The Heath Hover Mystery
Vol.I
By
Bertram Mitford

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Chapter One
The Door in the Corner

John Seward Mervyn lay back in his accustomed armchair, andlooked.

The room was of medium size, partly panelled, and partly hung with dark red papering. It was low ceiled, and the bending beams between the strips of whitewash were almost black. This added to the gloominess of the apartment whether by day or night; and now it was night. To be precise it was the stroke of midnight.

A bright fire glowed and flared in the wide, oldworld chimney grate, but even this failed altogether to dispel a certain suggestion of the hauntings of vague, shadowy evil influences that seemed to be in the atmosphere. The lamplight too, was cheerful enough, and yet not. It would have been, anywhere else, but here it seemed that any element of cheerfulness must somehow infallibly miss its way.

The moan of the winter wind surged around the gables of the old house, rising now and then to a most doleful howling, and within, beams and rafters cracked, breaking out loudly in new and unexpected places. Also in a manner somewhat nervetrying to one who sat there in the ghostly midnight solitudeas this one sat, and he in the full consciousness that for years and years past nobody had been found to inhabit this house even rent free and for the sole consideration of residing within the same. And he was trying the experiment.

John Seward Mervyn was a man who prided himself on being an absolute and cynical sceptic with regard to the supernatural, and he was poor. Dreadful tales were afloat with regard to this particular tenement, but at such he laughed. Nobody had been able to inhabit it even for weeks. Several had made the attempt, allured by the inducement of rent free. They had remained just long enough to begin to congratulate themselves upon such a findand thenout they had gone, bag and baggage, without so much as a day's notice. Several in succession; and what they had seenor heardsomehow or other none had been willingor ableto disclose. But the present occupant had been in possession for some months, to the marvel of the neighbourhood.

Now he sat there at dead midnight in absolute solitude. Not a soul was within call; the nearest habitations were two or three labourers' cottages on the further side of a wooded hill. His thoughts were of the past, and they were not pleasant, those of the past seldom are. A couple of pipes were on the table at his elbow, and a tobacco jarlikewise a square whisky bottle, a syphon and a tumbler, but of this he had partaken but little. But

somehow he felt his solitude tonight as he had never felt it since he had entered on possession. Tonight he felt he would have given something for human companionship in almost any shape. The winter wind howled without, not loud but inexpressibly dismal. And he sat, andlooked.

Looked! At what?

In a corner of the room was a doora massive door. It had a curious oldworld, wroughtiron handle. And at this he was lookinggazing, in fact, more than intently. Was it slowly turning?

He could have sworn that it was. Well, what, then? The door was securely locked, the key was in a very safe place. And the door led nowhere and from nowhere. It led, in fact, to a vaultlike underground cellar whose solid walls were totally devoid of outlet. When he had entered on possession he had exhaustively verified this, and having thus satisfied himself had laughed all the startling and shadowy possibilities which popular report ascribed to the place to utter scorn. And yet, now tonight, he could have sworn that the handle of this door was slowly turning.

To anybody less scepticalless unaffectedly and wholesouledly scepticalthere was that in the conviction which would have set up a bloodchilling, hairraising effect. The utter loneliness of the place, the midnight sounds, the moaning of the doleful winter wind, the crackings and creakings of the ghostly old house, the dreadful legends that centred round that very vault, of which the movement of this very door handle was a preliminary incidentwould have been sufficient to have driven out such into the pitiless winter night rather than remain sitting thereon the watch.

On the watchfor what? Could a spectral hand undo that lock? Then the watcher rubbed his eyes and looked again. Certainly the handle had turned. Its broad iron loop had been horizontal before, now it was at an angle of fortyfive. Of that he was as sure as that he was alive and sitting there. And then he remembered thatthis was the night.

It doesn't matter what day of the month it was. Manifestations were liable to occur at any time, and sporadically, but there were two nights in the year whenWell he had obtained a vague inkling as to what might be expected, but the last of these two dates had befallen prior to his occupation. This was the second of them within the year. This was the night.

"Now this is all unutterable bosh," Mervyn said to himself. "I'll have another drink anyhow. Then I'll turn in."

He reached for the whisky bottle, and filled up. Yet he was conscious of a feeling as though a chill were running down him from head to foot, notwithstanding that the fire was glowing with a heat that was almost fierce; and with the hissing squirt of the syphon into the tumbler there mingled a sound as though something or somebody were shuffling or groping behind that heavily locked door. He took a long pull at his tumbler, almost emptying it. Then he looked again at the broad iron loop handle. Its straight lower end, which before had stood at an angle of forty five, was now vertical.

His eyes dilated upon the phenomenon. The cold chill that ran through his system seemed to intensify. Mervyn, though by no means a total abstainer was a temperate manso it was not that. Well, the obvious thing was to go and get the key, and open the door and satisfy himself. But, for the life of him hecould not.

No. He could not. He sat staring more and more wildly with dilated eyes. He was even horribly conscious of a slow pallor creeping over his face. What did it mean? The whole atmosphere of the room seemed charged with some evil influence. An owl hooted melodiously outside. It was answered by another. This seemed in a measure to break the spell, for he loved birds and bird voices, and the hooting of owls in the dark woods overhanging the long lakelike pond behind his dwelling was a sound that often drew him forth on moonlight nights to stand on the sluice and listen for an hour at a time. There was to him nothing boding or sinister in the voices of the night birds, any more than there was in the jubilant shout of the cuckoo by day, or the twanging of the nightingale.

He looked again. Certainly that door handle was moving, and it could be moved by no mortal hand. Yet to make sure, he found his voice.

“Any one there?” he called, and as he did so he was conscious of a suspicion of a quake in his voice.

For answer only a soft drive of sleet against the curtained window, and through it he could swear that the door handle slowly creaked. The door itself stood shadowy in the gloom of the corner where the light only half reached.

Then something moved. For the life of him the watcher could not repress a start, a thrill of the nerves. But the sound, the movement, did not come from the corner whereon his tense gaze was fixed. There was a little black kitten curled up asleep in an armchair opposite the one in which he was seateda tiny ball of woolly fluff, which during its short life had been the regular companion of his lonely evenings, and of which he was almost humanly fond. It, now, was uncurling itself with a sudden celerity totally foreign to the usual deliberation of its kind on awakening from sleep. Its round eyes were wide open, and a crescendo fire of shrill growls were proceeding from its little throat. Its back was

arched, and its fur all standing up, andits gaze too, was fixed upon that door in the shadowy corner. Then it spat, retreating further and further till it was against the back of the chair, for all the world as though to repel the onslaught of its natural and hereditary enemydog.

“The fact is,” thought Mervyn, noting this, “I have been too much shut up with myself, and the utter, infernal loneliness of life here is eating into my nerves.” But the sensible side of this sceptical reflection was undermined by anotherthat there are occasions when animals can see what we cannot. And this tiny creature was showing unmistakable and increasing signs of perturbation and alarm.

He spoke to itsoftly, caressinglythen went over and picked it up. As he returned with it to his own chair it struggled violently as though to escapea thing it had never donegrowling the while with redoubled intensity. And his own chair was nearer to that door.

“Now Poogie, don’t be a little fool,” he apostrophised, holding it tighter. But the tiny creature became almost frantic, striking its claws into his hand. He released it, and it darted like lightning into the far corner of the room, where it crouched, still growling.

For all his scepticism the man was conscious of a chill feeling in the region of the spine. He reached out a hand for the square bottle. The hand shook, and glass clinked against glass more than once as he filled out a liberal measure. This he tossed off, and as he glanced again towards the centre of attention the glass fell from his hand on to the table. The door had opened.

Had openedwas opening. As yet but a few inches of dense black slit, but it seemed to be gaining in width. Mervyn gazed at it with dilated eyes, and as he did so he realised that the blood had receded from his face, leaving it coldclammy. What on earthor beyond the earthcould have opened that door, secured as it was with a solid lock, the key of which was at that moment safe within one of the drawers of his writing table? What on earthor from beyond the earthwas he going to behold when that door should be opened to its full width? Moved by a natural instinct of material defence, he backed towards the fireplacestill without taking his gaze from that slowly opening doorand bent down as though to seize the poker, but refrained, as the conviction flooded his mind that whatever it might be that he was about to meet certainly no material weapon would be available against it. Again he found his voice.

“Any one there?” he repeated, this time conscious of very much more than a suspicion of a quaver in his voice.

As if in answer, the door noiselessly opened further. The black gap now occupied half the doorway. And then, while he was meditating a frantic rush forward to make one desperate effort at clearing up the mystery whatever it might be, something occurred to divert the awful tensity of apprehension which had about reached its climax.

Through the doleful, long drawn howling of the winter wind and the rattle of sleet, came a cry. A cryever so faintdistantbut just audible; a cry, as of distress, of utter, dire, and hopeless extremityand it came from without. And it was clearly and unmistakably human.

Chapter Two.

The Cry from the Ice.

Every nerve rigid and tense Mervyn listened again. Yesit was repeated. It echoed forth more distinctly now upon the dismal night, and it came from far up the great pond above. Quickly he rose and threw on a warm cloak, and as quickly reached the front door, turned the key, and went out. Somebody was in imminent periland then he remembered. The ice!

He sprang up the path stairway which led to the sluice, and even as he did so the thought flashed through his mind that he had been on the eve of falling asleep in his chair when the phenomenon of the door handle had befallen to start him wide awake. No more thought however did he give to this, as he reached the level of the sluice and looked out.

The long triangle of the pond narrowing away between its overhanging woods, shone in the moonlight a gleaming sheet of ice, whose silver surface the drive of sleet was already whitening, and the firs in the dark woods which flowed down the banks were scintillating with hoarfrost. Now again, from far up that long gleaming triangle, came the raucous, agonised appeal for aid, this time quite distinctly audible.

“Some one’s got stuck there in the ice,” said Mervyn to himself. “But what the devil is he doing there at this time of night? Some poacher I suppose. Well, poaching isn’t a capital crime.” And raising his voice he answered the shout with a vigorous and reassuring halloo.

The sleet had suddenly ceased, and the clouds parting somewhat, showed glimpses of a rushing moon. Far up the frozen surface a dark interruption was just discernible. Here it was that the ice had parted, and from here now came a responsive, but weakening shout of hopeless human extremity.

“Keep upkeep up,” bellowed Mervyn through his hands. “I’m coming.”

He did not stop to think, he did his thinking while he moved. He went quickly down the sluice path to his house, all superstitious midnight imaginings thrown to the winds. To have started straight for the spot would have been to render no earthly service to the submerged man. He would have been powerless for anything save to stand on the bank and encourage him drowning, wherefore the additional few minutes sacrificed to returning to the house and procuring a ladder might mean the difference in any case between life and death.

The ladder was not found quite so easily as he had reckoned on, and when found, it proved a trifle heavier than he had expected. In spite of the biting cold he was streaming with perspiration by the time he had dragged it up the steep path to the level of the sluice again, and by the time he had brought it to the gate which opened into the path through the wood which skirted the length of the long triangle of ice he was wondering if he could get any further with it. But he sent forth a loud, encouraging shout, and without waiting for an answer, held on his way.

Fortunately every inch of the latter was known to him, and shafts of moonlight, darting through the leafless wood aided him appreciably. Still the way seemed interminable, and his progress, weighted as it was, was perforce slow. He knew exactly where to find the spot, and, lothere it was.

“Are you there?” he cried, parting some elder stems, to reach the edge, and thrusting out the ladder along the smooth, shining surface. No answer came, but in the glint of moonlight he could see the shattered, heaving ice slabs, and wedged in between these, supported by both arms extended, he made out the head and shoulders of a man.

The latter, obviously, was not more than half conscious, indeed it was little short of a miracle that he had not, in a state of relaxed muscular power, lost all hold and slid down to his frozen death in the black water. Obviously, too, he was in a state of collapse, and incapable of helping himself. The helping would all devolve upon his wouldbe rescuer. The latter, in cold blood, would not in the least have relished the job.

It is curious how the glow of a lifesaving attempt will warm the coldest blood. John Seward Mervyn was a complete and genuine cynic; yet to effect the rescue of this totally unknown stranger, and that at great peril to himself, here in the biting freezing midnight, seemed to him at that moment the one thing worth living for.

At great peril to himself. Yes, for he knew the water here to be a matter of four fathoms in depthit might as well have been four hundred for the result would be the same. It was likely enough that in attempting singlehanded to get the stranger out he would share the stranger’s fate.

The ice cracked and bent as he pushed out the ladder along its surface; and cautiously, and lying flat in order to distribute his weight, made his way along it. Then it broke, with a glasslike splintering, and jets of water spurted through. Then the moon was again obscured, and a wild drive of sleet whirled down.

“Here, buck up, man, and lay hold of the ladder,” he panted, having attained within grasp of his objective. The latter, whose staring eyes and blue lips showed the very last stage of exhaustion, made a wild attempt to comply, but his hand just missed its grasp, and the supporting ice slabs, loosened by the effort, would have let him through and in another moment would have closed over his head, when his wrist was seized in a tolerably firm grip.

“Nowyou’re all right,” gasped Mervyn. “Grab hold with the other hand, and work your way along the rungs of the ladder. Come on. Buck up.”

The nearly drowned, and wholly frozen man seemed to understand, for although powerless for speech he did just what he was told. There was a mingling of splashing and glassy splintering as the ice gave way beneath this double weight, but Mervyn’s head was clear, and he distributed his own weight while piloting the other along the half submerged ladder. At last slowly and laboriously, foot by foot, they regained the bank.

“Here. You get outside a great toothful of this,” said Mervyn, producing the square whisky bottle which he had shoved hastily into his side pocket with an eye to just such a contingency, and had hurriedly deposited under a tree, when starting to venture upon the ice. “Then we’ll sprint as hard as we can for my diggings. Do as I say,” he added, sharply, as the other hesitated. “It may mean the difference between life and death.”

The stranger, who had seemed to hesitate, now obeyed, and took a liberal pull at the potent spirit. His rescuer followed his example.

“Here, take another pull,” urged the latter. “Nothing like it, on top of a freezing soak. Go ahead. It can’t hurt you under the circumstances.”

The stranger complied, and the effect was nearly instantaneous. His chattering teeth were stilled, and the awful numbness that held his frame, relaxed, as the generous warmth of the spirit ran through his veins. Still he did not speak. Mervyn eyed him critically.

“Come along,” he said. “My crib’s just handy. Sooner we get there the better, for I’m in as risky a state as you are. Man, but I’m just steaming with perspiration, and a chill upon that on an icy night like thisat my ageno thank you! HereI’ll give you an arm. You must be clean played out.”

“I am,” said the other, speaking for the first time. But that was all he said. No words of thanks, of explanation. Mervyn passed a tolerably strong arm through that of his guest, and piloted him along the path beneath the trees, athwart whose frosted boughs the

moon was networking in fitful strands of light. The ladder he did not trouble his head further about. It would be there in the morning. Two owls, floating over the treetops, hooted sepulchrally but melodiously to each other.

“That’s how I heard them when I was in there. They sounded like the voices of devils.”

Mervyn looked at the speaker curiously. They had nearly gained the gate which opened out of the sombre woods on to the sluice. The voice was rather deep, not unpleasing, but strained. Lord! what if a touch of brain fever followed on the strain of the long immersion? What on earth was he going to do with a raving delirious man, in his lonely, haunted abode? thought Mervyn.

“Oh, that’s how they struck you!” he answered, bluffly. “No ‘devil’ about them. They’re jolly beggars and I like to hear them. I dare say, though, when you’re hanging on for dear life in a freezing ice hole at midnight anything strikes you as all distortedeh? Well, here we arethat’s my crib. Hold up, go easy down this path. It’s really a flight of steps, you know. By the way, as you see, I’m yards below the level of the pond. If that sluice were to give way it’d sweep me and my shack to Kingdom Come before you could say knife. I shouldn’t like to say how many million gallons of water there are in that pond. It’s about half a mile long, and fills what is really the bottom of a valley, so you can imagine it’s astonishingly deep.”

Thus chatting, he had piloted the man he had rescued safely down the staircaselike path and had gained the front door, which had been left half open in his hurried exit. The lamp in the inner room was still burning, and into this he led the stranger.

“Now, peel off all your wet clothes,” he went on. “This is the only decent fire in the housethe one in my bedroom has burnt low. Butlose no time about it. I’ll get you a couple of rough towels for a glowing rub downthen you’ll be none the worse.”

Mervyn stirred up the fire and piled on it several great billets. In a moment they were roaring up the chimney. But as he did so his glance quickly sought the mysterious door in the shadowy corner. It was tight shutmoreover the long loop handle was in its normal positionat the horizontal.

“I must have been dreaming,” he said to himself, as he went upstairs to rummage out the towels aforesaid, and anything else that his newfound guest would be likely to need. “And yetif that devilish rum optical delusion hadn’t come offwhy I should have dozed on comfortably, and never have heard that chump’s shout for help. Well I’ve read of that sort of thing, but here’s a firstclass case in point.”

But at this decision his meditations stopped short, and that uncomfortably. For the dread legends that hung around his lonely abode invariably had it that any manifestations within the same boded illwere productive of illto the witness or witnesses thereof; certainly not good, to any living soul. Yet this manifestationif manifestation it werehad been directly instrumental in the saving of a human life. And with this came another uncomfortable reflectionto wit, the proverb that if you save anybody's life, heor sheis bound to do you an injury.

"All bosh," he decided, next minute, as he proceeded to get out a suit of clothes, in fact a complete outfit, for his guest. Both were tall men, and much of the same build. The things would fit admirably. But this sudden acquisition of human companionship had made all the difference in Mervyn. An imaginative man when alone, he was as hardheaded and matter of fact as could be in the society of his fellows. He did not disguise from himself that the society of this one, whoever he might be, had come right opportunely just now.

"Here you are," he cried, flinging the bundle of things down on the table. "Get into these while I go and rummage out some supper. You can do with some I expect after your 'dip.' But I warn you it's all cold, and there's no kitchen fire. There isn't a soul on the premises but myself."

The stranger protested that he really required nothing. His voice was rather a pleasing one, with ever so slight a foreign intonation and accent. He had a wellshaped head, straight features, and a short dark beard trimmed to a point. On the whole, rather a striking looking man.

While he was changing Mervyn made several expeditions to the back premises, and by the time these were completed the table looked alluring by reason of the adornment of a cold silverside, half a Stilton cheeseand the usual appurtenances thereto.

"Rough and ready," declared Mervyn, "but all good of its kind. I thought we could dispense with laying a cloth."

The other bowed a smiling assent. If his dark eyes flashed round the room in a quick appraising glance when his host was not, looking he evinced no appreciable curiosity otherwise, either by look or speech. The latter, for his part, was equally contained. He detested being crossquestioned himself, consequently forebore, as second nature, to subject other people to that process. If his guest chose to volunteer information about himself he would do so, if notwell, he needn't.

A renewed whirl of dismal wind round the gables of the house, and a fine clatter of sleet against the windowpanes as they began their meal. The stranger looked up.

“I am fortunate indeed,” he said, “to have fallen upon such hospitality as yours tonight, Mr?”

“Mervyn,” supplied his host. But hardly had he uttered his own name, than a very strange and unaccountable misgiving struck root within his mind. Was it some longforgotten brain wave that suggested to him that he had seen this man somewhere or other beforeand that under circumstances which would in no way render it desirable that he should see him again? Yet, like a longforgotten dream which locates us in similar place or circumstances, it was an impression to vanish as completely and as bafflingly as recalled.

“Hark! That is not the wind,” went on the stranger, looking up.

“No, it isn’t,” said Mervyn, on whose ears the sound of a scratching on the windowpane and a plaintive little cry at the same time struck.

He raised the sash, admitting a whirl of icy sleet, also the little black kitten, its fur plentifully powdered with the white particles. It had slipped out of the door when he had started upon his rescue quest, and he had been too much occupied with this and the sequel to give it another thought just then.

“Why, Poogie, you little fool, what did you want to leave a snug fire for at all on a night like this?” he apostrophised as the tiny creature sprang lightly to his shoulder, and sat there purring and rubbing its head against his cheek. He sat down with it at the table, and began feeding it with scraps from his plate. The stranger looked on with a slightly amused smile.

“I see you are a lover of cats, Mr Mervyn,” he remarked.

“Why, rather. They’re such jolly, chummy little beasts. Look at this one,” holding it up. “Isn’t it a picture, with its little tufted ears and round, woolly face?”

But somehow the object of this eulogy did not seem appreciative. It struggled, and half struck its claws into its owner’s hand, which held it up under the armpits. But its said owner realised that its resentment was not directed upon him. It was viewing the stranger with much the same manifestations of disapproval and distrust as when gazing at the weirdly opening door, earlier in the night. And to its owner was borne in the consciousness that it had never displayed hostility towards anybody beforestranger or

not. This, however, he kept to himself. He replaced the kitten on his lap, but even then it seemed restive and uneasy.

“Are you fond of dogs too?” said the other. “I suppose you are, but I didn’t see or hear one when we came in.”

“Yes. But I haven’t got one just now. The fact is this is a difficult place to keep a dog in. They get roaming off into the coverts and get trapped or shot. The last one I had disappearedsuddenly.”

There was a curious hesitation about this explanation. Perhaps the stranger noticed itperhaps not.

“Now we’ll have a smoke,” said Mervyn, when they had finished, producing a cigar box. “These are pretty well maturedUnless you’d prefer to turn in?”

But the other declared he preferred nothing of the kind. The comfort of this delightful room after the experience he had gone through was idyllic. So Mervyn, by no means averse to this opportunity of conviviality so unexpectedly thrown in his way, fell in, and for upwards of an hour they sat on, before the blazing roaring logfire, chatting easily, but always on indifferent subjects. And all the time the stranger, while an ideal conversationalist, had vouchsafed no information about himselfnot even as to his name.

But when bedtime came he flatly and absolutely refused to avail himself of his host’s bedroom. He could not think of entailing that inconvenience, he declared. Here was a roomy and comfortable couch, and a blazing fire. A couple of pillows and a blanket was all he needed. And Mervyn perforce had to acquiesce. The latter smiled queerly to himself at his own thoughts while doing so. If the mysterious one were a burglaronly he did not look like itwhy the most professional of burglars would hardly burgle a man who had just pulled him out of the jaws of death, andmore potent argument still perhaps to the hardened cynichere was nothing worth burgling.

Butwhen he was in his own room, and was disposing himself comfortably to sleep, with the little black kitten as usual curled up on his feet outside the counterpane, he reflected complacently that the door of his room owned a very strong lock, and that a Browning pistol reposed beside his watch under his pillow.

But these precautionsespecially in this instancehad nothing to do with burglars or burgling.

Chapter Three.

The House by the Pond.

Heath Hover was a long, twostoreyed house built in the shape of the letter E with the centre bar left out. Nobody knew exactly how it had ever come to be built at all. The property on which it stood had changed hands several times right up to date, and tradition on the subject was obscure. It could never have been intended for a farmstead, if only that it was situated right in the middle of woods, nor were there any traces of yard or outbuildings in the very limited and sloping space immediately behind it. Some were of opinion that it had been built as a dower house to one or other of the succeeding owners of Sotherby Hall, others that it had been a separate demesne altogether.

As we have said, it stood lowthe chimneys being below the level of the sluice which regulated the custody of the great mass of water pent within the long triangular pond which was the scene of the midnight incident. It was situated at the open end of the V formed by this and by a sweep of oakwoods on either side, flowing down to the water's edge. In summer it was a delightfully picturesque and inviting retreat, nestling in the heart of its sylvan surroundings, and never failed to catch the attention of the users of the not very good public road which ran along the sluice, whether motorists or cycle riders. In the darker months, when the cloudmurk hung grey and gloomy, and no sound broke the awful stillness of the moist air but that of the dripping woods, why then the impression conveyed to the onlookers was dismal and desolate to the last degree. Then it seemed to live up to its sinister reputation, for in the opinion of the countryside Heath Hover was a very badly haunted house indeed.

Its present occupant awoke the next morning later than usual, and feeling by no means best pleased with himself and the world at large. To begin with he had passed a bad night. Whether it was owing to the excitement of the strange midnight adventure which might so easily have culminated in tragedy, or that he had been wrought up by the weird phenomenon of the opening doorwhich, try as he would, he could not altogether persuade himself was a sheer optical delusioncertain it was that hour followed upon hour before sleep would come. When it did it brought with it strange dreams, or rather imaginings. Once he could have sworn that his own bedroom door was opening, then that the mysterious stranger whom he had so opportunely rescued, was standing by his bedside, bending over him with stealthy enquiring gaze; and his fingers had closed round the butt of the deadly weapon which reposed beneath his pillow. But no; there was nothing. The moon tempered the darkness of the room sufficiently to render visible anything moving within the same. Still, when he did doze off there was always that haunting apprehension of some impending peril and something which he had thought buried, and which had suddenly started to life to dog him down and threaten him in this

outoftheworld retreat. And it, somehow or other, was closely connected with his unexpected guest, sleeping peacefully in the room below.

Stay. As to the latter, was he sleeping so peacefully? Moved by an unaccountable impulse Mervyn decided that he would make sure of that, and was in the act of rising with that intent when a sudden wake of drowsiness swept over him, and he fell back and slept hard until morning.

The late sun was just rising, a red ball above the treetops. The ground lay shrouded in whiteness, and the dark firs and naked oak boughs were picked out in snow patterns, and the window panes were crusted with the delicate lacework of a hard frost. Mervyn shivered, and wondered apprehensively if he had caught cold in his undertaking of the night. He dressed quickly and went downstairs.

He opened the door noiselessly and looked in. The room was in semidarkness, for the blinds were still down. His guest was still asleep apparently, for there on the couch he lay, the rug drawn over his head. Noiselessly still, Mervyn closed the door, and went out. Then, through the back kitchenfor he would not open the front door lest the grating of the bolts should disturb the sleeperhe passed into the open air.

The exhilaration of it in a measure braced him. The sun, mounting higher and higher, had emerged from the red ball stage into radiating beams, which touched the frosty particles on ground and tree alike into myriads of faceted diamonds. Mechanically he mounted the staircaselike path which led up to the sluice. The ice lay, a pure white triangle, narrowing away to the distantly converging woods; the break, now frozen over and newly coated with snow, hardly showing. But to this he took his way.

Heavens! it was a mystery the man had escaped the frozen deatha marvel that he himself should have been aroused just in the very nick of time to rescue himhe now told himself standing on the bank and contemplating the spot in broad daylight. The ladder lay where it had been left, but now frozen fast into the ice. It resisted his efforts to move it. Well, it could stay where it was for the present. When old Joe turned upby the way, the old rascal was late this morningthey would be able to move it between them, and the ice was thicker for the night's frost, and would bear easily.

He retraced his steps along the woodland path. The leaves crackled crisply under his tread, and hungry blackbirds shot out swiftly from the hollies, uttering alarmed cachinnations. A little red squirrel clawed itself up a tree bole, and squatting in a fork chirked angrily and impudently at him from its place of safety. But as he walked, he was puzzling hard over the strange and sinister impression which the advent of his unknown guest had instilled within his mind. In the cheery and bracing morning light and air, this

seemed to strike him as sheer fancy, sheer unreasonable imagining. The man was probably quite all right; his appearance and manner were certainly not unprepossessing. He would persuade him to stay on a few days and relieve his loneliness. Why not? He was becoming altogether too selfcentred, as he had told himself the night before.

Thus musing he gained the sluice and looked down at his dwelling. The blinds of the livingroom were still down. Clearly his guest was "taking it out," and small blame to him, after his experiences of the night before. At the bottom of the stair path, the unit previously referred to as old Joe came round the end of the house.

Old Joe, surnamed Sayers, was his outdoor male factotumgardenerthough there wasn't much of a gardenmakehimselfgenerallyuseful, and so on. Old Judyotherwise Christiannamed Judithwas his indoor and female factotum; cook, generaldoeverything there was to be done. Joe Sayers was an ancient rustic, normally towards crisp surliness inclined, except when full of extra aleand Joe could carry a great deal of extra aleand then he would wax confidential, not to say friendly. On him his master now opened.

"Hard morning, Joe?"

"Surely," came the laconic assent.

"Is the gentleman in the sittingroom awake yet?"

"Gemmun in settin' room? I see nought o' he."

"Well, the blinds are still down. I thought Judy might have disturbed him, not knowing he was here."

"She's t'whoäm. Got roomatics. Tarr'ble hard marnin' t'is."

This ancient couple only gave their services during the hours of daylight; no consideration on earth would have availed to keep them within the precincts of Heath Hover during those of darkness. They inhabited one of the labourers' cottages referred to on the other side of the wooded hill and half a mile distant by road.

"Can't she come today then, Joe?"

"Not today," was the answer, with a very decided shake of the head. "Maybe not tomarrer neither."

Mervyn felt vexed. How could he ask the stranger to prolong his stay when there was nobody on the premises to so much as boil a potato. And he had rather reckoned that the other would prolong his stay. In fact he wanted him to, and that, paradoxically, on all fours with that vague, undefinable instinct of apprehension which had been upon him during those sleepless night hours.

“Look up the pond, Joe,” he said. “See that break in the ice, away there, by the two hanging ash trees. Well, I got him out of there in the middle of the night. I had to lug the ladder along to do itwe’ll have to haul it back again presently, by the way. He’d have been drowned but for it.”

“That he would, surely.” Then the intense rustic suspicion of everything and everybody unknown asserted itself“What be he a doing thereon the icemiddle of the night? Poachin’ may be?” Mervyn laughed.

“Nono. He’s no poacher whatever he is?”

“And what might he be? Tell me that,” and the old countryman’s little eyes blinked with satisfaction over what he considered his own shrewdness.

“Don’t know, I didn’t ask him and he hasn’t told meyet. It’s a bad habit to get intoasking people questions about themselves and their private affairs, Joe. It’s a thing I don’t do.”

The ancient slowly shook his headpityingly, contemptuously. He thought his master little removed from a fool.

“Folks as gets on the ice, middle of Plane Pondmiddle of the night, and don’t say nothin’ as to how they gets there and what they be after, bean’t up to no good. That’s what I say, muster.” And the speaker nodded profoundly.

“You’re a rare clever ’un, Joe,” and Mervyn laughed banteringly. “Now there’d be no great difficulty in any one, especially a stranger, losing his way in country like this, and that in the teeth of a howling sleet storm. Taking a short cut, you know, and thinking to cross the ice instead of taking all the way round? That needn’t prove he was up to no good. Eh?”

But to this the old fellow condescended no reply. He didn’t take kindly to banter, slow witted people don’t as a rule. He spat on his palms, picked up the handles of the barrow he had come to fetch and moved off with it. His master followed him, chatting desultorily. Three or four pigs in a stye grunted shrilly as the human clement suggested

morning aliment. To this was added the cacklings and flutterings of the occupants of a fowl roost, expectant of like solid advantage.

“Mus’ Reynolds he bin around surely,” chuckled old Joe, looking down on the numerous pad marks of a fox indented in the fresh snow. “Well, well, that there wire cageing’s too tough for his milk teeth. He’ll ha’ gone away wi’ an empty belly I rackon.”

“That reminds me, Joe, that I could peck a bit myself,” laughed Mervyn, turning towards the house. It was getting quite late too, he decided, looking at his watch. It would do no harm now to awaken his guest.

He passed in through the back, listened a moment, then softly turned the handle of the livingroom door. The room was still in semidarkness. On the couch lay the long, shadowy figure of the stranger.

“Feel like turning out?” said Mervyn genially, but not in so loud a tone as to startle the other. But no answer came. Then stepping to the window, he raised the blind.

The room was now flooded with lightthe light of a radiant, cloudless, frosty winter day. Still the recumbent form never moved. Bending over it Mervyn dropped a hand on one shoulder. Butstill no response.

With a quick, strange impulse that accelerated his own heartbeats he turned down the blanket and rug, which had been drawn over the head of the sleeper. The latter had removed his coat and waistcoat, otherwise he was fully dressed. But his face wore a halfstartled, halfpuzzled expression, and the lips were slightly partedand then, bending down for a closer glance, Mervyn’s countenance became if possible more whitecertainly more ghastlythan the one lying there beneath his gaze, as well it might.

For his unknown and unexpected guest, the man whom he had rescued from the frozen death in the black midnight depths of Plane Pond, was now lying there in front of him stone dead.

Chapter Four.

The Pentacle.

Yesstone dead. There could be no possible mistake about it. Mervyn touched the face. It was icy cold. But how on earth could this have befallen? The man had seemed as well as any one could be when he had bidden him goodnight and retired to his own room. Certainly he had appeared none the worse for his immersion. Quite himself after his hearty supper and generous liquid refreshment, he had sat and chatted and smoked in the enjoyment of perfect comfort for an hour or so. The room was still warm, the ashes of the glowing fire not yet dead in the grate. Heavens, what a thing to happen! Well, it had happened, and the next thing was to send Joe with the pony and cart into Clancehurstincidentally five miles distantfor a doctor.

To that end he moved towards the door. But before he reached it something caused him to turn. Ever so faint a sound had fallen upon his ear. Something had fallenhad fallen from the couch where the dead man layhad fallen with ever so faint a clink. It lay on the grounda small objectand it shone. He picked it upand then as he stood there in the winter sunlight holding it in his fingers, John Seward Mervyn felt the hair upon him rise, and his flesh creep, and his face grow rather more ghastly and livid than that of the dead man lying there. For one dazed moment he stood gazing at the thing, then went over to the mantelpiece and dropped it into one of the queer old vases of quaint ware that stood thereon.

“Good God!” he ejaculated. “Thatand now!”

Outside he could hear the movements of his old retainer. The latter had come into the kitchen, which adjoined this room, and could be heard fussing about and grumbling in very audible tones.

“Why, what be it, Mus’ Mervyn?” he exclaimed, startled at the perturbed apparition presented by his master. “Look as if you’d seed a ghoäst, surely.”

“Well, I’ve seen the next thing to it, and that’s a dead man,” was the answer; and even amid his own perturbation, the speaker’s sense of humour could not resist watching the effect the announcement was bound to have upon his ancient servitor. But upon the mind of the stolid countryman the statement had just no effect at all.

“Thass better,” came the almost unconcerned reply. “We’m all bound to die come the day; but them things what goes acreepin’ about at night, and what you can’t always see, like in this ’ere ’ouse some nightswhy they’re a deal wuss. Andwho’s the dead ’un, sir?”

“Why the stranger I pulled out of the pond last night. I left him comfortably tucked up on the couch in the room there, and now this morning he’s as dead as a stone.”

“Talking o’ he,” said the countryman, whom the tragical side seemed to impress not in the least. “I bin over to th’ ice to get that ladder out, but it’s that hard froze in, and that heavy I can’t move it. You’ll have to lend a hand, Muster.”

“And a devilish good thing you can’t move it, Joe. Why don’t you see, lying just where it was it’ll furnish a very important item of evidence.”

Now old Joe’s stolidity did undergo a shock. That last word conveyed an unpleasant suggestiveness of the atmosphere of courts, and of the atmosphere of courts the rustic mind stands in holy terror.

“There’ll be an inquess then, a crowner’s inquess?” he said, with sudden awe. “Lor sakes, Mus’ Mervyn they can’t bring in as we had to do with it?”

“Of course not, you old juggins. But don’t you seethe first thing they’ll ask was how he got here and where he came from, and all that. Well, the position of the ladderleft exactly where it was, you understandwill confirm my explanation as to how he got here. So it’s devilish important that it should be left there. Now, do you see?”

Joe did seeand saw something else, or thought he did. For now his little rustic cunning suggested to his little rustic mind that his master seemed rather over anxious to supply material for explanation.

“Well, I didn’t see the gemmun,” he answered, with a note of sulkiness underlying his tone. “You’ll mind I said so, Mus’ Mervyn. I didn’t see he.”

“No, but you’ve got to now, so come along and look at him. After that you must hitch up the pony and cart, and get along to Clancehurst, and tell Dr Sandys and the Police Inspector to come along here at once. Andlook. There are the strange gentleman’s clothes, hanging up on that clotheshorse to dry. I didn’t change minewasn’t wet enough.”

The clothes were hung in front of the kitchen fire now roaring and crackling merrily. Joe eyed them with surly disgust. He was becoming more and more imbued with a horrid suspicion that he would be involved in a charge of murdering the strangerwhom as yet he had not even seenand in the result, duly hanged in Clancehurst gaol; incidentally that

edifice was not of sufficient county importance to be used for capital executions, but of this, of course, he was ignorant.

“Well, come along,” said his master, turning. But Joe didn’t move.

“Beggin’ pardon, sur,” he said, “but I’d rather not. I said I didn’t see he, and I don’t want to now.”

“Oh, that’s it is it? Well you’d better. They’ll be asking all sorts of questionsand we are the only two people in the house. You’ll have to give evidence in any case, and you’ll do it all the better for having seen all there is to be seen. So, don’t be a fool. I only want you to see just how the man was when I found him. Of course he won’t be touched or moved or anything until the doctor comes.”

The old man gave way, although reluctantly, and followed his master into the chamber of death.

“Who be he, sur, do you know?” he asked in lowered voice, as he stood gazing, awed, upon the still features. “’E be a middlin’ likely sort of gent, for sure.”

“I know just as much about him as you do, Joe. As I told you this morningI never ask people about themselves, and he didn’t tell me anything. No doubt he would have done so this morning, poor chap, butthere he is. Well, get away now and fetch the doctor and the police, and the sooner we get all the bother over and done with the better.”

Mervyn went out, and superintended the harnessing of the pony, and saw his old retainer start. It would take the latter well over the hour to jog along the hilly road, between Heath Hover and Clancehurst.

“Straight on and straight back, Joe,” was his parting injunction. “You don’t want to wet your whistle at any pubs this journey you know. The business is too important. And keep your tongue in your head about it, too. The only people you’ve got to wag it to are the doctor and the inspector. To any one else might make things unpleasant to you. See?”

Having, as he thought, effectually frightened his ancient servitor into discretion, and duly seen him start, Mervyn went back to the house, but did not enter. Instead, he took his way up to the sluice and stood gazing out over the icebound pond. There was nothing to be done until the representatives of medicine and the law should arrive, and meanwhile he felt a sort of disinclination to enter the house. But for its rather thick coating of snow he would have put on his skates and amused himself upon the said ice,

cutting a few figures. Then he remembered he had had no breakfast, and suddenly felt the want of it.

Accordingly he descended the path, and entering began to get out the requisite materials. He was accustomed largely to doing for himself, so in a trice he had brewed his tea in the kitchen and got out other things needed. But some of the said other things were in the livingroom, left there from the night before. He did not care to breakfast there with the dead man lying on the couch in the same room.

The latter seemed unusually, supernaturally still. He glanced at the couch. It was just as he had left it. There was nothing particularly repellant in the dead man's aspect. On the whole it was rather peacefulstill, he preferred to have his breakfast somewhere else. And then, while collecting what he required, his thoughts went again to the thing he had deposited within the vase on the mantelpiece.

This he now extracted. Had there been any one to witness the process, they would have seen that it was effected with extraordinary care. For instance, he did not touch the object, he turned it out upon the table, and when he moved it at all it was with a bit of stick which he took from the remains of what had been used to make the fire with. Yet it was a harmless looking thing enougha small, shining disk not more than an inch and a half in diameter, and it had five points like those of a star.

What an extraordinary thing was that which had happened, he said to himself. The omen of the door handle and the open door; and involuntarily now he glanced at the latter. But it was fast shut, and the handle at its usual angle. It had been the means of saving the stranger's lifefor what a very short time, as events had provedand he remembered how he had marvelled that contrary to all report the manifestation had been effected in bringing any good to anybody. Well the "good" had not been effectual enough to last, so that far the grimness of the tradition did not belie itself. It was indeed extraordinary, and here in the broad daylight he could afford to contemplate it from a purely speculative point of view. Yet as he looked more and more at the little disk a good deal of an uneasy fascination was upon him, and well it might benone knew this better than himself.

Then he did a strange thing. He went out of the room, returning immediately wearing a thick pair of furlined gloves. He took up the trinket, even then holding it gingerly. He looked round for something to wrap it in, then thought better of it. He rose, and carried the thing out, holding it behind him, and ascended again to the sluice. There was a small hole in the ice, where the overflow ran out over an iron door. That would do. No, it would not. He pausedjust in time, as he realised he had been on the point of making a most fatal mistake.

He looked around, not furtively, not pointedly, just casually. Not a soul was in sight, but he knew, none better, that it does not follow that because you cannot see a soul therefore not a soul can see you. A cloud of blue titmice was twittering in a leafless alder, glancing from twig to twig. Overhead a little red kestrel was hovering against the cloudless blue of the dazzling winter sky, and two squirrels gambolled and chirked among the feathering boughs of a dark yew tree which still had a few berries left. Blackbirds clucked and flickered over the ice surface. All Nature was joyous and at peace this bracing, invigorating winter morning, and within the room down yonder the dead man lay.

Mervyn turned to regain the house. The little black kitten, its bushy tail erect, came bounding up the path stairway to meet him, but he did not take it up, as it rubbed against his legs, purring a greeting.

Halfway down the earth stairway a large stone lay, partly embedded in the soil. Mervyn bent down as though to tie up his bootlace. When he rose again that stone was the custodian of something. It was the tombstone of the strange small disk he had held in his hand.

Mervyn went into the kitchen, where he had left his breakfast all ready; and then he did another strange thing. He took off the big fur gloves he had been wearing, and put both well to the back of the red, roaring, kitchen fire. In an instant they were absorbed in the furnacelike heat. Then he sat down to his breakfast, but, in view of the proceedings just detailed he thought he could in a degree estimate the sensations of a murderer, who has carefully and effectuallyas he thinksdisposed of every item of evidence.

Chapter Five.

The Enquiry.

About lunchtime a smart dogcart came bowling along the snow covered road, and from it descended the doctor and the police inspector, likewise a constable: old Joe, with his slower conveyance, had been left to follow on. Dr Sandys was a good representative of the prosperous G.P. in practice in a prosperous market town; genial, hearty, and prepared to be surprised at nothing which came in his way professionally. The inspector likewise was a good type of his kind; tall, alert, rather soldierly in countenance and bearing.

“Well, Mr Mervyn, this is a strange sort of happening, isn’t it?” began the former. “However, the first thing to do is to get to work.”

“Will you look at theerthe body first, or the locality?” said Mervyn.

“The locality?”

“Yes. I mean where I first picked him up. I suppose Joe told you all about it, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he told us all about itafter a fashion,” said the inspector with a slight smile. “But I needn’t remind you Mr Mervyn, what sort of a ‘telling all about it,’ one would be likely to get from a man of old Joe’s stamp. So the first thing to do is for you to give us your account of what happened,” and the speaker’s hand instinctively dived for his notebook.

“I rather think I had better inspect the ‘subject’ the first thing, Nashby,” struck in the doctor.

“Of course. This way.”

Mervyn showed them into the room and raised the blinds, which he had lowered again after the first discovery. The constable was left in charge of the dogcart. The doctor bent over the dead man and proceeded to make his first examination. The bystanders could not but notice that he looked more than a little puzzled.

“We shall have to strip him,” he said, looking up. This was done, the police inspector giving his aid. Mervyn stood and looked on.

The body was that of a wellknit, wellproportioned man, probably on the right side of forty.

“No sign of injury, none whatever,” pronounced the doctor, “and his heart is as sound as a bell. Here is something, but it seems of no importance. At one time or other, he was addicted to the drug habit,” pointing to the left arm, which he had raised. “Butnot lately.”

“Not lately?” echoed the inspector, whose notebook was in full swing. “Now to be precise, doctor, up to how lately should you say?”

“It’s impossible to be precise,” was the answer, “if by that you mean exactly how many years ago he discontinued the habitand from all appearances he needn’t have been very greatly addicted to it even then. Certainly not less than five or six years ago, possibly longer; indeed, I should say longer.”

The inspector nodded, and for a minute or two his stylo was very busy indeed. The puzzled frown on the surgeon’s face grew deeper and deeper, and well it might. Here was a strong, wellbuilt, healthy man in the prime of life, dying in his sleep, and no sign whatever to guide Science towards the discovery of the cause.

“We shall have to make an exhaustive postmortem,” said the doctor at last, covering the dead man again, “and to this end I must take steps for having the body removed to Clancehurst, for I propose to call in firstrate expert assistance.”

“Very good, sir,” assented the inspector briskly, relieved that he was now going to get his own innings, and also all his professional keenness to the fore over the prospect of being put in charge of a very outoftheway case. “And now, with Mr Mervyn’s permission, I will take his statement as to the whole of last night’s occurrence.”

“You shall have it to the full,” was the answer. “But first of all had you not better go through the poor chap’s clothesthey are hanging up in the kitchen where I put them to dry, those he has on now are mine, which I rigged him out with as a change. Needless to say I haven’t touched a thing of his, pending your arrival. You may find some clue to identification there.”

“We’ll do so at once,” said the police officer, and they adjourned forthwith to the kitchen.

The clothes were hanging where they had been placed the night before, and were now quite dry. But mystery seemed likely to be piled on mystery. Except some sovereigns and silver change amounting to something over five pounds in all, the pockets were absolutely empty. Not a scrap of paper, no cardcase or pocketbook, not even a purse.

Besides the money, an old Waterbury watch, attached to a leather guard, made up the entire contents.

Furthermore the clothes themselves afforded no clue. The buttons were plain horn ones, and bore the name of no tailor, nor was there any shop mark upon any article of hosiery; and now the police inspector warmed to his work, for he could see that all such indications had been carefully and deliberately removed. But by whom, and with what object? That was his business to find out.

“Now Mr Mervyn, if you please. I should like your statement.”

“Certainly. Let’s go back into the other room and I’ll get you some foolscap to take it down on. It’ll ease your notebookeh, inspector?”

Mervyn told his story, plainly and concisely, as we know itnot omitting any detail. Any detail? Yes. He omitted just onethe finding of the metal disk. But at that part of the narrative which related to the apparitionor hallucinationof the opening door, both his auditors looked up keenly. For they were acquainted with the weird legends which popular belief hung around Heath Hover.

“As sure as I sit here,” went on the narrator, “that manifestationdelusion, if you likewas the means of saving the man’s life, for if I hadn’t seen it I should have finished dropping off to sleep in my chair, and had I done so, why he might have shouted till doomsday without my hearing him. However, it didn’t seem much good, as things turned out.”

The inspector laid down his stylo.

“Now, Mr Mervyn, if you will be so good. We will examine that door, and what lies beyond it.”

“Certainly,” and Mervyn, unlocking a drawer in his writing table produced a long, brown, heavy key.

“See,” he went on, “it was under this pile of papers. I always keep it there. Yet that door opened of itself, just as I have described. I’d swear to that as positively as I could swear to anything in my life.”

“You have strong nerves, Mr Mervyn,” said the inspector, a thought drily, perhaps, as he took the key which the other tendered to him.

The lock, though a trifle stiff, turned without difficulty. A black gap yawned in front, and a close yet chilly, fungusladen air greeted their faces.

“Hold hard now till I get some candles,” went on Mervyn. In a moment these were obtained and lighted, each carrying one. “I’d better lead,” he appended, perhaps anticipating the thought that flitted through the mind of the police officer. It would be so easy otherwise to spring back, and locking the pair securely in that vault, thus obtain for himself a start of several hours. Such things had happened.

A good bit of a shiver ran through the trio as they descended into the dank mustiness of the vault. The walls glistened with moisture, so did the stone floor. But there was no break in the solid masonry, save for one hole, barely four inches across, which admitted air from the outside but no light. The inspector made a minute and exhaustive examination of both walls and flooring, but there was no sign of either having been disturbed, perhaps for centuries.

“My belief is that this place was nothing more than a common or homely wine cellar,” said Mervyn, as having found nothing whatever to reward their investigation they took their way up the stone steps again. “The fact of the existence of a disused empty vault like this under a house is enough to give rise to all sorts of weird beliefs centring round it. But yetthat door business of last nightwell, if that was an optical delusion I’ll never believe in my own eyesight again. And now,” as they regained the outer day, “before we start to look at the hole in the ice, how about a little something stimulating after your drive. Eh?”

The doctor was agreeable, in fact quite willing, but the cautious police officer declined. Mervyn, seeing through this thought too, got out a new bottle with the seal intact, and drew the cork. Likewise he placed an unbroken syphon on the table, perhaps rather ostentatiously. While thus engaged, the ponycart rumbled up, bringing the returning Joe.

He, too, now the inspector desired to question. Possibly because disregarding his master’s parting injunction, the old rustic had been imbibing some Dutch courage in the shape of a couple of “goes” of square Hollands on the way back at the Dog and Partridge, the same number of miles distant upon the road, he was able to answer these questions in a straight and fairly lucid manner, though he would more than once revertas his mind misgave himto his stock declaration! “I didn’t see no strange gemmun ’ere last night. You’ll mind I said so, Mus’ Mervyn. I didn’t see he.”

“Nobody said you did, Joe,” reassured the inspector. “You only saw him this morning, after he was dead.”

“That’s Gawd’s truth, I reckon, Mr Nashby, zur,” was the fervent rejoinder.

“One thing more, if you’ll excuse me, Mr Mervyn,” said Nashby. “I’ll just examine this room a little.”

He looked on the floor, under the couch, in cupboards, and drawers; not omitting the old vases of quaint ware that stood on the mantelpiece. The owner, watching with outward indifference, had his own thoughts. So had the inspector. Whoever had been the cause of this unknown stranger’s death, it had been no one entering the house from outside, determined the latter.

Then they adjourned to view the scene of the rescue. Along the path through the wood Mervyn pointed out the footprintshalf obliterated by subsequent snowleft by himself and the rescued stranger, likewise those quite fresh, made by himself and old Joe that morning on their respective and independent progresses to the spot. Of these Nashby took careful measurements.

“There you are,” went on Mervyn, as they arrived at the place. “You’ll see the hole is newly frozen over, but the ladder’s just where I left it. The water’s over twenty feet deep there, but what the deuce started the poor chap on the ice at all is what bangs me. Seems to me we’re up against a very tall thing in mysteries.”

“I shouldn’t wonder if we were, Mr Mervyn,” rejoined the inspector, again rather drily.

“Couldn’t we trace his footmarks back?” suggested the doctor. “It would show the direction he had come from, and then we could make enquiries. Eh, Nashby?”

“The very thing I was going to do,” answered the latter.

But the plan, though good, was difficult of execution. The footmarks were almost obliterated by the more recent snowfall, in places quite so. And they led from nowhere direct. They zigzagged and twisted, as though their perpetrator were wandering at random and round and round, then lost themselves altogether in a sort of small ravine. But the very incoherency of their course suggested a reason for the stranger plunging into the peril he had done. Clearly he had got lost in the thick woods and had welcomed this long, broad stretch of open, and apparently strong ice, as a way out.

“Now I would suggest an adjournment for lunch,” said Mervyn. “We can take up the trail afterwards where we left it.”

“That’s not half a bad idea,” assented the doctor heartily. “Thanks very much, Mr Mervyn. I’d been about a bit before I started for here, and after a drive through this invigorating air, it seems a long while ago since breakfast time.”

Inspector Nashby raised no objection. A stalwart police officer, even though on an interesting case, and prospectively a case for advancement, is not proof against the pangs of deferred appetite on a crisp, keen, frosty day. But even while discussing good cheer in an impromptu way in Mervyn’s kitchenfor they left the livingroom in silent possession of the deadNashby kept his eyes about him and his perceptions at full cock. For Nashby had his theories already forming. The doctor as yet had formed none.

While thus engaged, they missed the fact that the sunbright day had overclouded. They were awakened to it, however, by the discovery that it had begun to snow again. More than begun indeed, for the snow was coming down, not merely in flakes, but almost in slabs. A little more of it and they would hardly be able to get back to Clancehurst. The Inspector jumped to his feet.

“Heavens!” he ejaculated, going to the window. “Why, this’ll cover up all and any footprints there may be to find beyond where we left off.”

“Shouldn’t wonder if it did. Well, it can’t be helped,” said Mervyn coolly. He had by now quite got behind the policeman’s suspicions, and was taking rather a halfhearted delight in teasing that worthy. “Have another whisky and soda, inspector?”

“Thanks, no. I’ll go and take up the track where we left it.”

“If you’ll take my advice you won’t,” said Mervyn. “In fact you’ll get back to Clancehurst as soon as possible, and come back here when all’s clear again. Why, you’ve seen how even a moderate snowdrift can pile up. If you get caught in the middle of this deluge of it, right out in the thick of the woods, why I shouldn’t wonder if you’re as stiff as our poor friend there, before many hours are gone. What do you say, doctor?”

“What do I say? Why that I can’t afford to get snowed up right away in the country for days. What price my practice? So if it’s all the same to you, Mr Mervyn, I’ll ask you to have my cart hitched up and start before it gets worse.”

Nashby had not waited to hear this decision. He had gone outside to see if it really was impracticable to pursue the search. But even before he had reached the top of the path which led to the sluice, the rush of the blinding cold flakes into his eyes drove him back.

“No, it’d be quite useless,” he said, by no means pleased. “Couldn’t do anything in the teeth of this. But it won’t be dead against us going back, rather behind us, that’s one thing.”

So they started, the inspector very dissatisfied and very suspicious. He questioned the doctor all the way along the road, under difficulties certainly, because of the blinding sheets of snow which drove in upon them, rendering breathinglet alone conversationdifficultas to Mervyn, his circumstances and his antecedentsabove all, his antecedents. But on this point the doctor was able to give no informationonly that he knew no more on the subject than did his questioner.

And Mervyn was left alone with the dead, in solitary, haunted Heath Hoveryet not quite alone, for the police constable was left too; and perhaps he was not sorry for the man’s companionship. For the snow whirled down in masses for the best part of the night, blocking the road in huge drifts, and the wind howled dirgefully round the gables of the house, where lay the living and the man who had come there to meet his strange, mysterious death.

Chapter Six.

"The Key of the Street."

"For the third and last time, I saywill you hand me that letter or will you not?"

"No, I will not." And the speaker's lips tightened, and her blue eyes met the angry red brown ones calm and full, and the coronal of golden hair shone upon a very erect head indeed.

The parties to this dialogue were a girl and a woman, the latter middleaged, not to say elderly. She had a hooked, commandeering nose and a hard mouth turning down at the corners. Now they were turning down very much indeed. It may be hardly necessary to explain that these two occupied the position of employer and employed.

"Now mark my words, Miss Seward," went on the first speaker, fast getting into the tremulous stage of white anger. "I'll give you just one more chance, and only one. Hand me over that letter, orout of my house you go. Without references mindand this very day at that. Nowtake your choice."

There was some excuse for the irritation displayed by the older woman, in that she had surprised the other in the act of reading a lettera fairly closely written one too, and that in the handwriting of her only son, a young subaltern not long gazetted, and only recently gone out to India. She had suspected something between them prior to his departure; and this girl was a mere paid teacher of French and music to her own twothen in the "flapper" stage. As a matter of fact there had been, but it was all on one sideon that of the boy.

"There's really nothing in it," was the answer, "I didn't want him to write to me, and told him so more than once. But as he has, well I can't show private correspondence to a third person, even though it be the correspondent's mother."

In hard reality the speaker was more than half inclined to complymore to put an end to the whole bother than anything. But there were two obstacles in the way of such a safe and easy course; first her own pride, of which she had all her sharein spite of her dependent positionnot that she considered it a dependent one as long as she gave quid pro quo, and who shall say that she was altogether wrong? And Mrs Carstairs had put on a tone that was raspingly dictatorial and commandeering. The second lay in the fact that the writer had particularly requested that all knowledge of her having received the letter should be withheld from his mother. Equally, as a matter of fact, even as she had saidthere was nothing in it. It was a very harmless effusion. It contained vehement

declarations of devotion, but such were merely unsophisticated and doglike. When at home the boy had fallen violently in love with her, but though kind to him in a sisterly way, she had not reciprocated, and while sorry for him had pointed out plainly to him more than once that this was so. She was older than him too, and could not look upon him from the point of view he wantedand this she also pointed out to him plainly.

In view of all this it seemed rather hard lines now that his mother should swoop down upon her in this fashion as though she were a mere designing intriguing adventuress, instead of being, as it happened, of considerably older descent than this family of two generations of worthy and successful manufacturers, among whom perforce for the time being, she was earning her daily bread, and perhaps it was a little of this sense of contrast that raised that goldcrowned, wellpoised, thoroughbred head somewhat higher in the air during the gathering storm of the interview. But here were two angry women, rapidly becoming more angry stillthe one steadfastly refusing what the other as equally steadfastly imagined she had every right in the world to demand. What sort of outcome was this likely to yield?

The elder woman's normally rubicund cheeks had now gone nearly white.

"So that's your last word?" she panted.

"I'm afraid so."

"Then go. D'you hear. Go upstairs and pack, and leave this house at once. That is the return I get for my kindnessmy charityin ever taking you into it at all."

Melian Mervyn Seward threw back her head, and straightened herself still more at the ugly word.

"Excuse me, Mrs Carstairs," she said, a small red circle coming into each of her likewise paled cheeks, "but I think you used the wrong word. You have had your full money value from me, fair work for fair wage. So I don't see where the word 'charity' comes in at all."

The other could only sputter, she was simply speechless with wrath. The girl went on:

"Not only that, but I am entitled to some notice. I refuse to be thrown out in the street without any at all. Remember, I have to make my own arrangements as to my next plans. So I will take your notice now if you like."

You see there was the element of a capable business woman about this thoroughbred, self possessed orphan girl, who had hardly a friend in the world and that not capable of

being of any use to her in a stress like the present. She, calm, because with the power to control her white anger, held the other at a disadvantage, who had not.

“Oh, well,” the latter managed to stutter. “I will pay you your month’s wages, and”

“Quarter’s,” corrected the girl quietly. “I am not a servant, let me remind you, but teacher of French and music to your children. Therefore I am entitled to a quarter’s notice.”

“Why, this is blackmailing,” blared the woman furiously. “Sheer blackmailing.”

“Don’t keep on using ugly words. You know it’s nothing of the kindonly a sheer matter of business.” And then somehow the mere mention of the word seemed to be effectual in calming the speaker’s restrained math. “I have got to take care of myself, you know. There’s no one else in this wide world to do it for me. So I must have my contract carried out, or take steps to enforce it if necessary. There is no blackmailing in that.”

“Oh, that’s a threat, is it?”

“Not a bit. I am merely putting the situation before you from both sides.”

“You shall have your quarter, then,” said the other, after a moment of silence. “Butleave this house by tonight.”

“If I can, I will,” answered the girl. “But I must first make sure that I have somewhere to go to. So if you will kindly have a telegram dispatched for me, and the reply is satisfactory, I shall be prepared to do as you wish. If it is not, I fear I shall have to burden you until tomorrow morning.”

The other gasped in speechless amazement. But she knew what was in the speaker’s mind. If the latter were to go out herself with the object of sending the telegram, who knew but that she might not find herself refused readmission? In justice it is only fair to say that such an extreme measure would not have been adopted. Still, as the girl had said, she had got to take care of herself.

“Very well, write your telegram then,” she snapped, and rustled out.

Melian went over to a writing table, found a telegraph form, and having filled it in, rang the bell and dispatched it. Then she went up to her room.

So she had lost her means of livelihood. It was not a very congenial means of livelihood, still it might have been worseinfinitely worseand this she candidly acknowledged. There was little sympathy between herself and her employer. The latter had treated her with a certain courtesy, but she was a hard, dictatorial, narrow minded type of woman, and utterly intolerant of contradiction in any shape or form. As for the nominal head of the house he was a mere nonentity, a mere cipher. Outside its limits he was a fairly prosperous stockbroker, and only returned home to dine and sleep, and seldom speak. Her charges were not particularly interesting or engaging children; emptyheaded, selfish, and thoroughly spoilt. Still she managed to get on with themand what was moreto get them on. And now she had to leave; to lose her means of livelihood for the time beingand Heaven only knew where and how she was going to obtain anotherand all because a silly boy now at the other end of the world had chosen to fall in love with her at this.

Yet as she caught her three parts length reflection in the glass, Melian Mervyn Seward would have been no woman had she not known that upon that account the boy was not so silly after all. For it framed a really exquisite picturethat of a beautifully proportioned figure, neither tall nor short, in fact exactly the right height for a woman. The wellpoised head, gleaming gold under the electric light was set upon a full, rounded throat. The blue eyes, beneath their well marked brows were steadfast, and full of character, and even more so if possible the set of the mouth. But the contour of cheeks and chin was perfect, and now that the reaction after the strife had brought an unusual glow of colour to the former the face was absolutely lovely. Here was a girl who well and tastefully dressed would have created more than a sensation in any big ballroom, and now she stood there realising more and more how utterly helpless and alone in the world she was, with her only means of livelihood taken from her, and with very precarious chances of finding another.

“Little fool!” she muttered with a stamp of the foot against the fender bar; the exclamation not being directed against herself but against her absent adorer. “Little fool! I expect he’ll feel pretty sick when he hears what he’s been the means of doingif he ever does hear. Stillhe couldn’t help it, I suppose.”

Looking up, the blue eyes suddenly filled, then overflowed, for they had encountered a portrait of her dead father. She caught up the frame from the mantelpiece, and pressed her red warm lips passionately against the cold glass, murmuring words of love and tenderness. Then she sank into a low chair and sobbed unrestrainedlyit may be that the reaction of the nervous system after her late passage of arms had something to do with the breakdown. There came a knock at the door. Instantly she sprang to her feet, dashing the tears away. Heavens! they would be attributed to grief and fear over her dismissal. That would not dono not for anything. It was difficult, however, to regain her

self command at a brace of seconds' notice, and the maid who now entered with a telegram, subsequently and as a matter of course did set them down to that very cause.

The wire was a reply from her friend, a girl who made a living as a typist, and hardly comes within the scope of our story except in so far that now she wired that she could take Melian into her modest quarters for a night or two while the latter "looked about her." This was so far satisfactory. Melian wrote out another telegram in reply, saying she was coming on in a couple of hours, and gave it to the maid, which message of course supplied that young person with something to talk about, and conjecture about, below stairs. Then she set to work to pack in earnest.

Mrs Carstairs was not quite happy in her mind, while sitting in her morningroom waiting for her discharged employée to come and take her leaveand her salary. She was not a bad hearted woman au fond, only there were times when the "fond" took a good deal of getting at. Now she had qualms. Miss Seward had not been wrong in saying she had given her good money's worth. She certainly had done that, and now the woman was already consumed with misgivings as to how she was going to supply her place. But as Miss Seward entered, this misgiving merged into a feeling of vague selfgratulation that it had turned out for the best. The girl was looking lovely. Quietly but tastefully dressed, her patrician blood and bearing was never so manifest. She wore a large black hatlarge without exaggerationwhich framed and set off the beautiful refined face, and the velvety blue eyes. No, assuredly she was too dangerously pretty to keep; otherwise there is no telling that she would not have climbed down even at the eleventh hour.

"Here is your cheque, Miss Seward," she said, "and there is the receipt form." Then having seen this duly signed, she added stiffly"And now, goodbye."

"Goodbye, Mrs Carstairs. I'll just repeat to you. There was no harm whatever in that letter. I did not feel justified in showing youonly on principle, mind. Goodbye, children."

For the two girls had just come in. There was, as we said, nothing engaging about them. They were gawky plain girls, sallow faced and inclined to be hooknosed too, with a skimpy black pigtail hanging down each of their backs. They showed no more feeling on parting with Melian than if she were just getting up from an afternoon call. They each stuck a limp bony paw into her palm, and there was an end of it.

She went downstairs. Her luggageby no means the traditional, and feminine, "mountain of luggage"was being stowed in and on a cab. A door on the ground floor opened into the hall. Within this stood thenominalmaster of the house.

“I hear you’re leaving us, Miss Seward. I’m sorry,” he began rather jerkily. “Will you kindly step in here for a moment?”

Melian wondered, but complied. Seen in the full light, he was a quiet looking, keen faced man, keen as to the upper part of his facethat represented his moderate success on the Stock Exchangefalling away in the lowerthat represented his subsidiary position as merely nominal master in his own house.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “You’re very young, and I understand, alone in the world. This fuss, whatever it’s about, is clean outside my department, but remember, if ever you want a friendeither to speak a good word for youor what notremember me. Goodbye, child.”

She flashed a bright smile at him as she took the hand which jerkily shot forth at her. Then she went out.

“By gad, she’s lovely!” exclaimed Carstairs, staring after her, “and the very perfection of a lady too. What a fool Adelina is to have got rid of one like that.”

And Adelina, who from the upper landing was privily assisting auricularly at this scene, was for once, inclined to agree with the submissive one. Certainly it would not be easy to find an adequate substitute.

“Stillshe’s too pretty,” she told herself with something of a sigh. “Too pretty, andtoo proud. Yesfar too proud.”

And this reflection seemed to carry something of consolation as her mind went back to that scene in the forenoon, and how the girl had uncompromisingly declined to capitulate, while she herself had come out of it with far from flying colours.

Chapter Seven.

Interim“Flu.”

The Carstairs abode was a large, dull, ugly villa in a large, dull, ugly suburbone of those depressing suburbs that is neither town nor country but has the disadvantages of both and the advantages of neither. But it was cheerfulness itself compared with the locality through which Melian’s cab was now slowly jogging. The squalor of the greasy streets; the dank, thick atmosphere; the hoarse, scarcely human yells and the incessant rumble and clatter attendant on that sort of locality are too well known to need any describing.

Leaning back in the mouldy vehicle, she set her mind to go over the events of the last few hours. Had she been ill advised, hastyshe asked herself? Their behaviour at the very last had seemed to show they were not such illmeaning people. Yet, as she looked back she knew that relations between them had been getting more and more strained. For some reason or other Mrs Carstairs had been growing more and more short in her manner towards her, and now she knew that reason. The old woman had had her suspicions all along, but the discovery of the climax brought things to a head. But the whole thing was ludicrous, and all about a little booby like thatMelian’s lip curled as she thus rather unjustly characterised the distant cause of all the bother.

The drive was long and the cab slow. She had time to let her thoughts go further back from her present troublesthe future was not a welcome subject, looked at sitting alone there in that mouldy box on wheels, and in the dark at that. Her earlier life had been a sufficiently happy one. She had seen a great deal of the world and developed her artistic instincts. Then had come losses; and speculations, instead of mending things, made them worse. Her father was lacking in the business capacity, while her other parent was under the impression that one pound sterling was endowed with the purchasing power of three, and acted consistently upon that conviction. So means dwindled till there was very little left.

Things had reached this point when one day her father started off on a railway journey to a place some hours distant. He was mysterious as to the object of it, but declared that they would none of them be the worse if it failed, whereas if it succeeded, they would be considerably the better. He seemed in a hopeful mood, and in fairly good spirits, and when at the big, dingy terminus, where she was seeing him off, he handed her a couple of accident insurance tickets, which he had just purchased; he seemed fairly bubbling over with fun.

“See these?” he had said. “All right. They cost a shilling apiece, and represent 1,000 pounds apiece if I’mertotally smashed up. So, you see, I’m more valuable to you dead

than alive. I used to think it was the other way about. But take care of them, I've signed them, and all, so it'd be quite safe. Put them away carefully. Two thousand pounds, remember."

"I've a great mind to tear them across and throw them on to the line," the girl had answered, looking at him with filling eyes and quivering lips. But he laughed gaily.

"Don't do that, little one. They cover minor injuries too, only those mean less dibs. You know. So much a leg, so much an arm, so much a fingerand so on. It's a rum worldand you never can tell. So stick to those tickets till I come back. Now, goodbye, my darling little one. Here, let gothe train's moving, by George!"

She was very nearly tightening her hold, so that it would be physically impossible for him to free himself until the train had gone, but she did not. With eyes blinded with tears she waved to him from the platform as he leaned half out of the window watching to see the last of her, and he was gone. Yet he would be back the day after tomorrow at the latest. She had often seen him off on such journeys before.

"I am a little fool," she said to herself as she walked away.

About two hours later, when in the middle of its longest nonstop run, Marston Seward fell from the train.

There were headlines in the evening paper posters, but somehow or other Melian did not notice these. It was not until the next day, when they opened their morning paper, that the tragedy rose up and hit them between the eyesname, description, everything, for by this time identification had been easily obtained. Melian hardly knew how she lived through that stunning blowperhaps because it was a stunning one. But the shock was too much for her motherthe shock only, for there was little if any affection between her and the dead man. Brain fever supervened and she died.

Her illness made an alarming inroad into the scanty resources remaining to them. Hard material necessities had to be met. Hitherto the girl had shrunk with shuddering horror from turning to account those fatal insurance tickets, the price of her father's blood. She could not claim it. Oh God! the thought of it? But she might have spared herself any qualms on this head. The railway company flatly and uncompromisingly repudiated all liability. The insurance was against accident not suicide. They were in a position to prove, and to prove indisputably that for any one to have fallen from the particular coach of which Seward was an occupant, and that by accident, was a sheer impossibility. The door handles were all in good order; if anything, rather stiff to turn than otherwise. They could prove too, that the said door handles were properly secured at the last

station the train had passed through. And worst of all, they were in a position to produce a platform inspector who had passed the pair at the moment of the utterance of those fatal words: “You see, I’m more valuable to you dead than alive. I used to think it was the other way about.” The official had heard the words distinctly, and after the tragedy had himself voluntarily come forward with the information. At the time they had struck him as uttered jokingly, but in the light of the subsequent event they took on a far different aspect. In short, Seward had bungled the whole business. He died as he had lived, and his last act was one of perfectly inexcusable bungle. “More valuable to you dead than alive,” had been his words, and in the result his daughter was left alone in the world, as nearly as possible penniless.

Alone! Yesfor she had no relations, except one, away in India, and for certain reasons the last person on earth to whom she would apply under any circumstances whatever. She had no real friends, only acquaintances who could be of no great service to her, but eventually, thanks to the inherent spirit and pluck which buoyed her up, she managed to find means of supporting herself. And all this had befallen rather more than two years previously to when we first see her, being, more or less politely, shown the door at the Villa Carstairs.

Now, shut up in the mouldy darkness of the slow, Jolting vehicle, it all came back to her again, and she had to hurriedly brush away the warm tears which the recollectionalways vividhad evoked, as the cab drew up with a jolt at her friend’s lodgings. But she met with what she most needed, a cordial welcome. Even the cabman, a rubicund old fellow with a bulbous nose and a rumbling voice, forebore to claim so much as a penny over his legal fare when he caught a full view of her face under the street lamp, and a gratuity of threepence, smilingly tendered, was met by a hearty “Thankee kindly, missie.”

Cumnor Lodge, the Carstairs villa, though dull and heavy outside, within was characterised by a considerable degree of solid comfort. But this narrow hallway and the nondescript combination of smells of sinkcumcabbage, with a slatternly landlady and a still more slatternly servant, waiting to give a hand upstairs with the luggage as well as to satisfy a natural curiosity as to what the visitor would be like, struck her with a very real chill. Would it be her lot to inhabit such a place, was the thought that instinctively shot through her mind? But the impression was partly neutralised when she found herself within her friend’s tiny but snug sittingroom, with its bright fire, and hissing kettle, and tea and its appurtenances all so dear to the feminine eye. Violet Clinock was a bright, pleasing type of girl, with dark hair, and honest grey eyes, not exactly pretty, but rather near being so. But with all her natural cheerfulness, there was intertwined an impression of one who was perfectly well able to take care of herself. In fact she rather prided herself upon this, and upon being an independent bachelor girl who could always make her own way. She was a country parson’s daughterone of manyunder which

circumstances she flattered herself she had done the right thing in striking out on her own.

“This shop’s rather dingy in the daytime, dear,” she explained as the two were seated comfortably in the really cosy little room, and the tea and muffins and other things dear to the feminine appetite were in full force. “But I’m not much here in the daytime, and at night, once I get inside it doesn’t matter. The main thing is it’s cheapvery. Not nasty either, for I do every mortal thing for myself. Heaven help me if I left it to anybody else. Well, I’ve been saving up, with an eye to running a typing shop on my own. It isn’t my ambition to remain for ever in a position to take orders from other people, I can tell you. Well, and why did you leave your last crowd? Had a row?”

“Sort of. It takes two to make a row, and there wasn’t much of that on my side,” answered Melian. “I just let the old woman talk, but she didn’t get what she wanted. I got the key of the street insteadso, here I am. By the way,” she added, waxing grave. “I don’t know where I’m going to be. That’s a pair of shoes of another pattern.”

“Oh, with all your high accomplishments,” laughed the other. “Why any one would jump at you.”

“Would they? They’re welcome to skip, then. But even ‘high accomplishments’ are no good without references.”

“Without references? But you can getOh, I see. The old cat won’t give you any.”

Melian nodded.

“The beastly old cat!” pronounced Violet. “She ought to be compelled to.”

“Well, she can’t be, and that’s all I’ve got to do with it. So there you are.”

“Let’s see. You’re no good at our job, are you, Melian?” said the other, drumming the tips of her fingers together meditatively.

“Unfortunately I’ve never learned it.”

“That’s a pity.” In her romantic little soul she was beginning to weave a web of destiny for Melian, and the meshes thereof were glittering. A secretarial post in some flourishing office, and if her beautiful friend did not promptly enslave an opulent junior partner, why then it was her own fault. But then, unfortunately, her said “beautiful friend” had never learned typing.

They chatted on, about everything and nothing, and bedtime came.

“I turn in early,” explained Violet, “because I have to turn out early, and get to my job. You’ll have to turn in with me, dear, tonight at any rate. Tomorrow, if you want a room to yourself, I dare say Mrs Seals can fix you up. But they’re all rather kennels I’m afraid. I’ve got the pick of the basket.”

“Don’t you worry about me, Violet. It’s something to have some one to come to when you get the key of the street door given you, I can tell you,” answered Melian, seriously. And then they went to bed and talked each other to sleep.

There followed then, sad, disappointing, heart weary days for poor Melian. She answered advertisements in person, and by letter. She went to all sorts of places, in and around London, in course of such answers. Sometimes she was sympathetically received, twice she was insulted, but that was where she found the dominant male had been advertiser under cover of what looked like one of her own sex. But in the genuine cases disappointment awaitedand but that she was free from vanity or selfconsciousness she might easily have read the real nature of the verdict“Far too pretty.”

Oh, the weariness of those daily tramps, and bus and tram journeys, through more or less hideous, drab, depressing streets in the dull, deadly depressing winter murk invariably characteristic of London during the young end of the year! Oh, the weight of it upon the mind, as she realised, instinctively, that it was not a case of try again, but that for some reason or other her case seemed utterly hopeless. She put it to her friend. But the latter, though she shrewdly suspected the reason, shrank from saying so.

Of her, Melian saw little or nothing during the daytime, Violet Clinock was thorough, and stuck to her job, with an eye to material improvement. But in the evening they would foregather, and the daily tale of worn out disappointment would unfold itself, and after the wretched, soulwearying effort of the day Melian could not but realise the warmth and comfort and companionship which it ended up with; and this in a measure heartened her for the next.

She had taken a small bedroom at the top of the squalid housea mere attic, but the two girls “chummed” together for the rest of their arrangements. But a fortnight went by, then three weeks, and still with the same result. Melian Seward was just where she was at the time of leaving Cumnor Lodge. There seemed to be no room in the world for her. Her slender savings, in spite of every possible economy, were dwindling. When they had done dwindlingwhat then?

And then the result of the cold, dank, and often wet, questings around after a means of livelihood, combined with lowness of spirits, and a sorely disturbed mind, came. She was laid low with a bad bout of influenza. The hydraheaded fiend was hard on the ramp, seeking whom he might devour, and finding it too in plenty. And among his countless victims was Melian Mervyn Seward.

And she could not afford to be ill; for is not illness a luxury for the rich?

But through it all her friend tended her with wholehearted and loyal camaraderie. Of course she suggested a doctor.

“A doctor? Heavens, Violet! I can’t afford such luxuries,” Melian burst forth fiercely. “The only thing I can afford is to dieand the sooner the better.” And then she became delirious, and imagined she was standing on the platform of the gloomy, dingy terminus, amid its vibration of hissing, shrieking engines, discussing those hateful, fateful railway insurance tickets with her dead father. But whether she would have a doctor or not, Violet was determined she should, and sent for one accordingly.

He, on arrival, looked grave.

“Has she any relations, Miss Clinock?”

“Oh, good Heavens! You don’t say it means that?” And the business girl was startled for the moment out of her normal takethingsastheycome attitude.

“No, no, no. Butthey ought to know. She’s in a very low state, I’m bound to inform you. There’s something on her mindsomething hard and heavy on her mindand that’s all against herall against everything.”

“Lord! I wish I knew what to do. But she’s very ‘close.’ Between ourselves, doctorof course, strictly between ourselves” The other nodded. “I believe she has one or two. But she must have quarrelled with them, or they with her, for if ever I got on to the subject she takes me up mighty sharp, I can tell you. And I don’t believe in forcing people’s confidences or prying into their affairs.”

“No, no. Ofcourse not. Still, do all you can in that direction. You may find opportunities, you knowor make them. Goodevening, I am very busy just now, there’s a record lot of ‘flu’ about, as I dare say you know. I’ll look round in the morning.”

Chapter Eight.

Violet's Discovery.

"In the morning," the doctor had said. What a deal of difference those three words can cover. In this instance Melian had passed a quiet night, thanks to his prescription, but was very down and listless. Violet Clinock had decided to take a day off on purpose to look after her, and with that intent had "expressed" a note down to her place of business to intimate that fact. Now she sat at breakfast, alone, with the morning paper propped up against her coffee pot.

As she read, a name caught her eye. "Seward Mervyn." She stared. "Seward Mervyn" again. Yes it was. And then running her glance down the paragraph and up again, she saw that it was headed: "ClancehurstThe Heath Hover Mystery." Thus it ran:

"The remains of the unidentified stranger, who met his death so mysteriously at Heath Hover, the residence of Mr Seward Mervyn, were buried yesterday afternoon in Clancehurst churchyard. No friends or relatives were forthcoming, but Mr Mervyn, unwilling that one who had been a guest of histhough from first to last unknown to himselfshould be buried by the parish, generously came forward, and together with Dr Sandys and a few other generous leading townspeople, raised sufficient to cover all expenses, and also attended the funeral. Up till now no light whatever has been thrown upon this strange occurrence which has baffled alike all the researches of medical science and the exhaustive investigations of the police. Inspector Nashby of Clancehurst, together with an official from Scotland Yard are in charge of the case from the latter point of view."

Violet stared at the paragraph and read it through again. Now it all came back. She had read about it before, but it had not fixed itself upon her memory. Even the name had failed to effect this then for she had not seen Melian for some time, and in the busy life she led, "out of sight out of mind" could not but hold good to a certain extent. But now the name seized her attention at once. "Seward Mervyn?" And she knew that Melian's second name was Mervyn, Clearly this must be a relation. And the doctor had asked her about Melian's relations.

She read no more of the paper. Her shrewd, busy little brain was at work. This must be a relation, probably an uncle or a cousin. Clearly her duty was to communicate with him. Clancehurst was only about an hour and a half from London. The day was youngshould she go down herself and interview him personally? But against that she did not care to leave her friend alone at this stage. Should she write? Perhaps that would be the best course. But she had better question Melian first as to her relative, while saying nothing

about any intention on her part to communicate with him. Having thus decided, she went up to her friend's room, taking the paper with her.

Melian was awake, but drowsily so. Her blue eyes were wide open, but had a pathetic and lacklustre look, and her hair, partly loosened, made a tumbled halo of gold against the pillow. Yes, she had slept wellshe saidonly rather wished she could go on sleeping for ever.

"By the way," went on Violet, casually, after having talked a little about things in general. "Have you got a relation named Seward Mervyn?"

"Oh yes! He's my uncle. He's out in India."

"Is he? Well have you any other relation of the name?"

"No. Not that I know of. In fact I can't haveor I should have known it."

"Well then, this one isn't out in India at all. He's in England, and not very far from London at that. In fact, only about an hour and a half by rail, if as much."

Melian stared, then raised herself on one elbow.

"What on earth are you talking about, Violet?" she said. "I tell you he's in India."

"Well, people come back from India sometimes, don't they?"

"Yes. But I've no interest in this one, nor he in me. He has never shown any at any rate. I don't want him to either. He wasn't at all nice to my father. He disapproved of his sister marrying him, and, in fact, he disapproved of him entirely. No. I couldn't bring myself to be civil even if I were to see him."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"No."

The word jerked out fiercely. Violet Clinock could see that her friend was getting excited, and that was bad.

"Then don't be in too great a hurry to pass judgment. Life isI'm not going to say, 'too short,' as the silly old chestnut runs, when if anything it's long enoughbut too busy, too hard, to keep grinding away at ancient grievances, even if they are not entirely or partly

imaginary. It's just possible that this relation of yours may have been a bit misunderstood. Anyway give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Where did you say he is?" said Melian listlessly.

"Clancehurstor near it, rather," glancing again at the newspaper. "Heath Hover, they call his place."

"That sounds rather nice," murmured the invalid.

"It's a jolly part of the country I can tell you," went on Violet, emphatically. Her plot seemed somehow to look hopeful. "I've been near that part, and I'd give something for a week or two down there now with my bike, even though it is winter. The glow of the heather, and the green and gold of the waving woods is something to see, I tell you."

"In winter?" smiled Melian artlessly.

"No, you goose. I'm talking about summer and autumn."

"Oh!"

"Shall I read you the paragraph?"

"Yes, do."

The other did so, and then went on to tell her all about the original mystery, which now came back to her memory. Melian listened, and grew more and more interested.

"It's funny how the thing should have escaped my attention," she said. "But I didn't see the papers regularly at the Carstairs'. Sometimes a day or two would go byor even longer."

Melian grew no better. Violet could not stay in to look after her every day, for she was entirely dependent upon her work, and were she to lose this, why then they would both be in the same boat. So during the day she was dependent on the slatternly landladywho though well meaning and kind according to her lights, was yet slatternly, and very vulgar in her ideas. So the girl would lie there by the hour, feeling too weak and listless even to read, with no more cheering a prospect to look out upon than a vista of black chimney stacks and chimney cowls, taking weird shapes against the grey murk of the London sky. And what was there to cheer her? Nothing. Even when she did get well her small savings would have vanished, or dwindled to vanishing point, in the incidental expenses of her

illness alone, apart from the liquidation of her medical attendant's claim. The girl felt very wretched, very despairing, as she lay there day after day in her loneliness. And in the evening when her friend returned and tried to cheer her, the process grew more and more difficult.

"This won't do," said the doctor, one morning, coming into Violet's little sittingroom with a very grave face. "Is there nowhere that Miss Seward could go to for a complete change of air and scene?"

Violet shook her head sadly. She thought of the dwindling purse, and of her friend's sinking despondency. She thought also of her friend's pride. And then an idea came to her.

"There is only one thing I can think of, doctor," she said suddenly, "and even that may bring forth nothing. But if I tell you, it is entirely in confidence you understand."

"Why that of course," answered the doctor. He was a youngish man, very hardworking, in a hardworked and poorly paying practice, and like most members of his profession had more than an ordinary share of intelligent human sympathy. He guessed pretty accurately at one of the causes for worry which kept back his patient upstairsin fact the main causeand had been puzzling how to hint, delicately, that so far as he was concerned, that cause need not count.

Then Violet told him of the existence of Melian's unknown relative and how the girl refused to communicate with him, through some notion ofprobably mistakenpride. At the mention of the name and locality Dr Barnes brightened up at once.

"By George, so that's her relative!" he said. "I should think I had heard of that case. Why it was a puzzlerbaffled all our people most effectually. It isn't likely to be forgotten either in the profession. Here is a man who dies suddenly and mysteriously, and even our experts can find no definite cause of death. But, there. I'm talking 'shop.' Let's get back to Miss Seward. She ought certainly to make herself known to this relative of hershe seems a kind sort of man if only by the way he has interested himself in the burial of this unknown stranger. Her uncle too. That's near enough. Make her write to him. I tell you in all seriousness that she is getting into a very critical state. The only thing for her is a thorough change of air and scene. You know what a hydraheaded beast 'flu' is, and its Protean after effects. Well, a splendid type of girl like Miss Seward is far too scarce to spare any effort to save from possible week of that sort. You must make her write to him."

"But if she won't? She's got a pretty strong will of her own, I can tell you."

The doctor looked at her for a moment in silence. Then he said:

“In that case write yourself.”

Violet clapped her hands.

“Goodand good again?” she cried. “Just the very thing I’d thought of doing, and now I’ve got your authority behind me, why, I will.”

Again the doctor looked at her in silence for a moment. Then he said:

“I will take upon myself to advise you further, Miss Clinock. Do so at once, on your own responsibility. Say nothing to our patientand so spare her the worry of argument and counterargument, which would be in the last degree bad for her at this stage. She will thank you for it afterwards, believe me; and then, if the answer should not be satisfactory, which I can hardly thinkshe will be spared that additional disappointment too. But I tell you, purely professionally, that a change to a quiet country place like Clancehurst, and its pure, splendid air, would be the saving of her. Goodbye. I needn’t look round tomorrow unless you send for me.”

“I’ll do it at once, this very night,” answered Violet briskly. “Goodbye, doctor. You have taken something of a weight off my mind.”

The next day Violet Clinock took “off,” though not without some qualms of trepidation. She had been taking several “off” of late, and her employers were getting a bit short. They were rather “fed up” with her sick friend and the absences entailed, and half hinted that a typing secretary unburdened with sick friends was more in their line, and in fact plenty were there ready and waiting. But Violet was shrewd enough to know her own value, which was really considerably beyond that of salary received. However, she fingered the reins delicately.

That day she devoted to Melian, and the general cheering of her up. The next or the one after that, at the furthest, should bring a reply to her diplomatically, but at the same time very humanly, expressed missive to a perfect stranger.

“You must buck up, Melian,” she would say. “Why, if the worst came to the worst didn’t old Carstairs say that he would be a friend to you if ever you were in want of one?”

“Pooh! He didn’t mean it. It was only something to saya sort of well rounded figure of speech to get rid of me comfortably,” announced Melian cynicallyher illness and

growing straits had rendered her cynical. “And even if he did, that old cat of his would soon want to know the reason why, I can tell you.”

“I don’t know. Very likely she has come round, since she’s had time to think things over.”

“Come round! Let her come roundor square. Turning one out like thatat an hour’s notice and all about nothing. They’re a cad crowd anyhow, and as the old chestnut saysyou can’t look for anything from a pig but a grunt. But even they may find their own turn come next. Old Carstairs’ job isn’t such a cocksure business, but very much ‘up today down tomorrow.’ I’ve heard him say so himself many a time, and give instances of it too.”

“Well dear, it’s a rum world, and to quote another mossgrown chestnutyou never know your luck. Now I’ve got a notion things are going to turn for you, and in a little while you’ll be all on the up grade.”

Melian did not answer. Even the up grade indicated meant a dreary vista of unceasing drudgery, giving the best of her lifeher young lifeto the totally unappreciated service of other people, and that for a mere living wage. Surely she was cut out for something rather different. But her friend would not allow her to get into a despondent vein. She switched the topic of conversation off to other matters, and her efforts were rewarded, for the invalid forgot the standing woes and grievances, and being of an imaginative temperament, soon found herself talking brightly, and even laughing. Decidedly here was a marked improvement, concluded the watcher, thankfully.

In due course, and exactly to the time Violet had calculated, came a letter. The girl’s eyes brightened as they lit upon the Clancehurst postmark on the large square envelope, and she could only just restrain herself from rushing into her friend’s room, after the early morning postal delivery.

“Melian, here’s a letter for you,”throwing it down on the bed.

“Letter? What? I’ve no one to get letters fromunless it’s another from that silly little booby, Dicky Carstairs,” she added bitterly. “Only, how should he write to me here? Oh, I suppose it’s only one of the deferred answers to one of my applications. ‘Will write and let you know.’ You know the rigmarole‘Mrs Stickinthemud is exceedingly sorry’and all that sort of thing. Well, let’s see.”

The while Violet had been on tenterhooks lest the other should spot the Clancehurst postmark, and perhaps decline, in her absurd pride, to open the letter at all. But Melian

tore open the envelope leisurely and listlessly, and then her brows contracted as she took in the contents of the large square sheetand the excited watcher saw a flush of red suffuse the sweet, delicate face. This was what she read.

“Heath Hover, Near Clancehurst.

“My dear Melian,

“I am deeply distressed, and more than glad at what I hear about you; the first that you have been so ill, the second that it has given me the opportunity of coming into touch with you at all. I had no idea where you wereI have not been very long back from India, rememberand neither you nor anybody else has ever communicated with me, or given me any information at all with regard to you. But I am only too thankful that nowthough late in the dayI have such.

“Now I am losing no time in writing to say that you must pack up and come to me here, at once, and make this your home for as long as ever you like to make it so. I am getting an old man and am quite alone, so it may be dull for you, but at present, anyhow, a whiff of pure, fresh, country air, on top of that beastly London fog in winter, may well set you up after your illness. Although winter, you will enjoy it as a contrast to town smoke, I should think. So wire or write the train I shall expect you by at Clancehurst, and I will be there to meet you. There are reasons why I cannot leave home at present, so am unable to come up to town personally to fetch you, as I should otherwise have been glad to do.

“Believe me, my dear child,

“Your affectionate uncle,

“John Seward Mervyn.

“PS. Illness involves expense. You will accept a trifle towards such.”

Two five pound notes remained in the envelope. The long white fingers took them out, and even in the act the girl appreciated the delicacy which should have placed them there until the letter should first have been read. She handed the letter to Violet, while the tears began to well forth from her wearied blue eyes.

“Hurrah!” cried the latter, having read it. “This uncle of yours is a brick, Meliana real hard, cemented brick.” Then growing serious. “Such a sweet letter too. There, I told you better times were coming, didn’t I?”

“You had no business to have written to him. I never told you you might,” was the weakly reproachful reply.

And then the two girls, the ill one and the wellthe ill one because she was illthe well one out of sympathy, had a good cry together, and there was much hugging and they were happy.

Chapter Nine.

The Arrival.

John Seward Mervyn was seated within the same armchair in which we first saw him gazing at the mysterious and shadowy door in the cornerbut now it was the middle of a brilliant winter forenoonand he was occupied in the reperusal of two letters, not bearing even date, for one was that of Violet Clinock informing him of his niece's existence and illness, while the other was from his niece herself.

Comparing this with the former epistle he smiled to himself. Violet's glowing description of her friend, and her multifold attractions, both physical and mental, amused him. He was gratified, too, that his niece should prove neither unattractive nor a fool. Melian's missive, on the other hand, struck him as rather strained and stiff as to style, but then, she had been ill, and likewise was he not a perfect stranger to her?

How would the experiment work, he was speculating? If satisfactorily, why should she not make her home with him altogether? He was not so young as he used to be, but there was plenty of "go" in him yet, and he was not deficient in ideas; perhaps she might not find him quite such an old bore as she probably expected to find. He gathered from her friend's letter that she had gone through no particularly glowing times, nor were there any likely to be in store for her; and life here, quietly, and at any rate for a while, might be the very thing to make the girl happy, dull under ordinary circumstances as such life might be.

There was one point, however, as to which he was not without secret misgiving. By this time no doubt was left in his own mind as to there being something about this house that was not about other houses; and which, for want of a better word, he described to himself as an "influence." He had experienced it himself, when sitting alone of an evening, and even in broad daylight. Sounds, too, shadowy, vague, and explicable by no natural or material causeagain as to such there could be no two opinions. And this girl who was coming had been ill, and naturally her nerves would not be at their best. It would be ghastly if she were to undergo the shock of some sudden fright.

With this in view he himself occupied the room he had destined for her, until she should arrive. But absolutely nothing untoward occurred to disturb him, either waking or sleeping. Further, he got hold of old Joe and his ancient spouse, and charged them by every consideration likely to carry weight, that they were on no accountby word, nod or winkto let fall the slightest hint to the visitor as to there being any stories afloat about Heath Hover at all.

“I’ll not nabble, b’lieve me, Mus’ Mervyn,” old Judy had said, clicking her Punchlike profile together, “I don’t b’lieve in nabbling on things like they. Folkses finds ’em out soon enough”

“If there’s anything to be found,” supplied the master. “Here there isn’t, you understand, Judy?” And the old woman declared that she did, and Joe emphasised the statement by a brace of emphatic nods.

The fact was that strict fealty to their employer came entirely within this old couple’s interests, for he remunerated them at rather more than double the rate of earnings they could have obtained from any other source or sources. John Seward Mervyn was shrewd, though poor. When he had to lay out money he did so to the best of advantage, and in the proper quarter.

The mysterious end of the mysterious stranger had been very much of a nine days’ wonder. It had puzzled the police, and, more important still, perhaps, it had puzzled the doctors. There had been an inquest of course, and a great deal of disagreement among doctors. Mervyn’s evidence was perfectly straight and to the point; given so straightforwardly too, that none who heard entertained the slightest doubt as to its thorough exhaustiveness; and his narrative of the rescue of the stranger in the freezing midnight, only for the latter to meet his death so mysteriously but a few hours later, created something of a sensation. But the official mind listened to it all with some reserve and the official mind, as represented by Inspector Nashby and the expert from Scotland Yard, resolved to keep a continuous but furtive eyeand that for sometime to comeupon the goings out and comings in of Mr John Seward Mervyn.

Old Joe Sayers, too, gave his evidence with straightforwardness, but that he was constantly harking back, with the suspicious persistency of the countryman, to the fact that he had never seen the deceased when alive. Likewise when he began to “feel his feet,” he volunteered again the opinion which we heard him enunciate to his master, that “folks as gets on the ice, middle of Plane Pond, middle of the night, etc, bean’t up to no good;” a remark whose naïveté drew forth a great laugh, and likewise an admonition from the coroner that the witness should not volunteer opinions containing an imputation of motive until he was asked for itwhich admonition for the most part was sheer Sanscrit to old Joe.

Not the least strange side of the investigation lay in the fact that no amount of enquiry was able to elicit any information whatever as to the previous movements of the stranger. The heavy snowfall which had supervened upon the arrival of the doctor and the police inspector at Heath Hover had lasted a couple of days, and had utterly obliterated all and every trace. Further, none of the dwellers in the

neighbourhoodwhether in village or scattered cottagescould be found to speak as to having noticed any stranger at all, let alone one bearing the slightest resemblance to the circulated descriptions. The man might have appeared out of nowhere. So the verdict was an open one, and the man was buried at the expense of Mervyn and a few more who came forward with subscriptions toward that endas we have said.

Mervyn sat scanning the two letters, as though to make the utmost he could out of every word and line of each. In his heart of hearts he felt rather impatient. His was not such an eventful life but that the impending arrival of a girl relativeand that an attractive one, he had reason to believeshould not inspire some modicum of pleasurable anticipation. What would she be like, all round, he found himself, for the fiftieth time, wondering?

There was a slight movement beside him. The little black kitten had leaped on to the table, and sat there purring softly, its green gold eyes staring roundly out of a little ball of fluffiness. Then, with one light, scarcely perceptible, movement it transferred itself to his shoulder and sat there, purring louder and more contentedly than ever.

“Ah, poogie?” he said, pressing the little fluffy ball against his ear. “You’ll have some one else to love now. I wonder if she will though. Yes, of course she must.”

The light waggonette, which, with the cart, constituted the sole wheel motive power at Heath Hover, swung easily over the hardened snow; but once under way, Mervyn felt himself beset with misgivings. What on earth had he been thinking aboutor rather not been thinking aboutto bring an open conveyance to meet a girl who was just recovering from an attack of “flu” and a fairly hard one at that? In the cloudless sunniness of the day this was a side of things he had entirely overlooked. Well, he would leave his own conveyance at Clancehurst and charter a closed fly.

But when he reached the station, the 2:57 from Victoria was just signalled. The station was busy and bustling as usual, and he did not care to risk not being there when his niece arrived. So he left the trap in charge of a hangeron and went on to the platform.

Quite a number were getting out of the train as it drew up, nearly punctual to time. For a moment he felt bewildered, and was moving rapidly among the alighting passengers, scanning each face. But none seemed to answer the description given by Violet Clinock’s glowing pen, as to her friend’s outward appearance.

Then he became aware of being himself a centre of interest. A girl was standing there, looking intently at hima girl, plainly dressed, with a pale face and golden hair framed in a wide black hat, and her straight carriage and erectly held head made her look taller than she actually was. As he turned, an exclamation escaped her, and the colour

suffused her cheeks, leaving them paler than before. And the look in her eyes was positively a startled one. Small wonder that it was so, for, standing there in the hurrying throng, Melian Seward almost thought she was looking at her dead father.

The likeness was extraordinary. The same face, the same features, even the cut of the grizzling, pointed beard; the same height, the same set of the shoulders. Good Heavens! The farewell on the terminus platform, the joke about the insurance ticketsmall wonder that she should have reeled unsteadily as though beneath a shock. Mervyn made a hasty step forward, both hands extended.

“My dear child, there is no mistaking you,” he said warmly. “You have the regular Mervyn stamp. But you are not looking at all the thing,” with a glance of very great concern. “Well, well, we’ll soon put that right here. Come along now. Porter, take this lady’s things. Come and show him what you’ve got in the van, dear.”

He took her arm, and Melian, who had not expected anything like so affectionate a welcome, felt in her present tottery state inclined to break down utterly. This he saw, and kept her answering questions about herself, and other things, the while the luggage was being got out and taken across.

“You will have to get outside of a hot cup of tea, dear, while they are loading up the things,” he said, leading the way to the refreshment room. “Oh, and by the by” For the idea had come back to him, and now he put it to her that she would not be up to a five mile drive in an open trap, so it would only mean a little longer to wait while he went across to the inn opposite and ordered a closed one. But opposition met him at once.

“Why, Uncle Seward,” she exclaimed, “that’s the very thing I’ve been looking forward toa glorious open air drive through the lovely country, and it’s such a ripping afternoon. Do let’s have it. Why, it’ll do me all the world of good. Fancy being shut up in a close, fusty fly! And there’s going to be such a ripping sunset too, I could see there was coming along in the train. No. Do let’s drive in the open.”

“Certainly, dear. I was only thinking that after a bad bout of ‘flu’ you have to be carefulvery careful.”

“Yesyes. But this airwhy, it has done me good already; it’s doing me good every minute. And I’ve plenty of wraps. The drive will be ripping.”

He looked at her admiringly. The colour had come back to her cheeks and the blue eyes danced with delighted anticipation.

“Very well,” he said. “Here’s your tea. Is it all as you like it? Yes? Well, I’ll just go and see that all your things are aboard.”

He went into the bar department, drank a glass of brandy and water, then went out to the waggonette. Everything was stowed safe and snug. There was certainly not a “mountain of luggage” he noticed, but it struck him that Melian’s “plenty of wraps” was a bit of imagination. He shed his fur coat and threw a French cloak over his shoulders. Then he went back to her.

She was ready, and the blue eyes had taken on quite a new lightvery different eyes now, to when their sole look out was bounded by a patch of grey murk as a background to bizarre and hideous patterns in chimney pots.

“Here’s the shandradan, dear. Now are you absolutely dead cert you’re equal to a five mile open drive. Hereput on this.”

“This” was the fur coatand she objected.

“Tuttut, I’m skipper of this ship, and I won’t have opposition. Soin you get.”

He had hoisted it on to her, and now enveloped in it she climbed to the front seat beside him. He arranged a corresponding thickness of double rug over her knees.

“Thank you, sir,” said the porter, catching what was thrown to him. “Beg pardon, Mr Mervyn,” he went on, sinking his voice, “but has anything more been ’eard about”

But Mervyn drew his whip across the pony’s hind quarters with a sharpness that that long suffering quadruped had certainly never merited, and the vehicle sprang into lively motion, which was all the answer the illadvised querist obtained.

“Wasn’t he asking you something?” said Melian, as they spun over the railway bridge above the station. The town lay beneath and behind; an old church tower just glimpsed above tall bare elms.

“I dare say. But if we are going to get home before you get chilly, we can’t stop to answer all sorts of idiotic questions.”

Even then the reply struck Melian as odd, less so perhaps than the change in her kinsman’s manner while making it. But she said:

“Before I get chilly. Why I’m wrapped up likeShackleton, or Peary, or any of them. In your coat too. It was quite wrong of you to have insisted upon my wearing it, and I had plenty of wraps.”

“Had you? As a prologue to our time together child, I may as well tell you I am a man of fads. One is that of being skipper in my own ship. You obeyed orders, so there’s no more to be said.”

It was put so kindly, so pleasantly. The tone was everything, and again the girl felt a lump rise to her throat, for it reminded her all of her dead father. Just the sort of thing he would have said; just the sort of tone in which he would have said it.

Chapter Ten.

Of the Brightening of Heath Hover.

They had left the outskirts of the town behind, and were bowling along a treehung road, which in summer would have been a green tunnel. The brown woods stood out above the whitened landscape, sombre in their winter nakedness, but always beautiful, over beyond an open, snow powdered stubble. Then between coverts of dark firs, where pheasants crowed, flapping their way up to their nightly roost. Past a hamlet embedded in tall, naked trees, then more dark firwoods interstudded with birch where the heathery openings broke the uniform evergreenthen out again for a spaceon a bit of heathery upland which would be glowing crimson in golden August.

"You can see around here for a bit," said Mervyn, pointing with his whip. "Away there on the ridge, that tower is Lower Gidding, so called, presumably because Upper Gidding, ten miles away, is about two hundred feet lower down to the sea level. Beyond that last wooded ridge but one, is my shopour shop I mean."

"It's lovely," replied the girl looking round with animation, and taking in the whole landscape.

"Yes, perfectly lovely. And look. Here's the sunset I told you we were going to get."

On the north eastern sky line, an opaque bank of clouds had heaved upa bank of clouds that seemed to bode another snowfall. The sun, sinking in a fiery bed, away in the cloudless west, was touching thisand lo, in a trice, the mountainous masses of the rising cloudtier were first tinged, than bathed in a flood of glowing copper red. Between, the long tongues of dark woodland stood out from the whitened ground. The bark of a dog, from this or that distant farmhouse, came up clear on the silent distance, and then from this or that covert, arose the melodious hoot of owls, answering each other.

"What a picture!" cried the girl, turning an animated face upon her new guardian. "Heavens, what a picture! And to think that this time yesterday I was staring at a row of hideous black chimney pots under a hideous murky sky. Not only yesterday, but day after day before! AndUncle Seward, you live in the midst of this!"

Mervyn smiled to himself, then at her, and his smile was a very good one to behold.

"Yes, dear, I do," he answered gently. "And now you are going to as well."

Down a steep road between dark woods, then an opening. A long reach of ice cleft their depth; then a sudden quacking as several wild duck sprang upwards from an open hole by the sluice, and swished high above their heads.

“Wild duck, aren’t they?” cried the girl, turning her head to watch them, then looking up the frozen expanse. “Why it might be some lake in the middle of the backwoods of Canada, such as one reads about.”

“Yes, so it might. I can tell you you haven’t come into exactly a tame part, even in our southern counties, which reminds me that I didn’t sufficiently rub it into you that you would have towellerrough it a bit.”

“If you had, that would have made it better still,” was the answer. “I prefer country places that are not too civilised.”

“That’s fortunate,” rejoined Mervyn with a pleased smile, “for you’ll be exactly suited as far as that goes, in my shack.”

Up another steep bit of road at a foot’s pace. It was quite dusk now, but a golden moon, at half, rising over the treetops, threw a glitter upon the frosty banks. Quite close by an owl hooted.

“Oh, but this is too lovely for anything,” cried Melian. “By the way, what on earth are people talking about when they talk about the hoot of an owl being dismal. Why, it’s melodious to a degree.”

“Great minds skip together, dear. That’s just what I think.”

In his own mind the speaker was thinking something else; thinking it too, with a great glow of satisfaction. They would get on splendidly together. All her ideas, so far expressed, were the exact counterpart of his own. What a gold mine he had lighted on when he had opened Violet Clinock’s letter but a couple of days back. Then he became aware that Melian had turned, with a quick movement, and was gazing at him with a curioushe even fancied halfstartledlook.

“That was exactly one of father’s expressions,” she said slowly. “Anddo you know, Uncle Seward, you are so like him.”

“Am I, dear?” was the answer, made very gently. “All the better, because then I shall be all the more able, as far as possible, to replace him. Buthere we areat home.”

The waggonette had topped the rise, and was now descending a similarly woodfringed road. On the left front extended another long, narrow, triangular expanse of ice; set in its sombre, treeframed encasing. Below the broad end of this a light or two gleamed.

Old Joe and his ancient spouse were there to receive them, and did so with alacrity. It was a tacit part of the bond that they were not to be required to remain at Heath Hover after dark, but on this occasion they were stretching a point; partly through motives of curiosity in that they were anxious to see what the new arrival was like; partly, that with the house well lighted up, and the bustle and stir of preparation, and the advent of some one young, and therefore presumably lively, on the scene, the idea of shadowy manifestations didn't seem in keeping somehow.

"Why, this is ripping," cried Melian as she obtained her first view of the old livingroom. The deep, oldfashioned grate with its wide chimney was piled high with roaring logs, and a bright lamp on the table lighted up the lowbeamed, whitewashed ceiling, and even the dark, redpapered walls. "Why, it's a typical oldworld sort of place. Ought to have a ghost, and all that kind of thing."

At this remark the venerable Judy, who was hobbling about putting some finishing touches to the table, stopped and stared. Then, shaking her head, she hobbled out again.

"What's the matter with the old party, Uncle Seward?" said Melian, whom this behaviour struck. But she looked up too soonjust in time to catch her uncle's frown in fact. "Is there one?" she added suddenly, and pointedly.

"Good Heavens, child. Every blessed house that wasn't built the day before yesterday, that isn't reeking with raw plaster and new cement, is supposed to carry a ghost, especially in the country, and standing in lonely solitude in the middle of woods like this. Throw in a deep oldfashioned fireplace and some oak panelling and thereyou've got your Christmas number at once."

Telepathy may be bosh or it may not. At any rate, to Melian Seward, the lightness of her uncle's tone, together with the annoyed look she had caught upon his face, and the sudden perturbation of the old woman at her remark, did not carry conviction. She felt certain that there was some story attaching to the place.

"What a jolly old door," she remarked, catching sight of the one in the corner, half hidden as it was, behind a curtain. "Why it looks quite old. Oh, but it is good," going over to it with her quick, rapid habit of movement. "And the lock! Why it's splendid. What is it, Uncle Seward? Sixteenth century, at least?"

Mervyn looked at her, and strove not to look at her queerly.

“I don’t know what date it is,” he said. “It leads down to an old vaultlike cellar, which probably was used for storing wine. It isn’t now, because I’m too poor to have any wine to store. At least, I mean, darling,”catching the expression with which she looked up“I can’t afford to run wine cellars, but,”and then came in a little embarrassment“I’m not quite too poor to be able to offer a home to mystranded little niece, shall we say?”

The additional term of endearment had struck her. She looked at him in the lamplight, standing erect and beautiful.

“Dear Uncle Seward,” she said. “I can’t say anythingexcept thatI don’t know how it isthere seems to have come something since I met yousince I heard from you. Why, you bring back my dear old father to me at every turn. You are so like him. You have the same expressionseverything. And yetyou were not even brothers.”

“Cousins, though. Nearly the same thing. Kiss me, child. You haven’t yet. You knowall the public squash on the station platform.”

She did, and in the act it seemed as if her dead fatherdead under the impression that he could serve her interests best by so dyingwere alive and speaking within this room. Even in the quiet, contained voice, she seemed to recognise his.

It may have been imagination, but Mervyn seemed to think she could not withdraw her attention from the old nailstudded, shaded door in the corner. She kept looking at it even while they were talking. He remembered his vigil on the night of the rescue. Heavens! was this beastly, deluding mesmeristic effect going to hold her too, now at the first few minutes of her arrival? Then a diversion occurred. A cry from Melian suddenly drew his attention.

“What’s this? Oh you little sweet. Here come to me, little poogepooge!”

The little black kitten had suddenly landed itself, without notice, upon the white tablecloth, where it squatted, purring.

“Oh, you sweet little woolly ballwhere did you come from?” cried Melian, picking up the tiny creature and stuffing it into the hollow of her cheek and neck. “Uncle Seward, did you get this on purpose for me? Tell me.”

Her cheeks were pink with animation, and her blue eyes shone.

“No, dear. That’s a special child of my own, since it’s little life began. It is with me always. I’m glad you’ve taken to it.”

“Taken to it? I should think so. Now you’re going to be jealous, Uncle Seward. I’m going to appropriate it. Oh, what a sweet little beast!” holding it up under the armpits. But the kitten growled expostulatingly.

“‘Beast’? But it’s human,” laughed Mervyn. “Well, you shall have it, dear. Poogiethere’s your new owner. See? My nose is clean out of joint. I can take a back seat.”

Again Melian started, and momentarily grew grave.

“Poogie.” That too was one of her father’s expressions. She looked again at her uncle. Bright as the lamplight was, still it was artificial light, and under it the likenesss was more and more emphasised, in fact, startling.

“Come upstairs, child, and I’ll show you your room. It’s right next to mine, so you’ve only to bang on the wallif you wantI meanerif you were to get nervous in the middle of the night, in a strange place.”

“But what on earth should I get nervous about?” exclaimed the girl, in roundeyed wonderment.

“Oh, nothing. But the sex is given that way, so I only thought I’d tell you, that’s all. Now, you can find your way down, and we’ll have dinner when you’re ready.”

Left alone, Melian proceeded to look round the room. It was small but cosy, with two cupboards let into the wall. A bright fire burned in the grate, and four lighted candles made a full and cheerful glow. The window she noticed was rather small, and looking out of this, under the light of the moon, she again took stock of the house. The windows at the projecting ends, unoccupied, seemed to stare lifelessly. The house was too much below the level of the sluice to allow a view of the pond, but the outline of the woods towered up against the frosty stars, and the hoot of owls and the high up quacking of flighting duck, sounded upon the stillness. A feeling of intense peace, of intense thankfulness came over her. She had found a very haven of rest she felt already, and her newly acquired relativewellshe was sure she was going to get very fond of him indeed.

Soon she betook herself downstairs, and cosy and bright indeed the room looked. A roast fowl lay temptingly upturned and surrounded by shreds of bacon, and the potatoes were beautifully white and flowery. The little black kitten was playing riotously with a cork tied to the end of a string which always hung from the back of one of the armchairs.

“Well, child, I hope you’ve brought an appetite with you,” said Mervyn, as they sat down. “You’ll have to be fed up. ‘Plain but wholesome,’ you know, as the school prospectuses used to say.”

“Yes, I’ve brought one. I feel miles better already.” And then she talked ontelling him about her life of late, and its ups and downs. But of her earlier life she seemed to avoid mention.

And Mervyn, encouraging her to talk, was furtively watching her. The animation which lit up her face, bringing with it a tinge of colour, the gleam of the golden hair in the lamplight, the movement of the long, white, artistic fingersthere was no point in the entrancing picture that escaped him. Indeed, he had been lucky beyond compare, he decided, when Violet Clinock’s letter had found him; and again and again as he looked at Melian, he made up his mind that she was there for good, unless she got tired of it and of him and insisted on leaving. But he would not think of that tonight.

They got up at last, and Mervyn drew two big chairs to the fire. Then he lighted his pipe. The kitten in the most matter of course way jumped upon Melian’s lap and curled up there.

“There you are,” laughed her uncle. “My nose is out of joint the first thing. It used to prefer me for a couch, but I don’t quarrel with its taste.”

So they sat on and chatted cosily. At last, bedtime came. Then Melian remarked on the circumstance that the table hadn’t been cleared.

“No. It won’t be, till tomorrow morning,” was the reply. “Old Judy has taken herself off long ago. I told you you’d have to rough iteh? You see she and old Joe are the only people I can get to do my outlying work, and they hang out in a cottage the other side of the hillbeyond the first pond we passed. The young ones won’t stay on the placefind it too lonely, they say. So there you are.”

“Yes. I’m going to turn to and do things,” answered Melian decisively.

“Well, never mind about beginning now,” he said, lighting her candle and preceding her to her room. “Look, here’s a handbell. If you want anything, or are feeling lonely or ‘nervy’ in the night, ring it like the mischiefand I’ll be there. Goodnight, dear.”

“Goodnight, Uncle Seward,” and she kissed him affectionately.

Mervyn returned to the livingroom and relighted his pipe. His gaze wandered to the shadowy door in the corner. Was its tradition really and completely upset? That strange manifestation, as to which he was hardly yet prepared to swear to as entirely an optical delusionhad presaged good to somebody, in that by keeping him awake he had been able to save the life of the stranger. But then the stranger had died immediately afterwards, under mysterious circumstances, and had this not befallen why then he, John Seward Mervyn would never have become aware of the existence or propinquity of his niece. And what a find that wasa young, bright, beautiful presence to irradiate the shadows of this gloomy old haunted grange. No room for any melancholic, fanciful imaginings with that about.

And yetand yetit may be that he was not quite easy in his mind. Not for nothing had he shown her that clearly ringing handbell, and laid emphasis on the unhesitating use of it.

Chapter Eleven.

A Slip on a Stone.

The morning broke, bright and clear, one of those rare winter mornings without a cloud in the blue, and the sun making additional patterns through the frost facets on the window pane. And the said sun had not very long since risen.

Mervyn looked out of the window; the house faced due east and caught the first glory of the morning sunwhen there was any to catch, and today there was. The frosted pines glistened and gleamed with it, so too did the earth, with its newly laid coating of crystals. But in the midst of this setting was a picture.

Melian was coming down the path. A large hooded cloak was wrapped round her, but she had nothing on her head, and the glory of her golden hair shone like fire in the new born, clear rays. The kitten, a woolly ball of black fluffiness, was squatted upon her shoulder, and she was singing to herself in a full, clear voice. He noted her straight carriage, and the swing of her young, joyous, elastic gait. A picture indeed! And this bright, beautiful, joyous child, was going to belong to him henceforwardto him, all alone. No one else in the wide world had the shadow of a claim upon her. She had come to him out of sordid surrounding of depression and wantyes, it would soon have come to that, judging from the account she had given of herself. Well, she had fallen upon the right place, and at the right time.

He dressed quickly. He heard her enter the house, and old Judy's harsh croaky tones mingling with the clear melodious ones. Then a silvery rippling laugh, then another. He remembered old Judy could be funny at times in her dry, cautious old rustic way. John Seward Mervyn felt the times had indeed changed for him. He felt years and years younger, under the bright spell of this youthful influence in the gloomy and shunned old house.

"Well dear!" he cried gaily, coming into the room. "You don't look much of the 'flu' patient slowly convalescing. What sort of an ungodly early time did you get up?"

"Oh Uncle Seward, I've had such fun. I've been out all up the pond, and this little poogie had a romp all over the ice. Then it rushed up a tree after a squirrel, and they sat snarling at each other at the end of a thin bough, and the squirrel jumped to another tree, but the poogie wasn't taking any. Were you, poogepooge?" And she squeezed the little woolly ball into her face and neck.

“Well, it won’t take you long to get on your legs again,” said Mervyn, looking admiringly at the perfect picture she presented. “What shall we do with you today? Go for a long driveor what? Well, I don’t know. The old shandradan I brought you here in isn’t too snug for a convalescing invalid, and it’s the best I’ve got. But first we’ll have breakfast.” And he hailed Judy, with an order to hurry on that repast.

“Oh, that be hanged for a yarn, Uncle Seward. I’m not a convalescing anything. I’ve convalesced already, in this splendid air and surroundings. Let’s go out somewhere. Do let’s.”

She had clasped both hands round his arm and the blue eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

“All right. You shall be Queen of the May, today at any rate. But I think we mustn’t overdo it at the start. We’ll lunch early, and then start on a rambling round of explorationequipped with plenty of wraps.”

“And we may get another ripping sunset like yesterday,” she exclaimed.

“You are extraordinarily fond of Nature’s effects, child. What else appeals to you?”

“Old stones?”

“What?”

“Old stones. Ruined castleschurchesRoman remainseverything of that kind.”

Mervyn emitted a long and expressive whistle.

“Good Lord! but you’ve come to the right shop for that,” he said. “Why this countryside just grows them. All sorts of old mouldy monuments, in musty places, just choking with dry rot. Eh? That what you mean?”

“That’s just what I do mean.”

“Oh Lord?”

He was looking at her, quizzically ruthful. He foresaw himself being dragged into all sorts of weird places; hoary old churches, whose interiors would suggest the last purpose on earth to that for which they had been constructed, and reeking of dry rothalf an ancient arch in the middle of a field which would require wading through a swamp to get

atand so on. But while he looked at her he was conscious that if she had expressed a wish to get a relic chipped out of the moon, he would probably have given serious thought to the feasibility of that achievement.

“But that sort of thing’s all so infernally ugly,” he said.

“Is it? Ugly? Old Norman architecture ugly! What next?”

Mervyn whistled again.

“I don’t know anything about Norman, or any other architecture,” he said, with a laugh. “I only know that when I run into any Johnnies who do, or think they dothey fight like the devil over it, and vote each other crass ignoramuses. How’s that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Let’s go and look at something of the kind this afternoon. Shall we?”

“No, my child. Not if I know it. You wait till you’re clean through this ailment of yours before I sanction you going into any damp old vault to look at gargoyles.”

Melian went off into a rippling peal.

“Gargoyles don’t live in vaults, Uncle Seward. They live on roofs, and towers.”

“Do they? Well, wherever they live, God’s good open English country is going to be the thing for you today, anyhow.”

“All safe. The other will keep.”

Mervyn dawdled over breakfast, absolutely contrary to his wont. His wont was to play with it; now he ate it. This bright presence turned a normally gloomy necessity into a fairy feast.

“Come and let’s potter round a bit,” he said, soon after they had done.

“Rather.”

Melian swung on her large hooded cloak, and they went up the step path to the sluice. The sheen of ice lay before them, running up in a far triangle to the distance of the woods.

“By the way, do you know how to skate?” said Mervyn.

“Yes, but I’m not great at it, and it makes my ankles horribly stiff.”

“Well, I sometimes take a turn or two, just to keep in practice. But it’s awful slow work all alone. If you like, dear, I’ll get you a pair from Clancehurst and you can take a turn with me.”

“It wouldn’t be worth while I think,” she answered. “In point of fact I’m feeling rather too much of a worm for hard exercise just now, and the ice will probably vanish any day.”

They wandered on, over the crisp frozen woodland path, and then he pointed out the scene of the stranger’s immersion and rescue. Melian looked at it with vivid interest.

“It must have been a lively undertaking, Uncle Seward,” she commented. “And that you should only just have heard his call for help? And thenhim dying afterwards. Poor man, I wonder who he was.”

“So do Idid ratherfor you can’t go on wondering for ever. But that idiot, Nashby, has still more than a suspicion that I murdered him. By the way, Melian, you remember I said there were reasons why I couldn’t come up to Town to fetch you; well, there it is. I’ve been practically under police supervision ever since. If I had gone up to London they’d have concluded I’d bolted, and started all Scotland Yard on the spot. How’s that?”

“How’s that? They must be idiots.”

“Yes. That’s near the ‘bull.’ But Nashby, though an excellent county police inspector, imagines himself a very real Sherlock Holmes whose light is hidden in a bushel called Clancehurst; consequently there being no earthly motive for me making away with the stranger, therefore I must have made away with himaccording to Nashby.”

“But, Uncle Seward. Do you really mean to say you’re suspected of murdering the man?”

“Well, more than halfby Nashby. I don’t know that any one else shares his opinion. In fact, I don’t think they do. Look. Here’s the place where I hauled him out.”

They had come near the head of the pond. In the weeks of frost that had supervened there were still traces in the ice of that midnight tragedy. Melian looked at them with wide eyed wonderment.

“Come along,” said Mervyn extending a hand. “It’s quite safefrom seven to nine inches thick. We can walk all over it now, can even walk back on it instead of through the wood.”

And they did; but first they went up it to where it narrowed to its head, where the feeding stream trickled in. Two wild ducks rose with alarmed quacking, and winnowed away at a surprising velocity over the treetops.

“There’d have been a good chance if I’d got a gun,” remarked Mervyn. “I come along at dusk sometimes and bag a brace. Old Sir John Tullibard up at the Hall gave me a sort of carte blanche to shoot anything in that line, and told the keeper to cut me in when the pheasants wanted thinning down. He’s a decent old chap, but isn’t at home much. To put it nakedly he’s a regular absentee landlord, but his people seem snug enough.”

“The Hall? What sort of place is it? What’s it called?”

Mervyn laughed.

“Why I do believe you’re scenting old stones already. Well, it’s rather a jolly old place, Plane House it’s called. Old Tullibard’s my landlord.”

“Good. We must have a look over Plane House.”

“Easy enough. If the old man comes over we’ll go and dine there. I do that when he is here, but that’s not often. He’s an old Indian too, though we weren’t in the same part. Now he prefers hanging out on the Riviera. I don’t. Old England’s good enough for me. Look at this for instance.”

She did look, and thoroughly agreed. They were walking down the frozen surface of the pond as on a broad highway. The gossamer branches of the leafless trees shone in the sunlight, picked out in myriad frosted, scintillating patterns of indescribable delicacy against the cloudless blue of the winter sky, and, in between, the dark foliage of firs. Now and then a slide of snow from these, dislodged by the focussed rays of the midday sun, thudded to the ground, with a ghostly break upon the silence of the woodland. But the aircrisp, invigoratingMelian’s cheeks were aglow with it, and the blue eyes, thus framed, shone forth in all the animation begotten of the scene and surroundings. Mervyn stared, in wholesouled admiration, likewise wonderment.

“Well done, my ‘flu’ convalescent,” he cried, dropping an arm round her shoulders. “You’ve come to the right sort of hospital and no mistake.”

“Yes, I have indeed,” she answered, becoming suddenly grave, as she thought of the all pervading murk and the blackened vista of chimney stacks. Then, as they gained the broad end of the pond, and she climbed lightly over the fence on to the road that ran along the top of the sluice“What an awfully picturesque old place Heath Hover looks from here, Uncle Seward. By the way, it’s a curious name. What does it come from?”

“Ahah! An enquiring mind? I suppose that goes on all fours with the love of old stoneseh? Heath I take it is after the surroundings. When you get up beyond these woods you’re on heathery slopes, which glow red in summer, so I suppose they called it after that; the other in local parlance is something coldish or damp, and this house is situated that way in all conscience. So there you are.”

“How ripping, I would like to see that same red glow.”

“Well, and you will,” he answered. “But you’ll have to wait for it, like for everything else. And summer’s none too near just now.”

They were halfway down the path from the sluice by now. Melian had halted to take in the view, her eyes wide open and fairly revelling in it. Mervyn did not fail to notice that one foot rested on the largish round stone which covered somethingwhich constituted the tombstone ofsomething. And then, whether it was that the stone was slippery with the frost, her footing suddenly failed, and she would have fallen, had he not caught her in a firm grasp.

“Steady up, child,” he laughed, as he set her on her feet again. “Why you haven’t got your ice legs even yet, although we’ve walked down that long frozen pond.”

She laughed too. But the coincidence struck him. Why on earth should that have been the one stone of all those around, on which she should have chanced to trip? It was significant. Further, as they resumed their way, he noticed that the stone had been displaced, though ever so little. Even that circumstance sent an uneasy chill through him. It had been firm enough before. Could the frost have loosened it? Orcould any other agency? And then came the sound of approaching footsteps on the road above.

“Goodday, sir,” and the passing man saluted, respectfully enough. “Sharp, middlin’ weather, this, sir?”

“It is,” he answered, with a genial nod, and the man passed on.

“You remember what I told you about being under police surveillance,” he said as they entered the houseold Judy could be dimly heard grumbling at her ancient proprietor through the back of the kitchen door.

“Yes,” answered the girl wonderingly.

“Well that was one of Nashby’s pickets.”

“What? That old yokel who just passed?”

Mervyn nodded, with a whimsical smile on his face.

“But what in the world does he think he’s going to discover?”

“Ah, exactly. Well, that’s his job, not mine. Only he’s wasting a precious lot of valuable time.”

All the same the speaker was just a trifleand unaccountablydisposed to uneasiness. What a curious coincidence it was, for instance, that his niece should have suddenly slipped and so nearly fallen, headlong, on that very stone that custodied this infernal thing! Then again, that the plain clothes man, with his unmistakable imprint of Scotland Yard, and his transparent affectation of local speech and dialect, should have happened upon the spot at the very moment of that coincidence! There was nothing in coincidence. Coincidence spelt accident:sheer accident. Still, this one set John Seward Mervyn thinkingthinking more than a bit.

Chapter Twelve.

The Shadow in the Place.

A fortnight had gone since Melian's arrival at Heath Hover, and she had picked up to such an extent that both she and her uncle found it difficult to realise that she had been seriously ill at all. He took her for drives, always carefully wrapped up, and she had revelled in the beauties of the surrounding country, winter as it wasthe wide vistas of field and wood, and the line of downs, sometimes near, sometimes far, stretching east and west as far as the eye could travel. But he absolutely refused, with a bracing sturdiness, to allow any practical incursions into the domain of archaeology.

"That will keep," he declared. "Old stones spell damp. You've got to steer clear of that for some time to come."

Then, as she got stronger, they had walked too, and the breezy, open uplands, contrasting with fragrant wood, did their share of the tonic. But this was not to last. A damp, muggy thaw set in, and the trees and hedges wept, the day through, under the unbroken murk of a wholly depressing sky; and you wanted very thick boots for underfoot purposes. Mervyn began to look anxiously at his charge.

"I'm afraid you'll be getting awfully fed up with this, dear," he said one morning, when the thin drizzle and the dripdrip from bare, leafless bough and twig seemed rather more depressing than ordinarily. "What can be done for you? Frankly I'm too poor to take you away to a more sunshiny climateor I would, like a shot. For my part I'm used to this sort of thing, and it doesn't 'get upon' me any. There was a time when it would have, but that time's gone. But for youwhy it's devilish rough."

Then Melian had reassured himhad abundantly reassured him. She didn't find it heavy, she declarednot she. Why, on top of her experience of bearleading a brace of utterly uninteresting and unengaging childrenand being at the beck and call of their detestable underbred mother, this was ideal. And she somehow or other managed to convey that her sense of the improvement was not merely a material one. Did they not get on splendidly together? Had they not any number of ideas in commonthose they had not, only serving to create variety by giving rise to more or less spirited but always jocose arguments? Rough on her? Dull for her? It was nothing of the sort, she declared with unambiguous emphasis. And the fascination of the open country, even with the weeping woodlands and soggy, miry underfoot, was coming more and more over her, she further declared. And her uncle was hugely gratified, more so than he cared to realise. This bright young presence lightening his lonely existence from morn till nighthow on earth would he be able to do without it again? Those long rambles, not by himself now, beset

as they had been with uncheering thoughts of the past and a less cheering vista of the future; the now cosy snug evenings by his own fireside, with the afterdinner pipe, listening to the girl's bright talk and entering into her ideas while the lamplight gleamed upon her golden head and animated eyesand she herself made up such a picture sitting framed in the big armchair oppositethe little black fluffy kitten curled up on her lap. Of a truth life held something yet for him after all, if only this were going to last. But now he said:

"How about getting that nice girl you were chumming withand she must be a nice girl from the way she wrote about youdown here to stop with you a bit, dear? Make a kind of relief from me, you know. Always stewed up from morning till night with an old fogeythe same old fogey at thatcan't be altogether lively."

"Violet? She couldn't come, if she wanted to ever so," was the answer. "She's entirely dependent on her joband, as it was, her people cut up rusty if she chucked it for a day or two when I was ill. What beasts people arearen't they. Uncle Seward?"

"We shan't quarrel on that question," answered Mervyn, sending out a long puff of smoke, and meditatively watching it resolve itself into very perfect rings in mid air. "A very large proportion are, and that just the proportion which could best afford not to be. Doesn't she ever get any time off then? Holidays?"

"She'll get about four days off at Easter time. It would be jolly to get her down here then, poor old Violet. She does work, and she's a good sort. It's precious lucky I had her to go to when I did."

"Precious lucky for me too."

"Look here, Uncle Seward," said the girl, gravely. "Don't talk any more about old fogeys and it being heavy and slow for me, and all that. I don't want to be disrespectful, but it'serit's bosh."

Mervyn burst into a wholehearted laugh. The answer, and, above all, the look which accompanied it, the tone in which it was made, relieved him beyond measure.

"Is it? Very well, little one. We won't talk any morebosh. How's that?"

"'That' is. So we won't. Yes, we'll get her down here at Easter,"and then the girl broke off suddenly and looked graver still.

“Listen to me, Uncle Seward, and how I am running on,” she said. “Any one would think I had come here to live, instead of for a rest until I can find another job. And Easter is a long way off, and”

“And? What then?” he interrupted. “Of course you have come here to live. Do you think I’m going to let you go wasting your young life bearleading a lot of abominable brats while I’ve got a shack that’ll hold the two of us? Well, I’m not, then. How’s that?”

Melian looked embarrassed, and felt it.

“Uncle Seward,” she urged at last. “You said you werepoormore than once. Well, is it likely I’m going to sponge on you for all time? It’s delightful to be here with you, while I’m picking up again, but”

“‘But’,”and again he interrupted. “My dear child, I see through it all. You are going on the tack of the uptodate girl, wanting to be independent. There’s a sort of grandiloquent, comforting smack about that good old word ‘independent,’ isn’t there? Well, you can be just as independent as you like here. You can take entire charge. You can order me about as you want toI don’t say I shall obey, mindbut I shan’t complain. Well, if you go bearleading some woman’s cubs they won’t do the first, and they’ll do the last ad lib. Now then. Which is the lesser evil?”

Melian laughed outright. That was so exactly his brusque and to the point way of putting things. He went on, now very gently.

“I am getting an old man now, child, and I have led a very lonely life. In my old age it promises to be lonelier still. You are alone too. Is it mere chance that brings us together? But if you think you have a mission, may it not conceivably be one to look after the old instead of the young. So nowthere you are.”

The voice was even, matteroffact sounding. But underlying it was a note of feelingof real pathos.

“When I emphasised the fact of being poor,” the speaker went on, “I meant that I was in no position to indulge in luxuries, or outside jollification, like going abroad, for instance, to escape English winters, and so on. But you can see for yourself how this show is run, and that there’s plenty of everything and no stint, and what’s warm and snug and comfy for one is for two. That’s where the ‘poverty’ begins and ends.”

The girl got up and came over to him.

“Uncle Seward, I will stay with you as long as ever you want me,” she said gravely, placing her hands upon his shoulders.

“Hurrah! This old shack’s going to look up now,” he cried. “I’ll see if I can’t beat up some one young about the country side, to make things livelier for you, dear. And then, when it gets warmer and springlike, we’ll have such romps all over the country. Why these rotten old gargoyles with their noses rubbed offyou’ll soon know them all by heart, be able to write a book about them, and all that sort of thing. Can you ride a bicycle, child?”

“Rather, but”

“Oh well, I’ll get one for you. I’ve got mine stowed away. I never use it in winter, but at other times it’s handy forgetting about. Now we’ll have rare romps around together.”

She looked at him in something of astonishment. He was talking quite excitedly, quite loudly in fact, for him.

“Why, you’re scaring the poogie,” she cried, with a laugh. “Look. It has gone under the table.”

The little black kitten had dived under the table, and thence now began to emit a series of growls. Melian was puzzled.

“What’s the matter with it?” she said. “Oh, I suppose it hears another poogie out in front, and resents it. But it’s generally so placid, even then.”

But to Mervyn’s mind came an uncomfortable chill. He had known just such a demonstration before, but on one occasion only. And now it was behaving in exactly the same way. Its shrill growlings even increased. Melian dived into the shadow to coax it out, then reappeared, holding the tiny creature aloft.

“Poogie. What’s the matter with you?” she cried. “Be quiet now, and go seeps again.”

But though it curled itself on her lap, it showed no intention of going to sleep. Instead, it lifted its little fluffy head and growled again, though not so furiously as it had done when alone.

“I do believe it’s afraid of something,” said the girl, wonderingly. “It must be something outside. Look. It’s staring towards the window.”

Mervyn could not for the life of him account for it, but that a cold shiver was running through his whole being, there could be no doubt. His back was to the window, the blinds were down and there was no draught. But right under this window, and against the wall, was the couch upon which the dead man had fallen asleepnever to wake again. And in this direction the kitten was now staringand growling; growling just as it had growled on that night of the opening of the door. And, more marvellous still, a feeling was upon him that he dare not look round, dare not turn his head and follow the little creature's set, unquiet glanceand that in the thoroughly warmed and now cheerful room. But Melian's voice and movement broke the spell.

"What is it, poogie," she was saying, advancing to the window, and incidentally to the couch. "Another poogie outside or a dogOh, you little beast!"

She had broken off suddenly, dropping the kitten on to the table, under which it promptly dived and crouched, growling again. For it had grown perfectly frantic as she was carrying it to the window and had struck its claws into her hand, drawing blood.

Mervyn sprang to his feet.

"What? It has scratched you?" he cried, taking the long white hand and examining it concernedly.

"Oh, it's nothing," laughed the girl.

"Nothing or not, we'll bathe it a bit," he said, going over to the sideboard, and dashing some water into a tumbler. "Any sort of wound should be bathed at once, just in case there might be something left in it," and he proceeded to perform that process then and there.

"Oh, it's all safe," laughed the girl. "Poor little poogie! I suppose it was scared over something and had to get away at any price. I'm dead cert, it didn't mean it."

"Nono," assented Mervyn. "Cats are extraordinarily 'nervy' things. I believe they've a sight more imagination than they're given credit for. It's quite likely it was aware of something outside to which it had an objection, a stoat perhaps or even a badger. Now a dog would have barked the house down, but there'd have been no scare."

"Of course. By the way, Uncle Seward, I wonder you don't keep a dog or two. They are such jolly beasts to haveespecially in a place like this."

“I’ve tried it, and they’ve disappeared. They get into the coverts you know, and then! I don’t care to keep one always on a chain. It’s beastly rough luck on them.”

He had tried it, and the dogs had disappeared, even as he had said. They had done so, however, on their own initiative. But he did not tell her this.

Yet it struck him that she must instinctively have graspedor been affected bysomething of the “influence” which at times seemed to haunt the place. She, too, now kept looking towards the blinddrawn window, and that not in her natural way. So far he had guarded her from any rumours from outside as to its sinister repute; and, as we have said, had threatened the old couple with the last extremity if they should let go anything. And now, just as he was congratulating himself that she would settle down quite happily and contentedly, comes this untoward mysterious making towards upset. And now, all at once, she had grown quite grave, quite subdued.

“Uncle Seward,” she said, suddenly. “Do you remember what I said the night I arrivedthat this place ought to be haunted?”

“Yes, dear, and I remember my answerthat every place not screechingly new, etc, etc, is supposed to be.”

“Well, is it?”

The directness of the question was a trifle staggering, coming just when it did.

“Well, I’ve been in it some monthsall alone too, mind you,” he answered, “and I’ve never seen anything. All alone, mind,” he reiterated, “through long, dark winter evenings and nights. Of course, that poor chap coming to grief here so mysteriously, might give rise to all sorts of yarns among the yokels. But then, where is the housebuilt longer ago than last yearin which some one or other hasn’t died? No, child; you mustn’t bother your little gold head over such boshy ideas as that. And if you listen to all the old women of both sexes round the country side, why half of them are afraid to cross their village street after dark, unless some one invites them to the pub.”

She laughed; yet somehow or other her laugh did not ring quite spontaneous.

“Of course,” she said. “But”

“Butwhat?”

“Oh, nothing. As you say, it’s astonishing how one’s imagination can play the fool with one. Tell me, Uncle Seward, do you believe in that sort of thing?”

“What? In imagination? Of course I do.”

“Nono. I mean in places being haunted, and apparitions and all that?”

“No. Certainly not. The Christmas numbers have a great deal to answer for in that line. Surroundings, solitude, the state of your nervesthe weather, evenall do the rest. You can get yourself into a state which I believe theologians call ‘the dispositions’which done into plain English means that if you want to see a thing, you can, in the long run, bring yourself to see itin imagination.”

“Only in imagination. You’re sure you mean that, Uncle Seward?”

“I should rather think I was sure. Go to bed now, child,”she had lighted her candle“and chuck out all that sort of disquieting bosh. Why, we are as jolly here together as we can be, and we are going to be ever so much jollier. So chuck these imaginingsby the way, just because the little poogie starts growling at nothing in particular. Eh? Sounds rather absurd doesn’t it?”

“It does rather,” she said, with a laugh as they bade each other goodnight. But there was just a subtle something about her laugh, about her tone of voice, even about the expression of her eyes, that left her uncle in a state of vague uneasiness. Something must have occurred to alarm her; but then women were “skeery” creaturesespecially where the imaginative element came in. But for all that he didn’t want even this to come in where Melian was concerned.

He sat on, after she had gone, sat on over the cosy fire, thinking. He could hear her footsteps overhead as she crossed and recrossed her roomcould hear her sweet young voice trilling forth snatches of all sorts of melodies, and again he blessed the chance that had sent her here to him in his loneliness.

He lighted another pipe, and tilted a final “nightcap” out of the square bottle at his elbow. The little black kitten jumped lightly up on to his shoulder and rubbed its soft little woolly shape against his cheek, then dropped down on to his knees and sat purring.

What could have occurred to set up a scare in the child, he wondered? Something hadobviouslybut he had purposely evaded pressing the point for fear of making it too important. Well, if it came to getting on her nerves, he would, by hook or by crook get her awayat any rate for a time. As a matter of hard fact he had grown attached to Heath

Hoverstrangely soand he occupied it practically rent free, that was for the sheer keeping of it up; and this was a consideration. Also he enjoyed a fair modicum of sportlikewise free. But if it were to come to making a choice between this and his niecewhy by now he knew that there would be no sort of difficulty in deciding.

He dropped more and more into the dreamyand rather contentedstage. He was looking forward to a very pleasurable time before him when the year should grow and mellow into glorious spring and golden summer. The sound of footsteps overhead had ceased now, and that for some time. She was asleep, and had forgotten her uncanny imaginings. He found himself looking forward to the morrow when she would be with him againher sweet, quick, animated face, and the golden hair shining in the sunlight.

And then?What was this? A sudden pounding of feet overheada strange, half stifled crya rush down the old creaky stairs. In a fraction of a second he was at the door, and as he opened it, framed against the dark background of passage and staircase, Melian was standing, her face set with a strange horror that seemed to turn the spectator's blood to ice, the blue eyes dilating in a wild stare, as though they sawor had seensomething not of the earth earthly.

Chapter Thirteen.

The Stone again.

“Well? What is it, dear? Forgotten something?”

With an effort he had put on a light, matteroffact tone. He pretended not to notice her perturbation.

“No. But”

She looked genuinely distressed, worse stillgenuinely frightened. She almost pushed past him in her anxiety to get into the full light, and he noticed a quick movement of half turning the head as though to look behind her.

“Butwhat? I think it’s that bit of fried plum pudding; still, the touch of burnt brandy on it should have counteracted its effects,” he went on, keeping up the rôle. “Nightmare of course. And our solemn discussion before you turned in would make that way.”

“No, no,” and she shook her head, decisively. “I wish it was. As sure as I sit here, Uncle Seward, there was a Something in the room. I heard itfirstheard it moving, but for the life of me I dared not move myself, not even to light the candle. It was the sound of stepsof light stepscoming towards the bed. Oh, it was horribleawful?” she broke off, with a quick, scared glance around as though still expecting to see something. “And thenwait a bit,” seizing him by the wrists. “Something cold and clammy touched my face, just touched itlike the feel of dead fingers. I could see something shadowy too in the light of the fireand then I just dashed out of bed and came straight down here.”

“Melian, pull yourself together child,” he said gently. “You’ve had a bad dream, coming on top of what we were talking about.” But the look on her face was that of one who had had a very bad scare indeed, and somehow Mervyn had been under the impression that his niece was the sort of girl who would take a great deal of scaring. “Here, put this down. It’ll pull you together.”

“This” was a glass of port, which he had got out of the sideboard. She sipped a little, and looked as if she didn’t like it, then a little more, and felt better.

“That’s right,” he went on. “Now, look here, you’ve been using that room for over a fortnight, and have never thought of bothering about anything of the kind. Why I slept in it myself for several nights before you came.”

He had meant the assurance to be reassuring, but hardly had he made it than Mervyn saw he had made a false step.

“But why did you sleep in it, Uncle Seward?” said the girl, quickly.

“Eh? Why to see that it was comfortablenot damp and all that sort of thing.”

He wondered if she accepted this explanation. In his heart he doubted it.

“The cold touch on your face was probably a bat,” he went on. “Do you sleep with your window open?”

“Oh yes, always.”

“There you are then. I think we’ve got at the solution. Now let’s go straight up and look for the bat.”

He had as yet not gauged the extent of his niece’s knowledge of natural history, and would have given much to have had a real live bat in his possession at that moment, that he might privily have set it loose when they gained the room. She, however, seemed not inclined to question the probability of bats hawking around at large in what was nearly midwinter!

“Now,” he said, holding up the light, and making a careful inspection of the room, “we’ll find him probably, hanging on somewhere in the corner. No,” after an exhaustive search. “Oh well, he’s probably gone out by the way he came. Better keep the window nearly up to the topthen he can’t get back again.”

“Do you think it was really that, Uncle Seward?” Melian asked.

“Why of course,” he answered with the uneasy consciousness of skating on thin ice. “Unless it was a common or house mouse which had found its way in through somewhere. But now you go to bed again, child, and I’ll come up and turn in too. Then you’ll know there’s some one right near you, and all you’ve got to do is to knock on the partition in case you get another scare. It’s not a very thick one, and I shall hear at once. But you mustn’t get another scare, if only that there’s nothing on earth to get scared at. Lookyou can see all over the room now. It’s just an ordinary roomold, but with no secret panels or anything of that kind, and I’m only just the other side of that partition. You’ll sleep like a humming top now, I should think.”

“I believe I will,” she answered, feeling more reassured by his tone of decisive confidence, the recent glass of port, to one unaccustomed, contributing largely to that end. “Tell me, Uncle Seward, do you think me an awful fool? I wouldn’t like that?”

“My dear child, of course I don’t. All women get nervy at timesnot only women eitherfor the rest the plum pudding, and the subject of conversation. Now goodnight, darling, you’ll be as jolly as Punch in the morning. And remember, there’s only the partition between us.”

Even as her uncle had predicted, the girl laid her head on the pillow perfectly reassured and calmed, and in no time was breathing softly and evenly in a dreamless sleep. But this did not fall to Mervyn’s lot. The incident had banished all sleep from his mind. He had laughed off the situation, and effectually soothed Melianin fact he was surprised to think how completely he had succeeded. But what if something of the sort recurred, and he found that it got too much upon the girl’s nerves, and that, too, just as he flattered himself that everything was going on so well? There were reasons why he did not want to leave Heath Hover; reasons over and above his undoubted attachment to the placeand they were very vital reasons indeed; perhaps not wholly unconnected with Inspector Nashby.

He put up the window sash and leaned out. The night, was wild and rather heavy, and a moist earthy odour came up from the saturation of the fallen leaves in the wet woodland. Away on the bank, up towards the head of the long pond, a fox barked several times. He liked the sound, he liked all the sounds of the lonely night, and when an owl floated out on noiseless pinions and hooted beneath the murky skyhe could just make out its shadowy shapethat too, fitted in with his mood. There was a moon, a feeble one, and concealed behind the prevailing mistiness, but in such light as it afforded he could pick out the boardings which held up the steps of the footpath leading up to the sluice. And on one of these the round stone stood out just discernible.

Just discernible! To his gazeto his then moodit seemed the one thing discernibleit and the thing that it heldthe thing that it entombed. And the pointed roundness of that thing seemed to rise from the earth and gleam dull white in the lacklustre of the night.

There it had lain for weeks, and for weeks, almost nightly, as now, he had gazed out upon the tomb of itjust as he was doing nowwith a strange, uneasy, but wholly compelling fascination. Why had he left it there all this time? Any chance movement, on anybody’s part, might dislodge the stone. Why, his niece had slipped on it, the first day she had been at Heath Hover! The time had come to bury this thingthis accursed thingfar away from any possibility of it being unearthedat any rate in his lifetime. After that it would not matter.

A stout bag, a stone or two, and the deepest centre of Plane Pond would custody it until the crack of doom. And yetand yetsomehow he had never been able to bring himself to touch it again. Was it that some instinct moved him to decide that the best hiding place for anythingor anybodywas the least likely hiding place? If so, the middle of that path stairway assuredly was that.

The observation, of which he had spoken laughingly, contemptuously to his niece, was another factor in the situation. All shut in as the place was, Mervyn knew that he could never absolutely count upon a single moment when he could safely declare himself free from such observation. In the day time he certainly could not. In the hanging woods, on the road, anywhere, there was always the possibility of the presence of those who could see him while he could not see them.

But what about the darkthe night time?

Simple enoughdoesn't it seem? But there was that about the thing that he wantedor might have wantedto removethat rendered the effecting of that process in the dark out of the question. Yet, all things considered, as he told himself here, tonight, not for the first timewhy should he trouble his head about it at all? Why should he not let well alone?

A life of solitude and selfconcentration breeds awell, a not altogether satisfactory state of mind; which for present purposes may be taken to mean that this thing had got upon Mervyn's mind. It was too closetoo near to him altogether. He would fain have known it farther away. Furthermore, there were all sorts of possibilities shrouding around the fateful thing which were wholly outside of such considerations as Inspector Nashby, and other peopleup to date. And since the advent of his niece, with her youth and brightness, and above all, affectionwhich he had seen growing day by day to irradiate his lifethe necessity of getting rid entirely and completely of this fateful horror had been growing upon him more and more.

He listened. No sound came from the other side of the partition. The girl had gone to sleep then, comfortably, calmly, as he thought she would. Some impulse now drew him to effect what he had long been contemplating, to remove that sinister thing beyond all chance of human eye ever falling upon it again. Everything favoured this. The night was here, and the night was not too dark, while just dark enough. Another instinct told him that now was the time, now was his chance.

He pulled out a drawernoiselessly, then another drawer. Yeshere was what he soughta pair of thick gloves; butit was an old pair, and the ends of some of the fingers were in

holes. He looked at them dubiously. There was a great deal underlying the fact of those gloves being in holes, it seemed. Then he put them on.

He listened againintently. Still no sound on the dead, soundless night. He fancied he could hear the girl's soft, regular breathing, in tranquil slumber, through the partition. That was just what he wanted. He had told her he would be there, if she had occasion to call him; but now, what he wanted to effect would take some time, nearly half an hour perhaps. What if she were to awake suddenly, in an agony of fear, and to call for him, and he were away in the dark woodland path up towards the pond head! Well, there were chances in everything.

He listened againthen opened the door silently, and went down the stairs, keeping to the end of each step to minimise the chances of it creaking. As noiselessly as possible he opened the hall door, then listened again.

All was still. He could hear the ticking of the clock in the livingroom, and to him it sounded loud. But for the rest nothing was audible. He went out, and the faint puff of the night air wafted round his face. All was still. Not even the ululating voice of an owl, in or over the dark woods, floated out to break it. Mervyn realised that his nerves were somewhat athrill as he placed his first step on the path stairway. And yetand yetat his age, and with his experience, why should they be? It was ridiculous.

There was the stone. One wrench, and what he wanted would be in his hand. He looked around, not quickly nor directly, but in a casual manner; taking fully a minute over the process. But as he turned to the stone again a kind of influence seemed to spring from it, almost assuming the tones of a voice. "You cannot. You dare not," it seemed to say. Then came reaction.

"Oh, can't I? Daren't I?" he repeated scornfully to himself. "We'll see."

He bent over the stone now, at the same time drawing the finger ends of his holed gloves as far forward as possible, as though to cover as far as might be, the defects of those same holes. Then he stood upright again, and continued his stroll up towards the sluice. For ever so faint a sound had caught his ear.

"Good evenin' Mr Mervyn, good evenin' sur. Fine evenin' to get the air, surely."

"Ah, goodevening, Pierce. Yes. A breath of air makes you sleep better in this February weather, eh?"

Sir John Tullibard's head keeper had been looking up the pond. Now he turned, the glow of the bowl of his short clay pipe showing dull red in the gloom.

"That it do, sur. But I could sleep middlin' without that," answered the man, with a grin.

"I'd say something about a pint of ale, Pierce," went on Mervyn, "but I don't want to risk disturbing Miss Seward. She sleeps light, andwell, do you know, I'm afraid she's getting a bit of a scare on about the old place. I only hope no one has been chattering over all the old silly yarns about it to her, eh?"

"That haven't I, sur," answered the man.

"Well, get the pint tomorrow instead of tonight," said Mervyn, and something changed hands. "Still, I believe she must have overheard some one chattering; yet I've rubbed the fear of the Lord into old Joe about it."

"Thank'ee sur. No, I don't know as how anything of the sort could have been nabbled around. Folks have been mighty careful since the strange gent's affair, sur. They won't talknot they. Think maybe they'll be 'pulled' over that."

"Do they. Well, long may they go on thinking so at that rate. But, do you know, I'm rather getting fed up with that business myself, and am always wishing to Heaven the poor chap had picked out some one else's hospitable roof to go and end up under, or that I hadn't heard, and had left him where he was in the first instance. It would have come to the same thing in the long runor rather the very short runand would have saved me no end of bother."

"Why, yes, sur, it would have done that surely. Thank'ee again, sur, and goodnight."

Mervyn had judged it time to go in. And as he walked back over the fateful stone again he found himself wondering whether the keeper's presence there was really accidental after all. Was Nashby privily employing the whole countrysideor such of it as was trustworthyto keep watch on himtireless watch by night as well as by day? Further, had Pierce actually seen him stop and bend over the stone? That would finish things. Mervyn's head and forehead were not quite dry as he noiselessly reentered his front door, and that in spite of the now chilly atmosphere of the night.

Chapter Fourteen.

The Coming of Helston Varne.

“I’m thinking we can about decide to give up the Heath Hover business as a bad job,” said Inspector Nashby to his auxiliary, one night as they sat over whisky and water and pipes, in the inspector’s snug private quarters in Clancehurst.

“Are you?” said the other, in a matter of fact way.

“Why, yes. There’s nothing in it, absolutely no clue whatever. So far, no one has come forward to make even so much as an enquiry as to the identity of the dead man, and, if you remember, he looked foreign. Mervyn, too, said he talked with a slightly foreign accent. Now all that goes to show the thing couldn’t well have concerned Mervyn. Where’s the motive? That’s what I want to locate. I’m all for motive. Show motive, and it won’t be long before you get your case right home. That’s what I sayalways have said.”

“Motiveeh?”

“Yes. Motive. Now what the deuce motive could Mervyn have had for doing away with this chap? First he fishes him out of the ice, in the middle of a dead cold snowstormy night, at some risk to himself; then he takes him in and does for him in the most hospitable manner.”

“‘Does for him’Is that a joke, Nashby?”

“Well, no. But what I’m getting at issupposing Mervyn had a motive for wanting this fellow in Kingdom Come, all he had to do was to leave him in the water. See? He needn’t have gone to the bother of hauling him out at all.”

“So Stewart seemed to think,” was the answer. Stewart had been the speaker’s predecessor in the private investigation of the case, but had come pretty much to the same conclusion that the local police official had, that it was hardly worth while going on with. This man had then appeared on the scene to take it up, rather to Nashby’s astonishment. To the latter he was an “outside” man, but he had come properly accredited. To tell the truth, he had come as rather a nuisance. Nashby wanted the discovery of whatever there was to discover to his own credit. He did not relish any one from outside coming in to benefit by his gleanings.

“I don’t want to say anything against Stewart,” went on the last speaker. “I expect he’s an excellent man, in his line. In fact, from what I hear, I’m sure he isin his line.”

“Well, butwhat the devil good are any one of us if it isn’t in his line?” said the inspector, feeling rather nettled, but pushing the cut glass decanteran ingredient of an appreciative public testimonial Tantalustowards the other as though to cover it. The said other might have smiled pityinglyhe felt like itbut did not.

“That sounds conclusive,” he answered. “Butit’s just when you get off your ‘line’ that you make discoveries. Now you know I’m not talking through my hat. I’ve had experiencesnot in this countrythat most of you here never get. I don’t say it to brag, mind, but as a bald statement of fact.”

“I know that, Mr Varne,” said Nashby, deferentially. “Well, we don’t get ’em, and it’s not our fault if we don’t.”

“Of course it isn’t. It’s all a question of opportunity. There are at least ten men in the world who would stretch a point to get me put out of the way, and at least four more who are vowed to do it. Out of these at least one will succeed sooner or later. But in that case it will puzzle you, and all the Yard, to find the motive.”

“You don’t say so!” said the inspector, gazing at the speaker, with a new access of veneration. “As we’re alone I don’t mind admitting I’m only a plain man who’s worked his way up, butsink me if I wouldn’t rather be out of the force than have so many desperate scoundrels sworn to do me down some time or other. Here, you see, we run some one to earthhe does his stretch and there’s an end of it. No malice borneand all that.”

The man who had been named as Varne could not repress the smile this time, at what to him was the simple grooviness of this country policeman, as he defined him in his own mind. But he managed to make the smile a goodnatured one.

“Ah, well, there are shaggier parts of the world than this, Nashby,” he said, mixing his glass again. “Here’s to the Heath Hover mystery.”

“And its unravelling,” answered Nashby, raising his own glass.

“I’ve been herelet’s see, how long have I been here? Three daysand a half, to be strictly accurate, and I’ve made one discovery, but only one.”

“What’s that?” said the inspector, brisking up.

“Well, it’s what I came in to tell you about. Butdon’t let it go to the rest of the Force.”

“Not me,” was the emphatic reply.

“Well then, Mervyn is hiding something.”

“Hiding something? Not the thing that did the job? Why there was no trace of any injury about the man.”

“No doubt. But Mervyn is hiding something. When I find that something we shall have the key to the whole mystery.”

“Well, we didn’t search the whole house,” said Nashby. “It would take about a week to do that, and only three or four rooms were used at all. We searched that weird old family vault of a cellar though. There’s nothing loose there. It’s firm everywhere. He showed us over it himself.”

“Of course he did. He’d have been a fool if he hadn’t. But what he’s hiding isn’t in the house at all. It’s outside.”

“Outside?”

Helston Varne nodded.

“Has a smack of that Moat Farm affair,” said Nashby, “only there they had something definite to finda body. Here we’ve nothing. But how did you get at that for a clue?”

“I’ve been down here three daysand a half, to be strictly accurate; there’s nothing like accuracy. Yet I’ve hit upon that much. The other day I thought I’d hit upon everything, but I hadn’t quite. It was just one of those exciting moments when you miss a thing just by a hairsbreadth, as it were. But it’s getting very warmvery warm indeed.”

Nashby filled a fresh pipe and said nothing. He was looking at the other enviously. Helston Varne’s reputation, among the secret few, was prodigious. If the scent was really getting very warm from his point of view, why then the mystery was as good as solved. But then, Nashby wanted the credit of solving it to be his own.

He wondered if Varne would manage things so that it might be. There was a good deal of the amateur about Helston Varne he had been given to understand, clever, marvellously clever as he had proved himself. At any rate, he was independent of material emolument, or at any rate seemed so. He seemed goodnatured too. Perhaps whatever

discovery he made he would contrive to let himNashbyget the benefit of some appreciable share in it.

The other smoked on in silence, the lamplight full on his strong, sunbrowned, clearcut facea sunbrown that showed he had won his reputation in tougher climates than thisas he had hinted to the inspector. Moreover, there was a marked difference between the two men which defined class distinction at a glance.

“Anything more known about this young lady who’s stopping at Heath Hover, Nashby, beyond what you told me?” said Varne suddenly.

“Why, yes. I got at something fresh today, only today.” And the inspector began to bristle up with a sense, as it were, of renewed importance. “Yes, only today, and I was going to tell you, but I was waiting to hear what you had to say first, Mr Varne,” he added deferentially. “She’s Mervyn’s niece right enough, on her mother’s side. Her father suicided. Jumped off a train, after taking a couple of thousand pound accident insurance tickets, which he handed to her, with a joking remark, overheard unfortunately for himfor themby a station inspector on the platform. Railway company repudiated liability, and there you are.”

“Clumsyvery,” pronounced the other, musingly. “Lord, what fools there are in the world, Nashby. Why, there were halfadozen ways of working that trick, perfectly successfully and carrying far more money with them too.”

“Then she went as a music teacher in a suburban villa, and got cleared out; I suppose she was too pretty, and the old woman got jealous.”

“I don’t know about that part of it, but she certainly is pretty,” said Varne. “She’s more. She’s lovely; and so absolutely uncommon looking. Well?”

“Then she went to stay with a girl friendand got ill. Her uncle heard of her, and got her down to keep house for him. So there you are again. I heard the particulars only this morning. The Yard can find out everything, you see.”

Whether the other saw or not, he smiled, enigmatically. Perhaps he was wondering whether “The Yard” knew as much about what his then colleague had been telling him as he did himself.

“She wasn’t there at the time of thehappening,” he said. “No, not tillwhat? Nearly a month afterwards? And now she has been there over a fortnight. No, Nashby. Whatever

the Yard can find outor can't,"again that smile came forward, "you can rule MisserSeward out of this business altogether."

The inspector felt a trifle disappointed. He thought he had found a new, and complicating, and rather interesting element in the case. He was a little inclined to feel rebellious against Helston Varne's opinion, but then he had a very considerable respect for Helston Varne.

"The tale about Heath Hoverit's rather interesting," went on the latter. "I might have said extraordinary, but then, I don't know. I've met with just such extraordinary cases in the course of my experience, and have been the means of unravelling at least two of them. Now I'm going to try and see if this one will hang up at all on the same peg as our mystery, butI don't know, I don't know."

He had subsided into a meditative, almost dreamy tone, gazing into the fire, and emitting slow puffs of smoke. Nashby was eyeing him with a touch of increased venerationlikewise expectation. He was hoping to get those narratives before their evening had closed.

"Have another whisky," he said, jumping up with alacrity. "I'm sorry, I'm sure. I ought to have seen you were empty."

"Thanks. By the way, do you mind telling me again what is precisely the source of scare that hangs round Heath Hover?"

Inspector Nashby looked as if he rather did mind, for he seemed to hesitate.

"Oh, it's only a lot of countryside superstition," he said. "But no one who took the place has ever been able to stick it long. I don't know either, that any one has ever seen anything. I think they only hear."

The other nodded.

"Just so. Reminds me of one of the cases I was just now referring to, one I was instrumental in clearing up. That was a matter of sound. I think I shall really have to obtain entrance to Heath Hover. You say this man gets it rent free?"

"At a nominal rent, yes."

"Well, why doesn't the owner pull it down, and run up another house on another site?"

“Becauseto put the matter nakedlyhe’s afraid to.”

“Afraid to?”

“Yes. Afraid it would bring him bad luckfatally bad luck. Old Sir John Tullibard’s a bit of a crank, and believes in that sort of thing. What’s more, he’s rather proud of owning a place with that kind of reputation.”

“And that doorwhat did you say it does?”

“Why, it opens of itself, when something is going to happen. It’s a curious thing that Mervyn should have sworn it did this very thing the night of this double barrelled event. But he didand stuck to it.”

“Yes. It’s certainly curious. Mervyn doesn’t strike me as the sort of man who’d decline to believe his eyesight. He’s rather a hardheaded looking chap I should say, and I can’t get anything out of the surrounding yokels about it. I’ve expendedlet me seeat least two half crowns in the neighbouring pubs during the three daysand a halfsince I came, trying to make them talk. But they shut up like steel traps when you try and get them on the subject of Heath Hover.”

“So they would,” said Nashby, “and for the reason that they hold it to be dead unlucky even to talk about the yarns that hang around the place.”

“Oh,” and Varne smiled. He had noticed that very reluctance about Nashby himself.

“Do you believe there’s anything in all that?” he said, facing the other with a very direct look. “You, yourself?”

“Well, the fact is, Varneand there’s no denying itvery curious things do happen in some places. Things that there’s no explaining or clearing up.”

“I agree with you, Nashbyas to the first. Very curious things do happen in some placesyes, very curious things. But as to there being no explaining them, or clearing them upwhy I don’t go with you there. Now look hereI don’t say it to bragbut given time, and no interference, and it being made worth my while, I undertake to disghost every haunted house in England.”

His keen face had lighted up. Nashby looked at him rather admiringly. The latter was an ordinary squareheaded, broadbuilt policeman, who, unarmed, would have advanced to

arrest an armed criminal without the smallest hesitation or wavering. But he was country born and bred, and country superstition is an ingrained thing.

“Well, Mr Varne, at that rate there’s a new line in front of you, and no mistake, and it ought to be a paying one,” he rejoined. “Why not begin on Heath Hover for one?”

“Because none of my conditions would apply to it. Timethat mightno interference, that certainly would not, for I should have to stay in the house for a while. Andmaking it worth it, would apply less still, since this Mervyn is only a tenant, doesn’t seem to care a damn about the haunting part, and is poor into the bargain you say?”

“Yes. He’s hasn’t got too much rhino. He was something in India and retired on a pension. He commuted about half of it to run an invention which he thought would make his fortune, and it didn’t.”

“Of course not. Inventions have been known to make fortunes, but practically never for the inventor. Now how could I get a look in at Heath Hover? It wouldn’t do as being concerned in this case, you know.”

“Oh Lord, no,” said the other, with some alacrity. “Why, it’s supposed to be dead and forgotten, and that’s just the stage at which we expect to be able to get something out of itif we ever do at all, that is.”

“Hasn’t he got any old oak in the place? Panelling, doorsthat sort of thing? Might work in on the connoisseur, scientific lay, don’t you see?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps. Yes, now I think of it there’s rather a rum old fireplace. It’s in the room where the door is, too, and, now I think of it again, the door itself is rather a quaint affair, with a curious handle, and lock, and all that. You could ‘make up’ a bit. You knowlook like a sort of scientific professor, and all that.”

“No. I don’t think I’ll make up. I’ll just chance it as I am. And I think, Nashby, that within the next day or two I shall have found out all about the inside of Heath Hoveras far as it concerns our case.”

Chapter Fifteen.

Overreachings.

It might have been somewhere in the middle of the morning, or a trifle earlier, that Mervyn, from his bedroom window descried a welllooking, comfortablydressed stranger leisurely descending the stairlike path which led down from the sluice, and him he eyed with curiosity, for visitors were scarce.

He himself, being unseen, was able to take in every detail of the new arrival's outward appearance with all the more ease and accuracy. He noted for instance that the other had a keen, clear, sunburnt face, and a light, firm, easy step, that showed the very pink of condition, that he was tall, and carried himself well, and then he fell to wondering who the devil he was and what he wanted. Some friend of Melian's perhaps, possibly a former admirerand somehow the idea of such a contingency seemed unpalatable. Here they werethe two of themas jolly as possible together; he, at any rate, didn't want any interloping nuisance from outside.

But from that his mind flew off to another conjectureone less palatable still. He had had about enough of mysterious strangers, he told himself. What if this one had come on the same sort of errand, and with the thought he slipped his Browning pistol into a handy pocket, and made up his mind to keep the other man carefully in front of him. Likewise he took his time about admitting the said other man.

"I'm afraid I'm taking rather a liberty," began the latter. "The fact is, Mr Mervyn, I'm particularly interested in old houses, old furniture, old panelling, and such like, and I have heard a good deal about Heath Hover in that line. Allow me to introduce myself,"tendering a card.

"Yes? Come in, MrHelston Varne," said the other, having glanced at it. "There are odds and ends of old sticks, but they are for the most part stowed away in unused rooms that would take about a week's dusting to render fit for entrance. That's a quaint old fireplace, if you notice."

"I should think it was," answered Varne, vividly interested. And then he expatiated in technical terms, which increasingly bored his host and made the latter wish him at the devil more heartily than ever. That was the worst of these collectors and antiquarians and people, they were always ramming their jargon down unappreciative throats. It was a pity Melian was not on hand, he began to think. She had an eye to all that sort of thing, and could answer with knowledge. And then he suddenly decided that his own boredom was the lesser evil. The stranger was a welllooking mana fine looking manand spoke

with a pleasant voice and refined accent. Her uncle preferred Melian fancy free, at any rate for some time to come. Were she here, these two would be finding out tastes in common. Yes, on the whole, he was glad she had driven into Clancehurst with old Joe after breakfast. Up till then he had not been glad; in fact, hardly was she out of sight than he had regretted not having accompanied her. It was rare indeed that he failed to accompany her anywhere; but that morning he had felt somewhat out of sorts.

The stranger passed from one thing to another, admiring the panelling and discanting thereon. Then he said:

“I should like to take another view of the house from outside, Mr Mervyn. It’s marvellously picturesque as seen from the road, and now I’ve seen the interior I shall be able to read new beauties into it.”

“Certainly,” assented Mervyn, beginning to think the speaker was a little over enthusiastic, or a little crackedonly he didn’t look the last. “We’ll go up to the road. The path you came down is the shortest.”

They went up, Mervyn contriving that the other should lead. When they gained the sluice, Varne stood expatiating afresh, on gables and old chimney stacks. His host was more bored than ever, and was wishing to this and to that he would straightway take himself off as he had come. Would he?

“That’s a curious old door I noticed in the corner of your room, Mr Mervyn,” he said, when he had exhausted his instructive technicalities, which Mervyn had defined to himself as a damned boring prosy lecture. “If I might venture to trespass upon your kindness for a minute or two further I should so greatly like to examine it. The fact is,” he went on, “I’m quite a stranger in these parts, I found a homely little pub quite by the merest chance, The Woodcock, at Upper Gidding, homely but cleanyou know it, I dare sayand I concluded to rest there for a day or two, and look around this lovely bit of country. I’ve got a bicycle with me, but I walked over here today.”

“Oh,” groaned Mervyn to himself. “That means I shall have to ask the fool to stay lunch, I suppose.”

“The fool” had turned, and was looking up the pond.

“Is thisexcuse me, Mr Mervyn, it must be. Is this the place they were telling me about where an unknown man was bravely rescued from drowning under the ice in the middle of the night, byby, I am sure, yourself?” And he turned to his host with a pleasant suggestion of admiration in his eyes.

“This is the place you mean, MrVarne. But I don’t know there’s anything particularly ‘brave’ in shoving out a ladder for the other fool to claw hold of.”

He spoke shortlyalmost rudely. This he recognised in time.

“I’m afraid I’m rather abrupt, Mr Varne,” he explained. “If so, excuse me. The fact is, I’ve been more than ‘fedup’ with that particular episode, and, not to put too fine a point upon it, I’m dead sick of the barest references to it. It was fairly unpleasant to me having the poor devil dying in my house, and all the nuisance of inquest and police investigations, and the rest of itas you can imagine. Now the whole thing’s a thing of the past, and I want to forget all about it.”

“Quite so, Mr Mervyn, quite so. It is I who must apologise.”

“Oh, no need for that. If you’re ready I shall be happy to show you that door.”

“That will be very good of you.”

They went down the path again, Mervyn still contriving that his visitor should lead the way. Halfway down, the latter stopped short.

“Here is another point that hitherto has escaped me,” he said. “That foreground of chimney stack, thrown out by the background of treemasses, leafless now, but even with a characteristic beauty at that‘winecoloured woods’ some one called itI forget whonow there’s a picture for you, one that a Yeend King for instance, would be at his best with, and still more so when it’s a soaring wall of foliage.”

“No doubt,” agreed Mervyn. And then he felt glad that the stranger had his back turned full towards him, for even he could hardly restrain a sudden, if ever so slight change of colour caused by that which now set all his pulses humming. For the said stranger’s right foot as he stood, was planted, firmly planted, on a stone, a rounded stone half embedded in the earth, and that foot was obviously, though stealthily, trying whether that stone was easily movable, or not movable at all. And with this consciousness a sudden resolve had come upon Mervyn.

“Yes, it’s all you say,” he went on, in an equable tone. “Are you an artist, may I ask, as well as a connoisseur in antiquities?”

“Oh well, only as amateur. I have done a little with the brushbut, only as an amateur.”

They had reentered the house, chatting lightly, easily. Then the visitor made a set at the door in the corner.

“Yes. That’s something of a bit of old work,” he pronounced admiringly. “Why there are connoisseurs who would give tall prices for that bit of wood, I can tell you, Mr Mervyn.”

“Then I wish to the devil ‘that bit of wood’ belonged to me,” returned Mervyn, with something of a sour grin. “They could have it and welcome. One door’s as good as another to me, as long as it shuts tight and keeps draughts out. I’d much rather have the ‘tall prices.’ Will you take a whisky and soda?”

“No thanks. I rarely touch spirits in the daytime. A ‘nightcap’ before turning in is a very good thing. Butyou’re very kind.”

He was feeling the graining of the door with his finger nails, then he turned the handle. This he held admiringly.

“Why, what a splendid piece of antique. This handle is worth a lot. And, what’s on the other side?”

“Only a black hole of a cellar, where I don’t keep anything. It’s too damp, for one thing. Like to see it?”

“Immensely.”

“Right. I’ll get a bit of candle and the key.”

Having done both, Mervyn opened the door.

“Mind the steps,” he said, holding the candle over the head of the other and still contriving that he should be in advance. “There are ten of them.”

“All right. I can seeWhat the?”

He broke off, turning to rush back. But it was too late. With the soft but quick closing of the door above and behind him, Helston Varne realised that he had made a fool of himselfas Nashby had not done; but this he did not know, for Nashby had not told him quite everything. Now he stood in dense, impenetrable pitchy blacknessand feeling very damp and chill at that.

“Well I’m damned?” he ejaculated to himself. “Well I am damned.” And sitting down on a cold stone step he began to think the matter out.

His gaoler the while, saying nothing, calmly withdrew the key from the lock and put it in his pocket. Then he went leisurely to the front door and looked out. There was no sign of anybody moving on the strip of lonely road above. He stood apparently unconcerned on the sluice, but in reality, listening intently. There were twitterings of small birds and the sweet singing of an early thrush, but of human footsteps or voices, or of wheels, there was no sound. Then he descended, equally leisurely. On one of the earth steps he paused; then, drawing out his handkerchief, blew his nose. The handkerchief dropped, by accident. He stooped to pick it up; was equally leisurely over the process too. Finally, when he did pick it up, he stood for a moment, stamping as though in the most natural way in the world to warm his feetor one footupon a stone. Then he returned to the house, but he had forgotten to return his handkerchief to his pocket. He was carrying itin a somewhat absent minded mannerin his hand. Incidentally, he was thinking that it was not an unmixed evil that old Judy should be suffering from a return of her “roomatics” that day, and should have remained “to whoäm.” There was no one at Heath Hover but himselfand his prisoner.

The latter, meanwhile, was beginning to experience what the expression “outer darkness” meant, for assuredly he was now in it. No glimmer of lightnot the very faintest, was there to relieve it. Black as impenetrable pitch. He waited till his eyesight should have been accustomed to the change to see if any stray dim thread came in from anywhere; a grating, a ventilator, what not? But none came. The door itself might have been cemented into the wall for any thread of light that came from it. But Varne felt no alarm. He was unarmed, but on that account felt no misgiving; “What was the game?” was the thought that held possession of his mind.

He struck a wax vesta and looked around. He was about halfway down the flight of stone steps. The walls of the vault glistened with slime and damp in the flickering light. Nashby had described the place exactly. He struck another. Yes. It was all solid, massive masonryhard, unyielding. But here he wasat about twelve middayentombed in a dungeon of blackest night. He began to feel interested. But, meanwhile, it was colddevilish cold.

Then, being there, he thought he might as well take a look round thiscellar, Mervyn had called iton his own, and to this end he cautiously descended to the bottom of the stone stairs. But of wax vestas he had only a limited supply, and it behoved him to be careful with them. Still he managed to obtain a good reconnaissance of the floor and walls, enough to bear out Nashby’s description of the place.

He returned up the steps. The door, he noticed, was quite smooth on this side, with no handle, andno key hole; so that any one shut in, as he was, might shout or call till the crack of doom. It fitted its aperture like a slab.

For the first time Varne began to feel a little uneasy. He was also feeling more than a little cold. The place had almost the temperature of an icevault. What if Mervyn had purposely shut him in and proposed to leave him here until cold and starvation had done their work? After all, he could pretend he had done the thing for a practical joke, and it would be difficult to prove the contrary. And the worst of it was heVarnehad given nobody the slightest idea as to where he intended going. Even Nashby would not have occasion to miss himnot for some days at any rate. But it certainly was getting most confoundedly cold.

He thought he would try the effect of knocking, and to this end got out the hardest thing about him, a substantial pocket knife to wit. Surely the rattattat would carry through the door. He also called out several times. Butno answer.

He began to feel resentfulgrim. Had he carried a pistol he would have felt himself justified in blowing the lock of the door awayif he could locate it, that is. But he had not. Really, this was past a joke. Andthe cold!

A very unpleasant idea now struck Varne. What if this vault really were a secret refrigerating chamber, in which, for purposes of his own, his “host” now intended to reduce him to frozen meat? He had taken pretty accurate stock of Mervyn during their brief intercourse, and had formed the conclusion that he was a man who would be quite capable of such a thing, given an adequate motive. It was a rotten way of ending a startlingly successful, though not much blazoned career, decided Helston Varne, sitting there in the inky blackness, his teeth now chattering like the proverbial castanets. But he almost told himself that he deserved it for being such a poisonous fool as to allow himself to be entrapped in so transparently callow a fashion.

The shadowless ink of the atmosphere weighed him down more and more, and strong man as he was, he felt that it was affecting his nerve. And the cold! His theory of the refrigerating chamber had now become a fixed idea. Oh, for lightfor warmth! He must have been hours in that dreadful vault.

He would make another trial. With the handle of the pocket knife he hammered again and again upon the door with all his might. Also he shouted, but his ordinarily strong voice sounded in his now appalled ears a mere quavering rumble. A moment’s pause to listen, andthe door opened.

Mervyn was standing looking at him with a faintly enquiring, halfamused expression on his face, Helston Varne almost staggered into the blessed light of day.