

THE HOUSE OF SECRETS

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THE SYDNEY HORLER NOVELS

The House in Greek Street
The Formula
Harlequin of Death
Tiger Standish
The Man Who Shook the Earth
High Stakes
My Lady Dangerous
Gentleman in Waiting
Adventure Calling
Prince of Plunder
Princess After Dark
The Spy
Cavalier of Chance
Checkmate
Danger's Bright Eyes
Horror's Head
Vivanti Returns
The Evil Chateau
The Screaming Skull
Lady of the Night
The Secret Service Man
The Mystery of No. 1
False Face
The House of Secrets
Vivanti
The Black Heart
In the Dark
Miss Mystery
The Curse of Doone
Chimpstead of the Lone Hand

Heart Cut Diamond
Huntress of Death
The Worst Man in the World
The Mystery Mission
The Murder Mask
Wolves of the Night
S.O.S.
Death at Court Lady
The Menace
Secret Agent
Lord of Terror
Tiger Standish Comes Back
Life's a Game
Goal
The House of Wingate
Midnight Love
Romeo and Julia
McPhee
A Legend of the League
Song of the Scrum
Beauty and the Policeman
 (Stories)
HORLERIANA
Excitement :
An Impudent Autobiography
Strictly Personal :
A Writing Man's Diary
Writing for Money :
The Blunt Truth about Modern
Authorship



THE HOUSE OF SECRETS

SYDNEY HORLER



HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,
and have no relation to any living person*

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DEDICATION TO DR. J. J. S. LUCAS

DEAR DOCTOR JOE,

Because, after the heavy day's work, you delight in a "thriller"; because the subject of "The House of Secrets" may interest you professionally; and because, also, from the beginning, you have been a faithful reader, I dedicate this story to you with my kindest regards.

Very sincerely yours,

SYDNEY HORLER.

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Prologue

WITH a shudder the girl quickened her step. The relief of leaving that dark and noisome alley behind ! She had had no idea that the place could possibly be so horrible as this ; her father had simply said that the Rue Ste Jeanne was "some distance from the boulevards." It seemed to her, as she hastened along, that it was in the very heart of the criminal quarter. It was here, amid this indescribable squalor and filth, that the Paris police must seek the Apache rat. She shuddered again, her heart leaping into her mouth as a dark form slithered out from a passage. Yet she had to go on ; her father had said that no other person could supply him with what he wanted.

The man's evil eyes sent a fresh throb of fear through her ; but he slunk away and became lost in the shifting shadows. With a deep sigh of relief, she turned the corner.

. . . That must be the house. Her father had described it so minutely that even in this murky twilight she could not mistake it. Calling upon a reserve of courage, she sped swiftly up the path, and, before her resolution could fail, rang the bell.

The French journalist turned to his companion.

"This quarter is not a very healthy one," he said ; "I brought you here because you wished to see a district that is quite off the tourist's track, but it would be wise not to hang about too long. That house now"—he broke off, to point with his walking-

stick—"it is notorious. An Egyptian named Ilbrahim lives there. He conducts a thriving business . . . in noxious drugs. See, there is someone coming out now . . . a girl!"

Barry Wilding could not help staring. He had only a fugitive glance at the girl who came out of that house of the sinister Egyptian, but he could see that she was very beautiful.

Alphonse Beaujour, meeting his eyes, shrugged expressive shoulders.

"Did I not tell you this was a strange place, m'sieu?" he said.

STANDING there, amid the tumult of the crowded platform, she looked the loveliest thing in the world. That was Wilding's opinion, and his eyes possibly betrayed something of this impression, for the girl flushed slightly as she held out her hand.

"And now I must really say good-bye, Mr. Wilding, after thanking you once again."

Barry Wilding engulfed the hand in a brown fist.

"Precious little I've done," he replied gloomily. Then, suddenly: "Why won't you let me see you again?" he asked; "I may look fierce, but I don't really devour my kind, you know."

The girl shook her head.

"I'm not exactly a free agent," she replied; "please don't ask me any more questions. It has been delightful meeting you—I shall always remember it, but——"

"You won't let me see you again!" supplied Wilding, whose gloom by this time was almost abysmal. "All right! But, listen: I'm going to give you my name and address. I shall be in London or the vicinity for quite a time. It may happen that—I don't suppose it will, but I've got to give my luck a

chance to turn—you would care to write to me.” He took a card from his pocket and scribbled.

“ You won’t refuse this ? ” he inquired.

She took the card and placed it in her bag.

“ No. And if ever I can write—I will. And now, please, I must really go.”

He escorted her to the taxicab, shook hands, raised his hat and walked away.

When, from a distance, Wilding watched the taxi thread its way out of Charing Cross station, to be swallowed up in the vortex of the Strand, he felt that something had gone out of his life which he would never be able to replace. He had only known the girl a few hours, and yet he knew that so long as he lived he would never be able to forget her.

In getting on the boat at Calais he had been able to render her a slight service. A man with a dissipated face and furtive eyes, thinking she was alone, had endeavoured to force his acquaintance upon her. The girl’s eyes had encountered Wilding’s. Without hesitation, he had stepped to her side. One glance at the athletic figure and determined expression of this deeply-tanned young man, and the lady-killer decided that the attempt was not worth the risk. For the whole of the crossing he kept his distance.

The man gone, Barry Wilding was faced with a nice problem in ethics: Could he continue to stay by the side of this charming girl? To render a service was one thing; to continue to thrust his company another.

The girl herself helped him out of his dilemma. She continued to talk after thanking him. He was not the impressionable type and he had seen too much of life during his thirty years—the last eight of which at least had been somewhat tumultuous ones—to be easily influenced. Yet the fact remained that within a few minutes Wilding realised with all the force of his nature that this girl, who was a complete stranger to him, whom he had not known twenty minutes before had even existed, meant a very great deal to him. Although the conviction was somewhat overwhelming, he accepted it as one accepts the vital truths of Life.

The Channel was in a gracious mood, being as smooth as the proverbial millpond, and, seated on the deck, Wilding found the time pass swiftly—too swiftly, as did the subsequent train journey to Charing Cross. For once a certain railway system which has not the best of reputations for meteoric speed was blessed and not cursed.

The jolt came when, somewhat awkwardly—for he realised that the girl might form an entirely erroneous impression—Wilding asked if he might not see her again. It was then that the girl for the first time had shaken her head.

Very graciously, but nevertheless with a quiet determination not to be gainsaid, she had replied that such a proposition was not possible. So Barry Wilding, as he stood watching the taxicab disappear, found himself confronted with the extraordinary

position of being on the point of falling in love with a girl whose name he did not know and who had told him as plainly as good manners would permit that he must make no attempt to see her after that day.

And yet, he reflected with a frown, the girl must have been interested to a certain extent, else why should she have prolonged the conversation? Had she not started that conversation on the boat he would merely have raised his hat and walked away. A man whose experiences had made him an acute observer, Wilding came to the conclusion as he lit a cigarette that if it had not been for a Something undisclosed the girl would conceivably have accepted the friendship which he had felt compelled to offer her. What was that mysterious Something? Exasperated, he realised that it was too late for him to find out now. True, the girl had his name and address, but, after what she had said and implied, it was a million to one against her ever writing to him.

Wilding was just about to signal a taxi to take him to his hotel, when he noticed that a man whom he had observed in a vague sort of fashion whilst he had been talking to the girl, was regarding him in a fixed and yet furtive manner. When he stared back, trying to fix the fellow in his memory, the man sidled away.

Sundry adventures in many parts of the world had taught Wilding that usually a man has a very good and sufficient reason for regarding another in the way that this man had stared at him. His recent disappointment had left him baffled and irritated. And

from the brief glance that he had had of this man's face he had formed a violent dislike to it.

He turned, one hand ready to catch the other by the shoulder and swing him round. But the energy was wasted; by the time he had gone half a dozen yards the man was nowhere to be seen.

It was in a ruffled frame of mind that Wilding drove to his hotel.

Chapter II

Barry Takes an Oath

THE following morning Wilding was up early and breakfasting with an appetite which evoked the waiter's hearty approbation.

"Been abroad, sir?" he ventured.

"Yes," replied Wilding, "but I may settle down now. The fact is"—waiting for the astonishment to dawn in the man's face—"I've just come into a fortune . . . bring me some more bacon, please."

Twenty minutes later Barry Wilding, his pipe cocked comfortably in a corner of his mouth (he was the type who called cigars "fancy smoking," whilst he had no use for cigarettes) was striding purposefully down the Strand. Arrived at the top of Norfolk Street, he consulted the back of an envelope and then turned to his right. Outside a huge building which bore the sign "Phoenix House," he ran his eye down the long list of firms on the brass plate outside.

"Milsom and Coventry—they're my pigeon!" he commented, and walked up the steps.

On the fourth floor, after stepping out of the lift he stopped outside a door on which was painted the number 120, and then resolutely walked in.

Pressing the bell beneath the word "Enquiries," he was scrutinised by a serious-looking clerk.

"My name is Wilding—Barry Wilding," he told this inquisitor crisply; "I have an appointment with your Mr. Coventry at ten o'clock this morning."

"Yes, sir," said the clerk, chewing a penholder. "I will see if Mr. Coventry is at liberty."

Closing down the partition window through which he had conducted his scrutiny, he disappeared. Knocking the ashes out of his pipe into a derelict-looking umbrella stand, Wilding waited with as much patience as he could manage.

In about five minutes the haggard face showed itself again.

"If you will step this way, Mr. Coventry will see you now, sir."

Opening a door on his right the clerk ushered the visitor down a long passage at the end of which was a door of noble mahogany.

"Mr. Coventry is at your disposal in that room, sir."

Opening the door, Wilding found himself in a large and lofty panelled room. Seated at the desk in the centre was a man who rose immediately and held out his hand.

"So you are Mr. Barry Wilding, eh? Well, let me say at once that I am very relieved to see you in the flesh, Mr. Wilding. It has taken some time to trace you!" The eyes of the speaker, a fit-looking man of affairs with an open-air appearance, twinkled slightly.

"Well, you see, I never expected to be left a fortune! As a matter of fact, I did not even know that this uncle person existed. And I like roaming about—haven't done much else as a matter of fact since the war."

"How far have your travels taken you?" inquired the solicitor.

"Pretty well all over—the States, Canada, South America. I flipped over to Japan and had a look at China. On the way back, I took in Australia and New Zealand."

"H'm! You must follow an interesting profession, Mr. Wilding."

"As a matter of fact, I haven't any profession worth speaking about—I've tried so many. But my experience has been that you can always pull out if you care to rough things a bit."

Samuel Coventry took another glance at the man sitting in the client's chair and smiled.

"Wandering seems to suit you, anyway," he said, "but now I dare say you are anxious for me to get to business?"

"Well, one doesn't come into a fortune every day."

"A small fortune, Mr. Wilding. Money values have changed during the last few years, you know."

"We won't split hairs. A regular income will be such a novelty to me that I promise you I shan't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"That's the right spirit. And now to business." Mr. Coventry pulled out a drawer on the right-hand side of his desk and deposited a number of papers on the large blotting-pad.

"It's rather a curious story that I have to tell, Mr. Wilding," started the solicitor. "You were not aware that your uncle, Tobias Trevannion, died in an asylum, I suppose?"

"Great Scott, no!"

"Oh, you needn't worry about the validity of the will. That is quite in order."

Wilding shifted in his chair.

"The thought didn't enter my mind," he replied; "to tell you the truth I was thinking what a shame it was in a way that I should have been loafing round the world when the only living relative I happened to have seemed to want help pretty badly here at home."

"Your uncle was well looked after—I saw to that myself. It was necessary to remove him from The Durdles, his house in the Thames Valley, because he could not get anyone to stay with him. Besides, he had to be removed, poor fellow—he became so violent."

"Was it because of his getting violent that he

couldn't get anyone to stay with him?" asked Wilding.

The solicitor drummed on the desk with his fingers.

"Not exactly. The Durdles—which you inherit, by the way—has rather a bad reputation. It is said to be haunted—and certainly some strange things are supposed to have happened there."

Barry Wilding slightly stiffened.

"I should rather like to have a look at the place. Haunted, eh? Well, I've never yet met a ghost, but I suppose it's never too late to begin."

In spite of his thoroughly practical appearance, the turn of the conversation did not seem to please the lawyer.

"As I was saying," he continued, "your uncle was removed some nine months ago. He did not live long after he entered the asylum. But before his illness he called in here one day and rather surprised me by saying he wished to make his will. It was then that I heard that he had a relative living—if you did not know of him, he evidently knew of you, Mr. Wilding. Being his only sister's child, that was only natural, I suppose. By the way, are you aware that your uncle came from a very distinguished family?"

"I knew that my mother before her marriage was one of the Devonshire Trevannions—but were they distinguished?"

Mr. Coventry looked pained at such levity.

"Your uncle could trace his family back for very

many generations," he said impressively. "You should surely know, Mr. Wilding, that an early Trevannion migrated from Cornwall to Devonshire in the sixteenth century and became famous as a seaman!"

"That possibly accounts for my wanting to wander about a bit, then. But tell me something more about this haunted house in the Thames Valley—I should have thought it would have been too wet there for spooks."

"The Durdles has been in the occupation of the Trevannions for very many years, Mr. Wilding—it was built by a member of the family, I understand. Certainly it has never been occupied by anyone but a Trevannion."

"What sort of a place is it?"

The solicitor shrugged his shoulders.

"I have only visited the house once—and that was many years ago. It struck me then as having been allowed to go to rack and ruin. I mentioned the fact to your uncle, but he was a man who would have his own way. With all respect to him, he was—shall I say rather pig-headed on occasion?"

"The Thames Valley in the winter—and a ramshackle place all falling to pieces; it doesn't sound a very attractive proposition—not as a residence, anyway."

The solicitor looked at the speaker keenly.

"Nevertheless, Mr. Wilding, I am afraid you will be compelled to live at The Durdles," he commented.

"Compelled!" Wilding did not like the word; he had always resented being "compelled" to do anything. He was not that type. "Why?" he asked.

"It is a condition—a strict condition—of the will that you shall live at The Durdles—make it your permanent residence, in fact," said Mr. Coventry.

"What!"

"The condition is clearly stated in your uncle's will. I have already told you that the house has been in the Trevannion family for many generations. Each member upon inheritance had to take an oath that he would not let the house pass out of his possession during his lifetime."

"Do you know the reason?"

"No. And I do not think your uncle did. In any case, he did not disclose it to me. But then Mr. Trevannion was not what one would call a particularly communicative man."

"So what it amounts to is this: That if I refuse to make this promise to live in the place and not to sell I get nothing? Is that the size of it?"

The solicitor picked up a paper-weight.

"You have put it very concisely, Mr. Wilding. But I hope you will have sufficient common sense not to refuse to comply with the request, strange as it may possibly appear to you. From your uncle's point of view, it seemed, no doubt, a reasonable clause. He himself had taken the oath, I know. An income of eight hundred a year is not to be lightly disregarded even in these days, I would remind you,

Mr. Wilding, especially as——” He paused, and Wilding supplied the missing words “Especially as my present financial resources are somewhat precarious. Oh, I don’t mind you putting it that way a little bit—fifty pounds represents my total wealth at the moment. Up till now I’ve never cared much about money; as long as I have had enough to go on with for the moment, I was satisfied.”

“And now you have changed that view, Mr. Wilding?”

“Well, yes—I have.” Wilding did not proceed to enlarge upon his reply. He didn’t propose telling this man that meeting a girl on the boat from Calais had altered his entire outlook upon life in certain important respects.

“I think you are wise. There is no truer saying than a man’s best friend is his pocket,” rejoined the solicitor.

Wilding leaned forward.

“What is this oath?” he asked.

Coventry arranged his papers.

“It will sound childish, I dare say, but when your uncle made his will that day in this room he took a very grave view of the matter. The words you are required to swear to are:

‘By this hearthstone I swear to lie,
All my days until I die.’”

“Why, I never heard such rot in my life!” laughed Wilding; “I should have thought that if we had had

a poet in the family he could have done better than that! It's the worst kind of doggerel."

"I quite agree. But that is the condition. You will also be required to affix your signature to a statement that during your lifetime you will not sell this property nor allow it to pass out of your possession. Should you do so it will be my painful duty to disinherit you. Directly I received your telegram saying that you were coming over from Paris, I got all the documents ready and now all that you have to do is to sign."

"Sounds like something out of a book," commented Wilding.

"My experience has been that Life is often far more strange than the most sensational fiction," replied the solicitor sententiously.

Leaving the lawyer's office ten minutes later, Wilding paused to look round for a taxicab. Being in undisputed possession of an income of £800 a year and a country house which, although derelict, was worth something like £3,000, gave him a pleasurable Croesus-like feeling. Walk, when he had fifty of the best in his pocket, filched from old Dryasdust up above? Not likely! He would sail up to the Fitzherbert Grill in the yellowest taxi he could get and have the most expensive lunch that could be bought! That was the way to do things.

It was while he was looking round, that he caught sight of the man leaning against the railings of an

area on the other side of the road. Norfolk Street, Strand, all through the day is a busy thoroughfare, and it is reasonable to suppose that Wilding would not have taken any special notice of this idler had it not been that, catching Barry's eye, the man gave an obvious start.

That start of recognition caused Wilding to look again—and it was after this second look that he crossed the road at a rapid pace.

The idler would have evaded him, shuffling off in a furtive fashion, but Wilding caught him by the shoulder.

"My name's Wilding," he said crisply, "do you want anything?"

The man assumed an attitude of astonishment. Into his rat's face came an expression of surprise that was admirably contrived.

"Want, guv'nor! No, I don't want anything. Why should I? I don't know you from Adam!"

"I was rather under the impression that you did want something. For this is the second time that I've seen you prowling about in my vicinity. If it had been only once I might have overlooked it. But twice . . . Well, all I've got to tell you is this: the only thing you are likely to get from me is a hiding that you will remember till the day of your death if ever I catch sight of your ugly mug again. Understand?"

"Why you should pitch on me, guv'nor, I don't know," was the whining reply. "I've been tramping

about all day looking for a job. It was because I felt fit to drop that I leaned up against those railings to have a breather, like. When you came out of that buildin' I thought 'twas Mr. Jerry Cavendish, 'im of the 1st Royal Loamshires. 'E was my orficer durin' the war, 'e was—an' a finer gen'l'man never breathed. That was what made me start, guv'nor, s'elp me. When I saw that you wasn't Mr. Cavendish, I turned away."

"All right!" came the brisk comment; "now I believe you to be a really first-rate liar, but because I don't feel like killing rats to-day I'll let it go that you're telling the truth. And here's five bob to go and get a meal. But my original promise holds good: if I see you a third time watching me I'll—*jump on you!* Vamoose!"

The man touched his hand to his ragged hat.

"Gawd bless yer, guv'nor!" he said, and then, with his back safely turned: "The prize mutt!"

Chapter III

In the Night

BARRY WILDING secured his yellow taxicab, and, as it wormed its way through the crowded Strand, he could have stood up in it and sung. For the world had changed for him. He was now a man of affairs, of some position—as old Coventry had said, £800 a year wasn't to be sneezed at, even in the present hard

times—a man who could with some justification ask a girl to marry him. Why, it was the jolliest possible old world; he would insert an advertisement something like this in every paper in the country:

GIRL ON BOAT: Must see you. Wonderful news. Don't disappoint. B.W.

There wasn't a girl living who could be heartless enough to refuse that appeal. Although she was lost, yet would he find her again. What a wonderful thing money was; it had changed him from a despairing ass into a bounding optimist!

Once in that eating-place of luxury, the Fitzherbert Grill, he sent for the head waiter.

"M'sieu requires?" asked the suave Frenchman.

"The best lunch even you are capable of. All over the place—in Pekin, Shanghai, the mining-camps of South America, the shacks of North-West Canada—I've heard men talk about the wonderful lunch they were going to have at the Fitzherbert Grill when they got back to London. Now, I've just come back to Town myself and someone has left me some money in addition . . . I leave everything to you."

"M'sieu is to be felicitated, first upon his temperament and then upon his good fortune. I promise that you shall not suffer disappointment." His face wreathed in smiles, the head waiter hastened away.

It was a meal over which to linger; it was a lunch to be recalled years afterwards. As he lit the Corona

and sipped his coffee, Wilding reflected thankfully that France was still our friend.

"Get me a taxicab!" he ordered the waiter, "a yellow one, if possible."

"Oui, m'sieu."

Seated in another yellow chariot, Wilding drove to every important daily newspaper office in London. At each he handed in the advertisement he had framed. That done, he felt more at peace. The rest was on the lap of the gods. Surely they would be kind.

Altogether it had been a wonderful day. He had tea'd at the Ritz, dined at the Savoy and supped at the Carlton. All of which had made a nasty dent in his fifty pounds advanced by Coventry, the solicitor, but had proved very satisfying nevertheless.

The revue he had attended, "Heels High," had induced a frame of mind that made him feel friendly to all mankind. Arrived at his hotel, he beamed at the doorkeeper, tipped the lift-boy and grinned at himself once he reached his room. When he got between the sheets it was with the pleasant reflection that the next day would assuredly bring him an answer from the girl on the boat. The morning newspapers would contain the advertisement.

Used to sleeping in all sorts of places, and under all sorts of conditions, no sooner did he put his head to the pillow than he went off.

What it was that caused him to struggle free from the close embrace of a perfectly beautiful sleep he did not know. Perhaps it was the sixth sense which never deserts men who have lived the kind of existence that had been natural to Barry Wilding for some years past that caused him to lift his head and listen carefully.

There was someone in the room !

For a moment Wilding lay still, trying to concentrate his waking impressions. Presently his eyes became better used to the light ; he saw a dark form creeping stealthfully towards the bed.

" All right, my beauty ! " he muttered ; " I'll soon see your pretty face ! " His feeling was one of jubilant anticipation. This was worth waking-up for.

Tossing to one side, he emitted a snore. That snore in its way was a small work of art. It was neither too loud to be mistrusted by the intruder, nor was it quiet enough to be missed. At the same time as he snored, Wilding pushed the spare pillow—it was a double bed in which he was sleeping—down between the sheets and then, with every nerve tense, waited for developments.

From the moonlight which filtered into the room between the curtains, Wilding was able to see that the uninvited guest had assumed a mask for this early morning call. He also saw something else—something even more melodramatic—the man carried in his right hand a long-bladed knife ! This—this was wildly exciting !

Wilding completed his scheme of strategy by wriggling farther and farther over to the far side of the bed. His intention was to leave the bed by that side and cut off the man's retreat from the door. If this gentleman with the mask was his Norfolk Street acquaintance of that morning, nothing would please him better than to furnish the hiding which had been so solemnly promised ; he would do it conscientiously too. Oh, very conscientiously, knife or no knife.

Before he could leave the bed, the man sprang. Deep into the feathers of the pillow, the long-bladed knife sank ; and while the man was trying to extricate the weapon, Wilding leapt in turn.

The very virility of his attack carried its disadvantage, for the effect of the man ducking was to make Wilding's fingers close on the air instead of the intruder's throat. Baulked of his prey, he hit the floor with a resounding thump.

Up again instantly, he received a vicious blow in the face—this came from the man's boot, apparently—and then, while he was again endeavouring to close, he heard the window raised.

He rushed forward. Any slight scruples he might have had before in desiring to twist the intruder's neck were entirely removed. The matter had now become a tooth-and-claw affair.

It was a case of more haste, less real speed, however : in that furious lunge forward, Wilding caught his toe against the bed-post and crashed heavily a second time. His luck was distinctly out.

This time he lay partially stunned ; and it was while he was waiting for his brain to clear that he heard a scurrying outside. The man had escaped by a fire-escape or over the roof. In any case, he was gone.

The first action of an average man upon regaining his full senses would doubtless have been to arouse the hotel staff, summon the police and give the latter full details of the abominable outrage. Barry Wilding did none of these things. Instead, he sat on the edge of the rumpled bed and lit a reflective pipe.

He looked curiously at the handle of the knife, the blade of which was buried in the pillow.

"That's something at any rate," he told himself ; and, withdrawing the weapon, he locked it away in his suitcase.

Then he smiled. It was a curious thing to do, but for the life of him Wilding could not help that grin. So much of an exhilarating nature had happened within the last few hours—he had fallen in love, been left a small fortune, and had narrowly escaped being murdered ! To a man who liked action, there was certainly small grounds for complaint in these occurrences.

Wilding became serious. It was all very well making a joke about it—but what was the mystery behind that night attack ? In modern London a man wasn't singled out for murder in the way he had been singled out without there being a very powerful motive at the back of it. Who was the man in the

mask? Was he the Norfolk Street idler—or someone else?

He broke off these reflections to recall a significant fact. This was that only two persons in the world knew his London address. One was Coventry, the solicitor, and the other was—*the girl!*

Had Coventry any sinister motive in wishing him dead? He debated the point. It seemed too fantastic to be true, and yet what could be more fantastic, if it came to that, than a masked man carrying a knife, breaking into his hotel bedroom with the obvious intention of murdering him?

But he must rule Coventry out. Hang it! he was a solicitor with a big practice, a man of affairs. Such a man could not afford to employ a crook to do a killing; for one thing he would lay himself open to be bled white by blackmail. And if Coventry had wished him out of the way, surely he wouldn't have wasted so much time and expense in tracing him all over Europe? No, that idea was preposterous and untenable; it wouldn't hold together for a minute's serious consideration,

Wilding's face hardened as he thought of the other possibility. He was willing to bet his life that the girl was as straight as a die. He recalled the clean, frank look she had given him when saying good-bye on Charing Cross Station the day before, and became incensed with himself for ever stooping to think . . .

Yet what were the facts? The facts were (1) that the girl knew that he had come to London to inherit

some property because in a moment of impulse he had told her so on the boat; (2) that there certainly had been an air of mystery about her—query, what were the “reasons” she had referred to when refusing to allow him to see her again? And (3) she knew at which hotel he was going to stay.

“But, damn it, that doesn’t make her out a crook, does it, you fool?” Wilding asked himself indignantly.

Yet even a well-drawing pipe brought him little consolation.

Chapter IV

Another Surprise

It rained the next morning.

“Nice morning to go and see the ancestral home in the Thames Valley,” Wilding told himself as he shaved: “let’s hope it won’t be washed away.” Going to his bag to take out a clean collar, he saw the knife that he had placed there the night before staring him in the face.

The sight sobered him. Naturally a man who tried to take a lighthearted view of life, he made no attempt to disguise the fact that this knife which, as near as possible, hang it! had punctured his vitals, was an unpleasant-looking object before breakfast.

“Perhaps the haunted mansion will yield up its hideous secret—this being kept in the dark is all right as a game, but hardly satisfying when prolonged,” he told his reflection in the mirror.

Coventry had given him full instructions how to get to The Durdles, so, when at twelve o'clock that day Wilding left the riverside station of Lulgate, he knew exactly how to reach his destination. His ancestral abode lay between the two villages of Lulgate and Hillsdown, being three-quarters of a mile distant from the latter place. It stood back from the main road, from which it was shielded by a high wall and some tall fir trees. There was a long carriage drive, and the place looked very mournful and neglected. All this that cheery blighter Coventry had informed him.

Having thoughtfully provided himself with a drink and some bread and cheese at the last public-house after leaving Lulgate, Wilding trudged on through the slight drizzle. He wore stout boots, a mackintosh which was really rainproof, an old tweed hat that had seen service in many climes, and he carried a hefty ash-stick. He had intended to buy a revolver in Town, but had decided that to trouble to take an automatic whilst visiting a derelict house was unnecessary. He mustn't become melodramatic like the gentleman with the knife.

Arrived outside the stone pillars which bore in faded lettering the words, "The Durdles," Wilding stared; instead of being secured by a trusty lock, the gates had evidently been opened. Moreover, judging by the marks made in the soft gravel of the carriage-way, the house had received a caller in a motor-car quite recently—probably that morning!

This was piling mystery upon mystery, surprise upon surprise. The thing was becoming as intricate as a modern child's puzzle. Why should anyone call in a motor-car at a house which was unoccupied and had not been offered for sale?

Wilding decided to investigate. Anything was better than this uncertainty. Did he or did he not inherit this moth-eaten ruin? If he did—and one of the biggest solicitors in London had certainly informed him to that effect—then he simply had to inquire who was the inquisitive cove in the motor-car.

Opening the gates, he walked up the long carriage-drive. But he had taken scarcely a dozen yards before he pulled up short. A couple of huge dogs came pounding towards him. Judging by the way they showed their teeth, they didn't appreciate strangers.

Barry had always prided himself upon the fact that he was a dog's man—that dogs, all kinds of dogs, liked him. But these brutes evidently meant business. Both looked a mixture of Great Dane and English mastiff: they would tear a man's throat out in a twinkling. Bravery was all very well in normal circumstances—but Wilding on this occasion turned tail and as promptly as possible closed the iron gates between him and the dogs. As though enraged at being robbed of such a toothsome morsel, they flung themselves against the bars, making the framework shake.

Wilding became annoyed. To be shut out of one's

own property in this fashion was exasperating. Then he noticed a hand-bell in the right-hand pillar and gave it a hearty tug. The handle came away in his grasp, but there certainly had been a faint tinkle.

Meanwhile, the baying of the dogs filled the air with menace. Their noise, he decided, would be certain to arouse any occupiers of the house—and that someone had had the cheek to pitch his tent in The Durdles, the presence of these angry brutes, still flinging themselves against the gates, went to prove.

Presently Wilding heard shuffling feet.

“What yo’ want here?” asked a voice.

Wilding took a long second look.

Standing before him was a huge negro with a singularly repulsive face.

Barry Wilding had had too many strange experiences in his life to feel surprise in the ordinary run of things, but this was such an unexpected happening that for a moment he could not speak.

The negro thrust his repulsive face forward.

“Yo’ go away,” he said.

Then Wilding laughed. Men in different parts of the world would have recognised that laugh and hung around in pleasurable hope of some development.

“Tell me, Uncle Tom, just what you think you’re doing here?” Wilding said.

The negro doorkeeper snapped his fingers impatiently.

"Dr. Daniel Kenwit lives here, and I am his servant," he replied.

"The devil he does!" commented Wilding; "well, you just slip inside, give Dr. Kenwit my card, and tell him I want to see him particularly."

The proffered pasteboard was refused.

"The doctor is very busy—he can see no one."

"He's going to see me, so the sooner you inform him of the fact the better I shall be pleased," said the caller uncompromisingly.

The ebon doorkeeper looked at Wilding, seemed to estimate at its proper worth the expression in the visitor's face, but still shook his head.

"The doctor can see no one—he is too busy," he said again.

The story was losing its original charm for Barry Wilding. It had become monotonous. Whose house was this, anyway—his, or this confounded doctor's who was so busy that he couldn't see anyone?"

"Look here, what's your name?" he demanded.

"Starkey."

"Then, Starkey, go straight to your master and tell him that the man who owns this house is on the mat—and that he intends to see him! Understand that?"

"Yo' own this house?"

"I do."

The information had the desired effect.

"Yo' wait here," the man said.

Barry Wilding, his interest piqued, did nothing of the kind. Considering that this was his house, he

decided that he had a perfect right to follow the negro servant into the hall.

He did so, smiling somewhat grimly at the reflection that it would take some display of physical energy to remove him. He resolved that once in he would remain in until he had been given a clear and satisfactory explanation of the unknown doctor's presence in a house, which he had been given clearly to understand, had been uninhabited since his uncle's death.

He had not long to wait. From a room on the right of the hall a man stepped out. This man was tall, thin, had stooped shoulders and eyes that gleamed behind thick, tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles. Wilding judged his age to be somewhere around fifty.

His manner of address was abrupt.

"What do you think you are doing in here, sir?" he demanded.

Wilding resented the tone. He might have been prepared to be conciliatory, but not now—certainly not now. This fellow was a boor.

He buttoned his coat.

"Your servant, no doubt, has given you my card, Dr. —?"

"Kenwit. Do you mind being quick? I am a very busy man."

"I will be as quick as possible," Wilding assured him. "May I ask what you are doing in my house?" he inquired.

"Your house?" Dr. Kenwit was quite obviously startled.

"My house. I can assure you there is no possible doubt about it."

"But there is bound to be some mistake!" The speaker's agitation increased. Without any further warning, he completely lost his temper.

"How dare you come here with such a cock-and-bull story?" he started to shout; "if you are not out of this house within two minutes I will set the dogs on you. Starkey!"

The negro servant, who did not appear to be such a villainous character as his repulsive face indicated, was about to shuffle away when Wilding replied.

"All right, Dr. Kenwit! I was prepared to listen to any reasonable explanation, but now you've spoilt that chance. If you were a younger man I would repay you for your insolence in another way, but as it is I'm going to set the law on you."

"The law?" repeated Dr. Kenwit.

"The law," replied Wilding; "I am the owner of this house, and you are trespassing. As a trespasser I intend to prosecute you. And when I come again I shall bring a revolver. Then your dogs may get hurt. Good afternoon!"

As he walked rapidly down the drive, Wilding fancied he heard a voice calling him, but he gave no indication that he had heard and continued on his way without looking back. He was thoroughly fed-up with Dr. Daniel Kenwit, and only wished that the man had been ten years or so younger. Then he

would have given him a job attending to himself.

"Coventry's the cove for this," he said as he turned his face towards London.

Chapter V Samuel Coventry has a Phone Message

THE solicitor moved in his chair.

"But the man must be mad," he said. "There is no doubt about the house belonging to you. The title claim is as clear as possible. What do you wish me to do?"

"Do? I want the fellow cleared out! If he had been even mildly pleasant about it, I shouldn't have bothered, perhaps—the position of the place doesn't appeal to me; too far away from anywhere for my taste—but as it is, I want his blood. In any case, I can't conceive that a man who employs a nigger servant with a face that might be used to illustrate the Seven Deadly Sins, and uses dogs to scare callers off, can be a suitable tenant for such a respectable property."

"I quite agree," responded the solicitor. "Excuse me a moment," as the telephone bell rang.

Barry Wilding could not help noticing that during the somewhat long conversation which followed, the expression of the solicitor changed. Once or twice Coventry looked across at his client and it was then

that his forehead became creased with perplexity. Finally, when he replaced the receiver, he pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his face.

"You say you don't like the position of The Durdles, Mr. Wilding?"

Even his voice was changed. Barry remarked this as he had remarked the other things, but he merely stored the information away in his mind for the moment.

"Well, it *is* rather lonely," he parried.

Once again the solicitor used his handkerchief.

"A most remarkable thing has happened," he said; "the most remarkable thing——" He checked himself, and, pulling out a box of cigars, pushed them across the table.

"Smoke," he said; "this, really, is a most——" And then again he paused.

Barry Wilding laughed.

"Every darn thing that has happened since I returned home has been remarkable, if it comes to that," he put in. For a moment he considered whether he should tell the lawyer of the attack that had been made upon him in the hotel bedroom the night before, and then decided not to. Samuel Coventry's manner was peculiar, to say the least; surprising as the feeling was, Wilding was almost inclined to suspect the solicitor in common with a good many other people. That message over the telephone had affected Coventry very strangely; what had been its purport? That it had concerned him, he felt sure.

This impression soon received confirmation.

"Mr. Wilding, you will be surprised, no doubt, at what I am going to tell you—but the conversation I had over the telephone just now concerned an offer to buy The Durdles."

"From the doctor-fellow?"

Coventry pulled at his cigar.

"There are certain circumstances, apparently, which make it desirable that the name of the purchaser should not be disclosed. But the offer is so exceedingly handsome that I should strongly advise you to sell."

"Exceedingly handsome, you say?"

"Yes. For a property worth not more than £3,000, I have been empowered to make you an offer of £10,000!"

Wilding blew a cloud of smoke.

"As I don't believe in philanthropy, it stands to common sense there must be something crooked about it," he commented.

The solicitor rose. He was plainly ill at ease.

"You do not suggest that I would lend myself to anything underhanded, I hope?" he said stiffly.

"I have not suggested anything of the kind. I have merely commented upon the fact, certainly strange, that someone has considered it worth his while to offer me £10,000 for something which you yourself say is not exactly a bargain at £3,000."

Samuel Coventry now fidgeted with his necktie.

"I strongly advise you to sell, Mr. Wilding!"

"You do, eh?"

"Most decidedly! From every possible point of view, I advise you to sell."

"Including the breaking of the oath which you made me take in this room yesterday morning?"

The solicitor started. The shot palpably had gone home. Yet it was with a certain dignity that he replied: "In certain circumstances it may be the wisest course to alter one's plans. In any case it was, as you said yourself, nothing but two lines of doggerel——"

"When I pledge my word, Mr. Coventry, I consider it's up to me to keep it," said Barry Wilding.

"Quite so; and if I told you——" For the third time since he had received the telephone message the solicitor mysteriously paused. It was proving an exasperating habit.

"I suggest that you do tell me, Mr. Coventry, without any further beating about the bush. Ever since I have been here, your manner, to put it mildly, has puzzled me. I never was any good at mysteries—suppose you tell me what is in your mind?"

"My dear Wilding," replied the solicitor in a tone that the other knew to be sincere, "my hands are tied. I know very little myself about the offer which I am empowered to make you for The Durdles. All I know is that the name of the would-be purchaser must not be disclosed. . . . But I should certainly accept the offer. Say you will, and the whole matter can be settled by the morning."

But Wilding shook his head.

" You may be an honest man, Coventry—that was my impression when I saw you yesterday—but I'm certainly not going to follow your advice ! "

" But—— ! "

" I've told you, Coventry, I'm not selling ! You've changed your story too quickly. Yesterday you stated that it was a strict condition of my uncle's will that I should live at The Durdles—make it my permanent residence, in fact—and now you are trying to force me to sell it."

" For more than three times its value."

" I don't care if I'm offered a hundred times its value ! " exploded Wilding ; " I'm not going to sell ! Your complete change of front, Mr. Coventry, is not reassuring——"

" I shall be pleased to hand over your business to any other solicitor you may care to nominate," was the stiffly-dignified answer, " but if you are a patriotic man, Mr. Wilding——"

" What the hell has patriotism to do with it ? " interrupted Wilding.

But Samuel Coventry was speaking on the telephone again, and Barry Wilding, feeling infuriated at not being able to disentangle himself from the mesh of mystery with which he was surrounded, picked up his hat and stick and left the office. It was a rude thing to do, perhaps, but he felt in the circumstances thoroughly justified.

An excellent dinner did not entirely restore Barry

Wilding to his usual equable frame of mind. As he had told Samuel Coventry that afternoon, he had no use for mysteries, and the series of events into which he had been plunged seemed to become more and more unfathomable. He tried to piece them together, but failed—hopelessly. How could anyone make top or tail of the following ingredients: a beautiful girl, who seemed to have some private mystery of her own, a prowling shadower, a man who tried to murder him as he slept, a “deserted” house which proved to be inhabited, a solicitor who urged him to break an oath he had made barely thirty-six hours previously, and an unidentified individual who had made an offer over the telephone of £10,000 for a £3,000 house?

He gave it up, but he certainly did not intend to give up his rights. He was going to Scotland Yard the next day, and . . .

The bell of the small service bachelor’s flat into which he had moved only two hours before suddenly buzzed.

Opening the door, he saw a girl looking at him with eyes in which both doubt and fear showed.

The girl on the boat!

He had to look a second time to make sure his eyes were not playing him a trick, but then: “You’re wonderful to have come!” he exclaimed—“you will come in?”

“Yes—I want to talk to you, Mr. Wilding.”

Still very pale, she entered the small sitting-room and sat down.

Wilding even now could scarcely believe his luck.

"It was splendid of you to look me up! I hope you didn't mind my advertising?"

A little wave of colour crept into the visitor's pale cheeks.

"What on earth are you talking about?" she asked.

Any other man but Barry Wilding would have looked foolish.

"Well, you see, I wanted to meet you again so badly that—I advertised." He handed her a morning newspaper.

The girl read out slowly:

GIRL ON BOAT: Must see you. Wonderful News. Don't Disappoint. B.W.

and then tilted her head back and laughed.

"You're really the most extraordinary person!" she told him.

"You've come, anyway," he replied, "and I thank you most awfully. Can I tell you about my luck?" Then, without waiting for her to reply, he plunged into his story. "You see," he concluded, "to a fellow who's never had much money, a regular income of £800 is something quite wonderful! I feel I want to buy you—to buy lots of things. It was because it seemed to me that it would be ever so much more jolly if you were with me when I bought them that I advertised."

The girl listened to this somewhat extraordinary statement without comment. When Wilding had finished, her face became serious.

"Mr. Wilding, my name is Kenwit—Phyllis Kenwit," she said.

This time it was Barry's turn to look astonished.

"Kenwit!" he repeated.

"Yes. It was my father you saw this afternoon."

He put his hand up to his forehead.

"Please let me get this quite clearly," Wilding replied; "do you mean to say that it's your father who is living at The Durdles at Hillsgate?"

"Yes—I've come to explain that father did not mean to be rude to-day. You see, he is engaged upon some very important work——" She stopped, gave a little gasp as though she might have said too much, and then continued: "It was the greatest shock of my life to discover that you were connected with the Durdles."

"How did you know?"

"By the card which you left."

Wilding regarded her intently.

"It was a considerable surprise to me, Miss Kenwit, to find the house which my solicitor only a few hours before had told me very definitely and specifically had been unoccupied since the death of the last owner—my uncle—inhabited by a negro servant——"

"Poor Starkey! His face really does malign him! He is such a faithful creature."

"I am very glad to hear it. But you must admit

that friend Starkey is hardly the sort of person to inspire trust on sight—not in the mind of a perfect stranger, anyway. And so Dr. Kenwit is your father ? ” Wilding continued.

“ Yes,” the girl said eagerly. “ We haven’t been in this country very long ; we came from America. My father——” Once again she gave a little gasp as though the realisation had come to her suddenly that her tongue was overrunning her discretion and that she had been in danger of saying more than she ought to have done.

Barry Wilding felt bewildered. That this girl with whom he had so unexpectedly fallen in love was directly concerned with the mystery that baffled and annoyed him, was the final assault on his senses. He could not help the suspicion returning that this girl might be a crook ; but the self-anger which this unworthy thought caused made him turn red in the face.

“ I must explain that my father has bought the house,” said the visitor. “ That was why he was rather rude, I expect.”

“ Bought it ? But from whom ? ”

“ Some firm of solicitors. He paid £2,800 for it.”

“ My dear Miss Kenwit, this is like some preposterous farce,” rejoined Barry Wilding. “ Listen ! The object of my returning to England was to inherit some property which an uncle I did not even know had ever existed had left me. The property proved to consist of the house called The Durdles at Hillsdown

in the Thames Valley and some investments which bring in about £800 a year.

"At the solicitor's office, I am distinctly given to understand that the house is unoccupied, but upon my arrival I find a negro butler installed together with a couple of ugly mastiff dogs. Naturally enough when your father commenced to lose his temper, I forgot myself too. Now that I learn that he is your father, I am very sorry, but I am afraid I must ask him to move out of my house."

"But he is of the opinion that it is *his* house. You see, he has bought it, Mr. Wilding."

"Then I am afraid his solicitors made a mistake. Directly upon returning to Town this afternoon, I went to see my lawyer and he was most positive that the property belonged to me. He said my claim to it was quite clear."

"And you will insist upon turning my father out, Mr. Wilding? It will be most inconvenient."

"I am sorry, Miss Kenwit—I want you to believe me when I say that I am afraid I have no option. It is absolutely essential that I should move into the house straightaway." As he looked into the girl's troubled face, Barry was tempted to relent, but, acting on an intuitive feeling of caution, he refrained.

The girl appeared to struggle with herself.

"Mr. Wilding," she said; "after what you have told me, it is not easy to say this, but I want you to promise me to let my father stay in your house—if it is really your house, as seems likely now—for another

few weeks. He—if only I could tell you the reason, the vital reason he has, I feel sure you would not think him unreasonable. If it is proved to his satisfaction and the satisfaction of his solicitors, that the house really does belong to you, I know he will be willing to pay you any rent you care to ask him."

"It is not a question of rent," said Wilding.

"How hard you are!" She bit her lip. "Do—do you remember saying at Charing Cross station that you would always be ready to help me if ever I should want a friend? That is why I came to see you to-night."

"Yes, I remember that quite well," was the somewhat grim reply, "and I'm quite willing to stand by my word—for how long does your father wish to stay on in The Durdles?" he added quickly.

"You mean you will let him remain? Oh, how splendid of you! Not more than three months I should think—but I will write, stating a definite period, if I may."

"Let us call it three months then. I dare say I have appeared a frightful boor this evening, but, believe me, I, as well as your father, had very good reason for wishing to live in this house."

"Then it is all the more splendid of you to have given way! Mr. Wilding, I shall never cease to be grateful to you. Will you believe that?"

Very desirable she looked at that moment, and Barry Wilding felt his pulse-beat quicken.

"It will scarcely be news if I tell you I should like

to see you again," replied Wilding; "that may sound like trying to take an unfair advantage, but——"

"I know you would not try to do that," was the ready answer. The speaker's face clouded. "Believe me, Mr. Wilding, if things were only differently arranged I should very much like to meet you again, more especially after this kindness. But, as I told you at Charing Cross, I am not quite my own mistress. I mean I am not at liberty to make all the friends I might perhaps care to make. Will you be staying on here? If so, shall we leave it that I will write if—if circumstances permit me seeing you again?"

Wilding gloomed.

"Will you forgive me if I say 'damn convention'?"

She laughed.

"Certainly! That is what I feel very often. Oh, I know I sound like a dreadful little prig—but I'm not, really!"

Barry Wilding never knew quite how it happened. He was conscious of two things—one, the beautiful, slightly mocking face of the girl smiling up at him, and the second, the feel of her lovely body as he suddenly drew her to him in an uncontrollable moment of impulse.

"Oh!" she said, and her voice was like the sighing of wind in the tree-tops.

The sigh was cut short.

Wilding deliberately kissed her.

The next moment he had sprung clear, conscious of the enormity of his offence.

"Forgive me!" he pleaded; "but I could not help it. I think I must have been mad!"

The visitor picked up her gloves.

"I must go now," she replied.

Chapter VI

Wilding Disregards a Warning

THE next morning Barry Wilding received a letter. The handwriting on the envelope was so graceful and had so much individuality that he guessed the identity of his correspondent directly he glanced at it. Neither was he disappointed; the brief note was from his visitor of the previous evening.

Dear Mr. Wilding (the letter ran),

I feel it is my duty to give you a warning. Will you please take it seriously?

Keep away from The Durdles during the time that my father occupies the house; there are vital reasons. Thanking you once again for your kindness, and in haste,

Yours sincerely,

Phyllis Kenwit.

The effect of this letter was to make Wilding think furiously. What were the "vital reasons"? He hated himself more than ever for the thought, but did not each succeeding circumstance point to the girl being associated with a gang of crooks?

That man she said was her father. A doctor? Why should a doctor employ a villainous-looking negro as a butler and keep savage dogs to frighten away visitors? And the yarn about his having bought the house! The girl had repeated it in good faith, believing it, of course, but it was obvious that the man had invented this story in order to give some sort of substance to his plea.

Now that he could regard the interview the night before calmly, Wilding realised that, in making his promise, he had done something which he would not have considered possible: he had gone back on his word. For quite definitely he had pledged his word, not only to himself but to Samuel Coventry, the solicitor, that he would take up his residence in the house immediately. And now he had given a promise to a man he knew nothing about, but whom he had a very real suspicion was a crook, for a further three months' tenancy!

His mind came back to the girl. Remarkable seeing her again—more remarkable still that she should prove to be mixed up in his affairs in this way.

Striding up and down the room, with his first pipe of the day still unlighted, Wilding came to a conclusion—he had to save the girl from the man into whose power she had apparently fallen. Nothing less would content him. One day Phyllis Kenwit—could that be her right name?—would be his wife; he did not want her besmirched.

The thought of her being in close contact with that

villainous negro was maddening ; until he solved the mystery of the girl being at The Durdles, he would not be able to rest. The baffling problem would work on his mind like a fret-saw.

It had never taken Barry Wilding long to act upon a decision ; within an hour he had packed a suit-case, locked up the flat, and was on his way to Paddington.

For the second time in two days he alighted at the small river-side station of Lulgate, had a frugal meal of bread and cheese (the only eatables the inn could provide) and walked along the country road in the direction of The Durdles.

Resisting the temptation to have another look at the house, he kept straight on until he reached the long-straggling village of Hillsdown. This, as well as he could estimate, was situated about three-quarters of a mile from The Durdles.

The rustic beauty of the place charmed his eye. And, nestling in a little cul-de-sac just off the main street, he saw an inn of the kind he had often visioned when wandering abroad.

A cheery-looking, bulging-fronted inn it was that seemed to smile as Wilding looked at it. There was sand on the front step, and a pleasant clatter of pots came from within. The invitation The Swan Tavern extended was not to be resisted ; and Barry walked up the cobbled stretch that led from the main street and entered.

A room on the right of the passage gleamed bright with polished brass and old mahogany. Behind the

bar was a red-faced man, wearing a sporting waistcoat, decorated with gilt buttons.

"Good mornin'," he said in a pleasantly husky voice

"Good morning," replied Barry Wilding; "a pint of bitter, please."

With the pot of pleasantly-foaming ale before him on a small table, he looked round. This room might have served for a haven of dreams-come-true. The lattice-windows with their spotless curtains inside and their flower-boxes outside; the panelled walls, all gleaming like a well-smoked pipe with promise of content and good-cheer; the small tables and the large, comfortable chairs grouped round them—all these made up a picture which soothed Wilding's mind and made him feel grateful at having pulled up at such an anchorage.

When the flow of custom had somewhat subsided, he approached the bar.

"Are you the landlord?" he asked.

"Joe Shippam is my name, sir—and I'm the landlord."

"I want to stay in this neighbourhood a little while—can you let me have a room?"

"I dare say," came the pleasantly-husky reply; "I'll just ask the missus."

Mrs. Shippam, a short, buxom woman, who had her husband's red face without his husky voice, smiled when she heard the request.

"It happens that we've just got pretty busy with a couple of other 'lets,' sir," she said, "but there's

still another room available if you don't mind climbing a few extra stairs and getting near Heaven, as the saying is."

"This is Heaven, Mrs. Shippam! At least, when I was wandering all over the world, I know I used to dream of staying in just such a little Paradise of an inn as this!"

"It's very kind of you to say so, sir, but my motto has always been that if you do your best to make people comfortable, they're likely to come again." Mrs. Shippam was inclined to be garrulous.

"You couldn't have a better motto, either, Mrs. Shippam."

"Well, now, I'll show you the room, sir. Did you intend to have lunch?"

"I certainly did!"

"A bit of plaice and a fowl to follow—how would that do, sir?"

"Do admirably, Mrs. Shippam! I don't mind telling you that I had some bread and cheese at Lulgate, but your excellent ale has given me another appetite."

"I like a gentleman to enjoy his food," replied the landlady.

The bedroom was small, but spotlessly clean and smelling of lavender. Wilding engaged it at once.

"I don't know how long I shall be staying," he said, "but I will give you plenty of notice."

"That will be all right, Mr. ——"

"Wilding. Barry Wilding," he supplied.

bar was a red-faced man, wearing a sporting waistcoat, decorated with gilt buttons.

"Good mornin'," he said in a pleasantly husky voice

"Good morning," replied Barry Wilding; "a pint of bitter, please."

With the pot of pleasantly-foaming ale before him on a small table, he looked round. This room might have served for a haven of dreams-come-true. The lattice-windows with their spotless curtains inside and their flower-boxes outside; the panelled walls, all gleaming like a well-smoked pipe with promise of content and good-cheer; the small tables and the large, comfortable chairs grouped round them—all these made up a picture which soothed Wilding's mind and made him feel grateful at having pulled up at such an anchorage.

When the flow of custom had somewhat subsided, he approached the bar.

"Are you the landlord?" he asked.

"Joe Shippam is my name, sir—and I'm the landlord."

"I want to stay in this neighbourhood a little while—can you let me have a room?"

"I dare say," came the pleasantly-husky reply; "I'll just ask the missus."

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"It happens that we've just got pretty busy with a couple of other 'lets,' sir," she said, "but there's

still another room available if you don't mind climbing a few extra stairs and getting near Heaven, as the saying is."

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"That will be all right, Mr. ——"

"Wilding. Barry Wilding," he supplied.

He happened as he spoke to be standing just inside the comfortable lounge. It might have been his fancy, he decided, but he imagined that he had distinctly seen one of two men standing at the bar nudge the other. The nudged one certainly looked up suddenly and stared at Wilding intently. When Barry gave him back stare for stare, however, he quickly dropped his eyes.

Wilding, stepping out of the room, turned to the landlady.

"Who are those men?" he asked.

"The gentleman what looked at you as though he knew you, sir? That's an artist-gentleman who's come to the Thames Valley because he's heard how beautiful it is round these parts. His friend is a writer. They're the two gents who are staying in the house. Shall I introduce you to them, sir; I always believe in my gentlemen being sociable."

"Certainly, Mrs. Shippam." Wilding felt he had a very good reason for wishing to know these fellow-lodgers.

The introductions were made and Wilding hospitably suggested a round of short drinks. The offer was accepted.

"I dare say you thought me very rude just now for staring at you, Mr. Wilding," said the man whose name was Ebury, "but the truth is I was attracted by your name. 'Barry Wilding'—it really is an uncommonly attractive name. As an artist I am drawn to the attractive in whatever form I may happen to meet it."

"And so am I," put in his companion. "You won't know it, Mr. Wilding, but my name's Gardiner—Oswald Gardiner—and I'm by way of being a novelist. It was really my fault that Ebury here was so rude just now: when I heard your name I said to him: 'What a name for a story!' And then he turned and looked at you. Do I understand you're staying here?"

"Yes. Like you, gentlemen, whom I understand have been attracted to the Thames Valley by its natural charm, I want to visit some beauty-spots in the neighbourhood." This was a safe enough reply, he imagined.

"We must see something more of you," returned Gardiner.

"I shall be delighted," was the courteous answer.

Sipping his drink, Wilding studied his new acquaintances. Ebury, the artist, looked a man of thirty-five or thereabouts. High cheek-bones, and an unpleasant mouth gave him a somewhat predatory appearance, which his hands—Barry Wilding had made a special study of men's hands: he rightly believed that they revealed character—did nothing to mitigate. A hard case, Wilding decided; and if he really was an artist, then his general demeanour certainly did him an injustice. He would have made an uncommonly-ferocious portrait-painter, Barry reflected.

Ebury's companion was of an entirely different type. Oswald Gardiner was as fleshy as his friend was spare, short whereas Ebury was tall; and inclined to

chuckle while Ebury's mouth showed hard and mirthless. Of the two, Wilding certainly warmed to Gardiner, the self-styled obscure novelist, more than to the man who had eyed him with such keenness. The explanation which both had given was ingenious, but was it good enough? Yet, apart from the feeling that everyone in the world just at that time was conspiring to mystify him, what cause had he to imagine that these two strangers were more than ordinarily interested in him, he asked himself?

There was no answer.

The lunch was excellent. Retiring to a pleasant garden at the back of the inn, Barry seated himself in a small summer-house—the afternoon had grown warm and he was attracted out-of-doors—lit a pipe and wondered what he should do now he had come to within a short distance of The Durdles.

He knew very well why he had come. He had come because he was determined to be within easy reach of Phyllis Kenwit. He intended to rescue her with or without her consent, propose to her, and, if she would have him, marry her straightaway, though she had the devil himself as her father! Quite an ambitious programme, and Barry Wilding felt he wanted time to think out a plan of campaign.

He would let that day go by. It would be better for him to allow what might pass for serenity to come to the peculiar household at The Durdles before he attempted anything.

Having arrived at this conclusion, Wilding made the most of his holiday, as he had already termed it in his own mind. Changing into a suit of comfortable tweeds, he did a ten-mile tramp over some of the most delightful country in England that afternoon, arriving back in time for a wash before sitting down to one of the best-cooked simple dinners he had ever eaten.

The small dining-room was empty, but towards ten o'clock Ebury and Gardiner came in and nodded to him as he sat in a corner of the comfortable lounge.

Upon Gardiner's face appeared an instant smile and even Ebury's saturnine countenance slipped into an expression that seemed meant to be amiable.

"Well, glad to see you again," said Gardiner; "you'll have a night-cap with me, Mr. Wilding?"

There seemed no point in refusing the invitation, which had been offered in a friendly enough spirit, and so Wilding left his seat in the chimney-corner.

"What shall it be?" inquired Gardiner with another smile.

"I think I'll have a whisky and soda."

Joe Shippam served the drinks, and, at the invitation of Gardiner, had one himself.

"Turned in cold," remarked Ebury, and led the way back to the fire.

"Here's good luck!" Wilding uttered the conventional wish as he drank.

A few minutes later, feeling drowsy, he yawned in his chair.

"If you will excuse me, gentlemen, I'll go up to bed," he said; "I'm not used to this air; it seems to have got hold of me."

Certainly drowsiness of a very heavy nature had embraced him. He climbed the staircase, yawning at every step, reached his room with difficulty—and then, feeling that all sense had suddenly gone from him, he reeled across the floor, and, as his outstretched hands touched the bed, crashed into oblivion.

Chapter VII

What the Morning Brought

WITH a feeling that his head was made of lead and that someone was aiming vicious blows at it with a heavy hammer, Barry Wilding awoke the next morning. He stared across the room into which the morning sun was pouring and rubbed his eyes. This causing him exquisite agony, he ceased the exercise, but still he could not see clearly either physically or mentally.

He was undressed and in bed! That was the first astonishing fact. Who had put him there? Certainly he couldn't have got into bed unaided, nor could he have rid himself of his clothing, for the last thing he remembered was falling unconscious across the bed at shortly after ten o'clock the night before.

Drugged !

The thought penetrated his brain like a lightning-flash. Drugged ! That would account for his becoming so drowsy all of a sudden. He had been wide-awake enough before taking that drink ; in fact, he had been looking forward to dipping into a detective novel he had brought down from Town. He had been on the point of fetching this from his bag when Ebury and Gardiner had entered.

He sat up in bed, his brain clear enough now. What had been the object of that filthy trick ? Who had done it he could leave for future consideration—the point he wanted settled now was : Why had it been done ?

The sight of his suit-case made him jump out of bed. The bag was locked. Yes, he had left it locked the last time he had gone to it. That was when he had changed his clothes.

Keys and money were on the dressing-table. He could not have put them there unless he had undressed unconsciously and gone through all the usual preparations for bed in a mechanical manner.

Directly he unlocked the suit-case he knew that his belongings had been rifled. Like many men accustomed to looking after themselves, Wilding had developed a passion for neatness. He felt certain he had left his things tidily arranged in the suit-case, but now this had every appearance of having been disturbed.

Barry's face became grim as he thrust his hand into

a compartment of the bag and withdrew it—empty. The crooks had been after his papers. All the documents relating to The Durdles which he had received from the solicitor, Samuel Coventry, he had brought away with him. And now they were gone !

Some men are at their best in a crisis. Barry Wilding belonged to this type. Realising he was up against something which required the most careful and resolute thought, if he were to checkmate it, he lit a pipe and tried to find a reason for this fresh development in a veritable maze of mystery.

He had not come to the end of his pipe when there was a knock on the door. In answer to his "Come !" Mrs. Shippam entered, carrying a small tray. The landlady appeared to be trying to look stern without being entirely successful. Her "Good morning, Mr. Wilding," was somewhat prim.

"I thought you might like a cup of tea, sir," she said, depositing the tray on a small table by the side of the bed.

Wilding looked her straight in the face.

"I wasn't drunk last night, Mrs. Shippam. I don't want you to think that."

"Why should I be thinking it, sir ?" But there was a noticeable change in her voice.

"I'll tell you why. When I woke up this morning I couldn't understand how I managed to get into bed last night. Then I realised that someone must have been kind enough to put me there. Was it your husband ?"

"It was, Mr. Wilding. He came up to wish you good night and found you lying all of a heap across the bed. It frightened him at first; and he called me in to have a look at you. I soon told him that he needn't be afraid that you were dead—the poor thing hadn't thought about feeling if your heart was still beating. After that Shippam got you to bed. And I never said you were drunk, Mr. Wilding!"

"I wondered whether you imagined I was used to taking too much to drink, Mrs. Shippam. As a matter of fact, I had very little yesterday. But," breaking off the topic, "I can do with that cup of tea."

"The bathroom is just along on the right, sir. Shall I turn on the hot water?"

"Cold, please, Mrs. Shippam. And you can expect me down to breakfast within half an hour. Oh, by the way, neither Mr. Ebury nor Mr. Gardiner knew anything about last night, I hope?"

"Shippam wouldn't breathe a word, sir!" came the dignified reply; "it was no concern of theirs. And, as a matter of truth, neither showed their face, although Shippam like a fool made more noise than he need have done when he found you lying across the bed as helpless as a babe."

"I was ill, Mrs. Shippam—I get these bad turns occasionally."

"Dear me—and you looking so strong and well, too! I was only saying to Shippam just before we went to bed last night: 'Now there's a healthy young

gentleman if you like! I guarantee that he could hold his own in a fight . . . !' "

" I mean to," replied Wilding absentmindedly.

" What did you say, sir ? "

" I was talking to myself, I am afraid, Mrs. Shippam. And the bathroom is along to the right, you say ? "

" Lord bless me, how I do talk ! " The good soul, conscience-smitten at the mild rebuke, hastened away.

While Wilding sipped the refreshing tea, he reflected that possibly he had been wise in not informing the landlady that he had been drugged the night before. Such a statement would have filled her with consternation, and the whole house would have resounded with the news. Naturally enough she would have been deeply upset if not offended. By that means, the very object he desired to obtain would have been defeated—the suspicions of the two men he intended to watch ceaselessly from now on would have been actively aroused. . . .

Then, a sudden thought coming to him, he jumped out of bed.

Ebury and Gardiner might have already decamped. If so . . .

A second knock sounded on the door, which immediately opened to admit the smiling face of Oswald Gardiner.

" How's it this morning, Wilding ? " the caller inquired with every evidence of good will showing on his beaming round face ; " the bathroom is ready to

receive your august presence—Ebury and I have finished tubbing.”

“That’s very good of you, Gardiner—thanks very much!” Two could play at that affability game.

The cold bath revived him; the intolerable throb at the back of his head vanished and he went downstairs to breakfast feeling fit for Round II. He had lost the first round, but he was determined to level matters up before very long.

The difficulty was, of course, that he did not want to arouse the suspicions of the men before he could get an inkling of what their plans were. Yet they must be aware that sooner or later he would discover the loss of the papers. However, for the time being he would lay low and give the precious pair back smile for smile.

The scene from the small dining-room window was so peaceful, so pleasantly picturesque that Barry Wilding, as he ate his breakfast, with Ebury and Gardiner at an adjoining table, could readily have believed that the astonishing episode of the night before had been nothing but an ugly dream. Had he not caught Ebury’s eye fixed on him calculatingly from time to time, the assumption might have been almost convincing. But now that man had his papers: it was very difficult to repress the natural inclination to spring up and knock the fellow’s head off.

Unlike Barry Wilding, who made an excellent

breakfast that morning, the very important personage who came down to the comfortably furnished room in a famous house not far from the British Houses of Parliament, eyed the tempting dishes gloomily. Finally he pushed his almost untouched plate away when a servant entered and gave him a message in a low tone.

Two minutes later he entered a room into which a man, whose usually disciplined face was now twitching with ill-repressed excitement, had previously been shown.

"You are Mr. Samuel Coventry?" asked the Home Secretary.

"That is my name, sir," replied the solicitor, the deepest respect in his voice.

"I should not have asked you to call here this morning, Mr. Coventry, except that I regarded your visit with the utmost importance. You—you did not induce the young man—Wilding is his name?"

"Barry Wilding, sir."

"You were unsuccessful in inducing this young man to sell the house known as The Durdles yesterday, Mr. Coventry?"

"I regret I was unsuccessful, sir." The solicitor wondered at the beads of perspiration which stood out on the forehead of the most distinguished politician in the country although the morning was fresh and a fire had not yet been lighted in the room where so much political history had been made.

"You have been spoken of to me, Mr. Coventry, as

a man of unusual discretion and reliability. On no account whatever must your visit here this morning be known. If necessary, contradict any such statement. Fortunately, there being no crisis pending, no press photographers are likely to be waiting in Downing Street, but in any case I want any statement that may appear to be contradicted by you at once. It is solely in the public interest that I ask you to do this, Mr. Coventry ? ”

The look of astonishment on the face of the solicitor increased, but he nodded his head.

“ I shall not say anything, sir,” he promised.

“ The amount to buy the house from this obstinate young man must be increased if necessary,” the Home Secretary continued ; “ what was his object in refusing the handsome offer which you were empowered to make to him ? ”

“ As you have said, sir, Mr. Wilding is obstinate. I am afraid he had the idea that someone wished to swindle him. At least, that was my impression. There is no doubt the house does belong to him, sir.”

The politician snapped his fingers impatiently.

“ It has been a succession of errors,” he commented, speaking apparently to himself ; “ but if persuasion fails we must use other means.”

This further stupefied the solicitor who left the room looking utterly bewildered. Samuel Coventry was in the mortifying and perplexing position of knowing only certain portions of the most baffling

mystery that even he, steeped in legal phenomena, had ever encountered.

"I rely on your utmost caution, Mr. Coventry," were the words which rang in his ears as he stepped out into the crisp morning air.

Chapter VIII

Through the Darkness

"WELL, I'm for a walk!" announced Wilding, rising from the breakfast table. He wondered what effect the words might have on the others.

Apparently they were not concerned.

"Good idea," commented Gardiner, pulling out his cigarette-case; "look here, I don't know if you are familiar with this part of the country, Wilding, but if you're not, let me suggest you taking the footpath over Craig's End and following down until you reach the old towing-path. That to my mind is the prettiest bit about here. I intend to bring it into my next book."

"I suppose you have painted it many times, Ebury?" inquired Wilding.

"Er—yes—many times," said the artist hastily.

"Liar!" commented Wilding under his breath. So far he had seen no evidence of the man ever having painted anything. "Well" (aloud), "I'll be off."

Once out of sight of the inn, he struck across the fields in the direction which he guessed would bring

him in a roundabout fashion to The Durdles. He had two objects in going in that direction. The first was to ascertain if the pair meant to follow him and the second was to see if he could get a glimpse of Phyllis Kenwit.

He walked slowly, frequently glancing back. But apparently Ebury and Gardiner had not set out to dog him that morning. He was musing on this when from a path leading through some woods that he believed shadowed The Durdles from the back, he saw a girl coming towards him.

It was Phyllis Kenwit.

He hastened to greet her, but she recoiled. That damnable mystery again !

" Mr. Wilding, what are you doing here ? " she asked. Her face was blanched and her voice unsteady.

" I—I was out for a walk," he replied, feeling it was the answer of a fool.

" Out for a walk ? Are you then staying in the neighbourhood ? "

" Yes," he had to confess.

" Why ? Haven't I already told you that it is dangerous for you to be here ? Surely——"

He had to cut her short.

" Just give me ten minutes, Miss Kenwit." He spoke decisively and led the way to a rustic stile.

" I can't imagine what you mean by there being any danger to me," he said.

" There is ! There is ! " she answered quickly.

" From whom ? "

"That I cannot tell you—and, oh, please, do not ask me any more questions for I cannot answer them."

Wilding looked at her intently.

"You must know I love you," he said ; "can't you confide in me ?"

She bit her lip.

"No—I cannot. I have promised—and there is far too much at stake !"

"For your father ?"

"Yes—but not only for him . . . And please do not ask me any more questions."

"I ask you these questions because, as I have told you, I love you. Won't you tell me that I'm not longing for the unattainable, that the moon isn't altogether out of reach ?"

She clenched her hands.

"I must stay with my father. He relies so much on me," was the reply.

Wilding took her hand.

"My dear—I am going to call you that—is it the best thing for you to be with your—father ?"

She drew away from him.

"Of course ! Why do you ask that ?"

Barry turned to her fiercely.

"Why do I ask that ? Because I believe you are in the power of a gang of crooks, that's why ! Do you think I can let things go on as they are at present ? It's all mystery, mystery, mystery—and I'm tired of mystery ! I love you and I ask you to confide in me. . . ."

"And I have told you that I cannot confide in you," she broke in gently. "You say you love me—will you prove your affection by doing something for me?"

"Of course I will. I'd go to the ends of the earth for you!"

She smiled for the first time since they had talked.

"What I want you to do is very simple, Mr. Wilding—all I ask is for you to stay away from The Durdles, to go completely away from the neighbourhood, until the time when my father leaves your house. By the way, you have not told me yet what rent you wish him to pay?"

Wilding snapped his fingers impatiently. At that moment he would have liked nothing better than to have smacked the girl.

"We won't discuss that," he replied; "what I want to tell you is that I cannot give you the promise you want. You have not yet convinced me that you are not the helpless associate or prisoner of crooks, and that being so, I am determined to continue to keep a watch over you."

The girl's face became rigid.

"That is absurd," she said, "absurd and—dangerous."

"To me?"

"To you."

Wilding laughed. If he hadn't laughed he might have sworn.

"I know all about the danger," he replied, "but I can't be frightened off that way."

Then he noticed the girl was trembling. He tried to take her hands again, but she evaded him.

"Please, please take me seriously!" she pleaded; "the most terrible things may happen if you attempt to interfere!"

"Interfere?—with what?" he demanded, but Phyllis Kenwit had got up and left him.

When he called to her she did not look back.

Wilding moved forward cautiously. Beneath his hands he felt the earth wet and clinging; once or twice slimy things crawled over his fingers. His knees were sopping.

He had not once lost sight of the two men in front of him since the moment they had left the Swan Inn, at shortly after eleven o'clock that night, however, and the discomfort he was experiencing was more than compensated for by the zest of the chase—especially as his quarry had headed in the direction of The Durdles.

They were now nearing the wall of the large garden at the back of the house. Waiting what he considered a sufficient time, after both Ebury and Gardiner had climbed the high wall, he followed their example. Considering that the top of the wall was decorated, not only with barbed wire, but with pieces of broken glass firmly fixed in cement, the act wanted careful negotiating and the thought came to him as he dropped as quietly as possible on the other side, how the rotund Gardiner had fared.

It was almost pitch dark. The garden seemed like a jungle, shrubs and flowers growing everywhere. Once again he had to get on to his hands and knees in order to make any progress, and to avoid the danger of catching his foot in something and crashing to the ground. Above all, the men he was following must have no idea they were being watched. Why they had come to The Durdles and what they hoped to accomplish once they were in the house—if they succeeded in gaining admission—were problems which vitally interested him. Did their plans concern Phyllis Kenwit, or were they directed merely against the girl's father? Was he witnessing the first act in a vendetta of crime by one set of crooks against another? These questions had to be answered.

He was pushing cautiously forward, hands outstretched in front of him, when his fingers touched something that moved. Instantly this something proved to be a man—whether Ebury or Gardiner he did not know—who turned immediately on him and fought with silent desperation.

It was a relentless battle in the pitch blackness. Neither made a sound—the opponent for reasons of his own, and Wilding because he did not wish to call the attention of the second man, whom he imagined to be Gardiner since his foe was tall and thin, with a surprisingly wiry body.

Twice the man had him down stretched at full length, with his knees on his stomach and his sinewy fingers tight at his throat, and twice Wilding, with a

superhuman effort, managed to wriggle and twist himself clear. Finally he himself got the upper hand, pressing his enemy down into the wet earth and dashing his fist several times into the man's face. He did not spare his strength ; and after a few muffled groans the man remained still.

Then, from a portion of the garden nearer the house, an inferno of noise and terror broke loose. Fleeing in the direction of the wall went two dark shapes which might have been men. Close at their heels were fiercely growling dogs, their teeth gleaming white in the darkness.

"The bull-mastiffs," Barry told himself as he crouched by the side of the man he had stunned. If those brutes returned he would be in danger himself.

He had just risen, uncertain what to do, when he felt a blinding ray of light playing on his face. At the other end of the light a voice which he recognised said : "I am armed—you will please come forward with your hands above your head. The dogs will soon return, and if there is any foolish business . . . !" The threat did not require to be completed in order to have a very real terror.

"It's Wilding," said Barry, doing as he had been bidden ; "you needn't shoot, doctor !" Submission was certainly the best plan, he decided, since now he might be given a chance of entering the house. And once inside he would guarantee to make good use of his time.

"Wilding !" repeated Dr. Kenwit, for it was he.

"What are you doing here? Even though you are my landlord, this is a very peculiar manner in which to call, Mr. Wilding." The voice was hard, strained and distinctly unfriendly.

Wilding tried to make his own voice sound conciliatory.

"I know, but you haven't heard my story yet, doctor. I was returning from a late evening stroll—I am staying at the Swan Inn at Hillsdown—when I saw some men climbing over a high garden wall. Suddenly it occurred to me that the house must be The Durdles. I jumped over after them and caught one. Here he is." Stooping, he hauled the insensible man to his feet; as he did so a faint cry broke from his lips.

"You seem to recognise the man, Mr. Wilding," commented Dr. Kenwit.

Wilding was forced to prevaricate.

"I do not know him, doctor. At first his face seemed familiar, it is true, but I do not know him." The information that the man he had knocked insensible was the same individual he had threatened in Norfolk Street for shadowing him some days before, he thought it wise to keep to himself.

The other seemed to debate something in his mind. Then, as though coming to a decision: "I must ask you to help me carry the man into the house, Mr. Wilding," he said. "Then I will send for the police. I cannot have my privacy outraged in this manner."

With Wilding carrying the heels and the doctor

the head and shoulders of the still insensible man, the short journey was completed. At the back door of the house, through which they passed, Barry recognised Starkey, the negro servant of the American.

"See to the dogs, Starkey," Dr. Kenwit abruptly ordered.

After the body had been deposited in what looked to be a kitchen, Kenwit turned to Wilding.

"There is a way to cure this man of his criminal instincts, you know, Mr. Wilding," he said in a tone which—he could not tell exactly why—filled the listener with a vague sense of horror. "I should have to open his head, of course, and examine his brain!" The speaker went on muttering, apparently oblivious now of the fact that he had an audience; "he might die—that type generally does. . . . But who would be the loser? The world? Of course not!"

Barry Wilding felt perspiration breaking out on his forehead. This was the solution, then—the man was mad! And he had Phyllis Kenwit in his power, alone in that house. . . .

"I am afraid I must ask you to leave now, Mr. Wilding——"

Dr. Kenwit had proceeded so far when from another part of the house came a nerve-tingling scream.

Wilding sprang forward. He caught the other by the arm.

"What was that?" he demanded.

The other's brows contracted.

"Please do not attempt to try to understand things

which are no concern of yours, Mr. Wilding," he said coldly.

"But, damn it, man, that was someone screaming—someone in pain——"

"Well?"

"Well! You stand there calmly and . . . look here, I'm not satisfied about you, Dr. Kenwit!"

"Indeed?" The sneer was palpable.

"No, I'm not. If it had not been for your daughter you would not have stayed in this house another minute. As it is——"

"Well?" asked Dr. Kenwit again.

"I am going to see who uttered that scream!" returned Wilding.

He attempted to thrust his way past, but Dr. Kenwit, putting his hand into the loose coat he wore, brought out the revolver.

"You are inclined to be a meddlesome fool—and I must see you out of the house. Here, Starkey, have you the dogs?" raising his voice.

"Yes, sah!" said the negro.

"Then see this gentleman off the premises."

Wilding turned. He was infuriated. Kenwit was rude to the point of effrontery.

Looking over the man's shoulder, he saw a face.

The lips of Phyllis Kenwit framed the words, "Please go!"

"Very well," he said to his ungracious host, "I will go, Dr. Kenwit, but I cannot thank you for your

hospitality, especially after going out of my way to do you a service."

"You were inclined to be inquisitive, Mr. Wilding—and that is not permitted," was the answer.

Wilding boiled over again, but the girl was still there standing by the door, unseen by her father—if this extraordinary man really was her father—and he did not want to precipitate a desperate scene in her presence. Besides, an idea had come to him which would enable everything to be settled and cleared up once he was away from the house.

It was at this point that the insensible man regained his consciousness.

"What——?" he grunted, staring around.

Dr. Kenwit stepped up to the man.

"I am a doctor—you are not well; I am going to cure you," said Dr. Kenwit, and then, as the man showed signs of anger, he knocked him senseless again without any parleying with the butt of the revolver he held.

Wilding was as anxious after this to leave the house as before he had been to stay in it. When the negro touched him on the arm, he followed the man without question,

The police inspector, a red-faced, stolid individual, gnawed one end of his flowing moustache.

"Yes, I've heard all you've got to say, Mr. Wilding, and my advice to you is to—forget it!"

Wilding stared incredulously.

"Forget it! Are you drunk or a lunatic? I came to you for help and to save a helpless man from being murdered——"

"Ah-h?" yawned this incredible police officer.

"——and you take not the slightest interest! You can rely upon this matter being reported to Scotland Yard. Once again, are you going to take any action in this business? I say emphatically that I am convinced that the man calling himself Dr. Kenwit, who is staying at the present time at the house near Hilldown, known as The Durdles, is a dangerous lunatic and that from my own knowledge he probably intends to murder a man who is helpless and in his power!"

Police-Inspector Cartwright stared at the man who had awakened him from his heavy slumber.

"Let me tell you this, Mr. Know-it-all," he said in a gruff tone of rumbling menace, "the less you say about the gen'l'man in question the better it'll be for you! And I'll tell you this, too—if I catch you hangin' round that house, The Durdles, again I'm going to arrest you! Them are my orders!"

Chapter IX

A Prisoner is Released

BACK in The Durdles, the house of strange happenings, Phyllis Kenwit faced her father. She was plainly worried, a frown creasing her forehead

"Daddy!" she exclaimed passionately, "I wish you would be more careful! This is England and you cannot do what you like. That man," pointing to the unconscious form of the burglar, "must be released. We cannot keep him here. It would be far too dangerous. You should see that for yourself."

Dr. Kenwit bit his lip.

"Why?" Then, with the wave of a hand, "Surely, even in England, a man has a right to defend his own property?"

His daughter smiled patiently.

"Yes—of course! But you cannot keep him here for . . . that purpose. Daddy, don't you realise that it would be an awful thing if anyone got to know?"

Dr. Kenwit fidgeted. An angry flash came into his eyes.

"'An awful thing!'" he repeated; "you are not aware of what you say, my dear girl, 'An awful thing,' when my object is——"

"Daddy! Please do not let us talk any more to-night!" she pleaded, as though the subject had become very distasteful to her. "It is awfully late and we all ought to have been asleep hours ago."

Her father, lost in brooding, turned on her swiftly.

"That fool Wilding—or whatever his name is!" he commented savagely; "you say you have warned him to keep away from here?"

"Yes. Oh, Daddy, I do wish you had never started——"

He cut her short.

"You do not know what you are talking about, Phyllis. If I thought you realised the enormity of your words, I . . . I am going to bed," he muttered, almost childishly, and turned away.

She went to kiss him, but he refused to be mollified ; and, after receiving her caress, stalked angrily out of the room.

With a sigh Phyllis turned to perform what she considered her duty. Of course it was impossible for her father to do what he had threatened. There would be a terrible scandal. . . . She broke off her thoughts to wonder what had happened to Barry Wilding. If only she could have told him ! And yet, if he had the real regard for her which he professed surely he ought to have faith in what she had said ? Why would he not believe that he was in danger, very real and grave danger, if he persisted in trying to solve the secret of that house ? Yet, she could not bear the thought of anything happening to him. It was all terribly perplexing.

In the meantime, the man her father had knocked unconscious was moaning and muttering. Perhaps he was in great pain. In any case, she had to help him.

"Hot water, missy."

Dear old Starkey ! There he was standing beside her, dependable as ever, with a look of sympathetic understanding on his misshapen black face and a bowl of steaming hot water in his hands ! Dear old Starkey !

"I must bathe and bandage that man's head, Starkey," she said.

"That is why I brought the hot water, missy. He is bad man, but the doctor hit him hard."

It was a wonderful help to have Starkey—how understanding he had always been with her!—and she set about her task immediately. By the time the wound on the back of the head was washed and bandaged, the man sat up, fully conscious.

"Would you like something to drink?" asked Phyllis Kenwit.

"Do you happen to be pulling my leg?" replied the burglar. His voice was cultivated, if hard, and the girl regarded him with more interest. This criminal might have been a gentleman once. The thought was saddening somehow.

"Certainly not," she said. "Starkey——"

But the huge negro servant had already placed the glass of brandy and water to the man's lips.

"That's awfully good of you!" was the comment of the marauder, after taking a deep draught. "Now tell me, who was it gave me that bang on the head?"

"My father. But you deserved it. Why did you try to break into this house? What was your object?"

A cunning look came into the man's bold, somewhat handsome, but hard-bitten face.

"You'd like to know that, I dare say," was the insolent answer; "suppose we let it go that we—I mean I—admired the outside view?"

Phyllis Kenwit frowned.

"If you tell me the truth," she said, "I may be inclined not to hand you over to the police."

The man twisted his cruel mouth. A gleam showed in his eyes.

"You thought of handing me over to the police, did you?" he inquired.

"That is the usual fate of a burglar, isn't it?" she parried.

The man looked at Starkey, who had taken up a position before the door of the room. He seemed to be weighing his chances against that magnificently-framed, if repulsively-visaged, jailer.

"The idea would be for the police to come here, I take it?" he asked.

In spite of the control which Phyllis was exerting over herself, she made a sign of uneasiness. What was this man hinting at? Was he suggesting——?

"Funny sort of household this," now mused the prisoner, as though speaking to himself; "you aren't offended at my saying that, I hope?"

Phyllis gripped the back of a chair.

"Offended? No, I am not offended. What an absurd question! Yet why is this household 'funny,' pray?" she asked, her heart quickly beating.

The man put his left hand up to rub his chin. She noticed that the little finger was missing.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied evasively; "only, what with a couple of man-killing dogs, a nigger butler who looks like sudden death, and one thing and another, I thought at first I had dropped into a lunatic asylum. . . . Why, you're frightened!" he broke off to ejaculate as the girl made a startled exclamation.

Phyllis Kenwit brushed the hair back from her forehead, which that night's events had caused to ache abominably.

"It is very late," she said; "if you will promise to cause us no further annoyance or trouble I will let you go."

"And what is the alternative?" The man seemed to have a perverted sense of humour, and a repellent propensity for asking questions.

"I shall do what probably I ought to do now—'phone for the police. Which is it to be?"

The man rose from the chair in which he had been seated and made her an ironical bow.

"Discretion has always been the better part of foolhardiness with me," he replied: "if the impressive gentleman of colour on my left will promise me a safe-conduct to the garden gate of this salubrious dwelling, I will leave it in peace, and will even bestow my useless blessing upon those brutes of dogs who nearly tore my throat out an hour ago. What is the object of those dogs, may I inquire?" He had swung round on her, asking his searching questions again.

"The house is very lonely. And now please redeem the promise you have just given me or I shall telephone to the police station."

The man bowed again.

"Thank you for being as gracious in spirit as you are beautiful in feature," he said. "Ready, Sambo?"

All the time that the midnight marauder had been

talking to his mistress, Starkey's face had held a thundercloud. Only his deep-rooted respect for the girl he had dangled on his knee when she was a child kept him from rushing forward and taking the man by the throat. Starkey knew enough about The Durdles to realise that the questions which had been put had caused Phyllis Kenwit acute distress.

"White trash!" was the indignant reply he now made. His rolling eyes sought his mistress.

"Please treat my servant with respect, or I may retract my intention to let you go free," said Phyllis Kenwit. "Take him away, Starkey—and see that he doesn't come back."

"Yes, missy. Come on—you!"

Starkey's good-nature had been badly imposed upon that night, and he was not prepared to be too considerate of his charge in consequence. It was a firm grip that he took of the man's arm.

Left alone, Phyllis wondered if she had done right. The police would have kept silent if the man had been taken into custody, but information on the subject would have been bound to leak out—and any gossip would add immeasurably to the difficulties with which she was already faced.

How fatal to her happiness these difficulties were she felt she had not truly realised until this moment. Once again the words, "If I could only tell him!" flashed through her brain. Standing at the window of her room, five minutes later, she looked across in the direction of the Swan Inn at Hillsdown.

Involuntarily her arms went out, while her lips framed an appeal.

“ Believe in me ! ” she said softly.

At that moment, had she only known it, the man who was occupying her thoughts to the exclusion of everything else, was passing only a few yards away from the entrance gate of The Durdles. Barry Wilding was furiously angry; in fact, he was almost insensate with rage. If this was England he would clear out and let it go to the devil ! But before he went he'd get that fool of a policeman the sack. He'd call at Scotland Yard in the morning and lodge a complaint. The whole affair was like a nightmare—he had gone to give information about a potential murderer, and had been greeted by a turnip-headed jackass who had merely yawned in his face !

He'd raise Cain over it even if he had to go to the Home Secretary himself. This was England ! . . . In the darkness he raised his clenched fist and shook it first at the police station which he had left behind and then at the house, the mystery of which ~~was~~ driving him distraught.

After that he hastened his pace. If either of those precious beauties, Gardiner, the minor novelist, or Ebury, the self-styled artist, showed up at the “ Swan ” that night he would have the greatest possible pleasure in wringing their necks.

The thought came as a grim relish as he sped quickly along the country road.

A NIGHT'S rest found Barry Wilding more calm but still determined. He would postpone his visit to Scotland Yard, but he would continue his watch over the house—this was the resolution to which he came. One factor had influenced him. He was not able to banish from his mind the dread that if Scotland Yard did take action—as he would force them to do if once he got into touch with the chief official—the girl would be arrested. Phyllis Kenwit in prison!—his mind recoiled from the vision.

He was lying flat on his back in bed as he reflected. Suddenly he sat bolt upright. Fool! not to have remembered before! Phyllis Kenwit *must* be a crook of some sort!

She was the girl he had seen leave that sinister house in the Rue Ste Jeanne!

Why hadn't he recalled that before? He could not tell; he only knew that he was positive of this damning truth now. He had caught but a fleeting glimpse of the girl's face that night as she sped swiftly from the dwelling of the notorious Egyptian vendor of illicit drugs, but he felt sure there was no mistake. Phyllis Kenwit was essentially a girl that a man having once seen could not forget—at least, a man who loved her as he did.

Wilding's face became grim and stern. This recollection was shattering. It was his plain duty to go to

Scotland Yard now—if only, he told himself, to expose the corrupt police-inspector who had been bribed by the man Kenwit (who, of course, was a dangerous crook himself) to keep his mouth shut. The idea of an English police-inspector being false to his duty seemed incredible . . . but hadn't he proof of it? "They are my orders!" the fellow had stated pompously. Whose orders? Barry Wilding felt he knew—they were the orders of Kenwit, that supremely dangerous criminal.

He fancied he could see everything daylight-clear now. The girl's father being a crook, she herself was forced to do criminal acts—such as frequenting that house of the Egyptian, Ilbrahim, in the Rue Ste Jeanne. Naturally enough, the man being her father, she had to shield him. That explained practically everything.

The men in the garden last night? Gardiner and Ebury possibly had been former associates of Kenwit's—perhaps they had belonged to the same gang or organisation, and the three had fallen out. Kenwit—it was quite likely—had double-crossed the other two, or attempted to do so, and they had sworn revenge. That would account for the marauding expedition of the night before.

Gardiner and Ebury had imagined possibly that he was on the same game. They must have decided that he was a crook intent on gaining something in Kenwit's possession. Yes, that must be it. If they had pictured something of that sort the successful attempt to drug him would be explained.

Mrs. Shippam, as she entered with the news that the bath was ready, found her lodger in a very abstracted frame of mind.

"It's a beautiful morning again, Mr. Wilding . . . and here's a cup of tea as I thought you would like."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Shippam." An idea came to him.

"Are either Mr. Gardiner or Mr. Ebury about this morning?" he inquired.

Mrs. Shippam's good-natured face assumed an expression of deep disdain.

"I must say I'm disappointed in both them so-called gentlemen," she replied. "Neither of their beds has been slept in—and when I looked round their rooms just now I found that what luggage they had was gone. I said to Shippam at the time, I said: 'Neither of them gents have brought much luggage with them,' but Shippam, who always reckons to know a bit about the world, told me that writers and artists and people like that weren't ones to trouble much about clothes—most of them only have what they stand up in, Shippam said—and so I didn't bother like. But I shall be more careful another time. Decapped in the night, as the saying is—and without paying my bill, too! What do you think of that, Mr. Wilding?—and they living off the best as there was to be had all the while they was with me!"

Wilding expressed proper sympathy and proportionate indignation. He was sorry to hear that the bogus novelist and fictitious artist had vanished.

Unable to see them the night before, he had looked forward to forcing the truth by some means or other out of either Gardiner or Ebury that morning.

"Will you inform the police, Mrs. Shippam?"

"What good will that do? Shippam said something of the sort, but I told him that so long as we have a jackass like that Inspector Baker at Hillsgate folkses can be murdered in their beds and nothing will ever happen to those that did it!"

Wilding, as he drank his tea, felt his own judgment flattered. If the criticised inspector was the one he had seen the previous night he cordially agreed with the landlady's scathing estimate. A more chuckle-headed idiot he had never met.

"Well, I mustn't stay here chattering, Mr. Wilding; you'll be wanting your breakfast. Will eggs and bacon with toast to follow do this morning?"

"Excellently! And I shouldn't worry too much, Mrs. Shippam. I have a feeling that those two fellows will be caught sooner or later. Then, if you like, you can charge them with defrauding you."

Mrs. Shippam picked up the empty tea-cup.

"It isn't the money so much, Mr. Wilding, although Shippam and I can't afford to lose nearly five pounds with equa—equa—you know the word I mean, Mr. Wilding. It's the fact of being 'done,' of having your kindness thrown back into your face, as it were, which I resent. But I'll be getting along now, or

you'll think that I do nothing all the day through but chatter-mag."

It was far from a pleasant day that Barry Wilding spent. His thoughts mocked him. So far as Phyllis Kenwit was concerned, what was the best thing that he could do? This was still a baffling problem. Would it be better for him to go to Scotland Yard, as he had originally decided the night before, and lay the whole facts before them? She might resent it at the time, but wasn't it his plain duty to get her away from a father who was corrupting her mind and making her life a hell? Such a girl, if left to herself, would instinctively shrink from evil. Very well, then.

But it was difficult to act even after he had arrived at the above conclusion. The thought kept recurring of a detective's strong, ruthless hand reaching out to catch the girl by the arm, and the mental picture revolted him. The consequence was that he dawdled the afternoon away.

As dusk fell Wilding found himself walking towards The Durdles. Some power or influence against which he was powerless drew him on. The dominant impression in his mind was that he had to keep near Phyllis Kenwit. And also he had the feeling that something would happen at the house that night in which he would be bound to participate. How this idea had come he could not decide, but it was strong enough to make him quicken his pace as he neared the house.

Whoom !

A long-bonneted limousine, exquisitely painted and upholstered, swept round the corner and drew up outside the derelict gates of The Durdles. Wilding, crouched in the deep shadows only a few feet away, watched a man leave the car and pass through the gates. The light from the powerful head-lamps of the car shone full upon his face as he walked forward.

Wilding stepped back. He had just received a tremendous shock. Even now he felt that his eyes had deceived him—and yet that finely-chiselled profile, that strong, determined face, that curious physical anomaly : the firm, athletic tread but stooped shoulders—no, he couldn't possibly have been mistaken. He had seen too many photographs of this distinguished visitor for that.

The man who had just entered The Durdles was Sir Bertram Willan, the British Home Secretary !

Wilding retreated still further into the shadows. The manner of Sir Bertram Willan had become apprehensive, furtive. He looked round nervously, and then called to the chauffeur : “ Put out those infernal lights and drive on a little way.”

Strange language this for a Cabinet Minister to use when paying a call ! Why should he be afraid of being seen ? Wilding, as he pondered on this fresh amazing development, told himself he knew the reason. The visit the Home Secretary was paying to The Durdles that night was masked in mystery. In any case it was decidedly unconventional, if nothing

worse. The Cabinet Minister intended to keep it a close secret. Hence his apprehensive, nervous manner and his querulous objection to the powerful headlights. Obeying his instruction the chauffeur dimmed the lamps and then drove the Rolls fifty yards or so beyond the gates and into the shadows away from the watcher.

A British Cabinet Minister an associate of crooks ! The Home Secretary of Great Britain a criminal ! The watcher's head swam. He had experienced many strange sensations, but nothing so startling as this. He almost felt convinced that he was an escaped convict himself !

He must discover, if possible, the reason of Sir Bertram Willan's visit. If he could accomplish that he might get the key to the whole mystery. Was the Home Secretary a Jekyll-and-Hyde character ? It might be that he was even engaged with Kenwit and the latter's daughter in the unlawful distribution of illicit drugs. . . . Nothing seemed too fantastic.

The dogs ! He suddenly remembered ; he must be careful of those brutes. One tussle with them in the darkness was quite sufficient. He had been lucky not to have had his throat torn open the night before.

He could not hear a sound as he walked cautiously up the drive. The curiously-shaped left wing, which took the form of a turret, showed dark and gloomy against the night sky. Looking at it, Wilding thought what an effective prison that turret-tower would make. . . .

He skirted the house, expecting every moment to hear a snarl from one of the dogs guarding the place, but by the time he had arrived at the spot he had selected—a group of bushes commanding an uninterrupted view of the front door and situated not more than six yards away—he had not heard anything. The dogs no doubt were chained up, probably on account of the visit of Kenwit's distinguished guest.

After waiting patiently for twenty minutes, the watcher was rewarded. The front door opened and two figures appeared. One was Sir Bertram Willan, his companion was Phyllis Kenwit. Barry Wilding's pulse quickened as he looked at the girl. She appeared more entrancing than ever in that soft light.

"Everything seems to be going on nicely—but the utmost secrecy must still be kept. One word of this, and I should be a thoroughly ruined man. I should have to retire for ever from public life."

The words, although uttered in a low and cautious tone, carried quite clearly to Barry Wilding.

And the girl's reply: "I quite understand, Sir Bertram. Let me assure you once again that you can have every confidence in Daddy and me."

"I know! I know! And you mustn't think I am not profoundly grateful—I am! I am!" Raising his hat, the Home Secretary turned quickly on his heel and walked hurriedly down the carriage drive.

For a few seconds the girl stood watching the retreating figure. Then she turned back into the house.

Wilding had an almost uncontrollable impulse to call after her. Yet what would be the use? In being there at all he had disobeyed her most earnest entreaty. And yet——

The problem was solved for him the next instant. A shriek that set every nerve in his body on edge suddenly rang out. It came from the house, and must have been uttered by Phyllis Kenwit.

With a wild rush Wilding emerged from his hiding-place and burst into the house.

Chapter XI

The Hypodermic Needle

THE desire that governed Barry Wilding's instantaneous action was to snatch the girl from the danger which threatened her. He would take her away once and for all from that cursed house in which mystery was piled on mystery and perplexity upon perplexity. Once she was away from the evil and malign influence of her father, he was convinced he could make her listen to him. They would get married. . . .

By this time he was inside the front door and half-way up the staircase. The scream had come, it seemed to him, from an upper part of the house. At the top of the short staircase was a broad landing. Here a sight so remarkable met his eyes that for a moment he stopped; the man he knew as Kenwit was struggling with a creature whose face was covered

with such a dense growth of hair that he looked like a baboon. A mad baboon, too, judging by the demoniacal expression which was in his eyes.

"You devil! You are killing me!" burst from the foam-flecked lips. "Kill! Kill! Kill!"

"Oh, help him!" The girl had turned, and even her astonishment could not keep back the words of appeal.

Wilding obeyed the request immediately. Flinging himself on Kenwit's assailant, who he was astonished now to see was attired only in pyjamas beneath the dressing-gown, he seized the hands which were seeking for the doctor's throat and, after a desperate struggle, prised one clear.

"Can you hold both his arms? Confound it, why should Starkey be ill on this of all nights in the year!" Kenwit spoke irritably and yet in a tone which accepted Wilding's unexpected presence on the scene as being the most natural thing in the world.

Wilding replied in the same strain.

"I'll try—but he's confoundedly strong!"

The hairy person was unnaturally strong; he still fought with unabated fury, and he seemed to have the resisting power of half a dozen men. Eventually, however, Barry was able to trip him over. When the man crashed to the floor, he completed his task by sitting on his chest.

"Ah! Thank you! Thank you! And now for a little soothing medicine!" Kenwit produced a hypodermic syringe. Sinking the needle deeply into the raving man's arm, he drove the contents home.

"That should quieten him," he said. Immediately a difference was observed. With what sounded like a deep sigh of contentment, the man in the dressing-gown ceased his struggles and sank back in Kenwit's arms, limbs relaxed. Very quickly he was unconscious.

"That's better! Thank you——" The words, which had started with a smile, ended in a snarl. Wilding thought he had never seen a man's face change so quickly: one moment Kenwit had been courteous and apparently grateful for the help which had been given him; the next the man was almost insane with rage.

"What are you doing here? Confound you, don't you know that I can have you sent out of the country?"

"Daddy, dear!" His daughter came forward with the intention of trying to quieten him.

But the infuriated doctor refused to be calmed.

"I tell you I will have him sent out of the country!" he stormed. "One word to Willan——"

"Daddy!" The word was a warning as well as an objurgation.

Dr. Kenwit pulled himself up short. He passed a hand over his face. The struggle he was having with himself was so severe that his whole body shook.

"Will you please leave this house?" he said in a choked tone.

The man had a natural dignity in that moment which was singularly impressive. Almost—it was a

strange but sincere impression—Wilding felt sorry for him.

"Certainly," he replied. "I should not have intruded now but for the fact that I heard your daughter scream. It was that which induced me to rush into the house. If you tell me that you are no longer in any danger I will leave at once."

"Danger! What danger should I be in?" demanded Kenwit angrily.

Barry Wilding smiled.

"Oh, of course, if you don't consider having a madman's hands clutched round your throat dangerous, I have nothing more to say," he commented ironically.

Dr. Kenwit's attitude now became really alarming.

"You are a fool!—worse than a fool!" he retorted with so much heat that the girl covered her face with her hands. "Who, pray, is the madman?"

"Perhaps the gentleman in the whiskers and the pyjamas makes a habit of foaming at the mouth, clutching people round the neck so tightly that they cannot breathe, and shouting 'Kill! Kill!' Please understand I am not unduly inquisitive, Dr. Kenwit—I merely make a comment, since you have asked for it."

Kenwit bit a twitching lip.

"That unfortunate person is my brother. He is suffering from alcoholic poisoning in an acute form. He is here under my care. To-night he was seized with delirium tremens. Usually on such occasions I have the assistance and help of my servant Starkey,

but to-night Starkey is ill. Hence the contretemps. Now, sir," he added, "I trust I have satisfied your curiosity?"

The explanation would have been thoroughly satisfactory to Wilding if he had not noticed the warning glance which the speaker gave his daughter before he commenced speaking. But for that glance he would have felt in a measure conscience-stricken; as it was, he knew Kenwit to be acting—and lying.

"I suppose your friend Willan is a specialist in such cases?" he inquired.

"Willan! What do you know about Willan?" The doctor looked as though he might burst a vital blood-vessel at any moment.

"Nothing. Only you mentioned his name. He is the man, I understand, who is to drive me from the country."

Kenwit choked and could not reply. The answer to Wilding's remark was made by the girl.

"If you only knew the distress you were causing, even you would not intrude any longer," she said. Colour flamed in her cheeks and her eyes were bright as stars. But it was scorn which lighted them.

Wilding looked at her gravely.

"Believe me, I do not wish to intrude," he said. "In the circumstances that is a hard word for you to use."

"Oh, I know you claim this to be your house," she replied quickly, "but do you forget that you made me

your promise to let us stay on until . . . for a short time longer ? ”

“ No, I do not forget.”

“ Then why do you persecute us in this way ? ”

“ Persecute ? ” His own temper was rising. He had already stood a great deal—more than he had thought he ever could have stood from anyone.

“ You heard what I said. I do not think ‘ persecute ’ is too strong a word.” She looked round to see that her father had left the issue with her ; it was her task to get rid of the unwelcome guest.

Wilding seized her hand. She tried to free it, but he would not let go.

“ Listen ! ” he said tensely. “ You persist in misunderstanding me—God only knows for what reason ! Don’t you realise that it is because I wish to save you from danger—danger which is inevitable if you continue to go on as you are doing now—that I came here last night and again to-night ? Confide in me, and I will fight the whole world for you ! My dear . . . ”

But she shook her head. “ You must not ask me,” she said in a sobbing tone.

“ Why not ? ” he demanded ; “ even if your father is a crook——”

“ My father is the most honourable man alive ! How dare you insult him ? ” she demanded.

“ I did not insult him ; I merely stated what I honestly believe to be a fact. I came here to-night determined to take you away from what I am sure

is a malign influence over you. My dear," he added earnestly, "won't you come away with me? Won't you give me the chance to prove that I really and truly love you?"

Her voice took on a softer note, but her tone was still determined.

"I have already told you that it is not possible. I must stay with my father—for the present, at least. If you would only trust me!" she pleaded.

"How can I trust you? No, I didn't mean that," he added quickly. Then, before he could make any further explanation, the voice of the girl's father cut in:

"If you are not outside this house within two minutes, Mr. Wilding, I shall ring for the police, who will very soon put you out!"

But for the girl by his side Wilding would have made a hot reply. To be threatened in his own house by a man he had every reason to believe was a criminal, and who was in possession only through his own kindness . . .

"Good night, Miss Kenwit," he found himself saying. Without another word he turned away. He dared not trust himself to speak.

"You mustn't be too angry with my father." She had opened the door and stood with the light full upon her face. Her beauty tore at his heart.

Yet what was the use? He was wasting his time, his thought, his energy, upon something unattainable—a mirage; he was chasing a rainbow. He would

never mean anything to this girl; she would never give him the chance for which he had pleaded so hard. For she was determined on her course, and nothing would persuade her to step aside. What a fool he had been! What a fool he still was . . .

"Good night!" she said. As she spoke her eyes seemed to be searching the darkness.

"Good night, Miss Kenwit! I am sorry I ever butted in." He could not keep the bitterness out of his voice. He did not know that he wanted to. Then the door was shut. He stood for a moment, and in that moment he fancied he could hear her sobbing on the other side of the door. Yet that, too, must be a delusion, a mocking phantasm. Why should this girl cry because he had spoken to her out of the bitterness in his heart?

He strode down the carriage-drive and out into the deserted country road. He was furious with himself and with the world. To-morrow would see an end however—that night's events had decided him; he would leave England the following day. Kenwit and the girl could live in the house as long as they liked; he would not thrust his presence upon either again. He was sick and weary of the whole affair. He would never be able to forget the girl—to imagine that he could would be as big an illusion as to cherish the hope that Phyllis Kenwit returned his love—but at least he could put as big a distance between her and himself as was possible. He would go to Australia.

Kenwit would have the laugh, of course. He would

be able to say that he had not only frightened him into leaving the country, but had got a £3,000 house into the bargain! Well, the crook was welcome to his laugh now. He personally wanted to forget everything about The Durdles; everything that had happened there; everything that was associated with the place . . .

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not notice the two men leap silently out from the deep shadows bordering the road until they were on top of him. Both wore masks over the upper part of their faces, but Wilding noticed that the taller of the two had a left hand in which the little finger was missing.

He struck out instinctively, but even as he put up his defence against this unexpected attack his thoughts were back at The Durdles. Why had Phyllis Kenwit's eyes searched the darkness when she had said good night? Had this attack been planned? Did Kenwit mean to murder him?

His fist struck one man, making him reel, but in the same instant a terrific blow on the back of the head robbed Wilding of all strength. He pitched blindly forward.

THE effort that Barry Wilding made to keep his consciousness was unavailing ; the blow on the back of his head had been too brutally effective. As he pitched forward all life went from him ; he was clean knocked out.

He awoke from that forced sleep, cold and shivering. How long he had lain there in the middle of the road he could not tell, for his watch had stopped. It was still dark, however, and he guessed the time to be about two o'clock in the morning.

He rose quickly and stamped his feet to get his circulation working again. Then he put a hand up to the back of his head. There was a huge lump where he had been struck and this, directly he put a finger on it, throbbed viciously.

Wilding's next act was to feel in his pockets. They were all empty. His foot touched something, and he bent down ; it was the small electric torch which he always carried. The switch was in good order, and by its light he could see money, keys, and other things which had been in his pockets, lying in the dust of the roadway. Slowly he picked up the various articles. After only a short time spent in consideration he came to the conclusion that nothing could have been stolen from him.

Then what was the object in attacking him ? What was the game ?

His first feeling was one of thankfulness. He would have to revise the impression he had when he was attacked. The fact that his pockets had been rifled showed conclusively that the object of his assailants had been plunder. But it was plunder of a peculiar sort. Those men had not been common robbers; that was proved by their leaving the money untouched. True, the amount was not very great, but it would not have been overlooked by the ordinary tramp or modern footpad.

Again he had that feeling of thankfulness. If, as he had imagined the moment before he lost consciousness, the Kenwits had arranged this assault the men would have taken his unconscious body away with them. They would not have left him in the roadway. Kenwit wished him not only away from Hillsdown, but out of the country. Besides, the Kenwits would not stoop to common robbery; at least, he did not believe so. No, there was another solution to the affair.

Once his mind was relieved with regard to Phyllis Kenwit, Wilding felt his temper rising. He was disgusted with himself. To think that a man who had been through his adventures should fall an easy prey to two wandering night-hawks! The recollection filled him with melancholy. Then he recalled that his mind at the time of the attack had been full of Phyllis Kenwit and something of his self-esteem returned.

Yet he was in anything but an amiable frame of

mind when he saw a dark figure of a man loom out of the darkness. He braced himself for a hectic few minutes' engagement, the throbbing at the back of his head giving a zest to his natural desire to hit someone.

"What 're you doin' here?"

Wilding almost laughed. This fresh opponent, for whom he had been preparing his best fistic efforts, proved to be nothing more formidable than a village policeman!

"I might very well ask you the same question, I think," was his somewhat caustic answer. "From what I know of the police force in this district you ought to be home a-bed, with a nice hot-water bottle tucked beneath the sheets. Aren't you afraid of catching cold, being out so late as this?"

"Tryin' to be funny, are yer? Here, let me have a look at you. . . . Ah!" with an exclamation of triumph, "I thought so! You're the feller who's been hangin' round The Durdles. You'll have to come along with me! Loiterin', with intent to commit a felony—that's what you're doin'."

"Honestly?"

The loutish constable, looking like a pantomime figure in his ill-fitting uniform and bucolic moustache, snorted.

"None of your larks, now!" he said with heavy dignity; "it won't pay you to take any liberties with me, let me tell yer!"

Wilding laughed. It was a laugh which some of his

intimates in other days and other countries would have recognised as presaging mischief.

"I can quite believe that," he replied. "Tell me, constable, will the inspector be in bed at this time?"

"Of course he will."

"Sound asleep, do you think?"

"Of course he will. At least, I should say so. Here, what's the idea?"

"My dear, stupid-looking friend," replied Wilding, taking hold of the constable's arm, "the idea is that I intend to come along with you and see the sweet inspector. If you hadn't assured me that he was safely in bed, and sound asleep, moreover, I might not have bothered. In that case, if you had really insisted upon taking me I should have been under the painful necessity of turning you upside down and making you stand on your helmet. As it is, however, I shall have the greatest pleasure in accompanying you. Will you kindly lead the way?" An impish humour had taken possession of him, he didn't know why, and he burst out laughing.

"Beside loiterin' with intent, you're wanderin' whilst of unsound mind," commented the constable. "You come along o' me!" he continued, tugging at his scrawny moustache.

"You promise me that I shall see the dear inspector?" persisted his companion.

"You'll see the inspector all right—I'll see to that!"

Twenty minutes later Wilding stood in the presence

of his friend, the police inspector. The latter, roused from his slumbers, was certainly not beautiful, but he was very wrath.

"You again!" he stormed.

Wilding bowed.

"If I don't drop round every night I feel that something is missing in my life. I hope you don't mind?"

"Well, Messer?" The inspector, unable to find a reply to this commentary, turned to the constable.

P.C. William Messer produced a notebook, stood at attention, and started to intone in an official sing-song voice: "At two-twenty this morning, Inspector, I was walking along the Hillsdown Road, when I saw the defendant standing in a suspicious attitude in the middle of the road. When I got up to him he assumed an attitude of defiance. Asked what he was doin', the defendant became ramblin'——"

"What did he say?" roared the inspector.

P.C. Messer scratched his head, took one look at Wilding and another at his superior, and then blurted out: "He said he wanted to see the sweet inspector. With that I arrested him, not only for loiterin' with intent——"

"Splendid fellow! Don't you think he is, Inspector?" interjected the prisoner.

"—but for wandering whilst of unsound mind."

"It is hardly possible to imagine the British Police Force without him. Don't you agree with me, Inspector?"

"One of the other things 'e said," continued the sing-song voice, "was that if 'e 'adn't wanted to see the sweet inspector 'e would 'ave turned me upside down and stood me on me 'elmet!" In the growing excitement P.C. Messer had lost grip of his aspirates.

"What have you to say?" asked the inspector, turning to the "defendant."

"This!" Wilding's attitude, as well as his voice, had completely changed. Gone was the puckish humour; now he was a grimly-determined man. "To-night, just before this buffoon came up, I was attacked by two men on the road leading to the Swan Inn. As evidence I have this lump on the back of the head." He turned so that the inspector could examine the wound. "Last night when I called on you to make a charge, you failed in your duty. If you do not make immediate plans to have the men who attacked me arrested, I will report you to Scotland Yard. That is clear, I hope?"

"You'll report me to Scotland Yard, will you?" The tone was bellicose.

"I certainly shall, Inspector. It seems to me that you are not worthy of your post. It may interest you further to know that The Durdles, the house outside of which, according to our friend Messer—rather an unfortunate name that for a policeman—I was to-night 'loitering with intent'—whatever that gibberish may mean—belongs to me!"

"Belongs to you!" The man was now plainly interested. He snapped his fingers the next moment,

however. "You don't know what you are talking about," he continued.

Wilding walked to the door.

"That is just the answer I expected. I will now see what Scotland Yard has to say," he remarked.

But the inspector had the last word.

"Scotland Yard will probably order you to be locked-up as a dangerous lunatic!"

With the taunting words in his ears, Wilding left the police station. If he had stayed any longer, he would have been forced to commit murder.

The interview with the local police that night, coming on top of his affray with the unknown footpads, forced him to a fresh resolve, however. Australia must wait; he could do that trip any time. In the meanwhile, he was going to stay in England and see this business definitely through—no one should have the laugh of him. To solve the mystery of The Durdles, to force Kenwit into an open confession of his crimes, to make Phyllis Kenwit not only listen to his love, but to marry him, to knock that stupid and insolent police-inspector off his perch and to track down and punish not only Gardiner and Ebury but the two ruffians who had attacked him that night—all these things he was fully determined to do.

So much can result from a bang on the head!

"Daddy! You were unjust! It was not generous of you! If it had not been for Mr. Wilding you might have been killed! You must not forget that."

Her father stopped in his uneasy pacing up and down the room. The two had gone to the drawing-room after Wilding had left.

"I do not forget it. But the man's presence infuriated me. My dear, we shall have to take strong measures with him. When the time comes we can make him what apologies are necessary, of course, but until then I really think that we had better ask for Sir Bertram Willan's assistance. Do you think he believed that story I told him to-night—about our—er—guest being my alcoholic brother?"

Phyllis Kenwit shook her pretty head.

"I'm perfectly certain he didn't!" she said promptly; "although the concoction was a clever one, you spoilt it by giving me a look of warning before you said anything. That ruined the effect completely, and, what is more, I am certain Mr. Wilding noticed it. You would make a very poor criminal, daddy!"

"Perhaps so! Yet I am convinced that that is what this impudent and meddling fellow Wilding imagines I am."

"A criminal, daddy, how—how comic!" Phyllis lifted her head and laughed.

"It's not comic at all!" replied her father severely; "it's not only extremely vexatious but dangerous. You scarcely seem to realise, Phyllis, what a consternation would be caused by the circulation of the true facts about this house. Wilding has got it into his thick head, I am absolutely convinced, that I am

engaged in some nefarious schemes here; he is convinced, moreover, that you are going outside the law at my bidding. He is obstinate to the last degree—you know that for yourself—and so long as he is in this country, he represents a peril which I shudder to contemplate. I shall lay the whole facts before Sir Bertram Willan without further delay. I should be failing in my duty if I did not do so.”

Phyllis, as she went wearily to bed, wondered when the maze in which she had been plunged would become straight. She could see no light anywhere now.

Chapter XIII

Crooks Confer

THE man whose little finger was missing from his left hand, held out something which showed a smudgy white, to his companion.

“Here you are—what I promised you—a couple of pounds,” he said. “Now hop it! And remember this: I never want to see your ugly face again!”

The individual whose features had been so severely criticised, drew himself up into a position almost approaching dignity. He and his pay-master were sitting on a grassy bank by the side of the lonely road. Two hundred yards away was the body of the man they had just rendered senseless.

“Ho! So it’s like that, is it?” exclaimed the offended man, “I can do the dirty work, and then I

'ave to push off because my face ain't to yer perishin' likin' ! Oo the 'ell are yer, Mister 'Igh and Mighty ? That's what I should like ter know ? "

The man minus the left little finger rose lightly to his feet.

" Listen, you little runt ! " he said in a cold, merciless tone that froze the listener's blood. " I have slit the throats of men for saying just about half of what you have had the sauce to yap. Who I am and what my game is, doesn't concern you—if it did, I'd pretty soon puncture you with this "—as quick as a lightning-flash the speaker had produced a long-bladed, murderous-looking knife. " Do you want to feel that tickling your ribs ? " he inquired savagely.

There is a social scale among crooks, and the shabbily-dressed tramp, who had been tempted to assist in a crime of which he did not know the motive, now recognised that his temporary employer was infinitely above him ; that, in fact, he was altogether out of his class. His manner became correspondingly respectful.

" All right, mate," he muttered, " no 'arm meant.' Without any further words, he shambled away, his figure soon being swallowed up in the darkness of the night.

Left to himself, the maimed man found relief for his bad temper in a series of explosive oaths. The evening's venture had not been a success judging by his expression. Once he made to go back the way he had come, and then his right hand gripped the

knife with which he had frightened his associate; but, after a moment's pause, he turned and walked off in the same direction as the scared tramp had taken.

About eight o'clock that morning this same man could have been seen warily approaching the Swan Inn at Hillsdown. Seen in the morning sunlight, he did not make such an unprepossessing appearance as might have been supposed from his nocturnal habits. On the contrary, he looked smart and almost distinguished as he drew near the entrance of the inn which was his objective. Sleeping under a hedge apparently presented neither terrors nor difficulties to him.

He was almost inside the bar when he suddenly drew back with the swiftness of an animal used to being hunted. A man was standing, warming himself by a comfortable fire.

"Starrock!" he muttered; "now what is he doing here?"

Unable to answer the question, and unwilling, it seemed, to inquire of the man he had so providentially (from his point of view) recognised, he retired. A few deft questions to a yard-boy, and he had gained information which caused him to turn away from the "Swan" with far more alacrity than he had shown in approaching the inn.

"God!" he muttered, as he took the road again. "Spider'll laugh his inside out when I tell him—I don't think!"

With which enigmatic remark, he set himself to do a steady five miles an hour. He was headed in the direction of London.

The man with the missing finger stepped out from a train at Paddington Station two hours later. In spite of the fact that he hadn't eaten any food for over thirty hours, he passed the refreshment buffet and, signalling a taxi, gave the driver an address in a famous Bloomsbury street. "Drive fast!" was his curt instruction.

Two men rose to greet him as he entered the comfortably-furnished room. Both were faultlessly dressed and provided a good setting to that room, with its deep, leather arm-chairs, exquisite mahogany and delightful decorations. They, indeed, looked what they were—finished men of the world; too finished, too sophisticated, a skilled observer might have said. It is interesting to note that they bore small resemblance to the two men who had recently left the Swan Inn at Hillsgate.

"Well?" snapped the one who had told Barry Wilding that his name was Oswald Gardiner, and that he followed the remarkably unprofitable profession of an obscure novelist.

The caller regarded the speaker with a cynical smile for a moment. Then he hurled his bomb.

"Starrock's in England!" he announced. "What do you think of it, Spider?"

Evidently Spider didn't think very highly of the

news. The man so addressed rapped out a blistering oath and then fiercely demanded full details.

"Spill it all, Warton!" he commanded.

"Have a heart!" protested the other; "I haven't eaten for thirty-six hours—let's have some food."

The others waited impatiently until he had wolfed what was set before him. They appeared to begrudge him every mouthful.

"Now, then," said the Spider, when at length the other pushed his plate to one side, "let's hear it all."

"I've only told you half so far," replied Warton, who seemed to take a taunting delight in provoking his companions' curiosity. "First of all, Wilding didn't have anything on him!"

This time both the listeners jumped to their feet.

"Are you sure?" demanded the man who had called himself Ebury when he was staying at the Swan Inn, Hillsdown.

"Sure? I searched him from top to bottom, after I had biffed him on the head, and I tell you he had nothing like it on him. The only pieces of paper he carried were a couple of letters. There was nothing in those."

"What did you do with him?" asked the Spider.

"Left him on the road—what do you think I did with him?"

"Did he see you? Would he recognise you, do you think?"

"I had a mask on for safety."

"That's all right, but this bunch of news is just about as welcome as a dose of smallpox, Warton."

"You needn't tell me that. Seeing Starrock's back in the bar of that inn you were staying at, and thinking what you two would look like when I broke the news, nearly made me burst out laughing. What's he over here for?"

"Why didn't you ask him?" volunteered the Spider; "you had the chance."

"Thanks, but stroking tigers is not one of my hobbies."

"It's just possible, Warton, that he's over here making some inquiries about that Philly murder job," put in the third member of the party.

"He, nor any one else, can't put anything on me over that," protested the other furiously.

The man he had called Spider put up his hand.

"Steady yourself, Warton," he remarked; "Starrock is supposed to be the cleverest sleuth in the States, but he's only human. If he butts in on this latest game of ours we'll just drop him off, that's all. I'm of the opinion that the English police—who are fools, anyway—won't be too sorry; they're mostly jealous of Starrock."

Warton considered this cool proposition to murder the most famous private detective that the United States of America possessed, without apparently arriving at any fixed conclusion; and then came back to the fact that worried all three.

"I can understand his being in England, but why should he be in that very inn?"

"You are sure it was Starrock?"

"Say! Do you think I don't know Starrock when I meet him? I ought to."

The others agreed that Warton certainly should know the detective Starrock when he met him, before sitting down to the conference which the information that Warton had brought necessitated.

In the meanwhile the two men they had been discussing had struck up an acquaintance. They had met for the first time in the small but cosy coffee-room of the "Swan" at breakfast-time that morning. Wilding, although naturally on his guard against strangers after his recent experiences at that hostelry, liked at once this man with the blue, flinty eyes, strong mouth and athletic frame. He had lived for a couple of years in America, and when the stranger announced that his name was Starrock, he leaned towards the other excitedly.

"Not the detective?" he asked eagerly.

They were smoking an after-breakfast pipe—sitting on a rustic bench in the pleasant garden of the inn. The stranger took his pipe from his mouth and looked round.

"Do you mind not speaking quite so loud?" he said; "why did you ask that?"

"Because if you really are Victor Starrock, the detective about whom all New York was talking when

I was there eighteen months ago, I have a case I should like to discuss with you."

"A criminal case?" asked the other.

"If several attempts at murder and the most unholy mystery I have ever heard of constitute a criminal case—yes!"

"I am very busy. My present visit to England is in connection with a most difficult and delicate matter. I am afraid I shall be fully occupied, Mr.——"

Wilding drew out his case, and passed a visiting-card over.

"If you want to make further inquiries about me, you can go to——" He paused as he was going to mention the name of the solicitor at whose behest he had returned to England. "The fact is," he added quickly, realising that the shrewd, flinty eyes of the detective were fixed penetratingly on him; "I'm in the very devil of a muddle, and I should really like to hear the opinion of someone like yourself upon it."

"I have half an hour before I need leave to catch my train," was the brief answer.

Although the reply was not very encouraging—no doubt the other imagined that he must be dealing with a potential madman—Wilding plunged into his story. The reason why he should confide his amazing story to a perfect stranger, he did not wait to analyse. This man had stated he was a detective whose fame was international—that was sufficient for him in his present mood. He had been hopelessly befogged too

long; he would welcome another man's brain—especially such an experienced brain as Starrock possessed—in trying to find some starting-point in the maze of mystery which bewildered and infuriated him. So he found himself telling the whole story—only leaving out as much reference to Phyllis Kenwit as was possible.

“Well,” concluded Starrock, when he had finished, “that certainly is a humdinger of a story. Sounds almost like a dope-dream.”

“You don't believe it?” snapped Wilding angrily.

“No, I wouldn't say that. It has been my experience that anything can happen in crime—and the more unlikely the thing, the more likely it is to happen! But I would say that your story is unusual. Mr. Wilding—that visit of the Home Secretary to this Kenwit man now . . .”

“I know it sounds preposterous, but all the same I can assure you that I am positive about my facts.”

“Walk to the station with me, if you haven't anything better to do, Mr. Wilding.”

“Certainly. As a matter of fact I had practically made up my mind to go to Town myself this morning.”

“You had?”

“Yes. I intended to put the whole affair before Scotland Yard.”

“I am going to the Yard myself this morning to consult with some of the chief officials. Suppose I mention the matter? Have I your permission? To-night, over dinner, I could tell you the result.”

"That's very good of you. But please understand I don't want any harm to come to the Kenwits—especially the girl!"

"I understand. I promise you it shall be a very diplomatic inquiry."

Starrock paused in his walk.

"Did either of those men who attacked you last night have any characteristic? Anything by which they might be recognised, I mean?" he asked.

"The chief villain, I noticed, had the little finger of his left hand missing."

The detective put his hand on the speaker's shoulder.

"What kind of a man was he otherwise?" he asked. His voice had become tense.

Chapter XIV

Three-fingered Dan

BARRY WILDING stared at his questioner.

"Do you know the man?" he asked.

The American detective knocked the ashes from his pipe, which he placed in his pocket. "If your man coincides with the fellow I have in mind," he replied, "this will be the best bit of news I've heard for a long time. I crossed to Europe to 'get' Three-fingered Dan Warton. Tell me what he's like."

"I can't tell you very much because I have not been able to decide yet whether the man I saw in *The Durdles* the night before last was the same fellow as

came out of the hedge last night. But I should say the man last night was about five feet nine inches in height. He had a certain polished swagger about him. More than that would be mere guess-work, because he wore a mask."

"Dan Warton, or I'm a Dutchman!" was the comment; "now what's he doing tapping you on the head in a country road on a moonless night? I'd give a great deal to know that."

"You wouldn't give more than I would," said Wilding dryly; "but all I ask is that if you do run across Mr. Warton, you'll send me a telegram. I should like to be in at the death with that joker; I don't like his sense of humour."

Starrock smiled.

"I won't fail to let you know; and I shall be back to-night, in any case."

"If I may ask, what's your reason in staying at an out-of-the-way place like the Swan Inn at Hillsdown?" put in Wilding. "Or is that what our lawyers would call a 'leading question'?"

The detective readily replied.

"I guess it's because I've seen so much of the seamy side of life that I'm a great beauty-lover, Mr. Wilding. Before I came across, I asked Jacob Fiske, the multi-millionaire, for whom I did a little work, what was the prettiest spot near London this time of the year. Without any hesitation, Fiske, who knows every inch of England and Scotland, said: 'Starrock, my friend, you go down to a little village

named Hillsdown in the Thames valley. There's an Inn there, called the Swan, I believe, which, the last time I saw it, I had a good mind to buy and then tranship it stone by stone to Great Neck, Long Island. You go there; you'll see England at its sweetest and prettiest.' And so that's why I came," concluded the detective. "The fact that I just missed the two cronies of Three-fingered Dan, was merely one of those things that the boys who review novels call the long arm of coincidence—nothing more. All the same, my luck appears to be good."

By this time they had reached the entrance to the station, and the detective held out his hand.

"Till to-night; I'll be with you for dinner."

Walking slowly back to the inn, Wilding reflected on this fresh strange twist which had come into the affair. That the man with the missing little finger, and his companions, Gardiner and Ebury, were crooks, he had long since decided, and the startling statement of Starrock, that he had come to Europe to effect the arrest of the maimed man, merely bore out the news. But the connection between these three men and the Kenwits—for there must have been some connection at one time, even though they were now ostensible enemies—remained a mystery.

His thoughts went to Victor Starrock. Usually a reserved type, it was not his practice to confide his affairs to strangers; but there had been something about the American which he found extremely likeable. The man with his unmistakable virility and frank,

steady gaze, had appealed to him at once. The fame which surrounded his name had completed the conquest. He was content to leave the initial skirmishing with the Big Wigs of Scotland Yard in Starrock's hands.

As he mounted the crest of the slight hill that dipped into the little valley in which the Swan Inn rested as though at an anchorage, he saw a figure standing in the road. In the first glance he recognised Phyllis Kenwit.

He raised his hat as he approached, half expecting the girl to turn away. But, instead, she advanced rapidly towards him. The sun had kissed her cheeks, making her look irresistibly beautiful. The feeling of hopeless longing to which Barry had become accustomed by now, returned.

Without waiting to return his "Good morning," Phyllis Kenwit touched his arm.

"You must leave the country immediately!" she said; "I have come to warn you. Oh, why haven't you listened to what I have told you?"

He looked at the lovely face. The girl's lips were twitching; she was terribly in earnest.

"I have listened, and I believe that you mean well, Miss Kenwit—but I am not the type of man to be frightened away. Now I'll tell you what happened last night after I left The Durdles: Half a mile or so away from the house, I was attacked by two men. I was thinking of—of something else at the time, and they got the better of me. The men were masked,

so that I could not give a very good description of either. One got behind me and knocked me out with a blow on the back of the head. I was unconscious for some time and then I went to the police station. There I was received with such effrontery that I threatened to report the inspector to Scotland Yard——”

“He has his orders,” said the girl.

Wilding looked at her fixedly.

“What do you mean by that?” he demanded; “what are those orders? And who gave them? Your father?”

“No . . . I cannot tell you! I ought not to have said . . .” She hesitated again to add: “You mustn’t ask me!”

“And you expect me to leave England upon the strength of that!” he replied ironically. It was impossible to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“But if I told you you were in actual danger? That you might even be put away? You would go then—for my sake, Mr. Wilding?”

“Put away!” He seized on the words, ignoring for the moment the personal appeal. “I’d like to see anyone attempt to put me away!” he exclaimed passionately. “They’d find—as this chuckle-headed police inspector will soon find—that I’m far from an amiable person when I’m roused!”

“You don’t realise what you are up against!” was the girl’s next strange statement; “you would be powerless——” She stopped suddenly then. Once

again she gave the impression of having incautiously said too much.

"You deal in puzzles which have no solution, Miss Kenwit—and you are an enigma yourself," he said coldly; "since you will not help me, I shall have to find the key to this mystery myself—and *I intend to do so!*"

"Then please remember when it is too late that I gave you ample warning!" Her tone matched his own for coldness, and before he could make any further comment, she had turned and was walking quickly away from him.

Entering the Swan Inn, Wilding was received smilingly by Mrs. Shippam. The landlady's face was aglow with interest.

"There's a registered letter come for you, Mr. Wilding. I signed for it since you were out."

"Thanks, Mrs. Shippam." He took the envelope mechanically and absent-mindedly put it into his pocket.

"Aren't you going to open it, Mr. Wilding? I always associate registered letters with good news. I remember I had one when my poor Uncle Charlie—him that suffered so with that terrible disease he caught out in the Tropicals, or whatever it is they are called—died. Perhaps someone has left you a fortune, Mr. Wilding." The good soul did not add that her curiosity had led her to give the envelope with the blue pencil-marks drawn down and along it a close

inspection, during which she noticed the name of a firm of solicitors on the flap..

Her guest gave her what she afterwards described to Shippam as “a very queer look.”

“I have had one fortune left me, Mrs. Shippam—and I don’t want another.” With that he went to his room.

In putting his hand into his pocket for pipe and tobacco-pouch, his fingers touched the envelope and he pulled it out.

Wondering what Coventry, the solicitor, wanted to bother him with now, he opened the letter. A few moments later he was still staring fixedly at what he read. The letter ran :

107, Norfolk Street,
Strand, W.C.2.

17th July.

My dear Mr. Wilding,

I have just come across the accompanying document—or rather part of a document. It appears to be half of a will referring to your family. I found it to-day when going through some old papers belonging to your late uncle, and now send it on, with an apology for having mislaid it.

With kind regards,

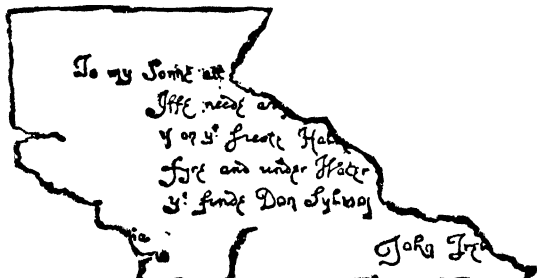
Yours sincerely.

Samuel Coventry.

P.S.—As you do not intend to settle down for some time, may I suggest a trip abroad—say for three months? In the circumstances, I strongly advise it.

S. C.

Barry put aside the letter and examined the "document"—or rather part of a document.



For a moment Wilding was inclined to tear the thing, which read like so much rigmarole, into a dozen pieces. Then, calmer reflection prevailing, he placed the faded, yellowed paper away carefully in his pocket-book. It would be something to show Starrock, at any rate.

Knowing that the American detective would probably ask him a good many questions, he furbished among the documents which Coventry had handed over to him at his second visit. Included in these was a detailed history of his uncle's family. After priming himself with the necessary information, he took up an ash-stick, lit his pipe, drank a pint of bitter beer, and spent the rest of the day tramping the country-side.

He returned at half-past six, to the obvious relief of Mrs. Shippam. The latter had previously confided to her husband that "that nice young man, Wilding, had such a funny manner all of a sudden that I didn't

like the look of him at all. I shouldn't be surprised if he didn't go out and do somethin' desperate, Shippam."

"Nonsense, Maria!" was Shippam's comment; "a man who's as fond of our bitter as that young gen'l'man is, ain't goin' to do nothin' to himself—he's got more sense."

At half-past seven that night Starrock and Wilding sat down to an excellent dinner. Both were hungry, and conversation lagged. But when the landlady had gone, after putting the coffee on the table, the American detective opened the talk.

"There's more in that affair of yours than meets the eye, Wilding," he said, "but we can't talk here. We'll go for a stroll in a minute or two and then I'll tell you what I managed to discover to-day. I warn you it isn't much."

Half an hour later Starrock threw himself down on a grassy bank overlooking the river. The air was delightful, and the detective's face reflected the pleasure he felt.

After expressing his delight at the scene, he turned to his companion.

"It strikes me you've landed yourself into an almighty tangle, Wilding," he said decisively.

Chapter XV

"A Captain under Drake"

WILDING greeted the announcement with a sign of impatience.

"Don't mind me being irritable, Starrock," he said.

"but that fact is perfectly obvious to myself; I do not want your statement to confirm it. There's been two fresh developments since I saw you this morning—at least, one new development and a bit more general mystery. But I'm sorry . . . you were saying——"

"Let me start at the beginning," returned Starrock, who spoke and acted less like any detective he had ever read of in novels than he would have believed possible; "I went to Scotland Yard to renew acquaintance with several old friends, and to see if they had any news about Three-Fingered Dan Warton. After the ice had been well broken, I happened to mention that I was staying at an inn at Hillsdown. I could see instantly that the man I was talking to—Deputy Chief Commissioner Cross—was all attention.

"'What're you doing down there?' he asked. He tried to make his voice sound commonplace, but he couldn't deceive me. I knew he was keenly interested, and had touched the spot at once.

"'I was recommended to stay there by Jacob Fiske, the millionaire,' I replied; 'no reason why I shouldn't stay there, I hope?'

"Cross looked curiously at me then. He seemed to be weighing something up in his mind.

"'To be frank, Starrock,' he said, 'there is—but I am not at liberty to tell you what it is.'

"'You're mighty mysterious!' I went on, trying to make him believe I was chaffing him, but he wouldn't rise to the bait. So I ventured a little further. 'I suppose it's that house called The Durdles,' I said;

'is it a gang of coiners down there that you're keeping an eye on?'

"When I said that I thought he would jump down my throat.

" 'What do you know about The Durdles?' he said. The man was on thorns to see what I was getting at.

" 'Nothing—only it looks the sort of place that would suit a forger or a crook of some sort. Why, Cross, what's the matter with you?'

"He kept looking at me in that curious way, so finally I said: 'As a matter of fact, it's not me at all but a young fellow I've met at Hillsdown who's interested in The Durdles. He says the place belongs to him, but that he can't get possession of it.'

"That settled it! Cross, after looking over his shoulder as though he were a musical-comedy conspirator, said: 'Take it from me as a friend, Starrock, the less your young friend mixes himself up with The Durdles and the people who are living in the house at present, the better it will be for him. I can't say more than that—and I wouldn't have told you that much, Starrock, if you hadn't been a particularly old friend and a man I know I can trust.'"

"But it's astounding!" declared Wilding, who had been waiting impatiently for a chance to comment on the detective's news. "From all appearance, Kenwit is crooked and yet he has the protection of Scotland Yard! He must have bribed the whole British nation. . . . Did you try to get anything more out of Cross?"

" I tried, but it was like endeavouring to scratch a way through a brick wall with your finger-nail. Cross closed up like an oyster. His manner was so serious, however, that I am convinced something pretty important is going on at The Durdles. And whatever it is, the utmost secrecy is being maintained."

" Well, the whole thing is a hotch-potch to me—and I'm sick to death of it ! " declared Wilding. " Are you any good at puzzles, Starrock ? "

" I've had to try to solve a few in my time. What's yours ? "

" This," replied the other, pulling the faded paper which Coventry, the solicitor, had sent him that morning out of his pocket and passing it to the detective.

" Looks like something out of ' Treasure Island,' " said Starrock, but he studied the thing intently.

" It's half a will, I should say," he mused. " What's the story about it ? Anything to do with The Durdles ? "

" Yes, I believe so. But what—I can't say. It was sent to me this morning by the solicitor who wound up my uncle's estate. He apologised for having kept it so long—said that he had found it among some old papers of my uncle's which he had been going through and which had been previously mislaid."

" I'll ask the silliest possible question—did he tell you where the other half of the document was ? "

" He didn't."

" There must be a story attached to it. What about the family history ; know much about it ? "

"A bit."

"Tell me. Perhaps we can put the pieces together."

"From what I can make out," started Wilding, "the Trevannion family, of which my uncle—my mother's brother—was the last, was descended from a famous old sea-dog, who served as a captain under Drake. It's quite likely that, like a good many others of his class, John Trevannion made a lot of money out of the Spanish Main and by the other favourite sport of the time, capturing Spanish galleons. He it was who built The Durdles, but nothing much was heard of him after he had sailed for Virginia with Raleigh. Evidently life in England after all his filibustering proved too tame. Leaving his son at The Durdles—which from what I can understand was then called 'Eagle's Nest'—he sailed away, never to return. At least, there is nothing in the documents I have to prove that he ever came back to England. Included in the family records, however, is a statement to the effect that he sent 'a greate gifte' to his 'dear son Francis by one Silas Bent, a faithfulle seaman.' Something must have happened to the worthy Silas—probably he got drunk with rum—for there is another passage to the effect that this 'faithfulle seaman' was robbed of 'half his greate gifte'——"

"I've got it!" cried Starrock, jumping up excitedly; "I've got it! What Silas Bent brought home from the far seas was a will which the old man had made—and *this is half of it!*"

Wilding stared. Then he examined the thick

parchment-like paper that had yellowed with age. Yes, it seemed likely; the ink was centuries old. It might be. . . .

"Can't you figure it out?" went on Starrock. "John Trevannion plundered Spanish galleons—you say he was a captain under Drake: why, man, the very words conjure up a picture of gleaming jewels of fabulous value! Having made his pile, as we should say nowadays, he returns to his native country. There—in a secluded spot, because he suspects the presence of enemies—he builds himself a house. The Durdles goes back a few hundred years; I don't know a great deal about English architecture, but I know that much—*ergo*: the place there is so much mystery about at the present time, the building which you have inherited, is THE HOUSE! Any objection to that?"

"No, because the documents I have prove that The Durdles—then called, as I have already said, 'Eagle's Nest'—was the actual house John Trevannion built and afterwards lived in. It was there also that his son, Francis, was born."

"And Francis was the boy to inherit the treasure! It's as plain as a pikestaff!" continued the New York reader of riddles.

Barry could not help smiling. Starrock, who by all the laws of precedent, should have been as cool as a cucumber, was the more excited of the two.

"Aren't you taking rather a lot for granted?" he asked. "We haven't any proof that there was any treasure. It's only surmise."

The detective wagged an admonishing finger.

"Don't be so confoundedly sceptical—it isn't natural," he replied. "Here you are on the track of a fortune that would probably make even John D. or any of those fellows blink in astonishment, and you sit there as mute as a mummy! Why, man, you ought to be dancing with delight—'let joy be unconfined' sort of thing!"

"That's all very well," responded Wilding, "but up till now I don't see, as I've said before, where the treasure comes in. I should like to think there was a chance of it——"

"Give me that paper!" interrupted the detective. "What do you think the words 'Ye finde Don Sylvios' mean if it doesn't mean the loot that John Trevannion took from some Spanish grandee? It's treasure all right—but where in the deuce is the other part? That lawyer fellow must have it; you ought to go up to see him without any further delay."

"I intend to. There are one or two other matters I want to discuss with him. We'll leave that until I can get some further information. It's the attitude of Scotland Yard that puzzles me; why should they be shielding a man we believe to be a criminal? Is this Deputy Commissioner Cross absolutely above suspicion, do you think?"

"If you mean, could he be 'bribed,'" answered Starrock, "I say 'no' at once. There isn't sufficient money in the Bank of England to turn him into a crook. No, we must find another solution than that."

"Any other answer to the puzzle is beyond me for the moment, I am afraid," replied Barry, rising and stretching his arms. "What do you say to turning back and having a game of billiards? It isn't much of a table, but it will while away an hour before we turn in."

"Right you are." Starrock seemed one of those convenient persons who are always willing to fall in with any reasonable suggestion. He got to his feet at once and the two walked back to the inn.

Starrock was not a good billiards player, but still Wilding was glad to have the game; it took his mind off a problem over which he knew he had been brooding not only too long, but too intently. He simply had to try and forget The Durdles and everything connected with the confounded house. So he concentrated on making the unsatisfactory ivory balls cannon in eccentric fashion on the worn and bumpy table and drop uncertainly into the sagging pockets.

They played two games of a hundred up and then it was time for a final pipe and a whisky-and-soda.

As Wilding wished the detective good night outside his room he remembered something.

"You haven't told me, Starrock," he said, "what's the crime in America that our three-fingered friend Dan Warton, has committed."

"Murder!" was the grave reply.

BARRY WILDING was not the only person who wished to forget The Durdles and all that it meant. It was with a deep breath of thankfulness that Phyllis Kenwit received instructions on the following morning to go to London. In the bustle of the hurrying crowds, amid the swiftly-changing scenes of the wonderful kaleidoscope of the Metropolis, she hoped to dull the pain in her heart. How stupid men were! How incredibly stupid this particular man was. . . . If he had only been content to wait. . . . But now, she knew, the interview that morning had meant an end to the friendship between Barry Wilding and herself. She tried to believe it were better so; the man had never trusted her; he had, indeed, stooped to spying . . . and this in spite of the appeals she had made. What chance of happiness could there ever have been between them? If Wilding loved her, why wouldn't he go away, as she had asked him to do? Oh, how she hated the obstinacy in him! . . . The pictures in the morning paper she had bought seemed to be smiling at her in pitiless mockery. This thought so grew on her that she scrunched the paper into a ball and threw it under the seat.

Once at Paddington the several calls she had to make kept her mind occupied. It was only when she was passing out of the British Museum, where she had gone to verify an important fact for her father, that

the horror returned. Standing on the pavement, hat in hand and bowing with a cynical, easy grace, was the man she had saved from arrest two nights before—the man who had broken into *The Durdles*, and whom her father had wanted to . . . Yes, it was the same man; the hand that held the expensive felt hat, she noticed, was minus the little finger.

“A glorious afternoon, Miss Kenwit—and may I say that the pleasure of meeting you so unexpectedly adds tremendously to my enjoyment of it?”

They were standing outside the entrance to a large family hotel; the pavement was thronged. She could not evade the man, for he stood directly in her way.

“I am afraid I cannot return the compliment,” she said coldly; “will you please let me pass?”

“On the contrary, I want to have a little talk with you, Miss Kenwit—it concerns your father,” he added, looking intently at the girl.

Phyllis felt as though a sword had been driven into her breast. That sharp pain which was habitual now returned. This man would never dare to threaten. . . . Yet, she reflected, he had the look of a blackmailer. Unpleasant though the task might be, she must endeavour to find out exactly how much this man knew—or suspected. Of course, she could have him arrested. But even with the swiftness with which Scotland Yard moved, some little time was bound to elapse before he could be placed under lock and key; and during that time he could cause tremendous

trouble. Suppose he really knew something and went to the newspapers ? . . .

She bit her lip and got her nerves under something like control.

"About my father ?" she repeated. "I am afraid I do not understand you, Mr.—"

"Warton is my name," he supplied. "Oh, yes, that is my real name. I have used many others, but Warton is the name I received at the baptismal font."

"I must catch my train—I cannot stay here. You were saying something about my father—" Oh, to be gone !

The man smirked abominably. Then his voice held a threat.

"I cannot say it in the open street. You should realise that yourself. I am afraid you must catch a later train, Miss Kenwit. . . . You needn't shrink away : all I am going to ask you is to come into this hotel and have a cup of tea with me. Then we can talk."

Certainly there was nothing very frightening in that proposal. In the ordinary event, of course, she would indignantly have refused, but with that unuttered threat hanging over her father she had to consent.

"Very well, I will give you a quarter of an hour," she said.

"That will be ample time," he replied. A smile on his face, he stood aside for her to pass into the hotel.

Barry Wilding had had another unsatisfactory day.

To begin with, he had drawn a complete blank at the office of Samuel Coventry. The solicitor had seemed anything but pleased to see him, and when Wilding had got on to the subject of *The Durdles*, Coventry had quickly evidenced signs not only of acute embarrassment but of downright annoyance. "I have told you all I can tell you—all that I am at liberty to tell you," he added unexpectedly, and as though he were unconsciously speaking his thoughts aloud.

Wilding brought a clenched fist down hard on the mahogany desk.

"Look here, Coventry, this business has got to stop! Damn it, I thought you were an honest man, but I find that you too are in the conspiracy!"

The solicitor looked at the speaker. There was a flush in his cheeks and a light in his eyes.

"That's clotted nonsense!" he replied briskly; "what do you mean, man—a conspiracy? You're talking absolute drivel."

The solicitor was angry, but to Wilding his anger did not somehow ring quite true. He seemed more *afraid* than angry.

"You know what I mean very well, Coventry. Ever since I saw you for the second time—on the day that you received that telephone message offering an obviously fantastic price for *The Durdles*, you have been keeping something back. The latest evidence is the postscript to the letter you sent me yesterday. You advised me in that postscript to go abroad for some months. Why?"

Coventry met his gaze like a man.

"Because I honestly thought it would be in your best interests," he replied.

"You still talk in riddles, and I'm sick of riddles!" declared Wilding. "Do you know what I would do if you were a younger man, Coventry? *I would force the truth out of you!*"

Then the solicitor made a surprising reply.

"I can appreciate that," he said, "but, as a man of the world, Wilding, can't you understand a situation—an extraordinary situation, defying all ordinary rules and regulations of conduct—suddenly arising?"

"In connection with The Durdles, do you mean?"

"I cannot tell you more than I have done," replied the solicitor, lapsing into his former non-committal attitude.

"Not even if you have the other half of that piece of paper you sent me yesterday?" inquired his caller.

"I'm sorry." Coventry now seemed on safer ground. He was more at his ease. "I have made a fresh, thorough search but I have not been able to find the missing portion," he said.

Barry rose.

"If you do, please send it [to the Swan Inn, Hilldown."

Samuel Coventry cocked his eyebrows.

"You intend to stay on there?"

"Most certainly! Some people have threatened to have me put out of England; others, like yourself, have advised me to go without waiting for violence,

but, in the absence of reliable information on the point, I intend to stay."

Coventry fidgeted with some papers on his desk.

"That may be dangerous," he remarked; and it seemed to Barry Wilding there was a little curious catch at his breath as he spoke.

"Yes," replied Barry Wilding, "dangerous to your side as well. Please remember that."

"I have no side," commented Coventry, but Wilding was gone.

Once out in the Strand Barry hailed a taxicab. As he did so he looked over his shoulder; really, the thing had become such an obsession that he half expected to see the slouching figure of the man he had threatened that day when he had paid his first visit to the solicitor's office still peering cunningly at him.

"Scotland Yard," he told the driver in a curt tone.

At the famous building on the Embankment he was received with the crisp courtesy characteristic of the great police service. But directly he found himself alone in the presence of Deputy Commissioner Cross he sensed that something was wrong. He carried on, however.

"I have come to you as a British citizen for a plain statement," he stated. "I have been surrounded by mystery long enough. I want you to tell me the truth about the house called The Durdles which I own. Now, Mr. Deputy Commissioner."

But Mr. Deputy Commissioner did not rise to the bait, nor did he answer the appeal. But he looked at the caller very keenly.

"You have already been given excellent advice by Miss Kenwit and Mr. Coventry, Mr. Wilding—act on it!" he said, after a pause.

"I'll see you all damned first!" came the explosive retort. "Let me tell you this, Mr. Deputy Commissioner: Not all the forces you have at your disposal will force me out of England—unless I go out dead!"

The detective chief toyed with a paper-knife.

"That is melodrama," he pronounced, "and if there is one thing which Scotland Yard does not like it's melodrama. Good morning, Mr. Wilding." He rose to terminate the interview, holding out his hand. When Wilding, seething with rage, ignored it, he smiled. A very perplexing person, Mr. Deputy Commissioner Cross. He was sufficient to make you—*angry!*

Tired of his own company, Barry turned into a club, the fees of which he had kept up for the last five years. He knew no one, and no one knew him—not even the hall porter, who asked his business—and he lunched in miserable, solitary state at a table by himself. Afterwards he wandered into the huge billiard-room. Here he was a trifle more fortunate, for the marker, engaged in the task of shepherding lost souls, asked him if he would like a game. He played a hundred up with a perfect stranger who

beat him handsomely, and then, feeling that the place was like a tomb, which might open its gigantic jaws to engulf him at any moment, he got his hat and stick from the cloak-room on the ground floor and went into the street.

There he hesitated for a moment. One of the reasons for his coming to Town was to go to the British Museum. Starrock had suggested that he might pick up a useful tip by making a deeper search into the early history of the Trevannion family—the man was ridiculously mad on the hidden treasure idea!—and he had half agreed to the suggestion.

But now . . . he did not know. Just over the way—only a hundred yards or so distant—was the broad bosom of the Thames. That wide waterway could carry him, like a magic carpet, to a far distance—to lands where he could forget the riddle which had brought such disappointment in its train. He was more than half inclined to walk round the corner to Cockspur Street and book a passage on any vessel sailing within a few hours.

But, in turning, he caught sight of the huge block of masonry which is known all the world over as "Scotland Yard." With a determined stride he walked off in the direction of Bloomsbury.

They should not beat him!

FROM the Thames Embankment to the British Museum is twenty-five minutes or so brisk walking, whichever direction you go, and Barry Wilding was pleasantly tired when he arrived opposite the wonderful building. A half-turn, followed by such an abrupt right-about-face that the passers-by stared, and he was strung up to such a state of physical tenseness, however, that he might have been about to run a race in which his life was the stake.

Coming out of an hotel was Phyllis Kenwit.

She was accompanied by a man.

A man whose presence evidently frightened her.

A man whom he instantly recognised.

A man who had proved himself his enemy.

These facts, beating upon his consciousness in perfectly arranged sequence and chronological order, filled him with a cold but deadly rage. He went straight up to the couple and raised his hat.

"Is this man molesting you in any way, Miss Kenwit?"

The girl had evidently not seen him approaching and her expression of surprise was almost violent.

"No—no——" she replied weakly.

It was a thoroughly unsatisfactory answer to Barry Wilding. If it had been anyone else but Phyllis Kenwit he would have said that the words represented a lie.

Her companion, after giving an involuntary start which passed unnoticed by the girl because she was so agitated and by Wilding because he was so enraged, sneered in the other man's face.

"Your chivalry is rather ridiculous in the circumstances, don't you think? If you will excuse us, Miss Kenwit has to catch a train."

There was a twitch of the upper lip as the sneer died. That twitch photographed a scene in Barry's brain: he saw the mental picture of the man he had thought of a few hours earlier that day; the man who had watched him first at Charing Cross Station and later outside Samuel Coventry's office on the day he arrived in London. This man was the Sloucher; perhaps he was also the man who had tried to kill him that same night in the hotel bedroom. He was also—good God! when were these revelations to cease?—the man who had attacked him on the Hillsdown road two nights previously; and he was—the final truth—the man with the missing little finger—*Dan Warton, the murderer!*

Starrock wanted this man!

He took a step forward, his purpose plain to see: he was going to hit the other man with all the strength he had in his body; and, after hitting him, he was going to hang on to him until a policeman came to take him into custody. All this Phyllis Kenwit saw; and seeing it filled her with a great, a terrible and an overwhelming fear. If Warton was taken into custody through an action concerned with her, through her

agency, as it were, he would have a dreadful revenge. Once again she saw in her mental vision screaming newspaper head-lines ; and these turned her sick and made her brain reel. She must shield her father—and that other man. . . .

“ Mr Wilding, please control yourself ! Do you realise what you are doing ? ”

To Barry the scathing words seemed to come from the mouth of a person who hated and despised him. In that moment of crushing surprise his clenched fist dropped to his side. Before he could recover his poise, the girl and her companion had passed on and were quickly lost in the crowd.

He was barely conscious, as he stood staring after the pair, that everyone who passed was eyeing him curiously. If he could have seen his fixed, grim, tense expression, he would not have wondered. He looked like a man whom Fate had suddenly driven mad.

When the man had gone, Phyllis felt that she must cry out in relief. Instead, being a woman, she went to the bookstall and bought an evening paper.

Warton had insisted on accompanying her to Paddington ; and, after what had happened, she was unable to refuse him. She realised she was giving the man the chance to think that she might be sinking into the pit which he was digging for her—but that couldn't be helped. Her immediate concern was to keep him quiet and conciliatory. When she reached home, she would tell her father. He would know

better what to do ; in an issue of such tremendous importance as this, she was afraid to trust her own judgment—the final decision must not rest with her.

Walking from the huge bookstall to the platform where the suburban trains started, she entered an empty carriage, thankful to be alone. So intense was this feeling that for some time she forgot the extraordinary scene outside the British Museum three-quarters of an hour earlier. The memory of Barry Wilding's drawn face, rigid with pain, now made her wince. But what else could she have done ? A sensation which would have shaken the whole of England, which would have reverberated to the far ends of the earth, which would have been shrieked in red-ink head-lines inches deep in her native America—that was what she had to avoid. Everything else—even the affection she knew she had for this man Wilding—had to be thrown overboard in face of that. This tremendous peril had to be averted—and she had done her best to avert it, even at the expense of a final break with the man she loved. Yes, she realised now with added force that she loved him.

This was a painful subject, and she tried to shake her mind free from it. Opening the paper, she started to skim the important news.

But a certain head-line made her bite her lip—

CONDEMNED MURDERER ILL.

Below were the words :

“ At an interview which a representative of

the *Evening Sun* had with the Governor of Pentonhurst Prison this morning, he was informed that the physical and mental state of Hector Mundesley, the famous inventor, who, in a sudden outburst of unaccountable passion, recently killed his housekeeper, gives rise to serious anxiety.

"Mundesley, who was sentenced at the Old Bailey last week, is occupying the death-cell at Pentonhurst Prison and is being closely watched. Since his trial his health, which formerly was excellent, has degenerated to a remarkable degree. It has given, and is still giving, the prison doctor the utmost concern. It may be that Mundesley will not live to be hanged."

The carriage filled up. Curious glances were directed at the remarkably pretty girl who, with her head leaning against the back of the seat, looked so pale and ill.

Reading that news on top of her recent experience had seriously upset Phyllis Kenwit. She was able to recall the startling case of Hector Mundesley vividly—too vividly. Mundesley, who was acknowledged to be the cleverest inventor, after Edison, that the twentieth century had produced, was cousin to a very famous British personage. Partly because of this, and partly because the crime which Mundesley, walking into a West End police station late one night, voluntarily confessed to having committed, was of such an appalling and atrocious nature, the news of

the murder was flung to the four corners of the world. It was the topic of the hour, the subject of general and continual discussion. No one could escape the "Mundesley murder," as it was universally called.

When first the rumour became current that the inventor-turned-murderer was said to be insane, public indignation was instantly alert. The newspapers were flooded with letters, warning the Government of their certain and irretrievable fall if any false mercy was shown to the "monster Mundesley." Stirred to the innermost depths of their souls, the British nation fiercely demanded that nothing—no caste standard, no political intrigue—should be allowed to stand in the way of Justice. This man, great as were his accomplishments for the country—he had been a very powerful factor in winning the late war for the Allies and America—must suffer for his terrible crime. He must die. Away with that cry of insanity! The awful majesty of the Law must not be tampered with in any way.

The Government took the hint. There were no further references to the insanity of the murderer. And, in face of the terrible outcry all up and down the country, no newspaper had the courage to demand that a fresh commission of mental experts should decide the momentous question to the complete and final satisfaction of everyone. The public anger was brutally and alarmingly awakened. "Mob-mind," as a great psychologist styled it, "prevailed." In the face of that, every other force had to be silent.

It was confidently said that if any question of Hector Mundesley being reprieved had been raised, the public would have raided Downing Street and Whitehall and stormed the Houses of Parliament.

So silence had come—a merciful silence. The newspapers, after the first shock, had been reticent to a marked degree about the dreadful business: it was recognised that this horrible scandal was a blot upon the whole British nation. Here was a man, honoured, accomplished in almost the highest possible degree, a man famous in the scientific progress and technical advance of his country: and this same man's name, illustrious as it was, would not go down to history as an inventor, as a great scientist, but—as a murderer! There was something so unspeakably foul about the association that the mind revolted against it.

The newspapers were loyal. They refused to pander to the ghouls who would have liked a daily column served up for their morbid delectation. The editors recognised their high sense of public duty: the Mundesley murder was not elaborated or worked up. Since the actual trial this paragraph was the first reference Phyllis Kenwit, who, like the modern girl, was a diligent reader of the newspapers, had seen.

Dr. Kenwit noticed how tired his daughter looked directly she entered the house.

“What's the matter, my dear?” he inquired tenderly. This was a very different man to the irate individual who had recently ordered Barry Wilding out of his own house.

"Oh, daddy, something dreadful has happened!" was the reply.

"Later—tell me later, child." Doctor Kenwit patted his daughter's head. "You have had a long and tiring day. You want some food, and then you must rest. I'll ring for Starkey."

A remarkable feature of this house was that there was apparently no female help of any description; the negro butler, Starkey, must have fulfilled many functions.

"No, daddy—I can't wait until then! I must tell you now."

"Is it so serious as all that?" asked her father with a deprecatory smile.

Phyllis Kenwit ignored the smile.

"Listen, daddy," she said gravely; "this is what happened to-day." For several minutes she spoke hurriedly, her father listening with close attention. By the time she had finished, the smile was gone from his face.

"You see you were wrong, child," he said at the end; "yielding to your persuasion, I allowed that man to leave the house. What I should have done was to——" He did not complete the sentence, but started to walk rapidly up and down the room.

"I offered him money—all that I had, daddy—five pounds. But he refused it with a smile—a hateful smile. Perhaps it wasn't enough. . . . Daddy, that man makes me afraid!—I think he knows—at least he suspects; I am certain of that. All the

time we were sitting in that hotel he showed he thought I was at his mercy ; he was like a cat with a mouse. Daddy, suppose he—*told* ? ” She breathed the last word tremulously. For, equally with the man, she knew what tremendous issues hung on that possibility.

Dr. Kenwit shrugged his shoulders. But there was a thin perspiration on his forehead as he replied : “ Don’t be afraid, my dear—the man is a common blackmailer. Sir Bertram Willan will know how to deal with him. This fellow, crook as he is, probably won’t be so difficult to manage as that young fool Wilding.”

“ Daddy, *please* ! ” said his daughter with a choked sob ; “ I cannot talk any more about it to-night ! ”

Chapter XVIII

Starrock Makes an Offer

“ WELL ? ” inquired Victor Starrock.

Wilding scowled. “ It’s anything but well,” he replied. “ I couldn’t find out a thing at the solicitor’s, and when I went to Scotland Yard——”

“ You went there ? ”

“ Yes, after leaving Coventry’s office, I was in such a rage that I thought I’d have the whole thing out. So I went along to New Scotland Yard and saw your pal—Deputy Commissioner Cross.”

“ I’ll make a rough guess that you didn’t get much out of Cross.”

Barry nodded in agreement with the American detective.

"I got nothing out of him, but I gave the fellow a piece of my mind! That didn't seem to worry him much, however—he just went on grinning that irritating smirk of his."

"You told him everything?"

"As much as I thought was necessary. I told him how fed up I was about the whole business, for instance, and I made the most of the extremely suspicious behaviour of the police generally in the affair. I added that, if he thought he was going to have me rushed out of the country, it would take more than his entire force to accomplish it. Of course that was ridiculous—but I was mad clean through."

Starrock nodded.

"I guess I should be if I were in your shoes," he remarked understandingly.

"Look here, Starrock," said Wilding, offering his tobacco-pouch to the other; "what do you really think lies at the back of this thing? No, wait a moment: let me tell you what that solicitor fellow said to-day. I must remind you first of all, however, that it was this man who, after making me take an oath that I would never allow The Durdles to pass out of my possession during my life-time, on the very next visit I made strongly advised me to sell! As a matter of fact, while I was sitting in his room he actually had—or said he had—a telephone message offering me £10,000 for the house."

“What do you put the real value of The Durdles at?”

“Coventry himself didn’t put a higher value than £3,000 on it. The house badly wants repairing in several directions and the general aspect of the place, house and grounds, is derelict.”

“Who was it offered you the £10,000? The Kenwit man?”

“I don’t know. Coventry refused to tell me. That’s what started to make me so mad. Think of the situation for yourself: one day a solicitor tells—orders you rather—to take an oath never to sell a property—if I hadn’t taken that oath I shouldn’t have been allowed to inherit: Coventry was very stiff and stuffy about it—and yet only a day or so after he urges you most frantically to sell. I remember he asked me some rot about being a patriotic man or not. On the face of it, it looks as though the whole world was in a conspiracy to make me look a fool and drive me out of the country!”

“You were going to tell me what Coventry said to you to-day,” put in the practical-minded detective.

“I can’t remember the exact words, but he gave me distinctly to understand that it would be better for my health if I left England. He suggested, in fact, in a sort of roundabout and underhand way, that it might be very dangerous for me to remain. I told him two could play at that game and went on to Scotland Yard. Here, when I said to Cross what I told you just now—that it would take more than mere

threats and hints to make me go—he started that stupid smile of his.”

“It wasn’t meant to be stupid, you can take my word for that,” replied Starrock; “there was a great deal behind that smile, and what we have to do is to try to find out what it signified. I must say it’s the most curious case that I’ve ever come across; if anyone had told me a week ago that I should be pitting my wits and using my brains against Pat Cross of Scotland Yard, I should have laughed at the fellow for being a fool, but—well, it’s a darned strange world sometimes! Excuse me asking you, Wilding—remember I’m in the position of a defending counsel now, and I want to know the truth—but there’s nothing in your past that the police could ‘get’ you for, is there?”

“Not a thing—honestly!” was the reply.

“Good man! That’s all I want to know. But now, can’t you yourself, casting round in your own mind, throw any light on this business? Think!”

The two men were sitting on the same grassy bank to which they had strolled on the previous evening. They had dined together, and now Wilding was explaining what had happened in Town that day.

“I ought to tell you one extraordinary remark—at least, it struck me as being extraordinary at the time,” Barry replied; “when I lost my temper with Coventry this morning, I told him that if he were a younger man I would take him by the throat and force the truth out of him. I thought the old boy

would choke at first, but then he almost smiled and said: 'I can quite appreciate that.' "

"H'm! He's not such a bad old cuss, then," remarked the detective.

"No. I liked him quite a lot at first—before this mystery-element crept in. And I'll say this for Coventry: judging from his manner, he would seem honestly to want to tell me, but he is *afraid*. I came away with that idea this morning at all events. But I was going to tell you the remark he made. It was this: looking at me very seriously, he said: 'Can't you understand a situation—an extraordinary situation defying all ordinary rules and regulations of conduct—suddenly arising?'

"I asked him if he meant that such a situation had arisen in connection with my property, The Durdles, but then he became the stony-faced sphinx again and refused to answer. What do you think of it, Starrock?"

The detective frowned.

"I am afraid I can't make anything of it yet," he answered. "Part of it is pretty clear—at least, half of the riddle can be read up to a point; as I have already said, I believe that the paper the solicitor sent you—by the way, you asked him for the other half?"

"He told me that he had been unable to find the missing half although he had searched all over the place for it."

"That may or may not be true, of course. In

spite of your original faith in the man, and liking for him, this chap Coventry may be a rogue. Time alone will tell that. It may be, also, that the half he sent you is no good; that the real clue to the treasure—you can smile, Wilding, but that story about your uncle's ancestor is far too good to be untrue; let me tell you, there's a million of money lying about loose somewhere!—is contained in the other half. Has Coventry kept that other half? Was he hoping to buy The Durdles for himself? Is that why he offered you £10,000?"

The speaker paused, and then resumed: "I was saying that to me half of the riddle is pretty clear; in some way or other, Three-Fingered Dan, and a couple of other crooks, got to hear of the treasure which is hidden either in The Durdles, or somewhere near, and they crossed to England to get it, if possible. It was because they thought that you had the clue, that you were once all but murdered, once drugged and once tapped on the head. Now that they've drawn blank, I'll bet they're as much puzzled as you are. But Three-Fingered Dan——"

"I'm awfully sorry, Starrock; I should have told you before—but I saw Warton this afternoon."

"What! Where?"

"Outside the British Museum."

"And knowing what you did—that I wanted him for murder—do you mean to say that you let the fellow get away?"

"I'm sorry, Starrock, but I couldn't do anything

else. There was a big crowd, and the man vanished." Although the detective had placed himself in the position of counsel to him, he could not tell the truth ; he could not say that Phyllis Kenwit was an intimate of this cruel and cunning killer of men. True, she had shown signs of fear when he had first seen her that afternoon, but hadn't she afterwards championed Warton, and walked off with the man ?

"To know that he is in London is something," admitted Starrock, after another pause ; "and I have set a pretty wide net for him so that not much damage may be done after all."

"I'm sorry, Starrock," said Wilding again.

"It's all right, my boy ! But you electrified me at the moment. You must remember that I have travelled many thousands of miles to lay hands on Mr. Dan Warton and when you announced almost calmly that you had seen him this afternoon the shock made me jump. The news rattled my nerves for a minute. However, don't let's talk about it any more. Did you discover anything at the British Museum ? "

"Yes. Nothing very valuable, perhaps, but still—well, interesting. I was fortunate enough to hit on an old history of the Trevannion family, and—perhaps there is something in your treasure notion, Starrock."

"Of course there is ! Well ? "

"The book I looked through—of course I wasn't able to bring it away : you can't take a book away from the Museum—had a reference to the family

tradition that old John Trevannion certainly did make a large fortune plundering on the Spanish Main, and losing Spanish men-o'-war."

"Ah!" exclaimed the American detective. Victor Starrock looked like a schoolboy listening to a fascinating story by an old sea-dog that moment.

"Where he placed the treasure has, according to the history book, never been discovered," went on Barry Wilding.

"It's there," declared his companion, pointing in the direction of The Durdles—"and we are going to find it—you and I—some day!"

"Do you mean that I can count you in?" asked Wilding. He had not attached any importance to what the other had said previously about pitting his wits against Scotland Yard. He had intended to see this thing through himself, but with the world arrayed against him, as seemed the case, the aid of this skilled tracker of criminals would be invaluable. His face reflected the pleasure he felt.

"You can count me in to the limit," replied Starrock, and held out his hand as a proof of his resolve.

"We'll go back and have a drink on it!" said Barry Wilding.

Chapter XIX

The Missing Half

WHILE Victor Starrock and Barry Wilding were pledging a practical friendship at the Swan Inn,

Hillsdown, a meeting, the decision at which was vitally to affect the latter, was held at Scotland Yard. There were four men in the room, and one of this number was not a policeman, but a famous politician—Sir Bertram Willan.

The latter now spoke. "Reluctant as I am to give my consent, I can see no alternative. The man has had repeated warnings and now you say is openly defiant and truculent?" The speaker looked across to Patrick Cross, the Deputy Commissioner.

Patrick Cross nodded. "He was in here this afternoon, breathing fire and vengeance," he replied. "He said that he knew there was a conspiracy against him, but that he wished to tell me to my face that it would take more than all of the forces I had at my disposal to get him out of the country. Of course, I can sympathise with the fellow——"

This time it was the Home Secretary who nodded.

"Yes," he admitted, "the man is certainly to be sympathised with. But sympathy cannot enter into this matter. It's not practical. The issue is far too important for that."

"Naturally, Sir Bertram," was the Deputy Commissioner's answer.

"Then I will leave all the details to you, Cross," said the Home Secretary, rising. "Do not use more force than is actually necessary and, above all, do

not let him get a hint of your identity. We have sufficient complications as it is."

"I will see to all those details, sir. And the place to which we are to take him?"

"The place already referred to. All arrangements will be made—I will telephone myself directly I get back. Good night."

"Good night, Sir Bertram."

The silence of the room was broken by the insistent ringing of the telephone bell. Phyllis Kenwit went to the instrument.

"Yes—oh, yes, Sir Bertram," she said into the mouthpiece. "I'm sorry, but daddy has gone to bed, I think. . . . Oh, yes, I will promise that . . . yes, I will give him the message." She listened intently to the words that came over the wire. But, as she listened, the colour ebbed from her face, leaving it white and strained.

"Oh, Sir Bertram, is that necessary?" she inquired in a voice that trembled with the force of the emotion she could not control.

Another wait, during which it seemed that she had scarcely strength to stand. Then: "Very well, Sir Bertram—I will tell daddy at once."

But, after placing the receiver back on its hook, she swayed uncertainly, and it was only after she had sat down for a while that she was able to go to her father's room to give him the message that had come over the wire from the British Home Secretary.

As she left the room a moan escaped her.

"But what is the use? He will not listen to anything I say!"

In that handsome room in the fine old Georgian house in Bloomsbury, there was another conference. Three-fingered Dan Warton, in fine fettle after leaving Phyllis Kenwit at Paddington, arrived late. He had always had a weakness for a pretty woman, and there was some quality about Phyllis Kenwit which lifted her clean out of the rut. That the girl had a secret which she was jealously guarding, and in which her father was vitally concerned, gave him a sharp sense of satisfaction. It was his experience that girls with secrets which they did not want to become public property, were apt to be pliable. Frequently they would listen to what he called "reason." He did not say that Phyllis Kenwit would yield to pressure yet, but he had distinct hopes that at some not too-distant date he . . . His reflections on this matter were so pleasant, so stimulating, that he hummed a merry tune as he got into the Underground.

His arrival at the Bloomsbury house was greeted with impatient cries.

"Where the devil have you been?" demanded the Spider.

"Seeing to a little private business," was the nonchalant reply. This secret of Phyllis Kenwit's was a matter which he intended to keep strictly to himself; that was not going into the common fund.

The business which had brought them all three to England was another affair. In that they were pledged to keep together—to take risks and share spoils equally. To this he was quite agreeable.

“Dan, you know what happened to the last man who tried to double-cross me, don’t you?” inquired the Spider in a low, wheedling voice. But his right hand was not visible. It was below the table.

Warton, who had every reason to believe that it clutched the handle of an automatic, smiled.

“Don’t be a fool, Spider,” he rejoined; “how could I double-cross you? You’ve got enough on me to send me to the Chair—and you know it! Don’t be silly! The little business I referred to just now was a girl—I took a skirt out to tea, and the time went quicker than I thought—that’s all. There’s no occasion for either of you to lose your hair. I’m here now, and willing to talk business; that’s the main thing, surely?”

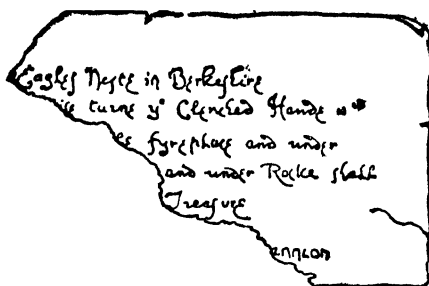
The words apparently disarmed the other two men’s suspicions. The tense expression left their faces, and the Spider smiled.

“All right,” he remarked; “now let’s get down to it. What I propose is to have another shot at this job to-night. The stuff *must* be there—damn it, there’s the word.”

“Let me see that bit of paper again,” said Warton.

With great care the Spider took from his pocket-book a piece of cardboard on which was pasted a

fragment of paper yellowed with age. This he placed on the table, while the other two drew closer.



"There's the stuff!" repeated the Spider, pointing to the last completed word, 'Treasure'—"and I'm going to have another shot to-night! We can't leave it there, but if we don't get a move on, that fellow Wilding will beat us to it. There's something funny about that house——"

"I don't like those cursed dogs," put in the man Barry Wilding knew as Ebury.

"Leave the dogs to me," put in Warton.

"And I'll see to the nigger!" The Spider's hard mouth became harder as he said the words.

"We've got to pull it off to-night—I agree there," now supplied the other man. "I want to get away to the South of France. Once I get my hands on my share of the stuff . . ." He became lost in a rhapsody.

"We may meet Wilding again," suggested Warton ;

"after all, it's his house. What I can't understand about that fool is why the hell he doesn't turn the Kenwits out, and live in the place himself. Then he could blow the whole show sky-high if he liked, with dynamite."

"The point is: does he know that there's a cart-load of jewels and stuff lying about there somewhere?" asked the Spider. "Of course we have had to act on the assumption that he does, and that we had to beat him to it—but, as you say, Dan, why the Sam Hill doesn't he fire the Kenwits out if he does know?"

"Search me! It's reasonable to suppose that he doesn't know."

"Then what was he doing in the garden the last time?" asked the former self-styled obscure novelist.

"I can't tell you that. Yes, I can!" added Warton quickly. "He's in love with the girl! That would account for his not forcing possession out of the doctor-fellow. By the way, that guy's a looney; he wanted to cut me up, or something, that last time; and if it hadn't been for the girl I believe he would have done it, too. I think he's mad."

"His condition won't bother him much if he gets in our way!" said the Spider with sinister determination.

"You mean to drop him off? I'm not standing for any more killing jobs, Spider," said the other man; "don't forget that Starrock's probably still at that inn not about half a mile away from the house. By this time he's got to hear, I expect, that we were

staying at the 'Swan,' and if he gets an earful from ^{first} Wilding he'll put two and two together pretty quick. You know Starrock ! ”

“ Yes, damn him ! ” retorted Dan Warton ; “ but never mind Starrock—he's as likely as not to have left by this time. What's there for him to do in a one-eyed village like Hillsdown ? ”

“ He's probably keeping an eye open for you over that Philly job, Dan,” incautiously remarked the other, with a covert glance.

There was a snarl, a blistering, horrible oath, and then a leap. Warton had his fingers clutched on the other's throat before the Spider could intervene.

Without a word the leader of the gang flung himself in turn upon Warton. A brief struggle and he had wrenched the two combatants apart.

“ Have you gone mad, you two ? ” he cried. “ What do you mean by it ? Haven't we got enough on without you two doing your best to kill each other ? You didn't mean any harm, did you ? ” he asked the victim, who was tenderly feeling his neck as though he were afraid that a vital part was missing.

“ Why did he open his yap about that job at Philly, then ? ” fiercely demanded Warton ; “ let me tell both of you now, and once and for all, that I won't have anything said about that Philly job ! ”

“ All right, Dan ! ” The Spider tried to soothe the speaker. “ Bill didn't mean anything. Neither of us forget that if it hadn't been for that Philly job—now, keep still, you fool ; what do you want to

jump for?—we shouldn't have got hold of this thing." He touched the outside of his coat, against which the pocket-book containing the paper rested. "We owe that to you, Dan."

"Well, keep your mouth shut about it—that's all I ask." His eyes glowered as he spoke. That remark which had roused him to such a state of insensate fury had sent his nerves twitching badly. Ever since he had recognised the back of the famous American detective, Victor Starrock, standing in the bar of that cosy-looking inn in the Thames Valley, he had lived in a state of secret nervous tension. He had succeeded in hiding his fear from his comrades until now, but had paid the inevitable price. If he had not wanted money so desperately, and if he had not known for certain that the other two men would do him out of his share if they were given the least chance, he might have considered throwing up the whole business.

But as it was he drew his chair up close to the table, and said: "Let's fix all the details!"

Chapter XX

The Voice in the Night

PHYLLIS sat up in bed. Surely there was something strange about the house that night. That noise again! . . . Yet all was still a moment later. If anything was happening, why were the dogs so quiet? And what was Starkey doing?

She had been sleeping soundly when the noise first came. Dreaming, too—a pleasant dream, in which she fancied herself walking along a quiet English country road. Barry Wilding was by her side. They were perfectly happy—nothing had ever happened to cause the least doubt in the mind of either. How happy she had been before that moment of startled waking, she now did not like to recall.

She remained perfectly still for a moment—so still that she could almost hear her heart beating, and could feel it quite distinctly thudding—before switching on the light. She remembered that if the noise was near her, as it seemed, she would have to tackle it alone, unless it had awakened Starkey. She would not be able to get to her father in time.

Only that day her father had moved to the turret tower. A heavy iron door separated them now. She had had the chance of moving to another room, but had declined; during the weeks that she had used the present room she had been able to make it homely and comfortable. All the rooms in the turret tower were terribly neglected; they couldn't have been lived in for centuries, by the look of them.

Once her father had made up his mind, it was quite hopeless to attempt to dissuade him. That was why she had not endeavoured to argue with him. The strain on her father had been very severe, owing to the work on which he was engaged at present, and whenever he was absorbed in a problem, such as was now occupying every minute of his time, it was worse

than useless to put any obstacles in his way. Even if they were well meant and for his own good, it was perfectly certain that he would not listen to them. So it was that when the doctor had announced that, "owing to these infernal interruptions lately I am going to shut myself away in that deserted turret," Phyllis had merely nodded her head before giving Starkey the strictest instructions to see that the rooms to be put into occupation were to be thoroughly warmed with immense fires, and that every possible precaution was otherwise to be taken to ensure that neither her father nor that other man should receive any ill-effects from the change of quarters.

Lost in his work, it had not occurred to Dr. Kenwit to inquire if the change was inconvenient in any way to his daughter. Phyllis remembered this as she cautiously got out of bed and reached for her dressing-gown, but the recollection, instead of angering her, merely made her more determined to discover who the intruders were. Afraid? Yes, she was afraid, but all the same she resolved to face that fear-inspiring noise.

After putting on her dressing-gown, she switched off the light over her bed, and waited. Every sense was now acutely alert, and it took her only a few moments to decide that there were more than one man in the dining-room. Who were they? And what was their object? Not many nights before there had been that attempted burglary and the affair had thoroughly upset her father. He must

be protected from further worry so far as was possible.

She must see who these men were. Was that creature, Warton—the man who had thrown out covert, sly hints of possible blackmail—among them? On the other side of the dining-room, in a little room that led off from the hall, was the telephone. Perhaps she would be able to get to it. If she threatened them with the police, the intruders might go. Her thinking became confused, but, despite the thudding of her heart, which was now beating out great hammer-strokes, her determination was as firm as ever. Very cautiously she turned the handle of her door.

Calling upon her courage, she stealthily crept to the dining-room.

She looked into a room that was perfectly dark, save for a thin stream of vivid light. This apparently came from an electric torch, the white flame of which shone on the really beautiful mantelpiece. Out of the blackness which was at the back of that small but revealing stream of light, a voice spoke in a low but quick and excited whisper, "The clenched hand . . . there it is! Turn it!"

From the darkness a hand reached out—to the watching girl it was an uncanny sight. This hand caught hold of the boss—now she came to think of it, that boss *was* in the form of a knight's mailed, clenched hand; it must have been many centuries old—and endeavoured to turn it. The thing remained immovable.

"It's no good—it won't budge!" said a querulous voice.

"Here, let me try!" answered another—did she recognise that voice? She appeared to—and then another hand came into the light. It was a big, powerful, yet well-shaped hand, the back of which was covered with dark hair.

"My God! it's moving!"

"Shut up, you fool!" came the warning from the man whose superior strength had turned the clenched hand. But despite his hissed admonishment a loud gasp went up from his companions. The clenched hand, turned, had disclosed an opening in the panelled wall. This was big enough to admit a man's body if he stooped.

"Quick, your torch, Warton!" cried a voice. The man who a moment before had uttered the warning, was now as excited as the others.

"There 're steps here—they lead down," he said.

"Get on down them, then," snapped a brittle voice behind him. "My God! if we find it to-night! . . ."

The watching and listening girl, to whom every word had come clearly, put a hand up to her throat to stop the cry which a moment later would have burst from her lips. What was "it"? What did these men expect to find in the dark, dungeon-like cellars beneath the house? She had never been to see them herself, but she had heard Starkey describe them. And, thinking of Starkey, where was he? Had these men killed him?

By the time the last of the three men had disappeared into the secret opening, she was inside the dining-room. The night had turned unexpectedly cold, and in that huge room, which at an earlier stage in the house's history had been used as the great hall, she shivered.

Reaching out a hand, she rang the electric bell. If Starkey was in the house he would hear—and come.

In an instant she knew she had done wrong. In the stillness of the night, the signal of the electric bell rang out with startling clearness. Yet, because of the excitement she was in, she rang again and again—she kept on ringing.

But Starkey did not come.

When she realised that that hope was gone, she went to the opening in the wall near the fire-place which the intruders had not closed behind them. She was about to peer into the cavernous depths of the blackness beyond when something unexpectedly reached out to clutch her. The horror of the contact of that hand. . . . She started to scream, unable to keep control over her over-tired nerves any longer, but instantly another hand was placed over her mouth.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but we can't have you making that noise," said a voice she had every reason to fear before, and for which she had now a separate loathing, "My friends are particularly busy just now, and they have asked me as a special favour to see that they aren't disturbed. I hope you won't mind me taking

a little liberty—you see, we're here to-night on rather important business."

She could not speak because the man's hand was still over her mouth, but she struck out at him with her hands.

"Spit-fire, eh?" commented a voice that had the edge of steel to it; "well, we'll soon see about that."

The man might have spoken other words, but she did not hear them. His voice trailed off and was lost in nothingness. What happened then she did not know, and she could not care because consciousness left her with appalling yet merciful swiftness.

Barry Wilding was unable to sleep. He tried hard, but the result was just the same—yet another turn in bed, with his brain as alert as ever.

Lighting the candle by the side of the bed, he looked at his watch. Twenty minutes past one—good Lord, he ought to have been asleep at least a couple of hours, for he went to bed just after eleven. Two hours' restlessness. He wouldn't have any more of it; he would fill a pipe and read. Perhaps a smoke would do the trick. . . .

He picked up his briar and was just about to fill it when, as distinctly as though the speaker had been sitting a yard away, he heard a voice say: "I'm in danger!—help me!" To complete the seeming miracle, Barry Wilding not only heard the words clearly and easily—but *he was able to recognise the voice!*

It was Phyllis Kenwit's voice.

Another man might have commenced to fear that he was losing his reason. Either that, or that someone was playing a practical joke off on him. Wilding came to neither of these conclusions—he had experienced this sort of thing before.

Only once. But that one instance was sufficient to make him reach out an eager hand for his clothes. As he dressed in desperate haste, he recalled the circumstances of the previous psychic warning.

He had been in the heart of the African jungle with a man named Morrison. They were doing a little trading with the natives, and looking out for rubber or other "prospects."

One night he woke from a sound sleep to hear Morrison say: "I want you—come to me! I am five hundred yards down the trail to the right of camp, and I've broken my leg."

He looked round to remonstrate with the man for trying to play the fool—but *Morrison wasn't in camp; he had disappeared!*

So strong was the impression of the dream—as he had put it down to be at the time—that he actually went five hundred yards down the trail leading from the camp to the right—and arrived just in time to save Morrison from being mauled by a prowling lion which had sensed somehow that the injured man was not able to defend himself. Undoubtedly he saved Morrison's life. His companion explained that hearing the lion roar, he had gone out to have a shot at

it, but had fallen in a bog-hole. When he tried to get out, he realised he had broken his leg. "God! how I wished you would come!" he said to Wilding, and when Barry had told him that he woke up to the sound of his voice saying: "I want you!—come to me!" Morrison replied: "You have the psychic sense, Wilding, old man. I don't know whether it will ever be of any use to you—but it may be to someone else."

And now this "someone else" was Phyllis Kenwit. She was in danger; he must go to her!

Chapter XXI

The Sinister Stain

RUNNING forward in the darkness, Barry stumbled over some large object, and nearly fell to the ground. The light from his electric torch showed the still form of a huge dog.

"Poisoned!" The thought flashed through his mind at once, making him hasten towards the house. His breath was coming in deep gulps by this time, for he had run all the way from the Swan Inn, his presentiment of danger to Phyllis Kenwit urging him on.

At the back of the house he imagined he would find a kitchen window which might be easy to smash—to try to effect an entrance through the front door he knew would be hopeless in any case—and he raced round.

The window was already open !

Without waiting to recover his breath, he sprang upwards, got his hands on to the window-sill and wormed his body through the narrow aperture, head first, so that he landed on his hands, and was forced to do some acrobatic balancing before regaining a normal position. It was queer work in the darkness.

He was in a smallish room, used presumably as a scullery by whatever domestic staff the house possessed. Careful not to switch on the light, he brought his electric torch into use.

The flickering beam of light came to rest on a dark mound in the corner, on the other side of the sink. Starkey !

A moment later Wilding was kneeling by the side of the motionless figure of the negro butler. He had no cause to like this repulsive-looking individual, but he remembered that Starkey was the guardian of Phyllis Kenwit, and seeing him lying there—perhaps dead—set his temples throbbing.

He put a hand inside the man's shirt and over his heart. The body was warm and the heart was beating although only faintly. The light from the torch now showed him a huge lump on the back of the butler's head. With the negro cranium so proverbially thick, it must have been a terrific wallop that the man had received.

He had no stimulant with him, and in any case his first duty was to Phyllis Kenwit. He got quickly to his feet again. Once again the psychic force had sent

him a true message. The Durdles had been attacked and broken into. That was proved by the unconscious form of Starkey and the dead body of the dog in the garden. Something devilish had happened . . . Phyllis couldn't be dead ? . . . He would go mad. . .

The scullery door was open and he started to make a tour of the house. He carried his automatic in his right hand, and the torch in the left. He was determined to shoot at sight.

But the extraordinary feature was that the house was apparently deserted. An uncanny stillness surrounded him. The silence was so intense that it seemed to close in on him like something alive. What had happened ? Was everyone who had lived there—dead ?

His pulse quickening its beat, and while a deadly coldness seemed to settle upon his heart, he went from room to room. The great dining-chamber was furnished, and there were signs of occupancy in the shape of a newspaper on a chair and a bowl of flowers on a side-table. Leading out from this huge room was a smaller one, evidently a bedroom. Going into this, Barry caught his breath ; this must be Phyllis's room !

It was empty ; and, terror seizing him, he called her name :

“ Phyllis ! Phyllis ! ”

No reply came. Only the silence seemed to send him a mocking echo. Then he hunted in the cupboards, under the bed—which had been slept in at some hour that night, he noticed—but, while the girl's

clothes were in the room, there was still no sign of Phyllis Kenwit.

That madman, hairy as a baboon, who had been struggling with the girl's father only two nights before! Had he turned Berserker again? Had he first attacked Starkey and then slain Kenwit and the girl?

With two bounds Wilding was up the short staircase, at the top of which was the broad landing where he had had such a struggle with the man. A number of doors opened on to this landing. He tried them all, but without exception these rooms were empty.

One room he was surprised to see seemed to have been partially fitted out to meet a case of illness. The hospital bed remained, but the bedding had been removed.

There was an intangible quality of "atmosphere" about this room which clutched at his imagination. He felt certain that it had been the scene of something secret, something which had been kept from the light of day. Something sly and stealthy.

It was owing to this persistent feeling that he started to make an examination. He felt certain he would discover some evidence—and he did; in one corner, on the bare boards of the floor, was a large dark-red stain.

He bent to examine it. Although it had dried, he guessed the sinister stain to have been made quite recently.

This room furnished like a hospital ward . . . that

dark-red stain . . . What did it mean? Was that stain—*blood*?

The suggestion made him hasten out of the room. He must find the girl. Down the stairs he leapt, and into the huge dining-room again. Somehow he felt that room contained the secret. And, as he came to this conclusion, he heard from below his feet a groan.

What could be below? Cellars? But how to get to them? Using his torch, he noticed on the right hand side of the large, ancient fire-place what appeared to be a hole in the panelled wall. Coming closer, he saw that the opening was really caused by the sliding back of a panel. Catching hold of the wood, he made the aperture bigger—large enough to admit his body.

Before him, leading downwards, was a flight of stone steps. It was from there that the groan he had heard had come.

“Phyllis!” he called, mental agony in his voice.

Praise God! There was an answer!

“Barry! . . .”

She had called him! She was still alive! She had called him by his Christian name! . . . Nothing mattered now! Nothing should ever come between them again! The tumultuous joy he had made him resolve this.

At the bottom of the steps, down which he leapt like a stag, were a number of cellars that were practically dungeons. In the second of these, which ran beneath the fire-place of the great dining-room above, he found Phyllis Kenwit. She was clad only

in her nightdress, dressing-gown and bedroom slippers, and, poor dear, looked as though the deathly chill of that underground cell had entered her very bones. She was unable to escape, being tied hand and foot to a chair with ropes.

"Darling!" In that moment of intensity, Barry remembered only that he loved her and that someone had been cruel to her.

"Oh-h—I'm glad—I'm glad!" she moaned. The barriers were down between them, the roughness of the track had been made smooth; she was just a woman now—and he was the man she loved!

With desperate haste he unbound the ropes and then caught her up in his arms.

"My darling! You are as cold as ice!" He placed her back on the chair for a moment while he slipped off his overcoat. This he wrapped round her shivering form.

She rewarded him with a wan but grateful smile. Then: "Those men! . . . Where are they? . . . I fainted when they tied me up!"

He caught her up in his arms again. And, held thus like a child, she was carried back into the great dining-room.

Cuddled down in an easy chair, she told him as much as she could remember of her night's experience. "I woke up suddenly, hearing a noise. I had a feeling that something had happened." She went on to describe what she saw when she opened her bedroom door. "When they saw me, they dragged me down

to those awful cellars and tied me to that dirty chair ! It was horrible ! ” She looked up at him through her fingers. “ But how did you come ? ” she asked.

Before she could show any return of her former manner, he had answered :

“ You may wonder at it—I wonder at it myself—but I had a message—a telepathic vision, if you like—that you were in danger—that something was going on here. I woke up suddenly at twenty minutes past one. At least, I should say that it was that time when I looked at my watch—I had been unable to get off to sleep until then. And then, equally suddenly, I fancied I heard your voice calling me . . . It sounds pretty fantastic, I know, as I tell it to you now—but it’s true.”

“ And you answered it ! ” She said the words softly, wonderingly.

“ My dear, I couldn’t do anything less—I had to answer it ! For I felt certain that you had called me—if not actually by your voice, through your mind.”

“ Perhaps . . . mentally, I believe . . . it was all so horrible that I cannot remember.”

He noticed she was still shivering.

“ Where do you keep the brandy ? ” he asked ; “ you really must have some to prevent taking a chill.”

“ It’s in the sideboard—I’ll get it. You are cold, too—and you have taken off your coat ! ”

His hand restrained her.

“ You stay where you are ! ” he commanded ; “ after

you have had some brandy, you must get back into bed—I will keep guard for the rest of the night.”

“ No, I couldn’t allow that. There is Starkey——

He went for the brandy, found a glass, poured some spirit into it and watched her drink it before he answered :

“ I am afraid your visitors to-night put Starkey out of commission for the time being. I got into the house through a scullery window. Starkey——”

“ Yes, sah ! ” came a sepulchral voice. Staggering slightly, the negro butler approached his mistress.

“ Missy, I was knocked on the head ; I could not come before. Bad mans here again to-night. . . . ” He looked challengingly at Barry Wilding as he spoke.

Phyllis Kenwit smiled at him. “ It’s all right about Mr. Wilding, Starkey. He is not one of the bad men—it was he who rescued me after the bad men had taken me into the cellars and tied me with ropes to a chair.”

If a negro’s face can be said to change colour Starkey’s ebony countenance did then.

“ Poor missy ! ” he said in a choked tone, and then : “ I must tell massa,” he said, and went away.

“ Yes, by the way, where is your father ? ” inquired Wilding ; “ don’t think me impertinent, but surely he ought not to have left you alone like this ? This is the second time he has been attacked—it isn’t as though he wasn’t prepared, as it were, for something of the sort to happen. My dear, you are going to confide in me at last, aren’t you ? ” he continued impulsively ; “ it’s not because I want to know any

private affairs of either yourself or your father ; it's because I love you and want to shield and protect you. When the thought came to me as I roamed about this house to-night that you might be—that something really serious had happened to you, I thought I should have gone mad ! Phyllis——”

The remainder of what he meant to say died on his lips. A hateful tenseness had come into the girl's face. As she heard footsteps approaching, she leaned towards him and said in a tense whisper : “ Go ! oh, you must go ! ”

Chapter XXII

The Appointment

HE stared at her, partly in resentment and wholly in bewilderment.

“ Go ! ” he repeated ; “ you mean that ? ”

She cowered at the tone in his voice, but went on : “ Yes, please ; for my sake ! I can explain later—but not now. Oh, please ! . . . ”

“ I will go on one condition,” Wilding said, “ and that is that you will give me your word of honour that you will meet me some time to-morrow—I mean to-day.”

“ Yes,” she said ; “ quickly !—tell me where ! ”

“ There is a stile near here leading across the fields to the Swan Inn——”

“ Yes, yes ! I know it—I will be there at three o'clock—oh, please, do go now—— ! ”

As he walked out of the room Wilding sought in vain for a solution of the amazing change in her. A minute before she had been grateful—not that he wanted any gratitude, of course—charming, delightful—in short, she had been the girl he felt sure was her natural self. Then, with a suddenness that was bewildering, her face had clouded over ; the old look of something which was not quite fear and yet perilously near it had returned. Eyes and mouth had become troubled ; there was the twitching of her hands he knew so well. That hellish Thing had come between them again ! . . .

Was it the thought of her father's arrival on the scene which had caused this change ? Up till the time that he had mentioned her father, she had had no sign of perturbation. Certainly she had showed evidences of genuine fright, but that was only natural after what she had passed through. And this was quite a different sensation from the stealthy terror that seemed to stalk her whenever mention was made of her father. Wilding cursed ; he knew he would end by taking Kenwit by the neck and forcing the truth out of him ; he was positive he would. The thought of leaving the girl to the mercies of that blackguard almost made him turn round as he entered the scullery and hurl himself back into the dining-room.

Leaving the house through the scullery window, he came to the grim determination of forcing the issue when he saw the girl at three o'clock that afternoon. He would make her come away with him. They

would go up to Town and get married at a register-office. Bless her heart! she would probably say she didn't believe it was a proper wedding, or something of that sort—but she would be his wife all right. And once they were married, he would take adequate steps to protect her. There would be no more night terrors for her. He seethed with fresh fury as he pictured what she had been forced to go through during the past few hours.

The thought of getting any sleep that night was now out of the question, and he walked about, coming back time after time to the border of the grounds of The Durdles in case he might hear anything which would give him an excuse for forcing his way into the place again. More and more perplexed he became as he pondered the problem. Who were the men who had made this second burglary? And what were they after? Did Kenwit possess something of fabulous value which these other crooks desired?

It was not until an hour had passed that light—or what he judged to be light—came to him. Of course! What a fool he had been! Victor Starrock was right; The Durdles *did* contain old John Trevannion's treasure, somewhere or other. Kenwit, laying claim to be a doctor in order that a cloak of respectability might be thrown over his doings, had learned this in some manner, and had occupied the house with the intention of searching for the treasure at his ease. Then other men, perhaps (as he had imagined before) previous partners in crime with Kenwit, had obtained

information of his activities and were determined either to force him to a share-out or, what was even more likely, they were resolved to bag the lot for themselves ! The more he considered the pros and cons of this new possible solution, the more likely and feasible it appeared to be.

His sense of anger against Kenwit increased. The man was a slimy scoundrel ! He had put the girl up to plead with him so that he could have further time to complete his plans for robbing the very man who was doing him what after all was a tremendous favour ! Did Phyllis know the truth ? In view of the mental distress she invariably showed whenever her father came on the scene, or his name was mentioned, it seemed to him almost certain that the girl must know. She was sorry, repentant—but she knew. The facts spoke for themselves.

When the first faint streaks of light showed, Wilding returned to the inn. At the front door he was greeted by a surprised stable worker who wished him a “ Good mornin’.” Not waiting to give the man any explanation, he went straight to his room.

Ten minutes later, after knocking, Mrs. Shippam entered. Curiosity was making her face literally twitch.

“ George tells me——” she started.

“ I got up early, Mrs. Shippam, and went for a walk,” put in her guest. He was in no mood for a long explanation that morning. “ The bath is ready, you say ? Good !” He took the cup of tea from

the hand of the landlady, who stared at him in open-mouthed wonderment before finally turning away in gasping disappointment.

Mrs. Shippam's expression was so humorous that Wilding was forced to smile. After his long tramp, the tea tasted good, and his subsequent cold dip did something to restore him to a more normal frame of mind.

Over breakfast, having by this time the utmost confidence in Starrock, he told the American detective about his night's adventure. Then he advanced the new theory which had occurred to him.

But Starrock shook his head.

"It's all right up to a point," he replied; "but there are some facts which you have forgotten. You cannot very well, for instance, conceive the British Home Secretary going fifty-fifty with a crook in a scheme to rob another man of a fortune. Neither can you imagine Kenwit being able to bribe the local police, not to mention the most important man in Scotland Yard. No, Wilding, it won't do, I am afraid—we shall have to look farther afield than that. I'm going up to Town again to-day, and if you like, I will have another chat with Pat Cross. He may let out something which will be valuable to us. What do you say?"

"Just as you like—but the more I think about it the more befogged I get. Anyway, I am meeting Miss Kenwit at three o'clock this afternoon. Starrock, do you know what I intend to do then?"

"No."

"I intend to get married."

"To Miss Kenwit?"

"Yes."

The detective whistled.

"Well, you know your own business best," he commented, "and, while I haven't yet met Miss Kenwit, I can quite imagine that she is very charming—but I always understood that an undesirable father-in-law isn't a very useful wedding-present. Correct me if I am wrong—but Miss Kenwit hasn't yet shown, so far as I can make out, any great desire to leave her father, rascal and crook though he may be from our present imperfect understanding. How do you know that she will do so now? Because, I take it, if you get married, you won't live at The Durdles?"

"I shall live as far from the place as possible," retorted Wilding; "my object is to get the girl away from the contaminating and demoralising influence of her father. So long as she is with him she is forced, I am certain, to do things which are—must be—repugnant to her. I'll give you an instance."

Before he quite realised what he was doing, Barry had started to tell the detective what was, perhaps, the most astonishing incident in the whole maze of mystery—the visit of Phyllis Kenwit to the house of the Egyptian, Ilbrahim, in the Rue Ste Jeanne, Paris.

"You are sure it was she?" inquired Starrock.

"Positive!—and I'm just as sure that she went there at the instigation, or rather command, of her

father, and not of her own free will. It is impossible to imagine a girl so clean, so fresh, so——”

The detective put up his hand.

“Spare me the rest, Wilding,” he said in a voice that held no offence. “I can imagine what you claim about Miss Kenwit to be perfectly correct——”

“Of course it’s correct !” broke in the other angrily.

Starrock remained unruffled.

“But the fact remains,” he went on, “that there is a great deal of incriminating evidence against her. That is, assuming that her father is a crook—as you suppose.”

“What on earth else can I suppose ?” asked Wilding ; “you know the whole story yourself now, and I guarantee that on the face of things you are not able to come to any other conclusion.”

Starrock reached for the marmalade.

“I frankly confess it beats me,” he said, frowning ; “certainly, the evidence in support of your theory about Kenwit’s being crooked is fairly strong, but it’s impossible at the same time to reconcile Scotland Yard’s attitude towards the man. There’s something big moving underneath the surface, but what it is—well, there’s the riddle. It seems to me that unless something breaks loose from the other side, we may never get to solve it.”

“I intend to solve it this afternoon,” remarked the other stubbornly ; “the fact remains that The Durdles belongs to me. Unless Kenwit gives me a satisfactory explanation of the whole business this afternoon, I

shall go to another lawyer and get possession of the house."

Starrock smiled aggravatingly.

"What with marrying the daughter and getting the father chucked out, you're going to be busy," he commented; "no, don't get annoyed, old man—it was only my foolish joke. Promise me this: don't do anything rash or silly until I get back from London to-night. You've got this thing so badly on your mind that—it's quite natural, too—you don't exactly realise what you are saying or doing. It would be bad enough in the ordinary way, but now that things have become complicated by your falling in love with the daughter . . . well, ease off it a bit; take a boat out on the river and have a real laze. Let the business go hang for to-day, at any rate. Will you promise me that? Believe me, I'm giving you the best possible advice."

"I know that. But I have to see Miss Kenwit at three o'clock—it was a definite appointment."

"Well, take her on the river with you—if she'll come," was the reply. "But just make love to her—excuse me, but I don't mean to tread on delicate ground; what I should have said was, leave anything controversial out of the question. I think it will be much better if I try to work the oracle from the London end; perhaps Pat Cross will give me a tip to-day."

"Very well," replied Wilding, "and I'm very much obliged to you, Starrock."

"Shucks!" responded the other, "this puzzle has got me almost as much as it has you. I'm not going to allow it to beat me—you can bet your last dollar on that! It's mighty interesting and I want to see right through to the end of it."

After the detective had left to catch his train, Barry managed to kill time with only indifferent success until half-past two. He was so excited at the prospect of having a real talk with Phyllis Kenwit—the first one he had been able to contrive—that Mrs. Shippam, when she came to clear away his lunch, rallied him on his loss of appetite.

Evading the topic, he walked to the stile which he had named as the trysting-place.

As the village church clock struck three, he heard approaching footsteps.

"My dear——" The words were already framed when he turned.

Then he scowled. It was not the beautiful face of Phyllis Kenwit at which he looked, but the repulsive countenance of Starkey, the negro butler.

Chapter XXIII

Melodrama

"WHAT do you want?" asked Barry angrily.

The negro flashed his white teeth.

"I come from Missy. She ill. She want to see you in the house."

Wilding looked at the man. Was he to be trusted ? Had Phyllis Kenwit really sent that message ?

"What is the matter with Miss Kenwit ?" he asked.

"Missy is bad—lying down. Headache, I think. **|**She is very sorry not to come—sent me."

The news was intensely disappointing. It meant **|**that he would be forced to alter his plans. He had intended to induce the girl to come away with him just as she was—clothes could be bought in London, and he had more money now than he really knew what to do with. But if Phyllis was ill, or even merely seedy, the flight would have to be postponed. It was terribly annoying. But perhaps if he saw the girl—naturally she knew nothing of his plans—he could still persuade her to leave with him.

"All right," Wilding replied ; "I'll come." He watched the negro's face intently while he spoke, but the man was impassive ; no trace of any emotion showed in his coarse, ebony features.

Starkey leading, they walked to The Durdles. As they turned into the carriage-way from one of the side-paths in the grounds, Barry imagined he saw a window curtain pulled slightly to one side. The face—if it was a face he had seen—was withdrawn directly, however.

The negro butler took him into the huge dining-room, out of which led four doors. One of these, Barry knew, opened on to Phyllis Kenwit's bedroom.

"Missy here in a minute," declared Starkey, and Wilding settled himself to wait.

He expected the girl to emerge from her room, the door of which he faced as he sat down, to greet him. He didn't hear any of the other doors open until a challenging man's voice made him swing round in his chair.

"Put your hands up, Mr. Wilding, please!" said the voice.

He was on his feet in an instant—but prudence kept him from rushing forward. Facing him were four men. All were masked, and all had revolvers pointed at his breast! Barry went cold inside—cold with fury. The girl had been used as a decoy; he had been trapped!

"May I inquire the reason for this mummery?" he asked; "I hope you realise that this outrage is taking place in my own house, in a room which is my property, and that sooner or later, I will have you all arrested?"

"Put your hands up," was the brusque rejoinder of the man who was evidently the leader of the party; "go and search him, Stevens."

When the man addressed approached sufficiently near, Barry took a step forward. His fist connected with the man's chin at the end of a really beautiful upper-cut. Directly he saw the man swaying, he made a dive across the room. Unarmed—why should he have brought a revolver to a lovers' tryst?—he was no match for these men, but he was hanged if he was going to be taken prisoner by them without a struggle.

He plunged into a real Rugby scrum. Hands sought

his neck, shoulders, arms, legs, ankles, and eventually he was down, with four opponents on top of him.

"Tie his wrists and ankles!" said the same authoritative voice, "and then put a bandage over his eyes."

When the bandage, after another desperate but ineffectual struggle, had been adjusted, and all was darkness to the captive, Barry heard another voice: "That would seem to do quite nicely." It had a complacency that was maddening.

"I'll remember that, Kenwit!" he shouted. The only answer was a tremulous "Oh-h!" Barry, biting his lips, made no answer, for he knew who had uttered that moan—the girl who had decoyed him: Phyllis Kenwit!

"Take him out!" ordered the voice which had spoken before.

Both wrists and ankles now tightly bound, the prisoner had to be carried out of the room and the house. Quickly Wilding realised that he had been placed in some vehicle—a motor car probably. Yes, it was a car—he could hear the engine throbbing. A moment later he was being driven rapidly away.

Where were these men taking him? What was their object? Was he going to be shipped out of the country? And was the reason because certain people in high authority suspected that he knew too much about The Durdles, and what was going on in that house? He had been warned, certainly—and this was the sequel.

But the villainess of the thing! The foulness of the scheme! To think that the greatest Police Force in the world—he felt certain his captors belonged to Scotland Yard—should stoop to such an action! Bribed by Kenwit—and, oh, yes, he mustn't forget that celebrity, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Home Affairs, Sir Bertram Willan—they had descended to a melodramatic action which would have been ludicrous but for the sinister significance attached to it.

Had Phyllis Kenwit been a deliberate or an unconscious participant? This was the question to which he gave the greatest consideration. Deliberate! He was bound to come to this decision for the following reasons: (1) It was she who had fixed the hour for the appointment; (2) she could have warned him in ample time if she had not been in the conspiracy herself. To feel that the girl had been the means of betraying him was the bitterest blow of all.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

"Sorry, sir, but I'm not at liberty to tell you that," replied the man whose hand was on his arm; "but no harm is coming to you—that I'm ready to swear; at least, not if you behave yourself."

"Nice, sportsmanlike action, wasn't it?" said Wilding in a bitter gibe; "to trick a defenceless man into a house and then set odds of four to one on to him—and those four all armed?"

"I'm not an enemy, sir—although you hit a couple of my teeth out back in that house," was the reply.

"But it's no use talking, sir—what is to be, will be, sir!"

Although Wilding addressed another couple of questions to him, this fatalist acted up to his philosophy and refused to reply.

After a journey of about twenty minutes, the car stopped.

"You get out here, sir," said the man on his right.

The prisoner thought of asking where "here" was, but, realising the futility of the question in his present circumstances, he complied with the request, and—the bonds round his ankles having been undone, stepped out of the car.

He was led into a house, apparently, and taken up a long and, he should judge, wandering flight of stairs—bare stone his feet stepped on, estimating by the sound his boots, and those of his guards, made. A door was unlocked.

Then into a room—for he was told to stop. There were whispered words between his guards, and his wrists were freed.

"When you are alone, you can take the bandage off," he was told. "Behave yourself, and no harm will come to you. You will be given plenty to eat and drink; someone will always be within call, and books and other reading matter will be provided—and, in fact, you will have absolutely nothing to worry about."

"Nothing whatever, apparently, except to long for the time when I shall be able to give you all the damned

hiding you deserve—and will certainly get when I have the chance ! ”

“ You mustn’t take it so hard, sir—you really mustn’t,” replied the man.

The whole thing was so preposterous that Barry laughed. Here was a tragic farce ready to the hand of some gifted writer—what a masterpiece of irony could be made of it !

A door slammed. This sounded so near that he felt it must be the door of the room in which he had been left. Feeling his hands free—they had been kept in the same cramped position for so long that they were numbed—he tore the bandage away from his eyes.

He blinked uncertainly for a little while, but was soon able to make out his surroundings quite clearly. He was in a room that might have been a large cell in some old and disused prison. It was evident that a recent attempt had been made to render the place habitable, but there still hung in the air a close, musty smell which spoke of long confinement. The room, so near as he could tell, was about eighteen feet by fifteen. It was furnished with a large mahogany bed, a washhand stand, an easy chair, a table. On the latter were a number of books and a few newspapers. Evidently what his warder had told him bore a substance of truth : he was to be made as comfortable as the exigencies of the situation permitted !

But that the room was really a prison-cell another glance round the place proved. The window, for

instance, was high up, and was barred. The door was of heavy oak, or some other dark wood, centuries old, and had no handle on the inside. This stone-flagged chamber could have told some tales, he had no doubt.

It seemed, however, that he must resign himself to the inevitable. He was weaponless, and the cell did not contain a thing that he could use for either offence or defence unless he excepted the water-jug on the washhand stand. However impatient he might be, no good would come of his stamping and rampaging. He must be content to wait. A solution would come sooner or later, he supposed—later than sooner, however, if his present vile luck was maintained.

There was only one bright spot, one ray of hope. That was that Victor Starrock, the American detective, would learn of his disappearance—and would know in which direction to start inquiries. Thank goodness he had told him of the appointment he had with Phyllis Kenwit that afternoon. If Starrock proved the man he thought he was, he wouldn't let any grass grow beneath his feet. He would act on his own, since he would realise that any co-operation with Scotland Yard was out of the question.

Barry was just congratulating himself on this when he heard a noise on the door. A small portion of this was drawn aside, leaving a space through which a tray of food was pushed. Before he could see who was outside, the iron grille on the other side had been pulled in again.

Here was food, however, and he proceeded to make short work of the tea and toast which had been supplied. The meal over, he sat down in the easy chair and tried to be calm. For calmness was the only quality of any value in his present situation.

He tried to keep his mind clear of her, but always his thoughts returned to Phyllis Kenwit. What were her feelings now? Was she thoroughly ashamed of the part she had played in his deception, or was she happy in the triumph, petty though it might be, she had gained for her confederates?

Suddenly he sat erect in his chair, every nerve alert. Outside his prison someone was crying—a woman. It did not sound a passionate abandonment to sorrow, but rather as though the sobs were escaping in spite of herself.

He waited, scarcely knowing what to think; and presently the crying woman passed on, leaving a silence which, to Barry, was full of speculation and wonder, behind.

Chapter XXIV

Starrock Takes a Risk

VICTOR STARROCK was not only puzzled; he was bewildered. As an experienced detective, he knew that the chief officials at Scotland Yard were beyond the reach of any corrupting hand. His common sense and knowledge of human nature told him, moreover, that Barry Wilding was fundamentally and essentially an honest man. He believed Wilding's story, extra-

ordinary as it was in so many of its features, implicitly. Yet there was no doubt Deputy Chief Commissioner Patrick Cross, in whose room he was now sitting, regarded Barry Wilding with the gravest suspicion. This baffled him—and what was more, he could obtain no enlightenment.

“Take it from me, Starrock, that discussing your young friend, Wilding, is not a very healthy occupation at the present time in this place; why not drop it?” Cross now said. “If you want to know the latest news we have about Three-fingered Dan Warton, I’ll talk to you till the cows come home—but, once again, there’s nothing doing about Wilding. That’s flat and definite; and you know me well enough by this time to realise that when I say a thing I mean it.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that,” replied the American detective, “but——”

“There’s no ‘buts’ about it: the thing simply can’t be discussed!” returned Cross brusquely. “As a matter of fact——” Then he closed his teeth with a snap as though afraid that, in spite of all precautions, his tongue might play truant.

“All right, but I just want to say this,” persisted Starrock; “I suppose you know that Wilding has discovered there’s treasure going back centuries, worth probably some millions of dollars, hidden somewhere at The Durdles?” It was stretching the truth a trifle, no doubt, but he wanted to “draw” the other.

The Scotland Yard official looked startled.

“Is that honest?” he asked.

" Absolutely ! I've seen the plan—or, at least, half of it. And, having given you one surprise, to show there's no ill-feeling, Cross, I'll give you another. At least, I think it will be a surprise. Do you know that Three-fingered Dan Warton and a couple of other crooks have succeeded twice in breaking into The Durdles ? "

" What were they after ? " demanded the Deputy Commissioner, momentarily taken off his guard.

" Why, the treasure, of course ! "

" Oh ! " It was plain to see that the Scotland Yard man was relieved at the reply.

Starrock was not the man to ignore a clue like that.

" Why, what did you think they might be after ? " he inquired, but Cross merely shook his head.

" I have an appointment," he said, rising, " and, Starrock, although probably you won't take it, I'll give you the same advice as I gave that fellow Wilding—keep away from The Durdles ! If you want to study nature and all that sort of footle, study it at another Thames-side village than Hillsdown. Otherwise——" He left the sentence unfinished, but the unspoken threat was plain.

Starrock flushed.

" That's a pretty plain hint, Cross," he said coldly. The other nodded.

" It is," he agreed, " and I give it because you are a friend of mine, Starrock. Once again I tell you to keep off the grass."

" Like that, is it ? "

"Very much like that. You are too experienced to mistake my meaning." The speaker held out his hand, opened the door, and gave his visitor polite banishment.

Starrock was in a very disturbed frame of mind as he turned into Parliament Street. The hint he had just received was so plain that he knew he would be the worst kind of fool to ignore it. As Pat Cross had said, "it was very much like that." The warning was as loud as a motor-horn in his ears; it meant that if he persisted in meddling with this affair he would be arrested and packed off to some place where he wouldn't be able to do any more mischief—he, Victor Starrock! No notice would be taken of his official position; he would simply disappear! No actual harm would come to him he felt quite certain; Scotland Yard wasn't in the habit of doing crude things like that—but he would be rendered ineffectual. The American Embassy—he had called there on the day of his arrival in England—might make inquiries, but of course nothing would be known concerning the mysterious disappearance of the well-known American detective, Victor Starrock, at Scotland Yard. Deep regret would be expressed, naturally, but all inquirers would nevertheless be up against a stone wall. They would not be able to see through, of their own accord, and they certainly would not be allowed to look either over the top or round the sides of the stone wall. And the Second Secretary at the American Embassy, or whoever it was who had called, would accept the situation and murmur as he

stepped into the waiting motor-car after drawing a complete blank: "What in the hell has that fool Starrock been up to? He ought to have known better!"

In the ordinary way the detective would have been perfectly content to let well alone. However unorthodox this situation might appear to the ordinary person, it was quite comprehensible to him. Back in the States he had handled many essentially delicate cases in which he would have "warned off" the President himself if the circumstances warranted such a drastic move. The difficulty was not that he did not understand or appreciate Cross's position, but that his natural feelings were warring with both his experience and his common sense.

The truth was—and he admitted it frankly by the time he raised his hat in passing the Cenotaph, that marvellous monument in honour of the British warrior dead—that he liked Barry Wilding sufficiently to run an undoubted risk in defying Scotland Yard. Moreover, he had pledged his word to Wilding, and he had never willingly been the type to back out once he had made a contract.

He finished the communion with himself by signalling a taxicab and ordering the driver to take him to Paddington station. He wanted to hear how Barry Wilding had progressed with his love affair.

At the Swan Inn, Hillsdown, he met with a rebuff, being told that Wilding had not returned. It was with a sense of disappointment that he sat

down to dinner ; each night since his stay at the "Swan," he had dined with the agreeable Englishman, and he missed his presence badly.

When nine o'clock came and there was still no sign of Wilding, he commenced to feel vaguely uneasy. Surely if the man had brought off his scheme to elope with Phyllis Kenwit, he would have left some message ; more likely still, he would have returned to the inn to fetch his things. One didn't depart on a honeymoon in just the clothes one stood up in ; at least, such a procedure seemed hardly feasible, or even respectful to the lady fair.

Throwing away the end of his after-dinner cigar, Starrock came to a decision. As Barry Wilding's friend, he was going to see what had happened to the man. And, as the person who had offered his help in the tangle of mystery which surrounded a thoroughly deserving fellow, he was going to put his shoulder to the wheel and his hand to the plough if the occasion demanded it.

The night was lovely ; he would walk over to The Durdles.

For hours Phyllis Kenwit had been greatly distressed. This fresh development was necessary, she supposed, but all the same she knew she would never be able to look Barry Wilding in the face again. And she was not sure that she would ever be able to forgive her father, either. Apparently her father had overheard her make that appointment with Barry Wilding, but

had not given her any indication that he had so heard. Perhaps he had begun to suspect her . . . and yet surely she had given proof enough of her faithfulness and zeal to him! At all events, he had taken advantage of the position. That afternoon the men from Scotland Yard had arrived unexpectedly—four of them. They had been very businesslike and brusque. One of them, the Chief, had locked her into her bed-room without any warning. If it hadn't been that she knew what the consequences might be if she created a scene, she would have been furious. As it was, she had flung herself on to the bed in order that the pillow might stifle her sobs.

After the dastardly thing was done she had crept up to the place. One of the Scotland Yard men was still in the house, and he had warned her that she must keep away. But this jailer was now having his tea, and besides, she felt she had to let the prisoner know that she was innocent—that she hadn't purposely and deliberately decoyed him.

She had meant to speak to him through the panel in the door if she could find the opening, but at the critical moment her courage had failed, and she cried instead. Had he heard her sobs? And did he realise it was she outside? These questions had to remain unanswered, for a minute later the hateful policeman in mufti appeared—she supposed it was because he held such a high position that he was such a brute—and she had to flee.

The night was beautiful, far too lovely not to spend an hour out of doors before she went to bed. She thought of the man she loved imprisoned in that dreadful room and a sob rose in her throat. In spite of everything, in spite of the respect she had for her father, in spite of the promise she had made and the oath she had taken, she felt she must work for Barry Wilding's immediate release. It was degrading and impossible, the present situation.

"I am going into the garden, Starkey," she said to the negro butler. Poor Starkey! She supposed he had been given his instructions to watch her.

"Yes, missy. Beautiful night, missy. Makes me think of 'Merica, missy." There was a hint of homesickness in the black man's voice.

"Do you want to go back to New York, Starkey?" she asked softly.

The butler nodded his head.

"So do I," she confessed. "I wish I had never come to England, Starkey." There was an infinitude of sadness in her tone.

The negro, whose face was so repulsive but whose heart Phyllis Kenwit had proved was pure gold, touched her arm.

"I have good news to tell missy," he said. "We all go back to 'Merica soon. Massa tell me just now——" He bent forward and whispered in the girl's ear.

The effect on Phyllis was astonishing.

" Oh, Starkey ! " she exclaimed, her voice vibrant with thankfulness.

She had to walk. When she had gone twenty yards or so down the carriage drive a form loomed up in the darkness.

" Miss Kenwit, I believe ? "

The man—a stranger to her—went on, " I am a private detective, and I have been engaged to inquire into the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Barry Wilding."

Starrock—for it was he—was not surprised to see the girl start violently. Evidently he was on the right track. Phyllis Kenwit knew a good deal, and he was determined to gain possession of all she did know. Beautiful she might be, but he would not spare her. He waited for the girl to reply.

" What do you mean, ' mysterious disappearance ' ? " she asked in a faint voice.

" Exactly what I say, Miss Kenwit. Mr. Wilding is my friend as well as client. We have been staying together at the Swan Inn near here. He has told me of the mystery which is surrounding this house, which, he says, belongs to him. This morning before I went to London on business, he gave me a further confidence ; he said that he was meeting you at three o'clock this afternoon and that he meant to try to induce you to leave your father and elope with him. Mr. Wilding is very much in love with you, Miss Kenwit," the speaker added.

The girl hung her head. She made no reply, but Starrock could hear her quietly sobbing.

"I had arranged to have dinner with Mr. Wilding upon my return from Town," resumed the detective. "My friend did not turn up—he has not turned up at the Swan Inn yet. That is why I have used the expression 'disappeared.' I added just now the word 'mysterious,' but there is really nothing mysterious about it; Mr. Wilding," his tone hardening, "I am convinced, is being kept a prisoner in this house against his will, and I am determined——"

"Miss Kenwit, who is this man?"

A hard, compelling voice asked the abrupt question. Swinging round, Starrock recognised the speaker with a sense of surprise; the man who had asked the question was Sir Bertram Willan, the British Home Secretary.

"I am perfectly willing to give you all necessary information about myself, Sir Bertram," he replied.

This time it was the politician who started.

"You know my name?"

Starrock smiled.

"The newspapers have a habit of printing the photographs of celebrities, I would remind you, Sir Bertram."

"He is a detective," softly said the girl.

Willan swung round on the American a second time.

"A detective!—are you a detective?" he inquired brusquely. "Then what are you doing here?"

"My name is Starrock. I am a friend of Mr. Barry

Wilding"—he paused sufficiently to notice the expression of dismay enter the statesman's face—"and I am here to-night to investigate Mr. Wilding's sudden disappearance."

Sir Bertram Willan made a gesture of impatience.

"I cannot wait here listening to your rigmarole—I will send someone out to deal with you. Come, Miss Kenwit!"

The speaker started to stride rapidly forward, but before he had gone more than a few feet he stopped. A man had come hurrying down the drive. Becoming somewhat inured to shocks by this time, Starrock was not altogether startled to find that this other man was Deputy Chief Commissioner Patrick Cross of Scotland Yard!

Cross seemed possessed by an insane rage.

"Didn't I warn you to keep away, you fool?" he demanded, his face distorted with passion. He drew a revolver and pointed it at the American.

Starrock felt the hair on his head bristle. He could take a joke with anyone, but this was sheer clotted rubbish.

"Put that gun away, Cross!" he said sternly.

"Clear out of here at once, or I'll puncture you as sure as my name's what it is!" retorted the Deputy Commissioner in a voice that was thick and scarcely recognisable with rage.

The American's reply took the form of action. With a quick movement of his arm, he knocked up

the revolver and the next instant leapt at his former friend's throat.

What followed had many of the qualities of a particularly ferocious dog-fight.

*Chapter XXV**The Completed Will*

ONCE again Three-fingered Dan Warton and his two fellow-workers in crooked paths were in conference. The second expedition to The Durdles had also been a failure so far as actually placing their hands on the supposed treasure was concerned, but there was a certain redeeming feature. This was supplied by Warton.

"You fellows were so keen to get away that you missed this," he remarked, pulling a pocket-book out of his coat and placing it on the table. "One of the first things I noticed when we made our getaway was that the window in the scullery was opened wider than we had left it. What was more, the body of that nigger had been shifted. Coupled with the fact that we had heard someone moving about overhead while we were trussing up the girl, and—well, it didn't take a superfluity of brains to realise that someone else was in the house. When the girl screamed, you two lost your heads and thought it must be the police. I said at the time I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't that fool Wilding, who, being in love with the girl, is always nosing about the place—but no, you wouldn't have it, either of you, and you did your bunk. I

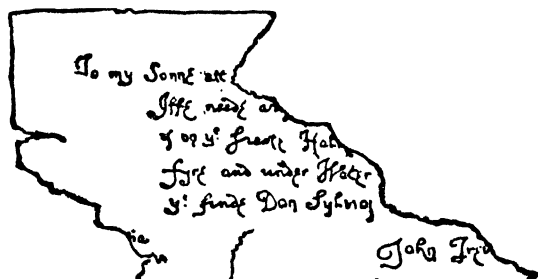
admit that we were unsuccessful in getting anything out of the girl, and that, as the stuff wasn't where we thought it might be, there didn't seem much purpose in remaining ; but all the same I was keeping my eyes well skinned. And you two have got to thank me for having the sense to do it too ! " the speaker added, almost savagely. " This is what I found. " He patted the pocket-book almost affectionately.

" What's all the song and dance about, Dan ? " inquired the Spider.

" You'll soon see ! " exclaimed Warton, his eyes gleaming. Opening the pocket-book, he pulled out a paper.

" What do you think of that ? " he exclaimed jubilantly.

The other two looked.



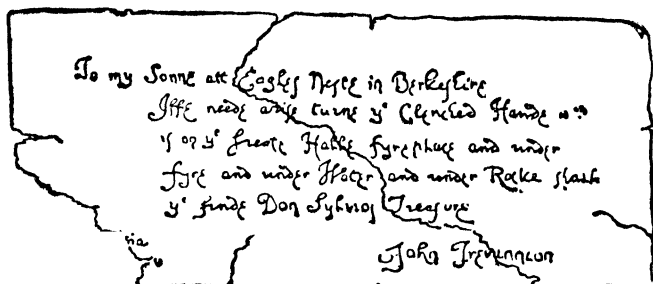
The Spider started to read ; " To my sonne——" " Why, that's the missing half ! " he cried ; " that's

the half that Wilding must have had—is that his pocket-book, Dan ? ”

The man with three fingers on his left hand turned the pocket-book towards them. On the inside band were the initials, “ B. W.”

“ Let’s put the two pieces together ! ” cried the third crook.

The idea was immediately adopted with this result :



The Spider whistled.

“ Is this all hokum ? ” he demanded belligerently of the world in general.

“ Hokum be damned ! ” stormily replied Warton ; “ of course, it’s not hokum ! You know what these old jokers did with stuff that they’d pinched from somebody else ; they buried it for their sons and grandsons. It was something put by for a rainy day, and also a bit in the hand hidden away from any King or Queen who wanted to do a bit of levying or tax-

collecting. This stuff was probably brought home by the John Trevannion guy, who we know served as a captain under Drake, after boarding and sinking some Spanish galleon. Anyway," as though further argument was merely a waste of time, "there's the book of words, and if you fellows don't want to waste any more time on it I'll collect the lot myself—and I'll do it even if I have to blow the whole damned place up with dynamite!"

"Don't you worry, Dan—we're still in on it," replied the Spider. "The house belongs to Wilding, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but what does that matter? In any case he's lost his half now . . . let's have another look at the thing." Once again all three studied the completed document.

"Yes, we'll get it if it means pulling down every stone in the house!" agreed the other member of the conference—the erstwhile portrait painter; "but both the Kenwits and Wilding must guess that there's something doing by this time. They'll be telling the police!"

Three-fingered Dan smiled a significant smile.

"If you leave things to me there won't be the least bit of trouble," he replied. "Wilding we can manage ourselves, and as for the Kenwits—I know too much about the Kenwits to think they'll frighten me off. In any case they're not after the treasure—not this kind, anyway."

"What do you know, Dan?"

“That’s my affair—but it’s something that some of the Sunday newspapers would give thousands of dollars to get hold of—both here and in the States!” he replied. After that not another word would he say.

It was roughly about the same time as the three crooks were celebrating their good fortune in capturing the missing half of John Trevannion’s will, that Barry Wilding discovered his loss. His mind switched back to the scuffle in the dining-room, and his first impression was that the man who had searched him had taken the pocket-book. This started a train of thought which made him seethe with indignation. Not only had Kenwit and his crowd violently assaulted him and thrown him into a prison, but they had robbed him of his inheritance. That was the motive actuating the outrage, no doubt; in spite of Victor Starrock’s scepticism, what other conclusion could there be?

But if they thought they were going to do just what they pleased with him they were darned well mistaken. He was going to get out of that room by hook or by crook.

Mounting the chair, he gazed out of the barred window.

So great was his astonishment that he almost fell off the chair—he had been brought back to The Durdles!

Fantastic as it appeared, there was not any mistake

—the scene upon which he now looked on was too familiar for him to be deceived. They had hoped, he supposed, to have thrown him off the scent by that motor-drive. It was a waste of energy.

He turned his attention to the window. Examining this, he noticed that rust had eaten away a good deal of the single stout bar that ran from top to bottom of the window. A good wrench——? He tried, but in spite of its age and decay, the iron rod remained firm. But the work which the rust had started could be finished. If only he had a saw!

The thought made him feel in his pockets. Then he jumped to the floor and clapped his hands softly in triumph. Of course, he *hadn't* been searched—he had knocked the man out who had been ordered to search him. Then his previous idea about the missing half of the will was all wrong . . . He shrugged his shoulders, easing them of that problem for the time being. What was more important now was the attempt to escape. That rusty bar was all that stood between him and freedom.

He pulled out a heavy knife from his pocket and patted it lovingly. This instrument, although it had the shape of a knife, was really something far more important than a mere pen-knife; it was a multiple arrangement, consisting of a number of gadgets that an explorer might have taken into the wilds. Thus it had a corkscrew, a gimlet, a steel button-hook, and—glory to the chap who had planned the thing!—a small saw. This was made of the finest steel.

Getting on to the chair again, Barry tried the saw, It worked ! It would take him some time, no doubt, but before the night was out he could have made such an impression that he would be able to snap the bar with his hands. The window was small, but he would be able to wriggle his body through somehow.

He was working away with desperate intentness when a knock came on the door. If his senses had not been tuned up to an acute state, he might not have noticed it, but as it was, he jumped lightly to the floor. and pulled the chair into the centre of the room.

Again the business of pushing a tray of food into the room was proceeded with, and this time Wilding was able to see the hand which propelled it.

"Starkey ! " he said softly.

There was a pause, and then a reply came : " Don't worry, sah ! Eberythin' comin' all right. Don't worry, sah ! Dat what missy says."

" Did she tell you to say that, Starkey ? "

Another momentary pause. Then :

" Yes, sah—dat what missy says." Then the grille was pushed to, and Barry could hear the negro servant walking away.

It was an excellent supper, and Barry sat down to it with a relish—a grim relish. This food would give him the strength he needed to make his escape. And Phyllis Kenwit could keep her consoling messages—he was going to get out of that house, and, once out, he would take such measures as would startle not only Scotland Yard, but the whole country ! He derived

so much comic satisfaction from his thoughts, that by the time he had finished the meal he was chuckling.

Once back at work again, he became lost to everything else. Thus, he did not hear the girl's voice softly calling him from the passage outside. In his present mood it is possible that he would not have paid any attention if he had heard.

Another hour's work, and after giving it a sudden wrench, the bar snapped in his hand like a rotten stick. It was while he was wiping the thick, red rust off his hand that he had a sudden misgiving. He could get out of the room now, but how was he to reach the ground?

Raising himself a little by giving a quick spring, he pushed his head out of the window. Suppose escape was impossible?

Then he found himself hoping again: fifteen feet or so down, was a parapet, some two or three feet across. If he could get on to that, he might find a rain-pipe down which he could shin.

But he dared not risk the jump, and if he dropped from the window backwards he would most certainly break his neck. Then what——?

He smiled as he caught sight of the bed. It was most awfully kind of his captors to provide him with sheets—when he had the pleasure of meeting them again, he would tell them so—but for the present he had to have a rope, and the sheets, torn into strips and knotted together, would do admirably. . . .

Fifteen minutes later, with one end of his im-

promptu rope tied securely to one of the posts of the heavy bed, Barry first flung the other end out of the window, and then proceeded to follow.

Worming his body through that narrow window, even now that the bar had been broken, was a rather difficult proceeding, and trusting to the strength of the rope he had made, whilst swinging in the air sixty feet or so off the ground was not exactly a nerve-tonic. Yet Barry accomplished both feats, and presently, the luck in this instance being with him, crouching on his stomach on that cold parapet, his groping right hand touched something which he knew must be a rain-pipe. He was safe !

He wriggled forward another foot, and was just about to hoist his left leg into space over the parapet when his attention was attracted to a light which suddenly illumined a window that had hitherto been dark. By the aid of this light, and because the curtains had not been properly drawn, he was able to look into the room.

What he saw made his hair bristle.

Sir Bertram Willan, the British Home Secretary, was shaking hands with the hairy, baboon-like man who, when he had met him in dramatic circumstances a few nights before, he had certainly judged to be mad !

It was a very ruffled Home Secretary who walked with Phyllis Kenwit up the carriage-way to The Durdles. A heavy frown disfigured Sir Bertram Willan's face.

"What do you know of that man, Miss Kenwit?"

The girl replied quickly: "Nothing, Sir Bertram! I had never seen him until ten minutes ago. I had gone for a stroll, the evening being so beautiful, and I didn't notice he had entered the grounds until he spoke to me."

"Humph! And he says he is a detective—an American detective, which is infinitely worse. We can control our own men, but this fellow——" He broke off to snap his fingers in annoyance. "However, I have no doubt that Cross will be able to manage something." Had the speaker cared to retrace his steps for a little distance, and to peer round the last curve of the winding carriage-way, he might have come to the conclusion that Cross was certainly managing something, seeing that at that moment he and the American were hopelessly mixed up on the ground in what looked very much like a particularly vicious dog-fight.

Phyllis Kenwit ventured to speak.

"I believe daddy has some good news for you, Sir Bertram." Gaining courage from the relief which suddenly flooded his face, she went on: "Oh, I do hope it's true—that it will mean an end—I do not think I could go on with this much longer!"

The statesman turned to her. His expression was gentle and sympathetic.

"I shall never be able to repay you or your father, Miss Kenwit. And I shall always be under a tremendous debt to you, personally, for what you have gone through so cheerfully and so self-sacrificingly. When I think of the good times you could have had . . ." He stopped, to add a moment later: "But when this is all over, I think I can promise that some reparation at least shall be made. Why, you are crying, Miss Kenwit." He walked on a pace, and then turned. "Can't you tell me the reason?" he asked.

She shook her head after wiping away the tears. No, she couldn't tell him. How could she tell him that the self-sacrifice to which he had just referred had robbed her of her life's happiness? How could she explain that she had fallen in love with the very man this all-powerful personage had ordered to be imprisoned in the turret tower under whose shadow they were now walking?

Noticing her distress at his question, Sir Bertram Willan walked on in silence. Girls were complicated machines, he knew, and, however sympathetic he might be, he had other and more weighty questions to be settled at this moment.

He was conducted to a room where Dr. Daniel Kenwit received him excitedly.

"I have succeeded—beyond my wildest hopes I have succeeded!" said the statesman's host. At

the words, Willan breathed a fervent sigh of relief before almost collapsing on to a leather settee.

Kenwit watched him solicitously.

"I should have broken it to you more gently, I am afraid," he said in self-criticism; "can I get you anything, Sir Bertram?"

"Yes—a large whisky and soda—I feel I want it," was the reply.

After he had drained the spirit, and placed the glass on the table, the Home Secretary said, as though apologising for his display of "nerves": "You can scarcely realise what a strain this has been on me, Kenwit. Every day, every minute of every day, I have been afraid that something would leak out—by the way," breaking off sharply, "where is the young man, Wilding?"

The doctor smiled.

"He's safe enough," he replied, "and well looked after. He has a comfortable bed, plenty to eat and drink, books to read—when the time comes to explain to him, I don't see that he will have a lot to complain about."

The Home Secretary smiled deprecatingly.

"On the contrary, Kenwit, I imagine he will have a very great deal to complain about! You must not forget that he is entirely in the dark. With the law on his side—the deeds of this house when you bought it were undoubtedly false—I can't understand why he ever let you stay on."

"My daughter arranged that." Kenwit's tone was

short, almost curt. A man of his type could not be expected to be bothered with extraneous details of this sort. A man like him should be left undisturbed. Why bother him with such petty things ?

Sir Bertram Willan lit a cigarette.

"Speaking about your daughter, Kenwit, I noticed when I saw her just now that she was very upset. I was sorry to see it. I promised to try to make up to her something which she has lost during the past few weeks. Do you think this—this business has unnerved her in any way ? "

The other became almost impatient, snapping his fingers.

"How can I explain a girl's foibles ? " he replied. "But since you have mentioned it, Phyllis certainly has seemed somewhat strange in her manner lately. I expect it has been due to the burglaries."

"Burglaries ! " Willan's cigarette-ash dropped on the carpet unheeded.

"Yes. Goodness knows what the fellows expected to find here, but there have been one or two attempts to break into the house lately. At least, I suppose they must be called more than actual attempts. Starkey woke me up in the middle of last night to tell me that he had been assaulted——"

"These men, whoever they might have been, learned nothing ? " interrupted the statesman, the look of anxiety coming back into his face in an intensified form.

"You need have no fear of that." Kenwit's

expression, an unfriendly critic of the man might have said at that moment, was almost cunning. "I realised the danger, of course. After the first attempt I changed my quarters. We went into the turret tower. This is cut off from the rest of the house by a solid iron door, immovable almost even when left unlocked. I did not leave it unlocked. Wilding is in another room of the tower now," he added.

"I don't like these burglaries," commented the Home Secretary; "this is not the type of country house that is likely to excite the attention of the average criminal. You can't throw any light on the subject, I suppose, Kenwit? You don't happen to have any ideas of your own on the matter?"

The other yawned.

"I am afraid I haven't, Sir Bertram. Let us leave it that the house is situated in a very lonely position. Perhaps the poor wretches were merely hungry, although——" and he paused.

"What were you about to say, Kenwit?" Willan's keen glance had detected the speaker's change of expression.

"I was merely going on to say," completed the other in the absent-minded manner which was characteristic of him, "that the man who was captured on the night of the first burglary did not appear to belong to the common wastrel, or tramp, class. He was well dressed and had a certain air of polish about him—of course, this may have been merely a veneer," he added hastily. "To tell you the truth, Sir Bertram,

I felt sorry for the man. Studying the subject as I have, I felt convinced that here was an excellent example of diseased brain-tissue. I was just about to offer to do what I could for the poor fellow, when he started to attempt to escape. I was compelled to knock him senseless with the butt-end of a revolver. After that, if it hadn't been for my daughter, I should certainly have examined this poor fellow's brain——"

"Good God!" burst from the statesman, "you wouldn't have been such a fool!"

His companion looked at him in startled fashion, and with more than a trace of annoyance.

"Isn't that my work?" he demanded.

The Home Secretary made a gesture of impatience.

"Yes, yes—but surely you recognise the danger, Kenwit? However, nothing happened to the man, I hope?"

"No," was the answer, spoken in a reluctant tone. "My daughter had the same absurdly restricted views as yourself. Consequently, the man was allowed to leave the house. It was a pity because I feel sure that his brain would have been worth examining."

"Tut! Tut!" Sir Bertram Willan commenced to pace up and down the room. "Now tell me about——" he paused before adding—"our friend?"

"You shall see him," replied Kenwit, his ill-humour gone immediately; "as I have said, it is wonderful—far more wonderful than I had ever hoped. Weismann, Giblein, Steinmayer, Folk and the others—ah! how

I wish they were here now ! But they shall read about it—yes, they certainly shall read about it ! ”

“ I will see him,” said the Home Secretary, breaking in, and it was the famous politician who now evidenced signs of nervous agitation.

His eyes bright, and his whole demeanour indicative of great excitement, Kenwit led the way out of the room. He walked along a long corridor, at the end of which was an immense iron door. As he unlocked this with a key which he took from his pocket, he remarked to his companion : “ You see, it is quite cut off from the rest of the house ! There is never any fear of being interrupted ! ” The Home Secretary nodded.

The two now found themselves in a small labyrinth of rooms, all of which smelt dank and close, as though the air had not been allowed to get at them for many years.

Making a grimace, Kenwit stopped, pointing to a door.

“ That is where Wilding is—shall we speak to him ? ” he inquired.

“ On no account ! ” hastily responded the politician. He looked at the other as though doubting in his mind whether the man was really normal.

Shrugging his shoulders, Kenwit passed on. Outside another room, he paused before producing a second key. With this he unlocked the door, holding it open for Sir Bertram Willan to enter.

From a wicker-chair in the room a man rose to greet

the Home Secretary. He was an uncouth-looking individual, his face being covered with an immense shaggy beard which could not have been trimmed for weeks.

Seeing Willan, he rushed forward, his hand outstretched.

The effect on the Home Secretary of seeing this man was most marked. His features worked convulsively for a few moments and it appeared as though he might utterly break down.

" Bert ! " shouted the bearded man in a tremendous voice, and immediately burst into a Jovian fit of gargantuan laughter.

The Home Secretary looked bewildered, but he took the extended hand.

" How are you feeling ? " he asked solicitously.

From the mouth of the bearded man came another terrific burst of mad laughter.

Kenwit seized the statesman's arm.

" Get outside quickly ! " he cried ; " he's had a relapse ! "

Chapter XXVII Mrs. Shippam has another Shock

IF Barry Wilding had not previously taken a firm grip of the tough creeper that covered that side of the house, he might have lost his balance, for, of all the extraordinary things that he had known take place inside this house of secrets, the meeting which

he had just witnessed was the most amazing. The connection which Sir Bertram Willan, the Home Secretary, had with Kenwit became more incomprehensible than ever. If this bearded scarecrow was really an alcoholic subject, why should there be need for all this preposterous secrecy, even supposing he was a friend of the Home Secretary?

Barry's speculations on this point were interrupted by a terrific burst of laughter. This came from the room into which he was peering. If he did not wish to be discovered, he must get away. Flinging one leg over the parapet, he groped for the water-pipe, found it, and commenced to wriggle down. All the while that nerve-shattering maniacal laughter flooded his ears, sending an indescribable eerie feeling through his body.

He dropped into a flower-bed, and then lay crouched. Not a dozen yards away he could see in the dim, scented dusk, a portly figure walking to and fro, smoking a cigar, the glow of which shone like a crimson star in the gloom.

Something gave way beneath his feet as he waited for this man to pass. Instantly the smoker became alert: he swung round, and after a moment's pause, walked straight towards the crouching man.

The one fact that sprang instantly to Wilding's mind was that he was not going to be re-taken prisoner. He would be shot rather. These swine would never lay him by the heels again.

"Come out!" growled a menacing voice.

The speaker was answered more quickly than he had perhaps anticipated, for Wilding, gathering himself like an athlete, sprang straight at the man's throat. Sprang—and gripped. He had his two hands round the other's collar before the man could cry out.

Wilding was desperate, and he took desperate measures. Already from what he had seen of this man's figure, he had gathered that here was the leader of the four masked men who had captured him that afternoon. Well, the tables were turned now.

Suddenly releasing his hold, he stepped back a pace and then swung his right fist. That blow had packed into it every ounce of strength there was in Wilding's perfectly-fit body, and when it connected with the portly one's chin, the man sagged as though he had been struck with a crowbar. Without a sound, he collapsed at Wilding's feet.

The fugitive did not waste any time in sentimentalising; breaking into a run, he was away across the ill-kept grounds directly he saw the man was unconscious. Although, to the best of his belief, one dog had been killed, the other remained, and he had no fancy for a struggle with a ferocious bull-mastiff now that he was practically safe.

Half an hour later he arrived, gasping, and with smears of mud all over his clothes, at the Swan Inn. He had run every yard, and had taken the way across the fields, being afraid of the road after his previous experiences. His arrival at the inn was greeted with

a loud wail by Mrs. Shippam, in which joy, fright and curiosity were all mingled.

"Lawks alive, Mr. Wilding, sir, and wherever have you been all these hours, sir? Mr. Starrock, he went out to meet you hours ago! As for myself, I didn't know what to think, sir, that I didn't. I couldn't go to bed. I said to Shippam, I said: 'Somethin' dreadful's happened to that there nice young fellow, Mr. Wilding,' beggin' your pardon, sir, for takin' such a liberty. Although it's late, Mr. Wilding, don't let that trouble you—if you want anything I'll be only too pleased to get it."

"Thank you, Mrs. Shippam, but I won't have anything except perhaps a little whisky. Have you a time-table in the place?"

"Yes, sir. Of course, sir. But surely you wasn't thinking——?"

"I have to get to London immediately, Mrs. Shippam. I only came back to pay my bill and to get my bag."

"Lawks alive, sir, but there won't be no trains stoppin' at Hillsdown in the middle of the night! Can't you wait till the mornin', sir? There's a hot-water bottle handy for your bed if so be as you're cold—and think, sir, how a nice, hot bit of supper would taste!"

"I know, Mrs. Shippam, but I really must get away." Wilding was thinking that once his flight from that room was discovered, search might be made in the vicinity. The Kenwits knew that he had been

staying at this inn, and it would be a poor return for all this good soul's kindness to create a disturbance and a scandal on her premises.

"But you won't be able to get there by train, Mr. Wilding," persisted the landlady.

"Then I must walk or hire a car. Surely there is someone in Hillsdown who would either drive me himself or hire me his motor-car?"

"There's Joe Biggs—he's got one of they things they call Lizzies. It's late, but perhaps if you went to see him——"

"I don't want to see him. Has your husband gone to bed, Mrs. Shippam?"

"He went up just now, sir, but whether he's in bed yet I can't say."

"Will you see, Mrs. Shippam, please? Give him this, and ask him if he would mind going to Mr. Biggs's house in the village and see if he can't arrange for me to be driven to London within a quarter of an hour, say? I would prefer to have a loan of the car, but——"

"That Joe Biggs is a funny feller to deal with, you must remember, sir. He don't trust no one, don't Joe Biggs."

Barry managed to smile, although inwardly he was cursing at this fatuous delay.

"Very well, Mrs. Shippam, if Mr. Biggs is of such a suspicious character as that, your husband had better be content with arranging for him to drive me to London. Tell him to let Biggs name his own price."

"Very well, sir." Mrs. Shippam prepared to depart. "I don't know when I shall get over the shock of the last few days," she volunteered at the door; "I was only sayin' to Shippam this evenin' that durin' all the years I've been at the Swan Inn I never known such a time as we've been havin' lately. What with what I thought respectable gen'l'men going off without payin', and other perfectly respectable gen'l'men—understand me, *please*, Mr. Wilding, I wouldn't pass any asturgeons, or whatever the word is, on your character, nor would I allow anyone else to pass such asturgeons—vanishin' in the middle of the night. . . . Well, well, well!"

She was gone at last, and, taking up a candle, he went to his room.

Packing was a question of only a few minutes, for he had not brought much away with him, and within ten minutes he was prepared for departure. Shippam had already gone off on his errand, and everything rested now with Joe Biggs. It would be an infernal nuisance if this man refused to earn five pounds. The thought of this made Barry walk restlessly up and down the inn parlour, where he had remained after paying his account. Certainly he must get away from Hillsdown that night. His enemies were so powerful that they had the aid of the very men who should have protected him—the police. But he would outwit them yet. They had asked for trouble—and, by Harry, they should get it! If he couldn't recruit a few choice spirits who would storm, and afterwards

hold, The Durdles against all comers, then he was very much mistaken.

He stopped in his walk. It was damned queer that Starrock hadn't turned up. Surely *he* wasn't in the conspiracy? A moment's reflection told him how absurd this fresh idea was, and he pulled out a fountain pen.

"Look here, Mrs. Shippam," he said to the goggle-eyed landlady, "Mr. Starrock is bound to come back here sooner or later. When he does, tell him that I have gone to London, and give him this address, will you?"

"I will, sir—but after what has happened lately I shouldn't be a bit surprised if the gen'l'man you name didn't turn up a corpse; or perhaps," as another tremendous thought came to her, "I shall 'ear of 'im bein' in prison!"

"I don't expect you will hear that, Mrs. Shippam," replied Wilding, laughing in spite of himself; "you may not know it, but Mr. Starrock is a very famous detective. He is far more likely to put other people in prison than to be sent there himself."

"I'm prepared for anythin'," replied the landlady with monumental poise.

"Hi, Maria!" called a voice from the entrance to the inn. Almost immediately afterwards, Shippam, the landlord, came bustling in. "My best respects, sir, and Joe Biggs says as 'ow 'e'll be round with the car in five minutes' time."

"He didn't raise any great objection, then?"

"Not when he 'eard about the five pounds, sir. But I've got a bit of news for 'e, sir—'straordinary news!"

"Don't tell it, Shippam!" cried his wife, holding up her hands; "don't tell it, leastways not in my presence! I've stood all I can stand. I was only saying to Mr. Wilding here—your news don't concern Mr. Starrock, Mr. Wilding's friend, who's been stayin' here, does it?" she asked eagerly.

The landlord scratched his head.

"That's the funny part o' it," he replied; "it do concern Mr. Starrock. An' when I 'eard it, Maria, you could 'ave knocked me down with a feather! 'Joe Biggs,' I said——"

"You know very well, Shippam, as how Joe Biggs is the biggest liar in Hillsdown. What do you mean standin' there and tellin' me that you stopped to listen to all the stuff and nonsense that Joe Biggs liked to fill you with! All lies——"

"Beggin' your pardon, missus, but what I told your husband is nothin' but the gospel truth. I might have added that 'e ought to be more pertickler who he took in, but that ain't neither 'ere nor there. Where's the gen'l'man who's promised me five pun to drive him to Lunnon to-night?" The speaker, a shifty-eyed, scraggy-necked man of forty-five or so, broke off to inquire.

Mrs. Shippam stepped forward. She had an impressive, not to say a majestic air. She confronted the smirking Joe Biggs and she spoke him good and true.

"And do you think, Joe Biggs, that I'm a-goin' to allow you to leave these premises without tellin' me exactly what you mean by those statements? I order you at once to inform me what it was you told Shippam a few minutes ago. You have cast asturgeons on a gen'l'man who's stayed at this inn with this gen'l'man here," she pointed at the fuming Wilding, who, suitcase in hand, was frantically eager to get away, "an' I demand to know what you mean by it!"

"All right—if you must 'ave it, Mrs. Shippam," retorted Joe Biggs, "you shall." He proceeded to make a statement of such a sensational character that Barry Wilding almost dropped his bag in astonishment.

"I was up at the police station to-night seein' about my licence," he said with a malicious grin, "when who should be brought in but the other gen'l'man—at least, he looks a gen'l'man—who's been staying at this 'ere inn."

"Do you mean to say he had been arrested—pinched?" inquired Mrs. Shippam in a loud tone.

"Yes—for breaking into The Durdles!" replied Joe Biggs with another irritating grin.

Chapter XXVIII

Confusion Worse Confounded

AFTER Sir Bertram Willan had gone into her father's room to have a private talk with Dr. Kenwit, Phyllis went in search of Starkey. She found the negro servant in the kitchen.

"Starkey, are you sure of what you told me just now?" she asked.

The butler's face became animated. The huge lips parted to display a magnificent mouth of teeth.

"Yes, missy. Massa, he tell me. He come to me here and he says: 'Starkey, I have done the most wonderful thing of my life!'" The speaker, lowering his tone, added a few more words.

Phyllis Kenwit's face became radiant with joy.

"Oh, Starkey, I'm so glad that I scarcely know what to do with myself!" she replied. "This will mean that the whole wretched business will be over—done away with, I hope for ever! Have you taken up Mr. Wilding's supper?" she continued with a quick change of tone.

"Yes, missy." The butler looked round cautiously: "I know what was in your mind, missy—so I told Massa Wildin' that eberything would soon be all right. Yes, missy, I told him that through the door." Again the teeth flashed in that ingratiating if rather terrifying smile.

"What did he say, Starkey?"

"He didn't say anythin', missy—leastways, I didn't hear him say anything."

The girl clasped her hands.

"Was he all right? Oh, Starkey, you should have looked to see that he was all right! Come up with me now."

"Suppose massa wants me, missy?"

"My father must wait," was the prompt response;

"you wait on him far too much as it is, Starkey!" Loyal to the backbone, the girl's spirit was fighting at last against her conditions. The possibility of her lover being ill had brought this spirit of revolt to the surface.

"You are sure that the doctor told you what you repeated to me, Starkey?" she asked as they walked away.

"Yes, missy, I'se sure—positive!"

"Very well, then—bring the key of Mr. Wilding's room!"

Starkey recoiled. If his face could have gone white it would have done so.

"What you goin' to do, missy?" he inquired in a tone that anxiety had caused to quaver.

"Do? I am going to release Mr. Wilding, of course! There will be no need for him to be humiliated any longer. I will present him to Sir Bertram Willan, and then the whole thing will be explained. Starkey, if you were Mr. Wilding, do you think you would ever be able to forgive me for what has been done?"

The negro put up a hand to touch very gently the girl's arm.

"Missy, Mr. Wilding, he like you, he forgive you eberything," he said. He might have added out of his own knowledge that whatever the girl had done she had done for the best.

When they reached the great iron door which separated the turret tower from the rest of the house,

Starkey produced a key. But he had no need to use it, for the door was found to be already unlocked.

"Daddy must have come here with Sir Bertram," Phyllis Kenwit said. If anything, this knowledge increased her own resolution, but the same could not be said for the negro butler. His manner became distressed; his knees shook and his eyes rolled piteously. He was struggling between the respect and loyalty he had for his master and the love he bore for his "missy."

"Perhaps if you spoke to massa——" he insinuated, but the girl shook her head.

"I am going to release Mr. Wilding," she replied; "you needn't be afraid, Starkey—I will take all the responsibility. Where is the key?" By this time they had reached the door of the room in which Barry Wilding had been confined. Her hand shook as she put the key into the lock and turned it. Then, mustering all her remaining courage, she opened the door and walked into the room.

A loud cry came from Starkey.

The room was empty.

"Missy! Missy!" The negro was pointing with a trembling forefinger to the bed that had been dragged out of place, to the rope made of torn and twisted sheets. . . .

Her heart in her mouth, Phyllis ran across the room. Yes, Barry Wilding had escaped—and the first thought that flashed into her brain after this realisation was that he had gone from her for ever!

By now he was—must be—a thoroughly desperate man. He would stop at nothing—his natural attitude towards her would be one of bitter contempt and scathing scorn.

Had the girl looked out of the window at that moment she would have seen the escaped captive crouching on the parapet fifteen feet below. But the fact that Wilding was no longer in the room was sufficient. That was so stupefying that she could only look blankly round.

A sudden terrific roar of laughter caused her to clutch Starkey's arm convulsively.

"You told me he was better!" she said in a tone of accusation.

The negro rolled his eyes.

"That is what massa said, missy," he replied. "I not know—I tell you what massa said."

Realising that it was useless to upbraid the butler, Phyllis left the room. She must tell her father of her discovery, she supposed. Everything had become complicated again: there was that dreadful man—really, she had to call him that—laughing in that fiendish manner again, and she would now be unable to give Barry Wilding the explanation which she had determined to make to him.

Outside in the passage she met Sir Bertram Willan. The Home Secretary looked very perturbed. "This is exceedingly unfortunate," she heard him say. Then he saw Phyllis and added: "I am afraid, Miss Kenwit, the news is not so good as I had been led to believe."

There was a tone of reproach as well as of disappointment in his voice.

"Mr. Wilding has escaped!" she announced in dull despair. She felt she almost hated this man through whom so much trouble had come.

Sir Bertram Willan changed his attitude. From a brooding figure, he became intensely alive.

"What?" he shouted. "Where has he gone? How did he escape? Tell me, quickly!"

She looked at him coldly. A spirited retort was forthcoming when her father joined them.

"Have you heard this, Kenwit?" exclaimed Sir Bertram Willan, turning to the other man; "your daughter tells me that Wilding has escaped! Why wasn't better supervision kept of him? This is lamentable!"

Kenwit seemed too stunned to make any reply, and it was left to his daughter to answer.

"I consider your remarks very unjust, Sir Bertram," she said, anger showing in her face; "against his own wishes, I feel sure, daddy carried out your orders. But if you want to know, I have every sympathy with Mr. Wilding—and I am glad he has escaped. Mr. Wilding is a gentleman, and should have been given your confidence. Now—anything can happen!" Feeling that if she stayed any longer she would utterly break down and say things for which she might never afterwards be able to forgive herself, she turned and walked rapidly away.

The Home Secretary turned to Kenwit.

"She is done up. I am sorry, Kenwit—but we can't worry ourselves with that, all the same. This man Wilding must be caught up and taken, before he can do any serious mischief. What do you suggest?"

"I think we had better tell Cross," replied Kenwit. The other brightened.

"Yes, we had. He is in the house, I expect."

Both stared when they saw the Deputy Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard. Cross looked as though he had barely escaped from a recent massacre. His face was swollen and bruised, his lower lip was cut and his general appearance would have disgraced a self-respecting pugilist, let alone an important police officer.

"What on earth has happened to you, Cross?" questioned the Home Secretary impatiently. For a man in Cross's condition to stand in the presence of a Cabinet Minister, seemed hardly respectful.

The Deputy Commissioner blushed beneath his bruises.

"The man Starrock gave me considerable trouble," he confessed.

Sir Bertram Willan reflected.

"Starrock—that was the American detective fellow who promised to create trouble, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Sir Bertram. I was forced to take him to the local station. He wouldn't go quietly, and——"

"No need for you to say any more, Cross. I am sorry you had so much trouble. But now I want your advice—the man Wilding has escaped!"

The Scotland Yard official started to whistle. Then, his cut lip giving him discomfort, he ceased giving expression to his astonishment.

"How did he manage that, sir? I looked the room very carefully over myself."

The Home Secretary made a gesture of impatience.

"How he did it is not important at the moment, Cross. Concentrate on essentials. Now that he *has* escaped, what do you advise?"

"He was staying at the Swan Inn, I understand, Sir Bertram—we must go there at once."

Another impatient gesture came from Willan.

"That is the most obvious thing, Cross—therefore it is out of the question! Wilding will realise that we shall make some effort to recapture him. No, that certainly won't do. You say you have taken the man Starrock to the police station. Very well; we will promise Starrock his release on condition that he tells us where he thinks is the best place to locate Wilding."

The Deputy Commissioner was too polite to throw cold water on the revised plan, but his expression showed that he did not think a great deal of the idea.

"Very well, Sir Bertram."

One has to be polite to a Cabinet Minister.

"They put him in a cell
Because he wasn't well!"

The lines of the old comic song came back to Victor Starrock as he brooded over the extraordinary fate

which had overtaken him. He felt as though he had been well beaten by a gang of toughs, but he had the consolation of knowing that Pat Cross was in even worse state. The thought of the cut lip of the Deputy Commissioner made him smile, although he felt very far from smiling on general principles.

He had been right when he told Barry Wilding that a very important personage, apart from the Home Secretary, was concerned in this affair. This man—whoever he might be—was so important, in fact, that rather than run any risks even with someone whose personal integrity he knew—if Pat Cross couldn't vouch for him, who on earth could?—the Deputy Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard preferred to take him into custody.

Starrock remembered Wilding and dashed one clenched hand impotently into the palm of the other. A nice fellow he was to attempt to give any help. Wilding had depended on him, no doubt—he was the only person upon whom he could rely with any certainty—and here he was a prisoner himself. The fact that it had taken three policemen to drag him to the station had nothing to do with it; the main and principal fact was that he had let a friend down.

Overcome by chagrin, he beat upon the cell door.

This opened to admit two men.

The first Starrock recognised as being the British Home Secretary.

SIR BERTRAM checked the stream of words that Starrock was about to utter by lifting his hand.

"I have come to give you a personal explanation, Mr. Starrock," he said to the American detective; "that, you will say, is due to you. Well, so it is—that is why I have come."

"I'm listening," remarked the detective shortly. This man might be one of the greatest men in England, but a mere apology wasn't sufficient to smooth over this amazing affair. He scowled at Deputy Commissioner Patrick Cross, who, taking up a position by the cell door gave the impression of a lion licking his wounds.

Sir Bertram Willan wasted no time. "This is a foolish position, Mr. Starrock, and I can only apologise once again for you being placed in it. At the same time, I would point out that you had only yourself to blame. If you had not interfered——"

"Unless you can change the tune of your conversation, Sir Bertram," cut in the prisoner, "your time, I shall have to inform you, will be wasted. I have already explained once this evening——" he glared afresh at Deputy Chief Commissioner Cross—"that I have been engaged by Mr. Barry Wilding to investigate a certain matter. Mr. Wilding, apart from being a client, is my friend. To-night I had every reason to believe that something had happened to him. The evidence pointed to his being confined against his will

in a certain house. In pursuance of my duties, I paid a visit to that house. With what result? . . . No, if you please, sir, I must continue. I ask you again, with what result? Why, with this result," Starrock went on, raising his voice, "that I am first threatened with a revolver, and after that I am violently assaulted, although," with another threatening glance at the sorely-battered police official by the door, "I am glad to say I was able to do a little damage in return. To wind up, I was arrested and brought here. This outrage, Sir Bertram Willan, was perpetrated by men who acted under your instructions there is no doubt, and I have to warn you of the possible consequences. The American Ambassador, Mr. Robert Laidley, is a personal friend of mine——"

"For the third time, I make you my apology, Mr. Starrock. I will not offend you by talking about compensation; I will give you an explanation instead." He turned to the man at the door: "Cross!"

The Deputy Chief Commissioner opened the door, took a look outside and then resumed his former position. "There's no one about, sir," he remarked.

"I am afraid I cannot tell you the whole truth even now, Mr. Starrock," started the British Home Secretary; "but at least I can give you sufficient information to throw some light on what, no doubt, is to you a very dark subject indeed."

"As black as pitch," supplemented the detective.

"You were correct in your assumption that **Mr.**

Wilding was being detained in The Durdles, Mr. Starrock," went on the Home Secretary. "For a grave State reason it was considered essential that he should be detained—but I would impress upon you that no harm was intended. He was not to be ill-treated in any way; indeed, I have no doubt that when you see him he will be able to tell you that he was made as comfortable as was possible under the circumstances."

"Then why——?" Starrock started to ejaculate.

"All in good time, Mr. Starrock. I have already told you—in the strictest confidence, please remember—that we felt it was essential that Mr. Barry Wilding should be detained for a reason of State. What that reason is I am not at liberty to add, but to a man of your experience the situation will be understandable. The unfortunate thing is that Wilding has now escaped—we had imagined the room in which he had been placed was secure enough, but unfortunately it did not prove so. The—er—consequences of his being again at large may be disastrous; as a matter of plain fact, they may be so overwhelming that I hesitate to think of them. Mr. Wilding must be found, and found quickly. When he is found I shall be prepared to make a full explanation to him although such an action may involve me in political ruin. Frankly, Mr. Starrock, my whole future as a statesman of this country depends on our being able to find Mr. Wilding quickly. You see I place my cards on the table. Can I count on your help?"

"Certainly!" was the prompt reply. Victor Starrock prided himself on being a sportsman, and this frank and manly appeal was irresistible. "What is it you wish me to do?" he asked.

"We want you to tell us where we may expect to find Mr. Wilding."

"Well, he was staying at the Swan Inn here——" started Starrock, when Sir Bertram Willan shook his head.

"We already know that, Mr. Starrock. What we want from you is another address which you are sure Wilding uses—an address in London, perhaps. He has probably got a good start of us, and I give him credit for more sense than to go tamely to the Swan Inn and wait until we apprehend him again."

The American detective nodded.

"Yes, he is not likely to do that," he agreed, "but all the same, I am afraid that I cannot give you much help, Sir Bertram. Apart from his lawyer—and Wilding hates the man now, I believe, because he thinks he has played a trick off on him—I do not know any address which might be likely to find him. You must remember," he went on, as he imagined the Home Secretary stared rather coldly at him, "that I have only known Barry Wilding a short time. He has told me far more of this present mystery than of his previous history. Although you do not approve of it, Sir Bertram, I would strongly suggest you going to the 'Swan'—in any case, that is the only thing I can think of at the moment."

The Home Secretary turned to the Scotland Yard official.

"Very well," he said. "Cross, you had better make your peace with Mr. Starrock, who will be immediately released, of course."

"If you had only listened to me," said Pat Cross, advancing towards his old friend with outstretched hand.

Starrock accepted the hand-grip, but made no other reply. His mind was too busy with other questions—more immediate problems. He could have his final settlement with Cross any time, he reflected. He wanted to ask a whole heap of questions, but he knew that they would not be answered. The Home Secretary, moreover, was plainly impatient to be away.

Ten minutes later the three were at the Swan Inn. The first person they saw was Phyllis Kenwit.

Sir Bertram Willan frowned.

"Miss Kenwit, I am surprised to see you here," he said, an edge to his tone.

The girl met his angry glance unflinchingly.

"At a proper time I will give you my explanation, Sir Bertram," she said; "in the meantime, I want you please to understand that I felt it my duty to come here—late as it was." Phyllis did not add that her real purpose in arriving at the Swan Inn after midnight was to warn the man she loved that, if he valued his freedom, he must get away at once from the neighbourhood.

"Very well." The statesman did not waste another word on the girl whose action he had so questioned, but turned to face the wide-eyed Mrs. Shippam. The landlady's round, rubicund face was puckered with astonishment. This momentous night she was feasting her fill upon sensation. Never would there be such another evening.

"Now, madam," started Sir Bertram Willan.

"Now, sir," replied Mrs. Shippam; "may I remind you that it's gone midnight and that I'm a respectable female who likes to be in bed at a Christian 'our? "

"We are from Scotland Yard, madam," was the prompt answer, "and, reluctant as I am to trouble you at this late hour, we are here on highly important business. What we wish to know is whether a gentleman by the name of Mr Barry Wilding has been here to-night? "

"Yes, he has—and gone again." The landlady snapped the words.

"Ah! And where did he go, my good woman? "

The Home Secretary was well-meaning, but his tone was patronising. Mrs. Shippam disliked being patronised. On such slender threads great events often hang.

"That's Mr. Wilding's own business—you won't get nothin' out of me!" she replied with spirit; "an' here's another thing. If you're from Scotland Yard, let me tell you that it's 'igh time we 'ad an inspector with some sense down in these parts! That Baker man is a fair disgrace." It would seem

that the speaker was resolved to drag a red herring across the path, if possible.

"I warn you that the consequences may be serious to yourself if you do not tell us all you know about Mr. Wilding's movements to-night," came the stern voice of the man who was interrogating her.

"I know nothin' about Mr. Wilding's movements after 'e left 'ere—if you can't stop makin' those foolish noises, Shippam, you had better leave the room!" she broke off to admonish her spouse, who was evidently keen on making a disclosure.

"What time did Mr. Wilding arrive here, madam?"

The landlady considered.

"It would be about an hour—no, it was well over an hour ago. Leastways, I should say it was."

"You had better refresh your memory. I have already warned you of the consequences if you don't."

Mrs. Shippam bridled.

"Don't you try to terrify me, sir!" she protested. "I'm a Hillsdown woman, born and bred, I am—and Hillsdown women were never ones to be terrified. All I can tell you is that Mr. Wilding—and let me say that a nicer gentleman than Mr. Wilding never stepped—came here about an hour or so ago and asked me for his bill. He said he was leavin' the neighbourhood. He paid me what he owed and that was the last I saw of him. An' now, as Shippam and me is both tired, I'll trouble you to allow us both to go to bed."

"Did Mr. Wilding tell you where he intended to go?" was the next question.

"No, he didn't! Shippam, get on off to bed—you make me feel ashamed of you, lookin' as stupid as any owl!"

"One more question! Did he leave any address?"

"What should he leave me any address for, pray? He was merely stoppin' in Hillsdown for a few days. It isn't none of my business to go pryin' into the affairs of gentlemen who stop at the Swan. I should soon lose what bit of custom I've got if I did things like that, let me tell you."

The Home Secretary made a gesture to the Deputy Commissioner who was standing by his side. It seemed hopeless to carry his questioning further.

"I am sorry to have troubled you, madam," he said, placing two pound notes on the table. "You will stay here, I suppose, Mr. Starrock?"

"Yes," replied the American detective. "Sorry I could not give you better assistance, sir."

Directly the other men had left, Mrs. Shippam caught Starrock's arm.

"I know where Mr. Wilding went," she said in an excited whisper, "but I wasn't going to tell them. No fear!"

Chapter XXX

The Step on the Stairs

PHYLLIS KENWIT did not wait to hear the end of the conversation between Sir Bertram Willan and Mrs. Shippam. She had arrived at the inn only a few

minutes before the Home Secretary and the Scotland Yard official, and a brief talk with Mrs. Shippam, whose heart had seemed to open to her at once—no doubt the landlady had read her secret—had told her all she wanted to know. Whilst Mrs. Shippam had pretended not to know the exact address, she had added that Mr. Wilding had gone to London.

London!

That meant, to Phyllis's mind, as she walked back along the pitch-black road to The Durdles, the little service flat in Newton Street, Piccadilly, which she had visited that night some time before. It seemed likely that Barry would at least call there. If she could not see him, she could leave a note.

Avoiding her father upon reaching the house, she went quietly to her room. But sleep proved impossible. The sense of excitement under which she was labouring became too intense. She was determined to see Barry Wilding—but how would he receive her? As likely as not he would treat her with the stinging scorn which no doubt he considered her conduct deserved. But she must risk that; at all costs she was determined to save him from further molestation. At all costs—yes, even if it involved telling him what should have been told him long before.

She was up at dawn, eager to be away. Leaving a note for her father, she breakfasted off a cup of tea and an apple—she was healthy enough not to suffer from any ill-effects!—and was on her way to the station before seven o'clock.

Arrived at Paddington, she took a taxi to Piccadilly. Her heart was beating wildly as she climbed the dark staircase, the memory of which had never left her.

Was that the door? Yes, she remembered the green paint. She rang, the suspense while she waited being almost unendurable.

No answer came, even when she rang the second and third time. Phyllis reproached herself then for being such a fool; naturally, with the police after him, Barry would not be so stupid as to come to the very house the address of which he knew was in her possession! The raking bitterness of that thought overwhelmed her. The man she had come to save would avoid her like the plague! To Barry Wilding she must appear as the incarnation of every feminine evil. . . .

Turning to go down the stairs, she heard a man climbing upwards. A feeling of fear came over her, and, actuated by this, she shrank back into a recess that held several degrees more gloom than the rest of the staircase.

The steps sounded nearer. Presently they stopped. From her hiding-place she could see a man ringing the bell of Barry Wilding's flat. She was tempted to come out from her dark retreat, touch the man on the arm, and say: "Mr. Wilding isn't there. I know because I've been ringing that bell myself."

But she did not do so, and the man, after ringing a second time, went back down the stairs.

Phyllis was quickly after him. This man must be

a friend or acquaintance of Barry Wilding's, she argued. She could not speak to him, of course, but by following him she might gain some kind of a clue. But supposing he were an enemy? Then again she decided she must follow him. There was not time as she walked down the stairs after the man to try to think calmly, or even logically; an impulse came to her mind and she resolved to act upon it. This man might represent only a thousand-to-one chance of her being able to get into touch with Barry Wilding, but she must not neglect it. This was her only hope.

The change from the dark stairway to the dazzling sun-scorched street almost blinded her, and for a moment she blinked. When her eyes became more accustomed to the trying light, she bit her lip—the man she had followed was the American detective, who had told her the previous evening that he had been engaged by Barry Wilding to clear up the mystery with which he was surrounded.

Should she confide in him? He must be a friend of Barry's. She stepped forward, one hand outstretched to touch the man on the arm.

Back at the Swan Inn, Hillsdown, Starrock had smiled appreciatively when the landlady vouchsafed the information that she knew where Barry Wilding had gone.

"Splendid, Mrs. Shippam!" he exclaimed. "I take it that Mr. Wilding asked you not to let anyone know but me—is that it?"

"That is just what 'appened, Mr. Starrock. Even

when that young lady, who's as beautiful as any picture, came half an hour ago, looking that pale I thought she would just about faint away in my arms, I kept what I knew to myself. 'Give this to no one but my friend Mr. Starrock,' Mr. Wilding said just before he went away. But what does all this mean, Mr. Starrock? Can you tell me that?"

"I'm afraid I cannot, Mrs. Shippam, because I don't know myself. But you can take it that Mr. Wilding has done nothing of which he need be ashamed."

"That I can well believe, Mr. Starrock. If you ask me, that there Baker is at the back of it all."

"I shouldn't be surprised, Mrs. Shippam," replied Starrock, seizing on this chance to give a reason which would be satisfying to the landlady; "but everything will come out all right, I feel sure. How long ago did Mr. Wilding leave, Mrs. Shippam?"

"He went getting on for an hour ago now in Joe Biggs's Ford car. Terribly anxious to get away, he were."

Starrock took his bedroom candle.

"I shall be off early in the morning, Mrs. Shippam—so early that I shall not think of disturbing you."

"What about breakfast, Mr. Starrock?" The thought of anyone leaving the inn without possessing himself of a good lining to his stomach was perturbing to this admirable person.

"I shall manage all right. I can get breakfast in London—the journey will give me an appetite."

"You'll tell Mr. Wilding when you see him that I

followed out his instructions ? ” called the landlady as he mounted the stairs.

“ I certainly will, Mrs. Shippam.” Turning the corner, Starrock applied the closure to the conversation.

Arriving at the station early the next morning, the American was able to catch a glimpse of the girl he had every reason to believe had decoyed Barry Wilding. The presence of Phyllis Kenwit on the train set him thinking. What was her reason in going to London ?

Although frantically hungry, he resisted the temptation at Paddington Station to go into the refreshment buffet. He must discover this girl's game.

When Phyllis Kenwit engaged a taxi, he got into the next one on the rank. If the girl had looked back, she would have been bound to see him. But she was too absorbed in her quest.

Starrock was not altogether surprised when the first taxi drew up outside the block of Piccadilly flats which represented the address he had been given by the landlady of the Swan Inn. Was this girl seeking to play the fascinating temptress again ? It seemed crude, because even a man who was as much in love as Barry Wilding would be on his guard a second time. Still, one could never tell with a woman.

Waiting until the girl had dismissed her taxi, Starrock followed her into the block of flats. He was astonished upon reaching the third flight and the door on which was painted “ B. III,” to find that the girl had apparently disappeared. She could not have gone into Wilding's flat, outside of which he now stood

because he could not get any answer to his own rings. His first surmise was inaccurate ; the girl must have called upon someone else in the same building.

Nevertheless, the presence of Phyllis Kenwit in London, and above all in that block of flats, that morning, was significant. Starrock resolved to wait until she appeared and then follow her.

His plan received severe sub-editing when he reached the street. Across the road he saw a man watching him. Instantly he put his hand up to his face in order to hide his features as much as was possible. Another hand emerged from a pocket holding a false moustache and a pair of spectacles. With a quickness that would have deceived ninety-nine persons out of every hundred, the moustache was placed over the upper lip and the spectacles fixed. In two seconds the entire personality of Victor Starrock had changed ; he was now an elderly gentleman, somewhat bent in the back, whose grey moustache and gold-rimmed spectacles gave him a professional air.

Quick as he had been, the man on the opposite side of the road had evidently taken alarm, for he started to walk away at a rapid pace.

The attention of several passers-by in Newton Street, Piccadilly, was immediately attracted by the sight of a distinctly elderly gentleman walking with tremendous speed.

“ What a wonderful old boy ! ” one admiring club-man exclaimed.



The man whose left hand had the little finger missing leered at the prisoner.

"Here you are all nice and snug, Starrock," he said with malicious satisfaction; "instead of putting me in the Chair you're in it yourself. And in about twenty minutes' time you'll be in Kingdom Come and there won't be so much as a waistcoat button left by which you can be identified!"

No sound came from the man who had been so tightly bound in the kitchen arm-chair that he could not move. But in that pregnant moment, when he knew that unless a miracle happened he would be murdered with such fiendish cunning that not a shred of evidence would be left by which his slayers might be traced, he stared unblinkingly at Three-fingered Dan Warton.

"You'll go to the Chair all right, Warton," he said; "if I don't send you there someone else will—don't forget that!"

"Bah!" commented the prospective murderer. "In twenty minutes you'll be blown sky-high. We've finished with this dump, so it doesn't matter. Twenty minutes in which to say your prayers, Starrock, and then——" Chuckling obscenely, Warton left the cellar.

VICTOR STARROCK had faced death many times, and in all kinds of ways, but his present ordeal was the most unnerving experience of his life. Only a few feet above him were the hurrying crowds of the metropolis ; he could hear their footsteps on the pavement. A few feet away . . . and yet so far that these men and women who would have rescued him so easily might have been in Africa !

He could not even shout, for Warton before he left had stuffed a gag into his mouth. Now, helpless in every way—he was bound hand and foot to a chair—he had only a few minutes left of life. His end would come at the moment that the slow-burning fuse connected with the high explosive which would blow his body into a million infinitesimal fragments. Twenty minutes, Warton had said. Five of these must have been ticked away. . . .

Starrock belonged to a class of man whose daily life is bristling with risks. Danger to such is merely part of the game. He had been a hunter of dangerous men for many years ; the murderer's knife or revolver had many times sought to kill him. That he was still alive was due in a considerable measure to luck.

In the ordinary way this might have made him philosophical ; given other circumstances, he probably would have met defeat with a quiet fortitude and a stoical resignation, realising that, however skilfully

one plays the cards, they sometimes run against you.

But to be caught like this was simply hellish ; so sure had Warton been that his enemy's death was encompassed that the crook had detailed the future plans of the small gang with which he was associated. If only he could get free . . . if only someone would come. . . .

Even while the natural wish nearly drove him mad, he knew that the hope could not be realised. According to Warton he had been left in an otherwise empty house. The upper floors had been unlet for some time. What was more, he had been taken into a cellar underground. Who would come by chance to the cellar of an empty house ?

Another five minutes must have passed. God ! this was agony ! Ten minutes left of life—with that swine Warton gloating over the success of his scheme ! The explosion would destroy all evidence of the man's crime ; nothing could be traced to him. “ And while you are floating about in the air, just specks of dust, Starrock, I shall be on my way back to Hillsdown to get the treasure at The Durdles ! That ought to give you a nice send-off ! ”

Starrock could not repress a groan. The gag in his mouth prevented any sound from escaping, and yet—yet——

What was it ? Surely that was a footstep he had heard ?

The next moment Victor Starrock had the shock of his life.

Standing in the doorway of the cellar, a revolver in her right hand, was a girl he knew — Phyllis Kenwit !

He could not make any appeal, and when she crossed to him he had a fresh terror. Suppose the explosion occurred before he could warn her ?

But Phyllis Kenwit proved quick-witted ; she saw immediately his plight. Her first act was to remove the gag from his mouth. Yet when he was free to speak, the sense of strain with Starrock was so intense that he could only point with a shaking finger at the slowly-burning fuse.

" Put it out ! " he mumbled almost incoherently, and when the girl stamped on the vile thing he shuddered with relief.

Neither wasted any time on explanations ; it was sufficient for both that a terrible tragedy had been averted, if only by the narrowest margin.

" I must get back to The Durdles immediately ! " exclaimed the detective after the girl had cut his bonds.

" Why, what has happened, Mr. Starrock ? I came to London to see Mr. Wilding. There is something I want to tell him—something I have to tell him ! " Her tone was urgent.

The American detective looked at her keenly.

" Do you mean you want to tell him what Sir Bertram Willan was afraid to tell me ? "

Unless he was mistaken, Starrock thought that the girl shivered.

"Yes," she replied; "it has gone on too long—I cannot stand any more. Whatever my father says, whatever may happen, I must tell Mr. Wilding! I should have told him last night only he had escaped."

"I must help you to find him," replied the detective.

At that moment the missing man might have been discovered in the private bar of a small hotel near Victoria Station. He was being assailed with offers of hospitality from two men he had never anticipated seeing again in this life, but whom he was all the more glad to meet on that account.

Arriving in the metropolis in the early hours of the morning, he had wandered aimlessly about the purlieus of Paddington after paying Joe Biggs the stipulated fee.

What he hoped to do, what he wanted to do, was very indefinitely fixed in his mind—in point of fact, it was not fixed at all. Only one thing was clear: this was that, whilst the mighty City was the best possible place in which to hide, he must keep clear of his flat in Newton Street. Phyllis Kenwit knew that address and, a traitress and a decoy, she would tell the police.

He breakfasted off a coffee-stall near Covent Garden, and enjoyed the simple food with the zest of a wonderful appetite. The thought flashed through his mind of effecting some disguise, but he dismissed

the notion as being fantastic and not worth while. Let a policeman put a hand on him. . . .

What made him clamber on the bus that was going to Victoria he did not know, but outside the famous station two men, who had been watching him curiously from the other side of the road, suddenly crossed at a rapid pace, regardless of the rushing tide of traffic both ways, and literally fell on him from the back.

Wilding lashed out wildly, and a crowd, probably under the impression that plain-clothes officers were making an arrest, had collected before Barry smiled somewhat shamefacedly. He had recognised the two men as old-time friends.

"Why, Barry, what the deuce?" asked the tall, thin man with the preternaturally grave face.

"Yes, Barry, what do you mean by treating fellows who haven't set eyes on you for nearly three years in this fashion?" demanded the rotund, shorter man who was the other's companion.

Wilding quickly pulled himself together.

"You mustn't think I'm not glad to see you chaps," he countered; "because I am—damned glad. But let's go somewhere where we can talk."

"We're both staying at the Belchester," said the tall man, naming a famous hotel in the neighbourhood.

"Croesus!" scoffed Wilding; "I'm not going there. I'm not dressed for the part. Let's find somewhere quieter—I've got something to tell you."

Both Phil Gregson, the tall man, and Tony Trevor, his rotund companion, were evidently so pleased to

meet their old friend again that neither raised any demur, and presently all three were pledging each other in a glass of good honest English ale in a neighbouring bar.

"Now, tell us your good news—I can see by the look in your eye, Barry, that something's happened to you," said Gregson. "What brought you to England, anyway? The last we heard of you was that you were prospecting up the Congo."

"So I was, but—well, something happened, as you say, Phil." The speaker paused sufficiently to take another pull at his glass. After several hours' wandering about alone, he was tired of himself. Besides, he knew he could trust both these men—he had known them in China, where the three had roughed it together some years before.

"At the present time I am a man for whom the entire police force of this country are looking," started Wilding, not realising how dramatic, even melodramatic, the words sounded.

Philip Gregson grinned.

"What've you been doing, you old freak?" he inquired; "robbing someone of a fortune?"

This time it was Barry Wilding's turn to smile.

"Do you fellows want some excitement?"

"We should love it!" was the prompt answer of Trevor. "England's fine, but after a fellow's been abroad he's apt to find life here a bit slow."

"You think so? Well, I can't say that I've found it tame since I got back."

Gregson rapped out an order for some more drinks. Then he turned to the last speaker.

"Look here, Barry, I know jolly well you've got a yarn to spin. Let's have it."

"All right," agreed Wilding; "long before I've come to the end you'll both decide that I'm clean out of my mind, but a little thing like that doesn't matter."

To a deeply interested audience he then told a plain, unvarnished story of everything which had happened since he had arrived in London after crossing the Channel.

At the end Gregson whistled.

"It was just as well you warned us, old boy," he commented; "if you told that story to the average mental specialist he'd certify you on the spot. The Home Secretary, did you say?"

"You don't believe me?" demanded Wilding indignantly.

"On the contrary," replied Gregson, "I believe every word. This is too good—far too good—a yarn not to be believed, Wilding. If this turned out to be untrue I should break my heart. All my life I have longed to be thrown neck and crop into a seven-and-sixpenny shocker—and here's the commencement of the best thriller I've ever heard! The Home Secretary the chief of a secret criminal organisation!—Barry, my boy, you must be beloved of the gods! The thing is—what are you going to do about us—you must fit us in somewhere."

gentleman's midriff, caused him to use some very unecclesiastical language indeed.

When comparative order had been restored, Gregson spoke again.

"We mustn't forget our parts," he said; "what's your name and rank, Wilding?"

Barry brought his hand up smartly to the salute.

"Captain David Guinness of the Tank Corps"—an announcement which was immediately greeted with "Stout fellow!" from Tony Trevor.

"And you?"

"Lieutenant Harry Osborne, of H.M.S. *Battleaxe*—surely there is a *Battleaxe*?" Trevor added hopefully.

"While I am the Rev. Oswald Osborne—brother to the last witness," supplemented the clergyman—"and I'll keep it up even if this confounded dog's collar chokes me," he added, fingering his neck tenderly.

To Gregson went the credit of the brain-wave.

"There's only one thing to be done," he had said the previous evening, after various plans had been discussed and found unpracticable; "we must go down there disguised. It's the only way. There's a difference between being merely plucky and being a darned fool. Wilding says himself that the police will be on the look-out for him. Obviously, then, he can't go down to the show simply as himself. The thing to do, as I said before, is to be disguised."

"You talk like someone out of a rotten book!" commented Trevor, "but go on."

"I know a fellow, an old actor, who'll change us all so that we shan't be able to recognise ourselves. He helps amateurs with private theatricals and"—vaguely—"all that sort of thing. I heard of him while I was in Hong-Kong. Freddie Simpson told me a great wheeze how this fellow—Anstruthers, his name is—got Freddie up as a girl to attend an Albert Hall ball, and one of the six blokes that made love to him was his own brother!"

"Good enough!" declared Tony Trevor; "if Wilding is of the same way of thinking, I vote we pay a quick call on Mister Anstruthers. I would fain transform myself."

"It's your stomach that will be your undoing, my lad!" said Gregson darkly; "you can't expect anyone to disguise that."

Barry Wilding joined in the good-humoured laugh. Meeting these two old wanderer-friends had changed his outlook. Before he had been inclined to be morbid and depressed. Now, although not one whit of his determination had gone, his mood was changed. He felt himself caught up in the spell of a big adventure.

Anstruthers proved to be a burly man with an infectious laugh and a keen sense of humour. Whether he believed the story that Gregson told him—how the three were going as guests to a country house and wished to play a harmless joke off on their host—neither could decide, but—and this was vastly more important—he readily agreed to change their features

so that their nearest friends, he swore, would be unable to recognise them.

"Yes, but we wish to keep the game up—we don't want to wash off the make-up before we go to bed the first night and then be stranded the next morning."

"I will explain how you can make yourselves up afresh every morning, gentlemen," replied the admirable Anstruthers; "you need have no misgiving."

"But clothes?" asked Tony Trevor, with a sudden rush of brains to the head.

Anstruthers smiled.

"I can also provide clothes. Will you tell me what new rôles you have thought of undertaking?"

"This fellow and I," said Gregson, indicating Trevor, "are supposed to be brothers. Mr.—I refer to the stalwart, handsome individual over there," nodding at Barry Wilding—"is our friend. What I rather thought of was myself as a parson, my brother as a naval officer, and our friend as a captain in the Army—he used to be in the Tanks."

"I admire your choice. Your brother may be a little awkward to fit, but I have no doubt we shall be able to manage everything satisfactorily."

Anstruthers proved to be not merely a man of his word, but a magician. That same afternoon he sent the three away completely disguised.

"Now we shall be as right as ninepence!" commented Philip Gregson, giving his clergyman's collar a somewhat vicious tug; "who would think of arrest-

ing a clergyman, a naval officer or a soldier? It's brains you want, you chaps. I thought of all this."

"Marvellous!" declared Trevor with a touch of satire. "What strikes me as being equally important, however, is to get a bed for to-night. What about wiring to that pub-place of yours, Wilding?"

"Right! I will," answered Barry and, crossing the road, he entered a telegraph office. He was in the place so long that his companions remonstrated with him when he came out.

And now here they were on their way to what promised to be a stirring adventure via the Swan Inn, Hillsdown.

The three of them had dined comfortably in Town, thinking it best to arrive at the village inn after sunset. Trevor, who had been rather heavy-handed with the port at dinner—"quite in keeping with my rôle of a naval officer, you fellows"—started to snooze. Gregson opened a book and, for want of something to do, Barry Wilding picked up the evening paper which he had bought at Paddington. He was idly scanning the front page when his eye was attracted by some staring head-lines:

"FAMOUS MURDERER DIES.

"FOUND DEAD IN CELL.

"SENSATIONAL CRIME RECALLED.

"A tremendous sensation was caused to-day by

the official announcement that Hector Mundesley, the famous inventor, who was declared guilty of murdering his housekeeper a few weeks ago, was found dead in the condemned cell at Pentonhurst Prison early this morning. The medical officer of the prison has stated that death was due to heart failure. Thus the most illustrious criminal condemned to death by an English court of law for many years has escaped the last dread punishment for his crime, which was of a particularly revolting character."

Beneath this was another and smaller heading :

"THE STORY OF THE CRIME

"The particulars of the crime of which Hector Mundesley was convicted will be fresh in the minds of our readers. Hector Mundesley, the cousin of Sir Bertram Willan, the present Home Secretary, was an inventor of international fame. He is said to have done more, by reason of his brilliant technical and scientific attainments, towards winning the European War than any other man among the Allies.

"On the night of April 9th, Hector Mundesley walked into the Cannon Row police-station and stated that he had killed his housekeeper, a Miss Carmichael, a woman who had been in the inventor's service for very many years, and who, it was proved at the subsequent inquest, was devoted to his interests.

"A visit by the police to the inventor's house disclosed a shocking sight. Miss Carmichael had been brutally killed ; her head had been battered by a bloodstained hammer, and there were marks on her throat which pointed to death by strangulation.

"Hector Mundesley freely confessed to the crime, and volunteered such an amazing defence that he was immediately considered to be insane. 'She made me eat food when I didn't want it,' he said. 'I had to kill her because I couldn't eat the food.'

"The accused was at once medically examined. Between the mental experts there was a wide and very conflicting diversity of opinion. Sir Aloysius Allen and Sir Farquhar Farjeon opined that the accused was hopelessly, even incurably insane, but other experts were equally strongly of the view that Hector Mundesley was perfectly sane.

"In the end he was adjudged able to plead ; and after a short but dramatic trial at the Old Bailey, he was declared guilty and condemned to death by Mr. Justice Averson, who broke down immediately he had pronounced the dread sentence and had to be medically attended.

"Much sympathy has been felt for that distinguished politician and faithful servant of the Crown, Sir Bertram Willan, His Majesty's Secretary of State for Home Affairs."

Newspaper sensations were not much in Barry Wilding's line, and but for the mention of Sir Bertram

Willan he would probably not have read on to the end. But seeing the name of the man he had every reason to believe was an implacable as well as a mysterious enemy, he was naturally interested. Crime seemed to run in the Willan blood, was the conclusion to which he came as he laid down the paper ; a first cousin was a brutal murderer and Willan himself, judging from appearances, was a crook of a most dangerous character. "Distinguished politician and faithful servant of the Crown" his hat ! Before many more hours he hoped to expose the man, to show him to the world in his true colours.

It was dusk by the time the party reached the small station, but the platform was crowded with curious sightseers, amongst whom Barry was able to recognise his acquaintance, Joe Biggs.

"Why the populace?" asked Lieutenant Harry Osborne of H.M.S. *Battleaxe*.

"The news of distinguished company being due at the 'Swan' has evidently gone the rounds," replied Barry. Then, almost instantaneously, Wilding's voice changed. "O Lord!" he groaned.

Coming towards him down the narrow platform was a girl.

Phyllis Kenwit.

PHYLLIS KENWIT proved her quality by not asking a number of questions when Starrock made the statement that he must get back immediately to The Durdles. One thing only she inquired: "Are you doing this for Mr. Wilding's good?" When the American detective replied with a decisive "Yes—certainly!" she raised no further demur.

Starrock showed how much he appreciated the girl's action by giving her a rapid résumé of what he had learned from Three-fingered Dan Warton.

"This house, The Durdles," he said as they sat over a hurried meal in the nearest restaurant before proceeding to Paddington, "belonged to an early ancestor of Barry Wilding's. This man, whose name was John Trevannion, was a captain under Drake——"

"Wonderful!" commented Phyllis Kenwit softly, her eyes aglow. She was thinking how picturesque the man she loved would have looked in the clothes of that bygone romantic age. A captain under Drake—the glamour there was in the words!

"Yes. I guess friend Wilding came from the right stock," went on the American detective. "This Trevannion was no better than the rest of his class at that time—he plundered the enemies of Good Queen Bess mercilessly, and amassed what no doubt was a very considerable fortune. Laden with this spoil, he returned to England, built himself a house in a quiet.

deserted spot where he thought what enemies he might have had would never find him, and settled down. There, in the course of time, was born to him a son. . . . Are you interested ? ”

“ I’m thrilled ! ” was the quick reply. With her face cupped between her hands, and her elbows resting on the table, she was obviously enthralled.

“ Apparently the quiet joys of domesticity and parenthood began to pall upon this hardy old seadog. In any case, from what Wilding has been able to discover, John Trevannion left with Sir Walter Raleigh, the famous explorer—and the discoverer of tobacco, by the way—for Virginia. There he would seem to have died. But he intended to do the right thing by his son, for he sent home by a faithful seaman his will. This—as was customary at the time, apparently—took the form of a cryptogram. This could easily be read by anyone in the know, but would be more or less incomprehensible to an enemy or to an unscrupulous person.

“ On the way home something happened to the faithful seaman, Silas Bent. At all events, he turned up with only half of the cryptogram, or will. The story he told was that he had been attacked, and in the scuffle the thing got torn. Who had the other half he could not say.

“ Of course, the whole affair, as you may imagine, is more or less wrapped in mystery and many blanks have had to be filled in by our imaginations. We

do not know for certain that the treasure is still hidden somewhere in the house——”

The girl touched his arm.

“It is in the cellars!” she said. “Listen, Mr. Starrock! Twice we have had burglars. The last time they captured me, bound me to a chair, and put me in one of those underground vaults. There were three men—one of them had the little finger of his left hand missing—and they commenced to search everywhere. They were awfully disappointed and angry when they met with no luck.”

Starrock nodded.

“Your story, Miss Kenwit, corroborates what I am going to tell you,” he said. “The man with the missing little finger is a notorious American crook. The reason I came to Europe was to arrest him for the murder of a famous American book collector named Rosenfeld. This man, who was a Philadelphia millionaire, had the finest collection of valuable books in the world. He was found stabbed late one night in his library. Suspicion rested on Three-Fingered Dan Warton, as this man is known to the police, and hearing that he had fled across the ocean, I was instructed by the relatives of the murdered man to trail him.”

The girl rose.

“To sum it up,” she said, “this man Warton got a clue as to the treasure at The Durdles—might it not have been that the millionaire he murdered had something in a book——?”

“That’s an idea!” admitted Starrock; “I’ve often

wondered why Warton fixed on Rosenfeld because the latter did not collect anything but books ; it may be, as you say, that in the mysterious way crooks of the highest class have—and Warton belongs to the top circles in crime, believe me—he got hold of the information that Rosenfeld had in his possession a clue which would lead to a great haul. But he is going to have a spoke put into his wheel. I think we are safe enough from his attentions to-night, but all the same I think we had better catch that first train down to Hillsdown.”

“ Yes. If there is any treasure it must be saved for the rightful owner,” replied Phyllis Kenwit. “ Mr. Starrock, I am going to exchange confidence for confidence—I am going to tell you the other secret of The Durdles—the reason why Mr. Wilding was imprisoned—the reason . . . oh, why everything has been so horrid and wretched for the past few weeks—ever since, in fact, I first met—Barry.”

Starrock’s eyes twinkled.

“ I am not going to allow you to tell me, Miss Kenwit—for this reason,” he added hastily. “ You have made a pledge both to your father and to Sir Bertram Willan, I take it ? ” When she had nodded, he continued : “ Very well, you must not break it on my account, Miss Kenwit. After all, I am not a principal in this business—it was only by the merest chance that I came into it at all. If Barry Wilding were here it would be a different thing.”

“ Oh, how I wish he were ! ” And so the question

which Starrock, greatly daring, was going to ask—if she returned the love Wilding had for her?—was not put. Phyllis Kenwit had answered it of her own accord!

On the platform at Paddington Phyllis noticed the back of a man. Somehow that back seemed familiar. Then she noticed that the man in question was attired in the uniform of a British army officer, and her new-found hope died swiftly.

On the way to Hillsdown she and Starrock discussed what was best to be done.

"I shall go to the 'Swan' after seeing you safely home, Miss Kenwit," said the detective. "We will not worry your father to-night unless you think fit; and, in any case, Deputy-Commissioner Cross and some of his men will probably still be in the house. You could tell Cross if you liked, but I do not think there is much fear of anything happening to-night."

"But we are going to offer you hospitality, Mr. Starrock. Do you think after all your kindness I am going to allow you to sleep at an inn? Daddy can let you have some things," she added.

"Well, if you put it like that, I shall be very pleased to accept. There is a chance, of course, that Warton and his gang may not waste any more time now that they have the full plan."

Phyllis considered. "I do not think we will bother father by telling him, not to-night at any rate," she said; "besides, he is so absent-minded that he probably would not take any notice if we did. And

I shall be fully occupied inventing some excuse for being away all day."

"Will you tell him how you saved me from a particularly unpleasant death?"

"Why should I?" she laughed.

"I shall insist upon telling Barry Wilding when I see him." And the detective was rewarded by seeing a vivid crimson tide flush the girl's cheeks.

By this time the train had pulled up at the small country station. They alighted and walked towards the entrance.

"Look, there's an unusual thing," remarked Phyllis, drawing her companion's attention; "a soldier, a naval officer and a clergyman all together. Which uniform do you like best, Mr. Starrock?"

The detective looked.

"The soldier looks the best fellow to my mind," he replied. His eyes became puzzled. "There's something about the way that man's standing which seems familiar to me," he added; "but I can't know him—I don't know any British army officer."

Yet, as he passed the trio, Starrock felt that the army officer's eyes were fixed intently upon him. Although he could not recognise the man's voice, he was certain he must have seen him somewhere or other.

Not being successful in securing a conveyance—it seemed that the only one available had been engaged beforehand by the distinguished-looking trio they had passed on the platform—Phyllis and Starrock walked

to The Durdles. A sleepy-looking Starkey let them in.

"Massa gone to bed, missy," he vouchsafed.

"Has he been anxious about me, Starkey?"

"No, missy—I've told him you had gone to London to do some shopping."

"That was very kind of you. Now, make haste and get a spare room ready—Mr. Starrock here is going to stay the night. You can manage to put him up?"

The negro butler looked doubtful.

"Not very well, missy. Massa Cross he went away to-day. But Massa Sir still here."

Starrock laughed.

"Who is 'Massa Sir'?"

"He means Sir Bertram Willan. I am afraid you will have to be content with a shake-down in that case, Mr. Starrock—I'm most awfully sorry, but our sleeping accommodation is rather limited. Of course, you are entirely welcome to my room——"

The detective cut her protestations short by an uplifted hand.

"If you have a sofa I shall be very pleased to sleep on it. Otherwise I'll sit up. I would not intrude at all, but that I have a sneaking feeling somehow that Warton may pay us a visit to-night. It isn't likely, as I have said, but I like to be on the safe side when it's at all possible."

"Do the best you can for Mr. Starrock, Starkey," said the girl.

Ten minutes later, while she was in her room, a knock came on the door. Going to it, she saw the negro butler.

“ Well, Starkey ? ”

“ I have made up a bed on the Chesterfield in the dining-room, missy—and here is a telegram which came to-night.” He held out the buff-coloured envelope.

A telegram ! Who could have sent her a telegram ?

Anxious to find an answer, she tore the envelope and smoothed out the pinkish piece of paper.

This is what she read :

Your last warning. Leave The Durdles directly you receive this. Vital.—Wilding.

Chapter XXXIV

Action

BARRY felt his heart thumping against his ribs as Phyllis Kenwit approached him. For a moment he thought that she had penetrated his disguise and that she would speak. But, with a curious trembling of the lower lip, she passed on with her companion.

Starrock ! What was he doing with her ? Had he fallen under her spell ? Had she enlisted the detective, who had sworn to be his ally, in her traitorous service ? He would soon know : Starrock would be sure to return to the Swan Inn that night, and when he did he would tackle him. He

had to know whether Starrock was still a friend or whether, through Phyllis Kenwit's machinations, he had turned himself into an enemy.

"Come on, what are you dreaming about, Wilding—I mean Guinness?" Tony Trevor's admonition brought his mind back to his surroundings.

As they all clambered into the dilapidated "growler" which a porter had requisitioned, the Reverend Oswald Osborne burst into what his naval officer brother crudely characterised as a horse-laugh.

"If we had wanted to call attention to ourselves, we couldn't have done it in a much more effective fashion!" he said; "a soldier, a naval officer and a parson!—it must have been as good as a circus to the yokels! All we wanted was a brass band and a loud-speaker and we should have been complete."

"The same thought occurred to me, only I did not say anything," commented the supposed naval officer; "it was your own particular brain-wave, and I had too much charity in my soul to want to rob it of its fine, glossy gilt. Still, everybody knows we're here by this time, so we had better make the best of it. Let's hear again what your plan is, Barry."

Wilding straightened his shoulders.

"That house belongs to me," he said; "so far I have not been able to obtain possession of it. With the help of you two fellows I intend to obtain possession of it now—and at the earliest possible moment. And once in—we'll stick in!"

"Pity we didn't buy a couple of machine-guns in

town," said the Reverend Oswald Osborne; "but we've each got an automatic and a good deal of ammunition. I don't know exactly what the law says about killing Home Secretaries and people like that when defending one's own property, but I'm quite prepared to risk it. I suggest we have some grub first, though. By the way, did either of you notice that perfectly stunning girl who was on the platform? Some coves get all the luck—I could have pushed the blighter she was with under the engine!"

"That girl was Miss Phyllis Kenwit," remarked Barry Wilding.

Both hearers whistled at the bitterness in his tone.

"Struck on her, eh, Barry?" said Tony Trevor, "well, crook or not, my 'gratters, old man! Under your kindly and beneficent influence no doubt she will reform. I've been all over the bally old world, and they aren't made like that every day, old son. Hence my crude attempt at congratulation."

"Shut up!" warned Gregson. He had more perception than Trevor, and he noticed how white beneath his tan Wilding had grown.

Conversation lagged until the Swan Inn was reached. It had been arranged beforehand that Philip Gregson should do the talking and act as the head of the party—"the simple villagers will probably bow and curtsy," said Gregson himself—and to watch Mrs. Shippam's face as he explained how they had heard of the excellence of her cooking at a London hotel from someone who had stayed at the "Swan,"

was to watch a wonderful screen star denied her true vocation.

"My brother, my friend, and my unworthy self wish to sample for ourselves the good things for which you are so justly famous, my dear Mrs. Shippam," continued the Reverend Oswald Osborne. "Er—may we have supper soon?"

Mrs. Shippam bobbed her plump body and nodded her head. Speech was beyond her. As she said to Shippam five minutes later: "What they were a-comin' to she didn't know. First we 'ave rogues stayin' at The 'Swan' what didn't pay their bills—then we 'ave gen'l'men who whisk themselves off in the middle of the night; and other gents what find themselves in prison—and all owin' to that there Baker, mark my words!—and after that who should come but a party that looks like—well, I don't know what—although I do say, Shippam, as how the parson-man has got a nice voice for all the severe way he looks at you."

"Who was it told 'em about us, Maria?" inquired her husband.

"Goodness knows! P'raps it was that Mr. Wildin' what towards the end didn't seem quite right in his 'ead. Anyways, here they be—and that hungry, the parson looked as though he would eat me if I stayed there talkin' any longer. It's a good job you killed that duck to-day, Shippam."

The meal had been one of Mrs. Shippam's best. Like a true artist she had risen to a big occasion. The

Reverend Oswald Osborne gave a loud ecstatic sigh as the last mouthful went down, and leaned back in his chair smiling beatifically. "If it wasn't for this collar," he said, fingering the maligned article protestingly, "I should be perfectly happy. Why the Church have to wear a confounded implement of torture like this I cannot understand. One of the archbishops should see to it."

"You needn't wear it much longer," said Barry Wilding quietly.

Gregson sat upright.

"What do you mean, Barry? Got another idea?"

"Only that after you have digested the disgustingly enormous meal you have eaten, I suggest we should make a start."

"To-night?" put in Tony Trevor. "Good, bally egg! Nothing would suit me better. And all I hope is that your pal, the Home Secretary cove, is there! I don't mind telling you that I'm expecting to make a bit on the side by holding His Nibs to ransom!"

"Don't be a fool!" replied Wilding. He was not in the mood to enjoy such asinine pleasantries. Once again the sight of Phyllis Kenwit had powerfully affected him, changing his outlook. Before he had come face to face with her on the platform of Hillsdown station that night he had been quite ready to fall in with the humour of his frolicsome companions, and regard the expedition as a high-spirited lark, to which the very real sense of danger gave an added zest. But now the old bitterness returned. He

wanted to feel this girl in his power ; he wanted to force her to confess her sins. Above all, he wanted to read the inscrutable riddle which she represented. Why was she a traitress ?

Gregson filled his pipe.

" It's a funny thing, but a fact nevertheless, but I can never do anything worth while for a couple of hours after I have eaten. In any case, the time for springing the surprise is two o'clock in the morning—all the best traditions of this sort of thing go to support that. There's heaps of time, Wilding, old son. . . . I'm with you to the last ounce, but hang it, let me digest my supper ! "

Wilding, if left to himself, would have started off immediately, but he had to consider the men who had volunteered so sportingly to come in with him. Viewed at such a short distance, the project now seemed almost mad—but even if it cost him his life he was going on with it now. Death ! . . . He looked at his two pals.

" I should have pointed this out before——" he started.

" Pointed what out, man ? " demanded the Reverend Oswald Osborne, and the naval officer chimed in with : " What's eating you now, Barry ? Why the deuce can't you smoke your pipe and keep quiet ? Haven't you any regard for your digestion ? "

" It's just occurred to me that I ought not to have allowed you fellows to become mixed up in this. If

anything happened I—well, I should never forgive myself. You've both got jobs to go back to in the East, and—it's a big responsibility."

The Reverend Oswald Osborne rose, one hand clutching the abhorred dog's collar.

"My dear, good, fat-headed, moth-eaten, brainless, knock-kneed, swivel-eyed, hopeless fool!" he said menacingly; "another word like that and Tony and I will fall on you—and for Tony with a full stomach to fall on anyone is no joke, let me add. It's the risk that we like, you frozen ass. What does the poet blighter say :

' The meteor flag of Wilding
Shall yet terrific burn,
Till danger's troubled night depart,
And the star of peace return '—

or words to the same effect. In a nutshell, Barry—forget it! An Englishman's house is said to be his castle, isn't it? This dump you call The Durdles belongs to you, doesn't it? An Englishman has a right to defend his own, hasn't he? Very well, then—let's hear no more about it, there's a good fellow."

"Very thoughtful of the residents, I must say," commented Tony Trevor. He pointed to the open scullery window. "They might have been expecting us."

Wilding stared. He was reminded of that other night when he had entered The Durdles through that

same window It had been open then. The coincidence was strange, to say the least.

It was half-past two. The night was intensely dark with that velvety blackness which often precedes the summer dawn. Arriving outside the house, Wilding had led his companions round to the back.

"There's a brute of a dog wandering round somewhere, I expect," he warned them. "There were two, but one got killed."

"He's trying to put the wind up us, Phil!" grinned Tony Trevor. "Why don't you bring on your dog, Barry?"

But the strange thing was that no sign of a dog could either be heard or seen. The house itself was in pitch darkness.

Wilding, as he stood contemplating the open scullery window, had a premonition that something sinister and strange had happened. He had always felt an uncanny atmosphere about this mysterious house, the secrets of which he had resolved to solve once and for all, but to-night this impression was intensified to an extraordinary extent. His nerves throbbed in spite of himself.

"Who's going first? We can't waste any more time. Up with you, Tony—only mind that stomach of yours!" said Gregson.

The next minute Trevor could be seen wriggling through the window.

A faint thud told the others that he had dropped

on the other side, and then came the sound of a gasp and the words : " O, God ! "

Wilding thrust Gregson aside.

" Quick ! Something's happened—let me go next ! " he said.

" Tony's found something ! " agreed Gregson.
" Up with you, Barry ! "

When he had got the upper part of his body through the window, Wilding could see Trevor pointing to a dark shape on the floor.

Directly he landed on his feet, Barry switched on his electric torch.

What he saw made him gasp.

Lying flat on his back was Starkey, the negro butler of The Durdles. There was a great gaping wound in his head.

One glance told Wilding that the man was dead.

Chapter XXXV

Captives of the Cellar

PHYLLIS stared at the telegram. Her first feeling was one of resentment, but this was quickly succeeded by an impression of fervent thankfulness ; that wire meant that Barry Wilding was still free. Nothing had happened to him since he had escaped from The Durdles.

But what was the meaning of the mysterious message ? Slowly she repeated the words :

Your last warning. Leave The Durdles directly you receive this. Vital.

She was thankful now she had induced Starrock to spend the night at the house. He would be able to advise her. Leaving her room, she handed the wire to the American detective.

"Starkey, our negro butler, has just given me this," she explained.

Starrock's face expressed his astonishment.

"I don't believe it was sent by Wilding," he said, "I am of the opinion that the author of this"—tapping the paper—"is Dan Warton."

"But—why?"

"He wants you out of the house—it's plain enough. And yet I don't know," went on the detective. "If Warton had really sent it I should think that he would have addressed it to your father while still forging Wilding's name. Have you the envelope?"

Phyllis produced it.

"No, it's addressed to you personally. 'Miss Phyllis Kenwit'—that's plain enough, as you can see for yourself. But whether it's from Wilding or Warton. . . . I don't think I'll take my clothes off to-night." Starrock's grim face showed a flicker of a smile. "The pity is that those crooks pinched my gun," he added, when the girl quickly replied, "I have a revolver—I'll get it for you."

"Quite a good gun," commented the detective,

after examining the mechanism; "you're a real American girl—I mean young lady."

She flushed at the obviously sincere tribute.

"If they are coming to-night, we ought to get help—what about ringing up the police?"

Starrock shook his head.

"With your permission—no!" he replied. "I don't want any local fools bungling this. It's still my belief that for some reason, which isn't plain to us, but which is very satisfying to Dan Warton, his gang of crooks want you out of the house because"—he paused—"they are coming here to-night! Let's have that chap Starkey in. I'm not partial to niggers as a rule, but"—he paused again—"you really trust this fellow?"

"He has been with us for years. He is the most devoted servant in the world!" declared the girl. "Starkey would lay down his life for either father or myself."

"All right. Then let's have him in."

A minute later Starkey stood before the detective.

"Starkey, something may happen in this house to-night," started Starrock.

The negro rolled troubled eyes, and looked at Phyllis Kenwit.

"You are to take your orders from Mr. Starrock, Starkey," said the girl.

"Very well, missy."

"I want you to keep a sharp look-out at the back of the house—inside, not outside," said the detective.

"Put out all lights. I will stay here in front. At the first suspicious sound, you communicate with me. Have you a revolver?"

"Yes, sah. I'se a revolver."

"It's about the size of a small cannon," remarked Phyllis.

"Will it fire?" queried Starrock.

"Yes, sah—it will fire. What about massa and missy, sah?"

"We don't want them disturbed unless it's absolutely necessary. So far as I can tell, Starkey, three men may be coming—you and I ought to be able to settle that little lot, don't you think?"

"Yes, sah." The white teeth showed in a wide grin.

"Very well, then. Now go and make your arrangements." When the man had left them, Starrock turned to the girl: "And you, Miss Kenwit, please go to bed. You can leave the rest to me."

She saw it was useless to argue, and so, holding out a hand, she wished him good night.

Left to himself, Starrock removed his boots, but made no other preparation for bed.

Then came the necessary but tedious business of waiting: the detective employed it in thinking of two things. The first was the astonishment Three-fingered Dan Warton would experience when he found that the man he had calculated to blow into infinitesimal fragments was still very much alive, and the second was the satisfaction American police circles would

express when he arrived back in the States with perhaps the most dangerous criminal in the world safely under lock and key.

After that his thoughts wandered. They settled on this girl, Phyllis Kenwit. She was a thoroughbred, and he was proud that she belonged to the same country as himself. Although he did not know the secret which had mystified Barry Wilding and himself all along, the thought that Phyllis Kenwit was either a crook herself, or was willingly connected with any criminal action, was now ludicrous: he would have staked his life on her entire innocence.

And the pluck and resource of her! Only a few words of explanation had she given concerning her rescue of him that day. Apparently when he started off to trail Warton, she was close behind, although he did not see her. Throughout the ensuing hours she had followed, never losing sight of him—"Knowing you were a friend of Barry Wilding, I thought you might take me to him sooner or later: that was why I tracked you," she had stated—and so cleverly that he had never suspected her presence.

From a shop on the opposite side of the Bloomsbury street, she had seen Warton and his companions leave, chuckling evilly to themselves. "I knew you were left in the house . . . so I climbed the garden wall at the back and broke a window to get in," she added simply.

Thinking of the girl naturally caused his mind to dwell on Barry Wilding. Was it Barry, after all, who

had sent that wire? If so, what was his intention? The present was as baffling as the past. But he felt that he would not have to wait very much longer for the final solution.

Time slipped by. Midnight had passed long since. The house was as quiet as the grave. A drowsiness, which even the sense of grave responsibility he had could not banish, was stealing over the detective when a noise which almost shattered his ear-drums rent the stillness into a thousand reverberating chasms of sound.

Starkey must have fired that miniature cannon of his.

Why?

Swiftly, but noiselessly, Starrock stole across the room. He had reached the door and was quietly opening it when a cry made him turn round.

"Mr. Starrock! What has happened?"

"I am just going to see . . . please get back to bed," he whispered.

Then came disaster: while he was half turned and apprehensive for the girl's sake, a pair of hands groped for his throat, found it, and squeezed with ruthless force. Instantly he hit out to right and left, but a fresh foe sprang on him from the back and he went crashing to the ground with what seemed a multitude of men on top of him.

The last sound that broke upon his consciousness before that shattering blow on the head which robbed

him of all temporary life, was hearing Phyllis Kenwit scream.

Then—a black void. . . .

“ A nice haul ! ” commented a mocking voice.

Slowly Victor Starrock returned to consciousness. He stared blankly at the amazing picture he saw : Stretched in a row to his right were Phyllis Kenwit, her father, and Sir Bertram Willan, the British Home Secretary, in the order named.

“ Looking for Starkey, Starrock ? ” inquired Three-fingered Dan Warton ; “ well, friend Starkey is unable to be present at this festive gathering. He sends his regrets, and says he’ll meet you all . . . later on.”

“ Have you murdered him, you fiend ? ” demanded Phyllis Kenwit in a choking voice.

“ My dear Miss Kenwit,” answered Warton, making his inquirer an elaborate bow, “ ‘ murdered ’ is such a crude term. I would much rather you used the word ‘ removed.’ Starkey made himself a nuisance, and so he had to be dealt with. As an American, I confess to having a rooted aversion to negroes, but——”

“ Can the chatter ! ” broke in a voice, “ and let’s get to work—unless you want to polish off Starrock. Only, for Sam’s sake, don’t bungle it this time, you fool ! ”

Warton swung round on the speaker, his teeth showing in an unpleasant grin.

"I will attend to Starrock, Spider," he replied; "you needn't fear about that. It would be highly interesting to know how he got away this afternoon, but, as you have so tactfully reminded me, time presses." He walked up to each of the prisoners, examining their bonds.

"They'll be safe enough here while we get to work," he pronounced.

A moment later the three men who had captured them passed from the cellar to which the prisoners had been taken, into the adjoining vault. They carried crowbars and pickaxes.

The detective's first thought was for the girl lying by his side on the unpleasantly cold floor of the cellar. If Phyllis Kenwit had not rushed out of her room at the precise moment when he was preparing to deal with the band of invaders, none of them might have found themselves in this present fix, but it was no use repining. Against that fact he had to put the knowledge that if it had not been for this girl he would not have been alive at all at that moment.

"It was all my fault—I attracted your attention, Mr. Starrock; will you ever forgive me?"

"Of course! And don't despair—whisper it to your father and Sir Bertram—Barry Wilding may be here at any moment." It was a pitiable fraud, but he thought it was justified in the circumstances.

She caught at the words with desperate eagerness.

"How do you know? Are you certain? Oh, if he is!"

"Of course he is!" replied Starrock, keeping up his lie, "I've been thinking things over—this cold floor has set the brain working at a terrific rate—and the only conclusion I can come to is that it must have been Barry Wilding who sent you that wire. If it had been these fellows, Warton would most certainly have mentioned it when he was taunting us just now."

Starrock tried to put a good deal of conviction and certainty into his tone, but all the time he felt that his words must sound unreal. Still, if it gave the girl sufficient courage with which to carry on, his immediate purpose would be served.

Now it was the Home Secretary who spoke.

"What do these villains intend to do with us, do you think, Starrock?"

He was answered from the door, where Three-fingered Dan Warton showed himself for a moment.

"You will not object to being held for ransom, my dear Sir Bertram? I don't know the exact value the British Government would place on your personal safety, but surely you ought to realise a matter of £20,000 or so?"

"You do not appear to realise the enormity of what you are doing," was the statesman's rejoinder. "That being so, I would remind you that you have already committed one of the most serious offences in English law."

Warton laughed.

"Is that so?" he sneered; "well, what's a trifle like mine compared to what you have done, Mr. Home Secretary?"

Starrock, who had been watching Sir Bertram intently, saw the statesman blanch at the words.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

Warton laughed again.

"Wait until we have done a little exploring; then I'll tell you. After all, £20,000 isn't much to pay to a man who knows as much as I do. Why, you'd no doubt be prepared to pay that much yourself for me to keep my mouth shut. But that matter, interesting as it is, must wait. Only I shouldn't advise any of you to try to get away," the man continued, turning round. "We don't intend to run any risks ourselves, and"—leering—"dead bodies have been buried in cellars before to-day. Think it over."

The next moment he was gone. Shortly after his departure, the prisoners heard the sound of a pickaxe striking stone.

"They're already digging our graves!" said Daniel Kenwit in a shaking voice.

"Ssh!" warned Starrock. His keen ear had caught a sound.

WILDING, after the first shock of surprise had passed, turned to Trevor.

"Someone's been here before us," he said in a whisper; "that would account for our not hearing the dog. I expect he's dead like this poor devil. Tell Gregson to come in—but for God's sake don't let him make a noise!"

It was a ghastly start to their adventure, looking at the dead body of the negro, and even Philip Gregson was sobered.

"What does it mean, Barry?" he asked.

Wilding shook his head.

"I don't know—I don't like to think," he replied, "but we must make a search of the house immediately." In his own mind he speculated whether that hairy creature, who looked like a baboon, and whom he had heard utter that maniacal laughter on the night of his escape from The Durdles, had got loose and killed the butler in a fit of insane rage.

He led the way, soft-footed, to the dining-room. There the electric torch which he carried showed evidences of a fierce struggle that had probably recently taken place. Trevor and Gregson stared around.

"Looks to me as though a cyclone has passed through here," commented the latter.

Wilding made no reply; he was too worried to

speak. Going across to the door of what he knew to be Phyllis Kenwit's room, he tapped. No answer came, not even when he tapped a second and third time. Finally, his growing anxiety overwhelming every other feeling, he burst the door open.

The room was empty.

"Phyllis!" he called softly—and then, as in a dream, the events that had taken place on that other night when he had come to The Durdles flooded through his mind. He recalled how then he had got into the house through the open scullery window; how that night he had also found Starkey beneath the window, only then the butler had been merely unconscious; how then he had gone to the dining-room to find evidences of a recent struggle and how then, as to-night, he had looked into a bedroom that he knew must belong to Phyllis Kenwit, only to find it empty.

What had he done after that? It did not take him a second to recall; a panel in the dining-room had been left open, disclosing a secret passage into the cellars below. The same men who had taken the girl captive that other night, must have come here again! It was they who had killed poor Starkey! Here was the solution.

What had they done to Phyllis Kenwit?

He called his two friends.

"Have you got your revolvers ready?" he asked; "because you will want them! You may have to fight for your lives! If you don't feel like going

on with it, say so now and I shan't think anything the worse of you ! ”

“ Suppose you lead us to the blighters in question, and don't waste any more valuable time talking arrant rot ’ ” commented Gregson coldly.

Wilding put a hand up to his forehead. The thought that Phyllis Kenwit might be dead—that at least something dreadful had happened to her—had temporarily unnerved him. He could not have been himself ; he must have talked nonsense. . . .

His brain, which had been befogged for a short time, cleared again. Phyllis Kenwit had told him something about a boss of the mantelpiece . . . something about a clenched hand. . . .

Yes, there it was. Rushing forward, he caught hold of the thing and gave it a violent wrench. . . .

“ That's interesting ! ” he heard Trevor say, “ what happens now ? ”

He gave no heed to the words. There, stretching before him, were the steps leading to the cellars down which he had gone the night he had rescued the girl.

He motioned with the hand that now held a revolver, and the other two fell in behind him. As they put their feet on the first few steps, they heard the close clash of implements ; steel was meeting stone. . . .

His dream-state was so real, and so vivid also were the impressions that had already formed in his mind, that Barry was not surprised to see bound figures stretched out in a row on the floor of the first cellar. He and his companions had come with panther-like

steps, making little noise ; and, commanding the situation, he held up his hand for silence.

But Sir Bertram Willan could not control his relief.

"The scoundrels are in there !" he said, pointing to the inner cellar ; "untie me so that I can get a chance at them !"

Then came the sound of a stampede.

Two men, holding pickaxes, burst in from the outer vault—burst in to find themselves covered by the revolvers of a man wearing a naval-officer's uniform, and another attired as a clergyman. Their faces expressed their astonishment.

Behind them sneaked a third figure. This man's right hand shot upwards. . . .

"A near thing," commented Barry Wilding, through whose coat-sleeve a revolver bullet had passed ; "a near thing——"

He leapt forward at the same moment as Victor Starrock, wriggling his body along the ground, was able to thrust out his legs sufficiently far for Three-fingered Dan Warton to stumble over them.

The two men met with a resounding crash. But, whereas Warton's hand merely landed in Barry's stomach, Wilding's hands seized the throat of the most dangerous crook in Europe—gripped, and held on !

Wilding was not merciful. Moreover, he was in a hurry. He wanted to learn the truth of this night's remarkable business. Releasing one hand, he dashed his clenched fist into the face of Warton with such

force that the latter staggered back, missed his footing, and then collapsed to the floor. His head coming into violent contact with the stone floor, rendered him senseless.

Their leader out of action, the other two crooks became shorn of much of their terror. They had been so taken by surprise, no doubt, that they were still wondering not only exactly what had happened, but *how* it had happened. While Trevor and Gregson looked after the pair, Barry Wilding released the prisoners.

When this was done, he hesitated.

He had not long to wait. Phyllis Kenwit came to him, both hands outstretched.

" Mr. Starrock said you would come," she said.

The revelation was not so much through the actual words as through the tone in which they were uttered. Barry looked wonderingly into the speaker's face. What he saw there made him hold out his arms. The next instant he was pressing the girl close to his breast. He did not speak a word in answer ; there was no need.

Both seemed regardless of the others. Sufficient was it for them that they had passed through great travail only to find at the end that a happiness almost too keen to be borne was theirs as a reward. Gone now were all doubts and fears ; Barry had seen them vanish after one look into the clear, transparently truthful eyes of Phyllis Kenwit.

" Well, I'm jiggered ! " said a voice.

Before Wilding could answer the scoffer—Tony Trevor—Starrock stepped forward.

"With your permission, Wilding, I'll search these fellows," he said.

The two men, whose arms were still in the air, yielded nothing, but from the breast-pocket of the unconscious Warton the American detective produced a pocket-book. Opening this, he pulled out what appeared to be two pieces of yellow paper.

"What I thought," he commented, with a satisfied smile; "Barry Wilding, do you want to see the plan to your fortune?"

"Fortune?" Barry repeated the word vaguely. Holding Phyllis Kenwit in his arms had been sufficient fortune for that night.

The girl he loved was quicker to understand.

"Is that the cryptogram, Mr. Starrock?" she asked excitedly.

"Yes," was the reply; "but first of all I intend to see to these beauties. This rope they used may do——"

"Starkey will get you some more," said Phyllis.

"My dear," Wilding hastened to tell her; "I am afraid poor Starkey is dead. You must not go upstairs yet."

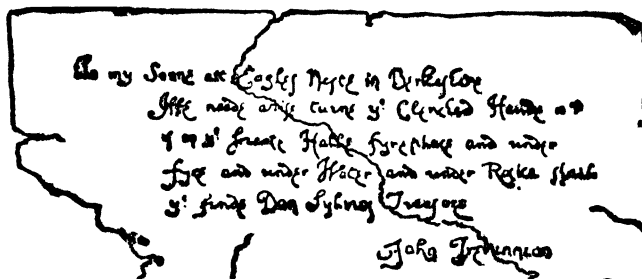
"Then that scoundrel wasn't lying," said Daniel Kenwit, pointing to Warton.

"No, he was speaking the truth. Starkey died game, however—you can rest assured of that," he told the weeping girl.

Making the three crooks ready for their reception by the local police, for whom the Home Secretary had telephoned, took some little time. When the body of the faithful negro had also been removed, Phyllis Kenwit contrived to smile.

"I promise not to be foolish any more," she said; "but dear old Starkey had loved me since I was a baby. It was dreadful knowing for certain that he was dead. . . . Now, please, Mr. Starrock, show Barry the key to his treasure." Sitting next to her lover, she slipped her hand into his.

For reply, the American detective placed the two pieces of crinkly paper, which he had taken from Warton's pocket-book, on to the table. A number of interested faces craned forward.



"May I inquire into this?" asked Daniel Kenwit.

"Certainly, sir," replied Wilding, to whom the world had suddenly become the sunniest of gardens; "but it would take too long to tell now; besides, it's worth keeping. How did you get hold of this, Starrock, you wizard?"

The detective grinned.

"You saw me take it out of Warton's pocket, didn't you? You appear to have lost your half and he must have picked it up."

The Rev. Oswald Osborne exchanged a look with his supposed brother, Lieutenant Harry Osborne of *H.M.S. Battleaxe*.

"Personally," he said in a singularly clear tone; "I came here to kidnap a Home Secretary, to help deliver up a house to its rightful owner, and to do my best to guard it against all comers—including the police. But apparently there are dangerous divergences, my dear brother!"

"My friend isn't a real clergyman," explained Wilding with a laugh, "but he's proved a splendid pal, and if there really is anything in that preposterous idea of yours, Starrock, he's coming in on a sharing basis. And so are you!"

"I am sure it's in that cellar—if you hadn't come just in time to-night, Warton and his cronies would have found it. If they weren't sure of finding it, why did they bring pickaxes and crowbars?"

"Oh, do let's go down!" Phyllis Kenwit stood up, did a few dancing steps, and clapped her hands.

"All right!" replied Wilding, "but I warn you all; don't be disappointed if you don't find anything! This is Starrock's notion, not mine, remember."

"*Allons!*" cried the Reverend Oswald Osborne, who had taken advantage of the general excitement to remove his dog's collar.

WHEN they reached the second or inner cellar, they found two flagstones already removed.

"I said you arrived just in time," commented Starrock; "now, wait a minute——" He consulted the pieces of paper he carried in his hand. "'Under fyre and under water'—at least it looks like 'water,'" he quoted. "Well, this would seem to be the place. It certainly is under fire—for we are now standing as near as I can estimate, directly beneath the huge fire-place in the dining-room which, in days gone by, was almost certainly the 'great Halle' referred to here." He tapped the paper. "So let's get to it, lads! The work has already been started; all we have to do is to carry on."

The Rev. Oswald Osborne seized a pickaxe, Starrock seized another, Tony Trevor got busy with a spade and Barry Wilding—well, if the present deponent must tell the truth, the man who was most importantly and vitally concerned in these extremely energetic proceedings, was perfectly content to let others do the digging. He himself was standing in a corner, looking at Phyllis Kenwit and experiencing once again the feeling that he was actually taking part in a miracle.

"Aren't you interested in the treasure?" she asked.

"My dear," he replied, lost to everything but the joy in being near her, "all I hope is that in time you will forgive me. What Gregson—that's the chap in

the parson's togs—said just now was perfectly true. I came down here to-night with two friends I had met by chance in London, with the sole intention of turning you and your father—yes, and the Home Secretary, too, if he happened to be here—out of the house, and holding it against as many police as you sent against us.”

“ I should never have sent any police against you,” Phyllis said ; “ what I did, I did . . . Oh, thank God, it is all over now,” she added ; “ before you leave to-night, Sir Bertram Willan is going to tell you——”

“ I don't know that I want to know now,” he answered ; “ you see, I was so puzzled about you, darling—can I call you that ? ” he whispered.

He saw the pulse-beat in her lovely throat, and that in itself would have been answer enough. But Phyllis said, flushing adorably :

“ It thrills me to hear you ; but oh—aren't you really going to look for your treasure ? ”

“ I have already found it ! ” he said with a sincerity equal to hers. The deep earnestness of his voice saved the words from being banal.

But she replied with a smile, the radiancy of which dazzled him, “ Mr. Starrock is positive that there is a huge fortune beneath these stones ! He has told me all about it . . . why, what is this ? ”

She had been removing with her shoe some moss that had grown over the stone on which she stood. What she was now regarding was an iron-ring handle

in the worn stone flag. It was rusty with age, but its purpose was plain.

"Here is the treasure!" cried Phyllis.

She pointed to the ring, and, instead of Starrock laughing, as Wilding anticipated, the American detective answered with a quick and decisive: "Yes—of course! The reason those crooks didn't notice it was because of that moss. Bully for you, Miss Kenwit!"

He bent down and put all his strength into a mighty tug. But the flag-stone was immovable.

"It's down there, right enough!" reiterated Starrock, and gave the iron ring another tug. This time the stone slowly moved and then came upwards at a pace that sent the detective staggering backwards.

"There's an iron ladder!" exclaimed Phyllis Kenwit.

"Down you go!" ordered Starrock, who had the shining eyes of a schoolboy; "down you go to find the missing millions!"

His enthusiasm was infectious, and now even Barry Wilding showed signs of increasing interest. Down the iron ladder, rusty with age, they clambered, to find themselves in a sort of cave.

The floor of this was studded with rocks.

"'Under water'—here you are, what did I say?" demanded Starrock. "This used to be a stream—look at the sandy bed—now the question is, under which rock?"

"What about this one in the corner?" inquired

Phyllis Kenwit, "there's a depression here ; it looks as though this might be a dried-up water-course."

"Right again—*dig!*" shouted the American detective. Seizing a pickaxe, he nearly decapitated the Reverend Oswald Osborne, whose clerical coat and waistcoat had by this time joined the dog collar.

As Barry Wilding afterwards bore tribute, he couldn't have engaged a harder working gang of navvies. They dug and dug—and presently a pickaxe ran against something which sent forth a metallic sound.

"Another rock," suggested Lieutenant Harry Osborne of H.M.S. *Battleaxe*.

"It's a box!" exclaimed Starrock ; "bring it forth!"

An old-fashioned seaman's chest it was, only made of iron. It had three massive locks, and these took some time to force. In fact, they never would have been forced had not the American detective confessed that his experience had taught him a few tricks of the housebreaker's craft.

On the top, as the chest was opened, was a huge piece of chamois leather which, upon being touched, crumbled into dust.

"Oh! . . . jewels! . . . *darling!*" cried Phyllis Kenwit.

An hour later, when the complete contents of that enchanted chest had been tabulated, Starrock gave his opinion.

" I don't know of course what the current value of these pieces of eight, doubloons and things represent, but I should say at a rough estimate that the jewels alone are worth a quarter of a million dollars. What do you intend to do about it, Wilding ? "

Barry beamed upon the speaker.

" What about you all coming to my wedding for a start ? " he replied.

Chapter XXXVIII

The Second Secret

THOSE present in the room were Phyllis Kenwit, Dr. Daniel Kenwit, Victor Starrock and Barry Wilding, besides the man whose right hand was resting on the table as he stood up to speak.

" The time has come, Mr. Wilding, for me to make the explanation which is due to you," said Sir Bertram Willan. " When I have finished you will appreciate, I feel sure, the grave reason which prevented either Dr. Kenwit, his daughter or myself giving you this information before. But I still rely upon you both," here he looked at Starrock as well as Wilding, " as men of honour, to keep my confidence. I ask you that for national reasons," he added.

Wilding said : " Certainly, sir," while the American detective replied : " Nothing will ever come from me, Sir Bertram."

The face of the Home Secretary showed relief as he

continued : " Some short time back not only England, but the whole world, was startled by a hideous crime. Unfortunately our modern civilisation is poisoned every now and then by such a throw-back to primitive barbarism, but there were certain features about this particular murder which caused it to remain, a dreadful memory, in the minds of all people. The murderer, to begin with, was an illustrious man—an Englishman of tremendous achievements——"

" Hector Mundesley, the famous inventor," put in Starrock quietly.

The Home Secretary, after biting his lip, nodded.

" You have been reading the newspapers, I see, Mr. Starrock. Yes, the man in question was Hector Mundesley, the famous inventor—and my cousin." He paused, as though considering how best to proceed. The hesitation was only momentary, however, and when he resumed his voice was clear and unfaltering.

" Hector Mundesley, the kindest-hearted man that ever drew breath, was charged with the murder of his faithful housekeeper, a woman who was devoted to his interests. It was an atrocious crime, and the whole world, as I have said, was shocked and horror-stricken.

" Naturally, the first thing to be said was that Mundesley must have been mad. There is not the least possible doubt but what at the moment he committed this dreadful deed, he was insane. But—and this I will not attempt to explain to you, because it is a matter for mental specialists—the shock brought his mind back to the normal. At the moment he

was examined by the medical authorities appointed he was declared to be sane." Again the speaker paused as though to marshal his thoughts.

"Hector Mundesley possessed the greatest inventive brain in the country. His loss to Great Britain—indeed to the world—would have been irreparable. Yet—and although he was not responsible at the time he committed the murder of his housekeeper—he was condemned to die.

"I was so stunned and shocked myself that I scarcely knew what I was doing. Mundesley was my closest friend ; I loved him as a brother. We had been the dearest comrades from our boyhood days. Apart from the country's sake—and Mundesley did more than any other scientific man to win the European War for the Allies—I would willingly have laid down my own life to save his. But, as men of the world, you will readily see that I was powerless to do anything. The official position I held would have rendered any suggestion of a reprieve out of the question. A national scandal would have been caused ; there would have been cries in the press of ' tainted justice,' ' unfair influence ' and the like.

"It was while I was wrestling with this terrible problem that Dr. Daniel Kenwit was introduced to me. You may not be aware of the fact, Mr. Wilding, but Dr. Kenwit is one of the foremost authorities on the human brain in the world—certainly he is the leading mental specialist in America. Dr. Kenwit offered a suggestion.

"The risks attached to this suggestion were so terrible that at first I blankly refused. But I will now get Dr. Kenwit to put his own story before you."

The man by whom Barry Wilding had been so mystified now stepped forward.

"Briefly," he said, "my case is that all crime is a question for the hospital and not for the prison. A criminal, to me, is not so much a vicious individual as a pathological study. More and more the world is taking the same view, I am pleased to say. Responsible thinkers are coming more and more to the conclusion that we must study *causes* if we wish to prevent *effects*. However, that is bordering on the technical, and I want to put this question to you as simply and as plainly as is possible.

"The suggestion I made to Sir Bertram was this: That Hector Mundesley should be handed over to me so that I might operate on his brain. I was confident of two things: the first was that the reason the inventor became temporarily insane—and without being insane he would never have committed his crime—was because he had overtaxed that wonderful brain of his in Government work, and the second was that, with care and the proper medical skill I could restore him to full health. That, I am thankful to say, is now practically an assured fact. During the time he has been here, Mr. Mundesley has had one or two relapses, but notwithstanding these he has made steady progress, and the trip to America which he is now about to make in my company should complete

the cure. Within six months he should be back—under another name, of course—working at his beloved inventions for his country, which needs him more to-day than ever it did.”

Barry Wilding caught the eye of his future father-in-law.

“ Then the man with the beard is—— ? ”

“ Hector Mundesley,” replied Dr. Kenwit. “ We had to let his hair grow because we could not run the slightest chance of his being recognised.”

“ But the articles in the newspapers ? ”

“ The public mind had to be satisfied,” replied the Home Secretary briefly. “ Mr. Wilding, now that you know the whole story, let me on behalf of the country render you my hearty thanks.”

“ And please accept mine, too,” added Dr. Daniel Kenwit.

“ You’ve already given me enough, sir,” said Barry Wilding. To bear out his words, Phyllis linked her arm in his.

THE END

