


THE MOUNT
MARUNCA
MYSTERY
HARRISON OWEN



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THE
MOUNT MARUNGA MYSTERY.

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BY
HARRISON OWEN.

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CHAPTER I.

LOVE IN A SNOW STORM.

LOOKING back on the tragic early morning of June 24th, 19—, and the startling events that followed, the whole affair seems too horribly fantastic to have taken place here in Australia. A man was murdered—shot while in his room at a large and fashionable hotel. It was a gruesome and mysterious tragedy; in itself, though, it would scarcely justify the extended treatment which I purpose giving to my narrative as a whole; my justification being the chain of incidents which succeeded the tragedy, and which must surely form one of the strangest stories in the annals of Australian crime.

The Mount Marunga murder and certain of the events which followed have, of course, been described in the newspapers; but, so far as the public is concerned, there is much that remains unexplained. The complete history of the murder, the events leading up to it, its bizarre sequel, and the ultimate solution of the mystery surrounding it, I, Richard Maxon, now set about to record fully for the first time. Even after a lapse of years, when I recall those weeks of agony and doubt, of alternate hope and despair, of plotting and striving, through which I and one who was very dear to me passed, I ask myself if it is

worth while again to live through them in retrospect. The answer is that there are certain suspicions which have never been effectively dispelled, and which, even now, may cause injustice to be done to innocent persons. Therefore, I have determined to make public the whole of the facts.

Bound up with this history are certain personal details connected with my wooing of Mabel Tracey; but, as they have a direct bearing upon subsequent events, I make no apology for including them in my story. Two persons in the throes of the tender passion described by Dryden as "the noblest frailty of the mind," have formed the subject of a million stories.

"The Book or Life," says Wilde, "begins with a man and a woman in a garden." This book begins with a man and a woman in a snow storm. Snow storms are not a common feature of Australian life, but they are common enough at Mount Marunga in winter. They are one of the things that make the place so popular and its leading hotel so profitable. Situated some miles from Melbourne, Mount Marunga is Victoria's most fashionable winter resort. There, in May, June, and July, go those who delight in ice-hockey, ski-ing, and long walks in the cold mountain air, which stings one's face and sets the blood tingling in one's veins. They go to Mount Marunga, that is, if they have the necessary leisure and the necessary cash.

But let not the reader mistake the narrator for one of the "idle rich." Greatly though it would please me to be able honestly to gratify what is apparently a fairly general liking for wealthy persons as the leading characters of a story, I am forced to admit that

for years I have made a comparatively honest, but by no means luxurious living by the sweat of my pen. Among the house party at the Mount Marunga Hotel I was, relatively, a pauper. An annual holiday in the demesne of snow was one of my extravagances.

If, however, you like your heroine to be rich, the desire is one which I can honestly grant you. Mabel Tracey, with whose name—if you belong to the sex that reads the social gossip in the newspapers—you are doubtless familiar, was one of Australia's most notable heiresses. Her father, Henry Tracey, had started life as a small farmer, and, when still a middle-aged man, had become an enormously wealthy pastoralist; the owner of huge tracts of rich grazing country and countless heads of stock. Left a widower when his daughter, Mabel, was a child of ten, Tracey had lavished upon the girl the affection which formerly she had shared with her mother, whom the pastoralist had married in the days when great struggles and greater ambitions went to the moulding of the strong and resolute character that was his. Mabel had the indifference to wealth which is possible only to the wealthy, and so did not hesitate to show that she reciprocated the regard which I felt for her, and which, owing to the barrier of her riches, I had for long endeavoured to conceal.

I had met Mabel at Mount Marunga the year before this story opens. For a time I knew her simply as "Miss Tracey," a charming, unsophisticated girl, who gloried in the open air and all the clean and decent things of life. I had gone for long tramps with her by day, and had been badly beaten by her at billiards on several successive evenings before I learned that

she was the daughter and heir of Henry Tracey. The knowledge came to me rather as an unpleasant shock, for the hours I had spent in her company had already caused me to conceive for her a liking which, I was quick to recognise, was destined to grow to something stronger and more intimate. But Miss Tracey's unaffected pleasure in my company, and her father's cordiality had in time made me feel that, for one professing democratic principles, there was a good deal of snobbishness in my idea that the fortune that would one day be hers created a gulf between us. When my leave was at an end, we parted, on the understanding that we were to meet in Melbourne on her return a few weeks later.

During the year that followed I had seen Mabel intermittently, and the conviction was forced upon me that if ever there was to be a Mrs. Richard Maxon it could only be the daughter of Henry Tracey. June came round once more, and again I went to Mount Marunga, and again Henry Tracey and his daughter were staying at the hotel. But this time there was another—the second Mrs. Tracey. Only a week previously the pastoralist had caused a sensation in what those who compose it call “society” by taking unto himself a young and undeniably attractive wife. The surprise caused by this action upon the part of an apparently incorrigible widower of fifty-eight, was heightened by the fact that the lady of his choice was not known to those people whose doings furnish material for the society paragraphists. Her name, prior to her second marriage, was Mrs. Hilda Gordon; she was said to be the widow of an Indian army officer, and had only recently arrived in Australia. Tracey's

wooing of the lady had been a secret even from his daughter, who had been informed of his intention of marrying a second time only a few hours before the event took place at a registry office.

The second Mrs. Tracey was a tall, handsome woman, of, I should have imagined, about thirty-one or thirty-two years of age, but feminine friends assured me that she was "thirty-six if a day." She was a lively companion, a clever conversationalist, and altogether a distinctly fascinating woman. Mabel, I know, did not relish having a step-mother, especially one who had been presented to her so suddenly.

Viewing the matter selfishly, I decided that Henry Tracey's second marriage was by no means distasteful to me. Mabel need now have no compunction in leaving her father, and the fact that Mrs. Tracey would, of course, come into a large share of Tracey's money, made Mabel less distressingly wealthy. These thoughts had been occupying my mind as, with Mabel by my side, I tramped through the snow. One of those snow-storms which for me, and for Mabel also, were not the least attractive feature of the Mount Marunga season, was in progress. The ground was covered inches deep with a soft fleece, and flakes were falling fast, filling the mountain air as with a thick white mist. We had set out that morning to climb to Scotney's Look-out, and toward midday the snow had begun to fall. We had gone too far to turn back, even had we so desired, and now after an hour's walk in the storm, we were ascending the path that led to

the shelter shed, only a couple of hundred yards distant, on the summit of the mount.

Reaching the shed, a fair-sized octagonal building, we shook the snow from our clothes and sat down to rest until the storm should subside.

“It was a glorious climb!” exclaimed Mabel, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks aglow.

“Great!” I assented.

“Oh, you did enjoy it?” she inquired in a tone of feigned surprise.

“Rather! Why do you ask?”

“Because I timed you by my wristlet watch, and, prior to our arrival here, you had not spoken for eleven minutes.”

“I’m sorry. I hope you have not been bored.”

“I’m never bored when there is snow, and fresh air, and a hill to climb, but you have not been a very dazzling companion, dear Richard the Silent.”

“To tell you the truth, Mabel, I was thinking.”

“Poor boy! Was the pain very great?”

“Somethink horful—at times.”

“Can I do anything to alleviate it?”

“Yes, a great deal,” I replied.

Something in my tone, for I had suddenly dropped badinage and become earnest, caused her to give me a quick glance.

I took her hand in mine. “Do you know what I was thinking of, Mabel?” I asked.

“How should I?”

“Well, I think you could guess.”

Her cheeks, pink with the cold and the exertion of our climb, took on a deeper flush. “If you want

me to answer a—a conundrum you had better tell me what it is," she suggested.

"Just this—if a poor man loved a rich girl and he asked her to marry him, what would people say?"

"The—er—conundrum scarcely seems worth an answer."

"Well, I'll put another: What would the girl say?"

"It would depend upon the man," she replied, slowly and hesitatingly.

"I suppose it would—and the girl."

"And the girl," she assented.

"You can guess who the man is who wants an answer to the conundrum?"

"I'm not much good at guessing."

"And I'm afraid I am not good at proposing."

"At *what*?" she exclaimed.

"At proposing. It may not sound much like it, my dear, but this is a proposal of marriage."

She took a quick breath and seemed intent upon examining the point of her boot. "Dear me," she murmured, "who would have thought it."

"You must excuse my clumsiness," I remarked, "but, you see, I haven't had any practice. But seriously, Mabel, I think you know my feelings for you, and if you had been the daughter of a poor man, or a man of moderate income, I would long ago have asked you to make me the happiest fellow in the world by promising to become Mrs. Dick Maxon; but your absurd wealth has frightened me, and I have—have put it off. But, my dear, I can't remain silent any longer—is there any chance for me?"

There was a short silence, which it seemed to me was destined to last for the term of our natural lives, and I suddenly acquired a horrible feeling of emptiness in the pit of the stomach.

"I suppose," remarked Mabel, still examining the toe of her boot—"I suppose I should remark 'This is so sudden!'"

"I believe it is the usual thing," I murmured, trying hard to camouflage the impatience and apprehension with which I was awaiting her answer.

"Well, I am not going to say anything of the kind," she said, raising her head and looking me frankly in the eyes. "I think you have been a beastly long while coming to the point, Dick Maxon, considering all—all the unmaidenly encouragement I have given you."

I threw my arms around her and drew her to me. "Do you mean to say that your answer is 'Yes'?" I asked her.

She allowed her head to rest upon my shoulder. "Don't be silly," she murmured, "you will be asking me to give it to you in writing next."

CHAPTER II.

REVELRY BY NIGHT.

THE day following the episode at Scotney's Look-out, June 23, was the date of the Mount Marunga Hotel ball. This was a big annual function which was always enjoyed by the guests at the hotel. Although not a great dancing man, I, too, had looked forward to it, for Mabel was to be there, and a ball always afforded opportunities for delightful intercourse. It was the last week of my holidays, and we had agreed that to-morrow I should ask Henry Tracey's consent to my engagement with his daughter.

The ball for a couple of weeks had been the main topic of conversation among the hotel guests, of whom there were over one hundred and fifty. It was a plain and fancy dress affair, and while many of the men were content to attend in ordinary evening dress, the majority of the ladies had for days been busily engaged in designing fancy costumes, or trying on or altering costumes they had ordered from Melbourne. When the dancing was in full swing the big ballroom presented an animated scene, the numerous lights, for which the electricity was supplied by the hotel's private plant, shining down upon the dancers, gleaming in the hair of

women, investing their bare shoulders with a white radiance, and causing their jewels to sparkle until it almost seemed that they were emitting sparks of fire. There was an infinite variety of fancy costumes, many of them beautiful, some bizarre or grotesque, and others merely commonplace. A string band occupied a small gallery at the northern end of the hall, and sundry cosy nooks, screened by arrangements of palms and pot-plants, were placed at intervals around the room. The spirit of carnival was abroad, and the fun waxed fast and furious.

I confess that for a time, during the earlier part of the evening, my newly-found happiness seemed in danger of eclipse, for jealousy gnawed at my—well, whatever part of the anatomy it is accustomed to feed upon. With so many men, young and middle-aged, anxious to dance with her, it was absurd for me to expect to have Mabel to myself, but those afflicted with the malady of love are apt to mislay their sense of proportion, and suffer in consequence. On four occasions I had attempted to get near Mabel, and each time she had been led off by someone else. twice by a fellow named Hector Blunt, for whom I had conceived an intense dislike when first I met him, long before I had come to regard either myself or him as suitor for Miss Tracey's hand.

The fact that Blunt had almost as many pounds as I had shillings—he had been born with a golden corkscrew in his fist, being one of the Blunt & Bayley crowd, the big wine merchants—did not tend to mitigate my misery as I watched him fox-trotting with Mabel. In an effort not to appear disconcerted, I asked another girl to dance, and she con-

sented, to the great disgust, I could see, of her watchful mamma, who obviously did not look upon me as eligible in a matrimonial sense. It is characteristic of mercenary mothers to regard all their daughters' dance partners as possible life partners; they are forever fearful or hopeful of a fox-trot developing into a wedding march

After the dance I had delivered the fair damsel into the hands of her disapproving parent, and was about to stroll to the smoking-room when I saw Mabel, radiantly lovely, coming towards me. She was dressed to represent Brunhilde, and the valkyrian costume suited admirably her tall, graceful figure and fair beauty. Her pale golden hair was surmounted by a silver helmet, and her silver corselet, composed of countless spangles, seemed moulded to her waist and bosom, and accentuated the gleaming whiteness of her well-rounded arms. Mabel always carried herself with an easy dignity, the poise of her head, thrown back slightly, her chin tending to tilt upward, being that of a daughter of kings rather than of the intensely democratic offspring of a democratic father. Watching her as she stood before me, her cheeks slightly flushed and her lips parted in a smile that revealed her strong, white teeth, I could not refrain from mentally contrasting this healthy, vigorous girl, who seemed to me a living embodiment of Wagner's valkyr maiden, with the various German opera singers associated in my memory with Brunhilde, most of whom, at a rough guess, had been both fourteen stone and forty. The Brunhildes whom I had previously seen had been but embonpoint matrons, but here indeed was a

warrior maid to gain whom any man worth his salt would gladly have braved Wotan's ring of fire.

"Well, how long is it to be before you favour me with a remark?" inquired Mabel.

"I beg your pardon, Brunhilde," I answered. "I am afraid my imagination had run away with me, and just at the moment I was dashing through the flames with which Wotan had surrounded you, determined to awaken you from sleep and carry you off to—to—er—"

"A comfortable seat somewhere away from this racket," she suggested.

"An admirable idea," I told her. "But are you sure Mr. Blunt will be able to get along without you for a few minutes?"

Mabel laughed musically as she linked her arm in mine. "I knew it," she cried; "I could tell by the way you scowled at poor Myra Hodges while you were dancing with her that you were furiously jealous."

"Frankly, I was. Excuse me if I appear a boor—I know I feel one—but when I think of Hector Blunt plastered all over with filthy lucre—"

"Silly boy," said Mabel, as we stepped out on to the broad verandah which flanked the ballroom, "you talk as if I were the daughter of poor but honest parents, and had either to acquire a rich husband or go out washing. You need not be afraid of Mr. Blunt. In fact, after giving the matter careful thought, I have just come to the definite conclusion that I dislike him. Anyhow, you must not speak disrespectfully of the wealthy lower orders. You seem to forget that poor dear papa is also

plastered all over with what you please to call filthy lucre."

"That's the trouble—I can't forget it. The more I think of it the more unlikely it seems to me that Henry Tracey will ever consent to his daughter marrying an ordinary, common or garden pressman."

"Ordinary pressman, indeed! You mean one of the——"

"Well, dear," I told her as I squeezed her hand, "you need not trouble to recite the list of my literary attainments, the value of which you so charmingly over-estimate. The reply you gave to my question yesterday made me feel that I was the luckiest chap in the world, and I suppose the only thing is to go to your father, tell him I love you and want to marry you, despite the uncomfortable fact that you are an heiress, and ask for his blessing. If he refuses it, I will have to tell him that, if you are willing—and you say you are, God bless you!—I will marry you without it. By the way, I have not seen your father to-night."

"No, he is probably in the card-room."

We had sat on one of the big cushioned seats in a cosy corner of the broad verandah. Mabel's face, after her last remark, took on a troubled expression, and in a second or two she turned to me. "Dick," she said, "I am rather worried about father. These last few days has somehow seemed—I don't know quite how to put it—but he has seemed different to the daddy I have known all these years."

"In what way, dear?" I asked.

“That is what I can’t exactly say, but he doesn’t seem the same. He hasn’t been the same since—since he married again.”

“Mrs. Tracey is a very attractive woman,” I remarked. “Not a type that appeals to me, though,” I hastened to add.

“Oh, she is nice enough in her way,” said Mabel, “and I think she looks beautiful; but the marriage was so strange. You know I had never even met her. Father dropped a hint that he was thinking of marrying again, but I didn’t take him seriously, and then one morning he told me definitely that he intended doing so. He went out, came back with Hilda, and announced that they had been married at a registry office. It wasn’t like daddy. We had had no secrets from one another for years, and I felt hurt at having a step-mother sprung on me like that. It may seem cattish, Dick, but there are times when I fancy that Hilda has some sort of a hold over father.”

“Of course she has,” I assured her, “she has him trussed up in bonds of love.”

“No, I don’t mean that,” Mabel answered with a frown. “It seems to me there is something else; something that I am not able to fathom.”

“You do not know under what circumstances your father became acquainted with your step-mother, do you?”

“No, and when I questioned him he came very near to losing his temper—a thing daddy hasn’t done with me for years. Of course, there was no reason

why he should not marry again if he wanted to, but why was he so mysterious about the whole affair?"

"Possibly at his age he felt sensitive about marrying a second time. By the way, what age is your father?"

"He was fifty-eight last birthday."

"Well, he doesn't look his age."

"No, thank goodness, his health is good; I think he is looking younger than ever."

"I call it positively outrageous, Mr. Maxon; monopolising the belle of the ball in this manner."

The words were spoken in a rich contralto voice, and Mrs. Hilda Tracey stepped through one of the French windows on to the verandah. She was not in fancy costume, but wore a black evening dress which became her well. A beautiful golden scarf draped her broad, generously-moulded shoulders, a diamond tiara scintillated in her jet back hair, and altogether she looked remarkably handsome. Mrs. Tracey was the possessor of a rich olive complexion, full red lips, a rather large mouth, and dark eyes, behind which, one somehow got the impression, lay a knowledge of things exotic and not altogether pleasant. Round her throat she wore always a broad band of black velvet, which to-night was fastened with a diamond brooch, and added to her attractiveness. There were times, however, when this band did not harmonise with the costume she was wearing, as I had pointed out more than once to Mabel, but

she, like me, had never seen her step-mother without it.

Mrs. Tracey stepped on to the verandah. "What have you to say for yourself, Mr. Maxon?" she inquired.

"I plead guilty, Mrs. Tracey," I replied, "and I cannot even say 'The woman tempted me!' for I told Mab—Miss Tracey that she had either to sit with me here for a while or give me three dances. As she has had some experience of me as a dance partner, she regarded the alternative as too appalling—so here we are."

"Well, as a punishment, Mr. Maxon, you will have to tolerate me for the one-step."

"The pleasure will be mine, Mrs. Tracey, and the punishment yours," I assured her; and the three of us passed inside.

I did not remain for the finish of the ball, which on several previous occasions I remembered had been still in progress when the housemaids were sweeping the passages in the early morning. Mabel, pleading a headache, retired at a comparatively early hour, and after strolling about the grounds to smoke a cigar beneath a sky of threatening blackness, I, too, resolved to seek my virtuous couch. Passing the card-room on my way toward the staircase I saw Henry Tracey with a group of men, known as "The Ricketty Kate school," enjoying that, to me, mysterious, but, to them, apparently fascinating game. I called "Good-night" and gave a comprehensive flourish of my arm as I passed, and Tracey and one or two others looked up and nodded pleasantly. "I

hope what I am going to ask of him to-morrow will not cause the old boy to alter his attitude toward me," I thought, as I made my way upstairs.

Before I reached my bedroom the storm that had long been threatening burst with rather startling suddenness. While I undressed the rain was falling in torrents, and every now and then a vivid flash of lightning was followed by the crash and roar of thunder. These things did not at the time seem to me unhappy omens, for Mabel's love was mine, and all was right with the world.

CHAPTER III.

MURDER MOST FOUL.

I WAS much too pleasurably excited to sleep soundly, and several times I was awakened by flashes of lightning or unusually loud claps of thunder. It was on one of these occasions that I heard other sounds above the noise made by the rain. I sat up in bed to listen, and became aware that persons were moving about in the corridor. Bed was very warm and comfortable, but the quick patter of feet and the sound of voices aroused my curiosity, so I tumbled out, got into a dressing-gown and slippers, and went into the passage. There I found the lights on, and several little knots of guests, some in their night attire, and others—enthusiastic dancers who had been keeping the tired orchestra at work in the ballroom downstairs—in fancy dress, standing about talking excitedly in hushed voices.

I approached one of these groups. "What's the matter?" I inquired.

"Something terrible!" answered a white-faced girl, garbed as Pierrotte.

"Well, what is it?"

"Mr. Tracey is d-dead!"

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed. “Why I saw him as I passed the card-room only a couple of hours ago!”

“He has been mur-murdered,” whispered another girl, and she shivered slightly and drew her wrapper more tightly around her.

I was too shocked to ask questions, and could only stand staring at those about me.

“You are sure that it was in the card-room that you last saw him, Maxon?” inquired a voice at my elbow, and turning round I saw Hector Blunt, still in evening dress, blinking at me through his spectacles, a peculiar smile on his mean little face.

“What the devil do you mean?” I demanded.

“Oh—nothing,” he replied, with an elaborate affectation of indifference.

At this moment, Milnor, the manager of the hotel, appeared, and implored the guests to return to their rooms. Some complied, while others remained. The picture of those groups, in garish carnival garb, some of them subdued and trembling, others morbidly excited, is one that will not easily be effaced from my memory. An anxious husband, in gaudy pink-and-green pyjamas, was endeavouring to soothe his stout, middle-aged spouse, who, dressed as Cleopatra, was indulging in a fit of hysterics on the stairs. In a recess, a lanky youth, wearing red tights—a grotesque caricature of Mephistopheles—was holding a glass of brandy to the lips of an anæmic, yellow-haired Ophelia who had fainted and lay stretched out on the floor. The contrast afforded by the gay dresses, and the pale faces of their

wearers, served to accentuate the atmosphere of tragedy that hung about the place, while the noise of the storm, and the uncanny tricks played by the lightning, reduced many of the guests to a state of absolute terror.

I walked along the corridor to where I knew Mr. and Mrs. Tracey's rooms were situated. The door of Mrs. Tracey's room was open. I saw her lying upon the bed, dressed in an elaborate flowered wrapper, still wearing round her throat the broad band of black velvet, while several ladies stood around plying her with sympathy, sal volatile and smelling-salts. Next door was the dead man's bedroom, and here the chief clerk of the hotel and the hall porter were on guard, pending the arrival of the constable from the police station, which was over a mile away. I was permitted to enter. The body of Henry Tracey, in full evening dress, with the exception of his coat, which was hanging across a chair, was lying on a rug at the foot of the bed. I learned from the porter that Dr. Brown, who was staying at the hotel, had loosened Tracey's collar, but feeling for his heart, and finding that it had ceased to beat, had ordered that the body should not be interfered with until the constable arrived.

Tracey was a man who probably would have been described by a novelist as "of military appearance." His hair and moustache were iron grey, his nose hooked and prominent, his face bronzed. In life his blue-grey eyes had been keen and penetrating. The blinds of the room were drawn, but every now and then a flash of lightning invested the scene with a ghastly vividness.

Crossing the room, I bent over the corpse of the man whom a few hours later I had intended to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage. The mouth was partly open, and the hands tightly clenched. On the exquisite evening shirt was an ugly red stain. Apparently a bullet wound below the breast on the left side had been the cause of Tracey's death. Blood had soaked through his clothes and disfigured now the rich whiteness of the rug upon which he was lying. A quick glance round the room revealed that the bed had not been slept in, and the only suggestion of a struggle was provided by an overturned chair. I noticed as I went out that one of the drawers of the dressing-table had been pulled open, but it contained only a shaving-set and some neckties.

"What happened?" I asked the hall porter, who followed me into the corridor.

"Nobody knows very much, sir," he answered. "It seems that he was shot; but the dance was still going on downstairs, an' what with that and the noise of the storm, nobody seems to have heard the shot, except Mrs. Miles, who has the room opposite. She woke her 'usband an' he went to Mr. Tracey's door an' knocked, but got no reply. Then he knocked at Mrs. Tracey's door. Mrs. Tracey got up an' Mr. Miles told her that his wife thought she had heard a noise in Mr. Tracey's room. Mr. Miles and Mrs. Tracey went in together an' turned up the light an' saw—well, you know what they saw, sir."

"It's terrible!" I murmured.

"It is that, sir," said the porter, with a touch

of unconscious callousness, "it will do the hotel a terrible lot of 'arm."

I left him, and went down to the first floor, where most of the guests were gathered in the sitting-room. Mrs. Tracey, armed with a large bottle of smelling-salts, had come downstairs, and was the centre of a sympathetic group, in which was Hector Blunt, who, I thought, again looked at me in a peculiar manner as I entered the room. I glanced round for Mabel, but she was not there.

"Miss Tracey, I presume, knows of this sad occurrence," I remarked.

"I don't know that she does, Mr. Maxon," said her step-mother, between sniffs at the smelling-salts. "Her rooms, you know, are right away from ours, at the other end of the corridor; she may not know, poor child!"

I decided that it would be better that Mabel should hear the terrible news from me than from some less intimate acquaintance; so I again made my way to the second floor and walked along the corridor, past the murdered man's room, in which I now observed Constable Mullins, to Mabel's suite. First I tapped gently on the door of her bedroom, but this elicited no response. Then I noticed a faint light coming from beneath the door of her private sitting-room. I knocked several times, then, taking hold of the knob, found that the door was not locked, and pushed it open. The room was in semi-darkness, the light I had noticed having been made by an electric heater, over which Mabel was crouching. At the sound of my entry she sprang to her

feet in a startled manner. "Who is it?" she gasped.

"It is I, darling—Dick; don't be afraid."

I switched on the light, and Mabel sank back into the chair in front of the heater and shivered. She was white to the lips, and in her eyes was a pitiful, hunted expression that hurt me like a knife. But what surprised me at the time was the fact that she was fully dressed, in the garb she had worn the day before yesterday when we climbed Scotney's Look-out. On the floor beside her was her hat, which she had evidently lately removed, and dropped there.

I placed my hand gently upon her shoulder. She gave a little shudder, and crouched more closely over the heater.

"Poor little girl," I murmured, "so you know."

"I don't know what you are talking about," she exclaimed hastily.

This was another surprise. If Mabel was ignorant of what had happened, what was the explanation of her present pitiful state?

"You have not heard about—about your father?" I asked.

She rose from her chair with a little hysterical cry. "Why are you questioning me like this?" she demanded. "I tell you I don't know what you are talking about. I don't know anything."

Evidently something other than the tragedy that had been enacted a few doors down the passage had caused the poor girl to become quite unnerved. My own nerves were beginning to make their presence

felt, and this probably caused me to blurt out the bad tidings less tactfully than I had planned.

“Your father, sweetheart,” I told her, “is dead.”

“Dead,” she repeated dully.

“Yes, dear—he has been shot.”

“Shot! Do you—do you mean murdered?”

“I am afraid so.”

“Oh, my God!” she muttered, swaying towards me, and it was only my arm about her waist that prevented her falling. She had gone off into a dead faint. I carried her into the next room, laid her on the bed, and hurried downstairs to bring one of her girl friends to her assistance.

Nearly an hour elapsed before Mabel was brought round. When I saw that I could render no further help, I returned to my room. The rain had ceased; the storm clouds had passed away, and dawn had laid cold fingers upon the dripping landscape. How different it was to the dawn to which I had looked forward a few hours previously. In a room not far from my own the man whom I had hoped to have for father-in-law was lying dead. A little further away, the girl I loved, white-faced, and with haunted eyes, was lying on her bed groaning. About the whole place hung an atmosphere of mystery and suspicion. God forgive me for it! but it almost seemed to me that there was something suspicious about the conduct of Mabel herself. Why had she been dressed in that costume at such an hour of the morning? And what was the explanation of her

agitation before she had heard of her father's death? Then I recalled Blunt's attitude toward me, and his pointed question as to whether it had been in the card-room that I had last seen Tracey. The very air seemed charged with suspicion. What was the solution of the mystery surrounding Henry Tracey's death? No weapon had been found, and no motive for the crime suggested itself to me.

CHAPTER IV.

SEEDS OF SUSPICION.

THE corpse of Henry Tracey was conveyed to Melbourne by train, and, after lying at the morgue for some days for the purpose of the post-mortem examination, was buried. Nearly three weeks elapsed before the inquest was held, the police—who at the time were coming in for a good deal of criticism because of the large proportion of undetected crimes in Victoria—securing its postponement in the hope that they would be able to obtain evidence to justify the coroner in committing somebody for trial on a charge of murder. Inquiries had shown that no strangers had been seen in the Mount Marunga district about the time of the tragedy, and the police were convinced that the murderer was someone at the hotel. As the guests and servants in the house numbered about one hundred and seventy, the detectives' inquiries covered a wide field.

A large number of the visitors at the hotel, including all those who figure in this history, left shortly after the tragedy. Mabel—whose brain and heart appeared to have been numbed by the shock she had sustained—and Mrs. Tracey, returned to their Toorak home, and I to my diggings in East Melbourne. Practically all the guests were at one

ask him, and he did refuse, it does not follow that you was the one who shot him—neither of us will believe that in a hurry—but your evidence would be valuable, as you would have been the last to see him alive before the tragedy actually took place.”

“I am sorry I can’t oblige you,” I replied, “for I can only repeat that the last time I saw Mr. Tracey alive was as I passed the card-room on the way to bed. Hang it all, you don’t suppose I wanted to butt in on him at one o’clock in the morning to put a proposition of that kind to him; especially as Miss Tracey and myself, even if everything had gone smoothly, had no intention of marrying for six months at the least? If you want my opinion I can give it to you here and now. This cock-and-bull story has been told you by a worm who would himself very much like to marry Miss Tracey, but he has not got a chance in life, and the name of the worm is Hector Blunt.”

The two obviously were under the impression that they had perfect control of their features, and that their faces were as masks; but, despite their assumption of mysterious omnipotence, it was perfectly plain to see that my guess was correct.

“In investigating crimes of this sort,” observed Ryan, with a tremendous air of wisdom, “I have always found it a good thing to search first of all for a motive. Now, just supposing you had asked Mr. Tracey’s consent to the marriage, and he had refused, you will admit that there *is* a motive.”

“I’ll admit nothing of the kind. It is too ridiculous. Had Mr. Tracey withheld his blessing I would not even have quarrelled with him. In due course, had Miss Tracey been willing, I would simply

have married her without the paternal benediction.”

“That’s just it, Mr. Maxon,” remarked Patullo. “The words that Mr. Blu—that the party who gave us the information says he heard were: ‘Very well, we will do so without your permission!’ ”

“All I can say is that Blunt—whose name you practically let out just now—is an unmitigated liar. As I went to my room and straight to bed, I cannot produce an alibi, but my word is as good as Blunt’s. I tell you the rotten little swine fancied himself a rival of mine for Miss Tracey’s hand, and this is an attempt on his part to get me out of the way. But if this is the only alleged evidence you can bring against me, I will not entertain any very serious fears for the safety of my neck.”

“To tell you the truth, Mr. Maxon,” said Patullo, “I would almost as soon suspect myself as you. But, you know, duty is duty, and our job is to collect the evidence.”

“Of course,” I answered; “go ahead, boys. But if you are looking for motives, just assume for a moment that Blunt is lying, and ask yourselves if he may not have an even stronger motive than mere dislike of me for concocting this yarn. Supposing Blunt himself went to Tracey’s room that night, and put the question which he alleges I put—what then?”

“Oh, well, Mr. Maxon,” said Ryan, “you may rest assured that Mr. Blunt will be questioned pretty closely and watched. We admit that we haven’t got anything very definite against anybody, but there are one or two clues we are following, and something may come to light.”

A few minutes later they left me, and I lit a pipe and sat down to think over the interview. Admittedly I was in an uncomfortable position; but I felt certain that no real evidence could be brought against me. The talk with the detectives had shown me what an unscrupulous scoundrel Blunt was, and to what lengths he was prepared to go. If he did not mind the target of a horrible suspicion endangering my liberty and even my life, in the hope of bettering his chances with Mabel, there was probably little he would stop at to gain his ends. My suggestion that Blunt himself may have interviewed Tracey was only a chance shot, but all the same it might be a true one. He possibly observed Mabel's demeanor and mine closely at the ball, and, determined to be ahead of me in interviewing Tracey, went to his room in the early hours of that tragic morning. Granted this much, anything might have happened between Tracey and Blunt. In endeavouring to fasten suspicion on to me Blunt had laid himself open to suspicion, and I resolved to inquire very closely into the movements of that gentleman on the night of June 23rd, and the early morning of June 24th.

CHAPTER V.

THE HOUSE OF THE DEAD.

TWO days after my second interview with Ryan and Patullo the inquest was held. That mid-July morning spent at the Melbourne Morgue has left an indelible impression upon my memory. A drizzling rain was falling, and a thick mist hung over the murky Yarra. The footpath leading to the Morgue is not asphalted, being little better than a cinder track. The road is bounded on one side by the river, crawling toward Jolimont like a sinister snake, and on the other by a railway siding, a long, soot-grimed, galvanised iron fence, and some squat, unlovely administrative buildings. The ugliness of this portion of Melbourne is in striking contrast to the green reposefulness of the Alexandra Gardens on the opposite side of the stream, where flowers bloom in multi-colored loveliness. On the Morgue side all is drab and hideous, save outside the House of the Dead itself, where two small, trim lawns but serve to accentuate the gloom that drapes itself about one like a pall when one passes within.

Although it seemed to me that the outrageousness of Blunt's insinuation against me was its own condemnation, and I had not up to now feared for myself, I confess that icy fingers seemed to touch

my heart as I passed through the tiled porch into the gloomy court house. The Coroner conducts his inquiries in a room that resembles a schoolroom of the bad, old-fashioned sort. Its walls are composed of varnished boards, and ugly varnished rafters support the ceiling. The witnesses sit on hard forms, placed along two sides of the room, and the Coroner at a sort of rostrum at the end of the apartment, the barristers, the police sub-inspectors in charge of the various cases, and the reporters, at a long table in front of the Coroner, while at a smaller table sits the depositions clerk, who records, on a noiseless typewriter, the words spoken by the witnesses. Each witness, after giving evidence, is required to sign the typewritten note taken by the depositions clerk.

A more hateful morning I had not previously known, and I am glad that I did not at the time guess the hours of greater anxiety and gloom that were to be mine before the Mount Marunga mystery was cleared up.

I will confess frankly that for me the horror associated with the morning of the murder was preferable to the atmosphere of sustained tragedy that seemed to lurk in every corner of the cold and dismal court house. I glanced at the doors at the further end of the apartment and shivered, for I knew that they led to the mortuary, where, day by day, were laid the bodies of men and women who had found life too bitter to be lived; unhappy victims of remorseless circumstance or casual mischance; unwanted infants, slaughtered at birth.

That Mabel, still suffering from the shock occa-

sioned by her father's death, should be compelled to attend such a place, filled me with the most profound regret. She was sitting beside me, in deep mourning, and heavily veiled. When she raised her veil she revealed a face of deathly whiteness, and eyes that seemed two deep wells of unhappiness. Next to Mabel was Mrs. Tracey, whose mourning garb fitted closely her generously moulded figure, and had obviously been designed with an eye to picturesqueness. Round her throat was the inevitable band of black velvet.

There was a cry of "Silence" from the court orderly, and all present rose to their feet as the Coroner, a little chubby-faced man with a very bald head, entered and took his place.

"Inquest on the body of Henry George Tracey," announced the orderly, and then he called "Herbert James Miles."

It was Miles's wife who had heard the shot and had roused her husband, and he it was who had entered Tracey's room, followed by Mrs. Tracey, and found the body. He was directed by the orderly to take his place in the witness-box and repeat the words of the oath.

Miles said that, awakened by Mrs. Miles, he looked at his watch, and it was then twenty minutes to two. He slipped an overcoat on over his pyjamas, went into the passage, and knocked at Tracey's door. The storm was then raging, the rain upon the roof making a great deal of noise. He thumped the panels of the door several times loudly, but, receiving no answer, went to the door of the next room, which was occupied by Mrs. Tracey. His second

knock brought a reply from within. He asked Mrs. Tracey to come to the door, and after a delay of a few seconds, she appeared, wearing a wrapper. He told her that Mrs. Miles had fancied she heard a shot in Tracey's room, and Mrs. Tracey admitted him to her room and pointed to a door which separated it from the one occupied by her husband. Tracey's room was in darkness, but as Miles was feeling about for the electric light switch an unusually vivid flash of lightning revealed with ghastly distinctness the body of the murdered man, lying at the foot of the bed. By the time Miles had found the light switch Mrs. Tracey had reached the doorway; she too saw the corpse, gave a shrill scream of horror, and rushed back to her bedroom.

After the witness had answered a few questions, his wife, Helen Jessica Miles, a frail, nervous little woman, was called. Mrs. Miles said that owing to the storm she could not sleep. She was lying listening to the rain when she heard a loud report, which came with startling suddenness. She was sure that it was not thunder, but the sound of a shot, so she roused her husband. Here her knowledge of the tragedy ended.

Mrs. Tracey, who was next called, was assisted toward the witness-box by a policeman. As she gave her evidence she wept quietly into an exquisite black-bordered silk handkerchief, about two sizes larger than a postage stamp. The earlier portion of her evidence merely corroborated that of Mr. Miles. All that she could add was that on returning to the death chamber later she noticed that a drawer of the dressing-table was half open, and a small

revolver, which her husband kept there, was missing. Upon hearing this piece of information those in court exchanged glances, and the Coroner for the first time showed signs of taking an interest in the proceedings.

"How do you know that there was a revolver in the drawer?" he asked.

"I know my husband kept it there."

"What was his object in doing so?"

"I really cannot say. He once made some remark about being ready for burglars."

"When did you last see the revolver in the drawer?"

"I happened to go into his room the morning before, while he was shaving, and it was there then."

"Do you know whether or not it was there on the night of June 23rd, or the morning of the 24th, when you and your husband retired to bed?"

"I cannot say."

"Did you and your husband go to your apartments at the same time?"

"Yes, at about twenty minutes past one."

"Were you in your husband's room before retiring to your own?"

"We were talking there for a minute or two."

"Was the dressing-table drawer then open?"

"I didn't notice, but I think I would have noticed if it had been."

"You did not hear a shot?"

"No; I had been dancing all night, and was very tired; I think I went right off to sleep."

"Are you sure that your husband's revolver was

not in any other drawer, or anywhere else in the room?"

"I could not say; but the police searched his room and mine afterwards, and did not find it."

"The Coroner turned over some papers on his desk, readjusted his spectacles, and continued the examination.

"I see on reference to the brief supplied me by the police that one of the guests at the hotel is to give evidence to the effect that on passing Mr. Tracey's room shortly after half-past one he heard voices from within—you were not in your husband's room at that hour?"

"No, I don't think so; it must have been about half-past one when I turned the light off in my own room."

"If anybody had been in Mr. Tracey's room at that time it must have been almost immediately after you had gone to bed—yet you did not hear voices?"

"No."

"Do you think you would have heard them had anybody been there?"

"I may not have done so; the storm was making a great deal of noise."

"You know Mr. Richard Maxon?"

"Yes."

"Did you know that he was suitor for the hand of your step-daughter?"

"I knew that he was paying her attention."

"Was your husband also aware of the fact?"

"I really do not know; we had never discussed the matter."

“Do you think your husband would have consented to a marriage between Mr. Maxon and Miss Tracey?”

“I cannot answer for my poor husband.”

“You would not regard Mr. Maxon as an unsuitable husband for your daughter?”

“No-o.”

“Had Mr. Maxon ever to your knowledge been in your husband’s room?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“You have no reason to suppose that he knew that Mr. Tracey kept a revolver in his dressing-table drawer?”

“No.”

“Your step-daughter did not share your bedroom at the hotel?”

“No, her room was some distance away, at the end of the corridor.”

“When did you first see Miss Tracey after the tragedy?”

“Not for some time. I was prostrated and could not do anything for a time, but when I was feeling better I went to her room. She was lying on the bed in a faint. Mr. Maxon had broken the news to her.”

“I see in a statement you have given to the police you say that Miss Tracey was fully attired, in walking costume?”

“Y-yes.”

“Did you not think it strange that she should be thus attired at such an hour?”

“I did at the time, but she told me later that she could not sleep, and had intended going for a walk.”

The Coroner remarked "Humph," and after a glance at his brief told Mrs. Tracey that she might stand down.

The next witness was Dr. Julius Collins, who had made the post-mortem examination. He read his report to the effect that the dead man's organs had been free from signs of disease. Death had been caused by a wound from a revolver bullet. The bullet had entered the body below the chest on the left side, and had penetrated to the heart. Death had probably been instantaneous.

"Could the wound have been self-inflicted?" inquired the Coroner.

"It might have been, but there were no indications of burning on the shirt front. I should say that the shot had been fired from a distance of some feet."

"In your opinion, the shot was fired by a second person?"

"Yes."

The doctor left the box.

"Call Hector Ernest Mayne Blunt," said the sub-inspector who was conducting the case for the police.

CHAPTER VI.

PERJURY.

WHEN Blunt went into the witness-box he was palpably nervous. He held the Bible in his uplifted hand, swearing by his God to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and then proceeded shamelessly to commit the most flagrant perjury. The story he told was that which had already been outlined to me by Ryan and Patullo. He stated that shortly after half-past one on the morning of the murder he had been passing along the corridor near Tracey's room and had heard voices. One voice, it seemed to him, was raised in anger. That voice, he believed, belonged to me. The only words he actually heard, and which he thought were spoken by me, were: "Very well, we will do it without your permission!"

Mabel started on hearing this, and turned her head toward me. "You don't believe the lie, do you, love?" I whispered. She made no reply, seeming intent upon catching every word Blunt uttered.

The police sub-inspector had been questioning the witness, but at this stage the Coroner took the examination into his own hands.

"The storm at the time, I take it, was very fierce, and was making a good deal of noise?" he remarked.

"Yes, I suppose it was," Blunt admitted, with evident reluctance.

"Are you sure that the voice you heard was Maxon's?"

"Well, I can't be positive, but I think it was."

"Did you hear a second voice?"

"No."

"You did not pause to listen?"

"Certainly not," answered Blunt, in a shocked tone, as though horrified at being even so much as suspected of an action so unbecoming a gentleman.

"From the brief supplied me by the police, I gather that you yourself are an admirer of Miss Tracey?"

Blunt hesitated. "I have a very high regard for her," he admitted.

"You knew that Maxon was paying her marked attention?"

"Yes."

"When you heard his words, to the effect that he would do something without Mr. Tracey's consent, did you think that he was announcing his intention of marrying Miss Tracey against her father's wish?"

"It occurred to me afterwards that he was."

"Not at the time."

"No—er—I don't think so."

"Have you asked Miss Tracey to marry you?"

Blunt became confused, glanced round the court, and began to stammer a protest.

"Kindly answer my question," snapped the Coroner.

The witness mumbled an affirmative reply. This

was news to me, for Mabel had never hinted that Blunt's advances had reached this stage.

"Was Miss Tracey's reply favourable?"

"No," came the answer, in what was little more than a mutter. I squeezed Mabel's hand, but received no answering pressure. Despite the painful position in which I was placed by his perjured evidence, I was beginning to enjoy my rival's discomfiture. Obviously he had not bargained for such a searching examination, compelling him to reveal matters regarding which, doubtless, he would have preferred to remain silent.

"I may take it that your feelings toward Maxon are not exactly friendly?" was the Coroner's next question.

"They are not unfriendly," was the lying reply.

"Where was your room in the hotel situated?"

"At the head of the staircase, on the first floor."

"On the first floor! Mr. Tracey's room, I understand, was on the second floor?"

"Er—yes."

"What were you doing on the second floor?"

There was a pause, and the Coroner repeated the question.

"I had intended knocking at the door of Miss Tracey's sitting-room, as I wished to speak to her; but when I got there I—er—thought better of it, and returned to my own room."

"Half-past one in the morning is an extraordinary hour for calling on a lady who, I presume, you could have seen at any time during the day, since she was a fellow-guest at the hotel."

“Oh, the dance was on, you know; many of the guests were still about, and Miss Tracey had only a short time previously left the ballroom.”

The Coroner “humphed,” and turned over some of his papers. After he had again asked Blunt if he could swear that it was my voice that he had heard in Tracey’s room, and had received a reply in the negative, the Coroner intimated that he did not wish to ask the witness any further questions. Hector Ernest made no attempt to conceal his relief at being allowed to leave the box.

I was then called to give evidence. The Coroner questioned me regarding my relations with Mabel and her father, and my movements after leaving the ballroom. He also questioned me concerning my visit to Mabel, to tell her of her father’s death. I answered as clearly as I was able, describing my doings very much as I have set them forth in previous chapters of this narrative. My examination was not prolonged, as I could only deny that I had even seen Tracey after observing him in the card-room when going to my own bedroom. I gathered from the Coroner’s attitude that he was satisfied with the answers I gave him.

It was now Mabel’s turn to go through the ordeal of being interrogated. Her agitation was pitiful, and every now and then she was shaken by dry sobs, which it seemed must choke her. I would have given all I possessed to have been able to spare her this suffering. After the sub-inspector had finished with her the Coroner concentrated his attention on one aspect of her evidence, and, as he followed each of her answers with yet another question, the pair

girl's distress became more and more acute.

"You attended the ball at the hotel Miss Tracey?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"Did you leave the dance room with Mr. Maxon?"

"No; I had a headache and left early; I think about twelve o'clock."

"You attended the ball in evening dress, I take it?"

"I wore a fancy costume."

"When Mr. Maxon, and later, your step-mother, came to your room, you were in walking dress—how did that come about?"

"I did not feel that I would be able to sleep, so I changed into walking dress, with the intention of going for a walk."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Do you make a habit of going for walks alone at such an unusual hour?"

"No; but I have done so before, when I have not felt inclined for sleep. My head was troubling me, and I thought that the fresh air would do it good."

"You were going out into the storm?"

"I would not have minded the rain, but when I looked through the window and saw how black it was I—I decided to stay indoors."

"But you did not go to bed?"

"No; I sat in front of the heater in my sitting-room."

"You had not been in bed at all up to the time Mr. Maxon visited you?"

"No."

“But, although you were awake and in your sitting-room, you did not hear a shot fired in your father’s room?”

“No; the rain was making a lot of noise, and father’s room was some distance away.”

“The first you knew of the tragedy was when Mr. Maxon came to your room?”

“Yes.”

This concluded Mabel’s evidence, and she returned to her seat beside me, on the verge of collapse. With the Coroner’s permission I took her into the fresh air, and obtaining a chair, placed it for her on one of the little lawns outside the building. When we returned to the court Detective Ryan was giving his evidence. He told of how every room in the hotel, the luggage of all the guests, and the grounds outside had been searched, but no weapon or other clue had been found. He also detailed conversations he had had with the various witnesses, but these were embodied in the evidence I have already summarised. Patullo corroborated the evidence given by Ryan. Then there was a nerve-racking interval of what seemed an hour’s duration, but was in reality only a minute or two, while the Coroner scratched his head with his pen, stroked his chin, turned over papers, and gave vent to several “humphs.”

At last he began his summing up.

“This case,” he said, “is a most mysterious one. A wealthy, well-known, and much respected gentleman—a man who, so far as his friends and relatives are aware, was without an enemy in the world—is foully murdered in a fashionable mountain hotel.

crowded with guests, and while a ball is still in progress. Nobody seems to have seen the murderer either enter or leave Mr. Tracey's room, and the weapon with which the crime was committed has not been found. The fact that the revolver which Mrs. Tracey says her husband kept in a drawer in his dressing-table is missing suggests that the victim was killed by a bullet from his own revolver, but if this is so, how the murderer managed to get rid of the weapon after perpetrating the dastardly crime is a mystery. I cannot attach very much importance to the evidence of the witness, Blunt, as regards the hearing of voices in Mr. Tracey's room, as at the time he says he heard them Mrs. Tracey was either disrobing in the next room, or had just got into bed, and she heard nothing. It seems to me that the witness, Maxon, gave his evidence clearly and frankly, and I think it is scarcely likely that he would approach Mr. Tracey at such an hour to ask him for his daughter's hand in marriage. Unless corroboration of Blunt's evidence is forthcoming, suspicion of Maxon would be unjustifiable. It is to be hoped that the police will redouble their efforts to solve this mystery and bring the culprit to justice. No evidence has been given at this inquiry to warrant me in committing anyone for trial."

The Coroner then delivered his formal finding, to the effect that "Henry George Tracey was found dead in his room at the Mount Marunga Hotel, Mount Marunga, on the morning of June 24th, death being due to cardiac failure brought about by a bullet wound."

“I find,” he concluded, “that the said Henry George Tracey was murdered by some person or persons unknown.”

My reputation had been practically cleared by the inquiry, but as I left the court with Mabel on my arm, I was even more depressed and worried than when I entered it. Especially was I puzzled by one point in Mabel’s evidence. She had stated distinctly that she had not gone to bed at all after leaving the ballroom, but had changed at once from her fancy costume into walking attire. Yet, when I had carried her fainting into the bedroom after telling her of her father’s death, I had noticed that the bedclothes were tumbled about, and that her nightdress, which she had evidently lately worn, was lying on the floor.

Why had my love committed perjury? What was she attempting to conceal? These questions troubled me as I walked toward the city after seeing Mabel and Mrs. Tracey into their motor car.

CHAPTER VII.

STRANGE BEHAVIOUR.

AFTER the inquest Mabel and Mrs. Tracey went to the seaside. My work kept me in Melbourne, but, of course, I corresponded with Mabel. Good taste forbade me suggesting a formal engagement at this stage, but I certainly expected more warmth of feeling than was revealed in Mabel's brief letters to me. Even our farewell on the evening before she left was marred by a certain coldness upon her part. I did not like to reproach her, attributing her demeanour to the fact that the tragedy had left her temporarily stunned, and incapable of any feeling other than intense grief; but on the last evening I could not refrain from saying: "Forgive me for asking, dear, but you do not believe that story which Blunt told at the inquest?"

"No, no; a thousand times, no," she answered, with tears in her eyes.

"I might have known, dear one," I said; "I should not have asked such a question." I kissed her fondly, but her lips were cold, and my embrace met with no response.

I did not mention to Mabel my surprise at her telling the Coroner that she had not been to bed on the morning of the murder. This portion of her

evidence, no less than her strange attitude toward me, caused me worry and distress. Even before Mabel left, I realised that relations between her and her step-mother were not cordial. I doubt if they ever had been, but while Mr. Tracey was alive, each had maintained an outward show of affection. In one of her letters Mabel mentioned that she had received a communication from her late father's lawyers, informing her that, by a will dated several years previously, he had left her—after providing for certain legacies to servants, and other employees, and several large donations to charitable institutions—all of which he died possessed. This comprised a very considerable sum in cash, a station in the Victorian Western District, another in the Riverina; "Avalong" (the well-known Toorak mansion), and a valuable collection of pictures.

Fresh trouble now arose between Mabel and her step-mother. Mrs. Tracey stated that her husband had given her to understand that he intended making very generous provision for her in the event of his death, but apparently the untimely tragedy had intervened before he had taken action. "Of course, Hilda is entitled to at least a half share in the estate," Mabel wrote, "and when I return to Melbourne I intend making arrangements to transfer some of the property to her. Since we have so little in common, we have agreed that it is better for both our sakes to live apart. I will keep on 'Avalong,' and Hilda will receive an allowance, which will enable her to live in a manner such as she might have expected had poor father not been taken."

I considered this very generous of Mabel, and

could not help thinking that Mrs. Tracey would very soon get over her grief at her husband's death, and find that her new mode of living suited her admirably. It may have been uncharitable on my part, but I had always held the view that it was not affection alone which impelled Mrs. Hilda Gordon to become the second Mrs. Henry Tracey. Her temperament was one that craved for gaiety and excitement, and the life of a wealthy widow, free from the restraints that would have been imposed upon her as Tracey's wife, would probably quickly reconcile her to the loss of her middle-aged husband.

My own unhappiness was not mitigated by the news concerning the will. After it had become public property, I overheard several remarks—couched in such a way that for me to have displayed open resentment would only have made matters worse—which brought home to me that the inquest had not rendered either Mabel or myself immune from suspicion. I had known all along that there would be people only too ready to believe the story told by Hector Blunt of my alleged interview with Mr. Tracey on the morning of the murder, but I had hoped that Mabel—inasmuch as I alone knew that, in one particular, at least, the evidence she had given was untrue—would be safe from the gossip of unfriendly tongues. Many people, I found, regarded as distinctly peculiar her behaviour in dressing for the purpose of going out walking at such an hour on the morning of the murder, and the halting manner in which she had answered some of the Coroner's questions had not been in her favour.

Troubled though I was by the memory of my sweetheart's agitation before I had told her of her father's death, and her strange behaviour in swearing that she had not been to bed that morning, I never for a moment believed that she had been in any way directly associated with the tragedy. I was not long in finding out that others thought differently, and the fact that she only had benefited by her father's will did not tend to lull their suspicions. In another interview I had with Detectives Ryan and Patullo, they questioned me closely regarding the circumstances in which I had broken the news of the murder to Mabel. I was careful to do all I could to protect her, but the impression left upon my mind was that the detectives were engaged in constructing some fantastic theory in which a quarrel between Tracey and myself regarding my relations with his daughter had led up to the tragedy, in which Mabel had somehow had a hand.

To Mabel I did not mention any of these things, but when she had been away a fortnight I suggested in one of my letters that, now that she was alone in the world, an earlier marriage than we had originally contemplated might be desirable. Her reply was that we must not think of marriage for "a long time yet." "You know how much I love you, dear," she wrote, "but while the mystery of poor daddy's death hangs over us, I feel that it would not be right to marry. Just now I can do nothing but think and think of that awful morning, and all that has occurred since."

With this I had perforce to be content, although

it seemed to me that unless some unexpected clue were to come to light, the chances of the Mount Marunga mystery ever being solved were exceedingly remote. Blunt's allegation against me, and Mabel's own peculiar behaviour, had put the police upon a false scent, but one which they were naturally loath to abandon.

A month dragged by, and I received a letter from Mabel announcing her intention of returning to Melbourne. My work prevented me meeting her at the railway station, as she arrived by a midday train, but I sent a telegram to Toorak intimating that I would be out to see her that afternoon. My spirits rose as I walked from the tram toward "Avalong," the Tracey mansion, which is in Pine Avenue. It was a beautiful August afternoon, such as we get in Melbourne when winter is in its decline. The sun cast a genial warmth, and great clusters of wattle and richly yellow daffodils made beautiful the gardens of the houses of the rich.

"Avalong" is a solidly built stone mansion, standing at the head of an ascending carriage drive, and surrounded by a large and beautifully kept garden. I walked briskly up the drive, eager to see the girl from whom I had been parted for five long weeks. A sudden turn in the path brought me face to face with the figure of a man, immaculately dressed, walking jauntily, and swinging a gold-mounted cane. In a second the garden, and the day itself, had lost all their beauty for me. As he passed, the fellow smirked and bowed. I did not acknowledge the salute, but hurried on, a prey to gloomy thoughts.

Knocking at the door of "Avalong," I was admitted by a neatly-dressed housemaid, and shown into the drawing-room, a luxuriously furnished apartment, decorated in white and black. Heavy black velvet curtains draped the three lofty windows, the rosewood furniture was upholstered in rich black and white striped poplin, covering the floor was a thick black pile carpet, and on top of this were several costly white rugs. The afternoon sun, flooding the room, gave to everything in it a rich glow, while at the same time making the apartment eminently cosy and homelike. Here I waited for Mabel, a prey to conflicting emotions. After a few minutes I heard the rustle of her skirts outside, and she appeared in the doorway, looking very pale and fragile in her black silk dress, cut low around the neck, and accentuating the whiteness of her skin. I noticed at once that her eyes were red as though she had quite recently been weeping.

"My darling," I cried, rising and holding out my arms.

With a little cry, half exclamation of joy and half sob, she rushed toward me, threw her arms around my neck, and rested her head upon my shoulder.

"Poor little girl," I murmured, stroking her golden hair, "you have been crying, I can see; what has been the matter?"

At once her manner changed; she pushed me gently from her and stood upright, as though on guard against a threatened blow. "There is nothing the matter, Dick," she said, "and I—I have not

been crying; if my eyes are red it must be from some other cause."

I said nothing, but felt convinced that Mabel was not speaking the truth. We talked for a while of her holiday, and of her intentions for the future. Mrs. Tracey, she told me, had returned to Melbourne a few days before, having taken a flat which she was now busy furnishing.

"Judging by her behaviour since his death," remarked Mabel, "I don't believe that Hilda ever really cared for poor daddy."

We continued to talk in a desultory way for some time; then I observed: "I met somebody in the drive as I was coming up to the house."

Mabel started slightly. "Met somebody," she repeated, "not—not——"

"Yes," I replied, "Hector Blunt."

"Oh, yes; he—he did call."

"Mabel, has that man been here trying to poison your mind against me?" I asked.

"No, Dick; indeed no. He was just making a—a friendly call."

"A friendly call! From that cad!" I exclaimed. "Really, dear, after what has happened—after his base innuendoes against me, which you say yourself you do not believe—I should have thought a friendly call from Hector Blunt would not be altogether welcome."

"I can't prevent him calling, darling," she murmured.

"You can refuse to receive him."

"Well, dear, don't speak of it any more. I—I probably will not see him again."

“I sincerely hope not,” I said. To put it mildly, I was piqued that Mabel should be on friendly terms with a man who, if he could, would have placed the hangman’s noose around my neck. Mabel did not seem to realise how much the evidence given by Blunt at the inquest might have meant to me had there been a scintilla of circumstantial evidence to support it, or even if the Coroner had been less thorough in his method of examination and more ready to take things for granted.

My first interview with my sweetheart after a separation of five weeks could scarcely be described as a happy one. Following her manifestation of pleasure at seeing me, the restraint that had been apparent in Mabel’s letters asserted itself, and her manner was lacking alike in warmth and frankness. We kissed at parting, but our embrace was scarcely lover-like.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SCENE AT THE CLUB.

A COUPLE of weeks passed and I saw Mabel frequently, but there was no improvement in our relations. There were times when she seemed almost like her old self, frank and affectionate; but soon a troubled frown would appear upon her brow, and her manner toward me would become restrained, and even cold. Obviously she had something upon her mind, but although I made many efforts to win her confidence they were not crowned with success. She persisted that nothing was troubling her except her father's death and the mystery surrounding it, but I felt certain that there was something else. When I again asked her if she really believed that I had gone to her father's room on the morning of the murder she assured me almost vehemently that she did not.

Then came an incident that brought about an entire change in our relationship. One night I was sitting in an armchair in front of the fire, in the smoking-room of the Constitutional Club, glancing through a magazine. At a table near me was a little group of men which included Hector Blunt.

They had been talking golf and racing for some time, and then came a lull in the conversation. "By the way, boys," said Blunt, in a voice that obviously was raised so that I could hear him, "I want you to congratulate me."

"What on, Hec.," inquired one, "have you drawn a starter in the Australian Hurdle?"

"No; it is something much more exciting—I am going to be married."

Several men offered their congratulations, some sincere, others couched in facetious terms.

"And who is the misguided lady?" someone asked in a jocular tone.

"Miss Mabel Tracey, daughter of poor old Henry Tracey," was the reply.

White with rage, I sprang from my chair and strode across to where Blunt was sitting. He also rose to his feet, with a sneer upon his lips. The other men looked uneasy.

"Gentlemen," I remarked quickly, though my blood was boiling and it was all that I could do to keep my hands from the little rat on the other side of the table, "gentlemen, you will kindly not believe the statement you have just heard."

Blunt attempted to bluster. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"I mean that you are a damned liar."

"Steady on, old man," remarked one of the members, placing his hand upon my shoulder.

"I mean exactly what I say," I remarked firmly,

“and what is more, Blunt will either confess at once that he lied, or take the consequences.”

Blunt looked uneasy, and edged away when I stepped round to his side of the table.

“Are you going to withdraw?” I asked.

“Certainly not,” he said; “I repeat, I am engaged to marry Miss Mab—”

He got no further, for I seized him by the throat and threw him back across the table, and, ere the other members could interfere, had administered several smart blows across his face with the back of my open hand.

The other men pulled me away. Blunt was red in the face from my blows, and his necktie was hanging loose. With one hand he felt his throat where I had gripped him.

“You will pay for this, Maxon,” he gasped, when he had regained his breath somewhat. “You don’t suppose that Miss Tracey wants to marry you, do you? Perhaps if you could explain what you were doing in her father’s room on the ni——”

I managed to break away from the two men who were holding me lightly by the arms, and this time my method with Blunt was less gentle. I struck out with my left arm straight from the shoulder, my fist caught him squarely under the chin, and he went down like a ninepin, his head striking against the edge of the table as he fell.

One member poured out a glass of brandy and knelt beside the prostrate man, while several others

hustled me from the room. In the hall I took my hat from the steward, and turned and faced them:

“I am sorry, gentlemen, that this scene should have occurred. If any explanation is required by the committee, I can only repeat that Blunt is a liar and a cad. Some weeks ago, as you are doubtless aware, he endeavoured to trump up a false accusation against me, which, had it been believed, might have resulted in the loss of my liberty, and even my life. To-night, if I had given him the opportunity he would have repeated it. Further he has tried to link his name with that of a lady whose good name is everything to me. If the committee requires my resignation it will be promptly forthcoming, for if Blunt repeated what he has just said, I would act again as I have just acted. I am sorry, gentlemen, to have disturbed your evening—good-night.”

“Good-night, old man,” a couple of them murmured sympathetically, and I received several warm hand-clasps as I left the club. Despite his wealth, Blunt was not popular at the Constitutional, and I felt that I had the support of the majority of the members present in the course I had taken.

Once outside I walked straight to Swanston-street and got upon a Toorak tram. It was only a little after 9 o'clock, and I intended going at once to “Avalong” and acquainting Mabel with what had taken place.

The maid who opened the door was evidently surprised to see me. She thought that Miss Tracey was at home. In a short while, Mabel, very agitated

in her manner, came into the room. I went to kiss her, but she evaded the caress by turning and sitting down hastily. Very quietly I gave her a full description of what had occurred at the club. While I was speaking her agitation increased, and when I had finished she rose from her chair and walked nervously about the room.

“You shouldn’t have done it, Dick,” she said, “you should not have made a scene.”

“I know it, dear,” I answered, “but when the little rat came out with such an outrageous statement I lost my temper completely. To think that a man in a decent club should go out of his way to tell such a damnable falsehood made me forget——”

“Oh, but it isn’t a falsehood,” she cried, “it isn’t a falsehood.”

Dropping to the sofa she buried her face in a cushion, and burst into tears.

As for me, the shock occasioned by her announcement caused me to sit in my chair as though petrified. It was only the sight of Mabel, her shoulders heaving from her sobbing, that moved me to action. I went across the room and knelt beside her, placing my arm around her waist.

“My dear, dear Mabel,” I said, “in heaven’s name what do you mean? Surely you do not mean that you have promised to marry Blunt? Say it isn’t true, dear—say it is not true.”

She sat up on the sofa and dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

“It is true, Dick,” she said; “I have promised to—to marry him.”

“But why—why, for God’s sake tell me why?” I urged.

The scene at the club and Mabel’s startling announcement, coming after the events of the last few weeks, threatened to reduce me to a state not very far removed from hysteria.

“Do not question me, Dick,” she pleaded; “it is all—all for the best.”

“All for the best!” I exclaimed. “Good heavens, Mabel; what are you saying! All for the best to become the wife of a little bounder like him! My poor girl, what are you thinking of! What hold has this scoundrel got over you?”

“Who says he has a hold over me?” she demanded, still sobbing. “You have no right to suggest anything of the kind. I am free to marry whom I choose.”

“Very well, Mabel,” I replied; “if you take that attitude, of course, I have no more to say. Not long ago you gave me to understand that you cared for me. If your feelings have changed——”

“They haven’t, they haven’t,” she sobbed.

“Then this man Blunt *has* got some hold over you. Tell me what it is, Mabel, and let me help you. Surely you can trust me.”

“Oh, don’t, Dick, don’t; you will drive me mad. I tell you it is all for the best. Try and forget me; I am not worthy of your love.”

“That,” I said firmly, “I will never believe. I will not make things harder for you by worrying you further while you are in your present state, but since you admit that you still care for me, I refuse to accept my dismissal as final. Perhaps, as you say, it is all for the best, for I intend to devote the whole of my energies to finding out what the secret is that you and this man share. I believe it is connected with your father’s murder, though in what way, heaven alone knows. Whatever it is, I am determined to get to the bottom of it.”

Mabel’s face was again buried in the cushion, and she did not raise her head when I approached her to say good-bye. I bent down and kissed her hair, then left the room, with the sound of her sobbing in my ears.

CHAPTER IX.

MOUNT MARUNGA REVISITED.

FOR several days after my interview with Mabel I did little but brood over the turn events had taken. Then I decided that unless I was to accept this reverse lying down, I must resolve upon a plan of action. One evening I drew my armchair up to my sitting-room fire, filled my pipe, and when I had got the tobacco burning nicely, set myself to think out the affair from the beginning. Recalling Detective Ryan's remark about first of all searching for a motive, I tried to find one for the murder of Henry Tracey. I had an advantage over the detectives inasmuch as I knew positively that one person whom they had under suspicion—myself—was innocent, and felt equally positive that a second—Mabel—was also innocent, however inexplicable some of her actions might appear. This narrowed the field of investigation.

Of all the guests staying at the Mount Marunga Hotel at the time of the tragedy, the person who, to my mind, had provided the most justifiable grounds for suspicion was Hector Blunt. First of all there

was his attempt to incriminate me. Of course, he might have actually heard voices in Tracey's room, and really thought that one of them was mine, but this I was not disposed to believe. Considering the ferocity of the storm at the time, and the fact that Mrs. Tracey had heard nothing, I felt justified in regarding Blunt's story as a pure invention. His object in endeavouring to discredit me might merely be to get a rival out of the way; on the other hand it might be a species of camouflage designed to put the police upon a wrong scent. The object of this could only be to protect another, and who could that other be but his miserable self?

But if I harbored suspicion of Blunt, my first move, assuming him to have been guilty of the crime, was to seek a motive for his action. The evidence given at the inquest showed that he had asked Mabel to be his wife some time before the tragedy, and she had refused. Under these circumstances, would it be likely that he would go to her father and ask permission to pay his addresses to Mabel? Even assuming that he had done this, I could imagine no reason that would justify a quarrel between the two men that would be likely to lead to murder. The only explanation that I could think of was that Blunt was aware of something discreditable in Tracey's life and had gone to give him the choice of exposure or his daughter's hand in marriage. I began to feel that I was getting "warm," as the children say. Here, surely, was an action that would justify the most violent kind of quarrel. Perhaps Tracey had taken his revolver from the dressing-table drawer and threatened Blunt, and there may have been a struggle

for the weapon, ending in Blunt obtaining it and shooting Tracey. The struggle, probably, was not a very fierce or prolonged one, or there would have been indications of it in the bedroom, and Mrs. Tracey would probably have heard it.

This train of thought led into another avenue. Perhaps Mrs. Tracey *had* heard it, but she too may have known of the secret (if there was one) in Tracey's past, and agreed not to expose Blunt, so as to protect her dead husband's memory. Perhaps, the secret (the existence of which I was assuming) if disclosed might prove that Tracey was not entitled to his wealth and possessions. This would supply a very strong motive for Mrs. Tracey not wishing it made public. It would also account for Mabel's otherwise inexplicable conduct in consenting to become engaged to a man whom she had more than once told me she disliked. From what I knew of her character, I felt that she was just the girl who would sacrifice herself to protect her dead father's reputation.

All these assumptions upon my part might prove absolutely wrong, but I felt that the trail was one well worth following. If Hector Blunt were the guilty party, the question was: How to go about proving his guilt? The more I thought, the more evident it became that it was no use merely to sit in my armchair constructing theories, however logical. There was not much chance of my picking up clues in my own sitting-room. The only thing was to re-visit the scene of the tragedy, in the hope of stumbling across something overlooked by the police, in whose perspicacity I had no very great faith. There and

then I decided that I would spend the week-end at Mount Marunga. As I knocked the ashes from my pipe preliminary to going to bed, I felt that at last I was about to take a step in the right direction.

I arrived at Mount Marunga station at about 7 o'clock on Saturday evening, and, with one or two others, boarded the char-a-banc that conveys guests to the hotel. It was during the pleasant evening drive through mountainous country that I acquired a fresh idea. Since Hector Blunt was the present object of my suspicions, what could be more reasonable than that I should ask to be allowed to occupy the room which he had had at the time of the tragedy. There was just a bare chance that there might be found a clue of some description. I knew the room well, No. 14, immediately at the head of the stairs, on the first floor. On reaching the hotel I saw Mr. Milnor, the manager, and asked him if No. 14 was occupied. Fortunately it was not. It was now the tail end of the winter season, and, owing to this, and the fact that the tragedy had not proved a desirable advertisement for the hotel, not many guests were upon the premises.

I followed the porter who took charge of my bag up to my room, and when he had been duly tipped and dismissed, looked around me. The room was the ordinary type of better-class hotel bed-sitting room, clean, airy, and comfortably furnished. A light blue paper covered the walls, and the door, skirting board, window frame and bed were coated with white enamel. A small table, on which was a reading lamp, was on one side of the bed, and on the other was a wash-basin fixed to the wall. At the foot of the bed was an arm-chair, and a comfortable sofa was placed near the

window. A wardrobe, a dressing-table, and a couple of chairs completed the furniture. In the wall furthest from the bed was a fireplace, and over this a mantelpiece, on which stood an inartistically ornate clock, and a couple of cheap bronze statuettes.

I filled in the night before going to bed conversing with various persons about the hotel, including the manager, the hall-porter, and the clerk at the booking office. I found that each was ready to talk of the murder. The manager, in pessimistic vein, waxed eloquent anent the harm it had done the hotel. Many of the guests had left within a day or two of the tragedy, and a number of persons who had booked rooms had cancelled them after reading the reports of the murder in the newspapers. The porter and clerk were less lugubrious, but none proved of any real assistance to me in my quest of a clue. Detectives Ryan and Patullo, I learned, had several times visited the hotel, but nothing had been discovered that would throw a light upon the mystery of Henry Tracey's death.

Next morning after breakfast, while most of the handful of guests whose names were upon the hotel book were either in bed or at church, I began a systematic search of the room. I was not looking for anything in particular, but was determined to leave no stone unturned, for I felt that anywhere I might stumble across something that might chance to have an important bearing upon the mystery. I took out every drawer, got inside the cupboard portion of the wardrobe and examined it minutely, took the clothes off the bed, and felt and thumped the entire surface

of the mattress, inch by inch. Next I seized the poker, and with it scraped and poked the crevices of the chimney above the fireplace, getting myself prettily decorated with soot for my pains. Then I crawled about the floor on my hands and knees, feeling the flooring boards one by one to ascertain if any of them were loose, but my labors were not rewarded by a discovery of any kind.

Covered with soot, dust and fluff, I lay upon the bed to consider what next I should do. Lying there, my eye was attracted by the wardrobe, and it suddenly occurred to me that I had not examined the top of that massive piece of furniture. I got up, pushed the sofa against the wardrobe, and balanced a chair on the sofa. Climbing on to the chair, I was just able to reach the top of the wardrobe and rub my hand along the surface, which was covered thickly with the dust of years. It was a laborious job feeling about in this way, but when suddenly my hand came in contact with something hard and cold, it was as much as I could do to prevent myself falling off the chair in my excitement. With my forefinger I was able to draw the article an inch or two nearer, and then to grasp it, and jump from the chair with it in my hand. I looked at my find, my heart gave a leap, and I could not keep back a shout of "Eureka!" which must have amazed my neighbors if the room next door happened to be occupied. It was a revolver!

I examined the weapon eagerly. It was a Colt 38.0 with six chambers, dusty, but not sufficiently so to suggest that it had lain there for any great length

of time. Five of its chambers were loaded, and one had been discharged. The presence of this weapon—which it was fair to assume was the one missing from the late Henry Tracey's dressing-table drawer—in the room which had been occupied by Hector Blunt, gave me at last a very definite and valuable clue. I tidied up the room, washed myself, and locked the revolver in my Gladstone bag. I resolved to keep my discovery a secret, and to return to Melbourne by the evening train.

CHAPTER X.

AT BABYLON MANSIONS.

HECTOR BLUNT had a flat at the Babylon Mansions, St. Kilda, and here I called on the Monday following my return from Mount Marunga. His man-servant answered my ring. "Tell Mr. Blunt that Mr. Richard Maxon has called to see him on urgent business," I said. The man passed down the little passage and entered a room, and at a discreet distance I followed.

"Tell him I'm out," I heard Blunt say.

"That is not necessary, Blunt," I remarked, stepping into the room.

The well-trained servant looked unspeakably shocked. Blunt, who was sitting in front of the fire, in a gorgeous smoking-jacket, rose to his feet.

"To what do I owe the unpleasantness of this intrusion?" he demanded.

"A private matter, which I scarcely imagine you would wish me to discuss in the presence of a third person," I replied.

"I am not aware——" he began, but I interrupted him.

"This is a matter that intimately concerns you, Blunt," I told him, "and I would advise you to listen to what I have to say."

I had decided that it was not advisable for me to go direct to the police and acquaint them with the discovery I had made at the hotel. What I wished to do was to frighten Blunt, and find out, if possible, the nature of the hold he had over poor Mabel. My next move would depend upon what happened at this interview. If it turned out that he knew of something really disgraceful in the career of the late Henry Tracey—though I found it difficult to believe that anything of the sort could exist—by having Blunt arrested and placed on his trial I would only bring fresh unhappiness to Mabel. I was willing, if I thought the circumstances warranted it, not to make public my discovery, and to allow the Mount Marunga murder to remain a mystery so far as the outside world was concerned, if only I obtained a confession from Blunt, and he agreed to absolve Mabel from her promise of marriage and not trouble her further.

My manner apparently had the effect of impressing on Blunt that it would be wise to listen to me, for he motioned the servant from the room, and resumed his seat.

“I will call if I want you, Bell,” he remarked significantly. Evidently the poor worm feared that I might resort to personal violence, and was desirous of letting me know that assistance for him would be at hand.

I helped myself to a seat and filled and lit my pipe with great deliberation, taking a certain grim pleasure in noting the nervous manner in which Blunt fumbled with the matches in lighting his cigarette.

Not until I had got my tobacco burning satisfactorily did I speak, then I went straight to the point. "I want you," I said, "to give me an account of your movements on the morning of the Mount Marunga murder."

He started, and flashed a keen glance at me, obviously anxious to find out if I knew something, or if my air of assurance was mere bluff. Before replying, he leaned back in his armchair and assumed an air of composure. "You are really rather a humorous bounder, Maxon," he remarked.

"Cut that out, Blunt," I answered, "the game is up."

"What game?"

"Yours."

"I would be immensely interested if you would tell me what my game *is*."

"Well, a part of it is to blackmail Miss Tracey into becoming your wife."

"My dear fellow, Mabel"—he dwelt on the Christian name and glanced at me to see how I liked it—"has exercised a free, untrammelled choice. Of course, you are an awfully fascinating young man, and all that kind of thing, but Mabel happens——"

"It won't do, Blunt," I told him, "it is no use trying bluff. Perhaps it may interest you to know that I spent the week-end at the Mount Marunga Hotel."

"Indeed; I trust you had an enjoyable time."

"Very satisfactory, thank you. You see, I occupied your room."

This shot went home. I had always considered

Hector Blunt a miserable coward, and his agitation now confirmed this belief. For a few seconds he did not know exactly what to say or do. He cast the stump of his cigarette into the grate, and stood up.

“Did you—er—find the room comfortable?” he inquired.

“Quite, thank you. I was very interested in some of the furniture.”

“Er—you don’t say so.”

“Yes, I was particularly interested in the wardrobe.”

This time he crumpled up completely. First he sat down, then got up again, and finally walked over to the sideboard and poured himself out a whisky-and-soda.

“You see,” I remarked, “I was not bluffing. Now do you feel inclined to give me an account of your actions on that morning, or do you prefer that it should be given to the police?”

His hand shook as he lit another cigarette, but by now he had evidently decided what line to take. “It is a matter of indifference to me,” he said; “why not consult Mabel and ask her advice?”

“I have no intention of doing anything of the kind,” I told him. “Apparently you have been successful in frightening her, but you are dealing with a man now, not a defenceless girl. I presume you know of, or have invented, some more or less discreditable incident in her father’s past, and are using it to blackmail the poor girl; but, whatever may be the consequences to the late Henry Tracey’s

reputation, I intend to save his daughter from your clutches."

I had evidently made a false move, for Blunt showed unmistakable signs of relief. First he grinned at me, and then threw his head back and laughed outright, a mirthless but eminently self-satisfied laugh.

"So that is the wonderful theory your investigations as an amateur detective have led you to form," he said. "Well, it does credit to your imagination, but, let me tell you, you are barking up the wrong tree."

I decided that if it came to bluff I was at least his equal. I rose from my chair. "Do I understand, then, that you wish me to take the revolver I found at the hotel to Detective Ryan, and explain to him the circumstances in which I found it?"

"If you wish; but again I suggest that you should first consult Mabel."

"That will not be necessary. I do not regard her as the best judge of what action I should take in this matter." I looked at my watch. "If I go to Russell-street now," I remarked, "I will probably find Ryan there."

"Here, sit down," he said. "Listen to what I have got to say before you make a fool of yourself. You have surmised, not incorrectly, that Mabel is not head over ears in love with me."

"That may be taken for granted," I observed.

"Well, why do you suppose she has agreed to marry me?"

"Because, like the cur you are, you have held out some threat of what you will do if she refuses."

“I have no objection at all to admitting that,” he replied, with disgusting cynicism. “But, I repeat, you are barking up the wrong tree if you imagine I know anything against the late lamented Henry Tracey. So far as I am aware, the dear departed was a model of respectability. What I know concerns, not Tracey, but his daughter.”

I had to exercise all the restraint at my command to keep my hands off the little beast, but I realised that if I was to find out all I wished to know I would have to keep my temper.

“Perhaps you would not mind informing me what it is you know.”

“Why should I?”

“Because if you do not I go straight from here to Ryan or Patullo. However you may attempt to blacken Miss Tracey’s character, it will not save you from being arrested on a charge of murder. Her good name is very precious to me, but I fancy, Blunt, that your miserable neck is equally precious to you, and, I warn you, I mean business. I will chance the revelations concerning Miss Tracey if you are prepared to chance the hangman’s noose.”

“But, my dear Sherlock Holmes, I am not in any danger from your friend, the hangman.”

“That remains to be seen. The fact that the revolver with which Henry Tracey was shot was concealed in your room, and that you have already endeavoured to fix the crime on to me, are likely to prove damaging.”

“I do not mind admitting that I hid the revolver; but I did not fire the shot that killed Tracey.”

“Well, if you do not do as I wish, you will have an opportunity of explaining that to a judge and jury.”

“I would then be in the painful position of having to explain that Henry Tracey was murdered by his daughter.”

My resolution about keeping my temper was forgotten. “You damned scoundrel,” I cried, and sprang towards him. He attempted to rise, but I got him by the throat. “Take that back, you miserable cur, or I’ll choke you.”

Blunt gasped and wriggled in his chair, and his man appeared in the doorway through which I had entered. At the same time I heard a step behind me, and, relinquishing my grip on Blunt’s windpipe, I turned around, and, standing in a curtained opening, which evidently led to a bedroom, I saw Detective Ryan!

CHAPTER XI.

RYAN TAKES A HAND.

“ENOUGH of that, Maxon!” said Ryan sharply.

“What the devil does this mean?” demanded Blunt, when he was able to regain his breath.

“I couldn’t help it, sir,” said the servant; “he came in directly after Mr. Maxon, and insisted upon getting into your bedroom, sir. He said he was a detective and showed me his badge. It isn’t my fault, sir.”

“You damned fool!” exclaimed Blunt.

“It is all right,” Ryan told the servant, “you can get.”

“You have acted wrong in this matter, Mr. Maxon,” he remarked severely and ungrammatically. “Still, it looks as if you have helped to clear things up; so I suppose it’s all for the best.”

“How did you come to be in the room, Ryan?” I asked, my curiosity, for the moment, causing me to forget more important aspects of the affair.

“My dear chap,” he remarked, with evident satisfaction, “I have been shadowing you since Saturday. I, too, spent a week-end at Mount Marunga. I gathered you had found out something at the pub. I have been on your tracks all day, and followed you here to-night.”

“You have heard what has taken place?”

“Everything. I was in that room a few seconds after you began talking.” He then turned to Blunt. “You had better come along with me to the C.I. Branch,” he remarked shortly.

Blunt’s fear was abject. “You are making a great mistake, Ryan,” he said, his teeth chattering as he spoke. “You must look elsewhere for the murderer of Henry Tracey.”

“It is my duty to warn you,” said Ryan formally, “that anything you say may be used in evidence against you.”

“It can’t; it can’t!” exclaimed Blunt. “Before God, I will tell you the truth. That night I had just left the ballroom and was going upstairs to my room on the first floor, when I heard a shot. I paused outside my room—it was at the head of the stairs, you know—and I saw Mabel Tracey coming along the corridor. She was dressed in walking costume—hat and everything—and had a revolver in her hand. I don’t know why I did it, but I—I wanted to save her. I took the revolver from her, and told her to go back to her room; which she did. Then I threw the revolver on to the top of the wardrobe in my room, where I reckoned nobody would be likely to find it. This is the truth; I swear it.”

The detective stood stroking his thick moustache, looking frankly puzzled. His brain, like those of most of the underpaid Victorian official sleuth-hounds, was not one that moved rapidly. Despite his assumption of amiable omnipotence, Ryan was a plain, straightforward, rather dull citizen. He was

more at home in investigating a simple case of house-breaking, in which the offender, by the methods he employed, practically supplied his own identification to those familiar with the individual tricks of followers in the footsteps of the late unlamented W. Sikes. With a case like the Mount Marunga mystery, which called for deductive reasoning, poor Ryan was all at sea. Just at present, notwithstanding the success of his eavesdropping tactics, I imagined that he was not altogether pleased with the turn events had taken. The fact that he had not been the finder of the missing revolver was a wound to his amour propre, and there was also the possibility of his being hauled over the coals for the inadequate nature of the search which he had conducted at the hotel.

Blunt, pale and trembling, watched the detective's face anxiously. "Good God, man," he exclaimed despairingly, "I'm not lying to you. Can't you see I'm telling you the truth?"

"Oh, yes; a likely yarn!" I scoffed. "You'd better try another one, Blunt, if you want reasonable persons to believe you."

"This is my business," snapped Ryan; so I subsided. Not wishing to antagonise him at this stage, I did not remind the detective that it had also been his business to find the missing revolver, but he had not made a conspicuous success of it.

"You will have to come to the C.I. Branch with me, anyhow," he said, addressing Blunt. "And you, too, Mr. Maxon," he added.

Ryan pressed an electric button to the right of the fireplace, and Bell, Blunt's man, appeared, dis-

approval of the conduct of the detective and myself showing in every line of his face. Bell plainly held the view that persons accustomed to moving in the best society would not have acted as we had done and were doing.

"You rang, sir," he said, pointedly addressing Blunt.

"No, he didn't; I did," the detective told him; "I want you to 'phone for a taxi."

The man waited a moment, as though expecting his employer to countermand the order, but Blunt was hanging over one of the arms of the big easy chair like a wet rag. "Get me a whisky-and-soda first, Bell," he muttered.

Having executed this order, Bell retired, and we heard him at the telephone in the passage. For about five minutes the three of us remained in the room without speaking a word, the silence being broken only by the crackling of the fire and an occasional groan from Blunt. Ryan stood in front of the fire, frowning and caressing his moustache, while I puffed my pipe with an air of being quite at my ease, although, as a matter of fact, I was acutely conscious that the affair was by no means at an end, and that there was probably still much suffering in store for poor Mabel.

At last Bell announced the arrival of the taxi, again addressing himself directly to his employer. Never have I seen a human being in a more pitiful state of funk than was Hector Ernest Mayne Blunt. When Ryan told him to get up and put on his hat and overcoat, he clung to the chair and moaned. The detective dragged him to his feet, and he stood un-

steadily while Bell placed a gorgeous silk scarf round his neck, helped him on with his overcoat, and handed him his hat.

"Am I to wait up for you, sir?" asked the servant.

Blunt looked at him with a blank expression.

"I wouldn't if I were you," remarked Ryan grimly; whereupon Hector gave vent to a howl of dismay and seemed almost on the verge of tears. Ryan took Blunt by the arm, not, I fancy, that he feared he would attempt to escape, but to guide his faltering footsteps towards the lift. When we reached the hall downstairs, it seemed that Blunt's knees would give way, and we both assisted him to the waiting taxi.

"Russell-street, C.I. Branch," Ryan told the driver, and off we went.

I often now think with a certain grim amusement of the strange trio that that taxi bore from St. Kilda to Russell-street. I, who had been engaged to marry Mabel and had practically been accused of murdering her father; Hector Blunt, who was still Mabel's fiance, and who, in all likelihood, would have to stand his trial for the crime he had endeavoured to affix to me; and Ryan, who had suspected both Mabel and me, and who seemed more than half disappointed that his theories were now in danger of being completely upset.

I must confess, too, that things were not turning out as I had hoped. I had calculated upon being able to frighten Blunt into a confession, and then to compound a felony, by remaining silent regarding his crime on condition that he left the country;

but now a trial, with all the accompanying publicity, which would be so hateful to Mabel, seemed inevitable. If Blunt knew anything to Henry Tracey's discredit he was certain to divulge it, and also to attempt to implicate Mabel herself. These reflections were not conducive to cheerfulness upon my part.

The taxi-cab came to a stop outside the dingy office of the Criminal Investigation Branch, Ryan practically supporting Blunt on the journey across the pavement and up the stone steps. Patullo was sent for, and quickly appeared. After a whispered consultation he took Blunt into one room, while Ryan beckoned me into another.

"What about that revolver—were you bluffing or was it the truth?" he asked.

"I found a revolver on top of the wardrobe in the room at the Mount Marunga hotel which was occupied by Blunt at the time of the murder," I answered.

"Where is it?"

I produced the weapon from my hip pocket, and handed it to the detective, who examined it eagerly.

"H'm," he remarked; "one chamber discharged. It looks a true bill." Then, with official severity: "Why did you not at once bring your discovery under the notice of the police?"

"I wanted first to obtain a confession from Blunt, and find out just how matters stood."

"That was a wrong thing to do, Mr. Maxon," he informed me. "This amateur detective business is all right in plays and stories, but we are the proper people to handle these jobs."

I repressed a smile, and did not answer.

“As a matter of fact,” he said loftily, “we have had this man Blunt under observation for some time.”

“Indeed,” I remarked politely. I did not, however, attach any importance to Ryan’s statement. In my work as a newspaper man I had noticed that whenever one supplied the police with facts they invariably informed you that the person concerned had been under observation for some time.

Another sleuth-hound, Detective Brady, was called in, and I was questioned closely regarding the circumstances which led to the finding of the revolver. I described my movements very much as I have detailed them in a previous chapter, and the detectives seemed satisfied with my story. Ryan stepped across to the room in which were Patullo and Blunt, and Brady remained to talk with me, and keep an eye on me until the others had heard what Blunt had to say. For over an hour I remained with Brady in the room which, by day, is occupied by the Superintendent of the Criminal Investigation Branch, endeavouring to keep up a conversation which never at any time threatened to become interesting, and wondering all the while what was going on in the room across the passage. I felt convinced that Blunt was doing all in his power to transfer his guilt to the shoulders of my unhappy Mabel.

At length Ryan came into our room. “We will not require you any more this evening, Mr. Maxon,” he said; “I suppose we can get in touch with you at the office if we want you to-morrow?”

I assured him that he could, and endeavoured to find out something of what had taken place in the interview with Blunt; but on this point Ryan was mysterious and uncommunicative.

It was ten minutes to eleven when I left the C.I. Branch, but I was determined to see Mabel that night, and tell her of what had taken place. I had not the slightest doubt that the detectives would take an early opportunity of interviewing her, so I wished to acquaint her with the story Blunt had told at his flat, and place her on her guard. Perhaps, too, now that the crisis had arrived, she would tell me the nature of the threat Blunt had held over her to induce her to consent to become his wife.

CHAPTER XII.

A MIDNIGHT RESCUE.

WALKING slowly down Russell-street, I turned into Latrobe-street, and at once increased my pace until I reached the entrance to the Third City Court. Here I waited for several minutes in the shadow of the archway to see if I was being followed. I felt annoyed with myself to think that a dull dog like Ryan had been able to shadow me to Mount Marunga and back, and spoil my plans for dealing with Hector Blunt, and endeavouring to restore, to some extent, Mabel's lost happiness with as little unpleasantness for her as possible. I was not taking any risks of further interference this time. The street was deserted, and I was soon satisfied that no attempt was being made to shadow me. Apparently up to the time of the scene at Blunt's flat I had been an object of suspicion which had now been transferred to Blunt, and also, I feared, to Mabel.

I proceeded rapidly along Swanston-street, secured a taxi-cab, and gave directions to the driver to take me as quickly as possible to "Avalong," and to keep a look out and let me know if we were being followed by any other vehicle.

On the journey to Toorak I reviewed in my mind the events of the evening. I did not for a moment believe Blunt's story that he had met Mabel in the passage, with the revolver in her hand, and had taken it from her. This might be the desperate invention of a trapped cur, clutching at anything to save himself. On the other hand, it might have been put forward deliberately, in the hope that Mabel would even go to the length of endorsing the story, rather than that Blunt should make any unsavory revelations concerning her dead father. I still clung to the belief that some knowledge which Blunt possessed, or pretended to possess, concerning Henry Tracey's past was the means he had employed in forcing Mabel into a relationship which I knew must be hateful to her. I thought that if I could induce the poor girl to confide in me I would probably find that the incident, or whatever it was, which Blunt threatened to expose, was not nearly so terrifying as it might appear to the mind of a distraught girl.

Toorak was not yet asleep. Many of the houses were in darkness, but lights showed in the windows of others, and from several came, where parties were still in progress, the strains of music. "Avalong" was in a quiet street in which only one or two of the houses were lighted. The big iron entrance gates to the Tracey mansion were locked, but I knew of a small door in the stone wall which was always left unlocked until a late hour, for the use of the various servants on their nights out. Through this door I entered, and approached the

house by a garden path, some twenty yards from the main drive. It was a mild, starless night, but two big electric lamps in the drive shed a radiance over the greater portion of the garden, save where here and there shadows were cast by trees and bushes, which also in places made quaint arabesques upon the broad gravelled drive.

Suddenly my eyes were attracted by something which caused me to stop short. Coming down the drive was the figure of a woman. She was walking slowly and a little uncertainly. The figure was somewhat in the shadow, but in spite of this I could not mistake the graceful carriage and well-poised head. I had no doubt at all that this wanderer by night in the flowery demesne created by the late Henry Tracey was his daughter, Mabel. I felt a great surge of pity for the unhappy girl, who, even though she had dismissed me and pledged her troth to another, I still regarded as my sweetheart. Unable to sleep, Mabel was seeking surcease from the troubles that hedged her round in solitary communion with nature in one of her most peaceful moods. I found a side path that led to the drive and hurried toward the girl. In doing this I lost sight of her for some seconds, and when next I saw her she had accelerated her pace and was hurrying in the direction of the main entrance gates. Mabel was wearing a dust coat, which she usually used when motoring, over her dress, and about her head, in place of a hat, was draped either a pink scarf or a motoring veil, I was not sure which. On reaching the main entrance to the grounds she

took from her pocket a key and opened one of the smaller iron gates, which were placed on either side of the big carriage gates.

I was now some thirty yards behind her, and called her by name. She did not hear, and passed into the street, banging and locking the gate behind her. I was only a few yards from the entrance when she withdrew the key from the lock, and again I called her by name, but she placed the key in her pocket and hastened down the street without turning her head.

Her action left me puzzled. Mabel walking in her own grounds when the rest of the household was asleep was understandable, but Mabel leaving her grounds, locking the gate behind her, and hurrying off into the night was an altogether different matter. I felt sure that she had heard me address her on the second occasion, for I had spoken in a fairly loud voice, yet she had deliberately chosen to ignore me. I did not feel offended—how could I with a girl who had suffered as Mabel had, and was still suffering?—but her action frightened me. I felt that in her present state of mind she was capable of almost anything. I resolved to follow her; not only to protect her should occasion arise, but also, when the opportunity presented itself, to speak to her of what I had come from the city to tell her. First of all I had to get out of "Avalong." The direction Mabel had taken was the opposite to that in which lay the gate by which I had entered, so, to save time, I scaled the main gates and dropped to the footpath. By now Mabel was about fifty

yards down the road, and walking rapidly. I hurried after her, and in the darkness saw her turn to the left. My heart gave a leap which almost sent it into my throat. She had taken a little unmade side street, which skirted the grounds of "Avalong," leading to the river. Now I realised what was the explanation of her strange conduct and her unwillingness to speak to me. Finding her persecution by Blunt, combined with her grief at her father's death, more than she could bear, the poor girl was going to seek relief, like many another before her, in the murky depths of the treacherous Yarra.

A cold sweat appeared upon my forehead as I raced down the street. The lane into which Mabel had turned was not more than a hundred yards long, and at the end of it lay the river. When I turned the corner Mabel was almost at the bottom of the lane.

"Mabel," I shouted, "I want to speak to you; I have some good news."

She did not heed me, but continued straight ahead, apparently determined to carry out the course of action upon which she had resolved. Still running as fast as I could, I kept my eyes fixed upon her. She had reached the grassy bank at the end of the path, and I saw her, without a second's pause, step deliberately into the river. As the chilly water closed about her she gave vent to one piercing shriek.

While I covered the few remaining yards that separated me from the river, I discarded my over-

coat and coat, and on reaching the bank tore at my boot laces and pulled off my boots, peering the while through the darkness at the ripples Mabel had made, and straining my eyes to see her when she should rise. Her white face, framed in the pink scarf, appeared about the surface not more than seven or eight yards away, and I plunged into the stream.

I knew that at this point the river was exceptionally treacherous, and that a person could drown here as easily as in mid-stream. A few strokes brought me within reach of Mabel, who was making no effort to keep afloat. I succeeded in getting my hand under her chin, and, luckily, she did not struggle. With rather less difficulty than I had anticipated, I managed to get her to the bank. I placed her on the grass, and there she lay like one who was dead. Tearing open her dust coat and blouse, I felt for her heart, and thanked God to find that it was still beating. To return to where my taxi was waiting would have occupied precious minutes, but just at this moment there came from the main street the sound of several toots, of a motor-horn in rapid succession, and I guessed that they had been given by a driver to notify visitors to one of the adjacent houses of his arrival.

In my wet stockinged feet I rushed up the lane, and on gaining the street saw the great lights of a car outside a house only a few yards away. I dashed along and gasped to the chauffeur to drive at once down the lane. The sight of my dripping clothes, and no doubt generally wild appearance, convinced him that the case was one of urgency,

and he lost no time in starting the car, and under my direction, driving to where I had left Mabel. Together we lifted her, inert and unconscious, but with her heart still beating faintly, into the car. I told the man to drive to "Avalong," which we reached in a few seconds. In a couple of minutes I had roused the head gardener, who occupied a small brick cottage, originally used as a lodge, near the entrance gates. He opened the gates for us, and in a very short time, in answer to my furious ringing, a sleepy-eyed servant appeared at the front door. I explained rapidly what had happened. Mabel was carried to her room, and soon the big house was ablaze with lights, and all was bustle and excitement.

Mabel's maid came to undress her, another secured a great pile of blankets and rugs, and then rushed to the kitchen to prepare a hot drink, while one of the men-servants got into the car which had brought us to the house, and hurried off for a doctor. The gardener brought me a suit of his own clothes, for which I exchanged my soaked garments. Soon after I had completed the exchange the doctor arrived and was taken to Mabel's room.

"She is suffering seriously from shock," he told me when he came out, "but there is no reason why she should not pull through."

I waited on at "Avalong" till long past midnight, and assured myself that all that could be done for Mabel was being done. The servants, I knew, worshipped her and would see that she did not want for anything that it was within their power to give

her. Those who had known me as a visitor to the house endeavoured to convey to me as discreetly as possible that they had once hoped to have me there as a permanent resident. Although they were all too well-trained to make any definite statement, I had no difficulty in gathering that Hector Blunt was looked upon with distinct disfavour.

Having thanked them all for their kindness, I was preparing to leave the house with the gardener, when there came a ring at the bell. The door was opened by one of the maids, and in the portico stood Detectives Ryan and Patullo.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN ARREST.

THE men displayed their badges, and stepped into the hall. On entering, Ryan glanced round the place, and his eye, when it fell on me, gleamed with displeasure. "Hullo, Mr. Maxon, still trying to interfere?" he inquired.

"Look here, Ryan," I said, "I will thank you not to question my actions. Your bungling and readiness to listen to any sort of ridiculous yarn did me quite sufficient harm in the first place; and now, when it must be evident even to you that I was not involved in the murder, you will oblige me by leaving me alone, and not questioning my actions. You have no excuse for placing me under arrest, you know."

"No; but we could have detained you at Russell Street for a few hours," he answered, "and that is what we d——n well should have done. By now, I suppose you have seen that girl, and she is well primed."

"What the devil do you mean?" I demanded.

"I mean that I presume that you have informed Miss Tracey of what took place to-night at Blunt's flat, and have warned her of the kind of questions we are likely to put to her."

“Well, Ryan, you have made yet another mistake,” I assured him. “Making mistakes is becoming quite a habit of yours. I have had no conversation with Miss Tracey, who is at present lying in her room unconscious.”

Ryan looked at me suspiciously. “Now, what’s the game this time?” he asked.

“If you doubt my word you can question the servants,” I replied.

“Well, Patullo and me want to see Miss Tracey badly—we have a warrant for her arrest on a charge of murder.”

Although I had seen the possibility of something of this sort occurring, I had regarded it as remote, and Ryan’s calm and confident announcement came as a very unpleasant shock. The detectives certainly had lost no time in hunting up a magistrate and securing a warrant.

“You don’t mean to tell me,” I exclaimed, “that you are going to make choice asses of yourselves by arresting a lady of Miss Tracey’s character and position on the unsupported word of a poor little cur, half crazy with funk, who is ready to accuse anybody of anything to save his own miserable skin?”

“We will chance making asses of ourselves, as you call it,” said Patullo, whom I had evidently nettled. “Meanwhile we went to see Miss Tracey and execute our warrant.”

“Good God, man! you mustn’t think of it. Not long ago I dragged Miss Tracey from the Yarra, unconscious. The doctor has just left her, and she has not regained consciousness.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Maxon,” said Ryan, “I think we would rather question the servants. We don’t exactly see where you come in in this affair.”

They made their way into the morning room, and called in the servants one by one, while I waited anxiously in the hall.

“What does it all mean, Mr. Maxon?” Mabel’s maid, Dolly, asked me, on emerging, white-faced and agitated, from the morning room.

“It means, Dolly, that on the word of Mr. Blunt, the detectives want to arrest Miss Tracey for murdering her father.”

Dolly gave a little shriek. “Oh, the fools,” she cried; “Miss Mabel murder Mr. Tracey! Her that loved him more than anybody! They must all be mad. As for that Mr. Blunt, I always hated him. He is a snake in the grass, is that man.”

The detectives, having completed their examination of the servants, came into the hall. “Well, Mr. Maxon,” said Ryan, “of course we are not going to arrest an unconscious woman. Patullo is going to ring up the doctor and find out how things stand. Unless some very good reason prevents it, Miss Tracey is going to stand in the dock with Blunt to-morrow, and in due course a judge and jury can decide who is guilty and who is not. We have already got Blunt locked up on a charge of murder, and we can’t make fish of one and flesh of the other. If what Blunt tells us is true—and I am more than half inclined to believe him, though I agree with you that he is only the fag end of a man—if what he says is true, Miss

Tracey is likely to have a pretty strong case to answer."

I knew that nothing was to be gained by arguing. The detectives had the upper hand, and nothing I could say would prevent them doing what they conceived to be their duty. I dropped on to a sofa, and resting my chin in my hands, gazed myself up to miserable brooding, while Ryan and Patullo returned to the morning-room for a further consultation.

After a while Ryan came into the hall and placed his hand in a kindly manner on my shoulder. "If you take my tip, Mr. Maxon," he said, "you will get home to bed. Judging by the way you have been sneezing, you are in for a fine old cold, and you can do nothing here. You can take my word for it, we will do nothing brutal with the lady upstairs."

"Thank's, Ryan," I replied, "I think I'll take your advice."

I knew that sleep that night, or rather morning, was out of the question for me; but I wanted to be alone to think out what might best be done in Mabel's interest. Having ascertained from Dolly that her mistress's condition was unchanged, I accepted an offer of a hot whisky from one of the servants, and then allowed him to summon my taxi.

On arriving at my diggings I made no attempt to go to bed, but got into dressing-gown and slippers, and spent the hours till morning pacing the floor, or lying on the couch, smoking innumerable pipes, and searching vainly for a glimmer of light in the darkness that enveloped the actions of the girl who, only a few weeks previously, had been healthy, happy, and

with scarcely a care in the world. I cursed my own carelessness in not having taken the precaution of endeavouring to ascertain whether I was being followed when I returned to Mount Marunga, and again when I visited Babylon Mansions. Left to themselves, it is doubtful if Ryan and Patullo would have discovered anything further in regard to the mystery, and in due course the papers relating to it would have been stowed away in a pigeon hole where reposed documents relating to many other undetected crimes. And I might have found some other way of forcing Blunt's hand, and preventing his marriage with Mabel. As it was, I had provided the police with the only clue of any importance that seemed likely to come to light, and it looked as if the indirect result of my efforts would be to place Mabel in the dock with Blunt. I still did not doubt that Blunt's story was a lie, but Ryan and Patullo appeared inclined to accept it, and Mabel's demeanor and actions for some time had rather invited suspicion.

These were the thoughts that I had for company through the long hours of darkness. When came the dawn, chilly, and wearing a mantle of grey, I went to the bathroom, refreshed myself beneath the shower, and, having dressed, left the house to walk to Toorak. By the time I reached "Avalong" it was light, but the gates were not yet open. I roused the gardener, who had had but little rest; but he brushed aside my apologies. Whether he slept or not was of little moment to him at such a period of excitement. "It is an awful business, Mr. Maxon," he said; "I suppose you know that they have taken Miss Mabel away?"

Again I experienced a shock. It had been inevitable that, sooner or later, she would be placed under arrest, but that it should have happened within a few hours of her having been saved from a watery grave and carried unconscious to her room, seemed to me inhuman, almost fiendish. I cursed the law and all its works. At the house I interviewed Mabel's maid, Dolly. I learned that Mabel had regained consciousness shortly after I had left. The doctor had come again, and had said that he would not be responsible for the consequences if she were removed. The detectives had waited for over an hour, and had then interviewed her. She received them calmly, and agreed to whatever fate might have in store for her. Ryan had read over the warrant to Mabel in Dolly's presence, and Mabel announced her readiness to accompany the detectives.

"I cried and cried while I helped her dress," said Dolly—a fact to which her red and swollen eyes bore testimony—"but she was as quiet as anything, and told me I mustn't worry. Then they woke up Thompson, and got out the big car and drove away with her. She kissed me, and told me I was a good girl, and then she gave me this," and Dolly burst into tears as she drew from her pocket a beautiful diamond brooch, which I had often seen Mabel wearing.

"Come, come, Dolly, you mustn't cry," I told her; "we have to save Miss Mabel, and I want you to help me."

I then questioned the girl regarding the recent movements of her mistress, but her answers were not of any assistance to me. She was not even aware of

the circumstances in which Mabel had left the house on the previous night. Dolly slept in a different part of the big mansion, and after brushing Mabel's hair at night, retired to her own room, and did not again see her mistress until rung for in the morning. Last night Dolly had left Mabel, sitting in a bedroom jacket, reading, and had not again seen her until roused with the rest of the household when I arrived with my dripping and unconscious burden.

Having asked questions of several of the other servants, I left "Avalong," taking with me one of the newspapers that had just been delivered. When on the tram going into the city, I opened the paper, and my eye was caught by these headlines:

MOUNT MARUNGA MYSTERY.

SENSATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS.

TWO ARRESTS MADE.

MURDERED MAN'S DAUGHTER IMPLICATED.

The report that followed told of the finding of the revolver, and the arrest of Blunt, and set forth that Mabel had "attempted to commit suicide, by throwing herself into the Yarra, at a point not far from 'Avalong,' the well-known Toorak mansion, which was purchased some years ago by the late Henry Tracey." Then followed some stuff about "a gallant rescue" effected by "Mr. Richard Maxon, a well-known writer on literary and political topics," and an account of Mabel's arrest. Evidently the story had been ob-

tained from the police shortly before the paper went to press; it showed signs of having been hastily flung together, and contained several inaccuracies. What was there, however, was as highly colored as possible. I groaned to think of the name, even though incorrectly given, of the girl I loved being thus flaunted before a public avid for sensationalism. To me the most nauseating feature of the report was that, more by reason of the way in which it was written than by any direct hint, it suggested that the police were inclined to regard the crime as the outcome of a plot between Mabel and Blunt. "The two accused," stated the concluding paragraph, "will be brought before the City Court this morning on a charge of having murdered Henry Tracey at the Mount Marunga Hotel, on June 24th."

CHAPTER XIV.

“THAT THEY DID KILL AND MURDER.”

MABEL and Blunt were placed in the dock at the City Court that morning. I had rung up my friend, Clayton, the solicitor, at his house before breakfast. He at once came into town, and together we went to the watch-house to see Mabel. Clayton, as her solicitor, was allowed a brief chat, but I could not obtain permission to see her. When I emerged from the watch-house at twenty minutes to ten, there was already a large number of people outside the court, although the magistrates would not take the bench until ten o'clock. The court itself was crowded, but, although I was not reporting the case, I managed to obtain a seat at the press table. There I sat, breathing the heavy stale atmosphere which is an unpleasant feature of badly ventilated City courts, and which soon would be breathed by the girl I loved, and who, brought up in luxury, accustomed to every emblem of refinement which wealth and good taste could secure, had had little or no experience of the rough and sordid sides of existence.

To save myself from brooding, I filled in the time of waiting examining the crowd. The City Court habitu  is a distinctive and by no means prepossessing

type. There are persons, the majority of them men, who attend the sittings of the court day after day, year in and year out. They belong to the class that toils not, neither does it spin; and yet, somehow, always has the price of a glass of beer and a packet of "fags" concealed about its clothing. These people regard the court as a theatre in which the seats are free, and the lack of variety in the fare provided does not appear to worry them. After all, it is probably as varied as that set before the ordinary theatre-goer, and, for the most part, distressingly commonplace dramas enacted at the court have, at least, the fascination of being real, and not mere make-believe. For the student of psychology, the proceedings might easily be full of interest, but the average person who attends day by day is not a student of psychology. When he is not himself a person who has at some time been convicted, he is usually just a loafer, seemingly capable of deriving a certain amount of excitement from the two-penny tragedies and comedies which make up the ordinary routine of a court of Petty Sessions.

A case such as that promised for this morning was distinctly out of the usual. Murder charges, happily, are not frequent; especially charges surrounded with as many sensational circumstances as were these. In addition to the court's regular patrons I noticed a number of people, many of them acquaintances of Mabel's or of Blunt's, more or less well known socially. For these the case bristled with interest, and before the proceedings began they chattered loudly and continuously, as though they were present at a classical concert. The thought of poor Mabel as

a target for these eyes—the bleary eyes of the court loafers, and the hard eyes of the society loafers—filled me with anger and disgust.

The chatter was interrupted by the usual loud cry of “Silence” from the court orderly, as the police magistrate and five justices of the peace took their seats upon the Bench. Two unimportant remand cases were dealt with and then the names of Mabel Helen Tracey and Hector Ernest Mayne Blunt were called. Persons who had met both of them socially dozens of times craned their necks to see the two as eagerly as those who were now seeing them for the first time. There were dark shadows beneath Mabel’s eyes, and she looked pale and tired. Her head was cast downward, and her eyelids, with their long, dark lashes, hid the eyes that I had learned to love. There was that in her bearing calculated to excite pity, but certainly not contempt; whereas Blunt—his pasty face as white as it had been the night before, his cheeks unshaven, his eyes bloodshot—looked about him uneasily, licked his lips, shuffled his feet, and with his every action proclaimed himself a coward. Both were charged, in the customary tautological legal phraseology, with that they “did kill and murder Henry George Tracey.”

Detective Ryan entered the witness-box, and gave a brief resumé of the facts in connection with the murder, the finding of the revolver, and the scene at Blunt’s flat, and read a statement which Blunt had made, setting forth more fully the accusation he had brought against Mabel the night before. Ryan then detailed the incidents connected with the arrest of Mabel, and read a statement she had signed, in which

she admitted that she had met Blunt in the corridor of the hotel, and that he had taken the revolver from her. This revelation caused an excited whispering among the spectators, which was immediately subdued with a cry of "Silence."

Ryan was questioned by Clayton, and admitted that Mabel was in a highly nervous, almost hysterical condition when she made the statement. The detective then formally asked for a remand for seven days. This application, which was not opposed by Clayton, or by Blunt's solicitor, was granted. Clayton then made an effort to obtain bail for Mabel, but it is a rule not to grant bail to persons called upon to answer a capital charge, and, despite Clayton's appeal, on the ground that Mabel was in bad health and might suffer serious consequences as a result of her incarceration, the application was refused. The two prisoners were motioned from the dock, and the next case called. About half the disappointed spectators, many of whom had evidently imagined that the trial would begin there and then, left the court.

That afternoon I succeeded in obtaining an interview with Mabel, in company with Clayton. It took place in a room at the lock-up—a small, cheerless apartment furnished only with a table and two wooden chairs. The door was closed, but Patullo waited outside. Mabel welcomed me with a poor, wan little smile, and allowed me to kiss her pale cold cheek. "You are very good to me, Dick, after—after the way I have treated you," she faltered.

"Don't talk of that, dear one," I answered; "I never believed that in becoming Blunt's fiancée you acted willingly, and if this horrible business saves

you from him and restores you to me, our suffering will not have been in vain.”

“Poor old Dick,” she murmured, taking my hand and kissing it. This action was quick and spontaneous, but her manner as quickly changed, and she sat down with a sigh. “It is no use, Dicky,” she said; “you must not cherish false hopes. That statement I made to the detectives was true.”

“That may be; but even if you yourself tell me you killed your father, I will not believe you.”

“Speak quietly, both of you;” said Clayton, “Patullo is outside. Now, Miss Tracey, you must tell me exactly what happened on the morning of June 24th, and if it is humanely possible to prove your innocence, you may rest assured that it will be done.”

“I cannot tell you anything,” Mabel replied; “except that I met Blunt in the corridor, just as he says; I had the revolver in my hand, and—oh! what is the use of asking me questions? You are only torturing me! Leave me alone, and let me pay the penalty. I don’t want to live—I *did* kill father, and there is nothing for me to live for.”

“Hush, hush,” exclaimed Clayton, glancing anxiously at the door.

“What does it matter? What does anything matter?” cried Mabel, hysterically. “I tell you I did it—I did it, and I want to die. Death is the only boon I ask for.”

Flinging her arms across the table, she rested her head upon them, and wept. Her shoulders shook, and it seemed that her sobs would choke her. My distress was scarcely less acute. I could only pace the

floor with clenched hands, my nails biting into my palms.

“I don’t believe you, Mabel,” I exclaimed. “I will never believe this thing of you—it is horrible—damnable.”

“It is no use trying to do anything while she is in this state,” Clayton whispered to me. “You had better leave. Heaven knows how much of this Patullo has overheard already! You must let me see her to-morrow alone, and I will try and get to the bottom of the ghastly business. To continue this interview now will do more harm than good.”

I saw that he was right. “Good-bye, darling,” I whispered to Mabel, “and remember, I for one will always believe in your innocence.” She was still sobbing piteously, and I knew she did not hear me. I bent and kissed her bowed head, and left the room.

Out in the street the sun was shining, and there was a breath of spring in the air, but to me the world seemed cold and forbidding. One thought burned itself into my brain—that the woman whom I loved above all else on earth had declared herself a murderer—the slayer of the father who had cherished her. My loyalty to Mabel never wavered, but the horrible significance of her words had reduced me to a state of mental paralysis. It almost seemed that grief and worry had unhinged the poor girl’s mind. Mabel was shielding somebody, of course; but what could save her if she persisted in this mad self-sacrifice?

CHAPTER XV.

A CLUE FROM SHAKESPEARE.

THE evidence given at the City Court and my subsequent interview with Mabel only served to deepen my depression. I saw Clayton again in the afternoon, and he was scarcely less gloomy. "I have retained McPherson, K.C.," he said, "but what can he do if she persists in her present attitude? Like you, I find it hard to believe that the girl murdered her father; but Blunt has told the police a fairly circumstantial story, and if she repeats to the police what she said to us this morning, the case is hopeless. I have warned her to refuse to answer any questions put to her by anyone but me, but, in her present unstrung condition, the poor girl is as likely as not to make damaging statements to anyone who talks to her; and you may bet that Ryan and Patullo will not miss many opportunities."

Having got through the misery of the day I returned to East Melbourne to face the more acute misery of another sleepless night. I could not even concentrate my thoughts on finding a solution of the mystery. A hundred images from the past jostled one another in my brain. The memory of my first meeting with Mabel came to me; and this gave place

to memories of those happy days at Mount Marunga, when together we indulged in hill-climbing, ski-ing, dancing, and took part in a dozen delightful excursions. Then the incidents of the ball and the morning after crowded on top of the others, creating a medley of visions and emotions that rendered ordered thought impossible. After an hour or more spent in this manner, I decided that a mind as disturbed and a brain as agitated as mine were not likely to be of much use in Mabel's service. It were better that I should now seek mental relaxation, and, if possible, get a little sleep, so that in the morning, when more or less refreshed, I could again tackle the problem that lay before me.

I went into the bedroom, first taking from a book-case in my workroom one of the twenty volumes of my cherished set of Shakespeare. Many times in the past, when worried or depressed, had I sought, and found, relief in communion with the master mind. It was my habit to turn to Shakespeare as I might to an old and dear friend, and it was rarely that he failed me. He did not indulge in fatuous chatter, he did not drink my whisky or smoke my tobacco, his views on life did not irritate me, and he did not place his feet on my recently upholstered chairs. Taking one consideration with another, I regarded William of Avon as the most satisfactory of my friends.

Getting into bed, I propped myself up against my pillows, and began to read. The volume that I had happened to take down contained Macbeth and Othello. I opened the book at random—Shakespeare

being one of the few authors with whom this can be done in the full confidence of finding something of interest—and began reading the fourth act of *Macbeth*. I could not wholly forget my trouble, but very quickly I fell under the magic spell of Shakespeare's supreme genius, and I read on, and in due course came to the fifth act, containing the sleep-walking scene, which never failed to thrill me. I first experienced an excitement that had little to do with the dramatic quality of the scene when I reached the part where Lady Macbeth, taper in hand, enters, observed by the Doctor and the Gentlewoman:—

GENT.: This is her very guise, and, upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her; stand close.

DOCT.: How came she by that light?

GENT.: Why, it stood by her; she has light by her continually; 'tis her command.

DOCT.: You see her eyes are open.

GENT.: Ay, but their sense is shut.

I read the lines again, and put down the book. "You see, her eyes are open." "Ay, but their sense is shut." Lady Macbeth was walking in her sleep, her eyes wide open, a taper in her hand.

In a second, things which had seemed mysterious suddenly loomed up in my mind's eye with startling distinctness. When I had called to Mabel as she locked the front gate of "Avalong" behind her she had not answered me—had not even started, or given any sign that she had heard my voice. When I had called to her in the lane, she had not turned round, but had walked straight into the river; and then had come that scream, which I now

believed had been caused by a much more acute sensation than that caused by contact with the chill water from one who premeditated suicide.

The more I thought the stronger became my belief that Mabel had not deliberately left "Avalong" with the intention of taking her life, but had been walking in her sleep. If she had been walking in her sleep last night, might she not have been doing so on the morning of the murder? This would account for the state in which I had found her when I went to the room, the fact that she was then fully dressed, and the further fact, which had so disconcerted me after the inquest, that her bed had been slept in.

The feeling of relief at first induced by these thoughts was of brief duration. If Mabel really was a somnambulist, Blunt's story of having met her in the passage with a revolver in her hand might, after all, be true. Good heavens! The poor girl might even have killed her father in her sleep!

Rest, either mental or physical, was now impossible. I rose, and went into my sitting-working room. The theory that Mabel was a somnambulist had seized hold of me, and as I recollected, one by one, the details of my interview with her on the morning of the murder, and the circumstances of her journey through the grounds of "Avalong" to the river a few hours before, I told myself that there were undoubtedly facts to support the theory. But, even assuming that Mabel was a somnambulist, would it be possible for her to kill a person while walking in her sleep? My first task must be to

ascertain as much as I could concerning somnambulism.

I took down a volume of "Encyclopædia Britannica." Under the heading "Somnambulism," the reader was referred to an article on "Sleep." This I turned up and read eagerly. My excitement grew, and I placed marks against passage after passage. "Some persons," said the article, "rise during sleep, walk about, apparently unconscious of all external impressions, return to bed, and when they awake they have no recollection of any of these occurrences."

In this way, I reasoned, Mabel might have risen from her bed, dressed, killed her father, and returned to bed, unaware of the terrible deed she had committed, had she not encountered Hector Blunt, who awakened her and took the revolver out of her hand. If this had actually happened, small wonder that Mabel was in a semi-hysterical condition when I went to her room. When I entered, all that she knew, probably, was that she had been stopped in the corridor by Blunt, a weapon had been taken from her, and she had been advised to return to her room. When I saw her she may have been in a state of extreme nervous tension, owing to this unpleasant experience, but as yet unaware of the dreadful tragedy that had taken place at the hotel. When I told her that her father had been found murdered in his room, the awful possibility that she had shot him had at once been presented to her mind, and she had gone off in a swoon. Subsequently, possibly Blunt had seen her and warned her not to say anything of what had happened, promising that he would keep silent, and assuring her that

nothing was likely to be found out. After the inquest, Blunt had played on the doubts and fears of the nearly distracted girl, and had frightened her into agreeing to marry him, under a threat of exposure if she refused.

It was thus that I reconstructed a possible chain of events in my mind, which was now abnormally alert and active. I returned to the encyclopædia and read: "A cook has been known to rise out of bed, carry a pitcher to a well in the garden, fill it, go back to the house, fill various vessels carefully and without spilling a drop of water, and then return to bed, and have no recollection of what had happened." I read, too, of cases in which somnambulists, while asleep, had written letters, executed drawings, and played musical instruments. It seemed to me that, compared with the writing of a letter or the execution of drawing, the mere act of taking a revolver from a drawer and pulling the trigger was a very simple operation, and one of which a somnambulist might very easily be capable. "The somnambulist," continued the article, "acts his dream. Many of his movements are in a sense purposive; his eyes may be shut so that the movements are executed in the dark, or the eyes may be open so that there is a picture of the retina that may awaken consciousness, and yet may, by reflex mechanisms, be the starting point of definite and deliberate movements."

So far I had come across nothing that stamped my theory as impossible. A little further down I read: "In many cases he (the somnambulist) does not hear, the auditory centres not responding."

This would account for Mabel not having answered me when I called to her at the gate, and again in the lane; also it might mean that she had fired the revolver, and yet had not heard the shot.

In another place the article stated that with the sleep-walker on awaking "there is either no memory of what has taken place, or the dim recollection of a fading dream." It explained that a shock would have the effect of awaking a somnambulist, and might also have very serious consequences. Obviously, if a sleep-walker stepped into a river, he or she would awake immediately, and doubtless it was the shock of finding herself in the water, instead of in her bed at "Avalong," that had called forth Mabel's piercing scream. It must have affected her in much the same manner as a very terrible nightmare.

By the time I had finished reading the article I was thoroughly convinced that my theory, whether right or wrong, was not only possible, but, in the extraordinary circumstances, even probable. From one passage, which I marked in red ink, I derived a certain comfort: "It is important to notice that there is scarcely any action of which a somnambulist may not be capable, and immoral acts from which the individual would shrink in waking hours may be performed with indifference. Considering the abrogation of self-control peculiar to the physiological condition, it is evident that no moral responsibility can be attached to such actions."

Supposing Blunt's story should prove correct, and the death of Henry Tracey be shown to have been

caused by his daughter, in the face of such an opinion, coming as it did from an acknowledged authority, would any jury in the land convict her of the crime of murder? I had had sufficient experience of work at the law courts to know that what lawyers call "intent" was the essence of murder; without "intent" manslaughter was the most that a person could be held to be guilty of. What "intent" could there be upon the part of a somnambulist? I asked myself, and, constituting myself a jury, answered promptly "None." Still, I was aware that the jury of one that returned this answer was hopelessly prejudiced in Mabel's favour, and I realised that twelve commonplace men and true, who knew not Mabel as I did, might answer differently.

CHAPTER XVI.

MABEL'S SILENCE BROKEN.

I WAS at Clayton's office that morning before him, and as soon as he arrived acquainted him with my theory and read to him copious extracts which I had made from the "Encyclopædia Britannica." That afternoon we interviewed Mabel at the gaol. As gently as possible, I led up to the question I wished to ask her, namely if she had ever had reason to suppose that she was a somnambulist. She at once showed signs of distress.

"What is the use of asking me questions?" she demanded brokenly. "I tell you that what that hateful man says is true—I killed my father, the best father in all the world."

"You owe it to yourself, Mabel, and to all your friends, to be brave and helpful at a time like this," I told her. "Even if what you say is true, I am sure it was not a deliberate, or, perhaps, even a conscious, act on your part. Do you think your poor father would wish his daughter to bear the stigma of being a murderess if there was any way of saving her? Come now, dear, and answer my question: Have you ever had cause to suppose that you walk in your sleep?"

She pulled herself together and answered with comparative calmness: "I never had reason to think so until—until that horrible night at Mount Marunga. Now I know that I murdered my father while asleep. Oh! it is awful—awful!" She covered her eyes with her hands as if to shut out some ghastly vision.

I put my arms about her, while Clayton stayed discreetly in the background, jotting down notes. "You must tell me exactly what happened on that night, dear," I said.

"There is so little I can tell, and what there is is so horrible," she answered with a shudder. "All I know is that after saying good-night to you I went upstairs to my room. I had a splitting head, as I told you, and went straight to bed. I don't remember anything after that until—oh! I can't go on, I can't."

I waited for a little while until she became quieter. "And what do you next remember, sweetheart," I inquired gently.

"The next thing I knew was that I was standing in the corridor near the head of the stairs, with all my clothes on, and poor father's revolver in my hand."

"Obviously a case of sleep-walking," remarked Clayton. "What caused you to wake up, Miss Tracey?"

"Blunt must have awakened me. I opened my eyes with a start, as though—well, as though I had been aroused suddenly by somebody dropping something heavy near my bed—you know the feeling?"

We both nodded.

“Blunt was standing in front of me, and I almost screamed—it was all so startling, so uncanny. I could not understand how it was I was not in my room in bed. It seemed like a horrible nightmare. I think I must have been about to scream, for Blunt put his hand over my mouth and told me not to make a noise. Then he took the revolver from me, and told me to go back to my room at once. Scarcely knowing where I was or what was happening I obeyed him like one in a trance. I sat in my sitting-room in front of the stove, puzzling over it all, and I came to the conclusion that I must have been walking in my sleep. It seemed to me that if, without knowing it, I could get up, dress, go to father’s room, take his revolver out of the drawer where he kept it, and walk out into the corridor, I might do anything. It was dreadful to think of. My nerves were all on edge; and then you came into the room, Dick, and started asking me questions. You made me feel that I wanted to scream out in agony. And you told me that—that—oh, you know what you told me—and I fainted.”

“Poor little girl,” I murmured. “It is cruel to think that fate should have treated you in this manner. I know how you loved your father, and the thought of doing him an injury never entered your mind. You are no more guilty of murder than I am; Mr. Clayton will tell you that.”

“Perhaps not legally, dear,” she said; “but what does that matter? I swear by all I hold holy that I never wished to hurt a hair of my poor father’s head, and yet I—I killed him; and I don’t wish to live. The thought of what I have done would

haunt me for ever; death for me would be merciful."

"Hush, sweetest; you must not talk like that. You cannot be held responsible, either in the eyes of God or man, for something you did while unconscious. I can well imagine how the thought of it now tortures you, poor darling; but time will help to blur the hateful memory. I know it is no use telling you that you will forget all about it; but you will come to view things in a different perspective. Memory will deal gently with you; the years will heal your wounds as they have healed those of many another sufferer. I love you now more than ever before, and I will do all I can to make you happy. When this ghastly business is over I will keep you to your promise to marry me."

"Even if I agreed, you would not be marrying the girl you used to know."

"Perhaps not, dear. I would not marry the care-free girl with whom I have spent so many happy hours, but I would be marrying one whom I love just as dearly, and who needs my love more than that other."

"You are a dear, loyal fellow, Dick; and I hate to think of the pain I have caused you and everyone, but I know I could never be the same again. Even a future as your wife does not reconcile me to the prospect of living, haunted by the awful thought that I took the life of the being who, after you, was the dearest thing in the world to me."

Clayton coughed discreetly as a reminder that the time allowed for the interview was limited, and there were other questions which must be asked. I signed

to him to remain in the background, knowing that Mabel would be more likely to answer me.

"Tell me, dear," I said; "did Blunt use the knowledge which he gained that night to force you into an engagement of marriage?"

"Yes; he said that if I did not consent to marry him he would go to the police and tell them all he knew. Oh, I was a coward. I could not bear the thought of the exposure; most of all I could not bear to think of you, Dicky, getting to know everything. These last few weeks have been hellish—there is no other word for it. I thought I might be able to forget. I kept telling myself that I was not responsible for what I had done, and I shrank from the horror of a trial and all the other dreadful things which I knew would happen if Blunt went to the police. That I regarded a marriage with that hateful creature as preferable to it all, shows how unworthy I am of your love. But I know now that I could not have gone on with it. If the detectives had not come when they did I would have gone to them myself and confessed. I am ashamed now of my cowardice, and I see that death is the easiest escape from my misery."

"When you went down to the river did you know what you were doing? Did you intend—to com—to take your own life?"

"No, no. I went to bed that night, sick and miserable, and I knew nothing until I felt the cold water round me, and found myself in the river. The shock seemed to paralyse me, and I did not even know that you had sprung in to save me. It was brave of you, Dick, but how I wish you

had not been there. I believe that God in His mercy gave me that chance of escape from my unhappiness. Oh, why did I not drown! There in the darkness I would have found peace; I would have gone to my Maker, guiltless even of self-destruction."

"God sent me, dear, to save you," I told her. "If you had drowned through walking into the river while asleep, you would, as you say, have been guiltless of having taken your own life, just as you are of having taken that of your father."

After Clayton had asked a number of questions, to which Mabel replied dejectedly and unwillingly, I did my best to comfort the poor girl ere we left her. I went with Clayton when he laid the facts, as we had ascertained them, before Ian McPherson, K.C. That eminent barrister was deeply impressed and tremendously interested. He read eagerly my notes copied from the "Encyclopædia Britannica," and said that the case was the most extraordinary that had come within his knowledge. A few days later Clayton told me that McPherson had gone into the matter fully, had consulted legal authorities, had obtained further information from leading doctors of the subject of somnambulism, and intended putting up a good fight on Mabel's behalf.

"He thinks there is a chance of an acquittal," said Clayton; "but it will depend largely upon the sort of jury we get, and also upon what fresh evidence is presented by the police. We will not do anything in the City Court, but will reserve our defence and fight it out in the higher Court."

"But, meanwhile," I objected, "that poor girl,

in her present state of ill-health and her terrible mental state, will be left in prison."

"Yes, I know how painful that must be to you, old man," he replied, "but it cannot be helped. If we exposed our hand in the lower court, the prosecution would get to work to combat the suggestion that Miss Tracey killed her father while walking in her sleep. We must not allow a hint of our defence to leak out before the trial. If we take the prosecution by surprise, and McPherson can play upon the feelings of the jury, the victory will be ours."

I saw that he was right, and for the time being poor Mabel would have to be left alone with her unhappiness within the stern grey walls of the living tomb to which the law in its blindness had consigned her.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON TRIAL.

THREE times were Blunt and Mabel charged at the City Court, and remanded, before the police were ready to go on with the case. There is no need for me to describe the proceedings in the lower court, for they were destined subsequently to be repeated with sensational additions in the Supreme Court. The prosecution was content to make out a *prima facie* case against both the accused, and Blunt, like Mabel, reserved his defence. Both pleaded not guilty (though it was with difficulty that Mabel had been persuaded to agree to doing this) and the two were committed to stand their trial.

Then followed an anxious fortnight, during which Clayton was frequently in consultation with Mabel and with Ian McPherson, K.C. Blunt, too, had engaged a King's Counsel, Henry Stroude, and public interest in the case ran high.

At last the day for beginning the trial arrived. No sooner were the doors of the Supreme Court gallery opened than there was a rush for seats. Many people had waited outside the various en-

trances to the Law Courts from an early hour in the morning, and when allowed in, had raced along the stone-flagged corridors searching for the particular court in which the trial was to take place. A queue was formed by the police, and an effort was made to preserve order, but there was not a sufficiently large force of police present to control the rush which ensued immediately upon the opening of the doors. In a few seconds the public galleries were crowded, and the doors were closed in the faces of a disappointed horde for which room could not be found. These still waited outside, hopeful of gaining admittance, and later in the morning had to be forcibly dispersed by the police. As every seat at the totally inadequate press table was occupied by men engaged in reporting the case, I sat in the dismal pit, beneath the public gallery, which is reserved for witnesses and men summoned to serve on juries. The dock is immediately in front of this pit, and the prisoners sit with their backs towards the occupants, but I was careful to take up my position in a seat well to the side, where I would be able to keep my eyes on Mabel, and on Blunt also, for I was determined to watch him closely in the hope of detecting some sign that might betray him, and be of assistance to Mabel's counsel.

The trial began on a warm spring morning, and even before the Judge had taken his seat on the Bench the atmosphere of the court was far from pleasant. The places in which justice is administered in Melbourne are neither well-ventilated nor impressive, being inadequately equipped as regards

the provision both of air and of light. Their bare plaster walls and heavy mahogany fittings contribute nothing toward the relief of their general air of gloominess. The only touch of vivid colour in the dingy surroundings was provided when Mr. Justice Strutt took his seat, in the heavy white wig and gorgeous scarlet gown worn by judges when sitting in criminal jurisdiction. A jury was quickly sworn in, neither prisoner exercising the right of challenge, and the trial commenced.

I will not bore readers with a detailed account of the proceedings. With much of the evidence given they have already been made familiar. For me the trial was a prolonged nightmare. It was soon made apparent that McPherson was not alone in having surprises up his sleeve. The prosecution had been at great pains in preparing an elaborate case which, I was forced to confess, in the eyes of an unprejudiced person, made things look very black for Mabel. The police were evidently satisfied that she was the actual culprit, and, I learned afterwards, had even contemplated abandoning the charge against Blunt, but had decided to go on with it in the hope that additional facts would be brought to light during the trial which would establish his complicity. They still clung to the theory that the death of Henry Tracey had been brought about as the result of collusion between Mabel and Blunt.

As the evidence was unfolded, and point after point was brought out by the skilful Crown Prosecutor, I felt that the conviction was being forced

upon even those few of the general public who were anxious to believe the best, that Mabel was a murderer. I was called by the prosecution to give evidence regarding the finding of the revolver. Subsequently I was to be called by McPherson to recount the episode in the grounds of "Avalong," and the rescuing of Mabel from the Yarra, with a view to supporting the contention of the defence that Mabel was a somnambulist.

The sensation of the first day was the evidence given by M^{rs}. Tracey, who was called as a witness for the prosecution.

A murmur ran round the crowded courtroom when the handsome and expensively attired widow took her place in the witness stand. Many of the fashionable occupants of the packed gallery had never seen Mrs. Tracey, and these craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the woman whose second marriage had supplied a sensation which was eclipsed only by that associated with her second widowhood. That Mrs. Tracey, with her rich olive complexion, fine eyes, and costly habiliments, made a striking figure was undeniable. Her black silk blouse was cut almost sufficiently low for evening dress, displaying her finely moulded neck, round which was the usual band of black velvet. Knowing the strained relations that had come about between Mabel and her step-mother so soon after Henry Tracey's death, the calling of Mrs. Tracey as a witness for the prosecution filled me with apprehension, which deepened to dismay, when, with an apparent reluctance, which I felt sure was assumed, she unfolded her story.

Watching her, and noting, too, the blank surprise that showed on the face of Mabel while listening to her step-mother's evidence, I had no doubt that the woman was lying, and getting rid of pent-up venom against the daughter of the man she had married. I had never had a doubt but that Mrs. Tracey had hoped to benefit very considerably by her husband's will, and, despite Mabel's generosity toward her, she evidently cherished a grudge against a girl who had been left the fortune which she had hoped would be hers.

Hilda Tracey was a consummate actress, and the manner in which she told her story—as one suffering the torture of the rack, but determined to do her duty, however painful it might be to herself, in the interests of truth and justice—obviously impressed both the Judge and the jury. Briefly stated, Mrs. Tracey's evidence was that she had committed perjury at the inquest. On the morning of the murder she had said good-night to her husband in his bedroom and had then retired to her own room and gone to bed. Before turning out the light she had heard voices in Tracey's room. One of the voices was that of her husband, the other was Mabel's. She had called out good-night to Mabel, but had received no reply. The two appeared to be talking earnestly. This had not caused her surprise at the time, as Mabel often came to her father's room for a chat before going to bed. After Mrs. Tracey got into bed, the voices in the next room became louder, and it seemed to her that a quarrel was in progress. Owing to the noise made by the storm

she heard very little of the conversation, but she heard her husband say: "I will never consent—never, and that's final," and a little later Mabel exclaimed loudly: "Very well, we will do so without your permission."

This statement made me gasp, for these were the words that Blunt had alleged he overheard me use in Tracey's room. The clever Crown Prosecutor helped Mrs. Tracey to get out her explanation, which, I have to admit, she delivered in a manner which must have made it seem quite plausible to those unacquainted with the inner history of the affair as I was. Shortly after Mabel had spoken these words, Mrs. Tracey continued, she heard a shot. Her first inclination was to spring from bed and rush into her husband's room, but she was rendered almost numb with terror, and lay in bed waiting for further sounds from the next room. These did not come, but very shortly she heard a knock at her own door, got out of bed, opened the door, and admitted Mr. Miles, who occupied a room on the other side of the passage. When she learned of the murder she could not help suspecting her step-daughter, but she had learned to love Mabel, and, feeling sure that the girl had not deliberately shot her father, had remained silent concerning what she had heard. The only thing that had now induced her to break her silence was the fear that an innocent man, Mr. Blunt, might suffer for the crime.

"Did your step-daughter know that your husband kept a revolver in the drawer of his dressing-table?" asked the Crown Prosecutor,

There was a long pause before Mrs. Tracey answered, as though deeply distressed at being forced to divulge so damaging a piece of information: "Yes; she had been handling it the morning before, while my poor husband was shaving, and he told her to be careful with it."

The Judge made a note of this. The Crown Prosecutor asked one or two additional questions, and resumed his seat.

Knowing what I knew, Mrs. Tracey's story seemed too utterly fantastic to be credited by any sane person, but I had to recognise that the jury, who were without my knowledge of the leading actors in this tragic drama, and who could simply judge the case on the facts as presented to them, might not detect anything inherently impossible in the cleverly told story. My own conviction was that hatred of Mabel, reinforced in all probability by a bribe from some representative of Blunt's, had induced Mrs. Tracey to act as she had done.

McPherson was unprepared for this fresh evidence against Mabel, but in cross-examination he did his best to discredit Mrs. Tracey. The sallow-faced, deep-voiced K.C., who spoke with a marked Scottish accent, and drove home his questions by stabbing the atmosphere with an accusing index finger, was especially desirous of obtaining precise information regarding the relations existing between Mrs. Tracey and her step-daughter.

"Was there not a quarrel between you and your

step-daughter after your husband's death?" he inquired.

"No, not a quarrel; it was simply that we found we could not agree on matters of minor importance."

"What were those matters of minor importance?"

"Oh, trivial things—mere questions of taste, likes and dislikes, habits of life, and so forth."

"You were disappointed, I take it, at not figuring in your husband's will?"

"Certainly not. I scarcely expected anything. We had been married such a short time and his death came so suddenly. Miss Tracey, I may mention, has behaved most generously toward me—more generously than I had a right to expect."

This voluntary admission upon Mrs. Tracey's part was very clever, and doubtless served to impress the jury with her friendliness toward Mabel.

Nothing that McPherson could do caused Mrs. Tracey to alter her evidence. She admitted that she had done wrong in withholding it at the inquest, but pleaded her almost maternal feelings for Mabel, and her conviction that Tracey's death had been accidentally caused. It is doubtful if McPherson's bullying tactics at this stage and harping on the point that the witness was "a self-confessed perjurer" did any good. Most of the jury, I believed, sympathised with the handsome widow as a woman who at the inquest had risked a charge of perjury

in her anxiety to save her step-daughter. Altogether, I felt that Mrs. Tracey had created a distinctly favourable impression and had tightened the coils which were being drawn about my unhappy sweetheart.

When the court adjourned at the end of the first day of the trial, and the jury was locked up for the night, it was not difficult to gather from the conversation of those who had been present in the public galleries that poor Mabel was already adjudged a murderess.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE COILS TIGHTEN.

PUBLIC interest in the trial did not diminish on the second day. Again the court was packed to suffocation. The case for the prosecution was brought to a close early in the day with the evidence of the detectives; and Stroude outlined the evidence he proposed to call on behalf of Blunt. Briefly, his case was that Blunt was an accessory after the fact, but had had no hand in the actual murder. He had acted wrongly—doubtless from a mistaken sense of chivalry and out of his deep love for the girl—in endeavouring to protect Mabel Tracey from the consequences of her crime.

By the time the K.C. had finished, he had drawn a picture of Hector Blunt—which probably impressed those who did not know him—as a misguided, but extremely loyal and rather noble young man. Stroude concluded his address by announcing that his client would give evidence on oath on his own behalf.

Blunt was duly sworn, and there I had to sit and listen to the puny, white-faced coward committing what I knew to be the rankest perjury; each lying statement making the case against Mabel look more ominous. The poor, pale girl sat in the dock, staring straight before her; her thoughts evidently far away.

The perjured evidence given by her step-mother the previous day had seemingly left Mabel stunned and indifferent to anything that might now be said or done. Sitting in the court, a mere spectator, I felt singularly impotent; a fight for Mabel's life was going on in which I could take no part. McPherson, I knew, would not surrender without a struggle, but, after all, he was merely a hired advocate, determined to put forward the facts contained in his bulky brief in the best possible light for his client; but the fight to him did not mean what it meant to me, and it was not even certain that he had any real belief in Mabel's innocence.

Blunt's story was that shortly after seeing Mabel leave the ballroom he had gone upstairs and knocked at the door of her sitting-room. He loved Miss Tracey, and his intention had been to ask her to marry him. He admitted that it was an unusual hour at which to make such a proposal, but on the occasion of the annual Mount Marunga Hotel ball, night was turned into day, and there was nothing unusual in the guests visiting one another in the early hours of the morning. He knocked at Miss Tracey's door, but received no reply. Returning along the corridor, he heard the sound of voices coming from Henry Tracey's room. There was a slight lull in the storm and he heard the words, spoken in Miss Tracey's voice: "But what is your objection to him?" A clap of thunder drowned Tracey's reply. Blunt confessed—with an affectation of being heartily ashamed of himself—that for a moment or two he played the part of eavesdropper, but the only other words he caught were spoken by Miss Tracey, who exclaimed: "Very

well, we will do so without your permission." He then descended to the first floor, where he occupied a room near the head of the stairs. He had some difficulty with his key, and just as he opened the door of his room he saw Miss Tracey rushing down the stairs from the second floor, dressed in walking costume, and with a revolver in her right hand. She was very excited, and apparently did not see him until she was right in front of him, when she made as though to turn back. "Good heavens, Miss Tracey, what is the matter?" Blunt asked. "I have done it!" she exclaimed; wild-eyed, and, seemingly, scarcely knowing what she said or did. "Good God, what have you done?" he demanded. "He threatened to disinherit me if I married Dick, and I—I shot him!" was her reply.

When the wretch delivered himself of this shameless falsehood, I could control my pent-up feelings no longer.

"That is a damnable lie!" I shouted from my seat in the court.

There was a rustle in the public gallery, a stentorian shout of "Silence" from the court crier, and all eyes were turned towards me. As soon as I had spoken I realised that such an outburst could not do the least good. I was made to stand forward and receive a severe lecture from the Judge, who threatened to commit me for contempt of court if there was a repetition of the offence. I could do nothing but listen to the lecture in humble silence, and express contrition for what I had done. Mabel gave me a look of entreaty, as though begging that I should allow events to take their course, so that the trial might be

over as soon as possible. I took a firm grip of my emotions, and resumed my seat, to listen in silence to the remainder of Blunt's evidence.

On hearing Miss Tracey's words (Blunt continued) their awful significance was borne in upon him. His one desire was to protect the woman he loved from the consequence of her crime. He took the revolver from her, and told her to return at once to her room. He then entered his own room, and, looking round for a place in which to conceal the weapon, threw it on to the top of the wardrobe and remained in his room until he heard people moving about on the second floor, when he knew that the tragedy had been discovered. He joined the excited guests, but said nothing of what he had seen and heard. His action a few days later in going to Detectives Ryan and Patullo and endeavouring to incriminate Mr. Richard Maxon, attributing to him the words that had been spoken by Miss Tracey, was, he freely confessed, a piece of criminal folly; but he cared nothing for Mr. Maxon and everything for Miss Tracey.

McPherson subjected Blunt to a raking cross-examination. The result was to turn a strong light upon Blunt's cowardice and meanness, but not to shake his testimony on any of the main points which told against Mabel. Blunt was questioned concerning the circumstances in which he had become engaged to marry Mabel after her father's death. He denied that he had obtained her consent to this proposal by means of threats. He did not think that Miss Tracey really loved him, but he imagined that gratitude for what he had done in saving her from the consequences

of the crime at Mount Marunga had influenced her to consent.

"You deliberately went to Ryan and Patullo and told them that the words, 'Very well, we will do it without your consent,' which you now attribute to Mabel Tracey, were spoken by Mr. Maxon?" McPherson asked him.

"Yes."

"You told a dastardly lie, which might have resulted in a capital charge being brought against an innocent man?"

"I can only reply that I loved Miss Tracey and did it to save her," was the hypocrite's answer.

"I see," remarked the K.C., his Scotch accent adding to the biting sarcasm of his words, "you love Miss Tracey so fondly that you would cheerfully send another man to die for her, but when your own neck is in danger your love for this young woman becomes a matter of secondary importance?"

To this Blunt did not reply, and several similar remarks, put by McPherson in the form of interrogations, added to his discomfiture and caused him to cut a very contemptible figure. This occasioned me some satisfaction, but what worried me was that the case against Mabel was not being materially weakened.

"On your own confession, you lied then to save a woman whom you say you love; how do we know you are not lying now to save somebody whom you love a great deal more—yourself?"

"I am telling the truth," said Blunt; "I swear it."

"You were on oath when you perjured yourself at the inquest. Is it not that you are so fearful lest

this crime should be sheeted home to you that you are anxious to see somebody convicted—you are not particular who—and, having failed to make out a case against Mr. Maxon, you are now devoting your attention to Mabel Tracey?"

"No; you do me a cruel wrong to suggest such a thing."

By the time McPherson had done with him Blunt stood revealed for the sorry character he was; but, as Clayton warned me in the course of a conversation during the luncheon adjournment, the mere fact that Blunt had been made to appear despicable was not sufficient to secure Mabel's acquittal. "Blunt's evidence and Mrs. Tracey's dovetail so well," said Clayton. "I can tell you it is devilishly disconcerting. The evidence that Miss Tracey is to give—that she recollects nothing between the time of going to bed and finding herself face to face with Blunt in the passage—will not, I am afraid, make a very strong impression on the minds of twelve ordinary unimaginative jurymen."

This gloomy forecast, it seemed to me, was confirmed when Mabel gave her evidence. When I went into the witness-box and gave an account of my interview with Mabel in her room after the murder, and the episode in the grounds of "Avalong" which led to the rescue of Mabel from the river, I was afraid that I had not induced the court to share my view that the girl was a somnambulist. I could see that all would depend upon the effect on the jury of McPherson's speech, in which he would elaborate the sleep-walking theory.

Counsels' addresses were delivered on the following day. Henry Stroude, K.C., on behalf of Blunt, urged that there was no evidence to connect his client with the murder. Blunt's association with the case, apart from the fact that he had overheard a portion of a conversation which had taken place in Henry Tracey's room, began after the crime had been committed. Unquestionably Blunt had acted wrongly in concealing the revolver; he had acted criminally in endeavouring to incriminate the witness Maxon; some might even consider that he had acted contemptibly in betraying his fiancée to the detectives, after having been at pains to sacrifice another man in an effort to save her; the jury might brand him coward, poltroon, and perjurer, but there was no justification for saying that he was a murderer. Admittedly Blunt had committed perjury at the inquest; but the evidence he had given at the present trial did not stand by itself; it was more in the nature of corroboration of that tendered by Mrs. Tracey. Miss Tracey knew that the revolver with which the crime was committed was kept in a certain drawer, but there was nothing to show that Blunt shared this knowledge.

Stroude, as will be seen from this brief summary of his speech, made no effort to protect his client from the contempt which his actions deserved. Stroude's attitude was that he did not care what the court thought of Blunt as long as it did not think him a murderer: and this unquestionably was the best line he could have taken.

McPherson's address was eloquent, and, to my mind, absolutely convincing. He elaborated at

length the theory that Mabel had shot her father while walking in her sleep. He reconstructed the incidents of the murder night as he wished the jury to believe, and as I firmly believed, they had taken place. He quoted at length from the "Encyclopaedia Britannica" article and from several learned works on somnambulism, and also dealt with the evidence of two well-known doctors whom he had called as witnesses for the defence, and who had supplied instances of truly remarkable things done by persons under the influence of somnambulism. He cast doubts on the evidence given by Blunt and by Mrs. Tracey, dilating upon the point that both had for weeks remained silent regarding highly important facts connected with a mystery which the detectives had been making every effort to solve. He drew a touching picture of the love of Mabel for her father, whose constant companion she had been since childhood; and scouted as utterly ridiculous the suggestion that Mabel had shot her father because he would not consent to her marriage with me, before I had even asked Henry Tracey for his consent. In a moving peroration, which had the effect of bringing tears to the eyes of more than one person in the court, he appealed to the jury not to accept the evidence of two discredited witnesses, and brand a young and beautiful girl as the slayer of the father who for many years she had loved, honored, and obeyed.

About half the afternoon had gone when McPherson finished his address, and Barnett, the Crown Prosecutor, rose to put forward his final effort to secure a conviction. Barnett did not devote much attention to the case against Blunt, except to suggest

that the words "Very well, we will do it without your consent" might have referred to a marriage between Mabel and Blunt, and not Mabel and me. Blunt might have been waiting outside Tracey's door to hear the result of the interview, and might actually have had a hand in the crime. Certainly his subsequent actions had been criminal and suspicious in a high degree.

"As regards 'the accused, Tracey' (I winced each time I heard this hateful phrase) the chain of evidence that connected her with the murder was practically complete. Unless someone had actually seen her fire the shot which killed her father, it would be difficult to get a stronger case against her. According to the evidence of two witnesses she was the last person in conversation with Henry Tracey prior to his death. A few seconds after the murder she was seen in the passage with her father's revolver in her hand—a fact which she did not deny, but which the defence attempted to explain away by putting forward the fantastic theory that the girl was walking in her sleep. The girl had a motive for such a crime, inasmuch as her father was evidently opposed to the idea of her marriage with some particular person, but whether the person was Blunt or Maxon he could not say. It was terrible to have to associate so foul a crime with a young and lovely woman like Mabel Tracey, but his (the Crown Prosecutor's) duty was to assist in establishing the guilt of a culprit, regardless of age, sex, or sentimental considerations. He left it for the jury to say whether or not the case against this woman had been proved.

Judge Strutt summed up carefully, reviewing the facts at length, and striving throughout to preserve an attitude of strict impartiality. The suggestion of a murder having been committed by a person under the influence of somnambulism was unique in his experience. The theory was certainly an extraordinary one, but it must also be remembered that the medical evidence showed that somnambulists frequently did extraordinary things. The jury must be careful not to accept such a theory unless convinced of its soundness; on the other hand they must not dismiss it merely because it was unusual. They would do well to remember Hamlet's oft-quoted remark: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The court lights had been lit by the time the Judge had finished his summing-up. The jury filed out of the box to consider its verdict, and in the dimly-lighted courthouse the now chattering crowd, and the pale-faced girl and haggard man in the dock; the array of witnesses, and the friends of both prisoners awaited the return of the jury in an atmosphere pregnant with tragedy.

CHAPTER XIX.

ENTER A GHOST.

AFTER a retirement of over two hours the jury returned to court. The murmur of many tongues ceased, and the tense silence was broken only by a slight rustling sound made by the Judge adjusting some papers on his desk.

His Honor's associate faced the jury. "Have you arrived at your verdict, gentlemen?" he inquired.

"We have," the foreman answered.

"How say you; is Hector Ernest Mayne Blunt guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty," was the reply.

As the foreman spoke the words there came a shuffling sound from the dock. Blunt, who had been standing up, white and trembling, staring at the foreman, and licking his dry lips, had fainted. A policeman helped him to sit down, and the associate again addressed the foreman of the jury: "How say you; is Mabel Helen Tracey guilty or not guilty?"

The foreman paused for a moment, with eyes cast downward, and then answered quietly: "Guilty."

Outwardly Mabel gave the impression of being less affected by the verdict than anyone else in court; she received it with a calmness which seemed very little removed from indifference.

Blunt was curtly discharged by the Judge, after McPherson had made an eloquent and moving appeal for mercy on behalf of Mabel, and she was ordered to stand up to receive her sentence. She stepped forward, and with her hands held behind her, faced the red-robed judge without showing the slightest sign of fear.

“Prisoner at the bar,” said his Honor, speaking slowly and impressively, “the jury, after giving the most careful and earnest attention to this case, has found you guilty of the horrible crime charged against you. I am bound to say that, in the light of the evidence, I do not see how they could have arrived at any other verdict. You have had the advantage of a learned and eloquent advocate to plead your cause, but in face of the damaging evidence against you an acquittal, I think, would have been a miscarriage of justice. You have had some weeks in which to contemplate in solitude your dreadful crime, and doubtless you have already suffered at the whipping-post of conscience; which suffering is no more than you deserve. Your sex and your youth may serve to save you from paying the extreme penalty which the law exacts for crimes such as the one of which you have been found guilty, but it is not for me to hold out to you any hope of leniency. My painful—most painful—duty is to impose the only punishment commensurate with the enormity of your crime. Have you anything to say why sentence should not be passed upon you?”

“No, your Honor,” answered Mabel, quietly but firmly.

The Judge, not without emotion, then pronounced the sentence: "Mabel Helen Tracey, the sentence of the court is that you be taken back to the place from which you came, thence to the place of execution to be hanged by the neck until you be dead, and that your body be buried in lime within the precincts of the gaol."

Several women were sobbing quietly while his Honor was delivering his short address. When the sentence was announced a shrill scream came from among the spectators in the public gallery, and Dolly, Mabel's adoring maid, was carried out in a faint. Mabel stood erect in the dock, as though awaiting some fresh form of torture; a policeman tapped her lightly on the shoulder, and she seemed to realise with a start that her present ordeal was at an end. As she turned to walk down the steps leading from the dock to the cells beneath the court she smiled bravely in my direction, while I clenched my hands and bit my lower lip to prevent myself shrieking a protest against the horrible injustice that had been done to this dearest and bravest of women. The crowd that had remained in the court without tea was now scuffling to gain the exits; but I sat like a man turned to stone. The courtroom must have been unpleasantly warm, but I was chilled to the bone. After a time I felt a kindly arm linked in mine, and Clayton was leading me toward an exit used by the barristers and court officials.

"I was afraid of the verdict, old man," he said, "but at least the sentence is not likely to be carried out. It is many years since a woman was hanged in

Melbourne, and I don't think this case will be the exception."

Clayton thought that he was comforting me, but every word was as a handful of salt rubbed into a gaping wound. I did not myself think that the sentence would be put into effect, but the thought of beautiful Mabel Tracey being kept a prisoner for fifteen years or more in the soul-destroying atmosphere of Pentridge, and finally emerging into the world, her youth and beauty vanished, a dull-eyed, hopeless woman, broken in body and spoilt in mind, was no less agonising than the picture of the same queenly creature stepping on to the hangman's trap, a black cap hiding from view the brave blue eyes and the fair cheeks that I had so many times kissed. I was in a state of mental revolt, induced by my unshakable conviction that a most horrible, a most damnable miscarriage of justice had taken place.

That Mabel had shot her father, alas! seemed only too clear, but that she had done so while unconscious, and therefore irresponsible, I had not the slightest doubt. Any chance there might have been of inducing the jury to believe that the deed was done while the poor girl was asleep was destroyed by the evidence of Mrs. Tracey, and of Blunt, who had obviously perjured himself regarding the conversation alleged to have taken place in Henry Tracey's room. Apparently Blunt had determined to do all he could to make Mabel look as guilty as possible, for in this way was he most likely to save his own coward's neck; while I could only suppose that Mrs. Tracey had been bribed by a representative of Blunt's to give similar evidence. She had probably welcomed

the chance to feed the hatred which I now had no doubt she cherished toward Mabel.

I urged Clayton to consult with McPherson with a view of lodging an appeal against the conviction if there was any possible loophole for so doing, then parted from him and walked to the office. There were arrears of work for me to make up, and I welcomed the prospect of work as a possible means of escape from the torture of my thoughts.

But I was not to do any journalistic work that night. The hateful day had been sufficiently crowded with incident, but yet another, more startling than any that had gone before, awaited me. At the office a seedy-looking, red-haired man, with a weather-beaten face, and eyes screwed up in the manner of those used to gazing for long at the horizon, was waiting to see me.

“What do you want?” I asked the man, not caring greatly what he wanted.

His reply was to thrust into my hand a soiled and crumpled envelope addressed to me. I tore it open, and took out a half sheet of cheap notepaper on which was serawled:

“If you are desirous of serving Mabel Tracey, whom I believe you love, accompany the bearer of this note. The matter is urgent, and your help is badly needed.”

The note was not signed, and I questioned the man as to where he had come from and who had sent him, but all he would tell me was that his instructions were to deliver the note to me person-

ally, and to take me back to the house in Fitzroy from which he had come.

I told myself that it might be a trap of some kind, but I was not going to miss any chance, however slender, which might mean help for Mabel. I told the man that I was ready to come with him, and in the fellow's presence informed the chief messenger of my intention, so that in case of foul play some hint of my movements would be available. I walked with my shabby guide, whose nautical gait confirmed the impression I had formed, on seeing his weather-beaten countenance, that he was a sea-faring man. We boarded a Fitzroy tram, and when we alighted he led me along several mean streets and stopped before the door of an ugly, third-rate, two-storey house; one of a terrace of six dwellings in a dimly lighted thoroughfare. My companion knocked gently at the door, which was opened by a bent, white-haired, parchment-faced woman. In the shabby hall I stood with my back against the wall ready for an emergency.

"Has he come?" inquired a strangely familiar masculine voice from the front room.

"Yes, he's here, sir," replied my guide.

"Thank God!" exclaimed the voice.

The man motioned me to enter the room.

I stepped into a large, poorly-furnished apartment, noting as I did so a table, double bed, wardrobe, chest of drawers, and a couple of uninviting chairs. The room was dimly lighted by an unsatisfactory lamp, and it was not for a second or two that I discerned its occupant. When I did so I started back

and came near to bolting, for the sight set quivering every one of my badly lacerated nerves.

It required the sound of the man's voice saying quietly, "Good-night, Maxon," to convince me that I had not suddenly gone stark, staring mad, for there on the other side of the table stood Henry Tracey, whom I had seen lying dead with a bullet wound in his body in his room at the Mount Marunga Hotel on June 24th!

CHAPTER XX.

THE TATTOO MARK.

STEPPING round to my side of the table the man held out his hand. I made no attempt to take it, but stood staring at him. I thought that there could be no mistake about his identity; the military figure, which made very obvious whence had come Mabel's fine poise and carriage; the iron grey hair and moustache, the aggressive nose, and keen grey eyes were those of the man with whom I had had many interesting talks at Mount Marunga.

"You may as well shake hands with me, Maxon; I can assure you I am not a ghost," he remarked pleasantly.

Doubtfully and hesitatingly I took the proffered hand.

"You must pardon me if I have given you a shock," he said. "Sit down."

"Yes, I'll sit down," I told him, "and perhaps you will oblige me by telling me who you are and what the devil it all means."

He seated himself opposite me, took out his pipe and tobacco pouch, and handed the pouch to me. "You had better smoke," he remarked; "it will take some time to explain."

"I don't doubt that," I replied grimly, "but first or all you might introduce yourself."

"Certainly—my name is Henry George Tracey; by occupation I am a grazier."

"Supposing you drop that sort of thing, and give me the truth," I suggested.

"I am telling you the truth, Maxon," he answered quietly. "Hang it all, man, you ought to know me; we have had a good many long yarns in the past."

"All I know about you is that you are the living image of my friend Henry Tracey, who was murdered at Mount Marunga last June."

"At least I am glad you refer to Henry Tracey as your friend," he answered, "as I am going to test your friendship for him."

Having filled my pipe I handed back the pouch to the man opposite me; he, too, filled his pipe, and there in that dingy room of what I afterwards learned was a cheap lodging-house, I listened to one of the strangest stories I had ever heard or read. The narrative was simply and convincingly told, and yet, at the finish I still experienced difficulty in believing it.

"I would not doubt the word of Henry Tracey," I told the narrator at the conclusion of his recital, "but I must have proof that you *are* Henry Tracey."

"H'm," he remarked doubtfully, "I don't know exactly what proof I can give you on the spur of the moment. Hold on, though," he added, "I think I once showed you the sheep which, in a foolish moment in my young days, I had tattooed on my arm?"

“Yes, I remember Henry Tracey showing it to me shortly after our first meeting at Mount Marunga over a year ago.”

“Right-o,” said the man, preparing to remove his coat, “I will show it to you again.”

“But that would prove nothing,” I objected; “if you are an impostor you would probably know that Tracey bore that tattoo mark, and would take the precaution of acquiring a similar one.”

“That is so,” he agreed, “but on the other hand, if the man who was murdered at Mount Marunga was an impostor there is a chance that he did not know of Henry Tracey’s trade mark, and if you set about making inquiries you may find that he was not similarly branded.”

This seemed to me reasonable, so I waited while he took off his coat and rolled up the sleeve of his shirt. There on his left arm, above the elbow, was the picture, tattooed in blue and red, which Tracey had shown me in the early days of our acquaintance.

“By heaven!” I exclaimed, “I am not going to wait until to-morrow to have this settled; I am on fairly good terms with Dr. Collins, the Morgue surgeon, and I am going to the nearest telephone to ring him up and ask him if the body brought from Mount Marunga bore any tattoo marks.”

“Very well,” was the reply, “have the question settled at once, and then you may listen to what I have to say.”

I found a pastrycook’s shop which possessed a telephone, and rang up Dr. Julius Collins at his private house. He was at home, and in reply to my

inquiry stated emphatically that there was not a tattoo mark of any description upon the corpse that had been brought to the morgue from Mount Marunga. Of this he was absolutely certain.

I was now in a great state of excitement, and, thanking the doctor, rushed back to the house where I had left the man whom I now believed was Henry Tracey.

"Well, are you satisfied?" he inquired when I rejoined him.

"Quite," I replied, shaking him by the hand; "and I am more pleased than I can say to find you still in the land of the living."

The hour was late, but there was a great deal to discuss. I found that Tracey had had to rely on recently purchased newspapers for much of his information regarding the tragedy, and the arrest and trial of his daughter. He informed me that he had read every paper he had been able to lay hands on relating to the tragedy, but there were many points in regard to which he was in doubt. These I endeavoured to make clear, and I also supplied him with certain details which had not been published in the press.

"Poor Mabel," he murmured; "poor little girl; it must have been an awful ordeal for her."

"Terrible!" I agreed, "and she bore it heroically. But since you know what the defence was, tell me—is Mabel a somnambulist?"

"Yes. Had you ever asked my consent to marriage with her—as, I confess, I always hoped you would—I would have told you of this. The poor

girl herself never knew, and so far as I am aware there were only two occasions previous to this awful business when she walked in her sleep. The first was when she was seventeen, and the second about a year ago. In view of what you have told me about your proposal of marriage at Scotney's Look-out, don't you think that the excitement of that episode, followed by the excitement of the ball, may have left her in a highly nervous state, which paved the way for another manifestation of her affliction? The previous occasions upon which it manifested itself were times of high nervous tension for her. I think that it is not unlikely that she rose from bed in her sleep, impelled, by whatever unknown force it is that governs the actions of a somnambulist, with the sub-conscious intention of re-visiting Scotney's Look-out. How do we know that she even went near the room that I was supposed to occupy? According to the evidence given by Mabel, her mind was an absolute blank from the time she went to bed until she awoke in the passage and found herself face to face with this fellow Blunt. There is a hiatus between the two incidents which she cannot help us in filling. How do we know what occurred in between?"

"By heaven," I exclaimed, "I see what you are driving at. You mean that there is a possibility that Mabel did not fire that shot, even while unconscious and irresponsible!"

"Precisely my point. I think you can guess who is the person most likely to know what actually happened in the victim's bedroom?"

"I can. Your story throws a fresh light upon everything. You did well to return secretly, and for the present, I think you should remain here. Nothing will be lost if you delay proclaiming your identity for a while longer, and something—although I don't exactly know what—may be gained. Anyhow, in the contest of wits which I can see ahead, it will be an advantage for me to know something, namely, the fact that you who are supposed to be dead are alive, of which my adversary is ignorant."

"Exactly," he acquiesced. "That was my object in returning as I did, and in taking up my abode in this high-class mansion. We are in possession of the knowledge, which we can disclose when it suits us, that whatever poor Mabel did, she certainly did not shoot her father. With your complete knowledge of the case you may be able to devise some scheme for getting at the truth. If I am to remain here in the background, it rests with you, Maxon, to see this thing through. It is easy to see how dearly you love Mabel, and I know that I can rely upon you doing everything in your power to save her."

"You can trust me," I replied.

"Well, what do you propose as your first move?"

"I am going home," I told him, "to think like blazes."

CHAPTER XXI.

A GAME OF BLUFF.

ON the day following my astonishing interview with Henry Tracey, I called again at the Fitzroy lodging-house to ask him to elucidate certain points that were not clear. I also had a long talk with Mr. George Banks, the furtive seafaring gentleman who had acted as Tracey's messenger and my guide. Banks was a most undesirable type of person, but he furnished me with much valuable information. I took away copious notes from the two interviews, and set to work sorting out and arranging my facts, like a lawyer preparing a brief. I also saw Clayton, who was making arrangements for an appeal to the Full Court. Clayton had had a brief interview with Mabel. She was, he told me, bearing up bravely. I did not disclose to Clayton or anyone else what I knew regarding Henry Tracey. I considered that, for the time being, secrecy was best, and nothing was to be lost by allowing Clayton to proceed independently in preparing an appeal upon Mabel's behalf. I had hopes, however, that, armed with the knowledge which I had obtained from Tracey and Banks, I would eventually be able to solve the Mount Marunga Mystery.

In a few days I had constructed a very definite theory, and then set about putting it to the test.

My first move was to call upon Mrs. Hilda Tracey at her South Yarra flat. On sending in my card I was at once admitted. Although the afternoon was well advanced, Mrs. Tracey was still in a morning wrapper; a gorgeous Japanese silk garment which had the effect of accentuating, even while it concealed, the voluptuous lines of her figure. Around her neck was the customary band of velvet. When I entered she was lounging upon a rich Oriental divan, smoking a cigarette. Her silky black hair was done up in a loose coil, which concealed the nape of her neck, her eyes were unusually bright, her cheeks somewhat flushed. I at once formed the impression that she had made several excursions to the brandy decanter, and this was confirmed when I came near her.

"Good-day, Mr. Maxon," she remarked, holding out a beautifully white, long-fingered, heavily-be-ringed hand. "Excuse me for not getting up, won't you; but I have not been feeling very well for the last few days. That terrible ordeal at the court took it out of me. Sit down, there's a dear man; you will find cigarettes on the table there."

I helped myself to a seat and a cigarette. "The trial was indeed an ordeal for all concerned," I remarked.

She sighed, threw the stump of her cigarette into the empty grate, which contained at least twenty similar stumps, and signed to me to pass the heavy silver cigarette box which was on the table at my side.

"I suppose you simply loathe me," she murmured as I held a match for her to light her cigarette.

"Why should I?" I inquired.

"Because of the evidence I gave against poor Mabel. I could tell by the way you looked at me that day as I left the court that you hated me. But, really, Mr. Maxon, what could I do? That little beast of a Blunt is no friend of mine; but I knew he was innocent, and he might have been hanged. I couldn't have that on my conscience, could I?"

I did not vouchsafe a reply.

"Anyhow, don't let us talk of the horrible business," she said with a shudder. "I hope, Mr. Maxon, that we can still be friends, and that this is a friendly call. You know I have been left very much alone since my poor husband died."

"Your husband?" I remarked in a tone of assumed surprise, and with the air of a man asking a question. She gave me a quick look, but retained her composure. It was obvious, however, that she did not know what to make of the remark, and had suddenly become uncomfortable.

"You will excuse me, won't you, if I don't order afternoon tea?" she murmured. "I am feeling such a wreck that I don't like to ask visitors to stay long. My head is simply splitting."

Needless to say, I did not take the hint. Instead I fired the first effective shot of the battle which I was determined should be fought.

"I did not come here to have afternoon tea, Mrs. Tracey," I remarked, "but to find out who killed Stephen Rodda."

The shot went home. The cigarette, which had been hanging loosely from her lips, dropped to the floor, and she sat suddenly bolt upright, while her fine olive skin paled, and, touched by the afternoon sun peeping through the curtained window, assumed an unlovely sallow hue. In an attempt to recover her composure, she stooped to pick up her cigarette. Even then a second or two elapsed before she had sufficiently regained control of herself to speak.

"What on earth are you talking about?" she asked in an affected drawl; but she could not prevent a tremor creeping into her voice.

"My remark," I repeated firmly, "was that I had come to you to find out who killed Stephen Rodda."

She had herself well in hand by now, and, lolling back among her cushions, slowly blew from between her lips a thin spiral of cigarette smoke. "And who, may I ask, is—what was the name you said?"

"Stephen Rodda."

"Well, who is Stephen Rodda?"

"Do you mean to say you do not know?" I demanded.

"My dear man, I have not the remotest idea what you are talking about. I have never heard of anyone named Rodda."

"If he were alive," I said, "I don't think he would deny acquaintanceship with Belle Vere."

This second shot created even worse havoc than the first. The face of the woman opposite me became positively ghastly. Her lips were almost blue, and she gasped something which I guessed was "Brandy!" Rising hastily, I looked round for the decanter. Having found it and poured out a stiff

nobbler, I returned to the divan, to find that its occupant had fainted. Supporting her with one arm, I forced some brandy between her teeth. Her breath was coming in quick gasps, and she made a little gurgling noise in her throat. I placed the brandy glass on the floor, unfastened the jewelled clasp that held the strip of black velvet in position, and removed it. This brought to view on the left side of her finely moulded throat an ugly red scar, which stretched from half an inch or so below the ear almost to the windpipe. Seeing this livid disfigurement I told myself that it was no wonder that she had been careful never to be seen in public without a neckband.

Some anxious minutes elapsed before the woman—whom I will from now on refer to by her correct name of Belle Vere—recovered. She sat up and gulped down another glass of brandy which I poured out for her.

“Thanks,” she remarked, “I am alright now, I think. My heart has been giving me trouble lately.” Her hand went to her throat, and, feeling it bare, she looked toward me.

“Your neckband,” I said, “is on the table. Your breathing was difficult, so I took it off.”

There was a long silence which she at length broke by asking me to pass the cigarette box. With a trembling hand she struck a match and lit a cigarette.

“Apparently, Mr. Maxon, you know something of—of my past,” she said slowly.

“Yes, Miss Vere, I know a good deal of it,” I replied.

“Well, what of it?” she demanded with an air of recklessness. “What are you after, anyhow?”

“What I want is a full statement of what actually took place in Rodda’s room at the Mount Marunga Hotel on June 24th.”

She laughed unpleasantly.

“You have already heard the story told in court,” she said; “alter Tracey’s name to Rodda and you know all the facts.”

“I know a good many of them, Miss Vere,” I assured her, “and if I go with them to the police they will involve you in a great deal of—shall we say—unpleasantness?”

There was another long pause.

“Just what have you found out?” she asked.

“You cannot expect me to show my hand,” I replied; “but I do not mind telling you that Henry Tracey is alive and in Melbourne.”

Again I observed her closely, and mentally registered a third bullseye to my account.

“Anything else?” she inquired, with a hollow assumption of indifference.

“Yes; George Banks is also in Melbourne.”

“I suppose the cur has been blabbing to you?”

“I have had the pleasure of several long and highly interesting conversations with Mr. Banks,” I replied.

“Well, I still don’t know what you want me to do,” she said.

“I want you to be frank with me, Miss Vere,” I told her. “I know of your relations with Stephen Rodda, and I know that he treated you like a brute. I know, for instance, that he was responsible for that

scar upon your throat, and—I know that you were given every provocation to kill him.”

She looked at me with cunning eyes. “If you know all this, why don’t you go and tell the police?” she asked. “Why do you come and tell me? No, no, Mr. Maxon; of course, you are awfully clever and all that, but you are trying to bluff me, and the bluff won’t come off. I may, as you put it, have had every provocation to kill Stephen Rodda, but I didn’t do it; and you can’t prove anything to the contrary. It was your beloved Miss Tracey who killed him. She thought he was her dear papa, and he would not agree to her marrying you.”

The woman was right when she accused me of bluffing. I could prove nothing against her so far as the murder was concerned, but in regard to other matters I was well primed with facts. I told myself that I might yet succeed in bringing off my bluff. I lit a cigarette and spoke slowly.

“A murder committed under extreme provocation,” I said, “is a very different thing to a similar crime committed in cold blood.”

“Indeed? How very interesting!”

“A jury is always sympathetic toward a woman who has been ill-treated, and if she were defended by the best legal talent available——”

She interrupted me with a shrill nervous laugh. “My dear man,” she cried, “you are not by any chance trying to induce me to confess to murdering Stephen Rodda—which, of course, I didn’t—by offering to pay for my defence? Really, Mr. Maxon, I am surprised at a man of your remarkable intelligence not being able to think of a cleverer scheme.”

“Am I, then, to understand, Miss Vere, that you refuse to tell me the truth concerning what happened at Mount Marunga?”

“There is nothing for me to tell.”

I rose and picked up my hat from the chair on which I had placed it. “Very well, then,” I remarked, “my only course is to go to the police.”

“And tell them that I killed Rodda? Very well, run along—if you insist upon making a fool of yourself.”

“The question of who killed Rodda can be dealt with later,” I said. “In the meanwhile I can supply the police with facts which will result in wilful and corrupt perjury, conspiracy to defraud and murder Henry Tracey, and several other charges being brought against you. These can be proved up to the hilt, and a long term of imprisonment is the very least that you will be able to look forward to.”

The woman was pale and agitated, but she had plenty of pluck. “Go ahead,” she remarked, but I scarcely recognised the voice that spoke the words.

CHAPTER XXII.

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD.

HAVING remained late at the office to correct the proof of a special article for the following day's paper, I had put on my hat and was strolling toward the stairs, when Clancy, our night roundsman (which is the name applied in the newspaper world to the man whose job it is to write up any cases reported to the police or the various hospitals—accidents, crimes, and so forth—between 6 p.m. and the time of going to press) rushed past me in the passage.

“Hullo,” I cried, “what's the latest?”

“Something big doing at ‘Como’; don't know what it is; Russell Street just rang up and gave me the tip; beastly fashionable hole, ‘Como’; ought to be something good.”

I at once became interested, for “Como” was the name of the South Yarra mansion—once the home of a wealthy solicitor, but now owned by a company which let it out in flats—which I had visited a few hours previously.

“Hold on, Clancy; I'll come with you,” I called after him.

The office motor car was waiting at the door, and we were soon exceeding the speed limit as we raced along St. Kilda Road—now almost deserted, for it

was after midnight—in the direction of South Yarra. We arrived outside “Como” almost simultaneously with a taxi-cab, from which stepped Ryan, Patullo, and a third detective named Collins.

“Hullo, Mr. Maxon,” exclaimed Ryan banteringly, but not without a trace of irritation, “I suppose you reckon that nothing connected with the Mount Marunga business would be complete without you?”

“Has this anything to do with it?” I inquired.

He looked at me closely. “Do you mean to say you don’t know?”

“I only know that Clancy told me something big had happened here, and curiosity impelled me to force my company upon him.”

“Well, the ‘something big’,” he remarked, rather offensively, “is that your mother-in law that was to have been has been found dead in her room.”

I was not altogether surprised. When Clancy told me that the police had had news from “Como” I immediately associated it in my mind with Belle Vere.

In the hall we were met by a stolid policeman, and an agitated manageress, with whom Ryan went into a room and had a short interview. When he returned I accompanied the three detectives, Clancy, and the policeman to the dead woman’s rooms. We passed through the sitting-room, in which she had received me, into the bedroom. This was a dainty and cosy apartment, with its pink wallpaper, the design being alternate broad stripes of light pink and dark pink; its white, fragile-looking furniture, and its thick red carpet. Lying on the bed, in the Japanese wrapper which she had worn when I visited her, was Belle Vere. A pink-shaded electric lamp on a small table

near the head of the bed cast a soft light upon the face, lending to the cheeks a warm color, which for a moment made me think that the woman could not be dead, but was merely sleeping. Her eyelids, fringed with heavy black lashes, hid the eyes in which I had seen terror a few hours earlier; on her lips was a faint smile; her right hand loosely clasped her throat, as though to hide that hideous scar, for the black neck-band was not there; while the left arm hung inertly over the edge of the bed. Her hair, which had come partly undone, lay in a black shiny mass upon the pillow.

While I was standing looking at the mortal remains of the beautiful but unscrupulous creature who had been Belle Vere, Patullo took from the table near the bed a small phial at which he sniffed. "Chloral, I think," he remarked, and handed the phial to Ryan, who promptly supplied confirmation.

"When did they find out about her?"

"About an hour ago," Ryan answered; "a woman from another flat wanted to borrow a book; she knocked at the door, and got no reply, but seeing a light in the room, she walked in. When she first saw Mrs. Tracey she thought she was sleeping, but she soon altered her opinion, and called the manageress, who sent for a doctor. When the doctor arrived the body was not quite cold, but he pronounced life extinct. Evidently she poisoned herself."

Just here Detective Collins, who had gone into the sitting-room, returned to the death chamber with an envelope in his hand. "This was on the table in the sitting-room," he remarked; "it is addressed to you, Mr. Maxon."

Ryan gave me a quick glance of suspicion. Obviously he regarded the fact of my receiving a note from the dead woman as another piece of unwarranted interference upon my part.

I took the bulky envelope, and the four of us went into the sitting-room. The constable remained on guard at the bedroom door. Clancy had already rushed back to the office to write something concerning the tragedy. Many sheets of pink, scented note-paper, bearing the monogram of Mrs. Hilda Tracey, were covered with writing in a large, sprawling hand. I read through a few pages, conscious that the eyes of the three detectives were upon me. It was not necessary for me to attempt to conceal the excitement produced in me by what I read.

“Sit down, you chaps,” I said, “and listen to this:—

Dear Sherlock Holmes,

By the time you receive this you will have heard of my demise; but I don't expect you to go into mourning. Something in a bottle, which has been a good friend to me during the past few months, is going to do me a still better turn by conducting me out of a world in which, believe me, I got very little happiness. I have never believed the tales of the pious about an after life—death means annihilation, and annihilation isn't a bad thing for a woman who has made the mess of her life that I have. But before I die I want to make things right for you and Mabel; not, I assure you, through any fear of a future made up of burning brimstone and red hot pitchforks, but because I was always rather a sport at heart, and by no

means a bad sort, although I sez it myself as shouldn't. Well, here goes—I KILLED STEPHEN RODDA. I didn't mean to; but I don't regret it; the beast deserved death. I know you are awfully clever, dear Mr. Holmes, but I don't believe you could ever have proved this against me. Still, it seems that you had enough evidence in regard to other things to earn me a long stretch, and I have always told myself that if the worst came to the worst, I would rather take a trip to nowhere for ever than stand the hell of gaol. Belle Vere (by the way, I suppose you learned my name from your charming new acquaintance, Mr. Banks) is not going to ruin her beautifully manicured finger nails picking oakum. Of course, I could, if I so minded, just say ta-ta to the world, and leave you all to find out what you can IF you can; but Mabel was always decent to me. God knows women get a rotten enough time of it; so there is no reason why I should let one of my sex suffer unnecessarily when I have nothing to lose by saving her. As dear Mr. Banks doubtless has told you, I was fool enough to fall in love with Stephen Rodda years ago. I believe that even to the end he loved me in a sort of way, but it didn't prevent him treating me like a brute. The mark you discovered on my throat this afternoon he put there two years ago when he attacked me with a razor. When he lost his temper, he was like a madman, and many a time he has kicked and beaten me black and blue. Heaven knows why I stayed with the swine, but in between times he was all right—nobody better—and he could always do as he liked

with me. It was only a year ago that we arrived in Australia from England, so we were not known to Mr. Ryan and the other bungler whose name I can never remember.

It was not without a certain satisfaction that I read this portion of Belle's letter. "You will excuse me, Patullo, won't you," I remarked; "you understand, I am merely reading what is written here."

"I can't make head nor tail of half of it," he observed glumly, "but go on."

I continued my reading:—

The business of which, I suppose, Banks has told you, was Stephen's idea. We had seen old Tracey several times, and the resemblance between him and Stephen was remarkable. Stephen had to grow a moustache, and get rid of some of his hair on the top, and then you couldn't—well, you know how like old Tracey he was, although Stephen was five years younger.

As I read this part of the letter I recalled the conversation I had had with Mabel on the night of the ball, when she had spoken about the change that had come over her father since his second marriage. When I expressed the opinion that it certainly was not having a prejudicial effect upon his health she had, I recollected, answered, "No, thank goodness, he is looking younger than ever."

"What are you stopping for?" asked Ryan, testily.

"I beg your pardon; I was just thinking of something."

Stephen was living in Tracey's place for a few days before I joined him. I was afraid he would

get struck on Mabel, and told him I would make trouble unless he arranged for me to live with him. So we put up the gag about old Tracey marrying a widow from India. Things were right enough for a while. Stephen at first behaved decently, but we soon began quarrelling. The night of the ball we had a deuce of a row—it doesn't matter what about—and I was sick of things. When I saw that he intended knocking me about again I grabbed his own revolver out of the dressing-table drawer and threatened him. I didn't mean to pull the trigger, but the thing went off and he just collapsed quite gently on the floor. I was in a terrible funk and rushed into the passage in my nightdress, for I had been ready to get into bed when the row began. A few yards along the passage I saw Mabel, fully dressed, walking towards me. She didn't say a word, but walked right past me. "Here, for God's sake get rid of this," I gasped, scarcely knowing what I was doing, and I put the revolver into her hand. She took no notice of me, but walked straight on, and down the stairs. I went back into Stephen's bedroom. I knew that he was dead, so I switched off the light, locked the door, went to my own room, and got into bed. I lay there until old Miles came knocking at the door. I was in a terrible state, not knowing what Mabel would do or say. I could not understand her behaviour in the passage, and it was only when I grew calmer and started putting two and two together that I guessed that she had been walking in her sleep. That bounder, Blunt, had nothing to do with the affair, except that, apparently, he met Mabel at the

foot of the stairs on the first floor, took the revolver from her, and later bluffed her into promising to marry him. I suppose it was just in the hope of getting you out of the way that he spun the yarn to Ryan and what's-his-name about hearing you talking in the room. When both he and Mabel were arrested, a satellite of his offered me a thumping big cheque to give the evidence I did at the trial, and which was all lies. Blunt reckoned that the conviction of Mabel was his best chance, and I thought it was mine also. Whether I could have gone through with it to the point of seeing Mabel hanged, I can't say. I don't think I would have, for life hasn't held enough attractions for me lately to make it worth my while to have that on my conscience. Anyway, you know the truth, and you owe me a vote of thanks. I haven't written such a long letter for years, and my wrist is tired. Any blanks I have left you and Banks can fill in between you. Tell Mabel I hope she will be happy.

BELLE VERE.

When reading the early part of the letter my chief feeling was one of joy that it was at last possible to establish Mabel's innocence, but by the time I had reached the end of the epistle, pity for its unhappy writer was uppermost in my mind. What a strange mixture of cynicism, unscrupulousness, and affectionateness she had been. Had the man to whom she had given her love been of a different type, poor Belle might have been a very different woman. From what I had learned from Banks, I knew that she had been brought up in an atmosphere of intrigue, and her

early and disastrous association with Rodda had apparently deprived her of her last opportunity for the development of that embryo sense of decency of which she now seemed to have been possessed. That, despite her cynicism, she had mourned for the man who for so long had ill-treated her, I had no doubt. Life had not given her a fair deal; nor had she dealt fairly with life. Do you wonder, now that the wrong that she had done Mabel was capable of being righted, I found it in my heart to pity beautiful but misguided Belle Vere?

CHAPTER XXIII.

A STORY OF THE SEA.

“WHEN you have done with brooding, Mr. Maxon,” remarked Patullo, with heavy satire, “you might tell us what it all means.”

I looked up with a start. The tragedy of Belle’s life and death, as revealed in the document she had left behind, had, for the moment, caused me to forget where I was and the work that there remained for me to do.

“It means,” I said, “that the conviction of Miss Tracey was a terrible miscarriage of justice, and application for her immediate release must be made to the Chief Secretary without delay.”

“It’s all very well to put forward a tall order like that,” said Ryan, irritably, probably more than half resenting the idea of the glory of having secured the conviction of the Mount Marunga murderer being snatched from him. “What I want to know is: what the deuce has this Stephen Rodda to do with it? Who was Stephen Rodda?”

“Stephen Rodda,” I explained, “was the man who was murdered at Mount Marunga and was mistaken for Henry Tracey. I saw Tracey only yesterday, alive and well.”

“For heaven’s sake,” said Patullo, “tell us what you know.”

“I will,” I replied, “begin at the beginning.”

The silver casket, which had been refilled with cigarettes since the afternoon, was on the sitting-room table. “I don’t think Miss Vere would object to us making ourselves comfortable,” I remarked, helping myself to a cigarette and passing the casket to Ryan. The four of us lit cigarettes, and there, in that luxurious sitting-room, already heavy with the odour of smoke which had been puffed from between lips now motionless for ever, I told my story; filling in for the benefit of the detectives the gaps left in the narrative which was my previous legacy from the dead woman in the next room.

“When I reached the office after the trial,” I told them, “a seedy-looking individual, whose name I afterwards learned was George Banks, called upon me. I let him take me to a Fitzroy lodging-house, and there I met Henry Tracey.”

“Or an imposter who thinks he will step into Tracey’s shoes, and play ducks and drakes with his money,” suggested Ryan.

“Not a bit of it,” I replied; “there is no doubt about this man; he proved his identity to me. If you are so quick at detecting imposters, Ryan, you should have spotted one months ago, at the time of the Mount Marunga murder. However, it is better that I should not get off the track. Tracey told me an astonishing story. It seemed too strange, almost, to be true; but so many incredible things have happened in connection with this ghastly business that I have lost my capacity for unbelief. In March last, about three

months before the Mount Marunga affair, Henry Tracey was abducted."

"Abducted!" exclaimed Patullo, incredulously; but Ryan's limited intelligence was getting to work, and he already showed signs of interest. He silenced his colleague with a wave of the hand. "Go on, Mr. Maxon," he urged.

"Yes, abducted. It was while he was in Sydney. As you are probably aware, Tracey was always fond of hanging about the water front, going on board boats, and chatting with the men who go down to the sea in big ships. Well, on this occasion, he was enticed on board a small schooner, engaged in trading with the Islands. While below deck he was knocked on the head with a belaying pin, and when he came to he was lying on a bunk in a small, stuffy cabin, bound and gagged, and with his pillow stained with blood from a wound in his head. The gentle motion of the ship made him aware that he was at sea. He tried to free himself, but the cords were tight about his legs and arms; so there he had to lie, silent and helpless. In due course, an evil-looking, black-bearded individual, who turned out to be the master of the craft, came to the cabin, loosened his bonds, and removed the gag. Tracey, of course, demanded an explanation, but the other merely laughed. 'It is no use fuming or carrying on,' the skipper told him; 'we are well out to sea now, and you are going to be taken a long voyage, whether you like it or not. Your only chance of escape,' he added, in such a way that he appeared to be putting forward the alternative as one worthy of Tracey's earnest consideration, 'is to jump overboard'.

“ ‘Thank you,’ Tracey replied, ‘I have no intention of doing anything of the kind.’ ”

“After the first day or two, Tracey was allowed on deck. He conversed freely with the members of the crew, there being no other passengers on board. From none of the seamen was he able to obtain any information as to why he had been brought on board. For the most part they were dull fellows who gave unquestioning obedience to the orders of the captain—a tyrant of the worst sort—and cared nothing for what might happen on the ship apart from their own work. They accepted Tracey’s presence as a matter of course, and even treated him with a certain rough respect, but he quickly came to the conclusion that they were in no position to tell him what he wanted to know, even had they so desired. The only man who appeared to be in the captain’s confidence was George Banks, the first mate, and Banks was a silent, moody man, who, when questioned, looked at Tracey with dull, uncomprehending eyes, and walked away without speaking. King, the skipper, was, obviously, a boor by nature, but in the course of a week or so he made efforts—which appeared, however, to occasion him acute pain—to display towards Tracey something which he evidently intended to be accepted as geniality. But when asked questions King was as uncommunicative as ever. Tracey came to the conclusion that he had been kidnapped and was to be held to ransom. The notion that he was the victim of a species of brigandage on the high seas afforded him a good deal of amusement, and but for the fact that he was troubled by the thought of the pain his disappearance would cause his daughter, he says he

would even have derived a good deal of pleasure from the rest and the sea voyage. He had been used to roughing it in his young days, so the coarse food did not worry him; and he had every opportunity for indulging his interest in sailors and the sea.

“When the ship was approaching the islands he was told that he would have to remain in his cabin, and that unless he gave Skipper King his assurance that he would not make any effort to attract attention he would again be bound and gagged. Tracey gave the required assurance, which was accepted.

“It was on the voyage back, after numerous consultations between King and Banks that Tracey was called into the captain’s cabin, and a proposition was put to him. King and Banks, it transpired, had entered into a contract with a man, whose name they would not at this stage disclose, to kidnap the pastoralist, and when they were well away from the Australian coast, take whatever means they thought fit to prevent him ever returning to Australia. They had been well paid for entering into this infamous agreement, and they explained to Tracey that it rested with him whether or not it would be carried out. It soon became apparent to Tracey that it was a case of ‘money or life.’ The two scoundrels had a fairly good idea of the extent of his wealth, and their demands were accordingly high, but Tracey agreed to them, on condition that he was acquainted with the details of the plot. He found that of this there was no reason to suppose that he would have the skipper knew little, and apparently cared less.

been seriously perturbed if his interests had demanded the dropping overboard of Tracey, but this, of course, would have been something of an inconvenience, and as there was a prospect of obtaining more money if Tracey remained alive, his inclination was to return the grazier to Australia, sound in wind and limb.

“The details of the arrangement had really been attended to by Banks, the mate, and it was from him that Tracey learned them. Banks confessed to a career on land which had been just as adventurous and twice as discreditable as his life on the ocean wave. Among his acquaintances in England had been Stephen Rodda, a swell magsman whose reputation could only be effectively inquired into by an investigator who went to work with a handkerchief held to his nose. Rodda was an educated scoundrel, who had for mistress a woman named Belle Vere, whom he treated brutally, but who had stuck to him for years, and assisted him in sundry nefarious schemes. Finding that his name, and numerous aliases, were becoming altogether too odoriferous in England, Rodda, accompanied by Belle, came to Australia. It was while in Sydney that he discovered his striking resemblance to Henry Tracey and conceived a daring scheme to get rid of Tracey, and take the missing man’s place as soon as he had disappeared, deriving thereby wealth such as he could not hope to acquire by a score of minor villainies. Banks had been well bribed to assist in the scheme, and he, in his turn, had made financial arrangements to secure the help of skipper King. Banks assured Tracey—and it doesn’t much matter whether we believe him or not—that he never had any intention of going to the length of

committing murder on the high seas. He accepted Rodda's money, intending to take Tracey for a voyage to the Islands, and then enter into negotiations with the pastoralist with a view to his safe return. Tracey tells me that Banks obviously had no love for Rodda, and from talks I have had with him in the last few days, I believe the strange, unprepossessing rascal harbored a silent passion for the unfortunate woman in the next room. He had met her in England, in connection with other schemes of Rodda's, and admits that she scarcely deigned to notice his existence. He knew Rodda ill-treated her, and hated him for it. It was from Banks that I first learned the story of that scar, which she mentions in her letter.

“To cut a long yarn short, Tracey made satisfactory financial arrangements with King and Banks, and was duly brought back to Australia. It was on reaching a Queensland port that he read in the press the startling news that in his absence he had been murdered and his daughter accused of the crime. At first he was going to telegraph at once to the police announcing that he was alive and well, but thinking that Miss Tracey might have discovered that Rodda was a usurper and that almost anything might have happened, he decided that the situation was one that required delicate handling. He came to Melbourne as speedily and secretly as possible, accompanied by Banks; went to the house at Fitzroy at which Banks was accustomed to lodge when in Melbourne, and

knowing that I had paid Miss Tracey marked attention at Mount Marunga the year before, and having learned from the press reports of the trial that before the tragedy we had become engaged, he came to the conclusion that I was the man who could best help him. So he sent for me in the manner I have described."

Once I had got fairly started, the three detectives listened to my story in absolute silence, and their faces when I had finished expressed blank amazement rather than incredulity. Like me, they had evidently realised the foolishness of refusing to believe events merely because they were bizarre, especially when they were associated with so unusual a crime as the Mount Marunga murder.

"Well, my oath! Truth is stranger than fiction," observed Patullo, platonically.

"So the woman in the next room was never married to Tracey, but was Rodda's mistress?" said Ryan.

"Exactly."

"And she killed Rodda?"

"I have read you her confession; you can read it for yourself."

"How is it she came to write that letter to you, Mr. Maxon?" asked Ryan, and I fancied I detected in his voice a new note of respect, which he evidently considered was due to one who, even though indirectly, had succeeded in solving a mystery that had baffled

the giant intellects of the Criminal Investigation Branch.

“Because I visited her this afternoon—or rather yesterday afternoon,” I replied, for I had just glanced at my watch and it was now 2.20 a.m. “I called on her, told her that I knew of the plot against Tracey, and that I suspected her of having murdered Rodda.”

Ryan pricked his ears up. “How did you get at that?” he asked.

“By methods that would scarcely commend themselves to professional sleuthhounds,” I replied, for I could not resist an unworthy desire to “rub it in” to these men who, from the first, had shown such a tremendous faith in their own theories and so little respect for those of others.

“I recollected your words of wisdom, Ryan—that in cases of this sort it was a good thing first of all to search for a motive. Well, the fact that Rodda ill-treated Belle Vere and had once come near to murdering her supplied the motive. I saw Belle Vere yesterday, and endeavoured to frighten a confession from her. To my mind, during the interview she undoubtedly betrayed her guilt, but would not confess it. I left, threatening to inform the police of the other crimes in which she had been concerned—the abduction of Tracey, and Rodda’s impersonation of him—and her second perjury at the trial of Miss Tracey. As a matter of fact, I had not decided whether it

would be good policy to do this, as I still had hopes of being able to devise some means of obtaining a confession from Belle, but, as her letter shows, she was not prepared to suffer a long term in gaol, and so put an end to a life which had held very little happiness."

"Women mostly do when the coils are tightening round them," was Ryan's comment.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHERE LOVE IS.

LITTLE now remains to be told. The death of the handsome woman whom Melbourne had known as Mrs. Tracey, and the publication of her confession created, if possible, a greater sensation than did the Mount Marunga murder itself. Society had been first surprised by the news that Henry Tracey had married a second time; then it was shocked by the announcement that he had been foully murdered; now it was astonished by the information that he was again in Melbourne, alive, and still a widower. The day following the death of the woman whom the world had supposed his wife, Tracey left the Fitzroy lodging-house to which he had been taken by Banks, and returned to the splendor of "Avalong." And "Avalong" in the course of a few days again sheltered its beautiful and beloved mistress, for when the newly ascertained facts relating to the murder had been laid before the Cabinet, Mabel was promptly released by a special order from the Attorney-General.

From the living tomb in which she had been incarcerated she stepped into a world of blue and gold, of warmth and sunshine; for Nature decked herself in her fairest robes as though in honor of the occasion.

The poor girl who had suffered so much, and shown such heroic fortitude, returned to a freedom which she could now enjoy, in the knowledge that not even sub-consciously had she offended against the laws of God or of man, and that the father whom she had mourned as dead still lived. Hers was a joyful home-coming. The servants at "Avalong" had always loved her, and their unbounded pleasure at her return brought tears to the eyes of others than Mabel. Dolly, the maid, ignoring all artificial restraints, threw her arms around Mabel's neck; and the two greeted each other, not as mistress and maid, but as woman and woman; and then, woman-like, wept together.

Of my own meeting with Mabel after her release, I will not write. This was one of those moments which no wealth of verbal imagery can adequately describe, and which, perhaps, it is not fitting that one should attempt to describe. Generous always, she over-estimated to an absurd degree the part I had taken in establishing her innocence. Although such praise, coming from the woman one loves, is sweet indeed, I did not want it. The reward I received for my blundering, although finally successful, efforts was much greater than any to which even a fond woman could give voice.

At the inquest on the body of poor Belle Vere a finding of suicide was returned. Hector Blunt, who from the start had cut such a contemptible figure, and had done so much to increase Mabel's unhappiness, received his deserts. Charges of perjury and suborning were brought against him, and he was given a substantial term of imprisonment.

The reader is now in possession of all the facts

relating to the sensational Mount Marunga mystery. If the narrative has failed to interest, the fault lies with the narrator, for the story itself is one of absorbing interest. The plot that germinated in the mind of Stephen Rodda was as daring and original as a clever and unscrupulous man could conceive. As things turned out, it was doomed to failure because, like many another criminal, Rodda made a mistake in selecting his accomplices. Had his own brutality not led to his death at Mount Marunga, his villainy would have been exposed upon the return from the Islands of the man whom he was impersonating. I am convinced—and the opinion is shared by Mr. Tracey—that George Banks, although he took Rodda's money, had no intention of carrying out to the full the dirty work allotted him. I have no doubt that the seedy little sailor, apart from his greed for gold, was influenced in this matter by his hatred of the man who had made life a hell for Belle Vere; the beautiful lady whom Banks regarded with an affection which was too sincere to be wholly ridiculous. Rodda's death saved him from paying the penalty which the law would have demanded for his wrongdoing, but the unlucky coincidences associated with it involved several innocent people in misery such, fortunately, as is the fate of few to experience.

However, to employ a trite quotation, "All's well that ends well." I write these words in a room, the large French windows of which open on to a porchway. Beyond this is a garden bright with flowers. Spanish broom flaunts its yellow loveliness, while simple white and yellow daisies, watsonia, pale and

chaste, and snapdragon—its white bell-blossoms moving gently in the breeze—compete for notice with the more gorgeous beauty of erythrina, just commencing to break into bloom. Mabel, fresh and sweet in white muslin, and a big, shady straw hat, comes in from the garden, her arms full of freshly-picked flowers.

“Haven’t you finished that beastly book of yours yet?” she inquires poutingly; “little Mabel and I have seen scarcely anything of you lately; you seem always to be writing.”

“Just finishing, dear,” I assure her, and as she moves about the room I know the blessed contentment of those who have gained:

*Rest after toil,
Port after stormy seas,
Peace after war.*

THE END.

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