

THE CURSE

BY

FERGUS HUME

AUTHOR OF

"BOY JIM OF CURZON STREET"

COLONIAL EDITION

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THE CURSE

BY
FERGUS HUME

AUTHOR OF
"LADY JIM OF CURZON STREET,"
"THE BLUE TALISMAN," ETC.

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CLIFFORD'S INN

LONDON

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. GOSSIP	I
II. AT THE MANOR	16
III. THE LEGEND	31
IV. THE TWINS	47
V. TWO PROPOSALS	62
VI. THE EXPERIMENT	77
VII. AT THE ABBEY	92
VIII. A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY	107
IX. ANOTHER MYSTERY	125
X. THE WILL	140
XI. AN IMPORTANT CONVERSATION	155
XII. SUPERSTITION	170
XIII. AN AMAZING ACCUSATION	183
XIV. IDA'S SEARCH	198
XV. DIPLOMACY	213
XVI. THE FAMILY BURDEN	227
XVII. "CALIBAN"	242
XVIII. SOMETHING OF THE TRUTH	257
XIX. THE ANTIDOTE	272
XX. THE GUILTY PERSON	290
XXI. THE LAST EVENT	309

THE CURSE

CHAPTER I

GOSSIP

MRS HEASY was a comfortably-stout, old-fashioned landlady of the true Dickens type, who lived in the past, tolerated the present, and had as little to do with the future, as she possibly could. All the same being both thrifty and human, she felt secret satisfaction when a smart motor-car in charge of a smart chauffeur stopped at the door of the Harper Inn. It was late in the afternoon of a sober October day when the new-fangled machine—as Mrs Heasy called it—buzzed through Hepworth village. She came forth to scorn the invention and remained to welcome its occupant on learning that he desired to stay for the night. Nevertheless, she objected when the chauffeur inquired about a garage.

“There’s nothing of that sort here, young man,” said Mrs Heasy with asperity. “Stables, sheds, outhouses, and a cobble-stone yard of the cleanest; you can put your engine in any one of these. But garage—what next I wonder in the way of silly words. Thank Heaven I’m none of your Board-school scholars.”

A head with a mop of shaggy, grey hair, and a

ruddy face with a shaggy, grey beard, appeared from under the hood of the car to make an abrupt inquiry. "Can you cook?" asked this wild man of the woods, who was so hirsute as to appear scarcely civilised.

"Fifty years of standing over the kitchen range has taught me something," said Mrs Heasy with delicate irony. "Bless the man, would I keep an inn if I could not cook? There's no indigestion to be found in my dinners, I promise you."

"Humph!" growled the wild man alighting from the car, "I'll test your bragging, Madam. Medway, you can put the machine in the stables, sheds, out-houses, or in the cobble-stone yard of the cleanest; then bring the luggage in, and look after yourself. Madam——"

"Mrs Heasy, sir! I don't hold with foreign chatter. Do what your master tells you to do, young man, and I hope your engine won't explode and blow us all to pieces. This way, sir; mind the step, take care of your head for the ceiling is low, and don't mind the darkness of the passage, for the day's dark and the lamps are not lighted."

"It's five o'clock and they ought to be," grumbled the traveller stumbling along a kind of narrow alley towards the back part of the house. "Do you want me to break my legs, Mrs Heasy?"

"You'd stay the longer here if you did, sir, and I should get the benefit."

"Humph! Candid, upon my soul. You're a despot."

"I'm a woman as God made me, seventy years of age and in full possession of my wits. I may be behind the age, and I am pleased to be so, but if you and me's to get on, sir, no names must be called on either side."

The new-comer chuckled. "A character, by Jupiter. One must come to these dead-and-alive holes to find people of your sort, Mrs Heasy. There, light the lamp and let me have a look at you."

Finding that her guest had a tongue quite equal to her own, Mrs Heasy, who was the village tyrant and the village gossip, prudently held her peace until she knew more about the man. With a doubtful snort and much rustling of her stiff black silk, the landlady lighted the lamp which stood on a mat of Berlin wool in the middle of an oval table. As the soft radiance spread around, the sitting-room into which they had entered revealed itself as one of no great size, crowded with cumbersome early Victorian furniture. The visitor dropped into a slippery horse-hair arm-chair, and Mrs Heasy lowered the blind of the one French window which looked out on to a misty garden. At the conclusion of these preparations she carefully examined her guest and he stared hard at the quaint landlady. The scrutiny was satisfactory on both sides. "You'll do," said the man.

"You're more decent than most," retorted the woman, "Mr—Mr——"

"No Mister at all, Mrs Heasy. Dr Minister, if you please: Theophilus Minister of nowhere in particular. I've travelled all over the world, Mrs Heasy."

"And I've never been more than a dozen miles from Hepworth, Dr Minister."

The guest chuckled, and smote his thigh with a mighty hand. "Extremes meet, you see. And talking about meat reminds me of dinner——"

"Dinner you can't have, sir. But supper——"

"Oh what's in a name? Give me what you like, but serve it up immediately. And I want you to stay and talk with me while I eat."

“What about?” asked Mrs Heasy suspiciously.

“About everything. A woman with a tongue such as you have must be a gossip of the best. I love to hear about my neighbours, and——”

“The folk hereabouts are no neighbours of yours, Dr Minister.”

“Never mind, I want to hear all about them.”

“Are you a spy?” demanded the landlady with a doubtful look, for, although she was eccentric herself, she did not approve of eccentricity in others.

“A German spy, Mrs Heasy. I’m arranging about an invasion, and——”

“Such nonsense,” interrupted Mrs Heasy tossing her ancient head, which was surmounted by a wonderful cap of artificial flowers, cheap lace, and gaudy beads. “You’re one of those funny fellows who say what they don’t mean, to get a laugh.”

“Exactly. You have summed up my character accurately. But the supper——?”

“In fifteen minutes. Cold roast beef, hot apple-tart, cheese, and beer, and the Lord forgive you if you aren’t satisfied.”

When the plain-spoken landlady departed, Minister gave vent to a Homeric laugh, and ponderously rose from his chair to look round. Experience of danger in queer corners of the world led him mechanically to examine the window and provide means of escape should it be necessary. Certainly in this somnolent English village there was nothing to escape from, and only habit made the man raise the blind and look out into the rambling old garden, now growing indistinct in the swiftly falling night. With a grunt he dropped the blind and moved cautiously in the small space afforded by the ever-encroaching furniture. This was massive and ugly, as table, chairs,

sideboard, bookcase, and fender-stool were all of mahogany, solid and sullen in their looks. On the green-leaved, rose-besprinkled wall-paper were steel-engravings of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort, together with pictures of "Wellington meeting Blücher after the Battle of Waterloo" and "Nelson dying after the Battle of Trafalgar." The curtains, the carpet, and the table-cloth were all flowery and faded, and the gilt-framed mirror over the fire-place was swathed in green muslin. A marble timepiece, china ornaments, and vases with tinkling glass prisms, completed the decoration of the mantelshelf, while antimacassars of crochet-work clothed every chair. The room was thus overcrowded and hideous, but all the same suggested comfort, as Minister recognised when he lighted the fire and sat down before its pleasant blaze. He was old enough to appreciate the inartistic homely look of the room, which reminded him of the days of his youth.

"And the landlady is quite a character," said the man to himself, as he raked his shaggy, grey beard with the outspread fingers; "I'll have some fun out of her. She's original enough to have her own opinions even though these may be out of date."

Dr Minister was a tall and bulky man, carelessly dressed in a well-worn tweed suit. Since he was the owner of the smart motor-car and employed the smart chauffeur, he could well have afforded better clothes, but his mind was so crammed with big ideas that he had no room for sartorial details. From the untidy look of him he might have dressed in the dark, and probably did when pressed for time. Although a physician by profession he had enough money to give himself up to his favourite of archæology, and

had wandered far and wide over the continents. Circumstances connected with an old friend of his who dwelt in Hepworth had brought him to the Harper Inn, and before calling on the said friend he wished to know everything about him and his surroundings beforehand. As they had not met for ten years Minister considered that any information Mrs Heasy could supply on this point would be useful. Experience in the Lands-at-the-back-of-beyond had always showed him that it was just as well to learn as much as he could before acting in any way. Yet with a twinkle in his deep-set grey eyes he reflected that Dr Josiah Borrin, his brother-physician, would not have altered one iota in the decade.

While the traveller played with the poker and nursed the fire, so that it might blaze the more, a rosy-faced maid bustled in and out of the room laying the snow-white cloth, bringing in the old-fashioned china, and arranging knives and forks and spoons. When she set down a mighty sirloin of beef, together with hot potatoes in their jackets, and an enticing beetroot salad, she finally appeared with an earthen jug of foaming beer to inform Minister that his supper was ready. He sat down at once being sharp-set.

"Bring in the apple-tart and cream, the cheese and Mrs Heasy all at once," he said slicing the beef. "I don't want to be bothered with your running in and out like a confounded ant."

The girl looked rather offended at thus being classed and at her mistress being alluded to as part of the supper. But she smiled when Minister raised his twinkling eyes, and with a toss of her head disappeared. It was Mrs Heasy who brought in the tray with the remainder of the supper.

"But I don't know that I'll stay, sir," said Mrs

Heasy, putting the tray down stiffly. "It's none of my business to tell tales about my neighbours."

"Bless the woman, I want you to tell truths and not tales."

"Tales may be truths and may be lies," said the landlady sententiously.

"Leave me to judge. Come now, sit down in that arm-chair and make yourself comfortable."

"In my own house." Mrs Heasy looked indignant. "Well I'm sure."

"And where should you be comfortable if not in your own house?" inquired the doctor dryly, "the night's young and the liquor's plentiful. Is Medway all right?"

"If eating goes for anything—yes!"

"Well, my dear woman, we've both motored from London to-day, and that's forty miles, so it's natural we should both be hungry." Minister was eating like a cormorant as he spoke, with his mouth full. "Come sit down and make yourself agreeable."

Mrs Heasy hesitated. There was nothing for her to do, and she loved to gossip, especially with one who was—as she put it—quick in the uptake. "I don't mind waiting for a few moments," she observed, taking the slippery arm-chair by the fire, "but I should like to know what *you* want to know."

"Listen, and you shall know. How's Borrin?"

"Dr Borrin! Do you know him?"

"None better, Mrs Heasy. We were at school together and walked the London hospitals side by side. He made his money and retired to grow cabbages here ten and more years ago like Caius, Valerius, Jovius, Diocletianus, a gentleman you never heard of, I'll be bound. I made money also, but preferred to travel, while he desired to vegetate. I've

come down here to call on him, but I wish to know what he's doing before I make myself known."

"He's growing cabbages," said Mrs Heasy tartly.

"Good for you, Ma'am. I use an illustration and you knock me out of time by taking me at the foot of the letter."

"Bless the man," cried the landlady bewildered, "what do you mean?"

"Gammon and spinach. If you've read the novels of the late Mr Charles Dickens you will understand. But there, I'm not a spy, or a police-officer, and Borrin hasn't killed anyone since he gave up practice, so——"

"He hasn't quite given up practice," interrupted Mrs Heasy, folding her fat hands on her black silk lap. "He's always curing the poor."

"Curing them, is he? Ah, he must have improved, though to be sure Borrin was always a decent doctor!"

"Decent! Why, he's a wonder, and cures everyone."

"And why shouldn't he, when the man's a genius?" demanded Minister as if he expected to be contradicted. "Borrin's a good man and a clever man, and hasn't an enemy in the wide world. Married?"

"No, he isn't. He's got no time to be married, and his sister Mrs Venery with her pretty daughter looks after the Manor for him."

"Lavinia! I remember Lavinia: a most tiresome woman with a tongue like a bell-clapper, and looks as though you could blow her away like a feather. I never could understand where Lavinia got her strength to talk so much."

"She's very popular and looks after the poor, Dr

Minister. Ah, you can say what you like, sir, but Dr Borrin and Mrs Venery are angels. They give themselves up to good works."

"I dare say you do the same, Mrs Heasy; there's a philanthropic twinkle in your eye. Now don't deny what I say."

"I'm not going to," replied the landlady laughing right out, so infectious was Minister's good-humour. "I do my share, and why not? Heasy died years ago, and my sons and daughters are all married with plenty of healthy children and houses of their own. It's little that I have to do save helping the doctor and Mrs Venery, though I don't deny but what these engines as you came in sir, have brought a deal of custom to the Harper Inn."

"Then don't call them names, my good woman," said Minister, attacking the cheese. "These motors are opening up all the old coaching inns which Dickens said were closed for ever. Moral—don't prophesy until you know."

"I don't hold with engines puffing about the streets. Railway stations are the place for them. As for narrow skirts and women's votes and insurance acts and income taxes and what they call flappers and nibs and nuts and——"

"Take breath," advised Dr Minister, twinkling. "You're too stout to waste any in this fashion. I see you love the past, although you know a considerable deal about the present. Well we can talk of these things later, as I intend to stay here on a visit to Borrin."

"In his house? At the Manor?"

"Here, don't I tell you, here—under this roof. I like my freedom, and I like you with your free tongue and good suppers. There"—Minister pushed

back his plate, and advanced to the fire—"I'm filled up. A pipe now unless you object, my dear woman."

"No! no!" Mrs Heasy's broad shoulders shook with amusement. "Why should I object when my late husband dried me like a herring with his smoking for many a year? Sit down, doctor, and I'll order port wine."

"You won't, for I'm teetotal and prefer coffee. Port wine: it's not hard to see that you belong to the Crimea epoch." The doctor chuckled as she pulled at an out-of-date bell. "Get the things cleared and then we can talk. I dare say you think me honest enough now."

"Oh, you're honest as men go," said Mrs Heasy when the rosy-faced maid entered to clear away and receive orders.

"Then you don't object to tell me about Borrin and about anything else of interest in your dead-and-alive neighbourhood?"

"It's not dead and alive," objected Mrs Heasy, mending the fire and sweeping the hearth. "We have plenty of people here who go up to London."

"Young men. Ha! When you mentioned that Miss Venery was pretty, I knew you would speak of young men."

"I haven't spoken of them. Here's the coffee. Milk and sugar, doctor."

"Neither, thank you." Minister accepted a cup of black coffee, and glanced round to see that the table was cleared and the door closed. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"About these young men who admire Miss Venery."

Mrs Heasy's large face broadened into a genial

smile. "They will be lucky if they get her," said she, nodding mysteriously.

"Bless the woman, is the girl going to marry a syndicate?"

"Disliking newfangled words, I don't know what a syndicate is, doctor. But Miss Ida is a charming young lady and as good-hearted as her uncle and ma, say what you will. I don't know which of the twins she loves, but it's one of them, unless Mr Mark Bally offers, which he may."

"You confuse me; you confuse me," cried the doctor, waving his large hands in the air. "Twins—what twins?"

"Mr Edwin Gurth, who is the elder by an hour, and Mr Edgar Gurth, who wears a red necktie as his brother does a blue one."

"What for?"

"Why, you can't tell the one apart from the other," explained Mrs Heasy, with a nod. "Both dark and clean-shaven and handsome and well-dressed. Mr Edwin always wears a blue tie, and Mr Edgar a red one. They live in a nice house at the end of the village, and Miss Jane, who is their sister, looks after them like a mother. She's older than they are."

"Have they any occupation?"

"Why, yes. Mr Edwin is a barrister and Mr Edgar is a solicitor, and they go to London every day at nine, coming back at seven. Very nice young men they are. I don't know which is the nicer."

"Does Miss Ida Venery?" questioned Minister shrewdly and raking his beard.

Mrs Heasy laughed comfortably. "Well, they do say as Mr Edwin with the blue necktie is the one she likes, and she'll be as lucky in gaining him as he will be in getting her."

“ Really,” remarked the doctor dryly, “ the folk hereabouts seem to be paragons, Mrs Heasy. Are there no wicked people? ”

“ Plenty, but not at the Manor. Dr Borrin, Mrs Venery, and Miss Ida are the best people in the world, and them twins with their sister are as good as you can expect anyone to be. But we have wicked people here too: those who drink and beat their wives, and those who waste their husband’s money on dress. Oh Satan’s as busy here as elsewhere, I do assure you, doctor.”

“ Humph! Borrin’s angelic household must have plenty to do to circumvent the gentleman. We have Shakespeare’s authority for saying that the Prince of Darkness is a gentleman you know, Mrs Heasy.”

“ You and your nonsense,” said the landlady, shaking her head, “ if your wife——”

“ I haven’t got a wife,” interrupted the traveller, “ if I had I shouldn’t have been able to see so much of the world. However, the chances are that I shall settle down in my old age; I’m nearing sixty, you must know, and will have time to choose a helpmate. Come now, don’t you think I can cut out the twins with Miss Ida Venery? ”

“ If a tongue could do it, yes,” responded Mrs Heasy dryly, “ but youth draws to youth, say what you will, doctor, and them twins are nice young men. But as Miss Ida will inherit heaps of money from her uncle, she might look a deal higher than lawyers. Why there’s Mr Mark Bally——”

“ You mentioned him before. Who is Mr Mark Bally? ”

Mrs Heasy opened her eyes widely. “ Ain’t you never heard of the Ballys with their family mystery? ”

“No. The fame of these local celebrities doesn't extend all over the wide world, Mrs Heasy.”

“Oh, but the mystery's been in print, and folk have tried to find it out ever so many times.”

“What is the mystery?” asked Minister curiously, for the old lady spoke in a very earnest manner, and with an uneasy look.

“Blood and ghosts, and vampires and hauntings!”

“What? What? What?” the doctor shrugged his big shoulders contemptuously.

“Well then, no one knows what the mystery of the Ballys is,” confessed Mrs Heasy in a more sober tone. “But it has to do with a black cell.”

“A black cell. Humph! that suggests hangings and criminals.”

The landlady nodded. “You can put it that way or any other way you like, but what it is the Bally family keep concealed, I don't know. They've been at the Abbey ever since Henry VIII.'s days, and the tales about the black cell make your blood run cold.”

“Chill it at once,” cried Minister with relish. “What is the legend?”

Mrs Heasy stood up, folded her arms and shook her head vigorously, “Why I shouldn't sleep a wink if I told the horrid thing,” she declared. “It's about some monkish curse and a black cell as is the entrance to the nether pit.”

“Oh what rubbish,” said the doctor contemptuously. “I suppose you simple creatures down here believe in a material hell situated under our feet.”

Mrs Heasy ignored the latter part of the speech to reply to the earlier observation. “Rubbish, is it? Well, you can say so. But there is a secret and a black cell, and evil beyond thinking connected with

the Bally family. The family solicitors know the secret, and the steward and the head of the family."

"This Mr Mark Bally you speak of is the head, I presume?"

Mrs Heasy became more mysterious than ever. "He might be and he might not be. There's someone, or something else."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't say what I mean, nor can anyone else, until the secret is known which will never be known. But if Miss Ida marries Mr Mark she'll rue the day she calls herself Mrs Bally and lives at the Abbey. Golden sovereigns," added the landlady with a shudder, "would not lure me into making a fool of myself in that way."

"Humph!" mused Minister, as she moved heavily towards the door, "this sort of thing reminds one of the Glamis Castle mystery."

"Nothing of the sort," cried Mrs Heasy with local pride. "I never heard of your Glamis Castle, but there's no mystery like the Bally mystery. And it will never be found out," she ended solemnly.

"I'm not so sure of that" replied the doctor coolly. "You have piqued my curiosity to such an extent that I think I shall stay here and learn the truth whatever it is."

"Then you'll never die in your bed."

"Oh, I've risked dying out of it for so many years that a danger more or less doesn't matter in the least. Well," he stood up bulky and tall to stretch himself, "so Mr Bally loves Miss Ida Venery?"

"He may or he may not," rejoined the landlady rubbing her nose. "They do say as he also favours Miss Jane Gurth, the twin's sister."

"You're confoundedly slippery, Mrs Heasy. First

you say one thing and then you say another. But as I intend to stay here for a few weeks, I dare say I shall get at what you mean in time. Meanwhile I shall step up to the Manor, and surprise my old friend Borrin."

"It's at the end of the village, standing in its own grounds," explained Mrs Heasy, relieved at getting away from the Bally legend. "You can't mistake it, for the gate's open day and night to admit the poor and needy. And as it's Saturday, I dare say you'll find them twins paying attention to Miss Ida."

"They won't thank me for my visit maybe," said Minister humorously. "However, I'm no spoilsport, and my business is with Borrin. Now get out there's a dear soul—or, stop, take me to my bedroom."

"It's just opposite this very room," said Mrs Heasy opening the door of the sitting-room and that of the bedroom. "I lock up the inn at ten as my mother did before me. So if you are late——!"

"I'll throw stones at the windows to get in," said Minister with a twinkle in his eyes. "I won't be later than ten. It's only six now. Oh, here's my luggage. Go away now and don't bother me."

"Well, I'm sure, doctor, and me letting my work alone while staying to entertain you. I hope," she added ironically, "that I haven't bored you."

"No! no! I have been much entertained. You have given me something to do here, for I intend to learn the secret of the black cell."

Mrs Heasy looked incredulous. "If you can," said she with a doubtful snort.

CHAPTER II

AT THE MANOR

DR MINISTER, as an accomplished traveller, was accustomed to the wild and wonderful, upon which he stumbled constantly. In fact it was his love for the unexpected which had sent him roaming in dangerous lands. He knew tales as strange as those of *The Thousand and One Nights*, and could very easily make an ordinary person's hair stand on end with a recital of his adventures. Therefore he was less surprised than pleased to discover that a mystery existed in the neighbourhood, and determined by hook or by crook to fathom the same. In all that concerned men, he was devoured by an insatiable curiosity, and Mrs Heasy's fragmentary hints piqued this to an extraordinary degree. If she had told a plain, straightforward story, the doctor would not have been so interested, but her nods and winks and ejaculations and shudderings made him desperately earnest to arrive at the truth. That—so far as he could gather—was connected with a black cell; but what the black cell might be it was impossible to say at the moment. Still the two words thus connected, suggested the weird and terrible.

“I shan't hurry myself,” chuckled Minister, changing rapidly into a serge suit still more untidy and rumpled than the one he wore. “A few months in this

place with an original landlady, and Borrin at hand won't bore me. Mark Bally!—humph! I mustn't question him, for he'll only tell lies. Ida!—humph! She won't know. It's difficult to know how to start. There's Lavinia Venery to be sure. She's a magpie for chattering, and is sure to know something if her daughter has any idea of marrying this young man. Then there's the twins. I see—three Richmonds in the field. Well! well! well! the more haste the less speed: I must be cautious and slow. Where the deuce is that box? Ah, here!"

Fishing about amongst his luggage which Medway had piled in the bedroom, Minister hauled out from under a heap of clothes a rather large dispatch-box of black japanned tin with a brass lock. Opening this by means of a key which dangled from his watch-chain he took from the box a small parcel, which, when unrolled, revealed a dozen or more dry leaves of a reddish colour. With a nod of satisfaction the old man thrust these into his pocket and huddled into his rough frieze overcoat. Then he opened the window to admit air into the somewhat stuffy room, and thereby saw that the darkness had shut down, a discovery which led him again to fumble in his trunk. Finally, after possessing himself of an electric torch, he extinguished the two candles which he had lighted and went into the passage. This, now illuminated with a small oil lamp giving out a feeble light, conducted him to the front door of the inn, and he emerged into the damp, dark night.

In the tap-room, the yokels were engaged in their autumn pleasures of drinking beer and singing songs, seemingly very cheerful in their mirth. A glance through the half-curtained window showed that Medway was amusing them and entertaining himself

at their expense, so the doctor with a nod of approval passed along the crooked little street, knowing that his smart chauffeur was quite at home in these rustic wilds. Owing to the misty gloom it was difficult to see what Hepworth village was like; but being Saturday night the tiny shops were yet open, and filled with customers. An inquiry here and there from a passing woman or child—the men apparently were all collected in the tap-room—directed Minister in the right way, and shortly he found himself beyond the village in a windy lane, which curved round to end in two iron half-gates swung wide open between stone pillars. From the description of Mrs Heasy this appeared to be the hospitable entrance to the Manor, so Minister walked up a wet and dripping avenue, waving his torch here and there to see where he was going. Five minutes brought him into an open space, where a large rambling house bulked on a rise, blacker than the blackness of the night. Light streaming from many windows did away with the necessity for the electric torch. Minister therefore economically dispensed with the same and strode ponderously up to the front door, which loomed under a mighty porch like the portal to an ogre's castle. An ivory button to the right of this showed him that the Manor was up to date in the way of civilisation.

The shrill vibration of the bell brought a fat footman to the door, and the visitor was informed that Dr Borrin was at home. No. Dr Borrin was not at dinner, as he dined at five o'clock in quite an old-fashioned style. He was in the drawing-room, and did not mind being disturbed. Yes! The fat footman would take in the gentleman's card, and this he did leaving the said gentleman standing in the hall. And a very quaint old-world hall it was, of dark panelled

oak with the heads of deer and bison and fox on the walls; a fire-place with a cheerful fire, and a stone floor carpeted with Persian praying-mats. Nothing very original to be sure, but the aspect of the whole was home-like and inviting. Minister, wandering round, was beginning to think that he would like just such another habitation, when the fat footman returned preceded by a lean dry little man in evening dress. With outstretched hands Dr Borrin hurried up to Dr Minister, and greeted him warmly.

"Theo, well, I *am* glad; to think of your coming here so unexpectedly. How are you, my dear friend? But I needn't ask, you are just the same, just like that head with your shaggy hair and beard," he pointed to a staring glass-eyed buffalo head on the wall. "Dear, dear, and it's ten years since we met. Have you dropped from the moon, Theo? and have you come to stay, and——?"

"You talk as much as ever, Josiah," interrupted Minister, banging his friend on the back until he winced. "I have come by motor from London and have put up at the Harper Inn, where I intend to stay for a few weeks."

"No! no! Theo. You must stay with me. Lavinia will be so pleased, and Ida and the boys. We have quite a merry party here."

"The deuce!" Minister surveyed his host's accurate evening-dress and then glanced down at his own untidy serge suit. "I'm not trimmed up for a party."

"You always were a sloven," sighed Borrin, shaking his head which was neatly adorned with a brown wig. "But you have a heart of gold, Theo. Don't deny it for I won't be contradicted. William," to the fat footman, "take Dr Minister's coat off. Do

you wish to wash your hands, Theo? Will you have a glass of wine, my dear fellow? Bless me," he caught Minister's hands to shake them once more, "I am glad to see you, old bear. Come along; come along!" and thrusting his little arm under Minister's big one the host dragged his unexpected guest into a vast room with a low ceiling, lighted with many lamps.

Here a girl was seated at a grand piano with a young man on either side of her, and another girl was seated near the fire, close to a solemn, thin lady, wrinkled and elderly and remarkably sedate. The soft glow of the lamps showed that the prevailing colour of the room was a pale green; walls, hangings, carpet, and the upholstering of chairs and couches were as emerald as grass in spring-time. The atmosphere was restful and serene, and Minister felt like a bear blundering into a flower-garden, as Dr Borrin dragged him forward. Five pair of eyes stared at his shaggy looks, and smiles beamed on five faces as the little host presented him.

"Lavinia, I needn't tell you who this is. Theophilus Minister, my dear, whom we have not seen for ten long years. Ida, you were a small girl when you saw our friend last. Miss Gurth, Edwin, Edgar, this is the first time you have seen the greatest traveller and the cleverest physician of the present day."

"Come, come, Josiah, draw it mild," said Minister, smiling broadly and in his deep mellow voice, as he advanced. "How are you all, you young people? Ha, I needn't ask: happy and merry, quite unaware of the troubles of life that are ahead of you. Lavinia has been through them." He halted before the solemn and lean lady who had risen to her feet. "Lavinia, what is the meaning of this?"

"Of what, Theophilus?" faltered Mrs Venery primly, as she took his big hand.

"Of your funeral looks and black dress and want of tongue?"

"I have suffered agonies during these ten years of your absence," said Mrs Venery sighing, and seating herself again.

"Pooh! pooh! We all think that we suffer agonies; it is vanity that makes us think so. Brisk up, Lavinia, and be the merry happy chatterbox I knew when I saw you last in London, looking about for your second."

"I never did look about for a second," cried Mrs Venery indignantly. "My heart is buried in the grave of Ida's father."

"No wonder you look like a person who has lost a sovereign and found a penny, my dear woman. Dig it up again and smile on your old admirer."

"Theophilus! Theophilus!" Mrs Venery shook her head sadly, "you have not changed in the least. Still rough and honest."

"Only fit for the Naked Lands, eh? Well, I shall go back there if you don't want me."

"Don't be an ass, Theo," cried Borrin, who was listening with his hands behind his back and his head on one side like a pert cock-sparrow. "Now we have got you we don't intend to let you go. Lavinia, he is staying at the Harper Inn, and won't come here."

"Oh, but you must come here, Uncle Theo," cried Ida, advancing.

"Humph!" Minister looked very pleased, "Since when have you learned to call me uncle, my dear?"

"Why, I did so when I was a small girl, and

Uncle Josiah is always talking of you. He is one uncle and you are another."

"Ha!" said the doctor, more pleased than ever. "Out of sight I have been, but not out of mind."

"I'm sure I have never forgotten what a bear you were," said Mrs Venery in a melancholy tone, "quite a rough diamond."

"You don't say such nice things as Ida does, Lavinia. Yet you were full of gush when we last met. Well, well, it's old age, I presume."

"Nothing of the sort," said Mrs Venery indignantly, as the young men laughed, "a woman is as old——"

"As she says she is. I've heard that before. Well I shall stay at Hepworth and come here daily if only to make you merry again. Miss Gurth, you look a sensible young lady, why don't you bully Mrs Venery into brighter looks?"

The girl addressed looked up from a silk tie she was knitting and laughed in a sedate manner. "Mrs Venery is quite happy," she observed.

"The Lord save me from such happiness. Humph! So you are twins, are you, young sirs. Which is Edwin and which is Edgar? Where's your red and blue badges? I'm hanged if I can tell you together."

With a simultaneous smile the young men each produced handkerchiefs, one of blue silk and one of red, whereby, remembering what Mrs Heasy had said, the doctor was able to identify. "You are the barrister," he said to the twin with the blue handkerchief, "and you are the solicitor," looking at the other.

"How did you know our professions?" asked the twins together in one breath.

"Made inquiries at the Harper Inn," said Minister

coolly. "I always get to know my ground you know, gentlemen."

"Oh, that Mrs Heasy," groaned Lavinia, "she forgets that the tongue is a raging fire which destroys many."

"Nonsense, she's a dear old newspaper worth reading."

"Really, Theophilus, you say strange things."

"Oh, there's no end to my eccentricities, Lavinia. What else can you expect from a wild man of the West? Josiah, I shall sit down although you have not asked me. Ida—Niece Ida—be good enough to go on with the firework piece you were playing when I blundered in. I want to look at you all, and as the music will reduce you to silence if you have any manners, there will be a chance of my forming my judgment on the lot."

Minister's rough humour made the assembled party laugh, although Mrs Venery, as in duty bound, sighed deeply. However, she made a sign to her daughter to obey and shortly Ida with a twin on either side was seated again at the piano, while the good lady took up her tatting, an early Victorian industry which she largely indulged in, and Miss Gurth went on knitting. As for the little host, he hid himself in a gigantic arm-chair and gazed affectionately at his best friend, who had been absent for so long. When the music started, Minister with his big hands on his big knees looked round calmly first at this person and then on that. He was pleased with what he saw, and contrasted this peaceful haven with the wild and stormy ocean of life upon which he had been tossing for so long.

Ida was tall, graceful, and beautiful, and of a Saxon fairness, with calm blue eyes, golden locks and a com-

plexion of roses and lilies; she was as lovely as Edith of the Swan-neck whom Harold adored to his destruction. And Minister was glad to see that there was nothing fragile, or neurotic about her. She was as stately as a Norse goddess, largely made and deep-bosomed: a woman of nerve and brains who would be a helpmate for an ambitious man dealing with the rough and tumble of life. The doctor was not quite sure if the two young men who hung over her were worthy of such blooming health and majestic beauty. To describe one of course means to describe both, since Edgar and Edwin were twins. They were tall and slim, with dark hair and dark eyes, possessed of the fire of youth to the full and evidently very determined natures. As both had clean-cut features and were clean-shaven it was difficult to tell one from the other; but on the whole Minister approved of Edwin most, as his gaze was franker and less lowering than that of his brother. Being both in evening-dress the wonderful resemblance was accentuated. All the same the doctor shrewdly concluded that their natures differed considerably. But whether this was positively the case he could not determine until he saw more of them.

As to the sister, she was a dark-haired girl of no great beauty, as it was evident that her brothers had monopolised the good looks of the Gurth family. But she appeared to be sensible and domesticated, the kind of woman who would make an admirable wife and a conscientious mother. There was nothing particularly original about her, but Minister, a restless man himself, liked her serene manner and quiet looks. She appeared to have quite a maternal adoration for the handsome twins and glanced at them every now and then in a silently affectionate manner.

“ Yes! Yes! ” said Minister loudly, and rubbing his hands. “ There’s luck in store for the man who gets her.”

This unexpected observation was made just as the music came to a gentle conclusion, and Ida swung round on the piano stool to ask what the visitor meant. The faces of the others also looked inquiring, and Minister came back to a sense of his surroundings with a start. “ Don’t be alarmed any of you good people,” he said, raking his beard as usual; “ I have an odd habit of picking up my thoughts and putting them into speech at the wrong moment.”

“ You are full of odd habits, Theophilus,” said Mrs Venery severely.

“ Ah, old age and passing years,” grunted Minister staring hard at her. “ You dressed like a parrot and chattered like one when I last saw you, Lavinia, now you are a raven, croaking disaster in black plumage. You haven’t been told the secret of the Bally family, have you, which is said to stop all smiles? ”

Everyone started, and Borrin made himself the spokesman for all. “ Where on earth did you hear about the Bally secret, Theo? ”

“ My newspaper, my gazette, my old wife gossip at the inn.”

“ She told you the story—the legend? ” asked Ida excitedly.

“ No. She did worse. Mrs Heasy hinted and shivered and roused my curiosity to such a degree that I wanted to shake the tale out of her. Tell it.”

“ There is nothing to tell,” said Mrs Venery crossly. “ It’s all rubbish.”

“ Even the rumours about the black cell? ”

Edgar Gurth laughed mockingly. “ Mrs Heasy has been playing with her imagination, doctor,” he

said with a shrug. "There is no black cell and no legend of any particularly dreadful kind."

"Humph!" murmured Minister disbelievingly, "You don't deny but what there is some sort of legend. What it is I want to know."

"We must ask Mark Bally to show you the family records," said Borrin briskly, and looking more bright-eyed than ever, "then you can try and guess the secret, if there is one. For my part I think the whole thing is merely moonshine. Moreover, Theo, you are not here to waste time over the fireside stories of our country-side, but to tell us all about yourself. I have scarcely received a single letter since we parted at Lima ten years ago. Where have you been? What have you been doing? How are you——?"

"One thing at a time, Josiah," interrupted the traveller throwing up his big hand with a deep, mellow laugh. "If Lavinia has left off talking you have not. I shall tell you of my wanderings when you tell me about yourself."

"There is little to tell, Theo," said Borrin modestly. "When we last parted, you remember, it was when we arrived at Lima with the Inca treasure which we found in the Andes."

"I know all about that," retorted Minister, impatiently. "You took your share and came home to settle down, while I took my share and spent the most of it in prosecuting my archæological inquiries. Well?"

"Well," echoed the host placidly, "what more do you wish to know? I turned my share of the treasure into coin of the realm and invested the money. Aided by Edwin's father, and later by Edwin himself, I have prospered exceedingly with my investments and I am

now very wealthy. So if you are in want of money——”

“ I am not. It is true that I have lived on my capital, and did not invest the proceeds of the treasure as you did, Josiah, but there is enough left to keep me in comfort, and even in luxury, for the rest of my misspent life.”

“ Well, well! Remember you always have a home here, Theo. And when I am gone, Ida, who is my heiress, will afford you shelter should you need it.”

“ That I will, Uncle Theo,” said the girl heartily, “ but now that you know all about Uncle Josiah tell us about your adventures.”

“ Do I know all about Uncle Josiah? ” questioned Minister, smiling broadly.

“ Certainly,” replied the little doctor quickly. “ I have been here for close upon a decade, having bought this tumble-down old family mansion and repaired it, I asked Lavinia and Ida to stay with me and look after the house. A very dull record compared with yours, Theo.”

“ A very noble record,” put in Edwin suddenly. “ He does not tell you, Dr Minister, that he is known throughout the length and breadth of Essex for his large-minded charity, and——”

“ There! there! ” interrupted Borrin hurriedly, “ I have not hired you to be my trumpeter, Edwin.”

“ I don't think Josiah requires one,” observed Mrs Venery sadly. “ The noble charity which led him to take under his roof a pauper widow and her——”

Borrin interrupted again, blushing like a schoolgirl. “ I shall leave the room if you talk such rubbish, Lavinia. Why, you and Ida are my blessings. Now, Theo, tell us about yourself.”

Minister laughed gruffly, and cast a kindly look

towards his small and amiable friend. Then he settled his big-boned frame more comfortably in the arm-chair he occupied and began his recital. It embraced wanderings all over the South American continent, hair-breadth escapes, the witnessing of weird ceremonies, the hospitality of strange races, and the exploration of steaming tropical forests. From Panama in the north, to Tierra del Fuego in the far south, Minister had wandered on foot and on mule-back, inquiring into the manners and customs and morals and histories of queer dark-skinned people, hearing prehistoric secrets and discovering hidden civilisations.

“And what I have learned convinces me of one thing,” said the doctor, as his fascinating narrative drew to a conclusion, “and that is, that the great lost continent of Atlantis, alluded to by Plato, actually existed. Thence came the civilisation of Peru and Mexico and Yucatan; the learning of Egypt and Chaldea, and the buried cities of the West African coast. I intend to write a book about my discoveries, and its writing will occupy my declining years.”

“It’s wonderful to hear you, doctor,” said Edgar Gurth, drawing a long breath. “You have talked yards of marketable stuff to-night. Did you bring anything back from these wilds?”

“Idols and pottery; inscriptions and photographs of mighty buildings,” said Minister, smiling. “Also these,” and he suddenly produced the packet of red leaves which he had taken out of his dispatch-box. As he did so he looked inquiringly at Borrin. “Do you know what these are?”

The little man took the leaves, examined them, smelt them, and shook his head gravely. “Something to do with medicine, I suppose,” he remarked, returning the packet with a smile.

The traveller put away the leaves carefully after the rest of the party had looked at them. "Do you remember that root we found together near Cuzco—the root which the mountain and forest Indians used in their sacred ceremonies to part soul from body?"

"Yes," replied Borrin after a pause, "but I have put what roots I had away, and quite forgot about them until you spoke now."

"What root is this?" inquired Mrs Venery severely.

"That of a certain plant known to the Indians who are the descendants of the Inca Indians," said Minister quietly. "They pressed it and boiled it and extracted a kind of juice in which they steeped arrow-heads and sharp flints. The arrow-heads they used in war to kill people, but the flints thus tainted were used during sacred ceremonies to scratch chosen people, who then were paralysed——"

"Paralysed," cried Edwin startled, "and what had that to do with any sacred ceremony, doctor?"

"When paralysed," explained Minister gravely, "the soul of the person went into the unseen world, and returned with information for the priests."

"What rubbish," muttered Edgar contemptuously.

"There was less rubbish and more wisdom in the knowledge of these elderly races than you think, young man," retorted Minister bending his bushy brows. "Several times I saw the ceremony and witnessed the fact that the soul by this process could be separated from the body. Josiah saw that also. Do you remember, Josiah, how one of the Indians thus paralysed went to England to describe your parents' home?"

"Well, yes," admitted Borrin reluctantly, "but that might have been a kind of telepathy. However,

I know that the juice of the root produces death when used largely and paralyzes when administered in small quantities. But the leaves, Theo, what have they to do with what you are talking about?"

Minister shrugged his broad shoulders and smiled pityingly. "Your brains are growing mouldy in this place, Josiah. There was only one antidote to the poison of the root, and the Indian priests refused to reveal from what plant it could be taken. This is the plant—I mean these are the leaves of the plant—which when boiled and pressed in the same way as the root revive the person paralysed."

"Not the person who is dead?" said Mrs Venery curiously.

"No. Only the paralysed person could be revived. So you, Josiah, have the root which paralyzes, and I have the leaves which revive."

"What is the use of either?" asked Borrin with a shrug.

Minister rose to take his leave. "One never knows. I only mentioned this to satisfy your curiosity, Josiah, as formerly you were so curious about the matter of the separation of soul from body."

"Oh, I have forgotten all such unprofitable things," smiled Borrin. "It is better to be charitable and helpful than to possess vain knowledge. Don't go yet."

"I must," said Minister resolutely. "Mrs Heasy locks up at ten, and as I intend to stay at the Harper Inn I must keep in her good graces."

Everyone laughed and approved, so Dr Minister departed very pleased with his successful visit.

CHAPTER III

THE LEGEND

IN spite of Minister's loudly expressed declaration that he would remain for an indefinite period at Hepworth, his lifelong friend knew him too well to believe that he would hold firmly to such determination. Borrin was well aware that the traveller was one of those restless people who are never satisfied with surrounding circumstances for any great length of time. Moreover, Minister was so accustomed to travelling that constant movement had strengthened his love of change. However, Borrin believed that the strong friendship between them would induce the new-comer to stay at the Harper Inn for a few weeks. Longer than that he could not hope to keep his too-active friend. "You're more like a fly than a human being, Theo," said Borrin, when Minister made his daily appearance at the Manor. "You settle on nothing for more than a second. At your age you should try and cultivate sitting still."

Minister, who looked more untidy than ever, clutched his shaggy beard with two great hands and laughed in his usual stentorian fashion. "Legs were given us to walk, and eyes to see, and brains to fill with knowledge of the wide, wide world," he roared gleefully. "I go round the world, Josiah,

while you sit and watch the world go round; that is all the difference between us."

"A very great difference," replied Borrin with his quiet smile.

"Well, well! It takes many to make a world, and it would never do if we were all alike. Would Columbus have discovered America had he been Josiah Borrin?"

"Oh, I'm not so stay-at-home as all that," rejoined the neat little man, adjusting his smooth, brown wig; "I have travelled in my time, remember, Theo."

"Pooh," said Minister with the contempt of the gipsy for the house-dweller, "your travelling amounts to nothing—simply nothing. You certainly went on that scientific expedition to Paraguay fifteen years ago, but five years of exploration was enough for you. Since then you have vegetated here."

"Quite so, but I could not have vegetated, as you call it, had I not found the Inca treasure along with you, Theo. That is, you found it, and were good enough to let me share it."

"Pooh! pooh! You helped, Josiah, by translating the document which revealed its whereabouts. I found the script and you put it into English; I owe you as much as you owe me. I am glad you have the money as you will live a long time to enjoy it, since you are just over fifty, and your health is good."

"Thank God for that, Theo," said Borrin reverently; "you will live long also I sincerely trust. You are only sixty."

"A few months off," said Minister carelessly. "Bless you there is so much to see in this world that I intend to live until one hundred, wearing out, and not rusting out. When I am eighty or there-

abouts I shall return here and marry Lavinia. I always had an admiration for Lavinia, although she did talk nineteen to the dozen."

"She doesn't talk so much now, Theo."

"No, by Jupiter! Her tongue's grown rusty from living here. Venery's dead?"

"Died eight years ago, and a very merciful thing it was," said Borrin seriously. "He never was a good man. Then I asked Lavinia to come here to look after me. She is an admirable housekeeper, and is much less flighty than she used to be."

"She has changed from a parrot into an owl," said the doctor caustically, "though I can't say that I've heard much of her wisdom. But, Ida—ah, there now!—she's clever, if you like. I tell you what, Josiah—but, no, I shan't tell you anything just now. My legs are stiff from sitting still. Let us go round the domain," and Minister, who had been seated for just ten minutes, jumped up with the agility of a boy.

Borrin humoured him, although he thought regretfully of the long morning's work connected with the classification of herbs which could not now be done. It was impossible to concentrate on any subject when Minister was in the vicinity, "Come then, I can give you an hour."

"Quite long enough," shouted Minister, following his host from the library. "I can easily make myself acquainted with the geography of the place in sixty minutes. Then I shall go back to midday dinner with Mrs Heasy's gossip to help digestion, and afterwards intend to take a long spin into the country to see the Abbey."

"Why do you wish to see the Abbey?" asked Borrin, stopping short.

“ It’s one of your show places hereabouts, isn’t it? Why shouldn’t I wish to see the Abbey? ”

“ Natural enough no doubt. But, knowing your insatiable curiosity, Theo, I suspect that your mind is running on that silly story of a possible secret in connection with a black cell.”

“ It is,” admitted Minister violently; “ but I have not yet heard the story.”

“ I’ll tell it to you myself,” said Borrin soothingly. “ There is really nothing in it, believe me. Meanwhile, let us go round the house and grounds.”

Although the traveller was intensely curious regarding the secret of the Bally family, he decided to see over the Manor, and learning all he could about it, before asking further questions. Like a great bull-elephant he rolled after Borrin, upstairs, downstairs, along passages, into rooms, and out of rooms. Nor did he express himself satisfied until he had explored the whole house from attics to cellars. Dr Minister was nothing if not thorough in his investigations.

The Manor was a rambling old mansion, formerly the property of a county family who had gambled away their house and acres. It had been quite ruinous when Borrin became the owner, as he informed his friend. But the little man, by spending money and taking care, and devoting time to the business, had converted the tumble-down dwelling into a very comfortable and up-to-date habitation. The Manor was now as neat as Borrin was himself, and as the restorations had been carried out in accordance with the original plan of the mansion the result was markedly artistic. Kitchen, cellars, and servants’ quarters in the basement; drawing-room, dining-room, library, boudoir, and breakfast-room on

the ground floor; and many comfortable bedrooms on the first floor under the roomy garrets which were immediately beneath the sloping roof of red tiles: all these were perfect after their kind, and furnished in a most complete manner. Minister tramped back to the library, loudly approving of his friend's cleverness and taste and patient changing of the old into the new.

"But I like this room best, Theo," he said, standing with his big legs apart and surveying the library; "it's cheerful, and confoundedly comfortable."

It was all that. As the prevailing colour of the drawing-room was green, so the note struck in the library was blue. The walls were of smooth azure plaster, and the book-shelves ranged against them of light-hued oak. The big writing-table in the deep bow-window was also of yellowish oak; and the chairs, of similar wood, had coarse canvas cushions of palest blue. Without any pattern the carpet spread to the four walls as cerulean as a spring sky, and even the glass ornaments on the white marble mantel-piece were of the same tint. There was little furniture in the room, so that ample space was given for the perplexed student to walk about and jog his thoughts with exercise. Minister quite approved of the airy lightness of the place, and the gracious peace of the dominant colour.

"One could have good thoughts here, Josiah," he said, looking round; "upon my word, I wouldn't mind settling down here myself."

"It is as much yours as mine, Theo," said Borrin, smiling kindly; "but you wouldn't be here for a week before those restless legs of yours would carry you off to some distant quarter of the world."

“Humph! I dare say you are right, Josiah; but I intend to stay here until I learn that secret connected with the Bally family.”

“Pish! There is no secret,” cried Borrin, testily.

“Leave me to judge of that, Josiah,” retorted Minister, producing a large pipe of the kind sold in Nuremburg with a china bowl and a curving stem. “Sit down and tell me the legend.”

Knowing Minister’s obstinacy Borrin did as he was requested, and took his seat in the chair standing before the writing-table. “Such as it is, the tale runs thus, Theo. The Abbey was given by Henry VIII. to Aymas Bally, who was a Court favourite. All the monks were turned out, and the new owner took possession, destroying the church to build his mansion. What remains of the Abbey itself is in ruins, and very picturesque ruins they are, as you will see.”

“I certainly shall see,” said the doctor determinedly. “I intend to examine every inch of the ground to find the secret.”

“I tell you there is no secret,” insisted Borrin, settling his wig in a frenzy of despair at failing to make his friend see sense; “there is only some nonsense about a black cell.”

“Well, and what is the black cell?”

“It *was*,” said Borrin, with emphasis on the last word, “the cell of a monk who refused to leave the Abbey with the rest of the brethren. He was supposed to be a magician——”

“Pooh, pooh, pooh!”

“I told you it was rubbish,” said Borrin serenely; “but this Brother Thomas had such a reputation as a master of the Black Art that Amyas Bally did not dare to force him to leave. He stayed on in the cell,

wherein he had always lived, and vanished one night. It was said by the superstitious that the devil he served carried him bodily away. However, he left a parchment behind him which cursed the Bally family to all generations until the black cell should be destroyed."

"Well, and why hasn't it been destroyed?"

"Because it never was found, and no one knows where it is. Brother Thomas appeared and disappeared at intervals, but where the famous cell was to be found no one ever knew, and no one—according to the legend—ever will know."

"Humph!" said Minister disbelievingly, and puffing huge clouds of smoke, "I don't believe that Brother Thomas vanished. He found the place too hot for him, and so lay low, like Br'er Rabbit, in his hidden cell, until he died."

Borrin shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly! Report says that he is alive."

"Does it? Your legend appears to be somewhat contradictory. First you give an authoritative opinion that Brother Thomas was carried off by the devil, and then you say that he is alive—after three hundred years too. Pooh!"

"I echo your exclamation," retorted the little doctor laughing; "you can see for yourself that the legend is nonsense with its many contradictions. However, the parchment with the curse which was found on the remains of the high altar certainly did some mischief."

"What is the mischief?"

"No one knows."

"Then how the deuce," Minister used a stronger word, "can anyone be certain that there is mischief, or that the silly old fool's curse had any effect?"

“Ask me another,” said Borrin rather vulgarly. “I only tell you the story as it was told to me, and I am not responsible for its many mistakes.” He hesitated, then went on rapidly. “Mark Bally is the master of the Abbey; yet he is not, according to common report, the owner.”

Minister dropped his pipe, and stared. “That’s Greek to me.”

“And Greek to many other people,” said Borrin grimly. “I mean that the black cell of Brother Thomas is supposed to still exist, and that to the something dwelling therein the Abbey belongs.”

“What do you mean with your something?” asked Minister, still staring.

“How do I know? How does anyone know?” rejoined the doctor with a shrug. “It may be that Brother Thomas never died, and is holding on to the Abbey which belonged to his Order while letting the visible head of the Bally family make use of the dwelling and property. Or, perhaps, there is something not quite human in this hidden cell. I can’t say anything definite, and, for that reason, I think—as I told you—that all the business is rubbish.”

“There’s no smoke without fire,” murmured Minister, who had resumed his pipe. “What does Mark Bally say?”

“He simply laughs and says that people talk nonsense.”

“Humph! Is the young man merry or sad?”

“Well,” said Borrin with some hesitation, “he is usually sadder than he should be for a young man of his age and looks and circumstances.”

“Then, depend upon it, there is something in the tradition of the black cell and its supposed occupant,” said Minister excitedly, and started to his feet.

" See here, I intend to remain in Hepworth village until I learn the truth."

" You never will, Theo, believe me."

" Oh, yes; I have already hit upon an idea of how to do so."

Borrin looked up in astonishment. " What do you mean? "

" That Inca root which can separate soul from body. Why not prepare the juice and let me inject it into your body? Then you can go to the Abbey and see behind the scenes, so to speak."

" I am astonished at a scientific man such as you are, Theo, talking such stuff and nonsense," cried Borrin crossly. " Science has not yet proved that the soul exists, and——"

" How can you prove the super-physical by means of the physical alone? " interrupted Minister, walking to and fro greatly agitated and waving his big pipe. " Myself, I believe that the soul does exist, and can be separated. How about that Indian near Cuzco who went away and came back with a full account of your parents and their house? "

" Telepathy. He read my mind," said Borrin curtly.

" I don't agree with you. However, as there is nothing in your mind or in mine regarding this black cell and its occupant, why not try the experiment ourselves? Then we will have a conclusive proof."

" No, no, no!" said Borrin obstinately and uneasily; " it's too dangerous! "

" Rubbish. It would have been dangerous had we not the antidote, for then you could not have been restored to your usual strength. But now all you have to do is to prepare the juice and have it

injected. I shall prepare the decoction of the leaves and can give you a dose when necessary."

"Suppose your dose doesn't act?" inquired the doctor shivering. "Why then I should remain paralysed, unable to speak, or see, or feel—a kind of life in death and death in life, Theo. Besides, you might inject too much of the root juice; remember, we do not know how much will paralyse or how much will kill. I tell you it's too dangerous, man. I have no wish to die, or to be paralysed."

"Duffer!" said Minister ungraciously. "Let me have the injection."

"That would be just as bad. You might die, and I should be hanged for murder; and, on the other hand, you might be paralysed, and I should never forgive myself for injecting the confounded juice into you."

"Man alive, isn't the antidote——?"

"It might not act."

"It does act. I have seen it act myself," insisted Minister. "The Indian at Chimborazo who showed me the plant allowed me to inject the paralysing poison and——"

"I thought you had none of the root," interrupted Borrin quickly.

"Nor have I. The Indians would not give me any roots. But this man had some of the juice already prepared. I have the leaves and you have the root, so if we can only work together——"

"I am not prepared to do so," said the little doctor testily. "In the first place it is too dangerous; in the second I don't wish to pry into the secrets of my neighbours and——"

Minister interrupted again. "There's no harm; you have no curiosity."

“ You are quite right, Theo; I have not.”

“ Well, then, I have, and I am determined to attempt the test, if only to find out if the soul can go away and discover things.”

“ I thought you were already satisfied on that point,” observed Borrin dryly.

“ Well, I am, and I am not,” replied Minister in a contradictory manner. “ Certainly, as you observed, since you knew all about your parents and their house, that Indian might have read your mind; it might be, as you say, a case of telepathy. But, in this case, seeing that neither one of us knows the secret of the Bally family, we can make certain of learning the truth about the separation of soul and body.”

“ Who is to prove the truth when we find it out—if we do? ”

“ Oh, Mark Bally will confess when put to the question.”

“ I doubt that. Bally is a strong man. Moreover, there isn't any secret. You can see from the contradiction of the story that there isn't.”

Minister nodded acquiescence. “ It is pretty muddled, I confess, and for that reason I want to arrive at some plain conclusion. Well, Josiah, if you have an objection yourself to prove the truth about the use of the root in the way the Indians use it in their sacred ceremonies, why not give the root to me and let me take the risk? ”

Borrin shook his head firmly. “ No, I won't. It's playing with fire, Theo. I may as well tell you that I had an idea of preparing the juice and submitting it to the Government as a more painless way of getting rid of criminals. Hanging is painful, I am sure; and a dose of this juice would send

some unhappy man out of the world in an easier way."

"Oh, so you have prepared the juice?"

"I did not say that. I said I had an idea of preparing——"

"Josiah, your face is too tell-tale for you to keep a secret. You have already boiled and bruised the roots for your philanthropic scheme to give criminals a painless death. Confess now."

"Well, I do confess. I have a bottle of the juice."

"Show it to me."

"You will want to take it away," said Borrin obstinately, "and I don't want you to risk your own life or anyone else's by using it."

"I swear to you, Josiah, that I shall never use it without your consent. But I should like to see if the juice you have prepared is of the same colour and smell as that we saw used by the Indians in the Andes. Come, now?"

"I'll show you the preparation some day, but not now."

"You obstinate pig," fumed the doctor, who knew well enough that the meek little man could be firm when necessary, "if I didn't love you so much I should shake you until you gave up what I want."

Borrin laughed and patted the big man on the shoulder. "Your bark is worse than your bite, Theo. However, we have talked enough about these things. Come out and look at the grounds."

"I'll bide my time," said Minister grimly; "but get that juice or those roots I will some day. You had a good supply."

"I had and I have; but I intend to keep what I

have to myself. Come out this way, Theo, and don't look sulky."

Minister burst into a genial laugh, and smote his friend so hard that Borrin shot through the bow-window like a rocket and out on to the lawn. The central window opened like a door on to the terrace, and thus afforded a short cut to the grounds to the occupant of the library. "A very good idea indeed," said Minister, turning round to look at the ingenious device. "I never saw a bow-window built in that way before, Josiah."

"It's my own notion," said the little doctor placidly. "With women in the house it was rather a nuisance having to go through the front door every time, as they will talk and disturb one's train of thought."

"Even Ida? I thought she was more sensible."

"She is but a woman with a feminine tongue for all that. Lavinia also has not grown so silent as you think. I am fond of them both, but, being a student, I feel at times that they disturb me. A student should never marry."

"Well, you haven't married," said Minister, beginning to puff again at his big china pipe and lumbering over the lawn.

Borrin laughed. "I might as well be married, with Lavinia and Ida in the house, Theo. Not but what they are angels of goodness."

"Recording angels, who always keep a watch on every action. Humph! It is the deuce and all to marry, though when I settle down I may be tempted to make Lavinia Mrs Minister. She's a fine woman still, and really good."

"Perhaps she won't have you."

"Oh, yes; she will. Lavinia and I always got on

well in the old days. But I shan't ask her until I am quite settled down in twenty years from now. If she dies in the meantime I shall remain a bachelor. Humph! If female chatter bothers you, Josiah, why not marry Ida to one of the twins? "

" I am quite ready she should marry one," rejoined the doctor briskly; " not that I wish to get rid of the dear girl, as you mustn't take my talk too seriously, Theo. But I hope she'll chose Edwin rather than Edgar."

" What about Mr Mark Bally? Isn't he a Richmond in the field also? "

" No, no! that's only village gossip. He admires Jane Gurth."

" Humph! Mrs Heasy said something about that also. Well, I like that girl; she's what I call good wearing material for a helpmate—not likely to lose her temper or run off with someone else you know."

Borrin nodded. " She's an excellent girl, not beautiful, but serious and motherly. What the twins would do without her I don't know. The parents are dead, and Jane looks after both."

" Which one does she love most? "

" Edwin, I think."

" Humph! And you prefer him also. Isn't Edgar a good chap? "

" Oh, yes," assented Borrin carelessly; " but I don't think he is so good or so reliable as his brother. The twins are alike so far as outward looks go, but their natures are different."

" I saw that myself," mused Minister, while the two walked along the winding paths, " and, curiously enough, from the glimpse I saw of them, I also prefer your favourite, Edwin. Edgar looks sulky."

“He has a temper, and also is more anxious to make money than Edwin.”

“It isn't wrong to wish to make money,” objected the traveller.

“No—not in moderation; but Edgar is greedy and rather unscrupulous. I do not want Ida to marry him, and I don't think she will. Edwin appeals to her more. He cares for Ida, and not for her money, while Edgar——” Borrin shrugged his neat shoulders.

“Humph! So Ida has money.”

“Not yet. But when I die she will have two hundred thousand pounds.”

“The deuce!” said Minister, greatly surprised, “I didn't know you were so rich as all that, Josiah.”

“Well, you see, I speculated with my share of the Inca treasure, and was very successful. Old Gurth, who is dead, and who was a stockbroker, helped me a lot with his advice, and the cash is safely invested. It brings in quite a large income, which will be Ida's when I die. Strange isn't it, Theo, that old Gurth, who helped me to make money should have died poor himself.”

“Oh, did he? Then the twins and their sister are not rich?”

“Not at all. But Edwin as a barrister and Edgar as a solicitor have their professions, and do fairly well. And, of course, if Jane marries Mark Bally it will be a good match for her—if she ever does marry him, that is.”

“Why shouldn't she?”

Borrin shook his head. “Mark hangs back for some reason, although he is in love with her, according to Lavinia and Ida.”

“Women are proverbially sharp in love affairs,”

said Minister decidedly. "I dare say it is this secret which prevents Bally from speaking."

"Oh, rubbish! Again, and for the hundredth time, I say there is no secret."

"There is, there is; and I intend to find it out," said Minister determinedly.

CHAPTER IV

THE TWINS

THE Gurth family lived in a doll's house on the outskirts of Hepworth village, and, on a small scale, their dwelling was quite one of the show-places of the neighbourhood. Never was there so perfectly appointed a house and never so neat a garden. This excellence was due to Jane, who presided over the establishment in quite an autocratic way, and who ruled her brothers with a rod of iron. She looked after the house herself with the assistance of one small servant, but made Edwin and Edgar work in the garden regularly. Miss Gurth was a most methodical tyrant and arranged everything so judiciously that certain things had to be done at certain times by her and the twins. She also had charge of the purse, and regulated the expenditure so precisely that there were never any outstanding accounts, and never any deviation from the sum set apart weekly for the living expenses. She was quite a jewel of a housekeeper, and the twins should have been grateful for her capable management of their domestic affairs. Strange to say they were not.

To outward appearance the Gurths were a most united trio, but such was not really the case. The house was divided against itself, which means that Edgar and Jane were always banded against Edwin.

He was, so to speak, the cuckoo in the nest, as he greatly differed from the other two. Jane was by way of being a miser and Edgar was inclined to wasting money, while Edwin took the middle way, and was just, generous and judicious in his dealings. He did not approve of Jane's mean nature, and disapproved of his twin's spendthrift instincts, so the two disliking such an opinion, invariably made things uncomfortable for the third member of the household. Edgar also objected to his sister's cheese-pairing, but sided with her as a rule, because he detested Edwin. It may seem queer that two brothers so closely connected should not get on well together, but such was the case, although it is only just to say that they would have tolerated each other's peculiarities more had Jane not been the Atê of the doll's house. The quiet demure young woman, who never raised her voice, or lost her temper, or forgot herself in any way, was an adept in causing trouble. Those who believed that the Gurths were a most united family would have changed their opinion had they been present at a Sunday-morning breakfast, which took place a fortnight after Minister's arrival in Hepworth village.

The meal was ready at nine o'clock as usual, so as to give the twins and their sister plenty of time to prepare for church. By way of getting ready for the service they were quarrelling as they invariably did over Jane's mean ways, Edgar's wasteful habits, and Edwin's provokingly calm reproofs in dealing with both. The breakfast-room was an extremely clean apartment, moderately well furnished, and tolerably comfortable as a rule. On this especial occasion it was not comfortable, since Jane had not lighted the fire. The twins came downstairs shivering in the raw

misty October air and exclaimed loudly when they saw the grate without its cheerful glow.

"Upon my word, Jane, you might have a fire," grumbled Edwin, usually so good-natured, "it's a beastly morning."

"It would be waste to light one," rejoined his sister calmly, "we are going to church this morning and in the afternoon we go to the Manor. There is church again in the evening, and after supper we can go to bed at once."

"I shan't go to bed at once," cried Edgar crossly, "hang it all Jane, you go too far. One would think we were paupers."

"We very nearly are," replied Miss Gurth, pouring out some very inferior tea which was cheap, "and if it wasn't for me you boys would be in the work-house."

"I'd rather be there than here," growled Edgar, "is this all the food there is: one rasher of bacon and one egg each?"

"It is all you can have this morning. If you want more, eat bread and butter and finish the jar of marmalade. Mrs Venery gave it to me, so there is no expense if we eat it."

Edwin accepted the situation philosophically, as he invariably did, knowing that Jane was a mule who was not to be moved from any position she chose to take up. "But I should like to know," he remarked smiling at the glowering face of his twin, "why you condemn us to this penury?"

"We must save money, Edwin," declared Jane virtuously, "you don't wish to come to want, do you?"

"There isn't the slightest chance of our coming to want," replied Edwin amiably, "both Edgar and I are not doing badly."

“ You have many expenses, Edwin. Your season-tickets to town, the rent of your offices, the far too many clothes you are always buying, your tobacco and amusements, and——”

“ Stop! Stop! my dear girl,” Edwin threw up his hand, laughing, “ all these things are the necessities of life and not the luxuries.”

“ Luxuries,” sneered Edgar, who was now busy with the marmalade, “ why I don’t know the meaning of the word. I’m sick of third-class carriages, and meals in A.B.C. shops, and this dull monotonous life alternating between town and country. I like the red carpet laid down when I go out: I want the flowers and the band, and the Mayoral addresses.”

“ You can have all those things if you marry Ida,” said Jane coolly.

Edwin looked up sharply and his dark face became crimson. “ I hope Edgar is a better man than you think, Jane. Surely he would never marry for money! ”

“ I just would,” retorted Edgar sharply, “ what’s the use of life without cash, you silly ass? I don’t want to marry at all, but as Ida will have two hundred thousand pounds when the old man goes I’m willing to put up with her as a wife.”

“ Shut up, hang you,” cried Edwin rising and striking the table with his fist, “ you shan’t speak of Ida in that way.”

“ Oh, shan’t I? And who will prevent me? ”

“ Edwin will try to,” said Jane sweetly, “ he is in love with Ida.”

“ Yes, I am,” declared the elder twin boldly. “ I love her for herself and not for her money. Dr Borrin likes me, and Ida does also. I am quite sure that if I proposed I should be accepted.”

“ You conceited beast,” said Edgar furiously, “ you think you are everyone. I have just as much chance with Ida as you have.”

Edwin laughed. “ Try and see.”

“ I intend to, this very day.”

Edwin sat down again to eat what his twin had left of the marmalade. “ I don't mind in the least what you do. Ida and I understand one another.”

“ What vanity,” remarked Jane serenely, “ Edgar is quite as clever and much better-looking than you, Edwin.”

“ As to looks, we are twins and there isn't the slightest difference between us, Jane. As to brains, I am quite content with what I have. But even if I didn't love Ida I should be very sorry to see her married to a spendthrift who would neglect her and waste her money.”

“ How do you know I would neglect her? ” demanded Edgar, savagely.

“ You say that you do not love her.”

“ Nor do I. But I shall marry her for all that.”

“ Don't bind yourself unless you are sure she has the money, Edgar,” advised Jane, her face sharp with avarice.

“ Oh she will have the money right enough,” said the young man with a shrug, “ old Borri~~n~~ has made his will, and, setting aside an annuity for Mrs Venery, Ida inherits everything. I wish the doctor would die! ”

“ What a cruel beast you are, Edgar,” burst out Edwin frowning. “ Borrin is such a dear old fellow. Surely you don't wish for his death? ”

“ Why shouldn't he? ” asked Jane, taking Edgar's side as usual to provoke her brother. “ Dr Borrin is over fifty, and is living a life like a cabbage. The

money is of no use to him. Now if Edgar had it——”

“ I’d have the time of my life,” interrupted Edgar enthusiastically. “ I want to live in town and have all that money can buy. I’d give Ida five hundred a year to dress on, with bed and board,” he ended coolly.

“ And would spend the rest of the money which rightfully should belong to her,” said Edwin sarcastically. “ How generous. Why Dr Borrin’s investments bring in ten thousand a year and more.”

“ Ten thousand a year and more,” murmured Jane, her face becoming crimson, as it always did when she was deeply moved by the mention of money, “ and to think that Ida will have so much.”

“ She will make good use of it.”

“ I dare say, Edwin, according to your notions. She is the kind of girl who will spend it in charity, and if you marry her you will help her to waste it in that way. Oh!” she clenched her hand, “ I wish I had it.”

“ What would you do with it? ”

“ Keep it to myself, and invest, and invest, and invest until I doubled the income. I don’t want to spend money: I never did want. All I desire is to have thousands a year coming in.”

“ What a miser you are, Jane,” said Edgar with a shrug, and lighting a cigarette, “ as if anyone could get pleasure from keeping money and not spending it. I don’t believe that you are economical because you want to save Edwin’s pocket and mine. You just scrimp us so as to save what you can out of the housekeeping money.”

Jane who had a small hoard of her own glanced at him disdainfully. “ I put aside something every

week which you two boys will be glad of when you are bankrupt."

"If we ever get what you put aside," said Edwin tolerantly, "your one idea is to save money and gloat over it, Jane. I don't envy Bally if he marries you. He will be stinted."

"I'd look after him for his good," said Jane with a pious look, "the waste that goes on at the Abbey is dreadful. And I could marry Mark if I liked."

"Then why don't you?" asked Edgar hastily. "He has a fine place and plenty of money and——"

"Has he?" inquired Jane in her turn very indifferently.

"Of course. Mark Bally is the master of the Abbey."

"Is he?" she said, still indifferent.

Edwin looked at her searchingly. "You are thinking of that family mystery, Jane," he remarked pointedly. "That rumour which states that Mark is only a kind of regent for the real owner in the person of his elder brother Alaric."

"What nonsense," burst out Edgar. "Why Mark told me himself that Alaric had died years ago. Mark owns the Abbey right enough. And if you are wise, Jane, you will marry him for his position and cash."

"Not until I am certain that Alaric really is dead," said Jane obstinately, "remember the rumour about the black cell."

"What rubbish!"

"Perhaps it is, and perhaps it isn't," said Miss Gurth tartly, "but there is certainly some doubt in my mind about the matter. Before I marry Mark, I must know the family secret, whatever it is."

"You will never know it," said Edwin positively,

“ plenty of people have tried to find out the secret but without success. For my part I don’t believe that there is any.”

“ Ah, that is what Dr Borrin says,” put in Edgar, turning away from the window, “ but Dr Minister thinks that there must be, and is determined to find it out.”

“ Is he ? ” Jane turned her dark eyes on her brother. “ I wish he would tell me, and then I might be certain that Mark’s title is not likely to be disputed. I would marry him then for his money ; and you, Edgar, could marry Ida for her money. We’d be so happy.”

“ Mark and Ida wouldn’t be happy, however,” said Edwin aghast at the intense selfishness of this speech, “ and what about me ? ”

“ Oh, you can look after yourself. Can’t he, Jane ? ”

“ Yes,” said Miss Gurth malignantly, “ you’re always setting yourself up for a paragon, Edwin, so a little taking down will do you good.”

“ I’m not a paragon,” cried Edwin, seeing that his brother and sister were as usual banding together, “ but I’m an honest man, and I shan’t see Ida or Mark sacrificed to you two greedy creatures.”

Jane, accustomed to compliments, rose quietly and rang the bell for the small servant to remove the remains of the breakfast. “ It is time to dress for church,” she said calmly. “ What is the use of calling names ? ”

There certainly was little use, as Jane was a block of ice, who could not be warmed into righteous anger, while Edgar cared very little what was said of him, so long as he had his creature comforts. When he followed in his sister’s wake to get ready for divine service, Edwin sighed and rested her head against

the window-pane, to look out into the neat garden and consider his position.

It was a particularly disagreeable one. The young man was kind-hearted and affectionate, a lover of peace, and of a charitable disposition. In all this he was a contrast to Jane and Edgar, who were devoured by selfishness and who would have sacrificed the whole world for their own pleasure. The knowledge that Edwin was of a more generous nature made them hate him fervently, and they were only too anxious to hurt him in every possible way. It was strange that he should differ so largely in his views of right and wrong from the two other members of his family, and had he not so closely resembled Edgar, he might have doubted if he came of the same stock. But there was no question that Jane was his sister and Edgar was his twin, and that in common decency he would have to put up with both, until such time as they married. But he was determined that Edgar should not make Ida his wife.

“ Even if he loved her I should make a fight for it,” thought Edwin, staring into the mists, “ but as he says so brutally that he only wants her money I shall expose his hand to Dr Borrin if Ida accepts him. But I don’t think she will, as I am sure she looks kindly on me. As to Jane she can marry Bally or not as she chooses. But I don’t think that she is so certain of getting him as a husband as she thinks. There certainly is some secret about the family, which makes Mark act oddly. I wonder if Alaric Bally did die, and if Mark really owns the Abbey? Of course, the black cell is all buncombe, yet it is strange that it should be remembered after three hundred years. Well,” Edwin straightened himself and yawned, “ if there really is a secret that old Minister is bound to

find it out. He is dogged and persistent and looks more like a mammoth than a human being."

Having finished his soliloquy he thought that he would get ready for church, but the conversation at the breakfast table did not tend to turn his thoughts towards religion, so he determined to stay at home. Jane, perfectly dressed, rebuked him as she went off with Edgar, but told those who inquired for the elder twin that Edwin had a bad headache and could not come out. She said this so sweetly and in such a motherly manner that everyone was deceived as usual, and applauded Jane for her beautiful nature. Edgar chuckled at the way in which his clever sister gulled the public.

"I wonder what they would say if they knew how we quarrelled?" he asked Jane, as they went home to the doll's house.

"They would not believe it," rejoined Miss Gurth calmly, "and after all I don't quarrel, Edgar."

"No you don't. But you always manage to make Edwin and I have a fight."

"It's your fallen natures. I am of a contented disposition."

"Bosh," said Edgar vigorously, "you have your little ambitions like the rest of us, Jane, and want to get all the money you can lay hands on."

"Do I?" questioned Jane quietly.

"Yes you do," he retorted. "I can see your idea of Paradise: sitting on a pile of gold and watching other people grinding their teeth because they haven't as much as you have. I don't believe you'd give a farthing to a beggar."

"I don't believe in indiscriminate charity, Edgar. If you were more like me in that respect you would be better off."

"Oh, I am like you there," said Edgar carelessly. "I keep my money for my own pleasures. It is Edwin who is the ass in giving money to the dirty poor. If he marries Ida he will throw her fortune away on orphans and beggars and weeping widows."

"Probably," said Jane serenely; "do you intend to let him marry Ida?"

"No I don't," was the fierce response. "I'd strangle him first."

"Oh, hush!" replied Miss Gurth in flute-like tones, "you mustn't talk of your brother in that wicked way."

"Oh, don't be a hypocrite," retorted Edgar crossly, "upon my word I am better than you are, Jane, as I don't pretend to be other than I am."

"Both you and Edwin may be better than I am," said Jane less quietly than usual, and her cheeks flushed, "but you are neither of you so strong. There is nothing I wouldn't do to get what I want."

"Heaps and heaps of money?" sneered her brother.

"Yes, and heaps and heaps in addition, Edgar. Tell me," she asked abruptly, "and tell me honestly—What are your chances with Ida?"

"Very good I think. She certainly," admitted the young man, reluctantly, "does like to be in Edwin's company."

"I believe that she likes Edwin better than she does you, and so does Dr Borrin," said Jane calmly, and getting at the absolute truth with the wonderful insight of a woman. "Propose carefully, Edgar, or she will refuse you. I perhaps could help you."

"For love?" demanded her brother with a side-glance.

"Oh, no," Jane opened her calm dark eyes at

the preposterous suggestion, "but I could speak to Ida on your behalf, and perhaps might induce her to marry you, if you gave me an undertaking to pay me ten thousand pounds on the day of your marriage."

"Upon my word that's cool," said Edgar, amazed at this blunt mercantile way of putting things, "but it's worth consideration, as I know you have some kind of female influence with Ida."

"I am very fond of Ida," was the even response.

"Because she makes you presents and takes you drives in her motor and lets you have a good time," scoffed Edgar, who knew his sister thoroughly.

"Of course," admitted Jane readily, "although I would not say as much to anyone else. But you daren't quarrel with me, Edgar, or betray me. I know too much about you."

"What do you know?" Edgar's dark face turned a trifle pale.

Jane laughed in quite a cheerful manner. "I know that you are not so pious as you pretend to be. You leave the house sometimes when Edwin thinks you are in bed. I've watched you coming and going."

"Have you said anything to anyone?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, no. I never give anyone away unless there is some reason for it. I am perfectly sure that you go to young Yeoville's house, where all the fast men of the neighbourhood congregate and play cards. I found a pack in your pocket on two occasions."

Edgar cast a swift side-glance at her serene face, and seemed relieved at the interpretation she put on his doings. "I find life so dull here, and Yeoville is a good fellow," he said apologetically. "I daren't gamble openly, as Borrin would get to hear of it and

then good-bye to my chances of making Ida my wife. You understand? ”

“ I understand,” said Jane delicately, “ only I think you are a fool to gamble and lose money you can't afford.”

“ Ah, but I win much oftener than I lose.”

Jane's nostrils expanded and she looked greedy. “ How much do you win? ”

“ Oh, I'm not going to tell you that. Keep my counsel and don't give me away to Edwin who is sneak enough to tell Borrin. Some day I'll tell you how much money I have won.”

“ Very good.” Miss Gurth shrugged her shoulders indifferently. “ I am never in a hurry. I have my own ideas about things. Only be careful, or you will lose Ida.”

“ And then——”

“ And then I shouldn't get the ten thousand pounds I mean to get from you by acting as your advocate,” said Jane coolly, “ the game isn't entirely in your own hands remember, Edgar.”

Her brother stopped and looked at her hard. “ Where the deuce do you get your cunning nature? ” he asked with strong distaste, for there was something about Jane's speech that scared him.

“ How rude you are. I am not cunning, only careful.”

“ A pretty name for an ugly quality.”

“ Well call it what you like, but if you had known father as well as you know me, you would not wonder that I am what I am. Father was clever, and I inherit his cleverness, as well as his strength of will which you and Edwin have not got. Father's only fault was that he behaved too scrupulously towards Dr Borrin; otherwise he would have made better use of

his handling that lot of money the doctor brought home from Peru."

"I suppose you would have swindled him," sneered Edgar uncomfortably.

"Oh, no. I never swindle anyone. But the labourer is worthy of his hire," was Jane's quiet reply, "we must live in this world, and I want money. As father failed to get the fortune I don't see why you shouldn't have it by marrying Ida: but remember you are not strong enough to get her without my help."

"Not strong enough?" echoed the brother much puzzled.

"Perhaps I use the wrong word. Not clever enough. Ida isn't the sort of girl to fall into your mouth like a ripe pear, remember. But if I talk to her——"

Edgar lost his temper at her assurance, being vain of his looks and tact, and dashing manner, which—he assured himself—took with all women. "I tell you what, Miss Jane, you are a confounded sight too pleased with yourself. I don't see why I should give you ten thousand pounds if I do marry the girl, as I am perfectly well able to get her without your assistance."

"As you please." Jane shrugged her shoulders, and advanced more slowly towards the doll's house, which was now in sight. "Try your luck and fail, for I tell you that Ida loves Edwin and not you."

"We'll see about that. I shall try this very afternoon. I shall try now. I shan't lose a moment." Edgar turned on his heel and walked swiftly away, but halted to come back and ask a question. "Do you intend to split about my going to Yeoville's card-parties?" he asked anxiously.

“ Oh, no. I won't use that knowledge unless it is necessary. I want you to marry Ida, remember.”

“ You won't get the ten thousand pounds anyhow.”

“ Oh, I think so. However, as you believe that you can manage without me, go and try your luck. When you come back we can talk over her refusal.”

“ You can't frighten me,” cried Edgar vain-gloriously, and speaking much more defiantly than he felt. “ I'm going to act as I think fit,” and he walked away with a resolute look and without a single backward glance.

Miss Gurth looked after him with a slight smile, and then entered the doll's house to remove her smart dress and substitute a very plain one. She then descended to the kitchen to see that the frugal dinner which she allowed her brothers on Sunday was ready. It was, as the small servant knew too much about Jane's methodical ways to dare to have the meal uncooked at the appointed hour. It was duly served up, and Jane took her seat at the table with Edwin facing her.

“ Where is Edgar? ” he asked, glancing round.

“ He has gone to propose to Ida Venery,” replied Miss Gurth coolly, and was pleased to note that the speech took away her brother's appetite. That loss made for economy and satisfied her miserly instincts.

CHAPTER V

TWO PROPOSALS

EDGAR was usually fond of his creature-comforts, therefore should have enjoyed the excellent dinner at the Manor, which was so different to the frugal meal provided by Jane. But on this occasion he ate very little, much to the distress of Mrs Venery, who always thought that a young man was sick if he did not act the part of a good trencherman. And Edgar was sick—sick with love, not of Ida herself, but for the money she would inherit from her uncle. He knew that he had stolen a march on his twin, and dreaded lest Edwin should make his appearance, and spoil the chance of a Sunday proposal. Therefore he did his best after dinner to inveigle Ida into the garden on the plea that it was better in the sunshine than indoors. The girl herself saw very plainly what was in his mind, and anxious to put an end to his philanderings which had annoyed her of late, she agreed to take a walk in the orchard.

Minister was present at the midday meal, and with his usual blundering interference proposed to accompany the young couple, quite forgetting that he was elderly and a nuisance. But Mrs Venery with the quickness of a woman guessed the truth and chained the big doctor to her side by asking wholly unnecessary questions concerning her health. She liked

Edgar who was wily enough to flatter her, and was not averse to having him as a son-in-law. He had a good profession, he was industrious, and—so far as she knew—a clean and wholesome young man. What more could she desire for Ida? Certainly he was not so rich as he might have been, but Mrs Venery, knowing that her brother had made a will in Ida's favour, did not object to the suitor's want of money. His good looks also had something to do with Mrs Venery's approval, since in this respect she was very feminine indeed.

"I do think you are stupid, Theo," she said with a deep reproach when the two lovers vanished, "can't you see?"

"See what, Lavinia?"

"Well, can *you* see?" asked Mrs Venery turning to her brother.

"See what, Lavinia?"

Mrs Venery looked at the two learned men, large and small, with deep disdain—the disdain of the quick-witted female for the stupid male. "Well you are dull, both of you," she exclaimed, shrugging her elegant shoulders, "why it is a case; anyone can see that."

"A case?" growled Minister, bending his black brows. "Explain yourself!"

"How dense you men are. Why, Edgar wants to propose to Ida. That is why he is taking her into the garden. And if I hadn't stopped you, Theo, you would have gone with them to spoil sport."

"Ha! Ha!" rumbled Minister, his brow clearing, "so that is the game Gurth is after, is it?"

"It is the game both the Gurths are after," said Borrin seriously, "but I am sorry that it isn't Edwin instead of Edgar. Never mind, Ida won't have him.

You may make your mind easy on that point. I am very glad as I much prefer the elder twin to the younger."

"The twin with the blue scarf to the twin with the red scarf," said Minister, "well for my part I don't see any difference between them."

"Physically there isn't, Theo. But I am quite sure that Edwin is the better man of the two."

"What do you say, Lavinia?"

"I like Edgar the best," replied Mrs Venery promptly, "he is much more polite and attentive."

"Much more artful you mean," said Borrin sharply. "I am not so blind as you think I am, Lavinia. I tell you Edgar is not as good a man as Edwin, and will not make Ida so good a husband. For one thing, he is too friendly with that scampish young Yeoville, who contains within himself all the vices of mankind."

Mrs Venery shrugged her shoulders again. Like most women she had a fondness for scamps, and considered that a thoroughly good young man was a bore. "I am sure Mr Yeoville is not so wicked as people say. He is so good-looking and well-dressed——"

"That he must be an angel," finished her brother with angry sarcasm. "How like a woman! Why, Theo, this beauty has a fine country house two miles away, and near the Abbey, which is a perfect pandemonium. He collects all the idle young men in the country, and they play cards there till the dawn. People of the most disreputable description come from town to assist at these devil-parties."

"Theo! Theo! Such language!"

"I beg your pardon, Lavinia, but it is useless to mince matters. I don't admire that rascal Yeoville and his gang, and if Edgar has anything to do with

them, as I suspect he has, he shall never marry Ida. I am not going to have a fine fortune dissipated by a spendthrift husband."

"Edwin your favourite may be just as big a spendthrift as Edgar, who after all is not a spendthrift," said Mrs Venery incoherently.

"How lucid," said Borrin grimly, rising to go to the library, "well we shall see, Lavinia. If Ida refuses Edgar, Edwin shall have his chance. I don't know how it is, but somehow I think that Edwin is as true as Edgar is false."

"Why they are twins and are alike in every way," snapped Mrs Venery, standing up for her favourite.

"In looks, yes; in personality, no."

"You have no reason to——"

"I am quite aware that I have no reason," said Dr Borrin with dignity, "but straws show which way the wind blows. One day when out with the twins, Edwin carried a bundle of wood which was too heavy for a little child, and gave the urchin sixpence when he set down the bundle at the brat's house. Edgar laughed at his brother as a simpleton. Now that shows me the difference in nature between the two. Edwin is kind and helpful; Edgar is selfish and wholly indifferent to the needs of humanity."

"Oh, my dear Josiah, what nonsense."

"By no means," cried Minister suddenly, "both twins being off their guard it is a very good illustration of their innate dispositions. As I am fond of Ida I shall make it my business to watch these two young men, and you may be sure that shortly I shall be able to say which one is the better of the two. So far I have not been observant."

"I like Edgar," said Mrs Venery obstinately, "because he is attentive to me."

“Edwin is also attentive,” said Borrin shrewdly.

“Oh yes, in a way. But——”

“But he doesn’t flatter you, and Edgar does. Another proof that the elder twin is the more honest of the two.”

Finding no more arguments in support of Edgar’s perfections, Mrs Venery retreated with great dignity, remarking that time would show who was right, and adding that if Ida chose Edgar she would be better pleased than if she became the wife of Edwin, “who is dull,” ended Mrs Venery, opening the door.

“He is by no means dull,” said Borrin dryly, “and let me point out to you, Lavinia, that if I don’t approve of the husband Ida chooses, it is very easy for me to tear up my present will which leaves her all, and make another one.”

“Oh Josiah——”

“You had better say no more, Lavinia”; and Lavinia being more discreet than one would suppose, did say no more, but retreated with surprising celerity.

“Now, Theo,” said Borrin briskly, “come to the library and I shall show you the bottle of the juice which I extracted from the roots we got from the Indians.”

“Do you mean to try an experiment?” asked Minister eagerly.

“Well yes, but not on you or on myself or on any human being. We can paralyse a cat or a dog, since a scratch will not hurt either. Then you can see if it is possible to revive the paralysed animal with your antidote.”

Minister nodded and his deep-set eyes gleamed. “I can get the leaves boiled and the antidote extracted to-morrow,” he said, following his little friend to

the door, "and if we are successful with a cat or a dog, surely you will not object to trying the injection on a human being, either you or myself? Or I tell you what," said Minister struck with a bright idea. "Let us submit one of the twins to the test, and whichever one consents shall have Ida."

"Certainly not," cried Borrin vehemently. "Ida shall choose for herself," and without further words he led the way into the library, where with Minister he was soon discussing the properties of the root and the leaves.

Ida *was* choosing for herself, and not in a way of which Edgar approved. When they left the house she led the young man through the more public part of the garden, pointing out the autumnal beauty of the grounds. But Edgar wished to reach the orchard, which was more secluded, and insensibly guided the girl's footsteps in that direction. Ida smiled covertly to herself, as she guessed what Edgar intended to do, and made no objection, since she was anxious to tell him plainly that she did not love him. Quite unaware that his proposal was answered even before he made it, Edgar walked by the girl's side down the narrow orchard walks bordered by tall lush grass which seemed well-nigh to smother the fruit trees. The pears had already been gathered, the plums also, but there remained a crop of red-cheeked apples, which glowed vividly amongst the yellow and fast-falling leaves. Round the orchard ran a mouldering wall of mellow red bricks, against which peach trees and apricot trees were trained, so that the place was as shut out from the world as the palace of the Sleeping Beauty. The idea occurred to Edgar, but if he believed that his Judas kiss which was given for money instead of for love could awaken this princess

he was vastly mistaken. He learned this truth more speedily than he liked.

"I have much to say to you, Ida," he began sentimentally, and tried to take her hand, an effort which she thwarted dexterously.

"Dear me, Edgar," her eyebrows went up and she looked at him frankly, "what can you have to say to me more than you have already said? We meet three or four times a week and must have exhausted the ordinary topics of conversation."

"But not the extraordinary ones," replied Edgar swiftly and looking very handsome and eager as he spoke. "I am about to ask you something unusual."

"Don't," advised Miss Venery, who had submitted to be led to the orchard to hear what he had to say, "you may receive an unusual answer so that all may be in keeping."

"You are trifling with me, Ida. My heart is hungry for——"

"Hungry! Are you hungry after the enormous luncheon you ate?"

"I ate nothing, if you only had looked," said Edgar, rather sulkily.

"Why should I look? Your eating doesn't interest me. But if you are hungry, Edgar," she added mischievously, picking an apple, "take this!"

He took it. "Can you give me nothing else, Ida?"

"What else can I give you?"

"Your heart," said the young man so sentimentally that she laughed, and shook her head positively.

"My heart must remain in my possession."

"But is it in your possession?" demanded Edgar jealously.

Ida's face grew cold and imperious. "At least it

is not in yours and is not likely to be," she said quietly.

"But I want it."

"Really! Want must be your master then."

"See here Ida—dear Ida," he seized her hands and held them firmly, "you know quite well that I love you. We have, so to speak, grown up together; at least we have known each other intimately as boy and girl, and young man and young woman for quite ten years."

Ida wrenched away her hands and a red spot burned on either cheek. "Perhaps it would have been better for you had we not known each other so intimately, Edgar," she said, striving to speak calmly, which was difficult, "for then you might have received a different answer."

"You have not answered yet," he reminded her.

"I have not been asked any question yet," she retorted, fencing.

"I ask it now, and will go down on my knees to ask it if you like. I love you, and I ask you to be my wife."

"That is explicit. Well then I am flattered by your proposal but I don't see my way to accepting it."

"You refuse me?" Edgar started back in dismay.

"It looks like it."

"But, Ida, don't answer in a hurry. I spoke to your mother, and she likes me."

"I dare say. But I am not my mother. It is I who have to live with you if I consent, and not my mother."

"Then you——"

"I say no. Ten times over I say no."

"Oh you are cruel," moaned Edgar, dejectedly,

and furiously angry at seeing two hundred thousand pounds take wings to themselves to fly away.

"I am sensible. Look here, Edgar, do you think a woman can't tell if a man is really and truly in love with her? If you think that, you are wrong. I am a woman, and I can read between the lines. You really don't love me."

"Then why should I propose?"

Ida looked at him deliberately. "I don't think the answer to that question would please you," she said in a low voice. "Suppose Uncle Josiah left his money to a charity instead of to me?"

"There's no chance of that," cried Edgar rashly, and falling into the trap, "he has made his will and you inherit everything save the sum set aside to buy an annuity for your mother."

"Oh," Ida flushed into sudden rage, as the mask fell from his face, "so it is the money you are after and not me!"

"No! No! No! A thousand times no," he exclaimed vehemently.

"If you said no ten thousand times I would not believe you, Edgar. You seem to be so well acquainted with Uncle Josiah's will——"

"Everyone knows how the money is left."

"I dare say, and knowing that I am an heiress you ask me to be your wife. I decline, and if you were the only man in the world I should still decline."

"Oh," Edgar grew white with thwarted rage, "then there is another man?"

"You have no right to say that."

"I shall say it. You have played fast and loose with my heart."

"Have I? It is the first time that I knew you possessed a heart."

“ You want to marry Mark Bally and be mistress of the Abbey.”

The suggestion was so preposterous that Ida laughed. “ Do I, indeed? You know me better than I know myself.”

“ Heartless girl——”

“ Oh, nonsense!” Ida took the arm of her rejected lover. “ Don’t be silly, you foolish boy. I like you well enough as a friend, and not well enough to be your wife. Let this proposal of yours be as though it had never been and things can go on in an agreeable fashion as they have done all these years.”

“ They can’t.” Edgar pulled himself free and scowled. “ I don’t see why you object to me. I am young and I have a good profession. I work hard and am not a scallywag. Ask Jane?”

“ I don’t need to ask Jane. Beyond the fact that you are too friendly with Dick Yeoville, I have nothing against you.”

“ Yeoville isn’t a bad fellow.”

“ I’m with you there, Edgar. He is his own worst enemy. But he is by way of being profligate, and can afford to be so, as he has money. You haven’t, and you are very silly to be with him so much. He will lead you into bad ways.”

“ I am not so easily led as you seem to imagine,” cried Edgar furiously, “ and whether I go with Yeoville or not is my own business.”

“ Entirely! I beg your pardon for referring to it,” and she turned away.

“ Ida! Oh, I say, Ida——”

“ Don’t say anything more,” the girl whose patience was fast wearing out, stamped her foot and turned wrathfully on this persistent lover. “ I won’t marry you. So there.”

“ I believe you want to marry Edwin,” blurted out Edgar recklessly.

Ida restrained herself by a strong effort and attempted to laugh off the pointed remark. “ Edwin hasn’t asked me yet.”

“ But he will.”

“ Oh, will he ? ” her face lighted up and she turned impulsively. “ That is—oh I don’t know what you are talking about. Go away and leave me,” she stamped again furious at having betrayed her secret.

“ I shan’t leave you.” Edgar came close up to her, and his eyes flashed angrily “ I am not going to be put off by your silly scruples. Edwin is a sneak and shan’t marry you. You are to be my wife and I shall kiss you now to prove it.”

Before Ida could retreat he seized her in his arms and tried to find her lips with his own. The girl swerved and pushed him back indignantly. “ Are you mad? Are you crazy ? ”

“ I am in love—in——”

He had no time to repeat the word. Two strong arms caught him by the shoulders and whirled him away from the girl to toss him on to a heap of withered leaves. “ You reptile,” shouted Edwin who had thus come to the rescue, “ if you dare to approach Ida again I shall break your neck.”

“ Oh Edwin! Edwin!” the girl with all her emotions on the surface clung to the new-comer, who had already thrown his arm round her drooping form.

Edgar rose with an expression that a devil might have envied. “ So that’s it, is it ? ” he said choking with anger. “ I am to be thrown aside for that worthless sneak, am I ? ”

Edwin calmly knocked his twin down with his

disengaged arm. "Do you want a thrashing?" he asked coolly, but quivering with wrath.

"Leave him alone, let him go," sobbed Ida, quite overcome. "Oh Edwin! Edwin!"

"I'll be even with you for this," growled the fallen twin rising once more but not attempting to resent his fall, "you think you will have your own way, Edwin. I swear that you shall pay for robbing me of my wife."

"I refuse to be your wife," cried Ida hysterically. "I refused before and I refuse again. I shall tell Uncle Josiah of your insulting behaviour and he will never allow you to come to the Manor again."

"Oh you and Edwin will make up a good lie between you," sneered Edgar, feeling himself very much at a disadvantage, and scarcely knowing what he said.

His brother allowed Ida to sink on to the seat under an apple tree and advanced towards Edgar. "I have had enough of this," he said quietly, and controlling himself by a great effort, "you have acted in a way which makes me ashamed to call you brother. Ida is perfectly free to choose her own husband, and to attempt to force her as you have done——"

"Oh you want her money, do you?" taunted Edgar with an ugly look.

"I want herself, and if she came to me as a pauper I should take her gladly as you know very well."

"I shall put you to the test," said a grave voice behind the young people, and they all turned to see Dr Borrin looking at them sedately.

Ida rose suddenly and went to her uncle. "He has insulted me," she said in a low voice, and shaking with anger.

“My dear girl, you must make allowance for a young man who has lost a prize,” observed Borrin quietly. “I have only this moment arrived in time to hear Edwin’s last speech, so I do not know what has taken place. Stop,” he threw up his hand, “I don’t wish to know. Let us give both these young men a fair chance.”

“I wouldn’t marry Edgar for the world,” cried Ida vehemently.

“Don’t be in a hurry,” said Borrin judiciously, “there may be more good in Edgar than you give him credit for.”

Edgar looked up hopefully at this speech as it seemed as though Borrin was on his side. His sullen face cleared. “Thank you, sir. If I have been unduly pressing in my attentions to Ida I am very sorry. But I love her so much that I lost my head for the moment.”

“You have behaved shamefully,” sobbed Ida, turning away to get nearer Edwin.

“I am very sorry. I can’t say more, can I? And as Edwin has knocked me down without my resenting it surely that makes a difference?”

“Yes it does,” cried the girl turning on him a look of contempt, “if you had hit Edwin back I should have admired you more.”

“Oh, that is easily remedied,” said Edgar, dashing forward, and would have struck his twin in the face, but that Dr Borrin flung himself between the two young men. “Let me get at him,” cried Edgar, struggling furiously.

“No, no!” said the doctor and held back the angry lover with a strength of which he did not seem capable, considering his size. “I make every allowance for your disappointment, but you must be

reasonable. Come now, listen. I have something to say."

The twins and Ida looked at the doctor in surprise, as they were greatly astonished by his calm tones. His quiet and even speech brought them to their senses, and they were all rather ashamed of indulging in the prehistoric passions which had caused such a scene. With a nod of approval the doctor continued:

"I have made a will in favour of Ida," he said serenely, "and, with the exception of a certain sum set aside to purchase an annuity for my sister, she inherits everything. This is no secret, as everyone knows of my intention. But I have observed that young people who inherit money rarely benefit so far as their natures are concerned. I think that I should be acting more sensibly towards Ida by letting her marry without a single penny. Only in this way she will find a husband worthy of her, as he will have to work hard to give her the luxuries to which she has been accustomed. Now I intend shortly to alter my will, and leave everything save my sister's annuity to a charity. I shall give Ida her trousseau, and one thousand pounds. Whosoever takes her must take her on these terms. I am not joking. I speak in earnest."

"But it's not fair," blurted out Edgar, greatly dismayed.

"What do you think, Ida?" her uncle asked with a slight smile.

"Well, I don't like to be poor," said the girl, who looked somewhat dismayed; "but I can understand what you mean, Uncle Josiah. After all, any man who loves me can support me, and you have taught me to live very simply."

“ And your opinion, Edwin ? ” Borrin turned to the elder twin.

“ I love Ida, and I am willing to marry her without getting a penny,” said Edwin simply. “ I can say no more than that.”

“ I don’t ask you to say more. You have justified my confidence in you. Well, Edgar, what do you say ? ”

“ You are joking,” said Edgar once more, “ it isn’t fair.”

“ I am not joking, and Ida admits it is fair. Well, do you still wish to marry my niece ? ”

“ No,” said Edgar bluntly ; “ I’m not a fool. I earn enough for one, but not for two, and I don’t want to drag Ida down to poverty.”

“ That is noble of you. Well, as the question is settled, had you better not go, my friend ? ”

Edgar stood irresolute for the moment ; then, recognising that he had burnt his boats, he turned on his heel and stalked gloomily away. Ida looked after him with contempt, and then glanced at Edwin. He drew her to his breast, “ Will you be my wife, dear ? ” he asked softly.

“ Yes,” she replied, and the betrothal was sealed with a kiss.

“ Good,” said Borrin cheerfully, “ but remember, I mean what I say. Paupers you are, and paupers you remain.”

CHAPTER VI

THE EXPERIMENT

JANE was delighted when she heard what had happened. Being able to manage Edgar much easier than Edwin, she would have preferred him to marry Ida had Ida been rich. But if her instrument, as Edgar truly was by reason of her stronger mind, married a penniless wife, such a marriage would not bring grist to her mill. And Jane wanted grist very badly; for her one great idea—strange in so young a woman—was to accumulate a heap of gold and gloat over it. She did not want money for what it could buy, but for its own sake. Through Edgar she had hoped to be able to handle Borrin's wealth, but there seemed small chance of that now, since the little doctor was determined to leave his fortune to some charity not specified. Judging Edwin by her own mean nature, Jane, and Edgar also, freely taunted their brother with his prospect of a pauper bride.

"I dare say you think that Dr Borrin will leave Ida the money after all," said Jane, when Edwin simply laughed at her dismal prophecies.

"No, I don't. He stated clearly that he was in earnest. Ida gets her trousseau and one thousand pounds, nothing more."

"And you will take her on those terms?" sneered Edgar.

“Yes,” replied the elder twin coldly. “I am not like you, Edgar. I love Ida for her own sweet self and not for the fortune she was supposed to possess.”

“I’m glad that I learned the truth before it was too late,” retorted Edgar comfortably. “And because I have saved my skin I forgive you for the way in which you assaulted me.”

“I don’t want your forgiveness,” said Edwin wrathfully. “You behaved in a most scandalous manner to Ida, and deserved what you got. I’ll thrash the life out of you if you insult her again.”

“Hush! Hush!” said Jane, mindful of public opinion. “We are supposed to be a very united family, so don’t let us let the truth be known.”

“You always were a hypocrite, Jane,” said her brother bitterly. “However, I am quite willing to behave decently to Edgar so long as he treats Ida with respect.”

“Oh, I shan’t bother about her in the least now,” cried Edgar, coolly. “When she was rich it was different. I don’t mind your making a fool of yourself, now.”

“I always thought that Edwin was weak in the head,” observed Jane spitefully. “This silly match proves it.”

The elder twin looked sadly at the pair so different to him in their notions of honour. “It is about time that you left me to my own devices,” he remarked significantly. “Don’t meddle with my affairs either of you. Otherwise I shall live in town and Jane can explain the break-up of the united family as best she can.”

“Oh, but that would be silly,” cried Miss Gurth, who did not relish the loss of Edwin’s contributions

to the household, "let us keep together until you are married."

"Only on one condition, Jane. You and Edgar must leave my affairs alone and drop this habit you have of banding together to taunt me. My nature is different to yours."

"It's a very foolish nature," retorted Jane contemptuously. "You are marrying, not to acquire a fortune, but to double your expenses. What is the use of life without money?"

"Love, such as Ida bears me, is worth more than money."

"You moonstruck idiot," said Edgar politely.

"That's enough," commanded Edwin sharply; "take care. I can box better than you as we have often proved, and I am stronger in body. Don't tempt me to give you a thrashing for insolence."

"Hang your impertinence," shouted Edgar, growing red. "I'd like to see you lay a finger on me, you bully."

Jane frowned on her younger brother. "Hold your tongue, Edgar. Edwin is right since his business is his own and not ours."

"I hope you will bear that in mind," said Edwin pointedly, and the disagreeable conversation ended for the time being.

Having given up all hope of acquiring the ten thousand pounds, owing to Borrin's strange announcement, Jane turned her attention in other directions. Edgar with his spendthrift habits and gambling instincts was not to be relied upon to give her the wealth she desired, while Edwin, soon to be saddled with a penniless wife, was worse than useless. Mark Bally remained. He admired Jane's demure looks and great common sense, not being clever

enough to read her true character; nor was anyone else for the matter of that, as Jane wore her mask very cleverly. She deceived Mark as she deceived everybody, and knowing that he took her at her own valuation she did not see why she should not become the mistress of the Abbey, and of a good income. The rents of the Bally estates certainly amounted to five thousand pounds a year.

It was during the ensuing week when she came to the determination to make a bid for a rich marriage, that Mark Bally paid a visit to the doll's house. He was a tall, lean young man with a reddish moustache and reddish hair. His face was intelligent enough, but was overshadowed by a look of profound sadness, which never departed, however merry the circumstances or conversation. For the rest he was well-dressed, well-groomed and of a distinctly aristocratic appearance. On the whole, when he entered the small drawing-room, Jane thought that she might do worse considering his looks and wealth. For five thousand a year was immense wealth to a young woman who had hitherto dealt more with pennies than with pounds.

"What a pity you did not come earlier," said Jane, after a cordial greeting and quite her best motherly manner in evidence, "you would have met Edwin and Edgar. They have gone to the Manor to see some experiment."

"I don't want particularly to see either," confessed Bally, candidly. "Edwin bores me rather and Edgar irritates me."

"Oh dear," Jane lifted her dark eyebrows, "what a cruel indictment of our family. And what have you to say against me?"

"Nothing. You are the best of the lot."

“ You are always saying that,” murmured Jane, flushing with pleasure and looking down demurely.

“ But you don't mean it.”

“ Why don't I mean it? ”

“ That is best known to yourself. At all events you give no proof that you do mean it.”

“ Do you wish me to fetch you the Great Cham's diadem, or the Roc's egg in proof of my admiration? ” said Bally shrugging.

“ I ask for possibilities and not for impossibilities,” said Miss Gurth colouring again in quite a pretty way.

“ I don't know but what anything and everything is an impossibility,” said Mark in his most gloomy tone, and his face grew dark, as he tugged moodily at his moustache, “ if you only knew——”

“ Knew what? ” asked Jane, wondering if he was about to tell her the family secret which made him look so much older than he was.

Her question was a mistake, as she saw immediately, for Bally glanced at her in a suspicious manner and changed the subject, or rather evaded it. “ Knew what a lot of trouble I have in looking after the Abbey. I would rather be in town enjoying myself, but I am tied by the leg to the infernal place.”

“ Why are you tied by the leg? ” asked Jane sharply, seeing that he had checked his impulse to confide in her.

“ Oh, hang it, a man has to look after his property.”

“ His property,” mused Miss Gurth significantly. “ *His* property! ”

Whether Bally caught her meaning or not it was impossible to say. If he did he took no notice, but introduced a new topic of conversation. “ Who is this Dr Minister? ” he demanded aggressively. “ He has turned up twice at the Abbey in a fine motor-car,

and the first time he brought a card of introduction from Dr Borrin."

"You have answered your own question, Mr Bally. He is a friend of Dr Borrin's, and is staying for a few weeks at the Harper Inn. He is a great trav——"

"Oh, yes. I know he has travelled," interrupted Mark quickly, and not very amiably. "He bored me at length with his description of his travels. He's an old pal of Borrin's, I know. But what I don't know is why he should bother me with questions about things which are none of his business."

"What kind of questions?"

"Oh, you know our supposed family secret which is all moonshine and poppy-cock," said Mark with a shrug. "There's no secret of course, but only this silly legend about the black cell. Well this Minister man will insist that there is truth in the legend and wants to search for the cell."

"Did you allow him to?"

"Oh, yes. There isn't such a place that I ever heard of, and I told him as much. I gave him permission to search and he has been hunting amongst the ruins of the old church."

"Without success, I suppose."

Mark smiled. "Naturally since there isn't any black cell, or Brother Thomas, or curse, or anything of that sort which goes to make up the lie. But I don't mind his rubbish in that respect as all the county know about our tradition. What I do object to is his inquiry as to whether my brother Alaric was still alive. Such a cheek to ask me that."

"Hum!" said Jane judicially, "it's none of his business, certainly. But he is a very inquisitive man as you have learned and if there is a secret——"

“ There isn’t; there isn’t,” interrupted Bally so earnestly that Jane was very well assured that there was.

“ Then you needn’t bother your head, Mr Bally. But why does Dr Minister ask about your brother Alaric? ”

“ Well,” Mark actually smiled, though in a saturnine manner, “ this ass having heard talk about the Glamis Castle mystery thinks that our secret must be something of the same kind. He hinted that Alaric might be a monstrosity hidden away in the black cell.”

“ What did you say? ” asked Jane curiously.

“ Say, what could I say but that he was talking through his hat? Alaric was my elder brother and died a few hours after birth. He just lived long enough to be christened, and is buried safe enough in the family vault. It is very queer,” mused Bally thoughtfully, “ how that mere fact has kept the name in the memories of the country-people. Minister got his idea of Alaric’s continued existence from the chatter of Mrs Heasy and the rest of the idiots.”

“ What are you going to do? ” questioned Jane, revolving the weird story in her mind, and wondering if it could possibly be true.

“ Nothing! These rumours of a secret chamber and a secret birth have been current hereabouts ever since the reign of Henry VIII., when we first got the Abbey. Minister can’t learn anything more than is already known.”

“ Is there anything to learn? ”

“ No,” said Mark promptly, “ nothing. But what I intended to say is this, that it was in my mind to charter a yacht and go to the South Seas for a few years if only to shake off this gloom, and the gossip

which makes the gloom. I am supposed to be a man with a terrible secret, whereas I am not."

"But you are rather dismal you know, Mr Bally."

"Bad crops, big expenses, small rents are sufficient to account for my sombre looks," said Mark hurriedly.

"But this voyage?—I want to go."

"Well, why don't you?"

"I hate to go alone."

"Hire a companion," suggested Jane.

"I don't care for bought friendship," said Bally coldly. "I want someone who loves me for myself, and not for what can be got out of me. Now, you, my dear Jane—I mean Miss Gurth are——"

"Oh, I don't mind being called Jane by you," said the lady forcing the proposal which she saw trembling on his lips. "We have known each other all our lives you know—Mark."

"Yes," he drew his chair closer to her, "and I know what a good and loving wife you will make. I know also what a fine business woman you are, who can help me to get the estates into better order. If I could only ask you to come on this voyage!" he paused and shook his head.

"Flattering!" said Jane, rather tartly for she was exasperated by this eleventh hour hesitation, which had happened frequently before. "You hint that you love me, yet hint also that I am not good enough for one of your long descended family."

"I assure you that is a mistake," Mark cried eagerly. "I think you are a hundred times too good for me. If I could only marry you and go on this voyage, I should be the happiest man in the world."

"Then why not be the happiest man," sighed Jane softly, yet very much on the alert for an answer.

"Oh, Jane, do you really care for me?"

“ Yes. You might have seen that ages ago.”

“ I thought I did,” said Bally, timidly taking her hand, “ and then I was afraid to hope because—because ”—he released her hand with a groan and pushed his chair back abruptly. “ Because it’s impossible.”

“ Our marriage? Why is it impossible? ”

“ My affairs are not what they might be,” muttered Mark lamely.

“ What of that? You paid me the compliment of saying that I was a good business woman, so why not let me help you with your affairs as you suggested.”

Mark rose and went to the window. “ It’s impossible,” he said firmly, although there was a hint of faltering in his tones. “ I can’t marry until I know how I stand. My father left the family affairs in such a muddle that I have never been able to get them straight. Just my luck!” and he drummed on the window-pane with his fingers.

Jane sat quietly where she was, pondering over his strange behaviour. She was perfectly certain that the reason he assigned for not prosecuting his suit was a wrong one. Yet think as she might she could not conjecture why the young man should hesitate in asking definitely for her hand. “ There must be some secret,” she murmured, frowning, yet low as she spoke Bally overheard and his face grew dark.

“ Surely you are not taken up with the silly rumours of the country-side,” he said violently. “ I thought you were more sensible.”

“ I *am* sensible,” said Jane cheerfully, and making her mind up to wait until she could learn more; “ it was only an idea. I love you, Mark, and am content to wait until your affairs are settled.”

“ My darling,” cried the young man, moving

swiftly into the middle of the room to clasp her in his arms, "you are an angel. I wish——" he again released her abruptly, "no, I don't wish. After all it would be better if I died a bachelor."

"Not better for me," said Jane beaming. "What strange ideas you have."

Bally looked at her searchingly, but so clever was Jane in concealing her true feelings that he only saw a fresh, demure, candid face. "What a dear you are," he said disconsolately, "and how good you are to put up with my shilly-shally ways. But there," he stretched himself, "let us talk no more about it for the time being. When I can ask you in all seriousness to be my wife, I shall not lose a moment."

Jane went forward and kissed him with the air of a vestal virgin. "I am ready to wait, dear," she said simply, "and now let us walk to the Manor and see the experiment."

"What is it?" asked Bally, as Jane left the room.

"Something to do with poison and an antidote," she called back. "I'll be ready in a few moments."

Mark Bally listened indifferently to the information. He knew that Borrin was in the habit of making various experiments, and thought that as the little doctor's friend this traveller found the like pleasure in learning the secrets of minerals and herbs. He therefore gave but a passing thought to what Miss Gurth had said and took his stand on the hearth-rug to look at his sad face in the tiny mirror. He was only five-and-twenty yet he looked as though he bore the burden of the world. With a groan he withdrew his eyes and sat down.

"I wish to the Lord that I was Smith, or Jones, or Robertson without a big family name, or any

money," he said aloud and heavily. "There are some things one can pay too much for."

Jane, who had paused to put on her hat and jacket outside the door, at the sound of his voice, halted to hear more. But Mark said no more, and only groaned, so she entered with a sweet smile to ask if he were in pain. "You are sighing like a furnace."

"That is because I am a lover," said Bally, his face growing brighter at the sight of her charming looks. "Come along and amuse me with the gossip of the village. You always comfort me."

Miss Gurth laughed and settled her rounded chin into a dark fur boa. Having the instinctive caution to keep her miserly nature concealed, she always dressed well. But the excuse that her twin brothers were not rich did away with the necessity of arraying herself in costly garments. What she wore, was of good material and shaped fashionably, yet a woman would have observed a certain scrimping, hinting either at poverty or meanness. Perhaps Ida and Mrs Venery saw this, but they generously put it down to Jane's loudly confessed idea to spare her brothers' pockets. Man-like Bally could see nothing but a delightfully charming girl, dressed to perfection and with the demure air of a Puritan maid. Jane had few charms in the way of good looks, but those she had were made to do double duty. Thus when not in the presence of true beauty such as Ida possessed, Miss Gurth looked smart and attractive.

"This experiment?" questioned Bally, as the two walked along the splashy road and under a grey lowering sky promising rain, "what's it about?"

Jane told him as much as she had gathered from the remarks of her brothers and the bluff speech of Minister. She described how Borrin possessed the

root which caused either death or paralysis, and how his friend had brought to Hepworth village the antidote. Then she passed on to some scanty account of the use of root and leaves in the sacred ceremonies of the Andean Indians. Bally listened indifferently at first and finally became interested. "This poison extracted from the root gives a painless death, you say?"

"I don't say that. Dr Borrin does. He had extracted the juice with the idea of getting the Government to substitute poison for hanging."

"That's ridiculous. But Borrin was always a crank."

"I think Dr Minister is just such another," said Miss Gurth smartly, "and if Dr Borrin's idea is to get rid of criminals painlessly, I don't see what is the use of Dr Minister's antidote. The Government won't want to bring wicked people back to life."

"How can the antidote do that, when the juice of the root causes death?"

"Oh, it only does that when injected in large quantities. But a single scratch of anything steeped in the poison produces paralysis, and a dose of the antidote restores the body to health again. That is the experiment the two doctors are trying to-day."

"What a silly game," said Mark, with the contempt of the ordinary man for what he cannot understand. "Where's it being played?"

"In the library, I fancy," said Jane, when the two came in sight of the lovely old house, clothed greenly in dark ivy. "Let us go in by the bow-window. I see that it is open and Dr Borrin gave me permission to use that entrance if I wanted to."

They stepped in through the framed glass door which had been so deftly contrived in the bow-window

and found themselves in the middle of a group listening to Dr Borrin. The little man was lecturing before his writing-table upon which lay a seemingly dead dog—a black retriever—and was frequently interrupted by Dr Minister who agreed with him, contradicted him, and argued volubly. Mrs Venery with Edgar beside her was seated on the sofa, while Edwin stood beside Ida's chair near the fire-place. The two wise men were standing. Evidently the experiment had not yet taken place, as it was apparent that the young men had only arrived. At all events they still wore their overcoats made exactly alike with a blue silk muffler to distinguish Edwin, and a red silk muffler to indicate Edgar. Bally thought again, and he had often thought before how singularly alike were the twins.

After hurried greetings Borrin went on speaking and pointed out that the dog before him had been poisoned by an injection.

“Not an injection, by a scratch,” interrupted Minister. “An injection would cause death, whereas a scratch——”

“Will you let me conduct the experiment in my own way, Theo,” cried Borrin in a vexed manner. “Scratch let it be. I used the wrong word.”

“This is the flint which inflicted the scratch,” said the irrepressible Minister, holding up an arrow-head which probably belonged to the Stone Age. “It was steeped in the poison here,” and he pointed to a saucer filled with a kind of greenish liquid.

“Let me speak, Theo,” said Borrin mildly, “yes, my friends, the flint has been steeped as has been mentioned. This is the juice of the roots,” and he held up a small bottle half filled with the poison.

“And this is the antidote,” cried Minister in his

big voice as he produced a phial containing a mixture of a reddish tint.

“ Well then, let us try the effect of the antidote,” said Borrin.

“ One moment,” blustered Minister, “ come all of you and see if this dog isn’t paralysed and incapable of motion in any way.”

The dog might have been stone dead for all the evidence it gave of life as the company found when they examined the animal. The body lay stiffly on the table with widely open eyes at which Ida shuddered.

“ Poor thing,” she said.

“ Poor nonsense,” cried Minister vigorously; “ why the scratch just sent the beast to sleep gently and painlessly. He looks as though he were dead, doesn’t he? ” and he appealed to all for confirmation.

“ Not when you examine the body closely,” contradicted Borrin tartly. “ See, the breathing is just perceptible to a trained eye.”

“ No eyes here are trained save yours and mine,” retorted the traveller gruffly, and elbowed his little friend aside. “ Come, let me give the beast a dose of the antidote.”

He uncorked the bottle and poured a trifling quantity of the reddish coloured liquid into a spoon. This was poured down the animal’s throat between his stiffly closed jaws, and then the result was carefully watched. After three or four minutes the eyelids closed over the staring eyes, the legs curled up, and the apparently dead dog rolled on his back. Then while the two savants were rubbing their hands at this proof of the efficacy of the antidote, the dog staggered to his feet and uttered a low bark. Minister caught him and rubbed his body and limbs

vigorously, then placed him on the ground. In less time than it takes to tell, the dog was frisking round, barking, and apparently in the best of health. All expressed their surprise.

"It's wonderful, isn't it," said Minister beaming. "Sambo's as healthy as ever he was in his life, and has had a refreshing sleep into the bargain."

"I don't call paralysis a sleep," said Mrs Venery, much displeased, as she thought that the whole business suggested vivisection.

But the rest of the company loudly praised the success of the experiment, and were very delighted. Only Mark Bally was silent and stared at the bottles of life and death with a queer expression. Minister noted the odd look.

CHAPTER VII

AT THE ABBEY

SEEING that Mark Bally disliked Minister and his too inquisitive nature so thoroughly, it might have been thought that he would have been consistent enough to avoid this—in his opinion—objectionable person. But to the surprise of Jane, who knew more about his feelings than anyone else, Bally actually courted the big doctor's society, and went so far as to accompany him round the county on a short motor-tour, pointing out objects of interest and making himself generally agreeable. Furthermore, when Minister expressed his intention of settling in Hepworth, Bally offered him the tenancy of a delightful old cottage, which stood back some distance from the high-road midway between the Abbey and the Manor. The doctor saw over the place, said that it was just what he wanted, and in his impetuous way wished to run up to London and buy furniture straight away. But Borrin, knowing his old friend's weathercock disposition, persuaded him to take a week to consider the matter before committing himself. This suggestion the impulsive traveller somewhat unwillingly accepted.

During the week Bally invited his possible tenant, the people at the Manor, and the twins, along with their sister to an afternoon at the Abbey. He did not ask them to dinner, because—for some reason best

known to himself—he rarely entertained company. The visitors were to arrive at two o'clock and go away at six, refreshing themselves with afternoon tea at half-past four. In this way Bally hinted they would be able to see, not only over the interior of the Abbey, but could walk in the grounds and explore the picturesque ruins, which were the delight of artists. Many times had the remains of the monastic church figured on the walls of the Academy.

“You seem to be coming out of your shell,” remarked Miss Gurth when she arrived at the big house.

“Don't you think it is about time?” he asked lightly, for he certainly appeared to be less gloomy than usual in his looks, on this occasion.

“Oh, yes. Quite time. But what has led you to depart so far from your usual habits, as to have a noisy party here? You see no one, as a rule.”

“Well, things are getting better with me,” explained Mark awkwardly. “Owing to my economy I am now freeing the estate from the financial burdens which my father and grandfather placed upon it. I am able to spend money without compunction. Therefore——” he shrugged his shoulders and smiled amiably.

Jane cast a queer sidelong glance at him. She did not in the least believe this explanation, as the afternoon tea would not cost much, and so far as such a mild entertainment went Bally could have given a hundred in the year! With the incurable suspicion which was deeply implanted in her nature she believed that he had some other reason and kept her eyes and ears open to see what that reason might be. From his pointed attentions to the two doctors, she began to think that his sudden hospitality had to do

with them. But in what way, she could not for the moment conceive.

However, be this as it may Bally certainly was a delightful host. He welcomed his guests standing on the steps of the old Tudor house which had been built out of the ruins of church and monastery, and suggested that before entering, they should take the opportunity of seeing the grounds during the continuance of the brief October sunshine. It happened to be a very pleasant day, mild and warm, with a blue sky filled with golden lights—one of those summer days which occasionally stray into the autumnal months. In the vast park, the trees were shedding their withered leaves, brown, yellow and red in crackling showers, and through the bare branches could be seen the distant square tower of Hepworth church, the tangle of roads and lanes marked out by high hedges, and a sprinkling of red-roofed houses alone or in clusters. And when the party turned their backs on this familiar scene, which they did, before them rose the grey old mansion with its twisted stacks of chimneys and many glittering windows. The mellow tints of the worn stones, the mantle of dark ivy which draped them, and the high roofs of red tiles, all made up an attractive picture. On either side of the big houses were groves of ancient oaks rapidly growing bare of leaves, and on the right in the background rose the mouldering ruins of monastery and church. It was these last that the visitors explored first and Bally related how his ancestor Amyas had destroyed the ancient habitation of the monks to build his lordly mansion. The idea seemed to be ridiculous to Minister, and he said as much in his bluff, domineering voice.

“Why couldn't the man have taken up his abode

in the ready-made monastery, and have turned the church into a banqueting hall?"

"Oh, that last would never have done, Theo," said Mrs Venery greatly shocked, "a sacred edifice!"

"Pooh! nonsense, Lavinia! In Henry's days the laity thought very little of such things. If they had thought at all they wouldn't have despoiled the Church as they did. Since they went thus far, they might have gone further."

"Well, I think it showed a very right feeling in Amyas Bally not to have done as you suggest, doctor," said Ida decidedly.

"Hear! Hear!" cried Edwin approvingly. "Just what I think."

Bally laughed and then looked gloomy. "I don't think it was any right feeling on the part of Amyas," he said with some hesitation, which he always evinced when talking of his family traditions. "The fact is Brother Thomas——"

"Well, well," said Borrin who looked neater and smaller than ever, "what about Brother Thomas. We know that he was a powerful magician."

"A magician, doctor?" questioned Jane disbelievingly. "I am surprised to hear you make use of that word, which should be kept for fairy tales."

"Call Brother Thomas an alchemist, then," retorted the little man, impatiently. "That will answer your objection. I believe from what we know of him that he belonged to one of those secret societies—propably the Rosicrucians who concealed great truths under their jargon. At all events he was in advance of his age, and was liable to be burnt."

"From what our family papers say," said Bally

dryly, "everyone being superstitious was very much afraid of Brother Thomas. He ran no chance of being burnt, I assure you."

"Humph!" said Minister doubtingly. "Superstition wouldn't have counted much with a man like Henry Tudor. But what were you about to say concerning the man, Mr Bally?"

"He said that if Amyas lived in the monastery, or turned the church to secular purposes, that he would——"

"Kill him," suggested Edgar, who was seated on a stone pillar looking very much bored.

"No. Paralyse him."

"What a beastly idea," muttered the young man, frowning.

"I wish I'd lived in the days of Brother Thomas," cried Minister, swelling out his big chest like the frog in the fable. "My antidote would have cured Amyas or anyone else."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Bally, glancing from the big doctor to the small doctor. "Suppose we explore the ruins while the sunshine lasts."

Jane followed the party through the broken door of the church, pondering over the glance of Bally when he stared at the doctors. She had noted that whenever the Indian poison and its antidote were mentioned Bally always seemed to be interested, and wondered whether the unexpected invitation to the Abbey had anything to do with the doctors' possession of the drugs. On reflection, she presumed not, as Bally could have no use for such things either to kill or cure. All the same it was curious that he should be on the alert for information whenever either Borrin or Minister mentioned them. At this point her reflections ended as Bally drew her atten-

tion to the ruins. "Not a very large church as you see, Miss Gurth," he said, waving his hand, "but perfect of its kind."

"Very imperfect, I should say," retorted Jane, gazing round at the dilapidated fane. "It's all in pieces. If Amyas Bally didn't make use of the place he might have preserved it."

Bally shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, he, like other people of that day, was dead against the Romish Church and so let her works decay. But it is picturesque, isn't it?"

It was indeed picturesque, although Jane was of too utilitarian a nature to appreciate such useless beauty. She would have levelled the building to plough the land for corn, or to erect cottages which would bring in regular rents. Or else—a thought struck her—"Why don't you charge a shilling a head for tourists to come and view the ruins?" she asked.

Bally was quite shocked to hear such a sordid speech from such charming lips. "Oh, that would never do," he exclaimed. "We have not come to that yet, Miss Gurth. Besides, I prefer that people should keep away from the ruins."

"Why?" asked Edgar, who was sauntering close at hand.

"Oh," Bally looked a trifle confused, "well you see I am something of a hermit and don't like tourists."

"Perhaps you are afraid lest they should discover the black cell?" joked Dr Minister in his magnificent way.

Bally darted an angry glance at his guest. "I have told you at least a dozen times that there is no black cell," he said with unnecessary violence.

"Perhaps not," put in Ida soothingly. "But I

prefer to think that it exists since the legend is so picturesque."

"There may be truth in the legend," remarked Dr Borrin thoughtfully. "For my part I believe that a grain of truth is to be found in all so-called superstitions."

The young host shook his head and compressed his lips, evidently annoyed by this persistent belief of everyone in the weird tradition of his family. However, he said nothing more lest he should make bad worse, but conducted the party round the tumble-down building, which was at once attractive and impressive. The roof had long since decayed, so that the thick walls and the two interior lines of pillars supported nothing but mouldering oaken beams here and there. The pavement was cracked in many places and thin grasses sprang through the crevices, while bramble bushes grew in the side aisles, and a perfect forest of plants flourished in the chancel. Five steps led to this sanctuary, and midway between these and the rounded termination of the building stood the remains of the high altar, marked at the corners and in the centre with the five crosses representing the five wounds of Christ. There were even some fragments of the reredos with carvings of apostles and saints. On either side of the altar to the walls stretched a high iron fence with no opening which had been erected—so Mark Bally declared—by a Georgian ancestor. Why, he was unable to say, but there it was preventing anyone going behind the altar, and there it had been allowed to remain.

"Humph!" mused Minister, staring at the rusty iron railings, "there must have been some reason for erecting such a stout palisade."

"Perhaps," said Bally lightly, and yet as Jane

noticed with an uneasy air. "But I have not yet been able to discover the reason. Jump over, doctor, and see if you can find any."

"I am too stout," laughed the big man, peering through the rusty spikes; "besides I see nothing but fragments of fallen stones and bushes growing amidst the grasses."

The young host laughed with a rather relieved air, and led the way out into the open. As it was growing chilly he proposed that they should look over the house. This was agreed to and shortly Bally was guiding the party through room after room of ancient magnificence. If the family, which had now dwindled to one representative, was poor, the poverty assuredly did not reveal itself in the decorations or furniture. Certainly these belonged mainly to Georgian times, consisting of spindle-legged chairs, gilded tables, inlaid cabinets, and China monsters. But they were worth much money as Jane's greedy glances told her, and would realise a large sum if sold. If Mark was so poor and encumbered as he said he was, why did he not sell such valuable antiques? She asked Bally this question in a whisper, but he protested that he would rather starve than part with such relics of the past splendour of the family. Jane shrugged her shoulders and promised herself should she become mistress of the Abbey to overcome these scruples. Ida and Mrs Venery on the contrary applauded Mark for his reverence of the past.

"Besides you would never be able to buy furniture to suit these lovely old rooms," said Ida, admiring the vast drawing-room in which the party finally assembled to enjoy afternoon tea. "Jane, you are a Goth," she added, for her sharp ears had caught the whispered question.

“ I am practical,” retorted Jane, who had no great love for Ida, and looking upon her as a visionary. “ Because I like everything up to date and comfortable.”

Edgar nodded. “ Electric light, private Turkish baths, lifts, motors, and a first-class French cook,” he said lightly. “ Mark, you don’t know how to enjoy life.”

“ There isn’t much chance of my enjoying life,” said Mark gloomily; then catching the eyes of all fastened inquisitively on him he added hurriedly: “ I mean that my grandfather left the estates so encumbered that all my time is taken up with solving the financial difficulties. Upon my word,” he went on as two staid old footmen brought in the tea, “ I shouldn’t mind going into the family vault tomorrow.”

“ Tush,” said Borrin severely, “ that is a ridiculous sentiment for a young man blessed with good health and a noble name.”

“ Perhaps, Josiah,” said Minister, with his eyes twinkling, “ you can give our young friend a dose of the Indian poison. He can thus slip painlessly out of an existence he detests, and I can inherit the Abbey.”

“ Will you pour out the tea, Mrs Venery? ” asked Bally, when all was ready; then turned towards the big doctor. “ What would you do if you did inherit the Abbey, may I ask, sir? ”

“ I should pull down the whole place until I found the black cell,” said Minister sturdily.

Mark frowned as he always did when the cell was mentioned. “ How many times am I to tell you that the black cell is a myth.”

“ I don’t care how many times you say that, Mr

Bally. There is, as Borrin said, truth in all superstitions, and for my part I believe that the black cell is in existence and perhaps Brother Thomas lives in it."

Bally laughed as the conclusion of the speech was so ridiculous. "Well, let us hunt for it and when we come across it we can poison Brother Thomas. I suppose," he said half seriously and half jokingly, "that your Indian drug is painless in its operation?"

"Oh, yes," replied Minister cheerily, and rubbing his hands, "if a sufficiently powerful dose is injected you slip out of life quite easily. And as to the lesser dose paralysing—you saw that the dog we experimented on the other day was quite well when I dosed him with the antidote."

"I think you behaved very wickedly to the dog, Theo," said Mrs Venery severely. "Dumb animals should be treated with kindness."

"Well, and so the dog was. I assure you, Lavinia, that he felt just like going to sleep when Josiah administered the poison."

"Yes, that is true," observed Borrin gravely, "so far as the pain goes I should not mind being paralysed myself."

"But you wouldn't like to be killed," said Edwin, nodding.

"No, no! I am much too deeply in love with life," said the doctor good-humouredly. "But if the Government could only be persuaded to give this painless poison to criminals, they would suffer less than in being hanged."

Minister rubbed his hands. "I would go further than that, Josiah," he said in a gleeful manner; "incurable invalids, cripples and lunatics should be put out of their misery in the same way."

There was an outcry at this. "Oh, Dr Minister, how can you speak so," said Jane very reproachfully.

"Well, what is the use of useless people?" retorted the traveller, holding to his idea, "they only cumber the ground."

"Then you really think," asked Bally, balancing his spoon on his tea-cup and avoiding a direct look, "that afflicted people should be put out of the way?"

"Yes, indeed. Painlessly, of course, and that is what Josiah's poison can do."

"I don't agree with you at all," cried Ida, impetuously; "many a distorted body contains a noble soul."

"I dare say, my dear. But if the soul is noble, and does not deserve its torment, why not release it?"

"Pains are sent for our punishment," said Mrs Venery solemnly. "It would be wrong to refuse to bear them."

Bally laughed. "Only the man who has had toothache can sympathise with the man who has it," he said pointedly. "If you were suffering agonies from—say neuritis, Mrs Venery, you might be glad of this drug which would procure you dreamless sleep."

"Ah, dreamless," echoed Edwin, shaking his head, "are we sure of that? Remember what Shakespeare says," and he mouthed—

"To die to sleep,
To sleep, perchance to dream :—aye there's the rub :
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us——'"

"I can't stand it any longer," cried Mrs Venery, rattling her spoon against her saucer and interrupting the noble quotation. "This gloomy room, your

horrid talk of death and poison. Do you want me to faint?"

"There, there!" her brother soothed her. "We are rather morbid. Let us talk of lighter things. My poison and Theo's antidote are not likely to be used again, Lavinia."

"Don't be too sure of that," muttered Minister, who was too ardent a scientist not to wish to make further experiments. "However, let us talk of lighter things as Josiah says. My cottage, my furnishing, my approaching departure."

"Are you going away, doctor?" asked Jane suddenly.

"For a week or so, my dear young lady. You see Bally has let me the cottage on the high-road, and it is necessary to furnish it. I am going to London on Wednesday to see my banker and search for chairs and tables, carpets and hangings. I shall go and return in my motor-car so as to see the country and thus combine business with pleasure."

"You will take the antidote with you, I suppose?" said Bally jokingly.

"Of course. But I shall leave Josiah the poison so——"

"I refuse to hear anything more about these horrid drugs," interrupted Mrs Venery again, hysterically. "My nerves won't stand it. I am all nerves," she went on, pleased that everyone was listening respectfully, "explosions and burglars shatter my nerves."

"You have not had any experience of either, Lavinia, so far as I know," was Borrin's dry remark.

"I may have," retorted Mrs Venery obstinately. "In that laboratory of yours all kind of explosions may take place; and then burglars are in the habit of coming into country houses."

"The Manor is quite safe, Lavinia."

"Indeed it isn't. You have never had a shutter made for that bow-window door, which you had made, Josiah."

"Pooh! Pooh! No one is likely to come through that. It is locked every single night, as you know."

"Locked," echoed Mrs Venery scornfully, "why anyone can break the glass which is unprotected by any shutter, and turn the lock. I quite expect to find you bound hand and foot, Josiah, some morning with the library cleared of its contents."

"The burglars will have to bring a furniture-van, then," rejoined the little man good-humouredly; "but to turn to a more amusing subject, Theo, I wish you would not go away on Wednesday. I am going to give a dinner-party on that evening in honour of Ida's betrothal to Edwin here."

"Oh, uncle," said Ida blushing, "how good you are."

"I want everyone else to be good also," said Borrin, with his eye on Edgar who was smiling. "There must be no grudging happiness to you and Edwin."

"If that is meant for me," cried Edgar, laughing outright, "I am quite content to wish the pair every happiness. Ida loves Edwin so I take a back seat."

"I don't think you will break your heart," remarked Edwin rather dryly.

"No, I don't think I will, though in honour bound I ought to. What do you say, Ida?" asked Edgar, looking at the blushing girl.

"I say that you are talking a lot of nonsense," said Miss Venery, who had not yet forgiven the twin for his outrageous conduct. "However, since Uncle Josiah is giving this dinner to reconcile us all, let us

do our best to make it a success. But it won't be one unless Uncle Theo remains."

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Ida," said Minister determinedly, "but it is necessary for me to go to town on Wednesday. I have made arrangements, and cannot break half a dozen appointments even for you, my dear. However it is of little moment, for when my cottage is furnished, I shall give a second dinner in your honour."

"Theo, you must stay to this dinner," said Mrs Venery, in her deep voice.

"No, Lavinia, I shall not stay."

"Let me add my prayers," pleaded Jane, smiling prettily.

"Oh, add as many prayers as you like, it won't alter my determination," said the doctor positively.

"I am very flattered by this demand for my presence, I must say, and thank you all the same."

"Theo, you are the most obstinate of men," said Borrin abandoning the contest.

"Josiah, I am proud of the reputation," retorted Minister, rising in his usual ponderous fashion; "and now, Mr Bally, may I suggest a smoke?"

"You can smoke on the way home," said Mrs Venery, getting on to her feet with much rustling of silken skirts. "Ida! Jane! It is time we departed."

"Oh, not yet," pleaded the young host, "remember you take the light with you," and his eyes were on Jane as he spoke.

But Mrs Venery was obstinate and shortly the visitors were stepping into Dr Minister's motor and Dr Borrin's carriage, the two vehicles which had brought them to the Abbey. As Miss Gurth was being tucked in by the attentive Bally she leaned down to whisper in his ear.

“ You will be at the party on Wednesday ? ” she asked softly.

“ Of course. I wouldn't miss the party for pounds,” replied Bally in the same undertone, “ you know that.”

Jane smiled as the carriage drove away, since Bally being so deeply in love with her, there was every chance that she would become mistress of the Abbey. And her view of the old place with its splendid rooms and wooded grounds and picturesque ruins had excited largely her desire to finger the money which such things meant. She was resolved to become engaged to Mark at the dinner-party willy-nilly, and however much he hung back, she intended to make him place a ring on her finger. Full of visions, she chatted agreeably with Dr Borrin, his sister, and his niece as the carriage rolled towards Hepworth, while her brothers smoked with Minister in the motor flying far in front of the horses.

Minister was thoughtful.

“ Strange that Bally should ask so many questions about those drugs,” he said.

“ Oh Bally has all sorts of queer ideas,” retorted Edwin eagerly, “ but he's a good chap for all that.” Minister nodded but grunted doubtfully.

CHAPTER VIII

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY

As may be guessed Mrs Venery was by no means pleased that her brother should act in his intended quixotic manner. She sympathised with the poor, and always assisted the poor, when such assistance did not inconvenience herself, but she considered it ridiculous that Josiah should leave such a large sum as two hundred thousand pounds to a charitable organisation. Even had he not had a niece worthy of inheriting the money, the idea was absurd, but as things stood the projected beneficence was actually criminal. Up to the day of the dinner-party and on the evening of the dinner-party, Mrs Venery protested vehemently, and did not spare Josiah in any way. For the moment she quite recovered the powers of speech for which—according to Dr Minister—she had formerly been so famous.

The traveller had duly gone to town in his motor, leaving Mrs Heasy to lament the loss of a very agreeable lodger. Certainly he intended to return in less than a fortnight, but as he would then be engaged in furnishing his newly-acquired cottage, the landlady of the Harper's Inn knew that she would see very little of him. Both Borrin and Ida were vexed that the big doctor had gone away and would not be present at the dinner-party; but Mrs Venery was far

too much taken up with the loss of her daughter's inheritance to bother about the absence of her old friend. Again and again she returned to the charge, but without shaking Borrin's determination and delivered a final opinion, shortly before the arrival of the guests.

Mrs Venery and her brother were in the large drawing-room waiting for their friends; both in evening-dress and both rather annoyed with one another. The good lady arrayed in a black silk gown glittering with jet, looked even more funereal than usual, and shook her head sadly at neat little Dr Borrin, who was on the defensive. He trotted about restlessly; he settled and unsettled his smoothly-brushed wig, and expostulated all the time with Mrs Venery, who replied with groans.

"Surely I can do what I like with my own, Lavinia," he cried when she exasperated him beyond endurance.

"That is no answer, Josiah," she replied solemnly.

"Not the answer you desire, I grant you," he retorted.

"I am a mother," wailed Mrs Venery, folding her arms, "and as a mother I have maternal feelings. Can you look on Ida, that beautiful girl, and not blush for your evil thoughts?"

"Yes, I can, Lavinia, because my thoughts are not evil."

"How can you say so, Josiah, when you propose to condemn your own niece to a poverty which makes me shudder to think about?"

"Then don't think about it," advised the doctor. "As to poverty, the girl will have her trousseau, and one thousand pounds to begin married life. Also she will have an affectionate husband ready and

willing and able to work for her. What more do you want?"

"I want you to leave your will as it stands," said Lavinia sharply. "Beyond the annuity to me, all the money goes to Ida as it should."

"Lavinia, if the young couple inherit a fortune it may be their ruin."

"It will be if they don't inherit, Josiah."

"On the contrary, it will be their salvation. Edwin will work hard, Ida will learn the value of money, and they will have a happy home."

"Furnished cheaply with one servant and poky rooms," retorted Mrs Venery scathingly. "How can you expect Edwin to succeed when he has a home like that? And Ida would adorn society, I know she would," wept Mrs Venery, putting a flimsy lace handkerchief to her eyes. "She would look a dream in a Court dress with diamonds."

"Edwin can buy her diamonds when he makes his fortune," snapped Borrin whose patience was rapidly giving way.

"Edwin will never make his fortune. Better had Ida become engaged to Edgar who has more dash and daring about him."

"He is more reckless if that is what you mean, Lavinia. Edwin is as steady as Edgar is whimsical. And you know that Edgar refused to take Ida without a fortune, whereas Edwin showed plainly that he loves her for herself."

"I don't believe it," cried the lady energetically. "Edwin thought you were only testing his affection. Even now he believes that you will relent and allow the will to stand."

"Then he will learn to-night at dinner that I intend to destroy the will, as soon as I can go to town to see

my solicitors. I go next week and shall make a new will. I shall give way this much, Lavinia," added the doctor hurriedly as Mrs Venery prepared again to argue, "that Ida shall have five hundred a year secured in her own right. That will save her from the poverty you so sadly speak of, until Edwin becomes a K.C."

"Five hundred a year," echoed Mrs Venery contemptuously, "why she ought to have that and much more for her dresses."

"She can spend it on frocks and frills if she likes," said Borrin doggedly, "that is her look-out. But more I don't intend to do."

"Then you are a criminal," said Mrs Venery, folding her arms again with the air of a martyr.

Further conversation was put an end to by the entrance of Ida who looked cheerful and happy. She was arrayed in white silk and wore a pearl necklace, so that her beauty was enhanced to a considerable extent. Mrs Venery groaned to think that her beautiful daughter as a married woman would no longer be able to appear in such smart frocks. She was about to make a bitter remark to this effect when Borrin hurriedly anticipated her by informing Ida of his latest idea with regard to the inheritance. The girl smiled and nodded and expressed herself satisfied.

"After all, Edwin and I can be quite happy on five hundred a year; and as he makes as much or more, we will be quite wealthy."

"Ida! Ida! Unhappy girl, you are mad," groaned her mother.

"I am sensible," replied Ida gaily, "and I'm sure I don't look unhappy. How can I when I am engaged to the best man in the world?"

"Is he? Nonsense," said Mrs Venery sharply.

“What about his brother who is like him in every way?”

“Edwin and Edgar are alike in outward appearance and different within. I wouldn’t be Edgar’s wife for pounds. He is selfish enough to make the best woman unhappy, while Edwin is all goodness.”

“I doubt it. But may you find it so,” said Mrs Venery, shaking her head, “and think of your poverty?”

“Five hundred a year isn’t poverty, mother,” said Ida, throwing her arms round Borrin’s neck, “and thanks to dear uncle I shall have that. I can’t get up any enthusiasm about money. Millions would only bother me.”

“Sensible girl,” said Borrin, kissing and patting her.

Mrs Venery rose and stood stock-still like Patience on a monument. “I say no more,” she announced witheringly, “only this that I am surprised at my own daughter’s sordid ambitions. To marry a barrister who has not yet made his mark, to live in a poky house and dress like a servant and——”

“I thought you were going to say no more, Lavinia,” said Borrin dryly.

Before Mrs Venery could find a reply to this, the door opened and Jane appeared, neatly and inexpensively dressed, with Edgar and Edwin in attendance, while behind them followed Mark Bally who had driven the party from the doll’s house to the Manor. This last young gentleman looked very aristocratic in his accurate evening-dress, and his face was as sombre as ever. One would have thought that he was present at a funeral instead of at a dinner-party.

“Here we are, dear Mrs Venery,” said Jane, kissing her hostess. “I hope we are not late.”

“Late or early matters little,” sighed Mrs Venery, looking volumes of woe. “The bolt has fallen.”

“What bolt?” asked Edgar astonished.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Lavinia,” cried Borrin impatiently. “Let us go to dinner and perhaps a good meal will make you more cheerful.”

“I shall never be cheerful again, Josiah.”

“Why not?” was Edwin’s question, as he stood very close to Ida and beamed on the assembled company, “because Dr Minister is not here?”

Mrs Venery, annoyed as she was by Borrin’s determination, yet had sufficient decency to keep the cause of her sorrow to herself. She had to give a reason for her gloomy looks, however, and reverted to her favourite fear, “It’s burglars, Edwin. I fear that this house may be broken into and robbed.”

“Why should you fear that, Mrs Venery?” demanded Bally quietly.

“My nerves are shattered by a cause which I am not inclined to explain. And every night I lie awake in agony listening for the sound of breaking glass, pistol-shots, and the groans of Josiah weltering in——”

“Stop! Stop!” Borrin broke in hurriedly, for Lavinia’s presentiments were so ridiculous as to annoy him. “There is no chance of these horrors coming to pass, Lavinia. I have lived for ten years here in safety, and expect that I shall live for ten years more. Nothing happens in Hepworth of this kind.”

“In the midst of life we are in death,” said Mrs Venery more gloomy than ever.

“Then let us dine when we can,” retorted her brother. “There’s the gong. Edwin, take Ida in to dinner; Edgar, take my sister; Bally, take Jane.

I shall follow at the end of the procession to see that you behave yourselves."

In this order the company proceeded to the dining-room, where a large table, snow white with linen and glittering with glass and silver, invited them to enjoy the meal. The wax candles in silver holders with red shades shed a rosy light on the autumn leaves and winter berries, which filled the grass-green Venetian glasses. Everything looked so sumptuous and cheerful that even Mrs Venery plucked up her spirits and became better company. And after a glass of champagne she actually joked in a light and airy manner with her daughter and prospective son-in-law. But when dessert was placed on the table, and Borrin rose to make a speech, her gloom returned. Knowing the little man's obstinate nature, it was hopeless to think that he would relent at the eleventh hour.

"I am sorry that Theo Minister is not here to help us with his merry ways," said Borrin, beaming on the guests with a glass of champagne in his hand. "I look upon this dinner as quite an event, since it is given to celebrate the engagement of my dear niece to my dear young friend, Edwin Gurth."

There was some applause at this and Mrs Venery shook her head and groaned aloud. "It would indeed be a joyful event if you were only sensible, Josiah."

"By sensible my sister means lavish of my worldly goods," said Borrin tartly, and determined to speak plainly. "She, naturally, as a mother, desires Ida to inherit my worldly wealth. I differ with her, as my experience of the world has shown me that young couples who begin with plenty of money generally end with nothing. Riches make the most sensible grow careless and luxurious in every way. Only by

struggling with adverse circumstances can character be formed, and for this reason have I determined to give Edwin and Ida a chance to improve. My will as it now stands leaves everything to Ida: some two hundred thousand pounds, less an annuity to my sister. But as I said when Ida first became engaged to Edwin I shall destroy that will and make another one. My money for the most part shall be left to a Society which has been formed to assist the poor and needy in a new and practical way. To Ida, on her marriage, I shall give her trousseau and will bestow on her an income of five hundred a year. This will serve to keep the wolf from the door while Edwin is working his way to the Wool-sack. It may seem hard to you all that I should act in this manner, but my desire is to bring the best out of the engaged couple in whose honour this dinner is given, and I know no better way of doing so than by allowing them to battle with the world."

"I am quite content," said Edwin, when Borrin sat down, and his bright face showed that he spoke truly. "I would take Ida without a penny, for I love her for herself alone and not for any money she may inherit."

Ida nodded with a face as bright and happy as that of her lover. "When a woman gains a good man's love for herself she gains all," was her remark. "I love Edwin and he loves me in a way which does not change either with poverty or riches."

"Then why not have riches?" interpolated Mrs Venery irritably.

"They would be something of a nuisance," said Ida, looking at her mother. "I only care for money so long as it is useful to assist the poor."

"Oh Ida, you are quixotic," cried Jane crossly.

“For my part, I think the more money one has, the better one can assist the poor.”

“That goes without speaking,” said Borrin quickly. “Therefore the bulk of my fortune is to be applied to assisting the poor. I have simply taken the burden of distributing the money from Edwin and Ida to place it on the backs of other stewards.”

“That is you will take away the burden when your new will is made,” said Edgar with a shrug. “Well for my part I wish the poor well, but I wish myself better. Still as Edwin and Ida always prefer helping others to helping themselves, I dare say they agree with your design, doctor.”

“Certainly we do,” said Ida, speaking for Edwin and herself. “I am not of a luxurious nature, and if we have enough to live on we want no more. What do you say, Mr Bally?”

“I like money; I want money, tons of money,” said Mark bluntly. “And I wish to have a good time without having to keep up an estate on nothing. Being one of the poor myself, I sympathise with the poor, but I wish the benefactions to come my way.”

“Self! Self! Self!” sighed Borrin shaking his head. “We can talk more on this point when the ladies go.”

“We are going now,” said Mrs Venery rising and giving the signal to Jane and Ida. “Your conversation promises to be dull. I,” she added, pausing at the door which Edwin was holding open, “like talk about theatres and books and what is going on in Society. Ida is a socialist, while Jane and I are people who wish to enjoy life.”

“In a frivolous manner,” cried out Borrin from his place at the head of the table. “Well, go to the drawing-room and talk fashions.”

“ A very sensible thing to do,” said Mrs Venery, determined to have the last word. “ Come, my dears, let us go,” and she swept out of the room followed by the two girls.

The rest of the evening was rather dull, for Mrs Venery would look on the black side of things, proving herself to be a very wet blanket indeed. Ida and Edwin were happy in one another’s company, and Jane cajoled Bally into the library to carry out her scheme. Having an idea that Bally was inclined to court Miss Gurth, the little doctor good-naturedly kept Edgar beside him, and the two strove to dispel Mrs Venery’s persistent gloom. Thus it came about that Bally and Jane were alone in the vast and well-lighted apartment in which the doctor passed most of his time. The windows were shuttered, all save the bow-window door, which, as Mrs Venery had stated, possessed no shutter. But the blind of this was down, so that the young couple were quite free from observation.

Jane tried all her arts to make Bally sentimental, but for some reason he appeared to be on his guard, and declined to speak as freely as he had done in the doll’s house on that memorable Sunday. The more amiable Jane became the more stiffly the young man behaved, until she was quite irritated, and suddenly said that she intended to return to the drawing-room.

“ Oh, don’t go,” said Bally looking round the room and at the comfortable fire, “ it is pleasant and warm here.”

“ It is freezing,” retorted Jane sharply; “ at least you are.”

“ What do you mean, Miss Gurth ? ”

“ What do I mean, Mr Bally ? ” she mocked. “ It was ‘ Jane ’ the other day.”

"I am sorry if I offended you," murmured Bally, colouring through his tan.

"You didn't offend me then, but you offend me now." Jane sat down again in the chair whence she had risen, and looked the picture of injured innocence. "I am sure I don't know what you mean."

"I know what I mean," said Mark hoarsely. "I know well enough, and if I could only explain to you——"

"Why can't you? You have a tongue, haven't you?"

"Jane! Jane! don't be angry with me," he implored, looking the picture of misery. "I have enough to bear as it is."

"The debts of your father and grandfather, I suppose you mean," said the girl, getting out her handkerchief, "as if they mattered. I could help you if you would only allow me to. But there," she sobbed and applied her handkerchief to dry eyes, "you don't care for me or you would not let poverty stand in the way of our happiness."

"I do care for you; no one cares for you as I do," cried Bally vehemently. "If I could only be frank with you——"

"You said that before," sobbed Miss Gurth, her ears on the alert.

"And I say it again. Why should I bother you with my troubles?"

"If you would let me bear the burden with you, it would grow lighter."

"Nothing could make it lighter."

"Oh, nonsense. These debts can't be so enormous. We could pay them in time by being economical. But there, if you won't be plain with me, it is best that we should part."

"Part. Oh, Jane."

"Why not? Being together makes no difference; you keep me at arms' length. I am quite sure that you don't love me."

"I told you that I did."

"Several times, and then you hang back, keeping me in this disagreeable position. But I've had enough of it." Jane rose and slipped her handkerchief into her pocket. "I'm going away from Hepworth."

"Jane?"

"Yes, I intend to earn my living in London. I can't go on all my life living on Edwin and Edgar, and now that Edwin is going to be married it would be a shame for me to be a burden on Edgar. I shall go to London and get an engagement as a housekeeper or a governess or a——"

"Jane! Jane!" Bally, with a pale face, caught her hand. "Don't talk like this, my dearest. Only wait."

"I shall not wait. Marry me and then I shall know you love me. Oh, Mark," she put her arms round his neck, "you know that I love you and you say that you love me. Let us be frank with one another; let us understand one another."

Mark's lips quivered, and he appeared to be struggling with his emotions. At length he removed the girl's arms from his neck and pushed her away with a groan. "It is impossible. I have been wrong to tell you of my love. Forget me, Jane, and let me go away from you for ever." He hid his face.

Jane stood where she was, pale and angry, for Bally's action in rejecting her had touched her maidenly modesty nearly. To think that she had gone so far only to be told that she must go back. It

was humiliating in the extreme. Had Bally been wise, he would have remembered the saying about a woman scorned; that was Jane's position when he pushed her back. But Bally, with his face hidden in his hands was groaning over the impossibility of adjusting the situation, and did not see the look on Jane's set countenance. What she would have said in her anger it is impossible to say, for just as she was framing her lips for an outburst, Borrin with the rest of the company walked into the library, to say that it was time to break up the party. At once Bally straightened himself and composed his features, while Jane, on the alert to prevent questions glanced round to see about what she could chatter. She happened to be standing near the writing-table, on which still stood the saucer of the greenish liquor extracted from the Indian roots, and which was now under a glass shade. Tapping this last and pointing to the flint arrow-head which was lying in the saucer, Jane laughed artificially.

"We have been looking at your famous poison, doctor," she said, when the little man, her brothers, and the ladies entered.

"I hope you have not been meddling with it," said Borrin, advancing hurriedly and with some alarm. "Remember the least scratch of that flint would paralyse you."

"No! No! We have not removed the glass shade even," said Jane lightly; "but I think it is dangerous to leave such a dangerous poison so unguarded."

"So do I," cried Mrs Venery, glad to reprove her brother whom she had not yet forgiven for his disposal of the money.

"Pooh! Pooh! It is all right," replied the doctor. "Under that glass shade, it can do no harm. I shall

pour what remains back into the bottle to-morrow, and shall throw the flint into the fire."

"Why not do that now, Uncle?" asked Ida, apprehensively.

"To-morrow; to-morrow," said Borrin irritably. "It is only an oversight my letting the saucer and its contents remain here. But the glass shade as I told you will keep the drug safe."

"What a peculiar colour it is," said Bally, advancing to peer through the glass. "Quite beautiful, though."

"It would be very beautiful if you were scratched by the flint," said Edgar ironically, "for then, according to Dr Minister, you would be paralysed, and unable to move hand or foot."

Mrs Venery shuddered. "Don't talk of the horrid thing, I beg," she implored in gloomy tones. "I have had quite enough to bear as it is this evening," and she shot an indignant glance at her brother.

Ida intercepted the look, and feeling uncomfortable hurried Jane upstairs to get ready for departure. Bally remained behind to stare in quite a fascinating way at the poison in the saucer, while the twins chatted gaily with their host. The young men had already assumed their overcoats of brown frieze, and Edwin wore his distinguishing muffler of blue, while Edgar had his red one round his neck because of the sharp night air. The younger twin, noting how persistently Bally hovered near the writing-table and eyed the glass shade, laughed carelessly.

"Do you feel inclined to be scratched?" he asked approaching.

Bally shuddered, but forced a smile. "Not me. I have my troubles to bear, but would never seek to be rid of them by death. Still, there is a fascination

about that drug, seeing how it would enable one to slip painlessly out of existence."

Borrin frowned. "Unhealthy thoughts; unhealthy thoughts. Don't be silly."

"The black cell is getting on Bally's nerves," laughed Edwin, more for the sake of saying something than because he meant the speech.

"Oh, confound the black cell," stormed Bally, growing ridiculously indignant. "Ever since Dr Minister revived that silly story you seem to have been talking about nothing else. I think I shall publish a pamphlet stating positively that the whole legend is moonshine, which it is."

"No one would believe you if you published fifty pamphlets," said Edwin, with great determination, "and why rob the country-side of its pet fireside tale?"

"Well, I wish you were the head of my family," retorted Bally, "and then you could have all the legend you wanted. I'm fed up with it myself," and turning on his heel he went away to put on his overcoat.

Shortly the brougham came round to the front door, and Mark drove the two young men and their sister to the doll's house on his way to the Abbey. Having received the thanks of his guests for a pleasant evening, Borrin closed the front door and returned to the library to remonstrate with Lavinia.

"They said that they had enjoyed a pleasant evening," remarked the doctor, shaking his head sadly; "yet I doubt it, as you have behaved so foolishly."

"I behaved as I should when my daughter is being ruined," sobbed Mrs Venery clinging to Ida. "Come to bed, dear; your uncle doesn't love us."

“ Oh, Lavinia ! ” began the doctor indignantly, but got no further in his speech as Ida looked at him significantly to intimate silence.

“ Mother is tired out and says what she doesn't mean,” observed the girl, as she led the lamenting lady to the door.

“ Yes, I do,” called back Mrs Venery, still sobbing. “ I mean every word and I expect you'll sleep very badly after your wicked conduct, Josiah.”

Borrin heaved a weary sigh when his sister departed, as she undoubtedly was a great trial with her foolishness and constant reproaches. He shook his head over her perversity and wandered aimlessly about the room touching this thing and that. When he came upon the saucer of poison under its glass shade he remembered Jane Gurth's remark and he frowned. After all the girl was right, and it was dangerous to leave such a deadly potion for careless people to meddle with. For a moment he had half a mind to throw the drug into the fire and the flint along with it, but decided to wait until the morrow before doing so. As Minister knew the poison was valuable and perhaps some good use could be made of it, so it was just as well to take time before deciding to waste it. Therefore Borrin replaced the glass shade which he had removed and examined the windows to see that they were safely locked. They were, even to the glass door of the bow-window. Then he extinguished the two big lamps and went straightway to bed. So early had the guests departed that by eleven the whole house was in darkness and the inmates were asleep.

Towards two o'clock Ida sat up suddenly in bed with her senses on the alert for the happening of something to which she could put no name. It seemed to her that she had heard a long wailing cry ;

but as all was silent when she sat up, she fancied that she must have been dreaming. Lighting the candle, she glanced at her watch to find that it was the small hours of the morning. As her uneasy feeling still continued, and a sense that something was wrong forced itself upon her, she rose and went to her mother's room, no great distance away. To her surprise her mother was not in bed, although she had been, as the tumbled and tossed condition of sheets and blankets and counterpane showed. Knowing how Mrs Venery feared burglars Ida thought that perhaps indeed there had been a noise (which had come to her in her dreams as a wailing cry) and believed that her mother had descended the stairs to investigate. Mrs Venery had plenty of courage when necessary, but Ida could not think of allowing her mother to wander about the house alone, so hastily ran down the stairs to peer into dining-room and drawing-room and library.

In this last she saw a faint light, and pushed open the door, which was ajar to see that a candle was standing on the writing-table. But Ida almost dropped the candle she held when she stumbled over a prone body and bent with the light to see that her mother was lying at her feet. Whether the poor woman was dead or not the bewildered girl could not say, for her attention was drawn to another body lying near the table—that of her uncle with blood flowing from a ragged wound in his head. Ida, as in a dream, so terrible was the situation, and so stunned did she feel, held the light down and saw that her uncle was dead, since the wound was deep. There was no wound so far as she could see on her mother's body. Raising herself, Ida then saw that the glass of the bow-window door was broken, and that the

door itself was open. As the whole dreadful situation dawned fully on her mind, and as she realised what had happened, she shrieked aloud in that grim death-room.

“ Help! Help! ” cried the girl again and again. “ Oh, mother; oh, uncle. Help! oh help, they have been murdered. Help! Help! Help! ”

CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER MYSTERY

By daylight Hepworth village was buzzing like a hive of bees in summer time. Ill news travels fast as the proverb says, and the truth of this was apparent by the swiftness with which every man, woman, and child became informed of what had happened at the Manor. The village policeman, hastily summoned at dawn by a frightened coachman, had gone to the big house to learn exactly what had taken place, and his knowledge was shortly the common property of everyone. At the outset it was reported that a double murder had been committed, but when the positive truth became known, it appeared that Mrs Venery was still alive. Her brother was dead past recall, as the blow which had killed him had been delivered with such force as to slay immediately; but there was no deadly wound to be found on Mrs Venery. All that indicated an assault on her was a long, but not deep scratch on her right fore-arm, and it was this scratch which gave Ida an inkling of the truth.

The twins were amongst the first to hear of the catastrophe, and at once hastened to the Manor to help the unfortunate girl. Ida proved herself worthy of her Spartan training by Borrin, for, after the first outburst of sorrow, she became calm and self-

possessed. Her face was as white as marble, and this with her immobility suggested comparison with the statue of some stately Greek goddess. The black dress which she wore enhanced her pallor, and her tearless calm quite distressed Edwin.

"My dear, why don't you cry?" he said nervously.

"My sorrow is too deep for mere tears," she replied quietly.

"Well, things are not so bad as they might have been," said Edgar with an attempt at consolation. "If your uncle is dead, your mother is still alive."

"What is the use of saying that, Edgar?" interposed the other twin hastily, "when Mrs Venery may die."

"She will not," said Ida unexpectedly.

"Why not, if she is wounded?"

"She is not wounded badly. All that we can find is a scratch on her arm."

Edgar looked up suddenly. "And that?" he inquired anxiously.

"Was inflicted by the poisoned flint."

Edwin sprang to his feet and looked round the library in which the three were seated. "Ida, do you mean to say that she is paralysed?"

"I do." Ida pointed to the writing-table. "See there is the saucer emptied of its contents, and with the glass shade removed. The flint was found on the floor near my mother's body, which was by the door. I would not allow my mother or the flint to be touched until the policeman saw both."

"Then you think——"

"I think that the assassin first killed my uncle," said Ida quietly, "and afterwards, when my mother entered the room, he rushed at her with the flint to

render her unconscious and prevent her denouncing him."

"Him," echoed Edgar, uneasily, "how can you tell that the assassin is a man?"

"I only surmise that such may be the case. But indeed, seeing that Uncle Josiah was struck down—as the policeman thinks—by an axe, it is probable that a man committed the crime. No woman could have inflicted such a blow."

Edwin, who was standing by the table staring at the empty saucer, turned with a thoughtful air. "The glass shade must have been removed by poor Dr Borrin himself," he said judicially, "for the assassin, if taken by surprise when your mother entered the room, would not have had time to remove it and get the flint. Yet we know that the flint was in the saucer, and under the shade."

"True enough," assented Edgar, nodding, "but why should Borrin have removed the shade?"

"Oh, that is easily accounted for. The saucer is empty. I expect after we went away last night, Borrin took Jane's advice, and removed the drug—that is, emptied it into a bottle or into the fire."

"I remember uncle saying that he would throw the flint into the fire, and pour the liquid back into the bottle," said Ida, after a pause, "but he intended to do so to-day. My impression is that he became uneasy because he had not done so, and therefore came down shortly before two o'clock to carry out his intention. The assassin watched him through the bow-window door which has no shutter, and afterwards smashed the glass and broke into the room to strike the blow. Then my mother, hearing a noise and being afraid of burglars as she always was, came down and entered suddenly, to be scratched by the

flint. After that the assassin escaped, and I came down to find the two bodies. I must have arrived just as the assassin left, for I was awakened by a wailing cry, and believe my mother uttered it."

"But why was your uncle killed?" questioned Edgar, perplexed.

"Ah, who can tell that?"

"And who was the assassin?"

"Ah, who can tell that?" repeated Ida once more.

"You know as much as I do, Edgar. However, we shall see what the doctor says. He is even now in Uncle Josiah's bedroom examining the body, and afterwards will see to my mother."

"But both your mother and Dr Borrin's body should have been left here until the Inspector arrived from Whipton," said Edwin sagely.

"I thought as much. But Belcham—he is the village constable you know—ordered my uncle's body to be taken and laid on his bed, and my mother to be carried upstairs."

"He'll get into trouble over that," said Edgar sharply; "over-zealous I call it. Nothing should have been touched until the Inspector arrived. Well, he is due now," and the young man glanced at his watch; "we shall hear what he has to say. So far as I can see there is no chance of his learning the truth, Ida. The assassin has vanished."

"But he may be known, Edgar."

"By whom?" it was Edwin who spoke.

"By my mother. It is true that Uncle Josiah had only one candle, but my mother, coming down the stairs, must have carried another. In the light of the two she may have recognised the assassin."

"But she can't speak," said Edgar hurriedly, "she never may speak."

"I think so, when Dr Minister administers the antidote."

Both the twins started. "By Jupiter yes!" cried Edwin eagerly, "remember the revival of the dog, Edgar. Only one drug can counteract this particular poison, and that is the one possessed by Minister."

Ida bowed her head gravely. "It is the sole chance of reviving my mother. If it fails she will remain paralysed and unconscious for the rest of her life. Edwin, I wish you to wire at once to Dr Minister asking him to come down at once and save my mother's life. Then she will be able to state who entered the room and killed my uncle."

"Do you suspect anyone?" asked Edgar, hesitating.

"No, I never knew that Uncle Josiah had an enemy in the world."

"My dear," said Edwin gravely, and taking her hand, "I shall telegraph at once to Minister, and he will be here before the evening. Then, if your Uncle Josiah had an enemy, we shall be able to find him by your mother's description."

"Please wire at once, Edwin."

"Yes!" said Edgar quickly. "I shall go with Edwin to wire also. And Ida you can't be left alone all day; I shall send up Jane."

Although Ida was not over-fond of Jane, she gratefully accepted the offer, as the girl would help her to bear the strain to which she was subjected. The twins departed, and Ida prepared herself to receive the Whipton Inspector, who was the next person to come on the scene. The officer was very annoyed by Belcham's silly behaviour in removing Mrs Venery and the corpse of the unfortunate doctor. The village policeman, a stolid, rosy-faced man with

the bulk of an elephant and the brains of a sheep, received his scolding in a calm, stupid way, but the fiery eloquence of his superior made little impression on him. Like all densely ignorant men Belcham considered that he had acted rightly in taking his own way. The Inspector, an impulsive Irishman, felt inclined to kick the heavy Saxon idiot out of the house.

"Such a beautiful case it is," he lamented to Ida two hours after he had made an examination, and had received the doctor's report. "One likely to cause a heap of talk, and the fool spoils it. Why didn't you stop him, Miss Venery?"

"How could I?" replied Ida quietly. "Belcham, in your absence, represented the law, and I could do nothing."

"Ye might have twisted his neck, Miss, an' I wish ye had, the divil take the silly ass. Well, what's done can't be undone. That poor uncle of yours is as dead as a door-nail, and your mother isn't much better, so far as I can see."

"My mother will recover, Inspector MacGrath."

"Ye don't say so. Then Miss, ye know more nor the doctor does. He told me that she may slip away before she can open her blessed mouth."

"I do know more than the doctor," replied Ida decisively, "as you will learn when I speak."

"Then speak, Miss, and say what you know." The Inspector fixed her with a pair of eloquent grey eyes, and took out his notebook.

"One moment, Mr Inspector; what is your opinion of the case?"

"Ah, now Miss Venery, an' how can I tell until I know more. Dr Carey tells me that your uncle was knocked down like an ox with an axe, and killed

before he had time to cry out. Death was instantaneous."

"Where is the axe?"

"It can't be found, though I had this room searched while you were upstairs, Miss Venery. But we'll look in the garden."

"Are you sure that an axe was used?"

"Dr Carey is sure of it, Miss Venery. Why, your poor uncle's skull is split, an' a mighty strong blow must have been——"

"Don't! oh don't," interrupted the girl, wincing. "It's too awful; my poor uncle, who could have been his enemy?"

"Ah, now that's what I wish you to tell me, Miss," said MacGrath eagerly.

Ida looked surprised. "Why, Uncle Josiah had no enemy. He was the kindest and best of men."

Inspector MacGrath directed a keen glance towards the broken window, or rather door. "Could it have been a burglar?" he mused.

"If so, nothing has been taken," said Ida swiftly, "and if a burglar came here to rob, he would surely not have gone without some plunder."

"True for ye, Miss." The Inspector nodded, then added coaxingly, "Just tell me what you know."

"Very little," was Ida's reply, and she related how she had been awakened at two o'clock by the cry, and how she had descended the stairs to find the evidence of the tragedy. "My mother was always haunted by a fear of burglars, Inspector MacGrath, and I believe that on hearing a noise—perhaps the glass being broken—she must have come down in a hurry, to meet her fate."

MacGrath, nursing his chin, looked at the girl doubtfully. "From what you tell me your uncle

must have known the burglar," he remarked shrewdly.

Ida stared. "How do you make that out, Mr Inspector?"

"Well, listen to me now, Miss. You say that you think your uncle was busy with some drug which he emptied out of yonder saucer, and suggest that the devil who killed him must have smashed the glass, and have entered the room to deliver the blow. But even if the glass was smashed it would take the murderer some time to fumble for the catch and open the window—or door, if you can call it so. During that time your uncle would have given the alarm. As he did not do so, it seems to me that the burglar, or whatever you like to call the beast, must have knocked at the glass, and have been admitted. He was someone your uncle knew, and the poor man suspected no danger until he was knocked down with the axe before he could cry out."

"But you hinted that my mother came down on hearing the sound of shattered glass," objected Ida quickly, "and if the glass was not broken——"

"Ah, but it is broken, Miss," put in MacGrath with a nod; "broken, I believe, when the murderer was leaving the room, so as to give the impression of a thief in the night."

"He would not leave until he had scratched my mother's arm with a flint, Mr Inspector, and if he broke the glass afterwards, what noise brought my mother down the stairs?"

"Your uncle's cry to be sure."

"But according to you, Uncle Josiah did not cry out, since the murderer who knocked on the glass was someone he knew."

"True for ye," said the Inspector much perplexed.

“It’s a divil of a puzzle this same, to be sure, Miss. Then the burglar must have broken the glass and got in unexpected. Your uncle cried out, and that, along with the glass being broken, brought the poor lady down the stairs.”

“But, since I heard the second cry—that of my mother, why shouldn’t I have heard the first cry?” objected Ida again.

“Ye were too sound asleep.”

“I was sound asleep when awakened by the second cry.”

“Ye have me there,” Inspector MacGrath scratched his red poll; “come now, we talk in a circle. Let us go to another point. You say, Miss, that your mother may recover.”

“She will when Dr Minister administers the antidote.”

“The antidote,” MacGrath looked bewildered, “an’ what in the name of all the saints is that, Miss?”

Ida folded her hands and gave the officer a detailed account of Minister’s visit to the Manor, and how he had brought an antidote to the Indian poison possessed by Borrin. She related the success of the experiment with the retriever Sambo, and ended by saying that she was sure Dr Minister could restore her mother to health. “Then she will speak and describe the man she saw in the room.”

“The divil; the divil,” cried Inspector MacGrath, ruffling his hair, “is it a fairy tale ye’ll be after tellin’ me, Miss.”

“No, I tell you the plain truth. My mother and I both saw the experiment, and know that the antidote is genuine.”

“Did anyone else see the experiment?”

“ Yes; Mr Edwin and Mr Edgar Gurth along with their sister, and Mr Mark Bally.”

“ And Dr Minister,” remarked MacGrath thoughtfully, “ hum! None of these had any grudge against the dead man, I take it? ”

“ Sir,” cried Ida, highly indignant. “ How can you even hint at such a thing as that? All those present at the experiment were our dear friends.”

“ Ye can be sure of nothing in the way of friendship, when self-interest stands in the way,” said the Inspector cynically. “ Come now, had any of these dear friends anything to gain from the death of your uncle? ”

“ No, certainly not.”

“ Well, Miss, if the lot of them are innocent, someone else must have known about this poison. The person who used the flint to scratch your mother certainly did know. D’ye see that now? ”

Ida bowed her stately head. “ It looks like it,” she admitted with dismay. I can’t believe any of them to be guilty, however.”

“ To be sure ye can’t,” said the Inspector encouragingly, “ a sweet young lady like you would find excuses for the devil himself. See now, here’s the flint which that fool, Belcham, picked up near the door. He should have left it there until I saw it, as his superior officer. Are ye sure it was lying near your mother’s body? ”

“ Yes it was, Mr MacGrath,” said the girl unhesitatingly. “ I expect the assassin of my uncle dropped it immediately he inflicted the scratch. It is a dangerous thing to handle.”

“ Ye’re right there,” said the Inspector, gingerly wrapping up the arrow-head in a piece of paper

taken from the writing-table. "Steeped in the poison it is, ye tell me; and where's the poison?"

Ida pointed to the empty saucer. "It was there."

"The devil, and where is it now?"

"Either in the bottle it was poured from, or in the fire. Uncle Josiah intended to remove the liquid from the saucer to-day, but I think he felt uneasy at leaving such a dangerous drug about even though it was under a glass shade, and came down to attend to the matter at night."

"Where's the bottle?"

"In Uncle Josiah's laboratory I think," said Miss Venery, pointing towards a small door in the corner of the library, "the laboratory is in there." Inspector MacGrath arose, and, walking towards the door, opened it. "Do ye know the bottle when ye see it?" he demanded, signing that she should follow.

"No," replied Ida, rising in her turn and entering the small room which was the laboratory, along with the officer.

"Do ye know the colour of the liquid, Miss?"

"Yes; every one of us knew it. A light green."

"That's some sort of clue, anyhow," muttered the Inspector; and together with the girl he searched the shelves of the small room. "Ah, here now," he took a tall and narrow bottle from the topmost shelf. "This has some green stuff in it ye see, Miss Venery, an' the label: plain white paper, written on. Powers above, what writing!"

"My uncle did write badly," said Ida, peering over his shoulder, "but I can read it. Yes, that is the bottle of poison. It is labelled 'The Andean Drug.'"

"Why Andean, Miss?"

"Because the roots from which that poison was

taken were given to uncle by Indians who live in the Andes. I am sure that is the bottle."

"And the poison," said the Inspector, making a close examination, "it's more than half full, which shows, Miss, that what was in the saucer was not poured back into the bottle."

"Uncle might have poured it into the fire," suggested Ida, "I mean that portion which was in the saucer."

"Hum," said MacGrath pondering, "ye say that the burglar took nothing."

"Not that I can see."

"Well he did now, Miss, I tell ye; he took what was in the saucer."

"Oh, ridiculous," cried Miss Venery when the two came back to the library.

"Why should it be ridiculous, Miss?" The Inspector fixed her with an inquiring eye. "The man who killed the poor gentleman must have come for something, and why not for the poison, since nothing else is missing?"

"But who would take the poison?"

"Ah, now, it's yourself must tell me that. Amongst all those who were present at the experiment, who wanted the poison?"

"None of them," said Ida, quite bewildered. "It would have been of no use to anyone. And then——" here she paused, for the library door opened, "I'm engaged," she called out.

"It's only me, Ida," said a meek voice. "Edgar sent me up to comfort you."

"It's Miss Gurth," Ida explained to the Inspector who looked up sternly as Jane entered quietly. "She was present when the experiment was tried, and can tell you that no one wanted the drug."

“Can ye now, Miss?” asked MacGrath, taking in Jane’s demure looks and Puritanic dress with an air of approval, for there was something fresh and innocent and timid about her which pleased him.

“I don’t understand,” said Jane with her gentle air, coming to the table.

“Listen now, and I’ll tell you,” said the Inspector, and put the question to her in detail, by explaining that the Andean drug—what was in the saucer that is—had not been restored to the bottle he held. “An’ it’s in my mind, Miss Gurth, that the assassin came to get the poison. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think,” said Jane, shaking her head.

“Oh, Jane, you know quite well that no one present at the experiment wanted the poison,” said Ida, somewhat impatiently, in spite of her grief.

“Oh, Ida, you know that Dr Minister wanted it.”

“What’s this now ye tell me?” asked MacGrath excitedly, and pulling out his notebook.

“Jane, you are making a mistake.”

“Indeed I am not, Ida,” said Miss Gurth, opening her eyes widely; “you know how poor Dr Borrin and Dr Minister quarrelled over the drug.”

“Did they now?” said the Inspector, making a note.

“Well, Dr Minister wanted to try an experiment on a human being, as one had already been tried on an animal,” said Jane hurriedly, “and Dr Borrin did not wish that. Dr Minister asked for the poison, and Dr Borrin refused to give it to him.”

“Jane, what rubbish you talk,” burst out Ida, frowning; “and don’t you see that by saying this, you give Mr MacGrath the impression that Dr

Minister came here to murder Uncle Josiah and steal the poison."

"Oh, no, no!" Jane clasped her hands pleadingly, "surely you don't think that, Mr Inspector. Why, Dr Minister is the best of men."

"He may be," said MacGrath cynically, "all the same he wanted the poison, and what was left in the saucer is all that is gone from this room. Nothing else, Miss Venery says, has been disturbed."

"I tell you, Mr Inspector, it's ridiculous," cried Ida wrathfully; "Dr Minister could have got the drug from uncle somehow."

"But he didn't, and this young lady says he couldn't."

"Dr Borrin certainly refused to give up the poison," murmured Jane in deep distress; "but don't go by what I say, Mr Inspector."

"I'll go by what Dr Minister says when I see him," said MacGrath grimly.

"You won't have long to wait," cried Ida defiantly. "Mr Edwin Gurth has gone down to the post office to telegraph for him."

"And why, may I ask?"

"Because Dr Minister has the antidote, and can revive my mother."

"Ah, can he now?" said Mr MacGrath doubtfully, "well if he does that and allows the poor lady to say who scratched her I'll believe that he is innocent. Until then I'm bound to say that things look black against him."

Both Ida and Jane were indignant at this view being taken, and were loud in their assertions that Minister would appear in the evening to face the hinted accusation. Colour was given to their protestations of the traveller's innocence by the receipt

of a telegram which Edwin brought to the Manor. In it Minister wired that he was horrified at the news, and would be at Hepworth by seven o'clock. Both girls were triumphant.

"You see—you see!" they cried to MacGrath, but the officer shook his head.

"He may come, and he may be able to clear up matters," he said doubtfully, "but if he didn't come for the poison, who did?"

No one could answer this question, and Jane was very much annoyed that her truthful statement should have put the idea of Minister's guilt into MacGrath's mind. However, the mischief was done, and it only remained to wait for the arrival of the doctor, and hear what he had to say. The twins were quite as angry as the girls at the insinuations made against Minister's character, and protested loudly that he would easily clear himself.

"If he arrives," said the Inspector significantly.

It seemed as though MacGrath was right, for seven o'clock saw no motor passing through Hepworth village. Then at eight a message came that Minister's machine had been found three miles away by a homeward-bound rustic, smashed to pieces. The chauffeur was under the ruins down a steep bank, but the owner was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared entirely.

"A very clever dodge," said the Inspector grimly. "It's a got-up job. Why, he had never any intention of showing himself here. He's guilty, sure enough."

CHAPTER X

THE WILL

INSPECTOR MACGRATH was an excellent officer, but being Irish was impulsive enough to say straight out whatever came into his head. The necessary secrecy of his profession had, to a great extent, ameliorated this trait, but he still was accustomed to say more than was judicious. Perhaps his superiors knew of this weakness and thus had left him, notwithstanding his acknowledged abilities, in a comparatively minor position. As Inspector at Whipton MacGrath could do little harm with his babbling, as the town itself, and indeed the whole district, was very law-abiding, and there were few serious affairs to be dealt with. The murder of Borrin, the paralysis of Mrs Venery, and now the inexplicable appearance of Minister were serious affairs however, and the Inspector claimed his right to deal with them. As it was undeniably only fair to allow this, the authorities left everything in his hands, although they did not think that he would bring the matter to a successful conclusion. MacGrath naturally was of a different opinion, and hoped to utilise the case as an aid to promotion.

As usual he said too much. Suspecting Minister on the grounds he had set forth to Ida, he should have ordered her and Jane to hold their tongues until

he could be certain of the truth. But this he did not do, and the two girls with great indignation, related MacGrath's suspicions to the twins. A secret known to four people is not a secret at all, therefore, in quite a natural way, the rumour spread round the neighbourhood that Minister had murdered his friend, and had injured Mrs Venery. Also the reporters of various newspapers learned details concerning the Andean drug and its antidote, which they published eagerly, and credited Minister with having stolen the poison for purposes of his own. Minister's friends, amongst whom was Mrs Heasy, were indignant that the big, burly, kind-hearted man should be suspected.

"He's as innocent as an unborn babe," cried the landlady of the Harper Inn to her gossips. "Him lay a finger on anyone. Why, I'd as soon think I was a murdering villain."

"But that doctor didn't come back to give the antidote to the poor lady, you know," hinted one of her friends.

"Yes he did. He was coming down from London in his engine, and met with an accident. If that poor Medway had only lived he would have been able to say where his master is."

"Nobody knows how the motor came to be smashed up?"

"And nobody ever will," retorted Mrs Heasy heatedly. "The chauffeur's dead, and the doctor's vanished—dead also, and tucked away in some grave, I'll be bound. Say what you like all of you, there's some devilry at work."

Other people thought so also, even if they did not express themselves so forcibly as the candid landlady of the Harper Inn. It was strange that the motor

should have gone over the steep bank, since Medway was known to be a careful driver, and was well acquainted with the roads round Hepworth village. Also the machine was so broken up that it looked as though it had struck some obstacle before falling over the bank, although there was no obstacle found on the road. Search was made for Minister's body, as it was ascertained that he had left London along with his chauffeur, with the intention of going to the Manor. But no trace of the big man dead or alive could be discovered. He had vanished as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up. And Medway being dead—he was found broken to pieces under the ruins of the machine—there was no information forthcoming concerning the whole terrible affair. Only MacGrath held to his opinion that the broken car, the dead chauffeur, and the disappearance of Minister were all part and parcel of a put-up job, to throw the police off the scent.

“I am more convinced than ever that this man is guilty, and murdered his old friend to steal the poison,” said the Inspector to Edwin, who tried to argue him out of his suspicions. “He must have arranged some obstacle in the road three miles away, and alighted to escape himself. The unfortunate chauffeur went on to meet with his doom, while Minister quietly walked away.”

“Oh, but such an idea is ridiculous,” cried Edwin, much vexed by this persistent blackening of the dead man's character. “Minister was in town and left in the car with Medway. How then could he have arranged an obstacle to overturn the car forty miles away from London? As to the poison, Borrin would in the end have let him use it for whatever experiment he desired, as the two men were such intimate friends.

I don't think that Minister would have risked his neck and murdered his friend to gain what he could have procured much easier."

"It looks fishy, that is all that I can say," said MacGrath, obstinately.

"And that is all that anyone can say," rejoined Gurth crossly. "Minister was in London, and there is no evidence to show that he came down to the Manor on the night Borrin was murdered."

"Oh, in the car he could have come and gone without anyone knowing he was in the neighbourhood."

"Except the chauffeur," Edwin reminded him.

"Well the chauffeur is dead, and his tongue can't speak," retorted the Inspector significantly. "Say what you will, Mr Gurth, I believe that my theory solves the mystery."

"I don't agree with you. Think, Mr Inspector; even if what you say were true, Minister, having stolen the poison and having got back to London, would hardly have come down all this way to engineer an accident. He could have slipped away to the Continent whenever advised, as he was, of Borrin's death."

"I don't believe that he did come with Medway," said MacGrath doggedly. "He stayed behind himself, and sent the poor man to his doom, so as to close his mouth as a possible witness for the prosecution."

"All theory, Mr Inspector."

"One must construct a theory to get at facts," replied MacGrath much nettled, and the conversation closed for the time being.

Edwin reported what had been said to Ida, and the girl agreed with him that there was little chance of help from the Inspector with his impossible idea

of Minister's guilt. But impossible or not, the theory of MacGrath appealed to many people, and the general opinion was that there might be some truth in his fancies. By this time the reporters of the London journals had come on the scene, as things were dull in the Metropolis, and the newspapers were in search of copy for the silly season. Here was quite a romance already constructed, and the bare facts of this were daily embellished in so lavish a style that by the end of the week Borrin's death, and Mrs Venery's paralysis, and Minister's disappearance assumed the complexion of an "Arabian Night's" story. MacGrath did all he could to find evidence to support his wild conjectures, but in spite of the way in which he scoured the country in search of the missing man, and in spite of the innumerable questions he asked, the fact remained that, when the inquest took place, he had nothing of any note to set before the Coroner and jury. The inquest was, therefore, a very dull affair, and even the flowery reporters could make but little capital out of it.

Dr Carey gave his evidence regarding the condition of the corpse, and that of Mrs Venery. With regard to the former, the death must have taken place shortly before two o'clock, the time when Miss Venery was awakened by a cry. The man had died immediately, as the blow—probably inflicted by an axe—had been delivered with great force. Concerning the lady's condition Carey confessed himself greatly puzzled. She was certainly alive as she yet breathed, and it was probable that some drug had been administered to bring about such a life-in-death state. In reply to a question by the Coroner, Dr Carey admitted that the scratch, which was highly inflamed, might have paralysed Mrs Venery, but the drug used

was unknown to medical men in the United Kingdom, therefore witness could say very little about it. There might be an antidote or there might not be one, but failing the existence of such it was impossible to say whether the poor lady would live or die. She might recover to tell what she saw in the library when her brother was killed, or she might slip painlessly out of life without regaining her senses. On the whole Dr Carey's evidence, as Coroner and jury felt, was not satisfactory, although he did the best he could with what material was at his disposal.

Ida deposed that she had retired to bed as usual, and had been awakened by a cry somewhere about two o'clock. She related how she had sought her mother's room, and, not finding her there, had gone down the stairs to discover her uncle dead, and Mrs Venery insensible. She remarked upon Mrs Venery's fear of burglars which might have lured her from her room presuming she had heard any unusual noise. Why Dr Borrin had come down to the library witness could not say, unless it was to get rid of the poison. Then the girl was examined closely by the Coroner with regard to the Andean drug and its antidote, about which she said all she could. But at the conclusion of her evidence on this point the jury were as puzzled as when she began to explain.

What was the stumbling-block to everyone was whether the presumed burglar was known or unknown to the deceased. If known he must have been admitted by Dr Borrin, and therefore Mrs Venery could not have been lured downstairs by the shattered glass. If unknown there was time between the shattering of the glass and the opening of the window-door to give Borrin time to call out, which he

certainly would have done had a stranger forcibly broken into the library. And if he had cried out Ida would have awakened to the first cry since she had awakened so readily to the second. As to the window being actually broken that could easily have been done later by the murderer to encourage the idea that the house had been broken into. But although Ida was examined and re-examined and cross-examined, no light could be thrown on this perplexing point. Finally the Coroner had reluctantly to abandon any idea of elucidating the mystery in this direction.

Inspector MacGrath's evidence pointed out that Dr Minister, being a friend of the deceased, would readily have been admitted. And what is more the dead man assuming that all was safe would not expect a blow on the back of the head. The criminal watched his opportunity and struck the blow, then departed with the contents of the saucer emptied into a bottle which he had probably brought. It was at this point that the Coroner reminded the Inspector that what he said was not evidence, an objection which reduced MacGrath to silence since he had nothing tangible to say. And the jury in the absence of Dr Minister who had certainly set out from London with the intention of coming to the assistance of Mrs Venery were not prepared to bring in a verdict against him. It was all extremely puzzling.

Nor did the Coroner's speech improve matters. On the evidence before him he could guide the jury very little. Everything was more or less theoretical, and there were no details likely to point either to the motive for the committal of the crime, or the identity of the assassin. In this dilemma there was nothing for the twelve good and lawful men to do but to bring in a verdict of "Murder against some person or persons

unknown!" This was duly done and the concourse broke up.

"All the same," said the Inspector to a reporter when affairs came to this unsatisfactory conclusion, "I hold to my point, and I am perfectly sure that Minister is the devil who murdered the poor man."

"But there is no motive," protested the journalist.

"Sure an' he wanted to steal the poison," expostulated MacGrath.

"That is too small a cause for so great an effect," retorted the other, and most people were of the same opinion.

The next event which roused Hepworth village to excitement was the funeral of the dead man. As he had been a very charitable individual, and personally popular, there was a large concourse of mourners gathered in the churchyard to do honour to his memory. Moreover, the terrible nature of the crime, and its mystery, together with the publicity given to that same mystery, lured a great number to the ceremony. Never before in the memory of the oldest inhabitant had there been so gigantic a gathering, and Dr Borrin was laid to rest under the shadow of the square tower with sincere demonstrations of sorrow. Edwin attended on behalf of Ida, who did not leave the house, but Edgar refused to go, as he asserted that the dismal ceremony was too much for his nerves. Jane, who remained with Miss Venery after the funeral had taken place, apologised for her brother.

"Poor Edgar is so tender-hearted that he thought he would break down," she said sadly, "he was so sorry on your behalf, Ida."

"He might have shown his sorrow by honouring my uncle's memory," retorted Ida, who had every cause to dislike Edgar for his selfishness.

“ I’m sure he would do anything for your sake, dear.”

“ I’m sure he would now that I have two hundred thousand pounds, Jane.”

“ Oh,” Miss Gurth’s eyes opened greedily. “ Then poor Dr Borrin did not alter his will as he intended? ”

“ No. I received a copy of the will from his London lawyer, and it leaves me all the money, less a sum set aside to purchase an annuity for my mother. I am at once sorry and glad,” sighed Ida pensively, “ sorry because such a large sum of money will be a trouble to administer, and glad since Edwin, who took me without a penny, will receive the reward of his unselfish love.”

“ Oh, I dare say Edwin guessed that Dr Borrin would not alter the will.”

Ida looked at the demure girl in astonishment, as like others she believed the Gurths to be a united family. “ I am quite sure that Edwin truly believed I would only have the five hundred a year and my trousseau,” she said quietly. “ You heard what Uncle Josiah explained at that dinner on the night he was murdered. Had he lived he could certainly have altered the will, and neither Edwin nor I would have objected to such alteration.”

“ What a strange girl you are, Ida,” observed Jane, pensively, “ you don’t care a bit about money.”

“ Well, that is true. I never can be enthusiastic in that way. I value love more than money. So does Edwin.”

“ Oh, Edwin,” said Miss Gurth scornfully, “ he’s full of cranky notions. Oh you may stare, Ida, but you don’t know Edwin as well as I do.”

“ I thought you were fond of him,” said Ida, still staring.

“Of course I am, but I am fonder of Edgar. He is much kinder than Edwin.”

“I don’t agree with you, Jane.”

“Well, I don’t expect you to. Of course Edwin has been clever enough to get engaged to you, and will have plenty of money for the rest of his life. But he is not so kind-hearted as Edgar, and not so good.”

“Isn’t he? Well I have had some experience of Edgar’s goodness and I can safely say that I prefer Edwin’s nature.”

“You are thinking of poor Edgar losing his head when he proposed to you. Oh, Ida, you should take his impetuosity as a compliment. He was crazy about losing you, as he loves you more than his life. Believe me, when I speak as a sister, that you will be happier if you marry Edgar.”

“I have no intention of marrying Edgar, and I am surprised, Jane, that you should cry down Edwin. I thought you loved him dearly.”

“I try my best to do so,” said Jane, virtuously, “but I love Edgar better. If you only knew what a tyrant and a bully Edwin is, you would be surprised. I pretend that all is smooth with us for the credit of the family, and I make Edgar pretend also: but we both have a dreadful time with Edwin. He is far too intimate with that dreadful Mr Yeoville to make you a good husband.”

Ida looked annoyed. “Poor Uncle Josiah told me himself that it is Edgar who is intimate with Mr Yeoville.”

“It’s Edwin,” said Jane, decisively. “It’s because of the likeness between my brothers that Edgar is supposed to go to those horrid gambling parties. All that Edwin has to do to be taken for Edgar is to wear

a red scarf instead of a blue one, and that is what he does, so that Edgar may be suspected instead of him. I wouldn't tell anyone else, Ida, but I tell you, because I don't want you to be Edwin's unhappy wife."

"I don't understand all this," said Ida, quietly. "You never spoke in this manner before, Jane. There must be some mistake."

"There is no mistake," insisted Miss Gurth, "I tell you that Edwin is as bad as Edgar is good. Any influence I may have shall go to induce you to marry my younger brother."

"Your influence as regards my marriage is nothing, Jane. I love Edwin and I intend to marry Edwin: nothing you can say or do will prevent that. I don't believe Edwin is as bad as you make him out to be."

"He is, and as his sister I ought to know."

"Will you say what you have said to me, to Edwin?"

"Yes," said Jane, boldly.

"Very good, then I shall tell him to-morrow when he visits me. In the afternoon I shall come and see you to explain how Edwin defends himself from your accusations."

Jane nodded amiably. "I shall be at home at three o'clock. But I don't want you to repeat what I have told you to any outsider, Ida, as I always like everyone to think that we are a united family. And we are," said Jane with a sigh, "at least Edgar and I are. As to Edwin——"

"You have said enough about Edwin," interrupted Ida, sternly. "Leave things alone until I give him an opportunity of defending himself."

"Ah, now you are angry, and yet I only spoke for

your own good. This comes of trying to be friendly." And Jane departed with a mournful air, quite sure that she had sown seeds of distrust in Ida's mind. Since she detested Edwin the idea made her very happy, the more so as she hoped by such hints to rob her brother of a rich wife.

But the seeds of distrust never sprouted in Ida's mind, since she had such faith in her lover. She was certainly surprised to find Jane so vehement an opponent of the elder twin, as she had always believed that the girl loved the two boys equally, and mothered both in a most impartial way. If she had trusted Jane wholly she might have been staggered, but Miss Gurth's demure, matter-of-fact nature had never appealed much to Ida. She thought her hard and unsympathetic, notwithstanding Jane's efforts to be amiable and entertaining. Women are quicker to read character than men, especially the character of each other, so Ida had never believed that Jane was the homely little saint that she pretended to be. Certainly she did not know that Jane had the instincts of a miser and loved money for its own sake, but she had always doubted Jane's assumption of humbleness, which was something after the style of Uriah Heep's masquerading. Also she mistrusted Edgar, especially since the time he had behaved so badly in the garden. Therefore the girl, much perplexed by the revelation by Jane, laid the case before Edwin with a view to hearing his explanation.

Meanwhile she attended to her mother, although there was little she could do. Mrs Venery lay on her bed as still as any corpse, and the sole thing that could be done was to feed her at intervals with nourishing liquid food lest she should die of hunger while inanimate. Ida was quite sure that when the antidote

was given and Mrs Venery recovered her senses she would be able to denounce the true criminal. Evidently—Ida reconstructed the scene in her mind again and again—Mrs Venery attracted by some noise had gone down to the library, and there had seen her brother lying dead with the murderer standing over him. The man, seeing her at the door and knowing the danger, had rushed at her, after snatching up the flint which probably lay in the saucer on the table. Mrs Venery had naturally put up her hands to shield her face, and so had been scratched on the right forearm. Then, of course, so swift was the action of the drug, she must have fallen prone without uttering a second cry, although her first, at the sight of the man, had wakened Ida, as has been explained. But of course all this was purely theoretical, and only when Mrs Venery was sensible could the truth become known. Her restoration to health of course depended upon the administration of the antidote. But only Dr Minister possessed the drug, and he was not to be found. Ida wondered if the criminal, knowing what would occur should Mrs Venery recover her wits, had kidnapped the big man so as to prevent his being denounced—that is, to do away with the danger of the absolute truth coming to light. This, however, she could not be certain of, and could only attend to her mother and possess her mind in patience until such time as Dr Minister's hiding-place was discovered. The Manor was a very mournful house in those days of grief and gloom.

Edwin came next morning to see her as it happened to be Saturday and he had not gone to town. He tried to be cheerful, but it was quite an effort to be so, since late events weighed as heavily on him as on Ida. It was a sad plight for two lovers to be

in at a time when they should have been enjoying the golden hours of complete happiness. Both were pale and both were depressed, and they sat side by side on the sofa holding each other's hands for comfort. Edwin asked after Mrs Venery and learned that she was still unconscious, and in return for this sad information explained to Ida that, notwithstanding all inquiries, the big doctor could not be found.

"He has vanished as though the earth had swallowed him up," said Edwin.

"He must be found so that he may give my mother the antidote," said Ida, determinedly. "It is the only chance of learning the truth. But what is the use of talking of these things," she added wearily. "All we can do is to wait and see what will happen."

"We must work as well as wait," said Edwin quietly; "and you may be sure that I shall leave no stone unturned to discover the truth. I want to avenge Dr Borrin as well as to rescue Dr Minister from his enemies. I shall hunt in all directions. So don't look so sad, Ida; all will be well soon."

"I am sad because of what Jane said," replied Ida thinking that this was an excellent opportunity to introduce the subject.

"Jane," Edwin frowned, knowing that his sister was no friend to him, "and what does Jane say, dearest?"

Ida told him, repeating the conversation almost word for word so deeply had it ingrained itself in her memory. "You see she says nothing outright," ended Ida, earnestly, "but only hints that you are the worst of men."

"And how much of this do you believe?" asked Edwin promptly.

"Not a single word."

“ You still trust me ? ”

“ I love you. Isn't that a complete answer ? ”

“ As complete as I can desire,” said Edwin taking her in his arms. “ Dearest, you know that I am not what Jane says I am. She and Edgar have always been banded against me ever since we were children together. I know Yeoville to speak to, and have met him occasionally ; but I have never been to his house at all. Gambling is not one of my failings.”

“ You have no failings.”

“ According to Jane I am made up of nothing but failings,” said Edwin, grimly. “ I wonder why she is so spiteful ? I have always been kind to her. However, when we are married, we shall see very little of either Edgar or Jane. Only be true to me, Ida, and neither of them can harm us.”

“ I shall marry you and you only. Nothing that can be said will ever part us,” and Ida kissed her lover fondly, so as to accentuate her speech.

“ That's my girl,” he replied, and they clung to one another feeling sad, but happy in their sadness, since absolute trust existed between them. But both knew that much had to be done before peace could come to them. They were too fortunate in having wealth and love to be without enemies.

CHAPTER XI

AN IMPORTANT CONVERSATION

AFTER the exciting events of the murder, the inquest, the funeral, the death of Medway, and the extraordinary disappearance of his employer, Hepworth village settled down to its normal calm. It took much to arouse the country people from their lethargy, and even when excited the effects were not very lasting. What had taken place in their midst became a nine days' wonder, but when nothing could be discovered likely to elucidate the mystery, the villagers resumed their calm, bovine ways. The tragic affair at the Manor was still discussed by fireside and in the tap-room of the Harper Inn, but in a rather perfunctory manner, as details had been talked threadbare. It seemed as though the truth would never become known.

Some extra excitement was caused by the funeral of the unfortunate chauffeur, who was buried in Hepworth churchyard, but when he was laid to rest the matter ended there. No one could conjecture how the motor-car had fallen over the bank as there was nothing to show that any obstacle had been placed in the road, and Medway knew how to handle his machine better than to drive it over what was no more nor less than a precipice. MacGrath went to the scene of the accident three or four times, but could discover nothing likely to solve the enigma, in spite

of all his searching and all his theories. It was ascertained that Minister had duly left London, as Ida had been informed by his telegram, and had evidently reached the scene of the accident one mile beyond the Abbey and three miles from Hepworth village. There he had vanished into thin air, leaving his wrecked machine and his dead chauffeur as the sole evidence that he had got thus far on his journey. The Inspector—as so obstinate a man naturally would—still held to his idea that Minister had engineered the trouble, so as to save himself from being arrested for the murder of Borrin. But MacGrath was alone in this opinion, as everyone else scouted the idea of the traveller's guilt. Therefore, not finding partisans, and being at his wits' end as to what was best to be done, the Inspector sullenly withdrew to Whipton. There he waited for something new to turn up, being much more hopeful than the public at large. The newspapers, expressing at length the general opinion, frankly stated that the murder of Borrin, which had led to the other disasters, would have to be relegated to the list of undiscovered crimes.

At the Manor things went on much the same as usual. Mrs Venery still lay as still as any corpse on her bed, and was only kept alive by the injection of liquid nourishment. She never moved a muscle and scarcely breathed, so according to Dr Carey there was every chance that she would pass away quietly. But the middle of November still saw her alive, and everyone wondered at the drug which so cunningly paralysed the body, and yet prevented the life-force from ebbing away altogether. It was a most remarkable case, as Carey admitted, and he wrote an account of it for *The Lancet*.

Ida, under the circumstances, could do nothing save

wait for the recovery of her mother, when some clue to the mystery might reasonably be hoped to be obtained. The will was duly proved by the London lawyer, who came down to see his client about the matter, and she was placed in possession of the two hundred thousand pounds, which had so unexpectedly fallen into her lap. Edwin visited her regularly, and occasionally Jane came to comfort her; but Edgar shunned the Manor, as he saw very plainly that Ida disliked being in his company. She had not even paid her promised visit to the doll's house, much to the annoyance of Jane, who had her own schemes to execute, but remained secluded in the Manor itself and in the grounds of the Manor, seeing few people, talking confidentially with none, and waiting night and day for the restoration of her mother to speech and motion. People respected her grief and she was little troubled with visitors, therefore it somewhat surprised her when one day in the middle of the month a card bearing the name of Mark Bally was brought to her, and she was informed that he wished to see her. As Bally had never called to condole with her over the miserable events which had for the moment wrecked her life, Ida was rather stiff in her greeting. "You are the last person I expected to see," she observed, bowing coldly and not giving him her hand.

"I should have called before certainly," stammered Bally hurriedly, and looking down, "but I knew that in your great grief you would prefer to see as few people as possible. Now that time has softened your loss to some extent I have called to offer my sympathy."

"Thank you," replied Miss Venery still coldly. "Will you not be seated."

Bally accepted the chair she pointed to and sat thereon looking decidedly unhappy and ill-at-ease. He never had been a particularly cheerful person, and always seemed to be bearing the whole weight of the earth on his shoulders, but on this occasion his appearance was that of a worn-out old man. He was leaner than ever, his manner was more restless, and there was a hunted look in his eyes which showed that he was much troubled. However, since he had called, he did his best to adapt himself to circumstances and converse freely. "You are not looking very well, Miss Venery," he remarked hesitatingly, "but that is to be expected after all you have gone through."

"I can't say you strike me as being very well yourself, Mr Bally," replied the girl dryly. "Is there anything preying on your mind?"

"Oh, no; nothing more than usual," he answered quickly, and trying to appear more at his ease. "Of course I am still bothered over the problem of making both ends meet. Owing to the extravagance of my father and grandfather it is hard to keep the estate in good order. I have very little money, and what with backward rents and rates and taxes and family debts which must be paid, there is little peace for me. But I did not come here to talk over my troubles," he went on more smoothly, "but to condole with you on your own. How is your mother?"

"She is still alive," responded Ida simply; "I can say no more than that. I expect she will hover between life and death in this way until we can find Dr Minister to give her the antidote."

"I hope he will be found," said Bally with evident sincerity. "It is very strange that he should have disappeared in this queer manner."

"Very strange indeed."

“ Perhaps he is dead, Miss Venery.”

“ I don’t think so,” rejoined Ida deliberately. “ If he had been killed in the accident his body would have been found. That it is missing seems to me to indicate that he has been carried off and is still alive.”

“ But why should he be carried off, Miss Venery ? ” asked Bally, with an uneasy look which did not escape Ida, who was puzzling over the why and wherefore of his visit.

“ Well,” she said deliberately, “ my theory is—and mind you, Mr Bally, it is only a theory—that the man who murdered my uncle and paralysed my mother knew of the existence of the antidote. For that reason, in some way not known yet, he wrecked the car and carried off the only man who could restore my mother to her senses.”

“ And if she was restored ? ” asked Bally anxiously.

Ida shrugged her shoulders. “ Oh, in that case, she would be able to either give the name of the murderer or would be able to describe him. Unless she had seen him he could not have scratched her with the flint to render her insensible, and so do away with all danger to himself.”

Bally nodded thoughtfully. “ Yes, I see your point of view, Miss Venery; but the person who murdered your uncle must, according to your theory, have comprehended the effects of this drug and have known that the antidote existed. Now, as only myself, with Miss Gurth and her brothers, were the strangers present on the occasion of the experiment of the dog, it hints that one of us must be guilty.”

“ Oh, Mr Bally, how can you talk so ! ” exclaimed the girl, horrified. “ I never meant to convey such an idea. Dr Minister talked a great deal, as you

know, and, moreover, stayed at the Harper Inn. It is quite likely that he told many people about the poison and its antidote."

"It might be so," said Bally with an air of relief. "Then why don't you try and find the persons to whom he talked?"

"What is the use of wasting time in that way?" retorted Ida. "There is not a single person in this village who would have murdered my uncle for the sake of getting the poison. It was of no use to anyone."

"I hear that the Whipton Inspector thinks Dr Minister——"

"Oh, that's all rubbish," interrupted the girl, flushing. "Dr Minister is a dear old man, who was much too devoted to my poor uncle to injure him. It is true that he wanted the Andean drug to try experiments on human beings and that Uncle Josiah refused to let him have it, but he would scarcely murder his best friend to get the poison. Moreover, it has been proved that he was on his way to revive my mother with the antidote when the accident occurred and he disappeared. If he was guilty he would not have acted in such a way, but would have left London for the Continent as soon as he got Edwin's telegram stating what had taken place."

Bally smiled. "You defend him very warmly, Miss Venery."

"Because I like him and because I am just, Mr Bally. Dr Minister would no more have murdered my uncle than you would."

"I am inclined to agree with you, Miss Venery. Dr Minister struck me as a singularly wholesome and kind-hearted man. I suppose"—he hesitated and his eyes wandered round the library in which they were

seated—"the bottle of poison and the flint are in the possession of Inspector MacGrath?"

"The bottle of poison is," rejoined Ida promptly, "but he left the flint with me. As it is steeped in the poison, and therefore dangerous, I have locked it up, so that no other accident may occur."

"Very wise of you, if I may say so. And the axe with which the murder is said to have been committed?"

"That has never been found, although search was made in the house and in the grounds. Even the pond has been dragged, but without success."

Again it seemed as though Bally was relieved, and also, since he rose to take his leave, it appeared to Ida that he was anxious to be gone, having learned all that he wished to know. "You must excuse me talking of the sad affair, Miss Venery," he said, picking up coat and hat and stick, "but, like everyone else, I am much puzzled over the business. Any assistance I can give—"

"I shall ask you readily when I require assistance," interrupted Ida as she walked with him to the library door, "but just now Edwin is doing all that can be done to learn the truth."

"Oh!" Bally wheeled at the door with a discomposed air. "And what clue has he found to the truth?"

"No clue. In spite of all his efforts nothing can be discovered likely to throw light on the darkness of my uncle's death, or Dr Minister's disappearance, or my mother's paralysis. They are all connected, you see."

"Oh, yes, I see that. When you find out the truth about one of these things, you will solve the other two mysteries without doubt. But it's all a mystery."

“ Yes,” sighed Ida, folding her hands sadly, “ as profound as the mystery of the black cell, Mr Bally.”

The man winced and shied like a frightened horse. “ Why do you mention the black cell, Miss Venery? ”

Ida looked at him much surprised at his vehemence. “ Only because it seems to be a good parallel to the mystery of Uncle Josiah’s death,” she said unhesitatingly.

Bally recovered himself and laughed nervously. “ You must excuse my irritability, Miss Venery,” he said, opening the door. “ My nerves are out of order, and the chatter about our family legend is so silly that any mention of that infernal black cell and Brother Thomas, and all the rest of the rubbish, makes me cross. Well, good-bye, and remember that if there is anything I can do to help you have only to ask. I suppose,” he added delicately, “ that you are still engaged to young Gurth? ”

“ Oh, yes. Why do you ask? ”

“ Well, my friend, Edgar, is so much in love with you that he hopes you will not marry Edwin, so that he may have a chance.”

“ Tell your friend, Edgar, that even if I did not marry Edwin I should never become his wife,” said Ida haughtily.

“ Yet Edgar is a better man than Edwin,” hesitated Bally nervously.

“ So his sister says, but I am not prepared to agree with his sister or with you. Why do you stand up for Edgar? ”

“ Jane asked me to. You see I call her Jane as one day I hope to marry her, Miss Venery. She is desperately fond of her brother Edgar, and would like to see him your husband. She thinks you would be

happier, as she knows the disposition of both twins better than anyone."

"Quite so, but Edgar had his chance of marrying me when my uncle said that I would have but little money. He declined, so Edwin, by proving himself a perfectly selfless lover, gained my hand. He had my heart before. I always liked Edwin more than I liked Edgar, Mr Bally."

"Well, you know your own business best, Miss Venery, and Edwin isn't such a bad sort of chap after all. A great impertinence on my part to speak thus openly upon what wholly concerns yourself, but Jane——"

"Jane asked you to."

"Well, she did," said Bally hastily. "Jane has very strong opinions, you know, Miss Venery. It is for that reason I admire her, as I am not a very strong-minded fellow myself. And please don't tell anyone that I call her by her Christian name, and hint at an engagement. We are not engaged yet, and never may be: it all depends upon my getting the estate put right."

Ida nodded. "I understand," she said graciously, "but I warn you, Mr Bally, that if you marry Jane she will be master."

"I don't mind that. She is so clever. But you won't say anything until our engagement is really a fact?"

"No. I am not a person given to gossip," Ida assured him, and then Mr Mark Bally reassured as to her silence took his leave.

Returning to the library Ida was more and more puzzled as to the reason of his visit. On the surface it was one of condolence, but she was sure that he had not come thus to condole. Had he intended to

comfort her he would have put in an appearance much earlier: but only coming as he did at the eleventh hour it seemed to her that there was an ulterior motive. It was borne in upon her that she should try and discover what that motive was, but for some time she could think of nothing. Then it flashed across her that the man had come at the instance of Jane to plead the cause of Edgar: but it seemed rather improbable that he would pay a formal visit for that purpose. Then again Ida considered Bally's reference to the poison, and to the antidote, and to the flint which was still dangerous. In some vague way she remembered that he had taken a great interest in the experiment, and had asked many questions of Borrin and Minister regarding the effects of the Andean drug. Whether it would act quickly: whether it would act painlessly: in what way it could be given:—yes Bally had certainly taken a surprising interest in the drug. But so far she could see no connection between the poison and the man, as he had no use for such a thing. Then a weird thought came to her which made her shiver. She put it resolutely away but it returned again and again most insistently, so that in the end she had to speak to Edwin, if only to set her mind at rest.

The elder twin of the Gurth family duly made his appearance after dinner at the Manor. He was in the habit of doing this so that Ida might not be alone all the evening, and as the two were engaged neither the servants or the village gossips thought anything of this very natural behaviour on the part of the lover. Indeed they would have been surprised had he not put in a nightly appearance to comfort his future wife when she was in such trouble. Edwin therefore came and went with the regularity of clockwork, and did

his best to cheer the girl up. It was a difficult task, for, with the memory of the crime and the presence of Mrs Venery paralysed in her bed upstairs, there was an atmosphere of deep gloom roundabout, over and in the Manor, which was hard to dispel. It took all Edwin's naturally lively spirits to counterbalance Ida's depression, which, under the circumstances, was equally natural. But on the whole he succeeded fairly well.

On this particular evening, which was that of the same day on which Bally had paid his visit of condolence, Miss Venery was more than usually sombre, and, when the two were seated in the drawing-room, Edwin asked what was the matter. Ida's prompt reply startled him greatly.

"Do you think that Mark Bally murdered my uncle?" she asked suddenly. Edwin sprang up from where he sat beside her and stared at the girl's white inquiring face in surprise.

"What on earth put that into your head," he demanded after a pause.

"Mr Bally himself. He has been here to-day."

"It was about time he did come," said Edwin, frowning. "I don't think he has behaved at all well, considering how great a friend he was of your uncle's. But why should his visit suggest your weird question?"

Ida stared at the carpet, holding a fan between her face and the heat of the fire. "He asked weird questions himself," she said at length.

"About what?"

"About the poison, and the antidote, and the flint, and about the number of people who might have been supposed to know about the drugs prior to the death of Uncle Josiah."

“H’m! Why did he cross-examine you in this way?”

“That is what I wish you to help me to find out, Edwin. His cross-examination, as you call it, aroused my suspicions.”

Gurth resumed his seat beside the girl, and spoke seriously. “Tell me exactly what he said.”

Ida did so, and as she had a good memory she conveyed her suspicions to Edwin pretty convincingly by giving the conversation in detail. “He wanted to know if the axe had been found,” she finished, “and on the whole impressed me with the idea that my assurance of the truth being still undiscovered relieved his mind in no small degree.”

“H’m!” said Edwin again and musingly. “It’s strange. Yet I can’t see for the life of me that Bally’s undoubted interest in the Andean drug and its antidote suggests his guilt. He had no use for the two of them.”

“What about the black cell?” asked Ida softly.

Edwin started and looked puzzled. “That silly family legend. Well what about it anyhow?”

“Is the legend silly?” persisted Ida. “It seems to me that there may be a grain of truth in the matter.”

“There is a grain of truth in every matter, dear,” replied Edwin coolly; “all the same I don’t see what the family legend has to do with the poison, or with the murder, let alone with the disappearance of Minister.”

“He disappeared at a place a mile beyond the Abbey. And remember that Mr Bally knew all about the poison since he was present during the experiment on Sambo, and took a great interest in the matter.”

“Oh, I see. You hint that Bally murdered your

uncle to get the poison, scratched Mrs Venery with the flint so that she might not denounce him, and kid-napped Minister to prevent his reviving her with the antidote."

"Yes," said Ida plainly, "that is exactly what I do mean."

"Oh, my dear girl, it is ridiculous," and Edwin started to his feet to walk up and down the long drawing-room.

"I can't see that it is ridiculous," said Ida offended. "Mr Bally did ask the most extraordinary questions, and did know all about the drug."

"You find a bird in every bush, my dear. Of what use would the drug be to Bally, I should like to know?"

"He wanted it," said Miss Venery slowly "to poison the monster."

Edwin wheeled and stared. "What monster?"

"Well you know the family legend," she said petulantly. "Brother Thomas cursed Amyas Bally and prophesied that the heir of every generation would never inherit, but would be an object of horror to all men."

"But Mark Bally is the heir, and he has inherited, and he is not an object of horror. He's a deuced good-looking fellow."

"Alaric was the heir."

"And Alaric died shortly after he was born," returned Edwin.

"Are you sure? May not Alaric have been the monster of this generation, and be hidden away in the black cell?"

"Ida! Ida! I wonder at a common-sense girl such as you are lending credence to such nonsense. Every old woman at every winter fireside talks in that silly

way. Bally has said again and again that there is no black cell and that the curse of Brother Thomas is all rubbish."

"Of course he would say that to preserve the family secret," said Ida, not to be convinced "but all the country people truly and firmly believe what I have said. Now suppose Mr Bally had such a monstrous elder brother, it is natural that he should try and get the poison to put him harmlessly and painlessly out of the way. For that reason——"

"I tell you it is ridiculous," interrupted Edwin irritably, "in these modern days a black cell and its occupant would easily be discovered."

"I have never heard that the Glamis Castle secret, which is reported to be similar, has ever been discovered," said Ida dryly.

"No, that is true. But—but—well—what do you wish me to do?"

"Go and watch the Abbey and hunt round the Abbey and search the ruins and grounds of the Abbey in order to find where the black cell is."

"I should be laughed at."

"Who would laugh at you? You need not tell anyone, not even Jane or Edgar. I feel sure that there is a black cell and that Alaric Bally still lives, if indeed Mark has not made use of this poison to put him painlessly out of existence. Do search in this direction, Edwin."

"It is a wild-goose chase," muttered the young man contemptuously.

"Everything in connection with my uncle's death has been a wild-goose chase so far. Another attempt of a fantastical nature matters little. Say nothing to anyone, Edwin, but watch the Abbey and watch Mark. Who knows what you may discover?"

“ I shan’t discover this black cell and its mythical occupant, anyhow,” said Edwin good-naturedly; “ however, I shall search to please you, although I don’t think that anything tangible will come of the matter.”

“ And you won’t tell anyone? ” said Ida as Edwin prepared to take his leave.

“ Not a word,” he said, putting his arms round her, “ not even to Jane or Edgar dear. Only if I disappear as Minister has done——”

“ I shall come and look for you,” finished Ida, walking with her lover into the hall and helping him to put on his over-coat. “ When will you start? ”

“ Immediately! But mind you I don’t believe anything will come of the matter, Ida. I really don’t.”

“ You said that before. At any rate you can but try. Good night, dearest.”

“ Good night,” said Edwin kissing her. “ It shows how I love you, Ida, when I am willing to make such a fool of myself.”

“ Wait until you search and then we shall see if you are a fool,” said Ida, and watched him disappear into the darkness.

She little knew that he was disappearing into a deeper darkness than that of the night, and that soon the country would have another sensation to puzzle over.

CHAPTER XII

SUPERSTITION

EDWIN did not pay his accustomed visit to the Manor next evening, but Ida was scarcely surprised. Of course he had to go to London and attend to his business in the day and only the night-time remained for him to utilise for the carrying-out of her idea regarding Bally. Naturally the girl missed him greatly and felt lonely, as the house was silent and dismal and extremely depressing. Ida wrote letters, read the latest successful novel to distract her mind, and in one way and another managed to employ herself until bed-time. But she did not sleep soundly that night, and rose in the morning as weary as when she had retired. Bad dreams had haunted her pillow, and these were connected with Edwin, who appeared to be in danger. What the danger was she could not remember when she opened her eyes. The dreams worried her all day, and although she told herself frequently that she was very foolish to be so superstitious an uneasy feeling took possession of her mind which she could not shake off. In the afternoon it occurred to her that she might call on Mrs Heasy.

Her reason for doing this was connected with the landlady's reputation for gossiping. Mrs Heasy was reported to know all that took place, far and wide, and she was a kind of unprinted newspaper thoroughly

able to supply information about her neighbours. Also the old dame knew stories, legendary and otherwise about the great people of the county. The Bally tradition was one of her stock stories told to any tourist who visited the Harper Inn. It struck Ida that it would be just as well to interview Mrs Heasy, and hear what she knew about the legend and about the present head of the family. Edwin had taken up the search for Borrin's murderer in a dangerous direction, for Mark Bally had a particularly bad temper and would not lightly part with his family secret—if indeed there was any secret at all. And Miss Venery believed in some vague way, which she could scarcely put into words, that the extraordinary death of her uncle and the still more extraordinary condition of her mother were connected in some way with the story of the black cell and with the curse of Brother Thomas. At all events it was commonly reported that there *was* a secret cell within the precincts of the Abbey, and as Minister could not be found it was probable that he had been taken there. To be sure, if this was the case, Mark Bally must be mixed up in the matter of the crime, and Ida, unwilling as she was to come to such a conclusion, felt convinced that he did know something about the doctor who had vanished so mysteriously. His behaviour during his visit had inspired her with many suspicions, and for this reason she had sent Edwin upon what he called a wild-goose chase. During his absence she thought it would be as well to collect further material to place before him when he returned. Hence her afternoon visit to Mrs Heasy.

The old lady was delighted to see her, and conducted her into the stuffy little sitting-room, formerly occupied by the missing man, to talk over a cup of tea. The stout old dame was arrayed in a rustling dress of

black silk and wore her usual wonderful cap of lace and artificial flowers. After the fashion of her far-distant youth her watch-chain was round her neck and a watch was thrust into her ample waist-band. Also she had gold bracelets, gold earrings, rings, and a large brooch, so that she glittered like a Hindoo idol decked for some particular ceremony. Mrs Heasy liked jewellery, and never hesitated to put on what belonged to herself and what had belonged to her mother and grandmother before her. She considered that it added to the dignity of her appearance, and showed that she was a person of wealth and station. Certainly there was a great air of dignity about her bedecked figure, although she was deferential to her visitor as one of the ladies of the Manor; but with this deference there was mingled a motherly feeling, which was very sympathetic and agreeable. Ida liked Mrs Heasy and her quaint ways, as everyone else did, and willingly accepted the tea. Also it was more likely that Mrs Heasy would converse at such a meal than talk in a stiff way without her creature-comforts.

“And how is your dear ma, Miss Ida?” inquired Mrs Heasy, when the door of the stuffy room was closed and she was pouring out the tea.

“Just the same. She lies on her bed like a log without moving or speaking, Mrs Heasy. But that she is breathing faintly, one would think she was dead.”

“Ah, poor dear,” said the landlady, handing a cup to Ida, and indicating the bread and butter with a nod, “perhaps it would be better if she passed away from this world of trouble.”

“It would not be better,” said Miss Venery emphatically. “I wish my mother to recover and relate what she saw on that fatal night.”

Mrs Heasy nodded gravely, and the flowers in her wonderful cap shook with her emotion. "I know all about that, Miss Ida, as that policeman from Whipton told me your dear ma must have seen the murdering villain. Why can't Dr Carey revive the dear lady?"

"There is only one thing which will revive her, and that is the antidote which Dr Minister possesses. There is no other remedy for the Andean drug."

"Drat your poor uncle for meddling with such heathenish things," cried Mrs Heasy vigorously, "and God forgive me for saying as much about the dead. He was a good man, my dear, and has gone to glory, but I wish he hadn't taken up his time with them poisons and things only fit for savages and assassins."

"I wish so to," sighed Ida. "Nothing went well from the time Dr Minister came with the antidote. That was the start of all the trouble. What do you think about his disappearance, Mrs Heasy?"

"I don't know what to think, my dear young lady, and so don't say anything. I do say this much, however," said Mrs Heasy, nodding vigorously, "that Dr Minister never hurt your dear uncle. It wasn't in him to do such a wicked thing, say what you will."

"I believe that myself," said Ida earnestly. "Dr Minister was too fond of Uncle Josiah to hurt him. All the same it is strange that he has vanished so completely, and at a time when he was needed to administer the antidote."

"Everything about the dreadful matter is strange, Miss," said the landlady, thoughtfully sipping her tea. "Dr Minister talked to everyone about them awful drugs and how they could part and bring back

soul and body—that is, my love, part the soul from the body with one of them, and bring back the soul to the body with the other. Such heathen rubbish!” cried Mrs Heasy indignantly. “As if souls and bodies could be tampered with in that fashion.”

“There is something in it, however,” expostulated Ida quickly.

“There’s wickedness in it, I grant you, Miss, and nothing else. Didn’t them drugs come from poor heathens who bow down to stocks and stones? Don’t tell me, I beg of you, Miss. I never did hold with such goings on.”

“Do you think that the truth will ever come to light, Mrs Heasy?”

“No, I don’t,” declared the old dame emphatically. “Whosoever had the heart to kill your poor dear uncle I don’t know, and no one will ever know. As to your dearest ma and Dr Minister, one will die without coming to her senses, and the other will remain wherever he is until the Day of Judgment. That is my opinion,” ended Mrs Heasy, setting down her cup with a bang, “and I never change my opinions unless I see a good reason to; and where am I to get any reason to alter my mind in this instance, I ask you, my dear?”

“Something may be discovered——”

“Nothing will be discovered,” interrupted the obstinate old woman. “That dratted policeman from Whipton said nothing will be discovered, and though he is a born fool he spoke sense for once in his life. No, Miss Ida, all that the thing has done is to add another story to the tales of the country-side, just as if we hadn’t enough of them as it is.”

Ida thought that this opening would afford her a chance of turning Mrs Heasy’s mind in the direction

of Bally and his family legend, so artfully set to work to get information about the same. She did not dare to put the question too pointedly lest she should arouse the sharp old lady's suspicions, but in a round-about way contrived to arrive at what she wanted to know. "You are thinking of the black cell?" she inquired delicately.

"Oh, I'm thinking of dozens of stories," said Mrs Heasy, rubbing her nose in a vexed way, "good, bad, and indifferent."

"The Bally family story is the most interesting, I think."

"It is: very interesting," assented the landlady, falling into the trap. "I told it to a gentleman writer last winter, and hope some day to see it in print, my dear, along with a picture of the Harper Inn, which, to be sure, will bring more custom to the house."

"Mr Bally won't like your doing that," hinted Ida.

"Then he can just lump it," retorted Mrs Heasy, after the fashion of Mrs Pipchin in "Dombey and Son." "Everyone knows the story."

"I don't think I know it particularly well," said the girl, drawing her hostess on carefully. "Mr Bally——"

"Mr Mark Bally," corrected the landlady. "Mr Bally is the name of the head of the family."

"Well, isn't Mark——"

"No, my dear, he isn't, although no one has ever set eyes on the true head. But I know," Mrs Heasy nodded wisely, "that the black cell isn't empty."

"Then there *is* a black cell?"

"Yes, unless everyone has been a liar from the time of that king with the thousand wives," said Mrs Heasy, confusing Henry VIII. with Solomon. "My father's father and their fathers knew that the black

cell existed, and why it existed, and who lives in it, and why The Thing lives there."

Mrs Heasy's wording "The Thing" made Ida shiver: it seemed so uncanny. "Are you thinking of Brother Thomas's curse?"

"I am, and a true curse it proved to be, my dear. He said that the heir would never inherit, yet never die, but be an object of horror to all men; and he cursed the family because Amyas Bally destroyed the church and built his house out of the ruins of the monastery."

"But that is all fiction," expostulated Ida. "Such things could never happen, Mrs Heasy. I am sure of that."

"In these days of over-education everyone is sure of that," said Mrs Heasy grimly, "but, thank the Lord, I belong to the old days when people had sense, my dear. I'd as soon disbelieve my Bible as disbelieve the story of the cell and the curse."

"But nobody has ever found the black cell?"

"And no one ever will. Mark Bally knows, and the steward, Mr Calthorpe, knows, and the family lawyer knows."

"They all know what?" asked Ida curiously.

"Know that there is a black cell and that The Thing is in it."

"What Thing?" questioned Ida, shivering again.

"Well, Alaric Bally in this instance."

"But he died just after he was born and christened."

"He did no such thing," retorted the landlady, "he lived on and lives now in the black cell."

"But why should he be there if he is alive and is the heir?"

"Because he's nothing human, I tell you. He's a

Thing. All the same, since Amyas Bally scorned the curse, as the eldest of the Bally family Alaric is the owner of the property, only Mark being presentable acts for him."

"Do you know all this for certain?"

"Well, I can't give chapter and verse certainly, my dear," said the landlady reluctantly, "all the same it's true. Why does Mark Bally go about looking so sad? Why doesn't he marry even though he's sweet on that Miss Gurth? who is a hard one if anyone is. I'll tell you, my love, because Mark Bally has to look after The Thing in the black cell, and daren't marry until The Thing—whatever it is—dies."

"Dies!" Ida echoed the word and her thoughts flew back to her idea of Mark wanting the poison.

"Yes! It is said that The Thing only lives until middle-age and then dies, but until it dies the outward head of the family never marries. For that reason, my dear, the Bally men have always married late in life. You mark my words, Miss Ida, that sweet as Mr Mark is on Miss Gurth her hair will be growing grey before she goes as a wife to the Abbey."

"But if she or anyone knew this dreadful story you are telling to be true, would she or anyone dare to marry the owner of the Abbey?"

"Money and position, my dear, is worthy of some sorrow," said Mrs Heasy sententiously, "although wild horses wouldn't make me take them at that cost. Oh the Ballys have always got wives, curse or no curse. And Miss Gurth's a hard one as I say. She'll marry Mr Mark sooner or later when the black cell is empty, and then——" Mrs Heasy paused significantly, "then there'll be another Thing to live in the——"

"Oh, don't, don't!" Ida felt quite sick. "It's too terrible."

"It isn't pleasant I admit," said Mrs Heasy complacently, and glad to think that she had made such an impression on her listener. "But we have to deal with facts and must take them as we find them."

"But you can't prove your facts."

"Well," said the old lady coolly, "that is true enough. But my father, and my father's father, and my very own self saw the fairy lights."

"What are the fairy lights?"

"Haven't you heard of them? Ah, I forgot you are a foreigner in the parish and only came ten years more or less ago. The fairy lights appear in the ruins of the old church at midnight, sometimes once a month and sometimes once a week. I have heard that once in George III.'s reign they appeared each night in the week and always at midnight."

"But what are the fairy lights?" asked Ida again.

"The Lord knows. Some say that it's the steward and the outward head of the Bally house, who go to feed The Thing in the black cell, and others say the lights are devil-lanterns set to guard the black cell, by Brother Thomas. He is said to be alive you know, my dear, being kept so by the will of the big black fiend he served."

"Oh, Mrs Heasy, how can you believe that?"

"I don't believe it," snapped the old woman rather ruffled. "I believe that the child who can't come into the light of day is in the cell and not Brother Thomas. I saw the fairy lights myself when a gel and ran for my life when I saw them twinkling in the old ruins."

"But if they are carried by men——"

“ We can’t say if they are,” interrupted Mrs Heasy with pious superstition, “ they may be devils and I’m not saying they aren’t. Anyhow no one will go to the Abbey ruins at midnight.”

“ But if some sensible man went he might follow the lights and learn where the black cell is.”

“ He might, Miss Ida, but he’d get a bullet in his heart if he tried,” said Mrs Heasy grimly, “ the Ballys won’t part with their secret lightly you may be certain. I have heard tell that since old times three or four men have been shot and wounded when prying round to watch them lights. That is why I ran as a gel when I saw them.”

“ It seems to me that Mark and the steward must carry food at midnight to the black cell,” said Ida, half to herself.

“ Maybe,” said Mrs Heasy philosophically, “ though others think that the lights are of the devil whom Brother Thomas served. But if you can find a man or a woman or a child to go within a mile of the Abbey at midnight, or to meddle with the Ballys and their secret, you can have the Harper Inn all to your very own self, Miss Ida, and I can’t say fairer than that.”

“ I would go myself for nothing,” said Ida, smiling faintly. “ There may be some truth in the tradition of the black cell and——”

“ Of course there is,” insisted Mrs Heasy sharply, “ my dear there’s the tale of something of the same kind in connection with what Dr Minister calls Glamis Castle.”

Ida nodded, and then an idea occurred to her. “ Do you think that Dr Minister wanted to find out the Bally secret? ”

“ Yes, I do,” said the landlady stoutly, “ he was

always asking questions and went to search the ruins in the daytime."

"Do you think he might have gone at night and——"

Mrs Heasy started from her chair greatly excited. "Why Miss, now that you put the idea into my head I shouldn't be at all surprised. The upset car was found only a mile from the Abbey with a shuffer dead and—yes——" Mrs Heasy was so overcome that she dropped back into her chair. "I dare say that will account for his disappearance."

"What do you mean, exactly?" asked Ida rather surprised at the effect produced by her words.

"I mean what you mean, Miss. Dr Minister might have learned too much, as he was always determined and inquisitive. If Mr Mark guessed *that*, he could and would," added the landlady emphatically, "have arranged to overturn the car and carry Dr Minister away."

"But he wouldn't have murdered Medway," objected Ida, uncomfortably.

"Oh, he had to take his chance of that when arranging the accident," said Mrs Heasy calmly. "Then Dr Minister when insensible must have been carried to the black cell, and when he'll get out again I don't know."

"You can't be sure of this."

"I can't, nor can anyone else, unless search is made. And then an Act of Parliament would have to be passed, I dare say, to make Mr Mark allow a hunt for the black cell. Well, it's none of my business, as if I meddle the Lord only knows what would happen to me."

"Why, what could happen?"

"Well, my dear, long ago someone in this village

did learn something, and one night the then head of the family came and dragged him out of bed to drown him in the horse-pond."

"Oh, but Mark would never act in that way in these enlightened days."

"He's got the family blood in him, and he means to keep the secret at all costs. At any rate I shall say nothing of this idea of yours, Miss Ida, and if you are wise you will say nothing also."

"Of course I won't," said Miss Venery quickly; for, having learned all she desired, she did not wish Mrs Heasy to think that she would act on the information in any way. "But I don't think Mark would behave in such a manner."

"You said that before, Miss," remarked Mrs Heasy, standing up to brush the stray crumbs from her apron. "But I have my doubts of what he'd do. They are a set of demons those Ballys when their blood is up. Let Dr Minister bide in the black cell along with the Alaric Thing, and don't you lift a finger to meddle with the matter. Say what you like there's more in the story of the curse than you think."

"I dare say," admitted Ida, who was greatly impressed by the old woman's earnest way of speaking. "But if the police find any clue to the disappearance of Dr Minister, all Mark Bally's threats won't prevent them arresting him."

"They've got to find Dr Minister in the black cell first," said Mrs Heasy shrewdly, "and the cell has never been found since Brother Thomas closed it with a curse in the old days. Well, Miss, I'm sorry you must go."

"I have to return to see my mother," said Ida, taking her leave, "and I am very much obliged to you for your interesting talk."

“That’s all right, Miss, you are welcome; but don’t meddle, I say.” And with this warning ringing in her ears Ida departed, having learned much which she believed would be useful in solving the mystery.

CHAPTER XIII

AN AMAZING ACCUSATION

THERE was so much superstition and tradition mixed up with probable facts in Mrs Heasy's story, that it was hard to say what was truth and what was not. Ida remained very quiet for the next twenty-four hours thinking over what the old woman had said, and trying to see what practical use could be made of the information. On the face of it there was every appearance that the Bally family legend rested on positive fact, for, had there not been a grain of truth in what was said, there would be no family secret at all. Even when allowance was made for the credulity of the country people, of whom the landlady was the mouth-piece, Miss Venery concluded that the black cell was by no means mythical. Probably it existed, but whether any monstrosity lived in it she was of course unable to say. There was no clue to the truth.

But presuming, as Ida did presume, that the Bally legend rested on absolute fact, however overlaid with the marvellous, there was every reason why Mark should desire to possess the poison. Maybe the unfortunate Alaric existed, and while he existed held his brother as the family representative to the precincts of the Abbey, since Bally could scarcely go away for any length of time when there was such a secret to be guarded. Both Borrin and Minister had declared

that the Andean drug was painless in its effects, and Mark had eagerly absorbed this information. The knowledge might prompt him to steal the drug, and administer the same to Alaric, always presuming that Alaric existed, as Mrs Heasy so firmly declared. In this way the miserable Thing, as Mrs Heasy called the elder brother, would be put out of his uncomfortable existence painlessly, and, seeing what gossip said he was, Mark would not think that he was committing a crime. But in order to get the drug—if indeed he was the culprit—Bally had committed a crime, in fact two crimes if not three or four. And all the four arose out of his desire to secure the poison. In the first place he had murdered Borrin to get the drug; in the second he had paralysed Mrs Venery by means of the drug so that she might not denounce him; thirdly he had kidnapped Minister so that he should not give the antidote and revive the poor lady to be a dangerous witness, and fourthly the means he had taken to secure the traveller had resulted in the death of Medway the chauffeur. It seemed when looked at in this light that the whole series of criminal actions had been executed by the one man, and that man the assassin of Borrin. But whether that man was really and truly Mark Bally, Ida could not say. She liked Mark, although she had never been very intimate with him, and she hesitated to ascribe such terrible wickedness to him. All the same on the face of it there appeared to be nobody else who would wish to gain possession of the Andean drug. And, according to MacGrath, the securing of the drug was the motive for the commission of the crime. It was all very puzzling, very improbable, and very terrible, yet at the same time not at all unlikely. Ida, throughout the twenty-four hours argued to herself in this some-

what Irish way, and longed to have a conversation with Edwin. On the assumption that two heads are better than one she thought that between them they might arrive at some conclusion.

But Edwin never put in an appearance at the Manor. Two days elapsed and three, yet he still remained absent and never wrote or called, or intimated in any way that he was alive. Ida began to feel alarmed. Minister had been looking for the Bally secret and he had disappeared; now Edwin had been sent by her to watch Bally and he was conspicuous by his absence. Could it be possible, she asked herself, that he also had been kidnapped and conveyed to this mysterious cell, which was so widely spoken about? At first she was inclined to go to Whipton and question MacGrath so that she might work with him to learn what had transpired since Edwin had left her. But this she did not do after some reflection, as the officer was by no means clever, and, moreover, there might be no need to search for her lover. Shortly he would make his appearance and then he would give an account of his doings. The errand she had sent him on was not likely to be executed in a moment, so the girl, reflecting that time must be given, possessed her soul in patience.

But when the fourth day of Edwin's absence arrived, Ida became seriously alarmed and decided to move in the matter. Her easiest way would have been to go to the doll's house and question Jane. But this she did not wish to do since Jane was hostile to her elder brother, and would be of little use as regards information. Then again, Ida so greatly disliked and mistrusted the other twin that she did not wish to be in his company. Under the circumstances she decided to go herself to London and see Edwin in his own

chambers. There she would learn why he had not been near her. Having come to this conclusion, Miss Venery arranged to go to town next morning. Meanwhile she attended to her mother and otherwise passed the weary hours as best she could in various occupations to distract her troubled mind.

It was about this time, and during Edwin's absence, that Ida began to suspect she was watched. When she walked in the grounds, some sixth sense told her that eyes were upon her, and when seated in drawing-room or library, especially at night, someone was spying on her through the windows. She had the shutters put up regularly, even the new shutter which, since the murder, had been made for the glass door of the bow-window. But this precaution did not reduce her fears. The person who watched was behind the shutters and haunted the grounds. Also when she walked in the village the same strange feeling of being overlooked prevailed and made her miserable. Yet, when she turned, all that could be seen was a small boy dawdling along the street staring into the shops. She began to meet this boy frequently both in Hepworth and during the walks she took in the surrounding country for the benefit of her health. She certainly never caught him in the grounds or hovering round the windows of the Manor. All the same she became possessed by the idea that this brat was keeping guard over her. Why, she did not know, but her idea that this was the spy was confirmed when by chance she had a closer view of the lad. He was not a country boy, rosy-faced and ignorant, but a sharp London arab with a shrewd wizened face and an alert manner. His dress was respectable enough, and he never worried her in any way, either by speaking to her, or even looking at her. All the same he

was on the watch, as she felt convinced. For the moment she felt inclined to question him.

This she very wisely did not do, since an examination would inform those who had set the boy to watch that she suspected something. It was better, she decided, to wait and see Edwin. When she explained he could take the matter into his own hands, and deal with the spy. But casually she questioned her maid, who, being a niece of Mrs Heasy, regularly learned the gossip of the place from her aunt. The maid made careful inquiries and learned that the boy had come to Hepworth with his mother for a holiday and was an errand lad in London. His name was Billy Ensor, and from all accounts he was nothing more than a harmless lad, taking his yearly rest. As Ida did not know whether errand boys took yearly holidays, she accepted the explanation and began to think that her fears for Edwin made her morbid about herself.

She changed her mind on this point when she went to town next day. When in the train on her way to Edwin's office she saw the boy slip on to the platform and enter a third-class carriage. Then in London he followed her at a safe distance along to the barrier where she gave up her ticket. Naturally she took a taxi to drive to Monks Walk near Lincoln's Inn Fields where Edwin had his chambers, and then a backward glance showed her that another taxi containing Billy Ensor was on her track. When she arrived at Monks Walk and alighted the other taxi stopped and Billy got out to walk away, apparently aimlessly, after paying his fare. She saw no more of him for the time being but entered the office of her lover with the feeling that the boy had seen her arrive at her destination. The moment she met Edwin she determined

to tell him about the spy, as she now felt positive the boy was.

But to her surprise and dismay Edwin's chambers were locked up. The barrister had only one room, and shared a clerk with other brother lawyers, who like himself had not many briefs. Finding the door closed Ida looked about for the clerk as she had visited Edwin in this place before and knew where to seek for the individual in question. The man, a dapper, smart little creature with twinkling eyes and a sharp, clean-shaven face was in his tiny little room, and informed her that his three employers were absent. Mr Ward and Mr Epsome had gone to the Law-courts——

“ And Mr Gurth? ” questioned Ida impatiently, for knowing who she was, the clerk should have given Edwin's name first.

“ Mr Gurth! ” the clerk looked at her in astonishment. “ He is ill at home.”

Ida started, “ I never heard that he was ill, Mr Simon,” she said faintly.

“ But you live in Hepworth, Miss Venery.”

“ Yes. But I have not seen Mr Gurth for three or four days.”

“ Neither have I,” said Simon promptly; “ it is just four days since he stopped coming up to business. Yesterday his brother—Mr Edgar Gurth, the solicitor you know, Miss Venery—came round to say that his twin—they are twins, as you know, Miss Venery—was ill in bed and would not be back for some days.”

“ Did he say what was the matter with him? ” asked Ida, wondering why this information had not reached her through Mrs Heasy's niece.

“ No, Miss Venery. Just that he was laid up for a time and would soon return to business again.”

Ida sat down feeling very puzzled. She could not understand Edwin's conduct, since he should have written her if he was ill. And, even if he could not have written, Jane surely might have sent round a message to the Manor. While she wondered what all these things meant Mr Simon, the clerk, made a suggestion. "Why not go round to see Mr Edgar Gurth, Miss Venery? He can explain all about the matter. His office is just round the corner, and I can send a boy to show it to you."

"Thank you," replied Ida rising and pulling down her veil. "I know where the office is, and your suggestion is a good one. I shall see Mr Edgar Gurth at once," and with a nod she walked out of the tiny room, leaving Simon wondering why she should have come to town in search of information which she could have procured easier in her own village.

Ida did not see Billy Ensor until she turned the corner of Monks Walk and then came upon him so suddenly that she made sure he had been spying on her since she had entered and left Edwin's chambers. Still she thought it wise to take no notice, and indeed the lad gave her no opportunity of doing so, as he bounded past her and entered the passage which she knew led to Edgar's office. This rather surprised her and she was still more surprised when she entered the office to find Billy Ensor there to receive her.

"Mr Edgar is engaged with a lady," said Billy glibly, and expressing no great astonishment at her appearance; "but I saw you coming, and told him, Miss Venery. He will see you in a few minutes."

"How do you know my name?" asked Ida sharply.

"Why, Miss, you've seen me heaps of times in Hepworth village. Mr Edgar gave me a holiday, and I've been staying there with mother. To-day

my holiday is ended, and I came up in the same train with you, Miss."

All this was uttered with such evident innocence and seemed so reasonable that Ida could not question the boy as to whether he had been watching her. Even if she did he would tell a lie, so she decided to accept his explanation as truthful. Nevertheless it gave her a shock to find that the supposed spy was Edgar Gurth's office-boy. "I understand," she said quietly and took a seat. "I shall wait here until Mr Edgar is disengaged."

"All right, Miss. I have to go out with a message," said Master Ensor, and putting on his cap took a large bundle of legal papers to depart whistling.

Ida scented danger in the air and resolved to ask Edgar why he had been having her watched. Meanwhile she sat quietly in the dingy outer room waiting until Edgar's client departed. To be plain, the office of Gurth consisted of one large room which was divided into two by a wooden partition which did not reach quite up to the whitewash ceiling, so that anyone in the outer portion could hear very plainly what was being talked about in the inner part. This being the case, as soon as Billy Ensor departed, Ida became aware that Edgar was conversing rather loudly with his client. And when that client spoke, she felt sure that the lady in question was none other than his sister Jane. For a moment she was inclined to announce her presence, but as Master Ensor had informed her that his master was aware she had come, she decided to wait until Edgar was free. Perhaps he did not know that the voices of himself and Jane penetrated so clearly through the partition. But that had nothing to do with her, and Ida could not help

overhearing what the two were talking about. Then she suddenly became interested when she found that Edwin was the subject of conversation.

"You really mustn't tell Ida," Jane was saying when the whistling of the boy died away in the passage. "It will break her heart."

"But I think she ought to know," expostulated Edgar evidently much distressed. "He will never come back."

"I am glad that he won't, Edgar. It would only mean disgrace and death."

"Well, I have done my best to give him every chance of escape," said the younger twin reflectively. "I have told Simon, his clerk, that he is ill and will not be back at his chambers for a few days. Before the hue and cry is out Edwin should be on the High Seas."

Ida could bear the suspense no longer. Evidently Edwin had got into trouble, and his sister and brother were trying to save him by aiding his flight. But it appeared ridiculous that Edwin, whom she loved, should commit any crime whatsoever, so Ida suddenly rose and opened the door quickly. As she stood on the threshold, a tall, graceful figure in black mourning and with her veil up, Jane and Edgar looked round with exclamations. It was Jane who spoke first and spoke reproachfully to her brother.

"Oh, Edgar, you should not have talked so loud when you knew Ida was outside waiting. I am sure she has heard."

"Sorry," said Edgar, rising to offer the new-comer a chair, and looking ashamed of himself, "I didn't know our voices would travel clearly."

Ida still remained standing looking from the sister to the brother; the two really appeared to be quite

distressed. "I heard enough to trouble me," she said slowly, "and not enough to set my mind at rest. I have been to Edwin's office and learned that he is ill."

"If you overheard what we were saying," retorted Edgar quickly, "you must certainly know that I told Simon that to give Edwin time to clear out."

"Why should Edwin clear out, as you put it?" demanded Ida faltering and with a sinking heart.

"Don't tell her," cried Jane sharply, yet beseechingly; "oh, don't tell her."

Ida turned on her with some fierceness and sat down. "I don't leave this office until I know what you both mean."

"Well, if you will have it, you must have it," said Edgar with a sigh, "although I am sorry that you overheard what Jane and I were talking about. Edwin has left the country."

"Why?"

"Because he is in danger of being arrested."

"What for?"

"For killing your uncle."

"It's a lie," said Ida tersely and boldly. "How dare you say such a thing?"

"I say it because it is true," retorted Edgar indignantly.

"It is not true, and nothing will ever make me believe it is true," insisted Ida, passionately. "This is your revenge because Edwin is engaged to me."

"Oh, Ida, you are too hard on Edgar," said Jane reproachfully. "He is acting for the best. Edwin is guilty."

"He is not. I defy you to prove that he is, Jane. You hate him as Edgar does, and you want to ruin

him in my eyes. But I shall hold him to his engagement whatever happens."

Edgar laughed somewhat cynically. "Edwin won't hold you to your engagement, Ida," he said coolly. "He has left you in the lurch and has cleared out."

"I don't believe it, I tell you."

"Your saying so won't make things different," put in Jane tartly. "You know quite well that Edwin has not been to see you for some days."

"Yes, and I know the reason," returned Miss Venery wrathfully, defending her absent lover. "I asked him to search for the assassin of Uncle Josiah."

"He told us so, and for that reason he cleared out," said Edgar sadly; "he is the assassin of Dr Borrin. When he knew that you insisted upon his searching for what he had done himself he could not meet you any longer."

"Edgar, you know that Edwin had no reason to murder my uncle."

"Indeed he had," said Jane who was now crying. "It was because Dr Borrin was going to make another will."

Ida's heart quailed, but she still insisted upon believing that Edwin was innocent. She loved him too deeply to think otherwise. "Edwin did not care for my money," she said in a faint tone.

"Yes, he did," said Edgar positively. "He was very angry when Borrin wanted to make a new will, and murdered him, knowing that the old will leaving you everything was not destroyed. Well, he gained his end for you have the money, and if you marry him—in America say, or wherever he has gone—he will enjoy the fruits of his crime."

"Nothing will ever make me believe that Edwin

behaved in so wicked a manner, Edgar. Jane, you know that what he says is not true."

"Ida, dear," Jane dried her eyes and took the girl's hand, "I wish I could spare you, and I did all that I could to spare you. But since you overheard what Edgar and I were talking about, you must know all. Edwin confessed to me and to Edgar that he deliberately struck the blow."

"No! No! No!" Ida snatched away her hand fiercely. "It's a lie."

"It's the truth," insisted Jane. "Although neither Edgar nor I got on well with Edwin we would not accuse him of such a crime and bring disgrace upon our family name. Edwin returned from his last visit to you greatly agitated, and said that you wished him to watch the Abbey, thinking as you did, that Mark Bally was guilty. Oh, Ida, how could you think so?"

"It was only an idea connected with the black cell," said Ida, feeling more and more how difficult it was to deny what Jane was saying. "I *did* ask Edwin to watch the Abbey and Mark, thinking that Dr Minister might be in the black cell. Of course I——"

Edgar interrupted, "Ida, I always thought you were a sensible girl," he said in a tone of wonder. "You must know that the black cell is all bosh. And why in Heaven's name should Mark kill your uncle?"

"It was only an idea," said Ida, not wishing to give her reasons. "Perhaps I am mistaken."

"You are," cried Jane vehemently. "I love Mark and I hope to marry him when his money-affairs are in order. Nothing would ever make me believe that he murdered Dr Borrin, or carried off Dr Minister. But your saying so to Edwin made him confess the truth, so your idea had some result—a very unhappy result for you and for us," ended Jane with a sigh.

“ Why for you ? ” asked Ida quickly.

Edgar sprang to his feet with an indignant look, “ Can you ask, when you know that Edwin is our brother ? ” he demanded savagely. “ If Edwin is caught he will be hanged, and then our name will be disgraced. I never got on well with Edwin, who was a prig and a bully, but I wish you and your money had been in the Red Sea before our name was sullied in this way.”

Ida rose also. “ I swear,” she cried passionately, “ that I shall dedicate my whole life to clearing Edwin’s name.”

“ How can you do that ? ” sobbed Jane. “ What is the use ? Edwin was afraid that you would learn the truth about him when you insisted upon his searching for the assassin, and for that reason he went away.”

“ If he was guilty he would not have told you,” said Ida doggedly. “ He knew you hated him and would make use of the knowledge.”

“ You are unjust, Ida,” said Edgar angrily. “ We have the knowledge and have kept it to ourselves. Do you think that we want our name disgraced by having Edwin hanged ? Far from denouncing him I gave him what money I had to add to his own to get away, and went to his chambers to say that he was ill and would not be back again.”

“ And I never said a word about his being away in the village,” sobbed Jane, who was quite overcome. “ I did not even tell you, wishing to spare your feelings. Edwin would not have told me, unless I had found him packing. Then I forced him to reveal the truth.”

“ Oh, the truth,” echoed Miss Venery ironically, although her face was very pale and anxious and her

heart was beating violently. "And what manner of thing is the truth which he told?"

"I can explain," put in Edgar, as Jane could not speak. "Edwin told the truth in my presence again when I came home from the office. He said that he had wanted to marry you for your money, and that he knew how the old will, still in existence, was worded. Before Borrin could alter it he decided to kill him, and on that night he took an axe we used for cutting wood for the purpose."

"He never would be so brutal," wailed Ida. "I can't believe it."

"You must," insisted the young man firmly. "Edwin said that he went to the Manor and knocked at the bow-window door. Dr Borrin had come down to the library to do something—I don't know what. He expressed surprise at seeing Edwin, who didn't give him time to ask questions but struck him on the head with the axe. Then Edwin broke the window-glass with the axe to suggest a burglary, and it was that sound which made your mother come downstairs. When she appeared she gave a cry on seeing her brother dead. Edwin thought that all was up with him, as she recognised him. He therefore snatched the flint from the table and rushed at her. She dropped her candle and put up her arms to shield herself. He scratched her right forearm as you know, and she dropped insensible. Then Edwin rushed away and you came down aroused by your mother's cry."

"It can't be true," cried Ida in agony. "Oh, Edgar, it can't be true."

"I only tell you what Edwin told us both," said the other twin sullenly.

"But Dr Minister's disappearance?"

"I know nothing of that. Edwin said nothing about it. Anyhow, Jane and I gave him what money we had——"

"All my savings from the housekeeping money," sobbed Jane despairingly.

"And he went away. Since then we have heard nothing of him," went on Edgar. "And Jane and I were so afraid lest you should move in the matter and consult MacGrath about the search upon which you sent Edwin that I sent my office-boy down to Hepworth and had you watched."

"Ah," said Ida, looking up with a pale face, "then my suspicions were right."

"If you guessed that you were being watched, they were," said Edgar calmly. "But Billy must have done his work badly to have allowed you to suspect. I don't apologise for having had you watched. Jane and I must guard our name."

"Even if what you say about Edwin were true I should never denounce him."

Jane looked up in amazement. "Don't you believe yet?"

"No," cried Ida fiercely clenching her hands. "I don't care what you say, or what proof you bring. Edwin is innocent, I swear."

"Well," said Edgar in a tone of relief, "I am glad that you take that view, as now you will stop searching."

A sudden idea came to Ida. "I will stop searching until I hear from Edwin that what you say is true or false," she said, opening the door.

"Thank Heaven," said Jane, still weeping bitterly. "In that case Edwin won't be found out and our name will be saved from shame. He will never write."

CHAPTER XIV

IDA'S SEARCH

WHEN Ida returned to Hepworth she felt very lonely and very desperate, since the burden of life was almost more than she could bear. Formerly all things had been smooth, the golden days passing swiftly in doing good work. And always her mother and uncle being at hand to advise and help her, Ida knew nothing of the stress and storm of life. Such a cotton-wool existence might have weakened a less resolute soul, but Ida's nature was strong enough to rise up and battle against circumstances. Thanks to the training of Dr Borrin she had gained during her life of ease a store of vitality and mental strength, which now enabled her to fight the many troubles which surrounded her. And these, as Shakespeare says, "came not in single spies, but in battalions."

With the advent of Dr Minister the period of storm had begun. Like Atê at the feast of the gods he had come bearing the apple of discord, although so far as he was personally concerned he had no wish to promote strife. But the fact remained—if MacGrath's theory was to be considered seriously—that the Andean drug was the root of the struggle, and that drug and its antidote had been brought into active life, so to speak, by the traveller. It is true that Borrin had possessed the Indian roots for many years

and that they had caused no trouble; but Minister's arrival with the antidote had induced Borrin to make the experiment on the dog, and the consequence of that experiment was all this weary anxiety. Ida was so bewildered by the sudden rising of the storm that she did not know how to act, and she had no one of whom she could seek counsel. Her uncle was dead and buried, her mother lay insensible in an upper chamber, Dr Minister had mysteriously disappeared, and Edwin had fled across the seas if Jane and Edgar were to be believed. None of those upon whom she had formerly depended were at hand to help her in this dire strait. It was no wonder that the poor girl returned to the melancholy house at Hepworth feeling despondent and despairing.

After seeing her mother, and learning from the nurse that there was no change, Ida took a warm bath to refresh her weary body, changed her dress and forced herself to eat some dinner. Then she shut herself up in the library to consider the position, and to find if possible some way out of the labyrinth in which she was straying. Fate had entrapped her into a maze, and had left her to get out of it as she best could. Surrounding circumstances were enough to shake the nerves and faith of the strongest. Nevertheless, as a rat will fight when cornered, Ida found sufficient courage within her heart to face the worst.

Before seating herself before the fire she saw that all the windows had their shutters up, including those of the glass door, so ingeniously arranged in the bow-window. She felt that she would be more comfortable after such an inspection, and she was, although she knew that now there was no chance of her being spied upon. Edgar had boldly admitted his employment of the office-boy as a watcher so as to prevent her

from communicating with MacGrath and endangering the family name of the Gurths. But, since she had agreed not to move further in the search until Edwin communicated with her, Edgar would not have her watched, since there was no need for him to do so. Ida was relieved therefore to know that her future movements were unhampered, and sat down to consider what those future movements should be.

Certainly on the face of it the dreadful story of Edgar, which was vouched for by Jane as being truthful, seemed to be very reasonable. The two had made out a very good case against Edwin as the guilty man, and a feasible explanation of the spying had been given. But for this last candid admission Ida might have doubted the sincerity of the solicitor; but Edgar's painfully frank statement that Billy Ensor had been on the watch suggested that the other portions of his revelation were equally truthful. Yet Ida, in her heart, could not believe that Edwin was guilty. She knew that the twins disliked and mistrusted one another, and knew also that Jane preferred her younger brother to the elder one. But, although the family were thus disunited, it seemed incredible that Edgar and Jane should deliberately attempt to ruin their brother. Edwin had assuredly disappeared, but the question was whether he had really fled as Jane asserted, or whether the person or persons who had kidnapped Minister had not captured Edwin also. If the matter was placed in the hands of MacGrath that official would easily be able to construct a black case against the missing man. The fact that he was missing, and on the grounds which Jane and Edgar stated to be facts, went far to prove that he was the criminal. Then the motive provided by Borrin's intended alteration of his will was sufficient to con-

vince Judge and jury of his true guilt. Looking at the case from every point of view Edwin's wickedness appeared to be absolutely plain on the evidence offered. Still, deep in her heart, Ida clung to a belief in her lover's innocence.

All the ground the girl had to go upon for thinking Edwin had no hand in the matter was contained in the two lines of the oft-quoted proverb :

"Convince a woman against her will,
She remains of the same opinion still."

Ida was, so to speak, by what had been said, convinced outwardly against her will, which wished to believe in Edwin's innocence, yet, in spite of the strong evidence in her innermost nature she remained true to him. Edwin would never have so brutally murdered an old man of whom he was fond; Edwin did not in the least care for the disposal of the fortune, since he loved her for herself and not for any money which she might inherit; Edwin's behaviour since the discovery of the crime had been that of a guiltless man—oh, it was impossible to think that he was stained with blood in this way. Ida rose from her chair and walked restlessly up and down the library threshing the matter out in her own mind for an hour or so, but returned to her chair with a despairing feeling that she could do nothing. If she did move, all that would come of her actions would be trouble to Edwin. No matter how innocent he was he would assuredly be arrested when found, if what Jane and Edgar knew was brought to the notice of MacGrath.

Then the girl remembered her belief that Minister had been kidnapped by Bally and incarcerated in the black cell, so as to do away with his evidence—no, not with his evidence, but to do away with the pos-

sibility of his reviving her mother, who had witnessed the commission of the crime. Edwin had evidently told his brother and sister that she suspected Bally, and this was another fact which seemed to prove that Edwin had confessed his guilt, since no one but himself could have stated this belief. Of course the two Gurths who remained in the doll's house scouted the idea, and Ida was glad that they did so, as they would probably keep silent about the accusation if only to save Edwin from being denounced. If that portion of the confession came out then the whole confession would have to be made public. No. Ida believed that Jane and Edgar for the sake of their family name would be silent about everything which Edwin had said, so she could still try to learn if Mark Bally really had anything to do with the matter, without risking interference. And after these long hours of worry Ida decided to so try and learn what she could in this direction. A memory of what Mrs Heasy had said about the fairy lights in the ruins of the Abbey, and an observation that the small hand of the clock was drawing on to eleven suggested the idea.

"No," said Ida aloud to herself, when she came to this conclusion, "whatever Jane and Edgar may say, Edwin is guiltless, I am certain. The man I love cannot be a murderer. He might have told them about my suspicions of Mark with the best intentions, for certainly that part of Edgar's information is true. But I can't and won't believe that Edwin confessed himself to be a murderer; nor can I believe that he has fled across the seas. It is much more likely that he went to watch Mark and was kidnapped as Dr Minister has been. It may be that with Dr Minister he is in that black cell, which I truly believe exists. At any rate I shall go there this very night and see if

I can find it. The fairy lights will direct me, if Mrs Heasy is to be believed, and I shall watch night after night until I see them."

In this way Ida made up her mind to action, ignoring with feminine caprice the facts of the case as set forth by Edwin's brother and sister. A more logical person would never have acted in this way, but Ida did so act. Her strong love made her illogical, so she set out on her midnight expedition to convince herself of the truth, not of what really was, but of what she really wished to believe. She desired to find Edwin in the black cell; she desired to learn that for purposes of their own Jane and Edgar were speaking falsely; and she desired to prove that her belief in Edwin's innocence was founded upon fact. Never was there such a wild-goose chase as that upon which this unreasonable and loving woman was bent. All procurable evidence was against her trust in Edwin, yet she swept this evidence aside, and went away on her lonely path to force, as it were, her dreams to come true. Her attitude was a most astonishing revolt against her common sense. Only a love as strong as death would have thus tried to achieve the impossible. And even she admitted that, looking at the matter from all ordinary points of view, her quest *was* impossible. All the same on that quest she went, steeled to the enterprise by her own loving heart.

The Abbey was only two miles away by the high-road, but by crossing the fields Ida knew that the distance was lessened to one mile. She knew the lonely path quite well, as she had often gone that way to the Abbey. And as the Hepworth villagers went early to bed it was unlikely that she would meet anyone during her journey. There was, of course, always a danger that she might stumble against Belcham

going his rounds, but Belcham kept generally to the village itself or to the high-road on either side of the village. By taking the bypath, she could escape the danger of meeting him. And it was a danger, since recent events had made the stupid policeman suspicious of all things and of all people.

The Manor was now in complete darkness save for the lights in the library where Ida sat. She extinguished the two large oil-lamps which illuminated the room and lighted her bedroom candle. Then she walked quietly up the stairs to change her dress for one more suitable to the enterprise. The rich rustling silk was quickly laid aside, and Ida slipped into a plain, short, woollen gown, deeply black, and over this she put on a heavy fur cloak. When she had stout shoes on her feet, and a cap on her head with a motor-veil to swathe round her face, she was ready to depart. Then she hunted round to find an electric torch which her uncle had given her to use after dark when she went into the grounds, or into the village, or paid a night visit to the doll's house. With this in her hand Ida put out the candle and stole down the stairs to leave the house by a small side-door, which led out into the garden from the laboratory, which was entered from the library. Locking this door behind her she found herself enveloped in a slight mist and felt the raw coldness of the night air. The sky was tolerably clear of clouds and there were a goodly number of stars, but the moon was not visible. Of this Ida was glad, as she wished to steal towards the ruins in the dark. In spite of her thick dress and fur cloak she shivered slightly with the damp chill of the autumnal season, but with dauntless courage groped her way down the path and across the wet lawns to the red brick wall which surrounded

the Manor park. In a few minutes she found the postern door and slipped out, locking it after her, and putting the key of this along with the key of the laboratory door in her pocket. When she stepped into the fields over the first stile she felt that she was fully committed to the adventure, and even felt a sense of exultation in her daring. There must have been the spirit of some buccaneering ancestor incarnate in Ida at the moment, for she found her courage rising as she went into the darkness, flashing her torch every now and then to make sure that she was on the footpath.

It was a very lonely walk, and but for her sense of duty and the thrill of the unusual excitement she might have faltered in her determination. But this she did not do, as she was resolute for Edwin's sake to arrive at her goal and make all possible discoveries. As she crossed stile after stile with the wet grass under foot, and the dripping trees overhead, the mists grew thicker, and in the faint starlight hung like white veils over the face of the earth. When stealing over the dampness of the last meadow Ida heard the Hepworth church clock ring out the hour of midnight, and exulted that she had arrived at the termination of her journey about the time when the fairy lights were said to be seen. Through the big iron gates which swung between stone pillars bearing the Bally crest, she did not attempt to go. These were fast locked, and to enter she would have had to arouse the lodge-keeper, a thing she did not desire to do. But by searching in the mists she found her way by a narrow path to a postern door in the wall of the park, which was never locked, and which the inhabitants of the big house used on all ordinary occasions. It seemed somewhat ridiculous that there should be a tall wall

with broken bottles on the top and great iron gates generally closed to guard the Abbey, when this door presented a point of weakness, which anyone who knew could take advantage of. But for all Mark's jealous guarding of the Abbey and his secret, he overlooked this easy mode of entrance. Or it might be that he believed that the legendary terrors of his family seat were sufficient to keep inquisitive people away. This might have been the case, for after dark no villager would go near the place, and tramps, thieves, gipsies, and burglars had never either by day or night invaded the sacred seclusion of the place. Ida was glad that Mark was so careless of the postern door, as, finding it open as usual, she was enabled to slip in without any trouble and closed it behind her when she was on the hither side of the wall. And now she was in the enemy's camp, and it behoved her to be extremely careful.

Under the park trees it was naturally very dark, so she had to pick her steps with great caution, by the glimmer of the electric torch. Not knowing the geography of the place very well Ida made as straight as she could for the main avenue, judging its position by the main gates, which she had passed when outside the walls. Having gained the broad walk it was tolerably easy for her to reach the ruins, as all she had to do was to walk up to the Abbey itself and then strike off at right angles to where loomed the mouldering church. At this late hour there was nobody about, nor did she see any of the lights mentioned by Mrs Heasy. But these last she did not expect to see—if she saw them at all—until she entered the ruins. When she emerged from the avenue into the open space before the house she found the light stronger, as by this time the wind had swept the sky clear of

clouds and the stars illuminated the earth to some extent. By creeping round the semicircle of the trees Ida gained the side of the house where the ruins were. She glanced at the big bulk of the mansion standing up grimly in the mists, and noted that no lights shone in the windows. Probably everyone, including the master of the Abbey, was sound asleep. Ida was both pleased and disappointed: pleased, because she could pursue her enterprise in safety, and disappointed as, if Mark was in bed, he would not be visiting the black cell on this particular night. For of course the girl believed that the fairy lights were carried by the master of the Abbey and his steward when they went to take food to The Thing which lived in the black cell. In this she might have been wrong; but at all events such was her belief.

There was very little difficulty in gaining the ruins now, and as Mark had showed them to her along with his other visitors when she had enjoyed afternoon tea at the Abbey, she knew her ground. Swiftly she ran across the open space to where the ruins loomed against the faint light of the sky, and did not use her torch lest she should be noticed. Of course, as everyone in the big mansion was asleep, there was no chance of this, but Ida thought that it was just as well to be cautious. When she entered the ruins themselves the mist was less thick, and the starlight revealed the surroundings to a certain extent. Having thus reached her goal she did not very well know what to do next. So far as she could decide it only remained to watch for the fairy lights so graphically described by Mrs Heasy, so Ida sat down on a fallen stone in the side aisle and stared into the more than twilight gloom. She could just make out the tall pillars rising to the broken roof of which little

remained, the outline of the chancel window, which naturally contained no glass, and the big stone of the high altar rising amidst a wilderness of grasses and low bushes. The place was very silent, save for the murmur of the wind amongst the trees in the park beyond, and occasionally she heard the rustle of some night animal intent upon its business. As Ida had a horror of rats it said a good deal for her courage that she remained where she was and did not fly when the obscene creatures made themselves heard. The vigil was uncomfortable and rather awe-inspiring.

For quite an hour she waited there in the gloom and cold, and the mists began to fill the ruined church, making the surroundings more ghost-like than ever in the faint light of the stars. Weary and chill she had half a mind to abandon the enterprise, especially as Mrs Heasy had informed her that the fairy lights did not appear regularly every night. But the knowledge of what depended upon her learning something, however small—the recovery of her mother, the rescue of Minister, and the safety of the man she loved—these things kept her at her post. Finally, when she had almost given up hope, her patience was rewarded. She saw two twinkling lights at the broken entrance of the Abbey, and heard the murmur of voices. These last did away with any supernatural fear she might possibly have felt, thanks to the hints of the Harper Inn landlady. The lights might be fairy lamps as Mrs Heasy said, but they were carried by human beings—to be precise by two men, as the girl saw when the bearers came up the central aisle. What with the twilight and the mists, and her retired position, she could not be seen in her dark cloak. In deep conversation, the men carrying oil lanterns, passed up towards the high altar, pausing so close to the

watcher that she heard their voices clearly. One of the men, as she expected, was Mark Bally, the other, to her surprise when she recognised the voice, was Edgar Gurth.

"Are they quite safe?" Edgar was asking, as he passed slowly.

"Quite. There's no chance of them escaping. The black cell is so securely hidden that no one can ever find it," replied Bally softly and gloomily.

"I found it," chuckled Edgar.

"Yes, you did, hang you, and by watching me," retorted the owner of the Abbey; "and by finding if you have involved me in all this trouble."

"Don't worry yourself, Bally, for everything is quite safe. I have thrown Ida off the scent as I told you. She will never see Edwin again unless she marries me, I swear."

"You fool," retorted Bally fiercely, "to wish to marry a woman who hates you as Ida does. She'll never marry you, Gurth."

"Oh, yes, she will. I know how to work the oracle. But come along we must go down and see how things are below."

During this conversation the two men had paused for a moment. Then they moved on and mounted the steps of the high altar. Ida heard the sliding sound of something being pushed out of the way, and recollected the rusty iron railings which extended on either side of the altar to the walls of the chancel. Evidently they were passing through this, and she swiftly stole up as near as she dared. The light of the lanterns disappeared behind the altar and a creaking, groaning noise was heard. Ida waited for some time but neither Edgar nor Bally returned, so, thinking that they were going below, as Edgar had hinted, she

boldly mounted the steps to see where they had gone. A few flashes of her electric torch showed her that the iron railing, while apparently firm, opened outward on a concealed hinge, and she carefully examined the mechanism to see how it acted. It was necessary to do this so that she could re-open it again when it was closed. After listening for a time she slipped behind the altar and found that a huge stone, worked by a lever hidden in the dank herbage, had swung to one side. In the cavity thus displayed worn steps of discoloured stone led down into darkness. The girl, brave as she was, did not dare to venture down lest she should meet the two men, and after an examination of the lever which worked the masking stone she stole back to her former place in the aisle and waited patiently. At least she had gained the knowledge that the black cell existed, and that the entrance to it was through the rusty railings, and at the back of the great stone altar so deeply buried in grasses and weeds and bushes. Her night's vigil had not been wasted after all.

With a heart beating high with hope Ida sat shivering in the cold gloom and comforted herself with the thought that now she would be able to rescue Edwin. From what his twin brother had said she felt sure that he was in the black cell, though how he had been taken there she did not know. But a great horror of Edgar came over her as she reflected what wicked lies he had told. Jane certainly had endorsed those lies, but she might have been misled. At all events, whether both brother and sister were culpable, or only one of them, there was no time to decide. Besides, Ida was so worn out that she felt she could not consider the matter calmly. So she sat and waited with her eyes staring in the direction of the altar, wondering

what would next transpire. And as the saying goes, her heart was in her mouth, all the time.

In an hour the lights reappeared, the groaning and creaking and sliding noises were again heard, and the two men passed down the ruined church. Once more she caught a few words.

"It is dangerous," said Bally anxiously; "there is sure to be trouble."

"Don't be a fool; there won't be trouble," retorted Edgar roughly. "You said as much before we went down."

"Your brother is a very determined man," said Bally gloomily.

"He will have to be very determined before he can escape from the black cell, Bally. Besides, think how the secret has been preserved during all these centuries. If I had not"—here the voices grew indistinct, and Ida did not learn how Edgar had stumbled on the secret.

As soon as the lights vanished, and she was certain that, having paid their visit, neither Edgar nor Mark would return, Ida rose and hastened to the iron railing. Without much difficulty she managed to open this barrier and then set her hand on the lever which moved the great stone altar back. The monstrous mass moved with a groan and again she beheld the ruined stair. This time she ventured down, and flashed her torch every few seconds to direct her way. After descending a dozen steps she came upon level ground, and the light of her torch showed her that she was in a small cell with a low ceiling. It had stone walls, a stone floor, and a stone roof, and was absolutely bare. Ida, in vain, searched for an opening. Round and round the confined space she went, but could discover no door. Yet Edgar had hinted plainly that Edwin

was underground, and, moreover, Alaric Bally must be hidden somewhere, since Ida was now convinced that the monster existed. However, after many vain attempts to discover the secret place of which this small cell was doubtless the vestibule she was compelled to abandon the search for the time being. She felt that she could not remain very long, as it might be dangerous, so she hastened up the worn stairs and reclosed the entrance to the black cell. Then she slipped back the railings as she had found them, and went down the church, and into the open space before the house. A glance showed her that there was a light in one of the ground-floor windows, so it was evident that Edgar was still with Mark Bally. Ida did not wait to see more, but ran down the main avenue, and slipped out of the postern. In a wonderfully short space of time, considering the length of the way and the gloom of the night, she reached home and entered the house worn out, but more than satisfied. To her the secret of the black cell was a secret no longer.

CHAPTER XV

DIPLOMACY

NEXT morning Ida was very weary. Her face was pale, there were dark circles under her eyes, and she felt almost too languid to rise. However, she forced herself to dress and come downstairs as usual, as she wished to be amongst the servants and make sure that none of them suspected her midnight peregrination. Close observation when she was giving her daily orders in the kitchen assured her that she had come and gone unobserved. Therefore, as her mind was set at rest upon this important point, she went to sit beside her mother for a time and think over matters. Mrs Venery prone on her back and with her hands by her side lay under the blankets, looking more like a dead woman than a living one. Beyond an almost imperceptible breathing there was no sign of life. Dr Carey, who was very greatly interested in the case from a purely medical point of view, came every day to see how the patient was progressing. But, as he told Ida, he could do nothing but wait to see if Mrs Venery would revive, or slip painlessly out of existence.

The nurse after the night-watch had retired to sleep for a few hours, so Ida was quite alone, as the insensible woman on the bed could scarcely be considered company. In the arm-chair near the window

the girl waited and watched, thinking meantime of her adventure. One thing she had discovered beyond all doubt—that there was a black cell, if the bare stone habitation under the ruined altar could be called so. But it was not even a habitation as she reflected, since it was unfurnished and no one lived therein. Bally and Edgar would scarcely have descended to see such a bleak place, and, moreover, they had talked of Edwin being hidden away. This being the case Ida thought again, as she had thought at the time, that the cell formed a kind of vestibule to the true underground dwelling-place where Alaric Bally was probably concealed. Now that she had discovered so much of the family secret Ida felt convinced that what Mrs Heasy asserted about the famous curse of Brother Thomas was true. Alaric, the first-born son of the last generation, had not died in infancy, but being malformed had been hidden away in the secret place, as many unfortunate creatures had been before him. It was therefore no wonder that Mark looked worn and haggard, and rarely left the Abbey lest his elder brother should be discovered. There was something very gruesome about the whole uncanny business.

At the same time Ida, resting her head on her hand, wondered why it was necessary to seclude this miserable human being. Even if he were a dwarf or malformed, or insane, or vicious, such afflictions were no disgrace to the Ballys. Other families suffered from such things yet did not seek to hide the matter, so why the owners of the Abbey should act otherwise Ida could not understand; and in any case she cared very little. Her aim was to discover the whereabouts of Edwin so that she could release him, as she was well-assured that Edgar had told a well-thought-out lie about his twin's absence. It appeared prob-

able that Edgar had in some way learned the whereabouts of the black cell and had compelled Mark Bally to keep Edwin a prisoner therein. Or it might be that Edwin having gone, as she had done, to spy on Mark had been caught, and having learned too much had been taken below. And whatever had happened, and however Edwin had been spirited away, it was to Edgar's advantage that this should be so, since it gave him an opportunity of aspersing his twin brother's character without any chance of contradiction. He evidently hoped that by accusing Edwin of the crime he would be able to alienate Ida's affections so far as her lover was concerned, and thus could hope to be accepted himself. When she had no fortune Edgar had declined to put himself forward as a suitor, but now that the money was in her possession he undoubtedly would make an advance. Of course she would scorn his time-serving offer. That was Ida's first thought—the thought of an indignant woman who objected to being wooed for her great possessions. But when the girl considered the matter she decided that it would not do, under the circumstances, to take this straightforward course. Cunning must be met by cunning.

From the few words she had caught when the two men passed her place of concealment Ida was certain that Edgar had some scheme in his head which had to do with the retention of his brother in the black cell until he achieved his aim. That was to marry her and become master of her fortune, and once this was gained Edgar would care very little if Edwin made his appearance. Then it would be too late for Edwin to benefit, and as her husband Edgar would not have her for an open enemy. Of course Bally had also to be considered, as if Edwin escaped he

would give away the long-preserved secret of the black cell. But Ida, wishing to beat Edgar with his own weapons, determined to grant his demands, however preposterous, so long as he produced his brother safe and alive. Then—so she thought—in some way Edgar would manage to release Edwin, however much Bally might wish to keep him. Such a man cared only for himself and nothing at all for the owner of the Abbey.

Since Edgar knew so much and had made use of his knowledge to get his twin out of the way Ida wondered if he knew that Bally was guilty of the murder of her uncle and of the theft of the poison. It was probable that he did, and this being the case he was an accessory after the fact. This was another weapon which she hoped to use against him. Then there was the question of Minister's disappearance, which had certainly been organised by Bally so that Mrs Venery should not revive to relate the truth. Minister also was in the black cell where Edwin had joined him, and while these two people remained in captivity there was little chance of the mystery being solved. But, as Ida reflected, she had gone a good way towards solving the mystery, and it depended entirely upon herself whether or no she solved the whole. And as she had no one but herself to act in the matter she was sorely puzzled how to proceed. The only method by which she could arrive at any result, so far as she could see, was to lull Edgar into a sense of false security. He was the man who knew everything, and, with due regard to his own safety, he was the man to straighten out this crooked path.

At this point of her meditations, and while she was still wondering what course it was best to take, a card was brought to her. It bore Edgar's name, and then

Ida remembered that it was Saturday, when the solicitor did not go to his office. Doubtless he had called on her to carry out the scheme which he had hinted at on the previous night. Unprepared as she was, Ida immediately resolved to see him and hear what he had to say. Her sole line of conduct, she considered as she went down the stairs, would be to gain his confidence, even at the cost of promising to marry him. It was an uncomfortable and sordid part to play and one which the girl little relished, but at the moment, owing to the man's unexpected arrival, she could not see what better course she could take.

"How are you, Ida?" said Edgar, coming forward with outstretched hand, suave and polite, when she entered the drawing-room. "You look ill, Ida. I'm sure I don't wonder at it after what I was forced to tell you yesterday."

"It was a blow," replied Ida, taking his hand with an effort and forcing herself from the outset to play her disagreeable part. "I never would have believed that Edwin would act in such a way."

"Terrible! Terrible!" said Edgar, shaking his head. "After a night's reflection, Ida, I see that you now admit the truth of what Jane and I told you."

"I must; the evidence is so strong."

There was an air of relief and satisfaction about the visitor's face as she said this, which did not escape her notice. Edgar seated himself nearer to her than she cared for, and, although he masked his true feelings with a doleful air, he was secretly delighted that he had—as he believed—induced her to believe in his lies. And so cleverly did Ida act that the scoundrel had no idea that she was playing a game with concealed cards.

"I said to Jane that you would understand when

you thought matters over," declared Edgar, triumphantly; "and bad as things are they might be much worse, you know. At least you have been spared marriage with Edwin. Think of your feelings if you had discovered his wickedness when it was too late."

"It is difficult to believe that he really is wicked," said Ida, careful not to overdo her part.

"Very difficult. Neither Jane nor I ever got on well with Edwin as he was such a prig and a bully; but we never thought that he would go so far as to risk being hanged. If we had not got him out of the way by giving him what money we had he would have been in danger of arrest and trial."

"I don't think so, Edgar, unless you and Jane gave him away."

"Oh, Ida, how can you think that we would act in such a way? Bad as Edwin is he is our brother and bears our name. Who would marry Jane, or who would do business with me, if Edwin was hanged? No, it was Bally who would have told the police, as I learned last night."

"Did you see Mr Bally last night?" asked Ida, wondering if the man would confess his visit to the Abbey.

He did so readily, evidently he did not think it wise to conceal more than was necessary. "Oh I slept at the Abbey last night. After Edwin told Jane and I that you suspected Bally I thought it best to interview him, and went to work cautiously; but Bally was too sharp for me and saw what I meant. He declared that your suspicions were entirely wrong and that he had nothing to do with the crime. He had no motive to murder Dr Borrin."

"No, I suppose he hadn't," admitted Ida, not

thinking it wise to put forward her theory at the moment.

“ Besides, Bally told me that he could prove an alibi. After leaving this house he called in at Yeoville’s on his way home and stayed there playing cards until the dawn.”

“ As you have done,” Ida could not help saying.

Edgar looked at her reproachfully. “ I see you believe with your uncle that I went to Yeoville’s card-parties. It is not true. I did go once, but was so disgusted with the quarrels which took place that I never went again. The person who went night after night, slipping out of the house when Jane and I went to bed, was Edwin, and as we are so much alike he was mistaken for me. Some gossiping ass told Mrs Heasy and she told your poor uncle.”

“ Why should Edwin have slipped out of the house? ” asked Ida, tartly, and not believing a word of this explanation. “ If he chose to go to Mr Yeoville’s card-parties that was his own private business.”

“ You ask why? ” Edgar assumed an air of surprise and watched her face keenly. “ Why, can’t you see for yourself that if he had gone openly your uncle would not have allowed him to come here, much less marry you. To keep his character he went secretly, and Jane told me that often she saw him slipping out, having discovered his goings-on by chance. Then she watched him and remonstrated with him, as you know, Ida, how good Jane is. But he only laughed at her and said that no one would find him out.”

“ And did Edwin go to Mr Yeoville’s on the night of the murder? ”

“ He slipped out as usual, as Jane saw. But Bally

says that he was not at Yeoville's party. If not, where was he? "

"Here, I suppose," said Ida, seeing that he expected her to say something.

Edgar nodded solemnly. "Yes. He returned about half-past two o'clock, as Jane saw him. Next morning she reproached him again with his goings-on, and although he said that he had been to Yeoville's he laughed at her. But he also," added Edgar, impressively; "said that if she held her tongue about his being out of the house he would pay her money when he married you. Of course," Edgar went on with a shrug, "by that time Borrin being dead Edwin was certain that you would inherit the money under the will which had not been destroyed."

"Did Jane agree to hold her tongue because of the offer? "

"Ida, how can you? " said Edgar again reproachfully. "Jane is the best sister in the world and is very careful of our name. Of course she held her tongue telling him that she wanted none of his money. As you know, everyone believed that we were a most united family, and that was owing to Jane's management."

Ida did not endorse this compliment. "Did Jane guess that Edwin had committed the crime, since he had been out on that night? "

"No. How could she suspect her brother? She believed—as he said—that he had been to Yeoville's as usual. Only when Edwin began to pack up in a hurry after seeing you did she force him to tell the truth." Edgar rose to his feet and stamped fiercely. "Oh it was horrible: horrible to hear him confess his wickedness so boldly."

"It shows how impossible it is to trust anyone," said Ida with feigned sadness, and playing her part as well as this Judas did, "and where is Edwin now I should like to know?"

Edgar made a gesture of despair. "I don't know. Out of the kingdom by this time, I expect. However, if Bally holds his tongue nothing of the truth will ever be known, and we will be spared a great deal of disgrace."

"What can Mr Bally say?"

Edgar looked round the big room, and then coming close to Ida bent down to whisper. "Bally saw Edwin on that night."

"How could he when he was at Mr Yeoville's?" asked Ida shrewdly.

Edgar started back rather confused as if he had been caught making a mistake and did not very well know how to get out of it. "Oh, Bally was not there all the time. You know he drove us back to our house and then went home. On the way it struck him that he would like to go to Yeoville's where there was a card-party, as he knew very well. To get to Yeoville's house he had to pass ours again, and saw Edwin dodging round the corner of the lane which leads to this place. He paid no attention to it at the time as Edwin's goings-on were none of his business. Besides, knowing that Edwin went to Yeoville's parties, he fancied he might be on his way there. He was surprised when he did not meet him at Yeoville's. But only a long time after the murder did he suspect him. That is why Bally did not come to see you, Ida."

"He came to see me at last," said the girl, quietly, "but he did not tell me anything of this."

"Of course he wouldn't tell. He could not be sure of Edwin's guilt, as he only suspected what he had

done. He—Bally that is—kept away lest you should ask questions. He wouldn't have said a word even to me if I had not told him of your belief. Then for his own sake he had to speak out."

Ida sat quietly where she was, thinking. If Edgar was to be believed a very strong case could be made out against the absent man. Of course the girl was sure that her visitor was telling lies and that for his own sake Bally would endorse those same lies. But if with the falsehoods the two went to MacGrath, that not over-clever man would undoubtedly be as certain that Edwin was guilty, as hitherto he had been certain of Minister's guilt. More and more plainly did Ida see that it was necessary to be cautious. "I think, Edgar," she said at length, "that as Mr Bally will say nothing——"

"He won't," the man interrupted quickly, "if you refrain from accusing him."

"I shall not accuse him," remarked Ida calmly, "for I have only a suspicion. It isn't necessary to tell you why I suspect, as now from what Mr Bally has said the whole thing falls to the ground. Well, it comes to this, that if I keep silent so will Mr Bally. In that case, and as Edwin is out of the country, there is nothing to be done but to let things remain as they are."

"I think as you do," cried Gurth, quickly, "better let sleeping dogs lie—say I. Only"—he advanced a step nearer to her. "Ida!"

He spoke in so beseeching a tone that she guessed his purpose. Although with her whole soul she shrank from the man who thus traduced his brother, she braced herself to play out her game to its conclusion. She even managed to smile faintly when he came near to her. "Well?" she asked, softly.

“ I have always loved you,” pleaded Edgar, with his usual assurance, “ although when Dr Borrin said that he would leave what was yours to charity I withdrew my suit. I did so, Ida, because, being poor, I did not think it right to drag you down to poverty. Edwin, more selfish than I, *did* think it right and you became engaged to him. I tried and so did Jane to open your eyes to his true character, but you refused to listen to us. Now you know what he is, and as you have decided not to marry him, I thought——”

“ That I might marry you,” said Ida, finishing his sugary speech.

“ Why not? In looks I am like Edwin, although, thank Heaven, I have a different nature. I love you more than he does, since he murdered your uncle to make sure of the money.”

“ Didn't you want the money also, Edgar? ”

“ I frankly admit that I think it is better you should have the money,” was Gurth's equivocation, “ if you were poor, Ida, how could I ask you to share my poverty. But as things stand——”

“ As things stand,” she echoed, “ they had better stand.”

“ You refuse me? ” he started back with a lowering face.

“ Why not? I loved Edwin and although you have shattered my faith in him, I cannot forget him so readily as you think. If I agreed to marry you, Edgar, you would not respect me since I don't love you.”

“ I should always respect you,” insisted this ardent lover, “ as I do now, and love will come in time. Ida don't reply hastily. Although you may not believe it my love is so strong that I may be tempted to do wrong to force you to consent.”

This in plain English meant that Edgar would stop at nothing to gain the fortune which Ida, as his wife, would bring him. She knew this, yet to force him to confess his base ideas she compelled him to speak. "What is the wrong you would do?"

"Well, suppose—mind I don't say that I would act in this way—but suppose I do not keep Bally quiet, as I alone can do? What would be the result? He would go to Whipton and see MacGrath and the hue and cry would be out against Edwin. In no corner of the world would he be safe, as there are extradition treaties with every country. If he was captured Jane and I would be called as witnesses, and then"—he paused significantly.

Ida rose wrathfully. In spite of her desire to throw dust in his eyes she could not help daring him for his wickedness. "Then you would hang your brother out of spite?"

"Well," said Edgar, coolly, "we never loved one another."

"You brute. I shall never marry you. Edwin may be as wicked as you say, but you are a thousand times worse."

"Take care, Ida, and do not provoke me too far," said Gurth between his teeth, and furiously, "you behaved badly to me in the orchard when my love for you—I admit it—carried me a trifle too far. Now you behave badly because you are willing to cling to the memory of that——"

"Oh, spare me these names you give to Edwin," said Ida, wearily, "if he has done wrong he has been punished by exile."

"He shall be punished by hanging if you don't marry me," said Edgar, brutally.

"Do you mean that?" asked the girl passionately.

“ Yes. I am hard-up and I want money. I love you and I mean to have you. I hate Edwin, and wouldn't mind in the least seeing him hanged.”

“ What about your family name? ”

“ Oh, I care little about that. I gain more than I lose. I can take your name and we can go to live in America. In any case two hundred thousand pounds are worth fighting for. Well? ”

Ida made up her mind swiftly. “ Let us leave love out of the question and make a bargain,” she said in quite a business-like way, “ in spite of what you say about Edwin I still love him—so much indeed, that I am willing to sacrifice myself for his safety.”

“ Oh,” said Edgar, insolently, “ then you will marry me? ”

“ On condition that you will bring me a letter from Edwin approving of the marriage.”

“ I can easily do that,” said Edgar, quite forgetting that he had declared his ignorance of Edwin's hiding-place. “ He is in Paris. I'll go there, and——”

“ You said you didn't know where he was.”

“ Quite right. There was no need to tell you. Now I do, because I can force you to do what I want. In three days I shall bring you a letter. Edwin will only be too glad to save his neck at your expense.”

“ I doubt that. However, you know my terms.”

“ Yes. You shall have Edwin's approving letter. You must marry me in a month.”

“ But my uncle's death: my mother's condition? ”

“ You must marry me in a month,” repeated the man doggedly.

“ If I must, I must,” and Ida burst out crying.

“ Oh, I don't want you to——” he stepped forward

as though to kiss her. She evaded him and he went stumbling past her. "Let me console you."

"No." Ida dashed the tears from her eyes and looked at him with a hard stare which made him turn red. "That is not part of the bargain. I don't love you and I never shall love you. But to save Edwin I am willing to marry you in a month. The letter——"

"You shall have it. And when we are married I shall tame your cursed pride."

"We are not married yet," said the girl significantly.

"Oh, I hold you too firm for you to think of escape," said Edgar lightly and with meaning, "if you don't keep to your bargain I don't keep to mine."

"I shall keep to my bargain. Will you write me from Paris and——"

"And say how Edwin is. Yes, I shall. Well, that's all settled. Ah, you won't kiss me won't you. Never mind, I can wait," and he swaggered out of the room.

Ida dried her tears as the door closed behind him. She had made up her mind how to act.

CHAPTER. XVI

THE FAMILY BURDEN

IDA had always mistrusted Edgar, as he was of a selfish and fickle disposition. Also she was biased by her late uncle's opinion of him, since the doctor considered the young man to be overfond of gambling and too much of a spendthrift. Finally Edgar's conduct when she had refused him in the orchard had not been of a nature likely to make a proud woman look upon him as a desirable friend. But all the unpleasant traits which he had displayed were as nothing compared to his present behaviour. Bad as she had always believed him to be the girl would never have believed that he could sink to such depths of infamy. So devoured was the miserable creature by egotism that he was willing to denounce his brother, and have him hanged for a crime which he well knew Edwin had never committed, in order to gain a fortune. It was an amazing revelation of the large amount of original sin which Edgar possessed.

Of course Ida never for one moment intended to let him have his own way, however much he threatened. He would say nothing and do nothing for the next few days, as by making a treaty she had gained necessary time to circumvent him. The question was how could she baffle his schemes? Edgar's denunciation and Bally's evidence would certainly go far to place Edwin

in the dock, but to get him there it was necessary that he should be released from his bondage in the black cell. That freedom meant the publication of the Abbey secret, as Edwin assuredly would not hold his peace, when in danger of an undeserved death. Then Bally would have to explain why he had imprisoned both the barrister and the traveller, who also, as Ida felt certain, was detained in the underground dwelling. Unless Mark could give a feasible explanation he would render himself liable to an action for the kidnapping. Also when Minister was set free—as he would have to be when Edwin was given liberty—he could revive Mrs Venery, and her evidence would bring home the crime to Bally himself. Ida firmly believed by this time that Mark was the guilty person, and Edgar, although he knew this, was willing to hold his tongue since the kidnapping of his brother helped him in his schemes to secure Ida's fortune. There seemed to be only one way of cutting the Gordian Knot and that was by entering the lion's den. In other words Ida determined to repeat her midnight excursion and find out in some way how the cell under the altar gave admission to the subterranean dwelling, so famous as a fireside tale. But if she got in she wisely arranged a scheme whereby she could get out, and this she put into operation at once. There was no time to be lost if she wished to thwart Edgar's plotting.

Whether he would go to Paris or not she did not know. Edwin certainly was not in the French capital, and to get the letter demanded, Edgar would have to seek the black cell. But he might go to Paris and write from Paris, if only to throw dust in her eyes. Ida was quite prepared for that move in the game. At the same time she did not believe that Edgar could

force his twin brother to write the letter approving of the marriage. Of course in that case the missive would be forged. However, all these were minor points, as the chief thing which mattered was that she had gained a few days respite, and during that time could act with resolution and boldness. The moment for mercy had passed: Edgar deserved none, and should receive none.

Ida therefore wrote a long letter to Inspector MacGrath relating how she had discovered the black cell, and asserting boldly that both Dr Minister and Edwin were imprisoned therein. She said nothing about Edgar's scheming or Bally's guilt, as these things could be dealt with later. Finally, she ended up with the remark that she also would probably be held a prisoner, since she intended to go to the underground dwelling, and would be there when MacGrath read the letter. She appealed to him to get a warrant and to have a search made if she did not return within twenty-four hours to the Manor.

This dangerous epistle Ida placed in an envelope and sealed, after which she gave it into the possession of the old housekeeper with instructions that it was to be taken by hand to the Inspector at Whipton, if she—Ida—was not back in her own house within the twenty-four hours. The housekeeper could be depended upon to carry out these instructions to the letter, as she had nursed Ida and had the greatest love for her.

“But my dear Miss,” said Mrs Windsor doubtfully, when she locked away the letter in the cupboard in her own room, “whatever do you mean by saying that you might not return? Where are you going?”

“To London for a time,” explained Ida telling a lie in a good cause, since it would never have done to

reveal the truth to Mrs Windsor. "I am going to see if I can't learn who killed my uncle. You must look after my mother meantime, and you can expect me back within the time I say. If not, then you must take the letter yourself to Inspector MacGrath."

"I'll do that, Miss. But I hope there isn't any danger that you're going into. Oh, my dear," cried Mrs Windsor anxiously, "don't say as you're going to be murdered likewise?"

"No, no! There is no danger of that," Ida assured the affectionate old woman; "but I may have to stay longer in London than I anticipate. If I do I want Inspector MacGrath to act during my absence. Don't say a word to anyone, but do what I say."

"You shall be obeyed, Miss, if I die for it," said Mrs Windsor, satisfied that things were not so bad as she fancied. "When will you start for London?"

"On Monday," replied Ida, reflecting that, as this was Saturday, Edgar might hear of her absence and become suspicious. "You can tell anyone you like that I am seeing the lawyers about the will."

Mrs Windsor, completely taken in, promised to do what she desired, and then Ida retired to bed. She had a wakeful night, and an uncomfortable day when she rose in the morning. Never had the hours dragged so, and in the afternoon she sought out Jane at the doll's house to see how the land lay there. Jane was pleased to see her and said that Edgar had gone on business to Paris. But as she confessed that she did not know what the business was, Ida believed that Miss Gurth was not entirely in Edgar's confidence. In return for the information, Ida informed Jane that on Monday she was going to London to see the lawyers about the will.

"It must be very nice to have all that money,"

said Jane, her eyes sparkling with greed. "I wish I was you, Ida."

"What, with my uncle murdered, and my mother insensible, and Edwin accused of both crimes?" said Ida bitterly.

"It is dreadful," replied Jane beginning to cry; "but I'm sure I'm not much better off. Edwin is my brother, and if he is hanged——"

"He won't be hanged," interrupted Miss Venery grimly. "I have promised to marry Edgar if he keeps Mark Bally quiet."

"Yes," Jane dried her eyes. "Edgar told me that, only I don't think he would let Mark speak even if you didn't marry him."

"He gave me to understand otherwise," said Ida still grimly.

"Oh, I'm sure you are mistaken. Edgar would never behave in such a manner, even though he doesn't get on with Edwin. And I can keep Mark quiet myself, for Mark loves me and would never say a word if I asked him not to."

"Well then, Jane, if I defy Edgar, will you support me?"

"Oh, yes," said Jane doubtfully, "although it will be hard, as Edgar may tell the police what Mark knows. And if Mark is driven into a corner even my desire to save my brother may not keep him silent. It is a very uncomfortable position. I'm sure I feel very miserable. I'll do what I can, Ida, but if the worst comes to the worst, and Edgar makes trouble, you will marry him and save Edwin, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, I promise you that," said Ida dryly. "In spite of the accusation made against Edwin, I can't bring myself to believe that he is guilty; and loving him as I still do I am quite ready to sacrifice

myself for his safety. But think what a husband I shall find in Edgar."

"Oh, Edgar isn't so bad as you think," replied Jane tossing her head. "He is a much better boy than Edwin, say what you like. I know my brothers better than you, Ida, and you can do much with Edgar."

"Even if he betrays Edwin?"

"He won't do that; he won't do that," cried Jane vehemently, and looking scared. "I should never survive the disgrace. If Edwin was hanged, Mark wouldn't marry me; I couldn't expect him to marry me. Edgar is only trying you, Ida. He loves you so much——"

"That he wants to kick me up the aisle to the altar," finished Ida, with a shrug. "Well, Jane, your opinion of your brother and mine are different. However we shall see what will happen. At present I have promised to marry him if he holds his tongue and keeps Mark's tongue quiet. You understand?"

Yes, Jane understood, and said as much, although she insisted up to the moment of Ida's departure that Edgar was being misjudged. Miss Venery did not argue the point, as she saw very well that the sister was strongly biased in favour of her younger brother. Moreover, as she had attained the object of her visit, which was to give a sensible reason for her absence, there was no more to be said. Even if Edgar did return unexpectedly from Paris, or from the Abbey, or from wherever he had gone, Jane could explain why the Manor was deserted. Therefore she kissed Jane at the door of the doll's house, and returned to spend a long and dreary evening considering how she would act when in the hands of the enemy. Ida quite expected to be discovered on the occasion of this expedition, but for this she did not care, as she could

only be detained at the risk of Inspector MacGrath getting a warrant to search for the black cell. Only by adopting this daring course could she hope to lighten the darkness with which she was surrounded. She was sorry for Jane, little as she liked her sordid character, as the girl was so distressed over the whole untoward circumstances, which were preventing her possible marriage to the master of the Abbey. So far as Ida could judge, Edgar was keeping his sister in the dark regarding his knowledge of the Bally family secret. Nevertheless, since Jane asserted that Edwin had confessed his guilt to her as well as to Edgar, it seemed probable that Jane knew much more about the affair than she chose to admit. Never for one moment did Ida believe that her lover was guilty, much less that he had voluntarily admitted his guilt. It seemed to her that the brother and sister were, as usual, banded against Edwin, but Jane was probably under Edgar's influence, and was much less to blame than he was.

However, Ida gave over thinking of Jane's behaviour, as her mind was too much taken up with the idea of her expedition. On Monday afternoon she packed a portmanteau, and went away presumably to London by train, since she bought a return ticket to Liverpool Street. But she alighted at the next station some five miles from Hepworth village about five o'clock and bestowed her portmanteau in the cloak-room. Before giving it up, however, she took from it a small, but powerful, dark lantern which she concealed in her pocket, as she judged very rightly that the electric torch was not strong enough in illuminating power to permit of a thorough examination of the cell under the altar. Then she left the station and went into the town—Wellam it was called—and

entered a tea-shop to have a good meal to keep her strength up. At seven o'clock she left the town and walked along the country road which ran to the Abbey and past it through Hepworth village. From Wellam to the Abbey itself the distance was three miles by the straight road, and as Ida knew every inch of the country she was quite capable of finding the way. In addition to her lantern she had a revolver with her, which she had taken from her uncle's desk, and therefore did not fear persecutions by tramps.

As a matter of fact she did not meet any tramps during that long and lonely and dark walk, and arrived at her destination without being harmed or interfered with in any way. The night was moonless and cloudy and cold, but Ida was well wrapped up in the garments which she had worn on her first excursion to the Abbey. Without being seen she reached the postern gate which was, as usual, not locked and slightly ajar. Then she stole into the dark woods, found a heap of dried leaves and sat down to wait for midnight. Notwithstanding the cold and the gloom Ida was quite comfortable, and ate some sandwiches she had brought with her. But the vigil was very dreary, and only her strong sense of what depended upon her bold actions kept her courage up. Many a man has received the V.C. for displaying less bravery than did this unprotected girl on this desperate occasion.

At last on the night breeze, which was blowing in the direction of the Abbey, Ida heard faintly the twelve strokes of Hepworth church clock. With a sigh of relief that her period of waiting was over she rose and stretched her stiff limbs. Then she lighted her dark lantern, concealed it under her cloak, and stole through the sombre woodland towards the big house.

Mark was yet up, as she saw a window on the ground floor illuminated, and for all she knew Edgar might be with him instead of being in Paris. But the sight did not daunt her courage. Once she gained admission into the black cell she could afford to defy them both owing to the letter which Mrs Windsor held, and which would be given to Inspector MacGrath if she did not return home safe and sound within twenty-four hours. In spite of her anxiety Ida smiled to herself as she stole across the open space before the house and slipped into the ruined church. Mark and Edgar might or might not visit their prisoners on this particular night; if they did not she could release Minister and Edwin; and if they did her strategy would save her from detention. But in addition to the aid of the letter Ida had a second means of dealing with her enemies in desperate circumstances, since in her pocket, wrapped up in paper, was the flint which had been used to scratch her mother. If all else failed she could use this on Bally and Gurth, and quite intended to do so to save herself and the prisoners. At the worst she would only paralyse the pair, and when necessary they could be revived with the antidote which Minister had in his possession. Therefore it will be seen that strong as was the position of Mark and Edgar, Ida had so arranged as to be quite in a position to baffle them. In fact she felt so certain that she and not they held the winning hand in the game, that she walked up the ruined aisle quite light-heartedly.

With her lantern she soon espied the concealed hinge upon which the entrance through the rusty iron railings worked, and was shortly amongst the bushes and grasses of the chancel. She closed the entrance behind her, so that Bally and his friend should not

suspect anything was wrong supposing they did visit the black cell on this particular night. The huge stone at the back of the altar was likewise easily worked, and when descending the worn steps, Ida closed this behind her also for the same reason. Then she found herself once more in the bare stone cell, but ascertained that this time there were several sacks of coal in the corner. These probably were being taken down for the use of the inmate of the black cell, as winter was coming on and fires were necessary. It occurred to Ida that this being the case, Bally would probably come that very night to take them below. If he did, she would assuredly be discovered; but knowing what means she had of defence she did not much care whether he found her or not. Moreover, she was so committed to the adventure that, as on a former occasion, she felt the thrill of excitement incidental to such daring.

But, search as she would, it was impossible to find any exit from the cell other than the way to the surface of the ground. The walls, the floor, and the roof all seemed to be solid enough, and after looking round and round, again and again, Ida sat down on the coal sacks quite at a loss how to proceed. Indeed so impossible did it seem, that she would solve the problem of the entrance to the realms below, that she almost decided to go away and bring MacGrath in broad daylight to see what he could do. But just as she determined to follow this course, feeling a keen disappointment at the failure of her efforts, she heard the groan and creak of the big stone swinging back at the head of the stairs. With a sudden thrill of fear she knew that Bally was coming and that she would have to meet him. To conceal herself was her first idea, and the sacks she was seated upon gave her the

one chance of passing unnoticed. She slipped behind these, and by lying at length her loose cloak looked more or less like another sack—at least she hoped so—and unless Bally examined the heap of sacks closely she thought this would be the case. Then with the lantern under her cloak, and with eyes and ears on the alert, she waited for what would happen.

Bally, in a dark overcoat and with a lantern, descended the steps after closing the entrance stone. He swung the light round swiftly, so swiftly indeed that he saw nothing of Ida behind the sacks. Then he set the light on the floor, and, advancing to the middle of the cell, used a crow-bar he carried to heave up a central flag of considerable size. When this was removed he took the lantern again and stepped into the opening, seemingly going down steps. Ida saw his head disappear, and there only remained the radiance of the light streaming upward through the hole. Then after this illumination vanished she heard the gurgling of water, and wondered what the sound meant. Cautiously she rose from behind the sacks and sending a stream of light from her lantern crawled along the floor. Shortly she was on the verge of the gap looking down.

The shaft of the well—for a well it was—was round and made of smooth stone, quite large enough to admit an ordinary-sized individual. The well was filled to the brim with water, which had caused the gurgling noise which Ida had heard. But as Bally had stepped down easily enough and could not have gone under water, Ida felt certain that there was some vent through which the water drained swiftly. What puzzled her was how the water rose again to its ordinary height. So this was the entrance to the black cell, and a very ingenious entrance it was, for

even when the flagstone was removed, the most inquisitive of men would only have beheld a well filled to the brim with water. Had Ida not seen Bally descend she would never have thought that this was the way to the subterranean dwelling. For the entrance was protected in a double manner, by the flagstone, which hinted at nothing below, and by the well. However, as Bally had gone down, Ida felt certain that she was quite able to follow, and she felt under the water round the edge of the shaft.

Her fingers came into contact with an iron ladder which went straight down by the side of the stonework into the water. Ida slung her lantern to her waist and put her foot on the first rung. Immediately the water dropped for some distance. When she placed her foot on the next rung, the water still retired, and this happened all the time she clambered down. It was no great distance that she had to descend, for when she came to the last rung, a narrow door beside her swung inward and a bright light poured out into the well. Ida stepped into the door off the ladder: immediately it closed and she heard the gurgling of the well water rising to the surface of the shaft once more to close the exit. It was certainly an ingenious and wonderful device to mask the entrance, but Ida was so anxious to explore her surroundings that she paid little attention to the deft contrivance. There was now no need for her lantern being kept alight, as the passage in which she found herself had electric globes placed along the wall at various distances. So she extinguished her lantern and advanced cautiously forward to see what would next happen. The adventure was so weird and strange that Ida felt as though she was living in the romantic impossible world of the "Arabian Nights."

The passage extended for some distance and then opened out into a circular hall, decorated with richly coloured tapestry and lighted by a cluster of electric lights in the dome. Under foot were soft carpets and a soft, deep divan extended invitingly round the circle between the doors. There were four of these at regular intervals. The atmosphere was scented with incense, and this was so strong that Ida, without thinking of the danger, coughed rather loudly. That cough led to her discovery, for hardly had she ceased before the door in front of her was thrown open violently and Mark Bally, with a pale and startled face, appeared. As Ida's veil was up he recognised her at once and stared as though he could scarcely believe his eyes.

"Miss—Miss—Venery," he stammered clutching at the tapestry to hold himself up. "Ida—Ida. How—how——"

"How did I come here?" said Ida, finishing the question as he could not. "I followed you."

"Why?" demanded Mark, pulling himself together and feeling in his pocket.

"Because I suspect that Dr Minister and Edwin are here."

"You are a bold girl."

"I am a loving woman and I want to save my lover and my mother, and," added Ida, with a sharp glance, "I wish to avenge my uncle's death."

"But why come here?"

"I have told you," said the girl impatiently; "you know the truth."

"I don't," cried Mark violently. "I have been dragged into the matter against my will. And you dare to come here—you do so," he pulled out a revolver, "at the risk of your life."

If he expected Ida to quail he was wholly mistaken. She merely laughed in a most contemptuous manner.

"I am not in the least afraid of your killing me, Mr Bally. I should not have come here had I not been certain that I could leave when I desired to."

Mark replaced the revolver in his pocket and seemed rather ashamed of his melodramatic outbreak. "I shall not kill you, as you know very well. But as you have discovered our family secret you will have to stay here."

"Along with Dr Minister and Edwin, I suppose?"

"Yes!"

"For how long?"

"For ever," said Bally in a gloomy tone. "I would much rather have your room than your company, but as you have been rash enough to come you must remain."

Ida laughed again. "If you don't allow me to depart when I want to you will have the police here in twenty-four hours."

"What," Bally started back, looking the picture of consternation.

"Oh, I have made sure of my safety," said Ida coolly. "Before I left the Manor to come here I described how those railings could be opened and how the stone at the back of the altar could be moved."

"But you have not had time to describe that to anyone."

"Oh, yes. I wrote a letter you see. I was here a few nights ago and found the cell under the altar, but only to-night did I find the very ingenious entrance to this place. That letter is directed to Inspector MacGrath, and, if I am not back at the Manor within twenty-four hours, the letter will be delivered to him."

"Who has the letter?"

“ Ah, I am not going to tell you that. But you know that I have your secret in my hands.”

“ And you will tell it ? ”

“ No. Not unless you prevent my going. Dr Minister and Edwin must come with me. Believe me they will keep your secret as I will.”

“ You are very clever,” said Mark with unwilling admiration ; “ and I must make the best of a bad job. I have many questions to ask you. You are safe.”

“ I am quite certain that I am,” Ida assured him calmly.

Mark bit his lip. “ Well, we must have an understanding, and, since you have learned so much, you may as well learn all. Come inside here,” he opened the door through which he had emerged, “ and you will see the family burden.”

“ The family burden ? ”

“ My brother, Alaric, who is alive here, but dead for ever to the world above.”

CHAPTER XVII

“ CALIBAN ”

FILLED with great curiosity to see the unfortunate being condemned to a solitary existence Ida came a step forward, then hesitated and hung back. “ Is he—is he—very dreadful? ” she asked faintly, for the courage which had sustained her so far was beginning to weaken under the constant strain.

“ He is dreadful to look at when you see him first, ” replied Bally equably.

“ And—and—afterwards? ”

“ Afterwards you will find him the best and kindest of creatures, ” said the young man, with emotion. “ Alaric remains here of his own free will. ”

Ida recovered her calmness, and looked at Bally curiously. “ Are you not angry that I should have penetrated your secret? ”

“ I was angry, as you saw when I was foolish enough to threaten you with the revolver, ” was the quiet answer, “ but I am not angry now, as I accept the situation. It is no use crying over spilt milk, you see, Miss Venery. Since Edgar Gurth, his brother, and Dr Minister know our family secret, it doesn't matter your learning it. ”

“ Then Dr Minister and Edwin are here? ” she said eagerly.

“ Yes! At present they are asleep. Before rous-

ing them I think it is better that you should speak to Alaric. He is cleverer than I am and can explain things better. When the situation is adjusted, then we shall see what is best to be done.”

“ You will not refuse to let them go ? ”

“ Owing to your method of protecting yourself I don't see very well how I can refuse. That letter you speak of must never be delivered to Inspector Mac-Grath, therefore you must return to the Manor in time to prevent it being sent to Whipton.”

“ I refuse to return alone,” declared Ida, rather taken aback by his coolness.

“ I have already stated that you will not return alone, Miss Venery. It only remains for us to arrange how Minister and Edwin are to account for their absence, so that the secret of the black cell may be preserved.”

Ida looked round. “ This is the black cell, then ? ”

“ Yes! It was first excavated by Brother Thomas, who belonged to the monastery which Amyas Bally received from Henry VIII. But since then more excavations have been made and the place has been greatly improved.”

“ You denied that there was a black cell, Mr Bally.”

“ And I shall continue to deny that there is one,” answered Mark quietly. “ I am bound by my family tradition, by my family pride from disclosing the truth about my unfortunate elder brother. He is the head of the family and the true master of the Abbey.”

“ But you—you——”

“ I am supposed to be. True. But you see that I act as his deputy. Our family lawyers know all about the matter, so everything is arranged in quite a legal manner. They know the secret as well as the

steward of the property, so you see, Miss Venery, that together with you, the Gurths and Dr Minister quite a number of people are aware that the family legend is true. But why do you waste time? Let us see Alaric."

"One moment," said Ida, as the young man turned to re-open the door. "I am sure from the way in which you have received me and in which you talk, that you did not murder my uncle."

"I did not. Edgar told me that you believed in my guilt; but I had no reason to murder your uncle, who was my good friend."

"I fancied you wanted the—the poison," faltered Ida, rather conscience-smitten; "you did ask a lot of questions about it you know."

Bally looked at her doubtfully. "I did want the Andean drug," he said slowly, "as Alaric sometimes is weary of his existence and would like to pass out of life in a painless manner. But I would never have procured the poison for him at the price of a crime."

"I am sorry, Mr Bally—I was wrong."

"When you see Alaric, and understand Alaric, you will comprehend how wrong. I owe much to my brother, who is a noble and wise man. He would never have allowed me to behave in such a brutal way."

"I am sorry," said Ida again, "but as Dr Minister who has the antidote is in this place it suggests——"

"That I am guilty. I am not. It was Edgar who brought Dr Minister here, and I was forced by his threats of exposure to hold the poor man prisoner. If I had refused to keep Minister and Edwin, the whole story of the black cell would have been spread broadcast by Edgar."

"Then—then—Edgar is guilty."

Bally shook his head. “ How do I know,” he said evasively, “ he swears he is not, and I have no proof that he is. Alaric knows the truth.”

“ Oh. And what is the truth ? ”

“ Alaric refuses to tell me, and ordered me to keep both Minister and Edwin here until he gave command what was to be done. Your arrival has brought matters to a climax sooner than Alaric thought, I believe. Therefore the truth will probably be told by him to you to-night.”

“ Let us go to him,” said Ida eagerly.

“ One moment,” murmured Bally in his turn, “ when you see Alaric do not display too much repugnance. He is very sensitive.”

“ I quite understand,” replied Ida, bracing herself to behold a dreadful sight ; “ you can rely upon my controlling my feelings.”

Bally looked at her approvingly, then holding the door open motioned her to enter. She did so with some trepidation, and he followed immediately. Ida found herself in a rectangular apartment of considerable size, the walls of which were draped with fluted hangings of pale blue silk. The carpet was of an ivory hue, while the sofa and chairs were upholstered in white. There were many pictures of landscapes on the walls, and here and there dwarf bookcases filled with volumes. The place was brilliantly illuminated with electric light, and Ida saw with painful distinctness the strange creature who was huddled up in a corner of the big sofa. She shivered at the grotesque horror of The Thing, but when he raised his soft brown eyes to look at her she shivered no longer. With the instinctive cleverness of a woman she divined in a flash that the repulsive body contained a beautiful soul.

“This is Ida Venery, Alaric,” said Mark quietly, “as others have done, she has discovered our secret, but her reason is a more honourable one than mere morbid curiosity.”

“How are you, Miss Venery,” said Alaric in a grave and mellow voice; “will you not be seated? Excuse my rising to receive you, but for your own sake the less you see of me the better.”

Ida sank into a deep arm-chair pushed forward by Mark, and stared at her host, amazed that he exhibited such little surprise at her unexpected appearance. The unfortunate head of the Bally family was more like a monkey than a human being, as not only was he a dwarf of just over three feet, but his face and hands—all the exposed parts of his body that she could see—were covered with fine brown hair. His head was well shaped, but he had a beaked nose like a bird of prey and a large mouth filled with white and shining teeth. It was the look of this last which made Ida shiver, as the weird little creature resembled some man-eating ogre of fairy tales. He was clothed in a loose white dressing-gown, which concealed his body and his feet, and reclining on the sofa he smoked a small hookah pipe, the serpentine coils of which ended in the bowl and water-bottle, which stood on a Turkish stool near at hand. A book was open on his lap, and his small hands darkened with hair looked like the paws of some animal. At the first sight although evidently perfectly formed, he was distinctly repulsive from his tiny size and hirsute appearance. But his pathetic, intelligent eyes did away with the impression almost before it was formed. Those eyes could only have belonged to a man with a beautiful nature and a clever brain. Yet a casual spectator would have said that this was less a man than an animal dressed

up. Ida no longer wondered that Alaric Bally remained in the black cell of his own free will. “ You are a very beautiful woman,” said the dwarf gravely, for he had stared at Ida as steadily as she had stared at him. “ I can appreciate in others what I lack in myself.”

The pathos of the tone and the pleading look in the sad, brown eyes were too much for Ida, although she was not impulsive as a rule. With a quick movement she rose and crossed to kneel beside the little man. “ Oh, you poor darling,” she cried, just as she would have done to a hurt child; “ how sorry I am—how very, very sorry,” and she kissed his hairy face without feeling in the least repulsed.

“ You have a beautiful nature, too,” said Alaric in a rather unsteady voice; “ few would have acted as you have done, Miss Venery.”

“ How could they act otherwise? ” exclaimed the girl earnestly, “ and call me Ida. You don’t know how sorry I am. Oh, Mr Bally, why did you not bring me to this place before, so that I could have made his life easier.”

Mark, who appeared to be pleased by Ida’s impulsive action, looked embarrassed. “ I did not think that I could trust you,” he murmured.

“ You are not a reader of character, Mark,” observed Alaric, laying his hand on the girl’s head, “ these eyes are true. I can tell what Ida’s nature is from her eyes.”

“ Strange,” said Ida, rising to return to her seat; “ it was your eyes that did away with any fear I might have felt.”

“ I don’t think you know what fear is,” said Alaric quietly, “ otherwise you would not have come here. Why did you come? ”

“ I guessed that Dr Minister was here. I believed that Edwin was here. I came to set them free.”

“ How did you hope to manage that ? ”

“ I—I—I,” Ida faltered. She was ashamed to reveal her stratagem to Alaric, although she had not refrained from acquainting Mark with the same. “ I made my plans,” she ended in a confused manner.

“ Hostile plans, I think,” said Alaric gravely, “ since you believed that you were coming to see a monster. I am not inwardly, believe me, although I undoubtedly am outwardly.”

“ No, Mr Bally,” said Ida, swiftly and with assurance, “ you are no monster, and God forbid that I should call you so. Still I can understand ”—she hesitated nervously.

“ You can understand why I occupy the black cell,” finished Alaric, taking pity on her confusion; “ quite so. If I were as animal as I look I should wish to break out. But, being a reasonable soul confined in a disgraceful body, I prefer to stay here. I shrink from the eyes of my fellow-creatures. Ah, Brother Thomas was right when he said that again and again the head of the Ballys would be an object of horror to all.”

“ The curse ! ”

“ Yes,” said Alaric sadly, “ the curse.”

“ But God would not permit such things,” faltered Ida.

“ God permits many things for His own good purpose, my dear. I know much mystic teaching which is not given to ordinary people, and therefore I recognise the justice of my fate. It seems sad to you, who are tender-hearted, but there are compensations which you could not understand even if I were willing to explain. I gain more than I lose, my dear.”

“ But Mark said that you were tired of life,” said Ida, doubtfully, “ and asked questions about the Andean drug which——”

“ Those questions which made you suspect him of having stolen the poison. I know all that Edgar told Mark of your natural suspicions, and Mark told me, though indeed, I had a conversation with Edgar on the same subject. My dear, I have been weary of life time after time, and when Mark told me about that Andean drug I was sorely tempted to ask him to get it so that I might pass painlessly away from this existence. But I know too well the penalties of suicide to dare God in such a way. I must remain at my post until He sees fit to call me hence. It will not be long, my dear: it will not be long.”

“ Alaric!” burst out Mark impatiently, “ how can you talk so? What should I do without your wise counsel and long head? ”

“ When I am gone you will be able to manage things for yourself, never fear,” said Alaric, with a kind glance at his brother. “ You see, Mark and I know that the end is near, and it will come in a most unexpected way. How, I know not; when, I know not; but my departure is at hand. I don’t think you would prevent my going if you could.”

“ No, dear old fellow,” said Mark, passionately; “ don’t I know how you suffer.”

“ The suffering is good for me,” said Alaric, tranquilly, “ there is a reason for that, as there is a reason for all things, since God is wise and kind.”

“ Can you say that when you——” burst out Ida in her turn.

Alaric interrupted her. “ It would take too long to explain, my dear, and even if I did explain I doubt if you would understand,” he said kindly, “ besides, the

night is passing and you must return to your home before dawn."

"Will you trust me with your secret?"

"Why not?" demanded Alaric, slowly and looking at her keenly. "You will say nothing? What use would it be to you to expose my miserable plight to the gaze of those who would scorn me?"

"I would rather die than do that."

"Of course." He smiled slightly. "Then why ask me if I can trust you? You are free to go and free to come again, if you will? Meanwhile, tell me the whole story of what brought you here."

"I shall do so, Mr Bally. But first I should like to know the innermost truth of your family tradition."

"Tell her, Mark," said the little Caliban quietly, and throughout his brother's speech, looked alternately at him and Ida with very bright and piercing eyes, all fire and intelligence.

"Alaric knows more of the meaning of these things than I do," said Mark, obeying his brother in this, as indeed he seemed to do in all ways. "All that I know is that there was a monk called Brother Thomas, who knew more things than are generally known."

"He had psychic instruction as I have had," put in Alaric, gravely nodding; "but he made a bad use of what he learned."

"To curse the family you understand," said Mark to Ida, seeing how puzzled she looked; "he was angry at Amyas Bally getting the monastery and turning out the monks. Brother Thomas refused to go and still remained in this underground dwelling which was known far and wide as the black cell. For this reason also, as it is under the church, Brother Thomas would not allow Amyas Bally to pull down the church as he wanted to."

“ But if Amyas was backed by the power of the king,” said Ida, “ he could do what he liked I should think.”

Mark shook his head, and Alaric smiled. It was the latter who replied. “ Brother Thomas had more power than Amyas or Henry put together, but he could only use it in a limited way. The monastic system in England had to go because it was decreed by those on the Other Side that its day was over. Therefore, all that Brother Thomas could do was to remain here until he died, which he did, and to curse the unborn babe of Amyas. He said that no heir should inherit the property stolen from the Church, but that the first-born should always remain an object of horror to all men,” he stopped and looked down at his shrivelled body, “ you see!”

“ But,” began Ida, only to be stopped by Mark’s uplifted finger.

“ Let me continue as there is no time to be lost, and we wish to hear your story,” said the young man. “ Brother Thomas was successful so far that in every generation a son who was—what you see—was born. But Amyas got the better of the curse in this way, that every grotesque son did inherit the property in spite of the prediction. The family lawyers know all about this place and they know all about Alaric. He is the head of the family and I hold a power of attorney from him to act in all necessary ways. Alaric is very wise, Miss Venery, and it is Alaric who looks after the property.”

“ But you talked about debts cumbering the——”

“ Yes! Yes!” broke in Alaric hastily, “ that is Mark’s story—his subterfuge to guard our secret and explain his constant presence at the Abbey. As you can see from Mark’s face, Miss Venery——”

"Ida," put in the girl quickly.

"Then Ida," echoed Alaric, his brown eyes shining with pleasure, "you know, Ida, that Mark has a somewhat trying time keeping our secret."

"It is a burden," said the girl, finding in this explanation Mark's restless anxiety on all and every occasion fully accounted for, "and is that why Mark has never married?"

"Partly," said Mark quickly, with a frown, "and partly because Alaric does not approve of my choice. As Edgar's sister, Alaric thinks that Jane cannot be good enough for me."

"But Alaric knows Edwin, also," said Ida naïvely.

The dwarf smiled. "Loyal girl, we can talk of that later. However, to make a long story short: When Brother Thomas died, Amyas utilised the black cell to hide in it all those born under the curse. Here many have lived and died. I am the last of them, unless Mark marries and risks the fulfilment of the prediction."

"That all depends upon you, Alaric," said Mark quickly, "much as I love Jane, she will never be my wife without your consent."

Alaric waved his hairy hand. "Later when things are made clear we shall talk of that, Mark," he said: then to Ida, "some of the heirs born as I am born have been miserable and uneducated and vicious. I happen to have a better spirit, and my father was quick enough to see that. He had me educated and looked after in every way. This place is very beautiful as you will see when Mark shows you the rooms. Beyond want of liberty I am happy in a way, although I do have my dark hours when I sigh for the Andean drug."

"But if you were educated you must have had

tutors,” said Ida puzzled, “ how then was the secret preserved ? ”

“ My father chose men who could be relied upon and paid them largely. And after all,” added the dwarf with a shrug, “ since I was well treated there was no reason why the secret should be given away. Also, to make things certain, there was a certain influence——”

“ She would not understand that, Alaric,” said Mark quickly.

“ No, I don’t think she would,” said the little Caliban, “ nevertheless I shall tell her something about the matter. Do you believe in reincarnation, Ida ? ”

“ I have heard Dr Borrin, my uncle, talk about it,” said Ida, readily, “ and he believed that it was the sole feasible explanation of the problem of life.”

“ Ah, then you do know something of the theory ? ” said Alaric, delightedly, “ that makes my explanation easier. There is the law of reincarnation which means that the progressing soul returns again and again to earth, to reap as it has sown in life after life. That sowing and reaping has to do with the law of cause and effect which Eastern people call the law of Karma. Well, if you can believe me, I am Brother Thomas.”

“ You! Oh, it seems to be impossible!” cried Ida, aghast.

“ It does,” admitted Alaric quietly, “ nevertheless, it is the truth. Hundreds of years ago I cursed the Ballys, and therefore am I born as the heir under my own curse. By thus suffering I am paying off the debt of evil which I contracted. In Henry VIII.’s day I knew much psychic lore, and this time I have learned more. I am in touch with certain superhuman

beings who have arranged many matters, so, knowing what I do know, I am fairly happy."

Ida's face expressed her feelings. She thought that the dwarf was less wise than she had believed, and fancied that his long captivity had turned his head. "I don't understand," she faltered in a bewildered way.

"No, I thought you would not," said Alaric indulgently, "however you must take the explanation as you best can. And now you know our family secret and know that it isn't so very dreadful tell us your story from the first. I shall be able to help you."

"Mark said that you knew the truth about the murder."

"Perhaps I do. Perhaps I have only drawn conclusions and may be wrong," said the dwarf gravely, "however, when the time comes all this tangle shall be straightened out. I am the instrument used by higher powers to bring peace again into your life. Now tell your story, and begin from the time when Dr Minister visited the Manor."

Ida was surprised by the significant tone of the Caliban and forthwith obeyed him. There was something about Alaric, small and grotesque as he was, which enforced obedience. Ida also felt such confidence in him that she never hesitated to speak the absolute truth. Shortly she related all that had taken place, explaining in detail how she had come to suspect Mark, and gave an account of her first and second visits to the Abbey. Finally, she ended with a frank confession of the method she had used to protect herself. The brothers listened quietly and did not interrupt, then glanced meaningly at one another when the tale was ended. It was Alaric who spoke first.

“ You are a very brave and clever girl, Ida,” he said gently, “ and Edwin is a lucky man to get you for his wife. Believe me, my dear, that you shall marry him and be happy for the rest of your life. This storm in which you are involved is severe, but it will be brief and already the clouds are beginning to break.”

“ How can you tell? ” she asked, anxiously, and eager to believe.

Mark’s saturnine face broke into a smile. “ If Alaric explained you would not believe him, since you could not understand his former explanation.”

“ Ida is not ready for the psychic knowledge,” said Alaric, indulgently; “ so all that I could say would appear impossible to her. She is yet at that stage when she believes nothing but what she sees and hears and touches. It is a necessary stage to pass through, and when the time comes new worlds will open to her view. Meanwhile, she is acting a splendid part and the happiness which will be hers is well deserved.”

“ Your knowledge is too high for me,” said Ida, shaking her head, “ all I wish to do is to have my mother revived, my uncle avenged, and to be Edwin’s wife.”

“ What you desire you shall have,” said Alaric gravely, “ but cherish not revenge. Rather be sorry for the person who struck down an innocent man. the law of Karma pays that debt, for ‘ Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay! ’ As the evildoer has sown, so must the evildoer reap.”

“ But who is the evildoer, if you mean the murderer of my uncle? ” asked Ida.

“ You cannot hurry the hour of punishment and you cannot delay the hour,” said the dwarf authoritatively, “ you can only wait. Ask no questions,

meanwhile. I think we have talked enough on this subject so far. Now we must ask others to join our counsels, Mark!"

Bally rose when his brother spoke, and without a word vanished through the door. Ida's heart beat rapidly, as she guessed that he was about to bring in Minister and Edwin. Shortly the object of her visit would be attained.

"How good you are," she said gratefully to Alaric.

He smiled with his wonderful eyes. "Brother Thomas has much need to do good to discharge the debt of evil he incurred so long ago," was his queer reply.

Ida scarcely heard him. Her eyes were fixed on the door through which Mark had vanished. She saw nothing, she heard nothing, but she knew that Edwin was at hand. Even as the thought shaped itself he entered hurriedly.

"My darling! my darling! my darling!" and he clasped her in his fond arms.

CHAPTER XVIII

SOMETHING OF THE TRUTH

WHEN Edwin, oblivious of the presence of onlookers, had kissed and fondled Ida to his heart's content, he demanded breathlessly how she had traced him, and how she had managed to find her way to the black cell? Before the girl could reply she became aware that Dr Minister was at her elbow smiling with bland approval on the meeting of the lovers. The traveller was as big and red-faced, as shaggy and noisy as ever, and the voluminous dressing-gown which he wore made him look like a giant beside the tiny little man on the sofa. Evidently Edwin and he, roused by Mark's intelligence from sleep, had hastily put on these flowing garments so as to lose no time. But the garb seemed to be quite in keeping with the oriental splendour of the apartment. Indeed, Mark in his evening suit, and Ida in her dark clothes, appeared to be quite out of place. But there was no time to criticise dress and looks, as everyone, save Alaric, was much too excited to notice such details. The dwarf himself sat on the sofa smoking quietly, and nodded his satisfaction.

“But I think,” he said in his deep, rich voice: “that if everyone will sit down and restrain their feelings, we shall the sooner come to an understanding.”

So great was the influence of the dwarf even over the shaggy mammoth, Dr Minister, that all took their seats in a semicircle facing the sofa. Edwin and Ida were close together, holding each other's hands, and looking completely happy. With their absence had only made their hearts grow fonder, and Alaric smiled when he witnessed the joy of their meeting.

"This is the beginning of your happiness," he said seriously.

Edwin's face fell. "I doubt that, Mr Bally, with such a wicked brother as I possess how can I ever hope to be happy?"

"Your wife's virtues will make up for your brother's shortcomings," answered the dwarf decidedly; "besides, Edgar may not be so evil as you suppose."

"Well," said Edwin grimly, "when my brother took a hand in having me brought here, and——"

"You have been well treated, have you not?" asked the dwarf sharply.

"Yes; I have no complaint to make," said Gurth, promptly.

"And you admit that you could have gone away had you wished, on promising to keep the secret of my retreat?"

"Yes, Mr Bally. Only, on your advice I remained."

"Quite so; I had my reasons for giving you that advice," said Alaric quietly: "but I am now sorry that I did not let you write to Miss Venery to assure her that you were all right. I had not met you, my dear," added the little man to Ida, "and so could not judge your character. I feared lest you should give information to the police if Edwin wrote you.

I see now that I need not have troubled, as you would never have spoken. All the same I am glad that I did so advise this young man, as his silence has brought you to this place."

"But how did you come?" asked Edwin quickly, and impatiently.

"I shall explain that to you and Dr Minister as I have already explained it to Mr Bally," said the girl quietly; "but first, I should like to know how you came here, Edwin?"

"And how I came also, I suppose," remarked Minister raking his beard with outspread fingers.

"Yes. You know that Medway is dead."

"Poor lad, yes," said the traveller sadly, "but for that I would not have minded incarceration here. I have learned much from Mr Bally there, and on the whole, my stay has not been unpleasant. But you never gave me the chance of going away that you offered to young Gurth there, Mr Bally!"

"Owing to my peculiar position I have to take precautions," said Alaric, a trifle dryly. "After all, when you recovered your senses here, doctor, you were not very well-disposed towards me."

"I didn't know you were such a good, and clever man," said Minister, looking rather ashamed. "And I was enraged at the destruction of my motor. If I could only lay my hands on that young beast," cried the doctor savagely, "I would strangle the miserable life out of him."

"Who is the beast?" asked Ida anxiously.

"Edgar Gurth. Yes! He knows more about my poor friend's death than he will confess; and he feared lest I should revive your mother, Ida, to bear witness against him. Lavinia is still alive, I hope?" he asked anxiously.

"Still alive," Ida assured him. "Dr Carey is administering nourishment every day, and the life is still in her."

"Good," said Minister with much satisfaction, "when I get out of this hole I can administer the antidote."

"This hole," echoed Mark angrily. "I don't think you can call it that. We had to keep you to guard our secret, but we have treated you well, I think."

"Well, well, well!" said the doctor testily, "perhaps you are right. All the same, if I could have found the way out of the place, I should have been gone long ago. Lavinia's life depends upon my seeing her soon."

"If there had been any danger of Mrs Venery's death you should have been released long ago," said Alaric positively, "but she will recover when you see her, which will be very shortly."

"Are we to be released, then?" asked Edwin quickly.

"Yes," said Ida, looking gratefully at the dwarf, "Mr Bally will allow you both to go away with me in an hour or so."

"You go now," said Alaric quietly, addressing the two men, "because the time has come to bring affairs to a crisis. Revive Mrs Venery, and when she speaks the mystery of the murder will be one no longer."

"You know the truth?" Minister asked the little man.

"I know the truth, but as yet I am forbidden to tell," said Alaric gravely.

"Upon my word," said the doctor, rubbing his shaggy head violently. "I don't know what to make of you, Bally."

Alaric smiled. "You have been here long enough to know my character."

"And to esteem it," rejoined Minister quickly; "you have a great brain, and a wonderful knowledge; but when you talk of those super-physical friends of yours who dictate——"

"They do not dictate," interrupted the dwarf quickly. "I am free to do what I wish. They simply advise."

"And they advise you not to reveal the truth which we want to know."

"For the time being They advise me to be silent."

Minister shook his head. "Imagination—hallucination—dreams—visions and rubbish," he said vigorously. "As a scientific man I do not approve of these cobwebs which you are always weaving."

"Naturally. Your limitations——"

"Oh, my limitations—my limitations. Well, maybe they don't extend to believing that you are Brother Thomas, although there is much truth to be found in that Rosicrucian teaching I admit. But this argument must be postponed for the time being, as we have other things to talk about."

"I agree," said Ida quickly, "such as the story of your kidnapping."

"Faith!" replied Minister easily, "that is soon told: After I received your telegram saying that Josiah was dead, and your mother unconscious with the drug, I started in my motor for Hepworth village to see into matters. When Medway and I got within a mile of the Abbey we ran into a stout rope, which extended across the road, tied to a tree on either side. The car swerved and went over the bank, and the next thing I knew I was lying on the divan in the hall outside that door. Edgar had picked me up, and

had brought me here to keep prisoner until such time as his villainous schemes ripened. As I did not know how I was brought in I could not find my way out, and had to remain willy-nilly. Then I made the acquaintance of Mr Alaric Bally and we have become the best of friends. He seems to know a great deal about the matter—indeed, he knows the truth as he admits. But he advised me to possess my soul in patience, until such time as is appointed—so he speaks—for Edgar's punishment."

"That time is near at hand," said Alaric gravely.

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," retorted the big doctor, "as I'm tired of living here like a rabbit in a burrow. I heard Mark Bally yonder, and Edgar talking one night about the accident—so-called, and then learned that it was no accident, but that Edgar had stretched the rope across the road. I learned also, that Medway, poor lad, was a corpse; and I would have strangled Edgar for his infernal wickedness if Mark Bally had not pulled me off him."

"It was indeed a narrow squeak for Edgar," said Mark quietly, "and you were very angry with me also, as an accomplice, doctor."

"Well, I was, and small blame to me; but when you explained that Edgar, knowing the secret of the black cell, had threatened to make it public unless you did his will and kept me prisoner, I saw the sense of your action, didn't I?"

"Yes," said Mark, "and you took Alaric's advice."

"To wait and see what would happen; I did. But I'm glad that I leave this place to-night, anyhow."

"How did Edgar find out the secret?" asked Ida, who had been listening earnestly, and feeling very curious.

"Much in the same way as you did," answered Mark, frowning. "He dined here with me, and pretended to go home. But he waited and followed me to the church. I had a lantern, of course, and——"

"The fairy lights," murmured Ida, "of course, I see exactly how Edgar managed the matter. How wicked he is to make use of you to hide his crime."

"His crime! What do you mean by saying that?" asked Alaric quietly.

"He must have murdered my uncle," said Ida impetuously, "why, Mark saw him lurking round the lane which leads to the Manor, on the night of the murder."

"I did," acknowledged Mark decisively, "when I drove back through the village to Yeoville's party."

"So Edgar said," replied the girl heatedly, "only, he declared that it was Edwin you saw."

"Ida," Edwin started, and spoke for the first time after his long silence, "do you mean to say that Edgar accuses me of the crime?"

"Yes, I do, and it is because he accuses you that I am here. Listen, and I'll tell you what I told to Mr Bally and his brother."

Ida did so, repeating the story from the beginning, and laying great emphasis on the fact that Edgar ascribed as the motive for the crime, Edwin's desire to gain the money. The elder twin was very angry when he heard of his brother's treachery, and could scarcely believe that he was so base.

"And he says that I am in Paris, does he?" cried the young man indignantly.

"Yes; he has gone there to get you to write a letter approving of his engagement to me."

"He intends to forge the letter. Paris, indeed. Why, the blackguard is only waiting in London to

prepare the letter, and to let a certain time elapse, so as to give colour to his pretended journey to Paris. Then he will return."

"To meet with his punishment," said Alaric, unexpectedly.

"I hope so, I hope so," muttered Edwin, clenching his fist. "I knew that he was bad, Ida, but I never dreamed that he would dare to accuse me of such a terrible crime."

"He declared that you had confessed your crime to him."

"The liar. How could I, or would I, confess to a wicked deed which I had not committed? No, Ida, when you advised me to watch Mark yonder, whom you suspected of——"

"I did so wrongfully," cried Ida hastily. "I have apologised."

Mark smiled, and Edwin nodded his approbation. "Well then, both Jane and Edgar guessed that something was in the wind when I returned home, as I was so disturbed and bothered over the matter. Edgar watched me, and saw me go out at midnight to the Abbey. He followed me into the church, where I fancied, and rightly, that the entrance to the black cell might be found. While I was looking into things he struck me a blow on the head which rendered me unconscious, and I was brought here in the same way as Dr Minister was brought. That is, neither the doctor nor I know how we entered, and so have been unable to get away. Although I am bound to say," added Edwin with a bow to Alaric: "that on the advice of the wise man of the black cell, we were both willing to wait until he permitted us to go."

"I permit you to go to-night," said the dwarf

calmly; "for the hour is fast approaching when the crooked will be made straight."

"And if Edwin and I had broken out by violence?" questioned Minister gruffly.

Alaric smiled. "Since there is only myself and my old nurse who live here, and Mark only comes every now and then, you and Edwin could easily have overpowered the three of us. But as you do not know the way out, doctor, such violence would not have been of much use."

"True for you, Mr Bally. It would have been foolish to have made bad, worse."

"Moreover," pursued Alaric slowly and pointedly, "had you escaped to look into things in your impetuous way you would never have discovered the truth of the matter. Now, at a certain hour, close at hand, the truth will be told to all immediately concerned therein."

"Not to Inspector MacGrath, I hope," said Mark uneasily; "as he will certainly come poking round the Abbey to find this place, if he learns too much."

"He will learn nothing," rejoined Alaric, waving his hairy hand; "the truth of these matters will be kept from the police for reasons which will appear when the necessary revelation is made. And, now that we have talked so long, and so exhaustively, I think that it is time Miss Venerý and her friends departed, so that she can prevent that letter from being delivered to the Inspector at Whipton. First, however, Miss Venerý might like to see round the black cell, of which she has heard so much."

"Oh, I can see round it another time," said Ida, who was very weary.

"I think it will be best for you to satisfy your

curiosity now," persisted Alaric, with gentle obstinacy. "There may not be another opportunity."

"What do you mean?" asked Mark uncomfortably, for he saw that his brother meant much more than he said.

"I mean that the curse of the Ballys is nearly at an end. As Brother Thomas I cursed the race, and as Alaric Bally I am feeling the effect of my curse. The evil has been repaid; the lesson has been learned; and soon there will be no grotesque heir, and no black cell, and no secret."

"Mad," muttered Minister, touching his big head with a big forefinger, "quite mad, but clever as they make them."

Low as the traveller spoke, Alaric heard him. "Oh, I know you don't believe in reincarnation, and in the teaching which I have tried to give you. Never mind, 'The wisdom of God is foolishness with men,' and that text answers your objections, doctor. Time will prove the truth of what I have just said."

Everyone rose as the dwarf waved his hand in token of dismissal, and all turned to go save Ida. She lingered, and hesitated, and looked hard at the quaint little man with the mournful eyes, set in the monkey face. He looked hard at her in return, and a telepathic wave evidently told him what she had in her mind. "Say what you have to say, Ida," he commanded, and all turned to look at the girl, who was much more nervous than she had been at any time during the whole wonderful adventure.

"I want to speak about Jane," said Ida at length.

Alaric Bally smiled in a satisfied way, but his brother started, and asked a leading question in a rough, blunt way: "What about Jane?"

"She told me," said Miss Venery deliberately, "that Edwin confessed his guilt to her as well as to Edgar."

"I certainly never did," cried Edwin positively and indignantly, "how dare she say such a thing?"

"I think Jane is a woman who will dare much to gain her ends," remarked the dwarf grimly, yet with something of pity in his tone.

"Perhaps Edgar bullied her into supporting his lie," said Mark, flushing.

"I am afraid not," replied his brother sadly.

"Oh Alaric, you don't know Jane."

"I am better acquainted with Jane than you are, Mark."

"Have you seen her?" questioned Ida greatly surprised.

Alaric bowed gravely. "Jane has been here."

"Here? Does she know the secret of the black cell?"

"Yes! she learned it by watching Edgar. It seems that she saw Edgar slip out night after night, and accused him of going to Yeoville's card-parties. He allowed her to believe this, as it preserved the secret of his real reason for midnight excursions. These were made to this place. One night—not very long ago—Jane followed her brother, and learned our family secret, much as you and Edgar did, Miss Venery. Because she wants to marry Mark she held her tongue, and several times she has visited me here to induce me to consent to Mark becoming her husband."

"You never have consented," said Mark gloomily.

"Because I have met Jane Gurth, and I know Jane Gurth. Believe me, Mark, I am acting for the best as you will learn shortly."

“ How long has Jane known the secret? ” asked Ida after a pause.

“ Not for very long. Shortly after the death of your poor uncle she learned the truth of Edgar’s doings. Do you like Jane, Ida? ”

“ No, ” said the girl bluntly. “ I don’t like her. ”

“ Neither do I, yet she is much to be pitied. ”

Mark started forward indignantly. “ I won’t hear a word against Jane, ” he cried furiously. “ She is the best, and dearest, and cleverest girl in the wide world. ”

“ Clever, assuredly, ” said Alaric with point; “ however, I shall say no more, since my plain speaking offends you, Mark. Time will convince you that Jane is not the wife for you; and now leave me, and show Ida round the place. I have something to do which I shall explain to her when she returns. ”

Mark would have liked to defend Jane further, but a long habit of obedience to Alaric’s superior will made him do as he was requested. He walked out into the circular hall side by side with Minister; and the lovers followed. Ida did not know what Alaric meant, and was puzzled by his manner when he spoke of Jane. But as he had something to tell her when she returned from the tour of inspection she fancied that perhaps he would explain why he did not like or trust Edwin’s sister. Having arrived at this conclusion, Miss Venery gave herself up to admiring the wonders with which she was surrounded; and truly the black cell was well worth admiring.

Mark acted as cicerone, and guided the party of three through a kind of Aladdin’s palace, which might have been constructed by the Slave of the Lamp. Minister and Edwin, of course, knew the place well,

but were quite willing to examine its magnificence again. It was of no great extent, consisting of only five or six caverns, excavated at different times, and divided by walls of earth thick and massive, which had been left standing by the workmen. The apartments, if they could be so called, were of no great height, and in every instance their walls were hung with rich tapestries, or with draperies of fluted silk of various hues. From the circular hall the four doors opened into four rooms much the same as that which Ida had already seen, and at the end of one of these was a small kitchen and a bedroom, where Alaric's old nurse slept. Then, of course, from the hall there was the tunnel which led to the well-entrance. Ventilation was provided by air-shafts which pierced through the roof, and were grated with iron on the surface of the ground; the same being hidden—as Mark explained—by vegetation, so that only a close observation could tell their whereabouts.

“Most of these caverns are under the church,” explained the young man; “although the additions now extend beyond it. So you can easily understand why Brother Thomas did not wish the church to be destroyed, and therefore frightened Aymas with his magic.”

“Magic—pouf,” growled Minister, raking his beard contemptuously.

“The curse is true magic, anyhow,” replied Mark dryly, “as our family know to their cost; witness Alaric's unhappy state.”

“How much of the curse do you believe?” asked Ida curiously.

“I believe the curse is genuine, as it has always done what it was said it would do. With regard to Alaric being Brother Thomas, and suffering from his

own wickedness, as a monk, I can't say. These things are too high for me."

Then Mark, who was a simple-minded young man, and not given to arguing, turned the subject, and conducted the party through the rooms. These were all splendidly furnished with the treasures of various ages, and evidently since the time of the Tudors everything had been done to make the lives of the various monstrosities endurable. There were many pictures of great value, and much fragile china, together with musical instruments, and games of all kind, even including a billiard-table.

"And the latest addition to the place is a cinamato-graph," said Bally, showing them the plant. "It is a great source of amusement to Alaric, as it keeps him informed of all that goes on in the world above. I have the latest pictures down every week. Think how strange it is, Ida, that he sees the world in this way, never having been above ground since he was brought down here."

"And the nurse who looks after him?"

"She came with him, and has likewise remained underground. She has dedicated her life to my brother, and indeed, Alaric is quite worthy of the sacrifice."

"It is a strange affair altogether," said Edwin reflectively, "much stranger than people imagine. I respect Alaric and I am glad he is happy."

"He is as happy as a being condemned to isolation ever can be," said Mark coldly, "but, of course, he has his moments of sorrow."

Alaric undoubtedly had such moments, as no civilised man could possibly have lived like a troglodyte without fretting, but when the party returned to the room where they had left him, he appeared to be

singularly happy. He had just sealed a bulky blue envelope with the family arms, but concealed this when his friends returned.

“ Well, you have seen my abode,” he said cheerfully, “ and nothing remains but for you to take your departure. Edwin! Dr Minister! I have your promise to be silent about the black cell.”

“ Certainly,” said Minister, and Edwin nodded, “ but what story——? ”

“ I shall tell Ida how you can satisfy people’s curiosity without revealing the truth,” interrupted the little man. “ Go with them to the entrance, Mark, and Ida will follow you directly.”

Minister and Gurth shook hands warmly with the dwarf and departed, rejoicing that they were about to be set at liberty. Left alone with Alaric, Ida listened carefully to the tales which he wished her to put into the mouths of the men to explain their absence, and then rose to take her leave. When she did so, Alaric produced the blue envelope he had sealed.

“ This,” he said solemnly, “ contains the secret of your uncle’s death, and of your mother’s insensibility. Take it and tell no one you have it until the time is ripe.”

“ When will the time be ripe? ” asked Ida, putting the packet into her pocket.

“ When Edwin is in danger of arrest.”

“ Will he be in danger? ” asked the girl, startled.

“ Yes, and the person who will place him in danger will be the person you love best after him.”

“ My mother? ”

Alaric did not reply to this question, but kissed the girl. “ Go,” he commanded gently; and so great was his influence that she did go without another word.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ANTIDOTE

THE examination of the black cell and the conversation with its occupant had lasted for such a long time that the dawn was breaking when Ida and her companions found themselves in the ruined church. There was some difficulty in getting Minister to the surface, as he was stout and the shaft of the well was comparatively narrow. Anxious as he was, Mark laughed while the shaggy doctor wiped his perspiring face with his handkerchief after his great exertions. Even the chill morning air could not cool him.

“It’s bad enough getting you up, Minister,” said the young man; “but at least this time you can help yourself. When Edgar and I took you down, it was like stuffing a wad of wool into a gun-barrel. You were quite insensible, and Edgar pulled below while I shoved on top. How we got you down the well and into the passage, I don’t know to this day.”

“Humph! Two experiences of that sort are quite enough,” grunted the doctor puffing. “I’m not likely to go down the well again as I have had enough of the black cell. However, here I am, thank goodness, safe and sound breathing the upper air. What’s to be done next?”

Ida spoke anxiously. “I have to walk back to

Wellam and get my portmanteau from the cloak-room. As I went so I must return, if gossip is to be prevented."

"You can't walk back at once," expostulated Edwin, who saw how pale the girl was after her stirring experience. "You require food. It is a pity we did not ask Alaric to give you some."

"There is no need to worry over that," put in Mark abruptly. "Come to the Abbey and rest for a time. Then we can have breakfast and drive to Wellam to get this luggage."

"But the servants," hesitated Ida nervously.

"I can trust the servants. We have no tattlers here. And after all what is there to gossip about? You all have only come to pay me an early visit."

"I will be recognised," said Minister, bluffly, "and as I can't tell the truth if I am to keep your family secret, what am I to say?"

"Nothing at present," said Ida quickly. "After breakfast I can tell you what Alaric suggests."

Minister agreed to wait and the party entered the Abbey. Ida lay down for a short sleep on the sofa in the drawing-room, while the doctor and Edwin resumed their interrupted slumbers in the library. Mark interviewed his housekeeper who was already out of bed to begin her duties for the day, and explained that for reasons which need not be explained, Miss Venery and her friends had called thus oddly to see him. The housekeeper, wise in her generation, suspected that there was more in this unexpected invasion than her young master chose to explain. However there was always such an air of mystery hanging about the Abbey that she was accustomed to keep secrets, and arranged to attend personally to the breakfast. There was no need, she said, to let

the other servants see the visitors. And so acute was the old lady, knowing what a comfortable situation she had, that she did not even express surprise when informed that the missing Doctor Minister was one of the intruders.

Having arranged these things, Mark himself went to his room to lie down as his nerves required soothing. At nine o'clock the three men and the girl all feeling better met at breakfast, and the housekeeper waited on them. It was decided that they should walk and not drive the short distance to Wellam, so that more people than was necessary should not be brought into the matter. And, after the housekeeper left the room, Ida explained to Minister what Alaric suggested he should say to explain his absence.

"There is no need for Edwin to say anything," she remarked, towards the conclusion of the meal, "although Alaric did suggest a story. But at his chambers, thanks to Edgar, Edwin is supposed to be ill, and in the village he is supposed to be ill also, or absent on business. I forget which, although Jane did tell me. No one has noticed his absence, so there will be no need to invent an explanation. But you, doctor——"

"Aye! Aye," said Minister, raking his beard, "and what lies have I to tell?"

"I am sorry that there should be any need to tell lies," broke in Mark, much vexed; "but for Alaric's sake——"

"I am quite prepared to tell dozens," finished Minister coolly. "Don't bother your head, young sir. I speak falsely in a good cause, and my conscience is too tough to reproach me. Well?"

Ida explained. "You had a nasty blow on the head when you were upset in the car——"

“That’s true, anyhow,” interrupted the doctor gruffly.

“And the blow has impaired your memory,” went on the girl, getting over her uncomfortable task as speedily as possible. “You were taken to London in another motor-car, and there were nursed; after which you escaped——”

“No, no, no!” said the doctor good-humouredly. “I can tell a less-complicated story than that. The idea of loss of memory is a good one. I revived after the accident—for an accident it was, let us say, owing to poor Medway running too close to the bank—and wandered away, ignorant of my own identity. I went here, there, and everywhere, wandering far and wide, while I was being searched for, and finally got to London. Finally I recovered a portion of my memory and came down to Hepworth village. And—and—oh, I’ll throw dust in MacGrath’s eyes when he questions me, never fear. Only I hate to think that my story will prevent the punishment of that devil, Edgar.”

“I shall attend to that,” said Edwin grimly; “he will have to answer to me for his scheming and lies.”

“We can think of what is to be done to Edgar later,” said Mark quietly. Remember, he knows our secret, and that secret must be kept.”

“Oh, it will be kept by Edgar if we leave him alone,” said Ida quickly. “He must know that his doings won’t bear looking into. If we denounce him——”

“We can’t,” said Mark decidedly, “else out of revenge, he will give away the secret of the black cell.”

“I think,” remarked Minister heavily, “that it will be best for me to revive Lavinia and hear what

she has to say. Who knows but what she may denounce Edgar as the guilty man."

"Even if she does we can say nothing if we are to keep faith to Alaric," said Edwin frowning. "It is a difficult position."

"Well, Edgar is away in Paris or London," said Ida, rising with a cheerful air, "and will not be back for a few days. Let us revive my mother and learn as much of the truth as we can. When we know what she has to say we can refer the decision of what is to be done to Alaric."

"Right," said Mark, his brow clearing. "Alaric will know what to do."

Having come to this decision, Edwin, Minister, and Ida set out for Wellam, there to get her portmanteau and catch the train to Hepworth village. Bally did not go, as he judged it would be better for him to drive over later to the Manor, and for the time being to disassociate himself from the trio. He was prepared to sacrifice everything to preserve the family secret, which was in great danger of being discovered. It was undoubtedly a difficult position, as Edwin said. What was to be done in the future entirely depended upon what Mrs Venery revealed when she came to her senses.

Ida and her two friends arrived at Wellam without attracting any observation, and boarded the train there in quite an ordinary way. Edwin was known and saluted by a porter, but the man thought nothing of the young barrister's presence. Minister showed as little of his face as he could when he stepped into a first-class compartment; but he need not have troubled, as, having always come and gone from London in his motor, none of the railway officials knew him. Edwin procured the tickets and Ida's

luggage, and very soon the trio were moving swiftly towards Hepworth. When they arrived there, Edwin went at once to his house, while Ida and Minister drove in a station-trap to the Manor. In Hepworth village the doctor was immediately recognised, but managed to evade inquiries by driving hastily away.

When Edwin reached the doll's house and opened the door to enter he was met in the passage by Jane, who had seen him from the window. For the moment she took him for his brother, as she appeared to be very agitated, and greeted him by his brother's name.

"Why have you come back so soon, Edgar?" she asked, laying her hand on his arm. "Have you got the letter from Edwin to satisfy Ida?"

The young man's blood ran cold when he heard this greeting, as he saw at once that Jane also was engaged in a conspiracy against his honour. Without a word he gripped her wrist, and, dragging her into the little dining-room, shut the door. As the small servant was in the kitchen there was no danger of the two being disturbed, which was just as well, as Edwin was determined to force his sister to tell the truth. The moment he touched her she recognised him, and when face to face with him in the dining-room, stared at him with pale lips and startled eyes.

"You did not expect to see me," said Edwin grimly, and taking her by the shoulders to make her sit down.

"No," said Jane, almost inaudibly.

"And what have you to say?"

"Nothing!"

"Oh, pardon me, but you have a great deal to say. I want an explanation of your conduct."

Jane overcame her terror with a great effort and

forced herself to speak. "I don't know, what you mean," she said indignantly. "You go away without a word in the night, and you return in the morning unexpectedly. It seems to me that it is you who have to explain. Everybody is wondering at your absence."

"Really," said Edwin sarcastically. "Then everybody is not satisfied with your explanation that I am ill."

"I said that to keep people quiet here."

"And Edgar said it to Simon to keep people quiet at my chambers, I suppose."

"Yes," said Jane boldly, and beginning to face the situation. "If you chose to go away and give cause for scandal, Edgar and I must do the best we can to protect our name."

"Ah, you value our name highly, I have no doubt," said Edwin contemptuously, "but it is not I who run the risk of smirching it. Your veracious account of my illness was given less to protect me than to protect you and Edgar from suffering for your plots."

"What plots?" asked Jane stubbornly.

"Plots against my liberty and honour: plots to force Ida into a marriage with Edgar so that he and you might handle her money."

"I know nothing about such plots. You are talking nonsense."

"Am I, indeed. Then what about the letter you referred to which was to be got from me to satisfy Ida?"

"I know nothing about such plots," said Jane again, looking both calm and obstinate, for she felt that in denial lay her safety.

"You always were a bad girl, Jane," said her

brother sadly; "and always preferred to tell a lie rather than the truth."

"I have told no lies. I don't know what you are talking about."

"That is a lie to begin with. You *do* know what I am talking about. Where is Edgar?"

"In Paris."

"That is another lie. He is in London forging the necessary letter which was to persuade Ida that I approved of her marriage with him. Why did he not come to the black cell and try to force me to——?"

"The black cell." Jane started and bit her lip. "I know nothing of——"

"You know everything." Edwin sprang forward and shook her thoroughly. "How dare you sit there letting falsehoods pour out of your lips? I know all about your wickedness."

"I think you must be mad to talk in this way," sobbed Jane, whose nerve was giving way, or perhaps thought that tears would be her best defence.

"I am as sane as you are, and not so evil in my dealings," retorted Edwin. "I have seen Ida. Do you hear? I have seen Ida."

"What's that to me?"

"This much, that she has told me of the accusation you have dared to bring against me when I was not at hand to defend myself."

Jane wiped her eyes, and into her grey eyes there came a steely gleam. She saw that it was useless to feign ignorance as her brother knew too much. But whatever he did know—as she swiftly concluded—he could make no use of the information to harm her, since she was his sister. "Edgar wished to marry Ida and made use of your absence to carry out his plans."

“And you helped him?”

“Yes, I did,” said Jane shamelessly. “If Edgar married Ida and got the money, I was to have half of it.”

“You dare to sit there and tell me that?”

“Yes, I dare. You can’t harm me in any way without soiling your own name.”

“Well, you are a bad lot, Jane,” said Edwin astonished at her boldness. “I should never have believed you capable of such baseness.”

Jane rose with an assumption of wounded dignity. “You are a nice one to say that to me when you have done worse things than I have. It was you who murdered Dr Borrin.”

“That is a lie and you know it is.”

“It is not a lie,” cried the girl fiercely. “I truly believe that when Mrs Venery revives she will denounce you.”

“I am quite willing to be present when she is revived,” said Edwin calmly, “and you shall come also. Get on your hat and cloak.”

Jane started and seemed to be greatly discomposed. “What do you mean?”

“Mean. I mean that Dr Minister has been released from the black cell along with me, and is now at the Manor.”

“I didn’t know that you were in the black cell, or even that there was any black cell,” muttered Jane still dogged, and wilfully blind.

“You liar. Why Alaric Bally has told me how you came there again and again to try and get him to marry you. Shame on you. For the sake of gaining possession of the Abbey, you were willing to marry that unfortunate creature.”

“Oh,” cried Jane shrilly, and throwing off a mask

which it now seemed useless to keep on, "so he has spoken, has he? And how did he let you out of the cell?"

"Ida found out the secret and came to——"

"Ida," Jane stamped with rage. "I thought that girl was dangerous. I told Edgar that Billy Ensor should not have been taken off watching her."

"Ah, you and Edgar met with your match in Ida," retorted Edwin contemptuously, "as you might have guessed you would. She has more brains than the two of you put together."

"She has not; she has not," said Jane vehemently. "She is a fool, as you are, and I always hated you both."

"That may be, but you will find that our foolishness is wiser than what you think is your cleverness. Edgar is bad, but you are worse, Jane, as you always governed him. He has been set on this bad road by you."

Jane actually laughed. "Yes, he has. I make him do what I say," she cried in a triumphant manner; "and what do I care what you think? You can't hurt me without hurting yourself. I worked to get Edgar to marry Ida and have a share of the money to myself. Mark Bally has treated me badly. First he wanted to marry me and then he didn't. I learned the family secret, and was quite willing to become the wife of that little monster since he could give me control of the Abbey. Then I should have turned Mark out of doors to pay him bitterly for having played fast and loose with me."

"You are a most shameless creature, Jane," said Edwin staggered by her audacious confession. "I can't believe that you are my sister."

"Ah, bah! What is the use of preaching silly

morality to me," sneered the girl, shrugging her shoulders. "I want money, and at any cost I mean to have money. Since you have escaped, my plans with regard to Ida have fallen through, for she is such a fool that she would marry you with a rope round your neck—as it may be."

"As it may be. Do you persist in your lying statement that I am guilty?"

"Yes, I do. I believe that when Mrs Venery is revived, she will denounce you as the assassin of her brother. But she can do what she likes. I have done with you, Edwin. I wash my hands of you."

"You don't until you come with me to the Manor and stand in the presence of Mrs Venery when Minister revives her," said Edwin grimly; "after that you can go to the devil in your own way."

"Oh, I'll come," said Jane coolly, "if only to see your face when Mrs Venery describes how you struck down that poor old man. As to going to the devil, if you call Alaric the devil, it is to him I am going."

"He won't marry you, so don't think it," retorted Edwin, disgusted with her shameless greed for money, which would make her accept such a husband as the dwarf.

"Oh, yes he will. If he doesn't I shall go straight to MacGrath at Whipton and tell how I discovered the black cell. I am not the woman to stick at anything which stands in my way, Edwin, so don't think it."

"Oh, don't tell me any more," cried her brother with horror. "You make me quite sick with your shameless behaviour. The less we have to say to one another the better. I would rather have your room than your company, but I shall put up with it until

we hear what Mrs Venery has to say. Get on your hat and cloak."

Jane snapped her fingers contemptuously and went out of the room. "You needn't be afraid that I shall run away," she called back. "I am going willingly to witness your downfall."

Edwin sat down and buried his face in his hands. The baseness of his brother and sister filled him with horror and he wondered how they could have possibly concealed their true natures for so long. But, as he might have guessed, the full wickedness of the pair had not come to the surface until circumstances had so tempted them that they had put their evil minds to work. Both wanted money, the love of which is the root of all evil, and so had been prepared to go to any lengths (so long as they were safe) to obtain their heart's desire. But by their very wickedness both Jane and Edgar had overreached themselves; they had been too clever. Now that Edwin was free he would marry Ida, and Edgar would be balked, since he would be unable to obtain either the girl or her money. As to Jane, by admitting to Alaric her willingness to marry him, she had so disgusted the dwarf—as Edwin guessed, knowing the little man's fine character as he did—that Alaric would do his best to prevent her marrying Mark, while refusing her himself. So Jane also would be balked as her brother had been, and the two disappointed conspirators deprived of their prey, would be condemned to penury for the rest of their miserable lives. It was a fitting reward for their evil deeds.

So Edwin thought while Jane was absent getting ready for the visit to the Manor, but he wondered if indeed his brother and sister would get off so lightly. If Mrs Venery spoke it was probable that she would

denounce Edgar as the criminal, since the murder of Borrin was evidently part and parcel of his scheme to secure Ida and Ida's money. Such being the case MacGrath would have to be told, if only to do away with his suspicions of Minister, and then Edgar would be hanged. Jane also, as an accessory-before-the-fact—if indeed she knew what her brother had done—would be punished. Considering the circumstances Edwin wondered whether Ida would marry him. In his heart he knew that she would, but it seemed to him that with two such wicked relatives put to public shame, it would not be fair to give her a smirched name. A noise cut short his unhappy meditation—the clicking of the gate—and he glanced out of the window. It was only the small servant evidently bound upon some domestic errand, and not Jane as he had supposed. She made her appearance at the door immediately the servant had passed out of sight and said that she was ready. And indeed she had arrayed herself in her best to witness her brother's downfall, which she fondly hoped that Mrs Venery would bring about. Never had Jane looked so smart and so demure: in fact with flushed cheeks and bright eyes, she looked almost pretty.

“Come along,” she said smiling in a most brazen way, “if you dare to come.”

Edwin put on his hat and walked with her out of the house. “As I am a perfectly innocent man there is no reason why I should not come,” he said coolly. “Are you leaving the house to look after itself?”

“Eliza won't be long,” rejoined Jane in a matter-of-fact way; “I have only sent her on an errand. Ugh!” she shivered, “what a disagreeable day.”

It was very disagreeable indeed, being damp and misty and grey and chill, a true autumnal day,

depressing in the extreme. Had not the brother and sister known the path so well they would have lost their way, so thick was the mist in street and lane and field. However, they managed to find the great gates of the Manor and walked up the avenue. All the time Jane went on describing the tricks and plots and evil designs of herself and Edgar in a most candid way. Now that her brother knew so much, and as she was aware that for his name's sake he could not make use of any information she might give him, she laid bare her tainted mind. Again and again Edwin, shuddering with disgust, asked her to be silent, and wondered if a demon in Jane's form was not walking beside him. She laughed and jeered and exulted over the evil into which she had led her weaker brother Edgar, and all through her unholy song of triumph ran an undercurrent of greed for gold.

"I shall marry Alaric and have all his money," she said gaily. "He won't dare to refuse me because I can expose the secret of his family."

"Alaric won't marry you," said Edwin coldly; "you can do your worst."

"I intend to. I have not done my worst yet," said Jane viciously. "I intend to tell the Inspector when Mrs Venery denounces you, and then you will be hanged—hanged," she added with relish, "by the neck until you are dead."

"Hold your tongue," said Edwin fiercely, as they stepped into the Manor door.

"La! la! la!" sang Jane, and almost waltzed into the library.

Here was Mark and Ida both waiting for Minister who was upstairs attending to Mrs Venery. Jane held aloof from Ida, and Ida from Jane, but Bally stepped forward to greet the girl. He still loved her,

notwithstanding the assurance of Alaric that the woman was wholly evil. But this time he heard the truth from Edwin, who stepped between his sister and the master of the Abbey with a stern face.

“Before you take my sister’s hand,” he said calmly, and bent upon telling the absolute truth, “you must know that she wants to marry your brother.”

“Alaric,” Mark started back horrified. “It’s impossible.”

Jane gave a thrill of laughter. “Oh dear me, no,” she said smiling. “Alaric is the master of the Abbey and it is the Abbey I want, not you. When I saw your brother, I said that I should like to marry him and look after him and——”

“Stop,” Mark flung up his hand and retreated with a pale face, “don’t say such horrible things. You don’t know what you are saying. You are mad.”

“Pooh,” said Jane with brazen assurance, “you are a fool. I never loved you, and all I want is money. I tell you this as Edwin will tell you if I don’t. Alaric must marry me, or I shall tell the police all about the black cell.”

Mark was so horrified by her wickedness that he dropped into a near chair and stared at her aghast. What he would have said or done, so great was the shock he had received by this sudden and crude revelation of her character, it is impossible to say, for at that moment the door opened. Minister appeared with an exulting face.

“The antidote has proved successful,” he said in a loud whisper. “Lavinia has recovered her senses, although she is weak from the long time she has been comatose. However, thanks to the daily nourishment administered by Carey, she is stronger than might have been expected. Ha!” ended the doctor, rubbing

his hands, "how astonished Carey will be when he calls."

"Can I see my mother now?" asked Ida anxiously and coming forward.

"You can," answered Minister with emphasis, "but no one else."

"Doctor, we wish to see her at once," said Edwin positively. "It is necessary that we should know as soon as possible who murdered Borrin."

"I don't think it is wise for Lavinia to see so many people," retorted the doctor gruffly and frowning. "After all, Carey is her medical attendant and he will be annoyed if she has any shock, which she would have, if bothered."

"Can't you give her some brandy to make her strong enough to have an interview?" asked Mark insistently. "Every moment is of value."

"Perhaps in an hour, more or less, you may come in," said the doctor in a grudging manner. "After all, Lavinia has more strength than I expected her to have, and she always possessed great recuperative power. Ida, come with me, and the rest of you wait here."

As Minister was the autocrat of the sick-room he had to be obeyed, so Ida followed him, while the others remained behind to wait events. Jane took up her station near the glass door of the bow-window, which had been mended and looked out into the misty atmosphere, while Edwin, ignoring his sister, remained near the fire. He was wrapped in gloomy meditation, which was very natural, considering the shock he had sustained. That his brother and sister should have conspired against him to such an extent as to endanger his life and liberty seemed impossible of belief. Still more impossible appeared to be the amazing demean-

our of Jane, who from being a demure and gentle girl had suddenly turned into a fierce virago worthy of the French Revolution. Mark, staring at the girl, evidently was as startled as Gurth. After the dreadful things she had said he felt that he loved her no longer, and yet he tried to believe that she did not know what she was saying.

“Jane,” he said approaching, “surely your behaviour——”

“Leave me and my behaviour alone,” interrupted Jane in a hard voice. “It is you who have driven me to this. Had you married me nothing of this kind would have happened; but you played fast and loose with me. The result is of your own making,” after which speech she resolutely turned her back on him and refused to speak further.

For more than an hour the silent trio remained uncomfortably together. Dr Carey arrived and went up to see his patient, and it was half an hour after his arrival that Ida came down to summon those interested in the case to the sick-room. Without a word they followed and found Mrs Venery lying on her bed, pale and withered, with the two doctors in attendance. As the three, with Edwin leading, filed into the bedroom, she raised her eyes in a languid manner. But when she saw Gurth an unnatural strength seemed to come to her and she raised herself unaided from the pillow.

“Take him away; arrest him,” she cried shrilly, pointing at the astonished Edwin. “He murdered Josiah. He came by night to——”

“It was Edgar! Edgar!” panted Ida, running to her mother.

“It was Edwin. I saw him. I saw the blue scarf he wore. I heard a noise; I went downstairs. He

was in the room standing over Josiah's dead body. I knew his dress; I saw his—his—face——” she faltered and her voice grew weak. “It—it—was—Edwin—who—killed—killed——” she stopped suddenly and dropped back on the bed in a faint.

Carey and Minister hastily waved those present out of the room and began to administer restoratives. Jane laughed callously as she went away.

“Didn't I say that Edwin was the murderer,” she cried in an exulting manner.

Mark grasped her arm. “Hold your tongue and don't tell lies,” he muttered.

“And it is a lie,” cried Ida fiercely. “Edwin is innocent.”

CHAPTER XX

THE GUILTY PERSON

THE moment the party returned to the library Jane hurried to the bow-window glass door, and peered out as if she expected someone to come out of the mist. Edwin noted her eager gaze, and it flashed across him that his sister had sent out the small servant on an errand before they had left the doll's house. That errand he believed now had to do with a telegram. In a few strides he crossed the room and caught Jane by the shoulder.

"You have wired for Edgar," he said quietly.

"Have I, indeed," said Jane, shaking him off contemptuously. "You will learn sooner than you will like who it is I have wired for. Leave me alone you—you—murderer."

"Edwin is no murderer," said Ida, who was quivering with shame and anger.

"Oh, indeed," Jane threw back her head and laughed shrilly. "Then your mother, who witnessed the deed, is a liar."

"My mother has been deceived. I truly believe that Edgar, who has been conspiring with you to get my money, is the guilty person. He resembles Edwin in every way, so far as looks are concerned, and could easily have worn Edwin's blue scarf to trick my mother, instead of his own red one."

“ Ah, then,” said Jane with a sneer, “ Edgar expected your mother to come downstairs? ”

“ No; I believe she came down unexpectedly, when she heard the noise of the shattered glass,” persisted Ida quietly, yet intensely, “ but Edgar was prepared to deceive; he came to the Manor dressed like Edwin, to throw the blame on Edwin. Pretending to be Edwin, he came to this door, and was admitted by Uncle Josiah under that impression. Very likely my uncle saw at once through the trick, and then was struck down to prevent him from giving the alarm.”

“ Dear me,” said Miss Gurth coolly, while the two men listened intently to the duel between the two women. “ One would think that you had been present during the commission of the crime. You seem to know all about it.”

“ I am only drawing my conclusions,” said Ida coldly; “ since my mother came down as soon as she heard the glass being broken the murder must have already been committed, otherwise she would have been in time to prevent it. You or Edgar—I forget which—said that the glass was broken, to suggest a burglar. Do you remember the story you and Edgar told me in his office, in which you recounted how the crime had been committed. That story is true, only Edgar is the culprit and not Edwin.”

“ It was Edwin,” persisted Jane with brazen assurance, “ he said——”

“ I said nothing,” interrupted Edwin very calmly, but in a white heat. “ The confession which you stated to Ida that I made, was not made by me.”

“ Then how did I describe the murder? ”

“ Edgar told you how he had committed it, and you laid the blame on me. The fact that Edgar upset the

motor-car and had Minister kidnapped proves that he feared lest Mrs Venery should accuse him."

"Does it, when Mrs Venery accuses you?" jeered Jane contemptuously.

"Because Edgar masqueraded as me with the blue scarf."

"In that case, and if he expected Mrs Venery to denounce you, there was no need for him to kidnap Dr Minister, and prevent the antidote from being administered. You can deny the truth as you please, Edwin, but you are the guilty person, and you murdered Dr Borrin to prevent the will from being destroyed."

"I don't believe it for one," said Mark suddenly.

"Oh, one is in the minority," sneered Jane, "it is a Judge and Jury who will decide the matter. I knew that Mrs Venery would denounce Edwin, and for that reason I wired to Inspector MacGrath."

"You wired for the police," cried Ida starting, and turning even paler than she was, "and why?"

"Because I want to see Edwin marched off to prison."

"Oh, indeed," said Edwin, perfectly calm, for, being innocent, he could not feel afraid, "and what happens to our name you were so tender about?"

Jane shrugged her shoulders, and peered eagerly out of the window. "Our name can take care of itself," she retorted; "it doesn't matter to me, as I shall soon change it for that of Bally."

"I shan't give you the chance," said Mark indignantly, "you are a wicked woman as Alaric declared, and I am glad that I have found out your evil nature before it is too late."

"Who talked of you? It is Alaric I am to marry."

“ I quite believe you are capable of behaving so scandalously,” raged Mark, furious at her calculating wickedness; “ but my brother is not fit to marry.”

“ Fit or not, he has promised to make me his wife.”

Mark laughed angrily. “ If Alaric did make you such a promise, it was for some good purpose. Let alone the fact that he is physically unfit to marry, he is too good and noble a man to link himself to you.”

“ A man,” sneered Jane with scorn, “ do you call that monkey a man? ”

“ A very great and noble man,” said Mark steadily. “ He will never marry you.”

“ Then his secret will be given away,” cried Jane furiously. “ I know all about the black cell, and I shall tell the police—what then? ”

“ What then? ” echoed Bally.” “ Then our long-preserved family secret will become known to the public. But remember that there is no disgrace attached to it, for Alaric stays in the black cell of his own free will. So far as I am concerned the secret of what Alaric is and the secret of the black cell has only been kept by me because of the family tradition. But I never did see any reason why there should be such a mystery. Alaric shrinks from publicity because of his appearance, it is true; but I am not ashamed of him, and he is a much better head of the Ballys than ever I can hope to be.”

“ Well,” said Jane coolly, “ I care little for what you say or do. I have your secret, and I shall make it public unless Alaric marries me.”

“ Won’t you be content if Alaric hands you over the Abbey? ” asked Mark sarcastically.

“ Oh yes,” retorted Jane, grimly candid. “ That will suit me better. I have no wish to marry a monkey.”

“ And yet you would for the sake of the money,” said Ida disgusted.

“ Why not? I want money, and I mean to have it; but all this question of my feelings is beside the point, Ida. The question is, what defence Edwin proposes to make when the Inspector comes to arrest him. He will be here soon; I wired him to come at once, as the murderer of Dr Borrin was to be found at the Manor. Edwin is done for.”

“ Unless he can make a defence I suppose? ” demanded Ida scornfully.

“ Yes; and what defence can he make? ”

“ I can ask Alaric to come forward and help me,” said Edwin hurriedly.

“ Oh! ” Jane laughed. “ Alaric is much too afraid of public opinion, and public contempt for his appearance to venture out of the black cell, or even to allow the secret of the cell to be known. There is no help there.”

“ Yes, there is,” broke in Mark unexpectedly. “ When Alaric finds that Edwin is in danger of being hanged——”

“ Which he is,” interpolated Jane tauntingly.

“ Which he is if you have your way,” retorted the young man. “ Well, when my brother learns that, he will permit the secret of the black cell to be made known, and will tell what he knows.”

“ And what does he know? ” demanded Jane contemptuously, and yet with a certain uneasy manner.

“ He knows the truth,” said Edwin sharply; “ he declared to us all that he knows the truth, and can solve the mystery.”

“ I don’t believe it,” said Jane, still uneasy, “ and even if he does he will not venture out of his retreat to tell it. Why, he would be taken to the monkey-house

at the Zoo if he showed himself," she ended scornfully.

Furious at the scandalous way in which she spoke of his brother Mark started forward to stop Jane's vile tongue, when Ida laid her hand on his arm; "I don't think it is necessary to reply," she said quietly, "Jane knows that the truth can be written as well as spoken," and at the last word she drew out of her pocket a large blue envelope.

Jane stared at it hard, and the colour left her face. "More lies," she said, but there was a quaver in her voice, defiantly as she spoke.

"We leave the telling of lies to you," said Ida smoothly, while the two men stared at her and at the envelope in surprise. "Alaric gave me this document when I left the black cell, and told me to open the envelope when Edwin was in danger of arrest from the denunciation of the person I loved best after him. That person, as you may guess, is my mother."

"Ah!" said Mark quickly, "and she has denounced Edwin; he is in danger of arrest. What do you say now?" he added, turning to Jane.

She was holding on to the handle of the bow-window door, nervously, still looking out every now and then, to see if Inspector MacGrath was emerging from the mist. To Bally's question she made no reply, but kept her eyes fastened on the blue envelope which Ida was now opening. So fraught was the document she drew forth with portentous information, that the two men held their breath as Ida glanced over the sheets of foolscap. Jane, too, looked on pale and white. It was evident that she feared greatly what the writing contained.

"Why!" cried Ida, seizing the gist of the document in a moment, as one or two particular words and

names caught her attention, "it is Jane who is the guilty person. Jane, you——"

The girl at the window leaped forward like a pantheress and made a snatch at the document; but Mark was on the watch, as he had never taken his eyes off her, and before she could reach Ida, he met her and flung her back. She fell against the glass door of the bow-window with a snarl, and in doing so, her shoulder broke the glass. With the fierce despair of a wolf at bay, she immediately sprang to her feet; slipped the latch of the window, and darted out into the raw air. Bally would have followed, but Edwin detained him. "For God's sake let her go," he cried in a broken voice, and even as he spoke, Jane, running at top speed, vanished into the grey mists.

Mark obeyed, as he could not bring himself to run down the girl he had loved, wicked as she was. He fell back with a gasp of fear. "She must be possessed by some devil," he muttered.

"The devil of her own greed," said Edwin bitterly. "Good Heavens! what a revelation of evil. I always thought Edgar was bad, and believed he might have murdered Borrin; but Jane—Jane of all people," his voice failed him, and he sank into a chair, covering his face with his hands.

Meanwhile Ida, having taken no notice of Jane's flight, was rapidly reading the document, uttering ejaculations of amazement and horror every now and then. The two men did not interrupt her, but waited passively until she had skimmed the closely written sheets. Then she extended the last page to them, and they saw the name, "Jane Gurth" written there with the names of Alaric Bally, and the name of his nurse, Dora Quail, as witnesses.

"Do you mean to say that she has signed her name

to a confession?" asked Edwin amazed, and scarcely believing his eyes.

"You see," said Ida pointing, "and the confession has been witnessed. If Edwin is to be saved from being hanged, Mark, this document must be shown to Inspector MacGrath."

"Yes," murmured Bally dismayed. "Alaric would not have signed his name otherwise, as a witness."

"And the secret of the black cell must be made known to the public."

"I suppose so. Of course, if it could be concealed——"

"I leave that to Alaric," broke in Edwin, raising his pale face, which had become old and haggard. "If he wishes the truth to become known, he must give us leave to tell the family secret; if not, I for one will keep silent."

Mark grasped his hand warmly. "You are a good fellow, Gurth," he said heartily; "but for your own sake what Alaric has set down must be made known to the police. Then there is Minister to be considered as MacGrath suspects him of the crime. Alaric and I have often talked of the foolishness of keeping this secret, and it was only because my brother shrank from the commotion its revelation would cause that he has not allowed it to be known. After all, as I said before, there is no disgrace in it, and if MacGrath sees Alaric he will know that my brother stays in the black cell of his own free will. The family secret can go, so far as I am concerned, if Alaric—as appears from that document—is willing. We have only been bound to keep it by our family tradition."

"Still, Alaric with his sensitive nature——"

“ My dear fellow, you don't know how strong and brave, and bold Alaric is,” said Mark warmly. “ He doesn't mind what he suffers so long as wrong is made right, and in this instance there is a great wrong to set right. Mrs Venery, owing to the colour of the scarf worn by Jane, believes that you are the criminal, and—and—oh!” Mark stopped and looked astonished. “ If Mrs Venery believed Jane to be Edwin, she must have worn Edwin's clothes.”

“ She did,” said Ida quietly, “ she got herself up to play the part of her brother, so that he might be accused.”

“ But why did she murder Borrin? ” asked Mark puzzled.

“ For the same reason as she has acted all through. Jane is devoured by greed for money, and Edgar promised her if he married me that she would get half my fortune.”

“ Ugh! how could she? Even for one hundred thousand pounds,” said Mark with a shiver. “ To commit a murder for that; it is appalling.”

“ Not only did she commit the murder,” said Ida, also shivering, for the revelation startled her; “ but she intended to have Edwin hanged for it. Then there is the death of Medway, for which she is indirectly responsible.”

“ It was Edgar who arranged that upset,” said Edwin hastily.

“ Under the direction of Jane I am afraid,” said Ida glancing at the document. “ You told me yourself, Edwin, that Edgar was always managed by Jane.”

Gurth nodded. “ He has a much weaker mind than Jane. She is very determined to get her own way. So far she has got it.”

“So far,” repeated Ida with emphasis, “but this confession proves her guilt.”

Mark stared at the papers which Miss Venery held in her hand. “How on earth did Alaric manage to get her to accuse herself? I should have thought that she was much too wary to have given herself away.”

“She counted upon Alaric being anxious to keep the secret of the Ballys.”

Edwin nodded. “There’s something in that—still, a written confession—”

Ida interrupted. “Jane never thought that it would be made public, since the name of Alaric and that of his nurse is set down. When she came to the black cell and saw Alaric he guessed from something which she let fall that she was the guilty person. Therefore he got her to confess, and sign.”

“But how?” questioned Mark. “It seems so impossible that such an artful woman would put a rope round her neck.”

“Don’t say that,” said Edwin with a shudder. “Jane has vanished and let us hope she will never be found again. Bad as she is it would be terrible for her to die such a shameful death.”

“Hum!” said Bally disbelievingly, “she didn’t mind giving Borrin a painful death. But how did Alaric get Jane to confess, Ida?”

“Well, he found out how much she loved money and when she hinted that she was willing to marry him since he was the true master of the Abbey, he allowed her to believe that he would. Alaric—it is set down here,” said Ida, looking at the closely-written sheets. “Alaric said that he was lonely. But he refused to marry her unless he had some guarantee that she would respect the secret of the black

cell by giving him some secret of her own. Jane declared that she had no secret and then went away."

"But she returned."

"Yes. Several times she returned."

"Every night in fact," said Mark gloomily. "I was annoyed when she followed Edgar and learned the truth and yet I was glad, as if I had married her she would certainly have been told the family secret." He paused and thought for a few moments, then continued: "I see how Alaric worked the business. He has a great influence over everyone he meets—a kind of magnetic influence. And knowing Jane's greed for money he agreed to marry her and give her control of the Abbey if she gave some guarantee that she would keep the secret."

"Yes, that is how he managed," said Ida quickly, "but it was a regular duel of wits and only after many visits did Alaric manage to get Jane to confess and sign the document. When it was signed she wanted it back again, but could not manage to get it. Alaric threatened to keep her in the black cell altogether if she did not obey him. Of course she had to, seeing that she had given away her secret."

Mark nodded. "I can understand. Of course knowing the black cell business she felt quite safe in telling Alaric all about her crime, as he could not denounce her without the secret of his retreat being made public. All the same he must have exerted a wonderful influence to force her to put the awful truth in writing."

"He cajoled her into doing so, I think, by saying that he would marry her. To gain the Abbey income Jane did what she was asked, and, of course, had Alaric's secret, as he had hers. I expect she thought

she was quite safe. She must have believed that, since she sent for MacGrath to arrest Edwin."

"Ah," said Edwin, nodding, "Jane never believed that you, Ida, would have dared to venture to the Abbey and discover the truth. It is you, my dear, who have brought this conspiracy to light."

"I did it for your sake, Edwin. But I am sorry that the truth should involve danger to Jane and to Edgar, bad as they are."

"As they have made their beds so must they lie on them," said Mark gruffly, for he now detested Jane, as much as hitherto he had loved her. "Well we know now how Alaric managed to get the confession. Even if you hadn't come to the black cell, Ida, I expect Alaric would have found means to send it to the police and save Edwin."

"Yes, but Jane never thought that he would, because of his own secret."

"Ah, she doesn't know what a good man my brother is," said Mark, affectionately, "and how willing he is to sacrifice himself to others. It is her greed for money which has made her behave so foolishly. She thought that she held everyone in the palm of her hand, but she has fallen into her own trap."

"Now that she knows as much," said Edwin heavily, "I hope she'll manage to escape. I expect she'll join Edgar wherever he is, and the two will leave the country."

"They will have to be smart then," said Mark quickly, "for to put things straight we will have to show this document to Inspector MacGrath when he arrives. He may be here at any moment."

"Will you give your family secret away, Mark, after it has been kept so close for so many centuries?"

It was Ida who asked the question, and Bally had no hesitation in replying. "I am sure that Alaric, by giving you that document, signed by himself, intends that the secret should be made known to save the life of an innocent man."

Edwin nodded his thanks, then turned to Ida. "It seems incredible that a woman so weak as Jane should have dared so much."

"Jane was never weak if Alaric is to be believed," said the girl, taking up the loose sheets. "She is bold, and wary, and dangerous, and to get money is willing to sacrifice the whole world."

"Well," said Edwin grimly, "she has done so. Both she and Edgar have overleaped themselves. How did she commit the crime?"

Ida cast her eyes over the sheets, then rolled them up. "I need not read the long account set down here," she said, "but will tell you the story as shortly as possible. Jane knew that Uncle Josiah had not altered his will, and knew also that he intended to alter it. She determined to prevent him."

"Why?" asked Mark, sharply.

"Because she had agreed with Edgar that if he married me she was to receive ten thousand pounds of my fortune. When you became engaged to me, Edwin, then Edgar thought that there was no chance. Jane did."

"But surely she and Edgar did not arrange the murder together?" asked the young man, looking horrified.

"Oh, no. Jane says that Edgar knew nothing of her intention. When she was driven back to your house with you and Edgar by Mr Bally, then she determined to return and kill Uncle Josiah and lay the blame on you."

“As she did,” muttered Edwin, “and ascribed as my motive a desire for your fortune, Ida.”

The girl nodded. “To make sure that you would be accused if anyone saw her, Jane dressed herself up in a suit of your clothes, put on the overcoat you had worn on that very night and used your blue muffler. Then she got an axe out of the wood-shed and went out by stealth.”

“I saw her go up the lane when I was driving back to Yeoville’s party,” said Mark suddenly. “I thought it was you, Edwin.”

“Yes,” said the young man grimly, “and both Jane and Edgar made use of your seeing her to fasten the guilt on me with you as a witness. Go on, Ida.”

“Jane intended to enter by the bow-window door,” continued Ida, “as she knew that there was no shutter. Then she intended to steal upstairs to Uncle Josiah’s bedroom and kill him. She knew where the bedroom was, of course.”

Edwin nodded. “She came here so often that she knew all about the habits of your uncle. Well, and there was no need for her to go upstairs?”

“No. Uncle Josiah was in the library and Jane saw the light shining through the glass door which had no shutter. As she wore the overcoat and was also wearing the blue muffler, she knocked guessing that in the dim light—Uncle Josiah had only his bedroom candle with him—he would mistake her for you.”

“But why did the doctor come downstairs?”

“He was uneasy about the poison being left in the saucer, and came down to throw it into the fire. He did so and was about to throw in the poisoned flint also when Jane knocked. He admitted her and addressed her as you, Edwin, asking what you

wanted. Jane struck at him with the axe and killed him. Then she broke the window to suggest a burglary and looked round to see if she could take anything to hint that a robber had done the deed. She had just laid hands on the flint when my mother came rushing down breathlessly, having heard the noise of the breaking glass. Naturally with the overcoat and the blue scarf, she took Jane for you and screamed. But Jane, having the flint in her hand at the moment rushed forward; my mother put up her arms to shield her face, and Jane scratched her arm with the flint. My mother fell insensible, and Jane, dropping the flint, ran away as quickly as she could. Then I, having heard the scream, came down to discover what had happened."

"And Jane?" asked Mark, horrified by the recital.

"She went home and retired to bed. She said nothing next morning until she heard that Dr Minister had been sent for. She determined to stop him."

"Why? when he would have denounced Edwin and not her?"

"She was not quite confident of her disguise and thought that it was best to be on the safe side. She therefore told Edgar and demanded half the money for what she had done. Also she ordered him to upset the car and get Uncle Theo taken to the black cell."

"Did she know about the black cell?"

"Yes. She forced the truth out of Edgar just before the murder, as she had seen him slipping out night after night. Edgar was horrified when she explained what she had done. At first he refused to have anything to do with the kidnapping of Uncle Theo, but Jane swore that she would say that he had helped her to commit the crime if he did not do what

he was told. Edgar was frightened and stretched the rope across the road. When the accident took place he carried Uncle Theo to the black cell."

"And I helped," said Mark with a shrug. "Edgar threatened to tell all about our family secret if I did not take Minister there. Then you had to be taken, Gurth, and—well, you know the rest."

The three looked at one another and were just about to begin a discussion on the advisability of telling Dr Minister what had transpired when a motor-car shot up the avenue out of the mist and halted at the front door. As this was visible from the broken window Mark saw that it was Inspector MacGrath who had arrived. He stepped out of the bow-window door which Jane had left open when she fled and beckoned the officer into the library. MacGrath came forward in a great state of excitement with a telegram in his hand, and addressed the trio collectively and severally.

"Miss Jane Gurth has wired to me that the assassin of Dr Borrin is to be found here. Who is he? Where is he?"

"It is no 'he' at all," said Mark, acting as spokesman, and taking the document from Ida's hand. "It is she—Jane Gurth herself is the guilty person. If you read that, Inspector, you will learn not only how she murdered the doctor, but all about the secret of my family."

"The black cell?"

"Yes," said Bally curtly, "read." And he held his peace as did Ida and Edwin while the officer rapidly made himself acquainted with the extraordinary contents of the paper.

MacGrath was an impulsive and talkative man on ordinary occasions, but what he read so astonished

him that he could find no words, and for the moment did not know what to say. Finally, he found his voice, "Is this true?"

"Every word of it," said Mark calmly. "I can take you to see the witnesses."

"Witnesses!"

"My brother Alaric and his nurse who live in the black cell."

"I thought that was merely a silly story," gasped MacGrath, amazed.

"It is a true story, as you will find. Jane Gurth is guilty, and my brother Alaric can prove her guilt, although that signed and witnessed confession should be enough for you."

There was so much to ask, and so many questions to be answered that MacGrath did not know where to begin. "Where is Jane Gurth?" he asked, after a pause.

"She has fled. We don't know where she is," said Edwin with a sigh.

"You must come with me to the Abbey to look into this extraordinary matter, Mr Gurth," said the officer sharply, "for if you have aided your sister to fly you will be arrested as an accessory-after-the-fact," and he stood up to give emphasis to his word, the others present standing up also.

Then an amazing thing happened. The room seemed to rise and fall just as if a great rolling wave had passed under it. Ida fell to the ground, as did MacGrath, and the other two men staggered, wildly clutching at near curtains to prevent themselves from tumbling. Several ornaments fell off the mantelpiece, and a bookshelf crashed on to the floor, scattering its contents. From the back of the house rose screams of terror. Then the earth heaved again, quivered and

became still. More or less, all present were sick and startled by the unusual event.

"An earthquake," cried Edwin, and dragged Ida hastily out of the house on to the lawn, followed by the Inspector and Mark Bally.

"My mother! my mother!" she cried, and Edwin ran inside again.

"I'll save her," he shouted, and ran up the stairs to be met by Minister who was startled also, but not dismayed.

"Pooh! Pooh! There won't be another shock," he said genially. "Mrs Venery is all right. You should have felt the earthquakes in Peru; then indeed you would have something to talk about."

Everyone, servants and visitors, invalid and the other doctor were reassured by this light way of treating the matter, and as no other shock came, life at the Manor resumed its ordinary aspect. Minister called Ida to the side of her mother, and thither she went while Mark and Edwin bundled into MacGrath's motor-car and moved swiftly in the direction of the Abbey. All the time they talked of the earthquake even to the exclusion of the other interesting matter which was taking them to the ruined church. A thought struck the Inspector when they came to the Abbey gates.

"Did Miss Jane Gurth pass through here some time ago?"

"Quite an hour, if not more," said the lodge-keeper. "She had a message to leave at the Abbey for the master."

When the car ran up the avenue, MacGrath looked significantly. "She has gone to the black cell to revenge herself on your brother for giving the show away," he said grimly.

"Good heavens," cried Mark alarmed, for he knew

that his tiny weak brother would have no chance against such a strong girl as Jane. "Let us go down at once. There is no time to be lost."

But the unexpected had happened with a vengeance. They entered the ruined church to find that a great part of it had fallen. Mark opened the railings and removed the huge stone at the back of the altar. Then he looked down to find the stairs down to the cell all broken up, and the descent filled with rubbish.

"The earthquake," he groaned, "it must have destroyed——"

"Look out! Look out! here's another shock," cried Edwin, as he saw a pillar totter, and the men fled from the church while pillar after pillar crashed down in splintered stone.

One shock came, than another, finally a third, and the whole structure piled itself in disorderly and giant masses of stone over what undoubtedly would prove to be the tomb of Alaric Bally, his nurse, and Jane Gurth.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST EVENT

AN earthquake being unusual in that part of England where Hepworth village is situated, the whole countryside was greatly alarmed and surprised. There were no more shocks, but those which had taken place had been sharp and pronounced. With the exception of the ruined church no buildings had fallen, so there was but trifling damage done. The fane itself had tumbled down into a heap of confused and gigantic fragments, and only portions of the walls and a few sturdy pillars were left standing. During the day people came from far and near to see the sight, and gradually the rumour circulated that the famous and generally considered mythical black cell had been discovered. That is, it had been discovered only to be lost again, as the earthquake had shaken it into a confused mass of earth and masonry. At least everyone supposed with very good reason that such was the case, since the entrance was blocked and there was no means of ascertaining the true state of affairs.

The excitement was very great, the more so when it became known that Alaric Bally had dwelt in the underground retreat for so many years, and was supposed to be lying dead, buried under tons of earth. And even if this was not the case, the several shocks must have so dislocated the air-shafts that it was

probable the dwarf had been asphyxiated. Then it became known that his nurse, Dora Quail, was also entombed, and with her, Jane Gurth, who had fled to hide herself from justice. Now that the catastrophe had taken place Mark Bally no longer made any attempt to preserve the family secret. Alaric had passed away—Mark was certain of this—and the black cell was no longer in existence, so it was just as well for the sake of all concerned in the crime of the Manor House, that the absolute truth should become known. And even if the now legitimate owner of the Abbey had still wished for the long-preserved secret to be kept, Inspector MacGrath would have insisted upon the matter being made public. Also MacGrath could never hold his tongue, and talked freely to this one and that, detailing with much embellishment what had been discovered. The consequence was that reporters of local papers and special correspondents from London came down with their eyes and ears open for information. Their presence settled the question of secrecy or publicity. Next day the whole of the three kingdoms were in possession of a very frank statement of the facts.

The death of Borrin and the mystery enveloping the same was recalled, and the details obtained at the inquest were reprinted in all the great newspapers. Later information concerning the discovery of the black cell, the kidnapping of Minister and Edwin Gurth, the guilt of his sister and the complicity of his brother were given at length. Edwin and Mark, Minister and Ida writhed under the publicity of the whole affair, but they were wise enough to see that the time for suppression was past. Until the public at large were made acquainted with all matters concerning the death of Josiah Borrin, as now was the case,

there was no chance of peace coming to any of them. Therefore, they endured the unpleasant situation as best they could. No family likes its dirty linen to be washed in public, and the linen in this case was very dirty indeed. But it had to be washed before the eyes of all men, and washed it was, with much noise and excitement.

Edgar, doubtless wherever he had gone to, saw that the game was up, for when the police sought him at his office they found from Billy Ensor that he had disappeared. Billy stated that his master had not gone to Paris as he intended—that is if he ever did intend—but had remained in London during the time Ida supposed him to be on the Continent. At once a description of the young man was sent to all seaports and railway stations. Everywhere detectives were on the watch to arrest the fugitive as an accessory-after-the-fact to the murder of Borrin, but two or three days passed and still Edgar could not be found. Still it was impossible for him to leave the kingdom owing to the hundreds of people who were searching for him, and every hope was entertained that he would be captured within a reasonable time. Then he would have to stand his trial for the murder of Borrin, for the manslaughter of Medway, for the illness of Mrs Venery, and for the kidnapping of Minister and his brother. The description of the fugitive's doings read like a romance, and great eagerness was manifested by the public in all details concerning his possible capture. When everything came out at the trial quite a feast of melodramatic information was anticipated. But Edgar had to be caught before the trial could take place, and at the present moment he was conspicuous by his absence.

Nothing could be done to Mark, as both Edwin and

Minister protested that they had remained in the black cell of their own free will, and it was also proved by the confession of Jane that the barrister and the doctor had known nothing of the commission of the crime by herself. Alaric's added testimony showed also that the two men were innocent, as the dwarf had been acute enough to guess that, when the confession was made public, the characters of his brother, of Edwin, and of Minister would be canvassed. On the whole, although there were some dissenting voices, public opinion was in favour of all three, and it was openly said that the trio had behaved very well under difficult circumstances. As to Ida, when her connection with the affair, which had ended in the discovery of the whole business, became known, she was looked upon as quite a heroine. Reporters and photographers came to the Manor to interview both her and her mother, but thanks to the attitude of Dr Carey neither of the two women were troubled. Carey stated that it was dangerous to acquaint Mrs Venery with the state of affairs until she was stronger, and stated also that Ida had sustained such a shock from her late experience that it was wiser to leave her alone until she recovered. So far as this was concerned, therefore, the newspapers were disappointed, but they made up for the same by giving ample details regarding what was known of the whole mysterious case. And of course there were many pictures taken of the ruined church and of the excavations going on to find the black cell.

For excavations on a large scale were being made day and night in the hope that Alaric and Mrs Quail and Jane might be still alive. The presumption was that the earthquake shocks had been so strong that the roof of the subterranean retreat had fallen in, in which case those below had undoubtedly perished.

But there was just a chance that the roof had not fallen, and just a chance that the occupants of the cell were not asphyxiated. To make certain of this, parties of workmen were digging and delving in the ruins and beside the ruins to get at the place. As there was an electric plant at the Abbey, which illuminated both the house itself and the black cell, it was easy to rig up powerful lamps for night work. This was speedily done, and throughout the four-and-twenty hours incessant work went on, the men relieving one another in four-hour shifts. Truly there was plenty of excitement immediately after the truth had been discovered, and Hepworth village awoke from the repose of centuries to find itself the centre of interest. The Harper Inn was crowded with curious people and quite a fortune was made by the landlady. Indeed, Mrs Heasy told the story of the black cell again and again until she was quite weary, and her portrait appeared in several papers with her account of the legend.

Finally the workmen dug down to the underground retreat, and it was discovered that the roof had indeed fallen in when the earthquake took place. Several of the rooms were intact, and great was the surprise displayed at the magnificence of these. But in the circular hall which was piled with earth and masonry, the bodies of Alaric and Jane were found: the body of Mrs Quail was discovered in her small kitchen, where she was doubtless working when the catastrophe took place. Mark was very thankful when the body of his unfortunate brother was brought to the surface and could be laid as it was, in the family vault with Christian rights; but he was still more thankful when the poor little man's diary was unearthed. That proved throughout many years that Alaric, in obedi-

ence to the family tradition of the Ballys, had lived in the black cell of his own free will, and had been treated with tender care both by his late father and by his brother. In one part of the diary Alaric stated that as he was a reincarnation of Brother Thomas, with him the curse of the Ballys would end, and that at his death the black cell would cease to exist. Everyone scoffed at this passage in the diary, but everyone had to admit that the black cell and Alaric had ended together. However, the main point proved was that Mark had not kept his brother in durance against his will, so he was praised rather than blamed for the way in which he had striven to lighten the dwarf's captivity. Also, as Mark had frequently declared, there was no disgrace attached to the weird family secret, and now that it was wholly known public opinion was quite on his side that it should have been preserved. Few people were allowed to see the body of the unfortunate dwarf, and the funeral took place at night when there was no one about, as with the discovery of the bodies the excavations had come to an end. Mrs Quail and Jane were buried in Hepworth churchyard with great privacy.

Of course there was an inquest on the last mentioned, but so much was known before the inquest took place that there was little new information to be obtained. The confession of Jane, and the comments of Alaric were read, Edwin gave what evidence he could, Ida stated what part she had taken in the matter, and Minister made all necessary declarations likely to clear up doubtful points. Within a week after the funerals all signs of excitement disappeared, and life in Hepworth village resumed its somnolent aspect. Now that the mystery of the little doctor's death was solved no one was blamed in connection

with what had happened save Edgar. And Edgar could not be found.

“Once he is caught and punished,” said Edwin to Ida, “there will be no more trouble. It is admitted that Minister and Mark and myself are all perfectly innocent, having been drawn into the matter against our wills. I think that the worst is over, Ida.”

The girl nodded. She looked very pale and haggard, for the strain involved in the winding-up of the whole terrible business had been very great. “I hope Edgar won’t be caught, badly as he has behaved,” she said, with an air of fatigue; “we have had enough trouble.”

“Well, there has been so much disgrace that a little more won’t matter,” said Edwin, bitterly, “our name is covered with shame. I don’t see how I can take up my business again as a barrister without having people pointing their fingers at me in scorn.”

“Not in scorn, Edwin. You have been exonerated along with Uncle Theo and Mr Bally. Everyone thinks you are to be pitied having such a sister and a brother, and I’m sure you are.”

“I love *your* pity, dearest,” said Edwin, wincing, “but I don’t want the pity of anyone else. However, I shall live the whole unpleasant thing down.”

“Of course you will,” said Minister, who entered the library at this moment, “never say die, Edwin. The storm has blown over and for the rest of your life Ida and you will have fair weather.”

“I shall be very glad to walk in sunshine again,” sighed the girl.

“Then why not step out into it at once?” said the big doctor, raking his shaggy beard with outspread fingers as usual, “take my advice.”

“What is it?” asked the lovers simultaneously.

“Get married at once and go a tour round the world for a year or so. When you return the whole dreadful business will be forgotten.”

“But I can't leave my mother,” expostulated Ida, anxiously.

“Yes, you can, and in my hands—that is if you don't mind having me for a stepfather?”

“What?”

“My dear,” Minister took Ida's hand and patted it in quite a paternal way. “I always loved your mother, even before she met with your father and married him. Even if Josiah had lived I intended to marry Lavinia, and now that Josiah is dead it is more necessary than ever that she should have a protector. I have proposed and have been accepted, so shortly we will be made one. What do you say, my dear?”

“What can I say but that I am delighted?” cried Ida, her pale face flushing as she threw her arms round the shaggy man's neck and kissed him; “and as things are arranged in this way I am willing to marry Edwin, whenever he wants me to.”

“Let us marry at once,” suggested Edwin eagerly. “It is no disrespect to the memory of your uncle that we should do so, although he has not been dead for long. Under the circumstances he would have been the first to advise things being settled in this way. I don't care a straw for your fortune, Ida, as you know, but it is best that you should give me the right to look after you and the money. That is,” ended Edwin, flushing and looking uneasy; “if you are willing to marry a man with a soiled name?”

“The name doesn't matter,” whispered Ida, who was on her lover's breast, “before we marry take my name.”

“My dear, you not only endow a pauper with your

fortune, but you give him your name also. That is quite a reversal of ordinary custom."

"It is a very sensible thing to do," said Minister bluntly, "don't be a fool, Edwin. Take the name of Venery, marry Ida, and go away for a world tour."

"I think," said the young man after a pause, "that if Ida does not object, it would be better if I took the name of Borrin."

Ida clapped her hands. "Edwin Borrin. It sounds very well," she said with a pleased smile, "and I am sure that Uncle Josiah would approve."

"I am sure he does if he is looking on at us now, as I suspect he is," said the big doctor bluffly, "so be it. Edwin, you can take out letters patent at once and make Ida Mrs Borrin immediately afterwards. Lavinia and I will see you off on your travels and then marry quietly. Thus everything will be settled on the best and surest foundation."

"What about Mark? He is unhappy, poor boy," said Ida, anxiously.

"No wonder, when he has lost Alaric whom he loved so much," said Edwin.

"And Jane?" she murmured.

"Oh, Jane." Edwin winced and shivered at the memory of his dead sister's misdeeds. "I think his love perished in this very room when Jane went out of her mind and said such dreadful things."

"Do you think, then, that Jane was mad, Edwin?"

"No, I don't," struck in Minister, "she was a thoroughly bad woman, and I was quite taken in by her mask of demure amiability. Both Jane and Edgar had criminal instincts, and I don't know, Edwin, how you escape the taint."

"He has no taint," cried Ida, indignantly, "Edwin is the best, and most honourable man in the world."

“Of course he is,” assented Minister rather snappishly, “would I allow him to marry you otherwise? As your prospective stepfather I have some privileges I hope, Ida. But Jane was wicked.”

“She showed her evil very suddenly, Uncle Theo.”

“Not a bit of it. The evil was there all the time, and only when circumstances were too strong for her did she throw off the mask. Undoubtedly she went to murder Alaric because he gave her away. And with that evil intention in her mind she met with her death. And again——”

“Oh,” cried Edwin, throwing up his hands, “don’t talk any more about Jane. I am most anxious to forget that I ever had a sister. Doctor you are right. I shall take Borrin’s name and marry Ida, and go a tour with her round the world. We shall return in two years to settle in London.”

Minister nodded his approval. “Quite right. It is no use returning to this house which has been the scene of so much trouble. As I have plenty of money I intend to take Lavinia, when she is my wife, to the Continent for a trip and we shall settle in London, also.”

“Until you go off on one of your wild adventures again,” hinted Ida, smiling.

“No, my dear. My travelling days are over. Henceforth Lavinia and I shall play the agreeable parts of Darby and Joan by our own fireside. And in London I shall find plenty of excitement in fighting people over my discoveries of ancient civilisations which I intend to make public.”

“Including the Andean drug and the antidote?” inquired Edwin.

“Ah, that root and the leaves have been given enough publicity. And after what has happened I

see that it is dangerous to keep either the one or the other. I have no more leaves," said Minister, "as all that I had have been crushed to produce this antidote," he held up a small phial filled with a reddish fluid.

Ida ran to the writing-table and from a drawer produced the flint still wrapped in paper, which she had taken to the black cell. "Throw the antidote and this into the fire, Uncle Theo," she said with a shudder.

"All in good time, my dear. I agree with you that it is best to destroy the flint and the antidote and what remains of the Andean drug."

"Where is the bottle containing that?" asked Edwin, anxiously.

"Inspector MacGrath has it at Whipton, and he is bringing it over this evening so that the whole lot may be destroyed. I thought it better for the Inspector to be present when I got rid of the drug and the antidote," said Minister frankly, "as if anything else occurs he will not be able to say that these unfortunate things have anything to do with it. All the trouble began with my bringing the leaves to this house and reviving Josiah's interest in the Indian poison. Am I not wise?"

"Both of us agree that you are wise," said Edwin, exchanging a glance with Ida, "as the trouble began with the Andean drug and its antidote let it end with the destruction of both."

"In the presence of Inspector MacGrath," said Minister, and wrapped up his phial and the poisoned flint carefully.

This ended the conversation for the time being, and the lovers went out for a walk, while Minister returned to the bedside of Mrs Venery who was improving

rapidly. Ida and the man who had stood by her in her trouble so nobly went to the Abbey to see Mark, and learned from his lips that he intended to travel, and would set out very speedily.

"I have nothing to bind me to stay here now that poor Alaric is dead," said Mark with a sigh, "though I'm sure I don't know why I should use the word 'poor.' I am glad Alaric is released from his purgatory, and wherever he is now I am quite sure he is happier. He was such a splendid fellow."

"He was," assented Ida kindly. "I wish I had seen more of him, Mark. I loved what I did see, and I wish you had told me your secret long ago."

"I wish I had. But then I was bound by the family tradition. However, Alaric is dead and buried. We have recovered many valuable things from the ruins of the black cell, and now that my affairs are all in order I start next week for the East. I shall be away for some years."

"And you will return with a wife," suggested Edwin.

"I might and I might not. At all events I can marry without fear of the dreadful family curse. That passed with the death of Alaric and the destruction of the black cell. All's well that ends well."

"So we think," said Ida, and told him what she and Edwin had decided to do. "So we will go away also, leaving Uncle Theo to marry my mother," ended the girl.

Mark shook hands with both the lovers, quite approving of their scheme, after which he accompanied them to the gates of the park. "Good-bye," said Bally shaking hands again. "When we next meet in two or three years, if we live so long, all these horrible things will be forgotten."

“Amen to that,” said Edwin and Ida earnestly, and then they walked home to the Manor through the gathering night.

Meanwhile at the Manor a strange scene was taking place. Minister left Mrs Venery and came down to the library. Sitting at the writing-table he laid down the phial and the flint before him, as every moment he expected Inspector MacGrath with the bottle of the poison. Then the drug and its antidote and the flint would be thrown into the fire all together, and the last evidence of the case would be destroyed in the presence of the officer. Minister was quite willing to do this, as he no longer desired to experiment with such weird Indian magic—for magic it was of a sort. The death of his old friend had shaken him a great deal more than he chose to acknowledge, and he wished to see the end of the poison and its antidote, which had led to the catastrophe. The presence of MacGrath was necessary, both because he still had the sole bottle of the deadly juice which was in existence, and because Minister wished him to see the destruction of the same, together with its antidote and the tainted flint. Only in this way could any future danger be averted.

While Minister sat in the chair before the writing-table thinking over the way in which he had obtained the leaves from the Indian, he heard a low rapid knocking at the glass door of the bow-window which had once more been mended. Thinking that Ida and Edwin had returned, he went to the same and opened it with words of welcome. But these died on his lips when Edgar stepped into the room, looking dishevelled and old and dirty and terrified.

“You villain,” cried the bluff doctor. “Why have you come here?”

“Hush! Hush!” whimpered the miserable man,

closing the window and locking it carefully. "Don't give me up. I had nowhere else to go."

"I shall give you up," said the big man indignantly. "You have behaved like the scoundrel you are, and deserve the punishment you will surely receive."

"It was Jane—it was Jane," shrieked Edgar, staggering towards the chair at the writing-table which Minister had lately vacated. "I would never have hurt anyone. I didn't know until afterwards that Jane had murdered——"

"When you did know you should have given your sister up to justice."

Edgar laid his head on his arms and his arms on the table to cry bitterly, with fear and shame. "She said that she would denounce me as guilty if I breathed a word to anyone," he sobbed. "And as she was dressed in Edwin's clothes she could easily have turned round and said that it was me who killed old Borrin. All she had to account for was the blue scarf, and she could have said that I took that to implicate Edwin in the matter."

"I see your dilemma," said Minister after a pause, but very grimly, "still you should have spoken the truth even at such a risk to yourself. But to accuse Edwin, to kidnap me, to murder Medway——"

"I didn't," said Edgar raising his tear-stained face. "That was an unfortunate accident; you know it was an accident."

"Arranged by you who stretched the rope across the road. You might have killed me also, and——"

"And I'm sorry that I did not do so," broke in Edgar, desperate with despair. "As it is you are all right. Oh doctor," he began to cry again, "don't give me away. I have been hiding here, there and

everywhere. My money came to an end, and I came back to see if Ida and Edwin——”

“Would help you. Well, I like that. The very people you have injured. What a black scoundrel you are.”

“It was Jane, it wasn’t me,” said Edgar doggedly. “Give me money and let me go to America. I’ll never trouble any of you again.”

“I’ll take care of that,” said Minister grimly. “You shall be handed over to the police to suffer for——”

“No, no!” Edgar wrung his hands. “You wouldn’t do that and disgrace Edwin’s name.”

“You have disgraced it as it is,” retorted the doctor, “and Edwin changes his name to Borrin when he marries Ida, which will be soon. You have played a desperate game, but you have lost. Take your beating like a man.”

“They will hang me,” moaned the fallen villain.

“I hope they will.”

“No, no, no! I am afraid to die. I have not been good,” and Edgar fell on his knees in a panic.

“You won’t die,” said Minister gruffly, for he was beginning to be sorry for the abject creature. “Medway’s death will be brought in as manslaughter and I won’t prosecute you for kidnapping me, neither will Edwin. But as an accessory-after-the-fact to Borrin’s death you will probably be imprisoned for a long term of years if not for life.”

“I won’t; I won’t,” and Edgar sprang to his feet looking round for means of escape with despairing eyes.

“Don’t try to clear or I’ll trip you up,” bellowed Minister, “you have done enough mischief, and must be locked up to prevent you doing more.”

Edgar saw the flint on the table and guessed, as he naturally would, since he had seen it before, what it was. He snatched it up and retreated round the table.

"Try and stop me and I shall scratch you with this," he snarled.

Minister laughed contemptuously. "I can be revived with the antidote," he said incautiously.

The miserable man saw the phial of reddish-coloured liquor on the table, and remembered that this was the juice of the leaves exhibited by the doctor when the experiment was made on the dog. "The antidote," he muttered, and picking up the phial he hurled it into the grate where it broke to pieces. Minister ran towards the fire with a cry, but was too late to prevent the breakage, and while he was in this part of the room, Edgar, still holding the flint, ran towards the glass door.

"You can't revive yourself or anyone else now that the antidote is destroyed," shouted Edgar triumphantly, and wrenched the door open.

"Stop! Stop!" cried the doctor, moving hastily towards the fugitive. "Do you hear that horn? That is MacGrath coming in his motor to see me. You will be caught by him."

"Not me," said Edgar sneering, "I'll scratch him with the flint if he does," and he leaped forth into the darkness as the motor swept round the drive into the open space before the house.

Minister sprang to the window, "Edgar Gurth is here," he roared to MacGrath who had by this time alighted from the car. "Take care, he has the poisoned flint with him."

In a flash the Inspector grasped the situation, and in the powerful light of the motor-lamps, he made a dash at the flying man, careless of the death-in-life to

which he exposed himself. Edgar passed him swiftly and swerved aside to do so. At that moment he stumbled and uttered a strange cry of terror and dismay. In a moment MacGrath was on him and pinned him down.

"Lie still, or I'll knock you on the head," said the Inspector between his closed teeth and shouted for light.

Edgar made no reply; he did not even struggle. In reply to the Inspector's call the chauffeur removed one of the lamps and came forward, hastily followed by Minister who had stepped out of the house. In the circle of white light Edgar lay calm and peaceful with closed eyes, apparently dead. "He is shamming," muttered MacGrath savagely.

"No, no! Look," and Minister pointed to the man's right hand, the palm of which was deeply scratched. In falling, or perhaps with intention, so desperate was his situation, Edgar had wounded himself with the poisoned flint. Now he lay in a drugged sleep as deep as that to which his wicked sister had condemned Mrs Venery. "He is done for," said Minister heavily.

"The antidote?" growled the Inspector rising with a disgusted look.

"He threw that into the fire just after he grabbed the flint," explained the doctor. "I had both ready for you when you arrived. There is no chance of his being revived now."

"Can't you get more of the antidote?"

"No," said Minister positively. "I used up all the leaves. I should have to go into the depths of the Andean mountains to get more. That would take a few months."

"We'll keep him alive until then, never fear," said

MacGrath angrily, for he was enraged that his prey should have escaped him in this extraordinary fashion. "When he revives he will be punished."

But Edgar never revived. Ida and her lover returned to hear what an amazing event had taken place and to inspect the still breathing body of the miserable man. For a few hours it was kept at the Manor, and next day removed to London to see what could be done towards restoring the senses of the wretched creature. But all the resources of science proved to be unavailing in the face of the Andean drug. Edgar lay on a bed in a London hospital, kept alive by nourishment, and with all the doctors in London taking the deepest interest in his case. The papers were filled with the wonderful sequel to a wonderful case, and loudly demanded that Minister should return to the Andes to get more leaves and prepare the antidote. But the doctor declared that he was unable to penetrate into the recesses of the mountains where he had before procured the drug, as the Indians were hostile. Only an expedition could reach the village where the tribe who used the drug and the antidote lived. As no one was rich enough to fit out such an expedition, and no one save the doctors cared very much whether the life-in-death man revived or not, Edgar remained unconscious. Where his soul was hovering it was impossible to say. And in this remarkable way he escaped the punishment which he so richly merited.

"But he is sure to pass away quietly before long," said Minister after he had given a full account of what had happened to MacGrath. "All the liquid nourishment in the world won't keep him alive for ever."

"I hope he *will* pass away," said Ida. "It will

spare us further shame," and Edwin re-echoed the wish.

It was long before this wish was gratified, but in the end Minister's prophecy proved to be correct. Little by little Edgar's life dwindled away, although his insensibility extended for a much greater period than that of Mrs Venery's. Ida and Edwin, as Mr and Mrs Borrin had started on their tour round the world, and Minister was married to Mrs Venery, before the end came. The papers were filled with a description of how the man had suddenly stopped breathing, when no longer the body could be kept alive by the administration of liquid nourishment. The famous case with all its dramatic and romantic circumstances was recalled, and Edwin read the same to Ida when a bundle of journals was sent to them at Naples.

"This is the last of the business," said Mr Borrin, as he was now duly entitled to call himself, "poor Edgar. I think that Jane was more to blame than he was. I wonder if he wounded himself on purpose?"

"Perhaps he did," said Mrs Borrin thoughtfully. "He was afraid to die and he was equally afraid to live, so preferred this life-in-death existence which kept him hovering between two worlds."

"Well, he has gone to his place now," sighed Edwin and threw the bundle of papers on the fire. "As we can't do anything more, let us forget him. There goes the last of the black cell and its weird romance."

"Thank God, Who has protected us so wonderfully," said Ida reverently, "and to-morrow we sail for Australia to forget the past."

And on the morrow they did so in an Orient liner, leaving sorrow behind them, and looking forward to

a length of happy days. Before they returned to the shores of England the black cell was a memory of the past. The storm was over, the sunshine had come, and hand in hand the sorely tried couple walked in the bright splendour, using the fortune of Uncle Josiah as he would have had it used—to help the poor and needy.”

THE END

