

Uncanny Tales

Various

LONDON
C. ARTHUR PEARSON, LIMITED
HENRIETTA STREET, W.C.
1916

CONTENTS

PAGE		
I.	The Unknown Quantity	7
II.	The Armless Man	19
III.	The Tomtom Clue	33
IV.	The Case of Sir Alister Moeran	43
V.	The Kiss	63
VI.	The Goth	73
VII.	The Last Ascent	88
VIII.	The Terror by Night	97
IX.	The Tragedy at the "Loup Noir"	113

[7]

UNCANNY STORIES

I THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY

Professor William James Maynard was in a singularly happy and contented mood as he strolled down the High Street after a long and satisfactory interview with the solicitor to his late cousin, whose sole heir he was.

It was exactly a month by the calendar since he had murdered this cousin, and everything had gone most satisfactorily since. The fortune was proving quite as large as he had expected, and not even an inquest had been held upon the dead man. The coroner had decided that it was not necessary, and the Professor had agreed with him.

At the funeral the Professor had been the principal mourner, and the local paper had commented sympathetically on his evident emotion. This had been quite genuine, for the Professor had been fond of his relative, who had always been very good to him. But still, when an old man remains obstinately healthy, when [8]his doctor can say with confidence that he is good for another twenty years at least, and when he stands between you and a large fortune which you need, and of which you can make much better use in the cause of science and the pursuit of knowledge, what alternative is there? It becomes necessary to take steps. Therefore, the Professor had taken steps.

Looking back to-day on that day a month ago, and the critical preceding week, the Professor felt that the steps he had taken had been as judicious as successful. He had set himself to solve a problem in higher mathematics. He had found it easier to solve than many he was obliged to grapple with in the course of his studies.

A policeman saluted as the Professor passed, and he acknowledged it with the charming old world courtesy that made him so popular a figure in the town. Across the way was the doctor who had certified the cause of death. The Professor, passing benevolently on, was glad he had now enough money to carry out his projects. He would be able to publish at

once his great work on "The Secondary Variation of the Differential Calculus," that hitherto had languished in manuscript. It would make a sensation, he thought; there was more than one generally accepted theory he had challenged or contradicted in it. And he would put in hand at once his great, his long projected work, "A History of the Higher Mathematics." It would take twenty years to complete, it would cost twenty thousand pounds or more, and it would breathe into mathematics the new, vivid life that Bergson's works have breathed into metaphysics.[9]

The Professor thought very kindly of the dead cousin, whose money would provide for this great work. He wished greatly the dead man could know to what high use his fortune was designed.

Coming towards him he saw the wife of the vicar of his parish. The Professor was a regular church-goer. The vicar's wife saw him, too, and beamed. She and her husband were more than a little proud of having so well known a man in their congregation. She held out her hand and the Professor was about to take it when she drew it back with a startled movement.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed, distressed, as she saw him raise his eyebrows. "There is blood on it."

Her eyes were fixed on his right hand, which he was still holding out. In fact, on the palm a small drop of blood showed distinctly against the firm, pink flesh. Surprised, the Professor took out his handkerchief and wiped it away. He noticed that the vicar's wife was wearing white kid gloves.

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" she said again. "It—it startled me somehow. I thought you must have cut yourself. I hope it's not much?"

"Some scratch, I suppose," he said. "It's nothing."

The vicar's wife, still slightly discomposed, launched out into some parochial matter she had wished to mention to him. They chatted a few moments and then parted. The Professor took an opportunity to look at his hand. He could detect no sign of any cut or abrasion, the skin seemed whole everywhere. He looked at his handkerchief. There was still visible[10] on it the stain where he had wiped his hand, and this stain seemed certainly blood.

"Odd!" he muttered as he put the handkerchief back in his pocket. "Very odd!"

His thoughts turned again to his projected "A History of the Higher Mathematics," and he forgot all about the incident till, as it happened that day month, the first of the month by the calendar, when he was sitting in his study with an eminent colleague to whom he was explaining his great scheme.

"If you are able to carry it out," the colleague said slowly, "your book will mark an epoch in human thought. But the cost will be tremendous."

"I estimate it at twenty thousand pounds," answered the Professor calmly. "I am fully prepared to spend twice as much. You know I have recently inherited forty thousand pounds from a relative?"

The eminent colleague nodded and looked very impressed.

"It is magnificent," he said warmly, "magnificent." He added: "You've cut yourself, do you know?"

"Cut myself?" the Professor echoed, surprised.

"Yes," answered the eminent colleague, "there is blood upon your hand—your right hand."

In fact a spot of blood, slightly larger than that which had appeared before, showed plainly upon the Professor's right hand. He wiped it away with his handkerchief, and went on talking eagerly, for he was deeply interested. He did not think of the matter again till just[11] as he was getting into bed, when he noticed a red stain upon his handkerchief. He frowned and examined his hand carefully. There was no sign of any wound or cut from which the blood could have come, and he frowned again.

"Very odd!" he muttered.

A calendar hanging on the wall reminded him that it was the first of the month.

The days passed, the incident faded from his memory, and four weeks later he came down one morning to breakfast in an unusually good temper. There was a certain theory he had worked on the night before he meant to write to a friend

about. It seemed to him his demonstration had been really brilliant, and then, also, he was already planning out with great success the details of the scheme for his great work.

He was making an excellent breakfast, for his appetite was always good, and, needing some more cream, he rang the bell. The maid appeared, he showed her the empty jug, and as she took it she dropped it with a sudden cry, smashing it to pieces on the floor. Very pale, she stammered out:

"Beg pardon, sir, your hand—there is blood upon your hand."

In fact, on the Professor's right hand there showed a drop of blood, perceptibly larger this time than before. The Professor stared at it stupidly. He was sure it had not been there a moment before, and he noticed by the heading of the newspaper at the side of his plate that this was the first of the month.

With a hasty movement of his napkin he wiped the drop of blood away. The maid, still[12] apologising, began to pick up the pieces of the jug she had broken; but the Professor had no further appetite for his breakfast. He silenced her with a gesture, and, leaving a piece of toast half-eaten on his plate, he got up and went into his study.

All this was trivial, absurd even. Yet somehow it disturbed him. He got out a magnifying glass and examined his hand under it. There was nothing to account for the presence of the drop of blood he and the maid had seen. It occurred to him that he might have cut himself in shaving; but when he looked in the mirror he could find no trace of even the slightest wound.

He decided that, though he had not been aware of it, his nerves must be a little out of order. That was disconcerting. He had not taken his nerves into consideration for the simple reason that he had never known that he possessed any. He made up his mind to treat himself to a holiday in Switzerland. One or two difficult ascents might brace him up a bit.

Three days later he was in Switzerland, and a few days later again he was on the summit of a minor but still difficult peak. It had been an exhilarating climb, and he had enjoyed it. He said something laughingly to the head guide to the effect that climbing was good sport and a fine test for the nerves. The head guide agreed, and added politely that if the nerves of monsieur the Professor had shown signs of failing on the lower glacier, for example, they might all have been in difficulties. The Professor thrilled with pleasure at the head guide's implied praise. He was glad to know on such good authority[13] that his nerves were all right, and the incidents that had driven him there began to fade in his memory.

Nevertheless, he found himself watching the calendar with a certain interest, and when he woke on the morning of the first day of the next month he glanced quickly at his right hand. There was nothing there.

He dressed and spent, as he had planned, a quiet day, busy with his correspondence. His spirits rose as the day passed. He was still watchful, but more confident; and, after dinner, though he had meant to go straight to his room, he agreed to join in a suggested game of bridge. They were cutting for partners when one of the ladies who was to take part in the game dropped with a little cry the card she had just lifted.

"Oh, there is blood upon your hand," she cried, "on your right hand, Professor!"

Upon the Professor's right hand there showed now a drop of blood, larger still than those other three had been. Yet the very moment before it had not been there. The Professor put down his cards without a word, and left the room, going straight upstairs.

The drop of blood was still standing on his hand. He soaked it up carefully with some cotton-wool he had, and was not surprised to find beneath no sign or trace of any cut or wound. The cotton-wool he made up carefully into a parcel and addressed it to an analytical chemist he knew, inclosing with it a short note.

He rang the bell, sent the parcel to the post, and then he got out pen and paper and set himself to solve this problem, as in his life he had solved so many others.[14]

Only this time it seemed somehow as though the data were insufficient.

Idly his pen traced upon the paper in front of him a large X, the sign of the unknown quantity.

But how, in this case, to find out what was the unknown quantity? His hand, his firm and steady hand, shook so that he could no longer hold his pen. He rang the bell again and ordered a stiff whisky-and-soda. He was a man of almost

ascetic habits, but to-night he felt that he needed some stimulant.

Neither did he sleep very well.

The next day he returned to England. Almost at once he went to see his friend, the analytical chemist, to whom he had sent the parcel from Switzerland.

"Mammalian blood," pronounced the chemist, "probably human—rather a curious thing about it, too."

"What's that?" asked the Professor.

"Why," his friend answered, "I was able to identify the distinctive bacillus——" He named the rare bacillus of an unusual and obscure disease. And this disease was that from which the Professor's cousin had died.

The professor was a man interested in all phenomena. In other circumstances he would have observed keenly that which now occurred, when the hair of his head underwent a curious involuntary stiffening and bristling process that in popular but sufficiently accurate terms, might be described as "standing on end." But at the moment he was in no state for scientific observations.

He got out of the house somehow. He said^[15] he did not feel well, and his friend, the chemist, agreed that his holiday in Switzerland did not seem to have done him much good.

The Professor went straight home and shut himself up in his study. It was a fine room, ranged all round with books. On the shelves nearest to his hand stood volumes on mathematics, the theory of mathematics, the study of mathematics, pure mathematics, applied mathematics. But there was not any one of these books that told him anything about such a thing as this. Though, it is true, there were many references in them, here and there, to X , the unknown quantity.

The Professor took his pen and wrote a large X upon the sheet of paper in front of him.

"An unknown quantity!" he muttered. "An unknown—quantity!"

The days passed peacefully. Nothing was out of the ordinary except that the Professor developed an odd trick of continually glancing at his right hand. He washed it a good deal, too. But the first of the month was not yet.

On the last day of the month he told his housekeeper that he was feeling a little unwell. She was not surprised, for she had thought him looking ill for some time past. He told her he would probably spend the next day in bed for a thorough rest, and she agreed that that would be a very good idea. When he was in his own room and had undressed, he bandaged his right hand with care, tying it up carefully and thoroughly with three or four of his large linen handkerchiefs.

"Whatever comes, shall now show," he said to himself.^[16]

He stayed in bed accordingly the next day. His housekeeper was a little uneasy about him. He ate nothing and his eyes were strangely bright and feverish. She overheard him once muttering something to himself about "the unknown quantity," and that made her think that he had been working too hard.

She decided he must see the doctor. The Professor refused peremptorily. He declared he would be quite well again in the morning. The housekeeper, an old servant, agreed, but sent for the doctor all the same; and when he had come the Professor felt he could not refuse to see him without appearing peculiar. And he did not wish to appear peculiar. So he saw the doctor, but declared there was nothing much the matter, he merely felt a little unwell and out of sorts and tired.

"You have hurt your hand?" the doctor asked, noticing how it was bandaged.

"I cut it slightly—a trifle," the Professor answered.

"Yes," the doctor answered, "I see there is blood on it."

"What?" the Professor stammered.

"There is blood upon your hand," the doctor repeated.

The Professor looked. In fact, a deep, wide stain showed crimson upon the bandages in which he had swathed his hand. Yet he knew that the moment before the linen had been fair and white and clean.

"It is nothing," he said quickly, hiding his hand beneath the bed clothes.

The doctor, a little puzzled, took his leave,[17] but had not gone ten yards when the housekeeper flew screaming after him. It seemed she had heard a fall, and when she had gone into the Professor's bedroom she had found him lying there dead upon the hearthrug. There was a razor in his hand, and there was a ghastly gash across his throat.

The doctor went back at a run, but there was nothing he or any man could do. One thing he noticed, with curiosity, was that the bandage had been torn away from the dead man's hand and that oddly enough there seemed to be on the hand no sign of any cut or wound. There was a large solitary drop of blood on the palm, at the root of the thumb; but, of course, that was no great wonder, for the wound the dead man had dealt himself had bled freely.

Apparently death had not been quite instantaneous, for with a last effort the Professor seemed to have traced an *X* upon the floor in his own blood with his forefinger. The doctor mentioned this at the inquest—the coroner had decided at once that in this case an inquest was certainly necessary—and he suggested that it showed the Professor had worked too hard and was suffering from overwork which had disturbed his mental balance.

The coroner took the same view, and in his short address to the jury adduced the incident as proof of a passing mental disturbance.

"Very probably," said the coroner, "there was some problem that had worried him, and that he was still endeavouring to work out. As you are aware, gentlemen, the sign *X* is used to symbolise the unknown quantity."

An appropriate verdict was accordingly[18] returned, and the Professor was duly interred in the same family vault as that in which so short a time previously his cousin had been laid to rest.

[19]

II

THE ARMLESS MAN

I first met Bob Masters in the hotel at a place called Fourteen Streams, not very far from Kimberley.

I had for some months been trying to find gold or diamonds by digging holes in the veldt. But since this has little or nothing to do with the story, I pass by my mining adventures and come back to the hotel. I came to it very readily that afternoon, for I was very thirsty.

A tall man standing at the bar turned his head as I entered and said "Good-day" to me. I returned the compliment, but took no particular notice of him at first.

Suddenly I heard the man say to the barman:

"I'm ready for another drink."

That surprised me, because his glass was still three-quarters full. But I was still more startled by the action of the barman who lifted up the glass and held it whilst the man drank.

Then I saw the reason. The man had no arms.

You know the easy way in which Englishmen chum together anywhere out of England, whilst in their native country nothing save a formal introduction will make them acquainted? I made some remark to Masters which led to another from him, and in five minutes' time we were chatting on all sorts of topics.[20]

I learnt that Masters, bound for England, had come in to Fourteen Streams to catch the train from Kimberley, and, having a few hours to wait, had strolled up to the collection of tin huts calling itself a town.

I was going down to Kimberley too, so of course we went together, and were quite old friends by the time we reached that city.

We had a wash and something to eat, and then we walked round to the post-office. I used to have my letters addressed

there, *poste restante*, and call in for them when I happened to be in Kimberley.

I found several letters, one of which altered the whole course of my life. This was from Messrs. Harvey, Filson, and Harvey, solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields. It informed me that the sudden death of my cousin had so affected my uncle's health that he had followed his only son within the month. The senior branch of the family being thus extinct the whole of the entailed estate had devolved on me.

The first thing I did was to send off two cablegrams to say that I was coming home by the first available boat, one to the solicitors, the other to Nancy Milward.

Masters and I arranged to come home together and eventually reached Cape Town. There we had considerable trouble at the shipping office. It was just about the time of year when people who live in Africa to make money, come over to England to spend it, and in consequence the boats were very crowded. Masters demanded a cabin to himself, a luxury which was not to be had, though there was one that he and I could share. He made a tremendous fuss about[21] doing this, and I thought it very strange, because I had assisted him in many ways which his mutilation rendered necessary. However, he had to give way in the end, and we embarked on the Castle liner.

On the voyage he told me how he had lost his arms. It seemed that he had been sent up country on some Government job or other, and had had the ill-fortune to be captured by the natives. They treated him quite well at first, but gave him to understand that he must not try to escape. I suppose that to most men such a warning would be a direct incitement to make the attempt. Masters made it and failed. They cut off his right arm as a punishment. He waited until the wound was healed and tried again. Again he failed. This time they cut off his other arm.

"Good Lord," I cried. "What devils!"

"Weren't they!" he said. "And yet, you know, they were quite good-tempered chaps when you didn't cross them. I wasn't going to be beaten by a lot of naked niggers though, and I made a third attempt.

"I succeeded all right that time, though, of course, it was much more difficult. I really don't know at all how I managed to worry through. You see, I could only eat plants and leaves and such fruit as I came across; but I'd learnt as much as I could of the local botany in the intervals."

"Was it worth while?" I asked. "I think the first failure and its result would have satisfied me."

"Yes," he said slowly, "it was worth while. You see, my wife was waiting for me at home,[22] and I wanted to see her again very badly—you don't know how badly."

"I think I can imagine," I said. "Because there is a girl waiting for me too at home."

"I saw her before she died," he continued.

"Died?" I said.

"Yes," he answered. "She was dying when I reached home at last, but I was with her at the end. That was something, wasn't it?"

I do hate people to tell me this sort of thing. Not because I do not feel sorry for them; on the contrary, I feel so sorry that I absolutely fail to find words to express my sympathy. I tried, however, to show it in other ways, by the attentions I paid him and by anticipating his every wish.

Yet there were many things that were astonishing about his actions, things that I wonder now I did not realise must have been impossible for him to do for himself, and that yet were done. But he was so surprisingly dexterous with his lips, and feet too, when he was in his cabin that I suppose I put them down to that.

I remember waking up one night and looking out of my bunk to see him standing on the floor. The cabin was only faintly lit by a moonbeam which found its way through the porthole. I could not see clearly, but I fancied that he walked to the door and opened it, and closed it behind him. He did it all very quickly, as quickly as I could have done it. As I say, I was very sleepy, but the sight of the door opening and shutting like that woke me thoroughly. Sitting up I shouted at him.

He heard me and opened the door again, easily,[23] too, much more easily than he seemed to be able to shut it when he

saw me looking at him.

"Hullo! Awake, old chap?" he said. "What is it?"

"Er—nothing," I said. "Or rather I suppose I was only half awake; but you seemed to open that door so easily that it quite startled me."

"One does not always like to let others see the shifts to which one has to resort," was all the answer he gave me.

But I worried over it. The thing bothered me, because he had made no attempt to explain.

That was not the only thing I noticed.

Two or three days later we were sitting together on deck. I had offered to read to him. I noticed that he got up out of his chair. Suddenly I saw the chair move. It gave me a great shock, for the chair twisted apparently of its own volition, so that when he sat down again the sunlight was at his back and not in his eyes, as I knew it had been previously. But I reasoned with myself and managed to satisfy myself that he must have turned the chair round with his foot. It was just possible that he could have done so, for it had one of those light wicker-work seats.

We had a lovely voyage for three-quarters of the way, and the sea was as calm as any duck-pond. But that was all altered when we passed Cape Finisterre. I have done a lot of knocking about on the ocean one way and another, but I never saw the Bay of Biscay deserve its reputation better.

I'd much rather see what is going on than be cooped up below, and after lunch I told Bob I was going up on deck.[24]

"I'll only stay there for a bit," I said. "You make yourself comfortable down here."

I filled his pipe, put it in his mouth, and gave him a match; then I left him.

I made my way up and down the deck for a time, clutching hold of everything handy, and rather enjoyed it, though the waves drenched me to the skin.

Presently I saw Masters come out of the companion-way and make his way very skilfully towards me. Of course it was fearfully dangerous for him.

I staggered towards him, and, putting my lips to his ear, shouted to him to go below at once.

"Oh, I shall be all right!" he said, and laughed.

"You'll be drowned—drowned," I screamed. "There was a wave just now that—well, if I hadn't been able to cling on with both hands like grim death, I should have gone overboard. Go below."

He laughed again and shook his head.

And then what I dreaded happened. A vast mountain of green water lifted up its bulk and fell upon us in a ravening cataract. I clutched at Masters, but trying to save him and myself handicapped me badly. The strength of that mass of water was terrible. It seemed to snatch at everything with giant hands, and drag all with it. It tossed a hen-coop high, and carried it through the rails.

I felt the grip of my right hand loosen, and the next instant was carried, still clutching Masters with my left, towards that gap in the bulwark.

I managed to seize the end of the broken rail.[25] It held us for a moment, then gave, and for a moment I hung sheer over the vessel's side.

In that instant I felt fingers tighten on my arm, tighten till they bit into the flesh, and I was pulled back into safety.

Together we staggered back, and got below somehow. I was trembling like a leaf, and the sweat dripped from me. I almost screamed aloud.

It was not that I was frightened of death. I've seen too much of that in many parts of the earth to dread it greatly. It was the thought of those fingers tightening on me where no fingers were.

Masters did not speak a word, nor did I, until we found ourselves in the cabin.

I tore the wet clothes off me and turned my arm to the mirror. I knew I could not have been mistaken when I felt them.

There on the upper arm, above the line of sunburn that one gets from working with sleeves rolled up, there on the white skin showed *the red marks of four slender fingers and a thumb!* I sat down suddenly at sight of them, and pulling open a drawer, found a flask of neat brandy, and gulped it down, emptied it in one gulp.

Then I turned to him and pointed to the marks.

"In God's name, how came these here?" I said. "What—what happened up there on deck?"

He looked at me very gravely.

"I saved you," he said, "or rather I didn't, for I could not. But *she* did."

"What do you mean?" I stammered.

"Let me get these clothes off," he said, "and some dry ones on; and I'll tell you." [26]

Words fail to describe my feelings as I watched the clothes come off him and dry ones go on just as if hands were arranging them.

I sat and shuddered. I tried to close my eyes, but the weird, unnatural sight drew them as a lodestone.

"I'm sorry that you should have had this shock," he said. "I know what it must have been like, though it was not so bad for me when they seemed to come, for they came gradually as time went on."

"What came gradually?" I asked.

"Why, these arms! They're what I'm telling you about. You asked me to tell you, I thought?"

"Did I?" I said. "I don't know what I'm saying or asking. I think I'm going mad, quite mad."

"No," he said, "you're as sane as I am, only when you come across something strange, unique for that matter, you are naturally terrified. Well, it was like this. I told you about my adventures with the niggers up country. That was quite true. They cut off both my arms—you can see the stumps for that matter. And I told you that I came home to find my wife dying. Her heart had always been weak, I'd known that, and it had gradually grown more feeble. There must have been, indeed there was, a strange sort of telepathy between us. She had had fearful attacks of heart failure on both occasions when the niggers had mutilated me, I learnt on comparing notes.

"But I had known too, somehow, that I must escape at all costs. It was the knowledge that made me try again after each failure. I should [27] have gone on trying to escape as long as I had lived, or rather as long as she had lived. I knelt beside her bed and she put out her arms and laid them round my neck.

"'So you have come back to me before I go,' she said. 'I knew you must, because I called you so. But you have been long in coming, almost too long. But I knew I had to see you again before I died.'

"I broke down then. I was sorely tried. No arms even to put round her!

"'Darling, stay with me for a little, only for a little while!' I sobbed.

"She shook her head feebly. 'It is no use, my dear,' she said, 'I must go.'

"'I'll come with you,' I said, 'I'll not live without you.'

"She shook her head again.

"'You must be brave, Bob. I shall be watching you afterwards just as much as if I still lived on earth. If only I could give you my arms! A poor, weak woman's arms, but better than none, dear.'

"She died some weeks later. I spent all the time at her bedside, I hardly left her. Her arms were round me when she died.

Shall I ever feel them round me again? I wonder! You see, they are mine now.

"They came to me gradually. It was very strange at first to have arms and hands which one couldn't see. I used to keep my eyes shut as much as possible, and try to fancy that I had never lost my arms.

"I got used to them in time. But I have always been careful not to let people see me do things that they would know to be impossible[28] for an armless man. That was what took me to Africa again, because I could get lost there and do things for myself with these hands."

"And they twain shall be one flesh," I muttered.

"Yes," he said, "I think the explanation must be something of that sort. There's more than that in it, though; these arms are other than flesh."

He sat silent for a time with his head bowed on his chest. Then he spoke again:

"I got sick of being alone at last, and was coming back when I met you at Fourteen Streams. I don't know what I shall do when I do get home. I can never rest. I have—what do they call it—*Wanderlust*?"

"Does she ever speak to you from that other world?" I asked him.

He shook his head sadly.

"No, never. But I know she lives somewhere beyond this world of ours. She must, because these arms live. So I try always to act as if she watches everything. I always try to do the right thing, but, anyway, these arms and hands would do good of their own accord. Just now up on the deck I was very frightened. I'd have saved myself at any cost almost, and let you go. But I could not do that. The hands clutched you. It is her will, so much stronger and purer than mine, that still persists. It is only when she does not exert it that I control these arms."

That was how I learnt the strangest tale that ever a man was told, and knew the miracle to which I owed my life.

It may be that Bob Masters was a coward.[29] He always said that he was. Personally I do not believe it, for he had the sweetest nature I ever met.

He had nowhere to go to in England and seemed to have no friends. So I made him come down with me to Englehart, that dear old country seat of my family in the Western shires which was now mine.

Nancy lived in that country, too.

There was no reason why we should not get married at once. We had waited long enough.

I can see again the old, ivy-grown church where Nancy and I were wed, and Bob Masters standing by my side as best man.

I remember feeling in his pocket for the ring, and as I did so, I felt a hand grasp mine for a moment.

Then there was the reception afterwards, and speech-making—the usual sort of thing.

Later Nancy and I drove off to the station.

We had not said good-bye to Bob, for he'd insisted on driving to the station with the luggage; said he was going to see the last of us there.

He was waiting for us in the yard when we reached it, and walked with us on to the platform.

We stood there chatting about one thing and another, when I noticed that Nancy was not talking much and seemed rather pale. I was just going to remark on it when we heard the whistle of the train. There is a sharp curve in the permanent way outside the station, so that a train is on you all of a sudden.

Suddenly to my horror I saw Nancy sway backwards towards the edge of the platform. I tried vainly to catch her as she reeled and fell—right in front of the oncoming train. I[30] sprang forward to leap after her, but hands grasped me and flung me back so violently that I fell down on the platform.

It was Bob Masters who took the place that should have been mine, and leapt upon the metals.

I could not see what happened then. The station-master says he saw Nancy lifted from before the engine when it was right upon her. He says it was as if she was lifted by the wind. She was quite close to Masters. "Near enough for him to have lifted her, sir, if he'd had arms." The two of them staggered for a moment, and together fell clear of the train.

Nancy was little the worse for the awful accident, bruised, of course, but poor Masters was unconscious.

We carried him into the waiting-room, laid him on the cushions there, and sent hot-foot for the doctor.

He was a good country practitioner, and, I suppose, knew the ordinary routine of his work quite well. He fussed about, hummed and hawed a lot.

"Yes, yes," he said, as if he were trying to persuade himself. "Shock, you know. He'll be better presently. Lucky, though, that he had no arms."

I noticed then, for the first time, that the sleeves of the coat had been shorn away.

"Doctor," I said, "how is he? Surely, if he isn't hurt he would not look like that. What exactly do you mean by shock?"

"Hum—er," he hesitated, and applied his stethoscope to Masters' heart again.

"The heart is very weak," he said at length.[31] "Very weak. He's always very anæmic, I suppose?"

"No," I answered. "He's anything but that. He's——Good Lord, he's bleeding to death! Put ligatures on his arms. Put ligatures on his arms."

"Please keep quiet, Mr. Riverston," the doctor said. "It must have been a dreadful experience for you, and you are naturally very upset."

I raved and cursed at him. I think I should have struck him, but the others held me. They said they would take me away if I did not keep quiet.

Bob Masters opened his eyes presently, and saw them holding me.

"Please let him go," he said. "It's all right, old man. It's no use your arguing with them, they would not understand. I could never explain to them now, and they would never believe you. Besides, it's all for the best. Yes, the train went over them and I'm armless for the second time. But—not for long!"

I knelt by his side and sobbed. It all seemed so dreadful, and yet, I don't think that then I would have tried to stay his passing. I knew it was best for him.

He looked at me very affectionately.

"I'm so sorry that this should happen on your wedding-day," he said. "But it would have been so much worse for you if *she* had not helped."

His voice grew fainter and died away.

There was a pause for a time, and his breath came in great sighing sobs.

Then suddenly he raised himself on the cushions[32] until he stood upright on his feet, and a smile broke over his face—a smile so sweet that I think the angels in Paradise must look like that.

His voice came strong and loud from his lips.

"Darling!" he cried. "Darling, your arms are round me once again! I come! I come!"

"One of the most extraordinary cases I have ever met with," the doctor told the coroner at the inquest. "He seemed to have all the symptoms of excessive hæmorrhage."

III

THE TOMTOM CLUE

I had just settled down for a comfortable evening over the fire in a saddle-bag chair drawn up as close to the hearth as the fender would allow, with a plentiful supply of literature and whisky, and pipe and tobacco, when the telephone bell rang loudly and insistently. With a sigh I rose and took up the receiver.

"That you?" said a voice I recognised as that of Jack Bridges. "Can I come round and see you at once? It's most important. No, I can't tell you now. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

I hung the receiver up again, wondering what business could fetch Jack Bridges round at that time of the evening to see me. We had been the greatest of pals at school and at the 'Varsity, and had kept the friendship up ever since, despite my intermittent wanderings over the face of the globe. But during the last few days or so Jack had become engaged to Miss Glanville, the daughter of old Glanville, of South African fame, and as a love-sick swain I naturally expected to see very little of him, until after the wedding at any rate.

At this time of the evening, according to my ideas of engaged couples, he should be sitting in the stalls at some theatre, and not running[34] round to see bachelor friends with cynical views on matrimony.

I had not arrived at a satisfactory solution when the door opened and Jack walked in. One glance at his face told me that he was in trouble, and without a word I pushed him into my chair and handed him a drink. Then I sat down on the opposite side of the fire and waited for him to begin, for a man in need of sympathy does not want to be worried by questions.

He gulped down half his whisky and sat for a moment gazing into the fire.

"Jim, old man," he said at length, "I've had awful news."

"Not connected with Miss Glanville?" I asked.

"In a way, yes. It's broken off, but there's worse than that—far worse. I can hardly realise it; I feel numbed at present; it's too horrible. You remember that when you and I were at Winchester together my father was killed during the Matabele War?"

I nodded.

"Well," continued Jack, "I heard to-day that he was not killed by the Matabele, but was hanged in Bulawayo for murder. In other words, I am the son of a murderer."

"Hanged for murder!" I exclaimed in horror. "Surely there's some mistake?"

"No," groaned Jack, "it's true enough. I've seen the newspaper cutting of the time, and I'm the son of a murderer, who was also a forger, a thief, and a card-sharper. Old Glanville told me this evening. It was then that our engagement was broken off."[35]

"Your mother?" I asked. "Have you seen her?"

Jack nodded.

"Poor little woman!" he groaned. "She has known all along, and her one aim and object in life has been to keep the awful truth from me. That was why I was told he died an honourable death during the war. I've often wondered why the little mother was always so sad, and so weighed down by trouble. Now I know. Good God, what her life must have been!"

He rose from his chair and paced up and down the room for a minute; then he stopped and stood in front of me, his face working with emotion.

"But I don't believe it, Jim," he said, and there was a ring in his voice. "I don't believe it, and neither does the little

mother. It's impossible to reconcile the big, bluff man with the heart of a child, that I remember as my father, with murder, forgery, or any other crime. And yet, according to Glanville and the old newspapers he showed me, Richard Bridges was one of the most unscrupulous ruffians in South Africa. In my heart of hearts I know he didn't do it, and though on the face of it there's no doubt, I'm going to try and clear his name. I am sailing for South Africa on Friday."

"Sailing for South Africa!" I exclaimed. "What about your work?"

"My work can go hang!" replied Jack heatedly. "I want to wipe away the stain from my father's name, and I mean to do it somehow. That's why I've run round to see you, old pal, for I want you to come with me. Knowing Rhodesia[36] as you do, you're just the man to help me. Say you'll come?" he pleaded.

It seemed quite the forlornest hope I had ever heard of, but Jack's distress was so acute that I hadn't the heart to refuse.

"All right, Jack," I said, "I'm with you. But don't foster any vain hopes. Remember, it's twenty years ago. It will be a pretty tough job to prove anything after all these years."

During the voyage out we had ample time to go through the small amount of information about the long-forgotten case that Jack had been able to collect from the family solicitors.

In the year 1893, Richard Bridges, who was a mining engineer of some standing, had made a trip to Rhodesia with a view to gold and diamond prospecting. He had been accompanied by a friend, Thomas Symes, who, so far as we could ascertain, was an ex-naval officer; and the two, after a short stay at Bulawayo, had gone northward across the Guai river into what was in those days a practically unknown land. In a little over a year's time Bridges had returned alone—his companion having been, so he stated, killed by the Matabele, and for six months or so he led a dissolute life in Bulawayo and the district, which ended ultimately in his execution for murder. There was no doubt whatever about the murder, or the various thefts and forgeries that he was accused of, as he had made a confession at his trial, and we seemed to be on a wild-goose chase of the worst variety so far as I could see; but Jack, confident of his father's innocence, would not hear of failure.

"It's impossible to make surmises at this[37] stage," he said. "On the face of it there appears to be little room for doubt, but no one who knew my father could possibly connect him with any sort of crime. Somehow or other, Jim, I've got to clear his name."

My memory went back to a tall, sunburnt man with a kindly manner who had come down to the school one day and put up a glorious feed at the tuck shop to Jack and his friends. Afterwards, at his son's urgent request, he had bared his chest to show us his tattooing of which Jack had, boy-like, often boasted to us. I recalled how we had gazed admiringly at the skilfully worked picture of Nelson with his empty sleeve and closed eye and the inscription underneath: "England expects that every man this day will do his duty." Jack had explained with considerable pride that this did not constitute all, as on his father's back was a wonderful representation of the *Victory*, and on other parts of his body a lion, a snake, and other *fauna*, but Richard Bridges had protested laughingly and refused to undress further for our delectation.

We reached Bulawayo, but no one in the city appeared to recall the case at all; indeed, Bulawayo had grown out of all recognition since Richard Bridges had passed through it on his prospecting trip. It was difficult to know where to start. Even the police could not help, and had no knowledge of where the murderer had been buried. No one but an old saloon-keeper and a couple of miners could recollect the execution even, and they, so far as they could remember, had never met Richard Bridges in the flesh, though his unsavoury reputation was well known to them.[38]

In despair, Jack suggested a trek up country towards Barotseland, which was the district that Bridges and Symes had proposed to prospect, though, according to all accounts, Symes had been murdered by the Matabele before they reached the Guai river.

For the next month we trekked steadily northwards, having very fair sport; but, as I expected, extracting no information whatever from the natives about the two prospectors who had passed that way years before. At length, Jack became more or less reconciled to failure, and realising the futility of further search suggested a return to Bulawayo. As our donkey caravan was beginning to suffer severely from the fly, I concurred, and we started to travel slowly back to Bulawayo, shooting by the way.

One night after a particularly hard trek we inspanned at an old *kraal*, the painted walls of which told that at one time it had served as a royal residence, and as I had shot an eland cow that afternoon, which provided far more meat than we could consume, we invited the induna and his tribe to the feast. Not to be outdone in hospitality, the old chief produced the kaffir beer of the country, a liquid which has nothing to recommend it beyond the fact that it intoxicates rapidly.

A meat feast and a beer drink is a great event in the average kaffir's life, and as the evening wore on a general jollification started to the thump of tomtoms and the squeak of kaffir fiddles. There was one very drunk old Barotse, who sat close to me, and, accompanying himself with thumps on his tomtom, sang in one droning[39] key a song about a man who kept snakes and lions inside him, and from whose chest the evil eye looked out. At least, so far as I could gather that was roughly the gist of the song; but as his tomtom was particularly large and most obnoxious I politely took it away from him, and Jack and I used it as a table for our gourds of kaffir beer, which we were pretending to consume in large quantities.

A gourd, however, is a top-heavy sort of drinking vessel, and in a very short time I had succeeded in spilling half a pint or so of my drink on the parchment of the drum. Not wishing to spoil the old gentleman's plaything, which he evidently valued above all things, I mopped up the beer with my handkerchief, and in doing so removed from the parchment a portion of the accumulated filth of ages.

"Hullo!" said Jack, taking the instrument from me and holding it up to the firelight. "There's a picture of some sort here. It looks like a man in a cocked hat."

He rubbed it hard with his pocket handkerchief, and the polishing brought more of the picture to light, till, plain enough in places and faded in others, there stood out, the portrait of a man in an old-fashioned naval uniform with stars on his breast, and underneath some letters in the form of a scroll.

"That's not native work," I exclaimed. "These are English letters," for I could distinctly make out the word "man" followed by a "t" and an "h." "Rub it hard, Jack."

The grease on the parchment refused to give way to further polishing, however, and remembering a bottle of ammonia I kept for insect bites,[40] I mixed some with kaffir beer and poured it on the head of the tomtom. One touch of the handkerchief was sufficient once the strong alkali got to work, and out came the grand old face of Nelson and underneath his motto:

"England expects that every man this day will do his duty."

Jack dropped the drum as if it had bitten him.

"What does it mean?" he gasped. "My father had this on his chest. I remember it well!"

I was, however, too busy with the reverse end of the drum to heed him. On the other side the ammonia brought out a picture of the *Victory*, with the head of a roaring lion below it.

"Good God!" exclaimed Jack. "My father had that on his back. Quick, Jim, rub hard! There should be the family crest to the right—an eagle with a snake in its talons and R. B. underneath."

I rubbed in the spot indicated, and out came the crest and initials exactly as Jack had described them. There was something horribly uncanny and gruesome in finding the tattoo marks of the dead man on the parchment of a Barotse tomtom two hundred miles north of the Zambesi, and for a moment I was too overcome with astonishment to grasp exactly what it meant. Then it came to my mind in a flash that the parchment was nothing else than human skin, and Richard Bridges' skin at that. I put it down with sudden reverence, and, beckoning to its owner, demanded its full history. At first he showed signs of fear, but promising him a waist length of cloth if he told the truth, he squatted on his hams before us and began.[41]

"Many, many moons ago, before the white men came to trade across the Big Water as they do now, two white baases came into this country to look for white stones and gold. One baas was bigger than the other, and on his chest and on his body were pictures of birds, and beasts, and strange things. On his chest was a great inkoos with one eye covered, and on his back a hut with trees growing straight up into the air from it. On his loins was a lion of great fierceness, and coiled round his waist was a hissing mamba (snake). We were sore afraid, for the white baas told us he was bewitched, and that if harm came to either he would uncover the closed eye of the great inkoos upon his chest, which was the Evil Eye, and command him to blast the Barotse and their land for ever.

"So the white men were suffered to come and go in peace, for we dreaded the Evil Eye of the great inkoos. They toiled, these white baases, digging in the hillside and searching the riverbed; and then one day it came to pass that they quarrelled and fought, and the baas with the pictures was slain. We knew then that his medicine was bad medicine, otherwise the white baas without the pictures could not have killed him. So we were wroth and made to slay the other baas, but he shot us down with a fire stick and returned to his own country in haste. Then did I take the skin from the

dead baas, for I loved him for his pictures, and I made them into a tomtom. I have spoken."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Jack when I had translated the story. "Then my father was killed here in Barotseland, and it was Symes, his murderer, who went back to Bulawayo. It[42] was that fiend Symes, also, who took my father's name, probably to draw any money that might have been left behind, and who, as Richard Bridges, was hanged for murder. Poor old dad," he added brokenly, "murdered, and his body mutilated by savages! But how glad I am to know that he died an honest man!"

With the evidence at hand it was easy to prove the identity of the murderer of twenty years ago, and, having settled the matter satisfactorily and cleared the dead man's name, Jack and I returned to England, where a few weeks later I had to purchase wedding garments in order that I might play the part of best man at Jack's wedding.

[43]

IV THE CASE OF SIR ALISTER MOERAN

"Ethne?" My aunt looked at me with raised brows and smiled. "My dear Maurice, hadn't you heard? Ethne went abroad directly after Christmas, with the Wilmotts, for a trip to Egypt. She's having a glorious time!"

I am afraid I looked as blank as I felt. I had only landed in England three days ago, after two years' service in India, and the one thing I had been looking forward to was seeing my cousin Ethne again.

"Then, since you did not know she was away, you, of course, have not heard the other news?" went on my aunt.

"No," I answered in a wooden voice. "I've heard nothing."

She beamed. "The dear child is engaged to a Sir Alister Moeran, whom she met in Luxor. Everyone is delighted, as it is a splendid match for her. Lady Wilmott speaks most highly of him, a man of excellent family and position, and perfectly charming to boot."

I believe I murmured something suitable, but it was absurd to pretend to be overjoyed at the news. The galling part of it was that Aunt Linda knew, and was chuckling, so to speak, over my discomfiture.

"If you are going up to Wimberley Park,"[44] she went on sweetly, "you will probably meet them both, as your Uncle Bob has asked us all there for the February house-party. He cabled an invitation to Sir Alister as soon as he heard of the engagement. Wasn't it good of him?"

I replied that it was; then, having heard quite enough for one day of the charms of Ethne's *fiancé*, I took my leave.

That night, after cursing myself for a churl, I wrote and wished her good luck. The next morning I received a letter from Uncle Bob asking me to go to Wimberley; and early in the following week I travelled up to Cumberland. I received a warm welcome from the old General. As a boy I used to spend the greater part of my holidays with him, and being childless himself, he regarded me more or less as a son.

On February 16th Ethne, her mother, and Sir Alister Moeran arrived. I motored to the station to meet them. The evening was cold and raw and so dark that it was almost impossible to distinguish people on the badly lighted little platform. However, as I groped my way along, I recognised Ethne's voice, and thus directed, hurried towards the group. As I did so two gleaming, golden eyes flashed out at me through the darkness.

"Hullo!" I thought. "So she's carted along the faithful Pincher!" But the next moment I found I was mistaken, for Ethne was holding out both hands to me in greeting. There was no dog with her, and in the bustle that followed, I forgot to seek further for the solution of those two fiery lights.

"It was good of you to come, Maurice," Ethne said with unmistakable pleasure, then, turning[45] to the man at her side, "Alister, this is my cousin, Captain Kilvert, of whom you have heard me speak."

We murmured the usual formalities in the usual manner, but as my fingers touched his, I experienced the most curious sensation down the region of my spine. It took me back to Burma and a certain very uncomfortable night that I once

passed in the jungle. But the impression was so fleeting as to be indefinable, and soon I was busy getting everyone settled in the car.

So far, except that he possessed an exceptionally charming voice, I had no chance of forming an opinion of my cousin's *fiancé*. It was half-past seven when we got back to the house, so we all went straight up to our rooms to dress for dinner.

Everyone was assembled in the drawing-room when Sir Alister Moeran came in, and I shall never forget the effect his appearance made. Conversation ceased entirely for an instant. There was a kind of breathless pause, which was almost audible as my uncle rose to greet him. In all my life I had never seen a handsomer man, and I don't suppose anyone else there had either. It was the most startling, arresting style of beauty one could possibly imagine, and yet, even as I stared at him in admiration, the word "Black!" flashed into my mind.

Black! I pulled myself up sharply. We English, who have lived out in the East, are far too prone to stigmatise thus anyone who shows the smallest trace of being a "half breed"; but in Sir Alister's case there was not even a suspicion of this. He was no darker than scores[46] of men of my own nationality, and besides, he belonged, I knew, to a very old Scottish family. Yet, try as I would to strangle the idea, all through the evening the same horrible, unaccountable notion clung to me.

That he was the personality of the gathering there was not the slightest doubt. Men and women alike seemed attracted by him, for his individuality was on a par with his looks.

Several times during dinner I glanced at Ethne, but it was easy to see that all her attention was taken up by her lover. Yet, oddly enough, I was not jealous in the ordinary way. I saw the folly of imagining that I could stand a chance against a man like Moeran, and, moreover, he interested me too deeply. His knowledge of the East was extraordinary, and later, when the ladies had retired, he related many curious experiences.

"Might I ask," said my uncle's friend, Major Faucett, suddenly, "whether you were in the Service, or had you a Government appointment out there?"

Sir Alister smiled, and under his moustache I caught the gleam of strong, white teeth.

"As a matter of fact, neither. I am almost ashamed to say I have no profession, unless I may call myself an explorer."

"And why not?" put in Uncle Bob. "Provided your explorations were to some purpose and of benefit to the community in general, I consider you are doing something worth while."

"Exactly," Sir Alister replied. "From my earliest boyhood I have always had the strangest hankering for the East. I say strange, because to my parents it was inexplicable, neither of[47] them having the slightest leaning in that direction, though to me it seemed the most natural desire in the world. I was like an alien in a foreign land, longing to get home. I recollect, as a child, my nurse thought me a beastly uncanny kid because I loved to lie in bed and listen to the cats howling and fighting outside. I used to put my head half under the blankets and imagine I was in my lair in the jungle, and those were the jackals and panthers prowling around outside."

"I suppose you'd been reading adventure books," Uncle Bob said, with a laugh. "I played at much the same game when I was a youngster, only in my case it was Redskins."

"Possibly," Sir Alister answered with a slight shrug, "only mine wasn't a game that I played with any other boys, it was a gnawing desire, which simply had to be satisfied; and the opportunity came. When I was fourteen, the father of a school friend of mine, who was going out to India, asked me to go out with him and the boy for the trip. Of course, I went."

"I wonder," the Major remarked, "that you ever came back once you got there, since you were so frightfully keen."

"I was certain I should return," he replied grimly.

A pause followed his last words, then Uncle Bob rose and led the way to the drawing-room, where for the remainder of the evening Sir Alister was chiefly monopolised by the ladies.

"Well, Maurice," Uncle Bob said, when on the following evening I was sitting in his study[48] having my usual before-dinner chat with him, "and how do you like Ethne's future husband?"

I hesitated. "I—I really don't know," I replied.

"Come, boy," he said, with his whimsical smile, "why not be frank and own to a very natural jealousy?"

"Because," I answered simply, "the feeling Sir Alister Moeran inspires in me is not jealousy, curiously enough. It's something else, something indefinable that comes over me now and again. Dogs don't like him, and that's always a bad sign, to my thinking."

My uncle's bushy eyebrows went up slightly.

"When did you make this discovery?"

"This morning," I replied. "You know I took him and Ethne round the place. Well, the first thing I noticed was that Mike refused to come with us, although both Ethne and I called him. As we passed through the hall he slunk away into the library. I thought it a bit strange, as he's usually so frantic to go out with me. Still, I didn't attach any significance to the matter until later, when we visited the kennels. I don't know why, but one takes it for granted that a man is keen on dogs somehow and——"

"Isn't Sir Alister?"

"They are not keen on him, anyhow," I answered grimly. "They had heard my voice as we approached and were all barking with delight, but directly we entered the place there was a dead silence, save for a few ominous growls from Argo. It was a most extraordinary sight. They all bristled up, so to speak, sniffing the air though on the scent of something. I let[49] Bess and Fritz loose, but instead of jumping up, as they usually do, they hung back and showed the whites of their eyes in a way I've never seen before. I actually had to whistle to them sharply several times before they came, and then it was in a slinking manner, taking good care to put Ethne and me between themselves and Moeran, and looking askance at him the whole while."

"H'm!" murmured the General with puckered brows. "That was certainly odd, very odd!"

"It was," I agreed, warming to the subject, "but there's odder still to come. I dare say you'll think it all my fancy, but the minute those animals put their heads up and sniffed in that peculiar way, I distinctly smelt the musky, savage odour of wild beasts. You know it well, anyone who has been through a jungle does."

Uncle Bob nodded. "I know it, too; 'Musky' is the very word—the smell of sun-warmed fur. Jove, how it carries me back! I remember once, years ago, coming upon a litter of lion cubs, in a cave, when I was out in Africa——"

"Yes! Yes!" I cried eagerly. "And that is what I smelt this morning. Those dogs smelt it, too. They felt that there was something alien, abnormal in their midst."

"That something being—Sir Alister Moeran?"

I felt myself flush up under his gaze. I got up and walked about the room.

"I don't understand it," I said doggedly. "I tell you plainly, Uncle Bob, I don't understand. My impression of the man last night was 'black,' but he's not black, I know that perfectly well, no more than you or I are, and[50] yet I can't get over the behaviour of those hounds. It wasn't only one of 'em, it was the whole lot. They seemed to regard him as their natural enemy! And that smell! I'm sure Ethne detected it too, for she kept glancing about her in a startled, mystified way."

"And Sir Alister?" queried the General. "Do you mean to say he did not notice anything amiss?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "He didn't appear to. I called attention myself to the singular attitude of the hounds, and he said quite casually: 'Dogs never do take to me much.'"

Uncle Bob gave a short laugh. "Our friend is evidently not sensitive." He paused and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then added: "It certainly is rather curious, but, for Heaven's sake, boy, don't get imagining all sorts of things!"

This nettled me and made me wish I had held my tongue. I was quite aware that my story might have sounded somewhat fantastic from a stranger; still, he ought to have known me better than to accuse me of imagination. I abruptly changed the subject, and shortly after left the room.

But I could not banish from my mind the incident of the morning. I could not forget the appealing faces of those dogs. Ethne and Sir Alister had left me there and returned to the house together, and, after their departure, those poor, dumb beasts had gathered round me in a way that was absolutely pathetic, licking and fondling my hands, as though apologising for their previous misconduct. Still, I understood. That bristling up their spines was precisely[51] the same sensation I had experienced when I first met Sir Alister Moeran.

As I was slowly mounting the stairs on my way up to dress, I heard someone running up after me, and turned round to find Ethne beside me.

"Maurice," she said, rather breathlessly, "tell me, you did not punish Fritz and Bess for not coming at once when you called them this morning?"

"No," I answered.

She gave a nervous little laugh. "I'm glad of that. I thought perhaps——" She stopped short, then rushed on, "You know how queer mother is about cats—can't bear one in the room, and how they always fly out directly she comes in? Well, dogs are the same with Alister. He—he told me so himself. It seems funny to me, and I suppose to you, because we're so fond of all kinds of animals; but I don't really see why it should be any more extraordinary to have an antipathy for dogs than for cats, and no one thinks anything of it if you dislike cats."

"That is so," I said thoughtfully.

"Anyway," she went on, "it is not our own fault if a certain animal does not instinctively take to us."

"Of course not," I replied stoutly. "You're surely not worrying about it, are you?"

She hastened to assure me that she was not, but I could see that my indorsing her opinion was a great relief to her. She had been afraid that I should think it unnatural. I did for that matter, but I could not, of course, tell her so.[52]

That night Sir Alister and I sat up late talking after the other men had retired. We had got on the subject of India and had been comparing notes as to our different adventures. From this we went on to discussing perilous situations and escapes, and it was then that he narrated to me a very curious incident.

"It happened when I was only twenty-one," he said, "the year after my father died. I think I told you that as soon as ever I became my own master, I packed up and was off to the East. I had a friend with me, a boy who had been my best pal at school. They used to call us 'Black and White.' He was fair and girlish-looking, and his name was Buchanan. He was just as keen on India as I was, and purposed writing a book afterwards on our experiences.

"Our intention was to explore the wildest, most savage districts, and as a start we selected the province of Orissa. The forests there are wonderful, and it is there, if anywhere, that the almost extinct Indian lion is still to be found. We engaged two sturdy hillmen to accompany us and pushed our way downwards from Calcutta over mountains, rivers and through some of the densest jungles I've ever traversed. It was on the outskirts of one of the latter that the tragedy took place. We had pitched our tents one evening after a long, tiring day, and turned in early to sleep, Buchanan and I in one, and the two Bhils in the other."

Sir Alister paused for a few moments, toying with his cigar in an abstracted manner, then continued in the same clear, even voice:

"When I awoke next morning, I found my[53] friend lying beside me dead, and blood all round us! His throat was torn open by the teeth of some wild beast, his breast was horribly mauled and lacerated, and his eyes were wide, staring open, and their expression was awful. He must have died a hideous death and known it!"

Again he stopped, but I made no comment, only waited with breathless interest till he went on.

"I called the two men. They came and looked, and for the first time I saw terror written on their faces. Their nostrils quivered as though scenting something; then 'Tiger!' they gasped simultaneously.

"One of them said he had heard a stifled scream in the night, but had thought it merely some animal in the jungle. The whole thing was a mystery. How I came to sleep undisturbed through it all, how I escaped the same fate, and why the tiger did not carry off his prey——"

"You are sure it was a tiger?" I put in.

"I think there was no doubt of it," Sir Alister replied. "The Bhils swore the teeth-marks were unmistakable, and not only that, but I saw another case seven years later. The body of a young woman was found in the compound outside my bungalow, done to death in precisely the same way. And several of the natives testified as to there being a tiger in that vicinity, for they had found three or four young goats destroyed in similar fashion."

"Who was the girl?" I asked.

Moeran slowly turned his lucent, amber eyes upon me as he answered. "She was a German, a sort of nursery governess at the English doctor's. He was naturally frightfully upset about it, and a regular panic sprang up in the neighbourhood. [54] The natives got a superstitious scare—thought one of their gods was wroth about something and demanded sacrifice; but the white people were simply out to kill the tiger."

"And did they?" I queried eagerly.

Sir Alister shook his head. "That I can't say, as I left the place very soon afterwards and went up to the mountains."

A long silence followed, during which I stared at him in mute fascination. Then an unaccountable impulse made me say abruptly: "Moeran, how old are you?"

His finely-marked eyebrows went up in surprise at the irrelevance of my question, but he smiled.

"Funny you should ask! It so happens that it's my birthday to-morrow. I shall be thirty-five."

"Thirty-five!" I repeated. Then with a shiver I rose from my seat. The room seemed to have turned suddenly cold.

"Come," I said, "let's go to bed."

Next night at dinner I proposed Sir Alister's health, and we all drank to him and his "bride-to-be." They had that day definitely settled the date of their marriage for two months ahead; Ethne was looking radiant and everyone seemed in the best of spirits.

We danced and romped and played rowdy games like a pack of children. Nothing was too silly for us to attempt. While a one-step was in full swing some would-be wag suddenly turned off all the lights. It was then that for a moment I caught sight of a pair of glowing, fiery eyes shining through the darkness. Instantly my[55] thoughts flew back to that meeting at the station, when I had fancied that Ethne had her dog in her arms. A chill, sinister feeling crept over me, but I kept my gaze fixed steadily in the same direction. The next minute the lights went up, and I found myself staring straight at Sir Alister Moeran. His arm was round Ethne's waist and she was smiling up into his face. Almost immediately they took up the dance again, and I and my partner followed suit. But all my gaiety had departed. An indefinable oppression seized me and clung to me for the rest of the evening.

As I emerged from my room next morning I saw old Giles, the butler, hurrying down the corridor towards me.

"Oh, Mr. Maurice—Captain Kilvert, sir!" he burst out, consternation in every line of his usually stolid countenance. "A dreadful thing has happened! How it's come about I can't for the life of me say, and how we're going to tell the General, the Lord only knows!"

"What?" I asked, seizing him by the arm. "What is it?"

"The dawg, sir," he answered in a hoarse whisper, "Mike—in the study——"

I waited to hear no more, but strode off down the stairs, Giles hobbling beside me as fast as he could, and together we entered the study.

In the middle of the floor lay the body of Mike. A horrible foreboding gripped me, and I quickly knelt down and raised the dog's head. His neck was torn open, bitten right through to the windpipe, the blood still dripping from it into a dark pool on the carpet.

A cold, numbing sensation stole down my spine and made my legs grow suddenly weak.[56] Beads of perspiration gathered on my forehead as I slowly rose to my feet and faced Giles.

"What's the meaning of it, sir?" he asked, passing his hand across his brow in utter bewilderment. "That dawg was as right as possible when I shut up last night, and he couldn't have got out."

"No," I answered mechanically, "he couldn't have got out."

"Looks like some wild beast had attacked him," muttered the old man, in awed tones, as he bent over the lifeless body. "D'ye see the teeth marks, sir? But it's not possible—not possible."

"No," I said again, in the same wooden fashion. "It's not possible."

"But how're we going to account for it to the General?" he cried brokenly. "Oh, Mr. Maurice, sir, it's dreadful!"

I nodded. "You're right, Giles! Still, it isn't your fault, nor mine. Leave the matter to me. I'll break it to my uncle."

It was a most unenviable task, but I did it. Poor Uncle Bob! I shall never forget his face when he saw the mutilated body of the dog that for years had been his faithful companion. He almost wept, only rage and resentment against the murderer were so strong in him that they thrust grief for the time into the background. The mysterious, incomprehensible manner of the dog's death only added to his anger, for there was apparently no one on whom to wreak his vengeance.

The news caused general concern throughout the house, and Ethne was frightfully upset.[57]

"Oh, Alister, isn't it awful?" she exclaimed, tears standing in her pretty blue eyes. "Poor, darling Mike!"

"Yes," he answered rather absently. "It's most unfortunate. Valuable dog, too, wasn't it?"

I walked away. The man's calm, handsome face filled me suddenly with unspeakable revulsion. The atmosphere of the room seemed to become heavy and noisome. I felt compelled to get out into the open to breathe.

I found the General tramping up and down the drive in the rain, his chin sunk deep into the collar of his overcoat, his hat pulled low down over his eyes. I joined him without speaking, and in silence we paced side by side for another quarter of an hour.

"Uncle Bob," I said abruptly at last, "take my advice. Have one of the hounds indoors to-night—Princep, he's a good watch-dog."

The General stopped short in his walk and looked at me.

"You've something on your mind, boy. What is it?"

"This," I answered grimly. "Whoever, or whatever killed Mike was in the house last night, or got in, after Giles shut up. It may still be there for all we know. In the dark, dark deeds are done, and—well, I think it's wise to take precautions."

"Good God, Maurice, if there is any creature in hiding, we'll soon have it out! I'll have the place searched now. But the thing's impossible, absurd!"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Then Mike died a natural death?"[58]

"Natural?" he echoed fiercely. "Don't talk rubbish!"

"In that case," I said quietly, "you'll agree to let one of the dogs sleep in."

He gave me a long, troubled, searching look, then said gruffly: "Very well, but don't make any fuss about it. Women are such nervous beings and we don't want to upset anyone."

"You needn't be afraid of that," I replied, "I'll manage it all right."

There was no further talk of Mike that day. The visitors, seeing how distressed the General was, by tacit consent avoided the subject, but everyone felt the dampening effect.

That night, before I retired to my room, I took a lantern, went out to the kennels and brought in Princep, a pure-bred Irish setter. He was a dog of exceptional intelligence, and when I spoke to him, explaining the reason of his presence

indoors, he seemed to know instinctively what was required of him.

As I passed the study I noticed a light coming from under the door. Somewhat surprised, I turned the handle and looked in. My uncle was seated before his desk in the act of loading a revolver. He glanced up sharply as I entered.

"Oh, it's you, is it? Got the dog in?"

"Yes," I replied, "I've left him in the library with the door open."

He regarded the revolver pensively for a few moments, then laid it down in front of him.

"You've no theory as to this—this business?"

I shook my head, I could offer no explanation. Yet all the while there lurked, deep down in my heart, a hideous suspicion, a suspicion so monstrous that had I voiced it, I should probably[59] have been considered mad. And so I held my peace on the subject and merely wished my uncle good-night.

It was about one o'clock when I got into bed, but my brain was far too agitated for sleep. Something I had heard years ago, some old wives' tales about a man's life changing every seven years, kept dinning in my head. I was striving to remember how the story went, when a slight sound outside caught my ear. In a second I was out of bed and had silently opened the door. As I did so, someone passed close by me down the corridor.

Cautiously, with beating heart, I crept out and followed. However, I almost exclaimed aloud in my amazement, for the light from a window fell full on the figure ahead of me, and I recognised my cousin Ethne. She was sleep-walking, a habit she had had from her childhood, and which apparently she had never outgrown.

For some minutes I stood there, undecided how to act, while she passed on down the stairs, out of sight. To wake her I knew would be wrong. I knew, also, that she had walked thus a score of times without coming to any harm. There was, therefore, no reason why I should not return to my room and leave her to her wandering, yet still I remained rooted to the spot, all my senses strained, alert. And then suddenly I heard Princep whine. A series of low, stertorous growls followed, growls that made my blood run cold! With swift, noiseless steps, I stole along to the minstrel's gallery which overlooked that portion of the hall that communicated with the library. As I did so, there arose from immediately below me a succession of sharp[60] snarls, such as a dog gives when he is in deadly fear or pain.

A shaft of moonlight fell across the polished floor, and by its aid I was just able to distinguish the form of Princep crouched against the wainscoting. He was breathing heavily, his head turned all the while towards the opposite side of the room. I looked in the same direction. Out of the darkness gleamed two fiery, golden orbs, two eyes that moved slowly to and fro, backwards and forwards, as though the Thing were prowling round and round. Now it seemed to crouch as though ready to spring, and I could hear the savage growling as of some beast of prey.

As I watched, horrified, fascinated, a *portière* close by was lifted, and the white-robed figure of Ethne appeared. All heedless of danger she came on across the hall, and the Thing, with soft, stealthy tread, came after her. I knew then that there was not an instant to be lost, and like a flash I darted along the gallery and down the stairs. But ere I gained the hall a piercing scream rent the air, and I was just in time to see Ethne borne to the ground by a great, dark form, which had sprung at her like a tiger.

Half frantic, I dashed forward, snatching as I did so a rapier from the wall, the only weapon handy. But before I reached the spot, a voice from the study doorway called: "Stop!" and the next moment the report of a pistol rang out.

"Good God!" I cried. "Who have you shot?"

"Not the girl," answered the grim voice of my uncle, "you may trust my aim for that![61] I fired at the eyes of the Thing. Here, quick, get lights and let's see what has happened."

But my one and only thought was for Ethne. Moving across to the dark mass on the floor, I stretched out my hand. My fingers touched a smooth, fabric-like cloth, but the smell was the smell of fur, the musky, sun-warmed fur of the jungle! With sickening repugnance, I seized the Thing by its two broad shoulders and rolled it over. Then I carefully raised Ethne from the ground. At that moment Giles and a footman appeared with candles. In silence my uncle took one and came towards me, the servants with scared, blanched countenances following.

The light fell full upon the dead, upturned face of Sir Alister Moeran. His upper lip was drawn back, showing the

strong, white teeth. The two front ones were tipped with blood. Instantly my eyes turned to Ethne's throat, and there I saw deep, horrible marks, like the marks of a tiger's fangs; but, thank God, they had not penetrated far enough to do any serious injury! My uncle's shot had come just in time to save her.

"Merely fainted, hasn't she?" he asked anxiously.

I nodded. My relief at finding this was so, was too great for words.

"Heaven be praised!" I heard him mutter. Then lifting my beautiful, unconscious burden in my arms, I carried her upstairs to her room.

Can I explain, can anyone explain, the mysterious vagaries of atavism? I only know that there are amongst us, rare instances fortunately, but existent nevertheless—men with[62] the souls of beasts. They may be cognisant of the fact or otherwise. In the case of Sir Alister I feel sure it was the latter. He had probably no more idea than I what far-reaching, evil strain it was that came out in his blood and turned him, every seven years, practically into a vampire.

[63]

V

THE KISS

The quiet of the deserted building incircled the little, glowing room as the velvet incircles the jewel in its case. Occasionally faint sounds came from the distance—the movements of cleaners at work, a raised voice, the slamming of a door.

The man sat at his desk, as he had sat through the busy day, but he had turned sideways in his seat, the better to regard the other occupant of the room.

She was not beautiful—had no need to be. Her call to him had been the saner call of mind to mind. That he desired, besides, the passing benediction of her hands, the fragrance of her corn-gold hair, the sight of her slenderness: this she had guessed and gloried in. Till now, he had touched her physical self neither in word nor deed. To-night, she knew, the barriers would be down; to-night they would kiss.

Her quiet eyes, held by his during the spell that had bound them speechless, did not flinch at the breaking of it.

"The Lord made the world and then He made this rotten old office," the man said quietly. "Into it He put you—and me. What, before that day, has gone to the making and marring of me, and the making and perfecting of you,[64] is not to the point. It is enough that we have realised, heart, and soul, and body, that you are mine and I am yours."

"Yes," she said.

He fell silent again, his eyes on her hungrily. She felt them and longed for his touch. But there came only his voice.

"I want you. The first moment I saw you I wanted you. I thought then that, whatever the cost, I would have you. That was in the early days of our talks here—before you made it so courageously clear to me that it would never be possible for you to ignore my marriage and come to me. That is still so, isn't it?"

She moved slightly, like a dreamer in pain, as again she faced the creed she had hated through many a sleepless night.

"It is so," she agreed. "And because it is so, you are going away to-morrow."

"Yes."

They looked at each other across the foot or two of intervening space. It was a look to bridge death with. But even beneath their suffering, her eyes voiced the tremulous waiting of her lips.

At last he found words.

"You are the most wonderful woman in the world—the pluckiest, the most completely understanding; you have the

widest charity. I suppose I ought to thank you for it all; I can't—that's not my way. I have always demanded of you, demanded enormously, and received my measure pressed down and running over. Now I am going to ask this last thing of you: will you, of your goodness, go away—upstairs,[65] anywhere—and come back in ten minutes' time? By then I shall have cleared out."

She looked at him almost incredulously, lips parted. Suddenly she seemed a child.

"You—I——" she stammered. Then rising to her feet, with a superb simplicity: "But, you must kiss me before you go. You must! You—simply *must*."

For the space of a flaming moment it seemed that in one stride he would have crossed to her side, caught and held her.

"For God's sake——!" he muttered, in almost ludicrous fear of himself. Then, with a big effort, he regained his self-control.

"Listen," he said hoarsely. "I want to kiss you so much that I daren't even get to my feet. Do you understand what that means? Think of it, just for a moment, and then realise that *I am not going to kiss you*. And I have kissed many women in my time, too, and shall kiss more, no doubt."

"But it's not because of that——?"

"That I'm holding back? No. Neither is it because I funk the torture of kissing you once and letting you go. It's because I'm afraid—for *you*."

"For me?"

"Listen. You have unfolded your beliefs to me and, though I don't hold them—don't attempt to live up to your lights—the realisation of them has given me a reverence for you that you don't dream of. I have put you in a shrine and knelt to you; every time you have sat in that chair and talked with me, I have worshipped you."[66]

"It would not alter—all that," the girl said faintly, "if you kissed me."

"I don't believe that; neither do you—no, you don't! In your heart of hearts you admit that a woman like you is not kissed for the first and last time by a man like me. Suppose I kissed you now? I should awaken something in you as yet half asleep. You're young and pulsing with life, and there are—thank Heaven!—few layers of that damnable young-girl shyness over you. The world would call you primitive, I suppose."

"But I don't——"

"Oh, Lord, you must see it's all or nothing! You surely understand that after I had left you you would not go against your morality, perhaps, but you would adjust it, in spite of yourself, to meet your desires! I cannot—safely—kiss you."

"But you are going away for good!"

"For good! Child, do you think my going will be your safeguard? If you wanted me so much that you came to think it was right and good to want me, wouldn't you find me, send for me, call for me? And I should come. God! I can see the look in your eyes now, when the want had been satisfied, and you could not drug your creed any more."

Her breath came in a long sigh. Then she tried to speak; tried again.

"It is so, isn't it?" he asked.

She nodded. Speech was too difficult. With the movement a strand of the corn-gold hair came tumbling down the side of her face.

"Then, that being the case," said the man, with infinite gentleness, his eyes on the little,[67] tumbling lock, "I shall not attempt so much as to touch your hand before you leave the room."

At the door she turned.

"Tell me once again," she said. "You *want* to kiss me?"

He gripped the arms of his chair; from where she stood, she could see the veins standing out on his hands.

"I want to kiss you," he said fiercely. "I want to kiss you. If there were any way of cutting off to-morrow—all the to-morrows—with the danger they hold for us—I would kiss you. I would kiss you, and kiss you, and kiss you!"

II

Where her feet took her during the thousand, thousand years that was his going she could never afterwards say; but she found herself at last at the top of the great building, at an open window, leaning out, with the rain beating into her eyes.

Far below her the lights wavered and later she remembered that echoes of a far-off tumult had reached her as she sat. But her ears held only the memory of a man's footsteps—the eager tread that had never lingered so much as a second's space on its way to her; that had often stumbled slightly on the threshold of her presence; that she had heard and welcomed in her dreams; that would not come again.

The raindrops lay like tears upon her face.[68]

She brushed them aside, and, rising, put up her hands to feel the wet lying heavy on her hair. The coldness of her limbs surprised her faintly. Downstairs she went again, the echoes mocking every step.

She closed the door of the room behind her and idly cleared a scrap of paper from a chair. Mechanically her hands went to the litter on his desk and she had straightened it all before she realised that there was no longer any need. To-morrow would bring a voice she did not know; would usher a stranger into her room to take her measure from behind a barrier of formality. For the rest there would be work, and food, and sleep.

These things would make life—life that had been love.

She put on her hat and coat. The room seemed smaller somehow and shabbier. The shaded lights that had invited, now merely irritated; the whimsical disorder of books and papers spoke only of an uncompleted task. Gone was the glamour and the promise and the good comradeship. He had taken them all. She faced to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow empty-handed—in her heart the memory of words that had seared and healed in a breath, and the dead dream of a kiss. Her throat ached with the pain of it.

And then suddenly she heard him coming back!

She stiffened. For one instant, mind and body, she was rigid with the sheer wonder of it. Then, as the atmosphere of the room surged back, tense with vitality, her mind leapt forward in welcome. He was coming back, coming[69] back! The words hammered themselves out to the rhythm of the eager tread that never lingered so much as a second's space on its way to her, that stumbled slightly on the threshold of her presence.

By some queer, reflex twist of memory, her hands brushed imaginary raindrops from her face and strayed uncertainly to where the wet had lain on her hair.

The door opened and closed behind him.

"I've come back. I've come back to kiss you. Dear—*dear!*"

Her outflung hand checked him in his stride towards her. Words came stammering to her lips.

"Why—but—this isn't—I don't understand! All you said—it was true, surely? It was cruel of you to make me know it was true and then come back!"

"Let me kiss you—let me, let me!" He was overwhelming her, ignoring her resistance. "I must kiss you, I must kiss you." He said it again and again.

"No, no, you shan't—you can't play with me! You said you were afraid for me, and you made me afraid, too—of my weakness—of the danger—of my longing for you——"

"Let me kiss you! Yes, you shall let me; you *shall* let me." His arms held her, his face touched hers.

"Aren't you afraid any more? Has a miracle happened—may we kiss in spite of to-morrow?"

Inch by inch she was relaxing. All thought was slipping away into a great white light that held no to-morrows, nor any fear of them, nor of herself, nor of anything. The light crept[70] to her feet, rose to her heart, her head. Through the radiance came his words.

"Yes, a miracle. Oh, my dear—my little child! I've come back to kiss you, little child."

"Kiss me, then," she said against his lips.

III

Hazily she was aware that he had released her; that she had raised her head; that against the rough tweed of his shoulder there lay a long, corn-gold hair.

She laughed shakily and her hand went up to remove it; but he caught her fingers and held them to his face. And with the movement and his look there came over her in a wave the shame of her surrender, a shame that was yet a glory, a diadem of pride. She turned blindly away.

"Please," she heard herself saying, "let me go now. I want to be alone. I want to—please don't tell me to-night. To-morrow——"

She was at the door, groping for the handle. Behind her she heard his voice; it was very tender.

"I shall always kneel to you—in your shrine."

Then she was outside, and the chilly passages were cooling her burning face. She had left him in the room behind her; and she knew he would wait there long enough to allow her to leave the building. Almost immediately, it seemed, she was downstairs in the hall, had reached the entrance.[71]

She confronted a group of white-faced, silent men.

"Why, is anything the matter? What has happened? O'Dell?"

The porter stood forward. He cleared his throat twice, but for all that, his words were barely audible.

"Yes, Miss Carryll. Good-night, miss. You'd best be going on, miss, if you'll excuse——"

Behind O'Dell stood a policeman; behind him again, a grave-eyed man stooped to an unusual task. It arrested her attention like the flash of red danger.

"Why is the door of your room being locked, O'Dell?" She knew her curiosity was indecent, but some powerful premonition was stirring in her, and she could not pass on. "Has there been an accident? Who is in there?"

Then, almost under her feet, she saw a dark pool lying sluggishly against the tiles; nearer the door another—on the pavement outside another—and yet another. She gasped, drew back, felt horribly sick; and, as she turned, she caught O'Dell's muttered aside to the policeman.

"Young lady's 'is seccereterry—must be the last that seen 'im alive. All told, 'tain't more'n 'arf-an-'our since 'e left. 'Good-night, O'Dell,' sez 'e. 'Miss Carryll's still working—don't lock 'er in,' sez 'e. Would 'ave 'is joke. Must 'ave gone round the corner an' slap inter the car. Wish to God the amberlance——"

Her cry cut into his words as she flung herself forward. Her fingers wrenched at the key of the locked door and turned it, in spite of the detaining hands that seemed light as leaves[72] upon her shoulder, and as easily shaken off. Unhearing, unheeding, she forced her way into the glare of electric light flooding the little room—beating down on to the table and its sheeted burden. Before she reached it, knowledge had dropped upon her like a mantle.

Her face was grey as the one from which she drew the merciful coverings, but her eyes went fearlessly to that which she sought.

Against the rough tweed of the shoulder lay a long, corn-gold hair.

[73]

VI

THE GOTH

Young Cargill smiled as Mrs. Lardner finished her account.

"And do you really think that the fact that the poor chap was drowned had anything to do with it?" he asked. "Why, you admit yourself that he was known to have been drinking just before he fell out of his boat!"

"You may say what you like," returned his hostess impressively, "but since first we came to live at Tryn yr Wylfa only four people besides poor Roberts have defied the Fates, and each of them was drowned within the year.

"They were all tourists," she added with something suspiciously like satisfaction.

"I am not a superstitious man myself," supplemented the Major. "But you can't get away from the facts, you know, Cargill."

Cargill said no more. He perceived that they had lived long enough in retirement in the little Welsh village to have acquired a pride in its legend.

The legend and the mountains are the two attractions of Tryn yr Wylfa—the official guidebook devotes an equal amount of space to each. It will tell you that the bay, across which the quarry's tramp steamers now sail, was once dry land on which stood a village. Deep in the[74] water the remains of this village can still be seen in clear weather. But whosoever dares to look upon them will be drowned within the year. A local publication gives full details of those who have looked—and perished.

The legend had received an unexpected boom in the drowning of Roberts, which had just occurred. Roberts was a fisherman who had recently come from the South. One calm day in February he had rowed out into the bay in fulfilment of a drunken boast. He was drowned three days before Midsummer.

After dinner young Cargill forgot about it. He forgot almost everything except Betty Lardner. But, oddly enough, as he walked back to the hotel it was just Betty Lardner who made him think again of the legend. He was in love, and, being very young, wanted to do something insanely heroic. To defy the Fates by looking on the sunken village was an obvious outlet for heroism.

He must have thought a good deal about it before he fell asleep, for he remembered his resolution on the following morning.

After breakfast he sauntered along the brief strip of asphalt which the villagers believe to be a promenade. He was not actually thinking of the legend; to be precise, he was thinking of Betty Lardner, but he was suddenly reminded of it by a boatman pressing him for his custom.

"Yes," he said abruptly. "I will hire your boat if you will row me out to the sunken village. I want to look at it."

The Welshman eyed him suspiciously, perceived that he was not joking, and shook his head.[75]

"Come," persisted Cargill, "I will make it a sovereign if you care to do it."

"Thank you, but indeed, no, sir," replied the Welshman. "Not if it was a hundred sovereigns!"

"Surely you are not afraid?"

"It iss not fit," retorted the Welshman, turning on his heel.

It was probably this opposition that made young Cargill decide that it would be really worth while to defy the legend.

He did not approach the only other boatman. He considered the question of swimming. The knowledge that the distance there and back was nearly five miles did not render the feat impossible, for he was a champion swimmer.

But he soon thought of a better way. He went back to the hotel and sought out Bissett. Bissett was a fellow member of the Middle Temple, as contentedly briefless as himself. And Bissett possessed a motor-boat.

Bissett was not exactly keen on the prospect.

"Don't you think it is rather a silly thing to do?" he reasoned. "Of course it's all rot in a way—it must be. But isn't it just as well to treat that sort of thing with respect?"

Eventually he agreed to take the motor-boat to within a few hundred yards of the spot. They would tow a dinghy, in which young Cargill could finish the journey.

It took young Cargill half-an-hour to find the spot. But he did find it, and he did look upon, and actually see, all that remained of the sunken village.

He felt vaguely ashamed of himself when he returned to dry land. He noticed that several[76] of the villagers gave him unfriendly glances; and he resolved that he would say nothing of the matter to the Lardners.

They were having tea on the lawn when he dropped in. He thought that Mrs. Lardner's welcome was a trifle chilly. After tea Betty executed a quite deliberate manœuvre to avoid having him for a partner at tennis. But he ran her to earth later, when they were picking up the balls.

"How *could* you?" was all she said.

"I—I didn't know you knew," he stammered weakly.

"Of course everybody knows! It was all over the village before you returned.

"Can't you see what that legend meant to us?" she went on. "It was a thing of beauty. And now you have spoilt it. It's like burning down the trees of the Fairy Glen. You—you *Goth!*"

"But suppose I am drowned before the year is out—like Roberts?" he suggested jocularly.

"Then I will forgive you," she said. And to Cargill it sounded exactly as if she meant what she said.

A few days later he returned to town. For six months he thought little about the legend. Then he was reminded of it.

He had been spending a week-end at Brighton. On the return journey he had a first-class smoker in the rear of the train to himself. Towards the end of the hour he dozed and dreamt of the day he had looked on the sunken village. He was awakened when the train made its usual stop on the bridge outside Victoria.

It had been a pleasant dream, and he was still[77] trying to preserve the illusion when his eye fell lazily on the window, and he noticed that there was a dense fog.

"Bit rough on the legend that I happened to be a Londoner!" he mused. "It isn't easy to drown a man in town!"

He stood up with the object of removing his dressing-case from the rack. But before he reached it there was the shriek of a whistle, a violent shock, and he was hurled heavily into the opposite seat.

It was not a collision in the newspaper sense of the word. No one was hurt. A local train, creeping along at four miles an hour, had simply missed its signal in the fog and bumped the Brighton train.

Young Cargill, in common with most other passengers put his head out of the window. He saw nothing—except the parapet of the bridge.

"By God!" he muttered. "If that other train had been going a little faster——"

He could just hear the river gurgling beneath him.

He had got over his fright by the time he reached Victoria.

"Just a common-place accident," he assured himself, as he drove in a taxi-cab to his chambers. "That's the worst of it! If I happened to be drowned in the ordinary way they'd swear it was the legend. I suppose, for that reason, I had better not take any risks. Anyhow, I needn't go near the sea until the year is out!"

The superstitious would doubtless affirm that the Fates had sent him one warning and, angered at his refusal to accept it,

had determined to[78] drive home the lesson of his own impotence. For when he arrived at his chambers he found a cablegram from Paris awaiting him.

"Hullo, this must be from Uncle Peter!" he exclaimed, as he tore open the envelope.

"Fear uncle dying. Come at once.—Machell."

Machell was the elder Cargill's secretary, and young Cargill was the old man's heir.

It was not until he was in the boat-train that he realised that he was about to cross the sea.

It was a coincidence—an odd coincidence. When the ship tossed in an unusually rough crossing he was prepared to admit to himself that it was an uncanny coincidence.

He stayed a week in Paris for his uncle's funeral. When he made the return journey the Channel was like the proverbial mill pond. But it was not until the ship had actually put into Dover that he laughed at the failure of the Fates to take the opportunity to drown him.

He laughed, to be exact, as he was stepping down the gangway. At the end of the gangway the fold of the rug which he was carrying on his arm, caught in the railings. He turned sharply to free it and stepping back, cannoned into an officer of the dock. It threw him off his balance on the edge of the dockside.

Even if the official had not grabbed him, it is highly probable that he could have saved himself from falling into the water, because the gangway railing was in easy reach; and if you remember that he was a champion swimmer, you will agree that it is still more probable that he would not have been drowned, even if he had fallen.

But the incident made its impression. His[79] thoughts reverted to it constantly during the next few days. Then he told himself that his attendance at the last rites of his uncle had made him morbid, and was more or less successful in dismissing the affair from his mind.

He had many friends in common with the Lardners. Early in February he was invited for a week's hunting to a house at which Betty Lardner was also a guest.

She had not forgotten. She did her best to avoid him, and succeeded remarkably well, in spite of the fact that their hostess, knowing something of young Cargill's feelings, made several efforts to throw them together.

One day at the end of the hunt he came alongside of her and they walked their horses home together. When he was sure that they were out of earshot he asked:

"You haven't forgiven me yet?"

"You know the conditions," she replied banteringly.

"You leave me no alternative to suicide," he protested.

"That would be cheating," she said. "You must be drowned honestly, or it's no good."

Then he made a foolish reply. He thought her humour forced and it annoyed him. Remember that he was exasperated. He had looked forward to meeting her, and now she was treating him with studied coldness over what still seemed to him a comparatively trifling matter.

"I am afraid," he said, "that that is hardly likely to occur. The fact of my being a townsman instead of a drunken boatman doesn't give your legend a fair chance!"[80]

Less than an hour afterwards he was having his bath before dressing for dinner. The water was deliciously hot, and the room was full of steam. As he lay in the bath a drowsiness stole over him. Enjoying the keen physical pleasure of it, he thought what a wholly delightful thing was a hot bath after a day's hard hunting. His mind, bordering on sleep, dwelt lazily on hot baths in general. And then with a startling suddenness came the thought that, before now, men had been drowned in their baths!

With a shock he realised that he had almost fallen asleep. He tried to rouse himself, but a faintness had seized him. That steam—he could not breathe! He was certain he was going to faint.

With a desperate effort of the will he hurled himself out of the bath and threw open the window.

It must have been the bath episode that first aroused the sensation of positive fear in Cargill. For it was almost a month later when he surprised the secretary of that swimming club of which he was the main pillar by his refusal to take part in any events for the coming season.

He was beginning to take precautions.

Late one night, when taxi-cabs were scarce, he found that his quickest way to reach home would be by means of one of the tubes. He was in the descending lift when he suddenly remembered that that particular tube ran beneath the river. Suppose an accident should occur—a leakage! After all such a thing was within the bounds of possibility. Instantly[81] there rose before him the vision of a black torrent roaring through the tunnel.

Without waiting for the lift to ascend he rushed to the staircase, and sweating with terror gained the street and bribed a loafer to find him a cab.

He made an effort to take himself seriously in hand after that. More than one acquaintance had lately told him that he was looking "nervy." In the last few weeks his sane and normal self seemed to have shrunk within him. But it was still capable of asserting itself under favourable conditions. It would talk aloud to the rest of him as if to a separate individual.

"Look here, old man, this superstitious nonsense is becoming an obsession to you," it said one fine April morning. "Yes, I mean what I say—an obsession! You must pull yourself together or you'll go stark mad, and then you'll probably go and throw yourself over the Embankment. That legend is all bosh! You're in the twentieth century, and you're not a drunken fisherman——"

"Hullo, young Cargill!"

The door burst open and Stranack, oozing health and sanity, glared at him.

"Jove! What a wreck you look!" continued Stranack. "You've been frousting too much. I'm glad I came. The car's outside, and we'll run down to Kingston, take a skiff and pull up to Molesey."

The river! Young Cargill felt the blood singing in his ears.

"I'm afraid I can't manage it. I—I've got an appointment this afternoon," he stammered.

Stranack perceived that he was lying, and[82] wondered. For a few minutes he gossiped, while young Cargill was repeating to himself:

"You must pull yourself together. It's becoming an obsession. You must pull yourself together."

He was vaguely conscious that Stranack was about to depart. Stranack was already in the doorway. His chance of killing the obsession was slipping from him! A special effort and then:

"Stop!" cried Cargill. "I—I'll come with you, Stranack."

Oddly enough, he felt much better when they were actually on the river. He had never been afraid of water, as such. And the familiar scenery, together with the wholesome exercise of sculling, acted as a tonic to his nerves.

They pulled above Molesey lock. When they were returning, Stranack said:

"You'll take her through the lock, won't you?"

It was a needless remark, and if Stranack had not made it all might have been well. As a fact, it set Cargill asking himself why he should not take her through the lock. He was admitted to be a much better boatman than Stranack, and everyone knew that it required a certain amount of skill to manage a lock properly. Locks were dangerous if you played the fool. Before now people had been drowned in locks.

The rest was inevitable. He lost his head as the lower gates swung open, and broke the rule of the river by pushing out in front of a launch. The launch was already under way, and young Cargill trying to avoid it better, thrust with his boat-hook at the side of the[83] lock. The thrust was nervous and ill-calculated, and the next instant the skiff had blundered

under the bows of the launch.

It happened very quickly. The skiff was forced, broadside on, against the lock gates, and was splintered like firewood. Cargill fell backwards, struck his head heavily against the gates—and sank.

He returned to consciousness in the lock-keeper's lodge. He had been under water a dangerously long time before Stranack, who had suffered no more than a wetting, had found him. It had been touch and go for his life, but artificial respiration had succeeded.

He soon went to pieces after that.

From one of the windows of his chambers the river was just visible. One morning he deliberately pulled the blind down. The action was important. It signified that he had definitely given up pretending that he had the power of shaking off the obsession.

But if he could not shake it off, he could at least keep it temporarily at bay. He started a guerilla campaign against the obsession with the aid of the brandy bottle. He was rarely drunk, and as rarely sober.

He was sober the day he was compelled to call on an aunt who lived in the still prosperous outskirts of Paddington. It was one of his good days and, in spite of his sobriety, he had himself in very good control when he left his aunt.

In his search for a cab it became necessary for him to cross the canal. On the bridge he paused and, gripping the parapet, made a surprise attack upon his enemy.[84]

Some children, playing on the tow path, helped him considerably. Their delightful sanity in the presence of the water was worth more to him than the brandy. He was positively winning the battle, when one of the children fell into the water.

For an instant he hesitated. Then, as on the night of the Tube episode, panic seized him. The next instant the man who was probably the best amateur swimmer in England, was running with all his might away from the canal.

When he reached his chambers he waited, with the assistance of the brandy, until his man brought him the last edition of the evening paper. A tiny paragraph on the back sheet told him of the tragedy.

An hour later his man found him face downwards on the hearthrug and, wrongly attributing his condition wholly to the brandy, put him to bed.

He was in bed about three weeks. The doctor, who was also a personal friend, was shrewd enough to suspect that the brandy was the effect, rather than the cause of the nerve trouble.

About the first week in June Cargill was allowed to get up.

"You've got to go away," said the doctor one morning. "You are probably aware that your nerves have gone to pieces. The sea is the place for you!"

The gasp that followed was scarcely audible, and the doctor missed it.

"You went to Tryn yr Wylfa about this time last year," continued the doctor. "Go there again! Go for long walks on the mountains, and put up at a temperance hotel."[85]

He went to Tryn yr Wylfa.

The train journey of six hours knocked him up for another week. By the time he was strong enough for the promenade it was the fourteenth of June. He noticed the date on the hotel calendar, and realised that the Fates had another ten days in which to drown him.

He did not call on the Lardners. He felt that he couldn't—after the canal episode. Four of the ten days had passed before Betty Lardner ran across him on the promenade.

She noticed at once the change in him, and was kinder than she had ever been before.

"Next Saturday," he said, "is the anniversary!"

For answer she smiled at him, and he might have smiled back if he had not remembered the canal.

She met him each morning after that, so that she was with him on the day when he made his atonement.

There had been a violent storm in the early morning. It had driven one of the quarry steamers on to the long sand-bank that lies submerged between Tryn yr Wylfa and Puffin Island. The gale still lasted, and the steamer was in momentary danger of becoming a complete wreck.

There is no lifeboat service at Tryn yr Wylfa. It was impossible to launch an ordinary boat in such a sea.

Colonel Denbigh, the owner of the quarry and local magnate, who had been superintending what feeble efforts had been made to effect a rescue, answered gloomily when Betty Lardner asked him if there were any hope.[86]

"It's a terrible thing," he jerked. "First time there has been a wreck hereabouts. It's hopeless trying to launch a boat——"

"Suppose a fellow were to swim out to the wreck with a life-line in tow?"

It was young Cargill who spoke.

The Colonel glared at him contemptuously.

"He would need to be a pretty fine swimmer," he returned.

"I don't want to blow my own trumpet, but I am considered to be one of the best amateur swimmers in the country," replied Cargill calmly. "If you will tell your men to get the line ready, I will borrow a bathing suit from somewhere."

They both stared at him in amazement.

"But you are still an invalid," cried Betty Lardner. "You——"

She stopped short and regarded him with fresh wonder. Somehow he no longer looked an invalid.

Mechanically she walked by his side to the little bathing office. Suddenly she clutched his arm.

"Jack," she said, "have you forgotten the—the legend?"

"Betty," he replied, "have you forgotten the crew?"

While he was undressing the attendant asked him some trivial question. He did not hear the man. His thoughts were far away. He was thinking of a group of children playing on the bank of a canal.

To the accompaniment of the Colonel's protests they fixed a belt on him, to which was attached the life-line.

He walked along the sloping wooden projection[87] that is used as a landing stage for pleasure skiffs, walked until the water splashed over him. Then he dived into the boiling surf.

Thus it was that he earned Betty Lardner's forgiveness.

[88]

VII THE LAST ASCENT

The extraordinary rapidity with which a successful airman may achieve fame was well shown in the case of my friend, Radcliffe Thorpe. One week known merely to a few friends as a clever young engineer, the next his name was on the lips of the civilised world. His first success was followed by a series of remarkable feats, of which his flight above the Atlantic, his race with the torpedo-boat-destroyers across the North Sea, and his sensational display during the military manœuvres on Salisbury Plain, impressed his name and personality firmly upon the fickle mind of the public, and explains the tremendous excitement caused by his inexplicable disappearance during the great aviation meeting at Attercliffe, near London, towards the end of the summer.

Few people, I suppose, have forgotten the facts. For some time previously he had been devoting himself more especially to ascending to as great a height as possible. He held all the records for height, and it was known that at Attercliffe he meant to endeavour to eclipse his own achievements.

It was a lovely day, not a breath of wind[89] stirring, not a cloud in the sky. We saw him start. We saw him fly up and up in great sweeping spirals. We saw him climb higher and ever higher into the azure space. We watched him, those of us whose eyes could bear the strain, as he dwindled to a dot and a speck, till at last he passed beyond sight.

It was a stirring thing to see a man thus storm, as it were, the walls of Heaven and probe the very mysteries of space. I remember I felt quite annoyed with someone who was taking a cinematograph record. It seemed such a sordid, business-like thing to be doing at such a moment.

Presently the aeroplane came into sight again and was greeted with a sudden roar of cheering.

"He is doing a glide down," someone cried excitedly, and though someone else declared that a glide from such a height was unthinkable and impossible, yet it was soon plain that the first speaker was right.

Down through unimaginable thousands of feet, straight and swift swept the machine, making such a sweep as the eagle in its pride would never have dared. People held their breath to watch, expecting every moment some catastrophe. But the machine kept on an even keel, and in a few moments I joined with the others in a wild rush to the field at a little distance where the machine, like a mighty bird, had alighted easily and safely.

But when we reached it we doubted our own eyes, our own sanity. There was no sign anywhere of Radcliffe Thorpe!

No one knew what to say; we looked blankly at our neighbours, and one man got down on[90] his hands and knees and peered under the body of the machine as if he suspected Radcliffe of hiding there. Then the chairman of the meeting, Lord Fallowfield, made a curious discovery.

"Look," he said in a high, shaken voice, "the steering wheel is jammed!"

It was true. The steering wheel had been carefully fastened in one position, and the lever controlling the planes had also been fixed so as to hold them at the right angle for a downward glide. That was strange enough, but in face of the mystery of Radcliffe's disappearance little attention was paid it.

Where, then, was its pilot? That was the question that was filling everybody's mind. He had vanished as utterly as vanishes the mist one sees rising in the sunshine.

It was supposed he must have fallen from his seat, but as to how that had happened, how it was that no fragment of his body or his clothing was ever found, above all, how it was that his aeroplane had returned, the engine cut off, the planes secured in correct position, no even moderately plausible explanation was ever put forward.

The loss to aeronautics was felt to be severe. From childhood Radcliffe had shown that, in addition to this, he had a marked aptitude for drawing, usually held at the service of his profession, but now and again exercised in producing sketches of his friends.

Among those who knew him privately he was fairly popular, though not, perhaps, so much so as he deserved; certainly he had a way of talking "shop" which was a trifle tiring to those[91] who did not figure the world as one vast engineering problem, while with women he was apt to be brusque and short-mannered.

My surprise, then, can be imagined when, calling one afternoon on him and having to wait a little, I had noticed lying on his desk a crayon sketch of a woman's face. It was a very lovely face, the features almost perfect, and yet there was about it something unearthly and spectral that was curiously disturbing.

"Smitten at last?" I asked jestingly, and yet aware of a certain odd discomfort.

When, he saw what I was looking at he went very pale.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Oh, just—someone!" he answered.

He took the sketch from me, looked at it, frowned and locked it away. As he seemed unwilling to pursue the subject, I

went on to talk of the business I had come about, and I congratulated him on his flight of the day before in which he had broken the record for height. As I was going he said:

"By the way, that sketch—what did you think of it?"

"Why, that you had better be careful," I answered, laughing; "or you'll be falling from your high estate of bachelordom."

He gave so violent a start, his face expressed so much of apprehension and dismay, that I stared at him blankly. Recovering himself with an effort, he stammered out:

"It's not—I mean—it's an imaginary portrait."

"Then," I said, amazed in my turn, "you've a jolly sight more imagination than anyone ever credited you with." [92]

The incident remained in my mind. As a matter of fact, practical Radcliffe Thorpe, absorbed in questions of strain and ease, his head full of cylinders and wheels and ratchets and the Lord knows what else, would have seemed to me the last man on earth to create that haunting, strange, unearthly face, human in form, but not in expression.

It was about this time that Radcliffe began to give so much attention to the making of very high flights. His favourite time was in the early morning, as soon as it was light. Then in the chill dawn he would rise and soar and wing his flight high and ever higher, up and up, till the eye could no longer follow his ascent.

I remember he made one of these strange, solitary flights when I was spending the week-end with him at his cottage near the Attercliffe Aviation Grounds.

I had come down from town somewhat late the night before, and I remember that just before we went to bed we went out for a few minutes to enjoy the beauty of a perfect night. The moon was shining in a clear sky, not a sound or a breath disturbed the sublime quietude; in the south one wondrous star gleamed low on the horizon. Neither of us spoke; it was enough to drink in the beauty of such rare perfection, and I noticed how Radcliffe kept his eyes fixed upwards on the dark blue vault of space.

"Are you longing to be up there?" I asked him jestingly.

He started and flushed, and he then went very pale, and to my surprise I saw that he was shivering. [93]

"You are getting cold," I said. "We had better go in."

He nodded without answering, and, as we turned to go in, I heard quite plainly and distinctly a low, strange laugh, a laugh full of a honeyed sweetness that yet thrilled me with great fear.

"What's that?" I said, stopping short.

"What?" Radcliffe asked.

"Someone laughed," I said, and I stared all round and then upwards. "I thought it came from up there," I said in a bewildered way, pointing upwards.

He gave me an odd look and, without answering, went into the cottage. He had said nothing of having planned any flight for the next morning; but in the early morning, the chill and grey dawn, I was roused by the drumming of his engine. At once I jumped up out of bed and ran to the window.

The machine was raising itself lightly and easily from the ground. I watched him wing his god-like way up through the still, soft air till he was lost to view. Then, after a time, I saw him emerge again from those immensities of space. He came down in one long majestic sweep, and alighted in a field a little way away from the house, leaving the aeroplane for his mechanics to fetch up presently.

"Hullo!" I greeted him. "Why didn't you tell me you were going up?"

As I spoke I heard plainly and distinctly, as plainly as ever I heard anything in my life, that low, strange laugh, that I had heard before, so silvery sweet and yet somehow so horrible.

"What's that?" I said, stopping short and staring blankly upwards, for, absurd though it [94] seems, that weird sound

seemed to come floating down from an infinite height above us.

"Not high enough," he muttered like a man in an ecstasy. "Not high enough yet."

He walked away from me then without another word. When I entered the cottage he was seated at the table sketching a woman's face—the same face I had seen in that other sketch of his, spectral, unreal, and lovely.

"What on earth——?" I began.

"Nothing on earth," he answered in a strange voice. Then he laughed and jumped up, and tore his sketch across.

He seemed quite his old self again, chatty and pleasant, and with his old passion for talking "shop." He launched into a long explanation of some scheme he had in mind for securing automatic balancing.

I never told anyone about that strange, mocking laugh, in fact, I had almost forgotten the incident altogether when something brought every detail back to my memory. I had a letter from a person who signed himself "George Barnes."

Barnes, it seemed, was the operator who had taken the pictures of that last ascent, and as he understood I had been Mr. Thorpe's greatest friend, he wanted to see me. Certain expressions in the letter aroused my curiosity. I replied. He asked for an appointment at a time that was not very convenient, and finally I arranged to call at his house one evening.

It was one of those smart little six-room villas of which so many have been put up in the London suburbs of late. Barnes was buying it on the instalment system, and I quite won his heart by complimenting him on it. But for that, I doubt[95] if anything would have come of my visit, for he was plainly nervous and ill at ease and very repentant of ever having said anything. But after my compliment to the house we got on better.

"It's on my mind," he said; "I shan't be easy till someone else knows."

We were in the front room where a good fire was burning—in my honour, I guessed, for the apartment had not the air of being much used. On the table were some photographs. Barnes showed them me. They were enlargements from those he had taken of poor Radcliffe's last ascent.

"They've been shown all over the world," he said. "Millions of people have seen them."

"Well?" I said.

"But there's one no one has seen—no one except me."

He produced another print and gave it to me. I glanced at it. It seemed much like the others, having been apparently one of the last of the series, taken when the aeroplane was at a great height. The only thing in which it differed from the others was that it seemed a trifle blurred.

"A poor one," I said; "it's misty."

"Look at the mist," he said.

I did so. Slowly, very slowly, I began to see that that misty appearance had a shape, a form. Even as I looked I saw the features of a human countenance—and yet not human either, so spectral was it, so unreal and strange. I felt the blood run cold in my veins and the hair bristle on the scalp of my head, for I recognised beyond all doubt that this face on the photograph was the same as that Radcliffe[96] had sketched. The resemblance was absolute, no one who had seen the one could mistake the other.

"You see it?" Barnes muttered, and his face was almost as pale as mine.

"There's a woman," I stammered, "a woman floating in the air by his side. Her arms are held out to him."

"Yes," Barnes said. "Who was she?"

The print slipped from my hands and fluttered to the ground. Barnes picked it up and put it in the fire. Was it fancy or, as it flared up, and burnt and was consumed, did I really hear a faint laugh floating downwards from the upper air?

"I destroyed the negative," Barnes said, "and I told my boss something had gone wrong with it. No one has seen that

photograph but you and me, and now no one ever will."

[97]

VIII

THE TERROR BY NIGHT

Maynard disincumbered himself from his fishing-creel, stabbed the butt of his rod into the turf, and settled down in the heather to fill a pipe. All round him stretched the undulating moor, purple in the late summer sunlight. To the southward, low down, a faint haze told where the sea lay. The stream at his feet sang its queer, crooning moor-song as it rambled onward, chuckling to meet a bed of pebbles somewhere out of sight, whispering mysteriously to the rushes that fringed its banks of peat, deepening to a sudden contralto as it poured over granite boulders into a scum-flecked pool below.

For a long time the man sat smoking. Occasionally he turned his head to watch with keen eyes the fretful movements of a fly hovering above the water. Then a sudden dimple in the smooth surface of the stream arrested his attention. A few concentric ripples widened, travelled towards him, and were absorbed in the current. His lips curved into a little smile and he reached for his rod. In the clear water he could see the origin of the ripples; a small trout, unconscious of his presence, was waiting in its hover for the next tit-bit to float downstream. Presently it rose again.

"The odds are ten to one in your favour," said the man. "Let's see!"[98]

He dropped on one knee and the cast leapt out in feathery coils. Once, twice it swished; the third time it alighted like thistledown on the surface. There was a tiny splash, a laugh, and the little greenheart rod flicked a trout high over his head. It was the merest baby—half-an-ounce, perhaps—and it fell from the hook into the herbage some yards from the stream.

"Little ass!" said Maynard. "That was meant for your big brother."

He recovered his cast and began to look for his victim. Without avail he searched the heather, and as the fateful seconds sped, at last laid down his rod and dropped on hands and knees to probe among the grass-stems.

For a while he hunted in vain, then the sunlight showed a golden sheen among some stones. Maynard gave a grunt of relief, but as his hand closed round it a tiny flutter passed through the fingerling; it gave a final gasp and was still. Knitting his brows in almost comical vexation, he hastened to restore it to the stream, holding it by the tail and striving to impart a life-like wriggle to its limpness.

"Buck up, old thing!" he murmured encouragingly. "Oh, buck up! You're all right, really you are!"

But the "old thing" was all wrong. In fact, it was dead.

Standing in the wet shingle, Maynard regarded the speckled atom as it lay in the palm of his hand.

"A matter of seconds, my son. One instant in all eternity would have made just the difference between life and death to you. And the high gods denied it you!"[99]

On the opposite side of the stream, set back about thirty paces from the brink, stood a granite boulder. It was as high as a man's chest, roughly cubical in shape; but the weather and clinging moss had rounded its edges, and in places segments had crumbled away, giving foothold to clumps of fern and starry moor-flowers. On three sides the surrounding ground rose steeply, forming an irregular horseshoe mound that opened to the west. Perhaps it was the queer amphitheatrical effect of this setting that connected up some whimsical train of thought in Maynard's brain.

"It would seem as if the gods had claimed you," he mused, still holding the corpse. "You shall be a sacrifice—a burnt sacrifice to the God of Waste Places."

He laughed at the conceit, half-ashamed of his own childishness, and crossing the stream by some boulders, he brushed away the earth and weed from the top of the great stone. Then he retraced his steps and gathered a handful of bleached twigs that the winter floods had left stranded along the margin of the stream. These he arranged methodically on the cleared space; on the top of the tiny pyre he placed the troutlet.

"There!" he said, and smiling gravely struck a match. A faint column of smoke curled up into the still air, and as he spoke the lower rim of the setting sun met the edge of the moor. The evening seemed suddenly to become incredibly still, even the voice of the stream ceasing to be a sound distinct. A wagtail bobbing in the shallows fled into the waste. Overhead the smoke trembled upwards, a faint stain against a cloudless sky. The stillness seemed almost[100] acute. It was as if the moor were waiting, and holding its breath while it waited. Then the twigs upon his altar crackled, and the pale flames blazed up. The man stepped back with artistic appreciation of the effect.

"To be really impressive, there ought to be more smoke," he continued.

Round the base of the stone were clumps of small flowers. They were crimson in colour and had thick, fleshy leaves. Hastily, he snatched a handful and piled it on the fire. The smoke darkened and rose in a thick column; there was a curious pungency in the air.

Far off the church-bell in some unseen hamlet struck the hour. The distant sound, coming from the world of men and every-day affairs, seemed to break the spell. An ousel fluttered across the stream and dabbled in a puddle among some stones. Rabbits began to show themselves and frisk with lengthened shadows in the clear spaces. Maynard looked at his watch, half-mindful of a train to be caught somewhere miles away, and then, held by the peace of running water, stretched himself against the sloping ground.

The glowing world seemed peopled by tiny folk, living out their timid, inscrutable lives around him. A water-rat, passing bright-eyed upon his lawful occasion, paused on the border of the stream to consider the stranger, and was lost to view. A stagnant pool among some reeds caught the reflection of the sunset and changed on the instant into raw gold.

Maynard plucked a grass stem and chewed it reflectively, staring out across the purple moor and lazily watching the western sky turn[101] from glory to glory. Over his head the smoke of the sacrifice still curled and eddied upwards. Then a sudden sound sent him on to one elbow—the thud of an approaching horse's hoofs.

"Moor ponies!" he muttered, and, rising, stood expectant beside his smoking altar.

Then he heard the sudden jingle of a bit, and presently a horse and rider climbed into view against the pure sky. A young girl, breeched, booted and spurred like a boy, drew rein, and sat looking down into the hollow.

For a moment neither spoke; then Maynard acknowledged her presence by raising his tweed hat. She gave a little nod.

"I thought it was somebody swaling—burning the heather." She considered the embers on the stone, and then her grey eyes travelled back to the spare, tweed-clad figure beside it.

He smiled in his slow way—a rather attractive smile.

"No. I've just concluded some pagan rites in connection with a small trout!" He nodded gravely at the stone. "That was a burnt sacrifice." With whimsical seriousness he told her of the trout's demise and high destiny.

For a moment she looked doubtful; but the inflection of breeding in his voice, the wholesome, lean face and humorous eyes, reassured her. A smile hovered about the corners of her mouth.

"Oh, is that it? I wondered ..."

She gathered the reins and turned her horse's head.

"Forgive me if I dragged you out of your way," said Maynard, never swift to conventionality, but touched by the tired shadows in her eyes. The faint droop of her mouth, too, betrayed[102] intense fatigue. "You look fagged. I don't want to be a nuisance or bore you, but I wish you'd let me offer you a sandwich. I've some milk here, too."

The girl looked round the ragged moor, brooding in the twilight, and half hesitated. Then she forced a wan little smile.

"I am tired, and hungry, too. Have you enough for us both?"

"Lots!" said Maynard. To himself he added: "And what's more, my child, you'll have a little fainting affair in a few minutes, if you don't have a feed."

"Come and rest for a minute," he continued aloud.

He spoke with pleasant, impersonal kindness, and as he turned to his satchel she slipped out of the saddle and came towards him, leading her horse.

"Drink that," he said, holding out the cup of his flask. She drank with a wry little face, and coughed. "I put a little whisky in it," he explained. "You needed it."

She thanked him and sat down with the bridle linked over her arm. The colour crept back into her cheeks. Maynard produced a packet of sandwiches and a pasty.

"I've been mooning about the moor all the afternoon and lost myself twice," she explained between frank mouthfuls. "I'm hopelessly late for dinner, and I've still got miles to go."

"Do you know the way now?" he asked.

"Oh, yes! It won't take me long. My family are sensible, too, and don't fuss." She looked at him, her long-lashed eyes a little serious. "But you—how are you going to[103] get home? It's getting late to be out on the moor afoot."

Maynard laughed.

"Oh, I'm all right, thanks!" He sniffed the warm September night. "I think I shall sleep here, as a matter of fact. I'm a gipsy by instinct—

"Give to me the life I love,
Let the lave go by me,
Give the jolly Heaven above——"

He broke off, arrested by her unsmiling eyes. She was silent a moment.

"People don't as a rule sleep out—about here." The words came jerkily, as if she were forcing a natural tone into her voice.

"No?" He was accustomed to being questioned on his unconventional mode of life, and was prepared for the usual expostulations. She looked abruptly towards him.

"Are you superstitious?"

He laughed and shook his head.

"I don't think so. But what has that got to do with it?"

She hesitated, flushing a little.

"There is a legend—people about here say that the moor here is haunted. There is a Thing that hunts people to death!"

He laughed outright, wondering how old she was. Seventeen or eighteen, perhaps. She had said her people "didn't fuss." That meant she was left to herself to pick up all these old wives' tales.

"Really! Has anyone been caught?"

She nodded, unsmiling.

"Yes; old George Toms. He was one of[104] Dad's tenants, a big purple-faced man, who drank a lot and never took much exercise. They found him in a ditch with his clothes all torn and covered with mud. He had been run to death; there was no wound on his body, but his heart was broken." Her thoughts recurred to the stone against which they leant, and his quaint conceit. "You were rather rash to go offering burnt sacrifices about here, don't you think? Dad says that stone is the remains of an old Phœnician altar, too."

She was smiling now, but the seriousness lingered in her eyes.

"And I have probably invoked some terrible heathen deity—Ashtoreth, or Pugm, or Baal! How awful!" he added, with mock gravity.

The girl rose to her feet.

"You are laughing at me. The people about here are superstitious, and I am a Celt, too. I belong here."

He jumped up with a quick protest.

"No, I'm not laughing at you. Please don't think that! But it's a little hard to believe in active evil when all around is so beautiful." He helped her to mount and walked to the top of the mound at her stirrup. "Tell me, is there any charm or incantation, in case——?" His eyes were twinkling, but she shook her fair head soberly.

"They say iron—cold iron—is the only thing it cannot cross. But I must go!" She held out her hand with half-shy friendliness. "Thank you for your niceness to me." Her eyes grew suddenly wistful. "Really, though, I don't think I should stay there if I were you. Please!"

He only laughed, however, and she moved[105] off, shaking her impatient horse into a canter. Maynard stood looking after her till she was swallowed by the dusk and surrounding moor. Then, thoughtfully, he retraced his steps to the hollow.

A cloud lay across the face of the moon when Fear awoke Maynard. He rolled on to one elbow and stared round the hollow, filled with inexplicable dread. He was ordinarily a courageous man, and had no nerves to speak of; yet, as his eyes followed the line of the ridge against the sky, he experienced terror, the elementary, nauseating terror of childhood, when the skin tingles, and the heart beats at a suffocating gallop. It was very dark, but momentarily his eyes grew accustomed to it. He was conscious of a queer, pungent smell, horribly animal and corrupt.

Suddenly the utter silence broke. He heard a rattle of stones, the splash of water about him, realised that it was the brook beneath his feet, and that he, Maynard, was running for his life.

Neither then nor later did Reason assert herself. He ran without question or amazement. His brain—the part where human reasoning holds normal sway—was dominated by the purely primitive instinct of flight. And in that sudden rout of courage and self-respect one conscious thought alone remained. Whatever it was that was even then at his heels, he must not see it. At all costs it must be behind him, and, resisting the sudden terrified impulse to look over his shoulder, he unbuttoned his tweed jacket and disengaged himself from it as he[106] ran. The faint haze that had gathered round the full moon dispersed, and he saw the moor stretching before him, grey and still, glistening with dew.

He was of frugal and temperate habits, a wiry man at the height of his physical powers, with lean flanks and a deep chest.

At Oxford they had said he was built to run for his life. He was running for it now, and he knew it.

The ground sloped upwards after a while, and he tore up the incline, breathing deep and hard; down into a shallow valley, leaping gorse bushes, crashing through whortle and meadowsweet, stumbling over peat-cuttings and the workings of forgotten tin-mines. An idiotic popular tune raced through his brain. He found himself trying to frame the words, but they broke into incoherent prayers, still to the same grotesque tune.

Then, as he breasted the flank of a boulder-strewn tor, he seemed to hear snuffling breathing behind him, and, redoubling his efforts, stepped into a rabbit hole. He was up and running again in the twinkling of an eye, limping from a twisted ankle as he ran.

He sprinted over the crest of the hill and thought he heard the sound almost abreast of him, away to the right. In the dry bed of a watercourse some stones were dislodged and fell with a rattle in the stillness of the night; he bore away to the left. A moment later there was Something nearly at his left elbow, and he smelt again the nameless, fœtid reek. He doubled, and the ghastly truth flashed upon him. The Thing was playing with him![107] He was being hunted for sport—the sport of a horror unthinkable. The sweat ran down into his eyes.

He lost all count of time; his wrist watch was smashed on his wrist. He ran through a reeling eternity, sobbing for breath, stumbling, tripping, fighting a leaden weariness; and ever the same unreasoning terror urged him on. The moon and ragged skyline swam about him; the blood drummed deafeningly in his ears, and his eyeballs felt as if they would burst from their sockets. He had nearly bitten his swollen tongue in two falling over an unseen peat-cutting, and blood-flecked foam gathered on his lips.

God, how he ran! But he was no longer among bog and heather. He was running—shambling now—along a road. The loping pursuit of that nameless, shapeless Something sounded like an echo in his head.

He was nearing a village, but saw nothing save a red mist that swam before him like a fog. The road underfoot seemed to rise and fall in wavelike undulations. Still he ran, with sobbing gasps and limbs that swerved under his weight; at his elbow hung death unnamable, and the fear of it urged him on while every instinct of his exhausted body called out to him to fling up his hands and end it.

Out of the mist ahead rose the rough outline of a building by the roadside; it was the village smithy, half workshop, half dwelling. The road here skirted a patch of grass, and the moonlight, glistening on the dew, showed the dark circular scars of the turf where, for a generation, the smith's peat fires had heated[108] the great iron hoops that tyred the wheels of the wains. One of these was even then lying on the ground with the turves placed in readiness for firing in the morning, and in the throbbing darkness of Maynard's consciousness a voice seemed to speak faintly—the voice of a girl:

"There's a Thing that hunts people to death. But iron—cold iron—it cannot cross."

The sweat of death was already on his brow as he reeled sideways, plunging blindly across the uneven tufts of grass. His feet caught in some obstruction and he pitched forward into the sanctuary of the huge iron tyre—a spasm of cramp twisting his limbs up under him.

As he fell a great blackness rose around him, and with it the bewildered clamour of awakened dogs.

Dr. Stanmore came down the flagged path from the smith's cottage, pulling on his gloves. A big car was passing slowly up the village street, and as it came abreast the smithy the doctor raised his hat.

The car stopped, and the driver, a fair-haired girl, leant sideways from her seat.

"Good-morning, Dr. Stanmore! What's the matter here? Nothing wrong with any of Matthew's children, is there?"

The Doctor shook his head gravely.

"No, Lady Dorothy; they're all at school. This is no one belonging to the family—a stranger who was taken mysteriously ill last night just outside the forge, and they brought him in. It's a most queer case, and very difficult to diagnose—that is to say, to give a diagnosis in keeping with one's professional—er—conscience." [109]

The girl switched off the engine, and took her hand from the brake-lever. Something in the doctor's manner arrested her interest.

"What is the matter with him?" she queried. "What diagnosis have you made, professional or otherwise?"

"Shock, Lady Dorothy; severe exhaustion and shock, heart strained, superficial lesions, bruises, scratches, and so forth. Mentally he is in a great state of excitement and terror, lapsing into delirium at times—that is really the most serious feature. In fact, unless I can calm him I am afraid we may have some brain trouble on top of the other thing. It's most mysterious!"

The girl nodded gravely, holding her underlip between her white teeth.

"What does he look like—in appearance, I mean? Is he young?"

The shadow of a smile crossed the doctor's eyes.

"Yes, Lady Dorothy—quite young, and very good-looking. He is a man of remarkable athletic build. He is calmer now, and I have left Matthew's wife with him while I slip out to see a couple of other patients."

Lady Dorothy rose from her seat and stepped down out of the car.

"I think I know your patient," she said. "In fact, I had taken the car to look for him, to ask him to lunch with us. Do you think I might see him for a minute? If it is the person I think it is I may be able to help you diagnose his illness."

Together they walked up the path and entered the cottage. The doctor led the way[110] upstairs and opened a door. A

woman sitting by the bed rose and dropped a curtsy.

Lady Dorothy smiled a greeting to her and crossed over to the bed. There, his face grey and drawn with exhaustion, with shadows round his closed eyes, lay Maynard; one hand lying on the counterpane opened and closed convulsively, his lips moved. The physician eyed the girl interrogatively.

"Do you know him?" he asked.

She nodded, and put her firm, cool hand over the twitching fingers.

"Yes," she said. "And I warned him. Tell me, is he very ill?"

"He requires rest, careful nursing, absolute quiet——"

"All that he can have at the Manor," said the girl softly. She met the doctor's eyes and looked away, a faint colour tingeing her cheeks. "Will you go and telephone to father? I will take him back in the car now if he is well enough to be moved."

"Yes, he is well enough to be moved," said the doctor. "It is very kind of you, Lady Dorothy, and I will go and telephone at once. Will you stay with him for a little while?"

He left the room, and they heard his feet go down the narrow stairs. The cottage door opened and closed.

The two women, the old and the young, peasant and peer's daughter, looked at each other, and there was in their glance that complete understanding which can only exist between women.

"Do 'ee mind old Jarge Toms, my lady?"

Lady Dorothy nodded.

"I know, I know! And I warned him! [111] They won't believe, these men! They think because they are so big and strong that there is nothing that can hurt them."

"'Twas th' iron that saved un, my lady. 'Twas inside one of John's new tyres as was lyin' on the ground that us found un. Dogs barkin' wakened us up. But it'd ha' had un, else——" A sound downstairs sent her flying to the door. "'Tis the kettle, my lady. John's dinner spilin', an' I forgettin'."

She hurried out of the room and closed the door.

The sound of their voices seemed to have roused the occupant of the bed. His eyelids fluttered and opened; his eyes rested full on the girl's face. For a moment there was no consciousness in their gaze; then a whimsical ghost of a smile crept about his mouth.

"Go on," he said in a weak voice. "Say it!"

"Say what?" asked Lady Dorothy. She was suddenly aware that her hand was still on his, but the twitching fingers had closed about hers in a calm, firm grasp.

"Say 'I told you so!'"

She shook her head with a little smile.

"I told you that cold iron——"

"Cold iron saved me." He told her of the iron hoop on the ground outside the forge. "You saved me last night."

She disengaged her hand gently.

"I saved you last night—since you say so. But in future——"

Someone was coming up the stairs. Maynard met her eyes with a long look.

"I have no fear," he said. "I have found something better than cold iron." [112]

The door opened and the doctor came in. He glanced at Maynard's face and touched his pulse.

"The case is yours, Lady Dorothy!" he said with a little bow.

[113]

IX

THE TRAGEDY AT THE "LOUP NOIR"

The Boy at the corner of the table flicked the ash of his cigar into the fire.

"Spiritualism is all rot!" he declared.

"I don't know," the Host reflected thoughtfully. "One hears queer stories sometimes."

"Which reminds me——" started the Bore.

But before he could proceed any further the little French Judge ruthlessly cut him short.

"Bah!" Contempt and geniality were mingled in his tone. "Who are we, poor ignorant worms, that we should dare to say 'is' or 'is not'? Your Shakespeare, he was right! 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy!'"

The faces of the four Englishmen instantly assumed that peculiarly stolid expression always called forth by the mention of Shakespeare.

"But Spiritualism——" started the Host.

Again the little French Judge broke in:

"I who you speak, I myself know of an experience, of the most remarkable, to this day unexplained save by Spiritualism, Occultism, what you will! You shall hear! The case is one I conducted professionally some two years ago, though, of course, the events which I now tell in their proper sequence, came out only in the trial. I string them together for you, yes?"[114]

The Bore, who fiercely resented any stories except his own, gave vent to a discontented grunt; the other three prepared to listen carefully. From the drawing-room, whither the ladies had retired after dinner, sounded the far-away strains of a piano. The little French Judge held out his glass for a crème de menthe; his eyes were sparkling with suppressed excitement; he gazed deep into the shining green liquid as if seeing therein a moving panorama of pictures, then he began:

On a dusky autumn evening, a young man, tall, olive-skinned, tramps along the road leading from Paris to Longchamps. He is walking with a quick, even swing. Now and again a hidden anxiety darkens his face.

Suddenly he branches off to the left; the path here is steep and muddy. He stops in front of a blurred circle of yellow light; by this can one faintly perceive the outlines of a building. Above the narrow doorway hangs a creaking sign which announces to all it may concern that this is the "Loup Noir," much sought after for its nearness to the racecourse and for its excellent *ménage*.

"Voilà!" mutters our friend.

On entering, he is met by the burly innkeeper, a shrewd enough fellow, who has seen something of life before settling down in Longchamps. The young man glances past him as if seeking some other face, then recollecting himself demands shelter for the night.

"I greatly fear——" began the innkeeper, then pauses, struck by an idea. "Holà, Gaston! Have monsieur and madame from number fourteen yet departed?"

"Yes, monsieur; already early this morning;[115] you were at the market, so Mademoiselle settled the bill."

"Mademoiselle Jehane?" the stranger looks up sharply.

"My niece, monsieur; you have perhaps heard of her, for I see by your easel you are an artist. She is supposed to be of a rare beauty; I think it myself." Jean Potin keeps up a running flow of talk as he conducts his visitor down the long bare passages, past blistered yellow doors.

"It is a double room I must give you, vacated, as you heard, but this very morning. They were going to stay longer, Monsieur and Madame Guillaumet, but of a sudden she changed her mind. Oh, she was of a temper!" Potin raises expressive eyes heavenwards. "It is ever so when May weds with December."

"He was much older than his wife, then?" queries the artist, politely feigning an interest he is far from feeling.

"*Mais non, parbleu!* It was she who was the older—by some fifteen years; and not a beauty. But rich—he knew what he was about, giving his smooth cheek for her smooth louis!"

Left alone, Lou Arnaud proceeds to unpack his knapsack; he lingers over it as long as possible; the task awaiting him below is no pleasant one. Finally he descends. The small smoky *salle à manger* is full of people. There is much talk and laughter going on; the clatter of knives and forks. At the desk near the door, a young girl is busy with the accounts. Her very pale gold hair, parted and drawn loosely back over the ears, casts a faint shadow on her pure, white skin. Arnaud, as he chooses a seat, looks at her critically.[116]

"Bah, she is insignificant!" he thinks. "What can have possessed Claude?"

Suddenly she raises her eyes. They meet his in a long, steady gaze. Then once again the lids are lowered.

The artist sets down his glass with a hand that shakes. He is not imaginative, as a rule, but when one sees the soul of a mocking devil look out, dark and compelling, from the face of a Madonna, one is disconcerted.

He wonders no more what had possessed Claude. On his way to the door a few moments later, he pauses at her desk.

"Monsieur wishes to order breakfast for to-morrow morning?"

"Monsieur wishes to speak with you."

She smiles demurely. Many have wished to speak with her. Arnaud divines her thoughts.

"My name is Lou Arnaud!" he adds meaningly.

"Ah!" she ponders on this for an instant; then: "It is a warm night; if you will seat yourself at one of the little tables in the courtyard at the back of the house, I will try to join you, when these pigs have finished feeding." She indicates with contempt the noisily eating crowd.

They sit long at that table, for the man has much to tell of his young brother Claude; of the ruin she has made of his life; of the little green devils that lurk in a glass of absinthe, and clutch their victim, and drag him down deeper, ever deeper, into the great, green abyss.

But she only laughs, this Jehane of the wanton eyes.

"But what do you want from me? I have[117] no need of this Claude. He wearies me—now!"

Arnaud springs to his feet, catching her roughly by the wrist. He loves his young brother much. His voice is raised, attracting the notice of two or three groups who take coffee at the iron tables.

"You had need of him once. You never left him in peace till you had sucked him of all that makes life good. If I could ____"

Jean Potin appears in the doorway.

"Jehane, what are you doing out here? You know I do not permit it that you speak with the visitors. Pardon her, monsieur, she is but a child."

"A child?" The artist's brow is black as thunder. "She has wrecked a life, this child you speak of!"

He strides past the amazed innkeeper, up the narrow flight of stairs, and down the passage to his room.

Sitting on the edge of the huge curtained four-poster bed, he ponders on the events of the evening.

But his thoughts are not all of Claude. That girl—that girl with her pale face and her pale hair, and eyes the grey of a storm cloud before it breaks, she haunts him! Her soft murmuring voice has stolen into his brain; he hears it in the drip, drip of the rain on the sill outside.

Soon heavy feet are heard trooping up the stairs; doors are heard to bang; cheery voices wish each other good-night. Then gradually the sounds die away. They keep early hours at the "Loup Noir"; it is not yet ten o'clock.

Still Arnaud remains sitting on the edge of the bed; the dark plush canopy overhead repels him, he does not feel inclined for sleep. Jehane! what a picture she would make! He *must* paint her!

Obsessed by this idea, he unpacks a roll of canvas, spreads it on the tripod easel, and prepares crayons and charcoal; he will start the picture as soon as it is day. He will paint her as Circe, mocking at her grovelling herd of swine!

He creeps into bed and falls asleep.

Softly the rain patters against the window-pane.

A distant clock booms out eleven strokes.

Lou Arnaud raises his head. Then noiselessly he slides out of bed on the chill wooden boarding. As in a trance he crosses the room, seizes charcoal, and feverishly works at the blank canvas on the easel.

For twenty minutes his hand never falters, then the charcoal drops from his nerveless fingers! Groping his way with half-closed eyes back to the bed, he falls again into a heavy, dreamless slumber.

The early morning sun chases away the raindrops of the night before. Signs of activity are abroad in the inn; the swish of brooms; the noisy clatter of pails. A warm aroma of coffee floats up the stairs and under the door of number fourteen, awaking Arnaud to pleasant thoughts of breakfast. He is partly dressed before his eye lights on the canvas he had prepared.

"*Nom de Dieu!*"

He falls back against the wall, staring stupefied at the picture before him. It is the picture of a girl, crouching in a kneeling position, all the agony of death showing clearly in her upturned eyes. At her throat, cruelly, relentlessly doing their murderous work, are a pair of hands—ugly, podgy hands, but with what power behind them!

The face is the face of Jehane—a distorted, terrified Jehane! Arnaud recoils, covering his eyes with his hands. Who could have drawn this unspeakable thing? He looks again closely; the style is his own! There is no mistaking those bold, black lines, that peculiar way of indicating muscle beneath the tightly stretched skin—it *is* his own work! Anywhere would he have known it!

A knock at the door! Jean Potin enters, radiating cheerfulness.

"Breakfast in your room, monsieur? We are busy this morning; I share in the work. Permit me to move the table and the easel—*Sacré-bleu!*"

Suddenly his rosy lips grow stern. "This is Jehane. Did she sit for you—and when? You only came last night. What devil's work is this?"

"That is what I would like to find out; I know no more about it than you yourself. When I awoke this morning the picture was there!"

"Did you draw it?" suspiciously.

"Yes. At least, no! Yes, I suppose I did. But I——"

Potin clenches his fist: "I will have the truth from the girl herself! There is something here I do not like!" Roughly he pushes past the artist and mounts to Jehane's room.

She is not there, neither is she at her desk. Nor yet down in the village. They search[120] everywhere; there is a hue and cry; people rush to and fro.

Then suddenly a shout; and a silence, a dreadful silence.

Something is carried slowly into the "Loup Noir." Something that was found huddled up in the shadow of the wall that borders the courtyard. Something with ugly purple patches on the white throat.

It is Jehane, and she is dead; strangled by a pair of hands that came from behind.

The story of the picture is rapidly passed from mouth to mouth. People look strangely at Lou Arnaud; they remember his loud, strained voice and threatening gestures on the preceding night.

Finally he is arrested on the charge of murder.

I was the judge, gentlemen, on the occasion of the Arnaud trial.

The prisoner is questioned about the picture. He knows nothing; can tell nothing of how it came there. His fellow-artists testify to its being his work. From them also leaks out the tale of his brother Claude, of the latter's infatuation and ruin. No need now to explain the quarrel in the courtyard. The accused has good reason to hate the dead girl.

The Avocat for the defence does his best. The picture is produced in court; it creates a sensation.

If only Lou Arnaud could complete it—could sketch in the owner of those merciless hands. He is handed the charcoal; again and again he tries—in vain.

The hands are not his own; but that is a small[121] point in his favour. Why should he have incriminated himself by drawing his own hands? But again, why should he have drawn the picture at all?

There is nobody else on whom falls a shadow of suspicion. I sum up impartially. The jury convict on circumstantial evidence, and I sentence the prisoner to death.

A short time must elapse between the sentence and carrying it into force. The Avocat for the defence obtains for the prisoner a slight concession; he may have picture and charcoal in his cell. Perhaps he can yet free himself from the web which has inmeshed him!

Arnaud tries to blot out thought by sketching in and erasing again fanciful figures twisted into a peculiar position; he cannot adjust the pose of the unknown murderer. So in despair he gives it up.

One morning, three days before the execution, the innkeeper comes to visit him and finds him lying face downwards on the narrow pallet. Despite his own grief, he is sorry for the young man; nor is he convinced in his shrewd bourgeois mind of the latter's guilt.

"You *must* draw in the second figure," he repeats again and again. "It is your last, your only chance! Think of the faces you saw at the 'Loup Noir.' Do none of them recall anything to you? You quarrelled with Jehane in the garden about your brother. Then you went to your room. Oh, what did you think in your room?"

"I thought of your niece," responds Arnaud wildly. "How very beautiful she was, and what a model she would make. Then I prepared[122] a blank canvas for the morning, and went to bed. When I woke up the picture was there."

"And you remember nothing more—nothing at all?" insists Jean Potin. "You fell asleep at once? You heard no sound?"

Against the barred window of the cell the rain patters softly. A distant clock booms out eleven strokes.

Something in the artist's brain seems to snap. He raises his head. He slides from the bed. As in a trance he crosses the cell, seizes a piece of charcoal, and feverishly works at the picture on the easel!

Not daring to speak, Jean Potin watches him. The figure behind the hands grows and grows beneath Arnaud's fingers.

A woman's figure!

Then the face: a coarse, malignant face, distorted by evil passions.

"Ah!"

It is a cry of recognition from the breathless innkeeper. It breaks the spell. The charcoal drops, and the prisoner, passing his hand across his eyes, gazes bewildered at his own work.

"Who? What?"

"But I know her! It is the woman in whose room you slept! She was staying at the 'Loup Noir' the very night before you arrived, and she left that morning. She and her husband, Monsieur Guillaumet. But it is incredible if *she* should have _____"

I will be short with you, gentlemen. Madame Guillaumet was traced to her flat in Paris. Arnaud's Avocat confronted her with the now completed picture. She was confounded—babbled like a mad woman—confessed![123]

A reprieve for further inquiry was granted by the State. Finally Arnaud was cleared, and allowed to go free.

The motive for the murder? A woman's jealousy. Monsieur and Madame Guillaumet had been married only ten months. Her age was forty-nine; his twenty-seven. Every second of their married life was to her weighted with intolerable suspicions; how soon would this young husband, so dear to her, forsake her for another, now that his debts were paid? It preyed upon her mind, distorting it, unbalancing it; each glance, each movement of his she exaggerated into an intrigue.

On their way to Paris they stayed a few days at the "Loup Noir"; Charles Guillaumet was interested in racing. Also, he became interested in a certain Mdlle. Jehane. Madame, quick to see, insisted on an instant departure.

The evening of the day of their departure she missed her husband, and found he had taken the car. Where should he have gone? Back to the inn, of course, only half-an-hour's run from Paris. She hired another car and followed him, driving it herself. It was not a pleasant journey. The first car she discovered forsaken, about half-a-mile distant from the inn. Her own car she left beside it, and trudged the remaining distance on foot.

The rest was easy.

Finding no sign of Guillaumet in front of the house, she stole round to the back. There she found a door in the wall of the courtyard—a door that led into the lane. That door was slightly ajar. She slipped in and crouched down in the shadow.[124]

Yes, there they were, her husband and Jehane; the latter was laughing, luring him on—and she was young; oh, so young!

The woman watched, fascinated.

Charles bade Jehane good-bye, promising to come again. He kissed her tenderly, passed through the gate; his steps were heard muffled along the lane.

Jehane blew him a kiss, and then fastened the little door.

A distant clock boomed out eleven strokes, and a pair of hands stole round the girl's throat, burying themselves deep, deep in the white flesh.

"And the husband, was he an accessory after the fact?" inquired the Boy.

"Possibly he guessed at the deed, yes; but, being a weakling, said nothing for fear of implicating himself. It wasn't proved."

The Host moved uneasily in his chair.

"Do you mean to tell me that the mystery of the picture has never been cleared up?" he asked. "Could Arnaud have actually seen the murder from his window, and fixed it on the canvas?"

The little French Judge shook his head.

"Did I not tell you that his window faced front?" he replied. "No, that point has not yet been explained. It is beyond us!"

He made a sweeping gesture, knocking over his liqueur glass; it fell with a crash on the parquet floor.

The Bore woke with a start.

"And did they marry?" he queried.

"Who should marry?"[125]

"That artist-chap and the girl—what was her name?—Jehane."

"Monsieur," quoth the little French Judge very gently and ironically, "I grieve to state that was impossible, Jehane being dead."

The Boy at the corner of the table stood up and threw the stump of his cigar into the fire.

"I think Spiritualism is all rot!" he declared.

MILLER, SON, & COMPY., LIMITED,
PRINTERS,
FAKENHAM AND LONDON.

SOME NOTABLE SIXPENNY BOOKS

To be had of all Booksellers, or post free (Inland) 8d. each; four volumes for 2s. 5d., or six for 3s. 6d. from THE PUBLISHER, 17, Henrietta Street, London, W.C.

THE MYSTERIES OF MODERN LONDON.

By GEORGE R. SIMS,

Author of "The Devil in London," &c.

"Full of fascinating interest and romance. Those who are interested in the curious will find here much that is piquant and stimulating."—*Daily News*.

"Is as fascinating as its title and its author's name would lead one to expect."—*T.P.'s Weekly*.

SEVENTY YEARS A SHOWMAN

My Adventures in Camp and Caravan the World Over.

By "LORD" GEORGE SANGER.

Illustrated.

In this volume the famous Showman relates many exciting experiences of his early days on the road, and recalls the trials and triumphs of a career more interesting than many a work of fiction.

QUEENS OF FRAILITY

By C. L. McCLUER STEVENS,

Author of "The Secret History of the Mormons."
Illustrated picture wrapper.

This volume contains biographies of the following famous women: Nell Gwyn, the Marchioness of Brinvilliers, the

wicked Countess of Shrewsbury, the Duchess of Kendal (the Maypole Duchess), Hannah Lightfoot, Elizabeth Chudleigh (the bigamous Duchess), Jeanne de Valois, Lady Hamilton, Jeanne du Barry, Mary Ann Clarke, the Lady with the Camelias, Lola Montez, Cora Pearl, Adah Menken.

THE SECRET HISTORY OF THE MORMONS

A TRUE NARRATIVE OF THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY
RELIGIOUS IMPOSTURE OF MODERN TIMES.

By C. L. McCLUER STEVENS.

FIFTY YEARS A FIGHTER

The Life Story of JEM MACE.

(Formerly Champion of the World.)

TOLD BY HIMSELF.

Illustrated.

A record of the last of the old prizefighters, who fought to a finish many battles in the old prize ring. A list of the notorious champions Mace met and vanquished would fill many pages, but he has here set on record the romance of as wonderful a life as was ever lived.

CONFESSIONS OF A POACHER

By J. CONNELL.

With Illustrations by S. T. DADD.

Field: "The book is very remarkable, instructive in its disclosures of the dubious ways of poachers, and an intending reader cannot but be interested and amused."

BOOKS TO MAKE US MERRY

PRICE 1/- each net. (Postage, 3d. extra.)

In stiff pictorial paper boards.

THE AMUSEMENT SERIES.

After-Dinner Sleights. By Lang Neil. With many Photographs, showing tricks in actual operation.

Card Tricks without Sleight of Hand or Apparatus. By L. Widdop. Illustrated.

Conjuring with Coins. Including Tricks by Nelson Downs and other Eminent Performers. Fully Illustrated with Photographs and Diagrams.

Fun on the Billiard Table. A Collection of 75 Amusing Tricks. By Stancliffe. With Photographs.

Hand Shadows. The Complete Art of Shadowgraphy. By Louis Nikola. Fully Illustrated.

Indoor Games for Children and Young People. Edited by E. M. Baker. Illustrated.

Modern Card Manipulation. By C. Lang Neil. Enlarged Edition. With many Photographs, showing Tricks in operation.

The New Book of Puzzles. Up-to-date and original. By A. Cyril Pearson. With upwards of 100 Illustrations.

The Pearson Puzzle Book. A Collection of over 100 of the Best Puzzles. Edited by J. K. Benson.

Pearson's Book of Fun, Mirth and Mystery. Edited by Mr. X.

Pearson's Humorous Reciter and Reader.

Plays for Amateur Actors. Containing Nine Original Plays. Six for Adults, two for Children, and one for Scouts.

Plays and Displays for Scout Entertainments. This volume contains six long plays, also several shorter plays, and recitations.

Practice Strokes at Billiards. For Tables of all Sizes. From the Match Play of John Roberts and other leading players.

Recitations for Children. Selected by Jean Belfrage. With Three Original Plays for Children.

Simple Conjuring Tricks that Anybody Can Perform. By Will Goldston.

Tricks for Everyone. By David Devant. Illustrated with 134 Photographs.

Transcriber's Note: Minor typographical errors have been corrected without note. Dialect spellings have been retained.