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HIS LOVE OR HIS
LIFE

RICHARD MARSH





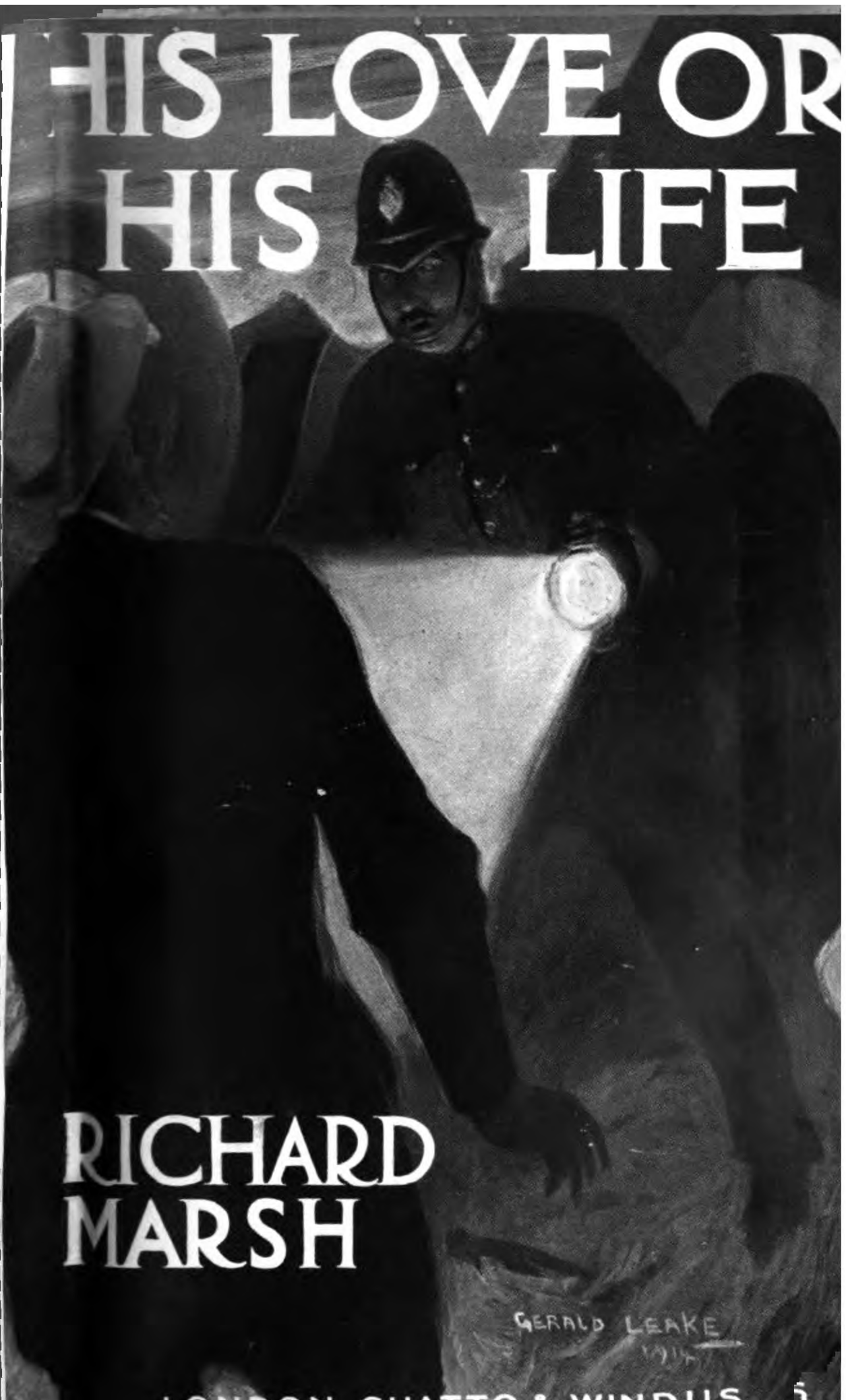
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HIS LOVE OR HIS LIFE



RICHARD
MARSH

GERALD LEAKE
1914

LONDON CHATTO & WINDUS 5

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

JUSTICE—SUSPENDED.

JUDITH LEE.

A SPOILER OF MEN.

A MASTER OF DECEPTION.

IF IT PLEASE YOU.

THE BEETLE.

VIOLET FORSTER'S LOVER.

A ROYAL INDISCRETION.

LIVE MEN'S SHOES.

THE ROMANCE OF A MAID OF HONOUR.

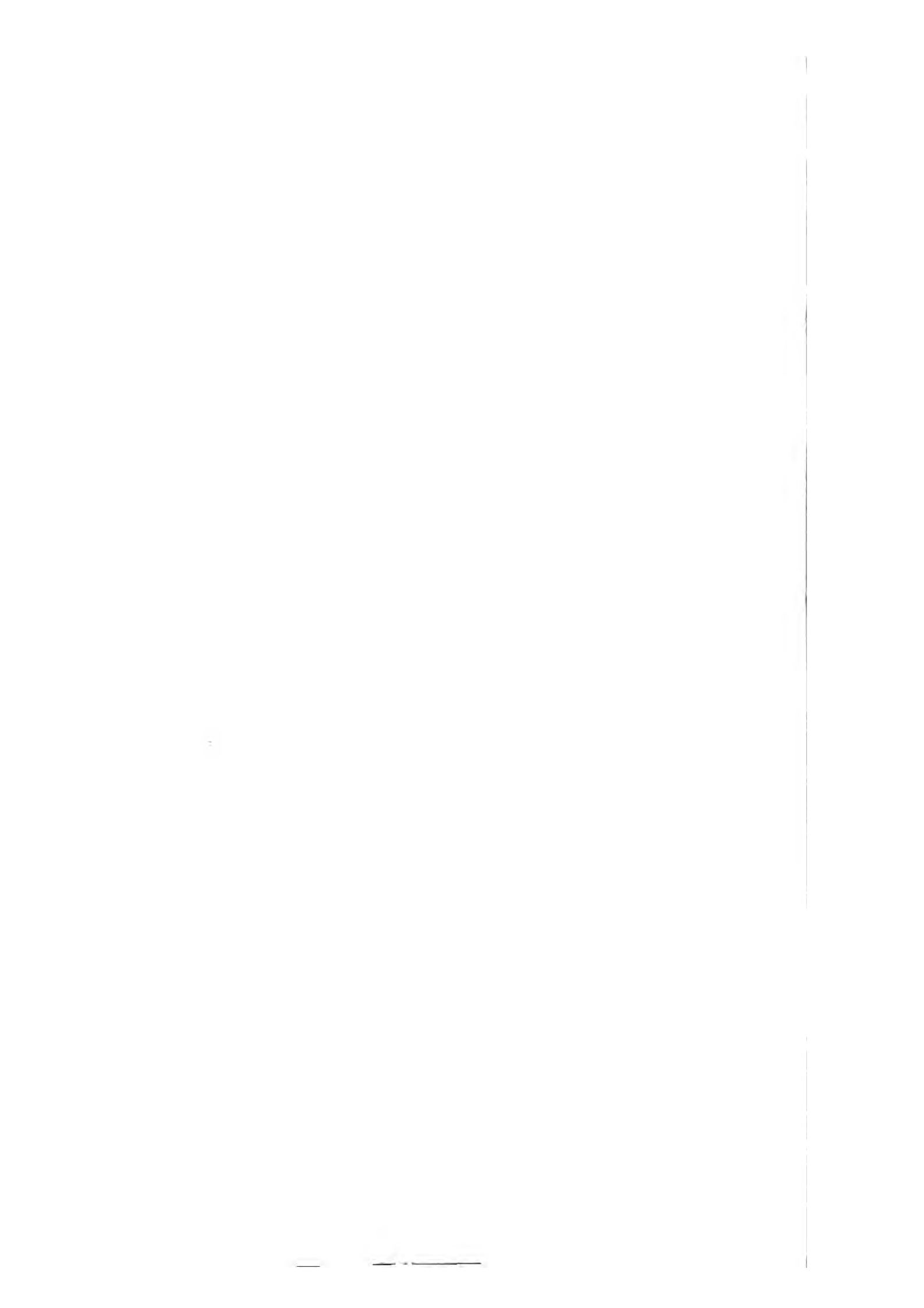
MRS. MUSGRAVE—AND HER HUSBAND.

THE GIRL AND THE MIRACLE.

TWIN SISTERS.

MARGOT—AND HER JUDGES.

HIS LOVE OR HIS LIFE



HIS LOVE OR HIS LIFE

A ROMANCE

BY RICHARD MARSH

AUTHOR OF "A SPOILER OF MEN," "JUSTICE—SUSPENDED," ETC.



LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS
1915



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HIS LOVE OR HIS LIFE

CHAPTER I

RELEASED

IT so chanced that in Canterstone Gaol Graham Burke was the only prisoner who was to be discharged on the morrow. When, in accordance with custom, he was taken in the morning to have a final interview with the Governor, he made one observation which caused that personage, as it were, to prick up his ears. Captain Winsley had been a naval officer; his blue eyes had that peculiar quality which marks the man who has spent the greater part of his life on the sea. The prisoner, tall, broad-shouldered, bearded, seemed dignified even in his hideous prison costume. As the Governor, who was short, looked up at him there was a twinkle in his glance, as of recognition that here was at least a man.

“So your time’s up to-morrow, Burke! I hope you’ll do well outside. One of the best things I can wish you is that we may never meet again. Have you formed any plans for the future?”

A smile flickered across the prisoner’s face; it was a grave smile, which only seemed to accentuate his air of gravity.

“I have suffered for another’s crime, Captain Winsley; I am not the only innocent man you have

had in your keeping, but I am one of them ; the law is an ass. Canterstone Gaol has taught me so much. The law found me guilty of what I am innocent of ; I am going to prove it. That will be my principal occupation, I expect, for some time to come."

The next morning, while a great part of the world was still asleep, Graham Burke strolled out of Canterstone Gaol ; strolled was the word which best describes the leisurely manner of his progression. When he found himself on the right side of the great entrance, and the wicket door through which he had emerged had been closed, he took half a dozen steps, then stopped and turned, so that he faced the grim, grey walls.

"To think that I should have been inside you for two whole years, for nothing ; for less than nothing ; that two years should have been taken out of my life—because the law is an ass ; that I, an innocent man, should have been punished instead of the knave ; it really is too funny !"

Half laughing, he shook his fist at the cold, hard walls, which somehow seemed to be suggestive of cruelty.

"It's just as well that I'm a man who can enjoy a joke even when it's against himself ; if you have used many as you have used me, if there were any abstract justice in the world, not one of your stones would be left upon another."

Later that same morning, two young ladies were passing along a lane which was not very far from the ancient township of Great Erdington, in Kent. They came to a little copse of young firs and spruces, which was on one side of the road. They paused, and one of them said—she was rather tall, held herself erect, and was generally good to look at—

“That’s private, but I don’t see why we shouldn’t go into it all the same ; I often do go into it, I’ve come to regard it almost as my own particular property. I am never disturbed, at least I never have been yet, and as for the owner, he certainly is not likely to turn us out.”

“Who is the owner ?” asked the other girl. “You speak as if you knew him.”

“I did—once ; but I’m not likely to claim his acquaintance if I am ever so unfortunate as to meet him again. Can you get over the stile?—it’s really not meant for a stile—and be careful of the top rail, it’s loose. This is what I call my path ; do you know, I believe it is principally my feet which have made it. Isn’t it pretty in here after that dusty road ?”

“This certainly is nice, though I thought the lane was pretty too ; it wasn’t particularly dusty. What house is that ?”

They could see, through the trees, that on the other side of the copse there was a low hedge, and not very far from this hedge was a house. It was to this that the girl referred ; whose name, by the way, was Olive Barber.

“That house belongs to the owner of this copse ; it’s called The Old House, which, so far as I know, is the only name it has. It’s a very ancient house indeed, as you can see for yourself.” There was a gate in the hedge, and they were leaning over it. “I have heard that part of it dates from 1499, or some such ridiculous date ; though, if it comes to that, it might be older from the look of it.”

“What a dreadful state it’s in ! The garden is all choked with weeds and things, and the windows of the house look as if they hadn’t been cleaned for years ; yet it seems furnished. Does any one live in it ?”

"At the present moment, no. You see, the gentleman who used to live in it happens to be in gaol; so of course he can't be in two places at once."

"In gaol? Enid! Really, do you mean it? What is he there for?"

"I have been told, for his country's good. The details I can't give you, it would be such a very long story. He had a ward, and he robbed her, and for that they sent him to gaol."

Something in the speaker's tone seemed to strike Miss Barber as significant. She glanced keenly at her face.

"Robbed his ward? Did you know her?"

There was an interval of silence before the other answered. She had plucked a spray of lilac from a gorgeously blooming tree which hung over the hedge, and was holding it out at arm's length as if to admire it better. Her tone, when she spoke, was perhaps studiously indifferent.

"Know her? Very well; as well, perhaps, as any one else in the world. Her name was Enid Whitaker." The other started.

"Enid! Do you mean—that you are the ward he robbed?"

"I do; I am that singularly fortunate person. Do you know, Olive, there was a time when he pretended that he was quite fond of me—that was the time he was robbing me; and that's why I'm so poor. My father left me more than two thousand a year; my guardian, whom he trusted, and who pretended to be so fond of me, left me less than two hundred; had not his opportunities to display his affection been prematurely curtailed, I dare say it would have been even less."

"How dreadful for you; some one told me that you

had lost money, but I did not know how. Did you—prosecute?”

Again there was a perceptible period of silence before Miss Whitaker replied. She shook the spray of lilac so vigorously that some of the blossom tumbled off. Her shapely mouth was wrinkled by a curious smile.

“The law, my dear Olive, is a very peculiar thing. I have learnt so much. Who was the actual prosecutor I don't quite know ; my name was used, with or without my leave. I did all I could to make the case against him as light as possible, so they only gave him two years' hard labour ; he is serving his sentence now.”

“Pardon me, Miss Whitaker ; in that respect, you are in error—my sentence is finished—I have served it.”

It was not surprising that the two girls jumped—the voice, which was both clear and deep, came from behind them. When they looked round they found themselves confronted by a very tall man, probably six foot two or three. His big beard was so fair as to be almost white ; he had blue eyes ; he was dressed in an old suit of dark-grey tweed ; and he leaned upon a stick which had apparently not long ago been torn out of a hedge. Had he been a ghost, Miss Whitaker could scarcely have been more taken aback. She was probably a young woman who seldom lost her self-possession, but it was all gone then. The colour in her cheeks kept coming and going ; she seemed unable to put a sentence together.

“You ! I did not know—I had no idea——”

“That my sentence was so nearly served. No ? You must have a short memory, Miss Whitaker. You surely must remember, since you were present on the occasion, that the judge sentenced me to two years' hard labour twenty-four months ago to-day. Probably

to you the exact date was a matter of no importance—is that the explanation?”

With an effort the girl seemed to pull herself together.

“It is two years ago to-day? I had forgotten.”

“Trivialities do escape one’s memory. In gaol one counts the days; outside one doesn’t; there is the difference. Still, I should have thought that you, of all persons in the world, would have been likely to make a note of the day on which I might be expected to make my reappearance in the world.”

The man and the girl eyed each other. While it was not exactly a threat which was in his glance, it was something which made the girl seem to shrink from him with something which was very like terror.

“I suppose I was stupid; I might have kept the date in my mind; had I done so, you would certainly not have found me here.”

“Is that so? I can easily believe it. Discretion was ever one of your strongest qualities; and, in appearance at least, Miss Whitaker, you don’t seem to have changed. Since you are here, is there nothing which you wish to say?”

“Nothing, except to express my regret for being here. Come, Olive, we had better go—we become trespassers now that the owner has returned.”

Miss Whitaker began to retrace her steps down the path along which she had brought her companion; the man moved aside to let her go. Miss Barber hesitated; as she regarded the stranger there was a very singular expression on her face, which, all at once, he seemed to notice. She was apparently about to speak—but perhaps she could not find words. With a little nod towards him, she followed her friend. Not a word was exchanged by the pair as they passed over the winding,

woodland path ; but so soon as they were out of the copse and again on the high-road, Miss Barber, turning to her companion, said—

“ Enid, I think you were rather horrid to him.” She spoke with a little air as of personal grievance.

“ I was not half as horrid as I should like to have been—if you only knew how I hate him ! And to think that I should put myself in such an ambiguous position ! It doesn't seem two years since he went to gaol.”

“ I dare say it seems more than two years to him.”

“ I wish it seemed twenty.” Miss Whitaker spoke with such sudden heat that the other stared ; being aware that she prided herself on always keeping cool. “ Rather than he should have caught me as he did, I'd have—I'd have done almost anything. Doesn't he look well ? I thought prison undermined men's health ; it doesn't seem to have affected his.” Some wave of passion seemed suddenly to rise up within her. “ Olive, there has only been one man for whom I have ever cared two pins, and there'll never be another, and that man is Graham Burke. It was all I could do to keep myself from telling him so when I saw him ; am I not a fool ? ”

Miss Barber looked at her with very serious eyes, as if considering.

“ I don't know. He looked to me like a man any girl could be fond of, and not in the least like a thief.”



CHAPTER II

RHODA SHAW

As the two girls went down the path Graham Burke stood looking after them. As he watched, he stroked his beard with his left hand. When they came to a bend, and were about to vanish out of sight, he said to himself—

“There goes a girl who, but for the grace of God, would be my wife. After all, there is something to be thankful for.” Then, turning, he regarded the overgrown garden and the dilapidated house which was on the other side of the hedge, and he added: “But not much.”

A rueful expression began to come on his face, as, by degrees, he took in all there was to see.

“Somehow, I didn’t anticipate quite this. I have kept on thinking of the place, if I’ve thought of it at all—I’ve had so many things to think of—as it was when I left it, neat as ninepence, everything in excellent trim. Of course, I ought to have known better. I never realised that the servants would go, and the gardeners, and that since there would be no one to look after things, they would be left to go to rack and ruin. I have always had a sneaking notion that some good fairy would preserve something like order. This is worse than my worst dreams.”

He opened the gate, which could with difficulty be induced to swing on rusty hinges, and went through.

“One would hardly think that this had ever been a garden ; still, less than two years ago it was the sweetest and dearest, and I do believe the prettiest, in the county. I rather fancy there have been thieves in here who have helped themselves to anything they fancied ; I miss things which have been among the glories of the Old House garden long before I was born. Why shouldn't they come to pick and choose ? There was no one to say them nay. I wonder if it will ever be a garden again—who knows ?”

His glance fell on the house ; his expression grew more rueful still.

“If it's like that outside, what must it be like within ? Shall I be able to sleep there, amid the dirt and the spiders, and who knows what ? I wonder if there have been thieves there also ? There were things well worth stealing. What a humorist the law is ! It sends a man to gaol for what he didn't do ; it might at least provide some one to keep an eye on his house and his land, his goods and chattels, having deprived them of their natural custodian. This is a home-coming ! I never dreamed it would be like this—all desolation.”

He stretched out his arms and opened his chest and drew a great breath, as if to relieve himself of a weight which pressed on him ; and with an obvious effort he smiled, a twisted smile.

“It's the fortune of war. I suppose one ought to have a heart for any fate. Let's see if anything at all is left inside. But how am I going to get in ? There is certainly no one to open the door. I shall have to play the part of housebreaker and try a window.”

The house dated from various periods. There were windows of many sorts ; some of them set deep in thick walls. It would not be easy for a man of his size to get through them, even if he took the frame out. He

came to what we nowadays call a French window, of an antique type, with small, leaded panes of glass, which were not easy to look through. He tried this.

“My word! It’s open! That looks as if there had been visitors since I was here. Perhaps they’ve left a note for me to acknowledge hospitality.” He had drawn the door wide open now and stood inside. “Phew! how dusty it is! Whoever has been here has not thought it necessary to admit much air; and—the dirt! Can it ever be made sweet and clean again? What’s that?” He listened. “Rats or mice. Probably both; apparently in hordes. They seem to be scampering all over the house. What have they been living on during the last two years? Who would think that this was the drawing-room of which my mother was so proud, this haunt of cobwebs and of everything the soul of a good house-wife hates?”

He passed from room to room, finding everywhere proof of how easy it is for a neglected house to degenerate into an abode of all uncleanness. He paused at the foot of the principal staircase. So far he had confined his investigations to the ground floor.

“I wonder if there is a bed upstairs in which it would be possible for me to sleep, a more comfortable bed than the coir mattress and wooden plank I have known for the last two years. Hullo! what’s that? That doesn’t sound like rats.” As he stood looking up the stairs, footsteps were heard on the landing above. “That sounds as if I had not only had visitors; but as if I’d got them still.”

A head appeared over the banisters above; two eyes looked down at him; presently a voice inquired—

“Who are you?” The question seemed to tickle Burke.

“It appears to me,” he said, “that that inquiry is

rather out of its proper place. Isn't it I who ought to ask who are you? It is a lady, isn't it?" The head vanished; presently a figure appeared at the top of the stairs, the figure of a young woman. "You'll pardon my intrusion, but you see I happen to be the owner of this house, and I didn't know that I was entertaining friends."

"You're the owner of the house? I thought the owner was in quod."

"I was in quod, even so recently as this morning, but it so chances that I'm in quod no longer; I've just come home. I was afraid the house was empty, but since I do seem to have a visitor, would you mind telling me what your name is? Don't be frightened."

"I'm not frightened; I never was frightened of any man yet! I should not think any woman could be frightened of you."

"You think not? You must have sharp eyes if you can see so much from where you are. Hadn't you better come a little closer? Shall I come up or will you come down?"

On the instant the girl descended; with an air of fearlessness and perfect unconcern, she paused a step above him. They regarded each other. She was apparently about sixteen or seventeen years old, slim and straight, with great black eyes, scarlet lips, dark brown skin, and a mass of jet black hair, which, unconfined, hung over her shoulders. She wore no covering on her head; an old red shawl was thrown across her shoulders; her shabby skirt scarcely reached to her ankles; thick laced boots were on her feet; she was young, and wild, and healthy. When they had eyed each other for several seconds, he said—

"You're a gipsy." Her retort breathed defiance, as if his words had conveyed an imputation.

“What’s the harm if I am?”

“There certainly is no harm in being what you are. I am inclined to wish that I also was a gipsy. What’s your name?”

“Rhoda!”

“Rhoda what? Or do your people only have one name?”

“Of course not; I’m Rhoda Shaw.”

“And I’m Graham Burke, so now we know each other. Without wishing to appear inhospitable, or to trespass on your confidence, may I venture to ask to what I owe the pleasure of your presence here?”

She was silent, as if his words were a trifle above her head, and she was not quite sure of his meaning. Then, all at once, she broke into voluble speech. Her voice was not unmusical; as she spoke, her eyes seemed to catch fire.

“We’re camping out over at Wilmington, on the heath. Yesterday Ben had been having a drop—Ben’s my man—he’d caught me talking to a Gorgio. He’s that jealous I daren’t look at a man while he’s about. Last night he began to hit me; he was well in drink by then. If I hadn’t made a run for it he’d have killed me; he nearly killed me once before. He tripped over a rope, and before he was up I was off. I’d noticed this house more than once, and I’d heard that the man it belonged to was in quod. As I’d never slept in a real house in my life, and I didn’t know where else to go to—he followed me pretty nearly to the end of the lane—I thought I’d try what it seemed like, so I came in here.”

“When was that?” She seemed to consider.

“That was last night, latish. I got into one of the beds upstairs, and I’ve been there ever since, sleeping. I must have slept! I haven’t had much sleep because

of Ben being on the drink the last few days ; I suppose that and the bed—it was a soft un—made me sleep it out ; but I've done no harm to you nor to any one. I haven't touched a thing."

"Who said you had ? I'm not suggesting it. Did you say that you found the bed comfortable ?"

"Rather ! I never see one like it. You just lay on it, and you sink right in ; it was that soft I couldn't have stopped awake if I'd tried."

"Is that so ?—and did it strike you as—reasonably clean ?"

"I never noticed. When I'm dead beat, as I was last night, clean or dirty don't make no difference to me. I've slept in a wet ditch before this, and slept well."

"I see. Then you're hardly likely to be very critical."

In spite of what he said, she seemed to be considering him with critical eyes, seeming to hesitate before she put a question.

"Is it true that you've just come out of quod ?"

"Absolutely. I received my discharge this morning. I've been there two years."

"What was it for ?"

"For something somebody else did." The reply did not appear to occasion her surprise.

"It often is like that. First you get sent for what some one else did, and then some one else gets sent for what you did. I've noticed it often. To me there don't seem no sense in it ; a chap gets to feel that whether he's on the straight or the cross it don't make no difference."

"I perceive, Rhoda, that you're a philosopher. I don't know how old you are——"

"I mayn't look it, but I'm well turned eighteen."

She said it as if he had accused her of the crime of youth.

"Are you indeed—so old as that? You seem to have had some experiences in your eighteen years."

"I have; few girls more. But, I say, I can't stop here talking to you. What's the time?"

"I haven't a watch. There used to be clocks in the house, but I don't suppose any of them are going. I should say, roughly, it's between twelve and one."

"Is it? I'll have to be stepping; I must have slept. Ben will think I've left him."

"Are you going back to Ben?"

The question seemed to amaze her. "Where else should I go? He's my man. It's only two or three times a year he's on the drink; when he isn't, no girl could want a better one." Something in his attitude seemed to inspire her with sudden doubt. "I tell you I've touched nothing. Aren't you going to let me pass?"

"With pleasure, if you wish it. I trust Ben will not resent your having availed yourself of my unconscious hospitality."

She eyed him sullenly. "I don't know what you mean. I'm not afraid of Ben—not me!"

He moved to one side. She went quickly past him; he listened; he could hear her footsteps, then there was a sudden noise.

"That sounds as if she had shut the window with rather a bang." There was a look in his eyes which was almost wistful as they were turned in the direction from which the noise had come. "I'm sorry she's gone; she was alive; this is so clearly a house of the dead. I don't see how I'm going to stay in it as it is, all alone. I'm not sure that I wouldn't rather go back to Canterstone. I think I'd better pay a visit to certain friends of mine in Great Erdington. When I've had a clear

understanding with them, if I do decide to live here, I ought to get some one to act as an attendant, and to put at least a couple of rooms into something like decent order. I'm not like Rhoda ; I may have had to sleep in something worse than the bottom of a ditch ; but I doubt if I ever could reach the point at which clean or dirty made no difference to me. What's that? Was it a rat squeaking? It might have been. It seemed to come from upstairs. I'm not a nervous subject, nor, I fancy, superstitious ; I certainly am not over-particular, but I doubt if I shall care to stay all alone in this—it might almost be a mausoleum, it is so crowded with memories of the dead—at any rate, in this receptacle of dirt in which rats make noises like that."

CHAPTER III

A ROAD-SIDE INCIDENT

LATE on the afternoon of the following day, Graham Burke was walking along the road which connects Great Erdington with the Old House; it is called a road, but is, in reality, a lane, and at that season of the year a very pretty one. But Mr. Burke was in no mood to enjoy the beauty with which spring was decking nature; his very attitude showed it. He walked like a man who is weary, physically, mentally, and perhaps morally too. Before quitting prison he had dreamed dreams of how delightful he would find the world, of all the good things which, in spite of everything, he would do in it. Now, scarcely more than twenty-four hours after his return to freedom, he was not sure that he was not as well off in gaol; everything was against him, all his hopes had miscarried; where he had placed his faith he had found treachery; instead of friends he had found hostility. He had thought that there were one or two who would be glad to see him; so far he had not chanced on a single person who, at sight of him, had not turned his face the other way.

And he was penniless. He had been to town to make certain investigations, of which nothing had come; he had returned with less than two shillings in his pocket; had he possessed more, he would have hired some sort of vehicle to take him over the five miles

which divided the country town from the place which still he called his home. He was walking because he had no money with which to ride. It seemed to him that he would never reach his journey's end, never before had those five miles seemed to be so long. He had traversed more than half the distance, and had reached a little stream which in that part of the world is called a river. It ran beneath a bridge, on either side of which was a wall. He leaned against the wall to rest; filling his pipe, he began to smoke. The tobacco had a soothing effect. His glance wandering hither and thither, it was borne in upon him after a while that the country thereabouts was good to look upon. Presently he noticed something; he commented on it.

"That looks as if the bridge were falling to pieces, as if, like some of us, it had seen its best days. It must be pretty old; I doubt if it's been repaired in my time."

Moving from where he was, he crossed to a part of the bridge at the end where the bricks had fallen away; quite a quantity of the brickwork had been displaced.

"That doesn't look as if it had fallen, it looks as if it had been knocked down." He examined the thing more closely. "It hasn't fallen; it has been knocked away; some heavy vehicle must have gone up against it, and then gone crashing through the hedge." A tall, straggling hedge, which just then was beginning to be a riot of wild roses, honeysuckle, blackberry, and may blossom, ran parallel with the bridge along the side of the road. The ground dropped on the other side of the road. Below and beyond was a neglected copse which was a wilderness of undergrowth. "Whoever knocked those bricks down seems to have made a hole in the hedge."

Some twelve or fourteen feet of the hedge had been

broken away, as if some heavy body had recently crashed through it. With his pipe between his lips and his hands in his jacket pockets, Mr. Burke considered the matter attentively.

"I wonder what's happened ; it looks as if something had. If anything did go through that hedge it would have a considerable tumble on the other side. Hullo ! What's that ? There's something there."

Standing in the gap, he perceived that something was lying amid the undergrowth beneath. It was so dense and so high as to serve as a screen. He had to scramble down the precipitous bank before he could make out what the thing was.

"It's a motor-car, as I'm a tinker, turned turtle. I wonder if any one was in it when it fell. If so, some one will be in it now."

The bare idea was enough to cause him to forget his weariness. It was a huge car, seeming larger as it lay there upside down. Apparently a new one. It looked as if, for some cause or other, it had swerved, possibly when it was moving at speed, had come in contact with the brickwork at the end of the bridge, had torn it clean away, and then, crashing through the hedge, had turned a somersault as it descended on to the ground below. It must have come down with tremendous force. If, as presumably was the case, some one had been on it at the time, unless that some one had been uncommonly active, he must have fallen with the car, and quite possibly was lying under it still. Graham Burke was no weakling, yet to move that great vehicle even by so much as an inch was a task altogether beyond his power. He satisfied himself, however, that there was no one under it then. It was a touring car. The side doors and the back had been burst open ; by stooping Mr. Burke was able to perceive that no one was

within. The doors in front had also been forced open. There was no one on the driver's seat, nothing to show that a driver had been there. He could not make it out. If the car had been moving, there must have been a driver ; it must all have happened in an instant—there could not have been time for him to scramble from his seat. If he had been in his seat he must either have been pinned beneath the car or else flung out ; if he had been flung out he could hardly have escaped uninjured, yet there was nothing and no one to be seen ; nothing about the underwood to show that such a thing as a human body ever had been there. Mr. Burke was puzzled. He looked about him for something which might shed light on what seemed to him to be a mystery. A piece of paper was lying almost at his feet. He picked it up ; it was an envelope which had been through the post ; when he glanced at the address he was amazed to see that it was addressed to himself :

“Graham Burke, Esq., The Old House,
“Great Erdington.”

“It certainly is addressed to me, but though it's been opened, and the contents taken out, it never reached me. The handwriting is strange ; the post-mark seems to be West Strand ; what a very queer thing ! Did it belong to some one who was in this unfortunate car ? If so, how comes that some one to be gone, and the envelope left behind ? Why, it's—it is blood ; I thought it was damp ; it's soaked with blood ; my fingers are all smeared with it. What does it mean ? If the person who had this envelope was so hurt as that, what's become of him ?” He glanced down. “I believe my boots are all drabbled with blood ; they are ; the leaves, the grass, the weeds, are

all covered with it; the ground seems sodden with blood. It looks as if there had been a tragedy, which is not surprising; but if so, where's the victim?"

He proceeded to subject the surrounding tangle of briar and bush to a thorough search, without finding anything. Feeling somewhat mystified he gave audible expression to his thoughts.

"Well, this is most uncommonly queer."

"It is queer, isn't it?—and the queerest part of it is that I should have seen you at it; you may find that really funny if you don't watch out."

The voice came from the road above. Looking up he saw that a short, thick-set young man, with a handkerchief wound round his neck, in an old cord jacket and ancient leggings, was standing in the gap observing him. There was something in his attitude and the expression of his saturnine countenance which was scarcely friendly.

"Who are you, sir?" inquired Burke. "Have you been there long? Did you see this accident take place?"

"You mayn't have known it, but I did, if accident you call it. I have known that sort of thing called something else."

"What do you mean by that sort of thing? What's happened?"

"Pretty innocent, aren't you? And you must think I'm simple. I am, but not quite so simple as that. Let me tell you quite plainly that I saw everything; that's what I saw, and don't you make any mistake about it."

"You seem to be making a mistake; you seem to think that I saw everything; the first thing I saw was the car lying here. If, as you say, you saw everything, perhaps you'll tell me what you did see?"

The youth grinned, not pleasantly ; he shook his head.

“ Oh, no, you don't ; not quite, you don't. What I saw I did see, and no one knows what that was better than you ; but unless you feel that you'd like to make it worth my while, I think I'd better tell my little tale to some one else. I don't want to get myself into trouble because I happen to see what I did see as I was walking along the road. But I must say this, you're a cool hand, you are.”

The speaker's words and manner were so very singular that Mr. Burke stared ; he wondered if the fellow were drunk.

“ You may understand what you're talking about, but I don't. It strikes me, my lad, that you're—a humbug ; that you saw no more than I did ; that you're trying to make me believe that you're in possession of some mysterious information, when, as a matter of fact, you know nothing at all. If you did see anything, if you take my advice, you'll tell me at once what it was.”

Mr. Burke made as if to ascend to the road above.

“ Why, there's blood upon his hands, and I believe it's on his clothes ; so you did get splashed, did you ? Yet he pretends he don't know what I'm talking about.” The youth suddenly changed his tone. “ If you think you're coming up here to play tricks with me, if you take my advice you'll stay where you are. I'm not the sort that you can monkey with as you did with him, and you've got it straight.” As Mr. Burke began to ascend, the speaker showed a disposition to retreat. “ You keep off. Don't you come near me, not with those hands ; I won't have it. Do you hear ? Don't you come too close ; I won't have it.”

Mr. Burke had paused in his ascent, as if to smile.

"What's the matter with the lad? One would think that he's afraid I'm going to hurt him. I only want you to tell me if you did see anything, what it was you saw."

"And I say I'm not going to, that's what I say. If you made it worth my while perhaps I might. I'm a poor lad. You look as if you were a gentleman; it ought to be worth a fiver after what you've done."

"What do you mean by after what I've done? You're a young fool. Don't I tell you——" The youth interrupted him.

"Here's some one coming. I'm not going to be mixed up with a thing like this; I'm legging it."

So far as Burke was concerned, the youth disappeared from view. He ascended to the road to see what had become of him. Still there was nothing to be seen. The presumption was that he had scrambled through the hedge on the other side and taken refuge in the wood. As Mr. Burke was in doubt whether to follow him, he became conscious that some one was coming along the road, a feminine some one, on a bicycle; some one who, when she came abreast of him, stopped and descended from her machine. He began to realize what the youth had meant by his exclamation that some one was coming; but why he should have fled from such a vision of delight Graham Burke did not understand.

The feminine some one was very small, probably not over five feet; Graham Burke had to bend to look at her. She was quite a girl, she could scarcely have been twenty, and as Mr. Burke recovered from the bewilderment caused by the sudden disappearance of that strangely speaking youth, it began to seem to him that she was quite the prettiest thing in girls he had ever seen. He supposed her to be a stranger until she

addressed him by name ; it seemed incredible that, if he had ever seen her before, the fact should have escaped his memory. Apparently it had.

"Are you not Mr. Graham Burke?" she asked.

"I am ; but I—I'm ashamed to say I don't know who you are, though I feel very strongly that I ought to."

He had his cap in his hand ; she thought as she looked up at him towering above her with his blue eyes, fair hair, and fair beard, that he was very like a viking, one of those heroes of legend.

"I saw you yesterday morning when I was with Enid Whitaker, trespassing outside your house."

All at once a flush seemed to go all over the man, to dye his throat, his cheeks, his brow, all of him that was visible. Her words recalled the brief interview he had had with Miss Whitaker ; the memory stung him. He remembered that there had been some one with her, but his attention had been so absorbed by the girl who had brought such tragedy into his life, that he had altogether failed to notice what kind of person that some one was. He had a hazy recollection that Miss Whitaker's companion had looked at him ; if he had looked at her it had been with unseeing eyes.

"I remember the occasion ; I ought to." His tone was grim.

"But yesterday morning was not the first time I saw you."

"Indeed? If that is the case I must have a more imperfect memory than I supposed."

"That is not necessarily the case considering the circumstances of our first meeting. I doubt if you really saw me even then ; but I saw you, your face was very close to mine ; it was impossible that I should ever forget you. You saved my life."

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN WHO SAVED HER LIFE

MR. GRAHAM BURKE was troubled about many things ; this young woman's allusion to his encounter with Enid Whitaker had brought back some of them. No doubt she knew that he was just out of gaol, and the whole miserable story, from Miss Whitaker's point of view ; it galled him to think of it. And he was tired, sick at heart, practically penniless, almost without hope, with that dilapidated, cobwebbed, dust-filled ancient house for his only haven. Then there was that unpleasant-featured youth who had vanished so quickly ; his words had left a sting behind. Altogether Mr. Graham Burke was in no mood for a softer emotion. Yet this minute maiden, so small that he could have borne her on one arm like a child, caused—for some reason which was beyond him altogether—his pulses to quicken ; it must have been the way in which she looked at him. Her head thrown back—she had to throw it back to see his face ; her eyes looked up to him with something in them so friendly that—perhaps because of late he had been unused to friendly looks—it seemed to him quite beautiful.

“ I saved your life ? You are joking. I never saved so much as a puppy's.”

“ You saved mine—two years ago last January.”

He knit his brows as if in an effort to think.

"Two years ago last January? Let me see; where was I two years ago last January? Why——" Something occurred to him; his expression changed. "Were you at Beaulieu?"

"I was—now don't you remember?"

"How very odd!—at the hotel? When there was a fire? Surely you weren't——"

"I was."

"That beats banagher! You don't mean to say you were the little girl——"

"Whose life you saved? I was; and I am."

"But I thought you were a little girl."

A faint flush came over the damsel's cheeks. "I was in bed when you came to save me. I suppose that's how it was. I believe I do look absurdly young when I'm in bed. And the next morning, when I tried to find you, you were gone."

"I had to leave for England; I'd had a telegram; that was the beginning of the business about Miss Whitaker's estate, which ended as you know. That morning I received the first intimation that something was wrong."

"I hope you suffered no inconvenience."

"Not the least; only I had a feeling that I had some wonderful dream in which I'd seen the face of an angel; that was yours."

"Was it?" She smiled.

"I doubt if mine was very like an angel's face just then. I did not know myself when I looked in a glass, I was singed all over—scorched—black. I had to be shaved; I was such a sight that I believe people were prejudiced against me when the trouble began."

"Did you ever know who it was you had saved?" He shook his head. "Did you ever wonder?"

"When I got back to England I was so full of worries of all sorts and kinds—the world seemed

tumbling about me like a pack of cards—that I had no time to wonder.”

“I never knew your name. You had only arrived that night, so late that you hadn’t registered, so I’ve been wondering ever since who you were and if I should meet you again. You seemed to have been sent from—I like to think from heaven—just to save my life; then immediately afterwards you returned from whence you came.”

“Not exactly; I had come from Brittany and I went on to town.”

“Now that I have met you I hope you won’t let me lose sight of you again. I—I am half American; they say American girls have their own queer ways, which is meant to be an explanation if there seems to be anything odd in my saying that, with your kind permission, Mr. Burke, I should very much like to be your friend.”

“You are very kind, Miss—. I still don’t know your name.”

“My name is Barber—Olive Barber.”

As she said it she eyed him with what, if he had been in an observant frame of mind, might have struck him as rather a peculiar way.

“You are very kind, Miss Barber. I trust that at least you will never regard me as an enemy. Don’t exaggerate the service I did you; the building was on fire; they told me there was some one asleep in one of the bedrooms; I broke open the doors and found a small person—a girl of twelve or thirteen, as I thought—sitting up in bed, as if wondering where the smoke was coming from; I said nothing to her, I just picked her up and carried her out into the street; any man would have done the same.”

“Possibly; but no other man did. I heard all about it afterwards. You were the only man who volunteered.

The hotel was a flaming furnace. They warned you that you would scarcely get in and out again alive ; but you did ; and I'm not at all likely to exaggerate the service you rendered me. That's why I wish you to be my friend."

"In England young ladies don't make friends with gaol-birds, Miss Barber. I've just been doing time. I only came out of prison yesterday. I must have the prison taint still about me—take care."

There was an interval of silence. Miss Barber was regarding him very gravely. Then she said—

"I want you to answer a question, Mr. Burke—will you?"

"Oughtn't I to say that that rather depends upon what the question is?"

"Enid Whitaker has told me her story."

"Has she? The darling! Yet you are talking to me. That's strange!"

"Did you do it, Mr. Burke?"

"Why, I was found guilty! I've just done two years' hard labour, and was told I might consider myself lucky to have got off so lightly."

"That's not answering my question—were you guilty?"

"Oh, if it's the truth you want you shall have it." There was a quizzical smile on his face. "I wasn't guilty, and that makes it all so queer."

"I thought you weren't."

"Great Scott, you did! On what grounds? You know you've no right to jump to conclusions like that."

"I thought so, all the same. You'll laugh at me, but I was sure of it. You are not the stuff of which a thief is made."

"Miss Barber, how old are you? Let me tell you that some of the greatest thieves have looked most like

honest men. I know one or two now, men of the highest repute, whom you would trust with everything you had ; yet they are—well, I don't want to speak of them as they deserve, to you, but they are."

"You aren't, that's the difference. But you must have been very stupid! Yet you're not stupid as a general rule, not in the least."

"You flatter me! You're an extraordinary person, Miss Barber. I took you for a little girl, but you must be centuries old. You're quite right, I was stupid. I'm not sure that I wasn't something worse, because stupidity can reach a point at which it becomes inexcusable, and deserves all it gets. I was Enid Whitaker's guardian, though I'm only twelve years older than she is. She's twenty-three and I'm thirty-five. Her father died rather more than four years ago, when I was thirty-one. When he was on his death-bed he sent for me and told me what he'd done. He explained his will, and appointed me one of the executors. There were two of us. One was a General Anson, who was at that time in India: it turned out afterwards that he had died two or three days before the will was signed, and there I was in charge of everything; and that's where my stupidity began."

"Were you and Enid engaged to be married?"

Again Mr. Burke indulged in that quizzical smile; he drew a long breath.

"I don't know if we were or if we weren't, and that's the simple truth. Everything about the business was in the same sort of hazy condition. I never have made a clean breast of the whole thing to any one, but I will now, to you; I don't know why, but I will. I never was very fond of Enid Whitaker; you know she's got a pretty lively temper; there were times when her own father was afraid of her; and I was afraid of her, too;

she—well, I don't want to say anything, but she used to say that she was rather fond of me."

"She was very fond of you, I have not the slightest doubt of it."

"Then she had queer ways of showing it. I believe it was she who made her father appoint me as guardian. When it was possible to talk about such things I told her quite frankly that it was not an office for which I had any fancy. She led me a dance from the first. When I added that I would rather resign, she frightened me, she did really! then she calmed down and outlined a sort of scheme. I wasn't to bother about her affairs, they could look after themselves; when we were married we could look after them together; that was her idea, that we should get married."

"Her idea? Wasn't it yours? I thought that was a subject on which, as a rule, two people had the same idea."

"As a rule I suppose that is so, but——"—he was tugging at his beard as if in search of inspiration—"the fact of the matter is that I don't know how to put it. You are her friend, aren't you?"

"I met her some years ago when, for some time, we were rather intimate. Recently I met her again. I have taken a house not very far from here, and she's staying with me."

"Is that so? You've taken a house? I see; I didn't know. I don't want to say anything to prejudice you against her, but if that's the case I dare say you are aware that she is at times a little difficult to manage."

"I haven't found her so." Miss Barber smiled.

"You're lucky; I did. I never knew such a girl. I very soon got to the point of understanding that if she wanted to marry me, I didn't want to marry her. I don't want you to think I'm a bounder, or a sneak, or

anything of that sort ; I'm simply trying to tell you the simple truth ; things came to such a point that I had to tell her so."

"You told her that you didn't want to marry her?"

"Exactly ; that's what it came to. I was quite calm. I always was calm at the beginning ; I pointed out that I didn't think we were suited to each other, and that I thought she'd be happier with another kind of man, and—well, that kind of thing."

"And she said, when you'd finished——?"

"She didn't wait till I'd finished. She started before I'd got properly going, and what she said would fill a volume. There was a frightful row. She said—well, she said things that I didn't like to think of then, and I don't like to think of now. The next morning she came down to me, and began all over again. I didn't know when that sort of thing was going to stop. She had no right to come round and talk to me as if we'd been married for years."

"The powers forbid! I suppose there are some happy marriages."

"You can at least suppose it. But I was quite sure that ours wouldn't be a happy marriage, and as I didn't want to have any more unpleasantness, the day after she came round to me I went off."

"She inspired you with such lively anticipations of more visits to follow that you ran away!"

"That's what it amounted to. I went to the Riviera, and had quite a good time. Then I went to Beaulieu——"

"Where you saved my life."

"Where you say I saved your life——"

"I don't merely say so, you did save my life. Do you wish to have unpleasantness with me?"

There seemed to be something on the maiden's face which caused his eyes to gleam.

"That's rather a difficult question to have to answer, but I can imagine unpleasantness with you being rather nice."

"What an absurd thing to say!—unpleasantness is not nice with any one. At Beaulieu you got a telegram calling you home, and when you got home, you found that trouble had arisen about Enid Whitaker's trust money?"

"You've hit it precisely; you've no idea what a figure I cut. Of course I had been guilty of culpable negligence."

"I am beginning to suspect it."

"I had. Do you know, I had never really gone into the question of what she had and what she hadn't. Her affairs were found to be in an awful mess, and they blamed me."

"Naturally!—you were her guardian, the sole executor of her father's will. It was your duty to see that they were in proper order."

"I dare say, but—if I were to talk for a week I couldn't make you understand—Enid would never let me. I don't pretend I was very anxious; I never was much good at figures. While I'd been away she'd come of age. I'd forgotten all about her coming of age."

"No wonder she has the opinion of you she seems to have."

"Oh, I don't know what opinion she has of me, and I don't say she isn't right. Well, it turned out that there was scarcely a penny of her money left, that it had all gone somewhere. I was dumbfounded. I couldn't sleep; for nights together I didn't go to bed. It was then I began to see what a fool I'd been, and before I'd got anything like an insight into the situation they

arrested me ; and they took me before a man I'd hated all my life, a man named Nockolds—Alfred Nockolds. He was an unspeakable object as a boy ; I'd had to thrash him more than once for things for which he ought to have been skinned. He'd made money—God knows how some men do make money, but he had ; somehow he'd been appointed magistrate. He wanted to marry Enid himself. I'm certain I would never have stood in his way in that direction. When I found myself in the dock with him on the bench I should like to have given him the hiding of his life. And when he sneered at me, if Vincent——”

“ Who was Vincent ? ”

Vincent was the policeman who had me in charge ; he was a son of my father's gardener ; when we were lads we'd had a discussion in which he hadn't come off best ; just think of it—I was his prisoner. If he hadn't caught hold of my arm, when I caught Nockolds sniggering, I believe I should have given my old friend the magistrate a hiding in court. It's a sordid story, the whole of it. I never clearly understood what the charge was against me, even when the jury came into court and found me guilty. Then the chairman of Quarter Sessions, Harry Parkins, who was at school with me—at least, he was just leaving as I went—gave me a talking-to and told me what he thought of me, and how I might consider myself lucky they weren't going to hang me, or something of that sort. When the sentence of two years' hard labour was pronounced, I felt that I deserved it for being such a first-class idiot. All the time I've been in prison I've been trying to puzzle things out. I haven't succeeded yet ; but one conclusion I did arrive at, that I'd never stop till I did ; before I've done I'll make it as clear as such a thing can be made that, whatever I am, I am no rogue, that I

never touched a penny of Enid Whitaker's money, and that I've not the faintest idea who did."

"Considering that you were her guardian I'm not sure that it was not an offence against the law, and even against good morals, not to know what had become of it. She trusted you."

"Did she? Oh! I wonder! Knowing the circumstances as I did, I am inclined to think that it was I who trusted her, and that she took advantage of my confidence. That's a solemn fact, Miss Barber. There was a thief somewhere, that's sure; I'm not suggesting for a moment that she was the thief, but I should like to have a trifle on it that she had some suspicion who the thief actually was."

Miss Barber opened her eyes. "Do you think so, Mr. Burke?"

"I say, Miss Barber, that I'm willing to have a trifle on it. At the present moment I'm disposed to go no further."

At that point the conversation was interrupted by the advent of a third person, who was also on a bicycle, and in uniform.

"Here's a policeman coming," observed Miss Barber. "Is he a friend of yours?"

A grim look had come upon the gentleman's face.

"In a sense he is, since he's the man of whom I was telling you. The last time I saw him he took me to Canterstone Gaol with a pair of handcuffs on my wrists. It's Vincent."

An expression of distress was on the girl's countenance.

"I am so sorry; what shall you do?"

"Do!" Mr. Burke laughed. "Why, stop him, and ask him how he is."

CHAPTER V

P.C. VINCENT

IT proved not to be necessary to stop the advancing constable ; at sight of the couple standing by the roadside he stopped of his own accord. Descending from his bicycle, he accosted the gentleman with what was perhaps the suspicion of a grin.

"Good evening, Mr. Burke."

"Good evening, Vincent. I needn't ask you how you are ; as usual, you look in excellent health. Yours is a healthy occupation."

The policeman's grin grew broader. "You're not looking very bad, sir ; I've seen plenty look worse."

Miss Barber spoke. "I'll be getting on. I suppose The Old House is the address which will find you ?"

"For the present, at any rate. I suppose in any case I can arrange to have letters sent on."

Mounting her machine, Miss Barber departed. The constable and Mr. Graham Burke were left alone together. The policeman was looking the gentleman up and down ; Mr. Burke was observing him with a curious something in his eyes.

"It's some time since I saw you, Vincent."

"It is, sir. Did they use you very badly there ?"

"No, considering. I can conceive of places in which they might use one worse."

"You seem to be in rather a state, sir."

"I am; I wonder that young lady didn't notice it."

"She must have done; she couldn't help it, if she looked at you."

"She didn't comment on the fact if she did."

"What's that on your hands? Blood—and on your boots—and it's on your trousers."

"I'm afraid it is; I'm afraid it's pretty well all over me."

"What's happened here? What's come to the bridge? Has the brickwork fallen away? And what's made this hole in the hedge? Has anything been up?"

"That's what I should like to know."

The policeman was standing where the hedge had been broken away. "Why, there's something down there. Isn't it a motor-car? Why, it's upside down; something must have been happening."

"As you say, something certainly has. As I was walking along I saw, as you saw, the brickwork fallen away, and the hedge all broken; and then I saw the motor-car, turned turtle. There must have been an accident. I thought that some one must have been in it and gone over the bank with the car. I went down to look, then I found my hands all over blood, and my boots; there's a pool of blood on the ground; but I could find nothing which could have caused it."

"Couldn't you?" The policeman glanced at Mr. Burke rather oddly. "Perhaps I may have better luck; you might come down with me."

The two men descended the bank.

"Take care," warned Burke, "that's where the blood is."

The policeman stooped down. "There's quite a pool, and it's still wet. Something must have happened

here not very long ago. How long ago is it since you came?"

"I couldn't tell you exactly, perhaps half an hour."

"Half an hour? There must have been a fine lot here when you came; blood dries quickly. Here's the number of the car, it's a local one. Unless I'm mistaken, I've seen this car before. Why, of course, it's Mr. Nockold's. He bought a new one not so very long ago, and this is it."

"Nockolds—Alfred Nockolds?" Mr. Burke seemed startled.

"I'm sure it's his, certain. I know his new car quite well. Then, as it's his car, who'd be driving it? Whoever it was must have come over the bank with the car, and from all this blood here, must have been badly hurt; if you've been here half an hour, it must just have happened. You're sure the car was here when you came?"

"Certain, man. Don't I tell you that I saw the broken brickwork as you did, and then the car; and that when I went down to look at the car I found the blood? Who is likely to have been driving?"

"He's got a chauffeur, Mr. Nockolds has; but very often he drives himself and goes out alone. I heard him say once that he didn't like to be always bothered with a chauffeur. I know his chauffeur very well, his name is Higgins, a young chap, very steady. I can't see how he can have had an accident like this on a road of which he knows every inch."

"Does Nockolds drive well?"

"I can't say if he drives well; I know he does drive."

"He might have been in the car with Higgins; one of them might have been hurt, and the other carried him away."

"It might have been like that, but where did he

carry him to? The nearest cottage is a mile away. Mr. Nockolds is no light weight."

"He wasn't when I saw him last."

"He's got no lighter; I can't fancy him trying to carry anything, and I can't imagine Higgins carrying him. It looks to me as if there's a mystery here. Did Miss Barber see the car?"

"You know Miss Barber?"

"By sight I do. Did she see this?"

"I don't think she did; I didn't call her attention to it."

"You didn't call her attention to it? Why didn't you?"

"Why should I?"

"It seems to me that's a question which would answer itself. I should have thought that would be the first thing you would have done."

"I don't see why. Miss Barber's a stranger to me."

"You seemed to be talking to her very friendly."

"I only saw her once before in my life, and that's more than two years ago. It looks as if something very unpleasant had happened here. The sight of it might have upset her."

"I see; that's why you didn't call her attention to it; because the sight of it might have upset her; that was the only reason. It seems to me very queer that she didn't say a word about the state you were in. Didn't she ask you how you got that blood all over your hands? She must have noticed it."

"If she did, I can only repeat that she didn't say so. I don't know what you're driving at, Vincent, but you seem to be driving at something."

"I don't quite know what I'm driving at myself, Mr. Burke, but I do feel as if I was driving at something, as you put it."

"You're not suggesting that I had anything to do with upsetting the car?"

"I don't say so ; the suggestion comes from you. I say nothing. Are you stopping in your own house, Mr. Burke?"

"I am, if it interests you to know it."

"I don't say it does interest me, and I don't say it doesn't ; you needn't flame out like that at me ; I just asked the question."

When Graham Burke parted from Vincent, he was in rather a singular frame of mind. He was possessed by a feeling of vague unrest. It was not only that so many things were against him—everything, it seemed to him—there was besides a sense of something threatening, some vague, intangible terror into which he might unwittingly blunder.

The incident of the wrecked motor-car had affected him to a degree for which there seemed not to be the slightest justification. It had nothing to do with him ; yet there were first that evil-looking youngster's mysterious words ; then there was an uncomfortable something in Vincent's manner ; there might almost have been something about the tragedy of the motor-car for which he was to blame. And then that it should have belonged to Nockolds—Alfred Nockolds—the man he believed himself to have such good cause to dislike—in his then mood there seemed to be something ominous even in that. And then the blood which was on his hands, his boots, his trousers—could that have belonged to Nockolds? The thought was horrible.

A stream used to run in the ditch which was on one side of that part of the road ; he looked to see if it was dry. There was a tiny runnel of water, just enough to be apparent. He knelt and put his hands into it, only to discover that there was more mud than water.

He wiped his hands as best he could on the long grass ; the result was not very satisfactory. They looked no better than they had done before. He would have to wait till he got home.

Home! The word stung him ; it had come unconsciously to his lips. To what a home he was going! and in what a plight! However, it was no use kicking against the pricks, reviling his fate ; he had better brace himself to make the best of things ; hitherto he had not needed much bracing to enable him to do that ; the mischief was that he had to make an appreciable effort then.

When he reached The Old House the shadows were deepening ; clouds had come over the sky ; a storm seemed pending. He approached, as yesterday, by the gate in the hedge ; the main entrance was in ruins, the path to the front door obscured by weeds. So far as he knew, the door itself was locked and bolted. Yesterday he had gone in and out by that French window, which he used to re-enter.

“ I wonder if Miss Rhoda Shaw has again availed herself of my hospitality during my absence, of which she no doubt became quickly aware ? ”

He asked himself the question as he stood just inside the window ; he would not have minded if she were still in the house ; he had an odd feeling that he would rather any one should be in it than that he should have it all to himself. Something in the silence affected him in a manner of which he had not thought that he was capable. Then it was so uncomfortable, so dirty, so unfit for human habitation. Every chair needed to be taken out of doors, and beaten, dusted, washed, before it would be fit to sit upon. It was the same with everything ; there was nothing fit to touch ; not a corner in which any self-respecting person could be comfortable.

He had brought some food with him in his pocket. He had had very little to eat all day. As it was a long way to the nearest apology for a shop, where generally nothing was to be obtained, it had seemed to him to be the part of discretion to provide himself at least with something in the way of food. He took out the brown paper parcel in which it was contained. It was impossible to eat in that room ; he would try the kitchen, and was startled when he saw it. It had been one of the glories of the house, a great kitchen, with a finely laid brick floor, a big fireplace, solid furniture, an abundance of well-kept culinary utensils. Now, like everything else in the place, it presented a scene calculated to break the heart of a good housewife ; all the more so because of the labour which would be required to make it anything like what it ought to be.

A tall dresser ran along one side. The first drawer he opened contained dusters. Taking out two or three, he wiped a corner of the big table, then a chair. When he found knives and forks, plates and a glass, they needed wiping. He thought of the wine cellar. It had been fairly well stocked when he was last, in The Old House ; but it was below, approached by a flight of steps which were, no doubt, in an impossible state ; he might not be able to find the key ; he would be content with water. He had been used to water for more than two years, and was inclined to think that it was the finest drink in the world. There used to be lovely water in the well ; there was a tap in the adjoining scullery ; he took his glass and filled it, and emptied it at a draught. It was lovely still ; it did him good. Replenishing the glass, he went back to enjoy his meal.

And he did enjoy it, after a fashion, queer though it was, rude the manner in which he had to eat it. The light was fading, the last glimmer found its way with

difficulty through the dirt-obscured window pane; it suddenly occurred to him that he had nothing with which to take its place when it failed altogether. He used to have lamps; but if there was any oil, it was hardly likely to be in a burnable condition, to say nothing of the state in which the lamps themselves probably were. As for candles, there might be some somewhere about; he immediately started to look. On a shelf in a cupboard he came upon a cardboard box which purported to have held candles; its torn condition suggested that rats and mice had made free with whatever its contents might have been. His prospects of being able to relieve the gathering gloom were looking pretty slight when, taking a big tin off the mantel, he found, amid the miscellaneous odds and ends which were within, nearly three parts of a candle.

"It seems to me"—he apostrophized that piece of candle—"that you're a friend in need."

He found, and cleaned so far as he was able, an iron candlestick, in which he inserted his "friend in need"; by its glimmer he surveyed what was left of the feast.

"I don't think I want any more; now that the brute has been partly fed, you don't look very appetizing. Besides, there's breakfast to think of. I shall probably be starving in the morning. I shan't want to walk I don't know how many miles to get a mouthful. Now there's the question of a bed. I funk'd it yesterday; that bed in town was worth what I paid for it, but it can be shirked no longer. Since less than two shillings represents my supply of cash, and there's no lodging obtainable, even if I could pay for it, if I am to sleep, it will have to be here; so I'd better go through the bedrooms, and learn which offers the best accommodation with the least expenditure of labour. There ought

to be clean sheets somewhere in the house. I know there used to be plenty. How proud my mother was of her linen! She would have found it hard to realize that I should ever be in doubt as to whether there was a clean sheet."

He had opened the kitchen door, and with the lighted candle in his hand stood in the passage without listening.

"That doesn't sound as if it were rats, though I have heard that rats scampering about an old house can make some very curious noises. Can Miss Rhoda have come back again? What was that? Wasn't that some one speaking?—some one's calling my name!"

Some one was. As he stood there in the broad, stone-flagged passage, shading the candle with his hand a voice was distinctly heard which sounded as if it were close at hand.

"Graham!" it said: it was not raised, as if it were unwilling to become too audible, but it was distinctly heard.

"I ought to know that voice; it can't be—if it is—what can it mean?" It came again, even more distinctly than before.

"Graham! Graham Burke! Where are you, Graham?" The voice trembled.

"It is! I'll swear it! What's going to happen now?"

Striding quickly along the passage, he threw open the door, which was at the end. As he did so, there was what seemed very like a stifled scream, a feminine scream; then an exclamation, half alarm, half amaze.

"Oh, Graham, how you frightened me, how you have made my heart beat! I wondered where you were, if you were in the house at all. The house was all in darkness, I couldn't see a glimmer anywhere,

and——” The voice stopped suddenly, then went on in quite a different tone. “Graham, say you’re glad to see me ?”

“I am at least surprised. Had I expected you, I might have made a little preparation ; such, for instance, as dusting a chair so that it might be fit for you to sit upon.”

“Graham, don’t talk to me like that, don’t. If you only knew how I’ve longed for you, you wouldn’t, you couldn’t ; I don’t believe even you could, if you only knew how I’ve suffered these two long years.”

“How you’ve suffered ? While I was in gaol ? I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“I’ve come to try to make you understand. I would have come last night, only I didn’t dare.”

“It’s just as well you didn’t if you wished to see me ; last night I wasn’t here.”

Mr. Burke, putting down his candlestick, turned to confront his visitor.

CHAPTER VI

A VISIT FROM A LADY

THE visitor was Miss Whitaker. Her head was bare ; a wrap was thrown over her evening dress.

"We have just finished dinner," she said, as if by way of explanation. "I am staying with Olive Barber. She has taken The Pleasaunce, and she will dine so absurdly early. I could eat nothing ; I've been thinking of you all day. Directly we'd finished I slipped up to my room and got this wrap ; I've come across the fields nearly a mile to see you—in my slippers."

She held out her foot so that he could see the fragile shoe.

"I trust that the fields aren't damp ; that doesn't look to me as if it were very well suited for cross-country work. There will probably be rain before you get back."

"I don't care if there is, and I don't care if I get soaked through, if—you'll only say you're glad to see me. Graham, say you're glad to see me."

"Isn't that rather a good deal to ask ?"

"Why ?" She put her hand up to her breast, as if there were something there which hurt. "Please—please be kind ; if you only knew—if you only knew how I have longed—with a longing which was almost past bearing—to see you. Don't look at me like that.

I can't bear it. Graham, kiss me! Take me in your arms and kiss me."

She spoke with a sudden passion which seemed to transform her into another being. A moment before she had stood there very straight and, in spite of the tremors which evidently possessed her, self-contained and even cold. Now dignity, restraint, coldness, she cast them from her; she was an eager, wild-eyed, frenzied woman. When, instead of instantly doing what she asked, he drew a little back, she cried, as if she were some wounded animal,

"Graham! You shall kiss me! You shall!"

She would have leaped at him, have thrown her arms about his neck and strained him to her, but he caught her by the wrists and held her off. He was cool enough; her cheeks flamed, his had paled.

"You must take me for a curious sort of creature, to suppose, after what has happened, that I am willing to begin it all over again."

"It never would have happened if—if you had not been so cruel."

"Explain yourself. I never did understand you very well; I have grown even denser."

"You haven't. You always did understand me, as no one else ever did do. You've known how I've loved you ever since I was a little child, how my love has grown with my stature, until, when I reached an age at which a woman has a right to love, you were all the world to me. You could have done anything you liked with me, except one thing."

"Indeed; that's news; what's that?"

"Not love me. When I began to doubt if you loved me I could have killed first you and then myself; it was your fault, all that has happened. You shouldn't have been so cruel."

He sighed, the look on his face suggesting that he was finding himself in a very delicate situation.

"It's the old story all over again. You sent me to gaol; you robbed me of all that a man holds dearest—good name, position, reputation; you had me branded as a felon—not because I was one, not because I'd taken a single farthing that was yours, but because——" He shrugged his shoulders. "When a man asks a woman to marry him and she won't, he has to make the best of it and hold his peace. I never have wanted to marry you—I've never given you the least cause to suppose I did."

"That's not true. Even when you were a boy you used to say that I should be your wife."

"When I was a boy! I don't remember the occasion, but if I ever did say such a thing it was because you made me. I can't conceive what has induced you to reverse what is generally held to be the ordinary course of things, but you have made love to me ever since I can remember."

"I don't deny it. Do I deny it? Have I ever denied it?"

"But the point is that never once have I pretended that I loved you."

"You said you'd marry me."

"I deny it. It's not a true statement of the case. I never disliked you. I was quite willing that we should be friends——"

"I also have been willing to be friends, if you understood by friendship what I do."

"And because I was unwilling to quarrel with you, I admit that when your father died and you were in trouble, rather than that you should continue to suffer as you seemed to be doing, I yielded to your persistence, and when you insisted on talking about our being

married, in a moment of weakness I ceased to say no. But I deny that I ever said yes. You've always known perfectly well that, to put it mildly, I'd rather not."

"But, Graham," both her hands were held to her breast, her cheeks burned, fire was in her eyes, "if you don't dislike me, if you are willing to be friends, I can't imagine why you should object to going a little further. What are a husband and wife but dear friends? A man and woman who love each other are friends. Can a man have a dearer friend than a woman who loves him? It isn't as though I were distasteful to you. I'm not ugly. Look at me, Graham: am I ugly? Why will you look away? Why won't you look at me? Are you afraid? Graham, if you'll only love me just a little, I'll undo all that has been done. I'll announce to all the world that the whole thing, from beginning to end, has been a mistake, a misunderstanding, anything you please, and so that every one may know that I'm in earnest, and mean what I say. I'll be the happiest woman in the world if you'll make me your wife. Oh, how proud I'd be of my husband! Graham, don't be so hard. If you once have me in your arms you'll want to keep me there for ever." She was moving closer to him. He retreated. "Graham, look at me!"

She spoke in a whisper, as if she were choked with passion.

"I will not look at you; I'll not touch you; I'll not have you come near me. What kind of creature you are is beyond my comprehension. I'm perfectly certain that you sent me to prison, knowing perfectly well that I'd not done you the slightest wrong; that you deliberately wove a web of false evidence in which you entangled me, out of revenge, because I was physically incapable of returning what you called your love for me. And now that I'm fresh out of the prison

to which your lies sent me—dishonoured, penniless, friendless, hopeless, helpless—you come to me in this fashion, and at this hour, to renew the proposition—the shameless proposition—for declining which you have done me all this evil. Let me tell you this, that if by your tricks and lies you were able to make out that I had committed murder, and brought me within the shadow of the gallows, I wouldn't marry you to save myself from the hangman. I'd assuredly rather hang than be your husband."

"Would you? Is that so?" Her cheeks still flamed, but her hands had dropped to her side, and quite a new look had come into her eyes. "You spent two years in gaol—because you wouldn't marry me."

"You admit it. And yet you dare to come to me like this! you dare!"

"And two years in gaol have made on you so little impression that you are willing to court the gallows. Are you? Is that a challenge?"

"What do you mean by 'Is that a challenge'?"

"Are you prepared to go back to the point when a policeman first laid an arresting hand upon your shoulder, to challenge fate to show what it can do a second time on the same lines? Graham, I tell you this: love me, kiss me, keep me in your arms, make me your wife; there's nothing I will not do to make it roses all the way. I'll make you happy; you shall never regret giving me what I asked; but if you won't—you've had two years in gaol; look out for something worse. There are worse things, you know, than two years' hard labour. You're the one thing I've got to live for; I can't help it, there it is, you are. I'm built that way. You'll be all the world to me if I'm your wife; and you'll be all the world to me if I'm not your wife; only in a rather different sense. So which is it

to be? Aren't you going to kiss me? Come, Graham, be wise! Take what I'm longing to give you."

Mr. Burke said nothing; he merely moved a little farther from her; she gave his action her own interpretation.

"I see, you won't? And you don't even think it worth your while to tell me so." She had removed her wrap, and thrown it on a chair; now she picked it up. Glancing at it, she perceived it was soiled by contact with the dust. "What a filthy place this is! I never liked it; it always seemed to me a sort of charnel-house; a place in which evil had its habitation; but it was always fairly clean, at least upon the surface; but now the very atmosphere seems foul; how perfectly you must feel at home! I can't possibly wear this wrap again until it has undergone some cleansing process." She moved towards the window, the wrap over her arm and paused on the threshold. "You are a gaol-bird as it is; aren't you a little bit afraid that you may be a gallows-bird, too? Such things, you know, have happened."

She looked at so much of him as the flickering candle allowed to be seen as he stood on the other side of the room; when he remained silent she went out into the night. So soon as she had gone, up went his hand to his beard. He said to himself—

"What a very queer world this is! Is it the world that's queer, or is it the people who are in it? I trust there's no one queerer than Enid Whitaker. If there is—and some unhappy man chances to marry her!"

For several seconds he remained where the girl had left him, looking towards the window through which she had vanished. He seemed to be thinking; she furnished him with sufficient food for thought. Then, with a little shrug of his shoulders, a movement of his

eyebrows, and the ghost of a smile, he seemed to make an effort to dismiss her from his mind.

“She’s gone ; so let her go ; I have the question of a bed to deal with, and possibly the puzzle of clean sheets to solve.”

As he turned to the door a sudden hubbub arose.

“What on earth is that ? This seems to be a house of many noises. It sounds as if some one were rushing downstairs, and wasn’t that the front door banged ?”

He was out in the hall in an instant, the candle held above his head, searching for the cause of the disturbance. The unsteady wick revealed nothing ; everything was still again ; so far as could be seen, it never had been anything else. The flickering flame hid rather than revealed innumerable corners ; its power to illuminate was so small, reaching but a foot or two on either hand, it seemed to heighten the darkness by which it was surrounded.

“I’ll swear that was some one running down the stairs ; I should say three at a time, and more persons than one ; the door was banged ; let’s try the front door. My word, it’s open !” It yielded at a touch. “And I thought it was locked, barred, and bolted. I wish I had a better light ; this is a position which wants a lot of it. Any number of people may be in the house and moving about it all the while, and yet I mayn’t be able to see them with a light like this ; I’m like a blind man in blind-man’s-buff. At any rate I’ll go upstairs and see if any one or anything can be seen ; it was from upstairs those people in a hurry seemed to come.”

He approached the staircase and called out.

“Is there any one up there ? Apparently there isn’t, at least no one who cares to say so. Now, if there should be some one, and he chooses to blow out the

candle as I go upstairs, or go so far as to knock it out of my hand, he'd be better off than I should."

Possibly, lest such a catastrophe should occur, he not only mounted slowly, step by step, peering sharply here and there, but he guarded the flame with his hand, as if to screen it from possible attack. He gained the top of the staircase and started on his search ; while he was above, something rather singular happened below. He had been upstairs some minutes, when a figure in the garden came fluttering toward the open French window in the room below, the figure of a woman in a hurry. She stood at the open window and looked through it. Perhaps because all was dark, she came quickly in, placing herself upon the seat of a chair against which she stumbled ; and in the pitchy dark room was audible the faint sound of a woman moaning.

CHAPTER VII

A SEARCH WARRANT

HAVING gained the top of the staircase, Graham Burke paused to listen. There was not a sound ; even the rats seemed to have ceased their rambles. The candle he was holding did not seem to give a very good light even for a candle, it seemed to intensify the darkness which it could not penetrate ; perhaps it was this pall of utter blackness with which he was surrounded which served to emphasize the silence. When he moved, his foot struck something. He stooped to see what it was.

“What’s this ?” He picked it up ; it was a leather wallet ; one of those in which papers and documents are sometimes kept. “Where did this come from ? I don’t remember this as belonging to the house. Those uninvited guests of mine must have dropped it in their hurry ; it’s pretty heavy ; they must have been pressed for time not to have stopped to pick it up, or in a very curious state of mind if they didn’t know they’d dropped it. They must have been in the house when I came in ; they could scarcely have entered without my hearing them, engrossing though Enid Whitaker’s conversation was. Was it because they heard us that they ran ? I wonder if they’ve left anything else behind, besides this wallet ? It’s pretty well stuffed with something ; its contents ought to give me some clue to their identity, should I be desirous of knowing who my visitors were.”

With the wallet in his hand he entered the room on his left, the door of which was wide open. With uplifted candle he surveyed it so far as its limited light permitted.

“This is the best bedroom; it looks like it now! How proud my mother was of it; how she used to reel off the catalogue of fine people who had slept here! She was a dear, good, simple soul, and didn’t believe there was another home in the land like hers. Would she recognize her guest-chamber in this pandemonium of disorder? There have been uninvited visitors here, not once or twice, but, from the look of things, I should say almost continuously since the day they put me into gaol. How they have made free with my mother’s treasures!”

There was evidence and to spare of ruthless hands having played havoc with what did not belong to them. Drawers had been pulled out and left open, some of their contents scattered on the floor; wardrobes gaped; furniture was in disorder.

“It looks as if a fight of sorts had been going on in here; I would dearly like to know what has been going on, and who is responsible for this. An honest man, being in gaol, has his home raided by thieves, and it’s pretty clear that the law has given him no protection, nor will, I imagine, give him compensation either. I would like a few words with the party or parties who did this.”

Moving farther into the room, he sought to get a clearer insight into the damage that had been done.

“It’s not easy, with the aid of a single candle; I’ll have to wait for the daylight. The joke is that I’ve only a faint recollection of what I really did possess; half the contents of the house may have been taken away and I not know it. Hard thinking may recall

things which ought to be here. So far as I know, no inventory exists, and certainly I never could have drawn one up, even a partial one. If I've been robbed, the thieves may count upon impunity, because, except by accident, I shall never be able to say what has been taken ; which is a pretty state of things for the thieves. Was Rhoda one of them ? ”

Bending down, he was examining, so far as he could, what seemed to be a miscellaneous collection of débris which littered the floor.

“It's odd, but I've a sort of notion that some one must have brought things into the house as well as taken them out ; there are a lot of odds and ends here which surely never belong to me.” He was eyeing something which he held in his fingers. “This looks like a locket ; it *is* a locket ; a gold locket, with what looks like a pearl and diamond monogram upon its front. What is the monogram ? These things are sometimes too ingenious. Is it N ?—N ? Is that initial going to haunt me ? It opens ; what's this inside ? A miniature ! Good God, it's Enid Whitaker, and an excellent likeness too. What in the name of all that's wonderful is her likeness doing in a gold locket on the floor—of my best room ? The mystery deepens. Is it possible that Miss Whitaker could give me, if she chose, a key with which to solve it ? ”

He stood upright, still with the open locket in his hand.

“I'd give a trifle, if I had it, to know what all this means, whose is this wallet, and whose the locket, and how come they to be here ? If I open the wallet will its contents tell me ? ”

He seemed to reflect ; he smiled, and then his face grew clouded.

“I'm not sure that I want to know, at least that

way. There's something in this which gives me a feeling—that it isn't nice. While Enid Whitaker was with me downstairs, some one was upstairs—some one who left these things. Did Miss Whitaker know? Could she tell me, if she chose, who that some one was?"

As he stood there motionless, staring intently into the shadows, as if he were seeking, by mere force of introspection, to penetrate the gloom, the house seemed to be almost shaken to its foundations by a sudden knocking below. So unexpected was it, with such force did it seem to rend the silence, that he was at a loss, for an instant, as to where it came from and what it meant. Before he understood, it came again.

"It's some one knocking at the door—the front door; some one who is not only not ashamed to announce his presence, but who seems in a hurry. There was surely not a minute between the two knockings. Hullo, again! This is haste indeed! If I'm to save the door from being battered in, I'd better see who knocks."

Having descended to the hall, he placed the candle on a table, to save it from being extinguished by a sudden gust of air. As he did so, the knocking came again.

"Really, my friend without is importunate." He opened the door. "You must permit me to say that, whoever you are, your haste outruns your courtesy——"

He had got so far when he stopped, as if the sight of who was without had brought him to a sudden standstill.

There were, as far as he could see in the darkness, four men upon his doorstep, three of them uniformed policemen, one in civilian dress. While he was still staring as if he were trying to make out what their

presence might portend, one of them said, in tones which were neither courteous nor friendly—

“So you are in, Mr. Graham Burke! I was just going to give orders to force an entrance.”

It was perhaps something in the speaker's tone which caused the gentleman addressed to move farther into the doorway, and so render it difficult for any one to pass. He showed no inclination to invite the visitors to enter. His tone was no friendlier than the other's.

“It is Inspector Dalton, isn't it?”

“It is, as you are perfectly well aware. Step aside and let me enter.”

“I do not know that I wish to step aside or to let you enter. I have no desire to have you in my house.”

“I dare say; that's a point on which you're not likely to be consulted. I have a search warrant in my pocket, Mr. Graham Burke; whether you like it or not, I shall enter—by its authority.”

There was a momentary silence; one felt somehow that Mr. Burke had been struck a blow, which he did not return. He eyed the officer.

“You have a search warrant? For what? What do you mean by saying you have a search warrant?”

“I've a search warrant authorizing me to search your house, and I'm going to search it; if necessary from roof to basement.”

“For what?”

“I fancy you know.”

“Then you fancy wrong; I don't. I was released from gaol yesterday morning, as I have no doubt you are aware; I came straight here for a few minutes; I have just returned to it again. I do not know, myself, what it contains. I have no notion what my house is supposed to harbour that you should think it necessary to search it—in your words—from cellar to attic. Of

what offence against the law is The Old House—my home—presumed to have been guilty ?”

“You will soon learn if you don’t know now. Here is my warrant if you’d like to hear it.”

“I should ; I certainly shall not allow you to enter until I have.”

In dry official accents he read aloud the contents of a paper which he took from the breast pocket of his tunic ; it was not easy, from the way in which he read it, to grasp what it was about. When he came to the end he folded it up.

“That’s my warrant, Mr. Graham Burke, issued on my information by Sir Henry Parkins.”

“Sir Henry Parkins ? Who’s he ?”

“Mr. Parkins has been knighted since he sentenced you to two years’ hard labour.”

“Has he ? Is that so ? Dear, dear ! and now he’s Sir Henry. And it’s on your information he’s issued that warrant ? As far as I could gather, it didn’t say anything about what you’re going to look for.”

“It isn’t necessary ; you’ll probably learn all about that afterwards. Now, Mr. Burke, I’ve read my warrant ; step aside and let me pass.”

“You have not a very civil way of putting it.”

“This is not a question in which civility is required. I’ve already shown you more civility than I need have done. In the name of the law I request you to offer no opposition to my entry.”

The inspector moved forward ; Mr. Burke stepped aside ; resuming, however, his former position so soon as the inspector had entered.

“I’ll let you in, Inspector Dalton, in obedience to the commands of the law, but these other gentlemen, no.”

“I’m entitled to enter this house, Mr. Burke, with as many people as I choose, fifty if I like. These are two

of my officers ; one is coming in, the other is going to stay without. There is also Mr. Clifford Baker, whom you will at once admit. I require his presence."

"Oh, I know Mr. Clifford Baker ; we used to call him 'Skimpy Cliff' because his clothes were always too small for him ; he still looks as if he had outgrown them, doesn't he ? And you require his presence ? I may tell you, Mr. Clifford Baker, that I'd sooner let—some very disagreeable things—enter my house than you ; but since Inspector Dalton requires your presence, why, enter. Anyhow, the house will require cleaning after you've gone."

Mr. Baker, who was a lanky, cadaverous-looking individual, showed not unnatural signs of resenting the other's words.

"You always had a tongue, Graham Burke ; you wait ! I'll be even with you before I'm through ; and don't you think I'd put a foot across the doorstep of your filthy, tumbledown old ruin of my own free-will. I'm not the sort of man who is likely to be a willing guest in a felon's house."

"Aren't you ? My word, Cliff. Baker——"

"Now, Mr. Burke, take care ; no violence, if you please." The inspector put his finger on the other's shoulder. "If you take my advice, Mr. Baker, you won't bandy words with Mr. Burke ; he'll find himself in a sufficiently bad hole without any assistance from you. Roberts, you come in as I told you ; Brown, you stay outside. If you see anything suspicious let me know at once. Now, Mr. Burke, I'm going to search your house, and I'm going to begin with the floor above."

"Are you, Inspector Dalton ? And what do you expect to find on the floor above ?"

"It's not a question of expectation. I hope, for your sake, that I shan't find what I've come to look for,

or anything like it. There doesn't seem to be much light; fortunately we came prepared. Mr. Baker and Roberts, you had better shed a light upon the subject."

The inspector and the two men he addressed took from their pockets what were presumably electric torches. The light which they emitted made that given by the guttering candle seem sordid gloom. One could see all over the hall, up the staircase and on to the landing above.



CHAPTER VIII

THE UPSTAIRS ROOMS

THEY had traversed the hall, and were about to mount the staircase, when there came a knocking at the front door which, by the inspector's instructions, had been closed ; a voice came through the panels.

"Inspector ! Inspector !" some one shouted.

The inspector turned on the staircase. "That's Brown's voice, Roberts ; see what he wants."

The constable opened the door to find his colleague without in a state of considerable agitation.

"Inspector !" he cried, "there's some one just come out of the house, by the side window."

The inspector hurried to him : "Which side window ?"

"There's a long window at the side here which opens like a door. I'd just got to the corner when I thought I saw some one come out. It's so dark I couldn't make sure, so I went forward, and I heard some one running across the garden, and a gate opened and slammed."

"Then what did you do ? Didn't you see who it was ? Which way did he go ? Didn't you follow ?"

The policeman seemed confused.

"The fact is, inspector, that I hardly knew what to do. I couldn't see anything, except what you might call a dim shadow, and you told me to stay and keep an eye on things, so I thought I'd better report to you."

The inspector turned to the master of the house.

"Have you any idea who it was whom Brown saw come out of your window, Mr. Burke?"

"Not the slightest. I should say that Brown, although possibly an estimable officer, possesses a vivid imagination. To the best of my knowledge and belief there was no one in the house except myself, and I should almost be inclined to swear that no one went through any window."

"You're wrong, Mr. Burke." Brown defended himself, still with the air of one who was slightly confused. "Some one did come out, I'll swear it, and went across the garden and through the gate; I heard it opened and slammed most distinctly; it was some one who was running very fast."

Holding the electric torch so that it shone on the man's face, the inspector eyed him steadily, then turned away.

"Very well, Brown, I'll look into your story later. You stay there, and the next time any one comes out of the house, or tries to come, you show yourself a little more spry, and don't you waste time by coming to knock at the door. You've got a whistle—blow it." The speaker returned to the house, the other followed. When he was in the hall again he said to Mr. Burke: "Extraordinary how liable you are to be misunderstood; you can't guess why we're here, and when some one bolts through your window you're ready to swear that there was no one in your house who could have done it. I remember when it was my duty to arrest you on a previous occasion, from the way in which you spoke and behaved, one would have thought you were overcome with astonishment, and yet you got two years' hard labour. Very odd indeed! Roberts, after what Brown has just said, I think I'll start by giving a look round

downstairs. You stay here and keep your eyes and ears well open. Mr. Baker, if he likes, can come with me."

Mr. Baker preferred to go with him; he, the inspector, and Mr. Burke went over the whole of the ground floor, to find nothing anywhere but overwhelming proofs of how the place had been neglected; except in the drawing-room and kitchen. In the latter apartment the inspector observed: "Some one has been having a meal in here."

"I have," rejoined Burke. "Have you any objection?"

"Not in the least." The officer smiled as he glanced at the table. "You don't seem to have been having a sumptuous repast."

"Is it your duty to make that sort of comment, Dalton? Does your warrant give you authority to be impertinent?"

"I was not impertinent; I was merely commenting on what I saw, which comes within the scope of my authority, Mr. Burke." They were in the drawing-room. "Some one has been in here."

"I have. Again, have you any objection?"

The inspector glanced at the open French window.

"I presume that's the window Brown saw some one go through; I see. Did you leave this window open, Mr. Burke?"

"I did."

"May I ask why? It's not very warm to-night."

"But, to put it mildly, the atmosphere of this room is stuffy; and anyhow I take it that I may leave a window open if I choose."

"Was any one in this room when you left it?"

"No one; it was empty, like the rest of the house. No one could have been in here, and therefore no one

could have gone out, except in the vivid imagination of P.C. Brown."

"That's what you say. What's that? I kicked against something on the floor; what is it?" Stooping, he picked something up. "Why, it's a sovereign purse, a golden sovereign purse, sovereigns one end, matches the other. Is this yours, Mr. Burke?"

"It is not; I have no idea whose it is; nor do I know how it got there. I certainly never saw it before."

It was perhaps something in his tone which caused the inspector to eye him oddly.

"You are sure that you never saw it before?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief I never did. Why do you look at me like that, sir?"

"If you never saw it before, how do you account for its presence here, especially if, as you say, no one except yourself was in this room? Isn't it possible that it may have been dropped by the person Brown saw going out of the window?"

"That explanation might satisfy you, Dalton, but, as I know that there was no one in the room to go out of the window, it doesn't me."

"The position then is—that I pick up from the floor of the room in which you admit that no one has been except yourself a valuable gold sovereign purse of which you are unable to give any account. Very well, we'll leave it there."

"Excuse me, inspector, but might I glance at what you're holding?"

The request came from Mr. Baker, and was at once complied with. Mr. Baker examined minutely the trinket which the inspector gave him.

"Have you ever seen that before?" the officer inquired.

"I am sorry to say I have, and very recently. I know this well. Here are the initials of the owner on it; you can see them for yourself."

The inspector stared at what the other pointed out to him.

"It's a monogram," he said, "and one not easy to decipher. Two initials, aren't there? What are they?"

"There are two initials, A and N, and they stand for Alfred Nockolds."

"Alfred Nockolds?" The inspector and Mr. Baker stared at each other with what seemed much significance. "Are you sure of that, Mr. Baker?"

"Not only am I sure of the monogram, but I tell you I know the case; I have often seen it in the possession of Mr. Nockolds. I saw it in his hand so recently as this afternoon, just before he started."

The two men continued to eye each other; Graham Burke interposed.

"What's the matter with you two? If that thing does belong to Nockolds, how does it come to be in my room?"

The inspector looked at him. "You, I understand, have no idea?"

"Haven't I already told you that I haven't, that I never saw the thing before, that I don't know whose it is, that I don't know how it got here? If, as Baker says, it belongs to Nockolds, I should like to hear how he explains its presence on the floor of my room."

"I suppose that Mr. Nockolds has not been here?"

"Nockolds? Been here? He knows better. If I caught him near my place—I'd teach him a lesson?"

"I am told that yesterday you informed him so."

Mr. Baker intervened, with an explanatory air.

"Mr. Burke said to Mr. Nockolds, 'If I ever get a

chance I'll kill you with as little reluctance as if you were some noxious insect,' then he added, 'By God! I mean it!' Those are the exact words Mr. Burke used to Mr. Nockolds in my hearing; I am sure of it because I made a note of it at the time."

"In your hearing?" cried Burke. "What do you mean by in your hearing? Where were you?"

"Never mind where I was, Mr. Burke. Your words, in the tone of voice you uttered them, might have been audible at a distance of a quarter of a mile. I was much nearer than that, and so were others. We all of us heard them, and so struck were we by their ominous character that I was not the only one who made a note of them. You will find others. By the way, Mr. Burke, I've noticed, ever since you came to the door, that something was in your hand. You have it still. May I ask what it is?"

Brought to sudden recollection of its presence, Graham Burke held up the leather wallet which he had discovered in the room above and which, more or less unconsciously, he had been carrying ever since.

"Is this the thing you mean? I've been wondering what it is. Perhaps you'll recognize this also."

"I believe I do, if you'll let me examine it closer." Burke handed over the wallet. One glance seemed to be sufficient for Mr. Baker. He addressed the inspector. "This seems to be carrying the thing too far, even for a person constituted like Mr. Graham Burke. You can see for yourself, here is the name stamped on the flap—Alfred Nockolds. And yet Mr. Burke, who has had it in his possession he alone knows how long, pretends that he's in complete ignorance of what it is and whose it is. It is a little too much."

"It does seem a bit too strong." This was the inspector. "You know nothing about Mr. Nockolds'

sovereign purse which is found on the floor of a room which you admit no one has entered but yourself; you carry about a case on which Mr. Nockolds' name is stamped so that all can read, and pretend that you don't know whose it is; before we go any farther, do you happen to have about you anything else which might belong to Mr. Nockolds without your knowing it?"

"Unless this does." On the palm of Graham Burke's outstretched hand was the locket. Mr. Baker snatched at it.

"Dalton," he exclaimed, "this grows more and more ominous. Not only is this locket the property of Alfred Nockolds, but it contains the portrait of a lady for whom I happen to know he has a very strong regard. I can hardly believe that he would have allowed it to be taken from him except under circumstances of which I do not care to think."

Without commenting on the trinket, the inspector slipped it, together with the sovereign purse, into a pocket in his tunic.

"I must ask you, Mr. Burke, to accompany me while I search the upstairs rooms."

"What does Baker mean by his insinuation?" demanded Graham Burke. "I begin to see that there's something in the air beyond my comprehension. Some one has been making free with my house during my absence. I can only suppose that that some one is responsible for the presence of the things which you say belong to Nockolds."

"You just now told us there was no one in the house but yourself."

"I said there was no one in this room but myself. Shortly before you came I was in this room alone when I heard a noise of some one running downstairs. When I

went to see who it was, I came upon that leather case and that locket in the room above."

"That's the story you tell us now. After assuring us that no one was in the house but yourself, you try to explain the presence of certain properties belonging to Mr. Nockolds by saying that you heard some one running down the stairs. Have you anything else to add? Remember that your words will be taken down and that you have already contradicted yourself twice."

"I have done nothing of the kind." The inspector waved his hand. Burke burst into a sudden rage. "What the deuce are you two men driving at? What infernal mischief are you hatching?"

"That sort of language won't do, Mr. Burke. I must ask you to accompany us while we go through the rooms upstairs."

"And suppose I refuse?"

"You won't be so unwise. I'm not compelling you to go; I merely suggest that it will be better for you to be present when any discovery is made."

"Discovery is made? What sort of discovery do you expect to make?—in a house in which for more than two years no one has lived, at least as far as I am aware."

"Are you coming with us, Mr. Burke?"

"Oh, I'll come; as host, I can hardly refuse to show you over my own house."

They ascended the stairs, going into the front room first.

"It is here," explained Burke, "that I found that writing-case and the locket. You can see for yourself that it looks as if this room had had visitors with rather lively tastes; while the law took more than sufficient care of me, it omitted to guard my house."

"The appearance of this room suggests to me, Mr. Burke, that it was quite lately the scene of a struggle. In your knowledge has a struggle of any sort taken place in here, say within the last four-and-twenty hours?"

"I cannot speak as to what has occurred within the last four-and-twenty hours. I have been in the house barely an hour."

"Barely an hour?" The echo came from the inspector.

"Or perhaps a little more."

"Or perhaps a little more. So if any one says that they saw you enter this house—say, some time this afternoon—what will you say?"

"I should say nothing; no one is likely to tell you such a thing; so it is not necessary for me to make any remarks on the bare supposition that some one will tell you an astounding lie."

"So it will be an astounding lie? I see; that's what you do say. We'll go into the next room; you'll allow this one to remain precisely in its present state; nothing is to be touched."

"This is the only room in which I've been upstairs, so what state the others are in I can't tell you."

"We shall probably be able to see for ourselves." They passed into the room adjoining, the inspector entering first. "There's a fusty smell."

"What can you expect since not a window has been opened and the dirt has been allowed to accumulate for two whole years?"

"There's a very fusty smell. It isn't two years since some one was in here; I should say it wasn't two hours."

"I certainly have not been in here for more than two years."

"You are sure of that?"

"Sure? You ought to know what I've been doing the last two years."

"The point is, where have you been the last few hours? Some one has been taking liberties with the bedclothes on that bed."

The room was illuminated by the electric torches which the two men were holding. A big four-poster bed was on one side, on which a heap of bedclothes was piled.

"It looks as if there were something underneath those bedclothes, Dalton." This was Mr. Baker.

"It does. Do you know if there's anything underneath those bedclothes, Mr. Burke?"

"I don't; I know nothing; I didn't even know there were any bedclothes there. I was just going to start to look for some when you knocked at the door."

"Were you? It seems there were one or two things you were just going to do about that time. There certainly does seem to be something underneath those bedclothes; I should like to see what it is."

The inspector began to resolve the heap into its component parts; sheets, blankets, quilts had been thrown higgledy-piggledy together. All at once he stopped.

"What's this we have here?"

He was staring at a blanket on which there seemed to be a great smudge. He touched it with his finger.

"It's wet; why, Baker, it's blood!"

CHAPTER IX

UNDER THE BEDCLOTHES

THE inspector stood with his finger held out in the glare of the electric torch; Mr. Baker stared at the finger; Graham Burke stared at the inspector. For several seconds the three men were still, as if something had come into the air, on a sudden, which tied their tongues. Baker spoke first; perhaps unconsciously he had dropped his voice.

"You are sure, Dalton, that it's blood?"

"Do you think I don't know blood? The blanket is soaked with it." He continued to move the bedclothes. "And there's this sheet—look at it. A reek of blood." He turned to Burke: "Are you still sure, Mr. Burke, that you don't know what's on this bed?"

"I'm beginning to wonder."

"You've got as far as that. Mr. Baker, call Roberts upstairs."

Baker went to the door, on quiet feet, as if anxious not to disturb an unseen sleeper by making a noise. He scarcely raised his voice as he called the policeman.

"Roberts, Inspector Dalton wishes you to come up here."

They could hear the heavy tread of the constable as he mounted the stairs, as he approached the room. The inspector stopped him at the doorway.

"Stay where you are, Roberts, until I give you orders."

The constable remained stock still, the glowing light held out in front of him. The inspector turned to the bed, and to the removing of the clothes. Baker advanced close to him on his left; Graham Burke stood on his right, erect, rigid, on his face an expression which a physiognomist might have found it hard to decipher. Presently only a sheet remained, which had perhaps once been white; it served to outline, with ominous clearness, something beneath. The inspector lifted a corner. He said, in a whisper, which was more effective than a shout would have been—

“There’s a dead man on this bed.”

Baker leaned forward; he also whispered.

“It’s Alfred Nockolds; he’s been murdered—by some unspeakable ruffian; and he was in the best of health and spirits such a very little time ago.”

The inspector turned towards the master of the house, speaking in dry official tones from which any sort of feeling seemed to have been purposely omitted.

“Graham Burke, I arrest you for wilful murder; you’re my prisoner. Roberts!” The inspector nodded to the policeman in the doorway, who came rapidly forward. “It’s my duty to inform you, Graham Burke, that anything you may say will be taken down and used in evidence against you. Put out your hands.”

The master of the house was looking at the inspector not only as if he were speaking in a strange tongue, but as if he were saying something at whose meaning he could not even remotely guess. The inspector repeated his instructions; he had something in his hand which shone.

“Did you hear what I told you?—put out your hands. Roberts!”

There was another significant nod to his subordinate, who instantly took Mr. Burke by the arm. Perhaps it

was the constable's touch which aroused him ; brought him to an as yet dim sense of what was taking place—of what all this meant. He started back.

“ You arrest me—me ? Dalton, what for ? ”

“ I have already told you, and I have no doubt you knew before ; I've seen you act before. Keep hold of him, Roberts.”

Probably it was the injunction which served as a goad to the prisoner. With a quick movement he wrenched himself free. When the constable tried to close with him he struck out at him, the electric torch was knocked out of the man's hand, going out as it fell to the floor. The policeman seemed in doubt whether to pick up his torch or to go for the man. Burke was gasping as if overcome by the stress of his emotions. He hurled defiance at the officer.

“ You'd better be warned by me ; don't you touch me with so much as a finger ! The law has done me wrong enough already, and, unresisting, I have endured in silence. But there are limits to a man's endurance, and if you try to lay your hands on me—I promise you shall pay for it. I want to know from you, Inspector Dalton, what you mean by saying that you charge me with the wilful murder of that blackguard Nockolds, when I didn't know that he was dead.”

“ You shall hear in due course why I charge you, Mr. Burke. This is neither the time nor place to tell you, nor is it my duty to bandy words with you. If you don't wish to make matters worse than they are already, you'll attempt no resistance. If you are innocent, you have nothing to fear—— ”

“ Nothing to fear when I'm just out from doing two years' hard labour for an offence of which I was innocent ? And I believe you've known all along ! Haven't I learnt how much innocence goes for when a

man's in the hands of a devil like you? I'm an innocent man now, and again I believe you know it, and you shan't, if I can help it, take me back to that infernal place where I've been for two years—in hell. Would you?"

In obedience to a signal from his superior officer Roberts made a sideways movement towards the man they sought to arrest. In what seemed to be a sudden frenzy of rage, Burke dashed at him, seized him by the throat, forced him on to his knees, and would have given him a very bad time had not the inspector, calling to Mr. Baker for assistance, advanced on him from behind.

"Give me your torch," cried Mr. Baker. "I'll stay where I am and hold the light, or we shall be all in darkness. Hadn't I better call Brown?"

The inspector said to Mr. Baker what he had said to Brown; he was so occupied in another way that, for the moment, words were at a premium.

"You've got a whistle; blow it."

And Mr. Baker did blow it—loud and long. Presently heavy steps were heard blundering up the stairs; police constable Brown came into the room. He was only just in time. The united efforts of the inspector and his subordinate were insufficient to master Graham Burke as he was then. He knocked Roberts down as Brown appeared, and was free to give his whole attention to the inspector, when the new-comer, putting his arm about his throat from the rear, dragged him to the floor. Very soon a pair of handcuffs were about his wrists, and the two policemen knelt upon him. The inspector looked grimly down at him.

"If you're going to behave like this, my man, you'll be shown no mercy. I'll knock you senseless if you try to move. I'll have you tied hand and foot and dragged

along the road to gaol. I'm going to get you there if I have to get you there in pieces."

When the prisoner showed signs of a desire to renew his struggles, the constable Brown, who had his knee on his chest, unceremoniously took hold of his head and banged it with all his force on the floor. The inspector approved.

"That's right; don't be too gentle with him. If we can't manage you when you've got your senses, Burke, we'll knock them out of you." He looked up at Mr. Clifford Baker, who, while he observed discretion, cast light upon the scene. "I believe he's broken my shoulder, and I don't know how many teeth he hasn't knocked out."

"He's a murderous ruffian," declared Mr. Baker. "But it will all go against him at the trial. I remember once telling him that one day he'd be hung; and he will."

Mr. Baker spoke with a quiet intensity which suggested that at any rate the wish was father to the thought.

CHAPTER X

A QUESTION OF FRIENDSHIP

THE Pleasaunce was a house which as regards size was constructed on generous lines ; most of its rooms were big. The one which was called the small breakfast-room was by no means a minute apartment. Apart from its height—all the rooms were lofty—it was probably eighteen feet square. That fine morning the table was drawn close up to the open window. Since but two persons were partaking of the morning meal, the table had been made as small as possible, which had the result of making the room seem larger. Miss Barber—to whom the house temporarily belonged, since she had hired it furnished, was the first at table ; judging from her appearance, she had that gift which very few women have, the gift of looking well in the morning. As she enjoyed her breakfast she was reading a letter which was propped up against a milk jug in front of her, at whose contents, as Miss Enid Whitaker came into the room, she was smiling audibly.

“What are you laughing at?” inquired the fresh arrival. “I know I’m late, but then I always am, so it’s no use my offering an apology ; and you’re always early. I can’t think how you do it. Generally when it’s time to get up I feel sleepier than when I went to bed. You always seem to have had all the sleep you are likely to want for months ; I can’t make out how you do that either.”

"Oh, it's a sort of little trick I was born with. You see, I sleep all night, I scarcely even dream, so I naturally don't feel tired in the morning. Have you got a headache?"

"Why? Do I look like it?"

"Well, I don't know what you want me to say. You don't look as if you'd had a very good night."

"I haven't; I've scarcely slept a wink; and talk about dreaming, directly I shut my eyes I dreamt. I was glad to open them again." She glanced across the table. "The usual pile of letters, I see."

"Yes, the usual pile, and most of them from beggars. I'm not exactly poor, but if I'd ten times what I have, there wouldn't be enough to give to every one who asks. I sometimes wish there were."

"Yes, and directly you'd given, some more would ask, and what would you do with them, especially if you had nothing left for yourself?"

The little lady sighed, a sort of butterfly sigh.

"I don't know; the world seems full of people who want things; but I'm not going to let them get between me and this fine morning. Here's a letter from a chum of mine who has recently got married and gone out to Nairobi, wherever that may be; and she's written to tell me of her experiences. Some people might think them tragic, but the way she writes about them makes them excruciatingly funny. Can't you eat anything? Poor dear!"

Enid Whitaker had pushed her plate away with what might have been called a petulant gesture.

"Thank you, I scarcely ever do eat any breakfast, as you are aware. That's another of the things you do better than I."

The conversation passed lightly from point to point, as it will do when two persons are merely skimming on

the surface of things, when all at once Miss Barber said—

“By the way, I met your Mr. Graham Burke yesterday.”

Miss Whitaker, who had been crumbling bread between her fingers, glanced up with what was very like a start.

“My Mr. Graham Burke? Oh! I didn’t know he was mine. I assure you I have no wish to advance any claim to a person who has just come out of gaol for robbing me of practically every penny I possessed, so that now I am dependent upon you.”

“Don’t be absurd; you know you are nothing of the kind. Do you know, I wasn’t unfavourably impressed by him.”

Perhaps it was because, as she said this, Miss Barber’s eyes were on her plate, that Miss Whitaker observed her so intently.

“You are not by any means the first person on whom he has managed to make a favourable impression. But I don’t understand; where did you see him?”

“Yesterday when I was bicycling, on the road-side, by the bridge.”

“By what bridge?” On Miss Whitaker’s face there had come all at once a very singular expression.

“I’m afraid I can’t give you a precise description of the exact locality; you know I’ve only been here about five minutes; this isn’t the home of my childhood. It was just before the place where the road forks. You go to the left for this house, and to the right for his.”

“I think I know where you mean.” Miss Whitaker was still watching the other with an intentness of which the girl was apparently unconscious. “Still, I don’t understand; what was he doing by the road-side, and

how did you come to speak to him, or did he speak to you first? He has assurance enough."

"I spoke to him; and do you know—I tried to keep my eyes off them, and I took care not to mention it, but his hands were all covered with blood." As she spoke, Miss Barber, glancing up, saw her companion give a sort of lurch in her chair. "Why, Enid, whatever is the matter with you? Why do you look at me like that?"

It was a second or two before Miss Whitaker answered; when she did speak, it seemed to be with an effort.

"I suppose it's because I've not slept. I don't think I can be very well. I'm sorry to be such an idiot, but—something seemed to go wrong with the works."

Her features were twisted into a grimace which perhaps was meant to do duty as a smile; the effect was not pleasing.

"You ought to see a doctor, Enid; I'll send for one this morning."

The suggestion seemed to make the other angry.

"You'll do nothing of the kind. I hate doctors, especially the old fossil who practises on the surrounding rustics. I shall be all right; I sometimes do go like this after a sleepless night. It passes off. What were we talking about?" She put her hand up to her brow as if to think. "Of course, I remember; you mentioned Graham Burke. What did he say to you—that he should have created such a favourable impression—in spite of the blood on his hands!"

"I can hardly tell you, it's so difficult to put into words how an impression is produced." Miss Barber, leaning her elbows on the table, looked her companion very straight in the face. "You're not to get wild with me, but do you know, Enid, I left Mr. Burke with the feeling strong upon me that he is an injured man."

"In what sense? Do you mean that you think two years' imprisonment was too much for what he did?"

"No, I don't mean that. I should like to look up the case; I suppose there's a full report to be got somewhere. He assured me that he was absolutely innocent of the charge that was brought against him——"

"Oh, you got as far as that, did you! You must have moved pretty quickly. How came you to talk to him about that sort of thing at all—by the road-side. Olive, what are you smiling at? There's something mysterious about you; what's the joke?"

"I don't know that there is a joke, and I didn't know that I was smiling." The speaker's manner was pensive enough just then. "I was thinking, that was all."

"You were thinking? About Graham Burke? How long did that little chat of yours with him last?"

"Oh, I dare say—I shouldn't care to attempt to be precise; it was quite a chat—a long chat."

"Olive, you are provoking." Miss Whitaker got up from her chair as if annoyed. "I don't know what impression Mr. Graham Burke may have made upon you, but you can take it from me that he was guilty of all he was charged with, and very much more; if he'd got all he deserved he'd have been sentenced to a long term of penal servitude, instead of merely two years' hard labour."

"I've no doubt you think so; of course, you must think so, or you wouldn't have done what you did."

"What did I do?—except to move heaven and earth to have things made easy for him. If it hadn't been that I went so much out of my way to get them to treat him lightly, he'd have been still a convict with his sentence only just begun."

"That, as I have said, was of course your point of

view ; I quite realize that. But, Enid, suppose he was innocent after all—how he must have suffered !”

“Stuff and nonsense ! Graham Burke is incapable of suffering. He can make others suffer, but suffer himself?—no, not he. If you take my advice, Miss Olive Barber, the next time you meet him by the road-side, or anywhere else, you’ll cut him dead, or he may give you as much cause to regret having made his acquaintance as he’s given me. I still don’t understand how you came to speak to him at all.”

“No—perhaps not. Thanks for your advice ; it’s well meant ; but, if I ever do meet him again—I still don’t think I should cut him dead. I rather liked what I saw of Mr. Graham Burke ; somehow, he appealed to me.”

“He appealed to you ? My dear girl, are you mad ? If I were to tell you all I could tell you about him you’d shun him like the plague, you’d go ten miles to get out of his way.”

“Not if I was on a bicycle ; no, I don’t think I should. He told me some things ; what have you to tell ? I should like to hear.”

“What did he tell you ? Don’t sit there grinning—tell me what he said.”

Miss Whitaker’s words and manner were so singular that the other looked at her in quite natural surprise.

“Enid ! you certainly can’t be well, or you would scarcely speak to me like that. What is the matter with you ?”

Miss Whitaker was apparently conscious that she had gone too far.

“I beg your pardon. I don’t know what is the matter with me ; as you say I certainly am not well ; but——”

Before she could finish her sentence a man in the

garb of an indoor servant came hurrying into the room. The two girls stared at him.

"Kelly!" exclaimed Miss Barber, "what has happened? You forgot to knock."

The man's agitation was so great as to prevent his giving an immediate answer.

"Yes, Miss Barber, I know I did. I beg your pardon, but—I'm so upset that I don't feel I know what I'm doing. They've arrested Mr. Graham Burke—again."

It was Miss Barber's turn to jump up from her seat.

"Kelly!" she cried, "what do you mean? Whatever for?"

"For murder."

"Murder! Kelly! They've arrested Mr. Graham Burke—for murder?"

"Mr. Alfred Nockolds has been murdered, and they say he did it, but I don't believe it. I don't believe he did what they accused him of before, and, as for murdering Alfred Nockolds, he was an all-round bad lot, was Alfred Nockolds. I know things about him which are much worse than what they charged Mr. Burke with, but, as for his murdering him, he was as incapable of doing that—as you yourself, Miss Barber. I'm as sure of it as that I'm alive."

The man was in a state of singular agitation; he was a tall, well-formed fellow, probably somewhere in the thirties. Miss Barber stared at him wide-eyed.

"What is the matter with every one this morning? How can you be so sure of Mr. Burke's innocence as you make out? Is he a particular friend of yours that you are so distressed?"

"My father and grandfather were in service at The Old House, in the garden. I was born there, me and my brother, who's a policeman over at Great Erdington,

we were both born there. We were, as you might say, brought up with Mr. Graham. I knew him as well as I knew my own brother, every inch of him. He's an outspoken, light-hearted, easy-going gentleman, and I'd take his word against any man's I ever knew; and, as for his being dishonest, he wouldn't touch a farthing that wasn't his, not if he was starving. I'd stake my own life upon his honesty. What Miss Whitaker here has against him I can't say, but I'd sooner believe she was guilty herself of what she charged him with than that he was."

"Kelly!" protested Miss Barber.

"How dare you say such a thing?" exclaimed Miss Whitaker. She looked more than annoyed. She had gone white and was hunched up on her chair as if unable to rise.

But the man was not to be put in his place.

"I mean no offence, Miss Barber, but I'm not your servant. I come to you with the house; if you like, I'll leave this moment. When Sir George comes back he can take me on again or not, as he chooses. It's as though my own brother was charged, their charging Mr. Graham, after the cruel way he's been used already. I'm told he had to break into his own house, where my father and grandfather lived, and I was born, and that a lot of scamps had been making free with it, turning it upside down, and playing heaven only knows what tricks. His must have been a home-coming, his must! Then within four-and-twenty hours, or very little more, of their turning him out of the gaol, where he never ought to have been put, them police comes for him again and drags him back to prison for—for such a thing as that! It makes me go all over hot and cold! I'm told he made a fight for it, and if he'd only killed that Dalton, who always has had a spite against him,

they might have had something against him then, but as it is——! Excuse me, Miss Barber, but you can see for yourself what a state I'm in. I'm no more capable of doing my duty in your service than the first boy you might bring in out of the lane. I'll consider myself dismissed from this moment, if you wish it; but, however that may be, go to Great Erdington I must. They're taking him to court to-day before the magistrates, and he shall see that he's got one friend there, and one who'd take his place and face the lot of them if they'd only let him. Of course, Miss Barber, I know what talking like this means, and if you'd rather I won't come back again. Young Arthur Stone he's coming on very well; he's next to me; he'd fill my place almost as well as I can. You won't know the difference if you make him butler instead of me; but I'll have to go to Great Erdington, Miss Barber, if you say yes or no."

"You talk in the most amazing way, Kelly, and your behaviour is altogether extraordinary, but you can go to Great Erdington, and, what's more, you can come back afterwards; in fact, I shall count upon your coming back. I have no doubt that Arthur Stone is a jewel, and capable of all you say, but you've been in this house a good many years."

"Fifteen in September, Miss Barber."

"And I don't wish, when my tenancy is up, Sir George Forster to think that I drove away his servants. When shall you wish to start for Great Erdington?"

"At once, Miss Barber, if you please. It's all of eight miles. If you'd allow me to use one of the dog-carts——"

"You can use one of the motors, Kelly, the two-seater."

"Thank you, miss. I'll try to make up to you for

my behaviour this morning. You shan't be sorry for forgiving me."

"I don't think, Kelly, that I shall. The sooner you start the better." The moment the man had quitted the room Miss Barber turned to Miss Whitaker. "What a marvellous man! Of course, you know that I'm not quite English, and I've always understood that the English man-servant is a type all by himself, incapable of human feeling, at least in the presence of his master or mistress; but Kelly is certainly a revelation. Enid, how dreadful that they should have arrested Graham Burke!"

"I am not surprised."

"You are not surprised! But for murder, when he has only just been released from prison, and can have scarcely yet got used to feeling what it means to be free! You may take it coolly, but I can't—I'm of Kelly's opinion that he's incapable of doing such a thing."

"What nonsense you talk! Who ought to know him better—you or I?"

"It's not a question of ought, but of who does. You have certainly been longer acquainted with him than I have; but it's not quite clear to me that you know him better than I do. I'm almost as certain as Kelly is that he's incapable of committing murder."

"And yet when you saw him yesterday he had blood upon his hands."

"So he had—I'd forgotten that. Well, what then?"

"Isn't it possible that they may call you as a witness?"

"Call me? Whatever for? Whatever evidence can I give?"

"Suppose he had just committed murder before you saw him?"

"Enid, what an awful thing to say!"

"Yet suppose it; and suppose, when the case is stated, that it comes out that Alfred Nockolds had been killed just before you came upon the scene. If you are able to prove that when you saw him his hands were still bloody, won't that be at least significant?"

A sudden and rather remarkable change took place in the look which was on Miss Barber's face; one might not have suspected that the pretty lips and mouth could look so set, so firm, one might add, so obstinate.

"And who is to tell them that I saw them—in that state?"

"Didn't any one see you talking to him?"

Miss Barber considered. "A policeman came up just as I was going away. He also was on a bicycle. I remember Mr. Burke spoke of him as Vincent."

"Vincent? I know Vincent very well; he's our local policeman, and quite intelligent." Something seemed to flicker in Miss Whitaker's eyes. "So he saw you, did he? Then you may take it for granted that when he made his report at headquarters he mentioned you, and I shouldn't wonder if, in the course of a day or two, you are summoned as a witness."

There was a hint of hostility in the two girls' glances as they met; it was there only for a moment, but—it was there. There was laughter in Miss Barber's voice when she spoke again.

"What I told you was told in the confessional. You are the only person who knows that I noticed anything at all, and of course you won't tell, and I certainly shan't, so my evidence won't amount to much."

There was again that flicker, which was certainly not one of friendship, in Miss Whitaker's glance.

"Do you mean to say that if they asked you if you had noticed blood upon his hands you'd say you didn't?"

"I should say that I had noticed nothing at all, just that. And really, now I come to think of it, I'm not sure that I did."

On a sudden Miss Whitaker sat up straighter in her chair.

"Olive, how can you say such a thing? You know it isn't true."

"Are you particularly anxious that I should do Mr. Graham Burke mischief? Your manner would suggest it."

"And how dare you say that? I don't understand you, Olive."

"And I don't understand you, so we're even. Let me make it clear to you, so that future misunderstanding may be avoided, that I'm of Kelly's opinion, and that I believe Mr. Burke to be a much-wronged and innocent man. I am almost certain that he was unjustly imprisoned; and, however facts may be twisted so that they may seem to be against him, I am absolutely certain that he's not of the stuff of which murderers are made; though, mind you, I'm not sure that to murder certain people wouldn't be to render a service to society. But then, as you know, I'm more than half American."

"What I don't understand is how your sudden interest in Graham Burke has come about. You saw him for the first time yesterday—how you came to speak to him you have not explained—and now, to-day, you are talking as if you knew him inside and out, and I always thought you were so shrewd."

"It's a mistake to jump to conclusions——"

"That comes well from you, considering the conclusions you jump to about Graham Burke."

"Yes, it does come well from me, doesn't it, considering that? I was applying the platitude to you; you should never jump to conclusions because, by your own confession, see how you thought me shrewd."

While she had been speaking Miss Barber had rung a bell. A servant appeared, whom she addressed.

"Stone, have the big car brought round at once, inside five minutes." The servant went. She addressed Miss Whitaker. "I am going to Great Erdington; what are you going to do?"

"Why are you going to Great Erdington?"

"Isn't it our shopping centre?"

"Is that what you're going for, to shop? I've heard you say more than once that you never can get anything you want."

"I'm also going to the court-house, for the same reason which has taken Kelly; in order that Mr. Graham Burke, if he likes to look my way, may see that he has at least one female friend in the world."

"Olive, you never are! What right have you to call yourself his friend?"

"Is that sort of thing a matter of right? If so, I shall probably have every right to call myself his friend—before I've done. I must go and put on my hat. I don't know what time those magistrate people take their seats, but I suppose Kelly does; he was in a hurry, so I ought to be, too."

"Olive! Stop! I'm coming with you."

"Are you? I do not need a chaperon; I shall be quite right alone. Why are you coming—as his friend or his enemy? If as the latter then I'm afraid there will be no room in the car."

"Why, it holds seven or eight."

"Yes, it might hold seven or eight of his friends, if he has so many; but you can take it from me there's no room in it for a single enemy."

"I am as much his friend as you are."

"In that case, if you're perfectly sure—come."

CHAPTER XI

THE SESSIONS HOUSE

THE first night which Graham Burke had spent in the cell of the Great Erdington police station had been to him a night of unspeakable things ; that was when he had first known what it meant to be a prisoner. How much worse was that first night when he was arrested for a second time. They had brought him to Great Erdington in an open tradesman's cart, which had been borrowed from the proprietor of the general village shop. He had lain in the bottom. They had hauled him into the station as if he had been a sack of coals, and dumped him down upon the floor of the cell. Then the door had been clanged, and they left him there.

And such a very short time before he had been dreaming dreams of the great and glorious things he would do when he once more tasted the sweets of being a free man ! Was it strange that that was for him a night of agony ; that sleep never came to soothe his smarting eyes ; that he was never able to get away, for a single instant, from the spectral horrors which were with him in that cell ? His first fall had been dreadful ; but this second one—charged with murder ! What evidence they had, or thought they had, against him he could not think ; his innocence, his ignorance, was so complete. He was aware that they must have some ; he was quite sure it would be made the most of.

Experience had taught him that, in an English court

of justice, it was not necessarily sufficient to be falsely accused; innocence did not, as a matter of course, prevail; a man might be, and was, sent to prison for offences of which he was utterly incapable. That had happened to him once, he had been sent to prison for what he had not done; that would be up against him. It would be stated in the open court that he, a notorious felon, had just been released from gaol, and had instantly taken advantage of his release to offend again. No doubt it would be said that while he was in gaol he had nourished a desire to be revenged, had formed a scheme of vengeance, and, the moment he was out, had put it into execution. He had killed the magistrate who, in the matter of his original offence, had, to a certain extent, been instrumental in bringing him to justice. The magistrates on the bench would look at him, and the judge, when it came to the assizes, and the jury and the people in the court; and then—might God have mercy on him; for he could expect none from his fellow-men.

What, in his muddled mental condition, seemed to make things worse, was a feeling he had at the back of his mind that, though he had not killed Alfred Nockolds, he might have been ready and willing to do so had occasion offered. The man was an unspeakable cur; he had always hated him; he had gone out of his way to do him an injury! Burke was convinced that, in some way which was beyond his comprehension, he had been concerned in a plot to abase him, to bring him to ruin, to punish him for what Nockolds had been quite aware he had never done. For that, Burke had told himself in his bitterness, he deserved to die. He had told Nockolds as much; and he had been heard to tell him so. They would bring that up against him. What a fool he had been in the whole conduct of his life; in his

dealings with Enid Whitaker ; in the conduct of her affairs, of his own affairs, he had blundered throughout.

When the next morning came they gave him but a very poor opportunity of making a satisfactory toilet. Bruised, battered, scratched, dishevelled, with all the signs of the resistance he had offered still on him, making him seem a very ruffian, they took him through the streets manacled to a constable who walked on either side of him. It was a strange *cortège*, and half the countryside was there to see it. It was not very far from the station to the court-house, but as they marched him through the staring crowd—hatless, collarless—it seemed to him to be miles.

The sessions house at Great Erdington made up in antiquity for what it lacked in size, light, ventilation. Its inconvenience was manifest, a by-word. When the court-house was full, which it often was, since fifty to sixty people filled it, its stuffiness was not easy to bear. That day if it had held a thousand it would have been filled to overflowing directly the doors were opened ; the police had to force a way through the eager, hustling crowd, which pressed upon the building from every side. It was not one of the days on which the magistrates generally sat, yet the bench was full ; the justices were as eager for the sight as the veriest street-boy. The mayor, Samuel Griffin, the chief draper, was in the chair. When they ushered Graham into the dock, he was still between two constables who were handcuffed to him on either side. To a stranger he would have presented a truculent figure ; for those who knew him it was pitiful. The mayor asked a question which gave expression to what was perhaps the general feeling of his colleagues.

“Why have you brought Mr. Burke in like that? Why is he handcuffed to two policemen?”

Inspector Dalton explained.

"We had the greatest difficulty, your honour, in effecting the prisoner's arrest; he offered the most violent resistance. He has given me some marks which I shan't get rid of for many a day. He has broken one of Police-Constable Roberts' fingers, and Police-Constable Brown is in the doctor's hands. He has shown a disposition to be violent this morning——"

"That's a lie!" The prisoner's intervention was curt and to the point.

"It's not a lie, your honour. So I thought it better, to avoid trouble, to make it difficult for him to be violent here."

"You hear what the inspector says?" observed the mayor. "You're a man of education, Mr. Burke, and should know that no good ever comes of resisting the police——"

"Have you ever been arrested for what you never did, Mr. Griffin?" The mayor adjusted the glasses on his nose; the question seemed to take him aback. "If you had, you'd feel like what Inspector Dalton calls 'offering violent resistance.' Inspector Dalton got no more than he deserved, not half as much."

"I'm sorry to hear you talk like that, Mr. Burke, very sorry indeed." The mayor's manner was paternal. "I do not like to see a prisoner, who may be innocent, fettered; we none of us do. Will you undertake to behave in a reasonable fashion if we have the handcuffs removed?"

Mr. Burke's answer was ambiguous. "I'll be as reasonable and calm as a man can be who has been treated as I have."

The mayor consulted his colleagues, then he nodded at the inspector.

"We have decided, Mr. Burke, to put the best

possible construction on your answer. Let his handcuffs be removed, Inspector Dalton."

They were removed. The moment the prisoner's wrists were free he raised his arms. The policemen on either side made a grab at him. He turned to them—

"What's the matter with you two? When a man, whose limbs love freedom, has been in bonds all night, can't he stretch himself just once when his bonds are loosed?"

The proceedings began. The charge was read. The inspector went into the box. The prisoner looked at him; if he had been wise, he would not have done it in quite that fashion; his look made it clear what, if he had his way, he would like to do with the inspector. Certain of the justices were at once convinced that he could be a very dangerous person. His glance wandered along the bench; some of its occupants were not prepossessed in his favour by the glance which he bestowed on them. They did not know that the man was nearly mad with a sense of injury and despair, so that he seemed to see an enemy in every one of them. Then his glance passed round the court; it came to William Kelly, the butler at The Pleasaunce, who had forced himself into a prominent place; and he knew that then, at any rate, he looked upon the face of a friend, and he smiled. And Kelly smiled at him; some of his soul was in that smile. Then the prisoner's glance reached another face—and the smile vanished. He saw Enid Whitaker, and he almost seemed to quail. He had a vague consciousness that another feminine figure was beside her, but Miss Barber was short, she was almost lost in the crowd. Enid Whitaker's face obsessed him so that he did not realize that she had a companion or who she was. Nearly

all the people in the court were known to him, and that made his position worse. He had known them under such different circumstances ; when he was one of the local gentry ; in the estimation of many, almost the chief man of the district ; keen at all sports and games ; ready at all times to be a leader in anything which was for the public benefit or happiness ; and now they looked at him as if he were some wild beast in a show. It was not strange that, oppressed by a consciousness of his hideous position, and by the look which was on Miss Whitaker's face, he allowed what Inspector Dalton was saying in the witness box to go unheeded.

As a matter of fact, Inspector Dalton said very little. His evidence was merely official. He proved the arrest and asked for an adjournment, which was granted for a week ; and the proceedings were over.

The mayor beckoned the inspector up to the bench. He asked if a conveyance could not be obtained so as to avoid as much as possible making a spectacle of him by marching him through the streets. The inspector explained that he did not propose to take him back to the station at all, but to keep him in the precincts of the court-house until a train was available to convey him to Canterstone gaol. Prisoners thereabouts who were awaiting trial, or further magisterial examination, were detained in Canterstone gaol. The inspector told the mayor that he thought the crowd would be cheated if he was kept in the court-house and then taken out by the seldom-used back entrance to a cab which could be driven up at the last moment, and hurried to the railway station.

"I suppose," inquired the mayor, "that he couldn't be driven all the way? There'll be a mob at the station. Couldn't you get a motor-car?"

"I doubt, your honour, if there's one available. I'll

see that the crowd don't get into the station ; we'll take him through the goods' yard, and I dare say I'll be able to reserve a compartment."

Two requests were made to see the prisoner, who was conducted by a flight of steps into the regions below ; one came from William Kelly, and the other from Miss Barber. Both were refused.

"I call it wicked," declared Miss Barber, when she found herself outside the court-house, which only by dint of some persuasion she had been induced to leave, "that an innocent man shouldn't be allowed to see his friends, merely because a policeman chooses to lock him up for what he never did. If they call that justice in England, write me down as quite American. I call it a monstrous survival of mediæval tyranny."

"If you told Inspector Dalton that I don't think he'd quite understand what you meant." This remark came from Miss Whitaker ; her face was white and her tone was dry. One felt that something curious was going on within her.

"Inspector Dalton !" Miss Barber's tone was one of supreme contempt. "If Inspector Dalton were in some parts of my country he'd soon be taught a thing or two. Am I to be prevented by a common policeman from saying a word of comfort to an injured man ? I'm more and more sure that Mr. Graham Burke is as innocent as you are, or as I am."

They brought the prisoner his dinner into his cell beneath the court-house. The bearer of the meal was Police-Constable Kelly, who relieved his colleague of the onerous task of keeping watch and ward.

"Thank goodness !" said the man, when Kelly appeared. "Now I can go and have a bit of dinner ; I want it. I've had more than enough of this job already."

Kelly, opening the cell door, was greeted by the prisoner almost as if he were a familiar friend.

"Why, Jack," he exclaimed, "am I in your charge? Well, I'd sooner be your prisoner than anybody else's."

The constable gave him a warning look; he spoke in lowered tones.

"There's a man outside; he's just going. When he's gone I fancy you and I shall be alone down here. If you don't mind, sir, I should like to say a few words to you through the trap in your door."

Presently Police-Constable John Kelly returned; his face appeared at the opening in the door of the prisoner's cell. He spoke in a whisper.

"I'd better talk to you, Mr. Graham, through here; then if any one comes along nothing will be noticed. I'm to take you over to Canterstone—me and Ned Vincent——"

"Ned Vincent? You don't say so? I say, Jack, isn't that rather odd? Both of you sons of my father's servants. He never thought that his gardeners' sons would take his only son over to Canterstone Gaol on a charge of murder. I say, Jack, has Dalton got much against me? I can't think what he can have got. I never knew anything had happened to Nockolds till he told me himself."

"Well, Mr. Graham, I don't want to say anything about that, but things do look so black that if you can give them the slip between this and Canterstone I should."

The man's tone could hardly have been graver; his face was troubled.

"In the first place, how am I going to do that, since there'll be two of you in charge of me, and I'll be handcuffed? And what should I gain if I did?"

"It will be your best chance, sir. I don't want to

say it, but I must. Dalton has got an awful case against you; he means to hang you, and he will, Mr. Graham, if you don't give him the slip. Listen to me, sir!"

Graham Burke listened.

CHAPTER XII

MISS BARBER'S PASSENGER

IT is possible that Miss Barber believed herself to be mistress of many accomplishments ; one of them was driving a motor-car. She certainly had driven a good many ; not seldom, it is to be feared, faster than she ought to have done, as certain endorsements on her licence testified. As she was wont to declare that she was never caught when she was going her fastest, one wondered.

Having returned to The Pleasaunce in what, for her, was a very bad humour—to do her justice, she was generally even-tempered, as a young woman should be who has nothing to ruffle her—she scampered through a hurried meal, had some quite unpleasant words with Miss Enid Whitaker, went to lie down because she had a headache, found she could not because it only made her headache worse ; then, in what seemed to be a fit of desperation, she ordered the big car to be brought round, and off she went in it all by herself. She travelled half the county, went right through Canterbury to the coast, which she skirted for miles, and then, finding herself at Margate, stopped for tea.

She returned towards home in the cool of the evening. All day there had been that close, stagnant something in the atmosphere which in England is apt to precede a thunderstorm. It broke upon her when she was still far from The Pleasaunce. She was driving

an open touring car. Prudence would have suggested that she should stop and at least try to put up the cape hood; or if that was, as was very likely, beyond her powers, she might have pulled up at some wayside inn and got some one else to do it for her. But she did not even deign to don a mackintosh, though presently the rain began to come down in real earnest; every one knows how wet one does get when driving unprotected in a motor-car through the rain.

"It won't hurt me if I do get wet," she told herself. "It will do me good, a thorough soaking is what I want, I feel sure of it." Then she added with a certain humorous grimness: "And it looks as if I'm likely to get all I can possibly want. I wonder if any one was ever drowned while driving a motor-car through this sort of thing; it feels as if there were already about a foot of water on the seat. And how dark it is! This is really fun."

She seemed to have her own notions of fun. Not only had it suddenly become so dark that it was not easy to make out the road in front of her, but the wind had risen, the rain was falling in torrents, the lightning flashes followed each other so rapidly that they were almost dazzling, and the thunder roared and rolled and rattled, making a continuous clamour which was deafening. Through it all the young lady, in summer costume, all alone on that great car, dashed gaily on; or it seemed to be gaily, for on the small, rain-spattered face was a smile.

All at once something happened which caused her gaiety, real or assumed, to vanish.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed, "what was that?"

She had almost run over something which was lying in the middle of the road; if she had not been a really skilful driver she would have quite. Quick though her

touch was on the steering wheel, she must have actually grazed the object, whatever it was; in the shortest possible space of time she stopped the engine and stood up to see what was in the road behind.

"Why—it's a man? Is he drunk or—is he dead?"

She was instantly conscious that in either case she was in a delicate position; but she did not hesitate for a moment. She jumped off the car and ran back to what was lying on the road, really conscious for the first time as her clothes stuck to her limbs how sodden with wet she was. And the rain still came down in bucketfuls; the lightning continually kept up a vivid illumination. Just at that moment there was a crash of thunder longer and louder than any that had gone before.

The man lay almost in the centre of the road, his knees bent under him in an attitude which suggested that he must have fallen forward. One side of his face was in the mud.

"Poor creature!" The girl bent over him. He was not a pleasant-looking object, but she did not show herself in the least unnerved. "His poor face in all that mud!" She had herself to kneel in the mud to raise his head. Directly she had it off the ground she broke into ejaculation. "Why—why—why——!" The monosyllable was three times repeated; for some seconds she got no further. She stooped down closer, so as to get a better view of the face which she was holding in her hands. Then her sentence was completed. "Why, if it isn't Graham Burke! However can he have got here? And, anyhow, what's wrong with him? Mr. Burke! Mr. Burke!"

In vain she called to him; he showed not the slightest sign of having heard. She looked wistfully about her.

"This is rather more than I bargained for. He is so

big. I can't lift him all by myself, and I can't keep him here. If I'd brought a chauffeur——”

She got no further; about her mouth came that grim look which had been there that morning—somehow it gave her dainty face a sudden look of strength.

“Perhaps it's just as well I didn't; chauffeurs have eyes and a tongue, even the best of them. As I'm pretty nearly certain that Mr. Graham Burke is still supposed to be a prisoner—there may be some curious explanation of his presence here. I'd just as soon be alone, only—how am I going to lift him? Now, if some strange person would only come along the road——”

The wish she was about to utter was not yet shaped when, after a fashion, it was granted. The road was bounded on either hand by hedges. On the right were open fields; on the left was a fringe of trees, beyond which was what seemed to be the nucleus of a copse. Suddenly from between these trees came a man. She saw his face some moments before anything could be seen of his body. Glancing towards her through a sort of frame of dripping leaves, they surveyed each other. It was a highly coloured face, which badly needed shaving; she took it to be the property of some member of the tramp class. Its owner was the first to speak.

“I saw him come. He went down pretty hard.”

“Do you mean to say that you saw this unfortunate”—she was about to say gentleman, but she chose another word—“man fall down and you never came to his assistance?”

“Came across those fields, he did, just about when the lightning was worst. I wondered if it had struck him.”

“And you never troubled yourself to come and see?”

"It wasn't no business of mine. What could I have done? Has it struck him?"

"Something is badly wrong. You'll have to help me to get him into my motor-car, and I'll take him to a doctor."

"I saw you coming along. I wondered if you'd go over him, and you nearly did. That would have finished him if you had." He allowed some more of his person to become visible. "You must have got wet in the motor-car without nothing to cover you."

"I did get rather wet. I'll bring the car just to here, and then perhaps you'll lift this poor man into it."

She did as she said, bringing the car to a standstill within a foot of the recumbent figure. The stranger had come out of the hedge. He was a shambling, awkwardly-built fellow, whose attire consisted of odds and ends. He was looking down at the man on the road.

"Can't you lift him?" the girl inquired, "or shall I get down and help you?"

"He'll want some lifting. He's over thirteen stone. I've got an eye for weight. He's within ten pound of two hundred. If I was a betting man I'd lay on it. I dare say, if you was to tell me where you want him put, I could manage to get him there."

She had descended from the driving seat, and held the door of the back wide open.

"Put him in here—can you?"

"I'll have a try. Let's see, how am I going to do it? I could throw him over my shoulder, like as if he was a sack, but a better way would be to lift him in my arms and carry him as if he was a baby. But that will want some doing. However, here goes."

Bending over, putting his arms beneath the recumbent man, he essayed to raise him from the

ground. After what was plainly a strenuous effort he succeeded. He bore him to the open door, then, climbing in, deposited him on the seat.

"It's a broadish seat," he said, but if you're not careful he'll slip off. He don't seem to have any sense left in him."

"Perhaps you'd better come with me and see that he doesn't fall."

The stranger returned to the road. He shook his head.

The girl left him standing on the road, the car throwing up torrents of mud as it sped over the spongy ground. Although Miss Barber was perfectly well aware that she was on what seemed very like the horns of a dilemma, she showed no outward signs of agitation. When she came to the cross-roads, instead of following the one which would have taken her home, she swung round to the left, and went on and on, farther and farther from Great Erdington and The Pleasaunce. It is to be feared that the car was going well over forty miles an hour, with occasional checks as she passed through a hamlet or little town. She had been driving for more than an hour when she showed signs of really slackening speed.

"I'm not sure where I am, but that looks like water, and unless my knowledge of the geography of this small island is altogether at fault that ought to have something to do either with the Medway or the Thames. What's that town? It looks like a town." She hailed two small boys who were passing. "What place is this I'm coming to?"

The urchins stared at each other; then the bigger of the pair said—

"Rochester." The pair walked on, glancing behind them as they went.

"Rochester? I believe that's quite an interesting old town, but it's not the sort of place I want."

She took the car round the first turning towards the open country, passing through perhaps five or six miles of lanes and roads in which there were practically no signs of human habitations. She came to a cottage which stood back from the road, the first she had seen for perhaps a mile.

"That looks like the sort of place; but he'll have to be carried in across that garden, and suppose there's no one there to carry him? I'll try again."

Another mile; a cottage stood close to the road.

"This ought to suit me better. I wonder if there's anybody here who'll take a lodger?"

She stopped, glanced into the back of the car, descended, knocked at the cottage door with her knuckles—there was neither bell nor knocker. A pleasant-faced woman appeared; Miss Barber could see that the room beyond opened right on to the road.

"I've just picked up in the road a poor man who appears to have met with an accident. Will you give him shelter?"

"Met with an accident? Is he hurt? Where is he?"

"I'm afraid he's hurt, but I'm not quite sure. He's in the back of my car."

"Hadn't you better take him to the hospital at Rochester? I've got no accommodation for accidents."

"I'd rather not take him to a hospital. If you will give him accommodation I'll pay you within reason anything you want."

The woman eyed her shrewdly. "Is he a friend of yours, miss?"

Miss Barber approached the truth.

"An acquaintance."

"And you say you've just picked him up on the road? Where does he live?"

"I'm afraid he lives some distance away from here, and that's where it is." Miss Barber suddenly tried other tactics; her manner changed. "Listen to me; I like your looks, and I hope you don't dislike mine. Can't you find a bed for my acquaintance and give him ordinary care and attention, say, for a day or two, till we've found what's wrong with him? I'll make it well worth your while. I'm not in want of money, I want help, and you look to me like the sort of woman who would be willing to help another. There's one other thing, I want you to ask no questions."

The woman was still eyeing her shrewdly. Miss Barber felt that she was taking in all the details of her appearance.

"Well, miss, it's like this. I have got a room which I should be willing to let, and I'd be glad enough of the money, but I'm all alone in the house, and—I suppose that it's all right."

"Perfectly all right. Come and look at him."

They went together to the back of the car; it had ceased to rain; the sun was beginning to shine. The woman eyed the recumbent figure with compassionate face.

"Why, poor soul, he's unconscious. And how wet and muddy he is!"

"Considering that I found him lying in the mud, with the rain pelting down upon him—"

"You've not run over him, miss, and don't want any one to know it? I couldn't let myself in for anything of that sort, miss."

"I'm not asking you to; he's not been touched by my car. A man who saw him fall, before I came, thought that he might have been struck by lightning."

"Struck by lightning? Poor fellow! Well, miss, I don't dislike the looks of him, and I don't think you'd tell me what wasn't true, or want to get me into any sort of trouble, so I'll do what you ask, and we'll talk about the money afterwards. How did you get him in the car? Did you lift him by yourself?"

"The man of whom I told you, who saw him fall, lifted him for me."

"We shall have to lift him by our own two selves. There's no one round here that I could get to help me."

"Do you think we could manage it between us?"

"Do I think? Why, bless you, miss, in my time I've lifted heavier weights than him. I could manage him all by myself if it comes to that. But if you was to get inside and lift his feet I'll take his head—that's where he's heaviest. The bed's all ready."

They got him on to that bed somehow; it was in a room at the back, looking out on to a cottage garden which, if she was responsible for its state of cultivation, did the tenant credit.

"Why, miss, his clothes are in a pretty state, but isn't he a gentleman?"

"He's an unfortunate gentleman. There are unfortunate people in the world, you know, Mrs. Eliot." The woman had told her that her name was Eliot.

"As if I didn't know it! It isn't often that you come on one that isn't."

"You haven't many neighbours, have you, Mrs. Eliot?"

"I haven't any. I'm a stranger in this part of the country. What people there are round here aren't neighbourly. What a state he is in, and his head's all matted with dirt."

"It might be just as well if he had that beard of his off, if only we were barbers."

"I'm barber enough for that. My husband was paralyzed; for three years before he died he could hardly move hand or foot. I'd make nothing of shaving your friend, if you think he wouldn't mind when he comes to."

"I'm sure he wouldn't. But, Mrs. Eliot, I'm beginning to wonder if he ever will come to."

The woman had her hand inside the unconscious man's shirt.

"He's not dead, have no fear of that, miss. I don't know what's wrong with him, but he certainly ain't dead."

CHAPTER XIII

NEWS AT BREAKFAST

IT was quite late when Miss Barber returned to The Pleasaunce. At the gate the lodge-keeper greeted her with acclamations.

"Miss Barber, I am that glad to see you. We have been wondering what had become of you."

Miss Whitaker met her in the doorway. After her own fashion she acted as echo to the lodge-keeper.

"My dear Olive, where have you been? Do you know it's after ten o'clock? You might have wired; you might have guessed how anxious I should be I've been wondering all sorts of things; if you'd lost your way, if anything had happened to the car, if you'd been caught in the storm."

"I did lose my way; something did happen to the car, but it wasn't very much. And as to being caught in the storm, just look at me—don't I look as if I'd been caught in the storm?"

"My dear child, what a sight you are! You don't look as if you had a dry thread on you. Come upstairs and change; how wet you are! You should have got into shelter."

The butler, Kelly, was standing in the hall. It was he who had opened the door. He said, not as he had

spoken in the morning, but in the suave tones of the well-trained servant—

“How about dinner, Miss Barber? Have you dined?”

“So you’re back again, are you? I’m glad to see you, Kelly.”

“Yes, miss, I’m back again; and if you’ll excuse me saying it, I’m glad to see you.”

The mistress and servant exchanged glances, almost as if each expected to find something on the other’s face.

“Well, Kelly, I certainly haven’t what you call dined, or anything like it; so if, after I’ve got myself into something like decent order, you could offer me something tempting to eat, I think I should rather like it; in fact, I’m nearly sure I should. I believe I’m starving.”

While she ate, the servants were in the room waiting; Miss Whitaker sat opposite, asking an occasional question, though the presence of the servants seemed to act as a check. When the meal was finished, and the two girls had adjourned to another room, the bridle seemed to have been removed from Miss Whitaker’s mouth—she was all questions. She wanted to know exactly where Miss Barber had been, why she went there, precisely what she had seen and done—in fact, she seemed to desire a minute account of her proceedings, almost as if she suspected her of having done something which she wished to hide, and which she—Miss Whitaker—ought to know. She seemed devoured with curiosity—to have a thirst for information which was insatiable.

“Really!” at last protested Miss Barber. “Enid, are you all notes of interrogation?”

“But it seems so strange that you should have

been gone all this time, been out in all that frightful storm, so far as I can make out from what you say, for no reason at all."

Miss Barber had a book in her hand which, presumably, she desired to read. She lowered it and regarded her friend.

"Enid"—she paused as if to choose her words—"I hope you won't mind what I'm going to say, but I believe I've told you already that I'm half American, and perhaps American girls do all sorts of things just because they choose. They don't like comment, they don't like criticism, they don't like to feel they're watched, and they don't like questions. I've been out over and over again for whole days by myself and you've never shown the slightest desire to know where I've been. What's the matter with you to-night?"

"Of course, Olive, if you think I'm intruding, or wish to pry into your private affairs——"

"My dear Enid, I don't like you to talk to me like that. You owned you weren't very well this morning, and I'm afraid you're not much better to-night; are you?"

Miss Whitaker, rising from her chair, tossed her book on to a table with what was very like an angry gesture.

"I suppose I'm not. I don't know what's the matter with me, but I know I'm very miserable. Graham Burke is trying to sleep in his cell at Canterstone; how would you feel if you knew that about the man you had once been going to marry?"

She turned to Miss Barber a face which was white, drawn, haggard. Miss Barber regarded her with what might have been described as observant calmness, as if she were some curious study.

"Did you ever care for him?"

"Care for him! Care for him!" Miss Whitaker repeated the words twice over, then she laughed. "What a way to speak of what I felt! I've been sick of love for him ever since the days in which I wore short frocks; now you have it. I suppose you'll laugh at me, but—I had to put it plainly. And there he is in gaol!"

"I don't wish to intrude upon your confidence, and won't say another word about it if you'd rather not, Enid, but there is one question I should like to ask."

"Oh, ask it! you can ask me anything. I'm the employed and you're the employer."

"Enid! what a horrible thing to say! How can you allow yourself to speak like that?"

"It's true, isn't it? You pay me two hundred a year to be your companion. You get very little value for your money, and sometimes you can't help letting me know it."

"What have I done or said which in the least degree entitles you to make such a statement?"

"When I asked you questions just now you put me in my place, but I have no doubt you consider yourself entitled to ask me what you like. Go on, ask me what you were going to, you can."

"I'm afraid you really are not very well, your nerves have been over-strained. And I'm feeling very tired. I'm going to bed. Good night."

"Olive, before you go, tell me what you were going to ask me about Graham Burke."

Miss Barber paused at the door to answer.

"Something which I shouldn't dream of asking you in your present frame of mind; you might throw things. I dare say, Enid, after a good night's rest you'll forgive me for what I haven't done."

Miss Barber went; Miss Whitaker stared at the

door as if she would like to see through the panel what she was doing.

"I wonder what she's been doing ; she's so secretive. As she says, I may be over-strained—God knows I have cause to be—and perhaps it's only my imagination, but the moment I saw her standing like a drowned rat in the doorway, I felt that she'd been doing something she didn't want me to know. I wonder what it was."

She seemed to be still wondering when the butler entered. Hours, as a rule, were very early at The Pleasaunce. The household was in bed before eleven o'clock ; it was his custom, before retiring, to come to learn if anything else was wanted. He looked about him when he saw that Miss Whitaker was alone.

"I beg your pardon ; has Miss Barber retired ?"

"She has ; I suppose she has ; I don't know what she's done." The young lady spoke with an irritation of which she could scarcely have been conscious. She turned on the man in a passion which seemed to disconcert him. "Well, Kelly, what about your Graham Burke now ? They've got him, and they'll keep him, and they'll hang him."

"Miss Whitaker !" Judging from his manner she might just as well have struck him. Suddenly he smiled : "You think so ?"

The smile seemed to add to her exasperation.

"I'm sure of it. You may indulge in all the rant you like, but he's a thief and a murderer. I wouldn't keep any one in my house who sympathized with a person of that description."

"Wouldn't you ? Fortunately, Miss Whitaker, this is not your house."

Still smiling, Kelly left the room, leaving what seemed to be a very angry young lady behind him ; one,

too, with whom suspicion seemed all at once to have become a disease; she saw something suspicious in Kelly's smile. She actually set herself to solve the mystery.

"I wonder what he meant by it. It came to him all of a sudden, his smile, when I was saying that they had got him, and would keep him, and would hang him. Why should he smile when I said that? That sort of thing wasn't calculated to amuse him."

In the morning the story was all over the house—Graham Burke had escaped. It came almost with the daylight; the servants had all the particulars at their fingers' ends by the time the young ladies rose. When Louise, Miss Barber's maid, took the tea in to her mistress, they were the first words on the tip of her tongue.

"Miss Barber, Mr. Burke has escaped."

Miss Barber's eyes were not yet quite wide open. When Louise said that, she opened them a little wider, but not much.

"Oh, has he?" she said. "I hope, Louise, you haven't made my tea so strong again; the last two or three mornings it has been almost undrinkable."

"I think you'll find it all right, miss. Mr. Burke jumped out of the train as it was going through Okeham tunnel, and nothing has been seen of him since."

"Hasn't there? I'm afraid, Louise, you're more interested in Mr. Burke than I am, especially at this hour of the morning. Will you see that my bath is nearly cold; I feel as if I shall want something to rouse me."

Louise went out feeling snubbed.

"Of course," she said to the housemaid, as she told her of the way in which her mistress had received the news, "she doesn't really know him, and that's why she

doesn't care what becomes of him. Yet I'm told she was in court."

"Lot's of people would have liked to have been in court who don't care what becomes of him." This was the housemaid, whose taste appeared to be slightly morbid. "I know I've often said to myself that I should like to be in court when a man is sentenced to be hung, and I shouldn't care who it was."

No one breathed a word of the great news to Miss Whitaker. Somehow, the servants never did say more to her than they could possibly help. The first she learned of it was from Olive Barber's lips at the breakfast table. Miss Barber finished reading a voluminous epistle, and laid it down beside her plate with a sigh.

"Teddy again! I shall have to deal with that young man."

Miss Whitaker glanced across at her.

"Do you mean to say that great long letter is from Mr. Sloane? Why, he writes to you every other day."

"He does. I suppose he expects me to read what he writes."

"Olive, what a humbug you are! You told me the other day what a dear boy he was, what nice letters he wrote, how you liked him, and how you weren't sure that your feeling for him wasn't even stronger. Doesn't he want to make you his wife?"

"I suppose he does; he's said so about a dozen times."

"Then why don't you marry the man if you like him, and you're not sure that you don't do more than like him?"

"No, that's just what I won't do. Directly I saw this letter I knew I couldn't. I'm going to write and tell him so, and I'll put it in a way that will let him understand that 'No' is the last word I've got to say."

"You're an extraordinary person, Olive, after hesitating as you have done, to make up your mind all of a sudden like that."

"Yes, I am rather sudden, but my mind is made up. I might have had him last week. I couldn't now—ever again. I wish people wouldn't write me letters; it's just hard work to have to read them."

"You told me only the other day that you liked having letters and you loved to read them."

"You mustn't quote the other day against me, Enid; it isn't fair. Did you sleep well? Have you heard the news?"

"What news?" Miss Whitaker glanced up from the letter she was reading.

"You can't have looked at Kelly, or you'd have seen it on his face."

"Seen it on Kelly's face? What do you mean? Has anything happened?"

"Only that you were mistaken last night when you talked about Mr. Graham Burke being in his cell."

"Olive!" Miss Whitaker leaned over the table, suddenly all eyes and ears. "Tell me what you mean."

"I only know what the servants say. When Louise brought me my tea she told me that Mr. Graham Burke had escaped. Didn't any one tell you?"

"Not a soul, not a word. It isn't true! Escaped? How can he have escaped? It's impossible."

"My dear Enid, don't allow yourself to get into a state about a thing like that." Miss Whitaker, who had got up from her chair, was visibly trembling. "I dare say it is impossible; it seems like it, doesn't it? The police do take such care of their prisoners in England. So far it's only servants' talk."

Just then Kelly came into the room, a dish in his hand.

"Kelly," cried Miss Whitaker, "what's this cock-and-bull story Miss Barber tells me about Graham Burke having escaped? What nonsensical tale have you got hold of in the servants' hall?"

The butler looked at his questioner, then at his mistress; then he placed the dish upon the table.

"Kidneys and mushrooms, Miss Barber; they have just left the fire."

"Thank you, Kelly, I think I'll have some. A kidney ought to be eaten while it still tastes of the fire."

"Yes, miss, that is so." He held the cover while Miss Barber helped herself. Miss Whitaker repeated her question.

"Did you hear me ask you, Kelly, what is this cock-and-bull story about Mr. Graham Burke having escaped?"

The butler called the young lady's attention to the contents of the dish.

"Will you have some kidney and mushroom, Miss Whitaker?"

"No, I won't." She stamped her foot. "Answer my question."

"If you please, miss, I don't understand what your question is. I've heard no cock-and-bull story, neither in the kitchen nor anywhere else."

Miss Whitaker looked at the man as if she would have liked to shake him.

"Is it true—that Mr. Burke has escaped?"

"I believe it is quite true. Are there any orders for Johnson?" The question was addressed to Miss Barber; Johnson was the chauffeur.

"Yes, Kelly, there are. Tell him to let me have the

big car as soon as possible. I'm going out in it alone. As I want to do some exploring in it on my own account, and shall probably be away some time, I hope you people won't perish with anxiety if I'm a little late."

Kelly departed. Directly he was gone Miss Whitaker asked her companion a question as if she were aiming a pistol at her head.

"Olive, where are you going?"

"These kidneys are delicious, so are the mushrooms, only I'm not sure that I ought to eat any more." Miss Barber rose. "I'm going to tell Teddy that it's absolutely and finally 'No.'"

"That isn't what I mean. Where are you going in the car?"

"Oh, in the car. Perhaps to the other end of the rainbow; and I'm going alone. It's rather odd about Mr. Graham Burke having escaped, isn't it? I wonder if they'll hear anything about him in the course of the day. Do you think they will?"

Before the other could answer, the questioner had left the room, leaving Miss Whitaker looking as if she could have said a very great deal.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LODGER

MISS BARBER left The Pleasaunce soon after ten, travelling as a rule at considerably over twenty miles an hour, and yet she only reached Mrs. Eliot's cottage at just upon one, the distance by the direct route being under sixty miles; the explanation being that she chose a route which was really no route at all, but a sort of turning and twisting business, winding in and out with a total disregard to mileage, as if she were possessed with an idea that she might be followed, and the first thing to be desired was to throw pursuers off the scent.

Directly Mrs. Eliot came to the door she asked her—
“Well, is everything all right?”

“I can't say as to that, miss, but the gentleman is conscious, if that's what you mean.”

“He is conscious? Thank goodness!” The look of relief which came over the young lady's face was so obvious that it could scarcely have escaped the woman's notice. “I've brought a few things in the car. I thought you might want them.”

With Mrs. Eliot's assistance, parcel after parcel was taken into the cottage.

“Whatever have you got in here?” she inquired as she surveyed the display they made upon her table.

“Odds and ends to eat and drink. I thought they might come in useful, as you don't seem to have many shops round here.”

Mrs. Eliot stared. "Why, miss, there's soles, and there's salmon, and there's turbot——"

"I thought your lodger might like a little fish."

"A little fish! It will take him some time to eat all this. And there's a chicken, and a duck, and there's pigeons——"

"Just so, Mrs. Eliot; you needn't go through the list. And how is Mr. Burnand?" The name came quite glibly to the young lady's lips, as if she had been familiar with it for years.

"Well, miss, he's hurt his leg, and I'm not sure there isn't a fracture. I've seen broken bones in my time; I told him he ought to have a doctor, but he wouldn't. It seems to me he's got something on his mind, and that's what's the matter with him more than anything else."

"Can I go in and see him?"

"I should think so, miss, for anything I know."

Miss Barber, tapping at the door of the adjoining room, opened it and entered, closing it the moment she was in. The figure of a man half raised himself in bed.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, me; who did you think it was?"

"I couldn't make out. The woman of the house told me a yarn about my having been brought here by a young lady in a motor-car, who left no name. Who the young lady could be was beyond me altogether. I knew no young lady who owned a motor-car, and anyhow, how I could have found my way into anybody's motor-car I couldn't understand. Was it you who brought me here?"

Miss Barber explained, he listening with a degree of amazement which was almost comical.

"And do you mean to say you found me lying in the road in the mud, and put me into your car and brought me here? Where did you find me?"

"I couldn't tell you the name of the place, but I suppose it was seven or eight miles from Canterstone. How did you get there?"

"I'm not quite certain. You know I jumped out of the train while it was running through the tunnel. I fell and hurt my leg; the woman here says she thinks the bone is broken, and I shouldn't wonder if she's right. I got out of the tunnel somehow, and across some fields. I know I felt very stupid, and could scarcely move; then a thunderstorm came on, and—that's about all I remember. How far is this from where you found me?"

"A long way, about forty miles; you're not far from Rochester."

"Why should you have brought me here?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"You knew that I'd escaped?"

"I guessed it."

"And that it was an offence against the law for any one to help me?"

"I don't care about the law."

"But why did you do it?"

"You saved my life."

"Yes; but I doubt that you can save mine, even granting that I saved yours. And anyhow the cases aren't on all-fours. You weren't a fugitive from justice. I've been thinking things over, and I'm not sure I haven't made things worse by running away, but the temptation was too strong for me. Still, that's no reason why I should drag other people into the hole I'm in. There's you, and there's the woman of the house; you are both of you running a risk."

"Mr. —, the name of the woman of the house is Eliot, I don't know if she informed you that I told her that yours was Burnand."

"She called me Mr. Burnand more than once; I

supposed she had got it from some one, so I just said nothing."

"Mr. Burnand, there's one question I should like to ask you."

"Ask it; ask anything: no one in this world has a better right."

"Is that so?" The young lady's eyes, in them an expression of unusual gravity, were fixed on the man's face. "I'm afraid you'll not think it a nice question, and it's not one which you are bound to answer."

"Having treated me to that preface, what is the question?"

"Did you kill the man they say you did?" Miss Barber was standing close by the bed; her words were whispered; they were certainly inaudible to any one who might be listening without. "You understand, if you'd rather not answer you've only got to say so."

"Miss Barber, when you were good enough to renew our acquaintance by the road-side, I told you that I had just come out from serving a sentence of two years' hard labour for something which I had never done. Did you believe me?"

"I did; yes, I'm sure I did."

"It's like that, you weren't sure at the time?"

"You see, Enid Whitaker lives with me, and she's so absolutely sure in the other direction; she takes it so for granted that it's impossible that there should be any room for doubt."

"That's her position, is it? I don't wish to say anything about Miss Whitaker, I said all I wish to say last time. You've got to believe that Miss Whitaker's view of me—what she tells you is her view of me—is not the right one. Don't you believe it?"

"I do. At Beaulieu I felt sure you weren't that kind of man; when I saw you the other day

I felt still more sure ; and, somehow, Enid has made me surer still."

"As regards your question, I did not kill Alfred Nockolds ; I did not know that he was dead till they found his body on the bed in the bedroom in my house."

She shrank back. "Did they find it there?"

"They did ; didn't you know it?"

"I know nothing, absolutely nothing, except that you're charged with it."

"Then in that case we're in the same boat ; with that exception, I know no more than you did ; I'm wholly at a loss to conceive how his body came to be there. I'm told they've got a chain of evidence, circumstantial evidence, against me which, unless Providence is on my side, and it hasn't been hitherto, will hang me."

"It's impossible that such a thing could happen, especially in England, where they boast of their administration of justice."

"Innocent men have been hanged in England before to-day ; I don't want to be one of them. Life is sweet ; that's why I made a bolt for it. But I'm under no delusion. They'll have me again before very long."

"Why should they?"

"In a case like mine the whole of England joins in the hunt. We're all sportsmen, men, women, children ; every one is always ready to hunt anything, even such as me. I can only do my best to give them a good run ; sooner or later they'll get me, sure as houses."

"Will they? We shall see. We may beat them, you and I together."

"You and I together! But, Miss Barber——"

"Don't call me that. If you must call me anything, call me Baines."

She waved her hand, as if to dismiss the subject.

"I didn't come to talk about that sort of thing ; I'm running this business, you merely have to do as you're told. What I chiefly want to know is—how are you ? I see you've been shaved. By the way, I never understood how you came to have a beard ; I thought in an English prison every one was shaved."

"I don't know about shaving ; where I was they cut your hair, beard, and whiskers as close as they could, and, as your term draws to a close, they let you grow what you like. The woman here tells me she shaved me. It must have been while I was unconscious. Has it made much difference ?"

"I should have known you. You're one of those people whose identity is not going to be concealed by a few hairs on—or off—your chin." She was regarding him as if critically. "You seem to be pretty bruised."

"I am ; something has happened to my left eye, there's a cut at the back of my head, there are pieces missing from various parts of my body, I feel all muddled and hazy, as if some one had been trying to shake me to bits, and Mrs. Eliot tells me that my leg is broken. On the whole, I don't seem to be the sort of person who is likely to keep the police off me for any length of time."

"That part is my business ; don't I tell you that I'm conducting this matter ! I've got to think things out. Time is of importance. I want to get you out of this as soon as you can move. When do you suppose that's likely to be ?"

"Why should you trouble yourself—about a thing like me ?"

"Don't argue ; the thing is settled ; the responsibility is mine ; don't make it heavier by unnecessary talking. I asked you, when do you suppose you'll be able to move ?"

"You see how it is with me. I tried to get out of

bed this morning—and I just couldn't. I may be all right to-morrow."

"You may be better, but not all right. I have got a glimmering of an idea in my head, and I'll tell you what it is. You know we're not very far from the Thames. I thought of chartering a steamer, say, to-morrow night, and running you across the Channel, and landing you somewhere on the coast of France. You might pass as an English tourist, and keep still for a while——"

"You're perfectly certain? I wish I were. What you call your glimmering of an idea suggests to me one or two objections. In the first place, I've got no money. You talk lightly of chartering a steamer. Do you think that would cost nothing? One able to cross the Channel would cost a good deal, if any owner could be induced to undertake the job. You don't seem to realize that by this time to-morrow night every one in this dear country will be on the look-out for a man like me, and that, if you succeeded in getting your steamboat, there would probably be a policeman on board waiting for me. As for the rest of your pretty little plan——"

"I'm not inviting your criticism. All you have to do is to get yourself into a state in which you'll be capable of a reasonable amount of movement, and leave the rest to me. Now, I am going to call Mrs. Eliot in and have a talk with her. By the way, what sort of person do you think she is?"

"It's rather early days for me to judge. I've not your keen wit. There will probably be a reward offered for my apprehension, and, though I've no doubt she's quite a decent body, and in the ordinary course of things wouldn't even throw a brick at a cat, I take it that she has two eyes, and I consider it as being quite possible that she'd regard that reward as—we'll say

tempting. And you must always remember—that she'd be a fool if she didn't."

"What a very disagreeable way you have of putting things. Why do you say that?"

"I believe you've told me you're more than half American."

"Is that against me? Are you going to say disagreeable things to me because of what I couldn't help?"

He looked astonished. "My dear Miss Barber——"

"Baines."

"I mean Baines."

"Then say it."

"My dear Miss Baines, I was merely about to observe that it is perhaps because you are in part American that you are unconscious of the fact that the risk Mrs. Eliot runs in harbouring me is a very real and a very serious one. If, the moment she discovers my identity, she doesn't rush off to the police, they'll make her pay for every moment she delays. Since some one is sure to get any reward that may be offered, wouldn't she be a fool not to get it for herself and keep out of gaol? And the same remark applies to you. Your duty is to go straight to the police and hand me over."

"You—an innocent man?"

"That's not the point. I'm a fugitive from justice, charged with a capital offence. It's the duty of every citizen to hand me over to justice."

"I don't happen to be a citizen, so don't talk nonsense. I'm going to call in Mrs. Eliot, so be careful what you say."

Mrs. Eliot was called in. She came, wiping her hands, which she had just taken out of the wash-tub.

"I hope you'll pardon me, miss, but this is the day on which I do my washing."

CHAPTER XV

DEAR FRIENDS

ONE of the first things Miss Barber did on leaving Mrs. Eliot's was to buy a newspaper. Of course, a man placed as she was would have been acquainted with the contents of the daily papers long before, but somehow the average woman does not buy newspapers, unless the idea comes to her now and then as a sort of inspiration. Passing a newsagent's shop in Rochester, Miss Barber purchased a copy of every journal the man had left. She drove a few miles down the road, till she came to a spot where there seemed to be no traffic, then she drew the car up under the shadow of some great beeches, and she read her papers. Some very surprising information she obtained from them.

In each of them the topic was the Great Erdington murder, and also, what most of them called the escape of the "murderer." What those papers did not know about the business was hardly worth knowing. They gave Graham Burke's history; some of them a sort of historical sketch of his ancestors. They told the story of what they called his defalcation as a trustee, and they gave a glowing account of Miss Whitaker and of all she had suffered. They told quite a number of things about Mr. Alfred Nockolds. According to the scribes, he was a person of blameless life and lofty reputation, who had risen, by his own unaided efforts, from nothing to be a

man of substance ; he was honoured by all, loved by his fellow-townspeople, and had left a void behind him which would not easily be filled. In short, those newspapers made out Mr. Alfred Nockolds to have been a paragon of all the virtues, and, by inference, Graham Burke a monster of vice.

This presentation of the case did not please Miss Barber at all, it made her very angry. She said things out loud about the men who had written those things which were not flattering, but she thought still more. She tore up each of those journals after she had read it, and she dropped the fragments on to the floor of her car. In some of them were what purported to be portraits of the man she had just now left, and they annoyed her even more than the things which were written.

“ ‘Graham Burke, the man whom all England is looking for to-day.’ ” She was holding up in front of her a page from a paper, in the centre of which was a process block of a man’s head and face with that inscription underneath. “ Was there ever anything so absurd or so libellous ? It’s no more like him than it’s like me. If that’s their only means of recognition he’ll never be found at all. Rubbish ! ”

And the page was torn in two, then across again, and the pieces joined the heap which was lying at her feet. There really was quite a quantity of paper on the floor of the car. She looked down at it.

“ I can’t take that home ; they’ll jump to conclusions at once. If Enid were to see it she’d never leave me alone until she’d got the whole thing out of me. I can’t litter the road with pieces of paper as if I were the hare in a paper chase. I’d better have a bonfire.”

She had one, and while the conflagration was at its highest an individual came over a stile which she had

not noticed and asked her what she meant by it. He wore leggings, and a velveteen jacket, and he had a gun under his arm; she set him down as a gamekeeper. His manner was not at all pleasant. She explained that she was burning paper.

"Don't you know better than to do it in a place like this—you might set fire to the grass and the hedge, and do no end of mischief."

"But it poured in torrents yesterday; the grass is quite wet."

"Not wet enough not to burn. Why, look at it! Look at that piece of lighted paper blowing away. With a wind like this you might set the whole country alight, to say nothing of the smoke that's blowing straight over to where I've got two hundred young birds."

He was stamping on the flames with his great hob-nailed boots; he certainly did find it rather difficult to put them out. The wind caught a half-sheet, the corner of which was just alight, and blew it up. If he had not seized it with his hand it might have gone over the hedge.

"See that!" he cried, as he extinguished the burning corner with his hand. "I don't know who you may be, but you as a lady ought to know better." He paused to stare at the "portrait" which filled the greater part of what was left. "What are you burning this paper for? Why, it's to-day's. What's the idea?"

"I don't think there's any particular idea, thank you. Only, you see, I had a lot of silly newspapers, with which I didn't wish to litter the road, and which I didn't wish to take home, so I thought I'd have a little bonfire. I'm sorry if that seems to you to be extremely dreadful. Good day; I'm glad to have met you!"

She got into the car and off she went, the game-keeper standing staring after her, evidently not knowing what to make of her.

"I wonder what this means?" he asked himself. "These papers are all about the Great Erdington murder." He had a portrait in either hand. "Why does she want to burn them out here?"

Miss Barber was saying to herself as her car rolled onward—

"England's a very nice place, but there do seem to be a great many things in it that one ought not to do. Britons may be slaves, but me—no, never! If I like I shall do just all of them." She passed a policeman who was walking smartly along the country road. "What would he do if he knew what I know? Perhaps before long he will. Not if I can help it!"

As she said that she, it might be unwittingly, quickened her pace, possibly to emphasize her words, and perhaps, in part, to relieve her feelings.

"They shan't touch him with their horrid hands if it costs me more than money. He saved me—and I'll save him."

It was odd how the idea obsessed her of returning in kind the service he had rendered her. Yet she was sufficiently honest with herself to admit that if he had been a different kind of person the desire might not have been so strong. Her life might have been saved by a quite antipathetic kind of person, in which case she might not have been so eager to save his. The truth was that, acute and—she believed—hard-hearted as she was, there was in her that romantic streak which is in every girl, and, quite unconsciously on his part, Graham Burke had appealed to it. That night on which he had roused her from sleep by bursting into her room and lifting her out of bed without a word, had borne her in

his arms through passage after passage, and down staircase after staircase, through smoke and flames, had, after a fashion, been always with her. She had not spoken to him a word, nor he to her; at the time she was scarcely sure that she was not still asleep and dreaming; but again and again afterwards she had imagined conversations in which they had said to each other the most amazing things. Although she did not know it, and indeed would have been the first to deny it, the whole incident had cast over her a sort of spell. Had she met him in the morning the spell might have been broken, but because she did not see him, unknowingly, it had grown stronger.

Olive Barber had not only personal charms, she had charms of a more material sort, and they were very abundant. She was a most tempting bait to any single gentleman who wanted money with a wife; and she had reason to know it. It had not been the slightest trouble to say "No!" to a large percentage of her suitors; but in one or two cases to say "No!" had been a little difficult. In one case especially—that of Mr. Edward Sloane—she would have consented long ago if—she herself did not know why. When she saw her rescuer at the gate of The Old House there had come a sort of glimmer, which had grown greater when she met him by the road-side. That morning it had become perfectly clear to her that she never could become the wife of Mr. Edward Sloane. To imagine that this sudden effulgence of light on a subject which had been so wrapt in darkness had anything to do with an individual of whom she knew very little—and that to his apparent disadvantage—was on the face of it ridiculous. All the same, Graham Burke's face went with her the whole way home, and on one thing she resolved—she would stick at nothing which could stand in the way of

her returning to him in kind the service which he had rendered her.

It was just as well that she was prepared for what awaited her. There descended on her an avalanche in the shape of Enid Whitaker and her questions directly she set foot inside The Pleasaunce. She had had some vague notion of avoiding it by taking the car round to the back door ; she was stayed by what she told herself was a sense of what was due to her position.

“ I’m very glad to see you back, Olive, especially as, if you’re quick, you’ll just have time to dress for dinner. I suppose it’s no use asking where you’ve been, although there have been heaps of people here who wanted to know what had become of you. I presume you forgot that it was your ‘ At home ’ day, and that you specially requested the Clarkes to come to tea and tennis.”

“ And did they come ? ”

“ Of course they did. It was a distinct arrangement.”

“ Then I’m rather glad I was out ; on a hot day the Clarkes are so trying, and it has been hot, hasn’t it ? ”

“ My dear Olive, I suppose it doesn’t occur to you that you placed me in a most anomalous and uncomfortable position ? How could I explain what had become of you when I didn’t know ? ”

“ Exactly, how could you ? You have asked me about fifty things already, and, as you said, I’ve only just time to change, so perhaps you wouldn’t mind asking the remaining fifty while we are eating.”

As a matter of fact, while they were dining scarcely anything was said. The presence of the servants, as usual, acted as a restraint. The conversation, which began as Miss Barber would have rather it had not begun, and which ended on a note which was probably unexpected

by both the parties, took place after dinner in the drawing-room.

It was started by Miss Whitaker as Miss Barber was sipping her coffee.

"Mr. Graham Burke will soon be recaptured." She spoke in what was meant to be a tone of final conviction.

"Will he?" Miss Barber's manner was meant to suggest complete indifference.

"He will. They know where he is."

"Do they? Who's they?"

"Why, Olive, how stupid you are! Of course, the police. He'll have to pay for his little escapade. But what a villain he must be—what an unspeakable brute! He almost killed John Kelly, and Edward Vincent is injured for life."

"Is that so? Two men against one, and he did for them both! Wasn't he handcuffed?"

"Haven't you read about it in the papers? Of course he was—that's the extraordinary part of it. It shows what a monster he is. When they started he was handcuffed to them both, but his right wrist was cut and bleeding, and after they got out of the station, to ease it John Kelly took that handcuff off!"

"Bravo, John Kelly! Is he any relation to our Kelly?"

"He's his brother—that's the shocking part of it. And then the wretch's monstrous ingratitude! At his request Kelly got up to open the window because the carriage was hot, and as he bent forward to do this, and his back was turned to Mr. Burke, Graham struck him a terrific blow on the back of the head and knocked him senseless. Then, before Vincent realized what had happened, he took him by the throat——"

"With one hand?"

"With one hand. They were handcuffed together,

so each only had one hand ; but that one hand was sufficient, with it he almost killed him."

"He seems to be a handy sort of man."

"Olive, how can you be so frivolous? The whole business seems to me to be the most horrible of which I have ever heard. It's inflamed the whole country against him. It isn't Great Erdington only, it's England which wants him now. There isn't a man, woman, or child who won't rejoice when the police have got him again. Each moment such a murderous brute continues to be at large is a fresh danger to society."

"It seems to me you use rather inflated language. Since Graham Burke was released from Canterstone Gaol you appear to have become quite a different person. You told me last night that you cared for him more than anything else in the world, and to-night you talk like this. I don't understand. Have you any special grudge against him, apart from what you allege to be his treatment of your trust funds?"

Miss Barber was looking at her companion over the top of her coffee cup, with a something in her glance which seemed to irritate Miss Whitaker. That already sufficiently excited young lady, coming closer to her friend, stood glaring down at her.

"You say I have become different ; what about you ? It isn't what you say, but what you don't say ; it's your manner, your way, your bearing, everything about you, which tells how you have changed ; since, according to you, you met Graham Burke by chance by the road-side, you've ceased to be the Olive Barber I used to know. Olive, do you know where Graham Burke is ?"

The girl, bending down, glaring at the other, asked the question with a sudden intensity which was almost startling. If, for an instant, Miss Barber was taken aback, she managed to conceal it and to meet the

other's flaming eyes with an appearance of the utmost calm.

"Why do you ask me such an extraordinary question? What has put such an idea into your head? I'm afraid, Enid, that, as you told me yesterday morning, you are still very far from well."

"I'm well enough, and you know it. What has Graham Burke been telling you about me? He's been telling you something; I'm as sure of it as if I'd heard him. It's that which has changed you towards me. What has he said? Olive, tell me."

Miss Barber still wore her air of coolness in a fashion which did credit to her powers of self-control.

"My dear Enid, I'll tell you what occurs to me: you and I would be all the better for a change. Suppose you go away for two or three months, abroad, anywhere you like. A fresh environment is what you want, at least for a while. If we go on like this we shall get on each other's nerves."

"You haven't answered my question. Do you think you can put me off by talking rubbish like that? What did Graham Burke tell you about me?"

Miss Barber hesitated. She did not intend, if she could help it, to tell a direct lie; she was at least equally unwilling to tell the whole truth. She sought for a middle path, which her quick-witted questioner at once perceived.

"Don't try to dodge, Olive. Don't search about for something which you hope will satisfy me without telling me too much. What did Graham Burke tell you about me? You are only making it clearer every second that he told you even more than I imagined. What did he say?"

Miss Barber, putting down her cup, got up from her

chair; Miss Whitaker was so close that there was only just room enough for her to do it.

"One would think that you had a right to ask me such a question, but you have no such right."

"He told you that, did he?"

"I tell you it. I don't like your attitude towards me at all. I did not ask you to come and live with me for this kind of thing. Would you mind getting out of my way, Enid—I am going to my room."

"You are not going till you have answered my question; what did he tell you?"

The two girls looked each other very straight in the face.

"Would you really like me to tell you? Your behaviour is so extraordinary that I'm beginning to think it would serve you right if I did."

"What do you mean? Tell me what you mean. Tell me."

"I think I'd better not, for your sake; although you are so provoking. Please stand out of my way."

"I swear to you, Olive, that if I can help it you shan't leave this room until you've told me what he said about me."

"If that's your attitude, I presume that I must yield to pressure. He told me that all your life you've pestered him with offers of your love and yourself; that you became so importunate that in a weak moment, out of pity, he said something to you which you twisted into an expression of his willingness to make you his wife; when he made it clear that you had quite mistaken his meaning, that he was as reluctant as ever to have anything to do with you in that way, in your fury, out of revenge, you so contrived that a trumped-up charge was brought against him, which you well knew was false, with the result that he was sent to two years' hard labour, because

he wouldn't marry you. That's what he told me, and I've not the slightest doubt that every word of it was true. You make that much clearer to me than he ever did."

"He told you that!" Miss Whitaker had drawn a little back from the other. She was breathing in gusts. "He told you that! and—you dare to tell me!"

"Not because I wished to, but because you insisted. You declined to let me leave the room until I had told you; I didn't wish to stay in it all night."

"He told you that! Why did he tell you?"

"Well—because——"

"You shall pay for it and he shall pay for it."

"He has already paid pretty dearly."

"Nothing like what he shall pay; he shall hang for it."

"I believe that it's your intention that he shall. You contrived to have a charge trumped up against him two years ago; I believe you're at the same trick again. Enid, who killed Mr. Alfred Nockolds?"

"He did."

"That's a lie, and you know it. I believe you know who did, and I'm quite sure you know he didn't. I can see it on your face, in your eyes, written large all over you."

"It's false, you can do nothing of the kind. Do you think you will ever get any one to believe you?"

"I do! I have faith in the old adage that 'truth will out'; that such as you, in the end, are tried in the balance and found wanting. Come, Enid, let me plead with you to save this man. He has done you no wrong; even now he wishes you well——"

"That, I presume, is why he told you what he did."

"He wished to justify himself in my eyes, to make it

clear that he was no felon ; to do that you had made it necessary that he should explain."

"Why should he wish to justify himself in your eyes? Why? Why? What is he to you, or you to him? Do you throw yourself at the head of every strange man who has just come out of gaol?"

"This hasn't been a very pleasant conversation, has it, Enid? Don't let us make it worse. It will lead us into a very queer place if we don't look out. I tell you, quite frankly, that I believe if you chose you could relieve him of the odium of this hideous charge, and that pressure will be brought to make you do so, if you refuse to do it of your own free will. Now I am going to bed."

Miss Barber made a rapid movement round the back of the table by which she was standing, and with rather more haste than is common on such occasions, she went through the door. As it happened, her movements need not have been so hurried. Miss Whitaker made not the slightest attempt to stop her. She remained standing where she had been during the last few minutes, staring at the door through which the other had passed.

"He told her that? He told her! Why? If—if—by moving a finger I could save him—now—I wouldn't! I'll never know a moment's peace until they've hanged him. I shouldn't wonder if she had helped him to escape; I could see it in her looks as I was telling her what happened in the carriage of the train; he didn't do it all by himself; there was collusion somewhere. And she knows where he is."

On the way to her room Miss Barber met the butler, William Kelly. She stopped him.

"Is it true, Kelly, that your brother was one of the policemen who were escorting Mr. Graham Burke from Great Erdington to Canterstone Gaol?"

The man looked at her with the imperturbable visage

of the well-trained domestic whom she had expected to find in an English household.

"Yes, Miss Barber, my brother John."

"Was he very seriously hurt?"

One might have suspected that for a moment there was a twinkle in the butler's eyes: "Seriously enough, miss."

"What do you mean by seriously enough? What happened to him exactly?"

"You see, miss, Mr. Graham had to hit him pretty hard to knock the senses out of him."

"Had he? I don't know how hard that might be, but—is your brother on the road to recovery?"

"Oh yes, miss, there's nothing the matter with him now; though I'm afraid there may be trouble for him in another way."

"What way is that?"

"You see, miss, Inspector Dalton he's very angry. He can't make out how a prisoner who was handcuffed to two constables in a railway carriage, both doors of which were locked, can have got away from both of them."

"It does seem rather—mysterious; don't you think it does?"

"It does, miss, not a doubt about it; that's what makes me afraid there may be trouble for my brother in another way."

"If there is, Kelly, I shall be happy to help your brother in every way I possibly can."

"Thank you, miss; that's very good of you, miss, very good indeed."

When Miss Barber had retired, the butler was trying to resolve a problem which was presented to his mind.

"There's something about all this I can't make out.

Miss Whitaker—I can understand her wanting to put him away ; but Miss Barber, so far as I know he's as good as a stranger to her—why should she want him to come off best—and want it badly too, as something inside tells me that she does.”

In her own chamber, having dismissed her maid, Miss Barber could not get her thoughts quite out of rather a curious channel.

“She knows! Enid knows! With a word she could clear him of everything ; she would never dare to let him go to the gallows—the gallows—oh !” She put her hands up to her eyes. “I don't think she could do that, but she'll bring him very close to it, unless—unless a means is found of persuading her to speak. The mystery should not be so insoluble. If there are detectives who can see as far as the ends of their noses I'll put them all on the track to-morrow. Trained men ought to be more than a match for an untrained girl. She's eaten up by jealousy as by a cancer ; she's got the disease so badly that in cunning it may make her the match of any man, or of any dozen. I know she knows.”



CHAPTER XVI

A HINT

MRS. ELIOT was clearing away Mr. Burnand's supper ; it chiefly consisted of one of the fowls which Miss Baines had brought that morning. The lodger had done it ample justice, a fact on which his landlady commented.

"Your appetite does not seem to have suffered, sir."

"No, Mrs. Eliot, it doesn't; it's the only part of me which hasn't. You are an excellent cook; it's more than two years since I have enjoyed food like that which you have set before me."

"Is it indeed, sir? Two years! Have you been abroad, sir?"

"No, Mrs. Eliot, not exactly; you don't always meet with good food in England."

"You certainly do not, that I do know. You see, I was a cook for more than fourteen years, till I married, the same place all the time, Sir George Forster's, over by Great Erdington. It's very odd that after that young lady, Miss Baines, had gone this morning I found an envelope in the garden addressed to 'Miss Barber, The Pleasaunce, Great Erdington.' That's Sir George Forster's place, The Pleasaunce. I've been wondering if she dropped it; you don't happen to know, sir, if that's where the young lady is stopping?" Before he could answer, the woman's keen ear caught a sound without.

"Now, who's that knocking at my back door?—I shouldn't wonder if it's that Joe Daniel."

"And who is Mr. Daniel?" Mr. Burnand was glad to have the subject changed.

"He's an old fool who ought to know better, that's who Joe Daniel is. He wants me to marry him. My husband has been dead ten years come September, and I don't suppose there's been hardly a day in which Joe Daniel hasn't been worriting around."

It was as the lady expected; Joe Daniel was the knocker. Her greeting, when she opened the door, was not so affectionate as it might have been.

"So it's you, is it? I never see the likes of you! I hoped I'd seen the last of you for a month at least, and it isn't two days since you were here."

"Three days ago, Maria, three days it is. I just happened to be passing——"

"It's always the same with you, you always just happen; I wish you wouldn't just happen quite so much."

Mr. Daniel was quite unabashed and apparently unmoved. He was used to the lady's manner of addressing him.

"So, with all this news in the paper, I thought to myself perhaps Maria hasn't heard of it. I'll just look in and ask."

"What news are you talking about?"

He had taken a paper out of one of his pockets, or at least a part of one; a part, it might be added, which had seen better days.

"About this ghastly murder, and about the escape of the chap what done it. It all happened over what was once your way. Did you ever hear of a party named Nockolds?"

"Nockolds? There's a Mr. Alfred Nockolds; a

cousin of mine was in service there. She didn't think much of the place, nor of the master either."

"That's him."

"What's him? What are you talking about, Joe Daniel?"

Mr. Daniel was leisurely unfolding his piece of newspaper.

"Alfred Nockolds was the name of the party what's been murdered. Did you ever hear of a party, also round that neighbourhood, named Burke, Graham Burke?"

"There were some Burkes living at The Old House, and, now you speak of it, I believe the son's name was Graham. But I never saw him."

"That's the party what done it."

"Done what? What do you mean? Will you speak plainly, Joe Daniel?"

"I tell you that the name of the party as was murdered was Alfred Nockolds, and the party who murdered him, his name was Graham Burke. As they were taking him to gaol he nearly did for the two policemen as had him in charge, and he took his leave, and now every one's wondering where he is."

"Where did you learn all this? What dirty piece of paper is that you've got there?"

"It's very curious how I did come by it, very curious indeed, quite a story. With your permission, Maria, I'll take a chair."

"You won't need my permission to do that; you'll put yourself on a chair whether I want you to or not, you generally do. I'm not going to have you bothering me to-night; I've got work to do."

"I'm going to tell you, Maria, how I come by this piece of paper. I was coming over the fields this afternoon, and was looking at the young birds in the long

meadow, when on the other side of the hedge I see flames, and when I got there, blessed if there wasn't a young woman making a bonfire out of a lot of newspapers, a young woman with a motor-car."

Mrs. Eliot echoed his words. "A young woman with a motor-car?"

"A great big motor-car, painted dark blue; she seemed to be alone in it, no driver, no nothing. There was the car by the road, and there was she by the hedge, and there was a regular bonfire."

"What did the young lady look like?"

"There were only two things I noticed about her. One that she was small—she didn't come up to my shoulder."

"Up to your shoulder! A great big lump like you!"

"She was extra small. I don't suppose she was over five feet. The other thing I noticed about her was that she had on one of the biggest veils I ever saw; dark blue it was, like her car."

Mrs. Eliot had turned her face away from him. She was busy with something at the dresser.

"What has all that got to do with me, Joe Daniel?"

"As I said, I happened to be passing——"

"How did you happen to be passing when your place is a good eight miles from this? What rubbish were you talking about a young lady in a motor-car?"

"When she'd gone—I sent her off with a flea in her ear—lighting a fire near my birds!—I stamped out the fire and picked up the pieces of paper that she'd left. Nearly burnt most of them were, but this wasn't so burnt as the others. It's got a picture of Graham Burke, the party as done the murder."

"What do I care about your pictures? Let me look at it."

He handed it over to the lady ; she just glanced at it, then put it down, seeming to take no interest in it whatever.

"Now, Joe Daniel, off you go. I told you before I can't be bothered with you to-night."

"I've come more than eight miles to see you, Maria."

"I thought you just happened to be passing."

"And I've got to walk more than eight miles back. It isn't every chap that would do it, Maria."

"No, thank goodness, it is not. Nice times I should have if it was!"

"There's a reward going to be offered for that chap whose picture you've got there. He'll be worth to somebody all of a hundred pounds. If I got it I'd give every penny of it to you if you'd come over to my place, Maria."

"Thank you, Joe Daniel, for nothing. You might keep it yourself, my man. It isn't blood-money that would get me over to your place. So I wish you good night, especially if that's the sort of thing you've got to talk about."

Mr. Daniel did not go at once. He had been told by Mrs. Eliot to go so many times all those years that it had become a habit with him to treat her requests to leave almost as if they were invitations to stay. He was a patient kind of person, and both parties knew perfectly well that if he ever were suffered to remain unmolested, it would mean that Mrs. Eliot had taken at least one step on the road to capitulation. When he had gone, the moment the door was shut and locked and bolted, she snatched up the piece of partially burned newspaper which she had suffered to lie unheeded on the table, and stared at it with an interest which would probably have surprised Mr. Daniel had he seen it.

"It's him. It is! And Joe Daniel's young woman with the blue motor-car and the blue veil was her. Now whatever am I to do?"

Sinking on to a chair she resumed her study of the pictured man. Reading was not her strong point; it would have taken her hours to go through those columns of printed matter; she was content to pick out a few words here and there; but they were enough for her.

She could take a good deal for granted, filling up the blanks after a fashion of her own.

"It explains everything; I thought there was something very queer about him when she brought him here. Why, so far as I can make out, he must have just got away from those two policemen—did you ever! And she couldn't have been cooler."

Taking an envelope out of a drawer, she studied what was on it.

"'Miss Barber, The Pleasaunce, Great Erdington.' If Mr. Burnand is Graham Burke, I shouldn't wonder if Miss Baines was Miss Barber. Susan told me that Sir George had let his house to some one. I wonder if it's to her. She's made of money, that's plain enough. I wonder what there is between them, what he is to her. He must be a good deal, or she'd hardly do what she is doing. I always understood that the Burkes of The Old House were one of the best and oldest families in the country. How dreadful that he should have done a thing like that!"

She shuddered; and unconsciously she crushed the paper between her strong fingers.

"I never did hear any good of Alfred Nockolds. Susan said some nice things of him, and she's not the one to let her tongue run away with her. But when it comes to killing him——! Whatever am I to do?"

She sat for some minutes in what was clearly

anxious thought. The position was not an easy one, even as it presented itself to her primitive standards and simple mind.

“ I wouldn't do a thing to hurt Sir George, not for a good deal ; and if this young lady is a friend of his, and she must be if she's staying at The Pleasaunce, and perhaps he's a friend, too—I know the Burkes were in and out a good deal—if they was to find him here there'd be a pretty state of things. I don't suppose he could put a foot to the ground ; if they was to come, whatever could he do ? I hope to goodness they won't take him in my house ; if I had only guessed I'd never have taken him in. I wonder if he did murder that man Nockolds. He doesn't seem to me to be the sort to do a thing like that unless he was very much driven. If he's got a thing like that on his conscience I never was more deceived in a man in my life ; I'll never trust my own judgment again. If he's innocent, how awful to be accused of a thing like that that he never did. Yet——”

There was the paper, and the picture, and a dozen things which by degrees came into the woman's mind, making it clearer and clearer that the man who was lying in bed in the adjoining room was in all probability the one whom all the bother was about. In spite of herself she began to be afraid.

“ If he did it, fancy me being left alone in the house with him, alone all night ! Didn't I ought to tell the police ? I have heard say that hiding a murderer is a crime ; people have been sent to gaol for it. Oh, dear, what am I to do ? I almost wish I'd told Joe Daniel. He isn't such a fool as I make him out to be. He might have given me some advice worth having. If I'm left all by myself with him in the house, and this”—this was the paper—“ I don't know what I shall do.”

A voice was heard addressing her by name, "Mrs. Eliot!" It came from the adjoining room.

"There he is a-calling to me! The sound of his voice gave me quite a turn. I wish I hadn't turned Joe Daniel out so quick; I don't half fancy going into his room with no one here. There he is again; I'll have to go. It might irritate him if I was to keep him waiting." She gave herself a sort of shake, as if with scorn of her own timidity. "Just as though he'd touch me, and he not able to put a foot to the ground! A nice sort I am! I'll just go and see what he wants."

She went; the lodger did not seem to want very much. He began with a question—

"Has Mr. Daniel gone? Did he bring any news?"

A sudden thought occurred to Mrs. Eliot.

"He brought a newspaper, sir; at least, a part of one."

"Did he? Is it to-day's? You might let me see it when you've finished, just for a few minutes. I'm still able to read."

"Yes, sir, I will. I hope your leg is feeling better."

"Well, I fancy I could hop a few yards if I were hard put to it. It's better to that extent."

Mrs. Eliot vanished, and presently returned, the fragment of newspaper in one hand, a wooden something in the other.

"My husband, he was 'paralyzed the last part of his life," she explained. "This here's a sort of crutch he made himself to get about with. You might find it useful, sir, if you wanted to get out of bed or anything. I'll stand it up at the head of your bed where you'll be able to reach it. Is there anything else you're likely to want, sir? If not I'll say good night. It's late for me, this is. You'll put out the lamp, sir, won't you?"

The lodger said he would. Mrs. Eliot went. The lodger looked at the door through which she had gone, and smiled—wryly.

“A crutch for me? One which the late Mr. E. made for himself. I’m brought to a pretty pass.”

The paper which the woman had brought him lay on the counterpane. He picked it up. The first thing he saw staring at him from the printed page was a crude representation of a man’s face.

“What’s that? Why——” His eyes opened wider. “It’s meant for me. Great Cæsar’s ghost! It’s the photograph they took of me when I first went into Canterstone Gaol. I suppose it’s been sent all round the papers, to reveal me to the world. If the man in the street recognizes me from that he’ll have to have pretty sharp eyes. What’s happened to the paper? It seems as if some one had been trying to burn it. Most of what’s left of it appears to be about me. I awake to a celebrity of which I never dreamed. ‘Daring Escape of the Great Erdington Murderer.’ They take things pretty well for granted, these newspaper gentlemen. So I’m a murderer, am I? Even before the fact is proclaimed by a jury of my countrymen. Coming events cast their shadows before. Is that the sort of treatment I may anticipate?”

He read all that the paper contained about the Great Erdington murder. Part of it was missing; one corner had been burnt right off; but enough was left to give him a tolerably clear idea of the position which, at the moment, he was holding in the eyes of the world. He had a hard think when he had made an end of reading, lying on his back with upturned face, staring at the low-pitched ceiling. A lacquered lamp was hanging on a nail in the wall on one side of the bed. It was like his cell in Canterstone gaol all over

again. He had lain like that thinking night after night, only there he was in darkness.

By degrees something like a clear comprehension of his position began to be borne in on his mind, for the first time since he was arrested in his mother's bedroom at home. Events had so crowded each other that he seemed to have had no time to think; nor had either his mental or his physical condition been conducive to calm reflection.

He was free—for the moment, and in what a sense! Even as he was descending from the carriage in Okeham tunnel he told himself what a fool he was; he had come with such a crash on to the six-foot way that all capacity for orderly thought was driven out of him, yet even as he was groping his way towards the mouth of the tunnel he was hazily conscious that he had done the most unwise thing he had done yet. When the notion had been put into his head by John Kelly, he had told himself that the idea of attempting to escape was sheer midsummer madness; he had even told Kelly. Yet so successfully had that friendly but not too clear-witted officer impressed on him that it was his only chance, that in spite of his own better judgment, he had yielded.

And here he was, little better than a torso, lame, in bed, with all the eyes in England looking out for him, a myriad hands ready to grip him anyhow, anywhere. If he showed his face in public, the first man in the first town he entered would quite probably suspect his identity. In a few minutes the whole place would be in an uproar; all the inhabitants of the place would be clamouring around him like a pack of wolves; in what a pleasant position he would be!

There was something else to be considered; the girl who had picked him up off the road, who had brought

him here, who was responsible for keeping him out of the clutch of the police—he was imperilling her. If she was not careful she would find herself placed in almost as serious a position as he was, and the fault would be his. The idea was unbearable ; better anything than that. That he should suffer seemed to be in the ordinary course of things ; he had possibly been born under some malignant star. But that frail girl, that feminine and diminutive Quixote, that ignominy should come her way, or even the shadow of it—and because of him—better he should hang ! What a fool he was to have hit John Kelly that pre-arranged blow, to have fastened his fingers around Vincent's throat ; if they had taken him to Canterstone Gaol and kept him there, at least Miss Olive Barber would not have run this risk.

Then there was the woman of the house, Mrs. Eliot ; she probably had seen the paper. Joe Daniel had brought it ; why ? He probably had seen it first ; realizing the interest of the delightful news it contained, he had shown it to her. She had seen the likeness of the escaped murderer ; had she recognized the original, when she brought it in and left it on the bed ? Was that the meaning of the crutch which she had left where he could easily reach it ? Was it intended to convey a hint ?

CHAPTER XVII

A CROWD IN THE COPSE

IT was not yet ten o'clock on the following morning when, for the third time, a motor-car drew up outside Mrs. Eliot's cottage; it was not the same motor-car, though it contained the same young lady. Fearful that the big blue car might become too familiar an object, she had exchanged it for a smaller and altogether different one. She had left The Pleasaunce before Miss Whitaker, at any rate, was down, and had come by devious ways which meant nearly doubling the distance. She was big with ideas and schemes to which, during the silent watches of the night, she had given form and shape; the moment Mrs. Eliot's face appeared at her door she knew that they were wasted.

"Has anything happened?" she asked, within her heart a tremulous something which she had never felt before.

"Yes, miss; he's gone. You'd better come inside."

When she had entered it became doubtful which of the pair was less her normal self—the girl or the woman. Miss Barber's jaw had assumed that oddly square look which so altered the expression of her whole face, while Mrs. Eliot was in such a state of nervous agitation that obviously she found it difficult to speak.

"When I went into his room this morning, miss, there was the window open, and he was gone."

"But how could he go, since he was lame?"

"Well, miss, I took him in a crutch which my husband had made for himself, thinking he might find it handy if he wanted to get out of bed. Perhaps he made shift with that; he don't seem to have left it behind."

"But a crutch! He couldn't go far with that."

"No, miss, you wouldn't think so, would you? But he don't seem to be anywhere in sight." Mrs. Eliot took something out of a drawer which she handed to her visitor, as though it was something dreadful. "Miss, a party I know brought me that last night."

It was part of a newspaper. The visitor took it into her gloved hand.

"Haven't I seen this somewhere before?"

"I shouldn't wonder, if so be as you're the young lady as was burning newspapers by the side of the road. I took it in to—Mr. Burnand."

"Mrs. Eliot, what have you done?"

The two women looked at each other, agitation in both pairs of eyes.

"Well, miss, what could I do? And is this yours, miss?"

She held up an envelope which she took from the pocket of her skirt. The young lady saw it was the one which had brought Mr. Sloane's last letter.

"However did you get hold of this?"

"You must have dropped it, miss, when you were here yesterday, without either of us noticing. I picked it up in the garden after you were gone. Excuse my asking, miss, but are you a friend of Sir George Forster?"

"I know Sir George Forster, but I can hardly pretend to be a friend of his. At present I'm his tenant."

"I thought as how you might be. And that

—was”—there was a blank where the word ought to have been—“from The Old House.” She had already been speaking in a whisper; she spoke still lower. “Do you think he did it?”

“Do you mean, do I think that Mr. Graham Burke, who I admit was the person you knew as Mr. Burnand, killed that wretched man? No more than you did; that’s certain.”

“Then, miss, why don’t he give himself up to the police and stand his trial? No good ever comes of running away from them police. They only make it hotter for them as does. If he’s innocent he’ll be able to prove it.”

“Will he? That’s the theory, but it’s not always the fact. I am sufficiently English to have found that out.”

“You don’t mean to say, miss, you think they’d find him guilty of what he never did?”

“It’s not a question of thinking, Mrs. Eliot, it’s one of fact.” The young lady went to the door of the sleeping room. “I suppose it’s empty?”

“Oh yes, miss., Nothing has been touched in it, either. I thought you’d like to see it just as he left it.”

The girl had entered and was glancing round her. “He dressed himself?”

“I suppose so, miss; you know he was pretty well all right except for that leg of his.”

“Didn’t you hear anything?”

“Well, miss, I did wake up once, and thought I heard what might have been a noise; but I turned over and went to sleep again. You see, miss, I didn’t want to hear anything.” Mrs. Eliot had taken the pillow off the head of the bed, and was shaking it into shape; the act revealed an envelope which was beneath. “Why, what’s this? ‘Miss Baines.’ It’s addressed to you, miss. Think of his having left it there!”

The girl tore it open with fingers which shook. She took out a sheet of common writing paper.

“I have stolen a sheet of Mrs. Eliot’s letter paper to wish you good-bye. I expect it will be good-bye, and don’t you worry about me. If you take my advice you’ll go for a trip round the world; long before you’re back again it will all be forgotten. What you need is some one to look after you and keep you from running risks; when you see men lying in the middle of the road, it’s much safer to leave them there. If they’re not bad eggs, luck’s against them. There’s nothing worse than mixing yourself up with unlucky folks. I won’t thank you, because that’s a thing that can’t be done. I’ve no delusions; I know what’s coming. The luck always has been against me. There’s one compensating clause, you’ll be with me to the end.

“I expect Mrs. E. will give you this. She’s a good sort, she’s dropped me a hint. Good-bye,

“G.B.

“You had better burn this before you leave the house in case there are any questions asked. I don’t want to bring bad luck to you; I simply had to say good-bye, and now I have said it you can tear it up.”

“Can I?” Miss Barber’s lip curled; there was a suspicious lustre in her eyes. “Thank you for your august permission. I won’t tear it up, and I won’t burn it, and I’ll never let it pass from my possession as long as I live.”

Having made to herself this somewhat rash pledge, folding the envelope in two, with the letter inside, unbuttoning her blouse, she placed it where it could hardly have been nearer to her dainty person. She looked up at the other, and she said—

"So you dropped him a hint, Mrs. Eliot?"

"Well, miss, it was hardly what you might call a hint, but—you don't know what them police are. If any one had let on to them that he was here, they might have pulled the place down about my ears, and I'd have had no redress."

Miss Barber had not gone very far after leaving Mrs. Eliot's cottage, and was still on the outskirts of the town, when she was the witness of quite an exciting episode. She had just left a row of cottages behind her; on the right were fields on which the builder had already laid his hands; roads were beginning to be laid out, bricks to assemble; on the farther side was a clump of trees. This clump seemed to be the scene of some sort of tumultuous gathering. People were hurrying towards it from all sides. Miss Barber had stopped her car. A woman who had apparently just quitted the wash-tub called out to her as she hurried past—

"They've got him!"

"Got whom?" Miss Barber asked; but her heart had already given a premonitory bump.

"The Great Erdington murderer."

Miss Barber sat still. The world had all at once grown dark, though the sun was still bright in the sky; a mist had fallen before her eyes; she trembled so that she could not have risen to her feet if she had tried. Something had settled on her brain; she could not even think; she wondered vaguely if she was going to die, or faint, or what was going to happen; she had never felt like that before.

The noise on the other side of the field grew greater. The news had spread; numbers of people were hurrying from the town, eager to lose nothing of the sight. A crowd emerged from the clump of trees, a bawling, noisy, vociferous crowd. It was formed of all sorts and

conditions of people; as if beside themselves with excitement, many of them were yelling execrations at something—some one—in the centre.

Miss Barber, on her motor-car, covered her face with her hands and cried, as she had never cried in all her life before.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRIAL BEGINS

IT was the third day of the Canterstone Assizes, the day on which Graham Burke was to be tried for his life. Miss Barber of The Pleasaunce was to be in the court ; she had a special ticket admitting her to a seat on the judges' bench. Her maid found her as particular about what she should wear as if she were going to attend some great function. To begin with she arrayed herself in splendour ; at the last moment she changed her mind ; her maid had to attire her all over again. She was very pale, so pale that when she saw herself in the glass she tried the effect of a touch of colour. Then she washed it off. She said to herself—

“He shall see me as I am, a little, white-faced thing ; I'll not hide my face from him. I'd be ashamed to meet his eyes. His eyes !”

As she repeated her words she seemed to shiver as with cold ; she had seen that in Graham Burke's eyes which had made her heart turn to ice within her.

She went in her big blue motor-car, with a chauffeur on the driving seat, a footman in livery beside him ; she went in state, to do him honour. She was mortally afraid ; all night she had lain in agony ; but she would bear herself as a friend of his should, as if the issue was certain. There had dined with her last night Sir Ellis Wrayburn, who was to be Graham Burke's chief counsel ; Gregory Stevens, who was to support the

great man ; and Isaac Benson, the head of the famous firm of solicitors who had the conduct of the prisoner's defence. The expenses of these three famous persons, and of many others, were being paid out of her pocket, after a struggle. When Mr. Benson first communicated with Graham Burke, that gentleman had asked him point-blank where he supposed the money was coming from to pay his bill. When Mr. Benson had told him that that was a point on which he need not concern himself, he instantly perceived the truth, and assuring Mr. Benson that he was a poor man, begged with the utmost possible respect to be allowed to forego his expensive services. Then there had come a letter from Miss Barber, a letter which that young lady seemed to have written with her heart's blood, and which caused Mr. Burke almost as much pain as anything that had happened yet. She wrote the wildest things, using language which seemed to him quite awful. She told him that if he had left the management of his affairs to her, and not taken hints which were never meant to be given, he would not be in his present position. Then there came the old references to how he had saved her life, and then something which took him aback. She begged to assure him, in the plainest possible language, that if he did not allow her to do her utmost to save him, but persisted in his efforts of self-murder—that was how she put it—then she would take her own life, and, as sure as his name was Graham Burke, would commit suicide. She knew how to do that sort of thing as well as he did, as he would learn within twenty-four hours if he adhered to his intention of treating her with a cold and selfish cruelty of which she had not thought him capable.

When he had read so far he sat down on the stool in his cell, the only piece of furniture it contained, and the

perspiration stood in beads on his forehead. There was much more in the letter ; it filled twelve closely-written pages ; by the time he had read it through he was reduced, metaphorically, to a state of pulp ; the writer could have fashioned him into any shape she chose.

He saw Mr. Benson when he came again, and agreed to avail himself of his services, however expensive they might be. So it came about that everything which experience, skill, and money could suggest was tried to the full, with very little result.

That dinner the night before the trial was quite contrary to etiquette. She explained, whenever she was in a tight place, and wanted her own way, as she was wont to do, that she was more than half American, so she took no stock of etiquette. Every one knew how very rich she was, and she had the most influential friends, so those three gentlemen dined with her. It was not a very cheerful evening ; she wanted the truth, she insisted on the truth, and she got it.

Sir Ellis Wrayburn made it clear that unless something turned up, which he did not expect, he feared that it would go hard with Mr. Burke. Isaac Benson pointed out that the man's own attitude was so against him. He would simply say that the whole affair was as much a mystery to him as it was to them, and there he would stop. What could be done with a man who could not be induced to open his mouth, except to say things which, from a legal point of view, made the case against him blacker than it was already ?

Miss Barber had suggested that Miss Enid Whitaker knew the truth ; there was nothing to show it. Criminal investigators had been called in from various quarters, and been highly paid ; they had discovered nothing which pointed to an improper knowledge on the young lady's part.

And not only had they been able to do nothing with Miss Whitaker, they had not lighted on a witness of any sort or kind who could give evidence worth having in his favour. On Mr. Benson's features, as he surveyed his hostess and client, there was a smile—in embryo—which suggested a curiously grim sense of humour.

“You asked for the truth, Miss Barber, and you have it ; only you must understand that the case is not really so bad as it may seem. Sir Ellis is a master of certain arts, which, on more than one occasion, have enabled him to make something out of nothing ; you will be surprised how excellent a case he will make out for your—friend.” He paused for a second before the noun. “Few things are more uncertain than the law ; it ought to be an exact science, but it isn't ; I have known men go into the dock expecting penal servitude for life, and come out of it without a stain upon their character. Let us hope that on this occasion history may repeat itself.”

The sentiment did not cheer Miss Barber at all. She wanted Graham Burke to be acquitted, but on his merits, not on the lines of Mr. Benson's suggestion. His innocence was so clear to her, as though it were written in flaming letters across the sky, that she could not understand how it could be hidden from any one ; but it was. She had an uncomfortable feeling that these three men who were seated at her board, who were on the morrow to strain every nerve on his behalf, would not be in the least surprised if he made to them a private confession of his guilt. Such a confession would not have caused them to relax their efforts. She believed that in their hearts—to put it at its best—they inclined to the opinion that he had done this thing ; but that whether he had or had not made no difference to them at all, so long as they were able

to prevent the other side from proving it. From their point of view, the mischief was that they were afraid that this was what they were not able to do.

And on her heart, as the motor bore her quickly through the lanes, the fear that this was so, lay heavy. She had long ago put behind her all attempts at self-deception. She loved this man with the whole force of her being ; she knew it ; and she knew that he loved her. He had never told her so ; he had never had a chance ; their actual intercourse had been confined to that talk by the road-side, the few sentences they had exchanged in Mrs. Eliot's cottage ; beyond that there had not passed between them a single spoken word. It was absurd ; yet she knew he loved her, and that he knew she loved him.

She was content to know that it was so. All the horror of the things which had happened—the magisterial examination had been a long-drawn-out torture ; the comments of the press, the things which people said, the worse things which she saw in their eyes ; all this had made her realize that before she was a child, and that now she was a woman, grown old in suffering. The child that was, who so light-heartedly had driven the man to Mrs. Eliot's cottage, had not dreamed that there could be such suffering as hers ; and at the back of it all was the fear that her education in what a woman can bear was only just beginning.

The streets at Canterstone were crowded. People were streaming towards the Assize Court as steel filings towards a magnet—as something whose lure could not be resisted. As she went they looked at her ; she knew it, though she glanced neither to the right nor to the left ; and she knew they nudged each other, as in a grinning whisper they told each other who she was. But she went straight on, doing her best to keep

herself from crying, forcing a smile to come into her eyes.

Outside the court-house there was a multitude. They would not see the man who was about to be tried for his life; the court, in a sense, formed an integral part of the prison. There was no passing through the street; so that not one of that assembled crowd would catch a glimpse of Mr. Graham Burke; they would have to be content to stand and stare at the exterior of the ugly building, filled with the consciousness of the drama which was being enacted within; that consciousness amounted to a pleasant sensation which made it worth their while.

As Olive Barber got out of her car, though the world was spinning round her, she was conscious of a buzz of voices; she even caught some of the words which were uttered, especially the comment of a woman.

"See how she's togged out, as if she was going to a wedding!"

The words frightened her; if she could, she would have attired herself for the third time: what would the woman have said if she had been dressed as at first? Her intention had been to show the world that she had complete confidence in the issue; that she was not ashamed of being where she was; that her heart was light because she was conscious that truth must prevail. So she had donned one of her prettiest dresses; and then, fearful lest she should seem too light-hearted, had changed it; and now, her fear recurring, she wished she could change it again.

She was conducted by a policeman to a leather-covered chair on a sort of platform. She would have liked to get rid of the haze in which she was moving. Because of it, it was some moments before she realized that this was the court-house. It was not a

large stage for the play which was about to be enacted. There was a gallery on one side which held perhaps fifty people, and which was crowded. Below her a sort of well seemed to form the body of the court; this was filled with barristers in wig and gown, persons whom she took to be solicitors, and perhaps their clerks. On a bench at the back was a row of persons who she presumed were spectators, like herself. Presently Enid Whitaker came in; Miss Barber did not see her, but she knew it. Something within her gave a bound, she clenched her fists, the mist cleared from her eyes. Miss Whitaker was led to a seat which was at the other end of the platform. Fortunately she was as far off as they could have put her. These young women had had for each other the sentimental friendship which girls do sometimes cherish. They had believed themselves to be attached to each other for life. One of the conditions on which Miss Barber had taken that great old house, The Pleasaunce, had been that Enid Whitaker should come and live with her. They had known each other at school—at a school at which Miss Barber had been for one term only—and meeting again three years afterwards there had sprung up an affection with the rapidity with which mushrooms grow, and without really knowing each other at all they had found themselves inmates of the same house.

Unlike most young women, Enid Whitaker never, if she could help it, talked about herself; and then what she said was apt to obscure the facts. On the other hand, in those days Miss Barber's chief topic of conversation was herself; it was a subject on which she was willing to chatter as long as Miss Whitaker was willing to listen; thus, while Miss Whitaker improved her acquaintance with her, she knew no more about her guest than she had done at the beginning. So everything

went well, the skies were blue, the sun was shining—until Graham Burke appeared upon the scene.

Now these two young women had feelings towards each other which were very far from being those of friendship.

Presently there was a stir in the court. A door behind her opened. Some one entered who said something which she did not catch. Every one stood up, she with the rest ; then she knew that the judge had taken his seat. There was an interval of silence. Then some one else said something, an elderly man at a table below, who was reading from a paper which he held in his hand. Again she did not quite catch what he said, except the last four words : "Bring in the prisoner." She heard those well enough. Every one was looking in the same direction. She realized for the first time that almost immediately in front of her was an enclosure surrounded by iron rails, and that behind it was an opening, as it seemed to her, in the floor, as though it led into a cellar. Through this opening some one all at once appeared.

It was Graham Burke.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SPEECH FOR THE CROWN

THE prisoner's appearance almost deprived Olive Barber of her few remaining vestiges of self-control; power went out of her; for quite a perceptible period she could not have moved so much as a finger-tip to save her life. She sat and looked at him, and looked. She could not have taken her eyes off his face if she had tried, and she did not try. He stood straight, shoulders square, head back, glancing round the court, and he actually smiled; the newspapers had it that "the prisoner wore a jaunty air." He saw the judge, seeming to appraise him; he saw the spectators in the gallery; the counsel below him; people here and there; and then he saw Olive Barber. And the whole fashion of his countenance was changed. Everybody saw it, since everybody's glance was fixed on him, and the change was so remarkable.

They all turned to see the cause, and they perceived, sitting bolt upright on a chair, five or six chairs from the judge, a small, feminine person, whose white, delicate face had all at once become illumined with a light which scarcely seemed to be of earth. She was evidently unaware that she was the cynosure of all beholders, for her there was only one person in the crowded court; for her, save him, the court was empty. And he stood in the dock.

The papers commented on the episode afterwards, with the descriptive flourishes which are dear to the latter-day reporter, for it was borne in to all who were present, including probably the judge, that those two were lovers. And there were those who said to themselves, "He can't be at all bad if she loves him; she does not look as if she could love a man who was, nor does she look a fool!" Something in the man's gaze seemed to have on her a magnetic effect, so that she half rose from her chair. But, when he waved his hand, as one who would say, "Be of good courage, all will be well," she sank back with a sigh which, in the silence, many of those about her heard. And the proceedings began.

Sir Frederick Stokes, the Attorney-General, was counsel for the Crown. He presented the case for the prosecution very much as if he were stating a problem in mathematics, indulging in no oratorical flourishes, and allowing himself to show no signs of active interest.

He pointed out that this was rather an unusual case they had to try, since the prisoner was a man of birth and education, and the general circumstances were peculiar. The prisoner, Graham Burke, was charged with the murder of Alfred Nockolds. The two men were old acquaintances. They had known each other all their lives, and there was evidence that practically for the whole of that period they had been in enmity.

"Alfred Nockolds was a man of some property; he was chairman of the local bench of magistrates, a member of the county council, a holder of various local offices, which showed that he was a person of reputation and possessed the esteem of his neighbours. Unfortunately, to make the case clear, it is necessary to explain that on a previous occasion a criminal charge had

been made against the prisoner. Among the magistrates who inquired into that charge in its preliminary stages was the deceased man, Alfred Nockolds. Witnesses will tell you that the prisoner regarded the dead man's attitude in that matter with much resentment. He was more than once heard to say that if opportunity offered he would call him to very severe account. Mr. Nockolds told more than one person that he should not be surprised at anything the prisoner might do to him. It will be shown that more than two years ago there was a feeling in Great Erdington that if ever the prisoner came within reach of Alfred Nockolds, under what he considered favourable circumstances, the magistrate would be fortunate if he escaped with his life.

“The prisoner was sentenced to two years' hard labour on the charge to which I have referred. On the afternoon of the day on which he was released he called upon a firm of lawyers, Messrs. Melville, Crunson and Co., whose client he had been, where he conducted himself with great violence; and after quitting them, still hot with passion, he met Alfred Nockolds, walking with a friend who will be produced, and he told him that he was glad to find him still alive, since that would give him a chance to make an end of him.

“That might have been regarded as the loose talk of an angry man, had it not been for what occurred on the morrow. The prisoner seems to have become aware that during his incarceration his lawyers, to whom he had given powers, in dealing with the claims against him, had been compelled to dispose, at the market price, of the house in which he had hitherto lived; it was called The Old House. The purchaser was Alfred Nockolds, who had purchased it in the ordinary course of business, as he might have done any other property. Since Burke told his lawyers, on the very day of

his trial, when he knew that sentence would be pronounced against him, that he wished them to put his affairs in order, so that when he came out of prison he might be able to start afresh, he knew, or he ought to have known, that to disentangle his affairs from the chaos into which he had brought them it would be absolutely necessary to dispose of as much of his property as was realizable. His lawyers did what they considered to be best for him; they sold The Old House for what, in the present state of the property market, was an excellent price. The prisoner does not seem to have regarded that as a grievance; his grievance seems to have been that the purchaser was Alfred Nockolds. It may be added that this sale took place during the last three months of Burke's imprisonment; seeking the best offer, his lawyers had put it off till the last moment. The prison rules permit a convicted felon to have a letter only four times a year; so that it was only possible to acquaint him with what had been done after his release.

"The day after his release he paid Alfred Nockolds a call. Mr. Nockolds, anxious to protect himself, caused other persons to be present during the interview which the prisoner forced upon him. They will tell you that Burke said, in so many words, that at the first chance he got he would take the other's life.

"The chance occurred on the afternoon of the same day. Mr. Nockolds had reason to suspect that, in order to gratify his spite, Burke would do all the damage he could to the property whose purchase he had just completed. He even feared that he would set fire to it and burn it to the ground. He desired, therefore, to take immediate possession, to secure its safety. He gave instructions to certain individuals to enter into immediate possession of The Old House, while he

himself went over by motor-car to see that those instructions were carried out. This is the point at which I have to claim your very close attention.

“The instructions which Mr. Nockolds gave miscarried ; you will be told how. Only after the tragedy to which I am coming had taken place did the messenger explain how they came to be delayed. In the meanwhile Alfred Nockolds had gone to his death. It was represented to him by at least one person, Mr. Clifford Baker, whom you will see in the box, that it was unwise to go on such an errand alone. Mr. Nockolds laughed at him ; it was broad day, the distance only a few miles, he had at his service a powerful motor-car ; he expected to find his agents already established. At four o'clock on the afternoon of Wednesday, June 10th, Alfred Nockolds left his office at Great Erdington. His destination, The Old House, is at a distance of rather under nine miles. He ought to have been there on his high-powered car in under thirty minutes. At a few minutes before six, Mr. Baker was standing outside the door of Mr. Alfred Nockold's private room. Mr. Baker was on terms of great intimacy ; they were concerned in many business matters together ; they were life-long friends, from their earliest days the relations between them had been of the friendliest nature. Baker, knowing that Mr. Nockolds had gone alone, and that he only intended staying in The Old House a very few minutes, since they both of them had engagements for the early part of the evening, expecting him to have returned, had come to hear what had happened. There was a private door to Mr. Nockolds' private office. When the clerks told Mr. Baker that if their principal had returned he must have entered through that door, Mr. Baker went to see if that was so ; so it came about that, as I have

told you, at a few minutes before six o'clock, he was standing outside the door of his friend's private room. And, as he was about to open it, he heard the bell of the telephone. He entered at once. The room was empty ; the bell of the telephone was still ringing. He took up the receiver ; he will tell you in the witness-box that, so far as he knows, the dead man and he had no secrets from each other, so that in what he did he was doing nothing improper. He asked, in the usual way, who was there. A voice inquired—whether it was masculine or feminine he is not sure, but he inclines to the opinion that it was masculine—who he was. He gave his name, and asked his interrogator to do the same. The answer he got was sufficiently startling ; I can give you the exact words, because Mr. Baker took them down immediately on a sheet of paper which will be produced.

“ These were the words he heard : ‘ Alfred Nockolds has been murdered. His car has been thrown over the bank. It lies in Whitethorn Copse, close to the bridge. For further particulars apply to Graham Burke. ’ ”

At this part of the speech, although no one could have been drier or more unemotional than Sir Frederick Stokes, there was a perceptible something which seemed to show that the court had awakened to sudden interest, which the papers afterwards described—in brackets—as “ Sensation.”

“ This was a singular message to receive over a telephone. Mr. Baker's first thought was that a practical joke had been played upon him ; so soon as the words which I have read to you had been spoken, the message ended. Mr. Baker did his utmost to learn further particulars ; to all his questions he received no answer ; apparently the connection had been severed. He had no idea from whom the message had come ; he

had no means of finding out ; he was not even sure if the speaker had been male or female. He had recorded the message ; he took it to Mr. Nockolds' chief clerk in the adjoining room ; he and the chief clerk took it to the Great Erdington Police Station. The Inspector, the most responsible official, was away. It was past seven when he returned, and by that time something else had happened which threw a suggestive side-light on that telephone message.

“ Alfred Nockolds had taken no human being with him in his car, but, just as he was starting, his dog, an Irish terrier, had come rushing along the street, and he had allowed it to jump up on to the seat beside him. The dog had returned without his master. The creature was in a curious condition. Not only had it limped home on three legs, for the fourth was broken, but its head had been injured in such a way that, for a time at least, it must have been unconscious, and was not even yet entirely itself.

“ The dog's presence gave that telephone message a sinister significance. Apparently something untoward had happened. Inspector Dalton presently received a report which seemed to make this even clearer. Police-Constable Vincent, who had been doing a long round on his bicycle, as is usual on certain days of the week, came in with a strange story while they were considering what it would be best to do.

“ He had met Graham Burke, standing by the roadside at the very point to which the telephone message had referred, by the bridge which spanned a little stream which runs through Whitethorn Wood. His hands, boots, and the bottom of his trousers were covered with blood ; part of the bridge, and also part of the hedge, had been carried away, as by the impact of some very heavy body. Vincent asked him what had

happened. Burke said that he did not know ; that he had just been walking that way and had discovered a big motor-car lying in the wood at the bottom of the bank, as if it had fallen over. Thinking, he said, that if any one had been in it the occupant must have been seriously damaged, he had gone down the bank to see, and before he knew it had found himself standing in a pool of blood. He assured Vincent that he had looked everywhere, that he could find nothing, and so presumed that the driver and possible passengers had been conveyed elsewhere.

“ Vincent at once recognized the car as being the property of Mr. Alfred Nockolds. He asked Burke various questions, to which Burke professed himself to be unable to find answers. Since he himself could find no injured person, he was forced to accept, at least for the moment, Burke’s suggestion that whoever might have been in the car had been conveyed elsewhere. He allowed Burke to go his way, while he himself made what haste he could to Great Erdington. Burke departed first ; when Vincent was about to mount his bicycle he found that both the front and the back tyres had been punctured, so that he had to return the whole distance on foot, which was the cause of his tardy arrival.

“ Inspector Dalton immediately set out with two constables and Mr. Clifford Baker, in a car which the latter had hired, to Whitethorn Wood. They found matters as Vincent had described. Knowing the kind of character with whom he had to deal, the Inspector had armed himself with a search-warrant before starting ; he decided to go on to The Old House, and seek for some explanation of the mystery there. They were within, perhaps, three hundred yards of their destination, when they were accosted by a young

woman who asked them if they could direct her to Great Erdington. In return they asked her if she had lately seen any one passing along the road. She replied that she had seen a gentleman wheeling a barrow enter the garden of a house just down the road, and then, when she had asked him to direct her, he had sworn at her, to use her own words, as if she were dirt. She was asked to describe this gentleman. It seemed clear, if what she said was true, that she had just seen Graham Burke wheeling a barrow, in which was something covered with a cloth; he had taken it into the garden of his house; and was apparently so anxious to avoid notice that he used very bad language to a woman who had committed no other offence beyond that of asking her way.

“Inspector Dalton, descending, took a powerful lamp out of the car and examined the surface of the road. There were visible traces of what might have been the wheel of a barrow, and there were, besides, blotches on the dust which were afterwards shown to be blood. The suggestion I shall lay before you is that in that barrow there was something which was in such a condition that blood dropped through the bottom as it was being conveyed along the road.

“You will be told of what followed; how Graham Burke was discovered alone in the house, with blood still on his hands, and boots, and trousers, and, indeed, all over him, with certain properties belonging to Alfred Nockolds in his possession, and how the body of Alfred Nockolds was found hidden under a heap of bedclothes in an upstairs room. You will also be told how in a shed at the back was found a barrow, which beyond doubt was the one of which the young woman had spoken, which had been used to convey the dead man’s body from the scene of the tragedy to the prisoner’s house.

“In cases of murder it is not often that a person can be found who witnessed the actual crime; this is an exception. A witness will be called who will tell you that he saw, without actually realizing what it was he was seeing, Alfred Nockolds done to death. He was a witness under circumstances which made it difficult for him to identify, with absolute certainty, the two persons chiefly concerned, and he had reasons of his own for not wishing to mix himself up with what, according to his standard of morals, had nothing to do with him.”

Sir Frederick Stokes said a good many other things, but that was the gist of his statement. He informed the jury in his driest possible manner that if the prisoner could offer an explanation of matters which seemed to point to his having been the perpetrator of an atrocious crime, he should be glad to hear it. In the event of the prisoner's not being able to offer an adequate explanation, and his defence was in able hands, he should produce evidence which he thought would convince the jury that the prisoner, Graham Burke, to gratify a private spite, of deliberate intent, had murdered Alfred Nockolds.

And Sir Frederick Stokes sat down.



CHAPTER XX

BENJAMIN SHAW'S EVIDENCE

AND there was scarcely a person in the court who did not feel, when Sir Frederick sat down, that, so far as the prisoner was concerned, the case was practically over, that he might as well plead guilty right away. And nearly everybody looked at Miss Olive Barber as if to see what she thought. She knew that they were looking, but she only looked at him. She knew also that Miss Enid Whitaker, on the chair at the end, was eyeing her with something in her glance which, although she did not see it, made her feel as if the blood was congealing in her veins. But she and Graham Burke had eyes only for each other; he smiled although he possibly felt that he was looking at her out of an already open grave; and oddly enough, his smile was meant to give her courage, though some would have thought that that was a quality which he needed even more than she.

The witnesses began to be called. Nearly all those who were present were familiar with what they had to say; they had read it all in the papers when the case was dragging its weary length before the magistrates. Miss Olive Barber had heard them also; she had arrived at a point at which she felt it was impossible to divide the true from the false. All these people could not be lying of set purpose; the thing was unbelievable; yet she was sure that most of them presented the truth in

an aspect in which it became falsehood ; yet counsel for the defence, in the course of the most rigid cross-examination, was not able to make this clear. Each witness drove another nail into the prisoner's coffin. The ghastly tale with which the public was already familiar was retold bit by bit ; not a word of it was shaken. There was the prisoner's bare word against this crowd of witnesses.

Most of those there felt that the evidence of Police-Constable Vincent was in itself enough to hang him. His account of the interview with Graham Burke by the road-side was productive of delightful shudders to all the women. The manner in which he suggested, intentionally or not, that all the time he was talking to Graham Burke there was in the air a sense of mystery and horror, was very effective. He described Burke's light-hearted bearing ; the careless fashion in which he had treated his official questions, as if they referred to matters which were of no consequence. And all the time while he was smiling, and carrying himself with such easy indifference, the dead man must have been lying somewhere in the wood, whose warm blood upon his hands he led the constable to believe was a mere nothing.

Counsel for the defence asked Police-Constable Vincent very few questions when his turn came. He probably felt that the man had spoken the truth according to his lights, and he did not see how he could away with it. He did not even try to make it clear that there was bad blood between these two men, and that that fact, unconsciously or not, might have coloured the witness's evidence. There was bad blood between the prisoner and so many of the witnesses. Counsel for the defence was quite aware that the prosecution was prepared to point to that fact as a sort of proof that

the prisoner was a person of ill-repute among his neighbours because he was a notorious evil liver. It was not his business to forge for the other side weapons of that sort.

The great sensation of the day was when the clerk said "Call Benjamin Shaw," and an ungainly, shambling youth, entering the court from some unknown quarter, was ushered into the witness-box.

He was rather a remarkable-looking young man, clearly of gipsy blood; his straight, black hair, parted on one side, was so long that it almost hid his ears. He would not have been bad looking had it not been that he had a trick of twisting his lips, and that when he did that his teeth protruded in a fashion which suggested a snarling cat. His eyes would not have been bad eyes if they had not had a defect of their own; when they were passive they were pleasant to behold, but every now and then he twisted them as he twisted his lips, and then, all at once, they conveyed impressions of the most disagreeable kind. You wondered uncomfortably what kind of a creature it was that was behind those eyes. He was shabbily dressed in odd garments, which looked as if they had known very much more than their share of wind and weather. He had a cloth cap in his hand, which he hung over the rail in front of him, so that one could see how much his hands stood in need of washing; while his fingers were long and slender, the fingers of an artist who did no real hard work.

The story he told was as strange as his appearance. He told it in a disjointed fashion, considering many of the questions before he answered, and then replying as if he would rather have kept still.

He was, he said, a basket-maker. He admitted that he also engaged occasionally in poaching. He

remembered June 10th very well. Two days before he had had a little argument with certain keepers. He had reason to believe that that fact was known to the police all over the country; and therefore he was particularly anxious, as far as possible, to avoid observation. The sight of a policeman had given him an unpleasant shock, and he had taken cover in a brake of fern on Bannislea Hill, when he saw a motor-car coming along the road from Great Erdington. His attention was attracted to it by the noise it made. It was not a particularly noisy car, but, everything being so still, every sound became obvious. He saw it coming alone the road; only one man was in it, who was driving. When it came nearly abreast of him he saw a man come out of the hedge and plant himself in the middle of the road, right in front of the car. The car had to stop or run right over him—it stopped. And the moment it stopped the man jumped on to the driving seat, and exactly what happened the witness could not say, but presently a first-rate fight was taking place right in front of him. It all took place so rapidly that the witness could not have interfered even had he felt disposed. He was at a distance of probably two hundred yards from the fray, and the intervening ground was very rough. The assailant got the best of it; he dragged the driver off the car, and as he did so something caused the car to start. It described a half circle and ran over the bank on to the ground below. As it did so the witness thought that some part of it must have struck the man who had been driving it, because he seemed suddenly to go quite limp in the hands of his assailant, who, uttering an exclamation, dragged his motionless body to the side of the road, and threw it after the car. The man stood on the edge of the bank for a minute or two; then he

descended the bank, at the bottom of which were already the car and its driver, and the witness saw him no more.

Asked by counsel if he had been able to get a clear view of the actors in the tragedy, he replied that he had seen them fairly well, especially the man who had acted as assailant. He had not seen so much of the driver of the car, whose face had never been really turned his way. To the best of his knowledge and belief the man who assailed him was the prisoner in the dock.

Such, in substance, was the tale which Benjamin Shaw told; and in no essential was counsel for the defence able to shake it. Counsel for the defence seemed to concentrate his efforts on an attempt to induce the witness to admit that he could not positively swear to the prisoner's identity; on that point he seemed quite willing to go some way with the counsel. His seemed to be an impartial attitude of mind; he seemed to care nothing if the prisoner was the man or not. It was his impression that he was the man; he picked him out at the police station the moment he saw him; but if counsel chose to say that he was not the man, then he went so far as to assert that he did not care if he was or was not. He believed him to be the man, and that was all he knew.

Cross-examination could get no more out of him than that; when Sir Ellis Wrayburn sat down, Sir Frederick Stokes stood up, and asked the witness if he really had any doubt on the subject of the prisoner's identity.

"I ain't got no doubt at all." The witness's manner was final.

"You believe the person you see in the dock to be the one who attacked the man on the motor-car?"

"I am sure he is ; it ain't no business of mine, but I'm sure he is ; he knows he is."

"Pardon me, but I know nothing of the kind, and I believe you know it also."

This remark, which was afterwards described as a startling interruption, came from Mr. Graham Burke, who was instantly silenced. After Benjamin Shaw had made his first appearance in the box at the magisterial examination, Burke had told Mr. Isaac Benson about the conversation he had had with him, when Shaw addressed him from the top of the bank ; but his narration had not the effect he desired. Mr. Benson immediately asked him why he had said nothing about this until that moment ; until Shaw had told his story, and it became so very advisable that Burke should have one of his own to tell. Mr. Benson had not said so in so many words, but his manner conveyed the idea that it was at least unfortunate that Burke had kept still so long. He more than hinted that he did not see how his client's position would be improved, even if his tale were true. Even if Shaw could be brought to admit the conversation in the witness-box, all that it would have amounted to would be that Shaw had charged him with the murder to his face directly after the crime had been committed. He did not see what good would be gained by that. However, he would lay Mr. Burke's story before counsel ; which he did in his own fashion ; and counsel agreed that no good would be gained by calling Mr. Shaw's attention to the conversation which Graham Burke alleged had taken place. He had accused him of the murder there and then, he was accusing him of it still, that was what it came to. One undesirable fact would be established ; that he had seen more than enough of Graham Burke to make sure of his identity.

So Benjamin Shaw was allowed to go out of the witness-box without that conversation ever having been alluded to by any one ; and his quitting the witness-box was considered a convenient moment for the court to adjourn.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LADY AND HER BUTLER

MISS BARBER had arranged that she should have a brief interview with the prisoner after the proceedings for the day were over. While the rest of the spectators were making their way as best they could into the crowded street, she was being shown into what, to her, seemed very like a cellar ; the place was certainly underground. There was a stone wall on one side ; on the other what struck her as bearing a terrible resemblance to a row of cages in a wild-beast show. Like the cages they were barred from top to bottom ; in one of them, behind the bars, was Graham Burke. As if the bars were not sufficient division, a chain had been suspended along the middle of the passage—the place was little more—some three feet above the flagged pavement, on the farther side of which she was requested to stand, and to approach no closer.

She had looked forward to seeing him ; she had said to herself that she would give him a word of good cheer ; assure him once again that, since truth must prevail, he need fear nothing ; but when she saw the conditions under which they were to meet, she almost wished that she had not come. Dreadful for her, it must have been worse for him. It was bad enough to be confined behind those bars ; that she should have seen him there was a humiliation which he surely would

never forget. And he bore himself so well ; smiled so bravely ; he wore an air of such gay courage ; had he been reduced to a state of visible distress and terror he could not have hurt her more. As it was she realized that he still was master of his fate, caring nothing for what might come ; that he was already in a region where, to all intents and purposes, no words of hers, or of any one's, could reach him. With a consciousness of pain which was too great to be articulate, she realized that this man already numbered himself among the dying ; that his glance was already fixed on what was beyond, and that, for him, the passing show was done.

She could have screamed. It was hideous that he should take this thing for granted when she was straining every nerve—it had become her one aim and object—to ward it off. She was ready to keep these hounds of so-called justice at bay at all—at every—cost ; and that he should be willing to admit that already he was their proper quarry, and the case was done—the thought was agony. He could not care for her as she cared for him.

The very tone and temper of his first words jarred on her poor torn nerves.

“They have got it up against me pretty well, haven't they ? I should say that that pretty story of Mr. Benjamin Shaw's is about the final straw ; a pretty liar that young man is. I wonder what he did see, and what he didn't ; I shouldn't wonder if he saw absolutely nothing at all ; and yet that young man will hang me. It is too funny.”

“You call it funny !” It was terrible to her to think that he could. “Can you think of no way in which he can be shown to be a liar ?”

“I'd have done it long ago if I could. It's Enid Whitaker's business all over again. I let them catch me

in a trap, upon my word I don't know how, but I have ; they've shut it down, and they've got me tight."

Her lips were so dry that she found it difficult to speak.

"And you don't think it matters that you are innocent ; you don't think that matters at all ?"

"When I was young I used to think that innocence was everything ; now that I am old I know much better. I wonder how many of the folk that the law finds guilty are more innocent than their accusers. Judging from my own experience, I should say rather more than half."

"I don't believe it ; I don't believe that God can allow such things."

Her tongue, like her lips, had grown parched ; it seemed to have shrivelled in her mouth. He looked at her with a light in his eyes for which she could have kissed and struck him. Why should he bear himself like [one who had already passed through the valley of the shadow, while she herself was fighting tooth and nail to prevent herself being dragged too near the edge !

"I'm doubting if God concerns himself with such small things as men. To Him we are merely microbes ; a million more or less, and what does it matter ? And I am one of the million. Do you think that I shall sleep one atom the worse because I know that the probabilities are that by this time to-morrow I shall have been sentenced to hang ? I have only one trouble ; you. I fear that you fear for me ; please don't. Get it clearly into that dear head of yours that I don't count, that I'm one of the things which have been, that indeed I never was ; because, when you come to think of it, in any substantial sense, I never have been." He gave a comical sigh ; how it hurt her ! "I suppose it's not the slightest use my suggesting that there are ships upon the sea, and

that the sooner you are on one of them the happier I shall be. You've done all the saving my life that can be done. The rest is going to be so sordid. You can do no good ; no one can. Don't let even the atmosphere of the thing soil your delicate fragrance. There's a poetical speech ! I ask it as a favour ; seek happiness for yourself, not for me ; and during the next few months seek it as far from England as you can. And don't look at a newspaper, not once all the time. Now, that's the favour I ask you ; and if I don't see you in court to-morrow, I shall know you're going to grant it ; and I shall be quite a happy man ; bursting with the knowledge that you—you—all the you that there is for me—that you have granted me a favour."

She could not speak ; that was another of her trials ; words flowed from his lips ; metaphorically she could not get one within a hundred miles of hers. And she wanted to tell him so many things. One thing she did say, just before she went.

"I shall never believe that God is on the side of injustice or will allow the righteous to suffer wrong."

She had said that with as bold a front as she could manage, as she stood outside that cage of his, in the cellar beneath the court-house ; when she was again in the open air, and saw the thronging people, and took her seat in her motor-car, her attitude did not suggest much confidence in her own brave words. When the town was left behind she shrank into a corner, and she seemed so little as she strained and strained her mental vision in her efforts to find light. Was there nothing to be done, nothing she could do, or any one else could do ? This man took it so for granted that all was over ; not because he was a coward, but because he was brave and, without fear, looked facts in the face. But were they facts ? Surely not—they could not be. It still to her

was inconceivable. Such a very little time ago she had been sure that this was the best of all possible worlds; it could not be the kind of world which such a triumph of injustice would make it. That would make it a world of demons, not a world of men and women.

The way her car was going involved passing through Great Erdington. On the outskirts of the town, standing back from the road, was an ivy-covered house which she had learnt was occupied by Mr. Clifford Baker, who lived there with his mother. At the gate, as she approached, there stood a motor-car, a smaller and less expensive one than hers. From it a man and woman were descending, both of whom she recognized; the man was Clifford Baker, the woman Enid Whitaker. At the sight of the latter she sat up straighter; a thought came to her which seemed to set her heart thumping against her ribs. She called to the chauffeur.

"Pull up in front of this house; I wish to speak to Miss Whitaker." The car pulled up. She leant over the side, addressing the young woman who stood with Mr. Baker on the footpath. "Can I speak to you a moment?"

Miss Whitaker looked her up and down, including the car, the footman, and the chauffeur in her scornful survey. Then she turned to her companion, uttering two words, as though they were a summary of the position.

"What impertinence!" Mr. Baker said nothing. One felt, somehow, that he did not find the situation altogether to his liking. Miss Whitaker had turned again to Miss Barber. "Such a request—coming from you—surely is an odd one. What can you possibly have to say to me? You!"

Olive Barber was probably doing her best to hide the fact that she saw anything unpleasant in the other's words and manner.

"If you won't mind getting into my car for a moment I'd like a little run with you. I'd bring you back again. There are some things I very much wish to say to you."

Miss Whitaker lifted her eyebrows. She was the personification of scorn ; or, at any rate, she probably meant to be. She did not even condescend to answer Miss Barber, except indirectly. She spoke to Mr. Baker, with such an air !

"My dear Clifford, this is the person who has associated herself with Graham Burke. She is not only suspected of helping him to escape, but she is finding the money which she hopes will cheat the gallows of its due. What connection there is between them one would rather not inquire ; but that she should have the insolence not only to speak to me, but actually to offer me a seat in her car—really that is too much. Would you mind taking me indoors ? There is no knowing to what lengths of impudence such a person may go."

Mr. Clifford Baker opened the gate ; Miss Whitaker put the tips of her fingers on his arm ; and the pair went through.

Olive Barber drove home. Possibly either the footman or the chauffeur retailed the story of Miss Whitaker's behaviour in the kitchen ; and it was that which induced Kelly to observe at dinner, as he was handing Miss Barber the asparagus—

"I hear, miss, that Miss Whitaker is going to marry Mr. Clifford Baker."

Miss Barber helped herself before she answered ; Kelly noticed that she could hardly keep her hand from shaking. Her pretence of speaking with indifference was a hollow sham.

"Is that so ? How fortunate for Mr. Baker ! I saw

her with him this evening, as I was coming home, and she refused to speak to me."

"So I hear, miss ; they'll make a nice pair."

The young lady ate, or rather tried to eat—in silence. Then she asked a question of her butler.

"What did you think, Kelly, of what took place to-day?"

"It's going all wrong, miss, that's what I think. That gipsy fellow was lying all through, from the moment he got into the box till he was out of it, I felt it in my bones. And yet no one seemed to make a real effort to bring him to book."

There was again an interval of silence. The mistress made a feint of eating what was on her plate, the servant did his duty ; then she spoke again, gently, as if she found it difficult to raise her voice above a whisper.

"Yes, Kelly, that's what I feel. Every one seems to take it for granted that Mr. Burke is guilty, and no one makes any real effort to prove him innocent. I saw him—before I came away ; he won't make an effort himself."

"There's only one thing we can do, miss," said the butler after a pause, "or so it seems to me."

"What's that, Kelly?"

"Hope that a miracle will happen. Because if one don't—nothing will. Somehow Mr. Graham never has been a lucky one, not since he was a boy. He was always getting into scrapes because of what some one else had done, and it looks as if he was going to up to the end."

"Don't talk like that, Kelly ; please, please don't."

The mistress looked up at her servant with that on her face, and in her eyes, which made him turn away, so that, at least for the moment, his own face might be hidden.

CHAPTER XXII

FOR THE DEFENCE

ON the second day of that memorable trial Mr. Clifford Baker was the first witness who was called. He was a long, thin, meagre man, who went about the world with an air of deprecation, as if he were always ready to apologize for being in it at all. By profession he was a land agent, and report had it that he was at present the proprietor of more than one property for which he had originally been the agent. On that occasion he was dressed in a tightly-fitting black frock coat and black tie. He had on black kid gloves, and on the top hat which he placed beside him in the witness-box was a tall crape band.

"The fellow looks like an undertaker," said one briefless barrister to another, as Mr. Baker drew off his right-hand glove.

"I am told that he'll have as good as buried Mr. Burke by the time he's through," replied the first speaker's neighbour; "so I suppose he looks the part he's going to play."

Mr. Baker, taking the proffered Testament in his hand, kissed it with the air of a man who was acquitting himself of a charge from which he would rather be excused. Then the questioning began. He proved to be an excellent witness, giving just the answer that was desired, and no more; doing that in the low, clear tones

of a man who is very sure of what he is saying, and who has weighed carefully every word before he utters it.

Probably some of the spectators had an inkling of the storm of emotion this man's presence was raising in the breasts of at least three persons in the court, if only because the bearing of each of the trio made it obvious. Miss Whitaker sat well forward on her chair, drinking in the words as they came from the witness as if they were things which ministered to her physical enjoyment. When he gave an answer which was particularly damaging to the prisoner, her lips parted in a smile; she glanced at the man in the dock as if to see how he took it, and at the girl beside her on the bench, as if to enjoy her discomfiture. For long periods together, Miss Barber, on the other hand, seemed scarcely to breathe; something seemed to have happened to her pretty face; since yesterday it had assumed an ashen pallor which made her seem to have suddenly grown old. One could easily believe that this man's voice was to her as the voice of doom—that each syllable which fell from his lips was to her like a fresh drop in her cup of agony. One might have been excused for thinking that, in imagination, she saw this man fashioning the strands of hemp until it became a rope, and then shaping it into a noose, which he then, gently, slowly, surely, fitted about the prisoner's neck.

The prisoner hitherto had borne himself with what that morning's papers described as "an air of jaunty indifference." For the first time when Clifford Baker began his evidence his bearing changed; and as the tale proceeded, those who watched him closest began to appreciate how dangerous a person he might be. Without doubt, could he have been alone with the witness, it would have fared ill with Mr. Clifford Baker. A very

close observer might have been forgiven for suspecting that the witness was aware of this, and, rejoicing in the knowledge, chose just those words which galled the prisoner most. He did it without ostentation; probably only those who knew him best guessed that there might be some feeling of that sort in his mind, and that at last he was happy in an opportunity to wipe off old scores. He wiped them off.

He gave the prisoner's history from boyhood. Counsel for the Crown took him back to the beginning. He traced the growth of enmity between the man who was dead and the one who was living. He told how, over and over again, he had given Alfred Nockolds a taste of his physical qualities, and how, if he could, he would have given him more. Intellectually Nockolds had been the better man from the very first; he had lent money even as a boy. Burke had borrowed, execrating him all the time. Nearly always, when repayment was desired, there had been something more than a discussion. The enmity had grown with their years. The witness stated that on more than one occasion, while he was still a young man, he had heard Burke declare that one day he would have Nockold's life.

Then the witness was brought to the period when Burke was discovered to have made havoc of his ward's modest fortune. He asserted that when Burke was brought before the magistrates it was only when pressure was put upon him that Nockolds consented to take his seat upon the bench. More than once, while the magisterial examination was proceeding, Nockolds had said that he should not wonder if Burke made him pay with his life for the part which his duty constrained him to take. Half-laughingly he had said, a few days before the prisoner's sentence was up, that he should not

wonder if Burke's release meant the end of the world for him.

"You may laugh," he said, "but that man means to kill me if he can."

Counsel for the defence wanted to know what all this had to do with the matter before them.

"I propose to prove," exclaimed Sir Frederick Stokes, "that the prisoner meant murder all along; I can quite understand that my learned brother objects. We do not allege that this was a crime done on the spur of the moment, but that the prisoner merely put into execution an intention which he had cherished for years."

The witness continued. He spoke of the scene which took place in the dead man's office within a few hours of the prisoner's release; how the prisoner had told Nockolds that he would kill him if he could, and how he had conveyed to the witness the impression that he meant what he said. So convinced was Mr. Baker of this that he begged Mr. Nockolds not to go to The Old House alone, but he had gone, believing that he would not be alone when he got there. He had instructed three men to meet him at The Old House, whom he proposed to leave in charge. But there had been a misunderstanding about the date. Nockolds had made what turned out to be a very serious error in his letter of instructions; he had meant to write Wednesday and had written Thursday instead. As events went, however, their presence at The Old House would not have saved Mr. Nockolds' life, though it would have made a very considerable difference to what happened afterwards. Nockolds was murdered on his way there; but had those three men been where he had expected they would be, the prisoner would hardly have ventured to deal with the body of his victim as he

actually did do. Mr. Baker did not say this in so many words—counsel for the defence would not have suffered him—but he made it clear to every one in court that that was the inference which he intended to convey.

There is no need to follow Mr. Clifford Baker to the bitter end ; in his account of his drive with Inspector Dalton ; of their meeting with a woman within hailing distance of The Old House ; of the reception which they had there, of their finding that dreadful thing upon the bed. Under counsel's guidance he told of these things with a quiet realism which rivetted the attention of every one who heard ; producing—without effort and apparently without intention—an impression of the horror of it all which was likely to linger long in the minds of the assembled people who hung upon his words. When he ceased, and counsel for the Crown sat down, the briefless barrister whom we have already quoted, whispered to his neighbour, with what was very like a little grunt of satisfaction—

“That's hanged him ; all that's left for Wrayburn is to cut him down after he's dead. He'll never undo the knot that fellow has tied.”

So it proved. Sir Ellis Wrayburn's gift for cross-examination was known to all the world ; but no man can get blood out of a stone, and the deftest barrister, when the facts are all against him, has sometimes to admit that they are too strong for him, by dint of mere verbal quibbling, to explain away ; especially when he has to deal with such a witness as Mr. Clifford Baker. Sir Ellis soon found that in this witness he had met his match ; and the court quickly learned it too. He tried to make capital out of the telephone message from the unknown caller, on which the witness had lightly touched in his evidence in chief.

Counsel for the defence wanted to know a great deal about that telephone call, as, for instance, whether the voice was a man's or a woman's. Mr. Baker merely repeated what he had said already, that while at first he had taken it to be a man's, since he had only heard the voice for a very few seconds, and then not too audibly, his hesitation to swear positively if it was masculine or feminine was clearly justified.

He beat Sir Ellis on that point, as he beat him all along the line. Counsel was not able to shake his evidence in one essential detail; so that when the witness finally left the box, that already quoted briefless barrister only voiced the common feeling when he again whispered to his neighbour—

“Graham Burke still remains hanged! Baker's done Wrayburn in the eye.”

What followed was of the nature of an anti-climax; interest rapidly grew less. When the announcement was made that the case for the Crown was concluded there was a distinct feeling of relief. Sir Ellis Wrayburn stood up, and he made a very excellent speech; in the art of making bricks without straw, few were his superiors; but when one has to get on even without clay, the most skilful artist finds himself a trifle hampered.

Sir Ellis brought out into very clear relief the fact that all the world was against the prisoner; that the common inclination was to twist all manner of facts against him. Nothing was more simple than that one man should not be on particularly good terms with another; each might threaten to break the other's head, yet, if one of the heads was broken, nothing was more likely than that the damage might safely be laid at a third party's door. His client had been convicted of an offence; yet he begged the jury,

as men of the world, to remember that that had nothing whatever to do with the case which was before them.

"I shall certainly instruct the jury to that effect," observed the judge.

Sir Ellis thanked his lordship. He then went on to suggest that if you once removed prejudice from this case there was very little left. The medical evidence had not clearly established that they were dealing with a case of murder at all. Professional witnesses had been put into the box, and not one of them had been prepared to swear that Alfred Nockolds had been killed by the hand of man. Medical witnesses for the Crown had admitted that it was quite possible that the car, when going over the bank, had killed its owner. Benjamin Shaw, whose evidence they had no doubt closely followed, had told them that from his post of vantage he saw some one board the car, and then, according to him, the car, when running off the road, had struck the driver, and he, Sir Ellis, suggested that that was the blow which had killed Mr. Nockolds. They had heard him ask the medical witnesses if that might not have been the case, and each of them had been reluctant to swear to the negative. If that was what had occurred, even admitting that the prisoner was the assailant, which he was very far from doing, then, at the worst, manslaughter was the only crime with which he could properly be charged.

Murder requires intention. A may mean to thrash B, owing him a grudge, without ever meaning to murder him, that was obvious. If while thrashing him, a traction-engine, a locomotive, or a motor-car, strikes and kills B, that is not murder. He was not, Sir Ellis explained in an outburst of candour, in any way exonerating his client, but even if it was allowed that

he had been guilty of assault, there was nothing to show that there was murder done.

On this point there was only one witness who counted, Benjamin Shaw. It was admitted that Mr. Graham Burke had suffered once in the hands of justice, and on that fact the whole fabric of this case had been built; Benjamin Shaw might, without abuse of language, be called an habitual offender. They had heard him, with their own ears, practically admit that he was an habitual liar. Even supposing that he had seen anything at all that memorable afternoon, which he—Sir Ellis—was not prepared to admit, what was it that he really had seen? The spot on which he stated he was concealed was at a distance of over two hundred yards from the roadway. It was true he said he was on the top of a hill, but even then his view was broken. The jury had heard Shaw admit that he had only seen Mr. Nockolds' assailant fairly well; he had an impression that he resembled Graham Burke, whom, it must be borne in mind, he had never seen before; he had not been prepared to swear that it was Graham Burke. The whole affair could have lasted only a very few seconds; he had only seen the attacking person, as the witness had put it, fairly well; he asked the jury if it was at all likely that from a distance of more than two hundred yards, through trees and over broken ground, he could have made sure of the identity of a person whom he had never seen before. Shaw, having, very properly, the fear of perjury before his eyes, had refused to commit himself on oath, and he—counsel—was therefore entitled to ask the jury to disregard that part of his evidence altogether.

There was the incident of the woman who had been met in the lane. Had he realized that she was not to be called as a witness he was not sure that it would not

have been his duty to protest against her being alluded to at all. She was stated to have told Inspector Dalton, and others, about a man whom she had seen wheeling a barrow, and whom she had described in such a way that Inspector Dalton and his friend had wished the jury to take it for granted that the person referred to was the prisoner in the dock. First of all, he would wish to observe that all the evidence agreed that the night was unusually dark ; the lane was narrow, the hedges high. Mr. Baker, the driver of the car, had told them that the obscurity was so great that he had to feel his way since he could not see it. And yet here was a woman, who was not produced, who told these gentlemen that she, only a few minutes before, had seen the stranger so clearly that she would almost have been able to paint his portrait. There was no doubt whatever about the darkness ; there was every doubt about the woman who has taken such extreme care not to be found ; it was his duty to tell the jury, and he believed that the judge would endorse what he said, that this incident in which she played so curious and conspicuous a part had nothing to do with the case whatever, and never ought to have been alluded to.

When the jury came to think of it, the jury would perceive that the greater part of the case for the Crown was built up on matter of this sort. If the evidence given, for instance, by Mr. Clifford Baker was dissected, and what he might call the trimmings taken away from it, what was there left ?

He had told them, what they had heard *ad nauseam* from the mouths of other witnesses, that these two men, having been brought up in the same country town, never had got on together, and that Graham Burke had, more than once, as it might be put in the language of the vulgar, threatened to punch his head. Mr. Baker

had not been prepared to swear that Alfred Nockolds had not paid the same compliment to Graham Burke. He ventured to say that, considering the terms he was admittedly on with Graham Burke, it would have been much better taste on the part of Mr. Nockolds if he had refused to take his seat on the Bench when that gentleman had been brought before the magistrates. It was not at all surprising that the prisoner had not felt grateful for the part Mr. Nockolds had played; he would have been more than human had he not both felt and spoken strongly. It seemed to counsel that the conduct of Mr. Nockolds in the matter of the purchase of the prisoner's home was marked by the same curious taste. Did the jury think it strange that Graham Burke should have been angered almost beyond bearing by his conduct in that matter? Mr. Nockolds set out on the day after Graham Burke had been released from prison to take possession of the home in which Burke and his fathers had lived, and which he had not had the least idea had passed out of his possession. If he did meet him on the road, was it remarkable that a scene of violence should have ensued?

Mr. Baker had told a very funny story about a telephone message. If there was anything in it, then it meant that some one must have had a guilty knowledge of what had taken place on that lonely roadside spot, and that that some one was not the prisoner in the dock. It was not Mr. Shaw. That keen-eyed gentleman had told them that he would not know how to use a telephone even if he saw one. Then who was that mysterious person who, only a few minutes after the murder had been committed, which, we are told, occurred at a spot which is at least ten miles distant from the nearest public telephone—who, under these circumstances, can the mysterious individual be who informs Mr. Clifford Baker

by telephone, within a few minutes of its committal, of the crime which had been committed? Mr. Shaw led them to believe that he was the only witness; yet if there was anything in Mr. Baker's story there must have been another. The impression left on counsel's mind, and probably on the mind of the jury, was that there was a great deal more, or else a great deal less, in Mr. Baker's story than he chose to admit.

Mr. Baker was in the box a long time, but there was only one point in his evidence which was of the least importance, and that related to the finding of the dead man's body on the bed in the prisoner's house. The body was found there, that was admitted; but Mr. Graham Burke would go into the witness-box and would tell them that how it came to be there was wholly and entirely a mystery to him.

"This is a case," counsel concluded, "of circumstantial evidence. Mr. Graham Burke will tell you that he is himself convinced that he is the object of a conspiracy. It is only at the last moment that he has decided to go into the box at all, so reluctant is he to make statements which will be painful to others. Had he gone into the witness-box when he was charged with the misappropriation of certain trust funds, it is at least possible that a very different verdict would have been returned. Now he is being tried for his life. He has been told plainly that he has no right to commit suicide—that if he has reason to believe that certain persons, actuated by motives which he will set forth, have been associated in what I cannot but call an attempt against his life, he ought to allow no consideration of any sort or kind to induce him to conceal the truth."

Then Sir Ellis Wrayburn asked that Mr. Graham Burke might be allowed to enter the witness-box; and presently Graham Burke stood there.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE PRISONER ON HIS OWN BEHALF

GRAHAM BURKE'S appearance in the witness-box was a surprise to not a few persons who were present in the court. It was distinctly a surprise to the prosecution. On his previous trial pressure had been put on him with a view to inducing him to give evidence on his own account. He not only refused, but had persisted in his refusal. It was known that pressure had been brought to bear on him in the present case and that he had again refused ; there had been reasons for supposing that he was likely to be persistent in his refusal now as he had been then. Messrs. Talbot, Melville, and George Crunson had certainly not expected to see him figure as a witness. They had reasons of their own for hoping that he would maintain the quixotic attitude he had taken up, and which had marked his conduct on the occasion of his first trial, to the bitter end. When he passed from the dock to the box the partners exchanged uneasy glances.

Nor was Mr. Clifford Baker altogether at his ease. He would much rather Graham Burke had spoken only by his counsel's mouth. There were hurried whispered consultations in the well of the court among the various persons who were concerned with the prosecution ; one might almost be inclined to put it, as a fluttering in the dovecotes ; the birds would have preferred that their serenity should not have been disturbed.

The two persons whose surprise was greatest were ladies, and they had chairs upon the Bench ; that it was not a pleasant surprise to Enid Whitaker her whole bearing made plain. She half rose from her seat, her cheeks went white, then a brilliant spot of colour appeared on each. Her eyes seemed to distend, her lips parted, as if to permit of her taking quicker breaths ; she presented a picture not only of startled amazement, but of actual apprehension. No one who watched her would doubt for a moment that, at least for a brief space, she had lost her self-control and was, all at once, conscious of something from which she would dearly like to flee.

Miss Barber was the other lady who was taken by surprise. Over and over again had she urged Graham Burke to do this very thing, and he had steadily, yet with the utmost courtesy, even laughingly, declined. She did not know that his change of front had occurred at the very last moment ; that in the middle of his speech the prisoner had given his counsel a glance which that quick-witted gentleman had been at no loss to understand, since it had been arranged that if the prisoner did change his mind he should convey the information by just such a glance, and that, therefore, only within the last few minutes was counsel himself aware that he had such a witness he could call. When Olive Barber saw Graham Burke take up his new position, and the glance he gave her, her heart beat faster, and she was, at any rate for the moment, happier than she had been for many a day.

“ Mr. Graham Burke’s going to say some very funny things, or I’m very much surprised ; we’re going to have a little fun.” This was the remark that briefless barrister made behind the back of his hand.

Sir Ellis Wrayburn said something rather odd to

the solicitor who had briefed him and to his junior ; it was perhaps as well that he whispered, so that his words were only audible to those whom he addressed.

“ Our friend does jump about in such a very peculiar fashion that it’s not easy to keep up with. Upon my soul, I hardly know what to ask him.”

Mr. Isaac Benson replied, “ Let him lead, you follow. He can’t make matters worse than they are ; give him his head.”

So far as he could, Sir Ellis did what Mr. Benson had advised. He asked short questions which served Mr. Burke as openings for lengthy answers. He came to that Wednesday in June, giving a clear and full account of his movements on that day. He told of his walk towards his home ; of the discovery of the car in the copse at the bottom of the bank ; then of the appearance of Mr. Benjamin Shaw on the road above as he had been searching for some traces of the occupant of the car. So far everything he had said made a favourable impression ; his manner, easy and confident, had lent force to his words ; the idea to which rumour had given prevalence, that he was in all respects a desperado of the deepest dye, was shown by the ocular, as well as the oral, proof to have but a very doubtful foundation in fact. This man, who told his story so simply, so quietly, even so convincingly, was certainly not the mere blackguard which gossip had painted.

When he came to the interview which he alleged Mr. Shaw had forced upon him, ears grew wider open. He explained that while he had been taken aback by Mr. Shaw’s unexpected appearance, and at a loss to follow his exact meaning, he had grasped enough of it to realize that Mr. Shaw was making what in reality amounted to a blackmailing proposition. He thought

it possible that Mr. Shaw might have been more explicit had the conversation not been interrupted.

Here the witness paused ; then, in graver tones, he asked to be allowed to make a personal statement. His advisers had repeatedly pointed out that it would be better that he should give evidence on his behalf ; but he had declined, not because he was afraid of anything he might say which would be damaging to himself, but because he was unwilling that persons who were, in fact, in no way concerned in the matter should be dragged into it. His conversation with Shaw had been interrupted by the arrival on the scene of a lady, of Miss Barber. She had not been called by the prosecution ; there was no intention to call her for the defence. It so chanced that she had passed along the road, and Mr. Shaw, seeing her coming, had taken to his heels, or he thought it not unlikely, if that gentleman had remained, he would have made himself clear in a manner which there was no mistaking. He had some conversation with Miss Barber which had no bearing on the business with which they were dealing, and which, in turn, was interrupted by the coming of Police-Constable Vincent. He had no fault to find with the evidence which Vincent had given. After the constable had left him he walked the remainder of the distance to The Old House ; there he had a rough and ready meal, the recollection of which seemed to cause him amusement. There he paused again ; then observed in still graver tones that it was only because he desired to state the exact sequence of events that he had to bring in the name of a second lady.

He told how Miss Whitaker had paid him a visit ; how the conversation he had had with her had lasted several minutes ; and how, after she had gone he had heard the sound of some one rushing down the stairs,

across the hall, and through the front door. He hastened to see who the intruders were, feeling sure that there was more than one; and then he had gone upstairs. He described the state in which he had found the room which he had entered; how he had picked up the leather satchel and the miniature on the floor, not knowing to whom they belonged; how, while he was wondering what might be the meaning of the confusion in the room, Inspector Dalton, Mr. Clifford Baker, and the two constables had come to the front door. What their coming meant he had not the slightest notion. He assured the judge and jury that he had not entered the room in which the body was found since he had quitted the premises to go to prison more than two years before. It was true that he had resisted arrest. Knowing himself to be innocent, in his amazement that so monstrous a charge should be made against him, he had lost his self-control, and had striven to retain the liberty of which neither Inspector Dalton nor any one else had a right to deprive him.

As regards the conspiracy of which he was convinced he was a victim, had it been possible to keep silence he would have done so. But when it became clear that the only way in which the court could be preserved from doing him an injustice which never could be undone was by laying before them the exact facts, so far as he knew them, he felt that it had become his duty to speak. It necessitated his going back to the former charge which had been made against him. He deeply regretted that he would have to touch on matters with which a lady who was present in court was intimately connected. He would make those statements, and then the lady, if she thought proper, would be able to rebut them there and then.

"It is necessary, Mr. Burke," interposed the judge, "for me to tell you that if you make any statements reflecting on a person whose evidence is not before us, unless you are prepared to substantiate them up to the hilt, instead of doing your case good they will do it harm. I say this before you mention any person's name. Are you aware, Sir Ellis, of what your client is about to say?"

Sir Ellis hitched his gown further on to his shoulders, and seemed for a moment to cogitate.

"Generally speaking, my lord, yes. The defence has all along been a very delicate position. My client's view is that the whole case against him has been engineered from outside; but as I understand the matter, he admits that he is not able to produce evidence which will substantiate his view. All he knows is that he is absolutely innocent of the offence with which he is charged; that he does not understand how he ever came to be in the position in which it could be made; and that, therefore, he is driven to the conclusion that the suspicion he has in his mind is fact, and that the whole affair is a conspiracy."

The judge, settling his pince-nez more firmly on his nose, eyed the prisoner steadily.

"Who do you allege, Mr. Burke, has conspired against you?—any of the witnesses we have heard, and, if so, which of them?"

"Clifford Baker for one; Benjamin Shaw for another; Mr. Talbot Melville and Mr. George Grunson. And there are others of whose good faith I have serious doubts."

"What motives do you allege these persons could have had for so wicked a proceeding?"

"My lord, I have told you how, when I first went to The Old House, I found a young woman who admitted

that she had slept on the premises. She told me her name was Rhoda Shaw, and that she had taken refuge in my house, which you will understand had been empty for more than two years, from the violence of a person whom I understand to be her husband. Whether she lied to me or not I cannot say; all I know is that I found her on the premises. Is it not possible that the person from whom she had fled was the man Benjamin Shaw who gave evidence yesterday?"

"You hear what the prisoner says? What remark have you to make, Sir Frederick?"

Counsel for the Crown stood up. "Shaw was cross-examined at some length, my lord, and no insinuation of the kind was then made. I don't say that the young woman who took refuge on the prisoner's premises is a sudden invention, but this is the first we have heard of her. Is she going to be produced?"

The judge looked at Sir Ellis, who replied—

"I'm afraid I am not in a position to produce her, my lord. We have searched for her everywhere, but she is not to be found."

The prisoner spoke. "To me it seems possible that the woman whom Inspector Dalton and the others met in the lane was Rhoda Shaw, and that she was one of the persons whom I had just heard rushing from the house."

"Is there anything to prove it?—any shadow of a shred of evidence?"

There was a hurried consultation among the legal advisers for the defence, the result of which was announced by Sir Ellis Wrayburn.

"I am afraid there is not, my lord. We have searched for this young woman, but she has not been found."

"Why did you not ask Shaw about his supposed connection with this woman when he was in the box? It was a very important matter."

“Exactly, my lord ; but we have throughout been hampered by the position which—I am bound to say it to his face—Mr. Burke has taken up. He has been so anxious that certain matters should not be introduced that I felt bound to be more reticent than I otherwise might have been.”

“Your counsel does not seem to understand you, Mr. Burke, and I confess I don't. What are the points on which you wish to preserve such secrecy ? You have said that you did not wish a certain lady to be introduced into the case ; so far as I can see, any evidence she could have given would not have been of importance either one way or the other. What else had you in your mind which has actuated you in the position which you have taken up ?”

Graham Burke hesitated for a moment ; then he actually laughed.

“It is all very droll, my lord, but, after all, it doesn't matter. I have already served two years' hard labour for what I never did ; I may as well be hanged for the same reason.”

“That attitude may satisfy you, Mr. Burke, but it doesn't me. You have chosen, at the last moment, to go into the witness-box, and you have already made certain statements which you are not prepared to substantiate. You have made very serious charges against witnesses, of which, I gather, you have no proof ; and now, so far as I am able to follow you, you insinuate that you could make other charges which you are only deterred from doing by what you appear to wish us to believe is a consideration for the feelings of others, in which, at present, I am bound to say, I see no ground to believe.” Leaning back in his great chair, the judge took his glasses off his nose. “Has your client anything further to say, Sir Ellis ? If so, let's get on.”

The prisoner answered instead of the counsel.

"No, my lord, I have nothing to say, so I'd better get back to the dock." He spoke as if he saw a jest which was entirely hidden from his hearers. Sir Ellis Wrayburn turned hurriedly towards the witness-box. He was joined by his junior and Mr. Isaac Benson. Clearly the prisoner was being urged to re-consider his attitude, which, judging from the manner in which Burke persisted in shaking his head and smiling, he refused to do. Presently Sir Ellis had to admit himself beaten.

"My lord, I regret to say that my client refuses to continue his evidence. I have pointed out to him that he has placed us in a very difficult position—one in which I can only put myself in your lordship's hands."

"You understand what your counsel means, Mr. Burke? He means that after what you have said, if you refuse to say any more, he may be compelled to withdraw from the conduct of your case."

Although the judge's manner was stern, the prisoner did not seem to be in the least abashed. Indeed, he bore himself with an air of frank good humour which could hardly have been assumed.

"My lord, I am very much obliged to Sir Ellis and his associates for what they have done for me; but I have told them that they are at perfect liberty to withdraw, and that they will have nothing upon their consciences if they do. My personal wish throughout has been that the case should be undefended."

"Your words seem to be tantamount to an admission of guilt, Mr. Burke."

"I have no doubt they do, my lord. I long ago came to the conclusion that things are very often not what they seem. I am not guilty; I never met Alfred Nockolds on the road, as that expert liar,

Benjamin Shaw, stated ; I know nothing about how he came to his death ; but I have felt all along that my innocence and ignorance would not save me from being hanged. The situation, my lord, is Gilbertian."

"You think so, Mr. Burke. That's not the way in which it strikes me. Then, I am to understand, Sir Ellis, that the evidence which your witness has to give is concluded ? Perhaps it is as well. Have you any questions to ask, Sir Frederick ?"

"I might have had several questions to ask, my lord, but as matters stand, it seems to me to be unnecessary to ask one."

"Then let the prisoner return to the dock."

The prisoner did return ; and in due course the case was concluded. The speeches on both sides were very brief. Counsel for the Crown observed to the jury that the evidence of the prisoner's guilt could hardly have been more conclusive, and that they would probably be of opinion that the prisoner's own attitude in the witness-box had only served to strengthen it ; that was what his speech amounted to, and it was all said in less than twenty minutes. Sir Ellis Wrayburn said even less. He pointed out to the jury the danger of judging by appearances, that was practically all he did say. Then came the judge, whose summing-up was a model of luminous reasoning, so that at the end there were no two opinions in the court as to what the verdict would be. The jury retired, but were back in the court within ten minutes, with the verdict of guilty. The judge assumed the black cap. In the fewest possible words he sentenced the prisoner to be hanged, and he desired him to entertain no hope of mercy. And the trial was finished.



CHAPTER XXIV

A CONFERENCE

THERE was probably no more unhappy woman in England that night than Olive Barber. There had been a moment, when Graham Burke had first elected to testify, in which she had actually thought that comfort was coming to her in spite of all. The fiasco had been so complete; the revulsion so entire. What she had hoped was the beginning of good, proved to be the harbinger of worse things than had ever been. How could the unmanageable person have behaved in such a fashion? She felt convinced that had he chosen all might have been so different; why did the unreasonable man not choose? The only answer she could find to the question was worse than none at all.

She dared not think of what had happened; while her car rushed over what seemed to be interminable roads towards The Pleasaunce, she tried her hardest not to think at all. She would have to later; in her heart she knew it; at the best she was only postponing the evil day; at any cost she would postpone it as long as she could. What a return that was of hers—when the car passed up the drive and stopped before the door, and she passed into the hall, it was as though she was entering a house of doom. The shadow of death was hovering over her and all that was hers; a shadow which was but the herald of the unescapable.

She had scribbled a hasty note, with fingers which

could scarcely be induced to write, and, before leaving the court, had given instructions that it should be handed to Mr. Isaac Benson. She had begged Mr. Benson to come up to her that night, and to bring Sir Ellis Wrayburn ; he might charge her what he chose, but she implored him for pity's sake to come. Wandering like an unquiet spirit from room to room, she had refused her maid's offer to relieve her of her hat and motor coat ; she came upon William Kelly, who had just returned. Judging by his looks the butler might himself have been sentenced to death ; he could hardly have worn a more disconsolate mien or seemed less at ease with the world. Miss Barber addressed him.

"Kelly, I think it possible that Sir Ellis Wrayburn and Mr. Benson may dine here to-night ; see that places are set for them." His mistress exclaimed at the look he gave her : " Kelly, do you think they'll hang him ? "

" It will be that Sir Ellis and Mr. Benson who will have done it if they do."

" Do you think that really ? Don't you think they did their best for him ? "

" Their best ! " The butler groaned. " If that's their best I'd rather they had done their worst. I'd have made a better fight than they did. That Sir Ellis put up no fight at all ; he acted all along as if he was a beaten man ; he never put his heart into it once."

" Do you think, Kelly, it was all his fault ? "

The girl's white face looked up at the man with something on it which caused him to turn his own away.

" I don't say that, miss ; not quite that, miss, I don't say. Everything has gone against Mr. Graham ; it seems to me he's gone against himself. He knows why, I don't ; but that Sir Ellis never ought to have let him go against himself, that's what I blame him for. The

worse case a lawyer's got, the more he ought to fight ; that's what you have one for. And I say he never fought at all, I do say that."

"I think I shall tell him so, Kelly, if he comes to-night. Oh, Kelly, do you think they'll hang him?"

"Miss, what they'll do is more than I can tell, or any one can tell. Everything's gone wrong. I can't see my way anywhere. All I know is that I'd like to have that Clifford Baker and wring his neck for him."

"You mustn't say that, Kelly, or if anything happens to him they'll be trying you."

Sir Ellis and Mr. Benson did not come for dinner. Miss Barber, in spite of all that her maid and Kelly could do to persuade her, had no dinner at all that night. She said that she wanted nothing to eat, that food would choke her. She could not even be induced to sit down.

When they were in the drawing-room she confronted them with a strange sort of passion. "I thought you were never coming."

Mr. Benson explained. "You must understand, Miss Barber, that we are men with many calls upon our time ; we ought both of us to have returned to town before this. I do not know what good purpose will be served by our coming to you here ; but your note was so—imperative that we have come. As we can only remain for a very few minutes—we must catch the night train up to London—will you be so good as to tell us as briefly as possible, Miss Barber, what it is you want?"

"I want you to save Mr. Graham Burke."

"If you will tell us how it is to be done, Miss Barber, we will. Mr. Burke seems determined not to do anything to save himself."

"Why did you let him go into the witness-box?"
The question was addressed to the barrister.

"My dear young lady, I understood that he would give evidence which would be of material assistance."

"Then why didn't you make him give it?"

The barrister shrugged his shoulders.

"It's no good your doing that. If you let him go into the box, it was your duty to see that he did what he went for."

"I don't know if you're aware how irregular all this is, Miss Barber. I have no business to be here at all, but my desire is to do anything for you that I possibly can. I have been thinking over the matter, and have been discussing it with Mr. Benson, and I'm not at all sure that the verdict was the right one."

"You're not at all sure? If you have half the intelligence you are credited with you ought to be absolutely certain."

"Even granting that I'm absolutely certain, what do you suppose I can do?—especially as I understand that Mr. Burke declines to appeal."

"Do you mean that he can be tried again?"

"Hardly that; but the verdict might be appealed against on various grounds. I have acted as counsel in a good many cases, Miss Barber, but I doubt if I was ever engaged in one bristling with more doubtful points than this of the Crown against Burke. To begin with it was crammed full of irregularities. I think that an appeal might be sustained on more than one of them. But if Mr. Burke refuses to appeal on any ground at all I fail to see what we can do."

"But he must appeal; he shall appeal."

"Can you induce him to take your view of the matter, Miss Barber?"

"Can't we appeal without his permission?"

"Supposing that to be possible, without his assistance

anything we might do would be futile. Mr. Benson has seen him—we have not been wasting our time, as you appear to imagine, Miss Barber.”

“What did he say, Mr. Benson—tell me? Did he seem—very much cast down?”

“On the contrary, I have seldom seen a man look more cheerful. Miss Barber, Mr. Graham Burke is a truly remarkable man. He sent you a message.”

“Oh, please, what was it?”

“He desired me to request you not to worry, to assure you that he’d be perfectly all right.”

“What does he mean by being perfectly all right? What does he mean?”

“That might be rather difficult to say. He probably has his own point of view, he seems to have it on most subjects. I touched on the matter of appeal. He merely laughed. When I informed him that I was in earnest, and got him, I think, to believe it at least to some extent, he assured me, still with a smile all over him, that he had had enough of trials, and rather than have any more bother—that was his word—he would much rather hang. My experience is that when a man has just been sentenced to death that is the moment of all others in which he is ready to jump at any suggestion of an appeal. Mr. Graham Burke is what biologists call a ‘sport’—a departure from the normal. He was quite pleasant, not in the least contentious; in the most agreeable way he made it clear to me that there should be no appeal with his consent. So, since to appeal without his consent would be absurd, what are we to do?”

Miss Barber was standing with her hands held against her chest as if to restrain, by force of pressure, the heaving of her bosom.

“We must make him consent.”

"Who is to bell the cat? Who will undertake to make him? Will you?"

"Permit me to remark," interposed Sir Ellis, "that even if we induce him to consent, and we do appeal, it must by no means be taken for granted that the appeal will succeed."

"Is there the least chance of its succeeding?"

"At the moment it is impossible to say. It depends upon the grounds which you may have to go upon. But I should say that what we have in our minds is that it's just possible to have the sentence altered to one of penal servitude for life; I should also add that I understand from Mr. Benson that Mr. Burke, rather than that such a substitution should take place, prefers to hang."

"Don't you think it possible that an appeal may establish his innocence?"

The two men of law looked at each other. The barrister asked the solicitor: "Shall I speak, Mr. Benson, or will you?"

"As matters stand, perhaps I had better speak." The solicitor proceeded to speak. "I think you will agree, Miss Barber, that this is a time at which frankness should prevail, but I will put it to you. You shall decide. Would you like me to be frank or otherwise?"

"Please be frank. I am not afraid of frankness."

Yet she looked as if she were; of the sort of frankness which she anticipated from him. They saw how she was trembling.

"I wish you would sit down, Miss Barber," urged Sir Ellis, advancing a chair; "please do." But she declined. "I see you are as obstinate as Mr. Burke."

"I will be if I choose." The lawyers exchanged a smile, which she caught. "Oh, you can smile if you like, I don't care. Mr. Benson, I am waiting for you to be as frank as you possibly can."

The solicitor seemed to consider. There is no mask which can be more expressionless than the face of a certain type of Jew. Mr. Benson's countenance was inscrutable; yet one felt that he might be wondering what was passing through this young woman's mind.

"You asked just now if it was not possible that an appeal might establish Mr. Burke's innocence; I doubt it."

"Why do you doubt it? Is it impossible to establish innocence in an English court of justice? You know I am more than half American, that is why I ask."

"Quite possible; it is done every day, where there is innocence to be established. Please restrain yourself." The young lady had made an impetuous gesture, as if she would say some very warm things. "I quite realize—Sir Ellis and I both realize—that you are profoundly convinced of Mr. Burke's innocence. I'm afraid we aren't. One moment—let me make myself quite clear. I pass no opinion on Mr. Burke's guilt; but I doubt—and Sir Ellis doubts—if we shall be able to establish his innocence. So grave are our doubts that, in the event of an appeal, I doubt if we shall even try to. The grounds of appeal will be legal. The law is rather a curious thing, Miss Barber."

"It appears to be a very curious thing in England."

"And in other countries also, Miss Barber, including the United States of North America. You must bear with me while I endeavour to make my meaning perfectly clear. We should not expect to succeed in the Court of Appeal; but there have been instances in which an appeal has failed, and yet has aroused public feeling in such a matter that pressure has been brought to bear upon the Home Secretary, who has in consequence revised the capital sentence to one of penal servitude for life. We

think it just possible that the matter might be engineered in such a fashion that such a result might be obtained in the case of Mr. Graham Burke. Further than that we are not prepared to go: and since Mr. Burke assured me—though he smiled I believe he meant what he said—that he would rather be hanged than serve as a convict even ten years, we are at a standstill. Perhaps you can see a way out of the position which we can't. If so, we shall be very glad to hear what it is. That is why we are here." Mr. Benson looked at his watch. "Since time presses, perhaps you will let us have your views as quickly as possible; and would you mind, Miss Barber, keeping to the point, the point as I place it before you."

"What do you expect me to answer? What can you expect me to answer? I know that he is innocent——"

Mr. Benson held up his hand. "That is not what I asked, Miss Barber. Will you undertake to obtain Mr. Burke's consent and assistance, if we lodge an appeal?"

The girl stared, as if he were a propounder of riddles.

"How am I to do what you ask? Will they let me see him?"

"They will. That part I will undertake. Only understand, you must move quickly; time is short. You must see him, say, the day after to-morrow, and advise me immediately of the result of your interview. Only please take my meaning clearly; it is not only his consent which is required, he must promise to render us all the assistance he can. So far he has practically ranged himself on the side of the prosecution; if he maintains that attitude it is finished. Now, Miss Barber, it is time we started. Will you undertake to see him and exert your influence the day after to-morrow?"

“ I will ; I will do my best ; I promise you I’ll do my best.”

On that understanding they parted. The lawyers hurried off to catch the night train to town. The lady placed herself between the sheets ; but she did not stay there long. She was in and out of bed that night a dozen times. Her thoughts were on the interview which was to take place the day after to-morrow. Over and over again she told herself—

“ Oh, if I could only think of the proper words to say to him!—just the very words! But I can’t, I can’t.”

CHAPTER XXV

TRESPASSERS

ONE of the chief topics on the morrow of probably every newspaper in England was the Great Erdington murder case. The particular journal which Miss Barber favoured was full of it. She read every word, leading article and all ; indeed, the leading article chiefly, because it touched a note which made to her a very strong personal appeal.

While, the writer of that article said, it was obvious that only one verdict was possible, there would still, possibly, be an uneasy feeling in the public mind that in the course of the proceedings the whole truth had not been told. That Graham Burke murdered Alfred Nockolds there seemed no reasonable cause to doubt ; that the whole mystery of how the latter had come to his death had not been elucidated seemed equally certain.

The leader-writer's position seemed to be that which the two lawyers had taken up the night before. Although Miss Barber confined her daily reading to one newspaper only, and sometimes did not read that, there were other journals in the house. That morning Miss Barber read them all. Some of them made her blood boil ; she would have liked to do something disagreeable to those reporters. In each there was a hint of the same kind—that the complete truth had not come out. It was her business, she told herself, to see that it did ; in

her hands was Graham Burke's life! she would leave nothing undone which could possibly save it.

The whole of that day she was considering how she could best reach Graham Burke's common sense. She consulted William Kelly, who proved to be anything but cheering.

"It's my belief," he maintained, "that Mr. Graham means to hang, and hang he will. God knows why he does, but that's my belief, and there's an end."

"How dare you say such a thing?" the lady cried. "It's not true, and you don't believe it. I asked you to help me, and you talk to me like this! How can you be so cruel?"

Instead of being diverted into an optimistic vein, Kelly became more pessimistic than before.

"Miss Barber, if an angel came down from heaven and pleaded to Mr. Graham on his knees, if he's once made up his mind, it wouldn't make that amount of difference to him." The butler snapped his fingers as if to express the smallest possible quantity. "The angel might plead himself hoarse and then go back to heaven with not a word left in him. Mr. Graham would do what he said he'd do, just as if no one had ever said a word."

"I had no idea that he was so self-willed; what a dreadful person you make him out to be! I did not think, Kelly, that you'd have been so ready to take away his character."

"I'm not taking away his character, Miss Barber. No, far from it; I'm only telling you that if he's made up his mind to hang you won't stop him, nor any one else either. And as for asking me to put words into your mouth to turn him from what he's set on doing, I couldn't, miss, nor any one else either."

Miss Barber looked at him with such trouble in her

eyes that the butler was visibly moved, but he stuck to his guns.

"Do you think, miss, if there was anything that could be done I wouldn't do it?—but if I was to knock down the prison walls I don't believe that he'd go through, not if he's set on being hung."

"But why should he be set on being hung, you ridiculous Kelly? I don't believe it for a single instant, and I know him better than you do, a great deal better. All I wanted you to do was to suggest something which might be of use. But now you needn't trouble to do anything of the kind. I'm the only friend he has in the world."

"No, if you'll pardon me, miss, that's not true. He's lots of friends, more than any one guesses."

"I don't know where they are. I am the only one who is willing to do anything for him. I am, Kelly, I am!"

The little lady bore herself with such a show of violence that the butler seemed positively frightened. She bounced out of the room, and out of the house, on to some rising, rough and broken ground which was at the back, and there, on a convenient spot, where she believed herself to be hidden from human eyes, she lay down full length, and she hid her face on the ground. No one who believes that money means happiness, coming on her then, would have taken her to be a multi-millionaire. She had lain there for a considerable time when she became conscious that some one was addressing her—

"Miss," said a voice, "miss." She looked up and found that it came from a young woman who was not so much dressed as covered with odds and ends of clothing. Miss Barber, in spite of her eyes being dim and hazy, thought that she had never seen an untidier

person or one who was in more urgent need of soap and water. And yet she was not ill-looking; she held herself very straight; she had red lips, a straight nose, fine eyes, and a profusion of coal-black hair was twisted in clumsy knots about her shapely head. Miss Barber was aware that gipsies had been known to camp out upon that piece of ground, and thought it possible that this young woman was one of a party that was not very far away.

"What do you want?" she inquired, as the other continued to stand and gaze at her. "You are trespassing; you have no right to be here."

The girl made what seemed to her to be rather an impudent request.

"Let me tell your fortune, Miss Barber."

"If you know my name, you no doubt also know that I am the present tenant of this property and that you have no right to be here. Will you please go; I don't want my fortune told, thank you."

"I know more about you than that you are Miss Barber. Let me see the palm of your hand, miss, and I'll tell you things that will make you open your eyes; things about Mr. Graham Burke."

This she added with a significance which made the other start.

"About Mr. Graham Burke? What do you know about him? Who are you?"

"Maybe I'll tell you that and more, miss, for a piece of silver." Then, as if warned by something which she saw on Miss Barber's face, she suddenly added: "I don't want your money; I'll tell you for his sake." The young woman looked about her as if to make sure that there was no one within listening distance; then, drawing closer, she dropped her hoarse voice to a whisper. "He never killed that there Nockolds, miss, never in this world."

Miss Barber showed every sign of being startled. Hitherto she had maintained her recumbent position, but now, scrambling to her feet, she stared at the other with eyes that were all at once very wide open.

"Do you know that? How do you know it?"

"I'll tell you, miss; because I know——"

The girl paused, and suddenly Miss Barber became aware that some one else was coming up the slope. The young woman discovered it as soon as she did. Glancing round, when she saw who it was, without giving Miss Barber the slightest hint of her intention, she rushed off as if for dear life, making her way through the bushes and brambles with an agility that was so great that in not more than half a dozen seconds she was out of sight.

Turning to learn what could be the cause of her alarm, Miss Barber recognized in the new-comer an individual whose appearance filled her with feelings of the most assorted kind.

"You!" she cried. "What are you doing here? How dare you trespass on my land?"

The intruder was Mr. Benjamin Shaw. He had scarcely moved since he had been first discovered, and had shown not the slightest sign of any desire to follow the flying woman.

"Since when has this been your land?" he inquired. "I thought it was Sir George Forster's. It was his before you were ever heard of."

"I rent it from him, and while I rent it it's mine."

With the exception that he had his greasy cloth cap on his head instead of in his hand, he was attired exactly as he had been in the witness-box. His unwashed face wore its most unbecoming expression; his cheeks and chin were covered with grimy stubble; his mouth was more crooked than ever; in his

badly-matched eyes was an evil look. The sight of him seemed to inflame the girl with sudden rage. She put to her lips a tiny whistle which was attached to a slender chain about her neck, and blew what, considering its size, was a shrill blast.

"What did you do that for?" asked Mr. Shaw.

"That's to call some one to teach you whose land this is; some one who will teach you properly."

"Who will that some one be, I wonder?" Mr. Shaw asked this question with what was decidedly an evil grin. "Was that young woman talking to you?"

"What young woman? How dare you ask me questions? Will you go?"

Mr. Shaw showed not the slightest sign of doing as she wished. That grin of his had the peculiar property of twisting his mouth into a shape which was scarcely human. He seemed to be enjoying her agitation.

"Gently, Miss Barber, gently. If I'm trespassing, so was that young woman, and I saw you talking to her quite friendly like. What did she say to you? To avoid further trouble, perhaps you wouldn't mind letting me know."

"She told me that Mr. Burke did not—do what they say he did; he did not kill Alfred Nockolds. Is that news to you, Mr. Shaw?"

"It would be if it was true, but it ain't. I don't believe she said anything so silly." Putting his hands into his breeches pockets, Mr. Shaw pulled them higher. "What does she or any one else know compared to what we know, you and me? And we know that he killed him, don't we, Miss Barber?"

"I know nothing of the kind, nor do you. I believe you to be a wilful perjurer and a false swearer."

The fellow's grin seemed to grow. "Do you indeed, Miss Barber? Now think of that! I wonder what

you'd feel like if I was to tell you what I believe about you—what I know!”

“What do you know about me, you impudent wretch? Stop one moment.” An idea had all at once occurred to her. “I tell you one thing, I'm not poor.”

“We all know that, and we all know how generous you are to them as is.”

“How much will you take to tell the truth?”

“Well, Miss Barber, it depends upon what you call the truth. Perhaps you're not old enough to know it, but there is truth of so many sorts.”

“That young woman just now told me that she knows that Graham Burke did not kill Alfred Nockolds, and no doubt you know it also. I shouldn't wonder if she's the young woman whom Mr. Burke found in his house, and the young woman who told Inspector Dalton that lie in the lane.”

“Where was the lie, Miss Barber? She might have seen some one wheeling a barrow in the lane. How do you know she didn't?”

“She might have seen that; she might have seen you, but she did not see Mr. Burke. She lied when she hinted that she had.”

“Oh, she might have seen me, might she, wheeling a barrow? Out of which something was dropping on to the road! You think that, do you? Now, that's very odd, very odd indeed.”

“Come, Mr. Shaw, you're not a rich man.”

“That's the truth, anyhow, if it was never told before and never will be again. No one can call me a rich man, seeing that I haven't got so much as a brown; if you was to search me you wouldn't find one.”

“Will you tell the truth, the real truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth if I give you a thousand pounds?”

Mr. Shaw's face assumed a most extraordinary expression.

"What's that you say? A thousand pounds! My lady, for a thousand pounds I'd swear to anything. You just try me."

"You'd swear to anything!" The scorn on her countenance was as remarkable as the expression on his. "I believe it, and that's just the point. How much have you got for what you have sworn?"

"Who told you I'd got anything? Has she been saying things?"

He jerked his thumb in the direction in which the young woman had gone.

"If you'll tell me how much you did get, and whom you got it from, I'll make it worth your while. If you'll tell me the whole truth I'll make you a rich man."

"Yes, I dare say! I've heard that tale before. And where'd I be after I was a rich man? You tell me what you want me to swear for your thousand pounds and—I'll think it over."

"I want you to swear nothing—nothing. I just want you to tell the truth, the simple, naked truth."

"That's all you want, is it? Who to? Here, who's this coming along?"

A man with a gun under his arm was coming over the crest of the hill. Mr. Shaw did not wait for the girl to answer, he took to his heels with the same haste which had marked the departure of the young woman.

"Stop! Stop!" cried Miss Barber.

"Shall I stop him?" asked the man with the gun. "What's he been up to? He's as pretty a young blackguard as ever I met; I'll soon have him back."

The keeper was already starting when Miss Barber checked him.

"It doesn't matter, Atkins. I think you frightened him."

"I shouldn't wonder, miss. If I could lay hold of him I'd do more than frighten him. The games he's been up to the last few weeks, him and the girl he goes about with, there's nothing safe in the house nor out of it. They're a pair of beauties!"

"Is the girl he goes about with, as you call her, black-haired, with big eyes, and dressed in odds and ends of rags?"

"I shouldn't wonder if you are talking of the same party, miss. We call her Gipsy Sal about these parts. When he's in drink, that chap, he knocks the life half out of her, and, from what I hear, sometimes when he's sober. She's like a dog, she is, which is sometimes all the more obedient the worse you treat it. He's only got to lift his finger and she'll do anything he tells her; beg, steal, lie, anything."

"You know that Mr. Graham Burke says that he found a young woman in his house; do you think it's likely to have been she?"

"I shouldn't wonder, miss, not a little bit. From all I hear, there were nice doings in The Old House while Mr. Graham was away. He's been badly used all round, Mr. Graham has. They were quick enough to put him away; they might have looked after his house when they'd got him."

"That woman told me that she knew that he did not kill Mr. Nockolds; she would have told me more if—that creature had not appeared. You seem to know something about her; do you think you could find her and bring her to me? You might tell her that I'll give her——" Miss Barber paused a moment as if to consider. The keeper took off his cap with his left hand to enable him to scratch his head with the right.

She added, "Tell her I'll give her twenty pounds if she'll come."

"Twenty pounds is a lot of money, miss; she'd come for a sight less than that, if I could find her. I come upon her now and then when I don't expect to, but as for knowing where to look for her, that's another pair of shoes. However, I'll do my best."

"Thank you, Atkins, if you will; and please do bring her as soon as you possibly can. Time is so short, every hour is precious."

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE CONDEMNED CELL

IN the morning the post brought Miss Barber an intimation that if she would be at Canterstone Gaol at eleven o'clock she would be admitted to see Mr. Graham Burke. It was ten minutes to eleven when her car drew up outside the great, grim gates. The warder who admitted her observed her with curious eyes. As the gate clanged to behind her she looked about her with a start. The warder took her name and address, and then left her for a moment, presently to return with warder No. 2. This second warder seemed to be a superior official. His manner was grim; it made her shudder to hear him talk; yet she felt that the man was human.

"You are entitled to a twenty minutes' interview with this man. Two warders will be present in the cell; I also shall be present. You are not to touch him or go near him. It is the rule to search persons who are visiting prisoners in a condemned cell; but in your case, if you will give me your word that you will not attempt to pass anything to him, or leave anything behind for him—anything of any kind—you shall be admitted without being searched."

"Can't I—can't I be alone with him?"

"You cannot—not for an instant. I don't wish to hurt your feelings, or to say anything which my duty does not compel me to say; but you must understand

that you are visiting a man who is condemned to be hanged, who is never alone, who is being watched by two warders, day and night, to see that he makes no attempt upon his life. I may tell you that nothing he may say, or that you may say, will be taken down; so that you need fear nothing as to any use being made of the conversation which takes place between you. Now, if you are ready, Miss Barber."

Miss Barber was not ready; she was much more unready than she thought could have been possible. The horror of the thing had all at once become materialized; she was going to see a man in a condemned cell who was sentenced to be hanged, and every precaution had to be taken that nothing might prevent his being hanged. And this was the man she loved! Her knees seemed to be giving way beneath her; her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth. She would have liked a chair—something which would have enabled her to pull herself together; but the grim warder was waiting for her to go; so she went. What a walk that was! Nothing she had ever read of the terrible surpassed it; the warder a little way in front, the keys which he carried in his hand clanking as he walked; she with her dragging feet taking more than two steps to his one. Across a courtyard on whose gritty surface the sun was blazing; through a door which the warder unlocked, and which, when they were through, he shut behind them. They were in the prison proper; in a bare, flagged passage, some six or seven feet wide, with whitened walls and ceiling. Nowhere was there a suggestion of a spot of dirt; its cleanliness was unnatural. There was another door at the end which had to be unlocked and shut again; then down some steps into another passage which was darker than the first, and longer. Then another door had to be unlocked,

and when they were through it, she reeled, and had it not been for the wall would have fallen.

The warder looked at her.

"You are not fit for this sort of thing. Had you not better re-consider the matter? There is still time to go back. I have seen many interviews with men in there, and no good was ever done to either side by one of them. You will only distress yourself and the prisoner. I have seen prisoners bear themselves like men until a friend came to see them, and then lose all self-control and remain like that to the end. I am exceeding my duty in saying this, but I am speaking not as warder but as a man."

"Thank you. You—you are very good; but—I must see him—if you don't mind."

"I don't mind. I'm like a doctor; I'm used to this sort of thing."

He was thinking that it would have been as well to bring a wardress with him from the female side of the gaol. This girl looked as if she would give trouble. Outside those walls he was a soft-hearted man; he had a wife and daughters; but he put away his soft-heartedness when he passed the prison gate—shed it like a garment. In the gaol, on duty, he had the strongest possible objection to anything that was feminine; he was of opinion that women ought not to be admitted to a prison at all, that they did no good whatever to his charges, and because he was of that opinion he had a sneaking satisfaction in observing how acutely they distressed themselves.

Then in such a case as this he was so helpless. This young woman looked as if it would need only a very little to induce her senses to leave her altogether. If he had had his way, he would have picked her up, borne her back to the entrance, and placed her on the

other side. If she fainted, or developed hysterics, or made some fuss of that sort, the fault would be entirely her own, though the nuisance of having to bring her back to sense again would quite probably be his.

Miss Barber's perceptions were acute. She did not need to be told that this grizzled person's attitude towards herself was not sympathetic. After a fashion, the consciousness braced her up. Had he uttered one feeling word, or shown by so much as a look that even in the slightest degree he shared her distress, she might have given way. As it was, knowing that he was watching her with a certain sort of curiosity to see if she would or would not make an exhibition of herself, strength came into her. She passed the scrap of linen which served her as a handkerchief across her face ; she even tried to smile.

"I—I am quite ready. I wasn't feeling quite well for the moment, but I'm—I'm quite right now."

She did not look or sound as if she were, but that warder seemed to notice nothing. He pointed with his keys to the end of the passage.

"The condemned cell is through that door and round the corner, so if you want to make a fuss you'd better make it now. You'll do no good by making it then. Unless you wish to break him up entirely, have some pity on the man you're going to see."

This was a sort of formula with that grizzled man. Women had been on the verge of breaking down over and over again at that particular point ; experience had shown that the only chance of steadying their nerves was to be brutally frank. The slightest touch of gentleness, of sentiment, and over the verge they went. It would sometimes take an unconscionable time to bring them back again. The girl bore herself as bravely as she could.

"I won't make a fuss either here or anywhere else if I can help it, and I think I can, if you wouldn't mind our going on."

They went to the end of the passage, through the door, into a cellar-like sort of place. There was an open space in the centre; there were two cells on either side, and a door beyond; there was something about the appearance of that door which made her feel suddenly sick. Was it through that door that they led men, bound hand and foot, to the gallows which was waiting for them on the other side?

That qualm brought her to an unintentional standstill. The warder glanced at her, no doubt understanding, then went on again. Another warder, clearly an understrapper, had been sitting on a stool, doing nothing. He stood at attention as the grizzled man approached.

"Everything all right?" asked his superior officer.

"Everything, sir."

The superior officer opened the door of the second cell on the left, saying as he did so: "Burke, here's a visitor for you, Miss Barber."

It was such a descent into bathos. The girl was conscious of a fairly spacious, white-washed, barely furnished place on the other side of the open door, in which two persons were sitting. One of them was a warder, the other was Graham Burke. He had been reading a book. As she entered he put the book down.

"Well, of all the surprises! I did not know that I should have the pleasure of seeing you."

If great words ought to be used on great occasions, it is unfortunate that as a rule they are not. There ought, perhaps, to have been a moment of stress, of emotion, on the part of this man, and then—also perhaps—he ought to have burst out with words which

had been torn from his heart. Nothing of the kind actually occurred. He could not have seemed more at his ease had Miss Barber been paying him an ordinary morning call. He stood up and smiled, quite naturally, and when the warder said: "Stop where you are; you mustn't come this side of the table," he smiled at him; and then again at the girl.

"Mr. Horne is not so hard as he seems. He has a disagreeable duty to perform, and he performs it like a man. I'm afraid I can't shake hands with you, Miss Barber, but—I think I may offer you a seat."

The girl sat on the stool which the second warder placed for her without having attempted to utter a word; this was almost worse than her anticipation—that he should be so self-possessed, so outwardly oblivious of the horror which agonized her soul. He went on with what to her was the same dreadful calmness.

"This is not a very fine apartment in which to receive a visitor, but—I've been in worse, and of course you will understand that beggars can't be choosers. And how are you? You are looking tired; you are worrying, you mustn't. Worry is forbidden. Look at me. I don't worry, and some folk would think I had cause. I have never slept better than I did last night, and you—you look as if you had never slept at all."

"I didn't." That was all she could say; she tried to go on, to put into speech something of what was in her heart, but words would not come.

"This won't do." Graham Burke was regarding, with sudden quizzical gravity, the girl's white face. "This will not do." Resuming his seat on the stool he had vacated, leaning towards her over the table, his manner became all at once alive with a humorous tenderness which changed him altogether. "Miss Barber, we are alone, just you and me; these three

gentlemen are merely dummies, for this occasion only ; they have neither eyes nor ears ; what I say to you I say to you only, it will not go beyond the walls of this place. So, if you please, may I speak plainly ?”

“I—I——” She got as far as the two “I’s,” then something seemed to choke her, and her words came with a rush. “I wish you would.”

“I’d dearly like to, and, if you please, I will. I have had the most curious life. I suppose, since the sins of the fathers are visited on the children, that some ancestor of mine must have done something very wrong for which I am paying the penalty. I hear you are a rich woman. Had things gone well with me I should not have dared to tell you what I am going to tell you now, for I am very poor. But, as matters stand, I dare.”

He paused. The girl sat on her stool watching him, with slightly parted lips and wide-open eyes.

“Olive, please may I call you Olive ?” She just nodded ; she could not speak. “Thank you for letting me call you Olive, after so brief an acquaintance ; but the truth is that I have grown to think of you as Olive. You told me once that I had saved your life.”

“You did, you know you did.” The words were gasped.

“If I did you have paid me back in kind, for you have saved mine.”

“I have not, but I will—in spite of you, I will.”

“If it were not for you I doubt if I should have lived, though I lived to be a centenarian, long enough to tell you what I am going to tell you now. So, in that sense, you have saved my life, or I should have died and never said it. Olive, I love you.” He had a pleasant-sounding voice, and at that moment it sounded very pleasantly indeed. “I do not ask if you love me.”

"But I do—you know I do. I love you—more than I thought I should ever love any one."

"Thank you, that's good hearing. I presume it's contrary to the rules of this establishment to dream of kissing you."

The girl started to her feet. She looked at the grizzled man who had brought her there, such a light in her eyes. "Mayn't I? Just once."

"It's contrary to the rules," said the grizzled man, "but if you'll give me your word, Burke, that there shall be no tricks."

"I give you my word of honour, Mr. Horne, that there shall be no tricks. Olive!"

She was in his arms so swiftly, and he was kissing her.

"At least," he told her, "I have known on earth what heaven means."

She went back to her stool, and he sat again on his. The episode had given her courage, and courage had given her words.

"If you love me, as you say you do——"

"As I say I do? Yes; as I say I do. Don't I love you? Doesn't every pulse in your body tell you that I do, sweetheart?"

"I want you to love me as I want you to love me—to do as I want you. I have come here to beg you to do as I want you. Please—please say you will. You can't want to break my heart if you love me, and—it's so near breaking."

"What is it you want me to do?"

"I want you—I want you—to appeal against this wicked sentence. Your life is my life—it's my life I'm asking for. You saved it before, and you shall save it again."

"Sweetheart!" His voice dropped to a whisper. "Don't you understand?"

“ Don't I understand—what ? ”

“ I am already dead. Don't start, sweetheart, you mustn't ; but I am. All these weeks I have been dying. I fought very hard for life when they took me first, and again in that railway carriage ; and a third time when I left Mrs. Eliot's cottage in the darkness, leaning on her husband's crutch ; but afterwards I realized that it was no good fighting. They meant to hang me. I'm a fool ; I'm what you please ; the knowledge was, in my bones. So, as far as I was able, I put my house in order and prepared for what was coming ; and it's nearly come. It will find me ready. If I thought that by what you propose, by what Mr. Benson proposed the day before yesterday, there was anything to be gained, worth gaining, that there was the least chance of it, I'd fight again. But there isn't. Do you know what Mr. Benson told me ? He's a very clever man—so clever that, at a pinch, he can be candid. He told me that there was no hope of an appeal succeeding, but that there was a remote chance of its making such an impression on—somebody's mind—possibly the public mind, that my sentence might be revised ; so that, instead of things being ended at once, I might be kept in prison—in a convict prison—for the term of my natural life. In other words, as a reward—I take it that it is to be as a sort of reward—I am to undergo what has always seemed to me the most terrible punishment which man can inflict upon man—I am to be sent to penal servitude for life. Why, my dearest dear, I would infinitely rather hang than be a convict among convicts, with only one hope—that I may die. If you love me, sweetheart—and I know you do—you will let me suffer the lesser punishment. To die is nothing—nothing ; but to live at Dartmoor or at Portland, or in one of those infernal tombs in which this Christian land buries its victims alive, that is

also death—death by slow torture, unceasing, merciless, spread over as many years as the resources of science can manage. Sweetheart, let me end all in a moment by the skilful hand of the public hangman; don't let these—gentlemen"—he made a movement of his hand towards the three warders—"with their ingenious tortures kill me by inches during an unending term of years. It is my turn, sweetheart, to say please!"

The girl was silent. When she did speak it was in a scarcely perceptible whisper.

"But you are innocent."

"They say I am guilty."

"You are not!—you are not! I can't express myself well; I have so tried to find words, yet I haven't; but I know—and you know—that murder can be done not only on an individual, but by a nation. And if this is done to you which they propose to do, the people of England will have your blood upon their hands. Don't you think you ought to try to save them from that?"

He looked at his hands with a whimsical little gesture.

"I would rather they had my blood upon their hands—at once, than after having kept me in one of their tombs perhaps for twenty years. Let's leave the people of England out of the question, and let me put the matter like this. If you were the queen upon her throne, and you had sentenced me to penal servitude for life, I'd plead to you on my knees to mitigate that dreadful sentence and let me hang at once. Won't you conceive of yourself as a queen upon a throne, and of me as an unlucky devil pleading; won't you grant the boon I ask? Don't keep me dying for twenty years amid such circumstances of ignominy and shame, but let me die at once. Don't speak; your silence is enough; I know that what I ask is granted. Sovereign lady, I thank you

with all my heart. And, Olive, be sorry neither for yourself nor for me. This is the last time we shall see each other, because I'm going to ask you not to come to this place again. I wish that we could understand each other. This world, I think, has used me rather ill, but, in a manner of speaking, in the end it is using me perhaps better than it thinks. I was not out of prison for very many hours, but I was out long enough to appreciate the fact that, though it were fifty years, the shadow of the prison would be over me still. The place which had known me would know me no more ; it declined to know me. Wherever I went, when it became known that I had been inscribed on my country's registers as a felon, that place would decline to know me, too. So, in what is about to be done, the world is perhaps using me better than it meant. And now, sweetheart, good-bye ! Do you believe in long farewells ? I don't. Who said parting was such sweet sorrow ? Let's make ours as sweet as we may. Good-bye, Olive ! Don't think me cruel if I ask you to take the advice I gave you once before. Go for a tour round the world. You need never forget that I have loved you. I could not have loved you better had I lived for ever. Good-bye ! ”

Mr. Horne motioned towards the other warder. The girl sat, a little figure of hopeless helplessness, on her stool. Each officer took her gently by an arm and led her out of the condemned cell.



CHAPTER XXVII

AN ENGAGED COUPLE

ON the Friday preceding the execution of Graham Burke, which was set for the following Tuesday, the *Great Erdington Gazette* appeared, a journal which had practically a monopoly for local news. It was delivered at Arcadia, the residence of Mrs. Henderson Baker, about two o'clock in the afternoon, and shortly after that hour, Miss Whitaker was reading it in the drawing-room and came upon a paragraph which seemed to cause her considerable perturbation. She was staring at it when the son of the house came in, bearing some papers in one hand, his hat in the other, about him all the marks of a person who had entered in haste.

"Enid!" he exclaimed, "the most extraordinary thing has happened."

"You may well say that," rejoined the lady. "Look at this."

She held up the local paper, pointing at one of the columns with her finger.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What have you got there?"

"This is the *Gazette*. It contains this paragraph." She read aloud from the offending sheet. "Our readers will learn with interest that a marriage has been arranged between Miss Whitaker, daughter of the late

Colonel Alexander Whitaker, of Otehill Grange, and our respected townsman, Mr. Clifford Baker. For reasons with which all are acquainted, the wedding, which will shortly take place, will be celebrated in the quietest possible manner.'” She stopped, raising her eyes from the sheet to look at Mr. Clifford Baker. “You put this in!”

Her tone might almost have been called accusatory. Certainly neither it, nor the glance which she bestowed on him, suggested either tenderness or affection.

“I don't think you are entitled to go so far as to say exactly that.”

“Don't quibble. I don't need you to teach me that that's an art in which you are a master. I know what a physical wrench is required to enable you to speak just the plain, simple truth, so I won't give you an opportunity to take shelter under a cloud of lies. How dare you put that in?”

“Enid! Really, your language and your manner—sometimes, my dear, I find you trying.”

One felt that Mr. Baker's manner was as conciliatory as he could make it. Hers was in contrast to his.

“Why did you put this in? It's contrary to our agreement. When we arranged that I should become your wife, the understanding was that not a word should be said about it till the deed was done. I did not want to go about having to look at people's faces, and seeing what was there, because they knew. It will be bad enough afterwards; but perhaps I shall not mind so much—when the deed is done; but—before! How dare you put this in?”

“My dear Enid, first of all, I cannot be said to have put it in——”

He was going on to explain had she not cut him short, rather oddly.

"Clifford Baker, let me give you a word of advice. When you're dealing with me, keep close to the point. I know how hard it will be to get over your natural inclination to wriggle, but where I'm concerned, you'd better. Why did you put this paragraph in the *Gazette*?"

She was standing close up to him in an attitude which, if she had been a man, would have been termed threatening, a fact of which he was seemingly conscious. He was deprecation itself.

"I am sorry if I have offended you, but I think you'll admit that there are matters on which my judgment may be trusted. Your position in this house is anomalous; tongues are already wagging; I wished to silence them. That will do it effectually."

She laughed, not cheerfully; the sound of her laughter made him start, as if it jarred upon his nerves.

"Either what a fool you are, or what an idiot you think I am! You know as well as I do that that paragraph will make people talk more than ever; it will sell the *Gazette*; people will rush to buy it in order to see for themselves if such a funny thing can possibly be true. You are as well aware as I am that the idea of my marrying you is a magnificent joke; and every one in Great Erdington will look upon it as something very much worse."

"Enid, I must beg you not to continue the discussion; unfortunate experience has already taught me that it may have an unpleasant result."

"Experience will have taught you much more than that before very long. Marry you! You know that I'd never do that if I could help it; but you are such a very clever man that you've got me tight."

"I must beg of you, I must really beg of you——"
He hurried on before she could speak again. "I came

here to bring you some very remarkable news. Nockolds' will has been found."

"Well, and what does that matter to me?"

"It matters a great deal to you. You are the sole residuary legatee; he has left you everything he had in the world."

"Clifford!" So far from the news affording her gratification, it seemed to affect her very much as though he had struck her a heavy blow. She flopped down on to a chair; the newspaper fell from her fingers; her arms hung nervelessly; she presented a picture of sudden collapse. "It's a lie; I don't believe it; he has done nothing of the sort."

"My dear Enid, your behaviour this afternoon seems to be more singular even than usual. What I tell you is what you spoke about just now, it's the plain and simple truth. You are at the present moment the sole legal possessor of Alfred Nockolds' entire fortune; I can tell you it's a pretty big one, bigger than some folks think; I know that as a fact."

"Do you mean to say that he left it me by will?"

"Certainly I do; I've said so already; I say it again."

"I thought his will couldn't be found."

"It couldn't; but then what was really only a superficial search was made. It was unearthed this afternoon, while we were going through some papers which were contained in a bureau in the library at his own house."

"Did you put it there?"

"Enid, what do you mean?" His show of amazed innocence was a trifle over-done; at least, so the lady seemed to think.

"You know perfectly well what I mean. I don't pretend to know all that you are capable of, but I know a

good deal. I don't believe that Alfred Nockolds ever made a will in which he left everything to me."

"Why not? He was alone in the world, he had no relations, and you and he were attached friends."

"Oh, yes, we were that; he also wanted to make me his wife. It's very odd that so many men have wanted to marry me, while there has only been one I wanted to marry, and he wouldn't have me. Although Alfred Nockolds was so fond of me, in his horrible way, I'm quite sure that he never made a will, because he knew I hated him."

"You are quite wrong, my dear Enid, quite absolutely wrong. See for yourself, look at that. Could anything be plainer?"

He took a sheet of paper out of a blue envelope which he was carrying, and handed it to her. She unfolded it, eyeing it strangely.

"What is this?" Her hands trembled as she held the paper.

"See for yourself; read it." He was watching her as a weasel might have eyed something which possibly could become its prey. She read aloud the opening words which were on the paper.

"'I, Alfred Nockolds, of the Wheel House, Great Erdington, give and bequeath——' Is this his will? Then now it isn't."

With rapid gestures, as if she feared interruption, she tore the paper into halves, then into quarters, then into eights, then into the smallest possible fragments, which she crushed in her two hands. Mr. Barber, still watching her, made not the slightest effort to stay the work of destruction. When she had finished, and looking up at him with a glare of triumph announced, "Now I will burn what's left," he merely smiled.

"I should; it may amuse you, especially as the

document you have destroyed was not his will. I know you too well by now, my dear, to trust you when you are in one of your pretty moods with anything which you can possibly destroy that's worth having. That paper you have destroyed seems to be a sort of rough draft setting out his intentions. You would have seen, if you had chosen to read it, that it was his intention to leave you everything. The actual will is in safe keeping, beyond your reach. You will learn in due course, from his solicitors, what it contains. By then you may have changed, and in another mood the contents may give you satisfaction."

The girl sat bolt upright on her chair, looking as if she would have liked to treat him in some such fashion as she had done the sheet of paper.

"So you've trapped me again! What a very clever man you are! When I look back to when you began to set your traps, and I to fall into them, I'm lost in wonder at your cleverness; that's a genuine compliment I'm paying you. Sometimes I wonder if even I know how far your trapping has gone; and then—I very nearly shiver. But one thing you will not be able to do; you will not be able to induce me to accept one penny of the ill-gotten money Alfred Nockolds has left behind."

"My dear Enid, I do trust that neither now or at any other time I shall put pressure on you to act contrary to your own desires."

Miss Whitaker regarded him as if these thoughtful and kindly words conveyed the most terrible threats, which she resented all the more because they were hidden.

"You fiend! I don't suppose you mind being called a fiend. You are a creature so low and contemptible that no word of mine can give it adequate expression; I don't suppose you mind my saying that either. Well,

we understand each other." Everything about her seemed odd that afternoon; the smile with which she got up from her chair was perhaps the oddest thing of all. It was so big with many possible meanings. "You think that you're going to make me accept that wretch's money, with blood smeared all over it, and you've planned some ingenious trap by means of which you think you're going to do it; well, we shall see. You think I'm going to marry you, since it seems that only by holy matrimony can each be safe from the other; well, we shall see about that also. By the way, I saw Mr. Benjamin Shaw this morning."

The pair exchanged a glance which it was not pretty to see. He spoke—

"There's talk of a warrant being issued against that gentleman which would lay him by the heels for a good many months to come."

"And one of the first things he would do would be to earn a remission of his sentence, which he easily could. I don't think I should try that way if I were you. Couldn't you induce the gentleman to go abroad to some place on the other side of nowhere?"

Mr. Baker was standing by a little table, trifling with the ornaments with which it was covered. He had his back to her.

"He's nearly killed that girl he lives with; they found her in the copse at the back of The Pleasaunce. She'd been lying there all night half dead. She can't speak, or she won't; possibly she never will. There's no doubt he did it; if she dies——"

The way in which he left his sentence unfinished had a dreadful significance. The girl still smiled.

"He'd talk on the way to the gallows. He'd see his way to save his skin by opening his mouth. That way won't do. We've got to send him the other side

of nowhere ; he can't write, he can scarcely read ; once there he'd be as good as hanged ; he might talk, but nobody would heed."

"Can't you manage him ? He won't come near me."

"I've got to manage so many things, all because of those traps of yours. I think I could manage him if I liked."

"I'm sure you could ; I never knew a man yet you couldn't twist round your finger if you set yourself to do it."

"Except one. Clifford, do you know that for one word of the proper sort from him I'd let everything go where it pleased ! You can't think what I suffer because of him at nights. I know the kind of man he is ; I'm sure I suffer more than he does ; and on Tuesday morning—when he hangs, I shall. You wouldn't think, to look at me, that I was the sort of woman who would go mad for the love of a man. I don't think I ever have been quite sane ; at bottom, you know, Clifford, you've a great deal of courage. Husband and wife are sometimes alone together, at night, when all is still, and no one sees or hears. You must be brave to look forward to the prospect of being alone like that with me."

He did not answer ; he held his head in an attitude of listening. "There's some one at the front door."

A maid-servant came into the room.

"Miss Barber wishes to see Miss Whitaker very particularly, miss. She must see you, she says."

Mr. Baker, turning swiftly, took it upon himself to answer the maid.

"Miss Barber wishes to see Miss Whitaker ! That person in my house ! I trust, Susan, that you have not allowed her to pass the doorstep."

"If you please, sir, she's waiting in the hall ; she says she must see Miss Whitaker."

“Must! What impudence! Request Miss Barber to leave my house at once, and tell her that Miss Whitaker will under no condition consent to see her.”

Miss Whitaker checked the maid as she was about to leave the room

“One moment, Susan; your master is under some slight misapprehension. I will see Miss Barber at once; bring her in here.”

“My dear Enid——” Miss Whitaker cut the gentleman’s attempted remonstrance short.

“Do as I tell you, Susan; bring Miss Barber here.” The moment the maid was gone, the lady turned to the gentleman. “When a visitor comes to see me, don’t you attempt to dictate whether I shall or shall not see her. As I propose to see Olive Barber alone, perhaps you’ll leave the room at once. Shall I open the door for you?”

There were two doors to that drawing-room; one on either side of the room. The maid had gone through one; she opened the other.

“Enid, your manner to me——”

“Will you go, or would you like me to put you out?”

The gentleman moved two or three steps forward; when he came near the door he paused, and asked—

“What are you going to say to her?”

“What I please. Shall I assist you, or will you go unaided?” The gentleman preferred to go unaided. Miss Whitaker, the door held open in her hand, stood looking after him. She said to herself, “And I’m to marry that!”

As she closed the door, the one on the other side was opened, and Olive Barber entered.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A FORLORN HOPE

A STRANGER might have found it hard to credit that only a very short time ago these two young women supposed themselves to entertain for each other an affection which would last till death divided them. There was no sign of affection in the way in which they eyed each other. Miss Whitaker, tall and slender, held herself more erect even than usual, in an attitude of unmistakable scorn; she could not have regarded the other more contemptuously had Miss Barber been some miserable wretch suing for alms.

Olive Barber looked smaller than ever. It was a lovely day; the pretty clothes which she would, as a rule, have worn in such weather were conspicuous by their absence. She was clad from head to foot in black. One would have supposed that she was mourning for the death of some near and dear relative. Seizing on the opportunity which the attire gave her to wound, Miss Whitaker asked, in tones which were very far from being sympathetic—

“Why are you all in black? Who’s dead? Is it Teddy Sloane?”

Instead of answering, Miss Barber asked a question on her own account.

“Have I ever done anything unkind to you?”

One might have suspected Miss Whitaker of an inclination to flush, but she got the better of it if it

was there. Perhaps the consciousness that she had been leaning towards such a weakness made her say something of which she would hardly have been capable had she been her usual self.

"Are you going to the execution on Tuesday? You know they won't let you in if you go; you'll have to stay outside while they're hanging him, and I should imagine that even with your peculiar tastes you won't find that very gay."

"Enid!" It was but a gentle utterance of her Christian name, but had the visitor struck her across the face with a whip it could hardly have stung her more. She tried to cover the fact by a show of anger.

"Don't you dare to call me Enid, you! whose name is a by-word on every street-boy's tongue."

Still the visitor did not seem to be either hurt or angry. The owner of the small, white face, the big eyes encircled with black rings, suggesting sleepless nights, had reached a point at which mere words had no power to hurt.

"Enid, are you really going to let them hang him?"

"If you mean Graham Burke, Miss Barber—once more I will ask you not to call me Enid—your question supposes that I could stop them if I chose."

"You know you could, and I know it."

"Indeed? You know a very great deal. I hear you paid him a call the other day, went to see him in the condemned cell. Was he in good health and spirits? Did he send any messages to his friends, or had he nice things to say to you only? What a lucky girl you are to have so much money! Only a person who has much more than she knows what to do with would be able to throw it away, as you have done, on Graham Burke—especially considering what a mere

casual acquaintance he is. You are a shameless creature, really. You take advantage of your pretended friendship for me to scrape acquaintance with a person whom you know to be a thief and a black-guard, and when he turns out to be a murderous ruffian to boot, you pour your money out like water in order that decent people may have him loose among them again. What must you have spent upon this—murderer? And in the name of all that's wonderful, why? You can't be in love with him. It's incredible that I could have associated with such a creature as that would make you out to be. Even granting that you are such a shameless little—what shall I say?—he certainly is not in love with you, you little half-grown doll, with your silly baby face and your mincing ways. The only thing you've got is pounds, shillings, and pence—or is it dollars and cents? I suppose if you got him out of gaol and cheated the hangman, and gave him a few sackfuls of money, he might—well, I can't fancy him bringing himself to kiss you even then—such a caricature as you are. If you've come here this afternoon to see if I will move a finger to rob the gallows of its due, so that you may try and see how much money he would want to touch you with the end of a barge-pole, you've wasted your time. I hear that some fools are getting up a petition imploring the Home Secretary, or whoever is responsible for that sort of thing, to remit the sentence of capital punishment. I don't mind telling you that if any one were to get up a petition to cut him into quarters after having hung him, I'd head it with my name; so now you know what my feelings are towards him, and towards you. I don't wish to soil my lips with language which would really describe you, but if you ever dare to try to speak to me again, or to enter this house,

I will treat you as if I were a man, to a whipping. Have you any other remark to make, Miss Barber, or would you like me to make a few additions? Or will you go?"

"If you were sane you could not say such dreadful things; but I am beginning to doubt if you ever have been sane since I have known you; unhappiness and conscience have driven you mad. You are murdering Graham Burke. You had him imprisoned on a charge of which you knew him to be entirely innocent. I am willing to believe that you are the victim of a mind diseased. You know, better than I know, why you are behaving to him with a wickedness which seems to me to be inhuman; can it be possible that you really think that good can come to you because of it? You have done him wrong enough already. I ask you to do him no more; not only for his sake, and for mine, but for your own. If you murder Graham Burke it is you who will suffer, not he; don't you know him? You are going, I hear, to marry the man who has borne false witness against him; if, before you do that, you let them kill this innocent man, what would your wedded life be like? Mr. Clifford Baker, I believe, was born bad; I have my doubts of you. Enid, don't marry him, and don't let them kill Graham Burke. I don't believe he has done you any wrong, or any one any wrong. He is an honest, simple-minded gentleman; his fault has been that he has believed others to be as honest and simple-minded as himself. If they do kill him on Tuesday, it will break my heart—I own it; but what will it do to you? You'll die, not once, but day by day, night after night. They'll kill him quickly; and, afterwards, you'll wish they had done the same to you. Even now I don't believe that you're all bad; won't you save him?"

Miss Whitaker stood silent, regarding the girl who was pleading for more than her own life. That the words that the other had uttered had touched her in her most secret places no one could doubt; although she seemed to be trying her best to keep it from doing so, her countenance showed it. For some instants the answer to the appeal which the other had made seemed to be hanging in the balance; then down went the scale with a thud, on the wrong side. She broke into the sort of laughter which had jarred on Clifford Baker's nerves, and she exclaimed—

“You incredible creature, to dare to speak to me like that! And it's almost as remarkable that I should have allowed you to, when, after all, it wouldn't involve the least real effort to pick you up and throw you out into the street. But—we'll try another way.” She rang a bell. The maid-servant entered who had ushered Miss Barber in. “Susan, show this person to the door, and if she ever dares to call again, slam the door in her face, and if she won't take that hint, send for a policeman.”

Without attempting again to speak, Olive Barber withdrew. She continued, dry-eyed, while she walked to the door; but when she took her seat in the car she drew down her veil to hide her tears. She had known before she started that that call of hers was of the nature of a forlorn hope, and it had failed.

So soon as she had gone Mr. Clifford Baker came into the room.

“Well, what did you tell her?” His face was all eagerness.

“I'll tell you something, Clifford.” The curious calmness of her voice belied the something which was burning in her eyes. “It would be better that we should hang on Tuesday instead of Graham Burke;

better for us. He'll hang once; we'll hang every hour of every day, and neither God nor man will be able to help us."

"Really, my dear Enid, your inclination is to say the most extraordinary things, one which I must beg you to get the better of."

"And there's another thing I must tell you, Clifford, that probably one day I shall hang for you. You make me feel like murder every time you talk like that."

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

IT promised to be an all-night sitting in the House of Commons. It was already nearly two o'clock in the morning, the flag was still flying, the lights still burning in the clock tower, the courtyard was still alive with men and vehicles coming and going. A woman, appearing at the Members' entrance, would have pushed on had she not been detained by a constable.

"What is it you want?" he inquired.

"I want to see the Home Secretary," she replied.

He looked her up and down. She was a young woman, well dressed, yet there was something in her attire which harmonized with her evident mental distress. Her agitation was so great that it impeded her utterance. Those were the days in which the ladies who called themselves militant suffragettes had made themselves conspicuous at Westminster; the constable eyed her with suspicion. That a person of her appearance should have legitimate business to transact with the Home Secretary at that hour was in the highest degree improbable.

"You wish to see the Home Secretary? Have you an appointment with him?"

"I have not, but he will see me all the same; he must see me! Where is your superior officer? Take me to him; I will explain to him what I want. Be quick—every moment is of importance."

He eyed her curiously. Her manner suggested that she was consumed by some internal flame, and that she was straining every nerve to keep it under. Two men approached in evening dress. One of them, who had his coat over his arm, pausing, glanced at her with hesitant eyes.

"Surely—can I be mistaken? Is it not Miss Whitaker?"

From the woman there came what might have been a cry of pleasure.

"Oh, Sir George Forster, thank God it's you! Please can I see the Home Secretary, at once, without a moment's delay? Please take me to him now."

"The Home Secretary? But, pardon me, Miss Whitaker, what business can you have with the Home Secretary at this hour of the morning? Besides, I doubt if he is still in the House." He turned to his companion. "Is he? Some one told me he had gone to the Duchess's party."

"He has returned; he was in the House a few minutes ago."

"Then take me to him, please, at once—at once. I have motored up to see him, and I must see him. The motor broke down at Croydon. There was no train, the last went long ago. I walked till I came to a taxi, and that brought me here. I should have been here long ago if it hadn't been for the trouble with the car. Please take me to the Home Secretary at once, for God's sake, Sir George; every second it may be too late."

"Have you any personal acquaintance with him? I doubt if he will see strangers at such an hour, or even entertain the idea of seeing them, unless he knows their business. You must be aware, Miss Whitaker,

that your presence here is, to say the least, informal. I trust that nothing serious has happened to you?"

The girl glanced wildly round, as if fearful of some overmastering horror. Her voice dropped; she spoke with difficulty; she bore herself as if some unspeakable thing had almost deprived her of her senses.

"Something will happen if something isn't done—quickly. They're going to hang Graham Burke at six, and it's nearly two. It—it will be murder if they do, and you'll have had a hand in murdering him if you don't take me to the Home Secretary at once." Her voice rose in a shrill crescendo. "For God's sake let me see him. Don't waste time standing here; let me see him at once."

The two men looked at each other.

"Graham Burke?" queried Sir George.

"I fancy," said his companion, "that the lady refers to the Graham Burke who was found guilty of the Great Erdington murder. I believe they're going to hang him in the morning; that is to say, since it is already morning, in a few hours from now."

"They are!" The girl shrieked the words. "They are! And if they do, I shall have killed him." On the instant she passed from something very like hysteria to ominous calm. "There's only one man in England, so they tell me, who can save his life, save him from being murdered—murdered, and that's the Home Secretary; that's why I want to see him—now, at once, while there's still time, if there is time! And so, Sir George, please will you take me to him at once—this moment, or, don't you see, it may be too late."

"But, Miss Whitaker, what can you have to say to the Home Secretary concerning the Great Erdington murder, only a few hours before the man is to be hanged?"

"I'm going to tell him that he didn't do it. I'm going to give him proof that he didn't do it. I'm going to tell him who did it; and if you don't let me tell him in time—they'll have killed an innocent man, as I'll prove to the Home Secretary—prove—prove, if you'll only let me see him! For God's sake let me see him. Don't let me have come like this—and be too late—after all. Where is he? I'll find him, if you'll only tell me where he is."

"Calm yourself, Miss Whitaker, please. I will take you to the Home Secretary, but as to whether he will see you or not, that is a matter for him, not for me. Anything of importance that you have to say on such a subject surely ought to have been said before."

She stared at the speaker as if he had perpetrated some grim joke; then she broke into a laugh which it was not pleasant to hear.

"I never meant to tell anything—no, not a word. I meant to let them hang him; but when—four hours ago—I went to bed—I couldn't—I couldn't. I stole out of the house, I got a car, and I have come—I have come to save those men in the prison there from doing murder; because he's as innocent as you are, and if you'll let me see the Home Secretary I'll prove it—I'll prove it! But don't you understand that if I can't see him now there won't be time!"

Sir George Forster and his friend accompanied her along the series of corridors till they paused at the door of a room.

"If you will wait here," said Sir George, "I'll go in and learn if the Home Secretary can see you."

Sir George passed into the room. The girl stayed without, with Mr. Arburton. Men were continually passing to and fro, members of the House, privileged visitors, attendants, officers; as they went, they observed

the pair with wondering glances. They were a curious couple. Mr. Arburton was a slight, grey-haired man, with a white face and tired eyes, immaculately attired, calm to the verge of listlessness. The girl was all in disarray; she looked as if she had been tearing for her life in an open motor-car; her hair was in disorder; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes aflame; she was so possessed by a passion of anxiety that she could not keep still for an instant; every fibre of her being seemed to be in unceasing movement.

Presently Sir George reappeared. "Mr. Stammerham's secretary will see you if you will come in." The girl entered; Sir George introduced her to a tall young man, who wore an eyeglass. "Mr. Ashdown, this is Miss Whitaker, the daughter of an old friend of mine."

With business-like precision the young man went at once to the root of the matter.

"I understand that you come from Great Erdington, and that you wish to see Mr. Stammerham on some matter connected with the recent murder there. You must be aware that your presence here is irregular, and that Mr. Stammerham is very much occupied, especially just now; before he can consent to see you, you must make it clear to me that your business with him is of real importance. What exactly is it that you wish to say to him?"

She drew a long breath, as if she were endeavouring to calm herself.

"I wish to tell him that Graham Burke did not kill Alfred Nockolds, and I want to tell him who did."

"Quite so; so I am informed by Sir George Forster; but you—of course, you know that on such a subject your mere *ipse dixit* is worth nothing. You must give me something more tangible before I can advise Mr. Stammerham to grant you an interview."

"Well, you shall have it." She paused for an appreciable instant as if to gain sufficient impetus to bring her to a point at which she was aiming. "I know that Graham Burke did not kill Alfred Nockolds—because I did."

The eye-glassed young man regarded the speaker intently; then he addressed Sir George, who was standing with his coat still over his arm.

"You hear what Miss Whitaker says, Forster?"

"I hear, but—I cannot help thinking that Miss Whitaker is in a state of great cerebral excitement."

"What do you mean by that?" queried the young man.

"I mean that I doubt if Miss Whitaker quite appreciates the full bearing of what she says. Knowing Miss Whitaker as I do, I find it impossible to believe it."

Mr. Ashdown asked the girl a question.

"The man whom the jury found guilty—this Graham Burke—is he a friend of yours?"

"He is not. That is why—I thought—I'd let them hang him; but"—there was again a pause—"I find I can't."

Mr. Ashdown attentively considered her with an appearance of the most complete impassivity.

"This is not a trick to save Mr. Graham Burke from being hanged? You know he is to be hanged in rather less than four hours?"

Miss Whitaker returned the speaker glance for glance; then opening the small handbag she was carrying, she took out some sheets of letter-paper.

"This is the statement which I set down, the day after it happened, of what exactly took place. I did not mean to kill Alfred Nockolds, but I did kill him all the same. Then I thought that I'd let them hang

Graham Burke, for various reasons. Then, when they had hanged him, I meant to send this paper to a certain person. After they had hanged him I knew I should not care in the least what they did to me ; and I knew that this would nearly kill—the person to whom I meant to send it. That is, as far as I could make it, a perfectly accurate account of how Alfred Nockolds came to be killed.”

She passed the sheets of paper she was holding to Mr. Ashdown. He continued to observe her, then glanced at what she had given him. Then he looked up again.

“Forster, if you will stay here with Miss Whitaker, I will take this in to the chief and let you know what he says. Stay here with Sir George Forster, if you please, Miss Whitaker ; I won't keep you a moment longer than I can help. I will take these papers with me.”

The lady and gentleman were detained in that room together for a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes. During that period only one remark was exchanged. That was when the gentleman, struck by the lady's pallor, suggested that she should cease to stand.

“Won't you sit down, Miss Whitaker? Here's a chair.” He pushed one towards her. “You look tired out.”

She looked at him with unseeing eyes, as if she were wondering what he meant ; then she shook her head.

“I am tired—dead tired ; but I couldn't sit down—I couldn't.”

She was still standing when the young man with the eye-glass reappeared.

“The Home Secretary will see you now, Miss Whitaker ; but as his time is very valuable—he has put aside other pressing engagements to see you—I must ask you to keep as closely to the point as possible. Forster, do you mind accompanying Miss Whitaker ? ”



CHAPTER XXX

TALKING AGAINST TIME

FIVE men were already assembled in the spacious apartment into which Miss Whitaker was ushered. A young-oldish-looking man, whose hollow cheeks were blue with the beard which was not allowed to grow, stood behind a big table; in him she recognized the Home Secretary—that keen-witted, quick-tongued, agile politician whose real self seemed to be a mystery both to his friends and foes. Two other persons were known to her—the leading counsel for the Crown as well as for the defence at the recent trial at Canterstone were standing side by side examining together the sheets of paper which she recognized as those which she had handed to Mr. Ashdown. A fourth individual was a very ancient-looking gentleman, short and bulky, with a square face and a bald head, who occupied a chair which was close to that on which the Home Secretary would presently sit down. Although she did not know it, this was the Lord Chancellor, who, happening to have business which had detained him in the House till that unseemly hour, had been requested by Mr. Stammerham to assist him in the difficult position by which he found himself suddenly confronted. Lord Buchanan sat blinking at Miss Whitaker, very much like some sapient owl, his lips being screwed up in a fashion which made it seem as if his mouth were set on one

side of his face. The fifth person present was a tall, sturdy, 'squarely-built individual, who stood with his shoulders held well back, his whole appearance suggesting the drill sergeant. This was Inspector Dennery, who, during the twenty minutes Miss Whitaker had been kept waiting, had been hastily summoned from Scotland Yard.

The eye-glassed young man performed the ceremony of introduction.

"This is Miss Whitaker, Mr. Stammerham, a friend of Sir George Forster's."

Mr. Stammerham observed his visitor attentively from under his nearly closed eyelids; it was a trick of his to keep them nearly shut when he was taking a person's measure.

"I understand, Miss Whitaker, that you have a communication to make to me with respect to the Great Erdington murder. I do not know that I am quite in order in receiving you like this; may I ask you to be as brief as you can. I think, gentlemen, we may be seated. Miss Whitaker, what have you to say? Won't you sit?"

Mr. Stammerham had placed himself on a great leather-covered armchair. Every one in the room, following his example, placed themselves on chairs; Miss Whitaker alone continued to stand.

"I cannot sit down, I cannot." She spoke almost as if she cried.

"Please yourself, Miss Whitaker; no pressure will be put upon you. Mr. Stammerham turned to the Lord Chancellor, who was on his right. "Will you speak to this lady? You will cut a better figure than I shall."

Lord Buchanan continued to blink; then unscrewing his lips he said, in the low, even tones of authority.

"I understand, Miss Whitaker, that you say that the

man Graham Burke, who is presently to be executed for the murder of Alfred Nockolds, did not kill that person, but that you did. This may or may not be true; one perceives that you may have an object to gain in either event. You may wish to unburden your conscience and prevent injustice from being done, or this may be a desperate attempt on your part to prevent the law being administered. You have handed Mr. Stammerham what purports to be a statement of what actually occurred, which again may or may not be correct. We should like to hear what you have to say with your own lips. You are not on oath, but it is none the less my duty to inform you that any false allegation you may make may have serious consequences for you in the immediate future. Now, bearing that remark of mine in mind, will you tell us as clearly and as quickly as possible what you have to say on the subject of the murder of Alfred Nockolds?"

The girl's first observation took the form of a question.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am the Lord Chancellor of England."

"Have you the power to reprieve prisoners?"

"I have not; that power is invested in my friend here, Mr. Stammerham, the Home Secretary, who has asked me to assist him in what may prove to be a very difficult task."

The Home Secretary spoke. "What you are about to say will be said to all of us, Miss Whitaker. It is possible that you may place me in a situation in which I shall require assistance; the persons you see present are the gentlemen in England who are best qualified to render me such assistance. Now, Miss Whitaker, quickly, if you please."

"Shall I begin at the beginning?"

“Begin where you please, only don’t say more than is absolutely necessary.”

“I want to make it clear to you how it was that I was brought to the point at which I felt that I should like them to hang Graham Burke.”

“Well, go on, only please understand that time is valuable. It is nearly three o’clock and the execution is to take place at six. If you are to convince me you have not much time.”

The girl was pausing as if to collect her thoughts ; then she began her story.

“Sir George Forster here will tell you that Graham Burke’s house was close to my father’s. He and I were children together. I never knew my mother ; I lived a lonely life ; he was perhaps the only playfellow I ever had ; besides, even when I was a child, I always liked men better than women. In years he was older than I was, but I have always been the elder in actual fact. I—I was in love with him before I was twelve.”

She stopped, a faint flush tingeing her white cheeks. She seemed to breathe more rapidly when she continued.

“But he never loved me, not even then ; as we grew older, he loved me less and less. I don’t know if I’m a normal woman. I don’t suppose I am ; plenty of men have made love to me in my time, but though I may have pretended, I have never cared for one of them, not a snap of the fingers ; the only one for whom I ever did care was Graham Burke, and he would not even pretend to love me. I don’t know how it is with other girls, I suppose they have plenty of occupation, lots of things to do ; I had nothing, nothing whatever. I was never sent to school. I had governesses, but they were generally more afraid of me than I of them ; the only thing I ever wanted to do was to be with Graham Burke ; I

don't know why. I can only tell you it was so, and he wanted me less and less. Where he was concerned, I was never the least bit backward or shy, quite the other way ; when he would not make love to me, I made love to him, desperate love. He would not kiss me, but I used sometimes to kiss him ; I used sometimes to offer to give him things if he would, but he always refused ; so I had to do what he wouldn't."

Each man in the room was intently watching her ; she did not show the least consciousness of their scrutiny or of the singularity of her position ; except that she hesitated now and then, as if seeking for the best method of expressing what she had to say, she went straight on.

" There isn't time to tell you everything, to fill in all the details, you must take those for granted ; I just want to tell you that on my eighteenth birthday I asked him to marry me, and when he said he wouldn't I went straight up to my bedroom, and on my knees I swore that if he would not marry me I would kill him, so as to make sure that he would not marry any one else. I was only a girl, but I meant what I said, and ever since then I have had it clearly in my mind that rather than that he should become the husband of another woman I would sooner he were dead. Then my father died, leaving me everything he had. I assisted my father in drawing up his will, and I took care that Graham Burke should be named as an executor. There was another executor appointed, and for him I suggested the name of one who I knew had recently died. My father pointed this out to me, but I told him that that didn't matter, as I wanted Graham Burke to be the only executor. My father laughed and agreed ; I think he understood. My father was a very curious sort of person, Sir George Forster will tell you so ; there was only

one person for whom he ever cared, and that was himself. I am quite sure he never cared for me. He had frittered away all his money in silly speculations and other foolish ways, so that all he had to leave me was under two hundred pounds a year."

"But I understood that your father left you a very considerable sum of money. Wasn't it for the misappropriation of your trust funds that Mr. Graham Burke was originally sent to prison?"

The interruption came from Sir Frederick Stokes, who as counsel for the Crown had been made acquainted with the prisoner's previous history, and who also supposed himself to know a good deal about Miss Whitaker.

"It was. But all the same there were no trust funds to misappropriate."

"That's a very surprising statement to make, Miss Whitaker. I was informed quite otherwise; it was among the instructions on my brief. Will you explain precisely what it is you mean?"

"I mean that the whole business of the will was a trap, a trap to catch Graham Burke. I asked my father one day if he had made a will. He said he hadn't—what was the use? The little he had to leave me might be dealt with in a paragraph. I told him that wouldn't suit me at all. I got him to draw up a list of securities and things that had once been his, but were his no longer, and I got him to specify them in his will."

"Then do you mean to say that the money he was supposed to have left you had no actual existence?"

"None whatever, except the two hundred a year; it was really just over a hundred and ninety pounds a year."

"But you paid probate on—how much?"

"I don't exactly remember; Mr. Burke found the money to do that."

"Mr. Burke found it? But you had to produce some evidence that this money, these securities, or whatever it was, had some actual existence. At the probate office did they accept your mere statement? Surely not."

"That was managed."

"That was managed? That's a cryptic saying, Miss Whitaker."

"If you like, I will tell you afterwards exactly how it was done; there's no time just now."

"I think Miss Whitaker is right," interposed Mr. Stammerham. "Let her for the moment confine herself to essentials."

"The idea of the will which I drew up, and which my father signed, was that if Graham Burke wouldn't marry me he should be made to pay for it. However, shortly after my father died he said that he would marry me, and I was rather sorry about the will, because I might have had to explain the absence of the moneys mentioned in it; though I don't think he would have really bothered about it. He never took the least interest in money; I don't believe he ever kept an account in his life; and if I had told him that I couldn't make out what had become of what my father had left me he would have been perfectly content to accept my statement and to ask no questions. Money means nothing at all to him, he doesn't understand it. I believe he'd be perfectly willing to live on a pound a week, and he wouldn't know what to do with ten thousand a year."

There was another interposition from Sir Frederick Stokes.

"This being the state of affairs, how came he to be

charged with the misappropriation of the trust funds which never had any existence, and, what is more, to have been found guilty?"

"He wouldn't marry me; so then I did what I had meant to do all along. I made it seem that he had taken the money my father had left me—and he was tried for it."

"Do you really mean us to believe, Miss Whitaker, that you concocted a scheme by means of which Mr. Graham Burke was charged with what you were perfectly well aware he had never done?"

"I do; I had meant to do it from the first, if he wouldn't marry me! I didn't take too prominent a part in it myself because I thought that if he were sent to prison it would make a different man of him, and that when he came out, and I showed myself willing to forgive him, he might marry me after all. I didn't care what I did to make him marry me."

"This is an extraordinary story, Miss Whitaker, one of the most extraordinary I have ever heard. You could not have carried out this nefarious scheme unaided; I do not see how it could have been carried out at all, but certainly you must have had accomplices. Had you?"

"Certainly I had. If Graham Burke was the only man I was in love with, there were other men who were in love with me, and they did what I wanted them to."

"Can you give me their names?"

"Alfred Nockolds was one of them."

"What, the dead man?—The man Graham Burke is alleged to have murdered?"

"He was one of them. I told him a tale which he more or less believed; I don't think he believed quite everything any one told him; but if he didn't believe, he understood. He was almost as anxious to pay

Graham Burke out as I was. And he wanted me to marry him."

"Alfred Nockolds wanted you to marry him?"

"Yes; I let him think that if Graham Burke got sent to prison I would. Then Graham Burke owed him money, or he made out he did, and I agreed to help him in getting hold of everything Graham Burke had."

"According to your story, Miss Whitaker, you and the late Alfred Nockolds would have made an excellent pair."

"We should; only—I hated him. Every one hated him."

"And nobody hated you? Is that the suggestion?"

"I didn't care if they did or didn't. I got Graham Burke sent to prison, and that was all I wanted; and then directly afterwards I was sorry. I suffered much more during those two years than he did, much more. And I looked forward to his coming out again with feelings which I can't describe. Then he was released, and I began to think of putting the scheme into execution which I had contrived while he was in prison. It had seemed simple while he was in prison. I felt sure that imprisonment would soften his heart."

"Towards you who had sent him there?"

"He didn't know I had sent him there, he didn't even guess it. I had managed too well. I had told myself while he was in prison that if I went to him directly he came out, and told him that my feeling had remained unchanged, that what he had done had made no difference to them, he would do what I wanted; but everything went wrong."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE TRUTH

"LET me point out to you," observed Mr. Stammerham in his curiously dry voice, "that the time is passing. It is just on three. To speak of nothing else, I may be wanted in the House."

The girl replied with a passionate intensity which was in curious contrast to the other's measured tones.

"I know ; I want to prove to you that what I am saying is true, and I have to think a little how best to do it. I won't keep you much longer ; I am getting to what you want—to the day on which Graham Burke was released from prison. I saw him for a moment in the morning, before I expected ; some one else was with me. I was unable to say—what I wanted to. That same day I tried again, twice ; I called twice at his house, but he was not there. The second time, as I was coming away from the house—there was no one in it, it was empty—I met Alfred Nockolds. He asked me what I was doing there. I refused to tell him. We quarrelled ; he was in his motor-car, alone, and I could not get away from him. He wanted to know when I was going to marry him. I told him, never. That made him furious. He knew I had been—fond of Graham Burke, and he asked if I proposed to marry that felon. He called him a felon, well knowing that he was nothing of the kind, and that made me boil. I said that, felon or no felon, I preferred Graham Burke

to him. He told me that if I played him false he would inform Graham Burke of the part I had played in his prosecution. We parted in anger. The next day I tried again to see Graham Burke, and failed; that was the Wednesday."

She had been speaking so rapidly that it seemed not unlikely that the reason of her pause was to enable her to take breath.

"In the afternoon I called at his house again. When I found that he still was not there, that no one was there, I waited and waited, hoping he might return, and then I walked along the road towards Great Erdington, thinking that I might meet him. Instead"—on a sudden her bosom seemed to swell—"I met Alfred Nockolds. Again he was in his motor-car. I tried to avoid him, but he would not let me. As on the previous day, he asked me where I had been. I told him. In return I asked him where he was going. He said that he was going to take possession of Graham Burke's house, of everything he had, and turn him out on to the road. I said he should not do it. He laughed at me though he was white with rage, and replied that he would not only turn Graham Burke like a beggar out on to the road-side, but he would inform him besides that I was really the person who had sent him to gaol. That made me mad. I saw he meant what he said, and I declared he should not do it. I tried to stop him, to make him turn and go back again. I jumped on to the car and caught hold of the steering-wheel; I gave it a twist; the car swerved, collided with the bridge, and went over the side of the road into Whitethorn Copse, a dozen feet below. I jumped off directly I saw what was going to happen, and he tried to follow me. But somehow his coat or something got caught in the wheel, and he went over with the car."

"You had not touched him?" This was Mr. Stammerham.

"Except that our hands came into contact as I snatched at the steering wheel. It had all taken place so suddenly, and was so unexpected—I had been thrown to ground myself—that for some seconds I did not know what had happened. Then I found some one else standing by my side on the road. It was Ben Shaw."

"Was that the gentleman who swore in the witness-box that he had seen Graham Burke struggling with Alfred Nockolds very much in the way you say you struggled with him?"

The question came from Sir Ellis Wrayburn.

"It was. It was I he had seen struggling, not Graham Burke."

"I had an instinct that the man was a liar, but I had absolutely nothing to go upon which would enable me to nail him to the counter. Why did Mr. Shaw perjure himself in such a fashion? Was it at your instigation?"

"I'm going to tell you. I used to be rather fond of him; and—he had presumed a good deal. We went down together to see what had happened. We found Alfred Nockolds, dead. His head had been all broken in. He was lying in a pool of blood. Ben Shaw said that we had better hide him before any one came along the road."

"Did the first suggestion come from him or from you?"

"From him; I knew that I might be held responsible for what had happened, and he knew it too. He wanted to screen me."

"Was he a friend of yours to that extent?"

"He was. He had a canvas sack. We crammed the dead body into it, and together we carried it to the

other side of the wood. Then I went home. That evening, after dinner, I went again to The Old House to try and see Graham Burke. That time I found him in. I told him what I had meant to tell him—that I had forgiven him for what he had done, that my feelings towards him were still unchanged, and that I was still willing to marry him. He told me that he would rather hang than marry me.”

“My client, Mr. Graham Burke, seems to be a person of even better judgment than I supposed.” The observation came from Sir Ellis Wrayburn.

The girl flamed out at him, as one who had got beyond the point of caring what was said.

“You can say that if you please, you can say anything. I left the house. As I went out of the gate I met Ben Shaw in the lane. He told me that he had just brought Alfred Nockold’s body to the house, thinking that it would stay there longer undetected. Evidently he did not know that any one was there. Then we heard a motor-car coming down the lane.”

“Where was the young woman of whom we heard from Inspector Dalton and Mr. Clifford Baker?” The questioner was once more Sir Ellis Wrayburn.

“I don’t know; she must have been somewhere close at hand; I never saw her.”

“One moment, please, Miss Whitaker. Mr. Clifford Baker stated in the witness-box that some one advised him over the telephone that Nockolds was dead. Do you know who that some one was?”

“I did. I told him over the telephone from the house in which I was staying, The Pleasaunce, which belongs to Sir George Forster; I was staying there with a person who I then thought was my friend.”

“But why did you single out Mr. Clifford Baker for such a communication?”

"Because I knew he was a particular friend of Alfred Nockolds, and because he was associated with me in the proceedings which had been taken against Graham Burke."

"Is that so? You seem to be a nice little party of friends. What exactly did you tell Mr. Clifford Baker over the telephone?"

"I told him exactly what had happened."

"Do you mean to say that you told him it was owing to you that the car had gone over the bank and its owner been killed?"

"I told him exactly what I have told you."

"And do you mean to say that, in face of the fact that he knew you were responsible for this man's death, he trumped up that charge against Mr. Graham Burke?"

"I don't think it was his original intention to charge Graham Burke. He never did exactly charge him; it was the discovery of the body in The Old House which was the cause of that."

"The body which your friend Mr. Shaw only a few minutes before had brought there in a sack?"

"Yes. And you must remember that the policeman, Vincent, had gone to the police station with his story of having met Graham Burke standing by the motor-car all drabbled with blood. I believe that was what first put the idea into Mr. Baker's head, and also into Inspector Dalton's."

"What did you do after your conversation, which, I presume, was a brief one, with your friend Mr. Shaw?"

"I heard the motor-car coming, and I did not know what to do, so I went back into the house. Then I heard the police come in, and knew what was going to happen; so I went out again, and one of the policemen saw me and tried to catch me."

"If he had caught you, Graham Burke would never have stood his trial for murder and been condemned for what most of the principal witnesses knew perfectly well he had never done. Is that so? Would you have told the truth, if he had caught you?"

"I don't know. Graham Burke had said that he would rather hang than marry me, and I was already beginning to make up my mind that he should."

"What finally induced you to make up your mind, if it is not an impertinent question?"

"The girl I had taken to be my friend. I became jealous of her. I began to think that she might marry him."

"I see; that was your idea. Rather than that——"

"I would rather he should hang. I wanted no other woman to have him if I couldn't, after what I had suffered. I should like to have killed her—only I did not dare."

"Then there was a point at which your courage failed you. After what you have told us, Miss Whitaker, that seems rather surprising."

"I have told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Now, if they like, they can hang him; the responsibility is no longer mine."

She stopped. Her listeners exchanged glances. Mr. Stammerham, leaning forward, drummed with the tips of his fingers on the table.

"I understand, Miss Whitaker, that you assert that Graham Burke had absolutely nothing to do with the death of Alfred Nockolds?"

"Absolutely nothing; no more than you had."

"You perfectly appreciate the meaning of your words, and are aware of the consequences which they may entail on you?"

"I appreciate the meaning of them perfectly, and

care nothing for what you call the consequences. In the first place, I doubt if, in any event, the law can touch me, although what I did resulted in Alfred Nockolds' death; the whole thing was entirely an accident. I had not the slightest intention of killing him; I had no intention even of sending his car off the road. I merely intended to prevent his going to The Old House and taking possession of properties to which he had really no claim whatever. The swerving of the car was an accident; his falling out was another; his becoming entangled in the wheel was a third. I do not see that I can be held criminally responsible for any of them, though I do not mind if I am."

"You appear to forget, Miss Whitaker, that according to your own admission you have associated yourself with a criminal conspiracy of the most appalling kind."

"I don't see how. I have never said a single thing to any one that was not true, nor have I suggested that any one should do so either. I was not compelled to go to the police station and incriminate myself; I just kept silent."

"I think you may find, Miss Whitaker, that the law's view of your conduct is different from your own."

"You also seem to forget, Miss Whitaker, that you have stated in our presence that you were the chief conspirator in the proceedings which were taken in the false charge which was made against Mr. Graham Burke, alleging him to have been guilty of misconduct as your trustee. I fancy you will find that the law considers that a criminal offence."

This was again Sir Ellis Wrayburn.

"Very well, it may. The law may do as it likes; I care nothing."

Mr. Stammerham nodded to the tall, squarely-built man whose bearing suggested military training, Inspector Dennery. Rising, he approached the girl.

“Miss Whitaker, you must consider yourself under arrest.”

She glanced at him, not angrily, nor fearfully, but rather with a glance of idle curiosity.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Inspector Dennery of Scotland Yard, and you are my prisoner.”



CHAPTER XXXII

WAITING TO BE HANGED

IN Canterstone Gaol on the morrow, at six o'clock in the morning, a man was to be hanged; the whole prison knew it. Authority may try its best to keep the news of the day out of a prison, nothing mortal can keep out of it such news as that. Interest in the coming event had grown day by day. The execution was to take place on Tuesday morning; on the preceding Monday every prisoner in the place was full of what the early morning light was to see. The scaffold had been erected, the gallows was there, and more than one of the prisoners had had a peep at it. John Calvert was to be the executioner; Graham Burke would be the fiftieth of his fellow-mortals he had hung; every prisoner knew that, too. When the inmates of the gaol retired to their cells, the day's work being done, each passed a hint to the other. Six o'clock was the appointed hour for quitting their plank beds, every man had to be standing at attention at a quarter-past. It was understood that on the morrow the hour for rising was to be made half an hour later. Graham Burke was to hang at six; the authorities possibly deemed it scarcely decorous that their charges should be rising from their uneasy couches just as the bolt was being slipped. No official intimation had been given, but it was generally believed that in the morning the hour for rising would be half-past

six, when the condemned man had been well hanged. There was an obvious air of suppressed excitement in the gaol as its inmates retired to rest; probably each one, so soon as his door was slammed, thought of that fellow prisoner, in the prime of his life, and health, and strength, for whom that night was to be the last on earth.

The two warders in charge of the condemned man that night were to be relieved at four-hour intervals. From the prison point of view, Graham Burke was to be allowed considerable latitude, since he would cease to be a prisoner in so short a space of time. George Lanyon and Timothy Elwood were the two officers who took charge of him at eight o'clock on the Monday night. Lanyon was a tall, thinnish man, with a body which, while it was still supple, was not quite so erect as it once had been. He was somewhere in the fifties, had earned his sergeant's pension in the Field Artillery, and had seen a great deal of service in India. Perhaps it was there he had acquired his peculiar manner, which suggested that nothing could possibly matter. Life and death were apparently as nothing to him; he had hung men with his own hands again and again; and at an early stage of his acquaintance with the condemned man had regaled Graham Burke with pleasing stories of how he had done it, of who they were, and what they had said, and all about them.

"Didn't you feel funny," Graham had asked, "when you hanged your first man?"

"Can't say I did. We was asked to volunteer, so I volunteered, and a sovereign I got for it."

"That's the chief thing you remember—the sovereign? That was what impressed you most?"

"I can't say that; it was spent before the day was done. The chap's name was Cooper, Syd Cooper. Just as I was sending him off, he said, 'Lanyon, I wish I was

hanging you.' I think that was what impressed me most. 'I'm glad you ain't,' I said; then he went."

Timothy Elwood was an older man than Lanyon, over sixty, short, white-haired, red-faced, and portly.

"Are you going to bed?" he asked when the prison clock struck nine.

"Not just yet at any rate. Why should I? I'm not the least bit sleepy."

Elwood eyed the prisoner; he seemed as much at his ease as if, to his thinking, everything was at its best in this best of all possible worlds. One would not have supposed that the scaffold was awaiting him within twelve feet of his closed door, and that he knew it. Elwood had occupied a similar position on more than one previous occasion; he did not remember one of his charges who had been more genuinely unconcerned. He said to himself that that was because Graham Burke did not really realize what was going to happen; some men did not; he was fond of saying that that was because they had no imagination; and then he would add that if a man had to be hanged, the less imagination he had the better.

Graham Burke filled and lit a pipe—they had given him tobacco, his own particular smoking mixture.

"I wonder where I shall be at this time tomorrow," he observed, when he had got his pipe in full blast.

"You won't be no worse off than you are now."

"I doubt if I could be that, saving your presence, Lanyon, and our friend Elwood's, here." He drew a few meditative puffs. "You see, strictly between ourselves, I know no more about the thing for which they are going to hang me, than—than you two do. I shall certainly die innocent, that's sure. The question is, if there's anything in the tales they used to tell me when

I was young, shall I be in the Elysian fields this time to-morrow?"

"'Casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea.' I know they sing that hymn in chapel. I shouldn't wonder if you were one of them."

This was Elwood, whose possible intention was to comfort.

"Yes, but, Elwood, where shall I get a golden crown from, anyhow? I can't be taking one with me from Canterstone Gaol."

"Can't say; I expect they'll be provided; so I've always understood."

"I wonder if there will be tobacco in the Elysian fields; and if there's any special reason why this particular pipe should taste so very good." He took the pipe out of his mouth and looked at it. "This seems to me to be the most enjoyable pipeful of tobacco I've had since I don't know when."

At midnight Lanyon and Elwood went off duty, and West and Gibbs took their places, ushered in by chief warder Horne.

"I suppose," said the prisoner as the two officers were leaving, "that it is good-bye to you two. Sorry to have kept you out of your beds; they do take such good care of me here that it's quite embarrassing. Good-bye, Lanyon; I'm not sure I wouldn't just as soon you hanged me as Mr. Calvert. Elwood, think of me next time they're singing that hymn in chapel."

The two officers went out with what was almost a sheepish look on their weather-beaten faces.

"He's a game un," said Lanyon as they went, "I never see one gamer."

"I don't believe he done it." Elwood considered a moment, then added: "I don't believe that man's a liar." Lanyon was more inclined to hedge.

"Every man's a liar sometimes ; he's bound to be ; but I don't say he's a liar when he says he didn't do it. I don't believe he so much as laid a finger on the man, and yet they'll hang him, and no one won't call that murder."

"I wonder how many they have hung who didn't do it."

"The thing is that some one's got to be hung, so perhaps it doesn't matter so much who it is."

"Everything all right, Burke?" inquired the chief warder before quitting the cell into which he had ushered the two fresh warders.

"Everything, thank you, Horne, including this tobacco. I don't think I ever felt better in my life ; perhaps it's the pipe that does it. I wonder, Horne, if you'd give a message from me to a certain young lady. I don't want to write ; I just want you to give her a message, if it's not very much against the rules."

"I dare say it could be managed. What's the message?"

"The lady is Miss Olive Barber."

"I guessed that."

"Do you think you could manage to go over and see her ; she doesn't live so very far from here?"

"I'm off duty next Sunday ; I dare say I might write her a line and ask her if it would be convenient for me to call."

"I wish you would. I am sure she'll make it convenient if you will. Will you see her and tell her just this. It's just past midnight, isn't it? Six more hours ! Tell her how fit I was feeling when my last day was ushered in by the clock—I don't want her to think I was in the dumps, or anything of that sort—then give her my love—I should like to see you doing it, Horne—and then tell her how glad I am that I saved her life,

because the thought that I had saved it was such a comfort to me when I was ending mine. Just tell her that, no more. I think she will understand. Got the message, Horne?" The chief warder had his note-book in his hand, in which he was making entries with a pencil. "Can't you trust your memory for a little thing like that?"

"Better not; I'd rather have it before me in black and white. I am to tell her how fit you were feeling, and how glad you were that you saved her life, because the thought that you had saved it was such a comfort to you when you were ending yours. Is that quite right?"

"Quite. You see, the idea is that if you find her in the dumps, I want you to cheer her up. I don't want her to think that I found it the least bit hard to die. It will be pretty hard on her anyhow, that's the worst of this sort of thing."

"You think so, do you? You've got your own point of view, Mr. Burke." The chief warder pocketed his note-book. "About time you were turning in."

"I don't feel in the least like sleep. Perhaps that's because I shall have so much of it very soon. Yet I don't know—I'll have a snooze perhaps presently. Good night, Horne."

The chief warder went. The two new warders were not like the last two. West was a young man, not much over thirty, who had recently been a constable in a neighbouring village, and who was inclined to regret the exchange he had made on to the staff of the county gaol. He was still soft-hearted. The consciousness that this man with whom he was temporarily associated was presently to come to such an ignominious end, weighed heavily on him. The condemned man's ease of mind, which was evidently quite unassumed,

made matters worse for him. He believed, as indeed did his colleagues generally, that Graham Burke was innocent, that in the space of about four hours he was to be hanged for what he had never done, and the thought was horrible to him. The bonds of discipline pressed him almost tighter than he could bear;—that he should be compelled to take an active part in depriving this unfortunate gentleman of the life in which he rejoiced, the thought was anguish. Then, Frank West had a wife. William Kelly, butler at The Pleasaunce, and John Kelly, constable at Great Erdington, were cousins of hers; the family feeling had got into her veins; she was convinced that Graham Burke was a much-wronged man. She had said some very plain things on the subject to her husband; she had even gone so far as to tell him that she would rather he should resign his post than have a share in the “murder”—“murder” was the word she used—of this ill-used gentleman. Only the fear that it would be very difficult for him to find fresh employment had prevented him from doing what she wished. He had endeavoured to evade taking that particular spell of duty; now that it had been forced upon him, the sight, in his distressing condition, of Graham Burke’s entire unconcern, moved him to an expression of opinion which might have startled his superior officers.

“I should like to tell you, Mr. Burke, if you’ll permit me, sir, that if I could have helped it I wouldn’t be here to-night, and that if I had my way I’d open this door and all the other doors and set you free, since I’m as sure as any one can be that you never did what you’re here for; and the thought, Mr. Burke, of—of what they’re going to do to you, how you can stand it is beyond me. I’ll not have a hand in the business, anyhow.”

The sudden emphasis of his language, to say nothing of his candour, seemed to startle not only the condemned man, but his colleague, Sam Gibbs.

“Steady, West!” exclaimed Mr. Gibbs, “be careful what you’re saying. That sort of talk is clean against the rules; I shall have to report you if you don’t take care.”

“You can report me, Sam Gibbs, and welcome. I’ll report myself in the morning. This is the first dirty job I ever have been mixed up in, and I’ll take care it shall be the last; and you can tell Mr. Chief Warder Horne, and Mr. Governor Winsley, and all the lot of them. I wish I was out of this, that’s what I wish, with all my heart I do.”

Warder West’s emotion was so great that his voice was positively broken. Graham Burke, taking his pipe from between his lips, shook it laughingly at him.

“My dear West, your sentiments do you credit, and I’m extremely obliged to you for the expression of your feeling; but might I ask you not to get things into the wrong key. It’s all signed, sealed, and settled; the time for talking is past. There’s a nice little scaffold waiting for me outside which has got to be used, so what’s the use of kicking? I’ve brought myself to a state in which I can truthfully say I’m ready even for Mr. Calvert. It won’t take me long; I shall be away from him almost before he knows it; then—I shall be the winner; I shan’t mind in the very least. Wasn’t your wife, West, the daughter of old Kelly’s sister? What was her name?”

“Yes, she was, sir. Her mother was Harriet Kelly, who married James Wakehurst. My wife she thinks no end of you, sir.”

“That’s very good of her, very good indeed. One likes people to think well of one; I haven’t found many

people who think well of me. Have you any children, West? How long have you been married?"

"We've been married seven years, sir, got two boys and one girl, and there's another coming. If it hadn't been for that other one coming, and my wife's health not being very good, and money short, I should have resigned this job before this; it don't suit me at all. It never has done, and now it suits me less than ever; and it's going to suit me less still."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE COMING OF THE CHAPLAIN

ABOUT two o'clock, the hour at which Enid Whitaker was arriving in Westminster Palace Yard, Graham Burke announced, rising from his stool, stretching himself and yawning, that he thought on the whole it would be better that he should get a little sleep.

"If I stay up all night, in the morning I shall perhaps look stale; I don't want Mr. Calvert to think I'm looking stale because of him. Since the hour is late, and the time is so short, I hardly know whether to undress or to get into bed as I am. What time do you think they are likely to want me?"

It was Gibbs who answered. West seemed incapable of articulate speech.

"I believe, sir, the chaplain will be here about five."

"The chaplain? Good Mr. Rose! So I'm to have an interview with the chaplain, am I? I suppose he wouldn't think he'd done his duty unless he saw me, so, for his sake, let it be. I only hope he won't be too professional."

"Mr. Rose isn't a bad sort, sir, when you know him. He's not only a psalm-singer by a long way."

"I quite believe it. I could believe the best of any one just now, but, all the same, wouldn't it seem something like irony if he came imploring me, for my soul's sake, to make a clean breast of what I'd never done?"

He had taken his coat and waistcoat off, and his shoes, and loosened his trousers ; now he divested himself of his collar and tie.

“Does any one know if they let you wear a collar when you’re being hanged? They used not to in the days of the axe-man, but I don’t know about a rope. Gibbs, do you happen to know?”

“I think they’d rather you didn’t wear a collar, sir.”

Gibbs, acting as valet to the garments which had been removed, seemed careful not to meet the prisoner’s glance.

“Thank you, Gibbs, for taking such particular care of that coat and waistcoat ; you handle them as if you’d been used to the job.”

“I was an officer’s servant once, sir, and used always to look after my master’s clothing.”

“And apparently you did it uncommonly well. You needn’t take so much care of those, you know, Gibbs ; I shan’t be wanting them so very much longer. Will they let you be buried in the clothes—you are hanged in?”

“They might, sir, but I don’t think it’s usual.”

“You don’t think it’s usual? Well, don’t let me do anything that’s in the least unusual. What is that striking? A quarter-past two? How that prison clock does clang out! It’s time I had those forty winks.”

The bed in the condemned cell, fashioned of wood, was built into the wall. One wondered if the intention was that it should not, under any circumstances, be used as a weapon of offence or defence either. Canvas was stretched from end to end ; on this was a coir mattress, on which the occupant of that dreadful place was supposed to sleep. Graham Burke had slept uncommonly well on it, night after night, sweet, dreamless, restful sleep ; as he did again while those two men stood and watched him, for the watchers were never allowed

to leave him for a single instant, night or day; nor was the naked gas-light, in its iron cage, put out while the night continued.

Graham Burke had been between the rough sheets scarcely five minutes when Gibbs whispered to his fellow, "He's asleep."

West's answer was not in reply to his words.

"I can't stand it, I simply can't! I wish they were going to hang me instead of him. Don't you see, Gibbs, what an infernal business it is?"

The other's rejoinder was characteristic.

"I've felt that more than once before. There's been many a chap in here that never ought to have been; but my duty is not to criticize, but to obey. I've been a soldier, lad; if you'd been a soldier, you'd know what obedience means; you'd know that you'd get no good by throwing things at the commanding officer."

At four o'clock Graham Burke still slept, the clanging clock did not awake him. West and Gibbs were relieved; and two men who had seen much longer service in the prison took their places, Philip Beale and Charles Edwards. Like Lanyon, they had assisted many a man to shuffle off the mortal coil. As before, chief warder Horne was their conductor. Even their entry did not seem to disturb the sleeping man. Horne asked his usual question—

"Everything all right?"

Gibbs answered in a whisper: "Everything; he's asleep."

"Is he? That's all right. Now, you two chaps, come along." He spoke to the two fresh warders. "The chaplain will be here in about an hour; I'll come with him."

"He needs no chaplain," said West.

"No, I don't think he does, but that's the chaplain's

business, not yours. Your opinion wasn't asked. Out you go."

At five o'clock Burke was still asleep. It was odd how profound his slumber was; the coming of the chaplain did not disturb him. The Reverend Donald Rose was a young man. He had thought himself lucky when he, in his first curacy, was preferred to be chaplain of Canterstone Gaol. But there were moments when, like Frank West, he doubted if he had been so lucky after all. This was one of them. Like many men, especially young ones, he had a physical shrinking from death. In private life he held heretical opinions on the subject of capital punishment. He was not sure if, under any circumstances, one man had the right to take the life of another, even in accordance with the dictates of so-called justice. He had followed the case of the Great Erdington murder very attentively, and while at the first he had been convinced of the prisoner's guilt, since he had made his acquaintance in the condemned cell his convictions were inclined to waver. He was conscious how frightful it was that he should be there to offer the last consolations of religion to a man who, after all, might be as innocent of wrong-doing as himself. He had grown fond of Graham Burke. Even his attitude of almost pagan indifference to the fate which awaited him was not without its appeal. On certain subjects he was only too well aware that his own sensitiveness was almost feminine; he was, unfortunately as it chanced, not without imagination. Had he himself been condemned to be hanged he was very sure that his agony would have been unspeakable. He doubted if he would have lived to reach the gallows, if his terror of the fate which there was no escaping would not have killed him on the way.

And that this man should so obviously care nothing, to him that was wonderful. It did him good to know that there was such courage in a man. He had more than a vague suspicion that this person, of whom the law was presently to exact the last penalty, to whom he had come to offer the last offices of the dying, was in all respects a better man than he was. Not only his flesh, his very soul quailed at the possibility of that suspicion being founded upon solid fact.

Taking off his hat as he entered the cell, when he realized that its occupant was sleeping, his attitude suggested that he was entering the presence of a saint rather than of a criminal.

"Is it possible that he can be asleep?" he asked in a whisper.

"He's been sleeping just like a baby," said Edwards. "He was asleep when we came in, and he's not stirred since. Most of the time there's been a smile upon his face."

"There is now." The chaplain was bending over him with what was very like an air of reverence. "Surely this man is innocent."

"It doesn't follow, Mr. Rose, that he's innocent because he sleeps; in spite of what the poet says, 'Conscience does not make cowards of us all.' There was a chap in this very cell who had killed his wife and two children, as bloody-minded a ruffian as ever lived; his last night he slept like a top. When we woke him he laughed; he cracked a joke, and not a nice one, with the hangman just before he turned him off. There are men who can sleep anywhere, through anything; it all depends on how a chap's built." This was the chief warder. He bent over the sleeping man. "Mr. Burke! Graham Burke!" He had to repeat his name twice

before the sleeper opened his eyes. "Here's Mr. Rose come to see you."

Burke rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "What's the time?" he asked.

"Past five. Mr. Rose want's to speak to you. You'd better get up."

Raising himself on his elbow, Burke smiled when he saw the chaplain.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Rose, that this is an uncanny hour to get you out of bed."

"I haven't been to bed; I've been sitting up all night trying to pray. I have come to pray with you, Mr. Burke."

"To pray with me?" A whimsical look came into the prisoner's eyes. "That's very good of you, but really, if you don't mind, I'd rather you didn't. I rather fancy, do you know, Rose, that if the Almighty heard your prayers He might almost be inclined to think that it was adding insult to injury. I'm going to be hanged for what I never did; I'm quite willing. But with all due deference to you, and not meaning the least offence, I don't think you ought to add to my punishment. God, if He knows anything, knows that I am innocent. The law is going to kill me all the same; but that you, as in a sort of way the representative of the law, should add to its ill-doing the mockery of prayer, seriously, that is too much. All the same I am very glad to see you, and—and quite ready to have a chat with you about the weather. Where are my shoes?"

Sitting on the edge of the bed he looked about him, recognizing that the officers who had been with him when he went to sleep were there no longer.

"Hullo! West and Gibbs have gone. Poor old West! I hope his is a mind at ease; and you other gentlemen are here instead, I suppose, considering the

hour, to render me the last kind offices. The law has done a lot for me this time ; I take it it will do all it can for me at the end. And here you are again, Horne : you can't have had much of a night's rest."

"I haven't ; I'm glad to think you have."

"Oh, yes, I've slept uncommonly well ; I never slept better in my life. There, I've got my shoes on. May I put on my coat and waistcoat, Horne, or will they want to hang me in my shirt ?"

"You can put on your coat and waistcoat, Mr. Burke."

Up to the last few hours every one in the gaol when addressing him had dropped the prefix Mr., and had called him simply Burke, or Graham Burke ; now the prefix had returned, as if it were recognized that he was once more entitled to be treated with the usual forms of respect, because of the dignity which shined him about.

Warder Beale assisted him into the garments he had discarded.

"Thank you, that's good. I'm obliged to you, my friend, for your assistance. Horne, when is Mr. Calvert likely to come ?"

"At half-past five, or perhaps a few minutes later."

"Then we've got a good twenty minutes. Well, Rose, what shall we talk about ? I know you're a parson, my dear chap, and I dare say you feel that you ought to play the part for all it's worth ; but if I were a parson and you were in my place, do you know what I should do ? I should say, 'Graham Burke, it's a jolly funny world ; you've had a jolly funny time in it, and you're going to have a jolly funny going out ; here's my hand, and God-speed to you.' Here is my hand, Rose,

you can take it ; not with the divine compassion of a parson who feels bound to take the hand of any sinner ; but because it's clean, as clean as yours or any one's. Consciously this hand has never done a dirty act, so shake, Rose, and be of good cheer."



CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAST OFFICES OF THE LAW

THE prison clock informed the world that it was half-past five. To the little group in the condemned cell the discordant tones were much more than a mere statement of the time; they were an intimation that to one of them the end of all earthly things was near. The one to whom it was specially addressed was the one who seemed most at his ease.

"I think you told me, Horne," said Graham Burke, "that this was the time when Mr. Calvert might be confidently expected. Will he take half an hour to prepare me? Surely not so much as that."

The chief warden's tone was unwontedly gruff.

"I can't tell you, Mr. Burke. Calvert will probably be here in a few minutes. Are you ready?"

"Perfectly, Horne; as ready as ever man was for such a visitation."

The chaplain had a prayer-book in his hand; his voice was tremulous.

"Mr. Burke, you are shortly about to meet your Maker. Let me entreat you to be of a penitent mind. The Church has appointed certain offices——"

"I am obliged, Mr. Rose, I am aware of it. Since the Church has allied itself to the law which is about to murder me—this is not a moment in which to put too fine a point upon the thing—you can hardly require me

to have much respect for its offices. I'm shortly going, with the assistance of the law as administered by Mr. Calvert, to meet not only my Maker but my Judge. Who knows? I have no fear of His judgment. It is you and your friends here who should fear it, for between you, you are destroying an innocent man; destroying him, at least, so far as the body is concerned. Fortunately, the soul you cannot touch. I am not sure, Mr. Rose, that I would not sooner be in my place than yours; you with your offices for the man whom you are about to assist to murder."

"You still maintain, Mr. Burke, that you are innocent?" The chaplain's voice was even more tremulous than before. Burke laughed; the chaplain started.

"You know, Rose, perfectly well that I am as innocent as you are. I believe there is not a man here who doesn't know it. Yet you are going to kill me, in the name of the monster which you know very well is not justice. That sounds like a key in the door; I fancy a different door from the one which I have hitherto heard opened. Is that the door which opens on to the scaffold? Have they seen that the rope is in readiness, and the bolt to the drop works easily? Is that what it means? Are they coming that way for the first and last visit they are ever going to pay me? They haven't been very many minutes, have they, Horne?"

Graham Burke had stood, while he had been speaking, in an attitude of listening, still with a smile. There was the sound of a key being inserted in a lock; the turning of well-oiled wards; then the feet of descending steps, then of whispers, then of feet moving over the flags in the passage without. The chaplain as he heard paled visibly; the warders were clearly uneasy; the chief warder was not unconcerned; there was

something in Graham Burke's bearing which suggested that all at once he was being lifted into another plane.

"Well!" It was rather a deep breath than an exclamation. "It's come at last—the feet of the executioner along the passage."

The sound of the tramping feet drew nearer. The chief warder opened the door of the cell. Without was a short, slight man, whose brown beard was tinged with grey. He had light blue eyes. He wore a soft black felt hat, a dark grey overcoat, and black kid gloves. This was Captain Winsley, the governor of the gaol. He had been a naval officer, had had a severe bout of fever on the China station, had been retired, invalided, had passed from the open-air life of the sailor into the comparative confinement of a gaol.

Just behind the governor, on his left, was a person attired like a decent mechanic in a suit of pepper-and-salt-coloured tweed, which did not fit him very well, and which gave him the appearance of being dressed in his Sunday clothes. He had a black bowler hat. An incongruous note in his attire was his light-blue neck-tie, on which there were large white spots. Behind him were two more warders.

The governor entered the cell. He fell into the same trick which the others had done, prefixing the "Mr."

"Good morning, Mr. Burke. I have to inform you that your time has come."

"It finds me ready, Captain Winsley." The prison clock was heard. "There goes the three-quarters. Will it take a quarter of an hour to prepare me? It won't take a minute to pass from here to the scaffold."

"I regret, Mr. Burke, that there are formalities which have to be gone through. Have you any statement which you wish to make?"

"None. All my statements have been made already, again and again. You know perfectly well that you're going to hang an innocent man. I don't propose to try to stop you. That's the only statement I have to make. Are you Mr. Calvert?"

The mechanic-looking person came forward. He had a mysterious-looking sort of garment in one hand, a coil of rope in the other.

"I'm John Calvert." He looked the prisoner up and down. It seemed to be something in his bearing which caused him to add: "I've got to do my duty."

He spoke with a strong accent, which Burke immediately noted.

"You are a Lancashire man, Mr. Calvert."

"No, I'm from Yorkshire."

"You're a shorter man than I am, Mr. Calvert. I'll have to stoop if you're to adjust the rope round my neck without getting on to a stool."

"I'll manage. You're not the first. I've seen bigger. You'll have to put this on."

He held out the mysterious arrangement of canvas and leather which he was carrying, which extended looked more mysterious than ever; even gruesome. Graham Burke eyed it askance.

"What's that?"

"This is to keep your arms down to your sides without them being roped."

"Oh, that's what it is, is it? If it's the usual thing, go ahead."

With the assistance of one of the warders, Mr. Calvert arranged the article about the upper part of Graham Burke in such a fashion that from his shoulders to his thighs he was like a trussed bird, his arms being secured to his sides so that he seemed unable to move

even a finger. He began to unfasten the coil of rope.

"What's that for? I understand now why you wanted so much time for preparation."

"This is to fasten your legs; we don't want no kicking."

While Graham Burke stood perfectly straight, with his feet close together, Mr. Calvert wound the rope round and round his legs. Burke observed the performance with what seemed to be almost an air of quizzical amusement.

"But I shan't be able to walk. Do you intend to carry me to the scaffold? I proposed to walk with the air of dignity which does become a man who is going to meet his Maker. As it is, I fear I cannot even waddle."

"We'll see to that." Mr. Calvert signalled to the two warders who had come with him. They placed themselves on either side of Graham Burke. Before he was prepared for what they were about to do, supporting him closely, they were moving him out of the cell.

"Here," he cried, "can't I go alone? You needn't push me."

Unheeding they hurried him onwards. Mr. Rose who, taken aback by the proceedings, had turned pasty white, began with a quavering voice to repeat the opening words of the service for the burial of the dead.

"Rose," exclaimed Burke, "please don't do that! Haven't I asked you to excuse me the offices of the Church?"

The chaplain faltered, paused; then, when they reached the door which opened out of the passage, and he saw the scaffold, with its dangling rope, waiting beyond, he seemed to reel, and turned to the governor.

"Captain Winsley, if this man's innocent——"

Captain Winsley paid him no attention. He passed

into the small courtyard without. The greater part of it was occupied by a scaffold which had been raised to a height of eighteen or twenty feet, which was ascended by a flight of ladder-like steps. Mr. Calvert went up first. The two warders, with Graham Burke between them, followed. They got him up the steps with a dexterity which did them credit, although just as they reached the top one of them stumbled. Mr. Calvert, advancing quickly, caught the prisoner by the shoulder. When the prisoner was safe upon the scaffold the others followed, the governor, the chief warden, warders Beale and Edwards, and last, the chaplain. It was all he could do to mount the steps; his legs seemed disinclined to perform their rightful office. Directly he was up he began again with the opening sentences of the service for the burial of the dead. Burke smiled at him.

"Well, Rose, if you will, I suppose you will. And after all I can't go out of the world with finer music in one's ears. 'I know that my Redeemer liveth'; I ought certainly to know that very soon."

The two warders, under Mr. Calvert's direction, were very particular as to the spot on which he stood. Burke looked down to learn the cause.

"This square thing is a trap door, and you wish me to stand in the exact centre; I see. Now I am beginning to see why I am pinioned; a man might do a jump. And that's the bolt which unfastens the trap; you kick it, I see the idea; down I go, or up. What's that?"

Mr. Calvert, who had brought a stool close to where the prisoner was standing, had produced from his pocket what looked like a white worsted night-cap. Without answering he mounted the stool. Extending the seeming night-cap with fingers which hinted that they had done that sort of thing before, he drew the cap as

quickly as possible right down over the prisoner's head, making of him in the eyes of all who beheld a horrid spectacle. Graham Burke seemed to be speaking inside the cap, but his words could not be heard, only his voice was audible. Mr. Calvert slipped the noose which was at the end of the rope over the prisoner's head, drawing it tighter when it was about his neck, a task which occupied some appreciable seconds. Then he jumped off his stool, pushed it aside, and stood for a moment surveying his handiwork. All was silent. In the horror of his appreciation of what was coming the chaplain's voice failed him altogether; words would not come. Mr. Calvert put up his hands to adjust the rope a little more to his liking.

As he did so there came a noise from the prison, the sound of voices shouting, of feet running. Mr. Calvert turned his head.

"What's that?" he said.

The governor had moved to the edge of the scaffold. The noise grew louder, the voices came nearer. The governor made a movement with his hand to Mr. Calvert; he stood leaning over the edge of the scaffold, listening intently. The chief warder placed himself beside him.

"Some one is shouting," whispered the governor, "but I can't make out what. What can it mean? What can have happened?"

"It sounds to me," replied chief warder Horne, "as if some one were shouting, 'Stop! Stop!' Whoever it is ought to be here in a couple of seconds; it will do no harm to wait?"

"Certainly not." Again the governor signalled with his hand to Mr. Calvert, motioning him aside, as if fearful that if he remained where he was, with his foot in such ominous proximity to that dreadful bolt, which

for Graham Burke was all that stood between life and death, professional zeal might prove too much for his discretion.

The noise of the feet and of the shouting still approached. Presently a bare-headed warder came rushing out into the courtyard, followed by two civilians attired as motorists. One of these waved an envelope in his hand.

"Stop!" he yelled. "Stop! I've a message from the Home Secretary."

With a warning glance at Calvert, the governor went down the steps to meet him.

"I'm the Honourable Reginald Ashdown," exclaimed the man with the envelope. "I'm Mr. Stammerham's secretary. I left him in the House of Commons at a quarter-past three to bring you this."

Captain Winsley tore the envelope open with fingers which, if he had not been the governor of a gaol, one might have said were shaking. He read what the envelope contained; then drew a long breath.

"Thank God, Mr. Ashdown," he exclaimed, "that though you are late you are still in time."

Hurriedly remounting the scaffold he addressed Mr. Calvert.

"Calvert, remove that rope and cap and unfasten Mr. Burke."

The thing was done with remarkable expedition. Graham Burke looked about him with wondering eyes.

"I was beginning to wonder if I was dead."

The governor, in a state of agitation which made him seem quite unlike his usual self, went quickly towards him.

"Another second and you might have been. Thank God this has come in time, or I should never have been

able to forgive myself! Mr. Burke, allow me to congratulate you—you are not only reprieved, you are released. You are free—free—your innocence has been established. What I have done has been what I deemed to be my duty. I can only hope I have not been unduly harsh. Will you please give me your hand, Mr. Burke?”

Graham Burke gave him both his hands and smiled.

“And I am still looking on the same old world again! Why, there’s the sun!” The sun, suddenly coming over the high prison wall, covered them with a glow of brighter light as they stood upon the scaffold. “I was thinking I had a cloudy morning on which to hang, and now here’s the sun, bringing a promise of life and—did you say I was free?—free!—please God, a promise of happiness!”

CHAPTER XXXV

MISS BARBER'S ERRAND

THOSE were grey times at The Pleasaunce ; days on which the sun never seemed to shine, on which everything was seen through a mist of sombre hue. On the Sunday and the Monday Miss Barber kept her room. She ate practically nothing. The whole energies of the household were directed towards inducing her to behave like a normal being. Louise, the lady's own particular maid, when she found her mistress persistent in refusing to pass the threshold of her apartment, sought to tempt her appetite with dainty dishes. The lady would have none of them. She might have been a member of some severe religious order, devoted to penitence and fasting. On the Sunday she ate nothing at all. On the Monday she had some bread and butter and the better part of an egg.

"Not enough," explained Louise to Kelly, "to keep a sparrow alive. There is not much of her to begin with, but, my word, if she goes on like this there will be nothing left of her at all."

Kelly's own visage would have done credit to a mute at an old-fashioned funeral.

"My own appetite is pretty nearly gone," he groaned, "but I can manage a little more than three slices of thin bread-and-butter and half an egg. I don't know where I should be if I couldn't. But perhaps when it's all over

she may be better ; when the worst has happened things may take a turn."

The maid turned up the palms of her hands and shrugged her shoulders.

"I know nothing about your Mr. Graham Burke, but I wish he had not chosen to be hanged. This house would have been more gay if he had not been of such eccentric tastes."

"Do you think he chose to be hanged?" Mr. Kelly glared at her. "Louise, you're pretty sensible for a woman, and you're a nice young woman in a way"—the maid dropped him a curtsey—"but when you talk rubbish like that—I'm sorry for you ; that's all I can say."

Mr. Kelly walked off with what would have been a much more dignified air had his head not dropped so between his shoulders.

"Oh, Mr. Kelly," cried the maid, "how cruel you are!"

He stopped, to correct her.

"I'm not cruel, Louise, or if I am, I don't mean to be."

"But you are cruel, very cruel." The maid had her apron to her eyes. "In this great house every one is sad—so sad that I also am sad ; mine is a sympathetic temperament ; but no matter how sad I am, there is no one to comfort me."

"Do you want comforting?"

"I do want comforting." That young French woman had a way of putting things which the butler found very alluring.

"Then in that case——" He gave a step towards her, then stopped. "No, I'm not going to comfort you ; I want comfort myself. Until it's all over I couldn't comfort any one ; I could not with an easy mind."

With a visage longer than ever the butler really did depart.

On the Tuesday morning Miss Barber rose betimes ; so early that when her maid entered she found her kneeling by her bedside with a prayer-book and Bible open in front of her, engaged in silent prayer. Her eyes were all blurred with weeping. Louise went running towards her.

“Mademoiselle, you should not cry like that, you will do yourself a hurt.”

The girl tried to choke back her sobs, but the more she tried, the worse they were ; they seemed to be tearing her to pieces. She was seized with such a convulsion of grief that the maid, flinging her arms about her, tried to comfort her as if she were a child. Her own tears were flowing ; presently the lady's were stayed.

“Thank you, Louise,” she managed to murmur. “You are very good to me, but—but——”

Emotion got the better of her again ; she threw herself face foremost on the bed. That time the maid let her cry it out. After a while there came a tapping at the door. The maid went to see who was there ; presently returning with a message.

“Mademoiselle, Kelly says that the car you ordered is already waiting.”

On the preceding day she had ordered a car to be ready at seven o'clock. Influence had been brought to bear, and arrangements had been made that she should be permitted to enter the prison and view the dead man's body as it lay in the coffin which she had provided. The coroner's inquest—that ghastly formality required in such cases by the English law—was to be held at nine. It was expected to last only a very few minutes ; she was to be admitted immediately

afterwards to look her last at the man who had saved her life ; then the coffin was to be fastened down, and later was to be delivered to her keeping and was to be deposited at her charge in the family vault of the Burkes in the little local graveyard.

The information given her by Louise that the car was waiting acted as a sort of brake upon her grief. She had to stop ; she did. She could not complete her toilette while her eyes were rendered useless by blinding tears, and her hands paralyzed by the force of convulsive sobs.

Within a comparatively few minutes she departed on that mournful errand, a solitary small person in her big car. She had refused to allow any one to accompany her. She preferred to be alone and unattended. She presented a melancholy picture, attired from head to foot in the deepest mourning, her small face obscured by the thick crape veil which was damp with her tears before the car had gone twenty yards. She had to thrust a surreptitious handkerchief beneath it in a futile attempt to dry her eyes.

The car, however, had not gone half-way to the lodge gate when all at once it stopped—so unexpectedly, so suddenly, that she was all but jerked off the seat. At the best of times one small person is not very secure if she is all alone on the back seat of a huge motor-car ; if she had not caught at the side she would certainly have fallen. Before she could right herself she became painfully conscious that something seemed to have happened to the chauffeur. He was standing up on the driver's seat and positively shouting.

"God bless my heart and soul," he exclaimed, "is it a ghost, or has he escaped again? Miss Barber, there's Mr. Graham Burke coming down the drive! Isn't it

Mr. Graham Burke? It is! I'm sure it is him! Miss Barber!"

The last was like a bellow of amazement. Still not quite realizing what was happening, or even what the man was shouting, the girl, leaning right over the side of the car, looked down the drive. What she saw amazed her more than anything had ever done before in all her life. A person was coming quickly along the roadway who bore a most astonishing resemblance to the one whose dead body she was hastening to see. When he saw her, as he quickly did, the person quickened his pace.

"Olive!" he shouted. He took off his hat and waved it in the air; then paused as if in doubt. "I suppose it is Miss Barber?" Then rushed on again. "By Jove, it is, but do you know it's not easy to recognize you rigged-out like that. Whatever have you got those silly things on for?" A thought seemed to occur to him. "Is it—for me? Olive! My sweet, my dear, my darling! Did you think that I was dead? I'm as much alive as you are. They've found out who did it, and I'm innocent. I'm released. I'm free, without a stain upon my character! Oh, my dear love, and you were in mourning for me! Why, sweetheart, I hope the days of our mourning are over."

She was standing up in the motor, staring at him as if he were indeed a ghost. Then the revulsion of feeling was so tremendous when she realized that in very fact he was natural, real, tangible, live flesh and blood, that the slight, crape-covered figure began swaying to and fro. In an instant he had the door of the motor open. And as she cried, "Graham!" he caught her senseless, in his arms.

And when she, in her turn, came back to life again,

her veil was raised, and out there he kissed her on the lips.

"I dreamed," she whispered, as one who is not quite sure that she is not still dreaming, "that you kissed me ; but I never thought you would."

"I will," he answered ; and he kissed her again.

THE END



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