

FLETCHER JOSEPH SMITH

THE TALLEYRAND MAXIM

Joseph Fletcher

The Talleyrand Maxim

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J. S. Fletcher

The Talleyrand Maxim

CHAPTER I

DEATH BRINGS OPPORTUNITY

Linford Pratt, senior clerk to Eldrick & Pascoe, solicitors, of Barford, a young man who earnestly desired to get on in life, by hook or by crook, with no objection whatever to crookedness, so long as it could be performed in safety and secrecy, had once during one of his periodical visits to the town Reference Library, lighted on a maxim of that other unscrupulous person, Prince Talleyrand, which had pleased him greatly. "With time and patience," said Talleyrand, "the mulberry leaf is turned into satin." This seemed to Linford Pratt one of the finest and soundest pieces of wisdom which he had ever known put into words.

A mulberry leaf is a very insignificant thing, but a piece of satin is a highly marketable commodity, with money in it. Henceforth, he regarded himself as a mulberry leaf which his own wit and skill must transform into satin: at the same time he knew that there is another thing, in addition to time and patience, which is valuable to young men of his peculiar qualities, a thing also much beloved by Talleyrand—opportunity. He could find the patience, and he had the time—but it would give him great happiness if opportunity came along to help in the work. In everyday language, Linford Pratt wanted a chance—he waited the arrival of the tide in his affairs which would lead him on to fortune.

Leave him alone—he said to himself—to be sure to take it at the flood. If Pratt had only known it, as he stood in the outer office of Eldrick & Pascoe at the end of a certain winter afternoon, opportunity was slowly climbing the staircase outside—not only opportunity, but temptation, both assisted by the Devil. They came at the right moment, for Pratt was alone; the partners had gone: the other clerks had gone: the office-boy had gone: in another minute Pratt would have gone, too: he was only looking round before locking up for the night. Then these things came—combined in the person of an old man, Antony Bartle, who opened the door, pushed in a queer, wrinkled face, and asked in a quavering voice if anybody was in.

"I'm in, Mr. Bartle," answered Pratt, turning up a gas jet which he had just lowered. "Come in, sir. What can I do for you?"

Antony Bartle came in, wheezing and coughing. He was a very, very old man, feeble and bent, with little that looked alive about him but his light, alert eyes. Everybody knew him—he was one of the institutions of Barford—as well known as the Town Hall or the Parish Church. For fifty years he had kept a second-hand bookshop in Quagg Alley, the narrow passage-way which connected Market Street with Beck Street. It was not by any means a common or ordinary second-hand bookshop: its proprietor styled himself an "antiquarian bookseller"; and he had a reputation in two Continents, and dealt with millionaire buyers and virtuosos in both.

Barford people sometimes marvelled at the news that Mr. Antony Bartle had given two thousand guineas for a Book of Hours, and had sold a Missal for twice that amount to some American collector; and they got a hazy notion that the old man must be well-to-do—despite his snuffiness and shabbiness, and that his queer old shop, in the window of which there was rarely anything to be seen but a few ancient tomes, and two or three rare engravings, contained much that he could turn at an hour's notice into gold. All that was surmise—but Eldrick & Pascoe—which term included Linford Pratt—knew all about Antony Bartle, being his solicitors: his will was safely deposited in their keeping, and Pratt had been one of the attesting witnesses.

The old man, having slowly walked into the outer office, leaned against a table, panting a little. Pratt hastened to open an inner door.

"Come into Mr. Eldrick's room, Mr. Bartle," he said. "There's a nice easy chair there—come and sit down in it. Those stairs are a bit trying, aren't they? I often wish we were on the ground floor."

He lighted the gas in the senior partner's room, and turning back, took hold of the visitor's arm, and helped him to the easy chair. Then, having closed the doors, he sat down at Eldrick's desk, put his fingers together and waited. Pratt knew from experience that old Antony Bartle would not have come there except on business: he knew also, having been at Eldrick & Pascoe's for many years, that the old man would confide in him as readily as in either of his principals.

"There's a nasty fog coming on outside," said Bartle, after a fit of coughing. "It gets on my lungs, and then it makes my heart bad. Mr. Eldrick in?"

"Gone," replied Pratt. "All gone, Mr. Bartle—only me here."

"You'll do," answered the old bookseller. "You're as good as they are." He leaned forward from the easy chair, and tapped the clerk's arm with a long, claw-like finger. "I say," he continued, with a smile that was something between a wink and a leer, and suggestive of a pleased satisfaction. "I've had a find!"

"Oh!" responded Pratt. "One of your rare books, Mr. Bartle? Got something for twopence that you'll sell for ten guineas? You're one of the lucky ones, you know, you are!"

"Nothing of the sort!" chuckled Bartle. "And I had to pay for my knowledge, young man, before I got it—we all have. No—but I've found something: not half an hour ago. Came straight here with it. Matters for lawyers, of course."

"Yes?" said Pratt inquiringly. "And—what may it be?" He was expecting the visitor to produce something, but the old man again leaned forward, and dug his finger once more into the clerk's sleeve.

"I say!" he whispered. "You remember John Mallathorpe and the affair of—how long is it since?"

"Two years," answered Pratt promptly. "Of course I do. Couldn't very well forget it, or him."

He let his mind go back for the moment to an affair which had provided Barford and the neighbourhood with a nine days' sensation. One winter morning, just two years previously, Mr. John Mallathorpe, one of the best-known manufacturers and richest men of the town, had been killed by the falling of his own mill-chimney. The condition of the chimney had been doubtful for some little time; experts had been examining it for several days: at the moment of the catastrophe, Mallathorpe himself, some of his principal managers, and a couple of professional steeple-jacks, were gathered at its base, consulting on a report. The great hundred-foot structure above them had collapsed without the slightest warning: Mallathorpe, his principal manager, and his cashier, had been killed on the spot: two other bystanders had subsequently died from injuries received. No such accident had occurred in Barford, nor in the surrounding manufacturing district, for many years, and there had been much interest in it, for according to the expert's conclusions the chimney was in no immediate danger.

Other mill-owners then began to examine their chimneys, and for many weeks Barford folk had talked of little else than the danger of living in the shadows of these great masses of masonry.

But there had soon been something else to talk of. It sprang out of the accident—and it was of particular interest to persons who, like Linford Pratt, were of the legal profession. John Mallathorpe, so far as anybody knew or could ascertain, had died intestate. No solicitor in the town had ever made a will for him. No solicitor elsewhere had ever made a will for him. No one had ever heard that he had made a will for himself. There was no will. Drastic search of his safes, his desks, his drawers revealed nothing—not even a memorandum. No friend of his had ever heard him mention a will. He had always been something of a queer man. He was a confirmed bachelor. The only relation he had in the world was his sister-in-law, the widow of his deceased younger brother, and her two children—a son and a daughter. And as soon as he was dead, and it was plain that he had died intestate, they put in their claim to his property.

John Mallathorpe had left a handsome property. He had been making money all his life. His business was a considerable one—he employed two thousand workpeople. His average annual profit from his mills was reckoned in thousands—four or five thousands at least. And some years before his death, he had bought one of the finest estates in the neighbourhood, Normandale Grange, a beautiful old house, set amidst charming and romantic scenery in a valley, which, though within twelve miles of Barford, might have been in the heart of the Highlands. Therefore, it was no small thing that Mrs. Richard Mallathorpe and her two children laid claim to. Up to the time of John Mallathorpe's death, they had lived in very humble fashion—lived, indeed, on an allowance from their well-to-do kinsman—for Richard Mallathorpe had been as much of a waster as his brother had been of a money-getter. And there was no withstanding their claim when it was finally decided that John Mallathorpe had died intestate—no withstanding that, at any rate, of the nephew and niece. The nephew had taken all the real estate: he and his sister had shared the personal property. And for some months they and their mother had been safely installed at Normandale Grange, and in full possession of the dead man's wealth and business.

All this flashed through Linford Pratt's mind in a few seconds—he knew all the story: he had often thought of the extraordinary good fortune of those young people. To be living on charity one week—and the next to be legal possessors of thousands a year!—oh, if only such luck would come his way!

"Of course!" he repeated, looking thoughtfully at the old bookseller. "Not the sort of thing one does forget in a hurry, Mr. Bartle. What of it?"

Antony Bartle leaned back in his easy chair and chuckled—something, some idea, seemed to be affording him amusement.

"I'm eighty years old," he remarked. "No, I'm more, to be exact. I shall be eighty-two come February. When you've lived as long as that, young Mr. Pratt, you'll know that this life is a game of topsy-turvy—to some folks, at any rate. Just so!"

"You didn't come here to tell me that, Mr. Bartle," said Pratt. He was an essentially practical young man who dined at half-past six every evening, having lunched on no more than bread-and-cheese and a glass of ale, and he also had his evenings well mapped out. "I know that already, sir."

"Aye, aye, but you'll know more of it later on," replied Bartle. "Well—you know, too, no doubt, that the late John Mallathorpe was a bit—only a bit—of a book-collector; collected books and pamphlets relating to this district?"

"I've heard of it," answered the clerk.

"He had that collection in his private room at the mill," continued the old bookseller, "and when the new folks took hold, I persuaded them to sell it to me. There wasn't such a lot—maybe a hundred volumes altogether—but I wanted what there was. And as they were of no interest to them, they sold 'em. That's some months ago. I put all the books in a corner—and I never really examined them until this very afternoon. Then—by this afternoon's post—I got a letter from a Barford man who's now out in America. He wanted to know if I could supply him with a nice copy of Hopkinson's *History of Barford*. I knew there was one in that Mallathorpe collection, so I got it out, and examined it. And in the pocket inside, in which there's a map, I found—what d'ye think?"

"Couldn't say," replied Pratt. He was still thinking of his dinner, and of an important engagement to follow it, and he had not the least idea that old Antony Bartle was going to tell him anything very important. "Letters? Bank-notes? Something of that sort?"

The old bookseller leaned nearer, across the corner of the desk, until his queer, wrinkled face was almost close to Pratt's sharp, youthful one. Again he lifted the claw-like finger: again he tapped the clerk's arm.

"I found John Mallathorpe's will!" he whispered. "His—will!"

Linford Pratt jumped out of his chair. For a second he stared in speechless amazement at the old man; then he plunged his hands deep into his trousers' pockets, opened his mouth, and let out a sudden exclamation.

"No!" he said. "No! John Mallathorpe's—will? His—will!"

"Made the very day on which he died," answered Bartle, nodding emphatically.

"Queer, wasn't it? He might have had some—premonition, eh?"

Pratt sat down again.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"Here in my pocket," replied the old bookseller, tapping his rusty coat. "Oh, it's all right, I assure you. All duly made out, signed, and witnessed. Everything in order, I know!—because a long, a very long time ago, I was like you, an attorney's clerk. I've drafted many a will, and witnessed many a will, in my time. I've read this, every word of it—it's all right. Nothing can upset it."

"Let's see it," said Pratt, eagerly.

"Well—I've no objection—I know you, of course," answered Bartle, "but I'd rather show it first to Mr. Eldrick. Couldn't you telephone up to his house and ask him to run back here?"

"Certainly," replied Pratt. "He mayn't be there, though. But I can try. You haven't shown it to anybody else?"

"Neither shown it to anybody, nor mentioned it to a soul," said Bartle. "I tell you it's not much more than half an hour since I found it. It's not a long document. Do you know how it is that it's never come out?" he went on, turning eagerly to Pratt, who had risen again. "It's easily explained. The will's witnessed by those two men who were killed at the same time as John Mallathorpe! So, of course, there was nobody to say that it was in evidence. My notion is that he and those two men—Gaukrodger and Marshall, his manager and cashier—had signed it not long before the accident, and that Mallathorpe had popped it into the pocket of that book before going out into the yard. Eh? But see if you can get Mr. Eldrick down here, and we'll read it together. And I say—this office seems uncommonly stuffy—can you open the window a bit or something?—I feel oppressed, like."

Pratt opened a window which looked out on the street. He glanced at the old man for a moment and saw that his face, always pallid, was even paler than usual.

"You've been talking too much," he said. "Rest yourself, Mr. Bartle, while I ring up Mr. Eldrick's house. If he isn't there, I'll try his club—he often turns in there for an hour before going home."

He went out by a private door to the telephone box, which stood in a lobby used by various occupants of the building. And when he had rung up Eldrick's private house and was waiting for the answer, he asked himself what this discovery would mean to the present holders of the Mallathorpe property, and his curiosity—a strongly developed quality in him—became more and more excited. If Eldrick was not at home, if he could not get in touch with him, he would persuade old Bartle to let him see his find—he would cheerfully go late to his dinner if he could only get a peep at this strangely discovered document. Romance! Why, this indeed was romance; and it might be—what else? Old Bartle had already chuckled about topsy-turvydom: did that mean that—

The telephone bell rang: Eldrick had not yet reached his house. Pratt got on to the club: Eldrick had not been there. He rang off, and went back to the private room.

"Can't get hold of him, Mr. Bartle," he began, as he closed the door. "He's not at home, and he's not at the club. I say!—you might as well let me have a look at—"

Pratt suddenly stopped. There was a strange silence in the room: the old man's wheezy breathing was no longer heard. And the clerk moved forward quickly and looked round the high back of the easy chair....

He knew at once what had happened—knew that old Bartle was dead before he laid a finger on the wasted hand which had dropped helplessly at his side. He had evidently died without a sound or a movement—died as quietly as he would have gone to sleep. Indeed, he looked as if he had just

laid his old head against the padding of the chair and dropped asleep, and Pratt, who had seen death before, knew that he would never wake again. He waited a moment, listening in the silence. Once he touched the old man's hand; once, he bent nearer, still listening. And then, without hesitation, and with fingers that remained as steady as if nothing had happened, he unbuttoned Antony Bartle's coat, and drew a folded paper from the inner pocket.

CHAPTER II

IN TRUST

As quietly and composedly as if he were discharging the most ordinary of his daily duties, Pratt unfolded the document, and went close to the solitary gas jet above Eldrick's desk. What he held in his hand was a half-sheet of ruled foolscap paper, closely covered with writing, which he at once recognized as that of the late John Mallathorpe. He was familiar with that writing—he had often seen it. It was an old-fashioned writing—clear, distinct, with every letter well and fully formed.

"Made it himself!" muttered Pratt. "Um!—looks as if he wanted to keep the terms secret. Well—"

He read the will through—rapidly, but with care, murmuring the phraseology half aloud.

"This is the last will of me, John Mallathorpe, of Normandale Grange, in the parish of Normandale, in the West Riding of the County of York. I appoint Martin William Charlesworth, manufacturer, of Holly Lodge, Barford, and Arthur James Wyatt, chartered accountant, of 65, Beck Street, Barford, executors and trustees of this my will. I give and devise all my estate and effects real and personal of which I may die possessed or entitled to unto the said Martin William Charlesworth and Arthur James Wyatt upon trust for the following purposes to be carried out by them under the following instructions, namely:—As soon after my death as is conveniently possible they will sell all my real estate, either by private treaty or by public auction; they shall sell all my personal property of any nature whatsoever; they shall sell my business at Mallathorpe's mill in Barford as a going concern to any private purchaser or to any company already in existence or formed for the purpose of acquiring it; and they shall collect all debts and moneys due to me. And having sold and disposed of all my property, real and personal, and brought all the proceeds of such sales and of such collection of debts and moneys into one common fund they shall first pay all debts owing by me and all legal duties and expenses arising out of my death and this disposition of my property and shall then distribute my estate as follows, namely: to each of themselves, Martin William Charlesworth and Arthur James Wyatt, they shall pay the sum of five thousand pounds; to my sister-in-law, Ann Mallathorpe, they shall pay the sum of ten thousand pounds; to my nephew, Harper John Mallathorpe, they shall pay the sum of ten thousand pounds; to my niece, Nesta Mallathorpe, they shall pay the sum of ten thousand pounds. And as to the whole of the remaining residue they shall pay it in one sum to the Mayor and Corporation of the borough of Barford in the County of York to be applied by the said Mayor and Corporation at their own absolute discretion and in any manner which seems good to them to the establishment, furtherance and development of technical and commercial education in the said borough of Barford. Dated this sixteenth day of November, 1906.

Signed by the testator in the presence of us both present at the same time who
in his presence } JOHN MALLATHORPE and in the presence of each other have
hereunto set our names as witnesses.

HENRY GAUKRODGER, 16, Florence Street, Barford, Mill Manager.

CHARLES WATSON MARSHALL, 56, Laburnum Terrace, Barford,
Cashier."

As the last word left his lips Pratt carefully folded up the will, slipped it into an inner pocket of his coat, and firmly buttoned the coat across his chest. Then, without as much as a glance at the dead man, he left the room, and again visited the telephone box. He was engaged in it for a few minutes. When he came out he heard steps coming up the staircase, and looking over the banisters he saw the senior partner, Eldrick, a middle-aged man. Eldrick looked up, and saw Pratt.

"I hear you've been ringing me up at the club, Pratt," he said. "What is it?"

Pratt waited until Eldrick had come up to the landing. Then he pointed to the door of the private room, and shook his head.

"It's old Mr. Bartle, sir," he whispered. "He's in your room there—dead!"

"Dead?" exclaimed Eldrick. "Dead!"

Pratt shook his head again.

"He came up not so long after you'd gone, sir," he said. "Everybody had gone but me—I was just going. Wanted to see you about something I don't know what. He was very tottery when he came in—complained of the stairs and the fog. I took him into your room, to sit down in the easy chair. And—he died straight off. Just," concluded Pratt, "just as if he was going quietly to sleep!"

"You're sure he is dead?—not fainting?" asked Eldrick.

"He's dead, sir—quite dead," replied Pratt. "I've rung up Dr. Melrose—he'll be here in a minute or two—and the Town Hall—the police—as well. Will you look at him, sir?"

Eldrick silently motioned his clerk to open the door; together they walked into the room. And Eldrick looked at his quiet figure and wan face, and knew that Pratt was right.

"Poor old chap!" he murmured, touching one of the thin hands. "He was a fine man in his time, Pratt; clever man! And he was very, very old—one of the oldest men in Barford. Well, we must wire to his grandson, Mr. Bartle Collingwood. You'll find his address in the book. He's the only relation the old fellow had."

"Come in for everything, doesn't he, sir?" asked Pratt, as he took an address book from the desk, and picked up a sheaf of telegram forms.

"Every penny!" murmured Eldrick. "Nice little fortune, too—a fine thing for a young fellow who's just been called to the Bar. As a matter of fact, he'll be fairly well independent, even if he never sees a brief in his life."

"He has been called, has he, sir?" asked Pratt, laying a telegram form on Eldrick's writing pad and handing him a pen. "I wasn't aware of that."

"Called this term—quite recently—at Gray's Inn," replied Eldrick, as he sat down. "Very promising, clever young man. Look here!—we'd better send two wires, one to his private address, and one to his chambers. They're both in that book. It's six o'clock, isn't it?—he might be at his chambers yet, but he may have gone home. I'll write both messages—you put the addresses on, and get the wire off—we must have him down here as soon as possible."

"One address is 53x, Pump Court; the other's 96, Cloburn Square," remarked Pratt consulting the book. "There's an express from King's Cross at 8.15 which gets here midnight."

"Oh, it would do if he came down first thing in the morning—leave it to him," said Eldrick. "I say, Pratt, do you think an inquest will be necessary?"

Pratt had not thought of that—he began to think. And while he was thinking, the doctor whom he had summoned came in. He looked at the dead man, asked the clerk a few questions, and was apparently satisfied. "I don't think there's any need for an inquest," he said in reply to Eldrick. "I knew the old man very well—he was much feebler than he would admit. The exertion of coming up these stairs of yours, and the coughing brought on by the fog outside—that was quite enough. Of course, the death will have to be reported in the usual way, but I have no hesitation in giving a certificate. You've let the Town Hall people know? Well, the body had better be removed to his rooms—we must send over and tell his housekeeper. He'd no relations in the town, had he?"

"Only one in the world that he ever mentioned—his grandson—a young barrister in London," answered Eldrick. "We've just been wiring to him. Here, Pratt, you take these messages now, and get them off. Then we'll see about making all arrangements. By-the-by," he added, as Pratt moved towards the door, "you don't know what—what he came to see me about?"

"Haven't the remotest idea, sir," answered Pratt, readily and glibly. "He died—just as I've told you—before he could tell me anything."

He went downstairs, and out into the street, and away to the General Post Office, only conscious of one thing, only concerned about one thing—that he was now the sole possessor of a great secret. The opportunity which he had so often longed for had come. And as he hurried along through the gathering fog he repeated and repeated a fragment of the recent conversation between the man who was now dead, and himself—who remained very much alive.

"You haven't shown it to anybody else?" Pratt had asked.

"Neither shown it to anybody, nor mentioned it to a soul," Antony Bartle had answered. So, in all that great town of Barford, he, Linford Pratt, he, alone out of a quarter of a million people, knew—what? The magnitude of what he knew not only amazed but exhilarated him. There were such possibilities for himself in that knowledge. He wanted to be alone, to think out those possibilities; to reckon up what they came to. Of one thing he was already certain—they should be, must be, turned to his own advantage.

It was past eight o'clock before Pratt was able to go home to his lodgings. His landlady, meeting him in the hall, hoped that his dinner would not be spoiled: Pratt, who relied greatly on his dinner as his one great meal of the day, replied that he fervently hoped it wasn't, but that if it was it couldn't be helped, this time. For once he was thinking of something else than his dinner—as for his engagement for that evening, he had already thrown it over: he wanted to give all his energies and thoughts and time to his secret. Nevertheless, it was characteristic of him that he washed, changed his clothes, ate his dinner, and even glanced over the evening newspaper before he turned to the real business which was already deep in his brain. But at last, when the maid had cleared away the dinner things, and he was alone in his sitting-room, and had lighted his pipe, and mixed himself a drop of whisky-and-water—the only indulgence in such things that he allowed himself within the twenty-four hours—he drew John Mallathorpe's will from his pocket, and read it carefully three times. And then he began to think, closely and steadily.

First of all, the will was a good will. Nothing could upset it. It was absolutely valid. It was not couched in the terms which a solicitor would have employed, but it clearly and plainly expressed John Mallathorpe's intentions and meanings in respect to the disposal of his property. Nothing could be clearer. The properly appointed trustees were to realize his estate. They were to distribute it according to his specified instructions. It was all as plain as a pikestaff. Pratt, who was a good lawyer, knew what the Probate Court would say to that will if it were ever brought up before it, as he did, a quite satisfactory will. And it was validly executed. Hundreds of people, competent to do so, could swear to John Mallathorpe's signature; hundreds to Gaukrodger's; thousands to Marshall's—who as cashier was always sending his signature broadcast. No, there was nothing to do but to put that into the hands of the trustees named in it, and then....

Pratt thought next of the two trustees. They were well-known men in the town. They were comparatively young men—about forty. They were men of great energy. Their chief interests were in educational matters—that, no doubt, was why John Mallathorpe had appointed them trustees. Wyatt had been plaguing the town for two years to start commercial schools: Charlesworth was a devoted champion of technical schools. Pratt knew how the hearts of both would leap, if he suddenly told them that enormous funds were at their disposal for the furtherance of their schemes. And he also knew something else—that neither Charlesworth nor Wyatt had the faintest, remotest notion or suspicion that John Mallathorpe had ever made such a will, or they would have moved heaven and earth, pulled down Normandale Grange and Mallathorpe's Mill, in their efforts to find it.

But the effect—the effect of producing the will—now? Pratt, like everybody else, had been deeply interested in the Mallathorpe affair. There was so little doubt that John Mallathorpe had died intestate, such absolute certainty that his only living relations were his deceased brother's two children and their mother, that the necessary proceedings for putting Harper Mallathorpe and his sister Nesta in possession of the property, real and personal, had been comparatively simple and speedy. But—what was it worth? What would the two trustees have been able to hand over to the Mayor and

Corporation of Barford, if the will had been found as soon as John Mallathorpe died? Pratt, from what he remembered of the bulk and calculations at the time, made a rapid estimate. As near as he could reckon, the Mayor and Corporation would have got about £300,000.

That, then—and this was what he wanted to get at—was what these young people would lose if he produced the will. Nay!—on second thoughts, it would be much more, very much more in some time; for the manufacturing business was being carried on by them, and was apparently doing as well as ever. It was really an enormous amount which they would lose—and they would get—what? Ten thousand apiece and their mother a like sum. Thirty thousand pounds in all—in comparison with hundreds of thousands. But they would have no choice in the matter. Nothing could upset that will.

He began to think of the three people whom the production of this will would dispossess. He knew little of them beyond what common gossip had related at the time of John Mallathorpe's sudden death. They had lived in very quiet fashion, somewhere on the outskirts of the town, until this change in their fortunes. Once or twice Pratt had seen Mrs. Mallathorpe in her carriage in the Barford streets—somebody had pointed her out to him, and had observed sneeringly that folk can soon adapt themselves to circumstances, and that Mrs. Mallathorpe now gave herself all the airs of a duchess, though she had been no more than a hospital nurse before she married Richard Mallathorpe. And Pratt had also seen young Harper Mallathorpe now and then in the town—since the good fortune arrived—and had envied him: he had also thought what a strange thing it was that money went to young fellows who seemed to have no particular endowments of brain or energy. Harper was a very ordinary young man, not over intelligent in appearance, who, Pratt had heard, was often seen lounging about the one or two fashionable hotels of the place. As for the daughter, Pratt did not remember having ever set eyes on her—but he had heard that up to the time of John Mallathorpe's death she had earned her own living as a governess, or a nurse, or something of that sort.

He turned from thinking of these three people to thoughts about himself. Pratt often thought about himself, and always in one direction—the direction of self-advancement. He was always wanting to get on. He had nobody to help him. He had kept himself since he was seventeen. His father and mother were dead; he had no brothers or sisters—the only relations he had, uncles and aunts, lived—some in London, some in Canada. He was now twenty-eight, and earning four pounds a week. He had immense confidence in himself, but he had never seen much chance of escaping from drudgery. He had often thought of asking Eldrick & Pascoe to give him his articles—but he had a shrewd idea that his request would be refused. No—it was difficult to get out of a rut. And yet—he was a clever fellow, a good-looking fellow, a sharp, shrewd, able—and here was a chance, such a chance as scarcely ever comes to a man. He would be a fool if he did not take it, and use it to his own best and lasting advantage.

And so he locked up the will in a safe place, and went to bed, resolved to take a bold step towards fortune on the morrow.

CHAPTER III

THE SHOP-BOY

When Pratt arrived at Eldrick & Pascoe's office at his usual hour of nine next morning, he found the senior partner already there. And with him was a young man whom the clerk at once set down as Mr. Bartle Collingwood, and looked at with considerable interest and curiosity. He had often heard of Mr. Bartle Collingwood, but had never seen him. He knew that he was the only son of old Antony Bartle's only child—a daughter who had married a London man; he knew, too, that Collingwood's parents were both dead, and that the old bookseller had left their son everything he possessed—a very nice little fortune, as Eldrick had observed last night. And since last night he had known that Collingwood had just been called to the Bar, and was on the threshold of what Eldrick, who evidently knew all about it, believed to be a promising career. Well, there he was in the flesh; and Pratt, who was a born observer of men and events, took a good look at him as he stood just within the private room, talking to Eldrick.

A good-looking fellow; what most folk would call handsome; dark, clean-shaven, tall, with a certain air of reserve about his well-cut features, firm lips, and steady eyes that suggested strength and determination. He would look very well in wig and gown, decided Pratt, viewing matters from a professional standpoint; he was just the sort that clients would feel a natural confidence in, and that juries would listen to. Another of the lucky ones, too; for Pratt knew the contents of Antony Bartle's will, and that the young man at whom he was looking had succeeded to a cool five-and-twenty thousand pounds, at least, through his grandfather's death.

"Here is Pratt," said Eldrick, glancing into the outer office as the clerk entered it. "Pratt, come in here—here is Mr. Bartle Collingwood. He would like you to tell him the facts about Mr. Bartle's death."

Pratt walked in—armed and prepared. He was a clever hand at foreseeing things, and he had known all along that he would have to answer questions about the event of the previous night.

"There's very little to tell, sir," he said, with a polite acknowledgment of Collingwood's greeting. "Mr. Bartle came up here just as I was leaving—everybody else had left. He wanted to see Mr. Eldrick. Why, he didn't say. He was coughing a good deal when he came in, and he complained of the fog outside, and of the stairs. He said something—just a mere mention—about his heart being bad. I lighted the gas in here, and helped him into the chair. He just sat down, laid his head back, and died."

"Without saying anything further?" asked Collingwood.

"Not a word more, Mr. Collingwood," answered Pratt. "He—well, it was just as if he had dropped off to sleep. Of course, at first I thought he'd fainted, but I soon saw what it was—it so happens that I've seen a death just as sudden as that, once before—my landlady's husband died in a very similar fashion, in my presence. There was nothing I could do, Mr. Collingwood—except ring up Mr. Eldrick, and the doctor, and the police."

"Mr. Pratt made himself very useful last night in making arrangements," remarked Eldrick, looking at Collingwood. "As it is, there is very little to do. There will be no need for any inquest; Melrose has given his certificate. So—there are only the funeral arrangements. We can help you with that matter, of course. But first you'd no doubt like to go to your grandfather's place and look through his papers? We have his will here, you know—and I've already told you its effect."

"I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Pratt," said Collingwood, turning to the clerk. He turned again to Eldrick. "All right," he went on. "I'll go over to Quagg Alley. Bye-the-bye, Mr. Pratt—my grandfather didn't tell you anything of the reason of his call here?"

"Not a word, sir," replied Pratt. "Merely said he wanted Mr. Eldrick."

"Had he any legal business in process?" asked Collingwood.

Eldrick and his clerk both shook their heads. No, Mr. Bartle had no business of that sort that they knew of. Nothing—but there again Pratt was prepared.

"It might have been about the lease of that property in Horsebridge Land, sir," he said, glancing at his principal. "He did mention that, you know, when he was in here a few weeks ago."

"Just so," agreed Eldrick. "Well, you'll let me know if we can be of use," he went on, as Collingwood turned away. "Pratt can be at your disposal, any time."

Collingwood thanked him and went off. He had travelled down from London by the earliest morning train, and leaving his portmanteau at the hotel of the Barford terminus, had gone straight to Eldrick & Pascoe's office; accordingly this was his first visit to the shop in Quagg Alley. But he knew the shop and its surroundings well enough, though he had not been in Barford for some time; he also knew Antony Bartle's old housekeeper, Mrs. Clough, a rough and ready Yorkshirewoman, who had looked after the old man as long as he, Collingwood, could remember. She received him as calmly as if he had merely stepped across the street to inquire after his grandfather's health.

"I thowt ye'd be down here first thing, Mestur Collingwood," she said, as he walked into the parlor at the back of the shop. "Of course, there's naught to be done except to see after yer grandfather's burying. I don't know if ye were surprised or no when t' lawyers tellygraphed to yer last night? I weren't surprised to hear what had happened. I'd been expecting summat o' that sort this last month or two."

"You mean—he was failing?" asked Collingwood.

"He were gettin' feebler and feebler every day," said the housekeeper. "But nobody dare say so to him, and he wouldn't admit it his-self. He were that theer high-spirited 'at he did things same as if he were a young man. But I knew how it 'ud be in the end—and so it has been—I knew he'd go off all of a sudden. And of course I had all in readiness—when they brought him back last night there was naught to do but lay him out. Me and Mrs. Thompson next door, did it, i' no time. Wheer will you be for buryin' him, Mestur Collingwood?"

"We must think that over," answered Collingwood.

"Well, an' theer's all ready for that, too," responded Mrs. Clough. "He's had his grave all ready i' the cemetery this three year—I remember when he bowt it—it's under a yew-tree, and he told me 'at he'd ordered his monnymment an' all. So yer an' t' lawyers'll have no great trouble about them matters. Mestur Eldrick, he gev' orders for t' coffin last night."

Collingwood left these gruesome details—highly pleasing to their narrator—and went up to look at his dead grandfather. He had never seen much of him, but they had kept up a regular correspondence, and always been on terms of affection, and he was sorry that he had not been with the old man at the last. He remained looking at the queer, quiet, old face for a while; when he went down again, Mrs. Clough was talking to a sharp-looking lad, of apparently sixteen or seventeen years, who stood at the door leading into the shop, and who glanced at Collingwood with keen interest and speculation.

"Here's Jabey Naylor wants to know if he's to do aught, Mestur," said the housekeeper. "Of course, I've telled him 'at we can't have the shop open till the burying's over—so I don't know what theer is that he can do."

"Oh, well, let him come into the shop with me," answered Collingwood. He motioned the lad to follow him out of the parlour. "So you were Mr. Bartle's assistant, eh?" he asked. "Had he anybody else?"

"Nobody but me, sir," replied the lad. "I've been with him a year."

"And your name's what?" inquired Collingwood.

"Jabez Naylor, sir, but everybody call me Jabey."

"I see—Jabey for short, eh?" said Collingwood good-humouredly. He walked into the shop, followed by the boy, and closed the door. The outer door into Quagg Alley was locked: a light blind was drawn over the one window; the books and engravings on the shelves and in the presses were

veiled in a half-gloom. "Well, as Mrs. Clough says, we can't do any business for a few days, Jabey—after that we must see what can be done. You shall have your wages just the same, of course, and you may look in every day to see if there's anything you can do. You were here yesterday, of course? Were you in the shop when Mr. Bartle went out?"

"Yes, sir," replied the lad. "I'd been in with him all the afternoon. I was here when he went out—and here when they came to say he'd died at Mr. Eldrick's."

Collingwood sat down in his grandfather's chair, at a big table, piled high with books and papers, which stood in the middle of the floor.

"Did my grandfather seem at all unwell when he went out?" he asked.

"No, sir. He had been coughing a bit more than usual—that was all. There was a fog came on about five o'clock, and he said it bothered him."

"What had he been doing during the afternoon? Anything particular?"

"Nothing at all particular before half-past four or so, sir."

Collingwood took a closer look at Jabez Naylor. He saw that he was an observant lad, evidently of superior intelligence—a good specimen of the sharp town lad, well trained in a modern elementary school.

"Oh?" he said. "Nothing particular before half-past four, eh? Did he do something particular after half-past four?"

"There was a post came in just about then, sir," answered Jabey. "There was an American letter—that's it, sir—just in front of you. Mr. Bartle read it, and asked me if we'd got a good clear copy of Hopkinson's *History of Barford*. I reminded him that there was a copy amongst the books that had been bought from Mallathorpe's Mill some time ago."

"Books that had belonged to Mr. John Mallathorpe, who was killed?" asked Collingwood, who was fully acquainted with the chimney accident.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Bartle bought a lot of books that Mr. Mallathorpe had at the Mill—local books. They're there in that corner: they were put there when I fetched them, and he'd never looked over them since, particularly."

"Well—and this *History of Barford*? You reminded him of it?"

"I got it out for him, sir. He sat down—where you're sitting—and began to examine it. He said something about it being a nice copy, and he'd get it off that night—that's it, sir: I didn't read it, of course. And then he took some papers out of a pocket that's inside it, and I heard him say 'Bless my soul—who'd have thought it!'"

Collingwood picked up the book which the boy indicated—a thick, substantially bound volume, inside one cover of which was a linen pocket, wherein were some loose maps and plans of Barford.

"These what he took out?" he asked, holding them up.

"Yes, sir, but there was another paper, with writing on it—a biggish sheet of paper—written all over."

"Did you see what the writing was? Did you see any of it?"

"No, sir—only that it was writing, I was dusting those shelves out, over there; when I heard Mr. Bartle say what he did. I just looked round, over my shoulder—that was all."

"Was he reading this paper that you speak of?"

"Yes, sir—he was holding it up to the gas, reading it."

"Do you know what he did with it?"

"Yes, sir—he folded it up and put it in his pocket."

"Did he say any more—make any remark?"

"No, sir. He wrote a letter then."

"At once?"

"Yes, sir—straight off. But he wasn't more than a minute writing it."

Then he sent me to post it at the pillar-box, at the end of the Alley."

"Did you read the address?"

The lad turned to a book which stood with others in a rack over the chimney-piece, and tapped it with his finger.

"Yes, sir—because Mr. Bartle gave orders when I first came here that a register of every letter sent out was to be kept—I've always entered them in this book."

"And this letter you're talking about—to whom was it addressed?"

"Miss Mallathorpe, Normandale Grange, sir."

"You went and posted it at once?"

"That very minute, sir."

"Was it soon afterwards that Mr. Bartle went out?"

"He went out as soon as I came back, sir."

"And you never saw him again?"

Jabey shook his head.

"Not alive, sir," he answered. "I saw him when they brought him back."

"How long had he been out when you heard he was dead?"

"About an hour, sir—just after six it was when they told Mrs. Clough and me. He went out at ten minutes past five."

Collingwood got up. He gave the lad's shoulder a friendly squeeze.

"All right!" he said. "Now you seem a smart, intelligent lad—don't mention a word to any one of what we've been talking about. You have not mentioned it before, I suppose? Not a word? That's right—don't. Come in again tomorrow morning to see if I want you to be here as usual. I'm going to put a manager into this shop."

When the boy had gone Collingwood locked up the shop from the house side, put the key in his pocket, and went into the kitchen.

"Mrs. Clough," he said. "I want to see the clothes which my grandfather was wearing when he was brought home last night. Where are they?"

"They're in that little room aside of his bed-chamber, Mestur Collingwood," replied the housekeeper. "I laid 'em all there, on the clothes-press, just as they were taken off of him, by Lawyer Eldrick's orders—he said they hadn't been examined, and wasn't to be, till you came. Nobody whatever's touched 'em since."

Collingwood went upstairs and into the little room—a sort of box-room opening out of that in which the old man lay. There were the clothes; he went through the pockets of every garment. He found such things as keys, a purse, loose money, a memorandum book, a bookseller's catalogue or two, two or three letters of a business sort—but there was no big folded paper, covered with writing, such as Jabey Naylor had described.

The mention of that paper had excited Collingwood's curiosity. He rapidly summed up what he had learned. His grandfather had found a paper, closely written upon, in a book which had been the property of John Mallathorpe, deceased. The discovery had surprised him, for he had given voice to an exclamation of what was evidently astonishment. He had put the paper in his pocket. Then he had written a letter—to Mrs. Mallathorpe of Normandale Grange. When his shop-boy had posted that letter, he himself had gone out—to his solicitor. What, asked Collingwood, was the reasonable presumption? The old man had gone to Eldrick to show him the paper which he had found.

He lingered in the little room for a few minutes, thinking. No one but Pratt had been with Antony Bartle at the time of his seizure and sudden death. What sort of a fellow was Pratt? Was he honest? Was his word to be trusted? Had he told the precise truth about the old man's death? He was evidently a suave, polite, obliging sort of fellow, this clerk, but it was a curious thing that if Antony Bartle had that paper, whatever it was—in his pocket when he went to Eldrick's office it should not be in his pocket still—if his clothing had really remained untouched. Already suspicion was in Collingwood's mind—vague and indefinable, but there.

He was half inclined to go straight back to Eldrick & Pascoe's and tell Eldrick what Jabey Naylor had just told him. But he reflected that while Naylor went out to post the letter, the old bookseller might have put the paper elsewhere; locked it up in his safe, perhaps. One thing, however, he, Collingwood, could do at once—he could ask Mrs. Mallathorpe if the letter referred to the paper. He was fully acquainted with all the facts of the Mallathorpe history; old Bartle, knowing they would interest his grandson, had sent him the local newspaper accounts of its various episodes. It was only twelve miles to Normandale Grange—a motor-car would carry him there within the hour. He glanced at his watch—just ten o'clock.

An hour later, Collingwood found himself standing in a fine oak-panelled room, the windows of which looked out on a romantic valley whose thickly wooded sides were still bright with the red and yellow tints of autumn. A door opened—he turned, expecting to see Mrs. Mallathorpe. Instead, he found himself looking at a girl, who glanced inquiringly at him, and from him to the card which he had sent in on his arrival.

CHAPTER IV

THE FORTUNATE POSSESSORS

Collingwood at once realized that he was in the presence of one of the two fortunate young people who had succeeded so suddenly—and, according to popular opinion, so unexpectedly—to John Mallathorpe's wealth. This was evidently Miss Nesta Mallathorpe, of whom he had heard, but whom he had never seen. She, however, was looking at him as if she knew him, and she smiled a little as she acknowledged his bow.

"My mother is out in the grounds, with my brother," she said, motioning Collingwood towards a chair. "Won't you sit down, please?—I've sent for her; she will be here in a few minutes."

Collingwood sat down; Nesta Mallathorpe sat down, too, and as they looked at each other she smiled again.

"I have seen you before, Mr. Collingwood," she said. "I knew it must be you when they brought up your card."

Collingwood used his glance of polite inquiry to make a closer inspection of his hostess. He decided that Nesta Mallathorpe was not so much pretty as eminently attractive—a tall, well-developed, warm-coloured young woman, whose clear grey eyes and red lips and general bearing indicated the possession of good health and spirits. And he was quite certain that if he had ever seen her before he would not have forgotten it.

"Where have you seen me?" he asked, smiling back at her.

"Have you forgotten the mock-trial—year before last?" she asked.

Collingwood remembered what she was alluding to. He had taken part, in company with various other law students, in a mock-trial, a breach of promise case, for the benefit of a certain London hospital, to him had fallen one of the principal parts, that of counsel for the plaintiff. "When I saw your name, I remembered it at once," she went on. "I was there—I was a probationer at St. Chad's Hospital at that time."

"Dear me!" said Collingwood, "I should have thought our histrionic efforts would have been forgotten. I'm afraid I don't remember much about them, except that we had a lot of fun out of the affair. So you were at St. Chad's?" he continued, with a reminiscence of the surroundings of the institution they were talking of. "Very different to Normandale!"

"Yes," she replied. "Very—very different to Normandale. But when I was at St. Chad's, I didn't know that I—that we should ever come to Normandale."

"And now that you are here?" he asked.

The girl looked out through the big window on the valley which lay in front of the old house, and she shook her head a little.

"It's very beautiful," she answered, "but I sometimes wish I was back at St. Chad's—with something to do. Here—there's nothing to do but to do nothing." Collingwood realized that this was not the complaint of the well-to-do young woman who finds time hang heavy—it was rather indicative of a desire for action.

"I understand!" he said. "I think I should feel like that. One wants—I suppose—is it action, movement, what is it?"

"Better call it occupation—that's a plain term," she answered. "We're both suffering from lack of occupation here, my brother and I. And it's bad for us—especially for him."

Before Collingwood could think of any suitable reply to this remarkably fresh and candid statement, the door opened, and Mrs. Mallathorpe came in, followed by her son. And the visitor suddenly and immediately noticed the force and meaning of Nesta Mallathorpe's last remark. Harper Mallathorpe, a good-looking, but not remarkably intelligent appearing young man, of about

Collingwood's own age, gave him the instant impression of being bored to death; the lack-lustre eye, the aimless lounge, the hands thrust into the pockets of his Norfolk jacket as if they took refuge there from sheer idleness—all these things told their tale. Here, thought Collingwood, was a fine example of how riches can be a curse—relieved of the necessity of having to earn his daily bread by labour, Harper Mallathorpe was finding life itself laborious.

But there was nothing of aimlessness, idleness, or lack of vigour in Mrs. Mallathorpe. She was a woman of character, energy, of brains—Collingwood saw all that at one glance. A little, neat-figured, compact sort of woman, still very good-looking, still on the right side of fifty, with quick movements and sharp glances out of a pair of shrewd eyes: this, he thought, was one of those women who will readily undertake the control and management of big affairs. He felt, as Mrs. Mallathorpe turned inquiring looks on him, that as long as she was in charge of them the Mallathorpe family fortunes would be safe.

"Mother," said Nesta, handing Collingwood's card to Mrs. Mallathorpe, "this gentleman is Mr. Bartle Collingwood. He's—aren't you?—yes, a barrister. He wants to see you. Why, I don't know. I have seen Mr. Collingwood before—but he didn't remember me. Now he'll tell you what he wants to see you about."

"If you'll allow me to explain why I called on you, Mrs. Mallathorpe," said Collingwood, "I don't suppose you ever heard of me—but you know, at any rate, the name of my grandfather, Mr. Antony Bartle, the bookseller, of Barford? My grandfather is dead—he died very suddenly last night."

Mrs. Mallathorpe and Nesta murmured words of polite sympathy. Harper suddenly spoke—as if mere words were some relief to his obvious boredom.

"I heard that, this morning," he said, turning to his mother. "Hopkins told me—he was in town last night. I meant to tell you."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Mallathorpe, glancing at some letters which stood on a rack above the mantelpiece. "Why—I had a letter from Mr. Bartle this very morning!"

"It is that letter that I have come to see you about," said Collingwood. "I only got down here from London at half-past eight this morning, and of course, I have made some inquiries about the circumstances of my grandfather's sudden death. He died very suddenly indeed at Mr. Eldrick's office. He had gone there on some business about which nobody knows nothing—he died before he could mention it. And according to his shop-boy, Jabey Naylor, the last thing he did was to write a letter to you. Now—I have reason for asking—would you mind telling me, Mrs. Mallathorpe, what that letter was about?" Mrs. Mallathorpe moved over to the hearth, and took an envelope from the rack. She handed it to Collingwood, indicating that he could open it. And Collingwood drew out one of old Bartle's memorandum forms, and saw a couple of lines in the familiar crabbed handwriting:

"MRS. MALLATHORPE, Normandale Grange.

"Madam,—If you should drive into town tomorrow, will you kindly give me a call? I want to see you particularly.

"Respectfully, A. BARTLE."

Collingwood handed back the letter.

"Have you any idea to what that refers?" he asked.

"Well, I think I have—perhaps," answered Mrs. Mallathorpe. "Mr. Bartle persuaded us to sell him some books—local books—which my late brother-in-law had at his office in the mill. And since then he has been very anxious to buy more local books and pamphlets about this neighbourhood, and he had some which Mr. Bartle was very anxious indeed to get hold of. I suppose he wanted to see me about that." Collingwood made no remarks for the moment. He was wondering whether or not to tell what Jabey Naylor had told him about this paper taken from the linen pocket inside the *History of Barford*. But Mrs. Mallathorpe's ready explanation had given him a new idea, and he rose from his chair.

"Thank you," he said. "I suppose that's it. You may think it odd that I wanted to know what he'd written about, but as it was certainly the last letter he wrote—"

"Oh, I'm quite sure it must have been that!" exclaimed Mrs. Mallathorpe. "And as I am going into Barford this afternoon, in any case, I meant to call at Mr. Bartle's. I'm sorry to hear of his death, poor old gentleman! But he was very old indeed, wasn't he?"

"He was well over eighty," replied Collingwood. "Well, thank you again—and good-bye—I have a motorcar waiting outside there, and I have much to do in Barford when I get back."

The two young people accompanied Collingwood into the hall. And Harper suddenly brightened.

"I say!" he said. "Have a drink before you go. It's a long way in and out. Come into the dining-room."

But Collingwood caught Nesta's eye, and he was quick to read a signal in it.

"No, thanks awfully!" he answered. "I won't really—I must get back—I've such a lot of things to attend to. This is a very beautiful place of yours," he went on, as Harper, whose face had fallen at the visitor's refusal, followed with his sister to where the motor-car waited. "It might be a hundred miles from anywhere."

"It's a thousand miles from anywhere!" muttered Harper. "Nothing to do here!"

"No hunting, shooting, fishing?" asked Collingwood. "Get tired of 'em? Well, why not make a private golf-links in your park? You'd get a fine sporting course round there."

"That's a good notion, Harper," observed Nesta, with some eagerness. "You could have it laid out this winter."

Harper suddenly looked at Collingwood.

"Going to stop in Barford?" he asked.

"Till I settle my grandfather's affairs—yes," answered Collingwood.

"Come and see us again," said Harper. "Come for the night—we've got a jolly good billiard table."

"Do!" added Nesta heartily.

"Since you're so kind, I will, then," replied Collingwood. "But not for a few days."

He drove off—to wonder why he had visited Normandale Grange at all. For Mrs. Mallathorpe's explanation of the letter was doubtless the right one: Collingwood, little as he had seen of Antony Bartle, knew what a veritable sleuth-hound the old man was where rare books or engravings were concerned. Yet—why the sudden exclamation on finding that paper? Why the immediate writing of the letter to Mrs. Mallathorpe? Why the setting off to Eldrick & Pascoe's office as soon as the letter was written? It all looked as if the old man had found some document, the contents of which related to the Mallathorpe family, and was anxious to communicate its nature to Mrs. Mallathorpe, and to his own solicitor, as soon as possible.

"But that's probably only my fancy," he mused, as he sped back to Barford; "the real explanation is doubtless that suggested by Mrs. Mallathorpe. Something made the old man think of the collection of local books at Normandale Grange—and he immediately wrote off to ask her to see him, with the idea of persuading her to let him have them. That's all there is in it—what a suspicious sort of party I must be getting! And suspicious of whom—and of what? Anyhow, I'm glad I went out there—and I'll certainly go again."

On his way back to Barford he thought a good deal of the two young people he had just left. There was something of the irony of fate about their situation. There they were, in possession of money and luxury and youth—and already bored because they had nothing to do. He felt what closely approached a contemptuous pity for Harper—why didn't he turn to some occupation? There was their own business—why didn't he put in so many hours a day there, instead of leaving it to managers? Why didn't he interest himself in local affairs?—work at something? Already he had all the appearance of a man who is inclined to slackness—and in that case, mused Collingwood, his money would do

him positive harm. But he had no thoughts of that sort about Nesta Mallathorpe: he had seen that she was of a different temperament.

"She'll not stick there—idling," he said. "She'll break out and do something or other. What did she say? 'Suffering from lack of occupation'? A bad thing to suffer from, too—glad I'm not similarly afflicted!"

There was immediate occupation for Collingwood himself when he reached the town. He had already made up his mind as to his future plans. He would sell his grandfather's business as soon as he could find a buyer—the old man had left a provision in his will, the gist of which Eldrick had already communicated to Collingwood, to the effect that his grandson could either carry on the business with the help of a competent manager until the stock was sold out, or could dispose of it as a going concern—Collingwood decided to sell it outright, and at once. But first it was necessary for him to look round the collection of valuable books and prints, and get an idea of what it was that he was about to sell. And when he had reached Barford again, and had lunched at his hotel, he went to Quagg Alley, and shut himself in the shop, and made a careful inspection of the treasures which old Bartle had raked up from many quarters.

Within ten minutes of beginning his task Collingwood knew that he had gone out to Normandale Grange about a mere nothing. Picking up the *History of Barford* which Jabey Naylor had spoken of, and turning over its leaves, two papers dropped out; one a half sheet of foolscap, folded; the other, a letter from some correspondent in the United States. Collingwood read the letter first—it was evidently that which Naylor had referred to as having been delivered the previous afternoon. It asked for a good, clear copy of Hopkinson's *History of Barford*—and then it went on, "If you should come across a copy of what is, I believe, a very rare tract or pamphlet, *Customs of the Court Leet of the Manor of Barford*, published, I think, about 1720, I should be glad to pay you any price you like to ask for it—in reason." So much for the letter—Collingwood turned from it to the folded paper. It was headed "List of Barford Tracts and Pamphlets in my box marked B.P. in the library at N Grange," and it was initialled at the foot J.M. Then followed the titles of some twenty-five or thirty works—amongst them was the very tract for which the American correspondent had inquired. And now Collingwood had what he believed to be a clear vision of what had puzzled him—his grandfather having just read the American buyer's request had found the list of these pamphlets inside the *History of Barford*, and in it the entry of the particular one he wanted, and at once he had written to Mrs. Mallathorpe in the hope of persuading her to sell what his American correspondent desired to buy. It was all quite plain—and the old man's visit to Eldrick & Pascoe's had nothing to do with the letter to Mrs. Mallathorpe. Nor had he carried the folded paper in his pocket to Eldrick's—when Jabey Naylor went out to post the letter, Antony had placed the folded paper and the American letter together in the book and left them there. Quite, quite simple!—he had had his run to Normandale Grange and back all about nothing, and for nothing—except that he had met Nesta Mallathorpe, whom he was already sufficiently interested in to desire to see again. But having arrived at an explanation of what had puzzled him and made him suspicious, he dismissed that matter from his mind and thought no more of it.

But across the street, all unknown to Collingwood, Linford Pratt was thinking a good deal. Collingwood had taken his car from a rank immediately opposite Eldrick & Pascoe's windows; Pratt, whose desk looked on to the street, had seen him drive away soon after ten o'clock and return about half-past twelve. Pratt, who knew everybody in the business centre of the town, knew the man who had driven Collingwood, and when he went out to his lunch he asked him where he had been that morning. The man, who knew no reason for secrecy, told him—and Pratt went off to eat his bread and cheese and drink his one glass of ale and to wonder why young Collingwood had been to Normandale Grange. He became slightly anxious and uneasy. He knew that Collingwood must have made some slight examination of old Bartle's papers. Was it—could it be possible that the old man, before going to Eldrick's, had left some memorandum of his discovery in his desk—or in a diary? He had said

that he had not shown the will, nor mentioned the will, to a soul—but he might;—old men were so fussy about things—he might have set down in his diary that he had found it on such a day, and under such-and-such circumstances.

However, there was one person who could definitely inform him of the reason of Collingwood's visit to Normandale Grange—Mrs. Mallathorpe. He would see her at once, and learn if he had any grounds for fear. And so it came about that at nine o'clock that evening, Mrs. Mallathorpe, for the second time that day, found herself asked to see a limb of the law.

CHAPTER V

POINT-BLANK

Mrs. Mallathorpe was alone when Pratt's card was taken to her. Harper and Nesta were playing billiards in a distant part of the big house. Dinner had been over for an hour; Mrs. Mallathorpe, who had known what hard work and plenty of it was, in her time, was trifling over the newspapers—rest, comfort, and luxury were by no means boring to her. She looked at the card doubtfully—Pratt had pencilled a word or two on it: "Private and important business." Then she glanced at the butler—an elderly man who had been with John Mallathorpe many years before the catastrophe occurred.

"Who is he, Dickenson?" she asked. "Do you know him?"

"Clerk at Eldrick & Pascoe's, in the town, ma'am," replied the butler. "I know the young man by sight."

"Where is he?" inquired Mrs. Mallathorpe.

"In the little morning room, at present, ma'am," said Dickenson.

"Take him into the study," commanded Mrs. Mallathorpe. "I'll come to him presently." She was utterly at a loss to understand Pratt's presence there. Eldrick & Pascoe were not her solicitors, and she had no business of a legal nature in which they could be in any way concerned. But it suddenly struck her that that was the second time she had heard Eldrick's name mentioned that day—young Mr. Collingwood had said that his grandfather's death had taken place at Eldrick & Pascoe's office. Had this clerk come to see her about that?—and if so, what had she to do with it? Before she reached the room in which Pratt was waiting for her, Mrs. Mallathorpe was filled with curiosity. But in that curiosity there was not a trace of apprehension; nothing suggested to her that her visitor had called on any matter actually relating to herself or her family.

The room into which Pratt had been taken was a small apartment opening out of the library—John Mallathorpe, when he bought Normandale Grange, had it altered and fitted to suit his own tastes, and Pratt, as soon as he entered it, saw that it was a place in which privacy and silence could be ensured. He noticed that it had double doors, and that there were heavy curtains before the window. And during the few minutes which elapsed between his entrance and Mrs. Mallathorpe's, he took the precaution to look behind those curtains, and to survey his surroundings—what he had to say was not to be overheard, if he could help it.

Mrs. Mallathorpe looked her curiosity as soon as she came in. She did not remember that she had ever seen this young man before, but she recognized at once that he was a shrewd and sharp person, and she knew from his manner that he had news of importance to give her. She quietly acknowledged Pratt's somewhat elaborate bow, and motioned him to take a chair at the side of the big desk which stood before the fireplace—she herself sat down at the desk itself, in John Mallathorpe's old elbow-chair. And Pratt thought to himself that however much young Harper John Mallathorpe might be nominal master of Normandale Grange, the real master was there, in the self-evident, quiet-looking woman who turned to him in business-like fashion.

"You want to see me?" said Mrs. Mallathorpe. "What is it?"

"Business, Mrs. Mallathorpe," replied Pratt. "As I said on my card—of a private and important sort."

"To do with me?" she asked.

"With you—and with your family," said Pratt. "And before we go any further, not a soul knows of it but—me."

Mrs. Mallathorpe took another searching look at her visitor. Pratt was leaning over the corner of the desk, towards her; already he had lowered his tones to the mysterious and confidential note.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "Go on."

Pratt bent a little nearer.

"A question or two first, if you please, Mrs. Mallathorpe. And—answer them! They're for your own good. Young Mr. Collingwood called on you today."

"Well—and what of it?"

"What did he want?"

Mrs. Mallathorpe hesitated and frowned a little. And Pratt hastened to reassure her. "I'm using no idle words, Mrs. Mallathorpe, when I say it's for your own good. It is! What did he come for?"

"He came to ask what there was in a letter which his grandfather wrote to me yesterday afternoon."

"Antony Bartle had written to you, had he? And what did he say, Mrs. Mallathorpe? For that is important!"

"No more than that he wanted me to call on him today, if I happened to be in Barford."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more—not a word."

"Nothing as to—why he wanted to see you?"

"No! I thought that he probably wanted to see me about buying some books of the late Mr. Mallathorpe's."

"Did you tell Collingwood that?" asked Pratt, eagerly.

"Yes—of course."

"Did it satisfy him?"

Mrs. Mallathorpe frowned again.

"Why shouldn't I?" she demanded. "It was the only explanation I could possibly give him. How do I know what the old man really wanted?"

Pratt drew his chair still nearer to the desk. His voice dropped to a whisper and his eyes were full of meaning.

"I'll tell you what he wanted!" he said speaking very slowly. "It's what I've come for. Listen! Antony Bartle came to our office soon after five yesterday afternoon. I was alone—everybody else had gone. I took him into Eldrick's room. He told me that in turning over one of the books which he had bought from Mallathorpe Mill, some short time ago, he had found—what do you think?"

Mrs. Mallathorpe's cheek had flushed at the mention of the books from the Mill. Now, at Pratt's question, and under his searching eye, she turned very pale, and the clerk saw her fingers tighten on the arms of her chair.

"What?" she asked. "What?"

"John Mallathorpe's will!" he answered. "Do you understand? His—will!"

The woman glanced quickly about her—at the doors, the uncurtained window.

"Safe enough here," whispered Pratt. "I made sure of that. Don't be afraid—no one knows—but me."

But Mrs. Mallathorpe seemed to find some difficulty in speaking, and when she at last got out a word her voice sounded hoarse.

"Impossible!"

"It's a fact!" said Pratt. "Nothing was ever more a fact as you'll see. But let me finish my story. The old man told me how he'd found the will—only half an hour before—and he asked me to ring up Eldrick, so that we might all read it together. I went to the telephone—when I came back, Bartle was dead—just dead. And—I took the will out of his pocket."

Mrs. Mallathorpe made an involuntary gesture with her right hand. And Pratt smiled, craftily, and shook his head.

"Much too valuable to carry about, Mrs. Mallathorpe," he said. "I've got it—all safe—under lock and key. But as I've said—nobody knows of it but myself. Not a living soul. No one has any idea! No one can have any idea. I was a bit alarmed when I heard that young Collingwood had been

to you, for I thought that the old man, though he didn't tell me of any such thing, might have dropped you a line saying what he'd found. But as he didn't—well, not one living soul knows that the will's in existence, except me—and you!"

Mrs. Mallathorpe was regaining her self-possession. She had had a great shock, but the worst of it was over. Already she knew, from Pratt's manner, insidious and suggesting, that the will was of a nature that would dispossess her and hers of this recently acquired wealth—the clerk had made that evident by look and tone. So—there was nothing but to face things.

"What—what does it—say?" she asked, with an effort.

Pratt unbuttoned his overcoat, plunged a hand into the inner pocket, drew out a sheet of paper, unfolded it and laid it on the desk.

"An exact copy," he said tersely. "Read it for yourself."

In spite of the determined effort which she made to be calm, Mrs. Mallathorpe's fingers still trembled as she took up the sheet on which Pratt had made a fair copy of the will. The clerk watched her narrowly as she read. He knew that presently there would be a tussle between them: he knew, too, that she was a woman who would fight hard in defence of her own interest, and for the interests of her children.

Always keeping his ears open to local gossip, especially where money was concerned, Pratt had long since heard that Mrs. Mallathorpe was a keen and sharp business woman. And now he was not surprised when, having slowly and carefully read the copy of the will from beginning to end, she laid it down, and turned to him with a business-like question.

"The effect of that?" she asked. "What would it be—curtly?"

"Precisely what it says," answered Pratt. "Couldn't be clearer!"

"We—should lose all?" she demanded, almost angrily. "All?"

"All—except what he says—there," agreed Pratt.

"And that," she went on, drumming her fingers on the paper, "that—would stand?"

"What it's a copy of would stand," said Pratt. "Oh, yes, don't you make any mistake about it, Mrs. Mallathorpe! Nothing can upset that will. It is plain as a pikestaff how it came to be made. Your late brother-in-law evidently wrote his will out—it's all in his own handwriting—and took it down to the Mill with him the very day of the chimney accident. Just as evidently he signed it in the presence of his manager, Gaukrodger, and his cashier, Marshall—they signed at the same time, as it says, there. Now I take it that very soon after that, Mr. Mallathorpe went out into his mill yard to have a look at the chimney—Gaukrodger and Marshall went with him. Before he went, he popped the will into the book, where old Bartle found it yesterday—such things are easily done. Perhaps he was reading the book—perhaps it lay handy—he slipped the will inside, anyway. And then—he was killed—and, what's more the two witnesses were killed with him. So there wasn't a man left who could tell of that will! But—there's half Barford could testify to these three signatures! Mrs. Mallathorpe, there's not a chance for you if I put that will into the hands of the two trustees!"

He leaned back in his chair after that—nodding confidently, watching keenly. And now he saw that the trembling fingers were interlacing each other, twisting the rings on each other, and that Mrs. Mallathorpe was thinking as she had most likely never thought in her life. After a moment's pause Pratt went on. "Perhaps you didn't understand," he said. "I mean, you don't know the effect. Those two trustees—Charlesworth & Wyatt—could turn you all clean out of this—tomorrow, in a way of speaking. Everything's theirs! They can demand an account of every penny that you've all had out of the estate and the business—from the time you all took hold. If anything's been saved, put aside, they can demand that. You're entitled to nothing but the three amounts of ten thousand each. Of course, thirty thousand is thirty thousand—it means, at five per cent., fifteen hundred a year—if you could get five per cent. safely. But—I should say your son and daughter are getting a few thousand a year each, aren't they, Mrs. Mallathorpe? It would be a nice come-down! Five hundred a year apiece—at

the outside. A small house instead of Normandale Grange. Genteel poverty—comparatively speaking—instead of riches. That is—if I hand over the will to Charlesworth & Wyatt."

Mrs. Mallathorpe slowly turned her eyes on Pratt. And Pratt suddenly felt a little afraid—there was anger in those eyes; anger of a curious sort. It might be against fate—against circumstance: it might not—why should it?—be against him personally, but it was there, and it was malign and almost evil, and it made him uncomfortable.

"Where is the will!" she asked.

"Safe! In my keeping," answered Pratt.

She looked him all over—surmisingly.

"You'll sell it to me?" she suggested. "You'll hand it over—and let me burn it—destroy it?"

"No!" answered Pratt. "I shall not!"

He saw that his answer produced personal anger at last. Mrs. Mallathorpe gave him a look which would have warned a much less observant man than Pratt. But he gave her back a look that was just as resolute.

"I say no—and I mean no!" he continued. "I won't sell—but I'll bargain. Let's be plain with each other. You don't want that will to be handed over to the trustees named in it, Charlesworth & Wyatt?"

"Do you think I'm a fool—man!" she flashed out.

"I should be a fool myself if I did," replied Pratt calmly. "And I'm not a fool. Very well—then you'll square me. You'll buy me. Come to terms with me, and nobody shall ever know. I repeat to you what I've said before—not a soul knows now, no nor suspects! It's utterly impossible for anybody to find out. The testator's dead. The attesting witnesses are dead. The man who found this will is dead. No one but you and myself ever need know a word about all this. If—you make terms with me, Mrs. Mallathorpe."

"What do you want?" she asked sullenly. "You forget—I've nothing of my own. I didn't come into anything."

"I've a pretty good notion who's real master here—and at Mallathorpe Mill, too," retorted Pratt. "I should say you're still in full control of your children, Mrs. Mallathorpe, and that you can do pretty well what you like with them."

"With one of them perhaps," she said, still angry and sullen. "But—I tell you, for you may as well know—if my daughter knew of what you've told me, she'd go straight to these trustees and tell! That's a fact that you'd better realize. I can't control her."

"Oh!" remarked Pratt. "Um!—then we must take care that she doesn't know. But we don't intend that anybody should know but you and me, Mrs. Mallathorpe. You needn't tell a soul—not even your son. You mustn't tell! Listen, now—I've thought out a good scheme which'll profit me, and make you safe. Do you know what you want on this estate?"

She stared at him as if wondering what this question had to do with the matter which was of such infinite importance. And Pratt smiled, and hastened to enlighten her.

"You want—a steward," he said. "A steward and estate agent. John Mallathorpe managed everything for himself, but your son can't, and pardon me if I say that you can't—properly. You need a man—you need me. You can persuade your son to that effect. Give me the job of steward here. I'll suggest to you how to do it in such a fashion that it'll arouse no suspicion, and look just like an ordinary—very ordinary—business job—at a salary and on conditions to be arranged, and—you're safe! Safe, Mrs. Mallathorpe—you know what that means!"

Mrs. Mallathorpe suddenly rose from her chair.

"I know this!" she said. "I'll discuss nothing, and do nothing, till I've seen that will!"

Pratt rose, too, nodding his head as if quite satisfied. He took up the copy, tore it in two pieces, and carefully dropped them into the glowing fire.

"I shall be at my lodgings at any time after five-thirty tomorrow evening," he answered quietly. "Call there. You have the address. And you can then read the will with your own eyes. I shan't bring it here. The game's in my hands, Mrs. Mallathorpe."

Within a few minutes he was out in the park again, and making his way to the little railway station in the valley below. He felt triumphant—he knew that the woman he had just left was at his mercy and would accede to his terms. And all the way back to town, and through the town to his lodgings, he considered and perfected the scheme he was going to suggest to Mrs. Mallathorpe on the morrow.

Pratt lived in a little hamlet of old houses on the very outskirts of Barford—on the edge of a stretch of Country honeycombed by stone-quarries, some in use, some already worked out. It was a lonely neighbourhood, approached from the nearest tramway route by a narrow, high-walled lane. He was half-way along that lane when a stealthy foot stole to his side, and a hand was laid on his arm—just as stealthily came the voice of one of his fellow-clerks at Eldrick & Pascoe's.

"A moment, Pratt! I've been waiting for you. I want—a word or two—in private!"

CHAPTER VI

THE UNEXPECTED

Pratt started when he heard that voice and felt the arresting hand. He knew well enough to whom they belonged—they were those of one James Parrawhite, a little, weedy, dissolute chap who had been in Eldrick & Pascoe's employ for about a year. It had always been a mystery to him and the other clerks that Parrawhite had been there at all, and that being there he was allowed to stop. He was not a Barford man. Nobody knew anything whatever about him, though his occasional references to it seemed to indicate that he knew London pretty thoroughly. Pratt shrewdly suspected that he was a man whom Eldrick had known in other days, possibly a solicitor who had been struck off the rolls, and to whom Eldrick, for old times' sake, was disposed to extend a helping hand.

All that any of them knew was that one morning some fifteen months previously, Parrawhite, a complete stranger, had walked into the office, asked to see Eldrick, had remained closeted with him half an hour, and had been given a job at two pounds a week, there and then. That he was a clever and useful clerk no one denied, but no one liked him.

He was always borrowing half-crowns. He smelt of rum. He was altogether undesirable. It was plain to the clerks that Pascoe disliked him. But he was evidently under Eldrick's protection, and he did his work and did it well, and there was no doubt that he knew more law than either of the partners, and was better up in practice than Pratt himself. But—he was not desirable ... and Pratt never desired him less than on this occasion.

"What are you after—coming on a man like that!" growled Pratt.

"You," replied Parrawhite. "I knew you'd got to come up this lane, so I waited for you. I've something to say."

"Get it said, then!" retorted Pratt.

"Not here," answered Parrawhite. "Come down by the quarry—nobody about there."

"And suppose I don't?" asked Pratt.

"Then you'll be very sorry for yourself—tomorrow," replied Parrawhite. "That's all!"

Pratt had already realized that this fellow knew something. Parrawhite's manner was not only threatening but confident. He spoke as a man speaks who has got the whip hand. And so, still growling, and inwardly raging and anxious, he turned off with his companion into a track which lay amongst the stone quarries. It was a desolate, lonely place; no house was near; they were as much alone as if they had been in the middle of one of the great moors outside the town, the lights of which they could see in the valley below them. In the grey sky above, a waning moon gave them just sufficient light to see their immediate surroundings—a grass-covered track, no longer used, and the yawning mouths of the old quarries, no longer worked, the edges of which were thick with gorse and bramble. It was the very place for secret work, and Pratt was certain that secret work was at hand.

"Now then!" he said, when they had walked well into the wilderness.

"What is it? And no nonsense!"

"You'll get no nonsense from me," sneered Parrawhite. "I'm not that sort. This is what I want to say. I was in Eldrick's office last night all the time you were there with old Bartle."

This swift answer went straight through Pratt's defences. He was prepared to hear something unpleasant and disconcerting, but not that. And he voiced the first thought that occurred to him.

"That's a lie!" he exclaimed. "There was nobody there!"

"No lie," replied Parrawhite. "I was there. I was behind the curtain of that recess—you know. And since I know what you did, I don't mind telling you—we're in the same boat, my lad!—what I was going to do. You thought I'd gone—with the others. But I hadn't. I'd merely done what I've done several times without being found out—slipped in there—to wait until you'd gone. Why? Because

friend Eldrick, as you know, is culpably careless about leaving loose cash in the unlocked drawer of his desk, culpably careless, too, about never counting it. And—a stray sovereign or half-sovereign is useful to a man who only gets two quid a week. Understand?"

"So you're a thief?" said Pratt bitterly.

"I'm precisely what you are—a thief!" retorted Parrawhite. "You stole John Mallathorpe's will last night. I heard everything, I tell you!—and saw everything. I heard the whole business—what the old man said—what you, later, said to Eldrick. I saw old Bartle die—I saw you take the will from his pocket, read it, and put it in your pocket. I know all!—except the terms of the will. But—I've a pretty good idea of what those terms are. Do you know why? Because I watched you set off to Normandale by the eight-twenty train tonight!"

"Hang you for a dirty sneak!" growled Pratt.

Parrawhite laughed, and flourished a heavy stick which he carried.

"Not a bit of it!" he said, almost pleasantly. "I thought you were more of a philosopher—I fancied I'd seen gleams—mere gleams—of philosophy in you at times. Fortunes of war, my boy! Come now—you've seen enough of me to know I'm an adventurer. This is an adventure of the sort I love. Go into it heart and soul, man! Own up!—you've found out that the will leaves the property away from the present holders, and you've been to Normandale to—bargain? Come, now!"

"What then!" demanded Pratt.

"Then, of course, I come in at the bargaining," answered Parrawhite. "I'm going to have my share. That's a certainty. You'd better take my advice. Because you're absolutely in my power. I've nothing to do but to tell Eldrick tomorrow morning."

"Suppose I tell Eldrick tomorrow morning of what you've told me?" interjected Pratt.

"Eldrick will believe me before you," retorted Parrawhite, imperturbably. "I'm a much cleverer, more plausible man than you are, my friend—I've had an experience of the world which you haven't, I can easily invent a fine excuse for being in that room. For two pins I'll incriminate you! See? Be reasonable—for if it comes to a contest of brains, you haven't a rabbit's chance against a fox. Tell me all about the will—and what you've done. You've got to—for, by the Lord Harry!—I'm going to have my share. Come, now!"

Pratt stood, in a little hollow wherein they had paused, and thought, rapidly and angrily. There was no doubt about it—he was trapped. This fearful scoundrel at his side, who boasted of his cleverness, would stick to him like a leach—he would have to share. All his own smart schemes for exploiting Mrs. Mallathorpe, for ensuring himself a competence for life, were knocked on the head. There was no helping it—he would have to tell—and to share. And so, sullenly, resentfully, he told.

Parrawhite listened in silence, taking in every point. Pratt, knowing that concealment was useless, told the truth about everything, concisely, but omitting nothing.

"All right!" remarked Parrawhite at the end, "Now, then, what terms do you mean to insist on?"

"What's the good of going into that?" growled Pratt. "Now that you've stuck your foot in it, what do my terms matter?"

"Quite right," agreed Parrawhite, "They don't. What matter is—our terms. Now let me suggest—no, insist on—what they must be. Cash! Do you know why I insist on that? No? Then I'll tell you. Because this young barrister chap, Collingwood, has evidently got some suspicion of—something."

"I can't see it," said Pratt uneasily. "He was only curious to know what that letter was about."

"Never mind," continued Parrawhite. "He had some suspicion—or he wouldn't have gone out there almost as soon as he reached Barford after his grandfather's death. And even if suspicion is put to sleep for awhile, it can easily be reawakened, so—cash! We must profit at once—before any future risk arises. But—what terms were you thinking of?"

"Stewardship of this estate for life," muttered Pratt gloomily.

"With the risk of some discovery being made, some time, any time!" sneered Parrawhite. "Where are your brains, man? The old fellow, John Mallathorpe, probably made a draft or two of that will before he did his fair copy—he may have left those drafts among his papers."

"If he did, Mrs. Mallathorpe 'ud find 'em," said Pratt slowly. "I don't believe there's the slightest risk. I've figured everything out. I don't believe there's any danger from Collingwood or from anybody—it's impossible! And if we take cash now—we're selling for a penny what we ought to get pounds for."

"The present is much more important than the future, my friend," answered Parrawhite. "To me, at any rate. Now, then, this is my proposal. I'll be with you when this lady calls at your place tomorrow evening. We'll offer her the will, to do what she likes with, for ten thousand pounds. She can find that—quickly. When she pays—as she will!—we share, equally, and then—well, you can go to the devil! I shall go—somewhere else. So that's settled."

"No!" said Pratt.

Parrawhite turned sharply, and Pratt saw a sinister gleam in his eyes.

"Did you say no?" he asked.

"I said—no!" replied Pratt. "I'm not going to take five thousand pounds for a chance that's worth fifty thousand. Hang you!—if you hadn't been a black sneak-thief, as you are, I'd have had the whole thing to myself! And I don't know that I will give way to you. If it comes to it, my word's as good as yours—and I don't believe Eldrick would believe you before me. Pascoe wouldn't anyway. You've got a past!—in quod, I should think—my past's all right. I've a jolly good mind to let you do your worst—after all, I've got the will. And by george! now I come to think of it, you can do your worst! Tell what you like tomorrow morning. I shall tell 'em what you are—a scoundrel."

He turned away at that—and as he turned, Parrawhite, with a queer cry of rage that might have come from some animal which saw its prey escaping, struck out at him with the heavy stick. The blow missed Pratt's head, but it grazed the tip of his ear, and fell slantingly on his left shoulder. And then the anger that had been boiling in Pratt ever since the touch on his arm in the dark lane, burst out in activity, and he turned on his assailant, gripped him by the throat before Parrawhite could move, and after choking and shaking him until his teeth rattled and his breath came in jerking sobs, flung him violently against the masses of stone by which they had been standing.

Pratt was of considerable physical strength. He played cricket and football; he visited a gymnasium thrice a week. His hands had the grip of a blacksmith; his muscles were those of a prize-fighter. He had put more strength than he was aware of into his fierce grip on Parrawhite's throat; he had exerted far more force than he knew he was exerting, when he flung him away. He heard a queer cracking sound as the man struck something, and for the moment he took no notice of it—the pain of that glancing blow on his shoulder was growing acute, and he began to rub it with his free hand and to curse its giver.

"Get up, you fool, and I'll give you some more!" he growled. "I'll teach you to—"

He suddenly noticed the curiously still fashion in which Parrawhite was lying where he had flung him—noticed, too, as a cloud passed the moon and left it unveiled, how strangely white the man's face was. And just as suddenly Pratt forgot his own injury, and dropped on his knees beside his assailant. An instant later, and he knew that he was once more confronting death. For Parrawhite was as dead as Antony Bartle—violent contact of his head with a rock had finished what Pratt had nearly completed with that vicious grip. There was no questioning it, no denying it—Pratt was there in that lonely place, staring half consciously, half in terror, at a dead man.

He stood up at last, cursing Parrawhite with the anger of despair. He had not one scrap of pity for him. All his pity was for himself. That he should have been brought into this!—that this vile little beast, perfect scum that he was, should have led him to what might be the utter ruin of his career!—it was shameful, it was abominable, it was cruel! He felt as if he could cheerfully tear Parrawhite's dead body to pieces. But even as these thoughts came, others of a more important nature crowded on

them. For—there lay a dead man, who was not to be put in one's pocket, like a will. It was necessary to hide that thing from the light—ever that light. Within a few hours, morning would break, and lonely and deserted as that place was nowadays, some one might pass that way. Out of sight with him, then!—and quickly.

Pratt was very well acquainted with the spot at which he stood. Those old quarries had a certain picturesqueness. They had become grass-grown; ivy, shrubs, trees had clustered about them—the people who lived in the few houses half a mile away, sometimes walked around them; the children made a playground of the place: Pratt himself had often gone into some quiet corner to read and smoke. And now his quick mind immediately suggested a safe hiding place for this thing that he could not carry away with him, and dare not leave to the morning sun—close by was a pit, formerly used for some quarrying purpose, which was filled, always filled, with water. It was evidently of considerable depth; the water was black in it; the mouth was partly obscured by a maze of shrub and bramble. It had been like that ever since Pratt came to lodge in that part of the district—ten or twelve years before; it would probably remain like that for many a long year to come. That bit of land was absolutely useless and therefore neglected, and as long as rain fell and water drained, that pit would always be filled to its brim.

He remembered something else: also close by where he stood—a heap of old iron things—broken and disused picks, smashed rails, fragments thrown aside when the last of the limestone had been torn out of the quarries. Once more luck was playing into his hands—those odds and ends might have been put there for the very purpose to which he now meant to turn them. And being certain that he was alone, and secure, Pratt proceeded to go about his unpleasant task skilfully and methodically. He fetched a quantity of the iron, fastened it to the dead man's clothing, drew the body, thus weighted, to the edge of the pit, and prepared to slide it into the black water. But there an idea struck him. While he made these preparations he had had hosts of ideas as to his operations next morning—this idea was supplementary to them. Quickly and methodically he removed the contents of Parrawhite's pockets to his own—everything: money, watch and chain, even a ring which the dead man had been evidently vain of. Then he let Parrawhite glide into the water—and after him he sent the heavy stick, carefully fastened to a bar of iron.

Five minutes later, the surface of the water in that pit was as calm and unruffled as ever—not a ripple showed that it had been disturbed. And Pratt made his way out of the wilderness, swearing that he would never enter it again.

CHAPTER VII

THE SUPREME INDUCEMENT

Pratt was in Eldrick & Pascoe's office soon after half-past eight next morning, and for nearly forty minutes he had the place entirely to himself. But it took only a few of those minutes for him to do what he had carefully planned before he went to bed the previous night. Shutting himself into Eldrick's private room, and making sure that he was alone that time, he immediately opened the drawer in the senior partner's desk, wherein Eldrick, culpably enough, as Parrawhite had sneeringly remarked, was accustomed to put loose money. Eldrick was strangely careless in that way: he would throw money into that drawer in presence of his clerks—notes, gold, silver. If it happened to occur to him, he would take the money out at the end of the afternoon and hand it to Pratt to lock up in the safe; but as often as not, it did not occur. Pratt had more than once ventured on a hint which was almost a remonstrance, and Eldrick had paid no attention to him. He was a careless, easy-going man in many respects, Eldrick, and liked to do things in his own way. And after all, as Pratt had decided, when he found that his hints were not listened to, it was Eldrick's own affair if he liked to leave the money lying about.

There was money lying about in that drawer when Pratt drew it open; it was never locked, day or night, or, if it was, the key was left in it. As soon as he opened it, he saw gold—two or three sovereigns—and silver—a little pile of it. And, under a letter weight, four banknotes of ten pounds each. But this was precisely what Pratt had expected to see; he himself had handed banknotes, gold, and silver to Eldrick the previous evening, just after receiving them from a client who had called to pay his bill. And he had seen Eldrick place them in the drawer, as usual, and soon afterwards Eldrick had walked out, saying he was going to the club, and he had never returned.

What Pratt now did was done as the result of careful thought and deliberation. There was a cheque-book lying on top of some papers in the drawer; he took it up and tore three cheques out of it. Then he picked up the bank-notes, tore them and the abstracted blank cheques into pieces, and dropped the pieces in the fire recently lighted by the caretaker. He watched these fragments burn, and then he put the gold and silver in his hip-pocket, where he already carried a good deal of his own, and walked out.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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