The Scales of Justice

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

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Chapter I

The Skeleton at the Feast.

Outside, a thin powder of snow was falling in fitful gusts; the low moan of the wind bent the elms like the masts of a ship in a gale. A solitary poacher, out from Longtown, glared through the swaying bushes, and wondered what was wrong at Grange Court, for the windows were all ablaze, and a string of carriages flashed to and fro along the drive. It was so black and cheerless and bitter without, that the poacher sighed for his own fireside.

The poacher was puzzled. Why were these carriages coming back so soon?

From his hiding-place he could see right into the spacious portico before the front door of Grange Court; he could see the brilliantly-lighted hall beyond, with its pictures and statues and belts of feathery ferns. Beyond, in the old oak-panelled ballroom, a dazzling kaleidoscope of figures moved in agitated groups. Somebody called loudly that no more guests were to be admitted. An unsteady voice was asking for a doctor. Tragedy was in the frosty air!

Had the Longtown poacher but known it, this was to have been a great occasion at Grange Court, for Sir Devereux Drummond was giving a dinner in honour of the twenty-first birthday of his niece, Sybil Drummond.

Sir Devereux had never married—he had remained faithful to a memory; but his only brother had died comparatively young, and his children had found a home at Grange Court. Sybil was twenty-one to-day; her brother, Captain George Drummond, was some years older. He was still with his regiment in Swaziland when the back of the campaign was broken, so that the heir to the estates of Grange Court and Longtown Rise might, it was thought, reach home any day.

Nevertheless, both uncle and sister had been a little anxious about George lately. There had been rumours, of a regiment cut off—one of the usual disasters of modern warfare—and of George nothing had been heard. He might even be a prisoner of the enemy.

There was another cause for anxiety, too, for Captain Ronald Cardrew, Sybil's lover, had been attached to the ill-fated half battalion. Some papers had hinted at incompetence, and even downright cowardice; though the idea was received with contemptuous silence at Grange Court, which had been the cradle of soldiers, as the portraits in the long gallery proved. Thus it was that pretty Sybil's smile was somewhat chastened as she stood in the drawing-room to receive the congratulations of her friends.

But why had not Sir Devereux joined her? He had promised to be down quite early, and the old friend and colleague of Loch and Havelock, was ever a man of his word.

Sir Devereux's name had stood deservedly high in the annals of the Indian Army. He had been something more than a soldier and a strategist. The Drummonds had ever been fighters, but Sir Devereux was different from the rest of his race. He was a deep and earnest Christian, a philanthropist; his name was known wherever good works were done. A little hard and stern at times, his code of honour was simple and sincere. He had never regarded his men as so many fighting machines, but had treated them like members of his own family.

Sybil knew that noble creature thoroughly, and had seen with dismay that the iron had entered the old man's soul. He had said nothing as to the paltry newspaper attacks; he did not allude to George's singular silence. The War Office

reported that George had escaped from the hills, but Sir Devereux vouchsafed no further information. That he had heard more Sybil felt certain, for his letters at breakfast-time had seriously disturbed him. But he would not hear of the party being put off. He would be better presently, he said.

And now the guests were arriving. Already some of them were in the hall. A vague sense of coming peril gripped Sybil as old Watson, the butler, came into the room.

"What is it?" Sybil gasped. "My dear uncle, is he ill, Watson?"

"I thought he was dying?" the old servant whispered. "It was after he had read the letters that came by the evening post. It's bad, miss—something about Master George. And I've sent for Dr. Gordon. It looks like a kind of stroke, miss."

One moment and Sybil was herself again. She thought nothing of her own disappointment, and had forgotten her new diamonds; she, too, was a Drummond.

"I can hear Dr. Gordon's voice," she said. "Thank God, he was at hand! Watson, you must send them all away. Tell them what has happened. Each carriage must be dismissed as it comes. Say how truly sorry I am. I could not possibly see anybody myself."

The butler bowed and withdrew as Sybil flew up the stairs. She noted the hush that had suddenly fallen on the guests and heard the sincere murmur of regret. There was a rush of carriages coming and returning, and command for others to be recalled. A large door at the head of the corridor closed, and Sybil was grateful for the profound silence.

There was Sir Devereux in his dressing-room. He had finished his toilette; he sat in the big arm-chair by the dressing-table, with a letter or two clenched in his hand. The fine, kindly old face was white and set, the lips were grey as ashes.

"Dear uncle," Sybil whispered, as she kissed the damp brow, "what is it?"

Sir Devereux Drummond looked up vaguely. He passed his hand across his forehead as if to collect his thoughts. Sybil noticed how the hand trembled.

"Have you sent them away?" he muttered. "I told Watson to do so. Little girl, I am very sorry. I tried to battle with it for your sake, but I am not so strong as I was. Gordon is in my bed-room. He said that I had had a kind of seizure. I must be very careful. I thought it was death at first. Indeed, I should have been glad. But if it be His will otherwise, I shall bow to it."

"Everybody has gone," Sybil said soothingly. "Uncle, what is it? You can trust me implicitly. I am sure you are in some deep trouble."

With an effort Sir Devereux struggled from his chair. Perhaps the shock had passed. Still he looked very old and bent and broken.

"Disgrace," he said—"dishonour! Mere shadowy words to me before to-day. Perhaps I have been too proud of my house and our good name. I have made too little allowance I fear. I never dreamt that anything of the sort could touch me. I was even too proud to ask a question till yesterday. Then I sent a long letter to Gilchrist at the War Office. I had his reply today, and a letter from Courtenay. I did not want you to know."

"Uncle," Sybil said, "is it anything—is it anything to do with George; and—"

"To do with George—yes. You need not speak; nothing could explain away the damning evidence that I hold in my hand. My poor child! Go and see if everybody

has gone; go and talk to those friends who are staying in the house, and who will be anxious to learn what is amiss. I'll come down presently; I must."

Sybil went off immediately. She had forgotten the handful of intimate friends, and they had to be considered. Sybil made as light as she could of the matter. Dinner was ready, and the houseparty must dine. Indeed the meal was already served. Would not Lady Hellington and Mr. Norbury make the best of it? Sybil herself must look after her uncle. Oh, yes, he was better, and would be down later. There was nothing critical. There was nothing else to be done; it was too late for anybody to leave Grange Court to-night. Sybil slipped out presently, anxious to gain the hall, and there breathe the fresh air after the heated atmosphere of the drawing-room.

She shivered as the big door opened, bringing in the sting of the gale and the whirl of the snow-wreaths. Truly a bitter, night—a night not fit to turn a dog out. And inside was the scent of flowers, and the warm, sweet air of the house.

Sybil wondered why the door had been opened, for she knew that there were no more guests to come. Watson stood on the big mat, listening with forced politeness to the late caller. It was a woman, wrapped from head to foot in furs. The full flare of the electric chandelier flooded her face—a pure, slim face of ivory hue. A very noble face, Sybil told herself; clean-cut features and delicate, arched nose, a small, resolute mouth, and eyes of steadfast brown. On the whole, a pretty, refined high bred countenance, Sybil thought, touched and ennobled by a suggestion of sorrow and suffering. Sybil wondered where she had seen the girl before. She was evidently a lady, and one accustomed to the luxuries of life. Impelled by curiosity and attracted towards the stranger, Sybil went forward.

"Is there anything that I can do for you?" she asked.

The other girl turned and smiled her thanks faintly. It was only the suggestion of a smile, but it showed Sybil how beautiful the stranger was. They made a fine contrast—the one slender and graceful as a lily, the other a perfect example of the rich dark beauty of the South.

"You are very good." The reply came in a clear, low voice. "Of course, I should not have intruded to-night, only it is a question of necessity. A poor man in one of the cottages at the back of Moor Lane is down with pneumonia—or so it seems to me. I went over after dinner to take him some fruit and I was quite alarmed. Dr. Gordon's partner has been called out suddenly and I learnt that Dr. Gordon himself had been called in here an hour ago. Our butler is not fit to leave the house, so I walked over myself. I am Miss Cameron, of the Moat House."

Sybil nodded thoughtfully. The Moat House was not more than two miles away; a fine old place, dull and secluded, perhaps, but full of historic associations—the dower-house of the Drummonds, in fact. The Camerons had come there some five or six years ago, but nobody in the county know anything about them. As the newcomers had let it be seen that they wanted no society, the county left them severely alone. There were strange stories, of course, but they were inevitable in a country place.

"It is very thoughtful and kind of you," Sybil said warmly. "Never mind. Watson, I'll go and fetch Dr. Gordon; I am quite sure that he will go at once. Whoever knew the doctor to refuse an act of kindness? My uncle is far from well, and the doctor has been to see him. Watson, take Miss Cameron into the library till I come back."

Evidently the doctor took a deal of finding, or so Miss Cameron thought, as she sat in the ingle-nook by the side of the fireplace waiting. She could hear the subdued murmur of the chastened guests, and the swell of gentle laughter, and she sighed softly to herself. For hers had been a lonely life—no companions of her own age, even, nothing during girlhood but the seclusion of a convent school. Flora Cameron went nowhere, saw nobody. Yet she was a very woman still, and the joy of life flowed in her veins.

After the brisk walk in the keen, shrewd air, the glow of the wood-fire made her drowsy. She did not feel inclined to move; she wanted to listen to the rise and fall of the distant but melodious hum.

She heard a firm, measured step across the oak floor, a quiet voice asking a question as to some letters which a groom had been sent to fetch from Longtown. A more respectful voice replied that the letters were on the library table. Sir Devereux had come down to the library for something, Flora surmised.

She could hear an envelope or two ripped open impatiently; she heard the sound of a heavy sigh—a suppressed suggestion of pain. Then she caught herself wondering if Dr. Gordon had already left the house: she felt herself like an intruder, as Sir Drummond began to talk to himself aloud.

"It's impossible!" he groaned. "A nephew of mine, my brother's son, the fellow who some day will be master here! Oh! no! I can't believe it. By Heaven, it is like some hideous dream! And yet Courtenay, my old friend Courtenay, would never have written like that if—if—I—I can't see. I'm getting old; my eyes are not what they once were. And to think—"

The hard, quavering voice trailed off into an unmistakable sob. A wave of red came over the hidden listener's face—she could not disclose her presence now. She heard a quick step of somebody who seemed to tremble with excitement.

Again did the hot blood flame over Flora's forehead. Delicacy forbade the discovery of her position. She could not proclaim that she had overheard a sacred family secret. She must stay there for the present, and seek an avenue of escape as soon as possible, Then came a step in the hall, and someone entered the library.

"Well, and what's the matter now, Watson?" Sir Devereux asked. His voice was quite steady again.

"Most wonderful thing, sir!" Watson said. His tone was joyfully hysterical. "He's come back, sir—actually come back, this night of all nights in the year! Mr. George, sir—our Mr. George—standing in the hall, as I seen him with my very own eyes, Sir Devereux!"

"George!" Sir Devereux cried. His voice rose again to a kind of hoarse scream. "George—to-night! Oh, I have been too prosperous; my life has been too well ordered by providence; I have neglected the things that I ought to have done. I might have known, I might have felt that my day of trouble must come. And to fall like this—all at once!"'

"Is—is there, anything the matter, sir?" the trembling Watson asked. His master, firm and resolute, his old employer stern and commanding, he knew; but this old, old man, with the white, quivering face and palsied hands, he had never seen before. "For Heaven's sake don't look at me like that, sir."

No reply for a moment. The uneasy listener in the deep ingle-nook could see in imagination the face of the old soldier as he fought for the mastery of himself. Flora would have given much to find herself in the teeth of the snow again; but she could not move now. She heard the howl of the gale, she saw the masses of red sparks go wheeling up the wide chimney, she tried to think of other matters. She had no wish to hear the ghastly secrets of the house.

"Yes, yes; you are right, Watson!" Sir Devereux said humbly. "I—I was overcome. It was so utterly unexpected, I didn't know what to do. Where is Mr. George? Has he seen anybody else yet, or—"

"Nobody, sir. He slipped into the cloak-room in the vestibule till I could smuggle him up to dress. Looks more like bed than dancing, to my mind. He wanted to make the surprise complete and—"

"Never mind that. Say nothing further, but bring Mr. George to me here. Tell him that I want to see him in the library at once. He is to come to me alone. Now go!"

Watson crept away, closing the door behind him. What hideous tragedy was here? The listener wondered. Not that she wanted to know; she would have given anything to be outside the door. She felt hot from head to foot. And yet the strange feeling of delicacy held her there. She was not quite as other girls: she knew but little of the world and its ways. She hoped that this close family secret wasn't going to be revealed to her. Looking round, she could see a little more than half of the room; the severe simplicity of the oaken panels, the portraits in hoop and ruffle, and lace and armour, telling of the pride of race and pride of place—the proud humility of good people. With the old Scottish blood in her veins, Flora Cameron understood that feeling. In the angle of an old Florentine mirror, she could see the solitary occupant of the room now.

He was tall and bronzed and grey, the typical old soldier even in his evening dress. But the stoop of the shoulders was fearful, the kindly face pitiful in its trembling, carking emotion. A scarlet riband flamed across his shirt, and a collar of some order dangled below his tie. He turned in his agitated, unsteady walk, and the door opened and a young man entered. Flora could tell that he was a young man by his step, even before he spoke, though the step dragged a little.

"Well, uncle," the voice said, "are you not surprised to see me? A little glad, too, I hope. I heard of this grand dinner in town, so I came on without delay. My doctor says I ought to have stayed in bed, but—But what is wrong?"

A pleasant voice, Flora decided—a voice that she liked—clear, firm, and true. Yet how she wished she had proclaimed her presence. Dr. Gordon must have departed on his errand, and Miss Drummond was under the impression that her visitor had left the house also. Even now it was not too late. Flora did not lack courage; it was shyness that held her back. Perhaps, after all, there would be nothing—.

"Did anyone see you just now?" Sir Devereux asked. "Anyone, of the house-party recognise you?"

"Nobody whatever," the young man replied, taken aback at his reception. "Nobody but Watson. But, uncle, why do you ask? Your manner is so strange!"

"Strange! And well it may be. It is even strange to me that I hold myself in check so well. And yet an hour ago I would have changed places with nobody in the

world. I am Sir Devereux Drummond, the head; mark you, of a family of distinguished soldiers—God-fearing, up-right, honourable. They are all about; you, here in the hall, on the stairway. And every man of them has helped to make history. Never was a Drummond yet who shamed the family honour—till you!"

The young man gasped. Flora caught a glimpse of him now in the angle of the mirror—tall, well set up, like the older man, square and soldierly. His face was very pale, he used a stick by way of support. A thrill of pity touched the listener.

"I am not quite so strong as I might be," the young man said. "I have by no means recovered from the effects of my wound, and the rough life with the rest after the affair at Kooli Pass. If you will please to be more explicit—"

"Then you are going to brazen it out? Well, I might have expected that. If you had only written and explained matters, only let me know—"

"But, uncle, it was impossible. After the Kooli Pass disaster my troops were cut up. I was desperately wounded and fell into the hands of the foe. They were as kind to me as they could be, but they were hard pressed to live themselves. Two months I spent with them, till fortune favoured me and I got down to the coast. They sent me home at once. I admit it was a bad business."

"A bad business! You merely admit that it was a bad business! Heavens, has the man no sense of shame? It was a disgraceful, a cowardly affair! If your men had stood firm you must have held the post and saved the battalion. As it was, you played the coward, you gave the order to retreat! If you had no heed for your own reputation, you might have thought of Ronald Cardrew, the man who is engaged to your sister. I tell you the affair is out, sir; it is whispered in the clubs and has got into the press. And you come back as if nothing had happened, expecting a welcome to the home of your ancestors! If you had only—"

The speaker paused as the door opened, and a rustle of silk draperies followed. Sybil Drummond fluttered into the room eagerly.

"The doctor has already gone, Miss Cameron," she said. "He did not—Why. George, George, my dearest boy—"

A little cry, half pleasure, half pain, broke from the girl's lips. She hurried forward with outstretched hands, but with a quick movement Sir Devereux stepped before her.

"No," he said, "not yet. This is the sorriest hour of my life, but I must not forget my duty to myself and to you, my dear. I would have spared you if I could. Go away, Sybil."

"But uncle," the girl protested, "after what you have already hinted to me, you must tell me everything, I could not rest till I know. And now that George has come home—"

"Ay, but not to stay." The words were deep and impressive. "Not till I am dead and gone. Perhaps it is best for you to hear the truth. I only learnt it myself within the last few hours. Here is the letter from Colonel Courtenay. Ask him if he dare to read it."

"Why not?" George exclaimed. "I will read the letter. Give it me."

The paper crackled in the dead silence of the room as George Drummond unfolded it.

"It has been delayed in transit." Sir Devereux said. "Read it aloud!"

Chapter II

The Letter.

Once more the listener felt the blood flowing into her face, but she could not withdraw now, and must remain where she was. She would try to forget all she heard. And yet she was prejudiced almost fanatically on the side of the accused. With all the tumultuous Highland blood in her veins, she had a fine contempt for a coward. But she did not believe that George Drummond was a coward. No man with such a voice could possibly be craven. It was illogical, no doubt, but her instinct told her she was right.

"As you say," George said, "this letter has been delayed. I underhand that Colonel Courtenay has gone up-country with a small field force. And this is what he writes:

> "'My dear old Friend and Comrade,—I have been through some trying moments in my time, and my duty compels me to do certain things that I had far rather have left alone; but never had I such a painful task as this. I am going to make the plunge, so that the pain will be the soonest healed."
>
> "'Your boy is a coward! You would strike me if you heard me say so, but the fact remains. It was over that affair at Kooli Pass. I daresay, as a keen old soldier, you followed all the details in the papers. And when I heard that your boy was dead, and that the Swazis had buried him, I was glad, though I liked the man as my own son.
>
> "The facts are quite plain. George lost his head and gave the order to retire, though young Ronald Cardrew tells me he could have held the position easily. You know all the mischief that followed the loss of the battalion, and for that loss George is to blame. I need not go into details. For your sake and for the sake of the house, I hope the matter will not be talked of. For I have done what I ought not to have done, and it is sorely against my conscience—I have glossed over George's conduct as much as I could. And from the bottom of my heart I hope that he is dead.
>
> "' I am writing you this because my position here is not secure, and my time may be near at hand. Anyway, I shall not have an opportunity of communicating with you again for months. What I want to impress upon you is this—if George is not dead, if he has escaped in the marvellous way a good many of our fellows have done, he must send in his papers. Of that there can be no shadow of doubt. If he does not, then I must tell the truth.
>
> "'God bless you, dear old comrade, and give you courage to bear the blow! I cannot say more.
>
> "'Yours very sincerely,
>
> "'GRANTLEY COURTENAY.'"

From end to end, slowly and in a cold, chilled voice, George Drummond read the fatal letter. Then it fluttered from his fingers to the ground. A long, painful silence followed. Sir Devereux moved at length, and tapped impatiently on the table.

"Well, sir," he said, "have you anything to say? Anything to account for your presence here to-night? Any sort of defence? But that is impossible!"

"I am utterly overcome," George responded. The words were an effort to him. "I am yet weak and low, and this has been a great shock to me. I—I was not close up with my men when the thing happened. There was a mistake somewhere. In trying to aid Ronald Cardrew—"

"Oh, George," said Sybil tearfully, "don't throw the blame on him!"

"No—I had forgotten," George went on. "It was a very painful business altogether. In any case, it would have had a serious effect on my promotion. Cardrew told his own tale when I was in the hands of the enemy. It is possible, perhaps, that I—"

"May say it was Cardrew's fault," Sir Devereux said, with a bitter sigh. "Such things have happened before. Do I understand that that it what you are going to do?"

There was a long pause before George Drummond replied. He looked from the quivering face of his uncle to the pitiful, beautiful one of his sister. She seemed so delicate and fragile, so incapable of standing anything in the way of a shock. George spoke at last.

"I say nothing for the present," he replied. "I am utterly overwhelmed by this thing. If you only knew the pleasure with which I had looked forward to this evening—and then to be called a coward. Well, sis, I am not going to defend myself."

"I am glad to hear it," Sir Devereux said. "We never had a liar in the family, and I find that you can spare us that disgrace."

"And Ronald might have suffered," Sybil murmured.

The listener felt her pulses quickening a little. If George had been her brother she would have lifted him up and poured oil into his wounds, even had he been a coward. But he was no coward. Weak and ill and broken as he was, no coward could have taken his misfortunes so quietly. Sir Devereux crossed the room and help open the door for Sybil.

"You must go back to our guests," he said. "This long absence on the part of both of us is not quite courteous. Though the wound bleeds we have yet to smile. And I have something to say to this gentleman."

Sybil departed obediently. The deeper, stronger emotions were not hers. Sir Devereux faced round slowly and sternly upon the younger man, who stood, pale and quiet, leaning on his stick.

"Now, sir," he asked, "what do you propose to do in this matter?"

"I am afraid I do not quite follow you, sir," George replied. "In the first place, the shock of the business has been a little too much for me. My head is giddy and confused. All I say is that I nearly lost my life trying to retrieve the mistake of—of another. I cannot tell you anything else. Perhaps if I was better—But I cannot stay here."

"You are quite right—you cannot. In time to come the property must be yours and the title. Your ancestors will probably turn to the wall. But, as you say you

cannot stay here; I could not permit it. You will do as you like. You have your mother's small property, so that you will not starve. I presume you sent your trap away."

"Of course I did. Foolishly enough I looked for a welcome. It is a bitter night, and I am not very strong, as I told you just now. To-morrow—"

"No—to-night!" The words rang out clear and cold. "Not under my roof, if you please. Not even for a single night, cold as it is! Call me cruel—perhaps I am. But you cannot stay here. My boy, my boy, for the sake of your mother, whom I loved, I would do all I could for you, but not that, not that, because—Perhaps in the course of time—"

"Say no more!" George cried; "not another word, if you please. If you asked me to remain now I could not possibly do so. You need have no shame for me. Watson is discreet, and will keep my secret. Let me have my coat in here, and I can leave by the French window. Will you let me have my coat without delay, sir."

Sir Devereux rang the bell and Watson appeared. The old servant started as he received his order. He would have lingered, perhaps expostulated, only Sir Devereux gave him a stern, yet pitiful glance.

"Better go, Watson," George said; "and be discreet and silent; don't say I have been here. The family quarrel must not be known even to a favoured old servant like you. Get my coat, please. To-morrow I will let you know where to send my kit-bag. Goodnight, Watson."

Watson muttered something almost tearfully as he helped George on with his heavy, fur-lined coat. The latter looked round about the room, with its carved oak panels and ceiling; he glanced at the grave faces of the dead and gone Drummonds looking down on him. As the French window opened, a gust of cold air and driving snow came into the room, causing the fire to roar as the sparks streamed like hot chaff up the chimney. A ripple of laughter, almost of mockery it seemed, came from the dining-room; the soft fragrance of the hothouse flowers floated in. George gave one backward glance—Flora could see the light on his pale face now—and he was gone. Just for a moment Sir Devereux stood with humbled head and shaking shoulders—a bent and broken man.

"This is foolish," he said. "I will forget; I will not let the others see this. And may God forgive me if I have done wrong to-night!"

He crossed to the door and vanished.

As he did so, Flora Cameron came from her hiding-place. There was nothing for her to wait for. She recollected that Sybil Drummond had proclaimed the fact that Dr. Gordon had gone on his errand—the hall was empty. Flora crossed over to the big door and closed it silently behind her. The cold night air blew chill on her crimson face.

A figure stood there with the lights of the house shining on his face. Then he turned and limped painfully down the avenue. Flora following close behind. Once she saw the outcast stagger and press his hand to his chest, as if in pain. The cold outside was intense, the fine snow cut like lashes. Flora was shy and timid no longer, she saw her duty plainly.

"You are going to try to walk to Longtown?" she asked. "Five miles on a night like this? You are Captain George Drummond, and I am Flora Cameron, of the Moat House. Captain Drummond, by no fault of mine, I was compelled to hear all

that passed to-night. May I be allowed to say, if it is not impertinent, how sorry I am."

"Though I am a coward," George smiled faintly. "You must see that, of course."

"I am quite sure there has been a mistake," Flora said quietly. "I used to see you when I first came here. I used to peep through the park railings and watch you and your sister playing together. I was a lonely child. But we need not go into that. You cannot walk into Longtown to-night."

"I have done worse things in South Africa, Miss Cameron," George said.

They were past the lodge gates and into the road by now. Truly a strange meeting and strange conversation, George thought. The pure sweetness of the girl's face and her touching sympathy moved him, cold as the night was. He staggered for a little way, and then looked up, dazed and confused.

"I am very sorry," he said; "I have overrated my strength. I cannot go any farther. If there is any cottage or place of that sort where I can—"

He stumbled again and fell by the roadside, his eyes half closed. Flora stopped, and chaffed his cold hands.

"Courage," she said, "courage! Make an effort. The Moat is not far off. Come!"

Chapter III

The Moat House.

George Drummond's expostulation was feeble; he was too far gone to protest much. The wind seemed to chill him to the bone, despite his fur coat. He staggered along by sheer instinct; he was back in Swaziland again for the moment—many a night there had he been compelled to drag his weary body along like this—then, just for an instant, all his faculties returned.

"It is more than kind of you," he said. "But it is absurd! Your people; are you quite sure that they will not wonder that—you understand?"

It seemed to him that Flora hesitated, that she felt rather than saw the blood in her cheeks.

"Oh, what does it matter?" she cried passionately, "Don't you see that this is a case of life or death? You cannot, you cannot go any farther! We are not like other people I know. We have our own sorrows and griefs, and they concern us alone, but this is not the ordinary course of things. Give me your arm."

There was a touch of command in the tones, softened by the slightest suggestion of the Scottish accent, and George was fain to obey. So far as he could recollect, they were nearly two miles from the nearest shelter, and these two miles would have been as a desert journey in his present condition. He yielded himself to his fate, he walked blindly on, bewildered as in a dream; everything was a blank now.

George recalled it in the after days piece by piece. He passed under a portcullis, across a courtyard, and into a hall, stone-flagged, oak-paneled, and flanked by figures in armour, with ancient needlework on the walls. It seemed as if Flora was

talking to someone who expostulated with her about something. The atmosphere of the hall was by no means suggestive of a vault. Lights burned from many candles, set in silver branches.

"It was inevitable," Flora was saying. "It is Captain Drummond, of Grange Court. A family quarrel, I suppose. At any rate, Captain Drummond was literally turned out of the house. Can't you see that he is ill—dying, perhaps? What else could I do?"

A faded voice quavered something querulously, and then George seemed to fall asleep. When he recovered his senses, he was lying before a blazing fire, his coat had been removed, and a grateful sense of warmth possessed him. From a certain pungent flavour on his lips, he concluded that somebody had given him brandy.

"That is all right," Flora's voice came out of the haze. "You are better now. Shall I get you something to eat? You have not dined."

George had not dined—there had been no time. He realised now that much of his weakness was due to the want of food. Something dainty was placed by his side on a heavy salver. Then, for the first time, George looked around him.

He was in what had been the refectory of the Mont in the old days, when it had belonged to the Order of the Capuchin Friars. There were the quaint carved saints on the walls, the arched roof with the pierced window below; the whole thing modernised by a heavy Turkey carpet and some oil paintings.

The beauty of the apartment was heightened by masses of flowers grouped everywhere. George wondered where he had caught their subtle perfume before, and why it reminded him of a church and an organ, and "the voice that breathed o'er Eden." Then it came to him that most of the flowers were white blossoms.

"It is very good of you to have me here," George said; "but I ought not to have come."

"Not that we mind," a faded voice that George had noticed before said. "In the old days of the Camerons hospitality was a sacred law. The prince and the beggar and the outlaw—they all came to the sanctuary for protection. But what will he say?"

The voice was faded and tired; the speaker's velvet gown was faded, too, though its gloss and its lace spoke of richness in the past. As George looked up at the speaker, he saw that her eyes were as faded as her dress; they seemed to be colourless and expressionless; she might have been moved by unseen wires at a distance. And yet the old, old face was by no means plain or lacking in intelligence and nobility, and again the softness and luxuriance of the rich brown hair belied the haggard anxiety of the face. The speaker was tall, too, with the old-world dignity of the grande dame, while her refined tones had the faintest suggestion of the Highland about them that George had noticed in Flora.

"It cannot matter what anybody thinks," the girl said, though her upward glance was not altogether free from timidity. "Captain Drummond will not be here for many hours. By good chance, as it turns out, I overheard a quarrel between Captain Drummond and his uncle, which ended in our guest being turned out of the house."

"The same thing happened to your Uncle Ivor in my young days," the older lady said.

“Precisely. We do not seem to have learnt much since then. Captain Drummond was very ill, and so I persuaded him to come here. Could I have done less, mother?”

The elder lady nodded; she sat down in a great oak chair, and the faded eyes became vacant. So this was Flora’s mother, George thought. Doubtless some deep sorrow had partially affected her reason. She was still under the spell of that grief, if not of some actual terror besides. For George could not fail to notice how she started at every little noise—the opening and shutting of a door, a step in the hall. Then her eyes went towards the door with a dumb, supplicating terror, as if pleading to an unseen tormentor.

“I hope that he will not mind,” she said. “It is for so short a time.”

“Only till to-morrow,” Flora said. “I have sent a little note to Sir Devereux’s butler to forward Captain Drummond’s bag here. Only for a little time, mother.”

The pathetic figure in the big arm-chair nodded and her eyes closed. Altogether a weird, strange household, with Flora the only bright and lovable thing about it. George’s eyes, roaming round the room rested at length upon the mantelpiece, where a photograph or two stood in silver frames. One of them was a soldier in uniform. The features seemed familiar enough to the intruder—surely they were those of his friend and companion, Ronald Cardrew! All unconscious of what he was doing he rose and advanced to satisfy the evidence of his eyes.

“Ronald Cardrew,” came from the big chair. The faded eyes were open again.

“Ay, Ronald Cardrew. You are a soldier yourself, sir; and perhaps you may be able to tell me—What was I going to say? Flora, what was I going to say? My mind is not what it was.”

Flora had jumped to her feet, her face flaming. In a flash the recollection of the conversation she had overheard came back to her. Ronald Cardrew was engaged to Drummond’s sister. Sybil Drummond had thought more of her lovers reputation than of her brother’s. George would have asked a question, but the flaming confusion of Flora’s face checked his words on his lips. The figure in the big armchair seemed to have lapsed into slumber.

“I cannot explain,” Flora whispered. “Don’t ask me. Some day perhaps if I ever meet you again. But, then, I shall never meet you after to-night.”

Again certain words came to George’s lips. He meant to meet the girl again. She had believed and trusted in him, when his own sister had turned against him. Her beauty and sweetness had touched him deeply. There might be strange and evil things going on in this house, but Flora was pure as the blooms from which she took her name.

“I am better already,” George said. “It was the cold and the want of food that overcame me. That and the—the great shock which you know of. If you have a conveyance of any kind to drive me over to Longtown, I would not intrude upon your kindness any longer. But I should be sorry to think that we are not going to meet again. I do not want to dwell upon it.”

“‘Journey’s end in lovers’ meetings,’” the faded voice from the armchair said, as in a dream. “Hark!”

Somebody had commenced to sing overhead—a pure, sweet voice, clear as a bell and fresh as that of a child. With his eyes on the grandly carved roof, George could imagine that he was in some cathedral, listening to the treble of the favourite

chorister. It must be a boy's voice, he thought, the voice of an artist, for the tones thrilled with feeling and passion as the glorious melody of the Message rang out. It was all so soft and soothing in that dark house of mysteries. And yet, at the first sound of the song, the faded figure sat up erect and rigid, and Flora's face grew stony and contemptuous.

"He is coming," Mrs. Cameron whispered. "What will he say, Flora?"

"I do not see that it very much matters," Flora answered, in a voice that she strove in vain to render indifferent. "The thing was inevitable, and I did it."

The clear sweet tones came closer, the pure passion of the song rang near at hand. Then the door opened, and the singer entered, with the song still upon his lips. George Drummond gave a little exclamation of surprise. He could feel rather than see that Flora was watching him, for the singer was no angel-faced boy, but a man of massive proportions—an enormous man, with great, pendulous cheeks, and a body like that of Falstaff. He was exceedingly tall, too, and well set up, his great, thick lips were clean-shaven, his grey eyes had pouches under them.

At the first glance he might have passed for a benevolent giant, but a further inspection revealed a certain line of the features and a certain suggestion of satire about the mouth. His voice was as an exceedingly pure alto, as George knew now, and once he had seen the singer it was strange that all the subtle beauty seemed to go out of the song.

The song had stopped suddenly, as the artist caught sight of the stranger.

"My uncle—Bernard Beard," Flora said. "This is Captain Drummond, uncle. I daresay you wonder why he is here when Grange Court is so close."

"But relations quarrel at times," the newcomer said. His voice was rich and oily. When he smiled, as he did now, George felt a strange sense of attraction. "Our space here is somewhat limited, but—"

George rose to his feet. The words were courteous enough, but their meaning was plain. As the big man turned to say something to the faded lady in the arm-chair, Flora caught at George's arm.

"Be patient!" she whispered. "God knows that I may have need of you. If there is any little thing that you owe me, for my sake be patient, patient and forbearing."

Chapter IV

In the Dead of Night.

George dropped back half angry and half ashamed. He had a burning desire now to be up and doing, to get away from here, even if it were into the black throat of the night. A snarling breath of wind shook the old house; there was a lash of thin snow on the windows. Exposure on a night like this meant death.

Flora seemed to divine what was passing through the mind of her guest, for she smiled faintly. The faded figure in the armchair nodded. Just for a moment her face lighted up, and then George saw what a naturally noble countenance it was.

The features were vaguely familiar to him. He wondered where he had seen them before.

"You are exceedingly good to me," he faltered. "But for Miss Cameron, I hardly know what would have become of me to-night."

"It was foolish of you to quarrel with your uncle," Bernard Beard put in.

"He is a good and just man," Mrs. Cameron said. "A little hard, perhaps, but good and upright men are apt to be narrow. They do not make allowance for the follies of weaker men. In the days when we lived at Knaresfield—"

The speaker's voice grew weak again and hesitating. But George knew now where he had seen and heard of Mrs. Cameron before. The word Knaresfield recalled the past to his mind. Mrs. Cameron of Knaresfield had been a household word in the world of philanthropy. Could this faded, unhappy woman be the same grand, noble-looking being that George remembered as a boy? She had been a great friend of Sir Devereux's ten or twelve years ago; and here they had been living close together for four years, and, to all appearances, Sir Devereux was ignorant of his old friend's existence. And yet she was living on the Grange Court estate! What mystery was here, George wondered. He came out of the world of speculation with a sudden start.

"There was no quarrel with my uncle," he said. "A difference of opinion, let us say. I chose to remain silent. I could not ask a favour."

"It will be all right in God's good time," Mrs. Cameron said, suddenly. "You have much to live for."

The last words brought a strange comfort to George. They rang out like an inspiring prophecy. Indeed, he had much to live for, but, meanwhile, he was tired and worn out. The food had revived him, the grateful warmth had thawed his chilled bones, and a great desire for sleep had come over him; the room began to expand; the figures then grew hazy and indistinct. Somebody was asking a question.

"Really, I beg your pardon," George murmured. "I am not very strong yet, and I have travelled too far to-day. I will not trouble you after to-morrow. It is really good of you."

"It is exceedingly selfish of us to keep you up," Flora said. "I will show you to your room. A fire has been lighted there. When you are quite ready—"

But George was quite ready now. He bowed over the hand of the faded lady in the chair. He half hesitated in the case of Mr. Beard. But the latter seemed to be busy arranging some of the numberless white flowers, and returned the good-night with a careless nod. He seemed to be secretly amused about something.

Flora had taken up a bedroom candle, and had preceded George up the shallow oak stairs. It was a pleasant room that she came to at length, an octagonal room, with panelled walls and blazing log fire burning cheerfully on the dogs. The red curtains of the lattice windows were not yet drawn, so that there was a glimpse into the blackness of the night. The thin snow fluttered on the diamond-shaped panes.

"I think you will be comfortable here," Flora said. "Pray that you may be yourself in the morning. If you care to stay here for a day or two—"

"I could not so far trouble you," George said. He did not fail to note the strange hesitation in Flora's voice, the desire to be good and kind struggling with some

hesitating fear. “You have been more than kind to me already, and, as your mother said to-night, I have much to live for. I must get back to London in the morning. I may not have a chance to speak freely to you again. Fate has placed you in possession of my story, or, rather, of a portion of it, but there is one thing I want you to believe—I am neither a coward nor a liar. Try to think that I am—”

“A good man struggling with misfortune,” Flora interrupted. “I am certain of it. If I had not felt certain, do you suppose that I should have brought you here to-night? You are suffering for the sake of another who—”

“I am; and you know who that other is. That photograph of Ronald Cardrew—”

“Hush!” Flora whispered “You must ask me no questions. There are reasons why I cannot speak. If you only knew the story of this house of sorrows! If you only know why my dear mother has changed from a noble, honoured woman to a broken wreck in ten years! But I dare not think of it. I dare not! What is that?”

Across the gale came the sudden boom of a gun. The sound rolled suddenly away.

“From Greystone Prison!” George explained. “You must recognise the signal that a convict has escaped. Fancy the poor wretch being hunted through such a night as this. I heard that gun an hour ago on my way to Grange Court. If they fire two guns it is a signal the convict is near. When I left for India two years ago, they were putting up a search-light on the prison tower. They use that now, I understand.”

Flora nodded. Her face was white and set. Her lips were parted as if she had run fast and far. Imagination seemed to be playing strange tricks with her.

“The searchlight was used twice last year,” she said. “It is just possible that on the present occasion—Captain Drummond, if I should want a friend to-night, will you help me?”

“I will do anything in the wide world for you,” George said passionately. “But for you—”

“Never mind me. It is merely possible that I may want your assistance before daybreak. If there was anybody else that I could trust—if you were not so worn and ill—”

“That matters nothing. I am feeling better already. Miss Cameron, I implore you?”

“Yes, yes. And yet I may be mistaken. I will knock gently on your door. Pray heaven that there may be no occasion to do anything of the kind. Good-night!”

The girl turned away, looking as if ashamed of the tears glittering in her eyes. George closed the door behind her, and flung himself on the bed. He was utterly worn out, weary in mind and body. The shock of the evening had told upon him more than he cared to own. It seemed so strange that he should be here in the very house where he used to play as a boy. Sybil and himself had been very fond of making adventures in the empty old house years before. George roused himself with an effort, and opened the casement window a little way; whatever the weather was, he never slept in a close room.

He flung himself half across the bed again, falling by habit into an attitude of prayer. But the unfinished prayer died on his lips to-night; nature was utterly exhausted. And then George Drummond slept as he knelt.

It seemed but a few moments before he was awake again—awake again with the curious feeling of alertness and the knowledge that he was needed by somebody.

He closed his eyes, but a strong light seemed to be upon them. The eyes opened languidly. There was no fancy, at any rate, for a great white glare played and flashed across the room. The wood fire had died down to sullen red embers; the candle had been extinguished before George knelt to say his prayers.

Then where was the light coming from? George's first idea was that the house was on fire. He sat up in bed and sniffed, but no smell came pungently to his nostrils, and the white light was far too steady and brilliant for an outbreak of fire. The gale outside must have fanned it to a roar. But still the light came and went in long, clear, penetrating glare, sometimes in the room and sometimes outside it.

Then George recognised what it was—the great electric searchlight from the tower of Greystone Prison. They were using the big arc and the rest for the wretched convict. A moment later and there came the sullen boom of two guns in quick succession. That meant that the search was nearly over, and that one party of hunters had signalled the near proximity of the quarry.

Fully awake now, George crossed to the window and opened it widely. The full force of the gale and the sting of the fine snow struck his face as with a whip. He could hear the pines on the hillside tossing and surging before the blast; the white, blinding band of the searchlight seemed to sweep and lick up the whole country.

Surely there was somebody tapping gently on the bedroom door. George scorned the notion as imagination playing tricks upon a brain already over-strained. But it was not imagination. He could distinctly hear the gentle touch of knuckles on the oak door. And suddenly Flora Cameron's strange request came into his mind. Again he heard the muffled sound of the two guns.

George softly crossed the room and opened the door. Flora stood in the dark passage with a candle in her hand. She had not undressed; her face was red and white by turns. Her confusion was pitiable to witness.

"It has come," she whispered—"the assistance that I so sorely needed. And yet I had no right to ask you—you, a soldier of the King, who—"

"Never mind that," George murmured. "If there is anything that I can do for you."

"Oh, you can do everything for me! If only you were not so worn by illness! You hear the sound of the guns—the two guns that tell that—But perhaps I am wrong—perhaps it is another convict, after all. Still, I heard the signal. Come this way."

A door seemed suddenly to open down-stairs, and a great breath of icy air came rushing along the corridor. The candle, shaking in the silver sconce in Flora's hand, guttered and flared, then there came another icy breath, and the candle was extinguished altogether. A moment later and George felt Flora's fingers gripping his own.

"Let the candle go," she whispered; "we are far safer without a light. Will you trust me? Will you let me take your hand and guide you?"

"To the end of the world," George said passionately. "To the end of the world for your sweet sake! Lead on and I will follow. The touch of your fingers gives me—"

George paused, as the flare of the searchlight seemed to fill the house again. It rose and fell through the great window at the end of the corridor; the place was light as day. Then the side sash of the parlour casement was lifted a little, and a white yet strong and sinewy hand appeared, grasping the edge of the frame.

"Look!" Flora whispered. "Look and tell me what you make of that!"

The white, hot flame seemed to beat fully upon the grasping hand. Then a steely wrist followed, and beyond the wrist the hideous yellow and the broad arrow of a convict's garb. And once more the two signal guns boomed out in quick succession.

"You are not afraid?" George asked.

"Afraid?" came the fiercely exultant reply. "Oh, no; I am glad, glad, glad!"

Chapter V

The Yellow Stripe.

The cold grey mist falling over London as George Drummond's train slid from the roaring arch of Paddington station had fallen still more chill over the moors behind Longtown. That was some hours before George started on his momentous journey—before the joy and happiness of his life went out. Against the background of the marshes stood the long, grey building that constituted Greystone Gaol. It was perhaps—at any rate from the point of view of the authorities—an ideal spot for a convict prison; from any standpoint it was dreary and desolate to a degree. If it had been necessary to chill the heart and take the last ray of hope out of a convict, a glimpse of Greystone would have done it. There was work to be done here of a kind—the building of a long wall, to keep back the creeping sea, foundations to be dug in the shifting gravel, a slow, tedious job that showed little result after a year's labour.

A gang worked now on the slimy gravel, some filling the burrows, others pushing the same up the slope to the big, grassy mound, where a warder stood looking here and there, his rifle resting on the hollow of his arm. The big figure in uniform stood out against the misty sky; there was a deep rampart behind him. There was no talk, no passing of words, nothing but dogged toil. And all wore the yellow stripe of the tribe. The mournful spectacle was in fit keeping with the dreary landscape.

For the most part the wearers of the yellow stripe were of the typical class. The one man at the end of the gang, working in the hole amidst the wet gravel, looked a little different from the rest. In the first place, he was by no means bad-looking, his face was gentle and refined, his hands had not been accustomed to this kind of toil. He had suffered, too, if it were possible to judge by the expression of his face—a proud, sensitive, eager face—the face of one who has been cruelly used by fate.

He worked on doggedly enough, and yet he seemed to be expecting something—that strange, restless feeling of hope that comes to us all even in the depths of the profoundest despair.

Two years of this had not killed his spirit. It is bad for the guilty to face the bitterness of their crime, but it is far worse for the innocent.

Nevertheless, the man started violently with surprise as a body came wriggling like a serpent over the marshy ground and slid head-first into the hole. But the worker never stopped in his labour, he did not even look down.

“Is it really you, Garcia?” he said hoarsely. “I began to wonder where you had got to. Is there any news?”

The newcomer was dark of face, a wiry little man, a mass of whipcord and steel. From the yellow tinge on his face he might have been a half-caste, or a Spaniard, or Mexican, certainly he would not have looked out of place in cowboy garb on the back of a horse.

“There is nothing fresh, my master,” he said. “Slowly things are being prepared. But it is all a matter of patience. Wait—wait—till we can give the signal and all will be well.”

“Well. If you knew what it was like! Two years—two centuries! And the mist gets into my bones as drink rots the lungs of the drunkard. Is there a letter for me—a message of any kind? You must have watched me closely to come here in this unerring fashion.”

“Even so, master,” Garcia said. “You read your letter whilst I pitch your gravel for you. The sentry yonder will not know the difference. Here is the packet I was to give you.”

The convict grabbed at the letter as eagerly as a starving dog grabs at a bone. It was something to break the maddening monotony—like a glass of cold water in a dreary desert. It was not a long letter, but the reader read it again and again with a quick, fierce intaking of his breath. The little man with the brown face was industriously pitching gravel all the time. The convict turned to him eagerly, there was a quivering, flickering light, in his eyes.

“First get rid of that letter,” he said. “Garcia, I must get away from here now. No matter if I am taken again in the daylight, no matter if it puts back the clock for a year. I must—I must be at the Moat House some time to-night.”

“If master says it must be, it must,” Juan Garcia said coolly. He placed the letter in his mouth, chewed it hastily, and swallowed the paper down. “But this haste spoils everything. A little longer, and my master would be free to defy his—”

“Fool! Cease your chatter. I tell you I must get away now, no matter what happens later. If I could only close the eyes of the warder for five minutes!”

“Escape may be taken as an evidence of guilt,” the Mexican murmured.

He worked on doggedly without looking up from his toil. The queer little man was as cool as if he had been a navvy working in a ditch. And yet there was an air about him of dogged faithfulness that was pathetic. It spoke of deep devotion to his master. His voice shook a little as he spoke.

“The letter was sent to my lodgings,” he said, never ceasing his toil. “I was to find some way of conveying it to you down here. It was for your sake, master, and I obeyed without asking any questions. For two days I have been studying the lie of the land here. And all the time I have been working in another direction.”

“I understand, my faithful Garcia,” the convict, said. “You mean that you have never given up the attempt to prove my innocence. And I am innocent. A fool I was, but dishonourable and dishonest, never. The Maker of us all, Who has laid

this heavy burden on me for His inscrutable purposes, knows that I am innocent. As you say, to escape only tacitly confesses my crime. But something is happening to one whom I love better than life itself. The letter told me that. If I die in the attempt, I must try to get away now. That I will be taken again is inevitable. My good Garcia, you must help me!"

The little Mexican nodded. All the time he had not paused in the mechanical labour of tossing the gravel out of the hole. He was scheming a plan. The convict watched him with some impatience. It was hard for the man of action to feel that he was helpless as a little child.

"I can get my master away from here quite easily," the Mexican said. "We have been in tighter places in Mexico together, you and I. I have a plan—"

"Yes, yes. But no violence, mind. I will not be a party to anything of the sort. There is only one warder watching over this gang. He must not be hurt."

"He shall not be hurt," Garcia said coolly. "A dramatic surprise, a shock, and perhaps a trifle of personal discomfort, what are they? Better men than yonder guardian with the rifle have suffered worse things. It shall be done, master."

"And you think that you can give me a good chance to gain the woods yonder? Well, all I ask is a fair field and no favour. If I am taken again to-morrow or sooner, perhaps, I shall not mind so much. There is something before me which must be done to-night. It will be very late before my task is done. Do you know where she is, Garcia?"

The little Mexican nodded as he proceeded with his task.

"Not far off," he said. "I do not understand—that fiend is too cunning for me. And yet I fancy that the young lady is safe; any way, there are other people about her—an old lady and her daughter, with faces like angels, both of them. One looks like the Madonna in the chapel at San Lucar, where I was born. If—"

"Never mind that now," the convict interrupted. "We will talk about that another time. Give me some idea of how you are going to get me away. It is very foggy beyond the marshes. If I could only reach the woods, I might succeed yet. What I want you to do is to close the eyes of the warder for a few minutes and—"

"That I can manage," the Mexican whispered. "Look over the edge of the pit when I am gone, and when you have finished counting a hundred slowly—"

"Ah, I understand what you mean. Give me your long overcoat and cap. Go on with your spade-work."

The coat and cap were passed over; the coat, a long one, reaching below the convict's knees. He removed his stockings, and rubbed his bare legs with the wet gravel till they were brown. As he stood up he might have passed in the gathering gloom for a sportsman coming back from a day's shooting or golf, with his big coat over his knickerbocker suit. Then he fell to the pitching of the gravel again, whilst the little man crept out of the hole. The half-caste kept close to the ground like a hare; he worked his way to the back of the rampart, where the warder stood like a statue; something long the little man removed from about his waist. There were two thongs at the end of the line, and a heavy iron weight at the termination of each.

The little man stood up now, for he was secure from observation. There was an uneasy grin on his face as he whirled his line round his head. Then he cast it forward with a dexterous jerk, and immediately began to run violently in a

contrary direction. Before the warder knew what had happened the thongs of the lasso had wrapped murderously round his throat; the line lengthened simultaneously with the full weight of the half-caste's flying body, and then, without a sound, the warder rolled over the rampart. The convict, with his eyes over the edge of the hole, saw the apparent miracle done without the least feeling of astonishment. He knew exactly what would happen now. Before the half-strangled warder had recovered his senses he would be gagged and bound by Garcia, who could be very well trusted to make his escape. The mists were falling thicker now; there would be nobody to bar the way. But not more than half an hour could elapse before the thing was discovered; still, much might be accomplished in that time. The convict scrambled out of the hole; he strode across in the direction of the marshes. Strangers found their way there by accident sometimes, so he passed without notice. A minute later, and the friendly mists hid him altogether. Then he gathered up the skirts of his long coat and began to run. He had an object in view, and he ran in a straight line. For three-quarters of an hour he sped on, until he was in a warm glow from head to foot; the sense of weariness and fatigue fell from him—he was a man again, with a grim purpose before him. An hour passed, and through the mists came no boom of guns, to show that a convict was missing.

He paused at length when he came to a properly-made roadway fringed with woods. Where the road forked was a signboard, bearing the information that Longtown was distant five miles, and the village of Grange barely two. It was all that the convict needed. He knew that he had only to pass through the wood and strike the Moat on the far side.

But not yet, not till quite late in the evening. He struck into the road until he came to a small stack of barley placed there by a keeper for the benefit of Sir Devereux Drummond's pheasants. Into this the fugitive burrowed deep, for he would be cold enough before he had finished his long vigil. He pressed his coat close to him, he dived his hands into his pockets. Something tinkled in the one, something rattled in the other. The convicts eyes gleamed. He had come upon a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches.

The luxury of it, after two years in that dreary hell yonder! There was something cheering and inspiring in the tobacco. The man lingered lovingly over his cigarettes, smoking but two very quietly, until he heard a clock somewhere strike eight. At the same time a distant sullen booming came over the marshes from the gaol.

"Well, they have given me plenty of latitude," the convict muttered. "I might have got halfway to London by this time, provided I had the money. Well, after the next few hours are over, it will not matter whether they take me or not. Poor little girl—poor little girl!"

The leaden minutes passed, and at intervals the gun boomed out. Presently it seemed to the watcher that he could hear voices on the edge of the wood. He drew back into the straw as the thought became a certainty, and two keepers passed along. A third man rose and accosted them.

"What are you doing here?" the fist keeper demanded suspiciously.

"In the King's name," came the reply. "One of the convicts, has got away. If you have seen anything—".

“Well, we haven’t. You’ll do no good coming here disturbing the squire’s pheasants, and he is going to shoot these very woods only the day after tomorrow. There are three of us watching here for poachers and if one of your gang comes this way, why we’ll take your place for you and secure him.”

The convict lay in the straw till the sound, of the intruders died away. He had been very near to recapture, but good fortune had aided him. But, at the same time, now he was conscious of a double danger. Not only had he to think of the warders, but the keepers also were his foes. So might the poachers be if he met them. For an hour or more he lay still and snug in the straw until it was safe to venture out.

He stood in the road presently, eager, panting, and alert. He passed along, sheltering himself from sight in the shadow of the ditch till he came to a place where four roads crossed. There was a thicket of hawthorn in the centre, and before this he stopped.

“This must be the place mentioned in the letter,” he muttered. “Four guide-posts and a little stunted tree. And it must be quite ten o’clock by now. I hope the messenger will not keep me long. Oh, the maddening suspense of this waiting!”

Chapter VI

Suspense.

Ten minutes passed; a solitary pedestrian or two came along, then a waggoner whistling quite blithely to himself as he drove his team, and after him a little dark figure of a girl, whose black hair was hanging down her back. The fugitive could see her face from his shelter in the centre of the bushes—a little pinched face, lighted by a pair of dark, frightened eyes. Yet there was something good and true about the face, and the convict felt that he was being drawn by some instinct towards it.

The feeling grew upon him, so that he stepped out of the tree and confronted the girl. She gave a little gasping cry, that was instantly suppressed, then her hands went out in the direction of her companion. For the first time he saw that she was lame.

“Little girl,” he said, “do not be frightened of me. I don’t think that anybody would be afraid of me if they knew my story. Are you looking for anybody?”

The child nodded. If she was frightened, it was not at the darkness of the night, for she was evidently accustomed to being out after dark.

“I fancy that I am looking for you, sir,” she said. “It was a message from the Moat House.”

“That’s right!” the man said eagerly. “I also had a message from the Moat House. I was to find my way here about this time, and somebody would meet me—somebody who going to find me shelter for an hour or so. Are you the kind little friend?”

“I hope so, sir,” the child replied. “My father is out to-night; he—he had to go away and do something. And Miss Flora asked me to do this for her. There is nothing in the wide world that I would not do for Miss Flora. I was to take you to our cottage and keep you there till nearly eleven o’clock. And after that I was to show you the way to the Moat House. You could never find your way to the Moat House alone.”

“I am afraid that I couldn’t,” the convict said. “I am sure you are a good little girl, or Miss Flora would not trust you so implicitly. If your father comes back—”

“My father will not come back,” she said. “Oh, you need not be afraid of that! He knows nothing; he thinks I am in bed, if he thinks anything about me at all.”

There was something pathetic about the last few words. The convict did not need to be told that here was a poor neglected child starving for love and sympathy.

“And your father, little one?” he asked. “Tell me what he does.”

“My father does nothing. He was once a gentleman. But there were misfortunes before I was born, and my mother died, and—and that is all. My father goes away at night this time of the year, and Mr. Markels the keeper over at Sir Devereux Drummond’s place, says he is the cleverest poacher in the county. But they have never caught him.”

The convict nodded in sympathy. He was sorry for the child, who spoke of her father’s shame so pitifully. He had forgotten for the moment that Sir Devereux Drummond lived so close at hand—Sir Devereux had been an old friend of his father’s.

“Well, I am to rest at your cottage till my time comes,” he said. “May I take your hand my dear little child? You are trusting me implicitly, and I shall not forget it some day. And so you love Miss Flora? Why?”

“Because she is so good to me. She taught me to read and write; she lent me the good books that I like so much. She told me all about Jesus, and how He cares for little ones like me. And when my father gets his black moods on, and there is nothing to eat in the house, she sends me food to keep us alive. And she is not afraid of father. He would kill anybody else who talks to him as Miss Flora does, but he only laughs and takes off his hat to her, as if she were a queen. Can you read Latin books?”

“I’m afraid that I have forgotten my Latin,” the convict admitted.

“Father hasn’t. He can read a lot of Latin books. He has them in his bed-room. Will you stay here whilst I go in and light the lamp?”

The strangely assorted pair had reached a tumble-down cottage at the side of a cover, with a shield of trees in front. The feeble rays of an evil-smelling oil lamp showed a poorly furnished room, with a few pots of flowers here and there, as if somebody had made a despairing effort after cleanliness and comfort. A crazy staircase led out of the sitting room, apparently to bedrooms overhead; the windows were covered by a pair of old curtains which had seen better days.

“I think we shall be comfortable now,” the child said as she locked the door. “If you will sit down I will put some wood on the fire. There is not very much wood, but we can manage with what little there is. My name is Jessie.”

“And my name is Wilfrid,” the convict replied. “No, I don’t think I will take my overcoat off. You see, your fire is not very big, and I may be liable to catch cold. I

feel as if the marrow of my bones was frozen, probably due, I fancy, to the fact that I have not eaten anything for—My dear little girl, would you do me a favour? A glass of milk, a crust of bread and cheese, or something of that kind—"

"There is absolutely nothing in the house to eat," the girl said. The convict could see that her face had grown scarlet, and that the tears had risen to her eyes. "I'm dreadfully sorry. Father and me finished it all up for supper. When he goes out long nights like these, he generally comes back with his pockets full of good things. Oh, I am so sorry!"

The convict laughed it off unsteadily. He felt half faint, wolfish, for the want of food. And yet, he was sorry for the poor little girl whose hospitable instincts had been so wounded by the necessity of refusal. The child was about to say more, but the shuffle of footsteps rattled on the gravel outside, and somebody tried the door and proceeded to knock. Forgetful of his hunger, the convict was on his feet at once. The hunted animal was alert.

"Don't reply yet," he whispered. "It may—it may be somebody for me. Is there any way out at the back? The back door is not fastened, you say? And it opens into the wood? Good! I'll just stand in the kitchen till you answer the door."

The convict slipped out into the gloom of the so-called kitchen as Jessie opened the door. But no warder stood there, no bloodhound of the law on the track of the prisoner. The convict could see a man in an expensive fur-lined coat there, a man who asked in educated voice if Jim Marston was at home. The light fell upon the stranger's face.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed. "So your father will not be at home for a long time? I daresay I could give a pretty good guess what that means. And I've run all this risk—I mean to say, I have come all this way to see Marston. I must leave him a message. Do you happen to have any paper and envelopes in the house?"

Yes, there was paper and envelopes in the house, Jessie said, if the gentleman would step inside. As the stranger came in, the convict looking through the door from the kitchen gave a violent start. There was just a shade of contempt on his face.

"Ronald Cardrew, as I am alive!" he murmured. "Now, what is that good looking scamp doing here? I wonder if anything came of the attentions he was paying to George Drummond's sister, Sybil? I hope not, for the girl's sake. He's up to no good here."

The stranger, sealed up his hastily scribbled note and gave instructions that Jim Marston was to have it directly he came in. With a curt little nod to the child he closed the door behind him, and the convict came back to the room.

"I hear the clock striking eleven," he said. "I am afraid I shall have to trouble you to come out into this dreadful night with me again, Jessie. If you are afraid—"

"I am not in the least afraid, sir," Jessie replied. "Let me put out the lamp. I will take you as far as the lodge gates of the Moat House, and after that I was to come here again. Miss Flora was very particular about that. And, oh, I am so sorry that there was nothing for you in the house to eat! This is the way, please."

They came at length to their destination, and then the child stopped. A great lane of light shot across the sky, and a gun boomed sullenly out from the distance. Jessie murmured something to the effect that a convict had escaped, and that she

was not afraid to go home alone. She did not appear to have any idea of the identity of her companion.

"You are a brave little girl, Jessie," the man said, with a catch in his voice. "You are brave and good, and some day you will get your reward. And now I am going to ask you to give me a kiss. It is a long time since innocent lips kissed mine."

The child stood up eagerly, and her arms were about the convict's neck. He pressed her lips to his as a child might be kissed by a fond father.

"Good-bye, little sweetheart," the man said, "and good-night! Some day you will be glad that you have done all this for a stranger."

The patter of little feet died away in the distance, the minutes crept on till the church clock struck again. The boom of the guns came no longer over the marshes. Very slowly and carefully the convict dragged himself across the lawn in front of the house and made his way to the long line of dark windows.

He came at length to the west wing of the Moat, he saw the light in the windows. It all looked so snug and warm and comfortable in there. And yet, behind those curtains what was taking place? The fugitive drew his breath fiercely as he asked himself that question. Then he opened his lips and gave an imitation of the wailing cry of the night-jar. He repeated it twice before a lighted window upstairs was gently opened and a face looked out. It was a pretty face, but it looked very white and frightened now.

"Master Gilbert?" a voice asked. "Dear Master Gilbert, is it really you? Really you at last. I had not dared to hope. I had not dared to believe that it was possible for—"

"Garcia managed it, Mary," the convict replied. "He had not forgotten the use of his lasso, as one of the warders learnt to his cost. But it cannot be for long, Mary; they must take me some time to-morrow. I came to see Miss Winifred, my little Winifred—"

"Hush, not quite so loud. I am running a great risk, because he may hear at any moment. And Miss Flora does not know that you have come yet. Big as he is, he moves like a cat, you never know when he is going to come upon you. You must wait and kill time till midnight, when I may manage to step out for a few minutes. And yet that fiend may be watching me; he may know already that it is you who has escaped. Can you manage the big window at the end of the corridor? You will see the spot I mean if you turn to the right."

"But you have not told me how Winifred is," the convict asked anxiously.

"She is about the same. Some days she is quite sensible, and others as bad as ever. And there is something going on that I can't quite get to the bottom of. Miss Flora is here but you know that already, and Miss Flora seems as helpless as the rest of us. Perhaps they also are afraid of him. If we could get away from here to the fresh, open country and see new faces I am certain that my dear mistress would recover. But he seems to have managed everything, and the trustees imagine him to be all that is desired. And yet I am sure—"

The voice broke off suddenly, the window closed, and the room was in darkness. The convict ground his teeth together impatiently. All the same he would have to possess his soul in patience till the midnight hour came. He crept across the lawn, and hid behind a laurel bush.

The thin wind was blowing nearly half a gale now, the snow cut like a knife.

The man behind the laurel bush felt that he was gradually being turned to stone. He watched the lights in the windows of the Moat House, lights that were gradually disappearing. He wondered if the hour of midnight would ever come. Then the stable clock boomed out its twelve strokes.

Almost simultaneously a light appeared in the window of the bedroom from whence the girl called Mary had addressed a few words to the fugitive. But the window did not open this time, only a shadow crossed it, the shadow of a woman who seemed to be beckoning practically to someone unseen. What did it mean?

The meaning came to the watcher in a flash of illumination. The girl was beckoning to him. She hoped that he would understand her. He was to make his way into the house. Perhaps the front door had been left open on purpose. Like one whose limbs are frozen, the watcher crept round the house, but the door was closely barred and bolted. Round the house he went again looking upwards, till at length he noticed a room with a flickering light in it; the window was just opened sufficiently to admit fresh air. Here was the great casement in the corridor, the way into the house. The shadow of the leaden casement stood out against the blind. The watcher saw his way at last.

"I'll go," he said between his teeth; "at any hazard I'll go. Very thoughtful of those people not to cut down the ivy. Unless I have lost my power of climbing, I shall be inside that room in two minutes. Here goes."

He was up at last, and in the corridor. The searchlight from the prison flared on him; he thought he could hear voices. And here was a door opened a little, a bedroom beyond filled with light; but nobody was in the room. There was a bed, which had obviously been occupied lately; a man's garments were scattered about; a kit-bag lay open on the floor. On the dressing-table candles burnt in silver branches; a great log fire roared up the chimney. The sight of it was as food to a starving man. He thrust his cold, thin hands almost against the logs, but there was no feeling in them.

Evidently a man's room, and evidently the man had just left hurriedly for some purpose or other. It seemed to the convict that he could hear footsteps outside. The man was coming back. There was no time to lose, no subtle plan to be thought out on the spur of the moment. The convict's ears were not deceiving him, and the occupant of the room was coming back again. What was to be done? It was a desperate situation crying for a desperate remedy.

The fugitive swiftly crossed the floor, and turned the key in the lock.

Chapter VII

For Friendship's Sake.

George Drummond stood in the corridor watching the movement of the slim hand on the casement. He had a feeling that he would wake presently and find that it was all a dream. And, with it all was the horrible feeling that perhaps he was doing something wrong. Was he taking part in some crime? he wondered. Was

this girl using him, for some ignoble and unworthy end? Beyond doubt the hand clinging to the casement was that of the escaped convict, and Flora Cameron was anxious for his escape.

George stole a quick glance at the face of his companion, and his heart lifted. It was impossible to look at those features, and feel that anything wrong was being done here. The girl seemed to divine something of George's feelings, for she laid a trembling hand upon his arm.

"Try to trust me," she whispered. "I want you to believe that I am acting entirely for the best. I have thought the thing out carefully, and I feel that the angels are on my side. You guess that yonder hand belongs to a convict?"

"It is obvious," George said.

"Well, you are right. That man has broken prison. I have gone out of my way to help him do so. A dreadful charge hangs over you, but you are innocent."

"You cannot tell what a comfort your opinion is to me," George whispered.

"You are innocent—innocent. From your face and manner I guessed that. My woman's instinct admits of no doubt of it. And, let me tell you with all the earnestness I can, that yonder poor fellow is as guiltless as yourself, Captain Drummond. I am going to ask you to help me."

George caught the hand extended to him, and carried it passionately to his lips. His whole heart had gone out to his companion. In the hour of his need she was the only one who had stood by him and believed his story. And she a stranger, too!

"I will do anything in the world that you ask me," he said. "I will do it, because you have proved yourself to be a good and noble girl, and because I feel that you are incapable of doing anything dishonourable. Pray command me."

George could see the flash of tears in Flora's eyes. Then suddenly the light vanished, and the corridor was left in total darkness. Apparently the search-light had been turned in another direction; anyway, the darkness was so thick that it could almost be felt. A moment later, and it seemed to George as if he felt somebody brushing past him; probably the convict had gained the shelter of the house. Another instant, and George dismissed the suggestion as a play of fancy.

He could hear footsteps coming in his direction; there were people in the garden calling to each other. Evidently the prison warders were close on the track. There was the quick flash of a lantern and a command in a hoarse voice.

"Oh, I do hope he has not failed," Flora whispered. "I must hide myself lest Dr. Beard should see me. He must not see me now, he must not know anything of this business. I will try to see you again presently. If you could only head those warders off the scent!"

"Show me a way," George said eagerly; "I will do anything that I can. But to do that, I must find a way of leaving the house. Is there any door at this end?"

"Oh, yes—yes! The little door under the turret. You must remember that door, seeing that you were here so much as a boy. A little door with a spring bolt."

George remembered the door. He pressed the girl's hand reassuringly, and then began to feel his way along the corridor in the direction of the stairs. Yes, this was the way, the recollection of it all was coming back clearly to him now. Many a time in the happy days of the past had he played hide-and-seek here. He had not the slightest difficulty in opening the little door and entering the garden. For some reason or other, it had been imperative that he should not be seen with Flora by

Dr. Beard; indeed, he gathered that the convict business was to be concealed from that individual. But no suspicion need be aroused if Dr. Beard found him in the garden. He could easily answer that he had been aroused by the noise of the warders, and had come down to see what was wrong. The thing suggested prevarication, and George revolted against that. Still, the cause was a good one, and it seemed to him that the means justified the ends. It was just possible too, that the unhappy convict was already in the hands of the law. Not if George could prevent it, he told himself. He was determined on this point as he stepped into the outer air, and looked for any sign of the warders.

It was still bitterly cold, and a thin powder of snow had begun to fall again. For a few minutes there was nothing but silence and the desolation of the night. Then George could hear footsteps on the hard ground, and somebody in uniform came along swinging a light. The man stopped as he saw George standing there before him.

"Have you seen anything of a man about here, sir?" he asked.

George was thankful to be able to say that he had not. He was also thankful to gather from the question that the warders had not as yet been successful in their search. It seemed to him that he could see footprints leading up to the big casement window that seemed to light the corridor, but the falling snow and the keen wind would very soon cover all traces. George stood there waiting for the next thing to happen.

"It is impossible for your man to get clear away," he said.

"I'm not so sure about that, sir," the officer responded. "He had assistance. Somebody managed to lasso one of the warders and gag him. It's pretty certain that the prisoner did not do that. One of the cleverest things I ever heard of. And the man was not missed till late this evening. A bit of an oversight, perhaps, but there it was. And when we missed the warder as well, we began to suspect things."

"I hope your man was not any the worse," George suggested.

"No, sir; it wasn't what you might call violence exactly. A bit bruised and cold from lying there so long. It was a very neat dodge, but one might expect that kind of thing from a prisoner of education."

So the escaped convict was a gentleman, and a man of education, George thought. Well, he might have expected that, after what Flora Cameron had told him. The man with the lantern had not the faintest idea of the identity of the escaped prisoner, and it was obvious that he was telling the truth as he said so. Behind a belt of shrubs, George could see other lights flickering. He hoped that the convict was hiding close somewhere. It would be just as well, George determined, to find out exactly how many warders were present to-night, so that if one was left behind to watch, the fact would be known. There were four of them altogether and they were playing a game of grim hide-and-seek in the bushes.

"Are you quite sure that your man came in this direction?" George asked.

"Quite sure, sir," the other said. "The snow helped us a little, and our gentleman had not yet got rid of his prison boots. Then the snow came down again and baffled us. I expect you know the place, sir, seeing that you live in the house?"

"I don't live in the house," George explained. "I am a visitor here. All the same, I know the place very well indeed, I have known it intimately from a boy. I suppose you want to discover if there are any good hiding-places here?"

"That's it, sir," the other exclaimed. "Outhouses and all that kind of thing."

George wanted nothing better. As a matter of fact, there were many places in the grounds where a prisoner could hide for a long time, and George indicated some of them. He did so in a loud voice, so that he might warn anybody. There was a sound of scuffling presently, and the noise of a blow, and George felt his heart beating painfully fast.

"Got him!" somebody cried. "Got him, clean and clever. This way, mates."

The cry of exultation was quickly turned into a growl of discomfort, as the figure of a man, held by two of the warders, emerged into the ring of light made by a lantern. It was clear from the first glance that the captive was no escaped convict. The man was tall and powerful, he had a black beard, and a pair of powerful dark eyes. He was quite well dressed, with a suit of rough home-spun. There was a sardonic smile on his face.

"Shot at the pigeon and killed the crow," he said. "What am I doing here? Well, I guess that that's none of your business. You can't prove that I'm doing any harm, and even if you could, you are not policemen. My name, eh? Well, it's James Marston."

"James Marston, the poacher," one of the warders growled.

"Most people suspect me of being a poacher," the dark man said coolly. "I have had to suffer under that reproach for years. As a matter of fact I've never been convicted of poaching, and, whats more, I have never been before a magistrate on suspicion."

"But you are trespassing," George said.

"I am perfectly well aware of the fact, Captain Drummond," was the quick reply. "Trespassing is not an offence so long as you don't do any harm. I lost a dog, and I am looking for him here; I expect he has been caught in some poacher's wire. You will find that Dr. Beard will not object to my being here."

The man set his hat more firmly on his head, and vanished into the night. George knew the man very well indeed, and his reputation. He would have liked to detain him, but there were more pressing things to occupy his attention. The warders were all busy again looking about the grounds, though with fainter hopes of success.

"Well, lads, we'll just go through the plantation at the back of the house again," said the one who appeared to be the leader. "I suppose there is no chance that our gentleman has made a bolt of it and got into the house some where."

"I think you can make your mind quite easy on that score," George said "Only a trained burglar could break into the Moat House."

"I suppose that's about right, sir," the leader said. "A good look, mind lads, and then the best thing we can do is to get back to the gaol again. Its long odds that our man has found his friends by this time and got clear away."

George returned to the house and closed the door, satisfied that he had done his best to carry out Flora Cameron's wishes. The convict had managed to give his pursuers the slip just in the nick of time, and he was hiding somewhere close by. But would he come back again? It looked as if that was the intention, especially after what Flora had said. And if he did come back and all the doors and windows were fastened, how would he manage to let Flora know that he was at hand?

Tired as he was, George resolved to sit up and watch. His own window was open, and there was a good fire in his room. Perhaps Flora would be waiting in the corridor to know whether the prison warders had been successful or not. The house was quiet enough now, and very dark. It was fortunate that George was familiar with the way.

The little green door opened quietly, and George fastened it on the inside. Very gently he made his way up the stairs and in the direction of his own room. There was no light in the corridor, and he had to fumble his way along as best he could. He could see slits of light under one or two doors, denoting the fact that the occupants of more than one bedroom had not finally retired for the night.

George waited a brief space to see if Flora would appear. He did not dare to give any loud signal of his presence, and there was no sign of Miss Cameron. Well perhaps she would come back when she felt that it was safe. And it would be easy for George to put his light out, and leave his door open. He could lie on his bed and doze, trusting to his quick hearing to bring him to the first signal. Many a time had he done the like in South Africa. He laid his finger on the knob of his door, and turned it. He turned it twice, and pushed at the door, steadily, but it did not give. The door of the room was locked on the inside.

It was a startling, and not too pleasant, discovery. Even now it did not occur to George that perhaps there was somebody in the room. It was just possible that the bedroom door had a spring lock; perhaps at one time the bedroom had been used as an office, the owner of which did not care for the eyes of servants prying about.

George turned away, and hesitated for a moment in some perplexity.

“There is only one thing for it,” he muttered. “I daresay I can manage it without those warders seeing me. It sounds almost like a farce, but there is nothing else to be done.”

Chapter VIII

A Friend in Need.

George congratulated himself on the fact that he had not removed any of his clothing. He had even donned his boots and slipped on his big coat before he left the room. The South African training had taught him to do that almost without thinking. But in all the many strange situations he had been in during the last two years he could recall nothing like the present one.

The thing did not look like an act of impertinence on any-body’s part, nor did George see how anybody could have slipped by him in the gloom of the corridor.

On the other hand, he was quite certain that nobody had been hiding in his room. There were no cupboards or anything of that kind, and under his bed he had pushed the larger of his pair of kit bags, so that he would have noticed if anyone had been hiding there.

The situation was as vexatious as it was absurd. Then a simple solution of the case offered itself to George. He had left the window slightly open, as most healthy

people do nowadays; the wind was strong outside, and perhaps the door had slammed to and the lock caught. Very carefully, so as to disturb nobody, George tried the door, but it was as fast as if it had been bolted top and bottom. He examined the old-fashioned lock as carefully as he could in the feeble light. Beyond doubt, the bolt had slipped.

There was only one thing to be done. George had given trouble enough as it was, and he did not desire to disturb the household. Beside, he was a little at a loss to account for what he was doing in the corridor at that time of night.

Again instinct warned him that he must not let Dr. Beard know that he had been watched.

Ridiculous as it seemed, there was only one thing for it. George stood there, trying to puzzle out the geography of the house. Years ago it will be remembered, the Moat had been the family dower-house, and Sir Devereux's mother had lived there. George had played hide-and-seek in the passages as a boy before the Camerons came there, and all the strange village gossip had followed them. It had all come back to George at Flora's reminder.

There was the second staircase, leading into a back hall under the turret, whence Charles II. was supposed to have escaped once upon a time—the way, in fact, that George had just gone to the garden. George could get out by this side entrance again, and make his way to the lawn, and creep down and fasten up the back door once more. He began to feel a little easier in his mind as this practical solution occurred to him. He strode along with his coat closely buttoned about him; the house seemed quiet as a grave. Then a door opened somewhere with a popping sound, and the midnight wanderer had barely time to slip behind an armoured figure before a girl was upon him. But George would not have been noticed in the least. The stranger had no eyes or ears for marauders, she walked swiftly along as if her errand was important. She was by no means ill-favoured, and the beauty of her face was enhanced by the splendid hair that flowed over her shoulders. But for this she was fully dressed. Her hands were clenched, and her eyes were flashing with overpowering anger.

She had not far to go, for she turned into a room at the head of the second staircase. The door was open, and a flood of light streamed out. Almost instantly George was conscious of the sound of voices, the musical tones of the strange girl, and the sharper ones of Bernard Beard. Something like a quarrel seemed to be in progress.

Impelled by ungovernable curiosity, George pressed forward. What diabolical mischief afloat here? Something out of the common must be taking place in that household, for George had not forgotten the obvious reluctance with which Flora Cameron had brought him here. Only because his life was in danger had she done so. But Flora was pure and innocent enough, George knew. Could he help her by trying to solve a mystery that might not be known to her? It might have been wrong, but, all the same, George decided to follow it.

He crept forward, his feet making no noise on the polished oak floor. He found that he could stand against the leather hangings, muffled between the folds, and look into the room. Unless anyone came out with a light, he was perfectly safe.

The room was fairly plainly furnished, and lined, absolutely lined, with books. On the table stood several vases of flowers, exquisitely arranged with long,

drooping sprays of orchids. Whoever occupied that room did not want in good taste.

On the far side was a couch covered entirely with buffalo hide, and on it reclined, as if asleep, the figure of a fair young girl, who seemed to be asleep. The firelight flickered upon the red gold of her hair, upon her still, beautiful face. Curious and rapt as he was, it seemed to George that he had never looked upon a fairer and more perfect picture.

The girl might have been dead for all the stir she made, but that could hardly have been the case, for Bernard Beard knelt by her side, and was gently chafing her hands. He was so closely engaged in his task that he did not heed the entrance of the other girl till she stepped forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"What are you doing to my sister?" she asked. Beard looked up with a scowl on his face. Just for a moment it was the face of a fiend.

"I am doing nothing to your sister," he said. "She has had one of her bad times again. It has been coming on for a day or two. You know the trouble as well as I do."

"Oh, yes, I know the trouble! And I knew the maker of it also. Let me take her to my room."

"Presently. Why do you interfere? Why do I let you stay in the house? Three of the first physicians in London decide that Winifred is safer in my hands than anywhere else; the Lord Chancellor agrees; the trustees of your late father agrees also; why do you interfere?"

The girl stamped her foot impatiently. She had almost lost control of herself.

"Oh. I know, I know!" she said thickly. "You are a clever man. Everybody says so. You can make yourself so agreeable and charming. My father, who was one of the best judges of human nature I ever met, found you charming. And when he was dying he told me to look to you as the best friend we possessed. And yet I know, I know."

The girl paced the room, pushing back the magnificent hair from her face. The other girl lay in her white robes as if in the sleep of death. Beard had risen also. He stood facing the passionate girl, a queer smile on his face.

"And so I am your best friend," he said. "You are frightened, when Winifred is with me. And yet I swear that I would lay down my life to shield her from sorrow. I would do anything for her. Say what you like, but that girl is part of my life."

The speaker's face changed as he spoke. It grew soft and human and strangely tender. It was the face of a man to trust, to turn to in the hour of trouble. The watcher across the corridor rolled his eyes in astonishment. Here was another man altogether; with an expression like that, he must be speaking the truth.

"I know it," the girl cried. "Strange as it may seem, I know it. When you speak in that tone I am bound to believe every word you say. And yet my poor sister never had a worse enemy than you, or one who caused her more suffering."

Beard's loving expression vanished like magic. The fiends were dancing in his eyes again.

"You think you know," he said. "It is not the first time you have hinted these things to me. But I should not think, if I were you; you will find it a dangerous process. Your sister is safe in my hands; I shall cure her of that distressing

malady in time. My plan may be original, but it is going to prove successful in the long run. Amongst all the names in the 'Medical Register' mine is going to stand highest as an authority on diseases of the brain."

"Oh, I do not doubt your marvellous abilities!" the girl said wearily, as she cast her hair from her face. "You will only cure what you produced."

Beard's lips clicked ominously. There was menace and something worse in the frown that he bent upon her. Yet his words were quite calm.

"You are thinking of that unfortunately interrupted wedding," he said. "You imagine I had something to do with that—and so I had. I felt from the first that Winifred had given her heart to a scoundrel. But I did not say so; I did not want to stand between that dear child and her life's happiness. I made inquiries. The result of those inquiries you know. And the bridegroom was arrested as he was entering the church."

"You could have stopped that," the girl said. "I am sure of it. And Winifred stood by the altar and laughed. Mercy on me! shall I ever get that laugh out of my head! She did not faint or scream, or cry, she simply laughed. And from that day to this she has been hopelessly insane. If Gilbert had been guilty—"

"If he had been guilty?" Beard cried. "As if anyone could have doubted it for a moment! Do you suppose all those witnesses committed perjury? Do you suppose the judge was party to a conspiracy to send an innocent man to prison? I am deeply sorry; nobody so passionately regrets the lamentable sequel as myself. And yet it is best for Winifred to be as she is than tied up to a handsome scoundrel for her life. Mary, listen to me."

There was a metallic ring about the words that caused the girl to look up.

"I am going to speak plainly," Beard went on. "This is not the first time that you have made this nasty insinuation—that Gilbert was innocent; that I, in some way, was at the bottom of his conviction. Now, you and I are by no means friends; but there is no reason why we should be enemies. Don't make an enemy of me. Don't cross me. Because, if you do, I shall find a way to silence your tongue. Reed in the wind, take care!"

The words were calmly spoken, and yet there was something in the eyes of the speaker that caused the girl to tremble and turn sick to the heart of her. From time to time she had glimpses of the hell that raged in this man's soul, but she never had had a clear view like now.

Afraid of nothing else in the world, she was afraid of him. George felt the blood rising to his face as he listened.

"I will not say any more," the girl whispered. "There is something the matter with my heart, I fancy."

She placed her hand upon her breast as if to stop its wild beating.

Beard's face changed, and the loving smile came back again as he stroked the girl's hair. It was strange to the watcher, but she did not seem to resent his caress.

"Now we are good friends again," Beard said quite blandly. "See your sister is stirring. For the time being the madness is passing off. This is the first time for a month that she has had a fancy to dress herself up in her bridal attire, and go to meet her husband in the dining-room which she imagines to be a church. I expected something of the kind this morning when she asked to have the room

decked with orange blossoms. Come, my dear Mary, is not Winifred much better since she has been here?"

"Yes," the other girl said slowly, as if the words had been dragged from her, "I admit that."

The figure on the sofa sat up and opened her eyes. They were deep-blue eyes, set in a petite face, as George noticed. He had never seen so lovely a face before. It was a little weak and white but sweet enough for a poet's dream. Her eyes were just a trifle vacant, but they did not lack in either tenderness or feeling.

"Mary," the girl said. "Mary, I am so tired. Have they got to the church yet? If you will only help me to get to bed Mary—Have I been foolish again?"

The question was asked almost pleadingly, as the speaker removed the veil from her head. As she rose the elder sister led her gently from the room and down the corridor. With a loving good-night, Beard closed the door of his study behind him. A moment later George heard the scratching of a match, and the quick puff of one who lights a pipe. Well, he knew something about the mystery, and it was hard if he did not know more before long. He crept gently down the stairs to the side-door, and drew the latch.

George was in the garden at last, and that without disturbing anybody. He recollected his way quite well now; he had only to follow the path till he came to the side of the house which the window of the room overlooked. Ah, there it was, slightly open, and the grateful flames of the big fire making a glow on the blind. It was piercing cold, and George lost no time in climbing the ivy. He pulled the blind aside, feeling for the spring, and, with his hands on the sill, prepared to enter. But the night of surprises was not quite over yet. At the same time a hand was laid on his shoulder, and somebody inside was trying to force him back-wards. Even then he did not recognise what had happened; he was so surprised that he nearly lost his balance for the moment. His theory had been that the door had blown to, and that the latch had caught; he had altogether dismissed the idea that anybody would be inside the room. And he was fighting for his life now.

Then it dawned upon him that he was not quite so strong as the man inside, and that he was certain to get the worst of the encounter. By a dexterous movement he managed to lock his arm about the neck of the other man, determined that if he fell the assailant should fall also. Their two faces were close together, and George glanced up to his room. Another lunatic patient of Dr. Beard's, no doubt. Then Gilbert gave a little gasp of astonishment.

"Gilbert Doyle," he said, "Gilbert Doyle! Old man, you are murdering me!"

The grip was relaxed, and a second later George staggered into the room. The other man stood transfixed.

"Georgie Drummond," he said, "old Georgie of my school-house, and—"

The convict covered his face with his hands and burst into tears.

Chapter IX

Dr. Beard.

It was strange how still and silent the old house was through it all—like a troubled and tumultuous heart beating under a calm exterior. From the outside one might have taken it for some haunt of ancient peace, some favoured homestead that sorrow and tribulation had not touched at all. There had been no noise, no sign of struggle, and there had been no sign of Dr Bernard Beard after his study door had closed upon him. Perhaps he had other things to occupy his mind.

The big man sat there sucking moodily at his pipe after the two girls had left him. He no longer looked contented and masterful. The lines on his forehead might almost have been drawn there by physical pain. He took some letters from a drawer in a little safe let into the wall of the room, and proceeded to read them.

"Where is it all going to end?" he muttered. "How long can this last without a breakdown? And all these signs again for the third time! How did those people get here, how did they manage it? If I could only meet them face to face, if I could only get my enemy in my grasp!"

Beard tossed the letter back in the safe and locked the door. It was a bitterly cold night, but the perspiration stood on the man's broad forehead. With a gesture as of a man who needs air, he opened the window. At intervals came the sound of a gun from Greystone Gaol.

Beard smiled grimly to himself as he saw the lanterns flitting about the garden. So the convict who had escaped had not yet been taken! The hunted, desperate wretch was still at large.

"I wonder how he feels?" Beard muttered. "I wonder if he can see me from his hiding-place. Perhaps he is envying me and feels inclined to change places. The irony of it all! For I would give anything to change places with him. Ah!"

Beard drew a deep breath as he saw a figure dragged by two warders into a circle of light caused by the lanterns. The man-hunting instinct which is common to us all was upon him now; he was going to watch the dramatic moment of the convict's recapture. Then as the light fell upon the face of the poacher, Beard gave a sudden gasp.

"They have got hold of Marston!" he exclaimed. "What a fool I am not to have thought of him before! I wonder what that fellow is loafing about here for. Still he has come at a most opportune time."

Beard heard the quick passage at arms between the poacher and his captors; he saw the former slink away into the darkness. Then he extinguished his light and found his way quickly to the drawing-room, the long French windows of which he quietly unfastened. A moment later, and he was in the garden, pushing the casement close behind him. It was the quickest and easiest way out, and there would be no danger for a little time. But Beard was not thinking of that, he wanted to find the poacher without delay. He had a pretty shrewd idea which path the latter would take.

A match spluttered out presently and a dark face appeared beyond the bowl of a pipe. Beard strode up and touched the smoker on the shoulder. The latter held up the expiring match so that he could see who his assailant was. A bitter smile crossed his face as he saw Beard. Yet there was no trace of fear or alarm on the dark features of Marston.

“In the name of the fiend, what do you want?” he asked. “For two years we have been cheek by jowl, as one might say, and you have never come near me. Not that I wanted you, because your presence always means mischief to somebody else. I applauded your decision because it seemed to me that you were desirous to forget the past. Heaven knows that I should be glad to forget the past if I could.”

“You are doing your best to try to obliterate it,” Beard said meaningly. “Surely you can do something better than waste your life over these trumpery poaching excursions!”

“Of course, I could. I could become a city swindler and make money. They say the life is very exciting and there is always the chance of getting into the meshes of the law. Our old existence was fairly exciting, for instance. But that is all done with; you have turned out quite commonplace and respectable.”

“The old life is not quite done with,” Beard said, significantly. “You can never escape the full consequences of by-gone sins. I had a warning to-day, Marston. My life is not worth a minute’s purchase. They have found me out, and if they have found me out they are on your track also. What do you think of that?”

Marston laughed contemptuously. Then he stopped to relight his pipe.

“I dare say you are right,” he said. “The long arm that reaches for you reaches for me also. It was a coincidence that I should return to the scenes of my youth, and that by a kind of accident you should take up your quarters in this locality also. You have steadily avoided me for two years until to-night, though, of course, you must have wondered why so clever a knave as myself should be half-starving here. Well, I’ll tell you. For three years now I have hardly ever been free from a pain that seems to eat my very heart away. I went to a doctor, who told me that if I wished to live I must be in the country air and out of doors as much as possible. I was penniless, the old lot had turned their backs on me. I was ready to do anything to get rid of this pain. Then I asked what the pain was, and they told me Beard, I am slowly dying of cancer.”

Beard muttered something that sounded like sympathy.

“That is why I am not afraid,” Marston went on. “I am afraid of nothing. The shadow of vengeance that hangs over us does not trouble me at all. I am too much of a man to rid myself of the torture that racks my life by suicide, but I shall welcome the end when it comes. I could have laughed aloud just now when you told me that the vengeance was upon us. Man, man I would go half-way to meet it. Why should I fly from death when life is not worth living?”

“Why, indeed?” Beard said gloomily. “But the case is far different with me. I tell you that I dare not die, at least, not just yet. There is something that must be done first. Come back to the house and have a chat with me.”

“No occasion to do that,” Marston replied. “My little cot is close by, and we can discuss matters there quite easily. Mind that ditch there on the right.”

The cottage was in pitch darkness as Marston lifted the latch and fumbled in his pocket for a box of matches. Then the feeble oil-lamp flared out, and disclosed the poverty of the little sitting-room. Beard smiled as he looked about him.

“Strange quarters for a man of taste like yourself,” he said. “At one time nothing was good enough for you. And your ambition was only limited to your horizon.”

“I know, I know, but things have changed. My ambition is dead, this pain in my chest has killed it. All I want now is plenty of air and those little fishing and shooting excursions to give me a flavour of excitement. Ah!”

The strong man suddenly groaned and placed his hand to his heart. His face had grown white and haggard, the dark eyes told a tale of dreadful suffering. Beard suggested brandy, but Marston did not seem to hear anything. Presently the spasm passed, the sufferer wiped his shining face, and a little colour crept into his cheeks.

“Sometimes that lasts for two hours,” he said. “Then I am so exhausted that I can only lie still and pray for death. Now tell me what you want.”

“Well, I want you to do something for me. The source of the danger just now is in Paris. You know your Paris as well as I do, you speak the language even better. I must stay here for the present; I have something that demands my staying in England. I want you to go to the old quarters over there and ask questions.”

“In my state of health? My dear Beard, it is impossible. In the first place, extreme caution is necessary. How could a man who suffers as I do be cautious? It is only by luck as well as judgment that the keepers have never taken me. Last week I had the worst attack I have ever experienced. I lay in a wood for twelve hours utterly incapable of getting away, my gun by my side, and every pocket full of fine pheasants. Fortunately, nobody found me. And yet you suggest that I should undertake a delicate and dangerous mission in Paris!”

Beard seemed to have no further remarks to offer. The moody frown was back on his face again; he paced up and down the little room glaring contemptuously at the evidences of poverty. Suddenly he came to a stop in front of the fire.

“Hallo,” he said. “It is perhaps out of the question for you to undertake what I suggest, but here is somebody, if I mistake not, who will do just as well. You did not tell me that you were keeping up a correspondence with Cardrew.”

“Well, I’m not,” Marston said sullenly. “I don’t even know where that handsome young scamp is. I thought that he was somewhere in India.”

“Why try to fool me?” Bernard Beard demanded. “Here is a letter from him on the mantel-shelf. It is addressed to you in pencil.”

Marston rose and looked at the envelope. It was quite clear to Beard that his expression of surprise was no acting. Moreover, Beard could see that the flap was sealed down. The letter must have come in Marston’s absence.

“Cardrew must have found me out here,” the poacher exclaimed. “He probably called this afternoon, and Jessie my little girl—gave him paper and envelope to write the note. It is the same paper that I use myself. Let’s see what he says.”

Beard watched his companion with an eagerness that he found some difficulty in concealing. Marston read the letter twice over without speaking.

“It is a private matter,” he said at length, “and can not concern you in any way. This much I can say, Cardrew is down here, and he is very anxious for no-body to know of the fact, not even the Drummonds. He says he will call upon me to-morrow to discuss certain business. Nobody knows he is here, remember.”

“Oh, I’m not the man to betray the secrets of another,” Beard laughed. He seemed to be delighted about something.

“I suppose our young friend is at home on special leave. I know there has been some bother out yonder, and that young Drummond came home in disgrace. He may possibly be expelled from the service. An act of cowardice.”

“Rubbish!” Marston cried. “No Drummond was ever a coward yet, and Captain Drummond was a fine fellow. Much more likely to be Cardrew, who has cunningly shifted the blame on to other shoulders. He comes down here without even letting his sweetheart know. But I had forgotten that he was a kind of connection of your friends.”

“I fancy my friends would like to forget it also,” Beard smiled. “Well, I must be getting back again. Sorry that you are not in a fit state to help me. I think I’ll look in some time to-morrow, and try to get a few words with Cardrew myself.”

Beard closed the cottage door behind him, and lounged off in the darkness. Apparently his thoughts were more pleasant than when he started, for he smiled to himself more than once. He got back at length to the garden; he glanced up, and saw the the light was still burning in George Drummond’s bed-room. If the visitor only knew everything! Beard chuckled again at the thought. He would perhaps have been less easy in his mind if he had only been cognisant of what George Drummond really did know.

A couple of warders were still poking about the garden. Beard paused with the sash of the dining-room window in his hand, a sudden thought had come to him.

“Perhaps I can help you,” he called out. “You seem to think that the escaped convict is hanging about the house somewhere. There’s a little tool-shed just by the side of the plantation, and a ladder is hidden alongside. Try the loft over the shed. It is full of straw, and would make a capital hiding-place for anybody. I’ll come and show you.”

“It is very good of you, sir,” one of the warders replied. “We will just look in the loft, though to my mind our man is far enough away by this time. He had friends to help him to begin with, and they would not leave him to wander about on a night like this.”

Beard led the way to where the ladder was standing, and superintended the searching of the loft. But the search was in vain.

“No luck,” the second warder said. “No luck at all. We’d better be getting back, Willis. Good-night, sir, and keep an eye on your window fastenings.”

Beard returned the salutation and went slowly back to the house.

Chapter X

The Man and His Story.

George Drummond stood with his back to the fire, and gasped for breath. In his poor state of health the struggle with Gilbert Doyle had been a severe one. But he was not concerned now so much about that as for the man who sat at the table, his face convulsed with sobs. George had forgotten his own troubles for the moment.

“Pull yourself together,” he said, “This is a sorry meeting, Gilbert, old fellow! I wonder if your trouble is as bitter as mine, after all.”

Gilbert Doyle glanced at the speaker. Then very slowly he removed the long coat that Garcia had given him. He had not washed yet, his hideous dress was covered with dirt, and bits of straw, his bare legs were caked in mud. George could only look on with helpless astonishment. He perfectly understood what that garb meant.

“A convict,” he faltered. “Impossible! It is no more than one of your escapades.”

“An escapade from Greystone Prison,” the other said bitterly. “If we could only have foreseen this the last time we were at Eton together. A convict! I got seven years. And yet I swear that I am as innocent as yourself.”

The words were hopeless enough, and yet there was a ring of absolute sincerity about them. With a sudden impulse George held out his hand.

“Of course you are,” he said, heartily. “Without hearing your story I am convinced that there is some hideous mistake here. The idea of associating Gilbert Doyle with vulgar crime!”

“Just as well call George Drummond a coward,” Doyle said with a quivering lip.

“And that is just what they are calling me,” George replied. “My dear old chum, I am in just as bitter trouble as yourself; truly we are comrades in misfortune! Otherwise I should not be here to-night. I am here because I am literally kicked out of Grange Court. I have been very ill—indeed, I am very ill now—and I should have died on the way to Longtown had not an angel brought me here. And then to find you in this way. And to find also that you have an interest in this mysterious house. Very strange!”

“Strange indeed, considering that I have never been here before,” Doyle said. “If you don’t mind I’ll wash myself and then I’ll tell you my story. I wonder if you have a change of clothes in one of those kit-bags that you could spare me? We are about the same size. I shouldn’t feel quite such a hound in a respectable suit of clothes.”

A suit of dark tweed, a clean white collar and tie made all the difference to Doyle. He seemed to hold himself more upright, though the collar appeared to gall him. He flung himself down in a chair and gazed into the fire.

“What trouble have you been getting into?” he asked.

George explained freely enough. The other listened with interest till the recital was finished.

“And you are quite sure that you have told me everything?” he asked. “Why do I put that question? Because I am certain that you are concealing something. Come, you could throw a different light on the matter if you liked.”

“Well, I could,” George admitted, none too willingly. “But I have very good reason for not doing so. I am silent for the time being, because the happiness, perhaps the life, of another depends upon it. But I must speak if the worst comes to the worst; so you see, Gilbert, you and I are comrades in misfortune, which makes it all the more curious that we should meet, and in this strange house and this weird midnight manner. And now for your story. Go back to the time when we parted four years ago.”

“The time when I came to London with visions of a splendid fortune?” Doyle smiled. “My father died, leaving me his blessing and some two thousand pounds

altogether. No reason to dwell upon the next few months. My history was the history of many a young fool before me. At the end of a year I had literally nothing."

"I was all the more foolish because I was in love. She was only 17, George, but then she and I had been sweethearts for years. And when I saw her growing so sweet and beautiful I knew that she was the only girl in the world for me. If you could only have seen her!"

"I have seen her," George said quietly. He was piecing the puzzle together. "I saw her not many minutes ago, if her name happens to be Winifred."

"You have guessed it. There are two sisters, Mary and Winifred Cawdor. How stupid of me not to follow you, seeing that they are both in the house at the present moment—in fact, I risked everything to-day to see them!"

"Perhaps you had better get on with your story," George suggested.

"Yes; keep me to the point, please. Winifred and I were not formally engaged, but all her people understood. Her father would not hear of anything regular; as a matter of fact, he did not approve of my ways at all, and no wonder. He took me aside one night, and spoke to me very seriously. I was to go away somewhere, and not to see Winifred for two years—not till I was capable of showing my capacity of making a girl happy. Well, those were pretty hard terms, but Winifred was worth them, and I consented. I got in with a man who was going to Mexico on a ranch. I worked hard, and began to get on. At the end of the first year I had a place of my own, at the end of eighteen months I found gold.

"You can only imagine my feelings when I made that discovery. It was 'placer' gold, and very easy to work, so I kept the secret to myself. I sold the stuff in small parcels a long way off. I gradually accumulated a pretty fair fortune in a New York bank. Nobody dreamt for a moment what I had done, and I have never mentioned it till this moment. You will see what an important bearing this has on my story presently.

"When I tell you that I never so much as mentioned this thing in my letters to Winifred, you will see how carefully I guarded my secret. Business brought me to Europe two or three times, but I was not fortunate enough to see my little girl, because her father's health had broken down, and they were in the South of France with some wonderful doctor friend, who was going to bring about a magical cure. I heard a lot about that doctor.

"Well, time went on, and Mr. Cawdor died, and the girls came home. I came home, too, for I was worth some fifty thousand pounds, and my idea, was to buy a place in England and settle down. Winifred was looking sweeter and lovelier than ever, and she had a little secret to tell me. A distant relative had died and left her a large fortune. These things always happen when it does not matter. I chaffed Winnie a good deal about the doctor friend, and when I did so I always noticed that her sister Mary looked grave and thoughtful. She used not to say anything against the man—indeed, she declared that her father owed a great deal to the other, and that his kindness and attention had been wonderful. Of course, I took very little notice at the time; I was happy and busy, and I could not be expected to take any great interest in a man I had never seen. I had to go back to Mexico to settle up affairs, and it was agreed that the week after my return Winnie and I were to be married.

"And now comes the strange part of the story. On the way out, I fell in with a very fascinating man of science, who was going to Mexico, he said, to perform an operation on an old friend. He called himself Dr. Something, but the name I quite forgot. He was a benevolent-looking man, a very pleasant companion, and he had a most extraordinary voice."

"Alto?" George asked. "A huge man with a clean-shaven face and rather prominent teeth. Has a fancy for velvet jackets and all that kind of thing, eh?"

"You've got it!" George replied. "Strange that you should happen to know him!"

"Not at all, considering that he is in the house at the present moment. I am beginning to see my way through a very pretty conspiracy almost before you have finished your story. Go on, my dear chap; you don't know how you are interesting me!"

"Now, it so happened that on the line of boats there had been more than one ingenious and daring robbery of bonds and securities lately, and naturally these robberies formed the basis of a deal of the ship's conversation. There was a brilliantly handsome woman on the boat, called Madame Regnier; and she and I saw a great deal of one another. I flirted with her in a mild sort of way, for she was very popular—indeed, the only man who seemed openly to dislike her was the doctor. Yet on one occasion I caught them talking together—the doctor scolding and the woman in tears. It certainly was very odd, but it was no business of mine, and I speedily forgot all about the matter. I did my business and started for home by the Southern Star. The first person I met on board was Madame Regnier.

"I saw a great deal of her on the voyage, an eventful voyage, for there was another robbery of bonds, and the ship was seething with excitement from end to end. When we got to Southampton. Madame Regnier asked me to take charge of a parcel for her, and would send for it to my rooms in a day or two. She seemed very particular about that parcel, and she looked relieved as I passed the Customs. For herself, she was not leaving the ship yet, she said, as she had so much heavy luggage to look after. I locked the parcel away and forgot all about it, being reminded of it from time to time by Madame Regnier, who wrote me little notes, which I pitched into the waste-paper basket.

"I have nearly finished now. My wedding morning came; at the door of the church I was arrested by two detectives, who charged me with being concerned in the robbery of bonds from the Southern Star, and as evidence they produced the parcel that Madame Regnier had given me to take care of. George, the parcel was full of the missing bonds, and Madame Regnier denied emphatically that she had ever given me that parcel. Those little notes of hers discovered in the waste-paper basket stood as damning evidence against me, and there it was. The prosecution found that I had left England two years before practically a pauper, and that now I had lots of money in the bank. My story of the gold treasure was laughed at because I could not prove it in any way. I had been on board when the bonds were stolen, I was known to be hand in glove with madame, and the long and short of it was that I got seven years' imprisonment. Two years have passed, two bitter years, rendered all the more bitter by the knowledge that my arrest had unhinged the brain of my little Winifred. From time to time I have had notes sent to me by Mary. They were delivered by my faithful Garcia—my faithful Garcia who lassoed the warder to-day, and thus enabled me to come here and see Mary in response to an

urgent message. I know that one or two friends have been planning my escape for a long time; but after Mary's letter I could not wait. I knew that she and Winnie were here in a kind of sanatorium, but I did not know that some terrible danger hung over Winnie. What it is I am still in the dark, because I could not get speech with Mary. On the desperate chance I climbed through your window, and here I am. But I am quite in the dark still."

"And, as it happens, I am in a position to help you," George said. "Tell me, did you ever see that doctor friend of the Cawdors?"

"Never, strangely enough. He was always busy or engaged or something. He was to have given Winnie away, but, of course, that ceremony never took place, and—"

"Never mind that for the present. My dear Gilbert, your doctor friend is here; he is the head of this house. Dr. Bernard Beard is the same man you met on the Southern Star. He followed you to Mexico with a purpose of his own. Why? Because I happen to know that he is desperately in love with Miss Winifred Cawdor, and her beauty and money combined form a combination that he cannot possibly resist. The man is wonderfully clever and attractive, I know, but that he is an utter scoundrel I have been quite long enough in the house to discover. But to return to my point. He makes up his mind to marry Miss Cawdor. But you are in the way, which is a small matter. So a plot is laid for you, and Madame Regnier—who must have known Beard well—on your showing comes into it. Part of the stolen bonds are hidden in your room, and the police put conveniently on the track when the time comes."

"Everything is carefully planned out; and how successful it was you know to your cost. The rascal thought Miss Cawdor would turn from you; he did not expect what the consequences of the shock would be. But he does not despair; he is a specialist in brain troubles. Therefore he gets Miss Cawdor's trustees to send her here, and he hopes to cure her. I do not doubt that he will do so in time. Do you follow me?"

"Oh, I follow you!" Doyle said, with a bitter laugh.

He paced up and down the room as if in pain, his features drawn in a ghastly grin that showed his teeth plainly.

"What makes you look like that?" George asked.

"Hunger," the other said fiercely. "Ravening hunger, that grips like a physical pain. We are always hungry yonder, and I have not had food since one o'clock mid-day; that is over twelve hours ago. Don't you think you could manage to get me something, even if it is only a biscuit?"

"I'll try," George said. "If anybody sees me now I can say that I wanted the stuff for myself. On the whole you had better lock the door till I come back again. It is always as well to be on the safe side. Give me that box of vestas!"

Chapter XI

In the Darkness.

George Drummond felt his way cautiously along the corridor. Instinct told him that the one person to avoid was Dr. Beard. If the latter came out and discovered what George was looking for he would probably divine what had happened. A sudden feeling of faintness and giddiness came over George and he had to stop for breath. A man in his weak condition should have been abed and asleep long ago, and George was over-taxing his strength more than he had imagined. His memory too was so confused that he wondered which was the way to the head of the stairs. If Miss Cameron would only come and help him! But apparently there was nothing for it but a dash to the dining room and back.

But which was the way to the head of the stairs? In his shaky state George could not recollect. He would have to risk it and strike a match. If Beard came out and caught him he must make some excuse.

But it was not Beard who appeared directly the match flared out. A door opened softly on the corridor and Flora Cameron stood there. The alert look was still on her beautiful face, the shadow of anxiety in her eyes.

"Let the match go out," she whispered. "I have been trying to get a word with you again. I had to leave you so hurriedly just now. I had to make sure that Dr. Beard was out of the way. Oh, I loathe all this prevarication! Would that I could find some other way! I hate that you should feel ashamed of me!"

"Why should I be ashamed of you?" George asked. "You took me at my word; you believed in me when everybody else regarded me as guilty. By the accident of circumstances you heard my guilt asserted. And yet you believed in me! Why?"

"From the look of your face," Flora said. "I was quite content to abide by that."

"Yes, that was well said. Only the noblest of women could speak like that. And I too judge you by your face. You could not do anything wrong or dishonourable; you could not even think of such things. Miss Cameron, I am under the deepest debt of gratitude to you. I might be dying in a ditch now but for you. By the irony of fate I have come into possession of some of your family secrets. I have learnt more perhaps than you would otherwise have told me. That you are sacrificing yourself for others I am certain. Then let me share that sacrifice, let me be your friend. For the present I can only wait till it pleases God to clear my name of the shadow that lies upon it. I want to be doing some good in the world meanwhile. Let me help you."

"You shall," Flora whispered. "God bless you for those words! You shall be my friend. There is much to be done even tonight. The fugitive must be found. I will never know a moment's peace till he is found."

"Then be easy on that score," George said. "The fugitive is in my bedroom, dressed in a suit of my clothes and looking quite another man. We came very near to being discovered, for he locked himself in my room, and I had to get in through the window. I never guessed that my burglar was your convict till we had had a struggle. And then I recognised Gilbert Doyle."

"Gilbert Doyle! Then you knew the man when—when—"

"My dear Miss Cameron, I was at Eton with him. He told me all his story. I know all about Doyle and Miss Winifred Cawdor and her sister. Unless I am greatly mistaken, I have already seen the poor little white bride and Miss Mary Cawdor. And I have made a discovery that is rather worse than that."

"Oh! You know what I suspect. Has it anything to do with Dr. Beard?"

“Yes. I am afraid that the whole conspiracy can be traced to Dr. Beard. But for him Gilbert Doyle would be a free man, and Winifred Cawdor happily married to the man of her choice. Do those poor girls live here?”

“Yes. Winifred is a patient of our relative, Dr. Beard who is also her guardian duly appointed by the Court of Chancery. They have been here for some time. I do my best for the poor girls; but unfortunately, till quite lately, I could not get Mary Cawdor to trust me. Perhaps she thinks that we are all alike. Oh, it makes me ashamed of my-self! I have been hot and cold all over when I think of it. And I am powerless to do anything. But I am forgetting. My mother would like to say a few words to you.”

“What! Now?” George asked in some surprise. “I was coming downstairs to get food for Gilbert Doyle. He is in a state of desperate hunger. I was going down to the dining-room to see what I could lay my hands upon.”

“Mr. Doyle must wait for a few minutes. Come and see my mother. Then I will ascertain that there is no danger from Dr. Beard. He is so suspicious, so quick-witted that he will guess what has happened if he sees you with food in your hands. Not that he has the slightest idea that Gilbert Doyle, above all men has escaped from Greystone Prison. Come and see my mother when she is herself and free from the hypnotic influence of Dr. Beard.”

George obeyed with a feeling that things were drifting. But he felt that he must do as Flora asked him. The girl led the way to a sitting room adjoining a bedroom, and here Mrs. Cameron was seated in an armchair with an air of expectancy on her face.

George had not realised before how beautiful that face was in its frame of grey hair. The strange, drawn look had gone from the eyes, the expression was sorrowful but benevolent. The long slim hands trembled so that the rings on her fingers flashed in the lamplight. She extended both hands to George and pressed his tremulously.

“I am glad you came,” she said. “I saw that you recognized me to-night, and what I was doing here in this great place. You wondered why I had left my position in the world, why I should have neglected all my charities for this. The thing is easily explained. When my husband died I was penniless.”

“The world looked upon him as a rich man,” George stammered.

“So did I—so did everybody else. My poor husband was never what you call a good man of business. He left all that to my distant relative Dr. Beard. So long as the charities were kept up the rest did not matter. I looked forward to carrying on those noble works after the death of my husband; the labour would console me for his loss. And then we discovered that everything was gone. Little by little my dear husband had dispossessed himself of everything. Dr Beard had it all down; he had kept what the lawyers call accounts splendidly. You can imagine my position. I had hundreds depending upon my bounty; I was interested in buildings and hospitals everywhere. And suddenly I was a pauper, as poor as any of my poor old people. I never liked Dr. Beard. I almost mistrusted him. But when he took this house for a poor young patient of his, and offered me an asylum, I could not refuse. It was very like eating the bread of charity but it was impossible to say so. It seemed almost like the will of God. And that is why you see me here to-night.”

George made no reply for a moment. He was beginning to understand. Mrs. Cameron had a widespread reputation for good works, and Beard was trading on the fact. It suited his purpose to have so good a woman as nominal head of his household; it prevented awkward questions, and gave him a free hand.

"I do not know what is taking place here," Mrs. Cameron said frankly. "I do not know even now after the lapse of years, whether Bernard Beard is a good man or a scoundrel. I know that he has an extraordinary effect upon me, as he has upon most people. And when I feel that I am very near the end, I tremble for the welfare of my dear child here. I like your face, Captain Drummond, in spite of your misfortunes, and I am sure you will be ready to help Flora if ever she needs it. Tell your uncle Sir Devereux what I have told you to-night. We were great friends in the old days."

"I would do anything that I can," George stammered: "and as to the events of to night—"

The speaker suddenly paused, seeing that Flora's eyes were turned imploringly upon him. Evidently Mrs. Cameron knew nothing about the dramatic scenes of the past few hours. George turned the conversation adroitly. He was feeling tired and fagged, and Flora saw it. A gentle hint to that effect to her mother sufficed.

"It was very selfish of me," Mrs. Cameron said contritely. "But I so wished to have a few words with you before your departure, Captain Drummond. I understood you to say that you would have to go to London early in the morning. Perhaps you will come and see me again?"

With a rather red face, George said that he would. He was doing no harm, and yet he felt horribly guilty in the presence of this good old lady. And George felt, too, in his heart of hearts, that there was little chance of his going to London in the morning.

He bent over the trembling hands of Mrs. Cameron and bade her good-night. Flora followed him into the passage. She was breathing fast, as if the pulsations of her heart were troublesome.

"It is a shame, all this concealment," she said, "but I could not—I dared not—tell my mother. She is so open and candid. She would assuredly betray us to Bernard Beard. That is why I tried to catch your eye just now, in time to prevent mischief. Where is all this prevarication going to lead to?"

George did not know. He thought he did not care much so long as he was by Flora's side, and he could study the deep light of her eyes. He had a feeling also that he was but an instrument in the hands of Providence. He moved forward in the direction of the stairs, filled with a sudden remorse that he had so long neglected Gilbert Doyle. Flora seemed to understand, for she laid a hand on George's arm.

"One moment," she whispered. "Let me be assured that there is nothing to fear from Bernard Beard. I will go and see if his study door is closed. Wait here."

Flora returned with the information that Beard was not in the house at all. There was nothing alarming about this.

"He might be helping those warders," Flora suggested. "You can see the flicker of their lanterns on the walls every now and again. Captain Drummond, you cannot leave the house early to-morrow—at any rate, not until we have settled what to do with Gilbert Doyle. Keep him where he is for the present, and by

morning I may hit on some plan. He must be near here, and yet a place of safety must be found for him. It is too late to-night to carry out the scheme that I had in my mind."

"I will take care of Doyle," George protested. "Make your mind easy. And now I must go on my errand of mercy." With a sudden impulse, Flora caught George's hands and held them hard.

"Good-night, my dear friend!" she whispered. "I cannot find words to thank you. Good-night, and God bless you."

Chapter XII

Entangled.

With a glow at his heart, and a tightening of his pulses to which he had long been a stranger, George crept silently down the stairs. After all, it was no pleasant and conventional thing that he was doing. As an officer holding His Majesty's commission his duty was plain. He should have put personal feelings aside, roused the household, and handed the convict over to the authorities. In the eyes of the law his present action was a misdemeanour.

But what man would have done the right thing in the circumstances? In the first place, George was smarting under the lash of a false accusation. He felt reckless and desperate. He knew that Gilbert Doyle was the victim of a similar misfortune. Anyone who really knew Doyle would deem him incapable of crime. He was the victim of a scoundrel who had deliberately planned his ruin so as to get a beautiful girl and her fortune in his grasp. That scoundrel was Bernard Beard. And Beard, though he might have set out with the sole intention of making himself master of Winifred Cawdor's fortune, undoubtedly had come to love the girl.

The house was dark and silent now, and very cold. Probably Beard was far from the house just now. George could feel the cold air on his face, as if a door were open somewhere. But these old houses were very draughty, and an ill fitting window might account for the stream of icy air.

It was a little stronger in the dining-room, where the wax match in George's hand flickered and flared. He lighted one of the candles on the old oak buffet, and a stream of wax guttered down. There were the provisions that he needed. George was making up his mind what to take when suddenly somebody seemed to lean over him and the candle went out.

Not for a moment did he lose his presence of mind. His right hand shot out and touched the fabric of a woman's dress, his fingers closed on a woman's arm. If George had expected an outcry, however, he was mistaken. The round, plump arm remained in his clutch. No effort was made to tear it away. The unseen woman was no enemy.

"Why did you blow out the candle?" George whispered. "And who are you?"

"I might retaliate with the same question," a steady voice said. "It was not polite of me, but there was no time for ceremony. You are Captain Drummond?"

George admitted it.

"I am Miss Mary Cawdor. Miss Cameron told me you were here. Besides, I happened to see you in the hall as you entered. I—I was a little struck by your pale face and look of illness. You will pardon the curiosity which impels me to ask you a few questions. Captain Drummond, dare I ask your sympathy for a woman desperate and in trouble?"

The passionate, trembling plea was enough for George. By way of reply he pressed the plump arm.

"I thank you," Mary Cawdor whispered. "I came down here on the desperate chance of seeing somebody—somebody I was prevented from meeting earlier in the evening. When you have a clever and unscrupulous scoundrel to deal with—"

"Meaning a certain doctor, who shall be nameless, Miss Cawdor?"

"That is the man. I was afraid that he had found something out. And I know my friend is still trying to see me. I came down here because there are French windows in this room leading to the lawn. My idea was to go outside and give my friend the signal. Judge of my surprise when I found the windows open already, and somebody else outside. I nearly betrayed myself before I discovered that Dr. Bernard Beard was standing there. I stepped back to watch him, and then you struck that match. I did not know what to do. I had to decide on the spur of the moment; so I came across the room and blew the candle out. We must wait here till Dr. Beard comes in."

There was nothing else to do, as George was forced to admit. There was some moonlight now, and the gigantic frame of Bernard Beard could be seen looming against the snowy background. The figure moved a little presently, and the two other figures in uniforms and carrying lanterns came from the direction of the lawn searching the ground as they proceeded. There was no need to tell George who these men in uniform were and what they were doing.

"You know who those men are?" Mary Cawdor faltered.

"Warders from Greystone Gaol," George said. "They are searching for a convict who has escaped, but the convict is safe in my bedroom, Miss Cawdor. I'll explain presently. I hope they have no clue, but there are plenty of snug hiding-places about this old house, and it is too bitter for a thinly clad convict to lie out in the open. Of course, they cannot know that Gilbert Doyle is in my bedroom."

"This is a night of surprises!" the girl gasped.

She was shivering with cold and excitement.

"Indeed, it is, Miss Cawdor! So you expected Mr. Doyle as well as Miss Cameron? And it turns out that I have known poor Gilbert for years. Fate directed him to my room. And, as an instrument of Fate, I am going to do all I can to help him."

George heard the girl's hysterical gasp; he could feel her shaking from head to foot, for his hand was on her arm still.

It was an unconscious case of mutual protection, the girl feeling that she had a good and self-reliant man on her side; George, alive to the knowledge that if they had to retreat in the dark the girl's knowledge of the house would save him from disaster.

"I begin to understand," Mary whimpered. "You had dinner when you reached here, or a very late supper, shall we call it? Therefore, it was not for yourself that

you came down for something to eat. I was stupid not to understand at first. You have come down for food for Gilbert Doyle. It is very good of you to do all this for a comparative stranger."

"I was at school with Gilbert Doyle, as I told you just now; we were in the same house at Eton," George said in a whisper.

"Poor fellow, he seems to have had bad luck and been cruelly used, but—"

"But you don't think that he is guilty? You will take a great weight off my mind if you say—"

"That Doyle is innocent. Of course, he is innocent! I should have known that without listening to his story. Gilbert, more or less, burgled the house to see you. He found his way into my room when I was absent for the moment, and locked the door on me. You see, this house used to be occupied by my grand-mother, Lady Drummond, and I recollected a great deal the ways of it. As I had left my window open, I judged that the draught had banged the door to; so, I went outside and climbed into my room by means of the ivy. Imagine my disgust to find myself hotly attacked by an escaped convict, who might have done me serious injury had not we mutually recognised each other. And now you know why I am here, and what my designs on the cold meat mean. If those fellows outside only knew what I could tell them!"

Mary Cawdor shivered again. The warders with their lanterns had come close to the window by this time, and Beard hailed them. His manner was grim, his tone sarcastic.

"That sheep of yours still failed to come home?" he asked.

"That's it, sir," one of the warders said. He dropped his lantern, and beat his frozen arms together for a little warmth. "Seems to have got clear away."

"Well, you hardly expect to find him in this house, I suppose?" Beard laughed. "Same old story? A warder attacked, and the prisoner bolts in the broad light of day, eh, my man?"

"Well sir, it wasn't quite like that. The warder was standing on the top of a grassy mound where he could see the gang at work. All of a sudden somebody creeps up and pulls him back-wards by means of a cord. Down he goes over the edge of the mound, where he lies half strangled, and not a man there is a penny the wiser. When we found him a few hours later he had not recovered full consciousness, and there were those convicts at work never knowing that nobody was looking after them. Most queer affair."

"The gentleman in the striped uniform who took French leave must have had more foresight than the rest," Beard chuckled in his oily way.

The warder was fain to admit that such was the case. As far as the listeners could gather, the unfortunate warder had the daziest idea of what had taken place. But at the next question from Beard they both stood rigidly to attention. It was seemingly an idle question, but a deal depended upon the answer.

"Who was the very clever gentleman who managed to get the best of you all?" Beard asked.

Mary fairly gasped. George was conscious that his heart was beating faster. His grasp stiffened on the girls arm; she sought his other hand as if safety lay there. The warder with the lantern seemed to hesitate.

“Well, sir, I can’t tell,” he said. “There are over fifteen hundred of them up there, and we merely know them by number. Makes no difference to us, so long as they wear the prison uniform. It’s only when those poor fellows manage to elude capture for a day or two that we allow their names and their convictions to get into the papers.”

The man was not telling the exact truth, and the listeners divined it, but they inwardly blessed him all the same.

The warders moved farther along with their lanterns, and Beard followed them, perhaps he expected to see a little sport—a successful manhunt appealed to the innate cruelty of his nature. There were one or two hiding-places, the ins and outs of which were known to him, and the convict might be lurking there.

“Possibly, I can help you,” the listeners heard him say. “Try the summer-house yonder.”

Beard was out of sight of the window now, and George ventured to let down a curtain. Greatly daring, he struck another match. The light flared on Mary Cawdor’s pale face and dark, gloomy eyes. She was uneasy in her mind, but George could see no trace of fear in her face. She would be a fine ally in time of danger.

“One must run a little risk,” George said. “You see, our friend upstairs is almost hysterically hungry. We can’t trouble about plates, for dirty plates may cause questions to be asked. Nor will we incur the responsibility of knives and forks. I have my hunting-knife in my kit-bag, that will serve its purpose. Is that a newspaper on the table? Good! Then we will fill it with this half loaf of bread and this half of a chicken. That will do. Stay, I daresay we could risk this small jug of something to drink. Now let us go.”

“Just one moment,” Mary pleaded. “For some little time I have had certain knowledge that Gilbert Doyle’s friends were planning his escape. He himself showed me the way by which I could communicate with him. We could have waited for that escape—without which Gilbert could not prove his innocence—only something happened that frightened me. I felt sure that I must see Gilbert at once, so, with the help of Miss Cameron, I sent him a note to that effect. Oh, I know it was wrong of me; but I got so terribly frightened, I lost my nerve! And he came—came at the risk of every-thing. Captain Drummond, I must see him to-night.”

George could not withstand that pleading tone. There would be a serious risk in the meeting, but he would bring it about if possible, though it was a very hazardous step.

“I’ll fetch him,” George said with sudden determination. “Get your interview over quickly, whilst I stand in the window and watch. It’s the only way that I can see.”

Mary’s eyes flashed their thanks. Without asking unnecessary questions, Gilbert Doyle found himself piloted into the dark dining-room, where, by the aid of a match carefully lighted, Miss Cawdor’s whereabouts were disclosed. It was a dramatic situation—the warders hunting in the snow outside, the escaped convict not far from them in the cover of the warmth of the house and the darkness.

“Now be as speedy as you can,” George whispered.

Five minutes passed and there was no sign of Beard, though in the distance the lanterns of the searchers were flashing over the snow like glow-worms. From

inside the room George could hear the quick buzz of conversation. Then the talk suddenly stopped, and a shrill cry came from inside the room.

Startled out of himself, George stepped inside the curtain. The room was less dimly lighted, for a second girl came in bearing a candle in her hand. The veil had gone, but she was still in the robes of a young and beautiful bride. From her manner she seemed to have been looking for her sister. But in a moment she placed the candle on the table and flung herself headlong into the arms of the astonished Doyle. Winifred's lips were parted, her eyes were full of the glow of a great and unexpected happiness.

"I have found him!" she cried. "Oh, my dear love, I have found him! And he shall never leave me again! Dear doctor, come quickly, for I have found him!"

"Bless the child!" come Beard's thick tones from the other side of the curtain. "I'm coming, little girl, I'm coming!"

A smothered groan burst from Doyle's quivering lips, while the curtains over the window fluttered ominously.

Chapter XIII

Nearly Lost.

The candle flared in the draught from the window. George Drummond remarked the wax guttering down as one notes trivial details in times of danger. He could hear the footsteps outside drawing nearer. Nobody moved, the little group were fascinated. With eyes half closed, the little white bride clung to her lover.

George was the first to recover himself. Another moment and everything would be lost. His military training and instinct came to his help. It was no time for sentiment. Kindly but firmly he untwined the girl's arms from Gilbert Doyle's neck and pushed him towards the door. The poor creature seemed to feel what was in the air, her clouded brain told her there was a crisis.

"No, no!" she cried "Do not be so cruel! Is there no kind Christian heart amongst you all? And I have waited so long for him already!"

"Take no heed," George whispered. "Gilbert, go back to my room at once. Leave me with this young lady. I dare say I can find a way to explain. See, the curtain is already being drawn. Go!"

With one loving, backward glance Gilbert Doyle vanished into the dark hall.

Mary Cawdor would have lingered, but George thrust her fiercely away. He began to see his way. It was fortunate for him that Winifred had fallen into a kind of trance—a waking dream. She stood there swaying slightly, passing a hand across her troubled eyes.

"Where has he gone?" she asked. "He was here just now, he had his arms about me. And they told me he was in prison! Did you pretend to be him, or was it a dream? Or is my madness worse than ever?"

George answered not. He was thinking rapidly. All the time his heart was beating painfully, and the deadly sense of physical weakness oppressed him. But

there was no need for reply, as the curtain was pushed aside and Bernard Beard stood in the opening. The whole thing seemed to have occupied a second.

"What does all this mean?" Beard demanded hoarsely. "Winifred, has this man been ill-treating you? I heard you call out as if in trouble."

George checked his rising anger, the hot blood flamed into his face. This man desired to insult him, but, after all, what did the insult matter? He was disgraced and friendless, another taunt made no difference.

"I am not in the habit of ill-treating ladies, Dr. Beard," he said coldly "It is quite possible this lady has mistaken me for somebody else."

"But why are you here at this time of night?" Beard asked. "I admit you are an involuntary guest, and did not trespass upon our hospitality of your own accord. It was your misfortune to have a misunderstanding with Sir Devereux Drummond—a misunderstanding that it made impossible for you to remain in your uncle's house. You were very ill, and fortune brought you here. I will not say that you are unwelcome, but I do say that I have a right to ask why you are prowling about a stranger's house at this hour of the night."

There was something cold and cutting in the speech. And yet George felt that he could take no objection to its tone. Beard had a perfect right to ask why a stranger was prowling about his house like a thief in the night. And one thing struck him as very strange. Despite Beard's hardness and suspicion, he seemed to have a tender smile and almost a caress for the girl by his side. She had closed her eyes, as if the physical effort had been too much for her, and Beard was supporting her with his arm about her slender waist. He was like a father who protects a child from some danger. George felt that he almost liked Beard at that moment.

"I hope you will find my explanation satisfactory," he said "I came to look down for food, something to stay the appetite till morning. This young lady happened to come in, and she mistook me for somebody else."

"It was no mistake," the girl said, upraising her eyes suddenly. "I saw him there. He stood by the sideboard. I woke up and found that my sister was not with me. And so I came to look for her. And I saw him standing by the sideboard. I tell you it was Gilbert. I did not dream it; I was not so mad as that. Gilbert stood there, and he turned as I called to him. I can feel the touch of his arms about me now."

With some anxiety George watched the effect of this speech on Bernard Beard. It was hard work to appear indifferent; besides, he was not used to prevarication. Nevertheless he succeeded in controlling his emotions. To his great relief Beard merely smiled—a sad, pitiful smile that made his face look quite attractive. His voice was very soothing. Was this a greatly maligned man or a consummate actor and scoundrel? At that moment he would have found it hard to determine. Beard seemed to have forgotten his presence.

"So you saw Gilbert," he murmured, "standing by the sideboard? Dear, dear! He took you in his arms and kissed you? That is exactly what he would have done. But he had no business in my dining-room at this time in the morning, and you have no business there either. Stay just a moment, and I will try to find your sister."

Beard walked out of the room leaving George alone with the little white bride.

He felt nervous and embarrassed, though rejoiced that Beard did not pay the slightest heed to what the girl said. She stood by the side of the table with one

hand resting upon the polished mahogany, her gentle face cast down. She was so lost in dreams that she had quite forgotten George's presence. What a pure and pretty face it was he thought; what a pathetic figure altogether! The romance of the girl's life and the story of her unhinged mind filled his soul with pity.

But George had to turn his attention to sterner issues. Doubtless Gilbert was safe in his bedroom again, but would not be the less hungry for that. George contrived to fill his pockets before Beard returned. He was not more suspicious than before, though his face was set and his lips compressed. He was followed by Mary Cawdor, looking sullen and defiant.

"I am going to put an end to this," Beard said. "If you are to retain control of your sister at night, I shall insist upon your acting very differently in future. She says that she wakes and finds that you are not in the room. Where were you?"

"I had gone downstairs for something," Mary explained—"something that I had forgotten. And Winifred appeared to be asleep at the time. She did not wait to undress, she said she was sure that she was going to have one of her sleepless nights. Then she sat on the sofa and went off almost immediately. But why do you question me in this way?"

"Because you are not to be trusted," Beard said brutally—or so it seemed to George. "This is not the first time this kind of thing has happened. Take care it is the last."

"And if it is not the last, what then?" Mary Cawdor cried with some spirit. "Why do you change your manner here—why are you not the same as you used to be in London? There we regarded you as our friend—a trusted friend!"

"Friend!" Beard cried. "Oh, you little know what a friend I am to you; If you only knew everything you would turn your backs on everybody else and cling to me. But I am wasting my time. Take Winifred away and try to persuade her that she is suffering from her old fancies again. She came down here and imagined that this gentleman was Gilbert Doyle, and—"

"No fancy," the little white bride burst out. "Oh, it was no fancy! I am not so mad as you think. Sometimes my brain is as fresh and clear as anyone's. When I came downstairs Gilbert was standing by the sideboard. I saw him quite clearly—the same dear old Gilbert, only pale, and thin, and worn. But the dear face and kindly eyes were there. Don't say I was mistaken. Ask the gentleman who was standing there."

The speaker turned almost fiercely to George, who could do no more than smile in a sickly fashion. He wished himself far away, that he had not come to the Moat House at all. All this mystery and intrigue were quite foreign to his nature. And yet there were helpless women here who demanded his assistance and attention. If cunning and crime are to be controlled, he would have to fight them with their own weapons.

"It is very sad," he murmured. "Dr. Beard, I am sorry that I have unwittingly happened upon the delicate side of the little tragedy. So far as I am concerned, I shall try to forget everything as soon as I am out of the house. Meanwhile, if I may venture a word of advice, I should suggest that the young lady may retire and—"

"You are quite right, sir!" Beard exclaimed. "Mary, take, your sister to bed, and see that she does not wander about the house again in this manner! Go with your sister, dearie; we will try to find your sweetheart in the morning."

Again the speaker's voice changed to one of infinite gentleness and charm. With the air of one who is asleep or blind, Winifred Cawdor held out her hands. Mary took her in her arms and kissed her; there were tears in her own eyes. As the door closed softly, Beard turned to George. There was nothing objectionable in his manner now.

"I am sorry that you have seen so much," he said. "No stranger has ever seen anything of this before, and I had made up my mind that the secret should remain buried here. That is why I left London and took the Moat House. Mrs. Cameron appears as the nominal tenant, but I am practically the householder. Miss Cawdor's case is a sad one, but she is gradually getting better. It was the sight of a stranger like yourself that upset her tonight. I am all the more annoyed because she was getting on so very well. But as you are leaving the house to-morrow—"

There was a significant pause here, and George bowed. In ordinary circumstances he would have left the house to-morrow and gone directly to London; but recent events had made that impossible. It would have been easy but for Gilbert Doyle. He must be provided for at any hazard; he must be smuggled out of the house in the broad light of day. And here was Beard intimating in the plainest possible language that George must leave without delay.

"Your hospitality is hardly embarrassing," he said bitterly.

"My dear sir, in ordinary circumstances, my hospitality leaves nothing to be desired," Beard said with a laugh. "I tendered it you to-night; I should have been guilty of something like murder otherwise. But this is not one of the stately homes of England, nor is it a private hotel. On the contrary, we came here to be removed from contact with strangers. Your case is not exactly an extreme one, speaking as a medical man. There is no danger likely to accrue to you from a railway journey to London. As for the rest, I shall be happy to drive you to the station. So far as my memory serves me, there is a train to-morrow early in the afternoon."

"I quite understand," George said quietly. "If I were in your place, I should probably take the same point of view. I can only thank you for your kindness. Good-night, sir."

Beard smiled and extended his hand. George would have given a great deal not to have taken it, but the rudeness would have been unpardonable. He was glad to find himself in his own room again. He heard the barring and fastening of doors downstairs, and the heavy footfall of Beard as he went up to bed. Then a bedroom door closed, and all was silent.

There was stillness everywhere now, for the prison warders had departed, and the great white searchlight no longer flashed out from the prison. "Well," Doyle asked eagerly, "did you manage to get out of the scrape?"

George proceeded to explain. The conversation was carried on in whispers, with an eye to a possible listener in the corridor beyond. The situation was strange enough—the man who had been so cruelly wronged, sheltering under the roof of the man who had wronged him.

"I am expected to leave here to-morrow directly after lunch," George said. "Beard was quite polite, but he made me understand that in a way there was no mistaking. The great thing is what to do with you. In the short time at our disposal—"

“Isn’t there anybody here whom we could take into our confidence?” Doyle asked.

“I have some kind of an idea,” George said thoughtfully. “At the same time, I fancy that we have quite enough people in our confidence already. Still, it may be arranged. I suppose you haven’t quite forgotten my sister, Gilbert?”

“Indeed no. Jolly little girl she used to be. But what could she do for me?”

“She might help you after I am gone. At any rate, I shall send her a little note the first thing in the morning asking her to come and see me before I go to London. Of course, I shall ask Mrs. Cameron’s permission, and I shall probably tell Sybil everything, or, at least, as much as I feel justified in telling her. And now, my dear fellow, let us go to sleep. I can hardly keep my eyes open; I am soddened to the marrow with fatigue.”

Chapter XIV

The Photograph.

Sir Devereux Drummond dragged himself slowly downstairs to the breakfast-room, looking like the ghost of himself. The stern old soldier no longer held his head high, he had few words for Watson, who came in with the breakfast. A brilliant sunshine was flooding the lawn and garden outside; the keen wind of the night before had dropped.

“Miss Sybil is not down yet, Sir Devereux,” the old butler said. “She will not be very long. Will you take some eggs and ham or a cutlet, sir?”

Sir Devereux waved his hand with the air of a man who cares for none of these things. Watson sighed as he handed over a cutlet. Like most clean-living men, Sir Devereux was in the habit of making an excellent break-fast. He noted the look of regret in Watson’s face.

“It’s no use, my friend,” he said. “I may become accustomed to it in time, but I will never be the same man again, Watson. I must go on living my life and attending to my duties, for it is only a coward who repines, and I have no right to rebel because the hand of the Lord is heavy on me. Is there any news this morning?”

“Poachers out again last night, Sir Devereux. Supposed to be that fellow Marston again. But Ganes tell me they’ve cleared all the pheasants out of the Home Wood—the wood that you were going to shoot to-morrow, Sir Devereux.”

But the master of Grange Court did not appear to be listening. At any other time the news would have raised him to a pitch of furious indignation, now he merely nodded and sighed. He glanced up with a watery smile on his face as Sybil came in. She looked white and drawn herself, and her eyes told of recent tears, though she had tried to hide the fact. For the first time for a very long while the pair sat down to break-fast in silence. There were letters by Sybil’s side, but she did not heed them.

“We cannot go on in this way,” Sir Devereux said presently. “Sybil, my dear, we had better come to an understanding. George will never come here again—at least, I don’t suppose that he will ever come in my lifetime. After I am dead and gone he will take the estates and the title, and be the first coward who over reigned here.”

“I don’t like to say that, uncle,” Sybil whispered. It was impossible to restrain the tears any longer. “Of course, it is a terrible blow to both of us. It is always a terrible thing to find our loved ones with feet of clay. We have our cross to bear, dear, and we will bear it. But we cannot help clinging to those whom we love. Dear George will always be my brother and your nephew.”

“Yes, yes,” Sir Devereux sighed, “and some day master of Grange Court. I am not going to come between you, Sybil, my dear. Blood is thicker than water, and it is only natural that you will like to see George sometimes. Get him to write you, and go and visit him in London occasionally. But don’t mention his name more than is necessary. Mind you, I was wrong last night. It was inhuman of me to send the boy away when he was weak and ill. But I lost my head, and he was stubborn and unbending. Still—”

Sir Devereux turned hastily and swallowed some coffee, and Sybil picked up her correspondence. She thrilled as she saw a note from George on the top of the pile. Watson had doubtless placed it there. And Sybil was moved with a certain curiosity when she noted the address on the flap of the envelope.

It was a long note, and Sybil read it two or three times before she placed the letter down again and turned to Sir Devereux.

“We have news of George sooner than I expected,” she said in a voice that she tried in vain to keep steady. “It appears that he stayed last night at the Moat House.”

“At the Moat House! Why, those people are practically strangers to us. It is true I used to know Mrs. Cameron in the old days, but she has avoided me here steadily. How did George get there?”

“Well, it appears that Miss Cameron knows everything. If you recollect, she came here last night seeking for the doctor. By mistake, she was overlooked, and sat in the ingle of the library when you were confronting George with his colonel’s letter. It was rather an embarrassing situation for Miss Cameron, who could not very well disclose herself. Her idea, George says, was to go away and delicately let it be understood that she had heard nothing. She followed George out of the house with the intention of making her way home, when she saw that he really was very ill and incapable of going far. Then she took him to the Moat House—”

Sir Devereux quivered as he listened. The heart of the gallant old soldier smote him sorely as he looked back to the events of the previous evening. Not that he intended in the least to go back from the line he had taken up. George had behaved like a coward; he had dishonoured a line of spotless men and women, and he must put up with the consequences. But the act of the previous evening savoured of brutality. In cold blood Sir Devereux would not have behaved like that to his worst enemy.

“I was wrong,” he said hoarsely. “I should have kept George here. If he had only said one word—but he said nothing; he seemed to try to justify himself by dignified silence. My dear, I could not know that he was as ill as all that. And those people

who are almost strangers to us have saved his life. Still, they must know the truth—"

"What does it matter?" Sybil exclaimed. "I have heard you say that Mrs. Cameron is one of the noblest women who ever lived. And Miss Cameron's face is a pure and beautiful one. I am sure that the secret of George's shame is safe in their hands."

Sir Devereux hoped so. But his belief in human nature had been rudely shattered.

"What does George want?" he asked. "I hope he is not staying long at the Moat House."

"No; he's going to town this afternoon, he says. But he wants to see me first. He has asked Mrs. Cameron if she had any objection to my calling there this morning, and she has given her consent. I had better go, uncle."

"My dear child, of course you had bettor go," Sir Devereux exclaimed. "I wish George had not stayed there. I wish he had been well enough to get back to town. I am going to write some letters. And if Ganes calls about those poachers, say I am not well enough to see him. I feel as if I never wanted to see a gun or a pheasant again. Marston can have all the game, for me, if he likes. And if it is possible that George—"

The other part of the sentence seemed to stick in the baronet's throat; he said no more, and hurried out of the room.

The proud set of the head was gone, Sir Devereux stooped like a very old man, as Sybil could see, and her heart went out to him.

"I will go and see George at once," the girl told herself. "I must be gentle with him. I must keep that passionate temper of mine within control. I'll try to forget that he sought to throw all the blame on Ronald."

A little later Sybil set out on her errand. The air was clear and crisp, and the great naked woods behind Grange Court shone in the brilliant light of the morning. The ground was so dry and hard that Sybil decided to go to the Moat House by way of the wooded path. She came presently to the tangled corner where the cottage of Marston lay. This was the dark, mysterious man who was responsible for all the trouble with the game, and who constantly kept the head keeper, Ganes distracted by his cleverness. Sybil had heard a great deal about Marston and his ways. He was reported to be a man of education, a clever man who had once been in a good position before he took to his present evil life. He had never been caught yet, but everybody knew that he was the cleverest poacher in the county.

The man himself was lounging over the gate smoking his pipe as Sybil passed. She gave him a half-glance as she went along, and Marston raised his hat politely. The hat came off with an inclination and a sweep—evidently Marston was quite used to bowing to ladies, Sybil thought. His voice as he said "Good-day!" and proclaimed the fact that it was a lovely morning, struck Sybil as being refined. A dark little girl darted from the gateway and into the woods beyond. Marston inquired where the child was going.

"Going to gather chestnuts daddy," came the shrill treble cry of the little one. "Then we can roast them on the bars of the grate after dinner."

Sybil went on, taking no further heed of the incident. The winding path was bringing her pretty close to the Moat House by this tine. Then there was a noise as of a falling body and a little cry of pain in a bush close by. Sybil pushed the bushes aside, and there before her lay the little dark girl who had come from Marston's cottage.

"What's the matter, my pretty?" Sybil asked. She had a soft place in her heart for children. "What have you done to your knee?"

"Cut it, miss," Jessie sobbed. "I was running fast, and my foot got entangled into a wire put down by some of those nasty poachers!" Sybil smiled. "But I'm not going to cry, and I am going to be brave. But there's a lot of blood—isn't there?"

Sybil took out her dainty lace hand-kerchief and bathed the place in a little pool hard by. When she looked up again she saw that the dark, earnest eyes of Flora Cameron were gravely and approvingly regarding her.

"Good-morning," Sybil said brightly. "This little girl has come to grief, but I fancy it is all right now. We'll tie the handkerchief about the place, and leave it there for the present. And now, girlie, you had better run home to your father."

Jessie put up her little red mouth, and Sybil kissed her gravely. With a flash of gratitude from her dark eyes and an especial smile for Flora, she vanished.

"That was nicely and kindly done, Miss Drummond," Flora said. "That is a dear child and I am only sorry that she is being brought up in such bad surrounding. Still Jessie is naturally good, and I fancy that I have influenced her in the right way. Were you coming to see me?"

"That is my intention," Sybil said. "I—I received a note from my brother just now. It was very good of you to help him when you did. You see, there has been a misunderstanding between George and Sir Devereux—but you know that."

Flora nodded, her face a little flushed and uncomfortable-looking.

"Unfortunately, I had to," she said. "I was forced to become a listener. I had no idea that I was going to be the recipient of family secrets. I dared not disclose my presence because it was too late before I could speak. My idea was to go away and say nothing to anybody. When I overtook your brother I saw at once that he was very ill, and that it would be dangerous for him to be out of doors. You see I have had a great deal of experience of illness. There was nothing for it but to take your brother to the Moat House."

"It was exceedingly kind of you," Sybil said; "especially when you heard everything. I suppose even the best and noblest of us make mistakes sometimes. I have heard soldiers speak of sudden spasms of cowardice—of how whole regiments have turned their backs to the foe. I expect that that was the matter with George."

"I don't think so," Flora replied thoughtfully. "I believe that your brother is the victim of some terrible misunderstanding. We talked of this thing last night—indeed, we had to. For I was compelled to tell your brother what I had overheard. And I am sure that Captain Drummond is no coward—I am certain that a man with a face like his could do nothing dishonourable."

"Most people would say so," Sybil replied. "But you do not understand everything. For instance, why should George try to shift the blame on Captain Cardrew? You were present at that painful meeting last night, and you must remember that."

Flora's face seemed to grow a trifle harder as she listened.

"I did not gather that," she said. "You will recollect raising the point yourself. You said that if your brother was not guilty, then Captain Cardrew was. Did it not strike you that the latter supposition may be correct?"

Sybil flushed with indignation. She was proud enough of George, but what brother would stand in the light of favour where a lover was concerned?

"You evidently do not know Captain Cardrew," Sybil said. "If you did, you would not connect him with anything of the kind. You may believe George, but if you saw the two side by side, you would have to admit that your belief in the one was doing the other a cruel injustice. But we need not argue the point. Is not this your way in?"

Sybil was in the house presently, in the great flagged hall with the oak carvings all around her. From thence she passed into the dining-room, which was deserted now. Sybil noticed the white flowers and the curious effect of the sunshine on the old castle. She inclined her head as Flora asked to be excused, so that she could fetch Captain Drummond. Left alone, Sybil wandered about the old room, falling under its soothing influence and calm. She glanced at the wonderful old over-mantel; her eyes fell on the little row of framed photographs there. She paused before one of them, and opened her eyes in wide astonishment.

"Ronald!" she exclaimed. "Ronald, here! What a curious thing! Ronald in a style of photograph I have never seen before! My dear Miss Cameron," as Flora entered the room, "why did you not tell me that you knew Ronald Cardrew well?"

"Your brother," Flora began, "will be here—. What do you mean? I have never met Captain Cardrew in my life. That photograph is not—"

"But it is!" Sybil cried aloud. "Do you think I don't know? What mystery is this?"

Flora looked down to the floor then up to the ceiling. Her face was a study in emotions.

"That is Mr.—. Oh, there is some mistake here!" she said. "Say what you will that is not Captain Cardrew."

Chapter XV

Who Is The Man?

Little used to anything that did not appear on the surface, Flora's agitation was yet not lost on Sybil Drummond. The former had the air of one who conceals something, and Sybil told herself proudly that she had not been brought up in an atmosphere of that kind.

"I do not care to make myself in the least disagreeable," she said, in her haughtiest way. "You have been very kind to my dear brother, and I am very grateful to you. Let me try to believe there is a mistake somewhere. Whose photograph did you say that was?"

"I did not say," Flora replied. "I said it was not the portrait of Captain Cardrew, and I adhere to my statement."

Sybil took the framed photograph from the mantle-piece and held it to the light. She was quick and passionate as a rule, and accustomed to having her own way, and not given to yield to anybody. Sybil passed usually for one of the most amiable of girls, but one or two people could have told a different story. Her blood was beginning to tingle now; she felt that she was being deceived. And yet there was no sign of prevarication on Flora's cold white face. The girl's expression suggested pain more than anything else.

"I think we had better get to the bottom of this thing first," Sybil went on. "You say that those are not the features of Captain Cardrew, and I say that they are. It is impossible for me to believe that two men could be so wonderfully alike. I am certain that I am looking at the face of the man to whom I am engaged to be married."

A sort of choking cry came from Flora. Her head was bent forward. Her eyes were full of some nameless terror. She was as white as the banks of flowers behind her. Just for a moment she seemed inclined to burst out into a torrent of words, then by an effort she checked herself.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "There must be a mistake here. We must—we must allow that two men in this world are identically alike. Such a thing has happened before. Did not a poor follow some time ago suffer a term of penal servitude on account of his amazing likeness to somebody else? Do you remember that?"

"Yes, I remember that," Sybil admitted slowly. "Lots of people swore that the innocent man was the criminal. If you can prove that that picture does not represent Ronald—"

"It represents my half-brother," Flora said, in a tone that conveyed the fact that she was not disposed to stand any further questions on the subject. "He passed out of our lives some five years ago, Miss Drummond, I am going to ask you something that may seem strange, not to say impertinent, to you. Have you known Captain Cardrew long?"

"For two years," Sybil explained. "He came to stay with us after the Boer War. He and my brother were very friendly at that time, and Captain Cardrew had done one or two little things that brought him before the public. He was an Imperial Yeoman."

"Oh, yes! Not a commissioned officer, then?"

"No; he was merely a trooper when he went out to South Africa. He won his commission. Then he came to stay with us, and we became engaged."

"You know his family and his people, I suppose? Pardon me if I seem to be impertinent."

"I don't know any of his people," Sybil admitted. "You see, Cardrew is anything but a common name. Ronald has told me several times that he has not a relation in the world. His father was a general in the Indian Army, and died out there."

Flora bowed, and asked no further questions. Yet she did not appear to be in the least easy in her mind. She turned away and looked out of the window, with a pained expression on her face. And it almost seemed to Sybil that she was glad to find that Captain Cardrew was not in England. Flora might have said more, but George entered the room at the same moment.

“This is very good of you, Sybil,” he said. “I am glad that you are not going to neglect me altogether. Perhaps, now that you have made the acquaintance of Miss Cameron—”

But Flora had already slipped from the room. Her natural delicacy of feeling prompted her to leave brother and sister alone. As the light filtered in through the painted window at the end of the dining-room, Sybil saw how pale and ill George looked.

“You poor dear!” she said, as she kissed him warmly. “I am afraid you are worrying dreadfully, George. Is there not some great mistake somewhere?”

“There has certainly been a miscarriage of justice,” George said, hoarsely. “I am not guilty of this abominable charge that hangs over me. And yet, if I am not guilty—”

“Then Ronald is? And that is impossible! George, you are not going to shirk your duty? You are not going to place the blame on him?”

“I am not going to denounce him, even,” George said coldly. “I would much rather not, dear. Don’t let there be any cloud between you and me, Sybil. My uncle has turned his back upon me; he will never receive me again till my innocence is proved. I would never return to Grange Court after what has happened. One thing puzzles me—why is Ronald Cardrew’s photo here?”

“But it is not his photo,” Sybil cried. “I noticed that directly I came into the room. Of course, I asked Miss Cameron about it, and she says the photo represents her half-brother. I should say that he had met with some kind of trouble, for she was very reticent. It is one of those extraordinary likenesses that one reads of sometimes.”

“Cardrew was always very close as to his past,” George said meaningly.

“Ronald is an honourable gentleman, and no charge hangs over him!” Sybil flashed out. “If you could only say the same thing! I am sick of these insinuations: I am tired—”

“For Heaven’s sake, do not let us quarrel!” George said. “Goodness knows, I have few enough friends in the world as it is! And some day the truth will come to light and the guilty will be punished. I am going to London to-day, Sybil. What will happen to me after that I don’t know. But there is one thing that I have to do first, if it is only to show my gratitude to the girl who has been so kind to me. This is a mysterious house—”

“Everybody says so, George. Have you tapped any of its mysteries?”

“Fate, has placed in my hands the key of the secret, Sybil. It has been thrust on me undesignedly. I can’t tell you everything—it would not be fair. All the elements of a great tragedy are here—the parted lovers, the wicked villain, and the persecuted hero. The hero has been in gaol—till quite lately.”

Sybil listened with dilated eyes. Everything savouring of the romantic appealed to her.

“There is nothing wrong in the people, I hope?” she asked.

“The women here as good and pure as yourself,” said George earnestly. “It is the man who is the rogue in the plot. You have seen Dr. Bernard Beard, no doubt? A big man, with a fine presence. I expect you have met him in the lanes. He is the man we have to combat. And I have pledged myself to do so and protect the innocent women here.”

“I am curious as to the hero in gaol,” Sybil said.

“I remarked that he had been in gaol—till recently,” George went on. “Convicts escape sometimes, and—”

“One escaped last night; he has not yet been found. George, do you mean to tell me that the poor fellow is actually the hero of the story? You have met him?”

“Yes; we had a most dramatic meeting in my bedroom last night. But the wonder of the thing does not cease here. Do you recollect Gilbert Doyle?”

“Of course I do! He was a most horrid boy! He used to break my dolls when he used to come down to Grange Court for the holidays. George, you don’t mean to say—”

“Indeed, I do, Sybil. The escaped convict is none other than old Gilbert. He told me his story, and a very sad one it is. And the rascal at the bottom of his misfortunes is the man who is head of this household. Sybil, Gilbert is in my bedroom. He must be got away before an hour is over to a place of safety. I am leaving here after luncheon. Indeed, it has been put to me so very pointedly by Beard that I could not remain. Directly I am gone, a servant will go to my room and the fateful discovery will be made. Can you see any way to avoid it?”

Sybil puckered up her pretty forehead and thought in silence for a minute or two.

“There is old Anna, my nurse,” she said. “Anna’s cottage is secluded enough, and she would do anything for me. Besides, she would be pretty sure to remember Gilbert Doyle. If you could only manage to postpone your departure for an hour or two, I might—”

“Yes, yes. But how to get him out of the house. That is what is puzzling me. I am prepared to do anything in the world to help Gilbert Doyle, but—”

George paused, suddenly conscious that Sybil was looking at him in a peculiar way. Her eyes were imploring him to be silent. She was like one who whispers of eavesdroppers. With the instinct of danger strong upon him, George turned round. There, in the doorway, stood Bernard Beard, with a smile upon his large features. It was a non-committal kind of smile, and told George nothing. He had not the least idea how much Beard had overheard.

“Miss Drummond, I think,” said the big man, advancing in his most engaging manner. “Very glad indeed to see you in my house. An apology is due to Sir Devereux and yourself. It was at my suggestion that Mrs. Cameron did not return your calls years ago. There are reasons why we prefer a secluded life.”

“We cannot interfere with the wishes of others,” Sybil said coldly. There was something about the man that drove her back upon herself. “We are very sorry, because my uncle knew Mrs. Cameron in the old days, and had a high opinion and regard for her. I came to see my brother to-day.”

“Before he leaves me for London? Quite right and proper of you. By the way, did I not hear you discussing a certain Gilbert Doyle?”

George admitted the suggestion promptly. In the face of so direct a challenge it would have been foolish to do anything else. They had been discussing a certain Mr. Gilbert Doyle; in fact, he had been an old friend of the speaker’s.

“Which is quite a remarkable coincidence,” Beard laughed. “I also know Gilbert Doyle. He was engaged to a girl in whom I took a great interest. It was not my place to interfere, but I had an idea that Doyle was not an ideal husband for the

young lady in question. I made inquiries, and investigations, proved that I was correct. Gilbert Doyle was subsequently sentenced to term of penal servitude. A short time ago he was removed from Portland to Greystone Prison, from whence he escaped last night."

Beard was speaking slowly and deliberately, with his eyes fixed upon the faces of his guests. That there was some hidden meaning behind his words George had no doubt. If it was going to be a battle of wits, he was quite ready for the encounter.

"You fill me with regret," he said. "So the dramatic pursuit of the convict last night was—"

"Was the hunting of Gilbert Doyle. It was more than strange that he should find himself so near to the abode of the girl whose life he wrecked, and just as strange that he should be so close to an old friend like you. It struck me that here was the making of a strong dramatic story. The fugitive pressed by the officers of justice; he makes his way here, and finds you, his friend; you hide him; you procure food for him. Upon my word, that last was a happy hit of mine. You were in the dining-room looking for food last night?"

"Let me admit the charge at once," George smiled. "Go on."

He had forced a smile to his lips, but his feelings were anything but pleasant. He was quite sure now that Beard knew more than he cared to say. Sybil had turned away, and affected to be deeply interested in the bank of white flowers behind her. She had a feeling that it would be just as well to keep her tell-tale face from Beard.

"We will suggest that the hunted man is concealed in your bedroom," Beard went on. "We will—"

"Stop a moment," George interrupted. "At this point it is quite possible to spoil the romance. We will ask Miss Cameron—who has just come into the room, I see. Let me tell you all that Dr. Beard has been saying. A dramatic story, is it not? But the whole thing would be exploded by looking into my bedroom to make sure."

"I had not thought of that," Beard said gravely. "Besides, that would be in very bad taste, even to the villain of the piece. If I were diplomatic, I would affect to despise such inhospitable methods, and wait till my guests had departed."

George gravely admitted that the point was correct. At the same time, he felt that Beard was sure of his ground, and playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse. He was telling George as plainly as possible what he intended to do after the latter had gone. George began to realise the full meaning of Beard's cleverness.

"There is a more prosaic obstacle," Flora said. "Your door has a spring lock. If you have removed the latchkey, which is usually inside the door, we could not get in."

George subdued his admiration. Flora was telling him that she had the latch-key, and that the door of the bedroom was fastened. It was cleverly managed.

"I had to take precautions," George said. "Last night the door locked upon me, and I had to get in by the window, which was fortunately open. If I mislay the latchkey, you will have to get a blacksmith to open the door. But Dr. Beard has not even told me how he learnt the name of the escaped prisoner. I should like to know that."

“I met the prison doctor just now, and he told me all about it,” Beard explained. “From that doctor I built up my little romance. What do you think of it, Flora?”

Chapter XVI

To the Rescue.

George crossed over to the French window and pushed it open. He felt that he would like to be alone for a little while and collect his thoughts. As if to check them, Beard followed him. Directly he was gone, Flora rose and rang the bell.

“Bring the little girl in here,” she directed the footman. “Miss Drummond, I see that your brother has already confided in you as he said he would. You also see how pressing the danger is. Dr. Beard suspects everything, his subtle mind has pieced it all together. In a day or two it would not matter so much, but Mr. Doyle must remain free for some hours to come. We must find some way of getting him to a place of safety. If you cannot think of a way, I must try a little scheme of my own.”

“I could manage it after to-night,” Sybil said thoughtfully. “There is an old nurse of mine who would do anything for me. But she is old, and she has to be prepared. To-morrow—”

“To-morrow may be too late for my purpose. I believe that I hold the clue to the whole villainy in my hands. Still, the idea of your old nurse and her cottage may come in very useful. In the meantime, I am going to use the child Jessie!”

Jessie Marston came demurely into the room. She was sorry to trouble Miss Flora, but she had promised to lend her a copy of “The Wide, Wide World,” which she was anxious to read. Her father had been talking to her about it.

“I expect I have been too busy over other things,” Flora smiled. “But you shall have my copy of the precious book, and I will go and fetch it for you from the library. And, after that I want you to do something for me, Jessie.”

Jessie responded bravely that she would do anything in the world for Miss Flora. Flora’s eyes were glowing now with the light of inspiration. She vanished swiftly from the room and came back presently with the coveted volume in her hand.

“I want you to take this home and come back again. But you are not to come to the house. It is a sort of game we are playing, but nobody is to know anything about it. You must come back and stay by the clump of trees opposite the lodge gates, where you can see the house. Then a man will come out with a letter in his hand, and you are to speak to him. Say you are Jessie, and he will come with you. Then I want you to take him and hide him in the woods so that only you can find him. Then you are to show the man your cottage, so that he can find his way to it after dark. There is nothing more I can think of, Jessie, except that you will stay in the house and not leave it again till tomorrow morning.”

Jessie was listening to all this with dilated eyes. She was quite sure there was nothing wrong in the little game, or Miss Flora would never have suggested it.

Besides, the child had the feeling that she was helping her benefactress in some way.

"I'll do it," she said. "I'll do anything that you ask me. Do we begin now?"

"We begin at once, Jessie. Take your book home, and then return to the beech-trees, from whence you can see the house. Now, run along, little girl."

Jessie departed obediently after a kiss from Flora and a large handful of preserved fruits. Sybil turned eagerly to Flora for details. But there were no details forthcoming for the present, as George followed by Beard came back into the dining-room. George had a carefully assumed expression of indifference; Beard's face was almost boyish in its gaiety.

"We have been carrying the mystery of the locked bedroom and the concealed convict a little further," the latter said. "I fancy I have convinced Captain Drummond that I should have made an excellent detective. My theory is that the bedroom door did not lock itself accidentally but that somebody else climbed through the window before the Captain was compelled to follow suit. It seemed to me that I could point out where the ivy had been pulled down by the convict on his way to the bedroom."

"And what would the object be?" Flora asked.

"My dear child, your knowledge of the ways of convicts is primitive. What is the very first thing that a convict requires when he regains his liberty? A thoughtful Government has provided him with a uniform that does not permit of disguise. A Chinaman might pass without comment in the street, but not a convict in his full dress. Therefore, he needs clothes. A change of garments is absolutely necessary, especially if he hopes to keep his liberty. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the first thing the escaped convict does is to steal a suit of clothes. This Gilbert Doyle—Well, what is it?" The intruding footman extended a shabby-looking note written in pencil on a tray. He was understood to say that a boy had brought it. There was no answer, only a request that the letter should be handed to Dr. Beard without delay.

"That being admitted beyond all shadow of dispute," Beard went on, leisurely opening the letter, and apparently enjoying the sound of his own voice, "we will proceed to our next deduction, which is—which is—Good heavens! You don't mean to say—I—I—I."

The man paused, white and shaking. George could see that there were only half a dozen words pencilled on the note. But the effect of them on Beard had been extraordinary. He seemed to collapse and shrivel up like a pricked bladder, his shoulders fell away, he looked half his natural size. He staggered across the room to the fireplace and dropped the letter into the blaze. George watched the dramatic change with a certain grim amusement.

"Are you ill, sir?" he asked. "I hope there is no bad news in your note."

Beard did not seem to hear. He turned his starting eyes upwards, as if seeking for new strength and assistance that were denied him. All the man's assurance had gone out of him. He tottered to the sideboard and poured himself out a glass of brandy. After he had swallowed this a little natural colour crept into his fat cheeks again.

"It was a shock," he muttered—"a terrible shock. The sudden death of an old friend."

George nodded grimly. He knew perfectly well that the man was lying—and, indeed, Beard was aware of the lameness of his excuse. There had been no time to invent anything plausible. He had to utter his shoddy falsehood on the spur of the moment.

"I have to go over to Castleford," he said. "I shall have to go at once. That will prevent me from having the pleasure of driving you to the station. Flora, you will see that there is a trap to take Captain Drummond to the station at the proper time." Flora intimated that she would do all that was necessary. In spite of his shock, Beard had not forgotten his intention to get George out of the house as soon as possible. With a muttered apology for his enforced absence, Beard left the room. A little later he was seen striding down the drive, a large stick in his hand.

"Fortune has played into our hands with a vengeance this time," George exclaimed. "What a wonderfully clever man that is! He seemed almost to divine exactly what had happened. Now that he is out of the way, cannot we act at once?"

"Fortune always comes to the side of truth and honour at last," Flora said thoughtfully. "But do not be too hasty. You have only a faint idea of the cunning cleverness of that man. He may be acting all the time. I don't think that he was, but one never can tell with a man of his marvellous ability. Let me put my plan into execution."

Flora slipped out of the room; she did not return for the best part of half an hour. When she did her cheeks were glowing and her eyes sparkled.

"I think I have managed it," she said. "I started the scheme a little time ago by sending one of the footmen into Castleford for me. Look down the drive and tell me what you see."

There was nothing to see for some little time till the figure of a servant in livery, who carried a letter in his hand, emerged into sight. The figure walked jauntily along, looking neither to the right nor left. As he approached the clump of beeches by the lodge gates, he stopped apparently to tie up a shoelace; and then there appeared a child, who spoke to him.

"I see it all!" Sybil cried. "How wonderfully clever you are! You have borrowed the dress of one of your footmen—the man you sent to Castleford—and dressed Mr. Doyle up in it! By the time your foot-man returns, his lost livery will be restored to his room. If Dr. Beard is on the look-out he will never see that."

George was warm in his congratulations. He could go to London now with an easy mind, he said. But he had made his mind up to one thing—he was coming back again. Was there anything in which he could be useful? Flora smiled as she held out her hand.

"There are many ways in which you can be useful," she said. "Before you go I will give you the address of an old family solicitor. I want you to see him and tell him what has happened here. And then I have some detective work for you to do also. And when the time comes, and you are free to hold up your head again—"

Flora said no more, but her glorious smile was enough for George. He did not realise the fact that he was still holding the girl's two hands in his. Here was a beautiful and noble girl, who believed in him when all the world had turned against him. For her sake he would fight the battle out to the bitter end. And when the truth was declared and he could hold up his head again he had made up his

mind to ask Flora the question which a good man should ask only one woman, and that woman once in a lifetime.

Meanwhile Doyle was making his way safely to the lodge gates. He knew pretty well what he had to do, for Flora, had told him all in the hall when he had smuggled himself downstairs. As he stood in the hall he would have passed anywhere for a respectful servant; he stood quietly listening to all that Flora had to say.

"You will do exactly as you are told," she said. "I daresay you are puzzled to know why I should take such an interest in your case, and why I have interfered like this. But there is no time to go into that now. I must see you later. It is arranged that you shall go to the cottage occupied by the poacher Marston, as you did last night. Marston will be out of the way, I know. Therefore I shall come and see you to-night at 10. I shall have news that will surprise you. Do you quite understand?"

"I quite understand that you are an angel of goodness and mercy." Doyle said huskily. "You are Miss Cameron of course, I have heard of you in the notes that Mary has sent me and smuggled into my possession by my faithful servant, Juan Garcia. But Mary seemed to hint that you were not interested in their misfortunes."

"So it appeared," Flora said. "But until very lately Mary had no confidence in me. I expect she looked upon everybody in the household in the light of an enemy. It was only when I found out certain things, and to a certain extent forced her confidence that she gave me the details. But I had to be careful and discreet; I had to deceive Mr. Beard. He does not know that I am on your side; he thinks that I only interest myself in my own affairs. And then I made a discovery that told me it was time to act. What that discovery is I will tell you when I see you to-night. Now you had better go."

The pseudo-servant touched his hat respectfully as he passed out of the house into the drive. By the clump of beeches he found Jessie awaiting him. Despite his disguise she recognised him, as her face testified.

"So we are going to play a little game together again," she said. "Miss Flora told me that. It seems a funny game and I don't see much point in it; only if Miss Flora says it is all right, why then, it must be, don't you think?"

"I'm certain of it," Doyle said gravely.

"Miss Flora is goodness and beauty itself. And our little game is only innocent hide-and-seek. Now, little girl, you are to take me to some pretty bower in the woods and hide me there. Then you are to go to the house and fetch a parcel, and take another back again. You see, I don't feel quite comfortable in these clothes, and I want my own again. But you will say nothing to anybody."

Jessie promised gravely to observe all these things. She brought Doyle at length to a dark recess in the wood, where there was the remains of an old charcoal burner's hut. Soon Doyle was once more in the suit of clothes he had borrowed from George and the footman's garb was on its way back to the Moat House again. There were two or three papers in the pocket of the coat, and a packet of cigarettes, to say nothing of a small basket of food. Nothing had been omitted for his comfort.

The long day dragged on, the dark fell, the boom of the clock in the village church told of the sullen passing of the hours. It was nearly 10 o'clock now, and there was no sign of Jessie coming back to take her friend to the cottage. Doyle was getting restless and uneasy. He felt at last that he must try and find the cottage for himself. Perhaps something had happened to Jessie. At any rate, he could not stay there any longer. More by good fortune than anything else, he blundered on the cottage. There was a light in the little sitting-room, and the sound of somebody unmistakably sobbing. Doyle ventured to look in. Jessie sat with one boot off, and a great swelling round her slim ankle. Her pitiable look changed as Doyle came in.

"Oh, I am so glad you came—so glad!" she said. "I slipped and fell. I can't put my foot to the ground. And my father has met with an accident, too. He sent a message by a boy to say so—a message on a scrap of paper. In the big wood by the keeper's lodge. And if my poor father is found there they will send him to prison. Oh, my dear, kind sir, can't you think of any way to help my poor father?"

Doyle stooped and kissed the pretty, quivering little face.

"I can," he said pithily. "Keep your courage up! I'll go to your father myself."

Chapter XVII

The Cause of Humanity.

The child's eyes sparkled, and a little April smile crossed over her dark face. Gilbert's heart went out to her. It was plain, too, that Jessie was keenly anxious about her father.

"It was very unfortunate," she said. "I ought to have been more careful. I should have thought more about my father. He is everything that I have left, you see."

Gilbert bent down and kissed the trembling lips of the child. His own case was sorry enough, but that of Jessie seemed worse, tied as she was to the dissolute scoundrel called Marston. And yet there must have been good in the man, or Jessie would not be so concerned.

"My father has these attacks," the girl went on, with the air of a middle-aged woman. "He has cancer and will never be any better. The pain affects his heart, and sometimes he will lie for hours without moving, so great is the pain. And if he is caught by the keepers in the woods he will go to prison."

"How did he manage to send the message?" Gilbert asked.

"By a boy. I expect he dragged himself to the edge of the wood, and then back to the place that we both know of. If I was all right I could go there on the darkest night. My father taught me all about the woods, and how to feel my way in the dark. And now I have hurt my foot, and I cannot do him any good at all."

And Jessie's tears began to flow again. It was perhaps a foolish thing on Gilbert's part, but he could not behold the little one's distress and do nothing. Heaven only knew how important his meeting with Flora Cameron was, but he

decided to risk missing that. A man could not, however abandoned, be out in the woods all night.

"Don't cry," Gilbert said. "I'll do what I can for you. If Miss Cameron comes here to see me, tell her what has happened, and if she can't wait for me, perhaps she will leave a message. Only I don't know the woods as you do. Will you tell me the way to go? I knew a lot about woods and forests in Mexico, so I don't suppose that an English thicket will puzzle me."

"But the woods are very thick," Jessie replied. "There are swamps that even the keepers do not go near at night. Sometimes cattle stray into them and get suffocated. You will give my father the cry of the night-jar, like this,"—imitating the call of that bird—"then, if he is near, he will know that it is a friend, and direct you how to get to him. You start from the little white gate and go through straight down the big ride, where they stand to shoot the pheasants. Halfway down is a pile of hop-poles, and you take the path by them till you come to a hut. Then there is a path down hill that leads you to the edge of the swamp. You will see a broken old boat there. Then stand still and give the call. Now, I am going to repeat that again till you get it by heart."

Gilbert had it by heart at length, and was ready to start. The night was darker than he had expected, and by the time he had reached the big ride he began to have an uncomfortable idea that he had lost his way. He could just make out the faint outline of the bare tree-tops against the sky-line; afar off he could hear the bleating of sheep. Holding his hand a little distance off, he could not see it at all. He blundered on and on, looking in vain for the pile of hop-poles. He was about to turn back and begin all over again when he faintly discerned the pyramid of sticks.

He almost wished he had not come. Why should he risk his freedom and happiness, to say nothing of the happiness of an innocent girl, for the sake of a poacher who was a pest to society? And yet, in the cause of humanity, Gilbert told himself that he must persevere.

Well, here was the pile of hop-poles at last, so that up to the present there had been no mistake. And suddenly Gilbert realised the fact that he had another danger to contend with. What if he should stumble across a keeper or two and be arrested on a charge of poaching? If that happened he would be back at Greystone before many hours were over his head. The reality of this danger stimulated Gilbert's sense of hearing, and he strained his ear for sounds. And presently the sound came—a peculiar, dull humming, as if a swarm of angry bees were close by. Something was coming heavily along, and a second later brilliant light illuminated the ride on either side.

Gilbert looked at the light in astonishment. What was the great humming motor doing on such a bad road? He was standing in front of a powerful Mercedes, and as his eyes grew accustomed to the light he saw that two men were inside. They were both swathed in furs with goggles and peaked caps. The car was creeping along like some monster that had strayed from its lair. Doyle could see that the thing was painted a dead-black, not a speck of brass being visible. He stood in the broad lane of blazing light, forgetful of the fact that he was picked out in full view of the occupants of the car. The big Mercedes stopped altogether.

“Say, can you put us on the right track?” the man next the driver asked. “We’ve gone by a local guide-book, and that’s let us down badly.”

Gilbert recognised the accent at once. He had not travelled in Mexico and the Southern States of America for nothing. The speaker came from the State of Virginia, and Gilbert wanted nobody to tell him that. It was a pleasant voice, with the faintest trace of a nasal drawl; indeed, few people who had no knowledge of the South would have recognised it, but the voice spoke plainly to Doyle.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked. These must be some wealthy Americans, with their national idea that all roads are public property. “You’re off the main track altogether. There is a right-of-way for the public through the ride, but not for wheels. How did you get here?”

“Through a gate that was off its hinges. We concluded from the guide-book that we were making a short cut of it. Can we get out at the other end?”

“Oh, yes, if you keep straight on,” Gilbert explained. “It’s about half a mile to the lane proper. Turn to the right and you’ll strike the main road.”

“Thanks very much! And how far is it to Castleford?”

“Upon my word, I don’t know,” Gilbert stammered. “I am a stranger in these parts, and—”

“Haven’t the bump of locality very well developed,” the questioner said, with a short laugh.

He started his hand to the guiding wheel of the machine, and Gilbert saw that the hand was smaller than a man’s hand usually is, just as if it had been shrivelled by an accident, and badly hurt, many years before.

“You don’t know how far it is to Castleford, and here you are wandering about this wood as if it were Piccadilly with the gas on. Well, I guess it is no business of ours, and I thank you kindly for your information.”

There was something gay about the speaker’s tones that was utterly devoid of offence. Still, the point was neatly made, as Gilbert was bound to admit. He laughed in reply, and the great Mercedes began to move again. It hummed and boomed, then it seemed to Gilbert as if it had stopped again, for the lights vanished, and there was no more sound beyond the scatter of a frightened rabbit or two.

But all this was taking time, so Gilbert proceeded on again till he came to the spot where the broken boat lay, and found it with some little trouble. He lifted up his voice, and gave the cry of the night-jar.

He called out again and again before any reply came. The reply was faint, but more like the call of the bird than his imitation was. He hesitated to speak; it was possible that keepers were lurking near. But at length he uttered Marston’s name in a low voice. The response seemed to come from close by.

“You need not be afraid of the keepers,” the faint, shrewd voice said. “I have taken care of that, and sent them on a wild-goose chase to the far side of the home spinney. Who are you?”

“Perhaps I had better know who you are first,” Gilbert said. “If you are James Marston—”

“Oh, I am James Marston, right enough. I can venture to tell you that, because you would never find me although you are close by. Only blunder a few steps forward in the dark, or even in the day-light, for that matter, and you would never

live to see the outer world again. Yes, you are talking to James Marston, who is down on his back, with the eagles preying on his very vitals. Who sent you to me?"

It was a strange, weird conversation in a strange, weird place. The full force of it was not lost upon Doyle. He shuddered to think what a false step might do for him.

"Your little girl sent me," he said. "I went to your house to meet a lady. But that has nothing to do with the matter at all."

"Pardon me if I venture to disagree with you. You are speaking of Miss Cameron?"

"As you know so much, it would be foolish to deny it. Miss Cameron—"

"Is an angel, if ever there was one," Marston groaned between his spasms of pain. "God bless her always, if it is only for her goodness to my little one. And if she picked out my cottage to meet you, then you are not a very bad man, or she would not meet you at all. She felt pretty sure that I should be out. It would have been all the same if I had been at home. I would do anything for Miss Cameron, though she scarcely deigns to speak to me. I should like to know your name, if you please!"

"Doyle," Gilbert said unthinkingly—"that is, Doyle will do as well as any other for the present."

"Of course it will. And for the future, too, seeing that you were born to the name. You are the man who escaped from Greystone Prison last night, and found your way into the Moat House by the corridor window. I was out on professional business, and saw all that. I waited with some curiosity to see what was going to happen. But when I saw that you had friends in the house, I understood that it was all a planned thing. At that moment I did not know that you were Mr. Gilbert Doyle, but I guessed it this morning when I was told that a convict called Doyle had escaped. I daresay you wonder how I know all these things, but everything will become plain presently. So you came of your own free will to take this poor body of mine home? Why did you come?"

"Because your little one has hurt her leg," Gilbert explained. "She had just received your message, and was in a great state as I reached the cottage. I may say that I was hiding near your cottage last night, but that, is another story. I had to come—I should have been in-human if I had not."

"Ay, and it's going to prove the best hour's work you have ever done in your life," Marston said in a hoarse voice. "I'm a great blackguard, but I have a sneaking liking for a good man yet. Stoop down by the side of the boat, under the locker. You'll find a lantern there. Light it, and I'll tell you how to get to me."

Gilbert found the lantern and a box of matches as well. He could see little patches of green grass dotted here and there across the pool like stepping-stones. But they were not all safe ones, Marston told him. He carefully indicated the different patches that would bear the weight of a man's body. There was a hollow of hard earth in the centre of the swamp, and here Marston lay on a mass of dry straw.

"It's no use," the latter said, as he essayed to rise. "With your help, I daresay I can manage to reach the other side of the mere, but I am too exhausted to get home. Give me the lantern, and take me on your back. I'll tell you which of the green patches to land on. Once we are on the other side of the water we can

develop the plan of campaign." The other side of the mere was at length reached, and then, utterly exhausted, Marston fell off the back of his supporter. Gilbert picked up the lantern, and let the rays of it play on the poacher's ghastly pale and drawn face.

"This is the worst attack I have ever had," he said feebly. "If only I had my medicine here, or a glass of brandy. If I don't get home I shall die. A little time ago I wanted to die, but not since you came. There is work for me to do yet."

"And for me also. In the first place I have to get you home."

"Which is improbable in the ordinary way. They don't feed you up for athletic exploits yonder, and I am a big man. You must fetch my pony. He is at the edge of the wood, tethered to the side of the road—a ragged little bay, without saddle or bridle. I always keep him like that to avoid suspicion."

Gilbert did not wait for further directions. He was anxious to get Marston home, and not to keep Flora Cameron waiting longer. With the lantern in his hand he felt pretty sure he would not lose his way. He had only to find the pony and take him back to Marston. Gilbert flashed the rays of his lantern from side to side, as if seeking for suspicious objects. Then suddenly the rays touched a mass of black metal pushed into a ditch that seemed to be more or less filled with water. Gilbert forgot Marston for the moment. He had not the least hesitation in guessing what the name of the metal was.

"Now. I wonder what this means?" he asked himself. "This is close to the spot where the Americans stopped me. Why have they hidden their car in that ditch?"

Chapter XVIII

The Scent of Danger.

There lay the great Mercedes, as if it had broken down, and been abandoned for the present. But there was no sign, so far as Gilbert could see, of anything wrong. Was it possible that these men were after no good here, that they had some evil scheme on foot? But predatory characters, as a rule, do not parade the county in motor-cars that cost a couple of thousand pounds. There must be some better explanation than that. Nevertheless, the car seemed to be all right, and had been hidden by men who knew the wood better than they pretended. Still, it was no business of Gilbert's. There was the pony grazing by the road-side. Gilbert found the end of the road, and led the docile little beast into the spinney. It was not far to the place where Marston lay, but the ground had began to be rough, and Gilbert decided to tie up the pony here, and carry the poacher to it. He fastened the animal to a tree, and placed the lantern by the side, taking care to push the dark slide in again. There seemed nothing to fear now, so Gilbert pushed on boldly. Then suddenly a figure gripped him by the throat; Gilbert was carried fiercely back-wards, and only a tree-stem saved him from complete collapse.

So utterly surprised was he, he showed no fight for a minute. But he knew that his assailant was big and strong and powerful, and that the clutch on his throat was murderous in its intensity.

"So I've got a hold of you," a hissing voice said. "You thought to trap me here like that. It was a pretty scheme of yours, but I saw through it. I'll kill you before the other one comes up, and then I'll kill him, too."

Gilbert said nothing; he was keeping his strength for a final effort. He was far weaker than he had imagined, and he would need all his strength presently. That the man meant to kill him he did not doubt. He would have tried to explain the mistake but for two things—the grip on his throat choked the words in the utterance, and he was wondering in a dazed way where he had heard that voice before. It came to him like an inspiration, like the illumination of danger in a lightning flash.

The mysterious doctor; the man on board the steamer who had schemed to get Gilbert into all the trouble that had fallen upon him! He recognised the voice distinctly! he knew his murderous foe to be Dr. Beard, under whose roof he had passed the night before. The fact that Beard had mistaken him for some body else did not lessen the danger. Even if Beard knew that he was attacking the wrong man, he would want to see the face of his foe. That would be equally fatal. To go back to Greystone was worse than death itself. And that would be the up-shot of the discovery of his identity.

There was nothing for it but to struggle and fight on to the end, in the faint hope that some stroke of fortune would intervene in favour of the weaker man. Not that there was much chance of anything of the sort, Gilbert thought bitterly. Cruel Fate was dogging his foot-steps again, and everything was going against him.

The world began to dance and reel before his eyes; there were stars every-where. For Beard's grip on the throat of his foe was like a vice; there was no shadow of doubt as to his intention. Just for a moment Gilbert managed to shift that grip and call for help. It was possible that Marston might come to his assistance.

The shout was not uttered in vain. Quick as a hare as to his hearing. Marston had detected the sounds of a struggle. When the cry for help came he realised that his new ally was in trouble. A stray keeper, probably. With a great effort, Marston managed to drag himself along the ground in the direction of the fray. Long nights in the darkness had given him eyes like a cat's. He came sufficiently near to see what was taking place. He could make out the powerful form of Bernard Beard and the slender figure of Gilbert Doyle. He had an idea, too, that the doctor was unconscious of his opponent's identity.

But Marston did not wait to discuss the point. Taking a thick stick from the sodden moss, he crept behind Beard, and dealt him a heavy blow on the head. The big man reeled, and as his grip relaxed, Gilbert wriggled under his arm and darted into the bushes.

The latter had lost his nerve. He did not go far, for he felt the thick bushes and the darkness made him as safe as if he were a mile away. Besides, he wanted to await developments, and, in any case, could not abandon Marston.

Beard fell with a heavy grunt, and held his aching head in both hands. For a moment he could not realise what had happened. Marston's low chuckle brought him to his senses. He staggered to his feet with a savage growl.

“Did you hit me?” he asked. “Was it you who stopped me just now when—”

“Of course, it was,” Marston said coolly. “I couldn’t sit there and watch murder done. I don’t mind dying—in fact, I shall be glad to die when the time comes—but I have the greatest possible objection to capital punishment, and you ought to be much obliged to me for saving you from the worst crime.”

“Whereas I look upon you as a meddle-some fool!” Beard snarled. “Do you know who that fellow was? He was one of the Virginians. They lured me here by one of the most wickedly ingenious plots ever hatched in the brain of an arch-scoundrel. But that did not deceive me. I laid my plans to get the better of them. And when they separated I followed one of them, with the result that you saw. And now your foolish meddling—”

“Nothing of the kind,” Marston interrupted curtly. “You have barked up the wrong tree, as they say in America. You’ve got Virginians on the brain. It was no foreigner you tried to choke to death, but a friend of mine who came to take me home. I’m suffering from a pretty bad attack now, and I had to send for assistance. Can’t you hear my pony close by?”

Beard growled something about being mistaken. So far the conversation conveyed little to Doyle, who sat listening in the bushes. The only point he could make out was that Beard seemed to know something about the Americans and the motor car; or why did he speak of Virginians? There seemed to be a connection between the two.

“Well, I’m sorry,” Beard muttered. “I don’t want a murder on my conscience if I can help it; and I certainly took your friend for one of those two. I tell you, they are here; I have sure information on the point. I was so startled by it that I had to put off a little surprise I had prepared for the authorities at Greystone.”

“I know,” Marston nodded. “You were going to hand the escaped convict over to them. Do you know where he is?”

“Far enough away by this time, I expect,” Beard said moodily. “Why, the fellow was actually in my house.”

“Gilbert Doyle in your house! Sounds dramatic, doesn’t it?”

“How on earth did you know who the convict was?” Beard asked, in some surprise. “Well, you do know it, and there is an end of the matter. But I’m not worrying about Doyle at present. He can do no harm, and most of his spare time will be taken up in dodging the police. A man may get away from prison, he may have powerful friends, but he can’t keep free for long—at least, if he stays in this country. And if Doyle does not stay here, he cannot be the smallest trouble to me. Pah! I dismiss him altogether.”

Beard waved his hand contemptuously. Marston said nothing, so he went on again.

“But those Virginians are quite another matter. They have found me out, as they were bound to do sooner or later. And my hands are tied. I can do nothing so long as they don’t resort to personal violence. If I were to tell the police, they would only laugh at me. All I have to do is to watch and wait my time. I thought that I was hastening one of them out of the way to-night, but it seems that I was mistaken.”

“You are sure that they have left Paris?” Marston asked.

“Oh, I’m quite certain about that! I went into Castleford directly I received your letter, and used the cable to Paris freely. Cost me ten pounds to find out all I

wanted. But they left Paris for London. After that, I can tell you nothing, except that they lured me hereabouts. I guessed what the game was, and did a bit of tracking on my own. And, seeing that you are in this thing almost as deeply as I am, I shall be glad of your assistance."

There was a menace in the speaker's tones, but the implied threat did not seem to have any effect on Marston, so far as Gilbert Doyle could gather. He merely growled, and said he was not in a fit state to do any business that night.

"You clear out, and let me go home," he said. "When you have gone I shall be able to call my poor assistant back. He'll be too frightened to show up till you're gone. And don't you cry out till you're hurt in future."

"But I nearly got hurt," said Beard. "I saw one of the Virginians, and he saw me. I suppose I was not quite so cautious as I might have been. I expect one of the fellows spotted me by my size. Anyway, we had a struggle. When I heard the other one running up, I broke away; but not before I had torn my man's coat off his back. One doesn't imagine things like that."

"Perhaps not," Marston replied. "We'll talk the matter over some other time. I'm so racked with pain that I can't follow you. Good-night."

Beard muttered something and went off into the darkness. Five minutes elapsed before Marston gave a little whistle, and Gilbert Doyle emerged from the bushes.

"That was a narrow shave for you," the poacher said. "Fancy being tackled by the very last man you expect to see. It's a good thing I gave Beard that crack on the head."

"Yes; I was pretty nearly done," Gilbert admitted. "If Beard had not spoken first I should probably have betrayed my identity by calling for assistance. But I recognised those tones. The last time I heard them was on board ship, coming from South America. Our friend called himself Dr. Something—the name I forget. If I had never met him, I should not be here to-night. If I could only get to the bottom of that scoundrel's scheme—"

"Patience, and you'll get to the bottom of it in time," Marston said. "The stars are fighting on your side now. Fortune has been against you, but she is going to smile again. Do you know that by your kindness to-night to me, a perfect stranger, you have enlisted as a friend the one man who can right everything—I have known Bernard Beard for years. I may as well admit it at once—I have shared his rascally schemes. When he came down to live here, I followed. My disease prevented my getting a living in the old way, and I wanted to be near Beard, with a view to blackmailing him if I needed money. As a matter of fact, I have not yet had occasion to do anything of the kind, though I have been pretty near it once or twice. As it is, I am going to help you."

"To clear my character?" Gilbert said eagerly. "To set myself right before the world?"

"Yes, yes; but it will take time. We have a clever man to deal with, how clever you will never know. Now hoist me on the pony."

Marston was hoisted up with difficulty, and the pilgrimage through the woods began. Gilbert was surprised to hear a clock somewhere strike 10. It was less than an hour since he had set out on his errand, and it seemed ages ago.

"You'll be in time to keep your appointment with Miss Cameron yet," Marston said, almost in a state of collapse. "And now, don't ask a lot of curious questions

about the Virginians. Of course, you were close by and heard what was said. You have perhaps heard of the Corsican vendetta. Well, there is another kind of vendetta out yonder in the Southern States that goes farther than anything the Corsican mind has ever thought of, and that you shall hear about in time."

Gilbert Doyle asked no further questions. Besides it was cruel to bother a man so near death as Marston was. He clung to the neck of the pony, his face white and damp with the pain he suffered. Gilbert slipped the slide of the lantern round, so that he could pick out even places in the road for the pony to walk on. He came at length to the spot where the motor-car had been pushed into the ditch; he flashed the lantern for a second on that spot. The powerful Mercedes was no longer to be seen.

Still Gilbert said nothing. He was going to keep this information to himself. After all, he had no kind of guarantee of Marston's good faith. The man, on his own confession, had been a scoundrel. A little farther, and the grass was trampled down; it was evidently the scene of Beard's first struggle. Something bright on the grass caught Gilbert's eye. As the pony passed along he stooped and examined the shining disc in the light of the lantern. Then he whistled softly to himself as he pocketed the metal.

"I think this may be useful to me." he muttered. "At any rate, it is a clue to go by."

The shining disc of metal was an American twenty-dollar gold piece!

Chapter XIX

At the Cottage.

Gilbert Doyle would have been puzzled to explain why he had said nothing to Marston as to the finding of the gold coin, but so it was. After all his sufferings, it was not for him to give his confidences to everybody, and he did not see why he should make an exception in favour of the poacher. And yet Marston had given a promise to help him when the time came.

"I'll get off the pony now," the latter said, drawing a deep breath "The pain is getting better. I wonder at times why the agony of it does not drive me mad. Ah, that is as sweet as a foretaste of Paradise!"

Marston staggered to his feet, and held his head up like a diver who has been under water for a long time The knitted lines of his face relaxed, his breath came like a sob. It was wonderful how quickly the strong man recovered.

"Is it as bad as that?" Doyle asked, with a sympathy impossible to withhold.

"Bad? Well, that is a poor word for it. It is the refinement of agony. I wonder how far I could go without dying of the pain. It is always there in some form or other, better or worse, but it is always there to torture me. It is only when I am on one of my midnight expeditions that I can forget it altogether. That is partly why I am a poacher."

"It seems to me to be a purposeless, rather cowardly, life," Gilbert said.

“So it is, I admit, but I must be doing something—something wild and hazardous and daring. I should go mad else. Fancy me stifled in town, getting my living at a desk! The thing is impossible. I would have gone abroad with some expedition where danger lay if it had not been for the child, I can’t quite forget her.”

Marston paused by a broken gate, and turned his pony just as the animal was going into a field. The cottage was close by, the light of the lamp was glowing red behind the blind. As Marston entered Jessie rose from the side of the fire and greeted him with a glad little cry. She seemed to have eyes for nobody else. She dragged her father to the side of the cheerful blaze, and began to chafe his blue hands, tinged and hardened with the cold.

“I have been so frightened,” the little one said “I imagined all kinds of things. I should have come to you, only I could not struggle across the kitchen without pain. And then that kind gentleman came, and seemed to understand at once. I was frightened lest he should find his way into the bog. I am so glad to see you back.”

Gilbert Doyle made some suitable reply. He had no eyes at present for anything but the tall figure in the black cloak standing by the oaken settle. The flickering rays of the fire-light played upon Flora Cameron’s beautiful face and lighted up her eyes. Marston stood waiting for his visitor to be seated.

“I am pleased and honoured,” he said, “to see Miss Cameron here. I should like to thank you for all your goodness to my little girl, but words fail sometimes. It was kind indeed of you not to judge the child by the father.”

“That would be unfair, indeed,” Flora said, as she bent to kiss Jessie. “She has been terribly anxious about you. It is not for me to preach, but for a clever man like you there is surely a more legitimate way of making a living.”

“I daresay there is,” Marston said, with unwonted humility; “but I am bound to have something to make me forget the pain that is slowly killing me. I might take to drink, but it is a pride of mine that I am not a coward. And if I had not been a poacher, I do not think that Mr. Gilbert Doyle would be standing here to-night.”

Flora looked up quickly. The light of the fire flickered on the poorly-furnished room and the dingy walls. Despite his rough face and shabby clothing, Marston looked strangely out of place here. He would have passed anywhere for a gentleman.

“I surprise you,” the poacher went on; “but I am stating a fact all the same. And I am glad to place my poor cottage at your disposal. I did not know that you had arranged a meeting with Mr. Doyle here, but I am glad to be of service. You have, at any rate, the satisfaction of knowing that you are enlisted on the side of an innocent man.”

“You are in a position to prove that?” Flora asked eagerly.

“I shall be, but it is a matter of time. You may be surprised to hear that Dr. Bernard Beard is an old acquaintance of mine. I could make things exceedingly awkward for the doctor if I were so disposed, and I feel really disposed to-night.”

“Why to-night more than any other time?” Flora asked.

“Well, because things have happened. You see, I have known for many months that Mr. Doyle was at Greystone. I had a pretty shrewd idea who sent him there, but I did not interfere—a shameful confession, perhaps, but there it is. But, of

course, I knew all about Mr. Doyle. And when I heard that a convict had escaped, and when I saw that same convict enter the Moat House last night, I had no difficulty in guessing who he was. Even then I told myself it was no business of mine; but I feel quite differently now. Who would not feel a warm heart for the man who, in spite of all his troubles, took compassion on the troubles of a little child and risked his life to save that of a worthless poacher? I've had a call to-night. I saw it plainly before me, as if a hand had written the words in fire on the sky. If the God whose laws I have so outraged gives me the span of life to accomplish it, I shall save the honour of Gilbert Doyle."

Almost impulsively Flora held out her hand to the poacher. He shrank back, abashed; a little colour crept into his tanned and rugged face.

"I am not worthy of it," he stammered. "I am not fit to touch your fingers!"

"Oh, hush, hush!" Flora said. "Pray don't speak like that! You have made amends; you are going to stand by the side of right and justice. Let us shake hands on it."

Marston's fingers were trembling with something besides pain. He hardly dared to look into the pure and noble face of the girl before him. Then their hands met.

"It is many years since I shook hands with a lady," he said. "Jessie, it is getting late. I shall come and put you to bed. I daresay Miss Cameron and Mr. Doyle have much to say to each other. Let me carry you upstairs, little one."

The thing was tactfully done, and Doyle felt grateful. He and Flora were at length alone. The girl stood by the settle, so that the firelight played upon her beautiful face. The long cloak had fallen away from her slim, graceful body. She stood there, the embodiment of womanly grace and strength. Her features were very thoughtful.

"Mr. Doyle," she said, "I daresay you wonder why I am here, why I am taking so great an interest in your welfare. Up to a little time ago I had no idea that I should be plunged into a mystery like this. To a certain extent I am doing wrong. It was wrong of me to induce Mary Cawdor to write to you and suggest a way by which you could make your escape from Greystone. And yet there was no other way in which I could test the discovery that I fancy I have made."

"You know something, too?" Gilbert cried. "The whole world seems to know something that bears upon my unhappy history. Will you tell me what it is?"

"All in good time. We had better keep to the proper sequence of events. Up to a short time ago, Mary Cawdor was very reserved with me. I am somewhat reserved myself, and perhaps I have no reason to complain of the reticence. Then a little accident broke the ice between us, and I began to gain Mary's confidence. She had regarded me as an enemy; I suppose being related to Dr. Beard was responsible for that. Then, gradually, the whole story came out. I recollected your trial; I became almost as convinced of your innocence as Mary was. She implored me not to come to any decision until I had read a full account of your trial. It caused a sensation at the time."

"I believe it did," Gilbert said, with a touch of bitterness. "It was the class of drama that the public feeds on. There was the dashing criminal, who had won the heart of a beautiful and innocent young lady, who had given her whole heart to him. Up to a certain point he played the soldier of fortune most successfully. He had made his money quite in the best style of the cheap novelist; and his bride

was rich and beautiful. Then comes the under-plot of the missing bonds. Behold, the missing bonds are traced to the dashing lover, and the thing is complete by the arrest on his wedding morning, even at the porch of the church. I understand that certain papers made a fortune out of it."

"I will ask you not to speak quite in that bitter tone," Flora said gently. "Remember that there are a faithful few who believe in your innocence. I did, after reading the trial. It was all in a woman's paper, that Mary Cawdor lent me. The report was decorated with a sketch of the principal characters engaged. But there is one thing that I cannot understand. Why was not Madame Regnier, the woman who asked you to take care of the bonds for her, prosecuted at the same time that you were convicted?"

"Because the proofs against her were held to be too slight. Mind you, my case was terribly weak. More than one lot of bonds were stolen, and each time I was on the ship when they vanished. And the bonds were found in my possession. So were some notes from Madame Regnier, but they proved nothing against her, really. It was my lawyer who was so strangely averse from my making accusations against her. He said that I should do myself no good, and that most people would regard it as a contemptible way of trying to shift the crime. That is why she was not charged with me."

"All the same, she was allowed to give evidence against you?"

"Oh, yes. And she did it very well. That woman is a splendid actress. There were tears in her eyes as she looked at me; there was a beautiful suggestion of reluctance and regret, as if she was doing all that a woman could to make it easy as possible for me."

"Yes, I rather gathered that," Flora said thoughtfully. "I read the account of the trial over again the night before you escaped from Greystone. The portraits are very good, I should say. There was one of Madame Regnier, too."

"I daresay," Gilbert replied. "But there was not one of Dr. Beard—the author of my disgrace. He was with me on two voyages, but though he must have known me, and must have followed me, with that diabolical scheme in his mind, he never told me that he knew the Cawdor girls, and he managed cleverly enough not to meet me at their house."

"Are you quite sure that it was the same man?" Flora asked.

"My dear Miss Cameron, I am absolutely certain! George Drummond settled that question for me last night. Besides, I have encountered my man. We had a struggle in the woods an hour ago. He mistook me for somebody else. His voice betrayed him. But perhaps I had better tell you all about that."

"Indeed, you had better," Flora murmured.

Gilbert told his story plainly. Flora followed with the deepest attention. Her dark eyes were sparkling. There was a flush on her pallid cheeks.

"This is amazing," she exclaimed. "I am glad now that I hit upon a way of getting you free from Greystone. The scheme came to me directly Mary told me about your faithful servant, Juan Garcia. He is going to be very useful to us later."

"But you have not yet told me why my presence was so vital at this particular moment," Gilbert urged. "Garcia brought me the letter, remember. And after reading it, I decided to make a dash for freedom at once. Why?"

“That will have to keep till to-morrow,” Flora said. “Mr. Doyle, I fancy that I have made a most stupendous discovery. It only occurred to me after reading your trial and studying the features of the principal characters in the drama which, as I said before, were published in the woman’s paper I spoke of. If I tell you what I have discovered it may only bias your mind. I want you to confirm it without any hint from me. And you are going to do so to-morrow night.”

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders and asked no further questions.

“Very well,” he said; “I will possess my soul in patience and leave everything in your hands. Of your goodness to me, I cannot speak in words. You come out on a night like this; you venture alone in these desolate woods. Let me come with you.”

“No, no,” Flora cried. “I am only doing what seems to me my plain duty. I may be wrong in my methods, but I have acted for the best. And I am not afraid. You and I are going farther yet to-night. And to-morrow I shall return to you and tell you of my little scheme. I warn you that it will require strength and resolution on your part.”

“I dare do anything,” said Doyle passionately—“anything to clear my name and save the dear girl who is being done to death by that scoundrel Beard.”

“There you are quite wrong,” Flora said quietly. “Best assured that Bernard Beard is not in the least likely to injure Winifred Cawdor. If I am correct, he has the best of reasons for making her well and strong again. And he is passionately fond of the child. I am certain that Dr. Beard is doing all he can for Winifred’s sake.”

“Perhaps he is,” Gilbert said wearily. “I will take your word for it. Meanwhile, would you mind telling me what we are going to do next. I am afraid that there is no room for me here, and in my own case it would be dangerous to stay. My host’s character is not of the kind to avert suspicion. He is just the sort of man to harbour an escaped convict.”

“I have thought of that,” Flora said. “Put on your coat and come with me.”

Chapter XX

A Startling Recognition.

Miss Cameron and Gilbert passed into the darkness together. Flora leading the way with the air of one who knows exactly where she is going. It was very dark now, but the girl’s step did not hesitate for a moment. Gilbert was struck with admiration.

“Angel of goodness and mercy,” he said hurriedly, “why do you do all this for me. What have I done that you should protect me? It is all so very wrong, too.”

“Yes, I am afraid it is very wrong in the eyes of the law and the world,” Flora said. “But it was the only way. I feel that I am doing right; on my knees I have asked advice. And after that the way became clear and my eyes saw more distinctly. I am going to take you to the cottage of an old nurse of Miss Drummond’s. Old Anna would do anything for Miss Drummond, and she will

probably remember you. She has a secluded cottage that will make an ideal hiding-place for the present. And I have told Anna part of your story. You will not find her the less kind and thoughtful for that."

"You overwhelm me," Gilbert said brusquely. "I cannot think of anything to say."

"Then please say nothing. The happiness of more than one person is at stake, and I must do the best I can to complete it. To-morrow I will come and see you again, and tell you what are my plans for the evening. You see, I can safely come to Anna's cottage, as nobody will have the least suspicion. But here we are."

There was no light in the cottage window, but Flora opened the door and entered as if she had been expected. But the light was there all right, though its rays were excluded by the shutters. A very old woman, with a clear face, rose and made a bow to Gilbert.

"I am not going to stay a moment," Flora said. "Anna, you will please make this gentleman as comfortable as possible, and see that he keeps to his room. I know that you are not a gossip, and that very few people come to your cottage, but one cannot be too careful. I shall come round to-morrow after luncheon, Mr. Doyle, Good-night!"

And Flora vanished before Gilbert could stammer out any word of thanks. He became conscious presently that the old dame was talking to him, but he hardly knew what she said other than that she asked if he wanted anything before he went to bed.

"Nothing whatever, thank you," Gilbert replied. "Show me my room, please. Bed is the one thing that I long for more than anything in the world just now."

In a dreamy way Gilbert was conscious of the fact that he was undressing, and that the sheets had a smell of wild thyme. He breathed a heartfelt prayer, snuggled down between the sheets, and almost immediately a deep sleep fell upon him. When he woke a brilliant sun was shining, and a little tray outside the door contained a tempting break-fast. Somewhat restlessly Gilbert passed the time till Flora appeared again.

"I am not going to stay long," she said—"only just long enough to give you your orders for this evening. Of course, you know that the young Duchess of Mantorby lives close by, at Tower Royal. To-night she is giving a charity ball at her residence. It is a new idea to hold a charity ball in a ducal manor, but the duchess thought that the cottage hospitals would greatly benefit, and sure enough the 500 three-guinea tickets have sold to the last one. I daresay you will wonder what all this has to do with you, but that is what I am coming to. It is some time since I attended any function of the kind, and I should not have gone to-night only that I have a special reason for so doing. My mother knew the duchess as a girl, and she called and made a point of our going. Of course, my mother refused, but she did not see why I should stay away."

"And, as I had a scheme in my mind, I shall take the single-horse brougham and drive to the house. As it is a fine night, I shall ask my coachman to wait for me at the lodge gates at half-past one. My excuse will be that I want to avoid the crush of carriages. As I possess a sort of reputation for independence, people will think nothing of my walking to the lodge gates to find my brougham. All this sounds trivial, but it is of the greatest importance. At 1.30 the footman with my wraps will be waiting on the terrace of Tower Royal for me. It will look as if he had

run up from the carriage with them. There will not be any footman really, because you are going to take his place."

"I don't quite follow you," Gilbert said, a little confused by the rapid way in which Flora sketched out her programme. "Where do I come in, please?"

"In this way. A parcel will come here for you presently, and Jessie Marston will bring it. Inside you will find the dress of a footman—hat, and big coat and all. I had to guess at the fit, but that will pass well enough in the dark. You will don that dress and make your way in the direction of Tower Royal soon after midnight. Nobody will notice you. You will be mistaken for a servant who is trying to see as much of the festivities as possible. A little after 1 o'clock you will approach my brougham by the lodge gates."

"That is all very well; but how am I to know my man?"

"Well, every other carriage will be within the gates," Flora explained. "Besides, you can ask. My coachman will be told that one of the ducal footmen will come to fetch my wraps, and he will give them to you, as a matter of course. Then you come up the drive and wait for me on the terrace where the great oriel window is. I will join you there. After that, you can see me to my brougham, and there will be an end of the matter. There will be a great surprise in store for you to-night."

"You are marvellously clever and thoughtful," Gilbert said, admiringly. "And so good to us all."

"It is all in the interests of goodness and mercy," Flora declared. "And I have had many, dark and weary hours to plan in. I daresay that all this may strike you as being a little cheap and sensational, but we have clever and unscrupulous people to deal with. I have tried and tried, but I cannot find a better way."

"There could be no better way," Gilbert declared. "Now, please tell me all over again, so that there will be no mistake. You will find me an apt pupil."

The thing was settled at length, and Flora went her way. Faithful to her promise, Jessie came over a little time later, staggering under a big parcel. She was much better to-day, she said, though her ankle still gave her considerable pain. She was all alone, too, for her father had gone to Castleford on business. Gilbert could not altogether repress the feeling that in some way that business was connected with him.

The hours crept slowly by, until it was time to dress and set forth on the mysterious errand. Flora had provided a bottle of stain, so that when Gilbert was dressed, and his face stained a deep hue, he flattered himself he would pass under the very eyes of the police without being recognised. A few directions given by old Anna sufficed to discover the way to Tower Royal, and Gilbert set out on his five-mile walk.

It was past eleven by the time he reached his destination, and the charity function was in full swing. There were other servants wandering about the grounds besides Gilbert, all intent upon seeing what they could of the festivities. Along the drive was a double line of carriages without horses, for some people had come a long way, and the horses were warm, and comfortable in the vast stables behind the castle.

There were a good many motor-cars also. From the terrace Gilbert could see into the chief room, for the windows came down to the ground, and some of the casements were open to temper the heat of the great room beyond.

With a certain sense of interest and amusement, Gilbert watched the gay throng, like a kaleidoscope of lively colours. He moved presently down the terrace in front of the house. Late as it was, some of the guests were still arriving. Two of them came up at the same moment in a fine motor-car. The occupants descended, and shed their heavy sable overcoats, and handed them to the chauffeur.

"Let's call it a couple of hours, Jakes," one of the guards said. "I daresay we can do the ducal castle in that time comfortably. What do you say?"

"That's about right," the other guest nodded. "Given our dancing days are over; and it's only for the sake of seeing how a duke with sixteen quarterings lives when he happens to be in the bosom of his family. Come back about 1 o'clock, Jakes."

The chauffeur took off his cap and departed. Gilbert watched the two strangers disappear in the great hall portico, with a feeling of surprise and the knowledge of discovery. He had not the least doubt who the two strangers were. He was quite certain that they were the pair of Virginians who had accosted him in the woods last night.

There was no mistaking their peculiar accent, or the queer grate in the voice of one of them. This was the twain that Bernard Beard was so deadly frightened of—the men who threatened his life. And here they were like peaceable, law-abiding citizens, paying their six guineas to have a peep at the inside of one of the stately homes of England.

It seemed incredible that these men could be the desperadoes that Marston had hinted. Gilbert wondered if he had made a mistake, and that the thing was sheer coincidence. At any rate, he would get a clue by an examination of the motor-car, which had been placed in a line with the others. The chauffeur was doing something to the gear as Gilbert strolled up. If these were the same Americans, then they had more than one car, for this was a great green machine, with shining brass so highly polished that it was possible to see one's face in it.

"That's a fine car of yours," Gilbert said. "Mercedes, isn't it?"

"Mercedes it is," the chauffeur said. "Cost fifty thousand francs, and is probably the fastest car in England. Strong, too, as it need be, for my master takes it everywhere. He's never tried to motor across a river yet, but I daresay it's only because the idea has not occurred to him."

Gilbert bent down, as if he were so taken with the car that he could not tear himself from it. As a matter of fact, he was examining the tyres. They were perfectly new tyres, and yet on both the outer wheels was a tiny scratch, as if they had been rubbed with a file, and many little thorns stuck out, as if the car had been across a patch of gorse.

"The tyres have had some pretty hard wear," Gilbert suggested.

"Yesterday," the chauffeur explained, "I had to go to London, and my gentlemen had the car out. They got lost in some woods, I understand. But you never know what an American will be up to."

Gilbert replied that he supposed not. He rubbed his hand carefully over the hood of the car, and something came away wet and greasy, on his palm. It was a dark smear, as he could see in the full blaze of the great acetylene lamps. Gilbert knew exactly what it meant. This was the same car driven by the same men he had encountered last night. He did not ask their names. Probably the names they used here were nothing like the names they were known by at home. But this was

the same car, and the mystery of the change of colour was visible on Gilbert's hands. The raven hue of the car the night before was due to a thick coating of grease and black lead. The stuff had only to be sponged off, and the car was changed out of recognition. Black-lead formed no part of the equipment of a motor-car, and Gilbert entertained no doubt that it was black-lead that defiled his fingers just now.

He strolled off again presently, as if he had satisfied his curiosity. It was nearing the time when he had to meet Flora Cameron. Very quietly he walked down to the lodge gates, and there found the single-horse brougham that awaited her.

At the mere question as to whether or not the man came from the Moat House, he jumped down and handed Gilbert a few wraps and a shawl. Armed with these, Gilbert returned to the terrace. He could see that the large room was thick with people now. Two of the casements in the great window were wide open, for the heat inside was intolerable.

A dance had just ceased with the music. From where he stood, Gilbert could see Flora drop the arm of her partner and walk across to a tall woman with a dark, handsome face, a woman dressed in scarlet, with diamonds in her raven hair. The woman smiled and walked with Flora down the room.

"Let us get a breath of fresh air," Flora was saying. "I am not used to an atmosphere like this. And dancing fatigues one so much more than it used to do."

The two came close to the window, so that Gilbert could see the face of the woman in scarlet. The full glare of the electric light picked her out in a batch of flowers. She had a striking face. The lips were a little thin perhaps, and the eyes large; but it was a face that, once seen, he was not likely to forget quickly.

"And now I must say good night," Flora murmured. "I promised to be back early. Really I do not go anywhere. I could not call on you. You see, my life is so very quiet and secluded. Is that you, James?"

Gilbert realised the fact that Flora was speaking to him. He murmured something, though he had the good sense to remain in the shadow. In a careless tone of voice Flora directed him to go to the great portico and wait for her. With his head in a whirl, Gilbert complied. Presently Flora came out and slipped into her furs. Then for a little while she did not speak till they were out of sight of the house.

"I told you I should not bias your judgment," Flora said. "I told you I should like you to decide for yourself. You saw my companion by the window to-night. Need I ask you if you can guess who she is?"

Gilbert gave a short, unsteady laugh. He dared hardly trust himself to speak. When he spoke his voice was hoarse and thick.

"Know her?" he said bitterly. "Know her? Ay, anywhere. For that is the woman who has wrecked my life—that was none other than Madame Regnier!"

Chapter XXI

„Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon".

Flora Cameron did not appear to be in the least surprised to hear Doyle's statement. She had the air of expecting to hear nothing else; in fact, she would have been disappointed otherwise. Gilbert looked at her in frank and open admiration.

"You came to me in the shape of an angel," he said. "You appeared on my horizon when I had almost lost faith in everything. Directly I saw you, it came to me that you were sent to bring the truth to light. But I did not think that you were so clever and so good and beautiful. How did you discover this thing?"

"I did not discover it at all," Flora explained. "The explanation is simple. When I had won Mary Cawdor's confidence and she had told me everything, I began to think. In the first place I wondered where Bernard Beard came into the conspiracy. Mind you, I regarded the whole thing as a conspiracy from the first, even before I had seen you. Never mind that the evidence was dead against you—that does not always weigh with a woman. I assumed you were innocent, and thought that Winifred Cawdor would not give her heart to a bad man. I studied the evidence to see if I could find any loophole in it, but in vain. I studied those pictures in the woman's paper when I read the account of the trial till I had them fixed in my memory. Amongst them was a sketch of Madame Regnier."

"Ah!" Gilbert exclaimed. "I begin to see. Go on!"

"Noted criminals have been tracked and murderers brought to justice by some newspaper sketch. Not that I ever expected to see Madame Regnier. I daresay that you will regard it as a coincidence that that woman is so near to the spot where the mystery will be solved, but, after all, it is not in the least curious. Madame Regnier came down here so that she could be close to Dr. Beard. Probably they are plotting some fresh mischief. But I am getting along too fast. About a month ago Dr. Beard told me that a certain Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon, who was by way of being a friend of his, had taken Breckland Lodge furnished for a time. Breckland Lodge is one of the finest houses in this quarter, and anybody taking it must be rich. I thought no more of it at the time, not till the day before we induced Juan Garcia to bring you that note. Then I met Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon as I was out for a walk, and, as she was beautifully dressed and had a splendid carriage and horses, I asked who she was. I was just a little curious to have a further look at her, and when I met her again an hour later I gratified my curiosity. She strongly reminded me of a face I had seen somewhere, but I could not quite make out where. Then it flashed upon me. It was Madame Regnier."

"And that was the urgent matter you desired to see me about?" Gilbert asked.

"Yes. I wanted to be certain. That is why I went to the charity ball to-night, and why I paved the way for you to convince me of the woman's identity. Don't you see what an important discovery we have made? It may or may not mean a factor in our ultimate success, but the woman has taken a fancy to me."

"You mean," Gilbert stammered, "you mean that you are prepared to do anything to—to—"

"Solve the mystery, yes," Flora said firmly. "I hate shams and prevarications of all kinds, but it is necessary to fight these people with their own weapons. I could not sit quietly and see so many lives blighted when I have the sword to cut the knot in my hands."

“You are more than good to me,” Gilbert murmured. “Did I not see Dr. Beard in the ballroom?”

“You may have seen him and you may have seen Sir Devereux Drummond and Sybil as well. She asked after you, and as to whether you were comfortable in your new quarters. If you remember, she offered to find you a shelter with an old servant of hers.”

“I shall recollect all these kindnesses,” Doyle said. “But there is one thing I should like to know. What did Beard think of the presence of the Americans here?”

Flora asked in some surprise what Gilbert meant. He recollected then that he had not told Flora anything about the Americans and the mysterious motor-car; indeed, he had had no opportunity. Flora listened eagerly to the strange story of the encounter in the woods behind Grange Court.

“It all seems to complicate the mystery,” she said. “Though I daresay it will be quite simple when we get the threads in our hands. There are a lot of people in the Castle, and there are so many rooms that it is possible for Dr. Beard to be there and never even see the Americans at all. From what you say they appear to have visited the castle as much from curiosity as anything else. Do you think that there is anything more?”

“Possibly they are trying to kill two birds with one stone. It seems odd that they should deliberately force themselves into the same house as Beard. But we need not discuss that till another time. I want to see you safely in your carriage.”

But this simple process was easier said than done. Gilbert had received Flora’s wraps at a spot quite close to the lodge gates, but the conveyance was no longer to be seen there. Perhaps the coachman had gone up to the house, having mistaken the latter part of his instructions. At any rate, he was not waiting at the spot where he had been told to wait.

Flora hesitated, uncertain what to do. It seemed futile to remain in the hope that the coachman would return—at the same time it was impossible she could walk home. There was nothing for it but to try to find the coachman in the mass of carriages by the castle.

“Will you stay here or come back with me?” Gilbert asked.

“I think I will stay here,” Flora decided. “We may be dodging backwards and forwards till daylight. If you can unearth the coachman, you will know where to find me. I am not in the least likely to come to harm with all these carriages going to and fro.”

Gilbert hurried off without more ado. With the aid of a stalwart footman, who possessed a pair of stentorian lungs, the brougham was found at length. The driver had made a mistake, he said, whilst Gilbert smiled. As a matter of fact, the coachman had come up to the house on chance of some refreshment, and he had been kept a little longer than he had intended. He would pick up his mistress on the road, he said.

“I think I’ll come along,” Gilbert decided, as he climbed to the box. “Besides, I haven’t had my tip yet, you know.”

The coachman grinned responsively and whipped up his horse. The inconvenience was not great, but the delay had taken time. With a smile Flora thanked the pseudo-footman for what he had done as he stood by the carriage-door with his finger to his hat. There was a flash of lights, the hum of a car, and

the big Mercedes darted along, and, as suddenly, pulled up right alongside the brougham.

"I beg your pardon," the driver said. "But would you kindly tell me which way to take to reach Breckland Lodge? We are strangers here or we would not trouble you."

Gilbert shook his head; he had not the least idea. He muttered something to the effect that he was a stranger to these parts who had just taken service there. But Flora was equal to the occasion.

She stepped out of the brougham again.

"Keep to the high road," she said, "till you come to the mile-post on the right. It is only a little way down the lane then."

The driver of the motor doffed his cap politely, and his companions did the same. Flora had not failed to notice the faint suggestion of accent in the voice of the questioner, and his almost exaggerated politeness and thanks for the information. The motor-car went whirring on again till the great lamps ceased to glow any more.

"Are those the Americans?" Flora asked eagerly. "Surely they must be!"

"They are," said Gilbert, with emotion. "Those are the men I saw last night. But the strangest part of it is that they are going to Madame Regnier's. She is on the side of a man who is their deadly foe, and yet those people are on friendly terms with her. The more one probes the mystery the more complicated it becomes."

"All mysteries are simple when you get to the right clue," Flora smiled. "I would give a great deal to know whether our friends of the motor-car saw Madame Regnier to-night or not; if they had speech with her, I mean. If so, they are going to her house by appointment; if not, then I hardly know what to think. I wish I could tell."

"Well, there is certainly a chance of finding out something," Gilbert said. "It is not a far cry from here to Breckland Lodge. Did you say a mile."

"Certainly not more than a mile and a half," Flora said.

"Very well then. I have nothing to do now, and the time hangs heavy on my hands. Besides, I am not sleeping very well just at present. I am always dreaming, dreaming of the prison—and the sound of that dreadful bell. I shall hate the sound of a bell as long as I live. But I am forgetting myself. Miss Cameron, I am going as far as Breckland Lodge, and I am going to watch there to see if I can discover anything."

Flora nodded her approval. The only anxiety she had was whether Gilbert could find his way back to old Anna's cottage again. She gave him minute instructions as to the road, and then ordered the coachman to drive home.

Left to himself, Gilbert made his way along the road towards his destination. It was not possible to see the house, a huge place lying back from the road, and having a lot of trees and ornamental timber in front. The trees would afford excellent cover for a seeker after knowledge, however, and Gilbert plunged into the grounds without hesitation.

He was close to the house now, and most of the windows were blazing with light. The motor-car was nowhere to be seen; perhaps it had merely called at the house and gone again. If it had gone, then Gilbert's mission was likely to be so much waste of time. But it was easy to ascertain that with the aid of a match. No,

there was only one track of broad spongy wheels on the well-kept gravel drive, therefore the motor-car was not far off. Very carefully Gilbert crept round to the back of the house in the direction of the stables. He found them at length, and tried the doors of one or two. The stables were locked for the most part, but two or three of the coach-houses were open still. Doubtless some helper or other was probably sitting up awaiting Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon's return. Gilbert found what he wanted at length. Here was the great motor car peacefully reposing in a coach-house, ample evidence that the two Americans were in the house waiting for its mistress. It was a puzzling matter altogether. Were they here at the instigation of their hostess, or was their visit intended as a most unpleasant surprise? In any way of looking at it the problem was confusing. These men were the enemies of Bernard Beard who was unquestionably in league with Madame Regnier. In that case, what were those Virginians doing here?

There was only one thing for it—to wait and see. Madame Regnier would be back some time, and the Virginians had evidently come to stay the night. It was just possible that there would be trouble presently, and then Gilbert might see and hear something to his advantage. He crept back to the front of the house again, and took his position behind a thick belt of shrubs. Then he set himself doggedly to wait.

The minutes passed slowly away. Gilbert had his cigarette case in his pocket, but he did not dare to soothe his vigil with tobacco. The silence was intense and rigid, so rigid that Gilbert could hear the rattle of the fallen leaves as his feet pressed them. And presently it seemed to him that somebody was treading on the grass close by. Gilbert drew himself nearer to his shelter, and he made out the outline of a figure, coming in his direction. Was it possible that he had been followed, he wondered? With an impulse that he could not control he gripped the figure and held on, saying nothing for a moment.

"And who might you be?" the intruder said coolly. "My good fellow if you take me for a poacher or anything of that kind, you are greatly mistaken. You are one of the servants here?"

"I have heard worse guesses," Gilbert said, in a muffled voice.

"Very good," the other said. "Then you will not be adverse from earning a sovereign. There is somebody in yonder house that I want to see, whom I must see without delay. Take a message to him from me, and I will give you the sum I mentioned. Only the message must be delivered to the gentleman himself. You know Captain Cardrew?"

"George," Doyle whispered. "What are you doing here? I thought I recognised your voice as soon as you began to speak. It's Doyle."

It was George Drummond's turn to cry out in astonishment.

"I might ask you the same question," he replied. "What are you doing here? I thought I had got into a nice mess for the moment."

"I think you had better explain first," Doyle laughed. "Mine is a very long story. And what do you mean by saying that Captain Ronald Cardrew is in that house? Why, you know he is in India with his regiment."

"So I thought; but he obtained leave almost as soon as I started for home. He came by the overland route, and must have landed before I reached Southampton. Gilbert, I can tell you what I have never openly spoken of to anybody else. Cardrew

was at the bottom of the whole business that led to my disgrace. He is afraid that the truth will come out, and that is why he has hurried home. Even Sybil does not know that he is in England. Why should he hide his presence from her? I am down here to have that question decided."

Chapter XXII

A Question of Identity.

"What do you propose to do?" Gilbert asked. "You can't force your way into the house, and—"

"Of course I can't. But fortune is on my side to a certain extent. For some reason or another you are dressed as a gentleman's servant. Perhaps you had better tell me your story, and what has been happening for a day or two, and then we can shape our plans without tumbling over each other and making mischief. What are you doing here?"

As rapidly as possible Gilbert told his story. George had no questions to ask; he was loud in his praise of Flora and the clever way in which she was managing things.

"An angel of goodness," he said. "As soon as my fair name is restored to me, I shall know where to look for a wife. There is only one women in the world for me now, Gilbert, old fellow. She would then compensate me for all the trouble that I have suffered."

"Ay, she is a good woman," Gilbert rejoined; "but this is no time for sentiment. Do you mean to say that Cardrew is actually in this house?"

"So I have been informed. I got my information in London, quite by accident. I have found one or two good fellows who are inclined to believe my story. One of them told me that Cardrew was in England, though he had not shown up at his club. Mind you, that struck me as being more than strange. So my friend made inquiries for me, and elicited the fact that Cardrew was staying here with Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon."

"Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon is best known to me as Madame Regnier," Doyle said quietly.

"Good gracious! Masquerading down here as a wealthy widow of a good family. Why?"

"Why? So as to be near Dr. Bernard Beard, who is in league with her. They used to be in partnership together, when they ruined me between them, and I see no reason why they should have broken off the friendship. It looks to me very much as if Cardrew was in the same boat, or why did he risk coming near your sister, at the same time evidently desiring that his presence in England should be kept a secret from her. I'll soon get to the bottom of that."

"But how do you propose to do it?" George asked.

"The easiest way in the world. I'll go up to the house and ask for the gallant captain. I'll say a gentleman is at the gate and desires to speak to him. Then I

shall come away without a reply, the assumption being that you are driving. If he is there, well and good; if not, you will be spared a few hours' loitering about here."

There could be no objection to Gilbert's ingenious suggestion, and Drummond was eager to carry it out without delay. With a bold face, Doyle knocked at the front door and asked for a messenger to be sent to Captain Cardrew without delay.

The shot was quite a successful one, but not exactly in the way that Gilbert had intended. It was true that Captain Cardrew was staying in the house, the footman said, but he had just gone out. He had slipped out by the side door that led to the woods.

"Anybody else staying here?" Gilbert asked.

"Nobody; only two gentleman who came to see my mistress on important business," the footman explained. "Americans, I should say, by their style. They're in the dining-room now."

Gilbert thanked his informant for his explanation, and slipped away. He would not leave any message, he said; perhaps his master would call on Captain Cardrew to-morrow. He made his way back to George.

"I've found out something at any rate," he said. "Cardrew is staying in the house all right, but he is not in at present. He has just slipped out at the side entrance which leads to the woods. The woods, my dear fellow, are a short cut to Tower Royal, and our man has gone off to warn Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon of her danger."

"The danger from the Americans," George exclaimed. "Precisely. We are getting on, Gilbert. Did you say that Sybil and my uncle were at the duke's charity affair?"

"So Miss Cameron told me," Gilbert explained, "If Cardrew were there—"

"I see your point," George responded with a chuckle. "The best thing you can do is to stay here and try to carry out your original programme. As for me, I shall go as far as Tower Royal and see what I can find out. For the present, good night."

Meanwhile, events were moving on at Tower Royal. The charity dance was at its height still, the floor of the great room covered with flying figures. A stately woman in scarlet detached herself from the glowing scheme of colour presently and walked towards the door leading to the beautifully lighted refreshment rooms farther down the corridor as Beard entered. The woman in red gave him a signal, and he followed. Beard had the air of a man who has thrown care aside in the enjoyment of the moment.

"What is the matter? You look as if you had seen something."

"So I have," the woman said with a fierce whisper. "I've seen two of them. You understand?"

Beard nodded. His flushed face had suddenly become a ghastly grey.

"Better to be quite plain," he said. "You have seen the Virginians. Where?"

"Here, in this very room! They came in a motor-car. They came like the rest, they are not the quests of the duke and duchess. They paid their three guineas, and they are consequently free of the castle. By great good fortune I managed to see them before they saw me; indeed, I doubt if they saw me at all. I tried to find you and warn you, but it was impossible. I waited till they were gone."

"You are quite sure that they have gone?" Beard asked.

"Yes, yes, I saw them off. The sight of the two in evening dress, like peaceable Englishmen who are just enjoying themselves, made me feel sick and dizzy. It may

be possible that they are just motoring about the country for pleasure, but I wish that I could believe that explanation."

"So do I," said Beard gloomily. "It is no use trying to deceive ourselves in that way. I thought I was free of them so long as my—so long as Winifred is well and uninjured. That was the promise given to me in Virginia nineteen months ago. And, but for her sad mental condition, the poor child is as well as you or I. Were they altered at all?"

"Who? Those men? Not very much. A little grey and thinner, perhaps, but much the same. Bernard, something must be done! It is impossible to sit down quietly with this terror hanging over our heads. It was cruel misfortune that deprived us of those bonds, I mean, the bonds that Gilbert Doyle went to prison over. People supposed that he got rid of the great bulk of them; those few found in his room we know were only placed there as a blind. And then to lose the great parcel after we worked so hardly for them! It was maddening!"

"It would be still more maddening if they were found," Beard said gloomily. "Such a thing would prove the innocence of Gilbert Doyle, and he would come and claim his wife. But what can we do? Could we get the police to take action?"

"On what grounds? Why, I have not even a letter or paper to show that I am under the ban of the Virginians. If I told the police, those fellows would come and shake hands with me and laugh in my very face. They would say that they were law-abiding citizens who were travelling for pleasure. And when they do strike, it will be in such a way as to make it impossible to identify them with the outrage. That they should appear after all these years alarms me. What I am afraid of is that they have discovered the lie under which I have shielded myself for so long. If they know of that—"

Beard paused, and wiped the heavy drops of moisture from his forehead; the big frame was quivering from head to foot like a jelly. Man of blood and iron as he was, he looked bent and sunken now. He hastily swallowed a glass of liqueur, but the courage did not come back tingling in his veins as he had expected. He rose with a stifled groan. "I am not the man I was," he said. "I used to imagine that fear was only a thing that people shielded their cowardice behind. I suppose I am getting old. Let us go as far as the end of the corridor and get a breath of fresh air. Perhaps when I am cooler and more collected I shall be able to see my way."

The handsome woman in scarlet took Beard's arm and walked with him to the end of the corridor. They made a fine pair as they passed along, and many eyes were turned in their direction. But it was the woman who smiled and carried off the thing so bravely. All the man wanted was to be alone to think.

They stood there for some time in silence, looking out into the night. Presently a servant came up and addressed Beard by name. A gentleman had called to see him. He was in one of the smaller rooms off the ground corridor. The foot-man thought that he was Captain Cardrew.

"I will come and see him immediately," Beard said, controlling himself with a great effort. "Say that I will be there at once. I hope there is nothing serious, too. Good gracious, what has happened to bring Captain Cardrew here to the very house where Miss Drummond is a guest? If she should happen to see him!"

"Go and ascertain what has happened," Madame Regnier said. "And try to look a little more like yourself. From your appearance, you might be a criminal

struggling in the net of the police. If you only know how grey and old you appear to-night!"

Beard made an effort to smile, but the effect was ghastly. He moved off in the direction of the grand corridor with limbs that seemed to bend under him. He was suffering from a wind of paralysis caused by fear and fright. Madame Regnier's arm through his was a real assistance to him. The footman stood before one of the doors.

"The gentleman is in here, sir," he said. "I was correct in saying Captain Cardrew."

Beard and his companion passed into the perfectly-appointed little room, and closed the door behind them. They were not conscious of the flowers or the shaded lights; the works of art and the old furniture were lost on them. All they could see was the white face of Ronald Cardrew staring at them in the yellow glow of the room.

"Bird of ill-omen," Beard croaked, "speak out! Have you done anything extra foolish, or is their real danger for us to-night?"

"Danger enough," Cardrew whispered. "The Virginians are here. When I say here I mean that they are at Breckland Lodge. I saw them."

"At the lodge!" Madame Regnier exclaimed. "Waiting for me—for us?"

"As true as I say the words," Cardrew went on.

"Ah, well after all, the honest, God-fearing man has the best of us poor wretches! I wish to Heaven—but it is too late for that! If I had never seen your evil face, Beard—"

"A truce to your maunderings," Beard cried passionately. "Tell me everything."

"There is very little to tell. The Virginians came up in a motor-car as if the place belonged to them. They asked for you, Madame, and decided to wait. They did not see me, and I was in a position to listen. They are going to stay till you return."

"Then I had better return at once," Madame Regnier cried. She was by far the coolest and most collected of the three. "Better a danger that is open and in sight than one that you cannot see. Go and order my carriage round here without delay, Ronald. We can slip away without any fuss or bother. Ask one of the men to call Mrs. Gordon-Dunlop's carriage."

Without further speech Cardrew left the room. With his head down he hurried along the corridor past many people who were there taking the air. He looked like what he intended to represent—a guest who was in search of his conveyance. There was just the risk of being recognised by some visitor who had met him at Grange Court.

"Ronald," a faint voice cried suddenly, "is it possible that you are here? Oh, Ronald, if you only knew how glad I am to see you! Did you intend this for a delightful surprise, or—Why don't you speak to me, Ronald?"

Cardrew swallowed down a furious execration. The greatest misfortune of them all had happened just at the time when there were misfortunes enough and to spare. This was the last thing desirable.

Cardrew looked up into the pretty, pathetic face of Sybil Drummond with a blank expression. He had made up his mind what to do at any cost.

"I am afraid there is some mistake here," he said. "I am not Ronald—in fact, that is not my name at all. A chance likeness, perhaps. Will you excuse me?"

The voice was cold and formal; there was no dropping of the thick mask from Cardrew's face. He pushed on, leaving Sybil standing there clutching at her heart as if she had some great physical pain stabbing her. That was Ronald, she felt sure. But he had denied himself to her—he was cold and distant. In a confused way the photograph that Sybil had seen at the Moat House flashed across her mind. She walked like one who dreams out into the open air, all exposed as she was to the weather. She wondered if she would wake presently, and find that it was some evil dream. In the same state of coma she saw Cardrew with Madame Regnier and Beard drive away. Then she laid her head upon the parapet of the terrace, and dry sobs choked her.

"Sybil," a man's voice said in her ear—"Sybil, what is the matter with you?"

"George," the girl moaned, "my head is on fire. I can't think. For I have just seen Ronald in the flesh there, and he denied his own identity. He walked past me as if he had never seen me before. George—George—what does it all mean?"

"I don't know," George said between his teeth; "but I shall find out before I sleep to-night."

Chapter XXIII

The Shadow of a Doubt.

The great clock in the hall at Grange Court struck the hour of nine as, punctual as the timepiece itself, Sir Devereux Drummond came down to breakfast. He was not looking so bent and haggard as usual; there was a speculative look in his eyes and a puzzled frown on his forehead. He inquired of Watson why Miss Sybil was not down. A touch of the old commanding ring had come back into Sir Devereux's voice.

"Miss Sybil is not at all well, Sir Devereux," Watson replied. The faithful old servant was delighted to see signs of the master in his employer once more. "I was to say that she had a very bad headache."

"Headache!" Sir Devereux repeated. "Bless me, I never heard of such a thing before. Your mistress never had such complaints. I hope it's nothing wrong, Watson. Nothing catching and all that. Better send for Dr. Gordon, eh?"

"I don't think so, sir," Watson replied. "Merely a headache, I expect. I noticed that Miss Sybil looked very bad when she came back last night. She said that you were not to wait breakfast for her."

Sir Devereux shook his head as he attacked the kidneys and bacon. Really, he told himself, he had quite a good appetite this morning. He had never expected to have anything of the kind again. As he despatched his breakfast, he read more than once a letter which he had found waiting for him the night before. It was a letter from an old comrade, a man holding a high position in the War Office, and the contents gave him food for thought. The letter gave him hope, too, which was better than nothing else.

“I can’t make top or tail of it,” he muttered. “Why is Norton so mysterious? Why does he not speak plainly if he knows, anything? Certain facts have come to hand in connection with a recent affair on the Indian frontier which put a different complexion on a matter that concerns my family honour! I am to suspend judgment for the present. If that means anything, it means that George has been misjudged. If that is so, I shall never be able to look the boy in the face again. And yet, and yet—”

Despite a certain feeling of shame and remorse, Sir Devereux was conscious of a glow at his heart that seemed to take twenty years off his life. If George were not guilty, as the letter seemed to imply, then Grange Court would carry no shame after the death of its present owner. Sir Devereux looked round the room to the old familiar objects and away across the landscape to the distant hills. Well, if he were compelled to make an amend to George, it should be done in no half-hearted manner.

Therefore, Sir Devereux enjoyed his breakfast in a way that he had not done for some time. He was restless and eager, a little anxious, too, when Watson came in an hour later and handed him the dingy blue envelope that contained a cable message. The baronet’s fingers shook a little as he tore it open. He flashed his eyes along the few words, and his face grew deadly pale. Watson’s jaw had fallen; he wondered what new catastrophe was here. He had rarely seen his master more moved than he was now.

“Don’t say that anything else is wrong, Sir Devereux,” the old man almost pleaded. “As for me, you’ll never get me to believe that Master George, that I taught as a boy to—”

“No, no, Watson,” Sir Devereux said huskily, “It isn’t that at all. There are some joys that shake one to the soul as much as a great sorrow. I have been very wrong, my faithful old friend. You never told any of the servants that Mr. George came home—”

“The other night! Not me, sir. I should be ashamed to have done so. There’s been no talk in the servants’ hall, or anywhere else. Because why? Because I know that it was all a mistake, and we should see Master George in his place again, and you as proud of him as you were used to be. And that telegram’s to say as it is a mistake.”

“Yes,” Sir Devereux replied. An absolute lump rose in his throat and seemed to choke him. “It is exactly what you say. This is from my old friend, Grantley Courtenay, the Colonel of Mr. George’s regiment. He says, ‘Cruel injustice has been done to the boy. Am writing full details by this mail.’ There, Watson, what do you think of that?”

Watson intimated with a sniff that his opinion had never varied from the first. He was still talking when Sybil came into the room. She was very white and shaky, the sunny smile had gone from her face altogether. With a delicacy that would have done credit to better-born men, Watson slipped from the room.

“My dear child,” Sir Devereux said, “what is the matter with you? I never saw you so pale and ill before. Nothing wrong, I hope? No lover’s quarrel with Cardrew, or anything of that kind. My dear, I am sorry to upset you. Tears, too. Bless me!”

Sir Devereux fumed round Sybil with a certain womanly solicitude. He was going to charm the tears away, he said. He had had some wonderfully good news,

first from the War Office, and now from his friend, Grantley Courtenay, the Colonel of George's regiment.

"As a matter of fact. George is not guilty of the accusation made against him," he said. "You can read the cable-gram for yourself. And if George is not guilty, why—"

The speaker paused, and a flush of colour tinged his cheeks. The inference was quite plain. If George's honour remained unstained, then what of that of Ronald Cardrew? Sybil herself had raised the point that fatal night when it looked as if George was leaving the home of his ancestors for ever.

"It is quite plain what you mean," Sybil said wearily. "If George is innocent, then Ronald Cardrew is the coward who caused the mischief. And Colonel Courtenay must have been very sure of his ground before he sent that cable-gram. I am glad for George's sake, and am sorry for my own. Thank God, I have learnt the truth, in time!"

"But, my dear, you have not yet learnt the truth," Sir Devereux protested. "Let us try to be fair. Do not allow your woman's instinct to carry you too far. When you see Cardrew—"

"I have seen Ronald Cardrew," Sybil said. "I saw him last night."

"You saw him last night! My dear, my dear! He is with his regiment in India."

"No, uncle. Ronald is here. It was a dreadful thing altogether. And I have been awake all night thinking about it. Ronald was not in my mind at all. I had just been sitting, and I walked along the corridor for a little fresh air. And then I saw Ronald. He had an overcoat on; evidently he had come in to find somebody. And just for the moment I was the happiest girl in the world. It seemed to me that Ronald had planned that happy surprise for me. You can imagine how I flew towards him; how my heart—but we need not go into that. Fortunately there was nobody in the corridor to see what was taking place. He looked me full in the face without the faintest sign of recognition. He told me quite coolly he was not Ronald Cardrew at all, and he passed me as if I had been a stranger."

"Bless my soul," Sir Devereux burst out. "Amazing! Extraordinary! My dear child, you were perhaps deceived by some marvellous likeness: Such things have happened."

"No, there could not be any mistake. He started violently when I called him by name. If he had not been Ronald Cardrew, why should he do that? Just for an instant his face turned black with passion and mortification; then he grew blank and stolid. He did not expect to see me there; he did not desire that I should know he was in England. But it was impossible to deceive me; the colour of his eyes, the suggestion of red in his moustache, the little speck of gold in one of his front teeth."

Sir Devereux paced the floor with rapid strides! The honour, of the family was at stake. It was impossible that any man could be permitted to treat a Drummond in this way.

"Have you any idea where this—this man is to be found?" he asked.

"Yes; I learnt that before we came away. I was so upset that I went on the terrace, to recover myself. A little time after-wards, I saw Ronald drive away with Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon. Uncle, you will do nothing rash!"

“I think that you can safely, leave everything in my hands,” Sir Devereux said sharply. “Of course, there may be some explanation of this outrageous conduct. I shall make a point of calling on Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon this afternoon, and seeing Captain Cardrew. In the old days a man would have been shot for less than this.”

“Then I am very thankful we do not live in the old days,” Sybil smiled unsteadily. “My dear uncle, I beg that there will be no talk of any kind, nothing that people can get hold of. It is hard enough, to bear it as it is; it is a dreadful thing to think that a girl has given her heart and all her affections to a scoundrel. That some villainy is going on here I feel certain. If only I could see George again. Last night—”

“Oh, then, you did see George last night. He was not at the duchess’s dance.”

Sybil proceeded to explain. She had hardly finished before the door of the breakfast-room opened, and Watson announced Captain George Drummond. The old man’s head was erect. He tried to speak as if he were announcing an ordinary guest, but the tears were in his eyes, and his voice failed him utterly at the finish.

“I was bound to come, sir,” George said coldly. “I have a message for Sybil. When I have delivered that I will go as soon as you like.”

“No, no!” Sir Drummond cried. “Sybil has told all about last night’s affair. George, my boy, I am afraid that I have made a dreadful mistake. I have heard from Morton at the War Office, and, in addition, a cable message has just arrived from your colonel. He says—well, he says, in effect, that you are innocent!”

“I think that was, in effect, my own view of the situation, sir,” George responded.

“My dear boy, you must not speak to me like that,” Sir Devereux murmured. There was a deep humility about him that George had never seen before. “I was proud of you—perhaps I was a little too proud of you, for Courtenay’s letter was a bitter blow to me. You refused to speak, to say anything in your defence, and I turned you out of the house like the hard-hearted wretch that I was. But I felt it, George; God only knows how I felt it!”

George held out his hand instantly, and the two stood for a moment looking into each other’s eyes.

“Don’t let the thing be mentioned again,” George said. “You see, the guilt lay between myself and another. I could not accuse Sybil’s lover, to her face; I only suspected. The thing will have to be threshed out by a court of inquiry. And whilst I am still, so to speak, on probation, it will be as well for me to remain in London. I came down here because Fate had dragged me into another matter concerning the happiness of more than one person. But we need not go into that. The real cause of my visit here to-day is to tell Sybil that Ronald Cardrew is staying at Breckland Lodge with Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon.”

“I have taken the matter in my hands,” Sir Devereux proclaimed. “I shall call there to-day and insist upon a proper explanation.”

George shook his head sorrowfully, and stole a glance at Sybil. She caught the pitiful expression of her brother’s face, and her cheeks flushed.

“I do not think altogether I am an object of pity,” she said. “It might have been worse. I might have been his wife. Girls have surmounted more bitter trials than this.”

Sybil spoke bravely enough, but she could not keep the scalding tears from her eyes. Her head ached, she said; she found the atmosphere of the house

insupportable. She would go for a walk. Her life had been so free from care and happy in the past that the sorrow seemed to overcome everything. And yet Sybil only needed this to bring out all the goodness of her nature. The trouble would purify the gold and remove the dross of passion and selfishness.

She resolved to fight the thing down, to prove to George that she was worthy of his affection—to be a little more like Flora Cameron, in fact. And as Sybil came to this determination, she looked up from the damp, leaf-strewn lawn into the face of the very girl she was thinking about.

"I declare that you are uppermost in my thoughts!" she cried. "May I speak to you. Miss Cameron? I had a great shock last night."

"I know," said Flora, with a tender sympathy infinitely soothing. "Your brother told me. It was the man who calls himself Ronald Cardrew. I have his photograph at home. It was very nearly the means of producing a quarrel between us. I told you that he was not Ronald Cardrew, and I told you the truth."

"Will you be so good as to tell me a little more?" Sybil asked.

"I think I will tell you everything. You were bound to know sooner or later. Ronald Cardrew is a half-brother of mine, my mother's son by her first husband. His name is Lancaster—John Lancaster. Almost from a boy he was a constant source of trouble. His debts were paid for him over and over again, but he never cared so long as he had his selfish pleasures. And then he did something that brought him within the grip of the law."

"Oh," Sybil cried, "what an escape I have had! I might have become his wife."

"You probably would have done so," Flora replied. "He disappeared; he went to South Africa. And there his chance came. I presume he changed his name to Ronald Cardrew. He joined the Imperial Yeomanry, and obtained a commission. Mind you, we only heard this by accident! It seemed as if he changed his life altogether, and we were glad. He came home, but never near us. He stayed with you. I will not say that it was not so, but I am sure that he loved money more. But he was ever a coward, ever ready to find some way of laying the blame on others, as he had done in the case of your brother. But you have found him out—indeed, it would have been my duty to speak in any case. The pain is sharp, but it will save you from a fate worse than death itself."

"You may be disposed to blame me for my reticence," Flora went on; "but I never guessed, I never knew anything till you showed me that portrait and asked who it was. And I said it was not Ronald Cardrew, in which I said no more than the truth. You see, for years I had been hoping against hope. It was always possible that John Lancaster had reformed. The mere fact that he had obtained a commission in the Army and appeared to be doing well pointed to that conclusion. When you told me that he was engaged to you the shock was very painful; but I decided not to say anything. I was going to watch the progress of events. If the change was permanent, all I should have done would have been to insist that John Lancaster should tell you of his past; if I had deemed that he was only playing a part, I had made up my mind to enlighten you as to his true character. But there is no occasion to go into that now. Unhappily, all my fears have proved to be true."

Sybil walked by the side of her new friend in silence. She was crushing the pain out of her heart; her pride was coming to her assistance. She would not think any

more of her own trouble, but throw herself wholly into the consideration of the trials and difficulties of others.

She was about to ask a question about Gilbert Doyle when little Jessie appeared, coming from the direction of the woods, with a letter in her hand.

"I was to give you this as soon as possible," she said. "It came from the gentleman who is at the cottage. I was to be sure to give it to nobody but you, miss."

Flora tore the note open, and glanced at it hurriedly. Then she reduced the paper to tiny fragments.

"It is from Gilbert Doyle," she explained. "He says that he has made a great discovery, and desires to see Captain Drummond at once. Will you send him to Anna's cottage?"

"Without a moment's delay," said Sybil. "I'll go back here and now."

Chapter XXIV

The Light That Failed.

As will be remembered, Gilbert Doyle had remained hidden in the belt of trees outside Breckland Lodge; whilst George Drummond returned to Tower Royal. Doyle had made up his mind to stay there even if he had to remain till day-light. It seemed to him that he was on the verge of some great discovery affecting his honour and his future happiness, so that he was filled with the patience that follows a great resolution. He stood with his back to a tree and his teeth shut together—a resolute expression on his face.

The best part of an hour passed without anything taking place. People were leaving the castle now, for Gilbert could hear the carriages one after another rolling along the road. It was some time later before one of them paused and turned into the gate leading to the lodge. The lamps were brilliant, so that Gilbert could see all that was taking place.

First came Beard, looking big and strong. He stood in the full flare of the lamplight, so that there was no mistaking the burly figure. If Gilbert had any doubt before, it was removed now; beyond question, there stood the mysterious doctor of the ocean steamer, the man who had planned his ruin. Then came Madame Regnier, or Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon, as she preferred to be called at present.

Gilbert felt a grim satisfaction in taking in his enemies. He wondered what they would say if they knew how close he was to them. He saw the third man alight; he could hear a fragment or two of the whispered conversation as the group stood on the doorstep after the carriage had driven round to the stable-yard.

"Go in and wipe them out, I should say," Beard growled.

"You talk like the villain of some cheap melodrama. As if one did that kind of thing except in the slums of some large town. Would you bury the bodies in a lime-kiln, or how?"

“And burn the motor-car as well,” the third man sneered. Gilbert rightly judged the thin man to be Ronald Cardrew. “There must be some more ingenious way than that, Beard.”

“Well, let us go and get it over,” Beard replied. “The best thing to be done is to send all the servants to bed, your own maid included.”

“I am sure there is no occasion for any eavesdropping here.”

The door opened, and the form of a footman stood out in the strong light for a moment. Gilbert could see that the house was lighted by electricity. Then the door closed, and presently a shadow or two flitted across the blinds in the drawing-room. With a view to hearing what was taking place, Gilbert crept across the grass and stood close to the window. He was conscious of a confused murmur of voices; then there was a woman’s scream, and a figure came staggering back heavily against the window, and one of the big sheets of plate-glass cracked and scattered all over the grass outside.

Gilbert felt his pulse quivering. He would have given much to be inside at that minute. But the outburst seemed to have passed as quickly as it had arisen, for a silence followed, and then somebody inside laughed with a suggestion of humour.

“I am sure there is no occasion for any thing of this kind,” a woman said. Gilbert recognised that voice with a thrill of remembrance. It was Madame Regnier who spoke. The conversation could be plainly heard now. “James, we have had an accident, and broke one of the windows. No, you need not trouble about it now. Captain Cardrew will put the shutters to before he goes to bed. Bring in the supper-tray and a box of cigarettes, and then you can all retire. We shall want nothing else to-night.”

The voice was singularly clear and even, Gilbert thought. But then Madame Regnier had ever been a woman who had her nerves under perfect control. Another silence followed; there was the musical tinkle of crystal glasses; then the scratching of matches, followed by the close of the dining-room door. The blind obscured Gilbert’s vision; he could not see in the least what was going on now; but he judged that the footman had done all that was demanded of him, and retired for the night.

“Well, I suppose you regard this as being tolerably free and easy,” one of the strangers said. It was not difficult to follow his American accent. “Didn’t expect to see me, eh, Beard?”

“I didn’t,” Beard responded. “I hoped that I should never look on your face again. And if you think that you can come here to play your Southern tricks, you are mistaken. It’s all very well out yonder, where the strong arm is a law in itself, but not in England. Besides, I am protected as long as the child lives.”

“So long as your daughter remains alive—yes,” the other stranger said. He had a deeper voice than his confederate, as Gilbert did not fail to notice. “But she is very ill.”

“Yes; but she is getting gradually better,” Beard cried eagerly. “Under my care she will become quite strong and well again. She was going to marry a scoundrel, who was stolen away from her side at the altar itself. It was a merciful escape for the poor child, but the shock nearly killed her, Delamere.”

“We should like to see your daughter Winifred,” the first American explained.

Gilbert pinched himself to make sure that he was awake. There could be no question of the fact that these strangers were discussing Winifred Cawdor. There was no other girl whose marriage had been broken off on the wedding morning, and here were three strangers who seemed to know all about it, speaking of Winifred Cawdor as Beard's daughter! And Gilbert had known Mary and Winifred Cawdor for years. He had known the girl's father before he died. There must be some strange mistake here.

"We have come four thousand miles to see the child," the deep-voiced stranger said. "And so you shall," Beard growled, "I admit that you have the right on your side."

"Well, yes, seeing that she is the daughter of our own sister," the deep-voiced went on. "It is now one and twenty years ago to-morrow since you came out to Virginia on what you called a scientific expedition. We extended you the same hospitality that we give to all educated strangers; we were kind to you, though we have our racial pride. Our pride is as the pride of the Jews—we look upon ourselves as a race apart. And we are as particular whom our women marry as the highest caste tribes in India. The idea that you would look upon Ada with eyes or affection never dawned upon us.

"But you did look with eyes of affection upon her; you asked her to be your wife. You thought she was an heiress, but she was nothing of the kind. We laughed your proposal to scorn; we did not desire to let our blood mingle with yours. You went away, and after a time Ada followed you, and you were married in New York.

"We had the right to kill you. No Virginian jury would have called that a crime. You were marked down as the victim of the oldest and sternest vendetta in the world. We found you at last in California, and we came to take your life. That was only a little over a year after your marriage. You happened to be away on business at the time, which probably accounts for the fact that you are standing so big and strong on that hearthrug to-night. We found our sister with a tiny child in her arms, and she was starving. You had gone away, and abandoned her to her fate. That is why I kicked you through the window when you entered the room. If—If—I had had a revolver in my hand I should have shot you. But my brother, who is cooler than I am, suggested a quieter way of dealing with the matter. I apologise for the blow in the presence of a lady. Madame Regnier, as a lady and a Virginian herself, forgives me."

"Let it be taken for granted, and get on," Madame Regnier said coolly.

"There is not much more to say. We were going to kill that man. But we loved our sister in spite of all that she had done, and Beard was her husband. We took her home, and we promised to spare that man's life. But we did not promise to spare him after a certain time; we did not promise to spare him after our sister's death. For twenty years he has imagined that he has given us the go-by, and that his whereabouts were not known to us. He is quite wrong, for we have known all his movements for many years. But our sister is dead, and we are free of our promise. Somebody must have warned him, for he failed to walk into our trap in the woods the other night. Not that we went to kill him there and then—oh, no! we had a better plan than that. What it is he will know in good time. At present, he is spared for the sake of his daughter, our sister's child."

The speaker paused. Gilbert could hear somebody walking heavily up and down the room, and judged that it was the man Beard.

"In the name of commonsense, let us have done with this silly mystery," the latter cried. "What is it that you require us to do? I know that you regard the stranger and settler in your part of the world much as you regard a nigger, and would as soon see your womankind allied to one. But the thing is not exactly a crime."

"Well, we think otherwise," the deep-voiced one said. "It was a crime to steal away our sister and abandon her in the way you did, and we take our vengeance for those things. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth is our stern motto, as many a scoundrel knows to his cost. The law is ours instead of the tribunal that you set up in England. But you are not going to escape your punishment; and Madame Regnier, whose assistance you needed to carry out your schemes, is not going to escape hers. Perhaps not to-day, perhaps not to-morrow, but yet us surely as the sun rises in the east. Do you leave here to-night, Beard?"

"I go home, of course," Beard said sulkily. "I shall probably walk."

"No, you will go in our car, which is waiting in the stables for us. We are going to drive you over, and spend the night with you at the Moat House. You need not worry about beds for us, as we are old campaigners, and can settle down anywhere. We are not going to let you out of our sight again; we are so fond of you that we are going to lock you in your bedroom, so that you can't be up to any of your tricks before daylight. And if the discovery that we have made does not prove—"

"You are going too far," said the other man. "Do not spoil the thing prematurely. Now, Beard, are you ready to come with us?"

Beard was understood to growl that he had no choice. The conversation broke off abruptly at this point; there were shuffling feet inside, and somebody pulled back the blind so quickly that the listener outside had barely time to hide himself. It was Cardrew making sure that the catch of the window was fastened before he pushed and barred the shutters.

There was not much chance of learning anything further, as Gilbert told himself; but, cold as he was, he decided not to strike for the cottage so long as Beard remained there. From his hiding-place in the belt of trees he saw Beard emerge; he saw the great car dragged into the flashing lights shining on the gravel of the drive. He saw Madame Regnier on the doorstep, smiling and cool, as if she were watching the departure of a few intimate friends. Then the car hummed and hissed round, and finally slid past the gates of the lodge. It hummed off down the road, and then there was silence.

"Well, what do you think of it?" a voice said, so close to Gilbert that he fairly jumped with surprise. "Did you get a grip of the conversation?"

Gilbert knew the voice now. It was that of Marston. How long had the latter been there, and how much had he seen? Gilbert wanted to know.

"I saw your shadow against the light of the room," Marston explained. "If a footman had come along it would have been awkward for you. I'll go your way, and you can tell me exactly what you heard. And perhaps you will find it to your advantage to speak quite freely. Beard's past holds no secrets from me. Now, did they happen to say anything relating closely to Miss Winifred Cawdor?"

Chapter XXV

A Wasted Life.

Gilbert Doyle felt that he ought to be astonished. But he was long past feeling anything of the kind. It seemed odd all the same that the mystery surrounding the little knot of people gathered together at the Moat House should be known outside the circle. Did everybody know all about it, he wondered? Was the secret shared by the officials at Greystone? Perhaps, Marston divined something of this, for he smiled.

"You need not be astonished," he said. "I daresay you are wondering how many more people know of this business. I assure you that nobody else is in it. But you may rest assured that few of Bernard Beard's rascalities are concealed from me."

"You know something about the mysterious strangers, perhaps?" Gilbert asked.

"I know all about them," Marston replied. "And, if you like, I will give you every information concerning them. If you are not tired, perhaps you will come as far as my cottage with me, and talk the matter over with a cigar. I still smoke cigars occasionally."

"I should never be too tired to glean valuable information about Beard," said Gilbert. "Pray lead the way. I don't know why, but I have a feeling that we are pretty close to the edge of the truth."

Marston vouchsafed no opinion on that head. He led the way in silence to his cottage, put fresh logs on the fire, and trimmed the lamp again. Then, to Gilbert's surprise, he produced a box of exceedingly fine cigars.

"These are by way of a treat," he exclaimed. "It suits my mind sometimes to remember that I was born on a family estate, and that I was educated at Rugby and Trinity, Cambridge. Mr. Doyle, would you like to hear the story of a wasted life?"

Doyle uttered something to the effect that he did not want to pry into Marston's past. The latter smiled somewhat grimly as he lighted his cigar.

"It suits my purpose to speak of it," he said. "It is so very seldom that I get a man of education to talk to. There is Beard, of course, and I could go to the Moat House if I chose. And as an intellectual force, Bernard Beard is hard to beat. But then I know what a consummate rascal he is, and that makes all the difference. If I had never met Beard I might have been a different man."

Gilbert nodded. He felt that he only needed patience for the discovery of valuable information. Marston wandered on in a general way for some time.

"But I need not dwell on that," he said. "I by no means lack intelligence or force of character, and it is always weak to blame another for your misdeeds. I had a brilliant career both at school and college, and great things were predicted of me. When I came of age, too, I did not lack friends to push my way in the world. Science was my line, and when I was in London I came in contact with Bernard Beard.

“From the very first that man began to influence me. He was so big and strong and clever. He had great ambitions, and at the same time great weaknesses. The things often go together. He was fond of good living and choice wines and the like, with the result that he was soon up to his eyes in debt and difficulties. As I was in the same wild, lawless set. It was not long before I found myself in a similar position.”

“Then there was some trouble over a cheque and Beard vanished from London. I was blamed over that affair, but I was ready to swear that I had no hand in the business; all the same, nobody believed me, and I found myself shunned everywhere. I was pretty well penniless by this time—in debt, hated, and desperate. Then I had a letter from Beard, written all the way from Virginia. He was doing pretty well there; he had settled down and given up everything in the way of drink. He had a big scheme on; if I would go and assist him he would be glad. But there was one stipulation—I must give up drink. If I would pass the word on this, he would send me his draft for 100 pounds.”

“I need not tell you that I jumped at the chance. I gave the promise about the drink, and I may say that I have never broken it, never—nor has Beard. Well, I got to my destination in time. I found Beard settled down in that lovely country, but I could see nothing of his scheme. Then gradually the idea came out bit by bit. It had nothing to do with science or discovery, or anything of that kind, it was a pure and simple love story.”

“Beard had fallen in love with Miss Ada Delamere, the only sister of the brothers Delamere. You know who they are, because you have seen them to-night. They were the two Virginians who called to see Madame Regnier—Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon, as she calls herself.”

“Go on,” Gilbert Doyle murmured. “You are beginning to interest me greatly.”

“I shall interest you still more before I have finished,” said Marston drily. “As I just remarked, these are the Delameres. What they are doing here will appear presently. I had not seen either of them for twenty years, but they drove up in their car to-night, and I recognised them at once. I should not have been surprised to find that meeting at Breckland Lodge end in a tragedy. But I am wandering away from the point again.”

“Let me tell you that the Delameres belong to one of the first families in Virginia, where caste acts as a kind of religion. These people are very hospitable and open-handed; they never show any sign of pride so long as race is not in question, but touch them and they are fanatics. They always marry in their own class, and to go outside is a deadly sin. You know how particular the Jews are on this point. Well, they are not so rigid as the great Virginian families. And when I came to realise all this, and found out that Beard had made up his mind to marry Ada Delamere, I could see the dark trouble looming ahead of both of us.”

“A beautiful girl was Ada Delamere, lovely and good, and a great heiress to boot. Beard was pretty deeply in love, but I am quite sure that he would not have sacrificed himself had he not thought of the money; at any rate, he had won the girl’s heart, and, as he told me, he went and asked the brothers’ consent to the marriage.”

“There was no scene of violence, no knocking of the impudent suitor out of the window, or anything of that kind. Beard’s request was as coldly and courteously

refused as if he had asked the king for one of his daughters. And, Beard protesting, he was advised to study the case of Colonel Lyndley, a Yankee, who had carried off one of the Virginian beauties some years before, and been tracked and shot by her infuriated relatives as a penalty for his crime. Mind you, that was not called a crime then—it was retributive justice."

"I cannot sufficiently impress upon you what pride and caste mean in Virginia. The brothers Delamere looked upon the whole thing as settled, but they had reckoned without their host where Beard was concerned. He had made up his mind from the first what he was going to do, and, as a matter of fact, he had had more than one to help him. We went into the whole thing carefully, and planned an elopement. Everything was ready, down to the clergyman who was going to perform the ceremony. We need not go into the cunning way in which the thing was worked, but before the brothers could realise what had happened, their sister was married to Beard, and they had made their way by a roundabout route to New York, where I parted company for the time."

"I did not see Beard again for a whole year. I thought that he had gone back to England with his rich bride, and that he was devoting his time to someone. But one day I met him in the Broadway, looking a little as if fortune had been against him, and he told me everything. He had run a great risk for nothing; Ada Delamere was not an heiress at all; as a matter of fact, she had nothing. Unless she married with the consent of her brothers, in which case a large sum of money was held in trust for her to be paid over on her wedding day. If she did not marry to the entire satisfaction of her family, she got nothing. There was an evil grin on Beard's face as he told me this, a look that did not say much for the happiness of Ada Delamere. I asked where Ada was, and Beard told me coolly enough that they had had a dispute and parted, and he did not know where she was. This was the scoundrel's way of telling me he had abandoned the poor girl to her fate."

"Now, I am not what I know I should be, Mr. Doyle, but I could not stand that. To a certain extent I had been instrumental in bringing this misery on an innocent woman, and I determined to find her out. I found her literally starving in the slums of New York, I found her at the very time that her brothers had got on her track. The poor girl still believed in Beard; she was still ready to go back to him if he gave the word. All she thought of now was to save him from the vengeance of her relatives. And at this point the Cawdors came on the scene. Mr. Cawdor was not the rich man he became later; he was very poor, and had hard work to support his wife and two baby girls."

"They were the only friends that Ada Beard had in the world. And it was they who helped her to save Beard when the Delameres turned up. They found their sister with a child in her lap. They offered to take her home again after they had done with Beard. The girl pleaded for Beard for the sake of her child; she asked for his life and they gave it. But the vengeance was not going to sleep; it was only lying dormant till Mrs. Beard died. Their vengeances are never forgotten; time does not soften them, they would take their own sister and her child back again."

"When they were ready to go, the child disappeared. Mrs. Beard declared that her husband had taken it away at the last moment. She pretended that he was devoted to it. It is strange to what women will resort where the safety of a loved one is concerned. As a matter of fact, she had not a child at all. The whole thing

had been got up to save Beard, and the child had been borrowed for the occasion from Mrs. Cawdor."

"Good heavens!" Gilbert cried, "do you mean to say that—that—"

"I see you have guessed it," Marston went on in the same deliberate way. "The little child who was supposed to plead dumb-mouthed for the sake of its father, was Mrs. Cawdor's—the young lady Winifred, to whom you are some time going to be married. It was a most ingenious scheme to save a worthless scoundrel. How could the Delameres track down and kill a man who had with him the outcome of their own flesh and blood? At the same time, they did not want the child, who would remind them too much of Beard."

"I see!" Gilbert said thoughtfully. "You said that you would interest me, and you have done so. This, then, is the terror that hangs over Beard—this is what he is so afraid of. But there is one thing that I fail to understand. Why has the vengeance broken out after all these years? Why do these men come to England and revive the vendetta?"

"I don't believe they intend to revive the vendetta in England," Marston said. "Mind you, that same thing that applies to Beard applies to me also. I was an instrument, and I have to suffer when the time comes. These Delameres will not try open violence; they will strike in quite another way when the sword is ready to fall. They are over here seeking definite information. That is why they looked up Madame Regnier, who is a renegade Virginian. It was a bit of good fortune that they struck upon Beard at his home.

"And as to the child," Marston went on, "The Virginians, as I did not fail to point out, are in mourning. My idea is that their sister, Ada Beard, is dead, and that she made a full confession before she died. It is the most likely conclusion I can come to. If that is so, the reason for their presence in England is quite obvious."

"I begin to see what you mean," Gilbert replied. "Beard has a feeling that he has been watched all the time. He feels comparatively safe so long as the Virginians believe that he has a daughter who is their own flesh and blood. If Winifred married well, their suspicions would be aroused by the fact that Beard never visited her. Now, as she was under the same roof as himself, things looked more natural. And that is why the scoundrel deliberately ruined me."

"I expect so," Marston replied. "You were in the way, and Beard does not permit anybody to be in the way. Besides, you were useful in taking all the blame of the stolen bonds, and also averting suspicion from the real thieves. Not that they benefited much by the risk they were taking, seeing that they lost all the bonds, with the exception of the few found in your rooms. But I think I shall be able to set that right before long."

"You mean that you can prove my innocence?" Gilbert cried.

"I hope so. Mind, there is a deal to be done yet, and I am by no means in the best of health. You did me a good turn the other night; you took a great risk for a stranger who is nothing to you, and I am not the man to forget these things."

"It is a most amazing story," Gilbert said. "It is so strange as to be almost beyond belief; and yet everything fits in perfectly. I think I had better tell all that I have heard to George Drummond. He may be able to make use of the information. I shall tell him in the morning."

Marston nodded thoughtfully. The cigar had been long finished; he was gazing into the embers of the fast-expiring fire. Perhaps his mind had gone back to the past, for he seemed almost to have forgotten the existence of his companion.

When he spoke again it was more slowly. “I am going to London to-morrow,” he said, “on your business. I fancy I can see a way to help you. It may be inconvenient to me, but that does not matter, as my end is so near. Once I get down on a sick-bed I shall never rise again; of that I am certain. And now it is getting late, and as I have many things to do to-morrow, I’ll say good-night!”

Gilbert rose and held out a hand to his companion. He could not feel anything but kindly disposed towards the man who was going to befriend him.

“Good-night,” he said, “and many thanks for all you have told me. And if anything happens to you, your child shall never know what it means to want a home.”

Chapter XXVI

Missing.

It was late the following afternoon before Gilbert had a chance of seeing George Drummond. The latter appeared to be excited and eager; he had had news from the War Office. The authorities had sent for Ronald Cardrew, who had followed George home by the next ship, and Cardrew was not to be found anywhere, though he had been seen in London.

“But you know where he is,” Gilbert exclaimed. “He is hiding at Madame Regnier’s. When matters are quite ripe, you can go and force him to see you. Has anything fresh happened?”

“A great deal has happened,” George said. “It has partially been proved that it was Cardrew who ordered that disastrous retreat when I was lying unconscious from my wounds. Cardrew said that I sent the orders by Sergeant Bexhill, and he was backed up by another man whom he bribed. You see, Sergeant Bexhill, who was the most valued non-commissioned officer in my regiment, was supposed to be killed. The good fortune that has come to me lies in the fact that Sergeant Bexhill is still alive. He managed to get away, after all, and Colonel Courtenay has seen him. He also saw the corporal, and examined him. Now the corporal has disappeared—deserted, I expect. So practically the whole thing is out, and that is why the War Office wants to see Cardrew. The thing will be public property in a few days.”

Gilbert congratulated his friend warmly. Then he told his own story at length. George put his own affairs aside to listen.

“We must settle this thing without delay,” he said. “I had better see Flora Cameron, and ask her what she thinks of it. She was lunching with my sister, and I felt her at Grange Court when I came here. And I am glad to say that Sybil is taking her trouble very well. She has the sense to see that she has escaped from a great danger.”

“You can do no better than tell Miss Cameron everything,” Gilbert replied. “She is likely to be able to help you. Perhaps she may have learnt something last night. We know that the Delamere brothers passed the night at the Moat House as Beard’s guests. And now you are aware why they came to England. It is a great advantage to know that. I shall wait here with all impatience.”

“And I will go back and see Miss Cameron at once,” George said eagerly.

Flora was just donning her furs as George got back to Grange Court. The young man’s eyes rested admiringly upon the girl; she had never looked more sweet and beautiful. And George was good to look upon, too. He was recovering from his wounds; he could hold his head up before the world, and he had found the one woman for him—the only one he had met that seemed to fulfill his ideals.

“I will walk back as far as the Moat House with you,” he said. “In fact, I returned on purpose. I have something that I should like to say to you, Miss Cameron.”

“Won’t you call me Flora?” the girl said shyly. And the pair walked down the drive together. “I have so few friends that I care for. And your sister calls me Flora.”

“Certainly, if you call me George,” Drummond replied. “How strange it all is! I met you so very recently for the first time, and yet I feel as if I had known you for years. There is nothing that brings people together more than the sharing of a secret.”

“And not a very reputable secret at that!” Flora smiled.

“Oh, well, it is all for a good end, Flora. We are working in the cause of truth and justice. If my misfortunes had not befallen me, I should never have been able to help Gilbert Doyle, and, what is more to the point, I should never have met you!”

George’s voice grew soft and tender as he spoke. The speech was a little daring, but George was pleased to see the pink flush that crept over Flora’s face.

“I think that I am glad that we met,” Flora said.

“I am more than glad,” George went on. “Flora, do you believe in love at first sight?”

The girl’s heart was beating fast, she was glad in some vague way. For she had had a sad and loveless life these latter years, and there was that in her that called for companionship and sympathy. Perhaps she had dreamt her dreams as other girls do, of a time when she would have a home of her own and the sunny presence of children. But that had all been dismissed in the cold light of day as a foolish idea of what could never be. And here was this good and strong man making love to her.

“I have read of such things,” she murmured. “I suppose they exist in real life.”

“I know they do,” George said boldly. “They exist in my case. From the first moment that we met I felt that Providence had guided me. There was something so pure and good about you, Flora. And you were so kind and sympathetic towards me. I shall never forget that you held out a helping hand to me when everybody else deemed me guilty. I could not forget that.”

“Is there no such thing as mistaking love for sympathy?” the girl asked.

“They frequently go together. I feel sure that I should have really loved you even if I had met you in the ordinary way. I know now that I love you, and that there will never be another girl in the world for me. I daresay you think this sudden, but

I want you to know this. I want you to think it over, and if you feel that you could care for me—"

George paused; he did not feel equal to saying any more. Something seemed to choke him. Flora, with a sudden rush of tenderness, placed her hand in his.

"It is sudden," she said gently and naturally. "I have liked and trusted you from the first, George. I wished that I could have a brother like you, and yet I didn't. But I fancy that you feel what my answer will be."

"I believe you care as much for me as I do for you," George said thickly.

"Well, perhaps not yet. You see, women are different to men. We may imagine that one cares for us, but it does not do to admit it till he speaks. One makes mistakes, and then the feeling must be dreadful. But I am glad that you love me, George; I am glad to know that a good man has asked me to come to him and share his life. I have never been so glad in all my life before. And if I let my heart follow its impulses, you know where it will rest, George."

The pure voice thrilled with feeling. Then George took the girl's hand and kissed it.

"Let the matter stay there for a day or two," he said. "Then if you can say that you love me—"

Flora might have said so then and there and spoken no more than the truth. But she spoke, instead, of the troubles and difficulties that still beset her people and her mother. George swept all these difficulties away. He felt sure that before long the hateful influence of Beard would be removed. And as to the rest, he had a fair fortune of his own, and his uncle would give him a liberal allowance suitable to the future owner of Grange Court on his marriage.

"And that reminds me that I am talking in a very selfish manner," George concluded. "My love for you has made me forget everything else for the moment. I have just been to see Gilbert Doyle; he has had a most interesting chat with Marston, who has told him all kinds of things. I daresay I can give you a fair idea of what he said before we reach the Moat House."

And George proceeded to tell her all that he had heard from Doyle. Flora followed him carefully and thoughtfully to the end. Her face was very grave as George finished his narration.

"This must be looked to," she said. "It seems almost incredible that such things could be at the beginning of the twentieth century. I had not gone to bed when the Virginians arrived at the Moat House."

"Then you saw them?" George asked eagerly. "What were they like?"

"Oh, they seemed to be very nice. As far as I can understand, they had lost their way—and Dr. Beard had offered at the Tower Royal charity dance to find them accommodation for the night. He said that he had met them years ago when he was on his travels. He introduced them by name. They are quite gentlemen, and of perfect breeding, I should say. They apologised very nicely, and made a deal of fun over their misfortunes. They were prepared to accept anything in the way of a bed, and as to their dress clothes, they did not seem to care, as they had proper motor coats to hide them. I rather gathered that they had business of some kind with Dr. Beard, and that they would be likely to stay with us till this evening. At any rate, they went into Longtown to-day for morning dress."

"Then you did not notice anything in the least suspicious?" asked George.

“Oh, no! That is, I did not notice anything at the time. But since you have told me your story, one or two things rise to my mind. Beard seemed to be afraid of them; his attitude was one of armed neutrality, so to speak. And once or twice he glanced at one of them in a murderous kind of way. I have pretty well made up my mind what to do.”

“I should like to hear,” George said.

“I am going to be candid. I am going to interview those strangers, and ascertain what they mean to do. I think it would be far the best way. Don’t you agree with me?”

George hardly knew what to say. He was determined to leave it all to Flora.

Anything would be admissible that tended to get rid of Beard. Flora went thoughtfully into the house; a big log fire was burning in the great hall, the fitful light played on the pictures and the armour. One of the Virginians was sitting there, smoking a cigarette. He rose from the depths of his chair as Flora came in, and pushed another chair forward for her. Flora sat there with her fur coat unfastened, the light playing on her face.

“This is a grand old house, Miss Cameron,” Delamere said. “It quite appeals to me. We have some fine old-houses, but they do not seem to suit our character.”

“A grand old house, indeed,” Flora said. “But a house of sorrow all the same. I am sorry that you should have come here to add to those sorrows, Mr. Delamere.”

A strained expression came into the eyes of the American. “I need not ask you to be a little more explicit,” he said. “Would you please kindly explain?”

“I don’t think that there is much to explain,” Flora went on. “I cannot tell you who my informant is, but I know why you are here in England. To a certain extent, you have my sympathy, but I hold that vengeance belongs to no man, but is in the hands of God alone. My relative, Dr. Beard, may be a bad man, but that does not give you the right to become his murderer. It is a strange code of yours that allows you to partake of a man’s hospitality when the dagger for his heart is warm in your hand.”

The American’s eyes flickered, there was a grim, hard line round his clean-shaven mouth.

“We are dealing with a great scoundrel,” he said. “Do you know that that man took our only sister away from us, the sister we loved so dearly? He took her away from us and married her for her money. And when he found that we had control of the money, he abandoned her. They had been married only a little over a year, and she was still in the first flush of her glorious beauty. Do you say that a man deserves to live, who has been guilty of a crime like that?”

“Perhaps not,” Flora admitted; “but do not forget that in God’s good time—”

“My dear young lady, you do not understand. If I talked to you all night you would not come to understand our point of view. It is part of our religion; it is the training of centuries. That man abandoned his wife and his little child. For the sake of the child, our flesh and blood, we held our hands. We gave a promise which we intended to keep so long as our sister lived. Beard fled with the child; perhaps he had a tender spot in his heart for her; since that day to this we understand that the child has been well cared for. She was well cared for with the Cawdors; she is well cared for here. I am alluding to Winifred, of course.”

“Winifred Cawdor!” Flora exclaimed. “How could she possibly—oh, there is some mistake here!”

“No, no! Winifred is the child of Bernard Beard. Unhappily, she gave her heart to a pitiful scoundrel, who was arrested on the way to the marriage—”

“Mr. Delamere, there is some strange error here,” Flora said earnestly. “Winifred is Winifred Cawdor. She was engaged to a good man, and Beard prevented the match. By his vile schemes he had the bridegroom arrested on his way to church. The poor fellow has suffered for the crimes of another ever since. You understand—”

“Come here!” Delamere cried, as his brother entered the hall. “I have been hearing things with a vengeance. That rascal has deceived even us. Miss Cameron, will you repeat in my brother’s hearing what you have told me?”

Flora repeated her statement quietly and firmly. The brothers exchanged glance. It was plain that they had information that presented events in quite another light to them. A question looked out of the eyes of each; then both seemed to speak when Beard came leisurely into the hall. He looked more easy and more confidential than he had done for years. He came forward and warmed his hands by the glowing fire.

“Bitterly cold again,” he said. “I do not remember at this time of the year—What?”

Mary Cawdor burst into the hall. Her hair had fallen about her face, which was deadly pale; the others could see that her boots and skirt were thick with grey mud.

“It is about Winifred,” she gasped. “I went up to her room a little time ago and could not find her there. She had gone out of the house, so one of the servants told me. And I followed her with an uneasy feeling that something was going to happen. I could see the marks of her feet where the sun had softened the ground, and they led in the direction of the river. The river was at high tide and just on the turn; the water was rushing out to sea like a millrace. I could see footmarks on the soft bank as if somebody had slipped there.”

“You don’t mean to say,” Beard said. “You don’t mean to say that you think—”

“I dare not think,” Mary, sobbed, “my brain is all on fire. And by the side of the river I found this. It belongs to Winifred.”

A little fur cap, covered in mud and stained with water. It was a favourite hat of Winifred’s, and one she wore for ordinary occasions.

With a cry that rang through the house, Beard rushed to the door, and tore frantically along in the direction of the river.

Chapter XXVII

Misgivings.

The rest of the little group looked at one another for a moment, nobody speaking. They could hear Beard as he tramped heavily through the hall; the door

clanged behind him. The two strangers seemed to be grave and concerned. They had forgotten their mission in the agony of the moment. It was all on the plane of common humanity now.

"You may count on our services, Miss Cameron," one of them said. "It matters very little who the young lady is, and what her proper name may be—"

"She is my sister," Mary said distractedly. "She—she was not altogether responsible for her actions; only she had never given any indication of violence before, either against herself or anybody else. Oh, Flora, she was one of the gentlest of creatures!"

"She was," Flora said. "Poor little white soul! I do hope that nothing has happened to her."

"Well, we can get out and see," the elder Delamere said. "It's a poor thing for strong men to be standing about here when there is work to be done. Miss Cameron, if you will lead the way—"

"To be sure," Flora cried. "Let us do something before darkness sets in. The idea of that poor little Winifred out there in the cold, and the night—"

Flora bit her lip to keep the tears back. She detested tears as a rule—she was not one of those who shed them—but the picture her imagination conjured up was a piteously sad one. She thought of the poor white bride lying there in the water, with the bitter darkness of the winter evening for her shroud; she thought of the dreadful end to Gilbert Doyle's hopes and aspirations, and yet it seemed almost impossible to believe that this had really happened. It was time for action, the brooding melancholy would come later. She snatched up her furs from the hall table; she made Mary don a thick cloak. They might be hours in the open air yet, and the light was almost fading already.

"If you gentlemen will follow me," she suggested, "I can take you to the spot where—But we need not give up hope yet. You had better put on something warm."

They passed into the drive and across the meadows to the tidal river that emptied itself into the sea beyond Ledge Point. The tide had turned now, and those slimy, greasy banks of the stream were plain to the eye. Standing large against the sky was the huge form of Bernard Beard. His face was ghastly, despite the coldness of the hour, there were beads of moisture on his forehead.

He stooped down as the others came up, and pointed to a number of grooves in the soft mud.

"Somebody has been here," he said hoarsely. "You can see the marks of feet in the clay leading down to the bank. These grooves are footmarks, as if somebody slipped here. Of course, it is just possible that—oh!"

Beard paused, and his voice seemed suddenly to choke. He had found something. He lifted from a tuft of grass a pair of boots. He handed them to Mary.

"I hope you will not be able to identify them," he said thickly.

"But I can," Mary faltered. "They are Winifred's! But does it not seem strange that she should have removed her boots before—before—"

The poor girl could say no more. It was all very well to try to be brave and collected, but the blinding tears filled her eyes and a great lump rose in her throat. Flora repeated Mary's question more than once before Beard appeared to listen.

“Oh, yes!” he said abruptly. “There is nothing strange about it. I have known many similar cases. In my experience, when a person means to commit—I mean when anybody develops this kind of mania, it is quite usual to remove certain articles of clothing. I have heard of women doing it, especially with articles of jewellery. It is the last sign of reason in the overturned brain. I am afraid that this points—”

It was Beard’s turn to stop, unable to proceed farther. The two Virginians were walking anxiously up and down the banks, as if trying to find something. Already the darkness was falling fast; it would be impossible to see for many minutes longer.

“Is there nothing that we can do?” the elder one asked Beard. All signs of enmity between the two men had vanished before the dreadful calamity, “Is the river swift?”

“Only for an hour or two, when the tide is falling,” Beard explained. “Usually the river is very slow and sluggish. You were suggesting—”

“Drags,” the other Delamere said. “I daresay we can find what we want in that way at the coast-guard station, and we could get some of the men to help us. Also, we had better send these ladies back to the house.”

“They must go back,” the elder Virginian said firmly. “They can do no good, and their presence here if the discovery we dread is made—”

Flora listened and approved. Really, Mary and herself could hope to do no good, and the dreadful matter was in far more capable hands than hers. She touched Mary gently on the shoulder. The girl seemed to understand, for she took Flora by the arm. It was no use trying to be brave and strong any longer. The scalding tears would flow, and Flora was glad to see them.

“You had better come home with me,” she said. “Mr. Delamere is quite right—this is no place for women. Let us go back to the house again.”

Mary made no objection; she was too dazed and strained for that. In a kind of waking dream she walked alongside Flora till the house was reached. Flora would have said something to comfort the girl, but words failed her just now. What were words in the face of a great trouble like this? Mary sat with her strained eyes fixed on the hall fire.

“Flora,” she whispered presently, “Flora, do you think that he has anything to do with this? Is it not possible that he has deemed it best to—to—”

The pause was significant. Flora thrilled as she listened to the grim suggestion.

“No,” she said, after a moment’s thought; “I feel quite sure not. There is one thing that I have never doubted, and that is, Bernard Beard’s extraordinary affection for Winifred. What manner of love a man like that is capable of feeling, I don’t know, but I am certain that he has a passionate attachment for Winifred. It is not that—”

“I am glad you think so,” Mary said, with a shudder. “He seemed dreadfully upset just now, but I fancied that he was acting. I have still a strong delusion that Bernard Beard is acting a part.”

“I wish I could feel it in the same way,” Flora murmured. “In that case, I should imagine that Beard had got Winifred out of the way to save an awkward situation with the Delameres. But his distress seemed genuine and spontaneous. Still, it is possible that—”

Flora paused, conscious of the fact that she was going to utter some commonplace sympathy. She could see from the expression of Mary's face that she was only half convinced. One thing, however, was certain—Winifred had suffered no violence at Beard's hands.

"I should like to feel quite certain," Mary said. "I cannot possibly sit here and do nothing. I shall go mad if we don't take action of some kind. As soon as it is quite dark, I am going as far as the river again. We need not appear, Flora; we can keep out of the way. But I find it impossible to sit here doing nothing."

Flora was conscious of much the same feeling. It was quite dark by this time. The big clock in the corner of the hall ticked on to seven o'clock, and there was some kind of a meal in the dining-room which nobody touched. Mrs. Cameron was not down to-night—she was nursing a cold in her own room—and Flora was glad of it. It was eight o'clock before the men of the party came in, looking jaded and wan. But they had no news to give; they had seen nothing. They sat eating their cold dinner in a listless kind of way.

"Now let us slip out and get a lantern from the stable," Mary whispered. "I feel that I must be walking, walking all the time, or else go mad. We must find something, where the men have failed. Did they bring Winifred's boots back?"

They have not done so, so far as Flora could say. The boots had been forgotten in the sorrow and intense feeling of the moment. It was no difficult matter to procure a lantern, and in a little time the two girls were by the side of the stream again. Presently, on a tuft of grass, Mary came upon the boots lying side by side. She picked up one, and proceeded to examine it in an aimless kind of way. Perhaps she was hoping to discover that the footwear did not belong to Winifred, after all. Then suddenly her dull eyes lighted, and her lips trembled.

"Flora," she said hurriedly—"my dear Flora. I have made a discovery! If what I think is correct, then we need not lose hope altogether. Let us go back to the house at once, but let us get back before we are missed. Then, when we are in the privacy of your own room, I can tell you what a discovery I have made."

Flora made no objection. She was glad to get away from the cold and the darkness. Action might be necessary to Mary's frayed nerves, but the cold and the dreadful gloom of the river were bound to have an injurious effect upon her imagination. Besides, she was anxious to know what Mary had found out.

They walked along hurriedly in silence till the stables were reached, and the lamp returned to its place. Nothing was seen of the men as they entered the hall. It was only when Flora's room door was locked that Mary began to speak.

"Let me place these boots upon the table," she said. "Let me recall what happened early in the afternoon. Little things are beginning to get clear in my mind, and point to great results. It was about four o'clock that Dr. Beard came to me and said he wanted to speak to Winifred. He told me she was in the garden. But I could not find her in the garden, and I told Dr. Beard so. Then he said that he fancied that he had seen her crossing the meadows in the direction of the river. It was one of Winifred's good days, and I felt no anxiety. But it was following the track of the river that I found the hat. Now, when I come to think of it, I recollect that Winifred had taken a great dislike to that hat lately. She had fads of that kind. Then why should she select that particular hat to-day? In the light of my greater discovery, this looks suspicious. But please to look at these boots. They

were new last week, and they were a little tight, so I had them sent to Longtown to be stretched. They only came back by the carrier to-day; I saw the parcel on Winifred's dressing-table; so that if she wore them she must have changed them before she went off—just before she went out. Now, that is not in the least like Winifred. Look at the boots. They have not been worn at all, the soles are quite clean, and could not have been worn anywhere near the muddy banks of the river. Surely you can see that for yourself, Flora."

Flora could see the thing quite plainly. The boots had been deliberately placed by the side of the river to give colour to the suggestion that Winifred had made away with herself. The same remark applied to the hat. If this was Beard's doing, he had over-reached himself this time. Perhaps he was unnerved by the presence of the Virginians; anyway, he had neglected to look at the soles of the boots.

"I believe it is as you say," Flora exclaimed, "and that Winifred has been spirited away to save a side issue and prevent the asking of awkward questions. But there is a way of testing it beyond all question. Do you know what foot-gear Winifred had?"

"Of course I do. Winifred did not go out much—you could hardly ever persuade her to take a walk. She had two pairs of slippers, one pair of brown shoes, and a pair of patent-leather ones. That is everything in the shape of foot-wear that my poor sister possessed."

"And they are all in her dressing-rooms, I suppose? Very good. Then please go to the dressing-room and see what is there. If a pair of boots or shoes are missing, then you may be sure that Winifred is standing up in them at the present time."

"How clever you are!" Mary cried. "That will be proof positive, I think. I'll go at once."

Mary hurried away, and Flora waited her return impatiently. The thing was prosaic, but the point would be complete and final. Mary came back presently with her eyes sparkling and a glow on her cheek.

"It is as you suggested," she said. "The pair of brown boots are missing. To make sure, I inquired of the servants, and they tell me that Winifred had the brown boots cleaned last night, and was wearing them to-day. What does that rascal mean by it?"

But to Flora the meaning of Beard's action was pretty plain. He had contrived to have Winifred spirited away and kept close from observation till the Virginians had departed. He had over-reached himself this time, and a little commonsense had betrayed him. "Winifred is safe," Flora said. "We cannot be sufficiently thankful for that. You may depend upon it that she has been hidden in a place of safety somewhere. When those American gentlemen are gone she will appear again. Only you must be careful not to betray what you have divined. Bernard Beard has sharp eyes."

"He is a fiend," Mary said, with a shudder. "But my anxiety is not quite at an end yet, Flora. I should like to discover where my sister is, if she is properly treated, and—"

"Oh, she will be properly treated, Beard will see to that. I rely upon the extraordinary affection that he has for Winifred. But if you like, I think I can see a way whereby we can very soon get to know, not only if Winifred is happy, but also where she is."

"If you would only tell me," Mary exclaimed, "it would take a load off my mind."

"My scheme is to go to James Marston and tell him exactly what has happened. We could go as far as the cottage to-night, and ask Marston's assistance. Beard is sure to try to see Winifred before long, and Marston can follow him in a way that only a poacher understands. Let us go and see James now."

Chapter XXVIII

Face To Face.

Marston was seated over the fire, nursing a pain that was eloquently reflected in his face. A half-smoked cigar by his side testified that he had found no alleviation that way. Yet he was quite courteous and polite as the girls came in. Jessie had gone down to the village, and had not yet returned. Would the ladies be seated, Marston asked.

"We are not going to stay five minutes," Flora said. "Mr. Marston, I want you to do something for me."

"I will do anything in the world for you," Marston protested. "If there were more like you in the world there would be fewer like me! Please say what you want."

Flora proceeded to explain all that had taken place. She felt she could be free with this man, seeing that he already had most of the threads of the mystery in his hands. He smiled as Flora came to the end of her story.

"Your deductions are perfectly correct," he said. "I should say that things have fallen out as you fore-casted. Does it not occur to you where Miss Winifred Cawdor is?"

Flora was unable to say. Marston smiled as he took paper and pen and began to write a letter.

"This is a note to Captain Drummond," he explained. "It is a letter to the effect that Captain Ronald Cardrew is staying at this moment with Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon—as she calls herself—at Breckland Lodge. I happen to know, that Captain Drummond is most anxious to meet Captain Cardrew and drag a confession out of him, and I am suggesting that he can do no better than call at Breckland Lodge without delay. I daresay you will wonder what all this has to do with Miss Winifred Cawdor, but that will be clear by-and-by."

Marston refused to say any more, and Flora had to leave it at that. Jessie came in presently, wild and shy and pretty, as usual, to be made much of by her visitors.

"I think you ladies had better go now," Marston said. "I'm sorry I cannot say more, because, after all, we are dealing with a very clever man, and disappointment may be in store for us. Jessie, you are to take that letter to Grange Court and deliver it into the hands of Captain Drummond."

Jessie nodded and vanished. Then it was that half an hour later George was reading the letter from Marston, and making up his mind what to do. There was nothing like striking while the iron was hot. It was only a little after 9, a fine night,

and a cycle ride of some ten minutes would bring George to Breckland Lodge. He donned a rough shooting-coat in the place of his dinner-jacket, and set off without delay. There was just the chance that there might be a dinner party in progress at the lodge, for Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon was by way of being exceedingly hospitable, but to-night the drive was deserted, and the lights in the drawing-room were down. In the dining-room the electrics seemed to be extinguished altogether.

George knocked at the door, and asked to see Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon, if she were alone. The footman seemed to recognise the caller, for he respectfully asked him inside. Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon had dined, and was at present in the drawing-room. There was nobody dining there to-night, except one gentleman, who was staying in the house. George smiled quietly to himself as he realised who the gentleman was. A minute later and he was ushered into the drawing-room. He managed to avoid seeing her outstretched hand as he took a chair.

"This is very informal and delightful of you," the woman said. She looked very beautiful and majestic in yellow satin. "All the more so as your people have never called here."

"They don't call much," George murmured. "My uncle is very conservative in his tastes. But I did not come here to-night to trouble you to any extent. My visit here is to see a guest of yours. I am alluding, of course, to Captain Cardrew."

The woman's face changed for a moment, her smile vanished. She looked very hard and cold.

"I know Captain Cardrew," she said. "We are old friends. But when you say that he is staying in this house, why, I am bound to reply that—"

"That I have stated an actual fact," George interrupted.

He met the woman's eyes as he looked up, and read the challenge in them. And George knew that this beautiful creature knew everything, and that he would have to speak plainly.

"I am going to be frank with you," he said. "I am not not the only person who is looking for Cardrew, and for much the same reason. He came to England almost as soon as I did. He was going to marry my sister. Fortunately, that catastrophe has been avoided. For reasons best known to himself, Cardrew chose to disappear at the very time when he ought to have been available. I discovered the fact that he has been here."

"He has been here? You are quite certain of that?"

"Absolutely. You seem to forget, my dear madam, that my sister encountered him at Tower Royal on the night of the duchess's dance. You also forget that he drove away with you when the dance was over. You will not deny this?"

Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon played slowly with her fan. The smile was on her face again now, she appeared to be quite mistress of herself.

"You would make a first-class detective," she said.

"Most men do when honour and good name are at stake," George retorted. "I have had to defend both against a man whom I regarded as my friend. Come, Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon, I know that Cardrew was dining with you to-night!"

"Is there anything else that you know?" the woman smiled.

"Many things. And what I cannot tell you, my friend, Gilbert Doyle, can. Your past and your future are no concern of mine; neither do I care to know why you have left the fields of your many brilliant exploits to come and live in a dull place

like this. But unless you are going to help me to-night, I could make things very unpleasant socially for the lady known to society as Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon, but better known to some of us as Madame Regnier."

George spoke slowly and deliberately, so that every word told. He saw the woman's face flame with anger before her lips grew deadly white.

"So," she said, "the simple soldier is a more dangerous foe than it would appear. That is a very neat stroke of yours, and I appreciate the cleverness of it. I am bound to admit that your story as to who I am would be very awkward if it became public property. I suppose it is no use to ask where you got your information from?"

"Not in the least," George replied. "The sting of the thing lies in the fact that I could prove it. I did not mean to use that weapon to-night, but I am not going to lose such a chance of seeing Captain Cardrew as this. Will you kindly send for him?"

With a lazy action Madame Regnier indicated the bell.

"Please ring that for me," she said. "I have enough to do defending my own cause, without bothering over the affairs of other people. You shall see Cardrew; in fact, your pluck and your coolness of resource fully entitle you to that victory. James, ask Captain Cardrew to come to me for a moment. He is in the billiard room."

All this in the coolest and most collected manner. Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon proceeded to talk of other matters—the prospects of skating if the frost lasted. George was a little amused, but he forgot that feeling as Captain Cardrew entered.

He came in with the debonair manner that George knew so well. Nobody could be more friendly and fascinating than that handsome ne'er-do-well when he chose. There was a gay tune on his lips, but he would have hastened from the room, only George was too quick for him. For a soldier who had a high reputation for courage, Cardrew looked very white now.

"No, you don't!" George said, between his teeth. "I have had some trouble to find you, and I am not going to let you go till you and I have come to a proper understanding!"

Cardrew stood there, saying nothing. He flashed a reproachful glance at Madame Regnier, who laughed as she left the room.

"I could not help it," she said. "My hand was forced. I would have protected you if I could, but Captain Drummond was too clever for me. You will find me in my boudoir presently. And do try to respect the furniture, Captain Drummond!"

The door closed on the speaker, and the two men were left together. George's pulse was leaping, he felt all the hot, insurgent manhood rising within him.

"Well, you paltry scoundrel!" he said. "What have you got to say for yourself? Why have you been hiding in this way you coward? Speak out!"

"There is some mistake here," Cardrew stammered. "If you take me for—"

"If I take you for! Do you think you are going to carry it off with me as you did with my sister? You stood up before her, and pretended that you were not Ronald Cardrew, but somebody else."

"Well, so I am. I can prove to you that I am not Ronald Cardrew at all. Have you not heard of these extraordinary likenesses before?"

“Yes, I have,” George responded. “There was a famous case not long ago, when an innocent man suffered a long, term of penal servitude for a rascal like you. But your double does not exist, simply because you are your own double. You say your name is not Ronald Cardrew?”

“I can prove that to you. I would give you a thousand pounds if it were not so.”

“Do you remember that night on the hills above Fort Gna?” George asked him suddenly.

“Of course I remember it!” the other said, taken off his guard. “Well, what am I speaking about? Oh, that I could prove that my name was not Cardrew at all!”

“Pitiful!” George resumed. “You have just betrayed yourself past all redemption. And it is news to me that your proper name is not Cardrew, seeing that I am already aware of that fact that your real name is John Lancaster, and that Miss Cameron, of the Moat House, has the misfortune of calling herself your half-sister!”

The listener’s jaw dropped, he turned a ghastly green. Perhaps he had hoped to get out of his desperate quandary in this way. He stood there, dejected and miserable, watching George out of the corners of his eyes in a fearsome way, as if expecting personal violence.

“Why try to play the same trick on me that you hoped would be successful with my poor sister?” George asked. “I know you. I should know you anywhere. I have found you out, and I am going to have a full confession from you. You disgrace your own family so much that you had to go abroad and take a new name. By stealing the exploits of a dead man, you managed to get a commission in the Army out in South Africa. You came into my regiment. You are a plausible scamp, and you imposed upon me so that I took you to my home, and you managed to gain the affections of my sister. But you were ever a coward at heart, and you proved it out in India. When I lay wounded you showed the white feather, and then tried to push the blame off on me. Luck seemed to stand you in good stead, as luck has done, before. You thought Sergeant Bexhill was dead, and you had it all your own way. But Bexhill is not dead, and he has come forward to clear my name. And you are coming forward to do the same thing.”

“No, no!” Cardrew cried. “There is no occasion to do that. They will hold a court-martial on me, and I shall be dismissed the Service. I—I should hate to have to stand out before my fellow-men like that. I’ve got a pretty vivid imagination, and I know what it means. I always wanted to be a soldier—the Service always appealed to me—but my imagination is a great curse. At times I feel brave enough for anything. Then that feeling of a bullet in my brain; the idea that I might lie in agony on the battlefield for hours—you know what I mean. And that is what I felt that night at Gna, when you came to grief. I lost my head and gave the order. Five minutes later I would have given years of my life to recall it. And when Bex-hill was out of the way I put the blame on you. I—I thought that—”

“That for my sister’s sake I would be silent. I had to be silent for a time. I was not going to charge you till I could substantiate my charges. Well, I will not be harder upon you than I can help. Write me a full confession; that is all I ask.”

“Come to my rooms, then,” Cardrew suggested. “I couldn’t do it here. And I will say anything that you like, and you can make any use of it afterwards.”

“A few words will suffice,” George said, as he followed Cardrew up the stairs. “A curt statement to the effect that you gave the order after I was wounded, and tried to put the blame on me. And I shall publish it, mind you. For the sake of my family I must do so. And when I come to think of the way in which you have treated me, it seems to me that I am letting you down very easily indeed. Now take the paper and begin!”

The paper was handed over at length. Once it was done, Cardrew’s head fell forward on his hands, and his shoulders heaved with same deep emotion. George touched him, but he made no response.

“Go away,” he said harshly, “go away. Do you suppose I don’t feel because I happen to be a coward and a liar? Go, and leave me in peace. I daresay you can find your way out of the house. Only leave me, and never let me see your face again!”

George said no more, for words would have been out of place. Silently he left the room, and his feet made no noise as he proceeded down the stairs. He could hear voices somewhere—one a pure treble, the other heavier, but soothing; and kindly. Then a door opened and a girl came out followed by somebody in the garb of a nurse.

“It’s all right, dearie!” the latter said. “Have a little patience. Come back into the sitting-room again, and I’ll go and find him for you!”

“I want my sister!” the girl said piteously. “If I could only have my sister!”

George started and rubbed his eyes. Here was another and more startling phase of the mystery. It was easy to recognise the white, innocent, beautiful features of the girl in the corridor. He was almost face to face with Winifred Cawdor!

Chapter XXIX

The Next Move.

George paused for a moment to make quite sure there was no mistake. The light on the landing was shining full on the face of the girl, and then all doubts were set at rest. Beyond question he was looking at Winifred Cawdor; he had seen that pretty, pathetic face in such strange circumstances that he was not likely to forget it.

But what was the girl doing? She seemed to be well treated—the nurse spoke in the kindest and most patient manner—and yet Winifred’s voice was pathetic as she asked for her sister! It was evident to George that Mary Cawdor was not here, and that she could not know where Winifred was. He would have liked to gain speech with the nurse, but he thought better of the idea. The suggestion of forcible interference, too, crossed his mind, but this he dismissed with hardly a second thought. A process of that kind might be playing into the hands of Bernard Beard, who had had the girl conveyed here for some purpose.

He crept downstairs and let himself out of the house. He rode quietly along with the confession in his pocket; he was feeling at peace with all mankind. He was in a

position to hold up his head again; he could ask Flora to share his life with him with no anxiety as to the future. But, at the same time, George remembered that much had to be done first.

In the morning he would see Flora, and tell her of the discovery he had made at Breckland Lodge. Doubtless, she would be able to throw some light on the mystery.

It was fairly late by the time George reached Grange Court, and Sir Devereux and Sybil had gone to bed. Well, he would have some good news for them in the morning, George thought. As a matter of fact, it was Sybil who opened the budget of news first.

She looked a little pale and anxious as she came into the breakfast-room, where the morning sun was streaming on the plate and silver and the red chrysanthemums in the old Venetian glasses. George kissed his sister a little more tenderly than usual. He was intensely happy himself; he felt a little ashamed of his bliss in the sight of Sybil's sorrow.

"Don't fret about it, Sybil," he said; "the fellow is not worth it! Try to be grateful that you have found him out in time."

"It's not that," Sybil replied. "Oh, I am brave enough as far as my trouble is concerned! I am not going to pretend that all the sunshine has gone out of my life; I do not propose to believe that all men are deceivers because I have made a mistake. It is this distressing business about Winifred Cawdor that grieves me!

"Winifred Cawdor!" George exclaimed; "what has happened to her?"

"Have you not heard? They were talking about it in the servants' hall last night. The poor child is supposed to have drowned herself in the river yesterday afternoon. Her hat was found by the stream and the boots she had removed from her feet. They were searching the river all night, but, I hear, without effect."

It occurred to George that he might have saved all this trouble and anxiety had he thought about it. But would not the proclaiming of his discovery, give Beard a chance to retrieve his position? Surely it would be enough to let Mary Cawdor and Flora know that Winifred was safe? At any rate, there would be no hurry in telling Sybil.

"This is more mystery on the part of Bernard Beard," he said. "It was like his cleverness to place the hat and boots beside the stream and give the idea of suicide, so that no unpleasant inquiries might be made elsewhere. It was all the more clever because the river runs fast at the turn of the tide, and a body lost there might not be found for weeks. But Winifred Cawdor has not committed suicide."

"You are quite sure of that, George?" Sybil cried.

"Absolutely! I saw Winifred Cawdor last night in the house of the woman who calls herself Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon, who really is the Madame Regnier that made all the mischief so far as Gilbert Doyle was concerned. It was pure accident. I received information that Ronald Cardrew was hiding in that woman's house, and I went there to see him and force a confession from him. I don't want to give you pain, Sybil, but it is necessary to allude to that man for a moment. I had some difficulty in getting to him, but I managed it at length, and the confession was written in his private room upstairs."

"Did—did he take it very badly?" Sybil faltered.

“At the last, he did. He tried to deny his identity to begin with; but when he saw that I knew he was Flora Cameron’s half-brother, he gave in. He was very contrite at the end—so much so that I left him to his trouble and made my way downstairs again. Then it was that I had an opportunity of seeing Winifred Cawdor without anybody else in the house knowing it.”

“Oh, George, I do hope the poor girl is being well treated!” Sybil cried.

“I fancy you can make your mind easy on that score. Whatever Beard’s other faults may be, he is devotedly attached to Winifred Cawdor. I should say, that the child was being treated just as well at Breckland Lodge as she was at Moat House. For some reason, Beard wanted her out of the way for a time, and this is the method he has adopted, I want you to run over to the Moat House after breakfast to see if there is any news, and, incidentally, to ask Flora to meet me in the woods at the back of the house. I could not go myself.”

Sybil gave the promise cheerfully. On the whole, it was by no means an unhappy breakfast table that morning, though, as yet, George had said nothing to Sir Devereux as to the confession he had in his pocket. He did not desire to speak of that in the presence of Sybil.

From time to time the girl was grave and silent, apparently engrossed in painful thoughts. But she put herself aside now, like the good girl she was, in the interests of others. Breakfast was barely done before Sybil was on the way to the Moat House.

“I think you will be interested in that, sir,” George said quietly, as he laid the confession on the table. “It closes a very painful incident in my favour.”

Sir Devereux put on his glasses, and read the confession two or three times. He seemed to have something the matter with his glasses, for he wiped them more than once. When he spoke at last, his voice was husky.

“Curt, but quite to the point,” he said. “My word, how we were all deceived in that man! He does not seem to feel what he has done in the least, George!”

“You are mistaken there, sir!” George replied. “As a matter of fact, there is more good in the man than you imagine. He is a coward because he sees too far ahead. And I did not want the confession to be any more florid. Of course the thing will get into the papers. Cardrew will be dismissed the service, and for Sybil’s sake, the fewer details the better. After all said and done. Sybil has suffered a greater wrong then I have.”

“Quite right, my boy, and spoken like yourself,” Sir Devereux said warmly. “And I was quite wrong; I should have trusted you before anybody. I ought to have taken your word for it that you were innocent. If you can ever forgive me—”

The old man turned away, pallid with a mingled pride and shame that left him incapable of words. There was nothing to forgive, George declared. In the circumstances Sir Devereux could have come to no other conclusion. George strolled from the room with a suggestion that the incident was closed, and that there was no occasion to allude to it again. His thoughts were pleasant as he walked down the woods at the back of the Moat House to meet Flora. She came a few minutes later; there was a flush on her face and a glad brightness in her eyes.

“Sybil has told me everything,” she said. “We discovered last night that Winifred had not been guilty of that dreadful thing, and the knowledge was a great comfort

to us. And so you are in a position to tell us where Winifred is to be found. What a lucky thing you went there to see Captain Cardrew last night!"

"Well, perhaps there is a better word than luck for these things," George smiled gravely. "The hand of Providence is behind us, Flora. I firmly believe that I was led to Breckland Lodge last night by the Power that moves us. I am in a position to frustrate Beard's further schemes, and prove my innocence at the same time."

"Sybil told me that," Flora whispered. "Oh, I cannot say how glad I am! And Sybil spoke so nicely about it, too. She is a good girl, George."

"Yes, I hope that she will have a good husband some day. There is one man who has waited faithfully for a long time, only Cardrew came along and the old love vanished. But it is early days to talk about that. So long as you are satisfied with me—"

"Of course, I am," Flora said. "I have always been. Did I not know from the very first that you were the victim of a hideous mistake? Did I not deem you innocent when all the world was against you? And now I am going to have my reward."

"And I am going to have my reward also, dearest."

Flora looked up at the frosty sky, and then down at the brown dead leaves at her feet. She was not in the least embarrassed—a pure joy shone in her eyes.

"Yes," she said simply. "When you said that you loved me my heart told me that I loved you in return. I did not know till you spoke, and then it seemed to me as if the whole thing had been arranged long ago. I love you, George. I could not say more than that if I had the most eloquent tongue in the world at my command."

She held out her two hands to him, and he took her in his arms and kissed her lips. They had forgotten the world and all its troubles in that blissful moment. It was some time before they came out into the high road again, where they parted without arriving at any decision as to what they had better do in the case of Winifred.

As George took his way back in the direction of Grange Court he found himself face to face with one of the Virginians. The latter paused and addressed George with a certain old-world politeness. His face was grave and set; there was a grim expression about the mouth that denoted trouble for somebody.

"You will excuse me, Captain Drummond," he said, "but may I have a few words with you? My name is Delamere. I am staying for the present at the Moat House."

"With your brother," George said. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, in the first place, I may ask you a few questions. You were at Breckland Lodge last night, at the residence of Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon. Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon has another name, but perhaps you may not be aware of that."

"If you mean Madame Regnier, I may say that the name is no new one to me."

"Very good," Delamere smiled. "I see you know a great deal. To be candid, I am having the house yonder watched, and that is why I know that you were there last night. I presume your visit there had something to do with the man who calls himself Captain Cardrew. It is surprising what a number of our acquaintances seem to have two names, is it not? Did you see anything of the young lady called Winifred Cawdor?"

George staggered before the question. He was disposed to say nothing. Delamere seemed to understand what was passing in his mind.

"I see I shall have to be still more frank with you," he said. "The young lady I am speaking of is known generally as Miss Winifred Cawdor. The paternity of Miss Mary Cawdor I do not question—that she honestly deems Miss Winifred to be her sister is obvious. But that is not our point of view or belief. We regard Miss Winifred as Bernard Beard's child."

"In which I am sure you are absolutely wrong," said George, recalling vividly the story that Marston had told to Gilbert Doyle of the borrowing of the Cawdor child to save the worthless husband of Ada Delamere. "Beard has deceived you. He is deceiving you still, so as to save his neck from your vengeance."

"So we begin to believe," Delamere went on, "But that man would baffle the cleverest lawyer that ever lived. We begin to have our doubts, and just at the moment when the truth is likely to come to light Miss Winifred vanishes. Her disappearance is so convenient to Beard that we had our suspicions. We did not quite believe in the suicide business. It would pay Beard to get Miss Winifred out of the way for a time. He must have her somewhere near. Where, then, a more convenient place than the residence of his old associate, Madame Regnier? When we saw you there last night it occurred to us that you had a hand in the mystery, but a few questions have dissipated that idea. Did you see anything?"

"Before I answer that question I am going to speak plainly to you," George said. "I know why you are here; I know what you came for. I deeply sympathise with your prejudices and can imagine your anger and grief over the way that scoundrel Beard treated your sister. But vengeance is no more yours than it is mine or any other man's. In my eyes you are no more than a pair of cold-blooded murderers. When I think how you are planning and scheming this thing, how you have nursed your wrath to keep it warm all these years, I have hardly the patience to stand here and talk to you. 'Vengeance is Mine, God says, I will repay.' Oh, it is such a cowardly thing!"

"You are wrong," Delamere said, without the slightest emotion. "Nor is it possible for you to look at things from our point of view. What we came originally for does not matter. I may say that Beard's skin is safe so far as we are concerned. We have discovered how the land lies; we have thought of a way to strike Beard a blow that will be worse than death, whether his story is true or not. And now, can you tell me anything of Winifred Cawdor?"

"I can," George replied. "I believe your word as to Beard. I saw Miss Winifred last night quite by accident. She is detained at Breckland Lodge."

Chapter XXX

The Arms of Her Lover.

The Virginian bowed and thanked George warmly. He hinted that he was going to take the matter into his own hands, and George could see no objection to that course. Let the strangers fight Beard in their own way. At any rate, that would

prevent Beard from finding out that his own household were conspiring against him in this matter.

"You have met me very fairly," Delamere said. "And I have to thank you sincerely. Whether Beard's story is true or not matters very little. We shall find a way to prove it or disprove it. Meanwhile, the circumstance had better be forgotten. I am walking to Breckland Lodge now. The poor girl is pretty well at the end of her troubles."

It was still early when the Virginian arrived at Breckland Lodge, and Mrs. Dunlop-Gordon was not yet ready to receive visitors, to which Delamere responded coolly that he was prepared to wait. He pushed his way into the house, and seated himself in the drawing-room. An hour passed, but he gave no sign of impatience. His dogged, resolute face never changed; it was as still and sphinx-like as Madame Regnier came into the room resplendent in lace and blue satin. She swept a kind of half-mocking curtsey to her visitor.

"Really, I am honoured!" she cried. "This is twice that you have come here in a few hours. Is there anything I can do for you, David Delaware?"

"Yes, you can do a great deal for me, Madame Regnier," the other responded. "For instance, you can tell the truth. I have no doubt that the effort will be a trying one, but a clever woman like you might easily accomplish a more difficult task than that."

The woman laughed as she settled herself in a chair. It was no use to pose before a man who was thoroughly acquainted with her chequered past.

"You were always candid," she said. "What can I do for you this time?"

"You can tell me where to find Winifred Cawdor. She was brought here at dusk last night in charge of a nurse, and I expect you had the nurse waiting for her. She was sent here by Dr. Beard, with instructions that her presence in the house was to be kept secret. I want to take the girl away with me."

"And if I say that you are entirely mistaken, David Delamere?"

"Then I should be under the painful necessity of disbelieving what you said. We know that the child came here yesterday; she was seen here last night. What is the use of trying to lie to me in this manner? Falsehoods will do you no good whatever."

"Softly, softly," Madame Regnier laughed. "There is nothing to be gained by this heat. I have not yet said that Winifred Cawdor has not been in this house. But I am going to ask you to believe that she is not in the house now."

"You mean, that you have sent her away when I came, guessing my errand?"

"Nothing of the kind. I never expected to find that you knew so much. To be candid, it was rather a shock to learn that you had followed our movements so closely. But Winifred Cawdor is not in the house now. She has vanished."

"You mean to say that she has run away?"

"You can put it that way, if you please. She passed a very bad night, so the nurse said, and did not sleep at all. I should say that the poor girl was subject to these bad nights. The nurse knew nothing of her charge, not even her name. She thought that she had come to look after a relative of mine whose intellect was weak. She came to me at 9 o'clock to-day and said that her charge was sleeping peacefully at last. She asked if she could go to the village, and, of course, I said

‘Yes.’ When she came back the patient had vanished. Nobody saw her leave the house, nobody knows where she has gone.”

The woman was obviously speaking the truth. Delamere was not going till he had seen the nurse, and he said so.

The nurse came in, upset and anxious; there was no kind of collusion. Her replies to Delamere’s questions were frank and plain. She had deemed her patient to be safe for some hours, and now she had vanished, taking with her nothing but a shabby old jewel-case which she seemed to prize much as a child cherishes a rag doll in preference to more expensive toys. The little jewel-case was locked, and the key had been lost. It contained nothing, so far as the nurse knew.

“Oh, she has not been spirited away and robbed of any valuables!” Delamere exclaimed. “You said just now that she asked for her sister a great deal. Obviously, she has gone to seek her sister. I have no doubt that the police will find her in the course of the day.”

Delamere spoke calmly, but with an irritating sense of failure upon him. He wondered if Winifred had found her way back to the Moat House. But that was hardly to be expected in her weak state of intellect and her slight knowledge of the locality. By the time that Delamere had reached the Moat House he had made up his mind what to do. The plan was arranged after a short discussion with his brother. He made his way to the library, where Beard was busy writing something in the way of a reward bill for the recovery of the body of Winifred Cawdor. Delamere reached over and took the paper from Beard’s hands, and tore it into fragments.

“I fancy there will be no need for your literary skill,” he said drily. “I suppose nothing about the missing girl has been ascertained in my absence?”

“Nothing is likely to come to light,” Beard said gloomily. “We shall never see the child again.”

“Oh, yes, we shall,” Delamere responded. “It is merely a matter of time. If I had been a couple of hours earlier in my call at Breckland Lodge I should have brought the young lady back with me. Unfortunately. Fate was too strong for me in that direction.”

The shot went straight home to Beard. His florid face grew pale, a few stammering words rose to his lips. But the ready lie and the cunning artifice failed him.

“You are a very fine actor,” Delamere proceeded. “So far, you have carried off the thing splendidly. But we know you, and that makes all the difference. From the very first I had an idea that you were playing some trick to prevent us from getting to the bottom of the paternity of that poor child, and so we began to cast our minds round as to the best and most convenient hiding-place. What better than the residence of Madame Regnier—close, convenient, and safe! Hence my visit to the lady’s house this morning. She could not deny that Winifred Cawdor had been there.”

“Had been there!” Beard faltered. “You don’t mean to say that—”

“That she is there no longer? Indeed, I do. You had better drop the mask for the moment and talk seriously with me. You sent Miss Cawdor to Breckland Lodge yesterday.”

Beard admitted the truth with words that seemed to be dragged from him. It was gall and wormwood to the scoundrel to find himself exposed like a felon caught red-handed.

"That being granted. I had better get on with my story," Delamere resumed. "Madame Regnier made no effort to prevaricate. She told me Miss Cawdor had come there, and that a nurse had been sent to take charge of her. The nurse is a good creature, and had no idea of what was going on. Miss Winifred had had a bad night, and she did not fall into a sound sleep till long after day-light. Being left alone, with nobody to look after her, she woke up and vanished."

"Why should she do that?" Beard asked with white lips. "I cannot understand."

"I think the reason is plain. The poor child missed her sister. She was asking for her sister all night. That was the uppermost idea in her poor confused brain when she awoke. That is why she slipped away with all the confidence of a child. She felt that she was being kept a prisoner; therefore, she would take care to keep out of the way. It will be no light task to find her and bring her home again."

Beard's troubled face showed this. People of weak intellect are often cunning, and Winifred would know that she would be brought back again if she were found. Therefore, she would by a kind of instinct keep to the woods and the deserted by-paths whilst she looked for Mary. Behind the woods a long, desolate stretch of moors lay, and there it would be possible for anybody to wander for days without being seen.

"This is dreadful!" Beard burst out. "I could not stand this for long. I admit that I was wrong, that I made a great mistake in the way I pitted my cunning against yours, but I was thinking more of the child than anything else. I would rather die a hundred times than a hair of her head should be injured. We must be up and doing. The idea of suicide must be abandoned; it must be suggested that Winifred has been seen wandering about, and a search party must be organised without delay. I will telephone to the police at Longtown and Castleford. Night might fall, and that child—"

Beard hurried away, unable to say another word. But dark was falling, and as yet there was no sign of the missing girl. With a sense of guilt and shame upon him—such a feeling as Beard had been stranger to for years—he went in the direction of Marston's cottage.

The poacher was just sitting down to tea. He had had one of his worst days. He had not been beyond the cottage, so that he had heard nothing of what had been taking place at Breckland Lodge or elsewhere. If he could be of any service to Beard he was ready for him now. The pain at his heart had abated—he felt in the restless mood of one who must be up and doing.

"I want you to join the search," Beard explained. "The poor child was at Breckland Lodge, where she slept last night. Do not look at me in that way now, and don't ask questions. She disappeared from Breckland Lodge about 11 o'clock this morning, and in spite of the large party of seekers not a trace of her has been seen. Now, no living soul, knows the woods and paths as well as you do. It is possible that Winifred may have seen some of us looking for her, and hidden herself. But she could not do that in the dark. Strange to say, I have more faith in the search after dark than in the search in the daylight. Will you do what you can for me?"

“I will do what I can for her and those who care for her,” Marston said, pointedly. He was wondering what Gilbert Doyle would say to all this. “But I am not going to be hampered with anybody else. I am going to conduct my search in my own way. As soon as I have finished tea I will make a start. Get your party on the moors between Breckland Lodge and here. I shall find the girl before daylight if she is to be found at all.”

Beard departed, taking what comfort he could from the assurance. Marston slipped off an hour later, telling Jessie that he would not be back till very late. As the hours passed the great woods grew darker and the silence oppressive. A stranger would have been hopelessly lost after the first few minutes, but Marston pushed his way softly on, and without so much as disturbing a pheasant in his progress. He seemed to know the way with his eyes shut—his quick ears were alert to every sound.

It was nearly midnight before he called a halt, and partook of the bread and cheese he had brought with him. He lay quite still in a hollow full of dead bracken, smoking his pipe.

A few minutes later and he was on the track again. He came at length to a cross-road, where the woods gave upwards without a hedge. In the darkness something seemed to flit across the road against the background of a cottage where a lamp still burnt behind the drawn curtain. Marston knew exactly where he was. This was the little cottage belonging to old Anna, where Gilbert Doyle was hiding. No doubt, Doyle was sitting up reading, and had not yet gone to bed.

Still, the light was useful, for it had shown up to Marston the flying figure of a woman as she darted noiselessly across the road.

He felt no sense of elation yet, because he was by no means sure that she was the object of his search. There were many gipsies about on the fringe of the moors, and the figure might be that of a female Romany who thought she had detected a keeper.

Marston stepped back and headed the figure towards the cottage. He saw the shadow flit. He tapped on the window of the cottage, and, surely enough, Gilbert Doyle opened the door.

“Is there anything wrong?” he asked quickly. “Are they after me?”

“No; but I am after somebody else,” said Marston. He felt that it would do no good to tell Doyle what had happened. “It is a poor, wandering woman. She is close here. Just step inside where you can see outside, and if she passes tell me. If she goes along the upper path I have her. Understand?”

Gilbert understood perfectly. He was to remain in the doorway and keep a quick eye for anybody who passed along the path leading to the woods.

He waited there for some little time before there came a cry of distress, more like the bleating of a lost lamb than anything else. The cry was repeated a minute or two later; then it seemed to Gilbert that he could make out the outline of a slim figure, the figure of a woman, who was beating her hands together in an agony of distress and fear. His heart went out to the poor creature with an impulse that he found it hard to control. He opened the door of the cottage, and stood there with the glow of the lamp full behind him.

“Is there anything that I can do for you?” he cried. “Don’t he afraid of me, please.”

From close by came a hoarse cry of vexation from Marston, and a request that Gilbert should go back to the house and close the door. But Gilbert heard nothing; he was only conscious of the slim, figure tottering towards him. A line of light shone on the girl's face. It was pale and white, and fearful in the glow.

The girl staggered towards him with a hoarse cry. Gilbert caught her in his arms.

"My darling," he cried, "my little Winifred!"

Chapter XXXI

A Gleam of Reason.

The girl lay in Gilbert's arms, her weary head had fallen on his shoulder; her eyes were closed as if the sleep of utter exhaustion had overtaken her. With a feeling of pity, Gilbert carried Winifred into the little sitting-room. It was no time to ask questions; at this thrilling moment it never occurred to him that this was the girl Marston was looking for.

At the same time, it was an awkward position for Gilbert. Practically, he was alone in the cottage with the girl he loved. If she needed help he could not summon medical aid. On the other hand, it was possible that Winifred had heard of some plot against the freedom of her lover, and that by some blind instinct she had come down to the cottage to warn him of his danger.

Still, that danger would have to be risked, and, if need be, Gilbert could call in old Anna, now peacefully sleeping in the attic bedroom at the back of the cottage. Gilbert congratulated himself on the fact that he had not gone to bed early, and that he had kept up a good fire. And there was a certain fierce joy to find himself in undisputed possession of Winifred, after all he had suffered for her sweet sake.

Gilbert dragged a couch to the fire, and laid his beautiful burden tenderly upon it. The first glance at the girl as she lay unconscious dissipated any idea that she had come by a more or less direct route to the cottage. Winifred's boots were stained and caked with dirt, the fringe of her dress was torn by countless thorns. The little hands were cold, and Gilbert chafed them till the blood began to flow again, and the grateful glow of the fire brought life to the half-frozen limbs. Winifred opened her eyes presently and looked about her.

"Where am I?" she asked. "Oh, that fire is so comforting. It is so good to be warm and comfortable after the coldness and silence of the night. I have been in the woods all day, Gilbert."

"Have you, darling?" Gilbert asked. He thrilled as he heard his name from the girl's lips. "Why did you do it? Were they unkind to you?"

"No. Only Dr. Beard said that I wanted a change. He took me to another house where they were kind to me. There was a nurse, but she was not like Mary. You do not know how I longed for Mary. So I ran away to find her."

"You poor little soul!" Gilbert said unsteadily. "You have been looking for her all day?"

“Yes. I was going to find Mary and ask her to take me home again. So I ran away. And I managed to lose myself. I had a few biscuits in my pocket, and those I ate in the middle of the day. Then they set people after me, and I had to hide from them. I don’t think I was ever so frightened in my life, Gilbert. It was so dark and silent in the woods. A fox came and stared at me. It was dreadful.”

“Poor little soul!” was all Gilbert could say. “Poor little soul!”

“I became more and more frightened with the darkness. Perhaps because I was frightened and perhaps because I had myself to think of, my brain grew clear. I seemed to recollect things that I had forgotten for a long time. Then I went to sleep under some straw that they had put out for the pheasants, and I slept a long time. After that a man followed me. Then I saw the light here, and I made my way to it. And to think that I should find you here, dear one! Gilbert, why have you kept away from me so long?”

Gilbert rose from his seat at the end of the sofa and warmed some milk. He fed Winifred with a spoon from the cup with the utmost tenderness, and gradually he had the satisfaction of seeing the colour creeping back into her cheeks. A little cold meat cut up very small followed, and at length Winifred was sitting up again.

“You are so good and kind to me, Gilbert,” she murmured. “Always so good and kind to me. But why did you go away? And what am I doing here?”

“I want you to try to remember dearest. Try to think of what happened to you two years ago.”

Winifred sidled up to the speaker. He placed his arm about her, and drew her to his side. Perhaps he ought to have called old Anna and seen that Winifred was safely tucked up in her bed, but he had hungered for this moment. It was the one hope that had kept his heart alive and his courage fresh in gaol. The bliss of the moment was too great to be resisted.

“Put your arms round me, and hold me as you used to,” Winifred whispered. “When I know that you are by my side, I can think it all the more clearly. Two years ago—it is beginning to come to me. We were going to be married, Gilbert, and I was the happiest girl in the world. Stop a moment, and let me see if I can get it quite clear. When I look at your dear face all the confusion seems to fall from me, and night gives place to day. Did you not come to me the other night—I was not mistaken—in the drawing-room at the Moat House?”

“You are not mistaken, darling. It was I whom you saw there that awful night.”

“I felt certain of it,” Winifred said with great triumph. “They tried to persuade me it was all a delusion. Even Mary tried to make me think that!”

Gilbert ignored the question. He was quite aware why Mary Cawdor had tried to pass off the meeting as a delusion. It had been necessary not to play into the hands of Bernard Beard. Gilbert could see that perfectly.

“Sometimes it seems necessary to conceal the truth,” Gilbert said.

“Does it?” Winifred asked innocently.

“That is not what I have always been taught. But we were talking about something else. What was it? Oh—two years ago, when you and I were happy lovers, and we were going to be married. I recollect everything now, even to the dress that I wore. And I drove to the church as if I should like all the world to share my bliss. Then it came that they took you away, and—what was the dreadful word?—arrested you—”

“Steady, little one!” Gilbert said cheerfully. “It is all coming right. I have a passionate regret for the wasted years, but we are both young yet. They took me away to prison.”

“They took you away to prison. And you were innocent. Why did they take you?”

“You must not blame the authorities, dear,” Gilbert explained. “They could not have done otherwise. If you read about it—”

“But I did not read about it, Gilbert. I fainted when I realised what had happened; then grief and shame were too much for me. And after that I seemed to understand nothing—to have no feeling save that something vital had gone out of my life, and that happiness for me was no more. And yet I could not forget your face; I could not forgot that I loved you. All the time I had a feeling that some day you would come back to me.”

“You felt that I was not guilty, darling?”

“Yes, yes. What would it have mattered to me? I should never have cared less for you. Does a true woman ever cease to love a man to whom she has given her whole heart, even if he turns out to be as base as she had deemed him exalted? Why, the mere sight of your face has brought the reason back to my brain. Who were your enemies, Gilbert?”

“It would be hard to say,” Gilbert replied. He felt that he must not say much about Bernard Beard and the part that he had played in the great conspiracy. “We will call it a kind of mis-understanding. Actual stolen property was discovered in my possession, and it was proved that I had a large sum of money in the bank. They refused to believe my account of how the money got there, and I received a long term of imprisonment. But friends of mine found out certain things in my favour, and they planned for my escape. It was necessary that I should be on the spot, and that is why I am hiding here.”

“But, my dear, dear boy, you are not going to hide here for long. Your innocence—”

“My innocence is going to be proved. Meanwhile, I am compelled to stay here in this cottage. Now, I want you to listen to me, Winifred. You will be back again at the Moat House soon. I have an enemy there, who must not know what has become of me. You were ever open and candid, my darling, and that is where my chief danger lies. You are not to tell anybody of this meeting to-night.”

“Very well, Gilbert,” Winifred said obediently. “I will tell nobody, not even Mary. But from the look of me they will know that something wonderful has happened. I feel so different, so clear and bright—the confused feeling has gone.”

Gilbert had not overlooked this fact. He nodded gravely.

“Perhaps you had better tell Mary,” he said. “There is no question that she is a friend of mine. But you will conceal everything from Dr. Beard.”

The pupils of Winifred’s eyes dilated. She shuddered slightly. “No, I am not cold,” she said, in response to Gilbert’s question. “Do you like Dr. Beard?”

“I am not prepossessed in his favour. Do you?”

“Gilbert, I can’t tell. Sometimes I do like him very much indeed; at other times he is positively hateful. I fluctuate between love and fear. But he has the most extraordinary influence over me. And yet, if I were told that I was never going to see his face again, I should be happy. He is not to know, Gilbert?”

“Most emphatically he is not to know,” Gilbert replied. “Don’t forget that.”

“I will try; but I am sure that the part will be difficult to play. And I don’t want to be separated from you any more, dearest. I feel so different when you are by my side—so strong, and courageous. And I have a feeling that when we are parted the old mist will close over my brain again, Gilbert. Cannot we go away together and be married? If you have to hide, I could hide with you, and—”

Gilbert smiled down on the pretty, pathetic, pleading face. It required moral courage to refuse, but the refusal had to be made all the same.

“It is out of the question, darling,” he said. “I have my loyal friends to think of. And it will not be long before we are together again for all time—till death do us part. If you—”

Gilbert paused; a single tap on the window-pane of the cottage brought him tumbling headlong to earth again. Somebody was asking to be let in, and that somebody was not alone. Unless the ears of Gilbert deceived him, Marston was out there and Beard was along with him. It was Marston who asked to be let in, and this Gilbert rightly took as a signal to keep out of the way. To meet Beard at this juncture would be a cruel misfortune, and the deathblow to Gilbert’s fondest hopes.

“Sit where you are,” Gilbert whispered. “A search party is looking for you outside. I feel quite sure that Bernard Beard is with them. And he must not see me. I am going to wake up Anna to open the door. Be true and silent!”

Winifred’s face turned deadly white, and though she nodded bravely, the old listless look was creeping over her face again. Gilbert noticed it, with a certain feeling of guilty regret. Still, he would effect a permanent cure when the time came. The great thing for the moment was to baffle Bernard Beard.

As Gilbert made his way into the attic bedroom, he could hear Marston pretending to try the door. As a matter of fact, the door was not locked, and Gilbert accepted this as a hint that danger was near. He shook the old woman in bed, and she sat up rubbing her eyes. In a few hurried words Gilbert explained matters. The brave nurse rose to the situation.

“Two minutes,” she said. “Give me two minutes, and I shall be ready for them, dearies. Now you go to your bed-room, and wait there till they have gone.”

The visitors outside were getting impatient, as the rattling of the door testified. Then the door was thrown open, with a great pushing of latch, and an irate old woman, with a dressing-gown over her head, wanted to know what they wanted at this time of night.

Marston explained. As a matter of fact, he had been led away by a phantom, and only reached the cottage again as Beard came up with a section of his search party. The light in the cottage window had attracted his attention. It was just possible that Winifred had seen it also, and had asked for a night’s shelter.

“Making all this fuss about nothing!” old Anna grumbled. “A young lady? Certainly I’ve got a young lady here. She lost her way, and she’s sitting by the fire. Nothing the worse for her tramp, I hope. And she’s had something to eat into the bargain.”

Beard pushed by the speaker into the sitting-room. His anger disappeared, he assumed his softest and most amiable expression as his eyes rested on the girl.

“My poor child, you have given us a fright!” he said. “Why did you do it?” Winifred shrugged her shoulders listlessly. She seemed to have fallen back into

the grey, hard woman again; the mist was enveloping her again. And yet she had appeared to remember the warning that Gilbert had given her—she was to say very little to anybody, and, least of all, to Bernard Beard.

"Did anybody bring you here?" he asked. "Did you see any strangers?—a tall man, with a clever, stern face, and the accent of an American?"

Winifred shrugged her shoulders again. She was understood to say that she had not seen anybody of the kind. Beard bent over her tenderly, and laid a finger on her pulse. It was beating furiously, as well it might. But Beard, being innocent of the cause, grew grave.

"She is not well," he said. "I should not wonder if this produced a grave illness. Old lady, could you find a bed here for my young friend to-night?"

"Yes," Anna replied promptly. "And right glad to be of any service to the young lady—God bless her!"

Chapter XXXII

Gilbert Speaks.

The news of the finding of Winifred spread like wildfire. It seemed to reach those others searching the wood and the moors by a species of mental telegraphy. It was known in the woods a few minutes later, and the shouts of the seekers reached the strained ears of those on the moors. As if by magic a crowd gathered round the cottage. Prominent amongst them were the Delameres.

"No occasion to go inside," Marston said. "I found the young lady some time ago, but she gave me the slip. The light of the cottage window attracted her, I suppose, and she obtained shelter there. No, she is not much the worse, but Dr. Beard deems it prudent to keep her here for the night."

The willing, eager band of searchers broke into a cheer. They were all tired and weary, but they had given their services generously, and were gratified their efforts had been crowned with success. They began to melt away immediately so that the woods were soon quiet again.

It was only the two Delameres who pushed their way into the cottage. By this time the sitting-room was empty, for Winifred had been conveyed to Gilbert's room by old Anna. She stoutly refused to have any assistance; Dr. Beard could come in and see his patient when she was safely in bed, but not before. As a mutter of fact, the quick-witted old woman had seen things of Gilbert's littered about that would have to be removed before Beard could be admitted into the room.

Everything was done, and at length Beard came into the sitting-room with the intimation that his patient was going on well. She was asleep already, and was likely to be herself in a day or two. Meanwhile she would be best where she was.

"I'm sure we can trust the old woman," David Delamere said. "She has honesty written all over her homely face. Shall we get back, doctor?"

Beard nodded moodily. He was not pleased with, the turn of affairs. And, moreover, he was dismayed to find that he was so entirely in the hands of the

Virginians. They had a cool, commanding way about them that he secretly dreaded.

"We had better," he said. "All's well that ends well. We have earned our night's rest, I fancy."

"Well, well, most of the mischief has been your doing," the younger Delamere said drily. "If you had been less cunning there had been no occasion for all this anxiety. Still, you are not likely to spirit the young lady away again. We can wait our time now. Have a cigar?"

Beard refused the offer curtly. In other circumstances he would have felt himself quite a match for the Americans, and have preferred to fight them with their own weapons. But he had an uneasy feeling now that things were closing in around him. He was silent and sullen all the way home; he stood before the hall fire warming himself, with a deep frown on his face. Mary was downstairs fully dressed, but looking wan and anxious.

"Is—is there any news?" she faltered. "Or have you—"

"Succeeded," Beard said curtly. "The lost one has been found. She is quite safe at old Anna's cottage. I think that's what they call the woman. She was little the worse for her adventure, and you will find her fairly well in the morning. Any of the servants up? All gone to bed? I hope there is something in the dining-room for us."

That had been thought of, for Flora Cameron was in the dining-room superintending the laying-out of the supper-table. Nothing was lacking when the men entered.

"You must be dreadfully in want of food," said Flora, "and I am sure you have earned it. Dr. Beard, there is a telegram in the study for you. It came by special messenger from Longtown. It is in the library."

Beard growled out his thanks for the information. He was in a dark mood to-night. The presence of the Virginians seemed to bear him down. They were so polite, so cool, so sure of their ground. The telegram could wait; it was pretty sure to contain some bad news, and perhaps after a good meal he would feel himself again. It was even as Beard imagined. As he ate of the good food and partook sparingly of the generous wine, his courage and resolution came back to him. With a coolness equal to that of the Virginians, he suggested a cigar in the library. He puffed luxuriously at his as he took the telegram from the mantel-shelf and leisurely opened it.

The expression of his face changed, he clicked his teeth snarlingly together. The flimsy was crushed in his right hand with passionate force. Evidently something exceedingly disturbing had happened. He turned his face from his guests, conscious of the fact that they were watching him. He did not desire that they should see his face for the moment.

"I have to go to London at once," he said. "You may stay here if you like as my guests."

"For to-night, at any rate," David Delamere said coldly, "as it is impossible for us to go elsewhere. To-morrow we could easily obtain lodgings at one of the farmhouses handy."

"There is no train for London to-night," the other said.

"Then I must have a special," Beard said hoarsely. He was pacing up and down the room with an agitation he could not conceal. "Something has gone wrong, one

of my schemes that I was fool enough to entrust to another. There is no help for it, I must get to Longtown without delay. Make yourselves comfortable, please."

The Virginians nodded. They did not appear in the least curious as Beard left the room and proceeded to knock up one of the grooms. A few minutes later and the clatter of the horses' hoofs on the hard ground died away along the drive.

David Delamere lay back in his chair and flicked the ash of his cigar into the old brass fender. He looked quite satisfied with himself; he would have been hard to please if he had not been equally satisfied with his surroundings. His alertness was only noticed by his glittering eyes.

"If anybody read all this in a story it would not be believed," he said. "And yet stranger things happen every day, as a casual glance at the papers tells one. Here we are settled down in the house of the man we are pledged to destroy—"

"No, no," said the other one. "Remember, we have given our promise on that score. There is a great deal in what Drummond said the other day, and I was struck with it. We can deal Beard a more crushing blow than that if his story is true."

"Ay, and if it is false also," David Delamere said, with a stern ring in his voice. "We have that fellow in the hollow of our hand, brother. And yet we hesitate. This is a fine old place, the very mention of the word violence is an outrage here; we are being entertained by two of the noblest women I have ever met. For their sakes we must be careful. I never dreamt of such hospitality as this. What say you?"

"Say that we should take advantage of the good fortune that favours us. Beard has gone away. It must have been some desperate thing that induced him to go off like this, leaving us masters of the place even for a little time. To-morrow we see that girl, and if she is sufficiently recovered to receive us we ascertain if Beard's story is true."

The listener nodded emphatically. He had been thinking of the same plan.

Then for a long time they talked in little above a whisper.

The news that Beard had been called away the night before on important business was received with a certain amount of relief by the Moat House party at breakfast time. Sybil had come over to see if the good news was true. She had only to look at the smiling faces of Flora and Mary to know that it was. The former was puzzled, and at the same time vaguely alarmed.

"I hope that this strange train of events has not brought trouble to Gilbert Doyle," Sybil said anxiously. "I thought of him directly I heard where poor Winifred was found. Anna's cottage is a very small one, and she has only two bedrooms. Marston found Winifred, I hear, and Dr. Beard was with him at the time. Then, where was Gilbert Doyle?"

"That we cannot tell you," Flora explained. "Winifred must have been attracted by the light in the window of the cottage. I am pretty sure that Mr. Doyle was reading by the lamp, for old Anna goes to bed about 8 o'clock. It is quite evident, therefore, that there was a meeting between Winifred and Gilbert Doyle, which was interrupted by Marston and Dr. Beard. Mr. Doyle may have managed to escape by the bedroom window, but the evidence of a stranger's presence would not escape the sharp eyes of Dr. Beard. If his suspicions were aroused he would say nothing at the time, but he would drop a note to the authorities advising them to pay a

visit to Anna's cottage, especially as he has known for some time that the escaped convict was Gilbert Doyle."

"Did he write a letter or note before he went away?" Mary asked.

"He had very little time," Flora explained. "I'll go to the library and see."

Flora came back looking disturbed. A hastily-written letter already stamped and sealed lay on Beard's desk. And the letter was addressed to the governor of Greystone Prison.

"It is, perhaps, a wrong thing to do," she said. "But this letter must not be posted. Its delivery would be no less than a catastrophe. I will slip it in the blotting pad."

The letter was placed in the blotting pad, and then left there as if it had been overlooked by some careless servant. Beard was in the habit of leaving his correspondence for one of the footmen to post; naturally he had assumed that a letter of his to the governor of Greystone would excite no comment.

Flora and Mary decided to go and see Winifred at once. They would be the more free to talk now that Beard was away.

But the Virginian's had preceded them. And Marston, by a good hour, had preceded the two Americans. Marston found Gilbert at his breakfast. Winifred was not awake yet; the old woman said she had had a splendid night's rest, and seemed quite cool and normal.

"It's a pretty case altogether," Marston said, as he took a seat. "Very strange that Miss Cawdor should have chosen to come here, of all places. It was foolish of you not to put out the lamp. Beard as nearly as possible had you. I came upon him just in time to prevent the catastrophe. He had his hand on the latch when I took it and pretended that it was locked. I felt pretty sure when I saw that you had not gone to bed that Miss Cawdor had come here. I'm glad you took my hint and got the old woman up."

"You see, I knew the door was not locked, and that aroused my suspicions directly I heard that you had a companion outside," Gilbert said. "It was lucky for me that old Anna took in the situation so quickly. I got through my bedroom window into the garden and returned by the door when you had all gone. Of course, Beard had no suspicions."

"I'm very much afraid that he had," Marston said grimly. "You were reading a volume of Tennyson's poems when Miss Cawdor came in. It was open with the face to the table as we entered. Your tweed cap was hanging on a peg behind the door. You forgot all about that when you made a bolt for it through your bedroom window. But I saw Beard's eyes on the Tennyson, I saw him look at the cap. He said nothing—for he seldom gives himself away—but he is a man very smart at deduction, and he knows the name of the person who got away from Greystone. Before night I must find you another retreat. I expect you are safe so long as Miss Cawdor is here, but I expect she will be removed in the course of the afternoon."

"I'll do anything you desire," Gilbert said. "It is very good of you to—"

But Marston cut the speaker short. He was off to scheme something out for Gilbert before the latter could finish his thanks. Almost in the same moment the door of the bedroom opened and Winifred came in. Her pretty face flushed, her eyes grew soft and tender.

“I am fully as well to-day,” she said. “A little stiff and sore, but bright and clear, Gilbert, you must not stay here, it is dangerous for you. If Dr. Beard returns—”

Gilbert explained that Beard was out of the way for a time. Presently Mary and Flora would come to the cottage, but there was nothing to fear from anybody else. Gilbert refrained from saying anything about Marston’s recent visit, and he was going to make the most of his opportunities with Winifred. Old Anna came in presently, bonneted and cloaked, with the intimation that she was going to the village, but would not be long. Familiarity with danger breeds contempt; for Gilbert did not lock the door; neither did he and Winifred hear the tapping of somebody outside. They were too engrossed in each other for that.

Winifred looked up presently and gave a little cry. Two strangers were standing gravely in the room. Gilbert guessed who they were.

“We are sorry to intrude,” the latter said; “but if you are Miss Winifred Beard, why, we should be greatly obliged if—”

“There is some mistake here,” Gilbert said. He was discovered now, so there was no reason why he should not speak. “If Beard has told you that Miss Winifred Cawdor is related to him he has told you a falsehood. I assure you that she is no relation of his at all. I can produce the most positive evidence of that, not a mile from here.”

“And if it is not a rude question, sir,” David Delamere asked, “who are you?”

“You have heard my story,” Gilbert replied. “It has been told in the news-papers. Possibly you may have heard of the man who was to marry Winifred Cawdor. The man was arrested on his wedding morning and convicted on a charge of stealing bonds. Some time ago that man escaped from prison, and has not been recaptured. Need I say more?”

“You have not told me the name of the gentleman in question,” Delamere replied.

“Indeed!” Gilbert said coldly. “His name was Gilbert Doyle. And I am the man!”

Chapter XXXIII

Face To Face.

Gilbert had spoken on the spur of the moment. Why, he could not tell, save that there was something in the look of the two, men that he liked. And they did not shrink from him now. On the contrary, they regarded him with sympathy. He made rather a striking picture too, standing with his head thrown back, a look of defiance on his face. Winifred had crossed to the side of her lover, and her arm was drawn affectionately through his. David Delamere permitted himself a grim smile.

“You are a lucky man!” he said. “I guess that things went badly for you. You don’t look like a man who is guilty of a crime.”

“Nor am I,” Gilbert said. “I am as innocent as either of you two gentlemen. I was the victim of a vile conspiracy, and Bernard Beard was at the bottom of it. I did not find that out until I broke prison.”

“Are you quite sure?” David Delamere asked. He seemed to do most of the talking. His brother stood by, following the conversation intently.

“Are you sure of your facts?”

“Yes. At first I could not understand why anyone should serve me so vilely—what they could have to gain by fastening the guilt on me.”

“It gives the guilty parties considerable immunity,” Delamere suggested drily.

“Yes; that is not everything. The culprits had the stolen property. They might have spared themselves the trouble of letting me carry off five thousand pounds of the spoils. You may say that that was a deep and cunning part of the plan, and perhaps it was. But those people were playing at something very different to throwing the blame on my shoulders. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the thief who carried out the robbery was Madame Regnier. You know her; indeed, I understand she comes from the States.”

“She does,” Delamere admitted; “though it is hard to see how you know that.”

“I do know it, and will explain presently,” Gilbert went on. “It was Madame Regnier who stole the bonds and laid the trap for me. That has always been plain. What I have found since my escape is the name of the man who planned the thing out. I knew him on board ship as Dr. Comperton. When I met Beard I recognised Compertan at once. To make the thing quite plain, Beard was a friend of the Cawdor family. He never appeared whilst I was in their house. He could not do that, as I should have recognised my acquaintance at once. It was he who planned my ruin.”

“I begin to understand,” Delamere said thoughtfully. “Why did he do that?”

“To get me out of the way. I stand between him and his schemes, because I was going to marry little Winifred here. Once the marriage was solemnised Winifred would have marched out of that scoundrel’s sphere of action. He could no longer pass Winifred off as his daughter. At any rate, that is what you imagined. After the death of Mr. Cawdor, Winifred came down to the Moat House, and then deception was far easier.”

“I see—I see,” Delamere murmured. “Everything is getting plain. Beard suspected that we were keeping an eye on him; hence the present friction. But are you quite sure that this young lady is not Miss Winifred Beard, after all?”

“When you have seen her side by side with her sister, you will not have any doubt,” Gilbert went on. “Besides, I have another authority to prove how you were deceived in New York. When you found your sister, she knew that you must kill her husband at sight. You were not likely to be less determined on that score after, you discovered that she had been abandoned by Beard. It is a strange thing that the greater rascal a man is, the closer does a woman cling to him. That was the case with your sister. To protect her husband from your vengeance, she made up the story of the child. She borrowed a little one from her friend Mrs. Cawdor to make the deception perfect. But surely you know this?”

“We suspected it,” Delamere said. “My sister made a half confession before she died. But we honestly regarded the child as hers, even though she intimated to us that Beard had come and taken the baby away with him. But our suspicions were

aroused on her deathbed. She meant to tell us everything, but there was no time. But we should like to know where you discovered all this.

"It does seem strange that I should know so much," Gilbert said, "more, even, than you yourself, though I am a perfect stranger to you. I had the story in detail from a man named James Marston, who lives not far from here."

The Virginians exchanged glances. It was evident the name was familiar.

"That explains everything," David Delamere went on. "Of course, we know Mr. Marston. He came out South with Beard. Indeed, his presence was necessary to the successful plot that ended in the marriage of our unhappy sister. When our blood was hot, and the sense of injury strong upon us, we should have killed James Marston as ruthlessly as we should have killed Bernard Beard. But the lapse of twenty years makes a deal of difference. There are other and innocent lives entangled in the tragedy, and we should hesitate to cast a shadow there. But we have a punishment for Beard—oh, yes, we have a punishment for him!"

The speaker's eyes burned, and his voice grew stern as he spoke of Beard. The brother turned to Gilbert.

"We should like to have a talk with Marston," he said. "Is he far off?"

Gilbert explained he was quite near. There was a path through the woods leading to Marston's cottage, and he was willing to take the strangers there.

"But not if there is going to be any strife," he said. "If you mean harm to Marston—"

"Why should we?" David Delamere demanded. "If we spare the principal, why should we destroy the assistant? You speak as if the man was ill."

"He is slowly dying of a mortal disease," Gilbert explained. "He is suffering from cancer. He has not the deadly sweating terror of you displayed by Beard, on more than one occasion. In fact, he laughed at the idea of coming in contact with you. But for his little girl he would have welcomed death long ago. He does not drink, and he is too brave a man to end his days by his own hand. You would like to see him?"

"But there is a certain element of risk," Winifred suggested uneasily. "Do not go, Gilbert."

The Virginians watched the pretty solicitude with much admiration. Gilbert kissed the girl, and put her aside gently. There was really nothing to be afraid of.

"People will be continually coming to see you," he said. "There is more danger for me here than in the woods. And, in any case, I shall not be gone long."

The trio presently struck the woodland path that led to Marston's cottage. They strode in silence for some time before David Delamere spoke.

"You have all my wishes for your speedy release, sir," he said. "My heart fairly bleeds for that pretty girl and her troubles. I almost wish that she was Beard's daughter, though it is just as well, perhaps, that that scoundrel has no children."

"Then you are quite convinced of the truth of what I told you?" Gilbert said eagerly. "Mr. Delamere, I implore you not to do anything rash. There have been tragedies and miseries enough in Winifred's short life, without making her the central figure in another tragedy. Whatever happens, my little girl must be spared that."

"She shall," Delamere declared. "And you can reckon that my brother and myself will do our best to be the friends of both of you. We know a thing or two

about Madame Regnier, and if there is anybody who can make her speak, we are the men. Is this the cottage?"

Gilbert explained that it was. Marston was at home, smoking his pipe, and passing his few leisure moments in filling cartridge cases. A gun lay on the table, and Marston pointed to it grimly as his visitors entered.

"You've come just in time," he said. "There is the man, and there is the gun. When the whole thing comes to be told, it will make an exciting column or two for one of the yellow papers. And you can put emphasis on the fact that I died game."

"You don't seem to have lost any of your coolness," Delamere said gravely.

"I haven't. I never knew what nerves meant. But that is not the real reason why I am not the least, afraid of you. Mr. Doyle may have told you what I am suffering from. Look at my grey hair and the hollow lines in my face. That is pain, pain so fierce and grinding that it leaves me old and feeble after-wards. Anything calculated to end that pain would be release. If you shoot me now you would be doing me a great kindness."

The man was speaking the plain truth. Gilbert was surprised to see how kindly the two Virginians were regarding him.

"We have no quarrel with a dying man," Delamere said. "Indeed, we have changed our minds materially during the last few days. We did not come here with any murderous intent; we came to hear the truth—the truth about our sister's child."

"There was no sister's child," Marston said. "That was all part of the scheme. If you like, I can give you such information as will show you that Mrs. Cawdor's two girls were registered in New York—I mean registered after their birth. I think that will go a long way to give Beard's statement the lie."

The Virginians nodded; they wanted no further proofs. Marston took some papers from a little safe, and began to sort them. Gilbert moved to the door.

"I don't think I will intrude longer," he said. "After all, this is no business of mine, and I want to get back to the cottage. Is there anything else that I can do?"

But there was nothing else for Gilbert to do for the present. They were infinitely obliged to him; they would come back presently and discuss Madame Regnier with a view of finding out means to make that lady tell the true story of the stolen bonds. But, first of all, it was necessary to have proofs whereby Beard's story might be nailed to the counter.

"Then I shall look for you later in the afternoon," Gilbert said. "Only be cautious, please."

He closed the cottage door, and made his way into the woods. Nobody was about; it was not likely he would meet anybody but a stray keeper or two, for the woodland path led to nowhere, and it was dark and dreary at this time of the year.

Nevertheless, Gilbert did not abate a jot of his caution, he was prepared at any moment to dart into cover if he saw anybody coming. Therefore he was all the more surprised, on turning into a thick ride, to find Winifred meeting him.

She was looking quite pale and anxious, and the old terror was still upon her. Gilbert's heart smote against his ribs despairingly. He had hoped that the shock of seeing him again had resulted in a permanent cure, and yet here she was, looking wild and anxious and hunted. He came close to her before she was aware of his presence.

“My darling, what is the matter?” Gilbert whispered. Winifred held up her hands with a gesture commanding silence. Her eyes were misty and far away. Poor Winifred’s cure was going to be a slow one.

“Hush,” she said. “I have seen them. They have come to drag you back to prison.”

Gilbert passed his hand over the girl’s eyes and kissed her. He held her to him till she could see nothing, and feel nothing but the beating of his heart.

“Now you are to collect yourself,” he said. “If there is any danger that is all the more reason why you are to try to restrain your feelings. What is it, little one?”.

“It’s all right now, Gilbert,” the girl said in quite another voice. “I got frightened and lost my head. A little thing seems to upset me still. I shall never be myself until all this trouble is chased away, and I can have you by my side always. As soon as I see the man, everything becomes misty and confused. Directly I feel your arms about me, I am different.”

The girl lay there quietly for a minute or two, and Gilbert deemed it prudent to be silent. When at length Winifred looked up, her face was flushed again, and her eyes clear as the reflection of stars in a silent pool. Her lips had ceased to tremble.

“A man came to the cottage,” she said. “He had come on some errand. He made an excuse that struck me as suspicious. He looked so like a policeman in his best clothes that I divined by instinct that he had come after you. I said that I was a visitor, and knew nothing, and so he went away again. And he turned into the wood instead of keeping to the path. Do you suppose that Bernard Beard saw anything last night?”

Gilbert declared stoutly that Beard could have done nothing of the kind. He decided to say nothing about the tweed cap and the open volume of Tennyson to which Marston had made allusion. All the same, he knew he had been detected.

“Your nerves are playing you sad tricks,” Gilbert smiled. “But I will find a new hiding-place, if it makes you easier in your mind.”

“Oh, do, do!” Winifred cried eagerly, “I could not bear the idea of your being taken back to that horrid place, to be treated like a dog, and you innocent all the time. I should dream of you all night. I have a feeling that your freedom is at hand. Events have marched so fast since you were free—slowly so long as you were in that place. Gilbert, for my sake, you will not stay at the cottage any longer.”

Gilbert kissed the pretty, pleading lips; he would have promised anything to take the pitiful expression out of that dear face.

“All right, darling,” he said. “I’ll go back to Marston and take his advice. You return to the cottage.”

Chapter XXXIV

The Jewel Case.

Gilbert walked slowly back to Marston, hoping that Winifred was suffering from nothing worse than a bad attack of “nerves.” At the same time, her description of

the visitor savoured strongly of a warder in plain clothes. And why had they not taken the proper path back to the road again? The visit to the cottage might only have been a kind of routine inspection of the district; but, on the other hand, it was more than possible that Beard's suspicions had been aroused, and he had dropped a line to the authorities, suggesting a visit to Anna's cottage.

When Gilbert reached Marston's cottage, he found the Virginians still there. If they had come on an hostile errand, there was no evidence to show it now, for the three men were smoking cigarettes amicably. A litter of papers covered the table.

"Not quite sure that you can trust me, eh?" David Delamere asked.

"It is not so much that as to whether or not I can trust myself," Gilbert explained. "It appears that a suspicious visitor has been at the cottage in my absence. Winifred met me on the edge of the wood in a great state of mind. She declares that the man was a disguised policeman. So I came back here with the idea of changing my hiding-place."

"I should not be in the least surprised to find that the young lady's deductions were correct," said Marston, smoking thoughtfully. "Don't forgot that Beard was at the cottage last night; don't forget that he must have seen the open volume of Tennyson and the tweed cap. Relatives and friends of old Anna's do not read Tennyson. And if Beard had seen anything his quick mind would have come to a logical conclusion. On the whole, I should advise you to change your quarters."

The two Virginians were of the same opinion. It was David who spoke, as usual.

"You must not go back there," he said. "There may be other suspicious visitors in the course of the day. But there is one thing you have forgotten that may lead to trouble for the owner of the cottage."

"What is that?" asked Gilbert "I am sure that old Anna—"

"Will be prepared to do anything for you and perjure herself on your behalf. And that is just the way that the old lady will get herself into trouble. If those people come with a search warrant, they will find your clothes and belongings there, and will know you have been hiding in the district all the time. How can old Anna account for those things being there?"

"I had never thought of that," Gilbert said blankly. "Why, that would be almost as bad as if I had left a message at the cottage saying that I had been there. What is to be done?"

"Quite simple," Delamere went on. "I'll go and collect everything, and hide them."

"And perhaps be watched by some warder hanging about the road," Marston exclaimed. "Your being a stranger will alone be suspicious. Whereas, if one of the ladies goes down, she will be merely regarded as a visitor anxious as to the welfare of Miss Cawdor. You may be sure the authorities know all about the missing young lady, and that she is located at old Anna's cottage. Now suppose I get my little Jessie to run up to the Moat House and ask Miss Cameron to come here at once? She would do it."

The suggestion was far better than the crude idea mooted by David Delamere. Jessie came in presently in response to her father's call. Her eyes sparkled with delight when she heard where she was to go.

"And you are to see Miss Cameron yourself," Marston said. "If you don't find her in, find out where she has gone. You are not to give the message to anybody else. And see how quickly you will be back again."

"Am I to say that it is very important?" Jessie asked.

"Well, you can say that if you like. But get along, now, and be back as soon as possible."

In a little over half an hour Flora reached the cottage. She was heated and flushed, but her face became a deeper pink as she saw the Virginians seated there. She was not quite sure whether these were friends or foes. In his quick, yet grave, way, David Delamere seemed to read the thought on Flora's face.

"You can speak quite plainly before us," he said. "In this business we are emphatically on the side of the angels. We came this long journey with other ideas and intentions, but we have decided to do nothing so far as our interests are concerned, until a cruel injustice is righted. After that, we shall have our method of dealing with Bernard Beard. For the present, we are far more concerned with the safety of Mr. Gilbert Doyle."

"So you know all about him?" Flora exclaimed, her face lighting up. "Is that so, Mr. Marston?"

"That is so," Marston said grimly. "In fact, these gentlemen know everything."

"Then I gather that Mr. Doyle is in some danger?" Flora asked.

"He is. The suspicions of the authorities have been aroused. Somebody has dropped a hint. Anyway, a disguised warder called there just now, and Miss Cawdor came down to the door to meet Mr. Doyle. Fortunately he had come here to show these gentlemen the way. I expect that Mr. Bernard Beard is at the bottom of it."

"But that is impossible!" Flora cried. "Not that he didn't know. I am sure he suspected. But he was called away last night by pressing business to London. I had an uneasy idea that he knew something, and I looked on his writing table, where he leaves his letters for the servants to post. Sure enough, there was one letter addressed to the governor of Greystone Prison. I did not think it right to open the letter, but have concealed it in the blotting-pad, so that it would look as if it had been pushed aside carelessly. I hate this sort of thing, but it seemed necessary."

"We are often led to choose strange weapons," Delamere remarked. "But there is no time for discussion. I suggested going down to the cottage, and making away with all Mr. Doyle's belongings, so that old Anna would not get into any trouble. But Marston says my presence, being a stranger, would be still more suspicious. He thinks that if you were to go—quite naturally—that you—"

"That I could do the thing much better," Flora exclaimed. "So I could. We must move carefully now, or all our delicately-laid plans may fail. We will hide nothing. I will go to the cottage at once and burn everything."

The happy idea was applauded. Flora stayed for one moment, and then hurried off to Anna's cottage. She found Winifred there, once more a prey to the deepest agitation and distress. Nobody else had visited the cottage, and old Anna had not yet come back from the village; but all that mattered nothing. Was Gilbert safe? Were those people likely to take him again?

“They are not in the least likely to do anything of the kind, you poor, dear girl!” Flora said, kissing her tenderly. “Gilbert is quite safe, and sends you his love. And now let us make a collection of his things and destroy them. You understand why?”

“Of course I do,” Winifred said, smiling again. Directly she had something to occupy her mind she grew better. “It is that those people shall find nothing. We will make up a fire in that big open grate, and destroy all there is.”

The collection was soon made. It looked very insignificant on the huge wood fire. There were no clothes to destroy, as Gilbert only had the suit that George Drummond had lent him. In a few minutes everything was reduced to ashes.

“Now we will just wait till Anna comes back, and then you are going to walk back with me as far as the Moat House,” Flora decided cheerfully. “Can you manage that? And you are not to worry over Gilbert in the least. He will be all right.”

Anna came in presently, and the story of the mornings alarm was told her. She was not disturbed or frightened. She was a match for any warder, she declared. And, on the whole, just now she preferred Miss Winifred’s room to her company. She was too likely to forget herself if any fresh, suspicious-looking visitors arrived.

“Oh, yes, yes!” Winifred cried. “Let us get away from here! I should never forgive myself if I did anything likely to harm Gilbert. Let us go at once, Flora.”

It was a slow journey, for Winifred was not so strong as she had deemed herself, and more than one halt was called on the way to the Moat House. But the journey was completed at last, and Winifred handed over to the tender care of her sister. Flora noticed how pale and drawn the girl had grown. She clung, as if to something precious, to the shabby jewel-case, without which she never went far.

“I’ll take care of that wonderful red box of yours,” Flora declared. “The first thing you must do is to get to bed and stay there the rest of the day.”

Winifred, raised no objection. She was tired, she said, and the idea of bed was very grateful. Her weary eyes closed almost before her head was on the pillow, and a minute later she was sleeping as peacefully as a child.

“She’ll do for some hours to come,” Flora whispered to Mary. “When she wakes up, I fancy you will find that she is quite herself. The great thing is to keep her out of Dr. Beard’s way, and to see that she is not alone with him. If she does, she is sure to betray that Gilbert is close at hand.”

“There is no danger of that for a day or two,” Mary replied. “A telegram came from Dr. Beard when you were out, saying that he was likely to be detained in London till Saturday, and that somebody was to pack a portmanteau for him, and send it, to be called for at Charing Cross Station. Something is wrong, Flora. Anyway, he does not want us to know his London address.”

“Well, we are not curious,” Flora laughed cheerfully. “It is a relief to know that Winifred is likely to be spared for a day or two.”

Down in the hall the Virginians were standing discussing affairs in a low tone. Mrs. Cameron was still in her room nursing her cold. She had not been down-stairs for two days. David Delamere came from the fireside as Flora entered.

“We understand that Beard is not coming back for a day or two,” he said. “In circumstances like these, we feel that we ought not to intrude on your hospitality any longer, Miss Cameron—not that we are going to leave the neighbourhood. We

are too interested in the affair for that. We have taken rooms at a farm-house by the river, and our man has gone to Longtown for our traps. And, if you want any assistance, you can rely upon us?"

"I am sure you are very good," Flora said. "Why do you take such an interest in us?"

"Well, it's like this," Delamere said, a little awkwardly, Flora thought. "You must not forget that for years we have regarded Miss Winifred Cawdor as being the daughter of our sister Ada. It was because we deemed Ada to be the mother of a child that we spared Beard. We thought that he had taken the child with him, and we left it at that. And Ada seemed to be resigned—anything so long as no harm came to Beard; for she loved that scoundrel to the end of her life. It was only when she was dying that she partly told us the truth. We came here to test that truth, and Beard told us, like the perjured rascal that he is, that she was his child. But, unhappily for the success of his scheme, Marston was near to tell the proper story, and we know that Miss Winifred Cawdor is Miss Cawdor and not Miss Beard."

"She is a dear, good girl, anyway," Flora said warmly.

"She is. We saw her to-day; and we saw Mr. Gilbert Doyle also, and heard his story, and he is an innocent man, if ever there was one. We could not but be interested in the girl, although she did not prove to be our own flesh and blood. And when we listened to her pitiful romance, we made up our minds to help her—didn't we, Stephen?"

"We made up our minds to help her even without consulting each other," Stephen Delamere said. He had wandered over to the side-table where Flora had laid the shabby red jewel-case, and had taken it in his hand.

"Now, I wonder how this came here? It used to belong to Ada. Perhaps she gave it to the little one, or perhaps Beard gave it to Miss Cawdor. Anyway, Ada used to have this on her dressing-table as a child."

"Are you quite sure that it is the same one?" Flora asked.

"Perfectly sure," Stephen Delamere declared. "There is a way of opening it without the key for anybody who knows the secret. If my way fails, then I was wrong. Miss Cameron, will you see if you can open the box? It is not so very complicated."

Flora avowed her willingness to try, but she could not succeed. The box was better made than the shabby leather would lead anybody to believe. She passed the case over to Stephen Delamere, who placed both hands on the lid and pressed down the little and fourth finger. In an instant the lid of the box flew open, and disclosed a mass of carefully folded papers inside. They had seals upon them, and a heavy scroll heading. They crackled to the touch.

"These look like legal papers of some kind," Delamere said, as he opened one of the documents, and laid it open on the table "They are legal documents. Good heavens!"

The speaker staggered back, his eyes dilated, his lips quivering.

"Bonds!" he said hoarsely, "railway bonds of great value! Negotiable, too! Great Pacific Railway! Why, these are the bonds missing from the Southern Star, the very bonds that Gilbert Doyle was sent to gaol for stealing!"

Chapter XXXV

The Missing Bonds.

The listeners trembled as they watched Delamere turning the papers over in his hand. If he was right, then a great discovery had been made. But it was open to doubt whether or not these were actually the papers for which Gilbert Doyle had suffered so much.

"There is no shadow of doubt about it," Delamere said presently. "I remember all about the Southern Star affair, because a friend of mine was more or less concerned in it; in fact, some of the stolen property belonged to him—Banbury shares, and so on. The question is, how did the papers get into that box, and why did Miss Winifred Cawdor take such care of it?"

Nobody was in a position to answer the question. It was Flora who spoke at length.

"I don't think Winifred could have had them," she said. "She could not have known the value of that box. She had a great fondness for it; she seemed to regard it as much as a child regards a favourite doll. But that I put down to a weak intellect."

"I should say, rather, it was some reminiscence of a bygone caution," said Delamere. "What I mean is, that when she was well she was told to take great care of those papers, and that when her illness came upon her she forgot where she had put them. I feel that the papers were given to Miss Cawdor by Beard on some pressing occasion, and that he has been trying to find out what she has done with them ever since. That would account for his tender solicitude over the poor child's welfare. We can see, at any rate."

"You have some scheme in your mind?" Flora asked.

"Well, yes," Delamere responded. "I have. When Miss Winifred has had her sleep out, I should like to talk to her. Whether she aids us or not, I can see my way to lay a very pretty trap for Beard. Only, one thing I must impress upon you all—Miss Winifred must not get the slightest idea of the value of the papers."

Both Flora and Mary could follow Delamere's reasoning. From the expression of her face, Mary was thinking more about the happiness of her sister than anything else.

"Do you think that the truth is going to come out?" she asked eagerly. "That the guilt will be traced to the proper people? If so, Gilbert will be free."

"Gilbert Doyle is going to be free," Delamere said, with a slow ring in his voice. "Let us hope that there are many, many, happy years before your sister yet. Providence is fighting on our side; the wrong is going to be righted, and the guilty punished. We are merely instruments in the hands of a higher Power. Who can doubt it, after the wonderful way in which the red box came under our notice? We were led to come over here, if only to identify that jewel-case. The rest was all part of the scheme. But we can do nothing till Miss Winifred wakes."

As a matter of fact, there was little to be done when Winifred did awake. She was greatly refreshed; she professed that her head was clearer than it had been for

a long time, but she could not give Delamere much assistance. She seemed delighted to hear that the way of opening the box had been discovered.

"I have lost the secret," she said. "I have had that box for ages. I don't know why I was so fond of it, except that nobody could open it but myself. Then I forgot how to work the spring. I forgot nearly everything after my illness. I seem to have some misty idea that I had to take care of something, and that I had that something in the box. I have that feeling upon me now. And yet I have not the remotest idea what it was."

Delamere produced one of the missing bonds. It was rather an attractive-looking document, with its seal and its small lettering. A gleam of recognition came into Winifred's blue eyes.

"Now, do you know, that looks quite familiar," she said. "And yet, in some undefined way, it is mixed up with the box. Let me think. Now, why does that paper remind me of a lunch at the Alexandra Restaurant and red flowers on the table? We had lobster cutlets, and Dr. Beard insisted upon my taking a glass of something. There was a waiter with something the matter with his left eye. Mr. Delamere! Mr. Delamere!"

Winifred uttered the name in a low tone. She was quite agitated.

"It is as if something had split in my brain and shown me a set of pictures," she said. "The luncheon I spoke of was no dream. I met Dr. Beard in Oxford street that morning by accident. I was shopping, getting ready for my wedding. I recollect that Dr. Beard was disturbed about something; he did not seem in the least like himself. When we sat down to lunch a man took his seat at a little table opposite us. He seemed to be interested in our movements, and in some vague way it seemed to me that Dr. Beard was afraid of the stranger. Somebody spoke to the stranger, and he left his luncheon and went out for a moment."

"And in that moment Dr. Beard gave you something to take care of?" Delamere suggested.

"That is quite right. Mr. Delamere!"

Winifred exclaimed. "How clever of you to guess it!"

Delamere exchanged glances with the others. So far, his theory was working out with the most gratifying results. The stranger was a detective, and Beard had reason to be afraid of him.

"I am not in the least clever," Delamere said gravely. "Beard gave you something!"

"Yes; a packet of papers. They were folded so that I could read the outside of one of them. And the outside was exactly like the papers you have just shown me. That is why the whole recollection has come back to me. The doctor handed me the papers with instructions to place them in the pocket of my jacket, and I did so. He said that I was to place them in some safe spot, and that he would call for them that evening at our house."

"Did the stranger you have spoken of come back again? Delamere asked.

"Oh, yes! He was not away more than a minute altogether. He returned and finished his lunch. He left the restaurant at the same time that we did, and the doctor put me in a cab."

"Did Beard seem easier in his mind after he had parted with the papers?" Delamere asked.

“Well, yes,” Winifred said. “Now you come to mention it, he did. Really, it is quite clever of me to remember all these details.”

Winifred talked with the easy abandon of a child. Not for a moment did she realise the tremendous importance of the occasion. She did not seem to realise what her story meant. But to Delamere and the others it was quite plain. Beard had those stolen bonds in his pocket. He had recognised the detective, and naturally concluded that he was the quarry the police were after. Hence his disposal of the bonds. They would be quite safe in the possession of Winifred for an hour or two. She would not have the slightest idea of their value, and had promised not to say anything about them.

“After that, I suppose you went home?” Delamere asked. “You went home, and probably deposited the papers in your little red box? Shall we take that for granted, Miss Winifred?”

“I suppose we shall have to,” Winifred smiled, “seeing that we have discovered the papers in the box. But I can assure you that I have not the faintest recollection of having placed them there. I am quite confused and misty on that point.”

“Then we will try to enlighten you,” Delamere said. “What I want to know is, why did not Dr. Beard come round the same evening and take them back?”

“That is the simplest question you have yet asked me,” Winifred smiled. “When I reached home, there was a little surprise in store for me. Gilbert and Mary were there, and they had planned a week’s excursion to Hastings. We were to go by train that evening. I was so delighted that I forgot all about the doctor and his papers. We went away that evening, and stayed for eight days. Dr. Beard did not come near us.”

Delamere nodded thoughtfully. He knew perfectly well why Beard had not gone to Hastings; it was because Gilbert Doyle was there. It seemed strange to the Virginian that Mary and Winifred should never have noted how completely Beard avoided Gilbert Doyle. There was a good reason for this, as everybody knew except the innocent victim. At that moment it was imperative that Beard should run no kind of risk.

“Then you did not see Dr. Beard again till your wedding morning?” Delamere asked.

“No; I would rather not speak of that time, please. After that my mind was absolutely a blank. I do not even want to think of it. It was so dreary and dreadful.”

“I have nearly finished,” Delamere went on. “You lost all recollection of everything. I daresay Dr. Beard has asked you several times since what you did with those papers. What did you say?”

“What could I say, Mr. Delamere? I had not the faintest recollection of any papers. I could not recall one incident relating to that lunch at the Alexandra. It was an absolute blank. Over and over again Dr. Beard has questioned me, but to no effect.”

“I hope he did not bully you over it,” Delamere smiled meaningly.

“He was everything that was good and kind,” Winifred declared. “I know that there are lots of people who regard him with suspicion, but to me he has been the best of men. Bully me! Oh, dear, no! There is not a kinder man in the world.”

Delamere hastened to disclaim any personal feeling in the matter. Neither did he attempt to carry the conversation any further. In his own mind he was perfectly satisfied with the result of his cross-examination of Winifred. Beard was in his power now, and was going to pay the penalty of his guilt before long. But there was much to be done yet. Winifred had left the room along with Mary, and Flora turned to Delamere eagerly.

"You feel certain that you are on the right track?" Flora asked eagerly.

"Absolutely," Delamere replied. "And my brother is of the same opinion. When Beard passed on those bonds to Miss Winifred Cawdor, he had a feeling that he was being followed. Probably he recognised the stranger in the restaurant as a famous detective. Beard rose to the opportunity, as he always does. He rid himself of the incriminating papers so that he would be safe if an arrest was made. He was dealing with an innocent girl, who would not have the faintest suspicion that anything was wrong. And he could see his way to recover the bonds in a few hours. But that unexpected jaunt to Hastings upset all his calculations. If Gilbert Doyle had not accompanied the sisters, he would have gone down next day. Still, it was all right. Getting the papers back was only a matter of time.

"You see, the wedding was fixed so far as Doyle was concerned—Beard knew that he would be permanently out of the way before very long. Then he would get his papers. But he did not quite calculate upon the effect of his scheme; he did not expect that Miss Winifred would suffer so terribly from the shock. That she suffered is known to all of us. It is quite within the bounds of possibility that Miss Winifred forgot all about these papers. Yet, at the back of the stricken brain all the time was the knowledge that that red box contained valuables, and must be prized accordingly. Miss Winifred was so fond of the box, and took such care of it, that Beard regarded the feeling as the outcome of childishness. The box was fastened, and nobody but Miss Winifred had the secret of the lock. And she had forgotten it. The papers, moreover, are light, and they were packed lightly, and could not rattle, so the box had the suggestion of being empty. And all these years Beard's ill-gotten gains had literally been staring him in the face!"

"It seems almost impossible," Flora said incredulously.

"Well, so it does. And yet stranger things are happening around us every day. Beard might, with some plausibility, say that Winifred was under a complete delusion as to these bonds, and that if they were in her possession, why, Doyle gave them to her. But with so pointed a weapon in our hands, we shall find a way of using it to the best effect. Beard must be tricked. It would be the greatest satisfaction to me to lure him on and on until he was caught red-handed. Not that I shall be satisfied with that. There is another of the thieves to catch."

"I am afraid that I don't quite follow you," Flora said.

"Surely you have not forgotten Beard's unworthy accomplice, Madame Regnier. She had just as much of a hand in Doyle's ruin as Beard. She it was who found in Doyle's possession those bonds, or a portion of those bonds, that led to his arrest. She it was who wrote innocent-looking notes that were 'confirmation strong as proof of Holy Writ,' when they were produced in Court after being found in Doyle's wastepaper basket."

"I had forgotten that woman," Flora said, the honest anger shining in her eyes. "You have some scheme to take the two at the same time?"

“Well, that is the idea,” Delamere admitted. “I haven’t quite thought it out yet, but my notion is to persuade Madame Regnier that her ally is playing her false. I want to bring the two together and provoke a quarrel—a quarrel that we can overhear. I read a story in a magazine the other day, that first gave me an inspiration. I’ll tell it you when I have got the details all worked out. But I will require Miss Winifred.”

“But you will not be able to let her know that she is part of the plot,” Flora argued.

“Oh, dear, no, that would never do. She would betray herself and me to a certainty. She must be an unconscious instrument. And, unless I am greatly mistaken, Beard will fall into the net. I shall get my brother to see that Madame Regnier comes into the drama. Still, we have plenty of time to mature our plans, as we can do nothing till Beard returns to the Moat House. Once back, we shall lose no time in putting the match to the powder.”

Flora looked into the keen, clever face of the speaker with a feeling that he would be as good as his word. Delamere had ceased to speak, for a footman had just come into the room with a telegram for Flora. She tore off the orange envelope, and her tones grew excited.

“You have not long to wait,” she said. “He is coming back this evening. He wants his bag packed, as business takes him to Paris in the morning.”

Chapter XXXVI

In the Net.

It was shortly before dinner that Beard arrived, apparently in one of his worst moods. He seemed to have no eye for anybody but Winifred, and no courtesy for the rest of the household. The Delameres had disappeared; they had gone off to take up their residence for the present at a neighbouring farmhouse, and Beard appeared to be relieved at the tidings. But he would have been less pleased if he had known what was going on. At the dinner table he was moody and silent, and Flora watched him carefully. It was an anxious time, and Flora only played with her dinner. An experiment was to take place presently, and on that experiment depended the happiness of two lives.

“We hardly expected you back so soon,” Flora remarked, by way of saying something.

Beard came with a start out of his reverie, and his face lightened a little.

“Perhaps not,” he said. “The fact is, I have been a good deal worried lately. Some important discoveries of mine have become public property sooner than I anticipated. I am being robbed both of credit and money. That is why I have to go to Paris.”

Flora murmured her sympathy politely. She gave a quick, nervous glance in Winifred’s direction, but the girl seemed to be serenely unconscious that anything important was in the air. During the afternoon Winifred had been carefully

coached to do certain things, and Flora was wondering if she would go too far. At the same time, her teachers had scrupulously refrained from telling her of the importance of her part. Still, it was an experiment, and there was just the suggestion of possible failure.

The meal dragged its slow length along, the servants vanished at last, and Beard took out his cigar case. Flora rose and glanced at Mary; the latter came across the room with a white face and lips that twitched a little. It was hard to play the hypocrite, before the man, to sit at table with him, and yet it was necessary, if Gilbert Doyle was to be saved and Winifred's happiness assured. Winifred would have followed the others, but Beard detained her.

"Don't go just yet, my child," he said. "I have something to say to you."

In ordinary circumstances the request would have conveyed nothing to the listeners. Beard frequently kept Winifred with him after the others had gone. But to-night it was different. The two other girls walked into the hall, where they paused, irresolute, as if they half expected to hear something behind the closed door.

"I do hope and pray that it will be all right," Mary whispered. "I could eat nothing for thinking of it. If Winifred makes a false step!"

"My dear, she will do nothing of the kind," said Flora confidently. "The kind of lesson that Mr. Delamere taught her was so simple. The idea of using Winifred in this way is not pleasant, but at the same time, it is fitting and retributive that she should become the instrument of Bernard Beard's downfall. Let us go to the drawing-room, and hope for the best."

Mary made some excuse, saying that she would follow, presently. As a matter of fact, some fascination seemed to hold her close to the dining-room door. The butler came a moment later, and left the door open when he had finished. There was a hum of voices and the pungent drift of tobacco-smoke.

Beard was talking quite gently to Winifred. Whatever the faults of that scoundrel, he was devoted to Winifred. And all the time he could see her suffer as she had done without diverting a hair's breadth from the inflexibility of his purpose. He was talking now as a father might talk to a favourite child.

"You are better," he was saying, "you are better than you have been, since a um—. When my business in Paris is finished, we will go to the sea for a time—say, a long spell at Brighton. Do you remember that season at Brighton two years ago?"

"Perfectly," said Winifred, in her dainty new voice. "It came back to me yesterday. My poor father was with us then. Do you know, my memory is returning in the most marvellous way."

Mary held her breath. The critical moment on which so much depended was at hand. And by pure good chance Beard was giving the girl the very opening she desired.

"You mean it has, all come back to you?" Beard asked. There was a suggestion of eagerness in his voice. "Come, that is good hearing, Winifred. You mean that everything is quite clear, like peals in a chord? What, made you think of that?"

"It was the red flower on the table," Winifred replied. The dinner-table decorations we're deep-red chrysanthemums. "I wondered what connection there was between something you once said to me and red flowers. It was something that you wished me to remember."

“Yes, yes!” Beard said. His voice sounded strained and hoarse to Mary. “What was it that I asked you to try to remember? Something to do with some papers?”

“Yes,” Winifred replied—“some papers and a luncheon party at the Alexandra.”

The listener could hear Beard rise from his chair and pace up and down the room. Mary hoped he would not close the door. She had made up her mind to rush into the room on some pretext if Winifred betrayed any knowledge beyond what it was suggested she should say. But Beard did not appear to notice the door.

“My dear child, I hope you are going to take a load off my mind,” he said. “Those papers you mention are of vital importance. Without them I shall soon be on the brink of ruin, or worse than ruin. Think of the red flowers.”

“I am thinking of them,” Winifred said. She spoke like a child rejoicing in the full knowledge of some difficult lesson. “I can see the red flowers quite plainly, and the waiter with something the matter with his eye. And I recollect that we had lobster cutlets for lunch.”

“Bravo!” Beard said. He spoke with enthusiasm, but his voice was shaking.

“We are getting on quite famously. Do you remember what I gave to you?”

“Certainly I do. We had just taken our places and begun lunch, when another man came and took a seat close by us. It might have been my fancy, of course, but it seemed to me that you did not like the look of the other man.”

“I didn’t,” confirmed Beard. “He was a hated rival, you understand, capable of stealing my cherished secrets, and of doing me a mortal injury to get possession of them. Perhaps I was absurdly nervous, but I had been working very hard, and my nerves were unstrung. I felt that man was dogging my footsteps to rob me.”

In spite of her anxiety, Mary could not repress a smile of contempt. The whole thing had fallen out exactly as Delamere had predicted. Before he had parted with the papers, Beard had been quite convinced that he was being followed by a detective, and his lively imagination had filled in the rest. Hence the transfer of the papers to Winifred.

“That is the truth of the matter,” Beard went on, in the way that we explain things to an intelligent child of tender years. He was fond of talking in that way to Winifred. “I was frightened. A great, big, strong man like me was frightened! But then, I had a cunning man to deal with, who was capable of anything. And he was far cleverer than me. So, when somebody called him out, I passed those papers on to you. Say you recollect.”

Beard’s tone had suddenly become almost beseeching. Mary could hear Winifred’s little laugh of pleasure.

“I do remember,” she said. “The sight of the red flowers on the table makes the recollection all the more vivid. Only, I’m glad I did not know of the danger at the time, or I should have been dreadfully frightened. I hid the papers in my fur.”

“You did! I knew they were quite safe in your hands, and that the enemy would never suspect. And that same night you skipped away to Hastings, where I could not follow you because I was so busy. And then came our great misfortune, and your illness. I tried and tried to recall things to your memory, but it was all in vain. But we are moving from the question of the papers.”

“I don’t think I should be able to tell you where I placed them but for an accident,” Winifred said. “You see, it is over two years ago, and I attached no great

importance to the matter. But when you sent me away from home ten days ago—why did you send me?"

"That you will know all in good time," Beard said caressingly. "Go on with your story."

"Very well, doctor. When I went away from here I took the little red box. You know that I was always fond of the little red box."

Beard nodded. He had regarded the affection for the red box as a sign of Winifred's great mental weakness, a thing to be humoured. But now he grasped the situation.

"I took the box with me. It seemed to me that that box was a sacred trust, concerned in some way with something that I had to do. And yet, at the same time, the box seemed to be empty. Also, I had forgotten how to work the secret spring. But I know now; I have opened it."

"And found the missing papers inside?" Beard asked hoarsely. "Is that what you mean?"

"One of the papers," Winifred said. "I have it with me now. I expect I must have dropped the rest out on my way here to-day. You see, I did not attach any importance to the contents of the box at the time, because I had not recollected I placed the papers in there. And now I cannot remember that I ever did put the papers there; but I must have done so, or the single one now in my possession wouldn't have dropped out."

Something that sounded like a suppressed groan came from Beard.

"You had better make sure," he said. "'Better make sure. Let me see it."

Mary could hear the crackle of the paper as it shook in Beard's hands. The listener was beginning to feel easier in her mind now. Winifred was carrying out her part quite naturally, and without the slightest idea how every word she said meant another mesh in the net that was slowly closing in upon Bernard Beard. Another minute or two and she would be able to make some excuse to enter the dining-room and take Winifred away.

"This is one of my papers, right enough," Beard was saying. "The other—. But you say that you have only quite recently remembered the secret of opening that box."

"That is so," Winifred replied. "It is only a matter of hours—to-day, in fact."

"Then the great bulk of the papers were in the box only a short time ago," Beard exclaimed. "They are not far off; probably in the woods somewhere. They fell out as you came along. But do not worry about that, my child. Don't tell anybody. And don't imagine that I blame you in the least. Oh, dear, no!"

It was quite time to interfere, Mary thought. Winifred had told Beard all that was to be told, and in her pretty, engaging way she had played the scheme of those who desired to bring Beard to justice. It would be a thousand pities to spoil the whole thing now by a chance error—an allusion to Mr. Delamere, for instance. And Beard could not get any further information. Winifred had told him everything.

"You are not angry with me?" Winifred asked.

"My dear child, how could I be angry with you?" Beard said. The tone was very tender, despite the ring of disappointment that filled the voice. "You have managed to recollect everything. The only pity is that you did not look at your box as you

came along. Still, the truth has come out so quickly on top of the disaster, that the lock can easily be repaired. What way did you come here to-day?"

Winifred explained the route taken from the cottage to the Moat House. She had hardly finished when Mary came in. The girl's face was white. As she dared not meet the keen eye of Bernard Beard, she kept outside the range of light on the dining-room table. But Mary might have spared all her anxieties, for Beard did not look at her at all. He had quite enough to occupy his own anxious mind. He had risen again, and was buttoning his dinner-jacket with the air of a man who had adventure before him.

"Don't you think that Winifred ought to go to bed early?" Mary asked.

She repeated the question twice before Beard seemed to be aware of the presence of a third person. He looked at Mary as if he did not see her at all.

"Of course; most assuredly," he said presently. "I had almost forgotten that the poor child was an invalid. She has been so bright and clear to-night. Her memory seems to have actually come back. Still, a good night's rest, you know! Take her and put her to bed."

"And if we should happen to want you?" asked Mary, greatly daring.

"My dear child, there will be no need for me," Beard said. "Make your mind easy on that score. I am going out. I may not be back for some time."

With a deep sigh of thankfulness Mary helped Winifred upstairs. Winifred must undress, and Mary would come back to her by-and-by, she said. Mary stopped at the corridor and looked furtively over the bannisters into the hall below. Presently she saw Beard come from the library. He had exchanged his dinner-coat for a rough jacket; he had something in his hand that looked very like a dark lantern. Then he opened the front door and disappeared into the outer darkness.

Mary flew along the corridor towards the little room where Flora frequently sat at nights.

Flora was there, waiting. Her dark eyes looked at Mary. "It is all right!" the latter burst out. "Flora, I listened—I listened to every word. I could not tear myself away. And Winifred came out of it splendidly; not a single question was asked that was likely to arouse Beard's suspicion. And he has gone out of the house dressed in rough clothes. He has a lantern with him."

"Everything is going for us to-night," Flora whispered. "Go to the house-keeper's room and bring little Jessie Marston to me. There is not a moment to lose."

Chapter XXXVII

Setting the Trap.

Little Jessie came up from the house-keeper's room, where she had been made much of. The smile vanished from her face as she looked at Flora. Perhaps the child recognised her actual importance, for she became quite grave.

“I am going to ask you to return home at once, little one,” Flora said. “In any case, it is quite time you were at home. I want you to take a letter to your father, and see that he gets it without delay. If he is away from home, can you find him?”

Jessie smilingly confessed her ability to find her father in most circumstances. She had not been free of the woods all this time for nothing. But her father was not away to-night, she said. He was sitting at home with the nice gentleman who was staying at Old Anna’s cottage. Flora had no difficulty in recognising Gilbert Doyle from that description.

“Then sit down for a minute or two whilst I write my letter,” she said. The letter was speedily completed and sealed. “Take it, and get home as soon as you can. And mind that nobody is to see that letter but your father.”

Jessie promised and vanished. Flora turned with the least suspicion of a sigh to Mary.

“It is all very hateful,” she said. “Here am I depending to a great extent on the hospitality of Bernard Beard, and yet I am plotting against his liberty. I should like to accuse him to his face, not stab him in the back like this.”

“It is dreadful,” Mary agreed. “Our position is worse than yours. Dr. Beard has been a great friend of ours. I could tell you lots of kind things that he has done. I am certain that, in spite of his extraordinary conduct, he is passionately attached to Winifred. And I am helping to bring about his downfall. But we could not do anything else.”

“No,” Flora said simply. “We could do nothing else. Only I hate to fight with this kind of weapon. Still, the innocent must be saved, and Winifred’s happiness secured. We are compelled to use the kind of weapons Dr. Beard uses himself.”

Meanwhile Jessie was speeding on her way to the cottage. It was a pitch dark night, with no suggestion of a moon. The great forest trees loomed like phantom shapes against the sky. Any stranger would have been hopelessly lost in a moment. But Jessie plunged into the wood with perfect confidence and not the semblance of fear. She could have found her way home blindfold. She was filled, too, with the subtle importance of her mission. She felt sure the letter was of great moment. She had the air of being a party to the conspiracy as she handed the letter to her father.

“It is from Miss Cameron,” she said. “I was to be sure to give it to nobody but yourself.”

Marston smiled as he took the letter and broke the envelope. But the smile faded from his face, and a keen expression took its place. There was a suggestion of pleased triumph playing about the corner of his mouth.

“This is good hearing,” he said. “I shall have to go out presently. In fact, we shall both have to go out. There’s a little time to spare, Jessie, my dear. You must go to bed. I have not the smallest idea when I shall get home again.”

Jessie nodded obediently. She never questioned anything her father said. In his wisdom he had decided that she must go to bed, and there was an end of the matter. She kissed Marston, and made her way quietly up the stairs. Marston vanished, too, returning soon with the news that Jessie was already in bed and fast asleep.

“I wonder she is not afraid to stay here alone,” Gilbert said.

“The little one is not afraid of anything,” Marston said with some pride. “She would go into the heart of the woods at dead of night if I asked her. The love I have for my child is the one white spot in my life. It is good to know that she will be well cared for after I have gone.”

“I will do that if nobody else does,” Gilbert replied.

“That is very good of you, Mr. Doyle. Miss Cameron has already undertaken the task, but that does not lessen the generosity of your offer. This is the second time you have proffered aid to the one who has been your passive enemy. Still, it was a good night’s work for you when you came to me in the wood. But I am forgetting. I have a letter of the greatest importance from Miss Cameron. I have already told you about those bonds in the little red box. It seems that Delamere’s scheme succeeded beautifully, and I hope before long to be in a position to prove that Madame Regnier and Beard were the real thieves. I want you to go as far as the farm where the Delameres are staying.”

“But I have not the remotest idea where it is,” Gilbert protested.

“That is a small matter. You see the way to the new road? Go along after turning to the right until you come to a fence of white posts. That is the path to the farm. There is a sunk fence in front of you, and facing the fence is the room where the Delameres are. If their light is out, come back to me at once. If the light is burning, you must give the call of the barn-owl twice. I can easily teach you to imitate the cry of the bird. Now try.”

Gilbert tried until he had become perfect. He was curious and asked questions. But Marston would have none of them. There was no time for long explanations, he said. “Go off at once, and do as I tell you,” he said. “If all goes right, and the Delameres come out to see who is calling, you are to say that everything is progressing splendidly, and also you are to ask for the parcel. Bring the packet back here. I shall not be in the house; but you can best find your way to the path leading from Anna’s cottage to the Moat House from a landmark like this. By the clump of big yews here I shall be waiting for you. But once you are in the road, tread lightly. Make your way as carefully as if you had only just escaped from Greystone and the warders were after you.”

“Then it is no use to ask for an explanation?” said Gilbert.

“Not the least. My dear sir, time is of the utmost importance. I would go to Delamere myself and leave you here but you get along so much faster than me. And if that pain of mine comes on I am done. But one thing I can promise you—that you will be a free man to do as you please before the week is out.”

Gilbert thrilled. Almost unconsciously his head was raised. Marston spoke in the tone of a man who is sure of the ground. Gilbert snatched up his cap and coat and made for the door. It was good to feel that things were moving.

“I need no further inducement,” he said. “I’ll restrain my curiosity. But it is hard.”

He said no more and vanished. As he walked along, Gilbert felt nothing of the darkness; his heart was full of eager gladness. He had suffered so unjustly that he had begun to feel hardened; he had loathed the hiding from men, the inability to come out and look the world in the face. And now all the hardness was falling from him, and his heart felt as soft as that of a little child.

It only seemed a minute or two before he was past the white path and close to the edge of the sunk fence that cut off the house from the fields. Gilbert had walked a whole mile without in the least being aware of the fact. His mind was full of Winifred and what he was going to do for her when he could come forward and claim her.

But he had to put this kind of thing out of his mind altogether. With a keen sense of satisfaction, he noticed that the lamp was burning as Marston had felt sure that it would be. Everything was going right now; there was going to be no hitch in the programme. The melancholy cry of the barn owl floated out thrice on the still, heavy air. Gilbert repeated the signal again. Then, to his great satisfaction, he saw a window thrown up and a figure emerge that way, and come down to the edge of the sunk fence.

"Is that Marston?" a cautious voice asked, "or a messenger of his?"

"A messenger of his," Gilbert replied. "Is that Mr. David Delamere?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. David Delamere right enough. And you are Mr. Gilbert Doyle. I never forget a voice if I have ever heard it. You have a message for me?"

"Yes; from Marston. I understand that the message comes in the first instance from Miss Cameron. Marston refused to discuss it with me, but I understand that it has a most important bearing upon my future. I was to say that the plot had been a perfect success."

Gilbert now heard the listener give vent to a dry chuckle. Then somebody else laughed. It was the other Delamere who had followed his brother.

"If that is so, you are as good as free," Delamere said. "The plot is a perfect success-eh? Did you hear if Beard had left the house?"

"Oh, yes! I was specially to tell you that. Marston said you would understand the meaning of it. He left the house as soon as he had finished his dinner. Went out in a quiet kind of way, you were to understand, as if he did not want to be seen."

"Modest man," Delamere chuckled again, in the same dry way. "I quite understand. And so Marston sent you here for the packet?"

"That is mostly what I came for."

Again the chuckle of satisfaction from the far side of the fence. Then one of the Delameres vanished through the open window, only to return with a package in his hand. This he conveyed to Gilbert across the fence.

"Now, go back to Marston at once," he commanded. "We have our part to play. Stephen, get the motor out; we are going on one of our late excursions—we have discovered that we are out of cigars, and we journey to Longtown to fetch them—if we don't go in a contrary direction; but any excuse will do."

"And that is all you have to tell me?" Gilbert said. Perhaps he was a little disappointed; perhaps he had expected to glean fresh information here, "As to my position—"

"Your position could not be better," Delamere interrupted. "You can leave all that to us. On the whole, it is just as well that you should not know too much at this stage. Now, be off as fast as your legs will carry you!"

It was hopeless to wait for more, and Gilbert disappeared in the darkness. He wondered, in a vague kind of way, what were the contents of the package. He would have been more than astonished if he had only known the truth on that

score. But he had to put curiosity out of his mind. His great task now was to get back to Marston as soon as possible. The cottage was reached at length, but, as Marston had said, he was not there. It was easy now to find the path leading from old Anna's cottage to the Moat House, and Gilbert struck it without any trouble. Mindful of Marston's caution, he crept along as if he were escaping from the grey gaol. Not a leaf crackled under his foot till he reached the great clump of yews. He waited there a little time; he began to grow impatient. Something was moving close by him—something that sounded like a fox prowling about in search of rabbits. It was very still and black there, and the silence of it began to get on Gilbert's nerves.

The rustling moved at his feet, and a hand touched him. He started, but said nothing.

"Good man!" a voice whispered. "You have plenty of courage. It's Marston. I have been having a rare hunt after our man, and have literally escaped from the oak spinney here, and very nearly ran on to his feet now. Well?"

The last word was asked with some impatience. Gilbert produced the packet.

"I should say that it is exceedingly well," he said. "I managed to reach the farmhouse all right, and the Delameres were at home. They came out at my signal, and gave me the packet. There it is."

Marston clutched at the papers eagerly. Evidently he attached the greatest importance to them. He plunged into a little thicket, where he cautiously struck a match, and for a few minutes fairly gloated over his treasures.

"This is quite satisfactory," he said, as he extinguished the match. "Now that we have got our bait we will proceed to catch our fox, who is not far off. Stay here."

Marston's proceeding was, to say the least of it, curious, He crept to the path-way, and laid the packet of papers in the centre of the grass. After that he returned to the shadow of the thicket and began to watch. A quarter of an hour passed before anything happened. Then there was a sound as if somebody was coming along the path. It was possible to catch the heavy tread of a man in the moss; a little twig snapped here and there. Presently Gilbert became aware of the glimmer of a lantern.

Below the lantern was a large, heavy face. Gilbert was past all surprise by now; otherwise he would have been astonished to recognise Bernard Beard. He pushed his lantern from side to side; he was muttering to himself as he went by. Something like an execration came from Marston as Beard passed out of sight.

"Missed!" he said; "missed that time. But he must come back again. How it was he didn't see the packet fairly beats me."

"Do yon want Beard to find it?" Gilbert asked, with a puzzled expression. "Then why not—"

"Send it to him direct? Oh, dear no. The bird must come to the twig without the least suspicion that it has been specially limed for him. If necessary he can't help seeing it. Hush, he is coming back."

Surely enough, Beard was returning along the path, pushing his lantern from side to side. Gilbert held his breath, as Beard came to the papers. The lantern flashed fully on the blue lines. With a hoarse cry, Beard dropped to his knees and examined the papers by the light of the lantern. He sobbed with delight and pressed the papers to his lips.

“Saved!” he said—“saved, saved! The good luck of it, the splendid fortune! And only to think how very near I was to being on the rocks!”

Chapter XXXVIII

Within the Snare.

Gilbert watched him as one watches some important piece of impersonation. He had not the least idea what it all meant. But Beard was not acting—that expression on his face was only the outcome of strong, glad emotion. He knelt in the path as if he had found some treasure that was beyond price; there were tears in his eyes.

“What has he found?” Gilbert asked. “And if the papers are useful to him—”

“You conclude that they might be far more useful to us?” Marston went on. “So they will, for we shall get them back again—at least, the proper owners will. And you mean to say that you don’t know what Beard is so excited about.”

Gilbert was free to confess that he had not the slightest idea. Marston chuckled.

“Then I’ll tell you,” he said. “The strange part of the bond rolling—I mean, the rolling that got you into such serious trouble—was that the bonds were never circulated. They are negotiable bonds, and could have been turned into cash before they were missed, but such a thing never happened. It was deemed by some that this was impossible and too sanguine, as things turned out, but a clever man like Beard would have laughed at the theory. Still, the bonds were never turned into cash, and the true reason is that the bonds were lost.”

“Lost!” Gilbert said, with difficulty suppressing a cry—“lost by him. Then you mean to say that these very bonds that were lost—”

“Have been found again in the strangest manner. As far as I can understand, they have been under Beard’s nose the last two years. At any rate, they are found now, and Beard has them in his possession at the present moment.”

“I am as much in the dark as ever,” Gilbert said.

Marston proceeded to explain the discovery made by Delamere in the little red box. The rest of the plan had been carried out after Winifred Cawdor had begun to recollect things as told to David Delamere.

“But why wait any longer?” Gilbert asked. “There is that ruffian with the bonds in his possession. Let us prove that, and I am free. I can hardly stand here and watch him, knowing the mischief and misery he has done to me and one that I love, and control myself. I want to rush out and seize the rascal and bring him to justice. What do we gain by delay?”

Marston laid a detaining hand on the shoulder of his companion. Gilbert was trembling with anger from head to foot.

“I shall keep you if I have to detain you by force,” Marston said cooly. “Would you spoil everything by your impetuosity at the last moment? Does it not seem that there are others to be trapped as well as Beard—Madame Regnier, for instance, and the one who calls himself Captain Ronald Cardrew? Do you suppose

that the Delameres have not made arrangements for them to be taken red-handed? Don't you suppose—Good heavens!"

Marston's astonishment was not unnatural in the circumstances. Beard has just risen to his feet and was placing the precious papers in his pocket when the bushes parted, and the figure of a woman stood there. She had a short skirt and a man's double-breasted reefer jacket. A tweed cap rested on her head. Her eyes flamed with anger.

"So I have caught you in the nick of time," she said. "It is not in vain that I have had you watched, all three of you. I knew that you had not lost those bonds. I knew that in some way you were making use of your ward, Miss Cawdor, in the matter. It never occurred to you, perhaps, that Miss Cawdor's own attendant was in my pay. She did not hear all your talk to-night, but enough to give me a clue. The telephone did the rest. Now, what have you to say for yourself?"

Gilbert, crouching down there, knew without being told that it was Madame Regnier who spoke. Marston was shaking with suppressed laughter. In the light of the lantern Beard looked white and flabby. He had not expected this denouncement. He stammered some explanation.

"You are too clever, but you are wrong. If you fancy that I am trying to do you out of your share of the plunder you are mistaken. I am prepared to swear to you that the bonds were lost, and that I have only recovered them a few minutes ago."

"Liar! Always a liar! You pretend that the bonds were stolen and you hid them here in some hollow tree. All that story about the red box was an invention. But I am glad your ward's maid told me of it, because I knew then that you had some hiding-place here. That is why I came away from home to-night as soon as possible and followed you. And my surmise was correct."

"Your suspicion was not correct," Beard said hoarsely. "I tell you the bonds were lost. It happened one day in London. I met Miss Cawdor, and asked her to come and lunch with me, and who should come in at the same moment but Theodore, the famous French detective. You know what I had to fear from Paris, and you can guess my state of mind. I thought the police were after me for that Paris affair. And then I felt cold as I thought of these bonds in my pocket. Whatever charge I was arrested on would not save me from having to give up the bonds, and in that case nothing could possibly save me. Theodore went out for a moment and I took the opportunity of passing the bonds over to Miss Cawdor."

"You were always quick at inventing a story," Madame said bitterly. "You have quite missed your vocation. Well, get along!"

"I am getting along as fast as I can," Beard said sulkily. "I didn't have an opportunity to get the bonds back for over a week as Winifred had gone to Hastings, and Gilbert Doyle was alone, and you know perfectly well that I dared not face him. After he was arrested, Winifred's mind was so preyed on that she lost her memory, and I lost the bonds because she could give me no clue to their whereabouts. And all that story of the red box is true. The bonds fell out of it as Winifred was coming back from a cottage near here, after she had escaped from your house, on her way to the Moat House. I came here to look with a lantern and I have found all the lost papers."

"I wish that I could believe you," Madame Regnier said grudgingly.

“I tell you I am speaking nothing but the truth!” Beard flared out. “Do you suppose that I should be pottering about here with a lantern attracting the attention of keepers and what not if I had known where to place my hand on the missing securities? And you know perfectly well that I would have disposed of these bonds at the very time the police were hottest in search of them. You are going to get your share, never fear.”

“Oh, I shall take care of that!” Madame Regnier said pointedly. “I am not going to let you out of my sight again as long as you have that plunder on you. As soon as I do, I shall be done out of my share to a dead certainty. You are coming back with me.”

“What for?” Beard asked. “Have you got some scheme in your mind?”

“Yes, I have. And if I have to trust somebody, that somebody will not be Dr. Bernard Beard. I can trust John Lancaster, alias Ronald Cardrew, because he is afraid to play me false. And he is going to be my messenger in this business.”

“Oh, indeed! And what part in that negotiation am I going to play?”

“You are going to hand over the papers to me to-night. Cardrew will slip off on his bicycle about half-past 10, and catch the mail to London at Longtown Junction. To-morrow he will see Isaac Barry, who had originally arranged to buy the bonds. He will get cash for them, and bring it back to me. I shall then hand you your share of the money, and after that there will be no need of any further business between us—I am rather tired of playing catspaw to you. Besides, I am quite clever enough to set up for myself.”

“You are, indeed!” Beard said bitterly. “Well, I suppose I shall have to do as you suggest. Once rouse a woman’s suspicions, and you need not try to do anything with her again. I’ll just hide my lantern, and come with you to Breckland Lodge. As you are so cruelly suspicious, you may as well take the papers whilst I hide my lantern here. I suppose you are not afraid to trust yourself with me in the dark—eh?”

“Not in the least,” Madame Regnier said coolly. “Let us get along.”

The sound of their footsteps died away in the distance. Marston laughed.

“This is a development that I hardly expected,” he said. “All the same, it is all in our favour. It was a slice of real luck getting to know just what the plan was. We shall be able to make the trap the more complete. I don’t know what plan the Delameres have made. They are somewhere near Breckland Lodge just now, and we are safe to see the usual delay. Let us follow that precious pair to their lair. Did I not tell you that you would be a free man before the week was out?”

Gilbert nodded; his heart was too full for words. Everything was going smoothly; he felt no longer anxious to confront Beard and accuse him of his crimes. He could see that Marston’s prudence was more useful. A day or two, and all would be well. Yet it was good to know that he could be up and doing something.

“Very well,” he said presently. “Perhaps it would be the best thing to follow those people and let the two Delameres know what we have done.”

They made their way through the wood and into the near road. By keeping on the grass at the sides of the heath it was possible to glide along almost close enough to the precious couple to hear what they were talking about. Breckland Lodge was reached at length, and the door closed on Beard and his companion. Immediately Marston raised the cry of the barn-owl.

In response, David and Stephen Delamere appeared. They explained that they had left the motor hidden in a deep lane, and that they had come here to force something like a confession out of Madame Regnier, but that she was out. Their idea was to drag the truth from the adventuress, and then confront Beard and compel him to disgorge the bonds.

"A very good thing that your plan failed," said Marston. "Mind, I don't say that it is not a good plan; but after what Mr. Doyle and myself saw and heard to-night, I fancy that I shall have no difficulty in suggesting a better."

The Delameres listened to Marston's story. They professed themselves to be more than satisfied with the turn of events. They would have to alter their scheme. For a little time both smoked a cigarette in silence.

"You say that madame has the bonds, and that she is going to send them to London by Ronald Cardrew to-night. The name is really not Ronald Cardrew, as you know; but let that pass for the moment, as that is the alias by which most people recognise the gentleman. He is going to take the bonds to London, and it is pretty clear that he has somebody willing to take them off his hands."

"That is so," Marston observed. "The name of the man was mentioned."

"Oh, indeed!" David Delamere chuckled. "The actual name was mentioned? I do hope that it did not escape your memory, for that is important."

"You may be quite easy on that score," Marston went on. "The name is Isaac Barry. I made a particular note of it, because I had an idea that the information would be valuable."

Delamere chuckled again. He seemed to be pleased with something. He proceeded to ask a few more questions, especially if Marston and Gilbert had any idea when Cardrew was going to London. Marston was also able to afford information on that point.

"Splendid!" David Delamere replied. "Perfectly splendid! Your effete criminal laws do not permit you to do certain things in this country, but we are going to have our own legislation on this occasion. We shall be able to dispense with your valuable services for the moment, Marston, but Mr. Doyle we shall require. Let us go and find a dry ditch somewhere, where we can smoke cigarettes till 10 o'clock. We are free till then."

"Why 10 o'clock?" Gilbert asked.

"Ten o'clock, my friend, is about the hour that Cardrew leaves Grove House on his way to London. He thinks he is going to London to-night, but in that respect he has reckoned without David and Stephen Delamere. As a matter of fact, he is not going to London. It will be a case of Mahomet coming to the mountain on this occasion. Now, Marston, as you are an authority on dry ditches, will you please to conduct us to one. The only stipulation I make is that it shall be not far from the house, and in a position to command the road. We will bring the motor close to it, so that we shall be in a position to start as quickly as possible."

The ditch was found, and the little party lay in it under the motor rugs until the clock struck the hour of 10. Then the Delameres came and stood looking up the road. A little while later and the flame of a cycle lamp came flitting quietly down the track. As the machine passed by, Delamere held out his hand and grasped the handle, so that the rider fell almost into his arms. Before he could speak a heavy scarf was flung gently round his head, and he was carried, kicking and struggling,

to the Mercedes car. Then a handkerchief was folded about his mouth, and his hands fastened behind him. The whole thing was done so rapidly that it created no disturbance at all.

"You had better go back to your cottage," Stephen Delamere said to Marston. "Mr. Doyle, we shall be exceedingly glad of your company—in fact, it is necessary. We are going to take this gentleman back to our rooms, and it will be for him to say how long he is likely to remain our guest. Get in, please!"

Gilbert did as desired, and the powerful car flew over the road in silence.

Chapter XXXIX

Beaten.

Gilbert Doyle could feel the prostrate form of Cardrew under his feet; his spirits rose as the great car hummed along, and the fresh breeze struck cold to his cheek. Presently the Mercedes pulled up in the roadway by the farm-house, and the Delameres got out.

"Take the car back to the stables," David Delamere said to his brother. "Mr. Doyle, I shall be glad if you will give me a hand with our prisoner. I suppose, in the eyes of the law, this would be regarded as a disgraceful outrage, but I am comforted by the knowledge that our man will not be likely to take proceedings against me."

Something low and inarticulate came from the body of the car. Gilbert waited to see what was likely to be required of him.

"Carry him round to the window," said David Delamere. "I mean the window opposite the sunk fence. It would be far better to use that mode of entrance—we don't want to disturb the good people of the house. Take his head, will you?"

Ronald Cardrew was smuggled into the sitting-room at length, and the window closed. Delamere proceeded to turn up the lamp. Then the other Virginian came in, and the door was closed. It was not till that was done that the bandage was removed from the prisoner's eyes, and the gag from his mouth. Besides being a little pale and ghastly, he did not look any the worse for his adventure.

"Sorry to give you all this trouble," David Delamere said; "but there was no other way that we could think of on the spur of the moment. Don't be alarmed."

"I'm not in the least alarmed," Cardrew stammered. His face gave the lie to this assurance. "I am not frightened. What do you mean by this outrage?"

Delamere's reply was to point to an armchair near the table. He produced a small bottle, and offered some of its contents to Cardrew. He took it eagerly, and Gilbert could see that his teeth chattered while drinking. Evidently the man's imagination was at work again, the imagination that had always been his bane.

"Better sit down," Delamere said. "Your stay here is likely to last some time. Whether or not it is to be a satisfactory interview depends entirely on yourself. Perhaps I had better introduce myself and my brother to you. I am David

Delamere and this is my brother Stephen. We are the brothers of Mrs. Bernard Beard. You have heard of her."

Cardrew nodded. The liquor had restored his courage, he began to understand that no great physical violence was going to befall him. He meant to be on his guard. Delamere spoke with the air of a man who is sure of his ground.

"Beard married my sister," Delamere went on. "He married her under the impression that she was a great heiress. She was nothing of the kind, and when Beard came to understand that, he deserted his wife. He managed to save himself from our vengeance in a very cunning way, but I need not go into that. When we found out how he had tricked us, we came here to exact the penalty."

"I don't quite see what this has to do with me?" said Cardrew sulkily.

"You will see before I have finished," Delamere went on smoothly. "We came to England with the firm idea of killing Beard. But fortune has given us the chance of dealing him a far heavier blow than that. But I am wandering somewhat from the point. We were under the impression that Miss Winifred Cawdor—as we know her to be now—was the daughter of Bernard Beard, and our sister Ada's child. Miss Cawdor possessed a box, a little red box with a secret spring that once belonged to our dead sister. Miss Cawdor was very fond of that box for some reason, and always took great care of it. My brother recognised the box, and showed Miss Cawdor the secret spring that she had forgotten. When the box was open, it was found to be full of papers. Come, sir, cannot you guess what the papers were?"

Cardrew stammered something, but his words were too indistinct to convey a meaning. The cigarette he had lighted in bravado had been allowed to go out.

"I am not good at this kind of riddle," he managed to say.

"Very good; then it will be my pleasure to enlighten you on the point. That box proved to be full of stolen bonds. Those bonds were stolen from the Southern Star steamer, and for the robbery of them my friend, Mr. Gilbert Doyle, was sentenced to penal servitude. Perhaps you remember the case?"

"No," Cardrew said sulkily. "I don't. What do I know of the stolen bonds? How do they concern me?"

"That we shall arrive at in good time. I merely remark that the stolen bonds for which my friend suffered imprisonment were found in the little red box belonging to Miss Cawdor."

"But that proves nothing to the advantage of the convict," Cardrew burst out eagerly; "quite the contrary, seeing that Mr. Doyle was going to marry Miss Cawdor. It looks as if the young lady was trying to shield her lover."

"That is a very pretty point," Delamere said drily, "especially considering that you professed utter ignorance of the whole transaction. In the language of the day, you have given yourself away, and proved that you know everything of this wicked business. But there is another side to the medal. Miss Cawdor has been so much better lately that she has been able to recall facts for some time forgotten. She recalled the fact, for instance, that the bonds found in the little red box had been given to her to take care of by Beard. But you know all about that; don't pretend to be ignorant. It was one day at lunch at the Alexandra, and a French detective was after Beard—or, rather, Beard fancied so—and to make things safe he handed the bonds to Miss Cawdor."

Cardrew affected to smile, but the effort was a sorry one. A thought occurred to him that turned his mouth dry, and caused his heart to beat painfully. What if this calm cold tormentor of his knew that he had the stolen bonds in his pocket. The mere idea brought him out all over in a cold perspiration.

"I hear you say so," he said, "but it proves nothing. And, in any case, you could not possibly identify me with the robbery."

"Oh, yes, we could!" said Delamere curtly. "For instance, I am in a position to prove that you made three voyages to America in the Southern Star immediately before the robbery. You were probably studying the lie of the land. Again, we know that you are very friendly with Madame Regnier, despite the fact that you did not know her on the Southern Star, and the same remark applies to Beard and yourself. All that I can procure witnesses to testify to. Now, my brother found the missing bonds by a strange accident. You may call it an accident, but I regard it as a direct intervention of Providence. The bonds fell into our hands, but Miss Cawdor did not know that. I mean, she did not know the nature of the papers, nor that they were the cause of Mr. Doyle's misfortunes. The great bulk of the documents my brother kept, placing one only in the box. This one Miss Cawdor handed over to Beard, feeling sure that she had lost the rest on her way home from an old servant's cottage. Miss Cawdor was carefully coached in her part; she was an unconscious instrument in our hands. Beard fell headlong into the trap; he went off at once to the woods for the missing papers, and he found them."

Cardrew listened with his heart beating painfully. He was getting afraid of this hard, cold man, who seemed to know everything.

"Beard found the papers," Delamere resumed. "It would have been exceedingly odd if he had not done so, seeing that they were placed almost under his nose by James Marston, the poacher, for that very purpose. You are not going to deny that you know James Marston?"

"I have known James Marston all my life," Cardrew said huskily, "though why he should take upon himself to interfere, seeing that his own past—"

"Never mind Marston's past. The fact remains that Marston has elected to be on the side of the angels. For the sake of Miss Flora Cameron, and for the sake of Mr. Gilbert Doyle, who stood him in good stead in a critical moment, he has done this thing. Beard found the papers, and almost before he had made his great discovery, Madame Regnier appeared on the scene. The whole of the conversation was overheard by Marston and Mr. Doyle."

"Doyle!" Cardrew cried. He had utterly forgotten himself for the moment. "Then Doyle has been hiding here all this time. If he dared to show himself—"

"He does dare to show himself," Gilbert put in coolly. "As a matter of fact, he has the honour of speaking to you at the present moment."

Cardrew stared at the speaker open-mouthed. He could feel the close and cruel meshes of the net closing in upon him; he knew that he was utterly in the power of these people. He rose and staggered across the room in the direction of the door.

"I am giddy," he said feebly, "I feel deadly sick. Let me go out into the open air. I promise that I will come back again."

"Certainly," Delamere replied. "The room is hot—it is the lamp. Suppose you remove your overcoat; you will find it so much cooler then."

Cardrew dropped into his seat again.

He knew the worst now. “Go on, and put me out of my misery,” he said.

“We will proceed, then,” Delamere went on. “Madame Regnier never trusted her ally; she refused to believe the story of the red box and the lost memory of the owner. She was not going to allow Beard to retain those papers any longer. She made a proposal that a certain messenger should convey the bonds to London, and there dispose of them to the kind of rascal who deals in that kind of property. I need not say, my good sir, that we had no very great difficulty in discovering who that messenger was to be. We heard that the messenger was to go over to Longtown Junction and catch the early morning train to London. Hence the fact that we waited outside Madame Regnier’s house till the messenger made his appearance. Need I say any more?”

Cardrew made one last fight for it. He turned savagely on the speaker.

“Your action is quite unjustifiable,” he said; “and I can promise you that you will hear more of this. It so happens that I was going to London by the early mail, in any case. If you think I have the stolen property on me—”

“We know you have,” Delamere said curtly. “As a matter of fact, it is bulging out of your inner overcoat pocket at the present moment. That is why we kidnapped you and brought you here to-night. It is not the least use to bluster. You are likely to stand in the dock with the rest if we wash our hands of the affair and leave it to the police. You are attempting to dispose of stolen property, well knowing it to be stolen. We can easily identity you with the gang at the bottom of the whole business. Are you going to defy us or ask for our mercy?”

Cardrew broke down utterly and completely. His vivid imagination was at work again. He saw himself in the dock; he could see the judge in his robes, and hear the dreaded sentence of penal servitude. He would make an appeal to these people.

“I admit everything,” he said. “I plead guilty to arranging the whole thing—in fact, I did everything, except steal the bonds, I was not on the Southern Star that particular trip, and therefore I did not see Mr. Doyle. I knew that Madame Regnier had arranged with Beard to throw all the blame on Mr. Doyle. That was to avert suspicion from her, because she had a fancy that one of the passengers knew her antecedents. Beard always declared that he had lost the bonds, but he would never tell us why. Probably because he did not want Miss Cawdor bothered about the business. At that time I went to South Africa, and from thence to India. I wanted to try to lead a new life there, but I had not the courage to do so.”

Cardrew stopped and covered his face with his hands. He looked an abject picture of misery, so that Gilbert could not but feel sorry for him.

“I am glad to see you adopting this attitude,” Delamere said, “because we shall perhaps be able to make it more easy for you. Give me the bonds.”

Cardrew produced the papers from his pocket. He no longer looked defiant, rather he was like a dog suiting the commands of his master. Delamere proceeded to lock the securities away in a drawer. He seemed to be well pleased with the progress of affairs. His manner was less stern as he spoke to Cardrew again.

“There is one more thing to be done,” he said. “And that is to give me the name and address of the man to whom you were going to dispose of the bonds. Now, do not prevaricate or shuffle, because I know all about it. Give me the name of the man and where he lives. I want to know where Isaac Barry is to be found.”

“I suppose you really know that as well as everything else,” said Cardrew, with just a suggestion of bitterness in his tone. “Isaac Barry lives at 17 Gargozle-crescent, Bloomsbury. Do you want me to go with you and see him?”

“No; you are going to send him a long telegram in the morning, and he is coming down here to see you instead. I shall find you a bed for the night.”

Chapter XL

A Blue Sky.

A little, wriggling man, with shifty eyes and a white set face, sat opposite to David Delamere, and whined for mercy on account of his family. Beard stood with his back to the fireplace, a smile of contempt on his face. Whatever happened, he was not likely to show his feelings. Cardrew was sullen and moody, Madame Regnier cold and distant. But there was a hard glitter in her eyes, and a suggestive movement of her fingers, as if she wished she had a dagger in them, so that she could plunge it into the heart of David Delamere. Altogether, it was an interesting group gathered together in the farmhouse parlour. The whole story had been told; there was no reply from the miscreants.

“I have quite finished,” David Delamere said. “You know the whole story, and the way you have been entrapped. By this time the missing bonds are in the hands of Scotland Yard, with a full account of this vile conspiracy. I like to have you all here, because it is a peculiar pleasure to me to feel that my journey to England has not been wasted. I had chosen another fate for Dr. Bernard Beard, but I have changed my mind. For him to be found out, for him to stand in the dock and hear that he is not likely to trouble society for some years to come, is a far surer punishment than I could ever inflict upon him. I have finished. You are all free to go your own way, which, I should say, is not likely to be far, seeing that the police are waiting outside for all of you. Now go!”

Nobody spoke, nobody said a word, nothing could be heard but the sniffling whine of Mr. Isaac Barry as he took up his hat. Outside it was as David Delamere had foretold. An inspector of police, with half a dozen constables, stood in the porch. The inspector touched his cap as he came forward.

“Madame Regnier,” he said, “I arrest you on a charge of robbery and conspiracy. The same remark applies to you, Dr. Bernard Beard, and you, Captain Ronald Cardrew. Mr. Barry, your capture will be reported in London. Mr. Gilbert Doyle, I must ask you to come with me. Your release is only a matter of hours, but for the present the law regards you as a criminal recently escaped from Greystone Prison.”

“I am ready,” Gilbert said cheerfully. “Can’t you detail one of your men to come with me back to the gaol, instead of—”

“That is exactly what I propose to do, sir,” the inspector rejoined. “Of course, you are as good as a free man, and your release will probably come to-morrow.

Meanwhile, you will simply be detained, you will wear your own clothes, and have what food you like to order. There has been a grave miscarriage of justice."

Gilbert thought so, too, but he decided to say nothing. He wondered if anything was likely to happen to him over the matter of his escape, and if any action would be taken as regarded Juan Garcia and his assault on the unfortunate warder. But Juan was in Mexico again on his master's business, and, after all, the warder had suffered no injury.

Meanwhile, David Delamere had gone over to the Moat House to see Flora and Mary, and tell them of all that had happened. The girls listened gravely, for it was a serious business, and the scandal was likely to be terrible. It was for her mother that Flora felt the shock most, but Mrs. Cameron bore the news with Christian fortitude.

"I am not surprised," she said. "I could never quite make out whether Bernard Beard was a good man or a great criminal. But I never dreamt that he was a man of this type. Two of my relations to turn out like this, Bernard and Ronald Cardrew, as they call him, and the latter my flesh and blood, too! I must bear it for your sake, Flora. Thank God that I have a good and pure child left to me."

It was better than Flora had expected, and she was grateful. Mrs. Cameron was a little quieter than usual, but she never spoke of her grief again. And, after all, the nameless sense of terror and mystery was lifted from the house for ever.

"I cannot profess to be sorry," Mary Cawdor said, as she and Flora talked the thing over together by the side of the hall fire. "We are well rid of a nest of scoundrels, dearest; the scandal can never touch the fair name of your mother and yourself. And in a short time Winifred will be herself again. I shall see the smile on that dear face and the laughter in those blue eves once more. I had almost given up all hope of that, Flora."

"That will be some recompense," Flora said thoughtfully. "And Winifred has been so very much better. She is quite another girl."

"She has quite changed since that eventful night when she met Gilbert at old Anna's cottage. The shock of that lonely time in the woods did much to bring her back to her senses; the interview with Gilbert completed the cure. By the way, where is Gilbert?"'

"Didn't you understand?" Flora asked. "He accompanied the party of police that took Beard and his friends into custody. You see, in the eyes of the law, Gilbert is still a convict, but they say his release will be speedy. What have you told Winifred?"

"I have told her nothing as yet," Mary explained. "I waited to consult you. What do you advise me to say to her?"

"I should advise you to tell her everything," Flora urged. "If you fail to do so, others may not be so careful. Besides, she must be told some time. Go and tell her now. You will find that she is quite equal to hearing the story."

It fell out exactly as Flora said. Winifred was a little confused and misty at first, but she speedily grasped the import of what her sister was saying. It was good to see the hot blood surging to her cheeks and the indignation flashing in her blue eyes. It was no child of feeble intellect who followed Mary's statement, but a beautiful, angry woman.

“Did anybody ever hear anything so monstrously cruel?” she said. “Fancy anybody calling himself a man behaving to a fellow-creature like that! But why did he do it, Mary? Why did he behave so when he professed to be so fond of me?”

“Who shall profess to read a complex nature like that of Bernard Beard?” Mary asked. “He was fond of you. Sometimes I used to think that he meant to marry you, and then again I am by no means sure. Perhaps it was your fortune—I cannot say. Beard is a man of indomitable ambition—nothing would be allowed to stand in his way; and Gilbert Doyle was very much in the way. He was going to marry you and remove you out of the sphere of Beard’s influence altogether. Hence, Gilbert had to be got rid of. You know how it was done.”

Tears came to Winifred’s blue eyes, but they were not tears for herself.

“My poor boy!” she said. “I say nothing about my own case, because most of the time I was mercifully unable to realise the full measure of my grief. But to think of Gilbert’s feelings! Mary, where is he?”

Mary explained what had happened, and Winifred said nothing. It was all right; she was going to have her own true lover back again. There was no reason why they should not get married now without delay.

It was later in the evening that George Drummond came over to the Moat House. He did not come alone, for Sir Devereux accompanied him. Naturally, the glaring scandal was the talk of the countryside by this time, and Sir Devereux Drummond had made up his mind to put ceremony aside and mark his opinion of his tenants in a way that there could be no mistaking. He was a little anxious too, to see more of Flora, for George had confided his feelings, so far as the girl was concerned, to his uncle.

“I am going to see my old friend, in her own room, if she will be so good as to receive me,” Sir Devereux had said to Flora. “Mrs. Cameron has been very reserved in the past, but she must not keep it up with me. She will understand my visit.”

“I am quite sure that she will appreciate your delicate kindness at its worth,” said Flora unsteadily.

“It was good for you to come at such a time as this. Sir Devereux.”

“Not at all, my dear,” Sir Devereux replied. “Besides, there is another reason why I have come here to-night, and that is to have a chat with you, if George does not monopolise you entirely. He has been talking to me, my dear. I am sure that you are a good and noble girl—all your family are like that, and I have not forgotten, to my shame, that you stood by George when his flesh and blood turned from him. I am a happy man to-night, and I shall be happier still when I see George and yourself established close to me. And I should like to hold an heir to Grange Court in my arms before I die.”

“We are going a little too fast,” Flora said. “Is Sybil taking it well?”

“Sybil has quite recovered,” Sir Devereux explained. “She never really cared for that—for your half-brother. There is another man who would have declared himself and married her before now, if Ronald Cardrew had kept out of the way. And he has taken to coming to Grange Court once more. He is very gentle and sympathetic and forgiving, and Sybil sees it all now in the proper light. It is only a matter of time, thank God. And now take me to your mother.”

George explained that he had been over to Greystone, where he had had a long chat, with Gilbert. The latter was only nominally a prisoner, and was detained on

the governor's own side of the prison. There was very little doubt that the Home Secretary's order for his release would come in the morning. It was a kind of comfort, too, to know that the Beard people had been removed to London, where their trial would take place, seeing that the venue of the offence was there. As Ronald Cardrew had made what was practically a full confession, there would be no occasion for a lengthy trial.

"Oh, I am so glad, if it is only for the sake of Winifred!" Flora cried. "But it is a dreadful thing, George, that one who is practically allied to me should have been in this conspiracy. I feel that I shall never be able to look Sybil in the face again."

"Sybil will soon console herself, if she has not done so already," George said. "And why should you be responsible for the sins of others? I love you none the less for it, Flora, my dearest girl. I have told my uncle everything, and he is quite convinced that I have displayed great wisdom in the choice of a wife. You mustn't keep me waiting."

Flora's reply was evidently satisfactory, but they said nothing for a long time, whilst Flora looked into the fire with her head on George's shoulder. There was a sense of peace in the house that night that Flora had never experienced before.

It was nearly tea time the next day before the welcome diversion came. The family party, together with Sybil and George, were grouped round the little gipsy table in the hall, when the butler announced Mr. Doyle, as if he had heard that name for the first time in his life. Winifred rose to her feet with a little cry, her hands went tremblingly out to the man she loved. Her blue eyes were full of happy tears.

Gilbert could not speak for a few moments; the sense of the welcome that looked from every face touched him to the heart. It was such a vivid contrast to the life he had been living lately; the exchange of the grey prison and the cold contempt of the warders for the refined home-like atmosphere, the power to come and go where he liked, exalted him.

"It is very good of you, my friends," he said unsteadily. "Very good of you, indeed. When you look at me in that way, I could sit down and cry. My little girl—my little girl!"

Gilbert's voice broke; he could say no more as he took Winifred in his arms. She looked up and kissed him fondly before them all. Then he grew quieter; he spoke of his past suffering, and how the order for his release had arrived an hour before. The hideous past, he added, was blotted out and done with.

"Put on your hat and jacket," he said to Winifred, "and take me for a walk. I want to feel that the great broad earth and the blue sky belong to me again, and that you are mine now and always."

And together they went out into the sunset, with the sunshine in their hearts for evermore.