The Five Knots

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Published: 1907
Serialized in »The West Australian«, Perth

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Illustrations

Illustration:

A pair of arms caught her, and she was uplifted from the floor.

Chapter I

No Bigger Than A Man's Hand.

Something like a shadow seemed to flicker across the dim hall and then the strange visitant was lost to view. But was it substantial, real and tangible, or only the creature of imagination? For at half-past four on a December afternoon before the lamps are lighted one might easily be deceived, especially in an old place like Maldon Grange, the residence of Samuel Flower, the prosperous ship-owner. Some such thought as this flashed through Beatrice Galloway's mind and she laughed at her own fears. Doubtless it was all imagination. Still, she could not divest herself of the impression that a man had flitted quietly past her and concealed himself behind the banks of palms and ferns in the conservatory.

"How silly I am!" she murmured. "Of course there can be nobody there. But I should like—"

A footman entered and flashed up the score or so of lights in the big electrolier and Beatrice Galloway's fears vanished. Under such a dazzling blaze it was impossible to believe that she had seen anybody gliding towards the conservatory. Other lights were flashing up elsewhere and all the treasures which Mr. Flower had gathered at Maldon Grange were exposed to the glance of envy or admiration. Apparently nothing was lacking to make the grand house absolutely perfect. Not that Samuel Flower cared for works of art and beauty, except in so far as they advertised his wealth and financial standing. Nothing in the mansion had been bought on his own responsibility or judgement. He had gone with open cheque-book to a famous decorative artist and given him carte blanche to adorn the

house. The work had been a labour of love on the part of the artist, so that, in the course of time, Maldon Grange had become a show-place and the subject of eulogistic notices in the local guide-books. Some there were who sneered at Samuel Flower, saying there was nothing that interested him except a ship, and that if this same ship were unseaworthy and likely to go to the bottom when heavily over-insured, then Flower admired this type of craft above all others. The reputation of the Flower Line was a bad one in the City and amongst seafaring men. People shook their heads when Flower's name was mentioned, but he was too big and too rich and too vindictive for folk to shout their suspicions on the housetops. For the rest of it Flower stuck grimly to his desk for five days in the week, spending the Saturday and Sunday at Maldon Grange, where his niece, Beatrice Galloway, kept house for him.

Beatrice loved the place. She had watched it grow from a bare, brown shell to a bewitching dream of artistic beauty. Perhaps in all the vast establishment she liked the conservatory best. It was a modest name to give the superb winter garden which led out of the great hall. The latter structure had been the idea of the artist, and under his designs a dome-like fabric had arisen, rich, with stained glass and marble and filled now with the choicest tropical flowers, the orchids alone being worth a fortune. From the far end a covered terrace communicated with the rose garden, which even at this time of year was so sheltered that a few delicate blooms yet remained. The orchids were Beatrice's special care and delight and for the most part she tended them herself. She had quite forgotten her transient alarm. Her mind was full of her flowers to the exclusion of everything else. She stood amongst a luxuriant tangle of blooms, red and gold and purple and white hanging in dainty sprays like clouds of brilliant moths.

By and by Beatrice threw herself down into a seat to contemplate the beauty of the scene. The air was warm and languid as befitted those gorgeous flowers, and she felt half disposed to sleep as she lay in her comfortable chair. There would be plenty to do presently, for Flower was entertaining a large dinner party, and afterward, there was to be a reception of the leading people in the neighbourhood. Gradually the warmth of the place stole over her drowsy sense and for a few minutes she lost consciousness.

She awoke with a start and uneasy feeling of impending evil which she could not shake off. It was a sensation the like of which she had never experienced before, and wholly foreign to her healthy nature. But nothing was to be seen or heard. The atmosphere was saturated with fragrance and delicate blossoms fluttered in the lights like resplendent humming-birds. As she cast a glance around, her attention became riveted upon something so startling, so utterly unexpected, that her heart seemed to stand still.

The door leading on to the terrace was locked, as she knew. It was a half-glass door, the upper part being formed of stained mosaics, leaded after the fashion of a cathedral window. And now one of the small panes over the latch had been forced in, and a hand, thrust through the opening, was fumbling for the catch.

The incident was sinister enough, but it did not end the mystery. The hand and the arm were bare, and Beatrice saw they were lean and lanky and brown, like the leg of a skinny fowl. From the long fingers with blackened nails depended a loop of string which the intruder was endeavouring to drop over the catch. Unnerved as

Beatrice was, she did not lose her self-possession altogether. While she gazed in fascinated horror at that strange yellow claw, it flashed into her mind that the hand could not belong to a white man. Then, half unconsciously, she broke into a scream and the fingers were withdrawn. The string fell to the ground, where it lay unheeded.

Beatrice's cry for help rang out through the house, and a moment later hurried steps were heard coming towards the conservatory. It was Samuel Flower himself who burst into the room demanding to know what was amiss. At the sight of his stalwart frame and the strong grim face Beatrice's fears abated.

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"The hand," Beatrice gasped. "A man's hand came through that hole in the glass door. He was trying to pass a loop of string over the latch. The light was falling fully on the door, and I saw the hand distinctly."

"Some rascally tramp, I suppose," Flower growled.

"I don't think so," Beatrice said. "I am sure the man, whoever he was, was not an Englishman. The hand might have been that of a Hindoo or Chinaman, for it was yellow and shrivelled like a monkey's paw."

Something like an oath crossed Flower's lips. His set face altered swiftly. Though alarmed and terrified, Beatrice did not fail to note the look of what was almost fear in the eyes of her uncle.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Have I said or done anything wrong?"

But Flower was waiting to hear no more. He dashed across the floor and threw the door open. Beatrice could hear his footsteps as he raced down the terrace. Then she seemed to hear voices in angry altercation, and presently there was a sound of breaking glass and the fall of a heavy body. It required all Beatrice's courage to enable her to go to the rescue, but she did not hesitate. She ran swiftly down the corridor, when, to her profound relief, she saw Flower coming back.

"Did you see him?" she exclaimed.

"I saw nothing," Flower panted. He spoke jerkily, as if he had just been undergoing a physical struggle. "I am certain no one was there. I slipped on the pavement, and crashed into one of those glass screens of yours. I think I have cut my hand badly. Look!"

As coolly as if nothing had happened Flower held up his right hand from which the blood was dripping freely. It was a nasty gash, as Beatrice could tell at a glance.

"I am so sorry." she murmured. "Uncle, this must be attended to at once. There is danger in such a cut. I will send one of the servants into Oldborough."

"Perhaps it will be as well," Flower muttered. "I shall have to get this thing seen to before our friends turn up. Tell them to fetch the first doctor they can find."

Without another word Beatrice hurried away, leaving Flower alone. He crossed to the outer door and locked it. Then he threw himself down on the seat which Beatrice had occupied a few minutes before, and the same grey pallor, the same queer dilation of his keen grey eyes which Beatrice had noticed, returned. His strong lips twitched and he shook with something that was not wholly physical pain.

"Pshaw!" he muttered. "I am losing my nerve. There are foreign tramps as well as English in this country."

Chapter II

A Little Bit of String.

Wilfrid Mercer's modest establishment was situated in Highstreet, Oldborough. A shining brass plate on the front door proclaimed him physician and surgeon, but as yet he had done little more than publish his name in the town. It had been rather a venture to settle in a conservative old place like Oldborough, where, by dint of struggling and scraping, he had managed to buy a small practice. By the time this was done and his house furnished, he would have been hard put to it to lay his hands on fifty pounds. As so frequently happens, the value of the practice had been exaggerated: the man he had succeeded has not been particularly popular, and some of the older patients took the opportunity of going elsewhere.

It was not a pleasant prospect, as Mercer admitted, as he sat in his consulting-room that wintry afternoon. He began to be sorry that he had given up his occupation of ship's doctor. The work was hard and occasionally dangerous, but the pay had been regular and the chance of seeing the world alluring. But for his mother, who had come to keep house for him, perhaps Wilfrid Mercer would not have abandoned the sea. However, they had few friends and Mrs. Mercer was growing old and the change appeared to be prudent. Up to the present Wilfrid had kept most of his troubles to himself, and his mother little knew how desperately near the wind he was sailing in money matters. Unfortunately he had been obliged to borrow, and before long one of his repayments would be falling due. Sorely against his will he had gone to the money-lender, and he knew that he could expect no quarter if he failed to meet his obligations.

While he sat gazing idly into the growing darkness, watching the thin traffic trickle by, he heard the sound of a motor horn and a moment later a big Mercedes car stopped before his door. There was an imperative ring at the bell, which Wilfrid answered in person.

"I believe you are Dr. Mercer," the driver said. "If so, I shall be glad if you will come at once to Maldon Grange. My master has met with an accident, and if you cannot come immediately I must find somebody else."

"I believe I can manage it," Wilfrid said with assumed indifference. He was wondering who the man's master was and where Maldon Grange must be. A stranger in the neighbourhood, there were many large houses of which he knew nothing. It would be well, however, to keep his ignorance to himself. "If you'll wait a moment I'll put a few things into my bag."

Few words were spoken as the car dashed along the road till the lodge gates at Maldon Grange were passed and the car pulled up in front of the house. A footman came to the door and relieved Wilfrid of his bag. He speedily found himself in a morning room where he waited till Beatrice Galloway came in. She advanced with a smile.

"It is very good of you to come so promptly," she said. "I did not quite catch your name."

“Surely you have not forgotten me?” Wilfrid said.

“Wilfrid—Dr. Mercer—” Beatrice exclaimed. “Fancy seeing you here. When we last met in London six months ago I thought you were going abroad. I have heard several times from our friend, Mrs. Hope, and as she never mentioned your name, I concluded you were out of England. And all this time you have been practising in Oldborough.”

“Well, not quite that,” Wilfrid smiled. “I have only been in Oldborough about a month or so. I had to settle down for my mother’s sake. To meet you here is a great surprise. Are you staying in the house?”

“Didn’t you know?” Beatrice asked. “Well perhaps you could not. You see, when I was staying with Mrs. Hope my uncle was abroad, and I don’t think his name was ever mentioned. I suppose you have heard of Samuel Flower?”

Wilfrid started slightly. There were few men who knew more of Flower and his methods than the young doctor. He had been surgeon on board the notorious Guelder Rose on which there had been a mutiny resulting in the death of one of the ship’s officers. The Guelder Rose was one of the Flower Line, and ugly stories were still whispered of the cause of that mutiny, and why Samuel Flower had never brought the ringleaders to justice. Wilfrid could have confirmed those stories and more. He could have told of men driven desperate by cruelty and want of food. He could have told of the part that he himself had played in the outbreak, and how he had brought himself within reach of the law. At one time he had been prepared to see the thing through. He had been eager to stand in the witness-box and tell his story. But by chance or design most of the malcontent crew had deserted at foreign ports, and had Samuel Flower chosen to be vindictive, Mercer might have found himself in a serious position. And now, here he was, under the roof of this designing scoundrel, and before him was the one girl in all the world whom he cared for, and she was nearly related to the man whom he most hated and feared and despised.

All these things flashed through his mind in a moment. He would have to go through with it now. He would have to meet Samuel Flower face to face and trust to luck. It was lucky he had never met the man whom he regarded as the author of his greatest misfortunes, and no doubt a busy man like Flower would have already forgotten the name of Mercer. It was a comfort, too, that Beatrice Galloway knew nothing of the antecedents of her uncle. Else she would not have been under his roof.

“It is all very strange,” he murmured. “You can understand how taken aback I was when I met you just now.”

“Not disappointed, I hope,” Beatrice smiled.

“I don’t think there is any occasion to ask that question,” Wilfrid said meaningly. “But I must confess that I am disappointed in a sense. You see, I did not know you were the probable heiress of a rich man like Mr. Flower. I thought you were poor like myself, and I hoped that in time—well, I think you know what my hopes were.”

It was a bold, almost audacious, thing to say in the circumstances, and Wilfrid trembled at his own temerity. But, saving a slight flush on the girl’s checks, she showed no sign of disapproval or anger. There was something in her eyes which was not displeasing to Wilfrid.

“I am afraid we are wasting time,” she said. “My uncle has had a fall and cut his hand badly with some glass. He is resting in the conservatory, and I had better take you to him.”

Mercer followed obediently. Samuel Flower looked up with a curt nod, as Beatrice proceeded to explain. Apparently the name of Mercer conveyed nothing to him, for he held out his hand in his prompt, business-like fashion and demanded whether anything was seriously wrong.

“This comes of listening to a woman,” Flower muttered. “My niece got it into her head that a tramp was trying to break into the house, and in searching for him I slipped and came to grief. Of course I found nobody, as I might have known at first.”

“But, uncle,” Beatrice protested. “I saw the man’s hand through the glass. You can see for yourself where the pane has been removed, and there, lying on the floor, is the very piece of string he was using.”

Beatrice pointed almost in triumph to the knotted string lying on the floor, but Flower shook his head impatiently and signified that the sooner Mercer went on with his treatment the better. As it happened, there was little the matter, and in a quarter of an hour the wounded hand was skilfully bandaged and showed only a few strips of plaster.

“You did that very neatly,” Flower said in his ungracious way. “I suppose there are no tendons cut or anything of that kind? One hears of lockjaw following cut fingers. I suppose there’s no risk of that?”

“For a strong man my uncle is terribly afraid of illness,” Beatrice smiled. “I see he owes me a grudge for being the cause of his accident. And yet, indeed, I am certain that a man attempted to enter into the conservatory. Fortunately for me, I am in a position to prove it. You won’t accuse me of imagining that there is a piece of string lying on the floor by the door. I will pick it up and convince you.”

Beatrice raised the cord in her hand. It was about a foot in length, exceedingly fine and silky in texture, and containing at intervals five strangely complicated knots of most intricate pattern. With a smile of triumph on her face Beatrice handed the fragment to her uncle.

“There!” she cried. “See for yourself.”

Flower made no reply. He held the string in his hand, gazing at it with eyes dark and dilated.

“Great heavens!” he exclaimed. The words seemed to be literally torn from him. “Is it possible—”

Chapter III

The Registered Letter.

Beatrice and Wilfrid looked at Flower in astonishment. He did not seem to heed until his dull eyes met theirs and saw the question which neither dared to ask.

“A sharp, sudden pain,” he gasped, “a pain in my head. I expect I have been working too hard. It has gone now. Perhaps it isn’t worth taking any notice of. I

am told that neuralgia sometimes is almost more than one can bear. So this is the piece of string the fellow was using, Beatrice? I am afraid I can't disbelieve you any longer. I am sure that there is no string like this in the house. In fact, I never saw anything like it before. What do you make of it, Dr. Mercer?"

Flower was speaking hurriedly. He had assumed an amiability foreign to his nature. He spoke like a man trying to undo a bad impression.

"It is curious, but I have seen something similar," Mercer said. "It was a piece of silken string of the same length, knotted exactly like this, and the incident happened in the Malay Archipelago. The ship on which I was doctor—"

"Oh, you've been a ship's doctor," Flower said swiftly.

Mercer bit his lip with vexation. The slip was an awkward one, but after that exclamation Flower showed no disposition to carry the query farther, and Wilfrid began to breathe more freely. He went on composedly enough.

"The ship was laid up for several weeks for repairs. Not caring to be idle I went up country on an exploring expedition, and very rough work it was. As you may be aware, the Malays are both treacherous and cruel, but so long as one treated them fairly, I had nothing to grumble about. I cured one or two of them from slight illnesses, and they were grateful. But there was one man there, his name does not matter, who was hated and feared by them all. I fancy he was an orchid collector. Anyhow, he had a retinue of servants armed with modern weapons, and he led the natives a terrible life. I purposely avoided him because I did not like him or his methods. One day I had a note from a servant asking me to come and see him as he was at the point of death. When I reached the man's quarters I found that all his staff had deserted him, taking everything they could lay hands on. The man lay on his bed dead, and with the most horrible expression of pain on his face I have ever seen. I could find no cause of death, I could find no trace of illness even. And by what mysterious means he was destroyed I have not the slightest notion. All I know is this—round his forehead and the back of his head was a tightly-twisted piece of silken string with five knots in it, which might be the very counterpart of the fragment you hold in your hand."

"And that is all you have to tell us?" Flower asked. He had recovered himself, except that his eyes were strangely dilated. "It seems a pity to leave a story in that interesting stage. Is there no sequel?"

"As far as I know, none," Wilfrid admitted. "Still, it is rather startling that I should come upon an echo from the past like this. But I am wasting your time, Mr. Flower. If you would like me to come and see you to-morrow—"

But Flower did not seem to be listening. Apparently he was debating some problem in his mind.

"No," he said in his quick, sharp way. "I should like you to come again this evening. We have some friends coming in after dinner, and if you don't mind dropping in informally in the character of a doctor and guest I shall be greatly obliged. Besides, it may do you good."

Wilfrid was not blind to the material side of the suggestion, but did not accept the situation too readily. He would look in about half-past nine. He had said nothing as to meeting Beatrice before. Neither did she allude to the topic, for which he was grateful. Beatrice led the way to the door.

“I am not to be disturbed, mind,” Flower called out. “I am going into the library for a couple of hours, and I want you to send James Cotter to me, Beatrice. I can see no one till dinnertime.”

Flower strode away to the library, where he transacted most of his business when out of town, and a few minutes later there entered a small, smiling figure in black, humble of face, and with a quick, nervous habit of rubbing his hands one over another as if he were washing them. This was James Cotter, Flower’s confidant and secretary, and the one man in the world who was supposed to know everything of the inner life of the wealthy ship-owner.

“Come in, Cotter. Sit down and lock the door.”

“You have some bad news, sir,” Cotter said gravely.

“Bad news! That is a mild way of putting it. Come, my friend, you and I have been through some strange adventures together, and I daresay they are as fresh in your memory as as they are in mine. Do you recollect what happened seven years ago in Borneo?”

Cotter groaned. “For Heaven’s sake, don’t speak about it, but thank God that business is past, and done with. We shall never hear any more of them.”

Flower paced thoughtfully up and down the room.

“I thought so,” he said. “I hoped so. It seemed to me that the precautions I had taken placed us absolutely outside the zone of danger. As the years have passed away, and you have grown more and more careless until one were inclined to laugh at your own fears, to wake up, as I did an hour ago, to the knowledge that the danger is not only threatening, but actually here—”

“Here!” Cotter cried, his voice rising almost to a scream. “You don’t mean it, sir. You are joking. You are playing with your old servant. The mere thought of it brings my heart into my mouth and sets me trembling.”

By way of reply Flower proceeded to explain the strange occurrence in the conservatory. When he had finished he laid the piece of silken thread upon the table. Its effect upon Cotter was extraordinary. He tore frantically at his scanty grey hair. Then he laid his head upon the table and burst into a flood of senile tears.

“What is the good of going on like that?” Flower said irritably. “There is work to be done and no time to be lost. I know you are bold enough in the ordinary course of things, and can face danger when you see it. The peculiar horror of this thing is its absolute invisibility. But we shall have to grapple with it. We shall have to fight it out alone. But, first of all, there is something to be done which admits of no delay. I sent into Oldborough for a doctor, and who should turn up but that very man Mercer, who nearly succeeded in bringing a hornet’s nest about our ears over that affair of the Guelder Rose? I should never have remembered the fellow if he had not foolishly let out that he was a ship’s doctor, and naturally I kept my information to myself.”

“You know what I want done. That man is poor and struggling. He has to be crushed. Find out all about him. Find out what he owes and where he owes it. Then you can come to me and I will tell you how to act. No half measures, mind. Mercer is to be driven out of the country and he is not to return.”

Cotter grinned approvingly. This was a commission after his own heart. But from time to time his eyes wandered to that innocent-looking piece of string upon the table, and his face glistened with a greasy perspiration.

"And about that, sir?" he asked, with a shudder.

"That will have to keep for the moment. I want you to go to the post-office and fetch the letters. I am expecting something very important from our agents in Borneo, and you will probably find a registered letter from them. It relates to that matter of Chutney and Co. It will be written in a cypher which you understand as well as I do. You had better open it and read it, in case there may be urgent reasons for cabling a reply at once. As soon as this business is done with and out of the way, Cotter, the better I shall be pleased. It is a bit dangerous even for us. Of course, we can trust Slater, who does everything himself and always uses the cypher, which I defy even Scotland Yard to unravel. Still, as I said before, the work is dangerous, and I will never take on a scheme like that again. You had better use one of the cars as far as the post-office to save time."

"I shall be glad to," Cotter muttered. "I should never dare to walk down to the village in the dark after seeing this infernal piece of string. The mere sight of it makes me shiver."

Cotter muttered himself out of the room and Flower was left to his own thoughts. He sat for half an hour or more till the door opened and Cotter staggered into the room. He held in a shaking hand an envelope marked with the blue lines which usually accompany registered letters.

"Look at it," he mumbled. "That came straight from Borneo, written by Slater himself, sealed with his own private seal, and every line of it in cypher. I should be prepared to swear that no one but Slater had touched it. And then when I come to open the envelope, what do I find inside? Why, this! This! This!"

With quivering fingers Cotter drew the letter from the envelope and unfolded the doubled-up page. From the middle of it dropped a smooth silken object which fell upon the table. It was another mysterious five-knotted string.

Chapter IV

In the Wood.

Master and man stared at each other blankly. Unmistakable fear was visible in the eyes of both. And yet those two standing there face to face were supposed not to know what fear meant. There was something ridiculous in the idea that an innocent looking piece of string should produce so remarkable an effect. It was long before either spoke. Flower paced up and down the room, his thin lips pressed together, his face lined with anxiety.

"I cannot understand it at all," he said at length. "I thought this danger was ended."

"But there it is," Cotter replied. "If these people were not so clever I should not mind. And the more you think of it, sir, the worse it becomes. Fancy that message finding its way into Slater's letter. The thing seems almost impossible; like one of

those weird conjuring tricks we used to see in India. And Slater is a cautious man who runs no risks. He wrote that letter in his own hand. He posted it himself you may be sure. And from the time that it dropped into the letter-box to the time it reached my hand, nobody but the postal officials touched it. Yet there it is, sir, there it is staring us in the face, more deadly and more dangerous than a weapon in the hands of a lunatic. Still, we have got our warning, and I dare say, we shall have time—"

"But shall we?" Flower said impatiently. "Don't be too sure. You have forgotten what I told you about Miss Galloway and the mysterious hand that was trying to force a way into the conservatory. She doesn't know the significance of that attempt, and there is no reason why she should. But, we know, Cotter. We know only too well that the danger is not only coming, but that it is here. Unless I am mistaken it threatens us from more quarters than one. But it is folly to discuss this matter when there is so much to be done. I have friends coming to dinner, curse it, and more are expected later in the evening. I must leave this matter to you and you must do the best you can. Prowl about the place, Cotter. Keep your eyes open. Pry into dark corners. See that all the windows are closed. Perhaps you might also explain something of this to the keeper, and ask him to chain one or two dogs up near the house. They may be useful."

Cotter acquiesced, but it was evident from the expression of his face that he did not feel in the least impressed by his employer's suggestions. This dark, intangible danger was not to be warded off by commonplace precautions. For some time after Cotter had gone Flower sat at his table thinking deeply. The longer he pondered the matter, the more inexplicable it became. Beatrice's discovery was grave enough, but this business of the registered letter was a thousand times worse. Nobody appreciated daring, audacity and courage more than Flower. He knew what a strong asset they were in success in life; indeed, they had made him what he was. But this cleverness and audacity were far beyond his own. He took up the silken string and twisted it nervously in his fingers.

"What is it?" he murmured. "How is the thing done? And why do they send on this warning? What a horrible business it all is! To be hale and hearty one minute and be found dead the next, and not a single doctor in the world able to say how the end is brought about! And when you tackle those fellows there is no safety. Why shouldn't they bribe some dissolute scamp of an Englishman to do the same thing after showing him the way. There are dozens of men in the city of London who would put an end to me with pleasure, if they could only do so with impunity."

Flower rose wearily and left the library. He was tired of his own thoughts and for once had a longing for human society. As he went along the corridor leading to the hall, one of the maids passed him with a white face and every sign of fear and distress. With a feeling of irritation he stopped the girl and inquired what was the matter.

"What has come to the place?" he muttered. "And what have you been crying about? Aren't you Miss Galloway's' maid?"

"Yes, sir," the girl murmured. "It is nothing, sir. As I was coming from the wood at the back of the house, on my way home from the village, I had a fright. I told

Miss Galloway about it and she told me not to be silly. I dare say if I had looked closer, I should have found that—"

The girl's voice trailed off incoherently and Flower suffered her to go away. It was not for him to trouble himself over the fears and fancies of his servants, and at any other time he would have shown no curiosity. But in the light of recent events even a little thing like this had its significance. At any rate, he would ask Beatrice about it.

Beatrice was in the drawing-room putting the finishing touches to the flowers. It would soon be dinner-time.

"I have just met your maid," Flower said. "What on earth is the matter with the girl? She looks as if she has seen a ghost. I hope to goodness the servants haven't been talking and making a lot of mischief about this story that a former lord of Maldon Grange walks the corridors at nights. If there is one form of superstition I detest more than another, it is that."

"You would hardly call Annette a superstitious girl," Beatrice replied. "As a rule she is most matter of fact. But she came in just now with the strangest tale. She had been to the village to get something for me, and as she was rather late she came home through the pine wood. She declares that in the middle of the wood she saw two huge monkeys sitting on the grass gesticulating to one another. When I pointed out to her the absurdity of this idea, she was not vexed with me, but stuck to her statement that two great apes were there and that she saw them quite distinctly. Directly she showed herself they vanished, as if the ground had opened and swallowed them up. She doesn't know how she managed to reach home, but when she got back she was in great distress. Of course it is possible Annette may be right in a way. I saw in a local paper the other day that there is a circus at Castlebridge, which has taken one of the large halls for the winter. The account that I read stated that one or two animals had escaped from the show and had caused a good deal of uneasiness in the neighbourhood. As Castlebridge is one about twenty miles from here, perhaps Annette was right."

Flower muttered something in reply. At first he was more disturbed than Beatrice was aware, but her news about the circus seemed plausible and seemed to satisfy him.

"It is very odd," Beatrice went on, "that we should have these alarming incidents simultaneously. For the last year or two we have led the most humdrum existence, and now we get two startling events in one day. Can there be any connection between them?"

"No, of course not," Flower said roughly. "Tell the maid to keep her information to herself. We don't want to start a rumour that our woods are full of wild animals, or the servants will leave in a body. I'll write to the police to-morrow. If these animals are roaming about they must be captured without delay."

Flower made his way upstairs to his room to dress for dinner. Usually he had little inclination for social distractions, for his one aim in life was to make money. To pile up riches and get the better of other people was both his profession and his relaxation. Still, there were times when he liked to display his wealth and make his power felt, and Beatrice had a free hand so far as local society was concerned. But for once Flower was glad to know he would have something this evening to divert his painful thoughts into another channel. Try as he would he could not

dismiss Black Care from his mind. It was with him when he had finished dressing and came down into the drawing-room.

Was it possible, he asked himself, there could be any connection between the maid's story and the more startling events of the day? Surely it was easy for a hysterical girl to make a mistake in the dark.

But further debate was no longer practicable, for his guests were beginning to arrive. They were Beatrice's friends rather than his. From beneath his bushy eyebrows he regarded them all with more or less contempt. He knew perfectly well they would have had none of him but for his money. For the most part they were here only out of idle curiosity, to see such treasures as Maldon Grange contained. Only one or two perhaps are people after Flower's own heart. Well, it did not matter. Whatever changed the tenor of his thoughts and led his mind in new directions was a distinct relief. He sat taciturn and sombre till dinner was announced.

Chapter V

Under the Trees.

Wilfrid Mercer had walked back to Oldborough very thoughtfully. The event of the past hour or two appeared to have changed the whole current of his existence. He had parted with the old life altogether, and had set himself down doggedly to the humdrum career of a country practitioner. No more long voyages, no adventures more exciting than the gain of a new patient or the loss of an old one. He had not disguised from himself that life in Oldborough would be monotonous, possibly nothing but a sordid struggle. But he would get used to it in time, and perhaps even take an interest in local politics.

But already all was changed. It was changed by a simple accident to Samuel Flower. There was some inscrutable mystery here and, to a certain extent, Wilfrid held the key to it. It seemed to him, speaking from his own point of view, that he knew far more about the affair than Flower himself.

It was as well, too, that nothing should have happened to cause Beatrice Galloway any fear for the future. She might be puzzled and curious, but Wilfrid did not believe that she attached any significance to the piece of string. The string she found appeared to have been dropped by accident as, no doubt, it was; but behind that there lay something which spoke only to Wilfrid Mercer and Samuel Flower.

The more Wilfrid debated the matter, the more certain did he feel that Flower saw in this thing a deadly menace to himself. Wilfrid had not forgotten the look of livid fear on Flower's face when Beatrice handed the string to him. He had not forgotten the sudden cry that burst from Flower's lips. He did not believe that the ship-owner suffered from neuralgia. The most important point was to find out whether Flower understood the nature of the warning: Did he know that the mystery had been hatched in the Malay Archipelago? Did he know that the natives there had invented a mode of taking life which baffled even modern medical

science? If Flower knew, then he might make a bold bid for life and liberty. If not, then his very existence was in peril.

So far Wilfrid's reasoning was clear. But now he struck against a knot in the wood and his plane could go no further. What connection was there between a prosaic British citizen like Samuel Flower and a bloodthirsty Malay on the prowl for vengeance? So far as Wilfrid knew, Flower had spent the whole of his life in London, where such contingencies are not likely to occur. The point was a difficult one to solve, and Wilfrid was still hammering at it when he reached home. Something like illumination came to him while dressing for dinner.

He wondered why he had not thought of it before. Of course, as a ship-owner, Samuel Flower would come in contact with all sorts and conditions of men. The crews of the Flower Line were drawn from all parts of the world. And amongst them Malays and Lascars figured prominently. Wilfrid recollected that there had been many Malays engaged in the mutiny on the Guelder Rose. Matters began to grow more clear.

The night was fine and bright, and the sky full of stars as Wilfrid set out to walk to Maldon Grange. He would not he justified in the extravagance of a cab, for the distance was not more than four miles, and he had been told of a short cut across the fields. At the end of half an hour a moon crept over the wooded hills on the far side, so that objects began to stand out clear and crisp. Here was the path he must follow, and there were the spinneys and covers with which Maldon Grange was surrounded. Most of the fallen leaves were rotting under foot. The ride down which Wilfrid had turned was soft and mossy to his tread. He went along so quietly that he did not even disturb the pheasants roosting in the trees. He passed a rabbit or two so close that he could have touched them with his walking stick. The rays of the moon penetrated the branches here and there and threw small patches of silver on the carpet of turf. Wilfrid had reached the centre of the wood where the undergrowth had been cleared away recently. Looking down the long avenue of trees, it seemed as if he were standing in the nave of a vast cathedral filled with great stone columns. For a moment he stood admiring the quiet beauty of it. Then he moved on again. His one thought, was to reach his destination. He did not notice for a moment or two that a figure was flitting along the opening to his left or that another figure a little way off came out to meet it. When he did become aware that he was no longer alone he paused in the shadow of a huge beech and watched. He did not want to ask who these people were. Probably he was on the track of a couple of poachers.

But though the figures stood out clearly in the moonlight, Wilfrid could see no weapons, or nets, or other implements of the poaching trade. These intruders seemed to be little more than boys if size went for anything, and, surely two poachers would not have seated themselves on the grass and proceeded to light a fire as these men were doing now. They sat gravely opposite one another talking and gesticulating in a way not in the least like the style of phlegmatic Englishmen. In a fashion, they reminded Wilfrid of two intelligent apes discussing a handful of nuts in some zoological garden. But then apes were not clothed, and these two strangers were clad. It was, perhaps, no business of his, but he stood behind the shadow of a tree watching them. He saw one reach out and gather a handful of sticks together; then a match was applied and the whole mass burst into a clear,

steady and smokeless flame. The blaze hovered over the top of the sticks much as the flame of a spirit lamp might have done. With Wilfrid's knowledge of camp fires he was sure that a casual handful of sticks would never give so clear and lambent a flame. He forgot all about his appointment at Maldon Grange, his curiosity overcoming every other feeling. He really must discover what these fellows were doing.

It was easy to creep from tree to tree until he was within thirty or forty yards of the two squatting figures. He saw that the fire was burning as brightly and clearly as ever. He saw one of the strangers produce a small brass pot into which he dropped a pinch or two of powder. Then the vessel was suspended over the fire, and a few moments later a thin violet vapour spread itself out under the heavy atmosphere of the trees until the savour of it reached the watcher's nostrils. It was a weird sort of perfume, sweet and intensely soothing to the nerves. It seemed to Wilfrid that he had never smelt the like of it before, and yet there was a suggestion of familiarity about it. Where had he been in contact with such vapour? How did it recall the tropics? Why was it associated with some tragedy? But rack his brains as he might he could make nothing of it. He felt like a man who tries to fit together the vague outlines of some misty dream. Doubtless it would come to him presently, but for the moment he was at fault. His idea now was to creep farther forward and try to see something of the faces of this mysterious pair. The mossy carpet under foot was soft enough, but there was one thing Wilfrid had not reckoned on. Placing his foot on a pile of dead leaves a stick underneath snapped suddenly with a noise like a pistol-shot. In a flash Mercer crouched down, but it was too late. As if it had been blown out with a fierce blast of wind, the fire was extinguished, the brass pot vanished, and the two figures dissolved into thin air. It was amazing, incredible. Here were the scattered trees with the moonlight shining through the bare branches. Here was the recently cleared ground. But where had those wanderers vanished? Wilfrid dashed forward hastily, but they had gone swiftly and illusively as a pair of squirrels. Mercer drew his hand across his eyes and asked whether he were not the victim of hallucination. It was impossible for those men to have left the wood already. And, besides, there were the charred embers of the sticks yet warm to the touch, though there was no semblance of flame, or even a touch of sullen red. There was nothing but to go on to Maldon Grange and wait the turn of events. That these strangers were after no good Wilfrid felt certain. But whether they had or had not any connexion with the warning to Samuel Flower he could not say. He would keep the discovery to himself.

He was in the house at length. He heard his name called out as he entered the drawing-room. He was glad when Beatrice came forward, for he felt a little shy and uncomfortable before all these strangers.

"I am so glad you came," Beatrice murmured. "Stay here a moment. I have something important to say to you."

Chapter VI

The Lighted Lamp.

Beatrice emerged from a throng of chattering people presently and Wilfrid followed her into the hall.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, "but I should like you to see my maid. It may be nothing but a passing fit of hysteria, but I never saw her so nervous before. She went to the village on an errand this afternoon, and when she came back she told me she had been frightened by two large monkeys in the pine wood behind the house. She said that they vanished in a most extraordinary way. I should have put the whole thing down to sheer imagination if I had not known that some animals have escaped recently from the circus at Castlebridge."

"It is possible the girl spoke the truth," said Wilfrid, with a coolness he was far from feeling, "but I will see her with pleasure. I daresay if I prescribe something soothing you can send into Oldborough and get it made up."

Wilfrid returned by and by with the information that there was nothing the matter with the maid and that her story seemed clear and coherent. There was no time for further discussion, as Flower came forward and enlisted Wilfrid to make up a hand at bridge. The house was looking at its best and brightest now. All the brilliantly lighted rooms were filled with a stream of gaily-dressed guests. The click of the balls came from the billiard-room. It seemed hard to associate a scene like this, the richest flower of the joie de vivre, with the shadow of impending tragedy, and yet it lurked in every corner and was even shouting its warning aloud in Wilfrid's ears. And only a few short hours ago everything was smooth, humdrum, monotonous.

"I hope you are not in any hurry to leave," Flower murmured as he piloted Wilfrid to the card table. "Most of these chattering idiots will be gone by eleven, and there is something that I have to say to you."

"I shall be at your service," Wilfrid said. "I will stay as long as you please. In any case I should like to have another look at your hand before I go."

Flower turned away apparently satisfied and made his way back to the billiard-room. For a couple of hours and more the guests stayed enjoying themselves until, at length, they began to dribble away, and with one solitary exception the card tables were broken up. Wilfrid lingered in the hall as if admiring the pictures, until it seemed that he was the last guest. It was a little awkward, for Flower had disappeared and Beatrice was not to be seen. She came presently and held out her hand.

"I am very tired," she said. "My uncle wants to see you before you go and I know you will excuse me. But I hope we shall not lose sight of one another again. I hope you will be a visitor at the Grange. Please tell your mother for me that I will come and call upon her in a day or two."

"Is it worth while?" Wilfrid asked somewhat sadly. "We are poor and struggling, you know, so poor that this display of luxury and wealth almost stifles me."

"We have always been such good friends," Beatrice murmured.

"I hope we always shall be," Wilfrid replied. "I think you know what my feelings are. But this is neither the time nor place to speak of them."

He turned away afraid to say more. Perhaps Beatrice understood, for a pleasant smile lighted up her face and the colour deepened in her cheeks. At the same

moment Flower came out of the library. He glanced suspiciously from one to the other. Little escaped those keen eyes.

"You had better go to bed, Beatrice," he said abruptly. "I have some business with Mr. Mercer. Let us talk it over in the billiard room. I can't ask you in the library because my man Cotter will be busy there for the next half-hour."

In spite of his curtness it was evident that Flower was restless and ill at ease. His hand shook as he poured out the whisky and soda, and his fingers twitched as he passed the cigarettes.

"I am going to ask you a question," he said. "You recollect what you told us this afternoon about that Borneo incident—about the man whom you found dead in such extraordinary circumstances. I couldn't put it to you more plainly this afternoon before my niece, but it struck me that you knew more than you cared to say. Did you tell us everything?"

"Really, I assure you there is no more to be said," Wilfrid exclaimed. "The victim was practically a stranger to me, and I should have known nothing about it if I had not been fetched. I am as puzzled now as I was then."

Flower's brows knitted with disappointment.

"I am sorry to hear that," he said. "I thought perhaps you had formed some clue or theory that might account for the man's death."

"I assure you, nothing," Wilfrid said. "I made a most careful examination of the body; in fact, I went so far as to make a post-mortem. I could find nothing wrong except a certain amount of congestion of the brain which I attributed then and do still to the victim's dissipated habits. Every organ of the body was sound. All things considered, the poor fellow's blood was in a remarkably healthy state. I spared no pains."

"Then he might have died a natural death?"

"No," Wilfrid said firmly. "I am sure he didn't. I am convinced that the man was murdered in some way, though I don't believe that any surgeon could have put his hand upon the instrument used or have indicated the vital spot which was affected. I admit that I should have allowed the matter to pass if I had not found that strange piece of string knotted round the brows. It would be absurd to argue that the string was the cause of death, but I fancy that it was a symbol or a warning of much the same sort that the conspirators in the olden days used when they pinned rough drawings of a skull and cross-bones to the breasts of their victims."

Flower was listening with his whole mind concentrated upon the speaker's words. He seemed as if he changed his mind. From the breast-pocket of his dress-coat he produced a letter, and from it extracted a piece of knotted string.

"Of course you recognise this?" he asked.

"I do," Wilfrid said. "It is the piece which Miss Galloway picked up this afternoon."

"Well, it isn't," Flower said with a snarl. "This is another piece altogether. I hold in my hand, as you see, a letter. This letter was sent me from Borneo by one of my agents. It is connected with a highly complicated and delicate piece of business, the secret of which is known only to my agent, to my secretary and myself. The letter is written in cypher in my agent's own handwriting. I know that from the time it was written to the time it was posted it was never out of his hand. It

reached me with every seal intact, and yet, neatly coiled up inside, was the identical piece of string which you are looking at now. I should like to know, Dr. Mercer, how you account for that?"

"I couldn't," said Wilfrid. "Nobody could explain such an extraordinary occurrence. Of course, there is a chance that your agent himself might—"

"Nothing of the kind," Flower put in. "He is not that sort of man. Besides, if he had been, there must have been some explanation in the letter, whereas the thing is not alluded to at all. Frankly, I am disappointed that you can give me no further information. But I will not detain you longer."

"One moment," Wilfrid said. "I must have a look at your hand before I go. It is as well to be on the safe side."

"One moment," Flower said. "I'll see if my man Cotter has finished, then I will come back to you."

Wilfrid was not sorry to be alone, for this was fresh material for his already bewildered thoughts. There was danger pressing here, but from what quarter, and why, it was impossible to determine. Yet he was convinced the hand of tragedy was upon the house, and that all Flower's wealth, all his costly possessions, would never save him from the shadow of the coming trouble. This pomp and ostentation, these beautiful chairs and tables and carpets and pictures were no more than a hollow mockery.

Time was creeping on and yet Flower did not return. The hands of the clock over the billiard-room mantle-piece moved onwards till the hour of twelve struck, and still Flower made no sign. It seemed to Wilfrid that the subtle scents of the blooms which lined the hall and overflowed into the billiard-room were changing their scent, that the clear light thrown by the electrics was merging to a misty blue. He felt as if a great desire to sleep had overtaken him. He closed his eyes and lay back. Where had he smelt that perfume?

He jumped to his feet with a start. With a throbbing head he darted for the window. He knew now what it was—the same pungent, acrid smell those men were making in their fire under the trees. Was it deadly? A moment's delay might prove fatal.

Chapter VII

The Shadow on the Wall.

Beatrice sat before the fire in her bed-room looking thoughtfully into the glowing coals. If appearances counted for anything she ought to have been a happy girl, for she seemed to lack nothing that the most fastidious heart could desire. Samuel Flower passed rightly enough for a greedy, grasping man, but he never displayed these qualities so far as his niece's demands were concerned. The fire was burning cheerfully on the tiled hearth, the red silk curtains were drawn against the coldness of the night, the soberly-shaded electric lights glinted upon silver and gold and jewels scattered about Beatrice's dressing-table. The dark walls were lined with pictures and engravings; here and there were specimens of the old

china that the mistress of the room affected. Altogether it was very cosy and very charming. It was the last place in the world to suggest crime or trouble or catastrophe of any kind.

But Beatrice was not thinking about the strange events of the evening, for her mind had gone back to the time when she first met Wilfrid Mercer in London. He had been introduced by common friends, and from that time Beatrice had contrived to see a good deal of him. From the first she had liked him, perhaps because he was so different from the young men of her acquaintance. Samuel Flower's circle had always been a moneyed one, and until she had known Wilfrid Mercer, Beatrice had met few men who were not engaged in finance. They belonged, for the most part to the new and pushing order. Their ways and manners were not wholly pleasing to Beatrice. Perhaps she had been spoilt. Perhaps she valued money for the pleasure it brought, and not according to the labour spent in the gaining of it. At any rate she had been at few pains to show a liking for her environment before Wilfrid's visit. Here was a man who knew something of the world, who could speak of other things than the City and the latest musical comedy. There was that about his quiet, assured manner and easy unconsciousness that attracted Beatrice. She knew as every girl does when the right man comes, that he admired her. Indeed he had not concealed his feelings. But at that time Wilfrid was ignorant of Beatrice's real position. Naturally enough, he had not associated her with Samuel Flower. He had somehow come to imagine that her prospects were no better than his own. There had been one or two delightful evenings when he had spoken freely of his future, and Beatrice had thrilled with pleasure in knowing why he had made a confidante of her. He had said nothing definite, but the girl understood intuitively that one word from her would have brought a declaration to his lips.

It was a pretty romance and Beatrice cherished it. The whole episode was in sharp contrast with her usual hard, brilliant surroundings. Besides, there was a subtle flattery in the way in which he had confided in her. She had intended to keep her secret and not let Wilfrid know how grand her prospects were till she had talked the matter over with her guardian. That Flower would give his consent she did not doubt for a moment. He had no matrimonial views for her. Indeed, he had more than once hinted that if she cared to marry any really decent fellow he would put no obstacle in the way. Perhaps he knew enough of his own circle to feel convinced that none of them were capable of making Beatrice happy.

These were the thoughts that stole through the girl's mind as she sat in front of the fire. She was glad to know that Wilfrid had not forgotten her. She had read in his eyes the depth and sincerity of his pleasure. He had told her frankly enough, that he was taken aback at her position, and the statement had showed to Beatrice that there was no change in his sentiments regarding her.

He would get used to her wealth in time. He would not love her any the less because she would come to him with her hands full. Ay, and she would come ready and willing to lift him beyond the reach of poverty.

"How silly I am!" the girl murmured. "Here am I making a regular romance out of a common-place meeting between two people who have done no more than spend a few pleasant evenings together. Positively I blush for myself. And yet—"

The girl rose with a sigh, conscious that she was neglecting her duties. She had come to her room without a thought for her maid who might be requiring attention. She stole across the corridor to the room where Annette lay. The lights were nearly all out and the corridor looked somewhat forbidding in the gloom. The shadows might have masked a score of people and Beatrice been none the wiser, a thought which flashed upon her as she hurried along. All the time she had lived at Maldon Grange she had never been troubled by timorous fears like these. Perhaps the earlier events of the evening had got on her nerves. She could see with fresh vividness that long, thin, skinny hand fumbling for the lock of the conservatory door.

It was too ridiculous, she told herself. Doubtless that prowling tramp was far enough away by this time. Besides, there were too many dogs about the place to render a burglary likely. At the end of the corridor Beatrice's little terrier slept. The slightest noise disturbed him: his quick ear detected every sound. Doubtless those shadows shrouding the great west window contained nothing more formidable than the trailing plants and exotic flowers which Beatrice had established there.

The door of the maid's room was open and the girl lay awake. Beatrice could see that her face was damp and pale and that the girl's eyes were full of restless fear. She shook her head reproachfully.

"This is altogether wrong," she said. "Dr. Mercer told you to go to sleep at once. Really, Annette, I had no idea you were so nervous."

"I can't help it, miss," the girl whined. "I didn't know it myself till this afternoon. But every time I close my eyes I see those horrible creatures dancing and jabbering, till my heart beats so fast that I can hardly breathe."

"You know they were animals," Beatrice protested. "They escaped from the circus in Castlebridge. I read about it in the papers. Doubtless they have been recaptured by now."

Annette shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't believe it, miss," she whispered. "I have been lying here with the door open and the light of the fire shining on the wall opposite in the corridor, as you can see at this moment. I had almost persuaded myself the thing was a mere fright when I saw a shadow moving along the wall."

"One of the servants, of course."

"I wish I could think so, miss," the girl went on. "But it wasn't like anybody in the house. It was short and thick with enormously long arms and thin crooked fingers. I watched it for some time. I would have called out if I only dared. And then when it vanished I was ashamed to speak. But it was there all the same. Don't leave me, miss."

The last words came in a beseeching whisper. With a feeling of mingled impatience and sympathy Beatrice glanced round the room. A glass and a bottle of medicine stood by the bed-side.

"I declare you are all alike," Beatrice exclaimed. "If you go to a dispensary and get free medicine you swallow it like water. But when a regular doctor prescribes in this fashion you won't touch it. Now I am going to give you your draught at once."

The girl made no protest. Apparently she was ready to do anything to detain Beatrice by her side. She accepted the glass and swallowed the contents. A

moment or two later she closed her eyes and in five minutes was fast asleep. As the medicine was a sleeping draught Annette would not wake before morning. Closing the door behind her Beatrice crept back to her room, looking fitfully over her shoulder as she walked along. She had caught something of Annette's nameless dread, though she strove to argue with herself about its absurdity. She glanced over the bannisters and noted the lights in the hall below. Seemingly her guardian had not retired. She found herself wondering if Wilfrid Mercer was still in the house. At any rate, it was pleasant to think there was help downstairs if necessary.

"I'll go to bed," Beatrice resolved. "I dare say I shall have forgotten this nonsense by the morning. That is the worst of an old house like this, these gloomy shadows appeal so to the imagination."

Nevertheless, Beatrice dawdled irresolutely before the fire. She would go out presently and see that her dog was in his accustomed place. Usually he was as good as half-a-dozen guardians.

As Beatrice stood there she began to be conscious that the room was becoming filled with a peculiar, sweet odour; the like of which she had never smelt before. Perhaps it came from her flowers. She would go and see. She stepped out in the darkness and paused half hesitating.

Chapter VIII

The Blue Terror.

The strange sickly scent went as quickly as it had come. The air cleared and sweetened once more. It was very odd, because there was no draught or breath of air to cleanse the atmosphere. Doubtless the scent had proceeded from the tropical flowers at the end of the corridor. Many new varieties had been introduced recently, strange plants to Beatrice, some of them full of buds which might open at any moment. Perhaps one of these had suddenly burst into bloom and caused the unfamiliar odour.

Beatrice hoped that the plant might not be a beautiful one, but if it were she would have to sacrifice it, for it would be impossible to live in its neighbourhood and breath that sickly sweet smell for long. In another moment or two she would know for herself. She advanced along the corridor quickly with the intention of turning up the lights and finding the offending flower. She knew her way perfectly well in the dark. She could have placed her hands upon the switches blindfold. Suddenly she stopped.

For the corridor was no longer in darkness. Some ten of fifteen yards ahead of her in the centre of the floor and on the thick pile of the Persian carpet was a round nebulous trembling orb of flickering blue flame. The rays rose and fell just as a fire does in a dark room, and for the moment Beatrice thought the boards were on fire.

But the peculiar dead-blue of the flame and its round shape did not fit in with its theory. The fire was apparently feeding upon nothing, and as Beatrice stood

there fascinated she saw it roll a yard or two like a ball. It moved just as if a sudden draught had caught it—this strange will-o'-the-wisp at large in a country house. Beatrice shivered with apprehension wondering what was going to happen next. She could not move, she could not call out for she was now past words. She could only watch and wait developments, her heart beating fast.

And developments came. For the best part of a yard a fairly strong glow surrounded the sobbing blue flame. Out of the glow came a long, thin, brown hand and arm, the slim fingers grasping a small brass pot and holding it over the flame. Almost immediately a dusty film rose from the pot and once again that sickly sweet perfume filled the corridor. Beatrice swayed before it, her senses soothed, her nerves numbed, until it seemed to her that she was falling backwards to the ground. A pair of arms caught her and she was lifted from the floor and carried swiftly along to her own room. It was all like a dream, from which she emerged by and by, to find herself safe and sound and the door of her room closed. She shook off the fears that held her in a grip of iron and laid her hand on the knob. The lock was fastened on the outside.

What did it mean? What terrible things were happening on the other side of that locked door? It was useless to cry for help, for the walls were thick and no one slept in the same corridor but herself. All the servants had gone to bed long ago. Therefore, to ring the bell for help would be useless. All Beatrice could do was to wait and hope for assistance, and pray that this blue terror overhanging the house was not destined to end in tragedy. Perhaps this was an ingenious method by which modern thieves rifled houses with impunity and got away with their plunder before alarm could be raised. It seemed feasible, especially as she recollected that her dog had not challenged the intruders. She hoped nothing had happened to the terrier. She could not forget her tiny favourite even at this alarming moment.

Meanwhile, help was near at hand, as Beatrice expected. In the billiard-room Wilfrid Mercer had come to his senses, and made a dash for the window. He knew now that some dire catastrophe was at hand. He did not doubt that this was the work of the two strangers whom he had seen under the trees. In fact, with the scent burning and stinging in his nostrils there was no room for question. Whether the stuff was fatal or not he did not know, and there was no time to ask. The thing to do was to create a powerful current throughout the house and clear the rooms and passages.

He thought of many things in that swift moment. His mind went flashing back to the time when he had encountered the dead English man in the Borneo hut with that knotted skein about his forehead. He thought about the strange discovery in the afternoon when those five knots had so mysteriously appeared again. He thought most of all of Beatrice and wondered if she were safe. All this shot through his mind in the passing of a second between the time he rose from his chair, and fumbled for the catch of the windows opening on to the lawn. He had his handkerchief pressed tightly to his face. He dared not breathe yet. His heart was beating like a drum.

But the catch yielded at last. One after the other the windows were thrown wide and a great rush of air swept into the room causing the plants to dance and sway and the masses of ferns to nod their heads complainingly. It was good to feel the pure air of Heaven again, to fill the lungs with a deep breath, and note the action

of the heart growing normal once more. The thing had passed as rapidly as it had come and Wilfrid felt ripe for action. He was bold enough to meet the terror in whatever way it lifted up its head. As he turned towards the hall Cotter staggered into the room. His face white and he shook like a reed in the wind. His fat hands were rubbing nervously together and he was the very embodiment of grotesque, almost ludicrous, fright.

"After all these years," he muttered, "after all these years. I am a wicked old man, sir, a miserable old wretch who doesn't deserve to live. And yet I always knew it would come. I knew it well enough though Mr. Flower always said we had got the better of those people. But I never believed it, sir, I never believed it. And now when I have worked and toiled and slaved to enjoy myself in my old age I am going to die like this. But it wasn't my fault, sir. I didn't do it. It was Flower. And if I had only known what was going to happen I would have cut my right hand off rather than have gone to Borneo ten years ago."

"In the name of common sense, what are you jabbering about?" Wilfrid said impatiently.

But Cotter did not hear. He had not the remotest idea whom he was talking to. He wandered in the same childish manner, rubbing his hands and writhing as if he were troubled with fearful inward pains.

"Can't you explain?" Wilfrid asked. "So you two have been to Borneo together, eh? That tells me a good deal. In the meantime, what has become of Mr. Flower?"

Apparently Cotter had a glimmer of sense for he grasped the meaning of the question.

"He is in there," he said vaguely, "in the library with them. Oh, why did I ever come to a place like this?"

Again the vague terror seemed to sweep down on Cotter and sway him to and fro as if the physical agony were more than he could bear. It was useless to try to extract any intelligent information out of this sweat-bedabbled wretch. And whatever happened Flower must be left to his own device for the moment. Doubtless he had brought all this upon himself, and if he had to pay the extreme penalty, why, then, the world would be little the worse for his loss. But there was somebody else whose life was far more precious. Wilfrid bent over the quaking Cotter and shook him by the shoulders much as a terrier shakes a rat.

"Now, listen to me, you trembling coward," he said between his teeth. "Try to get a little sense into that muddled brain of yours. Where is Miss Galloway, and where is she to be found?"

"Don't," Cotter groaned. "Do you want to murder me? I suppose Miss Galloway is in her bedroom."

"I can guess that for myself," Wilfrid retorted. "Show me her room."

"Oh, I will," Cotter whined. "But don't ask me to move from here, sir. It would be cruel. It is all very well for a young man like you who doesn't know—"

"If you won't come, I will take you see by the scruff of your neck and drag you upstairs," Wilfrid said grimly.

He caught hold of Cotter's limp arm and propelled him up the stairs. The atmosphere was clean and sweet now, though traces of the perfume lingered. Cotter, hanging limply from Wilfrid's arm, pointed to a door. Then he turned and fled holding on by the bannisters. It was no time to hesitate so Wilfrid tapped at

the door. His heart was in his mouth and waited with sickening impatience for a reply. Suppose the mischief had been done! Suppose he should be too late! He had with difficulty saved himself. Then he gave a gasp of relief as he heard the voice of Beatrice asking who was there.

"It is I, Mercer," he said. "There is no time to lose. Will you unlock the door?"

Chapter IX

Behind Locked Doors.

"I cannot," Beatrice replied. Her voice was low, but to Wilfrid's relief quite steady. "The door is locked on the outside. I am so thankful you have come."

Wilfrid turned the key. With a great thrill of delight he saw that Beatrice was little the worse for what she had gone through. He indulged in no idle talk but reached out his hand in search of one of the electric switches. Beatrice grasped Wilfrid's meaning. She stretched out her hand and immediately the corridor was flooded with light.

"I cannot understand it," she murmured. "Dr. Mercer, what does it mean?"

"Perhaps you had better tell me your experience first," Wilfrid suggested. "If I can throw any light afterwards on this hideous mystery I shall be glad."

"I'll tell you as collectedly as I can," Beatrice replied. "I had almost forgotten the alarm I had in the conservatory this afternoon when I came up to bed. I sat for a while dreaming over the fire—"

Beatrice stopped and a little colour crept into her face. She wondered what Wilfrid would say if he only knew what she had been thinking about. He nodded encouragingly.

"Then I suddenly recollected that I had not seen Annette. When I reached her room I found her wide awake and as terrified as when she came back from the village. I suppose she was too upset to take your medicine, for the bottle stood unopened on the table. After I had given it to her she went off to sleep almost immediately, but not before she had told me something which disturbed me very much. As she lay with the bedroom door open, the firelight shone upon the wall on the other side of the corridor, and she declared she had seen a shadow on the wall like one of the figures that had frightened her in the wood. I pretended to be angry and incredulous, but I confess that I was really rather startled. It seemed so strange that a quiet country house should suddenly be invested with such an atmosphere of mystery. Why did that man try to get into the conservatory? And why were those figures?—but I am wandering from the point."

"I think we had better have facts at first," Wilfrid said.

"Oh, yes. Well, I went back to my room after seeing Annette to sleep, and I fear I must own to feeling considerably frightened. It was a relief to find that somebody was still about downstairs, and to remember that there were so many dogs about the house. Then I remembered my little terrier who always sleeps on a mat at the end of the corridor. It is warm there, because I have had the place fitted with hot-water pipes and turned it into a conservatory where I grow exotic plants. It struck

me as singular that the dog should give no alarm if anybody were wandering about the house, and I went out to see if he were all right. I did not turn on the lights because I would not pander to my own weakness. Besides, I could find my way about the corridor blindfold. And then, in the darkness, I saw an amazing thing—a globe of flickering blue fire, about the size of a football. It moved in the most a extraordinary way, and at first I thought the floor was alight. But I abandoned that idea when I saw a long, lean arm thrust out and a brass cup held over the flame. Oh, I must tell you that before that I noticed a peculiar scent of the most strange and overpowering description. I thought that one of my new plants had come into bloom and that this was the perfume of it. Then I saw how mistaken I was, and that the odour arose from the brass cup over the flame. After that I recollect nothing else except that I became terribly drowsy and when I recovered I was in my own room with the door locked on the outside. I cannot tell you how thankful I was to hear your voice."

"It is very strange," Wilfrid said. "Obviously you did not go back to your room by yourself. Therefore, some one carried you there. I think you may make your mind easy as far as you are personally concerned. Whoever these mysterious individuals may be, they bear no enmity to you."

"Then whom do they want," Beatrice asked.

Wilfrid was silent for a moment. He could give a pretty clear answer to the question. But Beatrice was already terrified and troubled enough without the addition of further worry. Cotter's incoherent terror and his wild speech had given Wilfrid a clue to the motives which underlay this strange business.

"We will discuss that presently," he said. "In the meantime, it will be as well to find out why your dog did not give an alarm."

The black and white terrier lay on his mat silent. He did not move when Beatrice called. She darted forward and laid her hand upon the animal's coat. Then an indignant cry came from her lips.

"The poor thing is dead," she exclaimed. "Beyond doubt the dog has been poisoned by those fumes. And look at my flowers, the beautiful flowers upon which I spent so much time and attention. They might have been struck by lightning."

Wilfrid could see no flowers. Across the great west window was a brown tangled web hanging in shreds; in the big pots was a mass of blackened foliage. But there was nothing else to be seen.

"Do you mean to say these are your flowers?" Wilfrid asked.

"They were an hour ago," Beatrice said mournfully, "some of the rarest and most beautiful in the world. They have come from all parts of the globe. It is easy to see what has happened. Oh, please take me away. I shall be stifled if I remain. It is horrible!"

Beatrice was on the verge of hysteria. Her nerves had been tried too far. It was necessary to get her into the open air without delay. In his quick, masterful way Wilfrid took her by the arm and led her downstairs into the billiard-room. Beatrice was safe, however. It was plain the visitors had no designs against her; indeed, they had proved so much by their actions. And, unworthy as he was of assistance, something would have to be done to save Samuel Flower. Wilfrid would have to act for himself. He could expect no help from the terror-stricken Cotter who appeared

to have vanished, and it would not be to prudent to arouse the servants. He took Beatrice across the billiard-room and motioned her into the open air.

"I will fetch a wrap for you," he said. "I shall find some in the hall."

"Am I to stay outside?" Beatrice asked.

"It will be better," Wilfrid said as he returned with a bundle of wraps. "At any rate, you will be in the fresh air. And now I want you to he brave and resolute. Don't forget that these mysterious strangers have no grudge against you. Try to bear that in mind. Keep it before you and think of nothing else. I believe I have a fair idea what is taking place."

"But yourself," Beatrice murmured. "I should never know a moment's happiness if anything happened to you. You have been so strong and kind that—that—"

The girl faltered and tears came into her eyes. She held out her hands impulsively and Wilfrid caught them in a tender grip. He forgot everything else for the moment.

"For your sake as well as mine," he whispered. "And now I really must act. Unless I am mistaken it is your uncle who is in most danger."

Wilfrid turned and passed into the hall. The library door was shut and he seemed to hear voices from the room. Crouching behind a settee he made out the form of Cotter who rose as he approached and came forward writhing and rubbing his hands. The fellow's abject terror filled Wilfrid with disgust.

"Where is your master?" he demanded.

"In there," Cotter whispered, "with them. He'll never come out again. We shall never see Samuel Flower alive. What are you going to do, sir? You wouldn't be as mad as that."

"I am going into the library," Wilfrid said curtly. As he spoke he laid his hand upon the lock, but the key was turned inside and he could make no approach. Cotter caught him round the shoulders.

"Don't do it," he whispered. "If you value your life stay where you are. And besides, it is too late to do any good. He has been locked in there with them five minutes. And five minutes with them is eternity."

Cotter's voice broke off suddenly as a feeble cry came from within the room. Wilfrid stepped back a pace or two.

"Stand clear," he said, "I am going to burst the door."

Chapter X

„Mr. Wil—".

Wilfrid brushed Cotter aside as if he had been a fly, and flung himself against the door, heedless of its weight and strength, but it was of stout oak and he might as well have hurled himself against a brick wall. But the sullen blow echoed through the house and there were indications of alarm and confusion in the library. It was useless to bruise himself against the obstacle and Wilfrid looked hastily around for some weapon. His eyes fell upon a trophy of bill-hooks and battle-axes. He snatched one of the latter and attacked the door in earnest. The

third blow smashed in a panel and a crossbar so that it was possible to crawl through into the library.

As far as he could see the place was empty. One of the windows was wide open which was perhaps fortunate, for the overpowering scent hung on the air and the odour of it was keen upon Wilfrid's nostrils. Beyond doubt one of those mysterious fireballs had been lighted here. But there was no time to inquire into this. What had become of Samuel Flower? He must have been there a few minutes ago. Certainly somebody had been in the library. Flower's peril now seemed as great as ever. Wilfrid strode across towards the window past the mahogany writing-table where Flower's letters were scattered about. One letter with little more than a name and address lay on the blotting pad with a wet pen upon it, as if it had fallen suddenly from the writer's hand. Eager and excited as he was, Wilfrid noted this casually.

His search was finished now. As he strode past the table he blundered over a figure lying at his feet which he recognised at once as that of Samuel Flower. He had to call twice, and the second time sternly, before Cotter wriggled through the broken panel and came dazed and frightened into the room.

"There is no danger now," Wilfrid said contemptuously. "For the present, at any rate, those mysterious people have gone. Now help me to get your master on to this sofa."

"He's dead," Cotter muttered. "Of course he's dead. If you had been through what he has the last few minutes—"

Wilfrid did not deign to argue the point. He curtly motioned Cotter to Flower's feet, and between them they managed to raise the body of the ship-owner on to the couch. Examination proved that Cotter was wrong. Flower lay still and white and breathless, but Wilfrid could see that he breathed and that some faint tinge of colour was coming back into his pendulous cheeks. At a command from Wilfrid, Cotter went out and returned with a brandy decanter. Wilfrid moistened the blanched lips with the stimulant, and after a little while Flower opened his eyes in a dull way and gazed stupidly about. For the present he was safe, though it was sometime before he showed anything like real consciousness. There was an ugly bruise on his forehead, doubtless the result of a fall.

"I daresay you can give me what I want," Wilfrid said to Cotter. "Is there such a thing in the garden as a house leek? You know the herb I mean—it grows in clumps on the walls. It is capital stuff for bruises and swells. Go and get me some."

"I know where it is to be found," Cotter muttered. "But as to going out into the garden, or in the dark—"

"Fetch it at once," Wilfrid said imperiously. "There is nothing to be frightened of. Go and bring it, or I will kick you out of the window."

Cotter shambled off into the darkness. He came back presently with a handful of the thick, fleshy leaves, and under Wilfrid's direction began to mash them into pulp. The man's manner was so strange that Mercer asked the reason.

"I am mad," Cotter exclaimed. "We are all mad. There was never anything like this since the world began. I tell you those men have gone. I saw them in the garden—with my own eyes I saw them. And they were as much afraid of the other one as we are of them. What does it mean, sir?"

Just for a moment it occurred to Wilfrid that Cotter had really taken leave of his senses, but his speech was coherent enough and the look of absolute terror had faded from his eyes.

"What other one?" Wilfrid asked.

"Why the big man in the livery," Cotter replied. "But I forgot—you didn't see him. He came up to the other two with a whip in his hand and lashed them as if they had been dogs. A great nigger, nearly seven feet high."

"A nigger!" Wilfrid exclaimed. "What bosh!"

"I assure you it's true, sir," Cotter said earnestly. "It was on the other side of the lawn and the light from the window fell full upon his face. I tell you he is a pure-blooded negro. When those other two saw him coming they bolted and he after them. And he used his whip upon them vigorously. Don't ask me what it all means, sir. I am not going to stay here. I should be afraid to spend another night under this roof."

Wilfrid gave the thing up as hopeless for the present. Probably this new phase of the maddening puzzle would solve itself in time. And meanwhile there was Beatrice to be thought of. In a few curt words Wilfrid sent Cotter into the garden to bring Miss Galloway back to the house. He was to wait in the drawing-room till Wilfrid was at liberty again. He was glad to be alone so that he could concentrate attention upon his patient.

Flower was rapidly coming to himself, and by and by he would be able to give an account of what had happened. He opened his eyes from time to time and recognised Wilfrid with a flicker of his eyelids. There was nothing, however, but to wait, and Wilfrid sat down by the side of the table where the letters were scattered about. Without wishing to be curious he did not fail to notice the unfinished letter on which the wet pen was still lying. It was addressed, as he saw, to a firm called Darton and Co. Then followed the words:

Dears Sirs, Re M. Wil—

Here the letter stopped abruptly as if the writer had been interrupted. It struck Wilfrid as a coincidence that Darton and Co. was the firm from which he had borrowed the money to set himself up in business. But doubtless there were other firms of Darton and Co., and in any case the matter was not worth thinking about. Besides, Flower was sitting up now and holding his hands to his temples.

"What does it all mean?" he whispered. "And what is the matter with the door? Why is the window open? Ah, I begin to recollect. Cotter had given me some information which he had got from London by telephone and I was just writing a letter… It was a most extraordinary smell, Mercer, I don't think I ever smelt anything like it. I rose to open the window and after that I remember nothing till I came to my senses on the sofa and you were bending over me. What can it mean?"

"I think you know as much about it as I do," Wilfrid said guardedly. "Beyond question, a determined attempt to murder you has been made by some person or persons whom you know just as much about as I do. But I had better tell you what has happened in another part of the house."

Wilfrid told his tale briefly, not forgetting to touch upon Cotter's terror and the admissions which had come from the confidential clerk in a moment of peril.

“It is not for me to say anything about it,” Wilfrid concluded, “but seeing that I have already met the men who manipulate these kind of things through the symbol of the knotted string, why, naturally, I must draw my own inferences. I will not ask you for your confidence, and you may tell me as little or as much as you like. It seems only fair to conclude that you have somehow incurred the displeasure of these people. If I can help you—”

Flower shook his head despondently. Evidently he was in no mood to be communicative.

“I don’t think I’ll trouble you,” he said. “That this sort of thing should go on in England in the twentieth century is outrageous. Fortunately, no one knows anything about it but yourself and my niece and Cotter, and you will see that the less said the better. I’ll place the matter in the hands of a detective, and before the end of a week we shall be safe from a repetition of outrages of this kind.”

Flower spoke rationally, but he was so terribly shaken. The ship-owner rose to his feet as if the interview were ended.

“You wouldn’t care for me to stay all night, I suppose?” Wilfrid asked. “I will if you like.”

“Not the least occasion, my dear sir. I have a revolver, and Cotter and I can sit up till daylight. I am ashamed to have given you all this trouble. Don’t let me detain you longer.”

There was nothing more to be said, and Wilfrid walked out into the hall. He would have left the house, but Beatrice, hearing his step, came to the door of the drawing-room. At the same time Flower’s voice was heard demanding Cotter.

“I should like to speak to you before you go,” Beatrice said.

Chapter XI

On the Way Home.

“I was just going,” Wilfrid replied. “But, of course, if there is anything I can do for you—”

“I want to know if anything serious has happened,” Beatrice went on. “I could get nothing out of Cotter. The man is paralysed with fright. All I could learn was that my uncle’s life is in danger. What does it mean?”

“I only wish I could tell you,” Wilfrid replied, “but I will not rest till I get to the bottom of it. Beyond question, your uncle’s life was in danger, and I have no hesitation in telling you so. And I fear you are going to have more trouble before the danger is removed. But there is one thing you must bear in mind—you are perfectly safe yourself. And as far as your uncle is concerned, he seems to be himself again, because you heard him call for Cotter just now.”

Wilfrid might have said more, but he had no desire to alarm Beatrice further. He did not want her to know that if he had been less prompt in breaking in the library door the career of the ship-owner would have been at an end by this time. He tried to close the incidents with a smile.

“You must go to bed and sleep,” he said. “Your uncle and Cotter will sit up all night, and I understand that tomorrow the case is going to be placed in the hands of a detective. It is a good thing that the servants know nothing about the matter. I suppose you saw nothing to alarm you when you were in the garden?”

“No, I was not afraid,” Beatrice said simply, “but I did see a thing which puzzled me exceedingly. I saw two of those strange little figures run along the drive closely followed by a gigantic negro, who was plying a whip about their shoulders unmercifully. They didn’t seem to resent it in the least; in fact, they behaved just like refractory hounds who had been misbehaving themselves. They passed out of sight in a flash, and then I saw them no more. If you had not known so much I should have been almost ashamed to tell you this, for fear you should laugh at me.”

Wilfrid did not laugh. He did not even smile. So the thing that he had put down as a figment of Cotter’s diseased brain really was a fact. It was as well to know this, too. The small figures might be illusive. They might even obliterate themselves, but a stalwart negro, standing six feet six in his stockings, was another matter altogether.

“I am glad you told me this,” Wilfrid said thoughtfully, “because here we have something like a tangible clue. And now I must be going. I will see your uncle again to-morrow.”

Beatrice held out her two hands impulsively.

“How can I thank you for all your kindness?” she said. “How good and brave and patient you are!”

Wilfrid carried one of the hands to his lips.

“I would do anything for you,” he said, “and you know it, Beatrice. Perhaps the time may come some day when I can speak more freely. But I feel convinced that there is no occasion to tell you—”

Wilfrid might have said more but for the heightened colour on Beatrice’s face, and the way in which she shrank from him. A little dismayed and chilled, he followed the direction of her eyes, and noticed Flower standing in the doorway. The latter betrayed nothing on his face. He merely inquired somewhat coldly if it would not be better for Beatrice to retire. His expression changed when the big hall door closed finally upon Wilfrid Mercer.

“That young man will get on,” he said grimly. “He has the necessary assurance. But I should have thought that a stranger would hardly venture to go so far—”

“Mr. Mercer is not exactly a stranger,” Beatrice said confusedly. “I saw a good deal of him when I was in London. I should have told you this before only I have had no opportunity.”

“Oh, really! Quite a romance. He is a clever young man, but I think he must be taught his place. You will not ask him here again, after he has done with me.”

“I promised to call upon his mother,” Beatrice protested.

Flower was on the verge of an angry retort, but checked himself and smiled in his own sinister fashion.

“As you please,” he said. “It really doesn’t matter either way. Before many weeks have passed—but it is late to be talking here like this. Go to bed, child.”

Meanwhile Mercer was making his way back to Oldborough, his mind full of the events of the evening. The more he thought over them, the more puzzling and

bewildering they became. He emerged upon the high road presently, and went on steadily until he reached the cross-roads leading to Oldborough on the one hand, and Castlebridge on the other. Then he became aware that a group of people were standing in the road close by the sign-post. They were gesticulating and talking so fast as to be utterly unconscious of the newcomer. Wilfrid came to an abrupt standstill, then suddenly stepped off the road into the shadow of the hedge. He had ocular proof now that Beatrice and Cotter had been speaking the truth. Here were the two small figures, no doubt the very same he had seen over their incantations in the woods, and towering above them was a gigantic individual with a face black and shining as ebony. For some time the controversy went on until it was broken at length by the thud of a horse's hoofs and the jingling of a bell. Presently a flashy-looking dog-cart drove up, driven by a still more flashy-looking driver. The horse was pulled up, and the man in the cart hailed the negro in tones of satisfaction.

"So you've got them at last, Gordon," he said.

"Indeed, I have, mister," the negro said, "and a nice dance they've led me. I never expected to see Castlebridge before morning. What shall I do with them, sir?"

"Tie them up behind and let them run," the man in the cart said brutally. "A gentle trot won't do them any harm. You can ride yourself. Now then, hurry up!"

A moment later and the strangely assorted group were out of sight, and Wilfrid was trudging home-wards. He was too tired and worn out to think of much else beside bed and rest, and for once in a way a busy morning followed. It was late in the afternoon before he found time to go to Maldon Grange again, and then he was informed that Mr. Flower had left for London on important business, which would probably detain him in town till the end of the week. He hesitated before inquiring for Miss Galloway, but she, too, had accompanied her uncle, and the butler had not the least idea when she would be home again. It was disappointing, but Wilfrid had to make the best of it.

There was, too, a sense of dullness and reaction after the bustle and excitement of the last four-and-twenty hours. It was hard to drop back into the humdrum life of Oldborough, and as Wilfrid went about his work he found himself regretting that he had abandoned the old adventurous existence for the stale commonplaces of respectability. Then he had no cares and worries. Now every post began to bring them along. Certain of the local tradesmen were beginning to press him, and he dared not as yet ask for any money from such patients as had required his services. There was quite a little pile or these missives as he came in tired and weary to his frugal dinner. He tossed them aside impatiently.

"I think I'll wait till I have had something to eat, mother," he said. "I know what they are."

Mrs. Mercer glanced affectionately at her son. Generally he treated these things lightly enough, and took a cheerful view of the future. But to-night everything seemed to oppress and weigh him down. He had no desire his mother should see how he was feeling the strain. It was not till he had finished his dinner and could make a decent excuse to get away to the surgery that he opened his letters. They were just as he had expected. Nearly every one of them contained a request for money, from a polite suggestion to a curt threat of legal proceedings. But these

were small matters compared with the last letter which bore the London postmark. It was short and business-like and, though courteous, there was no mistaking its meaning.

> Dear Sir (it ran)—We have this day taken over from Messrs. Darton and Co. certain securities and bills upon which they have advanced money to various persons, yourself amongst the number. We notice that an acceptance of yours for one hundred and seventy five pounds becomes due on Saturday. As the circumstances of the case call for a clearance of these outstanding matters, we have to request that your cheque for the above amount be paid to us on Saturday morning, otherwise we shall with great regret have to place it in other hands for collection. At the present moment we have no funds available to renew your acceptance.
>
> Yours obediently,
>
> Flower and Co."

"Flower and Co., indeed," Wilfrid murmured bitterly. "They have got me in their net surely enough. Now I wonder what this means? I wonder what these fellows are driving at? They faithfully promised me to renew if I needed it; in fact, that was one of the conditions of the loan. And now I shall lose everything. All my efforts will have been in vain. It seems very hard just when I was making a little headway. But for my mother I would not care."

Chapter XII

In the Ring.

Wilfrid sat smoking moodily till gradually the right course of action occurred to him. He was powerless to cope with these rogues. He would have to place the matter in the hands of a solicitor. Of the few lawyers in Oldborough Wilfrid was only acquainted with Mr. Ernest Vardon, a rising young attorney, who had a branch of office in Castlebridge. They had met on several occasions lately, and something like friendship had grown up between them. At any rate, it would do no harm to consult Vardon, who to a certain extent, was already familiar with Wilfrid's position.

The prospect of action somewhat relieved Wilfrid's depression. He left the house and made his way to Vardon's lodgings. The latter had just finished his dinner and was ready to hear what his visitor had to say, though he intimated that Wilfrid must not be long, as he had an appointment in Castlebridge late that evening.

"I have got a case there before magistrates to-morrow," he said, as he laid his hand upon a telegram lying on the table. "I have just had my instructions by wire, and I want to see my client to-night. It has some thing to do with a fracas at Gordon's Circus, I understand. But I can give you half an hour. What is the trouble, Mercer?"

By way of reply Wilfrid laid his letter upon the table and asked Vardon to peruse it.

"Well, that is plain enough, at any rate," he said presently. "I happen to know something of these people, also something about Darton and Co. for the matter of that. More than one unfortunate client of mine has found himself in their clutches. My dear fellow, why do you let yourself be beguiled by these bloodsuckers? A man of the world, too!"

Wilfrid shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"What is the good of crying over spilt milk?" he asked. "The thing is done, and there's an end of it. As I told you before, I gave up my seafaring life for the sake of my mother. I knew it was a risk, but I thought that when I bought this practice I should have been in a position to pay the debt off when it became due. I should never have borrowed the money at all if I had not been definitely told that I could renew the bill when it became due."

"Ah, they are all like that," Vardon said. "And now they have turned over your business to another firm who really want the money. They won't wait an hour, you may depend upon it. They will sell you up, and what balance remains will go in lawyer's costs, half of which these sharks will share. You see, they have everything to gain and nothing to lose by crushing you; in fact, if you went with the money now they would be rather disappointed than otherwise."

"Oh, I can see all that," Wilfrid said gloomily. "But why do they part with my bill like this?"

"I give that up," said Vardon. "I suppose you don't happen to have made an enemy of either of these men? You haven't had any personal correspondence with them, or anything of that kind?"

"Nothing of the sort, my dear fellow. I can't understand it at all. And as to an enemy, why—"

Wilfrid broke off abruptly. A sudden uneasy suspicion filled his mind. Vardon's shrewd eyes were turned upon his face interrogatively. He waited for Wilfrid to speak.

"I dare say you will think it rather far-fetched," Mercer said presently, "but I have an enemy in the person of Mr. Samuel Flower, the ship-owner, whom, strange to say, I have been attending professionally. Of course, I am telling you all this in confidence, Vardon. Do you happen to remember a rather sensational case in which one of Flower's ships, the Guelder Rose, was mixed up? There was a mutiny amongst the crew, and I had a considerable hand in it. I was the ship's doctor, you understand. Between ourselves, it was a shocking bad case, and if Flower had had his deserts he would have stood in the dock over it. Instead of that, I nearly found myself in the dock. I managed to keep out of the way, and as I had never seen Flower, I thought I was safe. It was strange that I should have been called in to see him the day before yesterday, but he did not appear to recognise me, and I thought it was all right. I foolishly let slip a remark that I had been a ship's surgeon at one time, and I am sure now that it aroused Flower's suspicions, for he was on the alert at once. Mind you he asked no further questions, and I thought it was all right. Now it occurs to me that Flower might be at the bottom of this trouble of mine, for it is the sort of thing he would delight in."

"That he would," Vardon exclaimed. "Flower is just that type of man. Of course, I ought not to say so, but he is a thorough-paced rascal, and I am not the only man in the neighbourhood who knows it. I should not be surprised if you are right. I am only too sorry that I can't help you."

Wilfrid sat there thoughtfully. He did not appear to hear what Vardon was saying. Then he jumped suddenly to his feet and brought his fist crashing down upon the table.

"There is no longer any doubt about it," he cried. "I ought to have remembered it before. When I was in Flower's study the night before last there was a letter just begun lying on the table. I remember now that it was addressed to Darton and Co., no doubt in connection with this very transfer. More than that, the letter was headed *Re Mr. Wil*— and there the letter broke off. You may depend upon it, that this *Mr. Wil*— was meant for Mr. Wilfrid Mercer, and this is the result of the scheme. That man Cotter got all the information by telephone; in fact, Flower told me that he had been telephoning to London. And I am afraid that is not the worst of it, Vardon. You see, some time before I came here I met Miss Beatrice Galloway, and I don't mind telling you that I hoped some day to make her my wife. Of course, I had not the remotest idea that she was connected in any way with Samuel Flower, or probably I should have attempted to restrain my feelings. But she knows that I care for her, and I feel pretty sure that she cares for me. And when I was saying good-bye to her the night before last in the drawing room at Maldon Grange, Flower came in, and—and—"

"You needn't go into details," Vardon smiled. "As an engaged man, I can imagine the rest. It is plain what Flower intends to do. He has found you out, and he means to drive you away from Oldborough. Most men would have forbidden you the house and commanded the lady to have no more to do with you. But that is not Flower's method. What you have to do is to fight him. If you had this money, do you think you could manage it? I mean, is this the only big debt you have?"

"The other matters are pin-pricks," Wilfrid said. "If I could get this sum I dare say I could pull through. But the time is short, and I haven't a single friend in the world worth a sixpence."

"It might be managed," Vardon said cautiously. "I don't say it will, mind you. There is just a chance. I have got a client in Castlebridge who does a bit in this way, and possibly he may take up your security. You will find him rather expensive, but he is honest, and as long as he sees you are making a genuine attempt to pay him off, will not worry you. As I told you just now. I am going into Castlebridge by the 9.15 train, and you had better come with me, and see my client for yourself. I shall probably get my business finished by a quarter past ten, and then we will go round and call on the old gentleman."

"I cannot say how much I am obliged to you," Wilfrid said gratefully. "I shall only be too pleased to go with you. I will have no peace till this matter is settled."

It was a little after half-past nine when Wilfrid and his companion reached Castlebridge, and made their way through the crowded streets towards the wooden structure which had been erected by the Imperial Circus Company for their winter season.

"We will go in and watch the performance for half-an-hour," Vardon suggested. "By that time I believe my client will be disengaged. I don't care much for this class

of entertainment, but it is better than loafing about in the cold streets. I'll leave a message at the box-office to say in what part of the house I am to be found when my man is ready for me."

The performance was typical of its kind. The packed audience followed the various items with rapt attention. There were the usual ladies in spangles and short skirts, riding barebacked and jumping through paper hoops; the gorgeous ring-masters and the inevitable clowns; the flare of lamps, and the pungent smell of sawdust. To Wilfrid the whole thing was slow and monotonous to the last degree, and he was glad when one of the attendants whispered something in Vardon's ear.

"Come along," the latter said. "I see you want to get out of this. My man is waiting in the office at the back of the stables."

They soon reached the office, where three individuals were lounging, two of whom went out directly Mr. Vardon came in. The remaining figure was a gigantic negro fully six feet six in height, who grinned as Vardon came forward.

"My client," Vardon whispered. "Wait outside, Mercer."

Wilfrid made no reply. In Vardon's client he recognised the negro he had seen at Maldon Grange.

Chapter XIII

An Old Acquaintance.

The discovery did not startle Mercer as much as it otherwise might have done. There had been so many strange events during the last two days that an incident like this was trifling by comparison. Still, it had its bearing upon the central mystery, and Wilfrid was not disposed to underrate its importance. He wondered why he had not connected the negro of the night before with the Imperial Circus, for the big negro was the kind of man to be attached to this sort of undertaking. And this having been established it followed logically that the strange little men were to be identified with the circus also. Wilfrid felt glad he had come. He had forgotten about his own affairs in the excitement of the moment.

"I hope you won't mind," he whispered hurriedly to his companion, "but I should rather like to hear what takes place between you and your interesting client. I know the request is unusual, but I have the strongest reasons for making it, as I will explain to you presently."

"Well, it is irregular," Vardon said dubiously. "Still, there is no great secret about the matter. The negro is charged with an assault, and I have been asked to defend him. You can sit down and smoke a cigarette and hear as much or as little as you like."

Fortunately the negro's English was good enough. Probably he had been in the country for a long time. He stated his case clearly, and so far as Wilfrid could gather, he relied for his defence on an alibi.

"It was like this, sir," he said. "There were a lot of soldiers over here from the barracks last night, and most of them had been drinking. Mr. Gordon, he stood it

as long as he could, and then the men were offered their money back to leave. The noise got worse and worse till at last we were obliged to turn them out. They say that I followed them down the road and struck one of them, who is now in hospital, so violent a blow that he fell and hurt his head. They say that there was no cause for me to do this at all. I say that they made a mistake, because I was away from the circus on business last night and did not get back till half-past eleven. If you will ask Mr. Gordon he will prove that what I say is true."

"In that case, there is an end of the whole business," Vardon said cheerfully. "I should like to have a few words with Mr. Gordon."

The negro hesitated and appeared to be confused.

"Must we do that, sir?" he asked. "You see, I was away on very important business. I had to go and look for two men who were missing. If I am asked questions about them I shall not be able to answer. But I am telling the truth, sir, when I say that I was away last night, and Mr. Gordon will tell you the same thing."

Wilfrid could have told Vardon so, too, but he held his tongue. It was singular that circumstances should have placed him in a position to prove the truth of the negro's words. It was strange, too, that the African should have been so eager to conceal his movements on the previous evening. Vardon listened impatiently.

"But that is all nonsense," he said. "You don't seem to understand what a serious position you are in. A man in hospital is badly hurt. He declares that he gave you no provocation whatever, and he has a score of witnesses to prove that your attack was brutal and uncalled for. If you can't prove beyond a doubt that you were elsewhere, take your trial at the Assizes, and at the very least you will not get off under two years' imprisonment. In any case, the alibi will be a difficult one to establish; all the more because negroes of your size are not to be found wandering about in every country road. Now, are you alone here? Have you any fellow-countrymen in the circus?"

"Two," the Ethiopian replied. "Only two besides myself. But the others are men just about the usual size, and they were in the stable all the time."

"That is rather awkward," Vardon murmured. "Still, as we are not very far from Chatham, where there are sailors of all kinds, it is possible that one of your own countrymen about your own build might have been coming along at the time. As those fellows were all more or less intoxicated some insulting remarks might have been made. Still, it is in your own hands. And unless Mr. Gordon comes forward and speaks for you, your position is by no means a safe one."

The negro began to comprehend now. He glanced uneasily at the face of his lawyer.

"I'll go and see, sir," he said.

He came back presently with a large, florid-looking individual, loudly dressed and smoking an exceedingly strong cigar. The pattern of his clothing proclaimed the man, as also did his white bowler hat, which was jauntily cocked on the side of his head. Wilfrid hardly needed to look at the man to recognize him as the individual who had been driving the dogcart near Maldon Grange the night before. Indeed, Wilfrid would have been surprised to see anybody else.

"This is Mr. Gordon, sir," the negro said.

"Quite at your disposal," the proprietor of the circus said, floridly. "This poor chap of mine seems to have got himself into trouble. But whatever those drunken scamps say, Sam is innocent, for the simple reason he wasn't here last night. He was out on important business for me; in fact, we were out together. It is rather a nuisance, because I don't want our errand to become public property, because it had to do with two of my troupe who had absconded. We have only been in England two or three days and within twenty-four hours those fellows took French leave. A great nuisance, it is, too, because they were down for a turn which would have packed the circus for the next month to come. And I give you my word for it, I picked up those two fellows at Marseilles, where they were absolutely starving. And after costing me thirty or forty pounds between them, they go off and leave me in the lurch like this. Still, I can speak plainly enough now, because they have vanished again. I thought I had them safe and sound last night, but those chaps are slippery as eels. I am not going to trouble any more about them, and I'll just cut my loss and let them slide. And now, sir, I am prepared to go into the witness-box and take my oath that Sam here was with me in my cart ten miles from Castlebridge at the moment when the assault was committed. Is that good enough?"

Wilfrid could have testified the same had he chosen to do so, but it was not for him to speak then. He had learnt a great deal the last ten minutes. He had learnt that the two mysterious men who had caused such commotion at Maldon Grange were foreigners who had been members of the circus troupe. It was obvious, too, why they had signed an agreement with Gordon. They had been eager to come to England, and for that reason had jumped at Gordon's offer. Perhaps they had ascertained that, sooner or later the wanderings of the circus would bring them in more or less close contact with Samuel Flower. An absence from the circus the night before was easily explained. But after being brought back again to Castlebridge, why had they disappeared in this extraordinary fashion? Beyond all doubt they had made up their minds to murder Samuel Flower, but their work was far from being accomplished. Therefore, why had they gone? Were they following Flower? Had they already discovered that he had gone to London, where he was likely to remain for the next few days?

Wilfrid would have liked to ask the negro and his employer a few pertinent questions, but, perhaps, it was wiser not to do so for the present. He sat there quietly until Vardon intimated that he did not require the negro any longer, seeing that he had in Mr. Gordon a witness who was sufficient for his purpose. As the African left the office, Wilfrid followed. Without arousing the negro's suspicions he might, by two or three promiscuous questions, learn something of the two men of whom he was in search. The negro walked along at the back of the circus, where most of the lamps were extinguished now, save an occasional naphtha flare near the spot where the men were attending to the horses. It might have been Wilfrid's fancy, but it seemed to him that the African glanced cautiously about him from time to time as if afraid of being followed. Mercer made a wide sweep into the darkness of the field, then waited to see what was likely to happen. He was rewarded for his diligence, for the negro stopped under a tree and proceeded to light a cigarette. The evening was calm and still, so that the match flared brightly and steadily. In the narrow circle of light stood another figure in evening dress, his

coat unbuttoned. Just for an instant the circle of light fell upon his face and Wilfrid had no difficulty in recognising the features of Samuel Flower. Then the match died away, and the gloom became all the deeper. By the time that Wilfrid had thought it prudent to creep up to the tree, Flower and his companion had vanished. Which way they had gone Wilfrid did not know. Not that it much mattered. Still, the discovery was worth making, and Wilfrid returned to the circus in a thoughtful frame of mind. He was passing through the office again when a hand was laid upon his arm. He turned abruptly.

"Swan Russell!" he exclaimed. "Fancy seeing you here! I thought you were at the other side of the globe."

Chapter XIV

Russell Explains.

The stranger was a lean, spare man with not an ounce of superfluous flesh. He looked like a man that did not know the meaning of fatigue. His face was brown and tanned; his keen grey eyes looked out under bushy brows; the outline of a stubborn chin showed under a ragged moustache. Swan Russell had the air of one who has seen men and things, and his aspect did not belie him. For the rest, he was an adventurer to his finger tips, always ready to take his life in his hands, always eager for anything that promised excitement and danger. He had been first on the field in many a gold rush. He had a keen nose for locality where money is to be made. And yet, despite his shrewdness and energy, he had always remained a poor man. Perhaps it was his very restlessness, his inability to stay in one place long, that kept him in a condition bordering upon poverty.

"It is strange you should be here tonight," Wilfrid said.

"Not in the least," the other replied, "because I came on purpose to look for you. I found out in Oldborough that you had come here with Mr. Vardon, and then I elicited the fact that you were somewhere about the circus. Isn't it rather funny you should find yourself settled down within a stone's throw of Samuel Flower's house?"

Wilfrid started. Whoever he met, or wherever he went now, it seemed that Flower's name was doomed to crop up.

"What do you know about him?" he asked

"Quite as much as you do," Russell retorted, "and perhaps a little more. Oh, I haven't forgotten about that mutiny on the Guelder Rose. If I recollect, you had a lucky get-out there. Flower is not the man to forgive a thing of that sort, and if he could not have obtained evidence to convict you, he wouldn't have had the slightest hesitation in buying it. In the circumstances, wasn't it rather risky to settle down here?"

"Well, you see, I didn't know," Wilfrid explained. "I had no idea that Flower had a place in the country. Besides, I thought the whole thing was forgotten. It is two years ago, and so far as I know, Flower made no attempt to trace me. What will you think when I tell you that he is actually a patient of mine?"

“Oh, I am aware of that,” Russell said coolly. “I have not been hanging about during the last three or four days for nothing. I was amused when I heard you had been attending Flower. Did he recognise you—I mean, did he recognise you from your name? I know that you have never met.”

“He did not recognise me at first,” Wilfrid said; “indeed, the whole thing might have passed only I was fool enough to let out that I had at one time been a ship’s doctor. Then he gave me one glance, but said nothing. I began to believe that it was all right till this evening, when I had an unpleasant reminder that it was all wrong.”

“Would you mind telling me?” Russell asked. “Mind you, I am not simply curious. I want information.”

“Why not?” Wilfrid said despondingly. “You are an old chum of mine and you might just as well know what will be common property in Oldborough in two or three days. That scoundrel has got me in his clutches and means to ruin me without delay. But perhaps I had better tell you how things stand.”

“So that’s the game?” Russell said, when Wilfrid had finished his explanation. “Well, let the fellow do his worst. You were never cut out for a country doctor and the sooner you chuck it and come back to London the better. I want a friend to help me. I want a friend to rely upon. And that is the reason why I came to see you. You will never make bread and cheese in Oldborough, and you are wasting time there. If you will throw in your lot with me, it will go hard if I can’t show you how to make fifty thousand pounds during the next three months.”

“And where are the fifty thousand pounds?” Wilfrid asked cynically. “It sounds too good to be true.”

“The fifty thousand pounds, my dear chap, are at present in Samuel Flower’s pocket, accompanied by just as much more, which, by all the rules of the game, belong to me. I have been robbed of that money as surely as if my pocket had been picked by that rascally ship-owner. He left me without a feather to fly with; indeed, I was hard put to it to manage to get my passage money from the Malay Peninsula to London. But I have given him a fright. He knows what to expect.”

Swan Russell chuckled as if something amused him greatly.

“But is there a chance of getting this money?” Wilfrid asked.

“My dear fellow, it is a certainty. I don’t say there is no danger, because there is: but that is just the thing that would have appealed to you at one time. Besides, you needn’t chuck up your practice. You can run up and down to London as I want you, and leave the good people at Oldborough to believe that you have been called away on important consultations. Besides if you will join with me in this venture, I may be able to find you the money to pay Flower off.”

“When do you want me to start?” Wilfrid asked.

Russells’ reply was to the point.

“To-night,” he said. “I want you to come to town by the half-past ten train. We shall be in London a few minutes past eleven, and unless I am mistaken, there is work for you at once. Now don’t hesitate, but do what I ask you and you will never be sorry for it. You can get Vardon to call at your house when he gets back to Oldborough and explain to your mother that you have been called away on urgent business. I will find you a bed and the necessary clothing, and unless anything very, very pressing turns up, you can be back in Oldborough by breakfast time.”

Wild as the suggestion was, it appealed to Wilfrid. There were no patients in a critical state to require his attention, he reflected bitterly. And anything was better than sitting impotently at home waiting for the end which he believed to be inevitable. On the other hand, there was the desperate chance of something turning up; some way of tapping the golden stream which should render him independent of Samuel Flower. He held out his hand.

"Very well," he said. "I'll come with you. If you'll give me half a minute I'll ask Vardon to call at my house."

Vardon came out of the office of the circus at the same moment, and without going into details, Wilfrid proceeded to explain.

"I hope you won't think it rude of me," he said, "but Swan Russell is an old friend and it is in my power to do him a service. Will you tell my mother that I shall not be back till tomorrow? And perhaps you will call upon your client and see what you can do for me in the matter of that loan. It is possible that when I come back from London I shall be in a position to find the money myself."

"All right," Vardon said cheerfully, "anything I can do for you, I certainly will. But if you are going to catch your train you haven't much time to lose."

Mercer and his companion walked quietly down to the station. Wilfrid would have strolled casually on to the platform, but Russell held him back.

"You'll just keep in the shadow till the last moment," he said. "I have very particular reasons for not being seen here and one of these reasons you will see for yourself. One can't be too careful."

Wilfrid asked no further questions. He was content to leave matters in Russell's hands until the latter was ready to explain. He began to understand the necessity for caution presently, when amongst the steady stream of passengers trickling into the station he saw the familiar form of Samuel Flower.

"There he goes, the beauty," Russell murmured. "Look at the scoundrel. Isn't he the very essence of middle-class respectability? He might pass for a churchwarden or the deacon of a chapel. Of all the scoundrels in the City of London, there is not a more noxious specimen than Samuel Flower. I believe that if you gave that chap the chance of making a thousand pounds honestly, or a mere sovereign by defrauding a widow or an orphan, he would choose the latter. And the luck he has had too. Where would he be now if the whole facts of that Guelder Rose business had come to light? What would become of him if a single ship's officer had survived the wreck of the Japonica? But I'll bring him down, Mercer; I'll beat that ruffian to his knees yet. And I have got the information, too, if I can only complete it. My only fear is that the other vengeance may reach him first."

"You allude to the matter of the string with five knots, I suppose?" Wilfrid asked.

A look of surprise crossed Russell's face.

"What on earth do you know about that?" he asked.

"You forget that I was in the Malay Archipelago myself," Wilfrid responded. "You seem to have forgotten the tragic death of the white man I told you about. Besides, I was in Flower's house at the very moment when he received his warning in a registered letter, and that letter came from Borneo."

Russell chuckled.

"Come along," he said. "We have cut it quite fine enough. You can tell me the rest in the train."

Chapter XV

The Real Thing.

They found a carriage to themselves which they entered as the train was starting, secure in the knowledge that they would be uninterrupted till Victoria Station was reached.

"Now tell me your story," Russell suggested.

"I think I am going to tell you more than you expect," Wilfrid smiled. "But I will begin at the beginning, from the moment that I entered Flower's house. I was sent for in a hurry, because the great man had cut his hand and he was frightened to death, as people of his class always are. I suppose you know that he has a niece, Miss Galloway, living with him?"

"Yes, I know that," Russell said with a grin. "On the whole, I should say you are a lucky individual. But go on. Don't mind my chaff."

"Well, there was nothing much the matter with his hand, as you may imagine. I'll come to the registered letter episode presently, but I want to tell you first how it was that Flower's accident came about. Miss Galloway was sitting in the conservatory and she distinctly saw a man place his arm through a broken pane of glass and try to unlatch the door. She called to her uncle, who gave chase, but the man had vanished, leaving no trace behind him. It was in hurrying after him that Flower fell and cut himself. He was sitting waiting in the conservatory for me, when Miss Galloway introduced me and told me about the accident that had startled her so much. She went on to say that the man was fishing for the latch with a loop of string, whereupon Flower broke in in his elegant way and declared that the whole thing was a pack of nonsense. By way of proving her theory Miss Galloway picked up the piece of string which had fallen from the man's hand inside the door-way and handed it to her uncle. I suppose you can give a pretty good guess what sort of string it was."

Russell smote his hand vigorously on the cushions.

"You don't mean to say it was the string?" he shouted. "The string with five knots? That would be too good to be true."

"It is true all the same," Wilfrid went on. "And if you have been hanging about Castlebridge for the last three or four days you have wasted your opportunities, for during that time an attempt has been made upon Flower's life, and if I hadn't been at hand he would have been a dead man now. And what is more, up till last night the two mysterious individuals I told you of were members of Gordon's company."

"Stop! stop!" Russell cried. "You are going too fast. If you wanted to surprise me you have more than succeeded."

The train was drawing up to the platform at Victoria before Wilfrid had finished his recital. Russell's cheery manner had vanished. His face was grave and thoughtful. They waited in the carriage till everybody else had left the train, then Russell dodged across the platform and hailed the nearest cab.

“I am going as far as my rooms in Bloomsbury,” he said. “Then I will get you to don a suit of dress clothes which ought to fit you fairly well, as we are rather alike in build; with your overcoat on top nobody will notice anything peculiar. And then we shall go out for an hour or two.”

“Isn’t it rather late for an entertainment?” Wilfrid asked.

“For an ordinary show, yes,” Russell proceeded to explain. “But this is a function quite out of the common. It is a supper and fancy dress dance given by the proprietors to celebrate the opening of the New Dominion Theatre. Everybody will be there; in fact, there will be a couple of thousand people at one time or another on the stage, and the house will be filled with privileged spectators, of whom you and I will be two. You will be interested to know that Samuel Flower and Miss Galloway are among the invited guests. But all that is by the way. I don’t mind admitting that I am very much disturbed by the information you have given me. I knew vengeance would overtake him sooner or later, but I hoped that his time would not be yet. You see, I am candid. I don’t care whether he lives or dies so long as he remains on this planet long enough for me to get my money out of him. So we have every reason to protect Flower for the present. I am very glad I met you. I am very glad after all that you settled in Oldborough. There must be a sort of Providence in these things, Mercer.”

Wilfrid smiled grimly. It was rarely that Russell spoke like this. They drove on in silence till his quarters were reached, and, after partaking of a hurried meal, Wilfrid struggled into a dress suit of Mercer’s which might have passed for his own. There was nothing to wait for, and, as the night was fine and it was not a far cry to Kingsway, the two set out on foot. They soon reached the theatre, where a tremendous crowd had already gathered. A long stream of carriages was filing slowly up to the portico and an equally long stream of well-dressed people was pushing into the vestibule. It was a slow process. Wilfrid allowed himself to be carried along with the tide until the grand staircase was reached. It was up this staircase that the guests proceeded, a temporary entrance being made for the spectators who were to fill the body of the house. Wilfrid turned to speak to his companion, when he noticed that Russell appeared to be deeply engrossed in one of the pictures on the wall. At the same moment, Wilfrid, to his delight, saw that Beatrice Galloway was standing just behind him. In front of her, pushing on in his dogged fashion, was Samuel Flower.

“This is an unexpected pleasure,” Wilfrid whispered.

The girl’s face flushed with delight; then as the colour died out of Beatrice’s cheeks Wilfrid noticed that she seemed grave and troubled. There were lines under her eyes, too, which he had never remarked before.

“Are you not well?” he asked.

“Oh, I am well enough,” Beatrice said with a touch of despondency in her voice, “but I am a good deal worried. Do you know it is strange that with all our wealth and all our entertaining we seem to have no real friends.”

“I am sure you have one,” Wilfrid said reproachfully.

“I had forgotten that one for the moment,” Beatrice said with a quick flash of gratitude in her eyes. “I don’t know whether I ought to confide in you or not, but I must tell somebody. Can you contrive to see me before you leave to-night? I understand that the spectators will not remain after supper. You can manage to

be here at midnight? I could run downstairs under pretence that I wished to see a friend in the theatre. I can't think of any better way."

"I will stay here all night if necessary," Wilfrid said resolutely. "Let us say just here at midnight."

The pressure of those behind drove them apart so that Beatrice was lost to view round the bend in the staircase. Wilfrid had passed into the theatre itself, but Russell lingered.

"Ours are about the only two seats left," he explained, "and they are in one of the front rows in the stalls. I have my own reasons for staying here till most of the guests have arrived. A man I know promised me, if he could, to get us on to the stage after dancing began. At any rate, it is worth waiting on the off-chance of seeing him. So that was Miss Galloway you were talking to, eh? Why wasn't she in fancy dress? I can understand Flower coming in ordinary evening attire; I can't imagine his being so frivolous as to get himself up as a courtier or anything of that kind."

Wilfrid made no reply, for the simple reason that he was not listening. He was too concerned about Beatrice to think of anything else. He was shocked to see what a change so short a time had brought about in the girl's appearance. He wondered what she could have to worry her. Therefore it was that the stream of people in all sorts of grotesque and fancy dresses passed him as if he were in a dream. They came flowing along, laughing and chattering, all the favourites that have done duty over and over again ever since fancy dresses were first invented. Some were beautiful, some frankly ugly, and hardly one realistic. Russell kept up a constant stream of criticisms, to most of which Wilfrid replied more or less vaguely.

"You can't say that about that little man yonder," he said presently. "It is funny that he should be made up like an inhabitant of Borneo when our heads are full of the Malay Peninsula. Whoever dressed him was an artist and understood what he was doing. That is the man I mean, going up the stairs with the tall lady in yellow."

Russell looked in the direction pointed out by Mercer. He grabbed an opera-glass which someone had left on the table by his side. He turned eagerly to Wilfrid.

"Made up be hanged," he whispered excitedly. "That man isn't made up at all. He is the real thing, my friend. It seems to me that the plot is thickening."

Chapter XVI

The Yellow Hand.

It was not difficult to watch the slender figure of the stranger as he made his way leisurely up the staircase. In the ordinary course Mercer would have hardly recognised him at all. There were hundreds of people there in all kinds of the extravagant fancy dress which one usually associates with theatrical enterprise. But the more Mercer looked at the little man the more convinced was he that the stranger was not disguised at all. He was slight and slender, his dress-clothes

fitted him to perfection, and he wore the air of a man who was accustomed to that kind of thing. As to his head it was small and lean, his skin glistened like polished parchment, his dark, restless eyes were turned from side to side, though he did not appear in the least degree excited.

"He interests you?" Wilfrid asked.

"Why, certainly," Russell replied. "I should have thought that he would interest you, too, knowing all you do know. Now who should you say that fellow is, and where do you suppose he comes from? Take your time."

"Well, I should say that he is an Asiatic of some kind," Wilfrid replied. "And a full-blooded one at that. If he did not look so much at home in his dress-clothes and on such easy terms with his surroundings I could imagine him to be the head of some savage tribe or other. I can see him in his warpaint with his braves around him. But, of course, that is all nonsense, Russell. Whatever nationality the fellow belongs to, he is an educated man, and they don't breed that kind in the Malay Archipelago."

"Now that is just where you make the mistake," Russell answered. "There are certain islands in the Malay Archipelago which have never been explored by white men yet. Of course, I am not speaking of orchid-hunters and that kind of people, but I know for a fact that in North-eastern Borneo there are one or two tribes who come very near the level of our modern civilization. But we don't want to discuss that at present. Still, I was personally acquainted with one chief whose two sons were being educated at English public schools. Perhaps I will tell his story later. Meanwhile, I don't mean to lose sight of our friend. Let's push boldly inside and chance it. I know two or three officials connected with the theatre, and they will help me if they can. Ah, there is Franklin, the very man I want to see. Come along."

Russell dragged his companion eagerly up the stairs and laid his hand on the shoulder of a florid man in front of him. As the other man turned his face, there was no occasion to ask his profession. He had stage manager written all over him.

"Don't stop to ask questions," Russell said. "This is my friend, Wilfrid Mercer. We had invitations for the front of the house to-night; in fact, you were good enough to get them for us. As things have turned out it is more or less essential that we should become your guests for the time being. Can't you rig us up in something in your property-room?"

"You were always a queer sort," the stage manager said with a smile. "I suppose it is no use asking you what mischief you are up to now? Oh, I can smuggle you in right enough, especially as certain guests have failed us at the last moment. If you will come with me I will rig you both up in some sort of fancy dress. Only it seems hard that I should be kept out of the joke. Come this way."

"You shall know all about the joke in good time," Russell said grimly. "For the present, all I want you to do is to leave us severely alone. I suppose we could mention your name if any awkward questions were asked."

The stage manager replied good-naturedly enough, and some half-an-hour later Russell and his companion were roaming about the flies, mixing unconcernedly with hundreds of well-known people who appeared to be bent upon enjoyment. Meanwhile, the little yellow man had vanished.

“Oh, we shall see him sooner or later,” Russell said cheerfully. “Did I tell you what the programme is? There is to be a kind of variety entertainment on the stage and then the theatre will be closed for dancing and those who don’t care for the ‘light fantastic’ will amuse themselves in the body of the theatre. I think we had better separate and I will meet you here when the signal for supper is given.”

Mercer glanced at the clock and saw that the hour was close upon twelve. The time had gone more quickly than he had expected, and if he were to catch Beatrice Galloway he would have to go at once. A well-known opera quartette was occupying the stage to the exclusion of everything else, so that it was easy to steal down the stairs to the vestibule. A few young couples had secreted themselves behind the palms and flowers. It was some time before Mercer could make out the form of Beatrice seated alone. She looked up as he accosted her and he was not sorry to see that she failed to recognize him. He was got up like one of the Three Musketeers and the upper part of his face was masked.

“I’m afraid you have made a mistake,” the girl murmured.

“Indeed, I have not,” Wilfrid said. “You did not expect to see me like this, but my friend, Swan Russell, has managed this quick change. On the whole, I am glad not to be recognised, because I can speak the more freely to you without arousing the suspicions of Mr. Flower.”

Beatrice glanced uneasily at her companion.

“But why should you be afraid of him?” she asked. “Surely you have done no wrong to him. On the contrary, he has every reason to regard you as one of his best friends.”

“It should appear so,” Wilfrid said thoughtfully, “but, candidly, do you think your uncle is friendly towards me?”

It was some time before Beatrice replied. She glanced down with a troubled expression on her face.

“Really, I don’t know,” she confessed. “I don’t feel sure of anything lately. And my uncle is so changed. He is so different to everybody, even to me. He is afraid of something. I am certain some great disaster hangs over us. It is all the more trying and nerve-destroying that I have not the remotest notion what it is. I don’t know why I am here to-night, for instance. I don’t know why I have been dragged away from Maldon Grange. We have always been very good friends, or I should hesitate before I spoke as freely as this to you. And now I am going to ask you a question which I hope you will answer candidly. Do you think this mystery has anything to do with the attempt to rob Maldon Grange the other night?”

Wilfrid endeavoured to devise some plausible reply. Nothing could be gained by telling the girl the truth. On the other hand, she might be still more disturbed.

“I am afraid I cannot tell you,” he said.

“Do you mean that you won’t tell me?” Beatrice asked.

“I think you can trust me,” Wilfrid went on. “I think you can allow me to know what is for the best. I must ask you to have patience for the present, to rest secure in the knowledge that whatever happens no harm will come to you. And why worry yourself with these things at such a time as this? You ought to be enjoying yourself like the other guests. There is no suggestion of tragedy in this brilliant scene?”

Beatrice leaned towards her companion.

“I am not so sure of it,” she whispered. “At first I enjoyed it immensely. I had never seen anything like it before, and the brilliancy of the scene carried me quite out of myself. And yet I cannot help feeling that the trouble is here; in fact, I have seen it for myself. Do you remember the night I sent for you when my uncle was hurt? I told you all about that skinny hand pushed through the broken piece of glass and how the hand was fishing for the latch with a piece of string. You haven’t forgotten that?”

Wilfrid shook his head. He was not likely to forget Beatrice’s story.

“But what connection is there between that hand and such an assembly as this?” he asked.

“Because I have seen the hand here,” Beatrice went on in the same intense whisper. “Half an hour ago one of my friends came up to me with the offer of an ice, and we went into one of the refreshment rooms. There were a lot of men crushing round the bar, most of them drinking champagne and laughing and chattering. I was gazing about in a thoughtless kind of way when three men came in together and asked for champagne. One was a little man with his back turned towards me, though I could not see his face. One of his companions with a chaffing remark leaned over the counter and took a glass of champagne, at the same time telling his diminutive companion that he had been saved the humiliation of standing on a chair to get it. And then as the little man’s hand was stretched forward I recognised the yellow claw that I had seen groping for the latch in the conservatory.”

Chapter XVII

The Diamond Moth.

“But you couldn’t identify it,” Wilfrid said, speaking as coolly as he could. “You don’t mean to tell me that it was the same hand? You couldn’t swear to it?”

“Perhaps not,” Beatrice admitted. “But to all practical purposes it was the same hand though the arm was hidden in a black sleeve and the whitest of cuffs. But you can imagine how the incident disturbed me. I pressed forward as eagerly as I could, but at that moment somebody had finished singing on the stage and there was a rush of men into the refreshment-room, so that I was prevented from pursuing my investigations. But I am frightened, Wilfrid. The thing seems to have taken my courage out of me. I wish you would try to find out if there is a man here like the one I have described.”

Wilfrid muttered something in the way of a promise, though he knew that he had not very far to go to find the man that Beatrice spoke of. Then there was a tramping of feet overhead, the orchestra was playing the audience out of the theatre, and already an army of sweepers and cleaners had taken possession of it. There was a swift scattering of guests, and then, as it by magic, the stage was transformed into a huge supper-room and the guests were being ushered in by the stewards.

“Let me take you in,” Wilfrid pleaded. “That is, of course, if you have no other partner.”

Beatrice made no demur; indeed, she was thankful to have Wilfrid by her side. Already most of the guests had assembled on the stage. There were scores of little tables, flower-decked and shaded with pink lamps, which formed an exceedingly pretty picture. Towards one side, under a box, Wilfrid could see a table still unoccupied, and to this he piloted his companion.

“This is a slice of luck,” he said. “Let us hope we can have this to ourselves so that we may have a long, cosy chat that will disperse all your fears. A glass of champagne will make a different girl of you.”

A waiter bustled up to the table and Wilfrid gave his orders. A moment later and two guests came across the stage towards the table. One was a tall woman whom Wilfrid recognised at a glance as a well known actress, the other was no less a person than the little yellow man in evening dress who had so startled Russell earlier in the evening. All the colour left Beatrice’s face. She grasped her companion’s arm helplessly.

“They are coming here,” she whispered. “Oh, I am sure they are coming here. What shall we do?”

“Courage,” Wilfrid said coolly. “We can’t prevent them from sitting at the same table, seeing that they are the guests of the management as well as ourselves. So that is the man you were speaking about? He looks harmless enough. Don’t be silly, Beatrice. Try to behave as if nothing had happened.”

The girl recovered herself with a powerful effort. She even smiled as the handsome actress made a half-apology for intruding at the table.

“I think we know one another,” she said: “Of course we do. I recollect some friends bringing me to your delightful place, Maldon Grange. You are Miss Galloway.”

“You are Miss Marcombe,” Beatrice said a little coldly. “I recollect you now.”

“That’s all right,” the actress laughed. “Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Uzali. Mr. Uzali calls himself a Borneo chief or something of that kind, though how he manages to look after his duties there and spend six months of the year in England is beyond my comprehension. I daresay you will tell me it is no business of mine.”

Uzali bowed with the utmost self-possession. Disturbed as she was Beatrice did not fail to notice this. She was struck with the charm and grace of the Malay’s manner.

“You see, I was brought up in this country,” he said, speaking perfect English. “My country is more or less of an unfortunate one, and my father was an enlightened man. That is why he sent me to school and college in England. No doubt he had dreams, poor man, that some day or other I should come into my own again. But that time has passed for ever.”

To Beatrice’s surprise she found herself at the end of ten minutes chatting gaily and freely with the stranger. She noticed from time to time how his dark eyes were turned upon an ornament which she wore about her neck. It was a diamond pendant, consisting of a moth, in dark enamel, the wing set in diamonds. The other wing was gone, as indeed was part of the body. Beatrice was bound to notice Uzali’s curiosity.

“Do you admire my moth?” she asked.

“It would be impossible to do anything else,” Uzali said gravely. “The workmanship is unique. You see, I am interested in these kind of things, indeed, I have made a study of them all my lifetime. Perhaps you are acquainted with the history of that moth? Do you know where it came from?”

“Indeed, no?” Beatrice confessed. “It conveys nothing to me, but it has a fascination for me, and I wear it frequently.”

“And you don’t know where it came from?”

“No, except that my uncle gave it to me.”

Uzali’s eyes flashed, and he looked down at his plate which he appeared to be studying gravely.

“You are fortunate in the possession of such an uncle,” he said. “I wonder if I have the honour of his acquaintance.”

“That is probable,” Beatrice said frankly. She had lost all her fears. “So many people know my uncle. He is Mr. Samuel Flower, the shipper.”

Uzali said nothing. Sitting close by him, watching him carefully, Wilfrid noticed a sudden flush cross the Mallay’s cheek and how the dark eyes turned to purple.

“The name is familiar to me,” Uzali said, “but then there are so many people whom I know. So it never struck you to ask your uncle the history of that pendant. Now what should you say if I could produce the missing half?”

Beatrice looked up eagerly, her lips parted.

“How very curious!” she said. “But you are joking.”

Uzali bowed gravely, then produced a small green packet from an inside pocket from which he drew a small folded piece of wash-leather; and this being undone disclosed what appeared to be an engraved diamond in the shape of an insect’s wing.

“We do strange things in my country,” he said, with a queer smile. “We have priests and learned men whose philosophy is far beyond anything that one knows of in the West. Not that I claim these powers myself, oh, no. That is quite another matter. But I think you will be satisfied if I prove to you that this is the missing portion of your pendant. Mr. Mercer shall be umpire if you like, and we will leave him to judge. Perhaps you would not mind removing your pendant for a moment.”

Beatrice complied. She was quite excited now. All her strange fears had fallen from her. With trembling fingers she removed the pendant from its slender gold chain and laid it on the table-cloth. Wilfrid reached over and fitted the broken pieces together. He could see that they matched to a nicety.

“Not the slightest doubt about it,” he exclaimed. “These two pieces once formed one jewel. Now, whom does it belong to? Mr. Uzali, do you claim the whole thing? Are you going to hand over your half to Miss Galloway?”

“I wasn’t thinking of doing either for the moment,” Uzali said coolly. “But I am going to ask Miss Galloway to trust her portion into my hands so that I can get the ornament mended, when I hope she will allow me to send her the jewel intact. All I ask in reply is, that Miss Galloway will inquire of her uncle how the moth found its way into his hands.”

“Perhaps you know already,” Beatrice smiled. But Uzali was not to be drawn. He shook his head.

“I do not claim any occult powers,” he said. “I merely said that there are wise men in my country who possess them. And now, if you will be good enough to give your portion of the moth to me I will let you have it in a few days restored to its original beauty.”

Beatrice hesitated. Yet, why not comply? The request had been made tastefully and in good faith. It was a graceful thing to do and her moth had always fascinated her. She handed her portion to Uzali with a smile.

“It is exceedingly good of you,” she said, “and I am obliged by your kindness. I am equally justified in handing my half of the treasure over to you—”

“But I don’t wear those kind of things,” Uzali protested. “Now give me your address so that I may carry out my promise. Miss Marcombe, are you ready? I think the next dance is ours.”

The Malay had vanished before Beatrice could say more. Her excitement had passed away. She looked at Wilfrid with troubled eyes. Had she done wrong?

“Leave it to Providence,” Wilfrid said answering her unspoken thoughts. “The Malay, at least, meant well.”

Chapter XVIII

A Tangled Clue.

Beatrice turned once more to her companion. The look of fear was in her eyes again. No sooner had the charm of Uzali’s appearance been removed than it seemed that she had done wrong. Perhaps Wilfrid guessed her thoughts.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “It certainly was a most surprising thing to happen. But I have come across more extraordinary coincidences in my life, and, do you know, I rather like our friend. He seems to be a gentleman.”

“I think so,” Beatrice said doubtfully, “but I am frightened all the same. He was so like the man—”

“Who tried to get into Maldon Grange the other night. But you surely do not believe that a man like Mr. Uzali could be guilty of burglary. I am disposed to believe what he said. If I were you I should think no more of the matter.”

“That is all very well,” Beatrice protested, “but I am bound to tell my uncle.”

“Then tell him,” Wilfrid said, growing rather impatient. “It is clear that you have nothing to fear. When you mentioned your uncle’s name, Mr. Uzali gave no sign that he had ever heard it before. Don’t you think we are in the way of these people here?”

Beatrice glanced round her, to see that most of the tables and chairs had disappeared and that the stage was nearly ready for dancing. The guests had increased considerably, and the theatre appeared to be filled with visitors. They had overflowed into the auditorium and already many had gathered in stalls and boxes to watch the entertainment. As Beatrice moved away with her companion a man came up and accosted her.

“I think you are Miss Galloway,” he said politely. “I don’t suppose you remember me, though I have dined more than once at your house in town. Your uncle sent

me to look for you. He is in one of the boxes. If you will allow me to show you the way. From what I understand he has not been very well. I don't think there is anything to be alarmed about: only he wanted you."

Beatrice waited for no more. She hurried off with her new companion until they came to a box at the back of the dress circle. Here one or two men were talking somewhat earnestly to Flower, but he dismissed them with a gesture as Beatrice came in. There were one or two shaded electric lights behind Flower's head, but subdued as they were, Beatrice did not fail to notice the pallor of her uncle's face. There was a quick irritation in his manner which she had never noticed before.

"I have sent for you everywhere," he said. "Where have you been? And tell me, who was the man you were supping with? Now don't prevaricate. Tell me at once."

Beatrice's face flushed with indignation.

"There is no reason why I should not tell you," she said. "I went into supper with Mr. Mercer. He is a guest here as well as ourselves. Perhaps we stayed too long—"

Flower waived the question aside impatiently.

"Oh, why do you waste my time like this?" he asked. "I don't mean Mercer at all. I want to know who was the other man who sat at the same table with you?"

Once again the old dread was closing in upon Beatrice. She glanced at her guardian with troubled eyes.

"I have never seen him before," she said. "It was no fault of mine that he sat at the same table. He came in with Miss Marcombe, the actress, who, as you know has been a guest of ours at Maldon Grange. She introduced him as Mr. Uzali. He is not an Englishman, but I found him very entertaining, and a gentleman. Moreover, he surprised me by saying he had seen my moth brooch before. He declared he had a piece which would match the broken part and took it from his pocket. It seems almost incredible, but the match was perfect."

"You let him have it?" Flower asked hoarsely.

"What else could I do? He promised that he would return it in a day or two completely restored."

Flower said nothing for a moment of two. He sat looking gloomily at the glittering stage below. Beatrice could see that his hands were clenched so that the muscles stood out strong and blue. It was not for her to deduce anything from these signs, but she knew that Flower was moved to the very core of his being. He turned to the girl with an effort.

"Was my name mentioned between you?" he asked.

"Certainly, I told him who you were," Beatrice said, "but it did not strike him as familiar. You might have been perfect strangers from the way in which he spoke of you. But why all this mystery, uncle? What have I done that is wrong?"

Flower pulled himself together with an effort, but there was an unsteady smile on his thick lips. He tried to speak gaily, but Beatrice noted how forced his words were.

"Another romance!" he said. "I must make the acquaintance of your friend. No, I am not in the least angry; only one comes in contact with such strange people at these sort of affairs that you cannot be too careful. And now if you are ready I should like to go home. Somebody will call a carriage for us. I'll stay here till you come back."

For some reason the man was afraid to move, as Beatrice could plainly see. She wondered at his want of strength, at his sudden display of cowardice. She had never known him display anything that savoured of terror.

"Just as you like," she said, coldly. "I daresay I can manage."

The carriage came at length and Flower moved reluctantly from the shadow of the box. The night was not cold, but he huddled himself in a big coat so that he might not be recognised. But as they walked through the hall to the portico, Beatrice saw that Mercer was not far away. The latter waited until they had vanished, then he made his way back to the stage again. The first person he encountered in the wings was Russell.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," the latter said. "I saw you on the stage just now when you were having supper, but it was not policy to come near you. What has become of Flower and his niece? Have they left?"

"Some few moments ago," Mercer explained. "I think I shall have enough information even to satisfy you. If you were watching us at supper I suppose you saw whom we sat down with?"

"That was why I was looking for you," Russell said eagerly. "What a stroke of luck that our friend the Malay should take a seat at the same table. What was he doing with that ornament which Miss Galloway was wearing?"

By way of reply Mercer led the way to one of the refreshment-rooms. It would be much easier to talk the matter over a cigarette than stand chattering where they were in everybody's way. Russell was an attentive listener. He said nothing whilst Wilfrid poured out his story.

"Splendid!" he muttered under his breath. "Nothing could have happened better. I came here on the off-chance of picking up some information, but I never expected to gather as much as this. But I will explain all in good time. Now let us get as near that party by the alcove as we can. Unless I am mistaken Uzali is in the midst of them. We don't want to arouse his suspicions, but I am going to let him know that he has friends here. We can hear what is going on without appearing to listen."

There were four or five men in the alcove and room for as many more. Russell and his companion pushed their way in casually and lighted their cigarettes. Uzali appeared to be finishing some anecdote, for he stopped presently and smote emphatically with his fist on the table before him.

"Not a sign, gentlemen, I assure you," he said, "not so much as a single clue. But I am not the man to be rebuffed at the first disappointment. No, I would rather not go back to the stage if you don't mind. I will stay here till you are ready to go. I am not a dancing man."

The alcove speedily cleared leaving Wilfrid and Russell opposite Uzali, who smoked his cigarette as placidly as if nothing had happened to upset the even tenor of his way. Russell reached out his hand to an empty chocolate box around which a silk string was still attached. He took the string in his hand and tied it into a variety of knots.

"That was a strange story you told just now, sir," he said coolly. "You will pardon my friend and myself if we listened."

Uzali looked up sharply with a challenge in his eyes.

"I was wondering," Russell went on, "if the clue was anything like this which I hold in my hand." With apparent carelessness he tossed the string across the table and waited for the Malay to speak.

"You have said too much," Uzali murmured, "or too little."

Chapter XIX

Fencing.

Russell sat unmoved; he was not acting without due deliberation, though he realised that he had a dangerous foe to deal with. For some time Uzali played with the string, tying and untying the knots as if he were making up his mind what to do next. To Wilfrid Mercer, looking on, the incident reminded him of two chess masters bent over a table.

"You are a stranger to me," Uzali said.

"That, to a certain extent, I am prepared to admit," Russell replied. "I don't know whether you are a religious man or not, Mr. Uzali, but probably you will agree with me—"

"So you know my name at any rate," Uzali said.

Russell shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't want any credit for that," he said. "I could have learnt your name from a score of people since I have been here. Besides, it is no news to me seeing that I am under the impression that you are using it as a nom de guerre. On the other hand, my name is Swan Russell, and this is my friend Dr. Wilfrid Mercer. I have spent a great deal of time in Borneo seeking a fortune, which, until a short time ago, appeared to be within my grasp. Unfortunately, I had unscrupulous people to deal with, and am really hard up for a hundred pounds. My friend, Dr. Mercer, is even in worse case than myself. He had the misfortune to be a medical attendant on board a steamer which was wrecked in the East. I should not be surprised if you have heard of a boat called the Guelder Rose, which was owned by Mr. Samuel Flower, of the Flower Line of steamers. Believe me, I am not occupying your time merely to hear myself talk."

Uzali glanced keenly at the speaker. The look of suspicion had died from his face. Something like a smile lurked in the corners of his mouth.

"I may be mistaken," he said, "but I think you are a man after my own heart. Now tell me candidly—have you suffered any wrong at the hands of this Samuel Flower? Is your friend in the same predicament?"

"That is so," Russell said gravely. "But for Samuel Flower I should be a rich man. But for Samuel Flower my friend Mercer would not be so desperately situated as he is. I think I have given you enough evidence of my bona fides in the piece of string which you are holding in your hand."

"I am not going to deny it," Uzali said. "And I see the necessity for caution. I suppose you realise that Mr. Flower is in some danger?"

"Flower is in imminent peril of his life I know," Russell replied. "Upon my word, I hardly know how to go on. To all practical purposes you are as good as an

Englishman, Mr. Uzali, and you know our laws as well as I do. If anything happened to Flower now and the trouble were traced home to you, for instance, you would have considerable difficulty in saving your neck. In other words I am going to accuse you of being concerned in a conspiracy to put an end to Samuel Flower. I know this is a bold assertion."

"Oh, we will grant it for the moment," Uzali said coolly. "I confess you startled me when you passed me that piece of string. I see you understand the significance of those five knots, and, indeed, you have already told me that you have spent a good deal of your time in North Borneo. You pay me the compliment of deeming me to be an antagonist worthy of his steel, and I have an equal respect for your courage and audacity. But you are wrong in asserting that Samuel Flower stands in danger from me at the present moment. Later, perhaps, circumstances may alter. In the meantime he is as safe as yourself."

The last words were uttered with a grimness which was not lost upon the listeners.

"I thank you for those words," Russell said gravely, "and none the less because they prove to me that you don't know everything. You are unaware I suppose, that two of your fellow-countrymen were, until recently, engaged to a circus proprietor who is touring in Kent. It does not matter who this circus proprietor is. The main point is that he picked these men up in the Mediterranean, and they have been a great draw to his show. A little time ago the circus was at a place called Castlebridge, which happens to be quite close to Maldon Grange, the country residence of our friend Mr. Samuel Flower."

Uzali nodded his lean, yellow head restlessly. It was evident that this information was new to him. He looked at Russell rather searchingly, as if trying to read his inmost secrets. The company in the theatre was beginning to get smaller. Not more than a score or two of guests remained, and these were mostly men who has crowded into the refreshment-room.

"You cannot tell how vastly I am obliged to you," Uzali said. "But please go on. I give you my word of honour that I had not the least idea of this. I had not the remotest knowledge that one of my own clansmen was in England. But I still see you have something important to say. I am all attention."

"Well, how, I don't know," Russell resumed, "but these men found out that Samuel Flower was in the neighbourhood. They made one or two excursions to Maldon Grange, because my friend Mercer happened to see them himself. He will describe to you what incantations they were going through, and the mysterious way in which they vanished when he interrupted them. Late that night an attack was made on the life of Mr. Flower, and, but for the intervention of Dr. Mercer, the ship-owner's troubles would have been at an end. But perhaps my friend had better tell the story in his own way."

"Incantations," Uzali muttered. "Oh, yes, I understand. There were brass crucibles, a peculiar smell, strange globes of light. Oh, yes, I have seen it all before. And, mind you, it is not the poor make-believe of magic such as you get in Europe. That was the real thing. But I am interrupting you, doctor. I shall be greatly obliged if you will tell me everything."

Nothing loth, Wilfrid proceeded to tell his story, which Uzali followed with breathless attention.

“I assure you I knew nothing of this,” he said, when at length Mercer had finished. “I never guessed anything of the kind. On the contrary, I would give more than half I possess to ensure Samuel Flower’s safety for the next few weeks. We are wasting time here. I shall be glad if you gentlemen will come with me as far as Castlebridge without delay so that I may interview these fellow-countrymen of mine. They will listen to me as they will listen to nobody else. When they have my commands they will obey them as well-trained hounds should do. It is perhaps fortunate that Samuel Flower is in town, but those men are so fearless, so reckless of life, that it is little—but we must be moving. I shall be glad if you will come with me as far as my house so that we can take the motor without delay and get to Chatham before daylight. It is only way I can see.”

“But I cannot leave town,” Mercer protested. “I have some urgent business which will keep me here till Saturday at the least. You seem to have forgotten what I told you about those countrymen of yours. They were fetched back to the circus at the end of a whip by the proprietor and his big negro, but by the morning they had vanished. It seemed so strange to see them return in that docile fashion. I am afraid you will have great trouble in finding them now.”

“It is annoying,” Uzali muttered. “I had forgotten that those fellows had given the circus proprietor the slip. At any rate, I shall not have to look for them in the country. If they are not already in London, they are on their way here. And now, gentlemen, will you do me the honour of coming with me as far as my house? There is still much to be said between us, much to explain, and I am sure that if you will only put out a hand to help me, I shall do everything in my power to assist you. Is that a bargain?”

The lights were going out one by one. The few late stayers were drifting away from the bar. It was not far short of three o’clock in the morning, but none of the trio were disposed to sleep. The air seemed to be charged with magnetic fluid; something like danger lingered in every nook.

“By all means,” Russell said. “I should like to tell you my story, and then you can judge whether I am right or not in what I have resolved to do.”

Without another word Uzali slipped into his overcoat and bade his companions follow. They entered a cab and were whirled westwards until they came to a tall block of flats at the corner of Oxford-street. Uzali put his key in the latch and opened the door. Then he stood back with a bow, signifying that his companions might precede him.

Chapter XX

The Waterfall.

The flat was not a large one, but the newcomers could see it was most luxuriously furnished and fitted with every modern convenience. Uzali led the way into a cosy dining-room where he switched on the electric lights. The walls were dark red, showing up the pictures and china to perfection, and the over-mantel

was fitted with a bookcase. With a wave of his hand, Uzali bade his guests be seated.

"Oh, yes, it is fairly comfortable," he said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I am getting to the time of life when one takes a philosophic view of things. After all, I have little more than I want. I have my many friends in London and I have my books. Still, I cannot forget that if I had my deserts I should be in a very different position. I ought to be a prince in my native country, with the control of some thousands of men, and there are times when the longing for the old life grips me and I could commit a thousand crimes to feel my feet on my native soil again. But all that is past and done with. I am waiting my time, and when one man pays the penalty for his crime I shall be free to go my own way again. But I did not bring you here to talk about myself. On the contrary, I am anxious to hear Mr. Russell's story."

"I am afraid there is very little story I have to tell," Russell replied. "I have been a rolling stone all my life, always seeing a fortune, and never finding one. I have no doubt if I had stayed at home like the average man I should have done well enough, but from my earliest days the fever of adventure has been in my blood and I cannot settle down. I have been everywhere where gold is to be found. I have risked my life a score of times only to come out of each adventure a little poorer than I went in. Three years ago I was stranded at Key West penniless and without a notion how to get a night's shelter. There by great good fortune I found a man I had met years before and to him I explained how I was situated. He had not much to offer me save that he was going to Borneo orchid-hunting, and he wanted someone to accompany him. I jumped at the chance. Anything was better than the slow starvation that stared me in the face. To make a long story short, we landed three weeks later in North Borneo and proceeded to push our way inland. It was all right for a day or two, then we began to have some notion of the difficulties which surrounded us.

"The natives were bad, to begin with, and matters were made all the worse by the discovery that those people regarded certain flowers as sacred. They attacked us one night when we were quite unprepared for an assault, and in the morning I was the only one of our party who was left alive. My life was spared by accident. I happened to have in my possession a medicine-chest out of which I had given one of our native followers some quinine which cured him of ague. Of course I need not tell you that we were betrayed, and that my native patient was one of the traitors. I thought my time had come as I lay there before one of the camp fires, picking out words here and there from their jargon, a portion of which was familiar to me. After a day or two I gathered that I was going to be taken up country and brought into the presence of one of the chiefs who was suffering from some illness.

"Well, we jogged along for two or three weary days until we came to what, at one time, must have been a considerable town. I was surprised to find huge stone buildings divided into streets. I was amazed to see what must have been a magnificent circus. I saw scores of baths hewn out of the side and filled with most deliciously cool lake water. It was only afterwards that I learnt that the town was situated at the foot of a lake, and that hundreds of years ago a great dam had been built across the waters to keep them from flowing into the town. I have seen nothing so remarkable since I visited the old towns in Mexico. One thing struck

me as particularly strange. For all the town was so large, there could not have been more than five or six hundred inhabitants. Oh, you will pardon me, Mr. Uzali, but they were, for the most part, the image of yourself. The natives who had destroyed our expedition were a different clan of men altogether. They were big, ugly black men. There were thousands of them up in the mountains, but they appeared to be terribly afraid of the people who lived in the town."

"A matter of civilisation," Uzali muttered.

"Well, perhaps so," Russell went on. "At any rate, they made me comfortable. I was led to understand that they regarded me with a certain amount of reverence, and I felt safe so long as I made no attempt to escape. I was free to roam the mountains and valleys below the town: indeed, I was free to do everything I pleased so long as I showed up at twilight. By this time I had established my reputation as a doctor. I was well in with the chief of the tribe. I had learnt a great deal of their past history. I had learnt something on my own account, too, which I regarded as still more valuable. Below the town in one of the valleys I found traces of gold. I worked a place for weeks until I was certain that the gold was alluvial and that it had been washed down from the lake during hundreds of centuries. I calculated the amount of gold there. It was worth perhaps a couple of hundred thousand pounds, and when all that was extracted there would be nothing left. There was nothing for it but to bide my time and hope for the best. Sooner or later my store of drugs would be exhausted, and then it was possible that I might be allowed to go down to the coast and replenish the chest.

"There was another discovery made about the same time, and that was a large amount of treasure which was hidden away in the chief's palace. I found it out by accident, too, though I feared at one time that the accident was going to cost me my life. I don't think I have ever seen a man so majestically angry as the chief was when he caught me gloating over his treasures.

"*The cause of all our troubles*, he said. 'But for those accursed things I should be master of this island from one side to the other. They breed greed and murder amongst my followers, they caused the shedding of blood. Base treachery followed wherever they went. No one knows they are here but myself. No one shall ever know but myself, for after my death there shall be no more chiefs of the clan, and gradually we shall fade away and die, as our brethren perished across the seas in Mexico. I will make a bargain with you, if you like. If I die first you shall have your freedom, you shall take six of my males and six of my ponies, and you shall load them up with everything here that you most desire. Then I will put my seal upon them and they will be safe from all men until you reach the coast.'

"There was nothing more to be said or done after that, only to wait my time and trust to fortune for a means of escape. So far as the chieftain's offer was concerned I thought no more about it, for he was a man in the prime of life and likely to last as long as I should.

"But one never knows. A week or two later came rumours from the mountains that certain white men had penetrated there and that they meant to make a raid on the town, accompanied by a gang of desperadoes whom they had bought over by promises of reward. We thought nothing of it, though it occurred to me once or twice that the chief looked grave and that he did not go quite so far afield as usual. It was late one afternoon when he came limping back into camp and a messenger

came to me post-haste to say that he had poisoned his foot with a prickly cactus. No sooner had the attendants left us alone than the chief turned to me eagerly.

"'I have deceived them all,' he whispered. 'It is no cactus which is the trouble. I was attacked in the woods this afternoon by a handful of natives who have hitherto been faithful. I managed to escape under cover of darkness, but not before I received this wound in my heel, which will be fatal.'

"I smiled at the chief's fears, but he shook his head with the utmost gravity.

"'I tell you I am right,' he said. 'I know the poison well. There is nothing in your box that can cure me, and when I am out of the way those people will swoop upon the town and not one of my followers will live to tell the tale. Say nothing to anybody about this, but gather my most faithful men about you and let them know what has happened, so that they may be ready when the time comes, but not to-night—wait till the morrow. Meanwhile, all I want to do is to be left alone to sleep.'

"There was nothing to be done but to obey the chief's commands, and I went sorrowfully out. I did not return to the palace till the moon was high and the town asleep. The chief was slumbering peacefully, but his leg had swollen horribly, and it was evident that he had told me no more than the truth.

"Sick at heart and utterly undetermined in my mind what to do I climbed the moonlit street till at length I came to the majestic weir which bordered the lake and kept the tide back from flooding the town. It seemed to me as I stood there that I could hear whispered voices, and I hastened to hide myself behind a mimosa bush. Then a figure emerged into sight—a face and figure quite familiar to me. The light fell full upon his features and disclosed the last man I expected—"

"I know," Uzali cried, "Samuel Flower!"

Chapter XXI

A Double Foe.

Russell smiled slightly in reply. Apparently he expected Uzali to make that guess, for he went on again unsurprised. Nor had Mercer time to show any astonishment.

"I am obliged to you for saving me so much trouble," Russell said. "It is so pleasant to have an appreciative audience. I don't mind admitting that at the time I was more surprised than Mr. Uzali appears to be now. Mind you, I knew Samuel Flower well enough. I had done a variety of work for him from time to time, some of it shady, but nothing that one could call positively dishonourable. But to see that man on that side of the globe came on me like a shock. I thought the blackguard was in London, engaged in his congenial occupation of sending coffin ships to sea and profiting by their wrecks. When I came to think of it I remembered Flower once telling me that he had been pretty well all over the world in his youth, and now I guessed what he was doing in that out-of-the-way spot. I knew he was there with sinister designs upon my friendly host. I knew he must be

at the head of the faction of natives who were bearing down upon the devoted city."

Russell paused and helped himself to a fresh cigarette.

"Mind you, I am not taking credit to myself for any philanthropy," he went on. "I admit those people were very good to me, but I wanted to get back to civilisation nevertheless. And I am afraid I was thinking more about those jewels than anything else. If I could succeed in reaching the coast with them, why, then, my fortune was made. All these thoughts passed swiftly through my mind as I crouched behind the friendly shelter, watching Flower and his companions. There were two Europeans besides himself, and some half-a-dozen natives who stood at a distance waiting for orders. It puzzled me to know what they were doing up there, and it was some little time before I could make out. But gradually the thing began to appear plainer, for one of the Europeans came along with something in his hand, which I made out to be an electric battery. This man silently paced along the whole length of the dam, then he proceeded to make pencil notes in a pocket-book. Flower seemed to be watching him carefully, as if waiting for a verdict.

"'No great difficulty,' said the man with the pocket-book by and bye. 'On the whole, the thing appears feasible. It only means removing a stone or two and applying a big charge of dynamite and the thing is done. I don't think we need take the trouble to keep our men here. The less people we have about us the better. We can easily find some excuse for sending them to the coast. It is by far the most expeditious plan, to say nothing of its absolute safety.'

"And those places down there?" Flower asked.

The man with the battery shrugged his shoulders.

"What does it matter?" he asked. "It will only make the game exciting afterwards—the finest game of hide-and-seek you ever had in your life. You leave it to me, and I'll fix it all right. And the sooner it comes off the better."

Russell made another pause.

"I daresay you will think me stupid," he said, "but for the moment I could not make out what those fellows were doing. I knew there was mischief on foot. I knew that Samuel Flower would never come all that way for nothing. But, for the life of me, I couldn't see what they were driving at. I stayed there thinking the matter over long after Flower and his companions had gone, but the more I pondered, the more muddled I grew. Still, I decided to go down presently and see how the chief was progressing. It only wanted a glance in the moonlight to see what had happened. The poor fellow was dead. He had told me the sober truth. He had fallen by a poisoned arrow shot by one of those miscreants who had guided Flower and his companions to that out-of-the-way corner of the world.

"But there was nothing for it but to wait for the morning. I went back to my own quarters sorrowfully enough, feeling that I had lost what little power I possessed, for since the chief was dead my reputation for surgery would vanish to nothing. I might alarm the natives in the morning and show them what was in store for them if they had not much faith in my diplomacy. I lay on my bed full of fears, and none the less alarmed because I did not know in which quarter to look for the danger. I suppose I must have dozed into a sort of sleep, when I was alarmed by a tremendous crash and boom overhead, as if a mighty thunderstorm were in progress, and a moment later I heard the torrents of rain roaring down the flinty

streets. Even then I did not connect this with the peril to come, though it was impossible to sleep for the noise of the rushing waters, and I sat up in bed. Presently I could see the yellow flood creeping into my room and almost before I knew where it was it was knee-deep on the floor.

"And then it flashed across me what had happened. The truth came too late. I saw once more in my mind's eye the man jotting down his calculations in a pocket-book. It came to me with vivid force what he had said about the dynamite, and I knew. They had removed some of the heavy coping stones from the top of the dam, then with the aid of their battery they had fired a mine of dynamite, and in the twinkling of an eye the dam was no more. The huge wall had been removed as if by a gigantic knife, and the great lake overhead was rushing on to the destruction of the city. In a few minutes every man, woman, and child would perish, and the gigantic buildings be torn apart like so many packs of cards.

"I rose from my bed and rushed into the street where the torrent was already high. With a shudder I looked upward and saw a huge wall of water bearing down upon me like some all-compelling cataract down an Alpine mountain side. I could hear a cry now and again as something human flashed by me, but was powerless to give any assistance; I was even powerless to secure my own safety. A moment later and the water had me in its grip, tossing and turning me over as if I had been a chip. I remember sliding over a ledge of rock and finding myself pinioned by a great mass of bushes whilst the water slid over me, leaving me free to breathe, and indeed, the mass of rock forming a huge cascade as it did, saved my life.

"Goodness knows how long I was held there. It seemed that the night changed to day and the day to dusk again before the mighty roar ceased and I was free to creep from under the shelter of the rock and gaze on the destruction which had taken place around me. As to the city itself it had vanished. The great stone buildings were gone, the mass of temples were no more, nothing remained to speak of what had been except a mighty jumble of stones at the foot of the valley. I was the sole survivor of that appalling calamity. It did not need anyone to inform me that I witnessed one of the most awful tragedies of modern times. For the time being I could not even think.

"But gradually my strength and courage came back to me. I knew that I was not altogether alone. I knew not what Flower and his fellow miscreants were after. They had not dared to meet the people of the granite city single-handed; they had taken this murderous way of sweeping life out of existence, so that they might recover the lost treasures of the city without interruption.

"This knowledge was my one chance of salvation. If I could keep on the track of those people without being seen, then it was just possible that I might make my way down to the coast. I could hang about their camp at night, for they would not be likely to keep a very close watch, so that I could help myself to what food I required. For the best part of three days I hid myself closely in the daylight and prowled about at night until I got on the track of those people. As I had expected, they were after plunder alone, and gradually began to collect a mass of loot. But with all my caution there was one thing I did not succeed in finding out, and that was where the stuff was hidden. At the end of a week they appeared to be satisfied, and one morning they moved off towards the coast. It was only by a bit of sheer luck that I managed to keep up with them. You see, I had my life to think of,

for all the treasure on the island was worthless to me without that. At the end of a week we began to see signs of civilisation and I could afford to drop back and let Flower and his party go their own way. The strange part of the whole thing was this—when Flower reached the sea, save for one European he was alone. I don't insinuate anything, but I feel certain that not one of Flower's escort lived to tell the tale. I believe that every native who went with him as far as the granite city was murdered. Oh, that would be nothing to a man like Flower. It would be easy to make a present of a case of whisky to those natives and see that it was heavily drugged with poison. And now I think I have told you everything. Every word of it is true."

"Absolutely true," Uzali said. "I can confirm it if necessary. For the chief you spoke of just now was well known to me; in fact, I may say that he was my elder brother."

Chapter XXII

From East to West.

There was something almost pathetic in the way in which Uzali uttered the few words which passed his lips. His face was devoid of all trace of anger, his dark eyes had grown very sad.

"I am afraid you will hardly understand me," he said. "It is almost impossible for Western people to enter into the thoughts and ambitions of the East. You would hardly suppose to see me sitting here in the heart of London, surrounded by these evidences of civilization that I am a man who has set his heart upon the remaking of a nation. And yet, up to a few moments ago, that ambition was as strong and keen as ever. And now it has been dispelled like a dream. But perhaps I had better not talk in this poetic strain. Three or four years ago I came to England to see if I could come to terms with the Government. You see, both my brother and myself had been educated here, and we thought it was just possible that the British Government would take our province under their protection. We had talked it over scores of times, and, at last I came to England to see what I could do. It is about three years since the news of the catastrophe came to me, and even then I learnt it through the medium of one of the newspapers. I suppose the Press did not think it worth more than a paragraph, which merely told of the disaster of the lake and how the tribe to which it belonged had been swept out of existence. Mind you, I did not think there was anything wrong. It seemed not unnatural that some great storm might sweep the dam away, and then the rest would have been a mere matter of minutes. But I was not satisfied. I went to Borneo to make inquiries, and eventually I found two survivors of the disaster. Then it was I discovered what had taken place. I can assure you, from that time to this I have done nothing but investigate and investigate till, by slow degrees, I have hit upon the right track. But tell me, gentlemen, how did you find me out?"

"We didn't find you out at all," Mercer said. "The thing was pure accident. We discovered that some of your tribe were bent upon wreaking their vengeance on

Samuel Flower, and as my friend Russell was so mixed up in the matter he determined to see the thing through. It was the merest coincidence that we met you at the theatre to-night."

"I see," Uzali said. "Well, gentlemen, if you will help me I will promise to help you. But even as yet you don't quite appreciate where the danger lies. Everything is in the hands of those two clansmen of mine. If they are here on their own responsibility and I can gain speech with them, I may prevent murder. But if, on the other hand, these men are here as the emissaries of our priests then it is little heed they will pay to me. If I were to sit here talking to you all night, I could not impress upon you the influence which our priests exercised over our people. But at any rate, I can try. If you will both come with me to a place in the East End of London—"

"Impossible so far as I am concerned." Russell said curtly. "I have other and much more important work to do. But there is no reason why Mercer should be home before Saturday evening, and I daresay he will be glad to keep you company."

"Anything where I can oblige," Mercer said.

Uzali rose hurriedly to his feet.

"Then there is no more to be said for the present," he exclaimed. "I suppose Dr. Mercer knows where to find you if necessary. Now if you will give me a few minutes I will change my dress."

Russell had gone by the time Uzali came back. The latter had changed into a thick pilot suit with a blue cap which came well below his ears. A short clay pipe in his mouth gave him the aspect of the foreign seaman generally to be found loitering about Limehouse.

"We are going into some queer company," he explained. "I had better give you a cap like my own to wear and a shabby overcoat. If we have any luck we shall be on the track of our friends before daylight. We can take a cab as far as Upper Thames Street and walk the rest of the journey."

Uzali chuckled to himself as the first passing cabman looked at him keenly and demanded to know where his fare was to come from. The sight of half a sovereign seemed to allay the cabman's fears, and he set his horse going somewhat sulkily. When the cab was dismissed there was a good step yet to go before Uzali turned down a side street with the air of a man who appears to be sure of his ground, and knocked three times at a doorway which was so far underground as to be more like the entrance to a cellar than anything else. A grating in the doorway was pushed cautiously back and a yellow, skinny face peered through. It was the face of an elderly Chinaman scored and creased with thousands of lines, each line having the dirt ground into it, and the whole resembling an engraving after Rembrandt. It was an old, cunning, wicked face, too, so that even Mercer, accustomed to all sorts and conditions of men, recoiled at the sight.

Apparently the guardian of the door was satisfied, for he mumbled something in response to Uzali's question and opened the door. For a moment the atmosphere was unbearable. It smote Mercer with the strength of a blow. He had had many adventures in various sinks of iniquity on the four continents. He knew San Francisco and New York, Port Said and Cairo, but never before had he

encountered anything quite so bad as this. He reeled to and fro, and then sat down on the filthy doorstep. As to Uzali, it seemed natural to him.

He was speaking a kind of pidgin English which Mercer could understand. He chinked some coins in his pocket, which seemed to Mercer rather an imprudent thing to do, for the yellow face lit up and the dark almond eyes gleamed with cupidity.

"They are not here, illustrious one," the Chinaman said. "On my soul be it if I do not speak the truth."

"But they have been here," Uzali persisted.

The Chinaman bowed till his forehead touched the filthy floor. Apparently he was placing his den and all it contained at the disposal of the visitor. Uzali took a step forward and shook him violently. It seemed rather a dangerous thing to do, for the damp, stagnant floor of the room was littered with prostrate forms either in the full ecstasy of their opium or drugged to a dreamless sleep by it. The Chinaman shook his head again.

"One, two, three, four, five," said Uzali, counting on his fingers, "six, seven, eight, nine, ten sovereigns if you find them for me this evening. I have the gold in my pocket. More money than you could make in a week. Now wake up, exert yourself. Surely you could find someone who could tell me where they have gone."

Illustration:

Surely you can find someone who can tell me where they have gone.

The Chinaman pondered a moment with his long fingers in his grey beard. Then once more he bowed and excused himself a moment while he disappeared in the murky blackness at the back of the evil-smelling den.

"Dare you trust him?" Mercer asked.

"Bah, he would do anything for money," Uzali said contemptuously. "He could have told me in the first place if he liked."

"And your friends have been here tonight?"

"Yes, they have been here right enough, and I am rather glad of it for one thing. They would not be able to resist the opium, and when we do catch up with them, they will be like children in our hands. We are not going to have our walk for nothing."

"I don't mind so long as we get outside this place," Wilfrid said. "It seems impossible that anybody could live in an atmosphere like this. I hope that Chinaman of yours isn't going to keep us here much longer."

After what seemed to be an interminable time the proprietor of the opium den returned, accompanied by a fellow countryman almost as wrinkled, and quite as dirty as himself. It was only from the alertness of his movements that the newcomer proclaimed the fact that he was much younger than the master of the ceremonies. His face was suspicious and sullen, and there was no sign of animation in his eyes till Uzali produced a sovereign from his pocket.

"Malays," he said curtly. "North Borneo men. There were two or three of them here this evening who have now gone. Show me where to find them and this piece of money is yours."

A transformation came over the cunning face of the listener. He held out a lean, yellow claw which trembled violently as the piece of gold was passed into it.

"You stay here, small piecie," he said, "and I go find. Maybe, small piecie be long piecie, and I find all le same."

"We had better go with him," Uzali suggested.

The Chinaman winked slightly and shook his head. Even the display of a second piece of money failed to shake his determination, though his eyes fairly watered at the sight of it.

"No, no, I not go at all," he said sulkily. "All same piecie gold, good thing, but life better still."

Uzali gave it up with a gesture of despair. There was nothing for it but to wait in that loathsome atmosphere till the messenger came back. The minutes dragged along: a quarter of an hour passed and then the messenger returned. He held up his hand as a sign for the others to follow.

Chapter XXIII

An Expected Trouble.

It was good to be out in the open air, to breathe the pure atmosphere once more. For a long time the Chinaman stalked on ahead until the docks were passed and the Tower Bridge loomed high against the sky. It wanted little till daylight now, and already there was a red glow in the east. But the Chinaman went on and on till he came to the Strand and thence across into Leicester Square to Oxford-street and behind Gower-street. There were gardens and trees looming ghostly in the morning mist, and before one of the gardens the Chinaman stopped and peered through the high gate. He stood for a moment or two as still as a statue, then suddenly he grasped Uzali's arm.

"There," he whispered. "You see yourself."

Without another word he turned and sped silently down the road as if his feet were shod with india-rubber. On Uzali, peeping through the bars of the gate, this defection was lost. He was too intent upon some object which appeared to be creeping across the grass. In a low whisper he called Mercer's attention to it, but the latter could see nothing.

"I forgot you do not possess our eye sight," Uzali murmured. "But there is one of the men I am in search of. What they are doing here I don't know. That is what I mean to find out. Now give me a lift over this gate and stay till I come back. Oh, there is no danger."

In his heart of hearts Mercer did not feel so sure of it. But it was not for him to question Uzali's purpose. To lift the latter over the gate was easy, and a second or two later he was safe on the other side.

"One moment before I go," he said. "I am an utter stranger and have never seen this place before. So far as I can judge this is a fine square with a number of good houses round it. It is not difficult to guess that these fellow-countrymen of mine have their eye upon one of the residences. Now do you think you could find out

the names of some of the residents? Of course, I know it is rather a risky thing to try at this time of the morning, but you might hit upon some unsuspicious policeman who can give you all the information you want."

The request seemed ridiculous, almost farcical, but Mercer promised. Neither was he the less anxious to find out for himself because a shrewd idea had come into his mind and he resolved put it to the test. He strode off down the road as if on some important errand and presently he saw a policeman swinging silently along. There was an element of risk in what he was about to do, but Mercer did not hesitate.

"I have been looking for an officer for some time," he said. "I wonder if you could be of assistance to me?"

The policeman pulled up hurriedly and flashed his lantern full on Mercer's face. He was not in the least disposed to be friendly, Evidently his suspicions were aroused.

"What can I do for you?" he asked curtly.

"Well, you see, I have just landed off a voyage," Mercer said, "and I have had the misfortune to mislay all my belongings. I could not think where to go until it struck me that I had a friend who lived somewhere near here, a shipowner by the name of Flower. Do you happen to know his name?"

The policeman shook his head slowly.

"I can't say as I do," he said. "You see, I haven't been on duty in these parts very long, and anyway I don't suppose your friend would care to be knocked up at this time in the morning."

"Naturally enough," Wilfrid said coolly. "But, you see, I was not disposed to do that. If I can only find the house it will be easy to walk about till daylight."

Once more the policeman hesitated. His suspicions were not altogether lulled.

"You had better come with me and speak to my sergeant," he said. "I have got to meet him in five minutes at the top of Torrington Place. He will tell you about this Mr. Flower."

There was no help for it so that Mercer strode along carelessly by the side of the constable until the sergeant made his appearance. He seemed to be just as cold and suspicious as his colleague, but at the same time Wilfrid had the satisfaction of knowing that he had not drawn a bow at a venture altogether in vain, for at the mention of Samuel Flower's name the sergeant's face changed.

"Oh, yes, I know Mr. Flower well enough," he said. "He lives at number twenty-three on the other side of the square. For the most part he spends his time in the country. But the family is in town to-night because I was passing the house when they came home from a party. But what do you want with Mr. Samuel Flower, young fellow? You don't look like the sort of company he generally keeps."

"Very likely not," Wilfrid said coldly. "But the fact remains that I was once in Mr. Flower's service as doctor on one of his boats. I am much obliged to you for your information, which will save me a great deal of trouble in the morning."

Wilfrid strolled away quite naturally and easily; indeed, he was so cool and collected that the sergeant allowed him to depart with a curt good-night. There was just the chance that the officer might change his mind, so that Mercer sped on rapidly back to Gower-street, nor did he breathe freely till he stood once more outside the gate over which he had helped Uzali to climb. It struck Wilfrid as being

a good idea that he should climb the gate himself and stay till the square keeper came in the morning to unlock the gates. No sooner had this idea occurred to him than he proceeded to put it into operation. He dropped quietly on to the path on the other side and settled himself down to wait in patience for Uzali to reappear. Twice did he walk the circuit of the garden. Twice did he pass Samuel Flower's house; the brass numbers on the door shone so steadily under the street lamp that there was no mistaking it. The house appeared to be in darkness save one light in an upper room, which flickered every now and again as if a window had been opened and the draught had caused the gas to flare unsteadily. There was nothing for it but to wait with what patience he possessed, although Wilfrid was getting tired of his adventure. He was wondering if it would be safe to light a cigarette to pass the time away. He looked around him and saw in the centre of the garden a dense mass of bushes where he might conceal himself and smoke without the faintest chance of detection.

He made his way across the grass and as he reached the shelter of the thicket he seemed to hear someone breathing stentorously. Shading the vesta in his hand he swept the shining blue flame over the grass. There was the outline of a figure lying on its back with a pale face turned up to the sky.

"Good Heavens!" Mercer cried, "why, it's Uzali!"

At the mention of his name the Malay opened his eyes and looked drearily about him. There was a nasty cut on the side of his head and a big black bruise under the left eye. It did not take Mercer long to discover that his companion was suffering from loss of blood, but so far as he could see no very great harm had come to him. A minute or two later Uzali staggered to his feet.

"How did it happen?" Wilfrid exclaimed.

Uzali put the question aside impatiently.

"Don't ask me now," he whispered. "Get me home as soon as you can. I will tell you about it in the morning. No, you are not to come home with me. You will put me in a cab and send me straight round to my flat. I can summon my own doctor by telephone and no one will be any the wiser. Now do you think you could manage to get me over that gate?"

There was something so imperious in Uzali's manner that Wilfrid asked no questions. By the great exertion of strength he managed to lift Uzali over the gate and deposit him on the coping-stones outside. A sleepy driver of a hansom cab came plodding along and Mercer summoned him without delay.

"My friend has had an accident," he said. "Here is his card and address. I want you to get him home as soon as possible and see him into his flat. You will have nothing more to do after that except to mind your own business and ask no questions. Come my good man, I don't suppose you will mind earning a five-pound note like that. It isn't much for the money."

"I'll do it," the cabman said hoarsely. "I haven't earned ten shillings tonight. Now come on, sir."

Uzali was lifted bodily into the cab and as the driver reached the box the wounded man whispered a few, terse peremptory words to Wilfrid. A moment later the cab was out of sight. Wilfrid wondered what was going to happen next. He made his way back into the square again to the thicket of evergreens where he had dropped his cigarette case. He could see the houses opposite now. He could see

that a flare of light had flashed upon the second floor in Samuel Flower's residence; quite plainly, against the blinds, were the shadows of two men struggling together. It was only for a moment, then all was thick darkness again. Wilfrid stood there rubbing his eyes in bewilderment.

Chapter XXIV

The Long Dark Hour.

Even had Wilfrid Mercer had a stronger head and a steadier nerve, he might still have been pardoned for a feeling of dread at that moment. He had been on the rack nearly an hour and was, besides, more worn out than he was aware. At the first faint glow of the dawn filled the eastern sky it was impossible to piece together the tangled puzzle. In the first place it was idle to imagine what had happened to Uzali, and who was responsible for the murderous attack upon him. And it seemed purposeless now to conjecture why he had been in such a hurry to get away without at least trying to explain the drift of events to Mercer.

He wondered if those strange kinsmen had had anything to do with it, but so far as they were concerned the victim had been so confident, so absolutely sure of them that this theory seemed unlikely. There was nothing for it but to turn his attention to Samuel Flower's house and attempt to discover what had been going on there. Anything was better than standing still in the chilly dawn trying to solve a problem which was seemingly beyond human skill.

He must be up and doing. Mechanically he grabbed for a cigarette-case and placed it in his pocket; then he crossed the grass and made his way over the railings of the square close to Samuel Flower's residence. The house was in pitch darkness. There was no sign of any trouble within. Wilfrid's first impulse had been to alarm the inhabitants and let them know what he had seen, but in cooler blood he dismissed this notion.

He stood in the uncertain shadow of the trees making up his mind what to do and letting precious moments slip, though, for all he knew, some terrible catastrophe might have taken place under his very nose. As he watched doubting and hesitating, a figure crept along the other side of the square and entered Flower's house. The handle of the door was turned boldly and resolutely. It closed as firmly, but Wilfrid's ear caught not the slightest sound. Then he noticed that the light in the hall sprang up, followed by another light in one of the bedrooms at the top of the house.

"They are clever as they are daring." Wilfrid murmured. "Anybody passing would think the servants were up and about. I wonder what time it is."

At that moment an obliging clock struck the hour of five.

"Too early for town servants," Wilfrid muttered. "I have a good mind to try my own luck."

Wilfrid was by no means a timid man. He had gone through too many privations and dangers for that. With determined step, therefore, he crossed the road and laid his hand on the latch. He was not surprised to find that the catch was not

down, and that the door yielded to his pressure. A moment later and he was in the hall.

All the lights had been turned up. The place was flooded with a soft, tender glow: pictures and flowers and statuary stood out and delighted the eye and pleased the senses. So far, whoever the intruders were, they had made hardly any attempt to disguise their presence. There was a festive air about the house, too, for the atmosphere was heavy with the smell of cigar smoke and the half-opened dining-room door showed that a snug supper party had recently met. It must have been within a few hours, for the dregs of the champagne still sparkled in the glasses. Wilfrid pressed on, curious. He buttoned his overcoat over his throat in case of a surprise, and caught up an old-fashioned life-preserver from the hall-table and slipped it into his pocket.

Yet nothing broke the silence; nothing indicated anything out of the common. No doubt, he surmised, there must be scores of similar scenes in the west end of London to-night, where people had come home and partaken of a hasty supper after the servants had gone to bed and then retired themselves, carelessly leaving the lights burning.

But in this particular case Wilfrid knew the lights had not been left burning. He had seen that sudden, mysterious gleam in the upper windows and the quick flash of the electrics as the whole turned to a sea of light. It was his plain duty to investigate the premises from top to bottom.

Wilfrid chose the basement, but nothing rewarded his search. All the rooms there were empty, as they were on the dining-room floor. Nor were there any strange coats of hats in the vestibule, excepting Flower's big fur wrap and soft hat and some cloudy looking material which Beatrice doubtless had discarded when she came in. He must look further afield and see what the next landing would reveal.

It was dangerous and difficult, but Wilfrid resolved to go through with it. He found the switches of the drawing-room lights and just turned them on long enough to enable him to see that the room was empty. He dared not try any strong illumination, for fear of arousing the suspicions of the police, who would know a great deal more about the servants' habits than he could. There appeared to be a large bedroom behind the drawing-room, looking out on to the back of the house, and this Wilfrid tried cautiously. He felt sure someone was there because a long slit of light showed from under the door. The door was locked on the inside, and no sound proceeded from the room save a gentle purring noise, such as machinery will make when heard a long way off. Wilfrid likened it to the singing of a kettle rather than anything else. As he bent down and listened more intently he seemed to hear the murmur of voices and occasionally a suppressed groan as if from someone in pain, who was being quietened by the application of a powerful drug. A minute or two later Wilfrid knew that he was not mistaken, for from behind the locked door came a sound which was unmistakably a smothered laugh.

It was no business of his, of course, and he hesitated before he went farther. He might have paused until it was too late, had not his hearing caught a sound overhead, as if someone had left a room on the next landing and was coming leisurely downstairs. Wilfrid crept back into the deep shadow of the drawing-room door and waited. It was difficult to see, for he had only the gleams of the light

coming from the hall to guide him. Presently as his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom he saw that he was not mistaken. A man drew near with step noiseless and agile as a cat's. A peculiar perfume preceded him, a perfume which Wilfrid had not the least trouble in recognising. It was the same strange scent he had smelt during the eventful night he had spent at Maldon Grange. He saw the stranger try the door of the bedroom; then suddenly all his restraint deserted him. His right hand shot out and he caught the little man by the throat.

"Get them to open that door," he said hoarsely. "Get them to open it at once or I'll choke the life out of you. Do you hear?"

Whether the man heeded or not he gave no sign. Wilfrid's grip was as tenacious as that of a bulldog, all his fighting instincts aroused. He felt exhilarating sense of superior power. For the moment the man was as clay in his hands.

But only for a moment. Then in some strange way the little man managed to jerk himself free, and two arms of wire and whipcord were around Wilfrid's throat till he was fain to bend and give under the pressure lest his neck should break. In all his adventures he had never encountered such a force as this. Try as he would he could not shake those arms off. He felt himself gradually being borne backwards until his head touched the ground and one of those relentless grips was relaxed for an infinitesimal space of time. The struggle was none the less tenacious and deadly, because it was being fought out almost entirely in the dark, and Wilfrid temporarily lost his self-possession. Then he knew that if he could not fling the man off him his end was near. With a desperate effort he struggled to his knees and grasping his antagonist by the waist literally threw himself down the stairs.

Over and over they rolled, first one above and then the other, but making little or no noise as they slid down the velvet pile of carpet. No sound came from either and the ferocious struggle went on till they landed in the hall and Wilfrid was conscious of the cold marble under his head.

The time for the final struggle had arrived. Driving his knee upwards Wilfrid caught his antagonist fairly in the chest with a force that made him groan again, and as he felt the tense, rigid limbs relax, he knew that now or never was the time to save his life. A mist swam before his eyes: he turned faint or unconscious for a second or two; then when he looked about him again he saw that his assailant was gone and that someone was bending over him with tender solicitude.

"Beatrice," he murmured. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Hush," the girl whispered, "not a word. Thank goodness I have managed to get here in time to save your life."

Chapter XXV

The Diamond Moth Again.

Beatrice Galloway's feelings were strangely mixed as she drove along beside her uncle towards Gower-street. It seemed as if lately the whole world had gone astray, as if all happiness had ceased to be. For many months past she had felt the loss of

Wilfrid Mercer; indeed, she had missed him even more than she cared to acknowledge to herself. And yet, no sooner had he crossed her path again than all this trouble had come back with him.

Of course, it was absurd to blame Wilfrid, but nevertheless, ever since he had shown his face at Maldon Grange there had been nothing but misery and mystery.

And why did Samuel Flower hate the young man so? Beatrice had been half ashamed to admit it when discussing the matter earlier in the evening with Wilfrid, but she knew that he spoke no more than the truth when he said that her guardian was an enemy of his. Beatrice was by no means suspicious, but this fact had been thrust upon her.

And yet Samuel Flower professed that Wilfrid was a perfect stranger to him. There was something here that Beatrice would have to get to the bottom of. Under the shadow of the darkness she could make out nothing of Samuel Flower's profile except that it was hard and set. She was glad enough when the drive came to an end and the house in the square was reached at length.

Cotter stood waiting in the hall. He appeared to be full of eagerness and the desire to speak, when Flower checked him with a malignant frown and a flash of his eyes.

"Presently you fool," he muttered.

"It won't keep, sir, indeed it won't," Cotter muttered. "Jansen has been here and must see you to-night. I told him you would not be back till late, but he went away saying he would call again."

Beatrice, glancing up casually at her guardian saw that once more the pale grey tinge had crept over his face. The malignant look had died from his eyes, giving way to a fear almost unspeakable. The girl had never heard this man's name before, and yet, quite by instinct, she coupled it with something disgraceful and underhanded. What was this new terror? She walked quietly into the dining-room and threw her wraps upon a chair by the side of the fire. As she laid her fan upon the mantelpiece an object in a small box fell to the floor. Beatrice picked it up carefully.

"I had almost forgotten," she murmured.

In a spirit of pure curiosity she raised the lid and the diamond moth flashed into view. Certainly, it had been most careless of Uzali to leave the jewel on the supper-table after he had promised to get it repaired. Beatrice had taken it almost mechanically from the waiter who had brought it to her, and almost without thought carried it home. She took it casually from the box and ranged the two parts close together on the table so that the light might fall upon it. Really, it was a most lovely gem, one that any girl might be proud of, though, Beatrice shrank from it as if it had been a thing of evil. In her mind it was associated with a series of dark tragedies, purple crimes and deeds of violence with which somehow her uncle was not unconnected. She laid her finger upon the jewel almost with loathing. She was still contemplating its sinister beauty when Flower entered the room and closed the door carefully behind him.

His mood had changed for the moment. He was by way of making himself agreeable.

"I hope you won't think I was rude to you just now," he said, "but I am greatly worried by business. Everything seems to have gone wrong lately, and if things

don't mend before long I shall find myself very awkwardly situated. Like most successful men, I have enemies, and there is a conspiracy amongst them to drag me to the ground."

Beatrice murmured something sympathetic. Flower was telling her nothing new. She would have offered her assistance and advice had she thought it of the slightest use. She hardly heard what Flower was saying. She did not notice that he had broken off abruptly in his speech and that his gaze was concentrated upon the diamond moth.

"So that is what you were talking about?" he said. "Upon my word, it is exceedingly handsome. I should like to know the history of that jewel. But didn't it strike you as strange that an unknown man should have made you a present of the missing part of the ornament?"

"I don't know," Beatrice said indifferently. "Nothing strikes me as strange to-night. To begin with, it was such a remarkable gathering of people. Everything seemed to be so free and easy that I was bewildered. You may laugh at me as you like, but when Mr. Uzali produced the missing half, I was not in the least astonished."

Flower was about to ask a question when he altered his mind. He was leading up to a point cautiously.

"That being so," he said with assumed carelessness, "the man who made you this gift ought to have been rather an uncommon person to look at. What was he like? Did he resemble an adventurer or soldier of fortune? Was he a foreigner, or an actor, or what? As far as I could judge, though I was a long way off, he seemed a little insignificant man."

There was a forced gaiety in the speaker's voice which did not deceive Beatrice.

"You are right," she said. "Mr. Uzali is a little man, and very plain, with features not unlike those of a good-looking monkey, yellow face and hands more like a bird's claw than anything else."

"Ah!" Flower exclaimed. "And his speech?"

"His speech told me nothing. His English was as good as yours or mine. Mr. Uzali is a polished man of the world and as much at home in this country as in his own. But I thought it odd that his hand should be exactly like the one which I saw that night in the conservatory trying to find the latch of the door. But you need not be unduly curious. Indeed, I understood Mr. Uzali to express a wish to make your acquaintance."

"He wants to know me?" Flower murmured. "He is anxious to come here—the thing is preposterous. My dear child, you don't know what you are talking about."

Flower paused as if conscious that he was saying too much. The dark mood had come back upon him. He paced up and down the dining-room muttering. Then once more he realised that he was not alone, for he turned almost savagely to Beatrice and pointed to the clock on the mantel.

"I daresay we are making much ado about nothing," he said. "Don't you think you had better go to bed? I must finish some work before we go to Maldon Grange to-morrow."

"Are we going back to-morrow?" Beatrice asked.

"I think so," Flower said moodily. "On the whole it is safer—I mean I prefer the country to London."

Beatrice gathered up her wraps and departed, the old sense of tragedy coming stealing upon her again. But she was too tired to think about anything but bed. She touched her guardian's cheeks with her lips, but he did not seem conscious of her presence. No sooner had she gone than Cotter came into the room. He stood as if waiting for orders, his teeth chattering, his whole aspect one of ludicrous terror.

"Well, you blockhead," Flower cried, "why don't you speak? Why stand there in that ridiculous attitude? Anybody would think you a child frightened by a bogie. Where is your pluck, man? You used to have plenty of it."

"Never a man with more," Cotter said half defiantly. "But I have seen what I have seen and I know what I know, and I will never possess even the nerve of a rabbit. Oh, why didn't we leave well alone? Why couldn't we be satisfied with our ill-gotten gains? Surely you had more than enough. For years I have been dreaming about this danger. For years I have known that it was coming. Sooner or later it was bound to find us out. And the worst of it is you can't fight it. It is miles away one day and the next it stands grinning at your elbow. It may be in the house at the present moment for all I know, just as it was at Maldon Grange."

"Drop that!" said Flower fiercely. "Drop that, you lily-livered coward, or I will do you a mischief. Is there nothing in the world worth speaking about except those yellow-faced devils who are after us now? Isn't it bad enough that Jansen should turn up at this moment?"

Flower paused as an electric bell in the basement purred loudly and a sort of muffled cry came from Cotter as if he had been listening to his death-knell. He stood gazing abjectedly into Flower's face, his own white and sweat-bedabbled.

"Wake up, idiot," Flower said savagely. "Go and let him in. It is only Jansen."

Chapter XXVI

Dr. Jansen.

Cotter seemed to feel his way to the door, as if he were blind, or the room had been suddenly plunged into intense darkness. He hardly dared to breathe till he had opened the front door and admitted a short, enormously stout man who beamed on him mildly behind a pair of huge silver-rimmed spectacles. There was nothing in the stranger to inspire terror in the heart of Cotter, but his manner was servile to a degree.

"You see, I have come back again," the foreigner said. "Did I not tell you that I should come back, my friend? And it is no use telling me that Mr. Flower is not in, because I saw him arrive with his beautiful niece. In fact, I stood on the pavement on the other side of the road and watched the carriage come. If it had been all night I had to wait, I should have remained there. You have told your master I am coming?"

"I have done that," Cotter whined, "and he will see you at once. Will you come this way, please?"

The Dutchman bustled into the dining-room and threw his hat and coat carelessly on a chair. Then he proceeded to wipe his spectacles on an immense red handkerchief which he produced from the tail pocket of his greasy frock-coat. Without ceremony he hustled Cotter to the door and closed it.

Flower stood moodily gazing into the fire-place without taking the least heed of his visitor. Not in the least disconcerted, the Dutchman wheeled a big armchair to the fire-place and made himself comfortable. Then from another capacious pocket he produced a villainous cigar, from the fumes of which he began to poison the room. Helping himself liberally to brandy and soda, he sat down patiently waiting for Flower to speak. Despite the man's fatness and the jovial twinkle in his eyes, there was something about him which spoke of a grim and determined nature. Evidently, too, he was master of the situation and knew it. The tension grew until Flower could stand it no longer.

"Well, what the devil do you want?" he broke out passionately. "What are you doing here just at this time? Haven't I got worry enough without you turning up to blackmail me?"

The Dutchman waved the suggestion aside.

"There, my friend," he said coolly, "you are entirely wrong. I did not come here to blackmail you at all. You treated me very badly some years ago, and I have bided my time till I could get even with you. I don't know whether you are aware of it or not, but the time has come. I should like to know what you are going to do about it."

"Nothing," Flower said moodily. "I am going to let matters take their course. I am not afraid of you and the sooner you know it the better, and if you want money, well, you can't have it. For the last two years everything has gone wrong. People fight shy of me and only the smaller firms in the City will have any dealings with my firm. I am supposed to be rich and prosperous, to have made money in my own peculiar way but I tell you I am a ruined, almost desperate man. Two years ago—"

"Ah, I know what you are going to say," the Dutchman chuckled. "You are going to tell me that everything has gone wrong with you since that trouble over the Guelder Rose. There was the Japonica, too, and the time has gone by when you could make money in coffin ships. Well, on the whole, you have been a lucky man. If I choose to find where young Dr. Mercer is, and if we put our heads together, we could tell a tale about the Guelder Rose which would land Mr. Samuel Flower within the four walls of a gaol. Oh, you needn't look at me like that. I am not likely to do you any harm so long as I can make money out of you. I have waited long enough for this opportunity, knowing that you would find yourself in a corner sooner or later, and I have come here to-night to make a proposal. Why should you talk about being a ruined and desperate man when you have only to put out your hand and fill your pockets with treasure?"

Flower abandoned his place by the fire and began to walk up and down the room again. He was agitated.

"I will not be fool enough to pretend to misunderstand you," he said hoarsely. "I know what you are alluding to. You are speaking about that treasure which awaits us in North Borneo. I tell you I dare not. I cannot steel myself to go through that again. As for you, your case is different. Though you took a prominent part in that

expedition you were wily enough to keep yourself in the background. Nobody could identify you with any of the men who fired that mine and washed the whole city to destruction. I used to marvel at your cunning—"

"I hope you admired it," Jansen chuckled. "Did you think that I was such a fool as to embark upon an enterprise like that without taking proper precautions? Did you suppose I didn't expect to be murdered on my way down to the coast? And didn't your native servants do their best at your instigation to put me away? Not that I bear you any malice. I dare say if things had been otherwise I would have tried to wipe you out as they say in America. When the time came I discreetly disappeared, and it was generally imagined that I had perished miserably in the jungle. My dear, respected partner, I did nothing of the kind. I kept my head and by and by went back to the scene of the destruction to see what I could pick up for myself."

"You found nothing," Flower snarled.

"Absolutely nothing," the Dutchman said good-naturedly. "You had taken good care of that. But the stuff is there, and you know where it is to be found. That is why I am here to-night; why I want you to accompany me on a final voyage, after which neither of us will ever need to work again. The whole thing has blown over. There are no natives left to tell the tale, and we shall be rich men with a minimum expenditure of trouble. The key of the situation lies with us. You can do nothing without me, and I am powerless without you. Let us make an offensive and defensive alliance and take out our own staff. What do you say?"

Jansen spread his hands cheerfully out to the blaze, his little eyes beaming with good-nature. He was not in the least like a man in the close proximity of his would-be murderer. He seemed to take everything for granted. Flower came to an abrupt halt by the fire and looked down at his companion.

"A very pretty programme," he sneered. "Quite an excellent programme. We are to fit out an expedition to North Borneo together. We are to recover all that priceless treasure—why, the marvellous china and engraved glass alone would be worth a fortune—then come home rich beyond the dreams of avarice and live happily for ever afterwards. It sounds delightful, but there is one flaw. You are under the impression that the clan was destroyed root and branch when the city was washed away. You are mistaken. There were survivors, and at least two of them to my certain knowledge are in England at the present moment. Do you know that my life is not worth a moment's purchase? Do you know that one attempt has already been made upon it? The next may be successful. And when I am got rid of that treasure will never be seen again by mortal eye. Besides, how do you know you are safe yourself? You took extraordinary precautions, I know. But we had men to deal with whose cunning and foresight were far greater than our own. Now, in view of what I tell you are you still bent on going?"

The twinkle had died out of the Dutchman's eyes and his rubicund face had grown solemn. He sat for a long time gazing into the fire before he spoke.

"You are sure of this?" he asked. "You are certain there has been no mistake."

By way of response Flower took an envelope from his pocket and produced a five-knotted piece of string. He handed it gravely to his companion.

"Look at that," he said. "You know what it means. Now that came to me in a registered letter posted by my agent Slater in Borneo. Mind you, Slater knows

nothing about this trouble, my correspondence with him is always conducted in cypher. The letter was so private and confidential that it was written by Slater himself and posted by his own hand. And yet, when I come to open the letter I find this inside. You are an easy-going sort, but I ask you, would not your flesh creep and your hair stand on end if you found a message like that inside a confidential letter, written, sealed and posted by another person? I tell you the play is finished, the game is up, and I am doomed just as irrevocably as if I were the victim of some incurable malignant disease. Come, you are a clever man, Dr. Jansen, can you show me any way out of this?"

Jansen played thoughtfully with the string, but no words crossed his lips. He was baffled.

Chapter XXVII

No Foe of Hers.

The house was quiet enough now. The whole place was plunged into darkness; even Cotter had forgotten his terror and was dreaming uneasily. As for Beatrice, she had thrown herself upon her bed, worn out with fatigue and anxiety and for some time she slept. Her room and the dressing-room beyond were not dark seeing that they faced the front of the house and the street lamps shone upon the windows. She lay at first unconscious of her surroundings, but by and by she grew uncomfortable and awoke with a start. She could hear and see nothing beyond the dim shadows of the various objects in the room until gradually her eyes began to grow accustomed to the gloom and she could distinguish her dressing-table in the small room beyond. She recollected hazily that she had placed her diamond moth with the rest of the jewellery on the table. In a drowsy sort of way she was chiding herself for her carelessness when she seemed to see a hand moving noiselessly over the toilet articles. For a moment Beatrice put the impression aside as a mere fancy, but kept her eyes fixed on the spot till she knew that she was no longer mistaken. Somebody was in the room and bending curiously over the diamond moth. A moment later a shadowy arm waved and a second figure joined the first. The two dim outlines stood with clasped hands gazing rapturously at the moth, much as some heathen might regard a precious idol. Beatrice could see the intruder's lips moving as if in prayer. Evidently they had found some talisman which was engrossing their attention and probably keeping them from more serious work.

The girl lay still and rigid, too terrified to move, and incapable of uttering a syllable. For the life of her she could not have screamed, she was so overcome with dread. How long this scene lasted it was impossible for Beatrice to say. She knew that danger sharp and horrible was here. Then it flashed into her mind that the peril was not for her. The thought nerved her to exertion. She dragged herself from her bed and threw a wrap over her shoulders.

A new wild courage was burning in her veins. Action was better than lying quaking and fearing the worst. With a firm step she crossed the floor and walked

into the dressing-room. Then, before she had time to speak or move, unseen hands were laid upon her shoulders and she was dragged backwards, not with violence, not with anger, but with a considerate firmness that would brook no denial. An instant later and a small blue light flicked on the floor, throwing up a sweet fragrant incense which Beatrice found infinitely soothing to the senses. She seemed to rock and sway. She felt herself lifted from the floor and then she dropped into a deep sleep and knew no more.

When she came to herself again her mind was wonderfully fresh and clear. Like a flash she saw everything that had happened. Like a flash it came to her that these intruders were no other than the strange visitors who had made themselves so much at home at Maldon Grange. Beatrice was not in the least afraid; at least, she had no fear for herself. Whatever those uncanny creatures were searching for, they had no quarrel with her; indeed, they had gone out of their way to save her from the consequences of her interference. But if the danger were not for her, for whom was it intended? The answer was obvious. Samuel Flower was the enemy. Samuel Flower was the victim whom these little men were tracking down in their relentless fashion. How long had she been asleep?

She looked at her watch, but there was nothing to learn from that. She partly dressed herself with a view to arousing the household. As she opened the door leading to the landing she heard sounds of a struggle outside. With unsteady hand she turned up the lights, and, locked in a deadly grip, almost at her feet, were one of the strangers and another man whom she did not recognise at the moment. As the two rolled headlong down the steps, Beatrice gave a sharp cry, for she had seen the white, set face of Wilfrid Mercer. The thing was all over almost before she realised that it was begun. One assailant had vanished, goodness only knew where, and Wilfrid lay on his back bruised, battered, and all but unconscious. Thoughts for his safety uppermost in her mind, Beatrice flung prudence to the winds. She flew downstairs and raised her lover's head just as he was opening his eyes. Nothing seemed to matter so that he were safe, and with unfeigned thankfulness Beatrice heard Wilfrid mutter her name.

"You are not hurt?" she asked anxiously.

"Not very much, I think," Mercer said as he struggled to his feet. "But the man nearly choked the life out of me all the same."

"What has happened?" Beatrice asked. "How did you get here? What brings you in the house at this time in the morning?"

Wilfrid pressed his hands to his head. He was too dazed to reply coherently. Then as his mind cleared, events began to adjust themselves, and the strange panorama of the night unfolded itself slowly.

"I will tell you," he said. "I am here because I happen to know that your uncle is in imminent danger. How I got into the house doesn't much matter. I came here without ceremony, and I was making my way upstairs when I interrupted that man and had to fight for my life. But hadn't we better ascertain that your uncle is safe?"

"Oh, yes," Beatrice said eagerly. "I am afraid we shall not to be able to get into his room. He always locks himself in and the door of his bedroom is lined with steel, as a precaution against burglars or something of that kind, so he said."

Wilfrid waited to hear no more. He was quite himself by this time. Followed by Beatrice he went quietly up the stairs until he came to the door of her uncle's room. He tried the lock, but it resisted all his efforts. It did not seem prudent to call out in case something terrible might be going on inside.

"Is there no other way?" Wilfrid whispered. "Is there no balcony at the back of the house, no creepers, or rain pipes, or anything of that kind? Have no fear—forewarned, forearmed."

"There is a balcony running all the way along," Beatrice explained. "My uncle talks of having it removed; but he has not done so yet. I can help you through a bedroom window and you can creep along and see for yourself. But I implore you not to run into any danger."

"It is a case of life or death," Wilfrid said gravely. "I will be as prudent as I can. But we must not lose time."

Beatrice led the way into one of the back bedrooms and opened the window. Mercer crept along in the darkness cautiously until he came to a room both windows of which were lighted. One of the blinds was partly pulled up and one of the sashes raised a few inches. From beneath came a sweet, sickly scent, which caused Mercer to reel as if a desire to sleep had suddenly seized him. It was only by holding his handkerchief to his mouth and nose that he was able to lie down on the balcony and peep under the blind. He could see Flower lying on his bed apparently unconscious, with a white bandage around his forehead. He could see two figures flitting about the room, like doctors during an operation. For a moment Flower's two hands were raised above his head, then fell helplessly again by his side.

What infernal thing was going on? What black art was being practised by these miscreants? Flesh and blood could stand it no longer. Wilfrid forced the sash to its utmost capacity and dashed into the room. Seizing a chair he whirled it round his head and made a wild lunge at one of the would-be assassins. At the same time he cried out for others to follow him as if he had assistance at hand. Almost immediately the light was extinguished; there was a rustle of figures in the darkness and Wilfrid knew that he was alone.

The sweat was pouring off his face with the horror of it all. He groped round the walls until he found the switch and flooded the place once more with the welcome rays. He could see the key was inside the door. He opened it widely and called for Beatrice. Then he turned to the figure on the bed. The white bandage was gone from Flower's head and he lay still and motionless. So far as Mercer could see he did not breathe. Beatrice entered full of anxiety.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Is he dead?"

"I don't know," Wilfrid said. "It is impossible to say. You must rouse the household at once and send for the nearest doctor or the nearest half dozen for that matter. I want a brain specialist, if he can be got. Will you go at once please. Every moment is priceless."

Chapter XXVIII

Beyond Surgery.

Wilfrid had to repeat his command more than once before Beatrice seemed to understand what he was saying. The girl was dazed with the horror of the thing. She stood looking at the white, still figure on the bed, marvelling what was going to happen next. And yet at the back of her mind there was a glimmering of the truth. This was a vendetta and these relentless foes would never slack their efforts until Samuel Flower had paid the debt to the last penny. Many of these things Beatrice had read about in the pages of fiction. She had forgotten, perhaps, that there are stranger things in every-day life.

As for Wilfrid he was calm enough. His professional instincts came to his aid. Laying his hand gently upon Beatrice's shoulder he led her from the room.

"I want you to be brave and silent," he whispered. "I want you to help me all you can. It is possibly a selfish reflection, but your life is safe. If you would save your uncle, you must do what I tell you."

"I will try," Beatrice murmured. "What do you want me to do? Oh, I remember."

She departed without another word, leaving Wilfrid to do what he could with her uncle. This second attack was much more serious than the first, for Samuel Flower lay to all appearance dead. It was difficult for Wilfrid to make an examination, for Flower had undressed and gone to bed before the attack. He lay on his back with his arms inert by his side, the deep purple of his cheeks had given way to a ghastly whiteness. Wilfrid could detect not the slightest trace of violence anywhere, nothing but one or two small indentations on the forehead and at the back of the head. Try as he would Wilfrid could make nothing of the case. And if he could trust to his trained knowledge, he felt sure that no explanation would ever come from Flower's lips, for surely the man was dead.

He could hear no murmur from the heart. By laying the glass of his watch on the murdered man's lips he could distinguish no moisture. He could only wait patiently until assistance came, and then tell the story as best he could. With almost a sensation of shame Wilfrid realised that Flower was harmless to do him further injury. He tried to put the matter out of his mind, but it recurred more than once, until he was fain to walk up and down the room in the growing light. He pulled up the blinds by and by and let in the flood of day. Even in the strong light he could detect no motion and no change in that awful figure on the bed. Inured as he was to these kind of tragedies, it was with a thrill of thankfulness that he heard steps coming up the stairs and saw a stranger enter the room. There was no reason for Wilfrid to ask if the new-comer were a doctor, for he carried his profession in every crease of his well-fitting frock-coat, in every line of his well-groomed hair.

"My name is Dr. Shelton," he said. "I am sorry to be so late, but I have only just got back to town. So this is your patient? What do you think he is suffering from? You have made an examination?"

"I haven't the remotest idea," Wilfrid said frankly. "I have never seen a case like it before. Mr. Flower lies there to all appearances dead. He does not breathe. There is not the slightest motion of the heart, and yet, rigor mortis has not set in. I should say it is some brain trouble."

Dr. Shelton stripped off his coat and turned up his shirt sleeves. For a long time he bent over the bed, but at last he stood upright drawing a long breath.

"Most extraordinary," he murmured. "Everything points to severe concussion of the brain, and yet there is not the slightest trace of violence; there is no suggestion of a blow or fall, or anything of that kind. We must wait till the patient comes to himself, as he will before long."

"He is not dead, then?" Wilfrid asked.

"No. It is a case of suspended animation. That the brain is seriously injured the congestion of the eyes proves beyond demonstration. But, surely, you can throw some light on this mystery. How came you to be called in?"

Wilfrid had been dreading the question for some time. He hardly knew how to explain matters to this polished man of the world, whose lines had probably always fallen in conventional places.

"Well, it was like this," he began. "I have lately started a practice in Oldborough and Mr. Flower has a country house close by. I was called in to attend him for a trifling injury, and when I got to the house I discovered that Miss Galloway had been under the impression that some one was trying to get into the house, but perhaps I had better tell you at length what really happened."

Wilfrid proceeded with his statement, purposely, however, saying nothing as to the mysteriously-knotted string, or the strange incantations which he had watched on the part of the Malays. These matters seemed to have nothing to do with the case, nor could they influence the opinion of Dr. Shelton. He told his story straightforwardly, how he had got into this house and what sort of reception had met him. Shelton raised his eyebrows incredulously.

"So you think that this is a case of burglary?" he asked. "Mr. Flower has something in the house which these villains were after. You say you saw them in this room when you entered by the balcony?"

"I did," Wilfrid replied. He was feeling on safer ground now. "I suppose my presence frightened them and, you see, I had other things to think of. It is very singular that these fellows did Mr. Flower no violence."

"No violence whatever," Shelton said emphatically. "They hadn't gone as far as that, though their intentions might have been murderous. It seems to me, Dr. Mercer, that this is a case as much for the police as for the medical man. At any rate, I frankly own that I am as puzzled as yourself. It will be a great favour to me if you remain here while I go to Harley Street, as I should like another opinion besides my own. If you stay in the house it will be sufficient. It will be some time before Mr. Flower regains consciousness."

Wilfrid expressed his willingness to do whatever was necessary and Dr. Shelton bustled away. The servants were moving about the house now. Wilfrid heard the clock strike the hour of eight, then, presently, an appetizing odour of cooking stole over the room. It was nearly an hour later before Beatrice came and asked the latest news. There was no change, for Flower lay as he had done three hours before.

"I have told the servants nothing," Beatrice whispered. "They have merely been informed that my uncle has had a slight seizure and that the house must be kept very quiet. But won't you come downstairs and have breakfast? It is ready in the dining-room. And if you could manage to stay here till Dr. Shelton returns—"

Wilfrid explained that he had already promised to do so. Despite the thrilling adventure of the night before, he was hungry and did ample justice to his meal. At the same time he could not forget his own affairs. It might be a security to feel that Flower lay upstairs beyond the reach of mischief, but Flower was not alone in this business. Beyond doubt the man Cotter had received his instructions. Beyond doubt the law was already in motion which was to deprive Wilfrid of his good name and his means of living. It was hard he should have to stay there doing nothing and keep watch and ward over a man who was intending to ruin him through another; but of this he could say nothing to Beatrice.

She sat at the foot of the table playing with a cup of tea and some toast; recent events had shaken her terribly. For some time she kept silent.

"I must speak to you, Wilfrid," she said presently. "I want to know if you have found out anything. I want to know if you have discovered anything that has been hidden from me. Tell me truthfully, is this the first attack of the kind which has been made upon my uncle? Didn't a very similar thing happen the night you were at Maldon Grange?"

"I am sorry you asked me that," Wilfrid said quietly, "because I cannot look you in the face and tell you a lie. Of course I can't say yet whether I was successful last night, but under Providence I most assuredly saved Samuel Flower's life on the occasion you speak of. Please don't ask me more. Try to be brave and patient, and all will be well."

Beatrice said no more, but it was evident she was putting a great strain upon her curiosity.

Chapter XXIX

A Message.

The morning dragged slowly and Wilfrid began to think that Shelton had forgotten about his patient. It was maddening to wander about the house wasting precious time, when perhaps the blow had already fallen at Oldborough. More than once Wilfrid was tempted to make his way to the City where he could discuss his affairs with Russell and Uzali.

And what had happened to the latter? How was he getting on after his cruel treatment of the previous evening? And what was Russell doing all this time? Wilfrid was debating the matter seriously when about midday a motor car drove up and Dr. Shelton raised his brows interrogatively at Wilfrid, who shook his head.

"No change," the latter murmured. "He is just as you left him, hovering between life and death. I don't wish to be inconvenient but I shall be very glad if you will release me as soon as possible. I have urgent business in the City which is going to rack and ruin without me."

"Give us half-an-hour," Shelton said. "We are going to try an experiment—a desperate one I admit—but there seems else to do in the circumstances. But if you can get back by two o'clock to keep an eye upon things till the nurse I have written for arrives I shall be greatly obliged."

Wilfrid yielded with as good grace as possible. He began to feel reckless and desperate. He paced up and down outside the house smoking one cigarette after another until Shelton appeared again.

"I don't think we need detain you any longer," the latter said. "Our operation has been partially successful and I am leaving Mr. Flower with my colleague at present. There has been serious brain trouble, and I very much doubt if my patient will ever be the same again. If you can manage to return by two o'clock for an hour, I think I shall then be able to dispense with your services."

Wilfrid waited to hear no more. He had already laid his plans. In the first place he would call on Fowler and Co., who had written regarding the bill which threatened destruction to his home and future. He might, perhaps, obtain some information from them; though time was growing short and there remained barely a day and a half in which to satisfy these bloodsuckers and breathe freely once more. A reference to the Post Office Directory gave Wilfrid the information he was in need of, and a hansom conveyed him to London Wall, where the offices of Fowler and Co. were situated. The place was dingy, the office small and dirty. For a moment Wilfrid hesitated whether to go in or not, when he suddenly paused and looked into a shop-window as it fearful of being seen, for on the steps of the office stood Cotter, in close conversation with a small, slight man, whose keen, dark eyes bespoke a foreign origin. It was plain enough to Wilfrid now. Cotter had come down on business connected with the very security which was likely to be Wilfrid's ruin. The two men parted by and by and Wilfrid crossed the road, his mind fully made up what to do.

A shabby-looking clerk in the outer office announced the fact that Fowler was not engaged. Without waiting for any reply, Wilfrid crossed to the inner office and opened the door. Surely enough, seated at a desk, was the little man with whom Cotter had been talking so earnestly a few minutes before.

"My name is Dr. Mercer," Wilfrid said bluntly. "You are Mr. Fowler, I understand. I came to see you in regard to a security which I gave to a firm called Darton and Co. for one hundred and seventy-five pounds. This security will fall due to-morrow, and I am anxious to get it renewed."

The man shrugged his shoulders and took up his pen.

"My dear sir, I am very busy this morning," he said. "If you cannot meet the security, why, there is an end of it. I am sorry, but business is business, and of course you know the consequences if the bill is not taken up tomorrow."

"I am aware of that," Wilfrid said impatiently. "But what I want to know is, where do you come in? What connection have you with Darton and Co.? And why should they turn over my liability to you? These are simple questions."

They were simple, but Mr. Fowler had some difficulty in answering them. He changed colour slightly, and his dingy hands fingered a bell on the table before him.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid," Wilfrid said contemptuously. "I am not going to do you any harm, but I came here for certain information and I mean to have it. Is my credit so good that you could afford to speculate in a bill of mine? But perhaps I had better come to the point. Where is the security?"

Mr. Fowler laughed somewhat unpleasantly. He was more at his ease. He pointed over his shoulder to a safe in the wall.

“The security is all right, sir,” he said. “The point is, do you want to take it up? If you have the money with you the thing could be arranged quite amicably.”

There was a sneer underlying these words which brought the blood into Wilfrid’s face. The man was laughing at him. Here was a chance to test the truth of what Fowler was saying. Wilfrid took a bulky packet of letters from his pocket and laid them on the table before him.

“I didn’t come here to offer you a cheque,” he said, “because it occurred to me you might refuse it. But I suppose you have no objection to bank notes.”

Fowler was taken aback. The grin died away from his cunning features.

“Oh, certainly,” he muttered, “certainly.”

“Then produce the security and let us have done with it.”

Fowler arose reluctantly to his feet and rummaged among a mass of papers in the safe but the security was not forthcoming, which was exactly what Wilfrid had foreseen. With some show of disappointment Fowler returned to his desk muttering that he had left the security at home. Wilfrid gravely restored the bundle of papers to his pocket. He was not displeased at having forced the money-lender to show his hand. His suspicions had become certainties. Cotter had come down on purpose to take the security away. He rose carelessly from his seat.

“Very well,” he said, “it doesn’t in the least matter, but you must understand I can’t call again. You know my address in Oldorough. I shall be there to-morrow morning, and if you send a representative to meet me I shall be prepared to pay you off. I don’t think I need detain you longer.”

With a curt nod Wilfrid left the office and made his way to Uzali’s flat. He was informed that the Malay was in bed, but he had left instructions that if Dr. Mercer called he was to be shown up at once. He found Uzali propped up by the bedclothes and looking not much the worse for his adventure.

“Oh, I shall be right enough to-morrow,” he said cheerfully. “It is very unfortunate that I should have got into trouble last night. I daresay you wonder what it is all about?”

“My dear sir, I am consumed with curiosity,” Wilfrid said. “And when you have told me all your adventures I will tell you mine, which were thrilling enough in all conscience.”

“That is a bargain,” Uzali smiled. “But there is one thing you must tell me first. Is our friend Samuel Flower still alive? Did anything happen to him last night?”

“Oh, he is still alive,” Wilfrid said dubiously. “But how long he is likely to last is another matter. And now, if you will promise not to get unduly excited, I will tell you everything that has happened since I put you in the cab. You will be interested.”

Uzali listened with rapt attention to what Wilfrid had to say. He even expressed his satisfaction at the knowledge that things were no worse with Samuel Flower.

“So far, so good,” he said. “And now, perhaps I had better tell you my story. It is shorter than yours and not so dramatic. In the square I fell foul of these countrymen of mine, never doubting for a moment but that they would recognise me and my authority. Perhaps they took me for some impostor. Perhaps they lost their heads in the darkness. Anyway, they attacked me in a most murderous fashion before I had the slightest chance of explaining; hence the fact that you found me in the square nearly done for. Mind you, if this had happened a week

ago I would not have interfered, but have allowed matters to take their own course. But now things are different. They have changed altogether."

It was a long time before Uzali spoke again. He lay there with his eyes closed as if asleep or dreaming.

Chapter XXX

A Slight Misunderstanding.

Wilfrid walked slowly back to Bloomsbury, his own affairs uppermost in his mind. His morning had not been wasted. He had found out several things likely to be of use to him, but, on the other hand, the time was so short, that it seemed almost impossible to save the situation. There was an outside chance that his friend Vardon might have been able to raise the money, but no information had come from him and in such cases no news is bad news. The security had undoubtedly found its way into Cotter's hands and no time would be lost in making use of the weapon. The mere thought was maddening. Here was a man lying on his death-bed, yet ready to strike at another man who on two occasions had risked his life for him. It would have been better to allow those poisonous little Easterners to have their own way and remove a scoundrel like Flower altogether. Still, there was a chance yet and Wilfrid meant to take advantage of it if he had the opportunity. He was not beaten.

Beatrice's pale white face glancing wearily through the drawing-room window recalled him to himself. There was better news, on the whole, than Wilfrid had expected. Sheldon's operation had been partially successful, and he and his colleague were waiting for Wilfrid's return.

"You haven't very much to do," Shelton explained. "The nurse I have chosen will be here at any moment and she will take your place. You will find certain medicines upstairs which you will know what to do with."

Shelton departed hurriedly after the manner of his kind and Wilfrid made his way to the sick room. Beatrice followed him fearfully with a whispered request to be permitted to see how the injured man was, and Wilfrid had not the heart to refuse.

"It must be only a moment, then," he said. "I have no right to have stayed so long. I ought to have been back in Oldborough hours ago. You must promise to be quiet and not speak a single word if I admit you into the sick room."

Beatrice gave the assurance and they crept into the bedroom silently together. Flower lay with his eyes wide open, gazing about the room in a strange, lack-lustre fashion. Evidently he had not the remotest notion where he was or what was taking place around him. He murmured from time to time a medley of things in which the shrewdness of a man and the innocence of a child were curiously mingled. Wilfrid seemed to hear sounds of someone moving in the dressing-room beyond, and he looked into the room where he saw Cotter in the act of placing some papers in a desk. Flower's confidential clerk looked up guiltily as his glance met Wilfrid's eye.

“What are you doing here?” Wilfrid asked sternly. “Don’t you know that nobody but the doctor and nurse are allowed here? And why are you tampering with those papers?”

“I am not,” Cotter stammered. “I swear I am not. I am only putting away a few documents which my master told me to fetch from the City this morning. I am very sorry, sir, but I won’t come back again. Is he better?”

Wilfrid turned on his heel without reply. No sooner had Cotter left the dressing-room than Wilfrid was back in the bedroom intent on getting rid of Beatrice also. It was useless for the girl to stay, for she could do nothing except stand there with eyes full of tears of pity and sorrow. Wilfrid led her out to the landing.

“You must not come here again,” he said. “I will leave directly the nurse arrives. I have to call upon a friend, and then I must get back to Oldborough without delay.”

“Is there any hope?” Beatrice asked.

“I cannot say,” Wilfrid replied. “It may be days before we are sure of that, and whatever happens remember that you are safe. These people who come and go in this mysterious fashion have no feeling against you. It is only your uncle who is the object of their vengeance.”

“But, surely, the police ought to know,” Beatrice protested.

“I am not sure of that,” Wilfrid replied. “If your uncle were well, and we suggested the police, I am certain that he would oppose the idea strongly.”

A little colour crept into Beatrice’s face.

“You speak so strangely,” she said. “You hint at such dark things. Do you know that all the years I have lived with my uncle I have never found him anything but the best of men? It is only latterly that this cloud has come between us. There was none of it until you came into my life again.”

The words were quietly spoken, yet they stung Wilfrid to the core.

“That is easily remedied,” he said bitterly. “I can take myself out of your life as I brought myself into it. I could school myself to forget you in time. But do not forget that I have saved your uncle’s life twice, though, in so doing, I have rendered a very doubtful service to humanity.”

“What do you mean?” Beatrice asked hotly.

Wilfrid advanced a step or two closer and took the girl’s hands in his. His face was grave and set.

“Then I will tell you,” he said. “Samuel Flower might have been even more to you than you say he has, but that does not prevent him from being a great scoundrel. You may bridle and colour, but I ask you to hear me to the finish. You may say, quite sincerely, you have never heard anything of this before. But if you could go amongst business men who knew nothing of your relationship to Samuel Flower, and ask them what they thought of him and his methods, you would learn some startling things. Do you know that for over two years I was a servant of your uncle’s on board one of his ships? Have you ever heard him mention a boat called the Guelder Rose?”

“I have heard of it,” Beatrice murmured. “There was a mutiny on board and a great loss of life. It was a shameful thing altogether, and if my uncle had cared to bring the mutineers to justice most of them would have suffered long terms of imprisonment, but he refrained from doing so—”

“Because he was afraid,” Wilfrid said sternly. “He dared not face the ordeal of a court of justice. I was the doctor on board that ill-fated boat and could tell you all about it. If I could only put my hand upon one other survivor, poor and friendless as I am, I would fight your uncle to the last gasp. I hesitated to come to Maldon Grange the day I was sent for, because I was afraid I might be recognised and have to pay the penalty of my interference in that mutiny. And I was recognised—I realised that almost as soon as I entered the house.”

“My uncle said nothing to me,” Beatrice protested.

“Oh, no, he would not,” Wilfrid said bitterly. “That is not the way in which he works, but he has lost no time in trying to ruin me. He lost no time in getting into communication with the people from whom I borrowed money to buy my practice. He bought the security I gave, and if the money is not forthcoming to-morrow, I shall be a ruined man without a house over my head. I daresay you wonder why I tell you this, but sooner or later you are bound to know, and if it happens that somebody else—”

What more Wilfrid might have said was cut short by a sudden moan from the bedroom. Without another word Wilfrid turned and Beatrice crept silently down the stairs.

It was only for a moment or two, however, and the patient lapsed into the absent stage again. The minutes were creeping along: the nurse would be here soon and Wilfrid would be glad to turn his back upon that house of mystery. His mind was full of his own troubles; he found his thoughts wandering to the desk in the dressing room where he had seen Cotter arranging those papers. Then it suddenly struck him that the security he was in search of was actually within his grasp. As far as he could see Cotter had not even turned the key in the desk. Overwhelming curiosity drew Wilfrid from his seat and impelled his lingering footsteps towards the dressing-room.

Here was the desk with the key still in it. There was the heap of papers in the the drawer. A long, pale blue slip with a red stamp in the corner caught his eye. There was no occasion for him to ask what it was. He could see his own bold handwriting across it. Here was the precious document that meant so much to him, so little for the man in the next room. He had only to tear it in two and throw the fragments in the fire and he would be free from all anxiety for ever. It was only for a moment, but that moment was long enough, for the dressing-room door stood open and the shadow of Beatrice blocked the light.

“The nurse is here,” she said coldly. Her eyes were fixed upon the paper which Wilfrid held in his hand. “I thought I would bring her this way. And now, Dr. Mercer, don’t you think that we shall be able to dispense with your services?”

Chapter XXXI

A Question of Honour.

The thing was done beyond recall. Wilfrid had only to look into the face of his companion to see that everything seemed plain to her as an open book. He had been rummaging amongst her uncle's papers for the compromising document.

What would he have done with it had Beatrice not appeared? Would he have yielded to temptation or not? For the life of him Wilfrid could not say. He tried to think that he would have put the matter behind him. But he had not done so; he had not even attempted to do so. For a second or two he had even tried to justify himself in a course of action which would have been distinctly dishonourable. If he had gone down on his knees and made a full confession to Beatrice he could have told her no more than she already knew.

He glanced into her face, eager to see if there was any sympathy in her eyes. But Beatrice's face was stern and set. There was a compression of her lips that he had not noticed before. He could not know how deeply wounded and disappointed she was. She could not add anything to the humiliation which he was then suffering.

"You wish me to go?" he stammered.

"Would it not be better?" she said, scornfully. "Is it not a pity you ever came at all?"

"Perhaps it was," Wilfrid said, stung to retort. "But if fortune had never brought us together again Samuel Flower would have been in his grave by now. Had we not met once more I should have been spared an enemy whose sole desire it is to ruin me. Then, at the appointed time, I might have sought you out and, in the language of the fairy stories—"

Wilfrid paused, conscious that he was going a little too far. He saw the vivid colour creep into Beatrice's cheeks, but there was no relaxation of her lips.

"Go on," she said. "You might as well finish."

"And live happily ever afterwards," Wilfrid said defiantly. "You think I have done a wrong thing to-day, and possibly I have. May you be ever spared such a temptation as has been placed in my way during the last half-hour! You cannot understand these things. Brought up as you have been how could you make allowance for people in dire trouble? Oh, never mind the nurse; she can wait a few minutes. Since I have gone so far I must finish. Whether you like it or not, you shall hear all that I have to say. It is only due to me that you should."

Beatrice hesitated. Wilfrid's voice thrilled with passion, his words rang with sincerity. It was almost impossible to believe that a man distinguished for bravery should stoop to common theft. The hesitancy passed and Beatrice turned away.

"What is the good of it?" she cried. "What do I gain by hearing you? And, surely, this is a wrong time and place for a confession—"

"A confession!" Wilfrid echoed scornfully. "I was going to make no confession. But bring in the nurse, so that I may explain what she has to do: after that I will detain you very little longer. Perhaps you are right."

There was no sign of heat or passion on Wilfrid's face as he shook hands with the nurse. She looked white and fragile for so difficult a task, but that was no business of his. Perhaps the nurse guessed what was passing through his mind, for she smiled at him.

“I shall be all right,” she said. “Dr. Shelton is a very good friend of mine. He knows that I have been ill for some time, and I am sure he would not send me a troublesome case. I know exactly what to do, thank you.”

Wilfrid had only to take his departure. He had received his dismissal. He was not likely to see Beatrice again, therefore he could devote all his energies to the great fight before him. Nevertheless, he lingered in the hall on the off-chance of a last word with Beatrice, nor was he disappointed. The dining-room door opened in hesitating fashion and she stood before him. The hard, proud look had left her face now; her lips inclined to quiver.

“I cannot part with you like this,” she murmured. “I have been thinking of what you said just now, and perhaps I am disposed to judge other people harshly.”

“Did you ever know any prosperous man or woman who didn’t?” Wilfrid said with a bitter smile. “Oh, it maddens me to hear people prating their honesty when they have everything to make the path of existence smooth. Does it ever strike these smug Pharisees that they would be born fools to be anything but honest? Why, there are thousands of criminals who die honourable and respected, either because they have never been found out or because they have never been under the necessity of knowing temptation. Take your case. What has your life been—one constant round of pleasure, a succession of years during which you have had everything you wanted, and have been denied nothing? Do you suppose that you are any better than I am? Suppose you had somebody wholly dependent upon you for the mere necessaries of life, would you pry too minutely into things? But I am forgetting myself.”

“Is it as bad as that?” Beatrice whispered.

“I can see no difference,” Wilfrid said wearily. “If it were myself alone it would not matter. My household might be wrecked and everything taken away from me with impunity, because I have health and strength and would smile at the scandals of a place like Oldborough. But for the last four or five years I have promised my mother that I would settle down on shore and be near her in her old age. But, why worry you with all this? Why should I picture her delight and pleasure in the new home she has to look after, which she regards merely as the beginning of my prosperity? And now I must go home—to-night and tell her the bitter truth. I shall have to let her know that I have been deceiving her from the first, and that my so called home is really the property of strangers. A few moments ago I had it in my power to secure that home. I had only to take a certain piece of paper and drop it in the fire and there would have been an end of the matter.”

“That was when I came in,” Beatrice whispered.

She was interested in spite of herself. She began to see there might be something in Wilfrid’s point of view, and it was really dreadful that a rich man like Samuel Flower should stoop to crush another who was powerless to help himself. Indignation was warming Beatrice’s blood. To her it almost seemed that Wilfrid would have been justified in his action. She turned towards him eagerly.

“But, surely, something can be done,” she said. “I blame myself for not having seen your mother. If you will remember I promised to call upon her, but, really, there has been very little opportunity. Perhaps when we get back to Oldborough—”

"You forget that there will be no Oldborough for me after to-day," Wilfrid said quietly. "I am going to see this thing through to the bitter end, and your uncle and his tool, Cotter, can do what they please. Well, what is it?"

Wilfrid turned impatiently as maid-servant came into the dining room. The girl seemed to be distressed.

"Please, sir, it's the nurse," she said. "She doesn't seem at all well. She asked me to see if you had gone. Perhaps you wouldn't mind going upstairs again."

Though unwillingly, Wilfrid went back to the bedroom where Flower was lying. A regular conspiracy of circumstances had combined to keep him in that dreadful house. He found the nurse standing at the foot of the bed gazing at her patient with a white face and tearful eyes. Flower was sitting up now glaring about him and muttering strange things.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come," the nurse said. "I am afraid I shall not be able to manage this case. I am not as strong as I thought I was. I don't know what to make of the patient. He has been violent more than once since you went downstairs. I dare not be left alone."

Wilfrid's ill-nature vanished as he glanced at the pathetic face of the speaker. He forgot his own pressing affairs. He only knew that a fellow-creature in trouble was appealing to him for sympathy and help.

"Very well," he said, "I will do what I can. Go downstairs to the dining room and tell Miss Galloway I sent you. Ask her to give you a glass of wine, and then go and telephone at once to Dr. Shelton, letting him know what has happened. Don't worry. I will see that no harm comes to the patient till someone more suitable takes your place."

The nurse stole thankfully away, and once again Wilfrid was alone with his deadliest enemy.

Chapter XXXII

No Place Like Home.

Samuel Flower had taken a turn for the worse, and, as Wilfrid's practised eye could tell, this was no case for the average woman nurse. Flower was sitting up with his hands round his knees glaring at Wilfrid, though there was no recognition in his eyes.

"Send for Cotter," he muttered. "Why isn't Cotter here? Don't tell me that that rascal has betrayed me like the rest of them! Not that I trust him, not that I trust any of them for that matter. But he ought to have been here an hour ago. Who are you?"

The question was asked with an abruptness that almost startled Wilfrid. For a moment the cloud hanging over Flower's brain had cleared away, and he knew where he was and in whose presence he was lying.

"I am Mercer," Wilfrid said soothingly. "Don't you know me?"

"Oh, I know you," Flower whispered. "I recognise you. Keep those fellows away, will you? Don't let them come here again. I tell you it is terrible. I lie fast asleep

and then dream and dream and dream, and yet my brain is clear and I know everything that is going on around you. But that is nothing to what has to come, Mercer. It is pleasure compared with the awful sensation when they wind that dreadful thing about the head and you lie helpless, watching those knots coming closer and closer till the brain sets fire—"

The words trailed off incoherently and Flower closed his eyes for a moment. The brief interval of sense vanished, and he began again to fume and threaten.

"Keep them away from me!" he cried. "Keep them away from me! What did you say your name was? It wasn't Cotter. Oh, I remember, it was Mercer—Mercer, the dog that I am going to crush when the time comes as if he were an empty eggshell. He saved my life once, but what of that? The fellow is in the way and he must go. But that isn't what I want you for. I want you to send for that doctor. Telephone for him at once. Find him at any cost. I can't stay. I dare not stay here. Whatever happens I must get back to Maldon Grange. Now go and find him."

The last words came in a harsh tone of command, then Flower's sudden access of strength failed him, and he collapsed upon the bed an inert mass, scarcely moving and, hardly breathing. Wilfrid hurried downstairs into the dining-room. The nurse was seated by the fire, sipping at a glass of port-wine, and Beatrice was trying to soothe her.

"It is all right," Beatrice explained. "I have managed to get Dr. Shelton on the telephone, and he may be here at any moment. I suppose he will tell us what to do."

In a minute or two Shelton's car drove up to the door and the doctor alighted. He listened gravely to all that Wilfrid had to say, and found time to address a few words to the distressed nurse.

"You are not to blame," he said. "I did not expect complications like this. I shall have to trespass still farther upon Dr. Mercer's time. It will take me an hour to find a competent male nurse."

Beatrice glanced imploringly at Wilfrid. In as many words she was asking him to stay and see her through her trouble. He shrugged his shoulders more or less carelessly. What did it matter? It was only a question of a few hours till his house of cards fell about his ears. It would only mean postponing his explanation to his mother till the following day.

"I am in your hands," he said. "As Miss Galloway knows, there is nothing I would not do for her. So long as I get back to Oldborough some time to-night I shall be satisfied."

Flower still lay unconscious as Wilfrid and his companion reached the bedroom. Wilfrid gave Shelton a rapid review of what had taken place during the last half-hour.

"Upon my word, I am half disposed to let the patient have his own way," he said. "It is very likely he will do much better at Maldon Grange. Mr. Flower has something distressing in his mind, and I fancy he has been the victim of some outrage that has more or less unhinged his reason. In point of fact, we ought to call in the police. But it may be wiser to get our man back to Maldon Grange first."

"You are disposed to try it?" Wilfrid asked.

"Assuredly," Shelton replied. "It is not very difficult. If we wait till evening we can hire a covered motor and take Mr. Flower to his country house as quietly and

comfortably as if he were going out to dinner. It is repeatedly done, as you know, in cases of infectious disease. And if you don't mind, I should like you to go down to Maldon Grange with him. I cannot manage it myself as I have two operations this afternoon. I know that it is abusing your kindness—"

"Not at all," Wilfrid said. "I will see the thing through. I presume you will come down to Maldon Grange tomorrow?"

Shelton promised and went his way. He had forgotten almost all about the case before he reached his motor and Wilfrid watched him whirling down the street not without envy. What was almost a matter of life or death to him was merely an ordinary incident to the distinguished surgeon.

The afternoon began to drag. Luncheon was a thing of the past and still there was no male nurse. Not that he was needed, for Flower still lay comatose, opening his eyes from time to time to take such medicine as Shelton had prescribed. Wilfrid slipped out presently and despatched a couple of telegrams by means of the telephone. One was to Swan Russell, the other to his friend Vardon at Oldborough. He would know the worst of his position in an hour or two. When the replies came, they were by no means reassuring. Russell was detained and could hold out no hope of seeing Wilfrid till to-morrow, whilst Vardon's reply was more unsatisfactory. He had failed to get the money from his client in Castlebridge and was awaiting Wilfrid's further instructions. With a bitter laugh Wilfrid screwed up the telegrams and threw them into the fire.

The end of another act of the drama, so far as it concerned himself, could not be delayed more than four-and-twenty hours. And yet, close to Wilfrid's hands, lay the document which would make him a free man if he only had the courage to destroy it. But that temptation was past and gone. He would do nothing dishonourable. Wilfrid beheld the desk in which the bill lay without the slightest desire to lay hands upon the paper. In a restless fashion he wandered about the bedroom till dusk began to fall, waiting patiently to be relieved. It was nearly dinner-time before the male nurse put in an appearance and Wilfrid was free to leave the house if he liked. As he came down the stairs he met Beatrice.

"You are not going yet?" she said. "You must dine with me? Besides, I understood you promised Dr. Shelton you would come down to Maldon Grange with us. Everything has been arranged and the car will be here about nine o'clock. It seems strange my uncle should fancy he will be better in a great, lonely house like Maldon Grange. But Dr. Shelton thinks it right to humour him. I would rather stay here."

The girl shuddered as she spoke and her face turned pale.

"You don't want to go home?" Wilfrid asked.

"I am afraid to go," Beatrice confessed. "During the past day or two my nerves have broken down. The mere thought of returning to that mansion sets me trembling, but I must go because duty to my uncle bids me."

Wilfrid made no reply. He was watching how Beatrice made a pretence of eating her dinner. A sudden idea occurred to him.

"Something could be managed," he said. "The nurse will be with your uncle and I will stay at Maldon Grange to-night if you like. We shall be there a little after ten, and as soon as your uncle is made comfortable I can take you into Oldborough and you can stay with my mother. You will be company for her, and it will also be

better for you to be away from Maldon Grange. Now don't make any objection. You must see the advantages of the plan."

Beatrice contested the point no further. She was too unstrung to argue, but she smiled gratefully.

"Very well," she said. "It will be as you say, and I hope you will forget what I said to-day."

Chapter XXXIII

By Whose Hand?

The appointed hour came and with it the huge smooth-running motor which Sheldon had sent to convey the patient to Maldon Grange. In the skilled hands of the nurse everything went off without a hitch, and a few moments Samuel Flower lay in the car as comfortably as in his own bed. There was room for others besides Wilfrid and Beatrice, and Cotter, who had begged a seat, was accommodated. Any seat would do for him, he said in his simple way. All he asked was two or three minutes grace to collect certain papers which Samuel Flower would need when he was able to attend to business again. Wilfrid smiled grimly as he listened. He knew one of these papers. He knew that the little then screwed up in one of the back seats would have no mercy upon him.

It was a silent journey through the night, and the whole party were relieved when Maldon Grange was reached and Samuel Flower was safely laid in bed. During the whole run he had never moved once. He accepted the change of scene without the slightest knowledge that it had taken place.

"I think that is all," Wilfrid said at length. "You won't want me for anything else?"

"Well, no sir," the nurse said. "I have had full instructions from Dr. Sheldon, so that I know what to do."

It was good to be out of the house in the stillness of the night, and Beatrice breathed a sigh of relief as she walked by Wilfrid's side towards Oldborough. It was a fine night, very tranquil and restful to the nerves. The little town was reached at length and Wilfrid turned in at the gate leading up to his own house. He had sent a telegram from London so that his mother was prepared for him.

Everything looked bright and cheerful, Beatrice thought, in such strange contrast to the gilded misery through which she had been passing lately. She could understand now why Wilfrid was proud of his home and what a wrench it would be to give it up. She understood the matter still better when a delightful, grey-haired lady came into the drawing-room and kissed her affectionately on the lips.

"I am pleased to see you," Mrs. Mercer said. "What a terrible time you must have been having to be sure! But you will be safe in my house, and I will do my best to make you comfortable. Now sit down and be at home."

Beatrice's eyes were full of tears, and something seemed to rise up in her throat and choke her. She had many acquaintances, but she could never remember such

a hearty welcome as this. Her eyes wandered round the tiny treasures and marked the good taste with which everything was displayed.

"I am afraid it isn't much of a place to you," Mrs. Mercer said. "But at any rate it will be perfectly quiet. You don't know what a change it is for me after living in lodgings all the years Wilfred was at sea."

Mercer was out of the room so that his mother could speak freely to Beatrice.

"Of course, it was a wrench to him," she went on. "He always loved an adventurous life, and it was for my sake that he settled down, and I am sure he will do well in time. It has been a struggle till now, but things are gradually mending and I am becoming quite fond of my new home. It would be dreadful to go back to those lodgings again. I don't think I could."

Beatrice murmured something sympathetic. She was beginning to fall under the charm of this kindly old lady who seemed to have but one idea and that to sacrifice herself to other people. A tinge of colour mantled Beatrice's cheeks, as she thought how different this was to the life she had been leading. The pathetic side of it, too, appealed to her nature. It seemed a terrible thing that within a few hours this dear old woman should be deprived of everything that was the pride and joy of her declining years. And the thing was going to be done in cold blood. Surely, there must be some way to prevent it.

Wilfrid's return put an end for the moment to Beatrice's troubled thoughts. He was going back to Maldon Grange, at once, he said, but would return in the afternoon and take Beatrice to see her uncle. He kissed his mother affectionately and a moment later he was gone.

Quiet and peaceful at it was, yet Beatrice wished herself miles away. Indirectly her own hand seemed about to dash a cup of happiness from the lips of two worthy people. She was no longer blaming Wilfrid for the terrible temptation which had assailed him earlier in the day: she was thinking she herself would have fallen into it without the slightest hesitation. She was tired, too, a fact which did not escape Mrs. Mercer's attention.

"How thoughtless of me to keep you up!" she said. "Come with me and I'll show you to your room. You must be quite worn out."

It was pleasant and soothing. No shadow of tragedy hung over the house, and Beatrice slept as she had not slept for nights. She came down to breakfast strengthened and refreshed, and yet anxious to be away from the house when the blow fell. She felt like a traitor in the camp. She racked her mind again and again for some way to save the situation. She was glad and yet sorry when the early afternoon came and Wilfrid put in an appearance.

"Your uncle is no better and no worse," he explained. "He passed a fairly good night, but he has been very restless all morning. Now and again he recognises people, but it is only for a moment. If you are quite ready we will go back to Maldon Grange and you can stay there till bedtime. If you like to come back here—"

Wilfrid paused and bit his lip. He had forgotten what the next two hours were likely to produce for him. The time was past for paying the money, and Cotter, acting as Flower's agent, could step in at any moment and claim everything. There was a brief respite, Wilfrid knew, because Cotter had gone into Castlebridge, no

doubt to complete certain legal formalities, and would not be back much before six.

"I am going to leave you at Maldon Grange," Wilfrid explained when once they had set out on their journey. "I must be at home when Cotter returns from Castlebridge. I have had many unpleasant things to face in my life, but nothing that I shrink from so much as telling my poor dear mother the truth. I dread to have to tell her."

"But is it necessary?" Beatrice asked eagerly. "The amount is not a large one. Put your pride in your pocket and let me help you. I have jewels and ornaments which I could easily turn into money. There are lots of things at Maldon Grange I could give to you directly we get there, and you could be in Castlebridge and back on your bicycle before Mr. Cotter returns. Please do not hesitate to accept this offer."

Beatrice paused and laid her hand on her companion's shoulder. She was intensely in earnest. Her eyes were fixed upon his. They were passing through the wood which led to Maldon Grange, so that they were alone and undisturbed. Very gently Wilfrid removed the girl's hand from his shoulder and shook his head.

"I have very few possessions left," he said, "but my self-respect is one of them. Don't you see, Beatrice, how impossible it is that I can allow you to do this thing? I cannot find sufficient words to thank you, but I must refuse. I should never forgive myself if I yielded to a temptation which is far worse than the temptation which was placed in my way yesterday. Besides, it is just possible that I am alarming myself unduly, and I may yet find time and opportunity—"

Wilfrid paused and threw up his head. From the back of the wood someone was shouting in terror; then there rose a wild cry for help, and there was a crackling of broken twigs as someone bolted in the distance. It was all over in a moment and the silence fell again, but Wilfrid seemed dimly to make out the figure of Cotter as he dashed through the thickets towards the open fields.

Without another word he hurried to the spot where there were unmistakable signs of a struggle. A hat lay on the grass and by the side of it a revolver charged in all six chambers. Here, too, were pieces of torn blue paper tossed in a pile upon the dead leaves. Wilfrid picked up the fragments and pieced a few of them together. He turned to Beatrice eagerly.

"Amazing!" he exclaimed. "This is the acceptance itself—the very document that was to prove my undoing."

Chapter XXXIV

A Human Derelict.

About the time that Wilfrid was being hurried off in the motor towards Maldon Grange and wondering bitterly if he had a single friend in the world, Russell was coming to himself with a hazy feeling that all was not well with him. He was lying on a couch in his sitting-room, fully dressed. The gas had not been lighted, though

it was dark; indeed, as far as he could make out by the street cries, it was late in the evening.

His body was aching from head to foot and his head throbbed with feverish pain. Gradually he began to piece one or two events together. Slowly he began to have a faint idea of where he was and what had happened. He managed to stagger to his feet and ring the bell. His landlady came in, curious. She seemed to be relieved and annoyed at the same time.

"What on earth is the matter?" Russell groaned. "And how did I manage to get here? What time of day or night is it?"

"It is not quite half-past nine, sir," the landlady replied. "You came home this morning about seven o'clock. I didn't see you myself, but that is what they tell me. However, I suppose young men will be young men."

There was no mistaking the significance of the last few words, and, despite his racking head, Russell smiled.

"So you think it is like that, do you?" he said. "Let me assure you that you are mistaken. I had an adventure last night which very nearly landed me into serious trouble. But we need not go into that now. If you can get me something to eat I shall be glad, and please let me have a large syphon of soda."

Russell dragged himself into his bedroom where he felt all the better for a bath. Then he swallowed a strong dose of sal-volatile, which had the effect of clearing his head and making him feel almost a man again. He managed to eat a fairly good meal presently and partake of a strong whisky and soda, after which he lit his pipe and sat down to review the events of the previous evening. It was all clear to him now.

"What a fool I was!" he murmured. "And yet I don't see how I could have helped it. I thought I could have managed a couple of opium pipes without getting into such a state. And the worst of it is that the night was wasted. By the way, I wonder if the night really was wasted. Perhaps I shall recollect something that will put me on the right track. And, by Jove, I've forgotten all about Mercer. Has he been here to-day, or has he been busy with his own affairs? It is maddening to cut time to waste like this. The best thing I can do is to see Uzali."

Russell's naturally strong constitution had asserted itself by now. He even felt ready to undertake another adventure. And time was pressing, too, for he had more or less wasted the last few weeks in London, on his way home from Borneo, and his supply of money was getting very low. He was thinking of putting on his hat and coat when the landlady came to the door of the sitting-room with the information that somebody desired to see him.

"Send him up," Russell said casually.

"I suppose it is all right, sir," the landlady said dubiously. "I suppose you are capable of taking care of yourself. The person downstairs is not quite the sort of man one cares about having on the front door-step. Still, sir—"

Russell waved his hand impatiently and the landlady disappeared.

She came back presently, followed by a tall figure in the last stages of dilapidation. The man had seen better days, for his black frock suit had been well cut and his boots were not without a reminiscence of Bond-street. Now he was shiny and seedy to the last degree; a mass of dirty, greasy hair hung over his shoulders, and the top hat which he held gingerly between his thumb and

forefinger had lost most of its colour and shape. It was plain what had brought the man to this pass, for the facts were written in his bleary eyes and shaky fingers. He glanced uneasily at Russell as if somewhat doubtful as to his reception. The latter rose and motioned his visitor to a chair. Then he closed the door carefully.

"I hope I have come at the proper time," the stranger said.

"Oh, that's all right, Goatley," Russell replied. "Let me see, it must be quite two years since we met. You came to me when I was living at the other side of London and asked me to buy certain information from you. As the information was by no means complete, I refused the deal. I am prepared to open it again now if you can tell me anything definite."

The stranger cowered over the fire, warming his long blue hands; his lean frame shivered from time to time as if he and warmth had long been strangers. He lifted his bleared eyes to Russell and his glance fell again.

"I think I can help you," he said; "in fact, I am certain of it. I should have come to you before, only there was one little matter that I couldn't get to the bottom of anyway. And now I think I have got everything straight. But perhaps you have changed your mind. You used to be keen enough on getting even with Samuel Flower—"

"Ah, now you are beginning to talk," Russell exclaimed. "If you can help me there I am prepared to pay you handsomely. You look as if a few pounds would do you good."

"It isn't altogether that," Goatley murmured. "Though, Heaven knows, a sovereign or two will be my salvation. If you ask me how I have spent the past two years I couldn't tell you. I have been as low down as a man can get, though I don't mind owning that I have had my bits of luck occasionally. At present I am down to my last penny and I shall be turned out of my lodgings this evening if I can't find at least a sovereign. You wouldn't call them lodgings. They're not fit for a dog. But they have been a home to me, and I am getting fairly desperate. And while I have been starving, eager even to snatch a broken crust from the gutter, that scoundrel has been flourishing on the fat of the land. My own flesh and blood, too! I should like to know where Samuel Flower would have been to-day had it not been for me. I gave him his start in life. I pushed him up the ladder. And when he thought he was safe, he turned and ruined me as if I had been a deadly enemy. Do you suppose he would ever have made his money in Borneo if it hadn't been for me? I tell you when I wake up in the night and think of it I could find it in my heart to kill him. But I have neither nerve nor pluck left. I daresay if he were to pass me in the street and throw me a shilling I should pick it up with gratitude. But if I haven't the courage to strike for myself, I know those who have. And you are one of them, Mr. Russell. Oh, I can show you the way to pull him down, to make him the scorn of his fellow men. I have waited for this opportunity for years, and by great good luck it has come at last. But you will repay me, Mr. Russell. You will not allow me to starve when you come into your own."

All this came from Goatley in a vehement stream of concentrated passion which set him coughing until it was painful to witness his struggles for breath. With a sudden impulse Russell set food upon the table and invited his guest to eat and drink. Goatley did not need a second invitation. He fell upon the cold meat like a wolf. Then, gradually, the greedy look left his eye, he lay back in his chair and

took the cigarette which Russell offered him. Something like manhood had returned.

"Whatever you do for me shall be well paid for," Russell said. "Now tell me what you have discovered. I know you have a great deal of information. I know that you were well acquainted with North Borneo before Samuel Flower ever went there. But I seem to know as much about Samuel Flower as you can teach me. Now, if you could only tell me where one would come upon the track of Jansen—"

Goatley laughed as he puffed at his cigarette.

"We shall come to that in good time," he said. "But perhaps you had better hear what I have to say as to what happened to me last night. I was making my way back to Drury Lane, where the place which I call my home is situated, and was passing on the far side of Gower-street near the house where Samuel Flower lives in town. It was very late, and just as I reached the spot I saw a man on the doorstep talking to one of Flower's servants. I don't know why I stopped or why I listened. But I did. My hearing is exceptionally good, and I could follow everything that was said; so I lingered and listened, perhaps as much out of curiosity as anything. I gathered that the stranger wanted to see Flower on business, and that my dear friend had not come home yet. There was something peculiar in the accent of the caller which impelled me to wait till he had left the house. I followed him to the top of the street, and even farther. Can you guess who he was?"

"I think so," Russell said cheerfully. "You are going to tell me that you have found Jansen at last. Come, this won't be a bad evening's work for you."

Chapter XXXV

Jansen at Home.

"Is the information worth five pounds," Goatley asked.

"The information is worth five pounds," Russell said emphatically. "Especially as I take it that you can put your hand upon our man at any moment. Now what happened afterwards?"

"Well, I walked the streets till late in the morning, never losing sight of the Dutchman until he returned to the neighbourhood of Gower-street. The second time he called at Flower's house he was more successful, for he was inside the place for an hour before he came out again, on the best of terms with himself, and went off towards Gray's Inn Road. I tracked him to a house there, where I presume he lives, for he let himself in with a latch-key, and presently I saw a light in one of the windows over the shop. The place is a small bird-fancier's, and from what I could see I should say that Jansen has a couple of rooms and does for himself. I have the name and address. If you think it is likely to be of any use to you—"

"So far so good," Russell exclaimed. "But do you think that Jansen is there now?"

"He was there half an hour ago, because I came straight from Gray's Inn Road," Goatley explained.

Russell rose abruptly and took some money out of his pocket which he handed over to Goatley.

"There are the five pounds to go on with," he said. "And it is for you to say whether they shall multiplied a hundredfold. It is entirely in your hands, and if you can keep off the drink you ought to do very well over this."

"Never fear about that," Goatley laughed. "I would do much for money, but I would do a great deal more for revenge. But for that scoundrely cousin of mine, I should have been in a good position to-day. Look at me now and contrast me with what I was when you first knew me. If I stopped the first gentleman I met in the street and told him that I was an old University man he would laugh me to scorn. And yet you know I should be speaking the truth. But I am wasting your time. What do you want me to do? I don't suppose you made me a present of that five pounds."

"I didn't," Russell said curtly. "I want you to go back and keep an eye upon Jansen, and when he leaves his rooms, as he will probably do soon, you must follow him and ascertain where he goes. Then you can come and see me at the Wanderers' Club in Piccadilly where I shall be till midnight. After that I can dispense with your services for the present, but you had better keep in touch with me. But you will do that for your own sake as well as mine. I think that is all."

Goatley departed, feeling all the better for his meal, having also informed Russell of Flower's departure for Maldon Grange. Russell thought he could be trusted. Now he had to look up Uzali.

The latter was dressed. He had recently dined, for the things were still on the table and the occupant of the room was seated before the fire reading the evening paper. There was a shrewd smile on his face as he welcomed Russell.

"You mustn't take any notice of me," he said. "I have had an accident which accounts for the marks on my face, but I am feeling myself again. Have you anything fresh to tell me? I am all curiosity."

"Don't you think you had better be candid with me?" Russell asked. "If we are going to work together in this matter you should explain how you received those marks on your face."

"Quite right," Uzali agreed. "Any way, if I don't tell you, Wilfrid Mercer will. I am like a colonel commanding a regiment whose men have been fired on by his own troops. But sit down and take a cigarette, and I will tell you all about it."

Russell listened to the story without comment, though the situation was grave enough.

"It doesn't seem to trouble you much," he said by and by. "But doesn't it strike you as ominous that your fellow-countrymen should attack you in this way?"

"Well you see, it might have been an accident," Uzali explained. "I haven't met those men face to face yet, at least not in such a way that recognition might be mutual. And they may be priests. If they are, I should have no more command over them than you would. Honestly, the situation is somewhat alarming. I suppose all we can do is to catch one of my country men red-handed in his next attack on Mr. Flower."

"Well, that won't be in London," Russell answered "I have just had a man named Goatley with me. I don't suppose you have ever heard of him, but it was he, in the first place, who induced Samuel Flower to undertake a voyage to Borneo. He

knows as much about the whole thing as we do, and he tells me that Samuel Flower has gone back to Maldon Grange within the last two hours. There is no doubt that Flower has been made the subject of a second attack, for he was conveyed to Maldon Grange in a motor-ambulance, which points to another step in tragedy. I thought you would like to know this because it is important."

Uzali rose excitedly to his feet.

"It is important," he cried. "Then those people were more or less successful in their attempt last night. We must get down to Maldon Grange without delay lest a worse thing happen. I suppose it is too late to think about going there to-night?"

Russell said the thing was impossible before morning.

"I couldn't manage it," he went on. "Besides, there are matters which need an explanation. We have not got to the bottom of things yet, and I want you to see Goatley."

Uzali announced himself as ready to do whatever Russell required of him. It was getting on towards twelve o'clock when they left the flat, and made their way along Piccadilly to the Wanderers' Club. An inquiry of the porter elicted the fact that nobody had been asking for Mr. Russell, so that they were fain to wait in the smoking-room. About half an hour later a message came to Russell that some one wanted to see him outside on pressing business, whereupon he rose and signed Uzali to follow him. Goatley stood waiting patiently upon the pavement, though his manner was eager and excited. One glance at his face showed Russell that he had not forgotten his promise as to alcohol.

"Have you any news for us?"

"'Hextra sphesul,'" Goatley replied. "I had to wait outside his rooms so long that my patience was nearly exhausted. He has gone to a music-hall over the river. I forget the name, but I can take you."

A cab was called and the music-hall was soon reached, a shabby concern leading out of one of the streets off Waterloo Road. Late as it was the place was fairly well filled with a rabble of men and women enjoying themselves after the fashion of their kind, though most people would have found the entertainment dreary to the last degree. A moment or two later, as the smoke cleared, the form of Jansen was to be seen at one of the small tables, where he was talking earnestly to a companion whose face was partially hidden behind a big ulster overcoat the hood of which he had drawn over his head. Russell, however, recognised the features of the man he was in search of.

"I have made no mistake, sir?" Goatley asked.

"You have made no mistake," Russell said in tones of satisfaction. "I should know that rascal anywhere. You have done an exceedingly good night's work, and can go back to your rooms with the feeling that you have earned your money. See me in the morning and I will tell you what to do next. And if you could effect a change for the better in your wardrobe—"

Goatley nodded and went his way, so that Russell was free to take stock of the man whom he had been looking for so long. He was not more interested than Uzali, who kept his eyes fixed upon the two intently; indeed, Russell had to speak to him more than once before he could get a reply from his companion.

“Yes, yes,” Uzali whispered. “But it is nearly one and all these people will be going soon. Let us get outside and wait. I have a particular reason for wishing to see who it is that Jansen has in his company.”

The request was so significant that Russell rose without further protest. They stood together in the shade waiting till the audience poured out. Jansen and a little man in an ulster were almost the last to appear. Russell saw Uzali’s eyes glisten.

“Let us follow them,” the latter whispered. “It is as I thought. The man in the coat is one of my countrymen.”

Chapter XXXVI

Leading the Way.

To all outward appearances, the little bird-fancier’s shop in Gray’s Inn Road was innocent enough, and no doubt the police would have given the tenant of the shop a good character if they had been asked about his antecedents. The proprietor was a born naturalist and was too much devoted to his studies to make his business a success. He was a dried-up little man who lived behind the shop where he did entirely for himself, for he had a morbid horror of everything in the shape of woman. He cared little or nothing for the litter and confusion which marked his sitting room, and as long as he could pay his rent was satisfied to pass a monotonous existence.

It was, therefore, a stroke of luck for Mr. Giles when a somewhat obese foreigner walked into his shop one day and asked if he had a couple of rooms to spare. Giles had the rooms to spare, but there was no furniture in them, and he could not depart from his rule that no woman should ever set foot on the premises. Instead of regarding these statements as drawbacks, the would-be lodger affected to receive them with every demonstration of approval.

“Ah, my friend,” he said, “this is just what I want. I am an old traveller. I have seen a great deal of the world and have always been accustomed to do for myself. If I pay ten shillings a week for these rooms and bring my own furniture, will that satisfy you, eh? I will not interfere with you and you will not interfere with me. I will cook my own food and do my own cleaning and everything. What I want is quiet, for I am writing a book on my travels, and must not be interrupted.”

There was only one reply to such an offer, and that was to close with it with alacrity. Ten shillings a week would make all the difference between affluence and poverty to the naturalist. It would pay his rent and enable him to buy such books as his soul coveted. Within a week Jansen was established in his new quarters. It was no empty boast that his landlord and he would see little of one another, for weeks passed at a time without their exchanging a word.

Meanwhile, Jansen was conquering a certain shyness with which he had been afflicted during the earlier part of his tenancy. At first he hardly left the house except at night, but now he walked in and out, whistling blithely to himself as if he had no care or trouble in the world.

So far as his sitting-room was concerned, there was no reason to disregard his statement that he was writing a book. One or two tables were littered with papers, but maps and strange-looking plans which would have only been properly understood by an engineer were most in evidence.

One night Jansen had cooked his frugal supper over a spirit-lamp, and then put his cooking utensils on one side and lighted a big Dutch pipe. From time to time he glanced at the noisy little clock on the mantel-piece as if anxious he should not forget some important appointment. He drew from his pocket a bundle of letters which he spread out on his ample knee. The contents of the letters appeared to give him satisfaction, for he chuckled again and again as he read them.

"Strange what mistakes clever men make sometimes," he muttered. "There is Flower, who thinks he has deceived everybody. Well, he has not hoodwinked me. Ah, it is true that, as the philosopher says, everything comes to him who knows how to wait, and my three years have not been wasted. Within a few weeks there will no longer be neither Samuel Flower nor Cotter to stand in the way. And all I shall have to do is to go down to Maldon Grange and help myself, and spend the rest of my life in ease and pleasure."

Jansen glanced at the clock again, which now indicated the half-hour after nine. He rose from his seat and walked on tip-toe towards the door. Despite his great weight he made no more noise than a cat. He could hear his landlord bustling about in the back of the shop as he crept down the stairs and opened the front door. He stood there just a moment with the light of the gas behind him, looking up and down the street as if searching for someone. Then, presently, out of the shadows emerged a slight figure wearing a long overcoat and tall silk hat. As the figure passed Jansen the latter held out a detaining hand.

"All right, my friend," he said. "I am waiting for you. Come this way."

The figure made no demur; no remark whatever crossed his lips. He followed Jansen quietly upstairs into the sitting-room, the door of which was then carefully closed. No word was spoken till Jansen produced the materials for the filling and smoking of an opium pipe which he handed to his companion. The latter had discarded his hat and overcoat. He looked out of place in his European costume as he squatted on the floor with the pipe between his lips.

"You know why you are here?" Jansen asked.

"I know very well," the Oriental said stolidly. "I come because you are willing to help me. You will tell me how, and when it is all over you are going to show me that which I can take back to my country whence your countryman stole it. That is why I am here to-night."

"Quite right," Jansen said cheerfully. "But you are moving too fast. We don't do things so rapidly in this country. Do you know that your man has gone again? Do you know that he left London to-night?"

The Eastern looked up and his beady eyes gleamed like stars. Cold-blooded man of the world as he was, Jansen shuddered as he noticed the glance.

"What I am telling you is the truth," he went on. "He has gone. They have spirited him away, and no doubt they fancy he is out of harm's reach."

"He is not," the Malay said unconcernedly. "Were he at the end of the world he would not be safe from us. Have we not waited and watched and travelled all these

years, and did not the star of luck shine upon us at last? You know whether it is true that that man is safe."

"Oh, we know," Jansen said cheerfully. "But the point is this, my friend; you are in a civilised country where the police have peculiar ideas. If they can lay hands upon you they won't care a rap about your religious scruples. You will find yourself within the walls of an English gaol and the two of you will be hanged to a certainty. What about your revenge then? Your prey will escape you secure in the knowledge that he has no longer anybody to fear. He will be able to enjoy his ill-gotten gains with a light heart. You are taking this thing too easily. Now suppose I can show you a way—"

Once more the Oriental's eyes glistened.

"You are bound to show us a way," he said. "You are pledged to it. Are you not one of us? Have you not taken the sacred vows? And if you should dare to play us false—"

"Come, come, don't talk like that," Jansen said in an injured tone. "Do be reasonable. Didn't I ask you here to-night on purpose to show you a way? But it will be useless unless I can see both of you together. If you are not going to trust me, you had better go your own way, and there will be an end of it."

Jansen shrugged his shoulders as if he washed his hands of the whole transaction. Out of the corners of his narrow eyes the man squatting on the floor watched him intently. By and by he laid down his pipe with a sigh and produced from his pocket a flimsy bit of paper on which he proceeded to scribble something with a charcoal pencil. Even then he hesitated before he handed it over to Jansen. The latter assumed an attitude of indifference which he was very far from feeling.

"There," the Malay said, "that is where you will find him at twelve of the clock to-night. I have trusted everything into your hands, and if you fail us—but you will not fail us. You must see him and bring him here so that we may talk this matter over."

Jansen thrust the paper carelessly into his pocket as if it were of no importance. He began to talk of other matters likely to interest the Oriental. He spoke of the latter's country and people whilst the little man nodded drowsily over the opium pipes which his host was preparing for him. Finally his head fell back upon the carpet and he lay in the deep sleep which the drug produces.

"Good," Jansen muttered. "It is better luck than I anticipated. I did not expect to get two birds with one stone. And now to sweep the other into the net."

Chapter XXXVII

A Respite.

Wilfrid stood gazing at the handful of scattered fragments intently, fearful lest he might have made a mistake. The first feeling in his mind was one of passionate triumph. He had forgotten that he still owed this money to Samuel Flower. He had forgotten everything else in the knowledge that, for the time being at any rate, he was free. Doubtless Flower would ultimately be able to prove the debt, but days or

weeks must elapse before that came about, and meanwhile, Wilfrid would be justified in asking for proofs of any assertion Cotter might make. This was what Vardon would advise, anything to gain time, and in the eyes of a lawyer the advice would only be business-like. Before Flower could prove that the destroyed document had existed, Wilfrid would be able to place his affairs in order.

All the same, he was not without his doubts. Was it not his duty to restore these fragments of paper to their owner? There was no excuse for not doing so, seeing that Wilfrid knew what they represented. And, besides, he had had the money. It was not as if, having signed the document, he had afterwards been defrauded of his due.

"What does it mean?" Beatrice asked.

"I can explain in a very few words," Wilfrid said. "I borrowed a sum of money to enable me to set up housekeeping here on the understanding that I should pay it back within a certain period. The legal time was three months, but I was distinctly promised that if I could not repay the money then these people would wait a little longer. Mind you, I had nothing but their word for it, and I knew that, if they changed their minds, I must find the money at the end of three months or lose everything. I don't doubt that I could have had this respite if your uncle had not interfered. But as soon as he found out who I was he set to work to ruin me, or rather, he set Cotter to work, which is much the same thing. I dare say Flower guessed how I found the means to furnish a house in Oldborough and the rest was easy. At all events by buying that acceptance of mine he became my creditor himself, and in the ordinary course I should have found myself without a home tonight. We may take it for granted that Cotter was going to Castlebridge to-night to put the law in operation when something interrupted him."

"But it must have been some friend of yours," Beatrice exclaimed. "It must have been somebody who knew what Cotter was going to do. Of course, I don't understand much about these things, but you would seem to be free for the moment. Do you think anything will be gained in the long run by violence of this kind?"

"I am indebted to my friend for this," Wilfrid said emphatically. "Besides, there are letters and documents lying on the grass which refer to other matters besides mine. It was only by the merest accident that I recognised this scrap of my own handwriting. Whoever waylaid Cotter was looking for something else of which we know nothing. Don't you see that things must take their course, Beatrice, and that I must wait and see what is going to happen? There is something almost Providential in this business. However, I will do the right thing. I will gather up these fragments and give them back to Cotter if you think I should."

"Oh, I don't know what to say," Beatrice replied. "It is so hard for me to put myself in your place. Don't you think you had better consult some solicitor?"

Wilfrid pondered the matter. Perhaps Beatrice was right.

"I think I'll take your advice," he said. "I'll walk with you as far as Maldon Grange and then come back for you after I have seen Vardon. In the circumstances, there is nothing else to be done. All I want you to do is to believe that I am acting for the best."

"I am certain of it," Beatrice said warmly. "No, there is no reason why you should come with me any farther. I suppose you will return before dark. You will

not be afraid of trouble at home for the next few days. Oh, what a tangled coil it all is!"

Wilfrid strode to Oldborough in search of Vardon, whom he was lucky enough to find still in his office. The latter shook hands and motioned Wilfrid to a seat.

"I have been expecting to see you all day," Vardon said. "I am sorry I was not successful in this business of yours, but, as I told you before, my client is cautious and refused to take the risk. Is there anything else I can do short of lending you the money?"

"Well, you can answer me a question or two," Wilfrid replied. "As I understand it, Flower had no legal claim upon me till after twelve o'clock to day. Now, can you tell me what he is in a position to do at the present moment?"

Vardon shook his head gravely.

"Pretty well anything he likes," he said. "You see, you had failed in payment, so you are entirely in his hands. All he would have to do would be to send Cotter into Castlebridge to make a declaration that you were a defaulter, and the sheriff would then take possession. You are, however, probably safe till Saturday morning."

"But wait a bit," Wilfrid said eagerly. "We can put Flower out of the question for the moment, seeing that he is too ill to attend to business himself. Before Cotter made the declaration you speak of wouldn't he have to produce the original bill?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Because the original bill is in my hands," Wilfrid said grimly. "It is a most extraordinary story, and I hardly expect you to believe it, though fortunately I have a witness who will be ready to prove what I say. Look at this."

Wilfrid took the torn scraps of blue paper from his pocket and began to arrange them on Vardon's desk. The latter watched the proceedings as one follows some new and intricate puzzle. Naturally enough, the thing was roughly arranged, but by and by it took shape, and Vardon could read without trouble.

"What on earth does this mean?" he demanded. "I suppose this is the original bill you gave to Darton?"

"Make your mind easy on that score," Wilfrid said. "This is the original bill and no other. And as to the rest, I found it just as you see it now in the wood this side of Maldon Grange. I also found a revolver and a cap to say nothing of other documents in the same tattered condition, which I left there, as they were no business of mine. It was only by a lucky chance that I recognised my own handwriting, and there and then I explained to my companion Miss Galloway, exactly what had taken place. Now, let us have a clear understanding, Vardon. If I throw these scraps into the fire, I shall be able to snap my fingers at Samuel Flower and all his works?"

"Not the slightest doubt about that," Vardon said emphatically. "All the same, mind you, it isn't exactly the right thing to do. Still, it will give you time, and you must be the best judge how far that will help you. You see, if the thing got into court and it came out that you suppressed this document, a lot of awkward questions might be asked. But there is a way in which you can gain time and put yourself right in the eyes of outsiders."

"I should like to know what it is," Wilfrid murmured.

“My dear fellow, the thing is simple. You are justified in ignoring everybody in the transaction except Flower himself. Fortunately for you, he is in no position to deal with business matters, and, were I in your place, I should simply seal those scraps up in an envelope and make Flower a present of them when he is fit to attend to business. By that time you will probably have met your obligation, and you can use your own discretion as to whether you tell Flower your opinion of him or not. One thing is certain. So long as the torn bill remains in your keeping you need not have the slightest anxiety about your home. Flower is powerless to act, and his subordinates are in a still more helpless condition.”

“You won’t take these scraps?” Wilfrid asked.

“Not I, indeed,” Vardon protested. “As a matter of fact, I am sorry you told me anything about it. There are certain matters no client ought ever to tell his solicitor, and this is one of them. Go home and lock these pieces up securely, and do nothing till Flower is ready for business. That is the best advice I can give you.”

Wilfrid could only do as Vardon suggested and wait the turn of events. The trouble seemed to lift from Wilfrid’s shoulders as he walked along.

Chapter XXXVIII

A Sinking Ship.

Wilfrid was free for the present. The words kept rising to his mind as he made his way back to Maldon Grange. He could turn his attention now to the mystery which surrounded that strange household. He wondered what had become of Uzali and Russell and why he had not heard from either of them. He did not suppose that they had been idle in London. He would not have been surprised had either turned up. His chief concern was with Beatrice. It was good to know that she was likely to have a cheerful home over her head for a few days longer. It was like an intervention of Providence that he had happened upon those scraps of paper in the wood. And what was going to be the next act in the drama? Events had been proceeding fast lately. The situation was full of darkness and terror, but the real tragedy was as vague and intangible as ever. Two attempts had been made on the life of Samuel Flower without the slightest clue to the miscreants, and in his heart of hearts Wilfrid did not believe that further attack would be abandoned.

Was it wise, he wondered, for Flower to return to Maldon Grange? Surely, the ship-owner would have been safer in London than in that vast and solitary mansion. Those mysterious men were likely to come back at any moment, and perhaps the third time would recoup them for all their trouble.

Wilfrid was still turning these things over in his mind as he crossed the fields towards the Grange. The spot was lonely, for few people went that way, and Wilfrid gave a side glance of curiosity as he passed a stranger who was carrying a small Gladstone bag in his hand. The stranger was short and enormously stout, and his eyes twinkled behind large silver rimmed spectacles. He was evidently a foreigner, an impression which was confirmed when the stranger took off his hat with a flourish.

“You will pardon me,” he said, “but I am afraid that I have lost my way. Can you direct me to Maldon Grange?”

“I am going that way,” Wilfrid explained. “As a matter of fact, that is my destination. If you have any business there—”

“Not at all,” the stranger hastened to say. “Maldon Grange is only the landmark which they gave me in the village. I am going to a farmhouse a little way beyond to look at a picture for a client of mine. That is my occupation—an expert in oil-paintings. Perhaps you know the name of the farm. It is called ‘Giletto’—”

“There is such a place,” Wilfrid said. “I know where you want to go. From the field in front of Maldon Grange one can see the house. You had better come with me.”

But the self-possessed stranger evinced all at once a desire for his own society! He had been loquacious at first, but now he touched the brim of his hat and hung behind as if he held himself unworthy of his temporary companion. There was something about his looks which by no means prejudiced Wilfrid in his favour, and he was full enough of suspicions now. The events of the past two or three days had taught him to regard even the passing shadow as possibly sinister.

“Oh, but you must not lose your way again,” he said. “Come with me and I will see that you take the right path. I suppose you are a stranger?”

“I have never been here before,” the fat man said with unnecessary energy. “This part of the country is unknown to me. So that is Maldon Grange? I recognize the dormer window which—”

The stranger paused and muttered something in confusion. Then he immediately proceeded to descant on the beauty of the landscape. There was nothing about the man to suggest criminal intent, but Wilfrid disliked him more and more. Beyond all doubt he was no stranger in this quarter. As Wilfrid turned down one field-path to another, the man turned with him without hesitation and by the time they had emerged into the fields in front of Maldon Grange, Mercer was satisfied that the stranger knew his way about better than he did himself.

“I am going to stop here,” he said. “If you will follow that laurel track you will come to a gate leading to the road, and a few hundred yards farther down is the farm you speak of.”

The stranger was profuse in his thanks. Once more he raised his hat with a flourish and went rapidly down the laurel path. After a moment’s hesitation Wilfrid turned on his heels and followed. He knew the path twisted and wound along the edge of the plantation. He had only to make a detour and then, by looking through the bushes, he could see what the stranger was after. Cautiously making his way along, by and by he peeped through the bushes and saw the stranger nearly opposite him with a broad smile on his face and a look of amusement in his eyes. Face to face with the intruder was Cotter. The latter’s features had acquired a dull green hue and his jaw dropped. He was a picture of abject terror.

“Ah, so you had not expected me,” the stranger said “You thought you were done with me. That was a mistake. When Dr. Jansen makes up his mind to a thing he is not easily discouraged. I have been waiting years for the right time, and it has come at last. But you need not be afraid. Come, what have you to fear? Believe me, yonder ship is sinking. Oh, it is a magnificent vessel, and the owner is

a fortunate man, but she will founder all the same. It may go down this very night. Come, friend Cotter, am I not speaking the truth?"

The last few words came with a muttered ferocity which contrasted grimly with Jansen's previously jocular humour. Cotter made no reply. He stood rubbing his hands together as if the palms were wet and he could find no way to dry them.

"It may be now," Jansen went on. "It may have happened for all you know to the contrary since you left the house. A clever man like you makes few blunders. The only mistake you ever made was to think you could escape the vengeance and had seen the last of me. And what have I come for, friend Cotter? I have come to see the end, and you know it as well as I do."

"What are you talking about?" Cotter stammered.

"Oh, you know—perfectly well," Jansen sneered. "Take my advice. Leave the sinking ship and throw in your lot with me. But make no error; keep nothing from me, for I know everything. Strange that with your knowledge of the world you should cling to Samuel Flower when his life is not worth an hour's purchase. Think it over, my good Cotter. I am not coming to Maldon Grange, but I will not be far away. I find the country good for my health, and have rooms at that farmhouse down the road. It may be that I shall do nothing for a fortnight. It may be that I shall strike at once. It is for you to say whether you will be on the winning side or not. But I waste my time with you. Why should I worry over a creature like you? You are not worth it."

Jansen turned away with a contemptuous gesture and picked up his portmanteau. Without another word he trudged sturdily along the path until he was lost to sight. Cotter watched him till the stout figure disappeared. Then he took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face.

"Good Lord!" he muttered. "Fancy seeing him again! And I thought—goodness knows what I thought. This is no place for me. I'll get away while I can."

Wilfrid stole back to the path and walked towards the house. He had plenty of food for thought, and the more he gave his mind to the strange affair the more bewildered he became. One thing was clear. He could not see this plot through to a finish single handed. He must get into touch with Uzali and Russell. He must induce them to come down and investigate matters on the spot. For the present, however, he would keep his discovery to himself. He would not alarm Beatrice.

The house was perfectly peaceful. There was silence in the sick-room. The nurse was of opinion that his patient was progressing favourably. Dr. Shelton had called in Wilfrid's absence, and had left not displeased with the case. Wilfrid could but wait and hope for the best. It was a consolation to know that Beatrice was there and that no one could come between them and their friendship. Beatrice listened gravely to the result of Wilfrid's interview with Vardon.

"Do you think you have acted for the best?" she said. "I am sorry I misjudged you, Wilfrid. I might have known you would do the right thing in any case."

Chapter XXXIX

The Vaults Beneath.

Wilfrid had walked into Oldborough with Beatrice and returned to Maldon Grange. The night promised to be dull and long; but there was always the feeling of restlessness and uncertainty as to what might happen before morning. Wilfrid sat in the dining-room smoking cigarettes and trying to interest himself in a book until the hour for bed came. About eleven o'clock the nurse came into the dining-room with an expression of annoyance on his face.

"Is anything wrong, Mason?" Wilfrid asked.

"Well, yes, sir," Mason said in an aggrieved tone. "I ordered certain things from Castlebridge and the people have forgotten to send them. Mr. Cotter said he was going to town about seven o'clock this evening and would bring the things back with him. Now he wires that he is summoned to London on important business, and that if I want the goods I shall have to send for them. It is most annoying. There is a certain food Dr. Shelton said the patient must have. I don't know what to do."

"There is no one we can send," Wilfrid said. "You must bike into Castlebridge, late as it is. I will look after your patient."

"I know you can do that," Mason replied. "And, really, there doesn't seem to be any other way."

Wilfrid hesitated and then made some excuse to leave the room. Recalling the conversation he had overheard between Cotter and the man who called himself Jansen, a sudden idea crossed his mind. He went straight to Cotter's room and opened the door without ceremony. It was very much as he had expected. The wardrobe was open and most of the drawers had been pulled out and lay upon the floor. Not so much as a pocket-handkerchief remained in any of them. There was no sign of a portmanteau or dressing basket, either. Wilfrid smiled cynically as he looked round the dismantled room. The first of the rats had left the sinking ship. Beyond question, Cotter had stolen away, and Maldon Grange would see him no more. The telegram he had sent from Castlebridge was probably the last communication that Maldon Grange would ever receive again from Samuel Flower's confidant and factotum.

No doubt he had feathered his nest. Possibly, he had laid his hands upon everything available. He had fled from the terror to come before it was too late. He had been wise in his choice of time.

"I think you had better go!" Wilfrid said when he had returned to the drawing-room. "Everybody has gone to bed and your patient will be safe in my hands. You ought not to be more than an hour away. The road is a good one and you can't go wrong."

A few moments later and Mason was speeding off to Castlebridge on his bicycle. Wilfrid laid his book aside and pitched his cigarette into the grate. He must sit in the sick-room and watch till Mason returned. Flower lay quiet and still as death. He hardly seemed to breathe. There was a good fire in the room and the atmosphere inclined Wilfrid to drowsiness, and presently he shut his eyes.

He was aroused a little later by the sounds of muttering from the bed. Flower's eyes were closed and seemed to be dreaming about something in which the name of Cotter was mixed up.

“Why doesn’t he come back?” he was saying. “What a time he is! He promised me to see the matter through this afternoon. I was a fool to trust him. I am a fool to trust anybody but myself, and some day he will desert me and I shall have to bear it all myself. But he doesn’t know everything; nobody knows the secret that lies hidden in Maldon Grange.”

The speaker broke off into a feeble chuckle. There was something sinister in this senile mirth, something that caused Wilfrid to turn away in disgust. The voice ceased a moment later and all was still.

Surely Mason was a long time. More than an hour had passed and there was no sign of the nurse’s return. Wilfrid closed his eyes just for a moment, or so it seemed to him, and when he looked again he saw the clock was pointing to half-past two.

He jumped to his feet with a start. For nearly two hours he had utterly forgotten his duty to the patient! He turned to the bed to see if Flower required anything, then a startled cry came froth his lips. The bed was empty!

Wilfrid gazed at the sheets and pillows with a feeling of stupefaction. At first he thought some one must have stolen into the bedroom and kidnapped his patient. But the idea was abandoned as absurd. Wilfrid knew himself to be a light sleeper, and it would have been impossible for two men or more to enter the bedroom and carry off a heavy man like Flower. Besides, he would have offered some sort of resistance. He must face the matter calmly and find out without delay what had become of the patient. Most of his clothes no longer hung over the chair by the bedside where they had been thrown; and even the slippers were gone.

Wilfrid dashed from the room and made a tour throughout the house. He had taken the precaution before the nurse left to see that every door and window was rigidly fastened, but though he ranged from the top to the bottom of the mansion there was not a bolt out of place or a single catch neglected.

Obviously, Flower must be somewhere on the premises. Quickly and quietly Wilfrid went from room to room starting with the top floor and working down to the basement. He came at length to the cellars and there he hesitated. It seemed almost a waste of time to scour those dingy chambers, but Flower was nowhere to be found upstairs, and if the man were roaming about in a state of delirium there was no telling where he might wander. From the kitchen Wilfrid secured a candle and set out on his errand. It was cold and damp down here, for the cellars were all beneath the house. White fungus grew on the walls and clammy moisture oozed from the ceilings. There were certain cell-like structures closely barred and locked, and these, Wilfrid concluded, contained wine. He emerged presently into a wider, drier space, at the end of which were three small, insignificant-looking doors, approached by a short flight of steps. Wilfrid paused and held the candle above his head, for he could see a figure crouching on the top of one of the flights of stairs. He fancied he could hear the click of a key in the door.

Somebody was there, beyond all doubt. Wilfrid advanced cautiously until he ascertained that somebody was really there. Whoever it was took no heed of the approaching light. Wilfrid called out to Flower by name. He had found the missing man.

“Come away,” he said. “What madness is this! You will catch your death of cold. What are you doing here?”

Flower turned a blank face on the questioner. He was only dressed in his trousers and shirt. His face was begrimed with dirt and cobwebs, and his white linen had assumed a dingy hue.

"Go away," he said sullenly. "What are you doing here? It is no business of yours. Now that Cotter is gone none shall share the secret. But I forgot—not even Cotter knows of this. I had sense enough to keep this to myself. Come and open the door for me. It will be worth your while."

Flower's manner had changed all at once to a fawning civility. His truculent manner had vanished. He was like one in deadly fear who welcomes a friend.

"I can't get the key in the lock," he whined. "Perhaps you can do it. The door hasn't been opened for eleven years and the key has got rusty. You try it."

"We must oil it first," Wilfrid said. "Come upstairs and get some oil. You can't expect to use a key after all that time. Then we will return and you shall show me your treasures."

Flower obeyed instantly. His limbs staggered under him. It was as much as Wilfrid could do to get him upstairs and into the bedroom again. For a moment Flower clung tenaciously to his keys, but they dropped unheeded on the floor and his eyes closed again, as if his exertions had overpowered him. When he was between the sheets, the strange look of coma came over him again. How quiet the house seemed! Then, as he was feeling the tense stillness of it all, his ear caught the sound of a foot-step on the gravel, and a moment later there was a tinkle of pebbles on the window.

Chapter XL

Towards the Light.

Russell stood by the side of Uzali waiting for developments. They were still in the shade of the portico outside the music-hall, and it was Uzali's part to play the next card. But he remained perfectly motionless, though Russell could see his eyes gleaming, and that he was moved by some strong feeling. At the same time, Russell had no fear and no anxiety. He felt the thing was in capable hands and that Uzali would not spoil the situation by undue haste.

"What are you going to do?" he whispered.

"For the moment, nothing," Uzali said grimly. "We are going to pursue what one of your greatest statesmen used to call a policy of masterly inactivity. In other words, we will follow Mr. Jansen and my countryman and ascertain what deep scheme they have on hand. Unless I am mistaken Jansen is as much in my debt as Samuel Flower. But we can go into that later. Just now we have to keep those fellows in view and watch them all night if necessary."

Russell had no objection. He felt that action was blessed and that his dogged patience and perseverance were about to be rewarded. Few words were spoken as he and his companion turned and followed Jansen at a respectful distance until Gray's Inn Road was reached. Here Jansen paused and appeared to take a latch-

key from his pocket. A door was quietly opened and shut and then the watchers had the street to themselves. Uzali turned eagerly to Russell.

"You marked the right house?" he asked.

"Oh, I think I know the house," Russell replied. "I have had a very good description of it, and here comes Goatley to see that we are on the right track. Well, what is it, Goatley?"

"I ventured to follow you, gentlemen," Goatley said, "in fact, I have been following you all the evening. I was afraid you might make some mistake. Some description of the house where Jansen is lodging will be of assistance to you."

"You know all about it?" Uzali said.

"Well yes, sir," Goatley, proceeded to explain. "It is a shop where a man named Giles deals in bird and animals. He is a queer, solitary, old man, and does for himself in a small room behind the shop. He has a horror of women, and I don't suppose one has been in the place for years. You can understand how lodgings like that would suit Jansen. He has the two upstairs rooms where he cooks for himself, so that there is no one to spy upon his movements. He might commit half a dozen murders and no one be the wiser."

"Is there any way into the house?" Uzali asked.

"Certainly, sir," Goatley went on. "Behind the shop is a kind of Tom Tiddler's Ground where children come and play. It is easy to get over the fence and into the back yard on to which Giles' room looks. Above this room is a dilapidated glass house where a former tenant tried to grow flowers. By way of this little glass house one could readily get into the premises. I am sure of my ground because I have been over it before. I will show you the way so that there can be no mistake."

Goatley had spoken the truth when he had said that it would be easy to burgle the premises by way of the little glass house. Russell surveyed the whole carefully and nodded his head approvingly.

"The thing can be managed," he said. "And now, what I want you to do, Goatley, is to hang about the front and see if anybody leaves the house. If Jansen himself leaves come round at once and whistle quietly."

There were no further instructions for Goatley, so they disappeared to the side-street. Russell turned to his companion somewhat eagerly.

"I think I had better understand what you want," he said. "Your idea is to get into the house. What do you expect to see?"

"Well, I expect to see Jansen and one of my fellow-countrymen to begin with," Uzali said grimly. "And if I am not mistaken I shall find the other conspirator there, too. I don't think you appreciate how clever Jansen is. To begin with, he is an exceedingly skilful chemist and can produce the most extraordinary results from apparently innocent experiments. I have never met the man, but I know that he was in my country years ago, and at one time managed to exert a deal of influence over certain people there. It was much the same as in the early days when white settlers first appeared. The natives used to take them for gods and all that kind of thing and that is what has happened with those two fellow countrymen of mine who have done their best to put an end to Samuel Flower. I expect to find them under the thumb of Jansen."

"Well that can be easily ascertained," Russell cried. "The question is who is going first? As you are the lightest, perhaps you had better get on my shoulders

and try to wriggle yourself through that broken framework into the glass house. I can pull myself up afterwards. Are you ready?"

Uzali climbed up Russel like a cat and wormed his way through the broken woodwork until he stood upright in the place where plants had once grown. Russell followed a little more slowly but just as surely until he stood by the side of his more agile companion.

"So far, so good," he said. "Now, what next? I don't suppose there are more than two rooms over a small shop like this, so that we must be careful how we move. It won't be safe to light a match."

Uzali agreed, and there was nothing for it but to feel their way along the passage until they came to the top of the stairs. It was so dark that a slit of light shining under a closed door stood out like an edge of flame. Voices could be heard on the other side of the door, voices in earnest confabulation, though it was almost impossible to hear what was said. Uzali chuckled.

"What did I tell you?" he whispered. "There are three people there—Jansen and two others. You wouldn't notice it, but knowing the language I can discriminate between those two other voices."

They could only wait until Jansen chose to open the door. A quarter of an hour passed and gradually the voices died away to a murmur and then ceased altogether. After that there was the sound of a heavy footstep on the floor and the door was flung open. Jansen stood on the threshold, glancing back with an evil grin upon his face. It was so dark on the landing that it was impossible for him to detect the figures standing so close beside him. The Dutchman seemed to be on exceedingly good terms with himself, for he kissed his hand gaily.

"That is well," he said. "That is exceedingly well. I do not think, my friends, that you are likely to trouble me for many hours to come, so I will go about my business. There is no chance of anybody coming in, no chance of anybody discovering what has happened. Strange that men in some ways so clever should be so innocent in matters outside their understanding."

Jansen uttered the last words in a tone of regret. He went quietly down the stairs, as if fearful of arousing his landlord. The door closed softly behind him and he was gone. Uzali strode into the stuffy little sitting-room and applied his foot vigorously to two little yellow men lying like logs on the carpet. In spite of the rough punishment nothing came from either except a suppressed grunt or two.

"What did I tell you?" Uzali said in disgust. "Did I not say that I should find my other fellow-countryman here? They have become tools of Jansen. You can see for yourself what has happened to them."

"They have smoked themselves into a state of torpor," Russell said.

"Yes, and been drugged into the bargain. You heard what Jansen said before he went out. They will lie here like logs, perhaps for the next twenty-four hours, until Jansen has accomplished his deep scheme. But I am going to frustrate all that. Let us get out of here at once."

"I am ready," Russell said. "Where do you want to go?"

"Maldon Grange," Uzali replied. "We are going there at once. You can ask questions on the way."

Chapter XLI

Vanished!

It was as easy to leave the house as it had been to enter it. No sooner were Uzali and his companion off the premises than Goatley appeared all excitement.

"I could not make you hear," he said. "I whistled till I was afraid to whistle any longer. Jansen has gone away. He went up the street in a tremendous hurry as if he had some most important business on hand."

"Oh, we know about that," Russell explained. "You have done a very good evening's work and we shall not want you any more."

Russell hastened to overtake his companion who was striding down the street as if he wished to overtake Jansen. His manner was abrupt and irritable. He had little to say as Russell rejoined him.

"Has anything gone wrong?" the latter asked.

"Well, things are not as I expected," Uzali admitted. "And the worst of it is we are bound to lose time in picking up information. We shall have to go to my rooms to get Bradshaw. My dear friend, don't ask any unnecessary questions. The loss of every moment annoys me. What an extraordinary thing it is that you never see a cab in the street when you want one."

At length they reached the flat where Uzali immediately consulted his Bradshaw. When he came to what he wanted, something like an execration broke from his lips as he glanced at the clock on the mantel-piece.

"We have missed the down express by ten minutes," he exclaimed. "If we had been a quarter of an hour earlier we might have had the pleasure of travelling in the same train as Mr. Jansen. But it can't be helped. Now here is the position of things. It is half-past one. London is fast asleep, and we are thirty miles from Maldon Grange. What I want you to tell me is this. How are we to get there in an hour and a half?"

Russell shook his head. He was bound to confess that the problem was beyond him. The feat could not be accomplished. Uzali glanced at him with something like contempt in his narrow dark eyes.

"I thought it was always your boast," he said, "that day or night this London of yours could produce anything you required. Don't you know any place that you could ring up on the telephone and get a motor-car? Mind, I don't care what I pay for it. The only stipulation is this—it must be here in a quarter of an hour and I must drive it myself. We cannot afford to have any curious outsiders in this business. Can you manage that? I have plenty of ready cash and am prepared to put it down if you find the owners of the machine at all suspicious."

Russell thought for a moment. Surely the thing ought not to be impossible. He might learn what he wanted at the nearest police or fire station. He strode out of the house and accosted the first policeman he met. A judicious half crown produced the desired information.

"Oh, that is an easy enough matter, sir," the officer said. "There are one or two livery-stable-keepers hereabouts who have been investing in motors lately, and no doubt you could hire one providing your references are right."

The thing was not so easily achieved as the policeman had prophesied. The livery-stable-keeper listened suspiciously, but was won over by the sight of a five pound note and an offer to pay for the hire before it left the yard. At the end of half an hour Russell was back at Uzali's flat with a smart-looking car, which was handed over on receipt of twenty pounds in hard cash. All Uzali's irritation seemed to disappear. He threw himself heart and soul into the management of the car, which, before long, was speeding Citywards.

"This isn't the way," Russell protested. "You ought to have taken the Hampstead Road."

"And so I will," Uzali said gaily. "We are not going to Maldon Grange alone. I will take those countrymen of mine with me. They'll be all right in the bottom of the car. We'll just slip round to the back of the house in Gray's Inn Road and you shall go up to Jansen's room and hand them down to me as if they were sacks of flour. I admit there is an element of risk in the job, but it must be done. I can't get on without them."

The car stopped presently. It stood silent and motionless on the waste ground behind the little bird-shop, where, once more, Russell climbed into the house and made his way into Jansen's sitting-room. He was not afraid of interruption. He walked towards the fire-place, then stopped and rubbed his eyes. He had even cause for astonishment, for the little men had vanished, leaving no sign behind them.

"Extraordinary!" Russell muttered. "I wonder if this amazing tangle will ever come straight. Now what can have become of those chaps? Three-quarters of an hour ago they lay drugged into insensibility and now they have vanished. Well, I must look for them if I have to search the house from top to bottom."

Uzali was waiting impatiently in the yard when Russell reappeared after the lapse of nearly a quarter of an hour.

"Where have you been?" the former exclaimed. "And why have you come empty-banded?"

"For the simple reason that there was nothing to bring." Russell said grimly. "Those fellows have vanished. Did I search the house? Why, of course, I searched the house. But what was the good of doing that? It was only a waste of time? You saw what a state of insensibility they were in. You must know it was impossible for them to get away without assistance. Somebody has been to the house and carted them off. If you wish it, I will go back and have another look."

Uzali shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Absolute waste of time," he said. "Let us get into the country as soon as we can. It is not worth while to run the risk of some policeman coming along and asking our business, and goodness knows there is enough to do before daylight."

Russell stepped into the car without another word, and for some time they flew silently through the London streets. When the open country was gained they took the risks of the road, travelling at as high a speed as the car permitted. Uzali drove like a man who has been accustomed to cars all his life. Not once did he make a mistake, not once did he swerve from the straight path. By the light of the acetylene lamps Russell could see his eyes glowing, his face gleaming with excitement.

"You seem to like it," Russell murmured.

“There is nothing in the world so exhilarating,” Uzali exclaimed, “and it is none the less fascinating because of the danger of it. If my eye were to deceive me, if I were to swerve even as much as a hair’s breadth, what should happen in consequence would have no interest for us. Given luck we shall be at Maldon Grange in time to spoil the plans of our friend Jansen.”

The car pulled up at length under Russell’s instructions, for the ground was new to Uzali. They turned in through the lodge gates, going more cautiously, until they came to a thicket of trees in which they hid the car.

They were in front of the house, which was all in darkness with the exception of two windows on the first floor. It wanted no great foresight to infer that it was here where Samuel Flower was lying. For some time Uzali gazed up at the windows, as if hesitating what to do next.

“I wish I knew who was there,” he murmured. “It is necessary that we should get into the house and, what is more, we must do so without alarming the servants. It is a desperate chance, of course, but do you think it possible that your friend, Dr. Mercer, is there? I meant to go through Oldborough to ascertain for myself, but in the excitement of the moment I forgot about it.”

“It is possible,” Russell said. “I don’t suppose he would very much care for Miss Galloway to stay in a house like this at present. He may have induced Miss Galloway to go to his mother’s whilst he remained here. But can’t you invent some story about having lost your way? We shall be able to find out then. Throw a handful of gravel at the window and see what comes of it. It can’t do any harm.”

On the impulse of the moment Uzali stooped and raised a handful of pebbles and tossed them gently at the window. The experiment was repeated twice before the blinds were pulled up and somebody looked out and demanded to know what was the mater. At the sound of the speaker’s voice Russell gave a cry of triumph.

“It is all right,” he said. “What a tremendous slice of luck! It’s Mercer himself. Wilfrid, come down and let us in. We must see you for a few moments.”

Chapter XLII

Treasure Trove.

Mercer’s patient was sleeping peacefully. There appeared to be no reason why he should give any further trouble, and so far the nurse had not put in an appearance. Wilfrid concluded that only something out of the common would have brought Uzali and Russell at that time of the morning. From the way in which they spoke, too, their errand did not admit of delay. In the circumstances, it was no bad thing, either, to have a couple of friends in the house.

“One moment,” Mercer whispered. “Stay where you are and I will let you in.”

He unfastened the bolts of the front door, and the intruders strode into the dining-room where the lights were full on.

“Perhaps you had better explain,” Wilfrid said. “I have been wondering what had become of you, Russell. I could not stay in London as I had my own affairs to look after, and that is why I am here. But how did you guess it?”

“It was mere chance,” Uzali explained. “As for myself I was bound to come here. I came to prevent bloodshed. We calculated you had left London and we thought it possible that Miss Galloway would prevail upon you to take up your quarters here for the present, and upon that theory I didn’t hesitate to give you a signal.”

“This is the second night I have been here,” Wilfrid explained. “Miss Galloway is staying with my mother in Oldborough. But tell me what you want. Mr. Flower’s nurse has gone into Castlebridge for some necessaries and there is nobody but myself to look after the patient. And he is in no fit state to leave, I assure you. He has led me a pretty dance already to-night and I shall be very glad when Mason comes back.”

“Is he in his right senses?” Uzali asked.

“Oh, dear, no, and I question very much if he ever will be again. But tell me what you want me to do. You would not have come at this hour in the night unless yours had been an exceedingly desperate errand.”

“I forgot,” Uzali murmured. “I suppose everybody has gone to bed except yourself. If we stay here we are not likely to be disturbed by the servants.”

“You need not worry about them,” Wilfrid remarked.

“Very good. In that case we are safe. And now, assuming the nurse knows nothing about the family, he will be prepared to believe anything you say about us. We want to stay here just as we are till morning on the pretext that we are friends of Mr. Flower’s and have come down on business. The rest you can leave to us. I suppose when the nurse comes back you will be free to help us if we give the signal. We may need your services.”

Wilfrid nodded emphatically. It was plain that Uzali meant to say no more for the moment as he went upstairs again into the sick-room. Flower was lying perfectly still, and there seemed to be no suggestion that he was likely to wake up. A few minutes later there was a ring at the front door bell and Mason returned. He seemed to have all he wanted, but he paused and looked at Wilfrid as he caught the murmur of voices in the dining-room.

“Friends of your patient,” Wilfrid said glibly. “They have come from London on urgent business. I presume they were not aware that Mr. Flower was so ill. They will stay till morning on the chance of Mr. Flower’s being able to see them.”

The nurse smiled grimly.

“There is no reason why they shouldn’t wait, sir,” he said. “But it is precious little business Mr. Flower will be able to transact for some time to come. I hope he was all right while I was away.”

Wilfrid smiled in non-committal fashion. On the whole, it seemed best to say nothing about the patient’s escapade.

“You had better get yourself some tea or coffee,” he said. “I don’t mind sitting up for another hour or so, and then I shall go to bed.”

The nurse made his preparations by means of a spirit-lamp which he had in the dressing-room. Meanwhile, Wilfrid sat in a chair before the fire and dozed off. He was utterly fagged. The anxieties of the day had told upon him more than he was aware. At last the nurse aroused him and intimated that one of the gentlemen downstairs wished to speak to him. In the interval Uzali and Russell had not wasted their time. At first they sat smoking and helping themselves freely to the

decanters on the table till Uzali grew more taciturn and appeared to be listening intently.

"What is the matter?" Russell asked.

"Our friends are beginning to move," Uzali said in a whisper. "I have not been far out in my deductions and, if you will oblige me, I shall be glad if you will throw your cigarette into the fire whilst I turn the light off."

Russell obeyed without comment. He felt he was entirely in the hands of his companion. Uzali proceeded to shut off the light and also to open one of the windows that led to the lawn. He placed a screen across the fire and nodded with the air of a man who is satisfied with his plans.

"All right so far," he muttered. "Now I want you to stand by the window with me keeping quiet and being on the alert for what is going to take place. You will not find it so very dark when your eyes become accustomed to the gloom."

It was as Uzali said. As Russell's gaze was turned towards the darkness he began to make out objects here and there till it was possible to tell where the shrubs lay and where the flowerbeds were located. Everything was extremely still and the faintest sound could be heard. A quarter of an hour passed, then Russell felt his companion's hand clutch eagerly on his arm.

"There!" Uzali whispered. "Did you see anything? Did you hear anything? Now listen! I am not mistaken."

As Russell strained his ear he seemed to hear a footstep coming down the gravel path. By and bye a tiny twig snapped and it could no longer be doubted that somebody was walking on the path. A moment later and a figure loomed against the grey of the sky, a figure which paused a moment and then crossed on to the lawn. Russell felt his heart beating faster especially when he realized that the outline was quite familiar.

"You could see that, anyway," Uzali whispered.

"Oh, I can see that," Russell replied in the same low tone. "It seems incredible, and I may be mistaken, but if that man isn't Jansen call me blind."

A dry chuckle broke from Uzali's lips. He was unquestionably pleased at something. He was no longer moody and despondent, but had the alert manner of a man who means business.

"You are not mistaken," he said. "That is Jansen. I daresay you wonder how he got here. There is only one way in which he could have reached Maldon Grange: he caught the train which we missed. Ah, we shall see some fun presently. Our friend yonder little knows the danger he stands in."

"What on earth is he up to?" Russell exclaimed.

So far as could be seen in the darkness, Jansen seemed to be juggling with a ball of strong string. In one hand he carried a bundle of pegs which he proceeded to drive into the lawn at unequal distances. The head of the hammer was muffled and only the faintest sound came in response to the blows. As the work went on Jansen could be heard chuckling to himself. Soon he stood upright as if he had completed his task and then he connected the irregular row of pegs with the string. It suddenly flashed upon Russell what he was doing.

"Why, that is an old burglar trick," he exclaimed. "Jansen means to make an attempt upon the house and trusts to those pegs and strings to save him in case of pursuit. Hadn't we better catch him red-handed?"

“Plenty of time for that,” Uzali said with a note of laughter in his voice. “See he has vanished. It looks as if he had gone down to the basement. Now we shan’t be long. Look over at the big cedar tree and tell me what you see; quick!”

Two slight shadowy figures like huge night moths seemed to flit out from under the gloom of the cedar and make their way towards the spot where Jansen had gone. Russell would have darted out only Uzali restrained him.

“Wait,” he whispered, “another ten minutes.”

The minutes passed slowly, then came a sound like the splitting of wood, followed by a laugh which was drowned in a scream echoing horribly far and wide in the silence.

“Now,” said Uzali sternly, “it is time to act!”

Chapter XLIII

In Hot Pursuit!

It was a weird cry the like of which, in all his vicissitudes, Russell had never heard before. There was not pain in it so much as the wild and vivid fear of a soul going down into eternal torment. Twice again the cry came and then all was silent once more. Uzali rose to his feet without the slightest appearance of haste; indeed, from his collected movements and assured air he might have been expecting something of the kind.

“What shall we do now?” Russell whispered.

“That depends on whether we are too late or not,” Uzali replied. “Come and see for yourself. One or two things have been puzzling you lately, and now we can clear them all up.”

The speaker moved to the open window. He had scarcely reached the threshold before that strange cry came again. It was much fainter this time and lacked the dominant note of fear. It was more despairing and sounded a long way farther off. At the same time Russell held back a moment, for he could hear a disturbance overhead.

Surely enough there came the sound of voices raised in expostulation, and a moment later Mason came downstairs.

“What is it?” he exclaimed. “What are you gentlemen doing? Don’t you know that my patient is at death’s door? On no account was he to be disturbed. That extraordinary noise has awakened him, and now it is as much as two of us can do to keep him in bed. I don’t want to rouse the servants.”

Something like an oath broke from Uzali’s lips.

“For heaven’s sake! go back where you came from,” he said. “You have enough to do upstairs without disturbing us. Besides, you have Dr. Mercer to help you.”

Mason looked at the speaker in astonishment. He was not accustomed to being spoken to in that way but he made no protest. Overhead Flower’s voice could be heard raised in feeble fury. He seemed to be pleading for release.

“Oh, go upstairs,” Uzali said. “I assure you, my good fellow, you gain nothing by standing here, and if the servants are aroused you will be conferring a favour on everybody by sending them back to bed again. Now do as you are told.”

Without waiting for reply Uzali strode out into the garden followed by Russell. From the lawn they could see shadows flitting across the blinds of Flower’s room. It was plain that a struggle was going on.

“That’s a piece of cruel bad luck,” Russell muttered. “I wonder what woke him up.”

“Can’t you guess?” Uzali said impatiently. “Wasn’t that cry enough to wake the dead? It would arouse anybody who was not lost to consciousness. It appealed all the more to Flower because he had heard something like it before. But, come, we have no time to lose. I hope before morning that we shall have settled this ghastly business for ever. And now to find out where those fellows went. I hope you know the house.”

“Indeed, I don’t,” Russell said. “I don’t know any more than you do. Mercer could help us.”

Uzali made no reply. Very carefully he strode round the house, looking intently amongst the ivy which fringed the stone walls. He seemed to be seeking for some cellar trap or sunken door by which the basement might be reached. He gave a grunt of triumph presently as he pointed to a flight of moss-clad stairs leading to a small door below. He pressed his shoulder to the woodwork and it gave way quietly. Once more he chuckled.

“We are on the track at last,” he whispered. “We shall find it here. Strike a light!”

Russell took a vesta from his pocket and after lighting it held it aloft. He made out the outline of a dim vault with three doors at the far end approached by flights of steps. The place apparently was empty and Uzali strode along as if he were on the verge of some important discovery. Then Russell’s foot tripped over the support of an iron wine-bin, and the whole thing came over with a rattle and roar that made the place echo. With a cry Uzali started back.

“Now you have done it,” he said hoarsely. “Look out for yourself. Give us another match for goodness sake.”

The match went out as if some unseen person had stooped and extinguished it. Just before the last dying gleam faded it seemed to Russell that two shadowy forms had passed him rapidly. He knew a moment later that he was not mistaken, for he heard footsteps running up the gate leading to the garden.

“After them,” Uzali whispered. “The tragedy is done so far as we are concerned. That unfortunate man is beyond salvation. After them it is not so dark as you think.”

After the intense gloom of the vault the garden was by comparison light. Russell could see the two forms not more than a hundred yards ahead. He set off doggedly in chase. His blood was up now, his heart was full of anger. Come what might, those people should not escape him again, neither did he need Uzali to tell him who they were. He knew he was in close pursuit of the two Malays whom he had seen not so many hours before lying on the floor in Jansen’s sitting-room.

It all grew clear to Russell as he raced along. He was just as anxious to catch up with those men, just as determined to mete out to them the punishment they deserved, but the wild feeling of passion was gone.

Doubtless the Malays had been too cunning for Jansen. To a certain extent they had trusted him, but the Dutchman's drugs had been insufficient. What Jansen had come to Maldon Grange for, Russell could not tell. But there must have been some deep reason for his move, some pressing need of keeping the Malays out of the way till his errand was accomplished.

Russell ran on and on without sense of fatigue, for he was in hard training, his muscles tense and rigid as whipcord, his lungs playing freely. Uzali was far behind and out of the hunt. The Malays, too, showed that they knew they were being followed. For a long time they kept to the road, till it began to dawn upon them that their antagonist was gaining ground, then they vaulted lightly over a gate and entered the fields. Russell smiled grimly as he noticed the move. He was not, perhaps, quite so agile as those in front but he knew the heavier going would suit him better. Sooner or later he must wear those fellows down and bring them to a sense of their responsibilities. There was consolation in the knowledge that he was armed. He smiled as he felt for his revolver in his hip-pocket.

A mile or so and the pace began to tell. The fugitives were not more than sixty or seventy yards away. They were toiling distressfully along, and Russell could see that their limbs were growing heavy under them.

"Pull up!" he cried. "It is useless to go any farther. If you don't stop I'll fire into you."

But there was no suggestion of stopping on the part of the Malays. They swerved to the right as a hare might do and breasted a slight embankment on the top of which was the permanent way of the railway. Russell was not more than two yards in the rear as they stumbled over the fence and dashed across the line. His blood was up, but he did not lose his presence of mind. Something was ringing in his ears besides the rush of wind, something booming and tearing; with a blinding light and headlong rush round the bend tore the express at top speed.

Russell pulled up in the nick of time. He yelled to the Malays. But it was too late. They had seen and heard nothing. They seemed to be licked up by the flaming light and roaring steam. It was over in the flash of an instant. The express had disappeared, and the silence of deep darkness fell again, as Russell stood fumbling unsteadily in his pocket for his matches.

He turned, shuddering, from the horror of it. The two figures lay there battered almost out of recognition. They would do no more mischief in this world. Still, they should not be neglected. A few hundred yards down the line Russell could see the lights of a small station, and towards this he hurried as fast as his legs would carry him. It was an incoherent story, but he managed to make a sleepy night porter and one or two navvies camping up by the side of the rails to understand something of the tragedy. A few minutes later and the figures were removed to the station, where they lay side by side covered with coarse sacking.

"I am staying at Maldon Grange," Russell explained. "I will call in the morning. I daresay one of you would not mind notifying the police for me."

Chapter XLIV

The Meaning of it.

It was a weary walk back to Maldon Grange, but Russell finished it at length. The chase had carried him farther than he thought, and he was worn out with his exertions and shaken with the horrors of the night. The house appeared to have regained its normal peace, the dining-room lights had been switched on and Uzali impatiently waited Russell's return.

"You have been a long time," he said. "So they managed to escape you? I thought they would. Man alive, what is the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I have seen two," Russell said huskily. "For Heaven's sake, give me some brandy and not too much water. You needn't trouble about your countrymen any more, for they will do no further harm this side of the grave. And they didn't escape me, either. I was within a couple of yards of them when they met with their death; indeed, I was exceedingly lucky not to share the same fate. I will never forget the horror of it."

Uzali asked no questions. He saw how white and shaky Russell was and discreetly contented himself with pouring out the brandy, after which he sat down and waited till the generous spirit had begun to do its work.

"It was an express train," Russell said jerkily. "I was close to them. I had challenged them to stop in fact, when they swerved and climbed on to the line. They must have lost their heads, for they ran full tilt into the engine, and the rest you can imagine. They were cut to pieces, and, I should say are unrecognisable. I had them removed to the nearest station where of course, I had to give my name and address. I don't know what you think about it, but, upon my word, I don't see how I am going to explain when I come to give my evidence before the coroner."

"Oh, that will be easy," Uzali replied. "You happened to be a guest of Mr. Samuel Flower, and disturbed two burglars to whom you subsequently gave chase. There will be no occasion to say more than that. The thing will excite a nine days' wonder. People will ask what these foreigners were doing at Maldon Grange and then it will all be forgotten. You must admit the necessity of keeping this scandal as quiet as possible. The men are dead, and even if the story were told ninety-nine people out of a hundred would refuse to believe it. But if you are feeling better, there is much to be done before daylight. But you need not come unless you feel up to it. For my own part I mean to finish my investigation of the vault where we found those unfortunate men. We haven't finished with tragedy even yet. We have still to find Jansen."

Russell rose with more or less alacrity to his feet.

"Come and get it over," he said. "I thought my nerves were strong enough for anything, but I shall want a rest after this!"

Once more they turned into the garden and thence into the vault. Uzali had taken a candle off the dining-room mantel-piece, so that they did not lack light, neither was there any reason for extra precautions. They mounted a flight of steps leading to one of the doors in which Uzali's sharp eye saw that a key had been left.

He flung the door open and strode inside. The place was dark and musty. There were no windows in front and no ventilation, so that the two intruders at first found some difficulty in breathing. On the top of a packing-case Uzali placed his candle while he made a swift survey of the vault. The place appeared to be empty, save for a score or so of packing-cases, all clamped with iron and heavily nailed. But, apparently, he seemed to be looking for something quite different. Then he gave a sudden exclamation as he bent over an object lying between one of the cases and the wall. The object was dragged out into the centre of the floor and, taking the candle, Uzali bent coolly and critically over it.

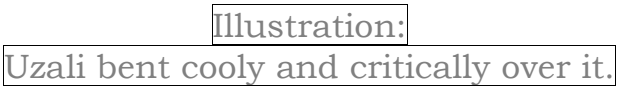
Illustration:
Uzali bent cooly and critically over it.

"The last of the tragedies," he said.

"Jansen!" Russell exclaimed. "And stone dead beyond a doubt. But what is that strange bandage around his head?"

Jansen lay stiff and stark with his bloated face turned up to the light. Around his forehead was a white bandage so stiff and tight that it might have been made of solid metal. It was hard and hollow to the touch as Uzali's fingers drummed upon it.

"Here is the mystery of the five knots," he said. "Don't you see what has happened? Jansen attempted to make a dupe of my fellow-countrymen, but they were too cunning for him. They were not drugged when he left his lodgings; they were only shamming. They followed him here, must have travelled by the same train, and they tracked him to these vaults where I dare say they have been before. Directly he saw them he must have known his end had come; let him turn and twist as he liked, there was a finish to Jansen. Whilst one held him at bay the other lighted that scent you know of, and, as soon as the wretched man's senses failed, they bound that cloth about his forehead and the five deadly knots did their work. The thing is put on wet, but dries in a few moments with a tremendous pressure that gives the brain no chance whatever. It is practically impossible even for the cleverest surgeon to guess it is concussion of the brain, since there are no signs of violence. And yet, after the application of those terrible knots for an hour or so, no victim could recover. By pure good luck you twice saved the life of Samuel Flower, for each time my fellow-countrymen were interrupted by you and managed to get away, leaving no trace of their secret. In Jansen's case it was different. We had cut off their avenue of escape and they had only themselves to think of. And they met their fate, too."

"But this is really worse than the other," Russell said with a shudder. "The whole story is bound to come out now. We cannot take this wretched man outside and throw him into a ditch."

"That is true," Uzali said grimly. "But we can remove all signs of the mischief. I know we are running a risk. I know we are placing ourselves within reach of the law, but I am going to take the chance all the same. Go to the dining-room and fetch me a decanter of water so that I can damp this bandage off. Besides, since no one knows Jansen or anything about him, it will be reasonable to assume that he was one of the burglars and that they had quarrelled with fatal results."

Russell was too upset by the events of the night to make any protest. He seemed to have hardly strength to attend to himself. In a dazed way he crept back from the dining-room with a decanter of water with which Uzali proceeded to remove the bandage until the remotest trace of the cause of death had disappeared.

"It is amazing," Russell murmured. "No wonder a doctor would be puzzled to give a certificate. He looks now as if he had died peacefully in his sleep."

"That is so," Uzali said coolly. "And now let us be convinced that he came here for some felonious purpose. I am certain I shall find housebreaker's tools in his possession. Ah, I told you so!"

From the breast-pocket of Jansen's coat Uzali produced a small but powerful jemmy, along with a neat case of instruments which left no doubt of the purpose for which they were used. With the jemmy in his hand Uzali crossed the floor and made a deliberate attack on one of the big cases. Presently the lid came off with a resounding crash and a quantity of sacks were exposed to view. Under the sacking lay a number of wash-leather bags evidently of considerable weight, for Uzali had to exert all his strength to release two of them and lay them on the floor. He untied the knots which bound the sacks, and plunged his hand inside. His fingers came out sparkling and shimmering in the candle-light.

"As I expected," he said. "With all your care and cunning Flower has been too many for you. The only man who guessed the truth was Jansen, and that is why he came down to-night. Take one of these bags in your hand and feel its weight. Isn't it heavy? It's so heavy that it can only be one metal. And see how it sparkles in your fingers."

"You mean it is gold dust," Russell cried.

"Nothing more nor less, my friend. This case is full of it, and when we come to open other cases I shall not be surprised to find treasures even more valuable. Flower must have brought them here by some extraordinary means and baffled all his party. We shall probably never know how he managed it. But we have yet to decide upon our plan of campaign. There is much to be done still."

Chapter XLV

Aladdin's Cave.

"And so all these things come from your part of Borneo?" Russell asked. "This, then, is the treasure which you have all been after?"

"I expect so," Uzali said with a smile. "Mind you, I don't want to affect a knowledge superior to your own and I admit that I have only had my suspicions lately. But I have been looking for Flower for some time, and hardly expected to identify him with the prosperous ship-owner. When he was in Borneo he bore another name, but all that does not matter now. The first suspicion of the truth I had was when Miss Galloway sat by me on the night of the party at the theatre. She was wearing a certain ornament which you have heard of—"

"The diamond moth," Russell murmured, "oh, yes."

"Or a portion of it," Uzali went on. "The ornament attracted my attention immediately, because I knew there was only one spot in the world it could have come from, and that was the palace where I and my ancestors were born. The jewel at one time had been a favourite ornament of a sister, long since dead, and I remember how it was broken. Nobody in our part of the island could mend it, and I promised that the next time I was in London I would see to the matter. That is how one part of it was in my possession, but for the life of me I could not tell what had become of the other half, till on the night of the party I began to feel my way. Nobody but one of the infamous crew who destroyed by birthplace could have the other half of my sister's jewel. I took the trouble to find out afterwards who this Samuel Flower was, and what he was like. Then you came along and made things still plainer. I saw at once that Flower had outwitted his confederates and had conveyed the treasure of my people to England. Of course, all this was conjecture, but I had the solution of the problem pretty plainly before me. When I knew that that scoundrel Jansen was coming down here and how he had contrived to misguide my unfortunate fellow-countrymen not a doubt remained in my mind. In point of fact, I came here to-night, not so much to catch Jansen red-handed as to denounce Flower as soon as he were well enough to listen to my charge. I never dreamt for a moment but that my countrymen were still in London, but when I knew they were here I saw it was all over with Jansen. I would have tried to prevent the catastrophe, but, unfortunately, I did not know where to begin. Directly I heard that cry I knew whose it was. But don't you think we had better take your friend Mercer into our confidence. I am sorry in a way the thing has ended like this, because it puts an end to your scheme—"

"For taking what belonged to somebody else," Russell laughed. "My dear sir, that is the fortune of war. I had intended to make a handsome thing out of this business, and I meant to put a large sum of money into Mercer's pocket at the same time."

"I am not sure that you haven't," Uzali said drily.

"But all this belongs to you," Russell protested.

"That is why I am not speaking without book," Uzali replied. "One thing is certain—if it hadn't been for Mercer and you I should never have found it. You will find that if anything happens to Flower and that scoundrel Cotter learns that Jansen is dead, he will lose no time in trying to lay a hand on the plunder. That at least is my theory, but the fact remains that, in the eye of the law, everything in this vault is mine and, with your permission, I'll put the key in my pocket till the proper time comes to claim possession."

So saying Uzali took up the candle and followed Russell out of the vault. He locked the door and together they made their way back to the dining-room. Tranquility reigned throughout the mansion. No sound came from overhead until the closing of a window brought Mercer downstairs.

"What on earth has happened?" he asked. "I began to wonder if you were coming back."

"How is Flower getting on?" said Russell.

"He is in a very bad way," Wilfrid said gravely. "He has an exceedingly rapid pulse and his temperature has gone up in the most alarming fashion. It is extraordinary how that strange cry excited him. It seemed to penetrate to the well-

spring of life and restore him to consciousness. One might have thought he was a man running away from some hideous doom. But now he is in a most critical state, and I should not be surprised if he did not last till morning. Not that I am disposed to waste sympathy on Samuel Flower. Goodness knows he has done me harm enough and to spare. And now if you will tell me what has been going on the last hour I shall be glad. As for Russell, he looks as if he had been face to face with tragedy."

Russell murmured that he had been a witness to no fewer than three. He told his grim story first, the detail being filled in by Uzali. The whole combined narrative was so amazing that it took Wilfrid some time to grasp it all.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"We shall do nothing," Uzali said calmly. "We shall notify the police in the morning of the finding of Jansen's body, and they can put their own construction on the rest. The authorities will regard the whole thing as a case of attempted burglary. Probably they will take no steps to have those packages in the vault examined, for the idea of treasure lying there would be beyond ordinary police imagination. What I wish to avoid is scandal. When the sensation has blown over I think I can show a way to settle matters without raising unpleasant questions. Meanwhile, I should like to sleep for an hour or so. I suppose one could manage that."

Uzali had proved a tolerably correct prophet. There was a great commotion in the neighbourhood next day when it became known that burglars had made an attempt on Maldon Grange, and that the body of one of had been found in the vault under the house. The body had been discovered by two gentlemen from London who had come to see Mr. Flower on important business, not being aware that he was suffering from a severe illness. They had arrived at the house early in the morning in a motor-car just in time to see two of the assassins leave the basement hurriedly. One of these gentlemen was known to a large circle as Prince Uzali, the other was a more obscure individual whose name had not yet been ascertained.

Uzali gave evidence at the inquest first. He was calm and collected and gave his testimony in a plausible and ingratiating manner. He told how the body had been discovered and confessed he thought the police theory of a quarrel amongst the thieves was the correct one. He could not account for the presence of the thieves in the vaults unless on the supposition that they thought that to enter by the basement was safest way to reach that portion of the house, which was more worthy of their attention. Asked if he saw any valuables in the vaults, Uzali merely shrugged his shoulders and explained that the place was filled with packages which appeared to possess no special value. They were overland trunks and things of that kind. In any case, he should not imagine that Mr. Flower would keep valuables in a cellar.

Uzali stepped down from the witness box presently, having created a favourable impression, and Russell followed. He spoke frankly enough of pursuit of the two men and related how the would-be burglars had been smashed up by the express train. There was little more to say, save that the two men were mutilated out of all recognition, and the police had only the faintest hopes of establishing their identity. They appeared to be Malay sailors or coolies and that was as far as the

official theory could go. On the other hand, some neighbour might come forward and claim Jansen for a relation, but Uzali had not much fear of that. Jansen's landlord was not the kind of man who studied the papers. It was long odds that he would never know of the tragedy at Maldon Grange, and would conclude that his lodger had vanished as secretly as he had come.

As for the rest Uzali appeared to know exactly what to do. As he and Russell returned from the inquest after the verdict had been given, they met Dr. Shelton coming along the road towards Maldon Grange.

"How is Mr. Flower?" Russell asked. "I am a stranger to you, but I took the liberty of stopping you—"

"It is only the matter of a day or two," Shelton said curtly. "I cannot tell you more than that."

Chapter XLVI

Uzali's Way Out.

Shelton's motor-car purred along again, leaving Uzali and Russell alone. Halfway up the drive to the house they encountered Mercer. He, too, looked grave.

"How did it go?" he asked eagerly.

"It went just as I told you it would go," Uzali replied. "I fathered my theory on the police who came to regard it as their own. They are under the impression that those three men came to Maldon Grange with the intention of committing a burglary, and that they quarrelled after they got into the house. The only thing I was a bit doubtful of was the medical evidence on the body of Jansen. The absence of violence rather upset the local doctor and he seemed to think that death was due to a sudden fright which had affected the action of the heart. I forget the technical terms he used. At any rate, he satisfied the jury and we have only to keep quiet and all scandal will be averted. I hope you see now that nothing would have been gained by allowing the whole truth to come out. Nobody would have been the wiser for it, and, as certain as we are standing here now before a month had passed we should have half a dozen cold-blooded murderers trying the same experiment on their victims. You never hear of a new crime, especially a new form of murder, without seeing it imitated within a few weeks. And murder would be more common than it is if criminals could only be convinced that they would never be found out. Be content to leave everything in my hands, and I promise you that beyond our three selves no one shall ever know of this. How is your patient?"

Flower was in a very bad way indeed. Wilfrid said that his conscience troubled him, inasmuch as he had not revealed the real state of affairs to Dr. Shelton. Perhaps, on the whole, his silence was wise. In time he might come to recognise that Uzali's policy was the correct one.

"I am going to fetch Miss Galloway," he said. "Now the danger is over I think she ought to be in the house till the end comes. Whatever Flower's faults his niece owes him much, and I believe she would like it."

But Wilfrid was too late. When he reached Maldon Grange early in the afternoon with Beatrice the blinds were drawn and the servants were creeping quietly about the house. Mason came downstairs with a grave face saying that his patient had passed quietly away an hour before. This was the tidings that reached Uzali and Russell when they came back just before tea. Wilfrid had sent to Oldborough for his mother and gave Beatrice into her charge. The girl was terribly distressed, and Wilfrid had made up his mind that she should never know the truth.

"I am glad to hear you say that," Uzali said. "Now you see how sound my advice was. Why should the poor girl know the truth? Why should anybody know it for the matter of that? Will you express my regrets to Miss Galloway and tell her how sorry I am for what has occurred? I am pleased there is someone in the house who can look after her. And now, Russell, if you don't mind we'll get back to London. Probably when we arrive there we shall find the news of Flower's death has preceded us. To-morrow morning we will go to the offices of the company and interview Cotter. He will be surprised to see us—"

"I shall be more surprised to see him," Russell said grimly.

"Not in the least, my dear fellow. Cotter has left the sinking ship right enough, but when he knows that his employer is dead and, what is far more to the point, that my fellow-country men are no more, he will return for the loaves and fishes fast enough. I dare say this will cost money, but I am anxious to keep up the credit of Flower's name and you know there have been strange rumours about him in the City lately."

It was wonderful how everything fell out exactly as Uzali seemed to expect. The death of Samuel Flower was the sensation in the City next day, and the offices were thronged with people when Uzali and his companion reached them. Uzali sent in his card and demanded to see Cotter at once on important business. Perhaps the peremptory command had its effect, or perhaps it was the name on the card, but a clerk came through the crowd of people with the information that Mr. Cotter would see Prince Uzali at once.

The little man sat in his master's office rubbing his hands nervously together. There was a half-malicious, half-frightened look in his eyes like that of a rat caught in a trap. Uzali closed the door and came straight to the point.

"Now you slimy scoundrel," he said, "we won't waste words, because you know who I am. It were weak to deny it. A few hours ago you had made up your mind to desert your master, but now you know he is dead, you think it is better policy to come back here. The death of three other persons has made your path a safer one, but we need not go into that. I believe that when matters are settled up Mr. Flower will prove to be deeply in debt. Now I will send an accountant to go through the books with me and I will arrange to pay everybody. In return, I must have the first offer of Maldon Grange which is bound to come into the market; indeed, to be quite candid I mean to buy Maldon Grange as a residence. When this has been done you will be free to depart on the one condition that you never show your face to me again. It will not be the slightest use your coming to Maldon Grange, because you will find the vaults empty."

Cotter looked up with a puzzled expression on his face and Uzali learned what he wanted. The secret of the treasure in the vaults of Maldon Grange was not known to Cotter.

"Wonderful man, Flower," Uzali muttered as he walked away with Russell. "Extraordinary how he managed to hoodwink everybody. He must have contrived to remove everything of value from the city of my birth before he destroyed the town by blowing up the water dam. Well, he has gone to his last account, but he was the means of restoring my own, so I will not say more against him. And now you see what I am going to do. I shall save a scandal in the City. Flower's blackguardly business will cease to exist, and in a short time Maldon Grange will find its way into my possession. I have long been thinking of purchasing a country house, and Maldon Grange will suit me very well. I shall count on your assistance in turning out those cases of priceless treasure. I shall sell what I don't want, and no curious tongues will be set wagging. On one thing I am determined, and I will take no refusal. But for you and Mercer I should never have seen my family treasures again, and that is why I am going to divide that equivalent in value between the three of us. Don't protest, for already I have far more money than I know what to do with. I shall have all those things valued as soon as possible, and I calculate there will be a cheque for a hundred thousand pounds for each of you when the business is finished. Now for a quiet lunch somewhere. I seem to need it."

* * * * *

To this day Beatrice cannot make out how events transacted themselves. That Samuel Flower had left nothing when his debts came to be paid she knew perfectly well. She also had to bewail the fact that she had not a single relative in the world. It was Uzali who, some time after he had taken possession of Maldon Grange, gave the plausible explanation of Wilfrid's sudden accession to fortune. He talked freely about concessions, of mineral wealth in his own country which he had shared with Russell and Mercer. He hinted at the marvellous way in which the venture had turned out.

"Prince Uzali says you have been speculating," Beatrice said with an attempt at sternness in her voice the next time she had an opportunity of being alone with Wilfrid. "Isn't that very dreadful of you? To have a husband who speculates—"

"I only speculated once in my life time," Wilfrid laughed, "and that was so far as you are concerned. And if one speculation only turns out as good as the other, I shall have no cause to be dissatisfied. But how much longer are you going to keep me waiting, Beatrice? We have a superfluity of this world's goods and there is nothing between us now. Besides, my mother has quite set her heart upon seeing you—"

"In that case," Beatrice said mischievously, as she glanced up in her lover's face, "there is no more to be said. I should never dream of doing anything to annoy your mother."

And with that, Wilfrid was content.