

THE
WHISPERING
LANE



FERGUS
HUME



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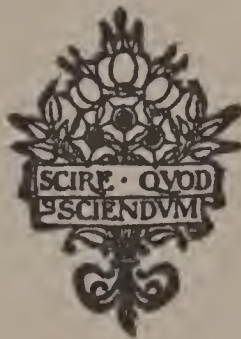
THE WHISPERING LANE

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BY

FERGUS HUME

Author of "The Moth Woman," "The Trick of Time,"
"The Mystery of a Hansom Cab," etc.



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TO
MY KIND FRIEND
ERNEST GEORGE MATHEW

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY	1
II	THE BEST POLICY	15
III	FACING THE WORST	29
IV	A FRIEND IN NEED	44
V	SEEKING FOR LIGHT	57
VI	WHAT THE LAW SAID	71
VII	WHAT THE WOMAN SAID	84
VIII	THE DARK PATH	100
IX	THE MYSTERIOUS WORD	117
X	HEARD IN THE DARKNESS	133
XI	AN IMPORTANT CLUE	149
XII	THE UNFORESEEN	163
XIII	THE LOST TRAIL	178
XIV	AN UNEXPECTED MEETING	192
XV	A CLUE	205
XVI	JIMMY'S ADVENTURE	221
XVII	IN THE UNDERWORLD	236
XVIII	AN AMAZING ADMISSION	249
XIX	THE FIRST REVELATION	263
XX	THE SECOND REVELATION	279
XXI	THE THIRD REVELATION	292

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CHAPTER I

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY

“AMERICA! Goodness to gracious, why do you want to go to America?”

With an astonished face, in an equally astonished tone, the girl in the blue knitted silk jumper and short cream skirt, pushed back her chair from the breakfast-table. Standing up straightly, in the pride of her beautiful youth, she stared hard at the dark-eyed, grey-haired woman, seated opposite, whose black stuff dress with stiffly starched collar and cuffs, suggested the uniform of an hospital nurse. No answer was forthcoming for the elder of the two twisted her thin hands nervously and gazed, unseeingly, as it were, out of the window, over the lawn, at a belt of stone-pines, which shut off the cottage from the high-road. What she found in the view to interest her, it was impossible to conjecture; but her gaze was so intent that the girl turned and looked also. Seeing nothing unusual in the everyday landscape, she faced her companion again, this time with a significant look at the glass of hot milk, which her friend was sipping. “Edith!” she spoke reproachfully, “you have been smoking opium again.”

"I have had a wakeful night," rejoined the other, hurriedly, and hoarsely, "my neuralgia—the long, dark hours—disagreeable memories—shaken nerves. The black smoke helps me to endure the nightly journey through Hell."

"Helps you to enter a Fool's Paradise, you mean. Oh my dear, my dear!" greatly distressed the girl knelt by Edith's chair. "You know how much I love you for your kindness to me—how much I owe you—how I have tried to help you, so that you might give up that Devil's Elixir. Yet—yet"—she broke off her speech, overcome with emotion, and sat back to cover a tearful face with her hands.

Edith smoothed the golden head tenderly. "I know—I know! But the past has ruined the present, and my sole chance of happiness is to drug myself into forgetfulness. Unless"—she hesitated—"America!"

The girl glanced up understandingly. "You mean that in another country you would have another chance?"

"Something like that, Aileen. I have half a mind to give myself that chance—yet half a mind to end it all in another way—perhaps the only way."

Aileen sprang to her feet, frankly horrified. "You mean——?"

"What if I do?" demanded the other, wearily. "Who would care?"

"I would—you know I would."

"Ah, yes. For a day, a week, a year: afterwards you would forget. And rightly forget. Why should I ruin your life, as I have ruined my own?" she made a gesture of despair, drank hurriedly what remained of the milk, and leaned back gloomily in her chair, again twisting her thin hands.

“Dear!” murmured the girl softly, “I owe you so much that——”

Edith threw up one hand in protest. “You owe me nothing—nothing!”

“Let us leave it at that,” suggested Aileen, coaxingly, “and talk over things quietly, before we decide what is best to be done.”

“Ah well. As you will,” agreed Miss Danby, listlessly, and closed her eyes.

Aileen nodded approvingly. Silence was the best anodyne to tranquillize this brain-storm, so she left her friend to its steadying influence, and moved towards the low-set window. Actually it was so low, that by pushing up the sash and bending slightly over the sill, she could easily have stepped out on to the lawn. And indeed, at the moment, she was strongly inclined to do so, feeling that the cool greyness of the early October morning would calm her own mind, stirred up to sympathetic unrest by the mysterious sorrows of Edith Danby. For mysterious they most assuredly were, so far as she had acquaintance with the surface of things. Troubles, Edith undoubtedly endured in common with most post-war men and women, but none so great as could not be diminished by the exercise of common-sense. The mole-hill certainly was by no means small, but there was no need to enlarge it into a Mount Blanc.

Often, during her year’s companionship with Edith in the lonely Essex cottage, had Aileen wondered what tragedy was written on the turned-down page in the woman’s life-history. It must be, thought the girl, anew, a singularly sinister chronicle to have changed the handsome, fresh-coloured, buxom brunette, she recollected ten years back, into the grey-haired, silent,

dull-eyed creature, who was drugging herself so deliberately. The victim herself admitted as much,—that she smoked opium advisedly in the endeavour to banish the memory of some poignant experience, the details of which she never revealed, even in confidential moments. And so life had gone on ever since Aileen More had come to live in Fryfeld village. Month after month, the atmosphere of that ancient cottage on its outskirts became increasingly charged with something of vague menace, hinting at a vague climax. Unknown to Aileen the climax had come that very morning—that very moment. The danger, long lingering at the door, had entered the house.

“America!” repeated Miss Danby, recalling the girl from the window. “Yes, I must go to America at once—next week, if possible. You need not come with me, Aileen: indeed, I prefer that you should not. Stay in this cottage, and I shall allow you a reasonable income.”

“Edith!” Aileen was wholly bewildered by this sudden insistence upon an unexpected journey. “What do you mean?”

The tormented woman did not reply, but looked sadly and a trifle enviously at the slim grace of the girl’s somewhat boyish figure, at her bobbed hair of feathery gold, at her distressed blue eyes and charmingly flushed face. There was no question but that Aileen was delicately lovely with that alluring air of feminine dependence upon masculine strength, which attracts men to protect forlorn beauty. And the girl in her budding womanhood, graciously fresh as a spring flower, had already attracted at least one genuine admirer. “Does Mr. Hustings love you?”

asked Edith abruptly, and ignoring the question so vehemently put.

"I think so—I don't know—I can't be sure—perhaps. He looks much, but says little. And—and what has he to do with our conversation?"

"Much; as I intend to cross over to America as soon as is possible—alone. And I should like to leave England with the certain knowledge that Mr. Hustings will marry you—for protection."

Aileen pouted resentfully, so peremptory was the speech. "I don't want to marry and be protected. I can look after myself. I am not in love with Mr. Hustings, although I like him. And I certainly don't want to leave the only friend I have in the wide, wide world."

"Child, you must marry and leave me," said Miss Danby with a desponding look. "It is for your good that I speak and I sacrifice much in so speaking. God knows that I love you dearly—so dearly, that I refuse to drag you down."

"Oh, Edith!" Aileen was both distressed and deeply moved. "Why do you talk in this dreadful way. I know you have troubles, of which I know little: Dr. Slanton who persecutes you to marry him—your health broken down by years of war-work in hospitals—this terrible opium habit, and—and—what else, what else? There is something in your life, which worries you constantly, and which you won't tell me. Yet if you do, I may be able to help you."

"Perhaps! Maybe! I don't know! But——" Edith broke off tremulously and once more her eyes strayed to the trees across the lawn. Suddenly she braced herself and spoke with a resumption of her

hospital authority. "Come here, child. I shall tell you as much as I dare tell you."

The younger woman obeyed, crossing the old-fashioned parlour to kneel again beside the chair and to look up trustfully into her friend's ravaged face. Whatever might be hidden behind that mask of torment: however dreadful the happenings, which had created its pain, the girl saw nothing there but gentle love and kind protection. "I don't care what you have done," she cried with defiant confidence, "you will always be to me the best of women; the sweetest and dearest of friends." And her fresh red lips touched caressingly the grey lips of the face bending over hers.

"Some day you may change your mind," muttered Miss Danby, in a trembling voice. "I—I—I"—she held her breath, then leaned back in her chair with a long-drawn sigh. Shaken by some overpowering emotion to the core of her being, she fought silently to regain self-control. Finally she succeeded: checked the climbing sorrow in her throat, and spoke with carefully calculated calmness. "Listen to me, Aileen, while I place before you, things as they were, and things as they are. A twice-told tale you will say. Yes! Yet one to be repeated, since who knows what the day may bring forth."

"What can the day bring forth, other than usual?" asked Aileen, wonderingly.

"Hold your tongue," commanded Miss Danby, harshly, although her caressing hand, smoothing the girl's hair, intimated that the harshness was largely feigned. "Listen. I tell you. Before the war I was secretary to a clever man—an inventor—a scientist—"

"My father, George More. I know that."

“Did I not say that I was repeating a twice-told tale? Don’t interrupt me more than you can help. When the war came, I gave up my post and took up nursing, sometimes at home, sometimes abroad. It was at a base-hospital in France that I nursed your brother Roderick. I loved him, if you remember, when I was your father’s secretary.”

“Yes! Yes!” broke in the girl, eagerly. “I was only ten years of age at that time, and Roddy told me that you were to be my new sister.”

“I hoped to be,” sighed Edith with a yearning look in her dark eyes, “but your father objected to the marriage, because I was poor and of humble birth. I did not meet Roderick again, until he was brought in, badly wounded, to the hospital. It was cruel, cruel. You were a dear little child, Aileen. I loved you, I loved Roderick, I admired your father; we could all have been so happy together. Now! Now! Ah me! Roderick is dead, your father is missing, and I am a wreck, old before my time, heart-broken, despairing.”

“Poor dear, poor dear,” cooed Aileen, fondling the hand she held, “but don’t lose heart, Edith. Hope for the best.”

“Your youth speaks,” cried the forlorn woman, bitterly. “How can I hope, when my beloved is lying in a foreign grave; when that man Slanton persecutes me to be his wife. Beast!” she clenched her teeth and frowned hatred. “As you know, Aileen, he was the doctor of the hospital, where I nursed Roderick, and even then paid his addresses to me. Ugh!” she shuddered. “But I loved your brother; yes, and he loved me, when we met again. All the passion of our early years revived. Even though he

was sick unto death, we became engaged. He gave me this ring"—Edith kissed the golden emblem of past delight—"Dear, dear Roderick! And thinking he would die—there was every chance of that—he made a will, leaving me his income of two thousand a year. And then—and then——" the woman's hands rose in trembling despair, and her voice died away in a faint, sorrowful cry.

"Then he died," whispered the girl, ending the sentence and burying her face in Edith's lap.

For quite three minutes there was an eloquent silence, the two remaining motionless with overpowering emotion. "Yes. He died of—of—his wounds," whispered Edith in a strained, unnatural voice, "and I was left, a rich woman to face the persecutions of Cuthbert Slanton. Beast!" she cried again, and fiercely, "he has no love for me, for anyone but himself. It is only the money he desires—the two thousand a year which my dead love left to me. When the War was over, I returned to London, and went to see your father—to insist that he should take back the money, so that I might prove to his hard heart that my love for Roderick was selfless; also that I might be set free from the persecution of Slanton. But your father had disappeared some months before. The house was shut up."

Aileen sat with her hands folded loosely on her lap, and looked sadly at a sandy-haired cat, lying comfortably before the fire. "Father gave up all his scientific work, during the war, and took a Government appointment, with the idea of making aeroplanes more perfect. He had wonderful powers of invention you know, Edith. He sent me to school at Brighton, and only wrote me occasionally. Just before the Armistice was

signed, his letters ceased, and he was reported as missing. Since then I have heard nothing from him; nothing of him."

"What has become of him I wonder?" Edith spoke more to herself than to Aileen.

"No one knows. It was said that the Germans took him prisoner. But I can't believe that, as, by this time, he would have been set free. I think he must be dead, else he would have returned. But Father never cared for me much," sighed the girl sadly, "he tolerated me, but adored Roddy. Oh, how he loved Roddy."

"Not sufficiently to allow him to gain happiness by marrying me," continued the gaunt, grey woman, harshly, "but let that pass. My darling is dead, your father is missing, as I learned at the War Office. I looked you up at your school, Aileen, but found that you had gone into a London office, as a clerk."

"Yes! The man with whom Father left money for me ran away. I was stranded. Then you found me, you angel," Aileen flung herself forward to embrace Miss Danby's waist, "and brought me here to live in peace and plenty. Oh you are good to me, Edith. How can I ever, ever thank you for all your kindness."

"Don't talk nonsense," retorted the other, sharply. "I offered Roderick's money to you, only to be refused. The least I could do was to ask you to live with me, as my companion, so that you might enjoy some of the money. Oh enjoy—enjoy!" she looked round the old-fashioned parlour contemptuously, "and in an isolated furnished cottage. I should have done better for you than this."

Aileen rose to her feet, and also glanced round the

room, with its Victorian decorations, and crowded furniture. It was old and shabby, but somehow comfortable in a home-like way, soothing to the nerves. "I don't know that I want anything better than this, Edith," she said slowly. "After all the trials of the war and my solitary life in London as a badly-paid clerk, I love this isolation, and middle-class comfort, which you needn't despise. We can be quite happy here so I don't see why you should want to go to America."

Miss Danby jumped up and flung out her arms recklessly. "Don't you understand that I wish to escape from that beast, Slanton?" she almost shouted, and with the look of a tragedy queen, "Does he give me any peace? If he isn't in this room twice a week, he worries me with letters nearly every day! I can't stand it; he will drive me crazy."

"Why don't you appeal to the police for protection?" asked Aileen, with a flash of anger, for she also detested the doctor fervently.

Miss Danby sank back into the chair with a ghastly look: "I—I—I—daren't."

"Has he any hold over you?" demanded the girl, shrewdly.

"No! No! No! Of course he hasn't. Why—why should you think that?" Edith was now white to the lips, but put the question with an uneasy laugh.

"How can I help thinking it? This is a free country, and men are not allowed to persecute women, as Dr. Slanton is persecuting you. For some reason—I can't guess what it is—you are afraid of him. But whatever the cause may be, better face the worst and ask for the aid of the Law."

"I can't—I shan't," breathed Edith, sullenly.

"You must," urged the girl vigorously, "I'll stand by you. This man is driving you to smoke opium: to shut yourself up in this isolated cottage. He seems to make you do what he likes, even to keeping that photograph of him on the mantelpiece. Beast! I use your own word, Edith. Beast!"

Miss Danby flushed redly and furiously in the face of this pointed rebuke, and when Aileen hurled the last word at her, she deliberately rose, took the photograph from the mantelpiece and held it before the girl's eyes. "Look at him!" she said, dourly. "Number 666. That is the number of the Beast in Revelations."

Aileen stared hard at the lean saturnine face in the picture with its heavy square jaw, and piercing little eyes. A cruel, cunning face—the face of a reckless scoundrel, who would stop at nothing to gain his ends. "Oh, he is Number 666 right enough," she said, scornfully, "all the same I would defy him and his devilments, whatever they may be."

"I do defy him and them," cried Edith, viciously, and, ripping the photograph out of its silver frame, she tore it into four pieces, flung them on the carpet and stamped on them. "There! That shows you how much I care," she ended with a defiant laugh, which yet had in it, an echo of fear.

"Good!" Aileen nodded her satisfaction, "And now go further. The Law——"

"No!" the woman quailed, and again her face became the colour of ashes, "it is impossible for me to appeal to the Law. The only way of escape is to cross the Atlantic."

"That's running away: and running away isn't playing the game."

"How do you know what game I am playing with Slanton?" demanded Edith, in fierce tones, and her eyes became hard.

"I know nothing, because you won't tell me anything. But I can't understand why you should let this man make a hell of your life. If I were you"—Aileen stiffened her fragile body and flashed defiance from her very observant blue eyes—"I should fight him—fight him to the last ditch."

"And be ruined when I fell into it," muttered Edith wretchedly. "Impossible!—Impossible! Yet I must do something!" and for the third time she looked at the belt of stone-pines.

"Why do you keep staring in that direction?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing!" said the other, hastily, "I am only trying to find a solution for my troubles." She stopped speaking, then stepped forward to face the girl squarely. "If I were a bad, wicked woman, would you stand by me?" she hurled the question almost savagely at Aileen.

"Yes, I would. I don't believe you are bad," answered the girl, steadily, "you aren't greedy over money, or you wouldn't want to give me, or Father, the income Roderick left you. You are not a society vampire, or you wouldn't stay here at the Back-of-Beyond. You don't seem to gain anything by being wicked, therefore, you can't be wicked, so far as I can see. We can talk of this later, when Dr. Slanton comes on one of his persecuting visits. This time he will find that he has me to face as well as you."

"No! No! You mustn't——"

"Yes I must. If you haven't pluck, I have, and I don't care what you say, or he says. I'm going to fight. Do you hear. Fight! Meanwhile your nerves

are screaming from your opium silliness, and this hot room doesn't help them to improve. A little air,"—she walked to the window, raised the lowered sash, and looked over her shoulder—"come for a stroll."

"Too tired," refused Edith languidly, and stooped to gather the sleeping sandy cat on to her lap. "Take Toby out for a run on the lawn. But don't go into the wood, or you'll get your feet wet. Toby has been scratching at the door for the last five minutes."

"Keep Amelia safe then," advised Aileen, nodding towards the cat, and she threw open the parlour door to admit a joyous wire-haired terrier, who immediately began to race wildly round the room. "Toby. Toby. Behave yourself."

But Toby had no desire to obey, since he possessed to the full, that usual amount of original sin, inherent in his breed. With a victorious bark he sprang for Edith's lap and bit Amelia, who, nothing daunted, responded with a vigorous scratch. Pandemonium ensued, as the women tried to part the combatants: until Amelia settled the question by squirming out of Edith's arms to dart out of the window with Toby in full cry after her swift heels. Aileen bent herself to step out in pursuit, hearing Miss Danby's warning cry, as she sped, like Atalanta across the lawn. "Don't go into the wood," cried the woman, and it seemed to the girl as if the distant voice was charged with dread.

But Aileen was compelled to neglect this advice, if Amelia was to be saved from the eager jaws of Toby. The flying animals made straight for the stone-pines, and the girl was shortly almost knee-deep in bracken under the dripping trees. Toby just missed his prey by a hair-breadth, for Amelia was up and over the mouldering red brick wall like a flash of lightning,

leaving her enemy to bark and caper at the base. But Aileen paid no attention to his antics. She was staring dumb-founded at the body of a man, over which she had stumbled. It lay amongst the yellowing grasses, and wet brown ferns, with a handkerchief laid over the face and with the hands crossed on the breast. For a moment or two the shaken girl could neither move, nor cry out, but stared and stared and stared at that thing which was lying so stilly amongst the jumbled wreckage of autumn. Then movement came back to her. She bent down cautiously and lifted the handkerchief, to behold a frozen face with four letters tattooed across a discoloured forehead. "C-A-I-N" spelled the girl, dumbly. "Cain!" Then she examined the face, and became white with terror. For the face was that of Cuthbert Slanton.

CHAPTER II

THE BEST POLICY

NOTWITHSTANDING her youthful years and fragile looks, Aileen More was remarkably strong-willed and self-possessed. Naturally, she endured an age-long sixty seconds of sheer horror, when stumbling so unexpectedly upon Edith's enemy lying dead in the grounds of Edith's cottage. The thought of a possible explanation flashed into her mind immediately, as she recalled the late conversation; and a vivid sense of her friend's peril suggested instant action. After ascertaining that Slanton really was lifeless, she picked up Toby, who circled distrustfully round the corpse, and returned swiftly to the cottage. Here a fresh shock awaited her. Edith was lying unconscious on the floor near the open window.

"Jenny! Jenny!" Aileen flew to open the door and summon the servant. "Bring a jug of water at once. Miss Danby has fainted. Get the smelling salts and sal volatile from my bedroom. Be quick, be quick."

Issuing these directions rapidly, she crossed the passage to shut up the terrier in the opposite room; then returned to attend to the insensible woman. Kneeling beside her, the girl loosened her collar, chafed her hands, placed a cushion under her head, and did all that was possible at the moment, to better the situation. Jenny, a stout red-haired damsel, not over-

gifted with brains, and extremely stolid on all and every occasion, tardily arrived with a jug in one hand and two bottles in the other. "Lor, Miss, whatever did missus go off like this for?" asked Jenny, heavily.

"A sleepless night—the heat of the room—Oh, I don't know. Here, give me the jug!" and Aileen dashed the water over Edith's white face. Very wisely, she decided to say as little as possible to the maid, who was known to be a notorious gossip. Then, as Edith showed no signs of returning to her senses, she ordered Jenny to help place her on the sofa. "You lift her feet," she said, slipping her hands under Miss Danby's arms. "Careful now."

The two women accomplished the transfer from floor to couch fairly easily, as Edith was little else than skin and bone, owing to the wasting effect of secret troubles. The smelling salts produced some signs of revival, for Miss Danby heaved a long weary sigh, half-opened her eyes, and closed them again, listlessly. "Get me a glass of water and a teaspoon," commanded Aileen, uncorking the sal volatile bottle: and these came to hand in less time than might have been expected from Jenny's cumbersome appearance. "Now you can go. She'll soon be herself again. I'll call you if I want anything."

Thus banished at this thrilling moment, the overgrown domestic retired reluctantly, overwhelmed with justifiable curiosity as to the reason for the unexpected fainting of her mistress. Despite her stolidity and limited capacity, she inherited all the easily-aroused suspicion of the lower-class scandalmonger, and had long since guessed that there was "something queer" about Miss Danby. Aileen knew that the girl was a born mischief-maker, so wisely took the precaution of

getting rid of her, lest Edith should reveal too much, when she regained her senses. The situation was so strained and suggestively dangerous, that it was necessary to move discreetly, if a public scandal was to be averted. But indeed, Aileen, watching her unhappy friend, slowly coming back to consciousness, did not see how it could be avoided in any way. The presence of the dead body in the wood must needs be explained, and the explanation would most surely bring to light uncomfortable matters best left in the dark. "It is the climax sure enough," said Aileen, and, unconsciously, she said it aloud.

"Climax!" muttered Miss Danby, confusedly, "what climax?"

"Never mind," said the girl quickly, "take another sip of sal volatile, and I'll get the brandy. Feel better don't you dear?"

Edith sat up weakly, pushing back her grey hair with a bewildered expression. "Feel better?" she echoed, brokenly, "why—what—when——?"

"You fainted," explained Aileen, quietly, and stepped over to the side-board to fill a wine-glass with brandy.

"Fainted! Fainted! Why—what—when?—oh I am sick—very sick!" and the miserable woman rocked herself to and fro, trembling violently.

"Hush! Hush!" Aileen held the glass to her lips, "drink this. Lie back, and in a few minutes you will be able to talk."

"But I don't—don't understand."

"Rest! Rest! We can speak later."

Speaking coaxingly, the girl adjusted the cushion, made her patient lie back comfortably, and stroked her forehead with a gentle hand. Shortly Edith closed

her eyes and became more placid, although every now and then, she moaned pitifully. Aileen crossed to the window silently, and as silently drew down the lower sash, looking meanwhile—as Edith had done several times that morning—over the lawn to the belt of stone-pines. Knowing what lay underneath those pines, she shuddered and wondered if, indeed, Edith knew also. It was evident that she did, else why her constant looking in that ominous direction, and why the unexpected fainting? Then again, the dead man had been her enemy, whom she frankly detested, whom she openly longed to get rid of. Had she accomplished this by violence, and was the projected journey to America a flight from justice? Aileen asked herself these dreadful questions, and the answers which suggested themselves filled her with dismay. Yet plausible as the answers were, the girl could not bring herself to believe that the best friend she had in the world had committed a cold-blooded murder. She comforted herself with the thought that there must be some exonerating circumstance, and that Edith would explain the circumstance in due time.

A low wailing cry from the sofa brought back Aileen in a hurry with an anxious face, and a rapidly-beating heart. She dreaded to hear what Edith might confess; yet knew that she must listen carefully, so as to plan future action. Assuring herself, by peering into the passage, that Jenny was not eavesdropping, she closed the door and returned to the sofa. Edith was sitting up, composed and apologetic, but smiling uneasily as she raised her eyes. "I don't know how I came to faint in this silly way," she said, with a foolish titter. "Probably the want of sleep last night."

"I thought that the opium made you sleep?" suggested Aileen, dryly.

"On and off: off and on," mumbled the other affecting lightness and swinging her legs on to the floor, "but I feel weak."

"Try and feel strong." Aileen's voice was still dry. "I have something very unpleasant to tell you."

Miss Danby winced, stood up and stationed herself on the hearth-rug. In her severely plain garb, now hanging so loosely on her tall figure, she looked miserably grey and gaunt. Her eyes did not meet those of Aileen, but stared over the lawn, as they had done previously. "Yes!" said the girl, immediately seizing the opening, "he is lying there."

"He—Who?" Miss Danby suddenly stiffened and looked as hard and grim as granite.

"Dr. Slanton!" retorted the other, bluntly.

"What is he doing there?"

"He isn't there."

"You said that he was."

"Only his body."

"Body! Body!" Edith's voice hinted at a scream, although she spoke hoarsely. "Do you mean to tell me that he is—he is—dead?" she whispered the last word, wild-eyed with panic.

Aileen nodded, looking straightly into her friend's eyes. She met therein an emotion, which made her recoil; not a human emotion, but one which suggested the animal, which lies dormant in all. A she-wolf peered out of those eyes—the merest hint of one—then again disappeared in a flood of fear, the new emotion overwhelming the old. "Murdered!" said Aileen, driving home the intensity of the moment.

"No! No!" Miss Danby shrank back against the mantelpiece, thrusting her two hands out before her, as if to ward off a blow, "It's—it's impossible."

"It is true. Come and see for yourself."

"I can't—I daren't!" her voice lowered to a horrified whisper.

"Why daren't you?" Aileen had recovered from her second of sick loathing when the animal strain had surged to the surface, and pursued her examination relentlessly. Even if this wretched woman was guilty, it was the duty of the girl she had succoured to stand by her in the hour of her need.

"I'm afraid!" faltered Edith, trembling. "He troubled me when alive, so why should I let him trouble me now that he is dead? Dead!" her voice steadied and leaped an octave, "Who killed him?"

"I should ask you that, Edith, and I do."

"What do you mean? I know nothing about the matter," her words poured out in spate, tumbling furiously over one another, "I have not been to the wood—it's impossible—you are mistaken. That beast can't be there: he isn't dead. Men like Cuthbert Slanton cannot die. They live—live to torment unhappy women," and she paused, breathless with wordy haste.

"Unhappy women sometimes take the law into their own hands," hinted Aileen, and again came the torrent of denial.

"Why do you say that—what do you mean—I know nothing—why should I know anything—you said you were my friend—you know you did."

"I am your friend," came the steady answer, "and for that very reason I wish to get at the truth."

"The truth—the truth. I know nothing of the

truth. Why come to me? I am ignorant of everything."

The girl, controlling herself amazingly, placed her hands on the woman's shoulders, "Can you swear to that?"

"I can—I can—why shouldn't I?" Edith shook her off. "How dare you think——"

Aileen interrupted. "It is not what I think, but what the police will think."

Miss Danby clutched at her breast and gasped painfully, her mouth opening and shutting with never a sound, for one long, long minute. Then, "You won't—tell the police of—of—this."

"Edith, it is impossible to keep this thing quiet. Dr. Slanton is dead, and his body lies in the wood yonder, so——"

"We can bury it!" Miss Danby clutched Aileen round the waist and whispered the suggestion hoarsely, "You and I—to-night—when there's no one about."

The girl pulled herself away, turning even paler than she already was. This hint at concealment was in itself an admission of guilt. "I lend myself to no such underhand doings," she said sternly, and her face grew bleak. "If we acted so madly, think what would happen. Dr. Slanton would be missed—it is known that he comes here—to the village, to the cottage. Inquiries would be made, and if the—the"—she shuddered and brought out the ominous word with an effort—"grave was found, both you and I would be accused of murdering him."

"But we are innocent. You know nothing—I know nothing," urged Edith, twisting her thin hands in a frenzy of fear. "I haven't seen Slanton for two weeks—you know I have not."

"I don't know what took place last night," was the significant answer.

"Nor do I—nor do I," moaned Edith, and flung herself on the sofa, crying.

Aileen sat down beside her, and took one of the limp hands between her own cold fingers: for cold they were, and cold she was to her heart's centre, so heavily did this nightmare horror weigh her down. "You know that I am your true friend, Edith—that I mean to stand by you, whatever happens. Tell me all you know—all you have done. Did you kill this man—not thinking to kill him perhaps—but in a moment of passion?"

"I know nothing, nothing," came from the woman in muffled tones, as she buried her face in the sofa-cushion.

"Think! Think! Had you been smoking opium? Were you unconscious of what you were doing? Drugged by the black smoke, you might have killed blindly."

"I know nothing!"

"You must know," urged Aileen. "Did you quarrel when Slanton came last night?"

"He never came: I never saw him."

"He did come; you did see him," insisted the girl, fiercely, for she realized clearly that the worst must come to the worst, if she failed to gain the miserable creature's confidence. "He insulted you, didn't he? And you struck at him, not knowing what you were doing? And afterwards, coming to your senses, you grew afraid and dragged the body into the wood to hide it."

"As you seem to be so certain of my guilt, it is useless for me to deny anything!" said Miss Danby, bitterly, and sat up rigidly obstinate.

The girl wrung her hands, desperately. "How can

I help you, when you won't be plain with me—when you refuse to confess.”

“I have nothing to confess,” retorted the woman, sullenly, “you construct the whole scene of what did not happen, so glibly, that it is evident you think me guilty. A fine friend you are, I must say.”

“You won't allow me to be your friend!” Aileen rose, and the extreme terror of the position forced her to brace up and face the worst. “Can't you understand that honesty is the best policy. We can't keep this murder quiet.”

“You run on too fast. It may not be a murder.”

“It is a murder, else why should the body be lying in yonder wood? And why did you tattoo the name ‘Cain’ on the forehead? You did it.”

Edith clasped and unclasped her hands, restlessly. “I did nothing of the sort—this is the first time I've heard of the thing. How can I have tattooed the forehead, when I have no instruments to do so, and would not know how to use them, if they were in my possession? Cain!” she rose to pace the room, swiftly, as if to work off her superabundant emotion in exercise. “Why should I brand that name on Slanton's forehead?”

“I don't know. I know nothing.”

“Neither do I,” retorted Miss Danby, throwing up her hands despairingly, “the whole thing is a mystery to me.”

“Then the mystery must be solved by the police,” said Aileen, moving past the woman, and towards the door.

Edith caught her by the arm. “Where are you going?”

“Down to the village to see the policeman.”

“You’ll ruin me if you go?”

“I’ll ruin you and myself also if I don’t go. Honesty is the best policy.”

“You said that before, parrot that you are. Aileen, don’t make bad worse. In some way Slanton came here last night; in some way he has been murdered. But I swear that I know nothing of the matter.”

“In that case, you can’t object to my going to the policeman in the village.”

“You believe that I am guilty?”

“No! I can’t—I can’t,” cried the girl, trying to persuade herself that she spoke truly, “you couldn’t have done it.”

A cynical smile curved the grey lips of the other. “You blow hot and cold,” she sneered, contemptuously, “one minute you say this: another minute you say that. Ah well—I am guilty.”

Aileen cried out in horror. “You admit it?”

Edith shook her head, positively. “I am only saying what the policeman will say—what the judge and jury will say.”

“The judge and jury,” echoed Aileen, faintly, the full danger of the situation coming home to her.

“Yes! If you go down to the village and tell what you conceive to be the truth,” said Miss Danby, with a shrug, and, although her face was deathly white, she spoke firmly, “everything is against me. I hated Slanton—he came here frequently—we quarrelled incessantly—you overheard our quarrels—Jenny, always with her ear to the key-hole, heard them also. Slanton is murdered you say, and his body lies on my grounds. Who will believe that I am guiltless?”

"I believe, unless you did it in a moment of frenzy."

"Then you don't believe," Edith laughed contemptuously, flung back her head, tossed her arms. "Well then, go. I can meet the worst, if the worst is to come, as it most assuredly will come, if you betray me."

"I am not betraying you. I am acting for the best."

"When I am under lock and key you will think differently."

"I will stand by you."

"Are you standing by me now?"

"Yes I am. You know I am. It is better for you to face the lesser danger of admission, than the greater danger of concealment."

Miss Danby reflected for a moment, then went to look into the mirror over the fire-place and smooth her disordered grey hair. "Suppose I kill myself while you are away, preparing my uncomfortable future."

"Then I shall know you are guilty," rejoined Aileen, promptly.

"You are frank." Edith wheeled round with a frown.

"Because I believe you to be innocent, unless you unconsciously——"

"Bah! Hot and cold again in your blowing. Well, for your comfort I say that I am innocent—that I don't intend to kill myself, and you——?"

"I shall discover the truth, somewhere, somehow."

"The truth! What is the truth?" questioned Edith, cynically, after the fashion of Pontius Pilate. "I should like to know it myself. How did Slanton come to the wood, who killed him, who branded him, and why was he murdered and so tattooed? Difficult

questions these, my dear, and I shall be asked to answer the lot. H'm! Here is a new Hell to walk through. Are you ready to walk along with me?"

"Yes! I won't leave you until you are out of the Hell you speak of."

"Aileen!" Miss Danby moved forward swiftly, laid her arms round the girl, and kissed her impetuously. "You are a dear child and my best friend. Do what you will. I agree with you that honesty is the best policy. But"—she removed her arm from Aileen's neck, and returned to the hearth-rug—"nothing will be said, or done by me to prove that it is the best."

"Edith! Edith! You must defend yourself."

"There is no defence," stated the grey woman, coldly.

"But—but——"

"There is no defence! I know nothing—I have seen nothing. I am completely at the mercy of circumstances."

The girl looked imploringly at the inflexible face, now impassive as that of the Sphinx. There was no evidence of fear, no sign of yielding, so she turned and left the room. Her heart ached for Edith, and she fervently wished that common-sense did not compel her to bring this further trouble upon one already burdened. Nevertheless, she felt that the way she was taking was the right way, and went upstairs to make ready for her errand. This did not take long, for in ten minutes Aileen descended drawing on her gloves. Before opening the front door, she peered into the parlour. Miss Danby was still standing on the hearth-rug but her gaze was directed towards the window, staring as formerly, over the lawn to the belt

of stone-pines, which sheltered the lifeless body of her enemy. Only God knew what her thoughts were but Aileen trembled to think what those thoughts might be.

It was a pale and very perplexed young woman, who hurried down the tangled avenue of the isolated cottage, out through the crazy wooden gates, swinging between weather-worn brick pillars, and on to the broad highway. Under the showering autumnal foliage, discarded by the bordering elm-trees, between the dwindling leafage of the red-berried hedges, she walked swiftly along the road to where it curved round the bare stubbled fields, towards Fryfeld. Everything looked sad and forlorn beneath the sullen grey clouds, moving sluggishly at the hest of the damp-blowing winds. The brooding mood of earth and sky was also Aileen's mood, for she, likewise, felt forlorn and sad, deserted and despondent. The presence of the body in that sinister wood, the silence of Edith, and the crying horror of the whole unfathomable mystery, quenched the light of her youth with most unholy gloom. She was inclined to risk immediate flight from this nightmare; to run and run and run, everlastingly, until the ghastly thing was left uncounted leagues behind. But the recollection of Edith's kindness, of Edith's peril, brought her to a halt in the village street. And yonder stood Constable Kemp, the one and only guardian of the peace in Fryfeld. One word from her, and he would hurry hot-footed to find the dead man, maybe to arrest Edith, as it were, red-handed.

Suddenly the idea of appealing to the higher authorities at Tarhaven some eight miles distant, came into her mind. She immediately turned aside into

the grocer-shop-post-office at her elbow to enter the telephone-box. A few brief words committed the tragedy to world-wide publicity, and having brought about the worst through the necessity of facing the worst, Aileen went to inform Constable Kemp. The smile with which he saluted her was speedily wiped off his face, when she abruptly addressed him: "There is a murdered man lying in Miss Danby's wood. I have called up the Tarhaven police. Come."

CHAPTER III

FACING THE WORST

NOONDAY brought a motor-car from Tarhaven, which decanted Detective-Inspector Trant, two of his underlings and the Divisional-surgeon, at the gates of the cottage. Already the ill-news—travelling proverbially fast—was known in Fryfeld, and a gradually-increasing stream of excited villagers surged eagerly along the curved road towards the scene of the tragedy. Men and women, also children, morbidly curious, invaded the grounds of the solitary dwelling, to stare fearfully at its grim walls of grey stone, and pointed roof of sombre slates. They peered in at the windows, tapped nervously on the green-painted door, rambled here, there, and everywhere, generally taking possession of the place. Constable Kemp was unable to cope with the throng single-handed, so contented himself with standing guard over the corpse, now hidden decorously under a tarpaulin. This mysterious crime was the most sensational event which had ever happened in Fryfeld, and its somnolent inhabitants were resolved to make the most of it. As the village wit remarked, shrewdly, "We don't kill a pig every day."

Immediately Trant arrived, he proceeded to deal masterfully with the situation, which was much too free and easy for his liking. Ejecting the morbid sightseers bluffly, he ordered the gates to be closed, and placed a policeman before them, so that no one should be able to go out, or to come in. Afterwards

he looked at the body, left the doctor to determine the cause of death and considered the scanty report of the constable. Kemp declared that an inquisitive urchin, overhearing Miss More's revelation in the village street, had broadcast the information, so that the inhabitants had descended in a body on the cottage. All he could do and did do, was to request Miss More to return to the house, and stay inside with her friend, Miss Danby, until the arrival of the Inspector to take charge of the case. Afterwards, he had covered the body with the tarpaulin, and while guarding it had kept a strict watch on the cottage—visible from the wood—so that neither of the women should leave without his knowledge. Finally, reported Kemp, he had searched the dead man's pockets, and now handed over to his superior officer the articles which had been found therein.

These consisted of a return half-ticket from Cornby—the nearest railway station—to the Liverpool Street Terminus in London, a bunch of keys, a gold watch, which was run down, some loose silver with a mixture of coppers, and a well worn pocket-book of red leather, containing Treasury notes to the value of five pounds, together with some memoranda slips, several visiting cards, and a few letters. Trant read these last rapidly, but there was not a single hint to be found in the writings, likely to connect the deceased with Fryfeld, with the cottage, or with its tenants. "Dr. Cuthbert Slanton, Plantagenet Hospital, Chelsea," read out Trant from a visiting card. "So that was your name," he added, looking down on the corpse. "I wonder why you were given this new one," and his finger traced the four letters on the puffed discoloured forehead. "If we could learn why you

were called Cain, we should learn who got rid of you. And how were you got rid of?"

The surgeon looked up and answered for the dead man. "There is a smell of opium," he said, sniffing, "and if I am correct, the man was drugged."

"Poisoned by opium?"

"I can't be sure until I make a further examination. After the post mortem I shall be able to speak decisively," the doctor rose, brushing withered herbage from his knees. "It can't be done here."

"I'll have the body taken down to the village later. Meanwhile, you stay here, doctor, and you, Jeringham," to the other policeman, "while I go into the cottage to question these women. Kemp, come with me."

Midway across the lawn, Trant halted the constable, "What do you know about these women, Kemp?"

"Ladies, sir. Miss Edith Danby and her companion, Miss Aileen More. They rented this cottage furnished a year ago—Miss Danby did I mean—and have lived here, very quietly, ever since."

"Do you know them: have you spoken to them?"

"Not to Miss Danby, sir. I have caught a glimpse of her wandering about the country, but she never came into the village, or went up to London. Miss More spoke to me several times, about the 'bus that runs to Cornby, three miles distant, and about various trivial things. She's a very pretty girl, sir, and quite a lady is Miss Aileen More."

"More! More!" the Inspector pinched his chin musingly. "Where have I heard that name before. More—George More! Ha! Of course—fifteen years ago. And to forget. Ha! There's gratitude for you!"

"Yes, sir," said Kemp, stolidly, quite at a loss what to make of this cryptic speech, "of course, sir."

Trant paid no attention to him, but resumed his walk across the lawn. At the door he halted again. "Who is the owner of this cottage?"

"Squire Richard Hustings, who lives in the old Manor House at the end of Fryfeld, beyond the church. He's a lawyer, sir, and goes daily to Town."

"Is he intimate with his tenants?"

"Not with Miss Danby, sir, I think," replied the constable, doubtfully, "he comes occasionally to the cottage. I rather think, sir, that he admires Miss More."

Trant nodded. "He's a young man then."

"Twenty-eight, or thereabouts, sir. Was a captain during the war and got the D.S.O. Everyone about here loves him."

"And he loves Miss Aileen More. I think you mentioned that as the name of the girl. H'm! Besides Mr. Hustings, did these ladies receive any visitors?"

"I never saw any particular person come, or go, sir, except the rector and he only called once. But, as the ladies stayed away from church, he didn't call again to my knowledge. Dr. Slanton was the one and only person who came—and he came often—to see the ladies."

"The dead man. Ha!" Trant looked up alertly, "He came often you say?"

"Every other week, sir. I used to see him step off the 'bus from Cornby, and get on it again, so's to catch his train."

"Did he ever stay here for the night? In the cottage: in the village?"

“Not to my knowing, sir. He came and went like a swallow as you might say.”

“And now his body, ticketed ‘Cain,’ is lying in yonder wood,” mused Trant, raising his eyebrows. “H’m! Anyone in the cottage besides the ladies?”

“Jenny Walton, the servant, sir, a girl of eighteen.”

“What does she say about them?”

“Only that Miss Danby is queer.”

“Queer! Queer! What does she mean by queer?”

“I can’t say, sir. But I do say,” went on the constable, upon whose susceptible heart Aileen’s beauty had made an impression, “that gossip as Jenny Walton is, she hasn’t a worse word in her mouth than ‘queer.’ And she only uses that about Miss Danby. She’s very well satisfied with her place, is Jenny Walton.”

“Have you seen her this morning?”

“She came out when I came up with Miss More, sir, and seemed all of a fluster like. Miss More told her to hold her tongue and pushed her into the house.”

“Ha! Miss More told Jenny Walton to hold her tongue, did she?”

The policeman nodded uneasily, thinking that he was unconsciously implicating the girl he so greatly admired. “And told her to wait until you came from Tarhaven, sir. I only think that Miss More wants things put straight,” ended the man, hurriedly.

“They are certainly crooked enough now,” commented Trant, and raised his hand to the large brass knocker, which adorned the green-painted door.

The Detective-Inspector was tall and thin, with a closely clipped grey moustache, and a fringe of closely clipped grey hair round the dome of his bald head. His face generally wore a severe expression, the result of official self-control; but his light blue eyes beamed

occasionally with kindly glances, and when he smiled, his whole being was transformed into the semblance of a benign deity, prone to mercy. Publicly, Trant had the reputation of being a just and honourable officer, strict in his dealings with the criminal fraternity; privately, he possessed the common sense, arising from long experience, to know that there is a soul of good in all things evil. And that soul he was always looking for, so as to temper justice with mercy. Édith Danby was more fortunate than she knew, to have so reasonable a man in charge of such a baffling and suspicious case.

Aileen, with a pale and troubled face, opened the door, and an expression of grateful relief, which the Inspector was swift to notice, came into her eyes. "I am so glad you have come," she said, impetuously, "Miss Danby is in a dreadful state of mind, and wants this matter cleared up."

"Very naturally, very naturally," remarked the officer, with a searching glance at her youth and beauty and manifest distress. Then he added abruptly, "You are Miss Aileen More—the companion of Miss Danby?"

"Yes!"

"Is your father George More, the inventor—the man who experiments with wireless matters?"

"Yes. Do you know my father?"

"I did know him," said Trant slowly.

"Oh!" Aileen grasped the man's arm, "then you may know where he is?"

The Inspector shook his head, "I heard that he disappeared just before the Armistice, but, so far, nothing has been heard of him." He stared at the disappointed girl, as if about to say something par-

ticular, then checked himself all of a sudden. "Lead me to Miss Danby," he commanded with abrupt sharpness, "and you, Kemp, stay by this door. Let no one go out, or come in."

The constable saluted, closed the front door and took up a watchful position outside, while Aileen, with compressed lips, silently conducted the Inspector into the old-fashioned parlour. Here, the woman he sought was seated on the sofa, staring into the fire, and with her hands loosely folded in her lap. She did not even glance round when the new-comer entered, but her hands involuntarily clasped themselves tightly. Trant noted this sub-conscious betrayal of repressed emotion, but, making no comment, examined his surroundings with meticulous care. The flowering wall-paper, against which hung antiquated steel-engravings; the flowering carpet, splashed riotously with gaudy roses; the round table, covered with an Indian, gold-embroidered blue cloth; the horse-hair sofa, the mahogany side-board, the ancient chairs, which did not match, and the many china ornaments, which decorated the mantelpiece in front of the oblong mirror in its tarnished gilt frame. All this jumble of quaint flotsam and jetsam, the trained observer took in at a glance, and then found time to address Miss Danby. "What do you know of this dead man in your wood?" he asked, coming to the point at once.

The harassed woman, rose tall and gaunt, looking at the officer with tormented sunken eyes, but perfectly self-possessed. "I know that he is Dr. Cuthbert Slanton, whom I first met during the war."

"Is that all?"

"What else is there to say?" she demanded, defiantly.

“For one thing, how does his dead body come to be lying in your grounds?”

“I don’t know.” Edith sat down again, crossed her legs and clasped her thin hands round her knees. But she did not meet Trant’s watchful eyes.

“When did you see him last?”

“A week ago—no, two weeks ago. My friend there was present when I saw him.”

Trant looked a question, which Aileen immediately answered, “I was in this room when Dr. Slanton paid Miss Danby a visit two weeks ago.”

“Have you seen him since?”

“No!” she replied with convincing emphasis, “not until I stumbled over his body this morning!” and she hurriedly explained how she had followed the animals into the wood. “It was just a chance that I went there,” she ended, coolly.

“H’m! Yes! Just a chance,” muttered the Inspector, pinching his chin, a sign of perplexity with him. Then he asked a sharp question. “What were you doing last night—at what time did you retire?”

“I read for the most part of the evening, then occupied myself with trimming a hat. It was close upon half-past nine o’clock when I went to bed.”

“Where is your bedroom?”

“Upstairs, immediately over this room.”

“Did you come down during the night?”

“No!” said Aileen, opening her eyes with manifest surprise, “why should I have come down? Once in bed, I stay in bed.”

“I see. You are a sound sleeper?”

“Very sound. I never wake from the moment I place my head on the pillow until the dawn comes.

White Nights, as the French call them, are unknown to me."

"Naturally!" agreed Trant, cordially. "Youthful health and an untroubled conscience banish insomnia. I understand then, that you heard nothing?"

"Nothing! It never occurred to me to lie awake, expecting to hear anything."

"Yet this cottage is very isolated, and the countryside is disturbed by the aftermath of the war. A burglar might have——"

Aileen laughed and shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Miss Danby and I have lived here for twelve months, in perfect peace and quietness."

The Inspector looked at her searchingly; but, as she neither flinched, nor flushed, nor lowered her eyes from his piercing gaze, he was convinced in his own mind that she was speaking truthfully, so far as the truth was known to her. "So it appears that you know nothing about this murder?"

Before the girl could assent to this tentative opinion, the older woman roused herself from a state of apparent indifference, to ask an abrupt question vehemently. "Are you sure that it is a case of murder?"

"It certainly looks very much like it," responded the officer, dryly.

"Why not a case of suicide?"

"Setting aside the difficulty of tattooing an unpleasant name on one's own forehead, why should a man bent upon suicide do such a silly thing?" Then, as Edith simply answered with a shrug of her shoulders, Trant continued: "Did Dr. Slanton ever suggest to you that he would commit suicide?"

"No. Why should he take me into his confidence?"

"Well—er—you were very intimate friends you

know, if one may judge from his frequent visits to this house."

"We were intimate only so far that he wanted me to marry him and I refused."

"And out of sorrow at your refusal, you suggest that he committed suicide?"

"I suggest nothing because I know nothing," said Miss Danby, coldly, "but if it is not a case of suicide I cannot understand how Dr. Slanton's body comes to be in my grounds."

"That is what I am here to find out," retorted the Inspector, quietly. "Come now, Miss Danby, your friend has accounted for her doings last night, so——"

"I am to account for mine," she broke in with a hard laugh. "Well, then, I played Patience for the first part of the evening, and afterwards read until I went to bed at ten o'clock."

"Oh!" Trant seized upon this admission, "so you remained in this room for thirty minutes after Miss More retired."

"Yes. Do you suggest that Dr. Slanton came to see me during that time" she asked, derisively, "and that I murdered him?"

"To use your own words, I suggest nothing. But the fact remains that you knew this man, and that his body is lying in the wood yonder."

"I don't dispute the facts, but I cannot explain the facts."

"Cannot, or will not?"

"Which you like," she returned, carelessly: then when Aileen would have spoken she signed to her to be silent. "Let him say what he likes and ask what he likes. Knowing nothing I can say nothing."

"Where is your bedroom?" asked Trant, following another trail.

"Across the passage. You can search it if you like." Miss Danby spoke insolently.

"Thank you. I shall do so at once!" and the officer promptly left the parlour to cross the passage and open the bedroom door. Immediately the dog, which Aileen had shut in earlier, bounced out with joyous barks. The girl caught him up in her arms. "For God's sake, Edith, tell the truth," she bent forward to whisper. "Let this man know everything. He looks kind."

"I have nothing to tell," said the gaunt woman, between her clenched teeth, and it was at this moment that Trant returned. "You have not been long," she taunted.

"Long enough to find this," said the officer, holding out an oddly-shaped pipe, with a tiny, tiny bowl and a long, long stem. "What is it?" he asked, unnecessarily.

"An opium pipe," replied Edith, knowing well the futility of denial. "I suffer from neuralgia, and smoke opium to relieve the pain."

"Did you smoke last night?"

"I did. And therefore slept too soundly to hear anything."

Hitherto Trant had pursued his examination in a somewhat desultory manner, peculiar to himself, and perhaps not strictly official. Now he sat down, placed the opium pipe in his pocket, and assumed an authoritative mien. "You did see Dr. Slanton last night," he insisted, positively, "here is the return half-ticket from Cornby to London, which was found in his pocket."

"I did not see him," was the sullen answer. "If he came down here last night, it was not to visit me."

"Has he other friends in the neighbourhood?"

"I don't know—I never asked him."

"Miss Danby," said the Inspector, sternly, and looking singularly severe, "you are playing with the Law, which I represent. To save yourself from being placed in a very dangerous position, it will be better for you to speak out."

"I have nothing to say," declared the woman, firmly.

"You have and you must say it. I warn you that what you say will be used in evidence against you."

"How dare you speak to me like this. I am not a criminal," she flashed out.

"If you are not, explain this. You smoke opium, and the doctor, now examining the body, says that the man was drugged with opium."

Aileen uttered a cry of terror. Every moment Edith was being entangled more and more in the nets of the Law: but she tried to defend her friend. "It's impossible that—that Miss Danby should have—should have——"

"Should have drugged Dr. Slanton and then tattooed the name 'Cain' on his forehead," finished Trant, emphatically. "Why should it be impossible? But if it is impossible as you suggest, I ask Miss Danby to explain away the impossibility. Otherwise——"

"You will arrest me!" broke in the grey woman harshly.

"That depends upon yourself. This one piece of evidence"—he tapped his pocket in which he had placed the opium-pipe—"is damning proof of your

complicity, and it may be"—he looked round the room—"that I may find other proofs."

"Search then—search!" was Edith's reckless defiance.

Trant nodded, rose, and began to prowl round the parlour. Aileen crossed to Edith and sitting down beside her, enfolded her in a protective embrace. As if aware of the tragic circumstances, Toby, the dog, lay quietly on the sofa, watching silently, his nose upon his paws. For quite ten minutes the officer pried here, there and everywhere, nosing the trail like a bloodhound. Nothing, great or small, escaped his keen eyes; nothing failed to register itself in his retentive brain. He looked behind the steel-engravings, lifted the edges of the carpet, shook the curtains, examined the cupboard and drawers of the sideboard, peered into the china vases, and even swept the Indian cloth off the round table. But nowhere could he find anything incriminating. It would seem that his first important find would be his last, and Miss Danby watched him with sneering lips. She was as cold and hard as a stone image; unresponsive to the sympathetic embrace of her girl-friend, and unnaturally calm with the extraordinary self-possession of a strong-willed woman. Neither by word, nor deed did she attempt to assist the Law to prove her guilt, or innocence. It was Kismet. To her—although no one knew this but her own tormented self—Trant represented Fate: and she passively allowed Fate to do as Fate would do. Nevertheless, it surprised her, when this pseudo Fate made a discovery, which—as seemed positive—adjusted the hangman's rope round her neck.

It was in the quaint, old-fashioned book-case in the far corner that Trant stumbled all of a sudden upon his find. Having gone through the room, so far, with a fine tooth-comb, as it were, he finally halted before this piece of furniture with the intention of shifting the books, one by one, in case they might contain a clue to the truth. But such precision of search was not required, for the moment he flung wide the glass doors, sheltering the volumes, a lacquer box of Chinese manufacture tumbled out. Picking it up off the floor, he lifted the lid to find that the box contained a set of tattooing needles, together with divers pigments for colouring the skin. Without a word, he walked across to the sofa and held this clinching evidence under the startled eyes of the silent woman. "Do you still deny that you saw Dr. Slanton last night?" he inquired, sternly.

She nodded faintly, summoning up her remaining strength for the denial. "I never set eyes on that box before."

"Or on this?" espying the torn photograph at his feet. Trant pieced the fragments together, and immediately the saturnine face of the dead man leaped to his eye.

Sitting breathlessly still, the accused woman stared at the photograph, at the lacquer box, at the relentless looks of the officer. Then she began to rock to and fro, shrilling thinly, the hopeless laughter of Hell.

"Edith! Edith!" cried Aileen in agonized entreaty, and shook her without effect. Terror-stricken, the girl turned her white face towards the Inspector. "What are you going to do—oh, what are you going to do?"

“The only thing that is left to me to do,” he replied, with soulless official calmness, and stretched a hand towards the woman’s shoulder: “Edith Danby, I arrest you, in the King’s name, for the murder of Cuthbert Slanton. Anything you say now will be used in evidence against you.”

But the frenzied creature only went on laughing and laughing and laughing, until Aileen had to close her ears to shut out the dreadful merriment.

CHAPTER IV

A FRIEND IN NEED

ALTHOUGH the evidence condemning Edith Danby was purely circumstantial, Inspector Trant was fully convinced of her guilt. The lacquer box and the opium pipe were, in themselves, sufficient proof of this. Still he did not content himself even with such a certainty; but questioned both Aileen and Jenny rigorously, as to the relations between the living and the dead. From the first girl, he forced the reluctant admission that Slanton had persecuted the accused woman for many months, in the endeavour to bring about a hated marriage; from the second, he learned of the frequent quarrels between them when they came together. Having exhausted all means of information, so far, there remained small doubt in the detective's mind that the woman had fervently detested the man, and therefore had resorted to violence. If ever a culprit was caught red-handed, in Trant's opinion, that culprit was Edith Danby.

As to Edith herself—she became silent and presumably indifferent after the hysterical outburst, revealing nothing of her thoughts, however enlightening these might be. As the worst had come, she was facing the worst with sullen defiance; and although Aileen implored her again and yet again, to offer some defence, however inadequate, she remained obstinately dumb. Even when the Inspector ordered her to go

with him to Tarhaven, she said nothing, but walked mutely down the avenue with Kemp at her heels. Trant remained behind to exchange a few last words with Aileen. The girl was pale, but tearless, and the officer approved of her reasonable attitude. "Many girls would have broken down under the stress and strain of these circumstances," said Trant, patting her.

"I am nearer breaking down than you know of," she answered, breathing hard.

"All the same you won't give way, Aileen."

"Aileen!" the girl repeated her own name, looking at the officer indignantly, as she by no means approved of this familiarity.

Trant's benignity broke like sunshine through his usual official severity, as he took both her hands within his own. "You don't remember me!"

"No! Yet you say that you knew my father."

"I knew your father and I knew you. When you were a little child I nursed you many a time on my knee. George More was my very good friend and I owe him much for helping me out of serious financial difficulties at a time when all others left me in the lurch. And it is fortunate for you, Aileen, that I do not forget my obligation."

"Why?" the girl looked distinctly puzzled. "Of course I am glad to meet anyone who knew my father; especially you, who speak so kindly of him. But I fail to understand how your gratitude to him can effect me."

The Inspector released her hands with a grave smile, "Think of your position."

"It is a very uncomfortable one," sighed Aileen, disconsolately.

"It is worse than uncomfortable," corrected the other, pointedly, "it is dangerous—very dangerous."

"Dangerous!" she started back in dismay.

He nodded. "If anyone but myself was in charge of this case, you might have to accompany your friend to her cell in Tarhaven."

"But—but I—I know nothing!" gasped Aileen, feeling as though an abyss had opened at her feet.

"Your friend said the same thing," commented Trant, dryly, "yet we must consider the circumstances from a commonsense point of view. Here are two women in a lonely cottage, visited regularly by a man—possibly a scoundrel—whom they dislike. That man is found dead, under suspicious circumstances, a stone's throw from the cottage, and evidence is forthcoming to indicate clearly that the older woman is guilty of his death. Another officer of the law," ended Trant, meaningly, "might arrest the younger woman as an accessory before, or after the fact. Now do you understand?"

"Not—not—exactly," quavered the girl, daunted in spite of her inborn self-control, "what do you mean by—by—an accessory?"

"One who helps another person before the commission of a crime; or one who helps that person to hide the crime after it has been committed."

"I knew nothing about Dr. Slanton's death until I came across his body in the wood," protested the girl, now fully awake to her danger, "and Edith said nothing to lead me to think that she is really and truly guilty."

"The lacquer box—the opium pipe," hinted Trant, significantly.

"I never saw the box before and, of course, until

you reported that Dr. Slanton had been drugged, I never gave a thought to the opium pipe.”

“H’m!” Trant rubbed his chin, doubtfully, “then you believe that your friend is innocent—and in the face of such damning evidence?”

“Mr. Trant!” Aileen was very earnest, very direct. “I don’t know what to think, or what to say. Miss Danby has been, and is, a good kind friend to me, and, so far as I know her, one of the sweetest and bravest women in the world. It is incredible to me that she should brand this man and kill this man, unless she was out of her mind at the moment. Then, of course, she can’t be held culpable.”

“H’m! Why should she take leave of her senses?”

“If you knew, as I do, how that horrible man persecuted her, you would easily understand. Also her indulgence in opium smoking has weakened her nerves—her will-power.”

“She seems to possess sufficient will-power to keep silent,” commented Trant, grimly. “So you think that she is guilty.”

“I can’t—I can’t!”

“Then you must think of her as innocent.”

“Yes. I do—I must. Unless her trouble unhinged her mind, and made her——”

The Inspector silenced her with a gesture. “I understand. You are right in believing in your friend: to find excuses for her. I am assured, that, so far as you know it, you are speaking the truth. But”—Trant shook his head gravely—“your view of the matter is not my view, nor do I think that, on the evidence already to hand, it will be the view of any jury. However, we can leave all this alone for the moment. I cannot keep you entirely out of the busi-

ness, as you will have to appear at the inquest; afterwards as a witness at the Assizes. But, so far as I can, I shall protect you."

"I don't want any protection," flashed out the girl vehemently, and with an indignant look. "If you think that I am an accessory, as you call it, I am quite willing to go with Edith to Tarhaven."

Trant laughed outright and patted her shoulder. "There! There! If I were not wholly satisfied that you know nothing I would not leave you at large. Stay here quietly until I see you again. Constable Kemp will look after the cottage."

"Oh!" Aileen spoke furiously, "Do you think that I'll run away?"

"No! No! No! Be reasonable. I must observe reasonable precautions. If this cottage is left unguarded, the villagers will come prying round."

"But you won't leave the—the body in the wood," said Aileen, shuddering.

"Certainly not. Before leaving I shall see that it is taken down to the village. I expect the inquest will take place to-morrow, or the next day, when I have looked more closely into matters. Well?"—Trant held out his hand.

Aileen took it with a hearty shake, "You are a good kind friend."

"I'm all that," he assured her, as they went to the front door, "as you will find, before we are through with this case."

"You will try and save Edith?"

"Edith must save herself, if she can, by speaking out," and with a reassuring nod Inspector Trant swung down the avenue, while Aileen returned with a sinking heart to the parlour.

For a young person of such a self-reliant nature, and with such clear vision, she felt singularly helpless. Her good friend had spoken truly. Edith alone, could save herself. And if she refused to do so, by speaking out, there seemed nothing for it, but to let the law take that course, which would land her, innocent or guilty, on the gallows. Dark as was the outlook—and not the very faintest ray of light was visible to dispel that darkness—Aileen still clung to the belief that Edith was guiltless. She must be, she must be, she must be, insisted the thinker, again and again, and if she would only confess, she would be able to prove herself guiltless. But—here came the doubt—if that was the case, why did she not protect herself and immediately. There was no answer to this.

The girl, seeking for what she could not find, groaned in the bitterness of despair, and flung herself on to the couch in a state of utter prostration. It was impossible to solve the riddle: at the best it could only be explained on the assumption that the unhappy woman had slain her persecutor, in a moment of madness, induced by opium. In her sane senses—and these were very sane, as the girl knew—Edith would never have drugged and marked and murdered the wretch, however great the provocation. And yet—and yet—Aileen could think calmly no longer, and buried her face in the sofa cushion, almost crazy with conflicting thoughts. Round and round these swirled, in a mental maelstrom of perpetually repeating bewilderment.

Then Jenny Walton entered the parlour, stolid, slow-footed, but helpful, since she brought tea and comfortable advice. “Come, come, Miss Aileen,” coaxed this red-haired angel of sympathy, in her heavy

dragging voice, "there ain't no use in taking on so. 'Earts up,' as mother ses, she being a Baptist and 'appy in 'er sorrers as never was. 'Ere's bread and butter and tea: both uf them will 'elp you to bear up. Y' can't be jiful with an empty inside, nohow."

"You're very kind, Jenny." Aileen sat up with a sigh and accepted a cup of tea thankfully, "I am thirsty, but not hungry."

"Shell I boil y' an egg, or grill a rasher of bacon, you pore dear?"

"No thank you, Jenny. I'll drink this tea, and then try to sleep for an hour."

The servant nodded approvingly. "You're fair wore out, and small wonder with the goings on of 'er."

"Not a word against Miss Danby," commanded Aileen energetically.

"But they ses in the village——"

"I don't care what they say. Miss Danby is innocent. Do you hear? Innocent."

"Oh I 'ear," sniffed Jenny, disbelievingly, "and I only 'ope as the judge and jury'll 'ear likewise. I knows as you're true blue, stickin' to 'er, Miss Aileen, but she's gone and done it, as sure as sure. And I dunno as I blame 'er much," ended Jenny, rubbing her nose thoughtfully. "I'd hev put a knife inter 'im meself fur 'arf the things es he chucked at 'er. 'Wimen 'ave their feelings,' as mother ses, and feelings is feelings, smother them es you like."

"Oh let me sleep, Jenny," said Aileen wearily and handing back the cup, "that is, if I can, with all this trouble."

"Don't let yourself be worrited, Miss Aileen. It'll be over sooner or later, when they try 'er and 'ang 'er and bury 'er, and then we'll be 'appy agin. Oh, I'm

going—I'm going!" Jenny took up the tray hastily, for there was an ominous look of rebuke in the eyes of her young mistress, "But I never did see anyone as stuck closer nor a mustard plaster to 'er, as you're doing. It's a case of ' 'Old the fort and keep yer tail up,' es mother ses, she being given to clever ways of putting things," and she retreated from the parlour with the tread of an elephant, unrebuked, since Aileen could find no reply. All she wanted to do was to sleep, and sleep, and sleep. And sleep she did shortly, utterly exhausted by the tumultuous doings of the day.

Jenny returned to her kitchen, after acting as a Job's comforter, and sat down to consider how she could help the girl. This phlegmatic damsel had her likes and dislikes very clearly defined. She objected to Miss Danby's cold dominance, and keep-at-your-distance attitude, which "froze her marrer," as she put it; but she had a warm corner in her plebeian heart for the younger woman. Aileen had been her friend from the first, treating her as a human being, and not as a machine. Always suspicious of the better classes and their aloof attitude, Jenny was moved out of her ordinary stolidity by the unusual sympathy of the girl. Aileen had given her ribbons and gloves, sometimes sweets and cheap jewellery; she had advised her as to the colour and cut of ambitious Sunday frocks; and once, on a red-letter day, had presented her with a pair of real silk stockings. Finally this paragon of mistresses had taken an interest in Jenny's family troubles, in Jenny's love-affairs, and had made useful suggestions for the betterment of both.

This being so, the grateful servant cast about in her slow-thinking mind to find some means of helping the girl in her dire trouble. The name of Mr. Richard

Hustings, the attentions of Mr. Richard Hustings, occurred to her, and she nodded approval of the thought. Here was a helper, if Miss More was willing to accept him as such. He was a lawyer, as well as a lover, and the qualities of both were admirably fitted to deal with things as they were. Having reached this point in her meditations, Jenny decided to take action, and meanwhile occupied herself with various domestic duties until the day was waning. Then she went through the village and beyond the village on an errand, which resulted in a surprise to Aileen. For the girl awoke from long hours of restorative slumber to find Mr. Richard Hustings comfortably seated in an arm-chair on the opposite side of the fireplace. She sat up hurriedly and stared, while the young man stood up and smiled. "I thought it was best to let you sleep on, and waken naturally," he said in a soothing voice.

"How on earth did you come here?" asked Aileen, somewhat dazed.

"Jenny thought that I might be a friend in need, and came to tell me of your trouble. I hope you don't think that I am taking a liberty?"

"No!" she rose wearily, "you are very kind to come. I need help."

"All that I can give is at your disposal," said Hustings, earnestly. "Let me light the lamp, and tell Jenny to bring you something to eat. Then we can talk."

When the dingy old parlour was illuminated, the new-comer revealed himself as a brown-haired, brown-faced young fellow; clean-shaven, well-groomed, with the whitest of even teeth and the brightest of brown eyes. He suggested less the lawyer than the soldier, and even in his civilian suit of darkly blue serge looked

the genuine military commander. And naturally so, since it is difficult to discard five years of army discipline in a moment, if, indeed, such can ever be discarded. Aileen liked him more than a little, and knew instinctively that he loved her dearly. Had she permitted her innermost feelings to sway her, she could easily have drawn a declaration from him on many occasions. But, so far, an innate maidenly fear had prevented her from casting her net. Aileen was never Diana the huntress, and preferred to fly, rather than to follow. Yet so heavy with woe was the hour that she wished it were possible for her to throw herself on to his broad breast, to nestle within the circle of his comforting arms. The poor child, utterly exhausted with groping her way through the very misty present, longed to find an immediate future of perfect rest.

The young man, sensitive lover as he was, guessed this swiftly, and forthwith took advantage of the weakness. Not meanly, be it understood, since he realized that only by establishing intimate relations between them, could be help truly. The so-far offensive attitude on his part and defensive on hers interposed a barrier, which must needs be removed if the sure confidence necessary for working harmoniously and understandingly together, was to be attained. So Mr. Richard Hustings went blithely over the top—that is, he deliberately removed the barrier. “Aileen,” he said bluntly, adding in answer to her startled look, “Oh yes, I know you think that I am taking a liberty, but if I am to help you, it is necessary to be bold. For the time being—until we clear up things—I am your big brother, and you are my little sister. Understand? So you must call me Dick, and I shall call you Aileen. Is that plain?”

“Very plain,” she retorted, dryly, “but——”

“No ‘buts.’ Let us be primitive man and woman—pals—comrades—partners, while this trouble lasts. Afterwards we can return to the civilized keep-your-distance stunt.”

“I never kept you at your distance,” said the feminine in Aileen, tartly.

“Some unprejudiced observer might have thought so. Anyhow, if that poor creature is to be saved we must have a common ground of understanding.”

Aileen shirked a direct answer. “You call Edith a poor creature, and that term suggests pity. Do you believe her to be innocent?”

“As a lawyer and in the face of what evidence I have heard, it is impossible for me to do that; but as a man, I can’t think that she would act in so cold-blooded a manner. What does she say in the way of excuse?”

“Nothing!”

“Then you and I will have to find out what is at the back of that nothing.”

“And in the meantime you agree to think her innocent?”

“As a lawyer I am bound to do so, until she is proved guilty.”

“Mr. Trant thinks that he has proved it.”

“So I gathered from the fact that Trant has taken her to Tarhaven. So far, the evidence is against her: but we may find, by looking into things, that she is not so black as our worthy Inspector paints her.”

“Then you will help me—really and truly do your best—Dick!” Aileen said the name, and held out her hand to show that she accepted the brotherly-and-sisterly partnership.

“Aileen!” he grasped her hand warmly, restraining himself by a great effort from kissing it. Then feeling that, mere man as he was, this suggested playing with fire, he hastily dropped her hand, and became advisedly common-place. “I think you might ask me to have some dinner,” he said, reproachfully, “I’m starving.”

“Strange to say, so am I,” replied the girl, knowing full well that he was suggesting the meal mainly for her sake. “It seems heartless though,” she added, soberly, “when Edith is locked up and in such dire straits.”

“Nonsense!” cried Dick, bluffly, “you need all your strength to assist her, and silly fasting would only prevent your doing it. Eat, drink, and be—sensible!” said he, striding to open the door and cry the cry of the famished to Jenny.

“You are—very brotherly,” gasped Aileen, amazed at these masterful ways.

He looked at her with twinkling eyes. “Oh, Eve, why should not Adam give you the apple to eat occasionally?”

“Meaning?”—but what he did mean by this cryptic speech was never revealed, for Jenny interrupted, by entering with a full tray, just as she spoke.

“I knowed you’d eat and hev bin cooking this larst hour,” stated the damsel, proceeding to cover the round table with a snow-white cloth, “fried chops and per-taters, rice puddin’ with custerd to foller. There ain’t no drinks.”

“We’ll have tea,” said Aileen, helping the domestic to place plates and spoons and knives and forks, “if you?”—she looked questioningly at her guest.

“Of course,” he nodded, “I learned tea-drinking in the Army. ‘The cup that cheers’—quite so. I agree

with Cowper." He brought a chair to the table. "Sit, madam."

With a smile at his humour, Aileen observed, when Jenny left the room to prepare the tea, "I wish I could tempt your appetite with daintier food."

"It is *your* appetite I'm concerned with," said Hustings, drawing in his chair. "To me this food and drink are the nectar and ambrosia of Olympus."

"What imagination!"

"*Coué* suggestion!" smiled Dick, well-pleased to wean her from dismal brooding. "To think a thing, is to have the thing. Let us consider this a banquet."

And a banquet they made of it, despite dreary circumstances, eating the untempting chops, devouring the rice pudding, and emptying the tea-pot. At the end of the meal, Hustings, gay throughout, became grave. "Now for business," said he.

CHAPTER V

SEEKING FOR LIGHT

THERE was no doubt that the presence of Hustings and his eminently common-sense method of dealing with her stormy mood, improved Aileen into a better frame of mind. Good food, and cheerful conversation, did wonders towards strengthening her to meet with equanimity what further troubles the future might hold. Recognizing that tears and wordy lamentations would hinder, rather than help, the girl addressed herself with calm resolution to the task in hand. "Before we begin to talk," she informed her co-worker, "it will be best to get Jenny to clear away, as we don't want any interruption," and she forthwith summoned the domestic to do what was required.

Jenny obeyed with cumbersome jocularly, greatly gratified that her cooking had been appreciated. "Left nothing but the dishes, you 'ave," said Jenny, tramping out of the parlour with a laden tray and when alone on the hither side of the door, she murmured a benediction on the young couple. "And I do 'ope as they'll tork of themselves, 'stead of 'er, as is only gitting wot she's bin arsking fur. Them two dears is well rid of 'er, I don't think!" She chuckled hoarsely and glanced longingly at the key-hole. The temptation to peer and listen was great; but, as she regarded herself as the fairy godmother of the lovers,

the temptation was nobly withstood. "Shouldn't like sich poll-prying meself, when I'm with 'im," was her conclusion, and she plunged heavily along the passage into the kitchen.

The sympathetic damsel would have been woefully disappointed had she lingered to overhear the prosaic conversation of her godchildren. "You can smoke," said Aileen, five minutes later, after making herself comfortable on the sofa.

"And you?"—Hustings, in the arm-chair opposite, held out his cigarette-case.

She shook her head seriously. "I have not that redeeming vice."

"Glad of it," said Dick, shortly, "not that it's wrong for a woman to smoke, but somehow it doesn't fit in with my conception of an angel."

"Oh!" said Aileen with innocent malice, "does your angel smoke then?"

He was quite equal to her. "She has just informed me that she doesn't."

This rash speech was rebuked with a frown. "We are brother and sister," she reminded him, pointedly, then ran her fingers through the feathery gold of her hair with a shame-faced look. "Oh, how can I talk such nonsense and hear you talk it, when Edith is in such trouble. I feel a selfish cat."

Dick lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his arm-chair. "If you will compare yourself to that animal, remember that cats are sensible as well as selfish. The nonsense you speak of has done you good."

"I do feel quieter," she confessed.

"That is the state of mind to which I have endeavoured to bring you. Now that success has crowned my efforts we can discuss this rotten business. Tell

me all about it. Begin at the beginning and go on straightly to the end, without leaving out anything you have seen or heard."

Aileen obeyed to the letter, and detailed all that had happened from the time when she sat at breakfast with Edith down to the moment when her listener found her sleeping on the sofa. She made no comment on what she told, saying neither "yea" or "nay," but simply gave the bald facts, thereby winning the approbation of the lawyer. "You will make an excellent witness," he said.

"Not in Edith's favour," she returned, sadly, and wiping her eyes.

"I speak with reference to the clear way in which you have set forth all you know!" Hustings threw away his cigarette and lighted another, "I must say that your evidence is very much against Miss Danby," he concluded, meditatively.

"Then I shan't give it."

"You will be forced to give it. Don't be silly. Any hesitation on your part would only make matters worse. Speak the truth, the whole truth, and——"

"But you said just now that what I say is dead against Edith," she interrupted.

"I say it again. It's no use mincing matters, Aileen. Your friend is in a very dangerous position. If possible you and I must get her out of it."

"How?"

"There you have me! I don't agree with your theory that Miss Danby killed the man, in a fit of rage, or under the influence of opium. The crime was planned deliberately—executed deliberately. Slanton was drugged, his forehead was tattooed when he lay insensible, and finally he was strangled."

“Strangled?” Aileen started up from the sofa, aghast.

“I made it my business to see the doctor—the Divisional-surgeon attached to the Tarhaven police-service. He is an old friend of mine, and let out more than perhaps was wise at the moment. I told him that I would be at the inquest to watch the case on Miss Danby’s behalf.”

“Oh you are good,” said the girl, gratefully, “but this strangling——?”

“Oh it’s plain enough. There are the marks round the man’s throat, showing a remarkably strong grip. That doesn’t sound to me like a woman’s work. Nor do I understand why the name ‘Cain’ was tattooed. Cain suggests the first murderer, so the person who branded the poor devil must have some reason to believe that his victim was a murderer.”

“Then you think the criminal is a man?”

“At this stage I can’t offer any opinion on that point. I am only seeking for a clue. The crime looks to me like one of revenge.”

Aileen spoke in a low tone and her voice quavered, “Edith hated the man.”

“Yes. But I don’t think she would have revenged herself upon him so coarsely. If she found him a nuisance she could easily have gone to America, as she suggested. Why should she risk her neck, when there was such an easy way of escape?”

“It does seem strange,” pondered the girl, with her eyes on the carpet. “Also if Dr. Slanton was drugged and branded and strangled in this room, I certainly would have heard some noise.”

“And you heard nothing?”

“Not a sound. Nor did Jenny, who sleeps upstairs

in the attic at the back of the house. Of course the walls are very thick—all the same, it seems impossible that Edith could have executed such a crime without one of us hearing something likely to bring us downstairs."

"Was Miss Danby her usual self when you joined her at breakfast?"

Aileen shrugged her shoulders. "It is hard to say, she has so many selves. One thing she confessed—that she had been smoking opium."

"Also, she cried to you not to go into the wood," mused the lawyer, harking back to Aileen's story. "She must have known that the body was in the wood."

"But how could she have dragged the body there, or, indeed, have strangled the man? Edith was a strong woman, once, but worry and the opium-smoking have made a wreck of her. And, apart from her physical weakness, her mind is not strong enough for the same reasons to plan and execute such a crime."

"Well, the man was drugged with opium, and we know that Miss Danby possessed opium. Then the lacquer-box——?"

"I never saw that until Mr. Trant found it in the book-case. Nor did Edith, I feel convinced. What on earth would she do with a box of tattooing instruments, unless she got them for this purpose? And, as I say, she hasn't sufficient will-power to do what she is accused of doing."

"Well!" Hustings rose and began to pace the room leisurely, "it comes to this: that Miss Danby is innocent, but that some enemy of hers and Slanton has brought about this devilment to do away with him and

get her out of the way. It is a case of killing two birds with one stone," he turned suddenly to face the girl. "Had she any enemies?"

"Only Dr. Slanton, whom she hated. I know of no others."

"Then we must look into Slanton's past and find out who desired his death, and who wished that death to implicate Miss Danby. What do you know of the man?"

"Very little. He was a bad-tempered beast, greedy and selfish and reckless to a degree, when he wanted to get his own way. I am sure he had some hold over Edith and was blackmailing her."

"You told me that your brother left Miss Danby two thousand a year?"

"Yes!"

"And it was that money Slanton was after?"

"Yes. Edith said so."

"Couldn't he have forced her to give up the money without marriage?"

"I can't say. Anyhow, Edith refused to give him anything, notwithstanding all his threats, so he thought that the only way to get the money was to marry her."

"What threats did he use?"

"I can't tell you. Edith told me nothing. I advised her to seek the protection of the police, but she refused."

"Odd," mused Hustings, chin in hand, "very odd. If Slanton had such power over her that she dared not invoke the aid of the law, it is strange that he did not succeed either in marrying her, or in wresting the money from her without marriage. It seems to me," he summed up, "that if Slanton knew something

against Miss Danby, Miss Danby knew something against Slanton. They were both in it."

"Both in what?" asked Aileen, impatiently.

"In some mess, in which both were equally culpable. Neither one could split on the other."

The girl set her mouth firmly, "I can't believe that Edith ever did anything wrong," she said, after a pause.

"My dear young innocent, Miss Danby was kind to you and evidently attractive enough to gain the affections of your brother. But, if I am not mistaken, she has a temper stowed away somewhere?"

"I never saw it."

"Perhaps not. But remember you knew her of late as a broken woman."

Aileen nodded with a sigh. "Yes. Ten years ago, so far as I can recollect, she was a bright-natured, brilliant, hard-working secretary to my father."

"Then since that time she must have got herself into some hobble along with Slanton, and so took to the drug which has wrecked her." Dick paused, and after a turn up and down the room, faced Aileen again. "Are you sure that your father is dead?" he asked, pointedly.

"No. He is missing, but there is no positive knowledge to show that he is dead."

"I wish he would return. He might throw some light on the subject."

"But—but"—Aileen stared—"what can Father possibly know of this matter?"

"He knew Miss Danby years ago, and may be able to tell us something of her past. In that past is to be found the reason for her commission of this crime."

"Oh! You believe then, that she is guilty?"

“Trant does, and very thoroughly,” replied the young man. “No. What with one thing and another I fancy she is innocent. But why on earth doesn’t she speak out and proclaim her innocence?”

“I can’t say,” the girl looked disconsolate, “all the same I believe that she *is* innocent.”

“Just because you like her; because she has been kind to you. That is a very feminine reason.” Hustings shrugged his shoulders and resumed his perambulation. “Hanged if I can see into this,” he muttered between his teeth.

“Oh don’t say that, Dick. We must do something.”

“We’ll do something right enough, but the thing is how to begin—what trail to follow. If Miss Danby would only speak out.”

“She won’t. I have done all I can to make her speak.”

“Well I shall watch over her interests at the inquest, and afterwards, when the verdict is given against her——”

“Oh, Dick! Dick!” Aileen covered her face with trembling hands, rocking and wailing with many shudderings.

Hustings, checked in his stride, glared angrily at this exhibition of nerves, and sat down on the sofa to shake her into strength—that strength which arises from indignation. “If you are to work long-side me you must get over showing any feminine weakness. I have no use for squealers!” and he shook her again—this time very thoroughly.

“You—you are—are a brute.” Aileen pulled herself away and her eyes blazed.

The young man laughed, jumping up briskly as he

did so. "That's better. You have lots of pluck, tucked away somewhere. Summon every ounce of it to your aid, to my aid, for we are both up against it, and no mistake."

"You—you needn't have shaken—shaken me."

"I'll shake you again, and yet again, if it's for your good," Dick assured her, grimly, "you are my associate in this damnable business and must obey orders, if we are to pull it off. When you allow me to love you and marry you, I'll be as—er—sloppy as you like."

"Love you—marry you!" she glared in her turn. "You expect that when you go on like this?"

"I'm a cave man, pulling the rough stuff. This isn't any Romeo and Juliet affair, so far. That'll come in time."

"It won't," cried Aileen, angrily, "I don't like sloppy love-making."

"Oh that's all right. I have other ways, when asked for," said this audacious lover, lightly, then suddenly became serious, as he glanced at his wrist-watch. "Don't fool round, partner. What I say is, that when Miss Danby has a verdict of wilful murder brought against her at the inquest—and I'm hanged if I can see the jury deciding otherwise—I'll interview her, wherever she may be locked up, and ask her to accept me as her solicitor."

"She won't have anything to do with the Law, I tell you," insisted the girl.

"And I tell *you* that she's jolly well got to cut her coat according to her cloth. Only a servant of the Law, such as I am, can get her out of the grip of the Law. I'll make her speak out," he ended, confidently.

"You can't. If she wouldn't tell me, she certainly won't tell you."

"I'm not so sure of that," replied Hustings, dryly. "I rather think she will, when she fully realizes that silence means hanging. Also, there is a sure way of forcing her into confession."

"What way is that?" asked Aileen, breathless with hope.

"You are the way, my dear girl. Think of your position: free on sufferance only while your father's friend, Trant, continues to act like the brick he is. If Miss Danby loves you—and she says she does—she won't risk your being dragged into her gutter-doings, and so will own up."

"I refuse to hear you talk of gutter-doings in connection with Edith." Aileen spoke with marked dignity and loyal devotion.

"You have heard my talk already, and I'll repeat the same if you like," said Dick, calmly brutal. "Strong measures are required to break down Miss Danby's wall of silence," he paused for a moment: then, "Well——?"

"I think she loves me sufficiently to save me from danger," faltered the girl much distressed, "but I don't wish to be free at the risk of her condemnation," and Aileen broke down, crying softly.

"There! There!" Dick patted her shoulder with extreme tenderness and only wished that he dare offer the consolation of a warm embrace, "Buck up; never say die. When bravely faced, things are never so bad as they seem. My handkerchief!"

"Thank you, I have one of my own," sobbed Aileen, refusing the offer resentfully.

Hustings laughed, although in his heart of hearts he

was far from feeling in any way gay. His studied bullying was merely intended to arouse the girl to action. And action immediate and strong was required if Edith Danby was to be saved—against her will, as it would seem. Hustings was immensely sorry for the unfortunate woman, struggling so helplessly in the coils of circumstance, and honestly wished to free her, if possible, from their tangle. But, as things were, it was hard to know what to think—how to act. “This dead man—this Slanton?” he asked, abruptly, casting about for some kind of a beginning, “What was he like? I never set eyes on him, you know.”

Aileen dried her eyes, regaining composure under the stress of the moment. “He was tall and thin and dark, with a lean savage-looking face, clean-shaven and really cruel in expression. His hair was so curly that I think he must have had black blood in him. Oh—and he had very white teeth, which showed like a wolf when he was angry. He snarled,” she went on, energetically, “snarled horribly, as if he was one of those werewolves we read of.”

“And which belong to fiction,” said Hustings the materialist. “How did he dress? One can learn much of a man’s character from the way in which he dresses.”

“I don’t think he differed much from the ordinary man,” said Aileen, closing her eyes to call up a picture, “a grey tweed suit with a cap to match and brown shoes. And an orange neck-tie—he said that orange was his colour—with a turquoise-set swastika as a tie-pin.”

“Ho!” Dick pinched his chin, reflectively, “orange was his colour was it: and a swastika tie-pin. Both

those things suggest occult leanings. A trifle of Hindoo blood, may be. The fakir stunt—clairvoyance—and—and such-like.”

“I don’t know,” said the girl thoughtfully, “he certainly believed in spiritualism. Table-turning, automatic-writing, and——”

“Yes! Yes! I understand. He was one of those charlatans who pretend to superphysical powers.”

“No! to be honest Dick, I don’t think he went that far. But he was a spiritualist, I know, and talked a lot about Edith being his soul-mate.”

“I hope the blighter didn’t rope you into his silly foolery?”

“Don’t be jealous, Dick. He had no eyes for me when Edith was about. I hadn’t any money to attract him.”

“A spiritualist,” murmured Hustings, reassured as to the direction of the dead man’s attentions, “that’s something of a clue. I’ll travel round London and look up the caste. From some member I may learn something about Slanton’s shady past. For shady it is, I swear, going by the description you give.”

“Is that all you can do?” said Aileen, rather dismayed at this weak termination to their interesting conversation.

Dick shrugged his square shoulders. “All I can do at present. We must go slowly—inch by inch, my dear, line upon line. Rome wasn’t built in a day. The chief thing is to learn what connection there is between Miss Danby and this black scoundrel. When we know that, we shall know who killed him.”

“Not Edith!” Aileen rose, indignantly, “Not Edith!”

“I hope not, but—one never knows. There!

There! Don't get into a wax. I don't deny but what there may be some other person in the business."

"If there is, and I truly believe there is, that person brought the lacquer box into the house," said the girl, decisively.

"How do you know? It may belong to Miss Danby."

"No. That was one of the few things she confessed—that the box did not belong to her. And I think she speaks truly. I never saw the box before, and I have opened the glass-doors of that book-case again and again, when I wanted something to read."

"It was found in the book-case?"

"Yes. And by Mr. Trant. The moment he opened the door the box fell out. Someone must have placed it there, and, if so, that someone is the guilty person."

"But how could anyone have got into the house? By the door, by the window? If this thing is what the Americans call 'a frame-up,' it must be the window."

"Perhaps!" said Aileen, doubtfully, and glancing towards the window with its noticeably low sill, "anyone could get into this room by pushing up the lower sash. There's only a snick to keep it down."

By this time Hustings was across the room examining the window, which was closed and fastened. "So I perceive! Aileen," he turned suddenly, "was this window snicked safely last night?"

"Yes. I closed it myself. I always do."

"Was it snicked this morning?"

"Oh!" as the doings of the breakfast hour occurred to her, she ran across the parlour to join the young man. "No, it wasn't."

"Are you positive—sure—certain?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! I opened the window to let in

the cool air as the room was so hot with the fire. The sash went up quite easily," she reflected. "No, I am certain that it wasn't snicked. But then,"—her face fell—"Edith was at breakfast before me and may have opened it before I joined her."

"We'll ask her. But I rather think,"—Dick manipulated the snick and pushed up the lower sash—"that someone has tinkered with this," he pointed to the frame of the upper sash, seen through the glass of the lower one. The ancient white paint was broken here and there, and one long sliver of wood was shaved off cleanly. "A knife has been used here," said Dick hurriedly, "thrust in between the upper and lower sashes to push back the snick. Aileen, I begin to believe that there *is* another person concerned in this matter."

"So do I," she sparkled, all vivacity and intense interest, and that other person hid the lacquer-box in the book-case to incriminate Edith."

Hustings nodded. "After using its contents to tattoo Slanton! Miss Danby's past—Slanton's past—we must look there for the person in question."

"Oh Dick, Dick! She is innocent," Aileen clasped his arm excitedly.

"Go slowly. One swallow doesn't make a summer. But—we've made a beginning."

CHAPTER VI

WHAT THE LAW SAID

THE judicial inquiry into the death of Cuthbert Slanton was held in a large wooden building, with a corrugated iron roof: one of the hastily constructed make-shifts of the war. It stood on an untidy patch of ground at the far end of the village, midway between the church and the manor-house. Hither an excited throng of people turned eager steps, two days after the discovery of the crime. By piecing together fly-about information, gathered promiscuously, the majority had come to assure themselves that the inquest was a mere formality, by reason of the truth being already known.

Slanton—so ran the many rumours—had visited Miss Danby secretly in the night, which said little for her reputation. She had induced him to join her in an opium debauch, and, when he became insensible, had strangled him remorselessly, before dragging him for burial in the wood. So far the evidence was sufficiently clear and direct, but there was nothing to show why the man had been murdered, or why his forehead had been scored with a suggestive Biblical name. These were the questions asked by one and all: questions to which no one received any answer.

Scenting a mystery, many journalists, both metropolitan and provincial, were hot on the trail, each one hoping to solve it to the honour and glory of his own particular newspaper. The village hummed with their activities, like a bee-hive in swarming time, and they

made as many inquiries as to the reason for this and for that, as a six year old child. The resulting information was decidedly mixed and untrustworthy; some saying one thing, some another, but sufficient was acquired to damn the accused woman as a vampire of the worst kind. The villagers had approved of Aileen, all youthful charm and vivacity, but Edith Danby had never been a favourite, because of her keep-off-the-grass attitude, and evasive habits of life. Therefore, when she arrived in Fryfeld, under the protective wing of Inspector Trant, they greeted her with groans and stones, condemning her, unheard, after the usual fashion of the ignorant. Aileen, soberly dressed, and heavily veiled, clung anxiously to Hustings, as he escorted her to the scene of the inquiry. She could not understand this amazing injustice of putting the cart before the horse. "Why can't they wait until Edith defends herself?" she asked, piteously.

"Oh, it's the senseless cry of all the ages. Crucify! Crucify! The blind passion of the mob-spirit, always more ready to curse than to bless."

"But Edith has done *them* no harm?"

"What does that matter?" questioned Dick, cynically. "She's their Aunt Sally for the time being, and they'll make a cock-shy of her until they grow tired."

"What if she proves her innocence?"

"Then they'll probably wreath her with flowers. The ignorant are always in extremes. Think of the Duke of Wellington and the broken windows of Apsley House."

Aileen sighed at this gross exhibition of human instability, and submitted to be conducted by her lover into the bleak, bare building, the interior of which was vaporous with grey autumnal mists. It contained only

a few chairs for the jurymen, several forms for the witnesses, and a small table for the use of the Coroner. The general public had to stand, and crowded the lower portion of the vast expanse, shepherded by three or four policemen: uncomfortable enough for the next hour, but so highly interested in the baiting of one tormented woman, as to be oblivious thereto. It might have been a witch-trial of several hundred years back, so venomous were the looks directed towards the miserable creature, for whom they had no pity. She, herself, was indifferent to this atmosphere of causeless hatred, and sat, swathed from head to foot in a hooded grey cloak, staring vacantly before her. Aileen's heart ached. "Can't I sit beside her and hold her hand?" she whispered to Dick.

"Better not; there is a nasty feeling abroad. Rest quietly here, while I ask for Trant's permission to speak with her, as a possible client."

The girl caught swiftly at his hand, as he stepped away. "Tell her I love her—I love her. Only that—I love her."

Hustings squeezed her hand reassuringly, nodded assent, and, making his way through a cluster of jurymen, explained himself tersely to the Inspector. "Oh, of course, you can ask if she will accept you as her solicitor," said Trant, immediately, and the young man crossed over to the motionless figure.

Edith did not look up, when he bent down to make his proposal, but nodded a silent consent. Only when Hustings murmured Aileen's message softly was she moved to speech, "Say that I love her, and trust her."

"Will you prove that you do, by defending yourself—by speaking out?"

“So far as in me lies—yes!” and Edith, crossing her hands on her breast to grip her shoulders, looked more pale and gaunt and unapproachable than ever.

With this ambiguous reply, Hustings contented himself for the time being, and, at the outset of the proceedings, announced himself as present to watch over the interests of Miss Danby. The hot-heads at the hall doors grumbled more than a little, that he should oppose himself to their expressed opinions. But, finally, the feudal spirit, obedient to the Squire, admitted that he was acting like a sportsman. “Not as he’ll do anything much,” said everyone to everyone, “he’s wasting his breath in the Squire. She’s a bad lot, is that one.” And a woman clinched poor Edith’s evil reputation by loudly calling, “Jezebel! Jezebel!” shaking her fist vigorously as she shouted.

A short speech from the Coroner, confined to dry statements as to the why and the wherefore of the meeting, opened the proceedings. This was followed by Inspector Trant’s explanation of all that he had heard and found, since taking charge of the case. The contents of the dead man’s pockets were displayed on the table, and the officer particularly drew the attention of the jury to the return half-ticket from Cornby to London. He also produced the opium pipe, and the lacquer-box with its ominous furnishings. As the twelve good men and true had already inspected the body with its branded forehead, this last exhibit vanquished any doubts they might have entertained as to the possible innocence of the woman, to whom it presumably belonged. Trant, likewise, gave further necessary details, baldly, but convincingly; and ended his oration by calling upon the Divisional-surgeon to give evidence.

This important witness did not take long to explain himself. From an examination of the corpse, he asserted that the man had been drugged by means of opium—probably had smoked himself into a stupor—and then strangled by violent compression of the windpipe. The discoloured skin of the throat showed the strength and persistence of the death-clutch. When the doctor made this statement, several of the jurymen glanced at Miss Danby's hands still clasping her shoulders. These were ungloved, and assuredly looked sufficiently large and powerful to execute the deed hinted at by the witness. Finally the doctor declared that, in his opinion, the deceased had been murdered shortly after midnight of the day previous to the finding of the body.

Jenny Walton was called upon to testify that Slanton had been a constant visitor at the cottage, and had as frequently quarrelled with his hostess. It was impossible for her to state positively why the two were always at variance, but she had gathered from stray words, let drop by Miss Danby and Miss More, that the deceased had insisted upon marrying the first lady, in spite of her constant refusals to entertain the idea. Witness had heard no noise of any struggle on the night when the crime was committed, and knew nothing about the matter until Miss Aileen discovered the body in the wood. Yes! Miss Danby possessed several opium pipes, and was much given to smoking—so as to soothe away the pain of almost constant neuralgia, she said. Well, of course, Miss Danby disliked Dr. Slanton; any woman would dislike a man who refused to take "No" for an answer. Miss Danby never made any secret of her detestation of this persistent suitor. No! Witness could not truthfully say that she had

heard her mistress make use of any threats; but once—a week or so previous, Miss Danby had talked of going to America so as to be quit of Slanton. Jenny concluded her evidence by stating that she had retired to bed at nine o'clock leaving the women in the parlour. Up to that time no one had arrived, nor had she any reason to believe that the ladies expected a visitor.

Then Aileen was summoned to the witness-stand, and her fair girlish beauty enhanced by her black dress made a great impression upon those present. However much Edith was blamed, not a single word was heard against Aileen. Rather was she commiserated by several women, as a “pore lamb” in the clutches of a bad lot. Hustings breathed more freely when he heard the encouraging sounds, as the placing of the girl in the same category as Edith might have led to her arrest, as an accomplice. He thanked his stars that both the crowd and Trant were favourably inclined; and listened to what Aileen had to say without any perturbation.

The girl said as little as she well could say, and what she did say was all to the betterment of her friend, as a good and innocent woman. She set forth with crude eloquence, how her brother had died, how Edith had nursed him; how the two had been engaged, and how the young soldier had left his income to the woman he loved. Then followed an explanation as to how Edith had found the witness, in difficult circumstances after the disappearance of witness's father, and how she had cherished her ever since. Miss Danby, admitted Aileen, disliked Dr. Slanton, who had tried to force her into marriage; but she had never desired his death, and had only suggested crossing the Atlantic in the

hope of escaping from his odious attentions. Witness had retired to bed at half-past nine, and had slept much too soundly to hear anything. "Any ordinary thing, that is," she supplemented, quickly, "but I certainly should have been awakened by any unusual noise—shouting or struggling I mean. Then I should have come downstairs at once, to see what was the matter."

"Was Miss Danby her usual self at breakfast?" inquired the Coroner, pointedly.

"Oh, yes. Although"—with hesitation—"she had been smoking opium on the previous night, and was feeling the after-effects."

"Oh!" The Coroner pounced alertly on this admission. "Then Miss Danby confessed to opium smoking?"

"Why shouldn't she confess?" demanded Aileen, tartly. "It—the smoking I mean—was her usual remedy to rid herself of neuralgia pains. Miss Danby was no different on that morning to any other morning," declared the girl, wilfully perjuring herself in the cause of friendship. "She had no reason to be otherwise."

"What?" The Coroner looked dubious. "With that body lying in the wood."

"She knew nothing of the body in the wood; nor did I, until I followed the cat and dog across the lawn!" and Aileen rapidly detailed the doings of Toby and Amelia, which had resulted in the shocking discovery.

A juryman pointed to the lacquer-box on the table. "Do you know this?"

"No! I never set eyes on it until Mr. Trant opened the book-case, and it fell out. It doesn't belong to Miss Danby. It never did, and I ought to know, as I

have been in her house and in her confidence constantly for the last year. I have often been to the book-case to find something to read; but no box fell out when I opened the doors. Besides," said the girl, forcibly, "Miss Danby never mentioned tattooing to me, which naturally she would have done had she bought that case of tattooing instruments. Someone must have hidden that box in the book-case to implicate Miss Danby," ended Aileen, positively.

"The assassin probably," commented the Coroner with an ironical air. "But how could anyone have entered the cottage to hide the box, without the knowledge of yourself and Miss Danby?"

"Very easily. I sleep up-stairs: Miss Danby in the room across the passage, so anyone could have climbed into the parlour through the window, by pushing back the snick, and lifting up the lower sash. And that was done," ended Aileen, emphatically, "as Mr. Hustings will tell you."

This astonishing statement—and it was particularly astonishing to Trant—brought about the calling up of Hustings as a witness. He related what had been noted by himself and Miss More, when they examined the window, and challenged the Inspector to look into the matter for himself. "I shall certainly do so," said Trant with a disbelieving shrug, "but I doubt if any examination will result in my gaining any clue."

"It will give you a clue," retorted Hustings, deliberately, "to the existence of the third person, who was hanging round the cottage when the murder took place. The evidence of the window proves that there is a third person."

"That is fancy rather than fact," struck in the Coroner, impatiently. "However, if Inspector Trant

examines the window, and the clue you hint at is worth following up, followed up it shall be. Meanwhile have you any other witnesses to call, Mr. Inspector?"

"No, sir. Unless Miss Danby?"—he looked meaningly at the woman.

She rose automatically, throwing back her hood, and folding her cloak round her gaunt figure. "I am willing to answer any questions you may put, sir," she said, quietly, "being innocent, I have nothing to conceal."

"Will it not be better to reserve your defence?" hinted the Coroner, doubtfully.

"Have you already settled what your verdict will be, that you talk of my 'defence'?" queried Miss Danby, scornfully. "I speak now or never!" and she glanced towards Aileen and her lover, both of whom nodded their approval.

There was a surprised movement, and astonished murmur in the hall, when the accused woman faced the unfriendly crew with regal calmness. Most of those present truly believed her to be a murderess with her back to the wall fighting for a cause already lost. But the scornful expression on her fearless face, the accent of positive command she gave to her every word, and her plainly hinted assumption that she was sole mistress of the situation, impressed the majority with the belief that they were somewhat hasty in condemnation. Without the slightest display of emotion, never hesitating in her speech, never flinching at a revelation, the woman began to tell her tale. There was no interruption: only the dead silence of intent listening.

"I met Dr. Slanton for the first time in France during the war, when I was acting as a nurse at the base,"

said the chill, deliberate voice. "At the outset he paid no attention to me, as I was simply an underling, carrying out his instructions. Later, Lieutenant Roderick More, the brother of the young lady yonder, was brought in, badly wounded, and placed in my charge. I had been his father's secretary during pre-war times, and we had been engaged. Owing to the disapproval of Roderick's father, the engagement was broken off, and I did not meet my lover again until he came to the hospital. For we were lovers—we two: he loved me as much as I loved him, so a renewed association ended in a renewed engagement. Fearing lest he might die, for his wound was deadly, Roderick made a will in my favour leaving me two thousand a year. It was witnessed by Dr. Slanton and by Alfred Rackman, who was my lover's batman. After the signing of the will Slanton began to pay me attentions which I discouraged, saying that I loved Roderick and him only. Then"—the speaker's voice trailed away into a faltering murmur, and for the first time she displayed emotion.

"Then Roderick—died," she began again after a pause, and with an obvious effort; "he was buried in France, and later I returned to England to surrender the money to Mr. More, senior, as I did not wish him to think that my love for his dead son was mercenary. I found that Mr. More had disappeared, having gone to France only—as was reported—to be captured by the Germans. Failing to find him, I searched for his daughter, Aileen, who, I found, had left school to work in a stockbroker's office. Her father had left ample funds for her maintenance, during his absence, but the guardian in charge of these had fled to South America with the money. I asked Aileen to take what

Roderick had left me by will but she refused to do this and would only consent to live with me as my companion. We came to Fryfeld, and then—then—Slanton re-entered my life!” Here, once more, the speaker became emotional, as her hands clenched themselves and her face became fierce with scarcely smothered anger.

Again, recovering her self-control, she proceeded swiftly: “The war being over Dr. Slanton was employed as a house-surgeon in the Plantagenet Hospital, down Chelsea way. He learned—I know not how—that I lived here, and thrust himself upon me, insisting that I should marry him. I refused, but he would not accept my refusal, and for some months persecuted me with his hateful attentions, as Aileen can testify. Small wonder,” went on Miss Danby bitterly, “that I took to smoking opium again. It was Slanton who advised me to soothe my neuralgic pains in that way: advised me, when we were in France. I am a wreck because of him. He lured me to tamper with the drug, and his persecutions so tormented me that I indulged in it to calm my brain!” She breathed hard, when confessing this weakness, frowned darkly, and struggled to control her feelings.

Three minutes later. “That is all,” said Edith, wearily. “I saw Slanton some two weeks ago for the last time. As usual, he proposed marriage and, as usual, I refused to entertain the idea. On the morning when his body was found in the wood, I mentioned to Aileen that I would probably go to America to escape his attentions. That, alone, should show you how ignorant I was of his death.”

“Or show,” remarked the Coroner, meaningly,

“that having rid yourself of the man, you hoped to escape the penalty of your crime.”

Miss Danby made a gesture of despair, and sat down, again folding her cloak, shaken loose during her speech, round her gaunt body. “Let it be as you say,” she retorted, contemptuously. “I know nothing more about the matter. By your faces I can see that you have already condemned me.”

“If you can make no better defence——?”

“What other defence can I make, save by telling you the story of my life?” she demanded, fiercely. “There is no evidence I can bring forward to prove my innocence. Yet innocent I truly am”—and again she drew herself up imperially. “Yes—I am wholly innocent. I never saw the man on that night—I never knew that his body lay in the wood, much less that he was dead. Yonder box of tattooing instruments is not my property; I could not have used them had they been my property. And ‘Cain’! Why should I have branded him as ‘Cain’? Such a name was too good for such a beast, as he proved himself to be. ‘Devil’ would have been my choice, and flattering at that. But I did nothing—I know nothing—I can explain nothing. Judge me—condemn me—hang me, if you will. I say no more, since there is nothing to say.”

Wrapping herself in the grey cloak, wrapping herself also in impenetrable silence, she resumed her passive attitude, looking as grim and aloof as the Sphinx. And like the Sphinx, she dumbly proposed a riddle, which none present could guess. That they did attempt to do so, did not prove that their guess was correct. “Willful Murder!” was the guess—the verdict. And the guess was made and the verdict

was given without the slightest hesitation on the part of the jury. "Oh, Edith! Edith!" wailed Aileen, when the fatal words fell from the lips of the foreman.

But Edith said nothing—she did not even look at her friend, who was suffering as much, if not more than, her own wretched self. Without a word she submitted to be led away by Trant, and took her seat in the waiting motor-car as an acknowledged murderess. Aileen did not see that sinister departure for a prison cell. She had fainted in the strong arms of her lover.

CHAPTER VII

WHAT THE WOMAN SAID

“WHAT is your opinion of this case, as it now stands?”

Hustings put this question to Trant very bluntly, and waited somewhat impatiently for an answer. The Inspector withheld the same for three or four minutes, as he was not quite certain what to say. The two men were seated in the detective's private room in the Tarhaven police-station, discussing the doings of the previous day, which had caused so great a sensation at Fryfeld. Ten minutes earlier, Dick had arrived, asking for an interview, which was readily accorded by the officer. The latter wished to work along with the former, as the case in hand perplexed him greatly. It was this very perplexity which delayed his reply, and he turned the matter over carefully in his mind before speaking. “Well, Mr. Hustings!” he said at length, “if you had asked me that prior to the inquest proceedings, I should have been better able to answer plainly. Now,”—Trant shook his head and rubbed his chin with a worried air.

Hustings nodded, comprehendingly. “You have examined the window?”

“This morning!” responded Trant, nodding also. “I agree with you that the snick was pushed back with a knife-blade inserted between the upper and lower sash. And lately, for the planed surface, where the

sliver was sliced off, is perfectly fresh. There is no doubt in my mind but that the window has been forced."

"And that means the intrusion of a third person into this matter!" declared Dick, triumphantly.

"It certainly looks like it. Nevertheless, Miss Danby's character is not cleared by such intrusion."

"To some degree, I think it is, Trant. That third person can only have broken into the cottage for the purpose of hiding the lacquer-box in the book-case. If Miss Danby was an accomplice of the intruder, that unknown individual would scarcely have left behind such dangerous evidence."

"He—let us assume, for the moment, that this unknown person is a man," said the Inspector, argumentatively, "he may have wished to get rid of the woman, and so left behind him sufficient evidence to implicate her thoroughly."

"I don't think so: I can't think so. It would be too much risk for him to take, for how could he be sure that she would keep silent in the face of his betraying her to her death."

"All the same, she *is* silent."

"Granted! But with the silence of ignorance. If she knew the name and the whereabouts of the man who hid the box, it is only natural to suppose that she would give him up to save her life."

"She may do so yet."

"I think not. Her confession, made at the inquest, convinces me that she knows nothing about the box, nor how it came to be in the book-case. Consider, Trant—would there have been any need for the forcing of the window, by a man who could have been admitted into the parlour by Miss Danby herself? No! No!

Believe me, this is a conspiracy to implicate the poor creature in a necessary murder."

"A necessary murder," echoed Trant, raising his eyebrows.

"I speak advisedly," said Hustings with deliberate firmness, "a necessary murder. Someone—the man who forced the window, maybe—had a strong reason for putting away Slanton. Knowing of Miss Danby's stormy relations with the doctor and the doctor's frequent visits, this man implicated her by means of the lacquer-box and the tattooing, so as to ward off suspicion from himself. Yes, and perhaps to get rid of her also."

"But, if she has any such enemy," said Trant, impatiently, "she would speak out."

"As I am to interview her to-day—you said earlier that I could do so—I hope to make her speak out."

Trant shook his head. "She is a mule for obstinacy."

"I intend to appeal to her love for Miss More. Tell her that the girl is in danger of being arrested as an accessory-after-the-fact."

"Yes!" the Inspector nodded approvingly, "a hint of that kind might lead to the breaking down of the reserve—especially as it is true."

"True!" Dick sprang from his chair, furiously. "You don't mean to say that you doubt Aileen—you, who owe so much to her father?"

"Oh, she told you that, did she?" queried Trant, coolly. "Well all the better, as you can judge how loathe I would be to proceed to such an extreme. Nevertheless, if I were other than I am, Aileen would be arrested. It seems inconceivable that all this should

have taken place in a tiny cottage without her knowing something, hearing something, seeing something.”

“She couldn’t hear because she was sound asleep when the crime was committed, and she couldn’t see as she was in bed upstairs, and she can’t know anything or she would speak out, if only to save her friend.”

“Perhaps her speaking out would condemn her friend,” observed Trant cynically. “Don’t grow angry Mr. Hustings, Aileen is as dear to me as to you.”

“How do you know that she is dear to me?” asked Dick, flushing redly.

“Village gossip, your expression when you look at her, her expression when she looks at you. It’s my business to read faces. Anyhow,” Trant rose briskly, “it is just as well that she has a friend in you as well as in me, for her position is both difficult and dangerous.”

“She is as innocent as—as—Miss Danby,” retorted the young man, angrily, “and in some way I’ll get them both out of the difficult and dangerous position.”

“Good luck to you!” Trant grasped Dick’s hand and shook it heartily. “I am as keen in this matter as you are. Keep me advised of what you discover—of what you hear from Miss Danby, and then we can consider what is best to be done.”

Dick nodded, made for the door and turned back. “There is one thing I wish to tell you,” he said, slowly, “did Slanton’s neck-tie have a scarf-pin in it, shaped like a swastika?”

“What on earth is a swastika?” asked the Inspector, openly puzzled.

Hustings scribbled the symbol on the blotting-

paper with his pencil. "That is an occult sign. Hindoo mysticism: Yogi business. Slanton, as I learned from Aileen, meddled with such dangerous things. The swastika scarf-pin was set with rough turquoise stones."

Trant ran over in his mind the number and nature of the articles found on the dead man, and shook his head. "I saw no scarf-pin whatsoever; much less one of that kind. Its oddity would have fixed it in my memory had I seen it."

"Yet Slanton declared to Aileen that he always wore that scarf-pin, so as to bring him luck. He must have worn it when he was murdered. Why is it missing from the body? I wonder," said the young man, suddenly, "if there is any occult devilment behind all this. Slanton was a spiritualist, and from this swastika, it would seem that he concerned himself with eastern mysteries. Did the man who branded him—who killed him—who forced the window—who hid the lacquer-box in the book-case, steal that pin?"

"You propose riddles?" said Trant, shrugging.

"Riddles which I mean to solve."

"How are you going to begin?"

"That depends upon what I hear from Miss Danby." Dick turned towards the door again, and again turned back. "When will she be brought before the magistrate?"

"In eight days."

"It's a short time in which to work wonders. But I am so sure of Miss Danby's innocence that a miracle may happen."

"Let us hope so. Meanwhile, as things are, you must interview your client and see if in any way she can help you to perform the miracle."

“And meanwhile,” repeated Dick, opening the door, “you won’t take any action against Aileen?”

“No! From old associations connected with her father I look upon her as my daughter. It is my duty to have her watched as a necessary witness, since she is involved, unconsciously it is true, in this matter. But she can remain in the cottage unmolested in every way. And I take it,” went on Trant, fixing a piercing gaze on his visitor, “that you will be frank with me—that all you learn will be confided to me?”

“Of course. I am as anxious to work with you, as you are to work with me, since two heads are better than one. Between us, we shall win to the root of this trouble, hard though it seems to dig downward to that root.”

“The ever-hopeful assurance of youth,” sighed Trant, smiling approvingly, and returned to his desk, as the door closed on Hustings. He was by no means so sure of success as the young man, but, unwilling to damp his ardour, refrained from saying so.

Fifteen minutes later Dick was in Miss Danby’s cell, explaining his reason for seeking an interview. The Inspector had arranged for strict privacy, knowing full well that if Hustings was dexterous enough to extract any kind of confession, the woman would not make it if a third person was present. Also he had the assurance that the same would be made known to him in due course. “So, as your solicitor,” said Dick, telling all this to Edith, “I wish you to say to me in private, what you refused to say in public.”

“I have nothing to add to what I said yesterday,” replied the woman, who was seated on her bed, wrapped up, as usual, in the grey cloak.

“But consider, Miss Danby,” urged the visitor,

earnestly, "in eight days you will be brought up before the magistrate, and if you fail to make a defence, you will be sent up for trial at the Assizes."

"What will be, will be."

"But consider," he urged again, "your reputation, your position——?"

Miss Danby threw back her head and laughed terribly. "My reputation—my position!" she sneered with quivering lips, pale and dry. "What are those to one already condemned to death."

"You are not condemned yet; you will not be, if——"

"Yes—'if'!" she interrupted, swiftly; "Much virtue in 'if,' as Touchstone says. But there is no virtue in yours, Mr. Hustings. I am condemned, already, and by a higher tribunal than any on earth."

"What do you mean?" Dick was at once puzzled and startled.

"I mean—Cancer," said Edith, pronouncing the sinister word callously. "No one knows—not even Aileen—that I suffer from cancer, that I have not long to live. For that reason I took to opium-smoking. I called it neuralgia,"—she laughed scornfully, "but now you know the truth."

Hustings surveyed her with profound pity. He was no physician, but even his untrained eye could see the hints of approaching dissolution. The livid, sagging skin, the dull eyes, the dreadful leanness of the figure, and the air of utter exhaustion, pervading her being. "I wish I could do something to help," he cried impetuously; for it seemed terrible to him that such a once splendidly handsome woman should decay into what he saw before him.

"You are doing as much as you can do," said Miss Danby, wearily, and huddled herself on the bed,

like a crooked old witch, then added with a dreary smile: "But there is one thing helpful to me at the moment."

"Yes. Anything I can do——"

"Marry Aileen. She is dearer to me than anything on earth; dearer than ever now, since she is standing by me in these straits. My position matters little to me. I shall probably be dead before it comes to my hanging: for hanged I must be on the evidence I heard yesterday. But I wish to see Aileen safe in your arms before I go. I know that you love her."

"I do—I do—with all my heart and soul."

"Does she love you?"

"I think so—I am almost sure; yes, I am certain she does. Otherwise her promise that she would allow me to talk to her of what is in my heart, after you are saved, would mean nothing."

"It depends upon my salvation then?" queried Edith shrugging, hopelessly.

"More or less. But you can set your mind at rest, Miss Danby. Come good, come bad, sooner or later, I hope to make Aileen my wife."

"Thank Heaven for that," murmured the woman, gratefully, "and she will not go to you penniless. No! I have made a will, leaving her the money which her brother left to me. It is rightfully hers, and when I am gone she need have no scruples in taking back her own, even though she may believe me to be a murderess."

"Aileen does not believe that," said Dick, sturdily, "nor do I."

Miss Danby looked at him rather cynically, "Strange that you should say that, seeing how strong the evidence is against my being innocent."

"There may be even stronger evidence found, likely to be in your favour."

"Where are you going to look for that saving evidence?"

"In the direction you indicate," said Hustings promptly.

Edith laughed drearily. "How often am I to tell you that I can give no help?"

"As often as you like, as I refuse to take such an answer. Before I leave you I am sure you will give me some clue to the truth."

She shook her head. "I know of no clue. The death of Slanton is a mystery to me, as to you and to all."

"But think—think—and consider before you refuse to help me. Aileen!"

"What about her?" Miss Danby looked up alertly.

"She is in the position of being arrested as an accessory-after-the-fact."

The woman sprang to her feet, and straightened her gaunt figure. "You dare not tell me that!" she exclaimed threateningly.

"I do tell you. The sole reason why she has not yet been arrested is that the Inspector is her father's old friend who knew Aileen when she was a child. He is allowing her all possible freedom just now, and while the case remains in his hands he will keep her name out of it, so far as is consistent with his duty. But suppose," Hustings bent forward to whisper the next sentence, "suppose, Miss Danby, the Scotland Yard authorities intervene?"

"They dare not arrest Aileen," gasped Edith, passionately, "she knows nothing."

"So she says; so you say," said Dick with studied

emphasis, as it was necessary to arouse her fears for the girl's safety to the uttermost, "but consider the position. Two women living in a lonely cottage, both hating a man who has been murdered on their door-step, as one might say. It is only reasonable for an outsider to credit both with guilt."

"Why not credit three women with guilt," she taunted, contemptuously, "there is Jenny Walton, who was sent from London by that beast Slanton to be my servant and spy upon me."

"That is news to me, and will be news to Trant," said Dick, startled by the information. "What does Jenny know about this man?"

"I don't know—I never asked her. I was obliged to take her when Slanton requested me to do so, otherwise"—she stopped and pursed up her mouth.

"Otherwise——?"

"That is my secret. I can tell you nothing."

"If you don't, then Aileen is in danger," warned Hustings, significantly.

"The revelation of my secret would not save her: I only wish it could save her," cried the wretched woman, wringing her hands, "but my secret, which concerns only myself and Slanton, has nothing to do with his death. Why he was killed and who killed him, I know no more than you do. Ask Jenny for information about Slanton's past life. She may be able to shed some light on the subject."

"I shall certainly question Jenny, and so will Trant," remarked the young man, deliberately, and rising, as if about to retire, "I am sorry you can't help Aileen. The Inspector will ward off all danger from her while he can but if in the end he is forced to have her arrested——"

Miss Danby sprang forward and clutched him by the sleeve. "She must not be arrested. She knows nothing, I tell you. Wait! Wait! Let me think," and she went back to sit on the bed with clasped hands and a frowning face.

Hustings held his peace, as he guessed that she was making up her mind whether to speak out or to keep silent. The woman twisted her body under the stress of some strong emotion: then, unable to control herself, rose impetuously to walk rapidly up and down the narrow limits of the cell. With her fierce lean face and gaunt body, and profuse grey hair now flying loose, she reminded Dick of a trapped wolf. "If I could only give you a clue," she cried despairingly, "but I can't—I can't."

"Let me be the judge of that," suggested the lawyer, "tell me the truth."

"I have told it—at the inquest."

"Not all. I wish to know exactly what took place on that night. I believe that you went to bed at ten o'clock, that you smoked opium. But!" added Dick, emphatically, "I believe also that you know about the death. Else why did you warn Aileen not to go into the wood, when she ran after the animals?"

Edith flung her body backwards, threw out her arms, and looked upward, as if to seek information. Then—"How do I know but what you will use any confidence I may give you against me?"

"As your solicitor I am bound to help, not to hinder. Of course, if you are about to confess that you are guilty——"

"I don't confess that," she interrupted vehemently, "not for one instant. But, as you say that you are my friend and promise to marry Aileen, I confess one

thing. Whether it will help to save her or not, I can't say." She returned to the bed, and again huddled herself up against the pillow, sullenly afraid. Yes. And so patently afraid that Dick had to urge her to speak.

"What is the one thing you speak of, Miss Danby?"

With an effort she blurted out the truth, "I did see Slanton on that night."

"Yes! Go on."

"He was—was—alive."

Hustings recoiled in horror, "Then you did kill——"

"No! No! No! I swear that I did not: never suggest such a thing. Listen. I shall tell you all I can, for Aileen's sake," and, flinging back her loose grey tresses she poured out a torrent of rapid speech: "I did go to bed at ten o'clock as I said. But I did not smoke my pipe immediately. For hours I lay awake, thinking of my foolish, reckless past——"

"Which you refuse to tell me," interjected Dick, reproachfully.

"Because it has nothing to do with the present," retorted Miss Danby savagely. "Be quiet, you fool, or you will learn nothing. I lay awake I tell you, for hours—for years—for centuries, in that hell of my own making. Then, towards the morning, I fancied I heard some noise outside: footsteps on the gravel of the path. I waited, thinking that I was mistaken—I can't tell you for how long. Then again I heard the noise of footsteps on the gravel, and this time was so sure that I got out of bed, put on my dressing-gown and slippers, and went across the passage into the parlour."

"Why didn't you look out of your bedroom window?"

“Because the noise seemed to be towards the other side of the house. I lighted a candle, and entered the parlour, but everything seemed to be as it was before I went to bed at ten o’clock.”

“Was the window down?”

“Yes.”

“You heard the noise of footsteps you say. Did you also hear the noise of the window being pushed up and pulled down?”

“No! I only heard the footsteps: heard them twice, the second time so clearly that I got up to investigate, as I told you. Then, seeing, as I thought, that everything was safe in the parlour, I opened the front door to peer out.”

“Did you take the lighted candle with you?” asked Dick, profoundly interested.

Miss Danby nodded, impatiently, and hurried her speech. “But there was no need, as the moon had risen. The sky was covered with grey clouds, but sufficient light filtered through to let me see a dark body lying on the lawn.”

“At the moment did you think that it was the body of Dr. Slanton?”

“As Heaven is my judge I did not,” asseverated Edith solemnly, “he was not in my thoughts at the moment. Indeed I had no thoughts, being so distraught and weak. But when I bent down, holding the candle to see who it was,”—here her voice cracked shrilly—“I realized that Slanton was lying there.”

“And alive!”

“I did not think so at the moment. I believed that he was dead, as he did not move, did not even seem to breathe. And—and,”—she caught her breath, faint with the recollection—“and his forehead: oh,

that was a terrible sight, all mangled and swollen. I knelt by the body, panic-stricken, appalled by the horror of the discovery. I wonder—wonder that I did not—not lose my—my reason!” and, covering her face with her hands, she rocked to and fro, groaning.

“Why did you not give the alarm immediately. Call up Aileen and Jenny to send for help to the village?”

Edith lowered her hands and looked at him wonderingly. “You ask that when you know how I hated the man—how I longed to get rid of him and his hateful attentions? You fool, why should I have signed my death-warrant?” She got on to her feet, gesticulating and speaking rapidly. “I saw my danger in a flash, should I be caught, as it were, red-handed, and therefore dragged the body towards the wood. I wanted to hide it—to bury it—to do anything, so long as I could put away this evidence of my having committed a crime, which”—she drew herself up indignantly—“I did not commit.”

“I see your dilemma,” admitted Hustings, sensibly. “Well?”

“Well?” she echoed, angrily, “what else can I tell you?”

“What you did next.”

Edith passed a thin hand wearily across her forehead and did her best to recall the doings of that nightmare moment. “I tried to think how this dreadful thing had come to pass. I dragged the body in a frenzy across the lawn, anxious only to hide it. When I got it into the wood, to where Aileen found it next morning, I knelt down beside it again, hoping against hope that Slanton was not dead—that he had only fainted. I fancied that the twice-heard steps had been his, and

that he had fainted when stepping on to the lawn."

"Didn't you notice the marks on his throat and guess that he had been strangled?" questioned Dick, believing all she had confessed so far.

"No! How could I in the dim moonlight, for the candle had gone out when I dropped it on the lawn at the horror of the discovery. I only noticed the swollen forehead, and wondered why it was swollen—the idea of tattooing never occurred to me. And hoping, as I say, that he might be alive, I shook him again and again. And"—her voice leaped an octave—"he *was* alive, opening his eyes to look up straightly into my face bending over him. And then—then—I—I ran away."

"You—ran—away?" Hustings looked amazed, "But why, when, having revived, the man might have explained the whole business?"

"I was—frightened," said the woman with a terrified glance round the cell, "yes—frightened out of what remaining wits I had. Just when he opened his eyes and—spoke——"

"Spoke!" Dick was all ears and eyes, "did he really speak?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Don't interrupt. I can't remember everything at once," she said peevishly. "Just when he spoke I thought that I heard cautious footsteps on the high road beyond the wall. I might have been mistaken—I don't know—for in my then disturbed state of mind, I might have seen anything—heard anything—believed anything. Think, Mr. Hustings!" Edith gripped her listener by the arm, shaking from head to foot with sheer terror, "There was I, alone with my enemy in that dark wood: alone in the night with that dying beast. The night has a

thousand eyes they say, and those eyes were all looking at me. I had no chance—I was spied upon—I was trapped. Oh, my God, how could you expect me to wait!" she dropped his arm and clutched her head frantically. "I couldn't stay—I doubt if you could have stayed. I was crazy with fear, and tore back to the house, to drug myself into a stupor with opium. No! No!" she thrust out her hands to silence the eager questions on Hustings's tongue, and shrank against the wall, against which the bed was placed. "I can say no more. Go! Go!"

"Just one thing," implored Dick hurriedly, "what did Slanton say?"

"Only one word."

"And that word?"

"Whispering!"

"Whispering! What does——?" then, because Edith had exhausted her strength and was moaning, face downward on the pillow, he refrained from pressing the question. "Be calm and hopeful," he said, touching her bowed head. "I believe in your innocence and will prove your innocence."

She only moaned and trembled, so Dick moved hurriedly out of the cell, having given what sympathy and assurance he could to the unhappy creature. But he frowned thoughtfully when he found himself in the street. "Whispering" he muttered, "now what does 'whispering' mean?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE DARK PATH

“WHISPERING! Whispering! Whispering.” Again and again and yet again, Hustings repeated that mysterious word, as he drove his car back to Fryfeld at top-speed. It sang insistently in his brain, like the catchy jingle of some popular tune, confusing his mind with its maddening reiteration. Somehow it declared itself to be of the utmost importance, but in what way he could not imagine. Slanton—as would appear from Miss Danby’s wild tale—had revived sufficiently to breathe out that one word, before she fled panic-stricken to the safety of the cottage. The Fool-woman! Better have remained to learn the truth, for there was no reason to suppose that the man had relapsed into insensibility the moment after he had regained his speech. But the golden moment had come and gone. The man was dead: the secret was untold.

Yes! The man was dead, but who had killed him? Edith swore that she had left him alive: in a dying condition certainly, but sufficiently himself to speak. Therefore, if her story was true—and Dick believed that it was true—some one had found the man, had murdered the man. He had been drugged, but not unto death, for the marks on his throat explained loudly how he had come by his end. Yes! Slanton had undoubtedly been strangled. But who had strangled him and why? Edith’s flight was due to

her hearing cautious footsteps on the high road beyond the wall, and those footsteps might have been—must have been, those of the assassin. It would have been perfectly easy for him to climb over the wall and execute his purpose; regaining the road in a few minutes to effect his escape. But how had he fled: on foot, or in some vehicle? And whither had he fled: north, south, east or west? Here was another series of perplexing questions which could not be answered. Not that Dick tried to do so, for the mystery of the word “Whispering!” dominated his mind. And try as he would to rid himself of the senseless jingle, he utterly failed to do so. Something—someone, kept telling him, voicelessly, that here was the key to open the Blue Beard’s Chamber of dreadful secrecy. But where was the keyhole into which that key could be thrust? His voiceless adviser gave him no hint of that.

Dick’s long day in Tarhaven, with the weight of two important interviews on his mind, and now the worry of a mysterious word which refused to explain itself, left him, mentally, a complete wreck. But recollected war-experiences, suggesting how very valuable well-considered slumber was to restore the balance of the brain, sent him immediately to his bedroom. Here he laid himself down and fell into a sound sleep. Considering the troubled state of things and the importance of the case creating that state, it was wonderful that he could settle himself so calmly to rest. But this he did, and successfully, for Nature, a generous lender but a hard creditor, demanded her dues, and got them.

For three necessary hours the young man slept placidly, to awaken, like a giant refreshed, when dusk was falling. A cold bath and a change of clothes improved his mood still more, while an excellent dinner

completed the cure. Assuring himself that a calm mind was necessary for him to solve the riddle he had set—or rather that Fate had set—Dick sat down in his library and loaded his pipe. Then, wreathed in fragrant tobacco smoke, he judicially sorted out his newly-gained knowledge, with the idea of seeking Aileen later, so as to advise her as to the present aspect of things. Involved in this somewhat arid meditation, he delayed his contemplated visit too long, and only realized his fault when he beheld Aileen standing at the door.

“I couldn’t wait any longer,” said the girl, coming forward, hurriedly, “so I came over with Jenny. Oh, Dick, how could you keep me in suspense?”

Hustings jumped up, full of apologies, thinking how charming she looked in the filmy black frock, which so vividly enhanced her fair loveliness. “I intended to go over to your cottage, as soon as I sorted out things,” he said, placing an arm-chair nearer to the fire for her convenience.

“What things?” Aileen threw the woolly blue cloak she carried over the back of the chair, and sat down with a shiver to warm her hands.

“Those which I heard from Trant—from Miss Danby.”

“And——?” she looked an anxious question.

“And which I shall explain later,” he replied smoothly, “just now you require coffee and a liqueur.”

“The first, not the second, please. But tell me——?”

“No! No! We must approach matters in hand calmly and in our right senses,” he crossed the room to touch the button of the bell. “I don’t want you to faint, as you did after the inquest.”

“The verdict gave me a shock: took me unpre-

pared. But," added the girl firmly, "the time for such weakness is past. You can rely upon me to——"

Her speech was interrupted by the entrance of the butler, to whom Dick gave an order for the immediate bringing of coffee. "And see that it is hot and strong and black," ordered Dick, sharply.

"I like milk in my coffee," protested Aileen, through sheer feminine resentment to masculine authority.

Dick shook his sleek head masterfully. "Better have the pure juice of the berry to buck you up. Now don't talk for the moment. I'm thinking!" and thrusting his hands into the pockets of his dinner-jacket, he wheeled to face the fire and stare silently into the burning coals.

The girl bit her lip, tapped her foot on the floor, and showed her displeasure very plainly. But as Dick took no notice of this indignant display, she leaned back in the deep chair to examine the room. It was an attractive sanctum for a scholar, with its air of luxury, its atmosphere of peace. Three walls were built up from floor to ceiling with numberless volumes, ranged shelf after shelf in carved book-cases of black oak, sombrely splendid. Piercing the fourth wall, two tall, narrow windows and an equally tall, narrow door, set midway between them, gave upon a broad terrace, whence shallow steps descended to spreading lawns of velvety emerald turf. The carpet and draperies of the library were darkly red, and over the fireplace hung the portrait of Dick's cavalier ancestor, who had fought at Naseby. The effect of the whole was rich but gloomy: the atmosphere suggestively monastic.

It was a strictly masculine apartment, without flowers, ornaments, cushions, or feminine trifles of any kind, and in consequence, looked—to Aileen's eyes at

least—somewhat bleak. A woman's hand, a woman's presence, she thought, would improve its grim sobriety into something more genially cosy. And thinking thus, she blushed, knowing full well that she could be the woman if she so chose. The rosy betrayal of the fancy coloured her face vividly, and somewhat awkwardly, since Dick turned to address her at that very moment. "What's the matter now?" he asked, with characteristic bluntness.

"Nothing!" the girl, naturally, was confused, "only this room—delightful!"

"It would be more delightful, Aileen, if you were always here."

His speech so exactly worded her thoughts that she blushed still more, looking down nervously so as not to meet his imperious gaze. "You promised not to talk like that until Edith was safe."

"I daresay," returned the young man dryly, "but I am flesh and blood you know, and a league-end wooing is not to my liking."

Before Aileen could answer this very direct speech the conversation was again interrupted by the coming of the butler. His master directed him to place the tray with its coffee and liqueurs on the writing-table, and "Tell Miss More's maid to come here in half an hour," said Dick, handling the cups and saucers as the man retired, closing the door after him.

"What do you want with Jenny?" demanded Aileen when they were alone.

"I want a little information from Jenny. Here is your coffee: drink it while it is hot."

The girl accepted the cup, and sipped the aromatic contents enjoyably. "And this information?"

Hustings filled a liqueur-glass and sat himself down in the arm-chair on the opposite side of the fireplace. "I saw Miss Danby to-day," he remarked.

"That doesn't answer my question."

"It is the beginning of the answer. Miss Danby tells me that Slanton induced her to take Jenny Walton into her service."

The cup and its saucer rattled in Aileen's hand. "Edith never told me that."

"I gather that Edith never told you many things," said Dick, shrugging. "You see, she was decent enough to keep you out of her mud as much as she could."

"I won't listen to your talking of my best friend in that way," cried Aileen impetuously, and her eyes grew angry.

"I think you said that before, and yet had to listen. Don't stumble over pebbles, you spitfire. This is serious."

"And so am I." She handed him her empty cup, made a gesture of refusal when he indicated a liqueur-glass, and folded her hands on her lap. "Only don't call me names."

"You *are* a trial, Aileen," observed Hustings, calmly, "I'd like to shake you."

"You did shake me," she retorted, resentfully.

"For your good: for your good, my child. But Jenny—what do you know about her?"

"Only that she came from London six months ago. Edith told me that she was engaged from a Registry-office."

"The Registry-office being Slanton, who sent her to spy on Miss Danby."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you, because Miss Danby wouldn't tell me. What is the link between her and Slanton I don't know; but it must be a deadly link, a strong link to bind so capable a woman as your friend to such an out-and-out scamp as Slanton seems to have been. However, Miss Danby talks of the thing as her secret, so I am as much in the dark as you are. But the point is this: in Slanton's past, lies the cause of his death. Jenny may know something of that past and may be able to reveal things."

"She won't if she is in Slanton's power."

"You forget that the man is dead. His power, if he possessed any over the girl, is therefore gone. But the best thing to do just now," said Dick, settling himself in his chair, "is to report my doings of this afternoon," and he forthwith detailed what Trant had said: what Edith had confessed.

Aileen heard him to the end without interrupting, and her face was shining with pleasure when he concluded. "So you see that Edith is innocent," she cried triumphantly.

"I believe she is innocent. Yet—yet—there is always the doubt."

"What doubt?" demanded Edith's loyal friend, bristling.

"The doubt that this wild story may be made up."

"No! No! If it was untrue she would have made it up before and told it at the inquest. I believe every word she says," declared Aileen, emphatically.

"I hope the magistrate will," murmured Dick with a shrug, "she appears before a magistrate in Tarhaven eight days from now."

"Then in those eight days we must learn the truth."

"It may condemn her."

"No, I am sure that it will set her free. You blow hot and cold," said the girl impatiently, "one moment you say that Edith is innocent, and the next you seem to doubt if she is."

"True! The fact is, I want to believe her innocent, and yet the evidence——"

"I don't care what the evidence is, Edith never killed that man."

"What a purely feminine view you take of the matter," said Hustings, ironically, then added with genuine admiration, "You are very loyal."

"I hold to Edith, whatever Edith may have done," she replied, resolutely, and ended, inconsequently, "not that I believe she has done anything."

Dick nodded absently. Then: "You know when the tide is coming in, it seems, from the surface wavelets, to be going out—yet it is coming in all the time."

"What's that?"

"It's a parable. The surface wavelets are my doubts of Miss Danby's honesty; but the under-surge, fulfilling its purpose, is my belief in her innocence."

"If you knew Edith as well as I do, you would have no doubts."

"Wouldn't I?" Dick again became ironical. "When she keeps the secret of her relationship to Slanton from you? That doesn't sound as if you knew her intimately. I'll say this much—that I believe Miss Danby to be a good sort, tangled up, against her will, in Slanton's nets. And, although the man is dead, the nets still hold."

"We must find the nets and get her out of the nets," said Aileen determinedly.

"I agree! But how?" Hustings suddenly rose from his chair, put his hands in his pockets, and looked

down at the girl from his tall height. "I say, do you believe in the Unseen?"

"You appear to be full of unexpected remarks to-night, Dick. Yes, I do. Why?"

The young man strolled the full length of the room and back again before replying, finally halting before the girl. "I am a materialistic sort of chap myself: an agnostic, not knowing what to believe or disbelieve."

"You apply that reasoning to Edith's troubles," said Aileen, meaningly, "but go on, explain yourself!"

"Well, it's this. Do the dead come back to haunt the living with suggestions?"

"I don't see why they shouldn't," the girl pondered. "Since the war the barrier between this world and the next has become very weak. Well?"

"Well! I mean this: that all day long, someone—something has been at my ear, repeating one word, incessantly."

"And the word?"

"The last Miss Danby heard Slanton say—Whispering!" Dick spoke in a low tone; adding in a louder one, "I believe that word is the clue to the truth."

"In what way?"

"'Search me!' as the Yanks say. I can't explain. The voice is voiceless, if you can grasp my meaning. Slanton was a Spiritualist," he ended, abruptly.

"What has that got to do with this?"

"Well—er—you see—that is!" Dick stumbled over his words, feeling that he was making an ass of himself, but an inward conviction drove him to continue more clearly. "Slanton was always trying to

get through to the other side, when he was alive: now that he is dead he may be trying to reach back through me. Old habits cling, you know."

"Oh nonsense," Aileen spoke scoffingly, but uneasily. "I don't believe it."

"You are the materialist now. It may be nonsense—I don't say that it isn't nonsense; yet the fact remains that the word—Whispering—is the clue. I feel it—I am sure of it. Slanton may be giving it to me so that I can revenge him."

"Or that he may save Edith. He harmed her enough in his life-time: so perhaps being dead and knowing more, he wishes to undo that harm."

"Who is blowing hot and cold now?"

"I am!" she admitted promptly, "we are both waverers, Dick, and this conversation is unhealthy. Anyhow, suppose we accept this word as the clue, how are you going to make use of it?"

"I'll tell you that after I have questioned Jenny." Dick glanced at the grandfather's clock ticking solemnly in the corner. "She'll be here in five or six minutes, if Brent has delivered my message."

Aileen nodded approvingly. "But before she comes, tell me how you think Slanton was murdered?"

Dick's eyes looked amazement at this unnecessary question. "You heard the evidence at the inquest, didn't you? He was strangled."

"Not by Edith."

"We'll let it go at that. Maybe the person whose footsteps she heard on the other side of the wall—the footsteps which made her run away—climbed over the wall to complete his job."

"How do you mean—complete his job?"

"My dear girl, if there is, as we think, a third party concerned in this matter, that person brought Slanton here when Slanton was insensible."

"You forget the return-half ticket found in the doctor's pocket."

"No I don't! The third party probably followed him to Cornby, got hold of him on the way to Fryfeld, and tattooed him while he was drugged."

"But how could Slanton be drugged while coming here?"

"I can't say. That is what we have to find out. The whole business smacks of premeditation to me. I don't know where Slanton was drugged and branded, or how he was branded and drugged. But the person who lurked behind the wall did all that, and then carried his victim on to the lawn. After hiding the lacquer-box in the book-case, he got back on to the high road and waited. When Miss Danby ran away, he got over the wall again and—as I say—completed his job."

"Why couldn't he have strangled him before?"

"Impossible to say!" Dick broke into an exasperated laugh. "You do ask the most unanswerable questions. Hush! Here comes Jenny: she may have a reply to some of them, if not to all," he raised his voice, which had fallen to a whisper, "Come in!"

Jenny, with her large moon-face looming above a bright orange sports-coat, and with her untidy red hair, straggling from under a flowery broad-brimmed hat, appeared at the now-open door, stolid and substantial. "'Eard as you wants me," said Jenny in her heavy voice, and looking at Hustings.

"I do. Come in and close the door. Take that chair and answer my questions."

The servant obeyed the first two commands, but seemed disposed to refuse obedience to the third. "I dunno as there's anything I kin answer."

Aileen spoke, before Dick could open his mouth. "For my sake, Jenny, reply to Mr. Hustings. I am in danger of being arrested as having something to do with the death of Dr. Slanton."

"You ain't got nothing to do with it, Miss," said Jenny with sullen fierceness.

"Inspector Trant has his doubts of that," observed Dick, seeing that the only way to the girl's confidence was through her affection for Aileen.

"Dunno as 'e's much clarse," drawled Jenny, stolidly. Then, leaning forward she patted her young mistress clumsily on the knee. "Don't you taik on, Miss. You've bin good to me, so I'll be good to you."

"Here's your opportunity, then," declared Hustings, cheerfully. "Miss Danby says that Dr. Slanton got you this situation."

"I ain't got no reason to say as he didn't."

"What do you know of Dr. Slanton?"

"Not much. One waiy I didn't taik to 'im: another waiy I did, some'ow. Did me a good turn he did, gitting me 'ere."

"Why did he take the trouble to get you this place?"

Jenny twisted her pudgy fingers together, glanced cunningly at Aileen, who was looking at her appealingly, and finally grinned largely. "Dunno why I shouldn't speak strite," she grunted, hoarsely, "it was this waiy, Mister. I 'ad a boy as was called Bill which I took down Whitechapel waiy from a no-clarse gal. 'E was pinched for burglaring a cove's 'ouse, and the gal clawed me fearful sayying as I double-crossed Bill. A blarsted lie, if ever there was one,"

said Miss Walton, fiercely. "Anyhow, she clawed me up and I was taiken to the 'orspital, where that doctor-bloke as was done in bossed the job."

"The Plantagenet Hospital in Chelsea," said Hustings, doubtfully. "How did you come to be taken there when your fight with this girl occurred—I take it—in Whitechapel?"

"Oh I'd seen the doctor-bloke afore. 'E uster go opium-smoking in Ole Wung's crib in them parts. And when 'e was coming fro' the crib, night-time, 'e found me clawed-up in ther street—Jibbers Alley is the naime—by Isabeller Crane. So 'e acts the gent, 'e does, and taiks me to 'is 'orspital. When I got orl raight 'e ses as 'ow a laidy down 'ere wanted a gal, so I taikes on the job."

Hearing for the first time of Jenny's none too respectable past, Aileen shrank a little, to be immediately scowled upon by the girl. "Thet's raight, Miss; jes' you drawr your skirts fro' a down-an-outer like me."

"No! No! No!" Aileen rose to stand by the self-confessed sinner and pat her on the shoulder. "I don't care what you have been—I only know what you are. I trust you thoroughly as my very good friend."

Jenny caught the kind hand that was patting her, and kissed it. "Thet's good enuff fur me," she said, huskily, "you don't need to saiy better, nohow, Miss Aileen. I'm 'and-an'-glove wif pinchers and coves as the cops are arter. Yuss, and Chinks too, in a waiy; but I ain't never been bad wif men. I'm es good a gal es you're, Miss. Bill wouldn't marry me else when 'e comes outer quod."

"You need never go back to that life," Aileen assured her, earnestly.

"Not me!" declared Jenny, resolutely, "but when Bill comes out—'e's gotter two years' stretch—I'm going to be 'is wife. He knows as I'm strite."

Aileen sat down again, nodding. "And Dr. Slanton?"

"Dunno as I kin tell you anything more abaht 'im."

"Why did he get you this situation?" asked Dick, impatiently.

"Kind 'eart I sup'ose," drawled Jenny, sneeringly.

"Oh, come now, my good girl——"

"Yuss, I knows wot you'd saiy, Mister, and you wouldn't be fur wrong in saiying it. 'E wos a bad 'un out-an-out. Ses 'e ter me in 'orspital, es 'e'd a laidy friend 'ere, 'e wanted to keep an eye on. Thort es she'd do a bunk, so 'e ses to me, 'e ses: 'You git daown and keep yer lights on 'er, sending me a telligrim if she cuts 'er lucky.'"

"In plain words you acted as Slanton's spy," growled Hustings, disapprovingly.

Jenny shrugged. "'Ad to git grub some'ow, Mister. Never liked thet dame mesself, wif 'er 'igh-mightiness. But I do love you, Miss!" she assured Aileen.

"So you know nothing more of Dr. Slanton's past," Aileen looked disappointed.

"Naow! 'Cept es 'e come daown times and times to smoke in Ole Wung's crib."

"Did he get into any rows in Whitechapel?" questioned Dick.

"Wot d'y think? 'Eaps and 'eaps. Ole Wung tried

to knife 'im onct, but 'e tipped thet Chink the Long Melford and scooted. But 'e come back!" went on Jenny with a note of admiration, "yuss 'e did, being afraid of nothing. And 'e knowed too much abaht Ole Wung fur Ole Wung to cut up narsty. Oh thet doctor-bloke was clever and tough enuff I don't 'arf think; and 'e did me a good turn. But"—here her eyes and her voice grew vindictive—" 'e wos a beast. Don't wonner a bit es thet Miss Danby choked 'im."

"She didn't!" contradicted Aileen, angrily, "don't say that."

"Orl raight. Shan't ef you don't want me to. All th-saime, if she didn't, oo did?"

"We thought you might have some idea, Jenny."

"Me, Mister!" The stolid servant shaken out of her stolidity, rose in wrath, "I dunno nuffin, I don't. Saiy I did it, do yer?"

"No! But I fancied you might know of some Whitechapel person who had a grudge against the doctor."

"Oh, I knows 'eaps of them as 'ad grudges," said Jenny, indifferently. "Ole Wung—Fancy Charlie—Roaring Luke—Totty Jones—Wu Ti. 'Eaps of 'em."

"Do you think that any one of these——?"

"Naow!" snarled Jenny, curtly and sullenly, as she walked to the door, "and ef you're coming along o' me, Miss Aileen, I'm on the jump."

When the servant disappeared, Dick turned to assist his visitor into her woolly blue cloak. "Do you think that she is hiding things?" he asked, nodding towards the door, for somehow he sensed reticence—the withholding of something, which could have

been said, should have been said, but which was not said.

"I think not!" Aileen pondered. "No! Jenny is too fond of me to hide anything likely to help. She is a rough diamond, Dick. I am sure she is honest."

"I'll make certain of that when I look up this opium-den," said Dick, grimly, "it is necessary for me to see Old Wung: he might be the third party we want."

Aileen shook her head. "A Chinaman wouldn't tattoo a Biblical name."

"Well—er—no," agreed Hustings, reluctantly, "and yet the tattooing—the lacquer-box—the opium-drugging: these suggest the Far East. I must follow all possible clues you know."

"Don't forget the clue of the swastika," she reminded him, "the murderer has it."

"You can't be sure of that. It might have been dropped in the wood."

"No! I thought of that and searched thoroughly. It is not there."

"Well," sighed Dick, "that's one clue and Slanton's last word is another."

At this moment Jenny peeped in. "Ain't you coming?" she asked, querulously.

"Yes! Yes!" Aileen drew her cloak round her and asked a question suggested by Dick's speech, "Jenny, what do you know of—Whispering?"

"Nuffin! I never whispers mesself and 'ates them es do. Sneaky I calls it."

"Did you ever hear Dr. Slanton use that word?"

"Naow! And I carn't wayt 'ere orl night."

"But Jenny,"—Aileen ran after her, passing into the hall.

“Don’t be a worrit, Miss. Ef the wust comes, I’m ’ere to ’elp you to bust up the wust. And,” ended Jenny, sharply, “I *can* ’elp. So there!” and she stalked out sulkily, leaving two very perplexed people staring at one another.

CHAPTER IX

THE MYSTERIOUS WORD

HAVING collected such information as was possible under present foggy conditions, Hustings proceeded to deal with the same as best he could. The trail, faint as it was, led him to London—to that London-under-London, of which, according to Jenny Walton, the dead man had been a secret citizen. And, however doubtful he might have been of her probity in several ways, the woman's statements proved to be correct in this instance. In the lawyer's opinion she was withholding important details, judging from the significance of her final remark in the library. Nevertheless, so much as she had admitted was valuable and capable of proof. Dick learned this from Bender.

The individual answering to this name was a shabby, under-sized man, with the mask of a fox and the squeaky cry of a field-mouse. His dingy frock-coat and baggy striped trousers were the last word in misfits, and he wore a battered silk hat, pulled well down over his wholly bald cranium. With his many pockets stuffed with papers, and always carrying a bulgy umbrella, Mr. Bender sidled, rather than walked, constantly turning his cunning eyes downwards, upwards, sideways, in search of possibilities. He was a born Paul Pry, searching out secrets from the sheer love of making those secrets his own, and was utilizing

his inquisitive instincts, as an inquiry agent, for the betterment of his fortunes. A brother-solicitor had recommended him to Hustings as a useful sleuth-hound, and Hustings had hired him promptly to look with those cunning eyes into the none-too-clean past of Dr. Cuthbert Slanton.

Naturally the young man would have infinitely preferred to work single-handed, but his one and only visit to Old Wung's opium-den, impressed him thoroughly with a sense of his incompetence as an amateur detective. An expert in gutter doings was needed, and he found such a one in Bender. The wary little fox was just the unscrupulous searcher-into-other-people's affairs which the lawyer required for his purpose. Within four days from the date of hiring, Mr. Bender proved his value, since he learned more in that time than Dick could have learned in a month. And the fourth day saw him sidling into the office of Hustings, Warry & Son, to make his report. The senior partner of the firm received him in a lordly room of a Georgian-fashionable house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and greeted him with mingled relief and impatience. "I thought you were never coming," snapped out that harassed young man.

Bender deposited his small person in the depths of a comfortable chair, placing on the carpet his hat and umbrella: one on one side, one on the other. "Ah youth, Mr. Hustings, sir, youth. Rome wasn't built in a day."

"And the horse is the noblest of all animals," retorted Dick, sitting at his writing-table to snatch up an ivory paper-cutter and fidget. "Don't quote copy-book maxims to me. What have you found out?"

In no wise disturbed by this brusque reception, Ben-

der leaned back with folded arms and fast-closed eyes. "I can talk better when they're shut," he squeaked, "seeing, as it were, inside my head, Mr. Hustings, sir," and he began his recital in a monotonous tone of voice, shrilly clear.

The recital took some time and covered a considerable space of ground, so Dick curbed his impatience to listen intently. In the capacity of an out-of-door patient, Bender had become friendly with one of the Plantagenet Hospital nurses, and, in some mysterious way, had learned from her that Slanton was a respectable, clever and reliable house-surgeon. Owing to his reticent character and saturnine looks, added to an unsympathetic manner, he was by no means popular, being regarded rather as a Robot than as a man. But his reputation was unblemished, his assiduity, as a doctor, great, and he was high in favour with the authorities. If he had a fault, it was his habit of going away, sometimes for a day, sometimes for a night, more often than any other member of the staff. Twice or thrice his superiors had remonstrated with him, disapproving of these frequent and desultory holidays. But on each occasion Slanton had grimly offered his resignation. It was never accepted, since his scientific attainments were so great, and his medical capabilities so proven. Beyond the eccentricity of his many disappearances, which he disdained to explain, there was nothing against him. His doings were finally accepted as the usual freakishness of genius. "And now?"—questioned Dick when Bender arrived at this point.

"Oh, now, Mr. Hustings, sir," said the little man, opening his eyes, "those in the hospital verify the proverb that the herd turn on the wounded deer. As

there was nothing too good for Mr. Slanton, now there is nothing too bad. He was murdered, they say, as a reward of his evil-doing. Secret vice has been the cause of his downfall. I won't tell you, Mr. Hustings, sir, what they say about Miss Danby. It might hurt your feelings."

"They believe her to be guilty?"

"Oh yes. And credit her with being as vicious as her victim."

"And the tattooing?"

"They say that the branded name was just what the tattooed name described him to be."

"And all this upon what grounds?"

"None, save the evidence at the inquest. The wounded deer, Mr. Hustings, sir. And another proverb—any stick is useful to beat a scamp."

"I never heard that proverb, Mr. Bender. Well they are right about Slanton being a scamp: but their opinion of Miss Danby is wrong. She is the victim of circumstances, and it's up to you and to me to prove her so. Go on!"

Bender closed his eyes again and went on, this time passing from the light into the shadow. That is, he descended into the under-world, and crept along the crooked paths used by the dead man when indulging in his secret lusts. These led to thieves' kitchens, to police-sought dancing-saloons, to opium-dens and such-like unsavoury haunts of animal gratification. In this place and that the prowling little fox had collected damning information, which revealed only too truly the Mr. Hyde side of Slanton's complex character. With his strong will, powerful physique, and command of money, the man had dominated those wastrels of

civilisation who ministered to his vicious tastes. But all the details of the man's doings were so general, and so far from leading up to the point which Hustings wished to reach, that he interrupted Bender impatiently, "All this is interesting, but not sufficiently so to me. Did you come across anyone likely to have murdered the man?"

"Well, no, sir. He made many enemies, owing to the way in which he snatched women from this man and that. But they were all afraid of their tyrant, as he was a scientific fighter, and fought on all and every occasion. In the kingdom of the Blind, the one-eyed is king," said Bender, in his proverbial way of talking, "but Slanton had two eyes and knew how to use them."

"What about Old Wung?"

"He hated Slanton and once tried to knife him. I spent several hours in his den, but could learn nothing. Besides," went on Bender, taking much the same view as Aileen, "a Chinaman wouldn't have tattooed a Biblical name like Cain on Slanton's forehead."

"I have heard that before," Dick nodded, sapiently, "but surely Slanton ran some chance of being black-mailed?"

Bender nodded in his turn. "One man tried that, Mr. Hustings, sir. He followed the doctor home——"

"To the hospital?"

"No, sir—to a cottage the doctor rented at Hampstead. Slanton had him arrested for burglary, and the man got two years."

"Oh!" Dick remembered what Jenny had confessed, "was the man's name Bill?"

"Yes, Mr. Hustings, sir. Bill Tyson."

"I see. Probably that was why Slanton got Jenny

the job with Miss Danby. He was sorry that he robbed the girl of her man, and sought to make amends."

Bender wagged his bald head solemnly, "You told me all about that girl, sir, when engaging me to handle the matter. And then you admitted that, on her own confession, she had been sent to spy upon Miss Danby. Dr. Slanton only did what he did do, Mr. Hustings, sir, because the girl was useful to him in that capacity. No! No! The leopard cannot change his spots, nor the Ethiopian his skin," ended the little man, sententiously, "there was no good in the man."

"There lives some soul of good in all things evil," retorted Dick, adopting Bender's favourite method of illustrating his points by quotations.

"Not with this man, sir, not with this man. He only reaped what he had long sown, and deserved all he got. A cold-blooded scientist on the surface, Mr. Hustings, sir: but underneath a very hot-blooded animal."

"You can't mix oil and water," said Dick, dryly.

"In this case I think I can, sir. Dr. Slanton was a Palæolithic man, with the veneer of our present Cainozoic civilisation."

"I never knew that you were so learned, Bender."

"I keep my eyes open and my brain filled, sir. And now——"

"Yes, now?" Dick rose with a dismal foreboding of failure, "what now? Nothing you have told me is of any use towards solving the mystery of the Fryfeld crime. And four days out of the eight are gone. When Miss Danby appears before the magistrate I'll have no fresh evidence to help her."

“I didn’t tell you everything, sir,” said Bender, wriggling out of his chair.

“Eh?” Hustings wheeled. “Why—what—well?”

“You told me of the last word which Miss Danby heard Dr. Slanton speak.”

“Yes. Whispering! Well?”

“Well, Mr. Hustings, sir, I used that word again and again, both in the hospital and down in the underworld. But without success. Then I remembered that you hinted to me that Dr. Slanton had been a Spiritualist.”

“I did. I had an idea that the word had something to do with his spiritualistic philanderings, from its being dinned into my ears, persistently. I daresay you thought I was talking nonsense.”

“Not nonsense, sir; not nonsense. There are more things in heaven and earth——”

“Yes! Yes! I know that well-worn quotation,” broke in Dick, testily, “get on.”

“With your permission, sir. Well then, I knew three or four spiritualists—mediums. I have been attracted to searchings into the unknown in my time.”

“And found a mare’s nest,” scoffed the lawyer contemptuously.

“Not in this case, sir,” squeaked Bender, indignantly. “I asked many questions about Dr. Slanton, and learned that he was a well-known figure in Spiritualistic circles. He was always seeking to penetrate the veil——”

“Well, well, well!”

“Near his cottage at Hampstead, sir, lives a famous medium—Mrs. Grutch, who was frequently consulted

by him. It is strange that I should know her, and that she should have known him, seeing that you are employing me to search into the mystery of his death. Mrs. Grutch consulted the Spirits, and——”

“And learned nothing that can be used in a court of law. Bender, Bender, you ought to know better than that.”

“Mrs. Grutch knows better, sir. She is waiting without. With your permission——” and Bender trotted towards the door.

“Oh damn it, I don't want any séance rubbish here, man.”

“You need not fear, Mr. Hustings, sir. Mrs. Grutch always refuses to give sittings to unbelievers. Still,” advised Bender with his hand on the door, “it would be to your advantage to see her.”

Dick sat down resignedly, as all this seemed to him to be a waste of time. “Oh have her in, Bender: have her in.”

Like magic the little man disappeared, and reappeared in an equally magical manner with a bulky female at his heels. “Mrs. Grutch!” he squeaked, as the ponderous lady rolled heavily into the room, “and, Mr. Hustings!” thus introducing lawyer and client with due formality.

“Please seat yourself, Mrs. Grutch!” said Dick, gravely. “I'm glad to see you.”

“Are you now?” queried Mrs. Grutch, subsiding like a spent billow into the nearest chair. “I never should have thought it, pleasant young gentleman as you are. Never! For Bender, here, tells me that you are an unbeliever.”

“I keep an open mind,” observed the young man, dryly.

“Well now, if that isn’t something comfortable to hear!” and Mrs. Grutch, placing two fat hands on two fat knees, smiled amiably.

She was a woman both broad and tall, also stout, and with a small-featured face, so neat and trifling that it looked ridiculously out of keeping with her huge body. With a pug-nose, a rabbit-mouth, and a narrow forehead, she likewise possessed two little piggy eyes of greenish-grey, with which she sharply surveyed the world, as she conceived it to be. And her conception was that the world should supply her with all the comforts and, if possible, all the luxuries of civilisation. Her complexion was fair and freckled, her hair smooth and sandy, so she would have seemed quite a meek, retiring person, but for the searching observance of her pin-point eyes. Clothed in a voluminous black silk dress, partially concealed by a profusely-beaded dolman and wearing an ancient bonnet, adorned with jet flowers, she suggested a respectable charwoman. But no charwoman would have worn so many coloured beads and mystic charms, not to speak of earrings, rings, brooches and bracelets. Her whole person twinkled with these: rattling and jingling with every movement. Hustings gathered all this at a glance, then asked a leading question. “What do you know, Mrs. Grutch?”

“Money is money,” stated the stout lady, less irrelevantly than might be supposed, and with a knowing leer.

“Oh, I shall make it worth your while.”

“And the amount, sir?” Mrs. Grutch became respectful to the holder of the purse.

“That depends upon the quality of your information.”

Bender nodded approvingly. "No use buying a pig in a poke," said Bender.

After some reflection Mrs. Grutch spoke persuasively. "A fiver now, sir. Eh?"

"If what you can tell me is worth that amount, you shall have it," assented Dick.

"It's worth more, sir," exclaimed the woman, and so vehemently that her many ornaments rattled alarmingly, "but there—I was never a greedy mouth. Take all you can get and be thankful, is always my motto."

Hustings nodded impatiently. "What do you know?"

"I know Dr. Slanton," asserted the lady, impressively.

"The man is dead: you mean that you did know him."

"Nothing of the sort," said the famous medium, loftily, "you, being an unbeliever, can put it in that ignorant way if you like, and no offence meant. But he is more alive than we are. And"—she embraced the whole room in one swift glance—"there he is, listening to us talking! Over there," she pointed.

"You might ask him to talk himself," urged Dick, ironically, "and explain."

"He isn't permitted to do that," stated Mrs. Grutch, now in an attitude of intent listening. "Justice will be done, when justice is done."

"And the sun, rising in the east, sets in the west," retorted Dick, crossly. "You are too obvious, Mrs. Grutch. Ask your invisible friend what is the meaning of the last word Miss Danby heard him utter."

"I don't need to do that, sir. I can help you by

physical means. It is my opinion that he"—she jerked her head to indicate the invisible victim—"was drawn to his death by that very word."

"Oh!" Hustings smiled disbelievingly, "and I suppose you will say that it was Dr. Slanton who kept shouting that word incessantly in my ear."

"I do say it," declared Mrs. Grutch, so energetically that the charms and beads jingled again, "follow up that word and you've got him."

"Got who?"

"Him!—the man who killed the flesh but not the spirit."

"How do you know that the criminal is a man?"

"The spirit, now in this room, tells me so."

"Then Miss Danby is innocent?"

"As a babe unborn!" said Mrs. Grutch, with clinching emphasis and renewed rattlings, "a man did it and for doing it a man will suffer."

"There, you see, Mr. Hustings, sir," struck in Bender, triumphantly, "I told you it was important to interview Mrs. Grutch."

"Tush!" Dick spoke contemptuously, "She has said nothing which would be accepted as evidence in a court of law. I want facts: not this crazy spirit-chatter, which is all double-Dutch to me. Your fiver is in danger, Mrs. Grutch."

"I think not sir. There's more to come. If I can tell you what the word means, and why he said it when casting off his body, you'll pay won't you?"

"If the word will lead me to the truth—certainly."

"Well then," said Mrs. Grutch, slowly and impressively, "he wanted to say two words, but could only get out one. 'Whispering' he said; but didn't add 'Lane!' It was Whispering Lane he wanted to say."

“And would have said if Miss Danby hadn’t run away,” observed Bender, quickly.

“Whispering Lane!” echoed Dick, mystified, “what’s that?”

“It’s a place where spirit manifestations are taking place,” explained the medium, now on her own ground and briskly business-like. “For some three to four months they have been going on, as is well-known in Spirit circles. Not wishing publicity, which the Friends on the Other Side don’t like, we have kept this to ourselves, investigating it privately. That’s why you haven’t seen any mention of it in the newspapers. Drat ’em for meddling busybodies,” said Mrs. Grutch wrathfully, and with an indignant jingle of her ornaments.

Seeing that his patron looked more mystified than ever, Bender took on the conversation, opening it with a proverb, as usual. “Silence is golden,” he quoted sententiously, “so for your golden silence, I shall give my silver speech.”

“Fire ahead then!” Dick resigned himself to the little man’s eccentricities, glancing sideways at Mrs. Grutch, who looked rather offended in thus being set aside. “You don’t mind, do you?” he asked her, abruptly.

“Oh, no, sir,” she snorted, with a glare which belied her denial. “I was never one to talk, unless so requested. But of course”—she cajoled—“the fiver——?”

“Will be yours when the story is finished. Go on, Bender.”

Thus adjured, Bender spoke his mind. “On the outskirts of the village of Wessbury, near Chelmsford, and at the end of a deeply-sunken and leafy lane,

there stands a bungalow, inhabited by Mr. and Mrs. Brine, for some years before the war. They were greatly attached to one another, and when the husband was killed in action, the wife took his death so much to heart that three months later she committed suicide. This being a sin, she is condemned to haunt the place looking for him, but never finding him."

"Does she haunt the bungalow as well as the lane?" inquired Dick, sceptically.

"Sometimes one, sometimes the other," burst out Mrs. Grutch, determined to lead the conversation, "she has been heard in both places."

"*Heard* in both places?"

"She's never seen," explained the medium with a mysterious look, "only her wailing voice is heard in the lane on certain nights."

"Wind in the trees," suggested Hustings, with a shrug.

"Wind doesn't talk like human beings," insisted Mrs. Grutch, "you may scoff your worst, sir, being an unbeliever, but I have heard the voices myself."

"What do they say—or rather what does she say?"

The stout lady immediately screeched like a banshee: "Where are you—oh my darling, where are you? Edgar! Edgar! Edgar! Where, oh where?" then dropping her voice to its ordinary pitch she went on, "I heard those words myself."

"In the bungalow?"

"In the lane, sir, although I did visit the bungalow to investigate. And I must say that Mrs. Jerr gave me every assistance, just as she gave to our other Believers, when they went down to help the poor spirit to find rest."

"Mrs. Jerr?"

“The old lady who rents the bungalow from its present owner, Mr. Simon Chane, he having bought the property after the suicide of Mrs. Brine,” gabbled the medium, all in one long breath, “like yourself, she is an unbeliever, yet even she admits to hearing the voices—noises she calls them.”

“And how does Mrs. Jerr explain the phenomenon?”

“Scoffs at it,” said Mrs. Grutch, sadly, “talks of wind in the trees, and a stray parrot, screeching what it’s picked up, as parrots do.”

“Mrs. Brine did have a pet parrot, you mentioned, Mrs. Grutch,” struck in Bender, doubtfully, “and it may have picked up her wailing for her dead husband.”

“Don’t you be an unbeliever, Bender,” cried Mrs. Grutch, vehemently, “it’s spirit-talk—I know it is. A message from the Summer-world.”

“Scarcely a message,” remarked Dick, dryly, “seeing that it is directed to no one in the flesh. But”—Hustings turned his face inquiringly to Bender—“what has this queer story to do with Dr. Slanton’s death?”

“He was a spiritualist, Mr. Hustings, sir,” said the little man eagerly, “and having heard of this phenomenon, he must have gone down to examine it. As he spoke of The Whispering Lane—for it is plain to me that he would have added Lane had Miss Danby waited to listen—I think he was drugged and branded there: afterwards being taken to Fryfeld, so that Miss Danby might be implicated in the matter.”

“That is a very far-fetched theory,” mused Dick, stroking his chin perplexedly, “but there is something in what you suggest. I’ll go down to Wessbury myself, and see what I can learn. Are the

voices"—he looked at Mrs. Grutch—"heard every night?"

"Only on certain nights, Mrs. Jerr says, but I don't know, myself, what particular nights. You may hear them: you may not. Spirits," ended Mrs. Grutch loftily, "are not to be dictated to by mere flesh and blood."

"Do you know positively that Dr. Slanton went down to investigate?"

"No I don't, sir. But many of our Believers went, and when I told him about the matter—for I was the first to tell him—he said he would like to see into things for himself. But whether he went, or whether he didn't, I can't be sure. I never meddle with what isn't my business."

"Slanton must have gone to Wessbury, Mr. Hustings, sir," insisted Bender, "else why should The Whispering Lane have dwelt so strongly in his mind as to make him speak about it, when just recovering from the drugging?"

"Yes! I agree, Bender. There is your fiver, Mrs. Grutch." Dick passed along a Bank of England note to the medium, who grabbed it greedily. "Your information is worth all the spirit-chatter you favoured me with."

Mrs. Grutch surged upward from the depths of her chair, with a pitying glance at the sceptic. "You can't make a blind man see, nor a deaf man hear, so why waste time in doing either? But he knows"—she pointed to the corner of the room, where an invisible Slanton was supposed to be standing—"and he is glad that you are going to revenge him."

"On Miss Danby?" said Hustings, contemptuously.

"The Spirit has no wish to harm Miss Danby. It's the man who drugged him and branded him and strangled him, he wants to be caught and hanged. There! I've said my say. Take it or leave it!" and she rolled tumultuously jingling towards the door.

"One moment, Mrs. Grutch," Dick called after her, "what is Mrs. Jerr like?"

"A very affable lady: well-to-do and keeps a servant."

"And the servant?" asked the solicitor, smiling at the woman's answer.

"A Chinaman—Wu Ti," said Mrs. Grutch, and rolled out of the room.

"Wu Ti!" gasped Dick. He recalled Jenny's naming of Slanton's enemies.

CHAPTER X

HEARD IN THE DARKNESS

WHEN in possession of the really valuable information supplied both by Mrs. Grutch and the shabby little inquiry agent, Dick lost no time in making use of it. There was true wisdom in his thus speeding up matters, since Edith Danby's appearance before the Tarhaven magistrate could not easily be postponed, and it was urgently necessary to find some evidence in her favour, however scanty. This, the young lawyer hoped, would be discoverable in Wessbury, and, within twenty-four hours of his acquiring the knowledge, he was dining in the private parlour of the village inn. As the landlord was a communicative individual, the landlady an excellent cook, and the room warmly home-like with a brisk fire, Hustings felt very well satisfied with the beginnings of this wild goose chase. For so, he inwardly termed it, so blurred was the trail. "I expect I am not the first person who has asked you about The Whispering Lane?" said Dick, when he arrived at the coffee and tobacco stage of after-dinner delights.

"Not by a long chalk, sir," grinned the landlord, a cheerful young ex-soldier, intelligently frank, "but you ain't like most of them spirit-merchants, sir: a weedy lot they are. Off their rockers, I reckon with their gone-west tosh. Beg pardon, sir, I hope I haven't——"

Dick shook his head, guessing why the man was confused, "I am a common-sense lawyer, Webb—I think you told me your name is Webb."

"Yes, sir. And I take it, sir, that you're an officer?"

"An ex-officer, R.G.A. Like yourself, one of the 'also rans,' Webb. But this Whispering Lane: is that story I repeated to you, as told to me, a true one?"

"Quite true, sir. Mrs. Brine did live in that bungalow; she did kill herself when her husband was killed; and she does haunt the lane."

"Oh, come now, Webb, what about your talk of gone-west tosh?"

The landlord scratched his head, thoughtfully. "Well I do think that there's a lot of nothing in that: all the same, sir, there's something in it, which ain't to be explained easily," he looked serious and sank his voice to a whisper, "for I've heard the voices myself."

"And they said——?"

"Something like—'Oh where are you, Edgar! Edgar!' and such-like. Plain enough."

"It must be a trick."

"Maybe, sir; but it's a trick no one has found out. Them spirit-merchants by the dozen have been hanging round for weeks, poking and prying and holding their blinking séances, but they've not got hold of the right end of the stick—if there is any right end," added the man as an afterthought.

Hustings looked thoughtfully into the fire for a few minutes then brought out of his pocket the patched-up photograph of Slanton—torn by Edith—which he had induced Trant to send him. "Is that the picture of an inquirer?"

Webb took the photograph, scrutinized it carefully,

and returned it with a dubious look, "I can't say as I remember anyone like that, sir. But my wife might have seen him."

"Ask Mrs. Webb to step this way, please!"

The landlady appeared in a few minutes, inspected the photograph, and also declared her ignorance. "Never set eyes on him before," she said, sharply, "but, of course, everyone drawn to Wessbury by this ghost-business doesn't come to us. Lots go straight to the lane and straight back to London when they've heard what they came to hear. And some stay with friends, going night after night to listen. No, sir," she passed back the photograph to its owner, "I don't know him."

Baffled in this direction, Dick tried another. "This Mrs. Jerr. Who is she?"

"Oh, quite a nice old lady, sir, who rented the Brine bungalow from Mr. Chane some six months ago," it was Webb who explained, anticipating his wife. "I've taken eggs and milk to her lots of times, when Wu Ti didn't come for them."

"A Chinaman!" Hustings feigned ignorance. "How does an old lady in an English village come to have a servant of that nationality?"

This time it was Mrs. Webb who gave the information. "Mrs. Jerr is the widow of a Hong Kong silk-merchant, who has lived all her life in the East. She brought Wu Ti with her when she returned to England after the death of her husband. He's devoted to her is Wu Ti. Although," added Mrs. Webb with a shiver, "I don't like him myself: a creepy-crawly kind of man."

"It's the English way of looking at foreigners that speaks, sir," said Webb, with a broad smile. "Wu

Ti's just the same as any other Chink. I've seen lots of 'em in the Mile End Road, when I lived there, afore the war. But Minnie," he grinned at his wife, "she's lived in this here village all her life and don't know things."

"I knew enough to marry you when you were billeted here," said the landlady, tartly. "Father was alive then. Now you've got this hotel he left me, and me too. What else do you want?"

Webb grinned at Dick to intimate that his wife's bark was a deal worse than her bite. "She don't mean half she says, sir."

"Oh yes she does, and a lot more if she's time to say it," snapped Mrs. Webb, with a betraying smile. "But Mr. Hustings doesn't want to hear of your goings-on, Alf; tell him about Mrs. Jerr."

Webb scratched his head again. "There ain't anything to tell."

"Well," volunteered his wife, placidly, "you're about right. She's a quiet old lady, Mr. Hustings, keeping herself to herself, and Wu Ti looks after her."

Dick nodded. So far everything seemed to be fair and square and above-board, so he tried another track. "Did you know Mr. Chane?"

The landlord gave the information. "Oh yes, sir. Minnie and me have seen him lots of times. He bought the bungalow two years ago from the cove as got it by will. But he didn't live in it altogether. Stayed mostly in Town and came down week-ends."

"And he rented the bungalow to Mrs. Jerr some six months ago," Mrs. Webb took up the story promptly, "saying he was going abroad on some scientific business. A pleasant gentleman he was, and clever with science things."

"Oh, indeed. What was his particular line?"

"I can't tell you, sir."

"Have you his London address?"

"No, Mr. Hustings. All I know is that he used to come down here, as Alf says, at week-ends; Saturday night he'd arrive and return to Town early Monday."

"Did he live alone in the bungalow?"

"There was a man-servant who came and went with him, but he mostly stayed in the bungalow, while Mr. Chane went about enjoying himself. I never saw him."

"No more did I," struck in Webb, hastily, "queer cove keeping himself to himself in the way he did."

"Like Mrs. Jerr," observed Dick, dryly; "by the way, was this voice, or these voices, heard in Mrs. Brine's time?"

"No, sir. Only during the last few months have the voices been heard."

"And Mrs. Jerr has been in the bungalow for six months," mused Hustings, with a nod. "I wonder if she has anything to do with the business—or Wu Ti?"

Mrs. Webb laughed disbelievingly. "She doesn't bother about spirit rubbish, Mr. Hustings, and is willing to let anyone examine the bungalow. What's more, she never knew Mrs. Brine, or anything about her, except what's common gossip. As to Wu Ti, he's a poor heathen, bowing down to stocks and stones, that ignorant you wouldn't believe. It's my opinion," ended Mrs. Webb, firmly, "that it's the parrot."

"The parrot!" echoed Dick, remembering Mrs. Grutch's mention of some such bird.

"Mrs. Brine's pet parrot," repeated the landlady, "a

grey bird with pink underneath. He talked wonderful. So I believe that when Mrs. Brine wandered about the bungalow and lane crying for her husband, the parrot picked up some of her words and goes about saying them."

"How long has Mrs. Brine been dead?"

"Close upon three years, sir."

"What became of the parrot?"

"The cove as got the property took it away with him," said Webb, striking into the conversation, "but it might have flowed back with its chatter. I don't know as Minnie's idea ain't right."

"What is the name of the man who inherited the property and took away the parrot?" asked Dick, taking out pencil and note-book.

"Brine, sir," said Mrs. Webb, quickly, "Horace Brine—the brother of the poor young lady. He lives somewhere in Hampstead, but I don't know the exact address. Why sir?"

"Because I wish to find out if he has the parrot. If so, the voice can't be that of the bird. I daresay I'll find Mr. Horace Brine's address in the London Directory." Hustings stood up and warmed his back against the fire. "I am much obliged to you both for telling me all this. I am down here on behalf of a client, who is interested in these ghostly happenings. And I wish to prove to her that they are all nonsense."

Both Webb and his wife shook their heads simultaneously. "I thought so once, and so did Minnie," said the former, seriously, "but she's heard the voices, and so've I. Everyone in the village has heard them; that's why we call the place—The Whispering Lane."

“With all this widely spread publicity, local as it is, why hasn’t the mysterious business got into the newspapers?”

“I dunno sir,” answered Webb, scratching his head as usual, “but it is getting in sure enough. Two days ago a gent from a London daily come down here to ask questions.”

“And we answered him as we’re answering you, sir,” chimed in the brisk little landlady, “for if there’s a stir in the newspapers about The Whispering Lane lots of people will come to The Pink Cow, and that’s our name for our hotel.”

Dick laughed approvingly, as he quite understood their desire to make hay while the sun of curiosity was shining. “Well, so far, so good. How do I get to The Whispering Lane?”

“Are you going there to-night, sir?”

“Yes, Mrs. Webb. I have little time to spare and must make the best use of it.”

The landlady opened her eyes widely and shivered. “I only went once myself, Mr. Hustings, and that was with Alf here. It was horrid—the darkness and the wailing. I wouldn’t go there again for pounds and pounds. Besides, it’s a nasty night, sir, with wind and rain and as black as pitch.”

“All the better atmosphere for psychic happenings. If you will tell me how I am to find this haunted place——?”

Mrs. Webb looked intelligently at her husband. “Jimmy!” she said, meaningly.

“Yes!” he nodded apprehendingly. “Jimmy Took. What he don’t know about the business no one knows. I’ll send out for him, instanter,” and the ex-

soldier left the room whistling an army song, while his wife began to clear away the dishes, talking all the time.

"Jimmy will lead you to the lane, sir. He knows the way blindfold, and it's as well that he does, seeing how black the night is."

"Who is Jimmy Took?" asked Dick, lighting his pipe and straddling before the fire with his hands in his pockets.

"The son of Arty Took the sexton, sir, and being so, is well up in ghosts. Some says as he's got too many wits and some say not enough. But he's a queer little chap, Mr. Hustings, as you'll see when he comes. And such a reader."

"Oh! Studious is he? What does he read?"

"Mostly them detective stories, sir," Mrs. Webb paused in her clearing away to shudder. "I never did see such a child for horrors. Wants to be a detective and track down people to hang 'em. If he was a child of mine I'd slap that out of him, if it took years."

"Detectives are useful people, Mrs. Webb. But for them many of us wouldn't sleep so soundly at night. So Jimmy is interested in this business?"

"It's bread and jam to him," was Mrs. Webb's homely metaphor, expressed emphatically, "never was there such a child for poking in odd corners."

"Child? How old?"

"Sixteen, and with wickedness enough for forty years of age. That is"—the little woman took up the laden tray—"he's not exactly wicked, as people call wickedness, for he doesn't lie, or smoke, or swear, and keeps himself tidy enough, I will say that for him. But he's—he's—well—he's touched. That's what it is. There's something as oughtn't to be, about Jimmy."

When she left the room, Dick, with his hands still in his pockets, swayed steadily, back to fire, like a meditative elephant. He guessed that Jimmy was a lad unusually clever, and being so, was dubbed wicked and queer by dull-minded people, who object to any departure from the normal. Even Mrs. Webb—and she was no fool—looked askance at a boy who took a larger interest in larger things than did the commonalty. Jimmy, evidently being original, had to endure the usual punishment of originality, which is always suspected and condemned by the ordinary person. Hustings was pleased that his good fortune should have brought him into contact with such an unusual human being. If Jimmy proved to be what he was reported to be—for the lawyer read between the lines—then he would be a useful helper. “And heaven only knows how badly I need a helper,” muttered Dick, reflecting on the quagmire of doubt and perplexity, in which he was, so far, vainly struggling.

“Jimmy Took, sir,” announced Webb, suddenly entering, with a boy close on his heels. “I’ll leave you to speak with him, sir, as I’ve to attend to customers in the tap-room. And Jimmy!” he fixed the boy with a terrific N.C.O. glare, “you do what Mr. Hustings here tells you: he being an officer, who don’t take no back-talk, nor side-answers. What he says—goes. D’jeer!” and with a smart salute to Dick’s departed dignity as a captain, the ex-soldier wheeled round with military precision, and departed.

Jimmy looked after him with twinkling eyes, and then turned those same twinkling eyes towards Dick, evidently possessing a sense of humour. Hustings, who had expected from early information to behold

and condemn an under-sized freak, was surprised at the astonishing good looks of the lad; so tall and slender and well-knit; so graceful in his every attitude and movement. Gypsy blood undoubtedly ran in his veins, for there was more than a suggestion of the Romany in his oval, clearly-cut face, olive-tinted skin and glossy black eyes. Also his feet and hands were small, his dark, closely-clipped hair, decidedly wavy, and his teeth gleamed as white as those of a young dog, between the crimson of his lips. Not even the well-mended second-hand clothes he wore could disguise him as a common village lad. He looked as limber and sinuous and gracefully dangerous as a panther. "So you are Jimmy!" said Dick, masking his surprise, for the boy—as he sensed—was a marvel of sharpness.

"Jimmy Took, sir. And I hope, Mr. Hustings, that you will not take me at the valuation of Mr. Webb."

He spoke so carefully, and with such a refined accent, that the lawyer was more surprised than ever. "I shall take you for what you prove yourself to be," he said, stiffly, "you speak well?"

"My father, sir. He was a schoolmaster before he turned sexton. The war, Mr. Hustings. We are the dice of the gods, and they have shaken us into different positions during the last few years."

This picturesque description of post-war circumstances, coming from such an unusual quarter, increased the lawyer's interest. But for the pressing business on hand he would have probed the character of this unusual lad, forthwith. As it was—"Can you guide me straightly to this place?"

"Easily, Mr. Hustings."

"It is a dark night and rainy, Mrs. Webb says."

"I am like a cat, sir: all places, all weathers are alike to me," smiled the boy.

Dick smiled also, struggled into his overcoat, put on his cap, and fumbled in his pockets to make sure that his electric torch was convenient. Then lighting his pipe, he glanced at the overmantel time-piece. "Nine o'clock. It is about this time that the voices are heard?"

"The voice—there is only one—is heard at different times and on different nights. We may hear it this evening; we may not. Sometimes it cries for three nights in succession: again, no one hears it for weeks and weeks."

"A freakish ghost," commented Dick with a shrug, "go ahead, Jimmy."

Man and boy passed out of the warm well-lighted inn, to find themselves in a rainy semi-gloom, for a late-rising moon glimmered occasionally through the storm-clouds. Jimmy was laughing to himself, and went on laughing, as he guided his companion by touch along the cobblestone street. "And the joke, boy?" asked Dick, smiling also, for the lad's merriment was infectious.

"Your talk of ghosts, sir."

"Ah! Then you don't believe in the supernatural?"

"Times I do: times I don't. In this case—no."

"It's a trick, then?"

"More than a trick, Mr. Hustings."

Halting abruptly on the edge of the village, Dick whipped out his torch to flash a revealing ray. "What do you mean by saying that?" he demanded, as the boy's vivid face sprang out of the darkness. "Out with it. Quick!"

In the glare Jimmy's head reared backward, menacingly, with the incredibly swift action of a striking snake. "If I told you, sir, you would be as wise as I am myself."

"I wish to be," retorted Dick, dryly, "what is more, I intend to be."

The youth laughed with easy confidence. "That depends, Mr. Hustings. After you have heard the voice—that is if the voice speaks to-night—you can hear me. I didn't talk to those bee-swarmling hunters of ghosts. But I can talk to you and I will in my own time. You're different."

"And you are a remarkable lad," the older man assured the younger, as he switched off the light to stumble onward through the dismal night.

"They call me a fool down here," muttered Jimmy, bitterly.

"More fools they," commented the lawyer, more to himself than to his companion. Then, on the sudden, an episode of Scott's Kenilworth story came into his mind: the fantastic tricks of Dickie Sludge when guiding Tressilian to Wayland Smith's forge. Here, setting aside the grotesque looks of Flibberty-gibbet, was just such another unusual boy. Therefore it would be wise to keep a watchful eye on Jimmy Took, who was evidently a diamond smothered, or nearly so, in the stodgy clay of a stolid English village—and no rough diamond either. Some good use might be made of his good looks and quick wits. Hustings thought this but did not say this, owing to the needs of the moment.

"Have we much further to go?" he inquired, as his guide elbowed him down a lengthy slope of watery mud.

“No. Here we stop to listen,” said Jimmy, letting go the lawyer’s arm, “not a pleasant post, sir. The lane is sunken and slushy with rain. Ah!”—he looked upward, as a pale radiance gleamed through the clouds—“the moon. Your luck holds, Mr. Hustings.”

Dick did not know whether to be amused or angry, so disarming were Jimmy’s methods of social intercourse. Nevertheless, he deemed it advisable to assert his dominance, somewhat imperiously. “Hold your confounded tongue, youngster, and allow me to listen for the voice—if there is a voice.”

“We may hear it, we may not,” said Jimmy with a shrug of indifference, “the light is growing stronger,” he observed, casually.

And so it was. Steady winds sweeping the rain-clouds from the face of the moon, now at full, permitted her cold white light to flood the depths of the haunted locality. An all-round glance conveyed the impression to ex-captain Hustings that he trod familiar ground,—the bottom of a Flanders trench, as muddy, as chilly, and as uncomfortable. On either side of him, almost within arm-reach, loomed sloping banks, rough with coarse grasses, tangled brambles and tall weeds, all streaming with moisture. From the topmost line of these, giant oaks shot skyward, bending over to interlace so closely as to make a veritable tunnel of the lane. But their withering leaves, showering down as the wind shook the branches, left the great tree so bare that the moonlight gleamed through a fanciful tracery of boughs, darkly silhouetted against the clear sky. The atmosphere of this sunken way with its skeleton roof—as Dick inwardly named it—was disturbing, shivery, uncanny. He could well understand why,

with this and the ghostly happenings, the villagers avoided so damnable a neighbourhood. For a second or so he wished feverishly that it really was a front-line trench, echoing with the boom of guns.

But there was no sound, save the swishing of the wind stirring the trees, and the faint rustle of constantly falling leaves. For what seemed to be centuries of dragging time, man and boy stood motionless, scarcely breathing, so intently did they harken for the expected, unexpected. It came at the end of league-long hours—a long, dreary wail, far away, high above, towards the termination of the lane it would seem. Dick jumped involuntarily, so despairing was the sound, and Jimmy grasped him by the arm. “That’s the beginning,” he breathed softly, “now for the——”

Before he could finish his sentence the cry became articulate, shaping itself into long-drawn-out words. “Edgar! Edgar! Edgar!” came the lamentable voice, faintly through the steady rushing sound of the wind, “where are you?—Oh, my darling, where are you? Oh! Oh! Edgar! Edgar! Edgar!” and the crying died murmuringly into the distance, as if the mourner was wandering further and further away. Then again the half-silence shut down, broken weakly by the whispering wind and the rustling leaves, falling, falling, ever falling. Dick the sceptic felt his hair standing on end, ice strike through his warm blood. Actual human beings, however dangerous, he could face, being war-hardened to numberless risks, but a ghost—“Oh, tosh,” he cried, shaking himself out of the momentary panic, “the dead don’t return. It’s a trick.”

“And more than a trick,” Jimmy whispered for the second time.

“What is your explanation?”

“I haven’t got any,” answered the boy bluntly, “all the same, Mr. Hustings, there are circumstances—” he stopped short.

“Connected with the bungalow?” asked Dick, reading his thoughts.

“Yes—no—I am not sure. But I think——”

“So do I,” broke in Hustings, resolutely, “and for that reason I am going to inspect the bungalow and interview Mrs. Jerr, straight away.”

“Don’t say anything about me, Mr. Hustings.”

“Why!” Dick who had stepped forward, turned back, “Aren’t you coming?”

“No! I’ll wait for you here and explain myself later.”

“Damn it,” said Dick, irascibly, “are you in the infernal business too?”

“No, sir. But I mean to be. Go on, Mr. Hustings. It’s growing late and the old lady may be retiring to bed.”

“How can I find the bungalow?”

“You can’t mistake it in the moonlight. It’s just at the end of the lane: on the left hand—within a white-fenced garden.”

Dick, striking a match, consulted his wrist-watch. “Ten-thirty. H’m! Show over?”

“Perhaps! Times, it repeats itself. I think—hark—there it is again,” and once more came the wailing cry, the mournful words, the sounds of agonized weeping, all gradually receding into distant silence.

This time Dick listened critically, with fully controlled nerves. “If it is a trick, it’s jolly well done. And if Mrs. Jerr had anything to do with it, I’ll force her to explain how she works the oracle, and why?”

"Mrs. Jerr!" Jimmy wagged his wise young head, "better be careful not to waken her suspicions, Mr. Hustings."

"Is that why you are not coming with me?"

The youngster nodded, and sat himself down comfortably upon a fallen tree-trunk. "Mrs. Jerr and Wu Ti call me a meddling brat."

Hustings looked at him searchingly, but the play of the shadow-branches over his face confused its expression, so that nothing could be learned. Dick wasted no questions, since time was precious, but immediately began to walk up the opposite slope of the sunken lane, ploughing his way steadily through the clammy mud. Before reaching the top he heard the voice for the third time, but paid no heed to the thrice-told tale. All he desired was to find the bungalow, and this he did very speedily, for it confronted him, immediately he issued from the shadow of the trees. On the left, as Jimmy had said, was an attractive, red-tiled building, standing in a neat garden, which was encircled by a gleaming white-painted fence.

Without hesitation Dick opened the gate, walked up the path, and rapped three times on the door. As lights glimmered through two windows, he assured himself that Mrs. Jerr had not yet retired. As by magic the third knock opened the door, and a Chinaman appeared. Dick stared. The man's jaw was working up and down rapidly, but no sounds issued from his mouth.

CHAPTER XI

AN IMPORTANT CLUE

FOR quite sixty seconds Hustings continued to stare, not so much at the blue blouse, white trousers and padded shoes of Wu Ti, as at the extraordinary movement of his jaw, which went on clicking wordlessly, like that of a snapping dog. Finally it stopped to reveal a tight-lipped mouth, grimly reticent.

“Mrs. Jerr!” explained Dick, as the man asked a question with his oblique Mongolian eyes. “I wish to see her—about the ghost,” he added, carefully.

Apparently Wu Ti was accustomed to such an inquiry made by belated visitors, for he silently admitted the new-comer, conducting him along a narrow passage, and as silently ushered him into an overheated, glaringly-lighted sitting-room. It was almost as crowded with shabby mid-Victorian furniture as Miss Danby’s stuffy parlour in the Fryfeld cottage, and, in addition to the illumination of a huge fire, there were at least seven lamps on brackets and tables and pedestals, burning brightly. Coming from the Far East, it was evident that Mrs. Jerr could not dispense with its heat and light, so adopted artificial means to supply the deficiencies of the English climate. She was seated close to the fire, in a deep arm-chair, knitting steadily, and looked up at her visitor through large horn-rimmed spectacles. “Another,” said Mrs. Jerr, in a quiet, rather husky, but composed voice,

“day and night they come. It is just as well that I have made up my mind to move.”

“You are going away?” asked Hustings, probing for information.

“I said that I had made up my mind to move,” she replied, with a glance at his muddy boots and damp overcoat, “come nearer the fire and dry yourself.”

“I must apologize for my late visit and for my disreputable appearance. But I will not come nearer the fire, thank you. This room is——”

“They all say that,” interrupted Mrs. Jerr, anticipating his remark, “but if you had lived in Hong-Kong as long as I have you would understand how I am chilled by my native climate. And Wu Ti—poor creature, he feels the cold even more than I do!” Then abruptly she asked, “Glass of wine, Mr. What-ever-your-name-is—piece of cake—cigarette—cigar?”

“Pipe only, if you don’t object to smoking,” said Dick, producing his briar and wondering if Mrs. Jerr was as lavishly hospitable to all her visitors as to him.

“My name is Hustings—Richard Hustings. I am a solicitor.”

“And a Spiritualist,” murmured the old lady, softly.

“By no means, I——”

“Wait!” broke in Mrs. Jerr in her leisurely way, “I have to count stitches.”

While she was doing so, Dick, ostensibly loading his pipe, surveyed her very keenly from under drooping eyelids. Sunken as she was in the deep arm-chair he could see little of her, but she appeared to be a barrel-shaped female, short and monstrously stout. Her face, what he could discern under the huge horn-rimmed spectacles, was nearly as small as that of Mrs. Grutch,

but she possessed a truly surprising quantity of silvery hair, scarcely hidden by a lavender-ribboned lace cap with lengthy strings of the same hue. And this colour was also repeated in her voluminous silk dress; a fleecy shawl over her heavy shoulders and a pair of shapeless woollen slippers completing her attire. Altogether, thought Dick, a harmless, tidy, somewhat eccentric old lady, who could not possibly have anything to do with the haunted lane. He judged her to be over seventy years of age, although, in speech at least, she was uncommonly vigorous for one who had passed the three score and ten limit. He felt that he was insulting her by his suspicions, yet stayed where he was to ask such questions as would wholly allay these. Then he became aware that Mrs. Jerr, assiduously counting stitches, was watching him stealthily. Immediately the young man saw something sinister in her homely looks. Mrs. Jerr had made a mistake in her work.

She appeared to be unaware of her error. "Yes, Mr. Hustings. You were saying?"

"That I am not a Spiritualist," replied Dick, speaking as composedly as she had done, "but a client of mine is deeply interested in this Whispering Lane phenomenon, and requested me to investigate."

"Strange that your client should consult a solicitor about such a thing," observed Mrs. Jerr, shrewdly.

"Not so strange as you may think," rejoined Dick, promptly, "it is better to have a sceptical investigator than a biased psychic lunatic."

"And you, I take it, are a sceptic, Mr. Hustings?"

"Very much a sceptic. I believe that there is a physical explanation of this so-called super-physical business."

"I wish you could give it to me then," said the old lady, eagerly. "I want to be left in peace."

"But you are going away you told me."

"I am. What with the Voice and the many silly fools who come here at all times to question me about the Voice—as if I knew anything—I am quite tired of the whole business. As an old woman I want that rest I am not likely to get in Wessbury."

"You have heard the Voice?"

"Well—er—yes," admitted Mrs. Jerr reluctantly. "Of course, being a Bible Christian, I don't believe that the dead return. Still I heard a voice purporting to be that poor creature, Mrs. Brine, crying for her husband, both in the lane and in this house."

"In the house? Did it—this supposititious ghost I mean—use the same words?"

Mrs. Jerr nodded. "But they were not so clear in the house as in the lane."

"How do you account for it?"

"I don't account for it. I have more to do at my time of life than to meddle with such nonsense."

"Do you think it is nonsense?"

"I call it nonsense, anyhow, Mr. Hustings. The thing is there, without doubt, and so far no one has explained its meaning reasonably."

"Is there an explanation?"

"How do I know?" demanded the old lady, wrathfully. "What a lot of questions you ask. I am tired of people always harping on the subject."

"Forgive me. But I wish to——"

"Satisfy that client of yours," finished Mrs. Jerr, meaningly. "Well then, tell your client to take this bungalow from Mr. Chane when I leave it, and then your client will know all that I, or anyone else, knows.

I am going away next week, or the week afterwards at the latest."

"My client is a lady," ventured Dick, cautiously feeling his way.

"Well?" inquired Mrs. Jerr, shortly.

"A man who wishes to marry her is also interested in this business."

"Well?"

"He said something about coming down here to search into the matter."

"Like the other fools. Yes?"

"I thought he might have called to see you as I am doing?"

"Oh, then he did come down, did he?" Mrs. Jerr continued to knit composedly. "Ah, well, he might have called or he might not. I see dozens of these nuisances, and no offence to you, Mr. Hustings."

"I can understand how you feel worried, Mrs. Jerr. But this Dr. Slanton——"

The old lady's needles suddenly stopped clicking, and she dropped her work with a sudden start.

"Slanton? The man who has been murdered by that woman Danby in some Essex village?"

"Fryfeld! Yes! But she did not murder him."

"Judging from the report of the inquest proceedings in the newspapers, it looks very like it," Mrs. Jerr resumed her knitting and glanced keenly at the man. "What is the real object of your visit to me?" she asked sharply.

"I have explained."

"Quite so. But have you explained truly? You spoke of this man in the present tense, as being engaged to Miss Danby: as saying that he intended to come down here to look into the Whispering Lane mystery.

Yet you know, and you know that from my reading of the newspapers I must know, he is dead. Why all this camouflage?"

Dick saw that the old lady was too clever to accept his decidedly twisted explanations, so blurted out the naked truth. "I am Miss Danby's solicitor, and came down to look for evidence in her favour."

"That's better! But why look for evidence in a place miles away from the scene of the crime?"

The lawyer reflected for a few minutes, wondering whether to be frank or reticent. He decided to take the former course, as what he knew now would be known to everyone when Miss Danby was brought before the magistrate. "Before his death in the wood Dr. Slanton used the word 'Whispering.' From inquiries I learned that he was a spiritualist, and that this phenomenon was exciting interest in spiritualistic circles. He told a lady who is a medium that he would come down here and investigate."

Mrs. Jerr nodded her satisfaction at this honest speaking, and knitted on calmly. "But—I understood from the newspaper report that Dr. Slanton was found dead in the ground of that woman Danby's cottage?"

"So it was stated at the inquest. But afterwards Miss Danby told me that he became conscious for a moment—sufficiently so to utter the word."

"And then she strangled him."

"No!" declared Dick, positively, "she became afraid and ran away."

"So that is the woman Danby's story. Very much in her favour when told by herself. I congratulate you, Mr. Hustings, upon the clever way in which you have linked up Fryfeld with Wessbury. But I don't

see what such linking up has to do with the murder.”

“I fancy it has more to do with the murder than would appear,” said Hustings, in a dry tone, “this Whispering Lane business was in Dr. Slanton’s thought almost the moment before he died.”

“That doesn’t prove the woman Danby’s innocence.”

“To my mind it proves that Slanton was here some time or another.”

“Maybe! I don’t deny that. But he was murdered in Fryfeld, not in Wessbury.”

“It seems like it!” said Dick, with significant emphasis.

Mrs. Jerr peered at him searchingly through her huge spectacles, “I can’t say that I follow your reasoning,” she remarked after a pause, “however, it is your own affair and I can only hope that you will prove this wretched woman’s innocence.”

“I may be able to if you will help me.”

“Help you, man! How can I help you?” Mrs. Jerr stopped knitting and glared her utter astonishment.

“By telling me if Slanton came down here,” and while saying this Dick produced the patched photograph from his pocket. “Do you know that face?”

The old lady took the photograph, studied it closely then handed it back with a shake of her head. “No! If Dr. Slanton—I suppose this is a photograph of Dr. Slanton—came to the lane, he never came here. Yet one moment. Pull the bell,” she pointed to a thick silk cord dangling on Dick’s side of the fire-place. “Wu Ti may have seen him. Wu Ti sees many people I don’t.”

“What does Wu Ti think of the business?” asked Dick, pulling the cord.

“He thinks nothing about it, so far as I know. He

is a very reticent person, is Wu Ti, and keeps his thoughts to himself like most of his countrymen."

Hustings nodded. This description coincided with his rapid judgment of the Chinaman. "What's the matter with his jaw?" he asked suddenly.

Mrs. Jerr laughed in her quiet way. "You noticed that. Poor Wu Ti. It's a nervous affection connected with some ear-trouble. He is often-times unconscious that his jaw works up and down in that weird way. Sometimes he is, and then, of course, he checks himself."

"It's not a mere habit then?"

"Oh no. Something quite beyond his control."

Just as his mistress finished explaining Wu Ti's ailment, the man himself glided into the room as silently as a shadow, and stood waiting orders, with his hands muffled in the long sleeves of his blouse. "Show him the photograph and ask him the question," commanded Mrs. Jerr, serenely.

Dick did both, but Wu Ti shook his head after a keen glance at the face of the dead man. "You might not have seen him in this house," urged Dick, disappointed, "but in the lane—in the village?"

"No! Me no see!"

"Are you quite sure?" inquired the old lady sharply.

"Me no see," repeated Wu Ti, phlegmatically.

"Thank you," said Hustings, despondingly, restoring the photograph to his pocket, "it seems to me that I am on a wild goose chase."

"Hope for the best, Mr. Hustings," said Mrs. Jerr, kindly, "there may be something in your idea after all. I am sorry that I cannot help you. Excuse my not rising to say good-bye. Rheumatism, you know. I am a great sufferer."

"Please don't apologize," said Dick, accepting his dismissal, "it is I who should do that, for visiting you at so late an hour. I am obliged to you for your courtesy. By the way," he took out his note-book and pencil, "give me your future address."

"What for?" asked Mrs. Jerr, sharply.

"I may wish to see you again."

"There is no need. I cannot tell you anything more than I have told you. Still you can have my address. Why not? Until I find a new house, I shall stay at a London hotel. Let me see! Oh, write to my Bank—The Empire Bank"—and she gave a number and a street in the City, which Dick noted down—"anything I can do will be done willingly. Wu Ti!"

In answer to her signal the Chinaman glided forward to throw open the door towards which Hustings moved, after bowing his farewell. Just as he was about to leave the room, Mrs. Jerr called a halt. "That young girl who gave evidence at the inquest."

"Miss Aileen More?"

"Yes! I think that is the name. Is she mixed up in this business?"

"No!" shouted Dick, furiously, and his eyes blazed.

"Ah!" said the old lady, complacently, "you need tell me no more, young man. I can guess that she is a pretty girl with whom you are in love."

"I am engaged to marry Miss More," he rejoined, shortly; both amazed and annoyed that this clever beldam should gage his feelings so accurately.

"Good! Then be advised, and whether that woman Danby is innocent or guilty—and I think from the reported evidence she is the last, myself—get her out of such bad company."

"Miss Danby is Miss More's best friend," rebuked Dick, stiffly.

"The Lord help her then," retorted Mrs. Jerr, piously, "it's a mercy she has a decent lad like yourself to protect her!" and with a gracious nod she signified that the interview was over.

Silently and softly Wu Ti guided the visitor to the door, down the neat garden path, and so far as the gate set in the gleaming white-painted fence. Dick walked out of the moonlight into the shadow of the lane and turned his head to see Wu Ti gliding back into the house. This disappointed him, as he had expected the man to watch him, although he could give no reason for such expectation. Both the Easterner and his mistress seemed to be fair and honest, concealing nothing, admitting everything with almost aggressive frankness.

Yet Dick mistrusted both. Why, it was impossible for him to say. Nevertheless a vague suspicion persistently haunted his mind, that beneath the surface of things-as-they-appeared to be, lurked sinister things-as-they-really-were, which needed to be dragged from the depths if Edith Danby was to be saved. Wessbury and Fryfeld, distant as they were one from the other, were plainly connected by the word "Whispering." He had proved that conclusively: but he had yet to prove the why and the wherefore of the connection.

"I thought you were never coming," drawled Jimmy Took, rising from the tree-trunk when Dick reached him, "found out anything, sir?"

"No! Mrs. Jerr can't explain this ghostly voice. Did you hear it again?"

"Only once after you left me," explained the boy, as the two climbed the slope to regain the village. "Wu Ti must have been disappointed," he added with a sly glance at his companion, visible enough in the bright moonlight.

"Wu Ti!" Hustings started and glanced round, inquisitively, "what about him?"

Jimmy answered the question by asking another. "Was he with you all the time you were with Mrs. Jerr?"

"No. He came in for five minutes only, when our conversation was ending."

"Ah!" The lad drew a deep breath of satisfaction, "then it *was* Wu Ti who came down the lane."

"Down the lane? What was he doing?"

"I can't tell you. But shortly after you left me I heard someone squelching through the mud—coming from the direction of the bungalow. I thought it was you coming back, and like a fool I jumped up. The squelching stopped, and I saw a dark figure, far up the slope, dimly, of course, as there were so many shadows. When I heard the footsteps again the squelching was dying away."

"And you think the man was Wu Ti?"

"Who else could it have been, sir? None of the Wessbury folk come here after darkness falls. And if the man had been another ghost-hunter he would have walked up to me to ask questions. It was Wu Ti sure enough. And I would like to know, as you would like to know, what Wu Ti was doing in the lane."

Dick nodded approvingly. "Wu Ti! Ha!" and he also drew a long breath of satisfaction. "Quite

so. I don't trust Wu Ti—I don't trust Mrs. Jerr."

"And," chimed in Jimmy, softly, "you don't trust me."

"So far as it is necessary, I do," snapped out Hustings, gruffly.

"No, sir. So far as you *think* it is necessary you do: and that means something more cautious. But, here we are at The Pink Cow," said Jimmy, stopping before the barred and bolted inn with its one glimmering window. "Late as it is I'll come in to explain myself. It's worth your while to hear me," he added quickly, when Dick, worn out with his searchings, hesitated to agree.

"Come in then," invited the lawyer after reflection, and when the yawning landlord answered his rappings, told him that he would keep Jimmy in the parlour for some twenty minutes or so. "I can let him out myself, Webb."

Quite agreeable to this assumption of authority by an ex-officer, Webb asked one question only, before retiring, "Did you hear the voices, sir?"

"Three times! Good-night! Come along, Jimmy!"

When in the sitting-room, Dick turned up the lamp, flung off his top-coat, and sat down to question his guest. "Well, what is it?"

"I shall put the thing in a nutshell, sir. Take me away with you."

"What?" Hustings stared at this abrupt demand, which sounded like a command.

"I am tired of this back-water village, filled with stupid people," cried Jimmy, passionately, "take me into wider surroundings where I can get a chance of using my brains. I know you can help me. And,"

ended the boy, emphatically, "I am quite sure that I can help you."

"How can you help me?" Dick watched the eager face, aglow with feeling.

"Oh, the mouse can help the lion, sir. We have Æsop's authority for that. Just you trust me with the real reason why you have come to Wessbury."

The boy's perception was so uncanny that Dick was fairly taken aback. Still he deemed it wise to be cautious. "I gave my reason to Mr. and Mrs. Webb."

"You gave *a* reason, sir. Mr. Webb told me that you said a client of yours wanted to learn all about The Whispering Lane. But your real reason. Tell me."

"Why should I," denied Hustings, frowning at the lad's persistence.

"Because I can help you. And if I do, will you give me a chance to better myself? You can do so, if you will do so."

Dick reflected. He was more and more attracted by the boy's dogged determination to obtain a place for himself in the sun. "I promise to help you."

Jimmy leaned forward with sparkling eyes, caught the older man's hand and shook it warmly. "Thank you, thank you. And perhaps I can guess the reason you hesitate to tell me. It concerns your client?"

"Go on," Dick nodded, wishing to exploit the boy's sharp wits.

"Your client is a man?"

Hustings remembered that he had told Webb otherwise. "Let us say it is a man."

"And he is missing. Perhaps," the boy's voice became a mere thread of sound, "perhaps he is dead."

Dick jumped up alive with curiosity. "Go on, go on, yes, he is dead."

"I thought so. And he was murdered hereabouts."

"Wrong. He was murdered at Fryfeld."

"The Slanton murder." Jimmy jumped up in his turn. "I wondered if it might be so, but wasn't sure. And this man, Slanton, wore—wore"—Jimmy clawed Dick's arm, tremendously excited—"an oddly-shaped scarf-pin."

"Yes! Yes! The swastika, made of gold set with turquoise-stones."

The boy fumbled in his pocket and brought out an object, hurriedly, "I found that near Mrs. Jerr's bungalow."

In the palm of his hand lay the turquoise swastika pin.

CHAPTER XII

THE UNFORESEEN

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR TRANT sat at his office desk, scribbling on the blotting-paper—scribbling aimless lines and circles, crosses and triangles, with monotonous persistence. Subconsciously he was an ideographist—a prehistoric throw-back—accustomed to represent his ideas, absent-mindedly, by symbols; and these vague figures he was setting down interpreted, only too truly, his chaotic state of mind. Formerly convinced on the strongest of evidence that Edith Danby was guilty, he was now much less positive: and, being an excessively just man, the doubt troubled him greatly. He wished to be absolutely sure that he was right, yet somehow felt that he was wrong, although where and how he could not imagine. It was the attitude of the accused woman which muddled his thoughts so grievously.

She was sick—so sick, that an order had been given to remove her to the Tarhaven Infirmary, where she now lay decaying into nothingness. The divisional-surgeon had reported two days previously that the prisoner was suffering from a particularly malignant form of cancer, which at any time might result in death. This being so, it was impossible to bring her before the magistrate, urgent as was the need. Therefore her appearance in court was postponed indefinitely, since the surgeon was doubtful if she would ever

recover sufficiently to face the ordeal. It would seem that God was to be her judge, not Man.

But all this did not trouble Trant so much as the woman's continued insistence upon her innocence. While she had a chance of living he could well understand any denial likely to set her free. But, doomed as she was by a higher tribunal to a worse death than by hanging, it was difficult to comprehend why she should still refuse to acknowledge her guilt. Of course, she might be thinking of her post-mortem reputation. But, having no ascertainable relatives likely to suffer from the disgrace of her being hanged, this was scarcely a feasible explanation. Altogether the Inspector was woefully puzzled. If Miss Danby was innocent, who was the guilty party? No one could answer this vexed question—not even Trant, acquainted though he was, so far, with the ins and outs of the case. And it was just that "so far" which baffled him, and caused his unrest. He knew much, but not all. Of that he felt assured. The poor man was a modern Aristides on the horns of a dilemma.

Being in this uncomfortable frame of mind it may be guessed how heartily he welcomed the return of Hustings. That young gentleman suddenly appeared at the office door with a handsome lad looking over his shoulder.

"Here I am, Inspector!" said Dick, briskly, "and this is Jimmy Took."

Masking his troublesome thoughts by assuming a severe official expression, Trant received the two in the traditional red-tape style. "I am afraid I cannot give you much time," he said, gravely nodding that they should be seated. "I am overwhelmed with work."

"You will be still more overwhelmed when you hear what I have discovered."

"Oh," Trant swung his chair round to face the speaker, looking both eager and relieved, "so it wasn't a wild goose chase, altogether?"

"It wasn't a wild goose chase in any way," responded Dick grimly. "I have just returned from Wessbury, where I passed the night."

"Wessbury?"

"It's an unconsidered village, near Chelmsford, eighteen odd miles from here."

"And this lad?" Trant eyed the slim, bright-eyed boy critically.

"He's a native of Wessbury. Father, once schoolmaster, now sexton—having come down in the world."

"Why have you brought him to see me?"

"Inspector Trant," said Hustings, with twinkling eyes, "allow me to introduce to you the future Sherlock Holmes of the C.I.D."

"If my luck holds," murmured Jimmy, who was taking in his surroundings swiftly and sorting them into the pigeon-holes of his clever brain.

"Oh, it will hold right enough," said Dick catching the words, "you're much too good to lose, youngster. Now then, Mr. Trant, before I tell, you tell."

The Inspector did not quite approve of this settling of the situation, but as Hustings was evidently bringing important news, sorely needed at the moment, he humoured him. "There is little to tell, save that Miss Danby's appearance before the magistrate has been postponed, *sine die*."

"Eh—how's that?"

"She is in the infirmary, suffering from cancer. The doctors are doubtful if she will ever recover."

"Poor soul. She told me of her disease, but I did not think it was so bad as all that. I hope to clear her character before she goes west. That will, maybe, cheer her last hours."

"Can you prove her innocence?" asked Trant, dubiously.

"I'll leave you to judge, when I relate my doings. Meanwhile, Aileen——?"

"She is still at the cottage with Jenny watching over her. Worried, naturally, but quite well. I have permitted her to see Miss Danby."

"Good man!" Dick drew a breath of relief now that he knew Aileen was safe.

"Your news—your news!" Trant was on tenter-hooks.

"Ah, yes. Help me, Jimmy: fill in my gaps," and Hustings fully explained his doings during the last few days, the boy putting in a word here and there. At the end of a meticulous narrative, the latter produced the scarf-pin. "So now you know," finished Dick, breathlessly, "and I hope you'll let me smoke."

"Smoke away," nodded Trant, looking at the turquoise swastika lying in the palm of his hand. "H'm! Did Slanton always wear this?"

"So Aileen says. He told her it brought him luck and kept him safe."

"It did neither on the night he was murdered," commented the Inspector, grimly, and stowed away the scarf-pin in a convenient drawer, "but if Aileen is sure of her facts, this is positive evidence that Slanton was in Wessbury, drawn hither, it would seem, by his desire to investigate this ghost-business. You have gone far afield to find evidence, Mr. Hustings."

"With success, you will perceive," said Dick, dryly,

“and Jimmy here can supplement the evidence of that swastika-pin. He saw Slanton.”

“In Wessbury?” Trant stared at the boy, “How do you know that the man you saw was Dr. Slanton, and where did you see him?”

“He arrived by the seven o’clock bus from Chelmsford, sir, and I recognized him, when Mr. Hastings showed me his photograph.”

“Which I now return to you,” said Dick, passing along the article, “and the night when you saw him, Jimmy?”

“The sixth of October.”

“But his body was found here on the seventh of October,” said Trant, pinching his chin, perplexedly. “How could the man have got to Fryfield?”

“I can’t tell you, sir,” admitted the youth, candidly, “I can only say that he did not return to Chelmsford by the bus.”

“How do you know?”

“I watched him. You see, sir,” went on Jimmy, deliberately, “there were heaps of these ghost-hunters coming to Wessbury for the past few months, and I used to guide some of them to the lane, so I got into the habit of watching the bus. Some came and went the same evening; others stopped all night, either at the inn, or in someone’s house. I saw Dr. Slanton come,” ended the boy, emphatically, “but I did not see him go.”

“He remained in Wessbury!” suggested the Inspector.

Jimmy shook his head, “I asked at every house, after I picked up that scarf-pin, if he stayed in any one of them. But—no,” and again he shook his head.

“Did you guide Slanton to the lane?”

“No, sir. I only give my services when they are asked. As Dr. Slanton did not speak to me, but to the bus-conductor, when he inquired the way, I did not pay much attention to him. Only when I picked up the scarf-pin did I think that something might be wrong.”

“Why did you think so?” argued the officer, sharply, and not approving of the lad’s aggressive confidence.

“Because I noticed the queer shape of the pin, when he wore it in his necktie, and naturally wondered how he came to lose it where it was found. He went through the village about seven o’clock, and down The Whispering Lane. But he never came back. I watched every bus,” asseverated Jimmy, “but Dr. Slanton did not return in any one of them.”

“He might have walked to the Chelmsford railway station?”

“Three miles, sir. Why should he have walked?”

“H’m!” Trant packed away the photograph, long-side the scarf-pin, “You have a very suspicious nature, young fellow.”

Jimmy laughed and coloured, “I think it is inborn, sir. I am always trying to learn the why and wherefore of things.”

“Oh!” commented Trant, cynically, “and you have found——?”

“Many things, which I prefer to keep to myself just now,” returned the youth with a composed air.

“You must tell me everything,” commanded the Inspector, assuming his most formidable official frown.

This did not intimidate Jimmy, who merely smiled

amiably, "I can't make four, out of two and two as yet, sir. When I do I'll speak."

"He won't go past that," put in Hustings, with a shrug, "the young rascal has something up his sleeve."

"Then why not tell it?" demanded Trant, angrily.

"For this reason!" Jimmy was firmly respectful, "I wish to become a detective."

"Pooh! You have been reading shilling shockers, my good boy."

"My favourite literature, sir. They are concerned with mysteries, and I am a lover of mysteries. And," continued Jimmy in animated tones, "when I get a chance of solving a real-life mystery I don't want to lose it."

"Very natural, Master Took. But only by telling me everything can you get it."

"I have told you all the facts, so far as I am acquainted with the facts. But what I deduce from them I tell no one, until I have satisfied myself that such deductions are correct."

"Rubbish!" Trant was as perplexed by this unusual character as Hustings had been. "What can an inexperienced baby like you do in a matter which is puzzling older and wiser heads?"

Jimmy smiled slyly. "Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings——"

"Pish!" the Inspector considered Dick's report and the boy's obstinacy for a moment or so, "I'll go thus far," he said at length, addressing the latter, "you can come down with me to Wessbury and help with your local knowledge. This Whispering Lane—the turquoise scarf-pin dropped near it—Mrs. Jerr and her Chinese servant. Yes, you will be useful to me in Wessbury."

"Will you give me a free hand, sir?"

"Well—er—yes, within limitations. You are smart enough in your own conceit and may stumble upon something helpful."

"When will you go to Wessbury, sir?" inquired Jimmy anxiously.

"To-morrow evening. I can't get away before then. We can motor from here."

"If I may offer an opinion, sir, I should go down to-day."

"Impossible! Impossible!"

"Or at least," continued the youth smoothly, as if there had been no interruption, "wire to the Wessbury policeman—Jinks is his name—to keep an eye on Wu Ti and Mrs. Jerr."

"And so arouse their suspicions, when they learn—as they may learn—that they are being watched," said Trant, derisively, "no! no! I'll take them by surprise, before they have time to concoct explanations. That is if there are any required. From what you and Mr. Hustings have told me, I see nothing suspicious in the couple."

"Neither do I," chimed in Dick, suddenly, "all the same I *am* suspicious. I have what the Americans call—a hunch."

"Like your Whispering word hunch," said Trant, lightly.

"Yes, and that proved to be helpful," retorted Dick, nettled. "It led me to Wessbury, where we have found evidence connecting that place with Fryfeld. Oh, Mrs. Jerr seemed to be fair and honest, I don't deny. But Wu Ti going down the lane when I was engaged with her—Jimmy finding the scarf-pin near the bungalow! Eh, Inspector?"

"I'll look into those matters when I go to the place," snapped Trant, tartly.

"If there is anyone in the place to tell you," breathed the boy, meaningly.

"What's that?" Trant turned on him, sharply and angrily.

"This! In my opinion Mrs. Jerr and Wu Ti are going to run away."

"Next week, Jimmy," put in the lawyer, "Mrs. Jerr said as much. And it is no running away, but a calculated and foreseen removal."

"Well," said Jimmy, with a humility which thinly disguised sarcasm, "in the presence of older and wiser heads I must hold my tongue. But, if I had this case in hand, I shouldn't lose four and twenty precious hours."

"You'd do a lot I have no doubt," remarked Trant, rising to intimate that the interview was ended, and placed his hands on the youth's shoulders, "See here young fellow, I have spoken to you more sharply than was needful, for this matter is bothering me considerably. But I think you're a clever boy, and if you can help me with your young wits, as I think you can, why then, your foot is on the first rung of the ladder leading to the heights of your ambition. See!" and he gave Jimmy a friendly shake, whereat the lad flushed with pleasure. He had his secret doubts as to Trant's perfection in detective doings, but all the same the officer was a personage, and praise from him was something to be appreciated.

When in the street Dick turned to his young friend, "Well, Jimmy, will you come to Fryfeld as my guest for the night, or will you stay in Tarhaven?"

"I'll stay here, sir, if you don't mind. There's lots to be seen."

“And lots of temptations to be led into,” said Dick, smiling, for he had no fear of the boy getting into trouble, shrewd as he was in spite of his youth. “Well, then, here are five pounds to see you through.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jimmy accepted the treasury notes gravely. “I’ll repay you out of my first fees as a detective. Are you coming with the Inspector and me to-morrow, sir?”

“No. My presence is not necessary. If it is, wire me to my office,” Dick gave the boy a card with the Lincoln’s Inn address of his firm. “Put your best foot foremost, Jimmy. Now’s your chance to gain your ends. Don’t lose it.”

“Not me, sir,” said the boy with a grim look, astonishing on so youthful a face, and he swung away into the crowded High Street, as if he had been used to the hustle and bustle all his limited life.

“There goes a *lusus naturæ!*” thought the solicitor, with a yawn, for the long journey and the long interview of the day had wearied him. Then he hired a taxi to take him home.

Followed a sleep, a bath, a change of clothes, and later, an evening visit to the cottage. Aileen received him in the stuffy parlour, with a tired face and listless movements, but she brightened and strengthened when her visitor was ushered in by Jenny Walton. “Oh, I am glad to see you, Dick. I have been counting the hours for your coming,” she grasped both his hands, looking anxiously into his face. “Have you found out anything—is Edith safe—who is guilty—why was Dr. Slanton murdered?—and—and”—she stopped, panting.

Dick loosened his hands gently and placed her in an arm-chair. “One question at a time, dear. Don’t

get too excited, and waste what strength you have, which is less than I could wish," and in his turn he looked anxious.

"It's Edith," wailed the girl, the bright colour of her welcome dying out of her cheeks. "I have seen her and she is—she is—dying."

"Yes. I know," Dick patted her shoulder gently. "Trant told me and, indeed, Miss Danby told me herself when I saw her last."

"Why didn't you let me know about the cancer?" cried Aileen, passionately.

"I didn't wish to worry you. Besides I never for a moment thought that she was ill enough to be removed to the infirmary."

"You should have told me. Worry! Nothing is a worry that I can do for Edith, as she is the best friend I have in the world."

"What about me?" Dick was distressed by this exclusion of himself.

"Oh, you. I love you as you well know, for this is no time to pretend. But I love Edith also, in a different way."

"Then there is your father—if he is alive?"

"Oh my father, my father!" Aileen spoke impetuously, bitterly, "Yes, he is alive, Dick. Since you have been away a letter has come from him."

"A letter!" Hustings was astonished, so unexpected was the information.

The girl nodded. "Written from Paris, saying that he had arrived there from Germany, where he had been in prison, and that he would see me soon. It was a cold, business-like letter, just the kind my father would write."

"But I thought that he was——"

“Oh, there, there. Let us talk of something else—what have you been doing for instance? Later—in a day or so, I’ll tell you all about my father.”

Dick looked puzzled. He had always believed that Aileen and her missing father were tenderly attached to one another. From the chilly way in which she referred to the reappearance of her missing parent, it would seem that such was not the case. Although anxious to learn more, the young man refrained from questions, since the girl obviously withheld her confidence. “I can wait!” said Dick, briefly, but feeling keenly the cold-shouldering of this reticence.

Aileen nodded her relief, and pressed for explanations of his doings. “I do hope you have discovered something helpful,” she said, pitifully earnest.

Sympathizing deeply with her anxiety, Hustings plunged into the middle of things; forthwith, repeating word for word his report to the Inspector. Aileen listened silently throughout, only showing her appreciation of his energy by occasional nods and glances. When he ended by describing how Jimmy had melted away into the Tarhaven population, the girl drew a long breath. “I wish you had brought that boy over with you, Dick. I should like to ask questions.”

“I doubt if he would answer any. Jimmy has a shrewd brain and a strong will of his own. Wild horses won’t drag the truth out of him until he makes up his obstinate mind to speak freely.”

“Do you think that he knows the truth?”

“I can’t offer an opinion. He may have a bee in his bonnet, or there may be method in his madness. Jimmy keeps himself to himself, very thoroughly.”

“What do you think, Dick?”

"I think that we are blundering about in the dark, and until we see light, will continue to blunder. Undoubtedly Slanton was in Wessbury on the sixth of October, and on the seventh was found dead in the wood outside, eighteen miles from that village. And with the return half of a Cornby to London ticket in his pocket. Make what you can out of that."

"Do you believe that Mrs. Jerr has anything to do with the matter?"

"On the face of things-as-they-are, it would seem not. Yet Wu Ti is her servant, and Wu Ti—according to Jenny—haunts Old Wung's dug-out. Moreover the girl more than hinted that Wu Ti was Slanton's enemy."

"And murdered him!" asserted the feminine in Aileen, jumping to conclusions.

"If so," argued the slower masculine nature, "why did he not strangle the man in Wessbury? You forget that Slanton was alive when Miss Danby found him."

"Wu Ti may have brought him here and killed him, after Edith ran away."

"But why—why—why in the name of the high gods?" wailed Dick, clutching his whirling head.

"He wished to implicate Edith."

"That the assassin desired to do so is clear enough. But Wu Ti? So far as we are aware, Miss Danby does not know the creature."

"She knew Dr. Slanton and he knew Wu Ti," persisted Aileen, holding to her theory, "and if Edith would only tell me——"

"There you are," interrupted Hustings, testily, "I think, and I have always thought from the first, that

Miss Danby can hand us the key to the riddle. But she won't, for some inexplicable reason: not even to save her life."

"Possible death by being hanged; certain death from cancer. What chance has she, poor darling?" said Aileen sadly. "And I think——"

Hustings could not endure the ever-circling arguments any longer, and rose in a hurry. "Don't think, my dear girl. Thinking on insufficient premises only muddles things, more and more. Better wait for the return of Trant and Jimmy from Wessbury with further information."

"But if they find nothing?" Aileen rose also and despairingly.

"They are bound to find something. Slanton's death is connected with Wessbury—with that Whispering Lane business, I fancy. When the mystery of that is solved—and it is a mystery from my own hearing—then the truth will come to light. Meanwhile"—Dick picked up his overcoat and cap, tumultuously. "I'm going home to soak myself in ten hours of sleep. You do the same."

"I can't sleep with all this on my mind. How can you think so?"

"My dear!" Dick, taking her gently by the shoulders, looked with tenderness into her sad and tearful eyes, "you must make an effort to sleep. Only by keeping your health and your self-control can you help your friend. And—and——" he gulped, pushed the girl roughly from him and made for the door.

Aileen followed him with a bewildered cry. "Dick! Dick! Dick!"

"To-morrow—I'll come again to-morrow," mumbled the flying lover, and fairly ran away from this too

perilous neighbourhood. Another moment of dalliance, and he would most surely have swept her into his arms for endless kisses. "I am only flesh and blood," groaned Dick striding homeward. "Why can't she remember that, hang her—I mean bless her, bless her. Oh, damn!"

Hustings did not visit the cottage next day as promised. To love a girl and yet keep at arm's length from the girl was much too tantalizing a situation for so hot-blooded a young man. He wrote a note, apologizing for his flight on the plea of over-anxiety for his client, and said that he would come again when possessed of fresh information. Then he went up, as usual, to his office, cursing the world at large and his own luck in particular, to devote himself to dry-as-dust work, in the hope of subduing the torments of unfulfilled passion. And so determined was he to keep all unruly feelings well under control, until all barriers were removed, that he lingered at his desk long after the clerks had departed. This honesty of purpose turned out to be for the best, else he would not have received an important telegram until the following morning. Just as he was switching off the lights, somewhere about eight o'clock, the wire arrived. It was concise, and very much to the point, running thus: "They have cleared out. What did I say? Jimmy."

CHAPTER XIII

THE LOST TRAIL

HARD-EARNED experience had taught Hustings the needfulness of at least four things, requisite to keep his body well-tuned and alert, if thoughts were to be clearly conceived and perfectly translated into useful actions. Regular meals, judicious exercise, ample sleep, and what the poet calls "well-judged idleness" were the apples which he had so far gathered off the Tree of Knowledge. On reading Jimmy's astonishing telegram, an earlier impulse urged post-haste travelling to Wessbury, for immediate verification of its contents, but a later one advised delay, amusement, and rest, before dealing with further vexatious matters. "The more haste, the less speed!" murmured Dick, recalling Bender's proverbial philosophy with a wry smile.

In this reasonable frame of mind, the harassed young man went to his club, where he always retained a room, changed into evening kit, enjoyed a belated dinner, and spent a lazy hour at the nearest music-hall, where no thinking was required to follow the light-some entertainment. Such wise philanderings with pleasure brought him a next-morning reward, for he stepped into the ten-thirty train to Chelmsford with a brain well swept of theoretical cobwebs. Cool-headed, clear-minded, and self-mastered in every way, he was thus ready to consider further problems. The

first of these was propounded to him by Inspector Trant, almost before he descended from the bus at Wessbury. "I got your wire and came to meet you, Mr. Hustings," burst out the officer immediately, "the boy's gone."

Dick looked, as he felt, puzzled, "I thought Mrs. Jerr and her servant had gone," he remarked, drawing Trant aside. "Jimmy sent me a wire last night."

"Hang that youngster. He will go and do things on his own."

"You gave him a free hand, remember," Dick reminded him.

"Within limitations, Mr. Hustings; within limitations." Trant was fuming, "But here he sends you a wire without consulting me, and now goes off on his own."

"Is he chasing the fugitives?"

"I don't know: he said nothing, but just disappeared."

"When did Wu Ti and his mistress go?"

"Yesterday afternoon or early last evening," growled the inspector, gloomily, "it is impossible to fix the time. All I can learn is that they did not get away from here by any bus; nor did they board any train at Chelmsford. I arrived in this place at seven o'clock last night and made the boy guide me immediately to the lane, afterwards to the bungalow. I heard nothing in the lane, and found no one in the house. This morning it was the same, for although I have searched everywhere, there is no sign of that infernal old dame or her Chink. Oh, they've gone, sure enough."

"Where?"

Dick was asking himself this question, but Trant,

overhearing, thought that it was addressed to him and fired up. "How do I know, Mr. Hustings? Would I be here, wasting time with you, if I did know? Come along to the inn. I have sent for that confounded brat's father, who may be able to explain things."

While the two walked up the cobblestone street to The Pink Cow, Dick very wisely held his tongue, easily conjecturing the reason for Trant's unusual heat. The man was mortified that he had neglected Jimmy's warning, and his pride was wounded by the lad's perceptive. However, being a just man, he swallowed that pride and blurted out an apology at the inn door. "It's my own fault, Mr. Hustings, for I should not have been above taking a hint. The boy is clever and well-worth listening to. But I suppose old dogs don't like being taught new tricks by young puppies."

"I sympathise," Dick nodded, comprehendingly, "it's a case of the younger generation knocking at the door. Eh?"

"Something of that sort. Unless"—Trant spoke deliberately—"unless, I say, sir, this youngster is double-crossing us."

"Nonsense! He told me, and he told you, that he suspects the couple. That alone should assure you of his honesty."

"I don't know, Mr. Hustings. After all, the boy knows much he won't let out."

"Whatever he does know is not being kept back to shield this woman," retorted Dick, heatedly, "I'll take my oath that Jimmy's a white boy."

"If he is, why hasn't he shown up this morning?"

"Perhaps his father can explain. Oh, good morning, Webb."

“Good morning, sir,” replied the landlord, who had approached quietly during the conversation, “Mr. Took is waiting for you two gentlemen in the parlour,” a piece of news which sent Trant hurriedly into the house. Hustings was about to follow when Webb detained him: “You’ve heard the news, sir?”

“About that couple skipping? Yes!”

“Don’t see why there should be any skipping about it, sir,” argued Webb, referring the matter to Dick’s common sense. “The old lady always said that she was going to clear out, because of being worried by this ghost-business. And there wasn’t no harm about her, so far as I know. But that blinking Chink, sir! I never did trust him, and now he’s gone and stolen my dog.”

“Your dog?”

“An Airedale, I kept in the yard. Pedigree pup I wouldn’t have taken twenty quids for. Chained him up and fed him last night, and now he’s gone.”

“Why do you suspect Wu Ti?”

“’Cause he offered three times to buy him, saying as the old lady was afeared of burglars. ’Course I told him to go where he’ll go in the long run, and now he’s been and stole him. If ever I lay hands on that blasted heathen I’ll——” here followed a lurid threat, interspersed with adjectives, ending with an apology for going off the deep end.

“Have you told the police?” questioned Dick, ignoring this wordy emotion.

“Police!” Webb looked disgusted, “why yes, sir. Leastways the only cove of the breed hereabouts. And a fat lot of good he is. Says he’s busy with more important matters than hunting for my tyke. And what are they, sir?” the man’s face lighted up

with curiosity, "what's that Inspector bloke nosing round here for along o' Jinks?"

"It's The Whispering Lane business," explained Hustings, reservedly.

"Waste o' time, sir. Heaps and heaps of them spirit-merchants have been poll-prying themselves sick without getting a sniff."

"The police may be more fortunate," was Dick's reply, and he passed along the passage into the parlour.

Here he found the Inspector conversing with a tall, thin, sallow-skinned man, who looked very much the schoolmaster he had been, and very little the sexton he now was. He had the face and stoop, and refined accent of the pundit caste; but there were traces of the Romany blood in him as in his son. Iron-grey hair, moustache and imperial, and melancholy dark eyes, gave him a kind of Charles the First appearance. "I can tell you no more, Mr. Inspector," he was saying when the lawyer entered.

Taking no notice of the new-comer, Trant proceeded to examine his man. "You say that your son went to bed at eleven last night, after I dismissed him?"

"Yes!"

"And this morning you found him gone when you went at six o'clock to waken him!" then in response to a nod from Mr. Took, the Inspector continued, "Did the boy say if he was going anywhere?"

"No. He was excited about this case and told me that you were good enough to let him work under you."

"He won't work under me long if he goes on behaving so independently," said Trant, grimly. "Do you approve of his being a detective?"

"Why not, Mr. Inspector? Where the treasure is,

there will the heart be. James is born to your trade. As a schoolmaster I hold that a boy should follow his bent, provided it is honest."

"You are not a schoolmaster now, Mr. Took?" inquired Dick, sympathetically.

"Younger men have ousted me from the pedagogue's throne," replied the other, smiling sadly, "and in these bleak days I must earn my bread as I best can."

Trant got impatiently on his feet, irritated by this side-tracking. "Can you swear, Mr. Took, that you don't know where your son is?"

"I can most certainly. But, if I may venture an opinion——"

"Yes! Yes! Go on."

"I think James is following up this matter in his own peculiar way."

Dick assented. "More than that, I rather think that he is following up our runaways with a dog," and he repeated Webb's tale of his missing Airedale.

Here again Jimmy was proving himself more far-seeing than the Inspector. "Why couldn't he ask Webb if he could borrow the animal?" asked Trant, half angry, half pleased with the boy's alert doings.

Took smiled faintly. "That is like James: he never tells anyone of his plans until he sees the result of his plans."

"But surely you don't approve of his stealing another man's dog."

"Not stealing, Mr. Inspector. James has only borrowed the animal in an emergency. I shall explain matters to Mr. Webb."

"No! No! Say nothing," cried the officer, sharply, "I don't want my business here known at present."

"It isn't," said Dick, "Webb thinks it is just The Whispering Lane affair."

"Let him and everyone else think so. Mr. Took, what do you know of this woman?"

"Nothing, or next to nothing, Mr. Inspector," the ex-schoolmaster halted at the door, "she lived quietly and troubled no one. Nor did the Chinaman. James is likely to know more than I. He worked in Mrs. Jerr's garden for a time."

Trant nodded a dismissal, and when alone with Hustings, turned to him frowningly, "What did I tell you? That youngster does know something."

"Probably! But you may be sure that the something will be used in our favour. If I were you I should allow Jimmy to follow his own fancies. He'll come back with important news: you'll see."

"He certainly has his wits about him," admitted the Inspector, with reluctant admiration. "I'll let him use them as you suggest. Meanwhile I am going immediately to Chelmsford for a warrant to search that bungalow."

"Wisely said. And later on you might get one to hunt through Old Wung's dug-out. Yes! Remember what I told you of Jenny Walton's statements. Wu Ti goes there to smoke opium. Wu Ti is the man we want, since he will be able to supply all information about Mrs. Jerr. And," concluded the young lawyer, impressively, "Jenny said that Wu Ti had a grudge against Slanton."

Trant approved of this suggestion, and accepted it willingly. "One thing at a time, Mr. Hustings. I'll look over this bungalow first," and he went off to catch the bus to Chelmsford.

Dick remained where he was to smoke and cogitate.

It was obvious that, in some inexplicable way, Mrs. Jerr was concerned in the crime. Wu Ti was the enemy of Slanton, and Wu Ti was the servant of Mrs. Jerr: thus linking the London opium den with Wessbury. Also Wessbury was connected with Fryfeld, by the man's scarf-pin, picked up in the former place—the man who had been found dead in the latter. But how Slanton had got to Fryfeld from the eighteen miles distant Wessbury, it was impossible to say. The return half-ticket suggested that he had travelled by train from Liverpool Street, intending to go back. But in that case how came he to be mutilated and drugged? Also Jimmy had stated that he had seen no sign of Slanton leaving the village by any one bus. This being so, Dick concluded—and it was the sole conclusion at which he could arrive—that the man had been drugged and branded in Wessbury: afterwards being taken to Fryfeld, that Miss Danby might be implicated. "But how?" Dick asked himself.

Ten minutes after it flashed across his mind that Mrs. Jerr and her servant had likewise dispensed with bus and train, which implied that they had other means of transport at their disposal. Of course they might have walked; but the old woman, by reason of her weight and age, was ill-fitted for pedestrianism. Moreover, although she had rented a furnished bungalow, it was probable that she and Wu Ti possessed a fair quantity of personal baggage, which could not be left behind, yet which could not be carried away by hand. Dick, fumbling thus at his problem, decided to apply to Mr. Took for its solution. Since Jimmy had worked in the bungalow garden, Jimmy's sharp eyes had undoubtedly seen all that could be seen, and he might have dropped his father a hint.

So Hustings asked the way to the man's cottage; learned from an elderly housekeeper that he was professionally engaged, and forthwith betook himself to the churchyard. Here he found Took digging a grave in the shadow of the square Norman tower and lost no time in satisfying his curiosity. "When your son was working for Mrs. Jerr, did he see about the place any motor-car, horse and trap, push-bike, motor-cycle, or even an aeroplane?"

Took paused to rest his hands on the spade and think, by no means surprised by the abrupt question, with its mention of all possible means of transport.

"James saw a motor-cycle!" he remembered after reflection.

"Ha! With a side-car?"

"Yes! That Chinese servant was accustomed to take out the old lady in it, for occasional airings. Never through the village though: always across the common at the back of the bungalow."

"Good egg!" Dick nodded hasty thanks for useful information, and walked away, satisfied that he had learned how Slanton had been transported to Fryfeld, how Wu Ti and his mistress had left Wessbury.

After a hurried luncheon, Dick spent the greater part of the afternoon in exploring the locality which had to do with the business in hand. The tunnel of the sunken lane could scarcely be called one now, so stripped were the overhanging boughs of leaves. He glanced upward at the bare oaks, sideways at the tangled banks, wondering how the marvel of the crying voice had been brought into being. It was certainly a trick. He thought so, Jimmy thought so; but how that trick was managed no one knew, no one could even imagine. However no tormented ghost

was terrorizing now, so the young man tramped stolidly down the descent, scrambled up the ascent to pause beside the bungalow. There it stood, ringed by its white fence: peaceful and silent amidst barren flower-beds, tiny lawns of brilliant green, and clustering shrubs, neatly trimmed. Innocent enough in outward seeming, yet to Dick, suggesting sinister possibilities. Slanton had not been murdered there; but Slanton had been drugged and branded there. He was sure of this, insufficient as was the evidence to think thus positively.

Walking on, Hustings inspected the spot which Jimmy had described as that where he had picked up the turquoise swastika. This was a stone's throw from the bungalow, immediately behind it, at the curve of an unmade-up road, which straggled crookedly across the common. Probably, when the unconscious Slanton had been packed into the side-car, clumsy, maybe hurried movements had shaken the pin from his necktie. And then—what then? Dick stared far away into the vast distance, where dim patches of woodland were scattered along the horizon. In his mind's eye he saw shudderingly, the motor-cycle with its dreadful freight, swaying and bumping over the clayey rutted road, on its eighteen miles journey to implicate an innocent woman. But was she really innocent? He thought so, he had stated so, more because he wished for Aileen's sake to think so, than because he was absolutely certain. One moment he believed, only to disbelieve the next. What linked Slanton to Edith Danby? What connected Mrs. Jerr with Slanton? How did the Chinaman come into the matter and with what news would Jimmy Took return? One question after another presented itself for answer, but to none

could he find any reply. Hustings thought of those marine plants floating apparently disconnectedly on the watery surface, yet solidly connected in the depths. He would have to go down and down and down to get at the one cause creating these many scattered effects. But how he was to dive; how to bring up the treasure of knowledge he coveted, was not clear.

Walking and thinking, searching and watching, Dick covered an immense track of country that afternoon, in quest of Jimmy and the dog. Undoubtedly, the fugitives had escaped on the motor-cycle— Mrs. Jerr in the side-car, Wu Ti racing the machine. And the Airedale in leash, Jimmy at his heels, was following a trail which Dick, being dogless, could not pick up. For hours he wandered fruitlessly, and retraced his steps, shortly after sun-down, to find signs of occupancy in the bungalow. Trant, brandishing an official-looking paper was expostulating at the door with a short, slim, neatly-built man, who was refusing him admission. "It is monstrous," he was saying in a light, rather weak voice, "you have no reason to suspect my tenant: no right to search my house."

"I have the right of this warrant," retorted the Inspector with a flourish of the document, "and that right I intend to exercise. Ah, Mr. Hustings, you arrive in the nick of time. As a solicitor you may be able to convince Mr. Chane that the law is with me. Mr. Hustings, Mr. Chane!" he waved his hand by way of introduction.

Dick surveyed the owner of the bungalow, this grey-tweed-clothed, light-voiced, dapper little fellow, elderly and frail. His voice somehow explained his looks. Light hair, light complexion, light eyes of

shallow blue, Mr. Simon Chane suggested an airy elfin changeling, too trifling to be taken seriously. Still, he was definitely serious at the moment, his fair skin flushed, his pale eyes brilliant with anger, as he blocked the doorway. "My house is my castle," piped this butterfly person, wrathfully. "Dora is a dead letter now that the war is over. You can't and you shan't enter."

"I take it that you are a law-abiding citizen, Mr. Chane," said Dick, quietly.

"Of course; and for that reason I stand on my rights."

"If we discuss matters I think you will exercise them in the cause of justice."

"I am willing to do that if you and this officer can show cause. But until you do, I stand here!" and the crabbed little fellow spread his arms from jamb to jamb to prevent entrance.

The Inspector smiled dryly, "I can walk in on the authority of this warrant, and any court will uphold my action. But, as I never create unnecessary trouble, I will state my reasons: the more so, Mr. Chane, as I wish you to give me certain information," and he then related succinctly, so much of the case as had to do with Mrs. Jerr's possible entanglement therein.

Chane listened intently, his shallow eyes fixed throughout on the speaker's face. "I gather then," said he when Trant ended, "that you suspect Mrs. Jerr of having seen this man, Slanton, when he came to investigate this ghost business."

"Yes! She must have seen him. A scarf-pin, worn by Dr. Slanton, was found on the road behind this bungalow."

“That doesn’t prove Slanton’s presence in the house,” retorted Chane, contemptuously. “Mrs. Jerr denied all knowledge of him, I understand.”

“She did, and to me,” put in Hustings, quickly.

“Then you may take it that she spoke truly. Mrs. Jerr is an honest woman.”

“And her servant—what about him?”

“I know nothing so far as Wu Ti is concerned,” rejoined Chane, coldly.

“Why did he and his mistress run away?” demanded the Inspector.

“I see no running away about their departure, Mrs. Jerr told me several times that she might leave at any time, since these ghost-hunters so worried her. She wrote me yesterday of her intention to give up the house. I received the letter by the mid-day post in London, and therefore came down to look after my property,” the little man produced a letter from the pocket of his grey tweed sports-coat. “There it is. You don’t want to see the notes she enclosed: her rent, gentleman, honestly paid at the last moment, to the last farthing.”

Trant, with Dick looking over his shoulder, skimmed the short epistle, which simply stated that the writer was worried into leaving Wessbury sooner than had been her intention. The last straw was the intrusion of a man called Hustings, who bothered her with foolish questions, and she refused to submit further to such persecution, “Herewith I enclose my quarter’s rent,” ended the letter abruptly, “with thanks for your courtesy. Truly yours, Selina Jerr.”

“May I keep this letter?” asked the Inspector, folding it up.

“Certainly, and now that you have explained, you

can search the house!" Chane stood aside as he spoke, "you will find nothing incriminating, I'll swear."

"What do you know of Mrs. Jerr?"

"Nothing, or next to nothing. I advertised my bungalow to let furnished. She answered my advertisement, saying that she was in search of a restful home."

"But her references?"

"I asked for none, as she paid the first quarter's rent in advance. Good enough for me, as I didn't wish to be bothered with business details. Come in."

The Inspector promptly obeyed, but Dick refused to join in the search as he was both hungry and tired. There was no need for him to be the inconvenient third, as the officer was quite capable of managing this strictly official business, solus and alone. He therefore returned down the lane and up the lane to bring up at The Pink Cow. There he found Mrs. Webb, pleasantly fluttered, watching for him at the door. "A young lady is waiting for you, sir."

Dick, on the point of entering, stopped, and stared, wholly taken aback by this very unexpected intelligence. "A young lady!" he repeated, mechanically.

"Miss Aileen More, sir. She says that you are expecting her."

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

THE news of Aileen's arrival in Wessbury was both incredible and unwelcome, but true enough, as the young man found on entering the parlour. Here the girl was seated before the fire, looking wan and anxious and worn, as she rose tumultuously to greet him with a torrent of disjointed sentences. "Oh Dick! Dick! I do want to know things. I just had to come here. I couldn't help myself. You ran away from Fryfeld. I am sure you are keeping something from me. I want to know the best, the worst, everything. What is it? What is it? Tell me! Tell me!" she stumbled forward to seize the lapels of his coat and shake him weakly. "Oh I shall go out of my mind if you don't tell."

Disengaging her hands very gently Dick replaced her in the chair, "Darling," he coaxed, kneeling beside her with soothing caresses and persuasive words, "you are overwrought. There is nothing to fear: nothing. Everything is going on capitally. In time the truth will be known."

"Are you sure—sure?"

"I am sure," lied Dick bravely, to quiet the storm.

"And—and Edith will be—be safe?"

"Of course. There! There!" he dried her eyes with his pocket-handkerchief, and rose quickly as the temptation to kiss her assailed him. "You need food

and rest, Aileen. I'll tell Mrs. Webb to hurry up dinner, and——”

“Dinner! As if I could eat anything, with Edith—Edith——” she broke down.

“You must. Do be sensible!” and he moved towards the door.

“Now you're leaving me, just as you left me at Fryfeld,” sobbed Aileen, who was sufficiently unstrung to be all the woman.

“My dear,” said Dick, desperately, and keeping well away from this attractive, exasperating, delightful, annoying angel, “I'm only a man.”

“Then why don't you help me?”

“Oh, Lord, am I not doing my best?” cried the badgered lover, too amazed at this unjust question to consider woman's protean capabilities.

“I suppose you are, though you aren't!” wailed Aileen, twisting his handkerchief between her fingers, and continuing to contradict herself lavishly. “Oh, you are too interested in all this bother to trouble about me. It's hard—very hard, although you're quite right. I want it proved that Edith didn't do what she didn't do, poor dear, whatever you may say. So like a man, though I'm sure I don't care. Still you might?”

“Might what?” almost shouted Dick in a maelstrom of bewilderment.

“Oh, if you don't know, you can't expect me to know. Father never cared for me, and I've never had anyone of my own to love me, but Edith, and she's—dying.”

“Darling! Darling!” Dick flung himself across the room, impetuously. “I care for you, love you, adore you, worship you.”

“So you say: but”—she rose totteringly, apparently to keep him off, really to draw him on, with the wonderful skill of Eve’s daughters.

“Aileen!” he snatched her into his arms with a caveman’s greed, “is it this?”

Woman-like, having brought him to the desired point, she denied any such scheming. “No! How dare you think that? Dick! Dick! What are you doing?” for by this time he was kissing her with all the ardour of long-starved love.

“Does it require any explanation?” he gasped, breathlessly. “You wanted——”

“I didn’t! I didn’t! I’ll never speak to you again if you say I did.”

“Oh, then you didn’t! All the same”—and again she was enveloped in a whirlwind of tempestuous caresses, “oh, my dear, my dear.”

The time to yield had come, for this masterful lover had stormed her into surrender. With a long-drawn sigh of enjoyment, she gave herself to him. “Dick I’m so glad—so glad. You really love me, don’t you?”

“Certainly not!” he cried, joyously. “Would I act like this if I did?”

The answer was apparently satisfactory, for she echoed his merry laugh without withdrawing herself. “But—if you loved me, why didn’t you say so like this long ago?”

“Darling, you told me that we were to remain brother and sister until all this miserable business was settled.”

“Did I? How silly of me!” then sudden remorse seized her and she escaped from his eager arms. “How selfish I am,” cried Aileen with shamed emotion.

"I think of myself—of you, when we should both be thinking of Edith. Oh, Dick, do tell me all about it—set my mind at rest."

"Not until you have had some dinner," said Hustings, firmly, and, silencing her protestations with a final kiss, he summoned Mrs. Webb, who entered smiling knowingly. "Will you see to Miss More's comforts, please, and bring in dinner as soon as she is ready."

"Yes, sir. Are you staying here for the night, Miss?"

"No," said Dick, before Aileen could reply, "Miss More returns to London."

"Miss More doesn't," retorted the girl, determinedly, "I intend to stay here, until things are settled one way or another. Mrs. Webb can act as my chaperone. Can't you—won't you, Mrs. Webb?"

"Of course, Miss," beamed the landlady, her romantic heart approving of romance, "your room is quite ready, Miss. I knew you would stay."

"Mrs. Webb knows me better than you do, Dick," taunted Aileen, gaily, as she followed the brisk little woman.

Hustings smiled to himself, very well pleased with his unexpected good fortune, which warmed his heart and stimulated his brain. From Aileen's own sweet lips he had learned that she would never tolerate any lover-like attentions while Miss Danby's fate was in abeyance. But, exercising the traditional privilege of her sex, by changing her mind, the girl now wanted what she had formerly refused. Dick quite understood her impossible chatter, and why she had surrendered herself after many wordy, futile contradictions. The danger and painful absence of

her dearest friend, the loneliness of the cottage, the drawn-out suspense and anxiety of the case—these things urged her insistently to seek the shelter of his protective arms. Feeling forlorn and deserted, Aileen required demonstrative love: those caressing actions, which speak louder than mere words, however sweet. And such love—any love, according to her own showing, the girl had never received, save from Edith. Yet there had been her brother, and there was her father—ah, yes, her father. Dick desired to learn more of that wanderer. So far as he could gather from a stray word or so, there did not seem to be much love lost between Mr. More and his daughter. Dick resolved to question Aileen that very evening, and learn how matters really were.

The lovers, superintended by Mrs. Webb as their guardian angel, enjoyed a good dinner, and a quiet dinner, since their happiness—a dream oasis in the midst of the woeful desert of actuality—made them little disposed to speak. Dick had demonstrated his love so very emphatically that Aileen was content to accept less pressing evidence. It was only when the meal ended, and the smiling landlady withdrew after bringing in the coffee, that Dick wished to renew earlier raptures. Aileen kept him at arm's length. "No! We understand one another fully. I love you: you love me. Let it go at that, Dick."

"And what then?" he asked disconsolately.

"Sit down over there!" she pointed to an arm-chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, "drink your coffee and smoke your pipe."

He obeyed, though unwillingly. "You are going back on the love-trail."

"We are leaving the love-trail for the more important

one, which will lead to a knowledge of the truth. Now then, dear!"—she seated herself at a safe distance, "tell me everything."

Hustings drank his coffee, lighted his pipe, and related later events: the disappearance of Jimmy Took, the appearance of Mr. Chane, and the suspicions of Inspector Trant—"who is searching that bungalow," ended Hustings, shaking his head doubtfully, "and if he finds nothing we're up a tree."

"I don't see that," expostulated Aileen, all ears and eyes, "Jimmy may come back with news."

"It's a forlorn hope."

"No! I agree with you, Dick, that the boy knows more than he will admit. He wants to prove his worth, so as to realize his ambition to become a detective, and will move heaven and earth to get at the truth."

"Heaven and earth are not easily moved," said Dick, cynically.

"Besides," went on Aileen, not troubling to notice the interruption, "there is Wu Ti who goes to that Whitechapel den to smoke opium. Your suggestion to the Inspector that the place should be searched is a good one. The man is sure to be caught there, and then we may learn what he and Mrs. Jerr have to do with the matter."

"They have nothing to do with it, according to Mr. Chane."

"By Mr. Chane's own showing he knows next to nothing about the couple," returned the girl, swiftly. "Mr. Trant may find something incriminating in the bungalow if he searches it thoroughly."

"Oh, he's bound to search it with a tooth-comb," said Dick, confidently, "and he'll come along later to tell me the result of his prying and pokings."

Aileen did not reply for a second or so, "I wish my father were here," she said, suddenly, "he is so clever, that he would help us greatly."

"I also wish he were here," commented Hustings, quickly, "I don't think very highly of your father, dear. If he was a real father he would not leave you to face all these troubles alone. And, from the newspapers, he must know how things stand."

"Father never loved me," said Aileen, clasping her knees and staring sadly into the fire. "Roddy was the only one he cared for. I was nothing. Oh, he was kind, in a chilly way, you know, Dick, but I always felt that he looked upon me as a nuisance."

"Impossible!" cried Dick, indignantly.

"Oh it's true," Aileen nodded positively. "Mother died when I was a mere infant and I was sent to my aunt—her sister—to be looked after. When I was in my teens Aunt Amy died, and I returned home for a time. Of course, while I was with Aunt Amy I used to visit father occasionally at his office, and he called sometimes to see how I was getting along. But he never wanted me in the house, as I wasn't in his heart, so he sent me to a boarding-school at Brighton. There I stayed until he was taken prisoner by the Germans—as was supposed—and Mr. Quick ran away with the money father had left for me. I got a situation as a clerk in London, and had a hard time, until Edith found me and took me to live with her."

"You poor darling," said Dick sympathetically, "but it's all over, Aileen. You have me now, and I'll love you for ever and ever and ever. If you weren't so thorny a rose I would show you how much I do love you," he half arose.

Aileen laughed and signed that he should remain

where he was. "Pleasure comes after work, you silly boy. Don't think I am not longing as much as you are for the golden hour, when all will be sunshine. I am starving for love; all my life I have wanted love. Roddy was very kind, but I was much younger than he was and he took little notice of me. Besides he was in love with Edith. As to father—he was always freezingly polite; kind enough in his cold, scientific way to me, but all his affection was given to Roddy. He idolized Roddy and tolerated me. Oh, Dick, you'll have to give me heaps and heaps of love to make up for what I have missed."

This was such an invitation to offer consolation that Dick jumped up, lifted Aileen clean out of her chair, and kissed her protestations into silence. Before either of the ardent young people could regain self-control, two or three sharp raps sounded on the door. "Oh!" cried Aileen, immediately returning to the safe respectability of her chair; and, "—Oh come in!" cried Dick, greatly annoyed by the interruption, as any lover would be.

Inspector Trant made his appearance, looking rather stern as he closed the door and addressed himself to Aileen: "You should not be here, young lady," he said, reprovingly, "I told you to stay in the cottage, under the care of Jenny."

"It was Jenny who suggested that I should come down here," replied Aileen, defiantly, "she saw that I was worrying myself ill, and so——"

"So she came to me," Hustings picked up the girl's speech, equally defiant. "I wonder it doesn't strike you, Mr. Trant, how terrible it is for Aileen to remain alone in that dismal cottage under surveillance."

"I acted for the best," said the officer, coldly, "and

in point of fact I did not do my duty. Only my debt to Aileen's father prevented me from charging her as an accessory. Now don't get into a rage, Mr. Hustings. As a lawyer you must know that appearances are very much against her."

"You know, as I know, that she is perfectly innocent," said Dick hotly, while Aileen rose to clasp his arm, going red and white, white and red by turns.

"Of course she is. I never for a single moment suspected her. All the same—but what is the use of arguing," Trant shrugged his shoulders, "you can't see things my way and never will, being in love. You must go back, Aileen."

"I shan't!" she stamped her foot, clinging desperately to her lover. "Dick and I are engaged to be married, and I want to be with him. Besides," she went on, artfully, "you seem to have lost the trail. My woman's intuition may find it again."

"There is something in that," agreed the Inspector, dryly. "I shall hold Mr. Hustings responsible for your safe keeping, all the same."

"She couldn't have a more careful gaoler," said Dick, patting Aileen's hand.

"Mr. Trant!" entreated the girl, "I appreciate your kindness and forbearance sufficiently to return to Fryfeld when you wish. But do allow me to help."

"Oh, well," the officer wavered, and yielded, "you can look into this ghost business, which I fancy has something to do with our affair. And visit the bungalow. Your younger and sharper ears and eyes may be of service there."

"Did you find anything suspicious in the house?" asked Dick.

"Nothing! Only Chane's belongings. Mrs. Jerr and Wu Ti have removed theirs."

"And what do you think of the man, himself?"

"I don't suspect him in any way, as he was quite a stranger to the couple. He let the bungalow without requiring references, since he accepted payment of the first quarter's rent as a sufficient guarantee of the woman's honesty. And she was honest to the last, as you probably gathered from that letter he received yesterday, enclosing money. Chane!" Trant spoke musingly, "I only saw him in the twilight and by the light of the candle he carried when we went through the house. But somehow he seems to be familiar to me: manner, eyes, voice—I can't put a name to it. Still," he threw back his memory over a score of years, but finally shook his head. "I can't remember. Old age! It is time I retired."

"You're not old," Aileen assured him gently, "no older than my father. By the way, I heard from him."

"From your father," Trant was surprised and pleased. "He is alive then?"

"Yes! He wrote from Paris, saying that he had returned from Germany and would explain his long silence when he came to see me."

"Odd!" commented the Inspector, pinching his chin, "very odd. If taken prisoner during the war, he could have returned immediately hostilities ceased. And should have done, my dear, to look after you."

"My father never cared for me," said Aileen, sadly.

"Oh, you must not say that," he protested, "your father is a scientist, you know, thinking much, speaking little. Such a man rarely reveals his innermost feel-

ings. I have not seen him for close upon twenty years. How old are you?"

"Twenty-one!"

Trant nodded. "It must be quite twenty years then, since I nursed you on my knee. I remember your father quite clearly. A stout, brown-haired man, with a thin brown beard, of no great stature and extremely reticent. He was a staunch friend to me when I greatly needed one, so I am sure, with such a nature, that he loved you, Aileen, although he did not show his feelings."

"He showed them to my brother," she retorted, bitterly.

"Well, well, well. Let us hope you are mistaken. When you meet him again, things may turn out better than you expect," he strode towards the door. "Good night, young people. I am going to listen for the voice of that foolish ghost."

"You won't hear it," Dick assured him, promptly.

"Why not?"

"Because I believe the whole business to be a trick on the part of Mrs. Jerr or Wu Ti—maybe of both. And with their going, goes this ghostly voice."

"You can't be sure of that," Trant shook his head, doubtfully.

"I can't be sure of anything. Is Jimmy back?"

"Not a sign of him. However, since you suggested the other string to my bow, I am communicating with Scotland Yard with regard to watching Old Wung's opium den. Wu Ti may be found there. It is a difficult case, Mr. Hustings, and the further we go into it the more difficult it becomes," the Inspector finished with a weary sigh and departed on his ghost-hunt.

Dick returned to find Aileen making ready to retire and remonstrated, "Oh don't go. I want to talk."

"There is nothing to talk about."

"Our love——"

"That must wait until things are more settled. Besides, I am tired after my long day in the train. Good night, Dick! And—and—there!" she kissed him in an amazing hurry, after a momentary pause, blushing delightfully at her boldness. He would gladly have returned that kiss with another—maybe with a round dozen or so, but that she laughingly evaded his embrace and flitted lightly out of the parlour.

"I wish this infernal case was at Jericho," growled the disappointed lover, naturally exasperated by this thwarting of romance by realism. And, not greatly caring to smoke a lonely pipe by a dying fire, in his turn, he went to bed.

But not to sleep. Throughout the long, long night, he tossed and turned, got up and lay down, times without number: his nerves all on edge with the perplexity of the outlook. The trail was lost, he gloomily assured himself, unless Jimmy and his dog, casting about, could pick it up by happy chance. The boy might possibly return with useful information, since he must have some good reason to act so boldly, yet secretively. Anyhow, in this direction there was a hope—albeit a forlorn one—of a prosperous issue, and that was something comfortable to dwell upon. But, towards the small hours of the morning, Dick assured himself, after much cogitation, that the best way of arriving at helpful results was to speed up the arrest of Wu Ti. That mysterious personage,

and Slanton's enemy, according to Jenny Walton, would certainly return like a homing pigeon to the Whitechapel opium den. When discovered there, helpless in the fumes of the black smoke, he could easily be captured and forced to speak. Then there would be revelations. On this more or less satisfactory conclusion, the young man slept, shortly before the dawn, worn out with the mill-wheel monotony of recurrent thoughts.

The morning found him less haggard than might have been expected after so sleepless a night. This was owing to Nature exacting her dues, for he did not open his eyes until a late hour. It was eleven o'clock before he was up and bathed and shaved and dressed and seated at a solitary breakfast. Mrs. Webb brought this in with a message that Miss More had left the inn an hour earlier to visit the bungalow, and desired Mr. Hustings to follow. Irritated by his lethargy, Dick dispatched a hurried meal and obeyed. His long strides soon took him through the sunken lane, up to the bungalow, and into the neat garden. The door of the house stood wide open, so the young man had no hesitation in entering forthwith. Aileen was in the house, and as Aileen's lover he did not intend to stand upon ceremony. Along the passage he strode masterfully and into the room, wherein he had interviewed Mrs. Jerr. There was the girl, pale and shaken: there was Chane, cold, aloof, watchful.

"Dick!" said Aileen, and her voice trembled, "this is my father."

CHAPTER XV

A CLUE

AILEEN's father—the released war-prisoner—the long-missing man? Frozen into an amazed silence by the revelation, Dick had strong doubts as to its truth. It seemed incredible that this elfish little creature, smiling cynically, could be the brown-haired, stout, scanty-bearded friend of Inspector Trant. "It's impossible!" he stammered, after a lengthy pause, during which he waited vainly for an explanation.

"Why impossible, Mr. Hustings?" asked More, alias Chane, in his light voice.

"Trant's description of your——"

"Yes! Yes! Aileen told me how he described my twenty-years-ago appearance. Very accurate then—but now—Time brings changes—Time brings changes."

"Surely not such great ones as would alter your looks so completely," blurted out the still-astonished young man. "Trant did not know you."

"Naturally. Twenty years: twilight: candle-light! How could he know me?"

"There was light enough for him to read Mrs. Jerr's letter."

"But not sufficient for him to recognize an old friend."

"Going by Trant's description, I doubt if any one of your old friends would know you, sir."

"Aileen knew me," retorted More, curtly.

"I should think so. It is not long since she saw you."

"Yet when she did see me, before I went to France," said the little man with twinkling malice, "I was still brown-haired, brown-bearded and stout, though a trifle the worse for wear and tear."

"Is that so?" Dick turned to the girl, more puzzled than ever.

She nodded, "I did not know my father immediately; but when I looked into his eyes—you can't alter the colour and individual expression of the eyes. Also, my father has a trick of stroking his chin when thoughtful, and——"

"And I stroked it when surprised by your unexpected visit," interposed More, shrugging. "Oh, these mannerisms: they always betray the best disguise."

"Disguise!" Dick scrutinized the speaker keenly, recollecting that the suspected Mrs. Jerr had been his tenant.

"An ominous word, isn't it?" jeered More, derisively, "and rather suggestive of my complicity in this Slanton murder. But you have found a mare's-nest, Mr. Hustings. My changed looks are due to an attempted escape from prison."

"A German war-prison?" asked Aileen, unthinkingly emphasising the noun.

"Surely my child, I am not a felon, although you imply a doubt."

She protested, flushed and apologetic, "I never meant——"

"I will take it that you meant less than your speech hinted," said her father with some dignity. "Aileen,

Aileen"—he shook his head, sadly—"you never loved me as your brother did."

"How could I when you never showed any signs of wanting my love?" demanded the girl, almost fiercely. "All your affection was given to Roddy."

"Not all. I had much left for you."

"Then why didn't you give it to me, father? You never allowed me to come into your life. I was exiled to Aunt Amy's house: after she died, to that boarding-school at Brighton. All my life I have hungered for what I never obtained."

"We are at cross purposes, it seems," commented More, coldly.

"Not on my part," denied his daughter, vehemently. "To me you have always been a guardian, never a father. Only Edith loved me——"

"And now I love her," struck in Dick, thinking it just as well that this dry-as-dust scientist should know the truth, "we are engaged to be married."

"I have not yet been consulted," said More, stiffly.

"It was impossible to consult you, father, when you were missing and, by many, supposed to be dead. Also, why should I consult you, seeing that I am less a daughter to you than a stranger."

"I am to blame," admitted More, again dignified, "but not so much as might appear to a superficial observer, which I fear you are, Aileen. Let me explain—and let us be seated," he shrugged, smilingly, "for I really don't know why we have been standing all this time."

Dropping lightly into the nearest chair, the little man, a strange mixture of gaiety and gravity, signed that the others should follow his example. They

did so, the girl seating herself as closely to Dick as was possible. He guessed that she wished for the comfort of his presence and closed a strong hand over one of her own. More noted the encouraging clasp, which revealed plainly that his daughter trusted her lover and doubted him. "Don't judge me until you hear my explanation," he said satirically, but wincing at the action.

The young people said nothing, and somewhat disconcerted by their silence, the speaker, now standing at the bar of judgment, entered into details. He related how he had taken a Government appointment in France, connected with aeroplane wireless operations; how, left behind during a forced retreat of the Allies, he had been captured, and how a German prison-camp had held him for months, fretting his heart out. "I tried to escape several times," he went on with the calm precision of a scientist, "but invariably I was brought back. Finally I was transferred to another and safer district, and in my new prison I found a friend. Herr Hopf was, like myself, a scientific student, disapproving of the war, and therefore declined to regard me as an enemy."

"A rare specimen of a German professor," remarked Dick, grimly.

"Quite so," retorted More, sharply, "but one with whom I was fortunate enough to come into contact. He helped me to get away by transforming my appearance from that which you knew, Aileen, to that which you now see. Meagre prison-fare had already rid me of my stoutness, and it was easy for me to shave off my beard. Hopf bleached my hair; changed, by a process, which I need not describe, the contours of my face, and——"

"He has altered your nose, father," said the girl, staring.

"Yes! And by cutting certain nerves, he changed my expression. Also he lightened my skin, formerly ruddy, now pale golden, and—and, oh in various ways he turned me from one man into another. But the eyes—you are right, Aileen, clever as he was, Hopf could do nothing with the eyes. It was clever of you to see in them your transformed father."

"I don't know," she said, slowly, "if you hadn't stroked your face——"

"Ah, yes. Hopf warned me against mannerisms, but one forgets."

"And your voice," went on Aileen, "it's so—so thin and—and—light."

"Used to be heavy, didn't it? Hopf again: you wouldn't understand if I explained, so I won't waste my breath. But that change isn't lasting—I can, if I chose go back to"—here More suddenly checked himself with a swift glance at Dick, "Well, well, so much for my changed looks."

"And you escaped!" said Hustings, wondering why the man had pulled himself up.

"Only out of the frying-pan into the fire," muttered the scientist, between his teeth, and frowning darkly, "it was impossible to creep westward out of Germany, so I was forced to struggle eastward."

"You went to Russia?"

"I went to Hell, Mr. Hustings. There, the new disorder of things drew me into their whirlpool, to be beaten, starved, shot at, tortured, and—oh let me talk no more of what I underwent," and covering his face with his hands, the cold little man became much more human for the moment.

Aileen's generous heart forgave him on the instant. Leaving her chair she went to kneel by the broken man and smooth his hand. "Don't think anything more about it, father. You are safe now, and happiness lies before you."

"Good child, good child," murmured More, not unmoved, "let us be better friends for the future, Aileen. But happiness is not for me," he rose with a tragic gesture, with a despairing cry. "I have lost my Roderick—my only son."

"But you have your daughter!" Dick reminded him gently, for the cry came poignantly, and rang truly in its revelation of suffering.

"My daughter will marry you; go away, and forget me."

"No, Father, no. We have been at cross purposes, as you say. But now——"

"Now we will be better friends: no more. You mean well, my dear. I thank you. But Roderick was everything to me, and I have lost him, lost him, lost him."

"Surely Aileen——" began Dick, indignant that the girl's proffered affection should be so definitely rejected.

More cut him short, fiercely positive. "Can Aileen carry on my research work—has she the brains, the training, the knowledge to finish what I have begun? No! You little understand my feelings, which are those of a scientist as well as those of a father. I have lost more than my son. I am deprived of an assistant, who helped me as no one else could have done, as no one else ever can do. My brilliant, clever boy. Oh what a loss to the world of science."

"He gave up his life for his country, sir."

"Oh!" More stared strangely at the speaker, ignoring his daughter, who clung sobbing to that speaker's shoulder, "he gave up his life for his country, you say. Why—so he did!" and he smiled so weirdly, that Hustings shrank back. He wished, for Aileen's sake, to like More, but he could not bring himself to the point of liking. There was something sinister, threatening, uncanny, about him.

"Oh, father, I am sorry for you," sobbed Aileen, raising her tearful face.

"There! There!" said More, gloomily, and patting her shoulder, "I appreciate your sympathy, my dear. Roderick is dead; crying and raging, prayer and fasting will not bring him back. But, as for those who killed him——" he stopped abruptly and clenched his fists, smiling in a most venomous manner.

"You hate the Germans, I see, sir. But—the fortune of war!"

"Hate the—oh yes! Fortune of war—naturally," he laughed shrilly, "my son—only son, who might have been—would have been, helpful beyond knowing to humanity, with his discoveries. A genius, sir—a genius! And he is dead! dead! dead! Fortune of war did you say, Mr. Hustings? Why, of course! Fortune of war!" and he laughed again, thinly, cruelly, mockingly.

Drying her tears Aileen glanced anxiously from her father to Dick, who was likewise perturbed. They simultaneously thought that the poor soul's mind was unbalanced. And small wonder if such was the case. The laborious work in France, the sordid captivity in Germany, the infernal torments in Russia, and above all the irreparable loss of his son—less crowded disasters than these would serve to shake a man's sanity.

More noted their silence and guessed their thoughts with uncanny perspicuity. "Perhaps I am mad!" he said, piteously, "only I wish that my madness would include loss of memory. But there! there! there!" he recovered his self-control with startling rapidity. "What else is there to say? I got away from Russia, some few months ago, in the steamer of a Petrograd skipper, to whom I did a good turn. That's all there is to tell."

"But your change of name?" questioned Dick, swiftly, as he and Aileen sat down again, "why did you change your name?"

"To match my changed looks maybe," replied More with a shrug.

"And why did you not write to me immediately—come to see me without delay?" demanded Aileen, "you knew how anxious I was."

"Did I? I forget," replied her father, indifferently, "but I learned that you were living with that woman who seduced Roderick into loving her, and for that reason I left you in ignorance of my doings."

"Don't say a word against Edith," cried Aileen, flushing up with sparkling eyes, "she is the best and dearest friend I have. When Mr. Quick ran away with the money you left for me——"

"I heard of that," interpolated her father, grimly, "and I shall settle accounts with Quick, sooner or later, never fear."

"Well, when his dishonesty drove me to work in a City office, Edith sought me out and took me to live with her."

"On Roderick's money," sneered More, cynically, "she could well afford to do that, since he was fool enough to leave it to her. The scheming adventuress."

"She is not that, father. You misjudge her. Edith went to find you and offer back the money, which she did not want. Failing to find you, she offered the money to me. I refused, so she engaged me as her companion. Does that look as if Edith was a bad woman? No! She loved Roderick truly and for himself."

More seemed rather taken aback by this information. "I am sorry if I have misjudged her," he said, slowly, "she may be better than I have thought."

"She is—she is," Aileen assured him, vehemently.

"Offered to return the money did she?" mused More, ignoring the speech. "If I had known that I might have—but it's too late now," his face darkened, and he sighed, regretfully, Dick fancied. A moment later and he went on, briskly, "I changed my name because I am engaged in certain scientific work, which I hope will end war. War deprived me of my son, and it is my desire to save other fathers from suffering as I am suffering."

"And your invention——?"

"No, Mr. Hustings. I shall say nothing of that just now. But when I am ready I hope to place at the disposition of a sane Government, a weapon which will give that Government the mastery of the world. I say a sane Government, you observe: one which will use this weapon to stop war, not continue war."

"Our own Government?" asked Dick, rather mockingly.

"I don't know: I can't say. It depends upon the Government in which I find most common sense. What did Tennyson say, years ago in Locksley Hall?" and the little man quoted with fiery emphasis:

“ ‘When the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe.’ ”

“Maybe I shall be the one to fulfil that prophecy. In the hands of sane men, this weapon I am inventing will shape the policy of the planet. And again I emphasise the word ‘sane.’ ”

“Where do you hope to find the sanity that will exercise unlimited power, in a selfless way, for the benefit of humanity?” asked Dick, with a doubtful shrug.

More did not answer this question, save that he imitated the disbelieving gesture. “So that is my explanation. I work in London usually, but come down here for rest. I bought this bungalow from Mrs. Brine’s executors for this purpose. But this silly ghost business worried me, so I let it to Mrs. Jerr. As you know, she could not stand that trouble either and left.”

“Did you hear the Voice before Mrs. Jerr came?”

“Yes! And tried my best to arrive at some explanation. But it proved impossible. That it is a trick I am convinced: but how and why I can’t say. However, now that I am here again with Rackham to look after me, I shall search again into the matter.”

“Rackham!” echoed Aileen, starting, “that was Roddy’s servant.”

“His batman. Yes! When I arrived in England I found that Rackham had left a letter at my office, saying that he wished to see me—to deliver some articles left by his master. I wrote to the address Rackham gave, and had an interview with him when he called.” More’s face darkened again. “It was a

very interesting interview," he said slowly, and gloomily, "and resulted in Rackham becoming my servant. It was the least I could do for one so faithful to my son. Rackham worshipped Roderick, as I did. Who could help doing so?"

"Is Rackham here?" asked Dick, suddenly.

"Yes. He came down this morning. Why?"

"He was in the Base-hospital when your son died, and might be able to tell us something about Dr. Slanton."

"Oh, yes. Slanton was the doctor there. Rackham told me that, but he said very little about the man, save that few liked him. Unless Miss Danby——"

"She detested him," broke in Aileen, angrily, "the man wished to marry her."

"So it was stated at the inquest proceedings, if the newspaper reports are to be relied upon. She must have detested him to some purpose, to have drugged, and tattooed, and finally to have strangled the poor devil."

"She did not—she did not. Edith is as innocent as you are, as I am, father."

"I hope so!" More spoke with genuine honesty. "I never liked the woman when she was my secretary, as I thought that she was scheming to marry Roderick, for the fortune his mother left him. But, if she really wished to restore it——"

"She did—she really did. Not finding you she several times offered it to me."

"And what is more," chimed in Dick, meaningly, "Miss Danby told me herself about her will, leaving the income to Aileen."

"Ah!" More looked up quickly, "she expects to be hanged then?"

"She expects death, anyhow, Mr. More; if not by hanging, then by cancer."

"Cancer!" More arose, his light-coloured face working with emotion, "Poor woman. I fear that I have misjudged her. Had I only known"—his hands opened and shut convulsively—"oh, had I only known."

"Known what, father?" It was Aileen who put the question, surprised at this display of feeling by the cold-natured little man.

"That she loved Roderick for himself and not for his money. Then I would not have forbidden the marriage. And my son might have been still alive. Shakespeare is right in his Puck saying: 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' But I am punished: Roderick is dead. I am alone."

"You have me, father!"

"Have I," he looked keenly at the girl, "then come and live here with me."

Aileen drew back, "No!" she replied, resolutely, "I shall stay in Edith's cottage until Edith's character is cleared."

"Or until she dies," mocked her father, shrugging. "That seems more certain than her chance of being proved innocent."

"Can't you help, sir?"

"No!" More looked both surprised and regretful, "I only wish it was in my power to do so, seeing how sadly I have misjudged this woman. But, as I have told all I know about Mrs. Jerr, and know nothing of Slanton, but what Rackham has told me, I don't see what I can do."

"I should like to ask Rackham a few questions, with your permission."

“Certainly!” More pulled the bell-rope dangling near his hand, “but I fear you will learn little from him. Still, he may suggest something useful, as possibly in Slanton’s past will be found the reason for Slanton’s death. Ah, Rackham!” he went on, lightly, as a tallish, soldierly man appeared at the door “this gentleman wishes to learn what you know of that doctor who attended Mr. Roderick when he died.”

Rackham presented himself as a grim-looking person, with a lean, weather-beaten face, clean-shaven, and cruelly marked. On its left side, a reddish scar ran down his cheek from ear to mouth, giving him a somewhat sinister appearance. He saluted, stood rigidly straight, and answered gruffly. “Dr. Slanton. A bad lot, sir: smoked opium and was much too free in his habits, begging this young lady’s pardon. Saw him often when Lieutenant More died; but haven’t seen him since, and don’t want to.”

“Had he any enemies do you know?”

“Heaps of ’em I should think, sir. I’m one.”

“You?”

“Yes, sir!” returned the ex-soldier, phlegmatically. “I don’t think he knew his business as a doctor or Lieutenant More wouldn’t have gone west.”

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“What I say, sir. Sister Danby who nursed my master was handy enough and did her best. But that blighter—if you’ll excuse the word, sir—didn’t give Lieutenant More proper attention.”

Before Dick could ask another question Aileen put one herself. “Do you know that Dr. Slanton has been murdered?”

“Saw it in the newspapers, Miss. And I’m neither surprised nor sorry, Miss. The Devil came for his

own and got him, as I knew he would some day."

"And the name of the Devil—the person who killed Slanton?" asked Dick, dryly.

"I know nothing of that, sir. If it's Sister Danby as they say, I'd like to shake her by the hand. That physic-merchant was a Hun, sir—leastways he'd all the devilment of one. I'm glad he got it in the neck."

"Then you can tell me nothing about the man?"

"Nothing, except what's rotten, sir." Rackham smiled grimly, and the wrinkling up of his gruesome face caused the scar to writhe unpleasantly. "Any more questions, sir? Not that I can tell you anything."

Dick shook his head, woefully disappointed, whereupon More dismissed his servant with a curt nod. "You mustn't be angry with Rackham's blood-thirsty talk!" he said, looking apologetically at the young people. "He loved Roderick as much as I did. Of course I can't swear that Slanton caused my son's death by inattention, or ignorance; but if I had known, for certain"—and his face became fiercely cruel—"I should have—should have—well there's no saying to what lengths I should have gone to revenge Roderick. But there you are! You know everything now. Let us change the subject. I am not master of myself when I think of my lost son. Well, well, well. Luncheon?"

"No thank you, father," refused Aileen, who was feeling exhausted by the somewhat stormy half-hour, "I wish to return to the inn and see Mr. Trant."

More was by no means offended, and, indeed, seemed relieved. "If you do, tell him who I am, and explain the reason for my changed appearance," said More, accompanying his visitors to the outer door, "it will

save me from repeating myself when Trant comes to see me again."

With marked courtesy he conducted Aileen and her lover to the gate, waving a friendly farewell as he returned to the house. But behind these externals—and both the young people felt the sensation—there lurked a hidden gladness at having got rid of them. "I am willing to help father, and father is ready to be friendly with me," said Aileen voicing her feelings, "but it's too late. I can never feel that he is really my father."

"Don't be too hard on him, dear. It's my belief that he is slightly crazy."

"Oh, Dick!" cried the girl in dismay, and with a shiver of pity and horror.

"Well, is it to be wondered at, considering what he has gone through? Let us accept the position, Aileen, and leave him to Rackham and his inventions. We must think of ourselves, of Miss Danby's plight, of getting things settled."

She nodded sadly. "If father showed the least sign of wanting me, I shouldn't agree with you, Dick. But, as it is, I think you are right. Poor father. He has nothing to live for now."

"Oh, there's his invention and dreams of creating a world-peace. Those will comfort him and help him to forget."

Dick spoke soberly, being really sorry for the wretched little man, in spite of his innate distrust, and was about to guide Aileen down the lane when the unexpected happened. A distant shout came to their ears, and they turned simultaneously to see a figure plodding wearily towards them—the figure of a man,

with a dog running beside him. "Jimmy!" cried Dick delightedly, and he ran to meet the boy, leaving Aileen where she stood expectant of news.

"Jimmy, boy," Hustings put his arm round the weary, dusty lad, who seemed to be on the point of falling, "I am glad to see you. Let me help you to the inn. You are worn out, and the dog isn't much better. When you have eaten and rested you can tell me your news."

"I must tell you now," gasped Jimmy, hoarsely, "that girl Jenny Walton?"

"Jenny Walton? How did you—yes—yes?"

"She has run away. And—and—oh Bill Tyson—Old Wung!" the lad collapsed.

CHAPTER XVI

JIMMY'S ADVENTURE

IT was Aileen who took charge of the situation. She and her lover between them half led, half carried the fainting lad to the inn, with the dog limping painfully behind. Both Jimmy and the Airedale were thoroughly worn-out, having evidently been traveling at top-speed for endless miles. And maybe, from distant Fryfeld, as might be surmised from the mention of Jenny Walton. Dick was on fire to learn how the boy had come into contact with Miss Danby's servant and why he coupled her name with those of Bill Tyson and Old Wung. Inspector Trant, whom the two met in the village street, was no less clamorous for information; and Webb, receiving them at The Pink Cow, demanded immediate explanations about his stolen dog. But Aileen suppressed the three, authoritatively. "Jimmy isn't fit to talk!" she declared, resolutely, and Mrs. Webb, with murmuring sympathy, supported her in this decision.

So the two wise women shut out the excited men, compelled their patient to eat a good meal, and conducted him upstairs to a comfortable bed with orders to lie down and sleep throughout the afternoon. Then they descended to defy interference on the part of the anxious inquirers, who resented any delay at so critical a moment. Mrs. Webb was particularly sharp with her husband, who harped peevishly on the exhausted condition of his prize Airedale.

"Oh, bother the dog, Alf. Food and drink and rest will put him right."

"Jimmy took him away without my permission."

"Well, he's taken him out before for runs with your permission. Jimmy's an honest lad, and you're a zany. Get along with you. Oh these men, these men, Miss More," mourned the landlady to Aileen, "however would the sillies get on without us sensible women," and she chased her grumbling husband out of the parlour, laughing at his protestations.

"When will that boy be able to talk?" asked the Inspector, when left alone with Dick and the girl.

"As soon as he wakens of his own accord," she rejoined promptly. "You wish him to describe his doings clearly, don't you? Well, how can he do so until he recovers his strength?"

Trant laughed approvingly. "Oh I think you have acted rightly; albeit somewhat authoritatively, Aileen. But every moment is of value."

"The more haste the less speed," retorted Miss More, spiritedly. "I daresay Jimmy will come down, clothed and in his right mind, about four or five o'clock. Meanwhile, Dick and I have plenty to tell you. Your time won't be wasted."

"One moment!" the officer pulled out his notebook and flipped over a dozen leaves or so, until he found what he wanted. "That boy mentioned the name of Bill Tyson when he met you, Mr. Hustings," he said, ponderingly. "Here I find a statement you made saying that he is the Walton girl's lover."

Dick nodded. "He got two years for burglary. Jenny told us that, but did not let us know that Slanton was the accuser. Bender found out that Tyson broke into Slanton's Hampstead cottage."

This time the Inspector nodded and turned over a few more leaves. "Old Wung—the Walton girl mentioned that as the place Slanton frequented."

"Yes. And Jenny herself, Tyson and Wu Ti all went there. I wish I had asked the girl for its whereabouts."

"Don't worry over that, Mr. Hustings," said Trant, dryly, putting away his note-book, "Old Wung's den has been located, and the police are watching there for the return of Wu Ti. I wonder if Tyson has gone there too?"

"But he's in prison," said Aileen, with a start.

"I rather guess from Jimmy's mention of his name, that he's broken prison. However, I'll soon make sure of that," and Trant rose to depart.

"Don't go," implored Aileen, hurriedly, "I want to tell you of my father."

"Your father—my good friend!" Trant's face lighted up with genuine pleasure, "Have you heard from him again? Has he left Paris for London?"

"No," said Dick, dryly, "he has left London for Wessbury."

"Really. I am delighted. He has come to see you, Aileen, I expect. But how did he find out that you were here?"

"He did not find me, I found him," said the girl, awkwardly, "at the bungalow."

"Oh, indeed. Then he knows Mr. Chane."

"He *is* Mr. Chane."

"What! What! What!" stuttered the Inspector, scarcely believing his ears, and sat down again, with astonishment written largely on his face, "Impossible, oh quite impossible. I would have recognized him last night."

"You wouldn't recognize him in broad daylight," sighed Aileen.

"All the same, Trant, you suggested that there was something familiar about the so-called Chane, when you met him," observed Dick, recalling to the man's mind the previous night's conversation in the parlour.

"So I did: so I did. Chane! Good Lord! Why has your father changed his name?"

Aileen told him, with the assistance of Dick, and between them they acquainted the officer with the dismal history of More, from start to finish. He listened in sympathetic silence. "Oh my poor, poor friend. How he must have suffered: how he must be still suffering. I shall call and see him. As he was good to me, I must be good to him. And Rackham! H'm!" his tone changed, as he pinched his chin perplexedly, "it seems to me that he knows more about this Slanton than he will let out."

"I don't think so," protested Hustings, hastily, "he hated the man so thoroughly that he told everything he could to his discredit."

"Well, then, he can repeat the same to me. He saw, by his own confession, a great deal of Slanton when in the base-hospital, and may give me some useful hints." The Inspector rose again and walked to the door. "I'll go to the bungalow this evening. Meanwhile I am going to Chelmsford, to telephone Scotland Yard and learn if Tyson has broken prison. Expect me back at four o'clock, and please see that Jimmy Took is up and about to explain his absence," he opened the door to go out, then paused suddenly and turned to ask a question, looking greatly puzzled, "I don't know why it should come into my head, but describe Rackham's looks to me."

Equally surprised, Dick hastily sketched the man's appearance, laying stress on the scarred face, "Although I don't know why you asked," said Dick.

"Nor do I," confessed Trant with a shrug. "I said as much!" and forthwith departed, leaving Hustings looking queerly at Aileen.

"Upon my word, I believe that Slanton is looking after this business from the other side, as Mrs. Grutch asserted," he remarked, slowly, "the word 'Whispering' dinned into my ears, and now Trant's apparently foolish question. He can't suspect Rackham, who has nothing to do with the matter. Yet he asks——"

"Oh, Dick, what is the use of worrying over such things," interrupted Aileen, wearily, "I'm too tired to argue. Besides it's silly."

The lawyer was of a different opinion, but said no more. All the same the oddity of the incident dwelt in his mind. The rest of the afternoon passed quietly, with an inspection of the Airedale, now recovering, a sauntering walk in and out and round about the picturesque village, and a return to the inn for tea and toast, and congratulations to Jimmy on his recovery. "You have pulled round wonderfully, youngster," Dick told him, while the boy devoured several rounds of buttered toast, and drank several cups of tea.

"Sleep always fills me up with strength," said Jimmy, smiling gratefully at Aileen, "and it's thanks to Miss More that I got the sleep. I was dog tired, as I told my father."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, Miss More, Mrs. Webb sent for him and he came up to the bedroom. I was just opening my eyes—about three o'clock, it was—so he sat himself down on my bed, and I told him all my adventures."

"Now you must tell them to us!" Aileen smiled on the handsome lad, to whom she had taken a fancy, which was, needless to say, heartily reciprocated.

"When the Inspector comes, Miss More," declared Jimmy, firmly: for not even the cajoling of lovely woman could move his singularly obstinate mind. "I don't want to waste words in repeating things for the third time."

"Trant will be here soon," observed Dick, glancing at Aileen for permission to smoke. "Mrs. Webb told me that he had returned from Chelmsford," and, even as he spoke the officer made his appearance, looking decidedly grim. "Eh! What is it?" queried Dick, hastily, when noting the expression.

"I'll tell you when I have heard this youngster's story."

"Some tea, Mr. Trant?" Aileen half arose to ring the bell for a fresh pot.

"No thank you, my dear," replied the Inspector, seating himself so as to command an uninterrupted view of Jimmy's face. "Now then, boy?"

"It's this way, sir. I always had an idea that Mrs. Jerr and Wu Ti were up to something. When Mr. Hustings told me about the murder, I was sure."

"Upon what grounds?"

"My finding of the swastika scarf-pin, for one thing. Also!" confessed Jimmy, guardedly, "I worked in the old lady's garden for some time, and, although there was nothing I could put a name to, somehow an air of mystery hung about that bungalow."

"Your imagination!" hinted the Inspector, dubiously.

The youth smiled, slyly. "Might have been, sir,

and perhaps it was that which made Mrs. Jerr dismiss me as a meddlesome brat. I was too inquisitive for her liking. Anyhow my imagination led me to watch the pair. After Mr. Hustings paid his visit, I thought that, if my ideas were worth anything, it would frighten them into taking French leave. And then—do you remember my going home to get my bag and things when you agreed to take me with you?" he asked, turning towards Dick.

"Yes! And I remember also that you were a confoundedly long time away."

"I had to go to the chemist to get some aniseed," confessed Jimmy, simply.

"What on earth for?"

"To lay a trail. I guessed that if my suspicions were correct, the two would not risk taking the bus or train, as both would be too public, if secrecy was their object. Everyone in the village knows that Wu Ti often took the old lady out for an airing in the side-car of his motor-cycle, so I felt certain that it would be used as the best means of escape. Knowing where it was stored, I crept into the coal-shed at the back of the bungalow and sprinkled the wheels thoroughly with aniseed."

"You had Mr. Webb's dog in your mind!" cried Aileen, admiringly.

"Yes, Miss More. Todgers and I are old friends. I knew that most dogs, let alone Todgers with his keen nose, would follow so strong a scent. My only fear was that it mightn't last long enough. And for that reason"—he nodded to Trant—"I wanted you to come straight down to Wessbury. When you did come later, and sent me home, I thought, during the

night, that I would test the trail. Just before six o'clock in the morning I collared the dog and laid him on the scent."

"Did he pick it up?" asked Trant, mortified to be reminded of his dilatoriness, but unable to refrain from approval.

"Like a bird!" cried Jimmy, metaphorically incorrect, but mightily enthusiastic. "I held Todgers in leash and he led me along the waggon-road across the common. Then, some miles away, the trail passed over the highway and went down a lane. I knew the lay of the land by that time."

"How did you know?"

"I had a road-map, and the highway gave me my bearings."

"Good lad!" cried Dick, delightedly, "you thought of everything."

"Not of food, sir," said the boy, ruefully. "I forgot to take some with me in my hurry, and was mighty hungry I can tell you."

"No wonder you were worn-out when you got back," commented Aileen, tartly. "Why didn't you get food in the first village you came to?"

"I didn't dare to leave the trail, Miss More. I knew that the scent was light enough as it was, and mightn't lie much longer. No, I hung on for miles and miles. It led me—the trail I mean—along all kinds of crooked ways: round ponds, through plantations, up hill paths and down them, always avoiding the main road."

"Natural enough," observed Trant, nodding, "I expect Wu Ti guessed that the sight of a pig-tailed Chinaman riding a bike with an old lady long-side him, would lead to them being easily traced."

"It would," agreed Jimmy, dryly, "but I rather think, sir, that Wu Ti put on European clothes for the journey."

"What makes you think that?"

"My common-sense tells me so. Also I didn't find—but there," Jimmy pulled himself up sharply, "I'm rushing on too far ahead. I was all day trailing my birds, and finally Todgers, somewhere about sundown, led me into an isolated little wood. There the trail ended."

"And you found Mrs. Jerr and——" began Aileen, breathlessly.

Jimmy cut her short. "I found neither. The trail ended in an open glade, in the middle of this wood. As the sunset was strongly red and flaming right in through the trees, I saw everything clearly."

"What did you see?" asked Trant, eagerly.

"The motor-cycle-side-car wheel-marks on the brink of a pool. I tied Todgers to a tree, took off my clothes and dived. Then"—Jimmy chuckled—"I found what I wanted. The machine lies at the bottom of that pool."

"No!" Dick was hugely pleased at the success of his protégé.

"Oh, it's there, right enough sir, as Inspector Trant can see for himself when I lead him to the place. The wheel-marks are plainly to be seen in the mud on the margin of the pool. Besides, I found it in the water."

"I'll see about the matter immediately," said Trant, patting the boy's shoulder appreciatively, "but go on—go on. What did you do next?"

"Dressed myself and began to hunt the wood, Todgers helping. The two had skipped, which was

lucky for me, as I expect they'd have given me a hot time," said the boy with an uneasy grin. "I didn't find them, but I nosed out, or rather the dog did, a bundle of clothes shoved away in a briar-thicket."

"I know," Aileen jumped immediately to conclusions, "Wu Ti's clothes."

"No, Miss, Mrs. Jerr's clothes. And now you can see, gentlemen, why I believe that Wu Ti left the bungalow in European togs. If he had worn his Chinese dress he'd have got rid of it in the wood."

"But why did Mrs. Jerr change?" queried Dick, puzzled.

"Oh that is not a difficult question to answer," said the officer, "she assumed another disguise—perhaps that of a boy."

"Impossible. An old woman of seventy."

"I rather suspect, from what we are learning, that Mrs. Jerr is less old than she made herself out to be, Mr. Hustings. Anyhow, whatever may be her disguise, we can hunt for the Chinaman. He is sure to be with him. Did you bring back Mrs. Jerr's clothes?" he asked Jimmy.

"No!" replied that youth, dryly, "I hadn't a chance."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Bill Tyson is wearing them."

"Good Lord," Trant pinched his chin, furiously. "I learned at Chelmsford that he had escaped. How the devil did he get down into these parts, and why?"

"I can't answer the first question, but I can the last, if you'll give me a moment or so to speak," snapped the youth, made irritable by his still exhausted condition.

"Go on—go on," Trant humoured him affably, "I am all attention."

"I heard the noise of someone rustling through the undergrowth," continued Jimmy, wearily. "At once I fancied that Mrs. Jerr and her Chinese devil were coming back. I made myself scarce as you may guess, by hiding along with Todgers in the middle of the briar thicket. Todgers held his tongue. Never a whimper out of Todgers; oh he's a jewel of a dog, is Todgers. I used my eyes and saw a short, broadly built man push into the glade. He'd a bristly black beard, an old cap pulled down over his head and wore a ragged suit of clothes, mouldy with age."

"Must have got those off a scarecrow," muttered the Inspector, "that is, if the man you saw is Bill Tyson."

"Oh he's Bill Tyson all right, although I didn't know it at the moment. He looked about for a few minutes and then sat down to eat some bread and cheese. I can tell you," said the boy, plaintively, "that the sight of food made me jolly envious. Lord, how hungry I felt. Anyhow, this tramp ate up every crumb, the greedy pig, and then took a drink from the pool. I thought he intended to stop there for the night, but he lighted a filthy black clay pipe and began to move away. All at once his eyes fell on Mrs. Jerr's clothes scattered about, just as I'd pulled them out of the bundle. He swore horribly and began to run round in a blue funk, peering here, there and everywhere."

"He had every reason to be in a blue funk," muttered Trent again, "the hue and cry is out for Bill Tyson."

"Well I didn't know anything about Bill Tyson at the time. I only thought that the man was a gypsy-tramp, and wondered why he was cutting up rough. Anyhow, to make a long story short—for I am tired—

this tramp put on the old lady's clothes. Yes. Petticoats, bodice, shawl, bonnet and all—even to her black veil—which last he needed badly enough to hide his bristly beard. Oh he looked quite the lady when he sailed out of the wood," grinned Jimmy.

"And you?"—the listeners held their breath, so intense was their interest.

"Well, I wasn't going to lose those clothes, so I held Todgers in leash again, and followed at a safe distance. After a time, although it was twilight, the country seemed somehow familiar to me. Then I remembered, Inspector, that you motored round by Fryfeld when you brought me down here."

"Fryfeld—were you near Fryfeld?" asked Trant, agreeing with a nod.

"Three or four miles from Fryfeld; but I am quick at remembering places and one thing and another gave me the idea where I was. The tramp went straight there, and although it was growing rapidly dark, Todgers kept track of him: as a dog could where a man couldn't. He skirted the village and went round about to Miss Danby's cottage."

"How did you know it was Miss Danby's cottage?" asked Aileen, puzzled by all this accuracy of detail.

"Inspector Trant pointed it out to me when we passed through Fryfeld on our way here," said the boy, smartly; "dark as it was I knew the place at once. I saw the man go to the back door and heard him knock. Then when a woman opened the door, and the light came streaming out, I knew who they were. Not by the light, but what they said. He cried, 'Jenny,' and she said, 'Bill Tyson.' Then she dragged him into the house and shut the door."

Jimmy stopped for breath, but Trant urged him to

continue. "Don't stop at the most interesting part, boy."

"Let me get my breath," protested the youth, half laughing and half angry. "I do feel jolly tired. Well, I sneaked up to listen, as, remembering all that had been told me, I knew Bill Tyson was Jenny's lover."

"That's why he came down to Essex," said Aileen, "but how did he induce Jenny to go away with him?"

"He didn't, Miss More: it was Jenny who got him to go with her. I could hear more or less plainly what the two were talking about, as I was near the window, and they didn't lower their voices. She asked him how he escaped, and he told her that he'd chucked himself out of the train."

"Yes!" said Trant, admiringly, "a smart and daring chap is Tyson. He was taken from Pentonville to give evidence against a pal at Colchester, and on the way he stunned the warder in charge, and threw himself out of the railway carriage. Luckily for him the train was slowing down to a local station at the time, so he wasn't killed."

"Only bruised a bit, as he told Jenny," continued the boy, "he then cut across country, making for Fryfeld, and stole the clothes off a scarecrow; stole food also, and tobacco, by breaking into a village shop on the way. Jenny told him it wasn't safe for him to remain in the cottage as it was being watched."

"Kemp!" grunted the Inspector, nodding, "he doesn't seem to have done his duty."

Jimmy went on with his interesting story: "Jenny suggested that she and Bill should go to Old Wung's den, and see if he couldn't get them both out of the country. Tyson agreed, so after a time they came out,

and sneaked by by-paths to take the London train at Cornby."

"Why didn't you follow them?" questioned Dick, sharply.

"Because I wasn't sure of myself, and also wanted to give the Inspector here the credit of capturing the lot. I believed not only Jenny Walton and Bill Tyson will be found in Old Wung's place, but Mrs. Jerr and Wu Ti."

Trant shook the boy's hand warmly. "Good lad! good lad. But if Wu Ti has discarded his Chinese dress he won't risk going to Wung's den, knowing that he may be searched for amongst his countrymen."

"Oh, he'll go there, sir—if only to smoke opium."

Dick looked up. "Would a respectable old lady like Mrs. Jerr go also?"

"Is she respectable?" queried Jimmy, meaningly. "I think when we learn who Mrs. Jerr really is, we won't find her so respectable as you think."

"Eh—what—what—what?" Trant jumped up in a nervous hurry.

"My imagination again, sir," said Jimmy, dryly: the accusation had rankled, "but it wouldn't be a bad idea to test its truth or falsity by going to White-chapel," and he chuckled mischievously.

"I can't think that Tyson would risk going there—into the lion's jaw."

"I have heard," observed the youth, sententiously, "that the only way to avoid danger is to walk right into it."

"I hope you are right," muttered the officer, "I'll visit Wung to-morrow; but to-night I must see Mr. Chane—I mean Mr. More—about Rackham. He's gone to Town."

"How do you know that, Trant?"

"I saw him boarding a train at Chelmsford and recognized him by the scar you described, Mr. Hustings. He was off before I could question him. Pity, as it's time lost. I want to know of Slanton's doings in France. Somehow I think that the truth of all these matters is to be found there."

He was turning to go when Mrs. Webb bustled into the room with a post-card. "For you, Miss," she said, handing it to Aileen, "it arrived by the second morning post, and went clean out of my head. Sorry, Miss." Aileen read the card as Mrs. Webb bustled out again—read it slowly, as both the writing and the spelling were execrable. "From Jenny," she said, and read it out. It was brief and to the point:

"Dere Mis, Ailin," wrote Jenny laboriously, "Bil hev kom, for me, and i am gowin wittth Bil. Ef ther's trouble, i kan 'elp, es i ses. Putt the trouble in the nospipirs, and i shell twigg. Yor Afextonite Jenny."

"What's the address," Trant took the card, "none—post-mark—Whitechapel—dated yesterday. Oh she's gone to Wung's crib sure enough. Tyson with her, I'll bet. Mr. Hustings, we'll visit that place to-night."

"Cheerio!" cried Jimmy, who had picked up that word from a soldier, "me too."

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE UNDERWORLD

AT Chelmsford the Inspector prepared the way for the success of the adventure by telephoning lavishly to Scotland Yard. This proceeding interested Jimmy enormously, as it implied his indirect connection with the C.I.D., and incidentally opened the path to preferment. He determined that his doings in the Fryfeld murder case should serve as credentials to impress the august heads of the Department with a full sense of his worth. The public praise could be given to Trant, but the private approval was to be for him alone, so that he might be elected a humble member of the profession so dear to his soul. Not that the boy intended to remain in the lower ranks of that detective army, which wages incessant war against the criminal classes. No! Once his foot pressed the first rung of the ladder, Mr. James Took was positive that he would ascend with the rapidity of a saint to heaven. He had a great opinion of his capabilities, had Jimmy.

For this reason the neophyte had clamoured for inclusion in the adventure, and had achieved his purpose in the face of troublesome objections. Aileen pointing out how tired and shaken he was by his late efforts, used all her persuasive powers to retain him in Wessbury. But in vain. This was the flood-tide in Jimmy's affairs which would float him on to fame and fortune, as he argued in his own logical mind. There-

fore he resisted female blandishments with the courage of an embryo St. Anthony, and braced himself for strenuous happenings. The mere thought of sharing in the peril—for peril there surely was—sent a surge of fresh vitality through his wearied young body. It was an alert, observant, bright-eyed youngster, who stepped into the train at the heels of Dick and the Inspector.

As the trio had a first-class compartment all to themselves, Trant requested his young companion to repeat his story, lest any detail should be overlooked. Jimmy, whose memory bordered on the miraculous, gave it out again, word for word as before, glancing slyly from one listener to the other. "Have you left out anything important, youngster?" asked Trant, when the thrice told tale was ended.

"Nothing that matters at the present moment, sir," said the boy, blandly.

"But later——?"

"When later comes, the rest will come."

"The rest of what?"

"Of my story."

"Then you are not telling me everything," scolded the Inspector, irritably.

"Everything you need know just now, sir," fenced Jimmy, artfully.

Trant looked at Hustings and Hustings looked at Trant. Jimmy was a hard nut to crack. "I think you should tell the Inspector all you know," advised Dick, seriously, "he may be the means of helping you to realize your ambition."

"I am sure he will," assented the youth, just as seriously, "he is all kindness."

The officer glanced quickly at Jimmy, suspecting

sarcasm, but there was no sign of that. "If you think that I am kind, why doubt me, by keeping back what things are necessary for me to know."

"I am not doing that, sir. All that is necessary I have told you."

"But there is something!" insisted Trant, angered by this reticence.

Jimmy nodded, emphatically, "Something you'll learn all about in Whitechapel."

"Why not agree to be guided by my experience?"

"When the time comes, I'll only be too glad to be so guided, sir," said Jimmy bluntly, "meanwhile I work out my own ideas in my own way."

"Don't be disrespectful."

"I don't wish to be, but— Oh, Mr. Trant!" the boy's voice sounded quite piteous, "don't you see that this is my chance of getting into the detective force? If I tell everything now, and you succeed on my telling, I shall only be a jackal to your lion, and will have no opportunity of showing what I can do."

"Nonsense," said Trant, brusquely, "you'll be given all the credit your sharpness demands. That is only fair. I am a just man, if nothing else."

"You are more than just, sir, for you have treated me like a gentleman, putting up with my way of doing things. There's more humanity than red-tape about you, Inspector," said Jimmy, in his audacious way, "and that is why I have told you so much. And didn't I return from Fryfeld, when I might have worked on my own, so that you might be in at the death and arrest the birds we're after? I'm only anxious to show what I can do, so that the C.I.D. may take me up."

"Oh you'll be taken up all right," Trant assured the

boy, "you are made to your trade, Jimmy—the detective trade. I see your point, for I think as a man and not as an official machine. All I ask is that you will withhold nothing which will lose me the men we're after."

"I swear I won't, sir," answered the youth, brightening as Trant spoke. "When Wu Ti is in your hands you shall know everything."

"Are you certain that we shall stumble on Wu Ti to-night?" asked Dick.

"From the moment Mr. Trant said something at the inn, I was certain."

"And that something?"

"I shall keep to myself," was the cool reply.

"Jimmy!" Dick laughed, "I believe you are preparing a cinematograph surprise."

"You might put it that way, sir."

Both the men gave it up. This extraordinary youth was as slippery as an eel, so there was nothing for it but to let him arrange matters in his own secretive way. And the Inspector, being, as he said, a man rather than a machine, wished to give the boy his chance. "It's the younger generation knocking at the door, as you said, Mr. Hustings," he declared, ending the matter.

At Liverpool Street Station the three were met on the platform by a plain-clothes detective from Scotland Yard. He informed the Inspector that Wung's crib was being carefully watched, and that all arrangements had been made to raid the premises when the order was given. The quartette then bundled into a taxi, and travelled swiftly to Whitechapel, where they were deposited in one of the main streets. Camp, the plain-clothes official, then took charge, guiding the party

down an evil-smelling lane. "I'm glad you're not in uniform, Inspector," he remarked on the way, "they're wary birds down here."

Trant laughed quietly, "I had to borrow a suit of Mr. Hustings' clothes, as I didn't bring my wardrobe to Wessbury. I guessed that a civilian kit was needed."

Camp nodded approval, and conducted the trio still further down the lane, which narrowed into a crooked alley, until they found themselves in a cul-de-sac, shut in on three sides by tall dilapidated houses. Lurking in the shadows loafed a few shabbily-dressed watchers, and Camp assured the Inspector in an undertone that a whistle would call the police, waiting no distance away. "No need to let Wung know what we're after," said Camp, cheerfully. "Here we are, gentlemen. All serene?" he addressed the last two words to one of the watchers and received an affirmative reply.

The man, who had for some time been ingratiating himself with the population of this unsavoury quarter, knocked seven times at odd intervals at the door of an unlighted and apparently deserted house. It was opened cautiously by a wrinkled, malignant-faced, old Chinaman, in his national dress, carrying a smoky petroleum lamp, which he held high above his head to scrutinize the visitors. A few words from the watcher assured him that this was a party of sight-seers, touring the underworld, whose curiosity meant money to its inhabitants. Wung—for this was the proprietor of the opium-den—demurred a trifle, but ultimately admitted all five men. He led them along a dingy, narrow, crooked passage, to a staircase; and thence down to a tolerably large cellar, with three doors, set

between lines of bedded bunks, arranged one above the other round the walls, up to the ceiling.

In these bunks, men of several nationalities were lying: some completely under the influence of opium, others recovering from its effects. The stone floor was raggedly matted; and scattered here and there were small stools and squat tables, scarcely higher. The atmosphere was hot and clammy: thick with the smoke of many lamps, and sickly with the acrid smell of opium. A lean Chinaman, hunkering down before one of the tables, was preparing his pipe by twirling the gummy stuff on a spatula, which he held in the tiny flame of a tiny lamp. He glanced up, indifferently, when the visitors entered, and as indifferently glanced down, intent upon his occupation.

"Wantchee, dlink?" queried Wung, with his long-nailed fingers snuggling in the wide sleeves of his blouse, and blinking hospitably through huge horn-rimmed spectacles.

"No!" said Trant shortly, and began to walk round and round the cellar, peering into the faces of sleeping and waking men.

Camp saw Wung make an uneasy movement, which hinted that his suspicions were aroused, and secretly tugged the sleeve of the watcher. Immediately the man slipped out and up the stairs, so stealthily as to be unobserved by anyone. "Smokee opium!" asked Wung, blandly, but coughing loudly.

"Stop that," cried Camp, guessing that it was a signal.

"Allee lightee!" murmured the old creature, and shuffled in his padded shoes towards one of the doors.

"Come back!" Trant not only commanded, but dashed forward to grip the man's arm and enforce

his command, "Quiet now!" for Old Wung wriggled violently.

"You no fiends," screamed Wung, struggling with amazing strength for one so old and apparently feeble.

"P'lice chop!" shrilled the lean Chinaman preparing the pipe, and rose, feeling swiftly for his knife, only to be checkmated by Hustings.

"Hands up!" shouted Dick, whipping out his service revolver, and the savage-looking Oriental obeyed with a vicious snarl.

"Follow me! Follow me!" breathed Jimmy in Camp's ear, and made for the door towards which Old Wung had moved earlier.

Before the detective could do this a horde of police came pouring down the narrow stairs, much to the comfort of Trant. The whistle had been blown by the watcher, under Camp's orders, and the house was surrounded in the nick of time, seeing how pressing was the danger of a rough and tumble fight. While the invaders swarmed into the cellar, tumbling the opium-smokers wholesale out of the bunks, Trant shook Wung violently. "Wu Ti! Where is he?"

"No hab got," squeaked the Chinaman, sullenly.

"And Tyson—the girl, Jenny. Come now?"

"No hab got!"

Piercing through the uproar of resisting smokers and assaulting police, a loud and shrill cry from Jimmy, now through the doorway, caused the Inspector to pitch Wung into the arms of the nearest policeman. A moment later, he was in the adjoining room, to see the boy struggling with Jenny Walton, and Tyson entrenched behind a table, topped with three chairs. The burglar was raging furiously, in his accustomed

garb as an East End tough, and levelled a revolver at the new-comer. Up shot Trant's hands, for he was completely at the mercy of the ruffian. The next instant Tyson was at his mercy, for Jimmy, escaping from the girl's hands, crawled under the table to sweep the man's legs from under him. Crack went his revolver, but the shot expended itself harmlessly in the ceiling. Immediately Trant closed with him, while the girl clawed the Inspector's back, hampering him sorely. Again Jimmy came to the rescue, pulling Jenny backward on to the floor, whence she spat out venomous words. Regaining her feet, she leaped upwards to the hanging lamp and dashed out the light.

"The roof, Bill, the roof!" screeched Jenny, groping with out-spread arms in the darkness. "I'll hold the blinking cop. Ahrr! I've got yer!" and she launched herself through the gloom on to Trant's back with such accuracy and force as to knock him sideways, thus releasing the burglar.

"Y' come along o' me," bellowed Tyson to his doxy, slipping eel-like out of the officer's loosened grip and making for an inner door. But Jimmy's keen young eyes had espied that door earlier, as the only safe exit for the pair and Jimmy was watching expectant by that door. "Blarst y'—lemme go!" snarled Tyson, as the boy closed with him, and easily tossed his feather-weight assailant, aside. "Jenny! Jenny! Get on with it, y' bitch!"

"I'm comin'—comin'!" gasped the girl, shuffling towards the voice, just as a policeman dashed in with a lamp. The light revealed the door, and like lightning, she and her man placed it between themselves and their pursuers.

"Hurt, laddie?" inquired the Inspector, rising at the same moment as Jimmy, who was feeling his head with a confused expression.

"Shaken a bit, sir. Come on! They're making for the roof!"

Even as he spoke a Chinaman, snaked in from the outer cellar, twisted through the disorderly group of constables and darted towards the door. He opened and closed it with incredible dexterity, but, scarcely less rapid in his movements, Jimmy pulled it wide again. "Wu Ti!" cried the boy, exultingly, and began to climb a steep staircase, with the Inspector and his underlings streaming at his heels.

"Hurry! Hurry!" panted Trant, as they followed hot-footed in the dark, "I would not have anything happen to that lad for a kingdom. Torches!"

Half a dozen beams of light flashed out immediately, to show Jimmy disappearing into a bare corridor. Along this the officers rushed with confidence, now that many lights revealed their surroundings. Up another flight of stairs they stormed, and along another passage. Then through several rooms, all bare, dirty, unfurnished, dusty, they surged in tumultuous disorder. Afterwards the trail led them up more stairs, along more corridors, through more rooms, so endless, so confusing, that the place resembled a rabbit-warren. Finally the pursuers, climbing up a ladder through a trap-door, found themselves on the roof, four stories above the street level. "This way—this way—this way," chanted Jimmy's voice, exultingly, from the near distance. And in the luminous starlight, Trant caught a glimpse of him scrambling up the slanting slates with the activity of a squirrel.

Then began a nightmare chase, dimly lighted by

stars and torches. In their heavy boots, the police slipped and slithered on the steep roofs, stumbled perilously along the narrow gutters, clambered to the ridge of one slope, to slide down the declivity of another, as they jostled and pushed their way from house-top to house-top. The Chinaman could not be seen but Jenny and her mate were visible, squirming their way, monkey-fashion, to safety. Occasionally they stopped to search desperately for a trap-door into the bowels of this house and that; but Jimmy and Trant, heading their pursuers, pressed them so closely that they had no time for discovery. Finally, they were driven to the last house-top at the lane-end of the cul-de-sac.

Here, perched precariously on the summit, the fugitives turned at bay—made a last stand: Tyson with his revolver, Jenny with a knife, which she flourished, screaming out insults. “Kim on, y’ crawling swine,” she taunted, hoarsely, “Bill an’ me’s ready t’ slit yer cussed windpipes!” and then followed a volley of foul words, shameless, and cutting.

“Shut yer jawr,” growled Tyson, giving her a cuff, “git daown— Hell!” he ended with a shout of dismay.

The blow, delivered when the girl was unprepared and uncertainly balanced, knocked her off the ridge, and her body went rolling down the sloping roof, shooting off into mid-air from the slight parapet, and falling swiftly to crash, horribly, on to the merciless stones far, far below. “Oh, Bill! Bill!” she screamed reproachfully, despairingly, and that was the last sound which Tyson heard from her lips.

With a roar of anger the man stood up, recklessly and unsteadily on the roof-ridge, cursing furiously, firing continuously. Jimmy’s left arm, just above the

elbow, stopped a bullet, and Trant swung him into safety, only a moment before he began to roll downward to share poor Jenny's awful fate. By this time, Tyson's ammunition was exhausted, so he flung away the useless weapon and slipped down to the leads between the gables. Here, while wrenching at a trapdoor, as a last means of escape, the police surrounded him, and the handcuffs were on his wrists in the twinkling of an eye. "You win!" gasped the burglar breathless and became passive. "Dunno as I care naow Jenny's gorn west."

"You knocked her off the roof," rebuked Trant, who was binding up the boy's arm with his handkerchief.

"Yer a liar, y' bloomin cop. I wos tellin' her o' sorts to hold her jawr, an' look fur this blinking trap, so's we'd git awayi."

This remark drew the Inspector's attention to the best means of descent, and the strong arms of the police soon forced an entrance. With their prisoner under guard, Jimmy supported by Trant, and with no opposition from the scared inmates of the house, the party dropped down, story after story, to the ground floor. They found Jenny's shattered body was being carried away on an ambulance, for which Camp's men had sent. She still breathed. "I think you'd better go to the hospital also, Jimmy," suggested the Inspector, "and get your arm dressed."

"Not me, sir," said the lad, stoutly, "we've got to hunt out Wu Ti, who is somewhere on the tiles."

"I'm afraid he's got away, youngster."

"He can't have got away, sir, with the houses surrounded. We must find him, and you must take

me to help. Else," ended Jimmy slyly, "you won't get your surprise."

Admiring the boy's pluck, but doubtful of capturing Wu Ti, the Inspector brought his neophyte along with him to the raided house. Camp, awaiting orders, had allowed no one to leave the cellar, and was lining up a motley crew of yellow men, with a sprinkling of whites, for Trant's inspection. Old Wung, accepting his fate philosophically, hunkered in a corner, smoking placidly, while Hustings caught the Inspector's arm immediately he entered, "Have you got Wu Ti?" he demanded anxiously.

"I think that bird has flown, sir. We've captured Tyson!"

"And the girl, Jenny? She may tell us——"

"She's not able to tell anything at present, and perhaps never will be able, Mr. Hustings," and he hurriedly related the way in which the unfortunate girl had met her doom.

Meanwhile Jimmy waited impatiently at the inner door, beckoning them to re-start the chase for Wu Ti, "If we don't catch him the truth will never be known," Jimmy assured them feverishly.

"Are you sure it was Wu Ti who made for the roof?" asked Trant, looking at the sullen line of yellow and white faces before him.

"I can't swear to it, sir. One Chinaman is so like another, that there's no knowing. But only Wu Ti would have been so anxious to escape."

A cry came from Dick. "Look!" he said, pointing his finger at the man with whom he had struggled—the man who had been preparing the opium-pipe when they entered. "Jimmy! Trant! Look, look!"

They looked, and saw that the Chinaman's jaw was working up and down soundlessly. He stopped immediately, but the mischief was done. "Wu Ti!" cried Dick, positively, "I know his trick of working his jaws. It's Wu Ti."

"Me no Wu Ti," growled the man sullenly.

Jimmy came forward, leisurely, looked at the man's blue blouse, white trousers, native shoes, at his pig-tail, at his lowering face, which seemed uncannily lifeless. "It's Wu Ti," he said slowly, "and someone else!"

The lean Chinaman backed nervously, trying to cover his face with his two hands. But the boy was on him like lightning, gripping his pig-tail. With a deft movement, he jerked it forward, and an exclamation of surprise came from Dick. With the pig-tail came the skull-cap to which it was attached—and with this, a mask of gold-beater's skin, fitting closely to the face. Then——

"Rackham!" cried Dick, falling back in stunned amazement.

Jimmy grinned triumphantly. "Mrs. Jerr's servant, Wu Ti; Mr. Chane's servant, Rackham!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AN AMAZING ADMISSION

EARLY the next morning Inspector Trant, accompanied by Hustings and the boy, travelled back to Wessbury with his prisoner. Camp also attached himself to the party, commissioned by the Scotland Yard authorities to aid the Tarhaven official in solving the riddle of Slanton's death. It still remained one, notwithstanding the capture and unmasking of Rackham. The man, sullen and silent, doggedly refused to explain either his own doings, or those of Mrs. Jerr. He was as dumb as the Sphinx and as tantalizing.

This being the case, it was necessary to confront him with his master, who obviously knew more about the mysterious old lady than he had hitherto admitted. Seeing that Rackham had turned out to be none other than the pseudo Wu Ti, it was certain that, unless More chose to risk instant arrest, he would be forced to recant his denial of Mrs. Jerr as being other than a mere business acquaintance. The stubborn fact that he had permitted his servant to act as her servant suggested an intimate friendship, possibly a conspiracy. Also, Rackham had disguised himself as a Chinaman: a masquerade of which More could scarcely plead ignorance.

Altogether Trant was half-glad, half-sad, when considering the result of the night's doings. Glad, as it would seem that a clue to the truth of the Fryfeld

murder had been found; sad, since that clue somehow involved his benefactor in the dreadful business. The Inspector had never forgotten More's ready help in the hour of need, and dearly wished to repay him for his generous assistance. Here was his opportunity, but one difficult to seize. Left to himself, he could have, and would have, strained a point to protect the old man to whom he owed so much. But, as things were, the case was not now wholly in his hands. Camp, representing central authority, would assuredly not permit the hushing up of a felony upon sentimental grounds; so it was extremely probable that More would have to face the worst.

And that worst was surely coming to him, as the discovery in Old Wung's den strongly suggested. The death of Slanton in Fryfeld—the ghostly happenings in Wessbury—the picking up of the scarf-pin in the second village, thus connecting it with the first, and the identity of Rackham with Wu Ti, which linked More and Mrs. Jerr indissolubly: these proven facts could scarcely be whiffed away as mere coincidences. The kindly nature of the man revolted against the stern demand of duty, which was compelling him to deal officially with his twenty-years-back patron.

“The pity of it! The pity of it!” he groaned, pinching his chin, worryingly, and shaking his head.

“Halloo! What's up?” inquired Dick, overhearing these sounds of woe.

The Inspector did not answer immediately, and indeed shrank from giving one, unwilling to lay bare his troubled mind. Along with Jimmy and the lawyer he occupied a reserved compartment in a first-class carriage, while Camp and an underling guarded the prisoner in the one adjoining. He could thus speak

freely, and finally did so, remembering that Hustings was engaged to marry the suspected man's daughter. "I am hoping against hope that More will clear himself. He was good to me, so I desire to be good to him. But I don't see—I can't see how——" he stopped abruptly, again shaking his head.

"Nor do I!" replied Dick, catching the idea. "More is up to the neck in it, and will have no easy task to explain his doings. I think he is insane, myself."

"Why?" Trant looked up with a gleam of hope.

"Because a sane man usually has a motive for his actions, even the maddest. But More—what motive could he possibly have to kill Slanton? I ask you?"

"He did not do that. Slanton was killed at Fryfeld."

"True. But More, indirectly, brought about the man's death."

"No! No! Mrs. Jerr, if you like."

"Or Rackham, who disguised himself to serve Mrs. Jerr. In either case, More is implicated, and deeply. He must be at the bottom of the trouble."

"Might be!" Trant flicked an irritable thumb against his teeth. "The motive! H'm! What about Rackham's belief that Slanton's neglect brought about the death of his young master? You reported to me that he hinted as much. This being so, Rackham——"

"More, also," broke in the lawyer, rapidly, "he loved his son beyond anything on earth, and therefore would be willing to join Rackham in any scheme of revenge. But would the two go so far as to kill the man?"

"They didn't kill him," denied the Inspector again, "so far as we know."

"Precisely! So far as we know, and there you have the crux of the matter. Also, admitting any motive

for revenge on the part of these men—say the one you suggest—what has Mrs. Jerr to do with the affair?” Dick, warming to his subject, spoke volubly. “Then there is Miss Danby to be considered. Why should the body of her enemy be found in her grounds to implicate a woman, for whom these men had no ill-feeling? Indeed, Rackham asserted that Miss Danby did her best to nurse young More back to health. If your theory of revenge is a feasible one, Miss Danby must be included as a victim as well as Slanton. No, Trant. It is Mrs. Jerr!”

“H’m! You said a short time ago that More was at the bottom of the trouble.”

“I repeat it and along with Rackham and that infernal old woman. But it is impossible, at present, to make head or tail of the business. I am floundering in a quagmire, Trant—so are you.” Dick clutched his head despairingly. “Oh, Mrs. Jerr! Mrs. Jerr! Who the devil is Mrs. Jerr?” he chanted, rhythmically.

Equally perplexed, the officer pinched his chin, and his eyes wandered absently to Jimmy, curled up comfortably in the corner of the compartment, like a bright-eyed fox. The boy’s arm was in a sling, and, along with some blood he had lost much of his vivid colouring. But his looks were eager as he listened intently to the conversation, evidently biding his time to intervene. Trant all at once remembered that Jimmy had promised to tell his secrets when Wu Ti was arrested, and reminded him of the fact. “Go on, youngster. Who is Mrs. Jerr?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

The officer frowned, “More evasion—more fencing?” he inquired, tartly.

“No, sir,” Jimmy sat up alertly and spoke frankly,

"I know much, but not all. It is this way, gentlemen. When Mr. Chane occupied the bungalow, I saw a lot of him as he was hail-fellow-well-met with most of us, but I saw next to nothing of Rackham, his servant, who kept very much to himself and rarely came into the village."

Trant nodded to Dick, "Webb said much the same thing, if you remember."

"Oh, everyone thought Rackham something of a mystery because he stayed away from the village," went on Jimmy, easily, "worked in the garden mostly, and always dodged out of people's way, I only got near him once myself, and noticed the scar on his cheek. It was growing dark at the moment and I couldn't see his face very clearly; but I noticed the scar and fixed it in my mind, as a mark whereby I should know him again."

"Why should you want to know him again?" asked Dick, bluntly.

"Because I was suspicious about his keeping himself to himself, sir."

"That wasn't any of your business, youngster."

"No, sir," Jimmy turned to answer the Inspector, "it was my imagination—my curiosity—my desire to find out what people are thinking and doing and saying. Rackham puzzled me, so I watched Rackham," ended the lad, frankly.

"No wonder Mrs. Jerr called you a meddlesome brat," said Hustings, laughing.

"Oh, she didn't think me one when she engaged me to weed her garden. And Rackham, as Wu Ti, never suspected that I had my eye on him, so he didn't warn the old dame. Anyhow, when Mrs. Jerr rented the bungalow, I was employed to look after the garden,

run errands into the village and clean the motor-cycle. A jack-of-all trades, gentlemen, and master of none."

"Don't be too humble," advised Trant, dryly, "you were a master-spy, anyhow."

"Oh, I didn't suspect anything then," admitted Jimmy, wincing a trifle at the epithet which no intelligence-officer admires. "At that time, I only thought of Mrs. Jerr as a kindly old lady, and Wu Ti as a genuine Heathen Chinee, devoted to the Manchu Dynasty."

"Why that last?"

"Because he wore a pig-tail, which is the sign of servitude to the Tartar Emperors of Pekin. Most Chinamen grow their hair like us Westerners now, so I fancied that Wu Ti clung to the Old Régime, like—like Old Wung."

"You must have been reading Wells's Outline of History," was the tribute Dick paid to Jimmy's display of learning, "get on with it."

"Yes, sir. One evening I went back to the bungalow, lateish, to get my cap, which I had left behind after finishing my work. And—you know, Mr. Hustings, how Mrs. Jerr lighted up that sitting-room so brightly?"

"The seven lamps, not mentioned by Ruskin. Yes."

"Well, the place was blazing with lights as usual, and they were flaring through the pulled-down blinds. Although it was a sultry evening the doors were closed also, so I stole up to a near window to find out, if possible, why the two had shut themselves up so tightly."

"You are a human sleuth, Jimmy," commented the Inspector, admiringly.

The lad smiled at the compliment. "The blind of this window wasn't pulled wholly to the bottom, so, by stooping, I could just get a glimpse of the room. As usual, Mrs. Jerr was knitting in her deep arm-chair, and Wu Ti was standing beside her talking and gesticulating violently. Then I got a shock, and must have made some noise, for Wu Ti turned his face towards the window. That was enough for me. I bolted, and he never saw me."

"What about the shock?"

"Wu Ti hadn't his pig-tail on; nor his face—I mean his Mongolian face. He was Rackham. I saw the scar plainly when he looked towards the window. In one hand he was swinging the skull-cap with the pig-tail attached to the back, and the false face to the front, while he gesticulated with the other. So now you know, gentlemen, how I managed to pull the whole thing off with one sharp tug. It was a mask."

"And a clever one," struck in the Inspector, nodding emphatically. "That gold-beater's skin, with a trifle of oil rubbed over it and a touch or two of paint, when clinging to the face would deceive anyone. But I doubt if it deceived Wung," he added, with an after-thought, "or Slanton."

"I had not heard that name when I spotted Rackham's disguise," said Jimmy, yawning, for he was still languid from loss of blood. "What bothered me was why he should pass as a Chinaman to serve Mrs. Jerr, when he was Mr. Chane's servant. From that moment I began to suspect her respectability: wondering if she might not have something to do with the Voice in the Whispering Lane."

"Why did you connect her with that?"

"Well, sir, the Voice was heard for the first time

shortly after Mrs. Jerr rented the bungalow. Also on several occasions I caught sight of Wu Ti in the lane, after dark. He was on the prowl while you were calling on the old lady if you remember, Mr. Hustings. Finally, although everyone else was scared, he wasn't, she wasn't. So I made sure that it was a trick. I don't know how it was managed," mourned the boy, disconsolately, "in spite of my searching everywhere. Yes! In the trees, up the banks, along the banks, even in the mud."

"The Voice has ceased since Chane arrived," suggested Dick, using the name most familiar to the lad. "That is another hint, indicating Mrs. Jerr as being responsible for the business. But her reason?"

"Now we come to theories," Jimmy shrugged his shoulders; "mine is, that Slanton being a Spiritualist, the trick was put about to lure him to Wessbury. Consider, gentlemen! Of all the many ghost-hunters who came, he was the only one who never went away. When you mentioned his name, Mr. Hustings, and, from Miss More's description, recognized the scarf-pin, I immediately connected Mrs. Jerr with the matter. And for that reason I did not say anything about Rackham being Wu Ti, until now. I wished to make my two and two a very positive four."

"If you had told me this when Mr. Hustings brought you to my office——"

"I should have queered my pitch, Inspector," interrupted Jimmy, bluntly, "my idea was to present you with a complete irrefragable case, before explaining upon what grounds I built my suspicions. Only by working on my own could I get my chance of being taken up by you, sir."

“Well, you’ve managed that all right, youngster. But the case——”

“Is wholly in your hands now, sir. I step out, having no more evidence.”

“Still your idea——?”

“My imagination, Inspector. Well, sir, it suggests that Mrs. Jerr and Rackham got hold of Slanton by using the Whispering Lane trick, drugged him, tattooed him, and then carted him in the side-car of the motorcycle to Fryfeld. If Miss Danby didn’t strangle him, then Rackham, who brought him to the wood, climbed the wall when she was frightened away, and finished Slanton off.”

“If so, why didn’t he finish him off in Wessbury?”

“In that case, Miss Danby wouldn’t have been implicated, and undoubtedly it was intended that she should be brought into the matter. But, Lord, Lord, what’s the use of building castles on sandy foundations,” wailed Jimmy sadly, “it’s all guess-work.”

“You may guess truly, laddie. What you suggest is feasible in the face of Rackham’s openly expressed hatred of Slanton.”

“All theory—potshots—gropings in the darkness,” shrugged the boy, whose master-mind was as insistent as that of Socrates, upon the need of absolutely truthful knowledge. “What about Mrs. Jerr? Did she know and hate Slanton? Then there is Mr. Chane—I mean Mr. More—did he——”

Dick intervened sharply, “How do you know that Mr. Chane is Mr. More?”

“The Inspector mentioned it at the inn last night, sir.”

“So I did,” grunted Trant, ruefully, “for a little pitcher you have uncommonly long ears, youngster.”

“My ears and eyes and wits are my fortune, sir,” said the boy with his usual polite impudence, as the train slowed down into Chelmsford.

On the platform and in the bus there was nothing particular about the party to attract unusual attention. Prior to leaving London, Rackham had been transformed from an easterner to a westerner: Camp and his assistant were in plain clothes, while Trant still wore his borrowed suit. When they arrived in Wessbury passers-by did certainly glance at them curiously, but as they did not put their curiosity into words, or action, the five men walked quietly through the village and down the sunken lane. Five—because Dick lingered behind to see that Aileen did not follow. Assured within himself that there would be an unpleasant scene, he objected to the girl’s presence, lest she should witness the arrest of her father. Unable to guess what defence More would make, Hustings felt certain that Trant would be forced into such drastic action, and he wished to spare the poor child the pain of witnessing the degradation.

“Miss More, sir,” said the landlady, who came immediately to meet him. “Oh, she has gone to Tarhaven. Went this morning early.”

“Why?” Dick was taken aback by this intelligence.

“There’s a letter to explain, Mr. Hustings,” Mrs. Webb produced the missive and gave it into his hands. “I think a friend of hers is ill—dying.”

Paying no attention to this prattle, Dick stepped out of the inn and read the letter while following Trant and his party to the bungalow. Aileen wrote that she was leaving immediately for Tarhaven, having received a telegram, containing panic information regarding Edith’s hopeless condition. “I must be by my dar-

ling's bed-side to hold her dear hand as she passes away," went on the hurried writing. "The shame of this false accusation has killed her. Oh, Dick, if you love me, do, do, do find out who murdered that Beast, so that my poor Edith can die in peace. And follow—follow quickly. She may live until you arrive. I am so distracted that I can scarcely hold the pen. My gentle, loving Edith. Oh come, come—come at once!" and the woeful epistle concluded with a hastily scrawled signature, betraying only too truly the tempestuous emotions of the writer.

Dick felt relieved that the girl should thus have been removed from uncomfortable surroundings but regretted the cause. Yet it was idle to grieve. Whether Miss Danby was innocent or guilty, she could not live. The malignant cancer, accelerated by worried brooding, would surely kill her: the sooner the better, so that the poor creature might be released from appalling pain. Dear as she was to Aileen, the girl would scarcely wish her to linger on in agony. Things were better as they were. Death promised more happiness than life.

But the wretched woman would certainly die easier if assured that her name was cleared. Dick, walking down the lane, fervently hoped that the truth might indicate the so-called culprit as the inoffensive victim of circumstances. The examination of More might result in such an admission. But would the man risk making that inculpatory acknowledgment, if it endangered his own safety? And if he did chance the revelation, would Aileen welcome Edith's salvation at the cost of her father's condemnation? In either case the girl was bound to suffer. It was with a sore heart that Hustings entered the bungalow. Far from

being bettered by recent discoveries, things were now worse than ever.

In that well-remembered room, wherein Mrs. Jerr had sat and knitted amidst the brilliance of many lights, Dick found More standing at bay, although, outwardly, there was no sign that he considered his position so final. The light-haired, light-complexioned little fellow, neatly dressed as usual, stood smilingly on the hearth-rug, facing his ordeal with dauntless composure. Rackham, backed against the front window, stood, still grimly silent, between Camp and the other detective; while Inspector Trant occupied a chair, near the one in which Jimmy was ensconced. The stage was thus set for the concluding scene of Destiny's tragedy, and Destiny's puppets were interpreting her climax. More broke off a flippant speech when the new-comer appeared. "Ha, Mr. Hustings, you are just in time to hear a most exciting story."

"I know it," said Dick, coldly stern and seating himself at Trant's elbow.

"And believe it apparently, going by your demeanour."

"Yes!"

"What!" More waved his hands with airy contempt. "Rackham's masquerade—the opium den—the girl fighting for her burglar lover, and the exciting chase over the house-tops? A shilling shocker of the best. Ha! Ha!"

"You have left out the most interesting detail," observed the Inspector, in dry tones, "Slanton's murder."

"Stale news—stale news, I read all about that in the newspapers. By the way, Mr. Hustings, have you

not brought my daughter to listen to these entertaining fairy tales?"

"Aileen has gone to Tarhaven," said Dick, gravely, "to Miss Danby's death-bed."

More's face clouded, partly remorsefully, partly defiantly, "Poor woman, let us hope she is guiltless."

"You ought to know," growled Trant, allowing the man to talk in the hope of catching him tripping.

"I don't know. On my honour, I don't know. Why come to me with these tales of Slanton's death—of Miss Danby's wrong-doing? I know nothing."

"Not even why Rackham disguised himself as Mrs. Jerr's servant?" inquired the officer, ironically.

"Oh!" More heaved up his shoulders and spread out his hands in quite a foreign way to intimate ignorance, "that is Rackham's business. Why ask me?"

"I do ask you!" Trant rose menacingly and advanced towards the mocking little creature, "and I require a satisfactory answer."

"Suppose I decline to gratify you?"

"In that case,"—the Inspector produced a document—"here is a warrant for your arrest, as an accessory before or after the fact."

"Very interesting. Execute your warrant by all means."

Trant called More's bluff immediately, "I arrest you in the name of——"

"Wait!" without flinching the cornered man jerked away the hand laid on his shoulder, "Don't be in such a confounded hurry," he glanced towards his servant. "Rackham?"

"It's in your hands, sir," said the man, answering the silent question.

"But you, Rackham, you?"

"I am not ashamed of my part in the business, sir."

More chuckled, rubbing his hands with glee, "Staunch friend. No wonder you were trusted by my Roderick," he faced his accusers. "So you think you've got me? Not so. If I chose to keep silent, you could bring nothing home to me. But I admit that Rackham is in your nets. And for Rackham's sake——"

"No! No!" cried the servant, vehemently, "think of yourself, sir."

"I think of Roderick," More drew himself up with dignity, and his face became cruelly grim. "All the world shall know what I did for Roderick's sake: how a father can revenge his son. You approve, Rackham?"

"Yes, sir. Thoroughly!"

More nodded, faced Trant and tapped his chest. "You want to know who Mrs. Jerr is. Behold her. I, gentlemen, am Mrs. Jerr."

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIRST REVELATION

AFTER making the astounding assertion that he had masqueraded as the long-searched-for woman, More glanced delightedly round the circle of startled listeners. To three of these he addressed himself particularly, rubbing his hands with chuckling glee, and jeering contemptuously.

“Aha, Mr. Hustings, you little thought that the be-wigged, spectacled, gowned and shawled, old knitter was your father-in-law to be. And you, you meddling brat, with all your prying, you failed to learn who your employer truly was. As to you, Inspector, you never expected to find Mrs. Jerr in me. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Trant looked sorrowfully at the impish creature. “I never expected to find a criminal in my generous friend. And that I should be the one to—to——” he stopped short, overcome with honourable emotion.

“Cheer up!” More patted him on the back and spoke kindly, not unmoved by the tribute, “You are only doing your duty, man. And I saw from the moment you entered how unpleasant you found that duty, although you aped the stern official.”

“There is no aping about me,” cried Camp, sharply, coming forward to take the lead, “I sympathise with Inspector Trant, as I gather that he owes you a debt of gratitude. But, as an officer representing Scotland

Yard, I warn you, George More, that anything you say now will be used in evidence against you."

"As if I cared," retorted the other, disdainfully. "Have no fear, you dressed-in-brief-authority puppet, I am now going to make a clean breast of all my doings. Hitherto I refrained for Rackham's sake, but as he agrees——"

"I do agree," resolutely declared More's accomplice without stirring, "what my master and I did was done because no justice could be got from the law of which you are the figure-head. Go on, Mr. More, tell them how we revenged Mr. Roderick."

"Willingly, Rackham, willingly, now that you consent. Take your seats, gentleman; get out your note-books; open your ears." More wheeled a chair round so as to face the company squarely, and sat down, markedly insouciant. "Your story, gentleman, is interesting, but you will find mine still more so. As in a serial it is necessary to capture the reader's attention at the outset, I will follow the example of the cunning author," he paused, his face grew dark, and, clenching his hands, he added in deep low tones. "My son, Roderick, was—murdered!"

A thrill passed through Dick. "God! Slanton?"

"And that woman, Danby."

"No!" the young man threw out a horrified hand to reject the imputation. "I can't believe that. It's impossible—incredible."

More drooped his head, sadly, "I have thought so of late. But—Rackham!"

The man stepped forward, followed by the watchful detective. "It's neither impossible, nor incredible, sir," he addressed himself to Hastings, heavily emotional. "I was Lieutenant More's batman. When he

was wounded and taken to the base I went with him, being done in with a bullet in the ankle and this," he touched the disfiguring scar. "Dr. Slanton was in charge of the hospital, and I saw that he admired one of the nurses—Sister Danby, who looked after my master. Later I learned that she loved the lieutenant and had been engaged to marry him. Mr. More broke off the engagement."

"Alas I did," sighed the little man, drearily, "to my cost. Had I not done so, my Roderick would have been alive now."

"I thought that Sister Danby was all right," continued Rackham, "especially when the lieutenant told me that he loved her and she loved him. He made his will in her favour, and I witnessed it along with Slanton. I thought that my master would die of his wounds, but he picked up when engaged again to Sister Danby, and seemed on a fair way to recovery. Then"—the speaker gulped—"then he—he died."

"Surely of his wounds," hinted Trant, softly, with an anxious glance at More, who had used the ominous word—murder.

Rackham's stern lip curled, "So it was reported, sir—and by Dr. Slanton, who had his own fish to fry. Oh, yes—died of his wounds. I don't think. After the lieutenant was buried I overheard that blarsted doctor jawing to Sister Danby in a corner of one of them French Caffys. Slanton said as she'd poisoned my master with some stuff soaking the bandages. She said that he'd prepared the bandages although it wasn't his work. 'And you know well enough why I did it,' says he, 'you know that if those bandages were put on, he'd die. Which was what you wanted, so's to get the money.' 'No,' says she, flurried-like.

'Rats,' says he, 'we're both in it, so we better get married and share the quids. If you don't do what I tell you,' says he, 'I'll——'" Rackham stopped short.

"Go on: go on," ordered Camp, looking up impatiently from his notes, "what else did you overhear?"

"Nothing!" replied the man, bluntly, "a rowdy lot of lads barged into the caff, and my two beauties bunked. Next day I was reported fit and sent back to the Front. But as sure as God made little apples, sir, Slanton and the woman did my master in, to get the money."

"But Miss Danby, in your hearing, denied that she knew about the bandages being tampered with," cried Dick, defending the unfortunate woman.

"And Slanton told Miss Danby in my hearing, sir, that she was jolly well in the know, and deliberately applied the poisoned bandages. For the money."

"That is just what I doubt," broke in More, uneasily. "I did think as you did, Rackham, when you told me your story. But since I have learned that Miss Danby looked for me and found my daughter, to offer back the money to us both, I think she must be innocent."

"I don't," growled Rackham, savagely, "and I never shall. She and that devil murdered the lieutenant. To hell with them both."

"Continue your story," said Trant, noting down this reply.

"There is little more to tell, sir. After the war I wrote to Mr. More, but, as he was missing, my letter didn't find him. When he returned to England he got it, and looked me up. Then I told him what I tell you, and we agreed to make Slanton sit up."

Camp shook his head. "Better have gone to the proper authorities."

"What good would that have done?" questioned Rackham, derisively. "My young master had been dead and buried for months, so there wasn't much hope of learning anything by digging him up. And I was only one against two. Slanton and Sister Danby would have denied everything. I'd have been laughed at, coming forward after months and months, with such a steep yarn. No, sir! Mr. More and I took the law into our own hands, and sent Slanton to hell, where I hope he is now. That's my story, sir," ended the man, savagely. "Mr. More can carry on," and he stepped back to his former position, the detective at his elbow.

Dick admired Rackham's vehement fidelity to his dead master, but thought, as did the rest, that he had carried it to extravagant lengths. "When you were told this wild story," he asked More, disapprovingly, "why didn't you seek out Miss Danby and learn if it was true?"

"Because I mistrusted the woman. I always believed that she was an adventuress, wishing to marry Roderick for the sake of his money. For that reason I refused to sanction the earlier engagement. When Rackham told me his story I thought that she had carried out her plan of getting the property by inducing Roderick to make a will in her favour, before murdering him. I am sorry now that I did not question Miss Danby. But what with the loss of my dear son and my dreadful captivity, my heart was hot within me. I had only one idea—Rackham's idea—to revenge myself on the man and woman who had robbed me of my boy."

Trant looked pityingly at his friend, recognizing how his enfeebled brain had entertained the idea, until it attained to such monstrous proportions as to swamp his better nature. His paternal love had made him a fanatic. "Explain how you carried out your scheme of revenge."

"The Whispering Lane," said More, dully, "that was the beginning."

"A trick—a trick!" murmured Jimmy, hugging himself, "I knew it was a trick."

"Yes, boy—a trick, but one which you failed to discover. Rackham and I wished to get Slanton to ourselves in some lonely place, and kill him. The question was how to lure him into such isolation. Some of you," went on More, looking from one intent face to another, "are doubtless puzzled to know why Rackham disguised himself as Wu Ti."

Dick nodded. "Yes! And how he managed to act his part so perfectly?"

"Oh that was easy. Rackham is an old soldier and for many years was stationed at Singapore. He acquainted himself thoroughly with Chinese ways and customs; and also contracted their vice of opium-smoking. To indulge in this freely and escape detection, he masqueraded as Wu Ti when seeking the opium houses of the Far East. Returning home, he still continued to do this, haunting Wung's establishment in Whitechapel. Thence he came straight to me one night, to say that he had met Slanton, who was likewise a slave to the drug."

"And I would have knifed the blighter if Mr. More hadn't prevented me," boomed Rackham's deep voice from the end of the room.

"Naturally I prevented premature revenge," de-

clared More, sharply, "as I wished to have a hand in punishing a murderer of my dear son. Engaging an inquiry agent I learned all I could about Slanton. That he was a spiritualist—that he visited Miss Danby in her Essex cottage, where she lived with my daughter—how he indulged in coarse pleasures under the rose, and how he was disliked in the Plantagenet Hospital. Spiritualist and opium-smoker—those two scraps of knowledge were sufficient to suggest a scheme. And I wished that scheme to include the punishment of Miss Danby, since the visits of her accomplice to Fryfeld indicated that they were still in league. I would have taken Aileen from the woman's evil companionship but that I feared to wreck my plans by letting my daughter know that I was alive and in England."

"You are all wrong about Miss Danby," insisted Dick, angrily, "she is a good woman and rescued Aileen from a life of poverty."

"I know that now, but I did not know it at the time I speak of," rejoined More calmly. "Well, to explain my scheme. It was necessary for me to retire into the country and think out things. I bought this bungalow when Mrs. Brine's executors advertised it was for sale. Here I learned the sad story of Mrs. Brine: how she had lost her husband, how she was accustomed to wander up and down the lane crying for him. I saw in this an opportunity of luring my enemy into my nets. Slanton was a Spiritualist and would naturally, like all his class, travel far and wide to investigate any phenomenon. I prepared one for him," More smiled cruelly, and stopped to draw breath.

"But how?" asked Dick, desperately anxious, like the rest of the company for immediate explanations.

"All in good time," said More, coolly, and continued

to tell his story in his own way. "I came down here with Rackham under the name of Chane, and lived in this house for some time. Then I set about the rumour that I had let it to a certain Mrs. Jerr, who had arrived from Hong Kong with her Chinese servant. Afterwards Mr. Chane and Rackham departed; Mrs. Jerr and Wu Ti arrived."

"But your disguise—was it necessary?"

"Certainly, if my doings with Slanton were to be hidden from the law. I intended to kill him, as I said, and wished to make things safe for Rackham and myself. It was easy for me to act the part of Charley's Aunt, as at college I had once taken that very rôle in an amateur performance. Also, as Mrs. Jerr, I kept myself to myself, always receiving visitors—as I did you, Mr. Hustings—seated in my arm-chair, knitting incessantly."

"You certainly deceived me," agreed the young man, wondering, no less at the subtilty of this long-drawn-out scheming, than at the persistence of the steady hatred which had engendered it.

"I deceived everyone, Mr. Hustings. But for yonder unscreened window, through which that brat peeped to catch Rackham undisguised, you would never have discovered what I am now telling you freely."

"Jimmy's a clever lad," said Trant, admiringly.

"Much too clever for me," retorted the little man dryly. "However, to go on with my story. When I settled myself here as Mrs. Jerr, I then created, and in a very easy way—The Voice."

"How, how?" asked Dick again, exasperated by this slow unfolding of the mystery.

More's light eyes twinkled, cunningly. "By wireless!"

"Oh, ah!" everyone drew deep and astonished breaths. In a second the ghostly whispering became commonplace chatter.

"And to think that I never guessed," lamented Jimmy, vexed with his density.

"Columbus and his egg. Eh?" chuckled More, enjoying the amazement his announcement had caused. "Yes! I brought in science to encompass my revenge. Very easy, gentlemen—very easy. A transmitter in this room, a receiving aerial with a loud speaker, an amplifier, hidden up the hollow trunk of an ancient oak, and there you are."

"But I searched the oaks," cried Jimmy, furiously.

"And found nothing—in the day-time. Naturally, since Rackham always removed the instrument from the lane after we had given our performance."

"So that was why Wu Ti was generally knocking about," muttered the boy, angrily.

"Rackham, you mean. Why yes."

"And you nearly caught me several times, you meddlesome little devil," grumbled the ex-soldier, gruffly. "I'd have twisted your rotten neck if you'd found out what wasn't meant for you to find."

"What about the Morse blurring your spirit voice?" inquired Camp, who had been reflecting, "that would have given away the show as a fake."

"Now you mention it, so it would," assented the schemer with pretended surprise. "It is no easy matter to exclude induction noises, especially from indoor aerials. But I worked on a sixty metre wave, sacrificing length, to rid myself of blurring. That limita-

tion has not been used—or only rarely used—since it came in handy for short distances in trench-warfare. Amateurs utilize longer wave-lengths, Mr. Camp. Therefore—” here More became aware that he was speaking much too technically for the understanding of his hearer, and checked himself—“but this is all double Dutch to you,” he ended with a sneer. “Let the cobbler stick to his last.”

“Wireless! Damned clever,” murmured Camp, undisturbed, “you spoke?”

“And Rackham. We both knew from the gossip about Mrs. Brine, what were the exact words she cried nightly in the lane.”

“But the tone of her voice?” questioned Dick, doubtfully.

“Oh, I imitated her parrot, who had caught her intonation accurately.”

“Her parrot!” echoed the young man. “Yes! I wrote to Mr. Horace Brine about that parrot, think it might have flown back here to account for the Voice.”

More shrugged his shoulders. “Much good that would have done. It couldn’t have re-echoed Mrs. Brine’s wailings. But it did pick up other sayings from her which I heard, when seeing Brine about purchasing the bungalow. In that way I caught the tone of the woman’s voice—so did Rackham.”

“I see, you left nothing to chance,” commented Camp, dryly. “Go on please.”

“Well,” drawled More, wearily, “Slanton came to my lure in a few weeks, as I guessed he would sooner or later. Rackham recognized him when he called here after hearing the Voice in the lane. And he

recognized Rackham as an habitu  of Wung's house. Mrs. Jerr!"—More tapped his chest, lightly, "entertained this welcome visitor: gave him tea, chatted about Hong Kong, and—smoked a pipe."

"Of opium?"

"What else? It was necessary to awaken Slanton's craving, if he was to be drugged. I explained that I had contracted the habit to relieve my rheumatic pains, and usually smoked a pipe before retiring, to ensure a restful night. My guest was wholly unsuspecting, and when Rackham brought in my pipe he begged to join me."

"But didn't Slanton regard Rackham as his enemy?" asked Dick, recalling what Jenny had said.

"Of a sort—a despised enemy, having knocked him about a few times when they quarrelled in Wung's cellar."

"And I let him," growled Rackham, sombrely, "the better to trick him into thinking me a fool. And I fooled him proper, by doing some funny business to the pipe I prepared for him, which laid him out proper. He was like a dead man when he got my brand of the black smoke."

"And then," asked Trant, anxiously, "when Slanton was insensible?"

"I wanted to knife the blighter and bury his blinking corpse in the garden."

"A drastic proceeding, which I would not permit," said More, shuddering. "No, gentlemen. Wicked as the man was; evilly as he had done to me and mine, at the eleventh hour I decided to spare his life. But I was determined that the world should know him as the murderer he was, and——"

"You tattooed that name on his forehead?" interrupted Dick, shuddering as the speaker had done, for the whole revelation was ghastly.

"I did not. Rackham was the operator, having learned in Singapore how to tattoo. Cain was scored on Slanton's forehead plainly for all to see. The Mark of the Beast!" More rose with a fanatical look in his light eyes, and threw up denunciatory hands. "And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him," he quoted, exultingly, and with fierce approval.

Rackham laughed harshly. "But I was jolly well determined that some one should kill our blarsted Cain," he grated, "Sister Danby for choice, since she was in the know, and would be glad enough to put a stopper on his tongue."

More shuddered again, nodding. "It was Rackham's idea that the villain should be taken to Fryfeld to implicate the woman."

"You wanted her to kill him?" said Dick, with a look of repugnance.

"I left that to her. If she killed him, well and good—he would be dead and she would be hanged. If she spared him then the whole wicked story would come to light, and both would be punished."

"Oh, she did him in right enough!" declared Rackham with grim satisfaction, "I made sure she would. And she did; strangled him, as the newspapers said."

"You were lurking on the farther side of the wall," suggested Hustings, "Miss Danby told me that she heard your footsteps."

"She heard footsteps I don't deny, any more than I deny they were mine. But she didn't know that. I brought Slanton to Fryfeld in the side-car, chucked

him down on the lawn, and then climbed in through the window into the cottage to hide my tattooing tools in the place where I meant them to be found, so that Sister Danby might be tied up."

"You're a devil!" said Camp, stirred out of his ordinary official composure. "What had the poor woman done to you?"

"Murdered my master, along with the Slanton blighter," snapped Rackham, tartly. "Haven't you heard? D'y want me to pitch the yarn again?"

More signed that he should be silent. "That's all!" he said, pacing about restlessly, and holding himself in as best he could.

"Not quite!" declared Trant, regretting the necessity of exerting further pressure. "Why did you and this man run away?"

"What else did you expect us to do?" retorted More, whose self-possession was fast yielding to uncontrollable passion. "Hustings visited me and from what he said, I saw that the Law was gathering up the threads to weave a net, in which we might be enmeshed. It was necessary for our safety to relegate Mrs. Jerr and Wu Ti to obscurity. Rackham cast off his disguise——"

"And took it with him," suggested Jimmy, meaningly.

"Clever boy: so he did. But it was in European kit that he drove the machine, knowing that the sight of a Chinaman doing so would lead to awkward questions being asked. I went as Mrs. Jerr and finally left that lady——"

"In the little wood where I found her clothes," finished Jimmy, nodding.

More nodded also, and savagely. "You have been

my evil genius. But for you, all this would never have come to light. Not that I mind the revelation. I want all the world to know how a father has avenged his beloved son."

"You sent Rackham to London, after Mr. Hustings and your daughter discovered your identity," remarked Camp, ignoring the burst of passion.

"I thought it best that he should be out of the way," said More, irritably, and striving desperately to control his feelings, "but I never thought that he would be such a fool as to go to Wung's house in his Wu Ti dress."

"I thought it was safe, master," Rackham glared at Jimmy, "if only that little devil hadn't put the cops on the trail——"

"Jimmy had nothing to do with that," interrupted Dick, sharply, "it was Jenny Walton who told me that Wu Ti was a customer of Wung's."

"Then I'm glad she's gone west."

"Not yet," declared the Inspector, "dying slowly, but still alive."

Camp rose putting away his notes. "Well, that's that. I think we have enough evidence to settle this business. My prisoner"—he laid his hand on Rackham—"is here. Yours, Inspector,"—he nodded towards More.

Trant went through the ceremony of arrest as best he could. "I won't put the handcuffs on," he mumbled, shamed by the memory of past favours.

More laughed shrilly. "Lord, man, why make a song about it. I am not ashamed of what I have done; neither is Rackham."

"You can stake your life on that," blurted out the ex-soldier, stubbornly.

"I rejoice! rejoice! rejoice!" More's voice leaped an octave as he let loose the full flood of his long-suppressed passion. "I am the Lord, who set the Mark of the Beast upon the forehead of him who adored the Beast. Call him no more Slanton, but Cain! Cain! Cain! the accursed one who slew his brother."

"My friend. Steady on!" Trant grasped the poor soul's arm soothingly.

More shook him off and went on shouting loudly. "Behold the Lord, the Lord, who doeth justice, when the hands of men wax feeble and the hearts of the wicked are hardened to wickedness. The worshipper of the Beast is slain, is slain, is slain. Yea. Yea, and in his high place. Sealed to the Beast, he hath gone to the Beast. Down, down, fathoms down to the eternal burning!" and the crazed creature flung himself wildly about the room, crying and gesticulating.

"Off his rocker!" commented Rackham with grim satisfaction, "not for the first time either. No prison for the master, I guess. He's past punishment."

"Any motor-car hereabouts?" Trant asked Jimmy, hurriedly.

"The Squire! I'll get his!" and the boy fled away with the speed of a wing-heeled Mercury.

"Selah! Selah! Let none give voice, when the Lord thundereth!" raved on the insane man. "Bring up the chariot, that He who reigneth may ride in triumph through the hosts of the Philistines. Anathema Maranatha! Anathema Maranatha! The Lord cometh to take vengeance. I am the Son, who bringeth the sword to smite and slay and spare not. The Son who—who,"—his voice faltered, broke; something snapped in his brain, and he sagged to the floor,

muttering and plucking at his face. "The son—my son—Oh, Roderick! Roderick! Would I had died for thee, my son!" and the frenzy ended in a burst of human tears. The tender father, the brilliant scientist, the cruel plotter was now a mere wreck of what had once been a man.

"Thank God!" breathed Rackham, reverently, "he has escaped you devils."

"You haven't!" Camp assured him tapping his shoulder. "I'll lay there's nothing dotty about you."

"Who said there was? What about it?"

"This! You're the man we want—the man who climbed that wall to complete your damnable work by strangling Slanton."

Rackham looked at the officer long and hard. "Prove it," he said briefly, and shut his grim mouth, firmly.

CHAPTER XX

THE SECOND REVELATION

OBEYING Aileen's anxious summons, Dick travelled back to Tarhaven as soon as circumstances permitted. And these released him sooner than might have been expected. More and his servant were taken to London, Jimmy remaining behind in Wessbury; while Tyson was again in prison, and Jenny in an hospital, with small hopes of recovery. Until the culprits were brought up before a magistrate, it was useless to probe further into the case. The drugging and tattooing and transfer of Slanton from one village to the other, had been explained, together with the reason for such nefarious doings. But, as yet, it was impossible to say, positively, who had strangled the man.

Camp declared that Rackham was the guilty person, on the grounds of his openly expressed hatred for the dead, and the admission that he had lingered behind the wood-enclosing wall, in the hope that Miss Danby would kill her accomplice. Climbing over to make sure, and finding that the villain still lived, he had then done what he always intended should be done. The others were inclined to agree with him, although more doubtful as to the actuality of this theory. They received no assistance from the accused. He reserved his defence, and defied them to convict him. "Prove it!" sneered Rackham, and relapsed into his impenetrable silence.

So it thus came about that shortly after the dam-natory explanations of the crazy man and his assistant, Dick was pacing the waiting-room of the Tarhaven Infirmary, awaiting the entrance of Aileen. She was with the patient, as a kindly nurse had explained, the authorities having accorded her free association with her dying friend, who could not be expected to out-live the day. The urgent message of Hustings brought her from the bed-side, and she entered hurriedly to excuse herself from an interview. "I can't wait, Dick," she protested, when he clasped her in his arms with heartening kisses. "Edith may pass away at any moment, and her only comfort now is to hold my hand."

"You must give me ten minutes and hear what I have to say, darling."

"Impossible! Impossible!" Aileen extricated herself from his embrace. "Edith will not die in peace if I am absent."

"She will not die in peace until she hears what I can tell her."

"Oh, Dick, have you learned the truth at last?" asked the girl, breathlessly.

"I think so, or what looks like the truth. There is a doubt, but that doubt Miss Danby may do away with."

"Tell me—tell me quickly. Then we can go to Edith and set her poor mind at rest."

"Darling," Dick looked anxiously at the pale, worn face and weeping eyes of the girl, "are you strong enough to bear further trouble?"

Aileen sank tremblingly into a chair. "What is it?" she inquired, faintly, "I can bear anything so long as it will prove my poor Edith's innocence."

“Even if that innocence is proved at the expense of your father’s safety?”

“Dick!” she put out a shaking hand, as if to ward off a blow.

“My poor girl,” he knelt beside the chair and put his arms round her, “I would spare your feelings if I could, and especially at this moment, when you are being tried to the uttermost. But you asked me in your letter to learn the truth, so that Miss Danby could die in peace. And the truth——”

“Dick! Dick! My father didn’t—didn’t——?”

“No! No!” the young man soothed her gently, “his hands are free from blood. He spared Slanton, although he intended to kill him. Rackham, it would seem, took the law into his own hands, and——”

“But what have Rackham and my father to do with the matter?” she interrupted, bewildered. “I don’t understand.”

Dick soon made her understand, unwilling as he was to be explanatory at so strained a moment. Holding her tightly in his arms, so as to afford her what strength he could from the comfort of his embrace, he swiftly but carefully reported the doings in Wung’s cellar, the tragedy of the roof-chase, and the confessions made in the Wessbury bungalow. It was impossible to soften the hard facts, much as he wished to spare her, since nothing but the naked truth availed, if the crooked matters of the case were to be straightened out. So Dick told her everything with uncompromising frankness, believing that the girl was staunch enough to face the terrible realities bravely. His belief was wholly justified. Aileen, not interrupting, and ceasing to tremble, heard him to the bitter end in still silence. “Is that all?”

"Isn't it enough?"

"More than enough. But—but you are not—not keeping anything—back?"

"No! I rate your courage too highly for that, darling."

"My poor father—my poor Jenny. Oh it's horrible! horrible!" and she covered her face with two trembling hands, shaken again for the moment.

"Dear!" he drew down the hands, "you have heard the worst and faced the worst like the splendidly plucky girl you are. Don't give way now. What is past is terrible—still it is past."

"But the present comes from that past. Is it less terrible?"

"I think so. We cannot undo what has been done. But it is possible to settle things for a brighter and calmer future."

"Edith will die."

"Yes, and peacefully, when she hears that her name is cleared. Would you wish her to live, when living means hourly agony from her disease?"

"No! And yet——"

"Dearest, believe me it is better so: Apart from her present suffering, the tragedy of that poor creature's life is so dreadful that she will be glad to rest peacefully in the loving arms of the Great Father. Jenny too, will die, and that also is a mercy, disguised though it may be. At the best she could only survive as a helpless cripple, a burden to herself and others."

"But my father!" said Aileen in low tones, and with her eyes on his face.

"Ah, that is the greatest tragedy of all," mourned the young man, "there is nothing so terrible as to witness the weakening of a strong will: the wrecking

of a powerful brain. Yet I am glad that, in this case, it should be so."

"Glad!" the girl's face flamed, and with a movement of indignation, she would have released herself, but for her lover's restraining arms.

"Think, my dearest!" he urged, tenderly, "your father lost all interest in life when his son died, until Rackham's story awakened the evil impulse of revenge. Now that the revenge has been accomplished, there is nothing left for your father to live for. And, in a way, he is not to blame, since he cannot be held responsible for his actions. The loss of Roderick—the sordid captivity in Germany—the horrors of the Russian wanderings and the knowledge of his return, that his beloved son had been murdered. Can you wonder that his brain gave way under sufferings, which would have shaken the reason of a stronger man? He was mad when he plotted Slanton's death—Miss Danby's complicity; but until these things were brought about as he wished, he did not betray his madness. Now it is apparent. He is a babbling child, forgetful of all."

"Poor father—poor father." Aileen burst into tears.

"Yes, poor father, but also happy father, since he now remembers nothing of the past. All horrible memories are wiped out. He believes that Roderick is alive—that Roderick is coming to see him. Aileen, it might be worse."

"Yes!" she buried her tearful face in his shoulder, "but, oh, the pity of it."

"The pity of it is most deep, my darling. Let us leave him in God's hands, for He knows the frailty of His children, and therefore is merciful."

There was silence for a few minutes, while the tormented girl cried quietly, as Dick smoothed her hair, patted her gently on the back, and pressed her lovingly to his sheltering breast. Finally, Aileen raised her head, drying her tears to kiss him gratefully for his comfortable words, and rose to face those things, which, in this work-a-day world, have to be faced. "We must see Edith, and ease her mind," she said, with a pathetic attempt to appear business-like. "I'll get permission for you to come to her bed-side!" and she was gone from the room in the twinkling of an eye.

Dick felt very weary, very ancient, both physically and mentally. The soothing of Aileen, the minute attention he had given throughout many woeful hours to the conduct of the case, and the long perplexing pursuit of the criminal—these doings had depleted his vitality. Yet, from old habit of the mind, so deeply rutted had it become, his tired brain began to grapple with the problem of Rackham's culpability. Was the ex-soldier innocent, or guilty? Going by the circumstantial evidence, it would seem that he might be the first. But he might possibly be the last, since nothing definite could be proven. The exhausted man sat down to muse but nodded and drowsed, until he almost slipped away into the restorative realms of sleep. Only Aileen's gentle touch on his shoulder brought him back to realities. "Come!" she said, beckoning.

Her lover rose with a yawn, rubbing his eyes to brush away the cobwebs of slumber, and followed gladly. He wished to get what would surely prove to be a painful interview, over and done with. But the meet-

ing with Miss Danby was less trying than might have been expected. She lay straightly on her back, under an excessively smooth coverlet, which was drawn up directly beneath her chin. Only her pinched waxen face was visible, looking small and unhuman amidst the darkly grey tangle of her loose hair. Dreading to move hand or foot, lest the burning pain of her disease should seize her, she could only open her sunken eyes in wan greeting. Dick's generous heart went out to the anguished creature, urgent, but helpless to relieve her sufferings. "I am grieved to see your sad condition, Miss Danby," he said, sympathetically, "and—and—but words are useless, intrusive, unnecessary. I only wish that I could help."

"You have helped," whispered the helpless invalid, weakly, "you are helping. I ask nothing more from you than what you are doing. Oh, you—you understand."

Aileen murmured in her lover's ear, "She means our marriage."

"Yes! Yes!" Edith catching the words spoke with more energy, "that's it; your marriage. Promise me that you will never fail my dear, dear girl."

"I promise, although there is little need for me to do so," Dick assured her, earnestly. "Aileen will be my wife as soon as circumstances permit."

The sick woman sighed happily. "Oh, thank God! Thank God that my loving friend will have an honest man to protect her from the terrors of this cruel world. It has killed me. I don't know why. I have made many mistakes—we all do—but I did my best."

"We know that, Edith; we know that," protested

Aileen, bending over her tenderly, "both Dick and I think of you, and will always think of you, as one of our best and dearest friends."

"And not as a—a murderess?" she inquired anxiously.

"Darling, I never thought of you as that. Never, never, never."

"But the world thinks of me as a—a——" Edith could not bring herself to repeat the sinister word.

"Only for a moment," said Dick with quiet firmness, "shortly the world will learn that you are innocent."

"Innocent!" she made an effort to rise, but fell back exhausted. "Innocent!"

"Wholly innocent," reiterated Dick, voicing Camp's view of the tragedy, although not entirely persuaded in his own mind that it was a correct one, "a man called Rackham——"

"Roderick's servant?"

"None other! He killed Slanton, because he believed that Slanton had murdered his young master by poisoning the bandages, and——"

"Stop!" interrupted Miss Danby, struggling up into a sitting position and with her voice ringing out clearly in manifest terror. "What does Rackham—what do you know about that?"

"Everything! Rackham overheard a conversation between you and Slanton in a French café at the——"

"And Slanton accused me of what I never did," she broke in passionately. "Oh, I remember only too well that wicked conversation. It is written in letters of fire on the tablets of my brain. It opened the gates of Hell to me—that Hell in which I have been tormented for centuries. It was his lie—his trap—his

devilment, to get me under his thumb, for the money's sake. And he did—he did, God help me! Aileen, Aileen, don't hate me. I never—never——”

“Darling!” the girl's arms were around the agonized woman in a moment, “the whole thing is a lie. There is no need for your denial. It was that man, not you, who brought about Roddy's death. Hate you? No! No! I love you a thousand times more, if that is possible, now that I know how dreadfully, how unjustly you have suffered for the sin of another. There! There! Lie down again and listen quietly to what Dick has to tell you. My dear, my dear, be calm. It is all right—all right!” and with tender caresses, she pressed back Edith gently on to her pillows.

“But—but Roderick's death—Slanton's death. You, you surely don't—don't believe that I—that I—oh, my God!” and the poor soul collapsed, pitifully.

“Call Sister Tait, Dick. Quick! Quick! Quick!” cried the girl, slipping a comforting arm under the unconscious woman's head.

In answer to the young man's hasty summons, the nurse came flying to the bed-side, to exhibit a wrathful countenance at the sight of her patient's condition. Promptly turning out the disturbing visitors, she administered restoratives immediately. For close upon an hour Aileen and her lover lingered outside the sick-room door, fearing to hear every moment that Edith had passed away. Troubled in their minds that she might do so, before learning that her reputation was safe, they looked anxiously at one another, speaking little, thinking much. At length, after many dragging minutes, Sister Tait appeared, looking tremendously serious. “She insists upon seeing you

both to hear what you have to tell her," said the nurse, in vexed tones, "I don't think it is wise, as she may die at any moment."

"All the more reason that she should hear my story," insisted Dick, imperatively. "You know of what she is accused, Sister. That accusation is wholly false, and we wish our poor friend to learn this before she goes west."

"I am glad!" Sister Tait's face grew radiant. "I never could bring myself to believe that such a sweet woman could act so wickedly. Go in, go in, and God bless you for bringing her peace of mind."

So with Aileen clinging to him, Dick re-entered the room. Again Miss Danby lay straightly and immovably under an excessively smoothed-out coverlet, and again she greeted them by opening her eyes. There was no need for her to speak. Dick knew what she wanted to hear, and kneeling beside the bed, with his mouth close to her ear, he quietly repeated to her the story that he had related to Aileen. There was no change of expression on the waxen face. It seemed as if she was so far divorced from earthly things, that the clearance of her character failed to excite any profound interest. But when the young man ended his careful recital, and rose from his knees, life came back to the moribund woman in a momentary swirl of vitality.

"Your poor father!" she breathed faintly to Aileen, thinking more of others than of herself.

"Dear!" the girl laid her fresh young cheek against the chilling cheek of her dying friend, "his memory is gone, but he believed that he had misjudged you before it went. Forgive him!"

"I do! I do, and wish him all happiness. Oh,

what am I saying. Happiness is not for one who has lost his reason."

"In this case it is," said Dick in low tones, "and I say this for your comfort. More's happiness is bound up with his madness. He believes that Roderick is still alive—he believes that Roderick is coming to see him. It is God's mercy that the poor creature forgets the true past to live only in a false present."

"God is always merciful. I can see that now in the greater light that is coming," murmured Edith in far-away tones. "He supported me through the agony of years. He is taking me to Himself with the knowledge that you and my dear Aileen know me to be an innocent woman."

"We always knew that; always, always," breathed the girl, passionately.

"Darling!" the sick woman's hand came painfully from the coverlet to stroke the pale face of her beloved friend, "but how can I explain what should be explained, in the short time remaining to me. Slanton prepared the bandages, which he had poisoned—which I applied unknowingly. But for that fatal will leaving me the money, I don't think he would have acted so—so wickedly. But his greed carried him away. He swore that if I did not marry him and let him handle the money, he would accuse me of the murder. It was my task to prepare the bandages; he therefore would have denied doing so. Oh, what chance had I of proving my innocence. But I held out—I held out,"—she checked herself, breathing hard and fast.

"Say no more, Edith!" implored Aileen, seeing how fast the strength of her dying friend was ebbing away, "we know it was the doing of that Beast——"

"No! No! Don't call him that. I did so myself, when I knew no better. But now I forgive him. As God is showing me mercy, shall I not show mercy to him. I am in God's hands; so is he, who wronged me. Aileen! Aileen?"

"Yes, Edith, yes?"

"Don't be hard on Rackham. He must suffer for his wrong-doing, if, indeed, he has acted as you tell me. But it was ignorance, my dear; nothing but ignorance. He did the evil, believing that it was good, out of sheer devotion to Roderick. I always liked Rackham. I really think in a different way, that he loved Roderick more than I did. Yes! Even more; although I would have given my life to save my darling. He will suffer—he must suffer—but from such suffering he will learn the true good. And if he—if he—Aileen?"

"I am here, dear."

"It is growing dark. I can't see you. Put your dear arms round me. Yes! I feel happier now. Never doubt, my darling girl, never fear; never despair. You and your good husband have happy years before you. I know it—I feel it. Do good with my Roderick's money—think of others—share your happiness with those who have less. Aileen! Oh!" she uttered a musical, astonished cry.

The cry brought in the nurse, soft-footed, anxious, "Better leave her now."

"No! No!" cried the dying woman, the flame of life brightening to its last splendid moment, "to the end, Aileen: stay with me to the end. But it is not the end—it's the beginning of something more glorious, more wonderful. Oh the darkness is going—is gone—and the light—the Light!" an expression of intense

joy, somewhat awed, brought back her youth—the years of anguish dropped down into nothingness, as she rose out of Time to Eternity. “Roderick!”—she stretched out her arms, radiantly happy. “Roder——” then the arms fell, the head drooped, and, for a single moment, the peace that passeth all understanding pervaded the room.

“God give her peace,” said the nurse solemnly, and drew the coverlet over the still face.

“He has given her peace and happiness also,” cried Aileen, triumphantly, “she has met Roderick again. No, I won’t cry, Dick. She has met Roderick.”

CHAPTER XXI

THE THIRD REVELATION

So Edith Danby died, and went to her own place, being thus mercifully released from dire troubles, which were certainly not of her own making. But the evil she was supposed to have done lived after her, as—on Shakespeare's authority—evil always does, with its nine lives of a cat. Those, searching out the truth, indeed, believed her to be more sinned against than sinning, but public opinion still held her to be guilty. Furthermore this belief was emphasized, when it became known how Roderick More had come by his death. The woman had been a monster, a vampire, plotting with Slanton, after the execution of the will, to secure immediate possession of the money by murdering the young soldier. Afterwards, it was to be expected that she should have strangled her accomplice, since, driven to extremities by her refusal to share the plunder, he might have denounced her. Oh, it was as plain as plain, said everyone. The Danby creature had committed the second murder to cover up the first.

When More and Rackham were brought before the London magistrates, and when the extraordinary story of their conspiracy was told, the newspapers made the most of so sensational an occurrence. Highly coloured accounts of this, that, and the other thing, were published, morning and evening: fiction poaching on

the domain of fact in every paragraph. The Spiritualists were jeered at unkindly, for having permitted themselves to be tricked by science-very-much-up-to-date, and their later reports, dealing with communications from the unseen world, were received with more suspicions than ever. Whereat the Materialists rejoiced, deeming that theirs was the victory.

Jimmy Took, and those with him, who had traced the tortuous windings of the trail under such foggy conditions, were applauded to the echo. And of course, the journals were filled with pictures of the scenes connected with the tragedy, and portraits of the actors therein. The Whispering Lane, the bungalow, the woodland pool, wherein the motor-cycle had been sunk, together with reprints of the Fryfeld cottage and its sombre surroundings: these appeared daily. Nor were wanting realistic representations of Wung's cellar, of the steep roofs over which Tyson had been chased, whence Jenny had fallen, and the sinister sordidness of the cul-de-sac. The strange story with its picturesque villainy was read with avidity from one end of the kingdom to the other. It was almost impossible to believe that it was actually true, so suggestively fictional were the details.

Edith, credited with the commission of two crimes, was loudly condemned on all sides, but opinions differed widely concerning Rackham's behaviour. Some held that he was justified in taking the law into his own hands, since an appeal to public justice, on his solitary evidence, would have been scouted as heated imagination. Others looked askance at his assumption of authority, objecting to private vengeance being taken, even for so cruel a wrong. Many letters, for and against, were written to the newspapers regarding

the moral aspect of the man's doings. But, on the whole, public opinion inclined to leniency. Rackham, it was agreed generally, should be punished, but not too severely.

As to More, unhappy creature—nothing but pity was felt for his sorrows, for the wreckage of his great intellect. It was widely held that he had been irresponsible from the first; that his mind had given way at that moment when Rackham revealed the dreadful secret of his son's murder. Therefore it was impossible to blame the outraged father, whose reason had been unseated by the tragedy of his loss. There would be no punishment for More: that was swiftly decided, when he appeared before the Bench, babbling and smiling in his second childhood. As Rackham had said—he was past punishment. It only remained to seclude him with every comfort, that he might live out his life of imagined happiness. That he had sinned was true, but his sin was the outcome of excessive paternal affection, driven to crazy doings by his dreadful sufferings, during and after the war. So the scientist also went to his own place. He passed from public life into a silent existence, never again to mingle with his fellow-men.

Things were thus unsatisfactory, when, one misty November night, Aileen sat with her lover in the library of the Fryfeld Manor House. The girl, clothed in unrelieved black, only too truly emblematic of her sorrowful feelings, looked pale and thin, out-worn as she was with the incessant sufferings of many troubled nights and days. Dick was scarcely less weary and down-cast, although he feigned cheerfulness to comfort the poor child. Outside all was blurred, rainy, cold, and mournful, but within, light and warmth

and colour prevailed so strongly that their influence should have heartened the young couple. But numerous newspapers on the table, on the chairs, even scattered about the carpet, hinted plainly that the reading of these had brought into being the melancholy atmosphere of the vast room. A grey atmosphere, which subdued the light, darkened the colour, chilled the warmth. In the real world they felt unreal, as if some invisible barrier shut them off from reality.

Aileen had implicitly believed, and Dick more doubtfully, that, when the tale of the tragedy was told, Edith's name would be cleared. The newspapers assured her that this was far from being the case. Formerly credited with one crime, now credited with two, the dead woman's reputation was now more stained than ever. Not all the waters of the wide ocean could wash out that stain: never could what had been done be undone—"Unless a miracle happens," wailed Aileen, putting her thoughts into words.

"Eh? What?" Dick looked up from the depths of an arm-chair, wherein he had been brooding over the contrariness of things.

"Edith! Only a miracle can cleanse her reputation."

"You may well say that, my dear. Our discoveries have only made matters worse for her. I am glad she is in her grave, poor creature."

"So am I. But I want people to think kindly of her."

"I wish they would, but they won't," responded the young man, gloomily. "Everyone thinks that the unfortunate woman is guilty—doubly guilty. How can I—how can you—how can anyone prove her innocence?"

"Yet she is innocent!" declared the girl, fiercely, "no one could have died as my darling Edith died and not be innocent. And you told her that she was."

"I did—I did. I would have told anything, so that she might die in peace, as she did, thank God. But, in my mind, there is always the doubt!" Dick rose in a restless mood to pace the room, feverishly. "Oh, my dear, my dear, I only wish that I could silence that doubt. But what can be done? Rackham sticks to his story that Miss Danby killed his master; that she killed Slanton."

"My poor father did not believe the first when he learned how Edith wanted to give back Roderick's money," said the girl, with quivering lips.

"No! But he is insane—his evidence cannot be accepted. Not to him can we look for any statement likely to prove Miss Danby innocent. I liked her for herself—I loved her for the immense kindness she showed to you. I heard her story at a moment when the most obstinate nature would speak truly. A woman with so many good qualities would not have died with a lie on her lips. I believe that she is guiltless of your brother's murder."

"And of Slanton's murder?"

Dick halted, shaking his head, "There is the doubt. She may have killed the man, more or less unconsciously—the opium you know, Aileen."

"Oh, that's ridiculous, Dick. She told her story plainly," said the girl, angrily.

"She did, and yet—how do we know but what she mistook for truth that which was untrue? Remember the nightmare confusion of her mind at the moment. She hinted plainly that she scarcely knew what she was doing. Darling!" cried the young man, with a

burst of despairing passion, "for her sake—for your sake, I wish to believe in her innocence. But the doubt—at the back of my mind, the doubt is always lurking."

"That doubt will be done away with some day," insisted Aileen, fanatically hopeful, so powerfully did her affection over-ride her reason. "I am sure that God will not allow Edith's memory to be smirched."

"It is smirched!" murmured Hustings, sadly, and resumed his prowling, longing desperately for the happening of the unexpected to adjust things.

"God will cleanse it, then. He can do anything! I have prayed, and prayed, and prayed. I know—I am positive, that my prayers will be answered."

"I hope they will be. But"—Dick looked profoundly sceptical—"the age of miracles is past, my dear."

Then at that very moment, to justify Aileen's faith, to rebuke the haunting doubts of her lover, the unexpected did happen, the miracle really did occur. Ever afterwards, the young man explained to the satisfaction of himself and others, that it was an amazing coincidence. But that was never Aileen's opinion. She held that Providence had intervened at the eleventh hour.

Hardly had the last words fallen from Dick's lips, when the door was flung open violently, and Detective-Inspector Trant charged into the room, followed by a protesting butler. The officer still wore his overcoat and his cap, both wet with the misty rain; also his boots were muddy, his trousers splashed, as if he had been in too great a hurry to pick his steps carefully along the miry roads. He appeared to be in a state of scarcely subdued excitement, for, pushing the servant

hastily out of the room, he closed the door with a loud bang, as if to relieve his feelings. All of which was very unlike the usually staid Inspector. "Trant?" queried Dick, as amazed by the appearance of the man at this late hour, as at the roughness of his entrance.

"Himself! I apologize for my—for my—for everything. Phew!" puffing out an explosive breath, Trant dropped into a chair and pulled out a large bandanna handkerchief, to wipe away the perspiration, beading his bald head. "Ouf! Phew! Ow! Ow! Ow!" he snorted and blew exhaustively. "There—there's news."

Before Dick could speak again, Aileen, who had risen with shining eyes, parted lips, and flushed cheeks, darted past him to lay gripping hands upon the Inspector's shoulders. "I know—I know—it's the miracle!"

"The miracle?" Trant stopped polishing his bald head, and stared.

"You have come to clear Edith's character. You have learned the truth."

"I have. But how can you guess——"

"I am not guessing! I know—I know. Dick, Dick. Didn't I tell you that my prayers would be answered. What is it—what is it?"—she shook the officer violently. "Has Rackham confessed?"

"No! He still sticks to his story."

"But is that story true?" asked Dick, shrewdly. "Come now, Trant, you didn't barge in here at such a late hour, and in such a hurry, to tell us that?"

"Who said I did," grunted the Inspector. "No! I came to set Aileen's mind at rest, once and for all."

"About Edith?"

"Exactly. She is innocent."

"Of course—of course," cried the girl, impatiently, "I never thought otherwise. But who is guilty? Quick! Quick! Who is guilty?"

"Jenny Walton!"

Aileen fell back a step to cling to a tall-backed chair for support. "Jenny Walton," she gasped, amazedly, for this was the last name she expected to hear.

"Air, Dick—give me air!" murmured the shaken girl, turning faint and white, "—air—the door—open the door."

Hurriedly Dick strode to the narrow door opening on to the terrace and threw it wide. The misty night air floating into the heated room restored the girl somewhat with its chill damp freshness, and she allowed Dick to place her gently in a chair. Then he turned to face Trant. "Jenny Walton," he repeated, "why should Jenny Walton kill Slanton?"

"Cast your mind back to what she told you and Aileen in this very room."

"Yes! Yes!" the girl caught her lover's hand, drawing him nearer to her, to feel the more his protective presence, "Slanton sent Tyson to prison. This is Jenny's revenge. Is that it, Mr. Trant?"

"That's it. Jenny is dead, and——"

"Oh, poor girl—poor misguided girl."

"But before she died I was sent for to hear her confession. It amounted to this—that she had strangled the man who sent her lover to gaol."

"But how, when, where did she?"—Dick was immensely excited and stumbled over his words—"I mean in what—what—way?—oh go on—go on."

"Pouf!" Trant unbuttoned his overcoat and opened

it widely. "I'm hot with running. And at my age too. But I only got at the truth early this evening in the London hospital where the girl lies, and, knowing Aileen's anxiety, I came down immediately with the good news."

"You dear!" fully restored to herself Aileen sprang from her chair and crossed over to kiss this welcome herald of good fortune, "Oh, how can I thank you enough for saving my poor Edith's memory from disgrace?"

"Your thanks are due to Jenny!" said the officer, patting her hand. "She was always jealous, as she confessed to me, of your love for Miss Danby. But knowing—for I told her—how you were suffering because of that dead woman's smirched reputation, knowing also that she was dying, Jenny told me the truth. I took down her confession. She signed it and I witnessed it along with the nurse and doctor, who were in attendance. Miss Danby's name is entirely cleared—or will be when the confession is made public."

"Not from the suspicion that she murdered Roderick."

"I am not so sure of that, Mr. Hustings," rejoined Trant, argumentatively. "A great many people think that she is guilty of the first crime, because they believe on the evidence adduced that she is guilty of the second. Now that she has been proved innocent of the second, it is more than probable that they will reconsider things, and credit her with being innocent of the first. Also Miss Danby's desire to return the money to Aileen and her father takes away any motive for her killing Roderick."

"Just what I think!" Aileen assured the speaker,

and squeezing his hand, thankfully. "You are a comfort!"

"But how did Jenny kill Slanton?" demanded Dick, brusquely.

Trant explained in his methodical way, "Slanton was hoisted on his own petard, I fancy. He employed Jenny to spy upon Miss Danby, both to gain his own ends and to provide the girl with a situation. As he had sent her lover to prison he owed her something, remember:—there lives some soul of good in all things evil, you know. Anyhow, whatever was his reason, he set the girl to watch her mistress. On that fatal night, Jenny heard Miss Danby leaving her room, and, according to instructions got up to watch her. She saw the woman go out with the lighted candle towards the insensible man lying on the lawn, saw her also drag him into the wood. Jenny followed stealthily, and when Miss Danby fled in a panic, came out of her hiding-place in the bushes to see who the man was. It was easy for her to recognize Slanton's voice, as he babbled, crazily, about the Whispering Lane—about More and Wessbury. Finding the man who had ruined her lover at her mercy, she killed him—strangled him deliberately, as she admitted to me with great satisfaction. There was no repentance about Jenny," ended Trant, positively. "She thought that she had done well to rid the world of a black villain, an out and out swine, as she called him."

"Oh, Jenny, poor, foolish Jenny," mourned Aileen, remembering the girl's good qualities.

"Did Rackham know all this? He was on the farther side of the wall, remember."

"No, Mr. Hustings. Jenny heard someone moving on the road and climbed up to see who it was, quite

prepared to battle with any watcher. Rackham heard the noise she made and immediately jumped on his motor-cycle to fly. Then Jenny, satisfied that she was safe, returned to the house, slipping in through the back window into her bedroom."

Aileen wrung her hands, "Oh, why didn't she tell me all this, to save Edith?"

"Because she didn't want Miss Danby to be saved, my dear. On the contrary, being madly jealous of the friendship between you and your friend, she was quite willing to see her mistress arrested, and tried, and hanged. Also, she had her own safety to consider."

"Oh, no, no, Jenny wouldn't wish to harm Edith so terribly."

"But she did," cried Dick, grimly, "the girl was nothing but a primitive animal, as her cold-blooded murder of Slanton shows plainly. Her one humanizing influence was her love for Tyson—her cave-mate."

"And her love for me, Dick."

"There was nothing particularly human about that, I fancy, since it led her to kill Slanton and keep silent so that Miss Danby might suffer. It was the jealous passion of a cat, or a dog—a destroying, selfish love. Jenny was a cave-woman, Aileen, ignorantly evil with a spark of good in her make-up."

The girl returned to her seat, thankful to the core of her being, but pale with emotion. "How awful father's revenge has been," she said in low tones. "Dr. Slanton dead—Edith dead—Jenny dead. If he had not plotted——"

"If Slanton had not plotted, you mean, Aileen," struck in the Inspector. "He was hoisted on his own petard I tell you. Roderick's death, his own death,

and the death of Miss Danby and Jenny—these were due to him alone. He brought into being the cause which produced such terrible effects.”

Dick nodded, “‘He digged a pit and fell into it himself,’ as the Bible says,” he remarked, and looked meaningly towards Aileen to emphasize his next words, “and now that everything is explained, let us have done with all these troubles and do our best to forget them.”

“It is not easy to do that,” sighed the girl, sadly, “my father——”

“He is quite happy,” interrupted the Inspector, swiftly, “never trouble about your father, my dear. He will be placed in a comfortable asylum and looked after kindly. In his madness, lies his happiness. I would not cure him if I could. It would be cruel to rob him of his delusion that Roderick is alive.”

“Perhaps you are right. I hope so; oh, I hope so! Then there is Rackham?”

“Oh, I fancy he will get a year or so in gaol. There is no blood on his hands, remember. Though maybe,” went on the officer with an awkward laugh, “indirectly perhaps—h’m—he—he—well, well, well; he sinned through excess of fidelity, turning a virtue into a vice. Leave it at that. Let the Law and Rackham’s conscience deal with Rackham, my dear.”

“I think we should rather think of Jimmy, who has done so much to help,” said Dick, bluntly.

Trant chuckled. “A great lad, Jimmy. I’m looking after him. Being an old bachelor without chick or child, I shall adopt Jimmy with his father’s permission, and do my best to help him to realize his ambition.”

“The Head of the C.I.D. will help also I think,” suggested Dick, smiling.

“Rather. Jimmy’s performance has earned approval in high quarters. Ouf!” the Inspector rose with a yawn, “I must ask you to put me up for the night, Mr. Hustings. I have travelled from London, and feel too tired to go on to Tarhaven. Give me a shake-down.”

“Delighted,” said Dick, cordially. “Tell Brent to see to your supper and your room. I’ll be with you shortly.”

Trant opening the door, laughed approvingly. He guessed that the lovers wished for a solitude of two. “Enjoy your golden hour, young people, and so make up for your many leaden days. My blessing on you both. Ha! Ha! Ha!” and he went out through the doorway, chuckling heartily.

When alone with Aileen, the young man folded her in his arms, “Darling, try now to forget our troubles of the past. This is the end.”

“No!” she whispered softly, “remember what Edith said when she was dying: ‘This is the beginning of something more glorious, more wonderful,’ because—you and I are together for always.”

“There is nothing more glorious than the thought that you will soon be my own dear wife.”

“And nothing more wonderful than the way in which everything has been discovered, so that we can marry in peace.”

“And all from the one word ‘Whispering,’” mused Dick. “Curious how that word haunted me, until I laid its ghost. But I must close the door, or you will be getting cold. Oh, Aileen, look! The moon!”

And indeed it was the moon, now breaking in white splendour, through the grey mists which were gradually dissolving into nothingness. The lovers stood at

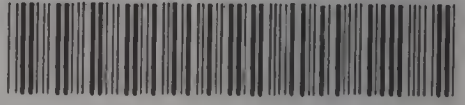
the door, clasped in one another's arms, watching the gradual unveiling of the night-world. Slowly the wreaths of pale vapour faded away, slowly the high winds swept the sky clear of clouds, until the moon rode triumphantly in the luminous azure of a starry sky. "It is an omen," said Dick, gladly, "so have our troubles faded away."

"Oh I hope so," murmured the girl, clinging to him fondly. "Please God we shall now have peace and happiness."

"Amen to that," said her lover, and kissed her twice, thrice, and again.

THE END

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