THE COPPER BOX

BY

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THE COPPER BOX. I

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I

The Lady of Kelpieshaw

ALTHOUGH it was springtide by the calendar, and already some little way advanced, the snow time was by no means over in that wild Border country. The exact date was April 19. I fix it by the fact that my birthday falls on the 18th, and that I spent that one, the twenty-third, in an old-fashioned hotel at Wooler, and celebrated it by treating myself at dinner to the best bottle of wine the house afforded. It may have been the bottle of wine—but more likely it was sheer ignorance and presumption—that prompted me next morning to attempt what proved to be an impossible feat of pedestrianism. I set out immediately after breakfast intending before nightfall to make a complete circuit of the country which lies between Wooler and

the Scottish border, going round by Kirknewton, Coldburn, and the Cheviot, and getting back to my starting-point by Hedgehope Hill and Kelpie Strand. That would have been a big walk on a long and fair summer day; in the uncertainty of a northern April it was a rash venture, which landed me in a highly unpleasant situation before the close of the afternoon. The morning was bright and promising, and for many enjoyable hours all went well. But about three o'clock came a disappearance of the sun and a suspicious darkening of the sky and lowering of temperature; before long snow began to fall, and in a fashion with which I, a Southerner, was not at all familiar. It was thick, it was blinding, it was persistent; it speedily obscured tracks, and heaped itself up in hollows; I began to have visions of being lost in it. And between five and six o'clock I found myself in this position—as far as I could make out from my pocket-map, I was at some point of the Angle between the Cheviot, Cairn Hill, and Hedgehope Hill and at the western extremity of Harthope Burn, but for all practical purposes I might as well have been in the heart of the Andes. I could just

make out the presence of the three great hills, but I could see nothing of any farmstead or dwelling; what was worse, no house, wayside inn, or village was marked on my map—that is, within any reasonable distance. As for a path, I had already lost the one I was on, and the snow by that time had become a smooth thick white carpet in front of me; I might be safe in stepping farther on that carpet, and I might sink into a hole or bog and be unable to get out. And the nearest indicated place—Middleton—was miles and miles away, and darkness was coming, and coming quickly.

The exact spot in which I made these rough reckonings was at the lee side of a coppice of young fir, whereat I had paused to rest a while and to consider what was best to be done. Clearly, there was only one thing to do!—to struggle on and trust to luck. I prepared for that by taking a pull at my flask, in which, fortunately, there was still half its original contents of whisky and water left, and finishing the remains of my lunch. But the prospect that faced me when I presently left my shelter and rounded the corner of the coppice was by no means pleasant. The snow was

falling faster and thicker, and darkness was surely coming. It looked as if I was either to struggle through the snow for more miles than I knew of, or be condemned to creep under any shelter I could find and pass a miserable night. But even then my bad luck was on the turn. Going onward and downward, from off the moorland towards the valley, I suddenly realised that I had struck some sort of road or made track; it was hard and wide, as I ascertained by striking my stick through the snow at various places. And just as suddenly, a little way farther to the east, I saw, bright and beckoning, the lights of a house.

The dusk was now so much fallen, and the whirling snow-flakes so thick that I had come right up to it before I could make out what manner of house it was that I had chanced upon so opportunely. It stood a little back from the road, on its north side, and in a sort of recess in the moorland, with the higher ground shelving down to its walls on all sides except that on which I stood. There was a courtyard all round it; on three sides of this the walls were unusually high, but on mine lower—low enough to enable me to see what

stood inside. And that was as queer-looking a house as ever I had seen. Its centre was a high, square tower, with a battlemented head; from its west and east angles lower buildings projected—lower, yet of considerable height; at one of the angles of these wings, connecting it and the tower, there was a round turret, with a conical top—altogether the place was so mediæval in appearance that it made me think of marauding barons, cattle forays, and all the rest of it. That the house was ancient I gathered from one circumstance—there was not a window anywhere in its lower parts. These seemed to be of solid masonry, unpierced by window or door; the lights I had seen came from windows fifteen or twenty feet above the level of the courtyard—one in the round turret, one in the left wing, a third in the right.

It was not until I was in the courtyard, knee-deep in drifting snow, that I made out where the door stood. It was at the foot of the turret, and when I reached it, I saw that it was in keeping with the rest of the place—a stout oak affair, black with age, studded with great square-headed iron nails, and set

in a frame as sturdy as itself. It was one of those doors which look, being shut, as if it would never open, and when after a brief inspection I beat loudly on its formidable timbers—no bell being visible—it was with a wonder as to whether such a feeble summons would carry through that evident thickness.

But the great door swung back almost at once. There, before me, a lamp held above her head, stood an elderly woman, a tall, gaunt, hard-featured woman, who first started with obvious surprise at seeing me, and then stared at me with equally apparent suspicion. There was no friendliness in her face, and the lack of it drove out of my head whatever it was that I had meant to say. But I managed to stammer an inquiry.

"Oh—er—can you tell me where I am?" I said. "I mean—what is the nearest village, or inn? I'm making my way to Wooler, and——"

It seemed to me that the door was about to be closed in my face; certainly the woman narrowed the already small opening between us.

"There's nothing'll be nearer than Middleton," she answered, "and you'll keep straight

on the road outside, and that'll be maybe six miles."

"Six miles—in this snow!" I exclaimed. "I'll be——"

"There's nothing nearer," she made haste to say. "There's no house at all between this and Middleton. And I'd advise you to be getting along, for the snow'll be far worse ere the night's fallen than what it is, and the road is not——"

The voice of a girl, clear, musical, and with a touch of masterfulness in it, broke in on the woman's harsh accents.

"Tibbie! What is it?—who is there?"

The woman frowned. But—involuntarily—she opened the door wider. I saw then that she was standing in a square stone hall of very small dimensions, and that from her right hand stone steps, obviously set in a newel stair, gave access to the upper regions of this queer old place. And I saw more—I saw a pair of slim and shapely ankles, in smart stockings and shoes; the edge of a dainty skirt, and the projection of the stair out of all else.

"It's a young man, miss, wants to know his

way," said the janitor. "He's for Wooler, and I've told him——"

"For Wooler? In this snow! Impossible, Tibbie! Why——"

The smart shoes suddenly tripped down the stair. Before I could realise my luck their owner was confronting me with curiosity and interest. I suppose I looked pretty forlorn and tramp-like; my water-proof coat was none of the newest, and I was wearing a disreputable, favourite old hat. But I uncovered and made my best bow. And if I stared it was because the light of the old woman's lamp showed me the prettiest girl I had ever had the good fortune to see. Perhaps, because we were both young, I made bold to smile at her —knowingly.

"You think I shall be—lost in the snow and found dead in the morning?" I suggested.

"That's precisely what you will be if you try to reach Wooler to-night," she answered, with some liveliness. "Such a thing's impossible! even if you knew the way, and I think you don't. Of course, you must stay here. My guardian, Mr. Parslewe, is out, but——"

"The master is not one for strangers, miss," interrupted the old woman. "His orders——"

The girl turned on her with a flash of her grey eyes that gave me a good notion of her imperious temper and general masterfulness.

"Fiddle-de-dee, Tibbie!" she exclaimed. "Your master would have a good deal to say if we turned anybody from his door on a night like this. You must come in," she went on, turning smilingly to me. "Mr. Parslewe is the most hospitable man alive, and if he were in he'd welcome you heartily. I don't know whether he'll manage to get home to-night or not. But I'm at home!" she concluded with a sudden glint in her eye. "Come up the stair!"

I waited for no second invitation. She was already tripping up the stair, holding her skirts daintily away from the grey stone wall, and I hastened to follow. We climbed some twenty steps, the old woman following with her lamp; then we emerged upon another and larger hall, stone-walled like that below, and ornamented with old pikes, muskets, broad-swords, foxes' masks; two doors, just then thrown wide, opened from it; one revealed a

great kitchen place in which an old man sat near a huge fire, the other admitted to a big, cosy parlour, wherein the firelight was dancing on panelled walls.

"Take off your things and give them to Tibbie," commanded my hostess. "And, Tibbie—tea! At once. Now come in," she went on, leading me into the parlour, "and if you'd like whisky until the tea comes, there it is, on the sideboard. Have some!"

"Thank you, but I've just had a dose," I answered. "I had some in my flask, very fortunately. You are extremely kind to be so hospitable."

"Nonsense!" she laughed. "You couldn't turn a dog out on a night like this. I don't know if my guardian will manage to get home—he and his old pony can do wonders, and they've sometimes got through when the drifts were two or three feet thick. But you're all right—sit down."

She pointed to a big arm-chair near the fire, and I obeyed her and dropped into it—to make a more leisurely inspection of my surroundings, and my hostess. The room was

evidently a part of the square tower I had seen from without, and filled a complete story of it; there were two high windows in it, filled with coloured glass; the panelling all round was of some dark wood, old and time-stained; the furniture was in keeping; there were old pictures, old silver and brass, old books—it was as if I had suddenly dropped into a setting of the seventeenth century.

But the girl was modern enough. She seemed to be about nineteen or twenty years old. She was tallish, slenderish, graceful; her hair was brown, her eyes grey, her face bright with healthy colour. I thought it probable that she spent most of her life out of doors, and I pictured her in tweeds and strong shoes, tramping the hills. But just then she was very smart in indoor things, and I was thankful that I myself, now that my outer wrappings had been discarded, was wearing a new suit, and looked rather more respectable than when I knocked at the door.

There was a lamp on the table, recently lighted, and the girl turned up the wick, and as its glow increased turned and looked at me, more narrowly.

"You're a stranger, aren't you?" she said. "You don't belong to these parts?"

"Quite a stranger," I answered, "or I shouldn't have been so foolish as to attempt what I was attempting." I gave her a brief account of what I had been after. "So you see how lucky I am to be saved, as you have saved me! And please allow me to introduce myself—my name's Alvery Craye, and I come from London."

"London!" she exclaimed, wonderingly. "Where I have never been! My name—you'll think it a curious one—is Madrasia—Madrasia Durham. Did you ever hear such a queer name as Madrasia?"

"Never!" said I. "How did you get it?"

"Born in Madras," she answered. "My father was a merchant there. Mr. Parslewe, my guardian, with whom I live here, was his partner. They died—my father and mother, I mean—when I was little, so Mr. Parslewe has looked after me ever since. We came to England three years ago, and Mr. Parslewe bought this old place, and fitted it up. Do you like it?"

"From what I've seen of it, immensely," I

answered. "What is it, exactly—or, rather, what has it been?"

"Mr. Parslewe says it was a sixteenth-century peel tower—a sort of castle, you know," she answered. "There are a good many here and there, on each side of the Tweed. We stayed for some time at Berwick when we came to England, looking round for an old place. Then we found this, and settled down. It's delightful in summer, and in winter it's weird!"

"Has it a name?" I asked. "Because it's not marked on my map."

"Name?—Yes!" she answered. "It's called Kelpieshaw—that's Kelpie Strand, that lies outside it, between Langlee Crags and Hedgehope Hill. But you'll see more in the morning—if the storm's cleared."

The old woman came in with the tea-tray. Whether she resented my presence or not, she knew her duties, and her home-made cakes were as good as her face was stern.

"That's our sole domestic," observed my hostess, as she poured out the tea. "Tibbie Muir: she's been with us ever since we came here. The old man you saw in the kitchen is

her husband, Edie Muir. He's a sort of useful adjunct. He grooms the pony, potters about the house, and nods over the fire. He's very little to do, but Tibbie is a marvel of activity."

"I hope she'll forgive me for coming," I said.

"Oh, her bark is worse than her bite! She's one of the faithful servants you read about in books and rarely meet in real life. She's under the impression that if Mr. Parslewe happens not to be at home it's her duty to be on guard. I believe she thinks of me as a mere child. But I'm mistress, of course!"

"I hope Mr. Parslewe will not think me an intruder?" I suggested. "I suppose I could have struggled through."

"And I suppose you couldn't," she retorted imperatively. "As for Mr. Parslewe, he'll be delighted to see you. If you can talk to him about anything old—old books, or pictures, old pots, pans, and plates, he'll be more than delighted."

I glanced round the room. It was one of those rooms which are difficult to light—there were dark and shadowy places and recesses. But I could see cabinets and presses, shelves

and cases, evidently full of the sort of things of which Miss Durham had just spoken; there was also, on my left hand, a massive sideboard, covered with what looked to me like old silver.

"Is Mr. Parslewe a collector, then?" I asked. "Or is he an antiquary?"

"A bit of both, I think," she answered, as she handed me a tea-cup. "Anyway, he's always bringing home some curiosity or other that he's picked up. And he spends most of his time reading his old books—there's a room higher in the tower full of books—big things that one can scarcely lift."

"And how do you spend your time?" I inquired. "Not that way?"

She shook her head, laughing.

"That way?" she said. "No!—not yet, anyway; I'll leave that sort of thing till I'm old and frumpy. No, I spend my time out of doors mostly. A bit of fishing, a bit of running after the beagles, and a good bit of shooting. We have the shooting round about; it's rough shooting, but good."

"You're a regular Diana," I remarked. "And Mr. Parslewe, does he go in for sport?"

"Not much," she replied. "Sometimes he

goes fishing, and now and then he'll carry a gun. But he usually becomes meditative over a stream, and is generally looking somewhere else if anything gets up in front of his gun, so his performances don't amount to much." She laughed again, and then looked half-archly, half-inquisitively at me.

"I'm wondering what you do with yourself," she said.

"I? Oh! I paint a bit," I answered.

"So, sometimes, does my guardian," she remarked. "He calls it daubing, but they aren't bad. There are two of his works of art on that panel."

She pointed to two small water-colour sketches which, framed in gilt, hung in a recess near the hearth. I rose and looked at them. One was of the house, the other a view of the Cheviot. There was some feeling of performance in both.

"What do you think of them?" she asked. "Perhaps you're a swell hand at that sort of thing?"

"Very nice," I replied. "And interesting, to me. My reason for wandering round to-day was that I wanted to find a good subject. I

think I've found one, this place. I could make a good picture of it, with the hills as the background."

"Do, do!" she exclaimed. "And I'll make my guardian buy it from you; he often buys pictures. You might put me in it, with my gun and my dogs; I'll show you the dogs in the morning—beauties!"

We got on very well together, chatting in this light-hearted fashion. The evening passed on, but Mr. Parslewe did not come. We had supper; still he did not come. And at ten o'clock my hostess pronounced a decision.

"He won't come to-night, now," she said. "And it's my bed-time. Tibbie will take charge of you, Mr. Craye, and I can promise you that your bed is properly aired. Don't be afraid of the room; it looks as if it were haunted, but it isn't."

She gave me her hand, smiled, and went off, and presently the old woman appeared and conducted me to a chamber in one of the wings. It was more mediæval in appearance than the parlour, but it was remarkably comfortable, and there were hot bottles in the bed.

I believe I fell asleep as soon as my head

fairly settled on the pillow, and at once dropped into a sound slumber. I have no idea as to what time it was during the night when I woke suddenly and sharply, to find a man standing at my bedside, and, by the light of a bull's-eye lantern, looking down on me with a half-shrewd, half-whimsical expression.

II

The Second Stranger

I SAT straight up in bed, blinking at the light and its holder. Half-asleep though I was, I got an impression of my visitor. An ascetic-looking, clean-shaven man, with a big, well-shaped nose, and firm thin lips, which, in unison with a pair of keen, observant eyes, could, as I found out later, assume various expressions, changing from intense disagreeableness to peculiar sweetness. Just then eyes and lips were quite agreeable—in fact, their owner laughed gently.

"All right, young master!" he said, in a voice as sweet and mellow as his smile. "Fall to your sleep again—I only just wanted to see what strange bird we'd got in our roost."

He laughed again and made for the door. I found my voice.

"Mr. Parslewe?" I asked interrogatively.

"At your service, sir," he answered, with a sort of mock politeness. "James Parslewe."

"I hope I'm not——" I began.

"Are you warm enough?" he inquired, suddenly stepping back to the bedside and laying a hand on its coverings. "It's a gey cold night, and I'm thinking you're not of these parts."

"Oh, I'm warm enough indeed, thank you," I assured him. "Couldn't be more comfortable, sir."

"Then go to sleep again," he commanded, with another of his half-jesting, half-cynical laughs. "You're heartily welcome to my ancient roof."

He went away then, quietly closing the door behind him, and I obeyed his behest and fell asleep again. Nor did I awake until the old man that I had seen by the kitchen fire the night before appeared in my room, bringing me hot water, shaving tackle, tea. He drew back curtains and blinds, and I saw that the sky was still grey and heavy.

"More snow in the night?" I asked him.

He started, as if unused to being spoken to, and nodded his old head.

"Aye, there'll have been a deal more

snow, master," he answered. "Many feet deep it is all round the house."

I got up, drank the tea, made as careful a toilet as I could, and eventually went off to the room in the tower wherein I had spent the evening with my youthful hostess. It was so far untenanted, but there was a great fire of logs blazing in the big open hearth, and the breakfast table was laid before it; from the adjacent kitchen came highly appetizing odours. I warmed myself at the hearth, looking round; now, in the morning light, dull though it was, I could see the room better. It was easy to get from it an idea of its owner's tastes—the beautiful old furniture, the panelling, the arrangement of the cabinets and their contents, all showed the inclination and love of the collector, who was also a good judge of what he collected. There were many things of great interest in that room—one struck me particularly, perhaps because the fire flames kept glinting sharply on its burnished front. This was a small copper box, a thing some six or seven inches square, which stood in the middle of the ancient sideboard, one out of many curious articles placed there. I could see, from

where I stood, that it was a bit of unusually good work, and I presently went closer and took it into my hands. Anything worked in old brass or copper had always appealed to me; this quaint little coffer, or chest, beautifully elegant in its severe simplicity, took my fancy. It was a plain thing throughout, except that on the lid was engraven a coat-of-arms, and on the scroll beneath it a legend—

Thatte I please I wylle.

I had just replaced the copper box and was turning away wondering what these words signified when I caught sight of something which I had certainly not expected to see. There, hung in two panels above the sideboard, obscured in shadow the previous evening but plain enough now, as they faced the big window, hung two small pictures of my own, water-colour sketches of scenery in Teesdale which I had shown at the Royal Academy a year before and had subsequently sold to a Bond Street dealer. I was looking at them when Miss Durham came in, followed by the old woman and the breakfast dishes.

Miss Durham and I shook hands solemnly.

Then we both smiled, and eventually laughed. She nodded at a door in the corner of the room.

"Mr. Parslewe came after all," she said.

"I'm aware of it," said I. "He came to see me—some time or other."

"No?" she exclaimed. "What for?"

"Wanted to know if I'd enough blankets, I think," I answered.

"Oh, I hope you had!" she said. "Had you? But how——"

Just then the door in the corner opened and my host entered. I saw then that he was a rather tall, loose-limbed man of probably fifty-five to sixty, with a remarkably intellectual face, sphinx-like in expression, and as I have already said, capable of looking almost fiendishly disagreeable or meltingly sweet. It was sweet enough now as he came forward, offering me his hand with old-fashioned courtesy.

"Good morning, master!" he cooed—no other word expresses his suavity of tone. "I trust you slept well and refreshingly after all your privations."

"My privations, sir, had been of short duration, and their recompense full," I replied,

imitating his half-chaffing tone. "I slept excellently well, thank you."

"Why, that's a blessing!" he said, rubbing his hands. "So did I!"

"It was very unkind of you, though, Jimmie, to wake up a guest in the middle of the night," said Miss Durham. "How inconsiderate!"

Mr. Parslewe motioned me to the breakfast table with a bow and a wave of his delicately fingered hand, and favoured his ward and myself with one of his sweetest smiles.

"Well, I don't know, my dear," he retorted. "He might have been a burglar!—you never can tell."

He laughed, with full enjoyment, at his own joke, and bent towards me as he handed me a plate.

"I was sorry I woke you!" he said, still smiling. "I was enjoying looking at you. I thought I'd never seen such a refreshingly innocent young mortal in my life! In fact, I was just thinking of fetching Madrasia to look at you when you woke."

He laughed more than ever at this, and I glanced from him to his ward.

"Don't mind him!" she said. "That's his way. He possesses a curious form of humour —a very twisted form sometimes. You're a queer man, Jimmie, aren't you? And I gave you such a splendid character last night!— said that you'd have been furious if I hadn't insisted on bringing Mr. Craye in, and lots more—didn't I, Mr. Craye?"

"Well, I'd certainly rather see him sitting there alive, eating his bacon, than dig him out of the snow, dead," remarked Mr. Parslewe, good-humouredly. "But Craye, now—do you happen to be related to Craye, the landscape painter?"

"I am Craye, the landscape painter, Mr. Parslewe," I replied. "That's why I'm in this neighbourhood. I was looking out all yesterday for a likely subject."

His face lighted up with genuine pleasure, and he stretched out his hand across the table and shook mine heartily.

"Man!" he exclaimed, "I'm delighted to have you in my house! You're a clever young fellow; I've admired your work ever since I was first privileged to see it. And bought it,

too; there's two water-colours of yours behind you there, and——"

"I've seen them," said I.

"And I've two more upstairs in my study," he continued. "Aye, well, I'm greatly pleased! And you're staying in these parts?"

"I came to the hotel at Wooler three days ago, just to look round the Cheviots," I answered.

"Any definite time?" he asked.

"No," said I. "I'm my own master as to that."

"Then when old Edie can get through the snow, we'll just send across to Wooler for your things, and you'll consider this house yours, Mr. Craye," he said, with a nod of his head which implied that he would take no refusal. "Your very obedient servant, sir, as long as you like to stop in it!"

"There!" exclaimed Miss Durham; "I knew you'd get on together like a house on fire! But perhaps Mr. Craye thinks he might be dull?"

"Mr. Craye thinks nothing of the sort," I retorted hastily. "He's overwhelmed on all sides. You're extremely kind, Mr. Parslewe; your sense of hospitality is princely."

"Pooh, pooh!" he said. "We'll just be glad. And there's no need to be dull, my girl, when you're about!" he added, nodding at his ward. "A lively damsel, this, Craye; the air of the hills is in her blood!"

"Miss Durham, sir, is, I am sure, one of those admirable hostesses who could never let a guest be anything but happy," I said, with a glance towards the object of my compliment. "And," I added, more seriously, "I should be very ungrateful not to accept your kind invitation. I won't let you get tired of me."

"Mr. Craye thinks he could paint a picture of the house, with the hills for a background, Jimmie," remarked Miss Durham. "You'd buy that, wouldn't you?"

"Hoots, toots! We'll see, woman, we'll see!" answered Mr. Parslewe. "There's finer subjects than this old place, but you'll not see them to-day, my lad," he added, turning to me. "The snow's thick and deep all round our walls, and what you'll see of the land for the next twenty-four hours, and maybe more, 'll be from the top of our tower. And a grand observation post it is, too!"

He took me up the tower after breakfast

was over. From the leads at its battlemented head there was a wonderful view of the surrounding country; he indicated the chief features as we stood there, looking out on the snow-clad expanse. And I saw then what I had not been able to see the night before, that this place, Kelpieshaw, was absolutely isolated; as far as I could see, on any side, there was not even a shepherd's hut or gamekeeper's lodge in view.

"You love solitude, Mr. Parslewe," I remarked as I looked about me. "This, surely, is solitude!"

"Aye, it is!" he agreed. "And it suits me. What's more to the purpose, it suits my ward —up to now, anyway. When I brought her from India, where she was born, I looked about for a likely place in this district. We came across this—half-ruinous it was then. I bought it, did it up, furnished it, got a lot of things here that I'd left stored in London when I first went to India, many a year ago, and settled down. The girl loves it—and so do I."

He gave me one of his half-serious, half-sardonic smiles, and we went down the stair

again, and into a big room, a floor above the parlour, wherein he kept his books and his collections. It was something of a cross between a museum and a library, and I could see that he was remarkably proud of the things in it. I saw, too, that my host was a man of means —only a well-to-do man could have afforded to bring together the things that he had there. Like all antiquaries he began to point out to me his chief treasures, and to talk about them, and finding that I had some knowledge of such things, to dig into old chests and presses in order to unearth others. Once, while he was thus engaged, I was looking at some small volumes bound in old calf which were ranged in one of the recesses; once more, on the side of one of these, in faded gilt, I came across the arms and legend which I had noticed on the copper box in the room below; he looked up from his task to find me regarding it.

"An odd motto that, Mr. Parslewe," I observed. "I noticed it on your old copper chest, or coffer, downstairs, 'That I please, I will!' What does it mean?" He laughed satirically.

"I should say it means that the folk who

sported it were pretty much inclined to have their own way, my lad!" he answered. "Whether they got it or not is another question. Now, here's a fifteenth-century Book of Hours, with the illuminations as fresh as when they were done. Look you there for a bit of fine work!"

I had meant to ask him whose coat-of-arms and whose legend it was that had excited my curiosity, but I saw that the subject either possessed no interest for him or that he didn't want to be questioned about it, and I turned to what he was showing me. We spent most of that morning examining his collection, and we got on together admirably. Still, I was not sorry when Miss Durham appeared and insisted on dragging me away from him to go out with her into the courtyard to inspect her horse, her dogs, and other live creatures. The old man had cleared much of the courtyard of snow, but beyond its walls the drifts were deep. From the gate I looked across them with a certain amount of impatience—I wanted to see more of the country, and I had notions that Miss Durham might not be unwilling to act as guide to it.

"Don't think you're going to be a prisoner for very long," she suddenly remarked, interpreting my silent contemplation of the vast waste of whiteness. "At this time of the year the snow goes quickly. You needn't be surprised if you find it vanished when you wake to-morrow, thick as it is."

"If it is, and we can get out, you'll show me some of your favourite scenes?" I suggested. "I could make a sketch or two."

"Of course!" she assented. "There's a lovely bit along the road towards Roddam. I'll take you there as soon as the snow's gone; you'll be ravished with it!"

We had three days' wait for that, and during that time, as if they felt themselves bound to compensate me for the delay, my host and hostess did all they could to amuse and interest me, though, to tell the truth, I was interested enough in them personally, and needed no other diversion. Mr. Parslewe was certainly a character, full of eccentricities, with a strong sense of humour, and a mordant wit; he had evidently seen much of men and of the world, and his comments on things in general were as interesting as they were

amusing. I made out, however, that his knowledge of our own country and our own period was considerably out of date; he appeared to know little of present-day affairs, though he had a fine old store of anecdotes of a previous generation. But a chance remark of his accounted for this.

"I left England for India and the East when I was twenty-one," he said to me one evening in casual conversation, "and I never saw its shores again until I'd turned fifty. And now that I'm back—and some years, too—I don't want to see any more of it than I can see from the top of my dear old tower! Here I am, and here I stick!"

I wondered if he meant his young and pretty ward to stick there, too—but those were early days to put the question to him. Still, by that time I had fallen in love with Madrasia; it would have been a most unheard-of thing if I hadn't! And already I meant to move all the powers that are in heaven and earth to win her—for which reason I was devoutly thankful when, on the fourth day of my stay, winter suddenly disappeared as if by magic, and springtide again

asserted itself and flooded the hills and valleys with warmth and sunshine. For then she and I got out of the old house, leaving Mr. Parslewe with his books and papers, and began to wander abroad, improving our acquaintance —very pleasantly and successfully. There had been a comforting air of romance about our meeting which, I think, appealed to both of us; it was still there, making an atmosphere around us, and now the elements of a most puzzling and curious mystery were to be added to it.

Those elements were first introduced by a man who came along the road leading from Wooperton and Roddam, and chanced to find Madrasia and myself sitting on a shelf of rock by its side, I doing a bit of perfunctory sketching, and she watching me. He was a tourist-looking sort of man; that is to say, he wore the sort of garments affected by tourists; otherwise, I should have said that he was perhaps a commercial traveller, or a well-to-do tradesman who loved country walks—a biggish, well-fed, florid-faced man, shrewd of eye, and, as we presently discovered, very polite—too polite—of manner. He regarded us

closely as he came up, and when he was abreast of us, he stopped in the centre of the road and lifted his cap; it was the latest thing in headgear of that sort, and he raised it with something of a flourish.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with a deprecating, ingratiating smile. "Can you tell me if, somewhere in this neighbourhood, there is a house called Kelpieshaw?"

It was Madrasia who answered—promptly.

"Two miles ahead, along the valley," she said. "Can't miss it."

The man bowed, and smiled again; a little too obsequiously, I thought.

"The residence of, I believe—er, Mr. Parslewe?" he suggested. "Mr. James Parslewe."

"Mr. Parslewe lives there," assented Madrasia. "Want him?"

He smiled again—enigmatically this time.

"I hope to have the pleasure of waiting upon Mr. Parslewe—and of finding him at home," he answered. "Er—Mr. Parslewe, I believe—perhaps you are acquainted with him?—is a gentleman learned in—er, antiquities—and that sort of thing?"

"He is a bit inclined that way," replied Madrasia, almost flippantly. "Are you?"

He waved his hand, shelving away from us.

"A neophyte—a mere neophyte," he said, still smiling. "A—er, learner!"

He strode off up the valley: we looked after him meditatively.

"Don't like the looks of that person," said Madrasia, suddenly.

"Neither do I—though I don't know why," I answered. "Case of Dr. Fell, I suppose. Bit too given to smiling readily, eh?"

"Oily!" said Madrasia. "Wonder who he is—and what he's after?"

"Doesn't look like a dry-as-dust antiquary, anyhow," I remarked.

But whatever the man looked like, we found him with Parslewe when we went home—one on each side of the parlour fire. And Parslewe introduced him, unceremoniously—Mr. Pawley.

III

Copper

MR. PAWLEY, who looked very comfortable in an easy chair, with a glass of whisky and soda conveniently at hand, smiled upon us as if we were old acquaintances. He was clearly one of those gentlemen who speedily make themselves at home anywhere, and, as it presently appeared, are by no means backward in the art of finding things out. Indeed, he at once began to put leading questions.

"Your daughter, I presume, sir?" he suggested, with a glance at Madrasia.

"Not a bit of it!" answered Parslewe, in his most off-hand manner. "My ward."

"Dear me, sir! now I could have thought that I saw a distinct family resemblance," said Mr. Pawley. "This young gentleman, perhaps——"

"Visitor of mine," replied Parslewe. "Mr. Craye—a well-known artist."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," murmured Mr. Pawley. "I observed that you were doing something in your line when I saw you and Miss—I didn't catch the young lady's name, I think—Miss——?"

"Durham!" said Parslewe. "Durham!"

"Just so, sir—Miss Durham. Ah!—and a very pleasant country this is, Mr. Craye, for your form of art—and very delightful quarters, I'm sure," added Mr. Pawley, with a bow towards our host. "And you were saying, Mr. Parslewe——?"

Madrasia, with an odd glance at me, went out of the room, and Parslewe, who, I thought, already looked bored to death by his visitor, turned to him.

"I was saying that if you're really interested in that sort of thing—barrows and stone circles and so on, I'm scarcely the man to come to," he said. "My tastes lie more chiefly in books. If you're going to stay in the district a while, I can give you a list of titles of books—local and otherwise—that you can read up. I think you'd find all of them in the various libraries at Newcastle."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Parslewe,

I'm sure," replied Mr. Pawley. "I should value that, sir."

Parslewe rose from his chair and left the room. I heard him climb the stair to his library on the next floor of the tower. Mr. Pawley looked at me. It was a peculiarly scrutinising, appraising glance—it gave me an idea that the man was wondering how much he could get out of me in the way of information.

"A very clever and learned gentleman, Mr. Parslewe," he observed. "Uncommon!"

"I agree!" said I.

"Makes a man like me—just beginning to take an interest in these things, do you see—feel that he knows—ah, nothing!" he said.

"I quite understand you," I assented.

"And what a—yes, you might call it—wealth of curiosities he's gathered about him," he continued. "Odds and ends of all sorts. Now, there's an object that's attracted my attention—a very pretty article!"

He rose suddenly, and walking across to the sideboard, picked up the copper box, holding it to the light, and examining it with exaggerated admiration.

"Beautiful bit of work, Mr.—Craye, I think—beautiful!" he said, unctuously. "Not made yesterday, that, sir. Old coat-of-arms, you see, and a motto. Um! You don't happen to know whose family coat-of-arms that is, Mr. Craye?"

"No, I don't," said I. "Do you?"

"No, sir, no! as I remarked—when I saw you and the young lady down the road—I'm a learner, a novice, a neophyte, Mr. Craye," he replied. "Fine coat-of-arms, though, that—and a peculiar motto. Now what would you take those words to signify, Mr. Craye?"

Before I could reply, we heard Parslewe coming back, and Mr. Pawley hastily put down the copper box and retreated to his chair, for all the world as if he had been caught or been about to be caught in the act of stealing something.

"These antiquaries!" he murmured, with a cautioning wink at me, "I know 'em!—they don't like their treasures handled. Precious! Old pots—worth sixpence to some people—worth their weight in gold, to them. Just so!"

Parslewe came into the room with a

sheet of notepaper in his hand; Mr. Pawley received it with gratitude as exaggerated as his admiration of the copper box. And presently he said that he must now be moving; I am sure it was with a desire to speed his departure that Parslewe offered to show him down the stair and to point out a short cut across the moor. So they vanished, and when Parslewe came back the tea-tray had just been brought in and Madrasia was busy at it. She turned on her guardian as he entered.

"Jimmie!" she exclaimed. "Who on earth was that creature?"

Parslewe laughed as he dropped into his favourite chair.

"No more idea than you have, my dear!" he answered. "Introduced himself as a humble fellow-labourer in the same field, in which—so he said—I'm a past master. Said he was holidaying in the neighbourhood, and had heard of me, so ventured to call and see me. Wanted to know if there were any objects worthy of his attention round about here—sepulchral things and so on. The odd thing," continued Parslewe, with one of his sardonic laughs, "the very odd thing was that

I never saw a man who looked less like an antiquary in my life!"

"Or talked less like one, I should think," suggested Madrasia.

"Oh, he'd picked up a few cant phrases, somewhere or other," observed Parslewe.

"He told me that he'd turned to this sort of thing, as he called it, for a hobby—a man, he observed, with the air of one uttering a hitherto-undiscovered truth, must have something to do. Ha-hah-hah!"

"He seems to have amused you, anyway," remarked Madrasia.

"Aye!—why not?" assented Parslewe. "Of course he did; I thought he looked much more at home with a glass in his hand and a pipe in his mouth than he would amongst either books or barrows."

"Well, really, I wondered whatever brought him here!" said Madrasia. "A neophyte, indeed!—in loud tweeds and a glaring necktie. I thought he was a sporting publican out for a walk."

I did not say what I thought. The fact was I had some queer suspicions about Mr. Pawley. I had noticed his odd, shrewd,

examining glances; he looked to me like a man who has an object, a mission; who is spying out the land; endeavouring to get at a discovery. That he had some purpose in view I was sure, but I said nothing to Parslewe and Madrasia. Just then we had a more pertinent and interesting matter to discuss.

Parslewe wanted me to stay there a while and to paint a landscape for him. He had a favourite view, near the house, and was keenly anxious that somebody should do justice to it—moreover, he wanted the picture to be painted in the freshness of springtide, though my own private inclination would have led me to paint it in the autumn. And he had offered me a handsome price for it, agreeing, too, that I should be allowed to submit it for the next Royal Academy exhibition. I was by no means unwilling to accept his offer, for apart from the advantages of the commission, the work meant spending at least a month or six weeks at Kelpieshaw—in the society of Madrasia. And I had already fallen in love with Madrasia.

We settled the affair of the picture over that tea-table. I decided to start on it at once,

and the first thing then was to get a suitable canvas. Parslewe said I should be sure to find one in Newcastle, and I arranged to journey there next day, seek out an artist's colourman, and buy what I wanted. On this errand I was in Newcastle about noon on the following morning, and the first person I saw there was our recent visitor, the somewhat mysterious Mr. Pawley.

Mr. Pawley did not see me. I caught sight of him by accident, but, having seen him, I made it my business to watch him a little. He stood at the exit of one of the arrival platforms, and he was absorbed in looking for somebody or other. An express came in from the south; its passengers began to stream through the exit; presently Mr. Pawley—who was still attired as when I had last seen him—removed his cap and bowed with sincere obsequiousness. The object of his reverence was an elderly, big-framed, very consequential-looking man, whose large face was ornamented by a pair of old-fashioned whiskers, and who, in my opinion, had family solicitor written big all over himself and his attire, from his silk hat to his stout-soled,

gaitered, square-toed boots. That he was a person of much greater importance than Mr. Pawley was very evident from the fact that he replied to Mr. Pawley's obsequious greeting with a mere condescending nod, and at once resigned into his hands a Gladstone bag and a travelling rug. There was an interchange of brief remarks between the two—then they marched across the platform to the hotel and vanished within its portals, the large man going first, and Mr. Pawley playing porter behind.

My curiosity had been aroused so keenly by that time that I had some absurd notion of following Pawley and the white-whiskered person into the hotel, just to see if I could find out a little more about their mutual relation. But on reflection I went off about my own business. Having some knowledge of Newcastle, I walked up town to a certain restaurant of which I knew and highly approved; there I lunched and idled an hour away afterwards. After that I set out in quest of a firm whose name Parslewe had given me. Its manager had not got a canvas of the precise size I wanted, but he promised

to make me one by noon of the following day, and I accordingly decided to stay in Newcastle for the night, and, later, went to the hotel at the station to book a room. In the smoking-room there, writing letters, was the white-whiskered person. Pawley was not with him. Nor was Pawley with him when, after dinner that evening, he came into the smoking-room again and took a chair close by my own in a comfortable corner. But now he was not alone; he came in company with a younger man, a middle-aged, sharp-eyed individual whom I also set down as having some connection with the law.

These two men had evidently just dined; a waiter brought them coffee and liqueurs; the elder man produced a cigar-case and offered it to his companion. They began to talk; sometimes quite audibly, at others, sinking their voices to whisperings. But they had scarcely lighted their cigars before a word or two from the white-whiskered man made me prick my ears.

"Without doubt!" he said. "Without any doubt, the copper box—its presence there—the coat-of-arms—the odd legend on the

scroll—is a most valuable piece of evidence! As soon as I heard of it——"

He bent nearer to his companion, and for a minute or two I failed to catch what he was saying. Out of my eye-corners, however, I could see that the younger man was listening, attentively and approvingly; from time to time he nodded his head as if in assent. Eventually he spoke.

"And you say that Pawley, in his opinion, took him to be of about that age?" he asked.

"That, of course, has to be considered."

"Pawley is an observant fellow," remarked the elder man. "I have employed Pawley on several occasions, and with excellent results. I can trust Pawley's estimate of the age. It fits in exactly!"

The younger man regarded his cigar thoughtfully for a while.

"Odd!" he said at last. "Very odd! But I should say it is so!"

"I don't think there's any doubt of it," answered the white-whiskered person. "At any rate, I am not going to travel all this way, and back again, without making sure. I shall

not be deceived!" he added with strong emphasis on the personal pronoun, accompanied by a complacent chuckle. "Even a point-blank denial would not satisfy me! No dust will be thrown in my eyes!"

"You were fully acquainted with the circumstances of thirty years ago?" questioned the other. "Personally, I mean?"

"Fully! Thirty-five years ago, to be exact. He—if it is so—is now fifty-six years of age. Oh, yes, I knew everything, was concerned in everything," affirmed the elder man.

"Up to a certain point, you know, up to a certain point. Now, if I can only get at close quarters, and Pawley assures me that's by no means difficult, I can satisfy myself rather cleverly. For instance——"

Once more he leaned nearer to his companion and lowered his voice; the conversation tailed off into whisperings. And now, fearful lest I should in any way betray myself, I rose from my chair, left their neighbourhood, and under pretence of looking at the evening newspapers spread out on a centre table, went across to another part of the room. I picked

up a paper and sat down, affecting to look at it. But in reality, I was still watching the two men, and wondering what it was that they were talking about.

For without doubt it had to do with my host, Parslewe. The references to the copper box, to the coat-of-arms engraved on it, to the curiously worded motto appearing on the scroll beneath, all that meant Parslewe. Pawley, again; whom had Pawley been visiting but Parslewe? And Pawley's estimate, so much valued by White Whiskers, that was, of course, in relation to the age of Parslewe. It was all Parslewe, and it didn't require much thought or reflection or analysis on my part to decide that about and around Parslewe hung a decided mystery.

But of what nature? It seemed to me, judging him by my short yet very intimate acquaintanceship, that Parslewe was a decidedly frank and candid man. He had told me a good deal about himself. He had left England as a very young man, gone East, settled down in Madras, gone into partnership there with another Englishman, Madrasia's father, trading in cotton and indigo, made a

big fortune, and, on the death of his partner and his partner's wife, had brought Madrasia to England, to settle down as I had found them. All that seemed a plain and straight story, with nothing remarkable or mysterious about it. What, then, were these men after? For there was no doubt in my mind now that Pawley had come to Kelpieshaw as a spy, seeking some particular information, and evidently getting what he wanted in an inspection of Parslewe and an examination of the copper box.

That copper box began to assume a sinister significance in my thoughts of it and its relation to this affair. But what was its relation? It was a box, and it was made of copper. Beautifully made, to be sure, and by some man who had taken vast artistic pride in his work; the engraving of the coat-of-arms, too, was beautifully done. But, after all, it was only a copper box! What was there about it, then, or appertaining to it, that made these men, if not exactly keen about it, at any rate remarkably interested in the mere fact of its existence?

I saw no more of the two men in the smok-

ing-room that night, except that I caught a glimpse of White Whiskers, as I had come to call him, going bedward at the same time as myself, and on my corridor. I saw him again next morning, in the coffee-room, at breakfast; he looked bigger, more solemn and judicial than ever. But no Pawley came to him; I wondered what had become of Pawley. Perhaps he had gone back to sneak round Kelpieshaw again—anyway, I myself was going back there as soon as my canvas was ready. And I had already made up my mind that when I got there I should tell Parslewe that at Newcastle there were people talking about him and his copper box.

The man who was making my canvas had his shop in a side street off Haymarket; I set off to it a little before noon, intending to get my parcel, return to the station, and depart for Wooler. But half-way up Percy Street I suddenly saw White Whiskers, a little way in front of me. With him was the man with whom I had seen him in conversation the night before. Once more they were in conversation; it seemed to be earnest and intense, judging by their attitude; White

Whiskers had his arm linked in that of his companion, to whom he bent, confidently; the other listened with rapt attention. Out of sheer curiosity I followed them. They turned, eventually, into St. Thomas Street, and then began to look at the names over the shops. Finally, White Whiskers raised his umbrella and pointed to a sign; a moment later they entered the shop beneath it. And from a little distance I saw what was on the sign: BICKERDALE, WHITESMITH AND COPPERSMITH.

Copper again! copper box, coppersmith—the whole thing was becoming more mysterious than ever! Here were these men, who had been talking about a copper box the night before, now entering the shop of a man who worked in copper. Why? I wanted to know. And instead of going off on my own proper business to the artist's colourman's shop, I crossed the street, walked on a little, turned, and kept an eye on the door into which White Whiskers and his companion had vanished.

They were in there about half-an-hour. I stuck to my post, though I knew I was

running the risk of losing my train. At last they came out. They came nodding and wagging their heads as if whatever had transpired within had settled the question—White Whiskers, in particular, looked uncommonly satisfied with himself. They went away, round the corner into the Haymarket—and thereupon, with a desperate resolution generated by sheer curiosity, I boldly entered the coppersmith's establishment. Its proprietor, an uncomfortably canny-looking sort of person, elderly and spectacled, stood behind the counter; his keen eyes fell upon me at once with such shrewd inquiry that I felt decidedly embarrassed, and knew myself to be growing red about cheeks and ears.

"Oh, ah, er," I began lamely. "I—that is—have you any old articles in copper, you know—curiosities and that sort of thing—to sell?"

It seemed to me that he took an unconscionable time in replying. When he did reply, it was with a curt monosyllable.

"No!"

"The fact is I—sometimes—go in for collecting such things," I said. "I——"

He suddenly bent forward across his counter, and gave me a keen, searching look.

"What are you after, young man?" he asked severely. "I saw you—watching those gentlemen."

IV

Midnight Warning

I GLANCED round, involuntarily, at the window of the man's shop, and saw that, there being little in it, he would certainly have been able, while talking to White Whiskers and his companion, to command a view of the other side of the street, and so had doubtless seen me hanging about. But his curt manner helped to disperse my embarrassment and awkwardness, and I boldly took another line. After all, I had—as far as I knew—as good a right to ask questions as White Whiskers had.

"Well, supposing I was watching them?" I retorted. "I may have had a good reason, and very good reason! What do you say to that?"

He began to shift about the things on his counter, aimlessly. I remained watching him. Suddenly he looked up, nervously, but defiantly.

"You're not going to get anything out of me!" he said. "I've said my say already, and I've been warned against such as you." Then he assumed a sneering look and tone. "Old copper articles!" he flung at me. "You should think shame of yourself coming in on a man with false excuses like that!"

I saw now that there was something, and I gave him a thrust that was intended to go right home.

"Copper is a good word!" said I. "And I wonder if you've ever seen or handled an old copper box, a few inches square, with a coat-of-arms engraved on it, and an unusual motto beneath that? Come, now!"

He stood straight up at that, and I knew that he had seen such a thing, and that the two men who had just gone had been at him about it. And having made this discovery, and without another word, I turned on my heel and went swiftly out of the shop, leaving him staring after me.

But if he was bewildered, so was I. What on earth was all this mystery, plainly centring round Parslewe and his copper box? I had walked up the street, turned a corner, and

gone far down another street before I remembered my canvas and my train. I turned back, got the canvas, and made for the hotel and the station. And of course, through poking my nose into other people's affairs, I had missed the train to Alnwick and Wooler, and there wasn't another until late in the afternoon. So I lunched in the hotel, and idled the time away there—chiefly wondering about this thing. Parslewe—Pawley—White Whiskers—the coppersmith—and that infernal copper box in the middle of them! What was the mystery attached to them and it? Was it fraud?—was it some matter of felony?—was it murder? I was going to tell Parslewe what I had discovered, anyway, and as quickly as possible. But I had to cool my heels until between five and six o'clock, and when at last I walked out on the platform to my train I saw White Whiskers standing at the door of a first-class carriage talking to the man who had gone with him to the coppersmith's shop. White Whiskers had his bag and his rug in the carriage; I glimpsed them as I passed—evidently, he was going northward by my

train, and was, of course, on his way to Kelpieshaw.

I had one of the hotel porters with me, carrying my bag and my canvas, and when he had found me a seat I engaged his attention.

"There are two gentlemen standing at the door of a first-class compartment up there," I said. "Do you happen to know who they are?"

The man looked, and nodded.

"Don't know the older gentleman, sir," he replied. "He stopped at the hotel last night, but I didn't hear his name mentioned. The other gentleman's Mr. Pebling, sir."

"And who," I asked, "is Mr. Pebling?"

"Lawyer, sir—well-known lawyer in the town," he answered. "Pebling, Spilsby and Pebling, solicitors—Grey Street. Everybody knows him."

Accordingly, I departed for Kelpieshaw in an atmosphere of Law and Mystery—I imagined that atmosphere centring thickly around White Whiskers in his first-class compartment (I, as a matter of principle rather than pence, travelled third) and mingling with the smoke of his very excellent cigars. I

would have given a good deal to pick the brains that lay behind his big, solemn, consequential countenance, but I knew that I should probably hear much on the morrow. For that he was bound for Kelpieshaw I had no more doubt than that our train was a slow one.

It was late when we got to Wooler—so late that I had already decided to spend the night there and go on to Parslewe's in the early morning. I had some notion, too, that White Whiskers would, of course, repair to the principal hotel, whither I was also bound, and that there I might find out a little more about him—perhaps even get into conversation with him; from what I had seen of him at Newcastle, I judged him to be a talkative man, and at Wooler he would have small chance of indulging his propensities. Now if I could only foregather with him over a smoking-room fire——

But no sooner had the train come to a halt in Wooler station than I saw that White Whiskers was expected, and was met. He was met, and very politely—almost reverently—received by a tall military-looking man in a

smart, dark uniform, braided and buttoned, who appeared to consider it an honour when White Whiskers—as I saw plainly—extended two fingers to him. They conversed for a minute or two; then, talking confidentially, as it appeared, they set off together. And being just behind them as they left the station, I indulged in more inquisitiveness.

"Who is that in the dark uniform?" I inquired of the clerk who was collecting the tickets at the entrance.

"Mr. Hilgrave," he answered, promptly. "Inspector of police. Nice gentleman!—not been here so very long, though."

I went on to the hotel, wondering what on earth White Whiskers wanted with the local police inspector. And upon getting into the hotel, I found them together. White Whiskers was just beginning a belated dinner in the coffee-room; Hilgrave sat with him, refreshing himself with a whisky-and-soda, and listening with apparent deep interest to his talk. I got some warmed-up dinner myself, but I did not overhear anything that was said between the two. The conversation seemed to be chiefly one-sided; White Whiskers evi-

dently explaining and detailing, and the police inspector nodding his comprehension. But towards the close of this episode I got some information. White Whiskers, bringing his dinner to an end, summoned the waiter and gave him some audible commands. He must be called, with hot water and tea, at seven o'clock in the morning. Breakfast must be ready for him at precisely eight—sharp to the minute. And at nine o'clock the best car in the place must be at the door to take him to Kelpieshaw. How far away was this Kelpieshaw?—nine or ten miles by the road? Very good!—then nine o'clock, precisely.

These things settled, White Whiskers turned to Hilgrave, bland and affable.

"Well," he said, now speaking in quite audible accents, the occasion for secrecy having evidently passed, "what do you say to a cigar?—I suppose there's a smoking-room here?"

"Very kind of you, Sir Charles," replied the inspector. "Smoking-room just across the hall."

When they had gone away, I thought things over—rapidly. It was then close upon ten

o'clock, and I already knew sufficient of the domestic habits of Kelpieshaw as to know that they kept early hours there. But I felt, more from instinct than anything, that Parslewe ought to be put in possession of my news, and that I ought not to leave the imparting of it until next morning, however early. So going out into the hall, I got hold of the boots, and, taking him aside, made inquiries about my chances of getting a car, late as it was. He got one for me—with considerable delay and difficulty—but I took good care not to let him nor its driver know where I was going until I had got clear of the hotel.

The last stage of the road to Kelpieshaw was of such a nature that a car could do no more than crawl over it, and it was nearly midnight when I saw the tower of the old house standing dark and spectral against a moonlit sky. As I expected, there was not a light to be seen in any of the windows, not even in those of the upper part of the tower wherein Parslewe had his library. I felt very lonely when the car had driven off, leaving me in the solitude of the wind-swept court-yard. I knocked on the turret door several

times without getting any response, and knowing the thickness of the walls and doors as I did, I began to fear that no summons of mine would be heard, and that I should have to camp out in one of the buildings. But my knocking roused the dogs; they set up a great barking, and at that a window opened, and Tibbie Muir's voice, wrathful enough, demanded to know what ill body was below.

"Don't be angry, Tibbie," I called. "It's I, Mr. Craye. Tell your master I'm back, and let me in."

It was Parslewe himself who presently came down. He seemed in no way surprised, and he treated me to one of his sardonic grins.

"Well, young master?" he said, holding up his lamp and giving me a careful inspection as I stepped within. "You look a bit wayworn!" Then, in his eccentric, jocular fashion, and as he bolted and locked the big door behind me, he began to spout, dramatically:—

" 'Even such a man, so faint, so spiritless,
So dull, so dead, so woe-begone,
Drew Priam's curtain in the dead of night,
And would have told him half his Troy was burn'd!'

"But go up, Craye, my lad, and we'll see if a drop of whisky'll revive you!"

He laughed again and pushed me up the stair; I went, willingly.

"Mr. Parslewe!" said I. "I'm neither dull, nor dead, nor woe-begone, but I am cold, for the night's bitter, and that miserable old car I got is a trap for draughts. And as to Priam and Troy, I've a tale to tell you that beats that!"

"Aye?" he said. "Well, a midnight tale is generally one that's worth hearing. And if you're cold, I believe there's a bit of fire burning, and we'll soon improve it. But——"

We were at the head of the stair by then, and Madrasia suddenly called from her room.

"Jimmie!—is that him?" she demanded, careless of grammar in her eagerness. "And what's he after at this time?"

"Aye, it's me!" I called out, catching at her spirit. "And I'm safe and sound, too, with a pack of adventures——"

"That'll keep till morning," interrupted Parslewe, pushing me into the room. "Go to sleep again, my girl!" He shut the door on us, drew the heavy curtain across it, and after poking up the fire and lighting the lamp, helped us both to whisky from the decanter

and lighted his pipe. "Aye, and what's the tale, Craye?" he asked.

I had been considering the telling of that all the way from Wooler—debating the best way of putting the various episodes before him. It seemed to me that the best fashion was one of consecutive narrative, leaving him to draw his own inferences and conclusions. So I began at the beginning, which was, of course, at the point where I first saw Pawley awaiting the arrival of the train from the south. I watched him carefully as I told the story, being anxious to see how it struck him and how things that had impressed me impressed him. And as I went on from one stage to another I was conscious of a curious, half-humorous, half-cynical imperturbability about him; his face remained mask-like, except for a sly gleam in his expressive eyes, and he never betrayed any sign of being surprised or startled but once, when his lips moved a little at the first mention of the copper box. And twice he smiled and nodded his head slightly—the first time was when I mentioned the coppersmith's shop, whereat he stirred a bit and said softly, "Aye, that would be old Bicker-

dale!" and the second when I said that the police inspector had addressed White Whiskers as Sir Charles. He laughed outright at that.

"Aye, likely enough," he muttered. "He's the sort that would turn out Sir Charles, for sure! But I hadn't heard of it."

"That's the lot, Mr. Parslewe," I concluded. "I left Sir Charles and the police inspector smoking their cigars and drinking their whisky. I saw them through the open door of the smoking-room, and they were hobnobbing comfortably enough. And then I raced through the night—to tell you!"

"Aye!" he said. "But to tell me—what?"

"What I have told you," I replied.

He gave me a queer, questioning look.

"Sounds very mysterious, my lad, eh!" he said.

"To me—uncommonly so!" said I.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and then took a pull at his glass.

"You've no doubt amused yourself with theories about it?" he suggested.

"No!" I retorted. "It's too deep for theo-

ries, Mr. Parslewe. Too deep for me to theorise about, I mean."

"Aye—well, we'll say speculate, then, instead of theorise," he remarked, drily. "You've indulged in speculations?"

I pointed towards the sideboard behind him.

"I've certainly been wondering what on earth that copper box has to do with it!" said I. "Here's a fat, solemn, self-important old buffer travels—possibly all the way from London—to talk about a copper box in a Newcastle hotel! A Newcastle shopkeeper starts with surprise when I mention a copper box to him! And there—with the firelight glinting on it—there is the copper box!"

"Aye!" he said. "Aye, there it is—and there it'll remain, master!" He closed his lips in a tight, firm fashion that I had already come to know very well, in spite of our brief acquaintance, and when he relaxed them again it was to smile in his sweetest fashion. "But that doesn't explain anything, Craye, does it?" he remarked.

"Explains nothing—to me," I assented.

He got up, threw two or three small logs of wood on the fire, and standing with his

back to it, thrust his hands in the pockets of his dressing-gown. He puffed at his big pipe for a while, staring across the shadowy corners of the room, and suddenly he laughed.

"You can tell all that to Madrasia in the morning," he said. "It'll amuse her."

"Mystify her, you mean!" I said.

"Well, both, then—they come to the same thing," he answered. "Please her, too; she thought—being a woman, and having feminine intuition—that Master Pawley was—well, something of what he seems to be."

"Then you think Pawley came here of set purpose—design?" I asked.

"Maybe!" he answered, coolly. "Didn't strike me at the time. I took the fellow for being what he professed to be—though I certainly wasn't impressed by his antiquarian knowledge. But then, the man described himself as a neophyte, a novice. Well, he was—very much so!"

"My opinion is that Pawley was a spy!" said I.

It was a direct challenge to him to let me into his mind. But as soon as I had thrown it down, I saw that he was not going to take

it up. There was that about his attitude which showed me that he was not going to say one word in elucidation of the mystery—then, at any rate. But just then I remembered something.

"I forgot this!" said I—"It didn't seem of much moment at the time—but it's this: when Pawley was here, you left him and me together, here, in this room, while you went upstairs to write down some notes or memoranda for him. During your absence he picked up the copper box, and after some remarks on its workmanship asked me if I knew whose coat-of-arms that was, and some other questions about it. He was—suspiciously interested."

"How do you mean—suspiciously?" he asked.

"It struck me—perhaps afterwards—that Pawley could have answered the question himself," I replied. "Although he asked me, he knew—already."

"Then the gentleman knew a bit more about heraldry than he did about sepulchral barrows!" he remarked with a sardonic laugh. "Well, tell that, too, to Madrasia in the morning—she likes mysteries in fiction and here's

one in real life. Finish your whisky, my lad, and let's go to bed."

I knew then that it was hopeless to get any explanation from Parslewe. I knew, too, that he could tell me a lot, if he wanted. But after all it was no concern of mine and I rose.

"I got the canvas I wanted," I told him, as we were leaving the room. "That's all right."

"Then you can make a start on your picture," he answered. "Good night, master!"

He grinned knowingly at me as we shook hands at the door of my room; then he moved off to his own. His door closed. The queer old house became silent.

I slept like a top the remainder of that night —so soundly, indeed, that it was late when I awoke. I had to hurry over my shaving and dressing, but after all, I was first in the parlour. A cheery fire burned in the hearth; the table was laid for breakfast, and on my plate I saw an envelope; another lay before Madrasia's. I snatched mine up, recognised Parslewe's crabbed writing, and broke the seal— to stare and wonder at what he had written on a half-sheet of paper within.

"DEAR CRAYE," ran his note, "you're a good fellow and dependable. Just take good care of the girl until you either hear from or see me again. What you told me early this morning inclines me to believe that I'd better attend to a possibly urgent affair, at once.—*Vale!*—J. P."

I had scarcely read and comprehended this truly remarkable message when Madrasia ran into the room. She was singing—some old country song. It came to a dead stop as she saw me pointing to the envelope that lay by her plate.

V

Sir Charles Sperrigoe

I STOOD silently watching Madrasia as she broke open her letter, drew out the scrap of paper inside (Parslewe, as I had already noticed, was an absolute miser in his use of stationery, and made any stray fragment serve his immediate purpose), and read whatever was there written. The slight pucker of astonishment between her eyebrows deepened to a frown, and with a gesture that was not exactly definable she tossed the paper across to me.

"What on earth does that mean?" she exclaimed. "And where is he?"

I glanced at this second communication; it was comprised in one line—

"Be a good girl and do as you're told."

"Do as you're told!" she added. "Good heavens!—who's to do the telling?"

I silently handed her my letter; she looked more astonished than ever when she read it.

"What does it all mean?" she asked. "Has —but he evidently has gone away. In consequence of something you told him, too! What? But wait!"

She rang a small hand-bell that stood on the corner of the breakfast-table; before its sharp tinkling had died away the old woman came hurrying in.

"Tibbie!" said Madrasia. "Has Mr. Parslewe gone away? When?"

"He went off at five o'clock this morning, Miss," replied Tibbie. "He just tapped of me and said he'd be away a day or two, likely, and that was all. I looked out of the window when he'd gone, and I saw him riding off on his pony."

"Which way?" demanded Madrasia.

"Across the moor, Miss," answered Tibbie. "Roddam way."

Madrasia hesitated a moment, nodded, and turning to the table began to pour out the coffee; the old woman withdrew. And as a beginning of my wardership, I turned my attention to the hot dishes.

"Fish or bacon?" I inquired.

"Hang the fish—and the bacon!" retorted

Madrasia. "Well, fish, then. What is all this mystery? What did you tell him last night?"

"This morning, rather," said I. "Early this morning. Well, I was to tell you. He said you'd enjoy it. Better than any fiction! But what it's all about, I don't know. I wish I did! Perhaps you do."

"I may do, when you tell me," she answered. "Go on!"

Between mouthfuls I told her the whole story of my adventures, from the moment of recognising Pawley to finding Parslewe's note on my plate. At the first mention of the copper box she turned and gazed at that mysterious article, reposing in its usual place on the sideboard; when I made an end of my narrative she stared at it again.

"Just so!" I said. "I wish it could speak. But—it can't. And what I want to know is precisely what you want to know—what is it all about? A first-class mystery, this, anyway! Pawley comes, and is seen examining the copper box. I go to Newcastle, and see Pawley meet a fat-faced, white-whiskered old party. I hear this person talk of the copper

box to another man, who turns out to be a solicitor. I have a passage-at-arms with a coppersmith, who, I feel sure, has seen and known the copper box—I have other passages. I come home and tell Parslewe—and Parslewe flees in the night, leaving me in charge of——"

"Thank you, but he'd far better have left you in charge of me!" she said. "And don't you forget it—while he's away, I'm boss!—never mind what he said—and you've got to be as good and obedient as they make 'em! I countermand his order, so you're deposed—by me! But—I'm thinking."

"What about?" I inquired meekly.

She pointed her fork at the sideboard.

"The copper box!" she answered. "What else?"

I helped myself to more bacon, and ate for a while in silent meditation.

"Perhaps it's bewitched!" I observed at last. "Sort of Arabian Nights' business, you know."

"Don't be silly!" she commanded. "The more I think of it, the more I'm sure this is, or may be, a very serious affair. Now to

begin with, the copper box wasn't always where it is, nor in this house at all."

"No?" I said, inquiringly.

She remained silent a moment or two, evidently reflecting. Then she turned to me with an air of confidence.

"As Jimmie put me under your charge," she said ingratiatingly, "I——"

"You told me just now that his orders were countermanded, and that you were boss," said I.

"Oh, well! You know what I mean!" she answered. "Anyway, as he said you were to tell me all about this extraordinary adventure, I suppose there's no reason why I shouldn't be equally straightforward with you. It seems to me that we're at a pass where frankness is advisable."

"Absolutely necessary, I should think," said I.

"Very well," she went on. "I remember the copper box coming here."

"You do?" I exclaimed. "Ah!"

"Jimmie," she continued, "to give him the name by which I've called him ever since I was that high, is an eccentric person—very!

Much more eccentric than you've any idea of. He has fits—not in the medical or pathological sense, but fits all the same. They take various forms. One form is that of going off, all of a sudden, by himself—the Lord knows where!"

"As in the present instance," I suggested.

"To be sure! This," she said, "is by no means the first time Tibbie and I have been suddenly bereft of his presence. He departs! and no more's heard or seen of him until a reappearance as unexpected as his disappearance. And usually—indeed, I suppose always—when he returns he brings things with him."

"The thing is obvious," I remarked. "He's been hunting for curiosities."

"Perhaps! But why in such secrecy?"

"Part of the game. The more secrecy, the more pleasure. Human nature—antiquarian human nature."

"Well, about twelve or fifteen months ago he was away like that," she said. "I don't know where he'd been, he never tells. But when he returned the copper box was with him. He polished it up the night he came

home. Of course, I admired it, equally, of course, I asked him where he'd got it. All he said was what he always does say, he'd just picked it up. Off the street, no doubt, or on the moor, or in an omnibus, or on a train! But that's Jimmie. And on the same occasion he brought back some half-dozen old books—very old, apparently rare books—about which I noticed a certain thing, though I never said a word to him about it—no good!"

"What was the certain thing?"

"The books are upstairs in his library; you may have seen them. In each there's a bookplate with a coat-of-arms, and a legend exactly like those on the copper box."

"I've seen the books. I saw the coat-of-arms, too," said I. "Odd! And—significant."

"Why significant?"

"Looks as if they'd all come from the same source. And he didn't tell you anything as to where he got these things?"

"He never tells anybody anything as to where he gets things—never! He just brings them in and puts them down, somewhere—and that's all. However, the copper box disappeared for a while—not so very long ago. I

noticed that, and he vouchsafed to tell me that he'd taken it to be repaired by a man in Newcastle."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "Now I see some light! That man was Bickerdale, the coppersmith. Of course."

"I'd thought of that already—thought of it as soon as you told me of the Bickerdale episode. But—what then?"

"Um! That's a very big question," I answered. "What, then, indeed! But I think somebody is very much concerned about that copper box—why, only heaven knows. This fatuous, white-whiskered old person, for instance. And that reminds me—he'll turn up here this morning, sure as fate. What are we to say to him?"

"Why say more than that the master is away?" she asked.

"That won't satisfy him," said I. "He's a pertinacious old party. And he's Sir Charles Somebody-or-other, and he'll resent being treated as if he were a footman leaving cards. Let me suggest something."

"Well — what?" she asked dubiously. "We've got to be careful."

"We'll be careful enough," said I. "Let's do this. If the old chap comes—and come he will—let Tibbie bring him up here. We'll receive him in state; you'll, of course, play the part, your proper part, of chatelaine; I, of guest. You'll regret that Mr. Parslewe is away from home—indefinitely—and we'll both be warily careful to tell the old man nothing. But we'll watch him. I particularly want to see if looks for, sees, and seems to recognise the copper box. Pawley will have told him where it's kept—on that sideboard; now let's see if his eyes turn to it. He'll come!—and before long."

"Good!" she agreed. "Now, suppose he gets cross-examining us?"

"Fence with him—tell him nothing," I answered. "Our part is—Mr. Parslewe is away."

We finished breakfast; the table was cleared; we waited, chatting. And before long a loud knocking was heard at the door of the turret. Tibbie Muir, already instructed, went down to respond to it. Presently we heard ponderous footsteps on the winding stair.

Tibbie looked in; behind her loomed a large, fur-collar-coated bulk.

"There's a gentleman calls himself Sir Charles—Sir Charles——" began Tibbie.

The bulk came forward, hat in hand.

"Allow me, my good woman," it said unctuously. It looked round in the subdued light of the old coloured-glass windows, and seeing a lady, bowed itself. "Sir Charles Sperrigoe!" it announced. "Ahem! to call on Mr. Parslewe, Mr. James Parslewe."

"Mr. Parslewe is not at home," replied Madrasia. "He is away—on business."

Sir Charles showed his disappointment. But he glanced keenly at Madrasia and bowed again, more politely than ever.

"Perhaps," he said, "I have the honour of seeing Miss Parslewe?"

"No," answered Madrasia. "My name is Durham. I am Mr. Parslewe's ward."

Sir Charles looked at me. I was purposely keeping myself in the shadowy part of the old room; it was darkish there, and I saw that he did not recognise me, though he had certainly set eyes on me at Newcastle and at Wooler.

"This young gentleman," he suggested. "Mr. Parslewe's son, perhaps?"

"No!" said Madrasia. "A visitor."

Sir Charles looked sorry and discomfited. He fidgeted a little, nervously.

"Will you sit down, Sir Charles?" asked Madrasia.

He sat down. He took a chair between the centre table and the sideboard. He looked at Madrasia with interest—and, I thought, with decided admiration.

"Thank you!" he said. "I—ah, deeply regret Mr. Parslewe's absence. I have heard of Mr. Parslewe—as a distinguished antiquary."

"Oh!" said Madrasia. "Distinguished?"

"Distinguished!" cooed Sir Charles. "Distinguished!"

"Odd!" remarked Madrasia. "I thought he was only a dabbler. That's what he considers himself to be, I'm sure."

Sir Charles waved a fat, white hand.

"Prophets, my dear young lady, are said to have no honour in their own country," he observed with a knowing smile. "And your truly learned man usually considers himself

to be a novice. What says one of my favourite poets?

"'Knowledge is proud that he has learned so much;
Wisdom is humble that he knows no more.'

—Just so—precisely!"

"You are fond of poetry, Sir Charles?" suggested Madrasia.

"Eminently so! And of antiquities," assented our caller. "And being in the neighbourhood, and hearing of Mr. Parslewe, I did myself the honour of waiting upon him in the hope of being able to pay him my respects, and to——"

"Just so!" broke in Madrasia. "So very kind of you! I don't think we were quite aware that my guardian's fame as an antiquary had spread, but he appears to be getting celebrated. You are the second person who has called to see him, on the same errand, within the last few days. The other," she continued, "was a gentleman named—er—Pawley. Mr. Pawley."

"Ah!" said Sir Charles. "Indeed!—I am not acquainted with many antiquaries; I am something of a recluse. And, perhaps, Mr.—ah—Crawley—oh, Pawley?—was fortunate

enough to find Mr. Parslewe at home and to enjoy the benefit—just so, just so! And I—am unfortunate."

"Mr. Parslewe went away this morning," remarked Madrasia, in matter-of-fact tones. "He may return to-morrow; he mayn't. He mayn't return for a week; he may. He's uncertain. But I'll certainly tell him you've called, Sir Charles."

"Thank you, thank you!" said Sir Charles. "Much regret—and I don't know how long I shall remain in these parts. Delightful, romantic situation—most romantic! You have been here long?"

"Ever since we came from India," replied Madrasia, forgetting our compact. "Some few years ago."

"Ah, Mr. Parslewe came from India, did he?" asked Sir Charles eagerly. "But you?—you were surely not born under those burning skies?"

"I was!" answered Madrasia, with a laugh.

"Of English parents, of course," suggested Sir Charles. "Of course!—the English rose!—ah, the English rose! No one, Miss Dur-

ham, could mistake you for anything else than that!"

I coughed—discreetly. And Madrasia took the hint.

"I'm sorry Mr. Parslewe is not at home," she began. "Can I give him any message?"

Sir Charles drew out a card case, and laid a card on the table. Then he rose, and we both saw his eyes turn to the copper box. He gave it a good, straight glance.

"Thank you, thank you!" he answered. "My card, and my compliments and regrets, and perhaps I may do myself the pleasure of waiting upon him again, if he returns soon. I should much like to see his—ah—collections."

Madrasia picked up the card.

"And you are staying, Sir Charles?" she asked.

"For a day or two at the hotel at Wooler," he replied. "After that, perhaps, for a few days in Berwick. The address at Wooler will find me, at any rate, during my stay in these parts; letters would be forwarded."

He was still looking at the copper box, and presently he became mendacious.

"What a truly beautiful old sideboard!" he

remarked, going nearer to that article of furniture. "Mr. Parslewe is, I see, a connoisseur in Chippendale work."

He went nearer to the sideboard, but we both saw that he was not looking at it at all; he was staring at the coat-of-arms on the copper box.

"Delightful pursuit, collecting," he said, straightening himself. "Well, I must run away. Pleasure must not be put before business, and I have a car waiting, and business at the other end of a drive."

He shook hands with Madrasia with—I thought — unnecessary cordiality. Madrasia turned to me.

"Perhaps you'll see Sir Charles safely down the stair?" she suggested. "It's rather dangerous if you don't know it."

I preceded Sir Charles down the stair and opened the door at its foot. It had been shadowy in the room, and more so on the stair, but there was a full glare of spring sunlight on us as we emerged into the courtyard, and now, seeing me clearly for the first time, the old gentleman let out a sudden sharp exclamation.

"Hallo, young man!" he said, staring at me, while his face flushed under the surprise of his recognition. "I've seen you before! Last night, at the hotel in Wooler. And—and—somewhere before that!"

"In Newcastle, no doubt," said I. "I saw you there two or three times."

He stopped dead in the middle of the courtyard, still staring.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "The girl up there said—a visitor!"

His bland manner and suave tone had gone now, and he was almost hectoring in his attitude. I looked at him wonderingly.

"Miss Durham described me as what I am," I answered. "A visitor!"

"Parslewe's visitor?" he asked.

"Mr. Parslewe's visitor—certainly," said I. "His guest."

"How long have you known Parslewe?" he inquired.

But his manner was getting somewhat too much for my patience.

"Really!" I began. "I fail to see why——"

He suddenly tapped me on the chest with a strange sort of familiarity.

"Look you here, young man!" he said. "You say you saw me in Newcastle. With anybody?"

"Yes!" I answered, somewhat nettled. "I saw you with the man who called himself Pawley."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "And you saw me last night at Wooler, with the police inspector. Did you come here and tell that—and the Pawley incident—to Parslewe? Come now!"

"I did!" said I. "Why not?"

Without another word he strode off to his car, motioned to its driver, and went away.

VI

The Irrepressible Newsman

I WATCHED Sir Charles Sperrigoe drive off along the moorland road, and closing the turret door, went slowly and full of meditation up the stair to the parlour. Madrasia was standing where we had left her, on the hearth; she had the copper box in her hands and was examining it carefully. On my entrance she put it down on the table, and we looked at each other.

"Do you think he'll come back?" she asked.

"I don't know what he'll do," I answered, "but I think he and Pawley are pretty much of a muchness! If he's master and Pawley's man, then there's not much to choose between man and master! Did you notice that he wouldn't allow that he knew Pawley, whereas he knew well enough that he and Pawley met at Newcastle only day before yesterday? But I'll tell you what happened downstairs."

I gave her a full account of the brief inter-

change of remarks between Sir Charles and myself in the courtyard. She listened eagerly, and her eyes lit up.

"Ah!" she said. "I see what he meant! He meant that on your telling Jimmie of the doings at Newcastle, and that Sir Charles might be expected, Jimmie cleared out quick!"

"Well, didn't he clear out?" said I.

She looked at me a moment in silence; then she nodded her head, as much as to assent to an undeniable proposition.

"I suppose he did!" she answered.

"Suppose? He did clear out!" I exclaimed. "Before morning! Why?"

"Didn't want to meet this pompous old person," she said. "That seems to be about it. Yes, I think Jimmie decidedly cleared out!"

"Leaving us to face this sort of thing," I said. "If one only knew what it's all about, what it means, why there's this hue-and-cry after that box——"

"I think the copper box is only a small part of it," she interrupted. "It's—a sort of handle, a clue, a—something!"

"Decidedly a something," I assented. "Doubtless you observed that old White

Whiskers very soon spotted it. That was all rot about the sideboard! He wasn't looking at the sideboard at all; his eyes were glued on the copper box."

"He'll come back!" she exclaimed, suddenly. "I'm sure he'll come back! And I'm wondering if, when he comes back, he'll bring the police."

"The police! What on earth makes you think that?" I asked. "Police? Come!"

"Didn't you see Sir Charles Sperrigoe—whoever he may be—in conversation with our local police inspector last night?" she answered. "Obvious! The old person is in consultation with the police. Perhaps—don't you see?—the box has been stolen."

"You don't imply that Mr. Parslewe stole it?" I suggested.

"Well, I have heard that antiquaries are not above appropriating things!" she answered with a laugh. "Their sense of mine and thine, I believe, is somewhat indefinite. But we'll acquit Jimmie. Only, he may have bought it from somebody who stole it."

"That's more like it," said I. "But in that case, why all this mystery? Why didn't Paw-

ley—who without doubt came after the box—say what he wanted? Why didn't Sperrigoe?"

"Oh, Pawley came to see if the box was really here!" she declared. "Sperrigoe came to ask how it got here! That's plain, to me. But what I want to know is, why such a fuss about it?"

"And what I want to know is, what made Parslewe vanish?" I said. "That's much more of a mystery."

"Didn't you tell me that he seemed to know whom you meant when you described Sperrigoe as Sir Charles?" she asked. "Very well! Sir Charles is somebody whom Jimmie knew years ago. And Jimmie doesn't want to meet him. Jimmie, as I have told you, is a queer man—an eccentric person. And I don't think he'll come home until Sir Charles Sperrigoe has gone away."

"And I don't think Sir Charles Sperrigoe will go away until he's seen Parslewe," said I. "So there we are!"

"Oh, well! does it matter very much?" she asked. "Aren't we going out this fine morning? We're doing no good here, staring at

that wretched thing and speculating about it. Let's be off!"

But before we could make any move, Tibbie Muir came into the room, looking very disapproving and sour of face, and presented Madrasia with another card. She became voluble.

"I've told him, and I've better told him, that the master's not at home," she declared, "but he'll not take my word nor go away, and you must just deal with him yourself, Miss Madrasia. And if there's going to be this coming and going at the door all day long——"

Madrasia glanced at the card and passed it over to me. It was a printed card, and the lettering was meant to be impressive.

MR. AUGUSTUS WEECH.
Newcastle Evening Planet.

"Well?" demanded Madrasia.

"I think I should see this gentleman," said I.

"Bring him up, Tibbie," commanded Madrasia. "Perhaps he'll be the last. What can

he want?" she went on, turning to me as Tibbie grumblingly departed. "A reporter?"

"Newspaper chap of some sort, evidently," I said. "And wanting news! But how does he come to know where to apply for news? And what news?"

"We're only getting more and more fog-bound," she remarked. "Wait till we hear what he's got to say; perhaps he has some news for us. He's here!"

A sharp-eyed, alert, knowing-looking young person entered the room and made his bow. He was smartly dressed, evidently quite at his ease, and full of vitality. And his first proceeding was remarkable. As he straightened himself after doing obeisance to Madrasia his eyes fell on the copper box, and without preface he pointed a long, slender forefinger at it.

"That's the identical article!" he exclaimed. "Sure!"

Then he looked round, saw me, grinned as if reassured by the sight of a fellow man, and turned again to Madrasia.

"Mr. Parslewe's not at home, I understand, Miss," he said, affably. "But you're Miss

Durham, ain't you? I've heard of you. Now if I might sit down——"

He had dropped into a chair at the side of the table before Madrasia had had time to invite him thereto; laying his hat by his side he ran his right hand through a rather abundant crop of fair hair—his action seemed to signify a preliminary to business.

"I recognized that as soon as I walked in!" he said, with another frank and almost child-like smile. "Queer business, ain't it, about that old box?"

"I gather that you know something about it," observed Madrasia.

"I do, Miss, that's why I'm here," he answered candidly. "Yes, I know something—so, too, I guess, does that young gentleman. I saw him t'other day—yesterday, to be exact—coming out of Bickerdale's shop."

"You did?" I exclaimed.

"I did! You came out as I was crossing over to it," he answered. "You made old Bickerdale jolly waxy, too, some way or other. You see Bickerdale, he's my father-in-law."

Madrasia and I looked at each other. I

think we both had the same thought—that our visitor looked very juvenile to be married.

"Oh!" I said. "Indeed?"

"Yes," he continued. "Been that for the last three years—a man of a queer and dour temper is Bickerdale. You set his back up yesterday, Mr.—I don't know your name?"

"My name is Craye," I replied.

"Mr. Craye—all right. Well, Mr. Craye and Miss Durham—or *vice versa*, if I'm to be polite—it's like this," he proceeded gaily. "There's a mystery about that copper box, isn't there? I guess Mr. Parslewe knows there is—but your old woman says he's away—queer old party, that old woman, isn't she?—a character, I should think. But if Mr. Parslewe's away, you ain't! And I want to get at something—and to get at it, I don't mind telling what I know. Between ourselves, of course."

Madrasia and I exchanged another glance; then we both sat down, one on either side of our loquacious visitor.

"What do you know, Mr. Weech?" I asked, in my friendliest tone.

"Yes," said Madrasia. "It would be so kind of you to tell us that!"

Mr. Weech smiled, drumming his fingers on the crown of his hat.

"Well!" he said, graciously, "I'll tell you! Of course, I came to tell Mr. Parslewe—but you'll do. And no doubt you'll be able to tell me something. Well, me first, then. As I said, I'm Bickerdale's son-in-law. I married his third daughter, Melissa—she's all right. Naturally, being in the relation I am to Bickerdale, I'm a good deal in and out of his place—go there Sundays, with the wife and kid. Now, not so very long ago, I was there one Sunday, and happening to go into his workshop for a smoke—my mother-in-law having a decided objection to tobacco in the parlour—I set eyes on that article—that very copper box! I was a a bit taken with the engraved coat-of-arms and the queer motto underneath, and I asked Bickerdale where he'd got it. He told me that Mr. Parslewe of Kelpieshaw had brought it to him to be repaired—it had got slightly damaged by a fall, and needed a coppersmith's attention. We talked a bit about it. Bicker-

dale said it had been made—beaten copper, you know—at least a hundred years, and was a very pretty bit of work. It had got a bulge in one side, and Bickerdale had to straighten it out—very delicate and gentle business. But he did it, and either Mr. Parslewe fetched it away, or it was sent to him. Anyhow, there it is!—that's the box!"

Mr. Weech gave the copper box a tap with his finger-nail as if to evoke a confirmation of his words, and proceeded.

"Now, a bit—can't say now how long exactly—after the box had come back here, I was up at Bickerdale's one Sunday, and after dinner Bickerdale took me into his office. 'I say!' he says, when we were alone. 'You remember that copper box that I was repairing, that you admired?—of course you do! Well, look here, there was some goods came the other day in an old copy of *The Times,*' he says, 'and my eye just happened to fall on this, on the front page,' and he pulled out an old *Times* and pointed to an advertisement that he'd marked, in the personal column. I read it, and I gaped at it! This," continued Mr. Weech, suddenly producing a folded newspa-

per from an inner pocket, "this is not the identical copy of *The Times* that Bickerdale had; this is another copy of the same issue—I got it, as a back number, for myself. Now, Miss Durham and Mr. Craye, you read that! and you'll be getting at a very good notion of what it is that I want to get out of Mr. Parslewe! There, marked with red ink."

He laid the newspaper on the table before us, and we bent over it, reading with feelings which—so far as I was concerned—rapidly became mixed.

"£250 Reward. To Auctioneers, Antiquarian and Second-hand Booksellers, Buyers of Rare Books, etc.: Missing, and Probably Stolen, from a well-known Private Library, the following Scarce Works. 1. Hubbard's Present State of New England, 1677; 2. Brandt's Ship of Fooles, 1570; 3. Burton's Anatomy, 1621; 4.Whole Works of Samuel Daniel, Esquire, in Poetrie, 1623; 5. Drayton's Polyolbion, 1622; 6. Higden's Polycronicon, 1527; 7. Florio's Montaigne, 1603. Each of these copies, all extremely scarce, contains a book-plate of which the follow-

ing is a full description. [Here followed a technical account, heraldic in detail.] Also Missing, and probably stolen at the same time, an Antique Box, of Beaten Copper, on the front of which is engraved the coat-of-arms and legend particularised in the foregoing description. It is probable that these properties will be offered to well-known collectors, here or abroad. The book-plates may have been removed. The above mentioned reward of £250 will be paid to any person giving information which will lead to their recovery. Such information should be given to the undersigned.

"SPERRIGOE, CHILLINGLEY, AND WATSON,
"Solicitors.
"3, FRIARS' PAVEMENT,
MEDMINSTER."

I took matters into my own hands on reading this. First nudging Madrasia's elbow to give her warning that I was about to do something requiring delicacy and diplomacy, I turned to Mr. Weech.

"That's very interesting," said I. "And—

curious! Er—perhaps you'd like a little refreshment, Mr. Weech, after your journey? A whisky-and-soda, now?"

"Well, thank you," he answered, readily, with a glance at the sideboard. "It wouldn't come amiss, Mr. Craye; I hired a push-bicycle at Wooler, but, my word! it wasn't half a job shoving the old thing over your roads—some part of the way, at any rate! Cruel!"

I gave him a good stiff mixture and put a box of biscuits at the side of his glass. Then I got Madrasia's attention once more, and, holding *The Times* in my hand, turned to the door.

"Just excuse Miss Durham and myself for a few minutes, Mr. Weech," I said. "We'll not keep you long."

Outside the parlour, and with its door safely shut on our visitor, I looked at Madrasia, who, in her turn, looked inquiringly at me.

"Come up to the library!" I whispered. "Those books!"

"Yes!" she answered. "I thought of that!"

We stole up the stair, for all the world as if we were going to commit some nefarious deed, and into the room wherein Parslewe kept his

various and many treasures. Within five minutes we had satisfied ourselves, and stood looking questioningly at each other. We had reason; the books specified in the advertisement were all there! Every one of them!—book-plates and all.

"What next?" muttered Madrasia at last. "Of course, we musn't tell him!"

She nodded at the floor, indicating the spot beneath which Mr. Weech was sipping his drink and nibbling biscuits.

"Tell him nothing!" said I. "But, let him tell us! Come down!"

We went down again; Mr. Weech looked very comfortable.

"We should like to hear more of your very interesting story, Mr. Weech," I said. "You got to the point where Bickerdale showed you this advertisement. What happened after that?"

"Why, this," he answered, evidently more ready to talk than ever. "Bickerdale and I consulted. He was all for writing to these lawyers at once, denouncing Mr. Parslewe as the thief. I said, metaphorically, you know—that he was an ass; it was much more likely

that Mr. Parslewe had been taken in by the real and actual thief. I advised seeing Mr. Parslewe. But Bickerdale, he wrote, unbeknown to me, to these lawyers, saying that he was sure he'd had this copper box in his hands, and that where it was, probably the books would be. And those lawyers sent a man—a private detective—down to investigate——"

"Name of Pawley, eh?" I suggested.

"Never heard it, but I shouldn't wonder if it was," he answered. "I only heard of him. Anyway, he came—and his principal followed him—a big, pompous man, who was at Bickerdale's yesterday. And that's where Bickerdale and I quarrelled, see?"

"Not quite," I replied. "How, and why, did you quarrel?"

"Because Bickerdale, for some queer reason or other, suddenly shut his mouth after that fat old party had been, and wouldn't give me one scrap of information," answered Mr. Weech, with a highly injured air. "Dead silence on his part, eh? Flat refusal! That was after I saw you leaving him. Ab-so-lute-ly refused to tell me one word about what was going on! Me! his son-in-law, and more than,

for that's where the shoe pinches, a press-man!"

"Ah!" I exclaimed, seeing light at last. "I see! You want to make what they call a story of it?"

"What else?" he answered, with a knowing wink. "What d'ye suppose I'm here for? I don't believe Mr. Parslewe—I've heard of him, many a time—stole that blessed box—not I! But there's romance, and mystery, and what not about the whole thing, and I want to work it up and make a live column, or a couple of 'em, out of it, and so I came to the fountain-head, and Mr. Parslewe's away, worse luck. Now, *can* you tell me anything?"

We got rid of Mr. Weech by promising him faithfully that on Mr. Parslewe's return we would tell him all that had transpired, and would entreat him to favour our visitor with his exclusive confidence, and after another whisky-and-soda, during his consumption of which he told us confidentially that he meant to Ride High, he went away, leaving us more mystified than ever.

And we were still more mystified when, during the course of that afternoon, a tele-

graph boy came all the way over the moors from Wooler, bringing me a message. It was, of course, from Parslewe, and, as Madrasia at once remarked, just like him.

Both of you meet me Newcastle Central Station noon to-morrow.

VII

What the Dying Man Said

WE discussed that telegram during the greater part of the next few hours, arguing out its meanings and significances; we became no wiser in the process, but it seemed hopeless to endeavour to settle down to anything else. Madrasia, I think, got some relief in making the necessary arrangements for our departure in the morning; I think, too, that she was further relieved at the prospect of meeting her eccentric guardian and getting —or attempting to get—some explanation of these curious proceedings. For that they were curious, to the last degree, was beyond question. My own rapid review of them, taking in everything from the first coming of Pawley to the visit of Mr. Augustus Weech, only served to convince me that we were becoming hopelessly entangled in a series of problems and theories about which it was as useless as it was impossible to speculate.

But there was more to come before the afternoon closed. First of all came another wire from Parslewe. It was short and peremptory, like the first, but it was more illuminating, and, in some queer way, it cheered us up.

Bring the box with you.

Madrasia clapped her hands.

"That's better!" she exclaimed. "That's lots better! It means that he's clearing things up, or he's going to. For heaven's sake, don't let's forget the copper box! Which of us is most to be depended upon for remembering?"

"I, of course," said I, "being a man."

"We'll debate that on some other occasion," she retorted. "As a woman—Lord! what's that?"

Old Tibbie was just entering with the tea-tray; as she opened the door, a loud, insistent knocking came on the iron-studded panels at the foot of the stair. Tibbie groaned and almost dropped her tray, and Madrasia turned appealingly to me.

"We're all getting nervous," she said. "Will you run down?"

I went down the stair, opened the great door, and found myself confronting a fresh-coloured, pleasant-faced man who had just dismounted from a serviceable but handsome cob and stood in the courtyard with its bridle over his arm. He smiled at sight of me.

"Mr. Craye, I'm sure?" he said. "I've heard of you. Staying here with Mr. Parslewe. Now, is Mr. Parslewe in? I mean, has he returned?"

"No!" I answered, bluntly enough.

He looked at me with a glance that was at once understanding and confidential; there was, I thought, something very like the suspicion of a wink in his eye.

"The fact of the case is, I'm his solicitor," he remarked. "And——"

But just then Madrasia came flying down the stairs, and greeted the visitor so warmly that for the fraction of a second I really felt jealous.

"Mr. Murthwaite!" she cried, catching his readily extended hand and shaking it almost fervently. "Oh!—this is awfully good of you. We're in an absolute muddle here—mentally, I mean—and now you'll clear everything up

for us! The sight of you is as good as sunshine after storm. Come in!—old Edie shall take your horse. This gentleman is Mr. Alvery Craye, a famous artist, and he's nearly as much out of his wits as I am!"

"Then I find myself in queer and possibly dangerous company!" remarked Mr. Murthwaite, with another half wink at me. "However, I hope you're sane enough to give me some tea, Miss Durham? Good!—then I'll come in." He handed his horse over to old Muir and followed Madrasia up the stair, I coming behind. His tone had been light and bantering up to then, but as soon as the three of us had reached the parlour and I had closed the door he turned to both with a quick, searching, earnest glance, and, unconsciously, I think, lowered his voice. "Now look here," he said, in the tone of a man who wants a direct answer. "Do you young people, either of you, know where Parslewe is? What I really mean, though, is—is he in this house?"

"In this house!" exclaimed Madrasia. "Good heavens! Do you mean—hidden?"

"Why not?" answered Murthwaite. "I dare say one who knows it could hide in this old

place for a month. But is he? Or anywhere about?"

Madrasia looked at me; I looked at the two telegrams which were lying on the table beyond the tea-tray.

"As Mr. Murthwaite is Mr. Parslewe's solicitor," said I, "I should show him those wires. They are the best answer to his question."

"Yes!" agreed Madrasia. She snatched up the telegrams, and put them in Murthwaite's hand; we both watched him intently while he read. "There!" she said, as he folded them again. "What do you think?"

"I think that Parslewe is a very strange man!" replied Murthwaite. "I think, too, that I must have a talk to you—both—about him. Now, as the tea is there, and you are so hospitable——"

We gathered round the table, and Madrasia began to busy herself with the teapot and the cups. It was useless to attempt the talking of nothings; we were all full of the occasion of Murthwaite's visit, and he was acute enough not to keep Madrasia and myself waiting for his news.

"I'll tell you, briefly, what brought me here," he said, after his first cup. "To-day, about noon, I had a visit from a Sir Charles Sperrigoe, who, after introducing himself as a fellow solicitor from a distant part of the country, told me that he had just ascertained in the town that I was solicitor to Mr. James Parslewe of Kelpieshaw; that he had been out to Kelpieshaw to find Mr. Parslewe, had failed to find him, and so had come to me. He then told me a very wonderful tale, which I am quite at liberty to tell you, and will tell to you presently. But first, I want to hear from Mr. Craye a story which I think he can tell about Newcastle. Sir Charles is under the impression that Mr. Craye told something to Mr. Parslewe last night which sent him off on his travels. I should like to hear that story, and then I'll tell you what Sir Charles Sperrigoe told me, under persuasion."

"I'd better tell you the plain facts about the whole affair, from the coming here of a man named Pawley until your own arrival just now," said I. "You'll then have the entire history of the matter before you, as far as I know it. It's this——"

He listened carefully, sipping his tea and munching his toast, while I told him everything. Now and then Madrasia corrected or prompted me a little; between us we gave him all the salient facts and details, down to the visit of Weech and the receipt of the last telegram; Madrasia had the last word.

"And then you came, Mr. Murthwaite! And if you can tell us what it all means, we'll bless you!" she said. "Can you?"

But Murthwaite shook his head, decidedly.

"I can't!" he answered. "Even now it's as much a mystery to me as ever, though I think I see a little gleam of light—a very, very little one. No, I can only tell you what Sperrigoe told me this morning. If I may have another cup of your very excellent tea, and a cigarette with it——"

He waited during a moment's silent reflection, then, leaning back in his chair, and using his cigarette occasionally to point his remarks, he began to address us pretty much as if we constituted a jury.

"The firm of which Sir Charles Sperrigoe is senior partner," he said, "has for many years acted as legal advisers to a very ancient family,

in the Midlands, the Palkeneys of Palkeney Manor, whose coat-of-arms you see on the now famous copper box on that sideboard, complete with its curious legend, or motto. The Palkeneys have been there at Palkeney ever since Tudor times—in fact, since the earliest Tudor times. A wealthy race, I understand, but one of those which have gradually dwindled. And to come down to quite recent times, a few years ago, an old gentleman who was believed to be the very last of the Palkeneys, Mr. Matthew Palkeney, was living at Palkeney Manor. He was a very old man, nearly ninety. Once, in his early days, he had had a younger brother, John Palkeney, but he, as a young man, had taken his portion, a younger son's portion, gone away from the ancestral home, and never been heard of again—the last that was heard of him was from South America, sixty or seventy years ago, when he was starting into hitherto unexplored country, where, it was believed, he lost his life. And so, in his old age, Matthew Palkeney, as last of his race, was very lonely. And one day he was stricken down in his last illness, and for some hours Sperrigoe, the doc-

tor, the housekeeper, the nurse, all gathered about his death-bed, were considerably disturbed and puzzled by the old man's repetition of certain words. They were the only words he murmured after being struck down, and he said them over and over again before he died. I will tell you what they were. These—*The copper box—a Palkeney—a Palkeney—the copper box!"*

He paused, with due appreciation of the dramatic effect, and looked at us. Madrasia gave a little shudder.

"Creepy!" she murmured.

"Very!" agreed Murthwaite. "Well, nobody knew what the old man meant, and it was useless to try to get him to give any explanation. But when he was dead, the old housekeeper, after much cudgelling of her brains, remembered that in a certain cabinet in a certain corner of the library there was a small box of beaten copper which she had seen Matthew Palkeney polish with his own hands in past years. She and Sperrigoe went to look for it; it was gone! Sperrigoe had the house searched from top to bottom for it; it was not in the house! That copper box had been

stolen—and there it is, on Parslewe's sideboard, here in Northumberland. That is—fact. Fact!"

He paused again, and we kept silence until it pleased him to go on.

"How did it get here?—or, rather, since nobody but Parslewe knows that, we can only deal with this—how did Sperrigoe find out that it was here? Mr. Craye has just told me one side of that, I can tell another. When Sperrigoe found that the copper box had been undoubtedly stolen, he had a thorough examination made of the contents of the library and checked by a printed catalogue kept there—for the library is famous. Then he found that several rare and valuable old books had disappeared with the copper box. Then he advertised. You know the rest. Parslewe had taken the copper box to Bickerdale; Bickerdale saw Sperrigoe's advertisement—and so on. And now, when Pawley, as Sperrigoe's advance agent, and then Sperrigoe himself, turn up to ask a direct question as to how he became possessed of the copper box, why does he run off?"

"Happening to know him," said Madrasia

quickly, "I can answer that. For good and honest reasons of his own!"

"As his friend and solicitor," remarked Murthwaite, "I say Amen to that! But—why not have given some explanation?"

But it was time for me to step in there.

"Mr. Murthwaite!" I said. "Neither Pawley nor Sir Charles Sperrigoe asked for any explanation! Sperrigoe, of course, never saw Mr. Parslewe; Pawley came here as a mere spy——"

"Yes, yes!" he interrupted. "But what I really mean is, why didn't he give some explanation to you?"

"To me!" I exclaimed. "Why to me?"

"Because you were the only person who knew the—shall we say immediate facts of the case?" he replied. "Evidently, although you have only known each other a few days, he trusts you, Mr. Craye. Why didn't he give you a brief explanation of this seeming mystery instead of stealing away in the night? Why?"

"As I said!" exclaimed Madrasia. "For good reasons—of his own."

Murthwaite drummed his fingers on the table, regarding us intently.

"Don't you see?" he said suddenly. "Don't you realise the suspicion he has brought on himself? Sir Charles Sperrigoe doesn't know him."

"I'm not so sure of that!" said I, with equal suddenness. "Anyway, I'm quite sure he knows Sperrigoe—or knew him once. Sure of it from a remark he made when I was telling him about Sperrigoe."

"Eh!" exclaimed Murthwaite. "What remark?"

I told him. He rose suddenly from his chair, as if an idea had struck him, and for a minute or two paced the room, evidently thinking. Then he came back to the table, resumed his seat, and turned from one to the other, pointing to the two telegrams which still lay where he had put them down.

"Let us get to business," he said. "Now I suppose you two young people are going to meet Parslewe at Newcastle to-morrow morning in response to those wires?"

"Certainly," answered Madrasia. "And we shall take the copper box with us."

"Very well," he continued. "Then I want you to do three things. First, tell Parslewe all that I have told you as regards the Palkeney affair. Second, tell him that on my own responsibility, and as his friend and solicitor, I have given Sir Charles Sperrigoe an assurance—a pledge, in fact—that he will, as quickly as possible, give Sir Charles a full account of how box and books came into his possession, so that their progress from Palkeney Manor to Kelpieshaw may be traced—it's inconceivable, of course, that Mr. Parslewe came by them in any other than an honest way. Third, I have persuaded Sir Charles to go home—where he awaits Mr. Parslewe's communication."

"Oh!" said Madrasia. "But has he gone?"

"He went south after seeing me—by the next train," replied Murthwaite.

"Leaving the police inspector at Wooler under the impression that my guardian is a possible thief, eh?" suggested Madrasia.

"Nothing of the sort!" retorted Murthwaite. "Come, come, my dear young lady! —things aren't done in that way. All that Sperrigoe did in that quarter was to make

certain guarded inquiries as to Parslewe's status in the neighbourhood. The police know nothing, of course."

There was a brief silence, broken at last by Madrasia.

"Of course, we will give my guardian your message," she said. "Every word! But, Mr. Murthwaite, haven't you any idea of what all this is about? All this fuss, mystery, running up and down country about a copper box—that box?"

Murthwaite laughed, and turning to the sideboard took the copper box from it.

"I've no more idea of the solution of the mystery than you have," he answered. "This article is certainly a curiosity in itself. Fine old beaten copper, beautifully made, and beautifully engraved. But why all this fuss about it—as you say—I can't think. Still, when a dying man mutters what old Matthew Palkeney did, over and over again, eh? Naturally his man-of-law wants to get at some sort of clearing up. My own notion is that it's not the copper box, but what may have been in the copper box! Not the case, but the contents—don't you see?"

"You think something was kept in it at Palkeney Manor?" I suggested.

"Probably," he assented. "That's just about what I do think."

"And that the original thief has stolen whatever it was?"

"Just so! The box may have passed through several hands before it came into Parslewe's. Parslewe no doubt picked up this thing in some curio shop—the books, too."

"Have the people of Palkeney Manor any idea as to how the theft occurred?" I asked.

"None!—according to Sperrigoe. But I understand that Palkeney Manor is a sort of show-place. That is, there are certain rooms which are shown to the public, including the library. A shilling fee is charged on certain mornings of the week—the proceeds are given to the local charities. And, of course, Sperrigoe thinks that this box and the books were stolen by some visitor only just before old Mr. Matthew Palkeney's death. So—there we are! All that's wanted now is—a few words from Parslewe."

He then said he must go, and presently we went down the stair and out into the court-

yard with him. Old Edie brought out the cob; with his hand on its bridle Murthwaite turned to Madrasia.

"Now just get Parslewe to come straight back and tell me all about it so that I can write to Sperrigoe and clear up the mystery," he said. "Tell him all I have said, and that he must come at once."

But Madrasia was beginning to show signs of a certain mutinous spirit.

"We'll tell him every word you've said, and all about Sperrigoe coming here, and Weech coming, too," she answered. "But, you know, Mr. Murthwaite, you're completely ignoring something, lawyer though you are!"

"What?" he asked, with an amused laugh.

"That my guardian would never have gone away, never have wired for Mr. Craye and myself, never asked that the copper box should be brought to him, unless he had very good and strong reasons," she answered. "Do you think he's playing at something? Rot! The whole thing's much more serious than you think!"

Murthwaite looked from her to me.

"That your opinion, too, Mr. Craye?" he asked.

"It is!" said I. "My absolute opinion."

He shook hands with us, and got into his saddle. He bent down for a last word.

"Never been so curious about a matter in my life!" he said. "But it must end!"

Then he rode off across the moor and disappeared. And next morning Madrasia and I journeyed to Newcastle, she carrying the copper box, neatly tied up and sealed. Our train ran in at the very time at which we were to meet Parslewe. But we saw no Parslewe. We stood staring around us until a man in the livery of a hall-porter came along, eyeing us closely, and stopped at my side.

"Beg pardon, sir—Mr. Craye, sir? Just so, sir—Mr. Parslewe's compliments, and will you and the young lady join him at lunch in the hotel? This way, sir."

VIII

One Minute Past Midnight

WE followed Parslewe's messenger across the platform to the hotel in a state of mute obedience, being, as Madrasia remarked afterwards, resigned by that time to anything that Parslewe did or commanded. But I think hunger had something to do with our meekness; we had breakfasted early, and had had nothing since, and as far as I was concerned the thought of this hotel and its excellent fare—already known to me—was by no means unwelcome. I turned instinctively towards the coffee-room as we entered, already anticipating its pleasures more than my meeting with Parslewe. But our guide steered us away from it; he took us upstairs, along corridors, down passages, finally opened a door. And there was a private sitting-room, and a table laid for lunch, and on the hearth, warming his coat-tails at a blazing fire, his

saturnine countenance wearing a more cynical grin than ever, Parslewe.

He greeted us as coolly and unconcernedly as if we were in his own parlour at Kelpie-shaw and had just come down to breakfast; indeed, he scarcely did more than give us a careless good morning, his chief concern just then seemed to be to catch the porter's attention before he closed the door on us.

"Hi, you!" he called. "Just tell that waiter to bring up lunch, will you?—there's a good fellow! Well," he went on, regarding us speculatively as the man went off. "I suppose you're hungry, eh?"

"Very!" said I.

"Famishing!" declared Madrasia.

He inspected her critically, rubbed his chin, and pointed to a side table.

"Take your things off and throw 'em on there, my dear," he said. "You can take 'em to your own room afterwards."

Madrasia, in the act of divesting herself, turned on him.

"Room?" she exclaimed.

"Number 186, yours," he answered, calmly. "Yours, Craye, is 95—next mine. Don't for-

get the numbers—however, if you do, they'll tell you at the office. They're booked in your respective names."

"Do you mean that we've got to stay the night here?" demanded Madrasia.

"Precisely," replied Parslewe, in his most laconic manner. "Two, maybe."

"I haven't come prepared to stay any nights," said Madrasia. "I haven't brought even a toothbrush!"

"Buy one!" he retorted. "Excellent shops in the place, my dear."

Madrasia stared at him harder than ever.

"You're developing a very extraordinary habit of ordering people about, Jimmie!" she exclaimed at last. "Why all this insistence?"

"Needs must where the devil drives!" he answered with a cynical laugh.

"Are you the devil?" she asked.

"I don't know exactly what I am, my dear, since night before last," he replied, with a relapse into mildness. "But I'm hoping to know before long. And in the meantime, let's be comfortable—here's food and drink."

Two waiters came in with hot dishes; we sat down. I don't know if Parslewe had

expected us to be unusually hungry, but he had certainly taken pains to order a delightful lunch and to prove to us that he had a very nice and critical taste in champagne. And all the time we were lunching he kept the waiters in the room, artfully, I thought, lest Madrasia should open out on the subject uppermost in our thoughts; true, he talked freely himself, but it was all about a play that he had seen at the Theatre Royal on the previous evening, and of which he was enthusiastically full.

"But you shall see it yourself to-night," he wound up. "I've booked two seats—Craye shall take you."

"And—you?" asked Madrasia. "Won't it bear seeing twice in succession?"

"I've some business," he answered. "I shall be out when you return; we'll compare notes in the morning."

I saw that Madrasia was dying to ask him what his business was, but the waiters were still in the room. It was not until they had served us with coffee and gone away for good that Parslewe came to what we certainly regarded as business. Giving me a cigar and

lighting one himself, he turned his chair towards the hearth, settled in an easy position with one elbow on the table, and flung us a glance over his shoulder.

"Now, then!" he said. "What's gone on up yonder since I left? And as you can't both speak at once, settle between yourselves which is going to be spokesman. But first—where is that box?"

Madrasia, the morning being cold, had come in furs; amongst them a big muff, in the pocket of which she had carried the copper box. She rose, extracted it from its hiding-place, and laid it on the table at Parslewe's side; then she pointed a finger at me.

"Let him tell," she said. "I'll correct him where he's wrong."

"Go ahead, Craye," commanded Parslewe. "Detail!"

I told him of everything that had happened at Kelpieshaw since his own mysterious disappearance, watching him carefully and even narrowly as I talked. He listened silently and impassively; only once did he interrupt me, and that was to ask for a more particular

description of Mr. Augustus Weech. He seemed to reflect a good deal when he got that, but he let me go on to the end without further questioning, and received the message from Murthwaite just as phlegmatically as he had taken in everything else. In point of absolute inscrutability and imperviousness Parslewe in that particular mood of his could have given points to the Sphinx.

"And that's all," I concluded. "All!"

"All!" repeated Madrasia. "Except that I reiterate precisely what Murthwaite said—you've got to go back to Wooler and see him and tell him all about it and enable him to keep his word to Sir Charles Sperrigoe. And that's that!"

Parslewe's thin lips resolved themselves into that straight, rigid line which I had already come to know as well as I knew my own reflection in a mirror. When he relaxed them it was to indulge in one of his sardonic laughs, which died away into a cynical chuckle and ended in one of his angelic smiles, cast, of course, in his ward's direction.

"Oh, that's that, is it, my dear?" he said, sweetly. "Well, then, it isn't! I'm not going

to traipse back to Wooler—till I please! I'm not going to suit the convenience of either Charlie Sperrigoe or Jackie Murthwaite —till I please! I reckon I know my own business as well as the next man, and I shall just carry it out—as I please! And if you want me to indulge in modern slang—that's that!"

"And it all means that you know a great deal more than you've let out!" exclaimed Madrasia.

He treated us to another of his sardonic bursts of laughter at that.

"I'm not aware that I've let out anything at all, my dear, so far!" he retorted. "And I've no intention of doing so until——"

"Until you please!" said Madrasia. "Precisely! More mystery! Really, Jimmie, for a respectable elderly gentleman——"

He laughed again, throwing up his head as if he enjoyed being scolded, rose from his chair, and, standing on the hearth with his hands in his pockets, looked from one to the other of us as if he enjoyed seeing us wonder. Suddenly he drew one hand out, full of

money. There was gold in those days!—plenty of it—and Parslewe had a fist full. He held it out to Madrasia.

"Go and buy a toothbrush!" he said. "You know the town—go and do a bit of shopping. Better get all you want—didn't I say we might be two nights? Go and amuse yourself, my dear, and leave mysteries alone. There are no mysteries—to me, anyway." He thrust the money into her hands, stood smilingly by while she put on her furs, and when she had gone, turned to me with a laugh.

"Trust a woman for making the most of a mystery, Craye!" he said. "If there isn't one she'll invent one."

"Is there no mystery in this matter, then?" I asked. "It seems to me that there's a pretty handsome one. But evidently not to you—you're in the inside of things, you see, Mr. Parslewe."

"Aye, well," he answered. "I dare say I see the game from another angle. However, I'm not quite so thickheaded as not to realise that what's pretty plain to me mayn't be at all plain to other folk, and I'm going to let

you into a bit of my confidence. Come downstairs to the smoking-room, and we'll have these windows opened—this room's got a bit stuffy."

He rang the bell and gave some orders about ventilating the room and about having some light supper laid there for eleven o'clock that evening (in readiness, he said in an aside to me, for our return from the play), and then led me down to a quiet corner of the smoking-room. And there, having first lighted another cigar, he proceeded to divest the copper box of the neat wrappings in which Madrasia had carried it from Kelpieshaw. He set it on the little table before us, and we both stared at it. He, in particular, stared at it so hard that I began to think the mere sight of the thing was hypnotising him. Suddenly he started, and began to fumble in his waistcoat pocket.

"Aye," he muttered, more to himself than to me. "I shouldn't wonder if it is so!"

With that he pulled out of his waistcoat pocket a tiny foot-rule, ivory, in folding sections, and, opening the copper box, measured its interior depth. Then he measured the

exterior depth, and turned to me with one of his dangerously sweet smiles.

"The devil!" he exclaimed. "Craye!—there's a false bottom to this box! I've been suspecting that for the last half-hour, and by all that is, it's true!"

I was beginning to get excited, and I stared at the box as hard as he had done.

"You make that out by measurement?" I asked.

"Precisely! There's a difference of a quarter of an inch between the interior and exterior depths," he replied. "That means there's the very slightest of cavities, but ample to conceal—what?"

"Nothing much, I should think," said I.

"No; but I've heard of very important and fateful things going into small compass," he remarked. "Anyway, there it is! You can't get away from the measurements. There's a space—there! And there'll be some trick of opening the thing from the bottom—probably connected with these feet."

He pointed to the four circular knobs on which the copper box rested, but made no attempt to touch them; his thoughts seemed

to be otherwhere. And after thinking a little, he suddenly turned to me confidentially.

"I told you I'd tell you something," he said. "You're a dependable chap, Craye—I showed that by leaving the girl in your charge. She likes you, too, and I suppose you two young people will fall in love with each other if you haven't done so already, and if you have, my lad—all right! You'll make a big name in your art—but never mind that; I'll tell you a bit about this box. Not how it came into my possession; the time for that is not yet. But when I did get it it was locked, and I had no key to it, and never bothered to get one found or made. When it got a wee bit damaged, I took it to Bickerdale, here in this town, and asked him to put it right. He was a bit wary of dealing with it, but said he knew a man who would, so I left it with him, and, incidentally, asked him, while they were about it, to have it unlocked. And now, Craye, now I think that while it was in Bickerdale's hands, or in the other man's hands, something was abstracted from that box—something that I never knew was in it. Abstracted then—unless——"

He paused, making a queer, speculating grimace.

"Unless—what?" I asked.

He leaned nearer to my shoulder, dropping his voice, though there was no one at all near us.

"Unless it was abstracted at Kelpieshaw yesterday, by that chap Weech!" he replied. "Weech? Augustus? What a name!"

"Weech!" I exclaimed. "By him! Impossible!"

"And why impossible, my lad?" he asked. "No impossibility about it! Didn't you tell me just now, upstairs, while you were giving your account of all that had transpired, that you and Madrasia went up to my library to compare the titles of the books in *The Times* advertisement with certain volumes on my shelves, leaving Master Augustus Weech alone—with the copper box in front of him? Of course!"

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "I certainly never thought of that!"

"No doubt," he remarked coolly. "But I did. However, now we come to another matter, though connected with the main one. I

have business to-night which, I hope, will illuminate me as to if anything was in the box or has been abstracted from it since—by Weech—and I want you to do two or three things for me, chiefly in the way of looking after Madrasia. We'll dine early, to begin with. Then you can take her to the play—here are the tickets while I remember them. When you come back, you'll find a bit of supper in that private sitting-room. Before you go, I shall tell Madrasia that I may be very late in coming in, so after supper she'll go to bed. Now comes in a job for you! I want you to wait up, in that sitting-room, until twelve o'clock—midnight. If I'm not in by exactly twelve"—here he paused and produced a sealed envelope which he placed in my hand—"put on your overcoat, and take that round, yourself, to the police station—it's not far off—ask to see a responsible person, and hand it to him. Do you understand?"

"Every word!" said I. "But—police? Do you anticipate danger?"

"Not so much danger as difficulty, though I won't deny that there may be danger," he answered. "But do what I say. You'll find

an inspector on night duty—he'll know my name when he reads my note, because I'm a county magistrate. If he asks you a question or two, answer. And, if you like, go with him if he goes himself, or with whoever he sends. Is it all clear?—midnight?"

"It's all clear," I replied, putting the sealed envelope in my pocket. "And I'll carry it out. But I hope you're not running into personal danger, Mr. Parslewe!"

His lips tightened, and he looked away, as if to intimate that that was a matter he wouldn't discuss, and presently he began to talk about something of a totally different nature. I wanted to ask him what I should do supposing anything did happen to him, but I dared not; I saw well enough that he had done with things for the time being, and that there was nothing to be done but to carry out his instructions.

We dined quietly downstairs at half-past six; when, nearly an hour later, Madrasia and I drove off to the theatre, we left Parslewe calmly chatting to an old gentleman in the lounge. He waved his cigar to us as we passed, then called Madrasia back.

"You go to bed when you get in, child," he said. "At least, when you've had some supper. Don't wait for me; I mayn't be in till the early hours."

Then he waved her off, and we went away, Madrasia mildly excited at the thought of the play, and I feeling uncommonly anxious and depressed. For the possibilities of the situation which might arise at midnight were not pleasant to contemplate, and the more I thought about them the less I liked them. It was useless to deny that Parslewe was a strange, even an eccentric man, who would do things in his own fashion, and I was sufficiently learned in the ways of the world, young as I was, to know that such men run into danger. Where was he going that night, and to do—what? Evidently on some mission which might need police interference. And supposing that interference came along too late? What was I to do then? When all was said and done, and in spite of what he had said about myself and Madrasia in his easy-going fashion, I was almost a stranger to him and to her, and I foresaw complications if anything serious happened to him. I did not

particularly love Parslewe that evening; I thought he might have given me more of his confidence. But there it was! and there was Madrasia. And Madrasia seemed to have been restored to a more serene state of mind by this rejoining of her guardian; evidently she possessed a sound belief in Parslewe's powers.

"Did he tell you anything this afternoon when I was out shopping?" she inquired suddenly as we rode up Grey Street. "I'm sure you must have talked."

"Well," I answered. "A little. He thinks the copper box has a false bottom, a narrow cavity, in it, and that something has been concealed there, and stolen from it. Possibly by our friend Weech."

"Weech!" she exclaimed. "When?"

"When we left him alone with the box while we went up to the library," I replied. "Of course, that's possible—if Weech knew the secret."

This seemed to fill her with new ideas.

"I wonder!" she said, musingly. "And is —is that what he's after, here, in Newcastle?"

"Something of the sort," I assented. "At

least, I gather so. You know what he is—better than I do."

She sat for a time in silence—in fact, till the cab drew up at the theatre. Then she spoke.

"There's one thing about Jimmie," she remarked, reassuringly, "nobody will get the better of him! So let him work things out."

I did not tell her that there was no question of choice on my part. We saw the play which Parslewe had commended so highly; we went back to the hotel; we had supper together; then Madrasia went off to her room. And it was then twenty minutes to twelve, and I sat out every one of them, waiting, watching the door, listening for a step in the corridor without. But Parslewe did not come.

And at one minute past twelve I seized my overcoat and cap and left the room.

IX

The Whitesmith's Parlour

THERE were few people about in the big hall of the hotel, but amongst them was the principal hall-porter, who, as I came there, appeared to be handing over his duties to his deputy for the night. An idea occurred to me, and I went up to him, drawing him aside.

"You know Mr. Parslewe?" I asked.

"Mr. Parslewe, sir—yes, sir!" he answered.

"Have you seen him go out this evening?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Parslewe went out just about eleven, sir—not many minutes before you came in with the young lady."

"You haven't seen him come in again?"

"Not yet, sir—not been in since then."

I nodded, and went out into the street. So Parslewe's business, whatever it was, had been fixed for a late hour, after eleven. He might have gone with us to the theatre, then!

Unless, indeed, he had been doing other business at the hotel. But it was no use speculating on these things, my job was to do his bidding. And it was not cowardice on my part that I heartily disliked the doing of it. I had no idea as to the whereabouts of the police station. Parslewe had said it was close by, but I did not know in which direction. I might have inquired in the hotel, but I did not wish the hotel people to know that we were or were about to be mixed up with the police; it might have got to Madrasia's ears before I got back. There were still people in the streets, I could ask my way. And just then, as I might have expected, a policeman came round the corner, and at my question directed me. Parslewe had been quite correct, the place was close at hand.

I went in, wonderingly, having never been in such a building before, and not knowing what to expect, I had no more idea of what a police headquarters was like than of the interior of an Eastern palace, perhaps less. It was all very ordinary, when I got inside; there was a well-lighted office, with a counter, and tables, and desks; three or four police-

men stood or sat about, examining papers or writing in books. One of them, seeing me approach the counter and probably noticing my diffident and greenhorn air, got off his stool, put his pen behind his ear, and came across with an almost fatherly solicitude on his fresh-coloured face.

"Can I see some responsible official?" I asked.

He half turned, indicating a man who wore braid on his closely buttoned tunic, and sat at a desk in the corner.

"Inspector, sir," he said. "Speak to him."

He lifted a hinged door in the counter, and I went across to the man in question. He looked up as I drew near, and gave me a swift glance from top to toe. I had a vague sense of thankfulness that I was well dressed.

"Yes!" he said.

I got close to him. Possibly I looked mysterious—anyway, I felt so.

"You know Mr. James Parslewe of Kelpieshaw, near Wooler?" I suggested.

"Yes!"

"Mr. Parslewe is staying at the North Eastern Station Hotel. I am staying there

with him. He asked me, in case of a certain eventuality——"

He interrupted me with an almost imperceptible smile—amused, I think, at my precision of language.

"What eventuality?"

"In case he was not back at his hotel by midnight, I was to bring and give you this note from him," I answered, and laid the letter on his desk. "He was not back—so I came straight to you."

He picked up and opened the letter and began to read it; from where I stood I could see that it covered three sides of a sheet of the hotel notepaper. There was not a sign of anything—surprise, perplexity, wonder—on the man's face as he read—and he only read the thing over once. Then he folded the letter, put it in his desk, and turned to me.

"Mr. Alvery Craye, I think?" he asked.

"Yes," said I.

"Do you know what's in this letter, Mr. Craye?" he went on. "Did Mr. Parslewe tell you its contents?"

"No," I replied. "But he said I could

answer any questions you asked, and, if you go anywhere in consequence of the letter, I could go with you."

"I've only one question," he remarked. "Do you know what time Mr. Parslewe left the hotel?"

"Yes," I said. "I found that out. He left just about eleven—a few minutes before, I gathered from the hall-porter."

He nodded, turned a key in his desk, put the key in his pocket, rose, and asking me to sit down a moment, went across the room and through a door at its farther extremity. Within a couple of minutes he was back again, in company with a man in plain clothes; he himself had put on a uniform overcoat and peaked cap. He made some whispered communication to a sergeant who was busily writing at a table in the centre of the room; then he beckoned to me, and the three of us went out into the night.

At that moment I had not the slightest idea as to our destination. There was a vague notion, utterly cloudy, in my mind that we might be going to some dark and unsavoury quarter of the city; I had been in Newcastle

two or three times previously, and in my wanderings had realised that it harboured some slums which were quite as disreputable as anything you can find in Liverpool or Cardiff. But my companions turned up town, towards the best parts of the place. It was quiet in those spacious and stately streets, and the echo of our footsteps sounded eerie in the silence. Nobody spoke until we had walked some distance; then the inspector turned to me.

"Did Mr. Parslewe speak to you of any possible danger, Mr. Craye, as regards what he was after?" he asked.

"I'll tell you precisely what he did say," I answered. "He said, 'Not so much danger as difficulty, though I won't deny that there may be danger.' His exact words!"

"Just so," he remarked. "And he didn't tell you much more?"

"He told me nothing, except that he was hoping to get hold of a possible something," I replied. "If you know Mr. Parslewe, you know that on occasion, when it suits him, he can be both vague and ambiguous."

"I know Mr. Parslewe—well enough!" he

answered, with a sly chuckle. "Highly eccentric gentleman, Mr. Parslewe, and uncommonly fond of having his own way, and going his own way, and taking his own line about everything. There isn't one of his brother magistrates in all Northumberland who isn't aware of that, Mr. Craye! Then, you have no idea of where we are going just now?"

"No idea whatever!" I answered.

"Well, as he said you could go with us, I may as well tell you," he remarked, with another laugh. "We're going to the house and shop of one Bickerdale, a whitesmith and coppersmith, in a side street just up here. That's where Mr. Parslewe's gone."

Of course, I might have known it! I felt myself an ass for not having thought of it before. But I started, involuntarily.

"The name seems familiar to you," suggested the inspector.

"Yes, I know it!" I asserted. "I've been in that shop. Oh! so he's there, is he?"

"That's where we're to look for him, anyway," he replied. "But whether we do find him there, or, if we do, under what conditions it'll be, that I don't know. However, we're

carrying out his instructions, and here's the corner of the street."

I knew that corner well enough, and the street, too. It was there that I had shadowed White Whiskers and the Newcastle solicitor, and thence that I had retreated after my passage at arms with Bickerdale. Presently we stood before the side door of Bickerdale's shop, the door which presumably led to his house at the rear. There was no light visible through the transom over the door, none in the shop window, none in the windows over the shop. And when the plain-clothes man, in response to the inspector's order, rang the bell and knocked in addition, no reply came.

It was not until we had knocked and rung three times, each more loudly and urgently, that we heard sounds inside the door. They were the sounds of somebody cautiously drawing back a bolt and turning a key. But no light showed through keyhole or letter-box, or the glass in the transom, and the inspector gave his man a whispered instruction.

"Turn your lamp full on whoever opens the door!" he said. "And get a foot over the threshold."

I held my breath as the door was opened. It moved back; the plain-clothes man's light from a bull's-eye lantern flashed on a frightened, inquiring face looking round the edge of the door.

Weech!

I could have laughed aloud as Weech turned and fled, for he let out a squeal at the sight of us, and bolted for all the world like a frightened rabbit. And, of course, he left the door wide open, and we were at once on his heels, and after him down the passage. He swept aside a curtain, flung open a door behind it, and burst into a well-lighted parlour or living-room with a sharp cry of warning.

"Police!"

I got a full view of the men in that room in one quick glance from between the two policemen as they walked in. There was a table in its centre, an oblong table; at our end of it, with his back to us, sat Parslewe, calmly smoking a cigar; at the other, morose, perplexed, defiant, sat Bickerdale. And behind Bickerdale, leaning against a dresser or sideboard, stood Pawley!

These three all looked towards us as we entered, each with a different expression. Bickerdale's face became angry, almost savage; Pawley appeared, after his first glance of surprise, to be intensely annoyed. But Parslewe, half turning, motioned to the inspector and whispered a few words to him; the inspector, his plain-clothes man, and myself remained after that in the doorway by which we had entered, and Parslewe gave his attention to Bickerdale, to whose side, near the fireplace, Weech, still nervous and upset, had made his way round the table.

"Now then, Bickerdale!" he said. "Without any more to do about it, you'll give me that document—you, or Weech, or both of you! Do you hear—hand it over!"

"No!" exclaimed Pawley. "I object. If there's any handing over, Mr. Parslewe, it'll be to me. And as you've brought police here, I'd better say at once that——"

Parslewe suddenly rose from his chair. He held up his left hand—towards Pawley. There was something in the gesture that made Pawley break off short in his words and remain silent. As for Parslewe's right hand,

it went into his pocket and brought out his cigar case. Silently he handed it to the inspector, motioning him to help himself and to pass it to his man. Then he turned to Pawley again.

"Mr. Pawley!" he said in his most matter-of-fact tones. "It's very evident to me that you and I had better have a little conversation in strict privacy. Bickerdale!—where have you a spare room?"

Bickerdale turned to Weech, growling something that sounded more like a curse than an intimation. But Weech opened a door in the rear of the room, and revealed a lighted kitchen place, and Parslewe, motioning Pawley to follow him, went within. The door closed on them.

They were in that kitchen a good half-hour. As for those of us—five men—who were left in the sitting-room, we kept to our respective camps. Bickerdale and Weech, at their end of the place, hung together, eyeing us furtively, and occasionally whispering. Weech in particular looked venomous, and by that time I had come to the conclusion that he had bluffed Madrasia and myself very cleverly on

the occasion of his visit to Kelpieshaw. As for the inspector and his man and myself, we sat in a line, on three very stiff-seated, straight-backed chairs, smoking Parslewe's cigars, for lack of anything better to do, and watched and waited. Only once during that period of suspense did any of us speak; that was when the inspector, happening to catch my eye, gave me a quiet whisper.

"Queer business, Mr. Craye!" he said. "Odd!"

"Very," said I.

He smiled and looked round at his man. But the man was one of those stolid-faced individuals who seem as if nothing could move them; also, he appeared to be relishing Parslewe's cigar. With this in one corner of his lips he sat immovable, watching the door through which Parslewe and Pawley had vanished. I think he never took his eyes off it; anyway, my recollection of him is as of a man who could sit down and watch a thing or a person for hours and hours and hours, without as much as flickering an eyelid—an uncanny, uncomforting man—doubtless fitted, by some freak of nature, to his trade of sleuth-hound.

As for me, I was wondering all round the affair. What was Parslewe after? What was Pawley doing there? Who was Pawley, anyway? Why, at that juncture, when his reinforcements had come up, did Parslewe want to parley with Pawley? For a parley it was that was going on in that kitchen, without a doubt. We heard nothing; there were no raised voices, no evidence of any angry or wordy discussion. All we heard was an occasional whisper from Weech, a muttered growl from Bickerdale in response. But on the hearth a kettle was singing, and at a corner of the rug, near Bickerdale's slippered feet, a cat sat and purred and purred. . . .

The door of the kitchen suddenly opened; just as suddenly I saw that whatever had been said, or whatever had taken place in that kitchen, a marvellous transformation had developed in Pawley's manner. He held open the door for Parslewe, and stood aside deferentially as Parslewe passed him. When he followed Parslewe into the parlour it was with the air of a man who has either met his master or been made subject to some revelation. And it was he who spoke first—in

answer to a nod from Parslewe. He turned to Bickerdale.

"Mr. Bickerdale!" he said in suave, placatory tones. "I think you'd better do what Mr. Parslewe asks! I—I've had some conversation with Mr. Parslewe, and—and I think that's what you'd better do, Mr. Bickerdale—just so!"

Bickerdale turned on him with a sudden glare which denoted nothing but sheer surprise. I could see that the man was fairly astonished—amazed.

"Why—why!" he exclaimed. "It was you—you!—that told me just now to do nothing of the sort!"

Pawley smiled in a queer, sickly, deprecating sort of fashion.

"Circumstances alter cases, Mr. Bickerdale," he said. "I—I didn't know then what I know now. My advice is, now—do as Mr. Parslewe wants."

Weech sprang to his feet—an epitome of anger and chagrin.

"But us!" he vociferated. "Us—me and him! What are we going to get out of it? Where shall we profit?" He turned almost

savagely on Bickerdale. "Don't!" he went on. "Don't you do it! Never mind those fellows over there! there's no police business in this that I know of, and——"

"I'll give you in charge of the police in two minutes, my lad!" said Parslewe suddenly. "Just to show you——"

"Mr. Bickerdale," said Pawley. "Take my advice! I—I understand—from Mr. Parslewe—you'll not be a loser."

Bickerdale gave him a searching look. Then, suddenly, he thrust a hand into his inner breast pocket and drew out a small square envelope, which, with equal quickness, he handed across the table to Parslewe. In its passage, the light from the lamp gleamed upon this envelope; it seemed to me that I saw a crest on the flap.

"Rid of it now, anyway!" growled Bickerdale, sullenly. "Done!"

We were all watching Parslewe. He drew back to a corner of the room, where a second lamp stood on a wall bracket. Beneath this he turned the envelope over, examining it back and front; I saw then that it had been slit open by Bickerdale or Weech, or some-

body through whose hands it had passed. And out of it Parslewe drew what seemed to be an ordinary sheet of notepaper. Whatever was written on it, he had read through in a minute. There were six pairs of eyes watching him, but you might as well have hoped to get news out of a stone wall as gain any information from his face; it was more inscrutable and impassive than I had ever seen it. He showed nothing—and suddenly he thrust paper and envelope into his pocket, sat down at the table, pulled out a cheque-book and a fountain-pen, and began to write. A moment later, he threw a cheque across to Bickerdale; then, without a word to him, or to Weech, or to Pawley, he strode out, motioning us to follow.

We made a little procession down town. Parslewe and the inspector walked first; I heard them talking about county business—the levying of a new rate, or some triviality of that sort. The plain-clothes man and I brought up the rear; we talked about the weather, and he told me that he had an allotment garden somewhere on the outskirts and wanted rain for what he had just planted.

Presently we all parted, and Parslewe and I went to the hotel and up to the private sitting-room. There was whisky and soda on the side-board, and he mixed a couple of glasses, handed me one, and drank his own off at a draught. Then, when I had finished mine, he gave me a questioning look.

"Bed, my lad?" he suggested. "Just so! Come on, then—your room's next to mine; we'll go together." We walked along the corridor outside. "Do you want an idea—not an original one—to go to bed with, Craye?" he asked abruptly, as we reached our doors. "I'll give you one. There are some damned queer things in this world!"

Then, with one of his loud, sardonic peals of laughter, he shook my hand and shot into his room.

X

Known at the Crown

THE various doings of that evening had not been of a nature that conduced to sleep, and I lay awake for a long time wondering about them. Naturally, my speculations chiefly ran on what I had seen in Bickerdale's back parlour. How came Pawley there? What did Parslewe say to Pawley in that kitchen that made Pawley suddenly transformed into a state of almost servile acquiescence in Parslewe's further doings? What was the document that Bickerdale handed over to Parslewe? Had Bickerdale found it during his repairing of the copper box, or had Augustus Weech abstracted it when Madrasia and I left him alone in the parlour at Kelpieshaw? All these questions ran helter-skelter through my brain as I lay there, anything but sleepy, and, needless to say, I hadn't satisfactorily answered one of them when at last I

dropped off to a more or less uneasy slumber. The truth was that in spite of various developments the whole thing, at two o'clock that morning, was to me a bigger and more exasperating mystery than ever.

And it was still there when I woke, sharply, at six o'clock; so much so, indeed, that I felt as if I should like to march into Parslewe's room next door, shake him out of his no doubt sound sleep, and tell him that he'd got to make a clean breast of things, there and then. As I knew no man in the world less likely to be forced into confession until such time as he chose to speak, I took another course to calm my perplexed state of mind. I rose, shaved, dressed, and going downstairs, went out into the big station. Railway stations, at any hour of the day, but especially early in the morning, have a fascination for me—the goings and comings of the first trains, the gradually increasing signs of waking up, the arrival of the newspapers and opening of the bookstalls, even the unloading and carrying away of the milk cans, are sources of mighty attraction. I lounged about for some time, watching and observing; finally, as the hands of the clock

pointed to seven, and knowing that neither Parslewe nor Madrasia would be ready for breakfast much before nine, I turned into the refreshment room for a cup of coffee. And there at the counter, a suit-case at his feet and a rug over his arm, stood Pawley.

Pawley gave me a smile which was half bland and half sickly, and wholly mysterious. And suddenly feeling that I had as good a right as another to indulge an entirely natural sense of inquisitiveness, I went up to him and bade him good morning. He responded civilly enough, and it struck me that he was rather glad to see me and not indisposed to talk. He was eating bread and butter and sipping tea; I got some coffee and biscuits, and for a moment or two we stood side by side, silent. But I had an idea that Pawley wanted me to speak.

"Leaving?" I asked, with a glance at his belongings.

"That's it, Mr. Craye," he replied, almost eagerly. "By the seven-forty, sir. I'm through with my job after last night."

I noticed a difference in his tone and manner. He was no longer the amateur antiquary,

affecting a knowledge and a jargon carefully acquired; he talked like what he probably was, an inquiry agent of some sort. And in consonance with my previous feeling of intuition, I thought that however much he might keep back, he was not against communicating some of his knowledge.

"Last night's proceedings," I remarked, "were somewhat mysterious, Mr. Pawley."

"Mysterious!" he exclaimed. "I believe you! I've been concerned in some queer things in my time, Mr. Craye, but in none queerer than this! Beyond me! But no doubt you know more than I do."

"I know nothing," I answered. "Nothing, that is, beyond what I've seen. And what I've seen I haven't understood. For instance, I didn't understand how you came to be at Bickerdale's last night."

"Oh, that's easy!" he said. "I was left here to keep an eye on Bickerdale and to get in touch with him. And, incidentally, to find out, if I could, whether Bickerdale had discovered anything in that copper box when he had it."

"Did anybody suspect that something

might have been concealed in the copper box?" I asked.

"To be sure, Mr. Craye! Sir Charles Sperrigoe suspected—does suspect. That's what he sent me up here for—to take a preliminary look round. Then—came himself. Gone back now—but kept me here for a day or two. To watch Bickerdale—as I said. And last night, just as I was hoping to worm something out of Bickerdale and his son-in-law, that ratty little chap—Weech—in walks Mr. Parslewe!"

"And did—what?" I asked.

He smiled, enigmatically.

"Mr. Parslewe, sir, is an odd gentleman!" he answered. "You'll know that by now, I think, Mr. Craye, though I understand you're almost a stranger to him. Well—Mr. Parslewe, he lost no time. He told Bickerdale that he knew he'd found a document in a secret place in that copper box—he'd the copper box with him, and he showed us the trick of opening it."

"Oh, he did, did he?" I interrupted, in surprise. "Found it out, eh?"

"He knew it, anyway," replied Pawley.

"It's done by unscrewing the feet—the little knobs—that the thing stands on. And he demanded of Bickerdale that he should hand that document over there and then! Sharp!"

"And—what then?" I inquired.

Pawley poured out more tea, and stirred it thoughtfully.

"That was where I came in," he said. "I objected—as representing Sir Charles Sperrigoe. I said he was the proper person to have any document, and I was his representative. We were disputing that, and Bickerdale was getting more obstinate about handing anything over to anybody till he knew what he was getting out of it, when you and those police chaps arrived. And the rest you know, Mr. Craye."

"On the contrary," said I, "I don't! I don't know anything. What happened between you and Mr. Parslewe in that kitchen?"

But at that he shook his head, and I saw that there were things he wouldn't tell.

"As to that, Mr. Craye," he answered, "Mr. Parslewe's closed my lips! But he's a gentleman of his word, and after what he said to me, I'd no choice, sir, no choice at all, but to fall

in with his suggestion that the document should be handed over to him. I couldn't do anything else—after what he told me. But as to what he told me—mum is the word, Mr. Craye!—mum! At present."

"Have you any idea what that document is?" I asked, going at last straight to a principal point.

"None!" he replied quickly. "But—I've a very good idea!"

"What, then?" I put it to him. "I'd give a good deal to know."

He glanced round, as if he feared to be overheard, though there was no one near us.

"Well," he said. "Have you heard of an old gentleman named Palkeney, Mr. Matthew Palkeney, of Palkeney Manor, away there in the Midlands, who died some little time ago, leaving money and a fine place and no relatives, and from whose library that copper box and those books were undoubtedly stolen?"

"I've heard of him—and of the rest," I replied.

"Just so," he said. "Well, Mr. Craye, between you and me, it's my belief that the document Mr. Parslewe got from Bicker-

dale last night—or, rather, early this morning—was neither more nor less than Mr. Matthew Palkeney's will, which the old fellow—a queer old stick!—had hidden in that copper box! That's what I think!"

"Is it known that he made any will?" I asked.

"In the ordinary way, no," he answered. "But things come out. This would have come out before, but for the slowness of country folk to tell anything. Sperrigoes, as the old gentleman's solicitors, have never been able to find any will, or trace of any. But recently—quite recently—they've come across this—a couple of men on the estate, one a woodman, the other a gamekeeper, have come forward to say that some time ago they set their names to a paper which they saw their old master sign his name to. What's that but a will, Mr. Craye? Come!"

"It sounds like it," I agreed. "And you think that it was that that Mr. Parslewe recovered last night?"

"I do," he answered. "For I've heard—Sir Charles told me himself—that when the old man was struck down and lay dying, all

he spoke of—as far as they could make out —was the copper box, coupled with the family name. Mr. Craye, I think he hid that will in the copper box, and that Mr. Parslewe now has it in his pocket!"

It seemed a probable suggestion, and I nodded my assent.

"I suppose we shall hear," I said.

Pawley picked up his suit-case.

"I must go to my train," he said. "Hear?" Yes—and see, too, Mr. Craye! I think you'll hear and see some queer things within this next day or two, if you're remaining in Mr. Parslewe's company. But, I'll say this—Mr. Parslewe, though unmistakably a queer, a very queer, eccentric gentleman, is a straight 'un, and whatever he got from Bickerdale, it's safe with him. Otherwise I shouldn't be going south. And, as I say, if you're stopping with Mr. Parslewe, I think you'll have some entertainment. Better than a tale, I call it!"

He said good morning at that, and went off to his train, and after buying a morning newspaper, I turned into the hotel and went up to the private sitting-room. And then, presently, came Madrasia.

I was not going to say anything to Madrasia—I mean, as regarded the events of the night. Fortunately, she asked no questions—about the past, at any rate; her sole concern seemed to be about the immediate future. There was a waiter in the room, laying the table for breakfast, when she came in; she and I withdrew into the embrasure of the window, looking out on streets that had now grown busy.

"Have you seen him this morning?" she asked significantly. "No? Did you see him last night?"

"For a few minutes," I answered.

"Did he say what we're going to do today?" she inquired.

"Not a word!" said I. "Said nothing!"

"Not even whether we're going home or not —or anything?" she demanded. "No? But what are we here for?"

"I don't know," I replied. "Ask him!"

"Might as well ask the man on that monument!" she retorted, pointing out of the window. "I feel like a marionette!—with Jimmie pulling the strings just as he pleases."

"Do you mind?" I asked.

"Well, it does seem as if one hadn't a mind or a will of one's own," she said. "Look here! —if he comes to breakfast with some new scheme, or plan, or mad notion, what are you going to do—yourself?"

I gave her a purposely steady look.

"Fall in with it," I answered.

"You are!" she exclaimed. "Why?"

"Nothing else to do," I replied.

She regarded me steadily for a while.

"I hope he hasn't hypnotised us," she said. "Seems to me he's only got to lift a finger and we walk after him like lambs!"

"Rather amusing, though, after all," I observed. "Adds variety to life. He may have something quite exciting in store for us to-day."

"Oh, well," she said. "If you like to be led about like a performing bear—however, here he is!"

Parslewe and breakfast came together. He had evidently been down to the bookstall to buy a financial paper, and he sat, grim and fixed of expression, as he ate and drank, and read figures and statistics. It was not until he had made an end of his food that he be-

trayed any particular consciousness of our presence. Then, laying down his paper, he bent across the table to his ward, favouring her with one of his charming smiles.

"Well, my dear," he said, "did you buy all that you wanted yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes," replied Madrasia, promptly, "I did."

"Enough to last you till you get home?" he continued.

"Quite!" said Madrasia.

"You didn't happen to buy a bag, or a case, or something to carry your impedimenta in?" he asked with a grin.

"Yes, I did," retorted Madrasia. "Do you think I was going to carry a brown paper parcel back to Wooler? I bought a very nice bag."

"Oh!" he said sweetly. "All right! Then you can just go and pack it, my girl, and be ready in three quarters of an hour, for we're going."

"Going where?" demanded Madrasia. "Home?"

"Not just yet," he said. "We're going south—by the express. A good way, too, and

we must get seats in the luncheon car. So you be ready."

Madrasia pointed a slim finger at me.

"You've never asked him!" she exclaimed.

"That's all right," replied Parslewe, calmly. "He's going too. We're all going. You go and pack your duds." He turned to me as she went out of the room and his smile was sweeter than ever. "You may as well see it through, Craye," he said. "I think we'll have about settled things up by noon to-morrow. And I'll show you something that'll appeal to your artistic eye. Eh?"

"In for a penny, in for a pound, Mr. Parslewe," I replied. "I'm game!—but hanged if I know what it's all about!"

"I'm not so certain that I know that myself, my lad!" he answered. "But I think we're getting near it. Well, be ready!"

He went off then, and I saw him no more until we all met to walk across to the express. There was considerable satisfaction in travelling with Parslewe, for he reduced the whole thing to the perfection of comfort. He had already booked three places and a table in the first-class dining-car, armed himself with

a heap of magazines and newspapers, and, as he said, we had nothing to do but drop on our padded seats, put our toes under the table, and go away in luxurious idleness. We went —but when that train moved out of Newcastle and started on its long journey southward, neither Madrasia nor myself had the faintest idea as to where we were going. I think it was much to our credit—especially to hers—that we made no inquiry, and allowed Parslewe to do just as he liked with us. Certainly I had some vague, shadowy idea as to our destination; probably it was Palkeney Manor, or to some place where somebody—Sperrigoe, perhaps—lived who had some connection with it. But then—I did not know where Palkeney Manor was; Pawley, to be sure, had referred to it as being in the Midlands, but the Midlands are wide-stretching.

Anyway, we remained in that express until, after we had had lunch, it ran into Peterborough. There Parslewe, without notice, bundled us out. He treated us to one of his sardonic grins when he had shepherded us on to the platform.

"This is where we begin to travel," he re-

marked, drily. "That was a preliminary—no bother about that—all straight running. But now——"

He broke off abruptly, and left us; presently we saw him in close conversation with an official. Madrasia turned to me.

"Of course, you haven't the least idea where we're going," she suggested.

"If you mean, do I know exactly and precisely, no!" I answered. "If you mean, do I know to within fifty or a hundred miles, yes!"

"Well?" she demanded.

"I think we're going into one of the Midland counties," I said, resignedly. "There are several of them. I remember sufficient geography to repeat their names if you want to hear them."

"I don't!" she answered. "But I wish we were there, wherever it is. Where are we now? I mean, in relation to where we're going?"

"A long way off," I replied, consolingly. "That's what he means when he says we're about to travel. The fact is, we've so far been on a straight line; now, I suppose, we've got

to cut across country. We're in the east, and we've got to go west."

There was a clock over our heads, and Madrasia looked at it. We were half-way through the afternoon.

"I suppose we shall land somewhere about midnight," she said. "But it's just what I expected."

She was wrong. We travelled a long way, to be sure, after leaving Peterborough, and I knew, by passing such places as Rugby and Warwick, that we were making into the heart of mid-England. But at eight o'clock, and at a small station, Parslewe had us out of our carriage and into a cab; within a few minutes we were in the quaint old streets of what looked like a mediæval town. And even then we did not know its name; all we knew was that he had ordered our driver to carry us to the Crown. Presently we were there, and saw an old-world hostelry, out of which came a very modern hall-porter, who, at sight of Parslewe, smiled widely and touched his forehead.

"Glad to see you again, sir!" said this functionary. "Rooms, sir?"

Parslewe looked at the man with a quizzical, inquiring glance.

"So you remember me, do you?" he asked. "Eh?"

"Never forget a face, sir," replied the hall-porter. "This way, sir!"

XI

Back to Elizabeth

WE found ourselves in a wonderful old house, a place of nooks and corners, old oak, old everything; it would not have surprised me if, as I made my way along its queer passages and stairways, I had met men in ruffs and women in farthingales. But it was modern enough in its present administration, and they served us with a capital dinner, late as it was in the evening. That and the charm of our surroundings put Madrasia and myself into a better humour than we had been in during the last tiresome stages of our long journey. I think that by that time we were both inclined to enter into the spirit of the thing; it was, after all, an adventure that had possibilities. And in the middle of dinner Madrasia, with a whimsical laugh and a roguish sparkle in her eyes, bent towards Parslewe, who, as usual, was uncon-

cerned, phlegmatic, and apparently quite at home.

"If it's not stripping away too many of the wrappings of your precious mystery, Jimmie," she said, "may one ask a question?"

"Aye, why not?" he answered. "As long as it's sensible."

"Sensible enough," she retorted. "Where are we?"

"Just so!" said I. "The same question has suggested itself to me, limited as my intelligence is. For I don't know!"

Parslewe regarded us with calm eyes and manner.

"We're in the ancient and eminently picturesque and very comfortable Crown Hotel at Medminster," he answered. "Which stands in the Market Place, and commands a remarkable view of one of the last bits of mediæval England, as you can read in the guide books, and, better still, see for yourselves in the morning."

"Medminster," exclaimed Madrasia. "But that's where old Sperrigoe comes from! At least, that was the address given in *The Times* advertisement that Weech showed us."

"Precisely!" agreed Parslewe, drily. "It was here in this very room, at that table, that I had the honour of meeting Sperrigoe."

"When?" demanded Madrasia.

"Oh! Some time ago," he answered, indifferently.

"Then, if you'd been at home when he called at Kelpieshaw the other morning, he'd have known you?" said Madrasia, giving me a kick under the table. "Of course he would, as you'd met before."

"He might have known my face," answered Parslewe. "But he wouldn't have known my name; at least, I mean, he never knew my name when I met him here. We chanced to meet here, as strangers, happening to dine together at the same table; we smoked a cigar together afterwards, and chatted about the old town. I heard his name, but he never heard mine; to him I was a mere bird-of-passage. I guess," he went on, with one of his cynical laughs, "old Sperrigoe would have been vastly astonished if he'd found me in at Kelpieshaw and had recognised in me the stranger of the Crown!"

"Have you come here to see old Sperrigoe?" demanded Madrasia.

Parslewe was the best hand I ever came across at the fine art of disregarding a direct question. His face became utterly blank and his lips set, and remained so until a new whim came over him, and he began to tell us something of the history of the old house to which he had brought us. Of that he would talk, but we both saw that it was no use questioning him on any other subject, and we left him alone. But I had already learned something—Parslewe had been there before; he had met White Whiskers there; White Whiskers would know him: without a doubt he had come there to meet White Whiskers. But why on earth did he elude White Whiskers at Kelpieshaw?

Before the evening closed I learned something else. Madrasia retired early; Parslewe began writing a letter in the smoking-room; left to myself, I strolled out to the front door of the hotel to take a look at my surroundings. The old Market Place was flooded in bright moonlight, and I saw at once that Parslewe had been right when he spoke of

it as a bit of mediæval England. On all sides of me were ancient half-timbered houses with high gables and quaintly ornamented fronts; above them, at one end of the square, rose the tall square tower of a church; fronting it, at the other end, was what I took to be an old Moot Hall. But for the gas-lamps which twinkled here and there, and for the signs and names above the shops, I should have thought myself thrown back to Tudor times.

The hall-porter came out as I stood there, looked up at the sky, and remarked that we should have a fine day to-morrow, and that good weather was desirable, for people were beginning to go about.

"You get tourists here, I suppose?" said I.

"No end of 'em, sir," he answered. "Deal of Americans come here—they like that sort of thing"—waving his hand towards the old houses opposite. "Nothing of that sort in their country, I understand, sir. Oh, yes, full of tourists all the summer months, sir."

"But you don't remember all their faces, do you?" I suggested.

He laughed at my reference to his remark on our arrival.

"Why, no, sir, not chance comers like that," he admitted. "Though I wouldn't be too sure on that point—one gets into a habit of noticing, you know, sir. But in the case of anybody who stops here a day or two—never forget, sir. I knew your friend at once—noticeable gentleman, of course."

"Easily recognised," I suggested.

"Just so, sir. Though it'll be—let me see—yes, three years or so since he was here," he answered. "Oh, I remember him well enough. Stopped here two or three nights, one autumn. A collector of curiosities, I think, sir. I remember I bought him a couple of packing-cases to carry away odds and ends that he'd bought in the town. Considerable trade done in that way here, sir—half those shops you see on the other side are curio shops."

"How do they keep up their stock?" I asked.

"Ah! that's a question that a lot of people have put to me, sir," he replied. "You'd almost think they manufacture things! But

the fact is, sir, this is an old part of England, with a lot of old houses about, old country seats, and the like. And families die out, and the stuff they've been accumulating for generations comes to auction, and a lot of it gets into these curio shops—that's how it's done, sir. Plenty of antiques in those shops, sir, but nothing to what there is in the old houses in the neighbourhood."

"Do you know a house near here called Palkeney Manor?" I asked, thinking that as this was an intelligent and communicative man I might as well improve my own knowledge. "There is such a place, I think?"

"Palkeney Manor, sir!" he answered readily. "To be sure, sir! Three miles out—fine old house that is—sort of show-place; you can look round it by paying a shilling—all our American customers go there, and the shillings go to the local charities. Oh, yes! that was old Mr. Matthew Palkeney's. Dead now, he is, and they do say that the lawyers don't know who the property belongs to—haven't found out yet, anyway. Fine property it is, too. Queer old gentleman, old Mr. Palkeney!—and that

reminds me that I think your friend knew him, sir. Leastways, the last day your friend was here I remember that old Mr. Palkeney drove up in his carriage and gave me a parcel for him—I helped him to pack that parcel in one of the cases I'd bought for him."

"You've an excellent memory," I remarked.

"Oh, well, one thinks of things, sir," he answered. "Faces, now, sir, they stir your memory up, don't you think? And I've seen some remarkable faces in my time—faces that you'd remember twenty years after. Some faces, of course, is that ordinary that you never notice 'em. But others——"

At that moment Parslewe put his face through the swing door behind us, and seeing the hall-porter on the steps came out. He had a letter in his hand. Coming to the hall-porter he waved the letter towards the west end of the Market Place.

"Isn't Sir Charles Sperrigoe's office just round that corner?" he asked. "Aye? Well, just go and put this note into his letter-box, will you? Then he'll get it first thing in the morning. Go now, there's a good fellow!" He turned to me when the man

had gone on his errand. "Well, master!" he asked, in his half-cynical, half-humorous fashion. "How does this appeal to your artistic sense?"

"A fine setting for a mystery, Mr. Parslewe," I answered.

"I dare say you're right," he said with a laugh. "But I think we shall have done with mysteries to-morrow, my lad. And what mystery there is has been none of my making! Well, I'm off to my bed. Good night."

With that, and a pleasant nod, he went unconcernedly off, and presently I followed his example, more mystified than ever by his last remark. For if he had not made all this mystery, who had?

Whether the mystery was going to be done with next day or not, its atmosphere was still thick upon us next morning. At ten o'clock, Parslewe, who invariably made all his arrangements without consulting anybody who was affected by them, marshalled us into a carriage and pair at the door of the Crown and gave some instructions, aside, to the coachman. We drove off into a singu-

larly picturesque and well-wooded country. Madrasia, fresh from the almost treeless slopes of the Cheviots, was immediately in raptures with it. Already the trees were in leaf, the wide-spreading meadows were covered with fresh green, and in the vistas of woodland through which we passed daffodils and wood anemones made splashes of colour against the bursting verdure. New to her, too, were the quaint thatched cottages, many of them half-timbered, and all ancient, by the roadside.

"It's like the old England that one sees in pictures!" she exclaimed. "It's as if we'd gone back!"

"We have gone back," said Parslewe, with one of his queer, grim looks. "Back to Elizabeth! There's not much that's altered hereabouts since Shakespeare's time—neither houses nor men. And if you're going to develop a taste for mediævalism, my dear, you'll soon be satisfied—we're presently going to set foot in a house that's as old as they make 'em."

But before this came about the carriage stopped at a wayside cottage, and Parslewe,

without a word to us, got out, knocked at the door, and went in. He remained inside for several minutes; when he emerged again it was in the company of a tall, weather-beaten old man whom, because of his velveteen coat and general appearance, I took to be a game-keeper. Motioning to the coachman to follow him up the road, Parslewe walked on ahead with his companion, and presently turned into a wayside wood. Coming abreast of the bridle-gate by which they had entered, we saw them in conversation with a third man, also elderly, who was felling trees; for some minutes the three stood talking together.

"What is he after now?" asked Madrasia.

I shook my head—nothing was going to draw me into speculations about Parslewe's proceedings.

"The best thing at the present juncture," said I, as oracularly as possible, "is just to let things occur. I don't know what he's after! Let him pursue it! We shall find things out as we go on."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I imagine—but I may be wrong—that

we're on our way to that Palkeney Manor of which Murthwaite told us," said I. "I think we've been on our way to it ever since we left Newcastle yesterday morning. That's probably the house that's as old as they make 'em. You'd better be prepared—for anything. I am!"

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "You're getting cryptic too!"

"I think my brains are addled!" I answered. "Never mind! I know something!"

"What?" she asked.

I bent forward to her, endeavouring to look as mysterious as I possibly could, and spoke in a hushed voice.

"This!" I said, thrillingly. "Parslewe has the copper box in his pocket!"

She drew back, staring at me as if she wondered whether my mind had given way. I nodded solemnly.

"Fact!" said I. "I saw him put it there! It's in the right-hand outer pocket of his coat. And in the copper box lies the explanation of —everything! Hush!—not a word! He's coming back."

Parslewe came back, leaving the two old men talking together, and I noticed that they stared after his retreating figure with vast interest. But instead of getting into the carriage again, he motioned to us, in his usual imperious fashion, to get out. Then he turned to the coachman.

"Isn't there an inn along the road there, near the village?" he asked. "Just so; then you go and put up your horses at it, and wait there till I send for you. We'll do the rest on foot," he went on, turning to us. "There's a path through the woods a little farther on."

He led us up the road for another hundred yards, then turned into a bridle-track that wound through a mass of venerable old trees for a good half-mile. We made slow progress, for Madrasia insisted on gathering a bunch of primroses. She was putting the last finishing touches to this when Parslewe, who had got a little ahead, called to us.

"Now then, here you are!" he said. "Here's the place!"

We went on, and found him at the edge of

the wood, leaning over a gate. He pointed before him with his stick.

"Palkeney Manor," he remarked, drily.

Madrasia let out a sudden, whole-souled exclamation of delighted wonder. I was not surprised; the scene before us was one of that peculiar charm and quiet beauty which no other country than our own can show. We were looking on an undulating park, vividly green, studded with old trees beneath which antlered deer were browsing; there was a tree-shaded stretch of water in one of the miniature valleys, and cattle standing knee-deep in it, and above this, on a rising ground, backed by tall elms and giant chestnuts, stood a beautiful old house, mellowed by centuries of age.

We were all intent for a time, staring. Then Madrasia spoke, softly.

"What a picture of a place!" she said. "Jimmie! even you must think it is!"

But Parslewe gave us one of his queer looks.

"Um!" he answered. "To tell you the truth, my girl, I was wondering if the drains

are all right! Picturesqueness is all very well—but, however, we'll go a bit nearer."

We went slowly across the park, admiring its sylvan beauties, past the shining water, past the shy deer, and up to the front of the house, Madrasia's ecstasies of admiration increasing with every step we took. And as for myself, I was beginning to have a great wonder and an itching curiosity—especially the itching curiosity. What were we doing here?

But Parslewe seemed to know. He led us straight to the front door, which stood open.

"This is a show-place on certain days in the week," he said. "This is one of those days, so we can go in."

We went in. An elderly woman appeared. She wore a black silk apron, and a thin gold chain round her neck; I took these to be symbolic of her rank and estate as housekeeper. And I noticed that after a first glance at him, she gave Parslewe a steady, knowing inspection.

"Good morning to you, ma'am," said Parslewe, with his best old-fashioned

politeness. "I understand we may look round?"

The housekeeper explained. The state rooms, including those once used by Queen Elizabeth, and the bed in which her Majesty had slept, were open to inspection. Visitors paid a shilling each; the shillings were given to the local charities. So Parslewe paid three shillings, and we all inscribed our names in a book—Parslewe last. And as he laid down the pen under the housekeeper's eye, he turned and looked at her.

"Now, ma'am!" he said. "Have you ever seen me before?"

The woman gave him a quiet, watchful look.

"Yes, sir," she answered readily. "I remember you. You're the gentleman who dined here with my late master some three years ago, and spent the evening with him. But I never heard your name, sir."

Parslewe nodded, and remarking that there was no need to show us round, he'd prefer to be left to himself, led us into the hall and up a great staircase to the state apartments. It was evident at once that he

knew the whole place, and for the next hour he was in his element as guide while we were lost in wonder and admiration at the things he showed us. And we were examining the very bed on which Queen Elizabeth had stretched her limbs when the housekeeper came in, more interested in Parslewe than ever.

"Sir," she said, with something of deference. "Sir Charles Sperrigoe's compliments, and he awaits your pleasure in the morning-room."

XII

The Palkeney Motto

IT was characteristic of Parslewe that he deliberately finished what he was telling us about Queen Elizabeth and her visit to Palkeney before he made any move in the direction of Sir Charles Sperrigoe. I am afraid we only heard a half of what he said; we were both conscious that what we might hear downstairs was certain to prove of far greater interest than anything Parslewe could tell us about the sixteenth century. Personally, I felt a throb of excitement when at last he turned away from the queer old chamber in which we stood.

"Well, come on!" he said, "I suppose we must see this chap and clear things up. Didn't she say the morning-room?"

He seemed to know where that was well enough, and led the way straight to it; its door was slightly open, and as Parslewe

threw it wide we became aware of Sir Charles, posted on the hearth, his large face turned expectantly towards us. Its expression was severe, pompous, and non-committal, but it changed with startling rapidity as his eyes fell on Parslewe. He almost jumped, indeed—moved, recovered himself, gasped.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "My dear sir, surely we have met before?"

Parslewe laughed sardonically.

"Aye, surely!" he answered, in his most casual fashion. "Neither of us difficult to recognise, I should think, Sir Charles. And I understand you've met these young people before, too?"

Sir Charles hastened to acknowledge us—perfunctorily; it was evident that we were very unimportant factors in the situation compared to Parslewe, upon whom his eyes were fastened with strange interest.

"I have had that pleasure," he said. "But you, my dear sir—we met, one night, some—is it two, or is it three years ago?—at the Crown, in our neighbouring town, where, I believe, you are now staying? I

remember our conversation—instructive and —and enjoyable. Dear me! But I never knew your name."

"I knew yours," said Parslewe, with a grin. "That's just why I wouldn't see you when you came to my house."

Sir Charles stared—this was beyond him. He looked from one to the other of us; finally at Parslewe. There was that in his expression which made me think that he was wondering if Parslewe might not be a little mad.

"But why, my good sir?" he asked soothingly. "Why? Am I so——"

Parslewe laughed and pointed to the panelling over the big fireplace. There, carved in oak, was the Palkeney coat-of-arms, and beneath it the motto that had excited my wonder when I first saw it on the copper box.

"Do you see that?" he asked. "Aye?—well, you see, I have the Palkeney blood in my veins! And what I please to do, that I do!—without caring for or consulting anybody. Family characteristic, Sperrigoe! But I guess you've seen it before, eh?"

Sir Charles was still staring at him. He looked like a man who has unexpectedly got hold of some curious animal and is uncertain what it is about to do next. But after rubbing his chin a little, he spoke.

"Do I understand you to say that you have the Palkeney blood in your veins?" he inquired. "Then——"

Parslewe suddenly pointed to the table which stood in the centre of the room, signing us all to be seated at it; I noticed that he himself took the chair at its head as with an unchallengeable authority.

"Better sit down and do our business," he said. Then, as we settled round the table, Madrasia and I on his right and left hand, and Sir Charles opposite to him, he put a hand in his coat pocket, drew out the copper box, and with one of his queer smiles, set it before him. "Do you know what that is, Sperrigoe?" he asked.

Sir Charles made a wry face.

"The cause of much worry and anxiety to me, my dear sir!" he answered. "I can see what it is well enough!"

"Aye, and you want to know how I got

it, don't you?" suggested Parslewe. "So do these young people. I'll tell you. Old Matthew Palkeney made me a present of it."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sir Charles. "You were acquainted with him?"

"Don't I tell you I've got Palkeney blood in my veins?" said Parslewe. "My great-grandmother was a Palkeney—born in this house. I have the Palkeney pedigree, and the Parslewe pedigree—at your service, any time. And when I came to the Crown, on the occasion you've just mentioned, it was just out of curiosity to see this place. I introduced myself to old Matthew. I'd brought my pedigree with me; we compared notes and family documents, and enjoyed ourselves. I dined here with him one night, and we went thoroughly into family history."

"He was convinced of your relationship?" asked Sir Charles.

"He couldn't be anything else," said Parslewe, drily. "The thing's there—it's fact. But we didn't dwell overmuch on that, once it was settled. We were more concerned with our mutual taste for old things. And the next day the old man

drove up to the Crown, when I was out, and left for me a parcel. It contained this copper box, which has been in the family for I don't know how long, and some six or seven old books which I had admired—a nice present. I wrote him a nice letter in return, and carried my present home. Not knowing, mind you," added Parslewe, with a sudden keen look, "what this box contained."

Sir Charles was getting keenly attentive. He looked like a man who has become sure that something is going to be sprung on him.

"My dear sir!" he said. "What did it contain?"

Parslewe picked up the copper box and tapped it significantly.

"I never knew that it contained anything until some thirty-six hours ago!" he answered. "I never should have known if you fellows hadn't made such a fuss about it. But when you did—when I found out from Craye here that you yourself were on the prowl, there in Northumberland, and after me—well, I naturally began to put two and two together. And it seemed to me that the secret lay with that man Bickerdale, to whom I'd entrusted

the copper box for repair, and who'd had it in his hands long enough to find out about it more than I had. It struck me that Bickerdale, not content with what he'd got out of you for telling where the box was, had discovered something in it which he was holding back in hopes of a further and more substantial reward. So I just went to Newcastle and started to find that out. I did find it out—and though I'm not clear now as to when Bickerdale found a certain document in the box, I did find out that he'd not only found one, but had got it! And in Craye's presence and in the presence of your man Pawley, to whom I'd just given a certain piece of confidential information—I forced it out of Bickerdale. I've got it! And it solves the question that's been bothering you."

Sir Charles was getting more and more impatient; his plump white fingers were drumming on the table. And as Parslewe finished, he voiced his impatience in a quick, direct question.

"What is this document?"

Parslewe smiled, and turned the copper

box over, so that the four rounded feet at its corners stood uppermost.

"I'll show it to you now," he said. "And I'll show you where old Matthew Palkeney had hidden it, probably intending before he died to tell you, Sperrigoe, where it was hidden. Now look here; there's a false bottom to this box. You unscrew these knobs so, one after the other. When they're unscrewed, like that, you lift this plate; there's a thin cavity between it and the inner floor of the box. And here's the document. I put it back in the box so that you could see for yourself where it had been concealed."

He tossed over the table the envelope which I had seen him take from Bickerdale. The solicitor picked it up eagerly. He drew out the sheet of letter paper which lay within, and his sharp, shrewd eyes had read whatever was written there in a few seconds. He gave a gasp; his big face flushed; he looked across at Parslewe.

"Good God, my dear sir!" he exclaimed. "Do—do you know what this—what this—this most important document—is?"

"I do!" replied Parslewe, drily. "But these two don't."

Sir Charles turned to us. I think he found some relief for his astonished feelings in having somebody to announce something to.

"This—this is a will!" he said, in almost awestruck accents. "The will of my late client, Mr. Matthew Palkeney! Made by himself on a single sheet of notepaper! But in strict order, duly executed and attested. I know the witnesses——"

"So do I," observed Parslewe, with a laugh. "Talked to both of 'em this morning on the way here."

"And—and, in short, it is what it is!" continued Sir Charles. "Nothing can upset it! And in it, in as few words as ever he could use, Mr. Matthew Palkeney leaves everything of which he dies possessed to—Mr. Parslewe! Wonderful!"

Parslewe thrust his hands in his pockets.

"I don't see anything very wonderful about it," he remarked, coldly. "We were of the same blood! The old man evidently wanted to—and he did. But he never consulted me, you know, Sperrigoe."

"All the more pleasant surprise for you, my dear sir!" exclaimed Sir Charles. A new mood appeared to have come over him; after re-reading the will more attentively, he rubbed his hands, chuckled, beamed on all three of us, and seemed to have had a great weight lifted off his mind. "My hearty congratulations, sir!" he went on, with an almost reverential inclination of his head across the table. "A very, very handsome property you have come into by this, Mr. Parslewe! One of the most beautiful old houses in England, a charming, if small estate, and—yes, I should say, as a good estimate, some five or six thousand a year! Delightful!"

But Parslewe, leaning back in his chair, with his hands thrust in his breeches pockets, had set those thin lips of his. He looked over the table at Sir Charles as if he were never going to speak. But he spoke.

"Aye!" he said, in his driest, hardest tones. "Just so! Maybe! But you see, I don't want it. And I won't have it!"

A dead silence fell on us. Madrasia turned wonderingly towards her guardian.

I was already watching him. As for Sir Charles Sperrigoe, he flushed crimson—as if somebody had struck him an insulting blow. He leaned forward.

"You—my dear sir, I am, I fear, inclining to deafness," he said. "Did I understand you to say——"

"I said I don't want it, and I won't have it!" repeated Parslewe, loudly. "I should have told old Matthew that if he'd ever asked me about it. I'm a man of fixed and immutable principle. When I went out to India as a young man, I made a vow that I'd never own or take anything in this life that I didn't earn by my own effort, and I'll stick to it! I don't want the Palkeney estate, nor the Palkeney house, nor the Palkeney money—I've plenty of money of my own, more than I know what to do with, and a house that suits me better than this does. If you want to know me, look again at that motto! What I please, that I'll do! And I won't have this —that's flat!"

Sir Charles's astonished face regained its normal colour, and he suddenly laughed with genuine amusement.

"Dear, dear!" he said. "There is no doubt, my dear sir, of your Palkeney blood—the Palkeneys were always eccentric. But—you're forgetting something; a very pertinent something. This place is yours! Yours! Everything's yours! I think I should put my —rather rash and hasty—vow in my pocket, my dear sir!"

Parslewe's lips became tight again. But they presently relaxed, and he bent forward to the table again, and began to smile.

"If this place and the whole thing is mine, absolutely and entirely," he said in honeyed accent, "I reckon I can do just what I like with it, what?"

"There's no man can say you nay!" answered Sir Charles. "It's—yours!"

"Then I'll tell you what," said Parslewe, with one of his beautiful smiles and a wave of his hand. "I'll give it to these two young people! They're just suited to each other, and it'll fit their tastes like a glove. They can get married at once, and settle down here, and I'll come and see them sometimes, and they can come and see me sometimes at Kelpieshaw. That's the best way I can see

out of the difficulty. We'll settle it on them and their children——"

But by this time Madrasia's cheeks were aflame, and she turned on Parslewe with blazing eyes.

"Jimmie!" she exclaimed. "How—how dare you? When will you give up that wicked habit of settling other people's affairs as if—as if they were so many puppets? Why—why—Mr. Craye has never even asked me to marry him!"

Parslewe turned the full force of his grimmest smile on us.

"Well, my dear!" he retorted leisurely. "It's his own fault if he hasn't! I'm sure he's had plenty of opportunity. But——"

Sir Charles rose to the occasion. He rose literally from his chair, bending towards Parslewe; he even allowed himself to indulge in a slight wink at Parslewe.

"My dear sir!" he cooed. "I think—er—if we left our young friends together, my dear sir! A little—er—informal conversation between them—eh?—while you and I—shall we try a glass of the famous Palkeney

dry sherry in another apartment, my dear sir? Just so—just so——"

In another moment he had coaxed Parslewe out of the room; the door closed on them. Madrasia and I, seated at opposite sides of the table, stared at each other. It seemed a long time before I found my tongue.

"Madrasia!" I managed to say at last. "Madrasia!"

"Well?" she answered.

"Madrasia!" I continued. "This is absolutely awful! You know what your guardian is!—a dreadful man. Nothing will prevent him from having his own way about—about anything! Whether we like it or not, he'll go and do what—what he said he would do just now."

Madrasia looked down at the table, and began to study the pattern of the cloth.

"Well?" she said.

"I don't think it's at all well," said I. "Supposing—just supposing, you know—supposing we fell in with his wishes and—and got married. I'm just supposing, of course!"

"Well?" she said, again.

"Don't you see what a dreadful thing that would be?" I said.

She gave me a quick flash of her eye—there, and gone in a second.

"Why?" she demanded.

"People would say I married you for your money," I declared boldly. "That would be awful for both of us!"

She remained silent a moment, tracing the pattern of the cloth with the tip of her finger. Then she spoke—emphatically.

"Rot!" she said.

"No!" said I, with equal emphasis. "Because they would! I know 'em! And it's beastly hard on me; it upsets my plans. Parslewe's upset all my plans. If I'd only known——"

"Only known what?" she asked.

"Only known that he was going to spring this on us!" I answered, bitterly. "If I'd only known that, I'd—I'd have——"

"You'd have what?" she asked, as I paused and hesitated.

"Well—I'd have proposed to you this morning when we were in the hotel garden, or in that carriage, or in the wood, when

Parslewe was ahead," I answered. "Or yesterday, or the day before, or the day before that—any time since I first met you. But now—wouldn't it look as if I were proposing to the Palkeney estate?"

She suddenly looked up, gave me a queer glance, and rising from her chair walked over to one of the embrasured windows. I followed her—and after a moment's silence, slipped my arm round her waist.

"What on earth's to be done?" I asked her. "Tell me!"

I got her to look round at last.

"You're an awful old ass!" she said in a whisper. "I saw the way out at once. He didn't say he'd give all this to *me!* He said he'd give it to—*us!*"

"Is it going to be—us, then?" I demanded eagerly.

"Seems very like it, I think, doesn't it?" she answered, demurely.

So—but not for a little while—we went to tell Parslewe.

THE END