

**MARY
BRADDON**

WYLLARD'S
WEIRD

Мэри Элизабет Брэддон

Wyllard's Weird

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Wyllard's Weird A Novel

WYLLARD'S WEIRD

CHAPTER I. IN A CORNISH VALLEY

There are some travellers who think when they cross the Tamar, over that fairy bridge of Brunel's, hung aloft between the blue of the river and the blue of the sky, that they have left England behind them on the eastern shore – that they have entered a new country, almost a new world. This land of quiet woods and lonely valleys, and bold brown hills, barren, solitary – these wild commons and large moorlands of Cornwall seem to stand apart, as they did in the days gone by, when this province was verily a kingdom, complete in itself, and owning no sovereignty but its own.

It is a beautiful region which the traveller sees, perchance for the first time, as the train skims athwart the quaint little waterside village of Saltash, and pierces the rich depths of the woodland, various, enchanting. Now the line seems strung like a thread of iron in mid-air above a deep gorge, now winds sinuous as a snake through a labyrinth of hills. A picturesque bit of road, this between Plymouth and Bodmin Road, at all times; but, perhaps, loveliest in the still evening hour, when the summer sunset steeps the land in golden light, while the summer wind scarcely stirs the woods.

In the mellow light of a July eventide the express from Paddington swept with slackened speed round the curve which marked the approach to a viaduct between Saltash and Bodmin Road – a heavy wooden structure, spanning a vale of Alpine beauty. An exquisite little bit of scenery, upon which the stranger is apt to look with some touch of fear mingled in the cup of his delight: but to the dweller in the district, familiar with every yard of the journey, the transit is as nothing. He is carried through the air serenely, as he smokes his cigar and reads his paper, and the notion of peril never occurs to him.

One man, sitting by the window of a third-class carriage near the end of the train, looked out at the familiar scene dreamily to-night. He was an elderly, gray-headed man, a parish doctor, hard-worked and poorly paid; but he had a keen eye for the beautiful in Nature, dead or living, and familiar as this spot was to his eye, it always impressed him. He sat with his face to the engine, puffing lazily at his black briarwood, and gazing at the landscape, in that not unpleasant condition of bodily and mental fatigue, when the mind seems half asleep, and the external world is little more than a dream-picture.

The train was not a long one, a good many of the London coaches having been left behind at Plymouth. Dr. Menheniot put out his head, and surveyed the line of carriages as they rounded the curve. There was a figure here and there by a window; but the train seemed sparsely occupied. They were nearing the viaduct. That narrow thread of water trickling over its rocky bed in the depth of the gorge was in winter a rushing torrent. The line at this point was under repair, and the wooden palisade had been removed in the progress of the work. The actual danger was in nowise increased by the absence of this barrier, which would have crumbled like matchwood before the weight of the train, had the engine run off the rails – but there was a seeming insecurity to the eye of the traveller as he looked into the gulf below; and Dr. Menheniot gave an involuntary shudder. Another moment and the engine came on the viaduct. Menheniot started up with a half-articulate exclamation, "What, in God's name – " he began.

He opened the carriage-door, seemed as if he were going to clamber out, to try and make his way along the footboard to a distant carriage, outside which a girl was standing, holding on to the

brass hand-rail at the side of the door. She had that instant stepped out, or been thrust out; Menheniot knew not which. He had seen nothing till he saw her standing there, a slender figure in a light-coloured gown, thin draperies fluttering in the wind – standing there, hanging between life and death, a creature to be rescued somehow, were it at the hazard of a man's life.

Before he could put himself in peril the chance of rescue was over. A wild shriek rang through the wood – a fluttering form went whirling down the ravine, flashing white athwart the sunlit greenery, and lay half buried amidst a tangle of ferns and wild flowers at the bottom of the gorge.

Twenty or thirty heads were thrust out of the windows. The train, which to Dr. Menheniot's eye just now had seemed almost empty, was now alive with people. The engine slackened speed, and stopped at about a hundred yards from the scene of the catastrophe. A dozen men of different ages and qualities leaped out of the train and clambered down the embankment; among others Julian Wyllard, the Lord of the Manor of Penmorval – a man of middle age, soberly attired, a tall stately figure, a man of mark in this part of the country – before whom all gave way; except little Dr. Menheniot, who hurried on ahead, intent upon affording professional help, if such help could avail.

Julian Wyllard had been an athlete in his boyhood and youth. He walked down the steep, rugged hillside more easily than many men walk down Regent Street. At the bottom of the embankment every one fell back involuntarily, as it were, and allowed Mr. Wyllard to head the procession. They went as fast as it was possible to go over that broken ground, trampling down the ferns and flowers, the tiny scarlet strawberries, and crimson and orange fungi, as they went, every lip breathless, every eye strained towards that one spot in the hollow yonder where the doctor was hastening.

"No use, I fear," said Mr. Wyllard, as if answering the common thought. "The poor creature must be quite dead."

"What, in mercy's name, made her do it?" speculated a burly farmer; "was she frightened, do you think, by some ruffian in the train; or did she want to make away with herself?"

The little cluster of passengers looked at one another curiously, as if seeking among those rustic countenances for the face of a scoundrel capable of assailing unprotected innocence. But if guilt were present in that assembly, there was no outward indication of the diabolical element. Almost every one there was known to the rest: small farmers, a squire or two, the elderly lawyer from Camelford, the curate of Wadebridge, a magistrate of Bodmin, a cornchandler and respectable inhabitant of the same town. Assuredly not among these would one look for that debased and savage humanity which is viler in its instincts than the wild beasts of the jungle.

There might be other passengers lurking in the train, among those loquacious women up yonder, who were all putting their heads out of windows, straining their necks to get their share in the pity and the terror of the tragedy down below.

Mr. Wyllard and his companions found little Dr. Menheniot on his knees beside the piteous figure lying in a heap, like a limp rag, among ferns and ground-ivy.

He had lifted the poor bruised head upon his arm, and he was looking down at the dead face, the open eyes gazing in the set stare of a great horror. Horror at the wretch who flung her down, or at that awful gulf of death self-sought? Who could tell? Those blood-bedabbled lips were mute for evermore, unless the dead could be conjured into speech.

"Is she quite gone?" asked Julian Wyllard, his compassionate countenance calm amidst the agitation of the little crowd.

That spectacle of sudden violent death was no new thing to his eyes. He had lived in Paris during the siege and the Commune, had seen the corpses laid out in long rows in the cemeteries, and piled in bloody heaps in the streets.

"Quite dead, and a blessed thing too," answered the doctor. "I don't believe she has a whole bone in her body. She could only have lingered a little while to suffer agonies. Her neck is broken. Poor little thing! She is quite a young creature and must have been pretty."

Yes, it was a pretty little face, even in the pallor of death. A small *retroussé* nose; large dark eyes, with long black lashes; pouting, childish lips; a delicately moulded figure, neatly dressed in light-gray alpaca, a linen collar cut low in the front and showing a good deal of the slim white throat, linen cuffs, long thread gloves, and little stuff boots.

"She looks like a furriner," said Mr. Nicholls, the burly farmer who had speculated as to the cause of her death.

"Hadn't somebody better examine her pockets for any papers which may identify her?" said a voice behind Wyllard.

It was the voice of a young man who had been the last to leave the train. He had followed the rest at a few paces' distance, and had only just arrived to look at the dead girl over Wyllard's shoulder.

"You here, Bothwell?" exclaimed Wyllard, turning quickly.

"Yes, I have been in Plymouth all day, and thought I'd get back by your train," answered Bothwell Grahame easily. "Don't you think they ought to examine her pockets?"

"Certainly; but it is a question as to whether it should be done now or later," said Wyllard. "She was evidently travelling alone, poor creature, and she must have been in a compartment by herself, since nobody seems to know anything about her. The chief thing to be done is to get her carried on to Bodmin Road, where there must be an inquest."

Everybody agreed that this was the voice of wisdom. Dr. Menheniot turned out the pocket of the neat alpaca gown. There was nothing but a handkerchief, a little bunch of keys, and a second-class railway ticket for Plymouth; no card-case or purse; not even an old letter to offer a clue to the dead girl's personality. This done, the doctor arranged the poor dislocated form decently, and two sturdy men lifted it from the greenery, and carried it gently up the embankment to the train, where that unconscious clay was laid on the seat of an empty second-class compartment.

"It is the very carriage she was in," said Bothwell, pointing to a torn strip of gray alpaca hanging on the metal handle. "Her gown must have caught on the handle as she fell, and this shred was left behind."

Bothwell gave the bit of alpaca to Dr. Menheniot.

"You can show that to the Coroner," he said; "of course, you will be a witness."

"About the only one necessary, I should think," said the doctor. "I saw her fall."

"Did you?" exclaimed Wyllard. "That's lucky! And what was your impression as to the manner of her fall – whether she deliberately threw herself out, or whether she was thrown out by a villain?"

This was asked in a lowered voice; since the murderer, if the deed were murder, might be within hearing.

"Upon my soul, I cannot tell," protested Menheniot, with a troubled look. "The whole thing was so rapid. It passed like a flash. I was smoking, tired, in a dozy condition altogether, and this horrible thing seemed like a dream. I saw no other head at the carriage window. I saw nothing but that girl standing on the footboard as the train came on to the bridge; and then, all in a moment, I saw her whirling down into the gorge, like a feather blown out of a window. If it was suicide she certainly hesitated, for when I first saw her she was standing on the footboard, holding the hand-rail by the side of the door. She did not leap out of the train with one desperate deliberate spring. However determined she may have been to kill herself, she must have faltered in the act."

"It would be only human to do so. Poor young thing – a mere child!" said Wyllard regretfully.

He talked apart with the guard, recommending that official to keep his eye upon the passengers who got out at Bodmin Road, and at all stations further down the line; to mark any man of ruffianly appearance or agitated demeanour; to give any such person in charge if he saw but the slightest reason for suspicion.

The passengers had resumed their seats by this time, and the train began to move slowly onward. The whole period of delay had not been twenty minutes, and the line between Plymouth and Penzance

was tolerably clear at this hour. The train would be able to recover lost time before the end of the journey.

"You had better come into my carriage," said Wyllard to the young man whom he had addressed as Bothwell.

"I have only a third-class ticket," answered the other. "I've been smoking."

"I never knew you doing anything else," said Wyllard, with a touch of scorn. "Go back to your third-class carriage. No doubt you want another pipe."

"I believe after that shock it will do me good," replied the young man, producing his tobacco pouch on the instant, and beginning to fill his little clay pipe.

Mr. Wyllard went back to the compartment where he had been sitting at ease all day and alone. There is a mysterious power in the presence of such a man which, save in the stress of the tourist season, can generally secure solitude. The tourist season had not yet begun, and Mr. Wyllard was known to be good for half-a-crown, and never to offer less; so his particular compartment was sacred. Even bishops and notabilities of the land were hustled away from the door, beguiled by the promise of something better elsewhere.

He had strewed the carriage with newspapers and magazines, and now he began to collect all this literature and to strap it neatly together before arriving at his journey's end. He was neat and methodical in all small matters, yet he was in nowise a prig or a pedant. His tall, powerful frame and strongly marked features were upon a large scale. He had a large brain and a large manner.

Look at him now as he sits in his corner of the luxurious carriage, against a background of light-drab cloth. A man in the prime of manhood, five-and-forty at most; a fine head well set off; light-brown hair, thick and silky, brushed aside from a broad square forehead, in which there are all the indications of intellectual power. Large, full blue eyes, whose normal expression is severe, but the expression softens when the man smiles, brightens and sparkles when the man laughs. He has a beautiful smile, a sonorous laugh, and a voice of power and compass rare among English voices. The features are firmly modelled, bold, massive; the mouth, when the lips are closely set, as they are just now, looks as if it were cut out of stone. A man likely to love profoundly, and not likely to hate lightly. A staunch friend, as everybody knows in this part of the country; but perchance a deadly foe were great provocation given; a man to keep a secret as closely as the grave. A man to give money as freely as if it were water.

The train stopped at Bodmin Road, in a picturesque valley, deep amidst pine-clothed hills, and adjoining a park of exceptional beauty. There was a quiet little roadside inn, about five minutes' walk from the station, and to this strange hostelry the dead girl was conveyed, a shrouded form lying on a shutter, and carried by two railway-porters. She was laid in a darkened chamber at the back of the house, to await the advent of the Coroner, a gentleman of some importance, who lived ten miles off.

An open carriage was waiting for Julian Wyllard, and in the carriage sat a beautiful woman, smiling welcome upon him as he came out of the station. The dead girl had been carried out by another way. The lady in the carriage knew nothing of the tragedy.

"How late the train is this evening!" she said. "I was beginning to feel uneasy."

"There has been an accident."

"An accident! O, how dreadful! But you are not hurt?" she cried anxiously, looking at him from top to toe, suspicious of some deadly injury which he might be heroically concealing.

"No, it was not a railway accident. There is no one hurt except a poor girl who threw herself, or was thrown, out of the train."

"How terrible!" exclaimed Mrs. Wyllard. "Is it any one we know – any one about here?"

"No, she is quite a stranger, poor child, and from her dress and general appearance I should take her to be a Frenchwoman. But we shall know more after the inquest."

"How very sad! A stranger alone in a strange land, and to meet such a death! But do you really believe that any one threw her out of the train, Julian? That seems too horrible to be true."

"My dear, I believe nothing. The poor creature's fate is shrouded in mystery. Whether she killed herself or whether any one killed her is an open question. I told the guard and the station-master to be on the alert, and to stop any suspicious character. I shall call at the police-office as we drive through the town. Here is Bothwell," added Wyllard, as the young man came sauntering lazily along. "Did you know that he had gone to Plymouth?"

"Not I," replied Mrs. Wyllard. "He did not appear at luncheon, but as he is always erratic I did not even wonder about him. What took you to Plymouth this morning, Bothwell?" she asked, as her cousin came up to the carriage door.

They were first cousins, and it was his cousinship with Julian Wyllard's beautiful wife which secured Bothwell Grahame free quarters at Penmorval. They were children of twin sisters who had loved each other with more than common love, who had seldom been parted till death parted them untimely. Bothwell's mother was cut off in the flower of her youth and beauty, leaving her only child an infant, and her husband a broken-hearted man. Captain Grahame went to India with his regiment, less than a year after his wife's death, to fight and fall in the Punjaub, and Bothwell, the orphan, was brought up by his mother's sister, Mrs. Tregony Dalmaine, at a fine old manor-house near the Land's End.

He was two years younger than Theodora Dalmaine, and he was to the child as a younger brother. They were brought up together, played together, and shared the same schoolroom and the same governess, till Bothwell was drafted off to Woolwich, having set his heart upon being a soldier, and in his father's regiment. The bright, quick-witted girl was considerably in advance of the boy in all their mutual studies. She was industrious where he was idle, for it must be owned that even in the beginning of things Bothwell was somewhat scampish in his mind and habits.

He did pretty well at Woolwich – passed his examinations respectably, if not with *éclat*. His heart was set upon soldiering, and he did not object to work when his heart was in the labour. He was a good soldier, and one of the most popular men in his regiment. He saw a good deal of service in Afghanistan, as an officer of Engineers, not without distinction: but he came to grief, in spite of his many good qualities. He squandered every shilling of his small patrimony, got into debt, and finally left the army, and thus dropped out of that one career for which nature and education had especially fitted him, turned aside from the one path which might have led him to fame and honour. And now he was an idler, without place or station in the world, money, or repute, an encumbrance and a burden to his family, as he told himself every day. He had vague ideas of chalking out a career for himself; had visions of colonial paradises, where he might do wonders; was always devising some new plan, inclining to some new place; but his aspirations had not yet taken any tangible form. He was continually falling in with some new adviser, who wrenched all his ideas out of the soil in which they had taken root, and transplanted them to another locality.

"Spanish America!" said Smith; "don't think of it. You would be dead in a week. Have you never heard of the *vomito negro*, the deadliest disease known to man? Otaheite is the place for you! A superb climate, a new area for an enterprising young Englishman! You would make your fortune in three years."

Then came Jones, who laughed at the notion of the South Sea Islands, and advised Bothwell to get a tract of waste land, near the mouth of the Gironde, and grow fir-trees, and export their resin; that was the one certain road to fortune. You had first your resin, a large annual revenue, and then you had your timber for railway sleepers, returning cent per cent. Bothwell did not venture to ask how you got your resin after you had sold your timber.

Anon came Robinson, who recommended Canada and the lumber trade; and after him Brown, who declared that the only theatre for intelligent youth was the interior of Africa. In the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom, says Scripture; but Bothwell found that in the multitude of counsellors there is bewilderment akin to madness. He had an honest desire to get his own living; but so far uncertainty as to the manner of getting it had barred the way to fortune.

"What took me to Plymouth?" he repeated. "Upon my word, I hardly know. It was so deadly quiet at Penmorval this morning. I wanted to hear the voices of my fellow-men. I went third class, you know, Dora. It wasn't a very extravagant proceeding," he murmured confidentially. "Shall I ride on the box?"

"You had better come inside," said Wyllard; "there is plenty of room;" whereupon Bothwell took the back seat of the barouche, opposite his cousin and her husband.

Bodmin town was some miles from Bodmin Road, a lovely drive in the tranquil July eventide; but both those men were haunted by the vision of that dead face, those dislocated limbs, hanging loosely, like a dead stag hauled along by huntsman and whip, while the hounds cluster round their prey. An event so terrible was not to be dismissed lightly.

"I wonder who she was, and where she was going?" said Bothwell.

"Some little nursery governess, I daresay, going to her situation."

"In that case we shall hear all about her at the inquest. She will have been expected, and her employers will come to the fore."

"What a terrible thing for her parents, if they are living; most of all for her poor mother!" said Mrs. Wyllard.

She pronounced the last word with peculiar softness. She had an exalted idea of the sacredness of the relationship between mother and child. She had passionately loved her own mother; had passionately longed for a child in the earlier years of her wedded life. But she had been a wife seven years, and no child had lived to bless her. A son had been born within a year of her marriage – born only to die: and now she had left off hoping that she would ever be called upon this earth by the dear name of mother.

They drove past familiar woods and hills, ferny dells, and limpid brooks. They saw the great brown tors standing afar off against the amber sky: but that one haunting thought of a horrible death spoiled all the beauty of the scene. They had no eyes for the landscape, but sat in serious silence.

Mr. Wyllard alighted at the Bodmin police-station, and spent about ten minutes in conversation with the Inspector, who was at once shocked and elated on hearing of the strange death on the railway. He was shocked at the horror of the thing; he was elated at the idea of an inquiry and investigation which might result in honour and profit to himself.

Mrs. Wyllard sat in the carriage with Bothwell, while her husband and the official conversed gravely on the threshold of the station-house. Bothwell talked about the girl and her mysterious death. He described the poor little white face, the look of horror in that glassy stare of death.

"Did she look like a lady?" asked Dora, full of painful interest.

"Hardly, I think. She had that pretty, neat appearance which one sees in French girls of a class just a little above the grisette. Her frock, and her boots, and her cotton gloves must all have suited herself and her station to a nicety. There was no touch of that vulgar finery which makes a half-bred English girl odious. I daresay Wyllard is right, and that she was a poor little governess, going out into a strange land to earn her bread and learn a foreign language. There are thousands who go out every year, I have no doubt; only this one has contrived to jump into notoriety and an early grave at the same time. By Jove! here comes the Coroner. We shall be the first to tell him that he will be wanted to-morrow."

Mrs. Wyllard blushed faintly as she turned to look at an approaching horseman. She had not, even to this day, left off blushing at any sudden mention of Edward Heathcote's name; and yet it was seven years since she had jilted him in order to marry Julian Wyllard.

A sad story, all forgiven now, if not forgotten. A deep wrong done by a noble-hearted woman to a noble-hearted man. It was the one act of Theodora Wyllard's life which she could not look back upon without remorse. In all other relations of life she had been perfect – devoted daughter, devoted wife. But in this one thing she had sinned. This man had loved her faithfully, fondly, from the dawn of her girlish beauty, from the beginning of her womanly grace. She had accepted his love, and had

seemed to herself to return it, measure for measure. She had looked forward to the years when they two would be one. And then, in a fatal hour, another face flashed across the foreground of her life – a new voice thrilled her ear – an influence was exercised over her which she had never felt before, a power too potent for resistance – and, in a moment of passionate self-abandonment, she knelt at Edward Heathcote's feet, and confessed her love for another. Julian Wyllard had broken down all barriers, had asked her to be his wife, knowing her to be engaged to another man. But there are those who think that a great irresistible love outweighs all scruples of honour or conscience.

"Why do you ask me for your freedom, as if it were so great a favour?" Heathcote said bitterly, as he lifted her up from her knees. "Do you think I would have you – this mere beautiful clay – now that your heart has gone from me? Do you think I, who love you a hundred times better than I love myself, would stand between you and happiness? You are free, Dora. I have seen this misery coming upon me ever since this stranger came into your mother's house."

"And you will forgive me?" she pleaded, with clasped hands, looking at him with streaming eyes, sorry for him, deeply ashamed of her infidelity.

"Can I be angry with you, loving you as I do? God forgive you, Dora, for all your sins, large or small, as freely as I forgive your sin against me."

He kissed her unresisting lips for the last time, and so left her, as nearly broken-hearted as a man can be and yet recover.

He did recover, or was, at any rate, supposed to be cured, since, two years after Theodora Dalmaine's wedding, he married a fair young girl, penniless, friendless, and an orphan; a wife who loved him as he deserved to be loved, and who, after less than two years of wedded life, died, leaving two children, twin daughters. It was three years since the grave had closed upon her, and Edward Heathcote was still a widower, and was believed to have no thought of marriage.

He came riding slowly along the street in the fading light, a man of striking appearance, mounted on a fine horse, a man of about three-and-thirty, tall, broad-shouldered. He had a dark complexion, and dark-brown hair, deep-set gray eyes, which looked almost black under dark heavy brows, an aquiline nose, a heavy moustache and beard.

He had begun life as a younger son, and had practised for some years as a solicitor in the town of Plymouth – had been town clerk and a man of public importance in that place – when his elder brother died a bachelor, and Edward Heathcote inherited a snug little estate near Bodmin, with a curious old country house called The Spaniards. The place had been so named on account of the Spanish chestnuts which flourished there in exceeding beauty. On becoming owner of The Spaniards, and the estate that went with it, Edward Heathcote retired from the law, and went to live at the place of his birth, where he looked after the well-being of his baby girls and his young sister, and let his days glide by in the quiet monotony of a country squire's life, hunting and shooting, sitting in judgment upon poachers and small defaulters at petty sessions, and acting as coroner for his division of the county. He had been leading this life of rural respectability for a year.

He rode up to the carriage and shook hands with Mrs. Wyllard. He was her neighbour, and had visited Penmorval during the last year. There had never been the faintest indication in his manner or his speech that Julian Wyllard's wife was any more to him than a friend. He was pleased to visit her, anxious that she should be interested in his motherless children, pleased to confide his plans and his thoughts to her. Time had sobered his enthusiasm about all things, and had softened all bitter memories. He took life now as a gentle legato movement. He had lived and suffered, and done his duty, and that which was left to him was rest. He sat down among his fields and his vineyards to take his ease just a little earlier than other men, that was all. A great sorrow suffered in the morning of life ages a man by at least a decade.

"Why are you waiting outside the station-house?" he asked; "have you had an alarm of burglars at Penmorval?"

"It is something much worse than that," answered Mrs. Wyllard gravely; and then Bothwell related the catastrophe on the railway.

Julian Wyllard came back to the carriage just as the story was finished.

"This will be a job for you, Heathcote," he said.

"A very sad one. The story has a brutal sound to me, remembering past stories of the same kind," answered Heathcote. "It shall not be my fault if the ruffian escapes."

"You think there is a ruffian, then? You don't take it for a case of suicide?"

"Decidedly not," replied the other promptly. "Why should a girl choose such a death as that?"

"Why should a girl throw herself off the Monument?" asked Wyllard. "Yet we know girls had a rage for doing that, fifty years ago. However, you will have a good opportunity for the display of your legal acumen in a really mysterious case. I did all I could in my small way to put the officials on the alert along the line; and if any scoundrel had a hand in that poor child's death, I don't believe he will get off easily. Where are you riding?"

"Only for an evening stroll over the downs."

"You had better come home and have supper with us. It will be too late to call it dinner."

"You are very good, but I dined at seven. Besides, I shall have to arrange about this inquest for to-morrow. I'll talk to Morris, and then ride on to the Vital Spark, and settle matters with the people there."

The Vital Spark was the small roadside inn where the dead girl was lying. The Penmorval barouche drove off, while Edward Heathcote stopped to talk to Morris, the Inspector. The jury would have to get notice early next morning. The inquest was to be held at five in the afternoon. This would give time for the tradesmen to get away from their shops. The chief business of the day in Bodmin town would be over.

"It will give time for any one in this neighbourhood, who knows anything about the girl, to come forward," added Mr. Heathcote. "If she was going to a situation in this part of the world, as Mr. Wyllard suggests, some one must know all about her."

"What a man he is, Mr. Heathcote!" said the Inspector admiringly. "Such clearness, such decision; always to the point."

"Yes, he is a very superior man," answered Heathcote heartily.

He had schooled himself long ago to generous thoughts about his rival. It pleased him to know that Dora had been lucky in her choice, that she had not taken a scorpion into her bosom when she preferred another man to himself. He had wondered sometimes – in a mere idle wonder, when he saw her in her beautiful home at Penmorval – whether it would have been possible for him to make her life happier than Julian Wyllard had made it; whether in his uttermost adoration he could ever have been a better husband to her than Julian Wyllard had been. He had looked searchingly for any flaw in the perfection of that union, and he had perceived none. He was generous-minded enough to be glad that it was so.

The carriage drove slowly up a long hill, and across a wide expanse of heathy ground, before it entered the gate of Penmorval, which was two miles from the town. It was a beautiful old place, standing on high ground, yet so richly wooded as to be shut in from the outer world. Only the Cornish giants, Roughtor and Brown Willie, showed their dark crests above the broad belt of timber which surrounded the good old Tudor mansion. A double avenue of elms and yews led to the old stone porch. The long stone façade facing northward looked out upon a level lawn divided from the park by a haw haw. The southern front was curtained with roses and myrtle, and looked upon one of the loveliest gardens in Cornwall – a garden which had been the pride and delight of many generations – a garden for which the wives and dowagers of three centuries of Cornish squires had laboured and thought. Nowhere could be found more glorious roses, or such a treasury of out-of-the-way flowers, from the finest to the simplest that grows. Nowhere did April sunlight shine upon such tulips and hyacinths,

nowhere did June crown herself with fairer lilies, or autumn flaunt in greater splendour of dahlias, hollyhocks, and chrysanthemums. The soil teemed with flowers. There was no room left for a weed.

For a childless wife like Dora Wyllard a garden such as this is a kind of spurious family. She has her hopes, her fears, her raptures and anxieties about her roses and chrysanthemums, just as mothers have about their girls and boys. She counts the blossoms on a particular *Gloire de Dijon*. She remembers the cruel winter when that superb John Hopper succumbed to the frost. She has her nostrums and remedies for green-fly, as mothers have for measles. That glorious old garden helped to fill the cup of Mrs. Wyllard's happiness, for it gave her inexhaustible employment. Having such a garden she could never say, with the languid yawn of the idle and the prosperous, "What can I do with myself to-day?" But Dora was not dependent on her garden for occupation. Exacting as the roses and lilies were, manifold as were the cares of the hothouses and ferneries and wildernesses, Mrs. Wyllard's husband was more exacting still. When Julian was at home she could give but little time to her garden. He could hardly bear his wife to be out of his sight for half an hour. She had to be interested in all his schemes, all his letters, even to the driest business details. She rode and drove with him, and, as he had no taste for field sports, neither his guns nor his hunters took him away from her. He was a studious man, a man of artistic temperament, a lover of curious books and fine bindings, a lover of pictures and statues, and porcelain and enamels – a worshipper of the beautiful in every form. His tastes were such as a woman could easily and naturally share with him. This made their union all the more complete. Other wives wondered at beholding such domestic sympathy. There were some whose husbands could not sit by the domestic hearth ten minutes without dismal yawnings, men who depended upon newspapers for all their delight, men whose minds were always in the stable. Julian Wyllard was an ideal husband, who never yawned in a *tête-à-tête* with his wife, who shared every joy and every thought with the woman of his choice.

To-night, when they two sat down to the half-past, nine o'clock meal, with Bothwell, who was not much worse than a Newfoundland dog, for their sole companion, the wife's first question showed her familiarity with the business that had taken her husband to London.

"Well, Julian, did you get the Raffaele?" she asked.

"No, dear. The picture went for just three times the value I had put upon it."

"And you did not care to give such a price?"

"Well, no. There are limits, even for a monomaniac like me. I had allowed myself a margin. I was prepared to give a hundred or two over the thousand which I had put down as the price of the picture; but when it went up to fifteen hundred I retired from the contest, and it was finally knocked down to Lamb, the dealer, for two thousand guineas. A single figure – a half-length figure of Christ bearing the cross, against a background of vivid blue sky. But such divinity in the countenance, such pathetic eyes! I saw women turn away with tears after they had looked at that picture."

"You ought to have bought it," said Dora, who knew that her husband had a great deal more money than he could spend, and who thought that he had a right to indulge his own caprices.

"My dearest, as I said before, there are limits," he answered, smiling at her enthusiasm.

"Then you had your journey, and I had to endure the loss of your society for three dreary days, all for nothing?" said Dora.

"Not quite for nothing. There was the pleasure of seeing a very fine collection of pictures, and some magnificent Limoges enamels. I succeeded in buying you a little Greuze. I am told by French art-critics that it is a low thing to admire Greuze, the sign of a vulgar mind. He is the painter of the *bourgeois*, the *épiciér*. But, for all that, you and I have agreed to like Greuze; so I bought this little picture for your morning-room. I got it for five hundred and fifty, and I believe it is a genuine bit in the painter's best manner."

"How good you are to me!" exclaimed Dora, getting up and going over to her husband.

She bent down to kiss him as he sat at the table. They had dismissed the servants from this informal meal, so Mrs. Wyllard was not afraid of being considered eccentric, if she showed that she

was grateful. She did not mind Bothwell. Five hundred and fifty! How freely this rich man talked of his hundreds, as it seemed to Bothwell, pinched by the consciousness of debts which the cost of that picture would have covered – little seedlings of debts, scattered long ago by the wayside, and putting forth perennial flowers in the shape of unpleasant letters from creditors, which made him hate the sight of the postman.

Neither Wyllard nor Grahame ate a hearty meal. That picture of the dead face was too vividly present in the minds of both. Meat and drink and pleasant talk were out of harmony with that horror which both had looked upon three hours ago. They took more wine than usual, and hardly ate anything.

"Will you come for a stroll in the garden, Julian?" asked Dora, as they rose from the table.

It was half-past ten o'clock, a lovely summer night. A great golden moon was shining low down in the purple sky, just above the bank of foliage: not that far-off moon which belongs to all the world, but a big yellow lamp lighting one's own garden.

"Do come," she said, "it is such a delicious night."

"I dare not indulge myself, dear; I have my letters to open before I go to bed. I was just going to order a fire in the library."

"A fire, on such a night as this! I'm afraid you have caught cold."

"I think it not unlikely," answered her husband, as he rang the bell.

"Don't you think your letters might keep till to-morrow morning, Julian?" pleaded Dora. "We could have a fire in the morning-room, and sit and talk."

"That would be delightful, but I must not allow myself to be tempted. I should not rest to-night with the idea of a pile of unopened letters."

He gave his orders to the servant. His letters and papers were all on the library table. A fire was to be lighted there immediately.

"You will be late, I am afraid," said Dora.

"I may be a little late. Don't wait up for me on any account, dearest. Goodnight!"

He kissed her; and she said good-night, but reserved her liberty to sit up for him all the same. There is no use in a husband saying to a wife of Mrs. Wyllard's temperament, "Don't sit up for me, and don't worry yourself!" Sleep was impossible to Dora until she knew that her husband was at rest; just as happiness was impossible to her when parted from him. She had made herself a part of his being, had merged her very existence in his; she had no value, hardly any individuality, apart from him.

"Julian looks tired and anxious," she said to her cousin, who stood smoking a cigarette just outside the window.

"You can't be surprised at that," answered Bothwell. "That business on the railway was enough to make any man feel queer. I shall not forget it for a long time."

"It must have been an awful shock. And men with strong features and powerful frames are sometimes more sensitive than your fragile beings with nervous temperaments," said Dora. "I have often been struck with Julian's morbid feeling about things which a strong man might be supposed to regard with indifference."

"He is a deuced good fellow," said Bothwell, who had been more generously treated by his cousin's husband than by any of his own clan. "Won't you come for a turn in the garden? I won't start another cigarette, if you object."

"You know I don't mind smoke," she answered, joining him. "Why, how your hand shakes, Bothwell! You can hardly light your cigarette."

"Didn't I say that I was upset by that business? I don't suppose I shall sleep a wink to-night."

They walked in the rose-garden for more than an hour. Garden and night were both alike ideal. An Italian garden, with formal terraces, and beds of roses, and a fountain in the centre, a bold and plenteous jet that rose from a massive marble basin. Roses, magnolia, jasmine, and Mary-lilies filled the air with perfume. The moon had changed from gold to silver, and was high up in heaven.

It was everybody's moon now, silvering the humble roofs of Bodmin, shining over the church, the gaol, the lunatic asylum, and shining on that humble village inn five or six miles away, beneath whose rustic roof the stranger was lying, with no one to pray beside her bed.

Bothwell sauntered silently by his cousin's side. She, too, was silent, and felt no inclination to talk or to listen. She was glad to be out in the garden while her husband opened his letters. She knew there was a pile of correspondence waiting for him – such letters as devour the leisure of a country gentleman of wealth and high standing, letters for the most part uninteresting, and very often troublesome. It would take Julian Wyllard a long time to wade through them all. But when the stable clock struck twelve, Dora thought she might fairly hope to find the task finished.

"Good-night, Bothwell," she said. "I'll go and look for Julian."

The servants had all gone to bed, and the lamps had been extinguished, except in the hall and corridors. A half-glass door opened from the garden into the hall, and this was always left unbolted for the accommodation of Bothwell, who was fond of late saunterings in the grounds. The library was at the further end of the house, a superb room, filled with a choice collection of books, the growth of the last seven years; for Julian Wyllard was a new man in the county, and had only owned Penmorval during that period.

There was a good fire burning in the artistic tiled grate – a modern improvement upon the old arrangement in wrought iron. Mr. Wyllard had opened all his letters, and had evidently burned some of them, for an odour of calcined paper and sealing-wax pervaded the room.

He was sitting in a low chair beside the hearth, in a stooping attitude, deeply meditative, looking down at some object in his hands. He was so profoundly absorbed as to be unconscious of Dora's presence till she was standing close beside him.

The object which so engrossed his attention, which had led his thoughts backward to the faraway past, was a long tress of chestnut hair. He had wound it round his fingers – a smooth, silken tress, which flashed with gleams of gold in the cheery light of the fire.

"What beautiful hair!" said Dora gently, as she looked downward from behind his shoulder. "Whose is it, Julian?"

"It *was* my sister's," he answered.

"The sister who died so many years ago. Poor Julian! You have been sitting here alone, giving yourself up to sad memories."

"I came upon this auburn tress among some old papers just now, while I was looking for Martin's lease."

He rolled the hair up quickly, and flung it into the flaming coals.

"O Julian, why did you do that?" asked his wife reproachfully.

"What is the use of keeping such things, only to perpetuate sorrowful memories? God knows we have enough of our dead. They haunt us and plague us at every stage of life. We cannot get rid of them."

The bitterness of his tone jarred upon his wife's ear.

"My dearest, you are wearied and out of spirits," she said. "You have worked too long. Were your letters troublesome?"

"Not more so than usual, dear. Yes, I am very tired."

"And that dreadful event on the line has troubled you. Poor Bothwell is quite upset by it. I am so sorry for you, Julian," said his wife soothingly, leaning upon his shoulder, smoothing back the thick hair from the broad, full brow.

"My dear child, there is no reason to be sorry for me. Dreadful events are happening every day, all over the world. We hear of them, and feel how feeble a thing life is under such conditions as those on which we all hold our existence. This evening I happened to be brought face to face with a terrible death. That is all the difference."

CHAPTER II. AFTER THE INQUEST

There was great excitement in Bodmin on the afternoon of the inquest; a delicious summer afternoon, which seemed made for quiet arcadian joys; an afternoon to be spent in day-dreams under forest boughs, or drifting lazily adown a placid stream; rather than for gathering together in a stifling tavern-parlour, listening to the droning accents of a police-constable, or the confused statements and innocent prevarications of a railway-porter. But it may be that the inhabitants of Bodmin had drunk their fill of the cup of pastoral joys, that they had had more than enough of heathery moorland and foxglove-bordered lane, dog-rose and honeysuckle, waving boughs and winding streams, and that this satiety made them flock to the little inn beyond Bodmin Road station, where they elbowed and hustled one another in the endeavour to get a good view of the Coroner and the witnesses.

An inquest was not in itself such a thrilling event. There had been inquests held in Bodmin which inspired neither curiosity nor excitement in the mind of the town. But this inquiry of to-day interested everybody. Who could tell what mystery – what story of falsehood and wrong – had gone before that sad, strange death? The report had gone about that the victim was a foreigner, and this gave a deeper note to the mystery. Why had she come to that spot to kill herself? or who had lured her there to murder her? These were the questions which were discussed in Bodmin freely that fair July morning; questions which gave birth to various wise and abstruse theories, every one of which seemed to the inventor thereof a most plausible explanation of this dark problem in human history.

"If anybody can throw light upon the business, Squire Heathcote is the man to do it," said Mr. Bate, grocer, general-dealer, and churchwarden.

Edward Heathcote was one of the most popular men within ten miles of Bodmin. He was a native of the soil, had been known to the neighbourhood from his childhood. He came of a race that was held in high honour, which had produced men famous with sword and gown in the days that were gone. Honour, courage, and all generous feelings were supposed to run in the blood of the Heathcotes. He had succeeded to a small estate and a fine old Grange, in which his forefathers had lived from generation to generation. In the deepest night of past ages there had been Heathcotes in the land. Thus, albeit he was by no means a rich man as compared with Julian Wyllard, he stood higher than the wealthy financier in the esteem of those good old conservatives who held that money is not everything. Mr. Wyllard was a new-comer, had bought Penmorval just before his marriage – choosing this part of the world for his residence because Theodora Dalmaine loved it, rather than for any leaning of his own. He was known to have made the greater part of his money himself – a low thing for a man to have done. Even commercial fortunes become hallowed after they have filtered from father to son for three or four generations. Thus, although he was altogether the most important personage in the neighbourhood, and belonged to the landed gentry by right of recent purchase, there were people who looked upon Julian Wyllard as a *parvenu*, and who were somewhat disposed to resent the weight which his wealth gave him in local affairs.

Squire Heathcote was said to be the best coroner who had filled that office at Bodmin within the memory of the oldest inhabitant. His legal experiences had been of a wider range than those of the average provincial solicitor. He had served his articles to a well-known London firm; he had travelled a good deal, and had seen men and cities. He had been brought into close relations with his fellow-men under manifold conditions; and he was said to be a marvellous reader of character, an impartial and clear-headed judge. On more than one occasion he had shown an acumen rarely met with at a rural inquest; and he had disentangled more than one knotted skein. It was argued, therefore, that if any one could unravel the mystery of the dead girl's fate, Squire Heathcote was the man to do it.

Nothing could be quieter or less pretentious than his manner as he took his seat at the head of the long table in the parlour of the Vital Spark; but there were signs of anxiety or emotion in the

sombre fire of the deep-set gray eyes, and the nervous movement of the sun-burnt hand, which played with his dark chestnut-beard. He sat for some minutes looking down at his notes, and then slowly raised his eyes and surveyed the room, which was quite full.

Julian Wyllard was sitting near the opposite end of the table, with little Dr. Menheniot by his side. Bothwell Grahame was seated apart from them and nearer the jury. He had a haggard look, Mr. Heathcote thought, as of a man who had passed a troubled night.

There were three or four railway officials present, and these were the principal witnesses. First came the guard on the down train from Paddington, whose evidence was meagre, since it appeared that he had only seen the dead girl standing on the footboard a moment before she fell. She was standing on the footboard and clinging to the hand-rail, with her face to the coach; she seemed to be talking to some one inside. It had not seemed to him that she threw herself off the footboard. It had seemed rather as if she had dropped off.

"Was it your impression that she was thrown off?" asked Heathcote.

"No, sir. I can't say that was my impression. But the whole thing was too quick for me to have a very clear idea either way. My first thought was how I could save her. I had only just stepped out upon the footboard when she gave a shriek and fell. She was at the farther end of the train. Before I could get to the carriage from which she had fallen, the engine had slackened and the passengers were getting out."

"Did you find the carriage out of which she fell?"

"Yes, sir. There was an empty second-class next but one to the engine. I believe that was the compartment. There was a little basket with some refreshments, and a newspaper, which I believe belonged to the deceased."

The basket was on the table. It had a foreign look; a poor little basket, containing a few cherries in a cabbage-leaf, and a little bag of biscuits. The newspaper was the French *Figaro*. The Coroner handed the basket to the jury, who examined the contents curiously. There was no scrap of writing, no card or old letter; nothing to identify the dead girl, or to indicate the place from which she had come.

"Her clothes and the contents of her pocket have been examined," said Mr. Heathcote, in reply to a question from one of the jury, "but no mark or clue has been found. Nor has any luggage belonging to her been discovered, which is curious, since it is not often that any one travels from London to Cornwall without luggage. I have communicated with the London police; and I have sent an advertisement to the *Times*, and to a Parisian newspaper. Perhaps, by this means we shall discover the girl's identity. In the mean time the question is, how did she come by her death?"

The next witness was a porter from the Plymouth station, who had taken notice of the girl there while the train waited. He had seen her on the platform, alone. He was sure that he had not seen her speak to anybody. She walked up and down the platform two or three times, and he thought she looked puzzled and anxious, as if she expected to meet somebody who had not come. He was too busy looking after people's luggage to watch her closely, but he had noticed her because she looked like a foreigner. He saw her get into a second-class compartment near the engine just as the train was starting. She got in hurriedly, and it seemed to him that some one inside the compartment had opened the door for her and helped her in; but he could not be positive about this, as he was a long way off at the time. He had seen the deceased, and he recognised her as the young person he had observed at Plymouth.

Dr. Menheniot was the next witness. He gave technical evidence as to the cause of the girl's death; but as to the circumstances that preceded her fall, he could say no more than the guard. Yes, a little more, for he had seen the carriage door opened and the girl stepping out on the footboard. Yes, in answer to the Coroner's question, it had seemed to him that some one thrust her out, yet he could not swear that it was so. The door had opened suddenly; and he had seen her standing on the footboard, clinging to the open door. If she had meant to commit suicide, it appeared to him that

she would have leapt at once from the carriage over the embankment. The act of standing on the footboard and clinging to the carriage would imply resistance.

"It might mean only hesitation," said Heathcote. "How long do you suppose she remained standing on the footboard?"

"Hardly a minute – perhaps not more than thirty seconds. I heard the guard signal for the stopping of the train, and then I heard her shriek as she fell. It was almost instantaneous. The engine was just on the bridge when I first saw her. It was in the middle of the bridge when she fell. That will give you the best idea as to time."

"Not more than thirty seconds," said the Coroner, who knew every yard of the line. "Is there any one else here who can tell us anything about this poor girl's death?"

There was no one else; though there were twenty people in the room who had been in the train yesterday evening, and who had gone down into the gorge to see that poor crushed form lying amidst ferns and foxgloves, to look curiously at the small white face, the childish lips for ever mute in death. No one could tell any more, or indeed as much about the details of the catastrophe as Dr. Menheniot and the guard, both of whom had seen the fall: whereas no one else happened to have been looking out of window on the near side of the train.

"We will adjourn the inquest for a fortnight," said Mr. Heathcote presently, after a whispered consultation with the jury. "The matter is much too mysterious to be dismissed without a very careful investigation. A fortnight will give ample time for the friends of the deceased to come forward. I have ordered photographs to be taken, with a view to her identification. Burial cannot, of course, be delayed beyond the usual time."

There were morbid minds among the spectators who envied the photographer his ghastly office. The inquest was felt to have been disappointing. Revelations had been expected, and none had come. But Mr. Heathcote had pronounced the case deeply mysterious: and there was comfort in the idea that he might know more than he cared to reveal yet awhile.

Julian Wyllard had driven from Penmorval in his own particular dog-cart, with one of the finest horses in the district. Bothwell Grahame, who was a great walker and altogether independent in his habits, had come across the hills, and over cornfields and meadows, as straight as the crow flies. The master of Penmorval's smart trap and high-stepping gray were out of sight before Bothwell left the pathway in front of the Vital Spark, where he lingered to talk over the inquest with some of his Bodmin acquaintance. The young Scotchman was steeped to the eyes in true Caledonian pride of race; but he had none of the petty pride which makes a man scornful of that portion of the human family which earns its bread by humble avocations. He was as friendly with a railway-porter or a village tradesman as with the proudest landowner in the county; had not two sets of manners for high and low, or two distinct modes of speech for gentle and simple, the very intonation different for that inferior clay. Bothwell had never been able to understand why some of the men he knew talked to a tradesman or a servant just as they would have spoken to a dog, or, indeed, much less civilly than Bothwell spoke to his dogs. He was a staunch Conservative in most things; but in this one question of respect for his fellow-man he was an unmitigated Radical.

And now he loitered in front of the inn door, talking to the railway officials who had appeared at the inquest, and who knew Mr. Grahame as a frequent traveller between Bodmin Road and Plymouth.

"There was one thing that didn't come out just now," said the station-master, "and that was the girl's ticket. The ticket was for Plymouth; and yet here was this poor young thing going on towards Penzance. Why was she going beyond her first destination, eh, Mr. Grahame? Why did she walk up and down the platform at Plymouth, as if she expected some one to meet her there? Why did she get into the train at the last moment, just as it was moving out of the station? Don't it seem likely that the individual who was to have met her in the station for which she had taken her ticket was the same individual that helped her into the train, and that he made away with her? A husband, perhaps, who wanted to get rid of a troublesome foreign wife. And he tells her to meet him at Plymouth, and

he is there to meet her, but not on the platform as she expects. He is there in hiding in a railway carriage, and he beckons her in just as the train is starting, when he is least likely to be observed in the bustle and hurry of the start."

"You put your story together very well, Mr. Chafy," said Bothwell somewhat indifferently, as if not deeply interested in the mystery which so enthralled the Bodmin mind. "You ought to have been a detective. But if this poor girl was murdered, and her murderer was in the train, how is it that you who are so sharp could not contrive to spot him when you took stock of the passengers? Mr. Wyllard gave you the office, I remember."

"Murderers do not carry the brand of Cain, Mr. Grahame," said Edward Heathcote, who had come out of the inn door in time to hear Bothwell's speech. "The assassins of our civilised era are high-handed gentlemen, very cunning of fence, and have no more mark upon them than you or I."

"I believe the girl's death was an accident," said Bothwell, with a touch of impatience – "one of those profound mysteries which are as simple as ABC. She may have been standing by the door, admiring the landscape, and the door may have opened as she leant against it. She might recover herself so far as to stand on the foot-board for a few seconds, clinging to the hand-rail, and then she fell and was killed."

"Not a very plausible explanation, my dear Grahame. She was leaning against the door, looking out at the landscape, you suggest, and the door opened and let her out. How was it, then, that when Menheniot and the guard saw her, she was standing on the foot-board with her face to the carriage? Did she swing herself round on the footboard, as on a pivot, do you suppose? Rather a difficult achievement, even for an acrobat."

"You need not be so deuced clever," retorted Bothwell, who seemed altogether out of sorts this afternoon. "It is not my business to find out how the young woman came by her death."

"No," said the Coroner, "but it is mine; and I mean to do it."

"It won't be the first queer case you've got to the bottom of, Mr. Heathcote," said the station-master, in a tone of respect that amounted almost to reverence. "You remember poor old uncle Taylor, who was found dead at the bottom of the Merrytree shaft over to Truro? You put a rope round the neck of the scoundrel that killed him, you did. There's not many men clever enough to keep a secret from you."

"Good-night, squire; good-night, Chafy," said Bothwell, moving off.

Heathcote followed him.

"If you are walking home, I'll go part of the way with you," he said.

"What, are you on foot?" asked Bothwell, surprised. "What has become of Timour?"

"Timour is in a barn, with his shoes off, getting ready for the cub-hunting."

"And the rest of your stud?"

"O, I have plenty of horses to ride, if that is what you mean; but I rather prefer walking, in such weather as this. How is it you did not drive home in your cousin's dog-cart?"

"I hate sitting beside another man to be driven," said Bothwell shortly. "There are times, too, when a fellow likes to be alone."

If this were intended for a hint, Mr. Heathcote did not take it. He produced his cigar-case, and offered Bothwell one of his Patagas. He was a great smoker, and renowned for smoking good tobacco; so Bothwell accepted the cigar and lighted it, but did not relax the sullen air which he had assumed when Mr. Heathcote volunteered his company.

"You are not looking particularly well this afternoon, Grahame," said Heathcote, when they had walked a little way, silently smoking their cigars.

"O, there's nothing the matter with me," the young man answered carelessly. "I was up late, and I had a bad night, that's all."

"You were troubled about yesterday's business," suggested the Coroner.

"The girl's dead face haunted me; but I had troubles of my own without that."

"You must have seen a good many dead faces in India."

"Yes, I have seen plenty – black and white – but there are some things against which a man cannot harden himself, and sudden death is one of them."

He relapsed into silence, and Heathcote and he walked side by side for some time without a word, the lawyer contemplating the soldier, studying him as if he had been a difficult page in a book. Edward Heathcote had spent a good deal of his life in studying living books of this kind. His practice in Plymouth had been of a very special character; he had been trusted in delicate matters, had held the honour of noble families in his keeping, had come between father and son, husband and wife; had been guide, philosopher, and friend, as well as legal adviser. His reputation for fine feeling and high moral character, the fact of his good birth and ample means, had made him the chosen repository of many a family secret which would have been trusted to very few solicitors. His name in Plymouth was a synonym for honour, and his advice, shrewd lawyer though he was, always leaned to the side of chivalrous feeling rather than to stern justice.

Such a man must have had ample occasion for the study of human nature under strange aspects. It was, therefore, a highly-trained intellect which was now brought to bear upon Bothwell Grahame, as he walked silently beside the flowering hedgerows in that quiet Cornish lane, puffing at his cigar, and looking straight before him into vacancy.

Mr. Heathcote had seen a good deal of Captain Grahame during the year he had lived at Penmorval; but he never had seen such a look of care as he saw in the soldier's face to-day. Trouble of some kind – and of no light or trifling kind – was gnawing the man's breast. Of that fact Edward Heathcote was assured; and there was a strange sinking at his own heart as he speculated upon the nature of that secret trouble which Bothwell was trying his best to hide under a show of somewhat sullen indifference.

As coroner and as lawyer, Mr. Heathcote had made up his mind more than an hour ago that the girl lying at the Vital Spark had been murdered. She had been thrust out of the railway carriage, flung over the line into that dreadful gulf, by some person who wanted to make away with her. Her murderer was to be looked for in the train, had travelled in one of those carriages, had been one among those seemingly innocent travellers, all professing ignorance of the girl's identity. One among those three-and-twenty people whom Chafy, the station-master, had counted and taken stock of at Bodmin Road station, must needs be the murderer. That one, whoever he was, had borne himself so well as to baffle the station-master's scrutiny. He had shown no trace of remorse, agitation, guilty fear. He had behaved himself in all points as an innocent man.

But what if the criminal were one whom the station-master knew and respected – a man of mark and standing in the neighbourhood, whose very name disarmed suspicion?

Such a man would have passed out of the station unobserved; or if any signs of agitation were noted in his manner, that emotion would be put down to kindly feeling, the natural pity of a benevolent mind. Had any hard-handed son of toil, a stranger in the land, reaper, miner, seafaring man – had such an one as this exhibited signs of discomposure, suspicion would at once have been on the alert. But who could suspect Mrs. Wyllard's soldier-cousin, the idle open-handed gentleman, who had made himself everybody's favourite?

It would have been a wild speculation to suppose, because Bothwell's countenance and manner were so charged with secret trouble, that his was the arm which thrust that poor girl to her untimely death. Yet the Coroner found himself dwelling upon this wild fancy, painful as it was to him to harbour any evil thought of Dora Wyllard's kinsman.

There were several points which forced themselves upon his consideration. First, Bothwell's changed manner to-day – his avowal of a troubled night – his evident wish to be alone – his incivility, as of one whose mind was set on edge by painful thoughts. Then came the fact of his journey to Plymouth yesterday – a journey undertaken suddenly, without any explanation offered to his cousin – seemingly purposeless, since he had given no reason for absenting himself, stated no business in

the town. He had gone and returned within a few hours, and his journey had been a surprise to his cousin and her husband. Thirdly, there was his clumsy attempt to explain the girl's death just now, in front of the inn door; his unwillingness to admit the idea of foul play. He who excuses himself accuses himself, says the proverb. Bothwell had tried to account for the catastrophe on the line, and in so doing had awakened the Coroner's suspicions.

After all, these links in a chain of evidence were of the slightest; but Edward Heathcote had set himself to unravel the mystery of the nameless dead, and he was determined not to overlook the slenderest thread in that dark web.

"Wyllard seemed to have quite recovered from the shock of yesterday evening," he said presently. "I never saw him looking better than he looked this afternoon."

"Wyllard is a man made of iron," answered Bothwell carelessly. "I sometimes think there is only one soft spot in his heart, and that is his love for my cousin. In that he is distinctly human. I never saw a more devoted husband. I never knew a happier couple."

Bothwell sighed, as if this mention of the happiness of others recalled the thought of his own misery. At least, it was thus that Edward Heathcote interpreted the sigh.

Completely absorbed in his own cares, Bothwell had forgotten for the moment that he was talking to the man whom his cousin had jilted in order to marry Julian Wyllard. The courtship and the marriage had happened while Bothwell was in the East. It had never been more to him than a tradition; and the tradition was not in his mind when he talked of his cousin's wedded happiness.

"I am glad that it is so, very glad," said Heathcote earnestly.

He spoke in all good faith. He had loved with so unselfish a love that the welfare of his idol had been ever of more account to him than his own bliss. He had renounced her without a struggle, since her happiness demanded the sacrifice. And she was happy. That was the grand point. He had paid the price, and he had won the reward. He had loved with all his heart and strength; he had never ceased so to love. That wedded life, which to the outside world had seemed a life of domestic happiness, had been on his part only a life of resignation. He had married a friendless girl who loved him – who had betrayed the secret of her love for him unawares, in very innocence of inexperienced girlhood. He had taken a helpless girl to his heart and home, because there seemed upon this earth no other available shelter for her; and he had done his best to make her happy. He had succeeded so well that she never knew that this thoughtful kindness which wrapt her round as with a balmy atmosphere, this boundless benevolence which shone upon her like the sun, was not love. She was one of the happiest of women, and one of the proudest wives in the west country; and she died blessing him who had made her life blessed.

And now the gossips were all full of pity for the widower's loss and loneliness – a poor bereaved creature living in a lonely old Grange, with a young sister, the twin daughters, just four years old, and an ancient maiden lady who looked after the sister, the children, the house, and the servants, and in her own person represented the genius of thrift, propriety, prudence, wisdom, and all the domestic virtues. People in the neighbourhood of Bodmin, and his old friends at Plymouth, all thought and talked of Mr. Heathcote as borne down by the weight of his bereavement, and all hoped that he would soon marry again.

The Spaniards lay in a valley between Bodmin Road station and Penmorval. It lay on Bothwell's road to his cousin's house, and he had thus no excuse for parting company with the Coroner, had he been so inclined. The old wrought-iron gate between gray granite pillars, each crowned with the escutcheon of the Heathcotes, stood wide open, and the rose and myrtle curtained cottage by the gate had as sleepy an air in the summer evening as if it had stood by the gate of the Sleeping Beauty's enchanted domain. Even the old trees, the great Spanish chestnuts, with their masses of foliage, had a look of having outgrown all reason in a century of repose. No prodigal son had laid the spendthrift's axe to the good old trees around the birthplace of the Heathcotes. There was only the extent of a wide paddock and a lawn between the hall-door and that grand old gateway, and the house, though

substantial and capacious, hardly pretended to the dignity of a mansion. It was long and low and rambling – a house of many small rooms, queer winding passages, innumerable doors and windows, and low heavily-timbered ceilings; a house in which strange visitors and their servants were given to seeing ghosts and hearing unearthly noises of funereal significance – albeit the family had jogged on quietly enough from generation to generation, without any interference from the spirit world. People coming from brand-new houses in Earl's Court or Turnham Green protested that The Spaniards *must* be haunted; and shuddered every time the mice scampered behind the panelling, or the wind sighed amidst the branches of those leafy towers that girdled lawn and meadow.

Bothwell thought that Mr. Heathcote would leave him at the gate of The Spaniards.

"Good-night," he said somewhat shortly.

"I'll go on to Penmorval with you, and hear what impression the inquest made upon Wyllard," said the other. "It's not half-past seven yet – your cousin will be able to spare me a few minutes before dinner."

Bothwell walked on without a word. Ten minutes brought them to the gates of Penmorval, by far the lordlier domain, with a history that was rich in aristocratic traditions. But that ancient race for which Penmorval had been built, for whose sons and daughters it had grown in grandeur and dignity as the centuries rolled along – of *these* there remained no more than the echo of a vanished renown. They were gone, verily like a tale that is told; and the *parvenu* financier, the man who had grown rich by his own intellect and his own industry – naturally a very inferior personage – reigned in their stead.

Penmorval seemed not quite so dead asleep as Heathcote Grange, *alias* The Spaniards. In the sweet stillness of the summer evening, Bothwell and his companion heard voices – women's voices – familiar and pleasant to the ears of both.

Mrs. Wyllard was strolling in the avenue, with a young lady by her side, a girl in a white gown and a large leghorn hat; tall, slight, graceful of form, and fair of face – a girl who gave a little cry of pleased surprise at seeing Heathcote.

"I was just rushing home, Edward," she said, "for fear I should keep you waiting for dinner."

"Indeed, Hilda! Then I can only say that your idea of rushing is my idea of sauntering," her brother answered, smiling at the girlish face, as he shook hands with Mrs. Wyllard.

"What did Mr. Wyllard think of the inquest?" he asked. "You have seen him, I suppose?"

"Only for a minute as he drove by to the house, while Hilda and I were walking in the avenue. Why, Bothwell, how fagged and ill you look!" exclaimed Dora to her cousin.

"Only bored," answered Bothwell, which was not complimentary to the companion of his long walk.

"But you look positively exhausted, poor fellow," pursued Dora pityingly. "Why didn't you come back in the dog-cart? There was room for you."

"I wanted to be alone."

"And I wanted company," said Heathcote, laughing, "so I inflicted my society upon an unwilling companion. Very bad manners, no doubt."

"I'm afraid you got the worst of the bargain," muttered Bothwell, with a sullen look, at which Hilda's blue eyes opened wide with wonder.

"Do you know, Mr. Heathcote, an idle life does not agree with my cousin," said Dora. "I never know what it is to be weary of Penmorval or the country round; but for the last three or four weeks Bothwell has behaved as if he hated the place, and could find neither rest nor amusement within twenty miles of us. He is perpetually running off to Plymouth or to London."

"I wish women would take to reading their dictionaries, instead of cramming their heads with other women's novels," exclaimed Bothwell savagely, "for then perhaps they might have some idea of the meaning of words. When you say I run up to London perpetually, Dora, I suppose you mean that I have been there twice – on urgent business, by the way – within the last five weeks."

"And to Plymouth at least a dozen times," protested Dora. "All I can say is that you are my idea of perpetual motion."

"I know you are hardly ever at home, Mr. Grahame," said Hilda, supporting her friend.

They strolled towards the house as they talked, and half-way along the avenue they met the master of Penmorval, correctly attired in sober evening-dress, with a light overcoat worn loosely above his faultless black.

"How do you do, Heathcote? Do you know, Dora, that it is ten minutes to eight? You'll stop and dine with us, of course," added Wyllard cordially. "You refused last night; but now Hilda is here, and you have no excuse for going home."

"I only came to afternoon tea," said Hilda.

"And you and my wife have been gossiping from five o'clock until now. Deepest mystery of social life, what two women can find to talk about for three mortal hours in the depths of a rural seclusion like this!"

"A mystery to a man, who cannot imagine that women either think or read," retorted Dora, taking her husband's arm. "You men have a fixed idea that your wives and sisters have only two subjects of conversation, gowns and servants. Of course, you will stay and dine, Mr. Heathcote. I am not going to dress for dinner, so please don't look at your frock-coat as if that were an insuperable obstacle. You and Hilda are going to stop, whether you like it or not."

"You know we always like to be here," said Hilda, in her low sweet voice.

She stole a shy little look at Bothwell, as if wondering what he thought of the matter; but Bothwell's countenance was inscrutable.

Hilda was pained but not surprised by his manner. He had changed to her so strangely within the last few months – he who half a year ago had been so kind, so attentive. She was not angry – she was not vain enough to wonder that a man should begin by caring for her a little, and then leave off caring all at once, and relapse into absolute indifference. She supposed that such fickleness was a common attribute of the superior sex.

They all went to the house, and through a glass door into the large low drawing-room, where the butler immediately announced dinner. The two ladies had only time to take off their hats before they went into the dining-room. They were both in white, and there was a grace in Dora Wyllard's simple gown, a cluster of roses half hidden by the folds of an Indian muslin fichu, a swan-like throat rising from a haze of delicate lace, which was more attractive than the costliest toilet ever imported from Paris to be the wonder of a court ball. Yes, she was of all women Edward Heathcote had ever known the most gracious, the most beautiful. Those seven years of happy married life had ripened her beauty, had given a shade of thoughtfulness to the matron's dark eyes, the low wide brow, the perfect mouth, but had not robbed the noble countenance of a single charm. The face of the wife was nobler than the face of the girl. It was the face of a woman who lived for another rather than for her own happiness; the face of a woman superior to all feminine frivolity, and yet in all things most womanly.

Edward Heathcote sighed within himself as he took his place beside his hostess in the subdued light of the old panelled room, a warm light from lamps that hung low on the table, under rose-coloured shades, umbrella-shaped, spreading a luminous glow over silver and glass and flowers, and leaving the faces of the guests in rosy shadow. He sighed as he thought how sweet life would have been for him had this woman remained true to her first love. For she had loved him once. Eight years ago they two had clasped hands, touched lips, as affianced lovers. He could never forget what she had been to him, or what she might have been. He sat at her husband's table in all loyalty of soul, in staunch friendship. He would have cut his heart out rather than debased himself or Dora by one guilty thought. Yet he could but remember these things had been.

The two ladies left almost immediately after dinner, and Bothwell sauntered out into the garden directly afterwards. Not to rejoin them, as he would have done a few months ago, but to smoke the cigar of solitude in a path beside a crumbling, old red wall, and a long, narrow border of hollyhocks,

tall, gigantic, yellow, crimson, white, and pink. There were fruit-trees on the other side of the wall, which was supported with tremendous buttresses at intervals of twenty feet or so, and about wall and buttresses climbed clematis and passion-flower, jasmine, yellow and white, and the great crimson trumpets of the bignonia.

The banker and the lawyer sat silently for a few minutes, Julian Wyllard occupied in the choice of a cigar from a case which he had first offered to his guest; and then Edward Heathcote asked him what he thought of the inquest.

"I thought it altogether unsatisfactory," answered Wyllard. "You did your best to thrash out a few facts; but those fools of railway people had nothing to tell worth hearing. Everybody knows that the poor creature fell off the train – or was thrown off. What we want to find out is whether there was foul play in the business."

"It is my belief that there was," said Heathcote, looking at him fixedly in the dim roseate light, almost as unsatisfactory for such a scrutiny as the changeful glow of the fire.

"And mine," answered Wyllard; "and so strong is my conviction upon this point that I stopped at the post-office on my way home, and telegraphed to my old friend Joe Distin, asking him to come down and help us to solve the mystery."

"Do you mean the criminal lawyer?"

"Whom else should I mean? He and I were schoolfellows. I have asked him to stop at Penmorval while he carries on his investigation."

CHAPTER III. JOSEPH DISTIN

Mrs. Wyllard was surprised and even horrified when, on the morning after the inquest, her husband told her that he had invited Distin, the criminal lawyer, to stay at Penmorval while he investigated the mystery of the nameless girl's death. The presence of such a man beneath her roof seemed to her like an outrage upon that happy home.

"My dear Dora, what a delightful embodiment of provincial simplicity you show yourself in this business!" said her husband laughingly. "I believe you confound the lawyer who practises in the criminal courts with the police-agent you have read about in French novels. A man of low birth and education, with nothing but his native wit to recommend him; a man whose chief talent is for disguises, and who passes his life in a false beard and eyebrows, in the company of thieves and murderers, whom it is his business to make friends with and then betray. Joe Distin is a solicitor of long standing, whose chief practice happens to be in the Old Bailey. He is a most accomplished person, and the friend of princes."

"He is your friend, Julian, so I ought not for a moment to have doubted that he is a gentleman," answered Dora sweetly, with her hand resting on her husband's shoulder. Such a lovely hand, with long tapering fingers, and dimples where other people have knuckles, like a hand in an early Italian picture. "Still, I wish with all my heart that he were going to stay at the hotel. I don't want you to be involved in this terrible business. Why should you concern yourself about it, Julian? Nothing you can do can be of use to the poor dead girl. What is it all to you? What have you to do with it?"

"My duty," answered Wyllard firmly. "As a magistrate I am bound to see that a terrible crime – if crime it be – shall not go unpunished in my district. I have no particular aptitude in unravelling mysteries. I therefore send for my old schoolfellow, who has won his reputation among the sinuous ways of crime."

"Ah, I remember. You and Mr. Distin were together at Marlborough," said Dora musingly. "That is enough to make him an interesting person in my mind."

"Yes, we were companions and rivals in the same form," answered Julian. "There were some who thought us two the sharpest lads in the school. In all our studies we were neck and neck: but in other points the difference between us was a wide one. Distin was the son of a rich London solicitor – an only son, who could draw upon an indulgent father for means to gratify every whim, who had his clothes made by a fashionable tailor, and could afford to hire a hunter whenever he got the chance of riding one. I was one of many children – the fourth son of a Warwickshire parson; so I had to reckon my cash by sixpences, and to wear my clothes till they were threadbare. Yes, there was an impassable gulf between Distin and me in those days."

"And now you must be a great deal richer than he, and you can receive him in this lovely old place."

"There will be some pride in that. Yes, Dora, Fortune was at home to me when I knocked at her door. I have been what is called a lucky man."

"And you are a happy one, I hope," murmured his wife, leaning her head upon his shoulder, as he stood before the open window, looking dreamily out at summer woods.

"Ineffably happy, sweetone, in having won you," he answered tenderly, kissing the fair broad brow.

"You must have been wonderfully clever," said Dora enthusiastically, "beginning without any capital, and within twenty years making a great fortune and a great name in the world of finance."

"I was fortunate in my enterprises when I was a young man, and I lived at a time when fortunes were made – and lost – rapidly. I may have had a longer head than some of my compeers; at any rate, I was cooler-headed than the majority of them, and I kept out of rotten schemes."

"Or got out of them before they collapsed," Mr. Wyllard might have said, had he displayed an exhaustive candour.

But in talking of business matters to a woman a man always leaves a margin.

So after a good deal more discursive talk between husband and wife it was agreed that Mr. Distin's visit was not to be regarded as an affliction. A telegram arrived while Mr. and Mrs. Wyllard were talking, announcing the lawyer's arrival by the same train which had carried the nameless waif to her grave in the valley, the train which was due at Bodmin Road at a quarter before eight. The dog-cart was to meet the guest, and dinner was to be deferred till nine o'clock for his accommodation.

"You can send a line to Heathcote and ask him to dine with us to-night," said Wyllard. "I know he is interested in this business, and would like to meet Distin."

"And Hilda – you won't mind having Hilda?"

"Not in the least. Hilda is an ornament to any gentleman's dining-table. But how fond you have become of Hilda lately!"

"I was always fond of her. Do you know there is something that puzzles me very much?"

"Indeed!"

"A few months ago I thought Bothwell was in love with Hilda. He seemed devoted to her, and was always asking me to have her over here. I was rejoicing at the idea of the poor fellow getting such a sweet girl for his wife, for I thought Hilda rather liked him, when all at once he cooled, and appeared actually to go out of his way in order to avoid her. Strange, was it not?"

"The fickleness of an idle mind, no doubt," answered Wyllard carelessly.

He had not his wife's keen interest in the joys and sorrows of other people. He was said to be a kind-hearted man. He was good to the poor in a large way, and never shut his purse against the appeal of misfortune. But he could not be worried about the details of other people's lives. He did not care a straw whether Bothwell was or was not in love with Hilda. To his wife, on the contrary, the question was vital, involving the happiness of two people whom she loved.

"If your cousin does not put his shoulder to the wheel before long he will fall into a very bad way," said Wyllard decisively.

"He would be very glad to do it, if he only knew what wheel to shoulder," said Bothwell's voice outside, as he sauntered to the window, wafting aside the smoke of his cigarette.

It seemed to Dora as if her cousin spent his home life in smoking cigarettes and sauntering in the gardens, where, on his energetic days, he helped her in her war of extermination against the greenfly.

"There is always a wheel to be moved by the man who is not afraid of work," said Wyllard.

"So I am told, but I have found no such wheel, as a civilian. Seriously, Julian, I know that I am an idler and a reprobate, that I am taking advantage of your kindness and letting life slip by me just because I have the run of my teeth in this fine old place, and because you and Dora are worlds too good to me. I have been taking my own character between my teeth and giving it a good shaking within the last few days, and I mean to turn over a new leaf. I shall go abroad – to the South Seas."

"What are you to do for a living in the South Seas?"

"Something. Sub-edit a colonial paper, keep a grocery store, turn parson and convert the nigger. I shall fall upon my feet, you may be sure. I shall find something to do before I have been out there long. Or if Otaheite won't give me a roof and a crust, I can cross to the mainland and drive sheep. Something I must do for my bread. Into the new world I must go. The atmosphere of the old world is stifling me. I feel as if I was living in an orchid house."

"No, Bothwell, you are not going to the other end of the world," said Dora affectionately. "You ought not to say such things, Julian, making him feel as if he were an intruder, as if he were not welcome here; my first cousin, the only companion of my youth that remains to me now my dear mother is gone. Surely we who are rich need not grudge our kinsman a home."

"My dearest, you ought to know that I spoke for Bothwell's sake, and from no other motive than my care for his interest," answered Julian gravely. "A young man without a profession is a young man on the high-road to perdition."

"I believe you with all my soul," cried Bothwell, with feverish energy, "and I shall sail for Otaheite in the first ship that will carry me. Not because I do not love you, Dora, but because I want to be worthier of your love."

He lighted a fresh cigarette, and sauntered away from the window, to breathe latakia over the John Hoppers and Victor Verdiers on the wall.

Dora's eyes filled with tears. She was angrier with her husband than she had ever been since her marriage.

"It is very unkind of you to drive Bothwell out of your house," she said indignantly. "You make me regret that I have not a house of my own. You forget how fond we have always been of each other – that he is as dear to me as a brother."

"It is because I remember that fact that I am anxious to stimulate Bothwell to action of some kind," answered her husband. "Do you think it is good for any young man to lead the kind of life your cousin leads here?"

"If he were to marry he would become more industrious, I have no doubt," said Dora. "You might pension off old Mr. Gretton, and make Bothwell your land-steward."

"Which in Bothwell's case would mean a genteel dependence, under the disguise of a responsible position. Bothwell would be seen on every racecourse in the west country – would play billiards at the George, shoot my game, and let somebody else do my work."

"Do you mean that my cousin is a dishonourable man asked Dora indignantly.

"No, dear. I mean that he is a man who has spoiled one career for himself, and will have to work uncommonly hard in order to find another."

This was cruel logic to Dora's ear. For the first time in her life she thought that her husband was ungenerous; and for the first time in her life she reckoned her own fortune as an element of power. Hitherto she had allowed her rents to be paid into her husband's bank. She had her own cheque-book, and drew whatever money she wanted; but she never looked at her pass-book, and she did not even ask what income each year brought her, or what surplus was left at the end of the year. She had never offered to help Bothwell with money; she had felt that any such offer would humiliate him. But now she considered for the first time that her money must have accumulated to a considerable extent, and that it was in her power to assist Bothwell with capital for any enterprise which he might desire to undertake. If he had set his heart upon going to the South Sea Islands, he should not start with an empty purse.

The train from Paddington came into Bodmin Road station with laudable punctuality, and without mischance of any kind; and the dog-cart brought Mr. Distin to Penmorval before half-past eight. Dora was in the drawing-room when he arrived. She had dressed early in order to be ready to welcome her husband's friend; even albeit he came to her with a perfume of the Old Bailey.

In spite of Wyllard's praise of his old schoolfellow, Dora had expected a foxy and unpleasant individual, with craft in every feature of his face.

She was agreeably surprised on beholding a good-looking man, with aquiline nose, dark eyes, hair and whiskers inclining to gray, slim, well set up, neat without being dapper or priggish – a man who might have been taken for an artist or an author, just as readily as for a lawyer versed in the dark ways of crime.

"My friend Wyllard looks all the better for his rural seclusion," said Distin, after he had been introduced to Dora. "He seems to me a younger man by ten years than he was when I met him in Paris just ten years ago. And that means twenty years to the good, you see."

"Is it really ten years since you have met?" exclaimed Dora.

"Exactly a decade. Our last meeting was a chance encounter in the Palais Royal in the summer of '72, when Paris was just beginning to recover herself after the horrors of the Commune. We ran against each other one day at dinner-time – both making for Véfour's, where we dined together and talked over old times. I thought that evening my friend looked aged and haggard, nervous and worried, and I put it down to the ruling disease of our epoch, high-pressure. I knew it could not be the effect of late hours or dissipation of any kind, for Wyllard was always as steady as old Time. But now I find him regenerated, glorified by rustic pleasures. Happy fellow, who can afford to enjoy his *otium cum dignitate* in the very prime of life."

"You hear what he says, Dora," said Wyllard laughingly. "Now, I daresay what he thinks is: 'How can this poor devil endure his existence out of London – two hundred and forty miles from the clubs – from the opera-house – from the first nights of new plays – the crowd of familiar faces?' I know my friend Distin of old, and that he could not exist out of London any more than a fish can live out of water."

"I like my little London," admitted Distin coyly, almost as if he were talking of a fascinating woman. "There's so much in it, and it's such a devilish wicked place, to those who really know it. But I think the country a most delightful institution – from Saturday to Monday."

"The cockney stands confessed in that one remark," said Wyllard, laughing.

"That is the worst of Devonshire and Cornwall," pursued Distin, in his airy way. "Charming scenery, eminently picturesque; but not available between Saturday and Monday. Now, there is one ineffable charm in those pretty places up the river, and that rural district round Tunbridge Wells."

"Pray what is that?"

"One is always so delighted to arrive on Saturday afternoon, and so charmed to leave on Monday morning. The rustic aroma just lasts till Sunday night, and the keen craving for town begins with the dawn of Monday. But I must go and get rid of two hundred and forty miles of dust," said Mr. Distin, slipping off as lightly as a boy.

He left the drawing-room at twenty minutes to nine, and returned at five minutes before the hour, in full evening-dress. It was like a conjuring trick. His costume was of the quietest, yet there was a finish and style about everything that impressed even the ignorant. One felt that the very latest impress of Fashion's fairy fingers had touched that shirt, had meted out the depth of the silk collar, the curve of the sleeve. That black pearl centre-stud might have been the last gift of a prince or a grateful beauty. One ring, and one only, adorned the solicitor's left hand; but that ring was a table diamond, two hundred and forty years old, said to have been given by Anne of Austria to the Duke of Buckingham.

Bothwell, who took some pride in his clothes, looked clumsy and unfashionable beside the London lawyer, or at any rate fancied that he did. Edward Heathcote was at all times a careless dresser, but his tall figure, and a certain dash which was more soldierly than civilian, made him an important personage in every circle. He had the free grace, the easy movements, of a man who has spent his boyhood and youth out of doors – hunting, shooting, fishing, mountaineering.

The dinner was lively, thanks chiefly to Joseph Distin, for Bothwell had a dispirited air, and Hilda could not help feeling unhappy at seeing his gloom, though she tried to conceal her sympathy. Mr. Wyllard and Mr. Distin had the conversation to themselves during the greater part of the meal, for Mr. Heathcote was graver and more reserved than usual, and Dora had a subdued and thoughtful air. She would have been quite ready to admit that Joseph Distin was a very agreeable person, and altogether worthy of her husband's friendship; but she could not dissociate him from the horror of the event which caused his presence in that house. She felt that of those gathered around her table that night, in the shaded light of the low lamps, amidst the perfume of hothouse flowers, the greater number were brooding upon a mystery which might mean murder.

She was very glad to escape to the drawing-room with Hilda, directly dinner was over.

"And now, I suppose, they will talk of that poor creature's death," she said. "Come, Hilda, sing one of Schubert's ballads, and let us try to forget all that horror."

Hilda seated herself at the piano obediently, and began "Mignon." She had a superb mezzo-soprano, clear as a bell, ripe and round and full. The rich notes went pealing up to the low ceiling and floating out at the open windows. Perhaps Bothwell heard them in the dining-room, for he came sauntering in presently, and slipped quietly into a seat in a shadowy corner. Hilda always sang and played from memory. There was no irksome duty to be done in the way of turning over music.

"What made you desert the gentlemen, Bothwell?" asked Dora, when the song was over.

"They were talking of that diabolical inquest again. Nobody in Bodmin seems able to talk of anything else. Wherever I went to-day I heard the same ghastly talk – every imaginable suggestion, and not one grain of common sense. What ghouls people must be to gloat over such a subject! No wonder that men who live in great cities despise the rustic mind."

"I do not find that the inhabitants of cities are any less ghoulish," retorted Dora, who felt warmly about her native soil, and would have fought for Cornish people and Cornish institutions to the death. "See how the London papers gloat over the details of crime."

These three spent the evening very quietly in the drawing-room, while the three men in the dining-room were discussing the event on the railway.

Hilda sang some of Mrs. Wyllard's favourite songs, while her hostess sat in the lamp-light by an open window working at a group of sunflowers on a ground of olive plush. Bothwell kept in his dark corner all the evening, so quiet that he might have been asleep, save that he murmured a "Thank you, Miss Heathcote, very lovely," after one of Hilda's songs. She thought that he was only grateful for having had his slumber soothed by a vague strain of melody.

The men in the dining-room had turned away from the lighted table, and were sitting in a little knot in the embrasure of the wide Tudor window, smoking their cigars, half in the ruddy glow of the lamps and half in the mellow light of the newly-risen moon. They could hardly see each other's faces in that uncertain light. Stodden, the butler, had wheeled a table over to the window and arranged the claret-jugs and glasses upon it, before he left the room. The little knot of men smoking and drinking by the window looked a picture of comfort, with the soft sweet air blowing in from the garden, and the great full moon shining over the roses and the fountain in the old-fashioned parterre. Joseph Distin's keen eye noted every detail of his friend's surroundings; and he told himself that, for the fourth son of a village vicar, Julian Wyllard had done remarkably well.

Between them Wyllard and the Coroner had contrived to put the London lawyer in full possession of the facts relating to the girl's death. Those facts were unfortunately of the scantiest. Edward Heathcote breathed no hint of that dark suspicion about Bothwell which had flashed into his mind after the inquest, and which he had vainly endeavoured to shake off since that time. Bothwell's manner at dinner this evening had not been calculated to disarm suspicion. His moody brow, his silence and abstraction, were the unmistakable signs of secret trouble of some kind. That trouble was coincidental in time with the event on the railway; for Heathcote and Bothwell had met in Bodmin, and had ridden home together on the previous day, and the young man had been cheery enough.

"The ticket found upon the girl was from London to Plymouth, I apprehend," said Distin, when he had heard everything.

"Yes."

"Then she started from Paddington that morning. My business will be to find out who she was, and the motive of her journey."

"And do you think there is a possibility of tracing her in London, without a shred of evidence – except the photograph of a dead face?" exclaimed Wyllard. "To my mind it seems like looking in a brook for a bubble that broke there a week ago."

"As a west countryman you should remember how otter-hounds hunt the bead on the water," answered Distin. "With a photograph, the police ought to be able to trace that girl – even in the wilderness of London."

"But if she were a foreigner, and only passed through London?" suggested Wyllard.

"Even then she would leave her bead, like the otter. She could not get a night's shelter without some one knowing of her coming and going. Unless she slept in the lowest form of lodging-house – a place through which the herd of strange faces are always passing – the probabilities are in favour of her face being remembered."

"Judging by the neatness of her clothes and the refinement of her features, she must have been the last person likely to set foot in a common lodging-house," said Heathcote. "But there was no money found upon her; neither purse nor papers of any kind."

"That fact is to me almost conclusive," said Distin.

"Upon what point?"

"It convinces me that she was made away with."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Wyllard, much surprised. "The thing never occurred to me in that light."

"Naturally, my dear friend. You have not devoted twenty years of your life to the study of the criminal mind," answered the lawyer easily. "Don't you see that the first thought of a man who made up his mind to throw a girl out of a train – unless he did the act in a blind fury which gave him no time for thought of any kind – his first precaution, I say, would be to see that there was no evidence of her identity upon her, more especially where the victim was a stranger in the land, as this poor thing was? The identification of the victim is often half-way towards the identification of the murderer. But if the dead can be buried unrecognised – a nameless unknown waif, in whose fate no private individual is interested – why, after the funeral the murderer may take his ease and be merry, assured that he will hear no more of the matter. Public interest in a mysterious crime of that kind soon dies out."

"And you think that this poor girl was the victim of a crime?" asked the Coroner, surprised to find his own idea shared by the great authority.

"In my own mind I have no doubt she was murdered."

"But why should she not have committed suicide?"

"Why should she have travelled from London to Cornwall in order to throw herself over that particular embankment?" demanded Distin. "An unnecessary luxury, when there were the Holborn Viaduct and a score of bridges at her service, to say nothing of the more natural exit by her own bedroom window. Besides, in the statistics of self-murder you will find that nineteen out of twenty suicides – nay, I might almost say ninety-nine out of a hundred – leave a piteous little note explaining the motive of the deed – an appeal to posterity, as it were. 'See how great a sufferer I have been, and what a heroic end I have made.' No, there is only one supposition that would admit this girl being her own destroyer. Some ruffian in the train might have so scared her that she flung herself out, in a frantic effort to escape from him. But against this possibility there is the fact of the absence of any purse or papers. She could not have been travelling that distance without, at least, a few shillings in her possession."

"Who knows!" said Julian Wyllard. "Very narrow are the straits of genteel poverty. If, as I suppose, she was a poor little nursery governess going to her situation, she may have had just money enough to pay for her railway ticket, and no more. She may have relied upon her employers meeting her at the station with a conveyance."

"If she were a nursery governess, due at some country house on that day, surely her employers would have communicated with the Bodmin police before now," said Distin.

"News finds its way slowly to sleepy old houses in remote districts off the railway," replied Wyllard. "There are people still living in Cornwall who depend upon a weekly paper for all news of the outer world."

"If the poor girl were going to such benighted wretches, let us hope they will wake in a day or two, and enlighten us about her," said Distin. "And now to be distinctly practical, and to tell you what I am going to do. Mr. Heathcote's carriage was announced nearly an hour ago, and I saw him looking at his watch just now."

"I was only uneasy about Mrs. Wyllard and my sister. We are keeping them up rather late," said the Coroner apologetically.

"Dora won't mind. She loves the tranquillity of midnight," replied Wyllard. "Go on, Distin. What is your plan?"

"Your adjourned inquest does not come on for nearly a fortnight," said Distin. "Now, you can't expect me to waste all that time in Cornwall, delicious as it would be to dream away existence among the roses of your delightful garden; so the best thing I can do is to run up to London to-morrow morning" – he spoke as if he were at Maidenhead or Marlow – "find out all I can *there*, and return here in time for the Coroner's next sitting. By which time," added the specialist cheerily, "I hope we shall have got up a pretty little case for the Public Prosecutor. Mr. Heathcote will kindly keep me informed of any new details that crop up here. I shall have the poor little girl's photograph in my pocket-book. You'll send a messenger to your town early to-morrow morning, Wyllard, and tell the photographer to meet me at the station with his photographs of the dead girl? He ought to have them ready by that time."

"I will give the order to-night," said Wyllard; and then the three men repaired to the drawing-room.

"I have been very happy here," said Hilda to her brother; "but I thought you were never coming for me. Mrs. Wyllard must be dreadfully tired."

"Never tired of your company, Hilda," interjected Dora. "Nor of Schubert."

"And as for Mr. Grahame, he has been asleep ever since dinner."

"That is a baseless calumny, Miss Heathcote. I have not lost a note of your songs. I am told that Schubert was rather a low person – convivial, that is to say somewhat Bohemian; fond of taverns and tavern company. But I will maintain there must have been a pure and beautiful soul in the man who wrote such songs as those."

"I am so glad you like them," answered Hilda, brightening at his praise. "I daresay you often heard them in India."

"No; the people I knew in India had not such good taste as you."

"But in a country like that, where ladies have so little to do, music must be such a resource," persisted Hilda, who was curiously interested in Mr. Grahame's Indian experiences.

She was always wondering what his life had been like in that strange distant world, what kind of people he had known there. She wondered all the more perhaps on account of Bothwell's reticence. She could never get him to talk freely of his Indian days, and this gave the whole thing an air of mystery.

The clock in the great gray pile of stabling was striking twelve as the Coroner's carriage drove away.

"I cannot think what has happened to Mr. Grahame," said Hilda. "He used to be so lively, and now he is so dull."

"The change is palpable to others, then, as well as to me," thought Heathcote. "Whatever the cause may be, there is a change. God help him if my fear is well grounded! If I were a criminal, I would as soon have a sleuthhound on my track as Joseph Distin."

Mr. Distin was on his way to London before noon next day, curled up in a corner of a *coupé*, looking out eagerly at every station for the morning papers. He had the dead girl's photographs – full-face, profile – in his letter-case. On making his adieux at Penmorval he declared that he had thoroughly enjoyed his little run into the country, his night in the fresh air.

"So delicious to wake at six – my usual hour – and smell your roses, and hear your fountain," he said. "I look forward with delight to my return the week after next."

During that interval which occurred between Mr. Distin's departure and the adjourned inquest, Edward Heathcote gave himself up to his usual avocations, and took no further trouble to fathom the mystery of the stranger's untimely fate. After all, he told himself, wearied by brooding upon a subject that troubled him greatly, it was not for him to solve the problem. He was not the Public Prosecutor, nor was he a detective, nor even a criminal lawyer, like Joseph Distin. His business was to hear what other people had to say, not to hunt up evidence against anybody. His duty began when he took his seat at an inquest, and ended when he left it. Why, then, should he vex his mind with dark suspicions against a man who was the near kinsman, the adopted brother, of that woman for whose sake or for whose happiness he would have gladly died?

This was how Edward Heathcote argued with himself; and it was in pursuance of this conclusion that he gave himself up to a life of idleness during the twelve days that succeeded Mr. Distin's departure. He rode far afield in the early morning, he drove with his sister and the twins in the afternoon. He appeared at two archery meetings and three tennis-parties, a most unusual concession to the claims of society, and he dawdled away the rest of his existence, reading the last new books in English, French, and German, and discussing them with Hilda's duenna, Theresa Meyerstein, a curious specimen of the German Fräulein, intensely domestic, and yet deeply learned – a woman able to turn from Schopenhauer to strawberry jam, from Plato to plum-pudding – a woman who knew every theory that had ever been started upon the mind and its functions, and who could tell to a hundredweight how much coal ought to be consumed in a gentleman's household. Mr. Heathcote had discovered this paragon of domesticity and erudition, acting as deputy-manager at a boarding-house at Baden, during the first year of his widowhood, and he brought her away from the white slavery and the scanty remuneration of that institution to the luxury of an English country house, and the certainty of a liberal recompense for her labours. Fräulein Meyerstein rewarded her employer by a most thorough fidelity, and adored Hilda and the twin daughters. Her soul had languished in a chilling atmosphere, for lack of something to love, and she lavished the garnered treasures of long years upon these Cornish damsels who were committed to her care.

More than once during those long summer days Hilda urged the necessity of calling at Penmorval; but her brother told her she could go alone, or take the Fräulein, who dearly loved a drive, and a gossip over a cup of tea, and who was always kindly received by Mrs. Wyllard, in spite of her short petticoats, anatomical boots, and Teutonic bonnets.

"You can perform those small civilities without any assistance from me," said Heathcote. "You women are so tremendously posted in the details of etiquette. Now, it would never have occurred to me that because we dined at Penmorval a few nights ago, we were strenuously bound, to call upon Mrs. Wyllard before the end of the week. I thought that, with friends of long standing those Draconic laws were a dead letter."

"I don't mean to say that we need be ceremonious, Edward," answered Hilda, "but I am sure Dora will expect to see us. She will think we are forgetting her if we don't go."

"Then you go, dear, and let her see that you are not forgetful, whatever I may be," said Heathcote.

He had a horror of entering that house of Penmorval just now, lest he should see or hear something that would give him new cause for suspecting Bothwell. He had a feeling that he could only cross that threshold as the bringer of evil: and it would be a bitter thing for him to carry evil into her home for whose peace he had prayed night and morning for the last eight years.

So Hilda drove her ponies up the hill to Penmorval, and Miss Meyerstein sat beside her in all the glory of her new bonnet, sent from Munich by a relative, and reported as the very latest fashion in that city. Unhappily for the success of the bonnet in Cornwall, Bodmin fashions and Munich fashions were wide as the poles asunder. Bodmin boasted a milliner who took in the fashion-magazines, and

beguiled her clients with the idea that everything she made for them was Parisian. The Bodmin milliner had a heavy hand, and laid on feathers and flowers as if with a trowel; but her bonnets and hats were light as thistledown in comparison with the art of Bavaria.

It was the afternoon of the adjourned inquest, and Joseph Distin was on the scene, ready to watch the inquiry. He had arrived at Penmorval in time for breakfast, after travelling all night.

"Such a good way of getting rid of the night," he said, as he discussed a salmi of trout, caught in the stream that traversed Penmorval Park.

Alone in the library with Julian Wyllard after breakfast, the London lawyer confessed that for once in his life he had been pretty nearly beaten. He had shown the photographs of the dead face to two of the cleverest detectives in London – had set one to work in the east and the other in the west, promising a liberal reward for any valuable information; and nothing had come of their labours. One had tried every lodging-house within a certain radius of Paddington. The other had explored the neighbourhood of London Bridge Station, and failing there, had come as far west as Charing Cross. The ground had been thoroughly beaten, and no likely place had been forgotten in which a stranger of this girl's class could find shelter.

"She might have gone to the house of friends," suggested Wyllard.

"If she had friends in London – were they ever such slight acquaintances even – they would have been heard of before now," argued Distin. "I take it that she was unknown to a mortal on this side of the Channel, except the man who murdered her, and who had no doubt some very powerful motive for wanting to get rid of her."

"What do you suppose that motive to have been?"

"My dear Wyllard, what a question for a clever man to ask!" exclaimed the lawyer, with a shade of contempt. "To speculate upon the motive I must have some knowledge of the man, and of this girl's murderer I know nothing. If I could once find the man, I should soon find the motive. Such a murder as this generally means the breaking of some legal tie that has become onerous – some bond which death alone can loosen."

CHAPTER IV. BOTHWELL DECLINES TO ANSWER

The room at the Vital Spark was filled to overflowing on the occasion of the adjourned inquiry. At the previous examination only the inhabitants of Bodmin and its immediate neighbourhood had been present; but on this second afternoon people had come from long distances, and there was not standing room for the audience, which filled the passage, and waited with strained ears to catch a stray word now and then through the open door.

The idea of a profound mystery – of a dastardly crime – had been fostered in the local mind by the newspapers, which had harped upon the ghastly theme, and gloated over the particulars of the nameless girl's fate in paragraphs and leaderettes *ad nauseam*. Articles headed "More details concerning the Bodmin Mystery," "Further particulars about the strange death on the railway," had served as the salt to give savour to cut and dried reports about the harvest, the markets, and those small offenders whose peccadilloes furnish the material for Justice to exercise her might upon at petty sessions.

Every one had read about that strange death of a lonely girl in the summer sunset. Every one was interested in a fate so melancholy – an abandonment so inexplicable.

"I thought that there was hardly ever a human being so isolated as to be owned by no one," said the curate of Wadebridge. "Yet it would seem that this poor girl had no one to care for her in life, or to identify her after death. If she had one friend living in England or France, surely that person must have made some sign before now."

"People in France are very slow to hear about anything that happens in England," replied Dr. Menheniot, to whom the curate had been talking.

"But I heard Mr. Heathcote, at the first inquiry, say that he meant to advertise in a Parisian newspaper."

"Then be sure the advertisement appeared," answered Menheniot. "Heathcote is one of those few men with whom meaning and doing are the same thing."

The inquiry dragged its slow length along, and hardly one new fact was elicited. There was a great deal of repetition, in spite of the Coroner's attempt to keep all his witnesses to the point. Mr. Distin sat near the Coroner, and asked a few questions of two or three of the witnesses; and though he elicited no actually new facts, he seemed to put things in a clearer light by his cross-examination.

Just before the close of the inquiry, he said:

"I see Mr. Grahame, of Penmorval, is here this afternoon. I should like to ask him a question or two, if you have no objection."

The Coroner paled ever so slightly at this suggestion, but he had no objection to offer: so Bothwell Grahame was asked to come up to the table, and kiss the Book, which he did with a somewhat bewildered air, as if the thing came upon him as an unpleasant surprise.

"You were in the train that evening, I believe, Mr. Grahame," said Distin.

"I was."

"Were you alone, in a compartment, or in company with other passengers?"

"I had a third-class compartment to myself."

"And you saw this girl fall?"

"I saw her fall – but as I saw just a little less than Dr. Menheniot and the guard saw, I don't see the good of my being questioned," answered Bothwell, with rather a sullen air.

"I beg your pardon," returned Mr. Distin suavely, "every witness sees an event from a different point of view. You may have noticed something which escaped the two witnesses we have just heard."

"I noticed nothing more than you have been told by these two, and I saw less than they saw. I did not look out of the window till I heard the girl's shriek, and I saw her in the act of falling."

"Good. But you may have observed this solitary girl – a foreigner, and therefore more noticeable – on the platform at Plymouth. You were on the platform at Plymouth, you know."

"I was. But I did not see the girl at the station."

"Strange that she should have escaped your observation, although the porter who was busy with his duties had time to notice her," said Mr. Distin.

"Would it surprise you to hear that during the four or five minutes I spent in the station before the train started I was standing at the bookstall buying papers, with my back to the platform?"

"That would account for your not having seen this noticeable young stranger. You were in Plymouth for several hours, I believe, Mr. Grahame?"

"I was; but upon my word I don't see what hearing that fact can have upon this inquiry."

"Perhaps not. Still, you will not object to tell us what you were doing in Plymouth – how you disposed of your time there."

This question evidently troubled Bothwell, simple as it was, and easy as it ought to have been to answer.

"I played a game at billiards at the Duke of Cornwall," he said.

"I am sure you are too good a player for that to occupy more than half an hour," said Mr. Distin, with his silky air, as if he were employed in a very pleasant business, and were bent upon being as cheery as possible.

"I had to wait for the table."

"Come now, Mr. Grahame, you need not be mysterious about so simple a matter," exclaimed Mr. Distin. "You don't mean to tell us that you went to Plymouth by the 12.15 train" – he had ascertained this fact before the inquiry began – "and spent the whole of the day there, in order to play a game at billiards in a public billiard-room. You must have had other business in Plymouth."

"Certainly. I had other business there."

"Will you kindly tell us what that business was?"

"As it concerned others besides myself, and as it has not the faintest bearing upon this case, I must decline to answer that question."

"Really, now, I should advise you to be more frank. You leave Bodmin early in the day – without giving any notice of your departure – and you return late in the evening. A most mysterious catastrophe occurs in the train which brings you home – a death so strange, so horrible, that it casts a cloud over all the passengers travelling by that train – leaves a stigma upon all, as it were, until the guilt of that deed can be brought home to one. Surely, under such circumstances, the utmost frankness is desirable. Every traveller in that train should be ready to answer any question which those who are charged with the elucidation of this mystery may ask."

"I have answered your questions as to what occurred to me in the train, and at the station; but I decline to be catechised about my business in Plymouth," answered Bothwell doggedly.

"That will do," said Distin; and Bothwell went to his seat next Julian Wyllard, whose handsome presence appeared in the front rank of spectators, amongst those of the *élite* who were favoured with chairs, while the commonalty stood in a mob at the back of the room.

The audience had been breathless during this examination of Bothwell Grahame. The young man's sunburnt face was clouded with anger, his dark strongly-marked brows were scowling over those gray-blue eyes which once had such a pleasant expression.

"I can't think what has come to Grahame," muttered a sporting squire to his next neighbour. "He used to be such a pleasant fellow, but to-day he looks like a murderer."

"You don't think he threw the girl out of the train, do you?" asked the other.

"God forbid! But by that London lawyer's questions one would think *he* suspected Grahame of having had a hand in the business."

The jury gave their verdict presently, "Death from misadventure."

"Tell Dora not to expect me at dinner," said Bothwell to Julian Wyllard, before they left the inn; "I shall dine in Bodmin."

"Have you any engagement?"

"No, but I can easily make one. I am not going to break bread with your lawyer friend. So long as he is at Penmorval I shall be missing."

"My dear Bothwell, you have no right to be angry at a simple question which you might have so easily answered," remonstrated Wyllard gravely.

"It was a question which I did not choose to answer, and which he had no right to ask. It was an outrage to ask such a question – to press it as he did. Fifty years ago he might have been shot for a lesser insult. By Jove, I never felt more sorry that the good old duelling days are over – the days when one man could not insult another with impunity."

"How savage you are, Bothwell, and against a man who was only in the exercise of his profession!"

"He had no right to question me as if I were a murderer," retorted Bothwell savagely. "Did he think that I spent my time in Plymouth plotting that girl's death? If I had made up my mind to push a woman over an embankment, I should not have wanted to spend a day in Plymouth in order to plan the business. A murder of that kind must be touch and go – no sooner thought of than done."

"All trouble would have been saved, my dear fellow, if you had given a straight answer to a simple question."

"To answer would have been to acknowledge his right to question me. No judge would have allowed counsel to have asked such a motiveless question. Nowhere except at a petty rustic inquiry would such a thing be permitted."

"I can only say that you are needlessly angry, Bothwell," said Wyllard. "Here comes Distin. You had better drive home with us."

"No, thank you; I shall be home before the house shuts up; but you'll see no more of me to-night."

"Good-night, then."

The Penmorval barouche was waiting before the porch of the Vital Spark – a great day for that rural hostelry when such a carriage could be seen waiting there – a great day at the bar, where all the strength of the establishment could not serve brandies-and-sodas and pale ales fast enough. Joseph Distin came tripping out, and took his place in the carriage beside Julian Wyllard. He had lingered at the inn for a few minutes' talk with the Coroner.

"Is not Mr. Grahame going back with us?" he asked, as they drove towards the town.

"No. You wounded his dignity by those questions of yours. He is a curious young man, and is easily offended."

"He is a very curious young man," answered the lawyer, with a thoughtful air.

He was looking at the landscape intently as they drove along the shady road, between deep banks and luxuriant hedges; but he would have found it rather difficult to say afterwards what kind of timber prevailed in the hedgerows, or what crops grew in the fields.

He was thoughtful all that evening, though he did his utmost to make himself agreeable to Mrs. Wyllard at dinner, talking to her of art, music, the drama, society, all the arts and graces and pleasures of life – doing everything in his power to distract her thoughts from that one grim theme which was the motive of his presence in that place.

When she was gone, and Distin and his host were alone together over their claret, the lawyer dropped his society manner as if it had been a mask, and began to talk seriously.

"For the first time for a good many years I find myself completely at fault," he said, leaning across the table, and cracking filberts in sheer distraction of mind. "I thought that I should be able to get up a case while I was in London, but not a shred of evidence have I discovered. If this girl had dropped from the moon, it could not be more difficult to trace her."

"Well, my dear Distin, you have done your best, and we must be satisfied," replied Wyllard quietly. "I felt it to be my duty as a magistrate to do all in my power to fathom the mystery of that poor girl's death. The best thing I could do was to put the case in your hands. If you cannot help us, no one can. We must be satisfied."

"But I am not satisfied, Julian; I never shall be satisfied until I have solved this problem," said Distin resolutely. "I am not the sort of man who can stand being baffled in a matter of this kind. Is all my professional training to go for nothing, do you think? And yet in your interest it might be best that I should let this business drop out of my mind – forget the whole story if possible."

"How do you mean, in *my* interest?" exclaimed Wyllard, surprised. "What bearing can the case have upon me or my interest, beyond my desire to do my duty as a magistrate?"

"I fear that this mystery touches you nearer than you suppose. Surely, Wyllard, you must have been struck by the manner of your wife's kinsman under my examination."

"Great Heaven!" cried Wyllard, "you don't mean to tell me that you suspect Bothwell Grahame of any hand in this business?"

"In perfect frankness, between man and man, I believe that young man to be in some way – either as principal or accessory – concerned in the murder of that girl."

"My dear Distin, you must be mad."

"Come now, my dear Wyllard, you cannot pretend that you did not notice the strangeness of Mr. Grahame's manner this afternoon: his refusal to answer my question about his business in Plymouth."

"He was angry at your catechising him in that manner; and I must confess that your question appeared to the last degree irrelevant, even to me."

"Granted. My question was irrelevant. But it was a test question. I should never have cross-examined Mr. Grahame, if I had not seen reason for suspecting him before the inquiry began. I was painfully impressed by his manner the night I dined here with him; and I believe, from certain indications dropped unconsciously by your Coroner, that he too saw reason for suspecting Mr. Grahame. His manner to-day confirms my suspicion. I am deeply grieved that it should be so, on your wife's account."

"You had need be sorry for her. Why, Bothwell is like a brother to her. It would break her heart," said Wyllard, strongly agitated.

He had risen from the table, and was walking slowly up and down the room, between the windows opening wide upon the gray evening sky, and the warm lamplight within. Joseph Distin could not see his face, but he could see that he was strongly moved.

"My dear fellow, let us hope that Mrs. Wyllard will never know anything about this suspicion of mine," said Distin soothingly. "I have – so far – not one scrap of evidence against Mr. Grahame; except the evidence of looks and manner, and the one fact of his refusal to say what he was doing in Plymouth the day of the girl's death. There is nothing in all that to bring a man to the gallows. I may have my own ideas about this mystery, and Mr. Heathcote may have pretty much the same notion, but there is nothing to touch your wife's cousin so far. I shall go back to town, and try to forget the whole matter. All you have to do is to keep your own counsel, and take care that Mrs. Wyllard knows nothing of what has passed in strictest confidence between you and me."

"I would not have her know it for worlds. It would break her heart; it might kill her. Women cannot bear such shocks. And to think that a man can be suspected of a crime on such grounds – suspected by you, a student of crime and criminals – because of a moody manner, a refusal to answer a question! The whole thing seems too absurd for belief."

"Say that the thing is absurd, and that for once in his life Joe Distin has made a fool of himself. Take your wife to Aix-les-Bains – or to Biarritz – "

Julian Wyllard started at that last word as if he had been stung.

"What the deuce is the matter with you, or with Biarritz?" asked Distin sharply.

"Nothing. My mind was wandering, that's all. You were saying – "

"That you had better forget all that has passed between us to-night – forget the death of that girl – make a clean slate. Take your wife to some foreign watering-place, the brightest and gayest you can find. And let Bothwell Grahame dree his weird as best he may. The catastrophe on the railway will be forgotten in a week."

"I doubt it. We have not much to think about at Bodmin, and we exaggerate all our molehills into mountains. That girl's death will be the talk of the town for the next six months."

"And yet people go on existing in such places, and think they are alive!" exclaimed Distin.

He left Penmorval after breakfast next morning, without having seen Bothwell, who was out on the hills breaking in a new horse while the family were at breakfast. He had been out since five o'clock, the butler told Mrs. Wyllard.

"Is he riding Glencoe?" she asked, with a look of alarm.

"Yes, ma'am."

"He is a dreadful horse, I know, Julian," she said. "Manby told me about him only yesterday. He had narrowly escaped being thrown the day before; and he said that Glencoe was a really dangerous horse, and that we ought to get rid of him."

"So that he may break somebody else's bones," suggested Mr. Distin. "That is what a good coachman always advises."

"And now Bothwell has gone out on him, alone."

"You would not have him take some one to pick him up if he were thrown," said Wyllard. "My dear Dora, there is not the slightest occasion for alarm. The horse is young, and a little gay; but your cousin excels as a rough-rider, and there will be no harm done."

"But why should he want to ride that horse?" said Dora; "I'm sure Manby would advise him not."

"The very reason why he should do it," replied her husband.

"I wonder if he is trying to kill himself while I am eating my breakfast calmly here?" speculated Joseph Distin. "He must know that I suspect him; and he may think that the game is up."

Whatever Bothwell's intention might have been, he came back to Penmorval before eleven o'clock, bringing home the big bay hunter bathed in sweat, and as tame as a sheep.

"A fine, honest horse! Only wants riding," he said, as he flung the bridle to the groom, who had been watching for him at the stable-gates, with an air of expecting to see broken bones.

In the hall Bothwell met Dora, cool, and calm, and beautiful, in her white muslin breakfast gown. She was bringing in a basket of flowers from the hothouse, to be arranged by her own hands.

"Is that London lawyer gone yet?" asked Bothwell curtly.

He could not be civil even to his cousin when he spoke of Joseph Distin.

"Yes, he has gone – I hope, never to come back again," said Dora. "He is really a very well-bred man, and he made himself most agreeable here; but he seemed to bring with him an atmosphere of crime. I could not help thinking of all the horrible cases he must have been concerned in, and that he had grown rich by the crimes of mankind. He could find out nothing about that poor girl's death, it seems, although he is so clever."

"Which goes rather to establish my view that the girl fell out of the train by accident," replied Bothwell.

CHAPTER V. PEOPLE WILL TALK

The year was a month older since Joseph Distin went back to town, baffled and angry with himself, yet glad for his friend's sake that his discoveries had gone no further. The heather was purpling on the hills, where the dwarf furze flashed here and there into patches of gold. The tourist season had set in; but the tourist for the most part avoided the little town of Bodmin, nestling snugly inland among the hills, and turned his face to the sea, and the wild rocks which defend that romantic western coast, to the Lizard and the Land's End, to rugged Tintagel and sandy Bude.

Life at Penmorval had drifted by as calmly as an infant's sleep, in those four weeks of soft summer weather. There had been no visitors staying in the house, for both Julian Wyllard and his wife loved a studious repose, and there were long intervals in which they lived almost alone. Penmorval would be full by and by, in October, when the pheasant-shooting began; and in the mean time it was pleasant to Dora Wyllard to be able to ride and drive with her husband – to be the companion of his walks, to read the books he read, and to waste long evenings in inexhaustible talk. They always had so much to say to each other. The sympathy between them was so complete.

Hilda Heathcote was at Penmorval nearly every day. She ranked almost as one of the family. She came to Mrs. Wyllard for counsel and instruction upon all manner of subjects – sometimes for a gardening lesson, sometimes for a lesson in crewel-work, in French, German, Italian. Dora was in advance of her young friend in all these subjects; but the pupil was so bright and quick that it was a pleasure to teach her. Between them Mrs. Wyllard and Miss Heathcote achieved marvels in the way of art-needlework – piano-backs which were as beautiful as pictures, portières worthy to rank with the highest examples of Gobelin tapestry, counterpanes that ought to have been exhibited at South Kensington. The calm leisure of country life lent itself to such slow and elaborate labours.

Mrs. Wyllard had a big box of foreign books once a month from Rolandi's library, and she meted out to Hilda such volumes as were fit for a young English lady's perusal; and then they met to talk over the books, sometimes alone, sometimes with Bothwell as a third. Bothwell was very scornful of all the sentimental books, laughed at the super-refined heroines of French novels, the dreamy heroes of German romance; but he read all the books that Hilda read, and he seemed to enjoy talking about them at that protracted function of afternoon tea from which he rarely absented himself.

The weather was peerless during this month of August, and Mrs. Wyllard's afternoon tea-table was set out in an arbour of clipped yew, at the end of the Italian garden, a point from which there was a fine view of the moors, and the great brown hills beyond.

Bothwell's sullen gloom had passed away soon after Mr. Distin's departure. He seemed to Hilda to have become once again the old Bothwell – gay, and cheery, and kind, and frank. But he did not commit himself by any of those delicate little attentions to Hilda which had made him such an agreeable person half a year ago. That particular phase of his character was a thing of the past.

A month had gone since the close of the inquest at the Vital Spark, but Bodmin people had not forgotten the strange death of the nameless girl, and had not left off talking about it. They talked about Bothwell, too, and of his refusal to give a plain answer to a plain question; and towards the end of that month Bothwell Grahame woke up all at once to the consciousness that he was under a cloud. He discovered that he was being cut by his old acquaintances, so far as they dared cut a man of his standing and temperament. They were not uncivil; they gave him good-day if they met him in the street; they would even deign to discuss the state of the weather, the results of the harvest. But Bothwell felt nevertheless that he was living under a cloud; there was a tacit avoidance of him, a desire to get off with as slight a greeting as civility would permit. Hands were no longer held out to him in friendship; salutations were no longer loud and cheery. No one asked him to stop and play billiards at the chief inn, as people had been wont to do, waylaying him when he wanted to get home.

Now he could pursue his walk without let or hindrance. He had even seen one of his most familiar friends stroll dreamily round a corner to avoid meeting him.

During the whole of those four weeks he had not received a single invitation to play lawn-tennis, he for whose presence tennis-parties used to compete. There were two or three engagements outstanding at the time of the inquest. He had kept these, and had played his best, struggling against a coldness in the atmosphere. It had seemed to him that everybody was out of sorts. There was an all-pervading dulness. Nobody could find anything pleasant to talk about. He had been very slow to perceive that cloud which hung over him: but by the end of the month the fact had become too palpable, and Bothwell Grahame understood that he had been sent to Coventry.

"What does it all mean?" he asked himself, aghast with indignant wonder. "What can they have to say against me? Can any one have found out – ?"

Bothwell's cheek paled as he thought of that one transaction of his life which he would least like to see recorded against him. But he told himself, after a few minutes' reflection, that nobody in Bodmin could possibly know anything about that particular episode in a young man's history.

He puzzled himself sorely about this change in the manner of his acquaintance; and on trying back he discovered that the change dated from the day of the adjourned inquest. He recalled too the curious manner in which everybody had avoided the subject of the inquest; how when any mention of the dead girl had been made in his presence the conversation had been changed instantly, as if the subject must needs be tabooed before him.

"Upon my soul," said Bothwell, "I begin to think they suspect me of having thrown that girl out of the carriage. Because I refused to answer that insolent ruffian's questions, these village wiseacres have made up their minds that I am a murderer."

He went back to Penmorval in a white heat of indignation. A week ago he had made up his mind to start for Peru. He had found out all about the steamer which was to carry him. He had obtained letters of introduction to the proprietor of a newspaper, and to some of the local aristocracy. He was ready to set forth upon his quest of fortune in the land of gold and jewels. But now he told himself that wild horses should not drag him away from Penmorval. He would stand his ground until he had humiliated those fools and rascals whom he had once called his friends. He would make them taste of the cup of their own folly.

He was much too hot-headed to keep the secret of his wrongs from that cousin who had been to him as a sister. He went straight to Dora, and told her of the foul suspicion that had arisen in men's minds against him.

She had read the report of the inquest, and although she had wondered at his refusal to answer Mr. Distin's questions, she had been able to understand that his pride might revolt against being so catechised, and that he might choose to persist in that refusal as a point of personal dignity.

"Any one who can suspect you for such a reason – any one who could suspect you for any reason – must be an idiot, Bothwell," she exclaimed. "There is no use in being angry with such people."

"But I am angry with them. I am rabid with anger."

"Why did you not answer that question, Bothwell?" asked his cousin thoughtfully.

"Because I did not choose."

"Yet it would have prevented all possibility of misapprehension if you had given a straight answer. And it would have been so easy," argued Dora.

"It would not have been easy. It was not possible to answer that question."

"Why not?"

"Because I could not answer it without injuring some one I – esteem," replied Bothwell, relapsing into that curious, sullen manner which Mr. Heathcote had observed on the day of the inquest.

"O Bothwell, you have secrets, then – a secret from me, your adopted sister!"

"Yes, I have my secrets."

"I am so sorry. I used to hope that I should have a share in the planning of your life; and now I begin to fear – "

"That my life is wrecked already. You are right, Dora. My life was wrecked three years before I left India, but I did not know then what shipwreck meant. I thought that there was land ahead, and that I should make it; but I know now I was drifting towards a fatal rock upon which honour, happiness, and prosperity must needs go to pieces."

"Don't talk in riddles, Bothwell. Tell me the plain truth, however bad it may be. You know you can trust me."

"I do, dear soul, as I trust Heaven itself. But there are some things a man must not tell. Yes, Dora, I have my secret, and it is a hard one to carry – the secret of a man who is bound in honour to one woman while he fondly loves another."

"Bothwell, I am so sorry for you," said his cousin softly.

She put her arms round his neck as if they had still been boy and girl. She put her lips to his fevered forehead. She comforted him with her love, being able to give him no other comfort.

Hilda Heathcote came up the avenue ten minutes later, escorting a matchless donkey, which was of so pale a gray as to be almost white. It was a donkey of surpassing size and dignity, and gave itself as many airs as if it had been a white elephant. It carried a pair of panniers, highly decorated in a Moorish fashion, and in the Moorish panniers sat Edward Heathcote's twin daughters.

The twins were as like as the famous Corsican Brothers in person, but they were utterly unlike in disposition, and the blue and pink sashes which they wore for distinction were quite unnecessary; since no one could have mistaken Minnie, the overbearing twin, for Jennie, the meek twin. People only had to be in their company half an hour to know which was which for ever after. Whereas Jennie was quite a baby, and could hardly speak plain, Minnie was preternaturally old for her years, and expressed her opinion freely upon every subject. Minnie always came to the front, was always mistress of the situation, and where Jennie shed tears Minnie always stamped her foot. Needless to say that Minnie was everybody's favourite. Naughtiness at four years old, a termagant in miniature, is always interesting. Mr. Heathcote was the only person in Cornwall who could manage Minnie, and who properly appreciated Jennie's yielding nature. Jennie felt that her father loved her, and used to climb on to his knee and nestle in his waistcoat; while Minnie was charming society by those little airs and graces which were spoken of vaguely as "showing off."

To-day Minnie was in a delightful humour, for she was being escorted in triumph to a long-promised festival. Since the very beginning of the summer the twins had been promised that they should go to drink tea with Mrs. Wyllard some day when they had been very good. Jennie had done everything to deserve the favour; but Minnie had offended in some way every day. She had been cruel to the dogs – she had made an archipelago of blots in her copybook, while her pothooks and hangers were a worse company of cripples than Falstaff's regiment. She had been rude to the kind Fräulein. She had been rebellious at dinner, had protested with loud wailings against the severity of seven-o'clock bed. Only towards the end of August had there come a brief interval of calm, and Hilda had been quick to take advantage of these halcyon days, knowing how soon they would be followed by storm.

The tea-table was laid in the yew-tree arbour, such a table as little children love, and which has an attractive air even to full-grown humanity. Such a delicious variety of cakes and jams and home-made bread, such nectarines and grapes. Minnie shouted and clapped her hands at sight of the feast, while Jennie blushed and hung her head, abashed at the dazzling apparition of Mrs. Wyllard in an Indian silk gown with a scarlet sash, and flashing diamond rings. Hilda had no such jewels on her sunburnt fingers.

"What a nice tea!" cried Minnie, when the blue and the pink twin had each been provided with a comfortable seat, each in a snug corner of the arbour, banked in by the tea-table. "Why do we never

have such nice teas at home? Why don't we, Aunt Hilda?" she repeated, when her question had been ignored for a couple of seconds.

"Because such nice things would not be wholesome every day," replied Hilda.

"I don't believe that," said Minnie.

"O Minnie!" cried Jennie, with a shocked air. "You mustn't contradict people. You mustn't contradict Aunt Hilda, because she is old."

"If cakes weren't wholesome *she* wouldn't have them," said Minnie, ignoring the blue twin's interruption, and pointing her chubby finger at Mrs. Wyllard. "She can have what she likes, and she is grown up and knows everything. She wouldn't give us unwholesome things. I know why we don't have such nice teas at home."

"Why not, Minnie?" asked Dora, to encourage conversation.

"Because Fräulein is too stingy. I heard cook say so the other day. She is always grumbling about the cream and butter. You don't grumble about the cream and butter, do you?" she asked, in her point-blank way.

"I'm afraid I'm not so good a housekeeper as the Fräulein," answered Dora.

"Then I like bad housekeepers best. I shall be a bad housekeeper when I grow up, and there shall always be cakes for tea – ever so many cakes, as there are here. I'll have some of that, please," pointing to an amber-tinted pound-cake, "first."

By this Minnie signified that she meant to eat her way through the varieties of the tea-table.

"And what will Jennie take?" asked Dora, smiling at the blue twin.

"Jennie's a bilious child," said Minnie authoritatively; "she ought to have something plain."

Jennie, with her large blue eyes fixed pathetically on the pound-cake, waited for whatever might be given to her.

"Do you think just one slice of rich cake would make you ill, Jennie?" asked Dora.

"I am sure it would," said Minnie, ploughing her way through her own slice. "She's always sick, if she eats rich things. She was sick when we went to see grandma. Grandma isn't rich, you know, because her husband was a clergyman, and they're always poor. But she gives us beautiful teas when we go to see her, and lets us run about her garden and pick the fruit, and trample on the beds, and do just as we like; so we don't mind going to tea with grandma, though she's old and deaf. Jennie had cherries and pound-cake the last time we went to see grandma, and she was ill all night. You know you were, Jennie."

The blue twin admitted the fact, and meekly accepted a hunch of sanitarian sponge-cake.

"You must not talk so much, Minnie; you are a perfect nuisance," said Hilda; and then she looked round hesitatingly once or twice before she asked, "What has become of Mr. Grahame? He generally honours us with his company at afternoon tea."

"Bothwell has been a little worried this morning," faltered Dora. "He is not very well."

Her heart sank within her at the thought that this girl – this girl whom she had once thought of as Bothwell's future wife – would come in time to know the dark suspicion which hung over him like a poisonous cloud. She would be told by and by that people thought of him as a possible murderer, a wretch who had assailed a defenceless girl, set upon her as a tiger on his prey, hurled her to a dreadful death. She would learn that there were people in the neighbourhood capable of suspecting this very Bothwell Grahame, gentleman and soldier, of so dastardly a crime.

Dora had hardly been able to realise the awfulness of the situation yet. In her desire to comfort her cousin she had made light of the unspoken slander, the cruel taint which had been breathed upon his name. But now as she sat at her tea-table ministering to her two little guests, trying to appear interested in their prattle, her heart was aching as it had not ached since she had been forgiven by Edward Heathcote. From that hour until the strange girl's death her life had been cloudless. And now a cloud had drifted across her horizon, darkening the sunlight: a cloud that hung heavily over the head of one whom she dearly loved.

CHAPTER VI. A CLERICAL WARNING

The children's tea-party lasted a long time, and the twins enjoyed themselves prodigiously in the yew-tree arbour, albeit both their hostess and their aunt were curiously absent-minded, and returned vaguest answers to Minnie's continuous prattle, and to occasional remarks propounded gravely by Jennie between two mouthfuls of cake.

Perhaps the twins enjoyed themselves all the more under this condition of things, for they were allowed to range at will from one dainty to another, and were not worried by those troublesome suggestions of unwholesomeness, which are apt to harass juvenile gourmands.

Tea was over at last, and then they had a game at ball on the grass in front of the fountain; after that they fed the gold fish, until Hilda began to talk of getting them home. It was nearly seven o'clock by this time, and Bothwell had not appeared.

The whole business seemed flat, stale, and unprofitable to Hilda, for want of that familiar presence. He had been such a pleasant companion of late – not attentive or flattering of speech, as young men are to girls they admire. He had said none of those pretty things which call up blushes in girlish cheeks; but he had been kind and brotherly, and Hilda was satisfied to accept such kindness from him. She thought it even more than her due. She was not what is called a high-spirited girl. She did not expect men to bow down and worship her; she did not expect that hearts were to be laid at her feet for her to trample upon them. She had none of the insolence of conscious beauty. If ever she were to love, it would be secretly, meekly, patiently, as Shakespeare's Helena loved Bertram, with a gentle upward-looking affection, deeming her lover remote and superior as a star.

There had been a time when she thought that Bothwell cared for her a little, and then he had been to her as Bertram. Now he was kind and brotherly, and she was grateful for his kindness.

She was somewhat heavy-hearted as she arranged her disordered hair – rumped in a final game of romps with the twins – and put on her hat to go home. The donkey was waiting before the old stone porch, and Fräulein Meyerstein had come to assist in escorting the twins.

"I thought Minnie might be troublesome after tea," she said, as if tea had the effect of champagne upon Minnie's temperament.

They set out across the fields in the warm glow of evening sunlight, a little procession – the children full of talk and laughter, Hilda more silent than usual. It was harvest-time, and the corn stood in sheaves in one wide field by which they went, a field on the slope of a hill on the edge of the moorland. On the lower side of the field there was a tall overgrown hedge; a hedge full of the glow of sunshine and the colour of wild flowers, red and blue and yellow, an exuberance of starry golden flowers, scattered everywhere amidst the tangle of foliage.

There was a gap here and there in the hedge, where cattle or farm-labourers had made a way for themselves from field to field, and through one of these gaps a man scrambled, and jumped into the path just in front of the donkey.

The animal gave a feeble shy, and the twins screamed, first with surprise and then with pleasure. The man was Bothwell, whom the twins adored.

"Why didn't you come to tea?" asked Minnie indignantly. "It was very naughty of you."

"I was out of temper, Minnie; not fit company for nice people. How do you do, Hilda?"

He had fallen into the way of calling her by her Christian name almost from the beginning of their acquaintance; in those days when he had been so much brighter and happier than he seemed to be now.

The donkey jogged on, carrying off the twins, Minnie holding forth all the time, lecturing Bothwell for his rudeness. The Fräulein followed, eager to protect her charges. They were only a few paces in advance, but Hilda felt as if she were alone with Bothwell.

"So the children have had their long-promised tea-party," he said, "and I was out of it. Hard lines."

"They missed you very much," said Hilda. "But did not you know it was to be this afternoon?"

"I knew yesterday – Dora told me," answered Bothwell, hitting the wild flowers savagely with his cane, as he walked by Hilda's side.

Unconsciously they had fallen into a much slower pace than the Fräulein and the donkey, and they were quite alone.

"I knew all about the tea-party, and I meant to be with you; and then something went wrong with me this morning, and I felt only fit company for devils. If Satan had been giving a tea-party anywhere within reach, I would have gone to *that*," concluded Bothwell vindictively.

"I am very glad Satan does not give tea-parties in Cornwall. Of course you know that he would never trust himself in our county, for fear our Cornish cooks should make him into a pie," answered Hilda, trying to smile. "But I am very sorry to hear you have been worried."

"My life has been made up of worries for the last six months. I try sometimes to be cheerful – reckless rather – and to forget; and then the viper begins to bite again."

Hilda would have given much to be able to comfort him. It seemed almost as if he looked to her for comfort, and yet what could she say to a man whose troubles she knew not, who kept his own secret, and hardened his heart against his friends?

They walked on in silence for a little way. Some of the reapers were going homeward in the soft evening light; there was a great wain being loaded a field or two off, and the voices of men and women sounded clear and musical through the summer stillness.

"Would you be sorry for a man who had brought trouble on himself from his own folly, from his own wrong-doing, Hilda?" Bothwell asked presently.

"I should be all the more sorry for him on that account," she answered gently.

"Yes, you would pity him. Such women as you and Dora are angels of compassion. They never withhold their pity; but it is tempered with scorn. They despise the sinner, even while they are merciful to him."

"You ought not to say that. I am not given to despising people. I am too conscious of my own shortcomings."

"You are an angel," said Bothwell piteously. "O Hilda, how much I have lost in life – how many golden opportunities I have wasted!"

"There are always other opportunities to be found," answered the girl, trying to speak words of comfort, vaguely, hopelessly, in her utter ignorance of his griefs or his perplexities. "There is always the future, and the chance of beginning again."

"Yes, in Queensland, in the Fijis, in Peru. If you mean that I may some day learn to make my own living, I grant the possibility. Queensland or Peru may do something for me. But my chances of happiness, my chances of renown – those are gone for ever. I lost all when I left the army. At seven-and-twenty I am a broken man. Hard for a man to feel that this life is all over and done with before he is thirty."

"I fancy there must be a time in every life when the clouds seem to shut out the sun; but the darkness does not last for ever," said Hilda softly. "I hope the cloud may pass from your sky."

"Ah, if it would, Hilda – if that cloud could pass and leave me my own man again, as I was nine years ago, before I went to India!"

"You seemed to be very happy last winter – in the hunting season," said Hilda, trying to speak lightly, though her heart was beating as furiously as if she had been climbing a mountain.

"Yes, I was happy then. I allowed myself to forget. I did not know just then that the trouble I had taken upon my shoulders was a lifelong trouble. Yes, it was a happy time, Hilda, last winter. How many a glorious day we had together across country! You and I were always in the first flight, and

generally near each other. Our horses were always such good friends, were they not? They loved to gallop neck-and-neck. O my darling, I was indeed happy in those days – unspeakably happy."

He had forgotten all prudence, all self-restraint, in a moment. He had taken Hilda's hand and lifted it to his lips.

"O my dear one, let me tell you how I love you," he said. "I may never dare say more than that, perhaps, but it is true, and you shall hear it, if only once. Yes, Hilda, I love you. I have loved you ever since last winter, when you and I used to ride after the hounds together. O, those happy winter days, those long waits at the corners of lanes, or in dusky thickets, or on the bleak bare common! I shall never forget them. Do you think I cared what became of the fox in those days, or whether we were after the right or the wrong one? Not a jot, dear. The veriest tailor that ever hung on to a horse could have cared no less for the sport than I. It was your sweet face I loved, and your friendly voice, and the light touch of your little hand. I was full of hope in those days, Hilda; and then a cloud came over my horizon and I dared hope no more. I never meant to tell you – I knew I had no right to tell you this; but my feelings were too strong for me just now. Will you forgive me, Hilda, that I, who dare not ask you to be my wife, have dared to tell you of my love? Can you forgive me?"

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered gently, looking at him with tear-dimmed eyes.

She was very pale, and her lips trembled faintly as she spoke. In her inmost heart she was exulting at the knowledge of his love. It was as if she had drunk a deep draught of the strong wine of life. In the rapture of knowing herself beloved she had no room for any other consideration. His love might be foolish, vain, unprofitable, fatal even. For the moment she could not measure the consequences, or look into the future. She cared only for the fact that Bothwell Grahame loved her. That love which she had given to him in secret, in all maiden modesty, purest, most ethereal sentiment of which woman's heart is capable, had not been lavished upon a blind and dumb idol, upon a god of wood and stone.

They walked on for a few minutes in silence, Bothwell still holding Hilda's hand, but saying never a word. He had said too much already, since he dared say no more. He had told his secret, and had entreated to be forgiven. And now he came to a dead stop. Fate had walled him round with difficulties, had set a barrier before his steps: Fate or his only folly, that easy yielding to temptation which a man prefers to think of afterwards as fatality.

The thud of a horse's hoofs upon the grass on the other side of the hedge startled Bothwell from his reverie, and Hilda from her beatitude. They looked up, and saw Edward Heathcote cantering towards them on his powerful black. Mr. Heathcote was renowned for his hunters. He never counted the cost of a good horse; and he never had been known to buy a bad one. He was a man who could pick out a horse in a field a quarter of a mile off, ragged and rough and unshorn, altogether out of condition, long mane and neglected tail, and could distinguish the quality of the animal to a shade. He had made many of the hunters he rode, and was not afraid to tackle the most difficult subject. He loved horses, and they loved him. This was a subject upon which he and Bothwell sympathised; and it had been a link between them hitherto. Nothing had been more friendly than their intercourse until the last few weeks, during which time Mr. Heathcote had carefully avoided Penmorval and Bothwell Grahame.

He rode through a gap in the hedge, acknowledged Bothwell's presence with a nod that was barely courteous, and then turned to his sister.

"You had better hurry home, Hilda, if you mean to be in time for dinner," he said.

Bothwell was not slow to take the hint.

"Good-bye, Hilda," he said, offering her his hand.

He called her by her Christian name boldly in her brother's hearing. There was even a touch of defiance in his manner as he shook hands with her, and lingered with her hand in his, looking at her fondly, sadly, hopelessly, before he turned and walked slowly away across the bright newly-cut stubble, which glittered golden in the evening light.

Mr. Heathcote dismounted and walked beside his sister, with the black's bridle over his arm, the well-broken horse following as quietly as a dog.

"You and Grahame were in very close confabulation as I rode up, Hilda," said Heathcote gravely, with scrutinising eyes upon Hilda's blushing face. "Pray what was he saying to you?"

Hilda hung her head, and hesitated before she replied.

"Please do not ask me, Edward," she said falteringly, after that embarrassed silence. "I cannot tell you."

"You cannot tell me, your brother, and natural guardian?" said Heathcote. "Am I to understand that there is some secret compact between you and Bothwell Grahame which cannot be told to your brother?"

"There is no secret compact. How unkind you are, Edward!" cried Hilda, bursting into tears. "There is nothing between us; there is nothing to tell."

"Then what are you crying about, and why was that man bending over you, holding your hand just now when I rode up? A man does not talk in that fashion about nothing. He was making love to you, Hilda."

"He told me that he loved me."

"And you call that nothing!" said Heathcote severely.

"It can never come to anything. It was a secret told unawares, on the impulse of the moment. I have no right to tell you, only you have wrung the secret from me. Nothing can ever come of it, Edward. Pray forget that this thing has ever been spoken of between us."

"I begin to understand," said Heathcote. "He asked you to marry him, and you refused him. I am very glad of that."

"You have no reason to be glad," replied Hilda, with a flash of anger. She was ready to take her lover's part at the slightest provocation. "You have no right to make guesses about Mr. Grahame and me. It is surely enough for you to know that I shall never be his wife."

They had left the stubble-field, and were in a lane leading to The Spaniards, a lane sunk between high banks and wooded hedgerows, such as abound in that western world.

"That is enough for me to know," answered Heathcote gravely, "but nothing less than that assurance would be enough. I hope it is given in good faith?"

There was a severity in his manner which was new to Hilda. He had been the most indulgent of brothers hitherto.

"Why should you speak so unkindly about Mr. Grahame?" she said. "What objection have you to make against him, except that he is not rich?"

"His want of money would make no difference to me, Hilda. If it were for your happiness to marry a man of small means, I could easily reconcile myself to the idea, and would do my best to make things easy for you. I have a much graver objection against Bothwell Grahame than the fact that he is without a profession and without income. There is a horrible suspicion in men's minds about him which makes him a man set apart, like Cain; and my sister must have no dealings with such a man!"

"What do you mean, Edward?" exclaimed Hilda, turning angrily upon her brother, with indignant eyes. "What suspicion? How dare any one suspect him?"

"Unhappily, circumstances are his worst accusers. His own lips, his own manner, have given rise to the conviction which has taken hold of men's minds. When the idea that Bothwell Grahame was the murderer of that helpless girl first arose in my own mind, I struggled against the hideous notion. I told myself that I was a madman to imagine such a possibility. But when I found that the same facts had made exactly the same impression upon other minds – "

"*You* could think such a thing, Edward!" exclaimed Hilda, pale with horror. "You, who have known Bothwell for years, who knew him when he was a boy, you who have called yourself his friend, seen him day after day! You, a lawyer, a man of the world! You can harbour such a thought as this! I could not have believed it of you."

"Perhaps it is because I am a man of the world, and have seen life on the seamy side, and know too well to what dark gulfs men can go down when the tempter urges them. Perhaps it is because of my experience that I suspect Bothwell Grahame."

"O, it is too horrible!" cried Hilda passionately. "I feel as if I must be mad myself, or in company with a madman. Bothwell Grahame – Bothwell, whom I remember when I was a child, the frank, generous-hearted lad, who went away to India to fight for his country, and who fought so well, and won such praise from his commanding officer – "

"Yes, Hilda," interrupted her brother, "and who, just when he seemed on the high road to fortune, threw up his chances, and abandoned his profession, to become an idler at home. That same Bothwell Grahame who, when he was asked what he did with himself during a long day at Plymouth, could give no account of his time. That same Bothwell, whose manner, from the hour of that catastrophe on the line, became gloomy and sullen – altered so completely that he seemed a new man. That same Bothwell, whom everybody in the neighbourhood of Bodmin suspects of a foul crime. That is the man whom I do not wish my sister to marry; albeit he is of the same flesh and blood as the woman whom I respect above all other women upon earth."

"I am glad you have remembered that – at last," said Hilda bitterly. "I am glad you have not quite forgotten that this murderer is Dora Wyllard's first cousin – brought up with her, taught by the same teachers, reared in the same way of thinking."

"God grant I may see reason to alter my opinion, Hilda," replied her brother. "Do you suppose that this suspicion of mine is not a source of pain and grief? But while I think as I do, can you wonder that I forbid any suggestion of a marriage, between my sister and Bothwell Grahame?"

"I have told you that I shall never be his wife," said Hilda. "Pray do not let us ever speak his name again."

They were at the entrance to The Spaniards by this time – not the great iron gates by the lodge, but a little wooden gate opening into the fine old garden, second only in beauty to the Penmorval parterres and terraces.

"Will you mind if I don't appear at dinner, Edward?" asked Hilda presently, as they went into the house. "I have a racking headache."

"Poor little girl!" said her brother tenderly. "You are looking the picture of misery. I am very sorry for you, my dear. I am very sorry for us all; for I fear there is calamity ahead for some of us. If Bothwell is wise he will go to the other end of the world, and take himself as far as possible out of the ken of his countrymen. If he should ask you for counsel, Hilda, that is the best advice you can give him."

"If he should ask me, that is just the very last counsel he would ever hear from my lips," answered Hilda indignantly. "I would entreat him to stand his ground – to live down this vile calumny – to wait the day when Providence will clear his name from this dark cloud. Such a day will come, I am sure of that."

She went to her own room, and shut herself up for the rest of the evening. The convenient excuse of a headache answered very well with the servants. She declined all refreshment – would not have this or that brought up on a tray to oblige Glossop, her own maid, who was deeply concerned at her young mistress's indisposition.

"I have a very bad headache," she said, "and all I want is to be left alone till to-morrow morning. Don't come near me, please, till you bring me my early cup of tea."

Glossop sighed and submitted. It was not often that Miss Heathcote was so wilful. Glossop was the coachman's daughter, had been born and brought up at The Spaniards, in old Squire Heathcote's time. She was a buxom young woman of five-and-thirty, and counted herself almost one of the family.

At last Hilda was alone. She locked her door, and began to pace her room, up and down, up and down, with her hands clasped upon her forehead, trying to think out her perplexities.

It was a fine spacious old bedroom, lighted by old-fashioned casement windows, looking two ways – one to the garden, one to that timber-belted lawn which might almost take rank as a park. There was a sitting-room adjoining, which was Hilda's own particular apartment, containing her books and piano, and the little table on which she painted china cups and saucers. Hilda had spent many a happy hour in these rooms, practising, studying, painting, dreaming over high-art needlework. But this evening she felt as if she could never again be happy, here or anywhere. A dense cloud of trouble had spread itself around her, enfolding her as a mantle of darkness, shutting out all the light of life.

The sun was sinking behind the tall chestnuts, in a sea of red and gold. Every leaflet of rose or myrtle that framed the casements showed distinct against that clear evening sky. Such a pretty room within, such a lovely landscape and sky without; and yet that young soul was full of darkness.

She had defended her lover with indignant firmness just now. She had protested his innocence – declared that this thing could not be true; and now in solitude she looked in the face of that cruel slander, and her faith began to waver.

What could be stranger or more suspicious than Bothwell's conduct this evening? With one breath he had avowed his love; with the next he had told her that he was unworthy to be her lover – that they two could never be man and wife.

Yes, it was true that he had changed of late – that he had become gloomy, despondent, fitful. His manner had been that of a man bowed down by the burden of some secret trouble. But was he for this reason to be suspected of a horrible crime? It was abominable of people to suspect him – most of all cruel and unworthy in her brother, who had known him from boyhood.

And then came the hideous suggestion, as if whispered in her ear by the fiend himself, "What if my brother should be right?" Her own experience of the world was of the slightest. Her chief knowledge of life was derived from the novels she had read. She had read of darkest deeds, of strange contradictions in human nature, mysterious workings of the human heart. Hitherto she had considered these lurid lights, these black shadows, as the figments of the romancer's fancy. Now she began to ask herself if they might not find their counterpart in fact.

She had read of gentlemanlike murderers – assassins of good bearing and polished manners – Eugene Aram, Count Fosco, and many more of the same school. What if Bothwell Grahame were such as these, hiding behind his frank and easy manner the violent passions of the criminal?

No, she would not believe it. She laughed the foul fiend to scorn. Her woman's instinct was truer than her brother's legal acumen, she told herself; and as for those Bodmin busybodies, she weighed their wisdom as lighter than thistledown.

"I would marry him to-morrow, if he asked me to be his wife," she said to herself. "I would stand beside him at the altar, before the face of all his slanderers. I should be proud to bear his name."

She blushed crimson at her own boldness, as she stood before her mirror, with hands clasped, in all the fervour of a vow; but from that moment her faith in Bothwell Grahame knew no wavering.

In an age when infidelity and scorn of religious ceremonial is very common among young men, Bothwell Grahame had always been steadfast to the Church, and to the good old-fashioned habits in which he had been brought up by his aunt. He was not a zealot, or an enthusiast; but he attended the services of his church with a fair regularity, and had a proper respect for the rector of his parish. Even in India, where men are apt to be less orthodox than at home, Bothwell had always been known as a good Churchman.

For the last year it had been his custom to receive the sacrament on the first Sunday of the month. He had risen early, and had walked across the dewy fields to the old parish church, and had knelt among the people who knew him, and had felt himself all the better for that mystic office, even when things were going far from well with him. There was much that was blameworthy in his life; yet he had not felt himself too base a creature to kneel among his fellow-sinners at the altar of the Sinner's Friend.

It was a shock, therefore, to receive a letter from the Rector on the last day of August, requesting him to absent himself from the communion service on the following Sunday, lest his presence before that altar should be a scandal to the other communicants.

"God forbid that I should condemn any man unheard," wrote the Rector; "but you can hardly be unaware of the terrible scandal attaching to your name. You have not come to me, as I hoped you would come, to explain the conduct which has given rise to that scandal. You have taken no step to set yourself right before your fellow-men. Can you wonder that your own silence has been in some way your condemnation? My duty to my flock compels me to warn you that, until you have taken some steps to free your character from the shadow that now darkens it, you must not approach the altar of your parish church.

"If you will come to me, and open your heart to me, as the sinner should to his priest, I may be able to counsel and to help you. If you can clear yourself to me, I will be your advocate with your fellow-parishioners. – Always your friend,

"JOHN MONKHOUSE."

"He did wisely to write," said Bothwell, crushing the letter in his clenched fist. "If he had spoken such words as those to me, I believe I should have knocked him down, priest though he is."

He answered the Rector's letter within an hour after receiving it.

"I have nothing to confess," he wrote, "and that is why I have not gone to your confessional. The difficulties and perplexities of my life are such as could only be understood by a man of my own age and surroundings. They would be darker than Sanscrit to clerical gray hairs.

"Because I did not choose to answer questions which I could not answer without betraying the confidence of a friend, my wise fellow-parishioners have agreed to suspect me of murdering a girl whose face I never saw till after her death.

"I shall attend to receive the sacrament at the eight-o'clock service next Sunday, and I dare you to refuse to administer it. – I have the honour to be, yours, &c.

BOTHWELL GRAHAME."

He walked to Bodmin and delivered his letter at the Rectory door. He would not run the risk of an hour's delay. On his way home he overtook Hilda, near the gates of The Spaniards. She was very pale when they met, and she grew still paler as they shook hands.

After a word or two of greeting, they walked on side by side in silence.

"I wonder that you can consent to be seen with me," said Bothwell presently, after a farmer's wife had driven past them on her way from market. "You must have heard by this time what people think about me – your brother foremost among them, I believe, for he has given me the cut direct more than once since the inquest."

"I am sorry that he should be so ready to believe a lie," said Hilda, "for I know that this terrible slander is a lie."

"God bless you for those straight, strong words, Hilda!" exclaimed Bothwell fervently. "Yes, it is a lie. I am not a good man. I have taken one false step in my life, and the consequences of that mistake have been very heavy upon me. But I am not capable of the kind of wickedness which my Bodmin friends put down to me. I have not risen to the sublimer heights of crime. I am not up to throwing a fellow-creature out of a railway-carriage."

"Why did you not answer that man's questions at the inquest?" asked Hilda urgently, forgetting that she had hardly the right to demand his confidence. "That refusal of yours is the cause of all this misery. It seems such a foolish, obstinate act on your part."

"I daresay it does. But I could not do more or less than I did. To have answered that inquisitive cur's prying questions categorically would have been to injure a lady. As a man of honour, I was bound to run all risks rather than do that."

"I begin to understand," said Hilda, blushing crimson.

Why had she not guessed his secret long before this? she asked herself. The mystery that surrounded him was the mystery of some fatal love-affair. She was only a secondary person in his life. There was another who had been more to him than she, Hilda, could ever be – another to whom he was bound, for whom he was willing to sacrifice his own character. She felt a jealous pang at the mere thought of that unknown one.

"No, you can never understand," exclaimed Bothwell passionately. "You can never imagine the misery of a man who has bound himself by a fatal tie which chains him to one woman, long after his heart has gone out to another. I gave away my liberty while I was in India, Hilda: pledged myself to one who could give me but little in return for my faith and devotion. I dare not tell you the circumstances of that bondage – the fatality which led to that accursed engagement. I am desperate enough to break the tie, now that it is too late, now that I dare not offer myself to the girl I love, now that my name is blasted for ever. Yes, for ever. I know these narrow-minded rustics, and that to the end of my life I shall in their sight bear the brand of Cain. Here is a fine example of liberal feeling, Hilda."

He handed her the Rector's letter, crumpled in his angry grasp.

She read it slowly, tears welling up to her eyes as she read. How hardly the world was using this poor Bothwell! and the harder he was used the more she loved him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I shall kneel before the altar of my God, as I have knelt before."

"There will at least be one communicant there who will not shrink from you," said Hilda softly. "We will kneel side by side, if you like."

"God bless you, my darling. God help me to clear my name from this foul stain which fools have cast upon it; and then a day may come when you and I may kneel before that altar, side by side, and I may be thrice blest in winning you for my wife."

There was a brief silence before Hilda murmured, "You have told me that you are bound to another."

"Yes, and I have told you that I will break through that bondage."

"Can you do so with honour?"

"Yes. It will be more honourable to cancel my vow than to keep it; and when I am a free man – when this shadow has been cleared from my name – will you take me for your husband, Hilda – a man with his way to make in the world, but needing only such an inducement as your love to undertake the labours of a modern Hercules? Will you have me, Hilda, when I am my own man again?"

"I will," answered Hilda softly, yet with a firm faith that thrilled him. "I shall have to brave my brother's anger, perhaps; but I will not wait till your name is cleared from this slander. Of what use is fair-weather love? It is in storm and cloud that a woman's faith should be firmest. When you have freed yourself from that old tie which has grown a weariness to you, when you can come to me in all truth and honour, my heart shall answer frankly and fully, Bothwell. And then you can tell all our friends that we are engaged. It may be a very long engagement, perhaps. I shall not be of age till two years hence, you know; but that does not matter. People will know at least that *I* do not suspect you of a crime."

"My noble girl!" he cried, beside himself with joy.

Never had he thought to find any woman so frank, so generous, so brave. He would have caught her in his arms, pressed her to his passionately beating heart, but she drew herself away from him with a decisive gesture.

"Not until you are free, Bothwell; not until you can tell me that the old tie is broken. Till then we can be only friends."

"Be it so," he answered submissively. "Your friendship is worth more to me than the love of other women. Will you walk to Penmorval with me? Dora has been wondering at your desertion."

"Not to-day. Please tell Dora that I have not been very well. I will go to see her to-morrow. Good-bye, Bothwell."

"Good-bye, my beloved."
They parted at the gate of The Spaniards.

CHAPTER VII. A RAPID CONVERSION

Three days after that compact between Bothwell and Hilda, an officious friend went out of his way to inform Mr. Heathcote that his sister and Mr. Grahame had been seen together several times of late, and that their manner indicated a more than ordinary degree of intimacy. They had been observed together at the early service on Sunday morning; they had sat in the same pew; they had walked away from the church side by side – indeed, Mr. Heathcote's friend believed they had actually walked to The Spaniards together.

"It is a shame that such a man as Grahame should be allowed to be on intimate terms with an innocent girl," said the worthy rustic, in conclusion.

"My dear Badderly, I hope I am able to take care of my sister without the help of all Bodmin," retorted Heathcote shortly. "Everybody is in great haste to condemn Mr. Grahame; but you must not forget that my sister and I have been intimate with him and his family for years. We cannot be expected to turn our backs upon him all at once, because his conduct happens to appear somewhat mysterious."

Notwithstanding which kindly word for Bothwell, Edward Heathcote went straight home and questioned his sister as to her dealings with that gentleman.

Hilda admitted that she had seen Mr. Grahame two or three times within the last week, and that she had allowed him to walk home with her after the early service.

"Do you think it wise or womanly to advertise your friendship with a man who is suspected of a most abominable crime?" asked her brother severely.

"I think it wise and womanly to be true to my friends in misfortune – in unmerited misfortune," she answered firmly.

"You are very strong in your faith. And pray what do you expect will be the end of all this?"

"I expect – I hope – that some day I shall be Bothwell's wife. I shall not be impatient of your control, Edward. I am only nineteen. I hope during the next two years you will find good reason to change your opinion about Bothwell, and to give your consent to our marriage – "

"And if I do not?"

"If you do not, I must take advantage of my liberty, when I come of age, and marry him without your consent."

"You have changed your tune, Hilda. A week ago you told me that you and Bothwell would never be married. Now, you boldly announce your betrothal to him."

"We are not betrothed – yet."

"O, there is a preliminary stage, is there? A kind of purgatory which precedes the heaven of betrothal. Hilda, you are doing a most ill-advised and unwomanly thing in giving encouragement to this man, in spite of your brother's warning."

"Am I to be unjust because my brother condemns a friend unheard? Believe me, Edward, my instinct is wiser than your experience. Why do you not question Bothwell? He will answer you as frankly as he answered me. He will tell you his reasons for refusing to satisfy that London lawyer's curiosity. O Edward, how can you be so cruel as to doubt him, to harden your heart against him and against me?"

"Not against you, my darling," her brother answered tenderly. "If I thought your happiness were really at stake, that your heart were really engaged, I would do much: but I can but think you are carried away by a mistaken enthusiasm. You would never have cared for Grahame if the world had not been against him; if he had not appeared to you as a martyr."

"You are wrong there, Edward," she answered shyly, her fingers playing nervously with the collar of his coat, the darkly-fringed eyelids drooping over the lovely gray eyes. "I have liked him for a long time. Last winter we used to hunt together a good deal, you know – "

"I did not know, or I should have taken care to prevent it," said Heathcote.

"O, it was always accidental, of course," she apologised. "But in a hunting country, the fast-goers generally get together, don't they?"

"In your case there was some very fast-going, evidently."

"I used to think then that Bothwell cared for me – just a little. And then there came a change. But I know the reason of that change now; and I know that he really loves me."

"O, you are monstrous wise, child, and monstrous self-willed for nineteen years old," said her brother, in those deep grave tones of his, a voice which gave weight and power to lightest words, "and you would take your own road in life without counting the cost. Well, Hilda, for your sake I will try to get at the root of this mystery. I will try to fathom your lover's secret; and God grant I may discover that it is a far less guilty secret than I have deemed."

He kissed Hilda's downcast brow and left her. She was crying; but her tears were less bitter than they had been, for she felt that her brother was now on her side; and Edward Heathcote's championship was a tower of strength.

Once having pledged himself to anything, even against his own convictions, Heathcote was the last man to go from his word; but if he needed a stronger inducement than his sister's sorrowful pleading, that inducement was offered.

He received a note from Dora Wyllard within a few hours of his conversation with Hilda.

"Dear Mr. Heathcote, – My husband and I have both been wondering at your desertion of us. For my own part I want much to see you, and to talk to you upon a very painful subject. Will you call at Penmorval after your ride to-morrow afternoon, and let me have a few words with you alone?"

"Always faithfully yours,
"DOROTHEA WYLLARD."

He kissed the little note before he laid it carefully in a drawer of his writing-table. It was a foolish thing to do, but the act was quite involuntary and half unconscious. The sight of that handwriting brought back the feeling of that old time when a letter from Dora meant so much for him. He had trained himself to think of her as another man's wife – to consider himself her friend, and her friend only. He felt himself bound in honour so to think; all the more because he was admitted to her home, because she was not afraid to call him friend. Yet there were moments when the old feeling came over him with irresistible force.

He did not ride that afternoon, but walked across the fields, and presented himself at Penmorval between four and five o'clock. Mrs. Wyllard was alone in her morning-room, a room in which everything seemed part of herself – her favourite books, her piano, her easel – all the signs of those pursuits which he remembered as the delight of her girlhood.

"You paint still, I see," he said, glancing at the easel, on which there was an unfinished picture of a beloved Blenheim spaniel; "you have not forgotten your old taste for animals."

"I have so much leisure," she answered somewhat sadly; and then he remembered her childless home.

She was very pale, and he thought she had a careworn look, as of one who had spent anxious days and sleepless nights. He took the chair to which she motioned him, and they sat opposite each other for some moments in silence, she looking down and playing nervously with a massive ivory paper-knife which was lying on the table at which she had been writing when he entered. Suddenly she lifted her eyes to his face – pathetic eyes which had looked at him once before in his life with just that appealing look.

"It is very cruel of you to believe my cousin guilty of murder," she said, coming straight to the point. "You knew my mother. Surely you must know our race well enough to know that it does not produce murderers."

"Who told you that I believed such a thing?"

"Your own actions have told me. Bothwell has been cut by the people about here; and you, who should have been his staunch friend and champion, you have kept away from Penmorval as if this house were infected, in order to avoid meeting my cousin."

"I cannot tell you a lie, Mrs. Wyllard, even to spare your feelings," replied Heathcote, deeply moved, "and yet I think you must know that I would do much to save you pain. Yes, I must admit that it has seemed to me that circumstances pointed to your cousin, as having been directly or indirectly concerned in that girl's death. His conduct became so strange at that date – so difficult to account for upon any other hypothesis."

"Has your experience of life never made you acquainted with strange coincidences?" asked Dora. "Is it impossible, or even improbable, that Bothwell should have some trouble upon his mind – a trouble which arose just about the time of that girl's death? Everything must have a date; and his anxieties happen to date from that time. I know his frank open nature, and how heavily any secret would weigh upon him."

"You believe, then, that he has a secret?"

"Yes – there is something – some entanglement which prevented his answering Mr. Distin's very impertinent questions."

"Has he confided his trouble to you? Has he convinced you of his innocence?"

"He had no occasion to do that. I never believed him guilty – I never could believe him guilty of such a diabolical crime."

Tears came into her eyes as she spoke, but she dried them hastily.

"Mr. Heathcote, you are a lawyer, a man of the world, a man of talent and leisure. You have been one of the first to do my kinsman a cruel wrong. Cannot you do something towards righting him? I am making this appeal on my own account – without Bothwell's knowledge. I come to you as the oldest friend I have – the one friend outside my own home in whom I can fully confide."

"You know that I would give my life in your service," he answered, with suppressed fervour. He dared not trust himself to say much. "Yes, you have but to command me. I will do all that human intelligence can do. But this is a difficult case. The only evidence against your cousin is of so vague a nature that it could not condemn him before a jury; and yet that evidence is strong enough to brand him as a possible murderer in the opinion of those who saw him under Distin's examination. He can never be thoroughly rehabilitated until the mystery of that girl's death has been fathomed, and I doubt if that will ever be. Where Joseph Distin has failed, with all the detective-police of London at his command, how can any amateur investigator hope to succeed?"

"Friendship may succeed where mere professional cleverness has been baffled," argued Dora. "I do not think that Mr. Distin's heart was in this case. At least that is the impression I derived from a few words which I heard him say to my husband just before he left us."

"Indeed! Can you recall those words?"

"Very nearly. He said he had done his best in the matter, and should not attempt to go further. And then with his cynical air he added, 'Let sleeping dogs lie, Wyllard. That is a good old saying.'"

"Don't you think that sounds rather as if he suspected your kinsman, and feared to bring trouble on your family by any further investigation?"

"It never struck me in that light," exclaimed Dora, with a distressed look. "Good heavens! is all the world so keen to suspect an innocent man? If you only knew Bothwell as I know him, you would be the first to laugh this cruel slander to scorn."

"For your sake I will try and believe in him as firmly as you do," answered Heathcote, "and as Wyllard does, no doubt."

Her countenance fell, and she was silent.

"Your husband knows of this cloud upon your cousin's name, I suppose?" interrogated Heathcote, after a pause.

"Yes, I told him how Bothwell had been treated by his Bodmin acquaintance."

"And he was as indignant as you were, I conclude?"

"He said very little," answered Dora, with a pained expression. "My regard for Bothwell is the only subject upon which Julian and I have ever differed. He has been somewhat harsh in his judgment of my cousin ever since his return from India. He disapproved of his leaving the army, and he has been inclined to take a gloomy view of his prospects from the very first."

"I see. He has not a high opinion of Bothwell's moral character?"

"I would hardly say that. But he is inclined to judge my cousin's errors harshly, and he does not understand his noble qualities as I do. I should not have been constrained to ask for your help, if Julian had been as heartily with me in this matter as he has been, in all other things."

Edward Heathcote's bronzed cheek blanched ever so little at this speech. It moved him deeply to think that in this one anxiety of her loving heart he could be more to Dora Wyllard than her husband, that she could turn to him in this trouble, with boundless confidence in his friendship. What would he not do to merit such confidence, to show himself worthy of such trust? Already he was prepared to be Bothwell's champion; he was angry with himself for ever having suspected him.

"I had another motive for appealing to you," continued Dora shyly. "I have reason to think that Bothwell is very fond of Hilda, and the dearest wish of my life is to see those two united."

"A wish which is in a fair way of being gratified," answered Heathcote. "My sister announced to me only yesterday that there is some kind of contingent engagement between her and Mr. Grahame; and that, he being free to wed her, she means to marry him when she comes of age, with or without my consent."

"My noble Hilda!" exclaimed Dora; "yes, it is just like her to accept him now when all the world is against him."

"Say that it is just like a woman," said Heathcote. "There is a leaven of Quixotism in all your sex, from the Queen to the wife-beater's victim in Seven Dials. Well, dear Mrs. Wyllard, for your sake and for Hilda's, I will be Quixotic. I will make it the business of my life to discover the mystery of that unknown girl's fate. I will pledge myself to think of nothing else, to undertake no other work or duty until I have exhausted all possible means of discovery."

"God bless you for the promise," she answered fervently. "I knew that I had one friend in the world."

A sob almost choked her utterance of those last words. She was deeply wounded by her husband's coldness in this matter of Bothwell's position. She had expected him to be as indignant as she was, to be ready to take up arms against all the world for her cousin; and he had been cold, silent, and gloomy when she tried to discuss the burning question with him. His manner had implied that he, too, suspected Bothwell, though he would not go so far as to give utterance to his suspicion.

And now to have won over this strong advocate, this brave, true-hearted champion, was a relief to her mind that almost overcame her feelings; here, where she had ever sought to preserve the calm dignity of manner which became her as Julian Wyllard's wife.

"I thank you with all my heart," she faltered, "and I am sure that my husband will be as rejoiced as I shall, if you can clear Bothwell's name from this stigma."

Heathcote rose to take leave. He felt that the business of his visit was accomplished, that he had no right to linger in Dora Wyllard's sanctum. It was the first time he had ever been admitted to her own particular nest, the one room in which she was secure from the possibility of interruption.

"Tell Hilda to come and see me," she said, as they shook hands. "She has deserted me most cruelly of late."

"Perhaps it is better for her not to be here until her engagement to your cousin is on a more definite footing."

"Ah, *there* is the secret in Bothwell's life – some entanglement which he half admitted to me the other day. He said that he was bound to one woman while he loved another. I guessed that Hilda was the one he loved. But who can the other be? I know of no one."

"Some lady whom he met in India, no doubt. The very air of the East is charged with complications of that kind. If your cousin is a man of honour, and if we can unriddle the railway mystery, all may yet come right. Pray do not be too anxious. Good-bye."

And so they parted, they two, who once were to have spent their lives together. Edward Heathcote walked away from Penmorval loving his old love as dearly as ever he had loved her in his passionate youth. He was young enough to love with youthful fervour even yet, although he had schooled himself to believe that youth was past for him. He was only thirty-six; Julian Wyllard's junior by nearly ten years.

Half an hour later Dora was presiding at afternoon tea in the yew-tree arbour, where her husband joined her after two hours' business talk with his land-steward. The weather was still warm enough for drinking tea out of doors, and this yew-tree arbour was Mrs. Wyllard's favourite retreat.

"How pale and tired you are looking, Julian!" she said, scrutinising her husband's face as he sank somewhat wearily into the comfortable basket-chair she had placed ready for him; "you must want some tea very badly."

"I always enjoy my afternoon cup; and you are the queen of tea-makers," answered Wyllard; "yes, I have had a tiresome talk with Gretton, who is getting old and prosy, and repeats himself infernally when he is describing the tenants' wants and grievances. He cannot tell me of the smallest repair required for a barn or pig-sty without repeating every syllable of his conversation with some garrulous old farmer, and even explaining the nature of the barn or the sty in dumb-show, 'as it might be this,' and 'as it might be that.' He maddens me with his 'as it might be.'"

"I am afraid you are growing nervous, Julian," said Dora tenderly.

She laid her cool white hand upon his forehead, and looked concerned at the touch.

"You are actually feverish. You have been irritated into a fever by that prosy old man. Why do you not superannuate poor old Gretton, and let Bothwell be your steward? He is much cleverer and more business-like than you think, and at the worst he would not prose."

"I never thought Bothwell a fit person to look after my estate, and I think him less so now," answered her husband coldly. "He is the most unpopular man in Bodmin. Do not let us talk about it any more. By the way, you have had a visitor this afternoon," he continued, as his wife handed him his tea. "I saw Heathcote go past the library-window while I was at work with Gretton. What brought him to Penmorval?"

"I asked him to come," answered Dora, very pale, but with a steadfast look in her eyes, and about the firmly-moulded lips.

She had never had a secret from her husband in her life, and although she had made her appeal to Heathcote without his advice or knowledge, she had no intention of leaving him uninformed now that the thing was done.

"You asked him to come to you – Edward Heathcote!" exclaimed Wyllard, with a surprised look. "And may I know what important business necessitated this interview?"

"You have a right to know all about it, Julian," she answered quietly. "I have asked Mr. Heathcote to give me his aid in a matter in which you have seemed unwilling to help me. You were content that my cousin should remain under a hideous stigma – shunned by those who were once his friends. I am not so content; and I have asked the son of my mother's oldest and staunchest friend to help me."

And then she told him, as briefly as possible, what kind of request she had made to Edward Heathcote, and how he had promised to help her.

Julian Wyllard was livid with anger. He set down his cup with a hand that trembled like an aspen-leaf; he rose from his chair, and paced the grassy space in front of the arbour, backwards and forwards half a dozen times, before he uttered a word. And then, coming back to his wife, he looked at her with eyes dilated with jealous frenzy.

"Why call him the son of your mother's old friend?" he exclaimed. "What need of so awkward and ambiguous a phrase? Why not call him your old lover? It is in that character you have thrown yourself upon him; it is as your old lover that you try to arouse his chivalry, that you urge him to do that which your husband's common sense revolted from. A husband is a reasoning animal, you know. He will only attempt the practical, the possible. But throw your glove to the lions, and your lover will leap into the arena and fight for it! And you take advantage of an unquenchable passion, of a despairing love, to attempt the solution of a problem to which the answer may be a rope round your cousin's neck."

"You have no right to insult me as you have done," said Dora, pale as marble, but calm in her just indignation. "You know that I am your true wife, and that my friendship for Edward Heathcote and his for me is above suspicion. As for my cousin Bothwell, I know that he has been most unjustly suspected of a foul crime; and I will not rest till the true history of that crime has been discovered. Nothing but the discovery of the real murderer can ever set Bothwell right with his fellow-men."

"Then he will have to remain in the wrong," answered Wyllard savagely. "The mystery which Distin's training and experience failed to fathom will never be brought to light by your knight-errant of The Spaniards."

CHAPTER VIII. A VALUABLE ALLY

Edward Heathcote devoted his every thought to the task which he had taken upon himself. His first business must be to discover the name and history of the murdered girl. The clue in his possession was of the slightest; but he was not without a clue.

First, there was the name and address of the baker on the biscuit-bag. This gave him an indication of the part of Paris in which the girl must have been living before she started for England; it also indicated that she had left Paris within a few days of her journey westward.

But he had a second clue, and a much better one. Within a week after the adjourned inquest, a farm-labourer had brought him a large oval silver locket, which he had picked up in the gorge where the girl fell. The spot lay a little way off the direct path to the man's work, and morbid curiosity had impelled him to go and examine the place in the early morning, before his daily labour began.

Prowling about among the ferns and crags, he had struck his foot against a glistening object, which proved to be an old silver locket, a good deal worn and battered; a double locket, containing a waxen Agnus Dei, and a little lace-bordered picture of the Virgin Mary, the paper worn thin by much handling.

The man carried the locket to the Coroner, who rewarded him with half a sovereign, and laid the relic aside in his desk, after a minute examination. It had been attached to a black ribbon, which was worn and old, and had snapped with the jerk of the girl's fall.

Upon the locket itself there was not the faintest sign which could lead to the identification of the wearer; but upon the little lace-edged engraving there were these words neatly written in a fine French penmanship:

"Souvenir from Sister Gudule de la Miséricorde to Léonie. Dinan, October 1879. Child of Jesus, pray for us."

To Heathcote's mind this brief legend indicated three facts.

First, that the Christian name of the wearer of the locket was Léonie. Secondly, that she had been educated at a convent at Dinan. Thirdly, that she left the convent in October 1879, and that the little paper had been placed in her locket at parting. The nuns have no valuable gifts to offer their *protégées*. An engraving of Saint or Blessed Virgin would be the most precious token holy-poverty could bestow. This indication of the locket was the clue which Heathcote decided to follow in the first instance. He made his arrangements for leaving England without an hour's delay; but before turning his back upon The Spaniards, he exacted Hilda's promise that she would not see Bothwell Grahame during his absence.

"Mr. Grahame's entanglement with another woman is an all-sufficient reason for your holding yourself aloof from him," said her brother. "When he is free to ask you to be his wife, let him come to me and submit his pretensions to me, as your natural guardian. Perhaps, by that time, I may have succeeded in setting him right with those who now look askance upon him!"

Mr. Heathcote determined to call upon Joseph Distin before he crossed the Channel. He had thought the question out thoroughly during a sleepless night; and it seemed to him that it would be folly to enter upon his difficult task of investigation without having first armed himself with such advice as the criminal lawyer was able to give. Before acting upon his own opinion it would be well to know the opinion of a disinterested expert.

He called at Distin's offices the morning after his arrival in London. The offices were in Furnival's Inn, a quiet and convenient spot, not too far from the Old Bailey, and within a ten minutes' walk of the stuffy old law-courts, still extant in Chancery Lane. Mr. Heathcote sent in his card; and although at least half a dozen clients were waiting for Mr. Distin, he was admitted immediately, and received with marked cordiality.

"My dear Mr. Heathcote, charmed to see you. How good of you to look me up!" exclaimed Distin, as he pushed forward a morocco-covered armchair.

There was nothing æsthetic, picturesque, or newfangled in Mr. Distin's office, where the prevailing tone was a sober, substantial comfort. Most of the furniture looked at least fifty years old; but the Turkey carpet was the richest that the looms of Orient can produce; the spacious armchairs invited to repose, and to that ease of body which favours expansion of mind and friendly candour.

"Are you in town on business or pleasure?" inquired the lawyer, in his airy manner. "Going through to the north, perhaps; grouse-moor, eh?"

"Nothing is further from my thoughts than shooting grouse," replied Heathcote. "I am in London on my way to the Continent. I am going to hunt up the antecedents of that poor girl who was killed on our line; I want to find out who she was and how she came to be in the way of meeting her death in our locality."

The lawyer's airy manner was dropped in a moment, and he became intensely grave.

"O, you are going into that business, are you, and so late in the day? But why?"

"I would rather not discuss my motive, if you will kindly excuse me." Mr. Distin bowed. "I want to avail myself of your talent and experience to the uttermost before I begin to work on my own account."

"The most my talent can do for you in this matter is very little; to tell you the truth, I made a dismal failure of the business," returned Distin, with agreeable frankness. He was too successful a man to be ashamed to confess a failure. "But really now, Mr. Heathcote, by far the wisest counsel I can give you is to forget all about this sad story, and to let the world go on just as if that poor girl's death had never come within your ken. You did your duty as Coroner, you know. Nothing more could be asked or expected of you. Why, then, should you do more? You are very friendly with the family at Penmorval. Take my advice. 'Let sleeping dogs lie.'"

"That is what you said to Mr. Wyllard the morning you were leaving."

"I may have used that adage. It is a very good one."

"And you recommend me to drop this investigation, for the sake of my friends at Penmorval," said Heathcote. "I infer from that advice that you suspect Mr. Grahame of being concerned in the French girl's death."

"I confess to you that his whole manner and conduct were to my mind suggestive of guilt. Of course, manner and conduct are not evidence. At this present time there is not a shred of evidence to connect Mr. Grahame with the crime, except the one fact that he was in the train when the girl was killed; but that point would apply equally to everybody else in the train, or rather to any one who happened to be alone in a carriage as Mr. Grahame was. At present Mrs. Wyllard's cousin is safe. If his was the arm that thrust that girl off the footboard, there is nothing to bring the crime home to him. But go a few steps further, follow up any clue which you may happen to possess – you would not start upon such an investigation without some kind of clue," speculated Joseph Distin shrewdly – "pursue your trail a few yards further, and you may come upon evidence that will put a rope round your friend's neck, and bring lasting disgrace upon the family at Penmorval. I advised my old friend Wyllard to let this matter drop. I advise you to do the same."

"I cannot act upon your advice. There has been too much mischief done already. Mr. Grahame's refusal to answer your questions about his whereabouts on the day of the murder has condemned him in the minds of his fellow-townsmen. His name is blackened by a terrible suspicion, and I have sworn to clear it, if it can be cleared. If he is guilty – well, he can hardly be worse off with a rope round his neck than he is now, with all his old friends estranged from him. For my own part, in such a case I should infinitely prefer the rope. It would be a short way out of a difficulty."

"My experience of criminals is that when the crisis comes they would rather endure the ignominy than the halter," replied Distin. "Perhaps you have never seen a man within an hour of his being hanged?"

"Thank God I have not been obliged to do that, though I have had to look upon one an hour after."

"Ah, then you do not know to what manhood can descend – how it can grovel before the spectre of instant, certain death. Come now, cannot I persuade you to think better of your idea of investigating this mysterious business?"

"No. I have promised to do it. I must keep my promise."

"So be it."

And then Joseph Distin discussed the matter freely, with perfect frankness. He told Heathcote what means he had used to discover the girl's identity on this side of the Channel.

"I should have gone further and crossed the water, if I had not seen good reason to desist," he said, when he had explained his plan of inquiry at every likely lodging-house, and how that plan had totally failed.

"But what would you have done on the other side of the water, without any clue?"

"I should have gone across myself and put the case into the hands of Félix Drubarde, one of the cleverest police-officers in Paris. He would have been instantly on the alert to hear of any application made to the police by the relatives and friends of the missing girl. She could hardly disappear for any length of time without some one being concerned by her disappearance. The application to the police might not occur perhaps until months after her death; but it would be likely to occur sooner or later. And, again, Félix Drubarde has his allies in every quarter of Paris. He hears of events so quickly that it might be supposed he had a network of speaking-tubes all over the city. With his help I should have been almost certain to arrive at the identification of the dead girl."

"But I sent three advertisements to each of the best known Paris newspapers," said Heathcote. "How do you account for those advertisements not having been seen by the girl's friends?"

"Because French people of the lower classes are sometimes very illiterate, and live in a very narrow circle. Your papers may not have come within the range of the girl's friends. They would be likely to apply to the police when time passed and they received no tidings of her. But they would not be likely to see your best known papers – the papers of the upper classes, no doubt. And then your advertisements appeared immediately after the girl's death; at a time when the parents or friends had no reason for feeling alarmed as to her safety."

"That may be so," replied Heathcote thoughtfully. "I think you can help me very much in my undertaking, Mr. Distin, if you are willing to do so."

"In what way?"

"Give me a letter of introduction to this Parisian detective, and let me engage his aid by and by, when I go to Paris. I shall be happy to pay him liberally for his services."

"Drubarde is no extortioner. He will not fleece you," said Distin. "In fact the man is a gentleman, in his own particular line. He has made an independence, and he only works now as an amateur. Yes, I will give you a letter of introduction to him with pleasure, since you are bent on pursuing this business to the bitter end. I suppose you will go straight to Paris."

"No. I want first to follow up the only valuable clue I have. I shall go first to Dinan, in Brittany, to find the convent, where I have reason to believe this poor girl was educated."

CHAPTER IX. FEVER DREAMS

Edward Heathcote left Waterloo Station for Southampton within an hour of leaving Mr. Distin's office, dined hastily at the Dolphin Hotel, and started for St. Malo in the South-Western steamer at seven o'clock in the evening. It was still early on the following morning when he landed on the long stone quay at St. Malo, and the picturesque old granite walls were still flushed with the rosy light of a newly-risen sun. The quaint island-citadel, with its exquisite bay and golden sands, had been familiar to Edward Heathcote in the past. He had lingered here to rest after a long ramble in Brittany, and he had an affection for the steep narrow streets and quaint old houses, with their all-pervading aspect of the seventeenth century, the days of Bourbons and Condés, kings and warriors, princely priests and priestly politicians.

Much as he loved the old-world town, Heathcote had no intention of loitering there on this September morning, lovely as the bay and the rocks and the smiling colony of white-walled villas yonder at Paramé looked in the early sunlight. He only waited to get his portmanteau through the Custom House in order to carry it to the little office attached to the Dinan steamer, where he ascertained the hour for the boat's departure.

Chance and tide favoured him. The steamer was to leave at eleven o'clock. This afforded time for a leisurely breakfast at the Franklin, and would enable him to reach Dinan early in the afternoon. He breakfasted briefly and temperately, as became a man whose mind was full of anxious thought, and then went for a stroll in the old streets, and looked in at the Cathedral.

He had reflected seriously upon his interview with the criminal lawyer. The fact that he had found his own original opinion about Bothwell Grahame shared by this man, so deeply versed in the ways of criminals, in the science of circumstantial evidence, was to the last degree startling and disconcerting. He felt that he was setting out upon a task which he could but perform in a half-hearted manner, struggle as he might against that first conviction of his. He had undertaken this task for Hilda's sake, for Dora's sake. What misery must result if Joseph Distin were right after all, and in an ill-judged attempt to gratify these two trusting women he should bring about the discovery of Bothwell's guilt! That guilt was at present but a dark suspicion which men hardly dared hint to each other; but if Distin's judgment was correct, any unlucky discovery might make the suspicion a fact.

But he had promised, and the pledge must be kept. He must follow up the clue which he held till it led him to other links in the chain of the victim's history; and the chances were that in the victim's history he would find a clue to the murderer's identity.

It was a lovely autumnal noontide, and the gay little town of Dinard, with its gardens rising stage above stage on the slope of the hill, its queer little bays and recesses of golden sand, was smiling in sunlight as the "Isle et Rance" steamed across the broad bay of St. Malo to the mouth of the Rance. There are few prettier rivers than this little Rhine of Brittany, and Edward Heathcote had loved it well in days gone by. But to-day he sat upon the bridge smoking his cigar, and gazing at the green hills and hanging woods, the villas and villages, and craggy cliffs and ever-varying shore, without seeing the objects upon which his eyes seemed to rest. The nearer he came to the task of investigation, the more irksome became his duty. His heart failed him as he took out the silver locket, and read the name upon the paper inside. It was the name of the woman who was to enlighten him about the dead girl, who was perhaps to put in his hand the clue which would lead him straight to the murderer.

And yet who could say that he would find Sister Gudule de la Miséricorde at Dinan? He did not even know the name of the convent in which she lived. She might be dead. And yet the date of the inscription was but two years old. There was every chance that the Sister still lived: and he must be dull if he failed to find her.

He stopped at the first church to which he came after leaving the boat – an old church in the lower part of the town. Here he asked his way to the presbytery, and called upon the priest, who told him that there was only one educational convent in Dinan, the Convent of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, an Ursuline convent situated in a quiet quarter of the town.

Mr. Heathcote left his portmanteau at one of the hotels in the market-place, and drove at once to the convent. It was a large white building, with plastered walls, far from beautiful in itself, and showing every sign of poverty; but the gardens were neatly kept, the rooms were exquisitely clean, and the clumsy old Breton furniture was polished to the highest degree.

Mr. Heathcote was received in the convent parlour by the Reverend Mother, a homely little tub-shaped personage, in a black serge habit and a picturesque white cap, which concealed every vestige of hair upon her broad intelligent forehead. She had kindly black eyes, and a frank benevolent smile, and Heathcote felt at once at his ease with her. She looked a little disappointed when, in answer to her preliminary question, he told her that he had not come to offer a new pupil. The pupils were the chief source of revenue for the convent, albeit the *pension* was of the smallest.

"Have you ever seen that locket before, madame?" he asked, laying the silver medallion before the Reverend Mother.

"I have seen many such," she answered. "The Holy Father allows us to dispose of them for the benefit of the convent."

"There is a little paper inside with some writing. Will you look at it, please?"

She opened the locket and unfolded the paper.

"Yes, this is Sister Gudule's writing. I know it very well indeed," said the nun, looking at her visitor with a puzzled air, as if wondering whether the gentleman had not gone a little astray, his real destination being the great monastic madhouse yonder on the crest of a wooded hill.

"Sister Gudule is still living – still with you, perhaps?"

"Yes?" interrogatively.

"And you remember Léonie, to whom that little picture was given?"

The Reverend Mother smiled her modest smile.

"Léonie is not an uncommon name," she replied. "We have had many pupils so called from time to time. Our school numbers over a hundred and fifty pupils, you must remember."

"Do you recall any pupil of that name who left you two years ago?" asked Heathcote.

"We have from thirty to forty pupils leaving us every year. Will you permit me to ask the object of your inquiry?"

"It is a very serious one, or I should be desolated to give you so much trouble," answered Heathcote courteously, in that polite language which he spoke almost as fluently as his native English. "The poor girl to whom that locket belonged met her death in my neighbourhood less than two months ago. She fell from a railway-carriage as the train was crossing a viaduct. Whether that death was accidental or the result of a crime remains as yet unknown. But there are those in my country to whom it is vital that the whole truth should be known. If you can help me to discover the truth, you will be helping the cause of justice."

"Sister Gudule will remember," said the Reverend Mother, ringing a bell. "She is one of our lay-sisters, a great favourite with all the children. She nurses them when they are ill, and takes care of them when they go out for a holiday, and plays with them as if she were a child herself."

A lay-sister, the portress, answered the bell, and went in quest of Sister Gudule.

"She has a very unprepossessing appearance," said the Reverend Mother. "I fear you may be a little shocked at first seeing her, but she is so amiable that we all adore her. She has been the victim of misfortune from her cradle. Her deformity is the consequence of a nurse's carelessness. It turned the heart of her mother against her, and she was a neglected and unloved child. Her family was noble, but the husband speculated in railways, and the wife was silly and extravagant. By the time Gudule was a young woman poverty had overtaken her father, and he was only too glad to acquiesce in the

girl's resolution to enter a convent. She came to us penniless thirty years ago, and has worked for her bread ever since. I do not think I exaggerate when I say that she is the most valuable member of our community."

The door was opened softly and Sister Gudule appeared. This little preface from the Reverend Mother had not been unnecessary to lessen the shock of her personal appearance, which was startling in its unqualified ugliness.

Sister Gudule de la Miséricorde was the very type of the wicked fairy in the dear old child stories. She was short and squat, with broad shoulders and a decided hump. She had a nose like a potato, and a lower lip like that of the lady who moistened the spinster's yarn; she had an undeniable moustache and beard; yet in spite of all, there was something pleasant, conciliating, reassuring in her face. The low broad forehead suggested intellectual power; there was a humorous twinkle in the small gray eyes, as of one who could revel in a joke; the thick under-lip and prominent under-jaw were the indications of a boundless benevolence.

The Reverend Mother handed the locket and its enclosure to Sister Gudule.

"I must tell you that the Sister has a most miraculous memory," she said confidentially to Heathcote. "I have never known her forget the most trivial event in the history of our lives. She is our unwritten calendar."

"It is Léonie Lemarque's locket," said Sister Gudule. "How comes it here? Is my little Léonie in Dinan?"

"Léonie Lemarque!"

How glibly she pronounced the name; and how strange it seemed to Edward Heathcote to hear it! Like a name out of a tomb.

"The owner of that locket is dead," he answered gently.

"Dead! Léonie Lemarque! Dead at twenty years old! Dead! Why, there was not a healthier child in the convent, after we had once built up her constitution. She was in a sad way when she came to us."

"Léonie Lemarque!" repeated the Reverend Mother. "I never thought of her when Monsieur showed me the locket. Léonie Lemarque! Yes, she left us in 1879 to go to her old grandmother in Paris. And now she has met with a violent death in England. Monsieur will tell you."

Monsieur repeated his story, this time with further details, for Sister Gudule questioned him closely. She would have every particular. The tears streamed down her cheeks, hung upon her bristly moustache. She was deeply distressed.

"You don't know how I loved that child," she said, excusing herself to the Superior; and then to Heathcote, "Ah, Monsieur, you could never understand how I loved her. I saved her life. From the weakest frailest creature, I made her a sound and healthy child. Indeed, I may say that I did much more than this. With the help of God and the intercession of His Saints I saved her mind."

"It is quite true," said the Reverend Mother. "The child came to us under most peculiar circumstances. Sister Gudule took entire charge of her for the first year."

"And she rewarded me tenfold for my trouble," added Gudule; "she gave me love for love, measure for measure."

"Will you tell me all about her – every detail? The knowledge may help me to avenge her death," said Heathcote eagerly. "It is my belief, and the belief of others, that she was foully murdered."

He was intensely agitated. He felt as if he had taken into his hand the lever which worked some formidable machine – an instrument of death and doom, and that every movement of his hand might bring destruction. Yet the process once begun must go on. He was no longer an individual, working of his own free will; he was only an agent in the hands of Fate.

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