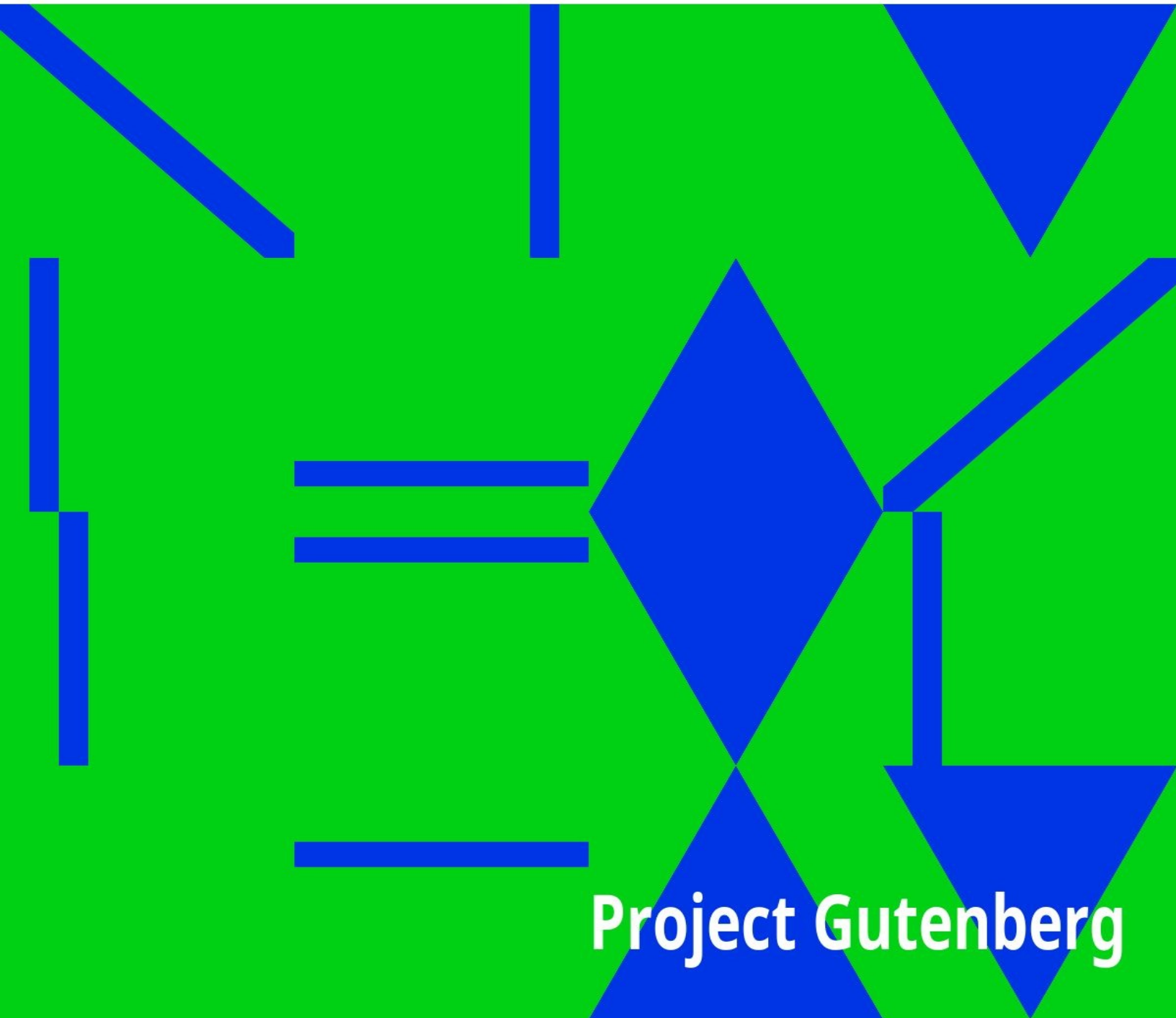
My Strangest Case

Guy Boothby



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My Strangest Case

By

By Guy Boothby

Author of "Dr. Nikola," "The Beautiful White Devil," "Pharos, the Egyptian," etc.

Illustrated by

L.J. Bridgman and P. Hard

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"A DARK, NARROW HOLE, THE BOTTOM OF WHICH IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE."

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MY STRANGEST CASE

INTRODUCTION

PART I

I am of course prepared to admit that there are prettier places on the face of this earth of ours than Singapore; there are, however, I venture to assert, few that are more interesting, and certainly none that can afford a better study of human life and character. There, if you are so disposed, you may consider the subject of British Rule on the one hand, and the various aspects of the Chinese question on the other. If you are a student of languages you will be able to hear half the tongues of the world spoken in less than an hour's walk, ranging say from Parisian French to Pigeon English; you shall make the acquaintance of every sort of smell the human nose can manipulate, from the sweet perfume of the lotus blossom to the diabolical odour of the Durien; and every sort of cooking from a dainty *vol-au-vent* to a stuffed rat. In the harbour the shipping is such as, I feel justified in saying, you would encounter in no other port of its size in the world. It comprises the stately man-of-war and the Chinese Junk; the P. and O., the Messagerie Maritime, the British India and the Dutch mail-boat; the homely sampan, the yacht of the globe-trotting millionaire, the collier, the timber-ship, and in point of fact every description of craft that plies between the Barbarian East and the Civilized West. The first glimpse of the harbour is one that will never be forgotten; the last is usually associated with a desire that one may never set eyes on it again. He who would, of his own free will, settle down for life in Singapore, must have acquired the tastes of a salamander, and the sensibility of a frog.

Among its other advantages, Singapore numbers the possession of a multiplicity of hotels. There is stately Raffles, where the globe-trotters do mostly take up their abode, also the Hôtel de l'Europe, whose virtues I can vouch for; but packed away in another and very different portion of the town, unknown to the wealthy G.T., and indeed known to only a few of the white inhabitants of Singapore itself, there exists a small hostelry owned by a lynx-eyed Portuguese, which rejoices in the name of the Hotel of the Three Desires. Now, every man, who by mischance or deliberate intent, has entered its doors, has his own notions

of the meaning of its name; the fact, however, remains that it is there, and that it is regularly patronized by individuals of a certain or uncertain class, as they pass to and fro through the Gateway of the Further East. This in itself is strange, inasmuch as it is said that the proprietor rakes in the dollars by selling liquor that is as bad as it can possibly be, in order that he may get back to Lisbon before he receives that threatened knife-thrust between the ribs which has been promised him so long. There are times, as I am unfortunately able to testify, when the latter possibility is not so remote as might be expected. Taken altogether, however, the Hotel of the Three Desires is an excellent place to take up one's abode, provided one is not desirous of attracting too much attention in the city. As a matter of fact its patrons, for some reason of their own, are more *en evidence* after nightfall than during the hours of daylight. They are also frugal of speech as a rule, and are chary of forming new acquaintances. When they know each other well, however, it is surprising how affable they can become. It is not the smallest of their many peculiarities that they seldom refer to absent friends by their names. A will ask B when he expects to hear from *Him*, and C will inform D that "the *old man* is now running the show, and that, if *he* doesn't jump from Calcutta inside a week, there will be trouble on the floor." Meanwhile the landlord mixes the drinks with his own dirty hands, and reflects continually upon the villainy of a certain American third mate, who having borrowed five dollars from him, was sufficiently ungrateful as to catch typhoid fever and die without either repaying the loan, or, what was worse, settling his account for the board and lodging received. Manuel, for this was the proprietor's name, had one or two recollections of a similar sort, but not many, for, as a rule, he is a careful fellow, and experience having taught him the manners and idiosyncrasies of his customers, he generally managed to emerge from his transactions with credit to himself, and what was of much more importance, a balance on the right side of his ledger.

The time of which I am now writing was the middle of March, the hottest and, in every respect, the worst month of the year in Singapore. Day and night the land was oppressed by the same stifling heat, a sweltering calidity possessing the characteristics of a steam-laundry, coupled with those of the stokehole of an ocean liner in the Red Sea. Morning, noon, and night, the quarter in which the Hotel of the Three Desires was situated was fragrant with the smell of garbage and Chinese tobacco; a peculiar blend of perfume, which once smelt is not to be soon forgotten. Everything, even the bottles on the shelves in the bar, had a greasy feel about them, and the mildew on one's boots when one came to put them on in the morning, was a triumph in the way of *erysiphaceous fungi*.

Singapore at this season of the year is neither good for man nor beast; in this sweeping assertion, of course I except the yellow man, upon whom it seems to exercise no effect whatsoever.

It was towards evening, and, strange to relate, the Hotel of the Three Desires was for once practically empty. This was the more extraordinary for the reason that the customers who usually frequented it, *en route* from one end of the earth to the other, are not affected by seasons. Midwinter was to them the same as midsummer, provided they did their business, or got their ships, and by those ships, or that business, received their wages. That those hard-earned wages should eventually find themselves in the pocket of the landlord of the Three Desires, was only in the natural order of things, and, in consequence, such of his guests as were sailors, as a general rule, eventually boarded their ships without as much as would purchase them a pipe of tobacco. It did not, however, prevent them from returning to the Hotel of the Three Desires when next they happened to be that way. If he had no other gift, Manuel at least possessed the faculty of making it comparatively homelike to his customers, and that is a desideratum not to be despised even by sailor men in the Far East.

As I have said, night was falling on one of the hottest days of the year, when a man entered the hotel and inquired for the proprietor. Pleased to find that there was at last to be a turn in the tide of his affairs, the landlord introduced himself to the stranger, and at the same time inquired in what way he could have the pleasure of serving him.

"I want to put up with you," said the stranger, who, by the way, was a tall man, with a hawk's eye and a nose that was not unlike the beak of the same bird. "You are not full, I suppose?"

Manuel rubbed his greasy hands together and observed that he was not as full as he had been; thereby insinuating that while he was not overflowing, he was still not empty. It will be gathered from this that he was a good business man, who never threw a chance away.

"In that case, I'll stay," said the stranger, and set down the small valise he carried upon the floor.

From what I have already written, you will doubtless have derived the impression that the Hotel of the Three Desires, while being a useful place of abode, was far from being the caravanserai of the luxurious order. The stranger, whoever he might be, however, was either not fastidious, or as is more probable,

was used to similar accommodation, for he paid as little attention to the perfume of the bar as he did to the dirt upon the floor and walls, and also upon the landlord's hands. Having stipulated for a room to himself, he desired to be shown to it forthwith, whereupon Manuel led him through the house to a small yard at the back, round which were several small cabins, dignified by the name of apartments.

"Splendeed," said Manuel enthusiastically, throwing open the door of one of the rooms as he spoke. "More splendeed than ever you saw."

The stranger gave a ravenish sort of croak, which might have been a laugh or anything else, and then went in and closed the door abruptly behind him. Having locked it, he took off his coat and hung it upon the handle, apparently conscious of the fact that the landlord had glued his eyes to the keyhole in order that he might, from a precautionary point of view, take further stock of his patron. Foiled in his intention he returned to the bar, murmuring "Anglish Peeg" to himself as he did so. In the meantime the stranger had seated himself upon the rough bed in the corner, and had taken a letter from his pocket.

"The Hotel of the Three Desires," he reads, "and on March the fifteenth, without fail." There was a pause while he folded the letter up and placed it in his pocket. Then he continued, "this is the hotel, and to-day is the fifteenth of March. But why don't they put in an appearance. It isn't like them to be late. They'd better not play me any tricks or they'll find I have lost none of my old power of retaliation."

Having satisfied himself that it was impossible for any one to see into the room, either through the keyhole or by means of the window, he partially disrobed, and, when he had done so, unbuckled from round his waist a broad leather money-belt. Seating himself on the bed once more he unfastened the strap of the pocket, and dribbled the contents on to the bed. They consisted of three Napoleons, fifteen English sovereigns, four half-sovereigns, and eighteen one-franc pieces. In his trouser-pocket he had four Mexican dollars, and some cosmopolitan change of small value.

"It's not very much," he muttered to himself after he had counted it, "but it ought to be sufficient for the business in hand. If I hadn't been fool enough to listen to that Frenchwoman on board, I shouldn't have played cards, and then it would have been double. Why the deuce wasn't I able to get Monsieur ashore? In that case I'd have got it all back, or I'd have known the reason why."

The idea seemed to afford him some satisfaction, for he smiled, and then said to himself as if in terms of approbation, "By Jove, I believe you, my boy!"

When he had counted his money and had returned it once more to its hiding-place, he buckled the belt round his person and unstrapped his valise, taking from it a black *Tussa* coat which he exchanged for that hanging upon the handle of the door. Then he lighted a Java cigar and sat down upon the bed to think. Taken altogether, his was not a prepossessing countenance. The peculiar attributes I have already described were sufficient to prevent that. At the same time it was a strong face, that of a man who was little likely to allow himself to be beaten, of his own free will, in anything he might undertake. The mouth was firm, the chin square, the eyes dark and well set, moreover he wore a heavy black moustache, which he kept sharp-pointed. His hair was of the same colour, though streaked here and there with grey. His height was an inch and a half above six feet, but by reason of his slim figure, he looked somewhat taller. His hands and feet were small, but of his strength there could be no doubt. Taken altogether, he was not a man with whom one would feel disposed to trifle. Unfortunately, however, the word *adventurer* was written all over him, and, as a considerable section of the world's population have good reason to know, he was as little likely to fail to take advantage of his opportunities as he was to forget the man who had robbed him, or who had done him an ill turn. It was said in Hong Kong that he was well connected, and that he had claims upon a Viceroy now gone to his account; that, had he persevered with them, might have placed him in a very different position. How much truth there was in this report, however, I cannot say; one thing, however, is quite certain; if it were true, he had fallen grievously from his high estate.

When his meditations had continued for something like ten minutes, he rose from the bed, blew a cloud of smoke, stretched himself, strapped his valise once more, gave himself what the sailors call a hoist, that he might be sure his money-belt was in its proper position, and then unlocked the door, passed out, re-locked it after him, and returned to the bar. There he called for certain curious liquors, smelt them suspiciously before using them, and then proceeded deliberately to mix himself a peculiar drink. The landlord watched him with appreciative surprise. He imagined himself to be familiar with every drink known to the taste of man, having had wide experience, but such an one as this he had never encountered before.

"What do you call it?" he asked, when the other had finished his preparations.

"I call it a 'Help to Reformation,' " the stranger replied. Then, with a sneer upon his face, he added, "It should be popular with your customers."

Taking the drink with him into the verandah outside, he seated himself in a long chair and proceeded to sip it slowly, as if it were some elixir whose virtue would be lost by haste. Some people might have been amused by the motley crowd that passed along the street beyond the verandah-rails, but Gideon Hayle, for such was his name, took no sort of interest in it. He had seen it too often to find any variety in it. As a matter of fact the mere sight of a pigtail was sufficient to remind him of a certain episode in his career which he had been for years endeavouring to forget.

"It doesn't look as if they are going to put in an appearance to-night," he said to himself, as the liquor in the glass began to wane. "Can this letter have been a hoax, an attempt to draw me off the scent? If so, by all the gods in Asia, they may rest assured I'll be even with them."

He looked as though he meant it!

At last he rose, and having returned his glass to the bar, donned his *topee*, left the hotel, and went for a stroll. It was but a short distance to the harbour, and he presently found himself strolling along the several miles of what I have already described as the most wonderful shipping in the world. To Mr. Hayle the scene was too familiar to call for comment. He had seen it on many occasions, and under a variety of auspices. He had witnessed it as a deck-hand and as a saloon passenger; as a steerage passenger, and in the humble capacity of a stowaway. Now he was regarding it as a gentleman of leisure, who smoked a cigar that had been paid for, and round whose waist was a belt with gold in it. Knowing the spot where the British India boats from Calcutta usually lie, he made his way to it, and inquired for a certain vessel. She had not yet arrived, he was informed, and no one seemed to know when she might be expected. At last, tired of his occupation, he returned to his hotel, and in due course sat down to supper. He smoked another cigar in the verandah afterwards, and was on the point of retiring for the night, when two men suddenly made their appearance before him, and accosted him by name. He immediately sprang to his feet with a cry of welcome.

"I had made up my mind that you were not coming," he said as they shook hands.

"The old tub didn't get in until a quarter to nine," the taller of the two new-

comers replied. "When did you arrive?"

"This afternoon," said Hayle, and for a moment volunteered no further information. A good poker-player is always careful not to show his hand.

"I suppose this place is not full?" inquired the man who had last spoken.

"Full?" asked Hayle scornfully. "It's full of cockroaches and mildew, if that's what you mean?"

"The best company we could possibly have," said the taller man. "Cockroaches and blackbeetles don't talk and they don't listen at keyholes. What's more, if they trouble you, you can put your heel on them. Now let's see the landlord and see what he's got to offer us in the way of rooms. We don't want any dinner, because we had it on board the steamer."

Hayle accompanied them into the bar, and was a witness of the satisfaction the landlord endeavoured, from business motives, to conceal. In due course he followed them to the small, stifling rooms in the yard at the back, and observed that they were placed on either side of himself. He had already taken the precaution of rapping upon the walls in order to discover their thickness, and to find out whether the sound of chinking money was to be heard through them.

"I must remember that thirty-seven and sixpence and two Mexican dollars are all I have in the world," he said to himself. "It would be bad business to allow them to suppose that I had more, until I find out what they want."

"The last time I was here was with Stellman," said the taller of the men, when they met again in the courtyard. "He had got a concession from the Dutch, so he said, to work a portion of the West Coast for shell. He wanted me to go in with him."

"And you couldn't see your way to it?"

"I've seen two Dutch gaols," said the other; "and I have no use for them."

"And what happened to Stellman?" asked Hayle, but without any apparent interest. He was thinking of something else at the time.

"They got his money, his boat, and his shell, with three pearls that would have made your mouth water," replied the other.

"And Stellman?"

"Oh, they buried him at Sourabaya. He took the cholera, so they said, but I have heard since that he died of starvation. They don't feed you too well in Dutch gaols, especially when you've got a concession and a consul."

The speaker looked up at his companion as he said this, and the other, who, as I have already said, was not interested in the unfortunate Stellman, or had probably heard the tale before, nodded his head in the direction of the room where the smaller man was engaged on his toilet, to the accompaniment of splashing water. The movement of the head was as significant as the nod of the famous Lord of Burleigh.

"Just the same, as ever," the other replied. "Always pushing his nose into old papers and documents, until you'd think he'd make himself ill. Lord, what a man he would have been for the British Museum! There's not his equal on Ancient Asia in the world."

"And this particular business?"

"Ah, you shall hear all about it in the proper time. That'll be to-morrow morning, I reckon. In the meantime you can go to bed, and content yourself with the knowledge that, all being well, you're going to play a hand in the biggest scoop that ever I or anybody else have tackled?"

"You can't give me an inkling of what it is to-night, I suppose?"

"I could, but I'm not going to," replied his companion calmly. "The story would take too long to tell, and I'm tired. Besides, you would want to ask questions of Coddy, and that would upset the little man's equilibrium. No! Go to bed and have a good night's rest, and we'll talk it over in the morning. I wonder what my curtains are like? If ever there's a place in this world for mosquitoes, it's Singapore, and I thought Calcutta was bad enough."

Having no desire to waste time in discussing the various capabilities of this noxious insect, Hayle bade the other good-night, and, when he had visited the bar and had smoked another cigar, disappeared in the direction of his own apartment.

Meanwhile Mr. Kitwater, for such was the name of the gentleman he had just left, had begun his preparations for the night, vigorously cursing the mosquitoes as he did so. He was a fine-looking man, with a powerful, though somewhat humorous cast of countenance. His eyes were large, and not unkindly. His head

was a good one from a phrenological point of view, but was marred by the possession of enormous ears which stood out on either side of his head like those of a bat. He wore a close-cropped beard, and he was famous for his strength, which indeed was that of a giant.

"Hayle, if I can sum it up aright, is just the same as ever," he said as he arranged the mosquito-netting of his bed. "He doesn't trust me, and I don't trust him. But he'll be none the less useful for that. Let him try to play me false, and by the Lord Harry, he'll not live to do it again."

With this amiable sentiment Mr. Kitwater prepared himself for slumber.

Then, upon the three worthies the hot, tropical night settled down.

Next morning they met at breakfast. All three were somewhat silent. It was as if the weight of the matter which was that day to be discussed pressed upon their spirits. The smallest of the trio, Septimus Codd by name, who was habitually taciturn, spoke scarcely a word. He was a strange little man, a nineteenth century villain in a sense. He was a rogue and a vagabond, yet his one hobby, apart from his business, was a study of the Past, and many an authority on Eastern History would have been astonished at the extent of his learning. He was never so happy as when burrowing amongst ancient records, and it was mainly due to his learning in the first place, and to a somewhat singular accident in the second, that the trio were now foregathered in Singapore. His personal appearance was a peculiar one. His height was scarcely more than four feet six inches. His face was round, and at a distance appeared almost boyish. It was only when one came to look into it more closely, that it was seen to be scored by numberless small lines. Moreover it was unadorned by either beard or moustache. His hair was grey, and was worn somewhat longer than is usual. He could speak fluently almost every language of the East, and had been imprisoned by the Russians for sealing in prohibited waters, had been tortured by the Chinese on the Yang-tse, and, to his own unextinguishable disgrace, flogged by the French in Tonquin. Not the least curious trait in his character was the affection he entertained for Kitwater. The pair had been together for years, had quarrelled repeatedly, but had never separated. The record of their doings would form an interesting book, but for want of space cannot be more than referred to here. Hayle had been their partner in not a few of their curious undertakings, for his courage and resource made him a valuable ally, though how far they trusted each other it is impossible to say.

Breakfast over they adjourned to the verandah, where the inevitable cigars made their appearance.

"Now, let's hear what you've got to say to me?" Hayle began.

"Not here," Kitwater replied. "There are too many listeners. Come down to the harbour."

So saying he led his companions to the waterside, where he chartered a native boat for an hour's sail. Then, when they were out of earshot of the land, he bade Hayle pay attention to what he had to say.

"First and foremost you must understand," he said, "that it's all due to Coddy here. We heard something of it from an old Siamese in Hanoi, but we never put much trust in it. Then Coddy began to look around, to hunt up some of his fusty records, and after awhile he began to think that there might be something in the story after all. You see it's this way: you know Sengkor-Wat?"

"Sengkor how much?"

"Sengkor-Wat—the old ruin at the back of Burmah; near the Chinese Border. Such a place as you never dreamt of. Tumble-down palaces, temples, and all that sort of thing—lying out there all alone in the jungle."

"I've seen Amber," said Hayle, with the air of a man who makes a remark that cannot be lightly turned aside. "After that I don't want any more ruined cities. I've got no use for them."

"No, but you've got a use for other things, haven't you? You can use rubies as big as pigeon's eggs, I suppose. You've got a use for sapphires, the like of which mortal man never set eyes on before."

"That's certainly so," Hayle replied. "But what has this Sengkor-Wat to do with it?"

"Everything in the world," Kitwater replied. "That's where those rubies are, and what's more, that's where we are going to find them."

"Are you joking, or is this sober earnest?"

He looked from Kitwater to Codd. The little man thus appealed to nodded his head. He agreed with all his companion said.

"It's quite true," said he, after a pause. "Rubies, sapphires and gold, enough to make us all millionaires times over."

"Bravo for Sengkor-Wat, then!" said Hayle. "But how do you know all this?"

"I've told you already that Coddy found it out," Kitwater replied. "Looking over his old records he discovered something that put him on the track. Then I happened to remember that, years ago, when I was in Hanoi, an old man had told me a wonderful story about a treasure-chamber in a ruined city in the Burmese jungle. A Frenchman who visited the place, and had written a book about it, mentions the fact that there is a legend amongst the natives that vast treasure is buried in the ruins, but only one man, so far as we can discover, seems to have taken the trouble to have looked for it."

"But how big are the ruins?"

"Bigger than London, so Coddy says!"

Coddy nodded his head in confirmation of this fact. But still Hayle seemed incredulous.

"And are you going to search all that area? It strikes me that you will be an old man by the time you find the treasure, Kitwater."

"Don't you believe it. We've got something better to go upon than that. There was an old Chinese traveller who visited this place in the year ... what was the year, Coddy?"

"Twelve hundred and fifty-seven," Codd replied without hesitation.

"Well, he describes the glory of the place, the wealth of the inhabitants, and then goes on to tell how the king took him to the great treasure-chamber, where he saw such riches as mortal man had never looked upon before."

"But that doesn't tell you where the treasure-chamber is?" argued Hayle.

"Perhaps not, but there are other ways of finding out; that is, if a man has his wits about him. You've got to put two and two together if you want to get on in this world. Coddy has translated it all, and this is what it amounts to. When the king had shown the traveller his treasure, the latter declared that his eyes were so blinded by its magnificence that he could scarcely mount the steps to the spot where his majesty gave audience to his people. In another place it mentions that

when the king administered justice he was seated on the throne in the courtyard of the Three-headed Elephants. Now what we've got to do is to find that courtyard, and find it we will."

"But how do you know that the treasure hasn't been taken away years ago? Do you think they were such fools as to leave it behind when they went elsewhere? Not they!"

Though they were well out of earshot of the land, and alone upon the boat, Kitwater looked round him suspiciously before he answered. Then a pleasant smile played over his face. It was as if he were recalling some happy memory.

"How do I know it?" he asked by way of preface. "If you'll listen for a moment, I'll tell you. If you want more proof, when I've done, you must be difficult to please. When I was up at Moulmein six months ago, I came across a man I hadn't met for several years. He was a Frenchman, who I knew had spent the most of his life away back in Burmah. He was very flush of money at the time, and kept throwing out hints, when we were alone, of a place he knew of where there was the biggest fortune on earth, to be had for the mere picking up and carrying away. He had brought away as much of it as he could, but he hadn't time to get it all, before he was chased out by the Chinese, who, he said, were strong in the neighbourhood."

Kitwater stopped and rubbed his hands with a chuckle. Decidedly the recollection was a pleasant one.

"Well," he continued, "to make a long story short, I took advantage of my opportunity, and got his secret out of him by ... well never mind how I managed it. It is sufficient that I got it. And the consequence is I know all that is to be known."

"That's all very well, but what became of the Frenchman? How do you know that he isn't back there again filling his pockets?"

"I don't think he is," Kitwater replied slowly. "It put me to a lot of inconvenience, and came just at the time when I was most anxious to leave. Besides it might have meant trouble." He paused for a moment. "As a matter of fact they brought it in 'suicide during temporary insanity, brought on by excessive drinking,' and that got me over the difficulty. It must have been insanity, I think, for he had no reason for doing away with himself. It was proved that he had plenty of money left. What was more, Coddy gave evidence that,

only the day before, he had told him he was tired of life."

Hayle looked at both with evident admiration.

"Well, you two, taken together, beat cockfighting," he said enthusiastically. Then he added, "But what about the secret? What did you get out of him?"

"Here it is," said Kitwater, taking an old leather case from his pocket, and producing from it a small piece of parchment. "There's no writing upon it, but we have compared it with another plan that we happen to have, and find that it squares exactly."

He leant over Hayle's shoulder and pointed to a certain portion of the sketch.

"That's the great temple," he said; "and what the red dot means we are going to find out."

"Well, suppose it is, what makes you send for me?" Hayle inquired suspiciously.

"Because we must have another good man with us," Kitwater replied. "I'm very well, but you're better. Codd's head-piece is all right, but if it comes to fighting, he might just as well be in Kensal Green. Isn't that so, little man?"

Mr. Codd nodded his head.

"I said, send for Hayle," he remarked in his quiet little voice. "Kit sent and now you're here, and it's all right."

"Codd speaks the truth," said Kitwater. "Now what we have to do is to arrange the business part of the matter, and then to get away as quickly as possible."

The business portion of the matter was soon settled and Hayle was thereupon admitted a member of the syndicate for the exploration of the ancient town of Sengkor-Wat in the hinterland of Burmah.

For the remainder of the day Hayle was somewhat more silent than usual.

"If there's anything in their yarn it might be managed," he said to himself that night, when he was alone in his bedroom. "Kitwater is clever, I'll admit that, and Coddy is by no manner of means the fool he pretends to be. But I'm Gideon Hayle, and that counts for something. Yes, I think it might be managed."

What it was he supposed might be effected he did not say, but from the smile

upon his face, it was evident that the thought caused him considerable satisfaction.

Next day they set sail for Rangoon.

PART II

The shadows of evening were slowly falling as the little party of which Kitwater, Codd, and Hayle, with two Burmen servants, were members, obtained their first view of the gigantic ruins of which they had come so far in search. For many days they had been journeying through the jungle, now the prey of hope, now of despair. They had experienced adventures by the score, though none of them were of sufficient importance to be narrated here, and more than once they had come within a hair's-breadth of being compelled to retrace their steps. They rode upon the small wiry ponies of the country, their servants clearing a way before them with their *parangs* as they advanced. Their route, for the most part, lay through jungle, in places so dense that it was well-nigh impossible for them to force a way through it. It was as if nature were doing her best to save the ancient city from the hand of the spoiler. At last, and so suddenly that it came upon them like a shock, they found themselves emerging from the jungle. Below them, in the valley, peering up out of the forest, was all that remained of a great city, upon the ruined temples of which the setting sun shone with weird effect.

"At last," said Hayle, bringing his pony to a standstill, and looking down upon the ruins. "Let us hope we shall have penetrated their secret before we are compelled to say good-bye to them again."

"Hear, hear, to that," said Kitwater; Septimus Codd, however, never said a word; the magic hand of the past was upon his heart, and was holding him spellbound.

They descended the hill, and, when they had selected a suitable spot, decided to camp upon it for the night.

Next morning they were up betimes; the excitement of the treasure-hunt was upon each man, and would not let him tarry. It would not be long now, they hoped, before they would be able to satisfy themselves as to the truth of the story they had been told, and of the value of the hopes in which they had put their trust. Having eaten their morning meal, they took counsel together, examined the

plan for the thousandth time, collected their weapons and tools, bade their servants keep a sharp lookout, and then set off for the city. The morning sun sparkled upon the dew, the birds and monkeys chattered at them from the jungle, while above them towered the myriad domes and sculptured spires of the ancient city. It was a picture that once seen would never be forgotten. So far, however, not a sign of human life had they been able to discover; indeed, for all they knew to the contrary, they might be the only men within fifty miles of the place.

Leaving the jungle behind them, they found themselves face to face with a curious stone bridge, spanning the lake or moat which surrounded the city, and in which the lotus flower bloomed luxuriantly. When they had crossed the bridge, they stood in the precincts of the city itself. On either hand rose the ruins in all their solitary grandeur—palaces, temples, market-places, and houses in endless confusion; while, at the end of the bridge, and running to right and left as far as the eye could reach, was a high wall, constructed of large stones, each one of which would have required the efforts of at least four men to lift it. These, with a few exceptions, were in an excellent state of preservation. Passing through the massive gateway the travellers found themselves in an open square, out of which streets branched off the right and left, while the jungle thrust in its inquisitive nose on every possible occasion. The silence was so impressive that the men found themselves speaking in whispers. Not a sound was to be heard save the fluttering of birds' wings among the trees, and the obscene chattering of the monkeys among the leaves. From the first great square the street began gradually to ascend; then another moat was crossed, and the second portion of the city was reached. Here the buildings were larger, and the sculpture upon the walls more impressive even than before. The same intense silence, however, hung over everything. In the narrower streets creepers trailed from side to side, almost shutting out the light, and adding a twilight effect to the already sufficiently mysterious rooms and courtyards to be seen within.

"This is by no means the most cheerful sort of place," said Hayle to Kitwater, as they passed down a paved street side by side. "Where do you expect to find the great temple and the courtyard of the Three Elephants' Heads?"

"Straight on," said little Codd, who was behind, and had been comparing the route they were following with the plan he held in his hand.

As he spoke they entered another square, and saw before them a mighty flight of steps, worn into grooves in places by the thousands of feet that had ascended and descended them in days gone by. At the top was a sculptured gateway, finer

than anything either of them had ever seen, and this they presently entered. Above them, clear of the trees, and towering up into the blue, were the multitudinous domes and spires of the king's palace, to which the gateway above the steps was the principal entrance. Some of the spires were broken, some were covered with creepers, others were mutilated by time and by stress of weather, but the general effect was grand in the extreme. From courtyard to courtyard they wandered, but without finding the particular place of which they were in search. It was more difficult to discover than they had expected; indeed, they had walked many miles through deserted streets, and the afternoon was well advanced, before a hail from Codd, who had gone on ahead of them, informed them that at last some sort of success had crowned their efforts. When they came up with him they found themselves in a courtyard somewhat larger than those they had previously explored, the four corners of which were decorated with three united elephants' heads.

"By the great poker we've got it at last," cried Kitwater, in a voice that echoed and reechoed through the silent halls.

"And about time, too," cried Hayle, upon whom the place was exercising a most curious effect. "If you've found it, show us your precious treasure-chamber."

"All in good time, my friend, all in good time," said Kitwater. "Things have gone so smoothly with us hitherto, that we must look for a little set-back before we've done."

"We don't want any set-backs," said Hayle. "What we want are the rubies as big as pigeon's eggs, and sapphires, and gold, and then to get back to civilization as quick as may be. That's what's the matter with me."

As I have already observed, the courtyard in which they were standing was considerably larger than any they had yet entered. Like the others, however, it had fallen sadly to decay. The jungle had crept in at all points, and gorgeous creepers had wreathed themselves round the necks of the statues above the gateway.

"I don't see any sign of steps," said Hayle, when they had examined the place in silence for some minutes. "I thought you said a flight of stone steps led up to where the king's throne was placed?"

"Codd certainly read it so," Kitwater answered, looking about him as if he did

not quite realize the situation. "And how are we to know that there are not some steps here? They may be hidden. What do you think, little man?"

He turned to Codd, who was looking about him with eyes in which a curious light was shining.

"Steps must be somewhere," the latter replied. "We've got to find them—but not to-night. Sun going down. Too late."

This was undoubtedly true, and so, without more ado, but none the less reluctantly, the three travellers retraced their steps to their camp upon the hillside. Hayle was certainly not in a good temper. The monotony of the long journey from civilization had proved too much for him, and he was ready to take offence at anything. Fortunately, however, Kitwater was not of the same way of thinking, otherwise there would probably have been trouble between them.

Next morning they were up and had breakfasted before the sun was in the sky. Their meal at an end, they picked up their arms and tools, bade their servants have a care of the camp, and then set off on their quest once more. There was a perceptible change, however, in their demeanours. A nervous excitement had taken possession of them, and it affected each man in a different manner. Kitwater was suspicious, Hayle was morose, while little Codd repeatedly puckered up his mouth as if he were about to whistle, but no sound ever came from it. The sky overhead was emerald-blue, the air was full of the sweetest perfumes, while birds of the most gorgeous plumage flew continually across their path. They had no regard, however, for nature's beauties. The craving for wealth was in their hearts, rendering them blind to everything else. They crossed the stone bridge, passed through the outer portion of the city, proceeded over the second moat, and at last, with the familiarity of old friends, made their way up the steps towards the courtyard of the king's palace.

"Now, my friends, listen to me," said Kitwater, as he spoke throwing down the tools he had been carrying, "what we have to do is to thoroughly sound the whole of this courtyard, inch by inch and stone by stone. We can't be wrong, for that this is the courtyard of the Three Elephants' Heads, there can be no doubt. You take the right-hand side," he went on addressing Hayle; "you, Coddy, must take the left. I'll try the middle. If we don't hit it to-day we'll do so to-morrow, or the next day, or the day after that. This is the place we were told about, and if the treasure is to be found anywhere, it will be here. For that reason we've got to set about the search as soon as possible! Now to work!"

Using the iron bars they had brought with them for the purpose, they began their task, bumping the iron down upon each individual stone in the hope of eliciting the hollow sound that was to reveal the presence of the treasure-chamber. With the regularity of automatons they paraded up and down the walled enclosure without speaking, until they had thoroughly tested every single stone; no sort of success, however, rewarded their endeavours.

"I expected as much," said Hayle angrily, as he threw down the bar. "You've been humbugged, and our long journey is all undertaken for nothing. I was a fool ever to have listened to your nonsensical yarn. I might have known it would have come to nothing. It's not the first time I've been treasure-hunting, but I'll swear it shall be the last. I've had enough of these fooleries."

A dangerous light was gathering in Kitwater's eyes. He moreover threw down the iron bar as if in anticipation of trouble, and placed his fists defiantly on his hips.

"If you are going to talk like that, my boy," he began, with never a quaver in his voice, "it's best for us to understand each other straight off. Once and for all let me tell you that I'll have none of your bounce. Whether or not this business is destined to come to anything, you may rely upon one thing, and that is the fact that I did my best to do you a good turn by allowing you to come into it. There's another thing that calls for comment, and you can deny it if you will. It's a fact that you've been grumbling and growling ever since we left Rangoon, and have made difficulties innumerable where you needn't have done so, and now, because you think the affair is going to turn out badly, you round upon me as if it were all a put-up job on my part, to rook you of your money. It's not the thing, Hayle, and I don't mind saying that I resent it."

"You may resent it or not, as you darned well please," said Hayle doggedly, biting at the butt of his cigar as he spoke. "It don't matter a curse to me; you don't mean to tell me you think I'm fool enough to stand by and see myself----"

At that moment Codd, who had been away investigating on his own account, and had no idea of the others' quarrel, gave a shout of delight. He was at the further end of the courtyard, at a spot where a dense mass of creeper had fallen, and now lay trailing upon the stones. The effect upon his companions was instantaneous. They abandoned their quarrel without another word, and picking up their crowbars hastened towards the spot where he was waiting for them.

"What have you found, little man?" inquired Kitwater, as he approached.

Mr. Codd, however, said nothing in reply, but beat with his bar upon the stone beneath him. There could be little or no doubt about the hollow sound that rewarded his endeavours.

"We've got it," cried Kitwater. "Bring the pickaxe, Hayle, and we'll soon see what is underneath this precious stone. We may be at the heart of the mystery for all we know."

In less time than it takes to tell Hayle had complied with the other's request, and was hard at work picking out the earth which held the enormous flagstone in its place. A state of mad excitement had taken hold of the men, and the veins stood out like whipcord upon Hayle's forehead. It was difficult to say how many feet separated them from the treasure that was to make them lords of all the earth. At last the stone showed signs of moving, and it was possible for Kitwater to insert his bar beneath one corner. He did so, prized it up, and leant upon it with all his weight. It showed no sign of moving, however. The seal of Time was set upon it, and it was not to be lightly disturbed.

"Push your bar in here alongside of mine, Coddy," said Kitwater at last. "I fancy we shall get it then."

"A DARK, NARROW HOLE, THE BOTTOM OF WHICH IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE."

The little man did as he was directed, Kitwater and Hayle seconded his efforts on the other side, and then, under the strain of their united exertions, the stone began to move slowly from its place. Little by little they raised it, putting all the strength they possessed into the operation, until, at last, with one great effort they hurled it backwards, and it fell with a crash upon the pavement behind them, revealing a dark, narrow hole, the bottom of which it was impossible to see.

"Now then, Gideon, my worthy friend, what have you got to say about the business?" asked Kitwater, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow. "You pretended to doubt my story. Was there anything in the old Frenchman's yarn after all. Were we wasting our time upon a fool's errand when we set off to explore Sengkor-Wat?"

Hayle looked at him somewhat sheepishly.

"No? no," he said, "I am willing to admit that so far you have won the trick. Let me down easily if you can. I can neither pass nor follow suite. I am right out of my reckoning. Now what do you propose to do?"

"Get one of those torches we brought with us, and find out what there is in that hole," Kitwater answered.

They waited while the latter went back to the camp, and when he reappeared, and had lighted the torch, they prepared to follow him down the steps into the mysterious depths below. The former, they soon discovered, were as solidly built as the rest of the palace, and were about thirty in number. They were, moreover, wet and slimy, and so narrow that it was only possible for one man to descend them at once. When they reached the bottom they found themselves standing in a narrow passage, the walls of which were composed of solid stone, in many places finely carved. The air was close, and from the fact that now and again

bats dashed past them into the deeper darkness, they argued that there must be some way of communicating with the open air at the further end.

"This is just what the Frenchman told me," said Kitwater, and his voice echoed away along the passage like distant thunder. "He said we should find a narrow corridor at the foot of the steps, and then the Treasure Chamber at the further end. So far it looks all right. Let us move on, my friends."

There was no need for him to issue such an invitation. They were more than eager to follow him.

Leaving the first room, or ante-chamber, as it might more properly be called, they continued their way along the narrow passage which led from it. The air was growing perceptibly closer every moment, while the light of the torch reflected the walls on either side. Hayle wondered for a moment as he followed his leader, what would happen to them if the Chinese, of whom the old Frenchman had spoken to Kitwater, should discover their presence in the ruins, and should replace the stone upon the hole. In that case the treasure would prove of small value to them, for they would be buried alive. He did not allow his mind, however, to dwell very long upon this subject, for Kitwater, who was pushing on ahead with the torch, had left the passage, and was standing in a large and apparently well vaulted chamber. Handsomely carved pillars supported the roof, the floor was well paved, while on either side there were receptacles, not unlike the niches in the Roman catacombs, though for what purpose they were intended was not at first glance so easy to determine. With hearts that beat tumultuously in their breasts, they hastened to one of them to see what it contained. The niche in question was filled with strange-looking vessels, some like bowls, and others not unlike crucibles. The men almost clambered over each other in their excitement to see what they contained. It was as if their whole existence depended upon it; they could scarcely breathe for excitement. Every moment's delay was unspeakable agony. At last, however, the coverings were withdrawn and the contents of the receptacles stood revealed. Two were filled with uncut gems, rubies and sapphires, others contained bar gold, and yet more contained gems, to which it was scarcely possible in such a light to assign a name. One thing at least was certain. So vast was the treasure that the three men stood tongue-tied with amazement at their good fortune. In their wildest dreams they had never imagined such luck, and now that this vast treasure lay at their finger-ends, to be handled, to be made sure of, they were unable to realize the extent of their future happiness. Hayle dived his hands into a bowl of uncut rubies, and having collected as many as he could hold in each fist, turned to his

companions.

" 'LOOK HERE,' HE CRIED, 'IT'S THE BANK OF ENGLAND IN EACH HAND.' "

"Look here," he cried, "it's the Bank of England in each hand."

His voice ended in a choke. Then Kitwater took up the tale.

"I must get out of this or I shall go mad," he muttered hoarsely. "Come let us get back to the light. If I don't I shall die."

Without more ado, like men who were drunk with the finest wines, they followed him along the passage and up the steps into the open air. They were just in time to see the sun setting blood-red behind the jungle. His beauty, however, had no effect upon them, in all probability they were regardless of him altogether, for with almost simultaneous sighs of relief they threw themselves down upon the flagstones of the courtyard, and set to work, with feverish earnestness, to overhaul the booty they had procured. All three were good judges of stones, and a very brief examination was sufficient, even in the feeble evening light, to enable them to see that they were not only gems of the first water, but also stones of such a size as is seldom seen in these unregenerate days.

"It's the biggest scoop on earth," said Hayle, unconsciously echoing the expression Kitwater had used to him in Singapore. "What's better, there are hundreds more like them down below. I'll tell you what it is, my friends, we're just the richest men on this earth at the present moment, and don't you forget it!"

In his excitement he shook hands wildly with his companions. His ill-humour had vanished like breath off a razor, and now he was on the best of terms not only with himself, but also with the world in general.

"If I know anything about stones there are at least one hundred thousand pounds worth in this little parcel," he said enthusiastically, "and what is more, there is a million or perhaps two millions to be had for the trouble of looking for them. What do you say if we go below again?"

"No! no!" said Kitwater, "it's too late. We'd better be getting back to the camp as soon as may be."

"Very well," Hayle replied reluctantly.

They accordingly picked up their iron bars and replaced the stone that covered the entrance to the subterranean passage.

"I don't like leaving it," said Hayle, "it don't seem to me to be safe, somehow. Think what there is down there. Doesn't it strike you that it would be better to fill our pockets while we've the chance? Who knows what might happen before we can come again?"

"Nonsense," said Kitwater. "Who do you think is going to rob us of it? What's the use of worrying about it? In the morning we'll come back and fill up our bags, and then clear out of the place and trek for civilization as if the devil and all were after us. Just think, my lads, what there will be to divide."

"A million apiece, at least," said Hayle rapturously, and then in an awed voice he added, as if he were discomfited by his own significance, "I never thought to be worth a quarter of that. Somehow it doesn't seem as if it can be real."

"It's quite real," said Mr. Codd, as he sprinkled some dry dust round the crack of the stone to give it an appearance of not having been disturbed. "There's no doubt of it."

When he had finished they picked up their tools and set off on their return journey to the camp. The sun had disappeared behind the jungle when they left the courtyard of the Three Elephants' Heads and ascended the stone steps towards the inner moat. They crossed the bridge, and entered the outer city in silence. The place was very dreary at that hour of the day, and to Codd, who was of an imaginative turn of mind, it seemed as if faces out of the long deserted past were watching him from every house. His companions, however, were scarcely so impressionable. They were gloating over the treasure they had won for themselves, and one, at least, was speculating as to how he should spend his share. Suddenly Hayle, who was looking down a side street, uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Did you see that?" he inquired of Kitwater. Then, without waiting for a reply, he dived into the nearest ruin and disappeared from view.

"What on earth is the matter with him?" inquired Kitwater of Codd. "Has he

gone mad?"

Codd only shook his head. Hayle's doings were more often than not an enigma to him. Presently, however, the runaway made his appearance before them. His face was flushed and he breathed heavily. Apparently he had been running, and for some distance.

"Didn't you see him?" he inquired of his companions in some surprise.

"See who?" asked Kitwater, with elevated eyebrows. "Who do you think you saw?"

"A man," Hayle replied. "I am ready to take my oath I saw him cross that narrow street back yonder."

"Was it one of our own men do you think?" said Codd, referring to the two Burmen they had brought with them.

"Not a bit of it," Hayle replied. "I tell you, Kitwater, I am as sure as I am of anything that the man I saw was a Chinaman."

"Gammon," said Kitwater. "There isn't a Chinaman within fifty miles of the ruins. You are unduly excited. You'll be seeing a regiment of Scots Guards presently if you are not careful."

"I don't care what you say, it was a man I saw," the other answered. "Good Heavens! won't you believe me, when I say that I saw his pigtail?"

"Believe you, of course I will," replied Kitwater good-humouredly. "It's a pity you didn't catch hold of him by it, however. No, no, Gid, you take my word for it, there are no Chinamen about here. What do you think, Codd?"

Mr. Codd appeared to have no opinion, for he did not reply.

By this time they had crossed the last bridge and had left the city behind them. The jungle was lulling itself to sleep, and drowsy croonings sounded on every hand. So certain was Hayle that he had not been mistaken about the man he declared he had seen, that he kept his eyes well open to guard against a surprise. He did not know what clump of bamboo might contain an enemy, and, in consequence, his right hand was kept continually in his pocket in order not to lose the grip of the revolver therein contained. At last they reached the top of the hill and approached the open spot where their camp was situated.

"What did I tell you?" said Kitwater, as he looked about the camp and could discover no traces of their two native servants. "It was one of our prowling rascals you saw, and when he comes back I'll teach him to come spying on us. If I know anything of the rattan, he won't do it again."

Hayle shrugged his shoulders. While the fact that their servants were not at the camp to anticipate their return was certainly suspicious, he was still as convinced as ever that the man he had seen slipping through the ruins was no Burman, but a true son of the Celestial Empire.

Worn out by the excitement of the day, Kitwater anathematized the servants for not having been there to prepare the evening meal, but while he and Hayle wrangled, Mr. Codd had as usual taken the matter into his own hands, and, picking up a cooking-pot, had set off in the direction of the stream, whence they drew their supply of water. He had not proceeded very far, however, before he uttered a cry and came running back to the camp. There was a scared expression upon his face as he rejoined his companions.

"They've not run away," he cried, pointing in the direction whence he had come. "They're dead!"

"Dead?" cried Kitwater and Hayle together. Then the latter added, "What do you mean by that?"

"What I say," Codd replied. "They're both lying in the jungle back there with their throats cut."

"Then I was right after all," Hayle found time to put in. "Come, Kit, let us go and see. There's more than we bargained for at the back of all this."

They hurried with Codd to the spot where he had discovered the bodies, to find that his tale was too true. Their two unfortunate servants were to be seen lying one on either side of the track, both dead and shockingly mutilated. Kitwater knelt beside them and examined them more closely.

"Chinese," he said laconically. Then after a pause he continued, "It's a good thing for us we had the foresight to take our rifles with us to-day, otherwise we should have lost them for a certainty. Now we shall have to keep our eyes open for trouble. It won't be long in coming, mark my words."

"You don't think they watched us at work in that courtyard, do you?" asked Hayle anxiously, as they returned to the camp. "If that's so, they'll have every

atom of the remaining treasure, and we shall be done for."

He spoke as if until that moment they had received nothing.

"It's just possible they may have done so, of course," said Kitwater, "but how are we to know? We couldn't prevent them, for we don't know how many of them there may be. That fellow you saw this evening may only have been placed there to spy upon our movements. Confound it all, I wish we were a bigger party."

"It's no use wishing that," Hayle returned, and then after a pause he added —"Fortunately we hold a good many lives in our hands, and what's more, we know the value of our own. The only thing we can do is to watch, watch, and watch, and, if we are taken by surprise, we shall have nobody to thank for it but ourselves. Now if you'll stand sentry, Coddy and I will get tea."

They set to work, and the meal was in due course served and eaten. Afterwards Codd went on guard, being relieved by Hayle at midnight. Ever since they had made the ghastly discovery in the jungle, the latter had been more silent even than the gravity of the situation demanded. Now he sat, nursing his rifle, listening to the mysterious voices of the jungle, and thinking as if for dear life. Meanwhile his companions slept soundly on, secure in the fact that he was watching over them.

At last Hayle rose to his feet.

"It's my only chance," he said to himself, as he went softly across to where Kitwater was lying. "It must be now or never!"

Kneeling beside the sleeping man, he felt for the packet of precious stones they had that day obtained. Having found it he transferred it to his own pocket, and then returned to his former position as quietly as he had come. Then, having secured as much of their store of ammunition as he could conveniently carry, together with a supply of food sufficient to last him for several days, he deserted his post, abandoned his friends, and disappeared into the jungle!

PART III

The sun was slowly sinking behind the dense wall of jungle which hems in, on the southern side, the frontier station of Nampoung. In the river below there is a Ford, which has a distinguished claim on fame, inasmuch as it is one of the gateways from Burmah into Western China. This Ford is guarded continually by a company of Sikhs, under the command of an English officer. To be candid, it is not a post that is much sought after. Its dullness is extraordinary. True, one can fish there from morning until night, if one is so disposed; and if one has the good fortune to be a botanist, there is an inexhaustible field open for study. It is also true that Nampoung is only thirty miles or so, as the crow flies, from Bhamo, and when one has been in the wilds, and out of touch of civilization for months at a time, Bhamo is by no means a place to be despised. So thought Gregory, of the 123rd Burmah Regiment, as he threw his line into the pool below him.

"It's worse than a dog's life," he said to himself, as he looked at the Ford a hundred yards or so to his right, where, at the moment, his subaltern was engaged levying toll upon some Yunnan merchants who were carrying cotton on pack-mules into China. After that he glanced behind him at the little cluster of buildings on the hill, and groaned once more. "I wonder what they are doing in England," he continued. "Trout-fishing has just begun, and I can imagine the dear old Governor at the Long Pool, rod in hand. The girls will stroll down in the afternoon to find out what sport he has had, and they'll walk home across the Park with him, while the Mater will probably meet them half way. And here am I in this God-forsaken hole with nothing to do but to keep an eye on that Ford there. Bhamo is better than this; Mandalay is better than Bhamo, and Rangoon is better than either. Chivvying *dakus* is paradise compared with this sort of thing. Anyhow, I'm tired of fishing."

He began to take his rod to pieces preparatory to returning to his quarters on the hill. He had just unshipped the last joint, when he became aware that one of his men was approaching him. He inquired his business, and was informed in return that Dempsey, his sub, would be glad to see him at the Ford. Handing his rod to the man he set off in the direction of the crossing in question, to become

aware, as he approached it, of a disreputable figure propped up against a tree on the nearer bank.

"What's the matter, Dempsey?" he inquired. "What on earth have you got there, man?"

"Well, that's more than I can say," the other replied. "He's evidently a white man, and I fancy an Englishman. At home we should call him a scarecrow. He turned up from across the Ford just now, and tumbled down in the middle of the stream like a shot rabbit. Never saw such a thing before. He's not a pretty sight, is he?"

" 'POOR DEVIL,' SAID GREGORY. 'HE SEEMS TO BE ON HIS LAST LEGS.' "

"Poor devil," said Gregory. "He seems to be on his last legs. I wonder who the deuce he is, and what brought him into this condition."

"I've searched, and there's nothing about to tell us," said Dempsey. "What do you think we had better do with him?"

"Get him up the hill," said his superior, without hesitation. "When he's a bit stronger we'll have his story out of him. I'll bet a few years' pay it will be interesting."

A file of men were called, and the mysterious stranger was carried up to the residence of the English officers. It was plain to the least observant that he was in a very serious condition. Such clothes as he possessed were in rags; his face was pinched with starvation, and moreover he was quite unconscious. When his bearers, accompanied by the two Englishmen, reached the cluster of huts, he was carried to a small room at the end of the officers' bungalow and placed upon the bed. After a little brandy had been administered, he recovered consciousness and looked about him. Heaving a sigh of relief, he inquired where he might be.

"You are at Nampoung," said Gregory, "and you ought to thank your stars that you are not in Kingdom Come. If ever a man was near it, you have been. We

won't ask you for your story now; however, later on, you shall *bukh* to your heart's content. Now I am going to give you something to eat. You look as if you want it badly enough."

Gregory looked at Dempsey and made a sign, whereupon the other withdrew, to presently return carrying a bowl of soup. The stranger drank it ravenously, and then lay back and closed his eyes once more. He would have been a clever man who could have recognized in the emaciated being upon the bed, the spruce, well-cared-for individual who was known to the Hotel of the Three Desires in Singapore as Gideon Hayle.

"You'd better rest a while now," said Gregory, "and then perhaps you'll feel equal to joining us at mess, or whatever you like to call it."

"Thanks very much," the man replied, with the conventional utterance of an English gentleman, which was not lost upon his audience. "I hope I shall feel up to it."

"Whoever the fellow is," said Gregory, as they passed along the verandah a few minutes later, "he has evidently seen better days. Poor beggar, I wonder where he's been, and what he has been up to?"

"We shall soon find out," Dempsey answered. "All he said when we fished him out of the water was '*at last*,' and then he fainted clean away. I am not more curious than my neighbours, but I don't mind admitting that I am anxious to hear what he has to say for himself. Talk about Rip Van Winkle, why, he is not in it with this fellow. He could give him points and beat him hollow."

An hour later the stranger was so far recovered as to be able to join his hosts at their evening meal. Between them they had managed to fit him out with a somewhat composite set of garments. He had shaved off his beard, had reduced his hair to something like order, and in consequence had now the outward resemblance at least of a gentleman.

"Come, that's better," said Gregory as he welcomed him. "I don't know what your usual self may be like, but you certainly have more the appearance of a man, and less that of a skeleton than when we first brought you in. You must have been pretty hard put to it out yonder."

The recollection of all he had been through was so vivid, that the man shuddered at the mere thought of it.

"I wouldn't go through it again for worlds," he said. "You don't know what I've endured."

"Trading over the border alone?" Gregory inquired.

The man shook his head.

"Tried to walk across from Pekin," he said, "*viâ* Szechuen and Yunnan. Nearly died of dysentery in Yunnan city. While I was there my servants deserted me, taking with them every halfpenny I possessed. Being suspected by the Mandarins, I was thrown into prison, managed eventually to escape, and so made my way on here. I thought to-day was going to prove my last."

"You have had a hard time of it, by Jove," said Dempsey; "but you've managed to come out of it alive. And now where are you going?"

"I want, if possible, to get to Rangoon," the other replied. "Then I shall ship for England as best as I can. I've had enough of China to last me a lifetime."

From that moment the stranger did not refer again to his journey. He was singularly reticent upon this point, and feeling that perhaps the recollection of all he had suffered might be painful to him, the two men did not press him to unburden himself.

"He's a strange sort of fellow," said Gregory to Dempsey, later in the evening, when the other had retired to rest. "If he has walked from Pekin here, as he says, he's more than a little modest about it. I'll be bound his is a funny story if only he would condescend to tell it."

They would have been more certain than ever of this fact had they been able to see their guest at that particular moment. In the solitude of his own room he had removed a broad leather belt from round his waist. From the pocket of this belt he shook out upwards of a hundred rubies and sapphires of extraordinary size. He counted them carefully, replaced them in the belt, and then once more secured the latter about his waist.

"At last I am safe," he muttered to himself, "but it was a close shave—a very close shave. I wouldn't do that journey again for all the money the stones are worth. No! not for twice the amount."

Once more the recollection of his sufferings rose so vividly before him that he could not suppress a shudder. Then he arranged the mosquito-curtains of his bed,

and laid himself down upon it. It was not long before he was fast asleep.

Before he went to his own quarters, Gregory looked in upon the stranger to find him sleeping heavily, one arm thrown above his head.

"Poor beggar!" said the kind-hearted Englishman, as he looked down at him. "One meets some extraordinary characters out here. But I think he's the strangest that has come into my experience."

The words had scarcely left his lips before the stranger was sitting up in bed with a look of abject terror in his eyes. The sweat of a living fear was streaming down his face. Gregory ran to him and placed his arm about him.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Pull yourself together, man, there's nothing for you to fear here. You're quite safe."

The other looked at him for a moment as if he did not recognize him. Then, taking in the situation, he gave an uneasy laugh.

"I have had such an awful nightmare," he said. "I thought the Chinese were after me again. Lord! how thankful I am it's not true."

Next morning George Bertram, as he called himself, left Nampoung for Bhamo, with Gregory's cheque for five hundred rupees in his pocket.

"You must take it," said that individual in reply to the other's half-hearted refusal of the assistance. "Treat it as a loan if you like. You can return it to me when you are in better circumstances. I assure you I don't want it. We can't spend money out here."

Little did he imagine when he made that offer, the immense wealth which the other carried in the belt that encircled his waist. Needless to say Hayle said nothing to him upon the subject. He merely pocketed the cheque with an expression of his gratitude, promising to repay it as soon as he reached London. As a matter of fact he did so, and to this day, I have no doubt, Gregory regards him as a man of the most scrupulous and unusual integrity.

Two days later the wanderer reached Bhamo, that important military post on the sluggish Irrawaddy. His appearance, thanks to Gregory and Dempsey's kind offices, was now sufficiently conventional to attract little or no attention, so he negotiated the Captain's cheque, fitted himself out with a few other things that he required, and then set off for Mandalay. From Mandalay he proceeded as fast as

steam could take him to Rangoon, where, after the exercise of some diplomacy, he secured a passage aboard a tramp steamer bound for England.

When the Shweydagon was lost in the evening mist, and the steamer had made her way slowly down the sluggish stream with the rice-fields on either side, Hayle went aft and took his last look at the land to which he was saying good-bye.

"A quarter of a million if a halfpenny," he said, "and as soon as they are sold and the money is in my hands, the leaf shall be turned, and my life for the future shall be all respectability."

PART IV

Two months had elapsed since the mysterious traveller from China had left the lonely frontier station at Nampoung. In outward appearance it was very much the same as it had been then. The only difference consisted in the fact that Captain Gregory and his subaltern Dempsey, having finished their period of enforced exile, had returned to Bhamo to join the main body of their regiment. A Captain Handiman and a subaltern named Grantham had taken their places, and were imitating them inasmuch as they spent the greater portion of their time fishing and complaining of the hardness of their lot. It was the more unfortunate in their case that they did not get on very well together. The fact of the matter was Handiman was built on very different lines to Gregory, his predecessor; he gave himself airs, and was fond of asserting his authority. In consequence the solitary life at the Ford sat heavily upon both men.

One hot afternoon, Grantham, who was a keen sportsman, took his gun, and, accompanied by a wiry little Shan servant, departed into the jungle on *shikar* thoughts intent. He was less successful than usual; indeed, he had proceeded fully three miles before he saw anything worth emptying his gun at. In the jungle the air was as close as a hothouse, and the perspiration ran down his face in streams.

"What an ass I was to come out!" he said angrily to himself. "This heat is unbearable."

At that moment a crashing noise reached him from behind. Turning to discover what occasioned it, he was just in time to see a large boar cross the clearing and disappear into the bamboos on the further side. Taking his rifle from the little Shan he set off in pursuit. It was no easy task, for the jungle in that neighbourhood was so dense that it was well nigh impossible to make one's way through it. At last, however, they hit upon a dried up *nullah*, and followed it along, listening as they went to the progress the boar was making among the bamboos on their right. Presently they sighted him, crossing an open space a couple of hundred yards or so ahead of them. On the further side he stopped and

began to feed. This was Grantham's opportunity, and, sighting his rifle, he fired. The beast dropped like a stone, well hit, just behind the shoulder. The report, however, had scarcely died away before the little Shan held up his hand to attract Grantham's attention.

"What is it?" the other inquired.

Before the man had time to reply his quick ear caught the sound of a faint call from the jungle on the other side of the *nullah*. Without doubt it was the English word *help*, and, whoever the man might be who called, it was plain that he was in sore straits.

"What the deuce does it mean?" said Grantham, half to himself and half to the man beside him. "Some poor devil got lost in the jungle, I suppose? I'll go and have a look."

Having climbed the bank of the *nullah*, he was about to proceed in the direction whence the cry had come, when he became aware of the most extraordinary figure he had ever seen in his life approaching him. The appearance Hayle had presented when he had turned up at the Ford two months before was nothing compared with that of this individual. He was a small man, not more than five feet in height. His clothes were in rags, a grizzly beard grew in patches upon his cheeks and chin, while his hair reached nearly to his shoulders. His face was pinched until it looked more like that of a skeleton than a man. Grantham stood and stared at him, scarcely able to believe his eyes.

"Good Heavens," he said to himself, "what a figure! I wonder where the beggar hails from?" Then addressing the man, he continued, "Are you an Englishman, or what are you?"

The man before him, however, did not reply. He placed his finger on his lips, and turning, pointed in the direction he had come.

"Either he doesn't understand, or he's dumb," said Grantham. "But it's quite certain that he wants me to follow him somewhere."

Turning to the man again, he signed to him to proceed, whereupon the little fellow hobbled painfully away from the *nullah* in the direction whence he had appeared. On and on he went until he at length came to a standstill at the foot of a hill, where a little stream came splashing down in a miniature cascade from the rocks above. Then Grantham realized the meaning of the little man's action.

Stretched out beside a rock was the tall figure of a man. Like his companion, he presented a miserable appearance. His clothes, if clothes they could be called, were in rags, his hair was long and snowy white, matching his beard, which descended to within a few inches of his waist. His eyes were closed, and for a moment Grantham thought he was dead. This was not the case, however, for upon his companion approaching him he held out his hand and inquired whether he had discovered the man who had fired the shot?

To Grantham's surprise the other made no reply in words, but, taking his friend's hand he made some mysterious movements upon it with his fingers, whereupon the latter raised himself to a sitting position.

"My friend tells me that you are an Englishman," he said in a voice that shook with emotion. "I'm glad we have found you. I heard your rifle shot and hailed you. We are in sore distress, and have been through such adventures and such misery as no man would believe. I have poisoned my foot, and am unable to walk any further. As you can see for yourself I am blind, while my companion is dumb."

This statement accounted for the smaller man's curious behaviour and the other's closed eyes.

"You have suffered indeed," said Grantham pityingly. "But how did it all come about?"

"We were traders, and we fell into the hands of the Chinese," the taller man answered. "With their usual amiability they set to work to torture us. My companion's tongue they cut out at the roots, while, as I have said, they deprived me of my sight. After that they turned us loose to go where we would. We have wandered here, there, and everywhere, living on what we could pick up, and dying a thousand deaths every day. It would have been better if we had died outright—but somehow we've come through. Can you take us to a place where we can procure food? We've been living on jungle fruit for an eternity. My foot wants looking to pretty badly, too."

"We'll do all we can for you," said Grantham. "That's if we can get you down to the Ford, which is about five miles away."

"You'll have to carry me then, for I'm too far gone to walk."

"I think it can be managed," said Grantham. "At any rate we'll try."

Turning to the little Shan he despatched him with a message to Handiman, and when the other had disappeared, knelt down beside the tall man and set to work to examine his injured foot. There could be no doubt that it was in a very serious condition. Tramping through the jungle he had managed to poison it, and had been unable to apply the necessary remedies. Obtaining some water from the stream Grantham bathed it tenderly, and then bound it up as well as he could with his handkerchief.

"That's the best I can do for you for the present," he said. "We must leave it as it is, and, when we get you to the station, we will see what else can be managed."

He looked up and saw the little man's eyes watched him intently. There was a look of almost dog-like affection in them for his companion, that went to the young soldier's heart.

"By Jove," he said, "I'm sorry for you fellows. You must have suffered agonies. The Chinese are devils. But yours is not the first case we have heard of. We only come up here for a month at a time, but the man we relieved told us a strange tale about another poor beggar who came into the station some two months ago. He had been wandering in the jungle, and was nearly at death's-door."

The blind man gave a start, while the little man seized his hand and made a number of rapid movements upon it with his fingers.

"My friend wants to know if you are aware of that man's name?" he said. "We lost a companion, and he thinks that he may be the man. For Heaven's sake tell us what you know. You have no idea what it means to us."

"Since you are so interested in him I am sorry to have to say that I do not know very much. You see he had very little to do with us. As I have said, he turned up while our predecessors were here. From what I heard about him from Gregory, he gathered that he was a tall, thin man, who had come through from Pekin by way of Yunnan."

"Are you sure it was from Yunnan?"

"That's what they told me," said Grantham. "Since then I have heard that he was on his way from Pekin to Burmah, and that his coolies had robbed him of all he possessed."

"You don't happen to remember his name, I suppose!"

The blind man tried to ask the question calmly, but his voice failed him.

"As far as I remember his name was George Bertram," Grantham answered.

There was a pause for a few seconds, after which the blind man began again—

"He didn't tell you, I suppose, whether he had any money about him?"

"He hadn't a red cent," said Grantham. "The Chinese cleared him out. They lent him the money to get to Rangoon. I happen to know that because he cashed my friend's cheque in Bhamo."

There was another and somewhat longer pause.

"You did not hear whether he had any precious stones in his possession?"

"Good gracious, no! From what they told me I gathered that the man hadn't a halfpenny in the world. Why should he have been likely to have had jewels? In point of fact I'm sure he hadn't, for I was given to understand he was about as woe-begone a customer as could be found anywhere."

The blind man uttered a heavy sigh, and sank back to his former position upon the ground.

An hour and a half later, just as the shadows of evening were drawing in, a party of Sikhs put in an appearance, bringing with them a dhooly, in which they placed the injured man. It was almost dark when they reached the station, where Grantham's superior officer was awaiting their coming.

"What on earth's the meaning of this?" he asked, as the *cortège* drew up before the bungalow. "Who are these men? And where did you find them?"

Grantham made his report, and then the wounded man was lifted out and carried to a hut at the rear of the main block of buildings. The little man watched everything with an eagle eye, as if he were afraid some evil might be practised upon his companion. When the blind man had been placed on a bed, and his foot attended to as well as the rough surgery of the place would admit, Grantham did something he had not already done, and that was to ask them their names.

"My name is Kitwater," said the blind man, "and the name of my friend here is Codd—Septimus Codd. He's one of the best and staunchest little fellows in the world. I don't know whether our names will convey much to you, but such as they are you are welcome to them. As a matter of fact, they are all we have with

which to requite your hospitality."

Why it should have been so I cannot say, but it was evident from the first that Captain Handiman did not believe the account the refugees gave of themselves. He was one of that peculiar description of persons who have an idea that it adds to their dignity not to believe anything that is told them, and he certainly acted up to it on every possible occasion.

"There's more in the case than meets the eye," he said suspiciously, "and I fancy, if only we could see the bottom of it, we should discover that your two *protégés* are as fine a pair of rascals as could be found on the Continent of Asia."

"I don't know anything about that," Grantham replied. "I only know that they were a miserable couple, and that I did the best I could for them. You wouldn't have had me leave them in the jungle, surely?"

"I am not aware I have said so," the other answered stiffly. "The only thing I object to is your treating them as if they were martyrs, when in all probability they deserve all the punishment they have received."

Grantham was too wise to carry the argument any further. He knew that when Handiman was in his present humour the best thing to do was to leave him alone in it. He accordingly returned to the hut where the two men were domiciled, and attended to their comfort as far as lay in his power. His heart had been touched by their misery. He did not give as a reason for the trouble he took, the fact that the face of the elder man reminded him of his own venerable father, the worthy old Somersetshire vicar; it was a fact, nevertheless. For a week the unfortunate couple were domiciled at the Ford, and during that time Grantham attended to their wants with the assiduity of a blood relation. Meanwhile Handiman scoffed and bade him take heed for his valuables, lest his new-found friends should appropriate them. He did not believe in honest gratitude, he declared, particularly where homeless wanderers in the Burmese jungle were concerned. At last, however, they were so far recovered as to be able to proceed on their way once more.

"We have to thank you for your lives, sir," said Kitwater to Grantham when the time came for them to say good-bye to the Ford. "Had it not been for you we would probably be dead men now. I don't know whether we shall ever be able to repay your kindness, that is with Allah, but if the opportunity should ever arise you may be sure we will not neglect it. Whatever we may be now, you may take it that we were gentlemen once. There's just one favour I should like to ask of

you, sir, before we part!"

"What is it?" Grantham inquired.

"I want you, sir, to give me a letter of introduction to the gentleman in your regiment, who looked after the stranger you told me of, when he came here from out of China. I've got a sort of notion in my head that even if he is not our friend, that is to say the man we are searching for, he may happen to know something of him."

"I will give you the letter with pleasure," Grantham replied. "I am sure Gregory will be only too pleased to help you as far as lies in his power."

The letter was accordingly written and handed to Kitwater, who stowed it away in his pocket as if it were a priceless possession. Then, when they had bade their protector farewell, they in their turn set off along the track that Hayle had followed two months before, and in due course arrived at Bhamo. Here they presented the letter they had obtained to Captain Charles Pauncefort Gregory, who, as may be supposed, received it with manifest astonishment.

"Well," said he, "of all the stories I have heard since I have been in the East, this is the most extraordinary. I thought that other chap was about as unfortunate a beggar as could well be, but you beat him hollow at every turn. Now, look here, before I go any further, I must have my friend with me. He is the man who discovered the other chap, and I'm sure he would like to hear your story."

Dempsey was accordingly summoned, and his wonderment was as great as his friend's had been.

"Now," said Gregory, when Dempsey had been made familiar with the other's story, "what is it you want to know about the man we picked up? Ask your questions, and we'll do the best we can to answer them."

In reply to Kitwater's questions, Gregory and Dempsey described, as far as they were able, the appearance of the man whom they had helped. The schedule was in a great measure satisfactory, but not altogether. There were so many English in Burmah who were tall, and who had dark eyes and broad shoulders. Little Codd leant towards his companion and taking his hand made some signs upon it.

"That's so, my little man," said Kitwater, nodding his head approvingly. "You've hit the nail on the head." Then turning to Gregory, he continued,

"Perhaps, sir, you don't happen to remember whether he had any particular mark upon either of his wrists?"

Gregory replied that he had not noticed anything extraordinary, but Dempsey was by no means so forgetful?

"Of course he had," he answered. "I remember noticing it for the first time when I pulled him out of the Ford, and afterwards when he was in bed. An inch or so above his left wrist he had a tattooed snake swallowing his own tail. It was done in blue and red ink, and was as nice a piece of work as ever I have seen."

"I thank you, sir," Kitwater replied, "you've hit it exactly. By the living thunder he's our man after all. Heaven bless you for the news you have given us. It puts new life into me. We'll find him yet, Coddy, my boy. I thank you, sir, again and again."

He held out his hand, which Dempsey felt constrained to shake. The man was trembling with excitement.

"I tell you, sir," he continued, "that you don't know how we loved that man. If it takes the whole of our lives, and if we have to tramp the whole world over to do it, we'll find him yet!"

"And if I'm not mistaken it will be a bad day for him when you do find him," put in Gregory, who had been an observant spectator of the scene. "Why should you hate him so?"

"How do you know that we *do* hate him?" Kitwater asked, turning his sightless face in the direction whence the other's voice proceeded. "Hate him, why should we hate him? We have no grudge against him, Coddy, my boy, have we?"

Mr. Codd shook his head gravely. No! they certainly had no grudge. Nothing more was to be gleaned from them. Whatever their connection with George Bertram or Gideon Hayle may have been, they were not going to commit themselves. When they had inquired as to his movements after leaving Bhamo, they dropped the subject altogether, and thanking the officers for the courtesy shown them, withdrew.

Their manifest destitution, and the misery they had suffered, had touched the kindly white residents of that far off place, and a subscription was raised for them, resulting in the collection of an amount sufficient to enable them to reach

Rangoon in comparative comfort. When they arrived at that well-known seaport, they visited the residence of a person with whom it was plain they were well acquainted. The interview was presumably satisfactory on both sides, for when they left the house Kitwater squeezed Codd's hand, saying as he did so—

"We'll have him yet, Coddy, my boy, mark my words, we'll have him yet. He left in the *Jemadar*, and he thinks we are lying dead in the jungle at this moment. It's scarcely his fault that we are not, is it? But when we get hold of him, we'll—well, we'll let him see what we can do, won't we, old boy? He stole the treasure and sneaked away, abandoning us to our fate. In consequence I shall never see the light again; and you'll never speak to mortal man. We've Mr. Gideon Hayle to thank for that, and if we have to tramp round the world to do it, if we have to hunt for him in every country on the face of the earth, we'll repay the debt we owe him."

Mr. Codd's bright little eyes twinkled in reply. Then they shook hands solemnly together. It would certainly prove a bad day for Gideon Hayle should he ever have the ill luck to fall into their hands.

Two days later they shipped aboard the mail-boat as steerage passengers for England. They had been missionaries in China, so it was rumoured on board, and their zeal had been repaid by the cruellest torture. On a Sunday in the Indian Ocean, Kitwater held a service on deck, which was attended by every class. He preached an eloquent sermon on the labours of the missionaries in the Far East, and from that moment became so popular on board that, when the steamer reached English waters, a subscription was taken up on behalf of the sufferers, which resulted in the collection of an amount sufficient to help them well on their way to London as soon as they reached Liverpool.

"Now," said Kitwater, as they stood together at the wharf with the pitiless English rain pouring down upon them, wetting them to the skin, "what we have to do is to find Gideon Hayle as soon as possible."

CHAPTER I

It has often struck me as being a remarkable circumstance that, in nine cases out of ten, a man's success in life is not found in the career he originally chose for himself, but in another and totally different one. That mysterious power, "force of circumstances," is doubtless responsible for this, and no better illustration for my argument could be found than my own case. I believe my father intended that I should follow the medical profession, while my mother hoped I would enter the Church. My worthy uncle, Clutterfield, the eminent solicitor of Lincoln's Inn Fields, offered me my Articles, and would possibly have eventually taken me into partnership. But I would have none of these things. My one craving was for the sea. If I could not spend my life upon salt water, existence would have no pleasure for me. My father threatened, my mother wept, Uncle Clutterfield prophesied all sorts of disasters, but I remained firm.

"Very well," said my father, when he realized that further argument was hopeless, "since you must go to sea, go to sea you certainly shall. But you mustn't blame me if you find that the life is not exactly what you anticipate, and that you would prefer to find yourself on dry land once more."

I willingly gave this promise, and a month later left Liverpool as an apprentice on the clipper ship *Maid of Normandy*. Appropriately enough the captain's name was Fairweather, and he certainly was a character in his way. In fact the whole ship's company were originals. Had my father searched all England through he could not have discovered a set of men, from the captain to the cook's mate, who would have been better calculated to instil in a young man's heart a distaste for Father Neptune and his oceans. In the number of the various books of the sea I have encountered, was one entitled, *A Floating Hell*. When reading it I had not expected to have the misfortune to be bound aboard a vessel of this type. It was my lot, however, to undergo the experience. We carried three apprentices, including myself, each of whom had paid a large sum for the privilege. I was the youngest. The eldest was the son of a country parson, a mild, decent lad, who eventually deserted and became a house-painter in the South Island of New Zealand. The next was washed overboard when we were rounding the Horn on our homeward voyage. Poor lad, when all was said and done he could not have

been much worse off, for his life on board was a disgrace to what is sometimes erroneously called, "Human Nature." In due course, as we cleared for San Francisco, and long before we crossed the Line, I was heartily tired of the sea. In those days, few years ago as it is, sailors were not so well protected even as they are now, and on a long voyage aboard a sailing ship it was possible for a good deal to happen that was not logged, and much of which was forgotten before the vessel reached its home-port again. When I returned from my first voyage, my family inquired how I liked my profession, and, with all truth, I informed them that I did not like it at all, and that I would be willing to have my indentures cancelled and to return to shore life once more, if I might be so permitted. My father smiled grimly, and seemed to derive considerable satisfaction from the fact that he had prophesied disaster from the outset.

"No," he said, "you have made your bed, my lad, and now you must lie upon it. There is still a considerable portion of your apprenticeship to be served, and it will be quite soon enough for us at the end of that time to decide what you are to do."

A month later I was at sea again, bound this time for Sydney. We reached that port on my nineteenth birthday, and by that time I had made up my mind. Articles or no Articles, I was determined to spend no more of my life on board that hateful ship. Accordingly, one day having obtained shore leave, I purchased a new rig-out, and leaving my sea-going togs with the Jewish shopman, I made tracks, as the saying goes, into the Bush with all speed. Happen what might, I was resolved that Captain Fairweather should not set eyes on George Fairfax again.

From that time onward my career was a strange one. I became a veritable Jack-of-all-Trades. A station-hand, a roust-about, shearer, assistant to a travelling hawker, a gold-miner, and at last a trooper in one of the finest bodies of men in the world, the Queensland Mounted Police. It was in this curious fashion that I arrived at my real vocation. After a considerable period spent at headquarters, I was drafted to a station in the Far West. There was a good deal of horse and sheep-stealing going on in that particular locality, and a large amount of tact and ingenuity were necessary to discover the criminals. I soon found that this was a business at which I was likely to be successful. More than once I had the good fortune to be able to bring to book men who had carried on their trade for years, and who had been entirely unsuspected. Eventually my reputation in this particular line of business became noised abroad, until it came to the ears of the Commissioner himself. Then news reached us that a dastardly murder had been

committed in the suburbs of Brisbane, and that the police were unable to obtain any clue as to the identity of the person accountable for it. Two or three men were arrested on suspicion, but were immediately discharged on being in a position to give a satisfactory account of their actions on the night of the murder. It struck me that I should like to take up the case, and with the confidence of youth, I applied to the Commissioner for permission to be allowed to try my hand at unravelling the mystery. What they thought of my impudence I cannot say, but the fact remains that my request, after being backed up by my Inspector, was granted. The case was a particularly complicated one, and at one time I was beginning to think that I should prove no more successful than the others had been. Instead of deterring me, however, this only spurred me on to greater efforts. The mere fact that I had asked to be allowed to take part in the affair, had aroused the jealousy of the detectives of the department, and I was aware that they would receive the news of my failure with unqualified satisfaction. I therefore prosecuted my inquiries in every possible direction, sparing myself neither labour nor pains. It would appear that the victim, an old man, was without kith or kin. He was very poor, and lived by himself in a small villa on the outskirts of the city. No one had been seen near the house on the night in question, nor had any noise been heard by the neighbours. Yet in the morning he was discovered lying on the floor of the front-room, stabbed to the heart from behind. Now every detective knows—indeed it is part of his creed—that, in an affair such as I am describing, nothing is too minute or too trivial to have a bearing upon the case. The old gentleman had been at supper when the crime was committed, and from the fact that the table was only laid for one, I argued that he had not expected a visitor. The murderer could not have been hungry, for the food had not been touched. That the motive was not robbery was also plain from the fact that not a drawer had been opened or a lock forced, while the money in his pocket was still intact. The doctors had certified that the wound could not have been self-inflicted, while there was plenty of evidence to show that there had not been a struggle. From the fact that the front-door was locked, and that the key was in the murdered man's pocket, it was certain that the assassin must have left the house by the back. There was one question, however, so trivial in itself that one might have been excused for not taking note of it, that attracted my attention. As I have said, the old man had been stabbed from behind, and when he was discovered by the police next day, his overturned chair was lying beside him. This, to my mind, showed that he had been seated with his back to the door when the crime had been perpetrated. When I had examined everything else, I turned my attention to the chair. I did not expect it to tell me anything, yet it was from it that I obtained the clue that was ultimately to lead to

the solution of the whole mystery. The chair was a cheap one, made of white wood, and had the usual smooth strip of wood at the top. On the back of this piece of wood, a quarter of an inch or so from the bottom, on the left-hand side, was a faint smear of blood. The presence of the blood set me thinking. When found, the chair had been exactly eighteen inches from the body. The mere fact that the man had been stabbed from behind and to the heart, precluded any possibility of his having jumped up and caught at the back of the chair afterwards. Placing my left hand upon the back, I clasped my fingers under the piece of wood above-mentioned, to discover that a portion of the second finger fell exactly upon the stain.

"Now I think I understand the situation," I said to myself. "The old man was seated at the table, about to commence his meal, when the murderer entered very quietly by the door behind him. He rested his left hand upon the chair to steady himself while he aimed the fatal blow with his right."

But in that case how did the knife touch the middle finger of his left hand? From the fact that the body was discovered lying upon its back just as it had fallen, and that the chair was also still upon the floor, it was evident that the blood must have got there before, not after, the crime was committed. Leaving the room I went out to the yard at the back and studied the paling fence. The partition which separated the yard from that of the house next door, was old, and in a very dilapidated condition, while that at the bottom was almost new, and was armed at the top with a row of bristling nails. Bringing the powerful magnifying-glass I had brought with me for such a purpose, to bear upon it, I examined it carefully from end to end. The result more than justified the labour. A little more than half way along I discovered another small smear of blood. There could be no doubt that the man had cut his finger on a nail as he had climbed over on his murderous errand. The next and more important thing was to decide how this information was to be made useful to me. Since nothing had been taken from the house, and the old man had been quite unprepared for the attack that was to be made upon him, I set the whole crime down as being one of revenge. In that case what would the assassin be likely to do after his object was obtained? Would he vanish into the Bush forthwith, or get away by sea?

After I had finished my inspection of the fence I visited every public-house in the neighbourhood in the hope of finding out whether a man with a wounded hand had been seen in any of them on the night of the murder. I was totally unsuccessful, however. No one recollected having seen such a man. From the hotels I went to various chemists' shops, but with the same result. Next I tried the

shipping-offices connected with the lines of steamers leaving the port, but with no more, luck than before. The case seemed rapidly going from bad to worse, and already it had been suggested that I should give it up and return to my duty without further waste of time. This, as you may naturally suppose, I had no desire to do.

I worried myself about it day and night, giving it a great deal more attention in fact than I should bestow upon such a matter now, or even upon cases of twice the importance. If there had been nothing else in my favour, my attention to duty should have been sufficient to have commended me to my superiors. It was the other way round, however. The Press were twitting the authorities concerning their inability to discover the murderer, and more than hinted at the inefficiency of the Detective Force. When I had been engaged upon the matter for about a fortnight, and with what success I have already informed you, the Commissioner sent for me, and told me that he did not think my qualifications were sufficiently marked to warrant my being employed longer on the task in hand. This facer, coming upon the top of all the hard work I had been doing, and possibly my nerves were somewhat strained by my anxiety, led me to say more than I intended. Though a man may have the bad luck to fail in a thing, he seldom likes to be reminded of it. It was certainly so in my case. Consequently I was informed that at the end of the month my connection with the Queensland Police would terminate.

"Very well, sir," I said, "in the meantime, if you will give me the opportunity, I will guarantee to catch the murderer and prove to you that I am not as incapable as you imagine."

I have often wondered since that I was not ordered back to the Bush there and then. The fact remains, however, that I was not, and thus I was permitted to continue my quest unhindered.

Ever since I had first taken the affair in hand I had had one point continually before my eyes. The mere fact that the man had been stabbed in the back seemed to me sufficient proof that the assassin was of foreign origin, and that the affair was the outcome of a vendetta, and not the act of an ordinary bloodthirsty crime. The wound, so the doctors informed me, was an extremely deep and narrow one, such as might very well have been made by a stiletto. Assuming my supposition to be correct, I returned to the house, and once more overhauled the dead man's effects. There was little or nothing there, however, to help me. If he had laid himself out to conceal the identity of his enemy he could scarcely have done it

more effectually. Baffled in one direction, I turned for assistance to another. In other words, I interviewed his left-hand neighbour, a lady with whom I had already had some slight acquaintance. Our conversation took place across the fence that separated the two properties.

"Do you happen to be aware," I asked, when we touched upon the one absorbing topic, "whether the unfortunate gentleman had ever been in Europe?"

"He had been almost everywhere," the woman replied. "I believe he was a sailor at one time, and I have often heard him boast that he knew almost every seaport in the world."

"I suppose you never heard him say whether he had lived in Italy?" I inquired.

"He used to mention the country now and again," she said. "If it was a fine morning he would sometimes remark that it was a perfect Italian sky. But nothing more than that."

I was about to thank her and move away when she stopped me with an exclamation.

"Wait one moment," she said, "now I come to think of it, I remember that about three months ago he received a letter from Italy. I'll tell you how I came to know it. I was standing in the front verandah when the postman brought up the letters. He gave me mine, and then I noticed that the top letter he held in his hand had a foreign stamp. Now, my little boy, Willie, collects stamps; he's tired of them now, but that doesn't matter. At that time, however, he was so taken up with them that he could talk of nothing else. Well, as I was saying, I noticed this stamp, and asked the postman what country it came from. He told me it was from Italy, and that the letter was for the gentleman next door. 'The next time I see him,' I said to myself, 'I'll ask him for that stamp for Willie.' I had my opportunity that self-same minute, for, just as I was going down the garden there to where my husband was doing a little cabbage-planting, he came into his front verandah. He took the letter from the postman, and as he looked at the envelope, I saw him give a start of surprise. His face was as white as death when he opened it, and he had no sooner glanced at it than he gave a sort of stagger, and if it hadn't been for the verandah-rail I believe he'd have fallen. He was so taken aback that I thought he was going to faint. I was standing where you may be now, and I called out to him to know whether I could do anything for him. I liked the man, you see, and pitied him for his loneliness. What's more, he and my husband had always been on friendly terms together. Well, as I was going on

to say, he didn't answer, but pulling himself together, went into the house and shut the door. When next I saw him he was quite himself again."

At last the case was beginning to look more hopeful. I thought I could see a faint spark of light ahead.

"Did you happen to say anything about this to the other detectives when they were making inquiries after the crime had been committed?" I asked, with a little anxiety.

"No, I did not," she replied. "I never gave it a thought. It was such a long time before the murder, you see, and to tell the truth I had forgotten all about it. It was only when you began to talk of Italy and of his having been there, that I remembered it. You don't mean to say you think that letter had something to do with the man's death?"

"That is a very difficult question to answer," I observed. "I think, however, it is exceedingly likely it may have had some connection with it. At any rate we shall see. Now will you think for one moment, and see whether you can tell me the exact day on which that letter arrived?"

She considered for a few moments before she answered.

"I believe I can, if you will give me time to turn it over in my mind," she said. "My husband was at home that morning, and Willie, that's my little boy, was very much upset because I would not let him stay away from school to help his father in the garden. Yes, sir, I can tell you the exact date. It was on a Monday, and the third of June."

I thanked her for the information she had given me, and then went off to see what use it was likely to prove to me. The letter from Italy had been delivered in Brisbane on the third of June. The murder was committed on the night of the nineteenth of July, or, in other words, forty-six days later. With all speed I set off to the office of the Royal Mail Steamship Company, where I asked to be shown their passenger-list for the vessel that arrived on the nineteenth of July. When it was handed to me I scanned it eagerly in the hope of discovering an Italian name. There were at least a dozen in the steerage, and one in the first-class. I was relieved, however, to find that all but the first-class passengers had disembarked at Cairns, further up the coast. The name of the exception was Steffano Gairdi, and he was a passenger from Naples.

"You can't tell me anything more definite about this gentleman, I suppose?" I said to the clerk who was attending to me. "Did you happen to see him?"

"He was in here only this morning," the man replied.

"Here, when?" I inquired, with such surprise that the other clerks looked up from their books at me in astonishment. "Do you mean to tell me that the gentleman I am asking about was here this morning?"

"I do," he replied. "He came in to book his return passage to Italy. He only undertook the voyage for the sake of his health."

"Then it's just possible you may know where he is staying now?" I asked, not however with much hope of success. "If you can tell me, I shall be under an obligation to you."

"I can tell you that also," the young man answered. "He is staying at the Continental Hotel in Adelaide Street."

"I am more obliged to you than I can say," I returned. "You have rendered me a great service."

"Don't mention it," said the clerk. "I am very glad to have been able to give you the information you required."

I thanked him once more and left the office. Now if Mr. Steffano Gairdi happened to have a cut or the mark of one upon the inside of his left hand, I felt that I should be within measurable distance of the end of the affair. But how was I to get a view of his hands? If he were the man I wanted, he would probably be on his guard, and he had already proved himself to be sufficiently acute to make me careful how I went to work with him. I had no time to lose, however. The next boat sailed for Europe in two days' time, and he had booked his passage in her. For that reason alone, I knew that I must be quick if I wished to accumulate sufficient evidence against him to justify the issue of a warrant for his arrest. I accordingly walked on to the Continental Hotel, and asked to see the manager, with whom I had the good fortune to be acquainted. I was shown into his private office, and presently he joined me there. He was familiar with my connection with the police force, and laughingly remarked that he hoped I had not called upon him in my official capacity.

"As a matter of fact that is just what I am doing," I replied. "I want you to give me some information concerning one of your guests. I believe I am right in

saying that you have an Italian gentleman, named Gairdi, staying at your hotel?"

"That is certainly so," he admitted. "I hope there is nothing against him?"

"It is rather soon to say that," I said. "I am suspicious of the man—and I want to ask you a few questions concerning him."

"As many as you like," he returned. "I cannot say, however, that I know very much about him. He has been up the country, and only returned to Brisbane yesterday."

"Is this the first occasion on which he has stayed here?"

"No," the manager replied. "He was here nearly a month ago for a couple of nights, and he had had his room reserved for him while he was away."

"Perhaps you can tell me if he slept here on the night of July the nineteenth?"

"If you will excuse me for a moment I can soon let you know," said the manager, and then crossed the room to go into an outer office. A few moments later he returned and nodded his head. "Yes, he slept here that night, and went to Toowoomba next day."

"One more question, and then I have done. Did you happen to notice that night, or before he left next day, whether he had hurt his left hand?"

"It's strange that you should speak of that," said the manager. "He had cut his left hand rather badly with a broken glass, so he told us. We gave him some sticking-plaster to do it up with."

"That will do beautifully," I said. "And now perhaps you will add to the kindness you have already done me by letting me see the gentleman in question. I don't want to speak to him, but I want to impress his countenance upon my mind."

"Why not go into lunch?" the manager inquired. "You will then be able to study him to your heart's content, without his being any the wiser. You're not in uniform, and no one would take you for a detective."

"An excellent idea," I replied. "By the way, while I am upon the subject, I suppose I can rely upon your saying nothing about the matter to him, or to any one else?"

"You may depend upon me implicitly," he answered. "I should be scarcely likely to do so, for my own sake. I trust the matter is not a very serious one. I should not like to have any scandal in the hotel."

"Well, between ourselves," I observed, "I am afraid it is rather a serious affair. But you may be sure I will do all I can to prevent your name or the hotel's being mixed up in it."

Then, as he had proposed, I followed him into the dining-room and took my place at a small table near the window. At that adjoining me, a tall, swarthy individual, with close-cropped hair, an Italian without doubt, was seated. He glanced at me as I took my place, and then continued his meal as if he were unaware of my presence in the room.

By the time I had finished my lunch I had thoroughly impressed his face and personality upon my memory, and felt sure that, if necessary, I should know him anywhere again. My labours, however, were by no means over; in fact they were only just beginning. What I had against him so far would scarcely be sufficient to justify our applying for a warrant for his arrest. If I wanted to bring the crime home to him, it would be necessary for me to connect him with it more closely than I had yet done. But how to do this in the short space of time that was at my disposal I could not see. The murderer, as I have already said, was no ordinary one, and had laid his plans with the greatest care. He had taken away the knife, and in all probability had got rid of it long since. No one had seen him enter the house on the night in question, nor had any one seen him leave it again. I was nearly beside myself with vexation. To be so near my goal, and yet not be able to reach it, was provoking beyond endurance. But my lucky star was still in the ascendant, and good fortune was to favour me after all.

As I have already observed, when the crime had become known, the permanent detective force had been most assiduous in the attentions they had given it. The only piece of valuable evidence, however, that they had been able to accumulate, was a footprint on a flower-bed near the centre of the yard, and another in the hall of the house itself. Now it was definitely settled, by a careful comparison of these imprints, that the murderer, whoever he might have been, wore his boots down considerably on the left heel, and on the inside. Now, as every bootmaker will tell you, while the outer is often affected in this way, the inner side seldom is. I noticed, however, that this was the case with the man I suspected. The heel of his left boot was very much worn down and on the inside. The right, however, was intact.

On leaving the Continental Hotel, I made my way to the Police Commissioner's office, obtained an interview with him, and placed the evidence I had gleaned before him. He was good enough to express his approval of my endeavours, but was doubtful whether the case against the Italian was strong enough yet to enable us to definitely bring the crime home to the man.

"At any rate it will justify our issuing a warrant for his arrest," he said, "and that had better be done with as little delay as possible. Otherwise he will be out of the country."

A warrant was immediately procured and an officer was detailed to accompany me in case I should need his assistance. When we reached the Continental Hotel I inquired for Señor Gairdi, only to be informed that he had left the hotel soon after lunch.

"It is only what I expected," I said to my companion. "His suspicions are aroused, and he is going to try and give us the slip."

"I think not," said the manager. "I fancy you will find that he is on board the steamer. You must remember that she sails at daybreak."

We accordingly hastened to the river, and made our way to where the steamer was lying. On arrival on board I inquired for the head-steward, and when he put in an appearance inquired whether Señor Gairdi had come aboard yet.

"He brought his luggage on board, and inspected his cabin about three o'clock," that official replied, "and then went ashore again."

There was nothing for it therefore but for us to await his return. Though we

did not know it, we were in for a long spell, for it was not until nearly nine o'clock that our man reappeared on board. He had just crossed the gangway and was making his way along the promenade deck, when I accosted him.

"May I have a word with you, Señor Gairdi?" I asked.

"Yes, certainly," he replied, speaking with only a slight foreign accent. "What is it you want?"

I drew him a few paces further along the deck, so that, if possible, the other passengers, who were standing near, should not hear what I had to say to him.

"I have to tell you," I said, "that I hold a warrant for your arrest on the charge of murdering one, Joseph Spainton, on the night of July the nineteenth of this year. I must caution you that anything you may say will be used as evidence against you."

The nearest electric light shone full and clear upon his face, and I noticed that a queer expression had suddenly made its appearance upon it. Apart from that, he did not seem at all surprised at his arrest.

"So you have found it out after all," he said. "I thought I was going to evade suspicion and get away safely. You would not have caught me then. It is Fate, I suppose."

He shrugged his shoulders and said something under his breath in Italian.

"Must I go ashore with you?" he asked.

"If you please," I answered, marvelling that he should take it so coolly.

Then turning his dark eyes upon me, he continued—

"Señor, in Italy I am a gentleman, and my name, which is not Gairdi, is an honoured one. What I am accused of, and what I admit doing, was no crime. The dead man was a traitor, and I was deputed to kill him. I did it, and this is the end."

"HE FELL WITH A CRASH AT MY FEET."

The words had scarcely left his lips before he took a revolver from his coat-pocket, placed it to his right temple and, before I could prevent him, had pulled the trigger. He fell with a crash at my feet, and before the ship's doctor could be brought to his side, he was dead. Who he really was, or to what Secret Society he belonged—for his last words to me warranted the belief that he was a member of some such organization—we were never able to discover. He was dead, and there was an end to it. Such is the story of the first big case in which I was engaged, and one that led me step by step to the position I now hold. I have told it perhaps at somewhat greater length than I need have done, but I trust the reader will forgive me. As a matter of fact I am rather proud of it; more so perhaps than I have any reason to be.

Having resigned my position in the police of the Northern Colony, I was not to be tempted to reconsider my decision. My liking for the life, however, and my interest in the unravelling of mysterious crimes, proved too strong, and I joined the Detective Staff in Melbourne, seeing in their service a good deal of queer life and ferreting out not a small number of extraordinary cases. The experience gained there was invaluable, and led me, after one particularly interesting piece of business in which I had the good fortune to be most successful, to entertain the notion of quitting Government employ altogether, and setting up for myself. I did so, and soon had more work upon my hand than I could very well accomplish. But I was too ambitious to be content with small things, and eventually came to the conclusion that there was not enough scope in the Colonies for me. After fifteen years' absence, therefore, I returned to England, spending a year in the Further East *en route* in order to enlarge my experience, and to qualify myself for any work that might come to me from that quarter.

On a certain bitterly cold day in January I reached Liverpool from the United States, and took the train for my old home. My father and mother had long since died, and now all that remained to me of them was the stone slab that covered their resting place in the quiet little churchyard at the foot of the hill.

"Well, here I am," I said to myself, "thirty-three years old, and alone in the world. Nobody knows me in England, but it won't be my fault if they don't hear of George Fairfax before very long. I'll be off to London and try my fortune there."

Next day I made my way to the Great Metropolis, and installed myself at a

small private hotel, while I looked about me preparatory to commencing business. To talk of gaining a footing in London is all very well in its way, but it is by no means so easy a task to accomplish as it might appear. Doubtless it can be done fairly quickly if one is prepared to spend large sums of money in advertising, and is not afraid to blow one's own trumpet on every possible occasion, but that is not my line, and besides, even had I so wished, I had not the money to do it. For a multitude of reasons I did not feel inclined to embark my hard-earned savings on such a risky enterprise. I preferred to make my way by my own diligence, and with that end in view I rented an office in a convenient quarter, furnished it, put a small advertisement in a few of the papers, and then awaited the coming of my clients.

As I have a long and curious story to tell, and this book is only intended to be the narration of a certain episode in my life, a detailed description of my first three years in London would not only be superfluous, but in every way a waste of time. Let it suffice that my first case was that of the now notorious Pilchard Street Diamond Robbery, my success in which brought me business from a well known firm in Hatton Gardens. As the public will doubtless remember, they had been robbed of some valuable gems between London and Amsterdam in a singularly audacious manner. My second was the case of the celebrated Russian swindler, who called herself the Countess Demikoff. This case alone took me nearly six months to unravel, but I did not grudge the time, seeing that I was well paid for my labours, and that I managed to succeed where the police had failed. From that time forward I think I may say without boasting that I have been as successful as any man of my age has a right to expect to be. What is better still, I am now in the happy position of being able to accept or decline business as I choose. It is in many respects a hard life, and at all times is attended with a fair amount of risk, but you cannot make omelets without breaking eggs, and if any one chooses to spend his life running to earth men who are waging war against Society, well, he must not grumble if he receives some hard knocks in return.

After these preliminaries I will proceed to show how I came to be mixed up in the most curious case it has ever been my good, or evil, fortune to encounter. It showed me a side of human nature I had not met before, and it brought me the greatest happiness a man can ever hope to find.

CHAPTER II

All business London, and a good many other people besides, must remember the famous United Empire Bank Fraud. Bonds had been stolen and negotiated, vast sums of money were discovered to be missing, and the manager and one of the directors were absent also. So cleverly had the affair been worked, and so flaring were the defalcations, that had it not been for the public-spirited behaviour and generosity of two of the directors, the position of the bank would have been most seriously compromised, if not shattered altogether. How the culprits had managed to slip through the fingers of the law in the first place no one could say, but the fact remains that they were able to get out of England, without, apparently, leaving a trace of their intentions or their whereabouts behind them. Scotland Yard took the matter up with its usual promptness, and at first were confident of success. They set their cleverest detectives to work upon it, and it was not until more than a month had elapsed that the men engaged were compelled most reluctantly to admit their defeat. They had done their best: it was the system under which they worked that was to blame. In the detection of crime, or in the tracing of a criminal, it is best, as in every other walk of life, to be original.

One morning on arriving at my office I found a letter awaiting me from the remaining directors of the bank, in which they inquired if I could make it convenient to call upon them at the head-office that day. To tell the truth I had been expecting this summons for nearly a week, and was far from being displeased when it came. The work I had expected them to offer me was after my own heart, and if they would only trust the business to me and give me a free hand, I was prepared on my part to bring the missing gentlemen to justice.

Needless to say I called upon them at the hour specified, and after a brief wait was conducted to the board room where the directors sat in solemn conclave.

The chairman, Sir Walter Bracebridge, received me on behalf of his colleagues.

"We wrote to you, Mr. Fairfax," he said, "in order to find out whether you could help us concerning the difficulty in which we find ourselves placed. You

of course are aware of the serious trouble the bank has experienced, and of the terrible consequences which have resulted therefrom?"

I admitted that I was quite conversant with it, and waited to hear what he would have to say next.

"As a matter of fact," he continued, "we have sent for you to know whether you can offer us any assistance in our hour of difficulty? Pray take a chair, and let us talk the matter over and see what conclusion we can arrive at."

I seated myself, and we discussed the affair to such good purpose that, when I left the Boardroom, it was on the understanding that I was to take up the case at once, and that my expenses and a very large sum of money should be paid me, provided I could manage to bring the affair to a successful termination. I spent the remainder of that day at the Bank, carefully studying the various memoranda. A great deal of what I had read and heard had been mere hearsay, and this it was necessary to discard in order that the real facts of the case might be taken up, and the proper conclusions drawn therefrom. For three days I weighed the case carefully in my mind, and at the end of that time was in a position to give the Board a definite answer to their inquiries. Thereupon I left England, with the result that exactly twelve weeks later the two men, so much wanted, were at Bow Street, and I had the proud knowledge of knowing that I had succeeded where the men who had tried before me had so distinctly failed.

As will be remembered, it was a case that interested every class of society, and Press and Public were alike united in the interest they showed in it. It is not, however, to the trial itself as much as another curious circumstance connected with it, that has induced me to refer to it here. The case had passed from the Magistrate's Court to the Old Bailey, and was hourly increasing in interest. Day after day the Court was crowded to overflowing, and, when the time came for me to take my place in the witness-box and describe the manner in which I had led up to and effected the capture of the offenders, the excitement rose to fever-heat. I can see the whole scene now as plainly as if it had occurred but yesterday; the learned Judge upon the Bench, the jury in their box, the rows of Counsels, and the benches full of interested spectators. I gave my evidence and was examined by the Counsels for the prosecution and for the defence. I described how I had traced the men from England to their hiding-place abroad, and the various attempts that had been made to prevent their extradition, and had just referred to a certain statement one of the prisoners had made to me soon after his arrest, when an interruption caused me to look behind at the rows of spectators.

At the further end of the bench, nearest me, were two men; one was evidently tall, the other very short. The taller was the possessor of silvery white hair and a long and venerable beard. He was a handsome looking man of about forty, and my first glance at him told me that he was blind. As I have said, his companion was a much smaller man, with a smooth, almost boyish face, a pair of twinkling eyes, but a mouth rather hard set. Both were evidently following the case closely, and when on the next day I saw that they were in the same place, I took an even greater interest in them than before. It was not however until the trial had finished and the pair of miserable men had been sent to penal servitude for a lengthy term of years, that I made the acquaintance of the men I have just described. I remember the circumstance quite distinctly. I had left the Court and was proceeding down the Old Bailey in the direction of Ludgate Hill, when I heard my name pronounced.

Turning round I discovered to my astonishment the two men I had seen in the Court, and who had seemed to take such an interest in the case. The smaller was guiding his friend along the crowded pavement with a dexterity that was plainly the outcome of a long practice. When I stopped, they stopped also, and the blind man addressed me. His voice was deep and had a note of pathos in it impossible to describe. It may have been that I was a little sad that afternoon, for both the men who had been condemned to penal servitude had wives and children, to whose pitiful condition the learned Judge had referred when passing sentence.

"You are Mr. Fairfax, are you not?" inquired the taller of the men.

"That is my name," I admitted. "What can I do for you?"

"If we could persuade you to vouchsafe us an hour of your valuable time we should be more grateful than we could say," the man replied. "We have an important piece of business which it might possibly be to your advantage to take up. At any rate it would be worthy of your consideration."

"But why have you not come to me before?" I inquired. "You have seen me in Court every day. Why do you wait until the case is at an end?"

"Because we wanted to be quite sure of you," he answered. "Our case is so large and of such vital importance to us, that we did not desire to run any risk of losing you. We thought we would wait and familiarize ourselves with all that you have done in this affair before coming to you. Now we are satisfied that we could not place our case in better hands, and what we are anxious to do is to induce you to interest yourself in it and take it up."

"You pay me a very high compliment," I said, "but I cannot give you a decision at once. I must hear what it is that you want me to do and have time to think it over, before I can answer you. That is my invariable rule, and I never depart from it. Do you know my office?"

"We know it perfectly," returned the blind man. "It would be strange if we did not, seeing that we have stood outside it repeatedly, trying to summon up courage to enter. Would it be possible for you to grant us an interview to-night?"

"I fear not," I said. "I am tired, and stand in need of rest. If you care to come to-morrow morning, I shall be very pleased to see you. But you must bear in mind the fact that my time is valuable, and that it is only a certain class of case that I care to take up personally."

"We are not afraid of our case," the man replied. "I doubt if there has ever been another like it. I fancy you yourself will say so when you hear the evidence I have to offer. It is not as if we are destitute. We are prepared to pay you well for your services, but we must have the very best that England can supply."

My readers must remember that this conversation was being carried on at the corner of Ludgate Hill and the Old Bailey. Curious glances were being thrown at my companions by passers-by, and so vehement were the taller man's utterances becoming, that a small crowd was gradually collecting in our neighbourhood.

"Very well," I said, "if you are really desirous of consulting me, I shall be very glad to see you at my office at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. I must ask you, however, not to be late, as I have several other appointments."

"We shall not be late," the man answered, "you may rely upon that. We have too much at stake to run any risks of losing your assistance. We will be with you to-morrow morning at ten o'clock punctually."

He thereupon bade me good-bye and raising his hat politely was led along the street by his companion in an opposite direction to that I was taking. They seemed delighted that I had given them an appointment, but for my part I am afraid I was too absorbed by the memories of the day, and the punishment that had been allotted to the two principal members in the swindle, to think very much of them and their business. Indeed, although I made a note of the appointment, it was not until I had arrived at the office on the following morning that I recollected their promised visit. I had just finished my correspondence, and had dictated a few letters to my managing clerk, when a junior entered with two

cards, which he placed before me. The first I took up bore the name of Mr. Septimus Codd, that of the second, Mr. George Kitwater. When I had finished the letter I was in the act of dictating, I bade the clerk admit them, and a moment later the blind man and his companion whom I had seen on Ludgate Hill the previous evening, were ushered into my presence. I cannot remember a more venerable appearance than that presented by the taller man. His was a personality that would have appealed forcibly to any student of humanity. It was decidedly an open countenance, to which the long white beard that descended almost to his waist gave an added reverence. His head was well shaped and well set upon his shoulders, his height was six feet two if an inch, and he carried himself with the erectness of a man accustomed to an outdoor life. He was well dressed, and for this reason I surmised that he was the possessor of good manners. His companion was as much below the middle height as he was above it. His was a peculiar countenance resembling that of a boy when seen at a distance, and that of an old man when one was close to him. His eyes, as I have already said, were small, and they were set deep in his head. This, in itself, was calculated to add to his peculiar appearance. He steered his blind companion into the room and placed him in a seat. Then he perched himself on a chair beside him and waited for me to open the debate.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," I said. "Allow me to congratulate you on your punctuality."

"We were afraid of missing you," observed Kitwater. "Our business is so particular that we did not want to run any risk of losing our appointment."

"Perhaps you will now be good enough to tell me what that business is?" I replied, taking my note-book out of a drawer preparatory to writing down what they had to say.

"In the first place, sir," the man began, "we of course understand that everything we have to tell you will be regarded by you as strictly private and confidential?"

"That goes without saying," I replied. "If I were to divulge what my clients tell me, my business would not be worth a day's purchase. You can rest assured that everything you may impart to me will be treated in strictest confidence."

"We thank you," said Kitwater. "The story I have to tell you is perhaps the strangest that has ever been told to mortal man. To begin with, you must understand that my companion and myself have but lately arrived in England.

We have been for many years missionaries in China, sowing the good seed in the Western Provinces. I do not know whether you have ever visited that country, but even if you have not you must be aware to some extent of the dangers to which our calling is subjected. We carry our lives in our hands from the moment we leave civilization until we enter it again. There are times, however, that compensate one for all the trials that have to be undergone."

"You must excuse me," I said, "if I remind you that my time is valuable, and that, however interested I may be in the missionary work of China, I cannot allow it to interfere with my business. The sooner you tell me in what way you want me to help you, the sooner I shall be able to give you the answer you are seeking."

"I must implore your pardon," the man continued, humbly enough, "I am afraid our calling, however, is apt to make us a trifle verbose. If you will allow me, I will put what I have to say in as few words as possible."

I bowed and signed to him to proceed.

"Our case is as follows," he began. "As I have told you, we have been in China for several years, and during that time we have had the good fortune to enroll not a few well-known names among our converts. To make a long story short, we were so successful as to be able to persuade even the Mandarin of the Province to listen to our message. He was an enormously rich man, one of the richest perhaps in China, and was so impressed by the good news we brought to him that, on his death-bed, he left to us for the benefit of the mission all his wealth, in gold, silver, and precious stones. It was a princely legacy, and one that would have enabled us to carry on our mission with such success as we had never before dreamed of."

"But if you were so lucky and so much in love with your profession, how does it come about that you are in England now?" I inquired.

"I will tell you why," he answered, leaning towards me and tapping with his fingers upon the edge of my writing-table. "It is a sad story, and the mere telling of it causes me more pain than you would believe. You must understand that at the time of the Mandarin's death an English traveller, who had been passing through the Western Provinces, reached our city and took up his abode with us. Needless to say we were overwhelmed with grief at the loss of our patron. The treasure he had presented us with we took to the mission and deposited it in a safe place. We had no suspicion of any sort of treachery. I fear my companion

and I are not men of the world, that is to say we do not go about suspecting evil of our neighbours."

"I think I understand," I said. "You brought the treasure home, put it in what you considered a safe place, and one day awoke to find your estimable guest missing and the treasure gone with him. Have I guessed correctly?"

"You have hit the mark exactly," Kitwater replied. "We woke one day not only to find the treasure gone, but also ourselves and our mission seriously compromised. The relations of the dead man not only accused us of having alienated him from the faith of his forefathers, but also of having robbed him of his ancestral treasure. We could not but admit that we had been presented with the wealth in question, and when it was demanded of us, we could only explain that we had lost it in our turn. You can imagine the position for yourself. At the best of times the foreigner is not popular in China, and our situation was particularly unpleasant. Situated as we were in one of the wildest portions of the empire, and accused of the basest sacrilege, that is to say of violating the home of a dead man, we could hope for but small mercy. The man who had robbed us had entirely disappeared and no trace of him could be discovered. To attempt to offer any explanation, or to incriminate him, was out of the question. We could only suffer in silence."

He paused and heaved a heavy sigh.

"And what form did your punishment take?" I inquired, for I was beginning to be interested in their story.

"Can you not see for yourself?" the man answered. "Can you not see that I am blind, while my companion is dumb? That was what they condemned us to. By that man's villainy I am destined never to look upon God's earth again, while my companion will never be able to converse with his fellow-men, except by signs. We are in the world, yet out of it."

I looked at them both in amazement. Their tale seemed too terrible to be true. And yet I had the best of evidence to show that it was correct.

"And why have you come to me? What do you want me to do? I cannot give you back your sight, nor your friend his power of speech."

"But you can help us to find the man who brought this misery upon us," Kitwater replied. "That is what we have come to ask of you. He must not be

permitted to enjoy the wealth he stole from us. It is sacred to a special duty, and that duty it must perform. We are not overburdened with riches, in fact we are dependent upon the bounty of another, but if you can help us to recover the sum that was stolen from us, we will gladly pay whatever you may ask! We cannot say more than that."

"But this is a most unheard-of request," I said. "How do you know where the man may be at this moment?"

"We do not know, or we should scarcely have asked your assistance," Kitwater replied with some show of reason. "It is because we have heard of your wonderful powers in tracing people that we have come to you. Our only cause for attending the trial at which you saw us was to hear the evidence you gave and to draw our own conclusions from it. That those conclusions were complimentary to you, our presence here is evidence of. We know that we could not put our case in better hands, and we will leave it with you to say whether or not you will help us. As I said just now, my companion is dumb, while I am blind; we cannot do much ourselves. Will you not take pity upon us and help us to find the man who betrayed and ruined us?"

"But he may be at the other end of the world at this moment?" I said.

"That does not matter," he returned. "We know that wherever he may be, you will find him. All we ask you to do is to bring us face to face with him. We will manage the rest. It will be strange then if we are not able to get him to a proper way of thinking."

This was the most unusual case I had had to do with, and for the moment I scarcely knew what to say. I turned to the blind man once more.

"Have you any idea where the man went after he robbed you?"

"He crossed the province of Yunnan into Burmah," he replied. "After that he made his way through Mandalay to Rangoon, and shipped on board the steamer *Jemadar* for London."

"When did the *Jemadar* reach London?"

"On the twenty-third of June," he answered. "We have made inquiries upon that point."

I made a note of this and then continued my inquiries.

"One other question," I said. "While we are on the subject, what do you suppose would be the total value of the treasure of which he robbed you?"

"That is very difficult to say," Kitwater replied, and then turned to his companion and held out his hand. The other took it and tapped upon the palm with the tips of his fingers in a sort of dot-and-telegraph fashion that I had never seen used before.

"My friend says that there were ninety-three stones, all rubies and sapphires; they were of exquisite lustre and extraordinary size. Possibly they might have been worth anything from a hundred and seventy thousand pounds to a quarter of a million."

I opened my eyes on hearing this. Were the men telling me the truth? I asked myself, or were they trying to interest me in the case by exaggerating the value of the treasure?

"What you say is almost incomprehensible," I continued. "I trust you will forgive me, but can you substantiate what you say?"

"When we say that we are willing to pay your expenses in advance if you will try to find the man, I think we are giving you very good proof of our *bona fides*," he remarked. "I am afraid we cannot give you any other, seeing as I have said, that we are both poor men. If you are prepared to take up our case, we shall be under a life-long gratitude to you, but if you cannot, we must endeavour to find some one else who will undertake the task."

"It is impossible for me to decide now whether I can take it up or not," I said, leaning back in my chair and looking at them both as I spoke. "I must have time to think it over; there are a hundred and one things to be considered before I can give you a direct reply."

There was silence for a few moments, and then Kitwater, who had been holding his usual mysterious communications with his friend, said—

"When do you think you will be able to let us have an answer?"

"That depends upon a variety of circumstances," I replied. "It is a matter difficult to average. In the first place there is no knowing where the man is at present: he may be in London; he may be in America; he may be in any other portion of the globe. It might cost five hundred pounds to find him, it might cost five thousand. You must see for yourselves how uncertain it all is."

"In that case we should be prepared to give security for the first-named amount, or pay you half in advance," Kitwater replied. "I hope you do not think, Mr. Fairfax, that we are endeavouring to play you false? You can see for yourself that our injuries are permanent, and, as far as they go, are at least evidence concerning the truth of our story. You can also see for yourself how this man has behaved towards us. He has robbed us of all we hold valuable, and to his act of treachery we owe the mutilations we have suffered. Can you wonder that we are anxious to find him?"

"I do not wonder at that at all," I said. "My only feeling is that I must regard it as an entirely business matter."

"We cannot blame you," Kitwater replied. "Yet you must surely understand our anxiety for a definite and immediate answer. The man has had a considerable start of us already, and he has doubtless disposed of the jewels ere this. At whatever price he sold them, he must now be in possession of a considerable fortune, which rightly belongs to us. We are not vindictive men; all we ask is for our own."

"I quite agree with you there," I replied. "The only question in my mind is, who shall get it for you? Let me explain matters a little more clearly. In the first place I have no desire to offend you, but how am I to know that the story you tell me is a true one?"

"I have already told you that you will have to take our word for that," he said. "It will be a great disappointment to us if you cannot take the matter up, but we must bear it as we have borne our other misfortunes. When we realized the way you managed those bank people we said to each other—'That's the man for us! If any one can catch Hayle he's that person.' It naturally comes to us as a disappointment to find that you are not willing to take up the case."

"I have not said that I am not willing," I answered; "I only said that I am not going to commit myself until I have given the matter due consideration. If you will call here at four o'clock to-morrow afternoon, I shall be able to give you a definite answer."

"I suppose we must be content with that," said Kitwater lugubriously.

They thereupon thanked me and rose to go.

"By the way," I said, "does this man Hayle know that you are in England?"

The blind man shook his head.

"He thinks we are lying dead in the jungle," he said, "and it is not his fault that we are not. Did he suspect for a moment that we were alive and in the same country as himself, he'd be out of it like a rat driven by a ferret from his hole. But if you will give us your assistance, sir, we will make him aware of our presence before very long."

Though he tried to speak unconcernedly, there was an expression upon the man's face that startled me. I felt that, blind though he was, I should not care to be in Mr. Hayle's place when they should meet.

After they had left me I lit a cigar and began to think the matter over. I had had a number of strange cases presented to me in my time, but never one that had opened in such a fashion as this. A man robs his friends in the centre of China; the latter are tortured and maimed for life, and come to me in London to seek out their betrayer for them, in whatever part of the globe he might be. The whole thing seemed so preposterous as to be scarcely worth consideration, and yet, try how I would to put it out of my mind, I found myself thinking of it continually. The recollection of the blind man's face and that of his dumb companion haunted me awake and asleep. More than once I determined to have nothing to do with them, only later to change my mind, and vow that I would see the matter through at any cost to myself.

Next morning, however, saner counsels prevailed. An exceedingly remunerative offer was made me by a prominent Trust Company, which, at any other time I should have had no hesitation in immediately accepting. Fate, however, which is generally more responsible for these matters than most folk imagine, had still a card to play upon Messrs. Kitwater and Codd's behalf, and it was destined to overthrow all my scruples, and what was more to ultimately revolutionize the conduct of my whole life.

CHAPTER III

Towards the middle of the morning I was sitting in my office, awaiting the coming of a prominent New York detective, with whom I had an appointment, when my clerk entered to inform me that a lady was in the outer office, and desired to see me if I could spare her a few minutes.

"Who is she?" I inquired. "Find out that, and also her business."

"Her name is Kitwater," the man replied, when he returned after a moment's absence, "but she declines to state her business to any one but yourself, sir."

"Kitwater?" I said. "Then she is a relation, I suppose, of the blind man who was here yesterday. What on earth can she have to say to me? Well, Lawson won't be here for another ten minutes, so you may as well show her in." Then to myself I added—"This is a development of the case which I did not expect. I wonder who she is,—wife, sister, daughter, or what, of the blind man?"

I was not to be left long in doubt, for presently the door opened and the young lady herself entered the room. I say '*young lady*,' because her age could not at most have been more than one-or-two-and-twenty. She was tall and the possessor of a graceful figure, while one glance was sufficient to show me that her face was an exceedingly pretty one. (Afterwards I discovered that her eyes were dark brown.) I rose and offered her a chair.

"Good morning, Miss Kitwater," I said. "This is an unexpected visit. Won't you sit down?"

When she had done so I resumed my seat at the table.

"Mr. Fairfax," she began, "you are the great detective, I believe?"

I admitted the soft impeachment with as much modesty as I could assume at so short a notice. She certainly was a very pretty girl.

"I have come to talk to you about my uncle."

She stopped as if she did not quite know how to proceed.

"Then the gentleman who called upon me yesterday, and who has the misfortune to be blind, is your uncle?" I said.

"Yes! He was my father's younger and only brother," she answered. "I have often heard my father speak of him, but I had never seen him myself until he arrived in England, a month ago with his companion, Mr. Codd. Mr. Fairfax, they have suffered terribly. I have never heard anything so awful as their experiences."

"I can quite believe that," I answered. "Your uncle told me something of their great trouble yesterday. It seems wonderful to me that they should have survived to tell the tale."

"Then he must have told you of Hayle, their supposed friend" (she spoke with superb scorn), "the man who betrayed them and robbed them of what was given them?"

"It was for that purpose that they called upon me," I answered. "They were anxious that I should undertake the search for this man."

She rested her clasped hands upon the table and looked pleadingly at me.

"And will you do so?"

"I am considering the matter," I said, with the first feeling of reluctance I had experienced in the case. "I have promised to give them my decision this afternoon."

"So they informed me, and that is why I am here," she replied. "Oh, Mr. Fairfax, you don't know how I pity them! Surely if they could find this man his heart would be touched, and he would refund them a portion, at least, of what he took from them, and what is legally theirs."

"I am afraid it is very doubtful whether he will," I said, "even in the event of his being found. Gentlemen of his description are not conspicuous for their pity, nor, as a rule, will they disgorge unless considerable pressure of an unpleasant description is brought to bear upon them."

"Then that pressure must be brought to bear," she said, "and if I may say so, you are the only one who can do it. That is why I have called upon you this morning. I have come to plead with you, to implore you, if necessary, to take the matter up. I am not very rich, but I would willingly give all I have in the world to

help them."

"In that case you are one niece in a thousand, Miss Kitwater," I said, with a smile. "Your uncle is indeed fortunate in having such a champion."

She looked at me as if she were not quite certain whether I was joking or not.

"You will do this for them?"

What was I to say? What could I say? I had well nigh decided to have nothing to do with the matter, yet here I was, beginning to think it was hard upon me to have to disappoint her. My profession is not one calculated to render a man's heart over tender, but I must confess that in this case I was by no means as adamant as was usual with me. As I have said, she was an unusually pretty girl, and had she not been kind enough to express her belief in my powers! After all, detectives, like other people, are only human.

"Your uncle and his companion have promised to call upon me this afternoon," I said, "and when they do so, I think I may promise you that I will endeavour to come to some arrangement with them."

"I thank you," she said; "for I think that means that you will try to help them. If you do, I feel confident that you will succeed. I hope you will forgive me for having called upon you as I have done, but, when I saw how disappointed they were after their interview with you yesterday, I made up my mind that I would endeavour to see you and to interest you on their behalf before they came again."

"You have certainly done so," I answered, as she rose to go. "If I take the case up, and believe me I am not at all sure that I shall not do so, they will owe it to your intercession."

"Oh, no, I did not mean that exactly," she replied, blushing prettily. "I should like to feel that you did it for the reason that you believe in the justice of their cause, not merely because I tried to persuade you into it. That would not be fair, either to them or to you."

"Would it not be possible for it to be on account of both reasons?" I asked. "Let us hope so. And now good-morning, Miss Kitwater. I trust your uncle will have good news for you when you see him again this afternoon."

"I hope so too," she answered, and then with a renewal of her thanks and a little bow she left the office.

I closed the door and went back to my seat, almost wondering at my own behaviour. Here was I, a hard-headed man of the world, being drawn into an extraordinary piece of business, which I had most certainly decided to have nothing to do with, simply because a pretty girl had smiled upon me, and had asked me to do it. For I don't mind confessing that I had made up my mind to help Kitwater and Codd in their search for the villain Hayle. The Trust Company would have to look elsewhere for assistance. And yet, as I had the best of reasons for knowing, that piece of business was likely to prove twice as remunerative as this search for the traitorous friend. Happily, however money is not everything in this world.

During the remainder of the day I found myself looking forward with a feeling that was almost akin to eagerness, to the interview I was to have with Kitwater and Codd that afternoon. If the two gentlemen had faults, unpunctuality was certainly not one of them, for the clock upon the mantelpiece had scarcely finished striking the hour of four, when I heard footsteps in the office outside, and next moment they were shown into my own sanctum. Codd came first, leading his friend by the hand, and as he did so he eyed me with a look of intense anxiety upon his face. Kitwater, on the other hand, was dignified, and as impressive as ever. If he were nervous, he certainly concealed it very well.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Fairfax," he said, as Codd led him to a seat. "According to the arrangement we came to yesterday afternoon, we have come here to learn your decision which you promised to give us at four o'clock to-day. I trust you have good news for us."

"That depends upon how you take it," I answered. "I have made up my mind to help you on certain conditions."

"And those conditions?"

"Are that you pay my expenses and the sum of five hundred pounds, to which another five hundred is to be added if I am successful in helping you to recover the treasure of which you told me yesterday. Is that a fair offer?"

"An exceedingly fair one," Kitwater replied, while little Codd nodded his head energetically to show that he appreciated it. "We had expected that you would charge more. Of course you understand that it may involve a chase round half the world before you can find him? He's as slippery as an eel, and, if he once gets to know that we are after him, he'll double and twist like a hare."

"He'll not be the first man I have had to deal with who possessed these characteristics," I answered. "And I have generally succeeded in running them to earth at the end."

"Let's hope for all our sakes that you will be as successful in this case," he said. "And now, if I may ask the question, when will you be ready to begin your search? We shall both feel happier when we know that you are on his track."

"I am ready as soon as you like," I rejoined. "Indeed, the sooner the better for all parties concerned. Nothing is to be gained by delay, and if, as you say, the man has now been in England two months, he may soon be thinking of getting out of it again, if he has not done so already. But before I embark on anything, you must answer me some questions."

"A hundred, if you like," he returned. "You have only to ask them and I will do my best to answer."

"In the first place, I must have a description of this Mr. Gideon Hayle. What is he like?"

"Tall, thin, with brown hair, and a short, close-cropped beard; he carries himself erect, and looks about thirty-eight."

"You don't happen to have a photograph of him in your possession, I suppose?"

"No," replied Kitwater, shaking his head. "Gideon Hayle is not the sort of man to allow himself to be photographed, and what's more you must remember that when we reached Nampoung, the station on the frontier of Burmah, we had scarcely a rag upon our backs. Any goods and chattels we might once have possessed were in the hands of the Chinese. They had robbed us of everything, except what that arch thief, Hayle, had already stolen from us."

As he said this, another look such as I had seen on the occasion of his previous visit spread over his face.

"The robber, the thief," he hissed, almost trembling in his sudden excess of rage; "when I get hold of him he shall rue his treachery to the day of his death. Upwards of a quarter of a million of money he stole from us, and where is it now? Where is my sight, and where is Coddy's power of speech? All gone, and he is free. 'Vengeance is Mine,' saith the Lord, but I want to repay it myself. I want to----"

Here he leant across the table and turned his sightless eyes upon me.

"This is certainly a curious sort of missionary," I said to myself as I watched him, "He may be smitten on one cheek, but I scarcely fancy he would be content to turn the other to the striker."

At this moment Coddy leant forward in his chair, and placed his hand upon his friend's arm. The effect was magical. His fit of impotent rage died down as suddenly as it had sprung up, and immediately he became again the quiet, suave, smoothspoken individual who had first entered my office.

"I must beg your pardon, Mr. Fairfax," he said, in a totally different voice to that in which he had just spoken. "When I remember how we have been wronged I am apt to forget myself. I trust you will forgive me?"

"I will do so willingly," I answered. "You have certainly won the right to be excused if you entertain a feeling of resentment for the man who has treated you so shamefully. And now to resume our conversation?"

"What were you about to say?"

"I was about to ask you the number and description of the stones of which he robbed you. You told me they numbered ninety-three in all, if I remember aright. Can you tell me how many there were of each?"

"Forty-eight rubies and forty-five sapphires," he replied without a moment's hesitation. "The rubies were uncut and of various sizes, ranging perhaps from ten to eighty carats. They were true rubies, not spinels, remember that. The sapphires ran from fifteen carats to sixty, and there was not a flaw amongst them."

"Has Hayle any knowledge of the value of precious stones?"

"There's not a keener judge in the East. He would be a cunning man who would succeed in taking him in about the value of anything from a moonstone to a ruby."

"In that case he would, in all probability, know where to place them to the best advantage?"

"You may be sure that was his intention in coming to England. But we have tried Hatton Garden and can hear nothing of him there."

"He may have disposed of some of them on the continent," I said. "However, we will soon clear that point up. The size of the larger stones is so unusual that they would be certain to attract attention. And now one other question. Are you aware whether he has any friends or relatives in England?"

"So far as we know he has not a single relative in the world," Kitwater replied. "Have you ever heard of one, Coddy?"

The little man shook his head, and then, taking the other's hand, tapped upon it with his fingers in the manner I have already described.

"He says Hayle had a sister once, of whom he was very fond." The tapping upon the hand continued, and once more Kitwater translated, "She was a cripple, and lived in a small house off the Brompton Road. She died while Hayle was in North Borneo; is not that so, little man?"

Codd nodded his head to show that Kitwater had interpreted him correctly. I then made some inquiries as to the missing man's habits. So far the description I had had of him was commonplace in the extreme.

"Do you know whether he shipped on board the *Jemadar* for England under his own name, or under an assumed one?"

"He booked his passage as George Bertram," Kitwater replied. "We know that is so, for we made inquiries at Rangoon."

I next noted the name and address of the vessel's owner, and resolved to pay him a visit next morning. It would be hard if I could not learn from him something concerning Mr. Hayle, and where he had gone on landing.

"I think those are all the questions I want to ask you at present," I said, closing my note-book. "It would be as well perhaps for you to furnish me with your address, in order that I may communicate with you, should it be necessary."

"At present," said Kitwater, "we are staying with my niece at the village of Bishopstowe in Surrey. My late brother was vicar of the parish for many years, and he left his daughter a small property in the neighbourhood. They tell me it is a pretty place, but, as you are aware, I unfortunately cannot see it, and my friend Codd here cannot talk to me about it?"

He heaved a heavy sigh and then rose to depart.

"I must again express my gratitude to you, Mr. Fairfax," he said, "for having consented to take up the case. I feel certain you will ultimately be successful. I will leave you to imagine with what anxiety we shall await any news you may have to give us."

"I will communicate with you as soon as I have anything to report," I answered. "You may rely upon my doing my best to serve you. By the way, are you aware that your niece called upon me this morning?"

He gave a start of surprise.

"No, I certainly did not know it," he replied. "She said nothing to us of such an intention. I know that she is heart and soul with us in our desire to find Hayle. But since you have seen her you probably know that?"

"I think I do," I returned, for some reason almost abruptly.

"She is a good girl," said Kitwater, and then took from his pocket an envelope which he handed to me.

"By the way I brought this with me," he said, "in the hope that we should be able to induce you to accede to our wishes. Inside you will find a hundred-pound note, which should be sufficient to cover any preliminary expenses. If you need more, perhaps you will be kind enough to communicate with me at once, and it shall be sent you. A receipt can be forwarded to me at your leisure."

I thanked him and placed the envelope upon the table. In my own mind I felt that it would be an easy matter to guess whence the sum had come, and for a reason that I could not then analyze, and therefore am unable to describe, the thought irritated me.

Having assured them that the amount would be quiet sufficient, in the event of nothing unforeseen happening, to last for some considerable time to come, I conducted them to the door, again repeating the promise that I would communicate with them so soon as I had anything to report. If I had only known then, that, at the very moment when they stepped in to the street, the man they wanted me to find for them, and whom they hated so desperately, was standing in a shop on the other side of the road, keeping an eye on my door, and evidently watching for their departure, how much trouble and vexation of spirit we should all have been saved. But I did not know this until long afterwards, and then of course the information came too late to be of any service to us.

Next morning I was early at the office, being desirous of winding up another little matter before I turned my attention to the new affair. One of my subordinates had just returned from the Continent whither I had sent him to keep an eye on a certain pseudo-French Marquis with whom I expected to have dealings at no distant date. He reported that the gentleman in question had broken the bank at Monte Carlo, had staked and lost all his winnings next day, and had shot himself on the promenade on the evening following. With his death the affair, on which I had confidently expected to be employed, came to an end, I could not say that I was altogether sorry.

"I shall want you to leave on Friday, Turner, for St. Petersburg," I said, when he had finished his report and I had commented upon it. "Do you remember Paulus Scevanovitch, who was concerned in that attempt to defraud the Parisian jewellers, Maurel and Company, two years ago?"

"Yes, sir, I remember him perfectly," Turner replied. "A tall, burly man, with a bushy beard, the top of his little finger on the left hand missing, and a long white scar over his right eyebrow."

"The same," I answered. "I see you have not forgotten him. Well, I want you to find him out, and let me have an exact account of his movements during the next three weeks. The office will arrange your expenses in the usual way, and you had better leave by the mail-train. In all probability I shall see you off."

"Very good, sir," the man responded, and withdrew.

He had scarcely gone before one of my clerks entered the room and handed me a card. On it was printed the name of Mr. Edward Bayley, and in the left-hand bottom corner was the announcement that he was the Managing Director of the Santa Cruz Mining Company of Forzoda, in the Argentine Republic.

"Show the gentleman in, Walters," I said.

In a few minutes a tall, handsome man, irreproachably turned out, entered the office. He seated himself in a chair the clerk placed for him, put his hat and umbrella on another, and then turned to me.

"My card has made you familiar with my name, Mr. Fairfax," he began, "and doubtless, if you are at all familiar with mines and mining, you are acquainted with the name of the company I have the honour to represent?"

"I am very much afraid the Mining Market does not possess very much

interest for me," I replied. "I have to work so hard for my money, that when I have got it I prefer to invest it in something a little more reliable. May I inquire the nature of your business with me?"

"I have come to see you, Mr. Fairfax," he said, speaking very impressively, and regarding me deliberately as he did so, "on rather a delicate subject. Before I explain what it is, may I ask that you will treat what I am about to tell you as purely confidential?"

"My business is invariably a confidential one," I answered for the second time in two days. "I venture to think that this room has heard more secrets than almost any other in England. But though they say walls have ears, I have never heard it said that they have tongues."

"It is sometimes a good thing that they have not," he replied. "And now let me tell you what business has brought me here. In the first place, if you do not already know it, I may say that the Company I represent is an exceedingly wealthy one, and, as our business lies a long way from Threadneedle Street, if I may so put it, it is necessary for us to trust very largely to the honesty of our *employés* on the other side of the world. Of course we make all sorts of inquiries about them prior to engaging their services, and it is also needless to say that we keep a sharp eye on them when they have entered our employ. Nevertheless, it is quite possible, all precautions notwithstanding, for an unscrupulous man to take advantage of us. As a matter of fact, that is what has happened, and what has also brought me to you. For some considerable time past we have had our suspicions that our manager at the mines has been in league with a notorious rascal in New York. In proof of this, I might say that our returns have shown a decided falling off, while our manager has, so we have lately discovered, within the past year become rich enough to purchase property to a considerable extent in the United States. Unfortunately for us, owing to a lack of direct evidence, we are unable to bring his defalcations home to him, though of course we are as certain of our facts as we can well be of anything."

"I think I understand," I said. "Your business with me is to endeavour to induce me to go out to the Argentine and make inquiries on your behalf with the idea of bringing this man to book. Is that not so?"

"That is my errand," he replied gravely. "If you care to undertake the task, we, on our side—and I speak as the mouthpiece of the Company—will be prepared to pay you very high terms for your services; in point of fact, almost what you

may ask in reason. The matter, as you may suppose, is a most serious one for us, and every day's delay is adding to it. May I ask what your terms would be, and when would you be prepared to start?"

"Your offer is a most liberal one," I said. "Unfortunately, however, I fear there is a considerable difficulty in the way of my accepting it."

"A difficulty!" he exclaimed, raising his eyebrows as if in astonishment. "But surely that obstacle can be removed. Especially for an offer of such magnitude as we are prepared to make you."

"Excuse me," I said, somewhat tartly, "but however great the inducement may be, I never break faith with my clients. The fact of the matter is, only yesterday I promised to undertake another piece of business which, while not being so remunerative, perhaps, as that you are now putting before me, means a very great deal to those who are, for the time being, my employers."

"Would it be impertinent on my part to ask at what time yesterday afternoon you arrived at this momentous decision?"

"Shortly after four o'clock," I answered, but not without a little wonderment as to his reason for putting the question. For my own part I did not see what it had to do with the matter in hand.

"Dear me, how very vexing, to be sure!" he observed. "This is certainly another instance of the contrariness of Fate."

"How so?" I asked.

"Because it was my intention to have called upon you shortly after lunch yesterday on this matter," he answered. "Unfortunately I was prevented at the last moment. Had I been able to get here, I might have forestalled your more successful client. Are you quite sure, Mr. Fairfax, that it is out of the question for you to undertake what we want?"

"If it is necessary for me to go at once, I fear it is," I answered. "But if it would be of any use to you, I could send you a trustworthy subordinate; one who would be quite capable of undertaking the work, and who would give you every satisfaction."

"I fear that would not be the same thing," he said. "My firm have such implicit faith in you that they would not entertain the idea of any one else going. Now

think, Mr. Fairfax, for a moment. If you are prepared to go, I, in my turn, on behalf of my Company, am prepared to offer you your expenses and a sum of five thousand pounds. You need not be away more than three months at longest, so that you see our offer is at the rate of twenty thousand pounds a year. It is princely remuneration."

I looked at him closely. It was plain that he was in earnest—in deadly earnest, so it seemed. Even a defaulting manager would scarcely seem to warrant so much zeal.

"I am very much flattered by your offer," I said; "and believe me, I most truly appreciate the generosity of your Company; but, as I said before, if it is necessary for me to go at once, that is to say, before I have completed my present case, then I have no option but to most reluctantly decline."

"Perhaps you will think it over," he continued, "and let me know, say to-morrow?"

"No amount of thinking it over will induce me to alter my decision," I replied. "You must see for yourself that I have no right to accept a retainer from one party and then throw them over in order to favour another. That would not only be a dishonourable action on my part, but would be bad from a business point of view. No, Mr. Bayley, I am exceedingly sorry, but I have no option but to act as I am doing."

"In that case I must wish you a very good-morning," he remarked, and took up his hat and umbrella. I could see, however, that he was still reluctant to go.

"Good-morning," I answered. "I hope your affairs in the Argentine may brighten before very long."

He shook his head gloomily, and then left the office without another word.

When he had gone I answered some letters, gave some instructions to my managing clerk, and then donned my hat and set off for the office of the Shipping Company that had brought Gideon Hayle to England.

Unfortunately it transpired that they were not in a position to do very much in the way of helping me. Mr. Bertram had certainly travelled home in one of their steamers, so the manager informed me, a boat that as a rule did not carry passengers. He had landed at the docks, and from that moment they had neither seen nor heard anything of him. I inquired for the steamer, only to learn that she

was now somewhere on her way between Singapore and Hong Kong. This was decidedly disappointing, but as most of the cases in which I have been ultimately successful have had unpromising beginnings, I did not take it too seriously to heart. Leaving the Shipping Office, I next turned my attention to Hatton Garden, where I called upon Messrs. Jacob and Bulenthall, one of the largest firms in the gem trade. We had had many dealings together in the past, and as I had had the good fortune on one occasion to do them a signal service, I knew that they would now do all that they could for me in return.

"Good-day, Mr. Fairfax," said the chief partner, as I entered his snug little sanctum, which leads out of the main office. "What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"I am in search of some information," I replied, "and I think you may be able to help me."

"I will do all that is in my power to render you assistance," he returned, as he wiped his glasses and placed them on his somewhat fleshy nose. "What is the information you require? Has there been another big robbery of stones, and you think it possible that some of them may have come into our hands?"

"There certainly has been a robbery," I replied, "and the stones may have been offered to you, but not in the way you mean. The fact of the matter is, I want to discover whether or not a large consignment of uncut rubies and sapphires of great value have been placed upon the market within the last two months."

"Uncut rubies and sapphires are being continually placed upon the market," he observed, leaning back in his chair and rattling his keys.

"But not such stones as those I am looking for," I said, and furnished him with the rough weights that had been supplied to me.

"This is interesting—decidedly interesting," he remarked. "Especially since it serves to offer an explanation on a certain matter in which we have been interested for some little time past. On the sixteenth of last month, a gentleman called upon us here, who stated that he had lately returned from the Far East. He had had, so he declared, the good fortune to discover a valuable mine, the locality of which he was most careful not to disclose. He thereupon showed my partner and myself ten stones, consisting of five rubies and five sapphires, each of which weighed between fifty-five and sixty carats."

"And you purchased them?"

"We did, and for a very heavy sum. I can assure you the vendor was very well aware of their value, as we soon discovered, and he was also a good hand at a bargain. Would you care to see the stones? I shall be pleased to show them to you if you would."

"I should like to see them immensely." I replied.

Thereupon he crossed the room to a safe in the corner, and, when he had unlocked it, took from it a wash-leather bag. Presently ten superb gems were lying before me on the table.

"There they are," he said, waving his hands towards them, "and as you can see for yourself, they are worthy of being set in the crown of an emperor. It is not often that we are enthusiastic in such matters, but in this case we have very good reason to be. When they are properly cut, they will be well nigh priceless."

"Do you happen to know whether he sold any more of a similar kind in London?" I asked, as he returned them to their place in the safe.

"I know that he sold fifteen smaller ones to Henderson and Soil, and three almost as large as those I have just shown you to a firm in Amsterdam."

"If he is the man I want to get hold of, that accounts for twenty-eight," I said, making a note of the fact as I spoke. "Originally he had ninety-three in his possession."

"Ninety-three?" the merchant replied, as if he could scarcely believe his ears. "Why, his mine must be a source of unlimited wealth. I wish I had known this before."

"So do I," I said. "And now perhaps you can go further and furnish me with a description of the man himself. I shall then be able to tell you whether my gentleman and your customer are one and the same person."

"I can describe him to you perfectly well. He was tall, but somewhat sparely built, very sunburnt—which would be accounted for by his long residence in the East—his hair was streaked with grey, he had dark eyes, and a singularly sharp nose."

"Did he wear a beard?"

"No, only a moustache. The latter was carefully trimmed, and, I think, waxed. Of this, however, I am not quite certain."

"And his name?"

"He would not tell us that. We pressed him to disclose it, but he obstinately refused to do so. He said that if his name became known it might lead to the discovery of his mine, and that he was naturally anxious that such an event should not occur."

"But what guarantee had you that the stones were not stolen?"

"None whatever—but it is most unlikely. In the first place, they are uncut; in the second, we have had them in our possession for some time, and you may be sure have made the closest inquiries. Besides, there are few such stones in Europe, and what there are, are safely in the possession of their owners. Surely you are not going to tell me that they were stolen?"

In the man's voice there was a perceptible note of alarm.

"I don't think you need be afraid," I said. "They were stolen by the man from his two partners, and all they want is to get hold of him in order to make him disgorge their share of what he got for them."

"I am glad indeed to hear that," was the reply. "I was beginning to grow uneasy. And now is there any other way in which I can serve you? If so, I shall be only too pleased to do it."

I informed him that, if I had anything else to ask him I would call upon him again, and then took my departure. While I was in a great measure satisfied with the information I had gained, I was not altogether easy in my mind. The question to be answered was, was the man I was after the same individual who had sold Jacob and Bulenthall the stones? The description given me varied in several particulars to that furnished me by Kitwater. My client declared him to possess black hair; the merchant had said grey; the one had declared that Hayle possessed a beard, the other that he had only a waxed moustache. The figure, however, was in both cases identically the same.

Having satisfied myself that he had no more to tell me, I thanked him for his courtesy and left the office. A fresh idea had occurred to me which I thought might lead to something, and I resolved to put it into practice without any further waste of time.

CHAPTER IV

It would be a truism to declare that human nature is about as complicated a piece of machinery as could be found in the human world. And yet I do not know why it should be considered so. All things and all men do not run in grooves. A man to be a criminal need not be hopelessly bad in every other sense. I have met murderers who did not possess sufficient nerve to kill a rabbit, burglars who would rob a poor man of all his possessions in the world, and yet would not despoil a little child of a halfpenny. The fact of the matter is we all have our better points, our own innate knowledge of good and evil. Hayle had betrayed Kitwater and Codd in the cruellest fashion possible, and by so doing had condemned them to the most fiendish torture the mind of man could conceive. Yet it was through his one good point, his weakness, if I might so describe it, that I was enabled to come to my first grip with him.

It was between the hours of two and three that I entered the gates of Brompton Cemetery and commenced my examination of the various graves therein contained. Up one path I wandered and down another in search of the resting-place of the poor crippled sister of whom Gideon Hayle had been so fond. It was a long time before I found it, but at last I was successful. To my astonishment the stone was plainly a new one, and the grave was tastefully decorated with flowers. As a matter of fact it was one of the prettiest in its neighbourhood, and to me this told its own tale. I went in search of the necessary official and put the case to him. He informed me that I was correct in my supposition, and that the stone had only lately been erected, and, what was more to the point, he informed me that the gentleman who had given the order for it, had only the week before paid the necessary sum for insuring the decoration of the grave for many years to come.

"I gather from your words, that the gentleman, who must be a relative of the deceased, has been here lately," I said.

"He was here last Sunday afternoon," the man replied. "He is a most kindly and generous gentleman, and must have been very fond of his sister. The way he stood and looked at that stone the last time he was here was touching to see. He'd been in foreign parts, sir, and is likely to go out there again, so I gathered from

what he said. It is a pity there are not more like him."

This was news, indeed, and I pricked up my ears on hearing it.

Having learnt all I was likely to discover, I thanked the man for his kindness and left the cemetery. If I had done nothing else, I had at least satisfied myself upon one point, and this was the fact that Gideon Hayle had been in London within the week. Under such circumstances it should not be very difficult to obtain his address. But I knew from experience that when things seemed to be running most smoothly, they are as much liable to a breakdown as at any other time—sometimes even more so. I accordingly hailed a cab and drove back to my office. Once there I entered up my diary according to custom, wrote a note to Kitwater, informing him that I had discovered that Gideon Hayle had not left London on the previous Sunday, and also that I believed him to have negotiated certain of the stones in London, after which I returned to my hotel to dine.

Most people who know me would tell you that it might be considered consistent with my character that I still occupied the same apartments in the private hotel, off the Strand, in which I had domiciled myself when I first arrived in England. If I am made comfortable I prefer to stick to my quarters, and the hotel in question was a quiet one; the cooking and the service were excellent, and, as every one did his, or her, best for me, I saw no sort of reason for moving elsewhere. It is something in such matters to know the people with whom one has to deal, and in my case I could not have been better cared for had I been a crowned head. I suppose I am a bit of a faddist in these things. Except when business compels me to break through my rule, I rise at the same hour every morning, breakfast, lunch, and dine at the same time, and as far as possible retire to rest punctually at the usual moment. After dinner in those days, things have changed since then somewhat. I invariably smoked a cigar, and when the evening was fine, went for a stroll, returning between nine and ten and retiring to rest, unless I had anything to attend to, punctually at eleven. On this particular occasion, the night being fine, though rather close, I lit my cigar in the hall and stepped out into the street exactly as the clock was striking eight. I had a lot to think of, and felt just in the humour for a walk. London at all hours is a fascinating study to me, and however much I see of her, I never tire of watching her moods. After I left my hotel I strolled along the Embankment so far as the Houses of Parliament, passed the Abbey, made my way down Victoria Street, and then by way of Grosvenor Place to Hyde Park Corner. Opposite Apsley House I paused to look about me. I had my reasons for so doing, for ever since I had left the river-side, I had entertained the notion that I was being followed.

When I had crossed the road at the Houses of Parliament, two men, apparently of the loafer class, had crossed too. They had followed me up Victoria Street, and now, as I stood outside the Duke of Wellington's residence, I could see them moving about on the other side of the way. What their intentions were I could not say, but that their object was to spy upon my movements, I was quite convinced. In order to assure myself of this fact I resolved to lay a little trap for them. Passing down Piccadilly at a sharp pace, I turned into Berkeley Street, some twenty yards or so ahead of them. Crossing the road I sheltered myself in a doorway and waited. I had not been there very long, before I observed that they had turned the corner and were coming along in hot pursuit. That they did not notice me in my hiding-place is evident from the fact that they passed on the other side of the street, and doubtless thinking that they had missed me, commenced to run. I thereupon quitted my friendly doorway, returned to Piccadilly, hailed a cab, and drove back to my hotel. As I went I turned the matter over in my mind. With the exception of the present case I had nothing important on hand, so that I could think of no one who would be likely to set a watch upon me. That I did not suspect Hayle would only be natural under the circumstances, as I did not know then that he had been the witness of Kitwater and Codd's visit to my office that afternoon, and I felt convinced in my own mind that he was unaware that they were in England. It was most natural, therefore, that I should not in any way associate him with the plot.

The following day was spent for the greater part in making further inquiries in Hatton Garden, and among the various Dutch merchants then in London. The story the senior partner of Messrs. Jacob and Bulenthall had told me had proved to be correct, and there could be no sort of doubt that Hayle had realized a very large sum of money by the transaction. What was more, I discovered that he had been seen in London within the previous twenty-four hours. This was a most important point, and it encouraged me to persevere in my search. One thing, however, was remarkable. One or two of the merchants to whom Hayle had disposed of his stones, had seen more of him than Messrs. Jacob and Bulenthall. Two had dined with him at a certain popular restaurant in Regent Street, and had visited a theatre with him afterwards. In neither case, however, had they discovered his name or where he lived. This secret he guarded most religiously, and the fact that he did so, afforded additional food for reflection. If he imagined his old companions to be dead, why should he be so anxious that his own identity, and his place of residence, should remain a secret? If they were safely out of the way, no one could possibly know of his connection with them, and in that case he might, if he pleased, purchase a mansion in Park Lane and flourish

his wealth before the eyes of the world, for any harm it might do him. Yet here he was, exciting mistrust by his secrecy, and leading a hole-and-corner sort of life when, as I have said, there was not the slightest necessity for it. Little by little I was beginning to derive the impression that the first notion of Mr. Hayle was an erroneous one, and that there was more in him than I supposed. This sentiment was destined to be strengthened and in the very near future, by two remarkable discoveries.

That evening I again went for a walk. Feeling fairly confident, however, that the men who had followed me before would do so again, I took certain precautions before I set out. One of my subordinates, a man remarkable for his strength, was ordered to be at the corner of my street at half-past eight. He was to wait there until I emerged from my hotel, himself remaining as far as possible out of sight. On this occasion I had planned my route deliberately. I made my way in the first place along the Strand as far as Trafalgar Square, down Cockspur Street by way of the Haymarket to Regent Street, then on by Langham Place to that vast network of streets that lies between Oxford Street and the Euston Road.

I had some time before this found out that I was being followed again. The two men who had dodged my steps on the previous night were doing so again, though the reason for their action was no more apparent. However, I had laid my plans most carefully, and hoped, if all went well, to be able to satisfy myself upon this point. I had plenty of enemies, I knew, as a man of my profession must of necessity have, but I could not think of one who would pry upon my movements like this. At last the time came for action. Turning into a side street, I slackened my pace in order to give my pursuers time to come up. Apart from ourselves the street was quite deserted, and, if they intended doing me harm, was quite dark enough to favour their plans. I could see as well as hear them approaching. Then, when they were close upon me, I slipped my hand into my coat-pocket, and turned and confronted them. My own man was softly coming up from behind.

"Now, my men," I began, "what's the meaning of this? No, you can keep your distance. It's no use thinking of violence, for I've got you before and behind. Take care that they don't get away, Wilson!"

"Aye, aye, sir," the man replied. "I'll take good care of that."

" 'LET'S OUT HIM, BILL,' SAID THE TALLER OF THE TWO MEN."

"Let's 'out him,' Bill," said the taller of the two men, and as he did so took a step towards me.

"Do you see this?" I inquired, producing my revolver as I spoke. "I am aware that it is not lawful to carry firearms in the streets of London, but when one has to deal with gentlemen like you, it becomes a necessity. Throw up your hands."

They did as they were ordered without demur. Then turning to the taller man I addressed him more particularly.

"You seem to be the leader," I said, "and for that reason I want to have a little talk with you. Your companion can take himself off as soon as he pleases. If he does not, let me assure him that he will get into trouble. Your intention to 'out me,' as you call it, has failed, as you can see, and when I have done with you I don't think the attempt will be repeated. Now get off, my man, and thank your stars that I have let you go so easily."

Never were the tables turned so quickly or so completely on a pair of rogues, and the man I addressed seemed to think too. After a whispered conversation with his companion, he walked away at his best pace, and we saw no more of him.

"Now," I said, turning to the fellow who was left behind, "you will come along with me to my office, and we'll have a little talk together."

Our prisoner would have resisted, but certain warnings I was able to give him, induced him to change his mind. When we reached my office I opened the door and conducted him to my sanctum, while Wilson followed close behind and lit the gas. He then passed into the outer office, leaving me alone with my prisoner. On closer inspection he proved to be a burly ruffian, and would doubtless have proved an ugly customer to tackle alone. He, in his turn, looked at me in some interest and then at the door, as if he were half inclined to try the effect of a struggle.

"First and foremost, do you know where you are and who I am?" I asked him.

"No," he said, "I can't say as ever I set my eyes on yer afore last night, and I

don't know yer bloomin' name or what yer are and I don't want to."

"Politeness is evidently not your strong point," I commented. "Just look at that!"

Taking a sheet of note-paper from the rack upon my table I handed it to him.

He did so, and I saw a look of surprise steal over his face. He looked from it to me and then back again at the paper.

"Fairfax," he said. "The d---- Tec, the same as got poor old Billy Whitelaw scragged last year."

"I certainly believe I had that honour," I returned, "and it's just possible, if you continue in your present career, that I may have the pleasure of doing the same for you. Now, look here, my man, there's some one else at the back of this business, and what I want to know is, who put you up to try your hand upon me? Tell me that, and I will let you go and say no more about it. Refuse, and I must try and find some evidence against you that will rid society of you for some time to come. Doubtless it will not be very difficult."

He considered a moment before he replied.

"Well," he said, "I don't know as how I won't tell you, a seein' you're who yer are, and I am not likely to get anything out of the job. It was a rare toff who put us on to it. Silk hat, frock-coat, and all as natty as a new pin. He comes across us down in the Dials, stood us a couple of drinks, turfed out a suvring apiece, and then told us he wanted the gentleman at Rickford's Hotel laid by for a time. He told us 'ow yer were in the habit of going about the streets at night for walks, and said as 'ow he would be down near the hotel that evenin' and when yer came out, he would strike a match and light a smoke just ter give us the tip like. We wos to foller yer, and to do the job wherever we could. Then we was to bring your timepiece to him at the back of St. Martin's Church in the Strand at midnight, and he would pay us our money and let us keep the clock for our trouble. Oh, yes, 'e's a deep un, jost take my tip for it. He knowed that unless we 'outed' yer properly, we'd not be able to get at your fob, and then 'e'd not have paid out."

"I see, and not being successful on your first attempt, you followed me again to-night, of course by his instructions as before?"

"That's so, guvner," the man replied, "but I reckon we ain't agoin' to see any money this trip. If I'd ha' knowed who you was, I wouldn't a taken this job in

hand, not for no money."

"That is where so many of you go wrong," I said. "You fail to make sufficient inquiries before you commence business. And I understand you to say that the gentleman who put you up to it, is to be at the back of St. Martin's church to-night?"

"Yes, sir, that's so," said the fellow. "He'll be there all right."

"In that case I think I'll be there to meet him," I continued. "It's a pity he should not see some one, and I suppose you will not keep your appointment?"

"Not if I knows it," the man answered. Then he added regretfully, "A regular toff—he was—free with his rhino as could be, and dressed up to the nines. He chucked his 'arf soverings about as if they were dirt, he did."

"It is sad to think that through your folly, no more of them will find themselves into your pocket," I said. "You should have done the trick last night, and you would now be in the full enjoyment of your wealth. As it is you have had all your trouble for nothing. Now, that's all I want to say to you, so you can go and join your amiable companions as soon as you like. Just one word of advice, however, before you depart. Don't go near St. Martin's church to-night, and, when you want to kick another unoffending citizen to death, be sure of your man before you commence operations."

As I said this I rang the bell and told Wilson to show him out, which he did.

"Now," I said to myself after he had gone, "this looks like developing into an affair after my own heart. I am most anxious to discover who my mysterious enemy can be. It might be Grobellar, but I fancy he is still in Berlin. There's Tremasty, but I don't think he would dare venture to England. No, when I come to think of it, this business does not seem to belong to either of them."

I took from my pocket the watch which was to have played such an important part in the drama and consulted it. It was just half-past eleven, therefore I had exactly half-an-hour to get to the *rendezvous*. I called Wilson and congratulated him on the success which had attended our efforts of that evening.

"It's a good thing you came out of it so well, sir," he said. "They were a nasty pair of chaps, and would have thought as much of 'outing' you as they would of drinking a pot of ale."

"But thank goodness, they didn't succeed," I replied. "As the saying goes, 'a miss has never killed a man yet.' And now, Wilson, you'd better be off home to bed. Turn out the gas before you go. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir," he answered, and then I put on my hat and left the office.

I found when I stepped into the street that the character of the night had changed. Thick clouds obscured the sky, and a few drops of rain were falling. At first I felt inclined to take a cab, but on second thoughts I changed my mind, and putting up my umbrella strode along in the direction of St. Martin's church.

The theatres were over by this time, and the streets were beginning to grow empty. I passed the Gaiety where a middle-aged gentleman, decidedly intoxicated, was engaged in a noisy altercation with a policeman, who was threatening to take him to Bow Street if he did not go quietly home, and at last approached the spot for which I was making. I took up my position on the darker side of Holywell Street, and waited. So far I seemed to have the thoroughfare to myself, but I had still some three or four minutes to wait.

At last midnight sounded, and as I heard it I concealed myself more carefully in my doorway and watched. I was not to be kept long in suspense, for the new day was scarcely three minutes old, when a hansom drove up to the other side of the church, and a man alighted. He paid off the man and wished him good-night, and then came along the roadway at the back of the church. From where I stood I could see his figure distinctly, but was not able to distinguish his face. He was dressed in a black cloak, and wore a deer-stalker hat upon his head. That he was the man I wanted I felt sure, for what would any one else be doing there at such an hour? That he was surprised at not finding his bravoes awaiting him was very certain, for he looked up the street, down the street, peered into Holywell Street, where, thank goodness, he did not see me, then along the Strand in a westerly direction, and afterwards came and took up his position within half-a-dozen paces of where I was hidden. Presently he took a cigar-case from his pocket, opened it, selected a weed, and struck a match to light it. The flame illumined his face so that I could see it distinctly. If I had not had myself well under control, I believe I should have uttered an exclamation of surprise that could not have failed to attract attention. *The man who had set those rascals on to try and get rid of me, was none other than Mr. Edward Bayley, the Managing Director of the Santa Cruz Mining Company of the Argentine Republic!*

Here was a surprise indeed! What on earth did it all mean?

CHAPTER V

I must confess that the discovery I had made behind St. Martin's church, and which I described at the end of the previous chapter, had proved too much for me. What possible reason could Mr. Bayley have for wanting to rid himself of me? Only the morning before he had been anxious to secure my services in the interests of his Company, and now here he was hiring a couple of ruffians to prevent me from doing my work, if not to take my life. When I reached my hotel again, and went to bed, I lay awake half the night endeavouring to arrive at an understanding of it; but, try how I would, I could not hit upon a satisfactory solution. Upon one thing, however, I had quite made up my mind. As soon as the City offices were open, I would call at that of the Santa Cruz Mining Company, and put a few questions to Mr. Bayley which I fancied that individual would find difficult and rather unpleasant to answer. This plan I carried out, and at ten o'clock I stood in the handsome outer office of the Company.

"I should be glad to see the managing director, if he could spare me a few moments," I said to the youth who waited upon me in answer to his question.

"He's engaged, sir, at present," the lad replied. "If you will take a seat, however, I don't fancy he will be very long."

I did as he directed, and in the interval amused myself by studying a large map of the Argentine Republic, which hung upon the wall. I had practically exhausted its capabilities when the door opened, and a tall, military-looking man emerged and passed out into the street.

"What name shall I say, sir?" inquired the clerk, as he descended from his high stool and approached me.

"Fairfax," I replied, giving him my card. "I think the manager will know my name."

The clerk disappeared to return a few moments later with the request that I would follow him. Preparing myself for what I fully expected would be a scene, I entered the director's sanctum. It was a handsome room, and was evidently used as a Boardroom as well as an office, for there was a long table in the

middle, surrounded by at least a dozen chairs. At the furthest end a gentleman of venerable appearance was seated. He rose as I entered, and bowed to me.

"In what way can I be of service to you, Mr. Fairfax?" he inquired, after I had seated myself.

"I am afraid there has been a mistake," I answered, looking about me for Mr. Bayley. "I told the clerk that I desired to see the managing director."

"You *are* seeing him," he returned with a smile, "for I am he."

"In that case I must have misunderstood the gentleman who called upon me two days ago," I replied, with some surprise.

"Do I understand you to say that a gentleman from this office called upon you?"

"Yes, a Mr. Bayley, a tall, good-looking man, of between thirty-eight and forty years of age."

The old gentleman stared, as well he might.

"But there is no Mr. Bayley here," he said. "We have no one of that name in our employ. I fear the man, whoever he was, must have been playing a trick upon you. I sincerely trust he has done no damage. Might I ask what he called upon you about?"

"He called on me on behalf of your Company," I answered. "He informed me that for some time past you have ascertained the gravest suspicions concerning the manager of your mines in the Argentine. He said that information had reached your ears to the effect that the man in question was in league with a notorious swindler in New York, and, though you could not bring any proved charge against him, you were equally certain that he was robbing you in order to fill his own pockets. He appeared to be most anxious to persuade me to go to the Republic at once in order that I might inquire into matters and report to you. I was to be away three months, and was to be paid five thousand pounds and my expenses for my trouble."

"My good sir, this is really preposterous," the old gentleman returned. "I can positively assure you that there is not a word of truth in his assertion. Our manager in the Argentine is an old and valued friend, and I would stake my life on his fidelity. Nothing would induce us to think even of sending a detective out

to spy upon him."

"I am beginning to believe that I should like to meet Mr. Bayley again," I remarked. "He has a fine imagination, and, from what you tell me, it seems that I should have looked a fool had I gone out to South America on such an errand."

"It would have been exceedingly inconvenient not only for you, but also for us," said the manager. "I shall report this matter at the Board meeting to-day. We must endeavour to discover who this man is, and also his reasons for acting as he has done. Should we hear anything further upon the subject, we will at once communicate with you."

"I should be glad if you will do so," I replied. "I should like to get this matter cleared up as soon as possible. There may be something behind it that we do not understand."

I thanked him for the interview, and then took my departure, more puzzled by it than I had been by anything for a long time. When I reached my office I took the card from a drawer, which Mr. Edward Bayley had sent to me, and despatched it by special messenger to the office of the famous mining company. That afternoon another surprise was in store for me. Shortly after lunch, and when I was in the middle of a letter to Kitwater, a message was received through the telephone to the effect that the managing director of the Santa Cruz Mining Company, whom I had seen that morning, was on his way to call upon me.

"Something has evidently come to light," I reflected. "Perhaps the mystery surrounding Mr. Edward Bayley is about to be cleared up, for I must confess I do not like the look of it."

A quarter of an hour later the manager was ushered into my presence.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Fairfax," he said. "I have come to ask you, if you will permit me, a few questions, and also to tell you that I think we have discovered who it is that is masquerading as the occupant of my position. You gave me this morning a rough description of the individual who called upon you, can you recall anything particular about his appearance. Any strange mark, for instance. Anything by which we should be able to swear to his identity?"

"I would swear to his identity anywhere, without a mark" I replied. "But since you *do* mention it, I remember that he had a small triangular scar upon his left cheek."

"Then it is the same man after all," said the manager. "That is certainly extraordinary. When our secretary spoke to me about him after you had left I had my doubts; now, however, they are quite removed. Why he should have called upon you in such a guise is a question I cannot for the life of me answer with any sort of satisfaction."

"Perhaps you will be a little more explicit," I said. "You have not told me yet how it is that you have been able to locate the gentleman in question. This morning you must remember you had no sort of remembrance of him."

"In that case you must forgive me," he replied. "As a matter of fact I was so much carried away by my excitement that I could think of nothing else. However, I have promised you the story, and you shall have it. Some years ago, eight or ten perhaps, we had a young man working for us in the Argentine as an overseer. He was in many respects a brilliant young fellow, and would doubtless have done well for himself in time, had he been able to go straight. Unfortunately, however, he did not do so. He went from bad to worse. At last he was caught in a flagrant piece of dishonesty, and was immediately discharged. When I tell you that that young man had a mark such as you described upon his cheek, you may be able to derive some idea of what follows."

"Might it not be a pure coincidence?" I replied.

"Not in this case, I fancy," he answered. "What makes me the more inclined to believe that it is the same individual, is the fact that our secretary met him in Leadenhall Street only a few days ago. He looked older, but had evidently prospered in the world. As a matter of fact, Warner described him as being irreproachably dressed, and turned out. I trust his good fortune was honestly come by; but I must own, from what I know of him, that I have my doubts."

"But what possible reason could this individual have for calling upon me, and why should he have made me such an offer as I have described to you?"

The director shook his head. The question was evidently beyond him.

"I can assign no sort of reason for it," he said, "unless he has some hope of being able to get you out of England for a time."

"I don't see how that could benefit him," I replied. "I am connected with no case in which he has any sort of interest."

"You never can tell," the old gentleman replied. "From what I know of him,

Gideon Hayle was always----"

"Gideon what?" I cried, springing to my feet. "Did I understand you to say Gideon Hayle?"

"That's the name of the young man of whom I have been speaking to you," he replied. "But what makes you so excited."

"Because I can understand everything now." I declared. "Good heavens! what an idiot I have been not to have seen the connection before! Now I know why Gideon Hayle tried to lure me out of England with his magnificent offer. Now I see why he set these roughs upon me. It's all as plain as daylight!"

"I am afraid I do not quite understand," said my companion in his turn. "But it is quite evident to me that you know more of Hayle's past life than I do!"

"I should think I did," I replied. "By Jove, what a blackguard the man must be! He robbed his two partners of enormous wealth in China, left them in the hands of the Chinese to be tortured and maimed for life, and now that he knows that I am acting for them in order to recover their treasure, he endeavours to put me out of the way. But you've not done it yet, Mr. Hayle," I continued, bringing my fist down with a bang upon the table, "and what's more, clever as you may be, you are not likely to accomplish such an end. You'll discover that I can take very good care of myself, but before very long you'll find that *you* are being taken care of by somebody else."

"This is a strange affair indeed, Mr. Fairfax," said the manager, "and it is evident that I have been of some assistance to you. I need not say that I am very glad, the more so because it is evident that our Company is not involved in any system of fraud. I will not disguise from you that I had my fears that it was the beginning of trouble for us all."

"You may disabuse your mind of that once and for all," I answered. "If there is any trouble brewing it is for our friend, Mr. Hayle. That gentleman's reckoning is indeed likely to be a heavy one. I would not stand in his shoes for something."

There was a brief and somewhat uncomfortable pause.

"And now allow me to wish you a very good-afternoon," the old gentleman observed.

"Good-afternoon," I replied, "and many thanks for the service you have

rendered me. It has helped me more than I can say."

"Pray don't mention it, my dear sir, don't mention it," replied the kindly old gentleman, as he moved towards the door. "I am very glad to have been useful to you."

When he had gone I sat down at my desk to think. I had had a good many surprises in my life, but I don't know that I had ever been more astonished than I was that afternoon. If only I had been aware of Hayle's identity when he had called upon me two mornings before, how simply everything might have been arranged! As a matter of fact I had been talking with the very man I had been paid to find, and, what was worse, had even terminated the interview myself. When I realized everything, I could have kicked myself for my stupidity. Why should I have suspected him, however? The very boldness of his scheme carried conviction with it! Certainly, Mr. Gideon Hayle was a foeman worthy of my steel, and I began to realize that, with such a man to deal with, the enterprise I had taken in hand was likely to prove a bigger affair than I had bargained for.

"Having failed in both his attempts to get me out of the way, his next move will be to leave England with as little delay as possible," I said to myself. "If only I knew in what part of London he was staying, I'd ransack it for him, if I had to visit every house in order to do so. As it is, he has a thousand different ways of escape, and unless luck favours me, I shall be unable to prevent him from taking his departure."

At that moment there was a tap at the door and my clerk entered the room.

"Mr. Kitwater and Mr. Codd to see you, sir."

"Show them in," I said, and a moment later the blind man and his companion were ushered into my presence.

Codd must have divined from the expression upon my face that I was not pleased to see them.

"You must forgive me for troubling you again so soon," said Kitwater, as he dropped into the chair I had placed for him, "but you can understand that we are really anxious about the affair. Your letter tells us that you discovered that Hayle was in London a short time since, and that he had realized upon some of the stones. Is it not possible for you to discover some trace of his whereabouts?"

"I have not been able to do that yet," I answered. "It will be of interest to you,

however, to know that he called upon me here in this room, and occupied the chair you are now sitting in, three days ago."

Kitwater clutched the arm of the chair in question and his face went as white as his beard.

"In this room three days ago, and sitting in your presence," he cried. "Then you know where he is, and can take us to him?"

"I regret that such a thing is out of my power," I answered. "The man came into and left this room without being hindered by me."

Kitwater sprang to his feet with an oath that struck me as coming rather oddly from the lips of a missionary.

"I see it all. You are in league with him," he cried, his face suffused with passion. "You are siding with him against us. By God you are, and I'll have you punished for it. You hoodwinked us, you sold us. You've taken our money, and now you've gone over and are acting for the enemy."

I opened the drawer of my table and took out the envelope he had given me when he had called. For a reason of my own, I had not banked the note it contained.

"Excuse me, Mr. Kitwater," I said, speaking as calmly as I could, "but there seems to be a little misunderstanding. I have not sold you, and I have not gone over to the enemy. There is the money you gave me, and I will not charge you anything for the little trouble I have been put to. That should convince you of my integrity. Now perhaps you will leave my office, and let me wash my hands of the whole affair."

I noticed that little Codd placed his hand upon the other's arm. It travelled down until their hands met. I saw that the blind man was making an effort to recover his composure, and I felt sure that he regretted ever having lost it. A moment later Codd came across the room to my table, and, taking up a piece of paper, wrote upon it the following words—

"Kitwater is sorry, I am sure. Try to forgive him. Remember what he has suffered through Hayle."

The simplicity of the message touched me.

"Pray sit down a minute, Mr. Kitwater," I said, "and let me put myself right with you. It is only natural that you should get angry, if you think I have treated you as you said just now. However, that does not happen to be the case. I can assure you that had I known who Hayle was, I should have taken very good care that he did not leave this office until you had had an interview with him. Unfortunately, however, I was not aware of his identity. I have encountered some bold criminals in my time. But I do not know that I have ever had a more daring one than the man who treated you so badly."

I thereupon proceeded to give him a rough outline of Hayle's interview with myself, and his subsequent treatment of me. Both men listened with rapt attention.

"That is Hayle all over," said Kitwater when I had finished. "It is not his fault that you are not a dead man now. He will evade us if he possibly can. The story of the roughs you have just told us shows that he is aware that you are on the trail, and, if I know him at all, he will try the old dodge, and put running water between you and himself as soon as possible. As I said to you the other day, he knows the world as well as you know London, and, in spite of what people say, there are still plenty of places left in it where he can hide and we shall never find him. With the money he stole from us he can make himself as comfortable as he pleases wherever he may happen to be. To sum it all up, if he gets a week's start of us, we shall never set eyes on him again."

"If that is so we must endeavour to make sure that he does not get that start," I replied. "I will have the principal ports watched, and in the meantime will endeavour to find out where he has stowed himself away in London. You may rest assured of one thing, gentlemen, I took this matter up in the first place as an ordinary business speculation. I am now going on for that reason and another. Mr. Hayle tried a trick on me that I have never had attempted before, and for the future he is my enemy as well as yours. I hope I have set myself right with you now. You do not still believe that I am acting in collusion with him?"

"I do not," Kitwater answered vehemently. "And I most humbly apologize for having said what I did. It would have served me right if you had thrown the case up there and then, and I regard it as a proof of your good feeling towards us that you consent to continue your work upon it. To-day is Friday, is it not? Then perhaps by Sunday you may have something more definite to tell us."

"It is just possible, I may," I returned.

"In that case I am instructed by my niece to ask if you will give us the pleasure of your company at Bishopstowe on that day. After the toils of London, a day in the country will do you no harm, and needless to say we shall be most pleased to see you."

I remembered the girl's pretty face and the trim neat figure. I am not a lady's man, far from it, nevertheless I thought that I should like to renew my acquaintance with her.

"I shall be very pleased to accept Miss Kitwater's invitation, provided I have something of importance to communicate," I said. "Should I not be able to come, you will of course understand that my presence is required in London or elsewhere. My movements must of necessity be regulated by those of Mr. Hayle, and while I am attending to him I am not my own master."

Kitwater asked me one or two more questions about the disposal of the gems to the merchants in Hatton Garden, groaned as I describe the enthusiasm of the dealers, swore under his breath when he heard of Hayle's cunning in refusing to allow either his name or address to be known, and then rose and bade me good-bye.

During dinner that evening I had plenty to think about. The various events of the day had been so absorbing, and had followed so thick and fast upon each other, that I had little time to seriously digest them. As I ate my meal, and drank my modest pint of claret, I gave them my fullest consideration. As Kitwater had observed, there was no time to waste if we desired to lay our hands upon that slippery Mr. Hayle. Given the full machinery of the law, and its boundless resources to stop him, it is by no means an easy thing for a criminal to fly the country unobserved; but with me the case was different. I had only my own and the exertions of a few and trusted servants to rely upon, and it was therefore impossible for us to watch all the various backdoors leading out of England at once. When I had finished my dinner I strolled down the Strand as far as Charing Cross Station. Turner was to leave for St. Petersburg that night by the mail-train, and I had some instructions to give him before his departure. I found him in the act of attending to the labelling of his luggage, and, when he had seen it safely on the van, we strolled down the platform together. I warned him of the delicate nature of the operation he was about to undertake, and bade him use the greatest possible care that the man he was to watch did not become aware of his intentions. Directly he knew for certain that this man was about to leave Russia, he was to communicate with me by cypher, and with my representative in Berlin,

and then follow him with all speed to that city himself. As I had good reason to know, he was a shrewd and intelligent fellow, and one who never forgot any instructions that might be given him. Knowing that he was a great votary of the Goddess Nicotine, I gave him a few cigars to smoke on the way to Dover.

"Write to me immediately you have seen your man," I said. "Remember me to Herr Schneider, and if you should see----"

I came to a sudden stop, for there, among the crowd, not three carriage-lengths away from me, a travelling-rug thrown over his shoulder, and carrying a small brown leather bag in his hand, stood Gideon Hayle. Unfortunately, he had already seen me, and almost before I realized what he was doing, he was making his way through the crowd in the direction of the main entrance. Without another word to Turner, I set off in pursuit, knowing that he was going to make his bolt, and that if I missed him now it would probably be my last chance of coming to grip with him. Never before had the platform seemed so crowded. An exasperating lady, with a lanky youth at her side, hindered my passage, porters with trucks piled with luggage barred the way just when I was getting along nicely; while, as I was about to make my way out into the courtyard, an idiotic Frenchman seized me by the arm and implored me to show him "ze office of ze money-changaire." I replied angrily that I did not know, and ran out into the portico, only to be in time to see Gideon Hayle take a seat in a hansom. He had evidently given his driver his instructions, for the man whipped up his horse, and went out of the yard at a speed which, at any other hour, would certainly have got him into trouble with the police. I called up another cab and jumped into it, promising the man a sovereign as I did so, if he would keep the other cab in sight, and find out for me its destination.

"Right ye are, sir," the cabman replied. "You jest leave that to me. I won't let him go out of my sight."

Then we, in our turn, left the yard of the station, and set off eastwards along the Strand in pursuit. Both cabmen were sharp fellows and evidently familiar with every twist and turn of their famous London. In my time I have had a good many curious drives in one part of the world and another, but I think that chase will always rank first. We travelled along the Strand, about a hundred yards behind the other vehicle, then turned up Southampton Street, through Covent Garden by way of Henrietta Street into Long Acre. After that I cannot pretend to have any idea of the direction we took. I know that we passed through Drury Lane, crossed High Holborn, to presently find ourselves somewhere at the back

of Gray's Inn. The buildings of the Parcels' Post Depot marked another stage in our journey. But still the other cab did not show any sign of coming to a standstill. Leaving Mount Pleasant behind us, we entered that dingy labyrinth of streets lying on the other side of the Clerkenwell House of Detention. How much longer was the chase going to last? Then, to my delight, the other cab slackened its pace, and eventually pulled up before a small public-house. We were so close behind it that we narrowly escaped a collision. I sprang out, and ran to the other vehicle in order to stop Hayle before he could alight.

"Wot's up, guvner?" asked the cabman. "Don't go a worritting of yourself. There's nobody inside."

He was quite right, *the cab was empty*!

CHAPTER VI

I flatter myself that I am a man who is not easily disconcerted, but for the second time that day I was completely taken aback. I had watched that cab so closely, had followed its progress so carefully, that it seemed impossible Hayle could have escaped from it. Yet there was the fact, apparent to all the world, that he had got away. I looked from the cab to the cabman and then at my own driver, who had descended from his perch and was standing beside me.

"Well, I wouldn't have believed it," I said aloud, when I had recovered somewhat my astonishment.

My own driver, who had doubtless begun to think that the sovereign I had promised him was in danger, was inclined to be somewhat bellicose. It appeared as if he were anxious to make a personal matter of it, and in proof of this he sternly demanded of his rival what he had done with his fare.

"You don't think I've ate him, do yer?" asked that worthy. "What's it got to do with me what a fare does? I set 'im down, same as I should do you, and now I am on my way 'ome. Look arter your own fare, and take him 'ome and put him ter bed, but don't yer a'come abotherin' me. I've done the best day's work I've ever 'ad in my life, and if so be the pair of yer like to come into the pub here, well, I don't know as I won't a stand yer both a two of Scotch cold. It looks as if 'twould kind a' cheer the guvner up a bit, seem' as how he's dis'pointed like. Come on now!"

It is one of my best principles, and to it I feel that I owe a considerable portion of my success, that I never allow my pride to stand in the way of my business. The most valuable information is not unfrequently picked up in the most unlikely places, and for this reason I followed my own Jehu and his rival into the public-house in question. The man was visibly elated by the good stroke of business he had done that night, and was inclined to be convivial.

" 'e was a proper sort of bloke," he said as we partook of our refreshment. " 'e give me a fiver, 'e did, an' I wishes as 'ow I could meet another like 'im every day."

"They do say as how one man's mutton is another man's poison," retorted my driver, who, in spite of the entertainment he was receiving, visibly regarded the other with disfavour. "If you'd a give us the tip, I'd 'ave 'ad my suvering. As it is I don't take it friendly like that you should a' bilked us."

"Yer can take it as yer darned well please," said the other, as he spoke placing his glass upside down on the counter, in order to prove beyond contradiction that it was empty. I immediately ordered a repetition, which was supplied. Thereupon the cabman continued—

"When I 'as a bit of business ter do yer must understand that I does it, and that no man can say as I doesn't. A gent gets into my keb and sez he, 'Drive me until I tell yer to stop, and go as fast as yer can,' sez he. 'Take every back street yer know of, and come out somewhere Hoxton way. I'm not partic'lar so long as I go fast, an' I don't git collared by the keb that's after us. If yer help me to give 'im the slip there's a five-poun' note for yer trouble.' Well, sez I to myself, this is a proper bit of busness and there and then I sets off as fast as the old 'orse cud take us. We turns up Southampton Street, and you turns up after us. As we was agoin' down 'enrietta Street I asked him to let me 'ave a look at his five-poun' note, for I didn't want no Bank of Fashion or any of that sort of truck shoved into me, you'll understand. 'You needn't be suspicious, Cabby,' sez he, 'I'll make it suverings, if you like, and half a one over for luck, if that will satisfy yer? 'When I told him it would, he give me two poun' ten in advance and away we went again. We weren't more than 'arf a mile away from here—thank ye, sir, I don't mind if I do, it's cold drivin'—well, as I was a sayin' we wasn't more than 'arf a mile away from here, when the gent he stands up and sez to me, 'Look here, Kebby, turn the next corner pretty sharp, and slow down at the first bye-street you come to. Then I'll jump out,' 'Right yer are, guvner,' sez I, and with that he 'ands me up the other two poun' ten and the extry half-suvering. I fobbed it and whipped up the old 'oss. Next moment we was around the corner, and a-drivin' as if we was a trying to ketch a train. Then we comes to a little side street, an' I slows down. Out 'e jumps and down he goes along a side street as if the devil was arter him. Then I drives on my way and pulls up 'ere. Bilked you were, guvner, and I don't mind sayin' so, but busness is busness, and five poun' ten ain't to be picked up every day. I guess the old woman will be all there when I get 'ome to-night."

"That's all very well, cabby," I said, "but it's just likely you want to add another sovereign to that five-pound ten. If you do I don't mind putting another in your way. I tell you that I want to catch the man I was after to-night. He's as big a thief as ever walked the earth, and if you will help me to put my hand upon

him, you'll be doing a service, not only to me, but to the whole country at large."

"What is it you want me to do?" he asked suspiciously. "He treated me fair, and he'll take it mean of me if I help you to nab him."

"I don't want you to do anything but to drive me to the side street where you put him down. Then you can take your sovereign and be off home as quick as you like. Do you agree?"

He hesitated for a space in which a man could have counted twenty, and then set his glass upon the counter.

"I'll do it," he said. "I'll drive yer there, not for the suvering, but for the good of the country yer speaks about. Come on."

I gave my own man his money, and then followed the other out to his cab. He mounted to his box, not without some help, and we presently set off. Whether it was the effect of the refreshment he had imbibed, or whether it was mere elation of spirits I cannot say, the fact, however, remains that for the whole of the journey, which occupied ten or twelve minutes he howled vociferously. A more joyous cabman could scarcely have been discovered in all that part of London. At last he pulled his horse to a standstill, and descended from his seat.

"This 'ere's the place," he said, "and that's the street he bolted down. Yer can't mistake it. Now let's have a look at yer suvering, guvner, and then I'll be off home to bed, and it's about time too."

I paid him the sum I had promised him, and then made my way down the narrow street, in the direction Hayle had taken. It was not more than a couple of hundred yards long, and was hemmed in on either hand by squalid cottages. As if to emphasize the misery of the locality, and perhaps in a measure to account for it, at the further end I discovered a gin-palace, whose flaring lights illuminated the streets on either hand with brazen splendour. A small knot of loafers were clustered on the pavement outside the public, and these were exactly the men I wanted. Addressing myself to them I inquired how long they had been in their present position.

"Best part of an hour, guv'ner," said one of them, pushing his hands deep down into his pockets, and executing a sort of double shuffle as he spoke. "Ain't doin' any harm 'ere, I 'ope. We was 'opin' as 'ow a gent like yourself would come along in the course of the evening just to ask us if we was thirsty, and wot we'd

take for to squench it."

"You shall have something to squench it, if you can answer the questions I am going to ask you," I replied. "Did either of you see a gentleman come down this street, running, about half-an-hour or so ago."

"Was he carrying a rug and a bag?" asked one of the men without hesitation.

"He was," I replied. "He is the man I want. Which way did he go when he left here?"

"He took Jim Boulter's cab," said another man, who had until a few moments before been leaning against the wall. "The Short 'Un was alookin' after it for 'im, and I heard him call Jimmy myself. He tossed the Short 'Un a bob, he did, when he got in. Such luck don't seem ever to come my way."

"Where is the Short 'Un, as you call him?" I inquired, thinking that it might be to my advantage to interview that gentleman.

"A-drinkin' of his bob in there," the man answered. "Where d'ye think ye'd be a-seein' 'im? Bearin' 'isself proud like a real torf, and at closen' time they'll be chuckin' 'im out into the gutter, and then 'is wife 'll come down, and they 'll fight, an' most like both of 'em 'll get jugged before they knows where they is, and come before the beak in the mornin'."

"Look here," I said, "if one of you will go in and induce the gentleman of whom you speak to come out here and talk to me, I would not mind treating the four of you to half-a-crown."

The words had scarcely left my lips before a deputation had entered the house in search of the gentleman in question. When they returned with him one glance was sufficient to show me that the Short 'Un was in a decidedly inebriated condition. His friends, however, deeming it possible that their chance of appreciating my liberality depended upon his condition being such as he could answer questions with some sort of intelligence, proceeded to shake and pummel him into something approaching sobriety. In one of his lucid intervals I inquired whether he felt equal to telling me in what direction the gentleman who had given him the shilling had ordered the cabman to drive him. He turned the question over and over in his mind, and then arrived at the conclusion that it was "some hotel close to Waterloo."

This was certainly vague, but it encouraged me to persevere.

"Think again," I said; "he must have given you some definite address."

"Now I do remember," said the man, "it seems to me it was Foxwell's Hotel, Waterloo Road. That's where it was, Foxwell's Hotel. Don't you know it?

> "Foxwell's Hotel is a merry, merry place,
> When the jolly booze is flowin', flowin' free."

Now chorus, gen'men."

Having heard all I wanted to, I gave the poor wretches what I had promised them, and went in search of a cab. As good luck would have it I was able to discover one in the City Road, and in it I drove off in the direction of Waterloo. If Hayle were really going to stay the night at Foxwell's Hotel, then my labours had not been in vain, after all. But I had seen too much of that gentleman's character of late to put any trust in his statements, until I had verified them to my own satisfaction. I was not acquainted with Foxwell's Hotel, but after some little search I discovered it. It was by no means the sort of place a man of Hayle's wealth would be likely to patronize, but remembering that he had particular reasons for not being *en evidence* just at present, I could understand his reasons for choosing such a hostelry. I accordingly paid off my cabman and entered the bar. Taking the young lady I found there a little on one side, I inquired whether a gentleman had arrived within the last half-hour, carrying a bag and a heavy travelling-rug.

Much to my gratification she replied that such a gentleman had certainly arrived within the past half-hour, and was now at supper in the coffee-room. She inquired whether I would care to see him? I replied in the negative, stating that I would call next day and make myself known to him.

"We are old friends," I said, "and for that reason I should be glad if you would promise me that you will say nothing to him about my coming to-night."

Woman-like the idea pleased her, and she willingly gave the promise I asked.

"If you want to see him you'd better be here early," she said. "He told me when he booked his room, that he should be wanting to get away at about ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

"I'll be here well before that," I replied. "If all goes right, I shall call upon him between eight and nine o'clock."

Feeling sure that, after what I had said to her, she would say nothing to Hayle about my visit, I returned to my own hotel and retired to rest.

Next morning I was up betimes, had breakfasted, and was at Foxwell's Hotel before eight o'clock had struck. I proceeded straight to the bar, where I discovered my acquaintance of the previous evening, in curl papers, assiduously dusting shelves and counter. There was a fragrance of the last night's potations still hovering about the place, which had the dreary, tawdry appearance that was so different to the glamour of the previous night. I bade the girl good-morning, and then inquired whether she had seen anything of my friend. At first she did not appear to recognize me, but on doing so she volunteered to go off and make inquiries. She did so, to return a few moments later with the information that the gentleman "had rung for his boots, and would be down to breakfast in a few minutes."

"I wonder what you will have to say for yourself when you see me, Mr. Hayle," I muttered. "You will find that I am not to be so easily shaken off as you imagine."

I accordingly made my way to the dining-room, and seating myself at a table, ordered a cup of coffee and an egg. The London egg is not a favourite of mine, but I was prepared to eat a dozen of them if necessary, if by so doing I could remain in the room long enough to find myself face to face with Gideon Hayle. Several people put in an appearance and commenced their morning repast, but when a quarter of an hour had elapsed and the man I wanted had not presented himself, my patience became exhausted and I went in search of my *hourie* of the bar.

"My friend's a long time coming down," I said, "I hope he has not gone out to breakfast?"

"You must be mistaken," she answered. "I saw him come down-stairs nearly a quarter of an hour ago. He went into the dining-room, and I felt sure you must have seen him. If you will follow me I'll show him to you."

So saying she led the way along the dingy passage until she arrived at a green baize door with two glass panels. Here she stopped and scanned the dining-room. The boots, who had just come upstairs from the lower regions, assisted in the operation, and seemed to derive considerable satisfaction from it.

"There he is," said the girl, pointing to a table in the furthest corner of the

room; "the tall man with the black moustache."

I looked and was consumed with disappointment. The individual I saw there was no more like Hayle than he was like the man in the moon.

"Do you mean to tell me that he is the man who arrived late last night in a cab, and whose luggage consisted of a small brown bag and a travelling rug?" I asked. "You've been having a game with me, young woman, and I should advise you to be careful. You don't realize who I am."

"Hoighty toity," she said, with a toss of her head that sent her curl-papers dancing. "If you're going to be nasty, I am going. You asked for the gentleman who came late last night with a bag, and there he is. If he's not the person you want, you mustn't blame me. I'm sure I'm not responsible for everybody's friends. Dear me, I hope not!"

The shock-headed boots had all this time been listening with the greatest interest. He and the barmaid, it appeared, had had a quarrel earlier in the morning, and in consequence were still far from being upon the best of terms.

"The cove as the gent wants, miss, must be 'im as came close upon eleven o'clock last night," he put in. "The toff with the bag and blanket. Why I carried his bag up to number forty-seven with my own 'ands, and you know it."

The girl was quite equal to the occasion.

"You'd better hold your tongue," she said. "If you don't you'll get into trouble."

"What for?" he inquired. "It's a free country, I 'ope. Nice sort of toff 'e was, forgot all about the boots, and me a-doin' 'is browns as slap-up as if 'e was a-goin' out to dinner with the Queen. But p'reaps he's left a 'arf-sovereign for me with you. It ain't likely. Oh no, of course it isn't likely he would. You wouldn't keep it carefully for me, would you? Oh no, in course not? What about that two bob the American gent give you?"

The girl did not wait to hear any more, but with a final toss of her head, disappeared into the bar.

"Now, look here, my friend," I said to the boots, "it is quite evident that you know more about this gentleman than that young lady does. Tell me all about him, and I'll make it worth your while."

"There ain't much to tell," he answered. "Leastways, nothin' particular. He was no end of a toff, great-coat with silk collar, neat browns, gloves, and a bowler 'at."

"Moustache?"

"Yes, and waxed. Got a sort of broad-arrow on his cheek, and looked at ye as if 'is eyes was gimlets, and he wanted to bore a hole through yer; called at seven, breakfast at half-past, 'am and eggs and two cups of corfee and a roll, all took up to 'im in 'is room. Ordered a cab to catch the nine o'clock express to Southampton. I puts 'im in with his bag and blanket, and says, 'Kindly remember the boots, sir,' and he says, 'I've done it,' I said I 'adn't 'ad it, and he told me to go to ------, well the place as isn't mentioned in perlite company. That's all I know about 'im."

He paused and shook his head in the direction of the bar, after which he observed that he knew all about it, and one or two other things beside.

I gave him a shilling for his information and then left the house. Once more I had missed Gideon Hayle by a few minutes, but I had received some information that might help me to find him again. Unfortunately, however, he was now well on his way to Southampton, and in a few hours might be out of England. My respect for that astute gentleman was increasing hourly, but it did not deter me, only made me the more resolved to beat him in the end. Making my way to Waterloo, I inquired when the next train left for Southampton. Finding that I had more than an hour and a half to wait, I telegraphed to the man I had sent to Southampton to watch the docks, and then took the electric railway to the city, and made my way to my office, where a pile of correspondence awaited me on my table. Calling my managing clerk to my assistance, I set to work to examine it. He opened the letters while I perused them and dictated the various replies. When he came to the fifth he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What is it?" I inquired. "Anything wrong?"

In reply he handed me a letter written on good note-paper, but without an address. It ran as follows—

"Mr. Gideon Hayle returns thanks for kind inquiries, and begs to inform Mr. Fairfax that he is leaving England to-day for Algiers."

"If he thinks he is going to bluff me with that sort of tale, he's very much

mistaken," I said. "I happen to be aware of the fact that he left for Southampton by the nine o'clock train this morning. If I might hazard a guess as to where he was going, I should say that his destination is the Cape. But let him go where he will, I'll have him yet. In the meantime, send Williams to Charing Cross at once, Roberts to Victoria, and Dickson to St. Paul's. Furnish each with a description of the man they are to look after, be particular about the scar upon his left cheek, and if they see him, tell them that they are not to lose sight of him, happen what may. Let them telegraph should they discover anything definite, and then go in pursuit. In any case I shall return from Southampton to-night, and shall call here at once."

Half-an-hour later I arrived at Waterloo, took my ticket and boarded the train for Southampton. When I reached the port I was met at the station by my representative, who informed me that he had seen nothing of the man I had described, although he had carefully looked for him.

"We'll try the various shipping-offices first," I said. "I feel positively certain that he came down here by the nine o'clock train."

We drove from shipping-office to shipping-office, and made the most careful inquiries, but in every case without success. Once we thought we had discovered our man, only to find, after wasting a precious hour, that the clerk's description was altogether a wrong one, and that he resembled Hayle in no sort of way. We boarded the South African mail-boat, but he was not among her passengers; we overhauled the American liner, with an equally barren result. We paid cursory visits to the principal hotels, but could hear no tidings of him in any one of them. As a matter of fact, if the man had journeyed to Southampton, as I had every reason to suppose he had done, he must have disappeared into thin air when he got there. The whole affair was most bewildering, and I scarcely knew what to think of it. That the boots at the hotel had not been hoodwinking me I felt assured in my own mind. His anger against the man was too real to allow any doubt upon that point. At last, having exhausted all our resources, and not seeing what I could do further, I returned to my subordinate's lodgings, where it had been arranged that telegrams should be addressed to me. On my arrival there a yellow envelope was handed to me. I tore it open eagerly and withdrew the contents. It proved to be from Dickson, and had been sent off from Dover. I took my codebook from my pocket and translated the message upon the back of the telegraph-form. It ran as follows—

"Man with triangular scar upon left cheek, brown bag and travelling rug,

boarded train at Herne Hill, went through to Dover, and has booked to Paris. Am following him according to instructions."

"Then he slipped me after all," I cried. "He must have gone on to Waterloo, crossed to Cannon Street, then on to London Bridge. The cunning scoundrel! He must have made up his mind that the biggest bluff he could play upon me was to tell the truth, and by Jove! he was not very far wrong. However, those laugh best who laugh last, and though he has had a very fair innings so far, we will see whether he can beat me in the end. I'll get back to Town now, run down to Bishopstowe to-morrow morning to report progress, and then be off to Paris after him on Monday."

At 8.45 that night I reached London. At the same moment Mr. Gideon Hayle was sitting down to a charming little dinner at the Café des Princes, and was smiling to himself as he thought of the success that had attended the trick he had played upon me.

CHAPTER VII

When I reached the charming little Surrey village of Bishopstowe, I could see that it bore out Kitwater's description of it. A prettier little place could scarcely have been discovered, with its tree-shaded high-road, its cluster of thatched cottages, its blacksmith's shop, rustic inn with the signboard on a high post before the door, and last but not least, the quaint little church standing some hundred yards back from the main road, and approached from the lych-gate by an avenue of limes.

"Here," I said to myself, "is a place where a man might live to be a hundred, undisturbed by the rush and bustle of the Great World."

That was my feeling then, but since I have come to know it better, and have been permitted an opportunity of seeing for myself something of the inner life of the hamlet, I have discovered that it is only the life of a great city, on a small scale. There is the same keen competition in trade, with the same jealousies and bickerings. However, on this peaceful Sunday morning it struck me as being delightful. There was an old-world quiet about it that was vastly soothing. The rooks cawed lazily in the elms before the church as if they knew it were Sunday morning and a day of rest. A dog lay extended in the middle of the road, basking in the sunshine, a thing which he would not have dared to do on a weekday. Even the little stream that runs under the old stone bridge, which marks the centre of the village, and then winds its tortuous course round the churchyard, through the Squire's park, and then down the valley on its way to the sea, seemed to flow somewhat more slowly than was its wont.

Feeling just in the humour for a little moralizing, I opened the lych-gate and entered the churchyard. The congregation were singing the last hymn, the Old Hundredth, if I remember rightly, and the sound of their united voices fitted perfectly into the whole scheme, giving it the one touch that was lacking. As I strolled along I glanced at the inscriptions on the various tomb-stones, and endeavoured to derive from them some notion of the lives and characters of those whose memories they perpetuated.

"Sacred to the memory of Erasmus Gunning, twenty-seven years

Schoolmaster of this Parish. Born 24th of March, 1806, and rested from his labours on September the 19th, 1876." Seating myself on the low wall that surrounded the churchyard, I looked down upon the river, and while so doing, reflected upon Erasmus Gunning. What had he been like, this knight of the ferrule, who for twenty-seven years acted as pedagogue to this tiny hamlet? What good had he done in his world? Had he realized his life's ambition? Into many of the congregation now worshipping yonder he must have driven the three R's, possibly with the assistance of the faithful ferrule aforesaid, yet how many of them gave a thought to his memory! In this case the assertion that he "rested from his labours" was a trifle ambiguous. Consigning poor Erasmus to oblivion, I continued my walk. Presently my eyes caught an inscription that made me halt again. It was dedicated to the "Loving Memory of William Kitwater, and Susan, his wife." I was still looking at it, when I heard a step on the gravel-path behind me, and turning round, I found myself standing face to face with Miss Kitwater. To use the conventional phrase, church had "come out," and the congregation was even now making its way down the broad avenue towards the high-road.

" 'HOW DO YOU DO, MR. FAIRFAX?' SAID MISS KITWATER."

"How do you do, Mr. Fairfax?" said Miss Kitwater, giving me her hand as she spoke. "It is kind indeed of you to come down. I hope you have good news for us?"

"I am inclined to consider it good news myself," I said. "I hope you will think so too."

She did not question me further about it then, but asking me to excuse her for a moment, stepped over the little plot of ground where her dear ones lay, and plucked some of the dead leaves from the flowers that grew upon it. To my thinking she was just what an honest English girl should be; straight-forward and gentle, looking the whole world in the face with frank and honourable simplicity. When she had finished her labour of love, which only occupied her a few moments, she suggested that we should stroll on to her house.

"My uncle will be wondering what has become of me," she said, "and he will also be most anxious to see you."

"He does not accompany you to church then?"

"No," she answered. "He is so conscious of his affliction that he cannot bear it to be remarked. He usually stays at home and walks up and down a path in the garden, brooding, I am afraid, over his treatment by Mr. Hayle. It goes to my heart to see him."

"And Mr. Codd?"

"He, poor little man, spends most of his time reading such works on Archæology as he can obtain. It is his one great study, and I am thankful he has such a hobby to distract his mind from his own trouble."

"Their coming to England must have made a great change in your life," I remarked.

"It *has* made a difference," she answered. "But one should not lead one's life exactly to please one's self. They were in sore distress, and I am thankful that they came to me, and that I had the power to help them."

This set me thinking. She spoke gravely, and I knew that she meant what she said. But underlying it there was a suggestion that, for some reason or another, she had not been altogether favourably impressed by her visitors. Whether I was right in my suppositions I could not tell then, but I knew that I should in all probability be permitted a better opportunity of judging later on. We crossed the little bridge, and passed along the high road for upwards of a mile, until we found ourselves standing at the entrance to one of the prettiest little country residences it has even been my lot to find. A drive, some thirty yards or so in length, led up to the house and was shaded by overhanging trees. The house itself was of two stories and was covered by creepers. The garden was scrupulously neat, and I fancied that I could detect its mistress's hand in it. Shady walks led from it in various directions, and at the end of one of these I could discern a tall, restless figure, pacing up and down.

"There is my uncle," said the girl, referring to the figure I have just described. "That is his sole occupation. He likes it because it is the only part of the garden in which he can move about without a guide. How empty and hard his life must seem to him, now, Mr. Fairfax?"

"It must indeed," I replied. "To my thinking blindness is one of the worst ills that can happen to a man. It must be particularly hard to one who has led such a vigorous life as your uncle has done."

I could almost have declared that she shuddered at my words. Did she know more about her uncle and his past life than she liked to think about? I remembered one or two expressions he had let fall in his excitement when he had been talking to me, and how I had commented upon them as being strange words to come from the lips of a missionary. I had often wondered whether the story he had told me about their life in China, and Hayle's connection with it, had been a true one. The tenaciousness with which a Chinaman clings to the religion of his forefathers is proverbial, and I could not remember having ever heard that a Mandarin, or an official of high rank, had been converted to the Christian Faith. Even if he had, it struck me as being highly improbable that he would have been the possessor of such princely treasure, and even supposing that to be true, that he would, at his death, leave it to such a man as Kitwater. No, I fancied if we could only get at the truth of the story, we should find that it was a good deal more picturesque, not to use a harsher term, than we imagined. For a moment I had almost been tempted to believe that the stones were Hayle's property, and that these two men were conducting their crusade with the intention of robbing him of them. Yet, on maturer reflection, this did not fit in. There was the fact that they had certainly been mutilated as they described, and also their hatred of Hayle to be weighed in one balance, while Hayle's manifest fear of them could be set in the other.

"If I am not mistaken that is your step, Mr. Fairfax," said the blind man, stopping suddenly in his walk, and turning his sightless face in my direction. "It's wonderful how the loss of one's sight sharpens one's ears. I suppose you met Margaret on the road."

"I met Miss Kitwater in the churchyard," I replied.

"A very good meeting-place," he chuckled sardonically. "It's where most of us meet each other sooner or later. Upon my word, I think the dead are luckier than the living. In any case they are more fortunate than poor devils like Codd and myself. But I am keeping you standing, won't you sit down somewhere and tell me your news? I have been almost counting the minutes for your arrival. I know you would not be here to-day unless you had something important to communicate to me. You have found Hayle?"

He asked the question with feverish eagerness, as if he hoped within a few hours to be clutching at the other's throat. I could see that his niece noticed it too, and that she recoiled a little from him in consequence. I thereupon set to work and told them of all that had happened since I had last seen them, described my lucky meeting with Hayle at Charing Cross, my chase after him across London, the trick he had played me at Foxwell's Hotel, and my consequent fruitless journey to Southampton.

"And he managed to escape you after all," said Kitwater. "That man would outwit the Master of all Liars Himself. He is out of England by this time, and we shall lose him."

"He has not escaped me," I replied quietly. "I know where he is, and I have got a man on his track."

"Then where is he?" asked Kitwater. "If you know where he is, you ought to be with him yourself instead of down here. You are paid to conduct the case. How do you know that your man may not bungle it, and that we may not lose him again?"

His tone was so rude and his manner so aggressive, that his niece was about to protest. I made a sign to her, however, not to do so.

"I don't think you need be afraid, Mr. Kitwater," I said more soothingly than I felt. "My man is a very clever and reliable fellow, and you may be sure that, having once set eyes on Mr. Hayle, he will not lose sight of him again. I shall leave for Paris to-morrow morning, and shall immediately let you know the result of my search. Will that suit you?"

"It will suit me when I get hold of Hayle," he replied. "Until then I shall know no peace. Surely you must understand that?"

Then, imagining perhaps, that he had gone too far, he began to fawn upon me, and what was worse praised my methods of elucidating a mystery. I cannot say which I disliked the more. Indeed, had it not been that I had promised Miss Kitwater to take up the case, and that I did not want to disappoint her, I believe I should have abandoned it there and then, out of sheer disgust. A little later our hostess proposed that we should adjourn to the house, as it was nearly lunch-time. We did so, and I was shown to a pretty bedroom to wash my hands. It was a charming apartment, redolent of the country, smelling of lavender, and after London, as fresh as a glimpse of a new life. I looked about me, took in the

cleanliness of everything, and contrasted it with my own dingy apartments at Rickford's Hotel, where the view from the window was not of meadows and breezy uplands, but of red roofs, chimney-pots, and constantly revolving cowls. I could picture the view from this window in the early morning, with the dew upon the grass, and the blackbirds whistling in the shrubbery. I am not a vain man, I think, but at this juncture I stood before the looking-glass and surveyed myself. For the first time in my life I could have wished that I had been better-looking. At last I turned angrily away.

"What a duffer I am to be sure!" I said to myself. "If I begin to get notions like this in my head there is no knowing where I may end. As if any girl would ever think twice about me!"

Thereupon I descended to the drawing-room, which I found empty. It was a true woman's room, daintily furnished, with little knick-knacks here and there, a work-basket put neatly away for the Sabbath, and an open piano with one of Chopin's works upon the music-rest. Leading out of the drawing-room was a small conservatory, filled with plants. It was a pretty little place and I could not refrain from exploring it. I am passionately fond of flowers, but my life at that time was not one that permitted me much leisure to indulge in my liking. As I stood now, however, in the charming place, among the rows of neatly-arranged pots, I experienced a sort of waking dream. I seemed to see myself standing in this very conservatory, hard at work upon my flowers, a pipe in my mouth and my favourite old felt hat upon my head. Crime and criminals were alike forgotten; I no longer lived in a dingy part of the Town, and what was better than all I had----

"Do you know I feel almost inclined to offer you the proverbial penny," said Miss Kitwater's voice behind me, at the drawing-room door. "Is it permissible to ask what you were thinking about?"

I am not of course prepared to swear it, but I honestly believe for the first time for many years, I blushed.

"I was thinking how very pleasant a country life must be," I said, making the first excuse that came to me. "I almost wish that I could lead one."

"Then why don't you? Surely it would not be so very difficult?"

"I am rather afraid it would," I answered. "And yet I don't know why it should be."

"Perhaps Mrs. Fairfax would not care about it," she continued, as we returned to the drawing-room together.

"Good gracious!" I remarked. "There is no Mrs. Fairfax. I am the most confirmed of old bachelors. I wonder you could not see that. Is not the word *crustiness* written plainly upon my forehead?"

"I am afraid I cannot see it," she answered. "I am not quite certain who it was, but I fancy it was my uncle who informed me that you were married."

"It was very kind of him," I said. "But it certainly is not the case. I fear my wife would have rather a lonely time of it if it were. I am obliged to be away from home so much, you see, and for so long at a time."

"Yours must be indeed a strange profession, Mr. Fairfax, if I may say so," she continued. "Some time ago I came across an account, in a magazine, of your life, and the many famous cases in which you had taken part."

"Ah! I remember the wretched thing," I said. "I am sorry that you should ever have seen it."

"And why should you be sorry?"

"Because it is a silly thing, and I have always regretted allowing the man to publish it. He certainly called upon me and asked me a lot of questions, after which he went away and wrote that article. Ever since then I have felt like a conceited ass, who tried to make himself out more clever than he really was."

"I don't think you would do that," she said. "But, if you will let me say so, yours must be a very trying life, and also an extremely dangerous one. I am afraid you must look upon human nature from a very strange point of view!"

"Not more strange probably than you do," I answered.

"But you are continually seeing the saddest side of it. To you all the miseries that a life of crime entails, are visible. The greater part of your time is spent among desperate men who are without hope, and to whom even their own shadows are a constant menace. I wonder that you still manage to retain your kind heart."

"But how do you know that my heart is kind?" I inquired.

"If for no other reason, simply because you have taken up my uncle's case,"

she answered. "Do you think when he was so rude to you just now, that I could not see that you pitied him, and for that reason you forbore to take advantage of your power? I know you have a kind heart."

"And you find it difficult to assimilate that kind heart with the remorseless detective of Public Life?"

"I find it difficult to recognize in you the man who, on a certain notable occasion, went into a thieves' den in Chicago unaccompanied, and after a terrible struggle in which you nearly lost your life, succeeded in effecting the arrest of a notorious murderer."

At that moment the gong in the hall sounded for lunch, and I was by no means sorry for the interruption. We found Kitwater and Codd awaiting our coming in the dining-room, and we thereupon sat down to the meal. When we left the room again, we sat in the garden and smoked, and later in the afternoon, my hostess conducted me over her estate, showed me her vineries, introduced me to her two sleek Jerseys, who had their home in the meadow I had seen from the window; to her poultry, pigs, and the pigeons who came fluttering about her, confident that they would come to no harm. Meanwhile her uncle had resumed his restless pacing up and down the path on which I had first seen him, Codd had returned to his archaeological studies, and I was alone with Miss Kitwater. We were standing alone together, I remember, at the gate that separated the garden from the meadowland. I knew as well as possible, indeed I had known it since we had met in the churchyard that morning, that she had something to say to me, something concerning which she had not quite made up her mind. What it was, however, I fancied I could hazard a very good guess, but I was determined not to forestall her, but to wait and let her broach it to me in her own way. This, I fancied, she was now about to do.

"Mr. Fairfax," she began, resting her clasped hands upon the bar of the gate as she spoke, "I want, if you will allow me, to have a serious talk with you. I could not have a better opportunity than the present, and, such as it is, I want to make the best of it."

"I am quite at your service, Miss Kitwater," I replied, "and if I can be of any use to you I hope you will tell me. Pray let me know what I can do for you?"

"It is about my uncle and Mr. Codd that I want to speak to you," she said, sinking her voice a little, as if she were afraid they might hear.

"And what about them?"

"I want to be loyal to them, and yet I want to know what you think of the whole affair," she said, looking intently at me as she spoke. "Believe me, I have good and sufficient reasons for my request."

"I am to tell exactly what I think about their pursuit of this man Hayle? And what chances of success I think they possess?" I said.

"I am not thinking so much of their success," she returned, "as of the real nature of their case."

"I believe I understand what is passing in your mind," I said. "Indeed I should not be surprised if the suspicion you entertain is not the same as I have myself."

"You have been suspicious then?"

"I could scarcely fail to be," I replied.

"Perhaps you will tell me what you suspect?"

"Will you forgive me, in my turn, if I am abrupt, or if I speak my mind a little too plainly?"

"You could not do that," she answered with a sigh. "I want to know your exact thoughts, and then I shall be able to form my own conclusions."

"Well," I said, "before I begin, may I put one or two questions to you? You will, of course, remember that I had never seen or heard of your uncle and Mr. Codd until they stopped me on Ludgate Hill. They were and practically are strangers to me. I have heard their story of their treasure, but I have not heard what any one else has to say upon the subject."

"I think I understand. Now what are your questions?"

"In the first place, did your late father ever speak to you of his brother as being a missionary in China?"

She shook her head, and from the look upon her face I could see that I had touched upon something painful. This, at least, was one of the things that had struck her as suspicious.

"If he were a missionary, I am quite sure my father did not know it," she said. "In fact I always understood that he was somewhat of a scapegrace, and in

consequence could never settle down to anything. That is your first, now what is your second question, Mr. Fairfax?"

I paused for a moment before I replied.

"My second partakes more of the nature of an assertion than a question," I answered. "As I read it, you are more afraid of what may happen should the two men meet than anything else."

"Yes, that is just what I *am* afraid of," she replied. "My uncle's temper is so violent, and his desire for revenge so absorbing, that I dare not think what would happen if he came into actual contact with Hayle. Now that I have replied to your questions, will you give me the answer I want? That is to say will you tell me what you think of the whole affair?"

"If you wish it, I will," I said slowly. "You have promised to permit me to be candid, and I am going to take advantage of that permission. In my own mind I do not believe the story they tell. I do not believe that they were ever missionaries, though we have convincing proofs that they have been in the hands of the Chinese. That Hayle betrayed them I have not the least doubt, it seems consistent with his character, but where they obtained the jewels, that are practically the keystones to the whole affair, I have no more notion than you. They may have been honestly come by, or they may not. So far as the present case is concerned that fact is immaterial. There is still, however, one vital point we have to consider. If the gems in question belong equally to the three men, each is entitled to his proper share, either of the stones or of the amounts realized by the sale. That share, as you already know, would amount to a considerable sum of money. Your uncle, I take it, has not a penny-piece in the world, and his companion is in the same destitute condition. Now we will suppose that I find Hayle for them, and they meet. Does it not seem to you quite possible that your uncle's rage might lead him to do something desperate, in order to revenge himself upon the other? But if he could command himself he would probably get his money? If, on the other hand, they do not meet, then what is to be done? Forgive me, Miss Kitwater, for prying into your private affairs, but in my opinion it is manifestly unfair that you should have to support these two men for the rest of their existences."

"You surely must see that I would rather do that than let my father's brother commit a crime," she returned, more earnestly than she had yet spoken.

The position was decidedly an awkward one. It was some proof of the girl's

sterling qualities that she should be prepared to make such a sacrifice for the sake of a man whom it was certainly impossible to love, and for that reason even to respect. I looked at her with an admiration in my face that I did not attempt to conceal. I said nothing by way of praise, however. It would have been an insult to her to have even hinted at such a thing.

"Pardon me," I said at last, "but there is one thing that must be taken into consideration. Some day, Miss Kitwater, you may marry, and in that case your husband might not care about the arrangement you have made. Such things have happened before now."

She blushed a rosy red and hesitated before she replied.

"I do not consider it very likely that I shall ever marry," she answered. "And even if I did I should certainly not marry a man who would object to my doing what I consider to be my duty. And now that we have discussed all this, Mr. Fairfax, what do you think we had better do? I understood you to say to my uncle that you intend leaving for Paris to-morrow morning, in order to continue your search for the man Hayle. Supposing you find him, what will you do then?"

"In such a case," I said slowly, looking at her all the time, "I should endeavour to get your uncle's and Codd's share of the treasure from him. If I am successful, then I shall let him go where he pleases."

"And supposing you are unsuccessful in obtaining the money or the gems?"

"Then I must endeavour to think of some other way," I replied, "but somehow I do not think I shall be unsuccessful."

"Nor do I," she answered, looking me full and fair in the face. "I fancy you know that I believe in you most implicitly, Mr. Fairfax."

"In that case, do you mind shaking hands upon it?" I said.

"I will do so with much pleasure," she answered. "You cannot imagine what a weight you have lifted off my mind. I have been so depressed about it lately that I have scarcely known what to do. I have lain awake at night, turning it over and over in my mind, and trying to convince myself as to what was best to be done. Then my uncle told me you were coming down here, and I resolved to put the case before you as I have done and to ask your opinion."

She gave me her little hand, and I took it and held it in my own. Then I

released it and we strode back along the garden-path together without another word. The afternoon was well advanced by this time, and when we reached the summer-house, where Codd was still reading, we found that a little wicker tea-table had been brought out from the house and that chairs had been placed for us round it. To my thinking there is nothing that becomes a pretty woman more than the mere commonplace act of pouring out tea. It was certainly so in this case. When I looked at the white cloth upon the table, the heavy brass tray, and the silver jugs and teapot, and thought of my own cracked earthenware vessel, then reposing in a cupboard in my office, and in which I brewed my cup of tea every afternoon, I smiled to myself. I felt that I should never use it again without recalling this meal. After that I wondered whether it would ever be my good fortune to sit in this garden again, and to sip my Orange Pekoe from the same dainty service. The thought that I might not do so was, strangely enough, an unpleasant one, and I put it from me with all promptness. During the meal, Kitwater scarcely uttered a word. We had exhausted the probabilities of the case long since, and I soon found that he could think or talk of nothing else. At six o'clock I prepared to make my adieux. My train left Bishopstowe for London at the half-hour, and I should just have time to walk the distance comfortably. To my delight my hostess decided to go to church, and said she would walk with me as far as the lych-gate. She accordingly left us and went into the house to make her toilet. As soon as she had gone Kitwater fumbled his way across to where I was sitting, and having discovered a chair beside me, seated himself in it.

"Mr. Fairfax," said he, "I labour under the fear that you cannot understand my position. Can you realize what it is like to feel shut up in the dark, waiting and longing always for only one thing? Could you not let me come to Paris with you to-morrow?"

"Impossible," I said. "It is out of the question. It could not be thought of for a moment!"

"But why not? I can see no difficulty in it?"

"If for no other reason because it would destroy any chance of my even getting on the scent. I should be hampered at every turn."

He heaved a heavy sigh.

"Blind! blind!" he said with despair in his voice. "But I know that I shall meet him some day, and when I do----"

His ferocity was the more terrible by reason of his affliction.

"Only wait, Mr. Kitwater," I replied. "Wait, and if I can help you, you shall have your treasure back again. Will you then be satisfied?"

"Yes, I'll be satisfied," he answered, but with what struck me as almost reluctance. "Yes, when I have my treasure back again I'll be satisfied, and so will Codd. In the meantime I'll wait here in the dark, the dark in which the days and nights are the same. Yes, I'll wait and wait and wait."

At that moment Miss Kitwater made her reappearance in the garden, and I rose to bid my clients farewell.

"Good-bye, Mr. Kitwater," I said. "I'll write immediately I reach Paris, and let you know how I am getting on."

"You are very kind," Kitwater answered, and Codd nodded his head.

My hostess and I then set off down the drive to the righ road which we followed towards the village. It was a perfect evening, and the sun was setting in the west in a mass of crimson and gold. At first we talked of various commonplace subjects, but it was not very long before we came back, as I knew we should do, to the one absorbing topic.

"There is another thing I want to set right with you, Miss Kitwater," I said, as we paused upon the bridge to which I have elsewhere referred. "It is only a small matter. Somehow, however, I feel that I must settle it, before I can proceed further in the affair with any satisfaction to myself."

She looked at me in surprise.

"What is it?" she asked, "I thought we had settled everything."

"So far as I can see that is the only matter that remains," I answered. "Yet it is sufficiently important to warrant my speaking to you about it. What I want to know is, who I am serving?"

"I don't think I understand," she said, drawing lines with her umbrella upon the stone coping of the bridge as she spoke.

"And yet my meaning is clear," I returned. "What I want to be certain of is, whether I am serving you or your uncle?"

"I don't think you are *serving* either of us," she answered. "You are helping us to right a great wrong."

"Forgive me, but that is merely trifling with words. I am going to be candid once more. You are paying the money, I believe?"

In some confusion she informed me that this certainly was the case.

"Very well, then, I am certainly your servant," I said. "It is your interests I shall have to study."

"I can trust them implicitly to you, I am sure, Mr. Fairfax," she replied. "And now here we are at the church. If you walk quickly you will be just in time to catch your train. Let me thank you again for coming down to-day."

"It has been a great pleasure to me," I replied. "Perhaps when I return from Paris you will permit me to come down again to report progress?"

"We shall be very pleased to see you," she answered. "Now, good-bye, and a pleasant journey to you!"

We shook hands and parted. As I passed along the road I watched her making her way along the avenue towards the church. There was need for me to shake my head.

"George Fairfax," said I, "it would require very little of that young lady's society to enable you to make a fool of yourself."

CHAPTER VIII

Unlike so many of my countrymen I am prepared to state that I detest the French capital. I always make my visits to it as brief as possible, then, my business completed, off I fly again, seeming to breathe more freely when I am outside its boundaries. I don't know why this should be so, for I have always been treated with the utmost courtesy and consideration by its inhabitants, particularly by those members of the French Detective Force with whom I have been brought in contact.

On this visit I crossed with one of the cleverest Parisian detectives, a man with whom I have had many dealings. He was most anxious to ascertain the reason of my visit to his country. My assurance that I was not in search of any one of his own criminals seemed to afford him no sort of satisfaction. He probably regarded it as an attempt to put him off the scent, and I fancy he resented it. We reached Paris at seven o'clock, whereupon I invited him to dine with me at eight o'clock, at a restaurant we had both patronized on many previous occasions. He accepted my invitation, and promised to meet me at the time and place I named. On the platform awaiting our arrival was my man Dickson, to whom I had telegraphed, ordering him to meet me.

"Well, Dickson," I said, when I had bade the detective *au revoir*, "what about our man?"

"I've had him under my eye, sir," he answered. "I know exactly what he's been doing, and where he's staying."

"That's good news indeed," I replied. "Have you discovered anything else about him?"

"Yes, sir," he returned. "I find that he's struck up a sudden acquaintance with a lady named Mademoiselle Beaumarais, and that they are to dine together at the Café des Ambassadeurs to-night. They have been in and out of half the jewellers' shops in the Rue de la Paix to-day, and he's spending a mint of money on her."

"They are dining at the Café des Ambassadeurs to-night, did you say? At what time?"

"I cannot tell you that, sir," Dickson replied. "I only know that they are to dine there together to-night."

"And pray how did you find that out?"

"I made inquiries as to who she was, where she lived, and then pumped her maid," he answered.

"You did not do anything that would excite his suspicions, I hope," I put in. "You ought to know by this time what women are."

"Oh, no, sir, you needn't be afraid," he said. "I was too careful for that. The maid and I are on very friendly terms. She believes me to be a Russian, and I've not denied it."

"It would be safest not to do so," I replied. "If she discovers that you are an Englishman, she might chance to mention the fact to her mistress. She would doubtless let it fall in conversation with him, and then all our trouble would be useless. You speak Russian, do you not?"

"Only pretty well, sir," he answered. "I should be soon bowled out if I came in contact with a real one."

"Well, I think I will be somewhere near the Café des Ambassadeurs to-night just to make sure of my man. After that I'll tell you what to do next."

"Very good, sir," he returned. "I suppose you will be staying at the same place?"

"Yes, the same place," I replied. "If you have anything to communicate, you can either call, or send word to me there."

I thereupon departed for the quiet house at which I usually take up my abode when in Paris. The big hotels are places I steer clear of, for the simple reason that I often have business in connection with them, and it does not pay me to become too well known. At this little house I can go out and come in just as I please, have my meals at any time of the day or night, and am as well cared for as at my own abode in London. On this occasion the old lady of the house greeted me with flattering enthusiasm. She had received my telegram, she said, and my usual room awaited me. I accordingly ascended to it in order to dress myself for the dinner of the evening, and as I did so, thought of the pretty bedroom I had seen on the previous day, which naturally led me to think of the

owner of the house, at that moment my employer. In my mind's eye I could see her just as she had stood on that old stone bridge at Bishopstowe, with the sunset behind her and the church bells sounding across the meadows, calling the villagers to evensong. How much better it was, I argued, to be standing talking to her there in that old world peace, than to be dressing for a dinner at an up-to-date French restaurant. My toilet completed, I descended to the street, hired a *fiacre*, and drove to the restaurant where I had arranged to meet my friend. The place in question is neither an expensive nor a fashionable one. It has no halls of mirrors, no dainty little cabinets, but, to my thinking, you can obtain the best dinner in all Paris there. On reaching it I found my guest had been the first to arrive. We accordingly ascended the stairs to the room above, where we selected our table and sat down. My companion was a witty little man with half the languages of Europe on his tongue, and a knowledge of all the tricks and dodges of all the criminal fraternity at his finger-ends. He has since written a book on his experiences, and a stranger volume, or one more replete with a knowledge of the darker side of human nature it would be difficult to find. He had commenced his professional career as a doctor, and like myself had gradually drifted into the detective profession. Among other things he was an inimitable hand at disguising himself, as many a wretched criminal now knows to his cost. Even I, who know him so well, have been taken in by him. I have given alms to a blind beggar in the streets, have encountered him as a *chiffonier* prowling about the gutters, have sat next to him on an omnibus when he has been clothed as an artisan in a blue blouse, and on not one of those occasions have I ever recognized him until he made himself known to me. Among other things he was a decided epicure, and loved a good dinner as well as any of his compatriots. Could you but see him with his napkin tucked under his chin, his little twinkling eyes sparkling with mirth, and his face wreathed in smiles, you would declare him to be one of the jolliest-looking individuals you have ever encountered. See him, however, when he is on business and has a knotty problem to solve, and you will find a different man. The mouth has become one of iron, the eyes are as fierce as fierce can be. Some one, I remember, likened him to the great Napoleon, and the description is an exceedingly apt one.

"By the way," I said, as we took a peep into our second bottle of Perrier-Jouet, "there is a question I want to put to you. Do you happen to be acquainted with a certain Mademoiselle Beaumarais?"

"I have known her for more years than she or I would care to remember," he answered. "For a woman who has led the life she has, she wears uncommonly

well. A beautiful creature! The very finest shoulders in all Paris, and that is saying something."

He blew a kiss off the tips of his fingers, and raised his glass in her honour.

"I drink to her in this noble wine, but I do not let her touch my money. Oh no, *la belle Louise* is a clever woman, a very clever woman, but money trickles through her fingers like water through a sieve. Let me think for a moment. She ruined the Marquis D'Esmai, the Vicomte Cotforét, Monsieur D'Armier, and many others whose names I cannot now recall. The first is with our noble troops in Cochin China, the second is in Algeria, and the third I know not where, and now I have learnt since my arrival in Paris that she has got hold of a young Englishman, who is vastly wealthy. She will have all he has got very soon, and then he will begin the world anew. You are interested in that Englishman, of course?"

"How do you know that?"

"Because you question me about Mademoiselle Beaumarais," he answered. "A good many people have asked me about her at different times, but it is always the man they want to get hold of. You, my astute Fairfax, are interested in the man, not because you want to save him from her, but because he has done a little something which he should not have done elsewhere. The money he is lavishing on Mademoiselle Louise, whence does it come? Should I be very wrong if I suggested gems?"

I gave a start of surprise. How on earth did he guess this?

"Yes! I see I'm right," he answered with a little laugh. "Well, I knew it a long time ago. Ah, you are astonished! You should surely never allow yourself to be surprised by anything. Now I will tell you how I come to know about the gems. Some time ago a certain well-known lady of this city lost her jewel-case in a mysterious manner. The affair was placed in my hands, and when I had exhausted Paris, I went to Amsterdam, *en route* if necessary for London. You know our old friends, Levenstein and Schartzer?"

I nodded. I had had dealings with that firm on many occasions.

"Well, as I went into their office, I saw the gentleman who has been paying his attentions to the lady we have been discussing, come out. I have an excellent memory for faces, and when I saw him to-night entering the Café des

Ambassadeurs, I recognized him immediately. Thus the mystery is explained."

He shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands apart, like a conjurer who has just vanished a rabbit or an orange.

"Has the man of whom we are speaking done very wrong?" he inquired.

"The stones he sold in London and Amsterdam belonged to himself and his two partners," I answered. "He has not given them their share of the transaction. That is all."

"They had better be quick about it then, or they are not likely to get anything. It would be a very big sum that would tempt *la belle Louise* to be faithful for a long period. If your employers really desire to punish him, and they are not in want of money, I should say do not let them interfere. She will then *nibble-nibble* at what he has got like a mouse into a store of good things. Then presently that store will be all gone, and then she will give him up, and he, the man, will go out and shoot himself, and she will pick up somebody else, and will begin to nibble-nibble just as before. As I say, there will be somebody else, and somebody else, right up to the end of the chapter. And with every one she will grow just an imperceptible bit older. By and by the wrinkles will appear; I fancy there are just one or two already. Then she will not be so fastidious about her hundred of thousand francs, and will condescend to think of mere thousands. After that it will come to simple hundreds. Then there will be an interval—after which a garret, a charcoal brazier, and the Morgue. I have known so many, and it is always the same. First, the diamonds, the champagne, the exquisite little dinners at the best restaurants, and at last the brazier, the closed doors and windows, and the cold stone slab. There is a moral in it, my dear friend, but we will not look for it to-night. When do you intend to commence business with your man?"

"At once," I answered. "He knows that I am after him and my only fear is that he will make a bolt. I cannot understand why he is dallying in Paris so long?"

"For the simple reason that he is confident he has put you off the scent," was my companion's reply. "He is doing the one foolish thing the criminal always does sooner or later; that is to say, he is becoming over-confident of his own powers to elude us. You and I, my friend, should be able to remember several such instances. Now, strange to say, I came across a curious one the other day. Would you care to hear it?"

He lit a cigarette and blew a cloud of smoke while he waited for my answer.

"Very much," I said, being well aware that his stories were always worth hearing.

"This is a somewhat remarkable case," he said. "I will mention no names, but doubtless you can read between the lines. There was a man who murdered his wife in order that he might marry another woman. The thought which he gave to it, and the clever manner in which he laid his plans, not only for the murder, but also for the disposal of the body, marked him as a criminal in the possession of a singularly brilliant intellect. He gave no hint to anybody, but left the country without leaving the faintest clue concerning his destination behind him. I was called in to take over the case, but after some consideration could make nothing of it. I have no objection to admitting that I was completely baffled. Now it so happened that I discovered that the man's mother was of Irish extraction. He, believing that he would be safe on that island, engaged a passage on board a steamer from Havre to Belfast. She was to pick up at Southampton, Plymouth, and Bristol, *en route*. My man, who, by the way, was a very presentable person, and could be distinctly sociable when he pleased, endeavoured to make himself agreeable to the passengers on board. On the first evening out of port, the conversation turned upon the value of diamonds, and one of the ladies on board produced some costly stones she happened to have in her possession. The murderer, who, you must understand, was quite safe, was unhappily eaten up with vanity. He could not forego the boast that he was the possessor of a magnificent ring, which had been given him by the ex-Emperor Napoleon III. Needless to say this information excited considerable interest, and he was asked to produce it for the general edification.

"He declared that it was too late to do so that evening, but said that he would do so on the morrow, or, at any rate, before he left the vessel. In the excitement of reaching Southampton the matter was for the moment forgotten, but on the day that they arrived in Plymouth one of the lady passengers reminded him of his promise. This was followed by another application. Thus surrounded, the unhappy man found himself in the unpleasant position of being discovered in the perpetration of an untruth, or of being compelled to invent some feasible tale in order to account for his not being able to produce the ring. It was at this juncture that he made his great mistake. Anxious, doubtless, to attract attention, he returned from his cabin with the astounding declaration that the lock had been forced, and the famous ring stolen from his trunk in which it had lain concealed. He certainly acted his part well, but he did not realize to what consequences it

would lead. The matter was reported to the police, and a search was made through the vessel. The passengers were naturally indignant at such treatment, and for the rest of the voyage the man found himself taking, what you English 'call the cold shoulder.' He reached Belfast, made his way into the country, and presently settled down. Later on, when the pursuit had died down, it was his intention to ship for America, where he was to be joined by the woman, to obtain whom he had in the first place committed the crime. Now observe the result. Photographs of the missing man and the murdered woman were circulated all through France, while not a few were sent to England. One of these pictures reached Plymouth, where it was shown to the officer who had investigated the case on the boat on its way to Ireland. He immediately recognized the man who had made the charge against his fellow-passengers. After that it was easy to trace him to Belfast and his hiding-place on land. Extradition was, of course, granted, and he left the place. Had he not imagined that in his safety he could indulge his vanities, I confidently believe I should never have found him. When you come to think of it, it is hard to come to the guillotine for a diamond that never existed, is it not?"

I agreed with him, and then suggested that we should amuse ourselves by endeavouring to find out how the dinner at the Café des Ambassadeurs was progressing.

"They will proceed to a theatre afterwards, you may be sure," my companion said. "In that case, if you like we could catch a glimpse of them as they come out. What do you say?"

I answered that I had not the least objection.

"One night does not make much difference. To-morrow morning I shall make a point of meeting him face to face."

"Should you require my assistance then, I shall be most pleased to give it to you?" my companion replied.

I thanked him for his offer, and then we left the restaurant together, hailed a cab, and drove to his flat. It consisted of four rooms situated at the top of a lofty block of buildings near the river. From his windows he could look out over Paris, and he was wont to declare that the view he received in exchange was the most beautiful in the world. Fine as it was, I was scarcely so enthusiastic in my praise.

Among other things they were remarkable for the simplicity of their furniture,

and also for the fact that in the sitting-room there was nothing to reveal the occupation of their owner. His clever old servant, Susanne, of whom 'twas said she would, did she but choose, make as clever a detective as her master (she had served him for more than forty years), brought us coffee so quickly that it would almost seem as if she had been aware that we should reach the house at that particular moment.

"We have plenty of time to spare," said my host. "In the meantime it will be necessary for us to find out what they are doing. If you will wait I will despatch a messenger, who will procure us the information."

He wrote something on a half-sheet of note-paper, rang the bell, and handed it to Susanne.

"Give that to Leon," he said, "and tell him to be off with it at once."

The woman disappeared, and when she had gone we resumed our conversation. Had he not had the good fortune to be such a great success in his own profession, what an admirable actor the man would have made! His power of facial contortion was extraordinary, and I believe that on demand he could have imitated almost any face that struck his fancy.

"And now with regard to our little excursion," he said. "What would you like to be? As you are aware, I can offer you a varied selection. Will you be a workman, a pedlar, an elderly gentleman from the Provinces, or a street beggar?"

"I think the elderly gentleman from the Provinces would suit me best," I answered, "while it will not necessitate a change of dress."

"Very good then, so it shall be," he replied. "We'll be a couple of elderly gentlemen in Paris for the first time. Let me conduct you to my dressing-room, where you will find all that is necessary for your make-up."

He thereupon showed me to a room leading out of that in which we had hitherto been sitting. It was very small, and lighted by means of a skylight. Indeed, it was that very skylight, so he always declared, that induced him to take the flat.

"If this room looked out over the back, or front, it would have been necessary for me either to have curtains, which I abominate, or to run the risk of being observed, which would have been far worse," he had remarked to me once. "Needless to say there are times when I find it most necessary that my

preparations should not be suspected."

Taken altogether, it was a room that had a strange fascination for me. I had been in it many times before, but was always able to discover something new in it. It was a conglomeration of cupboards and shelves. A large variety of costumes hung upon the pegs in the walls, ranging from soldier's uniforms to beggar's rags. There were wigs of all sorts and descriptions on blocks, pads of every possible order and for every part of the body, humps for hunchbacks, wooden legs, boots ranging from the patent leather of the dandy to the toeless foot-covering of the beggar. There were hats in abundance, from the spotless silk to the most miserable head coverings, some of which looked as if they had been picked up from the rubbish-heap. There were pedlars' trays fitted with all and every sort of ware, a faro-table, a placard setting forth the fact that the renowned Professor Somebody or Other was a most remarkable phrenologist and worthy of a visit. In fact there was no saying what there was not there. Everything that was calculated to be useful to him in his profession was to be found in the room.

For my own part I am not fond of disguises. Indeed on only two or three occasions, during the whole course of my professional career, have I found it necessary to conceal my identity. But to this wily little Frenchman disguise was, as often as not, a common occurrence.

Half-an-hour later, two respectable elderly gentlemen, looking more like professors from some eminent *Lycée* than detectives, left the house and proceeded in the direction of the Folly Theatre. The performance was almost at an end when we reached it, and we mingled with the crowd who had assembled to watch the audience come out. The inquiries we had made proved to be correct, and it was not very long before I saw the man I wanted emerge, accompanied by a female, who could be no other than Mademoiselle Beaumarais. Hayle was in immaculate evening dress, and as I could not but admit, presented a handsome figure to the world. A neat little brougham drew up beside the pavement in its turn, and into this they stepped. Then the door was closed upon them, and the carriage drove away.

"That's my man," I said to my companion, as we watched it pass out of sight. "To-morrow morning I shall pay him a little visit. I think you were quite right in what you said about the money. That woman must have made a fairly big hole in it already."

"You may be quite sure of that," he answered. "When she has finished with

him there will not be much left for anybody else."

"And now to get these things off and then home to bed. To-morrow will in all probability prove an exciting day."

I accompanied him to his room and removed the disguise which had enabled me to see Hayle without his being aware of my identity, and then, bidding my friend good-night, returned to my abode. Before I went to bed, however, I sat down and wrote a report of my doings for Miss Kitwater. Little as I had to tell, the writing of this letter gave me considerable pleasure. I could imagine it coming like a breath from another world to that quiet house at Bishopstowe. I pictured the girl's face as she read it, and the strained attention of the two men, who, needless to say, would hang on every word. When I had finished it I went to bed, to dream that Gideon Hayle and I were swimming a race in the Seine for five gigantic rubies which were to be presented to the winner by Miss Kitwater.

Next morning I arose early, went for a stroll along the Boulevards, and returned to breakfast at eight o'clock. In the matter of my breakfasts in Paris, I am essentially English. I must begin the day with a good meal, or I am fit for nothing. On this particular occasion I sat down on the best of terms with myself and the world in general. I made an excellent meal, did the best I could with the morning paper, for my French is certainly not above reproach, and then wondered when I should set out to interview the man whose flight from England had proved the reason of my visiting Paris. Then the door opened and the *concierge* entered with the words, "A gentleman to see Monsieur!" Next moment to my overwhelming surprise no less a person than Gideon Hayle entered the room.

CHAPTER IX

At the moment that I saw Hayle enter my room, you might, as the saying goes, have knocked me down with a feather. Of all that could possibly have happened, this was surely the most unexpected! The man had endeavoured to get me out of his way in London, he had played all sorts of tricks upon me in order to put me off the scent, he had bolted from England because he knew I was searching for him, yet here he was deliberately seeking me out, and of his own free will putting his head into the lion's mouth. It was as astounding as it was inexplicable.

"Good morning, Mr. Fairfax," he said, bowing most politely to me as he spoke. "I hope you will forgive this early call. I only discovered your address an hour ago, and as I did not wish to run the risk of losing you I came on at once."

"You appeared to be fairly desirous of doing so last week," I said. "What has occurred to make you change your mind so suddenly?"

"A variety of circumstances have conspired to bring such a result about," he answered. "I have been thinking the matter over, and not being able to determine the benefit of this hole-and-corner sort of game, I have made up my mind to settle it once and for all."

"I am glad you have come to that way of thinking," I said. "It will save us both an infinity of trouble. You understand, of course, that I represent Messrs. Kitwater and Codd."

"I am well aware of it," he replied, "and in common fairness to yourself, I can only say that I am sorry to hear it."

"May I ask why you are sorry?"

"Because you have the honour to represent the biggest pair of scoundrels unhung," he answered. "And in saying this, I pledge you my word that I am by no means overstepping the mark. I have known them both for a great many years and can therefore speak from experience."

Before going further with him I was desirous of convincing myself upon one

point.

"You knew them, then, when they were missionaries in China, I suppose?"

"That's the first time I have ever heard what they were," he replied. "Kitwater a missionary! You must forgive my laughing, but the idea is too ludicrous. I'll admit he's done a considerable amount of converting, but it has been converting other people's money into his own pockets."

He laughed at his own bad joke, and almost instantly grew serious once more. He was quite at his ease, and, though he must have known that I was familiar with the story, or supposed story of his villainy, seemed in no way ashamed.

"Now, Mr. Fairfax," he went on, "I know that you are surprised to see me this morning, but I don't think you will be when we have had a little talk together. First and foremost you have been told the story of the stones I possess?"

"I have heard Mr. Kitwater's version of it," I answered cautiously. "I know that you robbed my clients of them and then disappeared!"

"I did not *rob* them of the stones," he said, not in the least offended by the bluntness of my speech. "It is plain that you do not know how we obtained them. Perhaps it's as well that you should not, for there's more behind, and you'd go and get them. No! We obtained them honestly enough at a certain place, and I was appointed to carry them. For this reason I secured them in a belt about my waist. That night the Chinese came down upon us and made us prisoners. They murdered our two native servants, blinded Kitwater, and cut out Codd's tongue. I alone managed to effect my escape. Leaving my two companions for dead, I managed to get away into the jungle. Good Heavens! man, you can't imagine what I suffered after that."

I looked at him and saw that his face had grown pale at the mere recollection of his experiences.

"At last I reached the British outpost of Nampoung, on the Burmah-Chinese border, where the officers took me in and played the part of the good Samaritan. When I was well enough to travel, I made my way down to Rangoon, where, still believing my late companions to be dead, I shipped for England."

"As Mr. George Bertram," I said quietly. "Why under an assumed name when, according to your story, you had nothing to fear?"

"Because I had good and sufficient reason for so doing," he replied. "You must remember that I had a quarter of a million's worth of precious stones in my possession, and, well, to put it bluntly, up to that time I had been living what you might call a make-shift sort of life. For the future I told myself I was going to be a rich man. That being so I wanted to start with a clean sheet. You can scarcely blame me!"

I did not answer him on this point, but continued my cross-examination.

"You reached London, and sold some of the stones there, later on you disposed of some more in Amsterdam. Why did you refuse the dealers your name and address?"

Once more he was quite equal to the occasion.

"Because if I had told them, everybody would have got to know it, and, to be perfectly frank with you, I could not feel quite certain that Kitwater and Codd were really dead."

"By that I am to presume that you intended if possible to swindle them out of their share?" I asked, not a little surprised by his admission.

"Once more, to be quite frank with you, I did. I have no desire to be rude, but I rather fancy you would have done the same had you been similarly situated. I never was much of a success in the moral business."

I could well believe this, but I did not tell him so.

"When did you first become aware that they were in London?"

"On the day that they landed," he answered. "I watched every ship that came in from Rangoon, and at last had the doubtful satisfaction of seeing my two old friends pass out of the dock-gates. Poor beggars, they had indeed had a hard time of it."

"Then you could pity them? Even while you were robbing them?"

"Why not," he answered. "There was no reason because I had the stones that I should not feel sorry for the pain they had suffered. I had to remember how near I'd been to it myself."

This speech sounded very pretty though somewhat illogical.

"And pray how did you know that they had called in my assistance?"

"Because I kept my eyes on them. I know Mr. Kitwater of old, you see. I watched them go into your office and come out from a shop on the other side of the street."

The whole mystery was now explained. What an amount of trouble I should have been spared had I only known this before?

"You did not approve then of my being imported into the case?"

"I distinctly disapproved," he answered. "I know your reputation, of course, and I began to see that if you took up their case for them I should in all probability have to climb down."

"It is doubtless for that reason you called upon me, representing yourself to be Mr. Bayley, Managing Director of that South American Mining Company? I can now quite understand your motive. You wanted to get me out of the way in order that I might not hunt you? Is that not so?"

"You hit the nail upon the head exactly. But you were virtuous, and would not swallow the bait. It would have simplified matters from my point of view if you had. I should not have been compelled to waste my money upon those two roughs, nor would you have spent an exceedingly uncomfortable quarter of an hour in that doorway in Holywell street."

This was news indeed. So he had been aware of my presence there? I put the question to him.

"Oh! Yes! I knew you were there," he said with a laugh. "And I can tell you I did not like the situation one bit. As a matter of fact I found that it required all my nerve to pretend that I did not know it. Every moment I expected you to come out and speak to me. I can assure you the failure of my plot was no end of a disappointment to me. I had expected to see the men I had sent after you, and instead I found you myself."

"Upon my word, Mr. Hayle, if I cannot appreciate your actions I must say I admire your candour. I can also add that in a fairly long experience of—of----"

"Why not say *of criminals* at once, Mr. Fairfax?" he asked with a smile. "I assure you I shall not be offended. We have both our own views on this question, and you of course are entitled to air yours if it pleases you. You were about to

observe that----"

"That in all my experience I had never met any one who could so calmly own to an attempt to murder a fellow-being. But supposing we now come to business."

"With all my heart," he answered. "I am as anxious as yourself to get everything settled. You will admit that it is rather hard lines on a man who can lay his hands upon a quarter of a million of money, to have a gentleman like yourself upon his trail, and, instead of being able to enjoy himself, to be compelled to remain continually in hiding. I am an individual who likes to make the most of his life. I also enjoy the society of my fellow-men."

"May we not substitute 'woman'?" I asked. "I am afraid your quarter of a million would not last very long if you had much to do with Mademoiselle Beaumarais."

"So you have heard of her, have you?" he answered. "But you need have no fear. Dog does not eat dog, and that charming lady will not despoil me of very much! Now to another matter! What amount do you think your clients would feel inclined to take in full settlement of their claim upon me?"

"I cannot say," I answered. "How many of the gems have you realized upon?"

"There were ninety-three originally," he said when he had consulted his pocket-book, "and I have sold sixty, which leaves a balance of thirty-three, all of which are better than any I have yet disposed of. Will your clients be prepared to accept fifty thousand pounds, of course, given without prejudice."

"Your generosity amazes me," I answered. "My clients, your partners, are to take twenty-five thousand pounds apiece, while you get off, scot-free, after your treatment of them, with two hundred thousand."

"They may consider themselves lucky to get anything at all," he retorted. "Run your eye over the case, and see how it stands. You must know as well as I do that they haven't a leg to stand upon. If I wanted to be nasty, I should say let them prove that they have a right to the stones. They can't call in the assistance of the law----"

"Why not?"

"Because to get even with me it would be necessary for them to make certain

incriminating admissions, and to call certain evidence that would entail caustic remarks from a learned judge, and would not improbably lead to a charge of murder being preferred against them. No, Mr. Fairfax, I know my own business, and, what is better, I know theirs. If they like to take fifty thousand pounds, and will retire into obscurity upon it, I will pay it to them, always through you. But I won't see either of them, and I won't pay a halfpenny more than I have offered."

"You don't mean to tell me that you are in earnest?"

"I am quite in earnest," he answered. "I never was more so. Will you place my offer before them, or will you not?"

"I will write and also wire them to-day," I said. "But I think I know exactly what they will say."

"Point out the applicability of the moral concerning the bird in the hand. If they don't take what they can get now, the time may come when there may be nothing at all. I never was a very patient man, and I can assure you most confidentially, that I am about tired of this game."

"But how am I to know that this is not another trick on your part, and that you won't be clearing out of Paris within a few hours? I should present a sorry picture if my clients were to accept your generous offer, and I had to inform them that you were not on hand to back it up."

"Oh, you needn't be afraid about that," he said with a laugh. "I am not going to bilk you. Provided you play fair by me, I will guarantee to do the same by you. With the advantages I at present enjoy, I am naturally most anxious to know that I can move about Europe unmolested. Besides, you can have me watched, and so make sure of me. There is that beautiful myrmidon of yours, who is so assiduously making love to Mademoiselle Beaumarais's maid. Give him the work."

I was more than surprised to find that he knew about this business. He saw it, and uttered one of his peculiar laughs.

"He didn't think I knew it," he said. "But I did! His cleverness is a little too marked. He overacts his parts, and even Shakespeare will tell you how foolish a proceeding that is. If you doubt my word concerning my stay in Paris, let him continue to watch me. You know where I am living, and for that reason you can come and see me whenever you like. As a proof of my sincerity, may I suggest

that you give me the pleasure of your company at dinner to-night. Oh, you needn't be afraid. I'm not a Cæsar Borgia. I shall not poison your meat, and your wine will not be drugged. It will be rather a unique experience, detective and criminal dining together, will it not? What do you say?"

The opportunity was so novel, that I decided to embrace it. Why should I not do so since it was a very good excuse for keeping my man in sight? He could scarcely play me any tricks at a fashionable restaurant, and I was certainly curious to study another side of this man's complex character. I accordingly accepted his invitation, and promised to meet him at the well-known restaurant he named that evening.

"In the meantime you will telegraph to your clients, I suppose," he said. "You may be able to give me their reply this evening when we meet."

"I shall hope to be in a position to do so," I answered, after which he bade me good-bye, and picking up his hat and stick left the room.

"Well," I said to myself when I was alone once more, "this is the most extraordinary case upon which I have ever been engaged. My respect for Mr. Hayle's readiness of resource, to say nothing of his impudence, is increasing by leaps and bounds. The man is not to be met every day who can rob his partners of upwards of a hundred and seventy thousand pounds, and then invite the detective who is sent after him to a friendly dinner."

I sat down and wrote a letter to Miss Kitwater, telling her all that had occurred; then went out to despatch it with a telegram to Kitwater himself, informing him of the offer Hayle had made. I could guess the paroxysm of rage into which it would throw him, and I would willingly have spared his niece the pain such an exhibition must cause her. I could see no other way out of it, however. The message having been despatched, I settled myself down to wait for a reply, with all the patience I could command. In my own mind I knew very well what it would be. It was not so much the money that Kitwater wanted, as revenge. That Hayle's most miserable offer would only increase his desire for it, I felt certain. Shortly after three o'clock, the reply arrived. It was short, and to the point, and ran as follows—

"Tell him I will have all or nothing."

Here was a nice position for a man to find himself in. Instead of solving the difficulty we had only increased it. I wondered what Hayle would say when he

heard the news, and what his next step would be. That he would endeavour to bolt again, I felt quite certain. It was a point in my favour, however, that he would not know until the evening what Kitwater's decision was, so I felt I had still some time to arrange my plan of action. Of one thing I was quite determined, and that was that he should be watched day and night from that minute, but not by Mr. Dickson. That worthy I bade return to England, and his rage on discovering that Mademoiselle Beaumarais's maid had tricked him, would have been amusing to witness, had the principal event in which I was most concerned not been so grave. The expressions he used about her were certainly far from being complimentary.

Feeling that I must have other assistance, I set off for my friend Leglosse's residence. I had the good fortune to meet him by the *concierge's* lodge, and we ascended the stairs to his rooms together.

"I have come to ask you to do me a favour," I said, when we were seated in his sitting-room.

"A thousand favours if you wish, *cher ami*," the old fellow replied. "Tell me how I can have the pleasure of serving you."

"I want you to lend me one of your men for a few days," I said. "I have to send my own man back to England, and I am afraid the gentleman we were discussing last night may give me the slip in the meantime if I'm not careful."

The better to enable him to appreciate the position, I furnished him with a brief summary of the case upon which I was engaged.

"And so you are to dine with your prisoner to-night?" he remarked, with one of his quiet chuckles. "That is droll—very droll. It is very good for you that it is at such a place, or I should have my doubts as to the rascal's intentions. But you are well able to take care of yourself, my friend; that I know."

"And the man?"

"You shall have him. You shall have half-a-dozen if you like. I am only too pleased to be able to help in such a good work. You shall have Pierre Lepallard, my right-hand. I cannot give you a better. Nothing escapes Pierre, and he is discreet, oh, yes, my friend, he is discreet. He will not obtrude himself, but he will know all that your friend does, to whom he speaks, what he said to him, and sometimes even what he intends doing before he does it."

"In that case he is just the man for me," I replied. "I am exceedingly obliged to you for your considerate courtesy. Some day I may be able to repay it."

Within half-an-hour the estimable Lepallard had been made acquainted with his duties, and within an hour a ragged tatterdemalion of a man was selling matches on the opposite side of the road to that on which Hayle's apartments were situated.

I reached the restaurant at which we were to dine that evening punctual to the moment, only to find that Hayle had not yet arrived. For a minute I was tempted to wonder whether he had given me the slip again, but while the thought was passing through my mind a cab drove up, and the gentleman himself alighted.

"I must beg your pardon for keeping you waiting," he said apologetically. "As your host I should have been here first. That would have been the case had I not been detained at the last moment by an old friend. Pray forgive me!"

I consented to do so, and we entered the restaurant together.

I discovered that he had already engaged a table, arranged the *menu*, and bespoken the wines. We accordingly sat down, and the strangest meal of which I had ever partaken commenced. Less than a week before, the man sitting in front of me had endeavoured to bring about my destruction; now he was my host, and to all outward appearances my friend as well. I found him a most agreeable

companion, a witty conversationalist, and a born *raconteur*. He seemed to have visited every part of the known globe; had been a sailor, a revolutionist in South America, a blackbirder in the Pacific, had seen something of what he called the "Pig-tail trade" to Borneo, some very queer life in India, that is to say, in the comparatively unknown native states and had come within an ace of having been shot by the French during the war in Madagascar.

"In point of fact," he said, "I may say that I have travelled from Dan to Beersheba, and, until I struck this present vein of good fortune, had found all barren. Some day, if I can summon up sufficient courage, I shall fit out an expedition and return to the place whence the stones came, and get some more, but not just at present. Events have been a little too exciting there of late to let us consider it a healthy country. By the way, have you heard from our friend, Kitwater, yet?"

"I have," I answered, "and his reply is by no means satisfactory."

"I understand you to mean that he will not entertain my offer?"

I nodded my head.

"He must have 'all or nothing,' he declares. That is the wording of the telegram I received."

"Well, he knows his own affairs best. The difference is a large one, and will materially affect his income. Will you take Crême de Minthe—Kümmel or Cognac?"

"Cognac, thank you," I replied, and that was the end of the matter.

During the remainder of the evening not another word was said upon the subject. We chatted upon a variety of topics, but neither the matter of the precious stones nor even Kitwater's name was once mentioned. I could not help fancying, however, that the man was considerably disappointed at the non-acceptance of his preposterous offer. He had made a move on the board, and had lost it. I knew him well enough, however, by this time to feel sure that he by no means despaired yet of winning the game. Men of Gideon Hayle's stamp are hard to beat.

"Now," he said, when we had smoked our cigarettes, and after he had consulted his watch, "The night is still young. What do you say if we pay a visit to a theatre—the Hippodrome, for instance. We might wile away an hour there

very pleasantly if you feel so disposed."

I willingly consented, and we accordingly left the restaurant. Once we were in the street Hayle called a cab, gave the man his instructions, and we entered it. Chatting pleasantly, and still smoking, we passed along the brilliantly illuminated Boulevards. I bestowed little, if any, attention on the direction in which we were proceeding. Indeed, it would have been difficult to have done so for never during the evening had Hayle been so agreeable. A more charming companion no man could have desired. It was only on chancing to look out of the window that that I discovered that we were no longer in the gaily-lighted thoroughfares, but were entering another and dingier part of the town.

"What is the matter with the driver?" I asked. "Doesn't he know what he is about? This is not the way to the Hippodrome! He must have misunderstood what you said to him. Shall I hail him and point out his mistake?"

"No, I don't think it is necessary for you to do that," he replied. "Doubtless he will be on the right track in a few minutes. He probably thinks if he gives us a longer ride, he will be able to charge a proportionately larger fare at the end. The Parisian cabby is very like his London brother."

He then proceeded to describe to me an exceedingly funny adventure that had fallen him once in Chicago. The recital lasted some minutes, and all the time we were still pursuing our way in a direction exactly opposite to that which I knew we should be following. At last I could stand it no longer.

"The man's obviously an idiot," I said, "and I am going to tell him so."

"I shouldn't do that, Mr. Fairfax," said Hayle in a different voice to that in which he had previously addressed me. "I had my own reasons for not telling you before, but the matter has already been arranged. The man is only carrying out his instructions."

"What do you mean by already arranged?" I asked, not without some alarm.

"I mean that you are my prisoner, Mr. Fairfax," he said. "You see, you are rather a difficult person to deal with, if I must pay you such a compliment, and one has to adopt heroic measures in order to cope with you."

"Then you've been humbugging me all this time," I cried; "but you've let the cat out of the bag a little too soon. I think I'll bid you good-bye."

"IN HIS HAND HE HELD A REVOLVER."

I was about to rise from my seat and open the door, but he stopped me. In his hand he held a revolver, the muzzle of which was in unpleasant proximity to my head.

"I must ask you to be good enough to sit down," he said. "You had better do so, for you cannot help yourself. If you attempt to make a fuss I pledge you my word I shall shoot you, let the consequences to myself be what they may. You know me, and you can see that I am desperate. My offer to those men was only a bluff. I wanted to quiet any suspicions you might have in order that I might get you into my hands. As you can see for yourself, I could not have succeeded better than I have done. I give you my word that you shall not be hurt, provided that you do not attempt to escape or to call for help. If you do, then you know exactly what you may expect, and you will have only yourself to blame. Be a sensible man, and give in to the inevitable."

He held too many cards for me. I could see at a glance that I was out-manoeuvred, and that there was nothing to be gained by a struggle. I don't think I can be accused of cowardice; my reputation is too well known for that. But I do decidedly object to being shot by a desperate man, when there is not the least necessity for it.

"Very well," I said, lying back in my seat, "you have played your game with your usual cleverness, and I suppose I deserve what I have got for having been such a consummate idiot as to give you the opportunity you wanted. Now, what are you going to do, and where are you going to take me?"

"You will know everything in a few minutes," he answered. "In the meantime I am glad to see that you take things so sensibly. In after days you will laugh over this little incident."

"Whatever I may think in the future," I replied, "just at present it is confoundedly unpleasant."

Ten minutes later the cab came to a standstill, there was the sound of opening

gates, and a moment later we drove into a stone-paved courtyard.

CHAPTER X

If you could have travelled the world at that moment, from north to south, and from east to west, I believe you would have found it difficult to discover a man who felt as foolish as I did when I entered the gloomy dwelling-place as Hayle's prisoner. To say that I was mortified by the advantage he had obtained over me would not express my feelings in the least. To think that I, George Fairfax, who had the reputation of being so difficult a man to trick, should have allowed myself to fall into such a palpable trap, seemed sufficiently incredible as to be almost a matter for laughter rather than rage. There was worse, however, behind. Miss Kitwater had been so trustful of my capability for bringing the matter to a successful conclusion, that I dared not imagine what she would think of me now. Whichever way I looked at it, it was obvious that Hayle must score. On the one side, he kept me locked up while he not only made his escape from Paris, but by so doing cut off every chance of my pursuing him afterwards; on the other, he might console himself with the almost certain knowledge that I should be discredited by those who had put their trust in me. How could it very well be otherwise? I had committed the criminal folly of accepting hospitality from the enemy, and from that moment I should not be seen. The natural supposition would be that I had been bought, and that I was not only taking no further interest in the case, but that I was keeping out of the way of those who did. To add to my misery, I could easily imagine the laugh that would go up on the other side of the Channel when the trick that had been played upon me became known. But having so much else to think of, that fact, you may be sure, did not trouble me very much. There were two things, however, about which I was particularly anxious; one was to set myself right with Miss Kitwater, and the other was to get even, at any cost, with Hayle. The first seemed the more difficult.

It must not be supposed that when I had alighted from the carriage I had given up all hope of escape. On the contrary, had it not been for the presence of three burly fellows, who immediately took up their places beside me, I fancy I should have made a dash for liberty. Under the circumstances, however, to have attempted such a thing would have been the height of folly. Five to one, that is to say, if I include the coachman in the number, with the gates closed behind me, were too long odds, and however hard I might have fought, I could not possibly

have been successful.

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to step into the house," said Hayle. "The air is cold out here, and I am afraid lest you might take a chill."

Before complying with his order I looked round me once more to see if there was any chance of escape. But so far as I could see there was not one. I accordingly followed one of my captors into the building, the remainder bringing up the rear.

From what I could see of the house with the help of the light from a solitary candle hanging in a sconce upon the wall, it had once been a handsome building. Now, however, it had fallen sadly to decay. The ceiling of the hall had at one time been richly painted, but now only blurred traces of the design remained. Crossing the hall, my guide opened a door at the further end. In obedience to a request from Hayle, I entered this room, to find myself standing in a fine apartment, so far as size went, but sadly lacking in comfort where its furniture was concerned. There was a bed, a table, three rough chairs, and an entirely inadequate square of carpet upon the floor. I have already said that it was a large room, and when I add that it was lighted only by two candles, which stood upon the table in the centre, some idea will be afforded of its general dreariness.

"Now look here, Mr. Hayle," I said, "the time has come for us to have a serious talk together. You know as well as I do that in kidnapping me you are laying yourself open to very serious consequences. If you think that by so doing you are going to prevent me from eventually running you to earth, you are very much mistaken. You have obtained a temporary advantage over me, I will admit; but that advantage will not last. Do not flatter yourself that it will."

"I am not so sure upon that point," said Hayle, lighting a cigarette as he spoke. "If I did not think so I should not have gone to all this trouble and expense. But why make such a fuss about it? You must surely understand, Mr. Fairfax, that your profession necessarily entails risks. This is one of them. You have been paid to become my enemy. I had no personal quarrel with you. You can scarcely blame me, therefore, if I retaliate when I have an opportunity. I don't know what you may think of it, but the mere fact of you dining with me to-night is very likely to go hard with you, so far as your clients are concerned. Would it be a good advertisement for the famous George Fairfax to have it known that, while he was taking his clients' money he was dining pleasantly in Paris with the man they were paying him to find? I laid my trap for you, but I must confess that I

had not very much faith in its success. Your experience should have made you more wary. A student of human character, such as you are, should know that the leopard cannot change his spots, or the tiger his----"

"If you continue in this strain much longer," I said, "I'll endeavour to stop your tongue, whatever it may cost me. Now, either let me out, or get out of the room yourself. I want to see no more of you while I am in this house."

He blew a cloud of smoke, and then said nonchalantly—

"You had better occupy yourself thanking your stars that you are let off so easily. At one time I was tempted to have you put out of the way altogether. I am not quite certain it wouldn't be safer, even now. It could be done so easily, and no one would be any the wiser. I know two men now in Paris who would gladly run the risk for the sake of the ill-will they bear you. I must think it over."

"Then think it over on the other side of that door," I said angrily. "Play the same traitorous trick on me as you did on Kitwater and Codd if you like, but you shall not stay in the same room with me now."

My reference to Kitwater and Codd must have touched him on a raw spot, for he winced, and then tried to bluff it off.

"I rather fancy Messrs. Kitwater and Codd will just have such kindly things to say concerning you in the future as they do about me now," he said, as he moved towards the door. "And now I will wish you good-bye. As I leave Paris almost immediately, I don't suppose I shall have the pleasure of seeing you again. For your own sake I should advise you to be quiet. I might tell you once and for all that you can't get out. The door is a stout one, and the windows are exceptionally well barred. The men to whom I have assigned the duty of looking after you are in their way honest, though a little rough. Moreover, they are aware that their own safety depends to a very great extent upon your not getting out. Believe me, if you do not know already, that there is nothing like fear for making a good watch-dog. Farewell, friend Fairfax! You have been instrumental in sending a good many men into durance vile; you can tell me later how you like being there yourself."

With that he went out, shutting the door behind him. I heard the key turn in the lock, and a bolt shot at top and bottom. I thereupon went to the window and examined it, only to discover that it was made secure on the outside by large iron bars. So far as I could see, there was no other way of escape from the room.

Though I laid down on the bed I did not sleep; my thoughts would not permit of that. The face of the woman who had trusted me so profoundly was before me continually, gazing at me with sweet reproachful eyes. Oh! what a fool I had been to accept that rascal's invitation! The more I thought of it, the angrier I became with myself. Now, goodness only knew how long I should be confined in this wretched place, and what would happen during my absence from the world!

At last the dawn broke, and with it, a weird sickly light penetrated the room. I sprang from my bed and approached the window, only to find that it overlooked a small courtyard, the latter being stoneflagged and surrounded by high walls. I could see that, even if I were able to squeeze my way out between the bars, I should be powerless to scale the walls. At a rough guess these were at least twelve feet high, and without a foothold of any sort or description. This being so I was completely at the mercy of the men in the house. Indeed, a rat caught in a trap, was never more firmly laid by the heels than I. At about half-past seven o'clock a small trap-door, which I had not noticed near the ground and the main door, was opened, and a grimy hand made its way in and placed upon the floor a cup of coffee and a roll. Then it was closed once more and made secure. I drank the coffee and munched the roll, and, if the truth must be confessed, poor as they were felt the better for both.

At mid-day a bowl of miserable soup was handed in; darkness, however, had fallen some considerable time before I could detect any sound in the hall outside that might be taken to mean the coming of my evening meal. At last there was a clatter of feet, the bolts shot back, the key turned in the lock, and the door opened. A man carrying a lantern entered, followed by two others, and as the light fell upon his face, I uttered a cry of astonishment, for he was none other than my old friend Leglosse, while behind him was the infallible Lepallard.

"Well, thank goodness we have found you at last," cried Leglosse. "We have had such a hunt for you as man never dreamed of. I called at your apartments late last night, hoping to see you, on important business, but you had not returned from a dinner to which you had been invited. I called again this morning and was informed by the *concierge* that they had, up to that moment, seen nothing of you. When the good Lepallard informed me that you had left the restaurant in a cab with Monsieur Hayle, and that the latter had returned to his apartments this morning in a great hurry, only to leave them a short time after with his luggage, for the railway station, I began to grow uneasy. You have no idea what a day I have had looking for you, but it has been well spent, since we

have the pleasure of seeing you again."

"I shall be grateful to you all my life for the service you have rendered me," I replied. "But how did you manage to gain admittance to this house?"

"It was quite easy; the birds had flown," he answered. "Has the suspicion not struck you that they were going to clear out and leave you here to starve?"

"The brutes," I answered. "But I'll be even with their leader yet. And now let us get away from here as quickly as possible. Have you any idea where our man has gone?"

"To Naples," Lepallard replied. "I disguised myself as a pompous old bourgeois, and I was behind him when he asked for his ticket and distinctly heard what he said."

"Then I shall go after him at once," I replied. "He will in all probability be off his guard. He will imagine me to be still locked up in this room, you see."

"And I shall accompany you, if you will permit me," said Leglosse.

"But why?" I asked in surprise. "What have you got to do with him? You have no case against him, and you cannot spare the time to do it simply out of kindness to me."

"It's not kindness, it's business, my friend," he replied. "You may not believe it, but I have a warrant for your man's arrest."

"On what charge?"

"On a charge of being concerned in a big embezzlement in Cochin China," he answered. "We laid the other two men by the heels at the time, but the Englishman, who was the prime mover in it, we have never been able to lay our hands upon. I felt certain that day when I met him in Amsterdam, that I had seen him somewhere before. Ever since then I have been puzzling my brains to discover where it was, and why it was so familiar to me. A photograph was eventually sent us of the Englishman by the colonial authorities, but in that photograph he, the person I suspect, wears a beard and a heavy moustache. It is the same man, however, and the description, even to the mark upon the face, exactly tallies with Hayle. Now I think I can help you to obtain a rather unique revenge upon the man, that is to say, if you want it. From what you have so far told me, I understand that you have no evidence against him strong enough to

justify the issue of a warrant. Well, I have that evidence, and between us you may be sure we'll bring him back to Paris."

This was delightful hearing after all we had been through lately; at any rate I greeted the prospect of Leglosse's co-operation with acclamation. It would be hard, if between us we could not find Hayle and bring him to the justice he so richly deserved.

"Now let us get out of this," I said. "I must obtain something to eat if I perish in the attempt. I am well nigh starving. A basin of soup, a roll and a cup of coffee, are all that I have had to-day."

"You shall dine at once," he answered, "and here. There is an excellent little restaurant further down the street, and one of my men shall go there and tell them to bring you up a meal. After that you shall go home and change your costume, and then we will arrange what shall be done about the travelling."

This programme was carried out to the letter. We made a good meal, at least I know that I did, and when it was eaten, a cab was procured, and in company with Leglosse I said good-bye to the house in which I had spent so short a time, yet in which I had been so miserable.

"I shall never know how to repay you for your kindness," I said to my companion as we drove down the street. "Had it not been for you and your men I should now be starving in that wretched place. I'll certainly forgive Hayle if he is ever successful enough to take me in again by one of his rascally tricks."

"You must not let him do that," returned the Frenchman, shaking his head. "Our reputations are at stake."

When I reached my own apartments the *concierge* was much relieved to see me. She had been told that I was dead, perhaps murdered, and Leglosse's visit to find me had not helped to reassure her. A packet of letters and telegrams was handed to me, which I carried up to my room, to read them while I was changing my attire. Never before had I been so glad to get out of a dress-suit.

I had just finished my toilet and was in the act of commencing the packing of the bag I intended taking with me, when there was a tap at the door. I opened it, to find the *concierge* there.

"There is a lady in the parlor to see Monsieur," she said. "She has a maid with her."

"A lady to see me?" I asked incredulously. "Who on earth can she be?"

The *concierge* shook her head. In my own mind I had arrived at the conclusion that it was Mademoiselle Beaumarais, and that Hayle had sent her to discover, if possible, whether I had escaped from my confinement or not. On finding out that I had she would telegraph to him, and once more he would be placed on his guard. At first I felt almost inclined not to see her, but on second thoughts I saw the folly of this proceeding. I accordingly entered the room where the lady was awaiting me. The light was not very good, but it was sufficient for me to see two figures standing by the window.

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit, mademoiselles?" I began.

"Don't you know me, Mr. Fairfax?" the taller of them answered. "You forget your friends very quickly."

"Miss Kitwater?" I cried, "what does this mean?"

"It is a long story," she answered, "but I feel sure that you will have time to hear it now. I am in terrible trouble."

"I am indeed sorry to hear that," I answered, and then glanced at her maid as if to inquire whether it was safe to speak before her. She interpreted the look correctly and nodded her head.

"Yes, Mr. Fairfax," she said, "you can say what you please before Nelly."

"Then am I right in interpreting your trouble as being connected with your uncle?" I asked.

"Yes, that is it," she answered. "You have guessed correctly. Do you know that he and Mr. Codd have disappeared?"

"Disappeared?" I repeated. "Have you any idea where they have disappeared to?"

"No, but I can hazard a very shrewd guess," she replied. "I believe they have crossed to Paris in search of Mr. Hayle. Since last Sunday my uncle had been more depressed than ever, while the paroxysms of rage to which he is so subject, have been even more frequent than ever. If the truth must be told, I fear his troubles have turned his brain, for he talks to himself in such a queer way, and asks every few minutes if I have received news from you, that I cannot help

thinking his mind is not what it should be. You must understand that on Saturday last, thinking it might possibly be required for the case, I drew a large sum of money from the bank; more than a hundred pounds, in fact. I securely locked it up in my writing-table, and thought no one knew anything about it. Yesterday afternoon my uncle and Mr. Codd went for a walk, and did not return, though I waited for them for several hours. While I was thus waiting I opened the drawer in the writing-table to procure something I wanted, and discovered that the money was missing. Only one construction could be placed upon it, Mr. Fairfax. They had wearied of their inactive life, and had set off in search of Hayle."

"They are aware of his address in Paris, are they not?"

"Yes, my uncle repeated it from morning until night," she answered. "In point of fact, he did little else. Oh! it terrifies me beyond measure to think what may happen should they meet."

"You need not fear that," I replied. "Hayle has tired of Paris and has bolted again. Very probably to a place where they cannot hope to find him."

I believe she said "God be thanked" under her breath, but I am not quite certain upon that point. I did not tell her of the trick Hayle had so lately played upon myself. If the telling were necessary it would be able to come later on.

"May I ask what brought you to Paris, Miss Kitwater?" I inquired, after a pause.

"My great fear," she answered. "I wired to you from Charing Cross to say that I was coming. Did you not receive my message?"

I remember the fact that, not having time to open them all before I was called away, I had put some of the telegrams on one side. As ill luck would have it, Miss Kitwater's must have been amongst these. I explained that I had been away from the house all day, and only that moment returned.

"I felt," she said, ignoring my excuses, "that I must come to you and tell you all that has transpired. Also that I might implore you to keep the men apart at any cost."

"We can easily find out whether they have arrived in Paris, and also whether they have been to Hayle's apartments," I said. "That would certainly be one of the places which they would try first."

While I was speaking there was the sound of a step in the corridor outside and next moment Leglosse entered the room. He was in the highest spirits, as he always was when he was about to undertake a new piece of work. Seeing that I had visitors he came to a sudden standstill.

"A thousand pardons," he said in French. "I had no idea that you were engaged. I will wait outside."

"Don't do anything of the kind," I returned in the same language. "Come in and let me introduce you to Miss Kitwater, who has just arrived from England."

"Miss Kitwater?" he repeated, in some surprise. "Surely I understood you to say that your client, the gentleman who had lost his sight through Hayle's treachery, was Monsieur Kitwater?"

"That is quite right, and this lady is his niece," I returned. "She has brought me extraordinary intelligence. Her uncle and his companion have suddenly disappeared from the little village in Surrey, where they have been staying some time with her. It is her belief that they have come to Paris in search of Hayle. There would have been trouble had they met, but fortunately for them, and for Hayle, he has given them the slip once more. It would be possible for you to find out whether they arrived by this morning's train, and also whether they have made inquiries at Hayle's apartments, would it not?"

"Quite possible," he answered. "It shall be done at once. I will let you know in less than an hour what I have discovered."

I thanked him, whereupon he bowed to Miss Kitwater, and then disappeared.

"Monsieur Leglosse is also in pursuit of Hayle," I explained. "He holds a warrant for his arrest on a charge of embezzlement in Cochin China. For that reason we are following him to Naples to-morrow morning."

"To Naples. Has the wretched man gone there?"

"So we have been led to believe," I answered.

"Then do you think my uncle will find it out and follow him?" she asked, wringing her hands. "Oh! it is all too terrible. What shall I do?"

"Well, if I might be allowed to be like David Copperfield's Mr. Dick, I should be practical, and say '*dine*'! I suppose you have had nothing to eat since you left

England?"

She gave a little wan smile.

"We have not had very much, certainly," she answered. "Poor Nelly, you must be nearly starving."

The maid, however, protested that she was not; but was not to be denied. Bidding them remain where they were, I went down-stairs and interviewed my faithful friend, the *concierge*. With her I arranged that Miss Kitwater and her maid should be provided with rooms in the house for that night, and having done so went on to the nearest restaurant. In something less than ten minutes all was settled, and in under twenty they were seated at their meal. At first the girl would not sit down with her mistress, but with her usual thoughtfulness, Miss Kitwater ordered her to do so.

"And now, Mr. Fairfax," she said, when they had finished, "we must discover a hotel where we can stay the night. At present we know of no place in which to lay our heads."

"You need not trouble about that," I said, "I have already arranged that you shall have rooms in this house if you care to occupy them. The old lady to whom it belongs is a particular friend of mine, and will certainly do her best to make you comfortable. I presume that it was your bag I saw in the *concierge's* office, when I was there just now?"

"We left it there," she answered, and then gave me my reward by adding—"It is very kind of you, Mr. Fairfax to have taken so much trouble. I cannot thank you sufficiently."

"You must not thank me at all," I replied. "In helping you I am only doing my duty to my client."

I had scarcely said the words before I regretted them. It was a foolish speech and a churlish one as well. She pretended not to notice it, however, but bade her maid go down to the *concierge's* office, and take the bag to the room that had been allotted to her. The girl disappeared, and when she had gone Miss Kitwater turned to me.

"Mr. Fairfax," she said, "I have yet another favour to ask of you. I assure you it concerns me vitally. I want to know if you will let me go with you to Naples. In order that I might not be in your way, we might travel in different

compartments; but go I must. I am so frightened about my uncle. If I follow him to Naples, it is just possible I might be able to dissuade him from pursuing Hayle. If he were to kill me for preventing them, I would not let them meet. Believe me when I say that I am terribly anxious about him. Besides----"

Here she paused for a moment as if she did not quite know how to continue what she had to say to me.

"As I have said, you and Monsieur ---- I mean the French gentleman—could travel in your own way. All that I want to be assured of is, that I may be in Naples and at hand should anything happen."

"If you really wish it, I do not see why you should not go?" I replied meditatively. "But if you desire my candid opinion I must say that I think you would be far better off at home. Still if you desire to come, it's not for me to gainsay your wishes. We will arrange therefore that, unless you decide to the contrary in the meantime, you accompany us by the 8.50 train to-morrow morning."

"I thank you," she said.

A few moments later Leglosse returned with the information that it was as we suspected. Kitwater and Codd had arrived in Paris that morning, and had visited Hayle's lodgings only to find him gone.

"What is more important still," he continued, "they have managed to learn that Hayle had gone to Naples, and they will probably leave by the 2.50 train to-morrow morning for that city: It is as well, perhaps, that we arranged to travel by the next."

"Courage, courage, Miss Kitwater," I said, seeing that she was trembling. "Try not to be frightened. There is nothing to fear." Then turning to Leglosse, I added —"Miss Kitwater has decided to accompany us to Naples. As a matter of fact my position in the case has undergone a change since I last saw you."

He looked from one to the other of us as if in astonishment.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Hitherto," I replied, "I have been acting against Hayle, with the intention of securing him, in order that my clients might have a most important meeting with him. For the future, however, my endeavours will be used in the contrary

direction. They must never meet!"

"Then the best way to bring about what you desire is to assist me," returned Leglosse. "Let me once get my hand upon him in the name of France, and they will never meet."

"But we have to catch him before we do that," I said.

"Never-fear, we will do it," he answered confidently, and that seemed to settle it.

Next morning at 8.50, we left Paris for Naples.

CHAPTER XI

It was in the early afternoon following our leaving Paris that we reached Naples. By this time, in spite of our endeavours to prevent it, Miss Kitwater was quite tired out. She certainly pretended not to be, but it was difficult, if not impossible, for her to conceal the fact. Immediately on arrival we conveyed her to the best hotel, of the proprietor of which, Leglosse had already made inquiries, in order to find out whether or not Hayle had taken up his abode there.

It was with relief that we discovered that no person answering at all to his description was located there. That done we commenced our search for the man we wanted. We decided to first try the offices of the various steamers plying across the Mediterranean to Port Said. Considerably to our amazement, however, we happened to be successful at the first cast. A man signing himself Henry Gifford had applied for a first-class passage to Colombo, with the intention of changing at that port into another steamer for Hong Kong.

"What was he like?" I inquired of the clerk; "and did anything strike you as peculiar about him or his appearance?"

"Well, there was one thing," he said. "And at the time I must say I thought it funny. When I asked him his name, he began 'Gideon,' and then suddenly corrected himself and said 'Henry Gifford.' I remember wondering whether he was using a false name or not. He booked his passage at the last moment, and seemed in a great hurry to get aboard—being afraid he would miss the boat."

I questioned him as to the man's general appearance, and when I had learned all he had to tell us, I was perfectly satisfied in my own mind that Hayle was the man who had gone aboard.

"He didn't lose much time," said Leglosse. "Mark my words, he'll leave the steamer at Port Said, and will either come back on his own tracks, or go up the Palestine Coast to Jaffa, and thence back to Europe. What do you think is the best thing to be done?"

"See the agent of the company here and get him to telegraph to Port Said," I answered. "Both to their agent there and the captain of the steamer. If the captain

telegraphs back that Gifford is our man, we must wire to the police authorizing them to detain him pending our arrival. There is a bit of risk attached to it, but if we want to catch him we must not think of that."

We accordingly interviewed the agent and placed the case before him. We told him who we were, and Leglosse explained to him that he held a warrant for the arrest of one Gideon Hayle, an individual whom he had every reason to believe was endeavouring to escape under the assumed name of Henry Gifford. The clerk was next called in, and gave his evidence, and these matters having been settled, the telegrams were despatched to both the captain and the agent.

Some four days we knew must certainly elapse before we could receive a reply, and that time was devoted to searching the city for Kitwater and Codd. That they had not booked passages in the same boat in which Hayle had sailed, we soon settled to our satisfaction. In that case we knew that they must be domiciled in Naples somewhere. In the intervals between our search Leglosse and I used our best endeavours to make Miss Kitwater enjoy her stay. We took her to Pompeii, climbed Vesuvius together, visited Capri, Ischia, the Great Museum, the King's Palace, and dined together every evening. I had not been acquainted with the girl much more than a fortnight, and yet I felt as if I had known her all my life, and the greater my experience of her was, the better I liked her. As for Leglosse, he outdid himself in his devotion. He made the most extraordinary toilets in her honour, and on one occasion went even so far as to inform me that, if all Englishwomen were like this particular specimen, he would say good-bye to his beloved Paris, and cross the Channel never to return again.

At last the eventful day arrived, and from nine till twelve we called repeatedly at the office for the telegram that was to mean so much to us. It was not, however, until the afternoon was well advanced that a message was received. I could have taken my stick to the agent for the slowness with which he opened the envelope. The clerk was called in, the code translated, and the message presently transcribed.

"This, gentlemen," he said at last, pointing to the telegram, "is from our agent in Port Said, and is as follows—

"Gifford, small man, grey hair, and wears spectacles. No scar on face, cannot find first-class passenger with one. Fear you have been deceived."

"Confound the fellow," I cried, "he's done us again. What's worse, we've wasted four precious days waiting for this message. What shall we do now?"

"Look for him elsewhere," said Leglosse. "If he didn't go by that boat, he might have left by another."

We thanked the agent for his courtesy, and were about to leave the office when another telegram was handed in. We waited to see whether it was from the captain, and presently found that we were not destined to be disappointed. Once more the agent consulted his code, transcribed the message, and read it to us.

"Have interviewed Gifford, threatened him with the police for using passage booked by another person. He confesses having been induced by stranger such as you describe to accept passage Colombo. How shall I act?"

"We've been done again," I cried, bringing my fist down with a thump upon the table. "It's only another proof of Hayle's cleverness. The ingenuous rascal books his passage here, knowing very well that it will be one of the first places at which we shall make inquiries, lets fall a 'Gideon', and then transfers his ticket to somebody else. I suppose he didn't bargain for my getting out of that house in time to follow him, and to telegraph to Port Said. Now that we are certain that he did not go that way, we must try and find out in what direction he did proceed."

"And also what has become of the blind man and his companion," said Leglosse. "They may be hot upon his trail, and if we can only discover them, and keep an eye on them, we may find out all we want to know. But it is likely to prove a difficult task."

We tried the various shipping offices, without success. We called at every hotel, important or otherwise, questioned the City Police, who assured us they had seen nothing of the men we described and finally were compelled to own ourselves thoroughly well beaten. Leglosse's face was the picture of despair, and I fear mine was not much better. We inserted advertisements in the papers, but with no more luck than before. From the moment the trio had entered Naples, they seemed to have vanished entirely. Then one evening, a ragged little urchin called at the hotel and asked to see us. In reply to our questions, he informed us that he had seen two Englishmen only the day before, such as the police said we were inquiring for; one of them was blind, the other dumb. Indeed he was sure of this, for the reason that he had carried their bag for them down to the harbour whence the Palermo boat sailed. We pricked up our ears on hearing this. If his story was correct, and Kitwater and Codd had visited Sicily, then without a doubt Hayle must have gone there too. But we had no desire to allow ourselves to be taken in again. It might be another of Hayle's tricks, and for this reason we

questioned the boy more closely; he adhered, however, to his story without a variation. His description of the men was perfect in every respect, and he assured us most emphatically that he knew nothing of any individual with such a scar upon his face as Hayle possessed. At last we became convinced that his story was genuine, and we rewarded the boy accordingly. After he had disappeared we informed Miss Kitwater of the discovery we had made.

"You will follow them to Palermo?"

"Assuredly, mademoiselle," Leglosse replied. "I have my duty to perform."

"Then I must go with you," she answered. "If he is on the island the chase must be drawing to a close, and I must be present to protect him, if possible, against himself."

Accordingly next morning, for the steamer for that day had long since sailed, we set out for the kingdom of Sicily, that gem among Islands, as Goethe terms it. It was the first time Miss Kitwater had seen the southern coast, and for this reason I made her promise that she would rise early next morning in order that she might witness our approach to the far-famed island. This she did, and side by side we watched the vessel draw closer to the land. Away to the west lay the island of Ustica, its outline sharply defined in the clear morning air.

"How beautiful it all is!" she said, "and to think that we are sailing such lovely seas upon such an errand."

"You must try not to think about it," I said. " 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' Let us hope that it will all come right in the end. If only Leglosse can get hold of Hayle first, your uncle cannot possibly do him any harm, however much disposed he may be that way. Between us we ought to be able to manage that."

Shortly after breakfast we obtained our first glimpse of Sicily. It was a scene never to be forgotten. The blue seas, the towering mountains rising apparently out of it, made up a picture that was lovely beyond compare. Presently we steamed into the harbour, and made our way to the Dogana, where our luggage was examined. Here we commenced our inquiries concerning Kitwater and Codd, and had the satisfaction of learning, on undeniable authority, that the story the boy had told us was correct. Such terrible infirmities as theirs could scarcely fail to attract notice, and more than one of the officials remembered seeing and commiserating them. On leaving the Dogana, they had travelled to the city by

cab, so we were informed.

"The man who drove them is outside now," said one of them. "Perhaps the señor would care to question him."

I replied that I should like very much to do so, and we accordingly went out into the street together. It appeared that the cabman remembered his fares perfectly, the more so by reason of the fact that the blind man had sworn at him for not using greater speed in reaching the city. He had driven them to some furnished lodgings kept by his cousin, he said, and was proceeding to recommend them to us, when I cut him short by informing him that we had already decided upon a hotel. We thereupon entered the vehicle, he mounted the box, and we set off. From the moment that we had set foot ashore Miss Kitwater had been growing more and more nervous. When it was taken into consideration that before nightfall some very unpleasant things might happen, I do not think this fact is to be wondered at. I pitied her from the bottom of my heart, and was prepared to do all that lay in my power to help her. It was a strange change for her, from the quiet little village of Bishopstowe, to the pursuit of a criminal across Europe to an island in the Mediterranean.

"And when it is over?" was the question I asked myself on numerous occasions. "What is going to happen then? I suppose I shall bid her good-bye, she will thank me for the trouble I have taken, and then our acquaintance will be at an end."

After that it had become my habit to heave a prodigious sigh, and to wonder whether she could ever be induced to----

But somehow I never got much further with my speculations. Was it likely she would ever think twice of me? She was invariably kind and thoughtful; she deferred to me on everything, and seemed to think my opinions and actions must of necessity be right. Apart from that I felt certain I had made no other impression upon her.

"Now, *mon ami*," said Leglosse, when we had installed ourselves at our hotel, "I think it would be better that you should efface yourself for a time. None of the men we are after know me, but Hayle and Codd would both recognize you at once. Let me go into the town to make a few inquiries, and if they are satisfactory we shall know how to act. Do your best to amuse mademoiselle, and I will hasten back to you as soon as I have anything to tell."

Upon my consenting to this arrangement he set off, leaving me free to devote myself to the amusement of Miss Kitwater. As soon as she joined me we made our way into the garden of the hotel, and seating ourselves on a comfortable bench, spent the remainder of the morning basking in the sunshine, and watching the exquisite panorama that was spread out before us.

"I wonder what they are doing at Bishopstowe now?" I said, and a moment later wished I had held my tongue.

"Poor little Bishopstowe," my companion answered. "How thankful I shall be to get safely back to it! I don't think I shall ever want to travel again."

"Ah! you cannot tell," I replied. "You are seeing the world just now under very unfavourable auspices. Some day perhaps you will follow the same route under conditions as happy as these are the reverse."

I think she must have guessed to what I referred, for her face flushed a little, and she hastily diverted the conversation into another channel, by drawing my attention to a picturesque sailing-boat which at that moment was entering the harbour. I tried to entice her back to the subject later, but she would plainly have none of it. Only once did she refer to it, and that was when we were making our way back to the hotel to lunch. I stated my fear lest she should find all this running about from place to place tiring for her.

"You need not be afraid of that," she answered. "I am very strong, and am not easily tired. Besides, you have been so good and kind, Mr. Fairfax, and have done so much to ensure my comfort, that, if only out of gratitude to you, I could not very well be fatigued. I think you know how grateful I am to you, do you not?"

As she said this she looked up at me with her beautiful trusting eyes, and so overwhelmed me that it was as much as I could do to keep back the words that rose to the tip of my tongue. I answered her to the effect that I had only done my best to promote her comfort, and was about to say something further, when Leglosse made his appearance before us. There was a look of great satisfaction upon his face.

"I think I know now all that there is to know," he said. "If mademoiselle will excuse me, I will tell it. Monsieur Hayle arrived here some five days ago, and has taken possession of a charming villa some ten miles from the city. It is situated on the coast and the agent declares it to be unique. How long he intends

to occupy it, he, the agent, could not say, but he has paid a high rent for it in advance, which appears to have given unlimited satisfaction. The other two men are still prowling about the city in search of him, but so far they have not been successful in their endeavours."

"Could I not go to my uncle?" Miss Kitwater inquired. "It might be possible for me to persuade him to leave the island without seeing this wretched man."

"I fear it would be useless," I answered. "And you would only cause yourself unnecessary pain. No! what we must do is to communicate with the Palermo police: Leglosse can show them his warrant, and then we must endeavour to get Hayle under lock and key, and then out of the island, without waste of time. That is the best course, believe me."

"If all goes well, I shall make the arrest to-night," said Leglosse, and then added, "I must get back to Paris as soon as possible."

That afternoon he went out once more, this time to interview the police authorities. At five o'clock he returned in a state of great excitement.

"The other two have discovered Hayle's whereabouts," he said, when we were alone together. "And they have set off in pursuit. They have been gone more than an hour, and, unless we start at once, we shall be too late to take him before they run him to earth."

"Good Heavens! Are you quite sure of this?"

"As sure as I can be of anything," he answered. "I have been to their house."

"Do not say anything about this to Miss Kitwater," I said hurriedly. "We must make the best excuse we can to account for our absence."

I tried to do this, but she saw through my endeavour.

"You are going to arrest him, I can see," she said. "Poor unhappy man! But there, I would rather that should happen than he and my uncle should meet. Go, Mr. Fairfax, and I pray God you may be successful."

Leglosse had already engaged a cab, and when I joined him I discovered that he had also brought a Sicilian police official with him. This individual gave the driver his instructions, and away we went. As we had informed the cabman, previous to setting out, that there was no time to be lost, we covered the distance

in fine style, and just as the sun was sinking behind the mountains entered the little village on the outskirts of which the villa was situated. It was a delightful spot, a mere cluster of human habitations, clinging to the mountain-side. The Angelus was sounding from the campanile of the white monastery, further up the hill-side as we drove along the main street. Leaving the village behind us we passed on until we came to the gates of the park in which the villa was situated. We had already formed our plans, and it was arranged that the island official should send his name in to Hayle, Leglosse and I keeping in the background as much as possible. We descended from the carriage and Leglosse rang the bell which we discovered on the wall; presently the door was opened, and a wizened-up little man made his appearance before us. An animated conversation ensued, from which it transpired that the new occupant of the villa was now in the pavilion at the foot of the grounds.

"In that case conduct us to him," said the officer, "but remember this, we desire to approach without being seen. Lead on!"

The old man obeyed and led us by a winding path through the orangery for upwards of a quarter of a mile. At the end of that walk we saw ahead of us a handsome white edifice, built of stucco, and of the summer-house order. It stood on a small plateau on the first slope of the cliff and commanded an exquisite view of the bay, the blue waters of which lay some two hundred feet or so below it.

"His Excellency is in there," said the old man, in his Sicilian patois.

"Very good, in that case you can leave us," said the officer, "we can find our way to him ourselves."

The old man turned and left us, without another word, very well pleased, I fancy, to get out of the way of that functionary. Goodness only knows what memories of stolen vegetables and fruit had risen in his mind.

"Before we go in," I said, "would it not be as well to be prepared for any emergencies? Remember he is not a man who would stick at much."

We accordingly arranged our plan of attack in case it should be necessary, and then approached the building. As we drew nearer the sound of voices reached our ears. At first I was not able to recognize them, but as we ascended the steps to the pavilion, I was able to grasp the real facts of the case.

"Good Heavens!" I muttered to myself, "that's Kitwater's voice." Then turning to Leglosse, I whispered, "We're too late, they're here before us."

It certainly was Kitwater's voice I had heard, but so hoarse with fury that at any other time I should scarcely have recognized it.

"Cover him, Codd," he was shouting, "and if he dares to move shoot him down like the dog he is. You robbed us of our treasure, did you? And you sneaked away at night into the cover of the jungle, and left us to die or to be mutilated by those brutes of Chinese. But we've run you down at last, and now when I get hold of you, by God, I'll tear your eyes and your tongue out, and you shall be like the two men you robbed and betrayed. Keep your barrel fixed on him, Codd, I tell you! Remember if he moves you are to fire. Oh! Gideon Hayle, I've prayed on my bended knees for this moment, and now it's come and----"

At this moment we entered the room to find Hayle standing with his back to the window that opened into the balcony, which in its turn overlooked the somewhat steep slope that led to the cliff and the sea. Codd was on the left of the centre table, a revolver in his hand, and a look upon his face that I had never seen before. On the other side of the table was Kitwater, with a long knife in his hand. He was leaning forward in a crouching position, as if he were preparing for a spring. On hearing our steps, however, he turned his sightless face towards us. It was Hayle, however, who seemed the most surprised. He stared at me as if I were a man returned from the dead.

"Put up that revolver, Codd," I cried. "And you, Kitwater, drop that knife. Hayle, my man, it's all up. The game is over, so you may as well give in."

Leglosse was about to advance upon him, warrant in one hand and manacles in the other.

"What does this mean?" cried Hayle.

"THE WOODWORK SNAPPED, AND THE TWO MEN FELL OVER THE EDGE."

His voice located him, and before we could either of us stop him, Kitwater had sprung forward and clutched him in his arms. Of what followed next I scarcely like to think, even now. In cannoning with Hayle he had dropped his knife, and now the two stood while a man could have counted three, locked together in deadly embrace. Then ensued such a struggle as I hope I shall never see again, while we others stood looking on as if we were bound hand and foot. The whole affair could not have lasted more than a few moments, and yet it seemed like an eternity. Kitwater, with the strength of a madman, had seized Hayle round the waist with one arm, while his right hand was clutching at the other's throat. I saw that the veins were standing out upon Hayle's forehead like black cords. Do what he could, he could not shake off the man he had so cruelly wronged. They swayed to and fro, and in one of their lurches struck the window, which flew open and threw them into the balcony outside. Codd and the Sicilian police official gave loud cries, but as for me I could not have uttered a sound had my life depended on it. Hayle must have realized his terrible position, for there was a look of abject, hopeless terror upon his face. The blind man, of course, could see nothing of his danger. His one desire was to be revenged upon his enemy. Closer and closer they came to the frail railing. Once they missed it, and staggered a foot away from it. Then they came back to it again, and lurched against it. The woodwork snapped, and the two men fell over the edge on to the sloping bank below. Still locked together they rolled over and over, down the declivity towards the edge of the cliff. A great cry from Hayle reached our ears. A moment later they had disappeared into the abyss, while we stood staring straight before us, too terrified to speak or move.

Leglosse was the first to find his voice.

"My God!" he said, "how terrible! how terrible!"

Then little Codd sank down, and, placing his head upon his hands on the table, sobbed like a little child.

"What is to be done?" I asked, in a horrified whisper.

"Go down to the rocks and search for them," said the Sicilian officer, "but I doubt if we shall be able to find them; the sea is very deep off this point."

We went! Kitwater's body we discovered, terribly mutilated upon the rocks. Hayle's remains were never found. Whether he fell into the deep water and was washed out to sea, or whether his body was jammed between the rocks under the water, no one would ever be able to say. It was gone, and with it all that were left of the stones that had occasioned their misery.

Codd did not accompany us in the search, and when we returned to the villa above he was not to be found. Never since the moment when we left him sobbing at the table have I set eyes on him, and now, I suppose, in all human probability I never shall.

Later on we returned to Palermo to break the news to Miss Kitwater. Shocked though she was, she received the tidings with greater calmness than I had expected she would do. Perhaps, after all, she felt that it was better that it should have ended so.

Three years have elapsed since we paid that terrible visit to Palermo. It may surprise you, or it may not, when I say that I am now a married man, Margaret Kitwater having consented to become my wife two years ago next month. The only stipulation she made when she gave her decision was that upon my marriage I should retire from the profession in which I had so long been engaged. As I had done sufficiently well at it to warrant such a step, I consented to do so, and now I lead the life of a country gentleman. It may interest some people to know that a certain day-dream, once thought so improbable, has come true, inasmuch as a considerable portion of my time is spent in the little conservatory which, as I have said elsewhere, leads out of the drawing-room. I usually wear a soft felt hat upon my head, and as often as not I have a pipe in my mouth. Every now and then Margaret, my wife, looks in upon me, and occasionally she can be persuaded to bring a young Fairfax with her, who, some people say, resembles his father. For my own part I prefer that he should be like his mother—whom, very naturally, I consider the best and sweetest woman in the world.

THE END

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