

GALLON TOM

DEAD MAN'S

LOVE

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CHAPTER I.

I COME TO THE SURFACE OF THINGS

I came out of Penthouse Prison on a certain Monday morning in May. Let there be no misunderstanding about it; I came out by way of the roof. And the time was four in the morning; I heard the big clock over the entrance gates chime in a dull, heavy, sleepy fashion as I lay crouched on the roof under shadow of the big tower at the north end, and looked about me.

Looking back at it now, it seems like a dream, and even then I could not realise exactly how it had happened. All I know is that there had been an alarm of fire earlier in the night, and a great running to and fro of warders, and a battering at doors by frantic locked-in men, with oaths, and threats, and shrieks. The smell of burning wood had reached my nostrils, and little whiffs and wreaths of smoke had drifted in through the ventilator in my door, before that door was opened, and I found myself huddled outside in the long corridor with other fellow-captives. And at that time I had not thought of escaping at all, probably from the fact that I was too frightened to do anything but obey orders.

But it came about that, even in that well-conducted prison, something had gone wrong with the fire-hose; and it became a matter of a great passing of buckets from hand to hand, and I, as a trusted prisoner, and a model one, too, was put at the end of the line that was the least guarded. Smoke was all about me, and I could only see the faces of convicts and warders looming at me through the haze, indistinctly. I handed the buckets mechanically, as I had done everything else in that place during the few months I had been there.

I heard an order shouted in the distance, and I lost the faces that had seemed to be so near to me; the fire had broken out in a fresh place, and there was a sudden call for help. I hesitated – the last of the line of men – for a moment; then I set down my bucket, and turned in the opposite direction and ran for it. I knew where there was a flight of stairs; I guessed that one particular door I had seen but once would be open; the rest I left to chance. With my heart thumping madly I fled up the stairs, and flung myself against the door; it yielded, and I stumbled through on to the roof of the prison.

I could hear down below me a great hubbub, but the roar of the flames had subsided somewhat, and I knew that the fire had been conquered. That meant for me a shorter time in which to make good my escape. I went slipping and sliding along the roof, half wishing myself back inside the prison, and wondering how I should get from that dizzy height to the ground. Fortunately I was young, and fit, and strong, and they had put me to the hardest work in the prison for those first months, thereby hardening my muscles to their own undoing; and I was active as a cat. After lying on the roof for what seemed a long time – until, in fact, the hubbub below had almost subsided entirely – I determined that I could afford to wait no longer. I raised my head where I lay and peered over the edge, as I have said, just as the great clock struck four.

I looked straight into the open mouth of a rain-water pipe a few inches below me. It was almost full daylight by this time, but a hazy, misty morning. I worked my way to the very edge of the roof, and lay along it; then I got my arms over the edge and gripped the broad top of the pipe. There could be no half measures about such a matter; I threw myself over bodily, and dropped to the stretch of my arms, and hung there. Then I quickly lowered one hand and gripped the smooth, round pipe, and began to slide down. I remember wondering if by some fatality I should drop into the arms of an expectant warder.

But that didn't happen. I reached the ground in safety and crouched there, waiting; there was still the outer wall to scale. In that I was less fortunate, for although in the grey light I made the circuit of it inside twice over, I failed to discover anything by which I could mount. But at last I came upon a shed that was used for storing the oakum, picked and unpicked; it had a heavy padlock on the wooden door, and the roof of the shed inclined at an angle against the high wall. It was my only chance, and there was but one way to do it.

I stepped back a few paces, and took a running leap for the edge of the roof, jumping for the padlock. I tried three times, and the third time I got my foot upon the padlock, and caught the gutter with my hands. Exerting all my strength, I drew myself up until I lay flat upon the shelving roof of the shed, scrambled up that, and stood upright against the outer wall, with the topmost stones about a foot above the reach of my hands.

That was the most ticklish work of all, because the first time I tried to make a jump for the top of the wall I slipped, and nearly rolled off the sloping roof altogether. The second time I was more successful, and I got my fingers firmly hitched on to the top of the wall. I hung there for a moment, fully expecting that I should have to let go; but I heard a shout – or thought I heard one – from the direction of the prison, and that urged me on as nothing else could have done. I drew myself up until I lay flat on the top of the wall, and then I rolled over into freedom.

Incidentally in my hurry I rolled over on to a particularly hard road, without much care how I fell. I picked myself up and looked about me, and began for the first time to realise my desperate situation. What earthly chance was there for me, clad as I was in convict garb, in a wild country place, at something after four o'clock in the morning? I was branded before all men; I was a pariah, to be captured by hook or by crook; the hand of the meanest thing I might meet would legitimately be against me.

But then I was only five-and-twenty, and the coming day had in it a promise of sweetness and of beauty – and I was free! Even while I cast about in my mind to know what I should do, I know that I rejoiced in my strength and in my young manhood; I know that I could have grappled almost gleefully with any adverse fate that might have risen up against me. But I recognised that the first thing to do would be to make for cover of some kind, until I could make shift to get a change of clothing, or to decide after my hurried flight what the next move was to be.

After going some little way I dropped down into a ditch, and looked back at the prison. It stood up grim and silent against the morning sky, and there was now no sign of any disturbance about it. Evidently for the present I had not been missed; only later would come a mustering of the prisoners, and my number would be called, and there would be no answer. That gave me time, but not time enough. I determined to make my way across country as quickly as I could before the world was astir, and so put as great a distance as possible between myself and the prison.

But by the time I had run a few miles, and could see in the near distance the roofs of cottages, I began to realise that in the country people have a bad habit of rising at a most unearthly hour. It was but little after five o'clock, and yet already smoke was coming from cottage chimneys; more than once I had a narrow squeak of it, in coming almost face to face with some labourer trudging early to his work in the fields. Daylight was not my time, it was evident; I must wait for the friendly darkness, even though I waited hungry.

The record of a great part of that day is easily set down. I lay perdu in a little wood, where, by raising my head, I could see out on to the broad highway that was presently in some indefinite fashion to set me on the greater road for freedom. All day long the sun blazed down on that road, and all day long from my hiding-place I watched vehicles and pedestrians passing to and fro; I had much time for thought. Once some little children toddled down hand-in-hand into the wood, and began to pick flowers near where I lay hidden; that was the first sight of anything beautiful I had had for a good long time, as you shall presently understand. Despite the danger to myself, if they should have seen me and raised any alarm, I was sorry enough when they toddled away again.

There was so much to be thought about, as I lay there on my face, plucking at the cool green grasses, and drinking in the beauty of the wood. For I was but five-and-twenty, and yet had never known really what life was like. I had been shut away all my days in a prison, almost as grim and as bad as that from which I had this day escaped; and I had left it for that greater prison where they branded men and set them to toil like beasts.

My earliest recollections had been of my uncle – Zabdiel Blowfield. I seemed to have a vision of him when I was very, very small, and when I lay quaking in a big bed in a horrible great room, bending over me, and flaring a candle at me, as though with the amiable intention of starting my night's rest well with a personal nightmare. Uncle Zabdiel had brought me up. It seems that I was left on his hands when I was a mere child; I easily developed and degenerated into his slave. At the age of fourteen I knew no more of the world than a baby of fourteen months, and what smattering of education I had had was pressed then into my uncle's service; I became his clerk.

He lived in a great house near Barnet, and from there he conducted his business. It was a paying business, and although I touched at first only the fringe of it, I came to understand that Zabdiel Blowfield was something of a human spider, gathering into his clutches any number of fools who had money to lose, together with others who wanted money, and were prepared to pay a price for it. He taught me his business, or just so much of it as should make me useful in the drudgery of it; and, as it happened, he taught me too much.

I had ten years of that slavery – ten years, during which I grew to manhood, and to strength and vigour. For while he thought he suppressed me, and while, as a matter of fact, he half-starved me, and dressed me in his own cast-off clothing, and kept my young nose to the grindstone of his business, I contrived, within the last year or so at least, to lead something of a double life. I was young, and that alone shall plead my excuse. If another excuse were wanted, it might be summed up in this: that the world called me – that world that was a glorious uncertainty, of which I knew nothing and longed to know a great deal.

Uncle Zabdiel regarded me as very much of a poor fool; it never entered into his head for a moment to suspect the machine he had taught to do certain mechanical things. But I, who never had a penny for my own, constantly had gold passing through my fingers, and gold spelt a way out into the great world. I was tempted, and I fell; it was quite easy to alter the books.

I had two years of it. They were two years during which I worked as hard as ever during the day, and escaped from that prison when darkness had fallen. I always contrived to get back before the dawn, or before my uncle had come into the place he called his office; and by that time I had changed back into the shabby, apparently broken, creature he knew for his slave. For the rest I did nothing very vicious; but I saw something of the world outside, and I spent what I could get of my uncle's money.

The blow fell, as I might have expected – and that, too, by the merest chance. I had grown reckless; there seemed no possibility of my being found out. But my Uncle Zabdiel happened to light upon a something that made him suspicious, and from that he went to something else. Without saying a word to me, he must have unwound the tangle slowly bit by bit, until it stood out before him clearly; and then he took to watching.

I shall never forget the morning when he caught me. I got into my accustomed window, in those gayer clothes I affected in my brief holidays, and I came face to face with the old man in my room. He was sitting on the side of the bed, with his black skull-cap thrust on the back of his head, and with his chin resting on his stick; and for a long time after I knew the game was up he neither spoke nor moved. As for me, I had had my good time, and I simply wondered in a dull fashion what he was going to do.

"You needn't say anything, Norton Hyde," said Uncle Zabdiel at last. "I know quite as much as you can tell me, and perhaps a little more. You're an ungrateful dog, and like other ungrateful dogs you shall be punished."

"I wanted to live like other men," I said sullenly.

"Haven't I fed you, lodged you, looked after you?" he snapped out. "Where would you have been, but for me?"

"I might have been a better man," I answered him. "I've slaved for you for ten long years, and you've done your best to starve me, body and soul. I've taken your money, but it isn't as much as you'd have had to pay me in those ten years, if I'd been some poor devil of a clerk independent of you!"

"We won't bandy words," said my uncle, getting up from my bed. "Go to bed; I'll decide what to do with you in the morning."

Now, wisely speaking, of course, I ought to have made good my escape that night. But there was a certain bravado in me – a certain feeling, however wrong, that I was justified to an extent in what I had done – for the labourer is worthy of his hire. So I went to bed, and awaited the morning with what confidence I could. Being young, I slept soundly.

I was the only living relative of Zabdiel Blowfield, and one would have thought – one, at least, who did not know him – that he would have shown some mercy. But mercy was not in his nature, and I had wounded the man in that tenderest part of him – the pocket. Incredible as it may seem, I was handed over to justice on a charge of forgery and falsification of books, and in due course I stood my trial, with my uncle as the chief witness against me.

Uncle Zabdiel made a very excellent witness, too, from the point of view of the prosecution. I – Norton Hyde – stood in the dock, I flatter myself, rather a fine figure of a young man, tall, and straight, and dark-haired; the prosecutor – and a reluctant one at that – stood bowed, and old, and trembling, and told the story of my ingratitude. He had brought me up, and he had educated me; he had fed, and clothed, and lodged me; but for him I must have died ignominiously long before. And I had robbed him, and had spent his money in riotous living. He wept while he told the tale, for the loss of the money was a greater thing than most men would suppose.

The limb of the law he had retained for the prosecution had a separate cut at me on his account. According to that gentleman I was a monster; I would have robbed a church; there was scarcely any crime in the calendar of which I would not have been capable. It was plainly suggested that the best thing that could happen to society would be to get me out of the way for as many years as possible.

The judge took up the case on something of the same lines. He preached a neat little sermon on the sin of ingratitude, and incidentally wondered what the youth of the country were coming to in these degenerate days; he left me with confidence to a jury of respectable citizens, who were, I was convinced, every man Jack of them, fathers of families. I was doomed from the beginning, and I refused to say anything in my own defence.

So they packed me off quietly out of the way for ten years; and Uncle Zabdiel, I have no doubt, went back to his old house, and thereafter engaged a clerk at a starvation wage, and kept a pretty close eye upon him. I only know that, so far as I was concerned, he sidled up to me as I was leaving the dock, and whispered, with a leer —

"You'll come out a better man, Norton – a very much better man."

Perhaps I had not realised the tragedy of the business at that time, for it must be understood that I had not in any sense of the word lived. Such small excursions as I had made into life had been but mere dippings into the great sea of it; of life itself I knew nothing. And now they were to shut me away for ten years – or a little less, if I behaved myself with decorum – and after that I was to be given an opportunity to make a real start, if the gods were kind to me.

However, it is fair to say that up to the actual moment of my escape from Penthouse Prison I had accepted my fate with some measure of resignation. I had enough to eat, and work for my hands, and I slept well; in that sense I was a young and healthy animal, with a past that had not been interesting, and a future about which I did not care to think. But as I lay in the wood all that long day better thoughts came to me; I had hopes and desires such as I had not had before. I saw in a mental vision sweet country places, and fair homes, and decent men and women; I was to meet and touch

them all some day, when I had worked myself out of this present tangle. Alas! I did not then know how much I was to go through first!

I had lain so long, with but the smallest idea of where I actually was, and with a ravening hunger upon me, that I had actually seen men returning from their work to their homes in the late afternoon before I bestirred myself to think of what I was to do. More than once, as I lay there, I had seen, speeding along the great road above me, motor-cars that annihilated space, and were gone in a cloud of dust. I had a ridiculous feeling that if I were nimble enough I might manage to board one of those, and so get away beyond the reach of pursuit. For always the great prison menaced me, standing as it did within a mile or two of where I lay. I knew that the pursuit must already have started; I wondered that I had not yet seen a warder.

And then came deliverance. You may say it was miraculous, if you will; I can only set down here the fact as it happened. I saw in the distance, winding down a long hill, a grey monster scarcely darker than the road over which it swept, and I knew without the telling that the grey monster was a racing car. As it drew nearer I saw that it had a sharpened front like an inverted boat, and behind that sharpened front crouched a man, with his hands upon the wheel and his face masked by hideous goggles. He swept down towards the place where I lay at a terrific pace, and, half in wonder at the sight, and half fascinated by it, I drew myself forward through the bushes until I lay at the very side of the road, with my chin uplifted and my face literally peering through the hedge.

The grey monster came on and on, and the curious thing was that it slackened speed a little as it got near to me, so that I saw the dusty outlines of it, and the great bulk of it set low between its wheels, and caught the sound of its sobbing breath. And then it stopped at the side of the road, so near to me that I could almost have stretched out a hand and touched the nearest wheel.

The man got down stiffly out of his seat, and thrust the goggles up over his cap and began to pull off his driving-gloves. Something had gone wrong with the monster, and I heard the man heave a quick sigh as he bent down to examine the machinery. For a little time his head disappeared among the works, and then, with a grunt of relief, he straightened himself and began pulling on his gloves; and so, by a miracle, turning his head a little, looked down into my upturned face.

He was a youngish man with a thin, keen, shaven face, tight-lipped and clear-eyed. He had on a long grey coat, buttoned close about him, and his appearance, with the cap drawn down over his ears and the goggles set on the front of it, was not altogether prepossessing. But the man looked a sportsman, and somehow or other I was attracted to him. Scarcely knowing what I did, I glanced to right and left along the road, and then rose to my feet in the ditch.

He gave a low whistle, and nodded slowly, finished pulling on his gloves, and set his gloved hands against his sides. "Hullo, my friend," he said at last, "I heard about you on the hill up yonder. You're wanted badly."

"I know that," I said huskily, for my throat was dry, alike from thirst and from a new fear that had sprung up in me. "Perhaps you'd like to drive me back to meet them."

"If you're anxious," he retorted, with a laugh. "Only it happens that I'm not that sort. It would be playing it rather low down to do that, wouldn't it?"

"I should think so," I said, answering his laugh with another that had something of a sob in it.

"What's your particular crime?" he asked. "Murder?"

"Nothing half so bad as that," I answered him. "I stole some money, and had a good time; now I've been paying the penalty. I've done nearly one out of my ten years."

He turned away abruptly, and I heard him mutter something which sounded like "Poor devil!" but I would not be sure of that. Then, after bending for a moment again over his car, he said, without looking up at me, "I take it you'd like to get out of this part of the country, if possible?"

"Anywhere!" I exclaimed, in a shaking whisper. "I only want a chance."

He looked along the lines of the grey monster, and laid his hand upon the machine affectionately. "Then you can't do better than travel with me," he said. "I can swing you along at a

pace that'll knock the breath out of you if you're not used to it, and I can drop you a hundred miles or so along the road. There's no one in sight; get in. Here's a spare pair of goggles."

I adjusted the goggles with a shaking hand, and tried to thank him. He had tossed a short grey coat to me, and that I put about my shoulders. Almost before I was in the seat beside him the grey car began to move, and then I saw the landscape slipping past us in two streaks. I tried once or twice to speak, but the words were driven back into my mouth, and I could not get anything articulate out.

My recollection of that journey is dim and obscure. I only know that now and then, as we flew along, the man jerked out questions at me, and so discovered that I had had nothing to eat all day, and was practically famished. He slowed down the car and showed me where, in a tin case under my feet, were some sandwiches and a flask; and I took in sandwiches and dust gratefully enough for the next few miles, and gulped down a little out of the flask. The houses were beginning to be more frequent, and we met more vehicles on the road, when presently he slowed down to light his lamps.

"At what particular spot would you like to be dropped?" he asked, as he came round my side of the car and bent down over the lamp there. "Choose for yourself."

I told him I hardly knew; I think then, for the first time, I realised that I was in as bad a case as ever, and that, save for my short coat and the goggles, I was clad exactly as when I had dropped over my prison wall. I think I told him that all places were alike to me, and that I would leave it to him.

So we went on again at a diminishing speed, with the motor horn sounding continuously; flashed through an outlying village or two, until I saw, something to my horror, that the man was drawing into London. I turned to him to protest, but he smiled and shook his head.

"Don't you worry; I'm going to see you through this – just for the sport of the thing," he said, raising his voice to a shout, so that he might be heard above the roar of the flying wheels. "I'm going to take you slap through London to my place, and I'm going to give you a change of clothes and some food. To-morrow, if you like, I'll whack you down to the coast, and ship you off somewhere. You're as safe as houses with me; I've taken an interest in you."

I could only sit still, and wonder what good providence had suddenly tossed this man into my world to do this thing for me. I could have kissed his hands; I could have worshipped him, as one might worship a god. I felt that my troubles were over; for the first time in all my life I had someone to lean upon, someone willing and anxious to help me.

And then as suddenly the whole thing came to an end. We had got through a village in safety, and had swung at a terrific pace round a corner, and there was a huge hay-waggon in the very middle of the road. There was no time to pull up, and the road was too narrow to allow the car free passage on either side. I heard the man beside me give a gasp as he bent over his wheel, and then we swerved to the right, and flew up the bank at the side of the road, in a mad endeavour to pass the waggon.

We shot past it somehow, and I thought we should drop to the road again; instead, the car continued up the bank, seemed to hang there for a moment, even at the terrific pace we were going, and then began to turn over. I say began to turn over because in that fraction of a second events seemed to take hours to finish. I know I jumped, and landed all in a heap, and seemed to see, as I fell, the car before me turning over; and then for a moment or two I knew nothing.

When I recovered consciousness I got slowly to my knees, and looked about me. My head ached fearfully, but I seemed to have no very great injuries. A dozen yards in front of me lay the grey monster, with three wheels left to it, and those three upreared helplessly in the air. My friend the driver I could not see anywhere. I staggered to my feet, relieved to find that I could walk, and went forward to the car; and there, on the other side of it, lay my friend, doubled up and unconscious. He, too, seemed to have escaped any very great injury as by a miracle. I straightened him out and touched him here and there, in the hope to discover if any bones were broken; he only groaned a little, and even that sound was cheering. The man was not dead.

I had no thought of my own safety until I heard the rumble of wheels, and saw the cause of all the disaster – that hay-waggon – coming towards me. From the opposite direction, too, I heard

the sharp toot-toot of a motor horn, and knew that help was coming. And then, for the first time, I realised that that help was not for me, and that I must not remain where I was a moment longer: for if my situation had been bad before, it was now truly frightful. I was somewhere in the neighbourhood of London – near to a northern suburb – and I was in convict garb, partially concealed by a short grey coat, and I was hatless.

Fortunately for me, by this time it was dark, and I had only seen that hay-waggon looming up, as it were, against the evening sky. Knowing that my friend must soon receive better help than I could give him, I decided that that episode in my life at least was closed. I slipped off my goggles and dropped them beside him; then, after a momentary glance round, I decided to try for a fence at one side, opposite that bank that had been our undoing. It was not very high, just within reach of my hands. I made a jump for the top and scrambled over, and dropped among some undergrowth on the further side of it.

There is a humorous side to everything; even in my plight I was compelled to laugh at what I now saw through a chink in the fence. I peered out to see what became of my friend, and as I did so I saw that another motor-car had stopped by the overturned one, and that the driver had got down. Greatly to my relief I saw my friend sit up and stare about him; even saw him smile a little ruefully at the sight of his grey monster in its present condition. And then, although I could not hear what he said, I saw that he was asking questions eagerly about me.

For he had lost me entirely; it was evident that the poor fellow was in a great state of perplexity. I sincerely hope that some day he may read these lines, and so may come to an understanding of what happened to me; I heartily wished, as I looked through the fence then, that I could have relieved his perplexity. It was evident that after his accident he was not at all sure whether he had left me on the road at some place or other, or whether by a miracle I had been in some fashion snatched off the earth, and so snatched out of my predicament. As I feared, however, that he and the other man, together with the driver of the waggon, might begin some regular search for me, I decided that I could no longer remain where I was. I began to walk away, through thick rank grass and among trees, going cautiously, and wondering where I was.

In truth I was so shaken that I staggered and swayed a little as I walked. I tried to get my ideas into some order, that I might make myself understand what was the best thing for me to do. I came to the conclusion that I must first get a change of clothing; there was no hope for me unless I could do that. By this time telegraph wires would have carried messages to all parts describing me, and those messages would have travelled much faster even than that unfortunate racing car by which I had come so far. If I could break into a house, and by some great good chance find clothing that would fit me, all might be well. But at the moment I stood marked and branded for all men to discover.

Somewhat to my relief and also to my dismay, I found presently that I was walking in the grounds of a private house. I came upon a large artificial lake or pond, with stone seats dotted about here and there near the margin of it; the stone seats were green and brown with moss and climbing plants that had been allowed to work their will upon them. In fact, all the grounds had a neglected appearance, and so had the house, too, when presently I came to it. I was just making up my mind which was the best window by which I might effect an entry, when I heard voices quite near to me, and dropped at once on an instinct, and lay still.

The two figures, I now discovered, were those of a man and woman, standing close together in a little clump of trees. They had been so still that I had walked almost up to them, and might indeed have blundered against them but for the voices. As I lay now I could hear distinctly every word they said. The man was speaking.

"My dear, dear little friend," he said, "you know I would do anything in all the world to help you. You're not safe here; I dread that man, and for your sake I fear him. Why don't you let me take you away from this dreadful house? You know I would be good to you."

"Yes, I know that, Gregory," replied the girl softly. "But I can't make up my mind – I can't be sure of myself. I can't be sure even that I love you well enough to let you take care of me."

"But you don't love anyone else?" he pleaded. And now, for the first time, as he turned his head a little, I saw the man's face. He was quite young, and I noticed that he was tall, and big, and dark, of about the same style and appearance, and even of the same age, I should conjecture, as myself. He was holding the girl's hands and looking down into her eyes. I could not see her face clearly, but I judged her to be small, and fair, and slight of figure.

"No, there is no one else I love," she answered him. "Perhaps, some day, Gregory, I may make up my mind – some day, when things get too terrible to be borne any longer here. I'm not afraid; I have a greater courage than you think. And, after all, the man dare not kill me."

"I'm not so sure of that, Debora," said the man.

They walked away in the direction of the house, and I lay still among the dank grasses, watching them as they went. They disappeared round a corner of it, and still I dared not move.

After quite a long time I thought I heard in the house itself a sharp cry. Perhaps I had been half asleep, lying there with my head on my arms, but the night was very still, and it had seemed to me that I heard the cry distinctly. At all events it roused me, and startled me to a purpose. I must get into that house, and I must get a change of clothing. I made straight for it now, and presently found a window at a convenient height from the ground, and some thick stems of creeper up which I could climb to reach it. I stood there on the window-sill for a moment or two, a grey shadow among grey shadows; then I opened the window, and, hearing nothing, stepped down into a room.

I found myself in intense darkness. I left the window open so that I might make good my escape, and I began to fumble about for something by which I could get a light. I stumbled against a chair, and stood still to listen; there seemed to be no sound in the room. And then while I moved, in the hope to find a fireplace and some matches, I had that curious skin-stirring feeling that there was someone or something in the room with me, silent, and watchful, and waiting. I could almost have sworn that I heard someone breathing, and restraining their breathing at that.

I failed to find the mantelshelf, but I stumbled presently against a table. I stretched out my hands cautiously about it, leaning well forward over it as I did so, and my forehead struck against something that moved away and moved back again – something swinging in mid-air above the table.

I thought it might be a lamp, and I put out my hand to steady it. But that which I touched was so surprising and so horrifying that for a moment I held it, and stood there in the darkness fumbling with it, and on the verge of shrieking. For it was a man's boot I held, and there was a foot inside it. Someone was hanging there above me.

I made straight for the window at once; I felt I was going mad. Needless to say, I failed to find the window at all, but this time I found the mantelshelf. There my hand struck against a match-box, and knocked over a candlestick with a clatter. After two or three tries I got a light, and stooped with the lighted match in my hands and found the candlestick, and set it upright on the floor. So soon as I had steadied my hands to the wick and had got a flame, I looked up at the dreadful thing above me.

Suspended from a beam that went across the ceiling was a man hanging by the neck, dead – and the distorted, livid face was the face of the man I had seen in the garden but a little time before – the face of the man who had talked with the girl!

Nor was that all. Seated at the table was another man, with arms stretched straight across it, so that the hands were under the dangling feet of the other, and with his face sunk on the table between the arms. And this seemed to be an old man with grey hair.

CHAPTER II. I AM HANGED – AND DONE FOR

So soon as I could get my eyes away from that thing that swung horribly above the table, I forced them to find the window. But even then I could not move. It was as though my limbs were frozen with the sheer horror of this business into which I had blundered. You will own that I had had enough of sensations for that day; I wonder now that I was able to get back to sane thoughts at all. I stood there, with my teeth chattering, and my hands clutching at the grey coat I wore, striving to pull myself together, and to decide what was best to be done. To add to the horror of the thing, the man who lay half across the table began to stir, and presently sat up slowly, like one waking from a long and heavy sleep. He sat for some moments, staring in front of him, with his hands spread out palms downwards on the table. He did not seem to see me at all. I watched him, wondering what he would do when presently he should look round and catch sight of me; wondering, for my part, whether, if he cried out with the shock of seeing me, I should grapple with him, or make for the window and dash out into the darkness.

He did a surprising thing at last. He raised his eyes slowly, until they rested upon what gyrated and swung above him, and then, as his eyes travelled upwards to the face, he smiled very slowly and very gently; and almost on the instant turned his head, perhaps at some noise I made, and looked squarely at me.

"Good evening, sir!" he said in a low tone.

Think of it! To be calmly greeted in that fashion, in a room into which I had blundered, clad grotesquely as I was, and with that dead thing hanging above us! Idiotically enough I tried to get out an answer to the man, but I found my tongue staggering about among my teeth and doing nothing in the way of shaping words. So I stared at him with, I suppose, a very white face, and pointed to that which hung above us.

"He's very quiet, sir," said the old man, getting to his feet slowly. "I was afraid at first – I didn't understand. I was afraid of him. Think of that!" He laughed again with a laughter that was ghastly.

"Cut – cut him down!" I stammered in a whisper, holding on to the edge of the mantelshelf and beginning to feel a horrible nausea stealing over me.

He shook his head. "I can't touch him – I'm afraid again," said the old man, and backed away into a corner.

What I should have done within a minute or two I do not really know, if by chance I could have kept my reason at all, but I heard someone moving in the house, and coming towards the room in which I stood. I did not think of my danger; everything was so far removed from the ordinary that it was as though I moved and walked in some dream, from which presently, with a shudder and a sigh of relief, I should awake. Therefore, even when I heard footsteps coming towards the room I did not move, nor did it seem strange that whoever came seemed to step with something of a jaunty air, singing loudly as he moved, with a rather fine baritone voice. In just such a fashion a man flung open the door and marched straight into the room, and stopped there, surveying the picture we made, the three of us – one dead and two alive – with a pair of very bright, keen eyes.

He was a tall, thin man, with sleek black hair gone grey at the temples. He had a cleanly-shaven face, much lined and wrinkled at the corners of the eyes and of the mouth; and when he presently spoke I discovered that his lips parted quickly, showing the line of his white teeth, and yet with nothing of a smile. It was as though the lips moved mechanically in some still strong mask; only the eyes were very much alive. And after his first glance round the room I saw that his eyes rested only on me.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he demanded sharply.

I did not answer his question; I pointed weakly to the hanging man. "Aren't you going – going to do anything with him?" I blurted out.

He shrugged his shoulders. "He's dead; and the other one," – he let his eyes rest for a moment on the old man – "the other one is as good as dead for anything he understands. The matter is between us, and perhaps I'd better hear you first."

"I can't – not with that in the room!" I whispered, striving to steady my voice.

He shrugged his shoulders again, and drew from his pocket a knife. Keeping his eyes fixed on the swaying figure above him, he mounted to a chair, and so to the table, deftly and strongly lifted the dead man upon one shoulder while he severed the rope above his head. Then he stepped down, first to the chair and then to the floor, and laid the thing, not ungently, on a couch in the corner. I was able now to avert my eyes from it.

"Does that please you?" he asked, with something of a sneer. "Get forward into the light a little; I want to see you."

I stepped forward, and he looked me up and down; then he nodded slowly, and showed that white gleam of his teeth. "I see – a convict," he said. "From what prison?"

"Many miles from here," I answered him. "I escaped early this morning; someone brought me as far as this on a motor-car. I broke in – because I wanted food and a change of clothing. I was desperate."

"I see – I see," he said, in his smooth voice. "A change of clothing, and food. Perhaps we may be able to provide you with both."

"You mean you'll promise to do so, while you communicate with the police, I suppose?" I answered sullenly.

He smiled, and shook his head. "That is not my way of doing things at all," he said. "You are desperate, you tell me, and I have no particular interest in your recapture. If it comes to that, I have trouble enough of my own." He glanced for a moment at the body behind him. "I should like to know how it comes about that you are a convict – for what particular crime, I mean?"

I told him, as briefly as I could, the whole story, not painting myself too black, you may be sure. He listened with deep attention until I had finished, and then for a minute or two he stood still, with his arms folded, evidently considering some point deeply. I waited, forgetful of all else but the man before me, for he seemed to hold my fate in his hands. All this time the old man I had found in the room stood in a corner, smiling foolishly, and nibbling his hands one over the other. The other man who dominated the situation took not the faintest notice of him.

"How long have you been hanging about this place, waiting to break in?" demanded the man who had come into the room last. "Speak the truth."

"I don't exactly know," I answered. "I fell asleep while I lay in the grounds, and lost count of time. But I saw him," – I nodded my head towards that prone figure on the couch – "I saw him in the grounds."

"Alone?" He jerked the word out at me.

"No, there was a lady."

"Since you know that, you may as well know the rest," he replied. "This young man has had a most unhappy attachment for a young lady in this house, who is my ward. He has persecuted her with his attentions; he has come here under cover of the darkness, over and over again, against my wishes. She liked him – "

"I heard her say that," I broke in, incautiously.

"Then you only confirm my words," he said, after a sharp glance at me. "Perhaps you may imagine my feelings when to-night I discovered that the unhappy boy had absolutely taken his revenge upon me, and upon her, by hanging himself in this very room. So far I have been able to keep the knowledge from my ward, – I think there's a possibility that I may be able to keep it from her altogether."

I did not understand the drift of his thought then, nor did I see in what way I was to be concerned in the matter. He came a little nearer to me, and seated himself on the table, and bent his keen glance on me before going on again. I think I muttered something, for my own part, about being sorry, but it was a feeble mutter at the best.

"Perhaps you may wonder why I have not sent at once, in the ordinary course, for a doctor," he went on. "That is quite easily explained when I tell you that I am a doctor myself. The situation is absurd, of course. Perhaps I had better introduce myself. I am Dr. Bardolph Just." He paused, as though expecting that I should supply information on my side.

"My name is Norton Hyde," I said brusquely.

"And you speak like a gentleman, which is a passport at once to my favour," he assured me, with a bow. "Now, let us get to business. A young man comes here to-night and hangs himself in my house. I have a deep respect and liking for that young man, although I am opposed to the idea of his aspiring to the hand of my ward. He hangs himself, and at once scandal springs up, bell-mouthed, to shout the thing to the world. The name of an innocent girl is dragged in; my name is dragged in; innocent people suffer for the foolish act of a thoughtless boy. The question in my mind at once is: Can the penalty be averted from us?"

I must own the man fascinated me. I began to feel that I would do much to help him, and to help the girl I had seen that night in the grounds of the house. Fool that I was then, I did not understand and did not know what deep game he was playing; indeed, had I known, how could I have stood against him?

"I am, I trust, always a friend to the friendless and the helpless," he went on. "You are friendless, I take it, and very helpless, and although I am no opponent of the law, I have yet the instinct which tells me that I should help a fugitive. Now let us understand one another."

At this point we were interrupted, horribly enough, by a cry from the old man in the corner – a cry like nothing earthly. He advanced a few steps towards where we stood, and looked from one to the other of us, with his hands plucking nervously at his lips.

"I don't understand, gentlemen – I don't understand," he said, in a feeble voice. "He was alive and well and strong this morning; he clapped me on the shoulder, and said – what was it that he said?" The man put one hand to his head and looked at me in a lost fashion. "I forget what it was; something seems to have gone here!" He struck his forehead sharply with his knuckles, and again looked at us with that feeble smile.

"Get out of the way!" said Dr. Just fiercely. "Take no notice of him," he added to me. "He babbles about things he doesn't understand."

The old man slunk away, and sat down on a chair in the corner and dropped his forehead in his hands. And from that time he did not move until my strange interview with Dr. Just was over.

"Now, what I suggest is this," the doctor said, leaning towards me and impressing his points upon me by stabbing one white forefinger into the palm of his other hand. "We will say that you have suffered for a crime which was not morally a crime at all. We will put it that you, by all the laws of humanity, had a right to escape from the hideous doom to which you had been consigned. You have escaped, and by the strangest chance you have found a friend at the very outset."

He smiled at me, if that quick baring of his teeth could be called a smile, and I tried to thank him with broken words. Then he went on again —

"Before you can enter the world again it is necessary that you should have clothing which does not brand you as that dress does," he said. "Therefore I want for a moment to put a case clearly to you – to let you see what is in my mind. Suppose that this convict, fleeing from pursuit, haunted by the thought that he may be recaptured, and may have to serve a yet longer period for his escapade – starving, and fainting, and hopeless; suppose this convict enters a house, and, finding the means ready to his hand, puts an end to the business once for all, and throws up the sponge. In other words,

suppose that convict hangs himself, and so gets the laugh of those who are hunting him down. Do you follow me?"

I was so far from following him that I shook my head feebly, and glanced first at my own clothes and then at the man who had hanged himself, and who now lay on the couch. Then I shook my head again.

The doctor seemed to lose patience. "I'm afraid you haven't a very quick brain," he exclaimed testily. "Let me make myself more clear. A young man of good family and good standing in the world, comes in here to-night and commits suicide; soon after an outcast, flying from justice, follows him, and breaks in also. In appearance the two are something alike; both are tall, and strong, and dark; each man – the one from compulsion – has closely cropped dark hair. Suppose I suggest that, to avoid a scandal, it is the convict who has hanged himself, and that the other man has not been here at all. In other words, as you need a change of clothing, I propose you change with that!"

I gasped at the mere horror of the idea; I shuddered as I looked at the dead man. "I couldn't – I couldn't!" I whispered. "Besides, what would become of me?"

"I don't ask you to take the place of the other man; that would be too risky, and would, in fact, be impossible," he said quietly. "I am merely asking you to assist me to cover up this unfortunate business and at the same time to save yourself."

There was no time for me to think; I was like a rat in a trap. Nevertheless, on an impulse, I refused to have anything to do with so mad a notion. "I won't do it; it's impossible!" I said.

"Very good, my friend!" He shrugged his shoulders and moved quietly across the room towards the bell. "Then my duty is clear – I give you up to those who must be anxious concerning your safety. I've given you your chance, and you refuse to take it."

His hand was on the bell when I called to him, "Stop! is there no other way?"

He shook his head. "No other way at all," he replied. "Come, be reasonable; I'm not going to land you into a trap. Put the matter clearly to yourself. You are a pariah, outside the pale of civilised things; I offer you a fresh start. Mr. Norton Hyde, the convict, commits suicide – I pledge my word to you that the fraud shall not be discovered. A certain young girl is saved from much trouble, and sorrow, and anxiety; I also am saved from the consequences of a very rash act, committed by our dead friend here. So far as you are concerned, you can start afresh, with your record wiped out. Come – yes or no?"

"I don't trust you," I said. "What do you want to do with me? what purpose have you in this, apart from the hushing up of a scandal?"

He became thoughtful at that; presently, looking up, he answered me with what seemed to be a charming frankness, "You have the right to ask, and although I might refuse to reply, I want to treat you fairly," he said. "In a certain business in which I am interested – a certain scheme I have on hand – I want help. You will be a man who has thrown everything, as it were, into the melting-pot of life: you will have everything to win, and nothing to lose. In other words, you are just the creature I want – the man ready to my hand, to do anything I may suggest. You haven't answered me yet; is it to be yes or no?"

I said, "No!" quickly, and he moved towards the bell with an impatient frown. He had only three steps to take, but in that brief moment I had a vision of myself handcuffed and going back to my prison; I could not bear it. He was within an inch of the bell, when I cried out the word that was to change all my life, and was to set me upon the most desperate venture I had yet had anything to do with. I cried out, "Yes."

He smiled, and came back to me. "You should learn to make up your mind more quickly," he said. "Now, let us see what we have to do. You've nothing to be afraid of, and you need take no notice of that creature in the corner there; he knows nothing, and will remember nothing. Strip yourself to the skin."

As I began to undress, I glanced at the old man in the corner; he sat in the same attitude, with his head sunk in his hands. "What is wrong with him?" I asked.

Dr. Bardolph Just was bending over the body of the man on the couch; he did not look round. "Something snapped in his brain a little time ago," he answered me. "It is as though you had snapped the mainspring of a watch; the brain in him died at that moment."

"What caused it?" I asked, still shedding my clothes.

"Shock. Get your clothes off, and don't talk so much," he snapped.

He tossed certain garments to me one by one, and I flung him my own in return. So the change was made, and I presently stood up and looked down at myself, and saw myself as that young man who had stood in the garden and had talked to the girl. For, indeed, I was something like him in figure, and height, and appearance. When the doctor moved away from the couch I gasped, for there I lay, in the dress I had worn for a year, branded and numbered – and dead. It was not a pretty sight; I turned away from it, shuddering.

But the doctor laughed softly. "It is not given to every man to see himself as he will one day be," he said.

"What was his name?" I whispered.

"Gregory Pennington," he answered, looking at the body. "So you see at one stroke we get rid of Gregory Pennington, and of a certain unfortunate convict, named Norton Hyde. So far as your further christening is concerned, we must arrange that later, for this matter must be taken with a certain boldness, or weak spots may be discovered in it. I think you said you were hungry, and I daresay you've had enough of this room for the present."

"More than enough," I replied.

"Then come along, and let us see if we can find something to put better courage into you," he said. And gratefully enough I followed him from the room in that new disguise.

The house was a very large one. We traversed a number of corridors before coming to a room which seemed to be half-study and half-surgery. I should not have known as to the latter half of it, but for the fact that the doctor, who did not seem to care to summon any servants there may have been, left me there while he went in search of food. I peeped behind a screen at one end of the room, and saw an array of bottles, and test tubes in stands, and other paraphernalia. At the further end of the room were great book cases reaching to the ceiling, and a big desk with a reading-lamp upon it. But even here, though the furniture was handsome, the room had a neglected appearance, as, indeed, I afterwards found every room in that house had.

Bardolph Just came back in a little while, carrying food and a decanter. After he had set the food out on a table, and I had fallen to with a relish, he laughed softly, and said that, after all, he had forgotten to bring me a glass. He declared, however, that that was a matter soon remedied, and he went behind the screen, and came out with a tall measuring-glass in his hand. It seemed an uncanny thing to drink wine out of; but I had no choice.

He presently pulled open a drawer in the desk, and took out a cigar, and lighted it; as I had finished my meal, he tossed one to me, and I gratefully began to smoke. The man was evidently still turning over some matter in his mind, for he said nothing while he sat twisting the cigar round between his lips and looking at me. His back was turned towards the door of the room, and presently in that house of horror I saw the door begin slowly to open.

I suppose I ought to have cried out, but once again I was fascinated by what might happen at any moment, and perhaps in sheer wonder as to what was coming in. It was nothing worse, as it turned out, than the little, old grey-haired man I had seen in the further room, and who had evidently followed us. He crept in now, step by step, with that curious smile upon his face, and when he was fairly in the room closed the door – I noticed that it closed with a sharp little click, as though it had a spring lock.

Dr. Bardolph Just did a curious thing. As the lock clicked he suddenly sat rigid, gripping the arms of his chair, and staring at me as though from my face he would learn what was behind him.

Seeing, I suppose, nothing in my expression to guide him, he suddenly swung sharply round and faced the little old man; and I thought at that moment that a quick sigh broke from him, as of relief. I wondered what he had expected to see.

"What the devil do you want?" he demanded, in a voice raised but little above a whisper. "Why do you follow me about?"

The old man spread out his hands in a deprecating fashion, and shook his head. "Nothing, sir," he said, "nothing at all. But he won't speak to me – and he has never been like that before. I don't understand it. I knelt beside him just now, and his dress was different – and – and – " I saw his hands go up to his lips, and pluck at them in that strange fashion – "and he won't speak to me."

The doctor turned from him to me, and shrugged his shoulders. "This is a nice apparition to be following a man about," he said petulantly. "I can't make him out at all."

"Who is he?" I ventured to ask in a whisper.

"The servant of the dead man – one of those faithful old fools that attach themselves to you, and won't be shaken off, I suppose. He came here to-night, following his unfortunate master. What the deuce am I to do with him?"

"He seems harmless enough," I whispered. "But isn't it rather dangerous to have him about here, after the fraud that has been committed. Won't he speak? Won't he say that this dead man is not the escaped convict, but his master?"

"There's no fear of that," replied the other. "I tell you something has snapped in his brain; he doesn't understand. If I turned him out into the world now, he would remember nothing, and would have no story to tell, even if he were questioned. But I don't want to turn him out – and yet he haunts me."

"You say he changed in a moment?" I asked.

Dr. Just nodded. "When he saw his master dead, he simply cried out, and afterwards remained as you see him now. I must dispose of him for the night, at least," he said, getting to his feet, and approaching the old man. "Come, Capper, I want you."

The little old man looked round at him as he said that name, and I saw a faint fear come into his eyes. He shrank away a little, but the doctor grasped his arm quickly, and drew him towards the door. He went out in that grasp passively enough, and I was left alone again.

I had almost fallen asleep, worn out with the excitements of the day, when the doctor came back again. I started to my feet drowsily, and faced him.

"Good-night!" he said, and held out his hand to me – a cold hand, but firm and strong in its touch. "You may see and hear strange things in this house," he added, "but it is not your business to take any notice of them. You will be, I hope, properly grateful to me – the man who has saved you, and given you a new lease of life."

"Yes, I shall be grateful," I promised him.

He conducted me to a room in what seemed to be an outlying wing of the house, and left me to my own reflections. In truth, I was too tired to give much time to thought. I slipped off my clothes and got into bed, and was asleep in five minutes.

But I was not destined to sleep well, after all. In the first place, I was troubled most unaccountably by dreams, in which I saw myself going through the most extraordinary adventures, and finally hanging to what seemed to be the roof of Penthouse Prison, with the little old man of the grey hair grinning up at me from the ground below. And through my dreams there appeared always to go the light, quick figure of that girl I had seen in the grounds of the house; and always she went searching for someone. I dreamed at last that she came straight to me, and took me by the arms, and stared at me, and cried out that she had found the man she wanted. And so I sat up in bed in the darkness, struggling with someone very real, who was gripping me.

I almost shrieked, as I rolled out of bed, and tried to disengage myself from the arms of a man who was clinging to me. I contrived to drag him towards the window, where, by the faint light of the

stars outside, I saw that it was the man Capper – that seemingly half-witted creature who had been the servant of the dead man.

"What do you want?" I ejaculated.

"I've been dreaming," said Capper.

"Well, what of that?" I demanded testily, "I've been dreaming, too."

"Yes, but not dreams like mine," whispered the old man, looking fearfully over his shoulder.

"Tell me, do you think they'll come true?"

"I don't know what they were," I reminded him.

He clutched me by the arm, and stared up in my face. There seemed almost a light of madness in his eyes. "I dreamed that it happened a long time ago – before my head went wrong. I dreamed of a blow struck in the dark; I thought someone (it might have been myself, but I'm not sure even of that) – I dreamed that someone screamed, 'Murder!'"

In a growing excitement he had raised his voice almost to a scream; I clapped my hand over his lips as he got out the dreadful word. I felt my hair stirring on my scalp. I wondered if by chance something dreadful had happened in that house, of which this old man knew, and the memory of which was locked away in that closed brain of his.

"Let me stay here to-night," he pleaded, clinging to me. "I'll be still as a mouse; I'll lie in this corner on the floor."

So I let him lie there, and I went back to my bed. For a long time I lay awake, watching him and thinking about him; but gradually towards the morning I fell asleep, and slept heavily. When I awoke at last, with the sun shining in at my window, the man was gone, and my door stood open.

That was to be a day of happenings. Even now my mind holds but a confused memory of them, in which I seem to be now myself, and now some other man; now living on hope, and now sunk into the depths of fear and despair. For what I have to tell seems so incredible, that only by some knowledge of the man who carried the plot boldly through can any idea of how the business was arranged be arrived at.

Dr. Bardolph Just acted with promptness and decision that day. A messenger flew down towards London to summon the police; and a telegram sped over the wires back to Penthouse Prison. The missing convict had been found; all the world might come to the house of Dr. Bardolph Just, and see this thing for themselves. At the last, when we actually expected the enemy to arrive at our gates, as it were, I nervously plucked the doctor's sleeve, and whispered a question.

"What about his hair? They'll be sure to notice that."

He smiled a little pityingly, I thought; but then, to the very end the man retained some contempt for me. "Come and see for yourself," he said.

So I went back with him into that room where we had left the dead man, and there I saw a miracle. For while I slept the doctor had been at work, and the head of poor Gregory Pennington was cropped as closely as my own. I shuddered and turned away.

"How you ever contrived to escape puzzles me," said Bardolph Just. "You haven't half my courage."

The man was certainly amazing. He met everything blandly; he was firm, and quiet, and dignified with this official and with that. He told me afterwards all that he did, and I had no reason to disbelieve him. For my own part, of course, I had to keep out of the way, and I spent most of my time in the spacious grounds surrounding the house. There was an old ruined summer-house at one corner, under a high wall; and there, fortified with a few of the doctor's cigars, I awaited quietly the turn of events. According to the doctor's description to me afterwards, what happened was this:

In the first place, the puzzle fitted so neatly together that there was no feeling of suspicion. A tall, well-built, dark-haired man, in the clothes of a convict, was roaming over the country; by a miracle a man answering that description, and dressed in those clothes, and having the necessary number upon him, had got to this house on the northern heights above London, and there, in despair

of escaping further, had hanged himself. Dr. Bardolph Just was a man of standing in the scientific world – a man who had made discoveries; there was no thought of calling his word in question. This dead man was undoubtedly the escaped convict – Norton Hyde.

A very necessary inquest was held, and twelve good men and true settled that matter once and for all. There had been one curious point in the evidence, but even that was a point that had been miraculously explained. The doctor spoke of it airily, and I wondered a little why he did not explain the matter with more exactitude.

"It seems," he said, "that they discovered on the head of the unfortunate man the mark of a blow – a blow which had undoubtedly stunned him – or so, at least, they thought. It's impossible for me to say how the unfortunate Gregory Pennington came by such an injury, but at all events even that was accounted for in the case of Norton Hyde."

"How?" I asked.

Dr. Just laughed. "A certain motorist put in an appearance, and frankly explained that he had picked you up on the roadside near Penthouse Prison, and had given you a lift as far as this very house. Then there was an accident, and he and his passenger were both pitched out; he was convinced that in that way you got your injury. The thing was as simple as possible – you had recovered consciousness before he did, and had scrambled over the fence here."

"But did they swallow the story of my being in the house – of my breaking in?" I asked.

"I had thought of that," said the doctor. "So my tale was that you had hanged yourself from a beam in an outhouse – probably because you failed in your purpose of breaking into my dwelling. As a doctor, the moment I discovered you I cut you down, and carried you in, and did my best to restore animation, but in vain. You will like to know, Mr. Norton Hyde, that my humanity was warmly commended by the jury and coroner."

I laughed in a sickly fashion. "But I am not Norton Hyde any longer," I reminded him.

"True – and I have thought of a name for you that shall, in a fashion, mark your entry into another phase of existence. A nice name, and a short one. What do you say to the title of John New, a personal friend of my own?"

I told him that any name would suit me that was not the old one, and so that matter was settled.

He displayed so great an anxiety to see the matter ended, and was altogether so sympathetic with that poor convict who in his despair had hanged himself, that he even attended the funeral. Which is to say, that he carried the fraud so far as to go to Penthouse Prison, what time that disguised body of Godfrey Pennington was carried there, and to see it interred with all due solemnity within the prison precincts; I believe he lunched with the governor of the prison on that occasion, and, altogether, played his part very well.

It is left to me to record here one other happening of that time, and one which made a deep impression upon me. On the night of that strange finishing of the fraud, when Dr. Bardolph Just returned, I was sitting smoking in the summer-house, and enjoying the evening air, when I heard what seemed to be the quick, half-strangled cry of a woman. I tossed aside my cigar and started to my feet and came out of the summer-house. It was very dark in that corner of the grounds, and the summer-house in particular had great deep shadows inside it.

There came towards me, flying among the trees, and looking back in a scared fashion over her shoulder, the girl I had seen with Gregory Pennington – the girl he had called Debora. She came straight at me, not seeing me; and in the distance I saw Bardolph Just running, and heard him calling to her. On an instinct I caught at her, and laid a finger on my lips, and thrust her into the summer-house. Bardolph Just came running up a moment later, and stopped a little foolishly on seeing me. And by that time I was stretching my arms and yawning.

He made some casual remark, and turned back towards the house. When he had gone I called to the girl, and she came out; she was white-faced and trembling, and there were tears in her eyes. I felt that I hated Bardolph Just, with a hatred that was altogether unreasonable.

"I saw you here yesterday," she said, looking at me earnestly. "I need friends badly – and you have a good, kind face. Will you be my friend?"

I do not know what words I said; I only know that there, in the dark garden, as I bent over her little hands and put them to my lips, I vowed myself in my heart to her service.

CHAPTER III. THE MISSING MAN

I find it difficult to write, in my halting fashion, of what my sensations were at that time. God knows what good was in me, and only God and time could bring that good out of me; for I had had no childhood, and my manhood had been a thing thwarted and blighted.

You have to understand that in a matter of a few days I had lived years of an ordinary life; had been in prison, and had escaped; had come near to death; had found myself buried and done with, and yet enlisted on life under a new name; and, to crown it all, now come face to face with someone who believed in me and trusted me – broken reed though I was to lean upon.

I stood in the dark grounds, holding the girl's hands and looking into her eyes: and that was a new experience for me. I remembered how someone else – dead, and shamefully buried in the precincts of a prison – had held her hands but a little time before, and had begged that he might help her. Well, he was past all that now; and I, with my poor record behind me, stood, miraculously enough, in his place. Yet there were things I must understand, if I would help her at all: I wanted to know why she had fled from her guardian, and why, in his turn, he had chased her through the grounds.

"What were you afraid of?" I asked her gently; and it was pleasant to me that she should forget to take her hands out of mine.

"Of him," she said, with a glance towards the house; and I thought she shivered. "I wonder if you can understand what I feel, and of what I am afraid?" she went on, looking at me curiously. "I do not even know your name."

I laughed a little bitterly. "You must indeed be in need of friends if you come to me," I answered.

"But my name is John New, and I am a – a friend of Dr. Just."

"Oh!" She shrank away from me with a startled look. "I did not understand that."

"I am a friend of Dr. Just," I repeated, "because it happens that I am very much in his power, and I must be his friend if I would live at all. If that is your case, too, surely we might form some small conspiracy together against him. You're not fond of the man?" I hazarded.

She shook her head. "I hate him – and I'm afraid of him," she said vehemently. "And yet I have to look to him for everything in the world."

"Sit down, and tell me about it," I said; and I drew her into the summer-house, and sat by her side while she talked to me. She was like a child in the ease with which she gave me her confidence; and as I listened to her, years seemed to separate me from my prison and from the life I had led. For this was the first gentle soul with whom I had yet come in contact.

"You must first tell me," she urged, "why you are in the doctor's power. Who are you? and what have you done, that he should be able to hold you in his hands? You are a man; you're not a weak girl."

It was difficult to answer her. "Well," I began, after a pause, "I did something, a long time ago, of which the doctor knows; and he holds that knowledge over me. That's all I can tell you."

She looked straight into my eyes, and I found, to my relief, that I was able to look at her with some frankness in return. "I don't believe it was anything very wrong," she said at last.

"Thank you," I answered, and I prayed that she might never know what my sin had been.

"You see," she went on confidentially, while the shadows grew about us; "I am really all alone in the world, except for Dr. Just, who is my guardian. He was made my guardian by my poor, dear father, who died some two years ago; my father believed in the doctor very much. They had written a scientific treatise together – because the doctor is very clever, and father quite looked up to him. So when he died he left directions that I was to be taken care of by the doctor. That was two years ago, and I have lived in this house ever since, with one short interval."

"And the interval?" I asked.

"We went down to a country house belonging to the doctor – a place in Essex, called Green Barn. It's a gloomy old house – worse than this one; the doctor goes there to shoot."

"But you haven't told me yet why you were running away from him," I reminded her.

She bent her head, so that I could not see her face. "Lately," she said in a low voice, "his manner to me has changed. At first he was courteous and kind – he treated me as though I had been his daughter. But now it's all different; he looks at me in a fashion I understand – and yet don't understand. To-day he tried to put his arm round me, and to kiss me; then when I ran away he ran after me."

I felt that I hated the doctor very cordially; I had an insane desire to be present if by any chance he should repeat his conduct. I felt my muscles stiffen as I looked at the girl; in my thoughts I was like some knight of old, ready to do doughty deeds for this fair, pretty girl, who was so ready to confide in me. I forgot all about who I was, or what had happened to me; I had only strangely come out into the world again – into a world of love.

But the fact that it was a world of love reminded me that I had had a rival – another man who had held her hands and looked into her eyes, and pleaded that he might help her. I could not, of course, ask about him, because I held the key to his fate, and that fate intimately concerned my own safety; but I was consumed with curiosity, nevertheless. Strangely enough, she voiced my thoughts by beginning to speak of him.

"There is something else that troubles me," she said earnestly. "I have one friend – a dear, good, loyal fellow; but he has unaccountably gone away, and I can hear nothing of him."

I felt myself turning hot and cold; I blessed the darkness of the summer-house. "What was his name?" I asked.

"Gregory Pennington," she answered softly.

"He was my friend before my father died; he followed me here when the doctor took charge of me. He was afraid of the doctor – not for himself, but on my account; he had a strange idea, and one that I have tried to laugh at, that the doctor wanted to kill me."

She looked at me with smiling eyes, laughing at such a suggestion; but I, remembering the earnestness of Gregory Pennington's words to the girl on that first occasion of my coming to the house, seemed now to hear that warning as though it came indeed from the dead. And I could not answer her.

"That was foolish, wasn't it?" she said, with a little laugh. "But then, I think poor Gregory loves me, and that made him afraid for me. You have been in the house here for some days; have you seen nothing of him?"

I was obliged to lie; there was nothing else for it. I shook my head, and lied stoutly. "No," I replied, "I have never seen him."

"It's all so strange," she said, as she got to her feet. "The doctor did not like him, and had forbidden him the house, in spite of my remonstrances. As he was my friend, Gregory and I used to meet secretly in these grounds in the evening."

I remembered how I had seen them together; I remembered, with a shudder, all that had happened afterwards. But still I said nothing; for what could I say?

"It was all so strange," she went on; and her voice sounded ghostly in the darkness. I had risen, and was standing opposite to her; I seemed to feel that the air had grown suddenly very chill. "The last time I saw him he told me that he would go to the house, and would see my guardian. I did all I could," she proceeded helplessly, "to dissuade him, but he would not listen. He said he must have an understanding with Dr. Just, and must take me away; although I think I should never have consented to that, in any case – because, you see, I did not really love him. He had always been like a good, kind brother to me, but nothing more."

"And did he go to the house?" I asked, for the want of something better to say.

She nodded. "I would not go in with him," she replied, "but I saw him go towards the doctor's study. I went off to my own room."

"And you heard nothing, and saw nothing after that?" I asked breathlessly.

"Nothing at all," she whispered. "Early the next morning the doctor sent me off to Green Barn, with a woman who is his housekeeper; I only came back to-day. I expected a letter from Gregory – even expected to see him. It's all so funny; it is just as though he had walked into that study – and had disappeared from that time."

"You mustn't think such things as that," I exclaimed hurriedly. "A dozen things may have happened; he may have been repulsed by the doctor, and so have decided to go away. If he knew you did not love him, he would feel pretty hopeless about the matter."

"That is possible, perhaps," she said. Then, suddenly, she held out her hand to me. "I have one friend at least," she said, "and his name is Mr. John New. It's a curious name, and I shan't forget it. You tell me that you are in trouble, too: so that is a bond between us. Good-night!"

I watched her as she flitted away through the garden. Even in my relief at the thought that she did not love Gregory Pennington, there was the dismal feeling that some day she must learn the truth – the ghastly thought that I stood there, actually in the clothes of the dead man. The whole business was a nightmare from beginning to end, in which alone she stood out as something bright, and fair, and unsullied.

We were a curious household. There were one or two rather scared-looking servants, presided over by a woman to whom the doctor referred always as "Leach"; in fact, he called her by that name when speaking to her. As she was destined to play rather an important part in that strange business upon which we were all entering, she deserves a word or two of description.

She must have been about forty years of age, and had once been, and still was, in a way, astonishingly handsome. She was tall and very dark; she had hair of that blue-black quality that is so rarely seen. Her eyes were as brilliant as those of Dr. Bardolph Just himself, save that there was in hers a curious slumbrous quality, quite unlike the sparkle in the man's. I may best describe her by saying that she suggested to me that in the very soul of her was something lurking and waiting for expression – some smouldering fire that a touch or a word might start into flame.

So far as I could gather, Dr. Just was exceedingly contemptible of her, and treated her with a sort of bitter playfulness. He seemed to take a delight in making her perform the most menial offices; and to me it was rather pitiful to see the eagerness with which she anticipated his every wish or command. I did not know at that time what bond there was between them; only, whenever I think of them in this later time one scene always rises before my memory.

It was on a morning soon after I had arrived at the house, and the doctor was in a ferocious mood. Everything had gone wrong, and I had seen the woman Leach, who ordinarily waited behind his chair, and by quick signs directed the servants what to do, cower under the lash of his words more than once. It happened to be at the breakfast table, and I was seated at one end, facing the doctor. It was the morning after that memorable night when I had talked with the girl Debora in the grounds; and now she sat on my right hand, at one side of the table, between the doctor and myself.

Absurd as the suggestion is, it almost seemed to me that the doctor was striking a balance between the two women for the mortification of them both. He pressed dishes upon the girl, with suave compliments at one moment, and in the next turned to Leach behind him with what was almost a coarse threat.

"Why the devil don't you wait on your young mistress?" he snapped. "What do you think I keep you here for? What do I pay you for?"

He turned to the table again, and, looking down the length of it, I saw the woman swiftly clench and unclench her hands behind him, as though she would have struck him. And if ever I saw murder in a face I saw it then; yet she looked not at the doctor, but at the bowed head of the girl beside me.

"Come – move – stir yourself!" cried the man, bringing down his fist with a bang on the table beside him. "Don't wait for the servants to carry things; carry them yourself. Take this dish to your mistress – Miss Debora Matchwick."

It was the first time I had heard the girl's name in full; but I took but little notice of it then, so interested was I in watching the little scene that was going forward. While the doctor sat looking at the girl, I saw the woman behind him draw herself up, and I saw her nostrils dilate; then she seemed to swoop to the table, and to catch up the dish he had indicated. She moved round slowly to where the girl sat, and purposely handed the dish from the wrong side. And down came Bardolph Just's fist again on the table.

"The other side, you jade!" he roared; and with a glance at him she moved round, and presented it to the girl in the proper fashion. And the face that bent above the fair hair of the girl was the face of a devil – of a soul in torment.

"I want nothing, thank you," said Debora in a low voice.

"Come, my dear child, we shall have you pining away to a shadow if you don't eat," broke in the doctor, with a mocking smile. "Is it possible that you are fretting over something – hungering for someone? We must have a private talk about this after breakfast; you must confide your troubles to me. And may I ask," he went on, with bitter politeness, as he turned to the other woman, "may I ask why you are standing in that absurd attitude, when your mistress tells you she wants nothing?"

The woman Leach turned away abruptly, and set down the dish. Debora had risen from the table, as if to make her escape, and the other woman, after a quick glance at her, was preparing to go from the room also. But her humiliation was not yet completed; the doctor called her back.

"Wait, Leach," he said, and she stopped on the instant. "You are in a tempestuous humour this morning, and that sort of humour must be quelled. Ring the bell."

She gave a quick, nervous glance at him, and then walked across the room and rang the bell. She waited, with her eyes cast on the ground, until a servant came in, carrying in his hand a pair of shoes. The doctor turned round in his chair, and the man carrying the shoes dropped on one knee, as if to put them on. But Bardolph Just waved him aside.

"You needn't trouble; get up," he said; and the man rose from his knees, looking a little bewildered. "Leach, come here!"

The woman stood still for a moment, and then walked slowly across the floor, till she stood in front of him. He pointed to the shoes at his feet, and smiled; and I, who had risen in my place, stood helplessly, waiting to see what would happen.

It took her quite a long time to get to her knees, but she did it at last, and began to put on the shoes. All this time the man-servant stood gaping, not knowing whether to go or stay. Debora, too, had paused at the door, in amazement at the scene. And in that oppressive silence the woman Leach fastened the shoes with fingers that seemed clumsy enough for that work. Nor were the doctor's words likely to mend her confusion.

"You're precious slow, I must say! What's the matter with you? are you getting past your work? You know what happens to people who are no longer fit to work, don't you? We have to cast them out into the street, to make a living as best they can – or to die. There – that'll do; you've been long enough to fasten a dozen pairs of shoes."

I think he struck her with his foot as she was rising from her knees, but of that I cannot be sure. I know that she turned away abruptly, but not before I had had time to see that those great eyes of hers were blinded with tears. Yet her gait, as she went from the room, was as stately as ever.

But perhaps the strangest being in that strange house at that time was William Capper. He wandered like a lost spirit, and one never knew quite where he would appear. Knowing what I did as to what had become of the dead man, this man who looked for him and waited for him was as a ghost that would not be laid. More than that, he was a ghost who might suddenly spring into live flesh and blood, and tell what he knew.

The doctor seemed as disconcerted by his presence as I was, and yet he made no effort to get rid of the man. Capper wandered about the house and about the grounds just as he pleased, while those peering eyes of his seemed always to be searching for his master. But it happened that, as Debora

had been sent away on the very morning following the death of poor Gregory Pennington, and had only returned now, she had not yet come in contact with the man Capper. I found myself wondering what would happen when she did.

She was destined to meet him under curious circumstances. On that morning which had seen the degradation of the woman Leach before us all, Dr. Bardolph Just called me into that room that was half study and half surgery, and told me quite abruptly that he wanted me to go down into London for him. I suppose my startled face told its own tale, for he laughed a little contemptuously.

"Do you imagine anyone will be seeking you, or even expecting to find you above ground?" he asked. "Can't you get into your mind the idea that Norton Hyde is dead and buried in his own prison, and that another man – John New – has come alive in his place? People only look for what they expect to find, my dear John New; you are as safe as though by a miracle you had changed your features. I merely want you to go down into Holborn, to inquire about a certain scientific book which was promised to be sent to me and has not arrived. If it has not already been sent, you can bring it back with you."

He gave me the address, and money wherewith to travel; and I felt my heart sink at the prospect of going down, in this bare-faced fashion, into the great world. In my heart of hearts I determined that I would not go; the book might arrive in my absence, and the doctor might forget that he had sent me at all. So I made a feint of going, but in reality did not pass beyond the grounds.

It was a slumbrous day in early summer, and the grounds being very wide and extensive, I had rather an enjoyable forenoon of it. I determined that I would calculate to a nicety how long it should have taken me to get down to Holborn and back again, allowing a margin for accidental delays. Then I would put in an appearance at the house, and tell the doctor that I had reached the shop, only to find that the book had been sent off.

It may have been some sentimental feeling that carried my feet in the direction of that dark and half-ruined summer-house; or, as I think now, some direct Providence guiding me. Believing that it would be deserted, and that I might kill time there with some comfort, I was making straight for it among the tangled grasses and dead leaves of the garden, when I stopped, and drew away from it. For I had heard voices.

I make no attempt to excuse my conduct; I only urge that at that time I was surrounded by mysteries, and by trickery of every sort, and that I was, moreover, in hiding, in peril of my liberty. All the world might be conspiring against me – above all, those in this house, with one exception, might be only too glad to give me up to justice. I was fighting for myself; I make no excuse that I crept near to the summer-house, and listened. More than that, I looked in, for through a chink of the ruined boarding at the back of it I could see clearly all that happened.

Debora Matchwick was seated in a corner, drawn up tense and still, with her hands gripping the seat on either side of her; and in the doorway, with his arms folded, completely blocking her way of escape, stood the doctor.

It would seem that I had arrived at the very moment the man had discovered her, for his first words referred to the previous day. Whatever other words I had heard had been but a mere skirmishing before the actual battle began.

"I lost you in this direction yesterday, Debora," said the man; "you managed to elude me rather cleverly. What makes you afraid of me?"

"I – I'm not afraid of you," she said, with more bravery than she seemed to feel.

He laughed at her, showing his white teeth. "You're very much afraid of me," he corrected her. "And yet you have no reason to be; we should never be afraid of those who love us."

"You are my guardian, and you were my father's friend," she said quietly. "Beyond that guardianship you have nothing to do with me, and I will not –"

"You talk like a child, and you have a child's knowledge of the world," he broke in roughly. "I that am a man can teach you, as only a man can teach a woman, what life and the world hold for her."

Prudishly you step aside; with false modesty you refuse to look at facts as they are. You are a child no longer, in the ordinary sense of things; and I am a man that loves you. Your father liked me – "

"To my everlasting sorrow, he did!" she exclaimed passionately.

"And he would have approved of the arrangement. Above all things, the management of your extremely troublesome affairs are in my hands, and if you belonged to me the whole thing would be solidified. I have great power in regard to your fortune now; I should have greater powers then."

"It's the fortune that tempts you!" she exclaimed, starting to her feet. "God forgive me for saying it, but my father must have been mad when he made up his mind to place me in your care. I hate you – but I'm not afraid of you. I hate you!"

Bardolph Just stepped forward quickly, and took her prisoner in his arms. I had made a sudden movement, recklessly enough, to run round the summer-house and spring upon the man, as I heard her give a little gasping cry, when there came a strange interruption; and it came from outside and from inside the summer-house almost at the same moment.

I had heard the doctor say, over and over again, with a sort of savage triumph, as he held her, "You shall love me! You shall love me! You shall love me!" and I had made that movement of which I speak, when there broke in the sound of someone singing, in a high querulous voice, and that someone was moving towards the summer-house. The girl heard the sound, and she broke away from the man who held her; she seemed literally to shriek out a name —

"Capper!"

All the rest happened in a flash. Scarcely knowing what I did, I ran round and confronted them all – and that, too, at the moment that the girl, breaking from the summer-house, ran swiftly to where the little grey-headed old man was emerging from the trees. In her agitation she flung herself at his feet, and caught at his hands, and cried out her question:

"Capper, dear, good Capper! – where's your master?"

We stood there in silence, waiting to see what would happen. For both Bardolph Just and myself could have answered the question, but what was the man Capper about to say? This was just such a crisis as I had been expecting and fearing; it seemed hours before the little grey-haired man, who had been looking down at her in a bewildered fashion, made any reply.

"I don't – don't know," he said, and he smiled round upon us rather foolishly, I thought.

"But, Capper – you remember me, Capper; I was your master's friend," went on the girl despairingly. "You remember that Mr. Pennington came to this house – oh! – oh, a week ago!"

She had risen to her feet, and was staring into his eyes. He put a hand over those eyes for a moment, and seemed to ponder something; then he looked up, and slowly shook his head. "I can't – I can't remember," he said. "Something has gone from me – here" – he laid the hand upon his forehead – "and I can't remember."

The doctor drew a deep breath, and took a step towards the girl; of me he seemed to take but little notice. "Don't worry the man, Debora," he said in a gentle tone; "I can't make him out myself, sometimes. Why he should remain here, where his master is not, I cannot understand."

Both Just and the girl spoke of the old man in hushed tones, as they might have spoken of someone who was ill. But Capper himself stood looking smilingly from one face to the other, as if his eyes would question them concerning this mystery in which he was involved.

"Has he been here ever since – since Mr. Pennington disappeared?" asked the girl.

"I don't know what you're talking about," retorted the doctor, with a perplexed frown. "Disappeared? How could Gregory Pennington disappear? I refused to allow him to come here; I have seen nothing of him for some time."

I knew, of course, that the doctor was keeping from her the knowledge of the unfortunate young man's suicide – I realised that that knowledge must be kept from her, for my sake as well, unless disaster was to fall upon me. But the girl was looking at Bardolph Just keenly, and I wondered how he could meet her eyes as calmly as he did.

"The night before I went to Green Barn with Leach," she said slowly, "I was in these grounds with Gregory. And that night he went into the house to see you."

"To see me?" The doctor twisted about from one to the other of us in apparent perplexity. "To see me? I haven't seen the young man for months."

"Then what, in the name of all that's wonderful, is Capper doing here?" demanded Debora, pointing to that strange, smiling creature, who seemed the least interested of any of us.

For a moment even the doctor was nonplussed, for that was a question to which there seemed to be no possible answer – or, at least, no answer that should prove satisfactory. It was, indeed, the strangest scene, to us, at least, who understood the true inwardness of it: that little grey-haired man, who might carry locked up in his numbed brain something that presently should leak out; the girl demanding to know the reason of his presence there; and the doctor and myself with the full knowledge of what had really happened, and of where Gregory Pennington lay hidden.

Bardolph Just, however, was the last man to be placed at a disadvantage for any length of time. In a moment or two he laughed easily, and shrugged his shoulders. "'Pon my word, I don't know!" he replied, in reference to the girl's question. "I can make neither head nor tail of him; but as his master is not here, I scarcely care to turn him out into the world in his present condition."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Debora. "I never saw him like this before."

"Can't say," retorted the doctor quickly. "But I should judge him to have had a stroke of some kind. At all events, Debora, I don't want you to think that I'm a brute; and as Gregory Pennington was a friend of yours – I should say, is a friend of yours – the old man shall stay here until – until his master returns."

I noticed that Capper kept close beside the girl as she moved away towards the house; he looked up at her trustingly, as a child might have done who wanted a guide. As they walked away together, Bardolph Just stepped forward and laid a hand on the girl's arm. I heard what he said distinctly.

"I have not said my last word, by any means," he said in his smooth voice; "nor is this the end."

"It is the end so far as I am concerned," she retorted, without slackening her pace. "You shall be my guardian no longer; I'll arrange something, so that I can get out into the world and live for myself and in my own fashion."

"We'll see about that," he retorted, between his teeth. "Go to your room, and remain there."

She gave him a glance of contempt, that had yet in it some spice of fear, as she turned away and made for the house, with old Capper trotting dog-like beside her. Then the doctor turned to me, and although I saw that there were certain white spots coming and going at the edges of his nostrils and on his cheek bones, he yet spoke calmly enough – indeed, a little amusedly.

"What do you think of that for pretty defiance?" he asked; then, sinking his voice to a lower tone, and taking a step nearer to me, he went on – "She's getting suspicious about that boy; and the madman who's gone off with her now is likely to cause trouble. I don't know what to do with him, but I shall have to devise something. Don't forget, my friend, that if the worst comes to the worst you're in the same boat with me – or in a worse boat. I've only cheated the authorities for your sake; I can plead human sympathy and kindness, and all sorts of things – which you can't."

"Is that a threat?" I demanded, for now my gratitude was being fast swallowed up in a growing dislike of the man.

"Yes, and no," he replied, with a faint smile. "I'm only suggesting that you will find it wise, whatever happens, to fight on my side, and on mine only. I think you understand?"

I answered nothing; I followed him, sullenly enough, to the house. By that time I had quite forgotten the errand on which I had been sent, and which I had made no effort to accomplish; only when we were near to the house he turned quickly, and startled me by referring to it.

"By the way, you had your journey for nothing," he said. "The book arrived while you were gone. Did you meet with any adventures?"

"None at all," I answered curtly.

I was destined for another adventure, and a more alarming one, that night. There was no ceremony used in the doctor's house, and he made no attempt to dress for dinner. For that matter, I had not as yet seen any guests, and the doctor, on one or two occasions at least, had had his meals carried up to his study. So far as dinner was concerned, it usually happened that in the recesses of the house someone clanged a dismal bell at the time the food was actually put upon the table, and I would go down, either to sit alone, or to find the doctor awaiting me. You will remember that the girl Debora had been away for the whole of that eventful week.

The dining-room was dimly lighted by a big, shaded lamp, standing on the centre of the table; so that when I went in on this night, and looked about me, I could see figures seated, but could not clearly distinguish faces. The doctor I saw in his usual place, stooping forward into the light of the lamp to sup at his soup; I saw the bent head of the girl at one side of the table. I moved round the table to reach my place, and as I did so saw that another man was seated opposite the girl, so making a fourth. I could not see his face, as it was in shadow. I wondered who he might be.

The doctor bent forward, so as to look round the lamp at me, called me (God be praised for it!) by that new name he had given me —

"John New, let me introduce you to my friend, Mr. Harvey Scoffold."

I sat frozen in my chair, keeping my face in shadow, and wondering what I should do. For I knew the man — had known him intimately on those occasions when I had broken out of my uncle's house at night, and had gone on wild excursions. I saw him glance towards me; I knew that he knew my history, and what had become of me; and I wondered how soon he was to start up in his place, and cry out who I was, and demand to know who lay buried in my place. I left my soup untasted, and sat upright, keeping my face above the light cast by the lamp.

"Mr. Harvey Scoffold is an old friend of mine," said Bardolph Just, "although we have not met for some time. A worthy fellow — though he does not take quite so deep an interest in the serious things of life as I do."

"Not I," exclaimed the other man, squaring his shoulders, and giving vent to a hearty laugh that rang through the room. "I'm a very butterfly, if a large one; and life's the biggest joke that ever I tasted. I hope our new friend is of the same order?"

I mumbled something unintelligible, and, after looking at me intently for a moment, he turned and began to speak to his host. I think I had just decided that I had better feign illness, and get up and make a run for dear life, when he staggered us all by a question, put in his hearty, careless fashion.

"By the way," he said, looking from the doctor to the girl, and back again, "what's become of that youngster I used to see here — Gregory Pennington? I took quite a fancy to the boy. Does anyone know where he is?"

CHAPTER IV. A LITTLE WHITE GHOST

With the putting of that most awkward question as to what had become of Gregory Pennington, it may be said that a sort of bombshell fell into our midst. I leaned further back, determined to gain what respite I could in the shadows of the room before the inevitable discovery should fall upon me; and of the four of us only the girl, Debora Matchwick, leaned forward eagerly, peering round the lamp at the man who had asked the question.

"That's what we want to know," she said, in a quick, nervous voice. "Gregory has disappeared."

"Nonsense!" It was the doctor who broke in testily, still keeping his face in shadow. "You mustn't get such ideas into your head, child. Young men, strong, and well, and healthy, don't disappear in that fashion. I ordered him away from the house, and he has respected my wishes. Don't let me hear such nonsensical talk again."

The girl drew back, with a little quick sigh, and for a moment or two there was an abashed silence on the part of Scoffold and myself. But Scoffold was never the man to be abashed long by anything; in a moment or two he leaned his big body forward over the table, so that I saw his face fully in the light of the shaded lamp, and glanced quickly from one to the other of us, and began to put questions. And with each question it seemed that he probed the matter more deeply.

"But tell me, what had my young friend done to be forbidden the house?" he asked. Then, answered in a fashion by the silence about him, he shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his great hands deprecatingly.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" he went on. "I see that I'm prying into secrets, and that was never my way at all. Only I was interested in Gregory – a fine fellow, with a future before him. A little reckless, perhaps – a little given to the spending of money; but then, that is ever a fault of the young. If I did not wish to pry into secrets," he added a little maliciously, as he peered round the lamp at the girl, "I might suggest that perhaps his disappearance may have had something to do with Miss Debora here – eh? There are so many hearts to be broken in this world of pretty faces, Miss Debora."

The girl sat rigid and silent; presently the man leaned back in his chair again, with a little laugh, as the servants entered with the next course. I saw the woman Leach hovering about near the doorway; I wondered if we were to have another such scene as we had had that morning. But nothing happened until the servants had gone, with Leach following last. Then this unlucky guest had another word to say.

"I see you still keep your faithful retainer," said Harvey Scoffold, with a jerk of his great head towards the door. "Remarkable woman, that – and quite devoted to you, doctor."

"Servants are servants, and are kept in their places," retorted Bardolph Just coldly.

"But, my dear Just," broke in the irrepressible one again, "Leach is surely more than a servant. How many years has she been with you?"

"I haven't taken the trouble to count," replied the doctor. "Shall we change the conversation?"

Mr. Scoffold abruptly complied, by turning his attention to me, somewhat to my dismay. "Do you belong to these parts, Mr. – Mr. John New?" he asked.

I murmured in a low tone that I belonged to London, and as I spoke I saw him lean forward quickly, as if to get a better glimpse of me; but I obstinately kept my face in shadow.

"Ah!" he went on. "London's a fine place, but with temptations. I often think that it would be well if we could prevent young men from ever going to London at all – let 'em wait until they have reached years of discretion, and know what the world is like. I've seen so much in that direction – so many lives that have gone down into the shadows, and never emerged again. I could give you a

case in point – rather an interesting story, if you would not be bored by it." He glanced round the table amid silence.

Now, I knew instinctively what story he was going to tell, before ever he said a word of it; I knew the story was my own. I sat there, spellbound; I strove to get a glimpse of Bardolph Just at the further end of the table, but he did not move, and the only face of the four of us that could be seen was the face, animated and smiling, of Harvey Scoffold.

"The story is a little sad – and I detest sad things," the man began, "but it has the merit of a moral. You are to imagine a young man, of good education, and with a credulous and doting old man – an uncle, in fact – as his sole guardian. He rewards the credulous old man by robbing him right and left, and he spends the proceeds of his robberies in vicious haunts in London."

I may here interpolate that the only vicious haunt I had known in London had been the house of Mr. Harvey Scoffold, and that most of the money I had stolen had gone, in one way and another, into his pockets – but this by the way.

"His name was Norton Hyde," went on Scoffold. "I beg your pardon – did you speak?" This last was to the doctor, who had leaned forward, so that I saw his face clearly, and had uttered an exclamation.

"No," he replied. "Pray proceed with your story." He leaned sideways, under pretence of filling his glass, and gave me a warning glance down the length of the table.

"Well, this Norton Hyde paid the penalty, in due course, of his crime," went on Scoffold, leaning back in his chair again. "He was sentenced to a certain term of penal servitude, served part of it, escaped from his prison – "

"The story is well known, and we need hear no more, my dear Scoffold," broke in the doctor. "I don't want to shock Miss Debora, nor to have her shocked."

"But I am interested," said the girl, leaning forward. "Please go on, Mr. Scoffold."

"You hear – she's interested," said the man with a smile, as he leaned forward again, and looked round the lamp at the girl. "It's very dreadful, but very fascinating. You must know, then, Miss Debora, that the fellow broke prison, and made a desperate attempt to get back to London; reached a house somewhere on its outskirts; and then, being evidently hard pressed, gave up the game in despair, and committed suicide."

"Poor, poor fellow!" commented the girl, in a low tone; and I felt my heart go out to her in gratitude.

"And that was the end of him," went on Mr. Scoffold, with a snap of the fingers. "They carried him back – dead – to his prison; and they buried him within its walls. So much for Buckingham!"

"Now, perhaps, you can contrive to talk of something a little more pleasant," said the doctor testily. "You've given us all the horrors, with your talk of imprisonments, and suicides, and what not. You used to be pleasant company at one time, Harvey."

"And can be so still," exclaimed the other lightly. "But I'm afraid it's this dark room of yours that gave that turn to the conversation: one sits in shadow among shadows. May I move this lamp, or may I at least take the shade off?" He put a hand to it as he spoke.

If ever I had trembled in my life, I trembled then; but I sat rigid, and waited, trusting in that stronger man at the further end of the table. Nor was my trust in him betrayed.

"Leave the lamp alone," he said sharply. "It's not safe to be moved; it's rather an old one, and shaky. Besides, I prefer this light."

"You always were a queer fellow," said Scoffold, dropping back into his seat again. "And tonight you're a dull one. I swear I couldn't endure your company," he proceeded with a laugh, "if it were not for the charming lady who faces me, and who is mostly hidden by your beast of a lamp. Even our friend, Mr. New here, hasn't a word to say for himself; but perhaps he'll come out stronger under the influence of one of your cigars presently."

I vowed in my heart that there should be no cigars for me that night in his company; my brain was active with the thought of how best I could escape. I was perplexed to know how it was that he had not remembered that it was in this very house, according to the tale, that Norton Hyde had committed suicide; but for that point, he had the whole thing in chapter and verse. I was comforted, however, by the thought that it was to the interests of Bardolph Just to help me out of the scrape; I saw that he was as much astonished to learn that Harvey Scoffold knew me as I was to find the man in that house.

But for my desperate strait, I must have been amused at the doctor's perplexity. I saw, just as surely as though he had stated it in words, that he was working hard at that puzzle: how to get Norton Hyde out of that room unobserved. Fortunately for the solution of that problem, he must have known how eager I was to get away; and presently he contrived the business in the simplest fashion.

We had come near to the end of the dinner, and it was about time for Debora to leave us. I knew that he dreaded that if she got up it would mean a breaking-up of our relative positions at the table, and I must be discovered. I was dreading that, too, when relief came.

"I say, New," he called to me down the length of the table, "I know you have that business of which you spoke to clear up to-night. We're all friends here, and we'll excuse you."

I murmured my thanks, and got up, designing to pass behind Harvey Scoffold, and so escape observation. But, as ill luck would have it, Debora saw in the movement an opportunity for her own escape; she rose quickly, and the inevitable happened. Harvey Scoffold blundered to his feet to open the door.

And there we were in a moment, above the light of the lamp, and all making for the door together; for the doctor, in his consternation, had risen also. Scoffold got to the door before me, and held it open for the girl; and for one disastrous moment I hesitated. For there was a light outside in the hall, and I dared not face it. Properly, of course, I should have followed the girl with my face averted; but even in that I blundered, and so found myself suddenly looking into the eyes of Harvey Scoffold, as he stood there holding the door.

It was as though he had seen a ghost. He gasped, and took a step back; and the next moment I was out of the room, and had pulled the door close after me. Even as I did so, I heard his voice raised loudly and excitedly in the room, and heard the deeper tones of Bardolph Just.

There was no time to be lost, and I looked about me for the quickest way of escape. I was groping in the dark, as it were, because I did not even know whether the man was a chance visitor, and I might safely hide in some other room of the house, or whether he was staying there, and so could leave me no choice but to get away altogether. And while I hesitated, my mind was made up for me, as it has been so often in my life, in the most curious fashion.

I saw that Debora had stopped at the foot of the stairs, and was looking back at me; and in a moment, in the thought of her, I forgot my own peril. I took a step towards her, and she bent her head towards mine, as she stood a step or two above me on the stairs, and whispered —

"For the love of God, don't leave me alone in this house to-night!"

Then she was gone, before I could make reply, and I was left there, standing helplessly looking after her.

In that moment I lost my chance. The dining-room door was opened, and the two men came out quickly; it seemed to me that Harvey Scoffold was speaking excitedly, and that the doctor, who had a hand on his arm, was striving to soothe him. I made a dart for the stairs — too late, for the voice of Scoffold called me back.

"Here, don't run away; I want to talk to you!" he cried. "There's a mystery here —"

"Not so loud!" exclaimed the doctor sternly, in a low tone. "If you've anything to say, don't shout it in the hall in that fashion. I trust we're gentlemen; let us go and talk quietly in my study. John, you know the way — lead on."

So, knowing well what was to follow, I went on up the stairs, until I came to the door of that room that was half study and half surgery; I opened the door and went in. To gain time, I went to the

further end of it, and stood looking out of the window into the darkness. I calculated that it might be a drop of twelve or fourteen feet, if he drove me too far and I had to take flight. I was prepared for everything, and had for the moment – God forgive me! – clean forgotten what the girl had said to me. The two other men came into the room, and the door was closed. I heard the doctor speak in his most genial tones.

"Now, my dear Harvey, let's understand what bee you have in your bonnet. What's this about an escaped convict – and in my house? If I didn't know you better, I should suggest that my wine had been too much for you."

"Don't bluff, doctor: it would be far better to ask our friend there to show us his face clearly. If a man's honest he doesn't turn his back on his friends."

At that I threw discretion to the winds; I faced round upon him savagely. "Friends!" I exclaimed bitterly. "When were you ever a friend to me, Harvey Scoffold?"

The man laughed, and shrugged his shoulders. "Truly you are indiscreet," he said, with a triumphant glance at the doctor. "But youth is ever impatient, and one cannot expect that you, of all men, should be cautious. You never were. Come – can't we sit down and talk quietly, and see what is to be done?"

"There is nothing to be done – at least nothing that concerns you," said Bardolph Just quickly, as he stopped in the act of pulling open that drawer in his desk which held the cigars. "What in the world is it to do with you?"

"Oh-o! so *you* are in the swim, too, eh?" exclaimed Scoffold, turning upon him with raised eyebrows. "I thought it possible that you might have been deceived – that our friend here might have come upon you suddenly, and induced you to help him, without your knowing who he was."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders, and took out a cigar. In the act of biting the end of it with his sharp white teeth he looked at the other man with a smile that was deadly – it was as though he snarled over the cigar. "I knew all about our friend here from the beginning," he said. "Be careful, Harvey; you know me by this time, and you know it's better to have me for a friend than an enemy. Once more I warn you not to ask questions, and not to interfere in what does not concern you. Take a cigar, and sit down and smoke."

Scoffold took the cigar, and stood for a moment or two, while he lighted it, looking from one to the other of us, as though weighing the matter carefully in his mind. He voiced his feelings as he put the match to the cigar, and puffed at it.

"Norton Hyde escaped from prison" – puff – "Norton Hyde hangs himself" – puff – "Norton Hyde is duly sat upon by a coroner and a jury" – puff – "Norton Hyde is buried in a prison grave." He looked at the lighted end of his cigar carefully, and tossed the match from him. "And yet my dear friend, Norton Hyde, stands before me. Any answer to that puzzle?" He looked at me and at the doctor, and laughed quietly.

Truly the game appeared to be in his hands, and I knew enough of him to know that he was a man to be feared. It was, of course, a mere coincidence that the man who had helped me to my ruin was a friend of this man upon whose hospitality I had so unceremoniously flung myself; nor did it mend matters to know that he was a friend of the dead boy. I think we both waited for his next remark, knowing pretty well what it would be.

"A natural answer springs up at once to the puzzle," he went on, seeming literally to swell his great bulk at us in his triumph. "Some man was buried as Norton Hyde – some man who must have been able to pass muster for him. What man could that have been?"

"You're getting on dangerous ground: I tell you you'd better let it alone," broke in the doctor warningly.

But the other man went on as though the doctor had not spoken. "Some man lies in that grave, who has disappeared, and for whom no enquiry has been made. Now, who can that man be? What man is there that hasn't been seen for some days – what man is there that is being looked for now?"

In the tense silence of the room, while the man looked from one to the other of us, absolutely dominating the situation, there came an interruption that was so terrible, and so much an answer to what the man was asking, that I could have shrieked out like a frightened woman. Behind him, where he stood, I saw the door of the study slowly opening, and then the smiling face of the little grey-haired man looked round it. Scoffold did not see him; only the doctor and I turned our startled faces to the smiling face of Capper. And Capper spoke —

"Forgive me, gentlemen" — and Scoffold swung round on the words and faced him — "I'm looking for my master, Mr. Pennington."

"Gregory Pennington, by the Lord!" shouted Harvey Scoffold, with a great clap of his hands together.

The doctor turned quickly to the door. I saw him thrust Capper outside, and close the door, and turn the key in it. He put the key in his pocket, and his eyes looked dangerous; he was as a man driven at bay.

"Well, you think you've made some great and wonderful discovery," he snapped. "Perhaps you have — at all events, you shall know the truth of the matter from beginning to end. I'll keep nothing back."

"You can't, you know," sneered the other, dropping his great bulk into an arm-chair, and puffing luxuriously at his cigar.

I stood with my back to the window while the doctor told the story. He told it from beginning to end, and quite clearly. Of the coming of the disappointed Gregory Pennington to the house, after an interview with the girl; of that mad, rash act of the unsuccessful lover; of the finding of him hanging dead. He told of my coming, and painted a little luridly my desperate threats and pleadings; told of how he had given way, and had dressed poor Gregory Pennington in my shameful clothes. When he had finished the narrative Harvey Scoffold nodded, as if satisfied with that part of it, and sat for a time smoking, while we awaited what he had to say.

"It never struck me that it was in this house the convict (as the newspapers called him) hanged himself," he said at last. "Upon my word, the puzzle fits together very neatly. But what happens, my friends, when someone enquires for young Pennington? For instance, myself."

"You've no purpose to serve," I broke in quickly.

He laughed, and shook his head gaily. "Not so fast, my young friend, not so fast!" he answered me. "I may have an axe to grind — I have ground many in my time. Besides — putting me right out of the question — what of the girl? How do you silence her?"

"I can find a way even to do that," replied the doctor in a low voice. "Only let me warn you again, Harvey Scoffold, we are desperate men here — or at least one of us — fighting for something more even than liberty. I am fighting to keep this innocent girl's name out of the business, and to keep scandal away from this house. Let Norton Hyde rest in his grave; Gregory Pennington is not likely to be enquired for. He was young and restless; he may have gone abroad — enlisted — anything. That's our tale for the world, if questions are asked."

"It only occurs to me that the virtuous uncle of our young friend here — the man who was robbed so audaciously — would give a great deal to know that the nephew who robbed him was at large," suggested Harvey Scoffold musingly over his cigar.

I took a quick step towards him. "You wouldn't dare!" I exclaimed threateningly.

He held up a large protesting hand. "My dear boy, I am your friend; I was always your friend. You are quite safe with me," he said. Yet I knew that he lied.

He made one other comment on the matter before wisely leaving the subject alone. "It seems to me strange," he observed, with a furtive look at the doctor, "that you should be so willing to help our young friend here — a man you have never seen."

"I do that," replied the other quickly, "because in that way I can cover up the miserable business of young Pennington. Unless you speak, it is scarcely likely that anyone else will ever drag

that business into the light of day. Both Gregory Pennington and our friend here happen to have been particularly alone in the world: in neither case is there anyone who is likely to make awkward inquiries."

"Always excepting the girl," Harvey Scoffold reminded him. "So far as I am concerned, you have nothing to fear from me; I shall merely be an amused spectator of the little comedy; I don't know yet exactly how it's going to end."

He was tactful enough to say nothing more then, and we presently drifted, almost with cheerfulness, into some more ordinary conversation. Yet I saw that the man watched us both from between half-closed eyelids while he smoked and lounged in his chair; and I was far from comfortable. It was late when the doctor rose, and with a glance at the clock said that he had still much work to do before he could sleep. He unlocked the door; at which hint Harvey Scoffold and I left him for the night.

The excitement of the meeting had quite thrust out of my mind the question whether the man was stopping in the house or had merely come there as a chance visitor; but the question was answered now, when Harvey Scoffold told me that he had a long walk before him, and was glad that the night was fine. I felt some sudden uplifting of the heart at the thought that at least I should be relieved of his presence, only to feel that heart sinking the next moment, at the remembrance that he would be free to spread his news in the outer world, if he cared to do so. For it must be understood that my public trial, and all the disclosures thereat, had given to the world the address of my uncle, and my own movements on those secret expeditions of mine; it was possible for Harvey Scoffold to put that veiled threat of his into instant execution.

I knew, moreover, that he was a dangerous man, by reason of the fact that he was chronically in want of money, and had never hesitated as to the methods employed to obtain it. However, there was no help for it now; the murder was out, and I could only trust to that extraordinary luck that had befriended me up to the present.

I walked with him out into the grounds, and he shook hands with me at parting, with some cordiality. "You have had a miraculous escape, dear boy," he said, in his jovial fashion, "and you are quite a little romance in yourself. I shall watch your career with interest. And you have nothing to fear – I shall be as silent as the grave in which you ought to be lying."

He laughed noisily at that grim jest, and took his way down the road in the direction of London. I went back into the house and went to my room, and slept heavily until late the next morning.

The doctor had left the house when I went down to breakfast, and I had a dim hope that I might see the girl alone. But she did not put in an appearance, nor did I see anything of her until the evening, when the doctor had returned, and the three of us sat down to dinner. I had been roaming desolately about the grounds, smoking the doctor's cigars, and inwardly wondering what I was going to do with the rest of the life that had been miraculously given back to me; and I did not know at what hour Bardolph Just had returned. Yet I had a feeling that there had been some strange interview between the doctor and the girl before I had come upon the scene – and a stormy interview at that. Bardolph Just sat at his end of the table, grim and silent, with his brows contracted, and with his habitual smile gone from his lips; the girl sat white and silent, sipping a little wine, but touching no food. During the course of a melancholy meal no single word was heard in the room, for the doctor did not even address the servants.

At the end of the meal, however, when the girl rose to quit the room, the doctor rose also, and barred her way. "Stop!" he said quickly. "I've got to speak to you. We'll have this matter cleared up – once and for all."

"I have nothing more to say," she replied, looking at him steadily. "My answer is what it has always been – No!"

"You can go, John New," said the man harshly, turning towards me. "I want to talk to Miss Matchwick alone."

"No, no!" exclaimed the girl, stretching out her hands towards me; and on the instant I stopped on my way to the door, and faced about.

But the doctor took a quick step towards me, and opened the door, and jerked his head towards the hall. "I am master here," he said. "Go!"

I saw that I should not mend matters by remaining, but I determined to be within call. I passed quickly along the hall after the door was closed; I knew that just within the great hall door itself was another smaller door, opening to a verandah which ran round the front of the dining-room windows, on the old-fashioned early Victorian model. I knew that the windows were open, and I thought that I might by good fortune both see and hear what went on in the room.

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