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DRAWN BY W. B. STARKWEATHER

Then she took his hand and led him into the dining-room.

—Page 292.—*Frontispiece.*

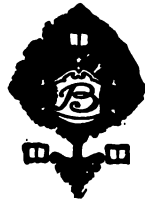
Something in the City

By

FLORENCE WARDEN

Author of

"Joan the Curate," "The Plain Miss Cray," "The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton,"
Etc., Etc., Etc.



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Something in the City

SOMETHING IN THE CITY.

CHAPTER I.

“ You may just as well go and see it, mother ! ”

“ But it’s Hammersmith. One couldn’t live at Hammersmith ! ”

“ Why couldn’t one? And you could call it ‘ West Kensington. ’ People who live at Hammersmith always do. ”

Mrs. Pender sighed. The widow of a Colonel who had had but a small fortune to leave, she had found existence a hard matter, with two children to educate, and liberal ideas to suppress. Hampered as she was, besides, by all the prejudices of her class, Mrs. Pender found the choice of a London residence, for which she could only afford forty pounds in rent, a very difficult matter.

Now her son Harry, a young fellow who had just got an appointment in the Civil Service, and for whose sake Mrs. Pender was leaving her cottage in the country, had picked out an advertisement from the ‘ Telegraph ’ to which he insisted upon her paying her attention. She was reading it, however, with a countenance full of distaste.

“ Besides, ” she said presently, in a dissatisfied tone, “ the rent’s so low, there must be something the matter with it. ”

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Nynee Pender, a little round-faced, blue-eyed girl, who was twenty, but whose very fair hair and bright color made her look about sixteen, left the window, where she was putting the final touches to a lace ruffle, to look over her mother's shoulder. And then she took sides with her brother.

"Why, it sounds quite nice, mamma! We must go and look at it, at any rate." And she read the advertisement aloud: "'Old-fashioned, comfortable house, with garden. Newly done up. Rent £40.'"

So, in spite of Mrs. Pender's reluctance they all journeyed to Hammersmith that afternoon, not in vain.

There was no doubt that No. 2 Vine Place was a "find." It was evident that the house, a plain, old-fashioned, two-storied building, painted white, and standing in a good garden, shaded with guelder-roses, lilacs, and laburnums, had at one time formed part of the adjoining house, which was somewhat larger. And the two white houses together, embowered as they were in early spring greenery, with a smooth lawn in front divided into two unequal parts by a thin wire fencing, formed as pretty and charming a residence as was to be found in the suburbs of London.

Even Mrs. Pender had to acknowledge that it looked nice.

"But there must be some disadvantage," she murmured, as her son and daughter hustled her through the gate of the landlord's house, and up the smoothly-rolled, broad, gravel path to the door.

It was some time before any one took any notice of the ring she gave, and again Mrs. Pender was filled with suspicion. Moreover, she afterwards claimed to have heard footsteps running softly and rapidly up the stairs, and a

window opening above, as if some one peeped out to see who the visitors were.

Then she rang again. Again a few moments elapsed, but the door was at last opened by as odd a little specimen of humanity as the whole army of London domestics could supply.

Rather below the middle height, but so slightly built, and with such sloping shoulders that she looked but a thread-paper of a girl, this young woman had the dead, opaque color of the born Cockney, light eyes rather near together, and a scarlet slit of a mouth. There was Cockney shrewdness, Cockney cunning in every glance of her eye, in every twist of her mouth : she wore a cap which was slightly on one side, and a clean muslin apron which had apparently been put on in a hurry. But withal she was fairly clean, standing out in this respect from her type in general.

“The landlord ! Oh yes, Mr. Justican. He ain’t back from the City yet; but——” and her light eyes ran quickly over the young gentleman and the young lady behind Mrs. Pender. “He won’t be long now, I expect. If it’s about the house next door, p’raps you’d like the key? That’d fill up the time, wouldn’t it, till he comes back?”

It was an obviously good suggestion, and they followed the girl’s advice and went down the garden path again, in order to enter the next gate.

When they got outside Mrs. Pender had another objection to make : “I don’t like the look of that servant at all.”

Harry laughed, and Nynsee said, “Why, mamma, I think I do. She looks intelligent, at any rate.”

“She’s an odd little person,” said Harry. “Looks like

an attempt to graft the manners of a gentleman's servant on a lodging-house 'slavey.' ”

By the time they entered the next gate the girl was waiting for them at the door of the empty house, having probably slipped under the wire fencing like a rabbit. She opened the door for them with a peculiar, confident smile.

“I'm sure you'll like the 'ouse,” she said. “It might have been made for people like you, as like everything cozy and yet rather grand.”

Mrs. Pender was rather taken aback by this speech, and she murmured some not wholly intelligible but repressive answer. Her son and daughter, behind her, were in fits of suppressed laughter. After a few more remarks of the same unintentionally patronizing kind, their guide withdrew, remarking, with a smile to Mrs. Pender, that she would be able to “settle with Mr Justican in ten minutes.”

Then the lady broke out into torrents of wrath.

“The idea of this impudent creature talking to me as if our taking the place was a matter of course!” she said, indignantly.

Harry interrupted her lightly: “Well, she was about right, you know, mother. It would be madness not to, wouldn't it?”

Nynce gave her brother's arm a surreptitious shake. She had made her mind, as he had, that they must have the house, which was perfectly adapted to their needs in every way; and she wanted her mother kept in an equable frame of mind for the interview with the landlord. For, as the house was clearly being offered at a rent below its value, any attempt on Mrs. Pender's part to elect herself a tenant, with the air of doing a favor, might lead to the prompt rejection of her offer.

“A great deal depends upon what sort of a person this Mr. Justican proves to be,” went on Mrs. Pender. “To have one’s landlord next door is a thing nobody particularly cares about. And when he’s only separated from you by a couple of wires across the grass, one has to be specially careful. If he is some retired tradesman, now, with horrible manners, and——”

“But he isn’t, mother. He’s something in the City. The girl said so,” said Harry.

And then Nynee, who was standing at the window of the first floor front bedroom, turned and put her finger to her lip.

“There he is,” she whispered.

And Harry hastened to look out.

“There’s nothing the matter with his appearance, at any rate,” said he.

There was not. Mr. Justican was a rather singular-looking man, under the middle height, broadly built, but inclined to thinness. He appeared to be between thirty and forty years of age, had light and rather curly hair which might or might not be slightly gray, a square and somewhat pale face, fairly good features, and remarkably fine blue eyes.

He wore no moustache, beard or whisker, and had a singularly placid expression of calm, self-possessed strength. It was not possible to see all this from the window, as he had his hat on; but they noticed these details later, and were all favorably impressed by them.

Mrs. Pender insisted upon seeing Mr. Justican first by herself. She considered herself a most penetrating judge of character, and she thought that the presence of two impatient and restless young people would “flurry” her, and perhaps make her less able to drive a good bargain.

On returning to his house, leaving her two children in the empty one, Mrs. Pender was at once shown through a wide and very bare hall into a front room, which looked like an office, although it had evidently been intended for a drawing-room.

“See the demoralizing effect of a bachelor’s life,” said Mr. Justican, as he swept a pile of newspapers off a sofa for his visitor, and at once betrayed by his accent and his slow, quiet manner of speaking, that he was an American. “I never can remember that sofas were made to sit upon, and not to hold books and papers.”

Mrs. Pender smiled graciously and seated herself, not without a suspicion that the cleared space was thick with dust.

“I’m happy to hope you want to live in my house, madam?” went on Mr. Justican, completely captivating the lady by the courtesy of his tone and manner.

And thereupon she thought proper to find a little fault, cautiously: to hint that there was a tap which “ran,” that there was a “quite dreadful” paper on the study walls, that the garden would be expensive to keep up, etc., etc.

But all these objections Mr. Justican swept away with the same deferential calmness. The tap should be set right; the garden should be kept as she pleased; he was the most conciliatory of landlords.

Then Mrs. Pender hesitated, and finally, with a blush, ventured to suggest that the rent being so moderate she would like his assurance that the house suffered from no drawback.

At that Mr. Justican looked up frankly, and nodded with a grave face.

“That’s it, madam, you’ve hit it. There is a drawback,” said he.

“And—and what is it?” asked she with a sinking heart.

“Well, to be frank with you, it’s my nephews. They’re the two best hearted lads in this world, but they do make no end of a row, they and their friends, in the billiard-room I’ve had built out at the back there for them. It frightened away one lady, and——”

“But do they sit up all night, then?”

“Well, not quite that, but while they *are* awake they make things hum. I’m afraid I’ve spoilt them a bit; I’ve made a little money, and I may say I’ve adopted these lads, and I’ve let them do pretty much as they pleased after leaving Eton, when I ought to have set them to earning their own living, instead of making themselves a nuisance to their neighbors. But if their presence is an insuperable bar——”

“Oh, but it isn’t,” interrupted Mrs. Pender, who had no special aversion from the thought of well-provided-for young men as neighbors. “I’ve got a son myself, in the Civil Service, so I suppose I am as well used to the noise young men make as any one can be.”

“Very well, madam, I’m glad to hear it. Then I suppose we may consider the matter settled, and I’ll have the agreement drawn up,” said the landlord, rising with the air of a man to whom time is always of value.

And when Mrs. Pender rejoined her son and daughter, she was warm in praise of the courtesy and good breeding of Mr. Justican, who was, she said, just as particular about his neighbors and as much interested in their being refined people, as she herself was.

So the three years’ agreement was signed, and the furniture was brought up, and for a week the new tenants were too busy with the terrors of “moving in” to take any

notice of their neighbors. But they remarked that, for the present at any rate, Mr. Justican had succeeded in keeping his nephews in order ; for whatever noise they might make in the billiard-room, which was built out at the back, very little of it penetrated to the ears of the new tenants.

Their great difficulty was that they could not get servants. They engaged two, one of whom never came at all, while the other had to be dismissed immediately, as she flatly declined to do anything that was not "her work," even in such an emergency as "moving."

The amiable Mr. Justican came to the rescue ; he lent them Susan, the maid who had first admitted them, having, as he said, all the work he wanted done by Mrs. Green, the cook.

As Susan was as clever as a sailor, and as obliging as an angel, Mrs. Pender had to be grateful, and Nynee, who found the girl amusing, was delighted.

And matters were going on swimmingly by the end of the week, when they all retired to rest on the Saturday night, with the comforting knowledge that very little now remained to be done in the way of making the house cosy and charming.

Mrs. Pender, however, could not sleep. She was worried about the servant difficulty : they seemed to have no prospect of getting any suitable domestics, and yet she was most unwilling to accept Mr. Justican's offer of Susan as a permanent treasure. It was while she was lying awake, thinking over this important matter, that she fancied she heard a cry. On the alert at once for the threatened noisy demonstrations next door, she rose, put on her dressing-gown, hurried out on to the stair-case, and opened the window.

This time she was quite sure that she heard another cry, muffled and faint, and she was on the point of rousing her son from his sleep, to listen with her. But reflecting in time on the probability that he would be derisive, if not rude, and not being deficient in courage herself, she wrapped a little woollen "cloud" round her head, went quickly downstairs, opened the back-door, and listened again.

She heard nothing whatever.

Wondering where the sound had come from, and convinced in her own mind that there was something wrong, she got from the kitchen a candlestick with a glass shade which she had bought for the servants' use, lit the candle, and sallied forth with it into the garden.

At the back a wall separated their garden from their landlord's, and a lane ran along behind them both, dividing them from more gardens on the other side.

Thinking that the disturbance, if such it could be called, had arisen from a quarrel in the lane behind, Mrs. Pender, still hearing nothing, picked her way, with dainty steps, over the grass, which had grown long, and along the paths, which were somewhat neglected and grass-grown.

A strong sense of some impending discovery seized her when she descried, by the light of her candle held high, a dark heap on the grass-grown mound at the end of the garden, under the dividing wall.

Slowly she drew nearer, watching the heap for some movement. She knew what it was. Before she came close enough to see the pallid, bloodstained face, with the staring eyes and gaping jaw, the protruding tongue and clenched hands, she knew she was looking upon the body of a dead man.

CHAPTER II.

Now Mrs. Pender, though she was not without many of the faults and foibles of the middle-aged woman, though she was fussy, prejudiced, and a stickler for her dignity, was not without a high degree of self-command and of courage.

So she did not scream and run away, but stood looking at the body of the murdered man with the closest attention.

She had been face to face with danger and with death, in the old days when she was out in India with her husband ; and having been an eye-witness of more than one tragedy, she was able to retain her calmness, and to utter nothing louder than a subdued exclamation of horror.

Then she listened attentively for any sound which might betray the near presence of the murderer or murderers ; for it needed but the most cursory examination of the dead man to convince her that he had come by his death by foul means. On a closer inspection this conviction was confirmed. The man lay head downwards, his distorted and swollen face just visible, while the gaping jaws and outstretched, clutching fingers suggested that he had been strangled, although there was no cord, no handkerchief round his throat.

Shaking as she was with alarm, Mrs. Pender had presence of mind enough to stoop over the body, and to

notice his features in the first place, and his dress in the second.

Difficult as it was to take stock of either in the circumstances, she satisfied herself that the murdered man was of respectable appearance, that he was apparently between sixty and seventy years of age, and that he did not look like an Englishman. He wore an overcoat which was of dark cloth and rather shabby, and she noticed that the bottom button had been torn away, so that it hung loosely by a torn piece of the cloth. In his dark blue silk cravat, which was blood-stained and crumpled, there was a scarf-pin in the form of a running fox in silver; this was sticking out of the silk and was bent almost in two.

On the third finger of his right hand there was a silver ring, formed of a number of loose hoops of twisted silver bound together in one place by a plain silver shield, on which initials had been roughly scratched by an amateur engraver.

When she had noticed all these things, Mrs. Pender ran to the door in the wall at the end of the garden to see whether it had been forced open from the outside. It occurred to her, in the first place, to think that the murder had taken place in the lane, and that the body had been brought into the garden afterwards.

But the door was still bolted from the inside, and her next thought was that the murdered man had been thrown over the wall from the landlord's garden next door.

At the end of Mr. Justican's garden there was a large wooden building, as a tool-house and potting-shed, the eaves of which protruded a little way over the wall. It was near this point that the body lay, and Mrs. Pender

wondered whether a struggle had taken place on the roof of the shed ; for a small piece of the pitched wood-work had evidently been broken away quite recently.

Having made all these observations in the course of a very few seconds, Mrs. Pender went quickly back to the house, with the intention of watching for a policeman to pass on his beat : she wanted, if possible, to keep her gruesome discovery from the knowledge of the rest of the household, for the night at least.

But she had no sooner reached the side-door by which she had come out than she heard some one moving about stealthily within ; and being naturally in a nervous and excitable state, she called out sharply to know who was there.

Susan, in an ulster and curl-papers, reluctantly presented herself. She looked, Mrs. Pender thought, more sly and more cunning than ever.

“ Was he dead, ma’am ? ” was her startling remark, uttered in a loud whisper.

“ Dead ! Why, what—what have you seen ? ” asked her mistress, sharply.

“ Oh, only that he seemed to fall like a dead man. Who was he, ma’am ? Did you see his face ? ”

Mrs. Pender shuddered. The girl knew something, evidently ; and though she was afraid to go out and look at the dead man, she was full of curiosity.

“ Where did he fall from ? ” asked Mrs. Pender, quickly.

“ Oh, dear, ma’am, I dunno where he fell from : only I heard the fall, and I heard him cry out, and so I knew something had ’appened.”

“ You’ll have to be more explicit when the police ask you about it,” said Mrs. Pender.

And she was about to go upstairs, when Susan ran after her, having by this time bolted the door, and said: "Are you going to the p'lice-station, then—to-night? My—you *have a nerve!*"

"I'm going to call to a policeman, as soon as I see one," the lady said, as she went towards the drawing-room door.

"Why don't you go to Mr. Justican?" suggested Susan. "He'd get a bobby for you sooner'n you would."

It was a good suggestion, and Mrs. Pender took it. Hastily putting some hasty touches to her impromptu toilet, she let Susan open the front door, and even condescended to creep under the wire fencing which the girl held up for her, and to enter her landlord's front garden in that somewhat undignified manner.

It was some time before Mrs. Green the cook answered her ring; and when the nocturnal visitor expressed a wish to see Mr. Justican, because there was a dead man in her garden, the worthy woman uttered a loud scream.

Mrs. Pender was by this time in the hall.

"Oh, ma'am, how dreadful!" cried the cook, as she showed the lady into the front room, which she already knew, and hurriedly lit the gas. "I'll wake him and tell him this moment."

She went out of the room and up the stairs, leaving the door ajar in her agitation.

Mrs. Pender, whose senses were keener than usual under the pressure of strong excitement, fancied she heard stealthy footsteps in the hall as the woman went upstairs; and while the cook knocked loudly at a door on the first floor, Mrs. Pender was certain that she heard the creaking of the stairs as of another person going softly up.

And she began to wonder whether some member of the household had not heard of the tragedy already.

A few moments later there was a noise of some one moving about the room overhead in a great hurry, and Mr. Justican's voice asking what on earth was the matter, as he unlocked his door.

Mrs. Pender went to the door of the room, waiting for his descent.

But in the meantime the rest of the household had been roused, and before Mr. Justican made his appearance, two young men, whom Mrs. Pender knew to be his nephews, ran downstairs, and introduced themselves to the lady, asking at the same time for confirmation of the cook's story that "there had been a murder."

As both young men were in evening dress, and had evidently not been to bed yet, Mrs. Pender looked at them narrowly, with vague suspicion.

The elder of the two was a tall young man of about twenty-five years of age, with a handsome figure and a face which was not either particularly clever or particularly good-looking, but which was not without attractiveness by reason of its expression of boyish, almost boisterous good humor. He was clean-shaven and dark-skinned, and he introduced himself as Neal Sheringham.

Mrs. Pender was very cool in her manner towards him. She began to believe, though not on very strong evidence, that it was one of these two young men whom she had heard stealing upstairs; and as Neal was the taller and heavier of the two, she thought it must have been he.

If he had been down to investigate when he heard the cries, why should he pretend he had heard nothing whatever?

The second nephew, who was the cousin of the first,

was short and slightly built, and his light eyes were shrewd and humorous. He also was clean-shaved, and this fact, in addition to his spare little figure, gave him the appearance of a mere boy, though his actual age was three-and-twenty. His name was Kenneth King; and in return for the lady's keen scrutiny of him, he noted every detail of her appearance with corresponding closeness.

In fact, Mrs. Pender set him down in her own mind as "the incarnation of impudence"; and the prejudice she conceived against them both was very strong.

She declined to give them any details of the errand which had brought her; and it was not until Mr. Justican, with an apology for a hasty toilet which brought him down in a tightly buttoned up lounge coat and without a collar, ran down the stairs, that she explained what she had seen.

"A dead man—in your garden! Are you sure? Good gra——"

He made a dash for the front door, but at the same moment the two young men made a wild rush for the back; and it was Mrs. Pender who suddenly called out, when she saw the foremost of them burst the door open at one touch:

"Why, it wasn't fastened!"

The fact, which became on the instant apparent to everybody, caused a curious pause. Mr. Justican, crossing the hall with a spring, found that this was indeed the case. But after an instant's hesitation, during which he looked penetratingly from one of his nephews to the other, and from them to the cook, he just waved his hand as if to dismiss the subject until a more convenient season, and himself led the way, at a rapid pace, into his own back garden.

"We can see over the wall," he said, "and these lads will think nothing of climbing over. It will save time."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when, one after the other, his two nephews got upon the wall and over, like a couple of cats, and ran down the neighboring garden together.

Mr. Justican thus had an opportunity for a few words with the lady.

"You sent to the police-station, of course?"

"Not yet. I've had no time. The whole thing only happened ten minutes ago. I heard cries, and went out, and found—this dreadful thing."

"Did you leave any one there with him?"

"No. I've told no one in my house except your little maid, Susan. I didn't want it to get to my daughter's ears until the morning. It's such a dreadful, such a horrible thing!"

"It is indeed. And very puzzling. You say your own garden-gate at the back was locked!"

"Yes. I have a fancy that he was thrown from the top of the shed at the end of your garden."

"Was that where you found him? Then they're looking in the wrong direction. Here, Neal, Ken!" And Mr. Justican went close up to the wall, and scrambled up the ivy which hung on it, so that he could look over: "Not over there! Look at the bottom—under our shed."

Neal came up to him.

"No, uncle, we've looked there."

Mrs. Pender, with a stronger and stronger suspicion in her own mind that either one or both of these young men did not choose to look in the right place, and that they were purposely examining the garden in every direction but the right one, made her way by herself to the end of

the garden, and mounting on a rough box which she dragged close under the wall, held high the candle she still carried, and pointed below, crying:

“It’s there, on that heap—just there.”

The young men had both come at her call.

“Where? Where?” cried both together.

But Mrs. Pender could not answer. She felt sick and faint, and had to drop her arm with the candle.

She had found the right spot indeed, for there was the heap of gravel and stones and rubbish.

But the body of the dead man was gone.

CHAPTER III.

THE first thing that roused Mrs. Pender from the state of sick stupefaction into which the disappearance of the body of the murdered man had thrown her was the sound of a suppressed laugh.

Raising her head quickly, she drew herself up, looked over the wall, and saw, not indeed the faces of the two young men—it was too dark for that—but their figures, standing side by side. And from their attitudes, it was plain to her that they were both struggling with a strong inclination to derisive merriment.

Mr. Justican had by this time come up, and the lady turned to him with much indignation.

“Your nephews both appear to be very much amused about this,” she said, sharply. “But I can’t see what there is to laugh at in this horrible affair.” Mr. Justican, who could not see over the high wall from where he stood, said: “Allow me,” and stepped up to her level by the help of the box on which she was standing.

“Is this some trick of you two lads?” he asked in a stern tone. “Because, if so, it is a very ill-judged one.”

It was the younger, little Kenneth King, who answered: “No, sir. It’s no trick of ours. We know nothing whatever about it.”

His tone was hard and rather dry, and did not impress Mrs. Pender favorably. Mr. Justican got over the wall, and requesting the lady to lend him her candle, examined the heap of gravel very carefully.

"There's certainly no trace of anything here," he said, at last, in a puzzled tone. Then he stood upright. "I'll come back and let you through into the lane, Mrs. Pender, so that you can see for yourself."

Mrs. Pender did not know whether she was more incensed by the secret derision of the young men, or shocked and bewildered by the disappearance of the dead man. When Mr. Justican got over the wall again and stood beside her, he had a suggestion to make.

"You're sure that the man *was* dead?" he said in a low voice.

She answered with considerable anger: "Perhaps, Mr. Justican, you think, as your nephews evidently do, or pretend to do, that I have made up the story?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Pender, I think nothing of the sort," said he, earnestly. "But as the removal of a dead body is a performance that requires time, and as there is no trace of anybody about, I thought it possible that the man might have been ill, or shamming, and that, as he no doubt came here with some nefarious purpose, probably burglary, he made the best of his way out as soon as you had gone away."

But the lady scouted the idea.

"The man was dead beyond any doubt," said she, positively. "And the body has been removed. If you will only persuade these young men to take things more seriously, and to search the place properly, some trace must be found. My gate is locked; the wall is high: I am sure there has not been time to take such a weight as a dead body very far. But if you all look upon the whole affair only as a very good joke, of course there is nothing for me to do but to leave you, and to go to the nearest police-station."

Mr. Justican reflected a moment before he answered, in the most gravely courteous tone: "That is absolutely necessary. The police *must* be informed. But you are a little too hard upon the lads. They think you have deceived yourself, and have taken fright at a fancy. For my part, I am inclined to think that the man must have been killed in the lane in a brawl, and that his body was thrown over into your garden."

"Yes, but how has it disappeared?"

"I should say that the men who killed him, whether accidentally or not, must have been on the watch, and seized the moment of your going indoors to get the body over the wall again. Of that we shall probably find traces in the morning. We could find out little by this light, could we?"

Mrs. Pender looked about her thoughtfully. The sound of suppressed laughter and whispering still came from her own garden, irritating her almost beyond endurance.

"I don't believe," she said obstinately, "that it could have been carried so far. I confess I should feel more comfortable if you would allow some sort of search to be made to-night. I don't see how the man could have been got away in so short a time."

"It shall be done," said Mr. Justican. "Come with me into the next garden, and you shall see how I will make the boys work."

But she drew back; he would have led her to the back door in his own garden-wall, as he meanwhile directed Neal to unbolt Mrs. Pender's, so that she could make her way round by the lane.

"No," she said. "I think I'll remain here to keep watch, while you direct the thorough searching of my garden."

"You'll be nervous all alone."

"No, I'm not specially nervous, for a woman."

"And there can be nothing to see on this side of the wall, can there?"

With a woman's obstinacy, Mrs. Pender refused to go, and he was obliged to leave her. She heard him speak severely to the young men, in an undertone, reproaching them with their discourtesy, and explicitly stating that he believed every word of her account of what she had seen.

Then he himself joined in the search they made, raking out every bush. And it was he who, with a low whisper, made the first discovery.

"Hallo!" said he, "who are you?"

And he dragged out, from behind a clump of laurels half-way down the garden, the lithe form of the maid Susan.

"I wasn't doing any 'am, sir," she said, sullenly.

"Of course you were not. But we want you to do some good. You've seen something?"

"P'raps I 'ave," said Susan, sulkily.

"Then out with it: what was it you saw?"

Susan folded her arms, and he gave her a slight shake. His nephews were still searching the end of the garden.

"Come, did you see anything before or after Mrs. Pender came into my house?"

"I see somethink—after," said Susan, in a low voice.

"Well, what was it?"

Susan wriggled to get her arm away, but failed.

"I see a dead man carried away," she said at last, sullenly.

"Where were you?"

"I was 'ere, be'ind the bushes."

"Well, and did you see the man or the men who did it?"

"Yes," said Susan, looking up with a sudden sullen flash of defiance.

"Could you swear to them?"

"It wasn't them; it was him," said Susan in the same tone. "And lor, yes, I could swear to him anywheres!"

"Who was it?"

Susan gave a sort of grim chuckle.

"Ain't a-going to say!"

"But you must!" Mr. Justican shook her again. "Was it one of your sweethearts?"

"Sweethearts!" With an air of ineffable scorn. "No!"

"You wouldn't say if it was, I suppose?"

"Yus I would. I don't take no account of sweethearts!"

"Well, tell me who it was, and describe exactly what you saw," pursued he, persuasively.

"Shan't," retorted Susan, coolly.

"You'll have to when the police ask you!"

"The p'lice!" This with more scorn. Then she said, in a quieter tone: "The p'lice won't ask me nothink."

"How do you know that?"

"That's *my* secret!"

"You're a cheeky baggage," said Mr. Justican, sending her away with a little push, as if despairing to get anything out of her. "You'd better go and tell Mrs. Pender what you saw, and set her mind at rest."

Susan gave a shrill guggle.

"No fear!" she said as she returned with a triumphant air to the house.

Mr. Justican went slowly down the garden till he stood

under the wall by the gravel-heap, and saw Mrs. Pender, with her candle beside her, still looking over the wall from his own garden.

“Was that girl watching?” she asked, eagerly. “Did she tell you anything?”

“She did tell me something,” admitted he, “but I fancy it was a lie.”

“I’ve no doubt of it,” said the lady, sharply. “She’s a horrid girl. Now, Mr. Justican, I have something to suggest: you’ve searched that garden thoroughly: now I want you to look in this one. I want you to examine this shed.”

“Oh, there can’t be anything in there,” said he at once. “It’s always kept locked, and the key isn’t in the door.”

“But I suppose the key’s kept somewhere about,” pursued Mrs. Pender, as she shook the door, and tried vainly to peer in through the dusty little window. “See what an easy thing it would be to put anything in here to hide!”

“The key’s kept on that nail to your right, Mrs. Pender,” cried Kenneth, as he leapt up on the wall, and jumped down on the other side. “Here it——” He stopped, whistling in surprise. “By Jove, here it isn’t!” he added in a different tone. “Never mind; if you want to see inside the shed, here goes!”

And running at the old wooden door as he spoke, he lunged against it with such unexpected muscular force for his spare frame that the wood creaked, cracked, gave way, and let him go crashing in through the splintered wood.

“By Jove!” echoed Neal from behind, as he came up to his cousin.

Mr. Justican was rather alarmed when he saw the young fellow go through the splinters.

"Have you hurt yourself, my lad?" asked he, anxiously, as he sprang after him, and took the young man hastily by the arm.

"Hurt, not a bit," laughed Ken, who was in the same jubilantly incredulous mood as ever, and who looked upon the whole affair as a "huge lark."

"It's all very well to laugh, but I've known men seriously injured by doing a mad thing like that," retorted his uncle, as he went right in, and leaned against a shelf in the corner, where dozens and dozens of small red flower-pots above, and a heap of matting and bass stuffed underneath, marked the scene of many of his potting exploits; for he was an enthusiastic gardener.

Mrs. Pender had followed them in, with a weird sense of undefined terror. For all their light mood and their "chaff," she felt an uncanny sense of what this shed might conceal; and without speaking, she set about examining the shelves all round, a pile of boxes in the corner, and the dark recesses under the shelves.

Meanwhile Mr. Justican remained in the same corner, half-leaning, half-sitting against his beloved potting-shelf, but doing all in his power to assist the lady by holding her candle aloft for her, and turning its somewhat weak light into the dark corners.

The two young men did not assist in this search. Satisfied with a look round on their entrance, they stood beside their uncle, who asked them a few questions, in a reproachfully stern voice, about their search of the next garden, just to show them that he took the matter seriously, if they did not.

Mrs. Pender was getting a little overwrought with the varied emotions of the night. Her forehead and upper lip became cold and wet, and she began to tremble and

to feel faint and weak. She put her hand into the pocket of the gown she wore to take out her handkerchief, and her shaking fingers let it fall on to the cold earth of the unboarded floor.

Nobody noticed her ; so she picked it up again, and staggered against the nearest shelf.

This action, however, caught Mr. Justican's eye, and he hastened to lead her out into the open air.

"This affair has been too much for you, my dear lady," said he, in his kind, grave way. "You must come in and have a glass of sherry, while I go off to the police-station."

On the instant she recovered herself a little.

"To the police-station? You are going, then?"

"Certainly I am. Unless you would prefer to go yourself?"

"Oh, no, no, I shall be only too glad if you——"

Indeed, the stirring events of the last hour or so had been too much for her. Declining the proffered refreshment, she bade him good-night, taking no notice of the two frivolous or culpable young men who had incurred her displeasure. And, hurrying through the gate into the lane, which Mr. Justican unbolted for her, she went back into her own garden, bolted the door after her, and returned to her own bedroom, worn out, excited, and bewildered beyond measure.

When she took her handkerchief from her pocket she uttered a scream: it was stained with earth—and with blood.

Sinking down on a chair, she remembered, while her heart beat wildly with the shock, that it was on the floor of the shed that she had let it fall.

Had the body been concealed there after all?

CHAPTER IV.

It is scarcely to be wondered at that Mrs. Pender slept but little that night. Indeed, she could not even rest in bed, or remain in her room, but kept stealing out, all through the early hours of the morning, to cross the landing, and, from the dressing-room window, to peer out into the darkness, with vague fancies in her head that something nefarious was still going on outside.

On one of these expeditions she was satisfied that she did actually hear a sound of sawing, faint but continuous; she could not be sure whether it came from her own garden or Mr. Justican's, but curious as she felt, her nerves were not in a sufficiently robust condition, after the sensations of the early part of the night, to allow her to make another voyage of discovery in the garden.

On the following morning, which was Sunday, she had scarcely got downstairs when Mr. Justican was announced. His face became at once full of kind concern when he saw what havoc the night's excitements had made in the appearance of the plump, handsome, middle-aged lady.

"Dear me, this is a sad business!" said he. "You look half-dead. However, I thought I'd look in as early as I could to let you know how things were going."

"Thank you. Did you inform the police?"

"I should say so!" replied he, promptly. "Had 'em here within twenty minutes of your leaving my house."

"I didn't hear anything—at least as soon as that."

"No. I took them round by the lane ; I want to keep this business as quiet as I can, for all our sakes. Of course, if they find out anything, it will all have to come out, and we must make the best of it ; but we'll keep it out of the papers as long as we can."

"Oh, yes, do, pray do," said Mrs. Pender, heartily. "I couldn't stay here another day, if the place were to become a sort of Chamber of Horrors, for all the world to come and stare at."

"Of course not. It's not to be expected. And as I don't want to lose my tenants, I guess we'll keep things dark as long as possible."

"Well, and what did they find?"

"Nothing. They say they've got a clue—it's a way they have—but goodness only knows whether they'll follow it up to anything."

"They searched the shed?"

"Yes, and gave me orders to have it boarded up, so that they can examine it again by daylight. So, as to-day's Sunday, and I could only get a carpenter to work by making a great fuss, I tried my hand at it myself, and sawed and nailed and screwed away into the small hours."

"Then that's what I heard!" cried Mrs. Pender.

"Let's hope nobody else did. For being only an amateur, I bungled a good bit, and fell over things, and nearly sawed my own hand off. Look!"

And he showed her a cut on his left wrist, and an abrasion on his right thumb as he spoke.

"And did *you* find nothing in the shed?" asked Mrs. Pender, earnestly.

"Nothing whatever. Didn't you search it thoroughly yourself last night?"

"I thought I did, but now I begin to doubt. I let my

handkerchief fall on the ground while I was in there," she went on, with a little shudder, "and this is what I found on it, in the light, as soon as I got indoors."

As she spoke, she unfolded a little paper parcel she had been holding, and showed him the stained handkerchief. Mr. Justican looked grave and alarmed.

"By Jove!" said he, "that's blood, without a doubt. Most extraordinary! You're sure this happened in the shed?"

"Quite sure."

"May I have this to show the police?"

Mrs. Pender instinctively put out her hand to recover the parcel.

"Oh, dear, I'd rather not!" she said faintly. "The more evidence they have, the more certain it is that this dreadful affair will be put in the papers!"

"Well, I'm not at all more anxious for that than you are, but at the same time I think to keep back such a piece of evidence as this would be almost as bad as conniving at a miscarriage of justice!" said he, with an unwilling shake of the head.

"Very well. Then I suppose you must take it," sighed she. "But oh! Do ask them to keep my name out of the horrid thing, at least until we have had time to get away!"

"Come, you're meeting trouble half-way," said Mr. Justican, cheerfully. "At present nobody knows anything of the affair but ourselves and the police. It's only if the press get wind of it that we have any reason to fear premature disclosures. Luckily, my nephews don't believe a word of the whole story." Here Mrs. Pender instinctively drew herself up. "I mean, they think you were carried away by your imagination. So much the

better! Let them think so, and they'll continue to make light of it, and the truth will get no further through them. How about your family? What do they know?"

"They knew nothing last night," replied the good lady, dismally. "But I'm pretty sure that horrid little Susan will have been chattering about it to them both this morning!"

"Susan! Oh, Susan's a caution!" said Mr. Justican, smiling, as he walked to the door. "Nobody's likely to believe anything on *her* evidence!"

Poor Mrs. Pender's fears on that head were soon confirmed. No sooner was Mr. Justican out of the house than the voices of her son and daughter and Susan, all talking at the same time in very excited tones, reached her ears. And when she opened the door of the breakfast-room she found the maid standing just inside the door gesticulating with a dish-cover, while Harry and Nynee, leaning over the table towards her, listened and commented at the same time.

The words Susan was uttering at the moment were disconcerting in the extreme.

"There," she cried, flourishing the upraised dish-cover, and speaking in a loud and thrilling whisper, "there laid the dead corpse, motionless and lifeless on the ground. And then Presto! In the twinkling of a heye, it was gone!"

This last word, which she pronounced "gor-r-r-rn!" Susan uttered in a tone which would have produced a great effect at the "Vic."

Mrs. Pender interrupted her impatiently.

"What nonsense are you talking, Susan? I thought you were too clever a girl to waste your time in that silly way!"

But Harry interrupted: "But she says you saw it, mother, saw a dead body in the garden!"

"And that Mr. Justican and his nephews were out there with you looking for it."

"Yes, yes, looking for it, and they found there was nothing. No doubt I was mistaken."

"But Susan says you weren't! She says she heard a cry, and a fall, and that you were out in the garden, and that you came in and said you'd go for the police. Did you?"

"Of course not. There was a disturbance, and I went in to Mr. Justican's."

"As I advised you to," here put in Susan most inopportunely. "And when we all went out be'ind the 'ouse, looking and peering, why, there wasn't nothink to look at, was there, ma'am?"

"You can go downstairs, Susan," said Mrs. Pender, with dignity.

But though Susan obeyed, with a sly twinkle in her eye which predicted more gossip in the dim by-and-by; and though Nynee and her brother dutifully turned the subject, seeing how acutely their mother was suffering from the effects of her adventure, it was promptly revived by them as soon as they were alone together. And Susan, who revelled in the tragedy, though she was more reticent with them than she had been with Mr. Justican, took the first opportunity of discussing it with them again.

Now although Mrs. Pender had been glad to consult Mr. Justican in this dreadful affair, she was not satisfied in her own mind that no member of his household had been concerned in the terrible event of the previous night.

She began again, with the nervous suspicion of the middle-aged matron, to recall her own doubts as to the house which had been offered at so cheap a rent, and to think that she had not been particular enough in satisfying herself as to the status and position of the landlord and his family.

To remedy this, she went up to Lincoln's Inn the very next day and interviewed her solicitor, with a view to his making inquiries upon the subject.

She went in the afternoon, having still a good deal to do in the mornings in the matter of arranging books and seeing servants.

She had not wished to draw fresh attention to the tragedy, which had been avoided between her and her children ; so she uttered no warning words on the subject which was taking her to the lawyer's.

When, therefore, Harry came back from Somerset House that afternoon, and he and Nynee strolled into the garden together, no ugly suspicion was in their minds when Neal Sheringham, who was in the adjoining garden, suddenly made his appearance on the intervening wall, and introduced himself by saying simply :

“ May we sit up here and talk to you ? ”

At the same time he and Kenneth, who had hoisted himself up to the same level a moment later, raised their felt tennis hats with the clockwork simultaneousness of heroes of comic opera.

Nynee, who felt rather than knew that her mother disapproved of the two smiling lads, was rather shy ; but Harry welcomed them with effusion.

“ Rather,” said he. “ We don't want any introduction, do we ? ”

“ Oh, yes, we do,” said Kenneth of the shrewd blue

eyes. "Allow me to present to you my cousin, Neal Sheringham, a poor but fairly honest fellow, and a commercial traveller, or what, in my uncle's country, would be termed 'a drummer.'"

Nynee and her brother both laughed heartily at this description, which they took for a joke. But Neal, with a roar of laughter of the most boyish, boisterous kind, undecieved them.

"I see you don't believe it, but it's true," said he. "I go backwards and forwards to Brussels and other places in Belgium for my uncle, with a couple of big trunks full of samples, chiefly of linens and cottons and such things, though I take screws and knives and all sorts of other things too sometimes."

"Do you really?" said Nynee, hardly yet knowing whether he was serious or not.

"Really and truly I do," said Neal, edging a little nearer to the spot where Harry had brought a garden chair for his sister, until finally he slid off the wall and stood beside her. "I don't say I'm a great success at the business, for I never get any orders that can pay for my journeys; but I go with the utmost regularity, with my trunks, and come back, with the same regularity, with instructions to send over a paper of pins and half a dozen dusters. And as my uncle seems quite satisfied, I suppose I ought to be!"

Harry and Nynee laughed again.

"Surely," suggested Nynee, "if you do no more than that, you might just as well stay at home!"

"So I think, and so I have said. But my uncle only tells me I'm a conceited young ass, and haven't a notion beyond what my slow-witted old British forefathers had before me. Now I'm rather proud of my slow old

British forefathers, but as they haven't done as much for me as my smart Yankee uncle has, why, I just do as I'm told, without any protest."

"And you, do you have to carry on the same remunerative business?" asked Nynee of Kenneth.

"No," replied he, gravely, with a twinkle in his eyes. "I carry on the equally pleasing and equally profitable trade of 'looking about me.' You see, I'm two years younger than Neal, and my uncle says I needn't be tied down to an office stool yet awhile, and I obey his wishes in the most submissive manner. Wherever he says I'm to go, I go. So I shall be at the Haymarket to-night, and at my aunt Lady Lucy Marshfield's to-morrow night, at a dance, and on Wednesday I shall be off to Paris for a week. Looking about one is a very comfortable and easy profession—while it lasts."

Harry looked amazed.

"What a ripping uncle!" said he.

"He is. He's the dearest old chap going!" chimed in Neal, heartily. "And when you know him better, you'll like him as well as we do," he added, turning to Nynee, whose pretty face and gentle, shy little manners had taken his fancy strongly.

"I'm afraid we shan't have the chance of knowing him better," said she, softly. "My mother's taken a dislike to the place, and she won't stay here long, I'm sure."

"Was it because of—last night?" asked Neal in a low voice.

Nynee nodded.

"I think so."

"It was all a fancy of hers, you know," said Neal. "There wasn't anybody there, really."

Nynee stood up, flushing a little.

"It isn't right to say that," she objected, in a slightly offended tone. "She was very much hurt by the way you laughed at her."

Neal grew earnest and serious in a moment, like the great, big, boisterous, good-hearted lad he was.

"We didn't do that, indeed, at least we didn't mean to. But you know there really wasn't any trace of anything having happened, and to tell you the truth, my uncle thinks so too."

Nynee felt so indignant that she could not answer; she turned away, and began to walk in the direction of the end of the garden.

Now neither she nor her brother had been to the end yet since the reported tragedy; for while Mrs. Pender was at home it was out of the question, for fear of annoying or irritating her: and this afternoon they had both been interrupted on their way thither by the two neighbors from next door.

This, therefore, was the first visit Nynee had paid to the scene of the much disputed occurrences of two nights before. She went up to the gravel-heap, and bending down, began to examine the spot minutely in her turn.

Neal who was following her with humble protests, had not yet come up with her when she uttered an exclamation, and stooping down, picked up something which had been half-covered by loose earth and gravel.

"What's this?" cried she.

And turning, she let Neal see the thing she had picked up. It was a silver scarf-pin, bent almost double, and marked with a red stain.

"It's a pin," cried she, "a silver pin in the shape of a running fox."

She had scarcely uttered the words, and shown him the pin, when Neal, stammering "What! What!" snatched it from her, and stared at it in apparent stupefaction, while every trace of red color left his cheeks.

CHAPTER V.

NYNEE grew pale as Neal grew red. He could not utter a word, but stood with the pin in his hand, his lips parted, his breath coming quickly, and was at no pains to hide the fact that he had received a great shock.

“What is it? Why do you look like that? You’ve seen the pin before!” cried the girl, holding out her hand for it, in a shy, frightened manner.

Neal shook his head, glanced at her quickly, and then looked down at the ground where she had picked the pin up.

Harry Pender and Kenneth King, surprised by what they saw of the strange behavior of these two, came down the garden towards them; the former crying in his turn:

“What is it? What have you found?”

But Kenneth King said nothing. He too saw the running fox, bent double, in his cousin’s hand, with the red stain on it; and he changed color as Neal had done. He too glanced at Nynee, and then at the gravel-heap, and it was left to Harry to break the strange silence which had fallen upon them all.

“Hallo! Did you find that on the ground? Why, it’s stained—with blood I think! Let me look at it.”

Then Nynee spoke.

“Give it back to me,” she said, imperiously. “It was I who picked it up. I will have it. Now you won’t be

able to laugh at my mother, and to say she talked nonsense when she told you what she saw! This pin must have belonged to the man who was murdered; and if we give it to the police, it may lead to our finding out who the poor man was. As for you, Mr. Sheringham," she went on, and her blue eyes flashed with excitement as she looked steadily up into his face: "I believe you *know* who he was."

But Neal, who was now as pale as he had before been white, shook his head emphatically.

"Indeed I do *not* know. I haven't the least idea."

"Then why do you—why do you both look so much disturbed?"

Neal tried to pull himself together, as, after a moment's hesitation, Kenneth answered: "I think I can explain that, Miss Pender. Neither my cousin nor I, till this moment, believed that there had been a murder committed at all. We thought Mrs. Pender had seen some man in the garden, and had imagined he was dead, or something of that sort. But this pin does prove that somebody must have been here, somebody who was wounded, at least. It's bent up, as if some violence had been used, and it's stained besides."

But Nynee wanted to know more than this. She turned to Neal again very solemnly. She had an idea that she was more likely to get the whole truth from this frank-mannered, boyish young fellow than from his younger, but cleverer cousin.

"Nothing you may say," she said, earnestly, "will convince me that you hadn't seen the pin before. It's rather a curious one, to begin with."

Very reluctantly, Neal had given it up to her; and she noted, with that abuddery feeling that the mere sight or

touch of such a relic naturally produces in a girl, that the fox had a bright yellow stone for his eye.

Neal, after a little more hesitation, answered her.

"I don't deny I've seen a pin like it before, but it belonged to such a harmless creature that he was the last person in the world who would be likely to be murdered. He was poor, for one thing, and as honest as the day for another, and in the third place he is not in England."

"Who was he?" asked Nynee.

Neal hesitated again, and again Kenneth spoke for him.

"I think he'd better not say," said he, frankly. "It wouldn't do to start a report that a man was dead whom we know very well to be alive. It's a very singular coincidence that there should be another scarf-pin like his thrust under our eyes; but it's only a coincidence, and of course his can't have been the only silver pin in the world made in that particular design."

Nynee was not satisfied, but her brother agreed with their young neighbors that they were right not to mention a man's name in the circumstances. And they were all discussing the question very earnestly, in a knot under the garden wall, when Mrs. Pender returned home from her lawyer's, and was filled with consternation on seeing the two young men in her garden, apparently already on the most intimate and confidential terms with her own son and daughter.

Her chilling manner caused them to withdraw into their own premises very quickly, although in almost abject humility and deference they now strove to atone for their incredulity about her adventure two nights before.

Nynee was sorry for the rebuff they thus received, although she was offended with them for their refusal to satisfy her curiosity.

Harry contrived to whisper to his sister that she had better not show the scarf-pin to their mother, before whom they still avoided all mention of the events which had disturbed her so much. As they followed Mrs. Pender indoors, he added to Nynee :

“I shall say nothing about Sheringham’s amateur efforts as a commercial traveller either.”

“Oh, no,” returned she in the same low voice. “But, Harry, you might just mention about Lady Marshfield.”

Harry replied by a vigorous nod. Both these young people liked their neighbors well enough to wish to see more of them ; and the wisdom of the serpent suggested that a careful regard for their mother’s prejudices would serve to that end.

So in the course of the evening Harry contrived to introduce the fact of the relationship of Kenneth King to Lady Marshfield, a well-known society woman, who gave large garden-parties at a beautiful place on the Thames.

Mrs. Pender took the bait at once, and became slightly, but sensibly, mollified towards the culprits next door. Perhaps, however, the two young men knew the advantages of reserve, for they did not obtrude themselves again upon the notice of their neighbors for some time.

It was not until Neal, about a week later, observed Nynee busily engaged in planting seed in the border, that he strolled out into his garden, and looking over the wall, politely raised his hat, and said, with an engaging smile :

“I beg your pardon, but could you lend me your gardening scissors to trim this creeper ? My uncle always keeps the potting-shed locked up now when the gardener’s gone, so I can’t get at anything.”

Nynee was polite too, but rather constrained and shy.

After a few minutes, during which she heard the snip-

snip of the scissors, and wondered what he could be cutting so early in the year, he said, standing on his toes for a moment to look over :

“Mrs. Pender doesn’t approve of us, does she?”

Nynee stammered a little.

“Oh, perhaps she hasn’t quite forgiven you for—for—that night, you know!”

“What shall I do to pacify her? I’d do anything—anything,” said Neal, energetically, but in a very low voice, for fear of Mrs. Pender’s making a descent from the house and carrying off the pretty girl.

“Oh, there’s nothing to be done,” answered Nynee, still planting, and without raising her head.

Perhaps she was no more anxious that her mother should pounce upon and carry her off than Neal was.

Then he cleared his throat and grew bolder.

“I suppose you don’t mind,” said he, abjectly. “Perhaps you’d rather not have anything to say to us either?”

“I—I shouldn’t like to have to seem discourteous to you,” said Nynee, cautiously, trying to speak in a beautifully level tone, without prejudice on either side.

“I’m quite sure you wouldn’t be discourteous to anybody. You know we didn’t mean to offend Mrs. Pender, and we’re most awfully sorry! Will you tell her so?”

Nynee glanced up dubiously at the top of his head, which was all she could see.

“I’ll say it if you like. But—it takes a long time to overcome a prejudice of mamma’s when she has one.”

“I know what I’ll do. I’ll set my uncle to work. He can get round anybody! I’ll send him in this very evening!”

Nynee rose up, and looked up shyly.

“It will be of no use, I’m afraid. I think her nerves

were upset that night; she's grown very shy with strangers."

"I shall try, at any rate," said Neal, wistfully, as Nynee, with a little bow, afraid that there would be a domestic "scene" if she were discovered holding any intercourse with the persons whom Mrs. Pender called "those horrid young men next door," took her seeds and her scissors indoors.

But the fates were in Neal's favor. It happened that, at that very moment, Mr. Gurling, the solicitor whom Mrs. Pender had consulted about her neighbors, was seated in the drawing-room, reassuring her on that very point.

The result of his inquiries had been most satisfactory. Mr. Justican had had an office in the city for a great many years; he was a cotton-broker, with a partner in one of the big towns in the north of England.

"A cotton-broker!" said Mrs. Pender, with aristocratic dubiousness.

"Or something of that sort, I believe," said Mr. Gurling, who thought his client's prejudices rather childish. "At any rate, he is a man of means and position, and he married a lady belonging to a very good English family, sister of a viscount, I believe."

Mrs. Pender grew interested.

"She ran away from him, but he didn't divorce her, and her family were grateful to him for not stirring up a scandal. It seems he took it very quietly, and even adopted and brought up two of her nephews, an instance of great magnanimity, I think."

"Oh, and are those the two young men who live with him?"

"I presume so. They are both very well connected, and, through him, they are well off, or will be some day."

Mrs. Pender looked thoughtful.

"I suppose you think me too particular, Mr. Gurling," she said at last. "But, remember, I have children, and for their sakes I have to be careful into what society I introduce them. And this very unpleasant affair, happening so soon after our coming here——"

"Well, surely that was not the fault of your landlord or his nephews! It's not the sort of thing they would choose to have take place on their own premises! By-the-by, has anything been found out about the affair yet?"

"I don't know. I haven't spoken to Mr. Justican since the day after it happened. But I saw a man come in with him one day, who looked to me like a detective; and I'm in daily fear of something coming out. You know how horrible it would be to have to give evidence in an affair of that kind!"

"It would be unpleasant, certainly. But I am sure Mr. Justican, being your landlord, would do his best to save you all the annoyance he could. It seems he hasn't even let the police worry you with questions?"

"No. He promised to keep my name out of it as long as he could, though, of course, I saw more than anybody did."

"Yes. Well, let us hope he won't have to trouble you at all about it," said Mr. Gurling as he rose to go.

Mrs. Pender followed him with another remark.

"These good connections of Mr. Justican's don't keep up much intercourse with him and his household, I think. I haven't seen any ladies coming or going."

"Well, his is a bachelor establishment, isn't it?" said Mr. Gurling.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when the

door was opened by Susan, who brought her mistress a note which, she said, had just been sent in by Mr. Justican.

"I'll open it before you go," said Mrs. Pender to the lawyer. "He may have something to say about this dreadful business."

But the good lady's countenance brightened as she read, and then looked up, holding out the note.

"No," she said, with great relief, "it's only a request that I will go in to tea to-morrow, to meet one of the ladies of his family, Lady Marshfield!"

The lawyer smiled. He perceived that this event would clear away a good many difficulties, and he went away with the comfortable feeling that he would be troubled with no more inquiries into Mr. Justican's connections.

Now Mrs. Pender was even more pleased than she cared to show, since Lady Marshfield was a well-known hostess, and the possibility that the meeting might lead to invitations for Nynee and herself was a most welcome one.

Determined that her pretty daughter should look her best, Mrs. Pender went out with her on the following morning to buy a new hat and various little *et ceteras* of the toilet. They came back from Sloane Square by train, and then Mrs. Pender sent Nynee home, while she journeyed herself up a little back street to a florist's, where she could get a couple of roses for Nynee to wear in the front of her dress.

Returning home slowly, fatigued with her morning's expedition, Mrs. Pender was coming down a narrow street which ran at right angles to their own road, when her attention was attracted by something she caught

sight of at the door of a very wretched and very dirty little shop, where rags and bones, bottles and old iron, second-hand clothes and musty books, were all huddled and heaped together behind dusty panes in a most forbidding way.

The object which fascinated her, filling her with a kind of dumb horror, was a man's overcoat, worn and creased, which hung, together with a woman's skirt and jacket, on a nail inside the doorway.

The overcoat was an ordinary garment enough, of small size, and commonplace in every respect but one. But that one was momentous.

The lowest button was torn away, and hung by an end of the cloth to the rest of the garment. Mrs. Pender could have sworn, without hesitation, that she had seen the coat before—on the body of the murdered man she had found in her garden.

CHAPTER VI.

How did the coat come there? Mrs. Pender was half inclined at first to dash into the little shop and interrogate the man in charge of it. But on second thoughts she refrained. The truth was the last thing he would be likely to tell her, especially as she was undeniably in a state of suspicious excitement, which would make him particularly cautious.

Already, indeed, Mrs. Pender noticed that the man, who was, as usual, lurking like a shabby spider in the dark recesses of his fusty little shop, peeped out at her, over the horn rims of his spectacles, in a curious fashion which warned her she had better go on, instead of lingering near his little dusty window.

So she glanced up at the name over the door, saw that it was just decipherable amid the grime of years as 'T. Kirby,' and then, after one more look at the man himself, went on slowly towards home, determined to inform Mr. Justican of what she had seen that very afternoon.

She did not like the look of the shop-keeper. He was a small, thin, mean-looking old man, with protruding eyes, a sharp, pointed nose, and a chin imbedded in a rusty stock. He looked, she thought, like a very low sort of lawyer's clerk run to seed and decayed, and she felt that whatever he might tell her she would not believe.

In the meantime there was the visit next door to occupy her thoughts; and although her recent discovery had taken away from the poor lady much of the enjoyment of anticipation, Nynee, who knew nothing of the incident of the coat, was so full of pleasurable excitement that her mother had perforce to forget her own worries a little in listening to her.

And when the time for the visit came, and mother and daughter walked sedately up Mr. Justican's garden-path, a few minutes after the arrival of the distinguished guest of the afternoon, they found themselves, on being shown into the drawing-room, in a scene of lively enjoyment as different as possible from the usual atmosphere of an afternoon tea.

For the element which is usually conspicuous by its absence from such functions was here in the ascendant; and the clamor of masculine voices rang loudly as Mr. Justican and his two nephews all told Lady Marshfield at once of the superhuman exertions they had made to turn the misused and neglected drawing-room into an apartment suitable for so great an occasion.

Lady Marshfield was a woman of fifty, with the vivacity of a girl and the *savoir faire* of a woman of the world. She entered fully into the fun of their description of the way they had made the writing-desk into a stand for flowers, 'shoved' account-books and ledgers under the flounce of the sofa, and rushed out to buy lace curtains which harmonized absurdly with the serviceable green rep hangings already in place.

Neal begged her to admire the tea-cloth, which he assured her he had chosen himself.

"And it was only one and eleven pence three-farthings," he added in stentorian triumph. "And I consider it's a

bargain. Look at the beautiful work-drawn thread, don't you call it?—and this delightful border—hem-stitched they called it—whatever that means.”

Lady Marshfield declared he should buy all her table-linen after this, as she could never hope to pick up such bargains herself. And they all laughed a great deal, though Mrs. Pender was secretly rather scandalized by the tone the young men were taking.

Mr. Justican affected to be scandalized also. He had for once discarded the comfortable but shabby old coat in which he usually went about the house, and looked in his well-fitting black morning coat and light trousers, with a flower in his button-hole, both handsome and distinguished-looking. His keen, grave face, which very seldom lighted up even with a smile, was not too solemn for him to be an agreeable companion when he chose. And the staid courtesy of his manners, and his quiet way of talking, were peculiarities which women liked.

The folding-doors between Mr. Justican's study and the room behind had been for once thrown open; this latter apartment had to be apologized for on the ground that it smelt of smoke, being, in fact, used chiefly as an anteroom to the billiard-room beyond. Into this billiard-room one descended by a short flight of steps, by a door which was now closed. “I couldn't get on without my game of billiards,” observed Mr. Justican, when attention had been directed to this extension of the house.

“And the boys play with you, of course?” said Lady Marshfield.

“Sometimes, but I have a friend who plays better.”

“That cad Flinders!” cried Neal, impulsively.

Mr. Justican frowned.

“I don't know why you should call him that. Most

people think him a very nice fellow," he said, rather shortly. "I wish he could have dropped in this afternoon, as I asked him to, so that you ladies could have decided whether it isn't jealousy of his play that makes these lads affect to turn up their nose at him."

"He can play billiards. I'll allow that," said Kenneth.

"What airs you boys give yourselves!" laughed Lady Marshfield. "It's quite amusing! I suppose you spoil them, Mr. Justican, and let them choose your friends for you."

"Indeed, he doesn't do that," cried Neal. "Our friends and his mix like oil and water, when they come together."

"Oh, nonsense," said Mr. Justican, shortly. "Lady Marshfield is quite right. I've let you have your own way till there's no bearing the side you put on."

He seemed thoroughly displeased, and everybody felt relieved when two more people came in and made a diversion.

The new-comers were a Mr. and Mrs. Paul Crayford, the former a rather short, rather stout, good-looking and well dressed man, of slightly Jewish type, who looked like a City man of the best type; his wife, a tall, thin woman, with a pinched but rather handsome face, and curiously watchful, observant eyes.

When Harry Pender had come, and Lady Marshfield had gone away, Mr. Justican would not be satisfied until he had persuaded the rest of his guests to stay to dinner. Mrs. Pender had to yield to his persuasions and those of her son and daughter, and it was pretty evident, from the perfect success of the repast, that this arrangement had been in the host's plans from the outset.

It was not until after dinner that Mrs. Pender got an opportunity of telling him about the incident of the morn-

ing. He was courteous and attentive, of course, watching her face with a keen eye for character, as he always did when anything interesting was afloat, as if the careful study of the narrator helped to a proper understanding of the narrative.

He was, however, slightly inclined to be incredulous.

"How could you be sure that it was the same coat, when overcoats are so much alike?" he asked deferentially but with gravity. "And when, too, you only saw the dead man's overcoat for a few seconds, by the light of a candle?"

"The way the button was torn off was peculiar," insisted she. "It hung by a little strip of the cloth, with one long thread attached. I could not be mistaken."

"Well, I will have inquiries made, carefully," said Mr. Justican. "I'll try and find out if anything is known of the man who keeps the shop. What is his name?"

"The name over the door is 'T. Kirby.' But it has been there a long time, evidently."

Mr. Justican wrote down the name "T. Kirby" in his pocket-book, and then said:

"I hope you and your son and daughter will give us the pleasure of your society sometimes in the evening, now that you know us and our people?"

Mrs. Pender hesitated a little.

"We shall be very pleased to come in sometimes," she said at last; "but I think, in a bachelor establishment like yours, you don't care much for ladies' society."

"That's just what we do," interrupted Mr. Justican, "we care more for it than they do anywhere else. I suppose you mean," he went on, with one of his penetrating looks, "that you wouldn't feel comfortable where there were so

many of the ugly sex to so few of the pretty one. Well, I guess I'll have to find a useful aunt or widowed sister or something of that sort, to make it all right."

"Oh, but——" began Mrs. Pender, slightly alarmed.

He put up his hand.

"Don't say a word more about it, Mrs. Pender; that obliging relative shall be found. I'll ransack all the establishments where they're on hire, and never rest till I've laid my hand on a suitable article."

And he rose to greet a batch of young men who were collecting about the door of the billiard-room, leaving his tenant in a state of considerable bewilderment as to how much of his speech had been uttered in fun and how much in earnest,

There were about half-a-dozen more guests by this time, all, as Mr. Justican had deprecatingly observed, of the ugly sex. There were only two among them who attracted enough attention on the part of the ladies from next door for them to remember them afterwards. These were a Mr. Harrington Jones, who was a tall, weedy-looking, gentlemanly man of about eight-and-twenty, with a delicate, refined face; and Mr. Flinders.

This latter personage they only noticed because of the controversy which had taken place between Mr. Justican and his nephews concerning him. For a man with fewer salient qualities, of appearance or manners, they had never met. He was neither tall nor short, and his complexion, hair, clothes, eyes, all seemed to partake of the same tint of a rather bilious gray.

He did not smoke; he played billiards beautifully, with peculiarly neat movements of his slim delicate fingers; and he scarcely ever opened his mouth except to applaud one of his own strokes in an undertone.

Neal was anxious to know whether Nynee liked him, and whether she didn't consider him an awful cad.

"I want you to dislike him," he said, eagerly, in a low voice—he took every opportunity of talking to Nynee in a low voice—"because I dislike him so much myself."

Nynee looked at Mr. Flinders, whose bilious eyes were fixed intently on the red ball, as he prepared to go off it neatly into the top right-hand pocket.

"I really can't say I dislike him," she said in the same tone, "for there's nothing to dislike about him!"

Neal frowned like a spoiled child.

"Oh, but there is, there's everything," he said, confidently. "I shall persuade you some day, I hope."

Mr. Harrington Jones, who was another *habitué* of the house, was extremely nervous, extremely irritable, and was always trying to provoke Mr. Flinders. In this, however, he seldom succeeded. The whole soul of the other seemed to be absorbed in billiards, as that of Jones appeared to be in the smoking of cigarettes. He consumed about twenty in the course of the evening, never finishing them, and never failing to throw a curious, nervous glance all round him as he helped himself to another.

Mrs. Pender whispered to her son: "That man is ruining his nerves by excessive smoking. Let it be a warning to you, Harry."

Mrs. Pender was enjoying herself more than she had expected to do. Both Mr. Justican and Mr. Crayford devoted themselves specially to her, with more deference and amiability than a lady of her matronly age and less than overwhelming wit usually receives from two entertaining and clever men at the same time.

Nynee was as happy as a bird. For Neal Sheringham

took a deep interest in neophytes at billiards, and he explained every stroke made on the board to her in the most careful and painstaking manner.

“Don’t think much of this whisky of yours, Justican,” observed Mr. Crayford, presently, as he peeped into the billiard-room, from the top of the short staircase that led to this annexe, with a glass in his hand.

“Don’t you? Very sorry, I’m sure,” said his host, “but I haven’t any of Macpherson’s left. Old Kaspar generally brings me a couple of dozen, when he gets as far north as Edinburgh; but I haven’t seen anything of him lately.”

“Oh, by-the-by, what’s become of Kaspar?” asked Mr. Crayford.

Neal and Kenneth looked at each other, and the latter spoke:

“He’s back in Germany, I suppose. He told me the last time I saw him, that he’d had enough of work, and that he meant to go back and settle in his native town, somewhere on the shores of the Elbe, and make his peace with heaven.”

“Make his peace with heaven, eh?” said Mr. Crayford.

“Yes, it seems he was brought up a devout Catholic, and he said his conscience began to trouble him. He wanted to go to a priest and confess his sins.

Mr. Justican raised his eyebrows.

“Poor Old Kaspar! I didn’t think he had any sins to confess!”

“Who is Kaspar?” asked Nynee.

Mr. Crayford answered:

“He’s an old fellow who earns his living in the respectable and responsible position of traveller for half-a-dozen small country firms, and he’s the oddest char-

acter going. He is, or pretends to be, very deaf; he's as obstinate as a mule; and his appearance, buttoned up tightly, winter and summer, in his long overcoat, with his small stock of personal jewelry, consisting of a curious silver ring, or rather series of rings, on one hand, and a big running fox in his scarf, very conspic—"

Mr. Crayford was interrupted, before he could finish his speech, by the strange behavior of Mrs. Pender.

Before his description of the old commercial traveller was ended, she had started up, and now, fixing her eyes upon his face in a manner as startling as it was unexpected, she cried :

"Ring! Silver fox! Then *he* was the man I found murdered on the gravel under the wall!"

CHAPTER VII.

A DEAD silence fell upon every one within hearing when Mrs. Pender uttered these words.

Even Mr. Flinders, who was standing, cue in hand, waiting for his turn to play, started a little, and peered under the red shades of the billiard-table lights at the excited lady, as she stood up near the end of the room, trembling with agitation, and stared at Mr. Crayford, who had come down the stairs on hearing her startling words.

Upon the robust and genial City man, indeed her words had more effect than on anybody else. His florid complexion lost its color; and from the intentness of the gaze he fixed upon the lady's pale face, it was plain that he, at least, did not regard her words with the good-humored but slightly incredulous indifference which Mr. Justican and his nephews had shown on previous occasions when dealing of this matter.

His wife was as much interested as he was in the alarming statement they had all heard. But she showed her interest in a different manner. She was sitting at the other end of the billiard-room, on the raised seat which ran round the room, and had been talking to Harrington Jones.

The moment Mrs. Pender's words reached her ears, however, she stopped short, and without uttering a single

word, or even moving from her seat, she watched the faces of all those present, looking from one to the other in a stealthy but keen way, while her companion, less self controlled than she, began to tremble so violently that the cigarette he was smoking fell from his lips to the floor.

It was Mr. Flinders who called his attention to this fact. And his were the first words spoken since Mrs. Pender's sensational outburst.

"You'll burn the place down if you don't mind!"

The words, uttered in Mr. Flinders' cold, dry voice, made everybody look at him: everybody, that is to say, except Mr. Justican, who was the only person whom Mrs. Pender's cry did not affect. He, having become accustomed to this lady's confidences and statements concerning the tragic event, was able to take things more quietly; and during the silence which had fallen on everybody he had gone on with his break until the respectable total of forty-seven had been reached, when he missed an easy cannon, and stood up.

Flinders' words caused him to go quickly to the end of the table, where he picked up the dropped cigarette, and told Jones to be more careful.

"We don't want any more sensations," he said, sharply. "Let us deal with one at a time."

Before he had finished speaking, Paul Crayford had come up to him, and now addressed him in a sombre tone, which caused Mrs. Crayford to move her hands nervously in her lap, the while she kept those strangely watchful eyes of hers fixed on both men.

"What's this? Kaspar murdered? How is it we haven't heard of it?"

Mr. Justican turned to him at once.

“This is the first time I’ve heard it suggested that he *had* been murdered,” said he, simply.

“But this lady——”

Mr. Justican waved his hand, somewhat imperiously, in the direction of Mrs. Pender at the other end of the room.

“Ask the lady herself,” said he, curtly. “And judge for yourself, when you have heard her account, whether you could have guessed more than I did in the circumstances.”

For a moment the two men stood eye-to-eye, both very self-contained, somewhat sullen, but cool, wary, and collected. Neal and Kenneth, who stood close by, watched and listened; and Kenneth grew deadly pale as he did so.

Nynce and her mother had by this time gone up the steps into the adjoining room, for the elder lady was seized with faintness after the excitement of her discovery. Harry, however, was too much interested to follow them; he came up to where the two gentlemen were standing.

“Will it help you to be sure who it was that was found,” he asked Mr. Justican, “if I show you the pin that has been mentioned? My mother only saw it that once, actually in the man’s scarf, as he lay. But my sister found it on the ground later, and we have put it away, and said nothing about it to her, because the whole matter is so painful to her that we think it best to avoid the subject.”

“Quite right,” said Mr. Justican, approvingly. “Quite right. But go, there’s a good fellow, and bring this pin, and let us look at it. It may be the means of bringing the right man to justice.”

A little dry, crackling sound, scarcely to be described

as a laugh, was emitted at this point by one of the listeners. Harry looked round quickly, but there was no smile on any one's face, and he could only make a random guess that the laugh was uttered by Mr. Flinders.

He hurried out, and was seized in the hall by his mother, who told him to make her excuses to Mr. Justican, as she could not go back into the room. Her nerves had been shaken, and she was afraid of breaking down if she were to trust herself to speak.

But even while the words were on her lips Mr. Justican himself came out to her, and soothed her and coaxed her into calmness, behaving with tact and deference which drew forth the warmest admiration from both Harry and Nynee.

"I can't tell how sorry I am this unpleasant subject should have come up again," he said, as he insisted on her taking his arm to go down the garden-path on her way home. "I've tried so faithfully to avoid and make light of the matter to you, and now to think that all my pains have been thrown away, and that you have been shocked and upset like this! You of all people! I don't know what to say!"

He had said just the right thing, however. Mrs. Pender seized upon his words:

"You've tried to make light of it for my sake? Then you *have* belived I was right all the time?" she said, eagerly.

Mr. Justican looked down at her with grave eyes.

"I'm sorry to say there was never any possibility of doubting it," he said at once. "I wished, for your own sake, to persuade you that you might have been mistaken. But I could not hope that you were."

Mrs. Pender breathed more freely. Perhaps the very

worst of all this unpleasant business had been the belief that her account was looked upon as an hysterical delusion. And the consciousness that this was not so was consoling, in the midst of her physical and mental distress.

Mr. Justican saw his advantage, and proceeded, by obvious attempts, to turn the subject and to allay her alarms, to ingratiate himself with her still further.

"I do hope," he said to her, with feeling, when they reached her door, "that you won't let this unfortunate ending to a delightful evening prevent your coming in to see us again. I won't allow this subject to be mentioned: I promise you that. And for the rest, you may accept my assurance that your name, at any cost, shall be kept out of the affair altogether, if the matter ever comes to light."

"Do you think it was this Kasper who was m—m—murdered?" whispered she.

"I do think things point that way," replied he in the same tone. "He has undoubtedly disappeared of late. You say that the man you saw was old, and wore an overcoat. While the two articles of jewelry he wore, both the ring and the scarf-pin, were sufficiently uncommon for their presence together to be more than a coincidence."

"Then who can have murdered him?"

Mr. Justican frowned.

"Ah!" said he, gravely, "that is more than I can tell you."

"You have some idea, some suspicion, I see!" insisted Mrs. Pender.

"Ah, you women! You are shrewd, all of you," said he, looking down at her with a grave, sad smile. "It's an ungracious thing to speak ill of the dead. But I have

sometimes fancied this poor fellow had got himself in some way mixed up with the doings of some persons not altogether desirable : with what I should call a shady gang, in fact."

"Dear, dear!" murmured Mrs. Pender, interested and rather shocked. "And you think they killed him! For fear he should betray them, I suppose! How dreadful!"

"Mind, I don't know whether I ought to say all this," said Mr. Justican, earnestly. "Indeed, I wouldn't breathe it to anybody else. But you are a woman of great penetration, and of equal discretion, I feel quite sure."

"Of course I won't repeat what you've told me!"

"I should like you even to forget it. Heaven forbid that I should cast aspersions on the memory of the dead!"

"You may rely upon me."

"And you will come in again sometimes?" urged Mr. Justican, gently, as for a moment he retained her hand in his.

"Oh, Mr. Justican, you have plenty of friends without us."

"But if I prefer quality to quantity surely you might be kind, if only for the sake of the young people, who get on very well together, as you must have noticed."

Mrs. Pender frowned slightly.

"One has to keep watch on young people, in order to prevent rash and hasty attachments. Don't you think so?"

"Well, one may be too careful, as well as not careful enough. And at least, putting aside the young ones, you might consider me a little. I have been placed, through no fault of my own, in a very unhappy position as regards ladies' society; and I feel the consequent deprivation very much."

Mrs. Pender was touched. She knew that he referred

to his unhappy marriage, and he did it so delicately, with such a light touch on the sensitive subject, that she could only say gently, in a low voice :

“ Oh, I am sorry, indeed.”

“ Then let your sorrow take a practical form,” said he, with grave playfulness, “ and take pity on my loneliness sometimes ; and admire my artfulness in representing that it’s all for the sake of the young ones.”

He gave her no time to say more than “ Good-night,” for he held out his hand, gave her that light but expressive hand-pressure by which he always managed to express a sort of tender deference which flattered and soothed her, and left her at her door.

When he reached his own garden-gate he found Harry, who had slipped past them both, and brought the silver scarf-pin with him.

“ Give it to me,” said he, when the young man told him he had got it. Harry at once gave it up. “ I don’t believe it is Kaspar’s, after all,” he remarked, in a tone of relief, as he took the pin under a gas-lamp to examine it. “ This, I see, has a jewelled eye. Now Kaspar’s had not. May I take it in and show it to the others ? Some of the men knew old Kaspar, and they could either confirm or deny this.”

“ Certainly you can take it, if you like,” said Harry, who was rather disappointed not to be asked to return to the party, where such a very interesting issue had been raised.

But Mr. Justican seemed to take it for granted that he would be anxious to get back to his mother, and he shook him heartily by the hand before entering by his own gate, and urged him to persuade the ladies to come in again.

Harry went back home, therefore, but he did not stay

up to discuss the murder with his mother, who let him in herself, and seemed anxious to avoid further reference to the subject.

Mrs. Pender, who knew nothing about the finding of the pin, preferred to think the matter over by herself; she was restless and disturbed, uncertain whether to allow the growing friendship between her children and their neighbors to go on, or to make an attempt to draw back. This lively party of young men, who were so fond of meeting next door, formed pleasant society for the young people, even though she did not care for the tone of one or two among them.

But, on the other hand, she objected to rushing into intimacy too quickly with a family she knew little about, especially as there were not wanting signs of an increasing attraction, on both sides, between Nynce and Neal Sheringham. She felt she would like to know more about them all before giving this attachment her definite approval.

In her uneasiness, she did not at once retire to rest, but went into the dressing-room, and looked out at the light thrown through the skylight of the billiard-room next door, wondering whether Mr. Justican and his friends were still discussing the murder, and the possibility that the victim might have been the man Kaspar whom several of them appeared to know.

The light was still there; but it remained only for a few minutes. She heard no noise; she just saw the light disappear, and then she threw open the window, early in the season as it was, feeling that the cold night air would do her good.

There was enough moonlight stealing through a film of light cloud for her to be able to see both her own

garden and her neighbor's; and she had not stood long leaning on the window-ledge when she heard the sound of a door being softly closed.

Between the built-out billiard-room and Mr. Justican's kitchens and sculleries there ran a passage into the garden some five or six feet wide. Mrs. Pender could not see this passage clearly, but she presently saw a man emerge from it into the garden beyond. He crossed the garden hastily, getting out of the full moon-light into the shadow of the trees and bushes. But as he crossed, Mrs. Pender recognized, to her surprise and alarm, the man whom she had seen in the little old-clothes shop.

Shabby silk hat, rusty stock, pointed nose, shambling figure: she was sure of her man.

She craned her neck to watch him, but he got out of her sight under the wall; and the next thing she saw, at the interval of a few moments, was the opening of the door of the potting-shed, and the disappearance of the man inside.

Regardless of the cold, of fatigue, of everything but the amazing circumstance, she watched for him to come out. After the lapse of a considerable time she shut the window, and sat down on a chair. But all the while she watched, and watched, and watched.

Doggedly, steadily, all through the night she sat there, never losing sight of the door of the shed for one moment. Even when the moon was obscured, she could open the window a little and listen for the faintest creaking, such as he had made on going in.

And when morning came, and daylight shone full on the door of the shed, Mrs. Pender was watching still.

The man had never come out at all.

CHAPTER VIII.

As Mrs. Pender, stiff and weary, turned away from the window, after seeing the gardener let in by Mrs. Green, the cook next door, and then seeing him in and out of the potting-shed in the most matter-of-fact way, she was startled to find herself confronted by Susan.

“How long have you been there? When did you come in?” asked the lady, sharply.

Susan, with a sublime smile, made a vague answer :

“Oh, I haven’t been here long, ma’am, not near so long as you have! Bless me, you must be cold! And all for nothink too! What’s the good of watching when there’s nothink to see?”

Mrs. Pender was highly incensed by this speech. For her to be offended by Susan’s plain speaking was, indeed, no new thing, and Nynee had hard work to persuade her mother to keep the clever and obliging little Cockney in her service. But these words, coming at a moment when she was benumbed with cold and irritated beyond endurance by disappointment, were the last straw that broke down her patience with the girl altogether.

“Your impertinence is unendurable. I shall tell Mr. Justican so, and you can go back into his service to-morrow, if he likes to take you; at any rate, you will leave mine.”

“Very good, ma’am,” said Susan, coolly. “And now

I'll just go and put a bit of fire in your room, for you look perished with cold, that you do."

It was difficult to make a firm stand against such docility as this. And although Mrs. Pender made no reply, and marched back into her bedroom with a haughty and offended air, she found it very hard not to smile back into the girl's face when Susan, knocking at her door, and being told to come in, quickly laid and lighted a fire in the grate, and then turned to her mistress, without rising from her knees, and said, cheerfully :

"There, that's better, ain't it?"

"Thank you," said Mrs. Pender, as chillingly as she could.

"And now," said Susan, rising, and picking up a little bit of coal and inserting it neatly between the bars, "I'll go and put my traps together for to take next door. Don't suppose I shall 'ave to go, all the same," she went on with an arch smile. "Mr. Justican 'll get round you and persuade you to keep me. He 'as such a way with him, Mr. Justican 'as !"

And without waiting for another rebuff, Susan disappeared in the twinkling of an eye.

She was wise. Mrs. Pender, on reflection, decided not to discard rashly such a useful servant ; and when she spoke to Mr. Justican over the wire fence that evening it was only to tell him what she had seen in his garden the previous night.

He frowned, and uttered a short laugh.

"Ah!" said he, "that accounts for something I discovered myself the other day. I'm not much of a domestic man in the way of troubling myself about housekeeping details. But I put my hand on a parcel in Mrs. Green's premises one evening, evidently done up for

prompt removal, which she said was 'kitchen grease,' but which was a variety of other things besides! That's what these rascals are, these rag and bone merchants, back-door thieves, and none the less thieves that they induce one's servants to become thieves also!"

Mrs. Pender did not know whether she was more relieved or annoyed at the prosaic view he took of her discovery.

"But how do you account for his bewildering disappearance?" she asked. "He went into your potting-shed—I saw him distinctly—and didn't come out again."

"Do you mean the gardener found him there this morning?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose not; he went in and out as if he had found nobody inside," admitted Mrs. Pender, rather fretfully. "But that only makes the affair more puzzling."

"I don't think so. I've no doubt the rascal helped himself to a few of my flower-pots, and perhaps to my trowel. I shall go at once and have a look," said Mr. Justican.

"But when did he come out? I watched, and certainly he did not leave the shed by the door."

She did not like to admit that she had watched all night, and Mr. Justican shrugged his shoulders.

"He's an artful card, I make no doubt," said he. "Very likely tumbled to the fact that he was being watched, and stole out on all fours. I'll go this minute and have it out with him, and let him know what I propose to do if he comes tampering with the honesty of my servants again."

And he went away that moment, looking angry and

determined, leaving Mrs. Pender very uncomfortable. She felt that he had wholly misunderstood her own solicitude, and looked upon her as a mere spy upon the misdoings of his servants, when she was bent on nothing less momentous than the unravelling of the mystery of the murder!

Late that evening he called upon her to let her know the result of his visit to "T. Kirby."

"I let the old rascal have it hot and strong," said he. "And he took it like a lamb, admitted that he had got into the garden over the wall, and bought some kitchen stuff—'nothing of any consequence,' he assured me, from one of the maids. He swore he was only in the shed half a minute, and that he took nothing away: he thought he heard some one open a window, and went in there to hide his rascally old person from detection. I asked him if he thought that was the action of an honest man, and he whined out something about the badness of trade. So I told him the police should put a stop to his trade if he did any more of it with my household."

"And you don't think," suggested Mrs. Pender, timidly, "that he had anything to do with—with the tragedy?"

Mr. Justican shook his head slowly.

"I don't know, I'm sure," said he. "It looks fishy, his being in the habit of getting over my wall at night: and then your seeing the coat—if it was *the* coat——"

"Did *you* see the coat while you were in his shop?"

"No, I turned over every garment within reach; but if it ever was there, it's gone. But don't you worry about that. The case is in better hands than ours; and that point won't be lost sight of, you bet!"

"Well, Mr. Justican, I trust implicitly in you. I confess I don't quite know whether I want it all to come out

or not: there is justice to be considered on the one hand——”

“ Ah, and that’s the most important thing! You can’t get away from that!”

“ Well, but there’s one’s natural disinclination to be mixed up——”

“ You be easy, and don’t cross the bridge till you come to it,” said Mr. Justican, soothingly. “ There are much pleasanter things for us to concern ourselves about than that, anyhow, to fill up the time.”

And he threw a humorous glance in the direction of the piano, where Neal Sheringham was talking very earnestly to Nynce.

For it was becoming more and more customary for the landlord’s nephew to find some pressing message to deliver to Mrs. Pender in the course of the evening, sometimes about one thing and sometimes about another, after which they would linger and seize the first half invitation thrown to them to stay an hour or so.

Mrs. Pender was still undecided whether she was glad or not at this devotion on Neal’s part: but Nynce and Harry always had a welcome for their young neighbors. Sometimes—when Mr. Justican had another lady among his guests, Mrs. Crayford or a quiet little nonentity who he always declared was a hired aunt—he would insist upon his neighbors’ coming in for the evening in their turn. But these assemblies were not very successful; for Neal’s remark that the elements in them did not mingle well was borne out by experience. Both the lads hated Flinders, who in his turn was curt to Mr. Crayford and Harrington Jones; and it was only Mr. Justican’s own overpowering individuality and tact that kept the whole mass fairly welded together.

Neal's devotion had become very evident, and his topics of conversation limited entirely to one, when Kenneth took him to task one night in a serious manner, over this attachment.

"Did you ever see such sweet eyes in a girl's face, just tell me that, Ken?" Neal had remarked in a maudlin fashion, for about the seventieth time within the week.

Little Kenneth, who was smoking, got up and waved his hand.

"Yes, we know all that," he said, rather shortly, but not unkindly. "But, I say, old man, have you seriously considered whether you are justified in asking the girl to——"

"I haven't asked her yet," said Neal, getting rather nervous.

"So much the better," said Ken, shortly.

"What do you mean?"

Neal sprawled over the sofa, and insisted on looking full in his cousin's face.

"I mean, well, you know as well as I do what I mean: what prospects have you got? How are you going to keep a wife when you've married her?"

Neal sat up and stared at his cousin.

"How do I keep myself?" said he, simply. "I work for my living, don't I? And uncle is satisfied with what I do, and pays me for it. He knows I want to marry Nynee, and he seems to take it for granted that I shall."

"And you seem ready to take everything for granted too?"

"What are you driving at, Neal? I can't make you out. You've grown as solemn and as sphinx-like lately as that beast Flinders."

“No, hang it! Don’t compare me to *him!*” said Kenneth, fretfully.

“Well, speak out, man, can’t you? You see no harm in living as uncle wishes us to live, on his money, and why should I?”

Kenneth was walking up and down the room, and puffing out the smoke of his cigarette with amazing vigor. He glanced restlessly from time to time at his cousin, and seemed to be asking himself how much he should say. When he did open his lips it was to ask:

“Do you think that an income dependent upon another person’s will is one sound enough to marry upon?”

“If you mean to doubt uncle, who has never shown us anything but indulgence and generosity from the moment he took charge of us, two wretched, poverty stricken brats hardly out of the nursery——”

“I don’t, I don’t. But trade and business are precarious. Do you feel so certain that our prosperity has a sound basis?”

“Do *you* mean that uncle is in difficulties?” asked Neal, in blank amazement.

Kenneth shook his head impatiently.

“No, no, I don’t mean anything of the sort. I only suggest that, for the girl’s sake, you should wait a little, and make sure that some day you may not be thrown on your own resources, before you let yourself in for a heavy responsibility.”

Neal sprang to his feet, and drew himself up.

“By Jove!” cried he, his good-humored and still rather boyish face aglow with enthusiasm, “and I’m ready to work as hard as anybody pleases for the dear little girl! I mean to work; I will work. I’ll tell uncle to give me more to do: I’ll not be satisfied with playing

at it as I've done up to now: I'll insist on his trusting me with harder, more responsible business. I'll show you I'm not the lazy beggar you think! Trust me!"

Kenneth's clever little face was puckered with deep wrinkles, and he looked at his cousin with a sombre, pitying expression, which exasperated Neal while it puzzled him. But he said no more on the subject. Tossing the end of his last cigarette into the fireplace, he just nodded to his cousin, and with a short "Well, good-night," went out of the room.

Neal was as good as his word. In the morning he begged his uncle, with a flush in his cheeks and a light in his eyes, to give him more work to do, not to limit him to the trifling, amateurish expeditions to Belgium which had been hitherto his sole employment, but to trust him with some business of more importance.

Mr. Justican looked at him steadily, with an immovable face.

"Guess you'd better be satisfied to go right along as I want you to," he said, drily, when the lad had finished. "You'll find your work responsible enough, all in good time."

Neal felt rather snubbed, but that very evening he was despatched by his uncle to Brussels, with a trunk full of samples of cotton goods, and an assurance that he would bring back some better orders than usual this time.

Full of joy and energy and hope for the future, Neal started on his journey to Dover to catch the Ostend boat, only troubled a little by the fact that he had not been able to bid farewell to Nynee before setting out.

He was rather surprised to see Paul Crayford in the train, when he got to Charing Cross, thinking it odd that Mr. Justican had not known of his intended journey and

proposed their going together. For Crayford had been at Vine Place the previous evening. He was rather glad, though, that he was not obliged to travel with him, as he did not particularly care for the somewhat too oleaginous Paul.

And he was amused to note, by the sort of glance Paul threw out of the carriage window at him as he looked out for a compartment for himself, that he was no more anxious to travel with Neal than Neal was to travel with him.

At Dover, however, when he was snatching a sandwich in the refreshment room, Neal was surprised to hear Paul's voice in his ear, speaking in a very low, but distinct voice :

"I want you to take on my luggage with your own. I'll have it fetched away from your hotel. I'm being shadowed, I feel sure, in connection with that affair at your uncle's. I'm afraid of being stopped, and it's important my things should get to the other side to-night. Don't make any sign : just put your hand on the counter if you understand."

Much puzzled and surprised, the young fellow obeyed.

When he looked round Paul Crayford had disappeared ; and a man, who looked very like a detective about the boots, left the refreshment room quickly.

Neal was bewildered, amazed, interested, excited. He guessed what it was that had happened. His uncle had instructed the police to look out for the murderer of poor old Kaspar, and in their zeal they were shadowing all the *habitués* of Vine Place. Knowing that Paul Crayford was a business man, he was not surprised at the necessity for his luggage to be carried across, whether he himself went over or not. What particular trade or business his was,

Neal did not know ; but he imagined it must be something in the nature of Mr. Justican's, and that samples, of one sort or another, had to be taken to the Continent in the ordinary course of things.

It was not until he took out his little book of tickets that he was struck by a difficulty. How could he get Paul's luggage without his ticket ? In England it would have been easy enough, but on the other side, where a ticket has to be shown——

His reflections were interrupted at this point by a discovery. For as he took out his book of tickets, something else came out too. Paul Crayford had, with surprising cleverness, slipped his own ticket into Neal's pocket while speaking to him.

CHAPTER IX.

It was on the very evening when Neal took his eventful journey to Ostend that his cousin Kenneth took the opportunity of having an important conversation alone with his uncle.

They were dining at home together, and Mr. Justican led the way opportunely to the explanation to which his nephew longed, and yet hardly dared to come.

Mr. Justican was helping himself to a banana, when he said, in a casual manner, and without looking up: "Oh, by-the-by, Kenneth, now that we are alone I can say to you something I didn't want to say before Neal. I know you're very good friends, you two, but at the same time each of you may have little troubles or worries which he perhaps might not care to discuss before the other. But to an old 'un like me perhaps it's different. Ten to one it's something I've gone through myself, anyhow. Come, now, what is it, love or money?"

Kenneth, whose pale, almost sickly face had suddenly grown gray to the lips, began to fidget in his chair. Mr. Justican waited.

"It's——it's neither," blurted out Kenneth at last.

Mr. Justican, who had guessed that his inquiry would lead to some slight agitation on his nephew's part, still refrained from looking at him.

"Neither, eh! Why, I thought those were the only

two things that ever troubled a lad of three-and-twenty! What is it, then? Not liver, surely?"

Kenneth was recovering his self-possession, and he now kept very still; one hand tightly clenched lay on the table, the other hung at his side.

"No," he said, bringing each word out clearly and sharply, as if by an effort. "It's not liver either." There was a short pause: then he raised his light gray eyes, which were shrewd and keen of expression, to his uncle's face: "Can't you guess what it is? You're clever enough, uncle, since you could see there was something wrong, to guess what it is."

Clever! Yes, there was no doubt of it! The straightforward, steady gaze of Mr. Justican's beautiful blue eyes; the firm closing of his handsome mouth; even the shape of his face with its broad forehead and square jaw—all betokened strength of intellect as well as of character. He looked full in his nephew's face, blandly, openly, but after a moment's pause he shook his head.

"My cleverness isn't the right sort," he said at last. "Can't guess riddles. You must explain."

The younger man tried in vain to return him stare for stare. Somehow, it was difficult to meet that bland, steady gaze, straightforward and full, with the exception of a slight tilt to one side or the other which Mr. Justican always gave to his face when he was talking earnestly to a person. It seemed as if, by this little turn to the right or left, he felt himself able to bring more power of penetration to bear upon his scrutiny.

Kenneth felt that, in the face of that steady strength, it was hard to screw up his courage to the point of speaking out. He did it nevertheless.

"You won't think what I'm going to say either a piece

of ingratitude or a piece of impertinence, uncle, because it is by your wish that I am speaking."

"Quite so," said Mr. Justican, his American accent, which was usually very slight, peeping out in his tone in a rather pronounced way.

"Well, then, do you feel altogether satisfied as to the character of some of the men who come here?"

He managed to meet his uncle's eyes again as he said this, but he did it with an effort, and with such a manifest reddening of the face as must have spoken volumes to the astute man of middle age, who still gazed steadily at him in return, as he asked :

"What men do you mean? My friends, or yours?"

"Yours," blurted out Kenneth, with another violent rush of blood to the head.

Over Mr. Justican's face there spread slowly the grimmest of smiles.

"Am I satisfied as to their character," he repeated slowly, with a sort of humorous enjoyment of the words. "Well, I guess I'm not." Kenneth looked up quickly, with a flash of meaning which died away as his uncle went on: "And guess I should say the same of any other group or body of men you could name to me: the Stock Exchange: the Royal Families of Europe: the Local Government Board: the Hammersmith Corporation: or any other set of men who ever breathed. Satisfied with their character: well, I should say I was not!"

And he looked down at the table-cloth and shook his head decisively. But Kenneth stood his ground.

"Well, any great body of men is bound to have its black sheep. May I put it like this: Has it ever occurred to you that the proportion of black sheep to white ones,

among our own acquaintances, is larger than it ought to be?"

Mr. Justican met his eyes again, very frankly, very fully.

"I guess by the black sheep you mean my friends, who are all men of business, and by the white ones your friends, who are all men of pleasure, eh?"

"Well, that does perhaps happen to be the case——"

"Happen! It's no result of chance," retorted Mr. Justican, emphatically. "Business men, traders, are all black sheep, if you have any high ideals of honesty. They are men who are ready to sell their souls for an advantage over their rivals, no matter how that advantage is gained."

"But there are such things as honest traders, honest business men, surely!"

"There may be. There may be serpents in the sea—they say there are. But you have to take the statement on trust! In the same way there may be honest men of business. *You* say there are. But I'm bound to say I've never met any."

"But," persisted Kenneth, "at least you'll admit, uncle, that business men are not all of the same type, the type of Flinders, Paul Crayford, and Harrington Jones, for instance."

"Why, what's wrong with those particular men?"

The challenge was direct, not to be escaped. Kenneth, after a moment's hesitation, took it up as boldly as it was thrown down.

"I can't tell you. If I'd only known them a few weeks I should have no more idea there was anything wrong about them than Neal has."

"What! Haven't you managed to impregnate Neal

with your own notions, your own suspicions ? ” asked Mr. Justican, for the first time showing a little acerbity in his tone.

“ Why, no, ” said Kenneth, hesitatingly. “ He’s not suspicious, poor old Neal. ”

“ And it would be better for your own happiness if you were not either, ” retorted his uncle.

“ I’ve no doubt of that, ” said Kenneth, rather bitterly.

Mr. Justican, who had for the moment flashed out into some heat, grew calm and cool again in a moment.

“ Come, now, my lad, ” said he, with his usual good humor, “ you can give me a better answer than you have done, I’m sure. You can’t mean me to believe that your vague mention of three names together is any answer to my challenge. ”

“ I can’t give a very much better one, though, ” said Kenneth, frankly. “ What I’ve noticed amounts to just this: that there’s some sort of secret understanding between these three men, and yet there’s an antagonism noticeable too, between Flinders on the one hand, and Jones and Crayford on the other. ”

“ Ah ! ” said Mr. Justican, “ that’s very shrewd of you. For it does happen that Crayford and Jones are in one line of business, while Flinders is in another. ”

“ Business ! Flinders professes not to have any ! ”

“ He has, though. He’s a broker, dealing in metals. While Crayford and Jones are cotton-brokers, both of them. There’s the secret of the understanding. They’re all brokers. And the secret of the antagonism ; they’re in different ‘ lines. ’ But as to their characters, I can only tell you I’ve done business with all three of them for years, and I’ve always found them fair and straight in their dealings with me ; so that I’ve no reason to suppose

they're anything else with anybody. Of course they would take advantage of me if they could: that's 'business,' not dishonesty, according to trade principles. But I'm a 'business' man myself: and I suppose I may say what I don't know about the tricks of trade isn't worth knowing. But perhaps you would take exception to my character also?"

Kenneth reddened painfully.

"That's not quite fair, uncle, is it?" said he, earnestly. "I don't think you've ever found either of us deficient in our behavior to you."

"Not at all. At the same time, I've never demanded any great sacrifices, have I? All I've asked of you is that you should both enjoy life; and in memory of the love I bore your aunt, love, unluckily for me, which she did not return." And for the first time Mr. Justican's voice trembled a little, and caused the young man to catch his breath. "I've provided for you both, and will continue to do so, as long as you care to remain with me."

"But, uncle," pursued Kenneth, much moved by this, the first outburst of deep feeling he had ever witnessed in the reserved man, "I couldn't go on accepting your generosity without return for ever! I hope you don't think so meanly of me as that!"

"What! Do you mean to break away from me and Neal, then, and start in life on your own account?" demanded his uncle, promptly.

Kenneth hesitated.

"I must either do that——"

"And bring yourself to beggary," interpolated his uncle, quietly.

"I suppose it would be that," answered Kenneth, steadily, "or I must work for you, as Neal is doing."

“And has Neal, do you think, any reason to be dissatisfied?”

“Not with your treatment of him, certainly.”

“Then with what is he discontented?”

“He isn’t discontented. But—I should be in his place.”

“Explain yourself!” said Mr. Justican, again forcing him to meet his eyes.

“I should want to understand how the taking over to Brussels or Amsterdam of a trunkful of samples, and bringing back a few paltry orders which can’t pay for the journey, can be useful work for which it is worth while to pay such an allowance as you are ready to pay Neal.”

Mr. Justican smiled again.

“I’m afraid,” said he quietly, “that I can’t put you in possession of all the means by which I, as agent, and the brokers for whom I work, have to try to steal a march upon our trade rivals: nor am I at all sure that you with your lofty morality, would altogether approve of them if I did. However, I have to conduct my business my own way, and therefore you would have to work as I pleased, as Neal has to do, if you worked for me at all.”

“I see that,” said Kenneth, in a hoarse voice.

“However, there is no need for that,” went on his uncle, quietly. “You have three courses open to you: the first is to go on as you are doing, enjoying yourself without working at all. I am willing, for my wife’s sake, to adopt you as my son, and to allow you what money you reasonably want in the future as I have done in the past. The second course you can pursue is to cut adrift from me altogether—a course which, for your own sake, as well as for mine, I hope you will think twice about

taking. The third course is for you to go into business, as Neal has already done, in which case you shall, in course of time, have your proper share in the profits, and become a rich man.

“What do you call your business, uncle?” asked Kenneth, suddenly.

“I’m a broker’s agent,” replied Mr. Justican. “I am simply a go-between between those who have to sell and those who want to buy. It’s an excellent business if you’re sharp: but you have to be sharp, or you’d soon get left. In all profitable business there are risks of one sort or another. And mine has risks like the rest. Now, I want you to look things squarely in the face,” went on Mr. Justican, rising from his chair, as a sign that the *tête-à-tête* was over, “before you decide which of the three courses open to you it will please you to adopt. Don’t say anything more about it to me till—Wednesday, say; that will give you two days to think it over. Let’s take a hansom and go to the ‘Empire,’ and hear Dan Leno’s new song.”

Not a word more was spoken on the important subject that night or the next morning. But when Kenneth, having been to luncheon with his aunt, Lady Marshfield, returned late in the afternoon to “Vine Place,” he was surprised, on bursting into the back drawing-room, which was rather less disordered an apartment than Mr. Justican’s room in the front, to find a lady in the deep mourning of a widow sitting there, talking to his uncle.

“I beg your pardon,” stammered Kenneth, thinking he had interrupted a business interview, for there was a certain business-like air about Mr. Justican’s tone and attitude that suggested this.

“Stay, I’ll introduce you,” cried Mr. Justican. “Ma-

dame, let me present one of my nephews, Kenneth King. Kenneth, Madame de Colmars-Mauriac.

Kenneth bowed, and the lady held out a small hand that looked smaller still in its black glove. She impressed him strongly, even before she spoke, with a sense of personal and feminine charm.

He saw that she was older than himself, though he could not guess by how much, and that her face was worn and rather sad. Her eyes had a plaintive, almost dim look, and although he was shrewd enough to know that the golden-bronze of her hair was not the work of nature, he felt that he forgave her this touch of art even against his better judgment.

"Do not go," said the lady, as Kenneth would have walked through to the billiard-room. "I hope you will not run away because I am here."

"Oh, you are English," said Kenneth, smiling, as he lingered.

"Yes. It was madame's husband who was French," said Mr. Justican, while the lady sighed gently. "She came to me in the belief that I could help her to recover some shares which ought by rights to have come to her with her portion of her husband's property. Unfortunately I can do nothing, as the business would have to be transacted in Belgium or France, and my duties demand my constant presence in England. Perhaps, if you go into business you might help madame. Or, if not, Neal might."

"I should be very happy if I could do anything," stammered Kenneth.

"It would be beautiful of you if you would," said the lady, in a caressing, seductive voice which affected the young man strangely. "For I have been left very poor."

As they all talked over the tea which was presently brought in, Kenneth felt himself drawn more and more under the spell of the lady's gentle, winning manner. He felt that he longed to be of use to her, to earn the gratitude she promised.

When she went away, his uncle made no remark about the lady, beyond saying that he was sorry for her, and that he didn't know how she had made the mistake of thinking he was a lawyer and coming to him.

Clever as Kenneth was, he had no suspicion that the lady was there on his account. But undoubtedly the thought of her, of the help he might be able to give her, influenced him on the following day when his uncle asked him if he had made up his mind what to do.

"I should like," said Kenneth, hesitating, "to wait till Neal comes back, uncle, before deciding."

Mr. Justican just nodded; but there was a shrewdly satisfied look about his mouth as he turned away.

CHAPTER X.

Two days later, Kenneth saw the fascinating Madame de Mauriac again at Vine Place; but this time there were also present Mrs. Pender, her daughter, and Lady Marshfield.

Madame de Mauriac made as good an impression upon two at least of the ladies as Kenneth could have wished. She was one of those women who knew when to be retiring, and both Lady Marshfield and Mrs. Pender found her an admirable listener.

It was not long before the Englishwoman with the French name found her way into Mrs. Pender's, while the ladies there called in return at madame's flat near Sloane Street, a beautifully furnished little nest rather near the sky, filled with the relics she had brought from her late husband's château in Normandy.

It was after a quiet little dinner at Mr. Justican's where the guests had been Madame de Mauriac and the Penders, that Kenneth, having insisted on seeing madame home, visited the flat for the first time.

Madame was a magnificent walker; and it had been her fancy, since Kenneth was ready to accompany her, to walk the whole way from Hammersmith. She turned to him when they reached the door of the Mansions where she lived.

"It is ever so late for a first call," she said, with her

fascinating smile, which had in it, Kenneth thought, more of seduction than any look he had ever seen on a human face; "but I'm almost an old woman, and you are scarcely more than a boy—so I suppose I may ask you to come in and smoke a cigarette. I can give you some charming ones, brought over on purpose for me: for when I am quite alone, I do sometimes—Hush! Don't let Mrs. Pender or her niminy-piminy little daughter know—I do——"

She made a little significant gesture, quietly raising two fingers to her lips in the demurest manner in the world.

Kenneth, who would have raged, a week ago, at the notion of a woman's smoking, was charmed.

"I should like to see you try one," said he, as she led the way upstairs.

Her flat was, he thought, the most perfectly cosy and luxurious place he had ever been in. It was decidedly more French than English in taste, hung with draperies of those subdued colorings and heavy textures that are as characteristic of the ordinary Parisian flat as the terrible "art" curtains and cushions, "quaint" furniture and sham curios, are of the middle-class house in London.

Madame de Mauriac let herself in, "like a bachelor," as she said to Kenneth with a smile and a sigh, touched the button that flooded the square hall with soft light, and led the way into the first of two charming rooms, where everything was subdued, harmonious, redolent of refined luxury.

Madame de Mauriac's black dress and long, sweeping veil seemed, to Kenneth's excited senses, to give just the needful contrasting touch of unrelieved sombreness to the rich tints around.

"Sit there," said she, indicating one of those deep saddle-bag chairs which leave all other seats far behind for comfort and ease. "And try this."

She took from a small table near her a curiously carved wooden box, inlaid with silver, and with a coronet in silver and jewels on the top.

"What a lovely box!" cried Kenneth, when he had taken one of the cigarettes from the gold-lined interior, putting out his hand with a gesture requesting that he might look at it more minutely.

"Never mind the box," said Madame de Mauriac, as she took out a cigarette in her turn, and carried the casket with her on her way to the window.

Drawing back the heavy curtains, she opened the French window, letting in a pleasantly cool breath of night air, and the strong perfume of the lilies which stood on the little balcony outside, overhung with palms, and filled in with a soft background of ferns.

Kenneth rose and drew near to the open window.

"What a charming arrangement!" said he. "It looks as if you had a great conservatory full of flowers outside! You have the most perfect taste, madame."

"All my life I have loved flowers," she said, dreamily, "and now that my youth and its hopes and pleasures lie far behind me, I find a comfort in surrounding myself with them. It consoles me for much, for poverty, for loss of friends, for all perhaps but the one great loss that can never be replaced."

Even while he was touched by her plaintive tone and by the words she uttered, it occurred to Kenneth, glancing round the room, to think that poverty did not press upon her very hardly. Neither did advanced age, at any rate. She saw the half-smile on his face.

"You think I am demanding a sympathy I don't deserve," said she, simply.

"No," said he. "I'm sure you've felt your loss keenly; I know that poverty is relative, and that the loss of a great establishment entails sacrifices of acquaintances whom you have called friends. But you've found new friends here, haven't you? And to call yourself old, as you so constantly do. Well, will you be offended if I say it's ridiculous?"

And Kenneth burst out laughing. Madame de Mauriac sat down and clasped her hands on her knees as she answered, with a gentle smile of indulgence at his amusement.

"I'm not offended, of course. No woman minds being laughed at when she calls herself old. But for all that it's true: I *am* old, in the sense that I've outlived all the keen emotions—love, disappointment, resentment, ambition, everything. Now I'm no longer living myself: I'm merely a looker-on at others' lives."

She spoke so simply, so earnestly, that Kenneth was forced to believe, even while he wondered. He admired her for this frank acceptance of the fact that she was no longer very young; he respected the cleverness with which she was perfectly easy with him, while yet she made him understand that there was a barrier of years between him and her. Everything she did excited his interest, his chivalry, his respect. So full of the sympathy and admiration he felt that he did not notice that what he said was rather daring, he presently asked, after a little pause, during which madame had played with her still unlighted cigarette: "What made you come back to England, and leave all your friends?"

"Ah! That's the question I've asked myself," said

she, quickly. "I think I'm sorry now, for I've lived so long in France that all my old set here has broken up. But I had a sort of longing to be back in the old country once more, to be among English women and English men again."

The glance she gave him on the last words pleased Kenneth; it seemed to imply an appreciation of him and his kind that flattered him.

"I am glad you lighted upon my uncle," said he, as he offered his own cigarette for her to light hers, and felt his hand tremble as he did so.

"So am I!" said she, in a low voice, full of winning gratitude. "And it was all by the merest chance. I had his address as the agent for a company my husband had shares in, and on the same paper I had the name and address of a London solicitor. And by mistake I went to him as the solicitor."

"How odd! And how lucky!" cried Kenneth.

"It was indeed, for me. I was feeling so lonely and friendless that I think, if I hadn't met him, I should have gone back to France. But he's so delightful, and so are the ladies I've met at his house, not to mention his nephew"—and madame smiled archly—"that I'm reconciled to England again."

"What? Haven't you any other friends over here?" asked Kenneth.

"Not one."

"Well, you'll soon have plenty now you know the Penders. And my uncle. Though I don't think you'll care for his men friends so much as for the ladies."

"You are very modest," said madame, smiling with meaning.

Kenneth laughed.

“If you can put up with me, you will like my cousin Neal,” said he. “But you won’t like Crayford, or Jones, or Flinders, the three men who are oftenest at my uncle’s place.”

“Flinders! What a curious name.”

“And he’s a curious fellow too,” said Kenneth.

“Well, well, your uncle and you and the ladies will make up for that. I ought not to have laughed at little Miss Pender. She’s charming, though she does lisp. You ought to fall in love with her and marry her.”

Kenneth shook his head and frowned disdainfully.

“I don’t care for bread and butter,” said he. “And besides, my cousin Neal is head over ears in love with her.”

“I shall give her some of my old lace as a wedding present,” said madame, with warmth. “And now I’m going to give you a stirrup-cup and then to turn you out. I must be careful of my reputation if I’m so young and charming as you say.”

And she went through the curtains into the adjoining room, returning with another beautiful thing in her hand, which excited Kenneth’s admiration and curiosity, in the shape of a flask-like decanter of greenish glass mounted in gold studded with small pearls.

“Here is the very elixir of life,” said she, as she poured out, into a jewelled glass to match the decanter, a brownish liquid, a strong liqueur which Kenneth did not know. “Drink it to the health of your uncle, the kind new friend who has brought so much light and brightness into my lonely life.”

Kenneth drank it, with a softened look into her dreamy, voluptuous eyes. If he had a sentimental word on his tongue, however; if the fiery liqueur made him bold, he

was at once checked by the stately graciousness with which she held out her hand and bade him good-night.

“May I come again?” said he, in a tremulous whisper.

Madame hesitated a moment.

“Yes,” said she at last, “you may come—with Mr. Justican, or your cousin.”

Kenneth bowed, feeling half consoled, half wounded. As his eyes fell, they caught sight of a cigar-case on the sofa. It was an ordinary sort of thing, made of gun-metal, with a serpent in turquoise on the outside. Kenneth had seen dozens in the shop-windows. He had also seen one, he thought, in the possession of some man he knew, but he could not remember who it was. That did not matter, however; it was the presence of a cigar-case, a man’s possession, in Madame de Mauriac’s room, that troubled him.

As he went downstairs, he tried to console himself by the reflection that it might be a relic of her dead husband.

He went home full of chivalrous feelings towards the charming yet discreet and modest-mannered widow. It pleased him to think that her spell fell upon women as well as men; for Mrs. Pender, who, indeed, took every suggestion of Mr. Justican’s with amiable docility, never failed to meet the charming widow whenever she had the opportunity. Nynee did not like her, but this was put down to a fear that Neal might admire her too much.

Three weeks had passed since Neal went away, and still he did not return. He sent his cousin short occasional notes, saying that he was travelling about from place to place on the Continent, and hoped to be back in a day or two; but he always wound up by saying that he wouldn’t write any more until they met.

Poor Nynee got quite depressed at his absence; and

at last Mr. Justican good-naturedly suggested that she and her mother should take a trip over to the other side themselves. He did not say that they should go for the purpose of meeting Neal, but the girl brightened vividly at the suggestion.

They were all having tea at Mrs. Pender's, and Kenneth and Madame de Mauriac were both present.

"Ah, I can't afford it!" said Mrs. Pender. "I wish I could."

"I think it might be managed," said Mr. Justican. "If you cared to go to Dieppe, now, I can always get a pass for two through my business connection. And so many of our travellers have to stay at hotels there, that I know of a place where they would take you and put you up most comfortably on terms which an English lodging-house keeper would disdain."

"Oh, mamma! Oh, mamma!" cried Nynee, jumping up and clasping her hands, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushing with such unspeakable joy that they all began gently to laugh at her. "It would be lovely, wouldn't it?"

But Mrs. Pender did not like the obligation, though her landlord laughed at her reluctance.

"I assure you it's the commonest thing among business men to oblige their friends in this way," said he. "For the sake of your daughter and the good the change would do her, you ought to go. Don't you think so, Madame de Mauriac?"

"I think it would be madness to refuse," said Madame de Mauriac, simply. "And if you'd only extend the privilege to me, I would accept the offer like a bird."

Encouraged by this example, Mrs. Pender hesitated, gave way. Nynee was crazy with delight; Kenneth was

mournful at the idea of Madame de Mauriac's temporary absence. Mr. Justican threw himself into the notion with energy.

"I'll do whatever I can to help you both," said he, "with advice. I've always got lots of that at anybody's service. Now, in the first place, about your luggage. Don't take anything that will spoil. They knock your trunks about dreadfully on those boats. Don't take any smart, new leather portmanteaus. Take a battered old Saratoga trunk as I do, that they can stick penknives in, if they like, with no harm except to the penknife."

"I'm afraid I haven't got one," said Mrs. Pender.

"Then I'll lend you one," said he. "Oh, I insist. I dare say you'll be ashamed of its appearance; but you're much less likely to get your things overhauled at the Custom House if you pack them in a shabby old thing that doesn't look worth more than ninepence."

Mr. Justican always had his own way with Mrs. Pender, with his grave, good-humored imperiousness. So, reluctantly enough, she had to accept the loan of his wooden trunk.

"These trunks are a fad of my uncle's," Kenneth explained, when he carried the lumbering thing next door on his own shoulders. "It's just like the beastly thing he made poor Neal take over to Belgium. It's only because they're American that he likes them; they're heavy, clumsy, and they don't hold much."

"Never mind. He's been so kind that we can't refuse," whispered Nynee, as she helped Susan to drag it across the hall.

It was not until the very day of their going away that Mr. Justican ran in next door with the passes for the journey. When he had received Mrs. Pender's effusive

thanks and gone away again, Nynee took up the tickets from the table and turned to her mother with a rather pale face.

“Mamma!” cried she, in consternation, “they’re not passes—they’re just ordinary tickets. *I believe he paid for them!*”

But Mrs. Pender thought the notion absurd.

“Nonsense!” said she. “Of course he didn’t pay for them. Why should he?”

CHAPTER XI.

It was on a Wednesday that Mrs. Pender and her daughter and Madame de Mauriac started for Dieppe ; and in the evening, as usual on that day of the week, there was a large gathering of men at Mr. Justican's to play billiards, to smoke and to talk.

Paul Crayford was there for the first time since Neal went away ; and in the course of the evening, among a lot of young men who were friends of Neal's or of Kenneth's, Flinders and Jones were also to be found.

Paul Crayford had an adventure to relate to Kenneth and Mr. Justican. He took them into a corner of the front room, when the doors between that apartment and the back had been thrown open, and buttonholed them both.

"Have you heard from Sheringham since he's been away?"

"Yes, I have," said Kenneth.

"Did he tell you about the singular adventure I had on the night he started?"

"No. He said he'd tell all he had to tell when he got back."

"Well, I happened to be going across to the Continent on the very same evening I saw Sheringham at Charing Cross, but as he and I were never great pals, I didn't ask him to get in with me. Well, I got out at Ashford and went into the refreshment-room, and there I saw a man

watching me. When I got out again at Dover I saw him again. And I was convinced he was a detective."

"Oh!" said Mr. Justican, raising his eyebrows. "You must put that down to me!"

Paul Crayford and Kenneth both turned in surprise

Mr. Justican nodded.

"It's on account of the murder, and the disappearance of Kaspar."

"Surely," began Crayford indignantly, "you don't suspect *me* of the murder?"

"Good heavens, no, man! But I suppose the police are keeping a watch on all *habitués* of this house."

"Oh! That's it, is it?" said Crayford. "Then, by Jove, you might have warned me! For it's not a pleasant thing to be stopped by a detective, and examined and cross-examined to within an inch of your life."

Kenneth was listening with much interest. Crayford went on:

"I was convinced he had some business with me, and, though I couldn't guess what it was about, I had an idea my journey might be stopped. So I got young Sheringham, who was in the refreshment-room at Dover, to take my luggage over for me, and then I led the detective a dance till I got him in a quiet street, where I turned upon him and we had it out together. I answered all his questions, and he let me go: but I was so much upset—for he wouldn't tell me definitely what he wanted with me—that I didn't go on, but put up at the Lord Warden till next day."

"Rather an odd thing that he didn't tell you why he followed you, wasn't it?" said Ken.

"So I thought," said Crayford. "However, there's no arguing with the police; and I thought it best to take it

quietly, and wait for an explanation to turn up in the course of time. Of course, it's our friend Justican's doing! But you let me in for a nice thing, I must say!"

Whether he was wholly in earnest, or only half angry, Kenneth could not be quite sure. Crayford was a man he disliked and mistrusted, and he was quite ready to believe that whatever suspicions concerning him the police might have they had a good foundation for.

Later in the evening, he was brought into contact with another of the three men he disliked. Flinders was playing billiards with Mr. Justican, who, though a good player, was no match for his slim-fingered opponent when, in the course of conversation with one of his own friends, Kenneth happened to mention that he had recently tasted a liqueur which he did not know.

Flinders, who had just played, turned from the table and joined abruptly in the conversation.

"Where was that?" he asked.

Kenneth hesitated.

"Where was that?" repeated Flinders, more curtly than before.

Kenneth was annoyed by his tone and manner. It took very little to annoy him when Flinders was in question, as he disliked the man. He did not, however, wish to make a disturbance by quarrelling with him. When, therefore, Flinders repeated his question for the third time, Kenneth answered rather shortly:

"Oh, it was at the flat of a friend of the Penders."

But Flinders, whose anger always took a particularly irritating form, a sort of fury in which he spoke low but with a certain offensive coldness, persisted, oblivious of the fact that Mr. Justican was calling to him that it was his turn to play.

“Whose flat was it? Can't you give me a civil answer?”

Kenneth had never seen the man lose his temper over a trifle like this before. He looked at him in amazement, and before he could answer, Mr. Justican strolled up.

“What's the matter?” asked the host, as he chalked his cue.

Flinders turned to him abruptly.

“This young cub of yours won't answer a civil question civilly. He says he's tasted a new liqueur at somebody's flat, and I asked him whose. Why make a mystery about it? Why——”

“There's no mystery,” interrupted Mr. Justican, looking him straight in the eyes. “It was at the flat of a lady, a friend of the Penders and of mine, whom you don't know—Madame de Mauriac.”

Flinders said nothing, but looked him full in the face for a few seconds. Then he shrugged his shoulders and said, with a slight snarl in his voice:

“All right. I only wanted an answer. Why couldn't he have given it himself?”

Kenneth would have spoken sharply upon this, but everybody liked him and nobody liked Flinders; and so two or three other men interfered between them and prevented the little wrangle from growing into a serious quarrel. But it was Mr. Justican who made the diversion which seemed necessary in the interests of peace.

“Kenneth,” said he, “I want you to go over to Paris to-morrow, if you will, to see M. Bertin again for me. I suppose you have no objection?”

“No, indeed,” said Kenneth promptly. “May I go by the Newhaven-Dieppe route, and see how the ladies stood the journey?”

“Certainly,” said Mr. Justican, putting himself between his nephew and Flinders, who appeared to be about to renew his attack on the young man.

Two or three of Kenneth’s friends asked him to fulfil commissions of a trifling character in Paris for them; and Harrington Jones asked if he would take over a Gladstone bag containing some clothes he had borrowed from a friend.

So, on the following day, Kenneth started for New-haven in his turn, in the highest spirits at the thought of seeing Madame de Mauriac again within a few hours. His uncle had given him leave to stay one night at Dieppe on his way, and as he did not know the name of the villa which madame had taken, but was determined to call upon her that very evening, he decided to go first to the hotel where Mrs. Pender and her daughter were staying. They would give him the address of their friend.

On his journey he got the idea into his head that he was being followed by a little middle-aged man with a cap well drawn over his eyes. He was made rather uncomfortable by this discovery, though, remembering Paul Crayford’s experience, he was not surprised by it. If the *habitués* of Vine Place were being “shadowed” on account of the murder of Kaspar, he must expect that he would not escape their unwelcome attention.

The boat reached Dieppe a few minutes before four o’clock, and within half an hour Kenneth was at the hotel. The two ladies were out, and it was not until late in the afternoon that he met them on the front, when they welcomed him with delight, and Mrs. Pender said she should telegraph to Mr. Justican to ask his permission for the young man to stay a few days at Dieppe to take them about.

They all dined together at *table d'hôte*, and then Kenneth, having learnt the address of Madame de Mauriac, and the unfortunate circumstance that she had a headache which prevented her leaving the house, went straight to the villa.

He was afraid that he would be denied admittance by the staid, discreet-looking English servant whom madame had brought with her from London; but to his delight, he was at once shown into the little salon, where the lamp was burning on the table in the twilight, and Madame de Mauriac, in a becoming gown of black lace, was lying on a little sofa, where she could catch the sea-breeze which was lightly agitating the straight lace curtains.

"I was afraid I shouldn't be able to see you," said Kenneth, as with a tremor in his voice and tender sentiment glowing in his eyes he took the hand she held out to him. "I hope you are feeling better."

"I am feeling almost well," answered she in a voice a little subdued, but none the less seductive and charming. "I'm only just not well enough to listen to our dear friends' amiable but rather pointless chatter."

Kenneth sat down on the chair she indicated, near the table by the lamp, the light from which shone on his sensitive, intelligent features, and showed her every movement of the muscles of his face. He was touched by the belief that she was suffering, if ever so little, and by her kind welcome to himself.

"Isn't there anything I can get you?" he asked solicitously. "Salts, eau de Cologne, any of those things ladies use?"

She smiled gently.

"You can bring me nothing so healing as the sight of your kind young face," said she, softly.

The words, the tone, set Kenneth on fire. He moved restlessly in his chair, afraid to come nearer, unable to keep still.

"Young, young! Why do you always harp upon that word?" said he, impatiently. "I'm not a boy, nor so much younger than you as all that. Perhaps—if you—if you could forget the difference altogether——"

The tone told her more than the words did.

"Stop!" cried she, not raising her voice indeed, but putting up her hand imperiously, "I will not allow you to go on in that tone. I will not let you make love to me!"

"But why not?" He was on one knee beside her couch in a moment. "Why shouldn't you hear what I have to say? Why shouldn't you listen? You are always kind to me; you say you like me, that the sight of me does you good. Couldn't you care for me? Couldn't you let me make you happy? Oh, if you'd be my wife——"

She checked him, half raising herself, and silencing him by a gesture of command.

"Not another word of that nonsense," said she, not harshly, not even indifferently, but in such a tone that he was at once reduced to silence. "You don't know what you're saying. There is no happy union possible between a man as young as you and a woman as old as I. Now go back to your chair, and listen to me."

He obeyed, reluctantly but submissively, with just a gesture of protest. Even as he went back to his seat Madame de Mauriac turned towards the window with a startled look as she sat up.

"What's the matter?" asked Kenneth, noticing that it was real alarm which he saw on her features.

"I—I fancied I heard someone—outside," said she.

Kenneth rose and would have looked out into the gathering darkness, but by a look she bade him remain seated.

"Let me tell you just what I feel," then pleaded he.

With a weary, sad little smile she shook her head.

"Let me tell you just what your uncle would say," replied she, mimicking his tone with half sad playfulness, "If I were to let you talk to me like that."

Kenneth gave a slight start.

"My uncle!" cried he. "Why, he gave me a letter for you!" And he put his hand in his pocket, and took the missive from his pocket-book. "I was to give it to you as soon as I saw you."

Madame took it with a troubled look, opened it, and read it through to the end. It was long: it occupied nearly two sheets of paper.

A tremulous movement of her fingers as she held the letter attracted Kenneth, and he threw a stealthy glance at her and saw that a look of bitterness had stolen over her face. Then she clenched the paper sharply and looked up with a hard, short laugh.

"You shall read part of it," she said suddenly, and thrusting the second sheet of the letter under his eyes, she pointed to these words, which Kenneth read with amazement and a feeling of anger and pain:

"Above all do not make the unfortunate lad too fond of you. He is sensitive, affectionate; above all, he is *young*. You know what the consequence would be to him and to you if you were to encourage him to make love to you. And——"

“There, that will do,” said Madame de Mauriac, suddenly withdrawing the letter and putting it away before he could read further; “you’ve seen enough to know that when I seem unkind, it’s for your good.”

“But——” began Kenneth.

Before he could get further with his speech he, too, heard the sound of a stealthy footstep close to the window. He rose quickly, and before Madame de Mauriac could stop him, sprang across to the window.

“Come back, come back!” cried she, and as she spoke she made a spring towards him and seized his arm, clinging to him with such real agitation in her manner and face that Kenneth, excited, thrilled, filled with a sudden joyous impression that she cared more for him than she pretended, turned to look into her face.

Even as he did so, standing thus for the moment with his back to the window, he saw a look of acute horror appear upon her face as her eyes travelled beyond him. She made a faint attempt to drag him from the window, crying as she did so, not loudly but with deep feeling, “Don’t, don’t!”

The next moment Kenneth was felled to the ground by a blow on the head, and remained stunned, bleeding, in a heap at Madame de Mauriac’s feet.

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Kenneth came to himself, he was in bed in a strange room, and faces he did not know were near him. In a dazed, unintelligent manner, his brain not yet able to fulfil its functions properly, the young man looked from the one to the other, the faces peering out at him from a misty background that he did not know.

First there was the face of a middle-aged man, rugged, stamped with the seal of his profession : Kenneth was just able to guess, not definitely, but with the dimness consequent upon his condition, that this was a doctor, a French doctor, whom he had never seen before. And the second face that looked down at him out of the mist was a foreign face also, lined and furrowed, as if it had been ruled by regulation with the proper lines for the face of a French functionary. Kenneth was not clear in his own mind as to this person ; but it afterwards turned out that he was no less a personage than Monsieur le Commissaire de Police for the district.

And further still in the background, behind these two gentlemen, was the reserved, discreet, wooden face of Madame de Mauriac's English servant.

The doctor bent over him, touched him, said something reassuring to the others.

And then, gradually, not without a sensible effort to hold the ground he was losing, Kenneth slipped back again into unconsciousness.

The next thing he was conscious of, after a long, long interval, was that there was some disturbance around him whether a thunderstorm or a discharge of heavy artillery he was not quite sure. It was all so vague, so dim, so unreal. And then there came to his ears, like an electric shock, a sound which cut sharply and definitely into his vague impressions. It was the voice of Madame de Mauriac, crying in a tone of fierce anger :

“Hush, you brute, you heartless brute! He’s coming to himself; his eyes are opening. Go, go, this moment.”

Whether there was an actual physical tussle at this point, or only a battle of tongues, Kenneth never knew. But when he opened his eyes, Madame de Mauriac, flushed, panting, her hair slighted disordered, and the lace fichu she wore round her neck torn and awry, was bending over him.

And at the foot of the bed sat her English servant, immovable, close-lipped, silent.

“Who was that? It was a man. Who was it?” said Kenneth, feeling surprised at the piping, broken sound of his own voice.

Of course he got the usual answer :

“Hush! You mustn’t talk!”

But he struggled to raise himself a little, and went on persistently :

“Who was it? Wasn’t it—some one—I know?”

“It was some one you’ve seen. It was the doctor,” said Madame de Mauriac.

Kenneth knew this was a lie, but he was not capable of thinking the matter out. So, as he saw that he should not learn the truth from her, whatever the truth might be, he lay back quietly, and submitted to be coaxed and cared for, and watched and waited upon. But for all the

easy kindness of Madame de Mauriac's manner, for all her assurances that everything was right, Kenneth knew that she was in a state of deadly fear. Her tightly closed lips, the stealthy glances which she cast around her incessantly, betrayed her.

"How long have I been here?" asked Kenneth, presently.

"Don't talk. You've only been here since last night. I've telegraphed to your uncle."

"What did you tell him?" asked Kenneth, quickly.

"That you've had an accident——"

"Accident!" interrupted Kenneth. "Some one struck me down. Who was it?"

He was struggling with his recollections and undefined impressions. Madame de Mauriac answered at once:

"It was a tramp, who was attracted by your watch. He made a snatch at it when he had knocked you down. I got it back, but it's battered, and the glass is broken. The Police Commissary has it now, but you will get it back. We hope they'll catch the thief first."

Kenneth shook his head feebly. He had doubts about the whole story; vague doubts, stupid, dim suspicions which he could not explain even to himself. So he lay quietly, soothed in spite of his vague mental uneasiness by the concern, and even tenderness, subdued and touching, of Madame de Mauriac's treatment of him. And in the afternoon Mrs. Pender called, and was shocked beyond measure on learning the news of his illness.

Late that night Kenneth started up in his bed, on the alert, full of sudden pleasure; for he heard Neal's full, deep voice in the little vestibule outside.

"Neal!" cried he.

Madame de Mauriac had started up to her feet, and

clasped her hands with unmistakable satisfaction, which puzzled Kenneth.

"Now you're safe!" burst from her lips, as the door opened and Neal was shown into the room.

The meeting between the two young men was touching in its quiet exchange of earnest looks and brief words. Neal bowed to Madame de Mauriac before going to the bedside, where he sat down quietly with one short pressure of his cousin's hand.

"You're thinner, old man," were Kenneth's first words. Neal nodded.

"I'll tell you all about it in the morning," said he.

Then he felt a light touch on his shoulder.

"You will stay here to-night. I want you to watch here, here in this room. Will you? And will you keep awake? I want your promise."

Neal rose to his feet.

"Is he so ill then?" asked he anxiously, forming the words with his lips rather than uttering them.

Madame smiled reassuringly.

"No, no; he is going on very well. But—these little seaside houses—you know—after that attempt at robbery—with violence—I can't feel safe about him!"

"I'll take him away to-morrow," said Neal, reassuringly.

But at her words the face of the lady clouded, and she cast at the sick man, lying back on his pillows, a look which woke Neal to the fact that there was some sentimental regard between these two. And he too wondered, when madame gave him her version of the accident to Neal, whether this were really the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

More still did he wonder when night came, and he was

left alone to watch by the bed, and in the silence of the night he heard footsteps and whisperings about the little villa, and sounds as of a long and earnest conversation carried on in undertones.

Kenneth had a good night, with much healthy, natural sleep; and the next morning Neal, knowing that he could not watch through another night without any rest between, and feeling anxious and suspicious without quite knowing why, persuaded the doctor and Madame de Mauriac to let him take his cousin away to the room Kenneth had engaged on his first arrival in Dieppe, at a little hotel in the town.

"Why did you go there?" asked he, in surprise. "Didn't my uncle tell you to go to a better one than that, the one I'm staying at?"

"Well," admitted Kenneth, with some hesitation, "I don't care to have all my movements 'stage-managed' for me according to uncle's rather domineering kindness, so I found out a place for myself. I think," he added, reluctantly, "kind as Madame de Mauriac is, she'll be glad to be rid of me. She seems to feel that I'm an anxiety, doesn't she?"

Neal nodded. He had noticed this, and wondered whether it was a mysterious somebody in the background who caused the difficulty.

She did not deny that she thought the notion of removing her patient a good one, "if he could bear it." So a *fiacre* was sent for immediately after the doctor's morning visit, and Neal took his cousin away to the little second-rate hotel in a quiet street.

Both the young men were much struck with the long, earnest look Madame de Mauriac gave them as they drove away.

“Uncanny sort of woman that!” was Neal’s first comment.

Kenneth was indignant.

“Uncanny! nonsense!” cried he, irritably. “She’s the kindest, sweetest, and most charming woman I’ve ever met, and——”

“Oh, all right, old chap, keep your hair on!” retorted his cousin, afraid of exciting him. “I know she’s taken a great interest in you, and all that. But, I say,” and he looked askance at Kenneth’s pale face, “you—you don’t feel too sentimental, I hope, about a woman nearly old enough to be my mother?”

“Oh, rot! she isn’t!” snapped Kenneth.

Neal prudently turned the conversation.

“I got Uncle’s wire yesterday afternoon,” said he, “when I was at Lille, grinding away, as I’ve been doing lately, at one factory after another.”

“What! you’ve been doing some genuine work then?” asked Kenneth, with interest.

“Genuine work! I believe you! I’ve been driven to death. Uncle sent me with an introduction to a fellow, who made me do the round of the factories on both sides of the frontier, taking note of everything, comparing, calculating. If I hadn’t been sent for to come to you, there soon wouldn’t have been a cotton factory, or lace factory, or, in fact, any kind of factory, in the north of France or in Belgium that I shouldn’t have known inside out!”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” said Kenneth, much relieved. “And I shall get my uncle to set me to the same thing. I’m tired of loafing about; I want to be at work myself, on the road to making money and settling down.”

"And marrying?" asked Neal, looking at him askance.

"Perhaps," said Kenneth, shortly. "I've as much right to think of that as you have, anyhow."

"Oh, of course, of course. But—never mind. We won't discuss it now. Seen anything of Crayford?"

"Yes; he was at my uncle's the night before I came away. It seems he had an adventure, in which you were concerned. I wanted to hear your account of it. He said a detective met him and he spoke to him; and my uncle said all the *habitués* of Vine Place were being watched on account of the disappearance of Kaspar."

"Yes. I am quite ready to believe, myself, that he had a hand in it. I loath Crayford," said Neal.

"Not more than I do that cad Flinders," said Kenneth. "He was there the same night, making himself more objectionable than I've ever seen him before."

They were at the hotel by this time, and Neal helped his cousin up the stairs to the small room on the second floor which he had engaged two days before. And in the afternoon, when Kenneth was lying down, as he seemed pretty well, and did not mind being left alone for a little while, Neal started off to see Mrs. Pender and Nynce.

He had to follow them to the Casino, where he found them enjoying the sunshine under the shelter of their sunshades. At least, Mrs. Pender was enjoying it, while Nynce looked pale and worried. An adventure had befallen her, before leaving the hotel that afternoon, which she related to Neal, when the first emotion of pleasure at meeting him was over, with trembling lips and a fast-beating heart.

They had finished luncheon, and Mrs. Pender had gone

into the *salon* to wait while Nynee ran upstairs to fetch their sunshades.

She ran lightly along the corridor towards the large, double-bedded room on the second floor which she shared with her mother, and unlocking the door quickly, burst in just in time to see a man on his knees in front of the Saratoga trunk, with a pile of clothes on the floor on one side of him, and the top tray of the trunk on the other. He sprang up at the cry she uttered and made a rush towards her, holding to his face the end of the green baize apron he wore, so that she could see nothing of his head but the short black hair on the top of his head.

But in his hand, to her horror and dismay, she saw her own poor little jewel-case, which contained not only her few ornaments, but a treasured small hoard of three or four sovereigns.

“Oh, my case!” cried the girl, hoarsely.

She could not utter another word, for the man darted at her, causing her to shrink back in fright to the other side of the corridor, and there, before her eyes, he snatched the key out of the lock of the door and shut himself into the room again.

Screaming with fear and distress, Nynee ran downstairs, explained her case in such French as she could muster on the spur of the moment to the first person she met, and returned with reinforcements to the room.

The chambermaid was called, who opened the door quickly with her own key. But the man had disappeared, and the trunk was, to all appearance, as Nynee had last left it herself.

After a futile search under the wooden beds, where he could not have hidden, and in the wardrobe, Nynee had

to come reluctantly to the conclusion that the thief had escaped by the balcony which ran round this floor.

In despair, and almost crying, she opened the trunk and took out the tray. The things had all been replaced, though they were not in the best order.

“But, oh, my pearls, and my bracelets, and my money!” wailed poor Nynee. “I know they’re gone! I saw the case in his hand!”

A moment later, however, she came upon the case, and, drawing it out with a flushed face and trembling fingers, raised the lid and looked in.

“Oh!”

A deep cry of relief, joy, and bewilderment it was which escaped her lips.

For there, in the little case, were all her treasures; the pearl necklace, her three bracelets, her little heart-shaped watch, her long gold chain studded with turquoises, and—wonder of wonders!—the four sovereigns and the half-sovereign which she had looked upon as the thief’s certain prey!

It was beyond measure delightful to see them again, but—it was very puzzling too!

CHAPTER XIII.

NEAL listened to Nynee's story with great interest and some uneasiness.

"Why, then, there seems to be an epidemic of crimes and outrages going on here!" said he at last. "There was the assault on poor Ken two nights ago, and Madame de Mauriac says that the man who struck him down seized his watch."

"Oh, well, I shouldn't believe too much of what Madame de Mauriac says!" said Nynee, with a sudden slight raising of her chin which was very eloquent.

Mrs. Pender, who was, Neal was vexed to notice, not nearly so cordial to him as she had been before he went away, turned to her daughter quite sharply.

"And why not?" asked she. "I should be ashamed, Nynee, if I were you, to let prejudice get the better of judgment as you are doing."

"Don't you like Madame de Mauriac?" asked Neal, in a low voice.

Nynee was between him and her mother, although Mrs. Pender had tried to arrange things differently. The girl answered in the same tone:

"No, I don't at all. It's not that she looks down upon mamma and me, though she does do that. By-the-by, why do women of mature age, like her"—Neal chuckled at the little touch of feminine malice—"think that girls

must be too stupid to notice anything? She fancies because I don't talk so much as she does—and heaven forbid that I should!—that I'm blind and deaf, I think."

"Tell me what it is you see," asked Neal, as low as before, not smiling now, but listening earnestly.

"I see that she is doing everything in her power to captivate your cousin, for one thing," answered Nynee, almost in a whisper, and very rapidly, so that her mother could not catch even the sense of what she was saying.

"But why should she? He's not well off, and she appears to have everything she can wish for, though I hear she calls herself poor!"

"Oh, that is just the sort of woman whose motives one can't fathom," retorted Nynee, whose blue eyes and baby face always gained her credit for being more guileless than she really was. "She's a coquette, I believe, and perhaps she practises on Mr. King just to 'keep her hand in.'"

"You don't think she cares about him?" asked Neal, dubiously.

"I don't think she ought to," retorted Nynee, "except in a motherly or elder-sisterly way. She must be years older than he is."

"It appears she says so, and that she has refused him," said Neal.

Nynee pursed up her pretty little mouth.

"Well, I don't want to be ill-natured," said she, "but I don't think your cousin is the sort of man to propose to a woman who hadn't encouraged him!"

Neal burst into a chuckle. He couldn't help agreeing with her. Mrs. Pender, who could not hear more than a word here and there of this conversation, for the band was playing on her side of the group, fidgeted uneasily.

“What is that you’re saying about Madame de Mauriac, Nynee?” she asked at last.

“We were talking about these two attempted robberies, mamma.”

Neal drew his chair forward so that he could talk to both ladies.

“Of course,” said he, “Miss Pender’s coming in frightened the thief, so that he thought it best not to take anything away. Didn’t they have the hotel searched?”

“Oh, yes, I suppose they did,” said Mrs. Pender. “But of course a man in a baize apron could easily get away. Nobody would suspect such a man if they saw him going from room to room by the balcony: they would think he was cleaning the windows.”

“And very likely he whipped off the apron as soon as he got into another room,” added Nynee.

“I wonder if it was the same man who struck poor Ken!”

“Very likely,” said Mrs. Pender, still speaking with some stiffness, which Neal felt he had done nothing to deserve. “Sir Henry Ruddock says that an enormous number of thefts of jewelry and of valuable securities have taken place during the last few years that have never been traced home to the thieves; and that it is supposed that there’s a gang working together on both sides of the Channel, so that what is stolen over here is taken over to England and sold there; while the things stolen in England are brought to the Continent.”

“But thieves who worked on a large scale like that wouldn’t be likely to ransack the luggage of people like mamma and me, would they?” said Nynee, shrewdly.

“Sir Henry says they are so clever it’s not easy to

penetrate their motives for what they do," said Mrs. Pender.

"And who is Sir Henry?" asked Neal.

Nynee blushed, and Mrs. Pender answered, with a complacent look :

"Haven't you heard of Sir Henry Ruddock? He's got a large estate in Worcestershire, and is a fellow of ever so many learned societies."

"Then he's an old man, I suppose?" said Neal, with some evident relief.

Nynee began to giggle, but Mrs. Pender answered rather sharply :

"Not at all old ; he's in the prime of life, a most handsome, delightful man, and a great admirer of Nynee's. He said, dear, that he should meet us here this afternoon," went on the lady, addressing her daughter, while Neal fell back a little, mortified and jealous.

"Where did you meet him?" he asked Nynee, in a low voice between his set teeth.

"At the hotel," answered the girl, with such a sweet, shy glance into the young man's angry face that he felt in a moment reassured.

Although he had never formally proposed to Nynee, she knew well how fond he was of her, and this look she gave him was meant to let him know that, whatever her mother might think about the new and rich elderly admirer, she at least had not changed her mind.

Neal was grateful, and his eyes told her so. Mrs. Pender, who perhaps caught something of this silent exchange of messages, began to grow restless again ; and it was with unveiled joy that she suddenly cried :

"There's Sir Henry ! Coming this way !"

Neal looked up, and saw a dignified, well-preserved,

elderly gentleman, with grayish hair and mustache and close-trimmed beard, raising his hat in response to the lady's salutation.

"I seem to know his face," murmured Neal.

And even as he spoke, he saw, by the look the other man gave him, that the same thought was passing through his mind. Mrs. Pender had to introduce the two men, and instinctively each conceived a decided antagonism to the other, following close on the heels of their mutual recognition.

"Have you met before?" asked Mrs. Pender, seeing the look that passed between them.

"I haven't had the pleasure of being introduced to Sir Henry Ruddock before," said Neal, "but I am sure I have met him, though I can't for the moment remember where."

"It was at Eastbourne, last year, at the Hotel Metropole," said Sir Henry, rather frigidly.

"Oh, I remember."

"Rather an unpleasant incident occurred there," went on Sir Henry, turning to Mrs. Pender. "I am reminded of it by the fright your daughter had at the hotel just now. A lady staying there had an immense quantity of valuable jewelry stolen; she was not so lucky as you, Miss Pender, for she did *not* have the satisfaction of even seeing the thief."

"I shouldn't have thought that much satisfaction, if he had got away with my pearls!" said Nynee. "And did she ever get them back, or find out who took them?"

"Never heard a word about them from that day to this, I believe," said Sir Henry. "You remember the incident, Mr. Sheringham, I dare say? You and a friend of yours were staying at the hotel at that time."

"*I was staying there,*" answered Neal, rather shortly, "but not with any friend. I was alone. I'd been sent down by my uncle after an attack of influenza."

"A Mr. Flinders, who was there, certainly represented himself to be your friend," said Sir Henry, still in the same perceptibly antagonistic tone.

"Oh, that fellow. He is the last person in the world who is entitled to call himself a friend of mine," said Neal, with irritation.

Sir Henry shrugged his shoulders slightly, and turned to the ladies. Neal grew red, indignant, uncomfortable. Not only was he much annoyed at the appearance in the field of this formidable rival, but he was incensed by the tone the elderly baronet was taking. It roused in the younger man, or perhaps it is more true to say that it helped to rouse in him, a most uneasy feeling concerning Flinders, and a determination never to be seen with him again.

Although Nynee did her best to talk as much to Neal as to Sir Henry, she found it impossible to do so; for both her mother's and Sir Henry's assiduity and Neal's irritation combined to defeat her good-natured object.

After a very few minutes, during which the younger man saw more and more plainly that he was not wanted by at least two of the group, he made the excuse of returning to his cousin, and walked back to Kenneth's hotel in a very unamiable frame of mind.

Kenneth, whom he had left in the care of a good-natured chambermaid who had promised to see that he should keep quiet, was sitting in an armchair by the window, with a letter in his hand.

"You ought to be lying down, you know," said Neal, rather irritably.

“Oh, no, I’m all right now, old chap. It’s you who look all wrong,” said his cousin. “Something put you out? Wasn’t little Miss Nynee nice to you, eh?”

“Oh, I’m right out of it now,” said Neal, crossly, as he bounced down on the end of the bed, and began to swing his legs furiously. “A baronet’s turned up with acres of land, and scores of horses and houses and things. He’s old enough to be my grandfather, but that’s nothing. It’s the fashion to be in love with your grandfather or your grandmother now!”

Kenneth reddened and frowned.

“You’re in a pretty temper, my angel, aren’t you?” said he.

“Dare say I am. It’s a nice thing to be told you’re a thief!”

“What!”

Kenneth had leapt out of his chair, his face as pale as death. Neal bit his lip and looked apologetic.

“Well, no, that’s not exactly the truth,” admitted he, irritably. “But this old brute really did talk about a robbery having been committed in a hotel where I was staying, in a purposely offensive way, as if he thought that I, and that bouncer Flinders, were confederates who had perpetrated a robbery!”

Now these random words had the most extraordinary effect on his cousin. For whereas Neal was conscious that his statement contained an exaggeration, Kenneth took it as if it had been a literal truth. Coming close to Neal, he seized him by the shoulder, and insisted on knowing exactly what had been said by Sir Henry. And when he had heard every word, he went back to his chair, and sat for a few minutes with his head on his

hand, so quietly and silently that Neal thought he had over-excited himself and was going to be ill again.

As the younger man came solicitously over to him, and laid his hand on his shoulder, Kenneth looked up.

"No, I'm not ill," said he hoarsely; "but listen, old chap! You know what I've said to you about those fellows who come to Vine Place, some of 'em, that there was something wrong about them?"

Neal nodded.

"Flinders is a cad, and so's Crayford. And there's another I don't care about—Jones."

Kenneth rose from his chair, his face white and wet.

"Look here," said he, in a whisper, "you know what Sir Henry is reported to have said—about a gang? Do you—do you think any of these——"

"Good Heavens!"

"Of course it's only a notion. But listen. I've just had a letter from uncle," and he picked up the paper from the floor where it had fallen, "and he says Jones wants to know if I've sent on his Gladstone bag, and if not, what I've done with it."

"What Gladstone bag?" asked Neal, feeling rather sick and very wretched, as he stared into his cousin's face.

"A bag he gave me to take to Paris for him. He said it contained only some clothes he had borrowed from a friend—but——"

Neal went on hurriedly:

"I know what you mean. That's what Crayford did—made me take his luggage across. Do you think——"

"Oh, I don't think anything. But look here," and into Kenneth's face there came the sparkle of energy and determination, "I'm not going to take or send that bag on without having a look inside it."

It was a strong step to take, and Neal looked rather shocked.

“Oh, I don’t think I’d go as far as that,” faltered he. “It’s a nasty thing to do—opening another fellow’s luggage. It—it——”

But Kenneth had already opened the wardrobe where he had locked the bag away, and dragged the thing out on the floor.

Once more Neal protested.

“Don’t, I say, don’t open it. Take it back to him and say——”

“I shall tell no lies,” growled Kenneth, who had a character of his own, and was not frightened by words. “I think we have a right to know whether things are on the square with these fellows, and I shall not be satisfied until I have assured myself with my own eyes that this bag does not contain anything of more value than Jones said.”

“But it’s not in the least likely,” said Neal. “Remember, everything is liable to be overhauled at the Custom-house, so that anything of value would be likely to come under your eyes on the journey.”

But Kenneth would not listen. He had the key to the bag; he had himself handed it to the Customs officer; and he was deliberately undoing the straps as his cousin spoke, kneeling on the floor as he did so.

Neal watched him, pale as the dead.

What were they going to discover?

CHAPTER XIV.

THE key turned in the lock, and the bag lay open before the young men.

Once more Neal tried to persuade Kenneth not to touch the things inside. But Kenneth, with a toss of the head, persisted.

“We must know,” said he, “whether it’s all right, or whether we’re being made catspaws of.”

Neal suddenly grasped his cousin’s right arm.

“Do you know what you’re saying?” said he, in a low voice. “If Harrington Jones is a-a-a—if he’s not all right, what about—uncle?”

Kenneth looked him straight in the eyes.

“I had a talk with uncle just before I came away,” said he. “And from that talk, and from what I knew of him already, I’m convinced, if he heard that Jones or Flinders or Crayford was little better than a professional swindler, he would just shrug his shoulders, and say: ‘So are all the other men I know. There are varieties of swindling; but trade, law, medicine, the church—they are all of them swindles; and the man of mark is the man who swindles most successfully.’ That’s what he’d say, Neal, without a doubt.”

Neal sat back on his heels on the opposite side of the open bag, and whistled softly.

“I wish he wouldn’t talk like that,” said he, half to himself. “Of course it’s only his way of talking, but—I wish he wouldn’t.”

Kenneth made no answer. He had taken out some of the things in the bag, and was feeling them carefully.

First there came a suit, lounge coat, trousers, waistcoat ; on the coat was pinned a scrap of note-paper, on which was written : "So sorry I couldn't send these back before : many thanks for the loan." Both knew the words and the signature "H. J." to be in the handwriting of Harrington Jones.

So far all looked right. The young men began to feel more comfortable. The next thing they found was a pair of half-worn boots, and at the bottom of all was a light overcoat.

Not content with a cursory survey of these things, Kenneth, regardless of the remonstrances of Neal, who would have bundled the whole lot back into the bag in a shamefaced and guilty manner, examined every article separately, even putting his hand into the boots. Neal continued to scoff, and to ask him what he expected to find ; but Kenneth, with a frown on his young face and with pursed lips, went on doggedly with his occupation.

There could be no doubt that their suspicions of the garments were groundless ; there was nothing sewn into the lining of the coat, or stuffed into the toes of the innocent boots.

They opened the other side of the bag : the result was the same. A complete change of underwear, fresh from the laundry was all that presented itself to their rather guilty eyes.

Kenneth strapped up the bag again with a sigh of relief ; but Neal spoke with some irritation :

"There ! We've done a disgraceful thing—and all for nothing !"

"Not a bit of it," retorted Kenneth, who was more

strong-minded than his elder cousin. "It was quite excusable, considering the suspicions we've had lately, to make sure that all was right. And now we've eased our minds. I'll send this off at once; or rather, you shall do it for me."

So the bag was despatched to Paris, to an address which Mr. Justican had given in his letter, and though Kenneth was rather morose, and Neal was inclined to be depressed, no more was said by the cousins about the doubts which had led them to take such strong measures.

In the meantime, however, things were not going as smoothly as could have been wished with either of them; Kenneth was persuaded to remain in his room for a day or two, and Neal spent most of his time with him. He did not prove a very exhilarating companion for an invalid, for Mrs. Pender continued to be cool to him and warm to Sir Henry Ruddock, and Nynee got very few opportunities of consoling him.

Madame de Mauriac usually joined the Penders in their walks and drives; but, as Neal cherished a sombre mistrust of her, partly founded on Nynee's dislike, and partly on Kenneth's depression, her presence did not prove an additional inducement to him to attach himself to the party.

The English newspapers having published an account of the alleged attack upon Kenneth, and given his name and that of his hotel, many inquiries were made about him, and Neal heard a lady asking the landlord very minutely about the extent of the young man's injuries.

Neal looked at the lady as he passed her, and saw that she was a small, slight, fair woman, no longer very young, and with no appearance of ever having been beautiful. Although she was speaking in French, with scarcely any

accent, he thought she looked like an Englishwoman. She was dressed very plainly, and her manner was extremely quiet and shy, and her voice had a charming and conspicuous refinement.

He went on towards the staircase, wondering who she was, and as the landlord said, "That is the brother of the gentleman who was attacked, madame," Neal stopped and raised his hat.

The lady's shyness caused her to shrink even as she returned his salutation. She looked at him for a couple of seconds, and then apparently making up her mind suddenly that she would not speak to him, she bowed again and went out of the hotel.

The landlord did not know who she was. She had come in only to inquire about Monsieur King, he said. And Neal went upstairs, relating the incident to his cousin as a pretty proof of the interest which the English people in Dieppe were taking in his case.

He saw the lady again that day, when he was talking to the Penders in the Jardin Anglais. He glanced at her, rather hoping she would bow to him again, for he had been most favorably impressed by her appearance and manner, which, plain and middle-aged as she was, had the subtle quality of being interesting. But, although he was certain that she saw him, she made no sign; when, however, he accompanied the Penders to the door of their hotel, he saw the lady in black on the other side of the street, looking up at the name of the hotel as she went by.

And when he called on the following day, as he always did in the morning to ask if the ladies had anything for him to do for them, he saw the little shy lady crossing the hall as he went in.

When he saw Nynee he asked if she knew who the lady was.

“Her name is Mrs. Black,” answered Nynee. “She came here only yesterday evening, but already she has spoken to me and mamma. She’s rather nice. How’s Mr. King?”

“Oh,” said Neal discontentedly, “he’s better, and so the first use he’s made of the fact is to go marching off to Madame de Mauriac’s villa.”

“Oh, dear! I’m so sorry!”

“I’m disgusted,” said Neal, crossly. “And you, how are you? I suppose you don’t want me to do anything for you? You’ve got that charming new friend, Sir Henry Rdddock, now!”

“That’s very unkind of you. Mamma told me to say how anxious she is to have you both to dinner as soon as your cousin is well enough. Can you come to-morrow?”

“We shall be delighted,” said Neal, with a beaming face. “By-the-by, I have a message for Mrs. Pender in a letter I got from my uncle this morning.”

“What is it? Mamma is always pleased at being remembered by Mr. Justican. He’s such a favorite of hers.”

“He says,” said Neal, reading from a letter he had taken out of his pocket, “that he is having a cupboard put in one of his rooms, and he wants to know whether she would like to have one put in the back bedroom on your first floor, between the wall and the fireplace.” And he read: “Tell Mrs. Pender her son says he would find it useful.”

“Oh, yes, that’s Harry’s room. Very well, I’ll tell her.”

But that was not necessary. For Mrs. Pender, who

never allowed Nynee to hold any long conversations with Neal now that Sir Henry's appearance had put him in the background of her favor, came up at this moment, and broke up the *tête-à-tête*.

In the meantime Kenneth had gone on his ill-advised expedition to Madame de Mauriac's villa. He had not got far on his way when some impulse he could not quite account for—nervousness, perhaps, induced by the recent attack upon him—caused him to turn suddenly, as he walked along the street. And he felt a qualm of uneasy surprise on descrying, among the people on the opposite side of the road, the little middle-aged man in the drawn-down cap, whom he had imagined to be following him on his journey from England. Kenneth felt half-inclined to turn back, to find out whether the man would turn back also. But on second thoughts he resumed his walk, and did not stop until he had got a considerable distance away.

Then he turned suddenly again. Now he could have no doubt of it: he was being followed.

Kenneth began to ask himself whether this was the man who had attacked him at the villa; and setting off towards him at a sharp run, he was confirmed in his surmise that the man had been following him by the fact that he promptly disappeared, whether into a gateway or up a side-street the crowd rendered Kenneth unable to make out.

Rather disturbed by this incident, happening as it did after other unpleasant occurrences, he nevertheless persisted in his intention of going to the villa. But when he reached it and rang the bell, madame's discreet servant replied to his inquiry by saying that madame was out.

Something told Kenneth that this was not true. And as he turned away, he glanced over the front of the

house, and detected Madame de Mauriac herself watching him from behind a lace curtain too flimsy to hide her.

Troubled, heartsore, miserable, he went back to the hotel. Already the hot sun and his anxiety and disappointment had made his head ache. He staggered upstairs, and threw himself on his bed, sick at heart, weary and despairing. He felt that he would have given the world for a touch of the widow's caressing hand, for one of those seductively sweet smiles of hers, for a softly uttered word.

Neal was distressed beyond measure by the state in which he found his cousin, who refused to go out again, and refused to allow the other to remain with him.

Poor Neal, with doubts about Nynee on the one hand, and fears concerning Kenneth on the other, spent a most unhappy day, and was thankful for an opportunity of pouring out his woes into Nynee's ear, when he met her and her mother on the cliffs that evening.

On the following day, Kenneth having refused to dine with the Penders, and sent Neal to the hotel by himself, the latter was still in a rather miserable state of mind. He sat next to Nynee, which was some comfort indeed; but Sir Henry was not far off; and Mrs. Pender was too near for him to be able to converse quite at his ease with her daughter.

Nearly opposite to them sat the shy little lady, who had asked after Kenneth; and Nynee presently told him that Mrs. Black had shown so much interest in what she heard of him and his cousin that Nynee had confided to her a great deal about them and their uncle.

"She seems to take such an interest, such a *nice* interest," went on the girl, "in everything concerning you and Mr. Justican, that I found my tongue running on with

her till I told her everything I knew about you—even about your cousin and Madame de Mauriac.”

“And what did she say to that?” asked Neal.

“She seemed quite agitated, and asked a great many questions about madame, what she was like, and how old she was, and seemed so strangely agitated that you might have thought she took some strong personal interest in you both.”

Neal’s curiosity was roused. He looked across at the quiet lady, and a dim suspicion began to take form in his mind. Whoever she might be, her sweet, modest face, with the slightly gray hair softening its outline, was not that of an idle curiosity-monger, he felt sure.

“Mamma doesn’t like her, I’m sorry to say,” added Nynee, softly.

Now the reason for Mrs. Pender’s prejudice against the gentle-mannered stranger arose in this way. Like almost all British matrons of the middle and upper middle class, Mrs. Pender occupied herself, unconsciously for the most part, when she made a new acquaintance of her own sex, in a steady and prolonged attempt to impress that new acquaintance by remarks and references as if casually made, with the firm superiority of her own social position, with her high connections and intimacy with or relationship to persons of rank and position.

There was nothing specially remarkable about this: it is the common weakness of her age and position. But the remarkable thing was that, whatever reference of the kind Mrs. Pender made, was promptly but quite softly and sweetly capped by the newcomer’s saying something, which proved *her* acquaintance with persons of rank to be much closer than Mrs. Pender’s.

Instead of receiving these references as satisfactory

proof that Mrs. Black was a fit person for her and her daughter to associate with, as she ought logically to have done, poor Mrs. Pender was human enough to be considerably piqued by the quiet stranger's meekly uttered words. She even hinted to her daughter that Mrs. Black, who was simply dressed to the verge of dowdiness, would probably turn out to be some superannuated, companion or governess, whose position had enabled her to obtain intimate details concerning the lives of great people.

Nynee, however, was greatly attracted by Mrs. Black and Neal shared her feeling. After dinner, therefore, these three drew together in the *salon*, and Neal was charmed and touched by the strange lady's manner of speaking to him.

"I've heard all about you from Miss Pender," said she, with her sweet, shy smile, "and I hope you'll forgive me for taking an interest in you which, if you were inclined to be severe, you might think impertinent."

"I should never think that of you," said Neal, impulsively, drawn to the lady by something stronger than curiosity.

"Then will you excuse me, even if I try to pry into your cousin's heart-secrets, and tell me all about this Madame de Mauriac, whom he's in love with?"

"She's a horrid woman," said Neal, bursting, after very few questions, into a full description of the seductive lady. "But if you want to see her," he added presently, "she's sure to be at the casino, and we're going there, I understand. I'll point her out to you."

When they started for the casino, Mrs. Pender and Nynee walked with Sir Henry Ruddock, who remained as cool as ever in his manner to Neal while the young man went with Mrs. Black.

When they reached the building, however, a strange thing happened. Madame de Mauriac, beautifully dressed in black with sequins, her bronze hair shaded by a huge black hat, was coming to meet them, leaving the old lady and gentleman who were her usual companions during her stay at Dieppe, when suddenly she turned back, and hid herself among the crowd.

"Did you see her?" asked Neal, eagerly.

"No. Where? Where?" cried Mrs. Black.

But Madame de Mauriac was gone.

A few minutes later, however, the old gentleman who was one of her companions came up to Mrs. Pender, and asked her to come with him to speak to Madame de Mauriac.

They found the lady sitting in a little nook, out of the blaze of the light; she rose at Mrs. Pender's approach.

"I thought you would think it strange," she said, "if you saw how I turned away when I saw who was with you."

"Sir Henry Ruddock?" asked Mrs. Pender, in surprise.

"Oh, no, he's a charming man. I mean the person who was walking with Mr. Sheringham."

"Mrs. Black! Ah! You know her! Is there anything wrong about her?" asked Mrs. Pender, quickly.

Madame de Mauriac shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I'm not censorious. Still, one must draw the line somewhere. That is Mr. Justican's wife, who ran away from him!"

CHAPTER XV.

“ I DON’r like that old man ! ” cried Nynee, not loudly but very emphatically, as soon as Madame de Mauriac’s friend had taken Mrs. Pender away from her friends.

The remark was addressed to Neal, who had taken the opportunity of Mrs. Pender’s moving away to get nearer to Nynee. The young girl was looking charming in her dress of champagne-colored washing silk, with a big boa of white tulle, and a flat hat of sunburnt straw, set sideways on her head, and trimmed with black velvet and cherries.

“ Who is he ? ” asked Mrs. Black, in her timid undertones.

“ He is a Monsieur d’Espalion,” answered Nynee. “ He and his wife are friends of Madame de Mauriac’s.”

“ And is that why you don’t like him ? ”

“ N-n-not altogether,” said Nynee. “ Though I won’t deny that may have something to do with it. I don’t like that very palpable wig he wears, for one thing, and I don’t like the expression of his face for another. And—and——” She hesitated, and then added quickly : “ Of course you’ll say I’m fanciful and prejudiced, but he reminds me, in some vague, indefinite way, of somebody I’ve seen before—somebody I don’t like.”

“ And may I ask who that is ? ”

Nynee frowned in perplexity.

"I don't know myself : that's the strange part of it !"

"Rather a vague ground of dislike, I must confess."

Nynee had to admit this, and then there was a pause. Mrs. Pender, with unmistakable consternation on her face, was returning to them after her short interview with Madame de Mauriac. Sir Henry, who had drawn a little apart from the group, went to meet her.

"You look quite frightened, Mrs. Pender," said he. "No accident has happened, I hope ?"

"N-n-no," said she faintly. "Nothing. At least——" She tried to smile her thanks for his inquiries, and then she beckoned to her daughter.

"Nynee," she said, as the girl came up to her, "I—I want to speak to you. I—I have something to say to you."

And then, trembling, she broke down, and had to be provided with a chair.

"What is it, mamma?" whispered Nynee, much alarmed, and full of suspicions that her mother had found out something unsatisfactory about Madame de Mauriac.

They were outside the casino, and out of the glare of the lights. Sir Henry went quietly away, and so did Neal and Mrs. Black, leaving mother and daughter together. Mrs. Pender clung to Nynee's arm.

"I've made the most awful discovery, child," she gasped out, "and it only shows how very, very careful one ought to be in these foreign places about speaking to the people one meets. Who do you think this Mrs. Black turns out to be? Why, Mr. Justican's wife! Isn't it dreadful!"

"Oh, mamma!"

"Isn't it shocking? And you've been walking with

her, and talking to her, and making quite a friend of her!"

"Well, but, mamma, why shouldn't I? We don't know anything against her!"

"What? What? When we know that she's living apart from her husband? That she ran away from him?"

"But that's all we do know. We don't know whose fault it was!"

"Nynee, I'm surprised at you! Really, to hear young girls talk nowadays one would think there was no morality left in the world!"

"And did Madame de Mauriac tell you this?" asked Nynee, suddenly.

"Yes. She saw in a moment who it was we had with us, and thought it her duty to tell me at once who she was. Living under a false name too! As if that alone wasn't enough to tell us that the fault was all on her side!" pursued Mrs. Pender.

But Nynee was looking grave and puzzled.

"But how did Madame de Mauriac know who she was, mamma?" said she, when her mother would let her speak. "I thought she only came to Mr. Justican's by accident a few weeks ago? And that she knew nothing about him before?"

"Well, she may easily have known his wife, though she didn't know him," said Mrs. Pender, who was displeased to find that Nynee was not inclined to see things with her eyes. "You must understand that, now we know the truth about her, you must not be seen with her more than you can help. I wouldn't have Sir Henry know for the world that I had, however unconsciously, allowed you to associate with a woman who was passing

under an assumed name! And the idea of her pretending she was on intimate terms with Lord Crossways!"

"Why, mamma, she is his cousin," pleaded Nynee. "Neal—I mean Mr. Sheringham—told me so!"

"Well, it's not proper for her to boast of the relationship now that her family have thrown her off," said Mrs. Pender, stiffly.

Nynee reflected that Mrs. Black had made no boasts, and that nobody knew whether her family had thrown her off; but she thought it better not to say so.

And Mrs. Pender rose to her feet, and led Nynee towards the spot where Sir Henry had said he should wait for them.

In the meantime Mrs. Black, who had gone into the casino with Neal, had been shrewd enough to wonder at the sudden disappearance of Madame de Mauriac.

"I wish," she said earnestly, "that I hadn't missed seeing her."

The manner in which she uttered these words made Neal bold enough to ask suddenly: "Have you any idea who she is?"

The little shy lady hesitated.

"If she is the woman I have in my mind," she said at last, in a low voice, "heaven help your cousin! Anne Bowker, whom I suspect this Madame de Mauriac to be, was, some years ago, a woman who ruined every man she came near who fell under the spell of her fascinations. For she had fascinations of a sort, undoubtedly."

Neal groaned.

"That will be she!" said he, despairingly. "Then of course her title and the story of her marriage to this French count are all a pack of lies together."

"Oh, no, I'm not at all sure of that. She was just

the woman who would marry well. For she was as cautious and cold as she was seductive, and her great danger to men lay in the fact that she was always mistress of herself, and could indulge her passion for admiration without any risk to herself."

"Then she was not an ordinary—adventuress?"

"By no means," said the little lady, gravely. "She was one of the most extraordinary women I've ever met. Nobody dared to say the worst of her, whatever they might think. But she was heartless, selfish to the core; and no matter what she made men suffer, she always enjoyed her life, and went serenely on to the next passion or the next fortune that came in her way, and was always ready with a sigh and a tear for the cruelty of fate that would not let her find rest with one faithful heart."

Neal was struck by the fervor and bitterness with which she spoke.

"You knew her well," said he.

"Very well."

"And was she always well off, as she seems to be now?"

"No. I don't know, if this is the woman I knew, where her money comes from, unless, as she says, she married a rich man and he left his property to her."

"I wish you would manage to see her, and make sure if it is the same," cried the young man.

"I will. Indeed I'm as anxious as you can be," answered the lady, promptly. "For no man—except one—has ever been able to resist her, and no man who has not resisted her has failed to come to hopeless grief."

"What? What?" stammered Neal, appalled.

"I mean it. One man committed suicide on her account; another robbed his employer; another——"

"Stop! Don't tell me any more," cried Neal, hoarsely. "Come, let us look for her at once. But first"—and he hesitated, and looked down, from the height of his six feet two inches, searchingly into her face—"will you tell me—I should like to know—whom you meant when you said that one man only was able to resist her?"

"Why do you ask that?" asked the lady, trembling, and speaking in a scarcely audible voice.

"Because—I have a sort of idea—that I should be much interested to know."

The lady bowed her head a moment, and then raised it abruptly.

"You are right," said she. "Well, the man was your uncle, my husband, Nathaniel Justican."

"I thought so," said Neal, taking the announcement quite calmly, for indeed he had anticipated it. "And now I know the reason for your interest in me."

The lady's small, lined face puckered into a thousand wrinkles, and the tears rushed to her eyes.

"Interest! Indeed I would give my life for you boys!" whispered she, huskily. "I would risk everything, everything, to see you happy and prosperous—everything—except one thing!"

Neal was deeply interested, but he dared not question her further. From the way in which her small, thin-lipped mouth closed on the last words, from the sombre look which came into her light eyes, he knew there was a world of character in the small, faded woman, and that she could keep her own secrets. After a short silence, she quickly dried her eyes, and said: "I shall go to-morrow morning and see this Madame de Mauriac.

Perhaps, if it is the same woman I mean, I can frighten her into giving your cousin up."

"Frighten her?"

"Yes," said his aunt, shortly. "And there is one other thing I can do: I can get you to take something, a little souvenir, for me to your uncle."

"That I will, with all the pleasure in the world," cried Neal.

"And now," said she, quickly, "take me home to the hotel, and say no more about this. I'm disturbed, broken by all this. Don't speak to me on the way."

Neal obeyed. The two walked silently and quickly along, in the pleasant summer night air, to the hotel, and it was not until they had nearly reached the doors that she said, in a voice full of passionate tenderness:

"Good-night, good-night, my boy, my own dear sister's child!"

And with that she put up her little wrinkled, tear-stained face, and gave him a kiss so affectionate, so gentle, that it warmed and comforted the young man's heart to think there was such tenderness and kindness and quiet strength working on poor Kenneth's side.

The next morning early, "Mrs Black" kept her word. She went to the villa and asked for Madame de Mauriac; but even as she did so, she had a prevision of the answer she would get. Madame de Mauriac had left for Trouville that morning, and M. and Madame d'Espalion had taken on the villa for the remainder of her term.

At the very time that this message was given to Mrs. Black, a letter from Madame de Mauriac was brought by hand to Mrs. Pender, who tore it open eagerly.

"MY DEAR MRS. PENDER," it ran, "I have taken the

sudden resolve to go away from Dieppe, partly because I do not wish to inflict pain on a fellow-creature, and the sight of me would recall to someone you know considerable uneasiness by reason of what I know of her history : but partly, too, because I am sorry to observe that a dear young friend of ours is growing fonder of me than is good for him, or indeed for me. Old as I am, my heart has a very tender place for this unhappy lad, and I think the best way to cure him of a growing attachment which, in view of the disparity in our ages, would be unwise for him, is to go away. Adieu. Forgive me for not coming to say good-bye in person. I think this way of farewell the best. Before you have been back in London long I shall be with you again.—Yours ever,
MAUDE DE MAURIAC.”

Mrs. Pender shed tears over the sweetness and right feeling of this epistle, which she did not show to her daughter, as it contained, she thought, allusion to an attachment which a young girl had better not hear about.

There was no need for her to lecture Nynce about “Mrs. Black,” for that lady left the hotel early that morning. She left a very small flat parcel for Neal, containing an enclosure directed simply to “N. P. Justican, Esq.,” with no message.

Somehow these various occurrences seemed to have spoilt the holiday, and as Sir Henry Ruddock was called back to England unexpectedly that day, Mrs. Pender made up her mind not to stay longer than the end of the week. In the meantime she snubbed Neal so decidedly, having conceived the idea that he had driven away Sir Henry, that both the cousins abruptly left for Paris together, to fulfil Kenneth’s mission.

One other unpleasant incident marred the end of the

ladies' stay at Dieppe. Nynee, on coming along the corridor to their bedroom on the eve of their departure for London, saw the very same man in the green baize apron whom she had caught with her jewel-case in his hand. This time he was coming out of the bedroom, and turning towards the other end of the corridor.

She cried out, and gave chase. But the man, without a look behind, ran at the top of his speed to the dark back staircase, and at once disappeared from her sight.

This time the young girl resolved to say nothing about what she had seen until she had once again turned out her luggage to see if anything was amissing; and when she did so, and found everything intact as before, she determined to withhold the knowledge of the fact that she had seen the man again from her mother. So many strange things had come within their ken lately that she was afraid Mrs. Pender's nerves might be unable to stand a fresh shock. But she was puzzled, deeply puzzled, by this second abortive attempt and disappearance on the part of the mysterious man.

When they got back to No. 2 Vine Place, they heard that their landlord's two nephews had reached home that very day; and while the ladies were unpacking, they saw Mr. Justican, returning from the City, walking up his garden-path to meet Neal, who came out towards him with a little flat parcel in his hand.

"What's that you've got, eh?" asked Mr. Justican, after the first greetings, as he followed his nephews back into the house.

"It's a souvenir which was given me by a lady, uncle, who told me to bring it to you," said Neal, in an agitated voice.

Mr. Justican threw at him one of his keen looks, took

the parcel, opened it, and showed that it contained a photograph of "Mrs. Black," with the one word "Remember" written underneath and thickly underlined.

He turned a little paler, Neal thought, and then he said, in his usual voice: "By Jove! My wife! How she's altered! What the deuce does she mean by 'Remember'? I should have thought she would have preferred to forget—as I do!"

And without moving a muscle, he stuck the photograph, inscription and all, inside the frame of the looking-glass over the mantelpiece, as if it had been an invitation to dinner.

The young men were silent, wondering, perplexed, anxious to ask some questions, but not daring to do so.

While they all stood without speaking, the sound of a loud, boyish laugh came through the open window to their ears, and looking out, Kenneth saw Harry Pender, on his own side of the wire fence, in a fit of laughter.

"Tell your uncle," said he, with the tears running down his cheeks, "that his beautiful Saratoga trunk, which was so much better than our English ones, is done for! The bottom's coming out!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Mr. Justican, calm and cool, but quick and agile as a deer, had leapt out of the window, to the young men's amusement, sprung over the fence, and run into the adjoining house.

CHAPTER XVI.

HARRY PENDER laughed still more when he saw Mr. Justican's feat.

"He doesn't like to be told that American goods are not a patch upon the English," cried he, speaking from the wire fence in the garden to Neal and Kenneth, who were sitting in the window-seat of their uncle's study. "When somebody moved the trunk just now, a piece of wood came right out of the bottom."

Kenneth and Neal both laughed rather half-heartedly at this, and Harry went back into the house to see what the further developments had been. Mr. Justican's nephews remained silent for a few moments, Neal softly whistling and swinging his foot.

"More mysteries about luggage!" said he briefly at last, without looking at his cousin.

Kenneth, who was very white, grunted impatiently. He had returned to England in a terrible state of depression, perhaps in part the result of the blow on the head which he had received at Madame de Mauriac's villa, but also due in part, as Neal knew, to the effects of his unhappy attachment to the fascinating widow.

Instead of answering his cousin, Kenneth rose suddenly went over to the mantelpiece, and stared intently at his aunt's photograph. He had heard the whole story from Neal of her confession of identity, but Neal had thought

it best to suppress the fact of her suspicions of Madame de Mauriac.

“‘Remember’! what does she mean by that, I wonder?” said Kenneth, musingly, as he looked at the portrait of the sad-eyed lady. “It’s a good face, Neal, not beautiful, but attractive in its own way. It seems odd to think that she was not a good wife, very odd!”

Neal had by this time joined him, and they were leaning against the mantelpiece together.

“I wonder,” said Neal, suddenly, in his deep, sonorous voice, “whether the fault really was all on one side!”

“Of course it wasn’t!”

These words, uttered with off-hand matter-of-factness by their uncle outside the window, startled both the young men considerably. Looking out, they saw Mr. Justican and Susan in the act of lifting the unlucky Saratoga trunk over the wire fence. The young men laughed in a shamefaced sort of way, wondering if their uncle knew what they had been talking about; and then one of them went to the door and let him and Susan into the house, where they promptly carried the trunk down into the basement, and then came upstairs again.

Susan went back next door, and Mr. Justican joined his nephews in the front room.

“So you want to know, Neal, whether the split between your aunt and me was my fault or hers?”

“Well, uncle, not exactly that,” said Neal. “We’d always understood that the fault was all on her side, and your behavior to us has made it difficult to believe anything else. But when I met my aunt, over in Dieppe, and she told me that she’d come all the way from St. Malo because she saw in a newspaper that one of us was

there suffering from severe injuries, why—why—I felt, you know, that she was human too, after all.”

“Very natural,” said Mr. Justican, as he sat down at his desk and opened the roll-up lid.

“And when I found her gentle and sympathetic, I couldn’t help asking myself whether there were no faults on your side too.”

“Well, there were—heaps,” said Mr. Justican, coolly. “You may bet your bottom dollar that in any matrimonial difference where the parties are two human beings, and not one human being and one angel, the fault is never all on one side. There! Are you satisfied?”

Mr. Justican’s movements and tone were as cool and grave as usual; but he had a habit of humming a vague melody to himself when he was at all disturbed: and he was humming it now. The subject of his rupture with his wife, therefore, was not proceeded with; and certain sidelong, frowning looks which he cast at the photograph as he spoke warned his hearers that the matter was not one to be lightly ventured upon with him.

Mrs. Pender, meanwhile, was enjoying to the full the luxury of finding fault with all that had gone on during her absence. She had sent Susan away for a holiday while she was abroad. And it seemed to her mistress that the girl had come back “more impudent than ever.” When it was discovered, for instance, that the bottom of the Saratoga trunk was coming to pieces during the process of unpacking, Susan, who happened to be in the room at the time, ordered, rather than asked, Harry Pender to go for Mr. Justican at once, and tell him what had happened. And in the meantime Susan had put a bold hand on the trunk, and prevented its being moved.

“Better see what Mr. Justican says before we touch it again,” she remarked, as she went down on her knees by the trunk. “He understands these Yankee gimcracks, and anyhow he may as well see what his notions are worth !”

Then Mrs. Pender objected most strongly to the impudent fashion in which, when Mr. Justican did come in, Susan looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes, and said :

“Here’s the bottom come out of your Yankee notion, sir !”

And it rather scandalized Mrs. Pender when Mr. Justican, who could be stern enough when he pleased, only said without any loss of temper, “Hold your tongue, you saucy minx, and help me carry the thing away.”

So Mrs. Pender waited until the girl came back, and then administered a slight rebuke.

“I was surprised to hear you speak in that off-hand tone to Mr. Justican, Susan,” she began.

“Oh, well, ma’am, he’s a Yankee, and they’re all lady ’elps over there. ’E didn’t think none the worse for me standing up to ’im.”

“But you should remember your place.”

“So I do, ma’am. An’ I make the men keep theirs.”

“The men! Susan, you forget yourself. You’re not speaking of ‘the men,’ but of Mr. Justican !”

“Lor’ bless you, ma’am, it’s all the same. Bless you, I know all the different ranks in my own sex : there’s the greatest in the land, princesses and duchesses and such-like. And there’s ladies like you and Miss Nynee ; and then there’s just women, and then there’s females such as cook and me ; and then there’s draggie-tails to wind up with. But with the other sex, why, whatever

they call themselves, princes, dukes, gents, or the loafers round the pubs, at bottom, when they talk to a woman, they're men, just men, every one of 'em!"

It was useless to carry on a discussion with a young person with such very independent views, especially when Nynee, who was also in the room, found it hard to restrain her appreciative laughter. But for the hundred and fiftieth time Mrs. Pender regretted that Susan's undoubted abilities made it impossible to send her away.

She had another trouble, poor lady, of a more important kind. For when Sir Henry Ruddock called, as he had promised himself the pleasure of doing on the first opportunity, he expressed more disappointment that Madame de Mauriac had not yet returned to England than Mrs. Pender thought quite consistent with his supposed passion for Nynee.

"A most elegant woman!" he said, warmly, in speaking of the widow. "I'm not a great admirer of Frenchwomen myself. But it's undeniable that they have great charm of manner: and it seems to me that Madame de Mauriac has caught that from them, while retaining all an Englishwoman's modesty and sincerity."

"M'yes," said Mrs. Pender, dubiously. "She's a very nice woman, and she certainly has a 'taking' manner. But I confess I prefer the perfect naturalness of our young countrywomen to the artificiality which older women bring with them from France."

"I have nothing to say against young Englishwomen," replied Sir Henry, promptly, turning with a smile to Nynee. "All women are charming, each in her own way; some," and he looked again admiringly at the pretty, blue-eyed girl, "superlatively so. But I'm sure

Miss Nynee will admit that she could not form herself on a better model, as far as social qualities are concerned, than Madame de Mauriac."

Nynee answered for herself with surprising promptness :

"I'm sure I couldn't indeed. She is so easy, and so quiet, and yet she is never to be overlooked. I do hope, mamma, you'll ask her to come and see us again as soon as she comes back."

Mrs. Pender was amazed. Nynee had before now shown considerable disinclination for Madame de Mauriac's society, and had roundly said that she was artificial and insincere.

"I don't suppose she'll care to come back very quickly," Mrs. Pender said, somewhat coldly. "She's very lively in her tastes, for a widow who has only recently lost her husband, and in a letter I had from her this morning, she says she is at the races every day. She was on the course when that sensational robbery took place the other day, when the Duke of Liverpool was robbed of two thousand pounds, and she says she's been so nervous ever since that she's left off wearing her pearls," added Mrs. Pender. "And I must say that jewelry is not at all the proper thing to wear when one is supposed to be in deep mourning."

"People are not so particular about these things now as they used to be, you know, mamma," said Nynee. "And Madame de Mauriac's pearls certainly do become her perfectly."

Mrs. Pender was a little mollified by seeing that Sir Henry admired the attitude Nynee was taking up, of apology for her fellow-woman.

But the artful little girl explained it to Neal presently,

in a conversation he was able to snatch over the garden-wall.

"I do my best to let mamma think that Sir Henry will be disgusted with Madame de Mauriac's artificiality, when he contrasts it with my 'youth and freshness' and all that," said Nynee, merrily.

"Why, so he will, of course," said Neal, gloomily. "Who could help it? I believe you're just as anxious to marry him as your mother!"

But the girl only laughed at him.

"I don't say he isn't a very nice man," said she. Neal growled. "But there happens to be some one else whom I consider still nicer." Neal beamed. "But mamma's ideas of niceness and mine don't agree, you see; and whenever I speak of somebody I think nice, mamma always shuts me up, and says she doesn't approve of very young men."

"Well, I'm not likely to be very young by the time she treats me well," said Neal, in a grumbling tone. "I've tried half a dozen times to tell her what brilliant prospects I have of—of—well, I don't know exactly of what, but anyhow I'm earning something now, and I'm likely to earn more."

And his voice sank to that depressed tone in which both he and his cousin had fallen into the habit of speaking of their prospects in life. For both Neal and Kenneth had an uneasy consciousness that they were not yet fairly launched in a money-making career, and Neal recognized the fact that he must have something more solid than promises to offer before he asked Mrs. Pender's permission to marry her daughter.

And in the meantime there was this lucky elderly baronet, rolling in money, in the way!

“Wait, wait. Be patient,” said Nynee, gently. She appreciated the difficulty of his position, but felt sure that his energy and determination to please his uncle would speedily give him the position he wanted.

“And in the meantime, while I’m waiting and hoping, this wretched old man will walk in and carry off the prize.” Nynee shook her head. “Oh, it won’t be your fault,” went on Neal. “You’re a dear little girl, and would wait like an angel if you were let alone. But your mother is a determined woman, and whatever you may think, girls get forced into marriages against their will every day. And you’re not any more strong-minded than the rest. You’ll give way at last, and be very happy as Lady Ruddock. And I? Well, who cares what becomes of me?”

“I do,” lisped out Nynee, forming her red small mouth into the prettiest little whisper. “And if you only had a little of the sense men never have, you’d see how cleverly I’m managing!”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, that while I’m persuading dear old mamma that Sir Henry will admire me all the more when he contrasts me with Madame de Mauriac, I’m really laying a deep plot. Of course he won’t admire me more than her. Sir Henry is known to be a rich man, and madame will do her best to fascinate him. And she’ll succeed. Already he admires her: it will take but a very little effort on her side to make him think me a little bread-and-butter miss, and to wonder how he could ever have looked at me when she was in the room. So I’m encouraging mamma to invite her here, and I prophesy that, when Sir Henry has met her a few more times,

you'll hear very little more of his deep-rooted passion for me!"

"Nynee, you're an angel!" cried poor Neal from the other side of the wall.

"Sh—sh! I hear mamma's voice. Go away!"

And, very reluctantly, Neal disappeared.

Mrs. Pender, poor lady, was always hovering about, in a rather perplexed and indefinite way, on the watch for unwelcome developments of the intimacy between her household and the one next door.

For Neal had been perfectly frank with her, and she had been shocked to discover that there really was nothing for either of the young men to look forward to but a share in their uncle's business of cotton-brokers' agent, which seemed an indefinite sort of profession, which might turn out well, and might prove the reverse.

So, absorbed in anxiety for Nynee to marry Sir Henry, she was always on the look-out to prevent meetings between her daughter and Neal, and in addition to this, she kept an eye upon Susan, whom she looked upon as an artful hussy, and a possible go-between.

On this particular evening the cook was out, and Mrs. Pender, who was a careful housewife who retained the right of entry into her own kitchen, went downstairs to see what Susan was doing when she was left alone.

But the kitchen was empty. So was the scullery. Mrs. Pender, who had a very soft footstep for these expeditions, thought she heard voices from the wine-cellar.

Now the cellar was a big place, which had been intended for the use of the house before it was divided into two; and the few dozen bottles which formed the

Penders' store occupied a very small space among the rows of empty wine-bins.

Mrs. Pender approached the door of the cellar, more and more convinced that she heard whispering inside. At last, opening the door very softly, but failing in her attempt to do so entirely without noise, she saw distinctly a human form flitting rapidly before the little grating that admitted a few rays of light between the shrubs and long grass outside.

"Who's there?" cried she.

"It's only me, ma'am," said a voice at her side, and Susan laid her hand upon the door.

"Stop!" cried Mrs. Pender, seizing the girl, and shutting the door. "There's a man in here. I saw him! And—I hear him, too."

"Why, ma'am, your dreaming," cried Susan, pertly. "There's nobody 'ere but you and me."

"Light the gas," said Mrs. Pender, peremptorily. "Light it this moment. The matches are here."

They were kept on the edge of the bin nearest to the door, and Mrs. Pender, without leaving the door, had no difficulty in reaching them and in thrusting the box into Susan's hand.

Very slowly, very sulkily, Susan obeyed her, striking a match half a dozen times, very noisily, before she got a light. Mrs. Pender waited, forming in her mind the phrases she would use when she discovered the offender. But when the gas was turned up, there was nobody but Susan and herself in the cellar.

"I told you so, ma'am," said Susan, calmly.

"What's that in your hand—under your apron?" asked Mrs. Pender, pulling away, as she spoke, the folds of muslin, and revealing the fact that the girl was hold-

ing a flat parcel about fifteen inches long and in thickness some six inches by eight.

“It’s only a present I’ve had given me, ma’am,” replied Susan, stolidly.

“Present! What present?”

“Oh, diamonds and jewels and such-like, I expect,” retorted the girl, pertly, as she took advantage of Mrs. Pender’s forward movement, and fled out of the cellar.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE feelings of Mrs. Pender may be imagined when the saucy house-parlor-maid brushed past her, and, with her impudent words still on her lips, ran upstairs at a rate which made it hopeless for her mistress to attempt to get within hearing for some seconds at least.

It was therefore some minutes later when, armed with the intention of giving the girl notice to leave her service forthwith, Mrs. Pender, having recovered her breath, reached the first floor, after having heard a door shut as she came upstairs.

Only one door was shut, that at Harry's room at the back of the house. Mrs. Pender, guessing correctly that it was into this room that the girl had gone, was just about to open the door, when she distinctly heard Susan's voice, inside the room, saying, in a muffled voice, as if she had something over her head as she spoke :

“ From Diah Symons ! ”

Mrs. Pender was so much disturbed by this mysterious occurrence, which seemed to imply that Susan was receiving strangers all over the house, that for the moment she lost her presence of mind, and stood, holding on to the handle of the door, uncertain whether to wait outside to hear more, or to burst open the door and try to catch the wretched girl in her delinquency. That she was speaking to some one was apparent, and that the some one was no member of the household was just as clear.

For Nynee was in the garden, and Harry had not yet come home from Somerset House.

Before she had made up her mind what to do, she heard Susan singing loudly to herself, apparently to cover some other noise. And then the door was opened brusquely from the inside, and the saucy girl herself, with a grin all over her odd little face, appeared in the doorway, and stood looking at her mistress with a little surprise indeed, but with the assurance for which she was famous.

“Lor’, you have come up quick!” was all she said, while Mrs. Pender, almost overwhelmed by such reiterated outrages upon her own dignity, was unable to decide with what awful words to begin her proposed harangue.

“Who is the person you have with you in there?” she asked at last, her voice broken with anger and irritation.

“In here! There ain’t any one in here,” answered Susan, promptly making way for her to pass into the room. “I’ve only been here to turn down the bed.”

Mrs. Pender paid no attention to her words. First she looked under the bed, while the girl stood in an attitude expressive of demure suppressed amusement at her mistress’s difficulty in getting her eyes down to the necessary level; then she ran across the room to the new cupboard, which had been made between the outer wall and the fireplace. But Susan, at whom she darted a savage glance, was just as much amused as ever.

The poor lady was quite overcome with her own amazement when she found that there really was no one concealed in the cupboard, where some of her own dresses, and some of her daughter’s, were hanging, with no appearance of having been touched. In vain she clutched at the garments, and looked behind them in search of the

supposed intruder. She had scarcely done so, and satisfied herself that no one was there, when a suppressed giggle from Susan made her look sharply round.

She shut the cupboard door, and with an uneasy feeling that her energies were not equal to the task of coping with the artful girl, she dismissed her by a gesture, went to her own room and put on her bonnet, and then called at the adjoining house to obtain the support of Mr. Justican.

Fortunately, he had just come back from the City, and apologizing for his dusty condition and his old City-going clothes, he at once acceded to her request that he would go back with her and help her to get some sort of answer out of the audacious Susan, whose conduct Mr. Justican could no longer attempt to defend.

On their way through the two gardens, Mrs. Pender put him in possession of the whole facts of the mysterious case. Although it annoyed her to see that he believed neither in the presence of a man in the cellar nor of another upstairs in the bedroom, she remembered how, on the previous occasion, she had at last forced him to acknowledge that she was under no delusion; and she did not despair of doing the same this time.

“But how could the man have disappeared from the cellar if, as you say, you were standing close by the door?” he asked.

Mrs. Pender could only shake her head.

“Perhaps I was not so close to it as I thought,” said she.

“There isn’t a second door to the cellar I know,” said Mr. Justican.

“No, there isn’t,” admitted she.

“As for what you heard the girl say when she got up-

stairs, I've no doubt that was only a bit of mischief on her part. You heard no other voice, I understand?"

"N-no, I didn't," Mrs. Pender admitted again. "But," she went on, with a flash of remembrance, "when she came out of the bedroom, the parcel I saw in her hands downstairs was gone!"

"Perhaps she threw it out of the window?"

Mrs. Pender had nothing to say to this suggestion; and as they had by this time reached the house, they were both silent while Mrs. Pender rang the bell.

The door was opened by Susan, who was looking preternaturally demure. Mr. Justican addressed her at once very sternly:

"I am sorry to hear a very bad account of your behavior, Susan. It's very annoying to me, when it was I who got Mrs. Pender to engage you, to learn that you can't behave yourself!"

Susan cast down her eyes.

"It appears you had a young man in the cellar just now."

"I hadn't," answered Susan, tersely.

"Well, you've been receiving presents; you admitted it," said Mr. Justican, more sharply than before. "Presents of jewelry, you said."

"Oh, that's only my manner of speaking," said Susan, with a toss of her head, not quite so pronounced as it would have been if she had been speaking to the lady, but still with assurance enough and to spare. "There's no 'arm in my havin' a present, and if I think as much of it as if it was jewels, why it's no business of any one's, is it?"

Mr. Justican did not answer the question. He struck the floor sharply with his right boot, and asked:

“Then, who is Diah Symons?”

Again Susan looked down, to hide a demure twinkle in her eyes:

“Oh, that’s one of my sweethearts,” said she. “A girl can’t be as good-looking as I am without havin’ sweethearts, and I’ve got plenty all round about here, and if I choose to say *to myself* as I’ve ’ad a present from Diah Symons, my sweetheart, why nobody can say there’s any ’arm in that.”

“Mrs. Pender says,” went on Mr. Justican, solemnly, “that she believes that you’re an associate of thieves.”

But this was more than Susan could stand. Suddenly raising her eyes, and looking Mr. Justican full in the face, she said slowly:

“Then Mrs. Pender tells lies. I’m no more an associate of thieves than *she* is!” And as Mrs. Pender uttered an exclamation of indignation, the girl added surlily: “Not so much, if it comes to that!”

Mrs. Pender could contain herself no longer. She began incoherently to protest, to exclaim, to appeal to her landlord, to express her feelings in disjointed words of helpless anger. Very gravely, very solemnly, Mr. Justican took up the word for her:

“Of course, after this disgraceful impertinence, you can’t expect to remain with Mrs. Pender any longer. I believe I express your feelings, Mrs. Pender,” and he turned to her, “when I say you wouldn’t tolerate her under your roof for another hour!”

“Indeed, indeed, I wouldn’t,” almost sobbed the poor lady.

He turned to the girl.

“Of course not. Go and pack up your traps this moment, and go next door to my place.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Susan's tone was half-impudent, half-submissive. She turned on her heel with the agility of a hare, and ran upstairs to the top of the house.

“You—you won't keep her? You won't take her back into your service, after this?” gasped Mrs. Pender.

“Guess I will,” said Mr. Justican, with a nod; “she's real smart for a help for one thing, and it will be as well to keep an eye upon the young minx for another. I'll soon find her out, if she's up to any tricks. You're too soft, too gentle, too good. It takes a hoary-headed old ruffian like me to manage such cattle. You're quite upset. If you'll take my advice, you'll rest quietly for a little while in the drawing-room, and I'll send Miss Nynee in to fetch your smelling bottle.”

“Thank you. You're always so thoughtful, so kind!” murmured the poor lady, thankful, in the midst of her irritation and excitement, that she had at least got rid of the distasteful Susan.

Kenneth and Neal, on the other hand, were rather glad to have her back at their uncle's. She was cleverer than her successor, who was, as it happened, under notice to go; and her quaint sayings amused them.

Kenneth got back his health and his spirits very slowly. And when Neal learnt from Nynee that Madame de Mauriac was back in England, he suggested to his uncle that he should take his cousin to the sea-side “for a change,” without saying anything about the reason.

“By-the-by,” said his uncle, “how are you getting on next door?”

“Oh, as badly as ever,” said Neal, despondently. “Of course little Nynee is always as sweet as can be; but her mother is decidedly chilling, while this old man she's

got hold of, and wants to give her daughter to, is positively rude to me."

"Jealous! Good sign for you, surely!"

"I don't think it's that. He's rather a conceited old boy, like all those country squires. No, he treats me as if I were a sweep!"

"Does he? We'll see if we can't alter that," said Mr. Justican, kindly. "I'll get Mrs. Pender to invite me to meet him and talk him into better sense."

Mr. Justican was as good as his word. And the result was that, two days after the departure of Kenneth and Neal for Hastings, Mrs. Pender gave a small dinner-party at which the guests were Sir Henry Ruddock, Mr. Justican, Madame de Mauriac, and two of Mrs. Pender's old friends.

The idea succeeded admirably. Sir Henry, who was a straightforward, self-opinioned gentleman of a good old English type, was very much entertained by the dry manner and cynical humor of his new acquaintance, Mr. Justican. And the shrewd American seemed to be equally pleased with the blunt straightforwardness of the country squire.

On no one point did the two men hold the same opinions: but their ways of looking at life were so different, that this gave a piquancy, in the eyes of each, to the view of the other.

Sir Henry delighted in a visit to town and a round of the theatres: Mr. Justican loathed the name of a play-house.

"If I go to your high-class theatre," said he, "what do I see? Some amiable and accomplished middle-aged gentleman occupying the centre of the stage, uttering a good many unnecessarily long speeches, and talking

when I want to hear some of the others talk. But that's not the worst of it. I could stand that. But this same amiable middle-aged gentleman is always making love to, or, preferably, being made love to by, two or three attractive ladies. Now, that's what I can't stand. It makes me bilious," went on Mr. Justican, while Sir Henry roared with laughter.

"Jealous, eh?" said the squire.

"Just so. For *I'm* middle-aged, *I'm* amiable, and if I chose I could be accomplished. But what's the good? I go home, and instead of finding all the ladies ready to fall down and worship me, I never meet a girl who doesn't look upon me as an old fogey, and prefer one of my rascally young nephews, who haven't half my years, nor half my sense!"

Sir Henry's laughter grew, perhaps, a shade less hearty. He did not care for this intimation that ladies might find men of half his own age more attractive than himself. Mr. Justican, however, with his imperturbable air, went on:

"It comes to this then, that either the plays are all wrong, or that human nature's all wrong. Anyhow, they don't agree."

"Try the music-halls, then."

"No. There, again, I'm confronted with the fact that the smartly dressed ladies on the stage sing only to 'the boys,' among whom I can't range myself. And the rest of the entertainment contains too much juggling. Having brought up two healthy boys, I've seen too much amateur juggling with my own hardware and crockery to be excited about the professional sort."

"Well, then, how do you amuse yourself? Do you hunt, shoot?"

"I used to ride half-broken colts on the other side

when I was a lad : never been across a horse since. And as for shooting, I should be sorry for the man who went out with me ! ”

“ Nay, you’re too keen-eyed not to be a sportsman. If you’re not one already, I’ll make you one. You must come down to my place in September, and we’ll have some shooting, and, later, a little cub-hunting. Come ; I’ll take no denial.”

Mr. Justican shook his head

“ Can’t leave my business,” said he. “ Where do you live ? Yorkshire, isn’t it ? ”

“ No. Essex. Quite close to town. You shall come ; I’m bent on it.”

“ But I’ve more on my hands than I can tell you : the bringing of a criminal to justice.”

“ Perhaps I can help you with my experience. I’ve been a J.P. for years ; and I flatter myself,” said the good-humored, pompous gentleman, “ that there isn’t a man who knows more about his work.”

At that very moment a servant came in with some letters for Mr. Justican by the evening post, and he apologized for opening two of them. Then he turned to his neighbor again :

“ Here’s a chance for your powers as a detective, Sir Henry,” said he. “ One of my nephews writes that a robbery of jewelry has just taken place at their hotel, and the whole place is upside down with excitement and uneasiness.”

“ Why, your nephew’s very unlucky ! There was a robbery at the hotel at Bournemouth where he stayed at the same time as I last year ! ”

“ Good gracious ! That is an odd thing now ! ” said Mr. Justican,

CHAPTER XVIII.

SIR HENRY drew himself up a little, and a look of deep wisdom appeared to spread over his rubicund countenance.

“Your nephews appear to be particularly unfortunate in their surroundings, Mr. Justican I must say,” said he, after a silence, during which Mr. Justican had once more read through very carefully, with frowning brows, Neal’s letter detailing the circumstances of the robbery committed at their hotel. “Robbery, murder, and outrage seem to form the atmosphere in which they live.”

“Come, that’s rather a sweeping assertion,” said Mr. Justican, with some dignity. “And scarcely the sort of thing that I should have expected a man of your fair and open mind to say of a couple of young men, of whom nothing worse can be said than that they are lively and spirited.”

The baronet made a deprecatory gesture.

“Perhaps I ought to apologize for being so frank with a man who, until this evening, was a stranger to me,” said he with courtesy, but with a little stiffness. “But, after all, you are naturally fond of these young fellows, and inclined, perhaps, to look upon their failings with too indulgent an eye. It cannot but be for their good if you look at them now and then with other men’s eyes, and ask yourself whether it is not more than a little strange that, in the course of about a year, one of your

nephews should have been twice in the neighborhood where a great robbery was committed, and once almost present at a murder——”

“ Ah ! ” said Mr. Justican, glancing across at Mrs. Pender and Harry, from whom, as he could not doubt, his neighbor had obtained this information.

“ While the other,” went on Sir Henry, “ was present at the murder, in the vicinity, when one robbery was committed, and was, further, the victim of a rather mysterious outrage at a lady’s house.”

Mr. Justican looked at him steadily, but with an expression of face which showed the self-important gentleman that he did not mean to be trifled with.

“ And what do you gather from these coincidences? What do you imply ? ” he asked, very curtly.

“ Well, to be frank, I think your nephews have both somehow got among very questionable company, and that you ought to keep a tighter hand upon them than you do.”

“ Do you mean, then, that in your opinion my nephews were actually concerned in these crimes ? ” asked Mr. Justican, in a low voice which was like the distant growling of thunder.

Sir Henry, seeing that he had encroached a little too far upon his neighbor’s good nature and sense of awe towards a British J.P., hastened to say :

“ By no means, by no means. But I think you will allow yourself that the spirit of levity in which, as it appears, they heard of the murder, and—and the light-hearted manner in which they treat these crimes which are brought under their noses, as it were, is an undesirable frame of mind for young men who are old enough to understand the duties of citizenship.”

"I don't admit that they do treat these crimes in a lighthearted manner," retorted Mr. Justican with spirit. "And I can tell you, Sir Henry, that I take it very ill that you should speak in a way which seems to cast a doubt upon the honesty of my nephews, neither of whom has ever given me a moment's anxiety except by the natural extravagances and irregularities of high-spirited young men."

"There you are!" cried the baronet. "You admit they've caused you anxiety. My dear sir, pray believe that I have no wish to cast any aspersion upon the young men. But don't you think it possible, that in support of the extravagance you speak of, and in the wild lives you acknowledge they lead, they may have fallen into temptation——"

"What! The temptation to rob and murder?" cried Mr. Justican, indignantly. "Sir, I shall call you to account for using such words of my relatives, unless——"

"Nay, nay, I beg your pardon. I have not the least wish to say anything to offend you."

"But you have said something to offend me!" retorted Mr. Justican, angrily, keeping his voice low, but speaking with fire. "Good heavens, sir! Do you mean to tell me that well-born young men, members of one of the best of your proud English families, would condescend to the trade of pickpockets?"

"Listen, Mr. Justican; listen, I beg. I admit I have gone too far with you, that I have been too frank. But surely you must know that there is now a widespread belief that these great robberies which have been committed during the last few years, at intervals, on both sides of the Channel, are not the work of common thieves, but of misguided gentlemen?"

“That may be, for anything I know. But you have no right to say that among those misguided gentlemen are my boys!”

“Pardon me, I didn’t say that. I meant only to suggest that when such temptations are about, young men with any tendency to extravagance or wildness ought to be kept under a careful eye. I may tell you that I am an excellent judge of character by the physiognomy—it is nothing less than a gift of second sight with me—and I read a certain moral weakness in the faces of both your nephews, especially of one of them—the one I know—which is as conclusive in my mind as to his character as is the impression I have formed of you, as a man who could not possibly be other than true to his principles, the principles of a stainless man of honor.”

“I hope I am a man of honor. And it’s one of my principles to stand up for my own kin. Now tell me, sir, what possible good my nephews could get out of the theft of jewelry, which would expose them to instant detection if they were either to sell or pawn it. For, remember, these thefts are not matters of a brooch or a ring, but of many thousand pounds’ worth of stones!”

“Ah!” said Sir Henry, with a knowing look. “Men like myself, who are behind the scenes of justice, as I may say, could tell you a thing or two that would surprise you. It’s not a matter to be babbled about to the first comer, but I may tell you in your ear that there is a strong conviction among the authorities that there is somebody worse than thieves behind these rascals—a receiver, in fact, who does things on a colossal scale, and who is so cunning and so clever, that so far he has defied all efforts to ‘spot’ him.”

"You don't mean it!" cried Mr. Justican.

"Indeed I do. It's even whispered that a man of very high position in England is in some way mixed up in these things—a man, that is, whose means are not commensurate with his position. There, I mustn't say more than that; but I've told you enough, I think, to justify myself in saying that the parents and guardians of young men with expensive tastes can't be too careful about their acquaintances."

"Sir Henry, although I'm sure you're wrong as to my boys, your words have, I admit, impressed me very much. Now as to this murder that took place here, or that did not take place, for we're not sure about it yet. Perhaps you might give me a hint or two as to what course to take to find out the truth."

"I shall be most happy if I can put my experience at your service. Have the police been informed?"

"Not yet. I'm trying a private inquiry agent who has a great reputation. I should like to have something more definite than I have yet to go upon, before I inform the police. Else they'll only muddle about, and put us all to a great deal of inconvenience, probably without any result."

"A curious case, isn't it?"

"Very. I wish you'd come into my place presently, when we leave here, and I'll tell you something more about it than I care to do just now."

"I shall be delighted."

The dinner, at which the preponderance of men over ladies had been so great that Mr. Justican and Sir Henry had been able to sit together by the former's wish, was a somewhat heavy affair. Madame de Mauriac talked a great deal, but seemed less at ease than usual. Nynee

was sad and timid in the absence of Neal. Mrs. Pender, the remaining lady, was preoccupied with fears for the success of the dinner.

It was with more than the usual sense of relief at the end of a middle-class dinner-party, therefore, that the guests presently took their leave. Sir Henry accompanied Mr. Justican to his house, and was surprised, on entering the back room, to find half a dozen men there smoking and playing billiards.

It was to Paul Crayford that Mr. Justican addressed himself first, in the hearing of the other men, who included Flinders and Harrington Jones.

“Crayford, let me introduce you to Sir Henry Ruddock, whom you certainly know very well by repute.”

Sir Henry was not displeased to observe that his name, which was fairly well known as that of a rich landowner and dabbler in the lighter sciences, excited some little sensation among the assembled guests of Mr. Justican.

The baronet was good-humored and pompously gracious, and when Mr. Justican told him that Sir Henry was going to help him with theories and suggestions about the murder which was supposed to have been committed in the neighborhood in the spring, Paul Crayford was visibly impressed, and expressed himself much interested to hear it.

“And here’s another man I should like you to know, Sir Henry,” said Mr. Justican, as he turned to Flinders, “the best, the very best amateur billiard-player I know.”

“Ah!” said Sir Henry as he shook hands with Flinders, who seemed a little bit confused at the intro-

duction, "now I think, from your tone, I've found out your weakness, Mr. Justican."

"Well, I admit it," said the host. "I do love a good game of billiards more than anything else on earth. But now I've something more interesting to talk to you about. I've got a lantern in the hall. If you'll come with me I'll show you the place where Mrs. Pender declares she saw the body, which nobody else ever saw before or since."

Sir Henry followed him out of the room, and then a strange thing happened. As he took the worthy baronet down the garden, and made him mount on a rustic seat to look over the wall on to the gravel-heap below, all the remaining guests in Mr. Justican's house gathered at the open window in a perfectly silent group, and stared out in the darkness at the two dimly seen figures at the end of the garden.

And not a word was spoken until Mr. Justican and Sir Henry came back again, the latter saying in a low voice, "My dear sir, I agree with you. No doubt the whole affair was an hallucination on the part of our good friend next door."

"I think so," said Mr. Justican, with a slight shrug. "She's a very excellent and a very charming woman. But ladies are fanciful, and fond of a mystery. And as for the appearances and disappearances from the shed, why, you've seen every corner of it yourself, and you know that what she describes to have taken place there is an absolute impossibility."

"It is, it is," admitted the baronet.

"Then I hope," said Mr. Justican, with one of his very faint smiles, "you'll admit you were too hard upon my nephews and their 'levity.'"

"I admit that too," said Sir Henry, good-humoredly, "and I wish they were both here to hear me say so."

And the worthy gentleman, after a little chat with his host and his friends, and a game for a hundred up with Flinders, in which that champion humored his opponent to the extent of letting him win by two points, went away to his hotel in the highest good humor.

Meanwhile Mr. Justican's nephews were having anything but a comfortable time of it at Hastings. Some ugly rumor had got about connecting them with the great jewel robbery of which a lady staying at their hotel had just been made the victim. A man, it was said had been seen going to their room after the robbery, and coming out again with a bag in his hand. As both young men, when asked if they had missed anything, said that they had not, and appeared perturbed and annoyed by the question, the report naturally arose that they "knew something about the theft," though there was no evidence upon which to accuse them.

The young men, sensitive and on the alert after their recent experiences, were depressed and irritated by what they felt rather than heard or saw of the demeanor of certain of their fellow-guests; and they decided to go back to town before the day they had originally fixed.

"I wonder how it is," said Neal, as they sat gloomily smoking their last cigarette one night, "that we seem doomed to such extraordinary and unpleasant adventures. You said last year that it was the presence of Flinders in the hotel you were staying at that brought ill luck to the place. But it isn't his doing this time, at any rate. For he isn't here."

"How do you know?" said Kenneth, not indeed with

any definite suspicion in his mind, but with the vague cloud of doubt over all his thoughts.

Neal started and stared at him, but he did not say anything for a few moments. Then he muttered, in a low voice: "Well, I don't like Flinders, but I don't suppose——"

He did not finish his sentence, and Kenneth did not help him.

On the following day they went back to town. As they sat back in their smoking-carriage, Neal was talking rather despondently, when his eyes happened to notice something on his travelling-bag, which was in the rack on the opposite side of the carriage.

"By Jove!" cried he, as he pulled it down on the seat, and looked carefully over it, "this isn't my bag at all! Somebody's changed it."

They were alone in the compartment, and could talk at their ease. Kenneth scoffed.

"My dear boy, your head's full of mysteries and sensations," said he. "It's your bag, right enough. Look at the letters."

By this time Neal had unfastened it, and ascertained that the bag contained nothing but his own things. This was pointed out to him by his cousin, but he still persisted:

"It isn't my bag for all that. There was a little stain, where I upset some ink over the cover, that I couldn't mistake."

"It's worn itself out by this time," said Kenneth, as he took up his newspaper, and left his cousin to his investigations.

So Neal fell to whistling softly to himself, without saying anything more about it.

That evening, however, when they had had dinner and were all in the billiard-room with their uncle and a few friends, Neal re-started the subject in a very abrupt way.

"By the way," he said to Flinders, who was blinking silently in a corner, while Mr. Justican made a "break," "an odd thing happened to me to-day. I found as I travelled back from Hastings that I had the wrong bag with me. Somebody had exchanged it with mine."

"Really?"

"So what do you think I did?" Neal went on. "I just opened the window, and chucked it clean out of the train."

Flinders started violently.

"You d——d fool!" cried he, his lips appearing suddenly to shrivel under the stress of intense excitement.

Neal looked at him steadily.

"*What, pray, what does it matter to you?*" said he, quietly.

CHAPTER XIX.

FLINDERS drew back a step, and he and Neal remained facing each other with angry eyes. Before either could speak again, however, Mr. Justican came up in a very matter-of-course manner, and said, "What's up now, eh?"

Flinders had already recovered his usual steely coldness.

"Oh, it's nothing," said he, shortly. "Your nephew told me he had thrown his travelling bag out of the railway carriage to-day, and I called him a fool. I was right."

And he turned away and walked to the billiard-table, where, however, he missed his stroke.

Mr. Justican made the little sound which with him usually did duty for a laugh; it was a sort of short rattle in the throat, accompanied by the very least little movement of the muscles of his face.

"Threw his travelling-bag out of the window, did he? Well, that's his own affair, surely, and whether he is a fool or not to do it, is no business of any one else's."

Flinders turned, met his eyes, and recovered himself completely.

"Oh, yes, certainly," said he.

Neal, who was excited, confused, worried, now turned sulky, and presently stole away to his own room before the party broke up. The first thing he did was to take

his bag, which he had unpacked, out of the wardrobe, and to look at it again.

And there, sure enough, he saw the ink-stain once more, as plainly as ever.

When he told Kenneth of this, he got little sympathy. Kenneth seemed listless and apathetic, and more anxious to go to sleep than to discuss mysteries. In fact, all he said was that he was tired of them ; and then, being ready for bed, he just jumped into the sheets, and left his cousin to bang the door after himself with an injured air.

But Neal was too much excited and mystified to let the incident pass without further notice. On the following morning, after breakfast, before Mr. Justican started for the city, his elder nephew asked for a few words with him, which he readily gave.

“ Well,” said he, laying down his hat, and putting his hand into his pocket, “ what is it? Want some more pocket-money? I’ve only got a fiver handy : will that do to go on with? ”

Neal shook his head. He was flushed and trembling, torn between gratitude for the kindness he had always received from his uncle, and fears as strong as they were vague.

“ Uncle,” said he, “ I hope you won’t think me a fool, but there’s some ugly mystery about that affair of my bag.”

“ Is there? Really? Well, what is it? How can I help you? ”

“ That’s more than I know. But I can’t help feeling that we’ve somehow lately, Ken and I, got among a lot of ‘ wrong ’uns.’ ”

“ Wrong ’uns! Pray, what are they? ”

“Oh, come, uncle, you know!”

“I know the expression in connection with race-horses, but not in connection with my nephews or their friends,” said Mr. Justican.

“Well, uncle, it’s in connection with some of them that I have to use it,” said Neal standing his ground, and then with his natural impetuosity rushing on with his indictment. “This Madame de Mauriac now, isn’t she a woman who used to call herself Anne Bowker?”

Whether Mr. Justican was surprised or not, he gave no indication. He was standing at the mantelpiece, with his back to his nephew, taking a match out of the box there; and Neal, who was watching his back, which was all he could see, could detect no start, nor could he observe any agitation in his uncle’s voice as the latter said, puffing his cigar as he spoke:

“Anne Bowker! Who on earth’s Anne Bowker?”

“My aunt said she was a woman you used to know,” blurted out Neal.

“Oh, your aunt said that, did she?” said Mr. Justican, by this time facing him, but looking at his cigar, which would not draw, rather than at the young man’s perturbed face. “Well, your aunt has a better memory than I, then, for I haven’t the faintest idea, at this time of day, of ever having known a woman of the name of Anne Dowker.”

“Bowker,” corrected Neal.

“Well, Dowker or Bowker, it’s all the same. Never remember to have heard the name before.”

Neal hesitated what to say next, what to believe. He wanted to trust his uncle: yet he felt that he could trust his aunt. He fidgeted, cleared his throat, said nothing.

“Well,” said his uncle, taking up his hat, “is that all?”

"No, sir," said Neal, shortly. "I—I—I'm not satisfied with my life here. I'm not ungrateful, but I feel restless, unsettled; I should like to go abroad, to try my luck in America, I think."

"All right," said Mr. Justican. "I don't think you'll find it as easy to rub along out there as it is here, where wits are duller than they are across the herring-pond. But do as you like. You don't mind leaving me, I can understand that. But don't you mind leaving Kenneth either?"

"I shall try to get him to come with me," said Neal, who was shaking with emotion.

"Humph!"

It was a short ejaculation, the meaning of which Neal could not gather. And his uncle left the room and went straight out of the house without another word.

Neal was on fire. He wanted to see Nynee, yet he dreaded to meet her, dreaded to have to answer the questions she would put to him. He was too much afraid of a rebuff from Mrs. Pender to make an unceremonious call before luncheon; but after spending the morning in a vain attempt to calm down his feelings by a long ride to Richmond, he presented himself next door at about five-o'clock.

Mrs. Pender, who was alone, received him as coolly as usual.

When he ventured to ask after Nynee, he was told she had gone to a morning performance with Madame de Mauriac, and the indiscreet young man thereupon broke out:

"I wonder you care to let her go about with that woman, whom you know so little about!"

Mrs. Pender drew herself up.

"Know so little about! Surely, Mr. Sheringham, you know that it was at your uncle's house I met her. I should not ask for a better introduction."

"*He* hadn't known her long," said Neal, bluntly.

"But he was quite satisfied that she was a proper acquaintance for us, or he would not have sent us the tickets for to-day," she replied, sharply.

"*He* did!"

"Yes. And more than that, he has sent your cousin Kenneth to meet them at the theatre doors, and to take them to tea in Bond Street afterwards!"

Neal started up, pale with anger.

"My uncle sent him! Then it's a shame, a disgraceful shame!" stammered he, hoarsely.

"Really, Mr. Sheringham," began Mrs. Pender, putting her hand on the bell.

But Neal was already at the door, stammering excuses. Before the maid could reach the hall, he had let himself out, and was tearing down the garden-path.

His uncle had sent Kenneth into the very jaws of danger and Madame de Mauriac! This was the thought that sent the young man flying towards the West End as fast as a hansom could carry him. He fought against the belief that his uncle could have done this of *malice prepense*, but the suspicion filled his mind that the day's programme was drawn up with the express purpose of bringing Kenneth once more under the influence of a woman who, if what "Mrs. Black" had said was true, was a very sorceress, in whose smiles there was ruin and death.

Crazy with his doubts and fears, his indignation, and his desire to save his cousin, Neal did not sufficiently prepare for the meeting, but dashed into the fashionable shop where he knew he should meet the three persons of whom

he was in search, and looked about him with fiercely expectant eyes.

Yes, there in a corner, seated together at a little table, eating cakes and laughing merrily over them, were Nynce, Kenneth, and Madame de Mauriac.

Neal could scarcely restrain himself from uttering a sort of war-whoop at sight of them, but he managed to get to the table without betraying unconventional excitement except in the look of his blazing eyes.

He raised his hat to the ladies, with a sort of sidelong appeal to Nynce as he did so.

"I'm afraid I'm intruding," said he, in a rather husky voice, "but I hope you'll excuse me, and—my cousin. Kenneth, can you come and speak to me?"

There was too much excitement in his face, too much sombre dislike in his eyes as they lighted on Madame de Mauriac, for Kenneth not to know what sort of interview it was that his cousin wanted.

"I can't come now," said he, shortly. And at once he turned again to the lady, under whose influence it was plain to see he had fallen more deeply than ever.

"Madame de Mauriac, I appeal to you to send him to speak to me. It's important," said Neal, bluffly.

Into Madame de Mauriac's soft, sly eyes there came a steely look that frightened Neal.

"He is perfectly free to go with you—of course—if he wishes," said she.

Neal, angry and excited, forgot prudence, courtesy, everything.

"Of course he won't come unless you choose," said he, sharply. "You've got him under your thumb."

Then madame rose from her seat, and stood in a statuesque attitude of injured dignity by the table.

“Mr. King,” she said, as softly as ever, but in a tone which sent a sort of shudder through Neal, so quietly confident was every note, “you will protect me from insult, I’m sure. I suppose we can trust this excited young man to be courteous to any lady but me; so I suggest that we leave him to put Miss Pender into a hansom, while you, to save me from any further attacks, put me into another. Nynee, dear,” and she turned to the girl with a caress which infuriated Neal, “you won’t mind my going. I don’t want Mr. Sheringham to make a scandal here in a public place. It would be bad for you, for me, for all of us.”

And, with a light kiss on the girl’s forehead, and a gentle gesture of restraint to Kenneth, who would have made a verbal attack on his cousin, she swept out of the shop, exciting her usual tribute of admiration; for indeed she looked, in her trailing, jet-trimmed gown, with beautiful pearls, veiled in soft lace, round her plump white throat, a graceful and striking figure.

Kenneth was trembling so much that he could scarcely speak clearly when they got outside the door.

“You—you will let me—let me see you home!”

She hesitated. But it was only coquetry. Unhappy Neal had done the worst possible thing for his cousin, in rousing this woman’s pique.

“Well, just this once,” she murmured, softly.

And poor Neal from the shop, had the unspeakable misery of seeing his cousin jump into the hansom beside the siren, and drive away with her.

It is scarcely necessary to say that this incident had inflamed the passion of the young man still further, so that, as they drove along, he poured into her gracious ear such vapors of youthful, enthusiastic devotion as

scarce a woman in the world could have listened to unmoved.

And Madame de Mauriac was not unmoved. Like most successful coquettes, she generally fell more or less "in love," if such an emotion deserves the expression, with her victims, and voluptuously enjoyed that sensuous gratification of passionate whisper and caressing touch which was all her essentially cold nature desired.

When they reached her flat, however, her ascendancy over the infatuated young man was great enough for her to reduce him by a word to a state of abject submission to her will; and from the ardent lover he became the humble slave.

"I am tired, worried," said she, as she led the way into the pretty little drawing-room, and sat down in the carefully shaded corner where a subdued light fell upon her bronze hair from the curtained window behind her; "I don't want to talk just yet."

"Well, I won't talk, then. I'll sit here and look at you," said Kenneth, as he drew a chair to a point from which he could study her well-cut profile at his ease.

Madame de Mauriac looked at him, and smiled softly.

"Poor boy!" she murmured.

He was on his feet in a moment. But she waved him away with a warning hand, and looking through the half-raised portière which hung between the drawing-room and the dining-room, said, "What's that on the table? Flowers, I think! Bring them to me, please."

Trembling with jealousy, Kenneth obeyed. He had already guessed that these flowers would prove to be a love-token, and when he saw the lofty pyramid of artificial-looking blossoms, redolent of Regent Street, and the

little card in the corner, with a few words scribbled on it, he was in a tumult of rage.

Madame de Mauriac read the words aloud: "‘I was not able to talk to you the night before last. May I come to-morrow?’"

"Whose card is that?" asked Kenneth, sharply.

"Oh, don't be angry! The flowers are only from that most respectful old gentleman, Sir Henry Ruddock."

"The old fool! You won't let him come! Say you won't let him come!" cried Kenneth, hoarsely.

"I can't say that. Sir Henry's a very nice old fellow, and he has a lovely place down in Essex, they say, and all those lovely things that extravagant women like me love."

"But you wouldn't marry him. Promise me you won't marry him! You whose every look and word and movement is beauty and sweetness, you wouldn't throw yourself away on an old man who couldn't love you as you deserve!" And Kenneth came nearer and nearer, till his hand touched the back of her chair. "No, no, you'll marry the man you love—you'll marry me, won't you? Won't you?"

And his trembling hand travelled down the chair towards her black-robed form.

"Marry you! Indeed I wouldn't do you any such injury! How could you support my extravagance? I should ruin you in a week!"

"No, no, I'll work—I shall have money!" stammered Kenneth, hotly.

"Not money enough for me! You can't guess what sums I waste even!" said madame, rising restlessly, and going to a little, fragile woman's writing-table that stood in one of the windows.

Kenneth followed her, passionately pleading.

"But I love you so! You'd sacrifice some whims, some tastes for me, wouldn't you?"

As he pleaded, his eyes seeking hers, then looking at her ungloved hand, he caught sight of a letter which was lying open on the writing-table. At the same moment she saw it too, and her face changed, becoming on the instant full of alarm.

In a rage of tumultuous, unreasoning jealousy Kenneth tore the letter from under her fingers, and read, at a flash, the few words it contained:

"If you flirt with that infernal boy, I'll go for him again, and this time I'll finish the business. H. P."

He knew, even as Madame de Mauriac tried to snatch the letter from him, that this was written by the man who had attacked him at the Dieppe villa. But another thing struck him at the same time; although he could not remember when or where it was, he knew he had seen the handwriting before.

"Give it to me," cried madame.

"Tell me who it's from, then," cried Kenneth.

They struggled for possession of the paper, madame white with fear, Kenneth shaking with passion.

As they wrestled, hand in hand, there was a crash: the fragile table was overthrown. It fell with force on the floor, and some receptacle burst open.

There came something like a flash of light on the floor in the afternoon sun. Kenneth, with a low cry, looked down in amazement and fear.

There, scattered all over the parqueterie floor and the deep pile carpet, was a dazzling mass of unset precious stones, a very glory of light and color, sparkling, brilliant, splendid.

CHAPTER XX.

KENNETH stared at the gems, dazed, stupefied at the sight.

Madame de Mauriac, after a moment's pause, during which Kenneth did not notice her face, so much astonished and perplexed was he by the sudden display of priceless treasures thus accidentally displayed, burst into a light laugh. Her laugh was always low, and somewhat artificial, not the laugh of youth and merriment, nor of complacent middle-aged geniality, but the more restrained manifestation of conventional emotion.

"How very careless you are!" she said, still laughing, as she went down on her knees and began to pick up the scattered stones; "you don't know what trouble you'd get me into, if through your clumsiness any of these were lost!"

Kenneth went down mechanically on his knees beside her, and stooped to help her. But she drove him off, stretching out her long slim white hand authoritatively.

"No, no, don't touch them! I swore to Hugh—I—I mean to the owner of the things, that I wouldn't let anybody but myself touch them. Why, do you know that some of these will be set next week in a countess's tiara?"

"Tiara?" echoed Kenneth, stupidly. Then he said quickly, "Whose are they, then? Who is 'Hugh'?"

"Oh, Hugh's your hated rival," answered Madame de Mauriac, lightly. "Just hand me that Chinese bowl.

If there's anything in it, turn it out, please, down on the table, anywhere."

She was sitting on the floor, with her hands and lap full of the precious stones. Kenneth, frowning, perturbed, noticing for the first time that the letter had disappeared, did as she directed, and then, as he gave her the bowl, returned to the charge.

"What do you mean by 'hated rival'? Is this Hugh the man who wrote you that letter?"

Madame de Mauriac had by this time emptied the stones into the bowl, and was looking about carefully in the carpet, to make sure that none of them had become embedded in the deep pile. At these words of his she suddenly looked up, with a rather haughty aspect.

"You have no right to catechise me like this," she said, no right whatever. Hugh is a friend of mine, a man who trusts me sufficiently to leave with me the very merchandise by the buying and selling of which he earns his living. These jewels ought by rights to be locked up in a safe in Hatton Garden; but, if you must know every detail of the business, he was dining here last night with a few of my friends, and as he was going to an hotel afterwards, we all advised him to leave the stones here."

"But why did he bring them here? It's an extraordinary lot of stones for even a diamond merchant to carry about with him, surely!"

"Oh, no, it isn't. These men, who've had the handling of these things for years, treat them as we do beans or common shells. He brought them because one of the ladies who was dining here wanted a necklace made, so I asked him to bring them to show her. She is a rich woman, and she chose fifteen hundred pounds' worth, and her husband took them away for her."

Kenneth, who had listened to this story with a frown and with close-pressed lips, said :

“ I thought you had no friends in England ! ”

“ It was true when I said it,” said she rather petulantly, “ but that was more than two months ago. I have made friends by this time, of course.”

“ Men friends, intimate enough for you to call them by their Christian name ! ” cried Kenneth, his tone eloquent of his suspicions.

“ Oh, I’ve explained enough : I shall explain no more ! ” cried madame, impatiently, as she rose to her feet, refusing the assistance of his hand, and walked towards the dining-room, her glittering black skirt trailing after her over the soft-hued carpet. She turned when she reached the portière, and standing with the bowl of jewels in one hand, and holding the curtain back with the other, she said languidly, looking at him through her eyelashes, “ I’m surprised, Mr. King, that you should interest yourself in a person whose word you evidently won’t take ! I’ve heard, of course, of affection without trust, without respect ; but I don’t believe in it. I’m too old ! ”

Kenneth was already creeping across to her, step by step, as if struggling with himself, struggling with the overpowering fascination she had for him. He made a gesture of entreaty, of humble submission.

“ Don’t, for heaven’s sake, don’t ! ” said he, hoarsely. “ Don’t speak to me like that, don’t look at me like that ! I can’t bear it ! ”

“ You don’t trust me ! ” Her voice was plaintive, broken. Her eyes, for he was now quite close to her, met his, full of reproach which cut the lad to the quick.

“ I do. Oh, I do ! Tell me, only tell me, that you like

me best. You've said you do. It was true, wasn't it? Wasn't it?"

Madame sighed, and made him retreat a step, waving him off with a regal gesture which, however, had no hardness in it.

"It was true. I wish it were not! For I tell you it's hopeless, hopeless."

"Why, why? Why should it be hopeless for you to love me, and for me to love you? Why shouldn't we be happy? Oh, I would make you happy! I worship you, and you say you like to have me near you. That's all I ask—all, all!"

"Ah, but it's too much," sighed Madame de Mauriac, as she turned again, and entered the little dining-room, which was another nest of ease and comfort and luxury, with soft green and gold walls, and heavy curtains of a darker shade.

Carved oak furniture, of light oak, and not the conventional, artificially aged sort of unnaturally sombre hue, harmonized delightfully with the soft greens and the rich gold. A few small oil-paintings, Japanese plaques with raised flowers in delicately tinted ivory, rapiers, old china, not too old and not too ugly: all these produced an effect harmonious and picturesque, glowing in the sunlight which came through tinted blinds.

"Why is it too much?" pleaded Kenneth, following her into the room.

She opened an old Italian cabinet that stood in a corner between fireplace and window, and put the bowl inside, locking it in, and taking away the key.

"Oh, why do you want me to go through the old story? I'm too old for love"—he laughed ironically—"too old for you."

"How much older are you?" cried he, eagerly; "two or three or four years perhaps?"

Madame de Mauriac discreetly left this unanswered.

"You," said she, "are too young to marry at all. And look round you—look in here." And she opened the door of a little bower of pale pink silk and cream-colored lace, more like the retreat of a fairy princess than the homely bedroom of twentieth century daily life. "How would you like to pay for these expensive whims of mine?"

Kenneth stammered out some protestations; but truth to tell, all this display of luxury, which seemed to him unparalleled, frightened him a little. Madame de Mauriac smiled, as she dropped the curtain and shut the door.

"But—but—but," stammered he, "for all your love of luxury, which I like—it's a pretty, feminine taste—you love something else more, don't you? You couldn't live happily among all your treasures if you weren't loved, could you?"

"Ah, well, I don't know! I've never tried."

These words, coquettishly spoken, roused his jealousy afresh.

"You wouldn't deceive me, would you? You don't care for this other man, this Hugh, any more than you do for old Ruddock? You are just a friend, a trusted friend, of his, and not—not what you are to me!"

"I think," said Madame de Mauriac, musingly, "it would be better for you, perhaps, to think he was more."

"It would not," flashed out Kenneth. "I'm not a boy, to be treated like this! I'll find this man—I'll meet him—I'll have it out with him!"

He was suddenly checked in the height of his passion

by madame's hand laid softly on his sleeve. She looked alarmed. In the depths of her languid eyes he read that, as he often thought he could read so much.

"You will not meet him! You will not find him! You must not! I forbid you!"

"But why? Why? Why shouldn't I meet him, if there's nothing between him and you? Oh, say there's nothing, swear you like me best!"

Even while he spoke earnestly into her ear, a listening look came into her face, a look he did not see.

"If I tell you that," said she hurriedly, in a very low voice, "will you go away—at once—quietly—without delay?"

"Why? Why?" asked he, wildly.

"Because I wish it. That's enough. Now, will you?"

Kenneth shook with the emotion which overmastered him.

"Yes, yes," he almost sobbed, "if you'll tell me that I'll go, I'll go at once."

A smile, one of those irresistible voluptuous smiles which intoxicated him, came over her features, as she laid one hand softly upon his shoulder, and said in a whisper:

"I—love—you—best—best of all." Then, with a little sigh, she threw back her head, and added, "Now go."

Before he could move, before he could seize her hand, he was startled to hear a man's firm footstep in the drawing-room, the door of which madame had shut. Kenneth sprang back, his face aflame.

In madame's eyes there shone a vivid alarm.

"Remember," whispered she, "remember your promise. Go!"

And she seized his arm with one hand, and with the other held open the door into the little vestibule.

“Who is it? Let me see. Let me——”

“Your promise. You will keep your word?”

For one moment he had to struggle with himself, torn by his jealousy, which told him that there, on the other side of the door, was the man he wished to see, the man the sight of whom would settle the truth, once for all, whether or not he was a rival.

But her hand on his arm, his pride, his honor—all came to his aid; and he kept his word.

It had all happened in a moment; the footfall, the remonstrance, the promise, the decision. Then Kenneth, with bent head and heaving breast, found himself on the stairs of the mansion, groping his way down, half blinded by his agitation.

In the throes of a mighty infatuation, the poor lad was held fast as with iron bonds.

In the meantime, Neal had brought down upon his unlucky head an avalanche of reproaches from Nynee, whom he put into a hansom as soon as Kenneth had driven off with Madame de Mauriac.

“It’s all for your good, yours and Ken’s, that I tell you Madame de Mauriac is not the sort of person you ought to be seen about with, and not the sort of person Ken ought to care so much about,” said he, stubbornly.

“What do you mean? If she’s received by such people as your aunt Lady Marshfield, surely that proves——”

“That my aunt doesn’t know much about her,” ended Neal. “I don’t mean that I know anything against the woman—as a matter of fact I don’t—for certain; but I’m sure she’s not the sort of person one ought to trust blindly, and you know you used to say so yourself.”

“ Well, so I did, and I’m not very fond of her. She’s so artificial, but she’s very kind ; and as mamma can’t go to morning performances because they make her head ache, I’m very glad of somebody to take me.”

“ Well, I shouldn’t go to any more, if I were you. Now promise, there’s a dear, to please me ! ”

“ But, Neal, do be reasonable. I’d do that, or anything else you wanted ; but what good would it do ? Don’t you know she’s going to Lady Marshfield’s garden-party next week ? Would you have me turn my back upon her, and annoy mamma and hurt the feelings of everybody ? ”

“ Oh, well, I shall be there, and I’ll take care you have precious little opportunity of talking to her or to any one but me.”

But the fates were against Neal. When Kenneth and he met that evening, there ensued a pitiful scene between the two young men, the one protesting, the other expostulating. Both were angry and unreasonable, and nothing but the entrance of Mr. Justican prevented a very serious quarrel between the cousins.

Their uncle had a very neat way of settling the dispute. He packed Kenneth off to Brussels that evening in charge of a consignment of cutlery ; and Neal he dispatched to Paris with a mission of inquiry into some business in which he contemplated acquiring an interest.

Thus it happened that both the cousins were away when the much-talked-of garden-party at Lady Marshfield’s came off.

Nynee looked as sweet as a flower in her pale pink muslin, with a black hat ; Mrs. Pender was matronly and slightly flushed, in that most dangerous of all costumes, a dark blue foulard with a pattern in white on it, which

she wore in conjunction with a bonnet containing mauve flowers.

Madame de Mauriac, as usual all in deepest black, contrived to look more strikingly well-dressed a figure than anybody there.

Yet the crowd was decidedly "smart." There was a celebrated beauty in cream and scarlet, who was a dream of delight; there was a leader of fashion in gray with touches of yellow, and there were numerous other toilettes which deserved to be chronicled, and—got their deserts.

Pearl necklaces were as common among the beautiful women as are the terrible barbaric strings of beads among ladies in the suburbs. There were diamonds set modestly here and there, in the way of brooches, in clouds of tulle and chiffon.

Nynce looked at the pretty faces, the lovely dresses, the picturesque scene of grass and trees and flowers and water, with dull and dreamy eyes. She found the whole affair tedious in the absence of Neal, having looked forward to that day for the chance of a long talk with him.

The heat of the day was tempered, for there were clouds over the sun. The green of the trees was fresh and charming; in and out of the marquees ran swarms of attendants, with sandwiches, cups of tea, plates of strawberries and cream. Nynce watched the busy scene while her mother conversed with one of the few acquaintances she met there, in a world which was not quite her world, and which was so much the more delightful on that account.

Nynce watching idly was struck by a little circumstance connected with the man who brought her straw-

berries. He had the most extraordinarily white and slim hands; a glance at his face showed an ordinary, foreign-looking face; only the hands were noticeable.

Struck by the circumstance, Nynee watched the man as he went up to a group of ladies, among whom she saw Madame de Mauriac. He stayed there for a few moments, with a little tray in his hand; and Nynee noticed the ladies, one of whom was a tall, stately woman, who was wearing half a dozen enormous diamonds pinned among the folds of a fichu of heavy old lace.

Then something else attracted the girl's attention, and she saw no more of any of the group, until she heard a buzz of talking, looked round, and saw that a crowd had collected a little way from her, on one of the lawns; in the midst of the gathering was the tall lady, who was speaking with some excitement, and looking about her to right and left, sharply.

The buzz grew louder, and presently Mrs. Pender rose to find out what the matter was.

She returned to her daughter with that look of almost affectionate commiseration with which a lady of her type regards the afflictions of the socially great.

"Just think, Nynee, isn't it dreadful? The poor Countess of Bradford has lost some of her lovely diamonds—had them *stolen*, she says!"

By this time every one was on the alert, and those attendants who had been near the group were interrogated in turn quietly by a gentleman of Lady Marshfield's family. One of them promptly made the suggestion that they should all be searched. And all the men, including, Nynee noticed, the foreign-looking man with the delicate hands, had to agree to go into a room to undergo the ordeal.

The crowd was still discussing the unpleasant affair, when Madame de Mauriac, who had been strolling with another lady, on a distant part of the grounds, came up.

"What is it? What is all this excitement?" asked she.

"Sh—sh," said Mrs. Pender with bated breath, "Lady Bradford has had three diamonds stolen, each of which was worth seven or eight hundred pounds."

"But when? When? How was it done?"

"Why it must have been done," said Nynee, joining in the conversation, "when you and the Countess and those two ladies in gray were petting Lady Marshfield's little Pomeranians."

"But who could have done it? There was nobody near us, was there?"

"No. Nobody but a man with a tray, and he's gone to be searched," said Nynee.

"What a very uncomfortable thing to happen!" said Madame de Mauriac.

CHAPTER XXI.

EVERYBODY who had heard of the Countess's loss was curious to know the result of the search which was being carried on. One man after another came forth out of the tent, with his head erect, and the satisfaction of knowing that his innocence of the theft was fully proved.

At last there remained only one man to be searched, and Nynce, who had been watching for his reappearance, knew that it was the man with the black hair and the strangely white, delicate hands.

She had a strong suspicion of this man, feeling that there was something uncanny and peculiar about the possession of such a mark of refinement about a man who was only a hired waiter. She turned suddenly to Madame de Mauriac, and said :

“Did you notice the hands of the man who is still inside the tent?”

“What man?” asked madame.

“Oh, of course you weren't here when they all had to go in. He was the waiter who was standing near you all when you were playing with the dogs, a foreign-looking man, with black hair. He had the most delicate-looking hands you ever saw, not a bit like an ordinary waiter's.”

“Really? No, I don't notice people of that sort much,” said Madame de Mauriac, indifferently.

Nynce blushed, feeling that she had been snubbed, but she presently said : “I think it would be worth while to

point the circumstance out to Lady Marshfield, because it really is a strange thing."

Madame de Mauriac looked as if she were again about to administer a rebuff; but something in the steady look of the young girl's face caused her to change her mind, and she said with a languid laugh:

"Very well, if you think it important, I will tell them about it. There is Lady Marshfield. I will go and speak to her at once."

She walked away, and Nynee saw her talking to their hostess, who was in a state of great distress about the mysterious and unpleasant occurrence. But the young girl was too far away to hear what she said.

It was with interest and some excitement that Nynee waited to see the white-handed man come out of the tent, for there was a long delay first. When he emerged, however, he bore exactly the same air of triumphant acquittal of the suspicions cast upon him as the other men had done before him. And Nynee heard the gentleman who had carried through the search say to another:

"Oh, no, the thief is not among those men. The search was most thorough in every case. I was very particular about that last man, because he admitted he was near Lady Bradford while she played with the dogs. But I am absolutely certain that he had nothing whatever concealed about him any more than the others."

"Perhaps the thief threw the jewels away!" suggested some one. "Or perhaps he had a confederate."

"Where? There was no one near these ladies but a few attendants. And as for throwing them away, we've searched the place for one thing, and we've had these men under watch ever since a few moments after the Countess missed the stones."

The whole affair was a mystery, and nothing else was talked of as the guests dispersed. Nynee said nothing about her vague suspicion concerning the man with the white hands to her mother, who was already nervous and uneasy and inclined to be hysterical over the occurrence. But she did mention it to her brother, who looked upon it as a girlish fancy; and she talked about it freely to Neal Sheringham, who returned from France on the following day, and who was daring enough to climb over the wall of the back garden, in order to snatch a *tête-à-tête*.

He did not laugh at her fancy; on the contrary, he looked down at her with a face full of passionate interest and said:

“Now perhaps you’ll believe what I told you, to beware of this Madame de Mauriac!”

Nynee faltered and turned pale.

“Neal, are you dreaming?” said she. “The robbery had nothing to do with her!”

“How do you know?” said he. “I don’t like the woman; I don’t trust her. Ken says enough for me to know she’s got heaps and heaps of money, and yet she says she’s poor, and Ken says she’s good. Where does her money come from? I tell you, I think it’s just as likely that she took the diamonds, or whatever they were, as the waiter.”

“Neal, it’s absurd. She was never close to Lady Bradford, for one thing. I remember just where they all sat, and there were two ladies in between them. Even if she had been the wicked creature you say, she couldn’t have taken the diamonds right out of the dress of a lady who was never within a couple of yards of her!”

But Neal sulked, and would not be convinced; and

when Kenneth returned from Paris that evening, he at once attacked him on the matter.

“Ken,” said he, going to his cousin’s room while he dressed for dinner, “I don’t want another row, old man, but I want you to answer a question : have you ever heard from Madame de Mauriac where she gets her money from?”

“What money?” asked Kenneth, flushed and restless in a moment, as he always was, when she was mentioned.

“Why, the money to buy the beautiful clothes she wears, and the beautiful things you and the Penders say she has in her flat, and for her beautiful life generally?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure ; it’s her late husband’s money, I suppose. What do you mean?”

And he turned fiercely upon his cousin.

“Does she go in for much jewelry when she’s in full dress?” asked Neal, drily.

Kenneth, who had begun to shave, had to put down his razor. The tone of his cousin’s voice, and his words, which recalled unpleasantly that display of precious stones which he had witnessed on his last visit to the lady’s flat, grated on his ear, excited, irritated him.

“What do you mean to insinuate?” he asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

“I don’t insinuate anything. What I want to know is this : have you seen any great quantity of valuable jewelry in Madame de Mauriac’s possession?”

Kenneth had to wait a few moments, for he was dizzy with agitation. Then he said :

“You only ask to annoy me. I shall give you no answer. Get out and let me dress.”

“Oh, all right, all right. I meant nothing to offend you. But if ever you should be struck by the amount of

jewelry you see at Madame de Mauriac's place, you might let me know, and then I'd tell you an anecdote."

"Tell me what you mean now."

But Neal had gone out, slamming the door. He knew he had said enough to pique his cousin, and that to tell him his suspicions which were certainly vague, would only lead to another quarrel. After an evening spent in reviewing the position, Neal came, without consulting anybody, to the conclusion that he could not leave England permanently until he knew how his cousin's infatuation for Madame de Mauriac was going to end, even if he could come to no conclusion upon the other points which occupied his mind.

The cousins learned from their uncle, during the course of dinner, that he had received an invitation to spend a week with Sir Henry Ruddock at his place in Essex.

"I tried to get the invitation extended to you," added Mr. Justican, good-humoredly, "but as there are ladies among the party, and Sir Henry wants to have the field to himself, he didn't see it."

"Who are the ladies? Any one we know?" asked Neal jealously.

"Rather. One of them is Madame de Mauriac." Kenneth reddened at the name. "And another is Nynee Pender." Neal looked up. "And then there's her mother, an exceedingly nice woman who may be expected to pair off with me; and then there are two charming country-women of my own, and a few husbands and such like."

"Rather jolly it will be, I expect!" said Neal, rather enviously.

"It would be for you boys, no doubt; but I'm not so sure that it'll suit me. For one thing, Sir Henry's got a yacht; but I told him I preferred a cheaper emetic.

And an English country house is always full of draughts. However, I didn't want to offend the old boy, so I'm going."

Both the young men were rather downcast at the news ; for each fancied that Sir Henry was bent upon proposing to the woman he himself loved. And while Neal was devoured by jealousy at the thought of the pretty things Sir Henry would whisper to Nynee, and at the influence which the beautiful house would be likely to have on her, Kenneth was mad to think that the baronet had devised this visit in order to enjoy the society of Madame de Mauriac.

This latter surmise was perhaps the nearer of the two to the truth.

Sir Henry had fallen more and more of late, as Nynee had prophesied that he would do, under the spell of madame's soft speeches and languid glances ; and he had indeed, as the young girl had further predicted, begun to think slightly of the charms of bread-and-butter misses compared with the seductions of maturer sirens.

When, therefore, the day came upon which they all found themselves at Sir Henry's house, which was a rambling, old-fashioned place on the flat seashore, it was evident from the outset to Mrs. Pender's angry eyes that Madame de Mauriac was first favorite, and that Nynee's charms had lost their potency.

The first dinner passed off brilliantly.

The scene was a charming one. Under the Cromwell ceiling of the long, wide dining-hall, with its panelled walls and ancient armor, was gathered round the table such a company of lovely women that Sir Henry declared the annals of beauty had never seen such a gathering. Madame de Mauriac, striking in black and pearls ; Nynee,

radiant, in her fresh young beauty: the two American ladies, resplendent in lovely dresses and magnificent jewelry, together with Mrs. Pender and Sir Henry's plain little sister as foils to the rest, did indeed make a company worthy of the compliment.

And when the ladies had gone to the oddly shaped drawing-room, with its low ceiling and many corners, Sir Henry asked Mr. Justican whether he had ever seen so many handsome women together in so small an assembly.

Mr. Justican uttered his dry laugh.

"You couldn't have asked a worse judge," said he. "I know when a woman's appearance pleases me, but I've no idea whether she's to be considered a beauty, or not."

"You speak as if you were no great admirer of the fair sex," said Sir Henry, who delighted in the friction of Mr. Justican's opinions against his own.

"Frankly, I'm not," said the American.

"You despise them?"

"Not at all. I don't concern myself much with them. That's all."

"Perhaps it's for that very reason that they all seem enraptured with you. Mrs. Pender, her daughter, Madame de Mauriac, every woman who meets you seems to like you. I wish I had half your luck in the matter."

Mr. Justican was eating greengages, with an air of indifference.

"It's caprice, that's all," said he. "My own wife ran away from me."

"Oh, you've been married? Perhaps an unlucky experience has made you prejudiced?"

"I think not. Perhaps my prejudices made my marriage unlucky. Perhaps a woman doesn't like to find out she's married to a man who feels just the same sort of

interest in her sex as he does in the doings of a mechanical toy, fitted with a little wheel to make its course erratic."

Sir Henry laughed long and loudly.

"Well, well, there's no knowing. She may have objected to your point of view!"

"Yes. Unhappily, I couldn't change it. So I went one way, and my mechanical toy—no, no, what am I saying?—I mean my wife, went another. That's all the story."

"You really mean that a woman like Madame de Mauriac, for instance, has no charm for you?"

"Oh, any amount of charm. So has a mechanical toy—when you're in the mood to be amused by it."

"Come, come, this is blasphemy."

"Oh, no. It's the golden truth."

"Yet I'm ready to bet she thinks more of you than she does of me," said the baronet, sentimentally.

It really seemed as if he was right. For when the gentlemen strolled into the drawing-room, the first person to whom Madame de Mauriac spoke was not her amiable and devoted host, but that hardened cynic, Mr. Justican. She was standing by the piano, a modern instrument which had been put into a charming, old-fashioned, painted case, and she smiled at him with an invitation to come and talk to her, which he promptly accepted.

"What a lovely old place, Mr. Justican! And what a delightful man Sir Henry is!"

"I quite agree with you. He seems very much attracted."

She laughed softly.

"Yes. They're not all so adamant as you."

"Oh, don't say that."

There was a pause, and then she said abruptly, while

her eyes shone in the light of the wax candles on the piano :

“ He wants me to be his wife.”

“ And you ? ”

She threw a languid, soft look of scorn at him and lisped out: “ How could I? with my ideas of comfort and enjoyment ! ” There was a pause.

“ What do you mean, then ? ” asked Mr. Justican.

She looked quickly up and quickly down again on the keys, over which her hands were straying.

“ He has shown me over the place already, and given me a peep at the family jewels. They belonged to his first wife—and—well, they are lovely.”

“ Well, marry him then, and they’ll be yours.”

She laughed again, and, under cover of a few bars which she played, her voice dropped to a whisper :

“ Oh, one might have them—without that sacrifice.”

“ No, one mightn’t.”

She glanced up again, and met a steady, frowning gaze from Mr. Justican’s eyes. Then in her own there suddenly glowed a stubborn fire.

“ Once I should have submitted,” said she, oh so softly, but with a steely look. “ Now——”

“ Now you will submit too,” retorted Mr. Justican, in a voice just as low as her own, “ or——”

“ Or what ? ”

“ Need I threaten? At this time of day? ” said he, simply.

And he walked away and did not exchange another word with her in the course of the evening.

Two delightful days of the visit had passed before there was a breeze strong enough for Sir Henry to take his guests for a cruise on board his yacht. When at last

the wind did favor them, on a beautiful, fresh July day, with the sun's rays tempered by light clouds, Mr. Justican was the only member of the party who steadily refused to set foot on board.

He loved them all, he said, nevertheless he declined to make his miseries a spectacle for their amusement. So the party had to start without him.

Nynce was as happy as a bird. The slackening of Sir Henry's attentions, which was such a sore point with her mother, was just the one thing the true-hearted little girl wanted to make her pleasure in the visit complete, and she was enjoying herself with a light heart.

She foresaw that, when once Sir Henry had withdrawn from the contest, her mother would grow less opposed to Neal and his suit.

If only he were here! If only he could sit by her side, and watch the flashing water dividing into clouds of sparkling spray! If only—

As she thought of him her eyes filled with tears, and she looked round, to be sure nobody saw her weakness. Madame de Mauriac, well-dressed as ever in a black serge with a white vest and yachting cap and white shoes, sat opposite with the faithful Sir Henry by her side. Mrs. Pender sat a little way off, looking somewhat pale, and wearing a fixed expression betokening no vivid enjoyment of the cruise.

Nynce's eyes travelled further. A man, one of the crew, was disappearing down the companionway. His back was towards her, but his hand was still holding the rail above him.

Nynce uttered a shrill scream: it was the white hand of the waiter she had noticed at Lady Marshfield's garden-party.

CHAPTER XXII.

EVERYBODY looked round at Nynee when the cry broke from her lips. Mrs. Pender, who did not feel well enough or steady enough on her feet to attempt to cross the yacht deck, called out to her :

“What’s the matter, dear ?”

One of the American ladies asked if she felt sea-sick. Sir Henry left Madame de Mauriac’s side, and came over to her.

“You look so frightened, Miss Pender. What is it ?”

Nynee’s first impulse was to tell him just what she had seen, and why she had cried out. But even as she turned to the kind-hearted baronet to begin her story, she felt a touch on her arm, and turning her head, saw that Madame de Mauriac also had crossed the deck, and was now sitting beside her on the other side.

“What is it, Nynee? Tell me,” she whispered.

And suddenly an instinct, a remembrance of Neal and his passionate warnings, checked the words on the girl’s lips. Instead of telling madame that she had seen again the white hand of the waiter who had been among the men searched at Lady Marshfield’s garden-party, she faltered, and lisped out, “Nothing,” in the proper young-ladylike way.

“Oh, but it must have been something! You’re not one of those silly girls who cry out about nothing!” urged the lady, rather sharply.

But good-natured Sir Henry caught the words and the tone, and thought them unkind.

"Oh, well, never mind," said he. "I suppose Miss Pender is not much used to the sea, and a puff of wind in the sails makes her feel rather frightened. That's it. Come now; wasn't it that?"

And he laughed slyly at her supposed want of courage.

"I didn't know you were a coward," said Madame de Mauriac, in ill-pleased tones.

And Nynee, glancing at her face, saw a look there which decided her, once for all, not to make a confidante of her this time.

Nevertheless she was ill at ease with her little secret. Nynee did not know exactly what to think; she even tried to persuade herself that her recognition of a man's hand alone was a preposterous fancy. But then again a moment's reflection reassured her on that point. The day was bright; her eyesight was perfect; her view of the hand had been distinct and clear. And a hand as delicate as a woman's was even more surprising a feature in a seaman than it had been in a waiter.

Sir Henry, touched by the pretty guest's supposed nervousness, remained by her side, and was so kind that Madame de Mauriac grew slightly jealous and sulky. But she did not move away from Nynee. She even followed the young girl when she changed her seat, so that if Nynee had felt inclined to confide in Sir Henry her little story, she could not have done so without being overheard by the widow.

But all the while the young girl worried herself with doubts and fears. She could not forget that the man with the white hands had been about when a great robbery had taken place, and she now asked herself whether

it was fair to the ladies in the house, all of whom possessed a large amount of valuable jewelry, not to put them on their guard.

She was still wondering what to do when, after a cruise of three or four hours, during which they had had luncheon on board (all but Mrs. Pender, who said she liked the breeze too much to spoil the enjoyment of it by eating), they sailed back into the little creek where they had embarked that morning.

Mr. Justican, looking beautifully cool in a linen suit and Panama hat, with a big white umbrella, hailed them from the shore.

Nynee's face suddenly brightened with a great resolve. Mr. Justican was the sort of person to confide in, a man who would find a way out of a difficulty if anybody could. So no sooner had the party disembarked, than the young girl contrived to get near to the American, and said :

"Oh, Mr. Justican, do let me come underneath your big umbrella, and then I needn't hold my sunshade up."

Mr. Justican was delighted.

"That's what I brought it out for," said he, promptly. "I knew very well all you ladies would be demoralized by the effort of pretending not to be seasick, and that I should thus be able to catch a charming companion without any trouble. Come along!"

And he seized Nynee by the arm and led her off in a march of triumph.

But Nynee, after joining in the general laugh, suddenly left off smiling, and said abruptly, "Mr. Justican, I wanted to speak to you, to tell you something."

"Do. Confide in me. Nobody has ever done so before,

and I don't suppose anybody will again. But do so, by all means: I shall like it."

"I'm not in fun," said she, gravely. "It's something serious, something awkward, and I haven't mentioned it to anybody."

"Well?"

"You know there was a jewel-robbery at Lady Marshfield's the other day?"

"Yes."

"I saw a man there that day, who had very white hands; and—I saw the same hands—one of them—on board the yacht to-day."

Mr. Justican looked down at her with a face which had suddenly become as cold and as hard as marble. He looked her straight in the eyes, as if he would have drawn out her very soul.

"You could swear to him?" he said simply.

"I could swear to—the hands," said Nynee, timidly, feeling as if the terrible cold fury which seemed to have transformed Mr. Justican's features, was something more than she could face. "I—did not see the man himself."

"How was that? Don't look frightened, child. You were right to tell me about this. There's some mischief brewing, and forewarned is forearmed."

Nynee described the little incident minutely, while he listened with the utmost attention.

"Did you see the man—or his hand—again?"

"No."

"Well, you were quite right to tell me about this. Now be sure you don't mention it to anybody else, *anybody*, mind!"

"I'll remember," said Nynee.

She had scarcely reached the house before Madame

de Mauriac came up to her and said, smiling and affectionate as ever :

“Pray what were you and Mr. Justican conversing so earnestly about, under the shade of his big umbrella?”

“I was telling him all about the cruise,” said Nynee, mindful of her promise.

Madame de Mauriac still looked curious, but nothing she could say availed to make Nynee more communicative, and with a remark that Nynee was an artful little puss, the widow had to go away unsatisfied.

Nothing of any moment occurred to mar the peaceful enjoyment of the next two days. They had another cruise one day, Mrs. Pender excusing herself on the plea of letters to write; and on the second day they had a most delightful picnic, with a drive back by moonlight, past the remains of an historical old abbey, with legends built into every cranny.

On the third day there was a thunderstorm, and Madame de Mauriac, who was affected by storms, had to keep her room for the greater part of the afternoon. When dinner-time arrived, however, she was well enough to make her reappearance, looking very interesting in a transparent tea-gown of black lace, with touches of gray ribbon.

Dinner was passing off as usual, when Nynee saw Mr. Justican, who had changed his seat for the past two days, for one from which he could get a good view of the creek and the garden, get quietly up from his chair and whisper a few words to his host.

“Dear, dear I am sorry! It’s the thunder. Did you ever try phenacetin?” said Sir Henry, attempting to rise in his turn.

“Don’t move,” said Mr. Justican. “It’ll go off as

quickly as it came on. I'll lie on a couch for half an hour."

"All right. I'll send Wilkins up to you with some ice."

Mr. Justican was already out of the room.

Everybody expressed regret when Sir Henry explained that Mr. Justican had been seized with a violent headache—every one with one exception. Madame de Mauriac expressed no sympathy, but sat with a look of such anxiety in her eyes that Nynee, taught by Neal to observe the lady and her looks, wondered whether she had a deeper feeling for the handsome American than mere friendship.

The weather was so warm and close, even after the storm, that the candles on the dinner-table had been put out as soon as lighted, and the meal had been ended in the soft gloom of a cloudy summer evening.

When the ladies left the drawing-room, they had to cross a lovely old hall, one of the prettiest in England, with a low ceiling, a polished floor, and lots of odd little nooks, some of them ancient and cosy with the shabbiness of generations, some of them modern and luxurious.

There was no light there yet, by Sir Henry's orders, but such stray, coppery beams as managed to struggle through curtain and lattice-paned window.

From out of one of the numerous nooks a voice came, soft and low, as Nynee passed. It was Mr. Justican's, and to hear him speak without being able to make out so much as the outlines of his face and figure, made the girl start.

"Will you stay here a moment? I want to say something to you."

Much surprised, Nynee stepped aside, leaving the lady who was with her, Miss Ruddock, to pass on in the wake of the rest.

By that time Nynee saw, to her surprise, that there was not one figure, but two, inside the recess from which Mr. Justican had addressed her.

“Come,” said he, “we can’t talk out here. Come this way. I’ll lead: you follow.”

Trembling with astonishment, Nynee now perceived that he was holding the wrist of another person, a slight man of the middle height, whom he led rapidly along a short passage to a little-used room where bows and arrows, targets and croquet-set were kept, with other things of the same sort.

Here there was more light, and Nynee looked from Mr. Justican to the man whom he was holding by the wrist.

“Now,” said Mr. Justican, “is this the man you saw at Lady Marshfield’s?”

Nynee, much agitated, looked at the man narrowly. He was fair, much tanned by the sun, and had a light moustache. She uttered an exclamation of bewilderment.

“No-o-o,” she stammered out at last. “He hasn’t the same face, but”—and she looked down—“he has the same hands.”

The man never moved.

“Ah!” said Mr. Justican, shortly, “then turn out your pockets.”

The order was given so shortly, so sharply, in a voice so hard, so cutting, that Nynee compared the effect of it, in her own mind, to a sudden immersion in ice-cold water. Not only she, but the man in Mr. Justican’s

grip, was affected by it. He started, began to tremble, and at last muttered in a low voice, while Nynee stood rooted to the spot :

“ You don’t—mean it, boss ? ”

“ Turn out your pockets,” cried Mr. Justican again.

And this time his voice was like the growl of distant thunder.

There was a pause, during which Mr. Justican and Nynee both stood as still as statues, while the man in custody gradually bent forward as if writhing under a blow. Then Mr. Justican shook him by the arm, with just one word uttered between his set teeth :

“ Obey.”

Before Nynee, who now wanted to get away, could move, the man with the white hands, with a sound like a wild beast’s cry, suddenly flung on the floor a glittering mass, which the girl, amazed and horror-struck, discovered to be a heap of jewelry : a tiara, brooches, necklaces, all mingled in confusion.

“ Will you, Miss Pender, ask Sir Henry to come here ? ” asked Mr. Justican, quietly.

The man writhed again, terror-struck.

“ You—you wouldn’t ! ”

Before he had said more Nynee had run out of the room on her errand.

The moment the men were alone together the accused turned on his accuser like lightning.

“ You—you wouldn’t give me up ? You—you daren’t ! Think what I *know* ! ”

“ Not so much as I do, I guess,” said Mr. Justican, dropping with intention into a sort of twang which was not usually in his voice.

“If I challenge you—before this ass of a J.P.,” gasped out the man, grimly, “you can’t deny you know me!”

“I don’t deny I know you,” retorted Mr. Justican, coolly. “But the fact that I know you is no reason why you should get off. Do you think,” said he, raising his voice indignantly, “that I’m going to pass for the friend of a common thief?”

The man made a movement as if to strike him in the face. But the American, alert, stolid, was too quick for him, and pinioned him by both arms till Sir Henry Ruddock appeared.

“Have you got a room strong enough to keep this rascal under lock and key till to-morrow, Sir Henry?” asked Mr. Justican, as soon as the baronet entered. “Then we’ll have him transferred to the nearest jail.”

“Good gracious! Why, what’s this? And—this?”

The baronet had picked up the scattered jewelry, and recognized some of his own family treasures among them.

“It’s one of the new men on my yacht, I declare!” stammered he, as he looked at the guilty man. “You rascal, you infamous rascal! And this ring! It’s Lady Cornford’s! Tut—tut—tut!”

“Show me the room, if you have it,” repeated Mr. Justican. “Or else we must take him away to-night.”

The man started again, and glared at him dangerously, out of the corners of his eyes. He had not spoken since Sir Henry’s entrance.

“Oh, yes, I have a room, the old strong-room, bolted and barred. Nothing there now that he can steal, though. So come along.”

They took the man to the strong-room, locked him

safely in, and took away the key to Sir Henry's own room. By this time all the household was in a ferment.

"Why, Madame de Mauriac, how lucky you are!" cried one of the ladies, as she recovered her own ring. "You're the only one of us the ruffian didn't lay under contribution!"

"I've nothing good enough to be worth his while to take," said madame.

"This excitement has been too much for you, madame, coming when you were upset by the storm," said the second American lady. "You look as white as a sheet!"

"Yes," said madame, faintly, "I—I do feel rather—rather shaky."

But she recovered her powers of speech and her vigor of movement in a surprising manner when she came upon Mr. Justican in one of the corridors, as she made her way to her own room.

"You look ill, madame," said he, in a low voice, but with little tenderness or solicitude in it; "this place doesn't agree with you. You'd better go back to town to-morrow."

She drew herself up, in a tempest of rage.

"I'll never forgive you," said she, between her clenched teeth.

"Is there any particular reason why you should?" asked Mr. Justican, quietly, as he turned to go to his own room.

When morning came the strong-room was still locked: but the captured thief had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GREAT was the excitement and commotion throughout the household when it was found that the thief had escaped. The strong-room was still locked, and the key was in its place on Sir Henry's dressing-table, where nobody but Mr. Justican had seen him put it. Yet there was the fact, plain as daylight, that the man had got away during the night, locked door and barred windows notwithstanding.

Happily he had taken no booty with him. And though Sir Henry vowed that the country should be scoured and the man caught, the ladies contented themselves with a sigh of relief at the thought that he was safely away, and that their lost jewels had been restored to them.

It was some time after breakfast, when the ladies were sitting about under the trees on the lawn at the back of the house, that Mr. Justican sauntered up to the spot where Madame de Mauriac, in a gray linen with a black sash, was lying in a hammock with a book in her hand.

His sharp eyes had already detected the fact that she was not reading, and he was not surprised to see the sullen look of resentment which came into her mysterious eyes as he came up.

"What train are you going by?" he asked, in a matter-of-course tone. "Shall I drive you to the station, or is that honor reserved for Sir Henry?"

The sombre look on her face deepened, and she fixed her eyes on him steadily as she answered :

“I’m not going to town to-day. I intend to stay here until the party breaks up, as arranged.”

For a moment there was a dead silence between them, each regarding the other steadily. It would have been hard to say which countenance looked the more dangerous, the more determined ; the man’s square-jawed finely cut face, with its firmly pressed lips and keen blue eyes ; or the woman’s handsome, slightly worn features, the glowing, veiled eyes and the resolute yet sensuous mouth. The look on each side was one of defiance, of remorseless will.

Then the man spoke—his voice was a very whisper :

“You heard what I said last night ?”

“I heard, and I refuse to obey. I don’t deny you had power over me once—the power your coldness gives you over every woman. But you’ve gone too far ; you’ve thwarted me too much. I shall stay. After all, who are you that you should order me about ? Are you so much better than I ?”

“There’s no question of moral comparisons,” said Mr. Justican drily. “Either you go, or——”

“Or what ?”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“I needn’t threaten,” said he. “You know me.”

Madame de Mauriac laughed very softly.

“But you don’t know me yet perhaps, though I admit you ought to by this time,” she lisped out slowly. “I don’t want to threaten either. But—well, you know best whether you can afford to quarrel with me. Perhaps you can : you’ve no heart to speak of, so why should you care what happens to your nephews ?”

“There shall happen to them no harm, madame, that you don’t have to pay for, whether I care for them or not!” retorted Mr. Justican, in a snarling tone. “However, we won’t waste words : you’re old enough to fight your own battles ; so let it be—*war !*”

And he turned on his heel without another word.

Madame de Mauriac stuck to her point, and remained at the baronet’s house. But she was not long in noticing that a change had come over her host’s behavior towards her, and that the attentions that he had at first bestowed upon her were now transferred to her younger rival.

The change arose in this way. The moment Mr. Justican left madame in the hammock on the lawn, he sought out Sir Henry, who was of course still full of the incident of the previous night. Mr. Justican had an uncanny suggestion to make.

“Did you remark,” he said thoughtfully, during the first pause in the country gentleman’s monologue, “that there was only one lady who had any jewelry to speak of, who was not robbed?”

The tone in which he said these words was too significant for the suggestion not to be understood.

“Good gracious ! Surely you don’t mean that she——”

Mr. Justican shrugged his shoulders.

“I make no accusation,” said he. “But the thief must certainly have been in league with some one inside the house, and your old servants are beyond suspicion.”

“But Madame de Mauriac is a woman of position, of fortune !” stammered the terror-stricken baronet, whose British prejudices against foreign titles sprang up into life under the influence of this suggestion.

“A great many robberies are committed which can only be accounted for by the connivance of women of whom one can say the same,” Mr. Justican said, with a shrug. “However, as I say, I don’t accuse anybody : I merely throw out this hint ; and a man of your experience and acuteness can decide for himself whether it’s worth anything or not.”

So Madame de Mauriac soon detected a coolness in her elderly admirer, whose devotion was not of the ardent sort she found in poor Kenneth ; and she had little difficulty in guessing who was the cause of this change.

Mrs. Pender was overjoyed when Sir Henry began to shower his attentions on poor Nynee, who would willingly have dispensed with them. And when, on the morning when they all returned to town, the baronet insisted on clasping round her wrist a beautiful bracelet set with pearls and diamonds, as a souvenir of her visit, Mrs. Pender was in the seventh heaven of delight.

Nynee was very silent, very subdued during the journey back to town ; she listened to what her mother said, but said very little in reply. She was making up her mind to take a decided step, and she took it that very afternoon.

Neal was at the window of his uncle’s study when the Penders returned to their home ; and Nynee, in acknowledging his salutation, gave him a look and a little gesture to imply that he was to look out for her. When, therefore, half an hour later, she went out for a walk by herself, Neal decided at once that he might take courage and follow her. And there a hundred yards down the street, he came up with her, and she at once held out her hand.

"I wanted you to come," she said, in a low, agitated voice ; "I want to talk to you."

"Not—not to tell me you're going to marry that old man?" said poor Neal, in an agony. "My uncle says Sir Henry paid you great attention and gave you a handsome bracelet. You're not going to keep it, are you?"

"I don't know," said Nynee ; "I wanted to speak to you before deciding."

"You'll break my heart if you do!"

"Now, Neal, don't be silly. It's time we should face things, and we must. I love you and you say you love me ; and you say I'm to refuse Sir Henry, if he asks me to marry him, and to wait for you. Well, I'd wait till I had gray hair if I could, but I can't. I'm not so weak-minded as mamma and Sir Henry think. Why do people always think, Neal, that if you are not very tall and have blue eyes you must have no more brains than a wax doll?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Neal, gloomily. "Go on with what you were saying."

"Well, though I'm not a doll, I feel I can't hold out for ever if they go on insisting, and Sir Henry does seem inclined to insist now—unless I can say to them something like this : I can't marry Sir Henry, because I'm going to marry Neal Sheringham. Why don't you propose to me, Neal? You never have, you know!"

"People never do propose, out of books and plays," replied Neal, with conviction. "In real life people just grow into engagements, unless they marry for money or something of that sort. Now you can't pretend you don't know we *are* engaged, you and I."

"Oh, yes, I can. We are *not* engaged," replied Nynee, promptly. "You must either give me up, Neal, and let

me drift into a marriage I don't like and don't want, or you must stand up like a man to your uncle and get a definite position in his employment or in somebody else's, and then bring me a ring—I don't care what sort of ring, *one out of a Christmas cracker will do—but I must have something tangible to show mamma, so that I can say: 'Look! I can't marry anybody but the man I love, and who loves me.'*"

"Well, you can say that now, can't you?" said poor Neal, dismally.

"No, I can't, and you know I can't. Mamma says, 'What is he doing? How can he marry?' And I have to stammer and say I don't know."

"It's quite true," said Neal, who was shaking with agitation. "And you're right. I will have a definite answer from my uncle; and if I can't get a satisfactory position in his office, I'll find one in another. And now," said he, "let us turn into this street, and go back by the lane that——"

"No," said Nynee, stoutly, foreseeing his intention, "I won't be kissed—in the lane, like the housemaids!"

"You will, you must," pleaded Neal. "Remember, you're just as badly off as any housemaid, for 'no followers are allowed' to you except the one you don't want, and your 'young man' is ashamed to show himself at the front-door!"

Nynee still protested, but she yielded all the same. And when they were walking up the lane at the back of the houses, she told him the story of the robbery by the man with the white hands, and of Mr. Justice's making him restore the jewelry and getting him locked up.

Neal listened with a frenzied delight she could not

understand. When, however, Nynce came to the episode of the thief's disappearance in the night, he said, promptly :

“That was Madame de Mauriac's doing, I'll swear !”

“Oh, hush ! For shame, Neal ! You're the most prejudiced creature I ever met.”

Neal would not retract, but preserved a grim silence while she finished her story. And as they had by that time reached the end of the lane, they separated, he returning by one street, while she went back home by another, to avoid the torrent of reproaches which would have been her lot if she had been seen by her mother with poor Neal.

When the young man got back home, he burst in upon his cousin with a face full of excitement. Kenneth, who looked pale and heavy-eyed, frowned languidly, glancing up from the book he was reading as he lay sprawling on the sofa in the back room.

“What on earth's the matter with you ?” he asked, petulantly.

“Why, old chap, I've got great news, grand news,” said he. And sitting on the end of the sofa, and looking down into his cousin's face, which soon became as much interested as his own, he told him the story of the robbery, and of Mr. Justican's energetic action.

Kenneth sat up, and heaved a great sigh of relief, as he stared into his cousin's face.

“Well, thank heaven !” he said, in a low voice. “That—that proves it's all right !”

That was all he said, being of a more reticent disposition than the impulsive Neal, who did not hesitate to say :

"That puts an end to the awful doubts we've had—both of us—about uncle."

"Sh—sh," said Kenneth.

Neal slid down beside him on the sofa, so that he could lower his voice :

"Well, we can say it now," he said, with a great breath of relief. "I couldn't help thinking it looked fishy, awfully fishy, and so did you. But now we see what a firm stand he takes against anything wrong, why, we can hold up our heads and breathe freely again."

"Yes," said Kenneth, simply.

He passed his handkerchief over his forehead, sufficiently proving by this significant action the importance this disclosure had for him. But he was very silent, very quiet.

It was Neal who presently said: "I say, Ken, did you ever wonder who it was that committed that murder, eh?"

"What murder?" asked Kenneth, lowering his voice, and turning a little paler than he was before.

And he started as the wind rustled the trees outside in the garden.

"Oh, you know. The murder of poor old Kaspar. You don't think uncle—knew anything about that, do you?" he added in a whisper into his cousin's ear.

Kenneth made a rapid gesture, as if thrusting away from him, for the hundredth time, a horrible idea.

"Good heavens, don't think of such things!" said he, hoarsely. "Do you remember what murder means?"

Neal trembled.

"Somebody about here must have known about it, if they didn't do it," he persisted, in the same tone. "I'm always asking myself which of those three men I hate,

—Flinders, or Crayford, or Jones—is the most likely to——”

Kenneth gave him a significant look. He had quick ears, and he was not surprised when, a moment later, the door was opened softly, and Mr. Justican entered the room.

“Kenneth,” said he, gravely, “I want to speak to you. Never mind, Neal, you needn’t go. I want,” pursued Mr. Justican, standing by the window, where he could watch their faces, but they could only see him in black outline against the sunshine outside, “to advise you to give up your visits to a certain fascinating Anglo-French friend of ours——”

“Uncle!” cried Kenneth, hoarsely.

“Oh, listen to me. I’m an old hand, and you can trust me, can’t you, to read character more accurately than you. Well, a most unpleasant incident took place down in Essex—a robbery, in fact; and I’m half inclined to suspect that our fair friend knew something about it.”

Kenneth started up.

“I won’t believe——”

“Right, quite right. Believe nothing till it’s proved. In the meantime—be careful. Don’t fall deeper in love than you can fall out of easily. It’s a maxim I’ve always practised myself with good results.”

And without waiting for an explosion of vehement emotion, Mr. Justican just put one leg over the window-sill and dropped into the garden, where he was soon at work with his shears and his pruning-knife.

Kenneth was with difficulty dissuaded from going that moment to see Madame de Mauriac, to pour out in a torrent his love, his protestations: when he did get away,

after dinner, to the flat, he was met by the assurance that madame was "not at home."

And this was his fate every day for the next three days, during which he wrote her wild letters, and worked himself into a fever of despair because he got no answers.

Nynee was more fortunate. Looking, as she did, upon Neal's suspicions of Madame de Mauriac as the result of empty prejudice, she readily fell in with her mother's suggestion that she should call upon madame one afternoon, with some trivial message. Mrs. Pender's real reason for sending her was to find out whether Sir Henry, of whom they had heard nothing since leaving his house, had been calling at the flat.

When Nynee got to Madame de Mauriac's, she was at once shown into the little drawing-room, as usual, and asked to wait, as madame was dressing to go out.

Nynee sat back in one of the cosy chairs near the window, watching the goldfish in a big aquarium which was the latest addition to the furniture of the flat.

She was more than half hidden from sight by the heavy window-curtain, and she had sat looking at the fish for some minutes when she heard the click of a door-handle, and looked out, expecting to see Madame de Mauriac coming in through the dining-room.

But the person she saw behind the portière was not Madame de Mauriac; it was a man. He was standing with his back to Nynee, and she had a curious feeling that she had seen him before. He was dressed in what looked like a workman's best clothes, and she could see by a half-glimpse of his profile that he had black hair and bushy black eyebrows. The next moment he put up his hand to his head, and she recognized the white, slim hand

of the jewel-thief who had been locked in Sir Henry's strong-room.

She held her breath.

Staring at him with starting eyes, Nynce saw him peel off his thick eyebrows, and his black wig. And as he turned towards her, on his way to enter the drawing-room, she recognized, with a gasp of amazement, her neighbor's frequent guest, Mr. Flinders.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IF Nynee was surprised at recognizing Flinders, her astonishment was not greater than his. Indeed, the blank consternation on his face when the young girl sprang up from her seat behind the curtains, and came out into the room, rendered him for the moment absolutely speechless.

"Who—who are you?" gasped Nynee. "What are you? And what are you doing here?"

She gasped out the words mechanically, staring all the time at his colorless face, with the thin lips and the pale eyes and eyebrows. She had never liked the look of this man, and she was probably affected by the dislike Neal had to him; but she had never before been so much impressed by the strange absence of color and human warmth in his face.

"I'm a friend of Madame de Mauriac's," said he, after a moment's hesitation, "and of Mr. Justican's who lives next door to you, Miss Pender. Surely you recognize me! I'm often there, playing billiards with him and with his nephews."

Nynee kept her eyes fixed on his face.

"Recognize you!" echoed she. "Of course I do. You're the man I saw at Lady Marshfield's garden party, disguised as a waiter. Oh, yes, it's of no use for you to shake your head: I know it was you disguised. And then again I saw you at Sir Henry Ruddock's. And I know who you are: you're a thief!"

Flinders let her finish, without betraying the least excitement. Whatever emotion he had felt on finding himself discovered he had completely mastered by this time.

“Ah!” said he, “you’ve been too clever for me. I shall have to let you know all about it.”

“Thank you, I know quite enough,” said Nynee.

And without having given any warning of the intention she had been maturing, she suddenly sprang across the room to the door, with the intention of letting herself out. As she did so, she heard a bolt drawn, and when she tried the handle, she found that the door was fastened.

A sudden terror seized her; she looked round, and saw that Flinders was standing, with his arms folded, leaning against the mantelpiece. Her brain seemed to spin; her heart beat wildly. What was this that had happened to her? Had the door been fastened on the outside by some one who was listening there? Or had it been secured by this man himself by some contrivance she did not understand?

Feeling unable to cope with a scoundrel of so much resource, she ran across to the door which led into the dining-room and thence to Madame de Mauriac’s room. But Flinders intercepted her, and stood in the way.

“I must beg you, Miss Pender,” said he, “to hear me before you go away.”

“I have no choice,” said Nynee, clenching her teeth tightly, and fighting against a strong inclination to burst into tears. “And if I were to find Madame de Mauriac, of course it would make no difference. No doubt she is in the plot with you!”

She controlled herself by a strong effort, sat down on

one of the pretty little Louis Quinze chairs, drummed softly with her fingers on the side-table near her.

Flinders came away from the doorway, and suddenly assumed a different manner, becoming in a moment courteous, gentle, deferential.

"There is no plot," said he, "and there's nothing further from my thoughts than any wish to frighten you. When I've told you who I am, you will see that I could not let you run away with a false impression. You remember you called me a thief!"

Nynee looked up, flushed and trembling.

"Didn't I see you with the jewelry in your hands, at Sir Henry's?" asked she, in a tremulous voice. "Didn't I see Mr. Justican take it away from you, and get you locked up in the strong-room?"

"From which, however, I was released by him before morning," added Flinders.

Nynee stared at him.

"By him?" echoed she, incredulously.

"Yes. Couldn't you see he knew me?"

"N-n-no, I never thought that."

"You heard me call him 'boss'? Don't you know what that means?"

"It means 'master,' 'employer,' I suppose. But Mr. Justican is not your employer?"

"How do you know?"

"Mr. Justican the employer of a thief! A thief whom he forced to disgorge what he had stolen, too! It's absurd! And I wonder how you dare say such a thing!" cried Nynee, boldly and indignantly.

"Oh, no, I didn't say that he was the employer of a thief. He is the employer of a—*detective*," said Flinders, lowering his voice.

Nynee sprang up.

"What?" stammered she. "A detective! Is that what you are?" Flinders nodded. "But a detective doesn't steal himself!"

"No. He is set on the track of those who do."

"But Mr. Justican made you give the jewelry up!"

"Yes. But I had not stolen it: I had taken it away from the thief who did. And Mr. Justican played me this trick, because I was acting without his orders."

"By whose orders, then, did you do it?" asked Nynee, puzzled.

"I would rather not say. But I've told you enough to satisfy you: you have only to question Mr. Justican himself to find out that I've told you the truth. I'm a private detective; have been for years, and never been found out before. I hear you knew me by my hands: I can only say nobody ever noticed them before."

Nynee was still puzzled.

"How was it, if you are a detective," she asked quietly, "that you let the countess have her diamonds stolen almost under your nose?"

Mr. Flinders looked rather taken aback by this question.

"Nobody is infallible," said he. "And the fact is, the gang who've been at work over here lately might puzzle old Nick himself! It's possible the rascals may have got to know me in the same way that you did, by my hands: I must be more careful for the future."

Nynee was silent. A moment later she heard the door of Madame de Mauriac's bedroom open, and she sank down once more into her chair with a frightened look on her face.

"I—I don't understand," she faltered, drawing one hand across her forehead in a bewildered manner. "What

has Madame de Mauriac to do with you? Why have I always seen you and her near together? Is *she* a detective too? Or——”

She did not finish her sentence, but a deep flush began to spread over her countenance.

Mr. Flinders had turned away, and was half-in, half-out of the drawing-room, speaking, Nynee thought, or making some sign to Madame de Mauriac, whom she herself could not yet see.

A moment later he had stepped backwards, and Madame de Mauriac, who looked very pale in spite of possible aids to nature in the manufacture of her complexion, came into the room. She was dressed in black, as usual, and was wearing a large black hat trimmed with ostrich feathers, and a long thin gold chain studded with diamonds round her neck.

She looked at Nynee in a sidelong way which the girl noticed particularly.

“Madame de Mauriac,” cried she, springing up and deciding to have the matter settled at once “this man says he’s a detective. Is it true?”

“Yes, it’s true. But I didn’t want anybody to know it,” said she, somewhat petulantly. “Why are you so inquisitive? What business is it of yours?”

Nynee was angry at this most absurd speech.

“How could I help being inquisitive,” she asked, sharply, “when I saw him take off a wig and false eyebrows before my eyes? Who would have seen such a thing without remarking upon it? And when, too, I knew I had seen him before—*twice* before!” she added significantly.

Madame de Mauriac suddenly lost her temper, and stamping her foot with an outburst of rage in strong con-

trast with her usual subdued and refined manners, turned upon Flinders with her eyes flashing and her voice as hard and rasping as that of a common virago.

“Why are you such a fool?” she cried. “It’s all your fault, all the result of your imbecility! Why didn’t you look round you before you ‘gave yourself away’? A detective indeed! You’re a common or garden idiot!”

To hear these slangy expressions from the lips which usually lisped out nothing but sweet words and graceful compliments was such a shock to Nynee that she almost shuddered. But a greater shock still was in store for her. While she still stood with her eyes fixed upon Madame de Mauriac she was startled to hear the sound of a sob. And looking quickly round, she saw Flinders sitting by the writing-table, with his head in his hands, in an attitude of abject grief.

The sight was so strange, so dreadful, that Nynee clasped her hands, and whispered to Madame de Mauriac, “Oh, let me go away, let me go!”

Madame frowned impatiently. Instead of answering, she began to pace up and down the little drawing-room in an undecided manner, alternately glancing at Flinders, who was already recovering himself, and at Nynee, who looked away from both of them, biting her lips, pale and alarmed. Madame was evidently not less troubled than she was, though her anxiety was of a different kind.

When at last Flinders jumped up from his chair, having mastered the paroxysm of emotion which had so suddenly seized him, Madame de Mauriac stopped short, and said to Nynee:

“Don’t look so frightened, child. There’s nothing for you to worry about. It is we who ought to be nervous. You’ve found out too much with your sharp little eyes.

But you must hold your tongue, do you hear? You must promise to say nothing about this to any one."

"Oh, I can't promise that," said Nynee, quickly.

An angry light shone for a moment in madame's long hazel eyes. The next moment she had apparently recovered her composure, and her voice was as soft as ever.

"Why, whom do you want to tell? Your mother?"

"Oh, no, I shouldn't worry mamma——"

"That's all right! Well, and you'd better not tell your brother either."

"No, I don't want to. But——"

"Ah! Neal Sheringham, perhaps?" Nynee blushed. "You'd better not. Look here, if you must talk to somebody about it, why not to Mr. Justican?"

"Mr. Justican?"

"Yes, he knows all about it, you know, and will explain more about this than either Mr. Flinders or I care to do."

"But why should he——" When she had got so far as this Nynee suddenly stopped short, and every trace of color left her pretty little round face. "Oh!" cried she, under her breath, "I—think—I understand! Is he—is Mr. Justican—connected with the pol——"

She was not allowed to finish the word. Madame de Mauriac put her finger to her lip, while Flinders gave a sudden start. Nynee turned quickly to him.

"Is he? Will *you* tell me, Mr. Flinders?" she asked, abruptly.

Flinders looked down on the carpet.

"I mustn't tell tales out of school," answered he, in a low voice. "And"—he looked up, quickly, meeting her eyes in a significant manner—"and *nor must you.*"

Nynee was so much perturbed that she had to hold the chair by which she was standing for support. Madame

de Mauriac, with all her old kindness, hurried to her side.

“Poor child, poor child!” said she, gently. “This has been too much for you! Come into my room; you shall have a cup of tea there, quite quietly, and then I’ll put you into a hansom and take you back home myself.”

But Nynee would not allow this. She wanted to be by herself on the way home, to think over the strange things that had happened, and she said so quite simply and frankly.

So they compounded for a quiet cup of tea and a solitary drive for Nynee, and madame took her at once into her pretty bedroom, made her take off her hat and refresh herself with eau-de-Cologne on her temples, while she dismissed the unhappy Flinders, who was still downcast and taciturn, with a few curt words.

Nynee found it impossible to be at ease again with this woman, who had so suddenly shown herself to her in a new and most disagreeable aspect. She drank her tea as quickly as she could; and although madame insisted on detaining her for a few minutes, with soft words and excuses for her violence of a short time before, the young girl said little in answer to her.

Perhaps Madame de Mauriac was rather perturbed because Nynee asked her no questions. At any rate, she presently volunteered a statement, the gist of which, however, had been already made apparent.

“That silly fellow,” she said, “has been in love with me for years, and nothing I can do or say will drive him away. You have had proof that I do try hard to get rid of him, and you see with how little result.”

“Yes,” was all Nynee said.

And then she pinned on her hat, and bidding Madame

de Mauriac good-bye, and submitting rather awkwardly to her kiss, ran downstairs and walked quickly up the street in search of a hansom.

She could not think clearly ; but out of the confusion in her mind one thought stood out, full of horror. If Mr. Justican was connected with the police, which was possible, or if he was the head of a private detective agency, which seemed more likely still, then the profession in which he proposed to place his nephews must be the hideous calling of a social spy.

The more she thought of it the more likely did it seem to her that this was the truth. The manner in which Mr. Justican had let the young men drift on, without knowing what their future was to be ; the tentative way in which he had entrusted them with petty commissions, the use of which they could not understand ; even the very character and personality of Mr. Justican himself, a certain quiet, watchful power there was about him, favored this unwelcome supposition.

Nynee made up her mind to tax him with it on the first opportunity. Greatly daring this resolution was ; but she liked Mr. Justican, who was always kind and courteous, and she had an idea that he would forgive her boldness, and perhaps listen to her appeal. For she meant to appeal to him on behalf of poor Neal, who, she felt quite sure, had no idea of the fate for which he was destined.

Fortune favored Nynee. For when she reached home, she found Mr. Justican himself in the drawing-room, having tea with her mother.

"Why, child, how white you are ! Have you got a headache ?" asked Mrs. Pender, when she came in.

"A little mamma," said Nynee. "Give me some tea,

please. I've had one cup at Madame de Mauriac's; but I'm ready for another. No, I won't have this tea. Go and get me some of that you had sent you by Uncle Geoffrey."

"Oh, you fanciful child! I shall have to go and get it out of the store-cupboard, and it's not a bit better than this," said Mrs. Pender.

"Never mind. Dear old mamma, she will indulge her spoilt girl!" coaxed Nynee, persistently.

So Mrs. Pender, much puzzled by this freak, went out of the room with her keys, and Nynee seized the opportunity to open her mind to Mr. Justican. By his manner of receiving what she had to say, she would know at once whether her suspicions were correct.

She turned to him at once, as soon as they were alone.

"Mr. Justican," said she, "I've made a discovery—at least I've made two discoveries."

"Have you indeed?" said he, raising his eyebrows. "And what are they all about?"

"Why, one's about Mr. Flinders, and the other's about—you."

"Well?"

"Well, I've found out Mr. Flinder's profession, and I've found out—*yours*."

Mr. Justican never moved a muscle. He just raised one finger, and glanced at the door.

"Hush! It's a dead secret though. You mustn't let your mother know!" said he.

CHAPTER XXV.

NYNEE sat down in the nearest chair, trembling from head to foot. The manner in which Mr. Justican had received her announcement surprised and distressed her. She had thought he would be angry, or at least astonished; but instead of that, he had taken her speech in the most matter-of-fact manner in the world.

He helped himself to another biscuit, and she heard him munching it while she, feeling suddenly too shy to meet his eyes, stared out at the flowers in the garden, clasping her hands tightly, and blinking her eyes to be quite sure that there were no tears in them ready to fall.

"And who told you?" said he at last. "Madame de Mauriac, I suppose? since your mother tells me you have been with her this afternoon."

Nynee shook her head, and ventured to throw a shy glance at him. He looked just the same as ever; his open, strong, handsome face was just as delicately pink; his calm blue eyes were as unruffled as the sea on a summer's day.

"No," she said in a quivering voice, "it wasn't Madame de Mauriac; it was Mr. Flinders who told me he was a detective, and then of course I guessed that you—that you had something to do with that profession too."

Mr. Justican smiled his peculiar, dry little smile that never seemed to travel further up than the muscles about his mouth.

"A very shrewd guess," said he.

Nynee looked up quickly. "You call mamma shrewd," said she, "when she's said or done something silly! I hope you don't think the same of me?"

"Well, I'm not sure that it is altogether a wise thing to talk about a matter which must, of necessity, be looked upon as confidential and secret," he began.

She interrupted him: "Oh, but I wouldn't say anything about it to any one but you!"

"Not even to Neal?" asked he sharply.

Nynee reddened, looked down, was silent. Mr. Justican got up quickly and came over to her, bending down, with one hand on the mantelpiece, and speaking rapidly and with emphasis:

"If you consult his happiness, and Kenneth's, listen to what I say, and profit by the hint. I love these boys; perhaps they're the only creatures I care for in the world. I've kept them in ignorance of my profession because, as you admit, it's not one that every one thinks well of. There are many social functions which are best kept out of sight. The hangman's is not an office to be proud of, but it is a necessary one, and you can say the same of mine. Well, then, I confess I shouldn't like to risk the loss of my boys' esteem by telling them that I'm a thief-catcher. Therefore I've let them amuse themselves, treating them as generously as any father could have done, and not forcing upon them either my profession itself or even the knowledge of it. Some day I suppose I shall have to confess myself to them, unless I can keep them contented with doing a little business for me in the cotton-broking line, as you know they have done already."

"I wish you'd only do that yourself, too, Mr. Justican," cried Nynee. "It would be so much nicer."

Again Mr. Justican smiled.

"It's nice enough, no doubt, but scarcely profitable. Cotton-broking's a machine-made calling; mine wants brains."

"Oh, but I shouldn't like Neal——" began Nynee.

Mr. Justican took her up quickly: "And I shouldn't like Neal, or Kenneth either, to take it up unless they had a vocation for it. In the meantime I don't want them even to know what my calling is. If you're a wise little girl, you'll hold your tongue about it."

"Do you believe a woman can keep a secret, then, Mr. Justican?"

"Women have kept my secrets quite as well as the men," said Mr. Justican, promptly.

"I thought you didn't like women, Mr. Justican?"

"Ah, that's a secret I wouldn't trust even with you," said he, with a dryly humorous look.

Nynee was preparing herself for another question. It needed some boldness, and her cheeks flushed and her eyes blazed before she uttered it.

"Mr. Justican, if I keep your secret, will you tell me something? Who murdered the man who was found in our garden?"

He raised his eyebrows at her daring, and met her eyes steadily.

"Nobody knows that but the man who did it."

"Well, then, tell me something about Madame de Mauriac. Who is she? What is she? And——"

Mr. Justican put up his hand.

"Softly, softly," said he; "don't ask too many questions, or I shall begin to doubt your discretion. Madame de Mauriac is a charming woman; that's quite enough to know about a lady. And——here comes Mrs. Pender with your specially imported tea."

Nynee was only half satisfied; she considered that Mr. Justican ought to have been more frank with her, considering what an important secret she was now in possession of. But she did not question the wisdom or the kindness of the ignorance in which he was keeping the lads as to his unpleasant profession, and she was resolved that no indiscretion on her part should allow Neal to find it out.

The little girl worried and puzzled herself by wondering what would become of Neal in the circumstances. She knew the difficulty of finding a profession for a man who has been brought to none in particular; and her thoughts grew very dismal as she began to understand how remote the prospect was that he would be able to make her his wife.

He came in that evening, "to return a book," he said. Never had he found Nynee so sweet, so charming. And although he was conscious of a certain subdued sadness in her face and manner, she would not own that she had anything on her mind.

When, however, he heard that she had been at Madame de Mauriac's that day, it was his turn to look gloomy.

"I'm rather hurt, Nynee," said he, in a low voice, "that you still go to see that woman, when you know what I think of her!"

The blood rushed into the girl's little fair face. She felt guilty and ashamed.

"I won't go there again," she said simply. "I'm ready to promise you that."

Neal was on the alert in a moment.

"Ah, you've found out something yourself that you don't like about her now, have you?" he cried triumphantly.

Nynnee glanced at her mother.

“Don’t speak so loud, please,” said she. “I don’t want mamma to know that I’ve caught your prejudice, and that I won’t go to the flat again. If she hears, she’ll ask questions, and I don’t want to answer them. It’s prejudice, prejudice, of course,” she answered presently.

Neal looked at her with scrutinizing eyes.

“Well, I must be content with that, if you’ll tell me no more,” said he. “But I should dearly like to know what has made you turn round so quickly.”

He was on his way to the door, for Mrs. Pender never encouraged either him or his cousin to stay very late. It was an understood thing that Harry should see the young men out on the occasion of their evening visits; but Nynnee, full of most heartfelt pity and sympathy for Neal, poor ignorant Neal, gathered up her courage, made a sign to her brother to go back, and herself accompanied their young neighbor to the front door, which she opened, keeping her eyes shyly cast down.

“Good-night,” lisped she in that little silver thread of a voice, that great, big, burly robust Neal thought so touching and sweet.

She did not even raise her head. But something in her dry little manner gave him courage. He stooped down and threw his arms round her.

“Nynnee, my little fairy, when am I going to have you for my own?”

“Hush, oh hush,” whispered she, almost crying, as she returned his kiss, “I suppose I’m silly; but oh, Neal! I’m so frightened! I think things will never, never come right for us! Don’t you ever feel that there’s a big black cloud hovering over us all?”

Ought she to have said even that? She didn’t know

But Neal, with his hopes and his buoyant belief in himself and his love, filled her with a pathetic sense of the difficulties and dangers which beset them both.

And Neal, instead of laughing at her words, or scolding her for being silly, just kissed her again, silently, and shuddered.

And she knew that the shadow was over him too.

Without answering her except by a few words so incoherent that they had no meaning, he left her and ran out of the house.

Nynee and Neal both felt some surprise that Mrs. Pender had let them talk to each other without hindrance; and this feeling was increased in the young girl when, on returning to the drawing-room, she received no rebuke for her daring in going to the door to see him out.

The fact was that Mrs. Pender, having heard from Nynee that there was no news of Sir Henry Ruddock to be had from Madame de Mauriac, had, with the instinct of the matchmaker, decided that, in the present state of doubt as to the baronet's intentions, it would be unwise to be too harsh towards Neal, concerning whom Mr. Justican had, that day, let fall some very satisfactory remarks as to his arrangements for the lad's future.

If Mr. Justican, who had the reputation of being a rich man, intended to leave his fortune to his nephews, their remissness in settling down to any occupation did not so much matter.

Arguing this, Mrs. Pender had promptly accepted Mr. Justican's invitation to dinner on the following evening, to Nynee's great joy.

Not that the dinner parties at Mr. Justican's were livelier than such functions usually are; they knew beforehand whom they would meet: two or three uninterest-

ing ladies and gentlemen, among whom were Mr. and Mrs. Paul Crayford, and their host and his two nephews, with themselves, made up the party.

But Nynee felt that each invitation accepted, cemented the friendship between the two households, and friendship meant—Neal.

She was glad to see that Flinders was not among the guests. But after dinner, when they all went into the suite formed by the study, the room behind and the billiard-room, she was vexed to see him among the first of the later visitors to arrive.

Now that she knew his profession, she found herself looking around uneasily, and asking herself whether any more of the *habitués* of the house were social spies. Harrington Jones, with his white face and his nervous movements, could scarcely belong to the fraternity, she thought; but she had doubts not only about Paul Crayford but about his wife, that silent woman with the watchful eyes whom she had noticed before.

On the alert as she was, Nynee noticed that both Mr. Justican's nephews avoided Flinders, and she herself was most careful not to meet his eyes. A curious man this, one whom she had no difficulty in associating with his profession, now that she knew what that was. Taciturn, quiet in his movements, never appearing to notice anything but the billiard-table, he was a man who might be said to be conspicuous by the very fact that he was so easily passed over. And she saw too, how well his colorless, commonplace face with its indefinite features and pale eyebrows, adapted itself to disguise.

The evening was passing off pleasantly enough. The ladies were talking together in the front room, the men were chiefly in the billiard-room and the room between,

when the door opened, and Madame de Mauriac, radiant and splendid in black lace, with a tiny black toque in which was an upstanding aigrette, and with diamonds flashing in the front of her dress, sailed into the room, making the kind of "sensation" which the unexpected appearance of a well-dressed and beautiful woman makes in any assembly.

Upon two of the persons present the influence of her advent was most marked. The one was Kenneth, whose face lit up with joyous excitement, as he instantly left the billiard-room and came towards her; the other was Flinders, whom Nynee noticed also, and whose face turned a sort of greenish-gray when madame greeted Kenneth with a warm pressure of the hand and a tender smile.

Flinders was playing billiards, but he instantly put down his cue and went towards her. That there was a feeling of rivalry between the two men was at once apparent; and Mr. Justican, perceiving that the consequences of a meeting between them might be awkward, hastened to intervene.

"Let me take your cape," said Kenneth, putting out his hand for an ethereal confection compounded chiefly of black tulle with white chenille spots, which madame threw back on her shoulders almost as soon as she entered.

Flinders snatched it from him. Mr. Justican frowned, and came forward between the two men, of whom it was plain Kenneth was the one most favored.

"Come into the dining-room, madame," said he. "You must have a cup of coffee and some fruit."

She would have stayed where she was, and requested him to bring it to her, but there was in his eyes such a

look that she thought it best to submit. Once on the opposite side of the hall Mr. Justican turned to her with a cold frown of displeasure.

“Why have you come here to-night? Innate love of mischief, I suppose? To stir up those two young fools?”

“Is Flinders a fool?” she asked, carelessly.

“As far as you are concerned he is,” said Mr. Justican, contemptuously.

Madame looked angry.

“Do you think it is quite safe to be as uncivil to me as you have chosen to be lately?” asked she, abruptly.

The hard smile peculiar to him appeared for a moment on his face.

“That’s my affair,” he said. “Anyhow, you must leave my nephew alone.”

She laughed shortly. “I shall do as I please,” said she. “You have done your best to prejudice him against me: Flinders has prevented my receiving him at my flat. What’s the use? *Ce que femme veut Dieu veut*. So if I wish to see him I come here.”

And, having drunk a cup of coffee without a look at her host, she swept across the hall again, and was met at the opposite door by Flinders.

“Come into the garden with me,” he said, “only for a few minutes. I have something to give you.”

“Really? I shall come in again if you haven’t,” said madame, with her seductive smile.

“Really!”

She followed him out; and in the garden, hidden from the house by a group of shrubs, Flinders took out of his pocket-book a jewelled slide, on which a fleur-de-lis in diamonds shone out from a background of pearls.

“Oh, how pretty!”

“Thought you’d like it! It belonged to a duchess,” said Flinders.

“Then pray how did you come by it?” asked a sharp voice behind them.

And turning quickly, Flinders and Madame de Mauriac saw Kenneth, who had made the excuse of taking Nynee out for a stroll in the garden in order to be near Madame de Mauriac and his rival.

“What do you mean?”

The two men were face to face, each bursting with ill-suppressed passion. Madame de Mauriac looked frightened, and uttered a low cry. It was Nynee who sprang between them.

“Hush, hush!” said she, in Kenneth’s ear, “it’s all right. I know, I can tell you! He’s a detective!”

“A detective!” echoed Kenneth, stammering in his amazement, as he stepped back and stared in the livid face of the other man. “A common detective!”

By this time Neal was in the garden too. He had watched the gradual disappearance of the most interesting members of the assembly, and had taken the first opportunity of slipping out after them.

“Yes, yes, I’ve seen him disguised,” said poor Nynee, thinking she was reassuring Kenneth as to the *bona fides* of his rival.

Kenneth uttered a low cry.

“Disguised!” echoed he. “Disguised! Then I begin to understand. It was you, Mr. Flinders, who followed me to Dieppe, and, by Jove! it must have been you who half-killed me at madame’s villa by an attack from behind!”

He had flown at the man’s throat. Flinders, unpre-

pared, swayed in his grasp, struggling for breath, when Mr. Justican came rapidly up, and, with a hand of iron, separated the two men and flung them apart as if they had been a couple of rabbits.

“I will have no rows here,” he said quietly, as they staggered back.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN the pause that followed Mr. Justican's intervention, Neal came up to his uncle.

"Surely, sir, you can't wonder that Ken's angry! To attack a man from behind——"

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Justican, shortly. "He has no proof whatever that Flinders was the man who attacked him. The young donkey is angry and jealous, and a mere suspicion is enough for him."

By this time Kenneth had recovered his composure a little, and had joined his uncle and cousin, while Flinders had turned to Madame de Mauriac, and Nynee had withdrawn towards the house. As soon as Kenneth came up, Neal retreated a step on the way to reassure Nynee. As he moved away he said:

"Anyhow, uncle, if the fellow's a detective, he's not a person one cares to know; and I for one mean to cut him dead for the future."

Mr. Justican only shrugged his shoulders as he turned to Kenneth:

"I hope you're ashamed of yourself for behaving in this manner, and in the presence of ladies," said he, shortly.

But Kenneth was sullen, and not inclined to be apologetic.

"Who is this Flinders?" said he. "Why do you have the bounder here at all? Any one can see that he's

a cad of the first water, whether he's a detective or not."

"To-morrow morning, when you've got over this discreditable ebullition," said his uncle, drily, "you'll wonder how you could have dared to talk in such a manner about any guest of mine."

And he left the young man, and going up to Flinders and Madame de Mauriac, persuaded the latter to go into the house, while he took Flinders by the arm and himself led him back to the billiard-room.

Madame de Mauriac was somewhat subdued by this episode; and, with her host's eye upon her, she refrained from any more coquetries with either of the rivals for her favor. Instead, she amused herself by gathering round her a knot of the other men present, whom she amused by witty speeches, uttered in her soft, low voice; so that the other ladies present had some reason to feel that they were outshone by her.

In the end, when the party had broken up, Mrs. Pender was troubled by an uneasy feeling that all had not gone well. She had been neglected, for one thing; Mr. Justican, who was usually very careful to pay her particular attention, had been too much occupied in keeping the discordant elements asunder to have much time to devote to her.

And although the good lady had known nothing definite concerning the altercation in the garden, some rumor of a disturbance had reached her ears and disgusted her mightily; so that she expressed to Nynee and Harry her decision never to accept another invitation from the "people next door."

On the following day, to Mrs. Pender's great satisfaction, Sir Harry Ruddock drove up in a hansom in

the course of the afternoon, full of apologies for not having called on them sooner. He had been down in Essex, he said, most of the time, and while in London he had been so busy in endeavoring to track the thief who had escaped from the strong-room, that he had no time for paying calls on his friends.

“And what results have your efforts had?” asked Mrs. Pender, with interest, while Nynee, more interested still, sat mute in a corner, wondering what Sir Henry would say if he knew who the supposed thief was.

“Oh, none at all, I’m sorry to say,” said the baronet.

“It appears that the police are at their wits’ end, though, of course, they won’t own it, as to the perpetrators of the numerous jewel-robberies that have taken place lately. There seems to be no doubt that there’s an organized gang at work, and that they dispose of their plunder in a particularly neat and prompt manner, owing, it’s supposed, to the cleverness of a receiver of stolen goods, whose name is known, and who has actually been identified.”

Mrs. Pender leaned forward, deeply interested.

“Well, if he’s been identified, can’t the police catch him?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, soon after he was identified, and before he could be trapped, the fellow disappeared.”

“Dear me! And who was he!”

“Oh, a miserable-looking little foreigner, a German, I believe, by birth; a shabby little old man, whom nobody would have suspected to be worth a sixpence.”

“Oh!” said Mrs. Pender and Nynee at the same moment.

Sir Henry looked from the one to the other. While Nynee’s thoughts had flown to the story of the murdered man found in their garden, Mrs. Pender’s mind reverted

to that strange discovery she had made of the murdered man's coat hanging up in the little shop in the street near their house.

"Does anybody know his name?" asked Mrs. Pender.

"Well, as far as I can find out, the name of the man suspected, is or was 'Diah Symons!'"

Mrs. Pender almost started from her chair.

"Diah Symons!" echoed she. "Why, there's a horrid little parlor-maid of Mr. Justican's, a girl I had in my service until I could put up with her no longer, who knows something about the man!"

Sir Henry was amazed.

"Can I see the girl, do you think?" he asked. "Would Mr. Just——"

Even as he spoke, Nynce sprang up from her chair with the news that Mr. Justican himself was coming up the garden. A few minutes later he came into the room, telling Mrs. Pender that he had come for a cup of tea, and to express the fear he felt that she had not enjoyed herself much at his house on the previous evening.

He had scarcely finished his apologies when Sir Henry Ruddock told him the subject of their conversation, and asked if Susan might be sent for.

Mr. Justican not only acceded to the request, but went himself in search of the girl, whom he brought back with him without delay.

Sir Henry assumed his most pompous magisterial manner, and proceeded to question her at once.

"Now, my girl, don't be frightened," he began.

"I ain't," said Susan, promptly.

Sir Henry cleared his throat, and went on a little more severely:

"But you've got to tell the truth."

"Always do," said Susan. "When Mrs. Pender used to call out"—and the impudent girl mimicked her late mistress's manner before her face—"Is the candle out, Susan?' I allus used to blow it out afore I said 'Yus,' so as I shouldn't tell a lie. Then I used to light it again direckly afterwards."

Mrs. Pender looked annoyed at this revelation, but both Mr. Justican and Nynee had to turn away to hide their amusement. Good Sir Henry was irritated beyond measure by the girl's flippancy.

"You don't appear to understand that I wish to question you upon a serious matter," said he, in a solemn voice.

"What matter?" asked Susan.

"I wish to hear a truthful statement as to what you know about a man named Diah Symons."

"I don't know nothing about him," replied Susan, promptly.

"Oh yes, you do. You received a parcel from him——"

"Not from him," interrupted Susan, promptly. "The party as gave it me said it was from him."

"What 'party'?"

"He was a soldier."

"A soldier!" echoed Sir Henry, more impatiently than ever, as his doubts of the girl's veracity grew stronger. "That's very vague. What barracks did he come from? And what was his regiment?"

"He said as 'ow he belonged to the 'Orse Marines," replied Susan, gravely, "but I don't see as 'ow that could be true."

By this time Sir Henry was far too furious to continue his examination with any hope of a good result, and Mr. Justican offered to put a few questions to the girl himself.

"Come, Susan," said he, "we all like smartness, but it's out of place sometimes. Now, be a good girl and tell us just how much you really do know of this Symons."

"Well, sir," said Susan, "it's just this: I've 'eard the name as bein' the name of a man as was 'wanted' by the police, and so I've given it as a nickname to one of my own sweethearts. And that's the blessed truth, as sure as I live."

"And how about this parcel Mrs. Pender saw in your hands?"

"It was a bit of stuff for a new frock, sir, as I'd just 'ad given me for a present. And as Mrs. Pender don't allow no followers, and as I don't deny there was a young man downstairs at the time as 'ad brought it to me, why, I just shoved it into my pocket while I was doin' Mr. Harry's room, and singing to myself about Diah Symons."

Mr. Justican glanced at Sir Henry, who, whatever he might think, could only bow to Mr. Justican's opinion that there was no more to be got out of the girl.

So Susan retired with a demure sense of having had the best of the encounter, and Sir Henry expressed his horror of the lower order of Londoners, their untrustworthiness and their pertness.

The good baronet soon got over his irritation, however, and taking advantage of the entrance of some lady callers, he obtained a pleasant *tête-à-tête* with Nynee in the big window-seat. The worthy gentleman had been wavering, for the past day or two, between thoughts of Nynee and thoughts of Madame de Mauriac.

His suspicions of the latter had never taken very deep root, and he had come up to town resolved to indulge himself with the pleasure of a call at her flat. But on the

whole he inclined to the opinion that Nynee would make a more desirable wife than the more mature lady; and the sight of her pretty, fair face determined him on this point.

Her manners were very gentle and charming too; and the longer he talked to her, the more strongly the worthy baronet felt her charm. At last he confided to her the fact that he had brought up with him from Essex some of his family jewels to be re-set, and as he spoke he took from his pocket a case in which lay, in its faded velvet bed, an old-fashioned necklace containing diamonds, emeralds and rubies which even Nynee could see must be of enormous value.

When she had expressed her admiration, Sir Henry said:

“Of course, they ought to be differently set; we don’t admire emeralds and rubies together nowadays. Now what arrangement of them would you advise?”

Nynee grew shy at once.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” said she. “I don’t know much about jewels.”

“But you will, some day,” said the baronet, in a tender whisper. “I cherish the hope, Miss Nynee, that you will one day wear these jewels as my wife.”

The good man had been so confident, that his proposal had been unduly sudden. Nynee grew crimson, and said hurriedly:

“Oh no, no, thank you. Never, never.”

Amazed at this reply, the baronet sat back and said:

“Are you serious? Do you understand?”

“Oh yes, yes, I think I do, I’m afraid I do. Please don’t look so much offended. It’s very good of you, but—but I like some one else. Only please, *please* don’t tell

mamma! And don't tell her you ever thought of—of this!" she pleaded in a low voice.

At this second rebuff in one afternoon poor Sir Henry lost patience. Putting his necktie back in his pocket with trembling hands, he said in an offended voice:

"Well, I shall take these to show Madame de Marmion. Perhaps she——"

Nancy, so far from feeling jealous, was delighted at the hope of escape.

"Oh yes yes," said she, "she knows much more about those things than I do. And she's fond of jewelry, very fond. You often heard her say so."

So Sir Henry, in great indignation, rose to take leave, and Mr. Justice, who had probably needed something of the kind, suddenly rose up at the same time and persuaded him to go with him to his house for a cigar and a drink.

Several days had been long to Mr. Justice's New name, and Sir Henry, who had been scolded and insulted and regarded as a traitor by his host, was persuaded to agree with the proposition of the latter that he and Neal should go and dine together at one of the "young men's clubs."

"I've got to wait some more," said Mr. Justice, "but I'm not a bad man, or a liner-out. I'm a solid, substantial fellow, and my boys have to be well entertaining for me."

So Sir Henry and Neal drove off together, the former too much mollified by Mr. Justice's artistic inclinations not to have overcome, for the time, his prejudices against the nephew.

At the club, however, his good humor had to stand the test of a meeting with Kenneth, his former rival. But they only exchanged a cool salutation, and Kenneth did

not offer to join them at the table at which they seated themselves.

They had scarcely begun dinner, however, when a most unwelcome addition to the party appeared in the shape of Flinders, who strolled into the room, and catching sight of Neal at the table with Sir Henry, went straight up to him, and addressed the young man in a low voice, only just loud enough for the baronet to hear.

"I'm exceedingly sorry for what occurred the other night at your uncle's," he said. "Of course your cousin was quite wrong in thinking I was at Dieppe when he was over there. As for my profession, I admit it's a disagreeable one, and I'm sorry you had to learn what it is. But please remember this; if I didn't go about as I do, and belong to swell clubs, and pass as an idle man, I shouldn't be of the least use to the people who employ me. And I only work for people of the highest position."

Neal gave him a curt nod and a frown, anxious to get rid of him. But Flinders turned to Sir Henry.

"I must apologize to you, sir, for this intrusion," he said, in a very courteous and deferential tone. "But I had an apology to make to Mr. Sheringham. I know who you are; and as Sir Henry Ruddock is known to every one in England as the soul of honor, I am quite willing that Mr. Sheringham should explain to you the reason of my speaking to him at such an awkward moment. You will keep my secret I know."

And with a bow, which Sir Henry, pleased and flattered, returned graciously, Flinders retired and seated himself alone at another table.

"Who is he?" asked the baronet, at once.

"He's a private detective, I believe," said Neal, coldly. "I only know him as a cad, and I know that that

description applies to him, whether the other does or not."

Sir Henry was impressed. He cast many a glance in the direction of Flinders during dinner, and when the meal was over, he went over to him, and said a few words in his ear. Neal wondered what they were talking about; and when Sir Henry sat down by Flinders, and the two entered into an earnest conversation, he grew uneasy.

Suddenly both men rose from the table by which they were seated, and the baronet came back to his late companion.

"Will you excuse me," he said, "if I leave you rather hurriedly? I have some very important business to attend to, and you know my time up here in town is limited."

"Oh, certainly. Pray don't use any ceremony," stammered Neal.

And even while he spoke, he cast an uneasy glance at Flinders, who was on his way to the door.

The baronet held out his hand. He was not very cordial, even now, to this young man to whom he had at the outset taken a dislike on account of his relationship to Kenneth.

Two minutes later, Neal, looking out of the window saw Sir Henry and Flinders drive off in a hansom together. Neal started, with an exclamation, and then he heard a little dry laugh behind him, not, however, a laugh of amusement.

"Kenneth!" cried he, as he turned and met the eyes of his cousin.

"I wonder," said Kenneth, slowly, "whether this Flinders *is* a detective after all!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

NEAL answered his cousin, slowly. The sight of the silly, pompous, kind-hearted Sir Henry driving off with Flinders awakened in his mind quite a different sort of fear from that which was in the thoughts of Kenneth.

Sir Henry had mentioned, at dinner, that he proposed to call on Madame de Mauriac, and to apologize for doing so at such a late hour, by informing her of his enforced early departure from town. If the baronet should let fall any hint of his intention to the amorous Flinders, what would the consequence be?

So he only said, dreamily, when his cousin expressed a doubt as to Flinders' occupation :

"I don't know, I'm sure. What makes you doubt it?"

Kenneth hesitated.

"I think my chief reason for doubting it is that it is he who makes the assertion," said he, "and that I can hardly conceive it possible that Madame de Mauriac should allow a man who is nothing better than a spy and a thief-taker to visit her in the character of a friend, or even of an acquaintance."

Poor Kenneth was puzzling out something that he remembered only too well: Madame de Mauriac's mention of a friend named "Hugh," who was a dealer in precious stones. Was Flinders the same man? And was it possible that such a man as Flinders was sufficiently intimate with her for her to call him by his Christian name?

The thought was horrible. Yet certain things which he had noticed on the previous evening did point that way. Although Madame de Mauriac had been much more gracious to Kenneth himself than she had been to Flinders, when she made her sensational visit at Mr. Justican's, yet Flinders' own behavior pointed indubitably to the fact that he looked upon himself as a privileged person, able to obtain a *tête-à-tête* with her by the simple means of asking for one.


Then there was the fact that Flinders had evidently offered her a handsome present, the value of which had provoked from Kenneth such an unreasonable and discourteous outburst of suspicion. Unreasonable and discourteous—that he admitted; but yet excusable surely, since Madame de Mauriac had plainly intimated to him that he was the only man she cared about, the only man therefore from whom she ought to accept valuable gifts.

The poor lad was tortured by doubts and suspicions of both of them. His uncle had kept him under his own eye until the evening, with the express intention of keeping him away from Madame de Mauriac. And she told him she would be out to dinner, so that a late call upon her would be useless.

What to do with himself he did not know, and he suddenly turned to his cousin and suggested that they should turn in at "The Palace."

Neal, however, excused himself. He was going home, he said; so in the end Kenneth decided to accompany him, and the two got into a hansom together.

As soon as they reached Vine Place, Neal left his cousin in the smoking-room, and went to the study, where Mr. Justican usually spent his evenings when he was not gardening.



He looked up from a colossal account-book when Neal entered.

"Hallo! Back early, aren't you? I thought you'd take the old boy to a theatre to wind up the evening?"

"He went off with somebody else instead," said Neal, who was rather nervous.

"What? Met an old friend, I suppose——"

"No. A new one. Flinders came up to the table while we were at dinner, let out that he was a detective, and Sir Henry and he went off together in a hansom."

Mr. Justican laughed.

"Ah, I see! Sir Henry can think of nothing but the robbery which was attempted while we were all down at his place in Essex. And the simple gentleman doesn't recognize Flinders as the very man he took for a thief!"

"What?" stammered Neal.

"Yes. However, it doesn't matter. Sir Henry couldn't be in safer hands."

"But, uncle," said Neal, coming forward to the desk, and leaning against it, and lowering his voice, that his cousin might not hear through the folding-doors, "Sir Henry said at dinner he might call on Madame de Mauriac. If he tells Flinders so, or if they meet there, won't there be a row?"

Mr. Justican frowned.

"He wouldn't tell Flinders, would he?" said he, in a low voice.

"No. But Flinders is clever enough to find out."

"By Jove, you're right. And Flinders is as explosive on the subject of that woman as Kenneth himself. What they can see in that genuine antique," muttered Mr. Justican, as he put away his account-book, locked

up his roll-top desk, and looked round for his hat. "I'll be off to her flat at once, and try to prevent bloodshed."

In half a minute he was out of the house, and Neal joined Kenneth in the smoking-room. He had been careful to say nothing to irritate his cousin as to his rivalry with such a man as Flinders; nevertheless he did marvel that Kenneth could admire Madame de Mauriac when there were young girls as fresh and as pretty as Nynee Pender left in the world.

Meanwhile, Sir Henry Ruddock was finding Flinders a most delightful companion. He had listened with the utmost attention to the baronet's account of the attempted theft at his place in Essex, and of the escape of the thief.

"A most artful, cunning fellow," added Sir Henry; "he was disguised as a sailor, in which character he got himself engaged on board my yacht. But like all these over-clever people, he forgot one thing: a young lady who was staying in the house knew there was something wrong about the fellow by the whiteness of his hands, which were, it appears, as unlike a genuine sailor's as yours or mine."

"Dear me!" said Flinders, looking down at his own hands, which were very neatly gloved. "And, of course, the police haven't got on his track yet?"

"Haven't the ghost of a clue," said Sir Henry.

Flinders shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course not. Give them anything beyond a common pocket-picking case where the thief's caught red-handed, and they're at fault at once. I'll bet you anything you like I could put my hand on the man within twelve hours, if I only had all the particulars!"

"I'll make it worth your while if you can," said Sir Henry.

They were by this time at Earl's Court, which they had chosen as a place where they could talk at their ease ; and seating themselves at a little table near the lake, they sat talking, watching the fearsome evolutions of the dragon, and enjoying peculiar perfume emitted by the oddly named "electric launches" on the water, the while Sir Henry sipped whisky and soda, and Flinders—did not sip his.

It was Saturday, and there was a great crowd. Flinders warned Sir Henry, who was sitting with his coat open, to take care of his pockets.

"I dare say, though," he added, "you are wise enough never to wear so much as a decent watch in a crowd as great as this. Look at mine."

And he produced an unmistakable "Waterbury" from his pocket. Sir Henry only laughed, and said nothing about the valuable jewelry he was carrying. He did, however, feel in his coat-pockets to be sure the case was safe, and he did take his companion's hint, and button up his coat.

Then he proceeded to give Flinders all details of the attempted robbery, mentioning Mr. Justican by name, and asking Flinders whether he knew that gentleman.

"Oh, yes, very well. I've done work for him, and I can refer you to him as to my capabilities."

When Flinders had made notes of Sir Henry's case, he entertained him for some time with stories of different smart captures he had made, and added that it would astonish a good many people who knew him only as an idle man about town, if they could suddenly discover his calling.

“You’ve no idea, Sir Henry,” said he, “of the number of cases I have had where people of the upper classes have been not only the victims but the victimizers. Of course, they’re always hushed up, but my services have to be paid for just the same, as you will understand. If you are robbed of a valuable article of jewelry which is on show among your wedding-presents, and I trace it for you to a society lady, pressure is brought to bear upon her or her friends, and she has to disgorge privately. But you do not grudge a fair honorarium to the man who has got back your jewels.”

“Of course not. Though it seems a strange career for a man of education and refinement, no doubt it pays.”

“Remember, education and refinement are often all a man has to start life with; and they pay for very little in the way of food, clothing and rent, to say nothing of enjoyment,” said Flinders.

Sir Henry, who was much interested in his companion, was quite sorry to have to break off the *tête-à-tête*. But the dinner and the excitement of this conversation had had their effect upon him, so that he was more than ever possessed with the idea of calling at Madame de Mauriac’s flat. He was conscious of the pleasure it would give him to have an hour in the society of the fascinating lady, who would console him for Nynce Pender’s cold disdain, and treat his family jewels with respect.

This meeting with the society detective, and his conversation with him about the attempted robbery, would furnish a sufficient excuse for the late hour at which he called.

So Sir Henry expressed his regret that he had an appointment to keep, and mentioned the name of Madame de Mauriac’s street, without any idea that it gave

his companion a clue to the person he proposed to visit.

Flinders, instantly consumed with jealous suspicion, no sooner saw Sir Henry start off in one hansom, than he proceeded to follow him in another ; and entering a confectioner's which was within sight of the entrance to the mansions, he ordered something, took out a paper, and waited.

Sir Henry, in the meantime, had mounted the stairs, and, on inquiring for Madame de Mauriac at the door of her flat, had been told by the discreet servant that madame was at home, but that she did not usually receive visitors at this hour. Sir Henry scribbled a few words on a card, and, to his great joy, was admitted, in a few moments, to the siren's presence.

He had been to the flat only twice before, in the afternoon, and had no idea how beautiful a place it was when the curtains were drawn and the electric light turned on.

Neither had he been prepared for the extra loveliness of madame's appearance when she sailed into the room, after keeping him waiting only a few minutes, in a flowing gown of embroidered white muslin, with half a dozen rows of lovely pearls round her neck, and pearls and diamonds in her hair and dress.

"I couldn't refuse to see *you*," said she, holding out her hand with a most bewitching smile, "when you come to town so seldom. But you must excuse my dress. Most untidy-looking, isn't it? But I've tried to smarten myself up by sticking these things in my hair and dress."

And, with nonchalant white fingers, on which sparkled three or four magnificent rings, madame touched the aigrette in her golden bronze hair and the jewelled butterfly that shimmered on her shoulder.

“You look most beautiful, perfect!” said Sir Henry, full of admiration, asking himself how he could have admired the insipid little girl he had proposed to that afternoon. Decidedly this was the woman for him, a woman who would show off those family jewels he was so proud of, and who would make an imposing figure at the head of his table.

“Ah, you always say nice things, pretty things! I wish you would come and say them oftener?” said madame, as she indicated a chair for Sir Henry, and sat down herself in a most graceful attitude, on a *chaise longue*, with one white hand, hanging over the side, within reach of that of her admirer.

“Ah!” said he, with a glowing look, “you have such taste that you will be able to help me in a little difficulty I am in.”

“Certainly I will if I can,” smiled madame.

“I wish to have some family jewels re-set,” he went on, putting his hand in his pocket and taking out the precious case, as he spoke. “I think you will say even you never saw handsomer stones. And I want your advice as to how——”

The words died on his lips. He had thrown open the case with a sudden movement, intending to dazzle Madame de Mauriac, to fill her with envy. But what was the poor man’s horror and consternation when the lid fell back, displaying only a faded velvet lining.

The case was empty: the necklace was gone!

For one moment the baronet sat stupefied, while the lady looked up in his face with surprise, thinking he was playing a trick upon her. Then he staggered up, with his hand to his forehead.

"I've been robbed, robbed!" he said, hoarsely. And his voice sounded feeble and broken.

Madame turned quite white, and uttered a cry.

"Robbed!" echoed she. "Oh no! Surely not!"

"But it's true, it's true! I had the jewels—in this case—and I never took them out after I left Mrs. Pender's."

"Mrs. Pender's!"

"Yes, yes," went on Sir Henry, still with his hand on his forehead, not looking at her, absorbed in the horror of his loss. "I've been robbed, robbed, I say. But I know who did it! I know who took them! Oh, the rascal, the pitiful rascal. That he should have taken me in—me, me! I must go this moment, and inform the police."

Instinctively he was looking round for his hat, which the maid had taken from him on his entrance. Madame de Mauriac, really frightened, sprang up, and with the full force of her fascinations thrown into the task, tried to soothe, to pacify him.

"But stay one moment, Sir Henry. Let me help you to find out where you lost them. Did you put them down somewhere for a moment? Did you——"

But her charms were now as useless as they would have been upon Mr. Justican himself. The sense of personal loss, of having been befooled, deluded, was strong enough not only to swallow up all feeling of admiration for Madame de Mauriac, but even to transform that admiration into suspicion and loathing. He turned upon her sharply.

"I didn't put them down for a moment. I admit I was in doubtful company, very doubtful. But the police will be able to tell me more upon that point, no doubt.

You will excuse me, madame, if I leave you somewhat abruptly. But every moment may be precious."

The color of madame's face had changed. Under the pearl powder her skin had grown gray. The steady light of a sudden determination now shone in her eyes.

"You are right," said she, quietly. "You shall go to the police. And I will go with you. I may be of more use to you in this matter than you think. Wait here one moment while I put on my bonnet."

She had flown out of the room like a whirlwind, into the dining-room, the door of which she shut behind her with a click.

Sir Henry protested angrily against even this delay ; but long before the words were out of his mouth he was alone. Only a minute did he hesitate. Feeling almost as much mistrust of Madame de Mauriac as he had done of some one else, he only took two turns up the small room when he resolved not to wait ; and making straight for the door by which he had entered, he turned the handle sharply.

But the door did not open.

He tried again and again, with the same result. And then, reeling back into the room, he began vaguely to realize that he was locked in.

Hurling himself against the door he tried to burst it open ; but it resisted his efforts. He turned to the door by which Madame de Mauriac had retreated, with a like result.

Then he put his finger on the electric bell button, and rang a long peal. There was no answer. He opened the window ; but a sudden horror of being discovered in a place which now filled him with suspicion made

him refrain from trying to attract the attention of passers-by.

Going back into the room he made another onslaught upon the door, and after one or two attempts, succeeded in splitting the wood and bursting it open with the help of the poker.

The moment he got into the little hall outside the drawing-room, however, he found that he was trapped again. There was no light there; and when, after groping his way round the walls and failing to find an outlet under the heavy hangings with which it was draped, he tried to return to the drawing-room. He found that there also the light had been turned out.

He staggered in, overturning tables, chairs and cabinets with a crash.

“Surely this is a very den of thieves!” muttered the unhappy gentleman, and then again he sprang up, on the alert. In the dark he could see nothing; but he heard the creak, creak of a stealthy footfall approaching him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BEFORE Sir Henry Ruddock could make out from which direction the unseen somebody was approaching him, he heard the sharp ring of an electric bell, and instantly assuming that madame was still in the flat, he stumbled across the drawing-room in the direction of the door by which she had disappeared.

A moment later, however, he heard the soft opening of a door, the outer door of the flat, as he judged, and a whispering sound, which convinced him that there was a conversation going on there.

Re-crossing the room, therefore, he went out into the hall by the broken door, having by this time accustomed his eyes to the gloom, and being able to see by the faint light of the late summer evening which he had admitted by drawing aside the window-curtains.

A woman's voice said "Oh!"

"Who are you?" cried he, furiously.

"I'm Madame de Mauriac's servant," answered the voice. "If you'll go back into the drawing-room, sir, I'll turn up the light for you."

And she passed him, pressed the button, and in an instant flooded the room with light.

"Dear, dear, sir, were you here all the time? And was it you I heard making such a noise? Why, you've broken the door!"

And the woman, who looked the incarnation of dull,

dry respectability, looked at the injured door and began to pick up the overturned furniture with a glance of respectful horror.

Puzzled and bewildered, the baronet, anxious as he was to get away, lingered a moment to see what excuse she would give for the manner in which he had been treated.

“What—what—what does this mean? Locking me in? And turning the light out?” he asked, indignantly.

“Oh, sir, madame went out in a hurry just now, to inform the police you’d been robbed, she said. And I, in a flurry like, without coming in to see if anybody was here, and thinking you’d gone out before her, bolted the door on the outside, as I always do the moment madame goes out, for fear of burglars getting in by the balcony.”

“Why didn’t you come when I rang?”

“I was frightened, thinking that I was all alone in the flat. So I went round by madame’s room into the dining-room, and then when I heard you burst the door open, I was that scared, I just ran in and turned the gas out, so you shouldn’t find me.”

The baronet shook his head dubiously. The explanation seemed at least as puzzling as the facts.

“Who was that came to the flat just now? I heard you talking!” said he, sharply.

“It was a friend of mine, sir.”

With a muttered word not complimentary to her or her mistress, the baronet seized his hat, and rushed out of the flat, by the door which the servant obligingly held open. And he ran downstairs as fast as his years and his weight would allow, while Mr. Justican, who was the “friend” she alluded to, and who had reached the flat

only a few seconds previously, slipped down after him, not coming very near, but keeping the baronet well in view.

So intent was Mr. Justican upon his pursuit of Sir Henry, that he did not notice that he had been followed in his turn by his nephew Neal, who, thoroughly imbued with the notion that both Flinders and Madame de Mauriac were dangerous people, had conceived the idea, and put it quickly into execution, of making his way, in the wake of his uncle, in the direction of the siren's flat, to watch events in the interest of his cousin.

Knowing, however, what a sharp-eyed man he had to deal with in the person of his uncle, he had kept a long distance away; and now, having dismissed his hansom and waited about for his uncle's coming downstairs from the flat, he saw the baronet come out, then Mr. Justican, and finally decided to follow in their wake, to see what these goings and comings portended.

Sir Henry went down the street at a great rate until he saw a policeman on the opposite side of the way. He crossed over, and at once overwhelmed the man with such an avalanche of incoherent statements that the policeman could make nothing of them, but offered to accompany him to the police-station, where he could make a charge.

Neal, on the alert, drew back a little and saw his uncle draw back too. Mr. Justican evidently had some idea that he was followed, for from time to time he cast a glance behind him. Neal, however, without knowing exactly why he was so cautious, kept well out of the line of sight. He knew that his uncle was following Sir Henry, and that Sir Henry was going to the police-station, and therefore he had no difficulty in guiding his

steps in the right direction, even when policeman, baronet, and uncle were out of sight.

Now Mr. Justican himself had no difficulty in keeping very near Sir Henry and the policeman without danger of being seen by either of them ; for the unhappy baronet was so full of his great trouble, so anxious for his companion to look at his empty jewel-case, and moreover so voluble and excited, that he made noise enough to drown any sound of footsteps, and indeed caused a little group of interested passers-by to turn and form a procession behind him, making it easy enough for Mr. Justican to keep near without fear of being recognized before he wished.

Just as the baronet reached the police-station, but while he was still engrossed in the recital of his woes, a woman darted quickly out of the building, and flitting rapidly past him, dashed into the group behind, and found herself suddenly face to face with Mr. Justican.

Wrapped as she was in a long cloak that hid every vestige of her figure, muffled as were her face and head in a sort of nurse's bonnet with a voluminous gauze veil, he knew her in a moment.

“ Anne ! ” said he, in a low voice.

And Madame de Mauriac, shaking from head to foot, stopped short as he laid a commanding hand upon her arm.

The baronet, meanwhile, had absorbed the whole attention of the bystanders, so that Mr. Justican, neat, quick, clever, was able to draw the lady aside, notwithstanding her manifest reluctance, and to interrogate her, still with one strong hand upon her wrist, in a voice so low, yet so clear, that every word reached her ears, and yet attracted no attention from anybody near them.

“What were you doing in the police-station?”

Madame de Mauriac hesitated. Then she said in a low voice, not nearly so steady as his, but distinct enough for his sharp ears:

“Sir Henry—said he’d lost something. Jewelry, I think.”

“And you—were obliging enough to put the police on the track of the thief?”

Madame de Mauriac glanced stealthily round her, calculating her chances of escape. But Mr. Justican’s sharp eyes caught every glint and gleam of hers through the folds of her veil.

“I haven’t the least idea who it was he accused,” said she quietly. “He wouldn’t say who it was.”

“Then what information could you give, if you didn’t know who took the jewels?”

She tried to twist her arm away. But he held her fast.

“Oh, my dear lady, do you think I’m so dull as not to know what you’ve been doing? It’s no affair of mine; your knaveries and those of your fellow-thieves are nothing to do with me; but do you really think, if you turn round upon your accomplice, that he won’t find you out, and turn round upon you?”

Madame de Mauriac did not answer. She tried to, but at the first attempt the words would not come.

“Do you think I’ve known you and loathed you for years, without knowing all the black recesses of your black and selfish soul? Your wretched partner, fool that he is, would have had his right hand cut off before betraying *you*. But you, with that beautiful instinct of self-preservation which is, I suppose, the first law of such natures as yours, no sooner think that the game is up,

than you try to save your own worthless skin by giving away your poor pal, your poor slave, the pitiful fool who would have given his life for you !”

“I—I don’t know what you mean !” stammered Madame de Mauriac.

“Don’t you ? Don’t you really ?”

“No, I don’t. And if you persist in detaining me here, in insulting me, I’ll call the police.”

Mr. Justican laughed.

“Oh, no, you won’t,” said he, quietly. “You’re a very bold woman, but not quite so bold as that !”

She turned upon him. Perhaps it would be more correct to say, she tried to do so ; for even as she gave her body a defiant twist, as if to meet him eye to eye, she cowered, and quailed.

“Do you dare me ?” she said, in a rather quavering voice.

“Yes, I do. You may have pluck enough to turn king’s evidence”—she moved uneasily—“but not enough for that.”

Finding herself mastered, she tried to turn the matter off with a laugh. It was noticeable that her wiles and her coqueties, her soft words and her languid looks were discarded the moment she began to talk to Mr. Justican. She became as hard, as clean-cut in looks and words, in spite of her nervous tremors, as he was himself.

“You’re right of course,” said she simply.

He had led her, little by little, far enough down the street for them to continue their colloquy entirely unheeded by the group that still stood round the entrance to the police-station, waiting for the excited baronet to come out.

“Now tell me : what made you do this mad thing ?”

“ It was Hugh’s fault. What did he want to do such a thing for, as rob this man, your friend? I’ve no patience with him : I’ve had enough of him, of it all. He pesters me eternally, eternally, to have him near, me to marry him.”

“ A very singular infatuation ! ” sneered Mr. Justican.

“ Oh, of course, it seems singular to you, who have no heart ! But other men are not like you, stone inside and out.”

“ Lucky for me that I am, it seems ! ” said Mr. Justican, drily. “ But I’m not quite satisfied yet with your explanation. You’ve blown the gaff, I suppose, for some reason, stronger than this whim that you’re tired of Hugh ? Now then, what is it ? ”

She did not answer. But something in the attitude she assumed as he peered under her veil into her face made her look like a wild animal crouching for a spring.

“ I’ve not been treated well,” said she, in a lower voice than ever. “ I’m getting tired of life, tired of everything. I feel reckless, ready for anything for a change.”

“ Why ? ”

“ Why, it’s your fault, to begin with.”

“ Mine ! ”

“ Yes. You encouraged me to get hold of your nephew, young King, for what reason you know best. When I’d done what you wished—and it’s still easy enough for me to attract a man, in spite of your sneers—you kept him away.”

“ Well ! It does a young man good to admire, from a respectful distance, an amiable and accomplished woman older than himself,” said Mr. Justican, with an easy, quiet sarcasm in his tones which irritated madame at every word ; “ but when the amiable and accomplished woman

appears to forget the difference in their ages, and to treat a man young enough to be her son——”

Madame started angrily.

“ Well, nearly young enough to be her son, as if she were a girl of his own age, then she ceases to be useful, she becomes dangerous.”

“ Ah ! ” said Madame de Mauriac, with a sibilant sound which seemed to justify his use of the adjective.

“ Why do you make yourself so ridiculous, Anne ? ”

She writhed under the words.

“ I—loved him. I do love him, ” said she, hoarsely.

He laughed shortly and drily.

“ Love ! You are no more capable of love than I am ! ”

“ What ! *You !* ”

“ Yes. Mind, I don't set any high value on the capacity ; in fact, it is generally a sign of mediocrity in some direction. But, such as it is, love is a feeling of which you are utterly incapable. And the diseased vanity and morbid sentimentality, which you unite to a beautiful, cold, practical power of getting the best of everything from everybody, is no more like love than it's like moonshine. So don't pose, to me, as a martyr to passion. For I know better.”

As the ruthless words, which betrayed at every speech how intimate and thorough his knowledge of her nature was, fell in precise tones from his lips, she quailed before him.

“ You are a devil ! ” she hissed out at last.

“ Very likely. But you'll have worse spirits than me to deal with before long.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Do you think, when Hugh knows you've split on him, that he'll let you off quietly ? You've exasperated him

already by your fancy for my nephew, which he knows, wretched as it is, to be the most genuine feeling you're capable of. Do you think he'll be sacrificed without one kick? Now, do you?"

It was not his words that alarmed Madame de Mauriac; it was a certain hard glitter in his blue eyes, as he peered under the meshes of her veil. She shuddered. "You—you—wouldn't tell him? Persuade him? Set him on?" whispered she, tremulously.

He laughed again, and again she shivered.

"I? Oh, no! I never persuade anybody!"

And, suddenly releasing her for the first time, he was turning back, when she stopped him, touching his sleeve in her turn, and speaking with passionate fear, passionate pleading in her voice.

"Because, remember, whatever I am, if I'm hard, if I'm cold, if I'm worthless, you know whose fault it is. Whether or not I can love now, I could love once, as you know. Who is it taught me the ugly things I know? The way to keep men off by keeping the one, and all to the profit, the pleasure, of one person? Who did? Who did, I say? Oh, before you urge another man to revenge himself on me, think of the strength of the revenge I might take on you!"

Her voice sank to a fervid whisper, but it left him wholly unmoved.

"I haven't the least idea what you mean," he said, with a slight shrug. "I had a flirtation with you once, of the briefest sort, certainly. You threw yourself at my head, you know."

"Well, what followed?"

"Nothing. You married, you lived your own life: I've had nothing to do with you ever since, except to keep up

some sort of conventional social intercourse since your return to England. If you are mad enough to imagine or to state anything else, I can easily prove that your statements are a fabrication."

As he said these words, with his cold eyes glittering more than ever in the light of the street-lamp near which they stood, Madame de Mauriac's face grew gradually rigid with horror. She tried to speak; but the words would not come. Then she turned abruptly, as if to walk away, and suddenly staggering, fell against the railings of the house she was passing.

A young man sprang across the road and supported her: it was Neal Sheringham, who had watched these two figures during their long conversation, in the course of which he had suddenly discovered the identity of the veiled and cloaked lady.

The trembling woman was grateful. She hung a moment on his arm, and he was shocked to see the abject terror in her face, to feel the tremulous twitching of her hands.

"Thank you, thank you," she said, hoarsely. And then she added: "Will you get me a hansom?"

He turned back with her, and had come up with his uncle, who was waiting about near the door of the police-station, when suddenly there came out the origin of all the disturbance, in the shape of the still excited and still voluble Sir Henry Ruddock.

As the baronet came out, he came face to face with Neal, at whom he stared for a moment with an exclamation of rage and amazement on his lips.

The next moment, uttering the one word, "Thief!" with stentorian voice, he raised his right hand and struck the young man a violent blow across the face.

CHAPTER XXIX.

NEAL reeled under the blow, which was totally unexpected, and delivered with so much force that in an instant the young man's face was covered with blood.

Half-blinded, and filled with amazement and resentment, Neal called out, "Liar!" and struck out in his turn, but he was too much dazed to know how he aimed, and his arm fell down, having failed in its attempt to reach the aggressor.

As he put up his handkerchief to his face to wipe away the fast-flowing blood, he felt a woman's hand on his arm, and heard the voice of Madame de Mauriac saying, not loudly, but in a tone full of contempt:

"Imbecile! You've got the wrong man. Why didn't you listen to me?"

But the baronet would not believe her.

"Allow me to know my own business best, madame," he said, as he seized Neal by the coat sleeve and began to attempt to drag him towards the open door of the police-station.

But even as Neal wrenched himself away, a couple of policemen interfered, and remonstrated with the excited gentleman, while Neal, turning to one of them, said:

"The old idiot's made a mistake. I'll go in with him and you, of course, and make him charge me, and see what he can prove against me. I'm no more a thief than

he is himself. And my uncle's here to bear witness for me."

For the last person Neal had seen in the crowd round him, before his wounds and the pain of them forced him to close his eyes, was Mr. Justican, standing almost at his elbow.

The unfortunate Neal, meanwhile, had to hold his handkerchief to his face, as he was helped up the step by one of the policemen, while the baronet, whose loquacity was as unbounded as ever, talked all the time, as he went in to enter his charge against the man he had assaulted.

At once, however, he found himself confronted with unexpected difficulties. The impetuous Sir Henry, blinded by his prejudice against Kenneth, which he extended gratuitously to his cousin, had jumped so hastily to the conclusion that Neal was the person who had robbed him of his jewels, that he had taken too much for granted. Now, therefore, when a few questions were put to him, he began to find that it was not easy to prove the charge he had so hurriedly made.

Neal, in the first place, denied absolutely, not only that he had stolen the baronet's necklace, but that he had even been aware that he had such a thing upon his person.

"Can you tell me," he asked his accuser simply, "how I could know you were carrying a valuable necklace about with you?"

"Oh, thieves have means of finding out these things," said Sir Henry, brusquely.

"Can you tell me on what grounds you suppose me to be a thief?"

The baronet hesitated.

"Nobody but you can have taken it," he replied,

evasively. "I looked at the necklace to see that it was safe before dinner——"

"In my presence?" asked Neal.

"N-n-no," admitted Sir Henry, rather sulkily.

"Then how do you account for my knowing you had it?"

Sir Henry was silent a moment. Then the inspector in charge put in quietly:

"You said, sir, when you came in just now to give the charge, that it was stolen during dinner. Was this gentleman, then, the only person who came near you during dinner, and until the time you discovered that the jewels had been stolen?"

"No, of course not, of course not," said Sir Henry, irritably. "But after that I was in the company of only one person, and he, I may tell you, was a detective."

A slight smile appeared and instantly disappeared on the inspector's face.

"Then you have really, sir, as I understand, no proof at all on which to make such a charge against this gentleman?"

"Well, if I think my suspicions are good enough, I am ready to abide by the consequences if I'm proved wrong," retorted the baronet, confidently.

"Well, sir, from information I've received, I should strongly advise you to withdraw your charge, for which there's really no foundation at all." He turned to Neal. "You'll give your name and address, sir?"

Neal did so at once, and the inspector had no difficulty in satisfying himself, by the baronet's own evidence, that they were correct.

"More than that," said Neal, firmly. "My uncle's here somewhere, and he will satisfy you that such a charge against me is utterly preposterous."

And he looked round, expecting to find that his uncle had followed him into the building.

But Mr. Justican was not there.

On finding that he was mistaken, Neal experienced a slight qualm of uneasiness. Surely, he thought, his uncle might have come forward at such a time, to speak up for him, and rescue him from the ignominious position in which the ridiculous accusation of the irascible country gentleman had placed him.

“And you, sir, do you wish to charge this gentleman with the assault?” asked the inspector.

Neal shook his head.

“No, indeed I don’t,” said he, promptly. “I don’t want any word of this disgusting business to get into the papers. Can I go now?”

“Yes. But won’t you have your face attended to first?”

“No, thanks. I’ll get home.”

And Neal, shaken by the adventure in more senses than one, hurried out of the police station and jumped into the first cab that came along.

He was irritated, disgusted, and perhaps rather alarmed by the fact that his uncle had not come forward on his behalf. The ugly doubts which he had long had about Flinders were naturally stronger now than ever. And the intimate footing on which this suspicious character had been at Vine Place became a more disagreeable fact than before in the face of the theft which had just taken place. Neal wanted to talk to Kenneth, to tell him not only of the outrage of which he had been the victim, and of the loss of the baronet’s jewels, but of that long interview which Madame de Mauriac had had with Mr. Justican, and of the words she had uttered when the baronet made his attack upon himself.

In the meantime, Madame de Mauriac, considerably shaken, in her turn, by the rapid succession of events which had taken place that evening, had gone home to her flat, looking nervously round her on the way to make sure that she was not followed.

Keen as her eyes were, however, she failed to discover two things. The one was that Flinders, stolid, patient, motionless, was watching her entrance from the shop nearly opposite on her return, just as he had watched her going out earlier in the evening : the other thing was that Mr. Justican, instead of going home to Hammersmith, as Neal supposed he had done, tracked madame to her home, and, being keener-sighted than she, detected Flinders in his ambush ; and beckoning him out, had a short conversation with him before leaving the neighborhood.

So short it was, that interview, the words on each side were so few, uttered so quietly, so rapidly, that a passer-by would have thought nothing more important than a few remarks upon the weather were passing between the two men.

But when they separated, Mr. Justican leaving the other man standing on the pavement, an acquaintance who had known Flinders as the lazy, quiet man about town, with the colorless hair and eyes and skin, would scarcely have recognized him in the stony-faced automaton that moved stealthily across the street and was lost to view in the wide entrance of the mansions opposite.

A curious disappearance it was, more like the fading of a ghost from sight than the full-blooded action of a living, breathing man.

By the time Neal reached his uncle's house, his face was horribly swollen, his cheek and the bridge of his nose having been cut by a signet ring the baronet wore. He could

not see to pay the cabman, but staggered up the path to the house, and told Susan, who let him in, to take the money out of his purse and pay the driver.

Kenneth, having heard him come in, now appeared at the smoking-room door.

“Hallo, old chap! What’s up! What on earth have you been doing to yourself?”

Neal pushed past him into the room without any answer.

“Give me something to drink,” said he, hoarsely. “Wine, brandy, anything! And hurry up!”

And he sank down on the nearest low chair and bowed his head on his hands.

Five minutes later Susan rang the bell next door, and asked the servant who opened it whether Mrs. Pender could give her some cotton wadding. While she was speaking the door of the drawing-room opened, and Harry came out. It was eleven o’clock, and he was on his way upstairs to bed, when he heard the request and asked what was the matter.

“Poor Mr. Neal’s come ’ome with a face the size of two, like a prize-fighter’s,” exclaimed Susan. “And we’ve got no wadding to dress it with. I thought as Mrs. Pender might have some, and as p’raps she’d come in and ’elp.”

Both Mrs. Pender and Nynce were by this time in the hall, but the former, kind-hearted though she was, did not care for the office of ministering angel to Neal.

“I’ll give you everything you want—wadding, oiled silk, bandages,” said she. “But——”

“I’ll come,” said Nynce. “I’ve learnt first aid, and——”

“Indeed, Nynce, you will do nothing of the kind.

If Mr. Sheringham has got hurt in some quarrel or——”

But Nynee for once would not be suppressed. Clasp- ing her little hands, and reddening very much, she said, firmly, as to intention, though her voice did quaver :

“Mamma, I must go. I don’t care how it happened ; I—I can’t bear to think nobody should help him. I—I *will* go.”

She ran out of the house before her bewildered mother could stop her, while the irrepressible Susan, to increase Mrs. Pender’s irritation, cried softly :

“Brayvo !”

There was nothing for it, of course, but to go after the naughty girl. And Mrs. Pender, with her bandages and her liniments, went indignantly in pursuit.

When she arrived she found a little group so touching that, much as she disliked her daughter’s encouragement of Neal rather than of Sir Henry Ruddock, she had not the heart to say a word.

For Neal was sitting on the sofa with Nynee beside him, his head leaning on her shoulder, struggling to suppress the heaving sobs which had risen when the young girl, so modest, so much alarmed by his wound and her own boldness, broke into the room like a ray of soft sunshine in the midst of the gloom in which both the cousins were plunged.

Kenneth was almost as much moved as Neal. He stood by the sofa thanking Nynee in a broken voice for coming, while she looked up at him through her tears, and caressed Neal’s thick black hair with one soft little hand.

“Now,” said she in a whisper to him, “here’s mamma with her things. We must get to work. Bring the water, please, and the sponge.”

Mrs. Pender would have made her give up her place,

but Nynee gently refused. It was her hand which bathed the wound, drew together the edges of the two cuts on Neal's face with clever little fingers, and applied the bandages with care and skill.

While she was at work no one spoke. Mrs. Pender watched her daughter with suppressed annoyance, which overpowered every feeling of compassion for the lad. Kenneth remained at a little distance, like a statue of gloom. Neal submitted to Nynee's ministrations with lamb-like docility, and Nynee herself, her brows knitted, her red lips firmly pressed, did her work in strictest silence.

When it was over, Mrs. Pender moved restlessly, anxious to take her daughter away. But Kenneth, with a fellow-feeling for his cousin, guessed that Neal was longing for the relief of a few words with the girl he loved.

So he suddenly approached the elder lady, and said "Of course you want to know all about this, don't you?"

Curiosity got the better of the lady's impatience, and she submitted to be led to the end of the room, while Kenneth, as if anxious that the story should not reach Nynee's ears, proceeded to entertain her with a highly coloured account of Neal's adventure, in which he took great care never, by any chance, to come within a mile of the unvarnished truth. Mrs. Pender, poor soul! was not the sort of person to whom one could confide the story of Sir Henry's mistake.

In the meanwhile, Neal was pouring into Nynee's ear such words of whispered gratitude as made her cheeks tingle and her pretty eyes brighten. In all his wild outpourings, however, it struck the girl with distress to note that there was an undercurrent of despair.

"I shall never forget this, Nynee—never forget you

wouldn't listen to them when they tried to keep you away! God bless you, darling! God bless you! If you must forget me, may you never—never——”

“Forget you! Oh, Neal! Why do you talk like that?” faltered poor Nynee, shocked and frightened.

“Can't tell you now; perhaps I shall never be able to tell you,” whispered Neal, hurriedly, “but—something's going to happen to us, I think, something that'll break off everything, and—and bottle up poor old Ken and me altogether. There, there, child, don't cry! Only remember this. If anything happens, and I can't see you again, remember I loved you all the time: that I'd have cut off my right hand for you, my little gentle darling!”

He bent his head to kiss her hand; but Nynee, carried away by her feelings, after one swift look round to see that Kenneth held her mother's attention absorbed, put her lips to Neal's forehead, above the bandages, and printed a tender kiss on the poor lad's brow.

“God bless you! God bless you! If only poor Ken could have a ray of sunshine in his heart like the one you've put in mine!”

He had scarcely uttered the last word when Mrs. Pender, waking suddenly to her responsibilities, when Kenneth had exhausted his powers of invention, came swooping down upon them, and carried Nynee off.

The two young men remained silent for a space, watching the ladies as they went down the garden, and the stealthy waving of Nynee's hand, which was meant as a sign of sympathy and encouragement.

“What—have you told her?” asked Kenneth, hoarsely.

“Not much. Only that—that something was going to happen. We don't know much more ourselves,” he added, gloomily.

He had told his cousin the adventures of the evening, the sudden impulse which had seized him to follow his uncle to Madame de Mauriac's, to learn, if he could, what the adventures of Sir Henry and Flinders had been.

Kenneth frowned and grew agitated at the mention of the lady's name, but he said nothing.

Neal had related how he saw Sir Henry Ruddock come downstairs from the flat, followed by Mr. Justican, and how he had followed them to the police-station and heard Sir Henry raving about his having been robbed. Finally he had told of the long talk between Mr. Justican and madame's emotion at the end of it, and of the final scene, when Sir Henry came out, struck him and accused him of being a thief.

Neither of the cousins made much comment upon these events. They both knew that something was in the air, something which was to come as a terrible climax to the fears and doubts which had of late beset them. Through all, they were careful to avoid one name. They talked of the baronet, of Flinders, of Crayford and his wife, but they avoided their uncle's name.

They were still sitting at the window, wondering why Mr. Justican had not returned, when a special messenger came up the garden-path with a telegram for Kenneth.

He torn open the paper with trembling hands.

It contained only these words: "Come and see me to-night: do not fail. De Mauriac."

He sprang to his feet and rushed out for his hat and overcoat. Neal followed him into the hall.

"Don't go," he whispered; "Ken, for heaven's sake, don't go. I tell you, you don't know what's been going on; you don't know what you'll see!"

Kenneth, whose face was as white as the dead, shook himself free from his cousin's hand.

"I must go, I must," said he, hoarsely. "Who could resist such an appeal? Could you?"

Neal did not answer.

The next minute Kenneth was being whirled along the road towards Madame de Mauriac's flat. He kept his teeth tightly clenched; the misery at his heart was like one long dull pain. Something would happen there to-night, something horrible, unspeakable. Would it be something irreparable, something that would blot out the sunshine, and make his after-life a grim horror?

These dim thoughts filled his mind as he drove along; and when he reached the house, and entered the hall of the mansions, where the lights were still burning, he was seized by such a sense of something terrible impending that at first he could not mount the staircase, but lingered a moment at the bottom.

When he had recovered himself a little, he rushed up two at a time. Madame de Mauriac's flat was high up; he knew the way well.

As he raised his hand at the entrance of the flat, he was astonished to see that the door was not shut.

He pushed it open and looked in. It was quite dark inside. Entering cautiously, with a feeling as if there were a weight on his feet, he felt for the inner door, that of the drawing-room.

The wood was broken and splintered; and as he touched it he drew back with a low cry; for it was wet, clammy to the touch.

Kenneth staggered back on to the landing, and looked at his hand: it was stained with blood.

CHAPTER XXX.

FOR a few moments Kenneth waited on the landing outside the flat, not with any definite idea of preparing himself for the ordeal before him, but because the horror of the discovery he had made paralyzed him and rendered him at first incapable of action or even of thought.

Then he went back into the flat, and resolutely pushing open the drawing-room door, entered the darkened room, and was promptly brought to a standstill, by finding that there was something lying on the floor at his feet, before he had gone three steps into the room.

For a moment his heart seemed to cease to beat, as he stood quite still, listening to the ticking of the little French clock on the mantelpiece, and to the soft shuffling about of Madame de Mauriac's birds, in the big gilt cage that hung over the aquarium in the window.

These little ordinary every-day sounds seemed to intensify the horror he felt of the dread unseen presence that hovered over the room. He felt in his pockets for his match-box, struck a light, and without yet venturing upon one look at the floor, turned sharply to the writing-table which stood, as he knew, against the wall near the door, and lit the two wax candles which were upon it.

He remembered, as he did so, with another pang of sick horror, how he had disliked those candles, fluted

and painted, as unfit for a lady's rooms. And in the wild excitement of this terrible moment, the thought struck him as strange and uncanny that these tasteless, gaudy candles should light up such a scene as that which he had now to see.

Not for a moment did he deceive himself with the hope that he should find Madame de Mauriac alive. And when with the candles in his hands, he turned his shrinking, sensitive eyes downwards to the floor, and saw the poor lifeless body, in its flowing, soft garments, the delicate embroidered muslin, the long cloak of gray corded silk lined with dainty pale brocade—lying, huddled, in a horrible attitude of strain and pain, at his feet, he shuddered without one word, one cry; then he went quietly down on his knees beside the dead woman, and putting the candles on the floor beside him, where the bright carpet was dark with a dreadful red stain, he touched her head, with its gold-bronze hair all disordered and bedraggled, and looked with staring, dim eyes into the face he had loved.

The glazed, upturned eyes, the aspect of death in all its unmitigated horror, were too much for the unhappy, sensitive lad. One long, wild look; one despairing touch of his trembling hand on the heart that would beat no more, were all he had strength for. Then a strangled sob broke from his lips, and he sprang up and staggered away from the terrible sight, unable to bear his misery.

He stumbled across the room, where each beautiful object, each cosy chair, each dainty nick-nack, had so often attracted his admiration; and throwing himself on the couch, face downwards, clutched in frantic despair at the sides of that very sofa on which he had so often seen her sitting, and admired her grace and her charm.

His fingers glided over the smooth satin surface, with a noise that made him shudder. He remembered the sound ; everything he saw, everything he heard in this room, recalled to him some hour of pleasure spent there in the society of the woman he had adored, with all the fervor of passionate romantic youth, content to worship, finding enjoyment enough in its own wild hopes and chivalrous imaginings.

As he lay thus, crazy with grief, remembering all he had felt and hoped, and oppressed by the horror of what he had just seen, he heard a footstep in the room ; and before he could look up, he felt a hand, a woman's hand, hard and rough, but tender and kind, upon his head.

"Poor boy !" said madame's servant, in a low voice.

And starting up, Kenneth found himself face to face with the woman, saw that her eyes were red with weeping, and felt, even at that moment, a sensation of comfort at the sight.

"You loved her, poor boy !" said the woman. "Well, so did I. She was so clever ! Ah, I shall never see a woman as clever as she was again ! Never, never !"

"Clever !" stammered Kenneth, who had loved madame for her womanly charm, her beauty, her grace, and who would have scouted the possibility of loving a "clever" woman, a creature whom he looked upon, with true masculine contempt, as only fit for a drudge or a slave. "No, not clever. She was beautiful, sweet, charming !"

"Ah, yes, to you !" replied the servant, with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "That was her cleverness : she was not beautiful to me, who knew how it was done ! I, who know how to turn eight-and-thirty to eight-and-twenty ! Look at her now, poor dear, with the wrinkles showing !"

And, to Kenneth's unspeakable horror, she turned up the electric light, and revealed the sad secrets of the dead woman, the touches of gray at the roots of the hair, the lines made by time in the face and throat, with a hand as unconsciously cynical as it was gentle.

"Don't, don't!" said he, in disgust. "Let me remember her as I knew her, as I loved her! My beautiful lady, my queen!"

He had stopped the woman's revealing hand.

"Now," said he, "we'll put her here, on the couch, and put some of her beautiful things over her, something to hide the worst!"

She looked at him kindly, understanding. Together they raised the dead woman, and placed her on the sofa; and the servant brought a coverlet of heavy white lace and threw it over her, while Kenneth stood sentinel, like a statue, waiting.

Then she took his hand and led him into the dining-room.

"You'd better not stay in there," she said. "You can do no good, and it'll only upset you. And there's a deal more for you to know still."

"What do you mean?" asked Kenneth, in whom every other thought had been swallowed up by the knowledge that the woman who had enslaved him was dead.

"Don't you want to know how it happened?"

"I know," said Kenneth at once. "It was that brute Flinders who killed her. I knew he would. I saw it in his eyes that night she came to my uncle's. When was it? A week ago? Last night? When was it?"

And he passed his hand wearily across his forehead.

"Yes, it was Hugh Peters—Flinders as he used to call

himself. He loved her too, you know, only she didn't like him."

"Why did she let him come, then? Why did she encourage him?"

The woman laughed.

"Oh, you innocent! Madame encouraged everybody. Bless her heart! How she could keep them all on, with a word here, a look there, and never a smile too much to anybody! There are not many women who can do that, mind you! They lose their heads, most of them, and go too far, and then it's all over! And sometimes I thought the poor dear would end like that with you—marry you and put an end to everything!"

Kenneth raised his head, looking at the woman as if he would have pierced her soul.

"Put an end to what?" he said, sharply.

"Why, to the business, to be sure. Come, sir, you must know, simple as you are, if you know why she was murdered, that she and Peters were the two cleverest jewel-thieves in all the world?"

And she put her hands on her hips, and drew herself up, with an unmistakable air of genuine pride.

"What!"

Kenneth could scarcely utter the word. The awful truth, in spite of all the hints he had had, of all the suspicions Neal had tried to instil into him, came like a stunning blow upon him.

"Why, yes. There wasn't a robbery of any consequence that they didn't have to do with! None of your petty, footling affairs, but matters of thousands and thousands of pounds. First one side the Channel, then the other. When things grew hot here, presto! they toddled over to the other side. Then back again when all was quiet.

And so they went on and on, year in, year out, for a matter of eight or ten years. And she keeping him off all the time! And yet always promising, promising, and smiling, smiling! Ah! Talk of a genius! That was Anne Bowker!"

"Anne—Bowker!" faltered Kenneth.

"Yes, that was her name, poor dear!"

"And wasn't she—married to a Frenchman?"

"Well, yes, she was at one time. But his name wasn't Monsieur de Mauriac. Of course her name wasn't always the same; it had to be altered for business reasons. But there! Under one name or the other she was just as clever, just as graceful, and just as difficult to get hold of!"

Kenneth was stunned, revolted, sickened. And to add to his disgust, there was the attitude of this woman, whose frank admiration of her late mistress and her career of successful crime, appalled him.

"Why—do you tell me this?" he asked at last, after a silence in which he had struggled to find his mental footing in the midst of these shocking revelations.

She smiled a little, and again shrugged her shoulders in a French fashion which she had adopted together with certain expressive movements of the hands and arms.

"I thought you knew something," said she. "But if you did not, it doesn't matter. It must all come out now. Madame is dead; her beautiful things that she loved will be sold; it's all over. I was going out myself, right away; but I heard you in there, and so I came in to see you, because I knew how you must feel, and I was sorry for you."

Kenneth stared at her in amazement. He was still

young enough not to be able to understand how a person who seemed in some respects utterly depraved and unprincipled could be susceptible to kindly, human feelings.

A sudden gust of rage against Flinders seized him. Surely it must have been that cold, self-contained man who had inducted the gentle-voiced, refined Madame de Mauriac into a career of crime!

"I hope they'll find him! I hope they'll hang him!" he muttered suddenly, between his clenched teeth.

The woman started, and stared at him.

"Come here," whispered she in a low voice. And as she spoke she went out into the little vestibule, holding the door open for him to follow her.

He did so mechanically.

She was stooping over something dark that lay in a corner, covered by a curtain which had been dragged down from the wall. She turned up the light, and, to Kenneth's unspeakable horror, she drew back the curtain, and showed him the dead face of Flinders himself, looking scarcely less like a waxen mask in death than it had done in life.

Kenneth uttered a cry, and she put her finger to her lip.

"Don't," said she, "we shall have the police here quite soon enough. See!" And she pointed to a stain on his breast. "He shot her first, and himself afterwards."

"He loved her—as much as that!"

"Oh, that wasn't love. It was revenge. She thought he had been detected by the police at last. It was all a mistake, but she thought so. The cleverest of us make mistakes sometimes; so she went to the police station and made a clean breast of it. It was what she always meant to do if anything went wrong. Poor dear,

poor dear! And to think that, but for that, she might have been alive still! For he managed to find out what she had done, you see. And he couldn't forgive her!"

Kenneth could not speak. Such a tale of perfidy, of deceit, of selfish cunning, seemed to have a stupefying effect upon him. An ordinary story of a fault or a crime would have roused in him more indignation, more disgust, than did all this history. It was outside the bounds of belief; it was appalling, incredible.

"Now," said the woman, quietly, "you'd better go. You don't want to be found here."

"And you—what will you do?" he asked mechanically.

"I shall give information myself. It's the best thing I can do now."

Kenneth nodded. It surprised him to find how coolly he was taking the amazing things she said. It seemed to him as if he felt himself already to be on a level with these people, these swindlers in whose lives he had played a part. If the police had come up the stairs at that moment, he felt that he would have allowed them to arrest him, and would have marched away with them as a matter of course, without resentment or protest.

"Oh yes," said he, "I suppose it is."

"Good-bye," said the woman, after a moment's hesitation. "I'm afraid I've told you more than I ought. You take it to heart so."

Kenneth met her dull, middle-aged gray eyes, and after a moment uttered a short laugh.

"Oh no, not at all," said he, "not at all, I assure you."

"But you're young. You'll get over it."

"Yes. Thank you—for—for telling me. Good-bye."

She was holding the outer door open, being herself impatient to be gone. Mechanically, with one shudder-

ing glance at the broken door with the stains on it, Kenneth went downstairs.

When he got back to Vine Place he found Neal in an agony of impatience for his return. Mr. Justican had not come back, and Neal had been in such a state of anxiety about his cousin that in a few minutes more he would have left the house in search of him.

In the smoking-room, by the light of a dying lamp, with the night silence round them, and the cold air blowing in upon them through the open window, Kenneth told Neal the whole sickening story of his visit to the flat, his discovery, his conversation with the servant, and of the last gruesome sight he had witnessed on his way out.

Neal heard it all without either comment or movement, spellbound by the appalling relation.

Then, when the lamp died out, they got up shivering, shut the window, and stumbled upstairs to bed, as much chilled as if they had been passing a winter's night on an iceberg.

Neither could sleep. From time to time the one would hear the other moving about, and would start up and call out, glad of any excuse to hear an answering voice. And when morning came Kenneth lay tossing and muttering, with glittering eyes and parched mouth, so that poor Neal, who was as pitiful an object as ever with his plastered face and one blackened eye, looked at him in despair.

"You'd better let me send for a doctor!" said he, dubiously.

Kenneth sprang up in his bed.

"Doctor!" cried he, irritably. "No. I'll have nobody sent for! We shall have somebody here soon enough! Let's stay in peace as long as we can!"

Neal said nothing to this. But as the morning wore on, and Kenneth grew manifestly worse, the elder slipped out of the room, ran softly downstairs, and jumped over the wire fence that divided their front-garden from Mrs. Pender's.

She had been kind to him the night before: she would take pity on them now, like the really good soul she was!

Neal felt that he longed for a kind word—a friendly look. All through that dreadful night, he and Kenneth had felt like outcasts, living under a shadow that grew darker every day. Just the sight of a friendly face, the touch of a warm hand, perhaps a smile from Nynce herself if he was in luck, would mean so much just then!

So he rang the bell, and waited in a feverish anxiety of hope until the door opened.

Before he could even ask for Mrs. Pender, Neal heard a voice from one of the rooms inside the house, which struck a death-knell to his hopes. It was the voice of Sir Henry Ruddock, speaking in loud and angry tones.

Neal turned pale, realizing in a moment the sort of errand on which the baronet had come to the house, the sort of story he would have been telling his shocked hostess.

He hesitated whether to send in the message which was on his lips boldly, and take the consequences, challenging Sir Henry to his face, or whether to retreat quietly and not risk further rebuffs.

And while he was hesitating, Mrs. Pender and the baronet crossed the hall towards the garden door.

“Mrs. Pender—” Neal began in a hoarse voice.

Both she and Sir Henry started, and she turned and stared at him indignantly.

“I cannot receive—thieves,” said she.

Neal staggered under the blow. Then he turned, and with a white face, and without a word, stumbled down into the garden and sprang over the fence.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NEAL's hand had scarcely touched the bell when Susan opened the door. Her face was a study; even in the state of resentment and misery in which Neal was, he noticed her expression, and was struck by it.

"What's the matter, Susan?" he asked, trying to speak in his ordinary voice.

The girl did not at once answer, but with a rapid gesture rather of command than of polite persuasion, beckoned him inside the house, and shut the door. Then, standing with her back to it, she let loose her pent-up wrath, her little plain face pale with passion, her voice hoarse with anger.

"They've insulted you! That beast Mrs. Pender has insulted you! Oh, don't tell me! I know it! I see it in yer face! If I'd ha' known I would'nt ha' let yer have gone in, that I wouldn't! Why, Mr. Neal, yer might ha' known as that silly old woman 'ud be the first to turn round upon yer, and throw it in yer face when troubles came! But I'll make her suffer for it! I'll teach her to insult my masters! I'll give the old beast a lesson she won't forget in a 'urry! Oh, I will, I tell you I will!"

"I don't know what you mean," said Neal, irritably.

Although he liked this odd little girl, and was in the mood to be almost grateful for her abuse of Mrs. Pender, he could not suffer this little outburst to go without a conventional rebuke.

Besides, did not the girl's words imply that the crimes

which had come to light were a matter in which he was intimately concerned? The fact that this was nothing but the truth did not make the reminder more palatable.

"There, there, to be sure," said Susan, as she crossed the hall towards the staircase, and took up a tray on which was a bottle of soda-water and a tumbler, "I didn't ought to have spoken so free. But there now, it goes to my heart, that it do, to see you and poor Mr. Kenneth looking as you look this morning."

And the girl gulped down a sob, and hastily dried her eyes to which the tears had sprung.

Neal's voice softened as he said, with a sort of sidelong look at her, to see how she received the question: "Has my uncle come back yet?"

Susan drew herself up, alert and self-possessed again in a moment.

"Well, no, he ain't. But don't you take on for that, sir. Mark my words, it's all right. He'll be back afore many hours is over, and he'll clear things up straight-like right away. Oh, trust your uncle! Trust Mr. Justican! Once he gets his finger in the pie, and things'll be as right as ninepence in no time!"

Neal stared at her with a frown.

"Of course things will be all right," said he, stiffly. "They're all right now, aren't they?"

A dry smile appeared on Susan's face.

"I s'ppose, sir, as you 'avent 'ad time to see the papers this morning?" said she.

Neal's heart leapt to his mouth. The newspapers! Of course they would be full of the sensational murder and suicide, and it was impossible to tell how much more than those bare facts would have been gleaned by this time.

"I've took them up to Mr. Kenneth," said Susan. "I wouldn't 'ave if I could 'ave 'elped! But he was that determined as there wasn't no saying him nay. I'm just agoin' up with this soda-water for him, for he won't 'ave no breakfast."

Neal was already half-way up the stairs. He found Kenneth out of bed, shivering in his dressing-gown by the window in the sunshine, with a newspaper in his hands.

Neal took it from him without a word. On the whole, the news was not so bad as he had expected. The account he read of the murder and suicide did indeed state that the police, who had the affair in hand, were on the track of certain very important discoveries as to the perpetrator of the crime, who was believed to be one of a gang of clever swindlers whose doings had become notorious, but who had hitherto baffled all attempts to get upon their track. But the name of the murderer was not given, nor was there any hint that Madame de Mauriac herself had been a colleague of his.

The impression given by the account was that robbery had been the prime motive of the murder; certain valuable jewelry, supposed to have been stolen from the lady, having been found in the dead man's pockets.

As to the suicide, that remained unexplained, except on the assumption that the thief and murderer had been disturbed, detected, and that he had shot himself in the belief that his career of successful crime was now over.

This hypothesis, however, was too weak to be satisfactory, especially as no witness to the crime appeared to be forthcoming. Apparently the press had not got hold of madame's servant, or even heard anything about her.

While Neal was still reading, Susan knocked at the

door and brought in her little tray with the soda-water.

“ You’re not going to get up, Ken, are you ? ” said Neal.

“ Yes, I am. ”

“ But you’re not well enough to be about. ”

“ I’m better than I should be lying there, ” said poor Ken, who was shaken mentally and bodily by the occurrences of the previous night. “ There’ll be a raid upon this house presently, I expect,—and—— ”

Neal made a sign to him not to talk so freely before the girl, but Susan saw his frown and laughed softly.

“ You needn’t mind me, young gentlemen, ” said she, drily, but not impudently, “ as Mr. Kenneth there is ’cute enough to guess, there ain’t much goes on ’ere as I don’t know of. And don’t you be afraid, either of you ; if the p’lice comes ’ere, a-thinking to find thieves and thieves’ plunder, why, they’ll soon go out again with their ’ands as empty as their ’eads. ”

“ How do *you* know so much, Susan ? Perhaps you’re one of the gang yourself ? ” said Neal.

Susan shook her head.

“ I don’t belong to no gang, and I don’t know nothink but what my own eyes sees. But that’s a goodish deal, ” said Susan, sententiously. “ And what I say is, don’t you be afraid. For there ain’t no call to be. P’lice ! What’s the p’lice ? Mr. Justican’ll soon send them to the right-about if they comes poking their nose in *his* ’ouse ! You may stake yer life on that ! ”

When Susan left the room, the cousins exchanged looks.

“ I wish I could feel as confident as that girl, about—uncle ! ” said Neal, under his breath. Then he jumped up, stretching his arms. “ Look here, ” said he, “ before

the police come, if they're coming, let's make some investigations on our own account."

Kenneth was reluctant to do this, but he was overborne by his cousin. Neal went downstairs to wait till Kenneth was dressed, and, looking moodily out of the smoking-room window, his attention was suddenly arrested by the sight of a small white object on the top of the wall which divided the garden from Mrs. Pender's. Stretching out of the window, Neal saw that the object was a note, folded very small. There was nobody within sight, but the blood rushed to his face as he made a shrewd guess as to the little hand which had placed it there. Jumping out of the window, he put up his hand, brought down the note, and recognized the handwriting on the outside. The address was one word only:

"Neal."

There was a clump of shrubs a little way down the garden, under the wall. Neal concealed himself among them, in the hope that he would presently hear a footstep or a voice he knew on the other side of the wall. In the meantime he could read the letter at his ease.

Of course it was from Nynee, and the handwriting, shaky and irregular, betrayed almost as much as did the words :—

"MY DEAR, DEAR NEAL,—I don't know what to say to you. I *hate* Sir Henry, and I have almost told him so. I will never speak to him again for saying such wicked, shocking things about you. I told him they were not true, and that he would have to beg your pardon some day for saying them. I will not listen to mamma, nor to anybody who says a word against you. I cannot see you ; they will not let me ; they watch me, for they

know what I think and what I feel. But I shall find an opportunity of putting this on the wall, when I think you or your cousin can see, and I entreat you, Neal, not to be miserable, and not to mind the nonsense they talk.

“If you can find an opportunity of writing me a few lines, and of letting me have them without anybody’s seeing them, do, do write. Let me know what it is that is troubling you so much. For you have been very miserable lately, I know. But whether you write to me or not, one thing I am sure of, and that is, that the trouble is not your fault, and that you are the honorable, straight forward Neal whom I love now, and shall love always, whatever happens.—Yours, NYNNE.”

Absorbed as he was in the reading of this letter, Neal was suddenly startled by the sound of a bell, and looking up, he caught sight of Susan, appearing at the end of the passage which ran between the billiard-room and the kitchen premises.

Then he heard a cry of “Bottles!” and Susan went quickly down the garden to the back-door, which opened on the lane.

There was nothing extraordinary in that, nothing extraordinary either, in the fact that the little old man from the wretched little shop in the back street near, who had uttered the cry, now stood for a moment, with his bag over his shoulder, and spoke a few words to the girl.

Neal was too far off to hear what was said ; but he saw Susan nod to the old man, without giving him anything, and then shut the door. As he went down the lane, still crying “Bottles!” after his wont, Susan came back up the garden in a leisurely manner.

When half-way up she stopped, strolled back to the potting-shed, and brought out Mr. Justican's big water-can, which she proceeded to drag along the grass up to the house. Neal supposed she was going to water the geraniums in the front window-boxes, and, at first he thought nothing of the circumstance. But, just as he emerged from behind the bushes, it struck him as singular that she should drag this heavy can up the garden, when there was a small one ready to hand.

He therefore, being now in a particularly suspicious frame of mind, had the curiosity to go round to the back kitchen window, and to peep in through the iron bars with which it was protected.

And he saw Susan, who was alone in the kitchen, kneel down on the floor, and plunge her right hand to the bottom of the big water-can.

She saw him at once, and reddening deeply, withdrew her hand; then jumping up, she dragged the can with her away out of his sight. He tried the handle of the kitchen-door, but it was bolted fast on the inside.

Sure now that something was wrong, Neal went indoors, in search of his cousin, and told him what he had just seen. Together they went to the kitchen where the cook, Mrs. Green, a stout, placid woman who was, or pretended to be very deaf, could tell them nothing about Susan. She had gone upstairs to do Mr. Kenneth's room, she thought, but wasn't sure.

The young men retreated, silently, and took counsel together in the front room. Kenneth laid his hand on his cousin's shoulder.

"Neal," said he, "let's hook it."

"Where can we hook it to?" said Neal, suddenly.

The intense anxiety in which they were living, and

the awful shadow of the events which were taking place round them, affected the two young men differently. Kenneth, who was still suffering from the frightful remembrance of what he had seen and heard on the previous night, was stupefied and maddened by turns. He wanted to be doing something, to be moving, to get away from the sights and sounds that reminded him of what he had gone through, of the life he had been living till then.

Neal, on the other hand, was sullen and fierce. They had been ensnared, victimized; he not only wanted to see what was going to happen, but he wanted to express his resentment, his disgust, with the author of all their troubles.

And at last he broke through the reserve they had both practised, and said:

“It’s an infernal shame! I won’t stir from here till I’ve seen my uncle, and asked him why we were dragged into this.”

“Come, we don’t know anything yet. We’re not sure of anything,” said Kenneth, moving restlessly about the room.

“We’re sure we’ve been surrounded by a set of rascals who are not much better than cut-throats, if they’re better at all,” said Neal, sharply.

“We don’t know that it was uncle’s fault,” said Kenneth, who, cleverer than his cousin, was more sensitive, more impressionable also. He could not bear to think that the affection and respect which he had felt for years for the man who had taken them into his home, educated, fed, clothed them, indulged them to the full, had been thrown away on a schemer, or something worse.

Indeed, neither of the lads dared as yet put his fears

and doubts into definite form even in his own mind. But Neal, pacing up and down the room impatiently, now burst out:

“Well, I mean to stay here until I know something more.”

“But—the police!” muttered Kenneth, whose eyes were feverish and glittering.

Neal shrugged his shoulders.

“If the police want us, they’ll find us, wherever we are!” said he. “And where are we to go to? We’ve only got a few pounds; we’re too proud to go to any of our friends with this business hanging over us: we can’t afford to emigrate. There’s nothing for us but to enlist. And even that we can’t do till we know—the—the worst!”

And his voice sank. Kenneth could not keep still.

“If only uncle would come!” he said, “at least we should know——”

“Let’s find out something for ourselves,” said Neal. “I’m pretty sure that old rascal Kirby, from the rag and bone shop round the corner, knows something. Let’s go and dig him out.”

Kenneth was glad of the excuse for active movement of any sort. They put on their hats, and went out of the house, by the back way through the lane, to the little side street where the shop of T. Kirby was.

They looked in through the dusty window at the shabby finery displayed there, the big Gainsborough hat with a bedraggled feather, the jackets, the limp skirts and limper bodices. And then they took a furtive peep into the shop itself, where an uninviting heap of odds and ends obstructed the view, and emitted a musty smell

of worm-eaten wood, ancient leather, and unaired, frowsy moreen hangings.

The heap protruded so far that the two young men could not see far into the recesses of the dark and dingy shop. So Neal, after a word to his cousin, walked boldly in.

There was no one there. No one behind the dirty, worm-eaten counter, where a small collection of rusty nails, keys, padlocks and such-like, filled half the available space—no one among the odd collections of clothes and books, broken furniture and old bottles, which lined the walls, and filled every corner.

The whole place looked as shabby, as forlorn, as disreputable as it was possible for a place to be. Not even a cat or a bird was there to give a touch of life to the grimy interior.

“Mr. Kirby!” called Neal, rapping sharply on the counter, as Kenneth, overcoming his reluctance and a strong sense of nausea, entered the shop in his turn.

There was no response.

“Perhaps the old fox is still on his rounds among the areas,” suggested Kenneth.

Neal called again, with the same result as before.

“Look here,” said he, desperately, “I’m going to look about me.”

In spite of his cousin’s protests, he pushed open the little door at the back of the shop, and found himself in a narrow passage, at the end of which was a step down into a perfectly bare outbuilding, which had not even a window.

The two young men could only see inside by the light they admitted as they opened the door.

"Look here," said Neal, "I shall just wait in here till the old ruffian comes back."

"What for?" asked Kenneth, uneasily.

"Because I want to find out something about him. Ten to one this is the place where he sorts out his ill-gotten goods. He'll come straight in here, and we shall have him fast, like a rat in a trap."

They had shut the door behind them, and were in the dark in the bare room.

The moment Neal ceased speaking, however, he felt a chill go down his spine.

The room had been empty when they entered; nobody had come in by the door. Yet, as he ceased speaking to his cousin, who was in front of him, *he felt the hot breath of another living creature on the back of his neck.*

CHAPTER XXXII.

It was some minutes after Neal and Kenneth had left the house when Susan came down into the kitchen, looking flushed and out of breath. Mrs. Green, who was peeling potatoes, looked at her askance.

"Where have you been, eh?" she asked, suspiciously, as Susan sat down and began to fan herself with her apron.

"Oh, never you mind," said Susan, with a nod. "What I want to know is, where have the two young gentlemen gone to?"

"Gone to? I dunno, I'm sure. They came in here just now, and wanted to know where you were, and of course I couldn't tell them. Then they took themselves off, and that's all I heard, except the slamming of the front door."

Susan looked worried.

"I 'ope they 'aven't gone far!" she said anxiously. "This is about the safest place to be in for us all just now."

"There, that'll do," said Mrs. Green quickly. "I wouldn't talk so much if I was you. It's best to know nothing at all, like me. If I'm asked, why, says I, nothing's wrong as I ever heard of. But you, you will go a-mixing yourself up in things, without so much as being asked, or paid."

Susan got up, and stood with her hands on her hips, with a grim smile on her face.

"I've got a few scores to pay off, I have," said she, "and it's only by taking a hactive interest in things as I can do it. And it makes things lively too, and I likes the fun of it—just like somebody else we know."

"Pretty fun!" said Mrs. Green. "With a man murdered at your door, and to be all in a dither with no: knowing who did it!"

Susan nodded solemnly.

"Some of us knows," she said, softly.

Mrs. Green gave her another sidelong glance.

"*You* do, I'm pretty sure," said she. "There ain't much escapes your little squint-eyes! But there, I don't want to know!" she went on, quickly, thrusting out her hand as if to repel a suggestion. "I don't want to be mixed up in these things, I tell you. I'm satisfied to be a good servant to a good master, as doesn't interfere, nor grudge me my perquisites, and I don't see I've any call to make inquiries about his friends."

"Ah!" said Susan, "you're a knowing old bird, you are, Mrs. G. And I'll tell you this, as the man as murdered poor old Kaspar ain't the man you think, and as he ain't fur off at this present moment either."

"Lord! Don't!" murmured Mrs. Green, wiping her face. "Why, if the p'lice finds out——"

"They won't find him 'ere!" retorted Susan, with a chuckle. "He came in last night, he did; I let him in myself when the young gentlemen had gone to bed, he and another of 'em. And they said that they wouldn't stay not above a minute, as they'd just write a note, and then let themselves out, without disturbing me. So good of them!" mocked Susan, pinching up her mouth, and putting her head on one side. "So I thanked 'em, and went upstairs. And when they was shut in Mr. Justi-

can's study, I came down again, and I waited on the landing. They didn't go out by the front-door, bless you, but by another way, a way you don't want to know nothink about."

Mrs. Green, with an affectation of indifference, was listening with much interest.

"Well, it ain't no concern of mine," said she. "But I hope you won't go letting in any more murderers. For it upsets my nerves, if it don't yours."

Susan laughed disagreeably.

"No," she said, pursing up her thin lips, "I don't mean to let in any more. And to make sure of that," she added in a low voice, which Mrs. Green, deaf as she was, heard perfectly, "I've—fastened the door they went out by."

Mrs. Green started.

"Do you want 'em caught?" she asked, nervously.

"Oh, they're welcome to get out by the other way—Diah Symons' way," said she. "Diah won't let 'em off too easy—only just easy enough," she added, grimly.

Mrs. Green looked uneasy again.

"You know a precious sight too much," she said. "You'll have the p'lice after *you*, if you don't look out."

"No fear," retorted Susan, calmly. "I've nothink to do with these carryings on, I 'aven't, 'ceptin' in all innercence, as they say. I'm just a ignorant tool, I am, in the 'ands of bold, bad men as give me things to fetch and carry what I don't know the value of. Oh, I'd puzzle 'em in the witness-box, I would! With a face like a new-born babe and a tongue as couldn't tell a lie!"

The cook put her potatoes into the saucepan with a contemplative air.

"I shouldn't mind, not for any of 'em," she said, shaking her head slowly, "but them two young gentlemen!

Bless their 'earts! I could cry when I think of the mess they're in!"

Susan looked grave too at that.

"I'm as fond of them two," she said after a pause, "as I am of the master himself, and I can't say no more than that. And it do go to one's 'eart to see how they've been fooled. It'd ha' been a deal better for them if they'd been chips of the old block, now wouldn't it?"

"Oh, there, be quiet!" said Mrs. Green, sharply.

Her own morals were a trifle lax where her interests were concerned; but the cynicism of the little Cockney girl frightened her.

In the meantime Neal and Kenneth had gone through a highly unpleasant experience in the outbuilding behind the little second-hand shop of "T. Kirby."

The moment Neal knew that he and his cousin were not alone in the dark wooden building which they had entered, he turned sharply, and tried to seize the newcomer who had so mysteriously found his way into the apparently empty room.

But he tried in vain. His hands grasped the air, while his cousin cried out, "What's that?" as he in his turn, felt, rather than heard, that some one passed him.

Suddenly, they both saw the door by which they had entered open and shut, and some one passed out so quickly, that neither of the young men could be quite sure who it was. Then they heard a bolt drawn on the outer side.

For a few seconds neither spoke. They could not be sure that they were alone, after this strange experience, and so they both stood listening intently, trying to hear what was going on round them.

Both had got a little nearer to the door, on the other side of which they heard some one shuffling softly about.

Neal, who had seen the rag and bone man that morning, believed that the man who had passed out was he; but Kenneth had not seen enough to be sure.

The flooring of the outbuilding consisted of loose boards, which creaked beneath their feet when they moved. Each slight sound made them nervous, and set them wondering whether any other person had got in with them.

At last they heard a voice, too much muffled for them to have a chance of knowing whether it belonged to anyone they knew. It seemed to come from the floor, a few feet from where they stood.

"Are you there, boss?" were the words they made out.

Neither spoke. Kenneth put his hand on his cousin's shoulder.

"Can we come out?" went on the voice.

Then another voice struck in, subdued, but with a sort of suppressed savagery in its tones: "Let us come out, Diah, is that you? Let us out, I say. We've had enough of this."

Neal whispered to Kenneth:

"Whose voice is that?"

Low as his whisper was, it must have attracted the attention of the men whose voices they had heard. For dead silence followed.

Neal whispered again:

"I can't stand this. Come, let's burst the door open."

So they ran against it, not indeed succeeding in breaking it open, but causing it to shake and to creak so that they evidently alarmed the occupant of the shop, who made haste to come towards it crying:

"Who's there? Who's in there?"

"Open the door," cried Neal, emphasizing his demand with a vigorous blow on the cracking boards.

"All right, all right, sir. Have patience. I didn't know it was you."

Neal had recognized the voice of the rag and bottle man, and the next moment that individual had drawn back the bolt and admitted the young men into the passage leading to his shop.

They both passed him quickly, and then Neal turned upon him as he was closing the door.

"Wait a minute," said he. "I want to know what this den of yours is, and what it's used for, and who——"

"It's only a photographic room, gentlemen, that I lend out to neighbors that haven't one in their own homes," said the rag and bottle man, who was an exceedingly dirty old man, of a markedly Semitic type of countenance; and again he tried to shut the door, which Neal was keeping open with his foot.

"What did you mean by bolting us in then?" went on Neal, sharply.

"How could I tell who you were, gentlemen?" said the man, keeping his lean old body bent in a deferential attitude, and still endeavoring to shut the door, which the young man as stubbornly kept ajar.

"Where did you spring from, eh?" asked Kenneth, who had not yet spoken. "From under the floor, wasn't it?"

The man hesitated.

"Come," said Neal, sharply, "you may as well tell us. We know you are one of the gang."

The old man tried to appear surprised, but it was evident that he knew perfectly well to what gang his questioner referred.

"It's an ill thing of you young gentlemen," whined he, "to come and make fun of a poor old man, who's very well known in the neighborhood——"

Neal laughed.

"I'll be bound he is!" cried he. "Known to the neighborhood as a harmless dealer in old bottles, and known to his particular friends, if I'm not mistaken, as a receiver of stolen goods."

They were still in the narrow passage, stuffy and evil-smelling, which led from the dark room to the front shop. There was very little light there; but even in the gloom Kenneth was struck by the sort of dull glare in the old man's eyes as he glanced up quickly at his interlocutor, and then looked down again on the worn flags under his feet.

And an idea struck Kenneth as he looked.

"I say," said he, looking intently and curiously into the wrinkled, cunning face, "are you 'Diah Symons'?"

"My name's over the shop door, young gentleman," replied the old man, without looking up. "T. Kirby, dealer in every sort of second-hand clothing, in rags, bones, bottles, old books, old furniture, old iron."

"And was it old iron or old bottles that you were buying just now in the lane, eh?" said Neal.

The old man looked up again, in the same furtive manner as before. Every moment his manner grew less prepossessing; every moment Neal's suspicions as well as Kenneth's grew stronger that this was the very head and leader of the gang of whom Flinders and Madame de Mauriac had been such prominent members.

Even as Neal put this question, Kenneth's attention was attracted to something he caught sight of inside a small room, which opened out of the passage in which

they were standing. He pushed the door, which was ajar, open a little way, and saw, standing against the wall, a Saratoga trunk, like the one which Mr. Justican had lent to Mrs. Pender for the trip to Dieppe.

A thought suddenly struck him, and he went into the room and turned the trunk over, while the old man, without attempting to prevent him, moved uneasily from side to side, and rubbed his face with a dirty silk handkerchief.

"Neal," cried he, suddenly, "look here."

Neal followed his cousin into the room, keeping, however, an eye upon the old man, and ascertaining, as he passed in, that there was no bolt outside the door of the room, and that the key was on the inside.

Kenneth was down on his knees, and as his cousin stooped, he pointed out to him that the bottom of the trunk was fitted with a sliding panel, which left a space of nearly an inch between it and the real bottom of the trunk.

Neal uttered an exclamation, and Kenneth stood up with a blank face, and looked around him. The room was fitted up as a carpenter's workshop, and on the bench at one end, under the window, were shavings of wood, nails, and a plane.

The cousins exchanged looks. Even as they did so, they saw the old man give a furtive kick to a portmanteau which stood half under the bench, pushing it further into the shadow. But the young men felt too sick for further investigations in that direction.

"I do odd jobs for the neighbors, to eke out a living," said the rag and bone man, in the same deferential tone. "I mend anything—trunks, chairs, china, umbrellas."

The young men made no comment. Kenneth went out

first, and Neal followed quickly. He turned again to the door of the dark room.

“And who have you in hiding in there?” he asked, abruptly. “Oh, yes, don’t look surprised. In the cellar, I mean, under the floor.”

The old man hesitated a moment, and suddenly appeared to make up his mind to be frank.

“Well, young gentlemen,” he said, “I will not deceive you. There is some one down there, and it was to oblige them that I was so particular, and that I had to keep you shut in till I knew by your voices you were friendly.”

The oily tone of semi-familiarity which the greasy wretch now adopted was even more repulsive than his former respectfulness, but they could not resent it, as they were both anxious to know the mystery of the voices from the cellar.

“Well!” said Neal, impatiently. “And who are they?”

“Friends, gentlemen, friends both,” said the old man at once. “One of them a very particular friend to you both.”

“Do you mean my uncle, Mr. Justican?” asked Neal eagerly.

The old man turned away his head, and did not immediately answer.

“Tell me, is he down there?” repeated Neal, in a sort of agony.

The old man turned to him again.

“Well, young gentleman,” said he, “I mustn’t tell tales. But you can speak to them, if you like, and find out who they both are for yourselves.” They both made a movement towards the door, but he did not at once advance, but went on: “For though I’m not concerned in any

gang whatever, young gentlemen, and though I'm only a poor old man that finds it hard to make a living, yet I have friends, gentlemen, powerful friends, that know where to find a humble but honest hand to help them in time of need."

While he finished his rigmarole, as if not yet quite decided whether to let them into his secret or not, the young men had gone impatiently to the door of the dark room, which they opened for themselves, pushing back the bolt, which the old man had drawn afresh.

Neal held the door open, and they both saw, by the dim light from the passage thus admitted, that the room was bare and empty as before.

"Let me go first, young gentlemen," said the old man, as he followed them in, letting the door shut behind him. "I've a candle and matches in the corner, so I can give you a light."

Not wholly satisfied with the position of affairs, when they thus found themselves once more in the dark room with the dubious rag and bone merchant, Kenneth would have retreated; but Neal, taking him by the arm, held him fast.

"If it should be uncle!" whispered he, in a stifled voice.

"Now, young gentlemen," said the old man's voice, as they heard him scraping a match, as if trying to strike a light, "this way, if you please."

As he spoke, the match made a feeble phosphorescent light, but not an illuminating one. "There's nothing before you, gentlemen, till you touch the wall. Then listen."

Even as he spoke, Neal advanced; but something in the old man's words or tone at the same moment struck Kenneth with a new suspicion. He had not, however, time to communicate it to his cousin, or to put a drag on

his impatient steps, when the two, stepping forward, the one eagerly, the other unwillingly, felt their foremost foot treading down—down into space.

At the same moment they each uttered a cry, a shout!

It was too late. A second later they were lying on the ground, in a cellar some ten feet below the floor of the dark room; and the rag and bone man, with a grim little chuckle, was closing his trap-door silently above them.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A SECOND cry escaped from Neal's lips as he touched the ground. He had fallen, all unprepared as he was, with terrific force, and he knew, before he had lain there a couple of seconds, that his right arm was broken.

It was so dark that he could not see his cousin, could not see what sort of a place he was lying in. The silence filled him with alarm.

"Kenneth!" cried he.

There was no answer. Shivering with the pain caused by his broken arm, Neal felt with his left, and found his cousin's body.

"Kenneth! Kenneth!" cried he again, while drops of sweat forced out upon his forehead by an awful fear, began to roll down his face, "Kenneth, old chap! Speak out, old man—say something—for God's sake speak!"

Still there was no answer. But as he felt with his hand for his cousin's face, he became suddenly conscious of a movement, slight indeed, but enough to show that Kenneth was not dead, in the muscles of the neck under his fingers.

It was some moments, however, and it seemed hours, before Kenneth was able to reply to his eager words. First he sat up, slowly, stupidly, and without uttering a word.

"Kenneth, what's the matter? Why can't you speak?"

implored his cousin. "Have you got a match about you I—I can't get at mine: I've broken my arm."

After a pause of some seconds, Kenneth said slowly, like a man just waking out of a dream: "Broken—your—arm! How? Where—are we?"

Then Neal understood that the fall which had broken his own limb had stunned his cousin, and that he was only beginning to get over his first effect of it.

"Yes," said he, in a low voice, mindful that they might be overheard. "Don't you remember? We were in the dark room, behind the shop of the old fox Kirby, or Symons, or whoever he is. And I dragged you forward, and we fell down here, and the old rascal shut down the door upon us. Don't you remember, old chap? Don't you remember?"

At each repetition of his question his voice grew more tremulous, more anxious, and he caressed his cousin's shoulder with his left hand, with the tenderness of a woman, and with an awful, unspeakable fear at his heart that the shock might have turned his brain.

But already Kenneth was gradually coming to himself. He sat on the ground for a few minutes with his head in his hands, trying to collect his thoughts, conscious of a violent pain in the head which made thought an agony. Even through the pain he was aware of the fear which was agitating his cousin; and the moment he was able he laughed feebly, and said:

"It's all right! And I'm all right! Let's—let's see where we are!"

"Easier said than done!" muttered Neal, as they both scrambled to their feet and became aware that they were standing on the rough, unboarded, unpaved earth, with

earth for walls, and a roof too far above their heads for them to reach it with outstretched hands.

Kenneth found a match, and they began to investigate, neither raising his voice above a whisper ; for both felt that they might be within hearing of more ears than they knew of.

A hole about ten feet deep, and some twelve or thirteen feet square, very roughly dug out of the earth, with untrimmed sides and floor flattened by much treading down : that was what they discovered when they were able to make their inspection. The roof was formed by solid beams, well boarded across, with a very large, well-made trap-door nearly in the centre. There were a couple of stout iron hooks deeply imbedded in the ground underneath ; and Kenneth rightly conjectured that the owner of this den was in the habit of using a rope-ladder to get up and down by.

Three sides of the hole had no distinguishing feature whatever. On the fourth there was the entrance to a narrow passage some two feet and a half wide and five feet high, which appeared to go a long way, to judge by the faint glimmer of a yellowish light which they were able to make out in the distance.

“ Come on,” said Neal, “ we must find out where this leads to.”

Kenneth hesitated a moment. When, however, he made up his mind to go forward, he insisted on going in front of his cousin.

“ At least,” said he, “ I’ve got two arms, while you’ve only one.”

So, without wasting any more of the matches which might grow to be precious by and by, they went slowly forward down the passage, in the bending position which

was the only possible one, with their feet sometimes slipping on the damp, greasy earth, sickened by the close, dank snell, watching the glimmer of light ahead, and hearing no sound whatever.

When they got nearer to the light they found that it came from an oil-lamp, of the kind used in churches, which hung from the roof so low that they would have to go almost on their hands and knees to pass underneath it. It swung from a strong iron chain, and the little feeble point of light showed nothing but rough roof, rough walls and a stone on the ground below.

This stone was apparently a paving-stone, of the kind used in the streets, and was about two feet by two and a half.

Kenneth stopped short to look at it, and, bending low read these words, carved rudely in large deep letters :

“Here lies one who would have been a traitor.”

“Kaspar!” whispered Neal, as they both shrank back sickened and horror-struck at the sight.

Without another word, they hurried on, past the lamp which they left swinging and spilling the oil on the stone beneath.

It was dark ahead, and, blinded by the fresh plunge from comparative light to pitch blackness, Kenneth ran into something in front of him and was brought to a sudden standstill. Something hollow it was. He and Neal stepped back together, and let the light from the still swinging lamp show them what it was.

And as they looked they saw a crack of faint light widening down one side of it, and perceived that it was a door. They had only time to step back a couple of paces further when it opened wide, and a man came out.

“Who are you?” asked Neal and Kenneth together.

"It's all right," answered the man, in a whisper. "You're King and Sheringham, aren't you? Don't you know me?"

And he held up a small bull's-eye lantern which he had had concealed about him, and turned the light upon his own face.

The young men stared at him, without recognition. The man stamped his foot impatiently.

"Oh, come," said he. "You know me perfectly well. You know we're all in the same boat, or *you* wouldn't be down here! Where's Flinders? Did he wire to you too?"

The young men were stupefied by this address, in the course of which both had dimly recognized, under a haggard, unshaven look which quite transformed him from the prosperous City man he usually appeared to be, the well-known features of Paul Crayford.

"Flinders!" echoed Kenneth, hoarsely. "Don't you know? Haven't you heard? He's dead."

"What?"

But Kenneth could not go on. The recollection of the scene he had witnessed in the flat, of the two ghastly discoveries he had made there, suddenly overcame him, and he leaned back against his cousin, shaking with heavy-drawn sobs.

Crayford was overpowered by the news. He took out his handkerchief and passed it over his face with a trembling hand, and began to ask a string of questions, hastily, incredulously Neal answered for his cousin.

"It's quite true. It happened last night, at—at Madame de Mauriac's flat."

"And she?" inquired Crayford, with sudden ferocity.

"Dead too," said Neal, in a low voice.

Crayford gave a sigh of evident satisfaction, and Kenneth was seized with a frenzy of mingled rage and horror, in which he would have struck the man, but for his cousin's passionate entreaty.

"Ken, Ken, for heaven's sake keep quiet!" whispered he into the ear of the unhappy lad. "Remember—where you are, remember, remember."

Paul Crayford was recovering himself. He looked at Kenneth not unkindly. A man without any sort of principle except self-interest, he was not entirely without heart. He was sorry for the young man in his despair.

"Poor lad! Poor lad!" said he. And then he looked at Neal. "Hallo! You're hurt!" said he. "How's that? Arm, eh?"

"It's that infernal knave of a Kirby, or Symons, that let us pitch headlong down his cellar!" cried Neal.

"What? You're not here to hide yourselves!"

But at that both the young men flashed out in a rage:

"Hide! Of course not! Why should we hide? We're not thieves, or receivers!"

Paul Crayford heard this outburst, in which both young men spoke together, using nearly the same words, with a quiet smile.

"Well, if you're not thieves or receivers yourselves, of your own knowledge and free will you've had a hand in many a theft," he said, calmly. "And when we all stand in the dock together, as it seems likely enough we shall, you'll have a precious hard task before you both, young gentlemen, if you put on an air of innocence, and say you had no idea you were the means of carrying about fifty thousand pounds' worth of stolen jewels and stolen

securities, between France and England, and England and Belgium !”

Neal and Kenneth were stricken into silence. Innocently as they acted in taking luggage over for Crayford, in forwarding Jones' bag for him to Paris, neither could deny that they had had many a doubt since those occurrences as to the use to which they had been put.

Crayford paused a moment, and then, since neither of the young men were ready to answer him, he went on :

“ Well, this isn't the time for recrimination, anyhow. And I can't say I'm altogether sorry to see you, though I wish the circumstances were pleasanter. For it's not the most agreeable experience in the world to be shut up with a raving lunatic ! ”

“ What ? ”

“ He's quiet now. But I've had awful work with him during the night. Look here ! ”

Crayford turned round in the narrow space at his disposal, and cautiously pushed open the door by which he had come through.

Neal and Kenneth, peering over his shoulder, saw a strange sight.

A room about ten feet square, with boarded floor and walls and roof, was dimly lighted by a lime-washed skylight, which admitted enough sunlight for them to see that, on a little bed in one corner, a man, whom they at once recognized as Harrington Jones, was lying at full length, on his back, staring up at the roof above him.

He started up on the opening of the door, and Neal and Kenneth were both amazed to see that this man, whose pale, pinkish face was usually almost effeminate in its shy and nervous expression, now wore a look of appalling ferocity ; while his long, lean fingers began to

writhe and to twist, as if hungering to be at some deadly work.

Paul Crayford shut the door at once.

"If I let you go in there now," he said, "he'll probably do for one of you, as he did for old Kaspar!"

"*He* did! Jones!" gasped out Neal in amazement.

"Sh—sh!" said Crayford. "Somebody else suggested it, of course; but it was Jones who carried it out. Followed the old fellow out of the shed, and strangled him with his long fingers, just as he would have wrung the neck of a chicken!"

Kenneth shuddered.

"*Who* suggested it?" asked Neal, sharply.

"The boss, of course," said Crayford, simply.

"Yes. Diah, Diah Symons, the—the rag and bone man!" said Neal, with emphasis, staring into Crayford's face by the light of the lantern.

But Crayford only laughed and shrugged his shoulders, and turned away. They were all huddled together in the narrow, damp passage, in unutterable discomfort, rubbing against the earthy sides, and stooping to avoid contact with the roof.

"Let us go in," said Kenneth. "if he wants to strangle me he's very welcome. Life's over for Neal and me!"

And brushing past Crayford, he opened the door, and passed into the little dimly lighted room, where the wretched Harrington Jones was now pacing up and down like a wild beast in a cage. He stared at Kenneth with a dull glare of non-recognition, and then went on with his monotonous walk up and down, up and down.

Crayford and Neal came in also, and sat down on the narrow bench that ran along one wall. That, with the

one little bed, a piece of carpet, an iron washstand and a table, were all the furniture of the room.

Kenneth seated himself on a corner of the table, and watched the murderer with stealthy horror. Then he turned sharply to Crayford.

"You may as well tell us all about it now," he said. "As you say, innocence won't help us much. So you were all in the same gang, you and Jones and—and—the others!"

Even now he could not pronounce the name of the woman he had loved nor of the man who had murdered her.

Crayford drew himself up.

"Indeed we were not," he said, promptly. "We had nothing to do with those people, common thieves and pickpockets! I'd as soon steal handkerchiefs as do that sort of thing!"

Kenneth stared. For the man's indignation was perfectly genuine.

"Do you mean to pretend that you had nothing to do with them? And you talk to us of innocence?" said he.

Crayford shrugged his shoulders.

"There are degrees," said he. "Jones and I dealt only in securities."

"Oh!"

"That's a very different sort of business; it's, in fact, the 'high art' of—of—"

"Crime," suggested Kenneth, boldly.

"Well, if you like, of crime."

"Then, if you had nothing in common with—with them, what was the connection between you and them?"

Crayford looked at him steadily.

"We all disposed of our goods," said he, "through the same channel."

"The same receiver?"

"Better not use that word. Say—organizer," said Crayford.

Kenneth was silent. Neal started up.

"By Jove!" cried he, "this is sickening. I won't stay here, penned up like a beast in a den. I'll make my way out somehow. Come, Ken! Where does this lead to?"

And he made a dash for a second door, opposite to the one by which they had entered the room, and found himself in another passage, similar in width and height to the first; about a dozen feet further on hung another oil-lamp, showing two ways—the one a continuation of the passage at the same level; the other a narrow way sloping upwards, which Neal at once took, crying "Come, Ken," as he did so.

Without waiting to see how near his cousin was, Neal scrambled up the sloping passage, only, however, to find himself confronted, at the end, by a stout, heavy, wooden barrier, apparently a small, square trap-door, which no efforts on his part sufficed to move. That it was fastened on the outer side he felt sure.

At the same moment he heard a stifled cry from his cousin, and scrambling back again, with his heart in his mouth, he found that Kenneth was lying on his back in the passage, gagged and already half-bound by Crayford and Harrington Jones.

Neal flung himself upon Crayford, who was the nearest to him; but the older man, who was as powerful as he was neat-handed, pinioned him against the slimy wall, and holding a revolver to his head, told him quietly,

between his clenched teeth, that it was no time for trifling.

"If you'll be quiet," said he, "we'll do you no harm. But you know very well we're desperate men, who have our own skins to save."

"What do you want to do with us?" asked Neal, controlling himself and understanding that the only chance for himself and Kenneth was to submit without demur.

"We want to put you both where you can't interfere with us till we're safely out of the way," said Crayford. "We daren't stir from here till the boss gives us instructions, and we daren't trust you ; you're too tricky. See?"

"I see," said Neal. "But mind my arm."

"We'll be as careful as we can. Are you ready, Jones?"

"Yes."

It made Neal shudder to see the long, murderous hands approach him, with the rope with which he was to be bound in his turn. But he only got one glimpse of what was in store for him. The next moment a gag was in his mouth and a handkerchief was tied round his eyes. Involuntarily he gave one struggle: the next, Jones' long, right hand gave a horrible twitch to his broken arm, which caused him to fall, writhing, to the ground.

He knew nothing more.

When he came to himself he and Kenneth were lying, bound, gagged, blindfolded, side by side, on a cold brick floor. And there was no sound of life near.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It was about one o'clock in the day, and soon after Neal and Kenneth left their uncle's house on their hazardous investigations, that a dark-colored brougham, with a coronet on the panels, drawn by a pair of beautiful brown horses, and with a coachman and footman in dark liveries on the box, drove up to the garden-gate. The footman came up the garden, rang the bell, and asked Susan, who opened the door, whether Mr. Justican was at home.

On his taking back the information that Mr. Justican was out, and had not returned home since the previous evening, there was a short consultation between the two occupants of the carriage, and then they both got out and walked up the path to the house.

The gentleman was an old man, slightly bent with age, with silver-white hair and a thin-lipped, blue-eyed face. He walked rather slowly, as if troubled with a touch of the gout, and he had a frown on his face, and appeared to be thoroughly ill-pleased with the circumstances of the visit he was making.

The lady by his side was the person whom Neal and Kenneth had known at Dieppe as "Mrs. Black," and she wore a veil so thick that it would have been impossible for any one to recognize her, as she gave the old gentleman her arm to help him up the short walk to the house.

Susan, with eyes shining with interest and curiosity,

was still at the door. The lady asked her if she had any idea when Mr. Justican would be in.

"No, ma'am," said Susan. "It's the first time, since the three year I've known him, as he's stayed out the night. I'm looking for him all the time. P'raps, now it's so late, he'll have just gone straight to the City this morning, same as usual, and if so, he'll be here most likely at 'alf-past one, as he mostly is Saturdays."

"Then we'll wait," said the lady. "If you can show us into a dark room—one on the shady side of the house, I mean—we shall be glad, on account of my father's eyes."

Susan looked from the lady to the gentleman, and in an instant saw a likeness between the old gentleman's pinched features and the young face of Kenneth King. Her shrewd little countenance lighted up with intelligence directly.

"Very well, ma'am, I'll show you into the billiard-room," said she, "and I'll pull the blind across if the light's too strong."

She led the way through the smoking-room into the billiard-room, where the old gentleman at once settled himself in the most comfortable corner, and put up his gouty foot.

"Will this do for you, father?" asked the lady, as she threw back her veil, and gave Susan a chance of examining her in her turn.

"Oh, yes, yes, I suppose so," said he, discontentedly. "But I hope you've not sent away the carriage! I suppose it's only necessary to see this gentleman, and then we can make an appointment for meeting your nephews later."

"The young gentlemen are not at home either?" asked the lady, her voice trembling a little.

Susan's face became troubled.

"No, ma'am. They went out less than an hour ago, and I 'aven't the least idea where they've gone to. I wish I 'ad."

The lady grew paler, and hesitated for a moment. The old gentleman looked at Susan with a displeased frown. It was evident to the girl's keen eyes that this visit had been forced upon him, that he looked upon it as a most disagreeable business, and was chiefly anxious for it to be brought speedily to an end.

"Tell Mr. Justican, please, as soon as he comes in, that there is a lady here who wishes to see him at once."

"Shall I tell him who you are, ma'am?" asked Susan, demurely.

The lady started, and the girl went on: "Shall I tell him, ma'am, as Mrs. Justican wants to speak to him?"

The lady hesitated, did not answer, and when Susan retired, she followed her into the hall.

"You are a quick, clever girl, I see," said she. "I won't ask you how you knew who I was——"

"It was your father's likeness to Mr. Kenneth first, ma'am," explained Susan—"that and your photo over the mantelpiece, and my putting this and that together. And oh, ma'am, I do 'ope as you've come to do something for those poor young gentlemen! I don't know what *you* know, ma'am, but by your living away I s'pose as you know somethink! But whatever you may know, and whatever *I* may know, those two 'aven't known nothink to speak of till quite lately, and now it's come upon 'em all of a 'eap, ma'am, and they're desperate, I do believe!"

Mrs. Justican was silently crying.

"They've never had anything to do with—with——"

"With the goings-on 'ere? Oh yes, they 'ave." Mrs. Justican started violently. "Unbeknownst they 'ave. And now I s'pose they're beginning to find it out. They looked like a pair of ghosts this morning, and poor Mr. Neal he's got a black eye and a cut face, and I'm pretty sure, though I don't know the rights of it, as it's all along of the row there's been over these doings!"

Mrs. Justican shivered.

"Have the police been here?" she whispered.

"Not yet," rejoined Susan, in the same tone. "But I see a feller as I don't like the looks of a-watching the 'ouse. I'm agoing out presently, promiscuous-like, so as he shall talk to me. And I warrant I'll give him somethink better to do than keeping his heye on *our* place!"

Mrs. Justican looked at the little figure in astonishment as well she might. This little slip of a Cockney girl had entered heart and soul into the life of her masters, and was now exerting all her native wit on their behalf in a manner which somehow inspired a curious confidence.

"But——" began Mrs. Justican.

Susan cut her short, not uncivilly, but firmly.

"You go back and look after the old gentleman," said she, "and I'll let you know as soon as anybody comes. Don't you fear."

The lady was impressed by the odd little creature's shrewdness and good will.

"You think," she said, hesitatingly, in a low voice, "you think Mr. Justican *will* come back here?"

Susan tossed her head with a confident smile.

"Sure as eggs is eggs," said she, promptly. "Bless

his 'cart! He ain't one to run before there's anythink to run for!"

Mrs. Justican gave a little sigh, and retreated into the billiard-room, while Susan, after a lapse of a very few minutes, took out a broom, and trailing it after her, went into the front-garden, and began diligently to sweep the entrance-step.

As she expected, she was very soon accosted by a police-sergeant in plain clothes, who stood near. And it was not long before she had given him certain information which caused him to stroll quietly away, and, once out of sight of the house, to jump into a hansom and drive off at express speed.

He had not been out of sight ten minutes before Mr. Justican himself, cheerful, cool, with a lounging gait and a calm eye, came in by the front gate.

Susan met him on the doorstep.

"Oh, sir," said she, "I'm so glad you're back! For there 'ave been some ructions 'ere since last night!"

"Ructions, eh?"

"Yes, sir. First Mr. Neal come 'ome with a black eye, and Mr. Kenneth with a scare on him! Then Mr. Jones and Mr. Crayford walks in and I lets 'em in and they says as they'll let theirselves out. And so they did, p'r'aps—but it wasn't by the front way." Mr. Justican, who had taken off his hat, listened quietly enough. "And now this morning the young gentlemen's both gone out, and—and there's Mrs. Justican and her father, sir, a-waiting for you in the billiard-room."

Susan was by this time out of breath. Mr. Justican merely raised his eyebrows.

"Her father, eh?"

"Yes, and that's not all, sir. For there was a 'tec

a-watching the 'ouse ten minutes ago"—Mr. Justican began to look thoughtful—"so I strolls down to the gate and I just give him the tip, sir, where he might put his 'and on a lot of stolen property."

At that Mr. Justican looked round quickly.

"Stolen property!" echoed he. "And pray what does any servant of mine know about stolen property?"

"Why, sir," said Susan, bringing her impudent little cunning face nearer to his, "I know there's gentlemen among your business friends, sir, as aren't so particular as you and me, sir, as to how they comes by valuables. And, sir, such folks as them ought to be shown up, now oughtn't they? And save innercent folks from being suspected-like?"

Mr. Justican looked down at the girl with steady eyes.

Then he shrugged his shoulders. "It's an odd thing," said he, "for a little girl like you to interest yourself in such people as thieves. I shouldn't. If people must be so foolish as to break the law, let them suffer for it, say I. They stole at their own risk; let them stand the racket."

And he hung up his hat, and strolled towards the door of the smoking-room.

Before he could turn the handle Mrs. Justican came out.

"Ah, my dear, how do you do?" said he, bending forward and offering to kiss her as coolly and as gracefully as if they had been the happiest couple in the world, meeting after the absence of a morning only.

But the unfortunate woman could not meet him in the same way. Into the dim, faded eyes there came a swift look of agony; her features became convulsed, her speech

failed her; and trembling violently, she received the kiss which he gave so coldly, and which stirred her own nature to its depths.

Only a look at these two was enough to show that it was the woman who had faithfully loved, the man who had been indifferent.

No fictions about a guilty runaway wife and a patient, long-suffering husband could have survived the sight of that meeting.

"Nat, Nat, how can you?" That was all she was able to whisper, in a stifled voice.

And he had to support her as he opened the door of the front room, and showed her in, kindly and courteously, but with the same perfect coolness as ever.

Once inside the room, however, she regained her composure by a great effort, and struggling for the sternness and hardness of manner which at other times was so easy to her, she stood erect, and said, turning abruptly to her husband:

"Where are my nephews?"

"I haven't the least idea," replied he, promptly, as he again offered her an easy-chair, with grave courtesy. "Do sit down. We can talk so much more comfortably if you will."

"I haven't come here to talk comfortably. I've come to reproach you with not keeping your word."

"What word?"

"When I left you—when you forced me to leave you, because you didn't care for me, and because you showed you didn't care—you promised, if I left my nephews with you, that you would never let them be mixed up in the life you were leading."

"Well?"

"Have you kept your word?"

"Fairly well, I think. But, really, I don't want to be rude, but it's no business of yours. Knowing me as you did, why did you trust me?"

"You said—I thought—you were fond of the boys!"

"So I was; so I am. As fond as I can be of any one. I think I've treated them very well; they, I fancy, are, on the whole, inclined to think so too. You've spoken to them. What was your impression?"

"I thought you were trying to get one of them at least under the influence of an intriguing woman!"

Mr. Justican shrugged his shoulders.

"One doesn't bring up young men under a glass case. It's too late to preach at me now. You chose to leave your sisters' sons with me, because your father was too mean to have done for them what I was ready to do, what I have done. You have to take the consequences."

Mrs. Justican stood up again trembling with passion.

"Is this gratitude for my forbearance? For my going away to live abroad by myself, and bearing all the odium of disgrace and exile, rather than go back to my father and betray you?"

"You preferred it, I suppose. The old gentleman is not amiable, and he wouldn't have provided for you as well as I've done. Come, it's too late in the day for this sort of thing. I don't understand your attitude."

"You promised to give up the life you were leading!"

"You knew I shouldn't, though," said Mr. Justican, easily. "You told me I married you to help me along in it——"

"So you did. And I see now that you've used my nephews as you used me, to worm yourself and your tools into the social position which would help you! Oh, it's

horrible, horrible! To think I should have lent myself to this! I've lived in torture for all these years——”

“Why did you do it, then? You could always have given me away!”

“No, I couldn't, and you know why. You know I've loved you all this time; in spite of your treatment of me, in spite of neglect, absence, I've loved you because I couldn't help myself,” sobbed out the little woman, shaking with the force of her passion. “But you've cured me! I thought when *I* came you'd excuse yourself, you'd tell me, prove to me, that you'd kept the poor boys out of it, out of the shame, the disgrace. Well, you've chosen to break your word! Then I keep mine!”

Perhaps for one second Mr. Justican's fresh color faded a little. But in a few moments he asked quietly:

“How?”

“I told you, when I left you, that if you dragged my boys into a life of crime I would expose you and I will!”

Mr. Justican looked at her steadily. Then he smiled, bowed, said, “Thank you, madame,” and went quickly out of the room.

She rushed towards the door; but he had the key on the outside and he turned it, locking her in.

Without the least hurry or haste, Mr. Justican walked to the door of the smoking-room, and entering, perceived Lord Crutherland, his wife's father, asleep on the cushions of one of the sofas in the billiard-room below. Passing quickly out into the garden, he was about to stroll down towards the potting-shed, with his hands in his pockets, when he saw a man standing outside the door of the small building, whom, by the boots he wore, he at once knew to be a policeman.

Mr. Justican hesitated a moment, then he slowly re-entered the house, and returning to the front-room, unlocked the door and once more came face to face with his wife.

She was standing by the mantelpiece, looking at the photograph which she had sent him, with the word "Remember" written on the foot.

Over Mr. Justican's face, which had grown pale and gray, there came a flood of pink color again. Going up to her, with a sudden change in his voice which was peculiar and touching, he said: "You see I've kept your picture, for all your hard words, where I can look at it every day!"

The poor lady trembled. Well as she knew this man, his daring, his resource, the overpowering influence he had over her reasserted itself the moment he chose to put a note of tenderness into his voice, a kind look into his handsome blue eyes. He touched her shoulder, and she shivered.

"You have your will now," said he. "The police are watching my house. You will have your revenge."

She made a valiant effort to stand firm, to resist the overpowering impulse to give way, to make submission, to be again his slave. Then, as if crumbling under his touch, she shrank into herself, broke down and burst into tears.

Mr. Justican, with his hand laid softly upon her head, was meanwhile looking out of the window, and over his face there was spreading a triumphant look of quiet amusement.

For he saw Mrs. Pender, dignified and leisurely, going out in tea-gown costume, by her garden-gate; and a police-officer in plain clothes, who had evidently been

lying in wait, put his hand lightly and respectfully on her shoulder, to signify that she must consider herself under arrest.

And the scream the poor lady uttered, the indignant words in which she refused to let him search her house for stolen property, "whether he had got a warrant or not," came floating in at the open window on the summer air, as the officer politely but firmly insisted on going with her up the garden and into her house.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Mrs. PENDER had hardly walked more than half a dozen steps up the garden-path when she was met by Nynee and Sir Henry Ruddock, both of whom, from a few paces behind her, had witnessed her arrest in a state of absolute stupefaction.

The poor lady turned to the baronet with tears of rage, mortification and disgust in her eyes.

“ Sir Henry, tell him, tell this man—who I am, what I am. Tell him it’s infamous, disgraceful, that I should be insulted like this! I! With my connections! Oh, I never thought such a thing was possible in England, never! It’s like Russia! China! Or any other barbarous country! Oh, I shall never live through this! It will kill me!”

Her excitement made her so voluble that for some moments neither her daughter, who caressed and tried to pacify her, nor Sir Henry, who was quite willing to join in her protests, got a chance of being heard.

At last Sir Henry got an opportunity of saying: “ There’s some mistake. Of course the officer must fulfil his instructions! And we’ll get the necessary apology afterwards. Come in, come in, and let us hear the rights of it quietly.”

He was scandalized by this scene in the front-garden of a suburban house, in full view of an interested little

group round the gate, some of whom were already pressing their way inside.

There was nothing for it but to take his advice ; and within a few more seconds they were all back in the house, where, by the baronet's further suggestion, they went silently to the dining-room before the man opened his business. Then came the unpleasant facts.

"From information received" the police had obtained a warrant for the arrest of Mrs. Pender on suspicion of being concerned in "stealing and receiving various articles of jewelry, the property of various persons," and a further warrant for the search of her house for portions of the missing property.

By the time the warrants were read over, Sir Henry's face had assumed a very grave and somewhat cold aspect, while over Nynnee's pretty features there had come a look of deep concern. Mrs. Pender, on the other hand, while as indignant as ever, laughed at the idea that there was any stolen property concealed in her house.

"You're very welcome to search the place from the top to the bottom," she said, haughtily, "on condition that you make a full and ample apology for your disgraceful treatment of me, and that you understand that I shall claim damages for the outrage to which I have been subjected."

The man was perfectly civil, assured her that everything would be done to satisfy her if it was found that they had made a mistake ; and going out quietly for a moment to the back of the house, he brought in two more officers who had been waiting for his orders to enter.

Mrs. Pender, who would not allow Nynnee to take off

her bonnet for her, remained sitting in the dining-room, in a frame of mind which grew rapidly less enviable.

It was plain, even to her eyes, that Sir Henry Ruddock by no means shared her easy confidence that the police had made a mistake, and she perceived also that her daughter looked more anxious than indignant at the proceedings.

After an ominous silence of some minutes, therefore, during which they all three listened anxiously to the tramp-tramp of men's feet up the stairs and about the house, the lady turned to her visitor, and said in an agitated voice: "You don't think, Sir Henry, that these dreadful people we've been living next door to have dragged us into this, to—to shield themselves, do you?"

"What dreadful people?" asked the baronet rather stiffly.

He was beginning to have uncomfortable memories of the attempted robbery at his place in Essex, and to wonder whether the Penders who were there at the time, had really had a hand in it or not.

"The young men next door. You know very well you've said they are thieves, that it was one of them that stole your necklace," replied Mrs. Pender, sharply.

Sir Henry made no reply. He could not sit still, but walked from the door to the window, and from the window back to the door, listening and watching. The dining-room door was at the back of the house, and he could see that there was another man, whom he judged to be a policeman in plain clothes, on the other side of the dividing wall between Mrs. Pender's garden and her landlord's.

Nynce stole up to the window, and looked out too. But she said nothing, and presently crept back to her

place by her mother's side without so much as a look at Sir Henry.

It became evident presently that there was some sort of commotion going on in the upper rooms of the house, and Sir Henry at last asked Mrs. Pender whether he should find out what was going on there.

The lady, who was much offended at the lack of whole-heartedness in her visitor's indignation, turned her eyes upon him haughtily.

"There's nothing going on," she said, icily, "except a most disgraceful outrage upon a family of position."

Sir Henry, however, chose to take this for permission; and he instantly left the room and went upstairs.

The three policemen were coming out of one of the bedrooms; one of them had a small parcel in his hands, and there was a look on all three faces which told the baronet that a discovery had been made.

"What is it?" he asked, breathlessly.

The chief among the three men would have told him nothing, but a smile on the face of one of the two subordinates caused Sir Henry to cry out, in a voice which rang through the house:

"You've found something! Is it jewelry? Let me see, let me see."

But before the words were well out of his mouth, the parcel on which his eyes were fixed had disappeared into the pocket of one of the men, while the chief said hastily:

"All in good time, sir, all in good time. We can show you nothing now."

"But you've found out something?" persisted Sir Henry.

They made no reply; but, glancing into the room out of which the men had just come, Sir Henry perceived

that the mattress on the bed had been ripped open, and jumped to the conclusion that some of the stolen property had been found concealed there.

“ Good heavens ! ” cried he.

And, encouraged to do so by a significant word or two from the sergeant, he turned, almost giddy with amazement and disgust, and stalked solemnly downstairs again.

By this time, Mrs. Pender, who had heard fragments of this dialogue through the half-open door of the dining-room, was in hysterics, and Nynee was at her wit's end to know what to say to comfort her.

The baronet remained in the hall, anxious to learn more but to avoid the ladies ; and the search went on.

By the time the three policemen came downstairs, it was no longer possible for them to conceal the fact that they had made discoveries of valuable jewelry on a large scale. But even Sir Henry had, by this time, come to the conclusion that Mrs. Pender was more probably a victim than an accomplice in these frauds, and he did his best to keep the facts from her by softly closing the dining-room door, with a whispered intimation to Nynee to keep her mother as quiet as she could.

From their search of the drawing-room and study the men made no fresh hauls ; and it was by Sir Henry's earnest request that they left the dining-room till later.

Mrs. Pender, therefore, was left undisturbed in her grief ; and the men went into the basement while the baronet watched them from the top of the staircase.

It was not long before he perceived that some fresh discovery of moment had been made below. And going downstairs quickly and quietly, Sir Henry was in time to meet one of the policemen running out of the cellar, with concern on his face.

“What is it? What have you found?” asked he.

“Two men—both more than half-dead by the look of them,” replied the policeman, promptly. “Get some brandy, sir, and a lamp. We can’t do much by the light we’ve got. And if you’d send for a doctor——”

Whether by intuition or by the help of senses rendered abnormally acute by anxiety, Nynee Pender had been drawn to the spot where the two men were talking. Before putting a single question she despatched the housemaid for the doctor, and then asked, in a whisper, if she could do anything.

At first an attempt was made to keep her out of the cellar, but as she was quite quiet and said earnestly that she might be able to help—she was not nervous, and could render first aid—they let her in, and the next moment she was kneeling on the brick floor beside what was apparently the lifeless body of Neal Sheringham.

The cords with which he had been bound were already cut, and the fact that his right arm was broken was now discovered.

It was Nynee herself, whom the awful shock seemed to have endowed with new powers, who said, when she had seen a slight quiver of his face :

“He’s not dead, thank heaven !”

Kenneth, though scarcely in less pitiable plight than his cousin, was able to speak as soon as the gag was removed from his mouth. But to the first questions put to him he made no answer.

“Who put you here? How long have you been here?”

Instead of replying, he would do nothing but ask whether his cousin was all right, and where they were.

Sir Henry and Nynee heard this last question with astonishment, and the policemen with interest.

“Why, you must know where you are, surely,” said one of the officers, “as well as who put you there.”

“I know who put us here,” replied Kenneth slowly, winking to the fact that his statements were being made to deeply interested ears, “but I don’t know where we are. Unless——”

He stared at Nynce with a ray of intelligence.

“You know me,” said she.

“Yes, of course. Are we—in your mother’s house?” asked Kenneth, quickly.

Before any answer could be given him, one of the policemen had made a discovery which was evidently of great interest. In a corner of the cellar, where the boarding which ran underneath the wine-bins was continued for a space, there was a trap-door.

It seemed advisable to remove the two young men out before making further investigations; and, with the help of Sir Henry, whose mind was getting more and more obscured by doubts and questionings, they carried Neal upstairs, and then helped Kenneth, who was by that time recovering the use of his limbs, to walk up after him.

They were taken into the drawing-room; but Mrs. Pender heard something going on, and had to be told of the fresh discovery that had been made. The doctor, indeed, who had been sent for, was already at the door, so that the presence of the two young men under her roof could no longer be withheld from the mistress of the house.

The information threw her into a fresh paroxysm of indignation.

“Send them away,” cried she, angrily. “Send them next door at once. I won’t have thieves under my roof, I won’t—for an hour.”

Nynee, who had rushed out to prevent her mother's intrusion into the drawing-room, faced her with a steady look.

"If they are thieves, mother," said she, very steadily, very quietly, "then so are we."

And Sir Henry, who was a few paces behind her, suddenly felt his heart go out to the valiant little girl, and he echoed her words, saying heartily :

"Well said, my dear, well said. And I believe you're right! I've been a fool, a fool in the hands of a knave! I think those two young men are as innocent as you are yourself, and I'm sincerely sorry for them both."

It was not without a little help from one of the police-officers that Sir Henry had come to this conclusion ; but having arrived at it, he set to work, like an honest gentleman, to atone for his own share in bringing about their misfortunes.

Going up to Kenneth, who was trying to rise, and feeling surprised at the pain and stiffness in his cramped and bruised limbs, he said straightforwardly :

"Let me apologize, Mr. King, for the suspicions I confess I've felt. I see that you've been victims, as well as myself, of the same rascally adventurer."

But Kenneth flushed and stood up, trembling and holding on by a chair, as he looked up with indignant eye :

"You've no more right," said he, shortly, "to suspect anybody else without proof, than you had to suspect us."

And he turned away to the sofa where his cousin was still lying, conscious now, but in great pain.

Neal, however, would not stay in the house a moment longer than was necessary. When his arm had been set, he insisted on going back to his uncle's house with Kenneth, who was fidgeting about, as eager as his cousin to be out of Mrs. Pender's house.

Nynee, who had been with her mother in the next room while the operation was going on, met the two young men as they passed out, looking like scarecrows, Neal with a white, drawn face, and Kenneth flushed and restless, with unsteady limbs.

Kenneth frowned sullenly, and looked down. But Neal faltered and stopped.

"Nynee," whispered he, "it's—it's all over. I shall never see you again. Good-bye."

She clasped her hands.

"What—what are you going to do?" whispered she, in an agony.

He laughed shortly.

"The question is what are they going to do with us?" asked he, with a shrug, and a glance at the policeman who stood almost at his elbow.

"But you've done nothing! They can't prove anything against you," cried Nynee, quickly and proudly.

"I don't know what they can do, I'm sure," said poor Neal, despondently, "after what they've done!"

"But it wasn't the police who did you any harm!"

"No, but your beautiful admirer did, and he seems to be in the humor to accuse anybody," said Neal.

Mrs. Pender's voice called sharply to her daughter from within the dining-room. But Nynee, with a hot blush overspreading her face, suddenly put up her arms, and hung about Neal, kissing him, with the tears rushing to her eyes.

"Good-bye, good-bye," said she, "I *will* see you again, oh, I will! Remember, we're all in the same trouble together, and if we get out so will you!"

There was comfort in her eyes, in her words, in the touch of her soft, loving hands. Neal blessed her, with

a broken voice, and Kenneth offered her his hand as he passed out after his cousin.

"God bless you! You're a dear, good girl, and if you'll wait for old Neal, he'll be a lucky fellow."

Then he hurried out after his cousin, and the two got over the rail between the gardens, and were at once admitted into their uncle's house by Susan, who burst out crying when she saw them, sobbing out her relief and her joy.

"Is my uncle back?" were the first words Kenneth asked.

"Oh, lor' yes, sir, two hours and more. And Mrs. Justican's 'ere——"

"What?"

"And Lord Crutherland, her father. He's been asleep in the billiard-room ever so long, while Mrs. Justican and your uncle's there a-talking. They've been there ever so long, sir, with the door locked."

"There—there are no policemen in the house?" asked Kenneth, in a low, hoarse voice.

"Not yet, sir, but it won't be long before they do come, I'm thinking," replied Susan, dolefully. "You can see 'em about, and look at the people outside. The beasts!"

And she shook her fist at the group that would gather about the garden gates of the two houses.

"Tell—tell my uncle we're here," whispered Kenneth, as he followed Neal into the front room into which he had staggered, and sat down with his head in his hands.

When she came back to the two young men, who sat as still and as silent as statues, Susan looked white and nervous.

"'E's gone away, your uncle has," she whispered, "but your aunt and her father, Lord Crutherland," and the girl made an appreciative mouthful of the title, "they're

coming to see you before they go. Look, the carriage has come. And see those brutes, the p'lice, 'ow they're a-looking inside, as if there was thieves and thieves' plunder under the seats!"

The young men started up, horrorstruck, and looked out. Yes, there was the carriage, with a small admiring crowd round it, and two policemen keeping off the too inquisitive spectators. The afternoon of a day which seemed never-ending was drawing to an end, and the shadows had begun to grow long.

Neither Neal nor Kenneth spoke: and when the door opened, and their aunt came in, with an old man whom they had never seen, leaning on her arm, they both stood up and bowed coldly and stiffly, and left it to her to speak first.

"Neal, Kenneth, you know who I am," said she. "This is your grandfather."

Her voice shook; she looked guilty and miserable. They looked at the old man with cold eyes. He held his hat in his hand, and they saw that he was bald except for a little fringe of short white hair. His jaws were sunken, and when he spoke, it was with difficulty they understood him, for he had lost all his teeth, and spoke slowly and indistinctly.

"I have to ask your forgiveness," said he. "I've not done my duty to you. I'm sorry. Perhaps I shall never see you again, but I'll see that you're not left without friends or help in the world."

That was all he said; and then he turned away, as if impatient to be gone.

Kenneth spoke, wondering.

"Thank you," said he. Then he turned to his aunt. "Aunt, it's our uncle we want to see," said he, in a low *voice*.

"Justican's a scoundrel," interrupted Lord Crutherland, without looking round.

"That may be, sir," put in Neal, in a feeble voice, but still with a spark of spirit, "but at any rate he's the scoundrel who's brought us up, and been kind to us, when nobody else apparently considered us worth a thought."

Lord Crutherland did not turn round, but an unmistakable thrill, whether of indignation or not it was impossible to tell, passed through his frame. He held out his hand without looking round, and Neal took it. Something in the warm, close grip of the fingers surprised him; from that bent old man he had not expected so much strength of muscle or of feeling.

Their aunt did not say a word of farewell, but, with her eyes cast down, and her lips pressed hard, as if she found it difficult to retain her composure, she led the old man out of the room, and down the garden to his carriage.

The policemen by the gate saluted respectfully, and the carriage drove away.

The young men were silent and thoughtful, as they sat quietly in the room, considering that short and strange interview.

Then, while they were still sitting in the mournful, miserable reverie, there came at the folding-door which divided the room they were in from that at the back, a feeble, intermittent knocking.

Kenneth started up, with a light on his face.

"Perhaps it's my uncle," whispered he, as, conscious of something furtive in the sound, he cautiously approached the door.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHEN Kenneth had removed the sofa from before the folding-doors, and had taken from the mantelpiece the key which unfastened the padlock that kept them together, he was surprised to hear an old man's voice from the other side, crying impatiently: "Norah! Norah! Where are you?"

A suspicion flashed through Kenneth's mind, and caused him to turn pale as he unfastened the door. The next moment he found himself face to face with an old gentleman whom he did not know.

"Oh!" said the old gentleman, drawing himself up and examining Kenneth as well as he could in the twilight. "And who are you, pray?"

"My name is Kenneth King," said the young man, simply.

The old gentleman started a little, and putting up his glasses, came slowly into the front room, and stared intently at Neal, who was standing by the mantelpiece.

"And you—are you Sheringham?" he asked, peering up into his face.

"Yes," said Neal, who in his turn began to understand what had happened. "And you, I think, are Lord Crutherland, our grandfather?"

"Well, yes, yes," said the old gentleman, rather testily, "I suppose I am. But let me tell you, young gentlemen, that this pass to which my daughter says you've been

brought, has been no fault of mine. She chose to marry this Mr. Justican of her own free will; she chose to adopt you two boys of her own free will, and she undertook to provide for you. It's all very well to spring upon me now, with the information that Justican is a scoundrel who has been found out!"

"Who says that?" asked Neal, abruptly.

"Your aunt says so; and as she's known the fact, she says, ever since she left him, and only concealed it because she was so fond of him, I suppose we may take it it's true. But it's most unfair upon me, most unfair. She should have brought you two boys away with her when she left him, instead of waiting to throw you upon my hands now!"

"I can assure you, sir," said Neal, hotly, "that we shall not be thrown upon anybody's hands. We shall stand our trial, if we are accused of complicity——"

"You won't be accused of anything," interrupted the old man, quickly. "We've already made inquiries as to that."

"Well, then, so much the better. We shall be free to start at once for the Cape as soldiers, rough riders, police, anything they will take us for."

"Oh, dear, dear, how short-tempered you are! I didn't mean that. Not at all. My estate's impoverished, wretchedly impoverished; it's a hard matter nowadays for a man with any position to keep up, to live at all. But of course I'll provide for you, of course I will. All I ask is that you'll do your best to keep as quiet as you can about this. The scandal would be terrible if it came to be known."

"I don't see how it can be kept unknown, sir," said

Kenneth. "But you may depend upon it we shan't gossip about it any more than we can help."

"That's right, that's right. And now where's my daughter? I must have had a nap. I think, after the light lunch she made me take. The whisky one gets down here is abominable stuff—no more Scotch than it's African. And it's getting quite late, I'm sure!"

"I think she's gone out a little way, sir," said Kenneth, who now understood who it was who had been introduced to them as their grandfather, and who could scarcely think of that last pressure of his guilty uncle's hand without a lump in his throat. "No doubt she will be back soon. Let me get you a cup of tea——"

"No, no, I can't drink that stuff," protested Lord Crutherland, irritably.

"Then let me have something prepared for you. It must be nearly dinner-time."

As a matter of fact Mrs. Green, who would have gone on calmly with the usual domestic routine if the house had been on fire, was even now engaged in dishing up a nice little dinner. And the two young men, who guessed that their aunt had started Mr. Justican on his way out of the country to escape possible pursuit, persuaded Lord Crutherland to go into the dining-room, and sit down to dinner with them.

Neither of the lads could eat, however. Neal was in pain with his arm; and it was only the excitement of the position they were in which kept him on his feet. Kenneth was white, restless, and seemed to be on the point of a complete nervous breakdown.

It was not till half-past eight that Mrs. Justican, flushed, excited, controlling her agitation with difficulty, returned to the house.

Neal went out to meet her in the hall.

"Where is he? Is he safe?" he asked.

She bowed her head.

"He won't be caught," said she; "but he says—he says—he'll never reach the other side of the Atlantic. He's never had a check before, you see. He's always gone on the same plan, of taking no precautions, and seizing every opportunity. Now that the end has come, it is sudden, complete. Oh! Let me come in here, and rest—and think!"

The little lady was trembling from head to foot. Neal led her into the front room, where he had taken such a strange leave of his uncle. The remembrance of him, as he had seen him so often, sitting at his desk, with his cheque-book in his hand, ready to give him anything he wanted, or smiling and bidding him go and enjoy himself, "youth and pleasure should go together"—was almost too much for the young man now.

"Aunt," said he, "it's awful! And I feel—I feel that I should like to punch the head of anybody who says a word against him!"

His aunt smiled sadly.

"Nothing will be brought home to him, I think," said she. "The influence he had over the others was too great. They'll be tried, convicted! Not he."

To the amazement of them both, a voice from the darkest corner of the room suddenly uttered, in a hoarse whisper, the one word:

"Hooray!"

Neal made a lunge into the shadow, and brought out Susan, who had stolen into the room after them. She stood, defiant and stubborn, before them.

"You can't do nothink to me," said she, coolly, "becos I knows nothink, and I means to stick to that."

"You're one of the gang, I suppose?" said Mrs. Justican, severely.

Susan shook her head.

"Never belonged to no gang in my life," said she. "No more than Mr. Justican himself."

"Hush!"

"Oh, it's too late to 'hush' now," said Susan, calmly. "Besides, as he's got away, it don't matter. Bless 'is 'eart! He never told me nothink! And I never knowed nothink! But when I see old Diah a-'anging about with a parcel for the boss, why, I used to take it, and to shove it into Mr. Justican's room. And he never says nothink, he never so much as give me a wink or a nod. And if I found old Diah in Mrs. Pender's cellar, when I was a living with her, and he 'ad a parcel as he didn't seem to know what to do with, why, I just took it and I ran up-stairs with it, and I shoved it through the door at the back of the new cupboard in Mr. Harry's room, into a cupboard the other side. See!"

"Why," said Neal, "then it was you, you little imp, that carried the things into Mrs. Pender's house this morning, and then gave information to the police that they were to be found there!"

He spoke in hot anger, but though the blank stare of amazement which she instantly assumed did not deceive him in the least, he saw that to hope to make her confess was out of the question.

"Oh, Mr. Neal, 'ow can you stand there and say such a thing?" said she, with the sort of expression on her face which would pass for innocence with a jury. "I am 'urt as you can think so mean of me as that! And if

it was true, wouldn't it be better for Mrs. Pender not to be no better off than you?"

Mrs. Justican gave a little soft sigh of relief. This man, Nathaniel Justican, with his handsome face, his overpowering personality, had taken captive the heart of the quiet insignificant lady so completely, that even when she discovered him to be a man of appalling principles, she could not denounce him, she would even have remained with him but for his own choice that she should go away. Having married her to secure a footing in the society where the organization under his command could work most effectually, he had preferred to dispense with her presence when it became irksome to him, fully knowing that his hold upon her was so strong that she would choose rather to live in the shadow of loneliness and suspicion, than to give him up to the justice he deserved.

For the two boys, however, it seemed possible to believe that he had had a genuine liking. And though they could not but suspect that he had brought Kenneth under the influence of his old accomplice, Anne Bowker, with the idea of gradually undermining his principles and drawing him into the net of his own vile organization, both the young men resisted this inference, and preferred to remember that one good trait of his generosity to them.

There was, however, the fact that he had undoubtedly used them both as unconscious agents in the carrying on of his gang's nefarious work, to set against this feature in his character.

Mrs. Justican dismissed Susan with a gesture of the hand. Neal turned to his aunt. "What was the change he had made in himself?" he asked, blankly. "When I

think of him now, as I saw him go out with you, I can't remember any likeness to him as I knew him before."

The little woman smiled with a sort of pathetic admiration.

"Nobody would have known him," said she. "You knew his teeth were false, didn't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I did."

"He simply took them out."

"But his head was bald! You can't get a bald head in half an hour!"

"Oh, yes, you can. He had prepared for a *coup* of this sort. He took all the hair off the top of his head with a depilatory, while I sat waiting for him. Then I gave him my father's hat and cloak, and he was ready. Like all good disguises, it was absolutely simple. As long as he chooses to keep it up, nobody will recognize in him the handsome man they were used to see in Nathaniel Justican."

Neal was stupefied. And he and his aunt were sitting silent and sad, in the poor light of a couple of candles, when Lord Crutherland came in from the dining-room, very cross, and followed by Kenneth.

"Where have you been?" he asked, petulantly. "You told me I should only have to be here half an hour, and I've been in this house all day. Come, come, find my cloak and let us go. Is the carriage here?"

"Yes. But your cloak—I'm afraid I've mislaid that," said she, gently. "You can do without it for this little journey back to Wilton Place, can't you?"

Grumbling and muttering, the old gentleman let himself be persuaded to go without his cloak, and he made no remark when his daughter put on his head a hat which she had brought with her.

They all wondered whether the police, who were still on duty about the place, would notice the going out of a second old gentleman; but it was by this time so dark that the passage to the carriage was made easily and quickly, and whatever suspicion might have been excited in the watchers, no remark was made by them.

Neal and Kenneth refused to leave the house. Both were dispirited and miserable, full of the feeling that life was over for them, yet determined not to bring suspicion upon themselves by running away. They would "see it out" together, they said.

So they sat, almost without speaking, in the dimly-lighted room, until it was nearly ten o'clock, when a diversion came in the shape of a sharp knock at the window at the back of the house.

Going quickly to open the door, they found Paul Crayford, looking scarcely human, and a policeman, who was supporting him with his arm.

"I've given myself up," said Paul, hoarsely. "Had to. Jones was trying to strangle me. He's gone off his head altogether, and—and they're taking him away."

"How did you get in?—get out?" asked Kenneth, puzzled.

But Crayford could not talk much just yet. He was weak and exhausted with want of food, with the tension of long-continued fear, and with his struggles with the madman. He was led into the house, and given food and wine, and presently he told them what they wanted to know, and more, much more than they cared to hear. It seemed to be a relief to speak out, and he appeared to care no more for the presence of the policeman than if he had been the domestic cat.

"It's all up now," he said. "The game was a merry

one while it lasted: but the last trick's won, and the cards are played out."

So he explained to them the ingenious manner in which the shop of Diah Symons, trunk-maker and trunk-fakir, second-hand clothes dealer and receiver of stolen goods, had been made to communicate by means of a forked underground passage with the potting-shed at the bottom of Mr. Justican's garden, and with the cellar of Mrs. Pender's house.

When Paul Crayford had helped Jones to put the two young men, bound and gagged, into the cellar that day, he had made his way back to the end of the passage at the back of Diah's shop. But the artful Symons, perceiving that discovery was imminent, had run away, leaving his two comrades in crime caught in a trap, by fastening down the trap-door at his end.

Crayford had made a second attempt to get out by way of the potting-shed, but had discovered, by careful investigation, that there was some one on the watch in the garden.

Neal and Kenneth were curious as to this entrance to the underground passage, as they had once helped to search the shed with Mrs. Pender, and had found no trap-door in it. Crayford explained that this entrance was under the potting-shelf in one corner, and was most ingeniously covered by a square door covered with a thin coating of earth. As nobody could tread over it, nobody could detect the hollow sound which would have betrayed the fact that it was not solid earth.

Another matter which puzzled Neal was the manner of lighting the underground room. Crayford explained that outside the potting-shed there were three common garden-lights, and that, while two of them covered seeds

or plants, the corner one was fastened down. Underneath it was a hole in the ground, covered with a sheet of brownish glass, which nobody could see plainly enough through the whitewashed outer glass to detect as a window.

Kenneth asked another question.

“When we sent on Jones’ bag to Paris,” said he, “we opened it and found only clothes inside. Was there anything sewn up in them?”

Crayford smiled faintly.

“Not in them,” said he. “But there were valuable securities hidden in the trunk itself, inside a false lining. That was always the system: all the luggage we used ourselves, or got others to use for us, was ‘faked’ by Diah Symons, who is as clever as the devil. When Flinders committed the Eastbourne robbery, you brought back with you a prepared bag instead of your own; and when you got home, your own was put back instead of the ‘faked’ one. You remember the fright you gave Flinders by telling him you had thrown his bag out of the window?”

Both the young men remembered it well and moved uneasily.

“The loss of that bag would have meant the loss of a big handful of loose stones taken from their settings, which he had inserted within the false bottom of the bag you carried.”

Neal rose angrily.

“Why couldn’t you have carried them yourselves, instead of mixing up innocent people in your rascally doings?”

“That was the way we were able to keep on so long,” retorted Crayford. “Whenever our journeys across

began to be too frequent, we got our luggage over through somebody else. Then we had confederates on the other side to take out what we had put in, and only once, I think, when little Miss Pender saw the man at work on her Saratoga trunk, was one of our 'workmen' ever caught at it."

"That night you made me take your luggage across to Ostend then, you might have got me into the hands of the police, since you were being followed?"

"No. For I knew that it was *I* who might be suspected, but not my luggage. You see I'd been doing that line a good deal. As a matter of fact a detective did speak to me, and I thought it wiser to remain in Dover and return to town. You, meanwhile, did my business for me very well."

"It's monstrous!" said Neal, in a rage.

Kenneth had another question to ask.

"What was it happened at Sir Henry's place?" said he.

"Oh, De Mauriac wanted Sir Henry's family jewels, and it was one of the rules that no business should be transacted where the boss was. So Flinders had to give them up, and it was then, I fancy, that the lady made up her mind to 'split.'"

There was a long silence. Crayford turned to the policeman.

"I suppose you're going to take me away?" said he, indifferently. And he rose, and turned to the two young men. "Good-bye," said he, "I'm sorry for you both—not for myself. I've had a harassing time lately, and I'd as soon be doing time as going on with the old game. When once the luck's broken the fun's over. Bah!"

And he snapped his fingers as he went quickly out.

Next day the great scandal of the break-up of the gang was the wonder of the hour. Poor Mrs. Pender had found the police more easy to satisfy than she could have hoped; for the fact that she was a victim, and not an accomplice of the notorious thieves, was soon proved. Both she and the young men next door found it impossible to stay at Vine Place; and she found refuge at Sir Henry's Essex seat with her son and daughter, while Lord Crutherland carried off Neal and Kenneth to Scotland with their aunt.

There were a good many questions to be answered before they went; but Paul Crayford's admissions and confessions went far to make it easy for them; so that in the end it was even found possible to dispense with their evidence in the trial of Crayford, and of Diah Symons, who was caught while on his way to Liverpool en route for America.

Just as she had predicted, Susan gave evidence in such a manner as to convince everybody in court that she was an ignorant girl who had been made a tool of by designing men, instead of a cunning little mischief-maker who found a delight in the excitement of her master's crimes.

Diah Symons got a term of penal servitude, and Paul Crayford a shorter one, while Harrington Jones, to whom the murder of poor Kaspar was clearly brought home, was confined for life as a criminal lunatic.

Neal and Kenneth both stole away one day from their grandfather's big, bare country-house, and came south to offer themselves as recruits for South Africa. Both were rejected—Neal for defective eyesight, the result of Sir Henry Ruddock's blow, and Kenneth for general delicacy.

Dejected, miserable, hopeless, they wandered away from the barracks where they had received their sentence,

and were walking silent and downcast along Piccadilly when a hansom stopped just behind them, and Neal felt a hand on his shoulder.

Turning quickly, he found himself face to face with Sir Henry Ruddock, whose kindly face was full of excitement, as he said :

“Well done! I’m in time then! You’re not off to South Africa yet?”

“No,” said Neal, rather surlily, “they won’t take us.”

“Won’t take you? Why, what’s wrong with a strapping fellow like you?”

“The wrong you did him, Sir Henry,” put in Kenneth. “The blow you gave him has injured his eyesight.”

The worthy baronet’s face fell. For a moment he was silent, and then he said, in a low voice: “I’ll make amends. I was going to do something for you, I was indeed. Now I’m all the more determined. Come here.”

Still holding Neal by the arm, he led him to the hansom, where he saw Nynee, sweet, pretty, fresh-looking, her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh!” said Neal, stopping short, with a wildly throbbing heart. “You’re going to marry her then? I congratulate you.”

He tried to retreat, but Sir Henry pulled him forward.

“Ask *her* who she wants to marry!” whispered he, good-humoredly.

Neal’s head swam. He knew—only one look in her sweet face told him so—what tender woman’s work of softening the baronet’s heart and working upon his feelings the girl had been busy with all this time. She held out one hand to him, and one to Kenneth.

“Oh,” she whispered, “take heart, take heart. It will be all right yet!”

And her words were a prophecy which she herself helped to bring to fruition. For nothing would turn her from her purpose—if Neal were to sweep a crossing, or to drive a cab, it was all the same: she would be his wife, and nothing should prevent her.

So good-natured Sir Henry, contrite beyond words at his own share in the young fellow's misfortunes, made him turn land-agent down in Essex, with the sweetest girl in England for his bride.

While Kenneth, not yet strong enough to begin life on his own account, was followed down to the south by his aunt, Mrs. Justican. And these two, saddened, widowed wife, and lonely, unhappy man, found in each other's society, on a sea voyage round the world, the peace of a warm and kindly companionship which was like that of mother and son.

And so the great scandal of the Vine Place gang came to an end. But the head and organizer of the gang was never found. No trace of his landing on any shore was ever discovered; and if Mrs. Justican knows more than any one else about his fate, she has never betrayed him.

THE END.

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A Rich Man's Daughter

By MRS. J. H. RIDDELL

392 pages, size 7½ x 5, cloth. Ink and Gold, \$1.25

It is not given to many novelists to portray the weaknesses and wickednesses of men and women and at the same time to preserve what may be called a "high moral tone." There is too often a tendency to extenuate baseness because it is coupled with some admirable quality, and vice not seldom goes unpunished because its votary is beautiful. Of Mrs. J. H. Riddell this cannot be said. She panders not at all to the popular feeling of tolerance and even liking for a handsome or brave villain. Sinners whom she introduces to us meet their deserts, and no one can complain of her stories that they tend to debase or corrupt youth. On the other hand, they are full of life and adventure. The plot of the one before us, "A Rich Man's Daughter" is sufficiently out of the common to be attractive even if it be not quite original. And it gives scope for some admirable character-drawing. To tell the story would be to deprive the reader of more than half the interest in the book.—*Globe*.

Mrs. J. H. Riddell is among the most capable of writers who are engaged in catering for the tastes of fiction readers, and it is with assured feelings of pleasure to come that we take a new book of hers into our hand. The characters are finished studies, and many of the scenes are drawn so vividly as to stick in the memory as though we had ourselves been present. "A Rich Man's Daughter" is, indeed, a novel to be read by all who wish to make themselves acquainted with the best fiction that each season produces.—*Times*.

It is no unusual thing for us to have readable romances from Mrs. J. H. Riddell, and in "A Rich Man's Daughter" she has not departed from her good custom. The book is carefully written and pains have been taken to make the characters creatures of clay, instead of puppets with sawdust substituted for flesh and blood.—*Journal*.

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A Woman's No

By *MRS. H. LOVETT CAMERON*

294 pages, size 7½ x 5, Cloth, Ink, Gold, \$1.25

We are taught to believe that a woman's "no" usually means "yes," therefore the discerning reader needs only a glance at the cover of Mrs. H. Lovett Cameron's new book to weave much of the romance himself. For instance, the heroine must undoubtedly be rich, beautiful and charming, else she would scarcely dare say "no," or, having once said it, the opportunities for changing her mind might not have been forthcoming. And so, feeling convinced at the beginning of the story that Ida Greythorne's future is secure and bright, the amiable reader may settle down to a perusal of her checkered romance. There is Lord Mannering, to whom Ida is engaged and who is rich, and, of course, the object of Lady Greythorne's most solicitous attentions. But there is also Dick Forrester, who is an Adonis, but poor. Dick has a sister Hester, whom Lord Mannering accidentally meets. Without betraying his identity to her he wins her love—a most inexcusable piece of baseness, considering his engagement to Ida. On the whole the story is replete with incident, and is of that delightful type wherein the ladies' hands are usually designated by such poetic terms as "drifts of snow," "fluttering white flowerlets," "tiny bits of whiteness," etc., while Ida, the heiress, usually disports herself arrayed in airy laces and ribbons—generally blue—and Hester's poverty confines her to "brown holland," which adorns her exquisite figure and captivates his Lordship's heart.—*New York Times*.

"A Woman's No" is one of Mrs. Cameron's best books. It is a love story, of course, and it is written in the charming style which carries one on from page to page and never tires. No better book can be had for a vacation trip. It will while away the hours in a delightful way and will make one better appreciate nature as he finds it.

—*Cleveland Recorder*.

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A State Secret

By B. M. CROKER

318 pages, size 7½ x 5, Cloth. Ink and Gold, \$1.25

Mrs. Croker's signature, either to a long or short story, has come to be generally accepted as security for a pleasant hour. The present series of sketches is no exception. There is little out of the ordinary in the experiences related in this book, if a certain grisly ghost story, which seems to have strayed into more cheerful company, be excepted. But whether the scene is in dingy lodgings in a faded Dublin street, among the Munster peasantry, on a Scotch moor, or away in an up-country Indian station, the people are very real. In the story which gives the title to the volume we meet an eccentric but very philosophical old French woman whose room is filled with lumber of all descriptions. She dislikes exceedingly to have the apartment swept, and declares that she rather likes dust; "I am getting used to it," she calmly announces. "We shall all come to dust ourselves ere long, and what harm is the poor dust doing? We may be dispersing our ancestors!" These sketches are brief, but they leave a defined impression, and one feels that it would be agreeable to prolong some of the acquaintances here made. However, as Mrs. Croker well knows, one of the qualities of a readable short story is that it stimulates rather than satisfies.—*The Washington Post*.

"A State Secret, and Other Stories," by B. M. Croker, is an excellent collection of Irish stories by a known and popular writer. Mrs. Croker has published many novels that have succeeded, and have deserved to succeed, one of those best known being "The Real Lady Hilda," and one of the best, one which has not so many readers, is called "Beyond the Pale." These stories are in the same vein as the books; they are the work of a writer who knows her subject, and has a very neat touch. It is reasonably safe to take up anything she writes with the expectation of being entertained and the certainty that the entertainment will not be of the kind one is more or less ashamed of feeling.

—*Harford Times*.

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The Mysterious Burglar

By GEO. E. WALSH

247 pages, size 7¼ x 4¼. Ink and Gold, \$1.25

"The Mysterious Burglar" is a first-rate detective story.
—*Chicago Record-Herald.*

"The Mysterious Burglar" is a very good story. The mystery is cleverly handled to the end and is a thoroughly up-to-date tale.—*Toledo Blade.*

Mr. Walsh is a bright story-teller.
—*New Haven Courier Journal.*

It is a peculiar and and intensely interesting story.
—*Cleveland Recorder.*

It is an exceptionally good story. From the outset it is interesting, and the plot is so well handled that surprises are as constant as in the life of a burglar himself.
—*Philadelphia Telegraph.*

"The Mysterious Burglar," which appears in the list of the best selling books, is said to be founded upon fact. As a study of modern criminology in the guise of fiction, it is certainly worth perusal.—*New York Journal.*

"The Mysterious Burglar," by George E. Walsh, recently published by F. M. Buckles & Co., is now in its third edition. Many letters asking about the possibilities of hypnotism described in the book, and, in particular, if there is any foundation in fact for the story, have been received by the author.—*New York Times.*

A story more singular has seldom been written and the conception is daring in the extreme. The plot is puzzling, and as the various mysteries unravel the reader is shocked and surprised. The iniquity has its daily parallel, however, and taking it as a whole, the author has been successful in producing a really admirable work.

—*Albany Times Union.*

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F. M. BUCKLES & COMPANY

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The Real Lady Hilda

By B. M. CROKER

266 pages, size 7½ x 5, Cloth, 3 stampings, \$1.00

"The Real Lady Hilda," by B. M. Croker, is a very pleasing novel, depending for its interest not upon sensational incident, but upon a clever portrayal of disagreeable traits of character in high society. The story is told by a young lady who finds herself with her stepmother in obscure lodgings in an obscure country town. The head of the family had been physician to a Rajah in India, had lived in princely style and had entertained in princely fashion. He had died and left to his widow and child nothing but a small pension, and they soon found themselves in straightened circumstances. Besides the character drawing, the entertaining feature of the story lies in the shabby treatment which the two impecunious women receive from the people whom they have so royally entertained in India, and the inability of the widow, with her Indian experience, to understand it. Entertaining too is the fawning toadyism of the middle class women, who disdainfully tip their noses and wag their tongues when they find that the poor women are neglected by the great lady in the neighborhood.

—*The Bookseller, Newsdealer and Stationer.*

Mrs. Croker belongs to the group of English country life novelists. She is not one of its chief members, but she succeeds often in being amusing in a quiet, simple way. Her gentlefolk lack the stamp of caste, but the plots in which they are placed are generally rather ingenious. Of course, in a field so assiduously worked, one cannot look for originality. The present book is just what the author modestly calls it—a "sketch," with the usual poor girl of good family and the equally familiar happy ending.—*Mail and Express.*

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Allin Winfield

By *GEO. E. WALSH*

326 pages, Size 7 x 5, Cloth, Ink, Gold, \$1.25

"Allin Winfield," by George Ethelbert Walsh, is a historical novel of New England during the days of Aaron Burr, who is one of the characters in the book, and a stirring romance of love and adventure. The story of the old carver of ship's figureheads—representing a class of artist-artisans long since obsolete—and his apt pupil, recall vivid pictures of days when American clippers and brigs were the pride of the sea. The story of America's shipping industry is told graphically in the book, flashlight pictures being given of quaint scenes and manners of life. Mr. Walsh is the author of one other novel, "The Mysterious Burglar," and a newspaper man of long training whose stories in the leading magazines have attracted considerable attention recently.

—*Albany Argus.*

This novel is far and away superior to Mr. Walsh's "Mysterious Burglar," published last year. The story of Allin Winfield is fresh and bright, and, though neither deep nor complex, possesses just enough coherency and body to lift it out of the ruck of light literature. The story is well told, and far be it from us to cavil at the slight technical errors that reveal an ignorance of the sea or a careless use of knowledge. The tale concerns a pair of lovers, and therefore is a love story. Its scene is laid in the early years of American independence, and at first the action takes place in Boston and then in the pirates' rendezvous on the Caribbean Sea. Allin Winfield, the hero, is in love with his cousin Priscilla, and she with him, but the course of true love, as usual in novels, is not smooth, and its complications involve—Mr. Walsh follows the fashion—Aaron Burr. A desperate rescue, a duel and an abduction, the terrors of the punishment inflicted by pirates, the great caves of the island stronghold, the sea fight and the destruction of the pirates' ships are all strikingly pictured. In the end the love of Priscilla and Allin finds happy reward.—*Baltimore Sun.*

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The Wager

By L. McMANUS

306 pages, size 7½ x 5, Cloth, Ink, Gold, \$1.25

"The Wager," written by L. McManus and published by F. M. Buckles & Co., is a thoroughly Irish book and one that has both interest and merit. It is historical in character, laid in Limerick during the siege of 1690. Brigadier Niell McGuinness, of Ireagh, some time captain in Sarsfield's Horse, tells the story, and tells it well. "The Wager" hangs upon the disappearance of a diamond cross that one Capt. O'Donnell has confided to his General's wife for safe-keeping. Ere it is found there are adventures, romance and mystery. The book has much originality, both in plot and manner of handling.—*Louisville Courier-Journal*.

"The Wager" is a rollicking story of Irish life during the days when William of Orange was over-running the Emerald Isle, after having chased James Stuart back to France. L. McManus, the author, has written of the period—1690—with feeling and skill. The siege of Limerick forms the setting for the story, which is romantic and yet not unreal. The actors have a life-like character which is refreshing after meeting with so many automatons parading up and down the pages of historical romance. The book takes its title from a wager regarding the ability to hold the city of Limerick against the English and Dutch troops of King William's army, the stakes being a jeweled cross against a cannon. The cross is given into the keeping of a fair lady, who in her flight from the English, leaves it behind in a house that is speedily reduced to ruins by the cannonading of the Irish defenders of the city. The attempts to regain the cross furnish the leading interest of the story, but cleverly interwoven is a love story both pleasing and mystifying. The progress of the tale unfolds many glimpses of brave men and high-spirited women, such as Ireland has always boasted among her native sons and daughters. Dashing battle scenes give variety, and the whole is charmingly told in excellent language.—*Pittsburgh Dispatch*.

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Separation

By MARGARET LEE

271 pages, size 7½ x 5, Cloth, Ink, Gold, \$1.25

This is a quaint, old-fashioned story. There is no plot to speak of. Incidents are few and trivial. Conversations are commonplace. Yet once begun one does not lay aside the book till it is finished. Life in a country village is portrayed. The interest centers chiefly on Mrs. Aston, who passes for a young widow there for her health, and Mr. Cortis, who is also there for his health. It develops that Mrs. Aston's father is endeavoring to compel his daughter to procure a divorce from her husband. Fate, or Providence, has sent them both to one place and they are near neighbors. Mr. Cortis is the husband. Mrs. Aston comes to her right mind and rejoins her husband. They will not be separated longer and are left happy and loving.—*Milwaukee Journal*.

"Separation," by Margaret Lee, author of "Divorce"—quiet and quaint is the manner of treatment which this love story receives. It is a relief from the rush and rattle of the average novelist's crowd of incidents, accidents and sensational situations. The book's opening scene is in a peaceful country village with the principal characters all in it or near it. There is no tedious explanation of how they all came to be there nor wordy pen pictures of the village and its inhabitants. The plan (rather than plot) of the story is not hinted at and the reader must of a necessity read on till far through the book to discern any pretext for grouping the characters and weaving the web of their lives. It all comes in time, and the reader learns how a young husband and wife have separated by mutual consent, aided by the suggestions and methods of the wife's father, who deems her marriage a false step that should be retraced. He has sent her and her child, with an aunt, to the secluded village in a state where a continued residence apart affords grounds for the legal separation of husband and wife. She poses as a young widow and adopts her husband's given name.

—*Albany Argus*

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A Rational Marriage

By FLORENCE MARRYAT

296 Pages, Size 7½ x 5, Cloth, Ink and Gold, \$1.25.

A Rational Marriage is the title of the book, which is Florence Marryat's latest contribution to her circle of readers. It belongs to that class of light literature which is enjoyed by those who read only for the pleasure of the hour, and will, doubtless, meet with approval from the novel reading public.

The story is of a young woman of rather Bohemian proclivities who lives in a flat and acts as secretary to an elderly nobleman. She has "expectations" from her grandfather, but only in the event of her remaining single, as the old gentleman has decided dislike for matrimony.

How it all turned out may be gathered from the book which comes from the publishing house of F. M. Buckles & Co., New York.

—*Toledo Blade*, Feb. 8.

The late Florence Marryat had a fine appreciation of a humorous situation, and she used it to good purpose in this story, which is based on a clandestine marriage. When rooms are reserved at a certain place for "Mr. and Mrs. Smith," and two couples answering to that name make their simultaneous appearance, there is apt to be some explaining necessary. The embarrassments resulting from hasty marriages, in which there is an object in preserving secrecy has been the theme of both novelist and playwright, but the lamented author of this volume has succeeded in extracting about all the humor and aggravation that can be found in the situation. Fancy a man having to play a game of freeze-out with his own wife as the attraction, and yet not daring to acknowledge the relationship! And the fact that the man is a journalist makes it all the more enjoyable.

The volume is a handsome one, the cover design being particularly attractive.—*Rochester Herald*, Feb. 9.

"A Rational Marriage," by the late Florence Marryat, daughter of the famous Captain Marryat, is not a strong story, but it was written with a praiseworthy purpose that shines forth from every page. The purpose is to show the magic power of love. A clever, independent young woman, who has formed her own conclusions regarding matrimony, and a bright young newspaper man enter into a marriage agreement with the understanding that everything is to go on exactly as before the ceremony. The young man agrees because it is the only way to secure her, and they are united by a magistrate. Then follow complications; uneasy days and sleepless nights, and all the woes possible to those who, reckoning, without love, enter the matrimonial state. After a judicious amount of trial and tribulations the clouds break away for a bright and satisfactory ending. A few contrasting examples of conjugal bliss and single unhappiness are thrown in quite effectively.—*Chicago Tribune*.

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The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton

By FLORENCE WARDEN

332 pages, size 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 5, Cloth, Ink and Gold, \$1.25

Florence Warden's latest novel, "The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton," is among the new publications of F. M. Buckles & Co., New York, and is well worth while. The story is bright and clean, a pleasant and wholesome society novel, lacking in the startling and sensational features, belonging to the other work of Miss Warden's, and its heroine is an attractive character.—*The Republic*.

"The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton" is decidedly less sensational than the books Florence Warden usually writes. The narrative interest, which is very slight, is centered exclusively on the experience of Nannie Pemberton, the daughter of a poor curate, and the wife of an obscure county solicitor. Gifted with a large sense of enjoyment, an attractive spontaneity of manner, a kind heart, and a fair share of good books, she unwittingly draws upon herself the notice of the county magnate, Lord Thanington, and he at once insists on having her absorbed into the smart set of which he is the leader. The young wife takes the goods the gods provide without any fear of finding a serpent in her paradise, and it is not till nearly the close of the story that her eyes are rudely opened. The thousand and one distinctions, some broad and obvious, others subtle and apparently trivial, that differentiate the life of the county people from that of the dwellers in provincial towns are cleverly utilized to form an effective background to an unpretentious story. The heroine's character is carefully and fully developed, and is noticeable rather for its evenness and balance than for any prominent idiosyncrasies.—*The Washington Post*.

"The Lovely Mrs. Pemberton," by Florence Warden, is a cleverly written, pleasingly wholesome society story. The numerous distinctions that differentiate the life of the county people from that of the dwellers in a provincial town are utilized to form an interesting background.—*The Mirror*

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A Rise in the World

By *ADELINE SERGEANT*

377 pages, size 7½x5, Cloth, ink and gold, \$1.25.

Miss Sergeant's new novel has not "Adam Grigson's" right to consideration, though it is not without a certain interest for the reader who has just laid down the latter book. The heroine of "A Rise in the World" is a little household drudge, kind hearted, good and unselfish, but untaught and illiterate as any other London "slavey." We do not say that it would be impossible for this girl to reach a high place in English society within an absurdly short time, but it must be admitted that the transition as described by Miss Sergeant is not convincing. A man's a man for a' that, but training, or the lack of it, and the human being's environment must count, so that it is not easy to accept as a probable personage the cockney servant who becomes a beautiful peeress and charming woman of the world with such startling rapidity.—*N. Y. Tribune.*

In "A Rise in the World" (Buckles) Adeline Sergeant outdoes Laura Jean Libbey in her efforts to bring her heroine from the lowliest walks of life to the height of the social world. She makes the poor girl, who is a nursery maid, awkward, stupid, stubborn, and untidy, only granting her the graces of a kind heart and a sensible name, Elizabeth. Of course, the hand of every man is against Elizabeth as she struggles to make herself worthy of the position to which marriage with a gentleman has raised her; but in time, by the tender guidance of the rash young man's unworldly mother, the girl becomes a marvel of feminine attractiveness. One by one her enemies are laid low and she forgives them all. The story is not quite so melodramatic as those of its kind usually are. The noteworthy thing about it is the ease with which the author removes immovable obstacles.—*Chicago Tribune*

Readers of this interesting picture of London society will perhaps be impressed by the unevenness of its literary merit. Some of the scenes are capitally done; others seem hurriedly sketched, but the author's style is always femininely incisive. Despite a few seeming improbabilities in plot, the story as a whole is one which has in it an inevitable attractiveness, as do all accounts of real rises and progresses in the world.—*The Outlook.*

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The Conquest of London

By DOROTHEA GERARD

322 pages, size 7½ x 5, Cloth, Ink, Gold, \$1.25

Dorothea Gerard writes stories which are bright and interesting without being particularly strong or aiming at anything beyond pleasant entertainment. "The Conquest of London" is not an historical novel, as the name might imply. It relates the experiences of four nice English girls, sisters, who having been brought up in an out-of-the-way place and inherited a small sum of money, went to London to see something of society. Out of these commonplace materials the author makes quite a readable story.

—*Indianapolis Journal*.

"The Conquest of London," by Dorothea Gerard, relates the adventures of four orphan girls between fifteen and twenty, who live upon the modest income of one hundred and twenty pounds a year in a little cottage at Gilham, miles from a neighboring village. After many severe struggles things shape themselves right in the end and everything has a happy finish. The book is brightly written, a pretty little story which will be certain to find favor with the readers.—*Albany Times Union*.

This is a healthy novel of the entertaining type, a capital story of the adventures of four sisters who are left in a village well nigh penniless. An uncle leaves them a thousand pounds apiece, with which they go to London and see social life—as long as their money lasts. They get through with it speedily and are forced to return to their village home. There they see some bitter days, but all ends happily by the oldest sister's marriage to a rich man of the neighborhood.—*Louisville Courier-Journal*.

Dorothea Gerard is the famous authoress of "A Forgotten Sin," "The Impediment," etc., but in this later work—"The Conquest of London"—she has brought forth a masterpiece which will make this famous English authoress a world-wide reputation as a writer of fiction.

—*Southern Star*.

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