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No. 21

Will contain the grandly written and
fully-illustrated Story, entitled—

THE FOUR
CONSPIRATORS.

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Vol. I.

THE RIVER OF DEATH;

Or, The Queen of the Forest.

CHAPTER I.

FRIENDS OR FOES?—AN AROUSAL OF MERCY—THE MEANS OF ESCAPE—FRANK LISTER CHAMPIONS CHARLIE HOLMES—DICK FLINTER'S AND BLACK MATHER'S RAFFRAZ—TEKACKKEY DEFEATES—THE DESCENT OF THE RAFTING—CHARLIE FIGHTS AT HIS ENEMIES IN MID AIR—THE FLIGHT AND PURSUIT—THE RIVER OF DEATH!

"Hut! Charlie!" someone said, on entering an inner room of a miser's hat, in Africa.

"Who are you, friend or foe?" asked Charlie Holmes.

He was a prisoner, bound hand and foot in the room where he lay, into which not a ray of light could penetrate from the outer world.

"In mercy's name speak low or all will be lost," said the speaker. "I am Rose Coglan, here to save, to befriend you!"

Closing the door of the apartment she turned on the light of a tiny bull's-eye lamp, and stood with a warning finger placed on her rich, red lips.

Talk for her age—sixteen—she was exquisitely lovely; a complexion of the lily tinged with the blush-rose, sapphire-blue eyes, and a wealth of golden hair that strayed down her shoulders in luxuriant abundance.

"Rose! can it be you?" said Charlie, in a whisper, his face lighting up with pleasure.

"Yes; listen to me, for your very life depends upon courage and quick dispatch."

Taking out a knife she severed his bonds, and left him once more free.

In a burst of gratitude, the first use he made of his freedom was to raise her hand to his lips and kiss it, an action that caused her to blush prettily.

"You are to be lynched to-night as soon as the moon rises," she said, hurriedly.

"Ay, murdered! strangled like a dog and riddled with bullets for a crime of which I am as innocent as you, Miss Coglan, so help me heaven!"

"If I did not believe that, Charlie, I would not have lifted even so much as my little finger to save you. Dick Flinter hates you because he thinks you have won my love. I detest him, Charlie, and rather than be wife of his I'd hury a knife deep in his black heart, and then end my own existence!"

"You love me, Rose? Oh! this is joy indeed, and more than compensates me for all that I've suffered!"

"That's a matter we must not talk about when a violent death stares you in the face."

"You must escape. Here is a knife, and a revolver loaded in each chamber, also spare ammunition."

Throwing back her jacket she unwound a thin rope, which despite its slight construction was as strong as steel, and knotted at intervals.

"You cannot escape by the front door," she said, on handing him the rope. "Frank Lister, who smuggled me in here, is your friend, but there are others than he to reckon with."

"You must get through the window, Charlie, and descend the abyss; the rope is long enough to take you to within a few feet of the bottom.

Make for the forest which lies beyond, and put your trust in Providence; may heaven help and defend you in my earnest prayer!"

Tears swam in her eyes as she held out her hand in token of adieu;

perhaps, a final parting! and she loved him so dearly, although there had been never a word of pledged faith between them.

Acting upon an unreasoning impulse, Charlie pressed his lips to hers, in one earnest lingering kiss.



FLINTER FLEW BACKWARDS OVER THE BARREL.

"Forgive me, Rose!" he said, in a voice which trembled with emotion, "it is a seal of my deep, undying love for you. My life belongs wholly to you, dearest. I will guard it vigilantly, and he or they who may attempt to take it from me will find that I will sell it very dearly."

A lingering hand-clasp and she was gone, leaving him sad, but full of a desperate courage to make good his escape at any price, even that of life itself.

Six months ago he had arrived at Hagerstown, a new mining settlement in Africa; driven from home by the brutality of his stepfather, who, moreover, had, as Charlie suspected, designs against his life.

His mother and sister had both disappeared most mysteriously, when Charlie was a mere child.

Fool play was suspected, but never brought home to her second husband, Sir Percival Groome, who was a

justice of the pose, but as arrest a scamp as ever broke bread, for all that. He had a son by a former marriage, between whom and Charlie no love was lost.

Charlie, who was several years Robert Groomer's junior, thrashed him again and again for his insolence, in spite of Sir Percival's threats.

At last, on Charlie's seventeenth birthday, Bob, the bully, by which name he was known in the neighbourhood, said something disparaging of Charlie's mother. For this he received such a thrashing that he was left for dead.

Charlie—who was kept miserably poor as regards pocket money by Sir Percival, although on attaining his majority he would be very wealthy—left home, and was fortunate enough to obtain the berth of cabin-boy on board a vessel bound for the Cape.

When he was turned sixteen, he received an anonymous letter, advising him, if ever he needed a friend he was to apply personally to Ephraim Lewis, at Cape Town, Cape of Good Hope.

But alas! on arriving at Cape Town he found that Lewis had gone to Hagerstown, and might not be back for months.

Miners and others were flocking to the new El Dorado, and Charlie had no difficulty in joining one of the bands going thither. Lewis had been there and gone, so Charlie elected to settle at Hagerstown for a time, at least. He was fortunate in obtaining a remunerative claim, and looked forward to attaining great wealth, when an unfortunate event happened to mar his future.

A rich broker called at the settlement, and was found murdered and robbed. He lodged in the same shanty as Charlie, and scrawls in the lad's room were alleged proofs of his having committed the foul crime.

It was in vain he protested his innocence. Dick Flinter, a fellow who was both feared and hated by his comrades, carried the day; and, acting as Judge Lynch, obtained Charlie's conviction and death sentence.

Human life was held in cheap esteem at Hagerstown, as many a wretched man had known to his cost. A death punishment was meted out to almost each offender; either that or ignominious expulsion with the loss of all worldly goods, which in those wild regions meant a life's ending from bitter privations.

Among the lad's self-commissioned judges there was one who stoutly asserted his belief in Charlie's innocence. This was a handsome young fellow named Frank Lister.

"Perhaps you were concerned in it?" sneered Flinter, who, in virtue of his office as president, sat on an empty cask, dangling his legs, misshapen legs about, and whittling away at a stick with a murderous-looking knife, as keen of edge as any razor.

His face was long and honey, his hair reddish and sparse, his eyes deep-set and glowing with evil passions, and a mouth upon which nature had set the seal of cruelty.

"You infamous ruffian, what do you mean?" cried Frank: "It's more than likely that you committed the murder and fastened it upon Charlie. We all know that you hate him like poison. Murder and robbery are more in your line, Dick Flinter, than in his or mine."

The miners stood aghast at Frank's boldness in thus branding the terror of Hagerstown. The knife whistled through the air, flashing in the sunlight like a meteor. Frank dodged it, and, before Flinter could draw his six-shooter, gave him a smashing blow on the chin, that literally flung him up and sent him backward over the barrel, where he alighted on his head.

"You must answer to me for that blow, youngster," roared Black Mathers, a veritable giant in stature and girth, and Flinter's lieutenant.

Crack went his revolver, but a bystander, who liked Frank in secret, knocked the weapon up, and the bullet went wide of its mark instead of crashing through

Frank's brain. Springing at the burly ruffian Frank dealt him a blow that knocked him down, when the revolver flew out of his hand.

Frank Lister was well-armed, and could have killed the scamp out of hand had he chosen; but he was adverse to shedding blood, except under dire provocation. The giant, boiling over with rage at the humiliation of being knocked down by a mere youth—Frank was only eighteen—rose and made an ugly snarl at him.

Frank was ready for him, however, as he soon found to his cost. Out shot his good right hand, then his terrible left, checking the fellow's wild advance, and sending him staggering backward as if a flash of lightning had struck him.

Frank followed up his advantage by raining blow upon blow upon him, until his face, under the terrific punishment, became a hideous and loathsome spectacle. Then, rushing in, he caught the giant round the waist, lifted him, and threw him, with the breath shaken out of his body, on his back.

This burly-bore some took place just outside the principal store, kept by Rose Coglan's uncle, which was little better really than a grog-shop and gambling saloon, out of which he made enormous profits.

Knowing the characters he had to deal with Frank placed his back to the wall, and though panting from exertion, stood there, a revolver in each hand, his fine eyes flashing defiance. A splendid specimen of young manhood he presented. Five feet eleven in height, a well-knit frame, with thighs and sinews hardened by honest toil, and a face full of indomitable will-power and frank courage, yet kindly withal, his equal could scarcely be found.

"What's the row, boys?" asked Nat Rieordan (Rose's uncle), appearing at the door. "Shake hands all round, like good fellows, and come in and have a drink at my expense."

"Lister has knocked Flinter and Mathers out of time," one of the miners replied; "there'll be two funerals, as well as a lynching to-night, I'm thinking."

"Don't talk rubbish," cried Frank, eyeing the man with scathing scorn. "What is it to be laid—peace or war? I'm ready for either; but if you attack me for giving a pair of lullies their deserts, I swear before Heaven to give you a taste of my quality before I go under!"

"Let it be peace, boys," pleaded Rieordan. "Our little cemetery is getting inconveniently full; we'll have to open another patch if things go on at this rate. Besides, I don't want to lose good customers; I'd rather serve one live man than follow two old pals to their last resting-place, any day."

Rieordan carried away in the pino, and when, as now, they saw he meant putting his foot down, they held out the olive-branch to Frank, who accepted it without demur. They trooped into the shanty, when Rieordan, as good as his word, served them with free liquor all round. Frank stood at the extreme end of the counter, talking in whispers to Rose about Charlie, and how best they could aid his escape.

"Look out, Lister!" someone shouted, suddenly.

Facing round he saw Flinter, knife in hand, and murder blazing in his ugly eyes, coming towards him. He was followed by Mathers, similarly armed.

Flinter made a lunge at Frank, who dexterously seized and twisted his wrist, making him drop the weapon with more haste than grace.

Mathers was in the act of striking at him when Rose, catching up a glass of whiskey, flung it into the giant's eyes, which blinded him in a trice. Enraged at Flinter's fresh attempt on his life, Frank caught him by the collar and waistband and pitched him over the counter, where he fell into the midst of a quantity of bottles and glasses.

Leaping on the counter, and drawing his revolver, Rieordan cried, sternly: "Clear out of this, sharp; the

first man that raises a finger against Frank Lister will reckon with me, Nat Rierdon!"

Turning upon Flinter, who had risen from his uncomfortable resting-place, he said: "You and Mathers will pay up sharp for this damage, or quit Hagerstown at once. You know who you're dealing with in me; I never break my word. Now be off, or you'll be carried out feet foremost!"

All the rowdy boys slunk away—Mathers had to be led out—like beaten hounds, for experience had taught them that Rierdon could bite as well as bark on occasions.

Rose pleaded hard with him for the life of Charlie now that he had quelled the rowdies of Hagerstown.

"I can't interfere with the doings of Judge Lynch, my girl," he said. "He may be innocent, but things look black against him. I can stand up for my own rights with the boys, as you've seen many a time; but to put down Judge Lynch is a thing I dare not attempt."

However, the brave girl, aided and abetted by Frank Lister, as already shown, did not desert the lad she loved so dearly.

Charlie, when she left, lost no time in perfecting the arrangements for his escape. The hut, which was used as a prison, was built on the edge of a deep ravine, which was too precipitous for ascent or descent without the aid of a rope or ladder.

Rose had left her bull's-eye lamp behind, by the aid of which Charlie found a strong staple capable of bearing his weight. Having properly secured one end of the rope, he unbarred the shutter, which did duty for a window, and lowered the other end.

After kneeling on the bare boards, and committing himself to the care of heaven, he commenced the descent. Half-way down was a platform, and as he approached it he detected the sound of voices. Pausing to listen, he distinctly heard Flinter say: "We are safe here from cross-borders, nephew Bob. I put off the young cub's execution till the rising of the moon, knowing that you'd arrive before then and be present at it."

"Jolly good luck to you, uncle," replied a voice, which Charlie recognized as that of his mortal enemy, Robert Greens.

"The dad, after writing to you, thought it as well for me to come out here to help you; besides, England was getting a trifle too hot for me in many ways."

"Why the young fool didn't change his name puzles me; if he had I wouldn't have been a rap the wiser about his real identity. I shall expect to be well paid for this job, nephew Bob."

"Yes, with my bitterest vengeance, you ear," cried Charlie, unable to restrain his indignation, though he was swinging between earth and sky.

Bob Greens, a coward at heart, shook in every joint, and his hair bristled with fright, for he thought he was in the presence of the supernatural, and sank upon the rocky platform quite limp.

Flinter, who recognized Charlie's voice, crouched low, too. And it was as well he did, for holding on with his left hand, Charlie seized his revolver and fired several shots in the direction of the speakers, without hitting either, however. Then he recommenced his perilous descent much more swiftly than before.

"Get up you fool," hissed out Flinter, "he's no ghost, but Charles Holmes creeping. If we can find the rope and cut it he'll be killed."

Flinter had come provided with a dark lantern, which he turned on full.

"Hang the thing, it's out of our reach," he cried, beside himself with impotent rage, "he'll escape us after all."

"You've got a revolver, see at it; I'll hold the light," said Bob Greens, excitedly. "He won't escape. I wish I could haul a piece of rock down upon him."

Flinter acted promptly on his nephew's suggestion.

The truly grand story, "The Four Conquerors," will appear in No. 21 of the "Halfpenny Surprise," ready next Friday.

and being one of the finest shots on the African Continent, had no doubt but that he could sever the rope with a bullet. Charlie overheard their intention, and made the rope oscillate so that it presented an uncertain aim.

With his sixth and last shot, Flinter struck the rope, but even then it did not quite sever it.

"He must be nearly at the bottom," cried the ruffian, frowning with rage. "Why does not the thing snap? The bonds seize the cub."

"Hurrah!" shrieked out Bob Greens, "it's parted at last; hurrah! hurrah!"

Luckily, Charlie was only a few feet from the bottom



WITH THE SIXTH AND LAST SHOT FLINTER SEVERED THE ROPE.

when this happened, and sustained no injury by the fall. Raising his clenched right hand in their direction he muttered:

"The year isn't over; mine will come! When it does I swear before high heaven to exact an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!"

Gathering up all his strength and energy, and with the bull's-eye lamp to guide him, he made his way towards a gorge.

In the meantime the sound of firing had alarmed the settlement and every man was on the alert, for the blacks—the Malabos, more especially—had an ugly knack of robbing outlying settlements occasionally.

"The prisoner has escaped," cried Flinter, bursting in among them. "Form yourself into two parties and start in pursuit. He must not reach the forest alive. I'll give a hundred pounds, money down, to the man or men who either capture him alive or kill him!"

Turning to Mathers, he said: "Bring out the bloodhound, and hold him in leash until we're ready to start."

Rose Cogan, who stood by, touched Frank Lister's arm, and whispered: "Come with me; we may save him yet!"

Flinter, Bob Greene, and half a dozen miners mounted and started in pursuit, accompanied by the bloodhound. When they had ridden off, Rose and Frank, both well mounted and armed, left the settlement by stealth.

In the meantime Charlie, more resolute than ever to escape since overhearing the conversation of the two miscreants, passed through the gorge and reached the open country. Fleet of foot, he hurried with all speed in the direction of the forest some few miles distant.

Sorely had he gone a quarter of a mile or so, when the moon rose in splendor, and quickly flooded the earth with light.

He considered this a disadvantage, inasmuch as it would enable his pursuers to track him easily.

Now that sober judgment had come to his aid, he saw clearly the mistake he had made in challenging the attention of his enemies.

However, as vain regrets would not aid him, he threw off the feeling and went forward at a rattling pace.

He was half a mile from the goal of his hopes when he heard the deep baying of the bloodhound, and saw, on looking back, several horsemen in pursuit. How he got over the last half mile in the time he never knew; but he dashed into the forest before Flinter and his gang could open fire upon him with their revolvers.

They would have to dismount ere following him up; but the bloodhound did not suffer from this disadvantage.

To add to his peril he had dropped the revolver during his flight, and now the knife was his sole dependence.

He was too fatigued to push his way through the forest with a deadly enemy at his heels—one who knew no pity, but would follow him until it struck his horrid fangs into his quivering flesh.

Selecting a tree he placed his back to it, and with set teeth, and breath that came in gasps, he awaited the onslaught, knife in hand.

The dog seemed to be warned by an unerring instinct that it had a determined enemy to deal with. It crawled along on its belly, its gleaming eyes fixed on his face as if to magnetise him before destroying him. A few rapid convulsions of its huge body preliminary to propelling itself through the air like an arrow from a bow, when lo! a python with a lightning dart was upon it, enveloping it in its deadly coils.

Charlie, with murmurs of gratitude to heaven for this merciful and unlooked-for intervention at the very eleventh hour, glided away from the spot, and was soon lost in the intricacies of the forest.

Meanwhile, a cruel disappointment overtook Rose Cogan and Frank Lister.

Being better mounted than the others they intended overtaking Charlie and giving up Frank's horse to him. But alas! the animal ridden by him put its foot into a hole, throwing the lad heavily and rendering him partly unconscious.

Rose dismounted and succeeded in getting him round, but much valuable time was lost through the accident. On arriving at the outskirts of the forest they saw a man taking care of a number of horses.

"Hallo!" shouted Frank.

"Same to you, boss," came back in reply.

"Where's Flinter and the others?"

"In the forest, matey."

"And the bloodhound?"

"Killed by a serpent, and no doubt devoured by this time."

The pair, after a whispered consultation, rode away at full gallop. Frank knew of a clearing which led to a

scull in print and now ready, Nos. 1 and 2 of the Grand Story, "Jack Eager's School-days," with the Coloured Price One Penny.

river interesting the forest, on the banks of which they hoped to meet and succor Charlie.

This necessitated making a long detour, but there was no help for it but to look the inevitable cheerfully in the face.

Arriving on the river bank they dismounted, tethered their horses to trees, and patrolled in opposite directions, but within easy call of each other. An hour spent in a state of suspense, that was becoming almost unupportable, passed, when Rose caught sight of Charlie.

She gave a shout of joy which, however, was short lived, for whether in his excitement at meeting Rose there, he slipped and fell into the river, or whether a shot which was fired from ambush took effect, was not apparent. She ran to the spot, calling loudly for help, and peering into the turbulent waters. So great was her agony of mind that she was oblivious to her own peril.

Two eyes glared at her vengefully—eyes which in their ferocity might easily be mistaken for those of some beast of prey. It was Black Mathers, who never forgave an injury, however slight or unprovoked.

"It's that mine, Rose Cogan, who thro' the whiskey into my face," he muttered. "I'll pay her off now that she's alone and in my power. She'll have a chance of joining her lad-lover. I shot him and will drown her!"

He advanced swiftly, seized her round the waist, and with prodigious strength, hauled her, shrieking, far out from the shore, into the swift torrent.

"Ha! ha! my fine lady," he said, mockingly. "you won't play tricks upon Black Mathers again."

But even so he had spoken two avenging bullets struck him, one in the forehead the other in the heart, tumbling him into the river.

The avenger of so foul a crime as mortal man could commit was Frank Lister; the weapon a repeating rifle. He had heard the poor girl's shrieks, seen the dastard haul her in, and meted out swift punishment to him in turn. But the act, a righteous one in itself, could not undo the mischief that had been done.

Little did she dream during their pleasant intercourse that he, Frank Lister, loved her dearly in secret. However, he could see that her young heart, with all its wealth of affection, was given to Charlie Holmes; so, like the manly young fellow that he was, he schooled himself to look upon her in the light of a dear sister only.

And this was to be their parting! So bitter did he feel at this irreparable loss that he actually cried like a child. Through his tears he watched the river for some sign of her, and amid the foaming hurry-hurry of the waving waters thought he saw a white hand waved in token of an eternal adieu.

Someone emerged from the forest and hailed him. He started like a man suddenly awakened from a dream.

"Have you seen Flinter and the other fellows?" asked Bob Greene. "I missed them coming through this confounded forest after that murderer, Charlie Holmes."

Drying his eyes secretly, Frank asked, hoarsely: "Who are you and what is Flinter to you that you speak of him so familiarly?"

"Oh, my name is Robert Greene, and Flinter is my uncle," he answered, flippantly. "It's useless remaining here any longer, mister, let me tell you."

"Why, might I ask?"

"Because the murderer has met his doom. He escaped before he could be lynched, so he was shot instead, and fell into the river. Are you glad, mister?"

"No, but surely Charlie is not dead."

"Isn't he though? I wouldn't change places with him for a trifle, you bet!"

"Who shot him—did you?" asked Frank, with

concentrated fury in his voice, as he handled his repeating rifle ominously.

Something in the speaker's manner and tone cooled the ox.

"No, mister, I didn't do it. I saw the man who did though; he was a giant of a fellow. My uncle owes him a hundred pounds, which he'll willingly pay him, I know, for certain family reasons."

"You navigated bruto to speak thus of us as base a murder as ever was committed," cried Frank, his face pale with righteous indignation.

Before Bob, the bully, was scarcely aware of it, he was seized by the collar and soundly thrashed with a riding whip, which Frank carried stuck in his belt.

Bob Greene roared like the proverbial town bull, and pleaded pitifully for mercy, but none was shown him.

At the finish, Frank said: "Tell your infamous uncle that it was Frank Lister who thrashed you; and that if he or you ever dare to show up in Hagerstown again we'll lynch you both."

Having given this defiant message Frank strode away, mounted his horse, led Rose's by the bridle, and made his way back to the settlement, his heart as heavy as lead.

Now apart from the thrashing he received, Bob Greene's deplorable position grew worse every moment.

He was alone in an African forest, at a time of night when predatory animals roamed about in search of prey; and though he was lanky, freckled, had a squint, and was not much to look at, yet a lordly lion might not disdain to sup off him. He had a splendid pair of lungs which he used to advantage, yelling so prodigiously that a pack of jackals started in rivalry against him, and made the night hideous.

"What's the row, youngster," asked Flinter, appearing before him suddenly.

"I've been horse-whipped to within an inch of my life, uncle, that's the matter," whined Bob. "The man who did it was Frank Lister. He told me to tell you so."

"Frank Lister? then he has helped Charles Holmes to escape?"

"Oh, no, he hasn't. Fighting Charlie lies in the river, with a bullet through him."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Flinter, eagerly.

"Yes; he won't trouble us again, but what I can't understand is, why your friend, the giant, should have thrown that girl in."

"What girl; surely you don't mean Rose Ogden?"

"I don't know her name, of course, but from the glimpse I obtained of her face, she's the girl I saw outside the saloon at Hagerstown."

"Ferdinand seize him," hissed Flinter. "What made him do that? He'll have to reckon with me!"

"Oh, don't put yourself out about him, uncle; the reckoning has taken place already."

"What do you mean?"

"That he's gone to join the other two in the river. I'm sure it was Frank Lister who settled him."

"I'm not sorry for that; it saves me a hundred pounds right away. If they're where you say they are, they won't come out again alive. The natives call it the River of Death."

"Why?" asked Bob Greene.

"Because it builds all it gets in its fatal embrace. It sinks into a subterranean passage, and at the other end is an immense whirlpool."

"That's all right then; we've seen the last of Charles Holmes, you bet. What are we to do next uncle, go back to Hagerstown and brave it out, eh?"

"Not if I know it. Not Gordon will put all the blame of Rose's death on me."

"I'm sorry she's dead, though, poor girl. She wasn't half a bad sort."

"You'd a smacking regard for her, eh?"

"Had she lived I meant to make her my wife by hook or by crook, because she would have been a rich

heirloom. However, that's neither here nor there now; we'd better make tracks for England, nephew Bob."

"How are you off for coin, uncle?"

"Not very flush. Gambling has been my ruin. You're not short, I hope?"

"Well, no!"

"Give what you have to me; I'll take care of it."

"I'm old enough to do that for myself, uncle, thank you," Bob said, dryly; "but I'm willing to share it with you. The dad will behave generously, no doubt, so that we needn't spare the cash we have in hand."

"It's a pity the young cuck didn't leave a will in his favour?"

"He has," replied Bob, with a triumphant leer. "What? and actually signed it?"

"Don't ask questions, Uncle Dick; the trick's done, let that suffice you."

"A nod's as good as a wink to a blind horse. And now for merry England, nephew mine. If you haven't yet seen the sights about town, I'm the one to show them to you."

"We'll see all about that when the time comes. Lead on, Uncle Dick, this gloomy spot, so full of lurking perils gives me a fit of the horrors."

CHAPTER II.

MONK HOUSE—A VILLAGINOUS TRIO—SCHEMES—CHALLENGING THE DEAD—THE CLOCK STRIKES ONE—A GHAZLY AFFAIR—A PERVERSIVE UNCLE—A DOSE OF LAUDANUM—A WRECKED FATHER—THE DISCOVERY THAT CAME WITH THE MORN.

THE scene changes to Monk House, the residence of Sir Percival Greene; the time, a year subsequent to the events narrated in the preceding chapter.

The baronet, his son Robert, and Dick Flinter, by which alias he will continue to be known, are seated at a table bearing a plentiful supply of wine and spirits.

"You say, Richard, that it is a paying speculation," said the baronet, his evil face lighted with the gleam of an avaricious soul.

"Paying! I should think so," replied Flinter, whose utterance was a little thick, "the Bank of England is as poor as a workhouse in comparison to it."

"I've often heard Uncle Dick speak of the diamond mine in the forest," put in Bob, who was arrayed in the height of fashion, and made a vulgar display of a quantity of jewellery.

"How is it you didn't stay out there and work it then?" asked Sir Percival, suspiciously.

"I only found it out just before I started for England," he replied; "ask Bob if I didn't leave him for a whole fortnight before embarking."

"That you did," he asserted, quickly, "and a precious flurry I was in until you returned."

"I doubled back to Hagerstown, in disguise, to see how things had got on in my absence, and to recover my share of a hoard of nuggets."

"And did you?" asked Sir Percival, sharply; "if so you ought not to dip so deeply into my pocket as you've been doing."

"Let that pass, although I think I've earned my salt here, Percival. Listen to my yarn, it won't take long in telling."

"I told my partner—there were three of us in the swim; myself, Black Mathers, and Jonas Price—that someone wanted to see him at Nick's Gully on important business; nothing more or less than a new goldfield he had discovered."

"As a start would be made at once, I advised him to bring all his swag with him, and bid good-bye to Hagerstown for a time. He took the bait as greedily as a hungry pike, for he was fond of gold as Jonas; at least I thought so."

"When I got him to Nick's Gully, I revealed to him who I was.

"I thought so," he replied, "and you want me to divide with you, Dick?"

"Which you are going to do, in full, of course," I observed.

"Yes; there it is, payment in full," he said, clapping a revolver to my head, and pulling the trigger.

"Luck favoured me, for the thing didn't go off; but he did me into with a knife through his heart.

"I searched him for the swag, but didn't find a brass farthing on him. What I thought a most unlucky thing now happened; but it turned out all for the best, as you will hear.

"Frank Lister—you remember him, Bob, don't you?" he said, grinning at him—"and a few other fellows returning from hunting saw my little affair with Jonas, and started in pursuit.

"I dashed into the forest which was close by, and baffled them; then I made for the river, and kept along the bank on the look-out for the bodies of Charles Holmes and Rose Ogden."

"Did you see either?" asked Sir Percival, eagerly, for he wanted proof positive of his step-son's death.

"No; but I did the more than half-eaten remains of Black Mothers, the night spent me so that I took to my heels and ran like mad.

"I called a halt near a dry creek, which filled in the rainy season, only I'd been to a diamond field or two in my lifetime, and saw at a glance that the spot I was standing at resembled others I'd seen before.

"And, great Jupiter, didn't my heart go pit-a-pat when I found these lying on the surface," producing a parcel, and spreading its contents upon the table.

"They're real diamonds!" exclaimed Sir Percival, after examination; "most of them are very fine stones, indeed, and worth a lot of money."

"I'm willing to form a syndicate, and put two-thirds of their value into it to work the concern," remarked Finter.

"Of course, dad, you'll give me a share in it?" said Bob, eagerly; "and, and I could work the affair splendidly between us."

"No doubt," was the dry response. "If I entertain the idea—most probably I shall—I'll go out to Africa with you, Richard; England is getting distasteful to me. First, my wife must needs run away and take her daughter with her. Of course, my excellent and charitable neighbours hinted at foul play on my part."

"Then Charles Holmes must needs follow his mother's example and die abroad. All my fault, of course. Perhaps a change to Africa would be the very thing for me? I'll give you an answer a few days hence, Richard. Changing the subject, you mentioned the name of Frank Lister just now."

"Yes; hang him," hissed Bob. "If I ever meet him I'll be even with him for the horse-whipping he gave me!"

"Don't interrupt, it isn't good manners," started his father. "What I want to learn from Richard is, whether his Frank Lister was young or old."

"Oh, about the same age as nephew Bob—nineteen."

"Can you describe him?"

"Yes, in every particular," and he did so.

"It must be the same. He is in the African trade."

"How long?"

"About six months. Lister and Co. are reputed fabulously wealthy."

"If it's the same man I knew, you ought to look him up."

"Why? Would he be likely to join our proposed syndicate?"

"Pshaw! he hates me like poison. He was Charles Holmes' partner. It looked out that in their claim they found several of the largest nuggets the world has ever seen. You are your step-son's heir, and have

possession of his fortune at the present moment; add to it by laying claim to his share in that partnership."

"So I will. If I succeed I promise you, in the presence of my son, Robert, to give you a tenth of what I receive. Now let's retire, it's just on the stroke of one—midnight."

"Let's have glasses round and drink the health of Charlie Holmes, with musical honours," cried Bob.

"Just the thing, a capital suggestion," said Finter, hoisterously. "Come, Percival, humour the lad for once. I do believe that it was he who shot the cub, but is too modest to own it."

"Very well, I see no objection," said the baronet, grimly. "Let's toast him in champagne. He's been a second Bank of England to me."

This brutal trio toasted Charlie not once, but thrice, with musical honours and uproarious laughter. In the midst of their merriment the clock struck one. Suddenly the door opened, and standing on the threshold was a figure in white, its ghastly face streaked with crimson. Its right hand was raised threateningly, and its eyes seemed to glow like hell of fire.

It was the apparition of Charles Holmes, whom they had impudently challenged to come back from the dead. Robert Greene, who was standing on a chair when this midnight visitor appeared, gave a screech of horror and tumbled backward, the glass shivering to atoms on the polished floor, while he lay gasping up uttering dismal groans. Sir Percival's jaw dropped as if suddenly smitten by a paralytic stroke, his tongue falling out of his mouth.

Finter tried to leave it out, and, seizing a bottle, staggered forward as if to attack the phantom. But even his courage failed him, he lurched into a chair, dropped his head on his breast, closed his eyes tight, and sat there shivering and shaking like a jelly fish. When he ventured to open his eyes, the specter had vanished.

Starting up, he poured out and gulped down half a tumbler of neat brandy as if it were so much water. Shaking Sir Percival by the shoulder, he said, in a voice as hoarse as any revenant's: "It's all right, the thing has gone. I believe one of the servants has been playing us a trick, after all."

The baronet tried to speak, but his voice failed him utterly. He pointed to the brandy with trembling finger and pleading eyes. The potent spirit revived him as if by magic, restoring to him the full use of speech and action.

"It was the spirit of Charles Holmes," he said, in trembling accents. "I was terribly frightened, but I'm not sorry it happened. I wanted convincing proof of his death and have had it full and complete."

Finter did not care to argue so gruesome a question at that unearthly hour, and turned his attention to Bob. He screamed when touched, and it required several good shakings to bring him to his senses.

Naturally, the servants were alarmed, but Sir Percival quieted their fears by telling them that his son had been taken suddenly with a fit of screaming hysteresis. All three shared the one bedroom for the remainder of that night on Bob's account, to keep him from having another fit.

There was a cheerful fire in the room, and every creature comfort; but it was a melancholy trio at best that sat there. Indeed, all were like nutes at a funeral, except Bob, who moaned and groaned painfully.

"Have you any alcohol in the house?" asked Finter, whisperingly.

"Yes, why?" answered the baronet.

"It would be a merciful thing to give Robert some; he would sink into slumber and forget all about this specter."

"Would it be safe to administer it without the advice of a doctor?"

"Yes; I have doctor'd myself for years. Anything would be better than seeing him suffer so."

"Perhaps you are right," answered Sir Percival, with a sigh. "I'll get it for you."

There was a medicine chest in the room, from which he took a phial, labelled "Chloral—poison." He handed it to his brother, who said, "I'll mix him a glass of brandy and water; you can then take half a dozen drops full into it."

"Don't you think it would have a bad effect?" asked the baronet, sharply.

"No, beneficial. You are his father, and in a case like this should prepare his medicine yourself."

The brandy was mixed by Flinter; but if the baronet could have seen the sinister expression of his face, as he bent over his task, he would not have consented to administer the poison. Sir Percival began to drop the chloral into the glass, when Flinter clutched his arm, and, pointing to the window, exclaimed, "Look there!"

In his excitement, the baronet split half the contents of the phial into the mixture, without noticing it.

"What was it?" he gasped out.

"I thought I saw that fire at the window; but I was mistaken, no doubt, through nervousness."

Corking the phial he replaced it in the medicine-chest; then, rubbing Bob's head on his arm, he placed the glass to his lips, and said, "Drink this, dear Bob, it will send you to sleep."

He did so, decidedly enough, when Flinter lifted him up and placed him in bed.

"It has taken effect already," he observed, after the lapse of ten minutes; "now we can have a quiet chat, Percival."

"What about?" was the ungracious reply. "I don't want to be startled again as I was just now."

"I'm sorry I did so; but it has dawned upon me that perhaps Charles Holmes might not be dead after all."

"I wish you wouldn't try to unsettle my conviction that he is dead," said the baronet, testily.

"I don't want to live in a fool's paradise, to receive a rude awakening. We are both in the swim, recollect, and I have a perfect right to speak out."

"What are you driving at, man?"

"Simply this; Charles Holmes was born and bred in this house. Are there secret doors or panels in it, let me ask?"

"Not to my knowledge; but there is supposed to be a secret chamber, known as the Monk's Room. I cannot say whether it exists or not."

"Did Charles Holmes discover it, think you?"

"Really I am no solver of puzzles."

"No, you're eminently practical, I know; but it's just possible your step-son may have escaped death by other bullet or water. If he knew of the secret hiding-place, he could easily have played himself off as a ghost upon us. Besides, I'd like to know who the Co. is in the firm of Lister."

"I know a man who would find out all about that. And now I am going to take a dose of chloral to send me to sleep, and restore my nerves."

"You don't think what he has taken will injure Robert? He's been a very troublesome boy, but I don't want to lose him for all that."

"Injure him, no! To convince you I'll take a double dose to what you gave him."

Producing the phial from the chest, he poured a stiff dose into a glass.

"By the way," he said, pleasantly, as he took up a decanter of port wine, "have you any cigars handy, Percival, my case is empty?"

Sir Percival went towards a shelf, when Flinter swiftly emptied the chloral into a long-necked vase, and filled the glass with wine. Lighting one of the

cigars given him he extended his hand, and with a Judas grip, said: "Good night, brother, pleasant dreams. I'm off into the bed myself."

He was soon sleeping soundly, the vagabond life he had led for years having seasoned him against the ill-effects of over-excitement, and benumbed his conscience, also.

The baronet, however, could not woo slumber readily. He kept dozing, and waking up with starts and many a shiver as if expecting to see some sight that would once more freeze the marrow in his bones.

To lose a state of torpidity had his nerves brought him that he dared not move from his chair even to replenish the fire. Spectral shapes, more creatures of the imagination; phantasms evolved from the brain seemed to float about the room, playing hide and seek in corners and in the folds of the heavy curtains.

He cast many a furtive glance towards the bed where his son, the only hope of his house, was lying, so still and motionless.

"He sleeps soundly enough, poor lad," he muttered, and the prevailing silence was so profound that the whisper of his own voice startled him.

"I wish I had not been over-ruled by Richard into giving him chloral. Ugh! it is a deadly drug."

The weary hours sped by on leaden wings for him, until he inwardly cursed the night and wished for the morn as he had never wished before. With the first streak of the grey dawn he rose and faced the bed, with a premonition that all was not right. He approached it with swift strides and terror laden eyes.

One look at that still form and white set face, and the unhappy man uttered shriek upon shriek of mortal agony.

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING ACCUSATION—DOCTOR MERTON SPEARS HIS MIND—THE APPARITION—THE SERIES—MURDER OF THE DOCTOR—FLINTER RECEIVES A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD—DESTRUCTION OF MORGAN HOUSE BY FIRE—FRANK LESTER TELLS THE BARONET A STRANGE STORY.

"WHAT'S the matter?" asked Flinter, awakened by that bitter sighing cry.

"You—you have murdered my boy!" blazed out the baronet, pointing an accusing finger at him.

"I; how?"

"You suggested the chloral; oh, fool that I was not to see through your fiendish artifice. You pretend there was a face at the window to distract my attention while you—"

"Stop," cried Flinter, angrily, a steady glitter in his eyes, his cruel mouth twitching with passion. "Dare to accuse me openly of so foul a crime, I, who have helped you to ricars through crime while I became a vagabond, an outcast, an Ishmael, and I'll strip you of your ill-gotten wealth and give you instead a convict's jacket to wear. This is no idle threat, Percival, I swear to do it by all the powers of evil if you provoke me!"

"Hush! in mercy's sake, hush!" said the baronet, in pleading whispers. "I was beside myself and knew not what I said."

"There's somebody knocking at the door. Attend to it, Richard, I'm not to be misled."

With a sinister smile, in which triumph and contempt co-mingled, Flinter opened the door.

"Fetch a doctor instantly," he said to the servant, "but don't alarm your fellows. Now go, and use your utmost despatch."

Having quailed his brother and reduced him to a state of abject submission, Flinter took the direction of affairs into his own hands.

"Is he dead?" moaned out the unhappy father.

"I fear so; but the doctor will soon be here and give his verdict. I believe the fright, more than the haemum, killed him."

By dint of awful cajolery he got the baronet to go to another room and to leave him to explain matters to the doctor when he came. There was a faint, disagreeable odour of chloral in the room, that anybody acquainted with the drug would detect in an instant. He recollected that he had thrown a quantity into the vase overnight.

Quick as thought he removed and rinsed it thoroughly, but did not put it back in its place. Then he opened both windows wide to purify the atmosphere of the room before the doctor arrived.

Standing over the body of Robert Greene, he said, haughtily: "It was a sudden temptation, nephew Bob, that caused me to cut short your young life. With

"What is the matter?" asked the doctor, when Flinter, who shivered and shook like an aspen, admitted him and closed the door. "Who's ill, is it you?"

"No—o," he stammered out, "I'm all right, but feel my nerves shaken a bit. It is not a case of illness, but of death, I regret to tell you."

"Who's death; not the baronet's, surely?"

"Come and see for yourself," he replied, leading the way to the bed, and casting fearful glances in the direction of the spot where that haunting face had appeared, but was no longer to be seen.

"It's young Robert," the doctor remarked, starting back aghast.

"Yes, my poor nephew Robert; it is the result of fright," observed Flinter.

Having recovered from the shock of seeing Robert Greene lying there in death, apparently, he proceeded to feel for a pulse, and examined the pupil of the left eye. In bending over the face he smelt the unmistakable odour of chloral, and turning to Flinter said sharply, "How's this? You told me he died from fright, and I detect the presence of a deadly poison—chloral."

"Where is the baronet? I must see him at once, and have this matter cleared up satisfactorily."

"He is quite prostrate, I assure you. Is my poor nephew dead?"

"Yes," was the curt reply. "Who gave him chloral?"

"His father, to quiet him after a prolonged fit of screaming hysteria, brought on through fright."

"Fright! of what nature?" asked the doctor, dubiously. "I have known the lad ever since his babyhood, and don't think he could easily be frightened."

"He saw a ghost."

"Nonsense; there are no such things. Are you inventing this chimney story to throw me off the true scent? It seems to me either a case of murder or suicide!"

"You are severely complimentary, Doctor Merton," retorted Flinter. "The chimney story, as you designate it, is true. I saw the apparition; so did Sir Percival. Ask him when you see him; and, what's more, I saw it again only a few minutes ago in this very room."

"You expect me to believe that? Pooh! Nonsense! You thought you saw a spectre. I wish it would appear to me. I'd soon prove to you that it was nothing more or less than a trick of the imagination."

Scarcely had he spoken when Flinter gripped his arm and said in a hoarse whisper, "Look! there it is! Now are you satisfied?" There was that ghastly face again, but this time no word escaped from those pallid lips.

Doctor Merton, the sceptic, was more than satisfied, and with a scream of horror, fairly bolted from the room, followed by Flinter; in fact, both jostled each other at the door to be the first to get through, followed by mocking, unseemly laughter.

The baronet, who was in a room at the opposite side of the corridor, heard the commotion, and met them at his door.

"Come in here," he said, hoarsely, on seeing their blanched faces, an invitation they availed themselves of with alacrity.

"What of my poor boy?" asked Sir Percival, brokenly.

"I—I—was not thinking of him," said the doctor, casting nervous glances behind him, "but of that spectre. You saw it, too, I'm told, Sir Percival. Did you recognise the face of your step-son, who perished abroad?"



"LOOK, THERE IT IS," FLINTER CRIED.

you out of the way, I will again tempt your father to leave England for Africa to visit my bogus diamond field.

"Once there he will fall another victim to the River of Death. I will succeed to his title and wealth, settle down, forsake all my old evil ways, and enjoy life to my heart's content."

"Beware of the River of Death," said a sepulchral voice.

Turning swiftly round he saw a ghastly face, that of Charles Holmes, he thought, framed in a portion of the wall. He was held spell-bound with horror, unable to move, to speak, scarcely to breathe, in the presence of this spectral face seen in the broad light of day. A knock at the door aroused him from his stupor of fear, and when he looked for the face it had vanished.

"Yes, only too well. To its appearance I attribute the sad end of my son, my only child."

"Is Robert past all human help, doctor?" Can nothing be done for him?"

"Absolutely nothing, Sir Percival. I don't wonder at his having died of fright."

"There needn't be an inquest, doctor, need there?" asked the baronet, eagerly.

"Did you administer chloral to him?" asked Doctor Merton, eyeing him keenly.

"Yes; to soothe him to sleep. You see it was after midnight, and I did not like to send for you."

"The dose would not have killed an infant, doctor, I assure you," put in Flinter. "I took three times as much myself, didn't I, Percival? just to send me into a deep sleep of forgetfulness after our midnight experiences."

"Yes; I can vouch for the truth of that," the baronet replied, eagerly.

"Would this gentleman mind leaving us alone together, Sir Percival," asked the doctor, looking at him significantly.

"Richard, please retire for awhile," said the baronet to Flinter, who at once withdrew.

Locking the door, Doctor Merton said, "Pray let us speak ourselves by the fire, Sir Percival. I have something to say to you, which, for your sake, I wouldn't care to be overheard."

The baronet complied, but looked ill at ease.

"You insured your son's life for ten thousand pounds. I examined him on behalf of the insurance company. Have the premiums been paid up to date?"

"Yes; to the uttermost farthing," he replied, moodily.

"The certificate of death must be above suspicion," remarked the doctor, "of course you're aware of that?"

Sir Percival nodded, and eyed the little man askance.

"Ten thousand pounds is a large, a very large sum. Chloral is a deadly poison; if that fact comes out at an inquest, you won't get a penny of the insurance money, besides bringing suspicion on your motives."

"I quite see the force of your argument, doctor. Is there no way out of this dilemma?"

"Yes; by my standing your friend, for a consideration."

"In money? How much?" asked the baronet, with brutal frankness.

"A thousand pounds! You'll clear nine thousand by the transaction, and avert all suspicion from you."

"It's a large, a very large sum, doctor," observed the baronet with a wry face.

"Only commensurate with the stake at issue, sir."

"Exactly! I do not dissent, doctor. When I see your certificate, you can have my cheque for a thousand pounds."

"No, not a cheque, please, but notes to that amount; the other would look suspicious."

"Agreed; the money will be ready. When will you call for it?"

"To-night, at ten o'clock."

"Very well, let it stand at that; it's a sad, a very sad business for me, doctor. Much as I like money, because of its power, I'd willingly give five times the amount to have my boy alive and well."

The baronet was very moody for the remainder of that day, and avoided Flinter as much as possible. However, they met at dinner, and after the cloth had been cleared away, he pushed several packets of bank-notes towards his brother, and said, none too graciously: "Just see that they make a total of one thousand pounds!"

"Jack Essey's School-days" is a side-splitting story. Nos. 1 and 2 are still selling by thousands. Get Fanny, this is splendid value for your money.

"It's the exact amount," replied Flinter, after totting them up. "Shall I take a note of the numbers, Percival?"

"No. Do you know what that thousand pounds represents?"

"How can I?"

"Well, I'll tell you—a dose of laudanum."

"You are bribing Dr. Merton?"

"Yes. As administering the drug was your suggestion, perhaps you'll go halves with me in the expense?"

"Certainly; under one condition."

"Which is?"

"That you share with me the ten thousand pounds, for which Robert's life was insured. You see, I know a thing or two, Percival. When is the doctor coming for his money?"



THE ARRANGING WAS NO OTHER THAN DECEIT FLINTER.

"To-night, at ten."

"I'd better make myself scarce, I suppose?"

"Perhaps it would be as well. Of course, I can rely upon you keeping this matter a secret?"

"Oh! of course, without a bribe. I've been your tool all through my life, Percival. You've waxed rich, while I've had to depend upon my wife. I'm going straight off to bed. Don't disturb me if you can possibly help it. Good-night!"

Doctor Merton came, received his money in return for a certificate of death, and rode off on his cob, whistling softly to himself in the moonlight. At an attic, used as a lumber-room, a ghastly face peered through the window which commanded a view of the country for miles.

Half a mile from Monk House a brook, swollen by recent heavy rains, flanked the road on one side; on the other was a hedge. The doctor ambled on, in good spirits, with a thousand pounds in bank notes, stowed away in the breast-pocket of his coat.

He had a sickly wife and five children, and was agreeably engaged in forming plans for benefiting them by this windfall. Suddenly the owner of that face at the window became strangely excited. Still gazed on the landscape he saw a figure spring to the foot of the bridge, and instantly after there was a gleam of fire. Then the pony became restive and threw its rider.

The figure was that of a man.
He picked up the doctor and threw him into the brook. There need be no mystery about the assassin, who was none other than Dick Flinter.

On retiring to his room he decided to waylay, murder, and rob the doctor. A man like this finds in human shape, who held human life as cheap as dirt, was tempted by the prospect of obtaining a thousand pounds for one more upraising of his murderous hand, stained with the life blood of many victims.

A knotted rope suspended from the window of his bedroom secured a secret exit from Monk House. Once out of the ground, he, wearing a half mask, laid in wait for his victim and perpetrated foul murder and robbery. Skulking back through fields, to avoid the high road, he encountered a tramp lying asleep under a hay-stack.

Thrusting three five pound notes into the pocket of his tattered coat, he made off and reached Monk House just as the clock in the turret chimed out eleven of the night. On looking for the rope, he found it gone.

"Can my brother have visited my room in my absence?" he asked himself.

Not a light was to be seen anywhere, so he concluded the household had retired for the night, which was really the case. Climbing into the loft of the stables he rested on a truss of straw and fell asleep.

He was up betimes, and entering the house unperceived gained his own room. The knotted rope lay on the floor. On the dressing-table was a paper, written in red ink, which ran as follows: "Murderer! beware of coming down! Meet me at the River of Death. This is a message from the other world!"

Though somewhat startled by the document, he was quick to perceive that it had been placed there by human agency.

"Whoever you are, you're overdoing your part," he muttered; "ghosts don't write such stuff as this. You are secreted in the Monk's Room. I'll have the whole of the panelling down where your face appeared; then, your hiding-place will prove a River of Death to you, in very truth!"

The doctor's body was found in the brook, and the tramp, who imprudently tried to change the notes in the village, was handed over to the police. The local bank, which had issued them, said they had been paid to Sir Percival Grease.

He, in turn, admitted having paid them to Dr. Merton for professional services; though wondering greatly where those representing the balance of one thousand pounds were.

Thus once again was Dick Flinter, the arch-villain, triumphant. True to his resolve to unsearch the secret of the Monk's Room, he entered at midnight—armed with a hammer and chisel—the death-chamber where all that was mortal of Robert Grease lay.

Placing the candle on a convenient bracket, he proceeded to work, intent upon another murder, should his quest succeed. Most men would have felt nervous amid such surroundings, with his victim lying in the same room. But he did not; and he struck blow upon blow at the spot where the supposed apparition had shown its face.

Suddenly and silently a panel opened, and before he could make use of his revolver some substance was thrown in his eyes, half blinding him.

Smarting with fear and pain he passed his hands in vain over the smooth woodwork in search of an opening. Groping for the candlestick, he knocked it off the bracket, when the burning wick fell among the folds of

a muslin curtain. Pursued by a smell of burning, he continued to grope his way forward until he reached the bed.

By this time the room was well alight, and he feared that he would be hoist with his own petard, and perish in the flames. Going down on his hands and knees to escape the suffocating fumes of smoke, he crawled towards the door, which he had left ajar.

Once through it he managed to reach his own room, and, after well rinsing his eyes, gulped down a stiff glass of neat brandy.

Going to a drawer he drew forth a bundle of bank-notes, and thrust them hastily, but safely, as he thought, into the side pocket of his coat. Then, after securing the knotted rope which was lying on the floor, he descended from the window, not caring whether the other inmates made good their escape or not; but chafed they did, and fled from the scene of disaster.

He gave a chuckle of satisfaction on finding himself safe below, and instinctively thrust his hand into his pocket in search of the bundle of bank-notes.

"I am undone!" he hissed, "I've dropped the notes!"

Lighting match after match, he searched for the treasure in vain.

"I'll re-ascend to the room," he muttered, "the bundle fell out on the floor, no doubt."

He climbed up, head over hand, with surprising agility, and reached the open window to find that the flames had invaded the room. He saw the bank-notes lying on the floor, and, with a cry of joy, started forward to seize them; but a lurid stream of fire, like a flaming arm and hand, shot forth and burnt up the precious notes—the proceeds of murder—under his very eyes, and drove him back to the window in mad haste.

On descending he raved like a lunatic, and uttering horrible imprecations shook his clenched fist at the flames. Before help could arrive, Monk House was laid in ashes, not a wall being left standing, and with it were cremated the mortal remains of the hapless Robert Grease.

In such universal detestation was the baronet held, that not a single door was opened by his neighbors to receive him, so he and his brother made their way by an early train to London, and took lodgings at an hotel.

After dinner was over, Flinter said, as he smoked a choice cigar and drank wine: "By-the-way, Percival, you were insured, of course?"

"Yes; why do you ask?"

"I'll tell you presently. If you deduct fifteen pounds from the total of a thousand, how much remains?"

"This is no time for foolery," snarled the baronet.

"As you are in a grumpy humour I'll answer my own question: why nine hundred and eighty five, of course."

"Did you make a memo of the numbers of the notes? I wanted to do so but you wouldn't let me."

"No, but the bank-cashier did."

"That's all right. Make an affidavit before a Commissioner of Oaths that those notes, to the value of nine hundred and eighty five pounds, were burnt in the fire at Monk House, and you'll recover that amount at the expiration of the time prescribed by statute-law. There's a wrinkle for you, Percival; I've been eyes and brain to you all my life."

"But they might turn up in the course of time?"

"I think not; in fact, I'm positive they won't. My judgment in such matters is infallible. Will you do as I suggest?"

"Certainly, and now why did you ask me whether the house and contents were insured?"

"To recover the amount of my loss. You'll recomp me that, of course?"

"Yes, if your claim is moderate. Surely you did not lose the diamonds, Richard?"

"No, they're in a belt round my waist. Now let me warn you I have more than a presentiment that Charles Holmes, your step-son, did not perish in the River of Death. I scent mischief in the air, Percival. Don't fold your hands and sleep in a kind of fool's paradise, but be up and doing."

"Why will you persist in harping on that topic, Richard?" asked Sir Percival, fretfully.

"Because I have convincing proof that human, not supernatural, agency produced the series of frights we received recently."

"Look at that," producing the document signed 'a message from the dead,' "ghosts don't do such things as that."

"Where did you find it?" asked the baronet, shuddering visibly from head to foot.

"In my bedroom on the night of the fire."

"If he's alive why doesn't he come forward and prove his identity?"

"Because he lies under more than a suspicion of murder and robbery, and knows that so I am in England he would be easily to be extradited to stand his trial in Africa on the capital charge."

"Perhaps he can prove his innocence?"

"Pshaw! the hangman's noose is sure to encircle his neck if ever he's caught. But we won't wait for that, Percival; if he's alive, and in England, he must be removed. There must be no bungling over the job this time, and won't if I'm allowed to have a finger in the pie, brother mine."

"How can we discover whether your suspicions are correct?"

"Write to Frank Lister, and ask him to meet you here. When he comes assert your claim to your step-son's share of the wealth amassed at the goldfields. If Lister is in the swim with Holmes he'll be likely to let out the truth, especially if you threaten him with legal proceedings."

"I'll do it," cried the baronet, resolutely. "This business must, and shall be ended. You'll stick by me, of course, Richard?"

"Yes, at a price, Percival. You have behaved rather slyly to me, so far; you'll find treating me generously will pay better in the end, though."

If Sir Percival Greene—who, in his way, was as great an evil-doer as his brother—could have read Flinter's thoughts at the moment he would have recoiled from him as though he were a serpent.

Having disposed of his nephew, he, as next heir, was anxious to get rid of Charles Holmes, whom he shrewdly suspected was not dead. That done, he fondly supposed that the late's fortune, which Sir Percival had obtained by fraud, would descend to him, for by enticing the baronet out to Africa he meant to get rid of him, once and for all.

As a plotter, Dick Flinter stood unequalled; and, as yet, somebody's lack and his own had attended his nefarious doings.

Frank Lister received the baronet's summons with a strange smile. "I must go well armed," he soliloquised, after reading the letter. "Flinter, who is hand and glove with his brother, Sir Percival, is at the bottom of this."

Thrusting a revolver into his pocket, and halting a cab, he was driven to a palatial hotel in Piccadilly. Having given his card to a servant he was ushered into the presence of the baronet, who was in deep mourning, befitting his recent bereavement.

"What is your business with me, Sir Percival?" asked Frank Lister, coldly.

Charles had given him an account of his stepfather's villainy, and now that he was face to face with the man he scarcely knew how to be civil to him.

"You were my step-son's partner at Hagerstown. I believe?"

"Yes; you have been rightly informed."

"He had money standing in his name at the time of his death?"

"Twenty thousand pounds and odd!"

The baronet's eyes lighted up with the unholty fire of avarice.

"You are prepared, of course, to pay over that sum to me, his heir?" he said, eagerly.

"Excuse me, Sir Percival, but you are not his heir," replied Frank listly.

"Who is then?" he asked, with a look of hot malignity.

"I am!"

"You; impossible!"

"Listen to me, and then claim his estate, if you dare! I have seen a copy of the will at Somerset House, which you put forward. Even if it were not a bogus will—a fraud, a forgery—a later will, by some months, duly signed and witnessed, puts your claim out of Court."

If a basilisk-like glance could have slain the intrepid speaker, then assuredly Frank Lister's days would have been numbered.

"You dare to accuse me, a baronet and a justice of the peace, with being a forger!"

"I do; and a bigamist to boot, Sir Percival Greene. Your first wife was alive when you married the widow of General Holmes."

"It is false!" hissed out Sir Percival, turning deadly pale, and trembling in every limb.

"It is true! You gave her a drug which sent her into a trance, and infernal monster that you were and are—you see I do not mince words with you, Sir Percival—you hurried on the funeral and had her buried alive! Your infamous brother, Richard Greene alias Dick Flinter—swindler, blackleg, nay worse, murderer—aided and abetted you."

"You insult me because I am an older man than you. Have a care, or you will find me a dangerous man," said Sir Percival, menacingly, as he thrust his hand sharply into the pocket of his dressing-gown where he kept a loaded revolver.

"Intimidation is not my forte, Sir Percival," snorted Frank Lister; "if you carry a weapon in your pocket, so do I."

"Probably your brother is in the next room and listening at the keyhole, and waiting for a chance to assassinate me; but I'm ready for him and you, too. Besides my clerk knows I have come here, so that should you or he succeed in murdering me, the crime of murder—one only out of many—would be brought home to you."

"Are you drunk or mad?" gasped out the baronet.

"Neither, and you know it. Your brother kept a diary in cipher. When he was driven out of Hagerstown it fell into my hands, and after months of hard study in my leisure moments I discovered the key to it."

"Really you are covering yourself with ridicule, young man," said Sir Percival, recovering his sang-froid, because of the difficulty in bringing home guilt to him from such a source as a diary kept in cipher. "This is mere bluff on your part to evade the issue at stake, the restitution of my step-son's money."

"You'll find it anything but that," retorted Frank, warmly. "Your brother's diary is complete up to a certain point in the strange story. I can supply the rest."

"You mean you can invent it?"

"Oh, no, nothing of the kind. Is it not true that your first wife's brother arrived in England from the Cape the very day of her funeral? To show you that I know what I'm talking about, I'll tell you his name—Ephraim Lewis."

"Charles Holmes supplied that piece of rubbishing information," observed Sir Percival, scathingly.

"No; I heard it from the lips of Ephraim Lewis himself; but what I am about to relate will startle even you, Sir Percival. Shall I proceed?"

"Pray do, I want amusing. Help yourself to wine and a cigar, they will help your inventive faculties."

"The sober truth needs no garnishing," was the dignified retort. Ephraim Lewis had a series of remarkable dreams.

"Ah! I thought something of the kind was coming," said Sir Percival, smugly.

Unheeding the interruption, Frank Lister pursued: "He went down to Monkstown, bribed the sexton, opened the coffin—a shabby one, by the way, for the wife of a baronet—and lo! found his sister, who had been buried in the trances you had thrown her into, alive! He wanted to prosecute you, but she begged that he would hush the matter up, and take her back with him to Africa; for you having made one attempt on her life, she feared a second."

"If you want the sequel to this strange story I can supply it, for I met and conversed with your first wife just before my return to England! If further proof is wanting, I can produce Job Quilten, the sexton, who left Monkstown, and has been living elsewhere for years on a comfortable annuity, settled on him by Ephraim Lewis."

The baronet wiped his clammy brow, and said, hastily, almost inarticulately, "Even if this more than strange story be true, it does not prove me guilty of an attempt to murder her!"

"Your brother's diary does that conclusively. You prepared the drug, and he put it in her wine when the nurse's back was turned. But he overlooked the fact that she saw his act in a looking-glass, and upbraided him with it."

"He pretended that it was only a harmless drug to induce sleep. She put the wine in a bottle, and slipped out at a late hour to get her brother, who was a chemist, to analyse it; but she never reached Monkstown. Her body was found in a brook, the same into which Doctor Merion was thrown after being foully murdered!"

"Really, Mr. Lister, you place too much stress upon the alleged statements of my brother, who has been more or less insane ever since he was a little child," observed Sir Percival, with a sickly smile. "If, as you tell me, my first wife is alive, let her return to me, and I will forgive her long death."

"Do angels mate with devils?" asked Lister, his eyes flashing with the fire of indignant scorn. "She is an angel of mercy, forsaking the pomp and vanities of this world, she became a missionary among the natives."

"One of them, in return for smothering him when dying and scolding his last moments, confided to her the secret of a submerged palace, once the habitation of a race of ancient African kings."

"I have been there; it is situated beneath the River of Death. It is a store-house of wealth, but the secret is well guarded, for I was blindfolded before being admitted."

Flinter, who was in the adjoining room listening to all that passed and longing to put a bullet or a knife through the heart of Frank, gave a start, and his face filled with ferocious joy on hearing of this vast treasure.

"I will find out the secret," he muttered to himself, "and the wealth he speaks of shall be mine—all mine!"

"What name is she known by?" asked the baronet.

"What is your motive for asking?"

"Some day I intend going to Africa, and would like to meet her again."

"She is known to the natives, far and near, as 'Queen of the Forest.'"

"Now, Mr. Lister, I want you to answer me this question: Is Charles Holmes living or dead?"

At this moment, the servant announced another visitor, and the interruption prevented Frank from replying.

"I will call upon you again about this business, Sir

"Do you like the 'Halfpenny Surprise'?" "Yes."

"It will cost only a few words to tell your friends so, but you will do me a great favour."

Percival," he said stiffly, ignoring the baronet's extended hand, and withdrew.

When the brothers were alone, Flinter said: "You and I must leave for the Cape by the next steamer, Percival. They can't proceed against you in your absence. England is not the place for you just now."

"Besides, look at the wealth to be obtained in that submerged palace of which your first wife is the custodian. What do you say? Will you stay to be worried, badgered, bullied, insulted, perhaps put in prison, and all the skeletons of our family exhibited in public, or make a bold bid for liberty and wealth, with me to aid you?"

"I will go, Richard. Make all the necessary arrangements. I can by my hands on a large sum of money at a moment's notice, and we will travel under assumed names."

"Egad! If I do lose Charles Holmes' patrimony, I'll gain greater wealth from my first wife. By playing the hypocrite I think I can win myself back into her favour."

CHAPTER IV.

ON BOARD THE "OUTRICK"—FLINTER AND CHARLES HOLMES ARE WASHED OVERBOARD—ON THE LONG ROCK—SAVED BY NATIVES—THE BARONET AND FLINTER GAIN ACCESS TO THE SUBMERGED PALACE—FLINTER DEFOGS THE OCCUPANTS AND MURDERS HIS BROTHER—NAJA'S VENGEANCE.

THE good ship *Outrick* steamed out of the docks en route for Cape Town with a fair complement of passengers, among whom were Sir Percival Greene and Richard Flinter, under aliases. One passenger, an invalid, kept to his cabin, nevertheless coming on deck even when the weather was most irritating.

The passage was an uneventful one until they sighted the coast of Africa, when a fearful storm broke out one night. It burst upon the vessel with all the fury of a cyclone, causing its timbers to groan and creak until they threatened to burst asunder. Flinter remained on deck, but his brother kept below, for the war of the elements was not to his liking.

During a more than vivid flash of lightning he saw someone standing near him, and gave a violent start on recognising Charles Holmes, not a specter, but a being of flesh and blood like himself. All the evil in Flinter's nature surged through the black heart of the man at sight of the lad whom he had unjustly accused of the foul crime of murder and tried to bound to death.

It has been well said, that those we injure the most we hate the most.

"So the mystery of Monk House stands before me," he thought, vaguely. "Not content with playing the 'bogus man' business there he shadows me here, intent upon my destruction. Surely, on a wild night like this, with nobody about, it ought not to be difficult to rid myself of him for ever?"

He made a step or two towards him, when a huge wave burst over the poop, carrying both overboard. At the same moment a lurid, almost blinding flash of lightning disclosed a huge rock, within a stone throw of the *Outrick*, and then came a mighty crash, and the vessel struck.

By the same wave that had carried him overboard, Charles Holmes was caught and hurled upon the rock, which had a flat surface. Flinter, who seized a life belt, was not quite so lucky, for before he gained the same position his right leg was almost disabled.

Luckily the storm of raging wind abated as quickly as it had begun, giving place to a deluge of rain.

Charles was too exhausted, too prostrate, to pay much attention to the presence of another human being. When day broke he saw and recognised Flinter, who was moaning and groaning painfully.

"So, my enemy, you are in my power completely, at last!" murmured the lad. "What would you do to me if our positions were reversed? Why, cast me into the sea to perish miserably!"

"Water! water!" moaned Flinter, piteously. "I am dying of thirst!"

"For her sake I must not let him perish," muttered Charlie; "but 'tis a hard thing to give back life and the power of doing evil to such a scoundrel at heart."

In the cavities of the rock were pools of rain water. Scooping his hands into one of these he held the water to Flinter's lips, who sucked it in greedily. After this life-giving draught Flinter sank into a deep slumber.

Taking off his coat, Charlie placed it over the sleeper's head to shield it from the intense heat of the African sun, muttering: "I know I'm a fool to help him, but for her sake I must do it, ay! even if it costs me my life."

He bored a wetted handkerchief around his own head, and then sat down to wait for death, unless he could manage to swim to the mainland which was not very far distant.



"MY ENEMY IS IN MY POWER," CHARLIE MURMURED.

"Self preservation is the first law of nature," he thought. "Why should I not leave him here to perish, and secure my own safety?"

A terrible struggle between good and evil took place in his breast, but the former, for the honour of a common humanity, triumphed in the end. He sat on wearily, until he was aroused by a shout from the shore, where a number of natives had congregated.

He replied, and soon several canoes put off.

Charlie understood several of the dialect to make himself understood.

When he mentioned that he was a friend of the Queen of the Forest, their sallow faces lit up with joy, and they became his devoted slaves on the instant.

Once more a terrible temptation assailed him to leave Flinter to perish.

He just hesitated, and that was all; in fact, it was problematical whether he would ever reach the mainland alive.

Again, good prevailed over evil; and the insensible man was carefully lowered into a canoe.

"Is he a friend, too, of the Queen of the Forest?" asked the head man, when their village was reached.

"No; but he is my friend," Charlie answered, though it gave him a twinge of conscience to say so.

From that moment Flinter received every care and attention; much more, in fact, than Charlie did, because he could shift for himself.

When Flinter recovered consciousness, and saw our hero, he said, grimly: "This is a strange meeting of ours, Charles Holmes!"

"Yes; but luckily for you the better part of my nature prevailed. I only waited to see you on the way to recovery to say good-bye!"

"Don't leave me among a pack of bloodthirsty savages," pleaded Flinter.

"You are perfectly safe with them," replied Charlie; "for my sake they will not injure a hair of your head."

"Don't leave me here alone," said the wretched man, earnestly. "I know I've injured you, but I swear to be your friend for the future."

"I must go if I'm to be of help to you. Repent, give up your evil ways, and then, but not till then, will I or any honest man call you by the sacred name of friend!"

"How did you escape from the awful waters of the River of Death," asked Flinter.

"I do not care to enter upon that subject with you at present; if I can possibly avoid you, we shall never meet in life again."

"At Monk House I tried to arouse your sleeping conscience, and that of Sir Percival and his son, through the agency of terror—but failed. You murdered Robert Grooms and Doctor Merton. Don't add to your sin by denying it! An angel of mercy, one who rescued me from the jaws of death, taught me to be patient and bide my time. I took her advice and did not denounce you."

"You refer to the Queen of the Forest, my brother's first wife."

"Don't couple their names together!" cried Charlie; "it is an insult to her to do so. If he and you are wise you will give the River of Death a wide berth, or, perchance, it may prove your joint destruction!"

"I've no wish to burn you now, that in spite of my past, you have so nobly befriended me," said Flinter; but the glitter in those cruel eyes of his proclaimed the hypocrite.

"We shall see. Actions, not words, must prove your sincerity. But be warned in time; in me you'll find a determined foe should you ever provoke me again. I am not friendless either, as you will find to your cost, if you ever try to harm me."

"Can you assist me with a triding loan?" he said, pleadingly. "Everything I possess in the wide world is aboard the *Ostrich*."

"You can have two pounds, half of what is in my purse. The natives will not ask for recompense. When you are fit to travel they'll guide you to the nearest settlement."

"Good-bye! For ever, I hope, though I do not mean it unkindly. Turn over a new leaf, and try whether honesty is not the best policy in the end."

"Will you do me another favour, by sending a letter to Sir Percival at Cape Town, telling him that I am alive, otherwise my kit might be sold?" Flinter asked.

"Bestial, he would probably return to England if he thought I was dead."

"I'll see that he is communicated with; and now, once more, good-bye!"

Flinter extended his hand, but Charlie said, gravely: "Should we ever meet again, and you can say to me honestly, 'I am a changed man, and have forsaken my evil ways'—then, and not till then, will I try to think that there is some hope for you."

"My evil ways, forsooth!" sneered Flinter, as he lay on a pile of mats made of sweet grass. "Yes, I'll forsake them when I've carried out my purpose. The River of

Death has a secret I mean to discover; let those who oppose me look to it. It will be their life or mine!"

Thanks to the skill of the medicine-man or witch-doctor of the tribe, Flinter was able to leave the village within a week, and eventually joined his brother at Cape Town.

"Alas, say you; hang him, he will spoil my game completely," exclaimed the baronet, angrily, when Flinter unfolded his budget of news.

"Where is he to be found? He must be 'removed' or he'll do us both some serious mischief."

"At the River of Death, enjoying the hospitality of your first wife; and probably pocketing a lot of the treasure. When will you be ready to start, Percival?"

"For where? The River of Death. I wish it had any other name than that," replied the baronet with a shudder.

"What's in a name after all, brother mine," said Flinter, jeeringly; "a fortune is within our grasp. Listen to me. I thought the matter well out when I was laid by the heels in the village among the savages."

"I'm afraid I'll have to go there alone, Richard. My wife, who has assumed the lofty title of Queen of the Forest, never could tolerate you."

"But I mean to accompany you for all that, disguised as a native," said Flinter.

"And he detected for your pains."

"Not at all. I think that you may leave me to take care of myself in that direction. I was careful not to let Charles Holmes into the secret, but I am well acquainted with the language of the natives."

After a lot of persuading, Sir Percival agreed to his brother's crafty plan. And really, when Flinter appeared before him as a native he looked the character to the life. Arrived at the River of Death, Sir Percival wrote a letter to his wife. Flinter undertook to get the letter delivered, and with his usual good fortune met with a native who did so.

The baronet begged so hard that his "dear wife, his darling Annie," would see him, that she sent a letter back, consenting. In the message which he wrote, he mentioned (at Flinter's suggestion) that he had picked up a native servant, a perfect treasure, and would like him to be included in the permission.

This was granted, and the letter from her brought to the baronet by an Ethiopian named Naja, who stood over six feet in height, and was as straight as a dart.

Through the agency of the Queen of the Forest, Naja had been rescued from slavery, and was now her most trusted servant and body-guard. He was their guide, and on reaching a certain spot Naja told them, in good English, if they wished to proceed further they must consent to be blindfolded, and their arms tied behind their backs.

The baronet demurred at first, but on Naja remaining as firm as a rock, he consented. Their eyes were bandaged and their hands secured; then the negro led the baronet off, after telling his supposed native servant that he would return for him presently.

Flinter did not like this arrangement, but he grinned and bore it for the sake of what was to come. He started when he heard Charles's well-known voice say, hither on: "Here we are at last, Frank; I'll give the signal for Naja."

"Hullo! wait a bit, who is this?" cried Frank, on catching sight of the supposed native; but they were spared the trouble of enquiring by the appearance of Naja on the scene. Charles and Frank were blindfolded, but their arms were left free.

When they were led away, and Flinter was left waiting till his betters were served, he muttered: "We'll have them all in the net now; it won't be my fault if any escape. But I do wish that nigger would attend to me; he'll be a tough fellow to tackle. I must be wary of him."

Flinter's turn came at last, and when the bandage was removed from his eyes he found himself in an apartment built of pure marble. He was well treated, and, thanks to the clemency of the pigment which he used, and his fluent command of the native language, his artifice was not suspected, at least, so he thought.

Seated on a throne was the Queen of the Forest, a lovely woman, although somewhat advanced in life.

She was dressed in purple raiment, trimmed with the richest furs, and a zone of burnished gold encircled her waist.

Sir Percival, astonished and awed at the sight that met his eyes, fell upon his knees before this woman, whom the natives worshipped as a goddess, but she held up her hands and his lips remained dumb.

"There will be time enough for you to speak presently," she said.

Then turning to Naja, who had mounted guard with an enormous sword in his hand, she said, "Bring the princess hither."

Sir Percival and Flinter started violently as—Naja drawing aside a curtain at the back of the throne—Rose Coglan, attired in a magnificent Eastern costume, appeared.

"Listen," said the Queen of the Forest, speaking in English, fixing her eyes on the pair of astonished villains, "this girl—princess as she is held to be by the natives, and daughter by me—was rescued with Charles Holmes by my ever faithful attendant, Naja. She and he are my heirs. The wealth, hoarded by a people long extinct, is theirs. I give them all—everything, for I have been warned that my life is drawing to a close."

"Not all," Sir Percival pleaded. "Return with me to England and I will make you happy. For years I have led a life of repentance, and I am a changed man. Do not send me away from you after travelling so many miles to do homage at your feet."

Charles Holmes was about to speak, when the Queen of the Forest silenced him with a glance of her magnificent eyes.

"What vile masquerading is this?" she cried, gazing scornfully at the arch-plotter cowering at her feet. "Do you think that I am not fully awake to your reason in coming here? Do you think that I have forgotten the wretched life I led with you, or how you comforted me when in a trance? Foolish fond! how can you expect mercy of me?"

Sir Percival held up his hand in supplication, but the Queen of the Forest paid no heed to him.

"And do you think," she cried—her voice ringing through the vast chamber—as she pointed to Flinter, "that I cannot see through such a flimsy disguise as that. Save them."

Almost before the pair of villains knew what had happened they were surrounded by a number of warriors, who brandished gleaming blades before their terrified eyes.

"Away with them to the dungeons beneath the palace," exclaimed the Queen of the Forest, clapping her hands. "Little did I dream that the men I have reason to hate meet in all the world would fall into a trap of their own setting."

She laughed wildly and almost hysterically, as Sir Percival, in his agony and horror at the situation in which he found himself, tried to break from the strong arms that held him.

Dick Flinter stood silent, baffled, dumfounded, and eating his heart out with impotent rage.

He had indeed fallen into a trap of his own setting; and there seemed little chance of escaping from it. But one hope was left, and he clung to it as a drowning man clings to straws. Enraged as the Queen of the Forest might feel against her unshrinking husband, she would never find it in her heart to have them slaughtered like wild beasts.

CHAPTER V.

THE FATE OF THE THREE DOERS.

To Dick Flinter's great disappointment he and Sir Percival were placed in separate cells. These apartments were not dark or lathsome, but in character with the magnificence of the palace, which, in remote ages, had been occupied by a race of people to whom gold and precious stones were held as scarcely of more value than the shells of the ocean.

No sooner had the door closed upon him than Dick Flinter threw himself down upon a bench hewn out of a block of solid alabaster, and gave himself up to a train of thought.

But he was not left long to his reflections. The door opened, and Naja, carrying a tray, covered with a cloth, and a pitcher of wine, appeared.

"You see," he said, grinning at Flinter, "we don't intend to starve you. You disguise yourself badly. You make bad black man. Ha, ha! You shall have time enough to wipe that stuff off your skin and be white man again."

This so exasperated Dick Flinter that it was with great difficulty he restrained himself from leaping at the powerful negro's throat.

"I suppose," he said, pointing to the provisions, "that the Queen of the Forest hasn't ordered anything to be poisoned by way of a joke."

This so enraged Naja that he took Dick Flinter by the shoulders and shook him until his teeth chattered in his head.

"You speak like that again," he cried, as he lurked the raffian into a corner, "and I will put my foot on you and crush you like a beetle."

Dick Flinter had had quite enough without wishing to argue the question in any form, and he lay perfectly still until Naja had departed.

"A man to be strong and full of purpose must eat and drink," he said, rousing himself. "Courage, Dick! It is not in your nature to whine like a thrashed ear. There is plenty of life in you, and you are worth a dozen dead men yet."

After making a hearty meal he made a detour of the cell. The walls were massive, and lighted by a small window at the top of a high, funnel-shaped roof.

"No chance there," Flinter said, glancing upwards; "a spider could scarcely crawl along these walls, much less a man. Well, if I start thinking of what is likely to happen I may unnerve myself and go mad, so I will go to sleep instead."

Flinging his head upon his arms he closed his eyes, and, true to his callous nature, was soon slumbering soundly. A slight creaking sound roused him. He started up, thinking that somebody had cocked a revolver close to his ear.

Night had come, and the dungeon was plunged in intense darkness; indeed, so pitchy black was it that Dick Flinter could not see his fingers even when held within a few inches of his face.

But one thing he noticed, and it puzzled him to find an explanation for it. The air of the dungeon had been warm and humid, but now a current of cool, refreshing air was playing on his face. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation, and brought his hands sharply together. The mystery was solved. The dungeon door was open, and Dick Flinter's way to freedom was clear.

How the door came to be open he did not trouble to ask himself, but no sooner had the first paroxysm of joy passed away than he began to suspect treachery.

"How am I to know but that some tawny rascal is not waiting to plant a dagger in my back?" he muttered. "I will swear that Naja closed the door when he left. But stay; he may have paid me a visit while I was asleep."

Dick Flinter went down on his hands and knees, and crawled noiselessly across the dungeon floor. He did

not intend to be caught napping if he could help it. Not a sound disturbed the stillness. The place was as silent as the grave.

On reaching the passage, Dick Flinter saw a ray of light shining straight ahead of him. It came from a lamp suspended from the ceiling, which was so low that a man of ordinary height could touch it with his hand.

Suddenly Dick Flinter saw an odd-looking shadow fall across the pavement just where the lamp shone. To his surprise he saw Sir Percival in exactly the same attitude as himself—creeping on his hands and knees, and looking furtively right and left.

"Hist!"

The sound came from Dick Flinter's lips, but in so low a tone that it sounded like an echo. Sir Percival wheeled round on his knees, and was preparing to make a precipitate retreat when Dick Flinter called to him again.

"Come to me," said the raffian, rising to his feet. "I cannot make out what this means. I found the door of my dungeon wide open."

"And that is exactly my experience," the baronet rejoined. "Is it possible that they are desirous of getting rid of us by permitting us to escape?"

"The very same thing was passing through my mind at the moment you spoke," Flinter replied. "It may be so, and if it is we shall have time to carry out our scheme, and laugh in our sleeves afterwards."

Sir Percival Grooms looked grave and shook his head. "For my part," he said, "I have done with the affair for ever."

"What a coward you are," Flinter remarked, contemptuously.

"Well, I am, so far as this matter is concerned," the baronet said, "and I am not afraid to confess it."

"Well, let us get out of this place to start with," Flinter observed. "For my own part if I am to die, I would much rather meet my fate in the open air than be buried alive underground."

The passage was a long one, with a gentle ascent.

Sir Percival and his precious brother grew bolder at every step.

Not a creature appeared to molest them, and at last, they saw the stars glimmering in the distance.

"I wonder where on earth we shall come out," Flinter growled. "This seems more like a dream to me than a reality."

"The ascent is increasing," Sir Percival remarked, "and we are gazing above the tree tops. Look up and see for yourself."

In a few moments both passed beyond the passage and into the open air.

They had not taken many paces when a door closed with the report of a cannon.

"I told you so," Sir Percival cried, triumphantly, "that was the parting salute. They are glad to get rid of us at any price; and now I intend to make tracks for England as quick as possible. You will do as you like, of course; I have no wish to interfere with your movements, but I intend to make myself scarce."

"Very well. I intend to stay, and, mark me, I shall win the day yet."

"What was that?" Sir Percival demanded, clutching at Flinter's arm.

"Some wild animal in the forest."

"It sounded like a peal of mocking laughter. Where are we, think you?"

"I have no more knowledge than the man in the moon," Flinter said. "I only know that we had better keep straight on until we come to a good big tree, climb into it, and wait until sunrise to enlighten us."

"You are a shrewd fellow," Sir Percival said.

"I did not want a fool to tell me that," Dick Flinter retorted, with a grin. "Here is a tree that will suit our purpose."

"And there is that disagreeable sound again," said Sir Percival, starting violently. "I wonder what sort of animal it can be?"

"A jacked, most likely," said Dick Flinter, leaping up and clutched at one of the lower branches of the tree.

"And it is the jacked that leads the lion to his prey," Sir Percival thought, with a shudder. "I do not like the easy way they allowed us to escape. There must be something in it, I am sure."

He climbed the tree as soon as possible, and selecting a forked branch, ensconced himself as comfortably as possible on it.

Dick Flinter soon began to snore as loudly as if tucked up in a feather bed.

"What a man he is, to be sure," the baronet thought. "Nothing seems to upset him. Here am I shivering and shaking with fright, while he is as happy as a king, and no doubt dreaming happily."

Sir Percival had never made a greater mistake in his life. Dick Flinter at that moment was dreaming most unpleasantly. It seemed to him that a huge creature of the tiger species had seized him by the neck, and was marching off with him to the crater of a volcano belching forth fire and molten lava.

The more he struggled the weaker he became, until at last he, with a mighty effort, twisted himself round—and awoke.

"By Jingo!" he said, sweeping away the beads of perspiration which had gathered on his brow. "I would not go through that again for the best hundred sovereigns that ever came out of the Mint."

Sir Percival was about to make some remark when Dick Flinter, who was now standing on the branch and peering through the foliage, uttered a cry of alarm and leaped full.

"What is the matter?" the baronet demanded.

"Marked enough to drive us both mad," Flinter yelled. "Those devils of natives have set the forest on fire."

"Without ascertaining for himself what was going on, Sir Percival flung up his arms and cried out hysterically, "We are lost! Oh, what a fearful death to die! Mercy, what shall we do?"

Dick Flinter made no reply in words, but he dropped to the ground, as if the tree had suddenly turned red-hot, and Sir Percival made haste to follow his example. The forest was on fire in several directions.

This was Naja's revenge.

Without consulting any one he liberated the prisoners, only to strap them again, and to unweave them.

"Which way shall we go?" Sir Percival asked.

"I know not," Flinter replied, gloomily. "I fear it is all up with us. The north and west sides are ablaze, and soon we shall be enclosed in a circle of fire."

And even as he spoke the flames, with a terrific rush and a roar, swept round, and then advanced on all sides. In the midst of this mass of fire whirled a column of black smoke, and it bore down upon the two men, who, knowing that it would be useless to seek safety in flight, stood trembling, and trying to utter the prayers they had long unheeded and forgotten.

One shriek of terror and agony, followed by another and a hoarse one, and all was over. In a few moments nothing remained of Sir Percival and his villainous brother but a few charred bones. And then the flames passed onward, leaving blackness, desolation, and death in their wake.

Now that both his enemies were dead, Charlie decided to return to England, which he did in the company of the Queen of the Forest, Rose, Frank, and Naja, and bringing with them vast stores of treasure.

Charlie and Rose were married in time. The Queen of the Forest inherited her husband's fortune, and Frank Lister, settling near his friends, led the jolly and happy life shared by all.

You must have observed that the popularity of the "Halfpenny Surprise" is increasing every week. All back numbers, parts, and divisions will be always kept in print.

The following is an Extract from the powerfully written, complete, and splendidly illustrated Story, entitled,

The Four Conspirators.

See No. 21 of THE HALFPENNY SURPRISE, March 22, 1895.

"The forged one is the one Beatrice herself holds now, and which will leave all the property to her if Spencer goes to prison. It is diabolical, and words cannot tell any resource for what I have done. Oh, if there is some way out of it!"

"There isn't I fear," Hayman replied, in a tone that accorded with the part he was acting; but sudden and critical ideas were flying through his mind.

He had made a frightful mistake. He ought to have brought someone with him to take down Baggles' words. His own uncorroborated statement would count for nothing.

Fool! Fool! He sprang up and walked the floor, thinking rapidly. It was a disastrous blunder, but it still might be rectified. He would return for the two men and have them witness the confession.

"Baggles," he said, "I left one of our men back here on the road to watch. As it is getting late we can sleep here, can't we?"

The old man nodded assent.

Hayman rose at once and walked towards the cabin-door, but before he could lay his hand upon the bell there was the sound of footsteps without, and the snort of a horse as a man was heard to dismount.

Baggles fell back in dismay. For a moment everything seemed to his dazed senses to be whirling round him in unutterable confusion. He did not know how to act, or what to say. He was trapped, and no mistake.

A thundering knock fell upon the rickety door that shook it like a dead leaf in winter.

"Who's that, Baggles?" Hayman ejaculated in a dismayed whisper.

"Hush! I don't know. Possibly they are detectives."

"What's to be done?" said Hayman.

A bright thought struck him. Baggles notion that he was likely to be arrested supplied the young lawyer with a good excuse for resuming the intruders.

"Quick! open this door, Baggles, or, by heaven, you shall answer for it with your life!" came a low, muffled voice against the window.

"It's all right," said the old man to Hayman, as he went towards the door with the intention of admitting the speaker. "He's one of us. I know his voice."

Hayman placed his hand on Baggles' arm, and held it with a grip of iron.

"Don't move, you fool! or you'll move at your peril! How easy it is for the police to assume familiar, but false voices. It's only a try-on."

"I could swear that that is the voice of Perryman," said Baggles, again making his way to the door.

"I don't believe it," exclaimed Hayman. "And rather than you shall give yourself and us away, by heaven, I will send this bullet through your brain!" Hayman stood with his back against the door, and pointed the revolver determinedly at old Baggles.

This was something unexpected by the old man. He sank back, silent and petrified with horror!

Suddenly a crunching sound was heard at the rear of the cabin, as if of some one plying a jemmy between the timbers that young Hayman had seen.

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