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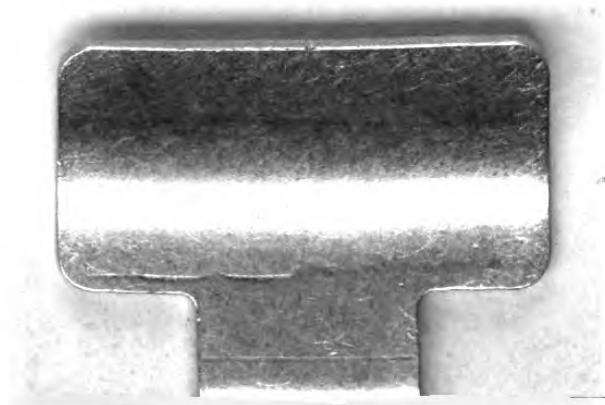


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THE GARDEN OF MYSTERY



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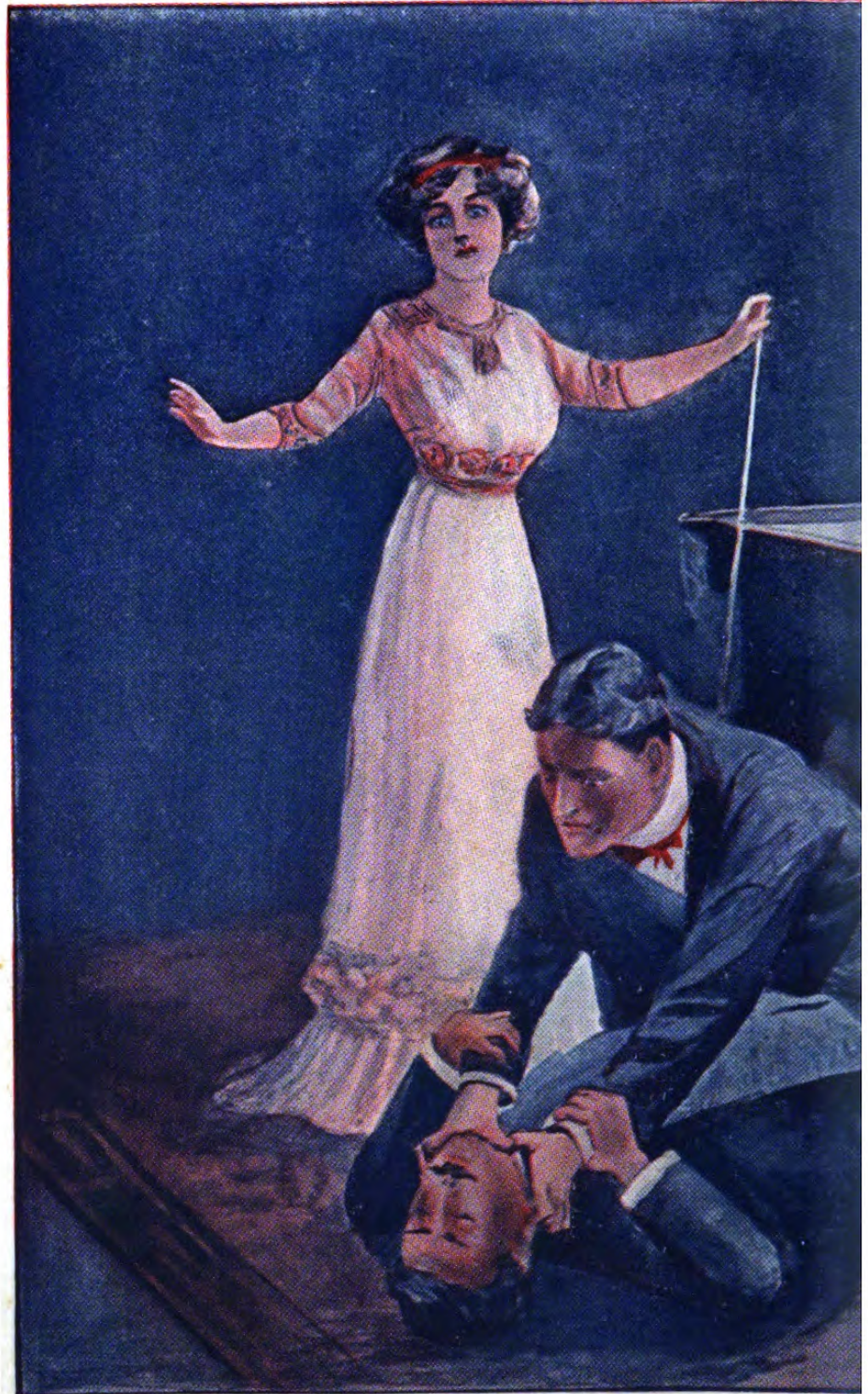
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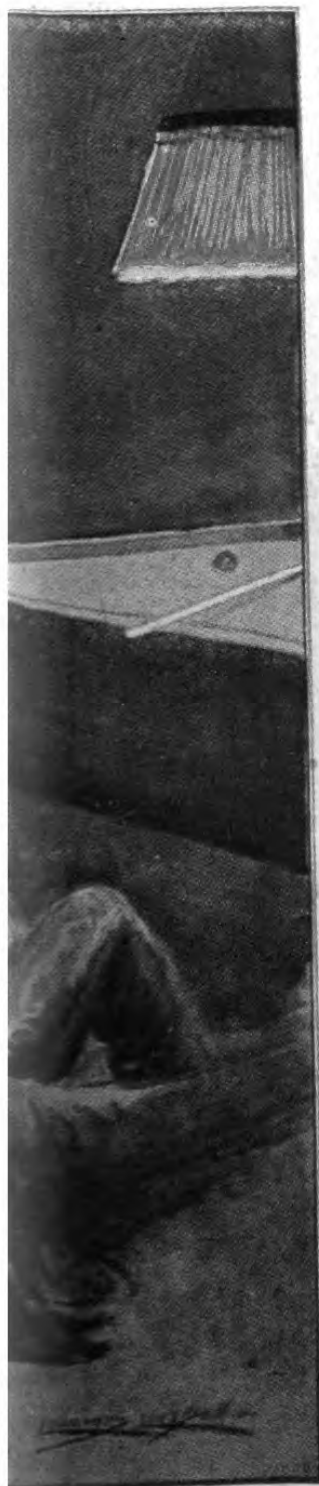
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THE GARDEN OF MYSTERY



"ALAN THURSTON HAD HIS FRIEND BY THE THROAT."—p. 91.

THE GARDEN OF MYSTERY

BY
RICHARD MARSH
AUTHOR OF "THE BEETLE," ETC.



Popular Edition

London
John Long, Limited
Norris Street, Haymarket
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THE GARDEN OF MYSTERY

CHAPTER I

THE TWO PLAYERS

PHILIP FORD watched the comedy with amusement. The gentleman had won again, the lady had lost—and she so obviously did not like losing. She was so young, so pretty, in that place so altogether unusual. Almost a girl, there was an air of freshness about her which many girls might envy. Her dress was simple, inexpensive, in striking contrast to many of those about her. In the casino at Monte Carlo there are so many women to whom their dress is their fortune. Normally, Mr. Ford felt convinced, her mood was sunny. Now she was in a rage. Like a child in a temper which came very near to tears. Indeed it was her childishness which made her seem so out of place in such surroundings. Ford found himself wondering who she could be. She was apparently alone. So far as he had seen not a soul had spoken to her, and she had spoken to no one. She was her own banker, carrying her money in a little leather satchel which hung about her waist. Philip Ford was beginning to suspect that there was not much left in it. He would

have liked to beg of her to cease to play, if for no other reason than that luck was so persistently against her. She had lost continuously—not large sums—though he was pretty sure that they were large to her. She had commenced by staking two or three louis at a time ; now she had descended to five-franc pieces ; and each piece seemed to linger longer between her fingers before she let it go. At last there was an end of them. He felt sure of it. She glanced inside the satchel. He would have been prepared to bet that it was empty, because she snapped the clasp with such a furious little snap, and because she bit her pretty lips as if trying to keep the angry tears out of her childlike eyes.

And the man won all the time, as he had been doing from the first. Ford doubted if he had lost half a dozen coups. It tickled him to notice that in appearance the fellow was not unlike himself—tall, thin, with a slight stoop ; black hair, parted in the centre, short moustache, monocle carried in his right eye—so far the resemblance was almost weird. Yet the differences were sufficiently marked to make it difficult to mistake one for the other. Ford's peculiarities were written large all over him. To look at him one could easily have believed that he was an anchorite under a vow of fasting. He was thin almost to the point of attenuation. There was an aloofness about his manner which induced strangers to regard him as austere. He was reserved, self-contained, prone, one might say, to speechlessness ; a man, one felt, who could be silent in many languages.

The man who was winning handfuls of gold

was, equally obviously, of a very different type. No traces of austerity about him, nor of reserve. His were eyes which had looked often upon the wine when it was red, and other liquors also, to say nothing of those various delights which appeal to the carnal mind. His lips were pendulous, the red wine gleamed through his cheeks, his eyes were muddy. This was not the first time this man had played roulette for stakes which counted. Indeed, to judge from his demeanour, the pursuit was such a familiar one that it had ceased to interest him whether he won or lost. He picked up the money which the croupier's rake continually pushed in his direction with a listless air as though, if anything, it rather bored him to have to put himself to so much exertion.

As the girl came to the conclusion that her little bag was really and truly empty the man had the maximum on fourteen, and the number turned. He had had the maximum on the winning number a few minutes before; since when he had been backing different combinations with nearly unvarying success. A murmur went round the table as he won again. The girl glanced in his direction with envy in her eyes. Ford noticed that desire, for what the fellow was winning, seemed to cause the whole expression of her face to change. He turned away, unwilling to continue any longer to be the witness of a spectacle which did not please him. The thing was familiar there. Men would win, and women would give themselves in exchange for some of their winnings; only Ford did not care to associate that pretty young English girl with such reflections. She was English, undoubtedly; that was, in fact, the

pity of it. What was so fair a compatriot doing in such an atmosphere? He did not like to think.

It was perhaps half an hour later when, having had more than enough of the casino, he went out into the night. Moon and stars gleamed from a cloudless sky. It was cool but beautiful. Buttoning his coat about his neck, he walked briskly from terrace to terrace, up and down, to and fro. The moon was almost at the full. The sea was like a silver lake. Only the faintest breeze was stirring. A yacht, blazing with illuminations, stood out like a thing of beauty. It was so still that voices, music, laughter travelled to him from its deck across the water. He knew what the yacht was, and the meaning of the blaze of glory. The boat, the *Hoosier*, was the property of Mrs. Van Volst, the widow of a notorious rather than famous, American multi-millionaire. She was giving a dinner on board, to be followed by a dance. Had he chosen Philip Ford might have been among the guests. Now as he stood there, solitary, listening, watching, he rather wished that he had consented to join the revels later. He would have at least been free to follow his mood. The sight and the sound seemed to accentuate his feeling of solitude.

He turned to go to his hotel. As he did so he almost knocked over some one who was standing so close behind him that it was almost impossible for him to move without coming into collision. He drew back, with a half-uttered apology.

“I beg your pardon—but——”

Then he stopped to stare. The person whom he had nearly overturned was a woman—to his astonishment, the girl of the casino, who had

always lost until at last he had been sure her satchel was empty. She was dressed exactly as he had seen her last, without even a cloak thrown over her shoulders; from her left wrist was still suspended the empty satchel.

It was the singularity of her attitude which startled him. Her right arm was raised in the manner of one who is about to strike a blow, while in her hand something gleamed. He saw it but an instant, but in the moonlight he saw it clearly—the flash of steel. In less than six seconds after he had turned and they had seen each other her arm fell, her hand went behind her—too late to hide what was in it. Both were silent, and both apparently for the same reason; because she seemed to be as much surprised as he was. If she was not the quicker to regain her presence of mind she was at least the first to speak. Her voice was not only musical, unmistakably a lady's, but she spoke with a smiling calmness which amazed him more and more.

“Do you know, it was lucky for you, indeed, it was lucky for both of us, you turned. I was almost—as nearly as possible—making a mistake.”

In the moonlight she was prettier than ever, and more of a child.

“Of what nature?”

She pulled a little face.

“It's very odd, but there's some one else exactly like you from the back, here in Monte Carlo. I've been watching you—oh, for some minutes, and you quite deceived me. When you turned it gave me such a shock. But, as I said, it was lucky for both of us you did turn—just then, very.”

She nodded lightly, gaily, carelessly; then, before he could speak again, flitted along the path at a pace which was half a run. She had vanished before it occurred to him that there were questions which it would perhaps have been better if he had put to her. Her bearing had been so debonair; there was about her such a suggestion of being amused, that it had been difficult to associate her with anything but comedy. And yet why had she stolen up to him so softly that, even in the intense stillness, he had not heard her coming? And his hearing, as a rule, was so acute. Why had she approached so close to him, within touching distance of his back? Why had her arm been raised in so ominous an attitude? What was it she had been holding in her hand? A knife, beyond a doubt. If such was the case—of which he was convinced—then was it conceivable that she, a mere child, a seemingly innocent girl, had meant to stab him in the back? To the question put so the answer was a negative. She had not meant to stab him. As she herself had explained, she as nearly as possible had made a mistake. He had all but fallen a victim in a case of mistaken identity. The uplifted blade had been meant for the fortunate gambler, by whose likeness to himself Mr. Ford had been struck. If there was a resemblance between them as seen from the front, from the back possibly it was greater still—especially in the moonlight. Seeing him in the glamour of the moon from behind the girl had supposed him to be the lucky gambler, whose pockets were stuffed with the casino spoils, and had proposed to bury her knife in his back. As she had said, it was lucky for both of them that

he had turned—just then. In another moment her error might have been beyond undoing.

On the other hand, ought he to have let her go scot free, suspecting her of such an intention? What did it matter? He was not a policeman. He was not even particularly interested in the preservation of law and order. He distinctly objected to being dragged into the public gaze. There were all sorts of people in Monte Carlo; the whole world knew it; let them all take care of themselves. So, strolling leisurely back to his hotel, Philip Ford slept the sleep of the just.

The following morning as he was thinking vaguely of where he should breakfast, a waiter thrust a telegram into his hand. He tore it open, with the indifference of the man to whom telegrams are common things; but all indifference vanished when he read the contents:—

“Sir Geoffrey has been seriously injured, and Mr. Geoffrey killed, in accident to motor car. Doctors say Sir Geoffrey’s condition is very grave. Come at once. “RAWSON.”

The words were so startling that he had to read them a second time before he began to apprehend their full meaning. Sir Geoffrey’s condition very grave? His only brother, from whom he had had a letter so recently as yesterday, in which the writer confessed himself to be in the best of health and spirits. Mr Geoffrey—young Geoffrey—killed? His brother’s one child, of whom the father had been so proud, and who had had in him the making of so fine a man. What—even in the first moment of the shock the thought

would obtrude itself—what a difference these things might make to him! But the thought was banished as quickly as it came. He recalled his brother's face, and the boy's, young Geoff's, flushed with youth and health and happiness; and he wondered, conscious of an unwonted strain somewhere within him, how quickly he could get home.

While he wondered some one spoke to him—Major Downs, whose acquaintance he had first made in the Punjaub, and who at Monte Carlo had shown the inclination of the solitary but gregarious man to attach himself rather more closely than Philip Ford desired. In spite of his preoccupation the Major's words seemed to penetrate his brain with curious distinctness.

“Shocking affair, Ford—eh? I always have said, and I always shall say, that Monte Carlo is the sink of Europe, and that something ought to be done. It is my firm conviction that more crimes take place here than people in general have the faintest notion of. They hush 'em up, that's what they do, they hush 'em up; devilish clever these fellows here at hushing up.” Apparently something in Philip Ford's face hinted that his remarks were unintelligible. “What—haven't you heard? The whole place is talking of it—no wonder! They won't be able to hush it up this time. That poor chap who was winning at roulette last night—won no end of a lot—I saw you watching him. I don't know if you noticed it, but it struck me that there was a kind of a likeness between you two—as if he was a sort of half-brother of yours, don't you know.” The Major laughed, as if he had made a joke.

“What’s happened to him?” He spoke as if in reply to an unuttered question. “The worst, my dear sir, the very worst. He’s been found dead in the casino gardens—without a farthing on him, after all his winnings. He’s been lying there all night, murdered—robbed and murdered”—the Major’s voice dropped to an impressive semitone—“stabbed in the back.”

CHAPTER II

IN MY LADY'S CHAMBER

MRS. THURSTON was in the best of tempers. She generally was, even when alone, which is rather rarer than some think. Persons who are notorious for their sunny disposition in public are frequently remarkable for something quite different when there is no one there but themselves, and the mask comes off. But it was characteristic of Mrs. Thurston that she was apt to be merrier in private than when other persons were present, if the thing were possible. On the present occasion something seemed to be tickling her immensely.

“To think,” she exclaimed aloud, as if some one else had been there to hear, “that all this is mine, and it might so easily have been hers. Mine! mine! all mine! It really is a most magnificent jest—for me!” She laughed, daintily, musically, the sound coming from her pretty throat as sweetly as if it were the song of some light-hearted bird. “And how long ago is it since I was a governess on thirty pounds a year? It seems ages, but in reality it's only weeks. Dear me, what vicissitudes I have known in my short life!” She sighed—a sigh which did not suggest distress, for laughter was dancing in her eyes. “What a room I had at Mrs. Welby's—quite a respectable room for a governess creature,

I'll admit—but, still, compared to this, which is something like a room—”

She sighed again, this time a sigh of sheer content. As she observed, it was something like a room the one in which she was ; as charming an apartment as even the soul of a beauty-loving woman could very well desire. A cunning mixture of the old and the new. Shaded electric lights looked down on furniture which would have delighted the connoisseur's heart, and yet which was all that one could wish in the way of comfort. The windows were draped with costly hangings. The half-dozen water-colours which hung against the daintily coloured walls were delights to the eye. Costly knick-knacks were scattered here and there, with a profusion which spoke not only of an artistic sense, but also of a well-filled purse. Indeed, every article which the room contained was a thing both of beauty and of price. And the most beautiful thing in it was the lady who owned it all. Very charming it was to note the delight which came to her from the mere joy of possession, as, like a child, she passed from treasure to treasure, admiring, fondling each in turn.

“ Mine ! mine ! all mine ! The most wonderful part of it all is that Alan, of all people in the world, should have such rooms, for the bedroom's almost more exquisite than this, and the drawing-room's a dream. When I first met Alan I never should have guessed him to be the owner of such a house as this. Money, yes, Alan emanates money ; but taste—dear Alan's taste is excellent—or I shouldn't be here ; but it's not equal to this. Dear, dear Alan.” Again the musical laughter which, in such a connection, one hardly knew

how to take. "It only shows that dear Alan is cleverer than one would think, or he would never have guessed that, in some directions, he wasn't clever. This Sir Philip Ford must be by way of being a curiosity. That Alan thinks him a tin god goes for nothing; he has a good many tin gods, has Alan, and he has no idea how tinny some of them are. The dear, dear boy! Fancy Alan asking him to furnish his house for him, and fancy Sir Philip doing it! 'I asked him,' says Alan, 'to make of it a perfect house for a perfect woman, and you'll find he's done it.' For once in his life Alan was right—Sir Philip has done it. The man must be a genius. I've seen some fine houses in one way or another, but I do believe that this is the most perfect of them all. And it's mine! mine! all mine!" Once more the laughter, which this time seemed more in place. "The point of the joke is that I am persuaded that she was the perfect woman for whom it was all designed; that it was she whom Alan had in his mind's eye when he set Sir Philip to work. Poor dear, ill-treated young woman! I could see it in her face as she entered the room. Of course she never would have come if it had not been for her mamma. What an affliction mamma must be. I have found her a trial on those occasions on which I have been compelled to have one; there are times when a lone lorn maiden must have a female parent; but a permanent mamma—how thankful I ought to be when I consider that I always have been saved from that!"

The little lady, stretching herself full length upon a couch, passed from the consideration of how delightful it was to be without a mother,

to admiration of the small pair of red shoes which peeped from under the hem of her skirt.

“What pretty feet I have—really pretty; because mine are feet which don't owe their beauty to a shoemaker. And that's the secret of it all—I am so pretty altogether. It makes it so delightful. In a female creature beauty and brains are the two things most to be desired; and since I have them both how thankful I ought to be. Men may pose as they please, but they find it impossible to be hard on a really pretty and clever girl, while the average masculine will forgive her anything. He likes to be twisted round a pretty woman's pretty fingers. Of course there are exceptions; it is they who give to life its savour. I love a man who can be a brute to me if only because it supplies me with such a very adequate reason why I should be a brute to him. Oh, dear, how sick I should get of always honey!”

There was a tap on the door. A maid entering advanced towards her with an envelope upon a salver.

“The person who brought it, madam, is waiting for an answer.”

Mrs. Thurston skimmed the brief note which the envelope contained. She looked up with a smile.

“Go into the other room and wait. I'll have an answer ready in a minute; then I'll ring.”

The maid retired. The little lady re-read the note, this time more carefully, yet still with smiling face.

“There is one of the brutes—I wondered how long it would be before he appeared upon the scene. Funny boy! he writes as if it were his

to command and mine to obey. When will men learn ? ”

Seating herself at a writing-table, which was so exquisitely fashioned that it seemed almost desecration to use it for its avowed purpose, scribbling a few hasty lines, she crammed the sheet of paper on which they had been written into an envelope, then hesitated.

“ Shall I put any name outside ? Better not.” Touching a bell which was in front of her she handed the blank envelope to the maid. “ Give that to the person who is waiting.”

Alone again, she glanced at the clock on the mantel.

“ I’ve nearly half an hour in which to compose my mind, and prepare myself—for the very worst. So here goes for preparation.”

Moving to the piano, she began to sing a song which had recently been the rage in Paris ; but which was hardly the sort of song one might expect that a young married woman would sing even in the solitude of her own chamber.

CHAPTER III

THE SUMMER HOUSE

MRS. OWEN was feeling unwell, as, when there was any unpleasantness in the air, she was very apt to do. There was something decidedly disagreeable in the air just then. Doris was behaving in a way which was most unsatisfactory. And that in spite of her mother's plaintive wailing.

"Really, Doris, if you will persist in going on like this you'll make me thoroughly ill. You know how easily things do upset me. In my present state of health it's most unfeeling—most!"

Mrs. Owen, lying farther back on the pillows of the couch, held an eau de Cologne laden pocket handkerchief to her forehead with one hand, and a bottle of smelling-salts to her nostrils with the other. In spite, however, of the lady's conspicuous distress, her daughter continued to persist.

"I'm very sorry, mother, but you have brought it all upon yourself. If you will subject me to such humiliations——"

"Brought it all upon myself! Subject you to humiliations! As if you yourself were not the cause of everything! Oh, my poor head! I know I'm going to be ill."

Instead of appearing properly sympathetic

an angry light came into the young lady's eyes ; her lips were drawn tighter together.

" I don't wish to argue with you as to who has been most to blame——"

" I should think you didn't ! "

" But you yourself must see how perfectly impossible our position is in Mr. Thurston's house."

" Mr. Thurston ! Why will you speak of him like that ? "

" Is his name not Thurston ? "

" Doris, you will drive me mad ! When you have called him Alan all your life ! "

" I will never call him Alan again, I promise you that ; and surely you should be the last person to remind me that I have ever done so."

" Oh, my poor head ! Where is my phenacetin ? "

" That you should insist on dragging me here was bad enough ; but that you should think of staying when it is the evident intention of that woman he has married——"

" He would have had to marry a woman even if he had married you. Don't throw the fact of his having married a woman in his face, my dear. You might have been the woman he has married had you chosen ; don't show temper because, by your own action, you are not."

" Mother, why won't you look the truth in the face ? "

" Oh, my poor head ! Why will you shout like this ? "

" Don't you know as well as I do how he has played fast and loose with me, throwing me on and off as if I were an old glove. Since you are my mother one would have thought that you would

have protected me from him ; but that you have never dreamt of doing."

"If you were like any ordinary person you wouldn't talk such nonsense. You wanted a saint ; instead of which Alan Thurston is just an ordinary man."

"I should imagine, mother, that only an extraordinary man would treat the girl to whom he is engaged as Alan Thurston has treated me. I have forgiven him again and again for what the ordinary woman would never have forgiven him once. How long ago is it since he came to me with vows of penitence, imploring me to give him another trial ? And then—within a month !—he marries a woman whom he has met for the first time in his life less than a fortnight before—and you say I could have married him. Apparently any one could have done that."

"Exactly. That has been my opinion all along, which only shows how foolish you were not to take advantage of the chance when you had it."

"Mother, for both our sakes I will credit you with an incapacity to understand the meaning of your own words. And then, after he has used me in such a fashion, you drag me here, to his house, immediately after he has returned from his honeymoon. No wonder he does not condescend to be at home to receive us, and that his wife is insolent. I don't know what you intend to do, but I shall leave to-morrow."

"You shall do nothing of the kind. If you are not careful you will really rouse me, and then you will be sorry, as you frequently are when it is too late. Since you take up this high-faluting strain you shall know what my—what our exact position

is. Are you aware that I changed our last five-pound note to bring us here ? ”

“ Mother ! ”

“ Our last five-pound note ! I have less than two sovereigns left. If you insist on leaving to-morrow I have hardly enough money to pay your fare to London, and then what is to become of you—of both of us ? ”

The girl stood facing her with white cheeks and wide-open eyes.

“ Mother, is this true ? ”

“ Absolutely, literally true ! I have not two sovereigns left in all the world. I don't know what you have.”

“ I ? I have only a few shillings—certainly not half-a-sovereign.”

“ Then that is precisely how it is with us.”

“ But—I don't understand. I had no idea that we were as poor as this. I—I thought you had some income, mother.”

“ My income, such as it is, was mortgaged up to the hilt and over long ago.”

“ Then—how have we been living ? ”

“ Better ask no questions. I should have told you nothing now had you not forced me. I only wished to point out to you how impossible it is that we should leave to-morrow, so please let us consider that subject closed.”

“ Mother, have you—have you been having money from Alan Thurston ? ”

“ I will tell you one thing—I intend to have money from Alan Thurston.”

“ Mother ! ”

“ You heard what I said, you are not deaf, nor am I, so please don't shout ‘ mother ’ ! I am as

conscious as you are that he has treated you shamefully; only, unlike you, I don't intend to allow him to escape scot free. Either he hands me of his own accord a handsome sum, a really handsome sum, by way of compensation, or—he will receive a communication from my solicitor."

"Mother, I—I won't have it."

"You won't have it! Doris, don't, if you can help it, be a greater idiot than you have been already. How are you going to prevent it? I have only to tell him the state of my affairs, and, unless I much misjudge him, he'll need no pressing to induce him to give me what I ought to have, after the way in which he has treated you. He is a gentleman, in spite of all that you can bring against him, and nothing you can do or say will prevent his doing his best to keep me out of the workhouse, and himself out of the law courts. So, if you take my advice, you'll hold your tongue, and for once in your life you'll attempt no interference. You can look and play the martyr; but you can't and shan't leave this house until I tell you. Now, go! Leave me! You have made me more than half hysterical, and my head is splitting."

Doris went, with a tempest of feeling raging within to which she was altogether incapable of giving utterance; out into the garden which, even in the darkness, she knew so well, along the winding path to the summer-house, in which it was the fashion at Glynde, in the long days of summer, to do almost everything but sleep. There, at that season of the year, she could be sure of being alone, and might sob out her grief and her shame in solitude.

By degrees the tumult even of her emotion began to be spent. She became conscious that time was passing, and that if she proposed to be present at dinner it was desirable that she should return to the house. She was lying, full length, face downwards, on a wooden seat, and was just about to change to a sitting posture when a sound caused her to continue motionless. She heard footsteps advancing along the path—the footsteps of more than one person. While she was hoping that it was no one who was coming in search of her, a voice came towards her through the darkness; one which, although she had only heard it once, she never should forget. It was the voice of Mrs. Thurston—Alan's wife. At the sound Doris clung still closer to the seat, as if it were a refuge. Surely she was not coming to look for her. She should not find her if she was. Than endure the ignominy of being discovered in such a position by her, with the traces of her anguish written in unmistakable characters upon her face, the girl would almost rather have died.

But apparently she had alarmed herself unnecessarily. It soon became plain that she was not the object of the lady's walks abroad. It was Mrs. Thurston's companion who was the magnet who had drawn her out into the cold dampness of the November evening; it immediately became obvious to the listener's attentive ear that that companion was a man.

The pair reached the summer-house, then paused. Doris held her breath. It was Mrs. Thurston speaking.

“This is the place I want; let us go in here. We ought to be safe from observation if there

should happen to be a spy about ; though let me inform you, my friend, this visit of yours must not be repeated. Now tell me—I can only give you two minutes at the most—what is it that you want ? ”

They entered ; there was their tread upon the boarded floor. Then the man spoke, in a not unpleasant voice, though now and then in some of his tones was that which was hardly suggestive of ultra-refinement. His idioms also were frequently his own.

“ The first thing I want’s a kiss. I’ve wanted that God knows how long. As I came I swore I’d have one, if I had to take it under your new chap’s very nose.”

“ My dear boy, you can have a dozen—under my very nose.” Judging from the sound he had them. At that moment Doris was physically incapable of revealing her presence ; but if the ground would only have opened and swallowed her up ! Presently it seemed that the lady was endeavouring to disengage herself from the gentleman’s arms. “ Now, boy, don’t be silly ! Since you’ve put pleasure first do let’s come to business. Don’t you understand that I haven’t a couple of minutes ? What do you want ? ”

“ What I’ve always liked about you is your—shall we call it ?—sublime cheek.”

“ You can call it what you please ; only please don’t waste time in talking about me.”

“ For calmness you’re unique. You promise that I shall be your best boy for all the days of your life, and then when, by the merest accident, I learn that you’ve gone and got yourself married, you tell me that I’m not to waste time in talking

about you. What might you think I've come to talk about?"

"My dear Bill, I had to marry; I was sick of governing."

"You weren't forced to govern. There was me."

"You! The police are such disagreeable creatures, and you know how unpleasant they were making themselves about you."

"I rather fancy that, at that time, they were also taking an interest in you."

"Well, all the more reason why I should regulate myself, as I have done. They would never interfere with so respectable a person as I have become. Do you know there's an earl in the family? One day I may be a countess."

"How many lives are there between your husband and the title?"

"Only two. Under certain circumstances, two lives—what are they?"

"Exactly. What are they? You're a beauty. What sort of man is the husband?"

"Well—he's not a bad sort in a way; but—he's variable. Normally, he's a gentleman from top to toe, though there's a streak of the cad in him."

"And you found it. I see."

"Really, Bill, that isn't very nice of you. Yet I suppose I did; and now the trouble is that I don't know whether to keep on finding it, or whether to screw him up to the gentleman pitch, and keep him there. But I dare say before very long I shall be able to make up my mind. Now, boy, I absolutely must go."

"Before you go what I want to know, as you

are very well aware, is, where, in all this, do I come in ? ”

“ If you’ll give me your address I’ll write to you, and meet you in town, and we’ll have a regular rare old time together ; then I’ll explain where you come in. In the meanwhile, I do hope that you’re not pressed for cash.”

“ I am, as you’ve evidently guessed.”

“ Would French bank-notes be of any use to you ? ”

“ Any number, if they’re not ear-marked.”

“ These aren’t. I’ve not much money of my own, but I happen to have some French notes, which came into my possession in rather a curious way.”

“ Is it a good story ? ”

“ Well, that depends ; perhaps I’ll tell it you some day. There are five of them for a thousand francs each ; that’s two hundred pounds. Would you like to strike a match to see that they’re all right ? ”

There was a rustling, as if papers were being passed from hand to hand.

“ No, thanks, I’ll trust you. Kiddie, you’re a brick. I shouldn’t be surprised if I make my fortune with this two hundred.”

“ Yes, I know. You’d better live on it until it’s gone ; you’ll find that’s the best investment.”

“ If two hundred was all you’d got you’d go for the gloves, I bet.”

“ Well, if you will go for the gloves—and I suppose you must—I hope you’ll get them. What’s the address which will find you ? ”

“ William Seymour, 72 Albion Street, Regent’s Park, until you hear from me to the contrary.”

“ I don't want to hear from you ; you'll hear from me in about a fortnight. I expect by then I shall be bored to death ; and when I am bored I must go bang. Now, boy, good-bye ! That's enough ! Be good ! ”

The speakers left the summer-house. They went together for a certain distance ; then they paused. Presently Doris could hear footsteps moving in two different directions. The pair had parted.

CHAPTER IV

SIR PHILIP FORD

UNTIL the retreating footsteps had altogether died away, Doris scarcely dared to breathe. One tread ceased first; the lady's, as she passed into the house. The other continued to be audible for some moments, as the man made the best of his, doubtless, more or less erratic way along the winding paths out of the grounds. When everything was perfectly still Doris drew a long breath; it seemed to her that she had been nearly stifled. Then she sat upon the narrow wooden seat; it was not strange that she felt stiff. Her uncomfortable recumbent attitude had continued much longer than she supposed. Again she drew a long draught of air into her lungs; she was conscious of an unpleasant feeling of oppression. Then, staring straight in front of her into the darkness, she tried to arrange her thoughts, to think, to make head or tail of all that she had heard; to put the pieces of the puzzle together, and try to find the answer to the riddle.

Than her mother few people had a wider acquaintance of the world, including certain aspects of its shady side. But she! She knew nothing. It seemed only the other day, and indeed it was not long, that she had left her convent school, to which she had been sent because it was cheap.

Her mother had kept her boxed up as much as possible since, in the hope and with the intention of marrying her to Alan. Because, however, in certain respects Alan had not come up to her fastidious standard, she had proved obstinate altogether beyond her mother's worst forebodings. She would not marry him until he did ; though she herself had not the faintest notion of how far, in reality, he had fallen beneath it. The young gentleman, with her mother's assistance, had managed to conceal from her about three-fourths of the truth.

The full significance of the interview of which she had been an unintentional auditor reached into worlds of whose existence she was ignorant. But even she could not help but understand that this seemed rather a curious woman whom Alan had won for a wife. So curious a woman that, for Alan's sake, she herself was frightened. Poor foolish Alan ! She had known throughout that his worst fault was his foolishness ; she would have given her right hand lightly to have made him what she considered wise. What had he done ? Married a woman who allowed another man to kiss her, and talked—What was it they had been talking about ? What did it all mean ? Poor Alan ! A wave of pity swept over her for Alan. Overtaken by a sudden irresistible something, putting her hands up to her face she broke into a flood of tears, and wept because of the plight in which Alan was likely to find himself.

For the second time she threw herself face downwards upon that wooden seat.

Suddenly a voice addressed her from out of the darkness—a masculine voice.

"I beg your pardon, but who is in there? Is anything wrong?"

Engrossed though she had been by her own sensations the owner of the voice must have moved softly to have come upon her without her having been conscious of his approach. Startled, she sprang to her feet with an exclamation which was part sob, part scream.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

Her first thought was that Mrs. Thurston's companion had returned. But the voice which replied was certainly not his. It was so quiet, yet so clear, that unawares it calmed her.

"I am no one in particular. Only as I was crossing the grounds I heard something which made me wonder if any one was in trouble. May I strike a match?"

The answer came quick as a flash.

"You may not; you will certainly do nothing of the kind. Will you be so good as to let me pass?"

"It is rather difficult in this obscurity to see whereabouts you are, but I don't think I am obstructing the way. I imagine that there is plenty of room for you to pass."

Apparently there was, for with a sudden whirl of skirts a figure went by him, and up the path which led to the house, running like the wind. At a more leisurely pace he followed. As he entered the brightly lighted hall, a young man, who had been warming himself in front of the blazing fire, came briskly forward, with outstretched hands.

"Hollo, Ford! I'm awfully glad to see you. I was beginning to wonder where on earth you were. But, I say, what's the matter with Doris?"

"Doris? I don't understand."

"She came tearing in at that door half a minute before you did, looking—well, as if she had been having a deuce of a time. She took me quite aback. When I went to speak to her she rushed off and up the stairs without a word. I hope she's not mad with me because I wasn't at home to receive her when she came. The fact is Earle persuaded me to stay and have a pop at some of his outlying birds, and time went so fast that I stopped later than I meant to."

Sir Philip Ford, moving towards the fire, held out his hands to the warmth.

"Is Miss Owen here?"

"Rather. She came this afternoon, when I was out, bother it! She's so quick to take offence. I thought you'd like to meet her."

A faint smile wrinkled the corners of Sir Philip's eyes.

"That was very good of you."

"You know you told me that you had never met her."

"I never have."

"Although you knew her mother."

"Oh yes, I know her mother." There was a pause. Sir Philip looked down at the fire. "I am a little surprised to find Miss Owen here."

"Quite so; only—the fact is, the old lady practically asked herself."

"Did she say that her daughter desired to accompany her?"

The young man edged closer to Ford.

"I'm half inclined to suspect that, if she had had her way, Doris wouldn't have come at all; and, between ourselves, I almost wish she hadn't."

It makes it most confoundedly awkward for me, you know."

"And for her."

"Yes, of course, and for her. But where she gets the pull is that she's got the right on her side."

"So I should imagine."

"And I haven't, which makes all the difference. And I can't help feeling that she knows it. The consequence is that I don't know exactly where I am."

"A feeling you have possibly had before."

"Don't be nasty, Ford. I don't need you to tell me that my conduct hasn't been altogether what it might have, worse luck! but then, who's has?"

"The point is that yours hasn't."

"Don't you understand that that's what makes it so horribly awkward for me? If I'd behaved well, and she'd behaved badly, I shouldn't have minded meeting her twenty times a day; I should rather have liked it. But as it is—especially as Doris is—oh, she's a thousand times too good for me."

"Tell me, Alan, does Mrs. Thurston know the story of your relations with Miss Owen?"

Again the young man drew nearer to the other.

"She does, and she doesn't; I had to tell her something. You don't see all that her questions are driving at until you've answered them, and then I don't doubt she's guessed more on her own account—in fact, I know she has, from the hints she's dropped. Bless you, she's as sharp as a razor, though it doesn't strike you when you know her first. At least, it didn't me. But then, don't you know, I believe women are sharper than men—all of 'em."

“What did Mrs. Thurston say to the idea of Miss Owen’s presence in the house as your guest?”

“Nothing—not a word. As you’ll soon see for yourself, Eveleen is one of the dearest girls in the world—one of the very dearest; but what I like about her as much as anything is that she lets me do just as I like; never tries to talk me out of it, or anything like that, but she just lets me do it. Why, I believe if I wanted to ask the whole Empire ballet down here, she’d say, ‘Ask ’em.’”

“Would she?” Sir Philip, who had been facing the fire, now turned to confront his friend. “And I suppose you’re very much in love with her?”

“In love? Thurston crossed his arms upon his chest and knitted his brows. “Do you know, I’m beginning to be of the opinion that there’s something in being a Mahometan, after all.”

“Is there? As how?”

“The harem, my boy, the harem. A Mahometan loves a girl, and marries her; then he loves another girl, and marries her, and so on. Every one’s contented.”

“Are they?”

“Of course they are, or the thing wouldn’t go on. But in England—what a difference! Absurd! In love with Eveleen? Of course I am, over head and ears, but that doesn’t prevent my having feelings towards other people also.”

“Doesn’t it? Has Mrs. Thurston heard you talk like this?”

“Ford, I don’t believe she’d care one bit if she did—not one atom. Eveleen is altogether different to the average girl. She broad-minded—wonderfully.”

“You make me anxious not to postpone the

moment of meeting her. I had better go and dress. Where am I?"

"In the old quarters. They'll be kept for you, old man, as often and as long as you'll do me the pleasure of using them. Marriage is going to make no change in our relations, so far as I'm concerned."

It chanced that as Sir Philip was going towards his room Mrs. Thurston came out of her door. She saw a man whose back was towards her walking along the corridor. She stared, as if in the sight there was something singular; then starting back, she leaned against the wall, as if overcome by sudden faintness; then, with a quick movement, which suggested a curious degree of haste, she returned into her apartment and closed the door. For some seconds she stood with her hands held to her side, as if panting for breath.

When, a few moments after, Mr. Thurston entered, she assailed him with an instant question.

"Alan, who was that man who just now went along the corridor?"

"Man? I suppose it was Ford."

"Ford? Sir Philip Ford? Your bosom friend?"

"Of course. Why not? You know he occupies the oak room at the end here. What's the matter with you? My dear child, you look upset."

She laughed; the tone in which she answered him could scarcely have been lighter.

"No wonder, considering that you have been away all day, and now that you have turned up you haven't even kissed me!"

He supplied the omission referred to there and then.

CHAPTER V

“WHAT ON EARTH AM I TO DO?”

THE host and hostess were first down in the drawing-room. Then came Mrs. Owen and her daughter. Sir Philip Ford came last. At the moment of his entry Mrs. Thurston was talking gaily to Doris Owen. She had some flowers in her hand, with which she insisted on ornamenting the girl's simple frock. As they stood face to face, close together, they made a couple worth looking at. So Mr. Thurston seemed to think. He so obviously had eyes only for his wife that was, and for his wife that was to have been, that Mrs. Owen relinquished her attempt to engage him in conversation. Instead she regarded him with something in her gaze which, had he observed it, he would hardly have felt was flattering.

It was a peculiarity of Philip Ford's that everything he did he did noiselessly. His movements had the quality of noiselessness, which, now and then, is apt to be disconcerting. On the present occasion he had been a second or two in the room before any one in it became conscious that he was there. Mrs. Owen perceived him first. She rose with a little exclamation.

“Why, Sir Philip, it is an age since I saw you. I must congratulate you. When we last met you

were plain Mr. Ford ; if you ever could have been plain.”

He bowed over her extended hand, and said nothing. Thurston cried :—

“Ford, let me present you to my wife. Eveleen, this is Sir Philip Ford, of whom you have heard me talk morning, noon and night.”

The lady came laughingly forward.

“Sir Philip, if I hadn't met you soon I should have expired of curiosity. According to Alan you have every virtue under the sun, and on that ground I'm almost prepared to dislike you ; because a man without a single vice must be a monster, and I do hope you are not that. But why do you look at me like that ? Is it because you think that I'm a monster ? ”

Ford had moved to meet her ; but the instant she had turned, and he saw her face, his advance was arrested, and he remained motionless, looking at her in a manner which under the circumstances certainly was odd. It seemed that it was with difficulty he found his tongue.

“I think that we have met before.”

Even his tone was curious.

“Have we ? ” she observed, with an air of child-like surprise, as if she were searching her memory in an endeavour to recall his face. She shook her head. “I don't believe we have. At least, I have never met you ; I am sure I should not have forgotten you if I had.” She turned to Doris. “I don't think, Sir Philip, you know Miss Owen ? ”

He found himself bowing to a tall, fair-haired girl, who blushed consummately. Before there was time for any further exchange of speech dinner

was announced. He took in his hostess. As they went she questioned him.

"Where did you think you had met me before, Sir Philip?"

"At Monte Carlo!"

"At Monte Carlo!—I wish you had. As it happens I have never been to Monte Carlo; but as I've never been anywhere worth going to, that's of course. Monte Carlo is one of the places I have always wanted to go to, and at last my desire is to be realised—after Christmas Alan is going to take me there. And pray, when did you think you saw me at Monte Carlo?"

"Last March."

"Last March! Why, last March I was in the wilds of Devonshire trying to teach three small children the rudiments of education and of manners—they were equally in lack of both."

They had reached the dining-room, and, with the others, were taking their seats at table. She spoke to her husband.

"Fancy Sir Philip thinking he had met me before; and where do you suppose, of all places in the world? At Monte Carlo!—last March!"

"Last March? Why, last March weren't you with the Welbys?"

"Rather! I was very much with the Welbys—at Sidmouth! We went to Sidmouth directly after Christmas, and we stayed there till the end of May, and, my! wasn't it dull. Mrs. Owen, have you ever been to Sidmouth?"

It seemed that Mrs. Owen had, some years ago. She and her hostess exchanged notes about the place. Dinner progressed. It was not precisely a lively meal, possibly because the conversation

hung fire. Mr. and Mrs. Thurston did most of the talking, with assistance from Mrs. Owen. Doris was not only nearly speechless, confining herself to monosyllables when spoken to; but each time she was addressed, she turned fiery red, which, however becoming it might have made her appear in the eyes of others, she herself probably found uncomfortable. Ford was in one of his silent moods, until, that is, the ladies had gone. For at Glynde that night they followed the old fashion of leaving the gentlemen alone.

For some seconds the remarks the two men exchanged were of the baldest kind. Then Thurston said:—

“Odd that you should have thought that you had met my wife before.”

“Very. Has she any relations?—a sister? anything of that kind?”

“She has neither kith nor kin; she is the sole remaining member of her family. And, let me tell you, that’s a position which is not without its advantages; at least so far as I am concerned. When she said she’d be my wife all we had to do was to marry. There were no bothering relations to consult—no bothering any one. It was all over and done with in less than no time—as comfortably as you please.”

“Then you made no settlements?”

“Not before. My dear chap, she married me for myself alone. For one thing, on such matters she was as innocent as a baby; I don’t believe she knew what settlements were. But I made it all right after. When we came back from our honeymoon Parkes had everything in order, so I gave her her marriage deeds as a sort of

supplementary wedding present. You should have seen her face when she understood what they were. Ford, I'm a lucky beggar!"

"She was a governess when you first met her?"

"Talk about a romance!—ours was a romance if ever there was one. When I got to Oban she was governess to some people named Welby, who were staying in the hotel. I only meant to stay the night—I was going on to Inverness; but when I'd seen her I decided to give the deer a rest. You'd have done the same. Anybody would."

"How long had she been with the Welbys?"

"I never asked; but I don't think such a very long time; though, mind you, she'd been quite long enough."

"Where was she before?"

"My good man, how the deuce should I know? Having a beastly bad time somewhere. Fancy her a governess!"

"Then you know nothing about her?"

"Except what she's told me—which is all that she knows about me—which is a situation which again has points."

Mr. Thurston winked. Ford, leaning back in his chair, contemplated the ceiling, apparently unconscious of the twitching of the other's eyelid.

"Who are the Welbys?"

"I fancy old Welby's a retired stockbroker, or something of that sort. They thought no end of her. When they saw that I was serious they made a devil of a fuss. Nothing would suit the old boy but that he should pay for the wedding; what's more, he gave her away. They behaved very decently, on the whole."

"Where do the Welbys live?"

“Nowhere in particular, so far as I know. They’re the sort who live at hotels, and keep moving from one to the other. Lots of people do it nowadays; so many women do hate house-keeping. When last I heard of them they were at Aldeburgh. Old Welby thinks that he can play golf. I saw a man the other day who told me that he had met him there, and that he was swearing like a trooper because he was what he called ‘off his game.’ What do you think of Doris?”

The question was such a sudden divagation that Sir Philip seemed to find it necessary to ponder his reply.

“Considering that, so far, I have not had the pleasure of speaking to her your inquiry is a trifle premature.”

“Getting an opinion out of you is like extracting an elephant’s eye-tooth. I mean, what do you think of her looks? You’ve seen her.”

“She looks like a lady.”

“Looks like a lady! Come along, let’s get into the other room. Looks like a lady! You’re an enthusiastic kind of creature. She’s the most exquisite looking lady you ever saw, I’ll lay anything on that.”

“Barring, I presume, Mrs. Thurston.”

“They’re different styles.”

“Indeed, Alan, on the subject of women you should be a better judge than I am.”

Mr. Thurston looked at his friend as if he would have said a good deal; but, instead of saying it, he laughed and laid his hand upon the other’s shoulder.

“Let’s go to the ladies. Ford, I’ve known you my whole life long, and I’ll be hanged if I know you yet.”

When they reached the drawing-room they found that Miss Owen had gone to bed. Her mother, in reply to Mr. Thurston’s inquiry, explained that the journey had tried her a little. The four played bridge. When the two ladies cut together Mr. Thurston pointed out that it was hardly fair that they should have to play against two men, a suggestion at which they smiled. They professed they were content. The result proved that they had cause to be. They began by playing for very trifling stakes, which, when the women won the first rubber, were raised to lend, as Mrs Owen observed, more interest to the game. Later, success continuing in the same quarter, they were raised again considerably. When, after a lengthy sitting, the quartette retired to rest, Mrs. Owen, in the privacy of her own apartment, found that she had won fifty-seven pounds, a fact which apparently afforded her considerable satisfaction. She counted the money again and again. Assured that the tale was right, she laughed, and then she sighed.

“It’s an extraordinary dispensation of Providence how often, just as I am reduced to my last sovereign, manna tumbles from the skies. That little windfall will render it unnecessary for me to turn the screw too suddenly on Alan. A very clever woman, Mrs. Thurston; no wonder Doris was eclipsed. At bridge she’d hold her own in any company. I wonder if she guessed how much my purse stood in need of being replenished. I should say that she’s good at guessing, and that

she's the sort who'd help a lame dog over a stile, even another woman.”

Sir Philip Ford, in the seclusion of his room, seemed to be perplexed by the intricacies of a problem which he felt constrained to solve, if possible, before he placed himself between the sheets. He sat down and thought; he stood up and thought; he paced the room and thought. But rack his brain as he might he seemed unable to find a satisfactory answer to the question which he kept continually asking himself:—

“What on earth am I to do?”

CHAPTER VI

DORIS RETURNS FROM HER WALK

FOR November, the next morning was unusually fine. Miss Owen was up and out betimes. She had the Englishwoman's cup of tea and bread and butter in her bedroom, and told the maid if she was not back to breakfast to explain that she had a slight headache, and had gone for a long walk. She tramped twelve miles, in a fashion which did credit to her pedestrian powers; when she returned to Glynde, so far from showing any signs of fatigue, she looked as if the exercise had done her good. There was a flush on her cheeks and a light in her eyes, both of which became her very well. And if her hair was a little blown by the breeze, that was not unbecoming either.

One could not but suspect that that was Alan Thurston's opinion, by the fashion in which he stood and watched her, as she came along the path leading from the clapper gate. He was attired in a costume which suggested that, ere long, he designed to do something with a gun. For some moments he was motionless; then with a certain something in his bearing which would have made those who knew him best doubt if he was altogether at his ease, he advanced to meet her. Her embarrassment, as she saw him coming, was unmistakable. The slight flush on her cheeks

became instantly exaggerated to a flaming red, a species of affliction to which she seemed constitutionally subject. The brightness in her eyes became suspiciously like a glare; the erectness which marked her carriage, sheer rigidity. That Mr. Thurston was not altogether oblivious of these signs and their meaning seemed likely from the halting fashion of his speech. It was possibly owing to a feeling of slight awkwardness that, avoiding all preliminaries, he came to the point at once.

"I—I hope you're not going to avoid me altogether, Doris?"

Her answer was uncompromisingly frank.

"I don't see how I can, while I am in your house; but I should like to."

"That—that's awfully hard on me, isn't it? But you always were hard on me." She said nothing, but her looks were eloquent. He staggered on. "Of course I know I—I've behaved very badly to you. It's not the slightest use attempting to offer any explanation of how it all came about. The plain truth is I—I've treated you like a brute."

If this very candid confession of misconduct was intended to move her to pity he could scarcely have found the result encouraging. Her tone was merciless.

"Mr. Thurston——"

"I say, Doris, don't call me that!"

"Mr. Thurston"—although she paused, as if to challenge him, this time he did not venture to remonstrate; he merely looked unhappy—"I imagine that even you would not attempt to insult me farther by offering what you call an explanation. The facts are in themselves a sufficient

explanation, thank you. But I want you to understand that, although I am in your house, I wish to have as little to say to you as I can possibly help; and I wish you not to attempt to say anything to me."

"Go it!"

This was by way of being an interpolated interjection.

"I wish you also to understand that, if it had not been for mamma, I never should have come to your house; mamma made me come. And I assure you that I intend to leave it at the earliest possible moment. To-day if I can."

"This is getting nice for me!"

Mr. Thurston sighed, a little boisterously. Miss Owen ignored both his words and his sigh.

"And I want you to understand something farther, and most of all"—she hesitated, as if at a loss for the exact words with which to express her meaning. When she continued she looked him straight in the face, with a gaze which he seemed to prefer to avoid by looking down at the gravel which he was kicking with the toe of his boot. "Mr. Thurston, mamma is not rich." She resented the grin with which the statement was saluted with sudden fury. "What do you mean by that?"

He glanced up, as if startled.

"What do you mean by what?"

"By smiling when I say mamma's not rich? Because you are do you think that you are entitled to jeer at those who aren't? What a standard yours is. I know, I understand. Because you're rich and we are poor you thought that you could buy me or not, as you pleased."

In his turn he fired up.

“That’s a lie! You know I loved you, and you told me that you loved me!”

“Loved you? I? Did I? What a creature I must have been. What a fool! But that’s all over. Mamma counted on my marrying you to make her better off; it was wrong of her, I know; then, when you made other arrangements, she was disappointed; and now she seems to think that she ought to receive some compensation for her disappointment.”

The lady stopped. The gentleman rather hastily concluded she had finished. He broke into eager speech.

“And do you suppose I’m such a brute as not to wish to do the right thing? Of course she shall have compensation, and you also, Doris. There is no sum you can name in reason which I shall not be willing to give you if you’ll only forgive me for what I’ve done. Forgive me, that’s all I ask. Regard me still as—as a friend. We were friends before we—we were something else; if you’ll only let us continue friends I’ll—Doris, I’ll settle on you a yearly income—a good one; I’ll——”

“Stop!—stop!—stop!” She repeated the word three times, as if she supposed there was virtue in the repetition. “Mr. Thurston, what manner of person do you suppose I am?—have you always supposed I am? Is it possible that you believe me to be the kind of creature your words suggest? Then no wonder you did not marry me! How dare you propose to give me money? or my mother? as if—as if we were people of that sort! Listen to me! If you dare to give my mother money, no matter what she

says, I will never speak to you again—never! What is more, it will mean parting between my mother and me, for I would sooner starve than live on bread which your money had paid for. From the moment in which I learn that she has stooped to take your money she will cease to be my mother; and so you will have robbed me not only of my self-respect, but of my mother too. Now, do you understand?"

"Oh, yes, I understand, at least I hear what you say; but, my dear Doris——"

"Don't call me that!—don't!"

"Oh, very well, I'm sure I'm willing to call you what you please. I'll call you Miss Jones, if you like; only let me tell you that your high-flown notions——"

"Mr. Thurston, I have said what I wished to say, and you have understood. Now will you be so good as to leave me, and not to speak to me again till I am able to quit your house?"

He looked at her straight enough then; his cheeks had a whitish tinge, his lips twitched.

"Do you mean that?"

"Absolutely. When I have left your house I will take care that you never speak to me again. I will make it my special business to see that you never have the chance, but while I am in your house I am, to some extent, at your mercy, which is why I ask from you this last favour. Mr. Thurston, I am waiting for you to go."

"Oh, I'll go fast enough, Miss Owen; and I'll tell you where I'll go. I'll go to your mother and I'll talk to her."

Mr. Thurston strode across the grass with what he probably intended to be an air of dignity; but

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which was rather suggestive of a mixture of bravado and bad temper. Doris stood looking after him till he had vanished from sight, then swung round on her heels, as if she proposed to return the way she had come, and found herself confronted by Sir Philip Ford.

CHAPTER VII

DORIS INTERVIEWS SIR PHILIP

SIR PHILIP greeted her as if he were unconscious of there being anything singular in her deportment.

“ Good-morning, Miss Owen. Is the headache better? Enjoyed your walk? ”

The young lady, deaf to his polite inquiries, answered him with the air of a tragedy queen.

“ Sir Philip Ford, I have to beg your pardon.”

“ Have you? Then it’s granted.”

His easy lightness seemed to take her aback, she being in no mood for lightness.

“ But I haven’t told you for what I have to beg your pardon.”

“ Haven’t you? Then I shouldn’t. If I were you I shouldn’t worry about trifles, especially in the morning.”

“ If you don’t mind I would rather tell you why I wish to beg your pardon. It is because I was so rude to you last night.”

“ Were you rude to me? I was not aware of it.”

“ For rushing out of the summer-house in the way I did, and—in speaking to you like that.”

Before he spoke again there was an interval of silence which was just sufficient to be perceptible.

“ Permit me formally to extend to you my full forgiveness.”

But the lady's humour was grandiloquent.

"Are you laughing at me, Sir Philip Ford?"

His tone was whimsical.

"Might I ask you not to address me at quite such length? It is only recently I have had a handle to my name. I never hoped to have, and I would so much rather that I hadn't. You see, it is mine because my brother and his son were killed both on the same day—last March. They were the best and dearest fellows in the world, and when they died nearly everything that I loved died with them."

As she looked at him there was positively something shining in the corner of each of her eyes.

"I am so sorry. I didn't know."

"So, when you address me at full length, it almost sounds as if you intended a reproach."

"I never meant it."

"I know; you didn't understand."

"That's how it was—I didn't understand."

This time the interval of silence was distinctly prolonged. She thrust the ferrule of her stick into the ground, while he, with his hands in the pockets of his shooting-jacket, seemed content to observe.

"Sir Philip, may I speak to you?"

"I shall esteem myself honoured."

"I mean—about something very particular."

She suddenly looked up at him with an expression on her face and in her eyes which moved him oddly.

"Although we are meeting each other for the first time in our lives, I believe you know everything about me."

"You credit me with a degree of knowledge which almost suggests omnipotence."

"I mean you know about what has taken place between Alan Thurston and me. You are his friend, and I think you know my mother very well."

"I have had the pleasure of Mrs. Owen's acquaintance for several years."

"Then you know, or at any rate you can guess, what a dreadful position I am in; what an altogether horrible, what an unendurable position. Please don't interrupt me till I have finished. Almost the worst part of it is that I am so—so—so absolutely alone. There is not a person to whom I can go for advice; no one whom I can consult. I am without a friend in the world."

"You have your mother."

"Yes, I have my mother." They exchanged glances. What telegraphic communication passed between them one cannot say; but each looked down with an air of almost shamefaced comprehension. When presently she spoke again her voice was pitched in a lower key.

"You know, I am not so very old."

"I should not have judged you to be very old."

"I mean—you know what I mean; though I dare say you think that I'm younger than I really am. Please don't think that I'm a child."

"In my opinion, if I may be allowed to express one, you are of exactly the right age; and I may add that you always will be."

"That is absurd. I don't want you to make remarks of that sort. What I want to do is to make you understand why I am talking to you like this."

"Exactly."

"It's because I know nothing of the world, and

you know everything ; at least, I mean that you know all about business, and—and that kind of thing.”

“ Well, we’ll concede it, though the statement is yours, not mine.”

“ What I want to do is to earn my own living.”

“ I see. It’s not always easy to earn one’s living.”

“ Isn’t it ? I suppose not. That’s what I feel. And yet—people do earn their living.”

“ Oh yes, people do—some people.”

“ I don’t see why I shouldn’t. In fact, I will—I must. You know, Sir Philip, I can do all sorts of things.”

“ As, for instance ? ”

“ I can do plain sewing.”

“ Plain sewing ? ”

“ I did no end of plain sewing at the convent—lots. I won three prizes for it. I did fancy needlework as well ; but, somehow, I never was much good at that. Then I can paint a little, and I can draw—I am rather good at drawing caricatures. I used to get into no end of trouble at the convent because of it ; but I kept on doing it, all the same.”

“ Did you ? You might let me see some examples of your work in that direction.”

“ If you would like to see them. Of course it’s rather horrid ; but I never meant to be horrid. I believe you can caricature people without being disagreeable, don’t you ? ”

“ Certainly.”

“ Then, of course, I can play and I can sing. Sister Annunciata once told me that I had one of the sweetest voices she had ever heard, and she

herself used to be a professional singer. I only tell you these things, not because I wish you to think that I am in any way a wonderful person—I am very far from being that—but because I wish you to understand that there is something I can do which might count when it comes to the question of earning my living.”

“Nothing can be clearer. I can take it that when you speak of earning your living you have in your mind the necessity of having to do so at, say, some more or less indefinite period.”

“Nothing of the kind. I want to start to-morrow ; to-day, if I can. I must.”

“Must ? Why ? ”

The lady searched the gentleman’s face with her eyes ; a process which he appeared to enjoy rather than otherwise.

“Sir Philip, I hope I am not boring you.”

“Not in the least.”

“And I hope I sha’n’t bore you if I explain to you the difficulty in which I find myself, and that you won’t think me an unpleasant person if I endeavour to explain to you the condition of degradation into which I have fallen.”

“Miss Owen, if you are in trouble and will tell me just what it is I shall esteem myself favoured if you will allow me to assist you to the best of my ability. Will that do ? ”

“Quite, thank you. Now I’ll tell you all about it.” She drew a long breath, as if to brace herself for the ordeal. “Do you know that mamma is not rich ? ” He inclined his head. “She is not only not rich, she is very poor.” He inclined his head again. “She has reckoned in a way that she ought not to have done on my

becoming Mr. Thurston's wife, and now that he has married some one else she wants him to give her money. I believe that she is going to ask him for some, and I believe he will give it her; and—and rather than be supported by his money I would beg my bread in the streets."

"Now I perceive the situation. I need hardly say that I entirely agree with you. I presume the position you fear may arrive at any moment?"

"She may be asking him for money while we're talking here; I feel sure she will directly she gets a chance. I can't imagine how she can do it; it makes me feel as if I would like to drown myself every time I think of it."

"I don't fancy you need resort to quite such drastic measures; especially as I can give you just the assistance you stand in need of; at any rate I think that I can find you work which will assure your independence."

"Oh, Sir Philip, can you? When? What is it?"

"It is work which quite possibly you will consider beneath your notice."

"I shall certainly not do that, whatever it is. But what is of almost paramount importance to me is, can I begin on it at once?"

"By at once you mean——?"

"To-day, or to-morrow at the latest."

He turned the matter rapidly over in his mind.

"I think that may be arranged; being entirely of your opinion that the sooner you leave this place the better. I go farther, under the circumstances I don't think you ever ought to have come."

"Of course I oughtn't. Do you think I don't know? We have been staying at an hotel; when

mamma left it yesterday there was absolutely nowhere I could go. Besides, my mother had my things and refused to let me have them unless I obeyed her."

"You poor child!"

"I am not a child, Sir Philip."

"Of course not; you are a woman. Let me explain what is the nature of the work which I am proposing you should take up. Campion, the rector of the parish in which my home is, is in need of a governess for his two small children. I have only to mention your name and I am sure he and his wife will receive you with open arms."

"But, Sir Philip, I'm not clever; and I've been told that governesses have to be frightfully clever nowadays. I wanted to be one before, but I was dissuaded. I was told I was no good."

"I assure you you are exactly the person Mr. and Mrs. Campion have been looking for. Their children are two small tots, who simply require to master the alphabet, and so on; you can teach them that."

"Oh yes, I can teach them that."

"Then I'll tell you what I propose. You go and do your packing, and I'll telegraph to Campion and ask if he can receive you to-day or to-morrow. I think you'll find that he and his wife will prefer to receive you to-day; in which case, after we have received his answer, I will myself take you down to the station and see you off by the very next train."

"Oh, thank you, Sir Philip, but—what will mamma say?"

"Nothing. If you want to leave this house you shall."

"You don't know mamma."

"Don't I? Possibly in some respects I know her better than you do. I tell you, Miss Owen, that if, during the course of to-day, you wish to take up your position as governess to Mr. and Mrs. Champion's children, no one shall do anything to prevent you. It is nothing very great you are going to; but the Campions are delightful people; they will like you and you will like them. You will at least be able to look round, and also able to make up your mind clearly what you would like to do in the future."

"That's what I want, a chance of looking round without being interfered with. And I am sure I would do my best to please Mr. and Mrs. Champion."

"Of course you will; don't I know it? So go and pack your boxes, or your box, while I send that telegram. Moments are precious."

"But, Sir Philip—mamma!"

"Never mind your mother. I will take her in hand. Will you go and pack?—unless you wish me to understand that you have been merely talking for talking's sake, and have not meant a single word you have said."

Without attempting a further remonstrance Miss Owen departed, with a good deal of the colour gone out of her cheeks, but full of resolution.

CHAPTER VIII

A QUESTION OF COMPENSATION

TAKING out his pocket-book Sir Philip proceeded to compose a telegram on a scale which showed a reckless disregard of the fact that it would have to be paid for at the rate of halfpenny a word :—

“ To Campion, Rectory, Baynham, Sussex.

“ Can you receive Miss Owen as governess to-day ? Pray convey my apologies to Mrs. Campion for putting her to inconvenience. You will confer on me a great favour if you can. When you read letter from me which Miss Owen will bring you will understand urgency of the matter. If your reply is in affirmative Miss Owen will come by afternoon train.

“ PHILIP FORD, Glynde, Essex.”

Having re-read what he had written Sir Philip thought :—

“ Better take that to the office myself ; that will be the shortest way of keeping my own counsel and avoiding complications. The mischief is that there is the old lady to tackle ; I ought to do that before she has a chance of getting at her daughter ; and time is short. If I only knew where to find her ! ”

He turned, and there was the lady, who, in a fine new sealskin coat, which reached almost to her heels, hardly looked as if she was impecunious. As he eyed her he wondered—as he had done on previous occasions—how old she really was. She was attired to look like twenty, and her manner was intended to match. It was a trifle boisterous, as a certain type of young woman's is apt to be.

"Fancy you hanging about the house when there is something to kill. I supposed that Alan and you would have been wading in slaughter long before this "

"I don't think Thurston has started yet, and it is possible that I sha'n't go at all."

"Hasn't Alan started? Then I wonder where he is."

Mrs. Owen had made what was for her a matutinal appearance with the express object of intercepting her host before he did start. She had been thinking things over, and while admitting that the fifty-seven pounds, her bridge booty, was a godsend, she felt strongly that, after all, it was the merest drop in the ocean, and that it was extremely desirable, for various reasons, some of them pressing ones, that she should come to a clear understanding with her daughter's recalcitrant wooer at the earliest possible moment. Sir Philip, assisted by Doris's confessions, guessed what was in the lady's mind.

"You wish to see Thurston?"

"There are one or two little matters which I should like to discuss with him if he isn't too much pressed for time."

"Discuss them with me instead."

“With you?” The lady opened her eyes.
“My good sir, what do you mean?”

“What I say. I myself am rather pressed for time; so, with your permission, we’ll come to the point in the fewest possible words. We have known each other long enough and well enough to excuse, on my part, a certain amount of candour. Mrs. Owen, you are going to ask Thurston to give you pecuniary compensation for the manner in which he has behaved to your daughter?”

Not impossibly the lady had been wondering what his hurried preface was leading to; now that she learnt, her tone suggested that surprise had given place to wonder.

“Really, Sir Philip, even candour between friends may go too far. What conceivable right have you to say such things?”

“I assure you that I merely say it to save time.”

“To save time! You say a thing like that!”

“My idea being that instead of going to Thurston you should come to me.”

“Come to you, Sir Philip! What do you mean?”

“I will treat you as handsomely as he will, on two conditions; one being that you will give me your written undertaking not to attempt to get money from him, and the other that you will not remain in this house another night. That, under existing circumstances, you never ought to have entered it, is by the way; but that you should have brought Miss Owen is an offence of which I had not thought that you were capable.”

Judging from her expression the lady listened with increasing amazement.

"Sir Philip, what you are talking about is so altogether beyond my comprehension that I am at a loss what to say, or how to answer you."

"Then I will endeavour to make myself still clearer, if you will be so good as to give me your close attention, since I am in a hurry to get to the village in order to send a telegram. In consideration of your giving me the written undertaking I have mentioned——"

"Written undertaking? Won't my promise be sufficient?"

"For form's sake you had better let me have it in writing, and of leaving Glynde to-day——"

"Whatever am I to say to Alan and his wife? I told him I would stay a week at the least; and I gave him to understand that if Mrs. Thurston wished it, Doris would stay even longer."

Something came into Ford's face which caused the lady to feel more and more bewildered; nor was that impression lessened either by his words, or by the way in which they were spoken—with an air of finality, as if he were warning her that he intended to brook no contradiction.

"In any case Miss Owen leaves Glynde this afternoon."

"Sir Philip! what—what do you mean? Where is Doris going?"

"Miss Owen is going to some friends of mine."

"Friends of yours? She—she has been talking to you."

"I have had the pleasure of having some conversation with Miss Owen; and, as a result, she has consented to act upon my advice."

"And suppose I say she sha'n't? I am her mother! What right have you to interfere?"

You are an entire stranger ! I never heard of such assurance ! ”

There was a quality in the smile with which Sir Philip greeted her show of indignation which made her conscious of a vague sense of discomfort.

“ If you are as wise as I believe, you will not attempt to interfere with your daughter’s freedom of action. She is of age.”

“ She has only just turned twenty-one.”

“ She has at any rate turned twenty-one. She is in no sense responsible to you for any steps she may take to ensure her independence. The more especially since you have shown by your conduct that you are not a fit and proper person to protect her.”

“ Sir Philip Ford, how dare you say such things ! ”

“ Because they are true. Unless you are a more shameless person than I imagine, now that the facts are known to me, you will not attempt any further coercion, or, to you, the consequences may be disastrous. Miss Owen, I repeat, leaves Glynde this afternoon, whatever you may say or do ; if you are not a foolish woman she will leave with your complete acquiescence. So far as Miss Owen is concerned the matter is settled ; she wishes to be removed from the scope of your influence, and she shall be. What I wish to discuss is your own position. Do as I have said, and, on your leaving, I will give you my cheque for five hundred pounds.”

“ Five hundred pounds ? That—that’s very generous of you ; but still—still it’s not a very large sum, Sir Philip.”

“ If you let me have your address in town I will

call on you, or my lawyers will call on you, and engagements will be made which I think I can promise will meet with your entire approval."

As she surveyed him a look became clearer and clearer on her face which conveyed an insinuation which Sir Philip instinctively resented.

"And, Sir Philip, you are willing to do all this for dear Doris's sake, although you only met her for the first time yesterday. I always told you that when you did meet you'd soon become great friends."

His reply was curt.

"I think you will find that your daughter is packing; you might render her assistance. I have to hurry to the village. When I return I shall be happy to hand you my cheque on the conditions I have named."

He strode off, leaving her to consider his proposition, and his manner of making it, at her leisure. He communed with himself as he went.

"The dear creature!—with her ready attribution of motives! How comes such a woman to have such a child? Confound it! here's another."

Quite what he meant was doubtful; but the ejaculation was prompted by the fact that he suddenly found his pathway blocked by Mrs. Thurston.

CHAPTER IX

HIS HOSTESS

CERTAINLY she looked charming. He had to concede so much. And in a style which, to the best of his knowledge and belief, was so wholly her own. That was what struck him—her uniqueness. There could hardly be another woman in the world who was just like her. In spite of his desire to avoid her he caught himself wondering how old she was, as he had just been wondering in the case of Mrs. Owen, though here the wonder arose from a very different cause. She seemed the merest child. She looked seventeen; surely she was not more than twenty. All the evidence was against it—her face, her hair, the air of freshness, of youth, which was about her as a garment. Even her manner, though so easy, was a child's—careless, irresponsible, light-hearted, with in it, now and then, just the faintest touch of impertinence—the impertinence of the pretty girl who fears nothing and no one simply because, in her short passage through the world, so far she has seen nothing and no one to fear. Her greeting had in it a flavour of the impertinent.

“Where are you going to, my pretty sir, at the rate of five miles an hour?”

“To the village. I am in rather a hurry.”

"But I thought you were going shooting with Alan. By the way, where is Alan?"

"I have not a notion. Anyhow I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to go with him; business will detain me."

"In the village? Then I'll come with you."

"The urgency of my business will compel me to walk rather too fast for you."

"Then we'll have a car out; that little one with seats for two which Alan calls his run-about, and I will drive you. I'll get you to the village quicker than even you can walk."

He hesitated.

"I fear that I shall still have to deny myself the pleasure of your society, since my business is of a nature which makes it desirable that I should be alone."

He moved as if to pass her, which she, with a quick movement, made impossible.

"Sir Philip, this won't do. I have come here with the express purpose of having a talk with you, and a talk I'm going to have unless you pick me up and throw me over a hedge, or something of that sort, and even then I shall run after you. So all you have to decide is whether I am going to walk to the village with you, or whether I am to drive you in Alan's car, because get away from me, until I have had that talk, you can't; your fate is sealed."

He chose what seemed to him to be the lesser evil.

"If there is something which you must say to me—since you are my hostess—I would ask you to say it here."

"Yes, I am your hostess, and that's what makes

it so dreadful ; that I should have to treat one of my guests as I am treating you before he will allow me even to speak to him." She paused ; but he was silent. There was a look in her eyes, hinting at the near neighbourhood of tears, which brought back to him such an instant flash of memory that he became, if the thing were possible, even colder and stiffer than before. She went on, with the impetuosity of a disappointed child. " And I thought it was going to be so different ! Alan has talked and talked of you as his one friend, as the man of all men, that I've drawn such pictures of you in my mind—I don't know if you'd laugh or not if I told you of them now—but I have ; and I've so looked forward to meeting you, feeling sure that as you were Alan's friend you'd be mine too ; and now, instead of giving me the least chance, you seem to have taken it for granted that I'm some dreadful person to whom it would be out of the question even to be civil—oh, it would be ridiculous if it weren't so horrid ! Sir Philip, why do you do it ? What have I done, or what do you think I've done ? "

" Pray let me beg of you to ask me no questions, Mrs. Thurston, lest you push me too far."

" Now what do you mean by that ? I only want you to tell me why you're so frightfully disagreeable—can't you do it without glaring at me like an ogre ? "

" You credit yourself with something like omnipotence."

" I do ? I ? Well, I never ! Is that what I've done ? "

" In imagining that it is your power to cajole me into discrediting the evidence of my own senses."

"I don't in the least understand you! I am not so clever as you suppose. I wish you would speak plainly."

"Before I do so, let me put to you a question. Do you still deny that I saw you before last night?"

"Is—is it possible that you have still in your mind what you said about seeing me at Monte Carlo, and that you think I—I tell stories? Oh, Sir Philip! But that can soon be settled. Tell me what was the exact date on which you think you saw me."

"To enable you to establish an alibi, in which direction you are probably already taking steps? It will avail you nothing. I saw you at Monte Carlo, as you are perfectly well aware, under circumstances which have often caused me to call myself severely to account in having ignominiously failed in my duty by not at once bringing them to the notice of the police; only a tragic occurrence in my own family prevented my doing so; but no alibi you can set up will prevent my believing that you are not you."

She had drawn away from him with, on her face, an expression of acute bewilderment.

"Sir Philip, are you—are you mad? If you're in earnest you can't be sane."

"Had you not played so well the part you have set yourself to play, I might have said to myself, 'She is very young; there may have been some excuse; I will give her a chance before I condemn her utterly.' But your conduct since we met last night, your astounding self-possession, your almost incredibly well-sustained hypocrisy, above all, your brazen impudence, that you should

stand there, looking the picture of wounded innocence, knowing that I know you to be the thing you are, and that I can prove it—these things prove you to be not only a dangerous, but probably also an irreclaimable criminal; the type of person whom all decent men and women must combine to crush out of existence. The mischief is that you have juggled Alan Thurston—who is like putty in the hands of women like you—into making you his wife, otherwise I would not take my eyes off you till I had seen you safe in a constable's charge. As it is I will give you another chance to put off the day of the rope. Take yourself away from here while you have still your freedom. Because if I do or do not find you on these premises this afternoon at five o'clock, I shall tell Alan what I know of you; and then if he does not consider it is duty to communicate with the police, I shall. Now, will you let me pass, or am I to force you to do so?"

There was no necessity for him to use force. She drew herself aside affrightedly, shudderingly, as if desirous of removing herself as far as might be from possible contact with him; and he went striding by.

CHAPTER X

MRS. THURSTON PRACTISES A LOSING HAZARD

THAT was a curious day at Glynde. To use a colloquialism, everything was at sixes and sevens. When Mrs. Thurston made inquiries for her husband, nobody seemed to know where he was. Apparently he was neither in the house nor about the premises. She sought him in vain in the stables; she searched for him equally without result all over the grounds. All that she could learn was that he had been talking to Miss Owen in the garden, and had then walked off, not a soul knew where. It being within the range of possibility that since Miss Owen was the last person he had spoken to that young lady might have some notion of his whereabouts, on her return to the house Mrs. Thurston asked where she was. Miss Owen, she was told, was up in her bedroom with her mother. Upstairs went Mrs. Thurston to the room of which Doris was the temporary tenant. She knocked at the door.

"Who is there?" asked Doris's voice from the other side.

"It's only me."

Mrs. Thurston turned the handle, taking it for granted that she had only to turn it to be able to enter; but the door was locked. Doris's voice came again.

"You can't come in, I'm engaged."

There was something in the words, and in the way in which they were uttered, which was not exactly genial.

"My dear child, I only want to speak two words to you. Open the door. I won't interrupt you whatever you are doing."

There was a momentary silence; then came what sounded like a not very civil ultimatum.

"I cannot open the door."

"You foolish girl! You cannot be doing anything so private as all that! Unlock this door at once; I tell you I want to speak to you."

She rattled the handle, as if by dint of rattling she could gain admittance.

"If you have anything to say to me will you please say it there?"

"You absurd child! What a goose you are! Where is Mrs. Owen?"

"She is in her bedroom, lying down."

"Lying down? Is her door locked?" It occurred to Mrs. Thurston the moment she had spoken that in putting such a question she had been guilty of an error of strategy, since it was quite possible that the door was actually being locked during the pause which followed. Moving rapidly to the next door—mother and daughter occupied adjoining rooms—she found that it at any rate was locked by the time she reached it, though how long it had been in that state there was no evidence to show.

"Mrs. Owen, are you there? Will you please let me in; I have something which I particularly wish to say to you."

Again it was Doris who replied.

"Mamma says she is sorry, but she has a headache."

"Indeed? She seemed quite well when I saw her only a few minutes ago; it must have come on very suddenly. Tell your mother I am so grieved; when you are quite well, a headache coming on you all in a moment must be very hard to bear. Can you tell me where Alan is?"

The silence which followed had in it something which was almost ominous. After a considerable interval, Doris asked, in tones of sepulchral gravity:—

"Are you referring to Mr. Thurston?"

"To Alan, yes, of course. I have been looking for him everywhere—can you tell me where he's hidden himself?"

"I have no knowledge whatever of Mr. Thurston's movements. I cannot imagine why you should suppose I have."

Mrs. Thurston laughed.

"Why, you absurd child, there's nothing dreadful in asking if you know where he is. I wasn't hinting that you'd got him locked up in there with you. Good-bye, you very funny person!"

Something seemed to strike Mrs. Thurston as funny, because, forced at last to recognise that Miss Owen was not in a sociable mood, she went off smiling. Throughout the day, although time must have hung heavy on her hands, a smile continually played about the curves of her lips and in her eyes. Since there was nothing in what was taking place about her to move her to mirth she must have been in the enjoyment of some private joke. As a matter of fact very

little did take place. She paced hither and thither, from room to room, like a child who is looking for some one to play with. In the billiard-room she knocked the balls about for a few minutes, showing no slight skill in bringing off fancy shots; very charming she looked as she handled the cue as one to the manner born. In the smoking room she lighted a cigarette, routed among Alan's boxes of cigars, examined his pipes, pulling a face when one of them smelt a little stronger than she fancied. In the morning-room she stretched herself in an easy-chair by the fire with the papers, as if she proposed to read them conscientiously through; then presently tossed them from her on to the floor, as if she found them very tedious companions. In the study she searched for a book, but, finding none to her liking, stared disconsolately at a row of volumes by Mr. Lecky.

"Fancy having such stuff as that! And it all seems to be the same! What can Alan have been thinking about? There doesn't seem to be a single decent novel in the place. Doesn't he care for a touch of cayenne ever? We must educate the youth, and teach him what literature really is."

It was while she was in the study bemoaning her fate in being among a number of books which to her mind were not books, that an incident took place to break the morning calm. A groom went past the window with a note in his hand. She hurried to the door to find that, despite her haste, a footman was there before her, to whom the note was being given.

"Is it for me?" she asked.

"No, madam, it's for Miss Owen."

"Miss Owen?—oh!—I suppose you don't know who it's from?"

"It's from Sir Philip, madam. I met him in the village. He told me to bring it up and see that she had it at once. 'If Miss Owen is in her room,' he said, 'see that it's sent up to her immediately; it's most important,' he said."

"Then in that case, James, you had better take it up to her at once, since Miss Owen is in her room."

Mrs. Thurston turned away, to resume her pilgrimage in search of something to do. At luncheon she had the table entirely to herself. She questioned the butler as to the whereabouts of everybody else.

"Has your master not appeared?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Nor Sir Philip?"

"I understand that Sir Philip sent up a message to say that he would not be in to lunch."

"And Mrs. and Miss Owen?"

"Word's just come down asking if you'll excuse them."

"With pleasure. I'll excuse any one and every one, although I rather wish I had a dog as a companion, if only a very little one."

The butler smile discreetly, as if in duty bound to mark his appreciation of what he supposed was meant for a joke.

After lunch the lady returned to the billiard-room, where, in company with another cigarette, coffee, and *crème de menthe*, she practised the art of making a losing hazard into the centre pocket, and bringing back the ball into a position

which would enable the shot to be repeated. She had just succeeded in doing this five consecutive times when Miss Owen appeared, dressed for out-of-doors.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed, glancing up as she was about to essay the hazard for the sixth time. "So you've come down; had any lunch?"

"Thank you, I have had all that I require. Before I go there is something which I feel I ought to say to you."

"Before you—what?"

"Before I go. I am leaving Glynde at once. Sir Philip is coming with the fly to fetch me."

"Sir Philip? What do you mean? Does Alan know you're going?"

"I really cannot say."

"Well, you're a cure. This is the first intimation I have had; and he's your host and I'm your hostess; you're sure you're not forgetting it, my dear? I thought you'd come to stay for a week?"

"My mother or Sir Philip will give all necessary explanations. I merely came to say that I was in the summer-house last evening while you were having an interview with your friend. I need scarcely observe, I trust, that I was there quite unintentionally. I may add that I will make no use whatever of the information I unwillingly acquired; and that I will not breathe a word to any one about the whole affair. At the same time I felt that it would not be right for me to leave the house without letting you know that I heard everything."

Before her hostess really had a chance to speak the young lady had left the billiard-room as

abruptly as she had entered it. For a second or two Mrs. Thurston stared after her as if with lack of comprehension. Then she took the cigarette from between her lips, looked up at the ceiling and laughed.

“Of all the jokes!”

Resuming her practice she not only brought off her sixth successive hazard, but brought back the object ball to the spot on which it was before. Nothing could have been neater, and no one could have played the shot with greater coolness. Before she tried again she emptied her cup of coffee, and sipped at her *crème de menthe*. There was a sound of wheels without.

“Sir Philip with the fly!” Evidently the vehicle had drawn up at the hall door. Silence reigned. “They’re taking down the luggage.” Presently the vehicle drove away. “Dear Doris has gone!”

As she was about to return to the table a footman brought her a note.

“From Mrs. Owen.”

“Any answer?”

“Nothing was said about an answer, madam.”

The man went. She opened the note.

“DEAR MRS. THURSTON,

“So sorry, but both Doris and I are unexpectedly compelled to leave, and although we are going in different directions I thought we had better leave together so as to avoid unnecessary fuss. It is unfortunate that we should be so abruptly called away. Pray give my apologies to Alan, and explain to him how much we both of us regret

the curtailment of a very pleasant visit. And believe me,

“ Dear Mrs. Thurston,
“ With many thanks for your kind hospitality,
“ Yours most sincerely,
“ MADELEINE OWEN.”

She read the epistle for a second time with dancing eyes.

“ This really is a curiosity. So they both of them have gone, mother and child. That’s why the doors were locked, they were packing up, and they wanted to do it on the sly ; how truly funny ! Alan’s little house-warming party doesn’t seem as if it were going to prove an entire success. I wonder what can have called them away in such a frantic rush ? It must have been something very very pressing.”

Whatever it was which had robbed her of her guests she did not seem to be in any way disturbed by their departure. She finished her liqueur and resumed her practice. The hazard was scored again.

“ That’s not so bad—seven running. I don’t play such a shocking game for a female thing ; but I should like to play so that in almost any company I could have a little something up my sleeve. These small accomplishments are apt at times to be so useful ; especially when they are unsuspected. One never knows.”

So serious, apparently, was her desire to excel in a game in which, generally speaking, women do not shine, that she continued to practise for more than another hour, always at that losing hazard into the centre pocket. The autumnal

shadows deepened ; she switched on the electric light ; still she went off the red, while the object ball travelled up the table, to return to just the proper place, with an accuracy which was really striking. She was yet at it when once more she was interrupted ; this time by the unannounced entry of Sir Philip Ford.

CHAPTER XI

THE END OF THE PARTY

HE seemed more surprised to see her than she did to see him. Indeed, she greeted him with a little grimace, which, if it was not unbecoming, was impertinent.

“ Well ? Did you see Doris off ? ”

“ I beg your pardon ? ”

“ Oh, don't do that ; I'm sure apologising is quite out of your line. Did you find Doris an empty carriage ? and did you tip the guard to keep it empty ? and did you put her in a corner seat ? and supply her with plenty of books and papers ? and look after her as a father ought to do ? I suppose people did take you for her father ? ”

He regarded her for some moments ; then came a little further into the room.

“ So you've not gone.”

“ Don't be ridiculous. Have a hundred up. If you'll give me twenty, I'll play you for a shilling.”

“ There is still time ; let me advise you to make the most of it.”

“ Of course there's time ; how long do you think it will take us to make a hundred ? Have you any choice in balls ? I like plain.”

"I don't know if you are trying to flatter yourself into supposing that I am not in earnest. If so you are making what you may find a dangerous mistake. I am very much in earnest."

"My good Sir Philip—I daren't call you dear Sir Philip, I am so afraid you'd glare; my good Sir Philip, I'm inclining to the belief that you always are in earnest; in fact, I'm beginning to fear that, as a rule, you're stodgy. And yet I've an inkling that you could be nice if you tried. Wouldn't you like to be nice to me if I tried very hard to be nice to you? You don't know how hard I should have to try; but I can try hard."

Moving round the table she went close to him. Claspng her cue with both hands behind her, her shapely head thrown a little back, she presented as pleasant a picture of the things which are desirable in a woman as probably he had ever seen. Most men would not have objected to the juxtaposition; but he did. He drew back a step or two.

"Be so good as not to come so close."

"Sir Philip! Am I so repellent? Surely you are not frightened of me!"

"I am; with reason. Come, young woman, I'll give you a last chance; it's the very last you'll have; you'd better make the most of it. You shall have a clear two hours' start. If you like to take advantage of my offer I promise that for two hours from now, by my watch, I will not say a word to Alan."

"You won't be able to keep from speaking to him for so long as that, because he's coming now. I fancy I heard his voice."

Apparently she had, for her words were hardly

uttered when the door was thrown violently open, and Alan Thurston entered, with his cap still on his head, and his whole appearance suggestive of something else besides the open air. Without any sort of introduction he burst out with a question which was asked in a somewhat louder tone than the occasion seemed to demand.

"What the deuce is this I hear? Dewsnap tells me that Doris and her mother have both gone. What has happened? What's it mean?"

His wife turned to him with a beatific smile.

"My dear Alan, that is what I want to know. For information I would refer you to Sir Philip. I think you'll find that it is he who is responsible for their departure."

"Ford! What—what do you mean? Eveleen, you're joking."

She shook her head sadly.

"I'm not; here he is; ask him. I think he'll admit that it was he who recommended Miss Owen to remove herself from the contaminating influences of Glynde. He certainly came to fetch her away in a fly; and, in the fly, he accompanied her to the station."

"Ford, is what my wife says correct? Is it in any way owing to you that Doris Owen has left my house?"

Sir Philip, who had been eyeing Mr. Thurston, had already drawn his own conclusions, as probably Mrs. Thurston had drawn hers. He perceived that, though the day was yet young, his friend had been drinking. Not to excess, but sufficient to bring him to a condition in which a very little might move him to unreasonable excitement. He knew the man almost better,

perhaps, than he knew himself, and was aware that in certain phases, he was as unmanageable and as dangerous as a mad bull. He suspected that the lady—in spite of her exceeding youth and transparent innocence—knew this as well as he did; and, if such was the case, he did not doubt that she was deft enough to use her knowledge to his detriment and her own advantage. Therefore he recognised that for the story he had to tell the moment was unpropitious, and immediately resolved that the telling should be postponed to a period when the listener would be better able to appreciate it at its proper value; that is, if the lady would permit of its postponement. One thing was essential, before he even answered Alan's question, that he should be alone with his friend.

"If you don't mind, Alan, I should like to speak to you in private."

In Mr. Thurston's glance there was a touch of defiance.

"What do you want to say to me in private that you can't say here?"

"I will tell you, Alan, dear, if you would like to know. But first I wish you would induce Sir Philip to tell you if he is responsible for Miss Owen's leaving our house."

"You hear, Ford? Can't you answer a plain question? What's the matter with you, man? It's inconceivable to me that you can have had anything to do with it; still perhaps you'll say right out if it is because of anything you have said or done that Doris Owen has gone."

"If you will put that question to me a little later I will answer it as fully as you please; I promise you that, Alan. But just now you must excuse

me ; I have something which I must do upstairs."

He moved towards the door. Swiftly the lady interposed.

" Alan, don't let him go ! " Her husband placed himself at her side. " He wants to pack and sneak after Doris Owen ; Alan, don't let him go ! You think he is your friend, but he has been treating me to-day as if he were your greatest enemy. But before I tell you about that make him say, make him, Alan, make him—he won't unless you do—make him say if he hasn't driven Miss Owen away from us by telling her that she ought not to stay in our house."

" Ford, is that true ? "

" It is certainly true that I did tell Miss Owen that it would not be wise to stay under your roof any longer than she could help, although she did not need my telling. You yourself, Alan, are perfectly well aware that she never ought to have come."

" Look here, Ford, you've been my friend for a jolly long time, but more than once you've meddled in my affairs in a way I didn't like ; and this time, let me tell you, you've gone altogether too far."

" Didn't I say so, Alan ? It appears to me to be very strange that Sir Philip Ford, who is our guest, should take it upon himself to say what persons we are and are not to receive in our house ; even to the extent of telling our friends that they ought not to visit us. But that is not all Sir Philip has done. Sir Philip Ford, be so good as to repeat, in the presence of my husband, what you said to me this morning, and just before he came into this room, if you dare."

The lady put her arm about her husband's waist, as far as it would go. He, acknowledging the mute appeal, put his arm about her shoulders, and glanced at his friend. Ford, realising that his feminine antagonist was a strategist of the highest class, felt himself to be in a delicate situation, and admitted it.

"I am sorry, Alan, to say that I am in a very difficult position."

"So I should imagine."

This was the lady. Thurston thus prompted came valiantly to her support.

"No shilly-shallying, Ford! Out with it! What have you been saying to my wife?"

Sir Philip reflected. Outwardly, he was the only one of the three who retained his coolness; inwardly, he was probably conscious that the moment was close at hand when it would be difficult even for him to guard against a rise in temperature; being perfectly aware that Mr. Thurston's attitude was growing more threatening, while the lady would certainly do her best to goad him to a point at which all self-restraint would vanish.

"As you say, we have been friends for a very long time; I have been your friend, Alan, from the instant you were born. Therefore I hope I need not ask you to believe that in anything I may have to say I have only your interests at heart."

The lady interposed, with a dexterity which Sir Philip seemed almost diabolical.

"Sir Philip Ford was not so roundabout in his methods when he was talking to me, Alan; he came to the point with a directness which I found very startling."

Once more the gentleman took the cue which had been given him.

"Don't prose, Ford! Tell me what you said to my wife, and say it as you said it to her."

"He daren't do that, Alan; you would kill him."

Thurston burst out with a sort of bellow.

"Do you hear me, Ford? Tell me what you said to my wife!"

"While you speak to me like that I will tell you nothing."

"Speak to him kindly, Alan. Don't you see how white he is? He was brave enough when he had only me to deal with; but he's frightened enough of you."

Her husband turned to her with what was possibly an unexpected appeal.

"Eveleen, Philip Ford and I have been chums our whole lives long; I don't want to quarrel with him if I can help it, and I don't want to hammer things out of him. You tell me what it is he has said to you of which you complain, since he so evidently shirks."

The lady looked at Sir Philip, and she looked at her husband, always smiling. It is possible as he watched her that Ford wished he had spoken on his own account rather than permit her to give her ingenious perversion, which she did so very daintily.

"Among other polite statements, Alan, Sir Philip Ford informed me that I was a woman of the worst class, and a type of creature against whom every decent man and woman ought to combine to crush out of existence. According to your dearest friend it is a delightful wife you have won."

“Eveleen, you don’t mean it! Ford, did—did you say that?”

“Not that you’ve won a delightful wife, oh dear no. He says that I’m a desperate character, and actually advised me to leave the house during your absence, and hide myself, lest all sorts of dreadful things befall me.”

“What the devil does he mean? Ford, what the devil do you mean? You hear my wife; is it true what she says?”

Sir Philip clearly realised that the answer he was about to make would mean the beginning of trouble in a physical sense. Alan Thurston was breathing hard, like the eager hound who tugs at his chain; his fists were clenched, his cheeks inflamed, his eyes fiery; there were about him all the portents of a coming storm: yet Sir Philip made it.

“What she says is quite true. I very much regret to have to inform you, Alan, that the woman whom, most unfortunately, you have made your wife, is a dangerous criminal; and that, if I had done my duty, she would now be an inmate of a prison, if worse had not befallen her.”

Alan’s breath came faster; the lady slipped the leash.

“Alan your best friend has held it over me as a threat all day that he would say to you, my husband, whom I love and who loves me, at the first opportunity, what he has just said. To realise the full enormity of his conduct, you must understand that I don’t believe he ever saw me in his life till we met in the drawing-room last night, that I am quite sure I never saw him, and that, in fact, he knows nothing whatever about me, except

what has been conjured up by his own monstrous imagination. Were I a man, his equal in strength, I would tear his tongue out by the roots, but you, Alan, had better let him go scot free, to repeat his vile slanders wherever and whenever he pleases ; because, of course, since he is your best friend, I cannot expect you to inflict on him even the slightest punishment. A woman ought to endure anything from the man who calls himself her husband's friend."

Mr. Thurston seemed to be gasping for breath.

"Take it back ! Take it back ! Ford, damn you ! take it back !"

"I would, Alan, if I could. The misfortune is that what I have said is the literal truth, as none knows better than the woman who is standing at your side."

"You infernal scoundrel !"

In a sense the words were Alan Thurston's battle-cry ; as he roared them he flung himself upon his friend.

Philip Ford was skilled in various kinds of athletic exercises. He could fence, wrestle, box, had at any rate a rudimentary knowledge of the much-extolled Japanese art of self-defence. The theory is that a man, in fair condition as Ford was, knowing these things, should be able to ward off an attack from whatever quarter it might come. In practice there are occasions on which he is able to do nothing of the kind, as was illustrated then and there. In a hand-to-hand tussle, other things being equal, the man who gets there first is not unlikely to score. Alan Thurston had his friend by the throat before the other had a chance to keep him off. Never a weakling, his wild

frenzy lent him fictitious strength, against which Ford found himself disconcertingly helpless. He did his best to resist, in accordance with the rules, but Thurston in his frenzy flung him here and there, in a fashion which distinctly could not have been agreeable. And Mrs. Thurston enjoyed the spectacle of his being flung about with a naïve frankness which in its way was droll. She kept up a running commentary, not exactly out loud, but half beneath her breath, which, in its candid appreciation of the discussion, as a discussion, was strongly reminiscent of the natural woman.

“ Kill him, Alan ! Choke the life out of him, dear ! Beat his head against the corner of the table ! Bang out his brains ! Oh, darling, don't let him get away ! That's right, down him, Alan ! down him ! Oh, Alan, I do love you—you great, strong boy.”

She looked so pretty as, inclined slightly forward, her small hands clasped about the billiard-cue, which she still retained, she smiled at the fun. The two friends, struggling like madmen, swinging from side to side, now one seeming to get the best of it, and now the other, dashed at last against an ingenious construction of the dumb-waiter order, which was laden with decanters, glasses, bottles, aerated waters of all sorts and kinds, with such force as to overturn it and its entire contents on to the floor. The din was tremendous. In rushed Dewsnap, the butler, with two footmen at his heels, to stare in amazement at the sight which they beheld.

“ Gentlemen ! ” exclaimed the scandalised butler.
“ Mr. Alan ! Sir Philip ! Gentleman, please ! ”

Mrs. Thurston touched him on the arm with the tip of her cue.

"Dewsnap, don't be silly! Sir Philip has been behaving very badly, and Mr. Alan's only treating him as he deserves."

"Whatever can Sir Philip have been doing? Strikes me that Mr. Alan will kill him if he don't take care. Mr. Alan, sir!"

There was some colour for the butler's forebodings. Not only had Sir Philip fallen back among the bottles, but his friend had fallen on to him, and, with his hands gripped tightly round his throat, was using him in a fashion which was neither sportsmanlike nor pleasant to behold. Yet so set was Thurston on treating his friend in most unfriendly fashion that it needed the united efforts of Dewsnap and the two footmen to induce him to desist. To all intents and purposes they had to carry Sir Philip out of the room between them, because, just then, he was incapable of walking.

CHAPTER XII

THE RECTORY GARDEN

THE rectory garden ! The words convey a picture to the mind. The garden at Baynham Rectory materialised it, perhaps, as well as any could that summer afternoon. An old garden, cherished with loving care, a spacious lawn, which surely generations of gardeners had watched and tended, giant trees, standing at sufficient distances apart, in just those places where shade was most required, over all, the glory of the June sun. On the lawn a game of tennis was being played, two against one ; but as the two were quite little, and the one was rather large, the game was scarcely even. As a matter of fact, Doris Owen was doing with her antagonists very much what she chose.

The players appeared to advantage amid their surroundings ; they became them very well. The small boy and girl, all in white, hatless, eager, laughing, shouting, running back and forward, doubling, twisting, as the ball went here and there ; the tall slender damsel, swaying this way and that, as alert as they, almost as eager, as full of laughter and the joy of life : it was pleasant to look at them, and to watch their game. Such, apparently, was the opinion of the small but select number of spectators, numbering four. Mrs. Champion and her sister sat in the centre of

the lawn under the shadow of a chestnut tree, which was a blaze of blossom, pretending to do some kind of needlework, but in reality watching the play and throwing out hints, first to this side, then to that. Stretched on the extending chairs at the end nearest the house was the Reverend Thomas Campion, M.A., of Jesus College, Cambridge, Rector of Baynham, and his friend, neighbour and patron, Sir Philip Ford. They were pretending to do nothing but watch, and that they were doing uncommonly well. Now and then Sir Philip made a seemingly careless observation, on which the rector commented, the comments, as comments are apt to do, covering more ground than the original text.

“Miss Owen seems happy.”

“She is happy. She is of that fortunate disposition which requires very little to make her happy. I have seldom met one whose capacity for happiness is greater, or who is more swift to assimilate all that makes for happiness.”

A pause; Miss Owen scored another point.

“She is looking, I think, better than she did.”

“She is better; she has perfect health—that precious possession of a woman; since I believe it to be more true of a woman even than of a man that a healthy mind goes with a healthy body.”

Sir Philip’s next remark, followed by another pause, sounded a trifle cynical.

“Then she has something to be thankful for.”

“Something? She has many things to be thankful for; youth, health, brains, beauty, charm—that indefinable something which inevitably inclines all sorts and conditions of men and women to like her. Between ourselves, Ford,

she's almost my ideal of what a young woman ought to be; and though I say it's between ourselves, Netta knows that's my opinion, and she shares it." Turning a little on his chair, the rector all at once became personal. "Do you know, Ford, that you're not looking so well as you ought to do. I'm not criticising—I don't know if it's because of the sort of life you're leading; I don't know how long it is since we saw you here, and you don't seem to go anywhere else. You're developing into a regular recluse—an unhealthy condition, sir! and certainly your appearance doesn't do credit to your excellent constitution."

"What you notice are the signs of advancing age."

"Advancing age! Advancing fiddlesticks! I'm as old as you are, and I should like to know what's the matter with my looks?"

"You have something to keep you young, you are happily married."

"Well, and why aren't you?" If the rector paused for an answer, none came. "I ask you again, why haven't you a wife?"

"Perhaps, Tom, it's because I know so much of women that I find the risk too great a one for me to take."

"That's the sort of remark one excuses as coming from a very young man who knows everything; but coming from one who knows his world as you know yours it's—fudge! Do you mean to tell me that you don't know plenty of women whom it would be no risk at all for any man to marry? You haven't the conscience! Why, in this garden, there are three at this moment. There's Netta."

"She's got you."

"There's her sister."

"She wouldn't have me."

"And there's Miss Owen."

"She's only a girl."

"Only a girl! What's the matter with that? What do you suppose she thinks you are? If my cloth didn't forbid it I'd venture one small wager that she thinks you're just as old as a husband ought to be; while I think that she's just the age for marrying. Look at her as she stands there, and tell me how she can be bettered." The rector rose to his feet. "I've a visit I must pay—Mrs. Faringdon is troubled about that son of hers; tell Netta I'll be back in time for a cup of tea.—Only a girl! Is it a grandmother that the man would have?"

When the rector had gone Sir Philip sat motionless. Since last November he had had a scar upon his right cheek. How it had got there nobody knew, as to all inquiries he returned evasive answers. At first it had been an open wound, like a jagged cut. Now it had healed. The scar which remained had the singular property of changing colour, as if in sympathy with its bearer's moods. While the rector had been speaking it had all at once become a lurid red; and that hue it continued to be for some time after Mr. Champion had gone.

The game had long been finished; tea was also over, when Sir Philip Ford found himself sauntering through the rectory garden with Miss Owen as his sole companion. How it had happened he did not exactly know; but it had. The peace of evening was stealing across the world, everything pointed to a perfect climax of a lovely

day, nothing could have been more in keeping with the hour than a stroll along the flower-lit paths. And, as they went, they talked ; at least the lady did, because she seemed to find it increasingly difficult to move the gentleman to anything like a flow of conversation ; a fact on which, with some asperity, she finally observed.

“ Do you ever talk ? ”

“ Sometimes.”

“ I suppose this isn't one of those times.” Silence. “ I suppose, also, it never is one of those times when you are with me.” Silence again. “ Why is it such a long time since you came to see me ? ”

Since this was a direct question the gentleman could hardly help but answer.

“ Is it so long ? ”

“ Is it ? This is the third of June ; you were last here on April the twenty-sixth, and you used to come three or four times a week, and sometimes every day.”

“ I've been away.”

“ You've been back a fortnight at least. Mr. Champion misses your visits very much. Is it because of me that you don't come ? ”

“ Miss Owen ! ”

She looked at him a little sharply, her lips pressed tightly together.

“ I thought we'd agreed about that.”

“ I beg your pardon—Doris.”

“ Every one calls me Doris ; I can't think why you won't.”

“ I think of you as Doris.”

In the words, which were spoken softly, there seemed to be nothing very occult ; yet their

utterance seemed to occasion each of them a sudden shock ; one, also, from which it took them several seconds to recover. One felt that it was with an obvious effort the lady spoke again, when she did speak.

" Isn't it perfectly lovely weather ? I certainly think this is the finest day we have had this year.

" In June we should have fine weather."

" Should we ? Then we don't always have what we should have. Does it make you perfectly miserable to talk to me ? "

This unexpected diversion seemed to take the gentleman by surprise.

" Miss Owen ! "

" I beg your pardon ? "

" I mean—I cannot conceive how my conduct can have caused you to imagine anything so—so contrary to the fact."

" Is it so contrary to the fact ? "

" Really——"

" Please don't equivocate."

" I had no intention of doing anything of the kind."

" You mightn't call it equivocation, perhaps. You are incapable of doing or saying right out anything which would hurt or injure any one."

" You labour under a misapprehension, I assure you."

" Oh, no, I don't." She looked at him as if she dared him to contradict her again ; and he dared not. " I know you better than you know yourself. You might feel that a person was a horrid nuisance, and yet you could never find it in your heart to tell them so."

" That would depend——"

"Oh no, it wouldn't, it would depend on nothing. Sir Philip, how much do I owe you? Indeed, what don't I owe you? I owe you all this happiness."

"You owe me an introduction to your first situation, and that is more than balanced by the debt which the Campions owe me for introducing you."

"Oh yes, I know! Situation! I should like to ask some questions, only I'm afraid of the answers I might receive; perhaps you could tell me who is supposed to be my master."

"Mr. Campion, if there is any question of a master."

"Exactly, if there is any question of a master; because it seems to me that both Mr. and Mrs. Campion regard me as if I were an honoured guest."

"If you remember I told you that I thought they would make you comfortable."

"You knew what you were talking about then, because they certainly have succeeded in doing that. My taste is considered in every way; the teaching I do is a complete farce. I should like to know how many women, totally without experience, and who know absolutely nothing, receive a hundred pounds a year in their first situation for allowing themselves to be treated with the greatest consideration. Do you think I don't understand? You must take me for a simpleton. But I wouldn't mind so much if I didn't feel you hate me."

"Hate you?"

"I daresay you didn't at first, though I don't understand what made you ever take any interest in me. I suppose you did it out of pity. As I

said, when any one tells you a pitiful story you can't find it in your heart to refuse to help. Oh, that morning at Glynde! Why did I ever speak to you as I did! I could have beaten myself over and over again for having done it."

"Do you often feel like this?"

"Now you're laughing at me; do you think I like that?"

"Doris!"

"Well?"

"Will you do something for me?"

"Of course I will."

"Will you tell me how old you are?"

"What do you mean by that? You know how old I am. I'm twenty-two. I was twenty-two last month."

"Last month? And I never knew!"

"Why should you know?"

"Did any one know at Baynham?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"You poor child!"

"Sir Philip, I wish you wouldn't call me a poor child; it's so ridiculous."

"Doris, on which day was your birthday?"

"It's not a matter of the slightest consequence. Won't you understand that at twenty-two one is a woman and not a child? You treat me as if I were an infant."

"You see, it's relative. I'm an old man."

"An old man! You're an old man! When you do talk, what silly things you say."

"I am, compared to you."

"As if you didn't know perfectly well that you're just the age a man ought to be!" The remark, fulfilled in such a singular degree the rector's

prophetic forecast that the scar on his cheek changed colour again. He was silent, as if surprise had made him dumb. She went on. "Sir Philip, Mr. Campion tells me that you used to pop in and out almost every day; I happen to know that he has missed you frightfully during the last six weeks; you see you're practically the only real friend he has round here. I hope, for his sake, it won't be another month before you come again."

"Let us put it the other way; when are you coming to see me?"

"I haven't been asked; besides, I couldn't come anyhow. You know I couldn't, though I don't say I wouldn't like to."

"Then you shall."

"I don't see how."

"The Campions shall come with you; all the lot of them. Won't that be chaperonage enough?"

"I should think so."

"When will you come with them?"

"Next month?"

"Next month!"

"It's more than a month since you were here."

"Will you come to-morrow if I can arrange with Mrs. Campion?"

She nodded.

"If I may."

CHAPTER XIII

THE TWO FRIENDS

MRS. THURSTON looked at Mr. Seymour, and Mr. Seymour looked at her; each seemed to be amused by something each perceived. They were *tête-à-tête* in the sitting-room of the gentleman's flat, a nondescript apartment, furnished in a fashion which pointed to an occupant of Bohemian tastes. One felt, as one observed him, that it was just the sort of room in which Mr. Seymour ought to be very much at home; and, indeed, he evidently was. He had his coat off; his body was in an easy-chair; his feet, stretched out in front of him, were on a small chair; on a third chair, conveniently close to his right hand, was something in a tall tumbler; between his lips was a short black clay pipe. A clay pipe appeared to represent, to him, the acme of comfort. Abroad, in public, in society, he might smoke anything, and did. But among his intimates, in the privacy of his own apartment, complete enjoyment meant a clay pipe. He was not a bad-looking man—somewhere in his thirties—with fair hair, neat moustache, light blue eyes—those glassy blue eyes which are so striking a characteristic of the figures in the Tussaud chamber of horrors.

Mr. Thurston would not have supposed that

his wife could be at home in such an apartment, with such a companion; yet she seemed to be very much at home. Her costume was also a little free and easy, considering that it was the middle of the afternoon; but then the day was warm. She sat on a corner of a table, with her feet on one arm of Mr. Seymour's easy-chair; near her something in a tall tumbler; and as fast as she finished one cigarette she lit another.

It was odd with what curious scrutiny they eyed each other with, as has been said, such a suggestion of mutual amusement, as if each saw in the other something excessively funny. It was the lady who broke the silence; her chin rested on her hands, and her elbows on her knees.

"Boy, you're getting fat."

"I am putting on flesh, aren't I? I've noticed it myself."

"I shall cease to love you if you do get fat."

"If you talk like that I shall start worrying myself to a shadow."

"Then start. If you don't take care you'll become repellent."

"Thanks very much."

Silence again; all the while they kept their eyes fixed upon each other with that singularly persistent stare. He spoke.

"So your latest venture hasn't turned out a success?"

"It depends on what you call a success. Five minutes after I had met Alan Thurston I had sized him up. I never expected to have a delirious time with him."

"And you must have delirium."

"I must; that's so; once in a while. Boy, have you ever been respectable?"

"Once; don't you remember?"

She considered.

"I think I do." Then, with a sudden smile, "No, I don't; I don't remember anything at all about it; I make a rule of never remembering. A memory's a mistake."

"Isn't that rather—hazardous?"

"Of course one has to docket things; but one needn't keep on taking down the dockets to turn them over. It's a nuisance. You don't know what it's like to feel that some one's sitting on the safety-valve, so that you can't let yourself go. I should explode if, at occasional intervals, I didn't go on the burst, if only to blow off steam your way."

"You flatter me. And I suppose, after a while, you'd be bored by me."

"My dear Bill, frightfully. I'm the kind of person who is bored by everything and every one, if I can't be rid of them the moment I want to. Change is the salt of life."

"You've lived up to that motto if any one has. It's marvellous how you've done it. I never met your match."

"And you never will. I'm what biologists call a sport; I'm abnormal, totally without a moral sense. Some one once told me that I'm a type of the irreclaimable criminal. He was right; I am."

"Who told you that?"

"Some one. Boy, I want you to do something for me."

"Put a name to it."

“ I want you to kill my husband.”

“ Are you joking ? ”

“ I’m not, boy, I’m dead serious.”

“ What’s he done that it’s come to that ? ”

“ It isn’t so much that he’s done anything, as that he will keep on living.”

“ What do you expect to gain by his turning over a new leaf ? ”

“ Well, for one thing, I want to be a countess I told you there’s an earldom in our family.”

“ You did. I looked it up, Earl of Glenlivet—Scotch.”

“ But there’s an English barony, which gives a seat in the House of Lords. And there are four family seats, and such jewels! and heaps and heaps of money, and miles and miles of land. It’s rather a good thing to be the Countess of Glenlivet.”

“ How are you going to be any nearer if Thurston goes underground? I should have thought it would have been the other way about.”

“ Perhaps I’d better explain.”

“ It might be as well.”

“ You see, it’s like this; the present man is seventy-six, and he’s a very bad life.”

“ You don’t propose to marry him ? ”

“ No-o, I shouldn’t gain anything if I did. When he died everything would slip through my fingers, and then I couldn’t marry his son.”

“ I suppose even you couldn’t do that.”

“ Exactly, and at present I can——”

“ You can what ? ”

“ Marry his son; how dense you are ! ”

“ It’s beginning to occur to me that this is

a case in which one needs to be uncommonly clear-sighted to see what you're driving at."

"Let me explain, and do try to understand, it's perfectly simple. There are two sons, the younger, the Hon. Ronald Scoones, has a wife, and the elder—the heir—Lord Ifield, ought to have. Of course, Alan felt in duty bound to introduce me to his uncle and his cousins, and the result is that Lord Ifield has fallen in love with me."

"Has he told you so?"

"He has. I am afraid he is not a very good man, or he would not have said to me some of the things he has said. But, the fact is, he mistook my character; now I have made that plain to him, though I found it difficult. It seems that some very respectable people in society have extremely lax notions. But if my husband died he would marry me."

"Has he also told you that?"

"Not in so many words. I would never allow him to say anything so wicked; could he respect me afterwards? But you may take it from me that he would, only—he's in rather a hurry, and that's where it is. By the way, the other night he took me to the theatre; it was perfectly proper, his brother was there, with his wife—such a woman! She would never let me get within a hundred miles of Ifield if she thought there was any danger; she has hordes of children, and she hopes to be the Countess of Glenlivet herself one day; but she little dreams! But I was going to tell you that there was a girl who sang such a darling song; have you heard it? It's like this!"

Springing off the table, sitting down to the

piano, the lady sang the "darling song" in question, to Mr. Seymour's entertainment.

"Kiddie, you're a marvel. You ought to go upon the stage."

"Perhaps I've been upon the stage."

"I mean seriously; you might do anything if you did."

"I think I'd like to be a countess first, if you don't mind; I might go upon the stage later, as a last resource." Swinging herself round on the music stool, so as again to face Mr. Seymour, the lady's manner became brisk. "Now, boy, let's come to business! Let me put my proposition in what I believe is called a concrete form; if you'll kill my husband within a week from to-day I'll give you five thousand pounds."

"You sound as if you were amazed at your own generosity; but that doesn't strike me as being too much for a job of that sort."

"That's only a little capital sum; as if you didn't know as well as I do that you'll live on me as long as I've anything to live upon. Besides, my dear Bill, you have put men—and women too—away for a good deal less than that."

"I thought you made it a rule to have no memory."

"I said one has to docket things, and I do so want you to do me this small favour."

"You talk as if killing a man was nothing."

"It isn't; is it?" Once more their eyes met in that curious prolonged stare, only, this time, while she smiled, his face was quite expressionless. She went on gaily. "I'd do it myself, and no one would be a penny the wiser, if it weren't that I want this done in a particular

way, and that's where you come in. Bill, I'll put my proposition in a revised form, and add a post-script. If you'll kill my husband within a week I'll give you five thousand pounds, and I'll give you another five thousand pounds if you'll get Doris Owen hung for it; and now you really have it."

"Doris Owen? Who's Doris Owen? And how on earth am I to get her hanged?"

"Doris Owen is the girl Alan would have married if he hadn't married me, and now I believe that he wishes he had married her and hadn't married me."

"I am surprised to hear that."

"Yes, it is surprising, isn't it? I thought you'd feel that way. This world is full of surprises. He has her portrait and some of her letters, which, of course, he ought to have returned, and the other day I caught him kissing her photograph—as if he wished it wasn't only her photograph. I don't exactly know why I should object, but I do. I fancy one reason is that she's a cat."

"Which being interpreted means——?"

"You remember that first time you came to Glynde, and kissed me in the summer-house and behaved so badly? She was in the summer-house the whole time—in the darkness—and heard it all."

"You don't say!"

"I do say. Wasn't it sly of her? It only shows that the most innocent people ought to be always on their guard, because you never know. If she was to tell Alan he might think all sorts of things. So you see, Bill, she's a dangerous little crocodile. But that's not all. She's mixed

up—well, with the man who told me that I was a type of the irreclaimable criminal.”

“What’s he know?”

“He knows—there are epsiodes in one’s life which one must keep to oneself—but he knows enough to know what sort of character I am.”

“Has he threatened to give you away?”

“Once he tried to give me away, but the attempt resulted in such dire failure that I don’t think it’s likely to be repeated. His name is Ford, Phil Ford. He’s a baronet, and his address is The Manor House, Baynham, Sussex, where he’s a very great man. I’d like to have married him instead of Alan, I’d have led him a dance. He’s taken Doris Owen under the shadow of his wing, to guard her from Alan and from me, and I rather fancy that they’re on the high road to fall in love with each other in that old-fashioned way which is simply sickening. Bill, I hate him; though I generally don’t hate people, because it is so expensive.”

“I’ve found it that way myself sometimes.”

“If I could get Alan put away, and be free to marry Lord Ifield—he’d marry me the very first moment I’d let him; the poor dear man is in such a hurry—and could only get Doris Owen hanged for killing Alan, it would be a bitter blow to Philip Ford, and it would be just delightful.”

“You talk as if you had only to wish to have.”

“It would be much simpler than it sounds. Doris Owen is supposed to be a governess at Baynham Rectory; if she were to write to Alan asking him to come and see her, he’d fly.”

“How are you going to get her to write?”

“Stupid! she never could be got! She’d

sooner cut her ugly hand off ! But I happen to have a letter of hers which I borrowed from Alan when Alan wasn't there, and here it is. If some one were to send him a letter in that writing it would do just as well."

Mr. Seymour examined the letter which the lady gave him.

"It oughtn't to be difficult to imitate that fist."

"A child could do it ! Then things might be arranged so that they would come across each other, and she would be so mad she'd go on awful. Their interview might be overheard ; her words would be noted—I feel sure she'd threaten him ; the very moment she left him the job would have to be done ; and then, with a little management, Miss Owen ought to find herself in a rather nasty fix."

"You're a pretty pet !"

"Aren't I ? You always have thought so Bill, dear, haven't you ? Well, you'll take it on ?"

"I don't know that I'm prepared to go so far as that ; but I'll see if I can draw up some sort of a workable scheme."

"Of course you will ; and I'll sit on your knee and help you. We've brought off some pretty difficult things together before to-day, Bill, and we'll bring this off. I've set my heart on it—so there you are."

"I see, it's a case of She-who-must-be-obeyed."

"Exactly. I'm She-who-must-be-obeyed, so obey me, Bill, and let's arrange."

"The first thing that strikes me is that if you want this Owen girl to be suspected something in the feminine line will have to do it."

"That's what I thought."

“ I suppose you wouldn't care.”

“ I'd love it ; only—there are obstacles. Lord Ifield is coming to pay us a visit, and I want it to be done while he is there ; and I must stay with him at Glynde.”

“ I see ; then that's off. I daresay that I do know a woman who might be induced to yield to—adequate—persuasion.”

“ I wonder if we're thinking of the same person. Does her name begin with B ? ”

“ Bianca—that's it.”

“ Boy, ours clearly is a case of two souls with but a single thought—she's the very creature.”

“ Mind you, she's not everybody's money. She's about half mad, and she might be dangerous ; I admit that, so far as I'm concerned, that I'm never quite sure where, with her, sanity begins and where it ends.”

“ That doesn't matter—that's just what we want. Now Bill, let's be serious, and plan it all properly out.”

They planned it.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LETTER

MR. THURSTON was not in the best of tempers. He had not been of late. It was the opinion of those with whom he was brought in contact that marriage had not improved him. Certain practices which, aforesaid, used to mark his behaviour only on very rare occasions had now become unfortunately common. Almost habitually he drank too much. For one so young, and, in particular, for one of his habit of body, he took insufficient exercise. It was singular in what a short space of time a change for the worse had taken place, not only in his appearance, but in his manner and general bearing.

“ I don't know what's come to him,” declared Mr. Barnes, his valet. “ Used to be as free-handed, pleasant-spoken a gentleman as I ever came across ; you couldn't have wanted to have had any one nicer to do with. Now ! when I tell you that he hardly ever speaks to me without swearing, and that nothing ever suits him, I've said enough.”

The butler shook his head.

“ It's the drink ! When a gentleman lives on whiskey what can you expect ? ”

Mr. Barnes was sententious.

“ It's not only the whisky, Dewsnap, though no one ought to know better than I do what whisky

is, seeing some of the gentlemen I have lived with ; but what I say is that with him it's not only the whisky. Ever since he had that row with Sir Philip Ford he's never been the same man ; what is the matter with him I don't know, but I know it's ne that suffers."

But Mr. Barnes was not the only person who suffered because of Alan Thurston's peculiar conduct. The night before he had gone to bed helplessly drunk. Considering that his cousin, Lord Ifield, was staying in the house, his conduct seemed, to say the least of it, to be unfortunate ; indeed, it was his cousin's presence which seemed, in a sense, to be the cause of his behaviour. The two men never had been unduly disposed towards friendship. Lately Mr. Thurston had developed towards his lordship a feeling of positive antipathy. To such an extent had he gone that he had actually requested his wife to discontinue his relative's acquaintance.

" Ifield's not the sort of man I care to have you mixed up with," he had told her. " So perhaps you'll oblige me by dropping him."

The lady had only laughed.

" What funny things you do say ! Why, Lord Ifield's coming to Glynde next week."

Mr. Thurston glared.

" Coming to Glynde ? Who asked him ? "

" Why of course, I did. Why shouldn't your own cousin come to stay with us ? Alan, don't be silly ; I'm sure it's not very exciting here with only you."

Mr. Thurston had not received his lordship on his arrival with any outward demonstrations of enthusiasm. He left his wife to entertain him all

the evening, while he himself sat alone in the smoking-room, drinking whisky until he had to be helped to bed. The next morning, as has been said, he was not in the best of tempers. His head was very bad. As he became gradually aroused to a clear comprehension of that fact he sat up in bed and looked about him.

"Barnes, where the devil are you?" In a moment the watchful valet was at his side with something in a tumbler of which his master immediately disposed. "What's the time?"

"Nearly a quarter to eleven, sir."

"What's that you've got there?"

"Your letters, sir. Mrs. Thurston sent them up."

"Sent them up! What's she mean by sending letters to my bedroom? Who told her to? Let me look at them." There was quite a batch. He tossed them all aside, unopened, with the exception of one. On that his eyes fastened with what, for him, was an unusual show of interest. "By Jove! it's from Doris!" Glancing up he became aware of the valet's propinquity. "What are you standing there staring at me like that for? You know I've told you I won't have it. Go and get my bath ready, and let me have some of those headache things; my head feels as if it were splitting."

When the man had left the room his master continued to eye the envelope which he held in his hand.

"It's from Doris! It's her writing. I'll swear to it anywhere! And the postmark's Baynham! What's she writing to me about?"

He tore the envelope open. It contained a sheet of paper on which was written this letter.

“THE RECTORY,
BAYNHAM. *June 8th.*”

“DEAR ALAN,

“I have something which I very much wish to say to you, something which I want to say but can't write. I don't know if you can guess what it is ; but it is something which you won't mind listening to, unless you are very much changed. I've been thinking things over ; in fact you've been more in my mind than you ought to have been. When I tell you what I really have been thinking you will be surprised, though I hope not disagreeably. Please come as soon as possible, to-day if you can. Only send me a telegram to know you are coming, and when. You know the rectory garden ? I will come to you in the summer-house. I want to be all alone with you ; you won't mind, will you ? ”

“DORIS.”

“I have come to the conclusion that Sir P. F. is a positive nuisance ; he tries me frightfully with his continual pestering.”

When he had mastered the contents of this epistle, letting his hand drop on to the counterpane, he stared into vacancy, with an expression on his face which in its way was comical.

“Well ! of all the rummy letters for Doris to write ! What's taken her ? and what can she be driving at ? ” He read the letter a second time, without enlightening himself much further. “The only thing I can make out is that she wants to see me, and if she doesn't do that before another twenty-four hours are past it won't be through any

fault of mine ; but of all the queer epistles for her to send me ! Barnes, I can't think why, whenever I want you, you are always out of the room."

When he got downstairs he found his wife and Lord Ifield in the hall, attired in that unbecoming costume which seems to be inevitably associated with a motor car. The lady's greeting was not exactly genial.

" So you have come down ! I was just wondering if I ought to come up to see if it was a case for the hospital ; but as Lord Ifield said that you would probably throw something at me if I did, I decided that I wouldn't."

" I'm obliged to Ifield for his suggestions ; and I'll be obliged if in future he will keep them to himself. What's the meaning of that rig-cut ? "

" Lord Ifield's going to take me for a spin in his new car."

" Is he ? And what do you suppose is going to become of me ? Am I to be left alone in the house all day ? I know what a ' spin ' means ; it means that I shan't see any more of you till dinner."

His wife and his cousin exchanged glances. Then his lordship said :—

" I daresay—if you don't mind a bit of a squeeze—we could find room in the tonneau for you, with my man, and the spare tyres and the other odds and ends I've got in there ; though I give you my word, Alan, you'll find nothing to drink."

Mr. Thurston favoured the speaker with what was distinctly not a look of friendship. Lord Ifield was a tall sandy-haired man who tooped ; his most striking characteristic was an air of insignificance, in spite of which, however, he did

not quail before the threat in the other's face and eyes.

"Ifield, one of these days I shall hurt you. If you only knew how I've had to put the break on to keep myself from doing it you wouldn't be so fond of trying to be funny at my expense. As it happens, Mrs. Thurston, you've my permission to let that spin of yours last just as long as ever you choose."

"Oh, Alan, how nice of you!"

"Because I also have an engagement—with a lady."

"With a lady! Oh, Alan, who can it be?"

"It's with a lady who hasn't shown much desire for the honour of your acquaintance; and who wouldn't trust herself in a motor car with a man like Ifield."

As Mr. Thurston strode off to the breakfast-room his cousin turned to his wife with, on his bilious countenance, what was possibly intended for a smile.

"What a charming chap he is! so overflowing with the little courtesies of life."

The lady sighed.

"The poor dear isn't very well."

"If, with him, courtesy's a sign of good health, I should imagine that it's some time since he was feeling very well."

The lady looked at him with, in her smile, a touch of pathos.

"Do you know, Lord Ifield, when you speak like that you make me shudder; I wonder if he ever will feel well again."

His lordship's reply, if it was meant to cheer her, seemed rather unfortunately framed.

“ You poor little thing ! Let’s hope he will.”

She shook her head sadly.

“ You mustn’t speak like that ; you really mustn’t ! How often have I forbidden you ? ”

What looked like a tear stood in the corner of each of her pretty eyes. His regard was apparently intended to denote a mixture of admiration and of sympathy.

“ You’re an angel ! that’s what you are. Upon my honour, you’re an angel ; and you’re the first I’ve ever met ! ”

CHAPTER XV

THE TELEGRAM

THAT ninth of June was memorable from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof. Matutinal though his rising was, Miss Owen was not long after him. Perhaps it was because she had gone to bed so early the night before that she woke so early. Whatever was the cause, she did. When she put her head out of her open window, together—since no one was about—with no small portion of her white-robed figure, and discovered what a glorious morning it really was, she decided that to stop in bed or even indoors any longer would be a sin. In a remarkably short space of time, considering what a change had taken place in her appearance, she was out on the lawn, with her hat in her hand. A few minutes later she was marching across the downs towards the sea. Presently an observant coastguard, at his station on the cliffs nearly a mile away, saw through his glass a white something appearing and disappearing as it flashed through the waves. As he spied he said to himself.

“There’s that young lady at the rectory out for her morning swim; she can swim, she can; it would be hard to find a man who could beat her.”

When she returned to the early rectory breakfast she was still shining like a goddess. The small lady and gentleman who were supposed to be her pupils shouted at the sight of her.

“ Oh, Doris, where have you been ? ”

“ I’ve been playing leap-frog with the porpoises. All of a sudden I found myself among a school of them, and, do you know, I believe that we frightened each other away.”

That was the occasion on which the family was to visit Sir Philip Ford for the second time within a week. The first visit had been such a huge success that their host had insisted on an early repetition. He was to come and fetch them in the nondescript vehicle which, in fine weather, was a motor wagonette, and in bad a motor omnibus, and which would easily convey five persons besides the driver, with room for more. The morning was still young when the car arrived. Miss Owen sat in front. She was to receive her first lesson in the art of driving.

“ When I’ve learnt,” she explained to her pupils, “ I’ll teach you, and then we’ll all take it in turns to drive.”

She progressed so rapidly, giving such complete satisfaction to her instructor, that it seemed not at all unlikely that she would soon be in a condition to teach others. As the Manor House was only distant between two and three miles from the rectory, and no one wanted to get there before lunch, they went for a run by way of an appetiser, at about the same hour that Lord Ifield and Mrs. Thurston were enjoying a “ spin ” in the neighbourhood of Glynde. By the time the run was over Sir Philip maintained that Miss

Owen was already quite an expert, but it is possible that his judgment was a trifle biased. Throughout the day she exercised over him an influence which perhaps, after all, was not singular, for she was not only herself in radiant spirits, but she had the happy gift of inoculating others with her own happiness.

In the evening, when the day was over, the young lady, who seemed tireless, returned to the rectory on foot and was escorted by her host. It was understood that there was something the matter with that motor wagonette; it was not exactly stated what, but it was presumably sufficient to render it desirable that another car should be used to take the party home, and as that car was not large enough to take them all, though they were wedged in never so tightly, it was obvious that either a third car would have to be requisitioned, or else something would have to be arranged. And the arrangement made was that Miss Owen should walk home. She declared that she would much rather walk, since she did so love walking, and then it was such an evening for a walk. And as of course she could hardly be expected to walk alone, though she was most willing to do so, and did not want to trouble any one, Sir Philip insisted on seeing her safe on her way.

That walk over the downs—they were at one in desiring to eschew the dusty road—was one which neither of them was ever destined to forget. The conversation was not brilliant, what there was of it, and, to be frank, there was not much. Miss Owen was not only content to allow her companion to say little, she was in a silent mood

herself. That point in the acquaintance between a man and a woman in which each says nothing, yet is not dumb, is not without its charm. The remarks which these two exchanged were the merest commonplaces, and the intervals between were decidedly long, yet there is an eloquence which is not born of words, and that evening on the downs they twain were under the spell of it.

When they reached the rectory Miss Owen ran into the house all aglow with something which made her feel as if she were walking upon air. As she entered the hall a maid came towards her with something on a waiter.

"A telegram for you, miss. It came soon after you were gone. We didn't know whether to send it after you or not."

Nowadays telegrams are as common as post-cards. Many people send them to save themselves the trouble of writing letters. The telegraph boy is almost as regular a visitor as the postman. But, on the other hand, there still are persons to whom the advent of a telegram is an event, and who never open the yellow envelope in which it is contained without a fluttering fear that something dire is upon them. Miss Owen was one of these. The sight of the yellow envelope brought her back to the solid ground with a bump. She took it up with fingers which actually trembled, wondering, with a conscious tremor, whom it could be from. There was only one person of whom she could think as being likely to send a telegram to her, her mother. Her mother had gone so completely out of her life of late, and her life had been so much pleasanter for it, that she recalled her existence with a sense of shock.

What message could she have to send her in a telegram? Nothing agreeable, she felt sure. She never had associated anything agreeable with her mother—never! and now, when all the world was so sweet and clean and honest, what breath of something very different had come over the wires?

Therefore, fearful of she knew not what, she tore the envelope open with tremulous fingers. On the pink sheet of paper which she took out of it was pencilled something which was so totally different from anything she had expected that for some seconds she stared at it with a total lack of comprehension.

“I shall be in the summer-house as near to seven-thirty as possible—find I cannot get there earlier because trains won't fit. Come to me as soon as you can. Very anxious to see you.

“ALAN THURSTON.”

What did it mean? It had been handed in at Glynde post office that morning, so apparently it was from Alan Thurston, but—surely it was intended for somebody else. He could surely not be telegraphing to her to say that he would be in the summer-house as near as possible to seven-thirty. What summer-house? And what had his movements—his, of all people in the world!—to do with her? And yet it was addressed to “Miss Owen, The Rectory, Baynham.” What did—what could it mean?

“I hope there's no bad news, miss.”

The words recalled her to the fact that the maid who had handed her the telegram was still

there, waiting, apparently, to learn if there was any answer. She looked at her with a start.

"Bad news? No—that is——" It was strange how stupid she felt; possibly owing to the almost unnatural haste with which she had been switched off from one train of thought to another. "I suppose I'm very dull but—I'm afraid I don't understand. Ellen, I'm going out into the garden, I shall be back almost directly if any one wants me."

Before the girl had a chance to answer Doris was back again into the open air. The summer-house? There was only one summer-house in the rectory garden; what Alan Thurston meant by saying that he would be in it she had not the faintest notion. She had a sort of hazy feeling that some one must be making her the subject of a practical joke; still—the summer-house was only at the other end of the garden; there could be no harm in going to see if Alan Thurston could be so absurd as to mean what he had apparently said. She went hurrying across the lawn at a pace which was almost a run. The summer-house was at a distance of perhaps a couple of hundred yards from the rectory. It stood not far from the hedge which shut off the road which led to the downs, almost surrounded by cedar trees, which were among the glories of the rectory garden. What time it was she had no idea; but as the sun had set and the shadows were falling it must be getting late. She told herself, as she neared the building, which was more in shadow than the ground over which she was moving, that it was a ridiculous errand she was on; still, as she had started, she might as

well see it through. Suddenly she realised that some one, a man, was standing in the entrance to the summer-house ; so suddenly did she realise it that she all but ran into him.

“ Alan Thurston ! ” she cried, more loudly than she was aware of, “ Is it you ? ”

A voice replied which unmistakably was Mr. Thurston's.

“ I should rather think it was me. By Jove, Doris, I'm glad to see you. I've been waiting here a deuce of a time. I was just thinking of coming up to the house to see if after all you meant to do me.”

She stared at him through the gathering gloom with bewildered surprise.

“ Meant to do you ? What are you talking about ? Why have you come ? ”

“ That's good, when I'm here at your own pressing and particular invitation.”

“ Mr. Thurston ! ”

“ Doris ! It's like old times to hear your voice again. Doris, I've been a frightful fool, and I never realised it more clearly than this morning, when I had your letter. The sight of your handwriting sent a thrill all over me—honour bright ! ”

“ Are you—— ” She stopped to give her question another form. “ Is this your idea of a joke ? ”

“ Rather ; just about ; what do you think ? The idea of your writing to ask if I'd mind coming to see you alone in the summer-house, when I'd have given any amount for the chance. Come ? I should think I would come ! And here I am. So you find Philip Ford a nuisance, do you ? Tires you frightfully, does he ? I'm not surprised ; I thought he would. But I should like to see his face if he knew you'd told me.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE CUPBOARD WAS BARE

IF Alan Thurston had only moved a very few steps the wish which he had uttered might have been gratified ; he would have been able to see the look upon Philip Ford's face as he received the intimation his whilom friend unconsciously conveyed.

When Miss Owen, on leaving him, had vanished into the house, he had inquired for the rector. On being informed that Mr. Campion had had a pressing call to a parishioner, but was expected very shortly to return, Ford decided to wait till he came back. There were matters on which he wished to speak to him ; a more propitious moment would hardly be likely to occur ; he was in a mood to make a confidant of his friend. He declined an invitation to enter the house, on the ground that he preferred to await the rector in the garden. There he would be alone in the coming glory of the summer night. There were many things of which he wished to think ; and they were things of which he would be better able to think amid the soft June airs, in the shadowed garden, under the stars.

He went along the winding path, intending to sit in the summer-house and smoke a cigar. As he advanced he became conscious that he had been

forestalled in both intentions. The scent of tobacco smoke came towards him through the languid air. As he moved nearer he realised that it was coming from the building for which he himself was making. He wondered who the smoker was. Campion did not smoke. He was acquainted with the entire local population. He could think of no one who would be likely to make an unceremonious entry into the rectory garden at that hour, and take possession of the summer-house to enable him to enjoy a cigar at his ease. Sir Philip flattered himself that he knew the smell of a good cigar; this was a good one. The people who smoked cigars in that part of the world might be counted on his fingers; there was certainly no one thereabouts who indulged in cigars which would yield a perfume like the one which was being borne towards him. Possibly some one had arrived at the rectory unexpectedly during the absence of the family and was still sitting in the summer-house in solitary state, unconscious of their return. If, Sir Philip told himself, such was the case, he would put the matter straight. He had reached the little side-path which led directly to the building when—he stopped.

From where he stood the edifice was in plain sight, at the distance of probably not more than twelve feet. On the threshold was standing Alan Thurston. He was looking across the lawn towards the house, so that his back was to Ford. He had not seen nor heard of him since the day on which, hounded on by his wife, he had attacked him in the billiard-room at Glynde, and given him the scar which he would bear to his grave. Had there not been circumstances which restrained him, Ford,

ignoring English prejudices, would have challenged him to fight for his life ; forced him into a duel. When he thought of him he was conscious of a constriction of the muscles ; that uncanny sensation which has been described as "seeing red." After a while he resolutely refused to think of him at all ; he put him out of his mind ; out of his life ; both Alan and the woman he had married. He would leave them to punish each other ; they were a well-matched pair.

When he first saw him standing there, first his amazement, and then afterwards something else, held him rooted to the ground. His every instinct urged him to move forward ; touch him on the shoulder ; call him to that account which had been so long postponed ; but against his instinct he strained every nerve. Turning right-about-face, he went back as quietly as he had come.

All at once his attention was called to something else. Some one was hurrying across the lawn ; it was Miss Owen ; she was moving quickly towards where Alan Thurston was smoking his cigar. What should he do ? call to her ? stop her ? warn her who was there ? Before he could arrive at a decision he was too late. She had seen him ; met him ; he had heard the exchange of greetings. What did it—what could it mean ? It was altogether out of the question to suppose that Thurston was there at Doris's invitation. That idea was too absurd ; as, Ford told himself, he had the best of reasons for knowing. What was possible was that Thurston had harried Doris into giving him an interview. He had invented some plausible excuse which had moved Doris to pity, and beguiled her into yielding to his solicitations.

But, alone in the garden ? at that hour ? with a man like Thurston ? after what had passed between them ? The girl did not realise what it was that she was doing. It was for him to protect her against her own simplicity. Again there came that curious feeling, as if each muscle in his body had stiffened of its own volition. Once more he moved towards the summer-house ; if Alan Thurston was not careful he would call him to reckoning after all. And for a second time he stopped where the little side-path branched off to the right ; for, as he gained the corner, he distinctly heard Thurston utter the words which already have been chronicled. They stung him as if the other had struck him with a lash across the face ; far more than this man's fury in the billiard-room had done. She had found Philip Ford a nuisance, and had said as much to Alan Thurston ! Doris had said it ! Was such duplicity conceivable in her ? Ordinarily he would have had sense enough to know that it was not, and would instantly have pushed on to demand the explanation which so far as she was concerned would have promptly been forthcoming. But, at the moment, his mind was without its proper balance. Thurston's appearance had unhinged him in the first place ; and then Doris's haste, as if she were speeding to a rendezvous ; and now, not only the words, but the tone in which they were uttered ; altogether it was as if he had been dealt a blow which, mentally, made him reel. There was a note of jubilation in the speaker's voice, of glee at the picture he conjured up of his old friend's discomfiture, which suggested that at least he was hideously sure of

the ground on which he stood with Doris Owen.

Again Philip Ford retraced his footsteps, leaving them to continue their interview at their leisure. She was tired of him, was she? And she found him a nuisance; and she had confessed as much to Thurston? Were all women, then, the same, practised in deceit? Certainly Thurston had taken to himself a wife in whose perfect innocence he himself undoubtedly believed; in defence of which, indeed, he had been willing to destroy his friend. His knowledge of the sex was probably as great as most men's. If he was duped so completely and so easily by one, was there any reason why he, Philip Ford, should not be duped as easily and completely by another? It was very well for him to say that he was not gullible, like Alan; but what proof had he that he was not? Every man flattered himself that, in that respect, he was not like his fellows; until one day he learned that he was.

He was striding along the path, meaning to leave the garden then and there, and so home, when he became aware that some one, with equally hurried steps, was coming towards him. Ere he could turn aside, all desire for conversation having vanished, he found himself confronted by Mr. Campion.

"Ford!" he exclaimed. "Do you know who's in the summer-house?" Apparently he translated Sir Philip's silence as a negative. He went volubly on, in tones of unmistakable concern. "It's that scamp Thurston, and Doris Owen is talking to him. I saw him as I was going out; I don't know if he saw me, but I was so surprised,

and in such a hurry to get to Mrs. Farrington's—that son of hers has been troubling her again; the poor old lady is in a very bad way—that I walked straight on, intending to inquire into the reason of his presence on my return. As I came back along the hedge I heard his voice and Doris Owen's, both of them raised a good deal louder than they need have been; I could not help hearing something of what was said, and, upon my word, I believe, Ford, that they are quarrelling. Listen! what's that? they are! Ford, that scoundrel's trying to play some of his blackguard tricks."

All at once the man's and the girl's voices were raised in accents which emphatically were not suggestive of affection. Suddenly Doris's voice rang out, almost as if she shrieked:—

"If you don't take care I'll kill you!"

There was the sound of Alan's laugh; not a pleasant sound. Then momentary silence. Then Alan's voice, like the roar of some wild animal, with something in it which thrilled the nerves of the two listeners.

"My God! Doris! you've done for me!"

Silence again; ominous silence. Glancing under the arching branches they saw Doris flying across the lawn as if she fled for her life. But not a sound from the summer-house. Mr. Champion turned to Sir Philip with what a clearer light would have shown were blanched cheeks and startled eyes. He spoke with a little stammer.

"Ford, what—what can have happened?"

"Nothing, man! What should have happened. Thurston has been misbehaving himself, and Miss Owen's left him; that's what's happened."

"Then why is he so still?"

"He's thinking things over, being probably ashamed of himself, a day after the fair."

"But—it's very odd." The rector seemed to be straining every nerve to listen. "We ought to hear him moving or—something."

"So we shall, if we wait long enough. You go up to the house and see if anything can be done for Miss Owen; I expect he's pretty well upset her. I'll go and talk to him."

"If you don't mind, Ford, I'll come with you."

Some singularity in the rector's utterance seemed to attract Sir Philip's notice.

"What's the matter with you, Champion? What's at the back of your head? You go up and see about Miss Owen, and let me interview Thurston on my own; there are reasons why I should prefer to be alone with him, having one or two remarks which I should like to make to him in private."

"You shall have all the silence you want, after I have satisfied my mind by making sure that there is nothing wrong."

"Champion, you're moonstruck; I tell you that there is nothing wrong. Can't you understand that there may be reasons why I should wish to be alone when I first meet Alan Thurston?"

"Philip, it's no good; I intend to see for myself what has happened. Every moment his silence continues increases my fear that something has. If you are going, go, and I come with you; if you are not going, then let me go. While we dally he may be in need of our assistance."

Without another word Sir Philip, turning,

strode to the summer-house, the rector close at his heels. There was still not a sound as they advanced ; nothing to show that their approach was observed, or, indeed, that there was any one there to observe. When he reached the entrance to the building Sir Philip paused ; the rector at his side paused too. It was he who spoke, asking a question in a voice which those who knew him best would hardly have recognised as his :—

“ Philip, is—is he—dead ? ”

Ford did not answer. Crossing the threshold, he leant over the figure which could be dimly seen lying on the floor.

“ Alan ! ” he said. “ Alan ! ” There was no reply. Suddenly Ford stood up straight. “ Who’s that ? ” he asked. Some one was approaching, apparently a stranger, who, being at a loss in the uncertain light, was forcing a way through the bushes. Sir Philip betrayed unusual and seemingly uncalled-for irritation. “ What infernal idiot’s this ? ”

The “ infernal idiot ” was in the plural number. Two masculine figures approached from among the undergrowth which bordered one side of the summer-house. Perceiving the rector and Sir Philip they stopped, as if surprised.

“ Hullo ! ” cried one, “ here’s some one here already. Excuse us, gentlemen, if we’re intruding ; but we were afraid that something was the matter.” The stranger peered forward, with an exclamation of horror. “ And it looks as if something was the matter. Frank, you were right, I believe she’s done for him.”

His companion rejoined :—

“ I told you she meant business ; I felt sure of it.”

The first speaker addressed Sir Philip.

“ Has she killed him ? ”

Again Ford's manner showed excessive irritation.

“ What the devil do you mean by addressing such a question to me, sir ? Who are you ? And what are you doing here ? ”

The stranger seemed in no way abashed.

“ As to who I am, if it is necessary, I shall have pleasure in telling you ; as to what I am doing here, my friend and I were on the downs, and hearing a man and a woman quarrelling at the tops of their voices——”

Sir Philip cut him ruthlessly short ; his manner all at once as cold as it had just been hot.

“ We will hear your story, later, sir ; we are wasting what may be valuable time. Campion, will you take these gentlemen up to the house and bring, with their assistance, a shutter or something on which Thurston may be carried indoors, while I go to the stables to send some one for the doctor. Gentlemen, if you will be so good as to at once accompany Mr. Campion, you may be of very material assistance.”

The four men walked away, separating at the end of the path, the rector, with the two strangers, turning to the left towards the house, and Sir Philip to the right towards the stables. Presently the rector's party reappeared considerably reinforced. With him were his wife, her sister, Miss Rodda, and seemingly all the maids ; the women being, without exception, in a state of great excitement and agitation. Mr. Campion and the strangers bore a mattress between them. As

the party moved across the lawn Sir Philip came towards them from under the trees, carrying a lighted lantern.

“Campion,” he exclaimed, “this will never do! Mrs. Champion, you must forgive my saying that I am surprised to see you here; this is no place for women. If you wish to be of service you will see that a bedroom is prepared. I have sent Gates for the doctor. Let me beg of you to return at once indoors and see that everything is made ready against his coming, and take these women with you.”

It seemed that the lady needed no further persuasion, the speaker's words and manner were sufficient. Turning, with her sister, she swept the maids in front of her back to the house. The men went on.

“We have brought a mattress,” explained the rector. “It was the only thing I could think of that seemed suitable.”

“A mattress will do.”

Not another word was spoken until they reached the summer-house. When they did they found that it was empty!

CHAPTER XVII

A PUZZLE

THE surprise was so complete as to be comical. Indeed, for some moments neither of the four would credit the evidence of his own senses. They entered the summer-house and, while Sir Philip held out the lantern, peered into every nook and cranny, as if the body of a man could be hidden in a corner like a pin. When at last it was sufficiently plain that there was no one there, they stared at each other, as if by dint of staring the position might be made clearer.

“Well,” observed one of the strangers, with a gasp, as if constrained to say something to relieve his feelings, “this does beat anything! Talk about dead men taking up their beds and walking!”

Sir Philip held up the lantern so that the light shone upon the stranger's face. His manner was severe yet courteous.

“The explanation is sufficiently simple, sir. Mr. Thurston has recovered consciousness, during our absence, and, finding himself uninjured, has taken himself off.”

One of the strangers, standing in the entrance, stooping, picked up something from the ground.

“What's this?” He had in his hand a soft felt hat. “It looks as if he had taken himself

off without his hat, if he has gone. Odd he shouldn't have missed it."

Ford moved towards the speaker.

"It is a hat; I suppose it's his."

"I recognise it," struck in the rector, "as the one I saw him wearing."

"He had no hat on when he was lying on the floor; at least I think not. Probably he dropped it as he fell, and was afterwards unwilling to waste time by looking for it in the darkness; even if he had regained sufficient control of his senses to be aware that he hadn't got it on."

"Your explanations do credit to your ingenuity, sir."

This was the stranger who had previously spoken. Again Ford gleamed the lantern to his face.

"May I ask your name, sir?"

"My name is Henry Sampson, and my address is 93, Gower Street. My friend here is Dr. Seymour Anderson, of 24, Buttress Road, Notting Hill."

"You seem to take a singular amount of interest in what has transpired here this evening."

"My friend and I are walking across the downs; we hear a man and a woman quarrelling; we hear the woman threatening to kill the man; we hear her endeavouring to put her threat into execution; immediately afterwards we find the man lying apparently dead; and you tell us that it is singular that we should show any interest in such proceedings. It seems to me that you take a very curious view of the matter."

Dr. Anderson spoke next.

"What we had better do, Sampson, is to communicate at once with the police. Possibly this

gentleman won't resent their being interested in what looks to me like, at any rate, an attempt to murder."

"Communicate with whom you please, sir. Campion, I don't think we need detain these gentlemen."

The rector hesitated.

"I'm bound to admit that I don't myself understand what can have become of Mr. Thurston. Even if he were able to leave this place, as he evidently has done, he may not be in a condition to go very far, and may at this moment be lying close at hand, more in need of our assistance than ever."

The others seemed to be pondering his words. Then one of the strangers said:—

"Quite so; that's very true. And if we do come across him, since I am a doctor, I may be able to give him the assistance he requires."

"You did not say anything about your being a doctor," remarked Sir Philip, "when I went off just now to send for a medical man."

"Why should I? I naturally took it for granted that you would prefer your own medical attendant."

"Nor, when Mr. Thurston was lying here, did you attempt to render him any of the services which one would suppose that a doctor would offer to a man in his condition."

"I admit it. I was so wholly taken aback. I have been calling myself names ever since."

"I only mention it because of your apparent eagerness to render him assistance now that he no longer stands in need of it."

"Instead of wrangling here" broke in the man

who had said that his name was Sampson, "don't you think it would be better if you were to try and see if you can find any traces of the man who has effected such a dramatic disappearance and left his hat behind?"

Sir Philip strode out of the summer-house.

"I think," suggested the rector "that if we were to begin with this little path, that is the one he would most probably take."

Ford, with the lantern, led the way. They had only taken two or three steps when Dr. Anderson exclaimed:—

"Hullo! I kicked against something; I felt it most distinctly." He stooped. "What's this? A gold watch, and a very handsome one; there's a crest and a monogram. If this is the missing man's, how on earth did it manage to drop out of his pocket if he was walking, unless he was walking upside down?"

His friend was also stooping.

"Here's something else; here are three sovereigns and two half-crowns, and I rather fancy that there's more under the bushes there. It's a puzzle which needs some solving to know how coins are to drop out of the pockets of a man who's walking, except on my friend's hypothesis, that's he's upside down."

"It certainly is extremely curious," said the rector.

On Ford's face, as he threw the light upon the articles which the two strangers held out for his inspection, was a smile.

"Possibly, since we come upon so many traces of him, presently we shall come upon the man himself."

But they did not, although they looked for him everywhere. They subjected the garden to a searching examination ; they went up and down the road ; they even scoured the grassy slopes which fringed it. Without the least result. They not only saw nothing of the missing man ; but they also discovered no more of what Sir Philip called his traces. Quite a considerable time was consumed by their goings hither and thither and in and out. At last Sir Philip suggested that they should give up the search as useless.

“ I think that we have done all that the occasion requires, gentlemen. Whatever condition Mr. Thurston was in, it is evident that he was able to remove himself to a sufficient distance from us.” The others were silent ; he went on : “ Therefore all that remains, gentlemen, is for us to wish you good-night.”

“ If you please.”

“ With reference to the watch and other trifles, if you will let us have them they will be in safe keeping, and we will see that they reach the proper hands.”

“ Excuse me, but that’s out of the question. The watch, and what you are pleased to term the other trifles, can only be transferred from us direct to the police. If you choose to come with us you will be able to see the transference take place.”

Sir Philip seemed to be considering the speaker’s answer, with the lantern shining in his face. When he spoke again his tone was very courteous and very grave.

“ Gentlemen, Mr. Thurston, the person who has so unceremoniously taken himself off, is an old personal friend of mine. There are circumstances

connected with this matter which make it desirable that it should be kept as private as possible. May I not therefore ask you to keep your own counsel, and relieve yourselves of the property of which you have accidentally become possessed? Especially as it must now have been made plain even to you that no mischief has been done."

"Pardon me, sir, but the exact contrary is the case. I am strongly of opinion that mischief has been done; and that, I believe, is an opinion which my friend shares."

"I do."

"Our bounden duty is to give these articles into the custody of the police, and into their custody only, and to tell our story. If the missing man reappears and says, as you say, that no mischief has been done, well and good; the whole business will be satisfactorily ended; but until then our duty, as law-abiding citizens, is so clear that I am surprised to find a gentleman of your apparent social position suggesting the possibility of there being an alternative course. You surely should know better."

Again there was a change in Sir Philip's manner. This time it was dry in the extreme.

"Very good, if you feel like that, you do. By all means act up to your own ideas of what you consider to be your bounden duty."

"We shall."

"I would. Good-night."

They returned into the garden, leaving the two strangers standing together in the road.

"I've seen that man's face before—it haunts me—though, at the moment, I can't think where."

“ To which of the two men are you alluding ? ”

“ To the man who calls himself Sampson.”

“ Why do you say ‘ calls himself ’ Sampson ? ”

“ His name may be Sampson for all I know or care. Only I’m convinced that the last time I saw him was under circumstances which were by no means creditable to himself. I shall place him presently.”

Suddenly the rector stood still.

“ Philip, what do you think has become of Alan Thurston ? ”

“ My dear Champion, doesn’t it seem as if he had slunk off like the cur I’m afraid he is ? ”

“ Then you don’t think that Doris Owen did him any serious injury ? ”

“ Champion ! what grounds have you for suggesting anything so monstrous ? ”

“ This.”

The rector stretched out his hand.

“ That ! What’s that ? Your hand is empty.”

“ If you will bring that lantern closer you will see that there is blood upon it ”

“ Champion ! what are you driving at ? ”

“ When I touched Alan Thurston as he lay in the summer-house I found that he was damp ; when I looked at my hand I saw that it was bloody, as you can see for yourself it is now. Ford, his clothes were soaked with blood.”

“ There were no signs of blood upon the floor. I looked most carefully.”

“ I also looked, when you brought the lantern. I saw that there was none. He was lying on his back, and I supposed his clothes had absorbed it all. You noticed their condition.”

“ There was nothing the matter with them so far

as I could perceive, and I touched him too. You are sure of what you say ? ”

“ Certain ; there is the evidence of my hand ; he was a-reek of blood. And—Ford, Philip, there is something else which I ought to say to you, I—I found this.”

The rector held out one of those dangerous weapons—in dangerous hands—which English dealers in cutlery call Swedish knives. This one had a blade which was some seven or eight inches in length. Sir Philip was monosyllabic.

“ Where ? ”

“ On the lawn. I—I picked it up, and when I saw what it was, I—I thought I would say nothing about it till we were alone. She—she must have dropped it in her haste when she was running.”

“ Give it to me.”

“ What are you going to do with it ? ”

“ Nothing, take care of it, that’s all. What should I do with it ? ”

“ It’s all bloody.”

“ Is it ? I’m not afraid of a little blood.”

“ Ford—I—I—shan’t sleep all night ; I feel as if I shall never sleep again until I know what has become of Alan Thurston.”

“ What nonsense are you talking ? You’re as bad as those two idiots. If there was blood upon him it was from a scratch. He came to his senses, found where he was, recollected what had happened, and took himself off. That is what has become of Alan Thurston.”

“ I wonder.”

“ What other solution would you substitute ? Do you suggest that during our brief absence he

was spirited away? By whom? how? where? with what purpose?"

"I say again, I wonder. I can only tell you that it will be one of the happiest moments in my life when I receive proof positive that you are right, and that the man is safe and sound."

"Campion, a notion has occurred to me; is it possible that he may have taken refuge in your house?"

The rector seemed struck by the suggestion. His tone was brisker.

"Ford, nothing is more likely. You've hit it! That is very probably what he has done. What a dunce I am not to think of it before! Come along, please God, we shall find him in the house."

But they did not, nor anything to show that he had been near it. Mrs. Campion and the servants were waiting in the hall. When they learned the cause of the delay in their arrival, that Alan Thurston had disappeared, their amazement was unbounded.

On the road where they had left Mr. Sampson and his medical friend another interesting little scene was taking place. The two men waited till the others' retreating footsteps had died away, then they turned and faced each other, and Mr. Sampson broke into a laugh; a proceeding which his companion criticised with some asperity.

"Stop that row, you fool, they'll hear you."

"I couldn't help laughing, not if I had to die for it the next minute; bar none this is the funniest thing I ever was mixed up in."

"I'll be hanged if I see where the joke comes in."

"That's because you've no sense of humour,

my boy. We come down to witness murder, and find the corpse. We witness the murder and we find the corpse, then, directly we turn our backs, the corpse picks itself up and hooks it. If you don't call that funny, I'm sorry for you. I've no use for a man who can't enjoy a jest, even when it's against himself."

"All I can say is that your ideas of what's funny aren't mine. Bianca's muddled it."

"Here! no names! Let's get up on the top of the slope here; we shall be able to see who's listening. After the capers which have been played we can't be too cautious"

They ascended the grassy slopes until they found a point from which, through the clear night air, they could see for unknown distances. In his own fashion Mr. Seymour appreciated the beauty of the scene.

"I say! what a night! isn't it balmy? Talk about seeing stars! did you ever see anything like the Milky Way? Isn't it like a blaze of gold and silver? That light over there's some fishing-boat; that's the sea; can you see how the ripples gleam? This is the sort of night on which the very worst sailor might venture to cross the Channel. If you don't mind I'll sit on this little ledge here; I'm a bit tired. You'd better sit down too."

"Thank you, I prefer to stand. The grass is damper than you think."

"Not it; sitting on the grass won't hurt any one on a night like this; but each to his own taste. My old mother never would sit down on grass, not if you were to prove to her that it was as nearly as possible red-hot; she'd still feel that it ought to be damp if it wasn't. And I think I'll treat

myself to a pipe. I feel as if I were in want of something comforting. So you're of opinion that Bianca's muddled it?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"You don't know her as well as I do or you wouldn't be so sure."

"It's perfectly clear that she didn't kill him."

"Is it? Oh! Until I hear what Bianca has to say, so far as I'm concerned, judgment is reserved. She's a remarkable woman. She hasn't sat for the figure, off and on, all these years without learning something about anatomy. She knows as well how and where to put a knife into a man as a butcher does into a sheep."

"Then are you suggesting that she made a job of it?"

"I'm suggesting that in this game there's perhaps a little more than meets the eye; that's what I'm suggesting."

"It doesn't need a clever man to see so much."

"No; that's true; or maybe you'll say I shouldn't see it. Now, let's reckon up what we actually saw. We saw Bianca slip round the corner of the summer-house."

"The rapidity with which she did that was marvellous; there was no perceptible interval between Miss Owen's going and her coming; she evidently deceived Mr. Thurston."

"His own words proved that. 'My God! Doris! you've done for me!' that's what he yelled out, and those words in themselves ought to be enough to hang her; and what's the betting that they don't? We saw Bianca strike at him."

"I didn't see her actually strike."

"You weren't so well placed as I was; I did."

What's more, I saw her withdraw the knife as he was falling, and throw it from her on to the lawn, so that they might think that the Owen girl had dropped it in her guilty flight."

"You did? Then why on earth didn't you manage so that it should be found while we were there? We've lost the chance of being present at the discovery of a most material piece of evidence."

Sampson puffed his pipe in silence. When he spoke again, in his voice there was the suspicion of something very like a chuckle.

"I'll tell you. We're not so simple. It was found. Mr. Campion, he found it."

"The parson?"

"The parson. I saw him pick it up."

"What did he do with it?"

"Slipped it inside his jacket. It was there the whole time we were looking for the man's dead body. It tickled me to notice the state he was in, knowing it was there; the perspiration was coming off from him in streams. If I'd taken him by the collar and made a grab at it he'd have tumbled down in a fit."

"Then why didn't you? As it is he'll be able to deny that he ever had it."

"Go on! go on! don't be silly! He's not a kind of man like you and me, my dear; we're not all built on the same pattern. That knife's burning into him like a flaming firebrand at this moment, as sure as the stars are in that sky. I've only got to go and say to him, 'Mr. Campion, have you seen anything of a knife or any sharp instrument which might have been used as a weapon of offence?' It'll all come out on the

instant—he'll be glad to get it off his mind—and, mark you, the concealment will do her more harm in the eyes of a judge and jury than if he'd shown us that he'd got it the very moment that he had."

"There's something in that."

"As you say, there is something. There's also something in what I'm going to add, which is why I propose to reserve judgment till I've heard Bianca's story. As she tore past me, she breathed just loud enough for me to hear, 'I've split his heart.'"

"You're sure she said that?"

"Quite sure—absolutely certain."

"Those were the exact words?"

"Her exact words. Am I the man to make a mistake in a thing of that sort?"

"I should say not."

"Nor is she the woman. As you know, she was doing a sprint. Ford and the parson were coming along and she didn't want them to get a glimpse of her, so she hadn't much chance to talk; but she did manage to give me that piece of information. 'I've split his heart,' she said, as plainly as I'm saying it to you—and that's a subject on which I've reasons for believing that she knows what she's talking about."

"Then the man must have been dead?"

"Stone dead."

"Then how do you explain the disappearance of his body?"

"If I could explain it I shouldn't be sitting talking here. One remark I may make, that we must always remember that we're dealing with a very peculiar person."

"You refer to his wife?"

“Or his widow, as the case may be. She—oh, she’s unique.”

“I should say that there is probably no doubt upon that point. But what has she to gain by the concealment of his body? It’s all the other way.”

“It would seem like it.”

“She’d be defeating her own ends; she can’t prove herself a widow unless she can produce his body.”

“That’s so.”

“There are only two possible hypotheses. Either he was dead, in which case somebody must have removed his body, or he was not dead, in which case he removed himself. Now let me tell you something in my turn.”

“All attention.”

“I never went into the house with the parson and you. I stayed outside, in such a position that the summer-house was in a direct line of sight. If anybody had gone in or out of it I must have seen it.”

“Must?”

“I’ll bet on it. If you’ll come back to the garden I’ll place you where I stood, and then you’ll perceive that I must have seen; and, if anything, it was lighter then than it is now. I never looked away.”

“Sure?”

“Never for more than a second or two, I’ll swear it! and nobody went either in or out.”

“But if nobody went in he must have gone out; unless you’re hinting at a trap-door, and that he dropped through it, and that’s getting a bit too thick.”

“ My theory is that he crawled.”

“ Crawled ! Good Lord ! ”

“ And that’s how he dropped his hat, and his watch, and the money out of his pockets.”

“ But why to goodness should he want to crawl ? This gets funnier and funnier ! ”

“ For the express purpose of not being seen. Bianca thought she had got home, but she hadn’t. I don’t pretend to have had her experience, but I do know something about a man’s physical conformation ; there’s nothing easier than for the blade of a knife to miss a vital part.”

“ And there’s nothing easier than for it to find one.”

“ Granted, both ways. She was in a tremendous hurry ; either her knife struck something of which, in her haste, she was unconscious, or else it glanced off a bone. Anyhow, the injury he received was merely superficial ; while we were bending over him he was almost as much in possession of his senses as we were ; so soon as our backs were turned, he bolted, either crawling or stooping, or in some attitude which made it impossible, from where I was standing, to perceive his movements.”

“ But why should he go ? Why couldn’t he have stayed ? ”

“ Can’t you conceive of possible reasons ? Suppose he believed it was Miss Owen who attacked him. Isn’t it possible that his desire would be to screen her, and that he therefore wanted to have a chance of thinking things over before he was asked any leading questions ? Wouldn’t that in itself be a sufficient reason why he should prefer to make himself scarce ? Then there is another equally plausible explanation, and one which may

turn out to be of greater interest to us. How are we to be sure that he really believed that his assailant was Miss Owen ? ”

“ Because of what he shouted ; his words were plain enough.”

“ The words may have come from him on the impulse of the moment—I can quite understand how—and a moment after he may have recognised his error. He may have had a suspicion of the actual game which was being played. In which case he would be more anxious than ever to have an opportunity for a good think before opening his mouth to say a word.”

“ Then are you suggesting that he walked out of that garden with the deliberate intention of queering us ? ”

“ If you like to put it that way, yes. In other words, he’ll probably endeavour to get to the bottom of what must seem to him to be a very curious business.”

“ Then in your opinion, at this moment, in spite of what Bianca said to me, he’s as hale and hearty as we are.”

“ Why not ? Appearances seem to show that she was mistaken. He may have a superficial wound—he probably has—but nothing that counts.”

“ If you’re right, we must let his good lady know what she may expect, because before very long, metaphorically, he’ll be getting his knife into her, and through her into us. As that prospect doesn’t strike me as being a very pleasant one, at best he’s only booked for a very short journey ; because, the next time we start to silence him, we’ll silence him for good and all. He can order his coffin to be made if he isn’t ready for it now.”

CHAPTER XVIII

THE UNINVITED GUEST

LORD IFIELD was already seated at the breakfast-table when his hostess entered.

"So you're here first," she said.

"It looks like it. Any news of Alan?"

She shook her dainty head; he thought it was the daintiest he had ever seen; every time he saw her his conviction was strengthened. That morning, if, from his point of view, the thing was possible she was looking even prettier than usual. He told her so, with the frankness which was in keeping with his notions of how to bear himself in the presence of a woman he admired.

"You're simply a radiant dream of beauty; I can't think how you do it." She half rose from her seat to bestow on him a mock bow in acknowledgment of what he intended for a compliment. "I'm in earnest. I can't think how you do do it. How many even pretty women appear to any advantage in the morning, or even venture to show themselves at breakfast? But you, you look so fresh and sweet and delicious that one feels that you must have just popped out of Paradise."

"What very pretty things you can say, Lord Ifield, when you try."

"That sort of thing requires no trying; it comes by nature."

"Does it? I wish it came to every one. It is so pleasant to have pretty things said to one sometimes." She sighed, a sigh which was eloquent. Then she changed the subject. "I wonder what can have become of Alan. He hasn't been in all night, and nothing has been seen or heard of him since yesterday morning."

His lordship was scarcely sympathetic.

"Alan's all right."

"Of course he's all right. But still, one cannot but feel that I am left to entertain you all alone."

"I'm content."

"It's not a question of whether you are content, or of whether I am content. There are so many things which have to be considered, as you are perfectly well aware."

As she spoke wheels were heard coming along the drive. Lord Ifield looked up.

"Here he is."

"Who? Alan?"

Had he glanced in her direction, although his faculty of observation was not his strongest point, he could hardly have failed to notice with what curious intentness she was listening.

"Probably. It isn't likely to be any one else at this time of day."

"I had better go and see."

She stood up, with the same air of acute attention to what might be going on without. A voice was heard speaking somewhat boisterously, apparently to some one in the hall.

"That doesn't sound like Alan," observed his lordship.

It did not. Nor did the person who unceremoniously came into the room look like Alan. The

new-comer was a woman. She stood looking about her with the air of one who, while conscious of having been the occasion of surprise, is yet confident of a cordial welcome. Then, with both hands stretched out, she moved impetuously towards Mrs. Thurston.

“ You dearest child ! aren’t you amazed to see me ? ”

“ I am.”

There was distinctly nothing enthusiastic about the fashion of the lady’s response ; a fact of which the other seemed wholly unaware.

“ I knew you would be ; I do love to take people by surprise ; I think it is so good for their nervous system. And how are you ? and how’s every one ? and everything ? Do you know I’ve been travelling since goodness knows what hour this morning, and I’m starving ; the sight of breakfast is perfectly delightful.” She looked at his lordship. “ I don’t know if I ought to know you, but I feel as if I don’t.”

“ I’m Lord Ifield.”

“ Lord Ifield—are you ? I’m Miss O’Connor, Norah O’Connor, at your service. I don’t look as Irish as my name, do I ? ”

She did not. She was rather tall and slight, and, one might add, sinewy. She had an olive complexion, big black bold eyes, a profusion of blue-black hair. One would have guessed her to be Italian. Although she was not badly dressed, and not ill-looking, and certainly at her ease, there was about her a flavour of Bohemia rather than of the caste of Vere de Vere. One felt, too, that her frank, careless, take-it-for-granted manner was more impudent than confident. She sat

down uninvited, and set about the consumption of a meal which showed, at any rate, that she was hungry. His lordship seemed to find her amusing. Mrs. Thurston obviously did not. For once in a way her even temper seemed to be in danger of being ruffled; nor did it improve as the minutes passed. The new-comer managed, while doing ample justice to the food, to talk as well.

"How's Alan?" she inquired of her hostess, between mouthfuls of kidney and bacon.

"Alan?"

"Yes, Alan; how is he?"

The eyes of the two women met in an odd lingering stare, as if, while they looked, a curious something was passing from one to the other. Mrs. Thurston's manner was unwontedly cold and precise. Lord Ifield told himself that he would never have suspected the dear little woman of being capable of inflicting so emphatic a snub.

"Mr. Thurston—if you are referring to him—is away from home."

"Is he? That's very naughty of Alan. I do hope he'll return as soon as he possibly can." She turned to his lordship. "Do you know, for a moment I thought you were Alan."

"Then you can't be very well acquainted with my cousin; the likeness between us is of the smallest."

"I'm not. I only saw him once, and then for a very short time. But, you see, here were you two breakfasting all alone." Lord Ifield glanced at Mrs. Thurston, who kept her face studiously averted. His amusement seemed to be increasing, which did not appear to be the case with the lady. The new-comer went glibly on. "You

can't think what a nuisance I've found my luggage."

"Your luggage?"

"Yes, my luggage. It's all right, my dear, I've told them to take my trunk upstairs."

Mrs. Thurston was silent, significantly. His lordship could have laughed out loud. The other seemed to notice nothing.

"They didn't seem to know which room to take them to, but I told them any one would do, so long as it was large, comfortable, and had a good look-out. Oh, my dear, I haven't come on a flying visit, I've come to stay. I've heaps and heaps of things to talk to you about, and it will take me years and years to talk about them all. We used to be so inseparable, and I felt your marriage such a wrench, that I'm sure you couldn't bear the idea any more than I could of my treating your house in any other way than as if it were my own."

Still Mrs. Thurston refrained from speech, while her unexpected guest went chattering on. By degrees Lord Ifield seemed to grow conscious that the situation was becoming uncomfortably strained. He moved, as if about to take his departure. His hostess checked him.

"Don't go; stay, please; we shall be going directly."

The new-comer laughed.

"I seem to be the only person who is eating anything; I hope, my dears, I'm not keeping you waiting." She glanced roguishly at his lordship. "I beg your pardon, I didn't mean to call you my dear. But we do seem so like a family party, breakfasting here all three of us alone, don't

we? There! I think I've had enough, or at least I've had as much as is good for me. I do assure you I haven't eaten such a breakfast for years; indeed, I am a very poor hand at breakfast as a rule. Now, as the man used to say in the play, next please."

Mrs. Thurston stood up.

"I think, Norah," the name was slightly emphasized, "I should like to have a little talk with you."

"Of course, Eveleen," the italics were returned, "I should like to have a great big talk with you, and I must and shall have it. You dear!"

The speaker, going up to Mrs. Thurston, put her arm about her shoulder with a gesture which, if it was meant to be affectionate, struck one oddly. Even more odd was the air, as it were, of aloofness with which the other turned and looked at her, eyeing her impassively before she spoke.

"Don't do that, please. Take your hand away."

Miss O'Connor laughed, not quite easily, as she obeyed.

"My dear! Pray don't look at me like that! How you have changed!"

"I have not changed in the very least. I am exactly the same as I always was. It is you who are under a misapprehension. Are you coming?"

Apparently her ebullient guest was at last disposed to show herself a little piqued. She lolled back against the table.

"No, I don't think I am, just yet, thank you, if it's all the same to you"

"Quite I will leave you here."

Mrs. Thurston moved to the door, Lord Ifield holding it open to let her pass. After she had gone he still continued to hold it open, as if by way of a suggestion to the other lady. She looked at him and laughed.

“ I suppose I had better follow my leader.”

She went past him with a nod and a smile. As he closed the door behind her he also smiled.

“ Now, I wonder who she is. I rather fancy, from the little lady's manner, that she's one of those friends whom one would rather one had dropped.”

Some trunks and other impedimenta were littering the hall. At sight of them the uninvited guest all at once waxed warm. She turned to the footman who was standing there.

“ Why haven't you taken my luggage upstairs ? I told you to take it. Why haven't you done as I told you ? ”

The man turned to his mistress.

“ There were no orders, madam, which room it was to be taken to.”

“ That is quite right. There are no orders.”

She addressed Miss O'Connor. “ Come up to my room ”

That lady chose all at once to become offended.

“ Really ! Is that how you speak to me ? In the presence of this man ! Aren't you making a mistake ? Order him to take my luggage up to my room at once, and tell him which room I am to have. Do you hear ? ”

“ I hear. The only remark I have to make is that you had better come to my room if you wish to speak to me.”

“ But how ridiculous you are ! I have been

travelling in these things all night. I want to make myself comfortable. I want to change them. Tell this idiot to take my luggage up at once ! ”

“ I am going to my room. ”

As if by way of giving point to her words Mrs. Thurston began to ascend the staircase.

CHAPTER XIX

BIANCA

MISS O'CONNOR hesitated. She looked at her hostess; she looked at the footman; for some instants it seemed possible that she proposed to use vigorous measures to constrain the latter to obedience. Then, when Mrs. Thurston had already reached the first landing she ran up after her, two steps at a time. It was apparently with difficulty that she restrained herself until they had gained the privacy of the lady's chamber. So soon as Mrs. Thurston had opened the door she brushed past her with a degree of impetuosity which pointed neither to good manners nor good temper. Although, in her haste, the other had hustled her aside, Mrs. Thurston, still with the door handle between her fingers, turned and regarded her with an air of complete imperturbability, an attitude which Miss O'Connor resented.

"Don't stand there gaping at me like that! Shut that door!" Mrs. Thurston obeyed, with a smile which moved the other to still greater heat. "You think it's a joke, do you? I know your ideas of what's funny, and that perpetual grin of yours; but you'd better not pretend that you think I'm funny; you'll make the greatest mistake you ever made in your life if you do."

Mrs. Thurston's only comment, although accompanied by a smile, was a chilly one.

"Do you propose to shout all the time?"

"If I choose I shall; I'll yell if I like."

"So that your remarks may be audible to those without? If that is what you wish I had better open the door to save you from too much exertion."

"You do open the door! you do! You come away from it and leave it alone. I want you to understand what your position is, and I don't mean to be shouted down."

"Did I shout? I was not aware of it. If I did I beg your pardon."

"None of your airs, my lady; it won't do—not when we're alone together. To listen to and to look at you one would think that you were a princess of the blood royal, as if you were born in the purple! I know better! Who are you, and what are you? That's what I should like to know, and it's what I do know! See? You and me have been in a good many games together, and every time we've won you've taken about ninety-nine per cent. of the stakes, and that's a kind of division with which I don't mean to put up any more, so now you've got it."

Mrs. Thurston was regarding the excited speaker as if she found her an amusing curiosity. Paying no attention to her rodomontades she asked a simple question.

"How comes it that you are here this morning?"

"I was doing your dirty work last night, and now I've come this morning to see that I get my proper pay."

"Were you at—Baynham?"

"I was."

“ What happened ? ”

Her reply, which was brutally frank, was delivered with what might be described as an air of sulky gusto.

“ I killed your husband—that’s what’s happened.”

Mrs. Thurston evinced not the slightest symptom of surprise, nor even of interest. Apparently her attention was occupied by a silver clock which was on the mantelshelf rather than by the lady’s words.

“ That clock’s stopped ; what a nuisance. I must have forgotten to wind it up. Do you know what the time is ? ”

The other glanced at a watch which was set in a gold bracelet.

“ It’s half-past eleven by me ; but I’m five minutes fast.”

“ Are you sure that’s right ? ”

“ It’s all right by the big clock in Liverpool Street Station. I noticed it particularly when I left. It’s now just on six and twenty minutes past by the correct time.”

Mrs. Thurston wound up the clock and set the hands.

“ So you—did do it ? ”

“ I did.”

“ And was it—all right ? ”

“ I don’t know quite what you mean, but it was all right so far as I was concerned.”

“ You didn’t wait to learn what followed ? ”

“ I did not.”

“ Have you—seen anybody since ? ”

“ You’re the first.”

“ I suppose they were there ? ”

“ Oh, yes, they were there—Seymour and the doctor—both of them.”

“ I rather expected to have heard something.”

“ It’s too early for it to have got into the newspapers, especially the ones you get down here.”

“ I wasn’t thinking of the newspapers. I thought I might have had a message, if only to say that everything was going on as well as could be desired. Was she—arrested ? ”

“ You mean the girl ? How do I know ? You don’t suppose I was going to risk spoiling everything by hanging about ? When I had done my little bit I quitted that neighbourhood before anybody guessed I ever had been in it—What’s that for ? ”

Mrs. Thurston had pressed an electric bell.

“ I want to know if the second post is in ; it may have brought me some news.”

“ When the servant comes tell her to take my things up ; do let’s be friends. It won’t do you any harm to let me stop with you awhile ; I can behave myself, although I never may have stopped in a house like this before. I’ve done you a good turn, you might do me one, especially as it’s nothing to speak of compared to what I’ve done for you.”

The door opened to admit a maid. Her mistress addressed her.

“ See if the second post is in. If it is bring all the letters up to me.”

The maid retired. The other turned to Mrs. Thurston, hot with a sense of grievance.

“ Why didn’t you tell her ? It’ll only make it more awkward when they know that I’m going

to stay ; because don't you make any mistake about it ; I am."

It seemed that so far as Mrs. Thurston was concerned the words might as well have remained unspoken ; her mind was occupied by another theme, to the exclusion of all else.

"What time did you—do it ?"

"Oh, somewhere about nine ; I couldn't tell you exactly ; they'll know better than I do."

"The mail train leaves Baynham a few minutes before midnight. There'd have been time for them to have sent a letter by it so as to reach me here by the second post."

"I wish you'd pay attention to what I'm talking about, and not keep on thinking only about yourself. Tell that girl when she comes——" There was a knock at the door. "Now then, mind you tell her." The maid came in, with several letters on a tray. Her mistress took them off the tray in silence. The maid turned to go, whereupon Miss O'Connor inquired of Mrs. Thurston with some warmth : "Aren't you going to tell her ?" As the lady merely glanced at her, to immediately look back at her letters, she addressed the girl on her own account. "Have those things of mine been brought up ?"

At the door the maid turned, as if she did not understand.

"I beg your pardon, madam ?"

Then Mrs. Thurston spoke.

"It's all right ; you can go."

For a moment or two it seemed possible that Miss O'Connor would assail her companion with actual physical violence. She looked as if she would have liked to have done so. She struck one

as being a person who would not hesitate to use force if her temper was roused ; and, unless her countenance belied her, her temper was a possession over which she had such slight control that it would not have been a matter of difficulty, at any time, and on the smallest provocation, to goad her into fury. Just then, however, she refrained from doing what she looked as if she would have liked to have done. With clenched fists, lowering brows and blazing eyes she dropped into an armchair, emitting a threat as she descended.

“ All right ! I’ll make you smart ! You wait ! ”

As if wholly unmoved by the other’s disapproval Mrs. Thurston continued calmly to examine the exterior of the missives which the postman had brought. Only one of them seemed to strike her as being worth her notice. She held it out.

“ Here is a letter. I thought I should have news.”

The other asked sullenly, “ Who is it from ? ”

“ It’s from Seymour ; probably written last night after you had vanished.”

“ Read it out loud and let’s hear what he says.”

Mrs. Thurston did not at once comply with this request. She scanned the communication, which she took out of the envelope, in silence ; she seemed to be considering what she had just read ; then she looked at the woman who had called herself Norah O’Connor.

“ Did you say you—killed him ? ”

“ Of course ; dead as mutton. You heard what I said, just as you’ve heard everything I’ve said, though it suits you to pretend you haven’t. But I do hope that you’re not such an idiot as to think you take me in. I hope it for your own sake.”

“ You’re quite sure you—killed him ? ”

Miss O’Connor struck a table near which she was sitting a heavy blow with her shut fist.

“ Sure ? What do you mean by asking if I’m sure ? I tell you that I killed him ! ”

“ Then listen to what Seymour says.”

Mrs. Thurston did what the other had asked her to do ; she read aloud the letter she was holding in clear, even, unemotional tones, as if it had been a communication which she had received from her dressmaker ; indeed, had it been from that important personage it is conceivable that she might have shown more obvious signs of being interested.

“ ‘ DEAR KIDDIE,

“ ‘ Just a hurried line to tell you that I’m afraid Bianca’s muddled things.’ ”

The lady in the armchair suddenly intervened angrily.

“ I’ve muddled things ? What’s he mean ? ”

“ If you’ll let me read the letter to the end you’ll know as much as I do.”

Mrs. Thurston read on :—

“ ‘ I suppose by now you know that as well as I can tell you. Bianca may have meant to make cold meat of A. T. ; I’m willing to give her credit for the best intentions ; but she didn’t. Or, if she did, it’s rummy. I guess her nerve failed, or her hand slipped, or something. She’ll have to explain. Anyhow, within five minutes of her making him a corpse, he got up and walked himself off, which seems unnatural. Though where he

walked to, at present I can't say. Perhaps you can.

“ ‘ It's just possible that his singular behaviour may make things awkward. I'll come up by the first train in the morning and shall be in your summer-house as near as possible to noon, when I'll tell you all there is to tell.

“ ‘ Yours, B. ’ ”

When Mrs. Thurston had finished reading she glanced at the clock.

“ I don't know when he supposed I should get his letter ; but, from what he says, he ought to be here almost directly. Perhaps, before I go to him, you'll explain what he means.”

Bianca, leaning back in the chair, looked up at her with angry eyes.

“ It's all a lie, that's what it is.”

“ What's all a lie ? ”

“ What he says about your husband walking off five minutes after I had made a corpse of him.”

“ The inference is that you didn't, what you call, ‘ make a corpse ’ of him.”

“ But I did ! I did ! ”

“ Tell me exactly what you did.”

“ I split his heart, that's what I did. I drove the knife clean through the right auricle into the tricuspid valve.”

“ That sounds as if it ought to have killed him.”

“ Ought to ? You idiot ! I felt him dying as I drew my knife out. I'll swear that he was stone dead in less than thirty seconds.”

“ Then what does Seymour mean ? ”

“ I'd like to know. I'm wondering if there's any little game being played to do me out of what I was to have. It had better be stopped if there is. You may take that from me.”

Mrs. Thurston laughed outright.

“ Bianca, you really are too funny. You're always thinking that people are willing to cut off their noses to spite you.”

“ I know ! ”

“ Don't be so absurd ! Can't you understand that all I want is that man's dead body ? To be privately assured that he is dead, and yet not be able to produce his body, is not of the slightest use to me ; so far as I'm concerned he might as well be sitting in that chair where you are.”

“ Perhaps your friend Seymour has got some little game of his own on.”

“ Not he ! You and your little games ! If the man's dead, and we can produce his body, all's right ; if we can't, then all's wrong, for all of us ; and I should say especially for you.”

“ Why especially for me ? ”

“ Can't you imagine ? Suppose Alan Thurston were to come through that door this moment, and were to accuse you of his attempted murder, where'd you be then ? ”

“ I tell you where you'd be ; in an even queerer street than me ! Because I should tell him you set me on to him, and I should prove it too.”

The two women looked at each other, with eyes which were so amazingly different, the one's seeming to be the embodiment of melodrama, the other's of the comic spirit. Mrs. Thurston laughed again.

“ Bianca, you're a dear ! ”

“Don't you sneer at me! and don't you talk about your husband coming walking through that door, because he's dead, dead, dead.”

She struck the table three times with her fist, as if to give point to her meaning.

CHAPTER XX

CONSPIRATORS

WHEN, a few minutes afterwards, the two ladies were moving across the hall, they were intercepted by Lord Ifield. He addressed his hostess.

“ I was wondering where you were. How about that run we were to have on the car ? ”

The lady looked at him with eyes which he had decided some time ago were the sweetest he had ever seen. She gave her dainty head a slight movement which apparently signified regret.

“ I'm afraid I can't come just yet. I'd love to, but—shall we say in an hour ? I can't promise, but perhaps. Isn't there anything in the house you can do for an hour ? Haven't you any letters to write ? ”

“ Never write 'em.”

“ Then you ought to write them.”

“ Never do what I ought ; never.”

“ I'm afraid you don't. Couldn't you amuse yourself by knocking the billiard balls about for an hour ? or doing something or other ? ”

“ Might. But, I say, you will be ready to come in an hour, and—without her.”

Bianca, for whom the allusion was intended, had moved discreetly towards the open door. Mrs. Thurston favoured him with one of those ravishing smiles which had done more towards

the bewitching of him than he himself imagined, and she said very softly:—

“ Dear Lord Ifield, do you suppose that, when we have a chance of being alone together, I would introduce a—gooseberry if it can possibly be helped; and, in this case, I think it can. If you’re very good, I will be ready for you in an hour—all by myself.”

As, his lordship having been left behind on the understanding that he was to be good, the ladies went down the path together, Bianca asked a question.

“ How long will it be before you marry him ? ”

“ Who knows ? ”

“ That means that you’ll marry him when it suits you. This is a queer world. Some women can’t get a man worth calling a man to look at them, do what they like. Others, by just holding up a finger, can get any man they like. You’re one of that sort ; it beats me how you do it.”

“ I don’t know how I do it myself ; that’s how I do do it.”

“ I daresay that’s meant to be clever ; but don’t ask me to believe that you don’t try, because I know better than that. Fancy your being a countess ; yet they pretend that it pays to be good.”

“ At present, let me ask you to remember, I am nothing of the kind. I’m not sure, even, that I’m a widow.”

“ Oh yes you are, I made sure of that.”

“ Did you ? Well, here’s dear Bill ; perhaps he’ll be able to ease my troubled mind.”

As they passed round a bend in the path they found that Mr. Seymour was awaiting them. The

sight of Mrs. Thurston's companion seemed to occasion him surprise.

"Bianca! what on earth! I heard two voices, and I couldn't make out whose the other was. I was wondering where you were; I've been wiring to you in town."

"You can see for yourself I'm not in town, I'm here, and here I'm going to stay."

He turned to Mrs. Thurston.

"Has she told you? Is he back?"

"Is who back?"

"Thurston. I was afraid he might have got a start of me, and that I might find things awkward on my arrival."

Mrs. Thurston looked first at the lady and then at the gentleman.

"I don't know what you mean by asking if Alan Thurston's back, unless you're suggesting that he's already begun to take his walks abroad in the form of a ghost, since Bianca tells me that she sent him to join the ghosts."

"Then Bianca's mistaken. You've had my letter?"

She nodded.

"Bianca says she knows no more what it means than I do."

"I don't, unless it means that you're playing one of those tricks at which you flatter yourself you're so clever."

"Thank you very much, it doesn't. It means precisely what it says, that five minutes after you killed the man his corpse picked itself up and walked away."

"That's a lie."

Mrs. Thurston interposed.

“ One moment, Bill ; if he wasn't hurt, or only slightly hurt, I think—if I know anything of the man—that I should have heard from him before now.”

“ You will hear from him. The trouble is that we don't know what you will hear, because, while we're in the dark, we don't know if he is.”

“ Don't talk nonsense, the man's dead.”

“ Bianca, my position is that for all I can tell you may be wrong, or you may be right ; I only hope you're right ; but, if you are, it's curious. Before going on with what promises to be an interesting little discussion, kiddie, let me call Anderson. I brought him with me so as you might have the somewhat barren satisfaction—as things are—of hearing what we both of us have to say.”

Seymour whistled gently. The person to whom we have been introduced as Dr. Seymour Anderson appeared from behind a clump of noble rhododendrons.

“ Anderson,” explained Seymour, “ Bianca says that she's quite sure that she—made a clean job of our friend of last night.”

Anderson shook his head. He addressed the lady referred to.

“ Tell us as clearly as you can what are the precise grounds you have for thinking so ? ”

Thereupon the lady went through a rather gruesome pantomime, in which the doctor was made to enact the part of Alan Thurston.

“ He was standing as you are now, with his back to me. I came up on the left, and I drove the knife into his side with all my strength. It was a tremendous blow ; in itself, without the knife,

hitting him just where it did, it would have been enough to knock him out. It was a downward blow ; I had the knife at an angle like this. I'll swear the blade went at least four or five inches right into his heart. I felt it ; there's no mistaking the feel."

" But he shouted after you had struck him."

" With his last breath ; by the time he had done shouting he was dead. I gave the knife a twist as I dragged it out which in itself was enough to finish him. I'll take my oath that he was stone dead before he reached the ground."

" If what you say is correct, and I'm not for an instant hinting a doubt, then he must have been."

" Must have been ! He was ! "

" Now let me speak." This was Seymour. " Let me tell you, Bianca, what happened after you had gone, and after—as you put it—the man was dead. Anderson will set me right if I go wrong." He told, as succinctly as possible, what had taken place in the rectory garden on the preceding night ; how the four men had searched for the supposed corpse in vain. Both women seemed impressed by the story. " Now," he concluded, " perhaps you'll tell us, if as you say he was dead, what became of the body."

" The thing's plain enough, somebody moved it."

" Excuse me, but I've told my story badly if I haven't made it clear that it's simply impossible that any one could have moved it. First of all, because there wasn't time. You know the place ; it isn't the sort of place in which a corpse could be made to vanish off the face of the earth inside five minutes. And then who could have done it ?

It wasn't one of us four, and it certainly wasn't anybody else ; if only for the simple reason that I'm perfectly sure that there was nobody else about to do it. Besides, who would want to play the vanishing trick with a dead body on which he had come by accident, twelve or fourteen feet, mind you, from the high road, in somebody else's garden ? Then Anderson here will tell you that he kept an attentive eye upon the summer-house, and that no one went either out or in."

"Of that I am convinced."

"Perhaps there was a trap-door, or some loose boards, or something, and the body fell through."

"That, Bianca, is the only explaining which remains, supposing the man was dead. But what an explanation that is. I'm prepared to lay you a thousand to one in anything you like that there were neither loose boards nor trap-door. Even granting the latter, and that it opened to let the corpse fall through, how came it to be closed when we returned ? Who closed it ? The corpse ? Bianca, the trap-door theory won't hold water."

"I don't care ! I'll bet you ten thousand to one in anything you like that he was stone dead by the time he reached the ground."

Mr. Seymour shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands.

"Then where, oh, where is the corpse's body ?"

"If what you've been telling us is true, it's you who have muddled things, not me. It's where I left it, in the rectory garden."

CHAPTER XXI

THE RECTOR IS TROUBLED.

THE reverend Thomas Campion, Rector of Baynham, was a man of simple piety and used to deal with simple issues. A country parson, possessed of sufficient private means, his life had been uneventful. The simple annals of the poor, at least that section of the poor with whom he was brought into parochial contact, presented, so far as his experience went, but few outstanding features. What had happened to Alan Thurston in his own garden? That was a problem which probed his usually placid nature to its deepest depths. For the first time he gained some personal insight into the meaning of the psalmist's words, "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord." All night long he cried unto the Lord. Not out loud; it made his trouble harder to bear that he had to keep it to himself. He was a man who had no secrets; he never had had. The occurrences of each day he was always willing to discuss with any one, with every one; especially was he willing to discuss them with his wife. His wife and he never had kept anything from each other, never, from the day on which they had first met, unto this hour.

When Sir Philip Ford had gone Mr. Campion would have given much to have been able to go

straightway to his wife and retail to her at full length all the incidents of that eventful evening. It would have been something to have been able to do that. But Sir Philip had drawn from him a promise that he would not speak to any one on that matter, at any rate till he came again in the morning. So he had to keep locked in his own heart the dreadful fear that the girl whom he had come to regard almost as if she was his own daughter had been nearly, if not quite, guilty of the crime of homicide. All sorts of doubts disturbed him. Could it be possible that it was she who had removed the body? who had endeavoured to conceal her crime? Fully conscious as he was that there were physical reasons, to speak of no other reasons, which made this seem impossible, yet he was haunted by a doubt. The thing was made worse by the feeling that Ford not only shared his suspicions, but was prepared, at any risk and at all costs, to shield her, whether she was innocent or guilty.

There, for the rector, was the very crux of his troubles. His ideas of duty, like all his ideas, were simple ones. Nothing hitherto had transpired to tempt him to look at what he felt to be his duty with anything but a single eye. Either a certain line of conduct was or was not his duty, and there was an end. Suddenly he found himself adrift among what seemed to him to be a maze of hideous complications. He had been the witness, or practically the witness, of a frightful crime. He had found the weapon with which the crime had been wrought; the criminal was under his own roof at that very moment. His conscience told him, or seemed to tell him, that

his duty towards society, and, he feared, towards God, required him to at once denounce both the crime and the criminal. Yet if he obeyed his conscience—as it had been his lifelong teaching was man's first and last and only duty—into what a sea of troubles would his action land him.

To begin with, Sir Philip Ford, the best friend he had in the world, would never forgive him; he knew his man, he was sure he never would. More, he was not certain that his attitude of unforgiveness would not be justified. What did he not owe to Ford? He owed his rectory; in a fashion—which it would occupy too much space to clearly set forth—he owed his wife. Did he propose to repay him by striking at him in his tenderest place? That Philip Ford loved Doris Owen he personally was convinced; as convinced as he was that if any tragedy overwhelmed the girl, all the light would go out of the world for the man. No one was better aware than he was that Ford was a man who had known many sorrows; was it for his hand to deal the blow which would crush him for all eternity under the greatest sorrow of them all?

Then there was the girl herself to be considered, Doris Owen. Thomas Campion was no fool, although circumstances had not fitted him to deal readily with compound issues. He did not understand how the meeting with Alan Thurston had come about; but he had imagination enough to enable him to guess how it was that they had quarrelled, and how Thurston's misbehaviour had driven her to an action of which she would have been incapable except in the sudden stress of self-defence. Still, how was it that she had a knife

when in her temporary madness it seemed to her that she was constrained to use it? It was not easy for him to believe that she had gone to the rendezvous armed against an emergency which she already had foreseen. That would be to place her conduct in an entirely different aspect. Whoever goes prepared to kill, and does kill, can hardly claim to be entirely innocent. He would have liked to have put some questions to the girl upon his own account, had it not been for two considerations; his undertaking to Ford, and the fear that her answers might make the position for him more difficult than it was already. Suppose she frankly admitted—and he had always found her the soul of candour—that she had stabbed Alan Thurston under great provocation, then what alternative would he have which could excuse him for not at once placing an exact statement of the facts before the guardians of law and order?

If he could only have talked the whole thing over with his wife, what a comfort that would have been! They understood each other's point of view so well that some satisfactory result must have come from such a conversation. And yet—there were dangers everywhere; there was a danger even there. Incidents had arisen, not infrequently, which had caused him to realise that his wife's was not always the judicial point of view. She would be shocked; she would be grieved beyond measure; but could he confidently rely upon her attitude being just the right one? Was it not a fact that where her sympathy was engaged her judgment was apt to go with it? He did not doubt that for Philip Ford and Doris Owen she

would be willing to do all she could ; indeed he doubted whether, under certain circumstances she would not be willing and ready to do more than she ought. On one point he felt assured, that on no terms would she consent to any course of action which would result in subjecting either of the pair to inconvenience or suffering. He feared that she might not hesitate to sacrifice her principles for the sake of her friends. She had not said so in so many words ; but he had an innate conviction that that was her notion of friendship.

Thus the rector was deprived even of that very human counsellor—whom he had found, more than once, perhaps almost unconsciously to himself, a very present help in time of trouble ; the little troubles which had come his way—his wife. Nor was the case improved by the fact that, while he was unable to say anything to her, she suffered from no such disability with regard to him. Not only did she assail him with questions, but when he shuffled—the poor man had to shuffle—he was almost maddened by the obvious fact that she was labouring under an entire misapprehension of the reasons which actuated his attitude, and, in consequence, was suffering much mental distress owing to her fear that he might have been guilty of something criminal himself. This unfortunate misunderstanding was intensified by what was possibly his own blundering. For the first time in their lives they came near to quarrelling. He would tell her nothing, which she not unnaturally resented. To her the whole business was “wrapped in mystery.” She wanted to know why he had come “with two strange men” to fetch a mattress on which to convey Alan Thurston’s

dead body to the house; and why, instead of bringing the body, he had tried, and was still trying to put her off with a mere casual intimation that it was nowhere to be found. On and round about this point she subjected him to a cross-examination from which he issued with ignominy, leaving an impression on her mind that he had been mixed up, in some inexplicable way, in some inexplicable crime, in a manner which was much to his discredit. When finally he bade her in so many words hold her tongue and question him no longer, the fountains of her grief were opened. From her tears he turned and fled from the drawing-room to the study.

But there he knew no rest. As he paced up and down and to and fro, like some caged animal, he suddenly recalled a corner of the garden which they had left unsearched. It was at least possible that the dead man was lying there. That possibility took such hold of his troubled imagination that nothing would content him but that he should go there and then to see. For the rector the hour was uncannily late. Where his wife was he did not know. He trusted, without much faith, that, with the rest of the household, she had retired to bed. There could be no rest for him while, in his fancy's eye, he could see that corner among the rhododendrons—with something in it. Out into the night he stole, on tiptoe through the hall, softly across the lawn to the spot where the thing might be. Such was his state of nervous agitation that, for some moments, he hovered round it, not daring to venture into its heart, where the shadows were. When at last he did, it was almost with a sense of shock that he

realised that the place was empty. While he was still peering underneath the branches and the leaves he heard a footstep on the road, on the other side of the hedge. He stood still to listen. Apparently he also had been heard, because presently

“Who’s in there?”

It was the voice of Felling, the Baynham policeman.

The rector drew a long breath, possibly of relief.

“It’s all right, Felling, it’s only me.”

Evident the policeman recognised the speaker.

“I beg your pardon, sir, but I thought it might be somebody after your flowers; there’s been a good deal of that sort of thing about lately—tramps, and that lot.”

“Thank you very much, Felling. Just going home?”

“Yes, sir, I’m just going home. I’ve been out on my rounds since eight o’clock.”

“Since eight o’clock?” The rector considered. “Haven’t you been home since then?”

“No, sir, I have not, and as it’s now past one I shall be glad to get there.”

“So I should think. Thank you for keeping a watchful eye upon my flowers. Good-night.”

“Good-night, sir.”

The constable’s heavy tread was heard passing down the road. His departure was a greater relief to the rector than that gentleman would have cared to admit; the first sound of his voice had affected him in an altogether indescribable manner. All at once he appreciated the sensation of the crime-stained wretch when, unexpectedly, he feels the policeman’s hand upon his shoulder. He could hardly have suffered more had he himself

stood in danger of arrest. Alone again, he reflected with such calmness as he could command.

If Felling left home at eight o'clock then he was out when—when it had all occurred. He was still out when those two intrusive strangers had called at the police station with their story, and the belongings of the missing man ; if, that is, they had called, as they had threatened, which explained Felling's evident ignorance of the fact that anything unusual had happened to ruffle the village calm. Immediately he began torturing himself with inquiries whether it would not be the part of wisdom—to put it at its lowest—to have been himself the first to broach the matter to the man. If Felling saw those two strangers, and heard their tale, would he not wonder why the rector had said nothing to him of the events which had almost, if not quite, turned his garden into the scene of a tragedy, and place the worst construction on his silence ? So affected was Mr. Champion by this view of the position that he all but started in chase of Felling, and possibly would have done so quite had he not suddenly found himself confronted by Mrs. Champion, in a condition of what was very near hysterics.

“ Tom ! ” she wailed. “ Tom ! What are you looking for ? What are you looking for at this hour of the morning ? Who was that you were talking to ? ”

Her utterance was so broken by her sobs that it was with difficulty she spoke. Plainly this was a case in which it was necessary to exercise marital authority. It was out of the question that he should have a scene with his wife, out in the garden,

in the small hours of the morning. He assumed a tone of command.

"Netta, I am surprised at and ashamed of you. I imagined that you were in bed hours ago. Come indoors with me at once."

This sudden assumption of a tone, which was at once that of a sorrowing clergyman and an aggrieved husband, apparently took the lady so completely by surprise that she entirely forgot any purpose which might have brought her there. She suffered her husband to march her, without attempting the least remonstrance, like some chidden child, back to the house, and straight upstairs to bed. Indeed, to such a point was the comparison to the naughty child carried, that the rector, addressing her in a tone which she had never heard from him before, forbade her to open her mouth to speak, and positively commanded her to go to sleep at once.

Mrs. Champion was one of those old-fashioned persons who believe that it is the part of a wife to obey, and endeavour to the best of their ability to act up to that belief. Therefore, however much it went against the grain, she observed the first part of his injunction, and refrained from speech. Obedience to the second part she found more difficult. Sleep comes to us at no one's bidding. It is to be feared that the rector was able to command its presence no more for himself than for his wife. And while the good woman lay in troubled wakefulness near by him, he cried, in wide-eyed unrest, out of the depths unto the Lord.

CHAPTER XXII

MRS. THURSTON INQUIRES FOR HER HUSBAND

NEVER before had there been such a breakfast at the rectory as that. The two little children were the only persons who were at their ease. The aunt, Miss Rodda, was uncomfortably conscious that there was not only electricity in the domestic atmosphere, but also that there was something very curious and even mysterious in the entire situation. Her sister, usually the most easy-going of women, was evidently in a condition of physical and mental disturbance which it was not agreeable to have forced upon one's notice. The rector was if anything in a worse state than his wife. It is strange what strain and sleeplessness can do for a healthy man in the course of a single night. Mr. Campion looked actually ill. His usual morning appetite had forsaken him. He ate and drank nothing; he said nothing either. He scarcely opened his lips to drink, or eat, or speak, from the he sat down to the moment in which, evidently anxious to take advantage of the first opportunity which offered, he hurried away.

The only "grown-up" who showed to advantage was Doris Owen. It was her attitude, as well as her presence, which had such a harassing effect upon the unhappy rector. To have to meet her on the old terms of pleasant familiarity, as if

nothing whatever had transpired to in any way affect their relations one to the other, that, from his point of view, was bad enough ; but that she should assume an air of unconsciousness of the fact that anything had occurred, that was almost worse. It seemed dreadful to him that she could appear so cool, so calm, so self-possessed ; it was to play the hypocrite on a scale which, to him, appeared to be monstrous. He was conscious, too, all the time, that she was looking almost unusually charming. He certainly had never previously been so much impressed by her physical graces. And that made it worse than ever, that she, a mere girl, unpractised in artifice, should look so sweet, and bear herself so sweetly, who last night had almost, if not quite, done a man to death with her own hand.

When the rector rushed from the breakfast-room he threw himself on his knees beside his study table, torn by such a tumult of conflicting emotions that only the God to whom he addressed his frenzied words could have traced them to their several sources. How long he remained there he never knew. When he rose he was, if not refreshed, at least calmer. Recalling the small duties which called for his immediate attention, he set out on their performance there and then. It was absolutely necessary that he should do something which should keep him as much as possible from thinking until he had had that further promised interview with Philip Ford. As it chanced, circumstances conspired to keep him engaged in outlying portions of his parish, and prevented him from returning to the rectory, not only for lunch, but until the afternoon was well advanced. At the door he

paused to ask a maid if any one had called to see him, and, when she answered no, was just turning into his study, when a lad came up the gravel path with a telegram in his hand, a reply-paid telegram for him. He tore it open.

“ To Rev. Thomas Campion, The Rectory, Baynham.

“ I have reason to believe that my husband, Alan Thurston, came yesterday to see Miss Owen who is staying in your house. Please let me know if he is with you now. Have no news ; expected him last night ; am very anxious ; if not with you can you tell me where he is ?

“ MRS. THURSTON, Glynde, Essex.”

The message was a trifle incoherent, as telegrams are apt to be, but its meaning was sufficiently clear ; whatever had become of Alan Thurston he had not gone home, nor had he communicated with his wife, who was at home. As he realised what that fact might signify his heart began to play the same ugly tricks it had played the night before. What should he tell this woman across the wires ? There was the reply form in his hand ; he would have to tell her something. If Philip Ford would only come !

Hardly had the wish been uttered than, lo ! the man was there. His familiar form came past the window. Rushing out to him with the eagerness of a boy, the rector thrust the telegram into his hand.

“ Read that ! You see he has not come home. What am I to say to her ? ”

With impassive countenance Sir Philip read the telegram.

"Give me the reply form." Champion gave it him. He wrote something on it and handed it to the attendant messenger. "Can you read it?"

The lad read out what he had written.

"To Mrs. Thurston, Glynde, Essex.

"I know nothing of Mr. Thurston's movements.

"THOMAS CAMPION."

"That's right; see that it is despatched at once."

The messenger departed; the two friends were left alone together. In the rector's utterance was an unwonted hesitation.

"Is that—is that quite true—that answer you have sent?"

"Perfectly, isn't it? You know nothing of Mr. Thurston's movements, do you?"

"To say so, baldly, hardly—hardly conveys the entire truth."

"This woman asks you to tell her where her husband is; you can't, can you?"

"I—I wish I could. Has—has nothing been heard?"

"That is a question which I wished to put to you."

Mr. Champion took off his soft felt hat to wipe the moisture from his brow.

"Ford, I have suffered many things because of that man this night. I should not have thought it possible that the whole face of nature could

so suddenly have changed ; even the light of God seems hidden from my eyes."

Sir Philip eyed the speaker closely, noting the marks of disturbance which were written large all over him.

"Campion, you are overwrought. You want a change. Take them all with you to somewhere where it's bracing ; it will do you good."

"Go away ? With this—this shadow hanging over me and mine ? I should feel as if I were running away ; I should be running away. No, Ford, I—I could not run away, until, by God's great mercy, the shadow shall have lifted."

"You use exaggerated language, in itself a sign of overstrain. I thought you prided yourself on the avoidance of words and phrases which were more strenuous than the occasion requires."

"Is there any language too emphatic, as the old writers have it, too horrific, to express the situation as it appears to me ? I know of none. Ford, where is Alan Thurston ? That question shouts at me from the heavens. I would the answer did. And yet, I am afraid of what the answer is."

Sir Philip leaned back upon his cane and smiled.

"Campion, you are melodramatic, actually. I had not thought that you of all men could be that. And with the sun laughing down at you !"

"Philip, I'm beginning to wonder if, in this matter, I am wise in listening to your voice ; to doubt if it is not the voice of evil. You may laugh ; but on me your laughter jars. Where is the knife you took from me, all stained with blood ? Do you know that the coat under

which I carried it, my waistcoat, my shirt, even my body, were stained with blood, the blood of the man whose wife has telegraphed asking me if I can give her news of him. Do you call that a thing to laugh at? God forbid!"

"Gently, Champion, gently! Here's Miss Owen!"

Mr. Champion turned hastily round. Doris Owen was coming towards them across the hall. At sight of her the rector seemed to change countenance. He drew a little back, as if he were afraid of coming into contact even with her garments. Ford took off his hat, a salutation which she acknowledged with an air of gravity which almost amounted to stiffness.

"Sir Philip, I wanted very much to see you. I was wondering how I could send you a message. May I speak to you now?"

"May you? As if I shall not be too highly honoured if you will only condescend. Where shall we speak? here, on the doorstep?"

"Please, no; let us go into the garden."

She came down the steps, and she and Sir Philip moved side by side across the lawn, towards the summer-house. The rector stood staring after them, with almost unnatural intensity.

"Grant that she be innocent!"

The words came from his lips as if he prayed for something which he feared could not be granted.

CHAPTER XXIII

SIR PHILIP IS CONVINCED

DORIS OWEN'S presence at his side had a rather singular effect on Philip Ford ; it made him feel ashamed of himself. She was so evidently that nowadays somewhat unusual article, a simple-minded girl. He knew his world as well as most men ; it was because he knew it that he was so convinced of the genuineness of her simplicity. No human thing after, say, the age of three, can be said to be wholly free from guile, and a guileless child is only a creature of the imagination. But there is guile and guile, particularly is there a certain sort which we, all of us, old and young, should cut very poor figures if we were without. Philip Ford was aware of that. He did not suppose that this girl was simple to the point of idiocy. But that her eye was single, and her desire only for the things that were good, he was as certain as if the knowledge had come to him as a revelation from on high. Therefore, because he was conscious that his eye was certainly not single—in the sense in which he applied the word to her—her presence at his side made him ashamed.

They went some little way in silence. It seemed that, although she had confessed to a desire to speak to him, she was at a loss for words. Because

he wished the subject which he knew they both had in their minds to be broached by her, he made a banal reference to the weather.

“Do you know that this is the sixth consecutive fine day we’ve had? Something must have happened to the English summer.”

She ignored his remark, as it deserved to be ignored.

Presently she said, coming characteristically to the root of the matter on the instant:—

“Sir Philip, last night Alan Thurston came to see me.”

“Did he?”

Sir Philip, improperly enough, was piercing holes in the rector’s lawn with the point of his stick.

“And he not only came to see me, but he had the audacity to pretend that I had asked him to.”

“And hadn’t you?”

“Hadn’t I? Sir Philip! As if I would ask him to come and see me, when I would go hundreds of miles to avoid him! He even dared to say I sent him a letter.”

“And didn’t you?”

“Didn’t I? I don’t know if you are asking me that question seriously; but if you are you cannot understand me as well as I had hoped you did. I have never written to him since before he was married, and if I know myself, I will never write to him again.”

“Let me follow you. He said you sent him a letter?”

“He dared to! after what has happened.”

“Did he show you a letter?”

“He took something out of his pocket which he pretended was a letter. But I wouldn’t look at it,

because of course I knew it couldn't be. It was only a trick of his to make me stay."

"You think so? Isn't it a little unfortunate that you didn't look at what he wanted to show you? Because then you would have found out if somebody had been playing a trick upon him as well as upon you."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Did you have any intimation that he was coming?"

"I had this telegram when I came in. I hadn't the least idea what he meant by it, and I don't know now."

He carefully examined the telegram she handed him.

"It was despatched, I see, from Glynde. He evidently wishes to convey the impression that he had received a letter from you, and that it was in consequence of what you had said in it he was coming."

"It was only his pretence. How could he have had a letter?"

"Quite so, how could he? And what took place between you when you met? Is it a secret?"

"It certainly is not a secret, though it makes me almost mad to think of it. He was rude—you don't know how rude he can be! I didn't till last night. He would persist in pretending to think that I was shamming when I said that I hadn't sent him a letter, and that I didn't want to see him. Then, when he saw that I was really cross, he was ruder than ever."

"Did you quarrel?"

"I don't know that we exactly quarrelled,

because, when he got to that stage of rudeness, I ran away and left him ? ”

“ You ran away and—left him ? ”

He was regarding her with a keen sustained scrutiny, which in her excitement apparently went unnoticed.

“ What else could I do ? ”

“ Was there a scuffle ? ”

“ I don't know what you call a scuffle. He—he tried to kiss me, and I ran away.”

“ Did you strike him ? ”

“ I never thought of it, or I might have done. I was so wild that the only thing I thought of was getting away from him.”

“ You are sure you didn't strike him ? ”

“ Quite sure ; has he been saying that I did ? ”

Looking down again, Sir Philip resumed his occupation of prodding holes in the rector's turf.

“ Did he call after you ? ”

“ I believe he did call something. Why ? ”

“ You didn't hear what it was ? ”

“ I didn't stop to hear. I was crying like a great baby, and all I wanted was to get up to my room before anybody saw me.”

“ Then you don't know what happened after you left him ? ”

“ What did happen ? I thought that perhaps you or Mr. Champion might be somewhere about the garden. Did you see him ? or Mr. Champion ? Then what tale has he been telling ? Perhaps that explains Mr. Champion's very peculiar manner. He wouldn't speak to me or look at me at breakfast. What tale has Alan Thurston been telling Mr. Champion ? ”

“ Do you suppose that there was any one behind

or close to the summer-house during your interview ? ”

“ Who could there have been ? Was it Mr. Champion ? ”

“ It certainly wasn't Mr. Champion. Did you hear anything or notice anything to cause you to suppose that any one was there ? ”

“ I was too angry to notice anything. Was there any one there ? Who was it, please ? ”

They had reached the wooden structure which had been the scene of the previous night's happenings. Entering, Sir Philip looked carefully about him. The girl seemed to find something singular in his manner.

“ What are you looking for ? Has anything been dropped ? ”

“ Not that I am aware of. I was wondering where Thurston was standing when you left him. ”

“ Standing ? He was standing about where you are. Why do you ask ? ”

“ He was still standing when you went ? ”

“ Still standing, of course ! He may have sat down after I had gone, but I'm sure I don't know. I never looked behind to see. Don't I tell you that I was crying like a great baby ; you don't suppose I wanted him to see that I was crying. I was so wild ; it makes me wild to think of it ! What makes you ask me such questions ? ”

“ Poor Doris ! ”

“ I would rather you did not speak to me like that, as if I were a mere child. I have spoken to you about it before. ” She put out her hand with a sudden appealing gesture. “ I don't mean to be cross, only—I don't like to feel that you are laughing at me. ”

"Nothing was farther from my intention than to laugh at you."

"I want you to do me a favour; to add one more to the many you have done for me already."

"What have I done—all that I have done—for you has been a pleasure."

"I wonder if you do mind doing things for me; if you mind very much?"

"Doris, you mustn't laugh at me if I tell you something."

"I promise I won't."

"I'd like to keep on doing things for you all day."

She looked down, smiling in spite of her promise.

"I'd like to do something sometimes for you. I wish I could! I'd love to. I hate to think that you have all the doing."

"Perhaps one day you may be able to do—something for me."

She glanced up at him quickly.

"Do you think I ever shall?"

"Who knows? One day you may be able to do something—very great for me."

"How shall I ever be able to do anything very great for you? I, who am only a girl?"

"You—who are only a girl!" As he echoed her words he turned aside, as if he was unable to meet the light which was in her eyes. "Well—what is it you want me to do?"

"It isn't a very nice thing; but if you won't do it for me I don't know who will. I want Alan Thurston to be made to understand that I never wish to speak to him again; and, above all, that he is never to try and come to see me again,

as he did last night ; and as it doesn't seem as if I could make him understand I thought perhaps—perhaps you could.”

“ I don't think there is any fear of his subjecting you to further annoyance.”

“ Don't you ? Why ? ” She was watching his face. “ Have you—have you seen him ? You haven't—quarrelled ? ”

“ No, we haven't quarrelled. Only I think that his experiences of last night may have taught him a lesson which may last him the whole remainder of his life.”

When, some half-hour later, the rector again encountered Sir Philip Ford, that gentleman was alone. He eyed him with an eagerness which was almost painful.

“ Well ? What has she been saying ? ”

Ford stood still. He observed his friend with something stern and frigid in his bearing, which was in vivid contrast to the other's feverish anxiety. He spoke, not only as one who desired to convey much meaning in the fewest possible words, but also as one who wished it to be understood that, so far as he was concerned, his utterance was final.

“ Champion, I should prefer that you would listen to what I have to say. In the first place, Miss Owen is as innocent as your own two little ones.”

“ In—in a certain sense I never doubted it. Who that knows her could ? ”

“ She is innocent in every sense ; you understand me, Champion ? in every sense.”

“ But—why did she strike him ? No matter what the provocation.”

“ She did not strike him. From whoever

Alan Thurston received his injury, it was not from her."

"Did she say so?"

"Campion, you will admit, that I am as honest a man as you are, and, possibly, nearly as shrewd. I say so. I am prepared at any moment to go into the witness-box and swear to it."

The rector seemed bewildered.

"But—I don't understand—we didn't actually see her do it, but we as good as saw her; then his cry, 'Doris! you have done for me!' I seem to hear it now; and the knife—the knife she dropped."

"How do you know she dropped it?"

"Who else could have done? I have been thinking it over, and I am convinced that I saw her drop something; it must have been the knife."

"Campion, if you are not careful to bridle your imagination you will bring yourself into the perilous position of the man who bears false witness. Whether you saw her drop anything is between you and your conscience; you did not see her drop that knife, for the sufficient reason that it was never in her possession."

"Then, in whose possession was it?"

"That, at this moment, I cannot tell you. But I trust to be able to do so before very long. It's a tangle which I propose to disentangle. But I want you to bear in mind two things. One, that Miss Owen did not injure Alan Thurston, and two, that she does not even know he was injured."

"Ford!"

"Of that latter fact I wish her to continue to remain in ignorance."

“ It’s all beyond my comprehension. If she doesn’t know that he was injured, perhaps he wasn’t, because if she doesn’t know, who does ? ”

“ As I have pointed out to you already, the probabilities are that Thurston picked himself up and walked away. However that may be, she has no knowledge of anything to the contrary. You will be so good as to remember that fact, Champion, in your intercourse with her.”

“ Wouldn’t it be better that she and I should have a talk together ? ”

“ It would not. No good end would be gained. If you take my strong advice you will dismiss the whole matter from your own mind. You must know yourself that you are unfitted both by constitution and education to regard an incident of this kind with that perfect self-detachment which it requires.”

“ There’s—there’s a good deal of truth in what you say.”

“ At present Miss Owen knows nothing, absolutely nothing—I wish to impress that word on you as strongly as I can—of any knife, or of any presumed injury to Alan Thurston. That being so, surely you perceive that it’s better she should continue to know nothing ? ”

“ Certainly, if—if she does know nothing.”

“ If ? Champion, are you a Didymus ? You may take my word for it that, in this matter, there is more than you have any notion of. I have my suspicions. In what direction they point I am not, at present, at liberty to tell you. When you do learn the truth I believe you will fall on your knees to ask forgiveness for the evil thoughts

you have been harbouring against the simple, child-like, unprotected girl, whom I have placed in your house for safe keeping, in the hope that she would find in you, through good and evil report a sure and certain guardian."

CHAPTER XXIV

P.-C. FELLING

IT appeared that Philip Ford had come to the Rectory on a little two-seated motor car. As—his own driver, and indeed its sole occupant—he was returning down the road which led to the village he encountered the Baynham policeman, William Felling. As Felling saluted he brought his car to a standstill. The man bore a brown-paper parcel and an air of importance; Sir Philip during his brief experience of the duties of a country magistrate had learned to recognise that air. It meant that Mr. Felling, having become an official, had ceased, for the moment, to be a man. Since the occasions on which such a transformation was called for were few and far between Mr. Felling was apt, in his new character, to seem a trifle ill at ease. Ordinarily a sufficiently shrewd countryman, in his official guise he was wont to display a tendency towards becoming muddle-headed, with, and sometimes without, the slightest provocation.

Sir Philip knew this trait in Felling very well. There had been times when he had found it inconvenient. This, it occurred to him, as he looked him up and down, particularly observing the brown-paper parcel which was in his hand, was

an occasion on which he might find it quite the other way.

“ Good-morning, Felling. Anything doing ? ”

“ Well, Sir Philip, there is a little something doing, in a manner of speaking.”

“ What’s the matter ? No more chickens been stolen, I hope ? You know it isn’t very much to our credit that people can’t keep fowls without having them stolen under their very noses.”

Felling shuffled his feet in the dust. Fowls had vanished, and, apparently, the thieves had vanished also.

“ No, Sir Philip, it’s not about fowls, not that I know of. The fact is, I was just coming up to see Mr. Campion about this very matter.”

“ What matter ? Have you any clue as to who took Wilmot’s hens ? ”

“ No, Sir Philip, I can’t say that I have, not at present ; but I’m keeping my eyes open. What I was going to say is this, it’s just as well that I have met you, because this here matter, of which I was speaking, has perhaps as much to do with you as it has with Mr. Campion.”

“ What have I to do with Wilmot’s hens, Felling ? By the way, I’m told they were rather fine birds, a prize strain.”

“ That’s what he says now ; but if you’d seen them before they were took you wouldn’t have noticed much prize strain about them ; no, that you wouldn’t.”

“ Ah ! Still, a man doesn’t want to be robbed of his hens and have the thief get off scot-free ; and under the circumstances I really don’t think it becomes you to run down the quality of Wilmot’s

hens, Felling. What is it you wish to say to me ? I'm in rather a hurry."

"It's about something, Sir Philip, which happened while I was out on my rounds last night."

"What happened ? Out with it, man, out with it !"

Thus hustled, Mr. Felling, drawing a long breath, burst into what threatened to be an unpunctuated story.

"It seems, Sir Philip, that while I was on my rounds last night, two gentlemen called at my place and saw my wife and told her a story of which she couldn't make head or tail about something which according to what they said had happened up at the rectory, so she asked them to put down what they had to say on paper."

"And did they put it down on paper ?"

"Yes, Sir Philip, they did."

"Where is that paper ?"

Felling took a sheet of foolscap out of his pocket-book, which he transferred to the other's outstretched hand. Sir Philip scanned it rapidly. It was a clearly worded statement, formally signed by the two strangers of the preceding night, with their addresses attached, of certain singular happenings in the rectory grounds of which they claimed to have been the witnesses. They practically charged Doris with at least attempted murder, and wound up with some sufficiently uncomfortable insinuations having reference to the disappearance of Alan Thurston's body.

"Where are the two men who signed this paper ?"

“That’s it, Sir Philip. When I got home my wife was in bed, and early this morning she was took ill, and, the fact is, Sir Philip, I’ve had an addition to my family—the first.”

Mr. Felling renewed the shuffling of his feet, and he smiled all over his face.

“I congratulate you, Felling. How is the lady progressing?”

“As well as can be expected, Sir Philip—likewise the boy.”

“That’s good news. You might use that to buy the young gentleman whatever is the first article which a baby requires.”

The proud father found himself richer by a sovereign.

“Thank you, Sir Philip; I’m sure I’m very much obliged to you, Sir Philip.”

“And I suppose this domestic upheaval—I believe babies can’t be born into the world without causing a fuss—occasioned a little delay?”

“That’s just how it was, Sir Philip. In consequence I never heard anything about the two gentlemen, or the paper they had left behind them, till it might be an hour ago. Then when I went down to the Wheatsheaf, where it seems they spent the night, it turned out that they’d gone up by the first train, so I started straight off for the rectory and that’s how it is, Sir Philip, I’ve met you.”

“Precisely. You’ve done quite right, Felling. I myself was at the rectory last night, and I may tell you, strictly between ourselves, that these two persons interfered in what was no concern of theirs, behaving in an officious and offensive manner, and trying to make mountains out of molehills. What they have stated with reference

to Miss Owen is not only entirely false, but distinctly libellous; for it, if they are not careful, they will be made to pay. As to Mr. Thurston, the gentleman to whom they refer, he happens to be a personal friend of my own, and I am sure will resent very strongly their ludicrous exaggerations. What have you in that parcel?"

"It's the hat and the watch and the money which, from what you will see they say in that paper, belong to this here Mr. Thurston."

"Give them to me. I will see that Mr. Thurston has them. Good-day, Felling. Give Mrs. Felling my compliments and congratulations."

Before the constable had quite realised what had happened Sir Philip was speeding down the road in a cloud of dust, with the brown-paper parcel and the sheet of foolscap paper. Mr. Felling rubbed the back of his head, as if in an endeavour to clear his brain; then he looked at the sovereign in his moist palm, and he took it home.

Sir Philip communed with himself as he went.

"It's lucky I met Mr. Felling, or it might have been awkward. It would seem as if those two men meant mischief. One doesn't wish to suggest anything against gentlemen of character; but it was at least a coincidence that they should have chanced upon the scene at that moment. It occurs to me that I shall want help; I think I'll apply for it, first of all to Mr. Beasley."

Stopping at the village post-office he sent this telegram:—

"To John Beasley,

"111, Feather Buildings, Holborn, London.

"Come by next train to the Manor House, Baynham.

"PHILIP FORD."

“That will bring him ; and on the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief he should be the very man I want.”

When he reached home, going straight to his study, he took out of a drawer in a bureau, to gain access to which needed several unlockings, the letter, in its original envelope, which had brought Alan Thurston from Glynde to Baynham. Both the envelope and the letter it contained were drabbled with blood. Sir Philip subjected each of them to the severest scrutiny.

“I should have said off-hand that the writing was hers.” He compared it with the writing on a letter which he took from his desk. “The imitation is certainly well done, and is, I judge, the work not of a mere tyro, but of an expert in the art of forgery. The discrepancy is in the paper and the envelope. I doubt if, since she had been at Baynham, she has written a letter except on the rectory stationery. I’m disposed to wager that she has no paper or envelopes like this, or ever has had. Still, the imitation of the handwriting is not ill done ; that signature would have taken even me in ; I’m not sure it didn’t till she herself said no. I’m not surprised that, together with the Baynham post-mark, which indubitably is genuine, it lured Alan Thurston to his doom. I’d give—what would I not give ?—to know who wrote this letter.” He threw back his elbows and expanded his chest, so that he might inhale as much air as possible into his lungs. “Thank God she didn’t. I wouldn’t exchange that knowledge for all there is in the world ! ”

CHAPTER XXV

MR. FELLING IS PUT TO CONFUSION

MR FELLING was at breakfast. It was Sunday morning, so that the meal was late. With the rest of Baynham the constable began his celebration of the Sabbath by stopping long in bed. The fine weather still continued. Mr Felling sat in his shirt sleeves, with the door leading from the front garden into the house wide open. Suddenly he heard the clapper gate open and shut. From where he sat rows of hollyhocks hid from him not only the road but the gate, so that he was unable to see who had entered. Taking it for granted that it was some village acquaintance, who had called perhaps to learn how Mrs. Felling was getting on, he continued his breakfast, very much at his ease. To his surprise, and also not a little to his confusion, there presently appeared in the open doorway two masculine figures which certainly did not belong to any one in Baynham, and which, in his own mind, he immediately associated with that blessed word "gentry." The owner of one of them inquired :—

"Are you the constable?"

Mr Felling stumbled to his feet, a piece of bread and butter in one hand, and a knife in the other.

"Yes, sir."

"I thought you might be. May we come in?"

Without waiting for the required permission the speaker entered, with his friend. "What a pretty place you have here. Your garden looks quite charming. I never saw finer hollyhocks."

Mr. Felling prided himself on his success in the culture of those old-fashioned flowers, and had indeed gone so far as to produce what he claimed to be an entirely new variety. The compliment pleased him, even while it added to his confusion. The stranger went affably on—

"My name is Sampson, Henry Sampson, and my friend is Dr. Seymour Anderson."

The names conveyed no meaning to the hearer's mind, although the speaker seemed to take it for granted that they would do. As Mr. Sampson appeared to be waiting for Mr. Felling to speak, that intelligent officer managed to say something.

"Is there anything I can do for you, sir?"

Mr. Sampson was still affability itself.

"Don't let us interrupt you, Mr.—I believe your name is Felling?"

"Yes, sir, that's my name."

"Go on with your breakfast, I beg of you. No doubt your duties keep you out of bed so late that you have to take an occasional slice off the morning—eh?"

"Well, sir, I am a bit late, Sundays, sometimes. People round here are. We get up early enough on week-days."

"I've no doubt. My friend and I are just setting out on a long walk; what beautiful country for walking you have here."

"If you had as much walking about it to do as I have you'd think so. Fine country, I call it."

"Splendid. I don't suppose my friend and I do quite as much walking as you, but we do as much as we can; walking's our favourite amusement. We go for a little walking tour whenever an opportunity offers. Before starting on our day's tramp we thought we'd just look in to learn if there are any news of our adventure the other night."

Mr. Felling looked as if he did not understand.

"To what adventure are you alluding, sir?"

Mr. Sampson seemed surprised at the other's lack of comprehension.

"That unfortunate occurrence up at your rector's."

Mr. Felling pursed his lips and knitted his brows as if trying to look wiser than he felt.

"Can't say I've heard of any unfortunate occurrence up at the rector's, or anywhere else—not lately, that is."

"My good sir! Surely you are joking."

"Excuse me, sir, but I don't know who you are, or what you mean by saying that I'm joking. Joking's not supposed to be much in my way."

"I presume you didn't catch our names. Let me repeat them. My friend here is Dr. Seymour Anderson, and I am Henry Sampson."

The policeman stared, as through a mental mist.

"You seem to think that I ought to know all about you, but I should say that there must be some mistake, because, to the best of my recollection, I've never heard either of those names before."

The strangers exchanged glances, as of amazement.

"This is most astonishing! most remarkable!"

For the first time Dr. Anderson spoke.

"Do you wish us to understand, Mr. Felling, that your wife did not tell you of our calling here, and making a statement as to certain remarkable happenings which we had witnessed in your rector's garden?"

A faint light began to break on Mr. Felling's mind, and, with it, a something approaching apprehension.

"I do remember something about it, now you mention it."

"You do remember something about it? Really, constable—I presume you are a constable?"

"Certainly, I'm a constable."

"Then, for a police-officer, you must allow me to tell you that you speak in a very extraordinary manner. Will you be so good as to explain what you mean by saying that you do remember something about it?"

Mr. Felling was in doubt whether or not to show resentment. There was that in the other's manner which filled him with a vague sense of discomfort.

"My wife, she told me that you called."

"Told you that we had called? Is that all she told you? Didn't she give you a paper, on which, at her request, we had made a statement in writing, together with certain articles, namely, a hat, a gold watch and some gold and silver coins?"

"She did."

"She did! Then what has been done in the matter?"

"Nothing has been done, so far as I know of."

“ Then has the unfortunate gentleman, who was the victim of that young woman’s murderous fury, and whose name we learned was Alan Thurston, come forward and desired that nothing should be done ? ”

“ I don’t know anything at all about it.”

Again the friends exchanged glances, this time of something approaching stupefaction.

Anderson delivered himself of words which were evidently intended to relieve his feelings.

“ Of all the amazing men ! I have heard a good deal about the peculiarities of our rural police, but this transcends anything.”

Mr. Sampson took up the tale, since his emotions seemed to have brought his companion to a standstill. His affability had disappeared. Its place had been taken by a brusque sternness which momentarily increased Mr. Felling’s uneasiness.

“ You appear to be inclined to treat this matter very light, constable, but let me warn you that if you are not extremely careful you will find yourself in a very serious position. My friend and I were witnesses if not of an actual murder, then at any rate of an attempted murder. We saw a young woman named Doris Owen either kill, or nearly kill, a gentleman named Thurston. We made all possible haste to lay the facts before you, as the local representative of law and order. In your absence we committed them to paper, and gave that paper to your wife, to be handed to you on your return. We also committed to her charge certain articles which had been the property of Mr. Allan Thurston.”

“ I beg your pardon if I am interrupting you, but

who was it that mentioned the name of Alan Thurston ? ”

When the three men glanced round to learn who the interrupter was they found that in the still open doorway stood a lady who, in spite of that disfiguring costume which, as things are, feminine motorists are obliged to wear, even in the finest weather, was obviously young and not ill-looking. As they turned she drew aside the thick white veil which hung about her as a curtain, and made both facts still plainer. A pair of pretty eyes set in a dainty, almost childish face passed from one to the other.

“ I’m very sorry ” she explained, “ if I seem to be intruding, but just as I was coming in I caught the name and—I am Mrs. Alan Thurston.”

“ Mrs. Alan Thurston ! ” exclaimed Mr. Sampson as if the announcement of her name, and the coincidence of her presence there at that particular moment, came on him with the force of a painful surprise.

Once more the two friends looked at each other, they both looked at Mr. Felling. Judging from his bearing, that intelligent officer would have preferred them to look at something or some one else. Partly, perhaps, owing to the facts that his unfinished breakfast still lay on the table in front of him, and that he was both waistcoatless and coatless, there was that in his general appearance which was hardly suggestive of the majesty of the law. Probably, also, the advent, under such circumstances, of a charming lady did not tend to increase his self-possession. Whatever the cause, after Mr. Sampson had given utterance to his exclamation all three men continued still. As

if struck by their silence, the lady asked, with an air of pretty timidity.

"Didn't one of you mention the name of Alan Thurston?"

"Yes, madam," admitted Mr. Sampson, "I did."

"Are you—you are not a policeman?"

"No madam, I am not. Our friend here, Mr. Felling, is a policeman."

"My husband, Mr. Alan Thurston, has been absent from home some days. I have reason to believe that he came to Baynham to see—to see a certain person."

"Did he come to see Miss Doris Owen?"

"I believe he did, but—but did you know?"

"Anderson, the plot thickens! I will explain to you presently, madam, why I mentioned that name; but—pray go on! You say your husband has not returned home?"

"He has not; and as I can learn nothing about his movements or his whereabouts I am getting very anxious; so I thought I would come to the police station and see if they can give me any information."

"Mr. Felling, you hear what this lady says. It begins to strike me, my man, that you have made a pretty fine mess of things."

Mr. Felling did his best to assume his air of official superiority.

"I don't know why you should speak to me like that."

Mr. Sampson showed not the slightest sign of being abashed; indeed, he became more peremptory than ever.

"Don't you? Then you very soon will."

Answer me at once, sir, what did you do with that statement, and with the articles we handed to your wife ? ”

“ What business is it of yours ? ”

“ What business is it of mine ? You hear him, Anderson ? You hear this man, Mrs. Thurston ? Such an answer is more than sufficient to expose his utter incompetence for the post he is supposed to fill. I hear that his official superiors have their quarters at Northenden, a town distant some seven or eight miles from here. Come, Anderson, and, if I may suggest it, you, Mrs. Thurston, had better come also, and we will quickly learn what those superiors think of his notions of a policeman’s duty.”

Mr. Felling spoke as Mr. Sampson was moving towards the door.

“ If you want to know what I did with the paper, I gave it to Sir Philip Ford, and the things you speak of, I gave him them also.”

“ To Sir Philip Ford ? What right had you to do that ? ”

“ He’s a J.P.—he’s our local magistrate.”

“ Is that your only reason ? ”

“ He told me that Mr. Alan Thurston was a friend of his.”

“ Then he told you a lie ! Philip Ford is his bitterest, cruellest, and most merciless enemy ! ”

It was the lady who delivered herself of this strong language. It served to move Mr. Sampson to greater heat.

“ Is that so ? Then, indeed, the plot becomes still thicker. Anderson, don’t you perceive in what direction everything begins to point ? It seems to me that we are getting on the track

of something that looks very like conspiracy ; what share Mr. Felling has borne in it he will soon find it necessary to explain. Mrs. Thurston, I must ask you to call to your aid all the self-control you have at your command. On behalf of my friend and of myself I have to make to you a painful communication. I fear that, from what we witnessed, it is only too possible that your husband, Mr. Alan Thurston, has been a victim of foul play."

The lady eyed the speaker in silence. That she retained no slight modicum of her self-possession was shown by the firm tone with which she addressed a fourth individual who made an uninvited entry on the scene ; this time the new-comer being no less a personage than Lord Ifield.

"Lord Ifield, this gentleman says he believes that Alan has met with foul play."

His lordship, his goggles looking rather curious at the top of his motor cap, where he had thrust them to be out of the way, glanced from one stranger to the other.

"Which gentleman ?" The lady pointed to Mr. Sampson. "Foul play ? Pray, sir, what do you mean by foul play ? and what do you know about it anyhow ?"

By degrees, by circumlocutory paths, and with many interruptions, Mr. Sampson and his friend told the story, from their own point of view, of the occurrences which they had witnessed in the rectory garden on that eventful evening. His lordship, inclined at first to make light of the affair, as the tale went on showed signs of becoming impressed. On one point he was especially insistent.

" You say you saw—actually saw this young woman, this Miss Owen, strike Alan Thurston ? "

It was Mr. Sampson who answered.

" My friend, as he has explained, saw her strike him, but he did not see with what she struck him. I did. The position in which I was standing enabled me to see plainly. She struck him with a knife."

" Of that you are positive ? "

" Quite positive."

" And you immediately came to the police station and made a statement in writing of what you had seen ? "

" We did."

" As the constable was absent on duty, why did you not remain in the village the following morning till you had an opportunity of seeing him ? According to your own account this was a very serious matter in which you had got yourselves mixed up."

" We were perfectly well aware of that. We made it clear in the paper we left behind that pressing business made it imperative that we should go up early to town ; but the statement contained our names and addresses, and an expression of our willingness to give, at any time, any further information which might be required, and which it was in our power to give."

Lord Ifield turned to Mr. Felling, whose demeanour, as he became more and more conscious that he had blundered, had become more and more dogged.

" And do you mean to say that you did not breathe a hint of having received such a statement to your official superiors ? "

"I tell you I gave the paper to Sir Philip Ford—he's our local magistrate."

"And you made no report to any one?"

"Sir Philip, he said it would be all right."

"And you made no inquiries on your own account?"

"I left it all to Sir Philip. I knew he knew better than I did."

"If what these gentlemen say is correct it seems probable that he did know better than you did, as you may find to your cost. Where are your headquarters?"

"Over at Northenden."

"Then, Mr. Felling, I must ask you to accompany us to Northenden at once." His lordship spoke confidentially to Mrs. Thurston. "I don't think if I were you I should attach too much importance to what these two men have said; but if you like I'll leave you here in the village and go over with them alone. It may turn out to be an awkward business."

"Thank you, Lord Ifield, thank you very much. I know how—how good you are. I appreciate your kindness, your desire to spare me pain, but after all Alan Thurston is my husband, and since I have begun, if you don't mind, I should prefer to see this business through. You remember that I told you yesterday how I had dreamed that Owen girl had killed him, and how I couldn't get the dream out of my head."

Lord Ifield smiled indulgently.

"Dreams aren't evidence. I remember once dreaming that I was killing my grandmother; but I haven't done it yet."

"I have no more faith in dreams than you have."

Still, it is strange that I should have had such a dream, considering what we have just now heard. Anyhow, I will come with you, if you don't mind."

Inspector Reynolds, in charge of the district of which Northenden was the centre, was just preparing for church—at which, when duty permitted, he was a regular attendant—when he found himself taken by storm. He surveyed with some amazement the four persons who had come trooping into the office, P.-C. Felling making a fifth—a sheepish and uneasy fifth—in the rear. His amazement grew still greater when he learned what they had to say. It was rather an involved tale as they told it, containing as it did so many elements of the unexpected, and it was some little time before he had a clear grasp of the whole business, in all its details; but, when he had, his treatment of the unfortunate Baynham constable was withering. It was not that, there and then, he said much; possibly a sense of what was due to the force kept him from pressing too hard upon even a humble colleague in the presence of the laity; but both his looks and manner suggested unspoken volumes yet to come. Still he did manage with a very few words to make his subordinate realise the enormity of the offence of which he had been guilty from the official point of view.

"Do you mean to say that all this time you've been aware that a possible murder has been committed in your district without mentioning a word of it to a single living creature, and that although you've been asked each day if you'd a report to make?"

Mr. Felling shuffled with his feet and fidgeted

with his fingers, presenting despite his uniform a picture of rustic confusion. He had been asked that question so many times, and in such varied forms, and the only reply he was able to give seemed each time it was given to make his position worse.

"I thought it would be all right if I left it to Sir Philip, seeing that he's a magistrate."

"Man, are you mad? You know better than that, if you'd take the trouble to think. Let me tell you what for one thing you have done. Supposing a murder has been committed, you've given the parties chiefly concerned an opportunity of getting rid of the body, and so making it impossible for us to prove their guilt, or even that there has been a murder. Why, before now they may have given it respectable burial in a respectable grave at the other end of England, and how are we going to get at it then? Or they may have taken it across the water and removed it from our jurisdiction, and then where shall we be? If you'd been hand in glove with them you couldn't have helped them more. William Felling, I wouldn't be in your shoes at the present moment, not for a thousand pounds."

No wonder that Mr. Felling writhed. He even, when for a moment he thought public attention was turned elsewhere, furtively drew the back of his hand across his eyes; he alone knew why. Possibly he was thinking of his wife lying in bed at home, with their new-born baby in her arms; the baby for whose benefit Sir Philip Ford had given him a sovereign. If it had not been for the feel of the gold coin in his moist palm would he have suffered that gentleman to carry off the matter

documentary and otherwise, with which he had been entrusted, in quite such easy-going fashion? It may be that in the recesses of his slowly working brain that was an inquiry which he was putting to himself.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RECTOR IS INTERRUPTED

BAYNHAM CHURCH was full that morning to its utmost capacity. The fine weather had brought people out from far and near to worship. There was not a vacant seat in any of the pews. Indeed, benches had been placed against the walls at the back, and on these were seated various late-comers and stragglers.

All the windows which would unfasten were unfastened, and the church doors stood wide open. As a consequence the interior of the edifice was permeated with the fragrance of flowers, for in the early summer Baynham churchyard is a blaze of blossom, sweet-smelling blossom, whose perfume is borne to those who love it by the lightest breeze, so that the prayers of the congregation went up to heaven mingled with the scent of God's own flowers.

It was a morning on which one would suppose that even the ailing might hope to feel in their veins something of the glow and the glory of life, and the strong would rejoice in their strength. When the sun shines, and through the invigorating air pass faintly scented gales, which seem to whisper that after all the world is beautiful, one must be a pessimist indeed not to feel that it is good to be alive. And yet in the church, that morning, there

was one person who was neither ailing nor a pessimist, who seemed impervious to the influence of the glory which was round about him. That person was the rector.

The fact that this was so impressed the congregation from the first moment in which he appeared in his place to begin the service ; impressed those most who knew him best. For as a rule the Reverend Thomas Campion was like a human breeze. He bore a gale of high spirits about with him wherever he went. He was an optimist of the optimists. Blessed himself with the best of health, the best of wives, the best of children, the best of friends, indeed, the best of everything, he seemed to experience some difficulty in admitting that in the world there was anything unblessed. Possessed of simple tastes, and placed in a position in which they could all be gratified, he had never known the financial pinch, and found it hard to credit that any one else need know it either. Of all men the clergy have the most abundant opportunities of becoming acquainted with the darker side of human life, but here again, for him, the lines had fallen in pleasant places. Baynham was fortunate among parishes in that, in his time, there practically were no poor, and there certainly was no crime. His life as its rector had so far been wholly uneventful. There are men wearing his cloth to whom this would not have been a cause of entire satisfaction. They would have feared stagnation. They would have yearned for opportunities to heal those festering human sores which it is the end and aim of their sacred office to attempt to heal.

But Thomas Campion was not fashioned on this

pattern. He loved to think that all things were going well, because then all was well with him. And perhaps not one person who was present in the church had ever before seen him when all was not well with him. Obviously all was not well with him that morning. The fact was almost painfully conspicuous. People looked to see if his wife was there, with a view of learning how she was affected by the peculiarity of her husband's bearing. As it chanced Mrs. Champion was absent. The only occupants of the rectory pew were the servants, the children, and Miss Owen. It struck acute observers that something ailed Miss Owen as well as the rector. She sat so very straight, maintained such an attitude of sever rigidity, looked so uncompromisingly grave, and so unusually pale, that people wondered. That she was affected by the singularity of Mr. Champion's manner was evident. She followed his every movement, his every utterance, his every gesture, with a strained attention which it was not pleasant to watch. When, as happened more than once, he stopped in the middle of a prayer, as if his voice had failed him, she leaned forward as if, tense with anxiety, it was all she could do to keep herself from going to his assistance.

It so happened that, the curate being away for his holiday, the rector had to bear single-handed the entire weight of the service. That for some reason he was unfitted to sustain such a burden became momentarily clearer. Something seemed wrong with him both physically and mentally; what, was altogether beyond the comprehension of his hearers. They became more and more mystified. He made errors—rudimentary errors—in the

order of the service. Of some of them he remained unconscious. When he did realise what he had done his efforts to correct himself only resulted in further blunders. Fortunately, as was the Baynham custom, the two lessons were read by members of the congregation; but when it came to the Communion service, his attempt at reciting the Ten Commandments almost resulted in total collapse. It was not here that his memory failed him; but that he seemed to be affected by such an intensity of feeling as to choke his utterance. It was apparently only with the greatest difficulty that he was able to enunciate each following commandment. When he came to the sixth, those memorable words. "Thou shalt do no murder," for some seconds he seemed to be struggling with his own emotions. When at last the words did come, they came in a sort of wail. Not only did his voice break before the last was spoken, but so soon as, with an almost convulsive effort, the grim word "murder" was pronounced, he burst into tears.

At once the place was in commotion. Some rose in their places, and there were those who began to move towards the chancel with a view of offering assistance. But in a moment or two the paroxysm passed, and with his hand the rector motioned them to resume their seats.

The actual service having reached an end, to the no small relief of a large majority of the congregation, it was generally felt that, under the circumstances, it would be wise if Mr. Champion were to forgo any effort to preach, and if, on this occasion, the sermon was omitted. Such however it seemed was not the feeling of the person princi-

pally concerned. With steps which obviously faltered he ascended the few stairs which led to the pulpit. He remained for an unusual length of time engaged in private prayer. When he rose to his feet and stood before them in the sunlight a sort of shock passed over the people as for the first time they fully realised how haggard he was ; what a mysterious change had taken place in the appearance of the man with whom they all of them were so familiar. As a rule preaching was not the rector's strongest point. He was wont to content himself with a brief and perfunctory exposition of well-worn platitudes, couched in the baldest language. There were those there who did not expect that then he would be able to do even so much. They looked to see him stumble through a dozen sentences and then retire. Their surprise was therefore all the greater when they presently found themselves listening to what, so far as their experience of him went, was the sermon of his life.

To begin with, the text he chose was not by any means the kind of text he was wont to choose. It was the seventeenth verse of the eighth chapter of St. Luke—"For nothing is secret that shall not be made manifest ; neither anything hid that shall not be known and come abroad." He read the words out, very clearly from a small Testament which he carried in his hand, and then pointed out how they are recorded, in a slightly different form, both by St. Matthew and St. Mark. They were Christ's own words, and the triple record showed how anxious He was that it should be clearly understood, in this world of weakness and of sin, that nothing is secret which

shall not be made known ; and nothing hid which shall not be revealed, not only to the eyes of God, from whom nothing ever is hidden, even for a moment, but also to the eyes of men. And on this theme he proceeded to preach to them in a manner which amazed them more than anything which had gone before.

It was his custom to read his sermon, and not too audibly. When the rector entered the pulpit it was a signal for certain members of his congregation to compose themselves for a doze. No one dozed then, or thought of dozing. Using no notes, he began to address them with a degree of eloquence, fluency and passion which went far to show that when a man has something so say he is endowed with the gift of power to say it. Evidently Mr. Champion had a great deal to say ; but not the least mysterious part of the business was that not one of his hearers had a notion to whom he was saying it. That his words had a personal and particular application seemed plain ; but to whom or what they applied was another matter. He exhorted all persons there to bare their breasts, take their courage in both their hands, and in the face of God and man make plain that which was hid ; to do this of their own accord, before God's fingers tore aside the veil, and forced them to a tardy confession. His voice rang out through the church—even while it trembled with emotion—as he painted the state of mind of that most unhappy person who, whether by accident or design, of deliberate intent, or on the spur of the moment, had been guilty of a great sin, and believing that all knowledge of the sin is confined to himself, or to herself—he lingered

on the herself in a fashion which caused several of his feminine parishioners to change colour—goes on, from day to day, apparently unabashed, unashamed, was contemptuous of the law which was ordained from the first, and which shall stand for ever, that nothing is secret which shall not be made known. “That person,” he cried, with a sudden vigour which took his hearers’ breath away, “is in hell already. The air of indifference is but pretence; it is a cloak which every breath of wind brushes aside, leaving the wearer exposed and bare. That person dare not think. If it is a woman—if,” he repeated, in accents which suggested tears, “it is a woman, to what a condition is she reduced, especially if she is young. In those moments when she is alone, what thoughts must be hers; thoughts which, strive against them as she may, will come. Her life is a living lie. She lies to her dearest friends; she lies to herself, when she seeks to delude herself into the belief that because the thing she has done is hid, it will continue hid; when she knows, all the while, that the finger of God is moving—moving—moving; and that, in His good time, it will brush aside the curtain, and all will be known. Then, may God forgive her, for she will not be forgiven by men.”

There was another side of the matter. Human society is a complex piece of machinery; if but a single nut goes the whole machine is broken. So we not only suffer for our offences, others suffer too; often suffer more than we do. Let the person who is living in secret sin consider this. First of all, his sin may be known or suspected by others; from the very beginning it may not be

so secret as she herself imagines. The preacher had dropped, perhaps unconsciously, into the habitual use of the feminine pronoun, in a manner which made it seem at least possible that he had some actual woman in his mind's eye, at whom his remarks were being directly aimed. The consequence was that every woman present was filled with a not unpleasant flutter of wonderment as to who the creature could possibly be. Had they been able to express themselves and their suspicions aloud there might have been more characters lost inside that church there and then than the rector had any notion of. Wholly unaware of the effect which his unusual eloquence was producing, Mr. Campion waxed warmer and warmer, and more and more rhapsodical, until an interruption came which brought him to a sudden and impotent standstill.

He was enlarging on the injurious effects in which sin might involve the sinner's friends. How, for instance, in their desire to screen her, they might be tempted to cross that border-line which divides wrong from right. It was indeed a moot question whether one did not do evil in attempting to screen an evil-doer. Crime was an offence against God and man, and he who associated himself with the criminal, in, for instance, her efforts—the pronoun was still feminine—to conceal her crime, was he not a criminal also? Given certain conditions, he certainly was. And in any case, the position of the sinner's associate was one which was fraught with the greatest peril. We cannot touch pitch without being defiled. And when once we begin to tamper with our consciences—because some one else has

tampered with theirs—then our condition was indeed perilous. Especially was this the case when dealing with offences against the law. The law of England rightly says that he who screens a law-breaker is himself a breaker of the law, and his offence is greater when he joins himself with a secret criminal in an endeavour to cover up a recent crime.

Mr. Champion's absorption in his own sermon seemed to have transformed him. He stood up straight, with head thrown back, eyes flashing, eager gestures; while a flood of words poured from him in a torrent of passionate volubility which was so unlike his usual halting delivery, even of his written sermons, that by degrees it began to dawn upon his hearers, and to wax plainer and plainer, that he must be inspired by some extraordinary occasion to have become so suddenly endowed with the tongue of eloquence. How far he would have gone, to what heights he would have risen, none can tell. The end came in the very middle of one of his most passionate periods.

His voice was ringing through the building, in tones which none of them had ever heard from him before, when all at once some one came into the church, and he halted; then some one else came in, and the man was instantly transfigured. His hands dropped to his side, his stature seemed suddenly diminished, his countenance changed, his voice died away, his lips twitched in an apparently futile effort to recover it; he stood before them, visibly trembling, like a man smitten with palsy. The change was so striking, so dramatic, that the whole congregation looked round to see

who the new-comers could be to have caused it. The first persons who had entered had been a lady and gentleman, Mrs. Thurston and Lord Ifield. Then had come the two persons who had given their names as Henry Sampson and Dr. Seymour Anderson. It was their appearance which had stricken the rector with at least momentary paralysis. He stood, clutching the pulpit railing, staring at them as if they were the creatures of some insistent nightmare, speechless. After them had entered Inspector Reynolds, of the Northenden police; in the doorway slouched William Felling; while behind him was still another policeman whom the inspector had brought with him from Northenden.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ACCUSATION OF DORIS

THE church was in confusion. The sudden irruption of the strangers, the effect their appearance had had upon the rector, who productive of something like a panic. The people, wholly at a loss to understand the situation, filled with all sorts of unreasoning doubts and fears, started to their feet, and forgetting for the moment where they were, began to address each other in tones which were hardly in keeping with the respect due to the sacred edifice in which they had gathered for worship. Their conduct, or misconduct, seemed to exercise a calming influence on Mr. Campion ; as if it caused him to realise that the responsibility for what was taking place was his. He seemed to put out all his strength to enable him to regain his self-control, and presently said, in accents which at least were audible :—

“I beseech you, my friends, to resume your seats.” Then, when they had obeyed, he added, “Let us pray.”

In a brief, informal, and indeed not very comprehensible prayer, each word of which seemed to be wrung from his lips, in striking contrast to his previous fluency, he dismissed the congregation. Then, stumbling down the pulpit steps, as he had

stumbled up them, he followed the choir out of the church.

His disappearance was succeeded by a buzz of tongues, the speakers seeming to find it impossible to restrain themselves till they were out in the open air. In their excited eagerness to relieve themselves in speech they blocked the aisles, making egress difficult.

Certain persons there were, however, who had quitted the building even before the rector, so that by the time he reached the vestry they had gained it too. He was still in his surplice when, without any warning, the door was opened and there entered Inspector Reynolds, with, at his heels, Mrs. Thurston and Lord Ifield, Mr. Henry Sampson and Dr. Seymour Anderson. Unceremonious though their entry was, especially considering the nature of the place and the moment they had chosen, Mr. Campion not only evinced no symptom of surprise, he offered not the faintest remonstrance. Not a word of greeting was spoken by either side. For some seconds there was silence. Though the five looked at the rector he could not be said to look at either of them. He stood by the bare deal table with one hand resting on the board, his eyes cast down, as if he were content to wait in patience until it should be their pleasure to address him; presenting, in his new and strange and almost unnatural humility a very different figure to that somewhat flamboyant personality with which his parish was familiar.

Inspector Reynolds broke the silence with words which might or might not have been meant for an apology.

“I am sorry to have come upon you like this,

Mr. Champion, but I fancy you know what has brought us."

It seemed that it was necessary for the rector to moisten his lips before he answered. When he did answer it was so indistinctly as to be almost inaudible.

"I believe that I do."

"This, Mr. Champion, is Mrs. Thurston, Mrs. Alan Thurston, the wife of a gentleman of whom I think you know something." The rector said nothing; he did not even look up, nor in any way acknowledge what was perhaps intended for an introduction. The inspector went on. "She telegraphed to you to say that she was in great trouble because of her husband's absence from home; and she asked you to tell her if you knew anything of his whereabouts. I believe, Mr. Champion, that your reply scarcely conveyed the whole truth?"

Again the rector had to moisten his lips, again his words were almost inaudible.

"It did not."

The lady spoke with, in her voice and manner, a pretty little touch of pathos.

"Your candour would have been greater, sir, if you had only known how great was my anxiety."

The rector was still. The inspector continued.

"Am I correct in saying, Mr. Champion, that Mr. Thurston paid a visit to a young lady who is at present a member of your household?"

"You are."

"You must excuse me, Mr. Champion, if I am subjecting you to any inconvenience. I assure you that no disrespect is intended; my only wish

is to do my duty. And it seems to me that the shortest way of getting at the truth of what is a very extraordinary state of affairs is by requesting you to give the very fullest possible answers to the, I am afraid, sometimes painful questions which I am about to put to you."

"I am ready to answer, to the best of my ability, any question which you may think it your duty to ask."

"Then perhaps you will tell me if, to your knowledge, Mr. Thurston was subjected to any violence while he was on your premises."

"I fear he was."

"By whom?"

"By—by Miss Owen, under what I sincerely believe to have been circumstances of much provocation."

"What was the nature of the injury this young woman inflicted on Mr. Thurston?"

"She—she stabbed him."

"Stabbed him! You knew this, and, till this moment, you have said nothing about it? I am sorry for you, Mr. Champion. Was this unfortunate gentleman seriously injured?"

"That I cannot tell you."

"What do you mean by saying that you cannot tell me?"

The rector explained painfully to a sceptical audience. Inspector Reynolds gave their scepticism voice.

"Do you wish us to believe, Mr. Champion, that the body of this unfortunate gentleman disappeared from your premises, from under your nose, and that you don't know what became of it?"

“What I have told you is the truth, and the whole truth, so far as I know it.”

“Then are we to understand that, to the best of your knowledge and belief, Mr. Thurston, dead or alive—and certainly severely wounded—has vanished into space?”

“I can add nothing to what I have already said; I only wish I could.”

“You must pardon my saying, bluntly, Mr. Champion, that your own behaviour makes that difficult to credit. You admit that you have been screening this young woman till it was not possible to screen her wholly any longer; one is forced to wonder to what extent you may be screening her still.”

“Possibly that is a subject on which I may be able to throw some light if you will permit me to ask this gentleman a question.”

The interposition came from Mr. Sampson.

“What is it you wish to ask?”

“I prefer to put my question to Mr. Champion himself. Mr. Champion, when we were returning to the building in which we had left Mr. Thurston’s body, did you not pick up something off the lawn?”

The rector started; the muscles of his face twitched; he looked at the speaker with agony in his eyes, seeming tongue-tied. Mr. Sampson had to repeat his question.

“I see you recall the incident to which I refer. Be frank with us, Mr. Champion, as frank as you said you would be. Did you, or did you not, pick up something from your lawn?”

The rector closed his eyes, as if to shut out from his vision things of horror.

" I did."

" What did you pick up ? "

" A knife."

" A knife ? Thinking over the matter afterwards, I remembered seeing you stoop to pick up something, and I wondered what it could have been. It was a knife, was it ? In what condition was it ? "

" It was all wet with blood."

" Then, presumably it was the weapon with which that young woman had killed—or tried to kill—Mr. Thurston ? "

" I fear it was."

" Did you by any chance see her drop it ? "

" I fear I did, as—as she was running across the lawn."

" You saw her drop the knife with which you knew she had stabbed this gentleman, and you picked it up. What did you do with it ? "

" I gave it to Sir Philip Ford."

This scarcely audible answer seemed to cause some slight sensation. The five persons looked at each other, and they stared at the rector, who indeed presented a pitiable figure for any one to stare at. It was the inspector who spoke.

" All roads seem to lead in the same direction. I was certainly right in speaking of this as a very extraordinary state of affairs. Everything seems to come into the hands of Sir Philip Ford. And, pray, Mr. Champion, what did Sir Philip Ford do with it ? "

" I cannot tell you."

" You can't tell us ? You mean you don't know ? "

" I do not know."

“ He may have taken it out to sea and dropped it in fifty fathoms of water ? ”

“ He may have done ; I don't think he did ; I do not know.”

“ Does it strike you as a proper thing to do, to give that knife, that essential piece of evidence, to Sir Philip Ford, and to say nothing about it to anybody else—particularly for a man in your position ? ”

“ It does not ; I know now that I did wrong ; I knew it then.”

“ Then why did you do it ? ”

“ He asked me to ; that is my only excuse, and it is no excuse.”

“ It isn't. If anything it is an aggravation of the offence.”

“ God knows that I have suffered for it. God knows.”

“ I rather imagine, Mr. Campion, that you will suffer for it still more in the future.”

Once more Mr. Sampson interposed.

“ Like Mr. Thurston, the knife has probably vanished off the face of the earth.”

“ We'll hope not. We'll trust that Sir Philip has some sense of what is due to his position. But the thing is possible. So it seems that you two gentlemen have conspired together—because surely that is what your conduct amounts to—in the first place to conceal the fact that a crime has been committed, and, in the second, should concealment become no longer possible, to screen the criminal. If that is not a conspiracy to defeat the ends of justice I don't know what is. And one of you is the rector of the parish, and the other a justice of the peace ! Am I to take

it that you have also spirited away Miss Owen ? ”

The answer was given by the lady herself. The inspector had hardly finished putting his questions when the door opened and Miss Owen came into the room. She had apparently taken the children home to the rectory, and had then returned to learn what detained the rector. She seemed concerned, looking first at the intruders and then at Mr. Champion, as if at a loss to understand what could possibly be happening. In particular she appeared to be troubled by the presence of Mrs. Thurston, that lady regarding her with a stony stare which she seemed to find embarrassing. As if uncomfortably affected by the stolid silence with which her entry into the room had been received, she turned to the rector with what, in her, was an air of unwonted humility.

“ Mr. Champion, has anything happened ? Is there anything that I can do for you ? ”

The rector shrank back, with a something significant in his bearing which obviously was, to her the occasion of painful surprise. She regarded him for some seconds without speaking as if in doubt whether his action was intentional. Then she herself drew back, and stood up straighter, while her cheeks were dyed red.

Mr. Sampson, moving a half-step towards her, said to Inspector Reynolds :—

“ Inspector, this is the young woman whom I saw stab Mr. Thurston.”

Doris looked at him, as if in doubt, not only as to who he was, but also as to what he had said, and certainly in entire ignorance as to the meaning of his allusion. The inspector moved

close to her. His manner was courteous yet firm.

“Are you Doris Owen?”

She drew herself still straighter, as if she resented, in the form of his question, something which she deemed unpleasantly familiar.

“I am Miss Owen—yes.”

“Then, Miss Owen, I must ask you to consider yourself as my prisoner.”

It was her turn to shrink away, and to stare at him with her big eyes open at their widest.

“Your—prisoner?”

“Yes, Miss Owen, my prisoner.”

“But who are you? What do you mean?”

“I am an inspector of police, and, as such, it is my unfortunate duty to arrest you for the murder—or for the attempted murder—of Alan Thurston.”

“Alan Thurston? Where—where is he?”

“That I cannot tell you. It is possible that you may be able to tell me.”

“Tell you? I? Where Alan Thurston is? What does he mean? Mr. Campion, what does he mean?”

If she looked to obtain enlightenment from the rector she looked in vain. As for aid or support, he stood more in need of those things than she did. He himself seemed scarcely able to stand, being as tremulous as a man newly risen from a bed of sickness. He stammered as, with downcast eyes, he replied to her question with another.

“Why—why have you not spoken yourself?”

“Spoken myself? What do you mean? What had I to speak about? What does it all mean? Did you say, sir, that I am your prisoner?”

“I did, Miss Owen, and you are.”

“For what am I your prisoner?”

“I have already told you; but, if you wish it, I will tell you again. For the murder—or attempted murder of Alan Thurston.”

“But—it’s ridiculous! It’s so absurd! Was ever anything more monstrous! Is Alan Thurston dead?”

“You must permit me to say, Miss Owen, that, as a prisoner, you are not entitled to ask me questions; and, in any case, it is certainly not my duty to answer them.”

“But—I don’t understand! I only want to understand! Who has been saying wicked things about me?”

“You will learn everything that it is necessary for you to learn in due course. In the meantime it is my duty to warn you that anything you may say will be taken down and used as evidence, and as several persons are present, you had better be extremely careful what you do say.”

“Why should I be careful? You speak to me as if it were necessary that I should use the utmost caution—as if there were something of which I have cause to be afraid. I am afraid of nothing—nothing. Is it you whom I have to thank for this?”

This question was aimed at Mrs. Thurston, almost as violently as if it had been an actual missile. That lady smiled, as if the question had been the pleasantest imaginable.

“No, it is not me whom you have to thank; but—did you really think that you would be able to kill my husband with complete impunity?”

“Kill your husband? I?”

The inspector intervened.

“Come, madam, I must ask you to be so good as not to speak to this young lady. And you, Miss Owen, I advise you, for your own sake, to come quietly with me, and to say as little as you possibly can.”

Scarcely had the inspector ceased to offer Miss Owen good advice, than once more the door leading into the churchyard was opened—to admit Sir Philip Ford!

CHAPTER XXVIII

AN INTERVENTION

It appeared that Sir Philip had come upon the scene at a moment when the actors were unready for his entrance. He was so completely at his ease ; they so obviously were not. One might have said that, with one accord, they were a little disconcerted, a fact which he, noticing, appreciated with a touch of saturnine amusement. He saluted no one, and no one saluted him. Standing cap in hand, just inside the doorway, his eyes travelled from one person to another ; something in them hinting that, as they went, his wonder and his entertainment grew together, yet, when he spoke, there was a quality in his voice which suggested neither.

“ This is hardly the kind of company one would expect to find in the vestry of a church after service on Sunday morning.”

Although the words were specifically addressed to no one, it seemed that the inspector chose to take them as containing a reference to him. There was a brusqueness in his tone as he replied :—

“ I am here to do my duty, Sir Philip Ford.”

Sir Philip was acidly civil.

“ It is possible, Inspector Reynolds, that, as on at least one previous occasion, your ideas of your duty may be your own.”

The reference was to one of those blunders of the police in which the inspector had cut quite recently a distinctly unfortunate figure, it having been owing to the position which Sir Philip had taken up that the blunder had been exposed. The allusion seemed to take the inspector so much aback as to leave him for the moment wordless. Turning from the inspector, Sir Philip moved a step or two towards Mrs. Thurston, then paused. As he regarded her, neither his tone nor his manner were flattering.

"It is you. I wondered if the thing were possible."

The lady, looking him straight in the face, did her best to return him scorn for scorn.

"Yes, Sir Philip Ford, it is the woman whom you have so foully injured. I do not wonder that you are unpleasantly surprised to see me here."

He turned again to the inspector, ignoring her utterly.

"Inspector Reynolds, I do not know who is responsible for her presence, but this person has no right to be in such a place as this. She is a notorious woman, of infamous character, and it is only owing to circumstances over which I have no control that she is not at this moment an inmate of a jail, if worse had not befallen her."

The lady's burst of anger was very well done; everything she did was well done.

"You coward! you unutterable thing! to dare to tell such lies! Last time you tried to tell them my husband thrashed you to within an inch of your life; but now that you and your friends have killed him between you I suppose you think that I am unprotected and helpless, and that therefore

you can say with impunity what you like. Lord Ifield, did I not tell you how he would behave when he knew that I had not Alan to protect me ? ”

Thus appealed to, his lordship did his best to assume the role of gallant protector of fair ladies ; but as, judging from his manner, he was already beginning to wonder what he was doing in such a galley, the attempt was not such a success as it might have been.

“ Come, Ford, that sort of talk won't do, you know. Not only is Mrs. Thurston my cousin's wife, but she's a particular friend of my own. I'll have you to understand that I insist upon your treating her with the respect which is due to her.”

Sir Philip was dangerously urbane.

“ You may rely, Lord Ifield, upon my doing that. You know me, that I do not speak lightly, especially where a woman is concerned. As I am in a position to prove beyond all doubt, and propose presently to do so publicly, that she is an infamous character, let me recommend you to be very sure of your facts before you go out of your way to associate yourself with her reputation.”

The lady had the last word.

“ If ever a man uttered a foul libel this man has done so now, in the presence of you all. What has prompted him to do so I have not the faintest notion ; it seems to me that he must be actuated by the very spirit of evil itself. But I assure you that I, on my part, will also take steps which will compel him presently to retract every word that he has said, in the face of all the world.”

The lady seemed moved by righteous wrath ; her words were well chosen, well spoken ; she had a charming personality, and yet, somehow, her

remarks had not that full effect—especially on Lord Ifield—which she doubtless desired and intended. As for Sir Philip, he took no notice of them at all. He was bestowing all his attention on Mr. Henry Sampson and his friend, both gentlemen showing a disposition to resent his attentions which, as regards degree, was only equalled by Mrs. Thurston.

“So you two persons have appeared again. You have some courage, gentlemen.”

“Not so much as you have, Sir Philip Ford—not by a very long way.”

If there was a flavour of vulgarity about the form of Mr. Sampson’s repartee, and the fashion of its delivery it was, possibly, to be excused on the ground of Sir Philip’s extremely aggravating manner.

“You think not? Then, in that case, I rate you higher than you rate yourselves. To me your courage seems sublime, in its way.”

That strain of something at least approaching vulgarity was still noticeable in Mr. Sampson’s rejoinder.

“Don’t you try to bounce me, Sir Philip Ford, because it won’t do, not by any manner of means. We’ve all heard the way you’ve been speaking to this unhappy lady.”

“Unhappy lady? Isn’t the unhappy lady a friend of yours?”

“A friend of mine?” It seemed, as if, for a moment, Mr. Sampson changed countenance; but, if so, it was only for a moment. “What do you mean by that? Let me tell you that I should only be too happy to have this lady as a friend of mine.”

“ So I have reason to believe.”

“ Though, as it happens, I never saw her in my life till a couple of hours ago, as she herself will tell you.”

“ She’ll tell me ? Oh yes, I’ve no doubt she’ll tell me. She’ll tell me the same sort of thing you do.”

“ Look here, Sir Philip Ford——”

Since it almost seemed as if Mr. Sampson was inclined to let his impetuosity carry him too far, Dr. Anderson laid his hand soothingly on his friend’s arm.

“ Gently, Sampson, gently. Don’t you see the mood this gentleman is in ? He evidently wishes to make himself as unpleasant as he can, possibly recognising that, shortly, things may be made very unpleasant for him.”

Mr. Sampson suffered himself to be soothed.

“ That’s right enough. I don’t want to say anything to him ; only don’t let him say anything to me.”

Sir Philip looked from one to the other and he smiled—an aggravating smile.

“ Courage, gentlemen, courage !” Then he turned to the rector, who, in his priestly vestments, still stood by the bare deal table. It is probable that Sir Philip’s appearance on the scene had had on him that tonic influence which, sometimes, the strong do have on the weak ; and that he was a better representative of a man than he had been when he first came into that room. But being still obsessed by his belief that Doris Owen was responsible for what had happened to Alan Thurston, he was yet very far from being the man he would have liked to be. So when Sir

Philip looked at him he found himself incapable of meeting his friend's eyes ; while his friend's words made him shiver almost as if they had been drops of ice trickling down his spine. " I am afraid that I cannot congratulate you, Champion, on the heterogeneous collection of persons you have gathered together in your vestry, apparently by way of providing a sequel to your morning's service."

The rector's manner as he replied might have been described, according to the taste of the reporter, as either sullen or sulky.

" They are not here by my invitation, none of them."

" But I presume that it is with your sanction they remain here ; since it is always in your power to show them the door. There is a door." The rector did not acknowledge this small item of useful information with either word or gesture. It was then that Sir Philip turned at last to Doris Owen. " Miss Owen, I beg your pardon for not having addressed you until now ; the singularity of my surroundings has a little overcome me. I trust that Mr. Champion's fashion of keeping open house in his vestry has subjected you to no inconvenience ? "

Sir Philip advanced, with outstretched hand. Instantly Inspector Reynolds interposed, also with outstretched hand ; but with him the outstretched hand had a very different significance.

" Stand back, if you please, Sir Philip."

" Inspector Reynolds ! "

" It won't do, Sir Philip. I won't have you come near this young woman."

“ Young woman ? Reynolds ! Of whom are you speaking ? ”

“ Young lady, then, if you prefer it ; and I’m speaking of Miss Doris Owen. She’s my prisoner, and, as such, I won’t have you come near her, or speak to her either, for the matter of that. And in saying so I am only doing my duty, as you very well know.”

On Sir Philip’s face was an expression of mingled bewilderment and amusement, which, if it was not altogether genuine, was at least a very fair imitation.

“ Inspector Reynolds, have you suddenly become transformed into a humorist—of a novel type ? ”

The inspector turned brusquely towards Miss Owen.

“ Be so good, Sir Philip, as not to interfere with me in the execution of my duty. Miss Owen, I must ask you to come with me at once.”

“ On what charge have you arrested this young lady ? ”

“ You know as well as I do.”

“ I know nothing of the kind, sir. And I beg you to understand that, though you are an inspector of police, I propose to do my duty as a magistrate. I ask you again, sir, on what charge have you arrested this young lady ? ”

“ For the murder of Mr. Alan Thurston.”

“ On whose information have you allowed yourself to blunder into such a monstrous absurdity ? ”

“ Both your questions and your conduct are irregular, Sir Philip. You will hear all about the matter in due course. Have the kindness to let me pass.”

“ Let me warn you that if, declining to answer

my questions, or to listen to what I have to say you leave this room with that young lady as a prisoner, in a very short time you will cease to be connected with the police force."

"Is that meant for a threat, Sir Philip Ford?"

"If, by reason of your being puffed up with an undue sense of your own importance, you persist—without the slightest real cause—you persist in inflicting an incalculable injury on an innocent girl, then I say that you are unfitted to the office you hold, and I will see that you do not continue to occupy it to the public danger."

"You say that to me because, in the ordinary course of my duty, I arrest a young lady with whom you happen to be acquainted!"

"Withdraw that insinuation instantly, or I promise you you will regret it. It is absolutely baseless. I repeat that you have not the slightest real ground for arresting this young lady on the monstrous charge you have named."

"No real ground, when this two gentlemen here say they saw her do it!"

"What do these two gentlemen say they saw Miss Owen do?"

"They say that they saw her murder Mr. Thurston, or as good as murder him."

"They say that, do they? Have either of you gentlemen the courage to repeat that statement in my presence? Have you, sir?"

The question was addressed to Mr. Sampson, who, for some cause, did not seem to be so much at his ease as he had been before Sir Philip's appearance on the scene. His manner was a little blustering.

"I'm not here to be cross-examined by you."

"I thought not. You see, Reynolds, that already your witness falters."

The inspector questioned Mr. Sampson on his own account.

"You and your friend came to me at Northenden to lay an information to the effect that you saw this young lady murder, or attempt to murder, Mr. Alan Thurston. Is that not the fact? I merely ask you for Sir Philip's satisfaction."

"It is the fact."

"You hear, Sir Philip?"

"I do hear. And I ask you, Reynolds, to make an exact note of what this man has said to you. You will find that you will need it later." Sir Philip turned to Dr. Anderson. "And you, sir, do you associate yourself with what this person has said?"

Anderson's reply, if not to the point, at least was pointed.

"I decline to recognise you in this matter in any way whatever, Sir Philip Ford. You have no right to ask me questions, and I shall certainly decline to answer any you may put."

"That, at any rate, is frank. I believe you told me the other morning that your name was Dr. Seymour Anderson?"

"I have nothing to add to what I have just now said."

"You are wise, sir, wiser than your more courageous friend, who calls himself—I imagine for this occasion only—Henry Sampson. Now, Inspector Reynolds, perhaps you will be so good as to come with me and hear what the murdered man, Mr. Alan Thurston, has to say for himself."

CHAPTER XXIX

HEATED PASSAGES

SIR PHILIP FORD'S words were followed by that sort of silence which is apt to be more eloquent than speech. Each of those present looked at him ; not with an ordinary careless glance, but with a startled stare. Miss Owen, who had not opened her lips since Sir Philip had come into the room, was the first to disturb the significant stillness. She had stood before them there as one in many minds ; ashamed, yet proud ; frightened, yet not afraid ; pained, yet scornful ; wounded in her tenderest places, yet careless of all that they might do to her. To Philip Ford never had she seemed so girlish, as at that moment when, perhaps, her greatest need was to be a woman. In her big wide-open eyes there was the look half of wonder, half of bewilderment, which you may see in the eyes of a startled child. In the whole poise of her body, even of her uplifted head, there was something which inevitably suggested youth. There was the petulance of childhood in the statuesque immobility of her attitude, as if she scorned to let any one see, by even so much as the movement of a finger, how sore her trouble was. And when, interrupting the silence, her hitherto motionless form becoming mobile and vibrant, she turned to him with sudden eagerness in her gestures,

in her voice was the suggestion of the impulsive child who is at last being roused to a consciousness of wrong.

“ Sir Philip, is Alan still alive ? ”

“ Indeed ? Who has hinted that he is not ? This—lady ? These two—gentlemen ? If so, let me assure you that theirs is a case in which the wish is father to the thought.”

“ Is he ill ? ”

“ In a manner of speaking—thanks to these two gentlemen, and this—lady, so ill that it would be well that our wise inspector here should make what haste he can if he wishes to make sure of seeing him alive ? ”

“ How—how comes he to be ill ? ”

“ Ah, that’s a question which you must put to others who are present. If you would know which ones they are, by observing carefully the faces which are about you may you learn.”

“ What—what do you mean ? ”

“ Look about you, child, and tell me is there none to whom you feel that you might apply for information with a fair assurance of not being sent empty away ? ”

Doris glanced about her ; first in the direction of the rector.

“ No, it’s not the slightest use your looking there. Champion is the most ill-informed of men, and unfortunately, like so many ignorant folk, he thinks he knows a deal ; the trouble being that few persons have it in their power to work more mischief than the weak-minded man who thinks he knows and doesn’t.”

The words served to sting the rector into a retort, though it was a very mild one.

“ Ford, do your words refer to yourself or to me ? And, if to me, I would ask you if you think that you are treating me fairly ? ”

“ Champion, you have not so much to fear from my unfair treatment as from your own. May I take it that it is untrue that you have been in any way or in any degree associating yourself with these disreputable persons in the foul imputations they have been making against Miss Owen ? ”

The rector was silent, as if the uneasiness from which to some extent he had succeeded in freeing himself had all at once returned. Mrs. Thurston spoke for him.

“ You appear, Sir Philip, to be so fond of the sound of your own voice that it is difficult to pick out a plain meaning from the multitude of your words ; but perhaps, if you try, you may manage to tell me, yes or no, if it is true that my dear husband is still alive.”

“ Your dear husband is, no thanks to his dear wife, and her dear friends.”

“ You resent pretty warmly what you call the foul imputations which you say have been made against your friend, Miss Doris Owen, while you yourself scatter broadcast insinuations which are not more shameful than they are absurd. Pray don't imagine that you will goad me into paying any serious attention to them, at any rate at this moment, whatever I may do later on. If my dear husband is alive, then pray where is he ? ”

“ In my house.”

“ In your house ! My husband ! ”

“ Your husband ; at least he believes himself to be your husband, with what truth you probably know better than he.”

Clenching her small fists the lady looked, for an instant, as if she would strike him with one, if not with both of them. But, calling to her aid that self control which she always seemed to have at her command, her hands dropped to her sides, and her pretty face was lightened by the deliciously impertinent smile which was not among the least of her attractions.

“If my husband is lying ill in your house, unwilling though I am to cross its threshold, I should like to see him. May I be permitted to do so?”

Sir Philip met her laughing glance with unsmiling eyes.

“If you have the courage.”

“Courage? As if courage were needed to see one’s husband! And, if it were, do you think that I should want for it?”

He said nothing; but continued to look at her. She turned to his lordship.

“Lord Ifield, in consequence of Sir Philip’s excellent news, would you mind taking me over in your car to his house, to see Alan?—dear Alan!”

Instead of bestowing his full attention on the lady his lordship was steadfastly regarding Sir Philip, as if he were once more impressed, and again not pleasantly, by something which he perceived upon his countenance. It was apparently with an effort that he gave the lady the affirmative reply which evidently she took for granted.

“Great pleasure,” he murmured. But somehow his manner hardly suggested that he would be so pleased as he said. A fact, however, of which the lady seemed wholly oblivious.

“Thank you so much. Shall we start at once?”

I am so anxious to see dear Alan ; and I am sure he is longing to see me."

As if he felt that the expression of the lady's anxiety was a trifle overdone his lordship was moved to a show of candour.

"I can't say that I'm in such a hurry as all that, and I don't see why you should be, considering how he seems to have behaved."

The lady sighed.

"Dear Lord Ifield ! You don't understand. Do let's start at once."

Whereupon his manner was distinctly stiff.

"Pray consider me as entirely at your service."

Sir Philip spoke as his lordship moved towards the door.

"Lord Ifield, if you propose to take this person to my house, I must ask you to be so good as to let me go in front of you. I also have a car outside, in which I intend presently to return home ; and I should certainly prefer, for reasons which later you will appreciate, to get there before this woman does."

That Lord Ifield's temper was ruffled his answer showed.

"I don't know, Ford, why you persist in talking to me in that strain. You seem disposed to fling mud at every one in reach. Is it your intention to throw some at me, and to try to make out that I'm a suspicious character ? Because if so I'll ask you to explain what the devil you mean by it."

"Please remember, when choosing your language, within what precincts you are standing. I reiterate that the woman by whom you are standing is one of the most infamous characters

in Europe. It is you who associate yourself with her, not I."

"Be very careful what you are saying, Ford, because speaking on my own behalf and on behalf of my cousin, Alan, I assure you that I will make you show chapter and verse for every word that you have uttered."

"I trust, Lord Ifield," murmured the lady, "that you are also speaking on my behalf."

"Of course I am. I merely wish Philip Ford to understand that he has me to deal with, and not you only."

"If Sir Philip Ford can only be brought to understand that clearly you will find it make such a difference in his point of view."

"Well, he's got to understand it, and the sooner the better."

His lordship favoured Sir Philip with a glare which left that gentleman quite unmoved. His manner was if anything blander and more significant than it had been before.

"I assure you, Lord Ifield, that I already understand that clearly: and on my part, I undertake to furnish you with all the chapter and verse that you require, when you deposit this woman at my front door. I may add that I shall esteem myself favoured by your performing the unpleasant task of transporting her to my house in safety, and would warn you earnestly to be extremely careful that she doesn't give you the slip upon the way."

The lady laughed, a musical little laugh, which made one wonder, with a vague feeling, that there must be something wrong if she really could be as light-hearted as it sounded.

"This man's magnificent! You'll realise, Lord

Ifield, how magnificent when he begins to produce his chapter and his verse.”

Sir Philip turned to the inspector, who all this time had borne himself as if, while conscious that some one was making a fool of him, he was in doubt as to who the offender actually was.

“Inspector Reynolds, I have a motor car outside which will carry six. I propose to take Miss Owen with me on the front seat, and you, Mr. Champion, and these two—persons in the tonneau. In that position you will be able to hear everything that I say to Miss Owen, and what Miss Owen says to me, while keeping an eye upon your fellow passengers, some of whom I fancy, will need it. I have also taken the liberty to requisition a trap out of the rectory stables to convey Felling and the constable whom you brought with you from Northenden, both of whom, when I entered, were standing outside the vestry door. I think that, when we reach my house, their services may be required—urgently required. Will that arrangement be agreeable to you?”

“Since things seem to getting a bit beyond me, you mustn’t mind my saying, Sir Philip, that I hope I may place implicit reliance on everything you have said; and that it isn’t a wild-goose chase you are taking us on; but that the missing gentleman, Mr. Thurston, is lying ill at your house.”

“I give you my word of honour that he was lying ill at my house when I left it, less than an hour ago; but since he was in a serious condition my only fear is lest he may be dead before we return to it.”

“You are quite sure he wasn’t dead when you came away?”

“Quite sure. The responsibility for any further delay will be upon your shoulders.”

“I am ready. Mr. Campion, I trust that you will accompany us, as Sir Philip suggests.”

“Certainly. But before I come, I should like to ask Sir Philip a question. Ford, how long has Mr. Thurston been an inmate of your house?”

If in the glance with which Sir Philip met his friend's inquiring eyes there was the suspicion of a twinkle, only the rector could have seen it; and, in spite of the doubts which instantly assailed him, even he was by no means sure.

“Campion, what we have to do is to interview Alan Thurston, and to hear any statement he may have to make, at the earliest possible moment, lest, before we have heard it, the breath shall already have left his body, and it will be too late for judgment to be done. After we have heard that statement I shall be ready to answer any questions you may put to me, to the best of my ability; but, since time passes, let us hear the statement first.”

The rector had to appear to be satisfied with this reply of Sir Philip's, which was no reply, even if, at the bottom of his heart, he doubted.

“Very good. I will at once come with you. Let me but remove my surplice, and I shall be ready.”

Then there came a hitch from another quarter. Mr. Sampson and his friend had been talking together, and now Dr. Anderson observed aloud:—

“Inspector Reynolds, my friend and I must decline to fill the parts in Sir Philip Ford's programme which he has allotted us. After the manner in which he has spoken to and of us it is

impossible that we should enter his motor car, or visit his house. Should our testimony be required, we shall always be willing to place it at your service. Good-day. I trust you will find everything as satisfactory as Sir Philip Ford suggests."

It was from Sir Philip that a rejoinder came.

"It won't do, my men. Before I came in I dropped a hint to the two constables who are outside. If you open that door and try to pass them you'll find they'll stop you, if they have to use vigorous means to do it. And besides the constables, there are others, I fancy, from the noise they are making, quite a crowd of others, as, when you open that door, you will perceive. Reynolds, exactly what I expected to happen is happening. Now that these two men realise that they are about to be brought to book they want to make a bolt for it; it is your duty to see they don't."

Mr. Sampson, a little truculently, feigned indignation even if he felt it not.

"It begins to strike me, Sir Philip Ford, that you think you own the earth. I take leave to tell you that my friend and I came to Baynham to do a long day's tramp, and we don't intend to allow your dirty insinuations—as Lord Ifield says, you seem disposed to throw them at every one—to keep us from carrying out our plans. Inspector Reynolds has my friend's address, and he has mine; if he wants us he knows where we are to be found. Come, Anderson, we've wasted too much time as it is. The whole morning's gone, and we've nothing to show for it; the sooner we do make a start the better, so let's be off."

"Reynolds, these men have charged Miss Owen

with a heinous crime ; in doing so they have been guilty of deliberate perjury. I require you to compel their attendance in my car, so that they may be confronted with Alan Thurston, when you will at once learn what sort of characters they really are. And I may tell you men that, even if Inspector Reynolds declines to exercise his authority, I have only to drop another hint to certain of my friends who are outside, and they'll tie you hand and foot ; and, in that state, I'll take you in my car, on my own responsibility, because take you in my car I will. Now, which is it to be ? Are you coming of your own accord or—the other way ? ”

The inspector spoke.

“ Without endorsing or otherwise anything that Sir Philip has said, I am bound to state that, in my opinion, the only course open to you two gentlemen is to come with us.”

Lord Ifield expressed himself to the same effect, a little more emphatically.

“ It's no good talking ; as Ford says, you've got to come. I heard your statement, and as now Sir Philip Ford has given you the lie direct, all you've got to do is to prove that you're right and he's wrong. To my mind the matter's a good deal more serious than you seem to think, though you thought it was serious enough just now. It's nonsense talking about your plans ; come you must.”

Mrs. Thurston agreed with his lordship gracefully, pleadingly.

“ Please spoil your holiday to render still another service to a total stranger, for whom you have done so much already, although the only

recompense I can promise you is my gratitude. Please come ! ”

As Mr. Sampson met her glance his face was hard and set.

“ You are asking us to do a very great deal.”

“ I know it ; still—please come ! ”

Mr. Sampson looked at his friend, who spoke.

“ Do you think it necessary that we should come ? ”

The lady shrugged her pretty shoulders ever so slightly.

“ As for necessary, I say nothing. But—please come ! ”

The two men eyed her steadily in silence ; then they looked at each other. Dr. Anderson asked :—

“ Shall we go ? ”

In his turn Mr. Sampson shrugged his shoulders, more vigorously than the lady had done.

“ What’s it matter ? If you like ! I don’t care ! ”

The doctor still looked at him ; then, as if something which he saw on his face had induced him to arrive at a final decision, he turned to the inspector.

“ We’ll come with you, not, mark you, in consequence of Sir Philip Ford’s threats, which are as despicable as they are cowardly, but entirely out of deference to Mrs. Thurston’s wishes.”

The lady gave him a smile and a nod.

“ Thank you ; you’ll find I’m not ungrateful.”

Without a word the inspector began to move briskly towards the door. Sir Philip touched him on the shoulder.

“ Still one moment, Reynolds. That man who

calls himself Sampson has a revolver in his pocket, which he is fingering at this moment. He's a desperate character, and presently he'll find himself in a desperate situation, in which he won't hesitate to make use of his weapon. Better take it from him before we start."

The inspector acted on the hint, a little awkwardly, as if he were not quite happy in his mind.

"Have you a revolver about you, sir?"

Mr. Sampson flamed up into fury, forgetting perhaps, as Lord Ifield had done, where he was standing.

"What the devil business is it of yours what I've got about me, even supposing I've got a Maxim gun in every pocket? I don't ask what you're carrying; don't you ask me, because you'll get no answer. As for you!"—he strode up to Sir Philip, in a fashion which was not friendly—"I've had about as much of you as I can stomach. The next piece of impudence you treat me to, if you'll step outside and keep your brave friends off me, I'll treat you to the best hiding you ever had in all your life, even though you are King Solomon in all his glory."

Mrs. Thurston intervened.

"If you did it would not be the first beating he has had. He's used to insulting people and being thrashed for it. That scar he has on his face is where my dear husband marked him for insulting me, and that is why he hates me so."

"I'll give him one on the other side and then perhaps he'll take to loving me."

Lord Ifield interposed.

“Come! this sort of thing won't do; remember where we are, and that there are ladies present.”

“Ifield, open the door.”

His lordship did as Sir Philip requested. In an instant Ford had gripped Mr. Sampson by his two wrists, and, forcing him backwards, had rushed him out of the vestry, the man, taken by surprise, being incapable of offering resistance. The instant he had him in the open air Sir Philip exclaimed:—

“Some one put his fingers into the right-hand pocket of this man's jacket, and take out the revolver which he will find in it.”

Before Mr. Sampson, in his pinioned state, clearly realised what was happening, some one was holding a revolver, which had been removed from his jacket pocket, up in the air.

“Reynolds,” cried Sir Philip, “take that revolver and see that it's kept out of this fellow's reach.”

This transference was effected, and Mr. Sampson's wrists were released. As was to be expected, he flew at his antagonist. But ere he could touch him, his arms were gripped on one side by Mr. Felling, and on the other by the policeman from Northenden.

“None of that!” commanded Mr. Felling, and Mr. Sampson had to obey.

“All right, my lad,” he shouted, “my chance will come, and when it does I'll make you wish that you'd never been born.”

Sir Philip's rejoinder, which was addressed to the crowd at large, did not suggest much apprehension. “Will some of you men put this fellow in my car? I shall be very much obliged to you.”

There were symptoms of a fairly general desire to “oblige” Sir Philip. Not impossibly there

might have been a warm few minutes had not Mr. Sampson evinced a willingness to save them trouble.

“Hands off! I’ve legs of my own. I can get into the car without your help.”

He got into the car.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PUNCH-BOWL

THAT was a curious run from Baynham Church to the Manor House. In the front went Sir Philip's car, followed by Lord Ifield's, and in the rear the rectory dog-cart. A more heterogeneous collection of passengers than Sir Philip carried could hardly have been assembled together in a single vehicle. What the rector thought he said nothing at the time to show ; but his face, bearing and manner were eloquent. Many of his most cherished feelings had been, and still were being, outraged. His feelings, for instance, for the Sabbath, for—as he would have put it—his own parish church ; how callously they had been, and still were being, trampled underfoot. Memories of that Sunday morning service, of the meeting in the vestry which had succeeded it, would haunt him to the end of his life. That he, who held so sacred all that appertained to the fabric of his church, should have allowed his vestry to have been polluted by the diversions of which it had so lately been the scene, the thought was gall and wormwood. Nor was his peace of mind lessened by the suspicion, which forced itself upon him, that he was himself in no small measure responsible for his own humiliation. The mystery of what had happened that night in the rectory garden

was still to him a mystery ; but he had doubts, which were rapidly becoming certainties, as to the wisdom of the part which he had played. He was almost convinced that, because things had not been what they seemed, he had done Doris Owen a serious wrong. Had he been a priest of an older Church he would willingly have subjected himself to bodily penance in expiation of his fault. He was a proud man in his way, and it was not comforting to his pride to have to consider the point of view from which, in future, Sir Philip and Miss Owen would regard him. He knew his friend, that probably he would never mention the subject again, Sir Philip being a man with an almost infinite capacity for silence. But Mr. Champion was not sure that this made matters very much better. Though Sir Philip continued speechless his own conscience would shout at him of the scorn which lay dormant at the bottom of his friend's heart. Mentally, the rector writhed as he thought of it.

Nor was his sense of happiness increased by the position in which he found himself, by the company which he was being constrained to keep. Next to him, on the left, was Dr. Seymour Anderson, and on the right, Mr. Henry Sampson, and beyond him, Inspector Reynolds. This was a fine society with which to be associated, in a motor car, on a Sunday morning ; while his anxious wife was waiting for him at home for lunch, and the hour for afternoon service was getting inconveniently close. He feared, almost tremulously, that neither of his neighbours was, to put it mildly, any better than he ought to be. With what outspoken contumely his friend had treated them,

and how their bearing had changed as they realised the attitude which he was taking up. If they were all that Sir Philip said they were, or even half! And he was wedged between them like a sardine; had they been the chosen companions of his bosom they could have been no nearer. And the fellow on his right had been carrying about with him, that Sunday morning—to the rector it was beginning to seem almost incredible that it could be Sunday—a loaded revolver, which had had to be taken away from him, in his own churchyard, after an unseemly struggle. Who knew but that the fellow on his left might have one also?

Neither of the occupants of that tonneau spoke a word. The rector did not even look at his companions. He stared straight ahead, as if his desire was to ignore those present. Anderson and his friend did look at each other. Indeed they were constantly exchanging glances of which they alone understood the full significance. Their sensations must have been peculiar. To what fate they were being driven they could not tell; that was both the worst and the best of it, but they must, furiously have doubted. Had there been the remotest chance of a successful issue—from their standpoint—they would unhesitatingly have made an end of Philip Ford, if they could; and, had it been necessary, of Inspector Reynolds. That there was danger ahead of some sort, they were both of them convinced. What they were wondering, during their rapid transit in that well-appointed high-power motor car, was whether the danger they were approaching was sufficiently great to render it advisable for them to take all risks, even

impossible risks, while there yet was time, in order to avoid it.

Had Inspector Reynolds clearly realised with what thoughts two of his companions were occupied he would have been more uneasy than he actually was. As it was, he was perhaps as uncomfortable as any other person in that tonneau. That former blunder of his, to which Sir Philip had so unkindly alluded, still rankled in his mind, and, he feared, what was more unfortunate, in the mind of the public also. If he had blundered again the consequences, to him, might be disastrous. He was in a bad temper with himself, and with all the world. Some one had been playing tricks with him ; let him only discover who, he would make it warm for the trickster. He looked viciously from Mr. Sampson to his friend. He was a big man, in fair condition ; had they assailed him, fairly and with fair weapons, they might have found themselves provided with a task which was beyond their strength. In his then mood he would have been glad of a chance of getting even with any one. But, to such men as they were, fairness is impossible ; their one dream is to be able to play every game with loaded dice.

Philip Ford, on the driver's seat, possibly understood what was taking place in the minds of those behind him nearly as well as they did themselves. As he sent the car speeding along he knew that two of the men at his back would have taken his life without an instant's hesitation, had they only seen a reasonable prospect of immunity from after inconvenient results. He was aware that it would need but very little to induce them to take it on the mere off-chance of crying quits with him. He

would not have been surprised to find himself, at any moment, struggling with them for dear life ; the same thought occurring to him which had occurred to the rector, that though, on the inspiration of the moment, he had taken the revolver from one man, the other might still have one in his possession.

He would have been indifferent to such a possibility had it not been for the presence of the girl at his side. Gifted beyond his fellows with a capacity for concealing what he felt, while outwardly he was *sauve* and perfectly cool, inwardly he was consumed by a heat which seemed to turn the blood to fire in his veins. The thought of what the girl had undergone, and still was undergoing, seemed actually to scorch him. That she should have been subjected to such ignominy, after all that he had done to save her from even the shadow of unpleasantness. He could nearly have murdered Inspector Reynolds on his own account, the blundering brute ! that he should have dared to soil her with his policeman's touch ! As for the others, the two men and the woman who called herself Alan Thurston's wife, he would deal with them in another fashion ; their time was coming. His only fear was, lest, realising the fate to which they were being hurried, they might create a scene which would leave the girl, for whom he had done all that man could do, with a hideous memory of which she never might be rid.

As for Doris Owen, the innocent cause of all the bother, her mood was perhaps the strangest of all. To her it was as if she was being borne in headlong flight through a mist. She had entered the region of mist soon after she entered the church. It had

grown thicker and thicker until now she could neither understand nor see, nor even dimly apprehend what was to the right and left, behind and in front of her. It was as if some dreadful paralysis had descended on her brain, some cloud of horror obscured her faculties. To her it almost seemed as if she must be an actor in some miserable waking nightmare, from which she was powerless to escape. Only one ray of light gleamed through her mental darkness, and it took the shape of Philip Ford. For every woman it is good that there should be a man who has the faculty of inspiring her with perfect confidence, not only in himself, but in herself, though "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" press hard upon her. Ever since the moment of their first meeting, unconsciously both to her and to him, to Doris Owen Philip Ford had been that man. Whatever she might feel when he was absent, and whatever she might feel when he was there, the mere fact of his being there was sufficient to fill her with a blind unreasoning faith in that unknown destiny which lay on the lap of the gods. His presence was to her a never-failing help. As the car, obeying him, tore over the dusty road, every now and then she glanced at him with a quaint timidity, as if she sought and found refreshment in his very look. And although he never turned her way, he was quite conscious of when she glanced at him, and from her glance received as much positive benefit as she did.

If in Philip Ford's car there was the atmosphere of tragedy shot, perhaps, with romance, in the car behind there was an atmosphere both of tragedy and comedy. Lord Ifield never had been notorious for his sweet temper; as he drove the charming

lady with whom he shared the car his temper was about as sour as it could have been. The end and aim of his existence was to avoid, as much as possible, the disagreeable things of life. He was constantly doing things he ought not to do ; but in doing them he liked to associate himself with people who could hold their tongues—and did. Scandal was disagreeable, and therefore to be avoided. Yet suddenly he found himself confronted by scandal, not only of huge proportions, but of the most unsatisfactory kind. His genial experience of the pleasant things of this world had left him with but one article of faith, a profound disbelief of the possibility of there being any good in a woman. He made no cynical professions, he was too much of a cynic to make professions of any kind, but in his heart he was convinced that every woman was a liar—from the beginning. It is true that his confidence in his fellow-men was scarcely greater, but it was greater ; and he was afflicted by a terrible doubt that what Philip Ford had said of his companion might very easily have a basis of fact. In which case how horribly he had been done, how horribly only he knew, and the lady. On former occasions he had been “done” brown ! by ladies of his acquaintance ; but never on quite such a scale as this, or anything like it. Paradoxical though it seemed, if there was even a flavour of truth in Ford’s assertions, his only chance would consist in the fact that the woman was worse than the man declared. In that case retributory justice might take her by the throat, and so relieve him of her. Otherwise he feared that nothing he might do could disentangle him from the toils in which she had

entwined him. These reflections occupying his lordship's mind to the exclusion of all else, it was scarcely surprising that he was not conversationally disposed; which, however, was to be regretted, since the lady seemed disposed for pleasant chatter. Whether her deliberate attention was to drive him mad his lordship was at a loss to determine, but she talked, and persisted in talking, of subjects which had nothing to do with the business in hand in a fashion which irritated him almost beyond bearing. Ignoring altogether what had gone before, and what was coming next, she discussed all sorts of trifles with an air of irresponsible gaiety which, on former occasions, he had thought charming, but which he then found trying. The result was that she had the conversation nearly all to herself, a fact on which, at last she commented.

"Dear Lord Ifield, you're not very lively, are you?"

His reply was frank, almost to the verge of brutality.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk till we've seen this business through."

"What business? My dear, dear man, you've surely not allowed yourself to be ruffled by anything Sir Philip Ford has said? On a day like this, when there's not a cloud in the sky, and there's such a delicious breeze! Do you know, you look—I won't say cross; but what shall I say?"

"Mrs. Thurston——"

"Mrs. Thurston? I thought it was always to be Eveleen when we were alone together?"

"Mrs. Thurston——"

"In what a tone he says it!"

“ Very well, if you insist on interrupting me I’m quite content to keep still.”

“ I do believe he means to be disagreeable. Have you finished? Are you sure you haven’t anything else to say—to Mrs. Thurston?”

“ Nothing whatever, at present.”

“ At present; but in the near future you’ll have a deal to say, won’t you, dear Lord Ifield?” Then she began to torment him. “ He is a poor little cross little thing, and he shan’t be spoken to. He shall be still when he wants to be still, and as nasty as he pleases. But, let me warn you, Lord Ifield, that I’ve borne a good deal from you, and that if you’re going to add bad temper to the rest of your—virtues, that will be the final straw on my poor weak back, and—I sha’n’t stand it.

“ Is that meant for a threat?”

“ As you please; your manner seems to be meant as a threat to me; threats are a game that two can play at. If you don’t take care I will place certain facts before my husband, and, if necessary, before the public, which will result in your being cut by every decent man and woman in England, besides other unpleasant consequences on which I will not touch.”

He answered her with an ugly look on what could be seen of his not naturally handsome face.

“ I believe that there is something in what Ford says of you.”

She turned round in her seat so that she faced him.

“ What’s that you say?”

His tone, as he replied to her, after a momentary pause, was sullen.

“ If you didn't threaten me I should say nothing ; that's just it, I want to say nothing.”

“ But you did say something, and you'll say it again—at once, please. Stop the car.”

“ Why should I stop the car ? ”

“ Stop as I tell you ; stop the car ! ”

“ For God's sake don't do that, you'll have us over.”

“ Stop the car ! ”

The road to the Manor House which they were following runs over the downs. Just there the ground descended sharply on their right into a steep valley which is known in that part of the world as the Punch-bowl. There was neither fence, wall nor hedge, but a steep, slippery grassy slope dropped down at an angle which was so acute as to be almost precipitous. At that season the closely cropped verdure on the surface was worn so smooth that in places where the gradient was greatest, in ordinary walking shoes it was as difficult to keep one's footing on it as if it had been glass. When the lady repeated her request to the gentleman to stop the car, leaning over she made a snatch at the driving-gear, which caused the vehicle to swerve in dangerous proximity to the edge of the slope. His lordship expostulated.

“ If you don't take care you'll have us over.”

“ I'll have you over, if you don't stop.”

He stopped, to find her confronting him with an expression on her face which was altogether new to him ; the thick veil she wore was unable to hide it.

“ Lord Ifield, you and I are going to understand each other, here and now. You have made

me certain promises, in writing and otherwise. Are you going to keep those promises, whether your cousin, my husband, is dead or living, and in spite of what Sir Philip Ford or any one else may say of me ? ”

A huge pair of goggles obscured a large portion of his lordship's countenance ; but enough of it was visible to make it plain that he felt that he was in one of the most uncomfortable positions he ever had been in ; so uncomfortable that, losing his presence of mind, he made a violent but altogether futile effort to assert his authority.

“ You forget yourself, Mrs. Thurston. I insist upon your allowing me to continue our journey, and upon your not making a scene in public. ”

“ Is that your answer ? ”

The words were quietly spoken, but there was something in her tone, and in the way in which she looked at him, which made him momentarily more uneasy. Sir Philip's car had vanished round a bend in the road in front. The trap which bore the constables, outpaced by the motors, had not yet come into sight, he wished to goodness it would. He spluttered out some sort of an answer ; he had to.

“ What do you mean by going on like this ? How on earth do you suppose that I'm going to deal adequately with such a question at a moment's notice ? ”

“ For the last time : Is that your answer ? ”

“ My answer to what ? What the devil's your question ? ”

“ Will you give me your written undertaking, here and now—I know you have paper, pen and ink in the car—to keep the promises you have

made me, to keep them under all and any circumstances ? ”

“ I never heard anything so monstrous. ”

“ Then that is your answer. ”

“ Mrs. Thurston ! Take care ! Woman. ”

“ Lord Ifield, I thought that one day I should be Lady Ifield—you promised me, but if I sha’n’t——”

She laughed, that gay little laugh which was always to her lips, as she leaned over to get a good grip of the starting lever.

“ What are you doing ? Are you mad ? Do you wish me to use violence ? ”

“ You—use violence ! ”

Again she laughed. His lordship’s indecision was his destruction. He might have done either of three things ; jumped out, which would have been the part of prudence ; knocked her down, which under the circumstances would have been the part of valour ; or, if that method seemed too drastic, he might have thrown his arms about her and held her tight. But in his state of dubitation, not understanding clearly what she would be at, he fumbled and failed to do either. Before he did understand, she had started the car with the top speed, they were off the road, flying down that grassy precipice at the rate of probably more than forty miles an hour—and she was laughing !

CHAPTER XXXI

THE PROCESSION STARTS AGAIN

MISSING Lord Ifield's car from the back, suspecting that something might be wrong, Sir Philip returned to see what it was, just in time to see Mrs. Thurston's last but not least achievement, his lordship's car make its great dive into space. It was from one point of view a sight worth seeing. For a distance of perhaps a couple of hundred feet the car went down the green slope as cars should do, on its wheels; bumping, bounding, swaying from side to side. But when suddenly the gradient changed, the huge vehicle turned a complete somersault; the lady was thrown in one direction, the gentleman in another, the car went roaring and thundering in a third. The audience could do nothing till the performance was over. Sir Philip and his passengers, the constables and the groom in the rectory trap, could only sit and watch, spellbound, the catastrophe arrive at its ultimate conclusion. Even when the car had reached the bottom, nearly five hundred feet below, they were so held by the horror of the thing that some seconds passed before any one either moved or spoke.

Then Sir Philip said to the inspector, "Reynolds, what shall we do?"

"Go down and render what help we can, though."

I fear it is little that we shall be able to do for them."

"The point is that Lord Ifield is a good driver and had a good car; he wouldn't make a blunder of that sort on a road like this. I've little doubt that that woman, foreseeing the fate in store for her, when she reached my house, deliberately sent the car to destruction, thinking, perhaps not wrongly, that for her that was the best way out of it."

"Ford!" cried Mr. Campion, speaking as if he were shaken by sobs. "How can you say such things! at such a moment! poor woman!"

"I say them, Campion, because I believe them to be true; and because I don't intend to allow these two men, who were her confederates, to escape in the same fashion. Doris, jump off."

The order was not given a moment too soon. Doris had scarcely gained the ground when the man Sampson, emitting a flood of oaths, flung himself on Philip Ford.

"All right, Reynolds!" exclaimed Sir Philip, in the midst of his struggles. "I'll look after this fellow; you tackle his friend; only take care of the revolver he has in his pocket."

But the doctor was too quick for the inspector. He sprang out of the tonneau with an agility which did him credit, while the inspector continued pinned to his seat by the struggling combatants. In his outstretched hand he held a revolver, a weapon having a very business-like appearance.

"If any man touches me, or tries to stop me, I'll put a bullet in him as sure as he's alive."

Without affording any one an opportunity of

putting his words to the test, turning on his heels he sped up the slope like a deer.

"Let him go," shouted Ford, as well as he was able. "He'll only have a short shrift! We'll have him before he's clear of the country. Reynolds, lend me a hand with this brute; I don't want to have to kill him, and I don't want him to kill me, and nothing would suit him better than to do it."

The inspector lent one pair of hands; the constables, running up from the rectory dog-cart, lent two more. Presently Mr. Sampson was lying handcuffed on his back in the road, with the inspector's knee upon his chest.

"You'd better keep him there for a moment, Reynolds," advised Sir Philip, "while I get some cord out of my car. The only way to keep him safe is to truss him. I should have done it at first if I had had my way. I knew what kind of man I was dealing with, and you didn't."

While they were engaged in the delectable operation of binding Mr. Sampson hand and foot, so that he was as helpless as a trussed fowl, some persons appeared on the crest of the slope, possibly attracted by the sound of something going on. Ford called up to them.

"Have you seen anybody running over the top there?"

"Rather! he just passed us! hard as he could pelt!"

"In what direction was he going?"

"Towards Westdean; he's in sight now; perhaps half a mile away!"

The inspector replied to the unspoken question which was in Sir Philip's eyes.

“ Better let him go ; you have a private telegraph wire in your house ; I’ll set it going when we get there. The odds are that we shall have him again before he’s got very far. What we must do now is see if we can’t help those two down there.”

The inspector’s suggestion was acted on. A general descent was made into the hollow, leaving Sir Philip to look after his car and Mr. Sampson. When the two men were left alone together a curious little conversation took place between them. Mr. Sampson began.

“ What have I ever done to you that you should make a dead set at me like this ? ”

Ford eyed him before he answered ; when he did speak it was with an odd smile.

“ I need only tell you that there is nothing I would not do to keep Miss Owen from harm, and I think you’ll understand.”

There was a pause before Mr. Sampson spoke again, sullenly.

“ It’s my like luck to run up against a thing like this ; especially as it was her job, not mine.”

“ Whose ? ”

“ Hers—down there.”

“ I shouldn’t tell tales of her if I were you ; she may give you the lie.”

“ Not she ; she’ll never speak again ; she’s dead. I guessed she meant to do it when she started.”

“ Really ? You mean it ? ”

Mr. Sampson did not reply ; he asked a question.

“ What have you found out about her ? ”

“ That’s tellings. What’s more to the point is, what have I found out about you ? That you’ll learn presently.”

After another pause another question.

“Who’s given you the office?”

“That also you may learn—presently.”

“I’ll——”

Mr. Sampson stopped, at a point where to stop was to be eloquent.

“Oh, no, you won’t. I don’t think you’ll ever have a chance.”

Possibly, even probably, the thoughts which weighed him down were too much for Mr. Sampson; he made no attempt to proceed with the conversation, and Sir Philip on his side was also still.

On what foundation Mr. Sampson’s statement had been based he alone knew; but it proved to be correct; the lady was dead. They found her lying in a hollow amid some bracken, looking as pretty as she had ever looked in her life, and that was saying not a little. She was on her side, with her face turned a little upward, as if she were asleep. No one could have presented a picture of more perfect peace. There was nothing in her appearance to suggest anything in the least degree unpleasant; no blood stains, no mark of any outward injury, while her apparel was unruffled. Her attitude was so natural, so unstrained, that a stranger coming upon her casually would have taken it for granted that she had laid herself down on the smooth turf in the hollow among the bracken to rest—with a smile upon her face.

With Lord Ifield it was different. He presented a dreadful spectacle, and was alive. The dead woman and the living man were borne up to the road, and placed in the tonneau of Sir Philip’s car. Sir Philip and Miss Owen got on to the front seat,

the inspector and Mr. Campion hung on anywhere and anyhow, while Mr. Sampson, bound and helpless, was conveyed, somehow, with the constables in the rectory trap. The ruined car was left at the bottom of the Punch-bowl. If the procession had had its singular features when it started, it was altogether a gruesome one by the time it reached its destination.

CHAPTER XXXII

JOHN BEASLEY

THE Manor House—the finest Jacobean mansion in all that country side—had in its time seen strange happenings—what curious things old houses must have witnessed!—yet it may be doubted if it had seen any stranger than it saw that day. Its owner's car came up the avenue of elms, laden with its uncanny freight, and behind came Mr. Sampson and his captors. When Sir Philip came to the front door he called out to some one within, "Is Beasley there?"

Servants descended the steps and with them one who was not a servant. He was a wizened man, who walked a little sideways, as if something was wrong with his conformation. He had iron-grey hair, shaven cheeks, a thin, keen face, grey eyes, set deep in their sockets, and he might have been any age between forty and sixty. He was dressed in a brown suit, of which the trousers were long in the leg, and the coat too tight across the chest. It was not necessary to glance at him twice to make sure that he had something to do with horses; but as a matter of fact, in his time he had had to do a great many things, and had mixed in some very queer society.

As he came down the steps, with his cloth cap very much on one side of his head, and his hands

very deep in his breeches pockets, he at once perceived Mr. Sampson screwed half round on the back seat of the rectory trap. At sight of him he stopped; an ill-natured grin wrinkled his thin lips; he thrust his head forward with something of the action of a bird which is about to strike.

“Hullo, Bill! So we’ve met again!”

The meeting seemed to occasion Mr. Sampson, addressed as Bill, but little pleasure. He scowled; his pale blue eyes gleamed murder.

“It’s you, is it, who’s given away the show?”

“Yes, Bill, it’s me. You welshed me, didn’t you? Me, an old pal. You said I might whistle for my money. I told you I’d be even with you for it.”

“And I’ll be even with you before all’s finished; well even.”

Mr. Beasley shook his head, and he grinned.

“Not you, Bill, not you. Now they have got you they won’t let you go; it isn’t likely. It’ll be a lifer before they’ve done with you; a lifer, Bill, it’ll be, you mark my words.” He touched his cap. “Beg pardon, Sir Philip, but where’s the Flat-catcher? She hasn’t given you the slip, has she?”

It was Mr. Sampson who replied.

“That’s just what she has done.”

“Has she? How did she do it? I thought she was so well shadowed.”

“If you’ll look in the tonneau there, and will pick up a corner of that apron you’ll find inside, you’ll see how she’s done it.”

Acting on the hint Mr. Beasley unveiled the dead woman’s face.

“What, croaked, has she? Well I never! So

she's done us after all. I might have guessed she'd never swing ; she was not that sort."

Philip Ford asked :—

" She is the woman you referred to ? "

" Oh, yes, she's her all right ; she's the Flat-catcher ; so called because her trade was catching flats and skinning them when done ; and they were lucky if she let 'em go when skinned. She was the best hand at the game I ever heard of. She was such a perfect lady, and so young, and so innocent, and so pretty. Oh ! she was pretty ! —the real proper kind of beauty she had, that goes straight home to a man's heart. The greatest swells they thought themselves in luck if it seemed to her that it was worth her while to start a-plucking 'em. She's cheated the gallows after all, has she ? And I'll lay that there was more than one they might have hung her for. Poor dear ! She robbed me of a sovereign once ; and though a sovereign's a fortune to me I never had the heart to go agin her ; she had such a way about her, so she had. Who's the bloke ? Is that the doctor ? "

They were carrying Lord Ifield into the house. Mr. Beasley's allusion was to him.

" No, Beasley, that's not the doctor ; that's Lord Ifield. Since I fancy that she guessed that in any case her course was nearly over, I suspect your lady friend of an intention to kill both herself and him."

Mr. Beasley screwed up his countenance till it resembled nothing so much as a gargoyle, of the more uncomely kind.

" Ah ! Lord Ifield, is it ? He was the last of the flats she was after catching. It's the old story of

the pitcher what goes one time too many to the well ; he was her one flat too many. It's hard to know where to stop ; but if she had stopped, and been content with the flats she had handled, especially with the one who thinks himself her husband, she might have been happy and blooming now. But that's where it is ; you never know. Where is the doctor ? You don't mean to say you've let him off ? ”

“ The man you call the doctor has gone for a little run on the downs ; but I don't imagine that he'll run very far. I rather fancy we shall have him by the heels before very long.” Sir Philip raised his voice. “ Inspector Grey, I think you might show yourself. Circumstances have caused our programme to be altered ; as things have turned out nothing will be gained by your keeping dark.”

A tall soldierly looking man came out of the shadow of the hall door, where, hidden from those without, he had been standing, an interested auditor and spectator of all that had been taking place. He saluted as he advanced.

“ I was wondering, Sir Philip, if it was any use my continuing to hide my light under a bushel.”

“ Not the least, as it happens. I believe, Grey, that this is an old acquaintance of yours.”

Sir Philip motioned towards Mr. Sampson, who had greeted the new-comer's appearance with unmistakable signs of resentment. The stranger however moved towards Mr. Sampson as if the encounter afforded him sincere pleasure, addressing him by a name under which we have known him on previous occasions.

“ Good-day, Mr. Seymour. I fear that you

may not be so pleased to see me as I am to see you, and it is just possible that you are a little surprised. I am afraid that I must ask you to consider yourself my prisoner."

Mr. Sampson, or Mr. Seymour, seemed distinctly surprised, and also he seemed distinctly displeased. His manner, surly enough before, became surlier still.

"Oh you must, must you? And it's you, is it? Inspector Grey, of Scotland Yard. This seems as if it were going to be quite a day. You have everything cut and dried. A pretty trap I seem to have walked right into, with my eyes wide open."

"Men of your profession—or perhaps I ought to say professions, because they are many—are surrounded by so many traps that sooner or later they're bound to walk into one of them. You've had a very nice little run, you know."

"You think so, do you? Thank you for nothing."

"And as for having your eyes wide open; we've been shadowing you and your friends during the last five days in a fashion of which you've been beautifully unconscious. To us your simplicity has seemed sublime."

"Has it? Laugh away! I've done a little laughing in my time at your expense, and perhaps I may again."

"You may, but it won't be just yet."

"For what am I your prisoner? What's the charge?"

"At present the charge is robbery with violence; you remember? that little matter in Park Street? The warrant for that's been out against

you nearly a year ; it's surprising how you've managed to keep yourself just out of our reach. But now that we have got you, no doubt fresh charges will be added, among them, perhaps, conspiracy to murder, and other things."

Mr. Seymour, or Sampson, used language which he ought not to have used. But fortunately by that time Doris Owen was out of hearing. She was crossing the hall with Philip Ford on one side of her and Mr. Campion on the other. The most casual observer could not have failed to be struck by the striking contrast which the two men presented. Sir Philip cool, masterful, imperturbable ; the rector looking as if he had been plunged, unawares, into a world of wonderment, and as if the sights which he had seen in it had all but deprived him of his wits.

Doris asked Sir Philip, speaking almost in a whisper, glancing about her as if affrightedly :—

" Sir Philip, who is that wicked old man ? "

He smiled grimly.

" By ' wicked old man ' are you referring to John Beasley ? Because if so I shouldn't be surprised if he regarded your description of him as of the nature of a compliment. He's a very old acquaintance of mine, and a character. Once upon a time, when I shared a racing stable with some friends, I used to do the training, which probably was why we fared so badly. Beasley was a stable hand. One of the horses, an ill-tempered brute, savaged him so seriously that we thought for a while he'd done for him. But Beasley's tough, and as you see he won through. Since then we've never lost sight of each other ; and in some curious walks of life he's been. At present,

nominally he's a jockey's valet, if you know what that is ; but I fancy he's one or two other things as well ; he generally runs four-in-hand at least. On occasions when involuntarily I've been brought into contact with persons who, I had cause to suspect, were we'll say of doubtful reputation, I have been in the habit of summoning Beasley to my assistance, and I have invariably found that he has been able to supply me with reliable information which has placed the matter beyond any doubt whatever. Beasley's knowledge of bad characters is—like Sam Weller's knowledge of London—peculiar."

It was a second or two before Miss Owen spoke again.

"I don't think I should care to have any more to do with Mr. Beasley than I could possibly help ; and I shouldn't think you would."

Again Ford smiled grimly.

"A man cannot always pick and choose his tools. When he has a difficult task to perform he is glad enough to use those which have served him before. Besides, on his merits, Beasley isn't such a bad sort. He's honest, in his own way. I've reason to know that he never departs from his own particular code of honour, which, as regards construction, is a marvellous piece of patchwork. You'd find him a much more amusing person than you suppose, and, on the whole, innocuous."

Miss Owen shuddered.

"Thank you ; but I trust that I may never be reduced to seek the kind of amusement he would be likely to afford me."

Mr. Campion put in a word.

"Then am I to understand, Ford, that this

whole business has been from its inception a conspiracy ? ”

“ From its inception—that’s what you’ve to understand. I had my suspicions that night in the garden, which induced me to take certain actions. Very quickly they became convictions ; though I admit I might have found them difficult to establish, especially in time, if it had not been for the assistance which I have received from Beasley. We owe more, all of us, to that ‘ wicked old man ’ than this young lady has any notion of.”

The young lady referred to was silent ; but the rector said his say, or rather he tried to say it

“ It is impossible for me to express to you, Ford, and more especially to you, Miss Owen, my consciousness of my blindness, my folly, and, in one in my position, worse than folly——”

The speaker had proceeded, stammeringly, so far when Sir Philip interrupted him peremptorily.

“ Then, Campion, why attempt the impossible ? Believe me, I appreciate the difficulty you were in, or thought you were, and speaking for myself and for Miss Owen—you see, Doris, I’m taking liberties with your name.”

The girl looked round at him and in her turn smiled, for the first time that day, though the smile was rather a wan one.

“ You are taking liberties with my name ? As if you could ! ”

Something caused him to avert his glance.

“ You see, Campion, how I’m encouraged to assure you that—you stand forgiven. Your intentions were excellent, and what can one expect more, even in a parson ? It’s true that you made—well, we’ll call it a mistake ; but it’s one which

it's perhaps just as well, for your own sake, that you did make; for it's my experience that a parson's a person who is apt to be strong in his own conceit; and it's not one which, having made once, you're likely to make again."

"Please God, I hope it isn't. I cannot tell you, and I cannot tell Miss Owen——"

"Then don't try, old chap, don't try. Well, Reynolds, what is it you want now?"

The inspector was coming towards them across the hall, cap in hand.

"In the first place, Sir Philip, I hope you, and I hope Miss Owen, will permit me to apologise——"

"Oh, that's all right; all apologies will be taken for granted. You're not the only ass in this part of the world. Is that all you wish to say—that you thought you were?"

The inspector looked unhappy, which was not surprising.

"I think I ought to see Mr. Thurston, Sir Philip, before I go—if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind; what else did I bring you for? You can see him at once."

Miss Owen turned towards him, regarding him with her eyes open at their widest, as they were wont to be whenever she was puzzled.

"Where is Alan?" she asked.

"Alan? He's lying in bed upstairs."

CHAPTER XXXIII

SIR PHILIP EXPLAINS

THEY went up the broad oak staircase, Miss Owen, the rector, Inspector Reynolds, and their host. On the first landing they met a portly, white-haired gentleman, who beamed at the world through a pair of gold glasses. At sight of him the four ascending stopped. He was known to them all. Dr. Hollyer was the medical man of the district; as well known for his geniality, his persistent optimism, as for the curative qualities of his prescriptions and his drugs. After greetings had been exchanged Philip Ford put to him the question which a doctor is required to answer many times a day.

“ Well, Hollyer, how’s the patient ? ”

The doctor put his fingers up to his glasses to steady them on his nose, a trick he had when desirous of gaining a moment for thought. His reply was terse.

“ Which one ? ”

“ I forgot that I should have used the plural. How are your patients ? ”

“ The lady is dead. I’m told she is Mrs. Thurston.” Sir Philip hesitated; then he nodded, “ Poor girl! she’s little more. Her fresh young life to have been brought to so sudden

a termination while she was engaged in a party of pleasure. Was she a dear friend of yours ? ”

If in Ford's reply there was more than a flavour of irony it apparently went unnoticed by the doctor.

“ I can hardly call her that. And how is Lord Ifield ? ”

“ His lordship's in a very parlous state. I have been able to make at present only a very superficial examination ; but I was wanting to ask you if I hadn't better telegraph for Sir Godfrey Jenkins. I've seen enough to know that it's a case for a surgeon, and a great surgeon, and Sir Godfrey's one of the finest men we have. And hadn't we better telegraph to some of his relations ? ”

“ By all means. Telegraph to whom and for whom you like. You have *carte blanche*. As you are aware, I have my private wire. Make any use of it you please. And Mr. Thurston, how is he ? ”

“ Well, he's alive. Mind, I'm not setting up to be a prophet, because a doctor, any more than any other man, should not prophesy unless he knows ; but I should say that the probability is that he means to keep on living, because, when I saw him a few minutes ago, before these two poor people were brought into the house, he swore at me.”

“ That's a good sign.”

“ That's as you take it. In such a man as Mr. Thurston appears to be I'll not say it's a sign that his health is any worse ; his physical health, mind you ! ”

"We can say a few words to him on a matter of great urgency?"

"I see no reason to the contrary; only mention nothing about the fate of his poor young wife, or I'll not be answerable for the consequences."

"On that point I promise you not a word shall be said."

They parted, the doctor going downstairs and the four going up.

Alan Thurston was in a great room, which was large enough to provide ample space for half a dozen bedsteads, even although they had all been of the same type as the huge four-poster on which he was lying. It was so mighty a couch that he seemed lost in its luxurious vastness. The apartment had three windows, running from floor to ceiling, and as they were all wide open, the glory of the summer sun and of the sweet shrewd air of the uplands filled all the place. A nurse had opened to them in response to their knocking, who whispered, while she smiled.

"He's not in a very good temper just now, and not very easy to manage."

"I suppose that means that he is better?"

"Much. A great improvement has taken place in him during the last hour; if he weren't disposed to be so refractory he'd be better still."

At least a part of what the speaker said was verified there and then. An impatient voice came from the other side of the door.

"Confound you, nurse, who's that you're chattering to? I hate people making mysteries of things; if there's any one there let me see who it is."

The nurse held the door open for the four to enter.

"It's some one who wishes to see you, Mr. Thurston; only please," she laid a stress on the word which was almost pathetic, "don't excite yourself by talking too much."

"As if the mere fact of your asking me not to excite myself isn't in itself enough to excite me."

As the four came into the room he stared. "Hullo, Ford! Why—Doris! Doris!"

He seemed to be making an effort to raise himself in bed, which caused the nurse to rush to his side.

"Mr. Thurston! you're not to move! You know the doctor told you so! If you're not careful in an instant you may undo all the good that has been done."

The patient showed no signs of being grateful to his attendant for her anxious thought for him.

"Don't you worry yourself; as if I could move, tied up like this. You wait till I get these things off; then I'll show you." When he spoke to Miss Owen it was in quite a different strain. His eyes glistened, his voice trembled. "Doris, it's awfully good of you to come and see me like this; awfully good. I don't know how to thank you, seeing you will do me more good than—than all the beastly doctors. I say, though, you're looking a bit pale, you know."

His eyes were keen enough to detect that fact. The lady's manner was inclined to be stiff, as if she hardly knew what to make of the position, or of the patient.

"Thank you, I'm not conscious of feeling unwell. But you—I'm sorry to see you like this."

"Don't you trouble yourself about that; there's nothing the matter with me. I'd be as right as rain if that fool of a doctor 'd only let me get up."

On this remark the nurse commented, as if she felt that the patient's criticism was intended to apply to her as well.

"How can you say that, Mr. Thurston, when only quite a little time ago you were hovering between life and death, and we didn't know how it 'd be."

Still the sick man showed himself disinclined to gratitude.

"You know now, because I've done hovering, and the sooner you understand it the better." The invalid bestowed his attention on Mr. Campion, evincing, as he did so, if anything rather more irascibility even than before.

"You look as if you were a parson, sir. I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance; but it's only fair to tell you that, as a rule, I don't like parsons; and that therefore if you've come here with a view of offering your services, because you think I'm in need of them, I'm afraid you've wasted your, no doubt, valuable time, because I'm not."

The matter and manner of this address, coming from a person whom he had supposed to be dead, apparently took the rector aback. Sir Philip came to his aid.

"Alan, this is Mr. Campion, a very old friend, the rector of Baynham, in whose house Miss Owen is at present residing."

Mr. Thurston indulged in a grin which, in view of his unnaturally pallid visage, had a very gruesome effect.

"Rather dull stopping at a parson's, eh? I give you my word, Doris, that you've my sympathy." Miss Owen was stiffer than before.

"Your sympathy isn't in the least required, thank you, Mr. Thurston. I've been happier than I've ever been in my life."

The rector's demeanour suggested a pleasant variety of emotions, as if, while he was both soothed and gratified, he was yet conscience-stricken and ashamed. The regard with which Mr. Thurston favoured him was hardly benign.

"There's no accounting for tastes, that's all I can say. And I know you, Doris you'd say a good word for the pigs, if you had to live in a sty." From the parson he turned to the policeman, showing himself inclined to treat the representative of the law not one whit more affably than he had treated the representative of the Church. "There's no mistaking what you are. And as, when I'm fit, I regard coppers as carrion, I don't know what on earth anybody means by bringing an animal like you into my room when I can't get out of bed to show him to the door."

Sir Philip explained; he probably enjoyed Mr. Thurston's outspoken candour more than the inspector did.

"This is Inspector Reynolds, the chief of our local police. It having been reported to him that you were dead his object in coming here is to make sure that you're alive."

"Is it? Then now that he has made sure

perhaps he'll go ; curse his impudence for coming ! ”

Sir Philip, turning to the officer, addressed him with an urbanity which was so marked as, under the circumstances, to be almost suspicious.

“ Are you satisfied, Inspector Reynolds, now that you have assured yourself that Mr Thurston is still actually in the land of the living ; or, bearing in mind that the nurse who is in charge of him has told us that he is not to be excited, are there any remarks which you would like to make to him ? ”

When he spoken the inspector's tone was huffy.

“ I am sorry that this gentleman should regard my presence here as he apparently does do ; but while it is far from my wish to in any way excite him, it is still my duty to ask if there is any statement he would like to make.”

Alan Thurston looked as if he did not understand what the speaker was talking about ; so the inspector went on.

“ I am informed, sir, that you have been stabbed, so seriously that you have been within an ace of being murdered.”

“ Who informed you ? ”

“ That is hardly to the point, sir. Are you in a position to make any statement as to who was your assailant ? ”

“ I don't want to talk to you. Get out ! ”

“ I would remind you, sir, that your condition is, to my knowledge, much more serious than you choose to pretend ; and that in view of your condition, it is of the highest importance that you should give me all the information bearing

upon your case which it is in your power to give."

"I've already told you to get. Nurse, from the way in which you treat me you must be as strong as a horse; take him by the scruff of his neck and drop him out of the window."

Nurse, a pleasant-faced, slightly built woman, who scarcely looked as if she possessed the strength which he attributed to her, smiling, eyed the inspector as if she was of the opinion that the proposed task was beyond her capacity. The inspector treated the suggestion as if it had been seriously intended.

"There is no necessity, Mr. Thurston, for you to urge any one to use violence. So soon as I have done my duty I will go. When I tell you that this young lady is still, formally, my prisoner, on the charge of your attempted murder, you will perceive how essential it is that you should give me the information I require."

"What's that? Your prisoner? Doris?"

"Mr. Thurston, you must not try to move! You must be quiet."

"I used the word formally. I have reason to believe that the statements which have been made incriminating her are false; but it would be more satisfactory if I were to receive an assurance that they are false from your own lips."

"Man, you're an idiot. If I were fit I'd twist your neck for you."

"Instead of using such language, it would be much better if, as I say, in view to your condition, you would tell us whether Miss Owen was, or was not, your assailant."

“ She was not, any more than you were ; you fool ! ”

“ Then who was ? ”

“ What business is that of yours ? ”

“ If you will kindly consider what is the position I occupy you will perceive how absurd your question is. It is in my power, Mr. Thurston, to put you in the witness-box and compel you to answer the question I have put to you, on oath.”

“ Oh, no, it isn't, my cocky copper ; I know better than that. To begin with, you've got to prove that I had an assailant.”

“ That is self-evident.”

“ How do you make that out ? ”

“ You don't wish us to believe that you stabbed yourself ? ”

“ Now, listen to me, Mr. Policeman. If it should come to an inquest—I don't think it will, because my intention is to get on my feet again as soon as I possibly can, in order that I may pull your nose—but if it should, you can tell the coroner from me, that I tumbled over a ham knife, which I'd brought with me to cut my corns ; and that's how it was. See ? Clearly understand ? So now that I have told you all about it hadn't you better go ? Unless you have made up your mind to make an inquest of me ; in which case it'll be you they'll hang, and serve you darned well right, says I.”

At this point Sir Philip intervened, feeling no doubt that it was time that some one did.

“ I think, Reynolds, we may take it for granted that Mr. Thurston is not likely to die just yet.”

Should any probability arise of any such unfortunate consummation I undertake that you shall be at once advised. On the other hand, if he recovers—and I would remind you that he is likely to do so more quickly if he is not excited—he will be at perfect liberty to give or withhold information exactly as he chooses, and I've no doubt that of that liberty he will take the fullest advantage. Now, may I ask you to leave us ? ”

The inspector hesitated for an appreciable instant, then he moved towards the door, where he paused.

“ I trust, Mr. Thurston, that you may soon be in a condition to pull my nose ; only, when you are, I feel sure you won't.”

Then he went. The sick man sped the parting guest.

“ Thank God he's gone.” He eyed the rector. “ I don't want to be rude, but—don't you think you might go after him ? ”

Mr. Champion endeavoured to resume the air of dignity of which lately he had been so obviously bereft.

“ Considering that our sole object, Mr. Thurston, is your welfare, your manner is so singular that, before I do go, let me tell you that for everything which has happened you are yourself responsible. You intruded yourself uninvited into my garden ; you forced yourself against her will upon this young lady ; you behaved to her, I am sorry to use the word, but it is the correct one, like a blackguard ; and then when we endeavour to remove from her the veil of suspicion which

your conduct has thrown over her, you still continue to forget that you are supposed to be a gentleman. I trust that you will rapidly reach a stage of convalescence in which you will be able to make those apologies which you will then perceive that your behaviour urgently demands."

"Have you finished?"

"As regards you, I have, for the present. But before I leave, Ford, there is something which I should like to say to you. You have expressed yourself freely on the subject of others; but—haven't you been yourself to blame?"

"Possibly, nay, probably; but—how?"

"I presume you were responsible for Mr. Thurston's disappearance?"

"You may take it at that."

"The whole trouble has arisen because it was feared that Mr. Thurston was or might be dead. Had you only said a word the misconception would have been at an end, and I should have been grateful. I do not think that you have acted the part of a friend to Miss Owen in keeping silent."

"You think not? It appears to be a weakness of yours to be unable to suspend judgment until you are acquainted with all the facts. Let me tell you precisely what, rightly or wrongly, but with the best intentions, was the part I played; then you will be better able to judge me. You will remember that night that I had a motor in your stables. When I went round to the stables to send for the doctor, and you went up to the house, I told my chauffeur, who's a smart fellow, and to be trusted, to take the car round by the hedge. Then I crawled into the summer-house, practically on all fours, so that I should be as

invisible as possible, and, in the same attitude, came out again with Alan on my back. I passed him through the hedge to my man, who took him off in the car."

"Thank you very much."

This was the sick man in the bed.

"But," inquired the rector, "why should you have played us such a trick, and incurred such a frightful risk?"

"I will try to explain. In the first place I didn't like the look of him at all; I thought it quite possible that he was dead."

"Did you?"

"I did; you were unconscious."

"If I hadn't been do you think I would have allowed you to take such liberties? passing me through a hedge!"

"Then, in the second place, it looked for the moment as if this child here had—laid him where he was."

"I! Sir Philip!"

"Yes, you, Miss Owen. Let me get on, or Campion here will continue to suppose that I wilfully misled him. It was the affair of a second; I had no time for reflection; if anything was to be done it had to be done on the instant. I said to myself something like this: if this child had laid him there, and he was dead, then so long as they couldn't find the body they could do nothing; because to bring a charge of murder they need a corpse. It is within the range of possibility, I admit it, that if he had been dead I should have put him in my sailing-boat and taken him five or six miles out to sea, in the moonlight, and—dropped him overboard."

“ Thank you very much again.”

“ They would hardly have been able to fish him out of a watery grave, or even to locate its whereabouts; so whatever they might have suspected, they would still have been able to do nothing.”

“ What awful ideas you do seem to have, Sir Philip ! ”

“ Cheerful way of putting them, hasn't he, Doris ? Talks about turning me into food for fishes as if the fishes were the only creatures which had to be considered.”

“ However, when I got home, I found that my man had put him to bed in a room over the garage, and—that he wasn't dead. I happen to know something about knife wounds, and, though I perceived that it had been a very near thing—the hand which gripped that knife knew how to handle one—still there was a chance that he might pull through. So I dressed the wound myself.”

“ You didn't send for a doctor ? ”

“ Not I ; that wouldn't have suited me at all, at that stage of the game. It still seemed possible that the child had laid him so ; and if a doctor came upon the scene questions might be asked. If he died I'd have buried him——”

“ Five or six miles out at sea ? ”

“ And if he didn't die I'd dare him to say a word.”

“ The joke of it being that I shouldn't have had a word to say.”

“ That very soon I began to see for myself. I commenced to have a dim notion of how the land was lying ; when John Beasley came to my assistance it became a very clear one. What that man

doesn't know about scoundrels isn't worth knowing. By that time, also, it had become plain that the chances were at least even that he'd keep on living ; so I had him removed from that room over the garage to where you see him now. But as it was essential, if a certain gang of criminals was to fall into a trap which Beasley and I were arranging, that nothing should be known of his whereabouts, I kept on keeping still ; to say nothing of the fact that until his lips were opened we could not tell what view of the matter he proposed to take ; and, up to that point, his lips had not been opened. Indeed, it was not until this morning that he himself gave us anything definite to go upon ; and the moment he had done I tore off, Campion, with the good news to you ; but by the time I arrived it was—a trifle late. So there's my story for you. And now you may judge me as you please."

Thurston spoke first.

" I say not guilty ; only don't you do it again. When a man passes you through a hedge, and talks about dropping you five or six miles out to sea, I say it's time to protest ; and, having protested, I add that if I'd been in Ford's position, and he'd been in mine, hang me if I shouldn't have done the same thing myself ; or at least I hope I should."

Then came the rector.

" I do not intend to judge you, Sir Philip. I perceive more clearly than I did the difficulty you were in, and what was the nature of the responsibility you undertook. I realise how it was you felt that it was a responsibility which had better not be shared. I am not sure that I do

not admire you for the part which you have played. To you, Miss Owen, I can only repeat what I have said already, that you will find it easier to forgive me than I shall find it to forgive myself——”

Miss Owen cut the rector short.

“ Please, Mr. Campion, don't say anything more about forgiveness. I'm sure I forgive you anything there is to forgive. I owe you too much and I know you too well not to be aware that in anything you may have done you meant me no intentional unkindness. And if Mr. Campion is going home—Mrs. Campion will be wondering what has become of us both—don't you think I ought to go too ? ”

“ No, I don't,” replied Sir Philip.

“ Nor do I,” said Mr. Thurston, in the bed.

Sir Philip addressed the rector.

“ Campion, convey my respectful compliments to Mrs. Campion, and tell her that I am detaining Miss Owen, and trust to bring her over myself later in the day.”

When the rector had gone Mr. Thurston said to Miss Owen :—

“ Since everybody seems to be forgiving everybody else, perhaps, Doris, you'll have a try at forgiving me. When I get up off this bed, which will be to-morrow——”

“ It will be nothing of the kind,” interpolated nurse.

“ Or the next day ; I don't want to feel that I'm still in your black books.”

The girl was silent ; she kept her eyes fixed upon the speaker, a proceeding to which he objected.

“ Don't look at me like that. You're a bit too

fond, you know, Doris, of looking at a fellow in that impersonal way, as if he were something of a curiosity. I always used to feel as if you were reading my very soul; and—my soul's not the kind of article which will bear it. When that woman was sticking her knife into me——”

“Who was it who did that, Alan?”

He hesitated before he answered, while he regarded her with a quizzical glance.

“It wasn't you.”

“I know that as well as you do, thank you.”

“Then don't you think you know enough?”

“Certainly, if you would rather I did not know anything else. Obviously it's no business of mine who, as you put it, sticks knives into you.”

“That's so.”

“Come, Alan,” struck in Sir Philip, “between ourselves, who was it who attacked you?”

“It was—a lady.”

“You saw her?”

“Enough to make sure it was a lady.”

“You recognised her?”

“That's the question.”

“Knowing that at any rate it wasn't Doris, why did you call out as you did?”

“Can't say. I suppose it was a confusion of ideas. I didn't know I had called out until you told me. Under such circumstances can one be held answerable for what one says or does? If I were a judge or a member of a jury I should say no. Frankly, as you say between ourselves, I haven't always been the best of men, though you might never have guessed it. It is just possible that some one in petticoats may have thought that she owed me a grudge, and fancies she has paid it.

You'll allow, if that is the case, that the matter is private and personal. When I'm allowed by the tyrannical nurse into whose hands I have fallen to get off this bed, that person in petticoats and I will settle this little matter between us ; because, I assure you, it's the kind of little matter I can settle without any extraneous assistance."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE FISH-POND

PHILIP FORD and Doris Owen were in the garden of the Manor House. We have been a good deal in gardens in this story—one could hardly desire to be in pleasanter places—but that garden was the fairest. It was a walled-in garden, very spacious, very ancient. The wall itself, at least from the inside, was by way of being a decoration, if only because it provided so fair a surface for the training of climbing plants and trees. The plan of the garden had been made perhaps a couple of hundred years ago, and had never since been altered, by some forgotten gardener, whose fancy took quaint forms. If the avenues were a little formal, the trees and bushes between which they ran were grotesquely fashioned, and everywhere, that summer afternoon, there was a blaze of colour. And this may be said of flowers, that however they may flame and flare their gorgeousness never assails the eyes. They may array themselves in all sorts of dazzling hues, yet against their taste not even scandal breathes a word.

There was a goodly basin of water, in which were goldfish, in the centre of which was a fountain, and which was called the fish-pond. About it was a fair expanse of green turf, softer than velvet to the tread. And on this turf were seats on which

to sit and watch the fish, and feed them—if they deigned to be fed. On one of these seats sat Doris, biscuits in her hand, of which every now and then she threw scraps into the water, at which the goldfish snatched, because they were the kind they liked. And on the same seat, not very far from Doris, sat Philip Ford. It seemed from their manner and from the things they said that these two had begun to understand each other pretty well. It is a place for understandings, is a walled-in garden, of sufficient size, with provision for privacy, if you have it to yourselves.

She threw another crumb to the fishes, and she said :—

“ Do you know that at first I was afraid of you ? ”

“ It is right that a woman should be afraid of a man—properly afraid.”

“ I’m not sure that I’m not afraid of you still.”

“ Is it not seemly that a woman should stand in awe—just awe—of the man she is to wed ? ”

“ But I don’t expect that I shall keep on being afraid—do you ? ”

“ I trust that I may be always able to inspire in your bosom a wholesome sense of terror.”

There were some seconds before she spoke again, during which the fish had other crumbs. Then, with her head a little on one side, and on her face the wisdom of the ages, she dealt out to him some gems of her philosophy.

“ I don’t think—I’m not sure, but I don’t fancy that a girl can ever be afraid of a man, as she used to be afraid, after—she has kissed him.”

“ Doris ! ”

“ You are not to laugh.”

“ I’m not laughing ; the subject is much too serious.”

“ That’s why I kissed you.”

“ Is that the only reason, with a view of exorcising the fear of me which possessed your soul ? ”

“ Well—that was one reason. You see, your kissing me was all right.”

“ Thank you.”

“ But my kissing you was different.”

“ That I willingly admit.”

“ When a man kisses a girl he takes possession of her, and she may be more afraid of him than ever ; but when a girl kisses a man she takes possession of him ; and one can hardly continue to be afraid of what one has taken deliberate possession.”

“ Then each time you kiss me your fear grows less ? ”

“ That’s something like the notion.”

She threw to the fishes another crumb.

“ Would it be wrong of me to suggest that, on those terms, I have no objection to your fear abating ? ”

“ However, one doesn’t want it to abate too quickly. I think it’s nice to be a little afraid—don’t you ? ”

“ It depends on the sense in which you use that word ; it would appear that you have senses of your own.”

Again she pondered, while she fed the fishes.

“ Do you think that I have got sense ? ”

“ Do I think ! My dear child ! When you have kissed me ! ”

She smiled, one of those rare smiles which,

because they seem to spring spontaneously from the heart, make the plainest faces beautiful, and Doris was very far from being plain.

"I used to be so angry when you called me a child; but now I sha'n't mind, because now you seem like a child to me."

He sat up suddenly.

"Gracious! Doris, how comes that about?"

Crumb after crumb fell slowly to the fishes.

"I think that when a girl has taken possession of a man—deliberate possession—she does begin to regard him almost as if he were a child. That's one reason why she ceases to be afraid of him."

"Shall I grow younger then as your terror abates?"

"That's what I'm wondering." Presently there was an end of the biscuits; the fish had eaten them. Standing up, dusting the palms of her hands together, she broke the silence. "Let's walk to the rectory, over the downs, now. I'm so glad you're fond of walking. What walks we'll take together!"

"Always, over the uplands, where the air is sweetest?"

"No, not always; sometimes between the hedges; and sometimes by the sea; and sometimes through the forest; and sometimes—but we'll walk together in all sorts of places." She held out her hands in front of her with a little passionate gesture. "Oh, to think that we shall always be together everywhere! and that once I thought I was born to be unhappy!"

"Doris, it is now I who am afraid."

"Of what?"

"Of you."

“Of me! Philip! You never could be afraid of me.”

“But I am; it’s my turn for confession. I’m not sure that I’ve not been afraid of you from the first; because I felt that you looked upon the world as if somewhere in it there was a fairyland, and a fairy palace, and a fairy prince. And now I’m fearful lest you should suppose that you’ve found the land, and the palace, and the prince; because, Doris, I do assure you, on my word of honour, that you haven’t.”

“So that’s why you’re afraid? You needn’t be.” She sighed, and then she laughed. “Come with me upon the downs.” Then she turned to him, with something strange and wonderful in her face and in her eyes. “If I choose to think that you’re a fairy prince, I shall. I’m not afraid, if you are.”

CHAPTER XXXV

VALE !

LORD IFIELD remains a bachelor. Since, as he himself grimly puts it, no one would be likely to marry him for himself, he does not propose to give any one a chance of marrying him for anything else. He is a confirmed recluse ; from a cynic he has become a misanthrope. Since that afternoon on which Mrs. Thurston precipitated herself and him and his motor car down the slopes into the Punch-bowl, because he declined to give her instant assurance of his intention to keep the letter of his promises, he has never walked a step. The resources of surgery were sufficient to keep him alive. Further than that they could not go. Life lingers in a torso. He is not only deformed, he is crippled. He is lifted in and out of a vehicle on those rare occasions when he takes the air. Without assistance he cannot dress himself. To all intents and purposes, physically, he is as helpless as an infant. So it is not strange that his sister-in-law, Mrs. Scoones, rests easy in the conviction that if, by any mishap, the earldom of Glenlivet—for the reversion to which the dead woman dared so much—does not descend to her husband, it certainly will to her son.

Alan Thurston has essayed a second dip into the matrimonial lucky bag. This time his wife

possesses some of those credentials which her predecessor so singularly lacked. Having once turned the corner he regained his health by leaps and bounds. Within a fortnight he was himself again. The loss of his wife troubled him not at all. He was much more concerned when he heard of Doris Owen's engagement to Philip Ford. About that he sulked for days, and even weeks. Indeed it is not certain that, occasionally, he does not sulk about it still. When they told him that his wife had been killed in an accident to Lord Ifield's car, and was buried, he did not seem surprised or distressed, or apparently even interested. Obviously she had been merely an episode in his life, of which he was glad to be quit. It is not on record that he has ever spoken of her since.

The second Mrs. Thurston was a Miss Parkinson-Giffard ; her mother was a daughter of that General Parkinson who made such a mess of things in the Boer War, while her father was one of the Loamshire Giffards, so that her forebears will endure inspection. She has a good seat on a horse ; given good cattle she will be as well up with the hounds as any one ; she is as fine a game shot as the average man ; in short, she is just the wife for Alan Thurston, though, if all tales are true, there are moments when he doubts it. If that is so it is possibly because, since she is a female Hercules, and possesses a temper to match his own, she is emphatically not a woman—where her rights as a wife are concerned—to stand any nonsense. Some quaint stories are told of the scenes which now and then take place between them.

Whether Mr. Thurston did or did not recognise

the woman who, that night, sought to personate Doris Owen in the rectory garden, has never been made clear. One thing is certain, he resolutely declined to take any steps to call her to an account with justice. Nothing has been seen or heard of her since the morning on which she paid her memorable visit to Glynde. Henry Sampson, *alias* William Seymour, is still an inmate of one of his Majesty's gaols. But those prophecies which first foretold that his colleague, Dr. Seymour Anderson, would not go far without being laid by the heels by the hands of the law, were falsified. He went very far. So far indeed that no one knows how far. Very soon after he ran up that grassy slope, with the revolver in his hand, he appears to have vanished off the face of the earth.

Mr. Campion is still the rector of Baynham. He officiated at Philip Ford's marriage. Mrs. Owen wanders over the continent of Europe, from one "British Colony" to another. She seldom or never comes to England. She seems to be in receipt of a snug and regular income, and also frequently talks of "my daughter, Lady Ford," and of her husband, Sir Philip, and of her three grandchildren—there are already three—but there is nothing to show that she is on terms of maternal intimacy either with Lady Ford or with her husband.

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