Bindloss Harold

The League of the Leopard

Harold Bindloss

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A DANGEROUS BEQUEST

It was very hot in the little West African factory where trader Niven lay dying. The sea breeze had died away, and though sunset drew near, it was not yet time for the spicy airs from the inland forest to mitigate the temperature. The dust lay still in the sun-scorched compound, about which the palm fronds hung motionless, and only the roar of breakers on the beach broke through the drowsy silence.

Two white men lounged in cane chairs upon the veranda which encircled the building. Both were limp, gaunt of frame, and pallid in face, because the climate they lived in is particularly unhealthy. Neither had enjoyed much education, or felt the lack of it in the trade they followed, while the cocktail jug on the little table betokened their favorite relaxation. Redmond and Gilby were West Coast traders who lived far remote from intercourse with their fellows, except for the two French rivals with whom they periodically quarreled. They concerned themselves with little beyond the well-being of their factory, and indulged each appetite on opportunity, knowing that on the morrow they might suddenly die. Yet they had their strong points, including a tenacious regard for their employers' interests, which led them to toil twelve hours daily when sick of fever if trade was good, and sometimes defy the French authorities, and an inconsistent generosity, as the result of which they had camped in the store shed, and turned over their own quarters to the man who stood behind them, and his stricken companion. The former was of very different type.

"You have done your best for the poor devil," said Redmond, glancing regretfully from him toward the empty jug. "But if I know anything about coast fever – and I ought to – Niven will get his release to-night. Still rambling about that fortune, I suppose?"

Carsluith Maxwell nodded, and Gilby commented meditatively: "It may be all a fever fancy, and it may be true. Niven was well known in this afflicted colony years ago, and there is gold up yonder. In fact, right away from here to the Volta you can find the color in the rivers, but there's very little of it that will pay for the washing, and few British mining companies that distribute much in dividends. Still, the old Portuguese took a good deal out, if the tales are true, and one gets small lots now and then put up in quills."

Redmond laughed maliciously.

"The last quills Gilby took in contained brass filings, and the firm wrote off their nominal value against our commission. Gilby had been drinking cocktails all that day. He may be right about the gold, but it's my firm opinion that unless the French send up a strong column and root out the Leopards, no white man will ever find it. You have heard about them, Maxwell?"

Maxwell was a man of discretion, and though he had ventured beyond the fringe of the Leopards' country, he only said:

"I don't know much about them. Do you?"

"He does not," said Gilby. "Neither does any white man; unless perhaps it's Rideau, or Niven. They are supposed to be members of one of the secret leagues run by the bush magicians in connection with the cult of the Ju-Ju; and if you want to know just what kind of devil a Ju-Ju is, you need not ask me. Anyway, from what one hears, those fellows can't be all impostors. They could apparently give our amateur necromancers points in hypnotism, and what they don't know about poisons is not worth learning. They're no fools at bush politics either; and have managed to run Shaillu's kingdom,

and keep white men out of it pretty successfully. It is believed that Shaillu would be glad to rule it without them, in his own way."

Maxwell knew all this, and a little more which his informant apparently did not; but he made no comment, and asked only one question:

"Who is Rideau?"

"He says he is a Frenchman," answered Gilby. "One would suppose that he ought to know; but after a dispute about the count of some monkey skins, Clancy of Axim once asked in public if there was not a dash of the tar brush in him, and was taken ill suddenly that night – which may, of course, have been a coincidence. In any case, he goes trading inland; and though he brings down a little gum, nobody knows exactly what he buys or sells. As you have heard, it's a ghastly country, and there's a heavy penalty for supplying niggers with modern rifles. The little French commandant would give a good deal to fix a charge on him."

"Thanks. I will remember if I meet him; but it is about time I returned to my patient," said Maxwell, and the other two looked after him until he disappeared round a corner of the dwelling.

"A curious man," Gilby commented. "He's probably like the parrot, for he says very little. Still, it is not everybody who would have turned back with his expedition on the very odd chance of saving a crazy countryman. It is just possible, however, he was glad to, after the bushmen had scared him."

"African parrots never think, unless it's about the pricking inside them," said Redmond. "You wouldn't either, if a nigger had fed you with broken glass, so you'd die as soon as he'd sold you, and keep the demand up. You're wrong, as usual, in other ways, too. If I'm a judge of character, there are no niggers in Africa who could scare that man."

Meanwhile Maxwell had seated himself on the opposite veranda, and, after a glance at a trestle couch which showed him that Niven was apparently asleep, was gazing out to sea. He was close on the age of thirty, of average stature, but spare and sinewy. His sallow face had been further darkened by the African sun, and though now its expression and that of the dark eyes was thoughtful, it was the face of a resolute man. Carsluith Maxwell was also, in a somewhat somber fashion, a handsome man; and though some of his fair acquaintances described him as too silent, and others as too sardonic, all agreed that he was interesting. Maxwell described himself as an individual of unsettled habits, born with fastidious tastes and no means to gratify them – which, he said, explained his wanderings in search of a fortune. He did not add that his chief ambition was to restore to its former prosperity an old Border stronghold which, with every acre of its grass parks and stony plow-land heavily encumbered, stood behind the shores of Solway. Carsluith Maxwell, who some day would be master of Culmeny, had inherited more than a trace of the silent grimness of the old moss-troopers from whom he sprang.

Turning presently, he saw that Niven was wide awake and looking out to sea. Their acquaintance had been brief, and dated from the night when Niven reeled into the camp of a small French expedition, alone, fever-stricken, and half-crazy. Seeing that he would die in the forest when the expedition continued its march, Maxwell abandoned his prospecting journey and turned back to the coast with him. The African malaria often attacks a white man's brain as well as his body; and during most of the time Niven had talked erratically. Now, however, Maxwell noticed that he appeared sensible and sane.

"Good to come back to, isn't it?" he said, glancing at the sea, athwart which the track of the sunset beat luridly. "I used to long for it in the forest when Lyle and I first set up the one factory which ever stood more than twelve months in Shaillu's country. That reminds me! I have a good deal to tell you, and, considering that I may not last out to-morrow, it's high time I began. I have given you a good deal of trouble, but you may not regret it when I have done."

"I shall not regret it in any case," said Maxwell quietly. He was seldom emphatic in speech.

"You are like Lyle, and that's partly why I'm going to tell you. He and I went up into Shaillu's country long ago, and the Leopards tried to poison us. They wanted no white men there, and did not like free trade. They also tried other ways; but if our lives were in our own hands, we held them tight

– and any man might face the devil with a partner like Lyle. You will understand presently why I'm commencing at the beginning. Well, we nursed each other through fevers, and twice stood behind a stockade with the rifle barrels burning our hands; but we made money, and I think the Leopards grew afraid of us because we lived in spite of them. Of course, we had our friends, because the brown traders from the North had to pay a heavy toll to the Leopards before we came; and some of them told us about gold having been washed out of a far-off river by niggers who had a poor idea of its value. We were too busy to trouble about ventures of that kind; and as the river flowed through No Man's Land there was nobody to sell us a marketable concession."

The sunset was fading off the waters when Niven paused to gather breath, while his strained voice sank to a deeper tone as he proceeded:

"There was a dispute as to who owned some gum we had paid for, and two men were shot before we convinced the niggers that nobody could lay violent hands upon our property. Then one of Shaillu's sub-headmen, who said there had been a mistake somewhere, summoned us to a palaver to talk the question over. We went, with twenty armed Krooboys scared almost to death, who feared Lyle more than they did the niggers, and were given a fair hearing. Several of the big Leopard men were there, but the headman held us justified, and when we had made everybody a present the palaver ended in revelry. I warned Lyle; but to fear nothing, and be equally ready with smile or pistol, was always my comrade's way.

"We came back safely; but he dragged himself up the stairway with his face all twisted the next night, and I knew what had happened before he told me. 'Those devils have poisoned me,' said he."

It was almost dark now, and the white mist from the forest slid in ghostly wreaths past the little factory. Niven shivered before he proceeded:

"Have you ever seen a comrade poisoned by the bushmen – when they meant to hurt him? No! Then you have something to be thankful for. Lyle, by worse luck, was young and strong, and took an unconscionable time dying; I don't know that I did well when I took the pistol from him. For three mortal hours I suffered all with him, and there was no power left in me when at last he let his head drop on the table. There are things it is not fit to remember which one can never forget. Then I knew all that the man had been to me; and what I must do was plain before me.

"I sent the chief Leopard man a message, with a token which, in accordance with his own superstitions, made it more impressive, that sooner or later I would demand full satisfaction, or, if I died too soon, would pass the debt on in a way he understood; and I had not forgotten when a new trading combination made me general manager. You see, I needed money, and could wait very patiently. I also made money, and, when badly sick, let the firm send me home, a fairly prosperous man, to recruit in England. It was there I met the woman I married; and she was worlds too good for me. I even forgot Lyle, and what we had done in Africa; and – for one looks at things differently over there – hoped for nothing better than to end my days in peace and security."

Niven so far had spoken sensibly, but he ceased when the thick hot African darkness rolled down like a curtain, and was silent a space. The land breeze had delayed its coming, the temperature was almost insupportable, and the roar of the breakers set the whole factory vibrating in unison. It is possible that the fever gathered strength, as it often does, at nightfall; for the sick man's speech was slow and disjointed when he began again. It was also evident that he was a little hazy in his mind.

"Poor Elsie died, and left me very lonely. Without her the life grew tame, and I would lie awake thinking of Africa and Lyle. He was growing impatient, and tried to warn me it was time I went back again. The warnings grew plainer, and at last I went. I had, so far as it was in me, trusted one man and loved one woman, and both of them had gone. The trading firms had forgotten my name, but I remembered the gold in the Leopard's country, and determined, if I could find it, to hire my own fighting boys, and hunt down the whole accursed league. There is no law but the right of the strongest hand in Shaillu's country. I went up with fifty Krooboys; and perhaps the Leopards remembered and were afraid of me, for we had almost reached the place in safety, when one of the sicknesses common

up there seized us. I left most of the boys behind in camp with my headman, and pushed on for the river where the gold was said to be. I found it – or Lyle found it for me."

Maxwell thought that no sane man would have attempted single-handed to try conclusions with the almost omnipotent league, but he sat still, with a composure that was characteristic of him, asking no questions, though the simple statement had roused his most eager interest. It was some time before Niven proceeded.

"I turned back to camp, and found none of all the boys I left there. Perhaps the headman had sold them. He had, you must remember, a curious cross-shaped scar upon his forehead. I don't know where the rest went, or what I did, being fever-crazy, and it must have been Lyle who brought me to the Frenchman's camp. Of course, Lyle is dead – I buried him with my own hands under the first big cottonwood behind the factory long ago – but he has never forgotten me. There was good alluvial gold in that river; and when I go you will find a record of my journey, with sketches and compass bearings, under my pillow. I'll bequeath it to you, with my curse upon the men who killed poor Lyle, on this condition: If you meet the Leopards – and whoever goes up there will – you will remember my quarrel with them, and how my partner died."

"After what I have heard about their doings, I can promise that," said Maxwell quietly.

"I think we both can trust you. You look that kind of man," said Niven. "I should never have told you if you hadn't. The two things go together, for the Leopard headmen will know I have passed the quarrel on. You can't take one without the other."

Niven sank into sleep or unconsciousness presently, and Maxwell sat beside him considering what he had heard. He could see that there was a burden attached to the legacy; but he had no profession, and was not a rich man. It was true that he would shortly succeed to Culmeny, and had inherited the family pride in the ancient estate; but, when the interest had been paid, the rental of the poor, encumbered lands would provide the barest living. He determined that if there was gold in the Leopards' country he would stake his life on the chance of finding it. After coming to this decision he called a Krooboy to watch the sick man, and retired to snatch a few hours' badly needed sleep. Sleep, however, was some time in coming. The mildewed building was insufferably hot, and the thunder of the surf sufficient to keep awake any man who had lately emerged from the hush of the twilight forest; but at last Maxwell sank into fitful slumber. It afterward was evident that the Krooboy, too, had slumbered.

Several hours had passed when Maxwell awakened suddenly, and sat up listening. Through the deep monotone of the breakers he could hear the land breeze sigh eerily about the building. A snake rustled in the thatch, and loose boards creaked as they soaked in the damp; but although there was nothing suspicious in all this, Maxwell felt that something unusual had roused him. Men acquire an almost instinctive prevision of danger in the eternal shadow of the African bush.

Suddenly a detonation shook the building. Maxwell, leaping from his couch, ran along the veranda and burst, breathless, into Niven's room. Bright moonlight streamed in through the window, and he saw the sick man lying propped up on one elbow, with a pistol smoking in his hand. Niven appeared perfectly sane, and his voice was steady when he spoke.

"My fingers are shaky, and this is a hard pull-off, or I'd have shown you the man who betrayed me," he said. "It was my book he wanted."

Maxwell, who was quick in action, sprang out upon the veranda and made a circuit of the building. The dusty compound beneath it was clear as noonday under the moon, but, save for two startled Krooboys and trader Redmond who crossed it at a run, nobody moved therein, and Maxwell hardly considered it possible that any fugitive would have had time to reach the bush. He returned and told Niven so.

"You must have been mistaken," he said.

The sick trader laughed harshly.

"I am not in the least mistaken. I saw the man with the scar on his forehead as plainly as I see you. He must have been one of the Leopards; and, whether it's magic or trickery, those fellows are fiendishly clever. You won't be astonished at stranger things before they have done with you. Take the book now, and keep it, if you can. If a man called Rideau ever hears you have it and wants to trade with you, distrust him as you would the devil. If he says I ever made any bargain with him, it will be a lie!"

Maxwell went out and allayed Redmond's curiosity by a promise to confer with him in the morning; then he returned to watch beside Niven, who slept tranquilly during the remainder of the night. After breakfast Maxwell told Redmond as much of the story as appeared judicious; but the trader did not, as he partly expected, laugh at it.

"Of course, it may have been all a delusion, and it may not," he said. "If so, it's a coincidence that I heard Rideau has just arrived at the next beach; and one of my boys, who seemed afraid of it, picked this up in the bush. It's a trifle that has a significance in the country your sick friend rambled through."

The trader handed Maxwell a little tuft of leopard's fur braided with fiber.

"If Niven has told you any of his secrets it might be good policy not to mention it," he cautioned; "and Gilby and I are not curious. This factory is sufficiently remunerative and deadly for us."

Niven grew rapidly weaker all day, and when Maxwell asked him at sunset whether he had any messages to send to friends in the old country, he did not appear to recognize him.

"They're all dead a long time ago," he said ramblingly. "Poor Elsie, who was worlds too good for me, lies in clean English earth a long way across the sea; but Lyle, who understands everything and why I forgot him, is waiting for me. I could not have a better comrade wherever he is."

These were his last comprehensible words, for he passed out of existence, sleeping, with the chill of early morning, and was, as usual, laid to rest that day. Maxwell returned thoughtfully from the simple funeral, feeling that the legacy might well prove an unmixed blessing.

On reaching the veranda stairway, he heard somebody moving softly about what had been the sick man's room. He had good ears, and felt tolerably certain that the next sound he caught was that made by cotton garments being quickly unfolded or wrapped together. Somebody, it appeared, was searching Niven's apparel. In spite of Maxwell's quickness, he had not reached the doorway when a man came out of it and advanced, smiling toward him. He was rather dark in face and full in flesh for an European who had dwelt any time in Western Africa. He also was more elaborately dressed, in spotless white duck, fine linen, and silk sash, than the average trader; but if his lips were a trifle thick, and his eyes cunning, he had an easy, good-humored air, and saluted Maxwell gracefully.

"Monsieur Maxwell, is it not? I have the honor to present myself – Victor Rideau," he said. "By grand misfortune, I arrive too late to change the adieux with my friend of long time, the estimable Niven, and so wait to ask if he left any paper for me. We have affair together, and there is small debt he owe me, *voyez vous*?"

Maxwell was a man of keen perceptions, and he would have distrusted the speaker even if he had not been warned against him.

"He left you no papers. Neither, so far as I can discover, did he leave a single franc piece in money."

"Grand misfortune!" exclaimed Rideau. "Possible it is he tell you of his affair. The estimable Niven, you understand, was old friend of me. That is why I have the pleasure of wait your company."

"He told me very little about his business affairs, and the rest was spoken in strict confidence," said Maxwell; and for a few seconds the two men eyed each other – Maxwell curious but expressionless in face; Rideau somewhat uneasy. The advantage was with the Briton, for he was seldom loquacious, while the man of Latin extraction seemed to find the silence irksome.

"You are perhaps busy," he said at length. "You grieve for the estimable Niven. Me, I grieve for him also. So, if it is not intrusion, to-morrow, by the morning, I come for condole with you."

Rideau withdrew, and Maxwell first packed his few belongings – a homeward bound steamer was due to call on the morrow – and then sat down to make a copy of the dead man's itinerary, with the sketches attached to it. He was surprised to find that, mad or sane, Niven had noted the magnetic direction of each day's march, as well as taken cross bearings of prominent objects wherever there was open country. These details increased his hopefulness; and when he had enclosed the copy in a sealed envelope and handed it to the French postmaster, he buttoned the original in an inside pocket and sat down on the veranda, smoking thoughtfully.

"It appears that other men beside myself believe Niven actually did find gold up there, as two attempts to steal his diary seem to prove," he reflected. "Whoever goes up to look for it will probably have to deal with Monsieur Victor Rideau as well as the Leopards; and a little delay in setting about the search may throw him off the scent. The first necessity is a reliable partner, and I can think of nobody better than Hyslop."

The homeward bound mailboat arrived before Rideau the next day, and when she stopped at the first port connected by cable, Maxwell despatched a message to London:

"*Wire Hyslop to meet me by Malemba.*"

Before the steamer proceeded he received the answer:

"*Hyslop dead South America, according to Dane.*"

"Poor Andrew!" thought Maxwell. "That is check number one. Still, there must be many suitable men at home, and I dare say I shall find one. Who Dane is, Carslake, parsimonious as usual, does not explain."

CHAPTER II
AN UNDERSTANDING

It was a pleasant summer evening when Hilton Dane leaned against a beech trunk outside Thomas Chatterton's villa which stands upon a hillside above the Solway shore. He was a tall, fair-haired man who looked older than his age, twenty-five, with steady blue eyes, and usually a somewhat masterful air; but just then his eyes were wistful, and his face, which betokened an acquaintance with the tropical sun, expressed somewhat tempered satisfaction. He had certainly cause for the latter feeling, because, after toiling hard at railroad building in a foreign land, it was comforting to know that he had earned the right to rest a while in that peaceful retreat.

The sun still touched the velvet lawn, though the shadows lengthened across it, and the larch wood behind the red-tiled building diffused resinous odors. The grass sloped to a river which came down amber-tinted from the stretch of heather growing black against the east, and, curving round two meadows, flashed through the gloom of fir branches into a deep pool. All this was pleasant to the wanderer newly returned from the glare of the desolate pampa and the turmoil of dusty construction camps; but Dane found the keenest pleasure in watching his companion.

Lilian Chatterton, niece of the childless owner of The Larches, was worth inspection. She was a year or two younger than the man, and lay in a low chair opposite him, her fingers busy with a ball of colored thread, while the last of the sunlight sparkled in her hair. Dane noticed how its bronze color flashed into lustrous gold, and decided that the changing lights in the hazel eyes matched it wonderfully well. Nevertheless, he had seen them burn with quick indignation, for the girl possessed a spice of the Chatterton temper, which was never remarkably equable. Presently he allowed several loops of thread to slip from the skein he held, and she looked up with a trace of indignation.

"That is the second time! You cannot be tired already," she said.

Dane smiled a trifle grimly. He had toiled for twelve hours daily under burning heat and then spent half the night poring over plans, not long ago.

"I am not quite worn out; but is it not an unfair question, considering my present employment? This skein is getting mixed, and I was wondering if you would allow me to help you in straightening it."

Miss Chatterton glanced at him keenly before she shook her head. It was not surprising that she had grown used to masculine homage, but none of her other cavaliers had quite resembled this one. He was slower and more solid, and, while he had a way of anticipating her wishes, he lacked their versatility. Sometimes she wished, with a sense of irritation, that she could dismiss him as summarily as she had done the rest, but that could not be done without incurring Thomas Chatterton's displeasure, which was no small thing to risk.

"No," she said decisively. "I believe you tangled it yourself. Don't you think it would run more smoothly if you gave the thread more length? Well, why don't you act upon the suggestion?"

"I was thinking," the man answered with a meditative air; and Miss Chatterton laughed.

"It is a bad habit of yours. Of the famous mining pump, or the lawsuit, presumably?"

There was something in the speaker's manner which qualified the smile in her hazel eyes, and warned the man that his companion was merely bent on discovering how far he was disposed to respect the wishes she had not directly expressed. He, on his part, was wondering how he could best intimate that certain fears she entertained were groundless. He laughed softly, though a tinge of darker color crept into his tanned face as he remembered the uncompromising frigidity with which she had at first received him.

"I feel that I ought to say something civil," he said. "How could one think of the things you mention in such surroundings?"

The girl was in a variable mood, and she smiled mischievously.

"That is not civil. It implies that I expected you to. Tell me instead how the pump is progressing."

"The pump is not progressing," said the man. "In fact, it is standing still; and, though the court upheld my patent, it will probably continue to stand still for lack of capital. Capital is hard to acquire, you know."

"But you were well paid, and promoted several times on your merits in South America, were you not?" asked Miss Chatterton.

"I was lucky," Dane said quietly. "It was due to no merit of mine that my superiors died off with yellow fever; but when the inventor desires a fair share of the profit himself, it requires a good deal of money to start off pumps and similar inventions successfully."

"You are growing avaricious," declared Miss Chatterton, and let her eyes fall a little under the man's gaze.

"You are right," he said. "I would sell half my life to any one for the few thousand pounds the invention would repay twenty-fold; and somehow I shall get them."

The listener fancied that this was possible, for there was a stamp of force and endurance upon the man; but she did not inquire why he was so anxious for wealth. While she considered her answer, and he wondered how he could best express what must be said, there was an interruption; for it happened a few moments earlier that the owner of The Larches flung down the balance-sheet he was perusing in a room which did not look out upon the lawn.

"Those new directors are a pack of fools," he observed. "They are throwing away all I so painfully built up. I'm going to catch a trout in the moss pool; and, as I saw Maxwell's rascals putting up the fence again, I'll demolish his iniquitous obstruction on my way. Helen, where have these stupid people hidden my flybook again?"

Mrs. Chatterton smiled a little, and, reminding her husband that the book was in his pocket, followed him to the door.

Thomas Chatterton and the father of Hilton Dane had set up a little wire mill when both were struggling men, and, though Dane's rolling machinery had started them on the way to prosperity, its inventor died too soon. Chatterton was always considered an upright man; but, because Dane's widow did not long survive her husband, nobody knew exactly whether his success was due to his own energy or the dead man's invention. Chatterton, however, recognized a moral debt, and would have discharged it, but that Hilton Dane had inherited his mother's pride as well as his father's skill. When the famous business was sold to a company, the iron-master, purchasing a small estate in Scotland, aspired to play the part of a country gentleman, in which he was not wholly successful. He was at once too autocratic and too democratic; and the local magnates of ancient descent resented his habit of doing exactly what pleased himself in defiance of their most cherished traditions. He had accordingly embroiled himself with Maxwell of Culmeny over what he contended was an ancient right of way.

When he reached the door he turned and smiled significantly at his wife.

"They seem well contented, do they not?" he said.

Mrs. Chatterton understood him, though she did not smile as she glanced at the two on the lawn. Lilian's white-robed figure was forced up sharply in a manner that emphasized its comeliness by the somber background of larches; and the last of the ruddy light deepened the faint, warm tinge in her cheeks. Dane's face was in the shadow, as he looked down upon the girl, but his form showing darkly against the light was that of a vigorous, well-made man; and Mrs. Chatterton, knowing his disposition, reflected that her niece might make a less desirable choice. It was, however, she thought, unfortunate that her husband was seldom addicted to leaving those he desired to benefit any choice at all; and she considered that he had made his intentions respecting Dane and his niece too plain, for Lilian had a tolerably strong will of her own.

Chatterton moved forward, and the two turned sharply at the sight of the stout, thick-necked, elderly gentleman, in vivid red leggings and slouch hat adorned with gaudy flies.

"We had neither time nor taste for needle-work when I was young, Hilton, but these are degenerate days," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes. "Do you feel inclined to help me to catch a trout during the evening rise?"

Dane glanced appealingly toward his companion. He would have felt no great inclination for being sent into the river to free the iron-master's line, which usually formed part of the program on such excursions, even if he had not a better reason for refusing.

"I am afraid the water is too clear, sir, for an indifferent angler; and it might spoil this skein if I left it partly wound," he answered lamely.

Lilian, however, possibly for Chatterton's benefit, ignored the appeal.

"So far you have only succeeded in entangling it," she said.

Dane had no choice left but to express the pleasure it would afford him at least to carry his host's landing net; and he did it as well as possible, though uneasily conscious that Chatterton was amused at him. Then they waded together through long damp grass which soaked Dane's thin shoes through, while Chatterton discoursed learnedly upon lines and flies. He was as choleric and obstinate as he could be generous when the impulse seized him, and he had ruled stubborn operatives so long that the use of the strong hand had become habitual to him. Presently he halted, fuming with indignation, before a hedge.

"That confounded Maxwell has built it up stronger than ever!" he exploded. "Look at that, and see how he respects a public right of way! Don't you consider it perfectly scandalous, Hilton?"

Dane saw an irate elderly gentleman, and a neatly mended gap in the hedge; but being uncertain as to what answer would best soothe the former, he wisely held his peace until he should furnish further particulars. Chatterton, however, espying a stout stake in the grass, commenced a spirited attack upon the hedge. So vigorous was it that his face grew flushed and his hat fell off, while Dane looked on with suspicious gravity, smothering a desire to laugh.

"If you really want that gap opened, I dare say I could assist you, sir," he said.

Chatterton panted wrathfully.

"Do you suppose I am doing this for exercise? It's a public duty! I have battered it down twice already, and defied Culmeny to sue me."

He plied the stake again until, glancing from a root, it smote him on the ankle. Desisting then, he commented upon his neighbor's conduct viciously while Dane proceeded to attack the obstruction with marked success. Chatterton, when he noticed this, watched him admiringly; and when Dane tore his hand on a strand of barbed wire, he positively beamed on him.

"I'm sorry, Hilton; but, in one way, it's almost a pity you did not tear it worse," he said. "Still, I dare say it will rankle sufficiently to give us something to claim damages from Culmeny upon. Meantime, go home and ask Lily to tie it up. Nobody could do it more neatly."

"I certainly hope it will not, sir," said Dane, with a trace of irritation; though, being thankful for the excuse, he lost no time in returning.

Meanwhile, Lilian Chatterton sat where he had left her, in a contemplative frame of mind. She and Dane had been playmates in their younger days, and the latter had afterward shown his admiration for her in youthful fashion. That was before he went abroad; but her cheeks tingled as she remembered how she had been made to feel, a few weeks earlier, that it was Chatterton's desire that their youthful friendship should speedily ripen into something further. Lilian was grateful to the iron-master, who had denied her nothing, and brought her up as his daughter; but she was also sensitive, and accordingly shrank from Dane, wondering, with a sense of shame, what had been said to him, and whether he, too, considered her own opinion as of no importance. The man's conduct had, however, partly reassured her, for he made no advances; she did not know that he had, during several years spent in strenuous effort, carried her memory and a stolen photograph about with him.

Had she been a free agent she might have been inclined to approve of Hilton Dane. She knew he was honest, resolute, and capable, while as regards physique, nature had treated him well; but as

it was, and because there were no friends she could find an excuse for visiting, it appeared essential that he should be made to recognize that there could be no more than a mutual toleration between them. Miss Chatterton had just arrived at this conclusion when the man came toward her across the lawn. Again it struck her that the bronzed face beneath the straw hat was that of an honest man, and that the blue eyes had a kindly gleam in them; but she brushed such thoughts aside impatiently.

"What has brought you back so soon?" she asked.

"The need of assistance," Dane answered with a laugh, and the girl's mood changed swiftly as she glanced at his injured hand. Her eyes grew sympathetic.

"Will you wait a few moments until I find some arnica?" she said.

Dane would have waited a long time in return for such a glance, and, when the girl rejoined him, he felt that the pain was a very small price to pay for the pleasure of letting his torn hand rest in her little cool palm. When it had been bound up with a dainty handkerchief, Lilian smiled prettily.

"I think," she said playfully, "with due care you should now recover."

"Do you know that I feel tempted to go back and tear the other?" returned the man.

Lilian regarded him with some uneasiness.

"Such speeches do not become you," she said. "No doubt there are idle men who consider that they prove irresistible to most of us; but you – you are different."

"Yes," Dane assented somewhat grimly. "I suppose my lot is to drag the measuring chain and do the hard work more famous men get paid for; but a little variety is refreshing – and there were times when you did not seem to find any levity on my part wholly irksome."

The girl's color rose a little, and there was a sparkle in her eyes. She understood that this was a challenge, but she did not guess that it had been thrown down for her sake out of kindliness. Unfortunately, she recalled several incidents connected with the days to which her companion referred, and she recollected that he had an unpleasantly good memory.

"We were only boy and girl then," she said. "One forgets such nonsense as one grows older. Still, I am almost glad you mentioned it, because – can't you see the uselessness of remembering?"

Dane, though he did not say so, saw most clearly the impossibility of ever being able to forget; but he was considerate, and had sense enough to see what he would lose by taking advantage of the position. He had noticed how, until his conduct reassured her, she held aloof from him.

"What could an unfortunate man answer?" he asked with a mirthless smile. "Do you expect me to admit that I am pleased to consider it is so?"

Lilian looked down at the grass to hide the anger in her face.

"Please don't – I am not wholly foolish," she said; and added abruptly, "I have almost decided on going to London for a course of art study shortly."

Dane leaned forward a little, and forced her to look up at him.

"That is, you are going away to avoid me," he said. "Have you considered that this might not only render circumstances unpleasant for you, but be unnecessary?"

Lilian looked at him steadily, for she was not lacking in courage.

"I am my own mistress; and they are distinctly unpleasant already."

Every word of the answer cost Dane an effort, but he determined to finish his task.

"I can realize that they must be so," he said. "I am not clever at expressing myself, and what I have to say is difficult to me, but I cannot allow you to be driven away. We are both master of our own inclinations, are we not? – and you have my word that, if you can trust me, it really isn't necessary."

There was no doubt about the relief in Lilian's face; and though it hurt the man to see it, he held out his hand.

"We shall be good friends once more; and that implies a good deal, does it not?" he said. "Promise so much, and I will engage that you have no further perplexity."

Lilian felt very grateful.

"I think I can promise that, now that we understand," she replied.

"Then it is a compact," said Dane, hiding his own regret manfully. "As a change, you might tell me why your uncle finds such satisfaction in destroying his neighbor's fences. He even said it was a pity I did not tear my hand more seriously."

Lilian was glad to change the subject.

"He fancied that Maxwell of Culmeny closed the gap to annoy him," she explained. "Unfortunately, when tearing down the first barrier, he hurt his foot, which naturally made him more determined to maintain ancient privileges. In one way, the feud is amusing; in another, vexatious; because we are lonely here, and the Misses Maxwell cannot well call upon us. Their brother Carsluith has lately returned from Africa, and would have made you a pleasant companion."

"Carsluith Maxwell?" said Dane. "It is curious that I was of some service to a friend of his, named Hyslop, in South America. The poor fellow struck our camp pulled down by sickness and apparently in want of money, and we were able to find him employment."

"Did you not mention that the contractors would not replace the assistants who died of fever?" asked Lilian. "Did they endorse your action?"

"I can't say they did," was the answer. "They were not required to."

"Oh! Then who paid Hyslop's salary?"

"It was arranged," Dane answered ambiguously. "You see, he was a countryman; and the poor fellow died soon afterward, anyway. I think I shall walk over to Culmeny."

Lilian asked no further questions. She felt that any one in trouble could trust the man beside her. She smiled as she said:

"I am afraid that would not be judicious. Your host would consider it an act of treachery."

They went back to the house together; and in the meantime, Thomas Chatterton, who was not a skilful angler, whipped several pools unsuccessfully, hooking nothing but weeds, and once, by accident, a water hen. Thus it happened that he had not returned when darkness fell, and Mrs. Chatterton despatched Dane in search of him. The moon was rising when the latter came down a path through the fir wood and stopped beside a deep, black pool. A streak of silver light crept up to the roots of an alder beside a ruined wall, and he paused to watch the wrinkled current flash athwart it. The odors of the firs and the stillness of the night were soothing: the sacrifice he had lately made had been a heavy one. Dane had not abandoned his hopes, but knew that he might have to wait long for their consummation, if they were ever realized.

Presently there was a sound of footsteps, and Dane guessed that the approaching shape was Chatterton by the red glow of his cigar. The iron-master stopped beside the alder, and it seemed that something which caused a ripple near its roots caught his eyes. Dane suspected that some poacher had set a night line.

Now, the wall marked the boundary between Chatterton's riparian rights and those of Culmeny; and it was out of idle curiosity that Dane watched his host instead of hailing him as, first looking about him, he descended the bank and hauled in the line. An exclamation of disgust followed as a writhing eel was flung out upon the grass; but there were nobler fish attached, and presently Chatterton stood up holding a splendid trout. Dane remembered that his father had sworn by Chatterton's commercial integrity, but he was not wholly astonished when the man slipped the fish, and a second one which followed it, into his creel. Then, surmising that the angler would not have desired a witness, he turned back softly and met him in the wood, flattering himself that he had arranged the meeting neatly.

"Had you any luck, sir?" he asked.

"The water was low, but here is something to convince the mockers," Chatterton answered, holding up a handsome trout; and Dane expressed admiration but no astonishment, which might not have been complimentary.

They walked home together, and Lilian met them in the hall. She surveyed the trout suspiciously, then laughed as she said:

"You look hot and muddy, and almost guilty. Are you quite sure you have not been poaching?"

Miss Chatterton was a shrewd young lady, and for a moment the iron-master, who had quelled several strikes unaided, looked positively uneasy.

"Young women were taught that flippancy did not become them when I was young," he rebuked.

Late that night the two men sat talking together.

"You have told me little about your affairs, Hilton," Chatterton said; "but I presume you will stay at home and put your pump on the market instead of accepting the foreign commission. There should be a good demand for it among the deep mine owners."

"I'm afraid not, sir," was the answer. "The patent lawsuit proved expensive, and to start an article of that kind successfully requires a good deal of money. I shall therefore go abroad to earn a little more as soon as the firm sends me."

"And risk your life for a thousand pounds," said Chatterton severely. "Don't you know that there are men with money who would be willing to finance you?"

"All I have met demanded three-fourths of the possible profits in return; and this is my invention."

"It is a valuable one," declared Chatterton with unusual diffidence. "But can't you think of anybody who would lend you the money out of good-will at a very moderate interest?"

Dane looked at the speaker steadily before he answered.

"I think I could; and I'm grateful; but unfortunately I can't bring myself to borrow money from such people. It would be abusing their kindness; and I might lose it for them."

Chatterton frowned.

"You are like your father – and as confoundedly hard to do a favor to," he said.

He retired shortly after this; and Dane went out into the moonlight, and leaned over the rails of a footbridge, watching the river slide past. He found a faint solace in the sounds and scents which filled the shadows, and knew that though he had taken the one course possible, if he was to retain his own self-respect and Lilian's esteem, there would be no sleep for him that night.

CHAPTER III
AT THE ELBOW POOL

While waiting for his foreign commission, Dane found the summer days slip by almost too rapidly, though there were occasions when, after a long afternoon spent in Lilian's company, he fancied he could understand the feelings of Tantallus. The girl appeared completely reassured, and treated him with sisterly cordiality, while Chatterton, who knew nothing of their compact, nodded sapiently as he observed their growing friendship. Dane sometimes wondered if he were not heaping up future sorrow for himself; but, with infrequent exceptions, he found the present very good, and, being a sanguine man who could wait, he made the most of it.

Lilian was troubled by no misgivings. Once, when her aunt asked a diplomatic question, she smiled frankly as she said: "Yes. I am in one way very fond of Hilton; you will remember that I always was. We understand each other thoroughly; and he is so assured and solid that one feels a restful sense of security in his company. You will remember the Highland chieftain's candlesticks – the men with the claymores and torches, Aunty. Well, I fancy that worthy gentleman must have felt the same thing when he dined in state with them about him. He had but to lift his finger and they would disappear, you know."

Mrs. Chatterton looked slightly grave as she answered: "Don't forget that they were also men with passions, and very terrible men, sometimes – for instance, at Killiecrankie. It would not surprise me if you discovered that there is a good deal of very vigorous human nature in Hilton Dane."

Thomas Chatterton still went fishing, generally with indifferent success, but once Lilian caught Dane examining his creel, which was surprisingly well filled.

"I am puzzled, Hilton," she said. "I made a wager with Uncle that he would not catch a dozen good trout in a month, and now I fancy that he will win it."

"Well?"

"Men are deceivers ever – especially when it is a question of catching fish. I have noticed that when your host goes fishing by daylight he rarely catches anything but eels, which, as everybody knows, do not rise to a fly, while when he rises early or returns in the dusk he brings a really fine trout or two. I cannot, however, believe that this one died only two hours ago. Can you suggest an explanation?"

"Charity," said Dane gravely, "suspecteth nothing. Don't you know that trout rise most freely just before the dusk?"

Lilian shook her head.

"You are not sufficiently clever to set your wits against a woman's," she declared.

Dane laughed, a trifle grimly; and the girl, momentarily startled by something in his merriment, decided that she must have been mistaken; but she abandoned the subject with some abruptness.

That very evening, perhaps sent forth by fate, because much depended upon his fishing, Thomas Chatterton took up his rod and landing net, and, as he did not return by nightfall, his wife once more despatched Dane in search of him.

"I think you know where to find him; and I wish I did, for he has only to take two more trout to win," Lilian added significantly.

Dane proceeded by the shortest way to the big elbow pool, but it was almost dark when he reached it. There had been heavy rain, and all the firs which loomed through thin white mist were dripping. The water came down beneath them thick with the peat of the moorlands in incipient flood. Dane could hear its hoarse growl about the boulders studding the tail rapid, and surmised that there ought to be several trout on the poacher's line. Having, nevertheless, no desire to surprise his host red-handed, he did not immediately proceed toward it, but sat upon the driest stone he could find,

listening for his coming. There was no sound but the clamor of the river and the heavy splashing of moisture from the boughs above, some of which trickled down his neck, until he heard a rattle of falling stones, and a shadowy figure, which he guessed was Chatterton's, crawled down toward the alder roots.

A splash was followed by a hoarse exclamation as the man slipped into the water up to the knee; then Dane heard the thud of a flung out fish, and sat very still, for it would clearly be injudicious to present himself just then. He noticed a minute twinkle of brightness among the boulders across the pool which puzzled him. It was too small for the light of a lantern, and he remembered nothing that shone in just the same fashion. While he wondered what it could be, another dark object rose beside the alder, gripping what looked like a heavy stick.

"I'm thinking I have ye noo!" a gruff voice exclaimed. "Ye sorrowful wastrel, stealing a puir man's fish!"

Thomas Chatterton stood upright, knee-deep in the river, with an exclamation; and Dane, knowing there was much deeper water close behind him, sprang to his feet. That the irascible iron-master would show fight if necessary, he felt certain, and equally so that a portly elderly gentleman would make a poor match for a brawny laborer. Hardly had he got to his feet, however, than the keeper, sliding down the bank, dropped silently into the river, and disappeared as if by magic, while, as Dane wondered what had startled him, another voice rang out.

"Run straight in on the alder while I head him off from the firs!" it directed; and a whistle was followed by the sound of trampling feet.

Somebody came smashing through the undergrowth, and Dane was never quite certain as to the cause for what happened next, though he surmised that Chatterton's dread of becoming a laughing-stock to his enemy proved momentarily stronger than his reason. In any case, he must have endeavored to follow the keeper's lead, and lost his footing, for a side swing of the stream swept him out from shore, while Dane, realizing that an elderly gentleman in heavy boots and leggings was hardly likely to make much head against a flooded river, plunged from the bank in the flattest dive he could compass, though horribly afraid that he might strike his head against a submerged stone. It was a good plunge, for he rose almost in mid-stream, and heard a great splashing and panting close before him. A few moments later, he had Chatterton by the shoulder, and braced himself for a struggle.

Chatterton, though driving sideways down the stream, could apparently swim a little, and did not appear unduly alarmed. Indeed, Dane had cause for believing he feared nothing except ridicule; but he was very heavy, and panted stentoriously, while muddy froth beat into the younger man's eyes and nostrils, and the rebound, which surged in a whirling eddy from a central rock, swept them down together toward the white race between the boulders at the tail of the pool. Dane had no intention of being hammered against them if it could be avoided, and did his utmost, thrusting with one hand on Chatterton's shoulder and swimming on his side. Still, the boulders swept up-stream past them, the larches flitted by, and though they drew clear of the fastest rush, it seemed impossible that they could make a landing in time to escape the rapid. Chatterton was apparently swallowing water, and choking badly now.

"For heaven's sake, make a last effort, sir!" spluttered Dane; and the iron-master splashed furiously.

A strip of shingle grew nearer, but they would hardly have reached it had not a man floundered in almost shoulder-deep and clutched them as they passed. All three went down together, Chatterton undermost; but when Dane's head broke the surface, a hand was twined in his hair, and a half-choked voice said:

"You are in wading distance, man. Get up and walk!"

Dane felt sliding shingle beneath him, and tightening his grip on Chatterton he struggled for a foothold; and finally they reeled, breathless, dazed, and dripping, out among the boulders. Then somebody turned back the slide of a darkened lantern, and the half-drowned Chatterton gasped,

for it was evident that his rescuer was Carsluith Maxwell, the son of his enemy. Maxwell stared at Chatterton, and the iron-master gaped at him; but while blank astonishment was stamped on both their faces, it was Maxwell who recovered his senses first.

"Robertson, hail Jim to run over to The Larches, and say that Mr. Chatterton, who fell into the river trying to capture a poacher, is coming home with me to change his clothes," he ordered, and then turned toward the dripping pair. "It was very plucky of you, sir, and you were only a few seconds too late. I thought you would secure the depredator. It is two miles round by the footbridge, and you hardly look fit for the walk, so you are coming to Culmeny with me. There is really no use protesting."

Thomas Chatterton did not look capable of much exertion, but he hesitated.

"It is very kind of you, but your father and I, unfortunately – "

Maxwell laughed.

"I believe you had some trifling difference; but this is a Christian country, and the reason given quite insufficient for letting you freeze to death. Mr. Dane, I presume? You will help me to persuade your host."

Chatterton, although exhausted, yielded dubiously, and it was not long before the pair shed their dripping garments beside a blazing fire in Culmeny, and struggled into the dry ones provided, both sets being of average size. Dane, however, was tall and long of limb; Chatterton was short and broad, and when his toilet was finished, he stood up half-choked, with every button straining about him.

"This is worse than a strait waistcoat, Hilton," he fumed; "and I'd rather forfeit five pounds than go down and meet them as I am. By the way, I believe I never thanked you; but I will not forget our swim. But tell me how you came to turn up so opportunely."

Chatterton betrayed some anxiety in the last words, but Dane managed to frame an answer which reassured him as he surveyed himself in a glass and hoped the Misses Maxwell would not put in an appearance. The wet hair plastered down his forehead showed a washed-out straw color against the darkened skin. His brown wrists and ankles projected ridiculously from the borrowed garments, and somebody's slippers would not cover more than a portion of his feet.

"We are neither of us particularly prepossessing at first sight, but I suppose we must make the best of it; Maxwell asked us to come down when we were ready," he said.

They went down, Chatterton fuming, Dane struggling with a desire to laugh; and two men rose to meet them when they entered a long, low-ceilinged room. That meeting was fraught with far-reaching consequences, and Dane could afterward recall it vividly. The old place of Culmeny was an ancient and somewhat decrepit edifice, owned for many generations by the Maxwells, and the wainscot of the room was dark with age. Quaintly embroidered curtains were drawn across one end of it; there were few pictures, and these old; while the whole place wore a somber air, almost intensified by the light of the wax candles on the great uncovered table, which supported a steaming bowl. This, Dane noticed, was of oak hooped with tarnished silver. It was, however, the two men who fixed his attention. The elder, a spare gray-haired man with a white moustache, came forward holding out his hand.

"I must congratulate you upon your escape, Mr. Chatterton," he said. "I am glad that Carsluith had sense enough to bring you home with him; and I can recommend a ladleful of this mixture as a preventative against a chill, while regretting that, because the fires were low, we could not send you a dose earlier. The customs of Culmeny are not altogether what they used to be."

The pair formed a striking contrast when Chatterton turned toward his host, glass in hand. The one was softly spoken, spare to gauntness, and characterized by a subtle air of distinction; the other, short, florid, abrupt in speech, and more often aggressive than dignified in manner. Then, because Chatterton was also a man of impulse, who cared for neither place nor tradition when anything stirred him, as his host's welcome evidently did, he bowed to Brandram Maxwell with more grace than Dane deemed him capable of.

"Here's to our better acquaintance, sir; and my best thanks," he said. "I'm a plain, self-taught man, and may have blundered in enforcing what I thought my rights. If so, I regret it."

What Brandram Maxwell answered Dane did not remember, but he expressed it very neatly; and while the feud was patched up, his son smiled curiously at the younger man. He was like his father, but taller in stature, dark in color of eyes and hair, and slightly olive-tinted in complexion, while his movements suggested a wiry suppleness. Dane surmised that he was of reserved, if not slightly sardonic, disposition.

The bowl of punch was emptied with every sign of amity; and when it was finished Thomas Chatterton, who had absorbed the major portion and declared that he had never tasted anything better, said: "I hope we shall see much more of each other in future, and, as an earnest of the wish, I will expect you shortly at The Larches, where Mrs. Chatterton will thank you for your kindness better than I can."

While Brandram Maxwell started some topic of conversation with his elder guest, his son, to whom Dane had mentioned the affair of the Englishman in South America, drew him aside.

"Hyslop and I were once good friends, and I consider myself your debtor for what you did for him," he said. "Did he tell you much about his wanderings, or that he and I came near successfully exploiting a Mexican mine?"

"No," said Dane. "He told me very little. What went wrong with the mine?"

Maxwell laughed.

"The unexpected happened. It generally does when one awaits the consummation of an ingenious scheme. I am especially sorry Hyslop has gone."

Dane longed to ascertain whether his new friend suspected any other explanation than the one he had seized upon for Chatterton's plunge into the river, and endeavored to do so, without success; for even when he afterward learned to know and trust him well, he never found it easy to glean more from Carsluith Maxwell than he wished to tell. An accident, however, favored him, and he thought more of the man for his reticence when, as the master of Culmeny was exhibiting some new artificial minnows in his gun-room, he heard his son, who had slipped away, say to somebody in the darkness beneath the open window:

"You remember the pheasants' eggs incident, Kevan? You need not repeat your explanations, because I have no intention of raking it up, and merely wish to suggest that you find means of preventing your comrades from talking too much about what happened to-night. When a gentleman of Mr. Chatterton's years allows his excitement to overcome him to such an extent that he follows a poacher into a flooded river, he naturally would not like his adventures made public property."

"I'm a wee bit puzzled, sir," answered an invisible person; and Maxwell's voice rose faintly through the sound of retreating footsteps:

"I am not puzzled in the least; and that ought to be sufficient. You are sure you understand my wishes?"

He came in a few moments later to inform his guests that the dog-cart was waiting.

As they drove home, Chatterton said sententiously:

"We all make mistakes at times, Hilton; and that was most excellent punch. For instance, when one comes to know him, Maxwell is what might be termed a very good fellow. Hard up like the rest of them, of course; land and buildings, as everybody knows, burdened to the hilt, but – I suppose it was born in him – he bears the stamp, and his son wears it too. You and I are different, you know, though travel has done a good deal for you. I have handled a good many men in my time, and I like that fellow's looks. He would be a very bad kind to tackle when the devil that smiles through his black eyes wakes up; and I think he'd stand by the man who played him fair through the damnedest kind of luck."

Dane, who fully endorsed this opinion, was afterward to discover that Thomas Chatterton was no bad judge of his fellow-men.

"They are neither of the type one associates with this part of the country," he commented.

"No," said Chatterton. "They were, I understand, always an adventurous family, and some of them who took part in the wars there in the old days intermarried with the Spaniards then holding the Low Countries. A strain of that kind takes a long time to work out, you know."

Chatterton's fishing was not without results, for in spite of, or perhaps because of, their different character and experience, it was the commencement of a friendship between himself and Maxwell of Culmeny. The iron-master had hewn his own way to fortune, and, being troubled by no petty diffidence, was, if anything, overfond of recounting has earlier struggles. The wild blood of the old moss-troopers still pulsed in the veins of the Maxwells, and the impoverished gentleman, who listened with interest, sighed as he remembered the sordid monotony of his own career, during which he had, by dint of painful economy, somewhat lightened the burden with which his inheritance had been saddled by the recklessness of his forbears.

Carsluith Maxwell took even more kindly to his new acquaintances; and there sprang up between himself and Dane a comradeship which was to stand a bitter test, while, as summer merged into autumn, he would sometimes wonder at himself. He said nothing about his African venture, and spent much time considering old rent books and the cost of moss-land reclamation schemes. The rest he spent shooting with Dane, or lounging at The Larches, if possible in Lilian Chatterton's vicinity; but, although he could rouse himself to temporary brilliancy, Maxwell was usually oversilent in feminine society, and Dane felt no jealousy. The latter rested content in the meantime with the knowledge that Lilian found a mild pleasure in his company; and only Mrs. Chatterton felt any misgivings respecting future possibilities. Being a wise woman, she kept her suspicions to herself until they became certainties, when one day Miss Margaret Maxwell, perhaps not wholly by accident, gave her a significant hint.

"I hear that your brother has undertaken an extensive drainage scheme," said the elder lady.

"We are hopeful that he will settle down at last," responded Margaret Maxwell. "My father's health is failing, and he has long desired his son's company; but Carsluith was always ambitious, and used to say he would never vegetate in poverty at Culmeny. Of late, however, we have been pleased to see that he is taking an almost suspicious interest in the improvement of the estate, and is now investing the money he made in Mexico in the reclamation of Langside Moss. As Carsluith seldom does anything without a reason, his sudden change of program puzzles us."

Mrs. Chatterton fancied she could supply the reason, but she made no comment. Lilian, she decided, had a right to choose for herself, and might make a worse selection than a Maxwell of Culmeny.

In the meantime, Dane still awaited his foreign commission, and might have waited indefinitely, but that once again a poacher played a part in the shaping of his destiny. There were plenty of them in that neighborhood; while rogue, and clown, and commonplace individual of average honesty usually outnumber either the saints or heroes in life's comedy. The poachers were netting the Culmeny partridges, and Dane promised to assist his comrade in an attempt to capture them.

CHAPTER IV
THE POACHER

It was a chilly night when Dane crouched in very damp clover beside a straggling hedge, waiting for the poachers, and wishing he had been wise enough to remain at home. Rain had fallen throughout the day, and now heavy clouds drifted overhead, while a chilly breeze shook an eery sighing out of the firs behind him. The moon was seldom visible, but a subdued luminescence filtered through, and he could just see Maxwell crouching in a neighboring ditch which was not wholly dry.

"What are you meditating upon, Hilton?" Maxwell asked.

"I was just thinking what a fool I was to come at all, and that it is almost time I went home again. When a man has had tropical fever it is his own fault if he suffers from indulgence in amusements of this description."

"I am not entirely comfortable either," Maxwell said dryly. "My boots are full of water, and my hair is thick with sand; but I dare say both of us have had worse experiences. If those fellows don't come in the next ten minutes I'll turn back with you."

Neither said anything further for a space. The firs moaned behind them, the dampness chilled them through, and the odor of wet clover was in their nostrils. When, instead of ten minutes, nearly half an hour had passed, there was a low whistle from a hidden keeper, and Dane could dimly see several indistinct figures in the adjoining meadow.

"Kevan and the constable should head them off," whispered Maxwell. "I'll race you for the first prisoner, Hilton!"

It was characteristic of Maxwell that he had worked an opening ready in the hedge, and slipped through it, while Dane hurled himself crashing upon the thorns. He broke through them, somehow, and noticed very little as he raced across the dripping aftermath except that two men strove to drag something over the opposite hedge. Before he could reach it, Maxwell had separated from him, and because the moon shone down through a rift in the clouds, he saw him clear the hedge in a flying bound. The next moment he had his hand on the collar of one man brought up by the thorns. Dane saw his face for an instant, and then, when the other kicked him savagely on the knee, he shifted his hand to his throat, and was doing his best to choke the fight out of him when he heard footsteps behind him, and something descended heavily upon his head. He fell with a violence that shook the remaining senses out of him, and lay vacantly listening to the sound of running feet and hoarse shouts which grew fainter in the distance, until Maxwell, returning, shook him by the arm. It was dark again now, for the moon had vanished, and a thin drizzle was falling. Dane's head ached intolerably, and a warm trickle ran into one of his eyes.

"Are you badly hurt, Hilton?" asked Maxwell, stooping and holding out a flask.

"No," Dane answered dubiously, as, gripping his comrade's hand, he staggered to his feet. "Mine is a pretty thick cranium, but somebody did their best to test its solidity with the butt of a gun. Did you get them?"

"We did not." Maxwell, who seldom showed what he felt, evinced no chagrin. "The constable managed to stick fast in the one gap in the second hedge; but we got their net, and, although I don't wish to trouble you if you are not fit, if you could describe the fellow you grappled with, we should know where to find him."

Dane did so to the best of his ability.

"It's young Jim Johnstone!" the keeper exclaimed; "an' after this we should grip him trying to slip off by the night train. I'm minding Mr. Black told me he'd e'en be sitting up in case yon rascals killed onybody, an' ye needed authority. He's a pleasant-spoken gentleman, an' this is a clear case o' unlawful woundin'."

"Start at once with that fool of a policeman!" said Maxwell. "Now, Hilton, if you can manage to walk as far as the road, I will drive you home."

He held out his arm, but grew tired long before they reached his trap: Dane was no featherweight, and he leaned upon him heavily. When Maxwell helped his comrade down before The Larches there were lights in the lower windows, though it was very late, and its owner stood upon the steps awaiting them.

"I could not sleep until I heard whether you had caught the rascals," he began. "But what's this? Have they hurt you, Hilton?"

"Not much, sir," answered Dane.

Seeing Mrs. Chatterton in the hall, he shook off Maxwell's arm, and attempted to enter it unassisted to prove his assertion. The attempt, however, was a distinct failure. He tripped upon a mat, reeled forward drunkenly, and, clutching at the nearest chair, sank into it, presenting a sufficiently surprising spectacle, for his collar, as he subsequently found, was burst, while there were generous rents in his garments, and the red trickle flowed faster down his face. Then there followed confusion, for Mrs. Chatterton was a gentle but easily disconcerted lady, and her husband addicted to over-vigorous action. So, while the one proceeded in search of bandages, and, not finding them, returned to ask useless questions and, in spite of his feeble protests, pour cold water over Dane's injured head, Chatterton smote a gong and hurled confused orders at the startled servants. This lasted until a dainty figure came swiftly down the stairway, and chaos was reduced to order when Lilian took control with a firm hand.

"Don't trouble him with questions, Aunty, but get some brandy, quick!" she said. "Uncle, please do not make any more useless noise, but ask one of these foolish women to bring hot water. Annie, bring me the arnica, and the first piece of clean linen you can find. Now, Hilton, you are not hurt very badly, are you?"

She bent down, with the light of a big hanging lamp upon her, and, forgetting the faintness and pain, which was considerable, Dane felt his heart bound within him. In spite of her swift orderliness, the girl's eyes were anxious as well as very pitiful, and there was a tension in her voice.

"No," he replied, as carelessly as he could, for all his pulses were throbbing. "I am just a little dizzy, and shall be better presently. I am chiefly ashamed of making such a scene, Lily."

It did the man good to see the relief in his attendant's face. Miss Chatterton flushed a little under his gaze and became once more strictly practical.

"The wound is worse than you suppose," she said, with a slight but perceptible shiver. "Take a mouthful of this brandy, and I will fix a dressing. Aunty, hold the bandage, and give me the scissors!"

She did all very cleverly, then slipped away; and ten minutes later Dane was glad to bid Chatterton and his wife good-night. His head still throbbed painfully – for the trigger-guard which struck his forehead had bitten deep – and, having seen what pleased him greatly, he desired to be alone to think.

When he had gone, Mrs. Chatterton looked at her husband.

"Did it strike you as significant that Lily should come down at a few moments' notice dressed just as she left us?" she asked.

"Am I quite a fool?" said Chatterton, and then added in oracular fashion: "Hilton Dane will make his mark some day; and it was his father's roll which started me on the way to prosperity."

As it happened, Lilian Chatterton had also food for reflection, and sat long by an open window looking out into the night. There was no doubt, she admitted, that she found Hilton Dane's society congenial. His swift deference to all her wishes pleased her; and as he had intimated that he desired nothing more than her friendship, there was no reason why it should not be granted him. Under different circumstances the girl fancied that her interest might have carried her farther; but Thomas Chatterton's thinly veiled command was a fatal barrier. Even then she frowned, remembering the summary manner in which he had purposed to dispose of her as though she were a chattel.

Nevertheless, she had been badly startled by the sight of the wounded man; and the fact remained that when her eyes first rested upon him she grew almost faint with a sudden and wholly unexplainable fear. Lilian wondered, with a crimsoning of her face, whether she had betrayed the relief she certainly experienced on discovering that his injuries were not serious; and then she closed the window with somewhat unnecessary violence.

The next sun had not long risen when Dane went out shakily into the freshness of the morning. His brain had refused duty during the preceding night, and there were questions to be grappled with. Hilton Dane possessed a long patience, but, although a chivalrous person, he was not a fool. He shrank from the thought of allowing the iron-master's ward to be forced into a union with him, even if that were possible – about which, however, knowing the young lady's character, he was very doubtful. Also, he was at present a comparatively poor man, and though he believed there was a moderate fortune in his invention, he saw that some time must elapse before he could realize it. Abusing his host's interference fervently, he decided that because the continual effort to keep silence was wearing his resolution down, it would be well to avoid further temptation by leaving The Larches.

He had just arrived at this decision when Chatterton came upon him.

"You do not look at all fit, Hilton," said the elder man. "The cut on your forehead would, of course, account for that; but it has struck me lately that something is troubling you. I refrain on principle from prying into other folks' affairs; but, considering the time I have known you, if you have any difficulty, I think you might confide it to me."

Dane understood what lay behind this, and he felt that it was the last thing under the circumstances he would think of doing.

"You have made my stay here so pleasant that if I remain much longer I shall never be fit for work again," he said. "I have accordingly decided to run up to London, and, if the railroad builders have not my work cut out, look round for another foreign commission."

Thomas Chatterton started a little, and tried to hide a frown.

"I thought you had changed your mind after the letter you showed me, and decided to stay in this country. It strikes me as downright folly to risk accidents and fevers abroad with such a patent in your hands. Your pump would beat the best pulsometer ever put into a mine. If you don't approve of the offers you have received, and my suggestions, why can't you sell it to the public through a limited company?"

Dane laughed a little.

"As I said before, sir, by the time I paid promoters and directors, there would be very little left for me. If the pump, which cost years of thought and experimenting, is to enrich anybody it shall be its inventor; and another good foreign commission should supply me with the necessary money."

"Listen to me," said Chatterton. "It is time I spoke plainly. I have been called a hard man, but I hope I am equally just, and I had to fight desperately for a foothold at the beginning. Well, I kept a mental ledger, and no man ever robbed or assisted me but I made against his name a debit or credit entry. Some of those debts were heavy, but in due time I paid them back in full."

For a moment Chatterton certainly looked a hard man as he shut his hand slowly, and with a very grim expression in his heavy-jawed visage, stared steadily at Dane. Then the grimness vanished as he added:

"There is still a sum standing to the credit of Henry Dane, and I feel ashamed often that I have let it stand so long. There is still one way in which you could help me wipe it off, if none of those mentioned already suits you. My niece will not leave me dowerless – and – for if it had not been so I should not have spoken – you expressed your admiration pretty openly some years ago."

Dane had no enviable task before him, but, remembering his compact, he was determined to accomplish it, even if it should be necessary to use a little brutality.

"I am afraid I see two somewhat important objections, sir," he answered quietly. "In the first place, it is not apparent that the lady approves of me."

"Pshaw!" said Chatterton. "When I was your age I never allowed such trifles to daunt me. You surely did not expect her to say she had been patiently waiting for you?"

"I think I mentioned two objections, sir, and the second is of almost equal importance," Dane responded gravely. "I am at present a poor man, you see."

Thomas Chatterton faced round on him again with his jaw protruded, and a deeper hue in his generally sufficiently florid countenance.

"You need not be, unless you are fond of poverty. You mean – "

"That a boy and girl attachment seldom lasts long – on either side."

Chatterton moved a few paces forward, with the dry cough which those who knew his temper recognized as a danger signal, then wheeled round upon his heel and strode toward the house; and Dane noticed that he kicked an unoffending dog he usually fondled.

As luck would have it, the next person Dane met was Lilian, and she looked very winsome as she stood bareheaded under the morning sunshine in her thin white dress. Dane's lips set tight as he watched her, then suddenly his face softened again.

"I am glad to see you recovering, Hilton," she greeted him. "That hat hides my bandages nicely. Do you feel able to walk slowly over to Culmeny with me to-day?"

It was a tantalizing question: Dane felt not only able but very willing to walk across the breadth of Scotland in Lilian Chatterton's company. He feared however, that his moral strength would prove unequal to the strain the excursion might impose, for it was growing very difficult to observe the conditions of the indefinite compact.

"I am very sorry, but I have letters to write," he said.

Lilian Chatterton was a trifle quick-tempered, and though Dane knew it, and considered it not a fault but a characteristic, he wondered at the ways of women as she answered:

"I could not, of course, expect you to delay your correspondence, which is no doubt important. Have you run out of those new powder cartridges?"

Dane felt that, under the circumstances, this was particularly hard on him, but he smiled dryly.

"The correspondence relates to my departure for London. I want you to listen, Lilian. I have just had an interview with your uncle, which makes my absence appear desirable. Perhaps you can guess its purport, and the gist of what he said."

The clear rose-color deepened a little in the girl's cheeks, but she answered steadily.

"I will admit the possibility. The most important question is what you said to him."

Now Dane had not only subdued mutinous alien laborers, and held them to their task, but he had even been complimented by a South American Spaniard upon the incisive vocabulary which helped him to accomplish it. Nevertheless, at that moment he felt almost abject, and found speech of any kind very difficult.

"Are you ashamed of your answer?" asked the girl.

"I am," Dane admitted. "There was, however, only one way in which I could satisfy Mr. Chatterton without running the risk of allowing him to apply considerable misdirected energy to the task of convincing a second person. Therefore, though I did not like it, I took that way. He was not pleased with me."

"You told him – " Lilian began, coloring still more.

"I did," said Dane grimly. "Horribly unflattering, wasn't it; but it was the best I could do for you."

The girl first experienced a wholly illogical desire to humiliate the speaker; but, recognizing the unreasonableness of this, she reflected a moment, and then laughed mirthlessly.

"It should certainly prove effective. Still, a woman would have found a neater way out of the difficulty!"

Lilian left him, and when the man passed out of earshot into the shrubbery, he used a few pointed and forbidden adjectives in connection with what he termed his luck.

He was leaning moodily upon a gate, looking down on a sunlit stubble-field the following afternoon, when the next link was forged in the chain of circumstances which, beginning with Chatterton's fishing, would drag him through strange adventures. There was late honeysuckle on the hedges, and festoons of warm-tinted straw. Running water sang soothingly beneath the pine branches overhanging a neighboring hollow; while all the wide vista of river, moor, and fell was mellowed by the golden autumn haze. Dane, however, was far from happy. He was in no way jealous of Carsluith Maxwell, which was perhaps surprising; but, in addition to his other troubles, it did not please him that the latter should have accompanied Miss Chatterton home on foot from Culmeny. They had also been an inordinate time over the journey.

Presently, a little brown-faced child came pattering barefooted down the lane, and stopping, glanced at him shyly, as though half afraid. She was a pretty, elfish little thing, though her well-mended garments betokened industrious poverty. She apparently gathered courage when the man smiled at her.

"Whom are you staring so hard at, my little maid?" said he.

The child fished out a strip of folded paper from somewhere about her diminutive person, and held it up to him.

"Ye will be the Mr. Dane who's staying at The Larches?"

Dane nodded, and the girl glanced up and down the lane suspiciously.

"Then Sis telt me to give ye this when there was naebody to see."

"And who is your sister, and what's it all about?" asked Dane; and the little thing smiled roguishly.

"Just Mary Johnstone. Maybe it would tell ye gin ye lookit inside it, sir."

She vanished the next moment, with a patter of bare feet, leaving Dane to stare blankly at the folded paper.

"Now, who is Mary Johnstone, and what can she want with me?" he wondered, as he prepared to follow the child's advice and read the missive. When this had been done, however, he was not greatly enlightened.

"*I'm taking a great liberty*," it ran. "*I am in great trouble, and you are the one person who can help me. If you would not have two little children go hungry all winter, you will meet me by the planting at Hallows Brig in the gloaming to-morrow. I saw you at The Larches, and thought I could trust you.*"

"Very confiding of Miss Johnstone, whoever she is, but I'm thankful my conscience is clear," thought Dane. It was unfortunate that he did not obey the first impulse which prompted him to destroy the note. Instead of this, he lighted another cigar, and sat down to consider the affair.

Just then the local constable, who on an eventful occasion had also stuck fast in the hedge, came tramping through the stubble with elephantine gait.

"Grand weather the day, sir," he beamed. "Ye will have heard we grippit the man who broke yere heid."

"I'm summoned as a witness; but who is Mary Johnstone?" asked Dane. "You should know everybody about here."

"Old Rab Johnstone's daughter; and that's no great credit to the lass. Rab's overfond of the whisky, and never does nothing when he can help it, which is gey often, I'm thinking. The daughter's a hard working lass – sews for the gentlefolks; and she and her brither between them keep the two mitherless bairns fed. It's him we've got in the lock-up for breaking yere heid."

"Oh," said Dane, as a light dawned upon him. "Then Mary Johnstone would be the pretty, light-haired girl I saw sewing for Miss Chatterton?"

"That same, sir," answered the constable, with professional alacrity. "Miss Chatterton has missed nothing, has she?"

"Of course not!" Dane said impatiently. "I was only inquiring out of curiosity. You need not mention it. Would this coin be of any use to you?"

The official admitted that it might be; but when he appeared to smother a bovine chuckle, Dane turned upon him.

"What the deuce is amusing you so?"

"Naething, sir," the man answered sheepishly. "I'm taken that way whiles in hot weather."

The constable furnished further particulars about the poacher's family before he departed; and Dane, reflecting that his must be the most damaging testimony against the prisoner, understood why Mary Johnstone had sent for him. It was perhaps foolish, but the child's face had attracted him; and deciding that the lot of the pretty seamstress, struggling to bring up her sisters under the conditions mentioned, must be a hard one at the best, he resolved at least to hear what she had to say.

CHAPTER V
THE TRYST AT HALLOWS BRIG

It was a clear, cool evening when Carsluith Maxwell leaned on the rails of a footbridge which spanned the river, looking up at the old place of Culmeny. It rose from the stony hillside, a straggling pile of time-worn masonry, with all its narrow windows aflame with the evening light, and the green of ivy softening its rugged simplicity. A square tower formed its major portion, and this had been built with no pretense at adornment in troubled days when the Maxwells had won and held their possessions with the mailed hand. They had been, for the most part, soldiers of fortune, and their descendant recalled the traditions of his race as, turning, he looked south and east across the shining flood-tide toward the Solway sands.

More of his forbears had, when there was scarcity at Culmeny – which was generally the case – ridden that way in steel cap and dinted harness than ever rode back, and Carsluith Maxwell had hitherto fulfilled the family destiny, chancing his life in modern ventures where the risks were perhaps as heavy as any the old moss-troopers ran. Now, however, he had come to a turning-point in his career, and that night must decide whether he applied his energies to the slow conversion of barren mosses into arable land, or went forth again to seek his fortune over seas. The wandering life appealed to his instincts; and fortune had not wholly evaded him; but he had recognized of late that unless he could share it with one woman, even prosperity would have little value for him. There was a trace of melancholy almost akin to superstition in his nature, and it was with a curious smile that he turned toward Culmeny to put his fate to the test. If Lilian Chatterton would not listen, it was high time to begin his search for the African mine.

In the meantime, Hilton Dane sat in the hall of Culmeny waiting for a word with Maxwell, and also until it was time to keep his appointment at the Hallows Brig. Three narrow, diamond-paned windows with rose lights in the crown of their lancets pierced one end of the hall, and the fading sunlight beating through, forced up into brightness the pale-tinted dresses of his companions. They were young and comely women, and, because the rest of the dark-paneled room was wrapped in shadow, neither face nor dainty figure suffered from being silhouetted against a somber background. A cluster of late roses in a silver bowl, and the tawny skin of an African leopard on the polished floor, both touched by the tinted gleam, formed by contrast glowing patches of color. Nevertheless, Dane's eyes most often rested upon Lilian Chatterton, who sat near an open window with a ruddy glory blazing in her hair, while the dark oak behind it emphasized the delicate chiseling of her face. There was a stamp of decision upon it as well as refinement.

"Is it not wonderfully peaceful to-night?" she said, glancing out across the velvet lawn. A few roses still flowered along one side of it, a tall clipped hedge hemmed it in, and, beyond the lawn, fir wood, yellow stubble, and meadow rolled down to the silver shining of the sea. The whole lay steeped in the sunset, serenely beautiful; but the black shadow of the firs lengthened rapidly across the grass.

"You are all very silent," the girl continued. "Why does not somebody agree with me? Don't you think it peaceful, Margaret? This might be an enchanted garden, and yonder hedge a barrier impassable to care. It is good to talk nonsense occasionally; and to-night one could almost fancy that no cause for trouble might enter here."

As she spoke, Dane noticed that the gloom of the firs had swallowed most of the lawn, and the coincidence struck him as an unfortunate augury. Lilian had known little of either sorrow or care; and having learned by painful experience that the balance of light and darkness is determined by immutable law, the man trembled for her.

Margaret Maxwell laughed a little.

"You are distinctly fanciful. Culmeny has seen very little of either peace or prosperity. The spot where this very garden stands was once worn down by the hoofs of stolen cattle, and the feet of armed men bent on exterminating the gentle Maxwells who plundered them. We also read that the serpent entered Eden, and have the authority of Milton and others for picturing the Prince of Darkness as a somewhat courtly gentleman; while one notices that when there is unusual harmony, trouble not infrequently follows the advent of a man. It is a coincidence, but that ditty should herald Carsluith's coming."

A voice rose out of the adjoining meadow chanting a plaintive ditty in an unknown tongue. The air resembled nothing Lilian had heard before, and she leaned forward listening, for the refrain, pitched in a mournful minor key, was equally striking.

"I did not know your brother sang so well; but I do not like that song. It strikes one as uncanny," she said.

Margaret Maxwell nodded.

"It is West African, and that, I understand, is an uncanny country. My brother spent some time there. He really sings – as he does most things when he thinks it worth while, which is not always – tolerably well."

The song died away as Carsluith Maxwell came lightly across the lawn, and Dane noticed that the last of the sunlight faded and the shadows shut in both himself and Lilian Chatterton when the newcomer entered through the open window.

"I did not know I had such an audience, or I should have been too diffident to play the nightingale," Maxwell laughed.

"Miss Chatterton did not like your song, though she admired its rendering," said Margaret mischievously. "But what put that doleful composition into your head to-night?"

"Association of ideas, most probably," answered Maxwell, with a smile on his lips, but none in his eyes. "I met the post-carrier, and must decide forthwith whether I shall follow up my African scheme or not. It is curious, but by the same token I'm standing with my heel on the neck of the leopard, and I feel inclined to say God send it be a true augury. You have your foot upon him, too, Miss Chatterton; and that is a very ill-omened beast."

"How so?" asked Lilian. "It cannot be very large or terrible, to judge by its skin."

"It holds a country larger than Scotland in terror," replied Maxwell. "There are whole tribes of black men who tremble at the sight of a tuft of leopard's fur."

"As an insignia, I suppose; but the beast is clearly vulnerable." Lilian stooped and pointed to the fur. "Surely that is the work of a bullet."

"You have keen eyes," said Maxwell. "The taxidermist did his best to hide it. That hole was made when I first pitted myself against the leopard by shooting one to convince my carriers the thing was mortal. For some time I suspected that was the beginning of a duel."

"And now?" interposed his sister, with a trace of anxiety.

"Now I almost hope I was mistaken," said Carsluith Maxwell. "With your permission, I have one or two things to see to, and should like a word with Hilton."

They went out together, and presently Dane returned alone to bid Miss Maxwell adieu.

"You have been very patient during the last hour," said that lady. "Now that you have seen Carsluith, one could not, of course, expect too much from you."

"I have been very self-indulgent," said Dane, who had seen the elfish child again and promised to meet his correspondent. "Still, there is a limit to everybody's opportunities for enjoyment, and unfortunately I must tear myself away."

Margaret Maxwell glanced at him sharply, for she fancied that he spoke with sincerity, as indeed he did; but Dane, having given his promise, intended to keep it. She also glanced at Lilian, and decided that Miss Chatterton was not wholly pleased.

"Carsluith proposed to drive you both home. Can you not wait until he is ready?" she suggested.

"I fear I cannot," answered Dane, with a trace of confusion. "The fact is, I have an appointment to keep."

He left them a trifle abruptly, and Miss Maxwell turned to Lilian.

"Whom can your guest have an appointment with? He looked positively guilty. I fear that he must have fallen into the toils of some rustic beauty, which, considering his opportunities, shows a deplorably defective taste."

If Lilian felt any resentment she showed no sign of it; but she was a little more quiet than usual while they awaited the return of Carsluith Maxwell.

Dane, remembering Lilian's glance of interrogation, hurried toward the Hallows Brig in a somewhat uncertain humor. Though the hillside was still projected blackly against a pale gleam of saffron above, it was nearly but not quite dark when he reached the bridge, and the water sang mournfully through the deepening gloom of the firs. The cool air was fragrant with the faint sweetness of honeysuckle, and the calling of curlew rose from a misty meadow; and it seemed to Dane that the slight, shadowy figure which presently flitted toward him was in keeping with the spirit of the scene. When the girl halted beside him there was still just sufficient light to show that her face was comely. Hilton Dane was not given to wandering fancies, and had long carried Lilian Chatterton's photograph about with him; but he felt compassionate when he saw the anxiety in the thin face, and noticed that the girl's lips were quivering.

"Miss Johnstone, I presume?" he said. "Will you please tell me why you sent for me?"

"I will try, sir," was the answer. "I have two little sisters to bring up on what I earn by my needle, and what Jim can spare; but work has been ill to get at the quarries, and, now when Jim's in prison, and winter's no far away, I'm afraid to wonder what will be the outcome if he is convicted."

"He should have considered such risks before he attempted to steal another man's partridges," said Dane, with a poor attempt at severity.

"Poaching is not stealing, sir!" There was a ring in the girl's voice. "Sorrow on the game that steals the farmer's corn to make a rich man's pleasure, and tempts a poor man to his ruin! May ye never learn, sir, what it is to choose between stealing and starving."

"The question is, what do you wish me to do?"

"To let Jim off, sir," was the answer; and the girl's eyes were eager to tearfulness as she fixed them on the man, who frowned, perhaps because he felt the appeal in them almost irresistible. "It was a dark night, and maybe ye could not be quite certain. It was the others who tempted him. He will go no more poaching if he once wins clear, and if the fiscal sends him to prison the bairns will be hungry often or the winter's through. It's for their sakes I'm asking; and the neighbors say there will be no conviction if ye cannot swear to Jim."

Perhaps it was Dane's duty to sternly rebuke the pleader, but she appeared half-fed and desperately anxious; and the face of her tiny sister, with its look of childish confidence, rose up before his fancy. He had once, and with little compunction, cut down with a shovel a frenzied Italian laborer who led a mutiny, but now, though he set his lips firmly for a moment, his eyes were pitiful.

"I am afraid what you suggest would not be right," he said presently. "Does your father not help you at all?"

The girl's "No," expressed a good deal, and the despair in her voice completed the man's discomfiture.

"I'm sorry; I had no right to ask," he said. "I am sure, at least, that it was not your brother who broke my head, because – because he was not in a position to attack anybody just then – and, for the sake of the little ones, if there is any doubt at all – and I dare say there will be, he shall have full benefit. But I cannot set him at liberty to continue poaching; and the neighboring land-owners will probably see that he gets no more work at the quarries; so he must take a letter from me to a contractor who will no doubt find him employment."

Here, to the consternation of Dane, who did not know that his underfed and overworked companion had done a courageous and, in the eyes of her neighbors, a very suspicious thing, the girl broke out into half-choked sobbing.

"You really must not cry," he pleaded awkwardly. "It is distressing to me; and it is not my fault that your brother's friends cut my head open. However, as I am the unfortunate cause of your distress, if the little ones have suffered already it would be my duty to – to see they didn't – you understand me?"

The girl, though still tearful, drew herself up with some show of pride.

"I'm no asking ye for money. The relief was just overmuch for me; but, and it's a last favor, ye will no tell Miss Chatterton. Her good word means work and bread to me."

"I am not likely to tell Miss Chatterton," the man assured her; then added in haste: "If I did, she would not blame you."

"Maybe! Ye will not tell her," the girl said enigmatically, and then once more caught her breath.

Dane, being unpleasantly uncertain what she might say or do in an hysterical attack, felt it incumbent on him to soothe her, and laid a hand reassuringly on her shoulder. It is possible that his companion found comfort in the grasp, or instinctively recognized the touch of an honest man, for she made no effort to evade it. As it happened, the lane was grass-grown and sandy, and the river frothed noisily down a rapid beyond the bridge. Thus neither of them heard the fall of hoofs until a sudden glare of light beat into the face of the man. Fate had decreed that the driver of the approaching vehicle should not only light the lamps a little earlier than usual, but choose the longest road.

The result was unfortunate, for Dane, acting on impulse, drew the girl farther back into the shadow of the hedge, and stood before her with his hand still on her arm. The light had partly dazzled him, but he recognized in the occupants of the dog-cart Lilian Chatterton and Carsluith Maxwell, and barely choked back an expletive. Neither, if they had seen him, showed any sign of recognition, which, however, was hardly to be expected under the circumstances. Then, as the vehicle jolted on, the girl, seeing the chagrin in the man's face, gazed at him curiously, and with half-coherent thanks hurried away, leaving Dane in a state of savage dismay.

"It is confoundedly hard on an unfortunate and innocent man! This is a situation which will require considerable explaining, and I shall probably never have an opportunity for attempting it," he muttered.

In the meantime Lilian Chatterton felt the hot blood surge upward from her neck, and was thankful that the darkness partly hid her face. It is true that she had effectively, so she hoped, put an end to any aspirations Dane might have cherished; but when he had once accepted the position there was no longer any necessity to conceal the fact that to a certain degree she found his society congenial, or to consider how far her interest in him might carry her. His complaisance had been the more gratifying because she fancied it was not every woman who could bend such an individual to her will. Lilian, however, had not only set up a somewhat elevated standard of conduct for herself, but was inclined to judge harshly those who fell beneath it; and now she was unmistakably, if illogically, angry. The knowledge that the man had gone out fresh from her presence to keep such an assignation stung her pride to the quick, and brought the crimson to her very forehead. It was, she considered, an unforgivable insult. Still, she had but seen him dimly for a second, and might be mistaken, and so she turned toward her companion.

"It is curious that I should fancy there was something familiar in the voices we overheard," she said as lightly as she could.

Maxwell had learned discretion.

"Voices are always deceptive," he answered. "One should never trust to a fanciful resemblance. The bridge is a favorite trysting-place for rustic lovers; as one result of the sudden appearance of a pair of them, this excitable beast managed to upset me the last time I approached it."

Carsluith Maxwell had done his best for his friend, and it was not his fault that he had only confirmed the girl's suspicions, and set her wondering if all men were equally perfidious.

"That being so, was it not very thoughtless of you to drive me this way?" she inquired, with some asperity.

"Guilty," laughed Maxwell. "May I plead in extenuation that it is the longest?"

He sprang down and looped the reins round a gatepost when they reached the winding drive which led up to The Larches.

"Do you mind alighting here, Miss Chatterton?" he asked.

"No," said Lilian. "But may I inquire the reason?"

"A desire not to risk your safety a second time. The drive is very dark, the horse addicted to bolting on opportunity; and it would be hard to do justice to what I must tell you if I were forced to watch him. The task is sufficiently beyond me already; I would give a good deal for the power of eloquence."

Lilian was startled, for the speaker had certainly not worn his heart on his sleeve.

"Could you not wait until to-morrow?" she asked with some trepidation.

"I am afraid not," said Maxwell, a trifle grimly. "I fear this must be a surprise to you, but circumstances prevent my waiting, and it is even better to hear one's sentence than to remain in suspense. Won't you listen?"

Lilian, seeing there was no escape, bent her head; and, if Maxwell had not the gift of eloquence, he could compress a good deal into a few brief sentences. There was no superfluous protestation. The man spoke abruptly, but Lilian could not doubt the earnestness in his voice, or, as he stood hat in hand under the lamplight, mistake the look in his eyes. She saw that what he offered was the enduring love of one who could be trusted to the utmost, and the few pointed words revealed depths of tenderness she had hardly suspected in him.

"I am sorry, very sorry – but it is impossible," she said softly.

Maxwell moved a pace or two forward, and his face seemed to have grown suddenly haggard.

"Think," he urged hoarsely. "This means so much to me. Will it always be impossible? I shall not change."

Lilian fancied she could believe him. She looked him fully in the eyes as she answered.

"It can never be possible. I am sorry. If I had known, I should have tried to warn you. You must forget me."

Maxwell recognized finality in her tone. For the space of several seconds he turned his head away. Then he faced round again, speaking very quietly:

"You have nothing to reproach yourself with. The mistake was mine. I shall, however, never forget you; and I want you to promise that if any adversity overtakes you – which God forbid – you will remember me. I sail for Africa shortly, and it may be long before we meet again. Now I will walk with you up the drive."

He held out his arm, and Lilian wondered a little at his composure as she laid her hand on it and they passed together into the blackness of the firs.

Miss Chatterton had not long joined her aunt when Dane came in, and glanced in her direction as he made some not oversapient observation to Chatterton. She did not avoid his gaze, but met it coldly, and, gathering up some needlework, moved without ostentation, but deliberately, out of the room. No speech could have been plainer, and Dane grew hot, while the fingers of one hand contracted without his will.

"You don't look well, Hilton," remarked Thomas Chatterton. "Is your head troubling you?"

"No," said Dane. "I must have walked tolerably fast, and I am perhaps a trifle shaky yet. With Mrs. Chatterton's permission I will go out and smoke a cigar."

He passed out, and the iron-master smiled as he looked at his wife.

"Can you tell me what is the meaning of this?" he asked.

"Your inquiry is indefinite; and why do you ask me?"

"Because I think you ought to know," Chatterton answered dryly. "Women generally have a finger in it whenever there is trouble."

"Even if true, that is not strikingly original," Mrs. Chatterton retorted. "I have not noticed anything unusual."

"Then listen," and Chatterton pointed toward the window. "When a young man goes out for a stroll he does not usually stamp in that savage fashion upon the gravel. Now, I want your candid opinion."

"You shall have it," said the lady, smiling. "I believe that no good ever resulted from a choleric elderly gentleman's interference in affairs beyond his comprehension."

Meanwhile Carsluith Maxwell stood talking to his sister in the hall of Culmeny.

"After what has happened, the sooner I get out on my African venture the more pleasant it will be for all concerned," he said gloomily. "It is a good country where one can forget one's troubles; in fact, there are so many peculiarly its own that I don't know a better."

"Poor Carsluith! It will be a heavy disappointment to father. He is failing more rapidly than I care to notice, and had begun to lean on you. I don't think I can forgive her. Yes; go out, and forget her."

"It was not Miss Chatterton's fault," Maxwell declared quickly. "She never, to use the inappropriate phrase, encouraged me. It was my own folly to hope that she could stoop to me."

"Without any wish to flatter you, I consider that Miss Chatterton might have stooped a good deal farther," said Margaret Maxwell. "However, we need not go into that; and I am only sorry you are so hardly hit. I wonder if it was because of Dane?"

"No," Maxwell answered with decision. "I can't exactly tell you why, but I am certain it was not because of Dane."

His sister said nothing further, though she was not convinced. Her heart was heavy for her brother, because she knew the Maxwell temperament, and that he was not the man to change.

Carsluith passed out into the darkness, and leaning against a fir, spoke half aloud:

"No man Miss Chatterton had smiled upon could scatter his affections as Dane seems to have done. Pshaw! The thing is perfectly impossible!"

This was, perhaps, a greater tribute to the speaker's loyalty than to his knowledge of human nature, though Carsluith Maxwell was usually accounted a shrewd man.

CHAPTER VI
DANE'S SILENCE

It was in a combative humor that Hilton Dane presented himself in court on the day of the poacher's trial. It was impossible to ignore the summons, which alone had delayed his departure from The Larches; but the time he spent there waiting had passed very uncomfortably. Lilian had, so far as she could do so without attracting attention, sedulously avoided his company; and he fancied that both Chatterton and his wife regarded him with suspicion. Dane, knowing the iron-master's opinions, surmised that Chatterton would not have blamed him had he frankly related all that had passed; but he had pledged himself to secrecy, and it never occurred to him to break his promise.

Therefore he kept his own counsel, and went into court prepared for battle, further fortified by a contempt for the assumed omnipotence of petty local magnates which men of his kind, who have tasted power in the vigorous life of the newer lands, acquire. He decided that the prisoner, who was very young, looked free from inherent vice, and worthy of a chance to prove himself, in the main, honest. He was not absolutely certain that the man was the one with whom he had grappled, and he gave him the full benefit of the doubt. His answers provided the neighborhood with a sensational topic for conversation, and, while there were some who laughed at the legal functionaries' discomfiture and the witness's nonchalance, the game preservers in the vicinity were emphatic in their indignation.

In any case, Dane left the court amid the plaudits of the assembled quarrymen, which the officials could not restrain. He hated the rôle of popular hero but he felt a certain grim satisfaction, though he guessed that every word he had spoken might cost him dearly. Also, because he did nothing by halves, he sought the discharged prisoner.

"I don't know whether you are the right man or not, and I don't want to," he said dryly. "If you are a wholly worthless rascal, you will no doubt drift back into the clutches of the police, when it is probable that the worthy gentlemen I addressed to-day will see that you don't get out again. It would not surprise me if they starved you out of this neighborhood; so, if you desire to make a fresh start, you will take this letter to the English waterworks contractor to whom it is addressed – and send your sister as much as possible of what he pays you."

"Would you believe that I'm sairly sorry, sir?" began the lad; but Dane turned upon him with a laugh and a frown.

"Sorry for what? Prove it by turning honest. Do you wish to convince me I did wrong to-day?"

The poacher departed with grateful protestations, and Dane was glad that he had vanished before Maxwell came up.

"I don't know whether I ought to congratulate you on your forensic abilities, or otherwise, but the spectacle was worth the journey," he said. "I hardly suspected that you possessed such talents; but why you displayed them is, of course, another question."

"It is also my particular business," Dane replied stiffly, and frowned when Maxwell smiled significantly.

"Confound you! Do you think – " he broke out; and Maxwell smiled again in ironical fashion as he moved away.

"I might make use of your own rejoinder, and say that I generally find it saves trouble to keep my opinions to myself," he returned. "However, since you asked me, what would any person of the most modest discernment think?"

Dane groaned inwardly as he climbed into the waiting vehicle, for the last speech placed beyond all doubt the fact that the occupants of the dog-cart had recognized him at Hallows Brig; and he knew that Lilian Chatterton held somewhat puritanical views. He had, it was evident, involved himself hopelessly.

That very evening, just as Dane had finished packing his few possessions, an irate game-preserving gentleman drove over to The Larches to express his indignation.

"I would not like to hurt your feelings, Chatterton, but your young friend did not give wholly unbiased testimony to-day," he said. "Considering his evident desire to shield the prisoner, I e'en felt it my duty to – "

He got no farther, for the choleric iron-master was equally loyal to those he honored with his good opinion, and prompt on any challenge to take up the cudgels.

"If that is all you called to tell me, you might have spared yourself the trouble, Black," he interrupted. "I have known Hilton Dane from boyhood, as I knew his father before him; and I haven't the slightest objection to hurting the feelings of any man who impugns the honesty of my friends."

"I'm thinking ye are very generous," replied Black, relapsing into his native idiom. "Man, do not be so testy, but bide and listen. He described his adversary so well that the police at once identified and arrested him; but he appeared troubled with a distressfully bad memory in court to-day.

"'What are ye meaning by the words, "A man like the prisoner"?' the fiscal asked him; and Mr. Dane answers: 'Just what I say.'

"'Can you not swear to him?' asked the fiscal severely; and your young friend smiled. 'Could you swear to the complexion and color of the eyes of any man who, on a dark night, had just kicked you hard upon the knee?' says he.

"It was not even respectful; and when the rabble cheered there was more than me who agreed with the fiscal: 'This place is a court of justice – or it ought to be,' said he."

Black, pausing, betrayed his indignation with a gesture, while Chatterton laughed in aggressive fashion.

"Considering my worthy neighbors' prejudices, I think there was something in that last remark," he said.

Just then Lilian, who may have overheard part of the colloquy, appeared in an opening in the tall hedge.

"Did you convict the malefactor, Mr. Black?" she asked.

"No," said that gentleman ruefully. "Unfortunately we did not, although I'm thinking that we did our best."

Lilian smiled a little, and Chatterton's eyes twinkled as he glanced at her encouragingly.

"Was that quite in accordance with the spirit of our glorious constitution?" she asked.

"Eh?" said Black sharply. "What's this I'm saying; and I see ye are laughing at me. I mean his guilt was manifest, but a friend of yours showed considerable audacity, forby a trace of talent, in his efforts to release him. Ye will mind that it's a principle of British justice to give even a poacher fair play, my dear young lady."

"So I was always taught," Lilian replied artlessly.

Thomas Chatterton chuckled again, and pointed toward a man who, in turn, passed through the opening in the hedge.

"I fancy that Mr. Black is anxious to talk to you, Hilton," he said.

Black, however, had evidently found two adversaries sufficient without engaging a third, and, as sometimes happens, he did not recollect the crushing things he might have said until the opportunity had passed; so, after a stiff greeting, he allowed Chatterton, who was rarely ungenerous to a beaten enemy, to lead him away.

Lilian had disappeared, but not before the manner in which she had ignored Dane had roused him to precipitate action. He forgot his prudence in a sudden fit of anger, and, remembering only that he might never have another opportunity for speech with her, he followed the girl. Miss Chatterton, however, had a fair start, and, perhaps being warned by the sound of his hurried footsteps, made the most of it; so that while Dane pursued her down two avenues, and through a shrubbery, the situation grew rapidly ludicrous. The humor of it did not strike him then, and he saw only the flicker of a

white dress receding before him. Finally he came upon the fugitive in a narrow path between rows of choice chrysanthemums, where, as there was no room for two to pass, Lilian turned upon him with an ominous light in her eyes. It was evident that Miss Chatterton was seriously angry, as well as a little breathless.

"What brings you here?" she demanded.

Dane was not, as a rule, readily disconcerted; but for a moment the power of lucid speech deserted him.

"I came – " he gasped.

"That is unfortunately evident," retorted Lilian, chillingly. "What I desire to know is why, considering the size of the garden, you must, after seeing I wished to be alone, choose this particular path!"

Dane had slight cause for merriment, but he actually laughed.

"Any other place would have suited me, but you went so fast!"

This was a blunder, and he realized it as he heard the gravel crunch in a manner that suggested the pressure of somebody's heel. Lilian had clearly roused herself to face the situation.

"Admitting that it was so, will you explain why you cannot take a hint?"

"I will," Dane said quietly, though he was once more maladroit. "I wished to ask why you have avoided me like contagion lately?"

"Is that a necessary question, or is it generous to place the onus of such an explanation upon me?"

"Perhaps not," he admitted. "I am not so quick of wit as I could wish, to-day, but I am going away early to-morrow, and it may be very long before I see you again; so I could not help asking it. We have known each other a long time, Lily, and I would not care to leave England feeling that you were displeased with me."

"Have I told you that I was displeased?" asked the girl.

"Speech was hardly necessary."

Lilian Chatterton was not deficient in courage, and she no longer tried to evade the difficulty. "Please understand that I have neither the right nor the desire to inquire into your motives, but – since you insist – there are limits within which one must restrict one's friendship; and after comparing your own account of your nocturnal adventures with what I heard Mr. Black relate about your conduct in court to-day, it is hardly possible to avoid concluding that you have overstepped them."

"There may be an explanation. Is it fair, as you reminded that very gentleman, to condemn any one unheard?"

"Can you furnish one?" asked Lilian, with a quickness which was not wholly lost upon her companion. If he had spoken plainly, it is possible that the explanation might have changed a good deal for both of them; but that was just what the man had pledged himself not to do. He was not a casuist, and, having no time for reflection, saw only one course open to him. It was too late when he realized that it was the worst one possible from any point of view.

"I am afraid I cannot, at present," he said.

The girl's eyes grew almost wicked, for his hesitation was fatal, and she was angry that she had even allowed him to draw her into the discussion.

"That is comprehensible," she said. "You must already have taxed your imagination severely, and it is perhaps natural that the testimony of a quite disinterested gentleman should be more convincing. Besides, as I said already, it is certainly not my part to judge you."

"Then I can only hope that you will hear the full truth from some other person you consider more worthy of credit," Dane said somberly.

Miss Chatterton returned no answer, but, drawing her skirt to her side, brushed past the man, who stepped recklessly among the chrysanthemums. She had, of course, no intention of looking back in his direction, but, on turning at the end of the alley, it was almost necessary to do so, and she

sometimes remembered, with both a smile and a sigh, how he had stood, a somewhat commanding, as well as a slightly ludicrous figure, staring straight before him, knee-deep among the chrysanthemums. That, however, was afterward, for then Lilian was in a royal rage with herself as well as the man, because she had allowed anything he could say or do to disturb her serenity.

Dane sighed a little, but there was resolution as well as indignation in his face as he moved away, and left the gardener, who had witnessed the scene with indignation, to assess the damage.

"Would nothing fit yon theatrical ijiot but stamping my new quilled Regents flat?" the gardener grumbled.

Early the next morning Chatterton and Dane stood waiting for the South express in the little country station.

"I don't altogether understand what you have been doing, Hilton, and, though nobody seems quite pleased with you, I won't ask," said the iron-master. "I know you had a good reason for it, whatever it was; and if that meddlesome Black or any of his friends feel inclined to make further unpleasant suggestions, I shall enjoy the opportunity for a little plain speaking. If you ever change your mind, remember what I said; and don't close with any offer unless it's tempting, but come back and wait at The Larches for a better. I can't help saying I'm sorry you did not altogether hit it with Lilian. Modern young women, however, often appear to consider cheap smartness more becoming than the genuine cordiality they may feel."

"It was not Miss Chatterton's fault, sir," declared Dane, who, growing slightly confused, wished the iron-master would favor anything else with his fixed attention. He was thankful that the approach of the express prevented the conversation from progressing further in that direction.

A few evenings later, Lilian dismounted from her pony in the shadow of a copse. For some reason she had been restless all day, and sought solace in a ride across the moor. The saddle had slipped a little, and she spent some time tightening the girth. Meanwhile two men came to a standstill in the stubble beyond the hedge, and she recognized Carsluith Maxwell in one spare figure. The sunset beat into his face, and she saw it was stamped with a curious melancholy as he looked down the deep-wooded valley toward Culmeny. Ridges of brown moorland, whose slopes were streaked by dark firs, hemmed the hollow in, and the tower rose blackly in the mouth of it against the shimmer of the sea.

"It is an inheritance to be proud of, sir," Carsluith said. "Perhaps it is because of the contrast with the rank luxuriance of the tropics, and their stifling heat, but each time I come home to the old place and breathe this keen sweet air, I feel that I love it better."

The second man, turning, laid his hand on the speaker's shoulder, and as he did so Lilian recognized the master of Culmeny.

"It will be yours some day which cannot be very distant now," the elder man replied. "It is a barren heritage, and I have long regretted that, after the girls are provided for, its revenues will do little more than cover the interest on the burden you must take up along with it."

"I hope that day will be long in coming, sir; and I shall never rest contented until by some means I win enough to restore our former prosperity. To-morrow will see me on my way to London, and we must hope that my latest venture will prove successful!"

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