate individual must not be moved. Call the servants and have a bed made up on the floor. I will do what I can for him, and then I will send a nurse over when I get home."

Half-an-hour later Bascoe was lying on an improvised couch, and the library had been turned into a sick room. The man was still unconscious and was likely to remain so for some days. But in the opinion of the doctor the case was not hopeless. And then, when he had done all he could, and the household had somewhat settled down, the superintendent of police went into the morning-room to have a few more words with Connie.

But she was ready for him this time. She had had an opportunity of thinking over everything, and had decided on her course of action. She did not pale even when the policeman produced the bullet with which Bascoe had been shot, and proved to Connie that it corresponded to the cartridges in the revolver, one only of which had been discharged.

"If you have any explanation," the inspector hinted.

"None," Connie said dully. "Except to say that I lost the revolver, and I had nothing to do with the attempted murder. I only hope that Mr. Bascoe will live. And then—"

She stopped, unable to say any more. How could she explain to this man, how could she tell him all about those strange documents which she had refused to sign, and go into the history of her little gold box with its mysterious key, and speak freely about those dreadful days in Serbia? What could be gained by doing anything of the kind? She had heard already that Bascoe was not dead, but with her training as a nurse she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he could not

possibly recover. She could only stand there, white and shaken, and gently refuse to ask any further questions or answer them.

"Very well," the inspector said. "For the moment, you will please not leave the house, and you will remain here until I see you again. And, in the meantime—"

The speaker left the words unfinished, and, turning on his heel, abruptly quitted the room. But he had said enough to leave Connie fully persuaded of the fact that although not a prisoner, she was practically under arrest.

But she was not going to stay for that. She was alone in the world, with no friends to help her and no money to provide for legal aid, and, with the exception of a few pounds she was utterly devoid of funds. Her jewellery was negligible—nothing beyond a couple of antique diamond and ruby rings which had come to her from the old countess years ago. These would sell for probably a considerable amount, and, until the proceeds were exhausted, she could manage to live somewhere. There were others who knew about the rings, but she would have to run the risk of that. If she could get far away she could pawn or sell them in some big town where it would be impossible to trace them.

It was just after ten o'clock when Connie found an opportunity of stealing out of the house unseen and, making her way across the fields in the direction of Upper Shere Junction, where the northern express stopped for a few moments to make a connexion. She had gone to her room, under the pretence of a splitting headache and had asked not to be disturbed.

So far, so good. She reached the junction and took a ticket so far as she knew, unrecognised. The station master had not seen her and she had contrived to avoid the porter as she entered the third class compartment where a woman was seated alone. She was a woman who, apparently, had little or no luggage with her, and Connie drew a deep breath of thankfulness when the train steamed out of the junction without the appearance of any further travellers in the compartment which she had selected.

What she would do when she reached Manchester, Connie had not the slightest idea. Probably she would be able to obtain a room somewhere and there she could hide herself until she could scheme out a method of escape.

She glanced at the woman opposite her, but the latter seemed to be deep in a paper she was reading. Then on, mile after mile, until presently a quick bump, followed by another and, after that it was as if some overwhelming avalanche had struck the train, for Connie felt herself thrown violently upwards, only to fall as swiftly into absolute oblivion.

Chapter V

There was sensation enough, and more than enough in the Uppertons mystery to keep the newspapers going in flaming headlines for some considerable time to come. First of all, the murderous outrage upon Bascoe, and then the disappearance of Connie with the natural result that everybody immediately jumped to the conclusion that she was guilty of the crime. The army of reporters

that swooped down upon Uppertons had, apparently, settled the matter to their own satisfaction. They had managed to worm out the story of the quarrel in the library and the threat of violence on Connie's part, and these facts, coupled with the murderous attack upon one who appeared to be a respectable citizen, left little doubt of Connie's guilt. And if there was a possible chance that she was the victim of circumstances, then her disappearance had dissipated it for ever.

As the days went on and the best part of a week elapsed, nothing happened to change this opinion. And, strange to say, Bascoe was decidedly better. The shot, apparently, had passed right through his chest without touching a vital spot and an iron constitution was responsible for the rest. Within seventy-two hours of the assault upon him, Bascoe was in a position to give a more or less coherent account of what had happened. Someone had come into the library through the window, which he had neglected to fasten and had shot him pointblank. But when asked to say who that somebody was, Bascoe refused to make a statement. It was as if he was shielding somebody and those near about him were giving him credit for a certain nobility of conduct. He hinted that perhaps a little later on he might be in a position to say more, but for the moment he did not wish to incriminate anybody.

Pressed as to the time when the shot had been fired, he was more definite. He had been stricken down according to his own account, just at the moment when the clock over the stables was striking the hour of eleven. On that point he was perfectly clear and in this he was confirmed by his butler, Joseph Tarrant, who suddenly remembered that he was just getting into bed when the stable clock struck eleven and heard something in the way of a report, of which he took no notice because, on several occasions lately, rabbit poachers had been busy in the neighbourhood. Anyhow, both Tarrant and his employer were firm on the point as to the time when the shot was fired.

By this time, Scotland Yard had taken matters out of the hands of the local police and Inspector Richard Clapp had come down with a view to solving the mystery. He did not appear to be a very formidable individual, being mild of manner and most of his questions sounded innocent and ingratiating. He had arranged to stay in the village for the moment, and, accommodation being limited, Jimmy Marrable had made the suggestion that Clapp should occupy a spare bed which Wimpole had in his cottage. And to this the detective Inspector agreed quite eagerly, so that he and Marrable were on good terms almost from the first.

Jimmy was not entirely disinterested in making this suggestion. He had something to say that might throw a good deal of light on the darkness, but on this point he intended to remain silent until the proper time came. There was one person he took into his confidence, and that was Hugh Gaskell.

Directly, the latter had heard of the tragic happenings at Uppertons, he had come over hot foot, to make inquiries for himself. He was shocked and grieved beyond words. He fretted at his own impotence, but in spite of all appearances to the contrary he declined to believe that Connie had had any sort of hand in the murderous attack on Bascoe.

"But the thing is impossible," he told Jimmy. "Oh, I know all about the revolver and the shot fired from it that nearly brought about a murder. It is useless to deny that the revolver belonged to Connie, but she never used it. It must have been

stolen from her, or she must have dropped it, as she told that Inspector of police. Now, my dear chap, can you see Connie coming in through that open window at eleven o'clock at night and deliberately murdering the man to whom she owed so much?"

"Did she owe him all that?" Jimmy asked drily.

"Well, I presume she did from what I have been told. I should say that Bascoe is a bit of a mystery and probably has a past that he would not care to have published to the world. But he appears to have been a friend of Connie's father and he sought her out and offered to make her his heiress when she was having a bit of a struggle to keep herself as a nurse. There may have been a selfish reason for Bascoe doing that but until we know more of the circumstances, we must give the man credit for acting on the square. You agree with that, don't you?"

"More or less," Jimmy said cautiously. "But, mind you, old chap, I have been in pretty close contact with Bascoe for some considerable time and there are things about him I don't like at all. I can't put my hand on anything, but I do know that the fellow was trying to bully poor little Connie into signing some papers which she was not even allowed to read. And when she declined he went off the deep end and behaved to the girl like a veritable blackguard. Nita Keene heard part of what he said. By the way, you know Nita, don't you?"

"Why, of course I do," Hugh said. "I knew her when you two were children together. What a funny mix-up it all is. Here are you, under Bascoe's roof, getting a sort of living by helping him with his painting and Nita comes along to play the parlourmaid, just as if the whole thing was a melodrama."

"Yes, but I managed that," Jimmy pointed out. "It was a case of real wrong 'un of a father trying to marry his daughter to a shady type of city magnate who was helping the old man to make a fortune out of the British public. So when Nita wrote to me and asked me to help her, I found her an opening down here. And I can tell you that Connie was precious glad to have Nita's company. You see, Bascoe keeps very much to himself and has never encouraged his neighbours to call. This means that Connie had no friends till Nita came along. Then I put one or two things together and it occurred to me that Connie was the girl you were looking for. I felt pretty sure of it when I learnt all about those days in Serbia, because we were both out there ourselves on and off, towards the end of the war and it occurred to me that you might be interested. That is why I wrote that long letter to you and why you came here, hot foot."

"Yes, only to discover that you were right," Hugh said. "But I have told you all about that. I told you how I met Connie in the woods at the back of the house and how wildly glad she was to see me. And I told you how, suddenly, she broke away and vanished as if I was some power of darkness. My dear fellow, there is something amazingly wrong about this place, and I shan't rest until I get to the bottom of it."

"Yes, there is something more wrong than you imagine," Jimmy said in an unusually sober tone. "I was discussing the matter with that very friendly bird, Inspector Clapp, an hour or two ago, and he told me the gist of a conversation he had been having with Bascoe. That individual is not in a position to say very much yet, but, for some reason best known to himself, he told the Scotland Yard Jonnie a thumping lie."

“Oh, did he?” Hugh explained. “What was that?”

“I am going to tell you, but you will have to keep it to yourself for the moment. Bascoe declares that the shot was fired at close quarters just as the clock over the stable was striking eleven. To that statement he adheres.”

“Well, why not?” Hugh asked. “Didn’t somebody tell me that it was confirmed by the butler, Tarrant?”

“Yes, that is all right,” Jimmy went on. “But I am going to prove to you that Tarrant made a mistake. I am not suggesting for a moment that he is in the conspiracy, because he is not that type of man and besides, he was butler to the old family who lived at Uppertons before Bascoe bought the place. It is just possible that some poacher outside did fire a shot at about eleven o’clock, but that coincidence has nothing to do with the attack on Bascoe. Now, just keep your mind fixed upon that point that Bascoe was attacked at eleven o’clock precisely. He said so deliberately and I believe that, so far, he is telling the truth. Perhaps, on the other hand, he had some sinister object in mind in fixing the hour definitely at eleven, because he may have wanted to implicate Connie. I mean, implicate her when he came back to his senses. Now. I don’t mind telling you the reason why I am in this part of the world at all.”

“You have told me already,” Gaskell said. “You are painting pictures which Bascoe wants to foist on the public as his own. Rather a foolish vanity in a man of his type, what?”

“Well, there it is. Now, on the night of the attack, I was working in the library on a picture till rather late in the afternoon. I had run over from my cottage in the intervals of nursing my old landlord, and when I left Uppertons to run back again to the cottage, the water colour drawing I was on was in a certain state. I mean, I had got so far with it and suggested to Bascoe that he might put in a few strokes himself. Not long before eleven o’clock that night, I slipped out of the cottage once more to see how Bascoe was getting on. I was only with him a very brief time, but he hadn’t touched the sketch when I left Uppertons. That was just before eleven o’clock. And here comes the point. When I came to look at that sketch again after the outrage, I saw that Bascoe had worked upon it by artificial light, and what he had done cannot have occupied him less than half-an-hour.”

Chapter VI

“What are you saying?” Hugh almost shouted.

“I thought it would astonish you,” Jimmy went on. “I am prepared to swear that the work Bascoe did on that drawing was done after eleven o’clock on the night of the crime and that it occupied him at least 25 minutes. You can make the best or worst of that, old chap, but at any rate, it proves that for some reason or another Bascoe was telling a deliberate lie. Either he wants to incriminate Connie, or he has some reason for shielding the identity of the real criminal.

“It certainly looks like it,” Hugh said thoughtfully. “I suppose you have not mentioned this to anybody else?”

“No, and I am not going to,” Jimmy said. “Not even to Inspector Clapp. My idea is to wait till the proper moment, and then confront Bascoe with this bit of information. Whether it will turn out useful or not, of course, I cannot say. But there is plenty of time for that. Meanwhile, where is poor Connie?”

It was a question that Inspector Clapp had been asking himself on and off for the last day or two. He had set every means in motion, but apparently the earth had swallowed Connie up. And then, on the third day, the Inspector had unearthed a shred of evidence that pointed to a certain conclusion. He had heard from a subordinate modestly lurking in the background that Connie had been seen on the night following the attempted murder entering the gates of the railway junction, where the northern express stopped for the purpose of picking up a connexion. Connie had been under the impression that she had managed to enter the train without being observed by anybody who knew her, seeing that she had contrived to reach her compartment without encountering the station master. But by the purest chance, the porter had noticed her and, all the more so, because it was a most unusual thing for anybody to join the express at the junction. Moreover, the porter knew Connie by sight, and though he was not absolutely certain as to her identity, the description he gave was quite sufficient to induce the police to make some further inquiry into the matter.

About the same time that Jimmy was taking Hugh Gaskell into his confidence. Inspector Clapp was discussing the disappearance of Connie with his subordinate.

“Yes,” he said thoughtfully. “I think there is little doubt that the mysterious female who joined the express at the junction was the young lady we are after. I don’t see how, otherwise, she could have got away. She didn’t take one of the cars and she certainly did not walk, because I have found out that the shoes she was wearing were not adapted for that purpose. Oh, she went off by the express, right enough. It wouldn’t have taken her half an hour from the time she pretended to go to bed with a headache until the time she reached the junction, and we know that she left the house secretly.”

“That is right, sir,” the sleuth said. “And she joined the express. But she didn’t get to Manchester.”

“Of course, she didn’t,” Clapp retorted. “The express was wrecked. I suppose she managed to find some sort of shelter with the other passengers, and, with the little money she had, hide herself somewhere near the remote spot where the accident took place. She had very little money and no valuables besides a pair or antique rings, which she must have taken with her, because they were missing from her jewel box. They were there the day before the crime, because one of the housemaids saw them. She would want those to turn into cash.”

“Quite right, sir,” the subordinate agreed. “I wonder if you have thought of an idea that occurs to me. I mean that it was a terrible accident involving a great loss of life, due not only to the collision, but to the fact that most of the carriages caught fire and blazed like a furnace. There are three or four bodies, charred beyond recognition, and I am wondering if Miss Wakefield happens to be one of them.”

“Now, that is a bit of an idea, Wood,” Clapp said. “At any rate, It would be worth following up. I read all about those bodies in the papers and I believe that more than one of them has still to be identified. It is very possible that they never will be

identified, except by ornaments of some kind, or fragments of charred clothing. I don't want to worry the people of the house here unduly, but somebody will have to go as far as the scene of the accident and try and help us to determine whether Miss Wakefield was one of the victims or not."

It was a slightly horrified Jimmy Marrable who heard what Inspector Clapp had to say on the subject later on in the afternoon. For once, even he was subdued.

"Good Heavens, Inspector," he cried. "What a horrible idea."

"Pretty ghastly, I admit," Clapp said. "But somebody has to do it. It is my duty to trace Miss Wakefield if I can and bring her back here, but, to put it in cold words, I don't want to waste my time on a wild goose chase when, possibly, Miss Wakefield is already beyond the reach of the law. Somebody will have to go over to the place where the train crashed and see if there is any foundation for my suspicion."

"Oh, well," Jimmy said resignedly. "If the worst come to the worst I can go. And perhaps I had better take Nita, the parlourmaid, with me. If Miss Wakefield really is dead and she left any little things behind her, then Nita will be able to identity them and we shall know where we stand. But, mind you, I don't like it and I would run miles rather than go."

"Well, you need not unless you like, you know," Clapp said. "I am told that those poor bodies were beyond all recognition—nothing left but a broken watch or a bracelet or something of that sort by which the relatives—well, you know what I mean."

"Oh, I will go," Jimmy said. "You leave it to me, Inspector."

With that, Jimmy went off in search of Nita. He saw how she paled and trembled when he told her of the gruesome errand on which he wanted her to accompany him. But she did not hesitate after the first few moments.

"Very well, Jimmy," she said. "If it is my duty to go, I will. And pray to Heaven that we don't find anything that leads us to believe that Connie was killed in that awful catastrophe. Things are bad enough as they are, without a horror like that. Now when do you want to go?"

"Well, I don't see why we shouldn't go now," Jimmy said. "We can take one of the cars and ought to reach the scene where those bodies lie shortly after tea-time."

It was a tedious and silent journey that those two undertook and they were almost glad when they reached the small town station to which the unidentified bodies had been removed and where they lay in the mortuary. A sergeant of police was in charge and came forward as the two entered.

"Oh, yes, sir," he said when Jimmy explained their errand. "It is a very strange thing, that, although three full days have elapsed, we have unfortunates here about whom no inquiry has been made whatever. None of those bodies will ever be identified, except by certain articles removed from them. These have been numbered and arranged so that if the lady you are looking for happens to be one of the victims, then we shall be able to tell you what belongings of hers we have found after the fire. Will you kindly come this way, please."

Jimmy placed his hand under Nita's arm as if half afraid that she might fall. But now that she was keyed up for the ordeal, her step was as firm and elastic as his. Then, in the dim light of the mortuary they passed a quarter of an hour or

more in an atmosphere that neither of the two would ever forget until the end of their lives. They were glad when the Inspector told them that only one of those charred trunks belonged to a woman so that they were spared what might have been a still more trying experience. The horror of it gripped Nita fast.

"It's no use," she managed to say. "It is impossible for me to identify what is before me. To think that a few days ago that was a woman full of health and life, and to think that it might possibly be my own friend! But, thank God, I can't say whether it is or not. Oh let me get out of this."

They were in the open air once more and in a little room which the police had commandeered for their own at the end of the platform. Here the officer in charge took certain objects from a safe and placed them on a table before him.

"You will see," he explained, "that these are in numbered envelopes corresponding to the bodies in the mortuary. Now, the corpse of the woman we have just examined is number three. So I take up number three envelope and expose the contents for you to see if you can connect them in any way with the lady you are looking for. There are only two of these and I am going to ask you to be very careful before you pronounce an opinion."

Just for a moment Jimmy thought that his companion was going to faint, so, too, did the policeman for, in a businesslike way he poured out a glass of water and handed it to Nita.

"Courage," he said. "It is nearly over."

And then, very carefully, he tilted the envelope up so that the objects inside might trickle out and lie on the table. There were two of these, stained and discoloured, but nevertheless, showing something of their value. One glance sufficed.

"Connie's rings," Nita whispered. "Oh, they are Connie's rings beyond the shadow of a doubt."

Chapter VII

It was some time before Nita recovered sufficiently from the shock to say anything as to the horrible discovery that simply overwhelmed her. The official in charge of the mortuary regarded her with a sympathy that was none the less genuine because he was a family man himself.

"Don't dwell on it?" he said kindly, "and take your time, miss. We shall want you presently to give evidence at the inquest, but that will not be for a week or two yet, because there are so many of these unfortunate people already identified whose cases must be heard before the coroner first. If you and this gentleman here will give me your names and addresses, I will see to it that you are not unduly troubled."

It was a sad homeward journey, and for a long time Nita and Jimmy exchanged never a word. Then, presently to the latter's relief, he saw that the tears were beginning to stream down Nita's cheeks.

“That’s right,” he said. “Don’t try and check it. Those tears will do you all the good in the world.”

Then, presently, Nita wiped her eyes and turned a little anxiously to her companion.

“I hope you won’t think me very selfish, Jimmy,” she said. “But nothing can bring Connie back again, and I am bound to consider myself to some extent. Is there any possible way of avoiding my giving evidence at the inquest? No, I am not afraid to face the ordeal, but what I do dread is to have my name blazoned in the papers. If that happens, my father is certain to find out where I am and what I am doing, and if I am once more dragged home, heaven knows what will happen. It is not as if you could protect me.”

“I can’t,” Jimmy said dismally. “I haven’t got a bean in the world. But cheer up, darling, I dare say we can manage it some way or another. It is merely a question of identifying those rings, and you are not going to tell me that nobody else at Uppertons can do that as well as you.”

“Well, there is one of the housemaids,” Nita said. “And, yes, Tarrant, the butler. I remember now, some little time ago Connie gave him those two rings to clean. She never wore them, and so I suppose they became tarnished. At any rate, I know they were handed out to Tarrant.”

“Then we need not worry any more about it,” Jimmy said. “Tarrant will be a much better witness than you. I will speak to him directly we get back.”

It had been more than a trying afternoon but the ordeal was not quite finished yet. There was Gaskell to be informed of the ghastly discovery and when, later in the evening, Jimmy came to tell his story. Hugh took it very hard indeed.

“Was there ever such a tragedy,” he said. “Here am I who have been hunting Connie all over the world for years only to find her in circumstances like these. Only to see her for two or three moments and hold her in my arms and then, almost before I could realize that we were going to be happy at last, she disappears and dies a horrible death.”

Jimmy could only nod his head sympathetically, because here was an occasion beyond mere words. Hugh paced up and down the tiny sitting room which he was sharing, for the moment, with Jimmy at Wimpole’s cottage.

“And that is not the worst of it,” he said. “Other men have lost those they hold most dear by death and that I could have faced most bravely. But consider the circumstances. Connie flying from justice and believed by everybody to be a potential murderess. A girl who, in cold blood, tried to take the life of her greatest benefactor. It would be no use for you to tell people that there was something sinister about Bascoe’s attitude towards Connie, because you could only get a very few people to believe you and not a newspaper in the country would listen to your story. No my dear fellow we shall never learn the truth and, least of all from Bascoe’s lips. If he does recover he will still maintain that Connie tried to murder him and all the facts of the case are in his favour. If she had only stayed and faced the thing out, then there might have been hope. But as it is, her memory will never be cleared.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jimmy said with some rough show of sympathy. “You never can tell. It will be a sort of a miracle, but I think, especially after hearing what the doctor said this evening, that Bascoe will pull through. They tell me he is

conscious again and probably, in a day or two, will be able to give some account of the events of that fatal night."

"But how is that going to help us?"

"Ah, that, my dear chap, remains to be seen. I am no admirer of Bascoe, in fact, I am quite sure he is a rascal as well as the humbug I know him to be. If he dies, there is an end to everything, but if he recovers, then it will be up to us two to inquire into his past and ascertain why he sought out Connie and brought her here and pretended to make her his heiress. I have a sort of feeling that he never meant anything of the sort. He brought Connie to Uppertons for some deep purpose of his own, and if we could only get hold of those papers which she refused to sign, we should probably have a clue to the mystery."

"Ah, there I am inclined to agree with you," Hugh said. "And, mind you, somebody else knows all about the conspiracy, or else that attempted murder would never have taken place. Nothing will convince me, nothing ever will convince me that the shot which laid Bascoe low was fired by Connie herself."

"Of course, it wasn't," Jimmy said indignantly. "But my dear boy, you can't get away from the fact that it was Connie's revolver which was used for the attempt. How she managed to lose it, and how it came into the hands of the would-be murderer is something that we shall have to find out."

"And I am going to find it out," Hugh said between his teeth. "I shall never rest until I do so."

Hugh might have said a good deal more, only at that moment the door of the little sitting-room opened, and the small, shaky figure of Wimpole appeared. He stood there rather nervously for a moment fingering his straggly beard shakily.

"I hope I don't intrude," he said. "But if you gentlemen are talking business—"

"You needn't go away," Hugh said. "We have quite finished for the time being, and if there is anything we can do for you—"

"No, no," the old man piped. "A sad business at Uppertons—very sad indeed. I have just come back from the village where I have been purchasing some provisions, and a man in the grocer's shop was telling me that the young lady—"

The speaker broke off with a cough. Hugh regarded him with a frown between his eyes. So then, the story had not been so long getting round. Well, the facts would have to be faced and fought if there was to be the slightest chance of ever vindicating the memory of the dead girl.

The old man seemed to sense something of what was passing in Hugh's mind, for he looked up with an ingratiating smile.

"Eh, a bad business, young gentleman—a very bad business," he muttered. "And more in this than meets the eye. I am a very old man, and most people regard me as not being too strong in the head. Perhaps I am not. But I am not so stupid as to believe that a beautiful girl like Miss Constance Wakefield deliberately shot the man to whom she owed everything. At least people thought that she owed him everything."

Jimmy Marrable looked up swiftly.

"Then you don't think so yourself?" he asked.

"I am quite sure of it," Wimpole said. "Eh, if everybody knew everything what a clever world it would be! And there are some folks who might be a good deal of use if they were only approached in the proper way. Why, even a man like myself—"

He paused abruptly and chuckled. There was something almost sinister in the grin that creased his lips. Then, with a nod to the other two, he vanished and closed the door softly behind him. Hugh touched his forehead significantly.

"Not quite right in his head, I presume," he said. "Anyone might think that he knew something."

"Well, perhaps he does," Jimmy said. "I don't know. He is a queer old chap, and there are depths in him that few people realize. And, mind you, he is no poor inventor living from hand-to-mouth and dreaming that some day he will make a fortune out of a new bulb. I happen to know that he is quite well off. Paupers don't have fat bankers' pass books on the Bank of England with their name in gilt letters on the front of it unless they are pretty solid. I only discovered that quite by accident a few days ago when I saw the old man opening his letters. And out of a big envelope I saw him take the volume in question, and could not help seeing his name on the outside. He shuffled it under his newspaper at once in the secretive way of a miser. But not before I had seen enough to convince me that the old man has resources behind him of which the people in this village little dream."

"Well, it doesn't matter, anyway," Hugh said. "I don't suppose that your landlord can be of any use to us."

Jimmy agreed outwardly, but, at the same time, made a mental note concerning which he said nothing.

Chapter VIII

More than a week elapsed and still things remained more or less as they were at Uppertons. There was nothing to gain, for a moment, by staying in the neighbourhood so far as Hugh Gaskell was concerned, and he, therefore, returned to his own home which was not so many miles away. If anything transpired in the meantime, Jimmy had only to call him up on the telephone, and he would be back at once.

"I think you are right," Jimmy said. "There is nothing you can do here, indeed, nothing that anybody can do until after the inquest on those unfortunate people has concluded."

"And that won't be for another fortnight at least," Hugh remarked. "By the way, have you done anything about Nita and the necessity for her giving evidence?"

"Yes, I have put that all right," Jimmy said. "I took the runabout car yesterday and went over to the scene of the accident with Tarrant as my passenger. We saw the man in charge of the mortuary and, after he had heard what Tarrant had to say, he decided that the butler would be a much better witness than Nita. So that is all right."

Hugh went back to his fine old house, there to possess his soul in patience and make some faint attempt to forget the tragedy of the past week or so. Meanwhile, Jimmy divided his time between Wimpole's cottage and Upperton's. It was three days later before he met the doctor who told him that Bascoe was making a

marvellous recovery and that he was now sitting up in bed, taking an interest in his surroundings.

"That man is a positive marvel," the doctor declared. "I am not saying he didn't have a wonderful escape, but he must have the constitution of an elephant. Of course, I saw similar cases during the war, but never one in which a man recovered so quickly. At the rate he is going on now, Mr. Bascoe will be downstairs within a week."

"And I suppose one could see him?" Jimmy asked.

"Oh, yes, I told the nurse that if he wanted to talk to any of his friends, there was no reason why he shouldn't do so. You will find him absolutely clear in his mind."

Jimmy went cheerfully on his way to Uppertons feeling that at last, things were moving. His request to see Bascoe was immediately complied with and a few moments later, he found himself in the library—still used as a bedroom—where Bascoe was sitting up awaiting him.

Jimmy was astonished to notice that Bascoe appeared to be little worse for his adventures. He had lost most of his florid colour, and his dead, white face was in strange contrast to those dark, menacing eyes of his and his pointed black beard. He seemed, however, to be cheerful, and quite ready to hear everything that Jimmy had to say.

"Sit down and make yourself at home," he said. "You will find some cigarettes on the table near the window. I am not allowed to smoke yet, though I feel up to it and rather miss my tobacco. Now, tell me all the news. I can't get a word out of the nurse and the doctor is just an bad. I have had to pick up what information I can from chance remarks dropped by the housemaid who is responsible for my meals. Am I to understand that Connie Wakefield is dead?"

"Yes, that is true enough," Jimmy said soberly. "She ran away from here on the evening following your attack and managed to catch the night express at the junction. It was a terrible misfortune for her, because she was involved in that dreadful accident and lost her life."

"I suppose there is no doubt about that?" Bascoe asked.

"No doubt whatever," Jimmy went on. "It was a most appalling affair and several of the passengers were so burnt in the fire that followed that they could not possibly be identified. At least, most of them were identified by card cases and pocket books and various scraps of metal."

Bascoe lay back for a moment and closed his eyes.

"I see," he said. "But how did you manage to identify Connie Wakefield? Did she take anything of that sort with her?"

Jimmy went on to speak of the two antique rings which had been recognized beyond dispute by the butler, Tarrant. It seemed to him that, in some vague, intangible way, this information was not distressing to the listener.

"Poor girl," Bascoe murmured. "Poor misguided girl."

It was an epitaph and an accusation at one and the same time. Just as if the speaker was forgiving someone who had attempted to do him some deep and lasting wrong.

"Yes, it was a great pity," Jimmy said guardedly. "Far better if Connie had stayed and faced the whole thing out. Of course, now that she is dead, the best

thing is to forget what has taken place in the past and leave it to time to heal all unpleasantness. It is nobody's business but yours, and the sooner we can stifle talk in the village the better. But I suppose you won't mind telling me what happened on that dramatic night?"

"I don't know that I do," Bascoe said, "though at the same time I don't see any object in going over the ground again. What possible good can it do? All I have to say is that robbery was the motive inspiring the crime."

"Perhaps you are right," Jimmy agreed diplomatically. "All the same, you arouse my curiosity. Do you mean to say that Connie Wakefield had any reason—"

"Did I even mention her name?" Bascoe asked angrily. "Did I mention any name at all? No, I didn't and I am not going to. I said that robbery was the mainspring of the attack on me."

"Now that is interesting," Jimmy said, with his most fatuous smile. "As you were treacherously shot down by a person you didn't even see, and whom, I suppose, you didn't want to see, that person achieved his, or her, object?"

"That is right," Bascoe agreed quite amiably. "It was a pocket book in green jade covers with a monogram in the centre and some fine filigree work in the corners. I had taken it out of my safe to verify some figures and I have not seen it since. There is no trace of it to be found."

Jimmy appeared to ponder over this revelation, then he returned to the attack from another angle.

"I suppose you don't remember the time, do you?"

"Yes, I do. It was just eleven o'clock. I heard the hour strike from the stable. I was just bending down over the table when I suddenly looked up—no, I didn't—I half lifted my head and after that I don't recollect any more."

"Well, that seems to settle one point definitely enough," Jimmy agreed. "I don't see that it matters much either way. Just as the clock was striking eleven, you say?"

Bascoe nodded carelessly, and Jimmy began to talk about something else. But he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Bascoe was lying to him, and it was going to be his business to find out why. it was impossible that the attack could have taken place at eleven o'clock, because there, in the library itself on an easel standing between two windows was evidence to the effect that Bascoe had been working on the water colour drawing for something like twenty-five minutes after the hour of eleven had struck. Jimmy knew this, but he was not going to say a word till the proper time came, when it might be possible to force from Bascoe's lips a confession which, at any rate, might go a long way to clear Connie Wakefield's name and prove her innocence of a crime which she never could have committed.

So Jimmy went back to his cottage presently in a thoughtful mood. It was something gained to know that Bascoe accused nobody of the shooting incident. Least of all did he accuse Connie herself. He had cunningly avoided giving a direct answer to Jimmy's question, no doubt hoping to leave him in two minds as to what had happened in the library on that fateful night.

Jimmy reached the cottage at length and, after he had partaken of his simple evening meal, went out into the greenhouse where he found Wimpole, as usual, at work. The latter was bending over a tray of tiny seedlings which he was examining

with the aid of a microscope. These seemed to give him considerable satisfaction, for he was chuckling to himself and looking up with a smile on his face as Jimmy came into the greenhouse.

"Look at these," he said. "Not that they would convey anything to you, but if I am not altogether wrong out of those tiny fragments will come something like a blue daffodil. Yes, the work of years and many, many disappointments. But there is yet a lot to be done. A little fertiliser, a little stimulant, much as a man stimulates himself when he is very tired. I pour a few spots from out of my bottle—but where is my bottle? Oh yes, I did not bring it. In that little safe of mine, behind the sitting-room door. It is on the bottom shelf. A tiny blue bottle marked poison. I dare not put these down now, lest I should shake them, so will you go into the house and bring out that little bottle, and so help in the miracle?"

Jimmy turned obediently on his heel and made his way back to the cottage. By the light of the lamp on the table he could see that the door of the small safe was open and the purple bottle standing on the shelf by itself.

And he saw something else. A green jade pocket book, with fancy filigree gold work and a gold monogram in the centre.

Chapter IX

Jimmy Marrable was generally regarded by his host of friends and Bohemian acquaintances as the type of sunny, inconsequent individual who went through life with a smile on his lips and an easy heart so long as he had a shilling in his pocket and the prospect of enough to sustain him on the morrow. But, all the same, there was another side to Jimmy's character of which the public knew nothing. In the year or two preceding the war at a time when he was the only son of a prosperous father, it was his mood to drift about Europe with a wandering concert party and study men and things. But when the conflict began, Jimmy's knowledge of continental cities and his peculiar aptitude for picking up languages was properly appreciated by the English Secret Service, and only a few in the know were aware of what good work he had done for his country in connexion with Hugh Gaskell and one or two other adventurous spirits, who took their lives in their hands at the call of duty.

It was this side of Jimmy's character that came uppermost when he found himself in the seclusion of his bedroom on the evening after he had seen that green jade pocket book in the safe of that eccentric old gentleman under whose roof he lodged. It was a most remarkable discovery he had made and one that puzzled him exceedingly. He did not doubt for a moment that Wimpole was a perfectly harmless old gentleman, devoted only to his beloved bulbs and, therefore, the discovery that the missing pocket book was found amongst Wimpole's effects was something that caused Jimmy to sit up far into the night smoking countless cigarettes and trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. He went to bed presently, having abandoned the attempt for the moment and trusting to fortune to find a clue in some other direction.

But he had made up his mind to one thing—he was not going to say anything about his discovery to anybody—not even to to Hugh Gaskell. He might confide in Inspector Clapp later on, but that confession would have to wait.

Meanwhile, things were moving in other directions. The inquest of the victims of that terrible railway accident finished at length when all bodies had been identified and the jury had brought in the usual verdict. This meant of course, that between themselves, Jimmy and the butler Tarrant had conveyed the remains of Constance Wakefield to her home and had seen them decently interred in the church yard. No doubt lingered in the minds of every body that Connie had perished in that terrible disaster, indeed, the evidence of the two antique rings placed it outside the range of all controversy.

Bascoe himself had not been sufficiently recovered to attend the funeral, but he professed himself to be extremely aggrieved and shocked. Indeed so much so that it was impressed upon Jimmy that he was overdoing the part. And Jimmy was closely studying every movement of Bascoe's just then.

It was one day shortly after the funeral, that Jimmy reverted once more to Connie and her unhappy end. He was seated with his patron in the library at Uppertons with the water colour sketch he was touching up in front of him. Bascoe was prowling restlessly about the room and making a suggestion from time to time, but to the keener side of Jimmy's brain it was plain enough that Bascoe was a long way from being easy in his mind.

"Yes," Jimmy was saying. "It is a terrible business altogether, at once so melancholy and so mysterious. But I am not going to believe that the murderous attack upon you that night was the work of poor Connie."

"What makes you say that?" Bascoe asked.

"Oh, well, if you put it like that, I can't tell you, except that she was absolutely incapable of anything of the sort. Of course, I knew, everybody knew, that she was an expert shot with a revolver but, considering the life she led during the war and afterwards, there is nothing very wonderful about that. I suppose you have not the least idea who the poor girl really was?"

"I could not prove who she really was," Bascoe said cautiously. "But I have a very shrewd idea. You see, I was out in the East on business before the war and throughout the whole of the long campaigns. Private business which I need not go into. But I think I was of some use to my country all the same. And I happened to be in Serbia when hostilities commenced. That is how I came to make the acquaintance of Countess Inez Matua whose adopted daughter Connie was. I don't want to say a lot more on that point, because the history of Connie's parents does not bear investigation. And it does not matter why I was interested and why I decided to look after the girl, provided that I could find her after the Armistice. I did find her, as you are aware and I brought her here because I have no one to leave my money to and I was going to make her my heiress. On the whole, we got on very well together and should have done better still, but for the fact that Connie had a wild, passionate side to her nature which caused me a good deal of anxiety from time to time."

"Oh, indeed," Jimmy said innocently. "I should never have suspected that."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't. But the fact remains. It was so difficult, in certain moments, to make her understand that I was acting for the best as far as her

interests were concerned. But she was always worrying me to know all about her parents. For her sake I put her off and she always seemed to hold that as a grudge against me. But we never had a really serious quarrel till the day when I asked her to sign certain papers."

"Oh, that was the time when I came into this room to speak to you about that watercolour drawing," Jimmy observed. "Yes, I noticed how strained relations were and that is why I discreetly disappeared in case I should hear too much."

Bascoe threw himself into a chair and lighted a cigarette.

"Yes, that was the time," he said. "It was a most bitter quarrel, and ended in a threat on Connie's part to shoot me. She went so far as to take her revolver from her pocket and point the weapon in my direction. And now, Marrable, I am going to tell you something. It does not concern anybody but ourselves and I should not have mentioned it now only you were present when the quarrel began, and I am quite sure you have certain suspicions. But it was Connie herself who shot me."

"Good Heavens, you don't mean that?" Jimmy cried.

"Indeed, I do," Bascoe replied. "It was she who came into the room when I was going over my papers and fired the shot which nearly ended by life. I don't know why, because we appeared to be on quite good terms after dinner, but then, who can account for the workings of an angry woman's mind?"

"Who, indeed?" Jimmy said thoughtfully. "My dear fellow, you have shocked me most profoundly. You mean to say it was Connie who came into this room that night when the clock struck eleven, and deliberately made an attempt on your life?"

"Well, as to that, I heard the clock over the stables finish striking eleven, and after that I remember no more. But I did in a flash, see Connie as she stood there with her revolver in her hand. I saw her raise the weapon, and I am practically certain I heard the report, though I would not swear to that. You can imagine what a shock the whole thing has been to me. If Connie had remained here, then my lips would have been sealed. I should have forgiven her, and, no doubt, in the course of time we should have been as good friends as ever. But the poor girl is dead now, and she has paid the full penalty of her act. Mind you, Marrable, this is a secret that must never be mentioned."

"Oh, of course, of course," Jimmy said. "No reason to tell me that. All the same, there are one or two features about the case that I don't quite understand. To begin with, anybody who could commit a murder in that cold-blooded way would hardly have left the weapon behind. Mind you, a weapon that would be certain to be identified. How do you account for that?"

"I don't," Bascoe said, with a shrug of his shoulders. "No sensible man ever attempts to explain the vagaries of the feminine mind. I have simply told you what happened."

Jimmy turned an innocent gaze upon the speaker, but if Bascoe could have seen into the back of Marrable's mind he might have been a little less easy himself. For Jimmy, sitting there, listened to all that Bascoe had to say, and was not in the least impressed by this dramatic story.

And Jimmy was still less impressed as he turned the whole thing over in his mind on his way back to Wimpole's cottage. It was all very well, now that Connie was dead and buried, for Bascoe to invent that amazing piece of fiction, which

could never be questioned with Connie no longer available to deny or confirm it. But Jimmy did not believe a single word of it. It was a lie on the face of it, and he had had considerable difficulty in refraining from telling Bascoe so point blank.

But what was the meaning of it? What did Bascoe expect to gain by a preposterous lie like that? The whole thing appeared to be utterly meaningless. Still if there was anything behind it, then Jimmy was not going to rest until he got to the root of the problem. For some reason or other, Bascoe was throwing up a sort of smoke barrage to hide certain actions or his behind cover of the fog. Then Jimmy had an inspiration. Had it anything to do with the papers that Connie refused to sign?

Chapter X

It was not only Bascoe who was giving Jimmy a good deal of food for thought at that particular moment. He was puzzled and just a little irritated by the strange behaviour of Nita Keene. He had contrived to see a good deal of her during the last few days, and in the course of four and twenty hours she seemed to have changed in the most remarkable manner. One moment she was her bright amusing self and the next almost on the verge or tears—a sort of semi-hysteria that was quite foreign to her nature. There was nothing of the neurotic about a girl who had deliberately run away from home and assumed the role of a parlourmaid in order to get away from her father, whose ambition it was to marry her to one of his shady business friends. As a rule, Nita had herself perfectly well in hand, but now she seemed to be almost on the verge of a break-down.

"What on earth is the mater with you?" Jimmy asked.

Nita had strolled away from the house in the course of the afternoon when things were slack, and had met Jimmy in a favourite nook of theirs behind the house, and he had just sold one of his pictures to a well-known patron of the arts for fifty pounds, with an offer of further work if he came to London, and a most encouraging letter from one who was powerfully placed and in a position to place many more commissions in his hands. And if this meant anything, it meant that in the course of the next six months, Jimmy would be in a position to offer Nita a comfortable home.

To this wonderful and glowing piece of news Nita had not paid the least mention. It was only when Jimmy spoke almost sharply that she pulled herself together and did her best to pretend that she had followed every word he said.

"Nonsense!" Jimmy laughed. "Oh, I have been watching you, my dear, and I don't believe you can tell me a single thing I have been saying. Come now, honest injun."

"I am so sorry, Jimmy," Nita said penitently. "I don't know what has come to me lately. I feel all on edge and almost ready to break down. My nerves are shattered."

"Why, of course, they are," Jimmy cried. "You must think me a nice sort of brute, but I was so carried away with the prospect before us that I had almost forgotten the ordeal you have been through lately. It is all that business or poor

Connie. Look here, old thing, I mustn't say too much, but there are events connected with that girl's death that have to be investigated. And that is why I am staying on. If I thought of myself alone, I should chuck Bascoe to-morrow. Say good-bye to him and make a start up in town to get that home together I was speaking of just now. Then we could take a risk and get married."

"Oh, not just yet," Nita cried. "It isn't that I am not game, Jimmy, but there is a reason—a reason I can't speak of even to you that keeps me tied here. Don't ask a lot of questions because I am not really in a fit state to answer them."

Jimmy maintained a diplomatic silence for a moment. Mysteries and yet more mysteries, he thought. Was there another side to the tangle of which Nita held the threads?

"Very well," he said presently. "I won't bother you. But I wish you would take a few days holiday."

Nita looked up, smiling for the first time.

"That is just what I am going to do," she said; "two or three days, at any rate. I have already arranged that with Mr. Bascoe. I shall be back on Saturday."

"And may I ask where you are going?"

"Of course, you may," Nita agreed. "I dare say you have heard me speak of a friend of mine called Dora Stevenage."

"Stevenage, Stevenage?" Jimmy said with a nuzzled frown. "A widow, isn't she? Lives on the other side of the country. Isn't she in some way connected with the man your father wanted you to marry? A sister, or something of that sort, what?"

"Half-sister," Nita corrected. "And very much younger than Stephen Cottingham. An old schoolfellow of mine. She has no children and, fortunately for her, the large income her husband left her is hers only for life, or Cottingham would have had it out of her long ago. She hates and despises him as much as I do, and it was more or less on her suggestion that I thought of going out into domestic service—the last situation in which my father would be likely to imagine me. I had a letter from Dora yesterday asking me to go and stay and I sent a telegram to-day to say that I would be with her to-morrow and stay till Saturday."

"That's right," Jimmy agreed cordially. "Even a few days' change from the sinister atmosphere of Uppertons will do something towards setting you right again. But isn't it a bit of a coincidence that you should be going to pass a day or two under the roof of the half-sister of the man your father wanted to foist on you? I mean, if Cottingham happened to turn up when you were under Dora Stevenage's roof—"

"There is not the slightest chance of his doing that," Nita smiled. "Dora is not in the least blind to Cottingham's faults and I don't think they have spoken for years. And now, Jimmy, tell me all over again what you were saying just now, about selling a picture and that man in London who is going to make our fortune. You are quite right; I didn't hear half you said."

So Jimmy told his story once more and when he parted from Nita half an hour later he was much easier in his mind.

But not entirely so. Making all due allowance for the trying time Nita had been through, there yet remained a good deal to be explained. Why had she, after the lapse of three weeks from the afternoon when she had visited the mortuary, suddenly developed signs of nervous collapse. Perhaps the reaction had been

longer coming than was usual, but even making that allowance it seemed to Jimmy that Nita was concealing something from him. Indeed, she had as good as said so. So here he was on the one side, knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt that Bascoe was weaving a web of apparently useless deceit, and Nita, on the other, with some concealed information which might prove to be of vital importance if only Jimmy could induce her to speak.

But he was not going to put undue pressure on her. He would wait, at any rate, until she returned from her visit to Mrs. Dora Stevenage. Perhaps, after that, Nita might be lured into taking him into her confidence.

Without seeing Jimmy again, Nita departed on her errand and early the following afternoon, found herself under the roof of her old friend and schoolfellow, where she was welcomed warmly. It was a pleasant house of more than moderate size, with a cheerful outlook towards the south and a sunny aspect that went far to lift the depression that lay like a cloud on Nita's spirits. She was in such congenial company, too, for the pretty little blonde who was her hostess was, in herself, the embodiment of good nature and gaiety and Nita reacted accordingly.

"Well, here you are, my dear," Dora said. "And for the next day or two I hope you will make the best of it. It will be a nice change for you to sit down and eat a well-served meal with servants to attend to you, instead of handing round dishes to other people. How you manage to get through with it, I can't understand. Fancy you, brought up as you have been, sitting down in a kitchen with a fat cook and scullery maid, to say nothing of having to address the butler respectfully as 'mister.' Then my dear, you always had plenty of pluck. Now, would you like to go upstairs and put out your evening frock?"

"My dear," Nita laughed. "I haven't got such a thing. It would never have done to have taken evening clothes down to Uppertons. I thought you might fit me out."

"Oh, of course," Dora agreed. "I can do that easily enough. And it will be all the easier because I happen to be without a maid at the present moment. But I told you that, didn't I?"

"Certainly you did," Nita said. "You mentioned that in your letter. It was a sort of S.O.S. from an unfortunate rich woman who is pining away and losing all interest in life, because she couldn't find a suitable maid for love or money. And when I read that letter, I determined to come and see you, because I have got the very girl you require. That is, if you don't mind one who wears spectacles and has long hair."

"Oh, my dear girl," Dora cried, "I don't care what she looks like as long as she does her work satisfactory. And if you can produce what the Americans call 'the goods,' then I shall be eternally grateful to you. Who is this prodigy? What part of the world does she come from?"

"Does it matter?" Nita asked. "I can assure you that you will find her everything to be desired. You will forget all about the hair and the spectacles. But wait a moment I will run upstairs and get her photograph."

"I am quite thrilled," Dora said. "Oh, by the way. I forgot to say anything about that poor dear, Connie Wakefield. I always intended to go and call on her. You remember I saw her once in London just before you left home. I took a fancy to her. What a sad business it is."

Nita came down with the photograph in her hand and passed it silently across the table to her friend. Dora Stevenage gave one glance at it and a cry of astonishment followed.

"In Heaven's name, what does this mean, Nita?" she asked. "What are you asking me to do?"

Chapter XI

The photograph slipped from Dora's fingers and lay neglected on the floor. She turned towards Nita with a face that was grave and not altogether free from a certain cold suspicion. She was no longer the smiling little blonde, like a piece of delicate Dresden china, but a woman who was conscious of something in the atmosphere that was sinister.

"Nita," she said. "If I didn't know you as well as I do. I should suspect that you were trying to take advantage of me. I don't understand this at all."

"I am not," Nita cried passionately. "I swear I am not. What I want to do and what I must do is to right a terrible wrong and you are about the only one I know who can help me to do so. You have known me all my life—"

"Yes, that is true," Dora said. "But this is so strange, so impossible that I don't know what to think."

"Well, perhaps you will give me the opportunity of explaining and I may convince you that you can play a prominent part in the mystery in which I am involved."

"Well," Dora said just a little coldly. "Go on with your story—I am all attention."

"I shall have to go back a bit," Nita said. "You knew me ages ago when I was a child and you were a child, and the world was a pleasant place to live in. We did not realise in those days that we were being brought up in an atmosphere that was full of cold calculated dishonesty. Then I regarded my father as everything a parent should be and you looked up to your half brother much in the same way. We didn't know, then, that we were intended to be just pawns in a sort of game which was meant to put money in the pockets of two dishonest men. But you were luckier than me Dora, because you found a husband of whom you were fond and who left you, all too soon, with this house and couldn't touch."

"Yes that was so," Dora agreed. "If I could have touched it, then my half brother would have had everything—a nice fortune, which luckily, you found out long before now. But what has this to do with the mystery?"

"I am coming to that," Nita went on. "You know already why I had to leave home, you know that your half brother and my father are in business together and what sort of a reputation they have in the City of London. Oh, they are not criminals in the strict sense of the world and I don't suppose they will ever land themselves in trouble with the police. But I have no more delusions on the subject of my father's integrity than you have with regard to that precious half brother of yours. Those two men are working hand in glove and for some reason that I never could understand—probably never shall understand—it was impressed upon me

that I should have to marry a man whom I hated and distrusted the moment I first saw him. And that is why I ran away from home. That is why I took service with Mr. Bascoe at Uppertons in which I was helped by Jimmy Marrable."

"But where is Jimmy now?" Dora asked.

"Oh, didn't I tell you in my letter? No, I suppose I forgot. You see, I had so many other things to think about. Jimmy is doing very little at present, though I think we can see daylight at last, and if this terrible business had not taken place, I should probably have become Mrs. James Marrable in the course of the next few months. Between ourselves, I shall never feel quite safe until I am. And then this dreadful thing happened and everything else had to be put on one side. Perhaps I am sentimental, but I shall never rest until poor Connie's memory is cleared. I know everything is against her. That revolver business and her flight and—ah well, everything. But she never did it Dora, never."

"I am inclined to agree with you," Dora said. "But, my dear friend, how are you going to prove it?"

Nita shook her head sadly.

"Ah, there you have asked me a question," she said. "Somehow or another it has got to be done, and with the help of providence and Jimmy I shall succeed. You see, Jimmy is just as certain as I am that Connie is innocent, and I believe that Jimmy knows something. His manner the last day or two has puzzled me. And I feel that he is hiding some secret which for some reason or another, he doesn't want me to share. But you will help us in this dreadful business, won't you, Dora?"

"I don't see how I can do anything else," Dora said. "But don't you think it would be just as well if we took Jimmy into our confidence. Two heads are better than one, and I suppose, by the same reasoning, three are better than two. I am not particularly wise, but it seems to me rather a mistake for us two to be working on one line when Jimmy is working on another. Can't you get him to come over here, if only for an hour or two?"

"Well, I might do that," Nita agreed. "But then I can't tell him everything I know—at least, I can't do so, because, you see, I am sworn to secrecy. In a day or two, perhaps, I can tell Jimmy a story which will help him, but meanwhile, my hands are tied and my lips are sealed. Still, if you like, I will send Jimmy a telegram and get him to come over here."

It was well into the following afternoon before Jimmy Marrable came to Dora's house in response to the guarded telegram which Nita had sent to him addressed to Wimpole's cottage. He came into the drawing room where the two girls were seated in his usual cheery way and greeted them with his sunny smile.

"Ah, here we are," he said. "Met together after the lapse of countless years. A meeting that would make a good caption for one of those sensational films. What is the meaning of it all? There was a time when Nita honored me with her confidence, but of late, all that has changed. A cloud has drifted between two otherwise happy lives, and if the misunderstanding is not cleared we shall drift on to the last chapter, just like they do in novels. Oh, I know that Nita came here because she wanted to get away from the atmosphere of Uppertons, but there is a great deal more in it than that."

“I don’t think you have got any cause to reproach me,” Nita said. “If I am acting the mysterious woman in the story, then there is a very good reason for it. And, after all is said and done, Jimmy, you have just been as reticent lately as I have.”

“Perhaps so,” Jimmy agreed. “You see, Dora, Nita has yet to find out that there are two sides to my character. One—the happy, careless Jimmy you know, with no thought for the morrow, and the dark conspirator who played a part on behalf of his country during the Great War.”

“And that is the side I like best,” Nita smiled. “Can’t we put all our cards on the table and come to some sort of an understanding?”

“Well, you begin,” Jimmy grinned.

“But I can’t do it like that,” Nita said. “At least, not for a day or two. Jimmy, you will have to trust me and I suppose if it comes to that I shall have to trust you. What I am so anxious to do at the moment is to prove to the world that Connie had nothing to do with that murderous attack upon Bascoe. We know, we all know that she is innocent.”

“Personally, I never doubted it,” Jimmy said. “The idea of Connie attempting to murder anybody, let alone Bascoe, in cold blood is absolutely ridiculous. Besides, I can prove—”

A little cry of pleasure broke from Nita’s lips.

“Ah,” she said. “You can prove it, can you? Does that mean that you have absolutely definite evidence in your possession that Connie had nothing to do with the outrage?”

Jimmy looked foolish for the moment.

“Well, I didn’t want to say quite all that,” he admitted. “But we are all friends of Connie’s here, and all most anxious to see her vindicated. Anything I say will not go outside these four walls I am sure. And, mind you I have not said a word about this, except to poor old Hugh Gaskell. I don’t mind telling you two girls that I have in my possession enough evidence to clear Connie on the charge against her.”

“You have,” Nita cried. “Then why on earth are you holding it back? Why are you wasting a single moment?”

“Ah, my dear girl, the impetuosity of your sex,” Jimmy said with a sad smile. “Always rushing headlong, without waiting to consider the consequences. If I were to open my mouth at the present moment it would be to deliver my most formidable weapon into Bascoe’s hands. That is rather a mixed metaphor, but you know what I mean. That rascal knows as well as I do that Connie had no hand in the attempt on his life. And yet he had the sheer audacity to tell me a little time ago that it was she who shot him. She came into the library just as the clock struck eleven on that fateful night and coolly plugged him as he sat at his table. Oh, he has got it all down chapter and verse, with everything fitting in nicely. But it is a pack of lies, all the same. Mind you, it no use my telling him at present it is lies, because that will only put him on his guard. But when the proper time comes, I shall be able to face him and convict him of wilful perjury from his own lips. No, I am not going to say anything more, and you will have to be satisfied for the present and possess your souls in patience. But Connie is going to be vindicated all right. It is, perhaps, a poor sort of satisfaction but, for the moment, it is as far as we can go.”

Chapter XII

Nita sighed with deep content.

"I am not quite so sure of that," she said. "It is just possible that we can do more then show the great British public that Connie was innocent of that dastardly crime. But don't you think, Jimmy, that we ought to consult Scotland Yard in the matter? After all is said and done, somebody committed that crime and somebody ought to be punished. I should say that Bascoe is a man who has more enemies than one, and I believe, if he liked to tell the truth, he has a shrewd suspicion as to the person who tried to take his life. If the detectives took the matter up, as they might after you told them the discoveries you were last speaking about, they could force Bascoe to speak."

"Perhaps they could," Jimmy agreed. "And, on the other hand, Bascoe is a pretty cool scoundrel and it evidently suits him to let the world believe he was the victim of an outrage perpetrated by one of his own household. If the worst comes to the worst, I will run up to Town and see Scotland Yard, but, for the moment I rather prefer to carry out my own plans."

There was not much more to be said for the moment, and a little later on Jimmy retraced his steps in his most thoughtful frame of mind. It had not occurred to him to consider an alternative to the generally-accepted belief that Connie Wakefield was a potential murderer. It was rather strange that Nita should have turned his thoughts in an entirely different direction. It was just possible, as she had said that Bascoe had bitter enemies, one at least of whom had not hesitated to make an attempt upon his life.

But where had the would-be assassin procured the revolver with which the shot was fired? There was no gainsaying the fact that the weapon in question belonged to Connie; indeed she had made no attempt to deny it. But, then, she had said that the revolver had fallen from her pocket—probably lost that day in the woods when Hugh Gaskell had unexpectedly come upon her and she had fled from him with a distracted cry that he must never see her again. Was it not possible that Bascoe's assailant had been lurking about the premises that particular afternoon, and had actually seen the meeting between Connie and her lover? It was well within the bounds of possibility that he had noticed the revolver as it had jerked itself out of Connie's sports coat pocket as she fled headlong in the direction of the house, and picked it up. If such was the case, then any cunning criminal desirous of hiding his tracks would certainly have made use of the weapon which had almost providentially fallen into his hands. To go further, when he had accomplished his design, he had deliberately left the weapon behind him on the library floor and gone away feeling certain in his mind that he had not only accomplished his purpose, but also thrown an overwhelming onus on somebody else.

The more Jimmy thought this over the more sure he was that he was on the right track. But assurance was one thing and proof another. He would have a long way to go before he could connect this phantom assassin with the crime. Possibly

the authorities at Scotland Yard might take it up again; they had done so previously, though after Connie's flight and that ghastly business of the railway accident, they had abandoned the inquiry and regarded the incident as permanently closed.

But it was by no means permanently closed; Scotland Yard might not think so when Jimmy came to tell them the curious incidents of that water-coloured drawing, and how Bascoe had pinned himself down to a declaration that the shooting had taken place at a moment when such a thing was impossible. At any rate, he would talk the whole matter over with Hugh Gaskell and see what the latter had to say. He knew that Hugh was as breathlessly anxious as himself to release Connie from that dreadful stain upon her memory. It was with these thoughts whirling in his mind that Jimmy went back to his work at Uppertons.

Meanwhile, matters were not exactly standing still so far as Nita and her friend Dora Stevenage, were concerned. It was comforting to reflect upon what Jimmy had said and the knowledge that sooner or later he might have something to say with regard to the Uppertons outrage and the real perpetrator thereof.

"I hope Jimmy is not unduly sanguine," Dora said.

"I don't think so," Nita replied. "Jimmy is always very sanguine and always assured that everything is going to turn out well, but I never saw him quite so earnest as he was just now. But never mind about Jimmy for the moment. What we have to do is much more important."

"Yes, I suppose it is," Dora said thoughtfully. "But do you think it is absolutely safe? I mean, isn't it possible that somebody will find out?"

"My dear girl, there is nothing to find out. I have shown you something but there is a good deal more to come yet. And I haven't said a definite word. I refrained from doing so because I thought probably you might be disinclined to take a hand in anything so decidedly risky."

"Well then, go on," Dora said impatiently. "That photograph you showed me was more than sufficient to arouse my curiosity, because it resembled—"

"Hush, hush," Nita said, with her fingers to her lips. "Don't forget that the windows are open, and your servants will be about. And don't ask me to say too much till I have shown you exactly where this new maid of yours comes in. I presume that you are going to take her into your employ?"

"Oh, yes," Dora said. "I have made up my mind to that. When you think she can get here?"

"Ah, that depends upon you entirely," Nita smiled. "I think the best thing you can do is to see her first. You don't want to interview anybody here and have the unpleasantness of telling her that she is not likely to suit."

"Where is the girl?" Dora asked.

"She is in rooms at a place called Northey. It is one of those manufacturing towns not very far from Manchester. I believe it is a dismal sort of place where they make cotton goods, but I have never been there and I don't particularly want to go. Now, suppose we take that runabout car of yours and adventure as far as Northey. I mean, you and me to go alone. We don't want your chauffeur and we don't want to tell anybody where we are going. Just tell the household that we are off on a trip for the day to visit friends and will not be back until very late in the evening. We

ought to manage it this time of the year easily enough if we start early in the morning."

"And who is going to drive us?" Dora asked.

"My dear girl," Nita exclaimed, "do you mean to say you can't drive your own car? And you call yourself a modern woman? Well, it doesn't matter, because I can drive as well as anybody. Get hold of a road map from the chauffeur and the whole thing is as easy as anything can possibly be."

Nita's plan agreed to, they set out the following morning after an early breakfast to cover the hundred and fifty odd miles between the starting point and the little town not very far from Manchester. It was a pleasant enough trip most of the way, but gloomy and depressing when the centre of industry was reached. Mile after mile of landscape dotted here and there by towns and then again a fleeting vision of trees and green fields. It was nearly four 'o'clock when, at length, the little runabout car entered the town of Northey and an obliging policeman directed them to Southport Road, which was the address that Nita was seeking.

"Some little way through the town," the policeman said. "If you go straight on, you will come to the Unicorn Hotel. It is the second street on the right after that."

Nita set the car in motion again and turned presently down a street with small houses, all exactly cut to the same pattern on either side. The car pulled up at number fifteen and, in response to Nita's knock at the door, a motherly woman responded to the effect that Miss Edith Evors was at present having tea in her own little sitting-room, and if the ladies wanted to see her they were welcome to come in.

The two found themselves in a small apartment at the back of the house where a young woman was partaking of a frugal tea. She looked up over a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles and her hand went up unsteadily to smooth her glossy hair as Nita began to explain her errand.

"This is my friend, Mrs. Stevenage," she said. "She is here with regard to your advertisement. Mrs. Stevenage is in need of a personal maid and, if your references are as satisfactory as they appear to be, then she will be willing to engage you. Look, Dora, what's that queer object outside the window?"

But Dora could see nothing out of the common, and said so. Then as she turned to confront her future maid, she saw the change that a few seconds had brought about. Gone were the steel-rimmed glasses, and gone was the glossy mass of hair plied upon the woman's head.

"Connie Wakefield," Dora almost screamed. "Connie Wakefield come back from the dead."

Chapter XIII

Connie looked pathetically from one to the other of her companions with a thin smile and the suspicion of tears very near the surface. It was plain enough that she had suffered terribly during the last few days, for despite her make-up, her

cheeks were pallid and under her eyes were blue rings that told of anxiety and sleepless nights. Dora Stevenage found it hard to restrain her own emotions.

"Oh, you poor dear thing," she murmured. "I can't tell you how dreadfully sorry I am. But please do regard me as a friend, though we are comparative strangers. And do tell me what all this means."

"Let us try and be practical," Nita said. "Perhaps I ought to have told you, Dora, beforehand what to expect. But Connie objected and I had to do as she wished. Of course, you have guessed that Connie is your new lady's maid."

"Yes, I suppose that is pretty plain," Dora said. "But the whole thing is madness."

"I don't see why it should be," Nita said coolly. "Now confess it. Could you possibly have recognised Connie if she hadn't removed her disguise? No, of course, you wouldn't. She will be perfectly safe under your roof and no one will ever dream of coming into your neighbourhood to ask awkward questions. It is the most natural thing in the world that you should want a new maid and I have no doubt that we shall be able to make up a biography of Connie that will pass muster amongst the rest of your servants. You won't stand in the way, Dora, will you?"

"Oh, my dear," Dora cried. "Of course, I will do everything I can. But I am still very much in the dark. Let us sit down quietly and talk it over. I think all three of us will be better if we can have a cup of tea."

"Of course," Connie smiled. "How stupid of me to forget it. Ring the bell, Nita, and my dear old landlady will be only too pleased to oblige. Just a moment until I can resume my wig and spectacles—I had almost forgotten them."

The landlady came in response to the bell and presently, the tea was brought in.

"That's better," Dora said. "Nothing like a cup of tea when you are upset. But what a dreadful place you have found to live in, Connie."

"Yes, it is a bit depressing," Connie admitted. "But it is quiet and it is safe, and my landlady is as good as a mother to me. She never asks any awkward questions and takes me absolutely for granted. You see, when I got here after dark, I asked a policeman if he could tell me where I could procure a couple of rooms for a few days and he directed me here. I am supposed to be a lady's maid waiting to go into a new situation. I have no friends in the north of England and I could not afford the expense of going so far south. Also I am believed to have an old schoolfellow somewhere in the neighbourhood whom I am trying to find. So, you see, I am accepted for what I pretend to be, and I have no dread of my identity being revealed."

"Of course, you haven't," Nita observed. "My dear girl, you are dead and buried. Everybody believes that and the police have ceased to be active. They are firmly under the impression that the late Constance Wakefield attempted to murder her benefactor, and that she fled the night after the assault, and perished in that dreadful railway accident. So long as you remain with Dora and take reasonable precautions, nobody is likely to be a bit the wiser. And, in the meantime, we can turn round and try and get to the bottom of the mystery. But to do that we shall have to take other people into our confidence."

"Must we do that?" Connie asked wistfully.

"Of course, my dear. How can two helpless women like us prove your innocence? Jimmy Marrable will have to know and I suppose Hugh Gaskill as well.

But I am not going to mention the matter to either until you give me permission to do so."

"Do let me know exactly how things stand," Dora Stevenage interposed. "I am still entirely in the dark. Don't forget that, until a few moments ago, I had not the remotest idea that Connie was still alive. I have had nothing to guide me, except what I have read in the newspapers, and when Nita came to stay with me and suggested that she could find me a lady's maid, of course I didn't dream that it was going to be you. How did you know that she was still alive, Nita?"

"Perhaps I had better explain that," Connie said. "Directly I had settled down here, I wrote to Nita. It was a dangerous thing to do, but I had to let her know that I was still alive. I went as far as Manchester to post the letter where, indeed, I wrote it and addressed the envelope in a disguised handwriting. I wanted Nita to know what had happened."

"And it came off all right," Nita smiled. "It was lucky that I got that letter by the afternoon post when no one was about and I was alone when I opened it, or probably I might have betrayed myself. And even now I don't know any details. It was only a few lines that Connie wrote, telling me where she was to be found, and after committing the address to memory. I destroyed the letter and the envelope."

"Now, let me tell you," Connie said. "It is no use asking me why I ran away, because I couldn't tell you. I made up my mind on the spur of the moment, and arranged my plans accordingly. I was very fortunate in being able to leave the house without being observed, and made my way through the woods at the back of Uppertons with the intention of catching the north express at the junction. I had nothing with me but a few pounds and two valuable rings of which you may have heard."

"Of course, I have," Nita interrupted. "It was those rings that convinced everybody that you had perished in that train disaster. And don't forget that I had seen them more than once and that they were identified by Tarrant, the butler."

"Yes, that is right," Connie went on. "I got safely to the junction and managed to evade the station master, who, of course, knew me by sight. And I was fully under the impression that the solitary porter on duty had not seen me get into the train. But there I was mistaken, because he did see and recognise me—"

"But how did you know that?" Dora asked.

"Oh, because I had read all about it in the newspapers. I got papers every day because I wanted to see exactly what was taking place at Uppertons. It was rather a shock to me at first to find that I had been traced as far as the express train, but in the end it was a real blessing in disguise. You shall hear presently how that was."

"The rings," Nita cried. "The rings."

"Precisely," Connie went on. "I took those rings with me so that I could turn them into money, because I knew that I should want funds before long, and my ready cash was represented by a few pound notes. Of course, I had to pay my landlady here a week in advance to avert any suspicions. When the train started I was alone in my compartment save for one woman who sat opposite me. So, for an hour or two, I sat in my corner, brooding over my troubles and taking no notice of my fellow passenger, who was absorbed in a magazine. And then the accident happened."

Connie broke off and shuddered slightly.

"Even now," she resumed, "the remembrance of that awful time haunts me and I wake up in the middle of the night trembling and wet from head to foot. Still, I must speak about it, because it is necessary. There was a crash and a smash and the whole train seemed to lift as if some machinery was raising it from the rails. It came down with a roar again, and, for some time after that I have no recollection of anything.

"When I came to myself, I could hear shouts and calls and the tramping of feet, mingled with the cries of wounded people. I was lying flat on my back between the two seats of the carriage and I suppose that is what saved me. At first I thought I was seriously hurt and then I realised that, beyond the shock, I was as well as I am at this moment. The coach in which I was travelling was tilted at an acute angle and the car side of the carriage was a mass or roaring flames. It was so hot that I could hardly breathe. I managed to smash one of the windows which, by some miracle, remained unbroken, and then I saw something that made me catch my lip between my teeth and fight to retain my senses.

"The woman opposite me was already almost unrecognisable. I could see that all her clothing had been burnt off—oh, I can't tell you any more, it is too dreadful. A little time before she had been a woman, but when I saw her again she was little more than the trunk of a tree that is partially destroyed in a forest fire. Her hands were shrivelled as those of a mummy. I think she must have been killed outright before the fire broke out. You can imagine what I felt.

"And then, you will hardly believe it, but a weird thought flashed into my mind. I seemed to have a feeling that I should escape, even from that fiery furnace. I had an idea that I might get away in the confusion and vanish. Vanish in such a way that I should be regarded as dead. So, acting on the impulse that possessed me, I took those two rings out of my bag and forced them on to the fingers of my dead companion."

Chapter XIV

Connie was speaking in a whisper now, but every word she said was being followed by her friends with rapt attention. It was some little time before she could resume.

"After that," she said. "I suppose I fainted again. When once more I opened my eyes I saw the fire had eaten a hole right in the side of my compartment, quite large enough for me to climb out of it on to the line. There everything was in the most terrible confusion. It was in the early morning, remember and dark as pitch. All the same there were men with lanterns and nurses and doctors and all that sort of thing, and, here and there other men working on the blazing carriages in the hope of finding some poor creatures who were not yet dead. One man saw me emerge from the compartment and asked if he could do anything for me. I responded, as best I could, that I was all right and that there was pressing work for him to do elsewhere. So, you see, I was left alone to look after myself, and I

managed to crawl along the line to the next station, which, providentially, was not far away. Later on, a relief train arrived and most of the survivors were carried to Manchester. Later I doubled back as far as this place, when I picked out haphazard and managed to find quarters under the roof of a comfortable old dame who believed my story. The spectacles and wig I bought in Manchester at a theatrical costumiers. And now you know all about it."

It was certainly a most extraordinary story and one that made a profound impression upon the hearers.

"Well, it sounds like a chapter from some dramatic story," Nita said. "Anyway, it makes Connie safe. But, of course, she can't stay here."

"I couldn't if I wanted to," Connie said. "For one thing, my money is nearly given out and if I don't find something to do, then there is only the workhouse."

"I don't think you need worry about that," Dora said. "You are coming to join me to-morrow. You can tell your landlady you have had a letter from your new mistress, asking for your presence at once. I will see that you are met at the station."

"So that's that," Nita laughed. "But I am still rather in the dark. What I want to know is what was the cause of that quarrel between you and Bascoe? Oh, I know he wanted you to sign certain papers which you refused to do, but why was it that you declined to meet his wishes?"

"Ah, that was a mere accident," Connie explained. "I was going to do so when I happened to catch sight of a name in one of the documents that revived an old memory. You know what I mean. You smell a certain scent or see a flower that suddenly brings back to you a whole flood of forgotten recollections. It was the same with the name I am speaking of. And then some instinct prompted me to refuse to sign that paper. Just at that moment, Jimmy Marrable came into the room, and, for some reason or another, Mr. Bascoe forgot all about me. He left the room for a little time, and I read the document I was asked to sign. It didn't convey much to me, but the impression I got was that I was signing away something that belonged to me, and was in a way, connected with my parentage. So I was going to sign nothing."

"But surely you are not going to let things stay where they are?" Dora asked. "From what you tell me and from what Nita said, Bascoe is no more than a common scoundrel who poses as your benefactor for some deep purpose of his own. It looks as if he were trying to rob you of some heritage. That being so, you must not disappear altogether and leave him to get away with perhaps valuable property. Why, he wouldn't hesitate to forge your signature and tell everybody that you signed the paper before you disappeared. I don't say that you should come back to life suddenly and confront him, because that would be playing his game. No, you must let him think you are dead until what the novelist call the psychological moment arrives, and then confront him. But nothing can be done unless we have the help of men like Jimmy Marrable and Hugh Gaskell. Now, why not let Nita tell these two exactly what has happened?"

"Oh, not yet—not yet," Connie implored. "I must have time to think and recover my lost nerve. Perhaps after I have spent a few weeks under your roof, Dora, I shall be able to summon up enough courage to face any crisis. And, anyhow,

Bascoe can do very little unless he has my gold box and the key of the safe in that bank in Paris."

"More mysteries," Nita said. "That is the first I have heard about a gold box and a key of a bank safe. Are you going to leave us in darkness on that matter, Connie?"

Connie went on to explain. It was rather a long story, but it was easy enough to understand it as Connie outlined a leaf from her past as simply as possible.

"Oh-o!" Nita laughed. "The plot thickens. And the more I hear, the more it seems to me necessary that Hugh Gaskell, at any rate, ought to be consulted. And Jimmy, too, for the matter of that. Don't you labour under the impression, Connie, that Jimmy is no more than an artist who lives for the moment. There are hidden depths in Jimmy, as you will see presently. Now, why not let us have a look at that little gold box and see if we can make anything out of the name that you say is enamelled on the key of the safe in the Paris bank."

"But I haven't got it," Connie confessed. "I was afraid that Bascoe might get hold of it on the same night that I refused to sign those papers, and I hid the box with a few more of my treasures in a place where nobody could find it but myself."

"Now, isn't that absurd?" Nita said. "Nobody can find it but yourself indeed. It must be somewhere at Uppertons, and if anybody can find it without arousing suspicions, who is a more suitable person than myself?"

"Yes, in the ordinary way, I agree," Connie said. "But, you see, the box is not in the house at all. It is hidden in a tree in the small wood at the back of the house. There is a hole just in the fork of a tree about as high as you can reach, where, at one time, a woodpecker built her nest. I found that out long ago, and when I realised that I might lose that precious box and how important its contents were, I stole out of the house and hid it in the old woodpecker's nest. Nobody could find it but myself, because the wood is full of trees of about the same age, and you might search for a month and never find the right one. If the box is to be recovered and handed over to somebody who is likely to make use of it on my behalf, then I shall have to go back to Uppertons and recover it myself."

"Absolutely impossible," Nita cried.

"No, I don't think so," Connie went on calmly. "Dora was absolutely taken in just now by my disguise. Why shouldn't I leave here to-morrow, or the day after, and make some excuse for calling at Uppertons. Ask a question about a late servant or something of that kind. Then I can make my way back to the road through the wood where the box is hidden and recover it. In fact, there is no other way possible."

It was some time before the two fell in with Connie's suggestion. But, at length, she prevailed and two days later in the afternoon, she found herself at the back door of Uppertons asking the housekeeper a question relating to a late servant whom she mentioned by name. And then, when she had apologised for the trouble she had given she retraced her steps and branched off into the wood at the back of the house as if she were taking a short cut to the high road which was used occasionally by tradesmen coming up to Uppertons.

She had almost reached the point where the box was hidden when she came face to face with Bascoe. Just for a moment she felt as if her knees would collapse from under her, then, quite steadily, she wished him a respectful good afternoon

and went slowly on her way, whilst Bascoe vanished in the direction of the house. She did not fail to see the gloomy frown on his brow and the cloud of trouble in his eyes.

With a deep feeling of thankfulness, she neared the tree in which the box was concealed. She had half reached her arm up to the hole in the tree when she drew back suddenly as another person hove in sight. She recognised the individual as the eccentric Wimpole, whom she had only seen on about two occasions and knew he was a queer person who was devoting his whole life and energy to the discovery of a blue daffodil. His head was bent and he was chuckling to himself and muttering strangely under his breath as he followed more or less in Bascoe's track. But, despite his innocent appearance, there was a menace in his eyes that Connie would have noticed had she not been too preoccupied.

She waited, panting breathlessly, almost afraid to move lest there should be some other interruption just at the moment when she was snatching the precious box from its hiding place. She stood, hardly daring to breathe until satisfied that she was quite alone and, a moment later, she had thrust the gold box deep down in the pocket of her coat.

It was all right now, so she turned and moved swiftly, in the direction of the road. As she did so, a twig snapped like a pistol shot a little distance away and Connie lost her head and fled as if for her life. For a few yards she sped, then her foot caught in a hidden root and she came to earth with a crash, shaking the spectacles from her eyes and the wig from her head. When she looked up, Hugh Gaskell was standing over her.

Chapter XV

Hugh Gaskell had been face to face with death too often with his life hanging on a mere thread to betray himself in that hectic moment. All the same, he had to clench his teeth hard to hold back the cry which almost tore itself from his lips. With a swift glance under his brows to make sure that nobody was in sight or hearing, he raised Connie to her feet and looked into her eyes with a perfectly blank expression.

"I hope you haven't hurt yourself," he said politely.

Connie contrived to play up to him at once.

"No, I don't think so, sir," she stammered. "I caught my foot in a root and came down rather heavily."

Very quietly she picked up her hat and wig and glasses and resumed them in a way that filled Hugh with admiration. Anybody looking on from a few yards away would have believed that there was nothing more in it than a trifling accident, with Hugh acting the part of the good Samaritan. But he was speaking under his breath and in a whisper so low that even Connie had to strain her ears to follow what he was saying.

"What does it all mean," Hugh asked. "Oh, course, we can't talk here, but you must realise that I can't part from you again without a thorough explanation."

“I suppose not,” Connie said. “You were the last person I ever expected to meet, Hugh, and, in a way, the last I wanted to see. Where can we go?”

Hugh shook his head, quite at a loss.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But we can’t stand here looking like a pair of fools. I must know how you got here and why. Why are you taking such a frightful risk in your present disguise? And where are you going next?”

“Back where I came from,” Connie whispered.

“And where on earth may that happen to be?”

“Oh, you are asking me to go into a long explanation and I dare not do it with the risk of being seen by anybody. It might be a servant from the house or anybody out of the village. What would they say if they saw you holding a sort of secret meeting with a domestic servant in this secluded spot. Now listen, I am lady’s maid to Dora Stevenage who is a great friend of Nita Keene. I came here to-day at great risk to gain possession of something I had left behind and I have succeeded. I am on my way back, now, to catch a local train at the junction which will land me, presently, at Greenfield where a car will meet me. Don’t you think it would be safer if you followed me at a discreet distance and took a chance—”

“Now that is a good idea,” Hugh said approvingly. “I will follow you into the junction station and watch till you take your seat. There will be very few people travelling by the local train so that you can easily get a carriage to yourself and I will take a ticket and join you.”

Everything fell out happily and half an hour later Hugh was listening to Connie’s story in a third class carriage which they had to themselves. She told him all about the gold box and the key to the safe in the bank in Paris, and how she had come to quarrel with Bascoe over her refusal to sign the papers that he had placed before her.

“And now you know all about it,” she said.

“No, I don’t,” Hugh said. “I want to know how it is that one who is supposed to be dead and buried has come to life again in this amazing fashion.”

“Oh, of course,” Connie said. “Fancy my forgetting that, I can’t go into the story in detail, Hugh, really I can’t. It is too horrible.”

In a few words she rapidly sketched the outline of the accident and what had happened to the rings. After that, there was a silence between them until Hugh crossed over to the opposite seat and sat himself down by Connie’s side.

“No, no,” she cried, warding him off with one hand. “You must not touch me, indeed you must not. There are reasons, and most powerful reasons, why you must never think about me again the way that—oh, you know what I mean. You love me, and I am happy in the knowledge, and I confess it freely enough—that love is returned. But it is useless, Hugh. There is a barrier between us that can never be dissolved. Don’t ask me what it is, for I can’t tell you. And don’t push me beyond my strength, because I have been tried lately so much that I fear that I shall break down altogether. Some day, perhaps, if providence is good to us—”

She broke off abruptly, and Hugh could see that she was trembling from head to foot. It was hard to restrain himself, hard to feel that he was losing Connie at the moment when he had found her again, but he managed to conceal his feelings.

“Very well, my dear,” he said. “It shall be as you wish. I have waited patiently so long that I can hold on a little longer. But you are in trouble. There is something

between you and that man, Bascoe, that I mean to hear sooner or later. At any rate, you might let me help."

"Oh, so gratefully," Connie said. "Perhaps I had better tell you how it was that I declined to sign those papers which led up to such a quarrel between Bascoe and myself not many hours before that attempt was made on his life."

With that, Connie went on to speak freely about the little gold box and the key with the enamel name on it.

"Now I begin to see something like daylight," Hugh said. "Where is that box?"

"I have it in my coat pocket at the present moment," Connie explained. "That is what I came to Uppertons to get. It was a great risk, but it had to be done."

"I am glad to hear that," Hugh said, "but you can do nothing with that box yourself. You can do nothing at all until we can prove that Bascoe is a foul liar. For some reason or another which we shall have to discover, he wants the world to believe that the late unfortunate Constance Wakefield made an attempt on his life. And whilst the real culprit is at large, there is nothing for it but for you to go on masquerading as you are. But that doesn't prevent me setting the wheels turning. Now, what I suggest is that you let me have the little gold box with its contents and leave me to deal with that side of the puzzle. If I can only ascertain the history of your parents it will be something gained. And I have an idea that the business is something even more important than that. It is fairly obvious that your signature to certain documents meant handing over a considerable amount of money to Bascoe. I feel convinced that if he liked to speak he could tell you all about your parentage and a good deal more besides. So if you will let me have that box and the key and an authority signed by you, so that I shall have something to show the bank people in Paris, I shall probably be able to solve more problems than one. Besides, the box will be much safer in my keeping than yours."

"Oh, if only you would," Connie sighed thankfully. "I felt bound to get the box back, though I haven't the slightest idea what to do with it. So if you will take it I shall be full of gratitude and, yes, perhaps hope."

She took the box from her pocket and handed it over to Hugh, who stowed it safely away.

"I don't think you are going to regret this," he said. "I will examine the contents of the box—by the way, is there anything inside there, except the key?"

"One or two papers," Connie said. "But they convey nothing to me. I dare say you will think it strange, but I have hardly looked at them."

"Ah so like a woman," Hugh smiled. "Now, Connie, can't you tell me anything of this barrier you are speaking about. Is it something real and tangible, or a sort of ghost you have conjured up to frighten yourself with."

"Oh, no," Connie cried. "I wish to heaven it were. It is as real as life itself. It is a bond that I forged of my own free will, and at the time it seemed so simple and so reasonable that I hardly gave it a second thought. It was inevitable in a way, too. When Mr. Bascoe suggested it to me, I thought he was quite disinterested."

"Oh, then Bascoe is at the bottom of it, is he?" Hugh said between his teeth. "Yes, I might have guessed that that rascal had something to do with it. But surely you can give me some sort of a hint as to what it is?"

"Oh, no," Connie cried. "I cannot, I dare not, I must not. Only this—that if I had been aware that you were still in the world and looking for me, I should have

declined at any cost. But I thought you were dead. Mr. Bascoe said that you were dead. No, not in answer to a question of mine—it came out in casual conversation. Oh, don't let us pursue the conversation any further. I can't bear it, Hugh, I can't."

"Very well, my dear," Hugh said resignedly. "It shall be as you wish at any rate for the present. Thank God you are alive and well and in good hands. So far as I can make out, only three people know you are alive and so long as your secret is kept, it seems to me that you are safe. But I am going to ask you to give me permission to mention these facts to one more person. I want you to let me take Jimmy Marrable into our confidence. You won't mind will you?"

Chapter XVI

It seemed to Connie that the request was reasonable, especially considering the relationship between Marrable and Nita, so that she was pleased to agree. Then a little later on the two parted and on the following morning Hugh got into his car and went as far as Uppertons with the intention of having a confidential talk with Jimmy Marrable. He found the latter in the eccentric Wimpole's cottage and took him outside when they could be free from listeners.

And here Hugh told his friend all that had happened the previous day. Jimmy Marrable listened with something more than astonishment until the story was finished and then turned to Gaskell with a question in his eyes.

"That is the most extraordinary thing that ever happened," he exclaimed. "I never read anything so strange in a novel or, still more remarkable, in a newspaper. Fancy Nita keeping that from me. Well, I shall never maintain that a woman can't hold a secret again."

"You must not blame her for it," Hugh smiled.

"Blame her, old chap, nothing of the sort. I am filled with admiration of her reticence. But what are we going to do? We can't confront Bascoe in his den and shake the truth out of him. My firm impression is that he knows who it was that made that murderous assault upon him. We can't prove at present that Bascoe is a thorough bad lot, but we can look up his record and see if, in the past—oh, well, you know what I mean. A chap like that is bound to make enemies. And one of them certainly tried, on that fateful night, to get even with him. And now I am agoing to tell you something. I am in a position to prove beyond a demonstration that Connie had nothing whatever to do with that revolver shot. Of course, the weapon was her own and only one cartridge of it was discharged. The police found the bullet and, from their point of view, the case was complete. But you are not to get me to believe that a woman, however hysterical, would be insane enough, after she thought she had killed a man, to leave the weapon behind her. However, that is only a detail.

"But, here we have Bascoe swearing positively to the time that the assault took place, which was a dashed silly thing of him to do, because there was nothing to gain on his part by specifying the precise moment at which he was shot. But anyway, he elected through thick and thin to stick to the time, and confirmation of

what he said was afforded by Tarrant, the butler. But my idea is that Tarrant was correct when he attributed that eleven o'clock shot to some rabbit poachers in the grounds. In other words, there were two shots fired, one at eleven o'clock and one twenty-five minutes or so later. It was the twenty-five minutes later report that did the mischief. Must have done, because, as I have told you before, I left Uppertons just before eleven and after that, Bascoe was at work on the water colour drawing for at least twenty-five minutes, which proves conclusively that at twenty-five minutes past eleven he was perfectly fit and well. Now, I have that water-colour drawing in my lodgings and I can produce it whenever it is required. I can procure expert evidence if necessary who will point out the difference between my work and Bascoe's, and nail down the fact that something like half an hour must have been spent upon it after I had finished."

"Most important," Hugh said gravely. "Later on, we may be able to use that information with fatal results as far as Bascoe is concerned. But, meanwhile, we have a long row to hoe. Bascoe still stands on pretty firm ground."

"Yes, I quite appreciate that," Jimmy said. "But what about the gold box? Don't you think we can make something out of that? I am hoping that after your visit to Paris, we shall be able to get a strangle-hold on Bascoe.'"

"Yes, that is my hope too. I don't want to be over-sanguine, but I should not be surprised to find, after I have examined the contents of the safe in the Paris bank, that Connie's past history and her parentage will be made clear. I feel perfectly certain Bascoe knows all about Connie, and where she came from. He could tell us who her father and mother were, and how she came to find herself as a small child in the care of Countess Inez Matua. It may be an ugly secret; and, on the other hand, it may go a long way to clear the air. Anyhow, Bascoe is the rogue in the play, and there must have been some very powerful motive on his part for trying to force Connie into signing those papers."

"You mean money, I suppose?" Jimmy asked.

"Well, of course. Money or jewels or securities or something of that sort. But you know Bascoe much better than I do, and it is fairly easy to see what opinion you have formed of him. You don't regard him as a rich philanthropist who sought Connie out and made her the mistress of his household, to say nothing of the reversion of his fortune, out of pure kindness of heart."

"Not exactly," Jimmy grinned. "If ever Bascoe lays out a sixpence, he expects to see half-a-crown in return. He poses as a patron of mine and deludes himself with the idea that I am grateful to him for lifting me out of the mud and paying me handsomely for certain work which scores of people could do just as well, whilst I am looking about me and trying to establish my name as an artist on a firm foundation. Of course, I ought not to have come to Uppertons at all; I ought to have been ashamed of myself. But I was absolutely on my uppers at the time, and what is a poor devil to do when he hasn't a bean in the world and stares the workhouse in the face? At first I looked upon the whole thing as rather a joke—"

"Yes, and I should think the joke became a little more enjoyable when you managed to wangle Nita Keene into Uppertons. My dear old chap, it is time you dropped these little vaudeville stunts of yours and thought seriously of your future."

“Spoken like a man who is born with a silver spoon in his mouth and ten thousand a year of his own,” Jimmy laughed. “But you are quite right old chap! This business has been a lesson to me, and I am not going to forget it. Besides, I have got my chance now, and I mean to grasp it with both hands. If I hadn’t Nita to think of I should have chucked Uppertons some time ago and gone to London. But, dash it all, old bean, you wouldn’t have me desert Mr. Micawber—what?”

“I suppose you never will be quite serious,” Hugh said. “However, I know I can trust you when the pinch comes. My present intention is to go to Paris without delay, leaving you here to keep your eye upon the firm. And if you can give Bascoe a real good jolt meanwhile, it won’t do any harm.”

“Oh, I can do that,” Jimmy said. “I am going up there presently, and if you will let me have your address in Paris, I will keep you au fait with all that transpires.”

There was no more to be said for the moment, so Hugh got into his car and drove homewards, whilst Jimmy, in a more than usually serious frame of mind, went as far as Uppertons. There he found Bascoe in the library, passing the time with a sheet of drawing paper and a box of water colours. Jimmy smiled as he saw this, because it gave him the opening he required. He bent over the table where Bascoe was at work and pointed out a glaring error.

“There you are,” he said. “Despite all I have told you. You will never make an artist if you will insist in disregarding all the canons of the art. It was just the same with that picture you were working on, on the night you came to grief.”

Bascoe looked up a little suspiciously.

“Why do you allude to that?” he asked.

“Well, because it is a case in point. If you had done what I told you, you wouldn’t have spoilt one of my best bits of work I ever did. It took me the best part of a day and a half to draw that bit of landscape, and when I left you about five minutes to eleven on that memorable night, I hoped that you would do no more than just add a touch or two. Instead of which, you must have spent at least twenty-five minutes, making an infernal hash of a delicate piece of colouring.”

Again Bascoe looked up with a scowl on his face. “I didn’t,” he said. “I never touched it.”

“Oh, yes, you did. I will bring it back presently, and show you what a hash you made of it. It was five minutes to eleven that night when I left here and you must have been working on it for nearly half an hour after that. And yes, by Jove, now I come to think of it, you swore till all’s blue that it was just eleven o’clock when Connie shot you.”

There was a direct challenge in Jimmy’s voice now, and Bascoe rose to it without a moment’s delay.

“You had best be careful,” he said hoarsely, “You are treading on delicate ground and the sooner you realize it the better. Let sleeping dogs lie. Oh, yes, I know what you are driving at. You are thinking about those papers that Miss Wakefield declined to sign. But I know how to close my mouth. What if I tell you that her legal name was not Wakefield, but Constance Bascoe? Oh, you are surprised, are you? I can show the certificate of marriage.”

Chapter XVII

As Bascoe calmly announced the fact that Connie was his wife, there was an easy assurance about him and a smile so different to his usual truculent air that Jimmy was conscious of a feeling of deep uneasiness. If the man had blustered or bullied or tried any bluff of that sort, then Jimmy would have felt more sure of his ground. But as it was, he was at a disadvantage and, moreover, Bascoe was aware of the fact.

"Yes," the latter went on in the same smooth, easy way. "What I am telling you, is nothing but the truth, though there is no reason why I should take you into my confidence at all. I did not like your manner just now, Marrable, and I tell you so frankly. But you and I have been pretty good friends and there are reasons why we should not quarrel."

"I don't think anybody said a word about a quarrel," Jimmy grinned. "I don't want to have any unpleasantness with you, and all the more because circumstances have compelled me to play a part of which I am not particularly proud. We are a couple of humbugs, Bascoe, and you know it."

"Ah, well perhaps you are right," Bascoe said airily. "Of course you are speaking from an artistic point of view. But, my dear fellow, there is no reason why anybody should know the history of those water-colour drawings."

"I was not thinking about them," Jimmy said. "I was more occupied with the story of the attack on you in this very room on that eventful night. And now you tell me that your own wife tried to murder you. Do you really want me to believe that?"

"Does it matter to me two straws whether you believe it or not?" Bascoe asked with a return of his usual truculent manner. "There are matters connected with this business of which I can say nothing. Family secrets, and all that sort of thing."

"Very likely," Jimmy retorted. "But why do you stick to that yarn about eleven o'clock when you know perfectly well, and I know perfectly well, that the trouble must have occurred not far short of half an hour later? That is what makes me doubt your story and forces me to the conclusion that you are shielding somebody else at the expense of poor Connie."

"Well, and if I am, what then?"

"Oh, well, in that case, there is no more to be said. But I tell you to your face that I don't believe a word of it. Of course, somebody shot you and I have a shrewd suspicion that you know something of the criminal. But to go on accusing Connie of having tried to murder you after she is dead is a pretty cowardly thing to do. And that is why I shan't feel happy until our business has come to an end."

Bascoe regarded the speaker with a placid smile on his face. He seemed amused about something and certainly had the air of one who feels that he holds all the cards.

"Just as you like, my dear chap," he said. "Just as you like. I have served your purpose and, no doubt you have made other arrangements. I rather wondered why

a clever artist like you stayed here so long, playing the ghost and allowing me to take the credit for that admirable work of yours."

Jimmy winced slightly under the sarcasm, but it was not his game to show any resentment and he said nothing. Then Bascoe crossed the room and threw open the door of his safe, from which he took a long narrow slip of paper.

"Here you are," he said. "Have a look at it for yourself. The sight of this document may be the means of saving you from making a fool of yourself in some other direction."

With that, Bascoe tossed the slip across to his companion and Jimmy read the writing thereon carefully. There was no doubt whatever of the authenticity of the document. It was a certificate of marriage between Rupert Bascoe and Constance Wakefield, the ceremony having taken place in a registry office in London some eighteen months before. It was impossible for Jimmy to regard this as a forgery and, in any case, Bascoe would never have dared to try a bluff like that, seeing that it was possible for Jimmy to memorize the date and the registry office and find out for himself if the marriage really had taken place. It had been a bit of a shock for him when Bascoe had bluntly spoken of his marriage, and that shock was none the less when Bascoe produced chapter and verse for it.

"Well, are you satisfied now?" Bascoe asked with a suspicion of a sneer. "Ah, yes, I see you are. And now perhaps you will allow the subject to drop once and for all. I am not going to deny that you have made a very good point over the question of the time, and I am not going to deny that I have a very good reason for trying to deceive you and everybody else. That it my business, and I want you not to forget it."

"I won't," Jimmy retorted. "But you are never going to get me to believe that poor Connie ever had any hand in the attempt on your life. For two reasons. First of all, if she had, you would never have told anybody. And secondly, because you have told us such a lot of lies about the time. I think the best thing I can do is to clear out without delay."

"Oh, not quite so fast," Bascoe said. "I shall at least expect you to complete your contract. There are three or four of those sketches yet to be finished, and I am not disposed to let you go until they are done. If you put your back into it, we ought to finish within a week."

Jimmy hastened to agree. He had very nearly succeeded is having the front door of Uppertons shut in his face, which would have been something of a calamity in view of the fact that he was still anxious to have the run of the house. The mystery was deepening instead of growing lighter and, until the end was in sight, the right of coming and going to Uppertons was a privilege that would have been madness to throw away.

"Very well," he said. "I have told you what was in my mind and feel all the better for it. I am not going to break my contract, though perhaps within the course of the next few days I shall be free to leave."

Jimmy went off presently, and from the hotel in the village managed to get hold or Hugh Gaskell on the telephone. It was not much he had to say, but the few pregnant words caused Hugh to jump in his car and hurry to Wimpole's cottage without delay. There he found Jimmy awaiting him, and the two turned into the

road where they could talk without the risk of being overheard by anybody who happened to be near.

"Now tell me all about it," said Hugh.

"Well, to begin with," Jimmy responded. "You must be prepared for a great shock. I have discovered why it is that Connie was so anxious to keep us at a distance. I mean the dramatic touch, old chap. The heroine snatching herself from the hero's sheltering arms and telling him it cannot be, and all that sort of thing. Just as Connie treated you."

"Yes, that is right," Hugh said moodily. "Some sort of barrier which she could not, or would not explain. And yet I am absolutely sure that she is as fond of me as I am of her. If it is anything to do with her birth, it would not make the slightest difference, and she ought to know it. If she were the daughter of the greatest scoundrel in Europe, and the worst woman, I should want to marry her just the same."

"Yes, but you can't," Jimmy said.

"What on earth do you mean by that?"

"Well, you see, old chap, she is married already."

"Connie married?" Hugh cried. "Married? Do you mean to tell me that the poor girl has a husband alive?"

"Very much so," Jimmy said mournfully. "But that is not the worst of it. She is married to Bascoe."

It was a blow between the eyes for Hugh, but he bore it manfully enough. He was dazed and half stunned, but he managed to keep a grip on himself as he turned to Jimmy for further information. And though Jimmy was full of sympathy, he knew that it was better to speak out plainly and get it over.

"Yes, it's Bascoe all right," he said. "There is not doubt about it, because I have seen the marriage certificate by trying to put a bluff over Bascoe in connection with that water-colour drawing and the alleged time of the attempted murder. But Bascoe was too many for me. He practically admitted that he had deceived everybody over the time and pretended that there was some reason for it which did not concern anybody but himself. So what an earth could I do?"

"We seem to have made a nice mess of it between us," Hugh said dismally. "But surely Bascoe didn't stick to the statement that Connie had tried to shoot him?"

"Indeed he did, and I couldn't shake him either. He certainly half suggested that he might be sheltering somebody else, but he would not exonerate Connie. And then, when I thought I had got him, he showed me that he and Connie were married and gave me the marriage certificate to read. Oh, it's right enough. I memorized the date and the registry office in London and I saw Bascoe smile as he noticed me doing so. There was no bluff about that bit of paper."

"But why, in the name of heaven, why?'" Hugh cried. "What form of madness can have induced that poor girl to ally herself with a man double her age when she knew that there was somebody else to whom her heart was given?"

"Meaning yourself, of course," Jimmy smiled.

Chapter XVIII

"Need we discuss that particular point?" Hugh asked. "It is years since I first met Connie in the most deplorable circumstances when we were thrown together for some considerable time. I didn't tell her what my feelings were, but she guessed them right enough and I guessed hers. Out in the east of Europe where everything was a fair imitation of Hades, it was no time to talk about love. But it was understood that were were to meet again, and we should have done if she hadn't disappeared in the most mysterious manner, and I don't suppose I should ever have seen her again if it hadn't been for you. My dear fellow, that scoundrel must have held some threat of dire terror over the poor girl's head to have induced her to take such a step. But I am not going to leave things as they are—I am going to have it out with that rascal. Now that the police are satisfied, and have ceased to take any interest in what they call the Uppertons Mystery, it remains for us two to try and clear it up."

"Very well," Jimmy said. "You can see Bascoe if you like, but you won't get anything out of him. That chap is too sure of his ground to fear you in the slightest."

"Perhaps," Hugh said grimly. "But then again, perhaps not. But in solving this diabolical business, we have one great factor on our side of which Bascoe knows nothing."

"And what does that happen to be?" Jimmy asked.

"The fact that Bascoe is ignorant of Connie being still in the land of the living," Hugh smiled grimly. "We have that on our side, and when we are ready, we can swing it on that rascal. Meanwhile, I want a little talk with him. And I am going to have that talk without further delay."

Seeing that Hugh was determined to pursue the course he had laid out for himself, Jimmy raised no further objection, and together they crossed the fields in the direction of Uppertons. They found Bascoe at home and quite ready to receive them. He elevated his eyebrows and looked slightly uneasy for a moment as he turned and faced Hugh Gaskell.

"Ah, this is an unexpected pleasure," he said scoffingly. "And none the less so, Mr. Gaskell, because I thought you were numbered with those who have passed over. In fact, I told Miss Wakefield so more than once."

"But why keep up the fiction of Miss Wakefield?" Jimmy smiled. "I told my friend, Gaskell here that a marriage had taken place between you and Miss Wakefield less than two years ago. That is why Mr. Gaskell is here."

"I presume you sent for him?" Bascoe challenged.

"Well, you can put it that way if you like," Jimmy said. "At any rate, my friend is here to discuss the matter."

"Really," Bascoe protested. "Really?"

"There is no occasion to adopt that tone," Hugh said. "I came here this afternoon in response to a telephone call from my friend, Marrable. I knew Constance Wakefield years ago and we were something more than friends. An accident of war parted us, and, ever since, I have been searching for her it was a

mere chance that Marrable was in this house and put me on the right track. And when I came, it was too late. I dare say you wonder why I know that, but I saw Miss Wakefield on one occasion and she let me know by inference that any friendship between us might be regarded as finished. But she didn't tell me that she was married and that you were her husband. I dare say you regard it as a liberty, but would you mind telling me why it was that you married her?"

"Well, of all the impudence," Bascoe said, with quite a pleasant smile. "You come into my house, practically a stranger, and demand, to know why I married my wife. Of course, I can guess something of your feelings, and, indeed, a few years ago Connie gave me a pretty broad hint as to how things had once stood between you two. And now, if you must know, I will tell you how it was that Connie Wakefield became Mrs. Bascoe."

"You are vastly obliging," Hugh said, bitterly.

"Not at all, my dear fellow, not at all. I married my wife because it was absolutely necessary for her safety that she would ally herself with an Englishman without delay. You see, she had not nationality, she hadn't the remotest idea who her parents were, or how she came to find herself a sort of lone orphan, living with Countess Inez Matua. So when the war was over, and Connie came to England to get her living as a nurse, one or two inquisitive people began to ask questions. Then the dear old lady called D.O.R.A. took a hand in the game. She wanted to know who Connie was and how she had managed to reach England without a passport. If things had remained as they were, the poor girl would have been inevitably deported. And where could she have gone?"

Bascoe flung the questions at the heads of the two men, and waited for a reply that failed to come.

"Very well," he went on. "You see the difficulty. Connie would have been turned out of this country with nowhere to go and something like starvation to face. So I came to the rescue because I liked her and because I am a rich man with no relatives I cared a straw about. I don't mind admitting that it was a long time before I could persuade that poor child to see reason, but she did at last and that's all there is to it."

"Very noble of you," Hugh said. "But, my dear sir, during the war I saw a good deal of the worst side of human nature in very high places and I have got in the habit of looking for a motive. Now, you won't be too much annoyed if I say that I don't believe you married Constance Wakefield to save her from the fate that you outlined just now. I believe, if you liked you could tell us all about her parents on both sides. And I have every reason to believe that Miss Wakefield was not the poor girl you make out, but that she was entitled to a considerable property in her own right. If that were not so, why were you so anxious to induce her to sign certain papers. Why did you threaten her with violence if she would not do so? Of course, you can refuse to answer these questions, but perhaps a court of law will force you to do so. Mind, I am not talking without book. I have in my possession—but that is another matter."

For the first time, Bascoe showed signs of uneasiness. "I can assure you that you are wrong," he said eagerly. "I can show you evidence concerning Connie's parentage which will astonish and shock you. Never mind how I came across it—it was one of the queer things that the war threw up. I remember many years ago,

during the time I was in Serbia doing my best to bring about an understanding between that country and Bulgaria, blundering on to some documents which I was examining together with a man named Hargest—what on earth am I talking about? His name was Gregory. I can't think what put the word Hargest into my mind. Well, as I was saying, I stumbled on documents I would much rather not have seen. If you are wise, you won't ask me any further questions."

"You would decline to answer them?" Jimmy asked.

"Most emphatically," Bascoe rejoined. "And now, gentlemen, if you have no more to say—"

Jimmy hastened to take the hint, and almost dragged Hugh from the room with him. It was only when they were well clear of the house that he turned to Hugh with blazing eyes.

"Great Scott, what a bit of luck!" he cried. "Do you mean to say that the name of Hargest didn't suggest anything to you, Hugh, old chap. Charles Hargest, the head of the Secret service in the near East? The man who knew every spy on both sides of the campaign from those at the top to the little germs that swarmed every city in Bulgaria and Turkey. It was a slip of the tongue and I could see that Bascoe could have bitten his out when that name escaped from his lips. Now, Charlie Hargest must be somewhere in England. Suppose we go back to the village pub and see if we can't get him at his club or something of that sort. You can bet your life he knows all about Bascoe, and if he doesn't turn out to be a real wrong 'un, then I shall be greatly mistaken. Come on and let us try our luck."

It took some time by the use of the trunk line to establish the fact that the man called Charles Hargest was in London. Further calls to his flat elicited the fact that he was lunching at the Wanderers' Club, where he would be likely to be found till fairly late in the afternoon. Then another call and, after a long pause Hugh heard, at the other end of the wire, a voice that had been familiar enough to him in the days of stress and danger.

"Hello, hello," he said. "Who is that? Oh, Hugh Gaskell, is it? Fancy that now! Good Lord! I haven't seen or heard of you for years. Where are you calling from? Oh, yes, you have a place near there, haven't you? I will run down one of these early days and have a chat over old times."

"I shall be glad if you will come today," Hugh said. "Here is the address. You had better come down by the evening train after dark. What's that? Oh yes, the same old game. Man called Rupert Bascoe. Do you know him?"

"Know him," the voice came back over the wires. "That infernal scoundrel. I should think I did know him. But he didn't call himself Bascoe then. If I can do anything to place him where he ought to have been long ago, then I should consider no money or time wasted. Yes, expect me by the last train, whatever time it is."

"Things are beginning to move," Jimmy smiled, as Hugh replaced the receiver. "If Bascoe only knew!"

Chapter XIX

Hugh Gaskell turned his back upon the telephone and faced Jimmy with a pertinent question.

"What are we going to do next?" he asked.

"Well," Jimmy responded, "what can we do until Charlie Hargest turns up? And if Hargest fails us, then we are no worse off than we were before—that is, unless I can do a bit of burglary work at Uppertons. I mean, get a sight of the inside of Bascoe's fireproof safe."

"There might be something in that," Hugh agreed thoughtfully, "but dangerous, Jimmy. Now, look here—you have got to put aside for a moment the inconsequent easy-going Jimmy Marrable and revert to the Marrable who was so useful to his country during the war. You know what I mean. Sink the artist in the alert Secret Service man."

"Oh, as to that," Jimmy grinned, "that Bohemian vagabond, Jimmy Marrable, has practically ceased to exist. When this tangle is all unravelled, James Marrable the eminent artist, is coming into his own. I have got my chance, and I mean to grasp it with both hands. Then, as soon as possible, I shall make Nita my wife and tell my highly-respected father-in-law to go and hang himself. It is very strange how my affairs and yours and Connie's are all mixed up in the same jig-saw puzzle. Just consider a moment. Connie is hiding under the roof of a woman who is half-sister to the man Nita's father wants her to marry."

"Oh, yes, I know all about that," Hugh said impatiently. "I have a few hours to spare before Hargest gets here, and I propose to go over to Mrs. Stevenage's house to see Connie. I am going to tell her of the disclosure we more or less forced out of Bascoe just now, and tell her that her secret is no longer her own. I don't know Mrs. Stevenage, so perhaps it would be as well if you gave me one of your cards."

"Right-o!" Jimmy agreed. "You will find Dora Stevenage everything that her half-brother is not. A most delightful woman, and entirely on our side. In the meantime, I am going to try and work out a little scheme of my own. If there is anything in it, I can let you know by the time you get back home."

"Which will be about half-past seven," Hugh said. "Just in time to meet Hargest and take him back to dinner. If you can contrive to run over later in the evening it won't be a bad move. But don't do it if you think that your absence would arouse Bascoe's suspicions."

"Oh, that's all right," Jimmy said. "My time is more or less my own, and in no case was I going to Uppertons to-night. There is a chap in the village who runs a car for hire, and I will arrange for him to bring me over to your place and stay there until we have finished our conference with Hargest."

Hugh, having no more to say for the moment, got into his car and made his way without further delay, to the residence of Dora Stevenage where he sent in Jimmy's card and asked for the favour of an interview with the mistress of the house. A moment or two later, Dora entered the drawing-room and made Hugh welcome in her own pleasant and friendly way.

"Of course, I know all about you, Mr. Gaskell," she said. "And I can guess why you are here. Do you want to have a private talk with Connie or can I—"

“Well, yes, if you please,” Hugh interrupted. “I know that you are in Connie’s confidence, and she has probably told you of the dramatic way in which I discovered that she had not met her death in that terrible railway accident.”

“Yes, she told me that,” Dora said. “And very distressed about it she was. She didn’t want anybody to know for the present that she was still in the land of the living, but as I pointed out to her, such a state of things could not go on indefinitely. And if I may touch on a delicate subject, I know what your feelings are so far as Connie is concerned and the light in which she regards you. Still, she has not been entirely candid, even with me, because when I asked her what possible obstacle there is between you both, she is reduced to a state of distress and says that she must never see you again. So what can I do? If you know what that obstacle is—”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Hugh interrupted. “But I only found it out a short time ago. Of course, I can’t tell you what it is without Connie’s consent and I hope, when I have seen her, that she will allow you to know everything. Would you mind telling her that I am here and waiting to see her.”

Dora smiled as she left the room and returned a moment or two later with Connie close behind her. The girl drew back when she saw Hugh standing there, but it was too late to retreat now and the look of reproach she turned on Dora was wasted.

“All right, my dear,” the latter said cheerfully. “I am not going to apologise for not telling you who your visitor was, I am going to leave him to explain.”

With that, Dora vanished leaving Hugh and Connie face to face. The door of the drawing-room was closed and Hugh noticed that the outlook permitted no one to see into the apartment from the garden outside. He turned to Connie with an expression on his face that was stern and a little grave.

“Now, my dear,” he said, “we must have an explanation. If I am to save you and to restore you to the world with your name absolutely cleared, you must be perfectly candid with me. First of all, take off those ugly spectacles and that wig, and let me see the dear little girl that I have loved and hankered for all these years.”

“Oh, please don’t speak like that,” Connie said pleadingly. “You don’t know how mean and miserable you make me feel.”

“But why, Connie—why?” Hugh asked. “What have you done wrong? Nobody who knows you would believe that you had anything to do with that attack upon Bascoe. Then why should you suffer all this worry and anxiety for nothing?”

Very slowly Connie removed her disguise and stood with her eyes fixed almost imploringly on Hugh.

“I don’t know,” she said pathetically. “Oh, Hugh, if I had only met you after the war was over, and before Mr. Bascoe sought me out.”

“Yes,” Hugh retorted. “And if only you had had the strength of mind to refuse Bascoe’s suggestion that you should shelter yourself under his name and become his wife.”

Connie stared in absolute amazement.

“How did you discover that?” she asked.

“I didn’t,” Hugh smiled grimly. “Bascoe told me himself. But Jimmy Marrable, in the first place, practically forced that confession out of him. Moreover, he told us

why such a step was necessary. He married you because you hadn't what the poet called a local habitation or a name, and he painted in the darkest colours what would have happened to you if you had been deported from England as an alien. And he also claimed slight relationship to your mother. Isn't that correct?"

"Oh, yes—yes," Connie cried. "Hugh, I can't say that man was anything but kind to me up to the time we had our quarrel; but, at the same time, I never really liked or trusted him. I can't tell you why, but I didn't. And when he pointed out the grave state in which I stood, and said it was necessary to give me the protection of his name, I yielded, because I thought you were dead. He managed to tell me in conversation that you were dead. And, mind you, Hugh, that marriage was practically to end when we came out of the registry office where it took place. We didn't even go away together, and directly the formalities were concluded, I went back to Uppertons and Mr. Bascoe departed to the Continent where he had business. When he came home we lived just as we had done before, he having his own apartments and I having mine. Because, you see I was still Connie Wakefield to the servants and everybody round about, and nobody knows anything to the contrary, except, I suppose, Jimmy and yourself."

"That is perfectly right," Hugh admitted. "We are the only persons who have discovered your secret, and, for the present, no one else need know. But if I were you, I should tell your hostess and I should certainly tell Nita. My dear child, you can't go on in this way. As soon as we have cleared your name, that ridiculous marriage must be dissolved. Of course, it is absurd to suppose that you are anything but English. And it is any odds that Bascoe is perfectly aware of the fact. He knows who you are, and all about you, and I shall be greatly surprised if it doesn't turn out eventually that you are the owner of considerable property. Otherwise why was Bascoe so mad keen for you to sign those papers? I am absolutely sure that I am right."

"But my dear Hugh," Connie asked. "How are you going to prove it? What evidence have you got?"

"Have you forgotten already?" Hugh smiled. "Have you forgotten that little gold box and the key with the name enamelled on it? That key in the clue to the whole situation. I am going to Paris in a day or two, and when I come back I shall have quite a lot to tell you. Things are in train now, and you have only got to be patient and hide yourself here until we can lay our hands upon the enemy who struck the fatal blow—or rather, fired the fatal shot that nearly ended Bascoe's life. Courage, my darling—courage, and all will be well."

"Ah, if I could only think so," Connie smiled faintly.

Chapter XX

Meanwhile, Jimmy Marrable was pursuing a little course of his own. He had said nothing about it to Gaskell, but for some little time past he had been keeping a careful watch up on his eccentric old landlord, Wimpole. Not because he had anything more definite to go on than the discovery he had made in connection

with the jade-covered pocket-book which Bascoe had missed, and which Jimmy had seen in Wimpole's apology for a safe.

When Jimmy reached his lodgings, he walked into the greenhouse at the end of the garden, where he found Wimpole in a state of suppressed excitement almost bordering on frenzy. In front of the old man was a longish green spike in a flower pot, on the top of which spike something faintly resembling a bloom had appeared.

"Ah, here you are," Jimmy said breezily. "Anything particularly interesting in that shoot you are examining?"

"The triumph of a lifetime," Wimpole piped. "Ah, yes, my friend, it is a discovery that will set every culturist in the world shaking with envy. For there is the blue daffodil."

"You are quite sure of that?" Jimmy asked.

"Ah, my young friend, you never can be quite sure of anything in this world, but I am prepared to pledge my reputation that when the little insignificant bud opens it will be a blue flower. Yes, and a fine one, too. An Emperor daffodil. I tell you, I can't be mistaken. All my life has been devoted to flowers. I have collected them in every quarter of the globe. I have suffered hunger and thirst and stared death in the face times out of number for the sake of a single bloom. Yes, all my life. There is only one other object I have and I shall attain that before I die. But that has nothing to do with flowers, no, no."

As the old man spoke, his face changed from one of wild enthusiasm to a concentrated hate and malignity that caused Jimmy to whistle softly between his teeth.

"And what might that be?" he ventured to ask.

"Ah, no, no," Wimpole cried. "That is my secret. A secret that concerns only myself and a dear one who has been lost sight of for years. But I shall succeed there, as I am going to succeed with the blue daffodil. And when they have both materialised, then I care nothing whether I live or die."

The old man went babbling on in the same strain, ignorant of the fact that he was once more alone, for Jimmy had returned to the cottage with an idea of looking at the inside of the pocket-book. It seemed to him that Wimpole was too deeply engrossed in that green spike to think of anything else at the moment, and, therefore, there would be no danger in an attempt to see inside the safe in the cottage sitting-room. And by good luck the key was in the lock and a few seconds later the jade-covered pocket-book was in Jimmy's hands.

For some ten minutes or so, he turned over the contents, which consisted of a lot of loose papers and letters, and ran his eye over them with a view to getting some sort of a grip on what they meant. And then, towards the end of his search, he came upon a letter in a woman's handwriting, a letter addressed to Bascoe and speaking of him as "my dear Rupert," and ending with the words. "Yours always, Edna." Twice Jimmy read the letter through and then replaced it in the safe, feeling sure that he had not been overlooked, for he could still hear Wimpole muttering and talking to himself in the green-house.

There was a look of mingled gravity and gratification on Jimmy's face as he left the cottage some time later and hired the village car with a view to reaching Hugh's house in time to dine with his friend and the man called Hargest. It was just after seven when the comparatively short journey was accomplished and

Jimmy found himself in Hugh's den, shaking hands with a man he had come especially to see.

"Well, Charles," he said, "dashed glad to see you once more, and that's a fact. Like old times, what? When we took our lives in our hands amongst those brigands in Bulgaria and Turkey and struck a blow for democracy, by jove! That was a life worth living, wasn't it? And now you have turned up again with that ugly old mug of yours to put it across friend Bascoe."

Hargest smiled. He was a long, lean, greyhound of a man with a prominent thrusting nose and a mouth that could smile pleasantly or be as hard as steel.

"Yes, I hope so," he said. "But let us defer all that till we have had something to eat. I never could work on an empty stomach, as you know perfectly well."

They adjourned presently to the dining-room and, once they were back in the snug little room again and cigars were lighted, Hargest at a sign from Hugh, began to talk.

"Look here, Marrable," he said. "Hugh has told me generally the story of recent happenings at a place called Uppertons. He has his own idea as to the trouble there, but he wants to know of Bascoe's past history. Well, it so happens that I am the man to tell him. It was a rotten slip on Bascoe's part this morning when he happened to mention my name and then tried to pass it off by saying he was thinking of somebody else."

"That's right," Jimmy grinned. "Directly the name Hargest dropped from Bascoe's lips, I thought of you at once. That is why Hugh telephoned to your club and got you down here. However, it is for you to do the talking, not me. Fire ahead."

"All right," Hargest said. "You must know that Bascoe was once a sort of extra attache to some fifth-rate embassy in the Balkans. By some means or another, he attracted the attention of his superiors and was entrusted with at least one delicate mission. Mind you, Bascoe was a man of considerable brain power, and his intellect is to be respected. More than that, he has courage and imagination. When the war broke out, he was given a sort of roving commission, because he was more or less a master of languages, and because he was self-indulgent and greedy over money, he could not resist the temptation of taking pay from both sides. More than one serious disaster to our troops in Salonika was entirely due to that scoundrel, and if I could have come up with him one particular occasion, I should have shot the traitor out of hand without the trouble of bringing him before a court martial. You see, we were both supposed to be more or less on the same errand, and it was only by the merest fluke that I discovered what a double game Bascoe was playing. So I tracked him all across Europe, right into Italy. Then I lost sight of him for the time being, and when I got on his track again, I found out that he had had a hand in bringing about the big Italian disaster on the Piave. After that, I couldn't find the least sign of the man. However, it didn't matter, because not long after that the Austrians were flung back when the Central Powers collapsed. That is years ago as you fellows know. But I have not forgotten and I have been keeping an eye open for Bascoe ever since. Mind you, I have chapter and verse for everything I say, and when we do meet, there is going to be trouble. I don't think there is a single incident in Bascoe's life that I haven't got down in black and white."

“Yes, all very interesting,” Hugh said. “But it doesn’t seem to help us much in our present task. I mean, it isn’t of much use to connect with the attack upon Bascoe’s life and his subsequent statement with regard to the girl, whom most of us know as Connie Wakefield. Bascoe still maintains that he married her for her own protection and with a view to leaving her ultimately the bulk of his large fortune.”

“Fortune be hanged,” Hargest cried. “When I last touched Bascoe’s trail, he had no more money than I have, and that is only a few hundred a year. If he is keeping up a large place, as you tell me Uppertons is, then it is either with somebody else’s money or the prospect of it.”

“That is just what I think,” Jimmy said. “And I don’t mind making a small bet that the fortune in question belongs to the young lady whom we know us Connie Wakefield.”

“Well, we may come to that presently. Meanwhile, we have other things to think of,” Hugh said. “Now, would it be as well to confront Bascoe with our friend, Hargest here?”

“Not for a day or two,” Hargest suggested. “I am going to put a proposition to you to-morrow after I have thought it all out. I don’t want to discuss it for a moment, because there are one or two threads hanging loose. You see, so long as Bascoe can claim Miss Wakefield as his wife—”

Jimmy laughed aloud.

“I haven’t had an altogether idle afternoon,” he said. “I spent most of it in the cottage of my eccentric old landlord examining certain things I had accidentally found there some little time ago. It was quite easy, because the eminent horticulturist was in his greenhouse in raptures over a potential blue daffodil, so I had a chance of looking into his safe.

“I found the jade-coloured pocket-book, missing from Bascoe’s library on the night of the attack. I told you about Bascoe missing that, Hugh, didn’t I? Well, although I had previously made that discovery, I had kept the matter to myself. I had time to read letters and documents in that book that threw quite a strong light on our puzzling problem. And one letter in particular intrigued me very much. I have it in my pocket. If I am not greatly mistaken Bascoe has a wife who is still in the land of the living.”

Chapter XXI

“Well,” Hargest said, when the three friends had talked over the matter at length. “I don’t see how you can get any further for the moment. There is one little matter, however, that rather intrigues me that is the question of the jade-covered pocket-book found by our friend, Jimmy, in his landlords safe, which article obviously was at one time the property, or at any rate, in the possession of the scoundrel we are going to unmask.”

“I don’t doubt it for a moment,” Jimmy said. “But for the life of me I can’t see any connexion between my eccentric host and Bascoe. Those two men must have

met during the eighteen months or so that Wimpole has been in the neighbourhood, and, if there is anything between them, I was bound to find it out. I have never heard Bascoe allude once to the eminent horticulturalist, and, certainly, I have never heard the old gentleman mention Bascoe by name, though I have probably alluded to him more than once in conversation with my landlord."

"Yes, that may be all right, but there must be some sort of affinity," Hargest went on. "Now, supposing you sound Wimpole on the subject and see if you can elicit a fact or two likely to help us in our investigations. There is no great hurry and I don't think we can get much further until Gaskell has been over to Paris and probed into the mystery of the safe there. I will go back to London with him and directly you telegraph to me, I will come back here again and carry on. Just a wire to say he arrived, so as not to arouse any curiosity in the village post office and I will be on the spot as fast as a motorcar and bring me. What do you say, Hugh?"

"Oh, I am entirely in accord," Gaskell said. "You devote your attention the next two or three days to your landlord, Jimmy, whilst I am in Paris. And if anything really substantial turns up there, then I will send you an innocent-looking telegram if I am successful, as I hope to be. For the present, at any rate, this palaver is finished."

Early the following morning, Hargest and Gaskell departed for London, leaving Jimmy to pursue his investigations at his leisure. He had certain work to do at Uppertons and this he did not neglect, lest he should arouse any sort of suspicion in the breast of his employer. All the same he had plenty of time on his hands, and spent most of it pottering about the cottage and in and out of the greenhouse where the old gentleman was still engaged in watching the development of that daffodil of his as if life depended upon it.

"Yes," Jimmy said, sympathetically. "I can quite understand how a man gets wrapped up in a pursuit so fascinating as yours. It reminds me of Alexandra Dumas's story of 'The Black Tulip.' Did you happen to read that romance?"

"I have it in my bedroom," Wimpole said. "I must have read it a score of times. In fact it was that wonderful story that first gave me the idea of attempting to propagate a blue daffodil. Ever since I was a boy I have been more or less mad on flowers, and, as I have told you more than once, I have hunted them all over the world."

"More or less for a living, I suppose?"

"Nothing of the sort," the old man chuckled. "My dear young friend, I am a comparatively rich man. That is, I am rich to-day, because my commercial-minded father happened to die without a will and I came into all his property. He didn't intend me to have a penny of it, but death stepped in before he could leave everything to some charity or other, and I inherited the lot."

"Indeed," Jimmy said politely. "If it isn't a rude question, why should a floriculturist like you, with all that money, come here and establish yourself in a cottage?"

A look of intense cunning crossed the old man's wrinkled face for a moment and then was gone.

"That is a shrewd question, my young friend," he said. "A very shrewd question. But when you keep up an establishment of importance, a thousand little things transpire to divert your mind from some central object. And my central object is

the blue daffodil. Hence the fact that I came down here where I could live quietly and think of nothing else."

It sounded logical enough, but Jimmy was not altogether satisfied. Why that look of cunning, he asked himself, and why should Wimpole still speak with a strange gleam in his eye?

"Yes, I see your point," Jimmy said casually. "I suppose your friends come and see you occasionally."

"I have no friends," he said. "When my father disowned me, my friends, so called, fell away, and I had to accept the offer of a firm who dealt in rare plants from all parts of the world or I should have starved."

"Then you are absolutely friendless," Jimmy said, sympathetically. "You don't boast even one?"

"Not one," the old said sadly. "I can't think of a single person I should care to write to and proclaim the fact that Andrew Wimpole is still alive. There was one once, but, I fear she is dead."

Jimmy pricked up his ears. He dared not ask a further question for fear of arousing the old man's suspicions. This was the very first occasion on which he had received anything like a confidence from his landlord, and instinct told him that if he betrayed symptoms of curiosity, Wimpole would probably close like an oyster and say no more. Therefore, all Jimmy could do was to shake his head sadly, and keep silent.

Then, to his relief, the old man went on to talk in an absent kind of way, as if he were alone.

"Yes, there was one," he said. "My sister. We were very good friends. Edna and myself, but I never really valued that friendship until it was too late."

"You mean that she is dead?" Jimmy asked softly.

"I don't know," the old man said, bringing his fist violently down on the table by his side. "I would give every penny of my fortune to be sure. She was a delicate creature, kind and beautiful and a general favourite with everyone who knew her. It would, perhaps, have been better for her if she had been allowed to see more of the world and learn the difference between the false and the true in humanity. But my father was a stern, cold man, who ruled his Puritan household with a rod of iron, so that no young people came into our barrack of a place in north London, and all that Edna learnt she had to read in the few books that I brought her from time to time. And then there came a day when by chance she encountered a man."

Wimpole was speaking now almost under his breath, and with a savage look in his eyes that suggested one who, for the moment, at least, was on the verge of insanity.

"Ah, well," he went on presently, "I don't want to go into that. I never quite knew how those two met, because I had left my father's house then, and had already started on my first voyage. But I know there were secret meetings, followed by an elopement."

"You mean your sister was married?" Jimmy asked.

"Oh, yes, she was married right enough. The scoundrel who took her away saw to that. It was part of the vile game he was playing. His idea was that, sooner or later, my father would forgive and forget and take him into the family. But he didn't know the cold-blooded individual that he had to deal with. My father was

not that type of being. There was no forgiveness and no money. Of course, all this happened when I was away and when I came back after the absence of three years all traces of my sister had vanished, and, try as I would, I could not find her. Then my father died suddenly, as I have already told you, and I found myself the master of a fortune. For a long time, I wandered about seeking Edna but all in vain. All I could ascertain was that the scoundrel who married her had treated her disgracefully and had finally abandoned her somewhere in Australia. So I went to Australia with the same barren result. Do you know, I didn't even know the man's name."

Jimmy spoke on the spur of inspiration.

"Do you happen to know it now?" he asked.

Once more, the look of malignant cunning crept over the old man's face. The madness of murder was in his eyes.

"Yes, I know it now," he almost whispered. "The information has only come to me recently, but I know it, and some of these days there is going to be a reckoning. Ah, my dear young friend, you don't know what it is to be alone in the world, as I am, and to be deprived of the one individual you really care for. Before long you will hear, perhaps, that—"

Wimpole broke off suddenly and refused to say any more. He had noticed the eager expression on Jimmy's face and this had been enough to drive him back on himself.

"I am talking nonsense," he said with an entire change of manner. "I am not a writer of sensational fiction, but an innocent old man whose life is devoted to the propagation of flowers. And my task is nearly finished. When that commonplace looking green spike develops a little further and from it protrudes the flower which will make my name famous all over the world, I shall be ready to lay down my task and meet any fate that awaits me. For the rest matters absolutely nothing."

Chapter XXII

Jimmy had a day or two in which to ponder over the strange conversation he had had with his queer old landlord and to draw his deduction therefrom. By the time that Gaskell was on his way home again, Jimmy had begun to see his way. If this theory was correct, then he was on the verge of a startling discovery. But as to whether or not it would turn out as favorable as he hoped was on the lap of the gods.

He had been rather surprised to have heard nothing from Gaskell in the shape of the promised telegram, and on the fourth day Hugh's chauffeur turned up with the car and the information that Gaskell wanted to see Jimmy without delay and would he make it convenient to run over as soon as possible. Five minutes later, Jimmy was racing along the road.

He found Gaskell, and, with him, Hargest. Both of them appeared to be grimly satisfied, and, indeed, at the end of an hour's conversation, Jimmy realised that important events were in the air. Then, when he had heard all that the other two

had to say, he told his own story, at which Hugh and Hargest exchanged glances and smiled as if they had received some unexpectedly good news. Almost before Jimmy could ask a further question, the door of Gaskell's sitting room opened and Connie entered.

She was still in her disguise, but there was about her a determination of purpose and a firm self control that filled at least one of the trio with satisfaction.

"What does all this mean?" Jimmy asked.

"It means," Gaskell said, "That things are working to a climax. No, you needn't settle down, Jimmy, because we are not going to stay here. We are going over to Uppertons in a body to have a heart to heart talk with Bascoe. I have got the big limousine at the door all ready to start."

More than that, for the moment, Gaskell declined to say. A minute or two later, they were packed in the luxurious car and on their way to Uppertons. It was, on the whole, a quiet journey and very little was said until their destination was reached. There the three men set out, leaving Connie in the car with the chauffeur in his seat and with an intimation to the girl that Gaskell would call her immediately she was required.

Bascoe rose with a grim smile on his face as he saw the three visitors file, one after another, into his library.

"Now, to what am I indebted for this honour?" he asked. "I should have thought, Mr. Gaskell—"

The rest of the sentence died on his lips and he turned white to red and red to white again as his eye encountered that of Charles Hargest. It was only for a moment or two and then he was more or less himself again.

"Ah, a stranger, I see," he said. "Would you kindly introduce me to this gentleman?"

"I don't think you will gain anything by playing the fool like that," Hargest said. "Now, what is the use of pretending that we haven't met before? Of course, if you like to challenge me to produce witnesses, I will bring a dozen from different parts of Europe, to say nothing of a few more from Italy, who will say enough to drive you out of this country, a broken and discredited man. Let me begin by saying that you are one of the most contemptible rascals that ever breathed. A spy and a double traitor who wronged his own country and the country who trusted him. The man who nearly brought about the greatest disaster that the Allies had all through the war. Oh, I have it all down, chapter and verse, and the archives are in the War Office. But of course, you weren't called Bascoe then. You have another name and another disguise. Now, under your own patronymic, you are posing as a rich and respectable man and a philanthropist. But it won't do, Rupert Bascoe, it won't do. If you are wise, you will sit down again in your chair and listen to what I and my friends have to say. Now, how are you going to take it?"

With a poor apology for a contemptuous smile, Bascoe threw himself back in his seat and prepared to listen.

"Go on," he said. "I am quite ready for you."

"I think it is my turn," Hugh put in. "I may tell you, Mr. Bascoe, that I am just back from Paris where I spent two quite interesting days with the manager of the Universal Bank. I don't know whether that interests you or not."

It certainly did, for Bascoe changed colour once again and the hand that held his cigarette trembled.

"Yes, I see that information is not uninteresting," Hugh went on. "The reason why I went is because Miss Wakefield or Mrs. Bascoe as you might prefer to call her, gave me, some time ago, a little gold box which she had received from the Countess Inez Matua not long before the latter died. In that box were certain papers, and the key of an iron safe on the barrel of which was enamelled the name of Le Forest."

Despite all his iron will, sometimes like a cry broke from Bascoe's lips. He stifled it as best he could, but the sound was by no means lost on his companions.

"I think," Hugh resumed. "That the name Le Forest occurred in one of those documents which Miss Wakefield declined to sign on the day before the murderous attack upon you. In fact, I know it was. In the safe I discovered a large amount of negotiable securities which total more than two hundred thousand pounds left by John Le Forest to his only daughter. Now, that only daughter is Constance Wakefield's mother. It is an old story of a headstrong girl marrying a man in spite of all the protestations of her family. He wasn't altogether a bad man and I believe he was genuinely fond of his wife. But he was reckless and extravagant and a born gambler. Also, he was a soldier of some distinction, but there came a time when there was a terrible scandal about money, and Major Wakefield vanished. As a matter of fact, he joined the French Foreign Legion and died very gallantly during the war, without ever seeing his wife or daughter again. John Le Forest, whose daughter, also, had vanished, realised all his property before he died and placed it in that Paris bank, sending the little gold box with the key to Countess Inez Matua, who had been an old schoolfellow of his daughter's. And then, by chance, the Countess, who had no family of her own, came in contact with the girl called Constance, and took her to that old castle in Serbia. She became so fond of the child, whom she came to regard as her own, that she never said a word to Constance, about the fortune in Paris or the gold-box, and very probably she would never have done so if war had not broken out. But when that event happened and the elderly lady realised that she was ruined, she began to reconsider her position. That is, at least, how I make it out, and subsequent events proved that I was not far wrong. Whilst the Countess was deciding on a course of action, the tide of war swept over her property, and she was fatally wounded by a stray bullet. It was then that she called the child Constance to her side and placed the precious gold box in her possession, telling her that, whatever she did, she was not to part with it. She did not part with it, neither did she mention the possession of it to a soul until, by chance, she met me, and gave it into my possession."

"Just one moment," Bascoe interrupted. "Will you kindly tell me where all this is leading to? I may or may not be the scoundrel Mr. Hargest represents to you, but I fail to see what my crime was in giving the protection of my name to a girl whom I regarded as a penniless orphan."

"You will pardon me, I am sure," Hugh said, coldly. "If I say I don't believe a word you are saying. You probably knew nothing about the gold box and the enamel key, but you were perfectly aware of the fact of the young lady's identity. You knew that she was the heiress of John Le Forest and had a pretty shrewd idea

as to where the old gentleman's money was lying hidden. Otherwise, you would have seen her in the workhouse before you married her."

"All that of course," Bascoe said, "is merely a matter of opinion. But there is no getting away from the fact that the young woman known here as Constance Wakefield was really Constance Bascoe. Mr. Marrable is quite aware of the reasons why that marriage had to take place, and I have no doubt he will tell you if he has not already done so. But the poor unfortunate woman who tried to take my life, was my wife, and, therefore any property that belonged to her is now mine. Would you gentlemen kindly inform me what you have to say to that?"

"Yes, you speak just as I expected," Gaskell said. "I happen to know that you are in desperate need of money, and now you are hugging yourself with the delusion that within a short time you will be master of two hundred thousand pounds."

"No delusion!" Bascoe jeered. "It is a cold legal fact. And let me tell you this. On the morning after my quarrel with Constance she voluntarily signed those documents. If you like to see them—well here they are."

As Bascoe produced some papers from his safe, Hargest went to the window and made a sign to the chauffeur.

"Here you are," Bascoe said.

As he spoke, Connie entered the room. She stepped across and looked at the papers in Bascoe's hand.

"A forgery!" she cried. "A deliberate forgery! I never signed those papers."

Chapter XXIII

If the three men confronting Bascoe were under the impression that he would break down and collapse at the sight of Connie, they were doomed to disappointment. Staggered and astounded he was, and made no attempt to disguise it, but it was only for a minute or two, and then he faced his accusers with a smile on his face and an equanimity they could only admire.

"Ah," he said. "Here is melodrama in its high form. A situation of which only the films could do justice. The wronged wife, back from the grave and the scoundrelly husband at bay. But there is something to say for the husband, after all.'"

He was carrying it off very well, as Hargest would have been one of the first to admit. But then, the latter had expected something of the sort from one who had not only risked his life as a spy for four years, but had taken a double risk inasmuch as he was playing off one combatant against another.

"Well," Bascoe went on in a challenging tone, "what have you good people got to say? That you are all against me is evident. And that you think you have me in a corner would be plain to the meanest understanding. So, if you don't mind, I should like to hear what all this is leading up to."

"Let us begin with forgery," Gaskell hinted. "I mean the forgery of those documents you hold in your hand."

"Quite so," Bascoe agreed. "But stop a moment. Suppose I refuse to admit that they are forged. Suppose I am prepared to swear that those documents are signed

by my wife here on the morning of the day when I met with my accident? I am calling it an accident out of sheer politeness."

"I never signed them, never, never!" Connie cried.

"So you say," Bascoe laughed. "On the contrary, I maintain that those signatures are yours. I am not going to deny the fact that we had words in connexion with them and that you refused during the evening to accede to my request. But you thought better of it next morning and came into this very room after breakfast ready to sign like the typical, obedient wife. Now, I am prepared to swear to this in a court of law. I don't think, my dear Connie, in the circumstances, you will be particularly anxious to stand in the witness box, facing a judge and jury."

So that was his game, Hargest thought. Well, up to a certain point the campaign was not going exactly in accord with plan and it might be necessary to lay another card or two upon the table. Meanwhile, Hargest was prepared to play the part of listener.

"I never signed the papers," Connie repeated. "And if you like to drag me into the light of day, I shall be ready to face the ordeal. You have tried to force me to put my signature to certain documents and I should probably have done so if Mr. Marrable had not come into the library just when he did and diverted your attention for a minute. You left the room for a moment and I had the chance of running my eye over those documents. It was only a glance, but a name there struck on my memory and I began to see that you were not so disinterested as you pretended. That is why I would not sign, though I knew that you would not hesitate to use your brute force, but you didn't. Then I was compelled to pull my revolver on you and, for a moment, the matter ended. You can't deny the revolver or the quarrel, because others heard it besides ourselves so, for the time being, you abandoned your intentions and, during the next day, we only met in the presence of others. I am ready to state this anywhere."

"Very well," Bascoe said. "We will leave it at that. Mind you, I am going to stick to my story and I am going to fight it out, even if you and your friends like to take the case up to the House of Lords. And I will tell you why. Because you are my wife, and, as such, you cannot give evidence against me. Now, you gentlemen, what have you to say to that?"

The three friends looked at one another for a moment or two as if in some doubt before Hargest spoke.

"I believe the next move is to my friend, Hugh Gaskell," he said.

"Now, Mr. Bascoe, will you kindly give me your undivided attention for a few moments. As I told you just now, I have been to Paris and have had the opportunity of going into matters with a certain bank manager there in connection with the affairs of the late John Le Forest. You already know all about the little gold box and the key with the name enamelled on it, and I have informed you what that led up to when I went to Paris with the box in my possession."

"Most interesting," Bascoe sneered. "And none the less because it is such a pleasure to discover that my wife here is an heiress in her own right. Allow me to offer you my most sincere congratulations, my dear."

“We will come to the congratulating part later on,” Hugh said, holding himself in with an effort. “If you want me to believe that all this is news to you, Mr. Bascoe, then I tell you plainly that you are a brazen and impudent liar.”

“Go on,” Bascoe smiled. “Go on.”

“Yes, I suppose anything I might say in that direction will make no impression upon you,” Hugh resumed. “But I am going to prove that you knew before you married the lady I prefer to call Constance Wakefield, that she was an heiress to considerable wealth.”

“I presume that would be rather difficult,” Bascoe jeered.

“Not in the least,” Hugh went on. “In that gold box were certain letters which were supplemented by documents and correspondence I found in the bank safe in Paris. Le Forest was a man of somewhat obscure nationality who lived in Paris for some years before the war. It was rather unfortunate for him that he never took out papers of naturalisation and, all the more so, because he had considerable dealings with business men in Berlin, and he always knew that, sooner or later, hostilities would break out between that country and France. It was a topic of conversation of which he never tired. And because he preferred not to take out those papers, and because of a fear that if war broke out he might be deprived of his property, he concealed quite a fortune in that safe in Paris and also deposited therein a will leaving all he possessed to his next-of-kin. He was under the impression then that his daughter was dead and he never knew that he had a grandchild. So, you see, without really intending it, his money, though diverted from his own daughter, went in direct succession to her child. Perhaps I am not making myself quite as plain as I should. What I mean is that the money, or rather securities, were meant for his daughter, if alive, and the gold box was placed in the custody of the Countess Inez Matua because she was practically the only friend Miss Wakefield’s mother had in the world. But then, you see, Miss Wakefield’s mother was dead and that is why the Countess never mentioned the box to Constance until the story was forced upon her, and that when the horrors of war swept over her country and carried her off. At any rate, Mr. Bascoe, you are not going to deny, after what I have said, that Miss Wakefield is practically the owner of two hundred thousand pounds.”

“Why should I deny it?” Bascoe demanded. “I am only too delighted to hear that the lady is so well provided for. Really, I don’t see what this is leading up to.”

“I don’t think you will gain anything by this bandying of words,” Gaskell responded. “What I am going to do is to prove that all this is ancient history to you.”

“Oh, really,” Bascoe grinned, “I think you will have a great deal of trouble to substantiate that.”

“No trouble whatever,” Hugh said contemptuously. “In the correspondence I speak of—I mean the correspondence I found in the Paris safe—you are actually mentioned by name. You are spoken of as a man who might be called upon to give certain evidence in case there were difficulties in proving the next of kin’s claim to Le Forest’s estate.”

“My name was mentioned, mine?” Bascoe cried.

“Certainly, your name, Rupert Bascoe, at one time, a sort of confidential secretary in the employ of John Le Forest. You are spoken of as an extremely able

and brilliant man, who might have gone very far indeed if you only could have kept straight. There was a time when you were in the close confidence of your employer, and there was little about him you did not know. Eventually, he had to discharge you for flagrant dishonesty, but he seemed to think that your presence in court was needed and you would be willing to give certain evidence, if you were paid well enough for it. Mr. Le Forest thought that you were employed, after you left him, somewhere in Germany. I suppose that is true, and I suppose that is how your perfect knowledge of that language enabled you to play the spy for two nations at the same time and draw double pay. But my friend, Mr. Hargest, knows a good deal more about that than I do. He can speak when the time comes."

"He most certainly can," Hargest said grimly.

For the first time, Bascoe showed signs of confusion. He had been convicted of a deliberate lie, and it was some moments before he regained his self possession.

"Very well," he said. "We will admit, for the sake of argument that I knew Connie was an heiress. But you can't get away from the fact that she is my wife. Now Marrable, tell them what you know. Tell them that you have seen the certificate of the marriage and convince them of the truth."

Chapter XXIV

"I certainly have seen the certificate," Jimmy admitted.

"Very well then," Bascoe went on. "Make the worst of it if you like, say that I am in desperate need of money, and that I induced my wife to sign those papers so that I might have the handling of a large sum of money, of which she knew nothing. But dash it all, she is my wife, and if there is any charge of conspiracy her evidence against me is inadmissible. I don't know how it is that she comes to be standing here when she is supposed to be dead and buried, but as I have no intention of doubting my own eyesight, I am taking her for granted. Now, suppose I send a message to the police informing them that the girl they knew as Constance Wakefield is still above ground, what will happen then? They are bound to arrest her on a charge of trying to take my life, a charge she will have some difficulty in disproving."

"You are trying to drive a bargain, are you?" Hargest asked. "Well, let me tell you, here and now that we are going to be no party to it. My friend, Mr. Gaskell, has told his story, but mine remains to be disclosed."

"Well, let us have it," Bascoe snarled.

"All in good time," Hargest said imperturbably. "I think the best thing we can do in to leave you to consider matters and decide what is best for your own sake. Then, when you are ready to receive us again, we will pay you another visit."

Bascoe drew a long breath, as if of relief.

"Very well," he said. "That will suit me perfectly. A case of armed neutrality, what?"

Without further parley, the visitors went back to the car with Connie once more behind her disguise. They drove as far as Gaskell's place, from whence it was decided that he should convey Connie once more to her hiding place.

"I don't think there is much more to say for the moment," Hargest remarked. "I will get my man to drive you back to your lodgings, Jimmy, and I want you to keep your eyes open and see what the enemy is doing. I wonder what Bascoe would say if he knew what I had up my sleeve."

"And what is that?" Jimmy asked eagerly.

"Oh, merely the fact the Bascoe was a married man when he went through the ceremony with Connie at the registry office."

"That confirms my suspicions," Jimmy put in.

"Absolutely, my dear chap!" Hargest said coolly. "The woman is alive still, and I know where to put my hand upon her. As a matter of fact, she is within two or three miles of Uppertons. Oh, I haven't been wasting my time when you were in Paris, Hugh. I set the old underground gang at work, and they were not very long in tracing Bascoe from the time he left Le Forest's employ until the end of the war. I thought I would ease your mind by telling you this, Miss Wakefield, and I withheld the information from Bascoe because it is going to be the knock-out blow."

More than that Hargest declined to say. A little later on, Jimmy was back in his lodgings, listening to the rather wild conversation of his eccentric landlord. The latter was still full of his blue daffodil, which he was quite sure would bloom in the course of the next few hours.

"To-morrow morning," Wimpole muttered. "I am leaving the plant all night in a heated atmosphere with a lamp by its side. That will force the bloom, and when I wake up in the morning, I shall be famous—like the poet Byron. Yes, my triumph is at hand, and, once I have shown it to a cynical world, then my life's task will be finished. Then I shan't care whether I live or die. I am not an old man as years ago, though most people regard me as having one foot in the grave."

Jimmy nodded sympathetically. From his point of view, Wimpole appeared to be an octogenarian.

"No, no," the speaker went on. "It is the life, the privations and dangers of the forest, the years passed in swamps where the finest orchids grow. There was one pure white orchid with yellow wings that I waited nearly a year for. I have passed whole days wading waist deep in slimy mire, tortured by mosquitoes and in danger of alligators, searching for some new bloom. If you ask me how many times I have suffered from malaria, I could not tell you. But I am not an old man, Marrable, though my beard is white and my head is bald. And I can love and hate just as well now as I could twenty years ago. Yet I know that my time won't be long, and that is why I am looking so eagerly for to-morrow. And there is one other thing."

Wimpole bent almost double as he chuckled with a sort of fiendish mirth that caused Jimmy to feel a queer sensation running up and down his spine. There was something diabolically evil about this repulsive hilarity, so sinister that Jimmy was almost inclined to take the other by the shoulders and shake him.

"Don't do that," he said. "Here, what is the matter with you? What murderous ideas have you got in the back of your mind? It doesn't fit in with an amiable old gentleman, whose one idea is to propagate a blue daffodil."

“Perhaps not, my young friend, perhaps not,” Wimpole chuckled. “But we humans are complex people. Many a man who was brought up in the odour of sanctity is a potential murderer and many a woman—but I don’t know much about women.”

“A good thing, perhaps,” Jimmy said curtly. “You are not a bad old chap, but, frankly, I don’t like that mood of yours at all. If I happened to be a casual visitor—”

“Ah, visitor, eh?” Wimpole went on. “A visitor. Funny you should say that, because I had a visitor not very long ago. A woman visitor, such a poor, miserable wreck of a woman. Tall and thin and haggard and worn the skeleton of what she was when we last met I don’t know how many years ago. And she told me a story, Marrable, such a remarkable story; because I knew a good deal of it before I was none the less impress.”

Wimpole broke off, muttering and mumbling, whilst Jimmy regarded him with increased uneasiness. It seemed to him that something had happened to throw Wimpole’s mind off its balance, something that was not entirely connected with the blue daffodil. And as there were no signs of a visitor, Jimmy was forced to the conclusion that it was a pure hallucination, conjured up by a mind suffering from excitement and solitude.

However, Jimmy, in his sunny way, had forgotten all about it when an hour or two later, he returned from a visit to the village and found the cottage deserted. Nor was there any sign of Wimpole to be seen in the greenhouse.

In that super-heated space a lamp was burning on a shelf near the floor and beside it, in a pot, something that appeared to be a mass of green spikes with a bulbous head on one of them which resembled a flower stalk about to burst into bloom. Already, Jimmy could see feint signs of blue where the sheath was parting and exposing the blossom to view.

For the first time, Jimmy was impressed. Up to now he had regarded the blue daffodil as a chimera of a perverted imagination. Something that the old man had dwelt upon until he actually believed that it contained the germ of positive fact. There had been something almost laughable about the idea of a blue daffodil, as there was about a blue rose—the one thing that horticulturists have been striving after for generations. There never would be a blue rose any more than a black tulip, though Dumas’s romance made such a thing feasible.

Still Mendelism had been responsible for some amazing discoveries, and it was within the balance of reason that Wimpole had, at last, succeeded where thousands of his fellow horticulturists had failed. At any rate, the morrow would show and Jimmy went back to the cottage almost as much filled with excitement and curiosity as his landlord.

He lingered some time over his frugal meal, and, once it was finished, left the cottage with the intention of going as far as Uppertons, where he wanted to collect such of his working materials as he had left behind him there, for he regarded himself, now, as through with Bascoe and, so far as he was concerned, he never wanted to see that individual again.

He turned into the road that approached the house from the woods at the back and, as he walked down a grassy ride in the dim light of the evening, he saw, to his astonishment, down the vista, the figure of Bascoe, who was talking, evidently

emphatically and angrily, with a strange woman dressed from head to foot in black, a woman who was obviously asking some favour.

Her hands were held out imploringly and Jimmy could see the working of her face and certain wisps of grey hair that had escaped from under her hat. He could make out Bascoe's scowling face and grim lips as he shook his head and turned away. Then the woman, half on her knees caught him by the coat tails and he faced round with fists brutally uplifted.

On that instant, a shot suddenly rang out Jimmy saw Bascoe crumple and fall like an empty sack, he saw the woman turn and fly into the thickness of the wood before he, himself, rushed forward and bent down over the prostrate body. There was no sign whatever of the individual who fired the shot.

There was no mistake about it this time. Bascoe had been shot through the brain and was dead beyond all recall.

Chapter XXV

Satisfied beyond the shadow of a doubt that Rupert Bascoe was no more, Jimmy wasted no time in seeking out the woman in black or the individual who had fired the fatal shot. He rose from a contemplation of the body and shouted loudly for assistance. A moment or two later, a woodman came into view and asked what all the trouble was about.

"There has been an accident," Jimmy said. "And Mr. Bascoe is the victim. Don't stand staring there, my man, but run as fast as your legs can carry you up to the house and tell Tarrant, the butler that Mr. Marrable wants him at once."

The man, with one glance at the prostrate body, turned away and ten minutes later Tarrant came hurrying to the spot. It needed only one look for the old man to realize what had happened.

"Is master dead, sir?" he whispered.

"As dead as a door nail," Jimmy said grimly. "And what is more, he has been murdered. I don't know who shot him, but I heard the report and I saw him fall, and that, for the moment, is all I know about it. Now look here, Tarrant, pull yourself together, don't stand staring at me like that. Go back to the house and telephone for the police. And when you have done that take this card and send another 'phone message to the number which I have written on it. I am not going to move from here till the police arrive and you are to see to it that nobody goes tramping about the woods, looking for clues. Now, off you go."

It was rather a long wait for Jimmy, but the man in blue arrived presently and listened to all that Marrable had to say.

"No," Jimmy explained. "I have not permitted anyone to go near the body and there are no footmarks around it, expect my own. At least that is not quite correct because I practically saw the crime committed. I was coming quietly down the ride, with my footsteps making no noise on the soft turf, when I saw Mr. Bascoe in what appeared to be an angry conversation with a strange woman. Then I heard a shot

fired and Mr. Bascoe fell to the ground, after which the woman disappeared and probably the murderer disappeared, too, for of him I saw no sign whatever."

"Sounds like a bad business, sir," the policeman said. "I suppose the body had better be moved up to the house."

"Well, it can't be left here all night," Jimmy agreed. "Are you going to see to this thing yourself, or are you going to call in Scotland Yard? They had the first case in hand, you remember."

"It is still more or less officially their business," the officer replied. "I expect we shall have Inspector Clapp down here as soon as the report reaches him. A strange business, sir, isn't it? Mr. Bascoe seems to have had more enemies than one."

"Personally, I rather doubt it," Jimmy said drily. "But mind you, that is only my opinion."

There was nothing more to do for the moment and Jimmy made the best of his way back to his rooms. There to him presently came Gaskell and Hargest who had been summoned by telephone. In fact it was Gaskell's telephone number that Jimmy had given to the butler when he despatched him on his errand.

With the old man, Wimpole out of the way—and nowhere to be found as far as Jimmy could see—it was possible to discuss the matter in the cottage without interruption.

"What do you make of it, Hargest?" Jimmy asked, when at length he had told his story.

"Well, I think I can make a good deal of it," Hargest said. "I told you, not very long ago, that I had put some of the old gang to inquire into the antecedents of Mr. Rupert Bascoe. I have in my possession pretty close accounts of his career during the past twenty years. You remember my telling you that he was a married man and that he had a wife living. By that, I meant to say that this woman was alive when he went through that form of marriage with Miss Wakefield at a registry office.

"At the present moment, she is within a couple of miles of where we stand. I had her brought into this neighbourhood with the idea of confronting her with Bascoe and thus bringing about a collapse of all his schemes. She knows why she is here and she was quite willing to come forward at any moment when I needed her. She is staying at a farm house where a friend of mine found lodgings for her."

"The deuce she is," Jimmy cried. "My dear boy, unless I am greatly mistaken, she is the woman I saw talking to Bascoe this very evening. I mean the elderly woman in black I was telling you about. She was with him at the moment he collapsed and died, and I saw her disappear into the thickness of the wood. It is any money that she came over here this morning on purpose either to warn Bascoe or to come to some sort of an understanding with him. You know what women are. Don't forget that she was his wife and there are some wives who never cease to care for their husbands however blackguardly they are treated. When you come to see Mrs. Bascoe, I am perfectly certain that she will not deny that she was within a yard of him when he was shot. Of course, it doesn't follow that she knew who the murderer was, but, at the same time, it is rather strange that she bolted in such a headlong fashion when she saw him collapse at her feet."

“I am rather inclined to think that you are right, Jimmy,” Hargest said. “At any rate, we can find out. I suggest that you stay here, Jimmy, whilst I go over to the farmhouse I spoke of with Gaskell and interview the woman in question.”

Jimmy would have liked to accompany the other two, but feeling that Hargest had some reason for leaving him behind, raised no objection. He remained where he was whilst the car sped off straight away in the direction of the farm house.

Once arrived there, Hargest asked to see the lady who was in temporary residence there. He spoke of her in a name that was not Bascoe and was told presently by the farmer’s wife that her visitor was lying down with a sick headache and did not feel equal to seeing anyone just then.

But Hargest was persistent and in the end got his own way. It was a hollow-eyed wreck of a woman who came down presently and confronted her two visitors. Her face was white and drawn, and she was evidently suffering from the stress of a great emotion.

“I think you can guess who I am,” Hargest said.

“Oh, yes,” the woman replied wearily. “You are the gentleman who was responsible for tracing my husband for me, and who kindly found me my rooms in this house. I—I—”

“I think it would be more kind to you to speak freely,” Hargest said. “Now, Mrs. Bascoe, your husband cruelly deserted you some years ago and left you to starve in Australia. You have been looking for him ever since and you would have looked in vain had I not for my own reasons been interested in your case. That is why I suggested your coming here so that we could arrange an interview between your husband and yourself. But it I am not greatly mistaken you anticipated me.”

“I—I don’t quite know what you mean,” the woman faltered.

“Oh, I think you do. I suppose you were asking questions about people in this neighbourhood from your landlady, and when you discovered that the man who had treated you so badly was living close at a place called Uppertons, you decided to see him before anybody else could interfere. A natural thing to do, perhaps, but not quite fair to me, was it?”

“I don’t quite know what to say,” the woman whispered.

“Then let me say it for you. You managed to see your husband this evening and you were talking to him when he died. Oh, I wouldn’t, deny it if I were you. I am not going to ask you why you decided to act on your own initiative, but I know that you were having an argument of some sort with Rupert Bascoe, when someone, standing behind you, fired the shot that killed him. And I should not be greatly surprised to find that you could tell us who it was that committed that crime.”

“Oh, I couldn’t, I couldn’t,” the woman cried. “You see, he was behind me. I lost my head because I was afraid that I would be charged with murder. And I am quite sure that my brother—what am I saying? What am I saying?”

“Oh, so you also know where your brother is?” Hargest asked. “I suppose you found out that Andrew Wimpole also happens to reside in the neighbourhood. Were you in any sort of communication with him, or did you learn that in the course of local conversation with your landlady?”

No reply came from the white-faced woman who stood there, trembling and regarding Hargest as if he were some enemy who was deliberately torturing her.

“I had better tell the truth,” she said. “I did discover exactly where my husband was living and I did try to see him and warn him of the trouble that I felt was hanging over his head. I knew nothing about that second marriage of his until I came down here and learnt it from the lips of my landlady. I have suffered a cruel wrong at the hands of Rupert Bascoe but in spite of everything, I could not quite forget that he was my husband. That in why I took matters in my own hands. I was with him, trying to tell him everything and I saw him die. Oh, please don’t ask me any more—I have had as much as I can bear.”

“Not quite,” Hargest said gently, “Not quite.”

Chapter XXVI

The woman seemed to know what Hargest meant, for, with a low moan, she collapsed into a chair.

“Your brother,” Hargest said. “When you heard he was in this neighbourhood, did it ever occur to you that he came here for a purpose? I happen to know that he was devoted to you and that when he discovered how you had been treated by your husband he became possessed of an obsession—I mean he made up his mind that if ever he met Bascoe, one of them would die. Is it this knowledge that is troubling you so terribly?”

No reply came from the woman cowering in the chair. Not that there was any occasion for an answer, for her whole attitude confirmed every word that Hargest was saying. Nor was there anything to gain by prolonging that ordeal.

“We are going to leave you now,” Hargest said. “I want you to promise that you will stay here until I have seen you again and, in return, I and my friends will make it as easy for you as possible. We are more sorry for you than I can say.”

Later the car returned in the direction of Uppertons and stopped presently outside the door of Wimpole’s cottage, where Jimmy was seen in conversation with Inspector Clapp of Scotland Yard, who had rushed down from London as soon as he received a telephone message.

“Good evening, Mr. Gaskell,” he said “This is a queer business altogether, and throws quite a new light upon the first attempt upon Mr. Bascoe’s life. Of course, I know that appearances were terribly against Miss Wakefield.”

“I am perfectly sure you did,” Hugh interrupted. “But perhaps you had better hear what my friend, Mr. Hargest, has to say.”

Clapp stood by the side of the car for some 20 minutes whilst Hargest gave a detailed account of recent happenings, and the events that led up to them.

“That is pretty remarkable,” Clapp said. “It seems to me, Mr. Marrable, that I might do worse than have a talk with that queer old landlord of yours.”

“Just what I was going to suggest,” Jimmy agreed. “He has been out nearly all evening and has just returned looking like a man who walks in his sleep. He is in the greenhouse at the present moment babbling about his blue daffodil, which turns out not to be blue at all, but a kind of washed out pink. But he seems to be satisfied, like a child with a new toy.”

In the greenhouse, Wimpole was singing and crooning to himself but as the others entered, he looked up and his face cleared, leaving him as cool and calm and collected as if he had not a trouble or a care in the whole world.

"Ah, gentlemen," he said. "Welcome to my conservatory. Mr. Gaskell I know and, of course. Mr. Marrable and Inspector Clapp. But the other gentleman is quite a stranger."

"As a matter of fact his name is Hargest," said Clapp, who was taking the lead in the proceedings. "It was Mr. Hargest who traced the whereabouts of your sister. I mean the lady who was talking to Bascoe this evening in the wood when you shot him. Of course, you have heard all about that Mr. Wimpole."

Wimpole sniggered and laughed in a senile sort of way.

"Of course I know," he said. "I shot him. I tell you this because I am quite sure you know it already. What is more, I shot him the first time. I mean on that occasion when he was found on the point of death in his library. I got him through the open window that night, and when he looked up, he recognised me, though I had never seen him before, and he knew what was going to happen. No words were exchanged between us, because I was not going to give him the ghost of a chance of raising an alarm, so I shot him in the chest and left him there for dead, never thinking that he could possibly recover. Yes, and I would have done it a dozen times over. You need not think I am afraid of what is going to happen to me, because I am not. The destruction of the man who treated my dear sister so cruelly and the discovery of the blue daffodil were the two darling objects of my life. Well, I have attained one and very nearly the other. I have not quite got the blue daffodil, but those who come after me will prove the benefit of my knowledge and they will bring to perfection the flower that I have so far achieved."

Wimpole broke off a moment and gazed almost affectionately at the bloom that he was holding in his hand. He was speaking quite calmly and rationally now, with no sign whatever of his usual senility. There was actually a smile on his face as he turned once more to the inspector of police.

"You made a fine mistake when you came to the conclusion that Miss Wakefield had shot her guardian." he chuckled. "It was her revolver that I found and used. I saw her drop it in the woods when I was hanging about Uppertons. That was the day you remember, Mr. Gaskell, when you met the young lady and she ran away from you. It occurred to me that it would be a good idea to use that revolver to kill Bascoe, but I never meant that she should suffer for my crime. Not that I call it a crime. I should have spoken as soon as that daffodil opened. But when the young lady met her death in such tragic circumstances, it seemed to me that it didn't matter very much whether I spoke or not. Anyway, I had to procure another weapon and when, quite by accident, I saw my sister talking to Bascoe in the woods and heard how she was prepared to sacrifice herself to save that rascal, I became determined more than ever to end his life. I was standing a few yards away, hidden in a belt of shrubs and I heard every word that passed between those two. He was brutal and callous and not in the least grateful to the woman who, in spite of everything, still had some sort of affection for him. And then, when he threatened her with actual violence, I shot him. And I think that is about all I have to say. And now I am quite ready to come with you, Inspector, and pay the penalty of my crime. I am not old in years, but I am weary and worn out and there

is nothing left to live for now I know that my sister will not want for friends in future. I think that Mr. Gaskell will see to that."

"I most certainly will," Gaskell said firmly.

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Naturally enough, the story of the first attempt on Bascoe's life and the second which ended in his death caused a sensation when it found its way into the Press. It was the sort of narrative that appealed far and wide because of its amazing setting, not the least dramatic situation being that Constance Wakefield—generally held as the murderess who had escaped the gallows through a fortuitous accident—was not only innocent of the crime, but still in the land of the living. For days there was practically nothing else in the newspapers and the neighbourhood of Uppertons was haunted by an army of reporters seeking the latest details.

But Connie, still hiding under the roof of her friend, Dora Stevenage, and playing the parlourmaid, was not to be found and consequently, spared the ordeal of meeting the multitude of questions which the pressmen were eager to ask her. Connie's disappearance was not the least dramatic feature of an amazing case. And so she remained where she was till a month or so had passed and then, when things were settling down she and Dora, together with Jimmy and Nita—now happily married—quietly crossed to the Continent and hid themselves in a village on the coast of Normandy. And there, when he could slip away almost like a criminal himself, and evade the pressmen that still dogged his footsteps, Hugh Gaskell joined them.

There was no occasion now for Connie to continue her disguise. She was happy in new scenes and already beginning to recover her health and spirits, to say nothing of her beauty, after the long and trying ordeal to which she had been subjected.

"Well, it has been a rum business altogether," Jimmy said one afternoon when they were all together, lying on the sands in the sun. "I wonder what would have happened if I had never gone to Uppertons. How would things have turned out then? And here am I, the God in the car, so to speak with more work to do than I can manage, and married to a wife that I don't deserve."

"But you are going to deserve her Jimmy, aren't you?" Nita laughed. "Oh, I assure you, ladies and gentlemen, that Jimmy is quite a changed character."

"Never quite the fool he looked," Jimmy interpolated.

He lay back looking at the sun, at peace with all the world. Then, presently. Connie and Hugh rose and strolled along the golden sands until they came to a spot where they could sit down with nothing but the sea in front and the sky overhead.

"Well, darling," Hugh said after a long pause. "When is it going to be? Now, don't shake your head and say you don't understand what I mean, because you do. And if you like to live out of England for the next year or two until the Connie Wakefield incident is forgotten, I am sure I don't mind."

Connie looked up into his face with a smile on her own and placed her hand in his. Then he drew her to his side and their lips met in a long and loving kiss.

"Any time you like," she said frankly. "On, Hugh, how wonderfully well everything has turned out for us."