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The Crowned Skull

Fergus Hume

Chapter I The Tent of Mystery

Sir Hannibal Trevick was a personage at St. Ewalds. Certainly he lacked money to support the dignity of his name, and therefore had been compelled to let Trevick Grange to a South African millionaire, and take up his abode in the Dower House at the Cornish watering-place. But he came of an old and distinguished family, and possessed to all appearances great force of character. Also, he was an ardent churchman, and a philanthropist. Finally, he had a most charming daughter, who was both clever and beautiful: two things not invariably found together.

Dericka Trevick — her quaint Christian name was a source of wonder to archaeologists, since it was that of the Babylonian fish-goddess, could have figured as Titania at a fairy solemnity. She was small and slender, golden-haired and blue-eyed, with a bright manner and a mercurial temperament. Such a description gives an impression of insipidity and shallowness. But Dericka was neither insipid nor shallow. Her will was strong, her judgement quick and unerring, and she ruled the Dower House. Sir Hannibal obeyed her, although he saved his dignity by pretending that such obedience was but fatherly kindness, which could refuse nothing to his household fairy. She dominated the mild, lean governess, Miss Warry, who had taught her everything, and she kept a tight hand over the three domestics who formed Sir Hannibal's modest establishment. In spite of her looks and manner Dericka was strong, and could have passed for an Elizabeth or Catherine in embryo.

All the same, she was popular, and therefore all the young men of St. Ewalds were bound to her chariot-wheels. But she favoured none of these as they were too bucolic and tame. Her heart had been given for over six months to a smart young barrister from London, who was called Oswald Forde. Sir Hannibal approved, for Forde was a rising man, and might yet become a K. C. or a judge; but as yet there was no open engagement. Dericka was only twenty, and Forde twenty-seven, so there was time enough for a mutual experiment as to whether they would suit one another before attempting matrimony.

Forde came to St. Ewalds to bask in the smiles of beauty whenever he could manage, and thus found himself at the fete given by Sir Hannibal in aid of the Fishermen's Chapel, which was being built on a promontory just outside the town. It was a splendidly warm autumn day, and the spacious grounds of the Dower House were occupied by all the fashion and wealth of the place. The square, ugly building — it was Georgian and comfortable — looked out over the waters of St. Ewalds Bay, and possessed garden far too large for the size of the mansion. These sloped down to a fringe of ragged rocks, barricading smooth stretches of sand upon which broke the white Atlantic billows. What with foreign plants and native trees, and late blooming flowers of all kinds bordering the green lawns, the place was very lovely, and the tents erected here and there for the fete made it look like an encampment. People were buying and selling, and

eating and drinking, and dancing, and playing games in the hot sunshine, and Sir Hannibal secretly assured himself with much satisfaction that the fete would bring in much money to the chapel. He liked to play the Lord of the Manor even on a small scale, and regarded those who attended the fete as so many worshippers who came to adore him — which they certainly did in a most snobbish manner.

As Sir Hannibal was a widower, with a daughter who would soon be married, at least so said the gossips, many young ladies had, as the saying goes, set their caps at him. He seemed to favour Miss Anne Stretton, a dark-eyed, handsome woman, who was studying art, and had just enough to keep a roof over her head and dress well, which she invariably did. Sir Hannibal, as Miss Stretton knew, was poor, but then he had a position, and was, as she guessed, fairly manageable. It was worth her while to be Lady Trevick, and that position she was determined to occupy, even though her heart drew her in the direction of Ralph Penrith, a dissipated-looking man, whose pedigree was long and whose income was extremely small. These two were at the fete, and talked together a great deal, perhaps, on Miss Stretton's part, to arouse the jealousy of Sir Hannibal, and force him into an ardently-wished-for proposal.

'You have scarcely given me a word,' complained Sir Hannibal, advancing to where Miss Stretton sat along with his rival. 'Will you not accept my arm and walk round the grounds?'

'Certainly,' assented the lady, alertly, and shot a glance at Penrith, whose face grew dark, 'but I cannot stay long. Mr. Penrith's mother has asked me to stay for a few days, and he drives me out to the Manor House at four o'clock.'

'It is three now,' said Penrith, looking at his watch; 'you have an hour to explore the grounds, Miss Stretton.'

'It will not take us long to drive five miles,' she replied carelessly, and walked away with the baronet, leaving Penrith sullen and silent. After a time he strolled away to the tent where drinks were sold and enjoyed himself there in his own gross way.

Miss Stretton looked sideways at her companion as they strolled among the visitors. She saw a well-preserved man of over fifty who might pass for forty, and could not but admire his alert military looks and perfect dress. Catching her gaze Sir Hannibal smiled, and examined her in his turn. She was certainly handsome — quite a fine woman, although it could be seen that later in life she would become stout and heavy. Her eyes were dark, and she knew how to use them, and her frock was all that could be desired, even by so fastidious a man as Sir Hannibal Trevick.

'You are very cruel to me,' he murmured in her ear.

'On the contrary,' said Miss Stretton, smiling. 'I should blame you. I have been here for half an hour and this is the first time that I have set eyes on you. But for Mr. Penrith I should have been sadly neglected. These St. Ewald people look down upon a poor artist.'

'They are jealous, dear lady. You are fit to be a queen.'

'I am a queen, without a kingdom,' said Miss Stretton meaningly.

'You shall have one soon,' replied Sir Hannibal significantly. 'A small kingdom, it is true, but still one wherein you can reign supreme.'

'The size does not matter so long as love rules.'

'And love would rule, were you the queen.'

‘That so much depends on my subjects,’ replied the lady, quickly, and cast another look on him, which made the elderly heart of Sir Hannibal beat faster than it had done for years.

They were in a secluded part of the grounds overlooking the beach, and undoubtedly after so propitious an opening Trevick would have proposed, but that he was interrupted. He had just opened his mouth to speak, and Miss Stretton, with a heightened colour, was getting ready to accept him, when Dericka appeared along with Forde. With his dark looks and her golden beauty they made a comely couple, but Sir Hannibal frowned all the same. His frown was reflected on the face of the calm queenly woman beside him. Dericka, glancing from one to the other, drew her own conclusions. She knew what Miss Stretton desired, and, not liking her, congratulated herself on thus preventing a proposal. Forde saw nothing, and shook hands with Anne; but Dericka saw everything with the quickness of a woman who is in love herself, and at once proceeded to detach her father from this too fascinating adventuress — as she characterised Miss Anne Stretton.

‘You are wanted, papa,’ she said quickly. ‘Mr. Bowring is waiting for you in the library.’

‘Mr. Bowring!’ echoed Sir Hannibal, growing red and looking fierce; ‘and what may Mr. Bowring want?’

‘I really do not know. He came over from the Grange in his motor-car and seems very anxious to see you — on business, I suppose.’

‘He might have chosen a day when I was less busy,’ retorted Trevick, and seemed inclined to deny himself to the untoward visitor. But on second thoughts he turned away towards the house. ‘I must see him, I suppose,’ he said ill-humouredly; ‘something to do with the Grange, I expect. He is a most expensive tenant in spite of his being a millionaire. He always wants something done. Miss Stretton, will you excuse? Dericka, please look after Miss Stretton.’ And he went away with a last look at Anne, who stood silent, drawing figures on the sandy path with the tip of her sun-shade.

‘Have you had some refreshment?’ Dericka asked her formally.

‘Thanks, yes,’ replied Miss Stretton with a sweet smile, and with rage in her heart at the interruption. ‘Now I must buy something.’

‘Or you can have your fortune told,’ said Forde smiling. ‘Go to the Tent of Mystery. Miss Warry is there, and she really tells the most wonderful things.’

‘Has she told your fortune?’ asked Miss Stretton with a glance at Dericka.

‘That is very easy to read,’ answered Forde, smiling again.

Anne tossed her head. ‘How superstitious you are.’

‘I believe that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy,’ retorted the young man dryly.

‘Poor Shakespeare; what a mis-quotation.’

‘Give the credit to Bacon,’ laughed Dericka, who scarcely knew what to say to a woman she so much disliked.

‘I am not clever enough to decide the Bacon—Shakespeare controversy, Miss Trevick. You are, I understand?’

‘You praise me too much, Miss Stretton.’

How far the battle of words would have gone it is impossible to say, but the presence of Forde restrained the feminine war, and the situation was adjusted by a glance between the two women. Then Miss Stretton turned away with a laugh — a society laugh, to hide deeper feelings, and left the lovers alone. ‘You can talk Romeo and Juliet,’ she called back mockingly.

Dericka rather talked Lady Macbeth. ‘How I hate that woman,’ she said clenching her small fist; ‘an adventuress, and —’

‘That is too severe, my dear.’

‘No it isn’t. She came here pretending to paint pictures, but in reality to look for a husband.’

‘Rumour gives Penrith to her in that capacity.’

‘And my knowledge of her scheming gives her my father.’

‘Pooh! Sir Hannibal is too old to think of marriage.’

‘A man is never too old to be cajoled by a woman,’ said Dericka, tartly.

‘I know that,’ replied Oswald gaily; ‘even my twenty-seven venerable years have not saved me.’

Dericka pinched his arm. ‘You donkey.’

‘A really nice girl would have put in an adjective.’

‘You silly donkey!’ Where upon the young man kissed her, and a lovers’ interlude followed.

‘When will you allow me to ask Sir Hannibal?’ demanded the barrister softly.

‘To-morrow, before you go back to town. But papa will not make any objection, dearest. He has just enough to live on, and will be very glad to place his burden — I am the burden, if you please — on someone else’s shoulders.’

‘Dear burden,’ murmured Forde, taking her in his arms. Then, when he descended to earth again, ‘Why doesn’t Bowring help your father? I heard that they were old friends.’

‘Old enemies, rather,’ said Dericka with a cloud over-shadowing her fair face. ‘Mr. Bowring knew papa in Africa years ago, when I was a little baby. When he made his money he asked papa to let him have the Grange, and pays him a good rent. But papa and Mr. Bowring hardly ever speak and never visit one another.’

‘But Mr. Bowring is with him now?’

‘Yes, and I am going into the house to see what is the matter.’

‘There is no need,’ urged Forde, restraining her.

‘There is every need,’ replied Dericka determinedly. ‘Papa in many things is a mere baby, and I have to do everything; besides, he has a very quick temper, and Mr. Bowring is a very rough man. Should they quarrel, and that is not unlikely, I don’t know what may happen.’

‘Let me go with you to the house.’

‘No, stop here. People always smile when they see us together.’

‘Who cares for their smiling? We are as good as engaged.’

‘Wait until our engagement is announced,’ said Dericka quickly, ‘then I won’t mind. But I hate gossip, until my position is assured with papa’s approval.’

‘Ah, then you do count Sir Hannibal as something?’

‘Of course. I like to do things in order. Papa, to the outward world, is a person of character and with a strong will. But he has my character and my will.’

‘What a terrible wife I shall have,’ said Oswald jokingly; ‘you will rule me in every way.’

‘Then I shall begin now,’ said the girl, laughing, but with a fond look at his handsome face. ‘Stop here and I’ll be back as soon as I know why Mr. Bowring has come. Papa cannot do business without me.’

Somewhat annoyed, Forde lighted a cigarette and leaned over the brick wall to watch the billows rolling on the shore, while Dericka walked quickly to the house. She had cause for uneasiness, as she had heard her father express anything but amiable sentiments towards his tenant. Mr. Bowring was a rough man, as she had said, for she had met him once or twice, and having lived in lawless lands he was not likely to be bound by social rules. Sir Hannibal, weak and refined, would have no chance against his rugged strength, nor indeed would he have any chance did Bowring do business with him. The South African, fighting for his own hand, was always trying to get the better of his landlord with regard to the Grange, and would have done so on three occasions but for Dericka’s shrewdness. Bowring bore no grudge towards the girl for her interference, and rather seemed to admire her for her cleverness of getting the better of him.

But Dericka’s fears as to a fracas proved to be vain, for when she reached the front door she met Sir Hannibal and his visitor, issuing therefrom. The baronet certainly appeared to be agitated, but Bowring presented a calm aspect.

The millionaire was a man of bronze, grey as an old wolf, with shaggy hair fringing a bald head, and shaggy eyebrows overhanging piercing grey eyes. His long beard was also shaggy, but his skin, in spite of his sixty years, was fresh and pink as that of the girl who gazed at him. With the contempt for appearance in which wealthy men indulge on occasions, he wore a shabby suit of black, with an African felt hat, and carried in his ungloved hands a queer twisted stick, carved and painted by the hands of some Zulu witch-doctor. Beside Sir Hannibal, polished, stately, accurately dressed, and eminently refined, John Bowring looked like a savage, but a savage dowered with a powerful brain.

Man of bronze as he was the keen grey eyes lighted when they fell on Dericka, gazing fascinated by his strength.

‘Good-day, missy,’ he said in a deep, harsh voice, yet in a kindly manner. ‘We have finished our conversation, and now your father — my old friend,’ he cast a side glance on the baronet as he spoke, ‘wants to see the fun.’

‘Dericka will conduct you round the grounds,’ said Trevick hurriedly. ‘Where is Miss Stretton, my dear?’

‘In the Tent of Mystery,’ replied the girl carelessly; ‘at least, I advised her to go there and have her fortune told.’

Sir Hannibal looked hard at his daughter, trying to discover if her words were double-edged. But she met his gaze serenely, and presently the baronet hurried away. Bowring turned to address the girl with something like a chuckle when behind him appeared a mild face and a lean, gaunt figure, in sad-coloured feminine garments.

‘Why, Sophy, are you not in the tent?’ said Dericka, recognising her governess with surprise.

‘I just came in for a few minutes,’ said Miss Warry timidly. ‘It is trying work telling fortunes. I read Miss Stretton’s hand.’

‘What did you read?’ asked Dericka, curiously.

‘Sorrow and trouble and wickedness,’ said the sibyl solemnly, and again the old millionaire chuckled.

‘Do you really profess to tell the future?’ he asked contemptuously.

‘I really do,’ said the mild governess, nettled by his disbelief, ‘and if you will come with me to the tent I can tell yours.’

‘My future is already my past,’ said Bowring harshly; ‘you can tell me nothing likely to interest me. However, I wish to give some money to the chapel, and as I give nothing for nothing I may as well buy a few fairy stories with my guinea.’

‘I may make mistakes,’ said Miss Warry simply and blinked with her tired old eyes, ‘and sometimes I do, as I am not sufficiently conversant with the psychic life. But I do occasionally foretell things which really happen.’

‘Let us see what will happen to me,’ said Bowring jokingly, and with a grim smile walked after Miss Warry, who floated — the term is very appropriate, for she did not walk like an ordinary human being — towards the Tent of Mystery.

It was now about four o’clock, and Dericka saw her father bidding farewell to Miss Stretton, who was hanging on the arm of the still sulky-looking Mr. Penrith. The baronet seemed to be younger than ever as he basked in the smiles of the adventuress. ‘For she is that,’ insisted Dericka to herself, ‘and wants to marry papa for his position.’ It never occurred to the girl, who, after all, was young in experience, that the adventuress might seek money also, and that she was not likely to find in the pockets of Sir Hannibal Trevick.

Dericka saw the three disappear down the short avenue, at the foot of which, presumably, waited the dog-cart of Penrith, wherein he proposed to drive Miss Stretton over the moorland to his mother’s place. She then walked about amongst the visitors, exchanging a few words, and making herself agreeable. Chance brought her in front of the Tent of Mystery, and from it there issued Bowring, looking somewhat white, followed by the governess.

‘You don’t believe me?’ asked Miss Warry severely — that is, as severely as her mildness would permit.

‘No,’ said Bowring harshly, ‘you talk nonsense.’

‘Yet you seem to be upset,’ said Dericka suddenly, and looking at him in a curious, puzzled way.

Bowring wiped the perspiration from his high, bald forehead.

‘I have had a turn,’ he said gruffly, ‘but from nothing that woman told me.’

The governess had again retired into the tent, and Dericka, thinking that the fortune-telling was at an end, was about to conduct the millionaire to the refreshment stall, when Miss Warry again appeared, holding an envelope in her hand. ‘Mr. Bowring,’ she called, and some people turned at the sound of the name.

‘What is it?’ he asked gruffly.

‘In this envelope I have written a prophecy which I read in your hand. It will be fulfilled before tomorrow. The envelope is sealed, and if what I have written here occurs, then the truth of my art will be made manifest.’

Bowring took the sealed envelope and thrust it into his pocket. ‘I shall look at it tomorrow night.’

‘It may be too late!’ said the sibyl solemnly, and vanished into the tent.

Chapter II

The Prophecy Fulfilled

‘What does she mean by that?’ asked Bowring sharply, when the governess had disappeared to foretell the futures of fresh dupes.

‘I do not know,’ said Dericka. Then she pointed to the pocket into which the millionaire had slipped the sealed letter. ‘You can learn, if you read what is written.’

Bowring took the letter out and twisted it in his gnarled, lean hands in a thoughtful manner. ‘No,’ he said abruptly, and after some meditation. ‘If it is good, it can wait; if evil, I must meet it blindly, as it is best that the future should be hidden from our eyes.’

‘Yet you went in there to inquire?’

‘Because I wanted to give my guinea to the chapel. I give nothing for nothing. In that way I made my money. It is all rubbish, this fortune telling,’ he added, looking keenly at Dericka. ‘Has Miss Warry ever told your fortune?’

‘Yes. By the cards and by the hand, and by looking into the crystal.’

‘And you believe what she said?’

Dericka blushed, and looked away in the distance to where Oswald Forde appeared, sauntering idly in search of her, with a cigarette.

‘I should like to believe,’ she said softly.

Bowring’s eyes followed her, and he also saw the handsome young fellow. The sight appeared to annoy him, and he frowned.

‘You are foolish, girl,’ he said roughly. ‘We make our own fortunes, good or bad, and it needs no palmistry to tell that as we sow, so shall we reap.’

Dericka, her eyes still fastened on her lover, who paused to talk with a pretty girl, defended what Miss Warry called ‘her art’. In a musing voice she replied. ‘To some natures,’ she said, ‘the veil between the seen and the unseen is very thin. Such natures may have a premonition which turns out true, or they may read by the present the doubtful future. I have known several of Sophia’s prophecies come true in the end.’

‘Sophia?’

‘Miss Warry. She is my governess, and has been for many a long day, but shortly she is leaving us, as the success of her fortune-telling has made her desirous to earn money in that way.’

‘If she sets up in London,’ said Bowring grimly, ‘she will be haled before the magistrates as a swindler, and quite right too. The woman’s a fool.’

‘She is a very good, kind woman, Mr. Bowring.’

‘Well,’— the millionaire shrugged his large shoulders —‘she certainly has a strong advocate in you, Miss Trevick. Where is your father?’

‘Somewhere about,’ said Dericka, looking round. ‘Do you wish to see him again?’

‘Not at once; though I would like to see him before five o’clock, when I must leave. It is a long drive to Trevick Grange, but my motor is swift, and I’ll get home very rapidly. I want to have a chat to you before I go away.’

‘With me?’ Dericka looked surprised. There was little in common between this old man and herself.

‘Yes.’

He led the way towards a secluded corner where there was a garden seat, and nodded that she should follow, with the air of a man who is accustomed to be obeyed.

‘Your father and I have been talking about you,’ he said abruptly, when Dericka was seated.

‘Yes?’ Dericka replied coldly, and fastened her brilliant blue eyes on the rugged face. She was not going to commit herself by asking questions until she knew how the land lay. Bowring, as she intuitively saw, was a man to be delicately handled.

‘You seem to be a girl with a head on your shoulders.’

‘Thank you for the compliment. But why pay it to me?’

‘I have heard of the way in which you manage this house, and your father, who is, and always was, a simple man.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because he was with me out in Africa years and years ago, when you were a tiny girl. He came home about the time your mother died, and came home, too, without a penny. Now I,’ the millionaire expanded his chest in a grandiloquent fashion, ‘I have made my fortune! I am worth a great deal of money.’

‘So I understand,’ said Dericka coldly; ‘but what has all this to do with me?’

‘I am coming to that. It has a great deal to do with you. I rented the Grange from your father, not because I wanted it, but so as to help him. I pay a fancy rent, upon which he lives.’

‘You have no right to talk to me like this,’ said Dericka, reddening. ‘After all, my father is my father, and your old association in South Africa does not give you the right to insult him.’

The millionaire was immovable.

‘You are a girl of spirit,’ he said approvingly. ‘I like you none the worse for it.’

‘With your permission,’ said Dericka, rising, and speaking sarcastically, ‘I will join our visitors and attend to my duties.’

‘Join that young popinjay there,’ said Bowring, nodding his head in the direction of Forde. ‘I see well what it means.’

‘Sir!’ Dericka looked angry, and really felt angry. ‘My private affairs have nothing to do with you.’

‘They have a great deal to do with me, as your father and I agreed.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Let me reply by asking another question, my dear. When Miss Warry told your fortune did she say who was to be your husband?’

‘I refuse to answer that question,’ said Dericka with spirit; but all the same she did answer it by looking again at Forde.

‘No,’ said Bowring, looking also; ‘he is not to be your husband.’

‘I chose for myself, Mr. Bowring.’

‘What a little spitfire you are. Listen. I want to help your father as he is my old friend and is poor.’

‘I never knew that my father and you were friends.’

‘We have both been very thick, certainly,’ said Bowring grimly. ‘He has kept away from me, and I from him. But today, I came over to make it up. We have done so, although it was not an easy task. Your father so far forgot himself as to threaten me with death.’

‘Ridiculous!’

‘So I told him,’ said Bowring quietly; ‘but for reasons connected with South Africa he would not be sorry to see me in my coffin. However, I managed to make him understand that his interest and mine are identical, and proposed a new arrangement.’ He paused.

‘Yes?’ said Dericka, interrogatively.

‘I intend to pay your father a larger rent and help him out of his present difficulties, of which you are cognisant, if you — you, Miss Trevick — will marry my son Morgan.’

Dericka rose with a bewildered air.

‘Marry your son — that idiot?’

‘He is not quite an idiot,’ said Bowring in vexed tones, ‘although his will is weak. All the better for a woman of your managing capability, my dear. Morgan wants a woman who can handle him firmly, and from what I have heard of you, Miss Trevick, you are the woman who would make Morgan a good wife. Also, you are a girl of old family, and the daughter of a baronet. Against these advantages I set my money. If you will marry Morgan and turn him into something resembling a man, I will give you your old family seat of the Grange, and allow you and your husband ten thousand a year. When I die you will get the lot of my money. Also, I will put your father’s affairs right.’

‘Are you serious?’ demanded the girl, with a red spot on either cheek.

‘Perfectly. I never waste words.’

‘Neither do I. Wait!’

She walked away, leaving Bowring wondering what she was about to do, and speedily returned with Oswald Forde.

‘I have asked this gentleman to come,’ said Dericka coldly, ‘so that he and you may hear my answer. Oswald, Mr. Bowring and my father have decided that I shall marry Morgan, the son of this man.’

‘Dericka, you will not, when I—’

‘When you love me,’ she finished, and placing her arms round his neck she kissed him fondly. Then, turning to Bowring, who looked on grimly at this comedy, she said promptly, ‘Do you require any further answer?’

‘What does all this mean?’ asked Forde in angry tones.

‘It means that Mr. Bowring wanted to buy me and that I am not for sale. It means, Oswald, that I will marry you whenever you like.’

‘It means also,’ broke in Bowring, perfectly composed, ‘that if you do not obey your father and marry my son, Sir Hannibal Trevick, baronet as he is, will be disgraced.’

‘Disgraced! What do you mean?’

‘I advise you to ask your father that,’ said Bowring sarcastically. ‘You will find that he is on my side, and is anxious to call Morgan his son-in-law. For the rest, I can wait. He pulled out his watch and glanced at it. ‘Five o’clock; I must go. I’ll return tomorrow to see if your conversation with your father has modified your attitude. Good-day!’

When the millionaire had gone Dericka stared after him in consternation.

‘What does he mean?’ she asked.

‘Blackmail,’ said Forde quietly. ‘My legal experience tells me that much. Your father was in South Africa and apparently got into some scrape. This man knows all about it, and unless you marry this Morgan Bowring he will tell all the world something, which your father would rather keep concealed.’

‘Oswald,’ said Dericka rapidly, ‘my father is weak and foolish in many ways. But I do not believe that he has done, or would do, anything disgraceful.’

‘Then why is this man so certain that you will marry at his bidding?’

Dericka passed her hand across her forehead with a weary air.

‘I do not know,’ she said. ‘This Morgan Bowring is half an idiot — a most dreadful person to look upon. Were he sane I would not marry him, much less when I know, what all St. Ewalds knows, that the man is not responsible for his actions in a great measure. My father would never consent to my marrying him. I am sure of that.’

Forde was silent. He knew that Sir Hannibal was a selfish man, and probably had pages in his past life which he would not like read by the world. To save himself from a single pang he would sacrifice Dericka without a moment’s hesitation. But he did not tell this to the girl for obvious reasons, and remained awkwardly silent. It was the girl who first recovered her speech.

‘I shall see my father at once,’ she said decisively, ‘and confront him with Mr. Bowring before he leaves this place.’

Forde acquiesced, but a search for the master of the house was in vain. Sir Hannibal was not to be found in any of the rooms, nor in the gardens. People, having exhausted the pleasures of the fete, were already leaving, and Dericka, with Forde at her heels, went down to the gates thinking to find her father there, saying farewell to some of his visitors. Instead she found Mr. Bowring getting into a 50-hp. Hadrian machine, more like a racer than a simple motor-car for travelling country roads. Bowring addressed her:

‘I cannot find my old friend Sir Hannibal,’ he said with something like a sneer, ‘or I should have told him of our conversation. But I’ll come again tomorrow. Good evening.’ And as the chauffeur placed his hands on the wheel the motor swung off with a powerful hum, like a gigantic bee.

Dericka stared after the machine, but found nothing to say. Then she went back with Forde to again search for Sir Hannibal, and again was unsuccessful.

What Bowring thought of the girl’s defiance it is impossible to say. He sat thinking deeply, sometimes with a grim smile, and again with a frown corrugating his brows. The chauffeur, a quiet, fair young fellow called Donalds, engineered the racer — for the Hadrian certainly was that, from the speed she was going at — up the High Street of St. Ewalds and out into the open country. Many people stopped to look at that low, rakish form painted grey, and looking uncanny, which ran up the steep ascent of the street like a fly up a wall. Everyone knew Bowring, and envied him the wealth which could command such a vehicle.

But when the steep ascent was mounted the machine ran smoothly along a level road until she topped the next and slid round a sloping curve, which dropped her into a valley. Then again came a rise, and she slipped forward humming into wild waste lands.

On all sides stretched the naked moorland, covered with heather and gorse, and huge grey stones lying here and there as though a Cornish giant had dropped a handful of pebbles from his pocket. On either side,

here and there rose rounded hills, topped with cromlechs and rocking-stones, and streaked with purple lights. The west flared with the vivid colours of the sunset, delicately pink, and melting on the horizon into sheets of shimmering gold. To the left were the bleak hills bathed in the imperial purple of the setting sun; to the right the cold blue of the trembling ocean, with white waves near shore tumbling amongst the black jagged rocks. Bowring knew the landscape well, and troubled himself very little about the beauty it took on under the changing hues of the western sky. He was thinking of many things — perhaps of his past, which rumour said was not all that could be desired. But of one thing he certainly was thinking, and that was the firm face of the fairy-like creature who had defied him. He wondered that so frail a form could contain so brave a spirit. Dericka was the very wife for the half-mad Morgan, and would bring good blood into the family. Then he, John Bowring, millionaire, could die in peace, leaving the firm foundations of a county family.

So the old man dreamed, while the car buzzed along the smooth road, swooping into hollows, soaring up ascents, and, spinning like a live thing, sped along endless levels. About three miles from St. Ewalds came a long downward stretch of road, which afforded Donalds the chance of letting his machine go. And go she did, with a roar and a rush like a live bombshell. The keen air cut sharply against their faces as they hummed down the long descent. At the foot the road took a sharp turn under some high banks, above which stretched the purple of the moorland. With Bowring dreaming, and Donalds exulting in the speed of the powerful machine, the car swept round the curve at a tremendous rate. But once round, and with another short road descending before her to a second corner, she had scarcely darted forward a short distance when right in front loomed up a huge mass of granite in the very centre of the roadway. With a cry of horror Donalds put on the brakes. But it was too late. The Hadrian met the mass of granite full, and the two men were hurled into the air, above a smashed mass of steel and iron, smoking and hissing.

It was like a nightmare. The chauffeur was tossed like a cork down a bank and fell on a soft bed of purple heather, narrowly missing a mighty stone, which would have killed him. Dazed and confused, and not knowing how time was passing, Donalds painfully climbed up to the road again. He saw, as in a dream, the broken motor-car, vague and doubtful-looking in the twilight, and saw also his master struggling to his feet. As Bowring straightened himself, swaying to and fro, a man leaped down from the high bank, and without hesitation, put a revolver to the old man's ear. The next moment Bowring fell as the report rang out, and Donalds, gasping with horror, weak from loss of blood, and confused by the shock, fell fainting down the bank, to all appearances as dead as the old millionaire.

But the shot had attracted attention. The murderer heard a shout, and without hesitation regained the top of the steep bank and vanished amidst the purple heather. Scarcely had he done so when round the corner came several labourers at full speed. They were quarrymen employed in breaking stones in an old quarry which belonged to Trevick Grange. These ran forward, exclaiming at what they saw. The whole appearance of the wreckage told a story — the broken car, the insensible man, and the great mass of granite in the centre of the road.

‘But the shot?’ said one man, picking up Bowring's body. He dropped it with a cry of horror. ‘Look!’ he cried, and pointed to the head.

‘Murder!’ said several voices, and the quarrymen looked at one another in the fast gathering twilight.

The sounds of wheels were heard rattling furiously, and round the second corner, whence the quarrymen had appeared, rushed a dog-cart bearing Penrith and Miss Stretton.

‘What is the matter?’ they asked. ‘We heard a shot, and came back.’

‘Bowring's dead,’ said a man with a civilised accent. ‘Shot!’

‘Dead! Shot!’ cried Penrith, while Miss Stretton shrieked, and he leaped down with a horrified face. ‘Let me see.’

While he examined the body Anne Stretton, with a white face and trembling lips, alighted also. Near the body her quick eye caught sight of an envelope. Picking this up she tore it open.

‘It might contain something likely to say who killed him,’ she said shaking; ‘perhaps the assassin left it here.’

‘What does it say?’ asked Penrith, while the quarrymen crowded round and one struck a match for her to read the letter by.

She read slowly: ‘You will be killed before you reach home this evening!’

There was a dead silence, and all looked at the body. The prophecy had been fulfilled.

Chapter III

Queer Evidence

The violent death of John Bowring caused, as was natural, an immense sensation in the district. Not only because crime was comparatively rare in those sparsely-inhabited parts, but also on account of the position and great wealth of the victim. The news ran like wildfire through the countryside, and the local reporters gathered like vultures round the famous corpse. But the evidence they picked up was scanty, as the police, ignorant themselves of many things, were reticent. No one knew why Bowring had been murdered, but there was a grim determination about the crime which revealed very clearly that the assassin had made up his mind that the millionaire should not escape. Failing with the granite rock, he had made certain with the revolver, and therefore must have had some extremely strong motive to induce him to place, so to speak, his neck twice in the hangman’s noose.

Then came out the fact of the sealed letter. Anne Stretton might have chattered, or some of the quarrymen to whom she read the single prophetic line might have told the story, or Miss Sophia Warry, proud of her powers, might have boasted of her achievement. No one knew exactly how the rumour got about, but certainly within four-and-twenty hours there were few people who had not heard of the strangely-fulfilled prophecy, and this introduction of a psychic element gave the case a weird interest, which removed it from the category of commonplace crime.

The body was taken by the quarrymen to Trevick Grange, which stood a couple of miles from the scene of death, amongst the wild Cornish moors. It was a rambling, two-storey house of rough grey stone, roofed with bluish slates, and covered with ivy and lichen, as though it were indeed natural to the soil. The mansion amidst its circle of wind-clipt trees, and fronting the changeful waters of the Atlantic, looked picturesque, but uncommonly grim; as autochthonic as the early British dwellings further up the moorlands. For centuries the Trevicks had dwelt there, and not always in the most reputable way; but pecuniary necessities had forced the present baronet to let the family seat to John Bowring, and retire to the more cheerful Dower House at St. Ewalds. So the body of the millionaire, who in life had lorded it under the ancient roof, was placed in the guest chamber, and the house was given over to a mourning atmosphere, which suited its sinister looks.

Of course, Sir Hannibal was greatly shocked. He and the dead man had not been very good friends, although they had passed through many adventures in the waste lands of South Africa. All the same, it was terrible to think that a man full of life and health and ambitious schemes should so suddenly be removed from the physical sphere, and in so horrible a manner. Also, Sir Hannibal recognised that he had

lost a good tenant. No one would pay him so excellent a rent; and, moreover, the solitary situation of Trevick Grange rendered it somewhat difficult to let, even at a moderate price. Sir Hannibal, being intensely selfish, was sorry for John Bowring, but he was more sorry for himself, and grumbled greatly as he drove out to the inquest with Dericka and Miss Warry. The last-named lady had come by particular request, as the coroner wished to know how she has so accurately foretold the death of the millionaire; and Dericka accompanied her old governess to support her in the ordeal. Not that Miss Warry anticipated trouble when being examined, for she was rather glad to display her cleverness; but she felt that Dericka would be a comfort to her at so proud a moment.

And along the road beside them streamed carts and carriages and motor-cars and bicycles of all kinds. Everybody seemed to be going to the old Grange, being drawn there mostly by morbid curiosity. The place where the death had happened was like a fair, as sightseers were exploring every inch of the ground, and some enterprising individuals had erected tents for the sale of refreshments. The granite rock itself had been blasted to atoms as it impeded the traffic, but the place whence it had fallen could be seen in the jagged rent overhead and the raw earth, which gaped through the heather. Some wiseacres insisted that the mass had fallen of its own accord, as wind and rain and sunshine had undermined its foundations; but others pointed out that the stone must have been purposely pushed over the cliff, whereon it had been balanced, since the herbage around was trampled and broken. And from the position of the rock, as it was remembered, a powerful man with an iron lever could easily have overturned the same to crash down on the highway below.

‘Who the dickens can have done it?’ mused Sir Hannibal, as with his party he drove through the chattering crowd.

‘We cannot tell until the inquest is over,’ said Dericka.

‘And perhaps not even then,’ piped Miss Warry, casting a side glance at the baronet, whom she greatly admired. ‘No one was about the road at the time.’

‘The quarry is near at hand,’ suggested Miss Trevick; ‘perhaps the men working there may have seen someone.’

‘So far as that goes,’ remarked Sir Hannibal, judiciously, ‘Donalds, the chauffeur, saw the murderer, though he did not recognise him. In the twilight recognition would certainly be difficult, let alone the confused state in which the man’s brain must have been.’

‘Had Mr. Bowring any enemies?’ asked Miss Warry artlessly.

‘Any amount,’ replied the baronet grimly. ‘Every successful man has, you know. But I don’t see what anyone had to gain from killing him. I presume Bowring’s wealth goes to his son?’

‘To that half-witted creature?’ exclaimed Dericka quickly.

‘Yes; and he is not so mad as people make him out to be.’

‘Certainly too mad for me to marry,’ she retorted.

‘Oh, that is all ended with Bowring’s death,’ said Sir Hannibal a trifle uneasily. ‘He certainly did propose something of that sort.’

‘And it made you angry,’ said Miss Warry with apparent innocence.

The baronet turned on her sharply:

‘Why do you say that?’

‘I went into the house while you were closeted with Mr. Bowring in the library, and I heard your voice raised in anger.’

‘Quite so. And my anger was on account of what Dericka has said. It was impertinent of Bowring to propose that his son should marry my daughter. Apart from the fact that Morgan is what the Scotch call “a daftie”, neither his birth nor his position are fitted to make him my son-inlaw.’

‘But he will be rich now,’ protested Miss Warry, casting down her grey-green eyes.

‘If he had a million I would not marry him,’ cried Dericka.

‘And he has a million,’ murmured the governess.

Sir Hannibal looked at her uneasily, and after clearing his throat and considering for a moment or so, he gave a perfectly unnecessary explanation:

‘Bowring and myself were not very good friends,’ he said slowly, ‘as he treated me very badly in Africa. Still, he was a good tenant, and his death’— he cast a sidelong glance at the governess, such as she had earlier cast at him —‘his death,’ he added emphatically, ‘will be very harmful to me.’

‘I am sure it will,’ murmured the governess meekly.

And still Sir Hannibal did not look satisfied.

‘See that place?’— he pointed with his whip towards the picturesque grey mass of the Grange, which was now only a short distance away —‘it isn’t everybody’s money, and Bowring paid me a splendid rent.’

‘Why?’ asked Miss Warry quickly.

‘Because liked the house,’ retorted Sir Hannibal sharply; ‘but, as I was about to say when you interrupted me —’

‘I am so sorry, Sir Hannibal.’

‘As I was about to say, no one else will pay the same rent, or pay it so regularly. Mr. Bowring’s death is a great — a very great blow to me, Miss Warry. I am sure you agree with me, Dericka?’

‘Certainly,’ replied his daughter, rather surprised that Trevick should take all this trouble to explain what seemed to her to be a perfectly obvious fact. ‘However, Morgan may stay on here, with Mrs. Krent, the housekeeper, to look after him.’

‘I don’t like Mrs. Krent,’ said the baronet, frowning. ‘She is a scheming, meddlesome woman, who came with Bowring from Africa. I expect she has been trying to get Morgan to marry her daughter Jenny.’

‘I am sorry for Jenny, if that is the case,’ replied Dericka calmly. ‘She is too pretty a girl to be thrown away on that half-mad oaf.’

‘Morgan is rich,’ said Sir Hannibal as the carriage passed up the avenue of his ancestral seat, ‘and Jenny hasn’t a penny. It would be a good match for her.’

‘It would be a sin,’ cried Miss Trevick emphatically.

Sir Hannibal shrugged his aristocratic shoulders.

‘I don’t see that, my dear. Morgan is sickly, and may not live long; his widow will be able to make a most advantageous second marriage. I almost wish,’ he added with an attempt at jocularly, ‘that you had married the creature, Dericka. Then, when he was laid beside Bowring you would be able to keep your poor father in his old age and renew the splendours of the Trevick family.’

Miss Warry raised her little eyes as Sir Hannibal made this speech, and gave him a piercing glance.

‘The marriage can take place still, can it not, Sir Hannibal?’

‘If Dericka consents,’ laughed the baronet, but still uneasily.

Indignation had hitherto kept Dericka silent.

‘I would rather die,’ she burst out at last, when the carriage stopped before the porch of the Grange. ‘Morgan is mad and dangerous.’

‘No! no!’ protested Sir Hannibal, ‘very harmless. Bowring assured me.’

‘Mr. Bowring made the best of what could not be helped,’ retorted his daughter. ‘I say that Morgan is dangerous, and falls into wild beast rages. Your jest is a poor one, father.’

‘Perhaps it was not a jest,’ tittered Miss Warry, meaningly.

‘Oh, yes, it was,’ said the baronet quickly; ‘merely a jest, though perhaps not in the best possible taste.’

‘I agree with you there,’ said Dericka coldly; ‘especially as I am really engaged to Oswald.’

‘I have not given my consent to that, Dericka.’

‘But you will,’ she replied. ‘I marry for love, father, not for money.’

‘Yet you should know the value of money,’ groaned Trevick, entering the house.

Dericka’s blue eyes flashed with sapphire lights, and but for the publicity of the place she might have made some retort. Sir Hannibal hitherto had always been ready to approve of Forde’s wooing, penniless barrister though he was; but since Bowring’s visit and proposal of marriage on behalf of his idiot son, he had wavered considerably. Dericka almost thought that Sir Hannibal wished her to marry the semi-lunatic for the sake of the money. And Miss Warry deepened this impression.

‘Your father is sorry that the money should be lost,’ she whispered as they walked towards the room in which the inquest was to be held. ‘Why not marry Morgan Bowring, and when he dies be a rich widow and become Mr. Forde’s beloved wife?’

‘Marry that?’ said Dericka in a fierce whisper, and pointed with her pretty, scornful chin towards a weak-looking man who sat next to a stout elderly woman and beside a pretty doll-like girl. ‘Are you out of your senses, Sophia?’

Miss Warry, as she always did when at a loss for a reply, tittered in a nervous manner, and meekly subsided into a chair between Sir Hannibal and his daughter.

Morgan Bowring’s wandering eyes rested on the newcomers. He passed over Sir Hannibal and the faded governess with indifference, but he looked with passionate eagerness at Dericka’s beautiful face. There was something almost savage in his fixed regard. But Dericka was, as has been said, a girl of unusually strong character, and she was not going to be outstared by one whom she regarded as a lunatic. Her blue eyes met his grey eyes with a hard dominating look, and a quiver passed over the animal countenance of Morgan. The light died out of his face, and with a kind of a whimper he suddenly grasped the hand of the stout, elderly woman, who undoubtedly was Mrs. Krent, the housekeeper. At once she turned to soothe him, and flashed an angry glance on Dericka. But that young lady having achieved her object in letting Morgan know that she was stronger than he, looked indolently round the room, and began to take an interest in the proceedings.

‘As we have inspected the body,’ said the coroner, a lean man with a mild, sheeplike face, and no very great intelligence in his dull eyes, ‘we will now hear the evidence. Inspector Quill.’

The inspector related how the body had been found, and how Bowring had come by his death. He detailed what he had discovered concerning the fall of the stone, which amounted to nothing. Quill insisted that the stone had been forcibly overturned, but although, as he admitted, he had examined the quarrymen, he could not learn who had cast down the rock. Nor, as the inspector again stated, had the quarrymen seen any suspicious person haunting the neighbourhood. He proposed to call several witnesses, and first named Donalds, the chauffeur, who alone had caught a glimpse of the criminal.

Donalds, who still looked ill from his shaking, had very little to say. He had been pitched down the bank when the car rushed against the stone, and on struggling up again, half dazed with the shock, he had dimly seen a man leap down the cliff whence the stone had fallen and blow out the brains of his staggering master. But Donalds could not say whether the man was short or tall, fair or dark, lean or stout. He caught but a glimpse of the crime and the criminal, and then had fainted. He had, as he said, never noticed the granite rock particularly when it had swung overhead in its accustomed place.

The doctor then appeared, a local practitioner who had been summoned to examine the body when it had been taken to the Grange. The deceased, he stated, had been shaken by the shock of the car smashing against the granite rock, but apparently, from the absence of marks, and the condition of the body, had been very little hurt. He would undoubtedly have been himself in a couple of days, as he would have merely suffered from shock. And even at the age of the deceased the shock would not have caused death. The revolver wound was different. The weapon had been placed so close to the dead man’s head that the hair had been scorched. The brains had been blown out, and death must have been instantaneous. As the bullet had gone right through the head and had spent its force whistling across the moor, it could not be found, so it was impossible to gain any clue in that direction.

Mrs. Krent’s evidence amounted to the fact that she had come with Mr. Bowring from Africa as she had been, and still was, the nurse of his son, who could not be left to himself. So far as she knew the deceased had no enemies, and had no fear of meeting with a violent death. He had left the Grange in very good spirits to go to Trevick’s fete, and she (the witness) had been more astonished than anyone else when the body was brought home.

Sir Hannibal Trevick gave evidence that he had known Bowring in Africa. He disagreed with Mrs. Krent, as Bowring undoubtedly had many enemies, although witness knew of none who would have gone so far as murder. The deceased had been quite cheerful at the fete, and had gone away in good spirits, intending to call the next day on witness. So far as Sir Hannibal knew, the deceased had no expectation of meeting with a violent death, and Sir Hannibal protested that he could throw no light on the subject. After a few final remarks as to the loss he had sustained by the death of a good tenant, witness stepped down.

So far nothing had been educed likely to reveal why Bowring had been murdered, and there was not, in all the evidence procurable, a single clue to the identity of the brutal assassin. The onlookers became slightly bored as they heard the many prosaic facts set forth, but everyone woke up and looked alert when Miss Warry was called. It was to hear the truth of the governess's strange prophecy that the majority of the listeners had come.

Miss Warry stated that the deceased had entered the tent an avowed sceptic, and had challenged her to give some proof that her psychic information was absolutely true. She read his hand, and looked into the crystal. In a way which Miss Warry declined to explain, as it would not be understood by the uninitiated, she had discovered that Bowring would die before he reached home. This prophecy, as she called it, she had written down and had placed it in an envelope. On the death occurring the letter had been opened by Miss Stretton, who was present, and the truth of her art became apparent. To all this the coroner listened sceptically, and many of the jury with profound awe. They were prepared to accept Miss Warry as a second Deborah in those superstitious parts.

‘Come now,’ said the coroner testily, ‘you don’t expect us to believe this hocus-pocus.’

‘I expect you to believe nothing,’ said Miss Warry coolly.

‘Did anything occur which might make you think that Mr. Bowring anticipated meeting with an accident?’

Miss Warry meditated.

‘There was certainly the Death’s Head,’ she said thoughtfully. ‘He assuredly was afraid of the Death’s Head.’

Chapter IV

The Will

When Miss Warry, with the air of an accomplished actress, pronounced those strange words — ‘He assuredly was afraid of the Death’s Head’ — an eloquent silence followed. What she meant no one knew; the coroner least of all.

But Dericka started and looked up suddenly as a memory crossed her mind. Sir Hannibal, who sat beside her, had been looking down while Miss Warry gave her evidence, but, while not starting as his daughter had done, he raised his eyes slowly and directed a long, piercing glance at the governess.

Strangely enough, she was gazing in his direction, and their eyes met. Trevick’s were the first to fall. And all this comedy was noticed by Mrs. Krent, who, since Dericka had attracted the attention of Morgan, had kept her eyes fixed venomously on father and daughter.

‘What do you mean by that speech?’ asked the coroner, puzzled.

‘Oh, it is easily explained.’ Miss Warry tossed her head as she spoke. For the first time in her tame life she found herself on the stage of life, so to speak, and an object of interest to an admiring crowd, who regarded her as a sibyl. In the midst of a dead silence she explained herself. ‘The skull in the tent, you know,’ said Miss Warry.

‘I am still in the dark. I must ask you to be more explicit.’

‘At the fete,’ said the witness, ‘I occupied a tent in order to tell fortunes. It was hung with red cloth, and there was a small round table covered with a black silk shawl. On the table were a pack of cards and a crystal; also a magnifying glass to read more clearly the lines of the hands of those who desired to know the future. All this,’ added Miss Warry, with a glance of supreme contempt at the obtuse coroner, ‘doubtless strikes you as what you call hocus-pocus.’

‘It strikes me as fraudulent,’ said the coroner dryly. ‘No one can foretell the future.’

‘I abide by what I wrote in the sealed envelope, sir.’

‘Ah. That is the point at which we wish to arrive. You must have had information to enable you to say that Mr. Bowring would not live longer than the evening?’

‘Oh,’ cried Miss Warry indignantly, ‘do you mean to say that I am an accomplice before the fact?’

‘Not exactly; but you saw something in the deceased’s demeanour, or he said something which enabled you to guess that he anticipated meeting with a violent death? You gambled, so to speak, on the chance?’

‘Nothing of the sort. I read in his hand, with the cards, and by the crystal, that he would die before he reached home.’

‘Yet you said that he was frightened by the death’s head?’

‘So he was. When he entered the tent he saw it on the table, and at once grew perfectly white. I thought he would have fallen, and perhaps he would have, had I not caught his arm. He murmured something about “The third time —”’

‘What?’ asked the coroner eagerly.

Miss Warry grew tart.

‘How can I talk, sir, when you interrupt me? Mr. Bowring, I repeat, said something about “The third time.”’

‘The third time of seeing the skull?’

‘I suppose so. At least his eyes were fixed on it when he made the remark. What it meant I don’t know.’

‘Did you not ask him?’

‘As I am a woman, and possess my fair share of curiosity, I did,’ admitted the witness, ‘but he refused to tell me why the sight of the death’s head caused him such emotion.’

‘What did he say in reply?’

‘Merely that the heat of the day had overcome him, and that he was not superstitious, and that he only wanted to get something for the guinea he gave me as he didn’t believe in fortune-telling.’

‘Did you say that he would die before he got home?’

‘No. I merely read his character, and he said that I read it all wrong. Which,’ said Miss Warry, drawing herself up, ‘was a story, as I am quite sure that I read him correctly; and he wasn’t at all a nice man either,’ she ended spitefully.

The coroner passed this very feminine speech over.

‘Then you did not say that he was within a short distance of meeting a violent death?’

‘No; and, what is more, I didn’t know that Mr. Bowring would meet with a violent death. I saw by the card and in his hand, and in the crystal, that he would die — no more. I wrote down the words so that after his death the truth of what I said should become apparent.’

‘I see.’ The coroner looked more puzzled than ever. He was too physical to believe in the psychic, and yet all that Miss Warry had said was true. The sealed letter with its fulfilled prophecy was a stern fact which could not be proved false. And on the face of it the meek little governess could have had nothing to do with the millionaire’s death.

‘Why did the death’s head excite the fears of the deceased?’ asked the coroner, wondering in what way he could best pursue the examination.

‘I told you before that Mr. Bowring refused to explain.’

‘Where is the skull?’

‘I don’t know.’

There was a movement of surprise in the room.

‘You don’t know?’ repeated the coroner. ‘Yet I presume you placed the skull on the table yourself so as to add to the effect of your fortune-telling?’

‘I did nothing of the sort,’ said Miss Warry angrily. ‘When I returned to the tent I found the skull on the table. I thought Sir Hannibal had placed it there.’

‘I?’ cried the baronet, starting to his feet and looking very white. ‘No, I never saw any skull.’

‘Then I don’t know who brought it,’ said Miss Warry. ‘Miss Trevick did not, because I asked her. I went into the house to get something, when Mr. Bowring was with Sir Hannibal in the library, and when I returned to the tent the skull was on the table. I saw Mr. Bowring immediately afterwards. When I gave him the sealed paper, and he went away, I came out before the tent, and remained chatting for a few minutes. When I re-entered the skull was gone.’

‘Then someone must have placed the skull there while you were in the house, and while you chatted before the tent after Mr. Bowring’s departure someone must have removed the skull?’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Warry. ‘I thought it odd, and spoke to Miss Trevick; but she knew nothing about the matter.’

‘This is true,’ said Dericka calmly, while all eyes were fastened eagerly on her face.

‘And I also could have nothing to do with it,’ said Sir Hannibal with a forced laugh, ‘since I was talking with Mr. Bowring in the library at the time when, according to Miss Warry, the skull must have been placed in the tent.’

‘Was there a skull in the house, Sir Hannibal?’

‘Not to my knowledge.’

‘What kind of a skull was it?’ said the coroner, addressing Miss Warry. And the governess shuddered.

‘A horrible thing,’ she said in a faltering voice. ‘Quite like a nightmare. It was not very large, but it was coloured scarlet, and round the forehead to the back was a broad band of silver, like a crown.’

Everyone was interested in this strange description.

‘I wonder you did not take charge of such a queer thing, Miss Warry.’

‘I would have done so, but it vanished.’

‘But how did it vanish?’

‘I really cannot say,’ snapped the witness, who was growing weary of this cross-questioning. ‘It was in the tent when I went in to tell Mr. Bowring’s fortune, and vanished when I returned after he went away.’

‘Did anyone else besides yourself and Mr. Bowring see it?’

‘Not to my knowledge. Have you quite done with me?’

‘Yes,’ said the coroner mechanically. And Miss Warry, looking very tired, stepped down.

Her evidence was so strange that he hesitated whether to believe it or not. Such a person might very well, as he thought, be the victim of an hallucination. Or again, the tale of this red skull might be a made-up story to advertise herself. On the other hand, the sealed letter was a fact.

‘That is all the evidence, gentlemen,’ said the coroner after a pause.

There was some chatter, and then the coroner made a speech in which he recapitulated all that had been discovered, and dwelt on the extraordinary evidence of the governess. But all his explanations could not throw any light on the mystery which undoubtedly environed the death of the millionaire. It did not take the jury long to consider their verdict, for the evidence left them completely in the dark. All that could be discovered was that Bowring had been shot by an unknown person who had failed to murder him by upsetting the motor-car.

A verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown was brought in, and the inquest was at an end.

Then the reporters who had been taking voluminous notes rushed away to build up the odd tale of Miss Warry into sensational articles. Everyone agreed that the case was more mysterious than ever, and Sir Hannibal was quite annoyed when he heard for the first time of the scarlet skull.

‘You should have told me of this,’ he said angrily.

Miss Warry, who was the person spoken to — and the conversation took place in the Dower House drawing-room, after dinner — looked down meekly.

‘I never thought it would interest you,’ she said. ‘I certainly mentioned it to Dericka.’

‘Why didn’t you speak?’ asked Sir Hannibal, turning on his daughter, who was writing a letter to Forde detailing all that had happened at the inquest, for the young barrister had returned to London.

‘There was no necessity,’ she answered, raising her eyes for a moment. ‘I thought someone at the fete might have placed the skull in the tent as a joke. Certainly, had I known at the time that it frightened Mr. Bowring, or that he was to die, I should have made enquiries. But it will be impossible now to find out who placed it in the tent, or for what reason.’

‘It was placed there to frighten Bowring,’ said Trevick angrily, ‘so the person must have known that he was to have his fortune told, and also must have known something of Bowring’s past life.’

‘You know much,’ said Miss Warry meaningly.

‘Yes,’ assented Sir Hannibal; ‘much that is bad, and much that is good, for Bowring was a strange mixture of good and evil. But I can safely say that I know nothing about a Death’s Head, coloured scarlet. It is extremely strange. I shall ask Mrs. Krent what she knows likely to throw light on the matter when I go over to hear the will read at the Grange.’

Dericka looked up suddenly.

‘Do you go to hear the will read?’ she asked quickly.

‘Certainly. Gratton, the lawyer, has come down from London to attend the funeral and look into things. He wrote saying that I was to attend the reading of the will, so I am going. Perhaps Bowring has remembered me for a trifle; or it may be that he wishes me to be the guardian of Morgan.’

‘Or, perhaps,’ said Miss Warry, with a titter, and her eyes fixed on the baronet, ‘poor Mr. Bowring has left his property to Dericka, on condition that she marries his son.’

‘That is extremely unlikely,’ said Dericka coolly.

‘I don’t know so much about that, since Mr. Bowring had the marriage in his mind on the very day of his death,’ snapped Miss Warry.

‘You talk nonsense,’ said Dericka, with great calmness, and rising with the letter to Forde in her hand. ‘And now, Sophia, you may as well tell my father that you intend to leave us.’

‘What?’ cried Sir Hannibal, wheeling round from the window at which he was smoking a particularly fine cigar. ‘You, Miss Warry — who have been with us since Dericka was a baby — leave us?’

‘Yes,’ said Miss Warry bashfully. ‘I must make provision for my old age, and the emoluments here,’ — with a viperish glance at Sir Hannibal — ‘are not regularly paid.’

‘I cannot make money out of nothing,’ said the baronet colouring slightly, for Miss Warry’s speech touched his pride; ‘but I’ll pay up before you go, although I think you are unwise to leave us. How the dickens can you make your living?’

Miss Warry coloured in her turn, and with anger:

‘Oh, I am not quite so helpless as all that, Sir Hannibal,’ she said shrilly. ‘This truth I told about poor Mr. Bowring’s death has made my fame. I am going to London to set up as a fortune teller.’

‘You’ll get into the hands of the police.’

‘No, I won’t. I’ll have powerful influence at my back. Everyone will come to me, for my prophecy about this death has made a great sensation. I’ll make a lot of money, and retire in a few years.’

‘But that prophecy was all rubbish,’ said Sir Hannibal angrily.

‘It was nothing of the sort. It was true, sir.’

‘Did you really read all that in Bowring’s hand?’

Miss Warry gave him an odd glance.

‘I really did,’ she said in a solemn tone. ‘You are a sceptic, but for once you and other jesters have been compelled to acknowledge the truth.’ And with this Parthian shot the governess left the room, with less meekness than she usually showed, and certainly with less veneration for the idol of her fancy, as Trevick had been.

‘She has altered altogether,’ said Dericka, looking at her father. ‘The success of this prophecy has sent her mad. She used to be quiet, and now is noisy, and really has been quite rude to me. I am glad she is going.’

‘So am I,’ said Trevick with a gloomy air, ‘only it looks as though the rats were leaving a sinking ship. Without Bowring’s assistance I really don’t know what to do for ready money.’

‘Wait till you hear the will read,’ said Dericka slipping her arm within that of Sir Hannibal in a caressing manner. ‘The poor man may have remembered you.’

‘Humph! It’s very unlike Bowring if he has. However, you must come over and listen with me.’

‘Why? — it is not necessary?’

‘Yes, it is. I cannot face that gloomy house and that scowling housekeeper alone. Of course, if you are afraid of Morgan —’

‘I am afraid of nothing,’ interrupted Dericka with a quiet smile, and spoke truly, for she had no fear. ‘I’ll come with you, father, and perhaps we may hear of something to our advantage, as the papers put it.’

She ended with a laugh which passed into a sigh. It was very hard on the girl to grub amongst sordid cares when she wished to be free and happy. But a sense of duty left her no option. Sir Hannibal was like a large child, and unless she guided him he would get into trouble. Dericka longed for the day when he would marry a second time, and select a capable, managing woman who would look after him. Then she could become Oswald’s wife and have at least a few years of happiness.

Thus it came about that Sir Hannibal drove his daughter over to the Grange after the funeral. The body of John Bowring was laid to rest in the St. Ewalds churchyard. Mrs. Krent, prompted by ambition for the fame of her dead master, had suggested the family vault of the Trevicks, in the little village church near the Grange. But Sir Hannibal refused, and so the millionaire was laid to rest in a less aristocratic grave. All the population of St. Ewalds turned out to follow the mourning coaches — not because Bowring had been popular, but simply on account of the notoriety of his death.

Mrs. Krent was there with Morgan, who, dressed in a new black suit, looked more uncouth and ungainly than ever. And when the service was ended those immediately concerned with Bowring went to the Grange to hear how the dead man had disposed of his worldly goods.

The listeners to the will were gathered in the great drawing-room, a sombre-looking apartment, which looked out on to the terrace of grim grey stone. Mr. Gratton, the London lawyer, a smart-looking young fellow, read the will.

Mrs. Krent, as usual, placed Morgan between herself and her pretty, doll-like daughter, and Sir Hannibal sat near the window with Dericka by his side. There were many people present who had done business with Mr. Bowring, and also a crowd of servants at the door. No one anticipated any surprise from hearing the will read — Mrs. Krent, least of all. It was thought that without doubt Bowring would leave all the property to Morgan, who was his only son, with perhaps an indication as to guardianship. And Mrs. Krent hoped and prayed that she would be appointed to look after the weak-minded heir. There would be some fine pickings out of so wealthy an estate. Therefore Mrs. Krent was uneasy on seeing Sir Hannibal present. She thought that Bowring, in spite of his unconcealed enmity to the baronet, might have made him Morgan's guardian, in which case she would be turned out of house and home.

But Mrs. Krent never expected to hear what she did hear; nor did anyone else.

After various legacies to servants and friends, it was found that the whole of the property was left to Sir Hannibal Trevick.

Morgan was disinherited, and the baronet was the heir. Mrs. Krent rose with fire in her eyes, and screamed with rage.

'You,' she foamed, shaking her fist; 'you killed Bowring for this.'

Chapter V

After—Events

Mrs. Krent was beside herself with anger as she hurled her very direct accusation at Sir Hannibal. At any time the stout elderly woman, with her little pig's eyes and red face and dyed yellow hair, would not have been considered beautiful: but at the present moment, with her features distorted with rage, she looked like a virago of the Revolution. It is no exaggeration to say that Mrs. Krent, had she possessed the power, would have there and then murdered the lucky baronet. Indeed, she half flung herself forward to scratch his face, and only the frightened clutch of her daughter prevented her from doing so. If ever a woman saw red and went baresark, Mrs. Krent was that woman. She was as one possessed by a devil.

Sir Hannibal never quailed: his courage was too high for that. Without rising he stuck his glass in his eye and calmly surveyed the infuriated creature. If he was a trifle paler than usual no one saw it, save Miss Warry, who kept a vigilant eye on his every movement. Why she should do so was not quite clear: but she certainly watched her employer rather than Mrs. Krent. Everyone else in the room, alarmed at the savagery of the housekeeper, looked at one another in consternation.

‘You murdered my master,’ bellowed Mrs. Krent, clenching her fat hands and quivering with passion.

Sir Hannibal never moved a muscle.

‘Such an accusation is not worth rebutting,’ said he with easy assurance. ‘My late friend —’

‘Friend!’ scoffed the housekeeper. ‘Why you and him quarrelled cat and doglike when you met.’

‘As you were never, to my recollection, present at any of our interviews, Mrs. Krent,’ retorted the other dryly, ‘I scarcely see how you can substantiate that statement.’

‘I know! I know!’ muttered the woman cowering a trifle. ‘Bowring never liked you. Him and you in Africa — oh, yes, you may wriggle, sir; all the same, you daren’t tell of your doings.’

‘Mr. Gratton’ — Sir Hannibal, still cool and unshaken, and addressing himself to the lawyer — ‘I apologise for this interruption to your reading of the will. I am the more annoyed,’ he added, fixing a cold eye on Mrs. Krent, who was calming down rapidly, ‘that it should have taken place in my house.’

‘Your house!’ screamed the housekeeper, angered again.

‘By inheritance from my own ancestors, Mrs. Krent, and now by legacy.’

‘I think,’ said the smart young lawyer, speaking to Mrs. Krent, ‘that you had better sit down. I have not finished reading the will.’

‘Yes, yes, mother,’ urged Jenny, pulling her parent’s skirts. ‘You are frightening Morgan.’

The disinherited son did indeed look frightened. His usually pale face was grey with fear, his large eyes looked furtively here and there as if to seek a refuge, and he licked his scarlet lips — they were unhealthily red — in a nervous manner. Dericka, who had sat unmoved throughout the scene, stared at the creature curiously, and wondered that Bowring should have dared to ask her to marry such a person. She wondered more that her father should have even thought of consenting to the match. But now there was no need that she should be sacrificed like another Iphigenia, since the desired money had come to Sir Hannibal on no conditions. At the same time Dericka wondered why John Bowring had made such a will. Meanwhile Mr. Gratton resumed his interrupted reading. Then it became apparent that there was some sort of condition, although its fulfilment depended upon Sir Hannibal’s personal view of the matter.

‘I should like,’ read the lawyer, rustling the important-looking document, ‘that my old friend Trevick should marry his daughter to my son Morgan for reasons he knows of, and —’

‘Pardon me,’ interrupted Sir Hannibal, raising one white hand. ‘I know of no reason why such a marriage should take place. If the legacy is contingent on such a match I decline to accept it.’

‘It is not contingent,’ answered Mr. Gratton, calmly. ‘In any case you inherit the property. But my late client suggests that Miss Trevick should marry young Mr. Bowring,’ and he glanced at Morgan, who was looking with sudden eager interest at Dericka.

That young lady sat cool and composed, as though the discussion did not concern her.

‘And if Miss Trevick refuses to marry Morgan?’ asked Mrs. Krent.

‘As she does refuse,’ put in Dericka in a clear, hard voice.

Gratton shrugged his shoulders. 'Things remain as they are,' he replied. 'In any case, Sir Hannibal inherits.'

'Am I a pauper?' demanded Morgan, speaking for the first time, in a thick, heavy, hesitating voice.

'Oh, no. Sir Hannibal by the will is instructed to allow you two hundred a year, and any further sums he may think fit.'

'Then my poor boy will not get one penny,' wailed Mrs. Krent, wiping her red little eyes. 'Oh, gentlemen, excuse me calling Morgan so, but I have nursed him for years, in Africa as in this place. He is like my own flesh and blood, and to think that he should be cast upon a cold world with his poor brain is cruel, wicked, horrible, and —'

Before Mrs. Krent could come out with her final adjective the baronet interposed.

'You exaggerate,' he said sharply. 'Morgan will receive the two hundred a year and such further sums as may be necessary to make him comfortable.'

'Out of sixty thousand a year,' flashed out the woman in cold fury. 'Oh, thank you for nothing, Sir Hannibal. I call it a wicked will.'

'I certainly think,' remarked Gratton, addressing the baronet, 'that it will be as well for you, sir, to carry out the suggestion of the testator and marry Miss Trevick to —'

'Marry that?' interrupted Dericka, rising suddenly. 'Are you out of your mind, Mr. Gratton? The man is not fit to marry.'

The answer came, not from the lawyer, but from Morgan himself:

'But if I love you?' he stammered thickly. And then, before he could speak further he was pulled back into his seat by Mrs. Krent.

Dericka turned pale. There was something terrible in the animal gaze which the half-mad creature cast upon her. The wild look in his eyes, the tremulous movement of his hands, the repulsive appearance of his white face with its scarlet lips and weak chin, repelled her as though a snake had crossed her path.

Strong-minded as she was, the timidity of the female came to the surface as Morgan glared at her in a leering manner. Biting her lips to keep down the climbing hysteria, she fairly ran out of the room and was followed by gaunt Miss Warry immediately. Sir Hannibal kept his composure.

'My daughter cannot marry you, Mr. Bowring,' he said coldly, 'as she is already engaged.'

'But you cannot take my money if she doesn't,' growled Morgan.

'The money is not yours, but mine,' corrected Sir Hannibal, eyeing the disinherited man as though he were a dog, 'and you may be sure that you will be well looked after.'

'I don't want to be looked after,' mumbled Morgan, and there came into his eyes the anger of a dog about to snap. 'I'm a free man. I won't be shut up!'

'Hush! Hush, lovey,' whispered Mrs. Krent, and drew him down beside her. 'You won't be shut up, but live always with your Martha.'

‘That entirely depends upon how you behave, Mrs. Krent,’ said Sir Hannibal tartly. ‘If I am forced to take measures to put away Mr. —’

A snarl from Morgan made him stop and retreat a step. Mrs. Krent fondled the man and cast a warning look in Sir Hannibal’s direction.

‘If you rouse him I won’t be answerable,’ she said sharply, ‘and as to sending me away, I won’t go; that is, until Morgan marries your daughter.’

‘And I will,’ growled the man heavily.

Sir Hannibal felt a qualm. The speech and look of the creature were too horrible for words, and he quailed at the idea of Dericka being handed over to such a husband. However, a timely thought that he was not compelled to gain the money by such a sacrifice restored his courage, and with a contemptuous look he again spoke to Mr. Gratton.

‘Have you finished?’ he asked in icy tones.

‘Nearly,’ replied the young man hurriedly, and went on to read out various instructions as to the estate, and also some details about Mrs. Krent, who was, it appeared, to be allowed a legacy of one hundred a year, and to be sent away, or retained, as Morgan’s guardian, at the discretion of Sir Hannibal.

‘Two pounds a week,’ wailed Mrs. Krent when in possession of these facts. ‘Oh, what a cruel will! And I saved John Bowring thousands.’

‘I shall see that you have justice,’ said the baronet, grandly.

Mrs. Krent glared, and again looked as though she could have struck the lucky inheritor of the Bowring property. However, her attention was taken off by the complaints of various persons who had expected to receive money but had been disappointed. One and all resented the fact that Sir Hannibal, connected by no ties of blood with Bowring, should have inherited, and one and all turned on the baronet. Some even hinted in loud tones that Mrs. Krent’s accusation might be true. Sir Hannibal winced, for the sound of the angered voices was unpleasant. He raised his hand.

‘There is no need for me to be placed on my defence,’ said Sir Hannibal calmly. ‘Everyone knows that at the time of the death I was attending to my guests in the grounds of the Dower House. Moreover, I had no reason to murder my lamented friend.’

‘You did it to get the money,’ snapped Mrs. Krent viciously.

‘If you say that again,’ retorted the baronet smoothly, ‘I will send you away with your one hundred a year.’

‘And part me from Morgan?’ she panted. ‘You can’t!’

‘You have heard the will, and know that I have unlimited power,’ said Sir Hannibal, sharply; ‘and as there is no further need to prolong this scene I shall bid you all good-day. Mr. Gratton, you can come to see me at St. Ewalds to consult about the business. Mrs. Krent, Mr. Bowring, you can remain here until such time as I make up my mind what is to be done. Good-day all.’ And with a polite bow Sir Hannibal stalked grandly from the room, leaving the disappointed people to comfort one another. One and all, under the stress of such disappointment, were certain that Sir Hannibal had murdered Bowring.

The drive home was a silent one. The baronet, mindful that the groom was at his back, handled the reins in complacent silence and dreamed of what he would do with the thousands of Bowring's. Dericka was still suffering from the revulsion of feeling which Morgan's unexpected wooing had brought about, and Miss Warry, gaunt and grim as usual, stared straight in front of her, occasionally watching her employer's face. When Sir Hannibal smiled at his own thoughts Miss Warry smiled also. Perhaps she was thinking of her successful prophecy as Sir Hannibal was thinking of his good fortune. But, whatever might be the cause, Miss Warry smiled very often in the course of the drive.

On reaching the Dower House, Dericka would have retired at once to her own room, but that Sir Hannibal requested her presence in his library.

She followed him there in a languid manner, but the first speech he made strung her up to a fighting humour.

'My child,' said the baronet blandly, 'by the dispensation of Providence'— he rolled the phrase on his tongue —'my difficulties have been unexpectedly ended. With this money we can now take our proper place in the county. It is my intention to refurnish the Grange and reinhabit the home of my ancestors. I shall do my share, Dericka, and I would point out that you must do yours by making a better match than that you contemplate.'

Dericka looked directly at her father, whose eyes were averted, and her colour rose.

'You said that I was engaged an hour or so ago?'

'Merely to satisfy that maniac, my dear. I do not wish you to marry him. But with your beauty and my money —'

'Mr. Bowring's money,' interposed Dericka cruelly.

'Mine now,' said the baronet with emphasis. 'With my money, my dear, I think you should marry a title.'

'One would think you lived at Bayswater to hear you talk so respectfully about titles. I am not of that way of thinking myself; I intend to marry Oswald.'

'No. He is not a good match for you.'

'I intend,' repeated Dericka, rising slowly and speaking slowly, 'to marry Oswald Forde. Your opposition will only make me marry him the sooner.'

'Dericka, would you leave your old father?'

The pathetic speech failed of its effect.

'I think you can console yourself very well,' said Miss Trevick, coldly.

Sir Hannibal changed colour.

'I don't understand —'

'I think you do, father,' she answered, going to the door, 'and now I will lie down for an hour! There will be no need for us to resume this discussion later. My mind is made up.'

‘Dericka, I forbid,’ began the outraged father, but spoke to the empty air. The door opened and closed and he was alone, fuming with anger at this behaviour of his daughter. He knew well that he could not coerce her into obeying him, as for years she had, in spite of her youth, exercised rule over the household. That was all very well, Sir Hannibal considered, when they were poor, as Dericka’s clever head kept things smooth — but now that ample funds were in hand the baronet wished to assert himself. Consequently he was annoyed that his first exercise of a long-surrendered authority should be quietly ignored.

‘She shall not marry Forde,’ he assured himself, pacing the library, ‘or if she does it will be against my express wish. Not one penny will she get of the money. As for myself’ — he cast a complacent look in a near mirror — ‘I am still young enough to marry and beget an heir. Then let Dericka look to herself, and —’

Here a sharp knock at the door made him start. Since the death of Bowring his nerves were not well under control.

‘Come in,’ he cried with a violent start. Then, when the door opened slowly, ‘Oh, it’s you, Miss Warry. I am engaged.’

‘I’m very sorry,’ said the gaunt governess, clasping her thin hands and speaking in a mincing manner, ‘but I go to town tomorrow, and I have not much time to speak.’

‘I really do not see what there is to speak about,’ said Sir Hannibal coldly. ‘You have arranged to go, and did so arrange at a time when it was inconvenient. Now, however, this unexpected inheritance makes things easier for me. You will receive your full salary for the year tomorrow, Miss Warry, and then we can say goodbye for ever.’

‘Oh, no — not for ever,’ said Miss Warry, and fishing in a little velvet bag which dangled from her wrist she brought out a handkerchief. ‘I cannot bear to lose sight of you.’

‘Well, well, you can come and see Dericka.’

‘I spoke of you, dear Sir Hannibal,’ moaned the spinster.

‘I am very much obliged to you, Miss Warry, but I think you will survive the loss of my company.’

‘Never! Never!’ And Miss Warry raised her cold eyes to the ceiling. ‘At this time my place should be by your side — so old a friend!’

Sir Hannibal shivered, although the room was perfectly warm and free from draughts.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked quickly.

‘The accusation of that horrid woman.’

‘Pooh! Rubbish! She can prove nothing.’

‘Is there anything to prove?’ questioned the governess smartly, dropping the handkerchief.

‘No — no; of course not,’ stammered the baronet, annoyed by the shrewd glance of her grey eyes.

‘People are so censorious,’ continued Miss Warry, throwing up her mittened hands, ‘they will add to the accusation of Mrs. Krent, and —’

‘They can add nothing,’ interrupted Sir Hannibal quickly. ‘I was, as I explained, here at the fete about the time the murder took place so many miles away. There is nothing to connect me with it; and I scarcely think, Miss Warry, that I am the man to kill a fellow creature in cold blood.’

‘People rarely murder in cold blood,’ murmured Miss Warry significantly; ‘a sharp word or two, a blow, and all is over.’

‘In this case it happens to be a pistol shot,’ said the baronet dryly. ‘Come, Miss Warry, you have not asked for this interview to accuse me of committing the crime?’

Miss Warry threw up her hands with a scream.

‘Oh, no no,’ she minced, waving the handkerchief; ‘dear Sir Hannibal, how can you think that I would dream of such a thing? But people are censorious, you know, and it may be they will say things.’

‘Let them say things.’

‘It may be unpleasant.’

‘Pooh! Sixty thousand a year will soon close their mouths.’

‘Well,’ said Miss Warry, replacing the handkerchief in the velvet bag and drawing the strings, ‘if you want me I’ll give you my address. I may be able to help you.’

‘In what way?’

‘I may be able to help you,’ she repeated, and moved towards the door in a stately manner.

Sir Hannibal placed himself in her path.

‘Do you know something likely to elucidate the mystery of this crime, Miss Warry?’

‘I don’t say that. But I may be able to help you.’

‘That skull affair is peculiar?’ said Sir Hannibal, inquiringly.

‘Very. And you think it is peculiar? Oh’ — Miss Warry flung up her hands again with a little laugh — ‘you can depend upon me, Sir Hannibal,’ and with a curtsy she swept from the room, leaving Sir Hannibal nervous and upset by her mysterious hints.

‘What does she know about that Death’s Head?’ he asked himself uneasily. But Miss Warry was not there to answer.

Chapter VI

Mrs. Krent’s Diplomacy

‘Money does not bring happiness!’

Sir Hannibal found speedily that this proverb was certainly true in his case. Hitherto, since he had arrived from Africa to settle in St. Ewalds his life had been fairly smooth, in spite of everlasting money troubles;

but now that the very things that used to worry him were eliminated he found himself in stormy waters. Gossip, as Miss Warry had predicted, had magnified the unsubstantiated accusation of the housekeeper, and there was a growing feeling that Sir Hannibal in some way was concerned in the murder.

Of course, no one was bold enough, or brave enough, to come forward and accuse him in so many words. If that had been the case the baronet might have been able to put a stop to the scandal by a direct denial.

But everywhere people were talking about the very opportune death of the millionaire, which had placed a pauper gentleman in receipt of a surprisingly good income. Round the tea-tables of spinsters, in the drawing-rooms of married ladies, in public-houses, and at the corners of streets Sir Hannibal's character and actions and appearance and past were amply discussed. No one could exactly make out how he was concerned in the crime, as assuredly he had been present in his own grounds about the time the murder had been committed. All the same, it was hinted that if not the actual perpetrator, he was at least an accomplice, and had hired a man to place the block of granite in the path of the motor. More, to make sure, he had instructed his accomplice to shoot Bowring should the first attempt on the man's life fail, as it had done. The motive for the commission of the crime was to be found in the inheritance. Sir Hannibal was notoriously in want of money and had murdered Bowring in an indirect manner to obtain it.

'It is all nonsense,' said Miss Stretton, who was one of those who defended the baronet. 'Sir Hannibal is incapable of committing such a wicked deed.'

She said this to Mr. Penrith, who was not exactly the person to whom such a remark should have been made seeing that he was jealous of the too fascinating baronet.

'I don't see why he shouldn't,' growled Penrith sulkily; 'anyone would do anything for money.'

'You would,' said Miss Stretton with a glance of disdain.

'And so would Trevick. Everyone knew that he was desperately hard up. Of course you defend him. You want to marry him.'

'He wants to marry me,' she rejoined with a gratified laugh, 'but I am not quite sure that I will accept him.'

'Anne, when you know that I love you.'

'My dear Ralph, you are very nice on occasions, and you are not bad-looking. All the same you have very little money, and your mother is not inclined to surrender her position as mistress of your house.'

'She will if you marry me,' urged the love-lorn squire.

Miss Stretton shook her head.

'Your mother is not fond of me,' was her reply, 'and seemed pleased when I left the house. I am only a poor artist, and she doesn't think me good enough to marry a Penrith.'

'I think you good enough. Anne, you must marry me.'

'No. That is — I can't say definitely at present.'

Penrith was white with rage.

‘That is because you want to marry the old man.’

‘Oh, he’s not so very old, and he is wonderfully well-preserved. Also, my dear Ralph, he has sixty thousand a year, remember.’

‘Gained by murder.’

‘You have no right to say that,’ she said sharply.

‘I’ll say what I like, and do what I like.’

‘You brute; a nice husband you would make.’

‘No, no!’ Penrith saw that he had gone too far. ‘You can guide me in any way you like, Anne. Chuck this old duffer and marry me. We’ll be jolly happy together.’

‘H’m, I have my doubts of that,’ she replied. Then, so as not to lose him, for Miss Stretton was a lady who liked to have two strings to her bow, she added, ‘I can’t give you an answer yet.’

‘I see,’ snarled Penrith, his healthy red face growing scarlet, ‘you will marry me if Sir Hannibal refuses you.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ she asked in a spirited manner. ‘Let me tell you, Mr. Penrith, that I am not a woman to be refused. Sir Hannibal wants to marry me. I have reason to know that,’ and her hand slipped into the pocket of her dress.

Penrith’s eyes followed.

‘He had written, asking you?’

‘Perhaps,’ she answered significantly. ‘At all events, I have not made up my mind to accept him. Perhaps,’ she cast a cajoling look at her cross lover, ‘I may become Mrs. Penrith after all — on conditions.’

‘Conditions!’ Penrith stared with open mouth.

Anne laid a slender hand on his arm.

‘My dear Ralph,’ said she in a grave voice, ‘there is a lot of gossip about Sir Hannibal which I firmly believe to be false. I heard that you have said things about him also. Now, if we are to be friends, you must hold your tongue.’

‘That is the condition, is it?’ said Penrith, his face turning pale with anger. ‘Well then, I’ll tell the truth about Sir Hannibal, and to the police. Then he’ll hang, and you’ll marry me.’

‘Then you have been saying something against him?’

‘Yes; because I know that you want to marry him, and I have made up my mind that you shan’t. Sir Hannibal is guilty.’

Anne gasped.

‘How can you be sure? What do you know?’

‘I know from a chap called Polwin —’

‘That’s Sir Hannibal’s steward!’

‘Yes. Josiah Polwin says that immediately after we — you and I— left the fete on that day that Sir Hannibal came after us on a motor-bicycle.’

‘Ridiculous! You drove slowly. He would soon have caught us up: yet we did not even see him.’

‘No, because he went another road.’

‘Then he could not have come after us,’ said Anne Stretton, crisply.

‘Polwin says that he did. At all events, he certainly left the Dower House on his motor-bike, and took the direction of the quarries. They are near the spot of the accident’— Penrith sneered as he pronounced the word —‘and I believe that Sir Hannibal went there and murdered Bowring; then he remounted his bike and got back to the fete before it was over. He could easily do the whole business in an hour and a half — if not in less time.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Miss Stretton, ‘and I shall ask Sir Hannibal myself, Mr. Penrith. He is my friend, and I won’t let him be traduced.’

The young man sneered.

‘The future Lady Trevick doesn’t want her husband to be hanged.’

‘There is no danger of his being hanged.’

‘Yes, there is; and in any case he’ll have to leave St. Ewalds. Feeling is running high against him, and he’ll be mobbed if he stops.’

This was undeniably the case, as Anne knew. She wondered if, after all, Sir Hannibal had murdered Bowring. On a quick motor-bicycle — and she knew that he was a good rider — he could have rapidly reached the spot near the quarries where the death had taken place. There was another road by which he could have come, and so have avoided her and Ralph driving in the dog-cart. Long before Bowring could arrive in his car he would be on the high bank, able, with the aid of a lever, to topple the granite mass on to the road. And after shooting the man he could easily have clambered up the bank again to run across the moor to the other road, where his bicycle was probably waiting. In twenty minutes after the commission of the crime he could be back in the Dower House grounds exhibiting himself to his guests, and so be ready with an alibi. Things looked assuredly very black against the baronet.

Miss Stretton was a lady who made up her mind promptly. She was, as Dericka surmised, an adventuress, and was not scrupulous as to ways so long as she attained her ends. In this instance she was rather pleased to hear of Sir Hannibal’s peril, as it enabled her to pose as his friend — to rescue him, as it were — and thus gain his eternal gratitude. He was quite willing to marry her, she knew, and even if he had committed the murder she cared very little so long as she became mistress of sixty thousand a year. Penrith was pretty well off and very deeply in love with her, but his mother was not friendly, and her position would be uncomfortable. Besides, Penrith might kick over the traces after the marriage, and had the makings of a brute in him. Sir Hannibal was a gentleman, a baronet, a wealthy man, and had an easy temper. He was the man she wished to marry; therefore, after the conversation with Penrith, Anne determined to interview

the baronet and place him on his guard by telling the tale which Polwin had related to Penrith. Then she would get Sir Hannibal to retreat to London and there marry her. They could go abroad for a few years until the scandal of the crime had blown over, and all would be well.

Having thus arranged her plans, Miss Stretton prepared to carry them out. Seizing an opportunity when she knew that Dericka would be absent, for she did not wish to meet that very sharp young lady, Miss Stretton called at the Dower House.

‘Is Sir Hannibal at home?’ she asked when the door was opened.

‘Yes, Miss,’ replied the servant, ‘but he is engaged just now.’

‘I wish to see him. Will he be long?’

‘I cannot say, Miss. Mrs. Krent is with him.’

‘Oh,’ said Anne, wondering what Mrs. Krent was saying to the baronet; ‘well, then, I’ll wait. I am going to London, and wish to see Sir Hannibal before I leave St. Ewalds.’

The servant, knowing that she was a great friend of his master’s, admitted her at once, and conducted her to the drawing-room. It was a small apartment, like all the rooms in the Dower House, and had two French windows opening on to a small terrace. Approaching the window to admire the view of the beach and bay, Anne heard the murmur of two voices close at hand. Then she recollected that the library was next to the drawing-room, and likewise had windows opening on to the terrace. A peep round the corner showed her that one of these had been left open, and the clearness of the voices assured her that the speakers were very injudiciously near the window. Anne could hear comparatively plainly what was being said, and, taking her chance, sat down cautiously to listen. One of the speakers was Sir Hannibal, as she recognised his refined and pleasant voice. The other, from the coarse, female tones, she presumed was that of Mrs. Krent. Not thinking that they had a listener in the next room, the host and his visitor spoke tolerably loud. Anne listened with all her ears.

If she could have seen through the wall she would have beheld Mrs. Krent seated near the desk, which was close by the open window. That good lady was arrayed in the deepest black, but apparently not liking so sombre a garb, she had smartened herself by adding a yellow shawl and a quantity of silver ornaments. Also, she carried a red leather bag and a green parasol, which contrasted oddly with the crape on her dress. Her face was redder than ever, and she frequently wiped it with a mauve handkerchief. Sir Hannibal, refined and well-bred, resented the presence of this common-looking woman in his library. But there was no help for it as Mrs. Krent had come on business and was determined to have her say. At the point of the conversation when the voices first struck on Miss Stretton’s ear Mrs. Krent was volubly urging her claims for money.

‘I’ve been with Bowring for twenty years,’ she declared in her rough voice, ‘and he always promised to look after me.’

‘He left you a hundred a year,’ said the baronet smoothly.

‘That’s nothing. I look to you to give me one thousand.’

‘What! Mrs. Krent, and after accusing me —’

‘Sir’— Mrs. Krent rose and folded her podgy hands. ‘I ask your pardon for saying what I did. I was not myself when I spoke. I am quite sure that you had nothing to do with the matter.’

‘Good! Then perhaps, Mrs. Krent, you will spread that story and help me to regain the popularity which I seem to have lost.’

‘I’m sure I’ve heard nothing against you, sir.’

‘That is not true,’ replied Sir Hannibal quietly. ‘Everyone seems to be under the impression that I murdered Bowring, and that impression, Mrs. Krent, must be put down to your wild accusation.’

‘I’m sure I’m very sorry,’ faltered Mrs. Krent, who seemed to be anxious to propitiate the baronet. ‘I only spoke wildlike; although, sir,’ she added with emphasis, ‘and I wouldn’t say this to everyone, Bowring was afraid that you would kill him.’

Trevick, who was trimming his nails, did not look up.

‘Bowring had no reason to think such a thing,’ he said slowly. ‘It is true that we did business in Africa together, and that he did not treat me over well. But he has made amends by leaving the money to me.’

‘And folk think you killed him for the money, sir.’

‘They are wrong; I never left this place. Your story, Mrs. Krent —’

‘I’m sorry I said anything,’ she interrupted hastily; ‘folks should not have taken me at my word. I’ll tell every one that you have nothing to do with the murder.’

‘Do you know who has, Mrs. Krent?’

‘No, sir; no more than a baby unborn. But if you want to stop folks’ mouths, sir, you can do it.’

‘In what way, Mrs. Krent?’

‘By marrying your daughter to Morgan. Then the money will come to the rightful heir and you’ll be praised.’

‘I would be blamed, if I allowed my child to marry a lunatic.’

‘Oh, no, oh, no,’ protested the housekeeper, fanning herself with her handkerchief. ‘Morgan ain’t so very bad. He’s easily guided, though I don’t deny that he has his bad times. Me and Jenny are fond of him in a way. What are you going to do about him, Sir Hannibal?’

‘I haven’t thought about the matter yet,’ said the baronet fretfully, and looking weary. ‘I am very much troubled over all these rumours which accuse me of the crime. But I cannot adopt the course you suggest. Dericka cannot possibly marry Morgan.’

‘Well, sir’ — Mrs. Krent spoke in a musing tone, but her little red eyes glanced furtively at Trevick’s face — ‘suppose you give out that Miss — Miss — I mean you daughter, sir — will marry Morgan, folk would then shut up. I’ll do my best to stop the scandal.’

‘My daughter cannot marry Morgan,’ said the baronet again.

‘You can say that she will,’ urged Mrs. Krent; ‘only to stop folks talking, sir.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Trevick, and the question was mentally asked also by the unseen listener.

Neither Sir Hannibal nor Miss Stretton could understand this mysterious conversation of the housekeeper, who seemed to have, as the saying is, something up her sleeve. She smiled significantly at Trevick’s question.

‘If you’ll make it right for me, sir, I’ll make it right for you.’

‘Again I must ask your meaning, Mrs. Krent.’

‘See here, sir.’ Mrs. Krent spread out her podgy hands. ‘I’m a plain woman, who ain’t been well treated. If you’ll swear on this,’ she pulled out a small Bible, ‘that you’ll let me have one thousand a year I’ll put things right for you.’

‘Do you mean to say that you know who killed Bowring?’ asked Trevick, pushing back his chair violently.

‘No, I don’t,’ retorted Mrs. Krent tartly; ‘but if you’ll swear to give me the one thousand a year and then announce that your daughter is to marry Morgan you’ll get back your reputation.’

‘I don’t see how —’

‘And you won’t, sir, until you swear.’

She held out the book.

Anxious to know what she meant, and really in a dilemma as to how to reinstate himself in the eyes of St. Ewalds, the baronet hastily snatched at the Bible. ‘I’ll give you one thousand a year if you put things straight,’ said he, then added a solemn oath and kissed the book.

‘Now, then,’ said Mrs. Krent, taking it back again with a smiling face, ‘you can say that Miss Trevick’s to marry Morgan, and folk will never believe that you killed his father.’

‘My daughter must not marry Morgan,’ said Sir Hannibal for the third time.

‘She can’t,’ cried Mrs. Krent, triumphantly, ‘for Morgan’s married already, and to my daughter Jenny.’

Chapter VII

Retreat

‘Morgan married already; and to your daughter Jenny?’ repeated Sir Hannibal wonderingly, then his face cleared. ‘That will certainly make matters easier.’

‘Of course, sir. Miss Trevick can’t marry the poor boy, seeing he’s my daughter’s husband. So you see, sir, if you appear willing to let Morgan, who is the rightful heir, have the money by marrying your daughter people will say that you are innocent.’

‘I don’t quite follow you there,’ responded the baronet dryly. ‘However, people will certainly see that I wish to do what is right if I announce a possible marriage. Nevertheless, if such could take place I should refuse to make such an announcement.’

‘It can never take place,’ cried Mrs. Krent eagerly, ‘seeing that Morgan is my son-inlaw. Give me and him and Mrs. Bowring, my daughter Jenny, one thousand a year and the Grange to live in and I’ll soon put it about that you, sir, are as innocent as an unborn babe.’

‘The Grange? Mrs. Krent, you are adding to your bargain.’

Like all ill-bred women, Mrs. Krent easily lost her temper. Now that she had secured so much she appeared to think that she could do what she pleased with the easy-going baronet, and rose in a fine rage. ‘I’m sure it’s little enough I ask,’ she cried harshly. ‘Morgan is the son of Bowring, and should have the whole sixty thousand a year. Why he should have left it to you, sir, I don’t know, but Bowring always was a scoundrel. But if you don’t give in to my fair demands I’ll make it my business to bring home the murder to you.’

‘Nonsense; that is quite impossible.’

‘Nothing is impossible to one who is wronged,’ said Mrs. Krent, doggedly, ‘and I wasn’t born yesterday, let me tell you, sir. Be my friend, and it will be better for you; get my back up, and —’ Here Mrs. Krent gasped, clenched her podgy fist, and looked volumes.

Sir Hannibal thought it best to temporise. Certainly the fact that Morgan was already married would help him greatly, as then he could announce that Dericka was to become Morgan’s wife. By this statement it would appear that the money had been left on such a condition by the dead man, and so any possible motive for Sir Hannibal committing the crime would be removed. All he had to do was to announce the possible marriage, and then Mrs. Krent would appear to state that it was too late. Afterwards Sir Hannibal reflected that he would play the patron to the extent of one thousand a year; but he was not very anxious to give up the Grange as he wished to live there himself.

‘One thing at a time, Mrs. Krent,’ he said judiciously. ‘You shall have the money, and meanwhile can live at the Grange until I make up my mind what course to pursue.’

Mrs. Krent nodded, and prepared to take her leave.

‘And if I were you, sir, I should go away to London at once,’ she said seriously.

‘Why should I do that, Mrs. Krent?’

‘It’s market day,’ said the housekeeper, ‘and folks is talking of you having had a finger in this murder. If you went through the town you would be mobbed; and I shouldn’t be surprised,’ added Mrs. Krent judiciously, ‘if the market folk came up to this very house. The quarrymen were fond of Mr. Bowring, who paid them well, and they’d not make much ado about ducking you in the sea, sir.’

Sir Hannibal gasped.

‘How utterly preposterous,’ he said indignantly. ‘If I were guilty, if there were any feasible evidence against me, the police would assuredly have arrested me long since. That I am free and respected should show these misguided men that I have had nothing to do with the lamented death of my friend.’

‘Free, yes,’ sniffed Mrs. Krent, ‘seeing as you are rich and titled, there being one law for the rich and another for the poor. But respected, sir? — just you go down to St. Ewalds and see. However, it’s none of my business. I go now, sir.’

‘One moment, Mrs. Krent. Where did this marriage take place?’

‘Ah, no you don’t, sir. Until I get that money I hold my tongue. You can’t prove anything without me, and in spite of your oath, I don’t trust you over-much. I believe that you do know something about this murder, but for Jenny’s sake I don’t give you up. She wants money as Mrs. Bowring, and you shall supply it, sir.’

Sir Hannibal gasped again with indignation, but Mrs. Krent swiftly removed herself from the room. The baronet was minded to follow her and insist that she should prove her accusation, but on second thoughts he reflected that such a course would be undignified, and remained where he was, thinking deeply.

His thoughts were not pleasant. He was well aware that if an inquiry were made into his past, and all his doings in Africa with Bowring were made public, that people would be more than ever certain that he had committed the crime. He shuddered to think of the publicity of the whole affair, and wondered if what Mrs. Krent proposed would really close the mouths of the people. Ever since he had inherited the property he had been aware of the sullen looks which greeted him when he went down the town, but it had never struck him that the people would proceed to violence. Yet, when he reflected on the rough characters of the Cornish folk, and their quick tempers, he saw well that it would be best to refrain from going into St. Ewalds, or on to the moors where the quarrymen lived. The fortnight which had elapsed since the reading of the will had changed his life. Formerly he had been poor, but respected; now he was rich, and suspected. Even as he thought of these things he heard in the distance a sullen roar, which seemed to come from the direction of the town. At once starting to his feet, he wondered if what Mrs. Krent had said was true, and whether the quarrymen would come to assault him in his own house, so as to be revenged for the death of their kind landlord. But the idea was too absurd, and he brushed it aside with a rather quavering laugh. All the same, he wished that Dericka were at hand to assist him with her common sense.

It was then that Providence, as the baronet afterwards believed, sent him assistance. It came in the shape of Miss Stretton, who stole round by the terrace and presented herself at the window. She also had heard the distant roar, repeated more than once, and from rumours she had heard was not at all sure but what the prophecy of Mrs. Krent would be realised very speedily. It was all the better for her plans, as she could rescue Sir Hannibal and thereby gain his eternal gratitude.

‘Miss Stretton — Anne,’ said Sir Hannibal, hurrying towards the window, where she stood with one finger pressed to her lips. ‘What good fairy sent you here?’

‘My love for you brought me,’ said Anne, and stepping into the room she closed the window to shut out another distant roar like the sound of surf on a rocky shore.

‘Love?’ In spite of his perplexities Sir Hannibal opened his arms. ‘Oh, my dear, then you will marry me?’

Miss Stretton brought out of her pocket a letter — the very same she had carried when Penrith’s jealous eyes had wandered to where it was hidden.

‘You really mean this for a proposal?’ she asked.

‘Is it not plain enough?’

‘Oh, yes. You ask me to be your wife, but you don’t say when.’

‘At this very moment, my darling — as soon as you can marry me. We can go to the church this day, if you like.’

‘In St. Ewalds?’

‘Why not?’

Anne seated herself and, checking the caress with which Sir Hannibal would have enveloped her, she raised a finger.

‘I was in the next room while you were speaking with Mrs. Krent,’ she said gravely. ‘I did not intend to listen, but by chance I did overhear a few words!’ This was a guarded way by which she hinted that she had overheard the whole conversation.

‘I do not mind,’ cried the baronet impetuously, ‘there will be no secrets between us. You, then, know that Mrs. Krent accuses me?’

‘Yes; but I don’t believe it.’

‘Believe it!’ echoed Sir Hannibal in a white fury; ‘of course not. I never had anything to do with the death. I was here all the time; that is, I walked on the beach after you departed on that day, so as to think of your sweet face, my own love.’

Miss Stretton had half a mind to mention about Polwin’s tale of the motor-bicycle, but on second thoughts she refrained. Explanations could come later. Meanwhile she was anxious to get Sir Hannibal away as soon as possible in case the quarrymen should come up to the house, as a still continued roar told her they would.

Sir Hannibal, taken up with admiring her face, and never dreaming of peril, paid no attention to the ominous sounds.

‘Of course I know that you are innocent,’ she said quickly; ‘all the same, people think that you are guilty, and the quarrymen openly say that they will assault this house.’

‘Nonsense, my dear.’ Sir Hannibal looked sceptical. ‘England is a country of law and order. In the wilds such a thing might take place, but here —’ He shrugged his handsome shoulders.

Anne threw open the window, and now the sound of angry voices could easily be distinguished.

‘Hearken,’ she said, ‘they are in the avenue.’

‘But the police — the police?’

‘The police can do very little against an angry mob of quarrymen.’

‘I’ll have the rascals locked up,’ said the baronet fiercely.

He was not at all afraid as his courage was too high to be daunted by a riot.

‘It is ridiculous that I should be accused of being concerned in Bowring’s murder. I shall address them,’ and he moved towards the open window as several large men emerged from the belt of trees encircling the lawns of the mansion.

Anne drew him back and quickly closed the window.

‘No,’ she said sharply; ‘it would be useless to argue with men inflamed with drink. Sir Hannibal, listen. It is just as well that I came up. Mr. Penrith lent me his dog-cart for the day; I’ll go down and get it and drive round the back road which runs past this house. Slip out and join me, and I’ll drive you to the Gwynne Station. There you can board the London express.’

‘But by that I’ll admit myself guilty,’ cried the baronet in dismay.

‘It’s better to admit that than to be killed,’ retorted Anne; ‘and the quarrymen are in no humour to listen to excuses.’

‘The police will arrest me.’

‘All the better; you will be safe in gaol. Come, Sir Hannibal,’ she added impatiently; ‘it is either London or prison. Will you come?’

The baronet thought for a few moments, and his decision was assisted by a stone which smashed one of the windows.

‘I’ll come,’ he said hurriedly; ‘where am I to meet you?’

‘In the back road in five minutes,’ she said quickly. ‘Don’t wait to write to your daughter; I’ll come back and explain. Get away to the back at once; I’ll meet the people.’

Sir Hannibal saw that discretion was the better part of valour, and although it went sorely against his grain to fly he deemed it was best to do so until he could explain his innocence under the shield of the law. He therefore snatched a hasty kiss from Anne, and, putting on an overcoat and a soft hat, went into the back parts of the house, where palefaced servants were congregated. A word or two pacified these, and then their master slipped out to the back road, where he waited uneasily for the dog-cart. Every moment he expected to hear the sounds of his house being smashed, or to see and infuriated mob of labourers pouring round the corner to kill him. It was a very uncomfortable quarter of an hour.

But Anne Stretton proved to be quite equal to the occasion. She stepped boldly out on to the terrace through the broken window and faced the crowd of angry-looking men. These looked surprised when they saw her, and many voices demanded that Sir Hannibal should show himself.

‘Sir Hannibal is not here,’ said Anne coolly, for she knew that she was quite safe; ‘he has gone to the Grange.’

‘We’ve just come from that direction, Miss,’ said a rough voice.

‘He went by the other road, to see Mr. Morgan Bowring.’

The crowd paused. It might be true, and if this was the case it would not be worth while to risk gaol by breaking into an empty house. But one big man, quite a giant in stature — the same who had already spoken — came forward.

‘You know Sir Hannibal, Miss,’ he said hoarsely; ‘tell us if he killed the master.’

‘Certainly not,’ replied Anne, holding her head very high and speaking with the utmost assurance; ‘but how do you know that I am acquainted with Sir Hannibal?’

‘You come out of the house, Miss,’ said the giant with a grin, ‘and I know you well, Miss. Don’t you remember how I found the sketchbook you had lost on the moors?’

Anne looked attentively at the big man.

‘Anak?’ she said with a flash of memory. ‘Yes, I remember you. We talked about Sir Hannibal; you are the foreman of the quarry labourers he employs?’

‘Mr. Bowring employs us, Miss,’ said Anak heavily; ‘Sir Hannibal let us and the quarry to Mr. Bowring.’

‘I remember. And you speak better than your fellows, because you have been to school, and to —’

Here her speech was interrupted by a growl from the mob, who were weary of waiting. Anak was their leader, so Anne, seeing that no time was to be lost if Sir Hannibal’s house was to be saved from destruction, spoke hastily. ‘Take these men away, Anak.’

‘They want Sir Hannibal, Miss.’

‘You will find him at the Grange.’

Anak looked at her hard, and appeared to believe her. With a loutish gesture he turned away and addressed his fellow-labourers. In a few words he pointed out to them that the police would shortly be on the spot, and that Sir Hannibal was at his ancestral residence on the moors. The speech had a good effect, for in a few moments the mob of big, uncouth men were running down the avenue again, leaving the Dower House untouched save for the one broken window. Anne followed and found Penrith’s dog-cart at the gate in charge of the groom.

‘You can tell Mr. Penrith that I will bring back the cart in two hours to the hotel,’ she said.

‘Don’t you want me to come, Miss?’ asked the groom, hesitating.

Anne whipped up the horse. ‘There is no necessity. I am going for a drive and will return in two hours.’ She was wise enough not to mention her destination in case it should be suspected that she had aided the retreat of Sir Hannibal.

Shortly she found the baronet, with his hat well pulled over his eyes and muffled up in his long coat. No words passed between them, but Sir Hannibal swung himself on to the trap at once. In another minute they were driving along the almost deserted road which led to Gwynne, a local station some six miles distant from St. Ewalds. Only when they were clear of the town did the baronet speak.

‘I cannot thank you sufficiently for your help,’ he said gratefully.

‘I am only too glad,’ responded Miss Stretton, looking at him with her bold, black eyes in a rather quizzical manner; ‘but you must think me very forward to come and overhear your private conversation.’

‘As I said, my dear girl, there need be no secrets between us,’ replied Sir Hannibal eagerly, and would have possessed himself of her hand but that she was holding the reins. ‘Now that the ice is broken between us, and you know that I love you, there is nothing you will not know. And our marriage?’

‘I have not thought of that yet,’ said Anne thoughtfully. The fact being that she did not intend to finally commit herself until she could be quite sure that Sir Hannibal had the money. She had no idea of marrying a pauper, however easy-going and well-preserved he might be.

‘Why cannot we get married while I am in town?’

‘What about your daughter?’ questioned Anne in her turn.

‘Dericka?’ Sir Hannibal waved his hand vaguely. ‘Oh, she will be quite pleased. She likes you, my dear Anne.’

‘I don’t think she does,’ responded the lady dryly. ‘However, she cannot prevent our marriage.’

‘Certainly not; I am my own master.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘She went out to see a friend and said that she would not be back until late.’

‘I fear she will be surprised to find that you have gone.’

Sir Hannibal shrugged his shoulders.

‘It cannot be helped, and I daresay she will soon learn that the cause of my flight — for that it is — is due to the feeling against me in St. Ewalds. By the way, have those rascally quarrymen sacked the house?’

‘Oh, no. I told them that you were at the Grange, and they have gone there to look for you.’

‘How clever you are. My dear girl, you are one in a thousand. I have always admired and loved you.’

Further compliments of this sort passed between them as they drove to Gwynne Station. Anne was certain that she now had Sir Hannibal fast, and looked forward to becoming the mistress of sixty thousand a year. She had some qualms of conscience regarding Penrith, whom she had led to believe would be her husband; but she dismissed these when she thought of the brilliant future before her. On the whole, Anne Stretton was thankful that matters had turned out as they had done, as in this way she had been enabled to capture Sir Hannibal. Not that he was a very shy bird, but it was necessary, as she had frequently found in her career, to make absolutely certain. Many a time had she proved the truth of the proverb, ‘There’s many a slip betwixt cup and lip.’

But she would not have been so easy in her mind had she known that Sir Hannibal, on stumbling into a first-class carriage, found that his travelling companion was none other than Dericka. There she was, comfortably ensconced in the corner, with a large bag packed away on the shelf overhead.

‘Dericka?’ cried her father in amazement; ‘what are you doing here?’

‘I am going to London,’ she replied, equally astonished. ‘And you, father, why are you going to town?’

Sir Hannibal explained, whereat Dericka was suitably angered that her father should be suspected of such a vile crime. All the same, when he had ended she significantly remarked:

‘It is just as well that I am going to London to see Oswald.’

‘Is that your reason for this secret journey?’

‘Yes. I knew if I asked you to let me go you would not consent. And I know, also, that Oswald is the sole man who can help you to find out who killed Mr. Bowring. I am going to stop with Aunt Lavinia, and then will call on Oswald at the Temple and explain everything.’

‘You should have told me, Dericka,’ fumed the baronet.

‘I think not,’ she answered calmly; ‘you would only have argued. It has been in my mind for several days to go up and see Oswald, as I have been aware of the feeling against you. But I did not expect that it would take the form of a demonstration such as you tell me about. You cannot return to St. Ewalds, father, until your character is cleared.’

‘And who will clear it, if it does need clearing?’

‘Oswald will clear it — at a price.’

‘Oh, indeed! And the price, Dericka?’

‘My hand,’ she answered, and Sir Hannibal grunted. He recognised that he was in a hole, and needed all the friends he could muster. All the same, he was by no means pleased at the prospect of having a penniless barrister as his son-in-law.

Chapter VIII

An Amateur Detective

Miss Lavinia Quinton was the sister of Dericka’s mother, a wealthy spinster, who disliked Sir Hannibal as much as she loved his daughter. She also liked Oswald Forde, and was disposed to forward his suit, both on account of his good looks and because the baronet did not approve of him as Dericka’s suitor. There must have been some Irish blood in Miss Lavinia, for she was always in the opposition, and would never cease to argue while she had breath left in her spare body. Dericka was very fond of her, and Aunt Lavinia approved of Dericka, saying that all the sense in the girl came from her mother, which remark was a side slap at Sir Hannibal.

The house of this odd personage was in a quiet Kensington square, where the rents were high and the dwellers in the various mansions well-to-do. Everything in that square went by clockwork, and the Judgment Day would have found the inhabitants dressed in their best bibs and tuckers ready to listen to the last trump. Miss Quinton herself was one of the precise old ladies in the place — tall, slender and aristocratic-looking. Her silvery hair was worn in the fashion of Marie Antoinette, and suited her wrinkled, oval face with its arched nose and thin lips. She always dressed in grey, like a demure nun, and like a nun she was given to religious works, mostly concerned with an extremely high church round the corner. Walking very erect, with her nose held aloft as though disdaining meaner clay, Miss Lavinia passed for being proud and cold. Proud she certainly was, but not cold, as many a poor person knew how warm hearted she could be when there was charitable work to be done. But she assuredly possessed sharp eyes and a sharp tongue, and could make herself eminently disagreeable on occasions. She chose to do so when Sir Hannibal and Dericka arrived from Cornwall.

‘H’m!’ said Miss Lavinia, kissing Dericka warmly, and greeting her brother-in-law coldly; ‘so you are here. Why?’

‘I thought that I would come and see you, Aunt,’ said Dericka, who knew that Miss Lavinia was pleased.

‘H’m! Your father has been making himself disagreeable again?’

‘I never make myself disagreeable unless there is a cause,’ said the baronet, coldly.

‘You usually find cause,’ snapped the old lady. ‘Dericka looks pale, I notice. H’m! Is Oswald Forde the cause of that, or —’ Miss Lavinia’s eye sought the tired face of her brother-inlaw.

‘I’ve got nothing to do with it,’ said Sir Hannibal hastily.

‘Papa is all right, Aunty,’ whispered Dericka quickly; ‘don’t be hard on him, he is very worried.’

‘On account of that Bowring murder? H’m.’

‘What do you know of that, Lavinia?’

‘All that I read in the papers. Well, the man’s gone, so there is no use in saying anything, but I never liked him.’

‘I did not know that you knew him well, Lavinia?’

‘I knew him much better than you think, Hannibal. You told me about him when you came from Africa, and I made it my business to have a few conversations with him when he came to town.’

‘Why, in Heaven’s name?’ asked the baronet, puzzled.

‘For the sake of your good name, Hannibal.’

‘My — good — name?’

‘Certainly. You more than hinted that this Bowring had done some shady business in South Africa, and as you were mixed up with him I wanted to know what that business was, so that I might help you should occasion arise.’

‘There was no need,’ said Sir Hannibal testily. ‘Bowring and I did do business together in Cape Town, and he did not treat me well. All the same, I was quite able to manage him. But if you are going to make yourself disagreeable, Lavinia, I shall go to an hotel.’

‘And waste your money. Nonsense.’

‘Money doesn’t matter to me now, Lavinia. I am rich.’

‘Indeed! And how did you make money?’

‘I didn’t make it. Bowring has left me sixty thousand a year.’

Miss Lavinia, who was seated bolt upright in her chair, fell back with a gasp of astonishment when she heard the news.

‘In Heaven’s name why did he do that, seeing that he has a son?’

‘An insane son,’ put in Dericka sharply.

‘Well,’ said Sir Hannibal, revolving what Mrs. Krent had said to him and anxious to set the rumour of an engagement going, ‘the money was left to me, in a way — on account of Dericka and Morgan.’

‘The son? Well?’

‘Bowring wanted Dericka to marry Morgan, and I was, so to speak, to hold the money in trust. The will did not put that in so many words, but the hint is enough for me.’

‘Hint! Hint!’ cried Miss Lavinia with rising anger. ‘Good heavens, do you mean to say that you want Dericka to marry a lunatic?’

‘There is no chance of that,’ said Dericka angrily. ‘Papa, you really cannot mean what you are saying. You would not like me to marry that fearful creature?’

‘There is no chance of your marrying him, my dear; but it will be as well to let everyone think that I am willing you should become Morgan’s wife so that some reason may be assigned for this money being left to me.’

Miss Lavinia looked at Dericka, and Dericka looked at Miss Lavinia. It was the latter lady who spoke first.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Then I can’t explain just now,’ retorted Sir Hannibal, wearily, and resting his head on his hand; ‘but if you will wait until Forde comes I’ll make everything clear.’

‘Oh, indeed, Hannibal. And pray, have you asked Mr. Forde to come to my house and without requesting my permission?’

‘No! No!’ interposed Dericka hastily, to prevent an angry reply on the part of the incensed lady; ‘I took that liberty.’

Miss Lavinia rubbed her aristocratic nose.

‘It is a liberty, my dear — that is, it would be if anyone but yourself took it. I shall be glad to see Mr. Forde to dinner. Does he know —’

‘I sent a wire from the station asking him to come here at seven.’

‘And if you object to his coming here, Lavinia, I will send another telegram and invite him to the Guelph Hotel, where I propose to stay.’

Miss Lavinia was sharp, and not over fond of Sir Hannibal, whom she regarded as a weakling. All the same, she was hospitable and saw that her despised brother-in-law looked worried.

‘My dear Hannibal, I should not think of your going to an hotel,’ she said cordially; ‘you must stop here. Your cab is there,’ — she glanced out of the window on to the quiet square — ‘and your luggage also? I will send —’

Her hand was on the button of the bell.

‘I have no luggage, Lavinia.’

The maiden lady’s hand dropped. ‘No — luggage?’

‘No. I left St. Ewald’s in a hurry. For Heaven’s sake wait until Forde comes. I’ll tell my story once, but not twice.’

The spinster looked again at Dericka, but that young lady shook her head.

‘I can give no explanation, Aunty. Father refuses to enlighten me until he sees Oswald.’

‘In that case we may as well drop the subject. But you did not tell me, Hannibal, how you came up?’

‘We came by the night train, Lavinia, and stopped at the Guelph Hotel.’

‘Why did you not come here?’ asked Miss Lavinia, putting up a lorgnette and speaking severely. ‘It is now three o’clock in the afternoon.’

‘Aunty’ — it was Dericka who explained — ‘I wanted to come to you, and had I been travelling by myself I should have come on, however late the hour. But father joined me at Gwynne Station, and said that we had better stop at the Guelph Hotel instead of troubling you. We were shopping this morning, and —’

‘You should have come here.’

‘I didn’t want to,’ said Dericka quickly. ‘I sent a wire, as I said, from the station when we arrived asking Oswald to come here this evening, and did not wish to come until the afternoon.’

‘Why?’ asked Miss Lavinia, snappishly.

‘It was my fault,’ interposed Sir Hannibal. ‘I had to see a doctor.’

‘Oh, then the shopping excuse is a lie?’

‘No. We did do some shopping, Aunty.’

‘H’m! And why, Hannibal, did you see a doctor?’

‘I have had a shock.’

‘What sort of a shock?’

‘Oh!’ Sir Hannibal rose and shook himself. ‘Do stop asking questions, Lavinia. The shock has to do with what I have to tell you in the presence of Forde. As to the shopping, since I came away without baggage I have had to get a few things.’

‘Which are in the cab?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then, when you said that you had no luggage you told a —’

‘Damn!’ cried the baronet, goaded beyond endurance.

Far from being angry, Miss Lavinia seemed amused.

‘I apologise,’ she said with very good grace; ‘I fear my questions worry you.’

‘They do. And I apologise in my turn for bad language.’

‘I accept.’ Miss Lavinia smiled grimly and shook out her grey skirts in a gracious manner. ‘Well, then, I’ll send Augustus’—this was the butler—‘to get your — your — purchases.’ Miss Lavinia was determined not to say ‘luggage’—‘and you can amuse yourself here while I take Dericka to her room.’

Sir Hannibal nodded and sat down again — he had risen in his anger.

Miss Lavinia gave her instructions, and escorted her niece to a very pretty bedroom next to her own. When the two were alone, and the door was closed, the spinster turned on Dericka with a look which spoke volumes. ‘Marriage,’ said Miss Lavinia.

‘Whose marriage?’ inquired Dericka, smiling rosily.

‘Not yours, my dear. Hannibal’s.’

The rosy flush died out of the girl’s face.

‘My father? Oh, you must be mistaken.’

‘I am very seldom mistaken,’ said the spinster frigidly. ‘Hannibal is one of those well-preserved old beaux who are the easy prey of any adventuress who comes along.’

‘Oh!’ Dericka remembered that this was her term for Miss Stretton. ‘Do you mean —’

‘Anne. Of course I mean Anne. She is well-born, and not bad-looking, even though she is older than she admits. She came to me some months ago saying that she wanted to go to St. Ewalds to join that art school there, and asked me to give her a letter of introduction or two. I think myself she is an adventuress, but I had a regard for her poor father. I therefore introduced her to you, my dear. But it never struck me that she would make love to your father.’

‘She has done so, however,’ said Dericka swiftly, ‘and I rather think that father admires her.’ And she related the conduct of Miss Stretton at the fete. ‘I believe father will marry her,’ ended Dericka.

‘So do I,’ said Miss Lavinia, who had listened grimly; ‘and foolish I was to send her to you, my dear. Of course, I knew that your father was poor and that Anne wanted to marry money, so, even if such a thought had crossed my mind, I should not have considered your father to be in any danger. However, the mischief is done. What your father wants to explain to Mr. Forde is that he is willing you should become his wife provided you are willing to receive Anne as a step-mother.’

‘But I don’t like her, Auntie.’

‘Neither do I. All the same, I have nothing to say against her. She is decent enough, although her career has been a somewhat Bohemian one. Now that your father has this money she’ll marry him. It would have been better had your father remained poor and free. However, my dear Dericka, there is nothing to be said.

You marry Oswald, and out of this Bowring money your father can well afford to give you a magnificent income.'

'But father's talk about my marriage with Morgan?'

'H'm!' said the maiden lady; 'I don't understand that.'

They discussed the matter at length, but could come to no conclusion, since they were in the dark as regards Sir Hannibal's conversation with the housekeeper. Dericka was also in the dark on that particular point, although she knew that Sir Hannibal had been driven by a popular demonstration from St. Ewalds. It was this, she guessed, that her father intended to speak about to Forde, and her heart leaped as she thought that Sir Hannibal intended to ask for Forde's assistance.

That would only be given on condition that Sir Hannibal sanctioned the engagement, so Dericka thought that her course of true love would run smoothly after all. She was on the point of explaining this to her aunt, when she remembered how she had protested that her father had not enlightened her as to the reason of his coming to London. If she admitted what had been told her in the train, Miss Lavinia would probably accuse her of deceit, and there would be trouble.

She therefore judged it best to pretend ignorance and to let Sir Hannibal tell his story to Forde and the spinster in his own way. Dericka had not intended to wilfully deceive her aunt, but Miss Lavinia was so very difficult to handle — a prickly thorn, in fact — that she had been hurried into a denial without thinking.

However, things went on very smoothly until Forde arrived. Miss Lavinia gave father and daughter afternoon tea in the most fragile of china, and refrained from hinting at her suspicions regarding Miss Anne Stretton. She made herself so agreeable, in fact, that the baronet, not thinking what lay behind the smooth, bland mask, thought it would be easy to announce his intended marriage, particularly as on that hung the future of Dericka with Forde.

Forgetting nearly how he had been driven from his home — Sir Hannibal had a wonderfully forgetful temper — he expanded in the amiable atmosphere of the spinster's house until Miss Lavinia said to herself privately that her despised brother-in-law was really a fascinating man. Dericka also was pleased to see the wrinkles of vexation vanish from her father's brow; and when the barrister arrived, the party of three were all merry and genial.

Oswald looked slim and dark and handsome in his dress clothes, and he greeted Dericka with great fervour. Sir Hannibal also was in evening dress, as he had managed to get a suit from somewhere — from his tailor, in fact.

That tradesman had made clothes for his customer, but, not having been paid, he had retained them. Sir Hannibal, however, had announced his succession to a fortune and had paid the bill with money received from Mr. Gratton, so the tailor had handed over the new and fashionably-made suit.

Sir Hannibal never said anything about this, and Miss Lavinia wondered how he had procured dress clothes which fitted him so well. However, she refrained from making further comment on his want of luggage, and mentally observed that London did not contain any finer specimens of young and old men than Sir Hannibal and the barrister.

After the first greetings were over Forde asked what happy chance had brought Dericka and her father to London.

Sir Hannibal would then and there have related all, but Miss Lavinia insisted that dinner should not be upset by any fevered discussion. Only when dinner was over — and a very good dinner it was — and the quartette were gathered in the drawing-room sipping coffee, did the maiden lady nod in the direction of her brother-inlaw.

‘Now, then, Hannibal,’ said she, sitting up alertly, ‘you can tell us what brought you to London.’

‘I have been driven from St. Ewalds,’ said the baronet bluntly.

‘Driven from St. Ewalds?’ cried the spinster, and Forde echoed her.

‘Yes.’ Sir Hannibal gave a detailed description of all that had taken place, and how Miss Stretton had driven him to the Gwynne railway station to escape the fury of the quarrymen. Miss Lavinia nodded her approval.

‘Anne has a head on her shoulders,’ said she; ‘you might do worse.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Sir Hannibal colouring.

‘I have eyes in my head, and I know Anne very well,’ retorted Miss Lavinia. ‘She doesn’t do any thing without expecting payment.’

‘You wrong her, Lavinia; you wrong her. She is as simple as a child.’

‘You are, you mean, Hannibal. However, we can discuss that later. What is to be done? Your position is really very disagreeable.’

‘Lavinia, you don’t accuse me of murder?’

‘If I did you wouldn’t be sitting in my drawing-room,’ said the old lady sharply. ‘No. You are foolish in many ways, and why my poor sister married you I can’t tell. However, we must get you out of this difficulty, that is certain. Oswald?’

‘I am at Sir Hannibal’s service,’ said the barrister. ‘The position, as you say, Miss Quinton, is difficult.’

‘I said disagreeable.’

‘Well, then both disagreeable and difficult,’ broke in Dericka impatiently. ‘What is to be done?’

‘Only one thing can be done,’ said Forde very decisively. ‘I must learn who killed Bowring, and prove the innocence of your father.’

‘That will not be easy,’ said Sir Hannibal.

‘Perhaps not; but things can be made plainer if you will tell me all you know about Bowring.’

‘There is very little to tell. I did business with him in Africa.’

‘What sort of business?’

‘It was connected with diamonds,’ muttered the baronet reluctantly.

‘And Bowring treated you badly?’ remarked Miss Lavinia keenly; ‘at least you said so to me several times.’

‘Bowring was a scoundrel,’ cried Sir Hannibal much agitated, ‘but he has made amends by leaving me his money.’

‘On condition that I marry Morgan?’ said Dericka.

‘No. You heard the will read yourself, Dericka. That was only a suggestion on the part of Bowring.’

‘And one you wish to carry out,’ snapped Miss Lavinia, tartly.

‘What?’ cried Forde, turning red and looking from Miss Lavinia to the baronet in an anxious manner.

‘Permit me to explain,’ said Sir Hannibal hastily, and detailed the conversation with Mrs. Krent.

Dericka was much surprised. Nevertheless, she objected to be made a catspaw for Sir Hannibal’s safety, even though the position was perilous.

‘Besides,’ she added, after raising some objections, ‘I don’t see, father, how any such announcement would help you.’

‘It would show that the money was left to me in trust for you and Morgan, my dear.’

‘You would have to make over the money to him, then?’

‘No. Because Mrs. Krent would come forward and tell of the marriage with her daughter.’

Miss Lavinia sniffed.

‘It seems a very roundabout way,’ she observed. ‘I think the best thing to be done, Hannibal, will be for Mr. Forde, here, to take up the case and clear your character.’

‘I am willing — on conditions,’ said Forde, and looked at Dericka.

Sir Hannibal bit his lip. He was not very anxious to make Forde his son-in-law, as, now that he was rich, he wanted Dericka to strengthen the Trevick family by making a titled alliance. However, he was in such a difficult position that he had to consent; and he did so the more willingly as he wanted someone in the family to delve into his past rather than a stranger. With this in mind he nodded.

‘I am willing that you should marry Dericka as soon as my character is cleared,’ he said reluctantly.

Forde rose with a joyful exclamation and, clasping Dericka in his arms, kissed her fondly.

‘Your character will be cleared in a month, Sir Hannibal,’ he said determinedly.

‘H’m!’ murmured Miss Lavinia.

She was watching the baronet’s face, and did not approve of the nervous, agitated look thereon.

Chapter IX

The Steward's Story

Oswald Forde was not displeased at the chance which had turned him into an amateur detective, since he was a briefless barrister who found time hang rather heavily on his hands. He was extremely clever, and possessed a small income, so he waited patiently hoping that clients would in due course come to his door.

As yet, few had made their appearance, so Forde wanted some occupation upon which to break his active mind. To solve a mystery was pleasant, especially as its solution meant the gaining of a beautiful wife with a substantial dowry. Forde was romantic, but also he was modern enough to appreciate the advantages of money being joined by love. He therefore readily assumed the position assigned to him, and prepared to start for St. Ewalds the day after that momentous conversation.

Then, to his surprise, Miss Quinton declared that she would come also so as to chaperone Dericka. The girl wished to return to St. Ewalds, if only to show that she despised the feeling which had driven her father from the town.

To do Sir Hannibal justice, he was also willing to return, but Forde strongly advised him to remain in town until the mystery was solved. The quarrymen were not capable of receiving truths unless these were made extremely plain to their somewhat dull minds, and would probably make another assault on the Dower House. When the true murderer of John Bowring was discovered then the maligned baronet could go back and pose as a martyr.

Dericka, however, insisted upon returning, and Miss Quinton, for obvious reasons, insisted upon coming also.

‘It won’t do for you and Mr. Forde to travel alone,’ said Miss Quinton; ‘you know how people gossip, Dericka!’

‘I despise gossip,’ exclaimed Dericka indignantly.

‘So do I. All the same, one can’t ignore it if one wants life to be pleasant. It was gossip which drove Sir Hannibal from St. Ewalds.’

Dericka assented. ‘Though I can’t understand anyone so silly as to believe that papa had anything to do with the matter. He was at the fete about the time the crime occurred.’

‘You can’t be sure of that, my dear.’

‘Aunty! You don’t believe —’

‘My dear, I believe nothing against your father. Whatever Hannibal may be, he certainly is too good-natured a man to commit a crime. But you know from what he said last night that he left the grounds after Miss Stretton and Mr. Penrith drove away and went down to the beach. No one saw him there as the place was deserted, so he cannot prove an alibi. When did you see him again on that day?’

‘Not until dinner, Aunty. I was looking for him at the time Mr. Bowring started for the Grange as I wanted to confront him with Mr. Bowring about this proposed marriage with Morgan. I could not find papa, however —’

‘Of course not; he was walking on the beach.’

‘Then he must have walked there for some hours, for he did not appear until dinner was on the table.’

‘Did you ask him where he had been?’

‘No. Papa dislikes being questioned; and then during the dinner came the news of that terrible death, and I never thought of asking questions. Why should I have thought,’ demanded Dericka indignantly, ‘seeing that I never doubted my own father’s innocence?’

‘No one doubts it now, dear,’ said Miss Lavinia, soothingly. ‘It is only that horrid Mrs. Krent who started the rumour, and no doubt she is sorry now.’

‘I don’t see any reason why she need be sorry.’

‘I do,’ replied the old lady tartly, ‘if she cannot discredit her own story. Hannibal certainly will not pay her the income he promised.’

‘Yes, he will,’ contradicted Miss Trevick, quickly. ‘Oswald thinks it will be as well to say that I am to marry Morgan, so that people may think Mr. Bowring left the money to him in trust for both of us, and so do away with any possible motive for the commission of the crime by papa. And unless Mrs. Krent is paid the one thousand a year she will refuse to state where her daughter was married to Morgan, and, then, oh —’ Dericka shuddered.

‘The question is whether such a marriage did take place. However, Mr. Forde can see Mrs. Krent.’

‘He intends to see everyone, and will begin with Polwin.’

‘That is Hannibal’s steward?’

‘Yes. He came from Africa, where papa knew him very well.’

‘Your father seems to have known many people in Africa,’ observed Miss Lavinia, dryly, ‘and not reputable people, either.’

‘Oh, Polwin is reputable enough,’ said Dericka cheerfully; ‘a quiet and timid man. He superintended the preparations for the fete, and Oswald wishes to learn if he knows anything of that death’s head.’

‘I should think Miss Warry would know of that.’

‘Oh, dear me, no, Aunty. She saw the skull, and fancied papa had placed it there, which he did not. Who placed it there, and why it should have been brought to the tent, is as strange as the fact that Mr. Bowring was afraid of it.’

Miss Lavinia applied herself to her smelling-bottle.

‘It is all very strange and very unpleasant,’ she said with a shrug; ‘however, the only thing I can do I am doing, and that is to support you at the Dower House during the enforced absence of your father.’

This conversation took place in the railway carriage, while the Cornish express rushed westward. Forde had gone to the smoking compartment for twenty minutes, so Dericka and her aunt had an opportunity of talking; but the discussion, as can be seen, had ended in a somewhat futile manner. However, one thing was clear to the girl, that Miss Quinton would stand by her in the very trying position in which she was placed. It was not very nice to return home as the daughter of a suspected murderer.

Forde took up his quarters at the 'King's Arms', an excellent hotel in the heart of the town. He could have gone to a more fashionable place on the brow of the hill, which overlooked St. Ewalds, but purposely remained near the market-place — where the 'King's Arms' was situated — so that he might hear any gossip, and be on the spot to contradict it should it touch on the supposed guilt of Sir Hannibal Trevick. The hotel was comfortable, and Forde being a pleasant young man soon made himself a favourite with the chattering landlady. But that important personage was too discreet to repeat tittle-tattle, even although Forde had known her for five years, from the time he had first come to St. Ewalds. Aware of her long tongue, without doors if not inside, he judged that she would be the best person to spread the news of a possible marriage between Dericka and Morgan Bowring.

'I suppose you have heard the news, Mrs. Tregar?' said the artful barrister, when the landlady came to his sitting-room to see if he was perfectly comfortable.

'No, sir. What is it, if I may make so bold as to ask?'

'The late Mr. Bowring left all his money to Sir Hannibal Trevick —'

'Oh, I know that, sir.'

'In trust,' went on Forde impressively, 'for Miss Dericka and Morgan Bowring, when they marry.'

Mrs. Tregar threw up her hands. 'Lord, sir, you do astonish me. I thought you were to be the happy man.'

'So did I,' replied Forde, heaving an ostentatious sigh. 'Miss Trevick and myself are very much in love with one another, but by a family arrangement she is to marry Morgan; that is why Sir Hannibal got the money — in trust, remember.'

'Oh, indeed, sir. I thought — I thought — well, you see, sir, everyone, knowing that Sir Hannibal is hard up, thought that he had murdered Mr. Bowring to get the money.'

'What nonsense. Why, even if Sir Hannibal had committed such a crime — which, mind you, Mrs. Tregar, is not at all probable — he would not have got the money.'

'But it is said, sir, that Mr. Bowring told Sir Hannibal at the fete that he had made a will in his favour, and then Sir Hannibal killed —'

Forde did not allow her to finish, but burst into a hearty laugh.

'I never heard such rubbish,' said he with a shrug; 'why, Mrs. Tregar, where are your brains and those of the people hereabouts? Sir Hannibal did not leave the fete, and was in his own house when the crime was committed. Besides, an old man like that could scarcely get to such an out-of-the-way place quicker than a powerful motor-car.'

'Begging your pardon, sir,' contradicted Mrs. Tregar, swelling with importance, 'but they do say that Sir Hannibal left the fete long before Mr. Bowring did, and went by a different route to the place on his motor-bike. And we know,' she added with emphasis, 'that Sir Hannibal does ride a motor-bike.'

This story was new to Forde.

'Who says that?' he asked sharply, and wondering if the tale was true.

'Mr. Polwin, for one, sir.'

‘Sir Hannibal’s steward?’

‘Yes, sir. Mr. Josiah Polwin; and, being the preacher also at Gwynne Chapel, he wouldn’t tell a lie.’

‘How does Mr. Polwin substantiate his statement? — no, stop! I won’t have the story second-hand. Send a note to Mr. Polwin and say that he is to come here and see me. I have a message for him from Sir Hannibal.’

‘Did you see him in London, sir?’ asked the landlady eagerly.

‘Yes. He is very indignant at the way in which he has been treated.’

‘Ah, sir, he’s not so indignant as the quarrymen, seeing that Miss Stretton sent them on a fool’s errand to the Grange. They went there, and nearly scared Mrs. Krent out of her wits when they found Sir Hannibal wasn’t there, as Miss Stretton said. She has had to keep quiet, as the quarrymen are so angry.’

‘Do you mean to say that they would attack her for saving the property of Sir Hannibal from an unprovoked assault?’

‘They are angry, sir,’ said Mrs. Tregar, evasively.

‘Where are the police?’

‘Oh, the police are looking after the matter, sir, and questioned Miss Stretton. She told how she had driven to Gwynne Station with Sir Hannibal, and the police are now watching the house she is staying at, so that she may be safe.’

‘Mrs. Tregar, all this is simply ridiculous. Miss Stretton has more brains in her head than all your people. Were Sir Hannibal guilty in any way, did the evidence point ever so slightly towards him as the author of the crime, he would have been arrested by the police. He is absolutely innocent, and has gone to town to complain about the quarrymen to the proper authorities. There will be some trouble over this riot, as it may be called.’

‘I’m sure I know very little about it, sir,’ said Mrs. Tregar, rather scared, and promptly disclaiming having anything to do with the matter. ‘I never did believe, myself, that Sir Hannibal had anything to do with killing the poor gentleman, in spite of Mr. Polwin’s talk.’

‘I am glad to hear that,’ said Forde dryly, ‘since it is Sir Hannibal’s intention on his return to sift this matter to the bottom and to punish those people who have maligned his character. Also, he will have the leader of the rioters arrested.’

‘That’s Anak,’ said Mrs. Tregar, decisively.

‘Who is Anak?’

‘Well, sir, it’s not rightly known. His mother is an old witch.’

‘What rubbish, Mrs. Tregar.’

‘It’s truth, sir. Anak is called so because he is so big; but his mother, Mrs. Carney, was deserted years ago by her husband, and now she lives near the quarry and gets her living by telling fortunes. Anak works in the quarries, and he led the men to the Dower House.’

‘In that case he will go to gaol, Mrs. Tregar. People cannot do these things without suffering for them. and you can take it from me, Mrs. Tregar, and you can tell everyone that Sir Hannibal Trevick is perfectly innocent, since he was at the fete when the crime was committed, and also had no motive for killing Mr. Bowring, seeing that the money has only been left to him in trust for the marriage.’

‘Well, it might be so, sir,’ said the landlady doubtfully.

‘It is so, and you had better tell everyone.’

‘I will, sir; and I’m sure you are a very kind young gentleman to speak so of Sir Hannibal, when he is parting you from Miss Dericka.’

‘We are not parted yet,’ said Forde dryly. ‘Sir Hannibal wishes the marriage with young Bowring to take place, but Miss Dericka objects.’

‘And quite right, too, sir, seeing what a handsome young gentleman you are. To think that she should marry that mad creature Morgan Bowring,’ cried Mrs. Tregar, raising her hands, ‘is too awful.’

‘You would like to see Miss Dericka married to me?’

‘Of course, sir, seeing how I have known you for years and years, and Miss Dericka is a kind, good young lady.’

‘Then, Mrs. Tregar, you can do me a good turn by telling everyone that Sir Hannibal is innocent on the grounds I have set forth. He will then know that I have defended him, and perhaps will let me marry Miss Dericka. Do you see?’

‘Yes, sir; but will he give back the money?’

‘Oh, a compromise of some sort will be arrived at,’ said Forde easily, and not wishing to say too much; ‘but help me and Miss Dericka if you can, Mrs. Tregar. You know the way.’

The landlady nodded vigorously and withdrew to send a message to Polwin and to spread the new gossip. Forde leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee, certain that he had done the best that could be done. Once people began to believe that Sir Hannibal might possibly be innocent, and once they heard that he intended to defend his good name, the probability was that the scandal would die a natural death. The truth of Sir Hannibal’s innocence would soon filter down to the quarrymen, and then the baronet would be able to come back and settle matters in his own way. On the whole, the train had been fairly fired, and the consequent explosion would undoubtedly blow Sir Hannibal back into the niche he had occupied before the crime had taken place.

Mr. Polwin did not hesitate to obey the summons. Within half an hour he made his appearance in Forde’s sitting-room, a timid, short, broad man, with pale eyes, and a blank white face like a full moon. He was badly dressed in ill-fitting black clothes, and appeared wonderfully harmless. A sheep would have shown more spirit. Mr. Forde thought it strange that Sir Hannibal should employ so obviously foolish a man. On the face of it, Josiah Polwin appeared incapable of managing any property, however small. Standing first on one leg and then on the other, he faced the keen-eyed young barrister, twisting a cloth cap in his hands and waiting to be addressed.

‘Well, Mr. Polwin,’ said Oswald briskly, and straddling his legs before the fire with his hands under his coat-tails, ‘and what is this tale you have been telling about your employer?’

‘What tale, sir?’ asked the other in a low, but not unpleasant voice.

‘Why, that Sir Hannibal left the Dower House on a motor-bicycle on the day, and about the time, Mr. Bowring was killed.’

‘Pardon me, sir,’ replied Polwin meekly. ‘I did not spread such a report, nor did I accuse Sir Hannibal of having anything to do with the matter. He certainly did go out that day, and on his motor-bicycle: I met him on the road.’

‘On the road where the murder was committed?’

‘No, sir. On the other road, which runs behind the hill.’

‘Then, to get to the spot where the granite fell Sir Hannibal would have to scramble over the hill from the other road?’

‘I never suggested such a thing, sir.’

‘Why did you speak of the matter at all?’

Polwin went on balancing himself, first on one leg and then on the other, hesitating in his reply.

‘It was this way, sir. I was coming along the second road as I had been to see Mrs. Carney —’

‘She is Anak’s mother?’

Polwin looked up swiftly, and then again dropped his eyes.

‘Yes, sir. She is a poor woman, to whom I go occasionally to carry a word of comfort. Her son Anak is employed in the quarries, which Sir Hannibal let to Mr. Bowring. I had been to see Mrs. Carney and was returning. Just outside the town on the second road, I met Sir Hannibal on his motor-bicycle. He asked me if I had seen Mr. Penrith driving Miss Stretton, as they had left the fete and he had come after them to give a letter to Miss Stretton. I said that I had not.’

‘I quite understand,’ said Forde. ‘They went by the first road, where the murder took place, and drove back when they heard the shot. Well?’

‘Sir Hannibal then said that he wanted a letter given to Miss Stretton, and asked me to take it, since he was wanted at the fete. I took the letter and went along the second road on the motor —’

‘How did Sir Hannibal return?’

‘On foot. He went back to the fete; at least, he said that he would.’

‘Did you catch up with Miss Stretton and Mr. Penrith?’

‘No, sir, because I was on the wrong road. They did go by the first road, as you know. I travelled along on the motor-bicycle as far as Mr. Penrith’s place, where Miss Stretton was staying, and there I left the letter. Then I came back again.’

‘By the same road?’

‘Yes, sir — by the second road. I returned to the Dower House, and some of the servants expressed surprise that I was riding Sir Hannibal’s bicycle, as he was so particular. I explained how the matter came about.’

‘Humph! The story is clear enough, and quite exonerates Sir Hannibal.’

‘I beg your pardon sir, but Anak —’

‘Yes; what about him?’

‘He declared to me that he saw Sir Hannibal near the quarries, where the murder was committed.’

Chapter X

A Strange Disappearance

Forde stared at the meek steward, scarcely believing his ears when he heard what he was saying.

‘When did Anak say that?’

‘Only the other day,’ replied Polwin. ‘I have said nothing about it to anyone, and beg you to observe, Mr. Forde, that I never in any way accused Sir Hannibal of being concerned in this crime. All I said was that Sir Hannibal went out on his bicycle. I expect the feeling against my master arises from the accusation brought by Mrs. Krent.’

‘Oh, you know of that, do you, Polwin?’

‘Yes, sir; everyone knows of it. Mrs. Krent makes no secret that she thinks Sir Hannibal killed Mr. Bowring. That is, she did say so, but lately she seems to have changed her mind.’

‘Quite so,’ rejoined the barrister, thinking of the bribe which was to be paid to the malignant housekeeper. ‘Mrs. Krent, as a woman, would say things in a hurry, which were not true. You can see for yourself, Polwin, that Sir Hannibal, having left you on the second road near St. Ewalds, could not have got over to the place where the crime was committed.’

‘Across the moors he could, sir.’

‘Good heavens, man, do you insinuate —’

‘Nothing, sir, nothing,’ said the steward hurriedly. ‘Only Anak did say that he saw Sir Hannibal near the spot. I daresay he told the quarrymen that, and so they went to wreck the Dower House.’

‘Humph! Why should these quarrymen take up the cudgels so warmly on behalf of Bowring?’

‘Well, sir, Mr. Bowring was an extremely good master, and paid them large wages.’

‘Sir Hannibal, who now again possesses the quarries, will do the same.’

‘Sir Hannibal was never famous for liberality,’ said Polwin dryly; ‘and the quarrymen liked Mr. Bowring, who used to talk to them as though he were one of themselves.’

‘As I believe he was,’ snapped Forde, considerably upset by the information of the steward. ‘He was born hereabouts of poor parents, and only became a gentleman, so-called, after he returned from Africa. By the way, Mr. Polwin, did you know him there?’

‘Slightly. He and Sir Hannibal did business in some diamond transaction. I was very hard up in Africa, and there Sir Hannibal was kind to me in giving me employment.’

‘All the more reason that you should defend him now, Polwin.’

‘I am perfectly willing to do so, sir,’ said the steward earnestly. ‘Believe me, Mr. Forde, I am deeply grateful to Sir Hannibal for what he did for me. It was not I who set the rumour afloat, but Anak, and — and —’ Polwin hesitated, ‘and Miss Warry,’ he ended.

‘Miss Warry!’ Forde stared in surprise. ‘I thought she had gone to London.’

‘She is going, sir; but has not departed as yet. She went to Mrs. Carney, who knows about fortune-telling, and had a talk with her. Mrs. Carney asked her how she came to prophesy so truly, but she refused to give an explanation.’

‘Naturally, seeing that she wishes it to be thought that she prophesied the death from a knowledge of the unseen.’

‘Don’t you believe she did, Mr. Forde?’

‘No, Polwin, I do not. Miss Warry knows something.’

Polwin nursed his chin in the hollow of his hand.

‘I believe she does, sir. She has stated very plainly that she believed Sir Hannibal to be guilty. And what with her story and Anak’s story, and a perversion of what I said about my master having gone out on the bicycle, the police are beginning to believe that Sir Hannibal is guilty.’

‘Good heavens! Things are indeed becoming serious, Polwin. But if the police suspect Sir Hannibal, why did they not arrest him?’

‘They would have done so, sir, had he not gone away. At least, Miss Stretton says so.’

‘I’ll see Miss Stretton, and also Miss Warry. Where is she?’

Polwin mentioned a quiet boarding house a stone-throw from the mansion of Sir Hannibal.

‘You’ll see Anak also, sir?’

‘Certainly; he must have made a mistake.’

‘Then you don’t believe, sir, that Sir Hannibal killed —’

‘Assuredly I do not, Polwin,’ interrupted the young man angrily. ‘I can see no reason why Sir Hannibal should have killed Mr. Bowring.’

‘They say that the money —’

Forde interrupted again. 'Ridiculous! Sir Hannibal knew nothing about the will making him the heir. And, again, Polwin, you can tell everyone that the money is left in trust for Miss Trevick and Morgan Bowring on condition that they marry.'

Polwin started and appeared disturbed.

'Is that marriage likely to take place, sir?'

'Perhaps. At all events, Sir Hannibal is agreeable.'

'And the young lady, sir? I thought,'— Polwin looked very directly at the barrister — 'that Miss Dericka had other views.'

'Perhaps,' said Forde again, and somewhat carelessly. 'At all events I understand that such a match may take place. But you can see, Polwin, that if the money was thus left there was no reason why Sir Hannibal should murder Mr. Bowring. Unless,' added Forde keenly, 'you, Mr. Polwin, know of some reason.'

'How should I know, sir?'

'What about Sir Hannibal and Mr. Bowring in Africa?' asked Forde, abruptly.

'They were partners, sir, in some diamond transactions.'

'And good friends?'

'I really cannot say, sir,' said Polwin, coldly; 'they appeared to be good friends.'

'Humph!' said Oswald, rather dissatisfied. 'And the skull?'

'What skull, Mr. Forde?'

'That placed in Miss Warry's tent by an unknown person.'

'I know nothing about that, Mr. Forde. Sir Hannibal will be the most likely person to explain.'

'Sir Hannibal declares he knows nothing. Come, now, Mr. Polwin; you must be aware of some circumstance in Mr. Bowring's past life — in Africa, we'll say — which is connected with his fear of the skull.'

'I swear I know nothing,' replied Polwin, a trifle sullenly; then his face cleared and he looked pleadingly towards the young man. 'Sir, I am only too anxious to be of service to Sir Hannibal, who has been a kind and good friend to me.'

'That sounds genuine enough,' said Forde, looking keenly into the meek face of the steward. 'Well, Mr. Polwin, and what do you advise?'

'What you have already suggested, sir. See Miss Warry and Anak and Miss Stretton and Mrs. Carney.'

'Why Mrs. Carney?'

'Miss Warry may have said something to her about her prophecy of Mr. Bowring's death.'

‘But you told me that Miss Warry refuses to speak.’

‘Mrs. Carney told me so, sir, but Mrs. Carney may tell you otherwise. I daresay Miss Warry paid Mrs. Carney to hold her tongue.’

Forde looked at the ground and moved the hearthrug with his foot dreamily.

‘There seems to be considerable muddling over this matter, and I don’t quite see my way. However, it will be best to do what you say, Mr. Polwin. I’ll see the people you mention.’

‘And advise Sir Hannibal to keep away, sir,’ advised Polwin earnestly, ‘else he may be arrested.’

‘That will be the very best thing that can happen,’ said Forde in a grim tone. ‘Sir Hannibal, being innocent, will have no hesitation in facing his accusers.’

Polwin looked doubtfully at the barrister, and the confidence the latter expressed in the baronet’s innocence did not seem to be shared by the steward. However, he said nothing, but meekly bowed and passed out of the room. Oswald did not try to stop him. For the present he had learned sufficient to advise him as to the next steps to be taken along the doubtful path which led towards the light. In that light Forde expected to see the assassin of John Bowring, and he did not think to find him in Sir Hannibal Trevick. But Polwin, who had known the baronet longer than the barrister, did not seem so certain that Sir Hannibal was innocent. Forde felt uneasy.

‘I wonder,’ he thought, warming his hands, ‘if there is anything in Trevick’s past life in Africa which would warrant his killing Bowring. It seems to me that the Death’s Head could clear up a lot, if its significance could be known. Miss Warry also seems to have her knife into Sir Hannibal, seeing what she said. I don’t believe that she read her prophecy in the stars. She knows something, and perhaps can explain the mystery of that crowned skull. Humph! I’ll call and see Miss Warry this very evening.’

Having made up his mind to this course, Forde sent up a note to Dericka saying that he would call in the morning. He had intended to go up to the Dower House that evening, but thought it as well to postpone his visit until such time as he had seen Miss Warry, and learned exactly what was her attitude towards the baronet. Behind all the evidence which pointed to this person and that, as the enemy who was engineering Sir Hannibal’s destruction, lurked an idea in Oswald’s head that Miss Warry was the moving spirit. Yet he knew that the exgoverness had been kindly treated by the baronet, and had no reason to trouble him. But it might be that Miss Warry was one of those persons who resent kindness, and who would be willing to hurt the person who was kind for the very reason that the person had behaved well. Forde had come across that sort of individual before.

However, he postponed his decision until he had interviewed the exgoverness, and meanwhile walked up to the boarding house where she was stopping. It was a large granite house overlooking the bay, and as comfortable as any place in St. Ewalds, if not more so. Two very charming ladies owned the place, and ministered to the many guests who came to their establishment, for it was wonderfully popular and quite deserved its popularity. Miss Warry, who was fond of her comforts, could not have chosen a more delightful abode.

Forde sent in his card and was shown into a small room, well furnished and illuminated by a tall lamp in a rose-coloured shade. Consequently, when Miss Warry, gaunt and grey as ever, sailed into the room, swinging her inevitable black velvet bag from her lean wrist, she looked quite presentable in the rose-hued light. She was arrayed in a dark red cashmere dress with a long train, perfectly plain and tightfitting. As Miss Warry had not an elegant figure the excellent fit of her dress showed her angles in an excessively unbecoming manner. Also she wore a paste star in her scanty hair, and assumed a solemn manner. Her

mincing ways and meek behaviour and nervous tittering were things of the past. Emancipated from the thralldom of an inferior position, Miss Warry had adopted a severe, imperative manner, which she thought befitted her new role of prophetess.

She greeted Forde with the air of one welcoming a mourner to a funeral, and scanned him closely with her green eyes before subsiding gracefully into an armchair. Forde could not help thinking that she looked like a problem of Euclid, so angular did she appear. And, like such a problem, Miss Warry, as he guessed, would be hard to solve.

She began the conversation by giving him a shock.

‘This is sad news, Mr. Forde,’ she said in a deep voice, and with a direct gaze.

‘To what particular sad news do you allude, Miss Warry?’

‘Have you not seen the weekly paper which came out today, Mr. Forde?’

‘No. I only arrived in St. Ewalds this day.’

‘With Miss Quinton and Dericka? I heard as much. But how wise that Sir Hannibal did not come.’

‘Really, I don’t see that, Miss Warry.’

‘Ah, I forgot you have not read the paper. There is no copy here.’

‘In that case, Miss Warry, perhaps you will tell me what is the sad news you allude to.’

Miss Warry was only too pleased.

‘It is stated that the police have found a clue which leads them to believe that Sir Hannibal murdered Mr. Bowring, and he is to be arrested. The warrant has been taken out,’ continued the exgoverness with relish, and passing over Forde’s exclamation, ‘and a detective has gone to London to arrest the assassin. How very sad.’

‘You seem to be very certain that Sir Hannibal is guilty,’ said Mr. Forde somewhat tartly, and recovering his self-possession.

‘On these facts I am,’ said Miss Warry, serenely.

‘What facts?’

Miss Warry forthwith launched into long explanations, which dealt with the story of Polwin, considerably distorted, with the tale of Anak, and with the marvellous truth of her own prophecy.

Forde listened in silence, alert to seize on any new point which might help him to solve the mystery of the millionaire’s death. But Miss Warry’s story was only the same as he had learned from the steward. He did not give the exgoverness the satisfaction of seeing what an impression she had made on him, but looked at her serenely when she had finished.

‘Of course, I don’t believe all this gossip,’ said Forde.

‘Gossip!’ echoed Miss Warry viciously. ‘The police do not take out warrants on gossip.’

‘The truth of these tales has yet to be proved, Miss Warry. I am quite sure that Sir Hannibal will willingly face his accusers.’

‘In the dock, remember,’ she snapped, annoyed by his coolness; ‘not in the witness box.’

‘Quite so. You will probably be there, Miss Warry.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean,’ said Forde, rising to give due effect to his words, ‘that I am aware of this conspiracy which has been formed to wreck Sir Hannibal’s good name, and that I have undertaken to learn the truth.’

‘It will not be hard to learn,’ said Miss Warry, coolly; ‘my late employer killed Mr. Bowring.’

‘There I join issue.’

‘I don’t understand law terms, Mr. Forde. But, of course, you believe that Sir Hannibal is innocent since you are to marry Dericka.’

‘Ah, but I am not to marry Dericka.’

‘What!’ Miss Warry looked profoundly astonished.

‘By the will of the late Mr. Bowring it is arranged that Dericka shall marry Morgan Bowring. Sir Hannibal intends that such a marriage shall take place. So you see, Miss Warry, that Sir Hannibal had no reason to kill Mr. Bowring. He simply holds the money in trust, as it were, for the young couple.’

Miss Warry sniffed and laughed in an artificial manner.

‘Pardon me, Mr. Forde, but I was present at the reading of the will. There is no hard and fast assertion that such a marriage shall take place.’

‘Sir Hannibal thinks that he should yield to the express wishes of his late friend.’

‘His late friend?’ scoffed the lady; ‘his late enemy, you mean.’

‘How can you be sure of that?’

‘Because I know what I know,’ said Miss Warry in an enigmatic manner. ‘Your story of this possible marriage doesn’t impose on me, Mr. Forde. Sir Hannibal is not the man to give his daughter to a madman, and you are not the lover to surrender a pretty girl such as Dericka is — to say nothing of the fact that Dericka has too much common sense to allow herself to be handed over to anyone. If you think to do away with the motive for the crime by such an explanation, Mr. Forde, you have failed so far as I am concerned. Sir Hannibal needed money, and he killed Mr. Bowring to get it.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘I’ll tell now,’ said Miss Warry quickly, ‘and if needs be I’ll tell what you are about to hear in the witness box. You know what I wrote in the letter which I gave Mr. Bowring?’

‘Yes; but I don’t believe that you read it in his hand.’

‘I did, and in the crystal,’ snapped the sibyl. ‘But I also had some grounds to go upon.’

‘I thought so,’ said Forde sarcastically.

‘The crystal and the palm of Mr. Bowring’s hand simply confirmed what I guessed. I went into the house to get something for my fortune-telling on that day of the fete, and about the time Sir Hannibal was talking in the library with Mr. Bowring I was there.’

‘Oh! Eavesdropping?’

‘Nothing of the sort,’ said Miss Warry, flushing all over her sallow face. ‘I wanted a book which was in the library which dealt with fortune-telling, as I had to refresh my memory. I went to the library, and when I heard voices I slipped behind a screen.’

‘Why did you conceal yourself so unnecessarily?’

‘Just because I didn’t want anyone to think that I had to refer to a book for my Art. You can call it weak, if you like, Mr. Forde, but that is what I did. Well, then, when I was hidden behind the screen Sir Hannibal came in with Mr. Bowring. They were quarrelling.’

‘What about, Miss Warry?’

‘Really, I cannot say exactly. It had something to do with that skull and with a Zulu witch-doctor. They spoke in low, angry tones, and as my hearing is not very good, and they were some distance away, by the window, I could not hear all. But I did hear Sir Hannibal say he would kill Mr. Bowring sooner than he should disgrace him.’

‘Did Sir Hannibal use those words?’

‘He did. So when I saw in the crystal and read in Mr. Bowring’s palm that he would die before he reached home, I guessed that Sir Hannibal would fulfil his promise and kill him. And when I found Sir Hannibal absent from the fete, I guessed that he had gone to kill his enemy.’

Forde pondered. ‘This is all very strange.’

‘Meaning that you don’t believe me?’ snapped the lady, rising.

‘Oh, yes, but —’

‘There is no but. I am very sorry that I told you since you doubt my word. I decline to stay longer in your company.’ And Miss Warry, in the most unexpected manner, swept out of the room before Forde could stretch a hand, or say a word to stop her. It seemed to him that Miss Warry was fearful lest he should question her, and therefore had made his doubts of her story a feeble excuse to get speedily out of the room.

He sent a message asking her to return, but she refused to appear, and Forde had to return home to bed considerably bewildered by the information she had given him. Whether it was true, or merely the invention of a spiteful woman, he would not say, but undoubtedly it made things look blacker than ever against Sir Hannibal Trevick. And even now he might be arrested.

Forde passed a bad night, as he foresaw trouble, and could not think how such trouble was to be avoided. Trevick was in danger of being hanged, seeing that the evidence against him was so strong and the public feeling ran so high. Yet never for one moment did the barrister believe his future father-in-law to be guilty. But how to prove his innocence he could not think, and thought it would be best to go to London again and have a conversation with him regarding the crowned skull, which seemed to turn up everywhere in this extraordinary case.

But there was no need for Forde to leave St. Ewalds. Just as he was preparing to go out Polwin appeared and made an abrupt announcement:

‘Sir Hannibal has disappeared,’ said Josiah Polwin.

Chapter XI

The Quarryman

It was as Polwin stated. Sir Hannibal Trevick had disappeared.

The detectives travelling by the night train had gone to Miss Quinton’s place to arrest him, and found that he had departed bag and baggage on the previous night. On making inquiries it was learned from the butler that the baronet had intended to go to the Guelph Hotel, thinking that he would be less restrained in his movements there than in his sister-in-law’s somewhat prim house. But the Guelph Hotel people had seen nothing of Sir Hannibal from the time he had stopped there with his daughter.

An inquiry at Sir Hannibal’s club showed that he had not frequented it of late, and the detectives could think of no place where to look for him.

Later on in the afternoon of the next day they appeared at the Dower House to question Dericka and Miss Quinton. Luckily, Forde had gone to the house and was on the spot to support the two ladies.

The detective who paid the visit was a dark little man, with a lean face and sharp black eyes. He sent in his card, which bore the name Giles Arkle, and Dericka passed it along to Forde with a bewildered expression. She already knew from Forde that her father had disappeared. Polwin’s information, learned from a friendly policeman who had no business to disclose official secrets, was perfectly correct.

‘What does this man want to see me about?’ asked Dericka, puzzled.

‘I can’t say,’ said Forde smoothly, and not guessing for the moment that the visitor was a detective. ‘Would you like me to see him for you, dearest?’

‘It will be best for Dericka to see him herself,’ said Miss Lavinia, who was knitting near the window.

‘Very well,’ replied the girl with a shrug and left the sitting-room to go to the drawing-room, where the man awaited her.

Forde looked uneasily at Miss Quinton, and she became aware of his scrutiny.

‘Well?’ she asked, without raising her eyes.

‘I am wondering if this Arkle is from Scotland Yard.’

‘Probably,’ replied Miss Quinton, unmoved.

‘You do not appear astonished or annoyed.’

‘I am neither one nor the other,’ replied the old lady, quite calmly. ‘If Hannibal will mix himself up with shady people he must take the consequences.’

‘But you don’t think he is guilty, Miss Quinton?’

‘No, I certainly do not. But from the rumours I have heard, and from what you repeated of Miss Warry’s information, I think that Hannibal will have a difficult task to clear himself. He did right to hide.’

‘I don’t agree with you,’ said Forde quickly; ‘that looks as though he was unwilling to face his accusers.’

‘Probably he is,’ said Miss Lavinia picking up a stitch. ‘Hannibal never can face the consequences of his own folly.’

‘I believe that there is a conspiracy against him.’

‘So do I, and it has to do with his doings in Africa.’

‘Miss Quinton, do you know —’

‘Nothing; absolutely nothing. All the same, I have conversed with Mr. Bowring, and from what I read in his face, and the few words he let fall, I suspect that both himself and my brother-inlaw were engaged in dealings which would not bear the light of day.’

‘I think Bowring was too clever a man to give himself away in such a manner,’ said Forde dryly.

Miss Lavinia looked at him with her shrewd old eyes.

‘I can see through a brick wall as well as most people,’ she said quietly, ‘and I don’t say that I know of anything against either my brother-inlaw or this dead man. Nevertheless, I guess that things are somewhat queer with both of them. But, of course, Bowring being dead, Hannibal has to bear the burden of both.’

‘Do you know of anything about the Death’s Head?’

‘Not a thing,’ retorted Miss Lavinia, and would have said more, but that the footman entered at the moment to request that Forde would come into the drawing-room. With a swift glance at Miss Quinton, who continued quietly to knit, Oswald followed the man, and found Dericka pale with anger standing before the dapper little man.

‘This is a detective,’ she said, as soon as Forde closed the door, ‘and he wants to know if my father is hidden here. I have told him that there is no need for my father to hide, but he does not believe me.’

‘I am very sorry, Miss,’ said Arkle apologetically, ‘but business is business, and we want Sir Hannibal.’

‘An innocent man.’

‘Why, yes, Miss. Every man is presumed to be innocent until he is proved guilty.’

‘How dare you mention guilt in the same breath with my father?’ flashed out the girl. ‘Oswald, make this man see sense.’

‘My dear Dericka, he is only doing his duty, and we must place no obstacle in the way,’ said Oswald calmly. Then he addressed Arkle directly: ‘Sir Hannibal Trevick is not here, I assure you.’

‘Do you know where he is?’ asked the detective doubtfully.

‘No. If I did I should go to him and advise him to submit to the law. Sir Hannibal is as innocent as you or I, Mr. Arkle, and can easily defend himself against the calumny which pursues him.’

‘Then why did he fly, sir?’

Dericka interposed, still angry. ‘You have no right to assume that he has fled.’

Arkle looked sceptical. ‘Sir Hannibal is not at Miss Quinton’s house in Kensington, nor at his club, nor has he returned to the Guelph Hotel. Since he cannot be found, and there is a serious charge for him to meet, I think, young lady, that I am right in believing he is unwilling to face his accusers.’

‘He is not; you have no right to say that.’

‘He certainly fled from St. Ewalds.’

‘And why: because a set of uneducated quarrymen, without knowing the truth, were prepared to take the law into their own hands. They ought to be punished.’

‘They will be, Miss Trevick. There is every chance that the man called Anak will be arrested. He was the ringleader.’

‘Do you know where Anak is?’ asked Forde quickly.

‘Usually he is at the quarries. He lives with his mother, a reputed witch, amongst the moors. Anak’s true name is Hugh Carney, and he is called Anak from the fact that he is six feet four high. However, I have come here to ask, not to answer, questions. Sir Hannibal —’

‘He is not here,’ said Dericka sharply; ‘do you doubt my word?’

‘My dear girl,’ said Forde in a low voice, as he saw the detective bite his lip with annoyance, ‘this is not the way to speak to a man who is merely doing his duty. We know that your father is not here, so to convince him let us allow Mr. Arkle to search the house.’

‘But the insult, Oswald.’

‘My dear, things have come to a pass where insults do not matter.’

Dericka thought for a moment. Then her common sense came to her aid and she saw that she had been unjust to the quiet little man, who have behaved very well considering how objectionable was his errand.

‘You can search the house, Mr. Arkle,’ she said abruptly.

The detective looked hard at her. ‘I don’t think it will be necessary, Miss Trevick,’ said he politely; ‘I’ll take your word for it. But if Sir Hannibal does communicate with you it will be wise that you should advise him to surrender.’

‘That will be my business,’ said Forde determinedly; ‘I am quite sure that what you say is common sense, Mr. Arkle.’

Arkle bowed and took his hat to go.

Dericka stopped him. ‘One moment, sir,’ she said quickly; ‘how did you know that my father was at Miss Quinton’s in Kensington?’

‘We learned that he had gone there with you from the Guelph Hotel, Miss. Sir Hannibal left his address.’

‘But why did you go to the Guelph Hotel?’

Arkle shrugged his shoulders. ‘The men who came from St. Ewalds, Miss, informed me that Sir Hannibal usually stopped there when in town.’

‘I understand. Well, Mr. Arkle, I can promise you that should my father write to me I shall certainly advise him to give himself up. You can take it from me that he is perfectly innocent. You must look in another direction for the assassin of Mr. Bowring.’

Arkle glanced at the young lady sharply.

‘Perhaps, Miss, you can tell me in which direction to look?’ said he in silky tones.

‘No, I cannot. But my father was at the fete all the time. Perhaps, Mr. Arkle, you will explain on what grounds you arrest him?’

‘Certainly, Miss. I am not exceeding my duty in telling you. Sir Hannibal and Mr. Bowring were not on good terms. At the fete Mr. Bowring told Sir Hannibal that he had made a will leaving the money to him. Sir Hannibal certainly was missing from the fete, and rumour says that he went on a motor-bicycle to heave the mass of granite on to the road. As that failed to kill Mr. Bowring it was then that Sir Hannibal shot him, and afterwards regained this house by means of the motor-bicycle. Mr. Polwin can state that he met Sir Hannibal on his bicycle, and Hugh Carney — that is, Anak — can state that he saw Sir Hannibal in the vicinity of the quarries on the day and about the time the murder took place.’

Arkle ceased, and, looking at Dericka, waited to hear what comment she would make on his very plain statement.

She held her tongue, however, and as Forde also did not seem inclined to speak, the detective withdrew after a keen glance at both of them. When the front door closed, and he was seen walking briskly down the avenue, Dericka turned to her lover.

‘What do you think of all this?’ she asked.

‘I’ll tell you that after I have seen Anak,’ replied Oswald; ‘I am going to drive out to the quarries now.’

‘One moment. Why should papa run away?’

‘I don’t believe that he has. He will turn up here, and then I’ll persuade him to surrender.’

Dericka mused for a few moments, while Forde held the handle of the door preparing to depart.

‘Sophia is a spiteful woman,’ she said abruptly.

‘Are you talking of Miss Warry?’

‘Of course. She is trying to injure papa because — it sounds very ridiculous, of course — but the fact is Sophia wanted papa to marry her. Yes, you may laugh, but it is the truth. And because he would have nothing to do with her she has made up this story of the quarrel in the library to get him into trouble.’

‘There may be truth in the story,’ said Forde meaningly; ‘after all, Dericka, you told me yourself that Bowring hinted your father had threatened him with death.’

Dericka changed colour. ‘Hold your tongue about that, Oswald.’

‘Certainly. But what do you think of the threat?’

Dericka looked contemptuous. ‘It was only a sample of papa’s wild talk when he is angry. I expect Mr. Bowring and papa really did have a quarrel, and both of them said more than they intended to say. It is lucky Sophia did not overhear everything papa said in an unguarded moment and when he was not responsible for his speech.’

‘Do you think she really did miss anything?’ asked Forde doubtfully; ‘she struck me as a woman who would keep a lot back until such time as she could make a dramatic announcement, the same as she did at the inquest, about her prophecy.’

‘Sophia is really deaf,’ replied Miss Trevick thoughtfully, ‘and if papa and his friend were near the window she certainly would not hear much unless her ears were sharp. The screen, behind which she was hidden, is at the other end of the room. No, Oswald, if she could have said anything harmful to papa she would have let it out to you at that conversation.’

‘Yet she left the room before I could question her.’

‘I’ll question her,’ said Dericka decisively. ‘I’ll go this very afternoon and ask her why she is maligning papa.’

‘You say that you know the reason?’

‘Sophia won’t give that reason.’

‘Very good. I’ll leave you to deal with the lady, and I’ll go out to see Mrs. Carney and her gigantic son.’

This being arranged, Forde left the house, and Dericka returned to report progress to Miss Lavinia. The young barrister procured a trap at the ‘King’s Arms’, and after a light luncheon took his way to the quarries, along the very road on which the murder had taken place.

He was anxious to interview Anak and to learn why the man was so persistent in making trouble. Trevick was not a man to have enemies, as he was good-natured and indolent. Yet Anak went out of his way to implicate the baronet in a crime of which he was assuredly innocent; and more, he had led the quarrymen to wreck the Dower House. Such an attack was more likely to occur in Russia than in a quiet Cornish watering-place; yet the assault had been made, and that it had not succeeded was owing to the cleverness of Anne Stretton. And at this point of his meditations Forde remembered that he had also to interview the adventuress, as Dericka contemptuously called her, if only to learn if she could in any way exonerate Sir Hannibal from complicity in the murder.

On this bright afternoon, under a clear blue sky radiant with sunshine, the moors looked wonderfully beautiful. They ascended on one side of the winding road, and fell away on the other towards the steep cliffs, which breasted the placid ocean. The air was crisp and keen, and Forde drew in long breaths as the trap spun along gaily behind the smart little pony.

Passing over the scene of the murder, he looked up to see the mutilation of the bank whence the mass of granite had fallen, and looked also down the slope where the scattered fragments revealed how it had been blasted by dynamite so as not to impede the traffic.

Then round the corner of the next bend he came unexpectedly upon Anak. There was no mistaking the giant, for there could not be another such huge creature in the district.

‘Isn’t that Hugh Carney?’ Forde asked the driver.

‘Yes, sir; Anak, we calls him.’

‘You can stop here,’ and Forde leaped from the trap to walk forward and confront the big man. Anak, who was walking towards the ragged rent in the high bank which led to the quarries, turned his head at the sound of approaching footsteps and waited when he saw Forde make a signal that he should stop. The man, bulky, brawny and animal, towered above the slim barrister, although Forde was not a short man by any means. He had the immovable face of an ox, heavy, bovine, and a trifle sullen. In his clothes, rusty with the grime of the quarries, with a shock of red hair, and a tangled, untrimmed beard of the same, Anak looked like one of those famous giants of Cornish lore whom Jack killed.

‘You are Hugh Carney?’ asked the young man briskly.

‘I am Anak,’ replied the giant, without much civility.

‘So I understand, and I think that the name fits you very well. I am Mr. Forde, and I am acting on behalf of Sir Hannibal Trevick.’

At the sound of the name Anak scowled and clenched his mighty fist in a savage manner.

‘He’d better keep out of my way,’ he growled.

‘Indeed,’ answered Forde lightly; ‘and why?’

‘I’ve got my own reasons.’

‘Perhaps you’ll tell them to me?’

‘Why should I?’ demanded Anak, still growling.

‘My friend, you are in danger of arrest for having led that mob of men to the Dower House. I can help you in this matter if you will help me.’

‘Help you in what?’ grumbled Anak, sulkily.

‘To clear the character of Sir Hannibal.’

‘I’m hanged if I do.’

‘You’ll be imprisoned if you don’t,’ said Forde sharply. ‘Come, now, you must be reasonable. Do you want to be arrested?’

‘I’d like to see the man who would arrest me,’ and Anak swung his arms fiercely.

The barrister looked at the fine animal critically.

‘You have been to school, I should say?’ he remarked, irrelevantly.

‘What if I have?’ growled Anak on the defensive.

‘Simply this. You have had some education, as I notice that you speak better than most of your class round about these parts. You should therefore know that the law is not to be defied by brute strength, which is all the strength you possess, my friend. All your thews can do nothing against a couple of policemen.’

‘I’d take a dozen.’

‘I am quite sure the dozen would be forthcoming,’ said Forde dryly, ‘and in any case you would have to go to gaol. I can save you from this if you answer me a few questions.’

These arguments appeared to have some weight with the big man, and he kicked a stone out of his way as he replied: ‘What do you want me to say — sir?’ He added the term of respect grudgingly.

‘Why did you lead those quarrymen to the Dower House?’

‘Because Sir Hannibal killed Mr. Bowring. He was a good master, was Mr. Bowring, and gave good wages. No wonder we’re angry at him having been done to death.’

‘But not by Sir Hannibal.’

‘Yes he was; I know.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because I saw Sir Hannibal on the moors near here at the time the rock was heaved over.’

‘Come, now, you’re not going to persuade me that so delicate a man and so old a man as Sir Hannibal Trevick threw down such a mass of granite?’

‘He might have asked one of the quarrymen to help him,’ asserted Anak savagely, ‘and if I find that man I’ll split his skull.’

‘What an amiable individual you are, Mr. Carney,’ bantered Forde, and although the man looked dangerous at a tone which he could not understand he still continued in the same light way. ‘I wonder you didn’t split Sir Hannibal’s skull when you saw him hereabout.’

‘I lost him in the mist,’ said Anak sulkily.

‘There was no mist on the day of the murder.’

‘Oh, yes, there was. Not on the road, perhaps, but higher up on the moors. It came down suddenly, as mists do in these parts, and while I was going home I saw Sir Hannibal quite plainly running up from the place where the murder was done. I followed, as I always hated him, but he got away, and although I followed him right over the hill to the other road I couldn’t catch him. But I heard the noise of his motor-horn,’ ended Anak triumphantly.

This explanation seemed to prove that the baronet really was guilty, and yet Anak’s tale contradicted that of Polwin’s. What if Polwin had been the man seen by that giant? But that was impossible, as Sir Hannibal was tall, and Polwin short. One could never be mistaken for the other. Forde was puzzled, so did not press the question. In place of it he asked another.

‘Why do you hate Sir Hannibal?’ he asked.

Anak reflected for a moment, then strode forward.

‘Come on,’ said he, throwing a gloomy look over his shoulder, ‘I’ll show you the reason.’

Rather perplexed, Forde climbed up the hill with the big quarryman, and after fifteen minutes’ hard work reached a small hut built under the lee of a mighty cromlech. Anak stalked forward and pushed open the door abruptly. ‘Mother!’ he called out harshly.

But no aged woman appeared. The door was filled a moment later by the graceful form of Miss Anne Stretton.

Chapter XII

News

Anak appeared as much taken aback as Forde at the unexpected sight of the woman who had foiled the attack on the Dower House. But for one moment did he look at her beautiful face, then rushed forward with dilated nostrils and upraised fist.

‘You let him get away,’ he growled, remembering the occasion when she had aided Sir Hannibal to escape.

Forde caught the giant back, and for his pains Anak turned on him in mighty wrath. But the young barrister, although by no means the equal in strength of this Goliath, yet knew something of which Anak was ignorant: that is, Forde had taken lessons in ju-jitsu. Before Anak, vain of his muscles, knew what had happened he was lying on his back, tripped up skilfully in the most unexpected manner. When he sat up again his face of stupid wonder was something to behold.

Forde burst out laughing, as did Anne Stretton, and with a savage growl Anak rose to renew the attack. Swinging his mighty arms, he lunged forward with all his strength. Forde stood still until the big man was nearly on top of him then dropped on his back, shot up a foot, and swung Anak, as on a pivot, over his head to crash amongst the wet herbage. It was all so lightly and neatly done that Anne, who admired physical dexterity, clapped her hands.

Forde laughed, and went towards the prostrate giant. His head had struck against a stone and he was stunned for the moment. The barrister cast a casual glance at him, and seeing that he would recover soon, strolled back to Anne.

‘That’s all right,’ he said easily; ‘in ten minutes he’ll be sensible again, Miss Stretton.’

‘You haven’t killed him, Mr. Forde?’

‘I have stunned him; he’ll be right again soon.’

‘Won’t you do something for him?’ asked Anne, marvelling at the coolness of this slight young gentleman.

‘Certainly not. He’ll only make trouble when he recovers his senses, and I wish to talk with you and with Mrs. Carney.’

Before Anne could express her sentiments regarding this calm behaviour — which, by the way, she secretly admired — she was pushed aside and a lean, blear-eyed old crone tottered forth on crutches. She was dressed in faded rags of once brilliant garments, and her white hair flew in wisps about her head, unrestrained in any way. A pair of brilliant black eyes showed that she had all her wits about her, and that her spirit was keen if her figure was a wreck. Her face was a mass of wrinkles, and she had a true nutcracker chin. Mrs. Carney certainly would have been burnt in the middle ages as a witch of the worst.

Seeing the recumbent form of her big son, she tottered forward with wrath in her eyes, and looked spitefully at Forde. Could she have blighted him at that moment she certainly would have done so. And yet in her regard there was something of fear that so slim a young man should have overcome such a giant as her son. It was David and Goliath over again.

‘I heard all,’ said Mrs. Carney, and Forde noted that she spoke in quite a refined way. ‘What do you mean by killing my son?’

‘I have merely stunned him,’ said Forde airily, ‘and now he has had a lesson, perhaps he will leave Miss Stretton alone.’

Mrs. Carney looked up from the head of Anak, which she had taken on her lap, and glanced at Anne.

‘What’s that?’ she asked shrilly.

‘Anak would have struck me,’ explained Anne, ‘but for Mr. Forde.’

‘Why should he have struck you?’

‘Because I thwarted him when he led the quarrymen to the Dower House.’

‘He’s a fool,’ said Mrs. Carney vigorously; ‘he’ll leave you alone when he comes to himself, I’ll go bail. Not that I think much of you, Miss, for having stopped him getting Sir Hannibal and ducking him in the horse pond.’

‘We discussed all that before,’ said Miss Stretton quietly. ‘Mr. Forde, may I ask why you have come here?’

‘To have my fortune told.’

‘To have Sir Hannibal’s fortune told, you mean?’

‘Well yes. I congratulate you on your discernment, Miss Stretton.’

‘Why did you not bring Sir Hannibal with you?’ she asked.

‘For the very simple reason that he has disappeared.’

Anne started, and an expression of extreme surprise overspread her dark face.

‘Disappeared! What do you mean?’

‘Exactly what I say. It seems that the police got out a warrant to arrest Sir Hannibal in London. Someone gave him warning I suppose, for when they went to get him he had gone away.’

‘Very wise of him, Mr. Forde. He will get no justice while the feeling against him is so strong. Does Miss Trevick know where her father is, may I ask?’

‘No; she is as perplexed as I am. I came here to question Anak, as he declares that he saw Sir Hannibal near the spot on the day of the murder.’

‘That is why I came also,’ said Anne very frankly. ‘I wish to help Sir Hannibal out of these difficulties.’

‘Why, Miss Stretton?’ asked Forde gravely.

‘I’ll tell you that later. As it is growing somewhat dark and I have to walk back to St. Ewalds perhaps you will accompany me.’

‘I have a trap waiting near the quarry,’ said Forde quickly, ‘and I shall be glad to take you back to St. Ewalds. But I thought that you were stopping with Mrs. Penrith.’

‘I have not been stopping there for some time,’ replied Miss Stretton, ‘there has been a quarrel between Mr. Penrith and myself.’

‘I understood that you were engaged to him.’

‘No. I could have been had I wished, but there are reasons —’

‘Connected with Sir Hannibal Trevick?’

Anne flung back her head and smiled evasively.

‘Perhaps,’ she said quietly; ‘but see, Mr. Forde, Anak is coming to his senses.’

‘And small blame to that young gentleman that he is not dead,’ said Mrs. Carney in a shrill and angry voice.

Anak sat up and put his hand to his head in a bewildered fashion, groaning heavily. He shook his head with both huge hands, and then rose in a lumpish fashion. He and his withered mother looked like Caliban and Sycorax, and seemed to be fond of one another in an uncouth way. What perplexed Forde was that although the pair seemed to be like animals yet they both spoke such good English — that is, comparatively, in contrast to the usual talk of the class they belonged to. He and Anne watched the two in silence.

‘All right, mother, all right,’ said Anak, in a strangely tender tone as he rose heavily; ‘it’s but a bit of a knock. I’ll be my own man soon.’

‘Come inside, lovey, and let me put some healing herb to your poor head. I’ll make you right and well in a few hours.’

‘Wait a bit,’ said Anak, as his mother hobbled towards the miserable hut, and then lurched towards his late antagonist.

Forde, thinking that the giant was about to renew the attack, held himself in readiness, but it appeared that Anak’s intentions were friendly. He extended a mighty hand with a slow smile.

‘Put it there, young sir,’ he grumbled; ‘I never thought to see the day as anyone could knock me over like a nine-pin.’

‘It’s a new way of fighting,’ laughed Forde, and shook hands.

‘A very queer way,’ said Anak, puzzled. ‘You never put out your strength in any sort of fashion, and yet over I went. Well, I know when I’m beaten, so let’s be friends.’

‘What!’ shrieked Mrs. Carney from the doorway, in which she appeared with a pot of ointment. ‘Are you going to let that jackanapes knock you down, Anak, and not have his heart’s blood?’

‘You try him, mother,’ grinned the giant; ‘even your nails won’t reach his handsome face. He’s got some trick.’

‘Lucky for me that I have,’ said Oswald, good humouredly; ‘if it was a question of strength I shouldn’t give much chance against you.’

This compliment to Anak’s size rather soothed Mrs. Carney. She made her gigantic son sit down on a bench near the door, and applied the ointment to the ragged cut in his head, whence the blood was oozing. ‘And you two gentlefolk can go away,’ she grumbled.

‘I’m quite ready,’ said Anne cheerfully. ‘Mr. Forde will drive me back to St. Ewalds; I’ll come and see you again, Mrs. Carney, and bring some clothes for you.’

‘Wait a bit,’ interrupted Anak, looking at Forde. ‘I promised to tell this young gentleman why I hate Sir Hannibal. As him and me is friends now I’ll keep that promise. There you are, sir,’ he pointed to the old witch, ‘mother’s the cause.’

‘Mrs. Carney? In what way?’

The old woman rose herself to explain, and her black eyes flashed fire.

‘In what way?’ she cried savagely, ‘in this way. Sir Hannibal promised to marry me when I was a gal, and he left me to break my heart. When I married Carney, who left me, and a bad egg he was — I brought up my son to hate Sir Hannibal in the same way as I hate him. Hugh,’ she pointed to the giant, ‘hates Trevick as much as I do. He sucked that hatred in with his mother’s milk, and if he can kill him or hang him, so much the better.’

‘But, surely, after all these years you do not bear malice against Sir Hannibal?’ cried Anne, appalled by the malignant expression of the old dame.

‘I hate him, no more than I did on the day he went away and left me, to marry Miss Dericka’s mother. She was a lady, I was only a poor and pretty girl. I hate him — I hate him.’ She shook a lean fist in the air, and spat with rage. ‘For years I’ve waited for the chance to bring him to the ground. Now I have the chance; he shall swing for killing John Bowring.’

‘In spite of his innocence?’ asked Forde quickly.

‘In spite of everything,’ glared Mrs. Carney. ‘I’ll teach gentlemen to break a poor girl’s heart. He shall be hanged.’

‘Mother!’ Anak was looking at her intently. ‘From what you say, I begin to believe that Sir Hannibal is innocent.’

‘He isn’t. You saw him yourself near the spot.’

‘Well, so I did,’ said Anak quickly; ‘but I didn’t see him heave the rock, and —’

‘Hold your tongue, you great baby,’ said Mrs. Carney fiercely; ‘don’t dare to say a word in his favour. If you don’t hang him, or kill him, or hurt him in some way, I’ll curse you.’

‘No! no!’ said the big man, shrinking, and he really did seem to dread his mother’s curse. And no wonder, for her face was a study fit for one of the Furies as she spoke.

Forde shrugged his shoulders. He was now certain that Sir Hannibal was innocent and that Anak was only trying to injure him to satisfy the vengeance of his mother. At the same time he wanted to be certain of the truth of Anak’s statement that Trevick had been on the moor about the time of the murder. But there was no chance of getting at the truth while Mrs. Carney glared at her son, so Forde held out his hand in a friendly fashion.

‘Come and see me at the “King’s Arms” one day,’ he said good-naturedly; ‘we can then talk. Mrs. Carney’ — he threw half a sovereign to her — ‘this may be of service.’

The old woman uttered a howl of delight and flung herself grovelling on the gold. Anne, drawing aside her skirts with a gesture of repulsion, for Mrs. Carney’s action was not pretty, passed down the narrow path along with Forde. The two walked downward in silence, for the path was somewhat difficult. Not until they reached the level and within sound of the quarry workings did Anne speak.

‘I am coming to see Miss Trevick,’ she said calmly.

‘I shouldn’t if I were you,’ objected Forde, recalling what Dericka had said of the woman beside him.

Anne laughed. ‘Oh, I know well what Miss Trevick thinks of me,’ said she with a somewhat sad gesture, ‘that I am an adventuress: that I wish to marry her father.’

‘Is that not true?’ enquired the barrister delicately.

‘Not exactly. Sir Hannibal wishes to marry me. He proposed in a letter, which I have in my pocket.’

‘Why not at the fete on that day when Dericka and myself came upon you, Miss Stretton?’

‘There was no time, seeing that you interrupted us,’ said Anne in a calm manner. ‘Miss Trevick put a stop to Sir Hannibal’s speeches, although a declaration was on his lips. If she had not done so,’ added the lady meaningly, ‘Sir Hannibal would never have been in this great trouble.’

‘I don’t quite follow you, Miss Stretton,’ said Forde stiffly.

‘I can explain, but there is no necessity to do so now.’

A silence followed, and the two gained the road where the trap was waiting in charge of the patient driver. Forde walked towards it, but was detained before he had taken a couple of steps.

‘Mr. Forde,’ said his companion, ‘I want to talk freely to you, and cannot do so with that man driving. Wait here and let me speak.’

‘I am quite at your service,’ said Oswald, somewhat stiffly and wondering what she was about to say.

‘You know Miss Quinton?’ said Anne suddenly.

‘Yes. She is now at the Dower House.’

‘Oh, indeed!’ Anne looked startled. ‘All the more reason that I should call there. Well, then, Miss Quinton knew my father, and has known me for many years — since I was a tiny girl, in fact. It was she who gave me a letter of introduction to Sir Hannibal and his daughter when I came to St. Ewalds to study art. Miss Quinton, who is a lady of the old school, for whom I have profound respect, considers me an adventuress because I act as a bachelor woman of the present day usually acts. Dericka — you see I am familiar, Mr. Forde — Dericka thinks that I am an adventuress also. Well, that may be, if an adventuress is one who battles with bad luck, and who wants to get married to a rich man. You see I am frank, Mr. Forde.’

‘Very frank,’ assented Oswald, puzzled; ‘but why?’

‘I am coming to my reason. I want to marry Sir Hannibal because he is now rich and is easily managed. I do not love him in any romantic way, but I think I should make him a very good wife.’

‘I don’t deny that, Miss Stretton.’

‘As you know,’ she pursued quietly, ‘I saved him from a very unpleasant quarter of an hour by helping him to escape from the quarrymen. Even although Dericka doesn’t like me she must admit that I have been good to her father in that way.’

‘I think she admits that, and if you call she will thank you.’

‘In the way in which one woman thanks another that she hates,’ said Miss Stretton, with her chin very much in the air. ‘Well, then, Mr. Forde, I can do much more for Sir Hannibal — if,’ she added meaningly, ‘I hold my tongue.’

‘What’s that?’ he asked, facing her quickly.

Anne pointed to the bank overhead a little distance away, where could be seen the raw earth from which had been wrenched the mass of granite to stop the motor.

‘Mr. Penrith drove me past that on the day Mr. Bowring was murdered,’ she said.

‘I am aware of that. You and he heard the shot and came back.’

‘Quite so. Well, then, as we drove past the mass of granite was not on the road but still poised overhead. Mr. Penrith was busy with his horse, and I looked up. I can’t tell you why I should have done so, but I did look up, and I saw —’

‘Well, what did you see?’ asked Forde anxiously.

‘I saw Sir Hannibal Trevick on the top of the stone.’

‘You must be mistaken,’ gasped the barrister.

Anne shook her head. ‘No. Sir Hannibal has a way of holding himself which cannot be mistaken — a military erectness. It was twilight and there was a slight mist drifting down the moor’ — here Forde remembered that Anak had said the same thing — ‘but I caught a glimpse of Sir Hannibal on the granite rock quite plainly. I uttered an exclamation of surprise, and Mr. Penrith asked me what was the matter. I made some vague excuse, as he was jealous, and I did not want him to see Sir Hannibal.’

‘Well, and what did you do?’

‘I made an excuse, as I said, and did not look back. Then, some distance further on we heard the shot and came back. The rest you know.’

‘And do you think Sir Hannibal killed Bowring?’

Anne shrugged her finely moulded shoulders. ‘I have formed no opinion,’ she said. ‘All I know, you know; what is your conclusion?’

Forde did not give it, but instead asked a leading question:

‘Would you marry Sir Hannibal if you had the chance?’

‘I have the chance, and when he comes back again I’ll marry him. But if Miss Trevick wants me to let him go I will do so and hold my tongue for five thousand pounds.’

‘Miss Stretton, I don’t like to make a bargain like that.’

‘Take some time to think over it and tell Dericka what I say. In the meantime, let us drive back to St. Ewalds. I refuse to say another word about the matter until you bring me my answer.’

And she kept to her determination. As they drove back to the little town Anne chatted of many things, but did not refer to Sir Hannibal or his doings all the way. Nor did Forde, for the driver was close to them, and would have overheard all. In the market place Anne jumped down, thanked Forde for the drive, and vanished. He ordered the man to drive up to the Dower House, anxious to tell Dericka what Anne Stretton had said.

He found Dericka in the sitting-room with Miss Lavinia. Both of them seemed to be excited over a legal-looking document, and Miss Trevick rushed at her lover as soon as he entered.

‘Oswald,’ she said, waving a letter, ‘here is a letter from papa enclosed in one from Mr. Gratton. Papa says that he is not coming back, and he has made over the sixty thousand pounds income to me by Deed of Gift. What does that mean?’

Chapter XIII

Mrs. Krent's Story

‘A Deed of Gift, and for so large a sum!’ said Forde, looking from one excited lady to the other.

‘Oh, never mind the value,’ said Miss Lavinia impatiently; ‘to whom should Hannibal give the money if not to his own daughter? The question is this: What does Hannibal mean by acting in this way?’

Forde could make only one reply: ‘It looks like guilt.’

‘No!’ exclaimed Dericka vehemently. ‘I can’t and won’t believe that. Papa is weak and easily led, and perhaps his moral principles are not so strong as they might be. But I decline to think for one moment that he would commit a murder.’

‘I am of your opinion also, my dear,’ said Miss Quinton. ‘Hannibal, painful though it is for me to say, is less of a knave than a fool.’

‘A fool often makes more mischief than a knave, Miss Quinton.’

‘I agree with you, but the mischief made by this particular fool has made things very unpleasant for him.’

‘Oswald! Aunt!’ cried Dericka, her fair face flushing, ‘I wish you would stop calling papa names. He is no worse than many another person. Weakness is not a crime.’

‘It may lead to a crime,’ snapped Miss Lavinia, determined to have the last word.

Dericka allowed her the satisfaction of having it, and turned to Forde, holding out the letter, which she had retained in her hand.

‘I received that with the Deed of Gift from Mr. Gratton,’ said she.

Oswald took the epistle and sat down to read it, while Miss Quinton, putting on her gold-rimmed spectacles, glanced again through the deed which made Dericka a wealthy woman.

First Forde looked at the address to see where Sir Hannibal might be. But not even to his lawyer or daughter had the baronet given away the secret of his hiding place. The letter was dated from Gratton’s office in Cheapside, and intimated that Dericka was to make what use she chose of the sixty thousand a year, as the writer had full confidence in her common sense. ‘And as with such wealth you will be a fair mark for every knave,’ wrote Sir Hannibal, ‘I advise you to marry Oswald Forde as speedily as possible. He is poor, but at least he is an honest man.’

‘That’s good hearing,’ Forde remarked to Dericka, who was reading the epistle over his shoulder.

‘Papa tells me nothing I did not know before,’ she replied, touching his smooth hair gently. ‘Go on. The important part of the letter has yet to come.’

This was true enough, for towards the end of his communication Sir Hannibal strongly advised Dericka to stop searching for the assassin of John Bowring. Also, he declared that he was going abroad and had sufficient money yearly to keep him comfortably. If he wanted more he would send to Dericka for the same. There was no chance of his coming back, and now that the trouble of Bowring’s death was ended by his retirement, Dericka could marry Forde and live happily.

On the whole, as Forde thought when he came to the signature, the letter hinted that Sir Hannibal was guilty of the crime laid to his charge.

‘No,’ said Dericka again, and guessing what Forde thought from the expression on his face. Papa is innocent, but he may have gone away to shield the true assassin.’

Miss Lavinia looked up with an exclamation. ‘Do you think that my brother-inlaw knows who killed that miserable man?’ she asked.

Dericka nodded. ‘I can account in no other way for papa’s going into hiding,’ she said helplessly; ‘there is no reason otherwise.’

‘Unless he is guilty,’ said Miss Lavinia, grimly.

‘Aunt, you told me again and again that did not believe papa would commit a crime.’

‘Not one likely to bring him under the shadow of the gallows, at all events,’ said the old lady cautiously. ‘I would not say it to anyone but you, Dericka, or to Mr. Forde here, but that letter,’ she pointed with her lorgnette, ‘looks highly suspicious.’

‘I must say that I agree with Miss Quinton,’ remarked Forde, ‘and again, what I have learned from Miss Stretton and Anak seems to prove that Sir Hannibal had something to do with the matter.’

‘Tell me everything you have heard,’ said Dericka, growing slightly pale, but in a peremptory manner. In spite of her strong belief that Sir Hannibal was innocent she was beginning to falter, seeing that these two near and dear to her were also wavering as to the cleanness of the baronet’s hands.

Forde wasted no time in preliminaries. He then and there, in a blunt, brusque way, told what Anak had said, and what Miss Stretton had repeated.

Dericka listened with clasped hands, her eyes on his honest face. She saw no reason to disbelieve what he had said, but tossed her head irritably when Miss Stretton’s name was mentioned.

‘An adventuress,’ said Dericka contemptuously.

‘Yes and no,’ remarked Oswald quietly. ‘I think you are too hard upon Miss Stretton, my dear girl. She is no more an adventuress than many another woman who wants to get settled in life.’

‘I quite agree with you, Mr. Forde,’ cried Miss Quinton suddenly. ‘I have called Anne an adventuress myself, but, after all, since the woman’s face is her fortune why should she not try to gain an income from it. Anne comes of good stock, and I knew her parents very well. She is also clever and handsome, and your father — who is so weak that he is bound to marry again — might do worse than make Anne his wife. At least, she would keep him out of mischief.’

‘I don’t like Miss Stretton,’ said Dericka obstinately.

‘No woman ever does like another,’ retorted Miss Quinton, ‘especially when a woman wants to become a second mother.’

‘She’d never mother me,’ flashed out the girl colouring.

‘I don’t think there is much likelihood,’ said Miss Lavinia dryly, ‘seeing that Hannibal is under the ban of the law.’

Forde waited until this war of words was ended, then addressed himself to Dericka.

‘You cannot deny,’ said he, ‘that Miss Stretton behaved extremely well with regard to saving this house from being wrecked and getting your father out of the way.’

‘She did that to marry him,’ said Dericka ungratefully.

‘Oh,’ retorted the barrister rather coolly, for he thought Dericka unreasonable. ‘I don’t think Miss Stretton is so very anxious to marry your father. Even with the chance of getting sixty thousand a year she is willing, as I told you, to retire from the position of Sir Hannibal’s possible wife on receipt of five thousand pounds.’

‘And who will give her that?’ asked Dericka, fingering the deed significantly.

‘You will, if you are wise. Miss Stretton’s evidence would certainly damage Sir Hannibal.’

‘And the mere fact that she is trying to blackmail shows how much she loved papa. It was the money she was after.’

‘I don’t think she ever disguised the fact, Dericka.’

‘Then she’s a bad woman,’ said Miss Trevick decidedly.

Forde shrugged his shoulders, being quite unequal to arguing with so prejudiced a young lady.

‘What do you think, Miss Quinton?’ he asked.

‘Anne is like the rest of our sex,’ said Miss Lavinia indifferently, ‘neither wholly black, nor wholly white, but particoloured. At one time I should have been sorry to see her Hannibal’s wife, but now, I can tell you, Mr. Forde, that he needs a woman with a head on her shoulders to marry him, so why not Anne?’

‘I manage him,’ said Dericka sharply.

‘Quite so, child. But I understand you intend to manage Mr. Forde.’

Miss Quinton chuckled over her joke, and even Dericka smiled.

‘Well,’ she said, after a pause, and making a concession, ‘perhaps I am hard on Miss Stretton. But so far as I can see from the present position of my father, she will never marry him, especially when she knows that I have the money.’

‘And her price?’ asked Forde curiously.

‘I’ll see her about that later,’ said Dericka shrewdly; ‘the first person to be paid is Mrs. Krent. The news that I am to marry Morgan is all over the town.’

Forde nodded. ‘I thought that Mrs. Tregar would prove a good town-crier,’ he said with satisfaction.

‘I want the gossip contradicted at once by Mrs. Krent,’ said Miss Trevick imperiously, ‘so I have asked her to come here to-night.’

‘And you will pay her one thousand a year, Dericka?’ asked the old lady disapprovingly.

‘Certainly,’ replied the girl with a nod. ‘Mrs. Krent will not give evidence as to the marriage of Morgan and her daughter other wise. If that marriage is not proved I may be obliged to marry him, and in any case there would be trouble.’

‘It seems to me that a thousand in all would be sufficient for Mrs. Krent,’ sniffed Miss Quinton.

‘I don’t agree with you, Aunty. After all, Morgan, insane as he is, is the son, and should be the heir of Mr. Bowring. It will be a small thing to give him and his wife one thousand out of sixty.’

‘Why not satisfy your conscience and give him the lot?’

‘No,’ answered Miss Trevick very decidedly, ‘I am not so quixotic as all that. My father told me that Mr. Bowring had every right to leave the money to him for some reason connected with doings in South Africa.’

‘Shady doings,’ said Miss Lavinia sharply.

‘Perhaps, Aunt; I can’t say. At all events I can make better use of the money in charity and such like things than can Morgan, who is scarcely responsible for his actions. I will give him and his wife one thousand a year and the Grange, rent free, to live in. Mrs. Krent can remain there also to look after the couple, for Mrs. Bowring seems to be almost as weak as her husband.’

‘What will your father say to all this?’ asked Forde, wondering at the prompt and business-like way in which Dericka was dealing with a very difficult situation.

‘He will say nothing seeing that he is absent, and you forget, Oswald, that the money is mine now. You may be quite sure that I’ll be just in every way. The first thing to be done is to settle with Mrs. Krent, so that the marriage of Morgan can be announced and this gossip stopped. Then I’ll see Miss Stretton and make a bargain with her as to holding her tongue.’

‘And then, Dericka?’

‘Then,’ said the girl determinedly, ‘you must find out who killed poor Mr. Bowring. When the real assassin is discovered and my father can come back, I’ll marry you.’

‘Not before?’ said Oswald in dismay.

‘It would not be fair to my father,’ said Miss Trevick gravely; ‘I wish him to be at the wedding of his only daughter.’

There was silence for a few minutes, while Miss Quinton and Oswald marvelled at the business-like qualities of Dericka. She looked from one to the other of their puzzled faces with a smile.

‘I dare say I seem to you to be hard,’ said she quietly, ‘but if you can tell me a better way to deal with the situation I am willing to be guided.’

‘No, my dear,’ said Miss Quinton; ‘you are right.’

‘I think so, too,’ said the barrister. Then, taking Dericka’s two hands, he looked quizzically into her flushed face. ‘But, really, you know, I shall be frightened to marry so clever a woman.’

‘Dearest,’ said the girl, kissing him, ‘I am only clever because the necessity of being clever has been forced upon me. Remember that from the age of fifteen I have had to do everything for my father, who would have gone to rack and ruin but for me. When I marry you, Oswald, you can take the head of the household. I resign in your favour, my dear. I have no wish to bear the burden longer than I can help. And now,’ she dropped her hands and turned away, ‘let us see if Mrs. Krent has arrived.’

‘Do you want me to be present, Dericka?’ asked Miss Quinton, gathering together her work.

‘Not unless you wish to, Aunty.’

‘Thank you; I have heard quite enough, my child. I’ll leave you and Mr. Forde to entertain the good lady, and I have no doubt that between you, a bargain will be struck likely to help Hannibal.’

‘Rest assured, Aunty, that my father will return here without a stain on his character.’

‘To marry the adventuress.’

‘If he likes,’ said Dericka, rather unexpectedly. ‘I fear I am hard on Miss Stretton. Perhaps if I knew her better I should find her a more amiable character than I think she is.’

‘I doubt it, my love,’ said Miss Lavinia grimly, and going to the door. ‘You and Anne are both business women, and two of a trade never agree. Both you and Mr. Forde and Hannibal will be woefully henpecked.’

When the old lady, with this parting shot, left the room, Dericka turned to Oswald rather ruefully.

‘See the character I get for trying to bear the burden of the Trevick family.’

‘Never mind, darling heart,’ said he caressingly; ‘when you become my wife you will not need to bear any burden.’

‘You don’t think me unwomanly?’ faltered Miss Trevick.

‘My dear, I think you are the sweetest and cleverest girl in the world. I don’t think a woman need be a helpless log in order to be what old-fashioned ladies like Miss Quinton call womanly. That early Victorian simpering damsel is a thing of the past, Dericka. The women of the day are better fitted to be the comrades of men than their grandmothers were. I would much rather have you as you are, than a romantic, useless girl, to recline on a sofa all day reading novels.’

‘It seems to me,’ said Dericka, scarcely able to keep from smiling, ‘that our marriage will be something like a partnership.’

‘It will be a comradeship,’ said Forde quickly, ‘and as such is more likely to be amicable than if it were founded upon romantic love. I don’t despise love, dearest. All the same, I like a better foundation than simply passion upon which to base my life and yours. We must mingle prose and poetry in our married life, my own.’

‘What a twentieth century wooing,’ laughed Dericka, and rather amused by the view Oswald was taking of the position. She would have continued the discussion but that Mrs. Krent was announced at the moment.

Both turned towards the door as the footman closed it, leaving Mrs. Krent inside, that good lady looking stouter and more comfortable than ever.

She still wore her black dress and her gaudy shawl, her silver ornaments and mauve gloves, presenting an incongruous figure, at which the young pair could scarcely help smiling. With her red face and obtrusively yellow hair, upon which a saucy bonnet quite out of keeping with her years was perched, Mrs. Krent looked what she truly was — an oddity.

‘What a night!’ she said gruffly, and dropping without invitation into a chair; ‘and after such a lovely day, too. As I drove here from the Grange it came on to rain, and now it’s pouring cats and dogs. I didn’t want to leave my warm fireside, I can tell you, young lady.’

‘I’m sorry you should be put to any inconvenience, Mrs. Krent, but it is necessary for me to see you about Morgan’s marriage.’

‘Who told you of that?’ asked Mrs. Krent suddenly, and stopped fanning herself with a lace handkerchief.

‘My father did, and Mr. Forde also.’

‘What do you know about it, sir?’ asked the housekeeper.

‘Merely what Sir Hannibal told me. He has agreed to your terms.’

‘I know that,’ snapped Mrs. Krent, ‘seeing that he swore on the Book.’

‘But,’ continued Forde smoothly, ‘you will have to deal with me and with Miss Trevick, here.’

‘Then where is Sir Hannibal?’

‘He has gone abroad for the time being.’

‘Ho!’ snorted the housekeeper; ‘and how do I know but what you two won’t diddle me?’

‘You’ll be paid the thousand a year, never fear,’ said Dericka in a quiet voice. ‘I’ll get Mr. Gratton to draw out the deed. In any case, since Morgan is truly the heir I think that he and his wife should have the money you ask for them. In fact,’ added Dericka, after a moment’s reflection, ‘I shall hand over two thousand a year.’

‘Lord, Miss!’ cried Mrs. Krent aghast. ‘What will your pa say to that?’

‘My father has left everything in my hands,’ said Miss Trevick, not considering it necessary to speak of the deed of gift; ‘but if I do this, Mrs. Krent, you must speak plainly.’

The housekeeper became suspicious. ‘In what way?’

‘You must tell me where your daughter was married to Morgan, and hand me a certificate of the marriage. Also, you must tell me all you know about Mr. Bowring and my father in Africa.’

‘You wouldn’t like to hear everything,’ said Mrs. Krent, rather disturbed. ‘You seem to be a kind young lady, and I’ll do whatever you ask me to do. I can be easily led,’ added Mrs. Krent with emphasis, ‘but if I’m forced to be nasty I can make things very unpleasant for some people.’

‘For Sir Hannibal, for instance?’ suggested Forde suavely.

Mrs. Krent nodded. ‘There are things in his life which he would like to be kept quiet. I declare,’ cried Mrs. Krent, much after the style of Lord Clive, who made a similar remark, ‘that I am surprised that I ask for so little. With what I know I could make Sir Hannibal give me half the money.’

‘Then why are you so moderate?’ asked Dericka suspiciously.

‘Because I can’t be bothered with a lot of money, Miss. One thousand or two thousand a year is plenty, and anyone else can have the rest so far as I am concerned. I’ll trust you, Miss,’ she added suddenly; ‘you’ll know all that I know this very night, and within the hour. I am quite sure you’ll give me the money. I’ll tell you everything.’

‘About Mr. Bowring?’

‘Yes; and about your father, and about the Death’s Head.’

Chapter XIV

An Unexpected Meeting

Forde had sat down to hear Mrs. Krent’s revelations, but when she mentioned the Death’s Head he started to his feet again.

‘I am glad to hear you mention that, Mrs. Krent,’ said he vigorously, ‘for I have an idea that the Death’s Head has much to do with the murder.’

‘What makes you think that?’ demanded Dericka, while the housekeeper leaned back and loosened her bonnet-strings with an enigmatic expression of countenance.

‘Remember what Miss Warry said, my dear, that Bowring turned pale and was very surprised when he saw the skull in the tent. Depend upon it, the thing had some disagreeable memory for him, and such a memory may have to do with his death.’

‘I don’t quite follow you or agree with you, Oswald.’

‘Oh, I may be wrong,’ answered the barrister, dropping back into his seat; ‘all the same, that idea is firmly fixed in my head. However, no doubt Mrs. Krent here will be able to account for Bowring’s fears when he beheld the beastly thing.’

‘No,’ said Mrs. Krent, unexpectedly. ‘I can’t explain why Mr. Bowring feared it, although I know that he did.’

‘Then you cannot elucidate the mystery?’

‘Not of the Death’s Head. There is only one person can do that, as he gave me a hint about it once in Cape Town.’

‘Who is the person?’

‘My husband.’

‘And where is he?’

‘Ah, my dear young lady, I am as ignorant as you are on that point.’

‘But, Mrs. Krent —’

‘There isn’t any “but” about it,’ rejoined the housekeeper with asperity, and her hands trembled; ‘don’t speak of the man or I’ll lose my temper. If ever there was a scoundrel who walked on two legs he was Samuel Krent.’

‘Was he a German?’ asked Forde; ‘the name sounds German.’

‘I don’t know what he was. He called himself English, and came, so he said, from New Zealander. But he was a bad man, and left me to starve. I should have done so but for Bowring,’ ended Mrs. Krent, and her listeners noticed that she dropped the prefix to the millionaire’s name.

‘Well,’ said Forde leisurely, ‘scraps of intelligence of this sort only serve to confuse. Suppose you begin at the beginning, Mrs. Krent, and tell us exactly what you mean.’

‘My dears,’ said the woman, with a vulgar familiarity, which neither of the young people liked, ‘you’re asking me to tell you my life history, which would take hours to relate. I’ll tell what I can, as briefly as possible. I’ve had a hard time, a very hard time,’ sighed Mrs. Krent, looking at her hands in the mauve gloves — admiringly, perhaps; ‘trouble is second nature with me.’

‘Your troubles will be over when you get the two thousand a year, Mrs. Krent,’ observed Dericka, comforting the woman.

‘Ah, my dear, money ain’t everything. Just when I’m settled down that husband of mine will turn up to make trouble. He always did, he always will. I’ve got a temper myself, and can hold my own with most people, but not with Samuel. No! no!’ Mrs. Krent shook her head with a weak smile. ‘Old Nick is Samuel’s father, and Samuel may be with him for all I know; I hope he is.’

‘Go on,’ said Forde, rather impatient and anxious to get to the truth so far as it concerned Bowring; ‘begin at the beginning.’

‘Ah!’ sighed Mrs. Krent, again shaking her head, ‘that takes me back many, many years. I was born in Whitechapel, and got good schooling when I was a gal, for my people were plumbers and well-to-do. I was a fine buxom gal, my dears, and when I went into service I had many an offer of marriage. I took Jerry Ward, who worked as a shoemaker. Him and me went to Africa, and there he died, poor soul, just three years after my Jenny was born.’

‘Oh!’ said Dericka, rather surprised; ‘I thought your daughter was Jenny Krent?’

‘Jenny Ward is her real name, my dear, called after her first father, though to prevent muddle I did allow her to say she was Krent, that being the name of my second. But she’s neither Krent nor Ward now, my dears, but Mrs. Jane Bowring.’

‘You can prove the marriage?’ asked Forde quickly.

Mrs. Krent drew herself up with an offended air. 'I can show you the certificate,' she said. 'Jenny's a good girl, and I'm a respectable woman. But that can come later. I want to tell all carefully, my dears, so that you may understand.'

'Yes, yes. Go on.'

Mrs. Krent settled herself comfortably and continued, pleased, as a chattering person always is, to find herself the centre of attraction, and with attentive listeners.

'Ward died, as I said,' she resumed, 'leaving me a lone widow woman with Jenny, quite a baby. I went out washing in Cape Town, for there we lived. Ward emigrated to better himself, but, Lord bless you, he was took off with consumption in a jiffy.'

'And what did you do?' asked Dericka, anxious to bring Mrs. Krent back to the point.

'I took in washing, my dears, as I said. Them niggers washed, too, but none of them could starch shirts like me, so I did well with the laundry. That was over twenty years ago,' sighed Mrs. Krent.

'I was a baby then,' murmured Dericka.

'Yes, Miss, and so was Jenny. Then I saw your pa. He was always fond of clean linen, and came to my laundry. More than that, he was so pleased with my washing that he brought along Bowring and Krent.'

'Were those three together?' asked the barrister suddenly.

'In partnership, as you might say, Mr. Forde; they did business over diamonds and gold and anything by which they could turn an honest penny. Sir Hannibal, who was friendly with me for so fine a gentleman, talked quite freely, and said that he had come out to make a fortune. How he fell in with Bowring, I can't say, but he did, up at Kimberley, I think, and Bowring, being clever without money, and Sir Hannibal having money, without being clever — asking your pardon, my dear — the two thought they'd join forces and make a fortune.'

'And Krent?'

'He was a kind of sleeping partner,' said the housekeeper; 'he did the dirty work.'

'Then there was dirty work?' demanded Forde, significantly.

'Plenty of it. Sir Hannibal, again asking your pardon, my dear, was a fine gentleman, but not clever. Bowring was too much for him, and for Krent, too. It was Bowring who made the money, and a blackguard he was, shame that I should say so, my dears, seeing he has been so good to me, and is dead, not to speak of the fact that he's my brother-inlaw.'

'Your brother-inlaw?' cried the listeners, simultaneously.

'By marriage,' explained Mrs. Krent, 'else I shouldn't have let my Jenny marry Morgan. Bowring married Ward's sister, and as he was my first husband that makes —'

'All right,' said Forde, cutting her short. 'We understand the relationship, Mrs. Krent. Go on.'

'Well, then, as I say,' pursued the housekeeper, 'Bowring married Amelia Ward shortly after my first husband's death. She was not quite right in her head, poor thing, and they say that Bowring treated her

cruelly. She died five years later, leaving Morgan, and as Bowring couldn't be bothered with the boy, and I was a relative, he left him to me to bring up. Then he and Sir Hannibal went to the Transvaal, after diamonds, I suppose. Krent waited behind, and you could have knocked me down with a feather,' said Mrs. Krent, lifting her hands, 'when he asked me to marry him.'

'You did?' queried Dericka.

'My dear, Krent told me a story of his future wealth, and as I was tired of washing I took him. He had pretty ways, too,' added Mrs. Krent, thoughtfully, 'but, Lord bless you, that was only at the beginning of the marriage. Afterwards he became a brute, and took all my money and went to the Transvaal after Sir Hannibal and Bowring, leaving me with next to nothing, keeping Jenny and Morgan, who were both well grown by then.'

'When did you see him again?'

'Not for years and years. One night he appeared in the rain, just such a night as this, my dears. He was at the door, and when I saw his face in the light of a lamp I gave a shriek — it was so white and horrid-looking. He came in and said that he wanted money and a bed. Bowring had kicked him out of the firm and was making money fast.'

'Why was Krent kicked out?'

The housekeeper lowered her voice and cast a frightened look round the room. 'I wouldn't tell everyone,' she said, softly, 'but I've promised to make a clean breast of it to that young lady. Krent told me that Bowring had forged Sir Hannibal's name to some bills, and these Sir Hannibal kept hanging over Bowring's head.'

'That is not true,' said Dericka, indignantly.

'It is,' insisted Mrs. Krent. 'Bowring admitted as much to me when he came back and took me to England after making his fortune.'

'But my father would never —'

'Hush! Dericka,' said Forde, quickly; 'let Mrs. Krent tell the story in her own way. I believe we are coming to something important.'

Dericka subsided and bit her lip, although she was annoyed that a common woman such as Mrs. Krent was should accuse Sir Hannibal Trevick of such conduct.

Mrs. Krent saw her annoyance, and became flurried.

'My dear young lady, I shouldn't say what I have said unless it was true,' she protested. 'Krent found out about these forged bills and — to be plain, my dears — he tried to blackmail Bowring, who was then rich. But Bowring took him to Sir Hannibal, who denied that there was any forgery, so Krent could do nothing. Bowring then kicked him out of the firm, and he came to me without a penny.'

'Serve him right, too,' said Forde indignantly; 'he was a scamp.'

'He was worse than that,' sighed the housekeeper. 'No one knows what I had to put up with. He kicked me and struck me, and spent my money on other women, begging your pardon, my dear, and lived on me,

till I was fairly driven wild. He was always writing to Bowring and Sir Hannibal, but they would not help him. Then he went away, and remained absent for a year.'

'Where did he go?'

'To the Transvaal. I fancy something was wrong which Krent could not put right, something about diamonds. He came back in a year with plenty of money and a tale of the Death's Head.'

'Ah!' said Forde with satisfaction; 'and what is the tale?'

'My dear young gentleman, I know no more than you do as Krent never would tell me. All he said was that Bowring had been warned once by the nigger skull, and had escaped death. If he was warned again he might escape; but the third time of warning was fatal.'

Forde reflected, his eyes on the woman's broad, common-looking face.

'Did Krent possess the skull?'

'No,' she whispered; 'he — Krent, I mean — said that Sir Hannibal had it.'

Dericka and Forde looked suddenly at one another, wondering if Sir Hannibal had placed the skull in the fortune-teller's tent on that fatal day.

'I don't understand quite,' said Oswald, after a pause, 'but it seems that this skull — a nigger's skull, you say? — was a kind of warning to Bowring that he would be killed if he saw it three times.' Then when Mrs. Krent nodded he went on: 'Bowring saw it for the first time in the Transvaal, according to Krent, and — I suppose, the second time here —'

'No; begging your pardon, sir. Bowring came down to Cape Town, and was about with many people over diamond mines. He sometimes came to see Morgan, who was with me. One day he came in quite white, and Krent gave him brandy. Then Krent afterwards told me that Bowring had seen the skull for the second time, and that the third time meant death.'

'And the third time was in the grounds of this house,' said Forde, meditatively, 'and it DID mean death. But explain.'

Mrs. Krent threw up her hands. 'I can't explain, sir. That was all Krent told me. Then Bowring paid him to go away, and he went. I have not set eyes on him for ten years, and glad I am that he is away. Then Sir Hannibal came back to England; afterwards Bowring came and took me and Jenny and Morgan. He said that he wanted to be near Sir Hannibal' — Mrs. Krent sunk her voice again, and again glanced round — 'and so took the Grange and made me housekeeper. But I think that Sir Hannibal made him stop there so as to keep an eye on him over those bills. I have no reason to say so,' added the woman, wiping her red face, 'but those are my thoughts, my dears.'

'And the marriage?'

'Well, my dears, Bowring was close-fisted, and often lost his temper with me and Jenny. He once or twice said that he would turn us out to starve, so, to get the better of him, I made Jenny marry Morgan.'

'That was not right,' said Dericka, indignantly, 'seeing what Morgan is — quite insane.'

‘Oh, he is not so very insane, and Jenny is quite fond of him,’ said Mrs. Krent easily. ‘If he was insane — very bad, that is — the clergyman would not have married him to Jenny. She and me can manage him; but no one else,’ added Mrs. Krent, ‘least of all his father, who always put him in a rage.’

‘Where did the marriage take place?’ asked Mr. Forde, brusquely.

Mrs. Krent produced a certificate of marriage from her capacious pocket.

‘In London, at St. Edwin’s Church,’ she said, handing this to the barrister; ‘everything is in order. It’s about a year ago, now. I intended to tell Bowring when he tried on any of his games about turning me and Jenny out. And now that is all,’ said Mrs. Krent, rising to go. ‘And if you like, sir, I’ll tell everyone that Jenny is Mrs. Bowring.’

‘I think it will be as well, Mrs. Krent,’ said Forde, glancing through the certificate, which appeared to be quite in order. ‘I’ll keep this to verify it at the church.’

‘Oh, you’ll find it all right, sir,’ said the housekeeper, tossing her head; ‘is there anything else, my dears?’

‘Yes,’ said Dericka, rising; ‘why did you accuse my father of having killed Mr. Bowring?’

‘Well, you see, Miss,’ said Mrs. Krent, colouring even redder than she already was, ‘I heard by a side wind about the Death’s Head in the tent, and knowing from my husband that Sir Hannibal had it, I thought that he had put it there to frighten Bowring, and afterwards had killed him. I knew, too, that Sir Hannibal wanted money, and fancied that he had tried to get the fortune in that way.’

‘Mrs. Kent,’ said Forde gravely and slipping the certificate into his pocket, ‘there was no need for Sir Hannibal to kill Bowring in order to get the money. With the bills you speak of in his possession he could easily have extorted what he wanted from Bowring.’

‘Oh, Oswald, do you accuse my father of blackmail?’

‘No, my dear, but if Mrs. Krent thinks him guilty of murder she can easily guess he would not hesitate at blackmail, and so would prefer the lesser crime to the greater.’

‘I don’t say Sir Hannibal killed Mr. Bowring,’ said Mrs. Krent, wagging her hands helplessly, ‘but it does look odd about this skull.’

‘Very odd,’ assented Forde quietly, and escorting her to the door; ‘it will be as well, Mrs. Krent, to say nothing of this conversation until such time as I give you leave.’

‘I’ll not say a word,’ she replied firmly; ‘all I want is the money.’

‘You shall have it as soon as Mr. Gratton can draw up a deed,’ said Dericka. ‘Meanwhile, tell everyone that Morgan is married.’

This Mrs. Krent promised to do, and departed rather relieved in her mind that her troubles, so far as money was concerned, were now at an end. She went out into the dark rainy night and climbed, groaning, into a trap which had brought her from the Grange. With a parting wave of her pudgy hand to Forde she went off.

All the time of that drive Mrs. Krent was thinking of her missing husband, and shuddering at the possibility that he might reappear in her life now, when everything was settled comfortably.

It was pitch dark, and only the lights of the trap cast a forward glare as the moors stretched out their arms to embrace and swallow up the vehicle. Not a star was to be seen, and the rain drove continuously in the faces of the driver and his companion. The housekeeper muffled her ample form up well against the raw air, and thought of the past. It was extremely disagreeable that it should concern itself almost exclusively with the hateful face of Samuel Krent.

‘I suppose it’s because I’ve been talking about him,’ thought Mrs. Krent as the trap drew near the Grange. ‘Ugh! I’ll never mention him again, now that I’ve told what I’ve been forced to tell.’

When the twinkling lights of home shone in her eyes Mrs. Krent became more cheerful, and the bugbear ghost of Krent vanished from her mind. At the sound of the approaching wheels Jenny opened the big hall door, and Mrs. Krent climbed groaning down, for her limbs ached with exertion and dampness. But she had help at hand. A man came forward to assist her. Without thinking, she took his hand and descended slowly, breathing heavily. The trap drove round to the stable. But while it was moving off Mrs. Krent caught sight of the man’s face in the light of the lamps, just as she had seen it years ago in lamplight in Cape Town.

‘Samuel Krent! Samuel Krent!’ she cried, and waddled up the steps as hard as she could, terrified out of her life.

But the man, who followed her closely, bore an uncommon resemblance to Josiah Polwin.

Chapter XV

Husband and Wife

Mrs. Krent swarmed up the steps with an agility surprising in so stout a woman. Tearing the heavy door from her daughter’s grasp, she flung it to and dropped in an untidy heap on to the pavement.

The door, however, simply swung against the foot of the man, who was determined to enter, and a moment afterwards he was standing over the frightened housekeeper, by this time dissolved in tears.

‘This is a nice welcome, upon my word!’ said Krent, alias Polwin, and in a bullying tone, quite different to his meekness in the presence of Forde. ‘Get up, Maria, and don’t make a fool of yourself.’

‘Who are you?’ asked Jenny, coming to the aid of her mother.

‘I’m your father, Samuel Krent,’ retorted the man.

‘Oh, liar — liar, seeing Jenny’s name is Ward,’ moaned Mrs. Krent.

‘I understood that her name was Bowring,’ said the returned wanderer cheerfully. ‘Get up, Maria; I have much to say.’

‘I shall sit here for ever,’ gasped Mrs. Krent, and placed one fat hand on her aching side.

‘If you don’t go,’ said Jenny, striving to screw her small pale pretty face into a severe look, ‘I’ll call the men and have you thrown out.’

‘A nice way to treat your father, my girl.’

‘You are not my father, and I am not your girl,’ was Jenny’s remarkable spirited reply; ‘address me with all respect as Mrs. Bowring.’

‘Oh Mrs. Bowring,’ he bowed ironically, ‘I ask you pardon. Will you be so pleased as to ask my wife to rise and conduct herself less like a fool.’

‘Morgan,’ cried Jenny, while Mrs. Krent still wept bitterly on the cold black and white pavement.

A thin whimper, like a kicked dog, answered her, and from a side room appeared Morgan, creeping along the wall, with a hanging head and hunched shoulders. His face was white, and his lips redder than ever, and he looked exactly like a vampire as depicted in Hungarian legends.

With strange, lifeless eyes he gazed at his pretty wife and then at Mrs. Krent grovelling on the stone floor.

‘A nice son to inherit John Bowring’s money,’ laughed Polwin jeeringly.

Morgan’s eyes settled on the lean, sneering face of the little man, and a look of recognition crept into them.

‘Polwin,’ he said in his thin, high voice, which was like that of a child. ‘I saw you in St. Ewalds. Yes; I remember. Jenny left me in the trap while she was shopping and you spoke to me. You told me to say nothing of having seen you.’

‘Polwin,’ echoed Mrs. Krent, struggling to rise and getting on her knees. ‘Eb, that name — Sir Hannibal’s steward?’

‘Quite so,’ said Polwin. ‘I have been acting as his steward for quite sixteen months.’

‘To think that you should have been so near and I never knew,’ wailed Mrs. Krent. ‘I would have put the ocean between us had I known.’

‘Oh, I don’t want you,’ said Polwin insolently; ‘all I wish for is a conversation, and then I’ll go.’

‘Swear to leave the house this very night and I’ll talk to you,’ said his wife, getting on to her feet.

‘I promise without swearing,’ said Polwin in a sanctimonious tone. ‘Be calm, Maria, I am not what I was. As Samuel Krent I was lost, as Josiah Polwin I am found; I preach at the Gwynne Chapel.’

‘Oh, Lord, the devil quoting Scripture!’ muttered Mrs. Krent; ‘it’s all right, Jenny,’ she added, seeing the look of fear on her daughter’s face; ‘I’d better talk to him lest worse befall.’

‘A nice greeting,’ snarled Polwin, ‘when I’ve come to do you a good turn, you ungrateful woman.’

‘You!’ Mrs. Krent laughed. ‘You never did man, woman or child a good turn in all your wicked days, Samuel Krent.’

‘Josiah Polwin, if you please,’ he snapped, ‘that being my real name.’

‘Oh!’ sighed the housekeeper; ‘you didn’t even marry me straight. I am glad Jenny is not your child.’

‘So am I,’ said Polwin, contemptuously. ‘A whey-faced minx.’

Morgan made an angry noise in his throat. 'That's my little girl,' he gurgled, clasping and unclasping his hands; 'leave her alone or I'll tear the heart out of you.'

Polwin stepped back a step, as the look in the man's eyes was not pleasant. Jenny laughed triumphantly.

'You see, I am protected, Mr. Polwin, or Krent, or whatever you like to call yourself,' and took her husband's arm.

'I am not afraid of your husband,' said Polwin, with his eyes on the white, vacant face of the idiot; 'you know me, Morgan?'

'Yes; I saw you in St. Ewalds.'

'And?' said Polwin, fixing him with anything but a meek look.

'And,' echoed Morgan, drooping lower and lower as though a burden was being piled on his shoulders; 'and — oh!' — he flung out his hands and covered his eyes — 'don't look. I'll be good — I'll be good. Jenny,' he tugged at his wife's dress, 'come away. He's the big, red devil. He's a witch-doctor, same as I saw in Africa. Oh, the scarlet skull — oh, the fire and — no — no!' As Polwin still kept looking at him he dropped on all fours like a beast, and crept swiftly up the stairs, moaning all the time, 'I'll be good — I'll be good.'

When his wailing died away Mrs. Krent, whose face was as white as paper, faced her small husband boldly.

'What does this devilry mean?'

'Never you mind, Maria,' he replied quietly. 'Morgan saw something in Cape Town that wasn't pleasant.'

'The Death's Head?'

'Never you mind,' said Polwin again, then suddenly became irritable. 'Here, take me in and give me wine and food. I'm tired of talking in damp clothes, and hungry. Jenny,' he turned sharply on the girl, 'go!'

Mrs. Bowring stood her ground, although her face was also white, and she trembled from head to foot. The effect of Polwin's gaze on the usually intractable Morgan had frightened her not a little. 'I stand by my mother,' she faltered.

Mrs. Krent moved forward and patted her hand. 'Go, deary,' she whispered, wetting her dry lips with her tongue. 'I'd best speak him fair.'

'See here,' said Polwin with a stamp, 'you're making a fuss about nothing; I've come to give you money.'

'I don't want it,' said Mrs. Krent; 'me and Jenny have two thousand a year. Yes, you may look and look, but Miss Trevick has given us —'

'Where did Miss Trevick get the money?' asked Polwin, and his pale eyes became two pinholes as they narrowed dangerously.

'From her father, I suppose. Sir Hannibal got Bowring's fortune.'

‘Yes, but Sir Hannibal wouldn’t —’ He stopped and gnawed his fingers with a thoughtful look. ‘There’s more in this man than I know of,’ he said suspiciously; ‘come away, Maria and tell me everything. If you don’t I’ll stay with you for the rest of my blessed life.’

‘Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!’ cried the terrified woman; ‘not that, Krent.’

‘Polwin, you fool. I don’t choose to be known as Krent here.’

‘Polwin, then.’

‘Mr. Polwin. Be respectful.’

‘Mr. Polwin,’ whimpered Mrs. Krent, terrified to death by the devilish look which the little man cast upon her. ‘Jenny, love, go to Morgan and keep him quiet.’

‘I wish Morgan would kill you,’ cried Jenny, mounting the stairs and facing Polwin for one moment.

He laughed in a nasty, sneering way.

‘I dare say you do, but I’m not so easy got rid of. If Morgan isn’t quiet tell him that the black man with the crowned skull will come to him.’

Jenny wondered what this threat might mean, but giving no answer disappeared round the landing on her way to the idiot. Mrs. Krent sighed heavily, pushed open the door of the sitting-room and walked in, followed by her undesirable husband. With a dragging step the poor woman went to the fire at the end of the room and put one foot on the high fender to dry her boots. Polwin snarled, and darting forward he twisted her arm until she shrieked.

‘Get food,’ said he, grinning at the pain of her expression; ‘do you think I’m here to wait on you? Have you any servants?’

‘Three,’ whimpered Mrs. Krent, standing before him like an elephant before a cock sparrow.

‘Where are they?’

‘In bed by this time.’

‘Then let them stay there. I don’t want it known that I am here. As Sir Hannibal’s steward I have to keep my good name. Go and get me some food and drink, and hold your tongue.’

‘Yes, yes, Samuel.’

‘Polwin, I tell you; Mr. Polwin to a slut like you.’

The big woman hurried away as quickly as her tottering legs would allow her. Polwin gazed after her with a smile of satisfaction, and then seated himself in an armchair which was comfortably near the glowing fire. Here he removed his boots, held his small feet to the blaze, and producing a cigar, lighted it carefully, and with the air of a man who knew what a good weed was. When the fragrant smoke of it was curling round his lank grey hair — such of it as remained — he cast a lordly look round the splendidly furnished room. Bowring had spared no expense in putting the Grange in order, and the result was that the furniture and hangings and decorations were of the best.

‘Mine,’ said Mr. Polwin with a gratified air. ‘Mine,’ he repeated, and licked his thin lips. ‘What a comfort it is to come home.’

The sentiment was not shared by Mrs. Krent, who entered hurriedly and placed on the table a tray covered with a white cloth. On it was a plate of dainty slices of ham, a crusty loaf, a pat of butter, a pot of pate de fois gras, and a bottle of excellent port. Polwin, who was delicate in his appetite, as she knew of old, cast a pleased look at the repast.

‘Place it on a small table and bring it here!’ he commanded abruptly, laying aside his cigar for the moment.

The obedient Mrs. Krent brought a small table close to his elbow and arranged the tray. He made her pour him out a glass of port, and then pointed to a near chair, rather an uncomfortable one. ‘Sit there.’

‘Yes, Samuel — I mean, Mr. Polwin.’

‘And hold your tongue till I give you leave to speak!’ commanded the little demon.

The housekeeper obeyed, keeping her anxious eyes fastened on the wrinkled yellow face that looked as malicious as that of the Yellow Dwarf. Mrs. Krent was as little like the vulgar virago who had defied Sir Hannibal as Polwin was like the meek steward who had cringed in the presence of Oswald Forde.

Polwin ate and drank leisurely, keeping his wife waiting fifteen minutes in silence while he finished his meal. Then he poured himself out another glass of port and relighted his cigar. It was noticeable that he did not offer Mrs. Krent any wine, although the poor woman needed some to sustain her. When the cigar was in full blast Polwin turned a smiling, satisfied face on his stout better half, or, rather, worse half, seeing that he was completely her master. For some minutes he eyed her with a grin, and Mrs. Krent’s hand worked restlessly. She longed to slap his face, but under the compelling power of those pale eyes she did not dare. Like a meek little school-girl, she quailed before the small man, whom she could have crushed with one hand. And, oh, how she longed to crush him!

‘I came to St. Ewalds over a year ago,’ said Polwin suddenly, ‘because the money which Trevick gave me to go to New Zealand was spent. As I knew much that was unpleasant, Trevick, at my desire, made me his steward.’

‘Oh, Lord!’ sighed Mrs. Krent; ‘and I never knew.’

‘I took good care that you shouldn’t know by never coming here. When you visited the Dower House I kept out of your sight.’

‘Didn’t Bowring recognise you?’

‘No, Maria. I kept out of his sight also, until such time as I required him. I haven’t forgotten the way in which he treated me.’

‘You beast,’ cried Mrs. Krent with sudden fury; ‘I believe that you killed him.’

‘Pooh!’ Polwin waved aside a wreath of smoke airily. ‘I would have killed him in a much more artistic fashion. What I have come to ask you is, why did Trevick kill Bowring when he had him under his thumb? Tell me, Maria.’

Mrs. Krent stared. ‘I’m sure I don’t know if Sir Hannibal killed him at all,’ she said piteously.

Polwin looked puzzled. 'But you accused him when the will was read.'

'I know, because of that skull in the tent.'

'Then you have no true evidence?'

'No. I was angry that Bowring had left the money to Sir Hannibal.'

Polwin for the first time looked disconcerted.

'I thought you knew something,' he said in an acid tone; 'you always were a fool, Maria.'

'I can't be expected to know about the death,' she replied sharply.

'Don't you talk like that, Maria, to me, or I'll show you a new trick I have learned, to make you suffer,' grinned her spouse. 'Come, now,' he added, when she quailed, 'do you know if Sir Hannibal killed —'

'I tell you I don't. I believe you killed Bowring.'

'I did not. He was more of value to me alive than dead. Those bills —'

'You could do nothing with those, seeing Sir Hannibal swore that they were not forgeries.'

'Hold you tongue and listen,' snapped the little man. 'I say that those bills placed Bowring under Trevick's thumb, so I don't see why Trevick should kill him.'

'I don't believe he did,' said Mrs. Krent.

'Oh, that's because Miss Trevick has paid you two thousand a year.'

'Well, yes. Jenny and me and Morgan are well off now. And if you think to get any of the money you won't, Samuel,' she added desperately; 'I shall have a divorce.'

Before she could withdraw her hand Polwin had seized it, and was screwing his knuckles into the back. Mrs. Krent writhed with pain and finally shrieked, while Polwin went on screwing and smiling.

'Are you sorry, Maria?' he asked.

'Yes, yes,' gasped the poor creature, and when he let her go she nursed her sore hand in her bosom, rocking with pain. Polwin still smiled.

'That's a new trick, Maria,' said the little demon, grinning. 'Now listen to me and don't interrupt or you'll have worse pain to suffer. I met Trevick on his motor-bicycle going after Miss Stretton and Mr. Penrith. He wanted to give the lady a letter. I was on the road behind the hill and met Trevick.'

'Why did he go by that road?' asked Mrs. Krent, still rocking. 'Miss Stretton and Mr. Penrith, as I heard at the inquest, came by the direct road leading to this place.'

'Trevick made a mistake. At all events he asked me to take the letter on and gave me the bicycle. I delivered it at Penrith's place and left Trevick on the other road behind the hill. Now,' added Polwin, placing one finger in the palm of his hand, 'Trevick could easily have climbed over the hill to loosen that

stone, and he had plenty of time to do so before Bowring's motor-car came along. I know for a fact that he was not in the house when I returned, for I came back by the second road, and did not appear until dinner. Plenty of time, Maria, for him to have walked back.'

'Then you really think that Sir Hannibal killed Bowring?'

'I do, Maria, but I want to know why he killed him, seeing that he could do what he liked about the money, thanks to those bills. Of course,' added Polwin thoughtfully, 'there is the Death's Head.'

Mrs. Krent stopped rocking. 'I can't understand that.'

'No, Maria, you're too much of a fool to understand anything. I am going to explain, as I want you to get me ten thousand a year from Sir Hannibal.'

'Why don't you get it yourself?'

'I don't know where Sir Hannibal is hiding, or I would.'

'I can't find him, Samuel.'

'Mr. Polwin, Maria, unless you want another screw. I am aware that you can't find him, but I dare say Miss Trevick can. You went to see her to-night, and you tell me that she is friendly enough to give you two thousand a year. You told me so.'

'Yes, but how did you know that I was at the Dower House?' 'You told me so,' repeated Mr. Polwin agreeably, 'and also I saw you there, Maria. For that reason I followed you here to find out your little game, my dear.'

'Impossible!' gasped Mrs. Krent, looking at the man with fear; 'I drove!'

'So did I, Maria.'

'I heard no wheels.'

'You heard the wheels of your own trap. I was hanging on behind, and a very unpleasant journey I had.'

Mrs. Krent gasped, and stared with her eyes as round as gooseberries and bulging with fear. 'Oh!' she gasped; 'what a devil you are.'

Polwin took this quite as a compliment.

'I am rather fly,' he said modestly; 'you take care, Maria, or I'll be one too many for you as I am now, my darling. Thwart me, and I'll screw not your hand but your neck. Obey me, and with ten thousand a year, mind you, I pass out of your life for ever, sweetheart.'

'I'd give double the money to see the last of you,' whimpered Mrs. Krent, drawing back, for his mean, yellow face was unpleasantly near her now plump red one, 'what do you want me to do?'

'Various things. First, to make matters clear, I'll tell you the story of the Death's Head. I think that will supply the motive for the murder of Bowring by Trevick.'

‘You told me of the three warnings.’

‘In Africa, but I did not explain fully. The fact is, I was not quite sure at the time of the true story. But I learned it, and came back to tell it to Trevick — with the Death’s Head,’ ended Polwin, slowly and pointedly.

Chapter XVI

The Letter

Mrs. Krent placed her fat hands on her fat knees and stared at her wicked little husband. That gentleman lighted a fresh cigar and lounged back in his chair sipping a glass of port with an appreciative air.

‘Well, Maria?’ he murmured.

‘You — you had the Death’s Head?’ she stammered; ‘you — you placed it in the tent at the fete?’

‘Quite so, Maria, and took it away again. I placed it there on the chance — we must always allow for chance — that Bowring would have his fortune told. He did, and saw it, so he must have known that the end was not far off.’

‘Samuel, do you mean to say that Miss Warry knows who killed —’

‘I believe she does,’ interrupted the steward quietly, ‘and on that knowledge based her prophecy, which every fool believed. As to the Death’s Head, I’ll tell you why it frightened Bowring. He was a superstitious ass.’

‘No,’ said Mrs. Krent, who looked frightened herself, and cast a shivering glance round the comfortable room, ‘Bowring didn’t believe in ghosts.’

‘He believed in other things, such as sudden death at the hands of an enemy —’

‘Sir Hannibal?’

‘Not in this instance — a Zulu witch-doctor.’

‘Oh, Morgan said —’

‘He mentioned a witch-doctor tonight in his mumblings,’ finished Polwin pleasantly, ‘so I remember. The witch-doctor saw him in the Transvaal, that time Bowring took the boy with him. Morgan has not been the same since, as he got his life frightened out of him.’

‘What a shame — the poor, mad boy.’

‘Not mad enough to prevent him marrying your daughter,’ chuckled Polwin. ‘But, enough! Maria, you are prolix, and the night is getting towards morning, also the wine is finished and the fire is going out. Listen, and hold your tongue about what I’m telling you until such time as I give you leave to speak.’

Mrs. Krent glanced at the clock, which pointed to twelve, and nodded in an anxious manner. Polwin tipped off the ash of his cigar with his little finger and began a rather gruesome story.

‘In the Transvaal,’ said he — ‘I won’t for obvious reasons mention the exact place — Sir Hannibal had the misfortune to murder a Zulu.’

‘No, I don’t believe it,’ gasped Mrs. Krent, pushing back her chair.

‘Maria, I’ll screw your hand again,’ said Polwin with displeasure, then, when she hastily hid her sore hand again in her bosom, he went on calmly: ‘This Zulu had a diamond, which Sir Hannibal, and I may say, Bowring, wanted. He refused to part with it, and while chaffering in the wilds, beyond sight of the Transvaal police — you understand, Maria — Sir Hannibal shot him and took the diamond.’

‘No,’ said Mrs. Krent, keeping a wary eye on her husband in case he should torture her again, ‘I don’t believe that Sir Hannibal is a thief and a murderer.’

‘He is a thief, because he stole the Zulu’s diamond,’ said Polwin calmly, ‘and doubly a murderer since he killed the Zulu and Bowring. No one knew the truth save Bowring, and Sir Hannibal feared him.’

‘Oh, and you say that Sir Hannibal killed Bowring for that reason?’

‘Yes,’ assented Polwin; ‘I believe that Bowring grew weary of Trevick’s threats about the forged bills, and said that he would tell of the murder of the Zulu. Then, to save himself, Trevick killed him.’

‘As though anyone would care about the death of a nigger,’ said Mrs. Krent contemptuously; ‘I have been in Africa, Samuel.’

‘Oh, but this Zulu was a young fellow of importance, the son of a famous witch-doctor whom the Boers were trying to conciliate. He made a lot of trouble over his son’s death, and if Trevick had been caught he would have suffered imprisonment, if not death. Yes, even now, long ago as it is; for the witch-doctor took his tribe away and gave the Boers a lot of trouble. Only the punishment of the witch-doctor’s son’s assassin will make that tribe amenable to British rule now that we have taken over the Transvaal. So, you see, Maria, that Sir Hannibal Trevick, Baronet, had every reason to fear lest Bowring should go to the Foreign Office and tell what he knew. The disaffected tribe is an important one, and the Government would do much to get it quiet, even by hanging the murderer of the man whose skull frightened Bowring so much.’

‘His skull!’ gasped Mrs. Krent, terrified; ‘is that scarlet skull the dead man’s?’

‘It is. It must be some dead man’s, you know, Maria.’

‘But why should it frighten Mr. Bowring?’

‘I’m coming to that, if you hold your confounded tongue. It seems, as I afterwards heard the story and before I learned the exact truth, that the witch-doctor — Moolu, they called him — thought that Bowring had killed his son and stolen the diamond. He could not bring the crime home to him, but he did witchcraft over the business.’

‘What kind of witchcraft?’ asked Mrs. Krent, fearfully, for she was superstitious in spite of her gibe at Bowring.

‘Suggestion,’ snapped the little man. ‘He cut off the boy’s head, boiled away the flesh, coloured the skull scarlet and bound it round with a broad silver crown. Then he showed it to Bowring and said that when he, Bowring, that is, saw it again he would be near death.’

‘Why didn’t he kill Bowring at once?’

‘He wanted to torture him. In vain Bowring protested his innocence. He could not give away Trevick, you know, because of the forged bills. But Moolu didn’t believe Bowring’s protestations. He wanted to torture him with suspense and gloat over his sufferings. And he did torture him. Once in the Transvaal, Bowring found the skull in his tent, and afterwards was nearly speared. Then, again, in Cape Town he found it in his room, and he was knifed at night, but not badly enough to kill him. Moolu had told Bowring that when he saw the skull three times he would meet with his death. You may imagine, Maria, that Bowring had a very bad time, seeing that twice he had met with a narrow escape from death, and knew that the third appearance of the skull would be fatal. However,’ added Polwin, with a yawn, ‘he need not have been so frightened, for when Bowring went to England Moolu died, and there was no one to carry on the vendetta. But Bowring did not know that, and feared the third appearance of the skull. Suggestion, you see, Maria? — merely suggestion.’

‘And you brought the scarlet skull to England. Why?’

‘I thought it might be useful, as I knew how Bowring dreaded it. I used it in the tent, as I told you, but upon my soul Maria,’ the little man rose and looked serious, ‘knowing that Moolu was dead, I never thought that any harm would come of the business. I merely placed it in the tent to frighten Bowring. But he was killed, as you know. I believe that the talk of the skull being in the tent put the idea of murder in Trevick’s head. But I can’t prove anything. However, that is the story. Later we’ll tell it to Miss Trevick, and get evidence to prove Sir Hannibal’s guilt. Then she’ll hand over ten thousand pounds a year to me, and I vanish out of your life.’

‘I wish you were dead with all my heart,’ muttered Mrs. Krent, rising.

Polwin smiled blandly, and gave her a swinging slap on the face.

‘And now, my dear,’ he said, just as though he had kissed her, ‘I’ll take my way back to St. Ewalds.’

‘I wonder you’re not frightened to walk back in the dark along that lonely road seeing how wicked you are,’ whimpered Mrs. Krent, patting her cheek, which was scarlet.

The little villain laughed jeeringly, and walked alertly to the door, followed by his ponderous wife. When she opened the hall door to let him out he paused, and assume a meek, depressed air, worthy of a great actor; even his face seemed to change into the semblance of a sheep. He was in one second in all respects the meek Josiah Polwin who had faced Oswald Forde.

‘This is the man as he is known in St. Ewalds,’ said he in a soft little voice, ‘when you see him, my dear Mrs. Krent, you need not recognise him. If you do,’ he straightened himself, and his mean face grew black and devilish, ‘you’ll get something like this to think about,’ and before the terrified woman could draw back he pinched the fleshy part of her arm so severely that she uttered a yell. The next moment damp darkness swallowed up the meek steward, still smiling blandly.

‘Oh,’ moaned Mrs. Krent, as she dragged herself up to bed, ‘why haven’t I the strength to squeeze the life out of that little beast?’

She might well ask this, for it did seem extraordinary that so large and determined a woman should submit to a mean, cruel dwarf. If Mrs. Krent had read about Quilp, she might have seen that Polwin’s character had been anticipated in fiction.

‘Has he gone, mother?’ asked Jenny, who was waiting at the head of the stairs, having heard the cry of her parent and the clang of the door.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Krent, sitting down and beginning to cry. ‘Jenny, my girl, I fear there are sad days in store for us.’

‘Surely not, mother, and you such a good woman.’

‘Ah, that I am!’ moaned Mrs. Krent, rocking herself to and fro; ‘if I were only wicked I would have killed that man long ago. Why did he come into my life again?’

‘Get rid of him, mother.’

‘Jenny, my dear, I can’t, you don’t know what a demon he is. I’ll wait, and in time he’ll go.’

‘When we get the money, mother, let us go away and hide.’

Mrs. Krent nodded, and kissed the poor, pretty face which bent over her.

‘What a comfort you are, deary. Yes, we’ll go to the ends of the earth. Samuel will never find us again. Never! never! Where’s Morgan?’

‘I sent him to bed,’ said Jenny; ‘wait one moment, mother. I’ll see if he is all right and come back and undress you.’

Mrs. Krent assented with a weary sigh, and Jenny glided away, looking frail and delicate in her flowing dressing-gown of white. She came back quickly and rather alarmed.

‘Morgan is not in his room.’

Mrs. Krent started to her feet and became all at once the active, managing woman she truly was when away from the sinister eyes of the man who dominated her so entirely.

‘Not in his room?’

Just as the words left her lips the bolts of the hall door fell, and it was opened. Snatching the lamp from Jenny, Mrs. Krent ran down the stairs and found the wind and rain streaming and blowing into the hall. There was not a sign of Morgan, yet she guessed that the idiot had slipped down to follow Polwin. His cap and coat were in the hall, so he must have run into the storm without any protection.

‘Mother! mother!’ gasped the little wife suddenly descending the stairs, ‘rouse the servants. We must hunt for Morgan.’

Mrs. Krent shut the hall door with a bang, and put up the bolts.

‘My girl, we can do nothing. Morgan has gone out like this before, and we have never been able to find him; you remember?’

‘Yes. He always comes back again in the morning. But he has not run out for a long, long time; don’t you think —’

‘We can do nothing,’ interrupted Mrs. Krent harshly; ‘let us go to bed. The boy will return again in the morning.’

This was all that could be done, as Morgan frequently, when the wandering fit took him, escaped on to the moors and returned wet, footsore and weary in the red dawn. But on this occasion Mrs. Krent doubted if he had taken to the moors. Rather did she think he was following Polwin along the lonely, dark road which led to St. Ewalds. And, remembering the man’s jeering remark when he had left, she shuddered to think that he might meet his death at the hands of the half insane man. But had she reason to believe that Morgan would kill the steward? Rather did he seem to be afraid of him. Therefore, utterly helpless, she went to bed, but lay awake for a long time picturing a gloomy road, and one man creeping stealthily after another one with murder in his heart.

She might or might not have been relieved had she known next morning that Mr. Josiah Polwin was eating a very good breakfast in the kitchen of the Dower House. He had arrived there without any mishap, and had gone to his own cottage in the garden without being seen. Now he was meek and timid, making an excellent meal, never thinking that Morgan Bowring had been following him on the previous night. And even had he known, Mr. Polwin would have been quite certain that no harm would have come of the meeting on the dark and lonely road. Polwin knew how to manage the idiot better than Mrs. Krent dreamed of.

But if Polwin was ignorant that Morgan was at large, Dericka was not. She came down to the breakfast-room in advance of Miss Lavinia, and after examining the letters to see if by any chance there was one from her absent father, went to look out of the window. To her surprise she saw a man asleep on the terrace, and opening the window — it was a French window — she stepped out and touched him with her foot.

The man sprang up with a weak cry, and she found herself facing Morgan, who looked more uncanny than ever in the clean morning light.

‘What are you doing here?’ asked Dericka sharply, but recoiling.

‘I came — I came —’ stammered the idiot, quivering from head to foot, ‘to see you.’

‘To see me?’ Dericka stepped back into the room as the look in his eyes was not pleasant; ‘what do you mean? No! Stop where you are,’ for he showed a desire to enter, and she feared to allow him inside.

‘I am cold,’ he grumbled, rubbing his hands together; ‘I came — I came — I came —’ he went on, hesitating, then his brain seemed to clear, and a more intelligent look came into his wondering, shifting eyes. ‘It’s about your father.’

‘What do you know of my father?’ asked Dericka sharply.

Morgan uttered a cry. ‘Don’t be angry with me,’ he stammered; ‘don’t hit me, pretty lady.’

‘I’m not going to hit you,’ said Dericka, in a softer tone, but keeping her eyes on his vacant face; ‘tell me about my father.’

‘I’m hungry,’ announced the idiot, his eyes on the breakfast table behind her, ‘and thirsty.’

Miss Trevick looked at him for a moment, then the lean looks of him and his timid glances softened her heart. She went and brought him a steaming cup of coffee and a crust of bread.

Morgan grabbed these eagerly and sat down to eat them. Dericka kept well within the room, ready to shut the window if he showed signs of violence. She was not exactly afraid, but she judged it best to be wary when dealing with such a creature.

‘I like you — I love you,’ mumbled Morgan, looking at her with the affectionate glances of a dog as he drank his coffee and ate the bread; ‘you’re much nicer than Jenny.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Dericka, humouring him; ‘she is your wife.’

‘I would rather have you. My father said that I was to marry you — yes, he did; but my father is dead. I didn’t like my father, you know,’ he went on confidentially, ‘he hit me very often. Jenny doesn’t hit me, but Mother Krent does. I’d like to slap her.’

‘Come, come. What are you doing here?’ said Dericka sharply.

‘Now you’re angry,’ whimpered the poor creature; ‘I don’t want to make you angry. See!’ He stooped and kissed Dericka’s foot, which was protruding from the window.

She withdrew it sharply. ‘Morgan, you must go home,’ she said coaxingly for she did not wish him to be here when Miss Lavinia came down.

The man rose and wiped his mouth.

‘I’m going,’ he announced; ‘I’m very glad you gave me food. I like you, but I don’t like your father. He killed mine, you know.’

‘How dare you say that?’ flashed out Dericka, forgetting that she was talking to an irresponsible person.

‘Mr. Polwin says so — yes, Mr. Polwin — he showed me the skull; you know — the scarlet skull. Oooh!’ — Morgan’s mouth widened — ‘how horrible it is: all blood. One, twice, and the third time death! Ooooh! I am so afraid. Tell Jenny I want her,’ he cried piteously; ‘no one understands me but Jenny-wenny-penny.’

Miss Trevick looked at him with a blank face. She could not understand how the idiot came to be speaking of Polwin and the skull. Then it flashed into her mind that the steward had been to Africa and might know something of the Death’s Head.

She was about to ask Morgan a question, when he suddenly straightened himself and spoke in quite a matter-of-fact tone:

‘I ran away last night,’ he said, pulling a dirty envelope out of his pocket. ‘I was on the road, and then I climbed the moors. The old witch let me lie down, and Anak — you know Anak, he is big, isn’t he?’

‘What about Anak?’ asked Dericka quietly.

‘He gave me this, and said I was to take it to you. I did so in the dawn, the red, red dawn, and you gave me food. I must go. I must dance in the sunlight. See?’ He thrust the paper into her hand and began to caper. ‘I can dance like a fairy — a fairy — a fairy.’ Here he skipped off the terrace and down the avenue, dancing all the way.

Dericka stood fascinated, with the envelope in her hand. Finally, just as he was about to caper round the bend, where the trees would hide him, Morgan blew her a kiss with his finger-tips, and disappeared. It was like a dream.

‘And this?’ murmured Dericka, glancing at the envelope. It was addressed to herself, and she started. ‘Father’s handwriting!’

It was indeed. She tore it open and read a few lines. Sir Hannibal was hiding in a disused mine and wanted to see her. She was to follow Anak, who would show her the road. Dericka read the lines, and dropped into a chair. She was too bewildered to think clearly, but this she gathered: Her father was hiding, and his enemy, Anak, was helping him to hide.

Chapter XVII

Under the Earth

Dericka returned to the cheerful breakfast-room with the letter in her hand. She could scarcely believe her eyes. That Sir Hannibal should be so near home as in a tin mine on the moors was extraordinary indeed. She had thought of him hiding in London, or as having gone abroad to escape arrest; but never did she suspect for one moment that he was in the neighbourhood of St. Ewalds. It seemed rash.

Miss Lavinia, prim, and stately as ever, entered to find her niece considerably perturbed, and was speedily made acquainted with the contents of the missive brought by the idiot. She was scarcely so surprised as the girl.

‘It is just the kind of silly thing Hannibal would do,’ was her comment. ‘A wise man would have gone abroad until such time as things had settled down; but Hannibal must needs run his head into the lion’s mouth. I have no patience with the man.’

Dericka reflected. ‘After all, Aunty, papa may not be as silly as you think. He could not leave England, as, after the warrant was issued, all the ports would be watched. If he remained in London you may be certain that search would be made for him there. To come back here is the last thing the detective expected.’

‘I think not,’ corrected Miss Quinton in a chilly voice, ‘seeing that Arkle came to make enquiries.’

‘Well, then, Mr. Arkle can be certain that papa is not here, so will return to town. But I think papa is wise to hide in one of those old mining shafts; no one will look for him there.’

‘Oh, yes, one would,’ said Miss Lavinia, obstinately; ‘if Arkle guessed that Hannibal had returned to Cornwall a mining shaft would be the first place he would search.’

‘He would have his work cut out for him, then,’ said Dericka coolly, ‘as there are dozens of those abandoned mines.’

‘And how do you know the right one? Is it here?’ Miss Lavinia tapped the letter with her lorgnette.

‘No, Aunty, papa has not given away the place of his refuge even to me. But Morgan Bowring received the letter from Anak, and I expect Anak will guide us to the place.’

‘In that case,’ said the spinster, moving towards the fire, ‘there is no need to keep such an incriminating letter.’ She dropped it into the heart of the burning coals and sat down at the breakfast table. ‘Come my dear, eat and drink; you must keep up your strength.’

‘I have no appetite,’ replied Dericka, sitting down to pour out the coffee with a sigh.

Miss Lavinia passed her a plate of eggs and bacon with a severe look.

‘My dear girl, you have no faith. Since Providence has helped my poor brother-inlaw so far, Providence will save him yet. Providence,’ added Miss Quinton, with uncomplimentary fervour, ‘watches over drunken men, fools and bairns. I need hardly mention which of those your father is, my dear child.’

‘Then you think that he is innocent?’ asked Dericka, beginning to eat.

‘Yes and no. I have made up my mind once or twice, and have unmade it three or four times. Let us wait and see. What do you intend to do, Dericka?’

‘I’ll tell Oswald about that letter, and walk with him to Anak’s hut. Then we will see papa.’

This arrangement having been made, the girl ate a good meal in spite of her anxiety, recognising Miss Quinton’s good sense in advising her to take things quietly. Within half an hour Forde entered the room, and to him Miss Trevick related her experience with Morgan Bowring. Forde was extremely astonished, but rubbed his hands, well pleased at what he had been told.

‘Now,’ said Oswald, nodding, ‘we shall hear the truth.’

‘From Hannibal?’ scoffed Miss Lavinia; ‘what an unlikely person to trust. Hannibal will tell as much as will suit him.’

‘He’ll have to tell the whole, then,’ said the young barrister, somewhat grimly; ‘that is, if he wants to save his skin.’

Miss Quinton nodded severely and took up her knitting, while Dericka went to her room to dress for the walk to the moors. When she had gone the spinster lifted her hard eyes enquiringly and mutely questioned the barrister as to his plans. Having none for the moment, he did not explain himself, but merely walked to the fire, saying: ‘I wish the letter had been kept, so that I could have seen it.’

‘There was nothing in it but what you know, Mr. Forde. And it is not wise to keep such a document in a house which may at any time be raided by detectives.’

‘I don’t think there is any chance of that. Arkle is satisfied.’

‘He must be a fool, then,’ said Miss Lavinia, jerking his chin in the air and knitting with redoubled vigour.

‘Let us hope that he is for Sir Hannibal’s sake,’ said Forde dryly.

While they were talking Dericka, hatted and cloaked, came into the room looking remarkably pretty, if somewhat anxious. Behind her appeared another woman, quietly dressed and with a scared face, pale and sweet, although somewhat doll-like.

‘Aunty! Oswald!’ said Miss Trevick, stepping aside to introduce the stranger, ‘this is Mrs. Bowring, who has come to tell us something.’

‘No! No! Really, Miss Trevick,’ protested Jenny, looking more scared than ever; ‘I really came to see what has become of Morgan. He got out of the house last night,’ she went on, addressing all three

impartially, 'and, having searched the moors, I met Anak, who told me that he had come on here with a letter to Miss Trevick.'

'He did come, as I explained,' replied Dericka, 'but he went away over an hour ago, and I thought that he had gone home.'

'He has not arrived yet,' said Mrs. Bowring anxiously, 'and I came by the direct road.'

'Probably an idiot like that would go by the second road, which is the longer,' suggested Miss Quinton; 'people of weak intellect always do exactly the opposite to what sane folk do.'

Jenny sank into a seat and clasped her hands, looking weary and worn and tired out with worry. Dericka glanced at her for a moment, then left the room to return with a glass of port wine which she made her drink.

'You must keep up your strength,' said Dericka, boldly plagiarising from her aunt.

'Thank you, Miss Trevick; how good you are. Oh, I'll do what I can to help you,' cried the poor, tired-looking doll.

'Do what?' questioned Miss Quinton sharply. Before Jenny could reply Forde intervened.

'One moment,' he said, anxious to settle a question which had been in his mind since Jenny had mentioned about her meeting with Anak; 'did that man, Hugh Carney, tell you what was in the letter he gave your husband?'

'Oh, no; how could he, sir? Anak did not know himself. He would not open a letter which belonged to Miss Stretton.'

Forde stepped back a pace in his surprise. 'Miss Stretton!'

'Yes. Anak said that she dropped this letter, which was directed to you, Miss Trevick, on the floor of his mother's hut. He ran after her to return it, but Miss Stretton had vanished. Anak therefore gave it to Morgan, whom he met on the moors. You see,' added Mrs. Bowring apologetically, 'Anak could not leave the quarries himself, as he is the foreman, and has to start the men to work.'

Forde turned away, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. This explanation showed him that Anak was still the enemy of Sir Hannibal, and that Miss Stretton was the sole person cognisant of the baronet's hidingplace.

While he reflected how he could meet her and have a chat, Dericka was talking to Mrs. Bowring, whose white face had now more colour in it, thanks to the generous vintage.

'What is it you wanted to tell me?' she asked softly.

'You won't tell mother that I told you?' entreated Mrs. Bowring, looking somewhat fearful; 'she would never forgive me. But that man is such a trial to mother that she cannot fight him singlehanded. I know that you are clever, Miss Trevick, so I thought that you might help mother; and of course,' added the doll with emphasis, 'it will help your father also.'

Forde wheeled round.

'What's that?' he asked sharply.

‘I crept downstairs when mother was talking to the man,’ said Mrs. Bowring, feverishly, ‘and I heard nearly all they were saying.’

‘Who is the man?’

‘Mr. Polwin — but that is not his real name.’

‘Humph!’ Forde rubbed his chin again and recalled the meek little steward. ‘And what is his name, Mrs. Bowring?’

‘Samuel Krent. He is my mother’s husband.’

‘What!’ ejaculated Dericka, ‘your father?’

‘Oh, no, no, how can you think so? My father was called Ward. Mr. Krent is my mother’s second husband. He is a wicked man, and she is very much afraid of him. Had she known that he was here she would have run away miles and miles.’

‘What, that sheep dangerous?’ murmured Dericka.

‘He isn’t a sheep, Miss Trevick, but a very terrible man. He bullied mother last night and struck her and pinched her. Oh, don’t tell Mr. Polwin that I listened,’ said Mrs. Bowring, piteously, ‘or he will hurt me. He will indeed; you don’t know what a terrible man he is.’

‘If he’s the biggest blackguard in England I’m equal to him,’ said the barrister quickly and grimly. ‘Go on, Mrs. Bowring, tell me all that you overheard and then we’ll send for Mr. Polwin.’

The little woman sprang up and clutched Forde’s arm. ‘You mustn’t do that,’ she panted, much terrified; ‘if you tell him I’ll say nothing.’

‘But I think —’ began Dericka, only to be cut short by her aunt.

‘Mrs. Bowring is perfectly right,’ said that oracle; ‘if Polwin, or Krent, or whatever he calls himself, is dangerous, it would be folly to put him on his guard by letting him see that he is suspected.’

Forde nodded.

‘I agree!’ He went to the door and closed it carefully, then returned and placed a chair for Mrs. Bowring in the midst of the room, beckoning to Miss Lavinia and Dericka to likewise draw their chairs up to the doll. Then he seated himself at her ear and leaned forward. ‘Tell us all, in a whisper.’

Mrs. Bowring cast a terrified glance round the apartment, then — in a whisper, as she had been advised — related nearly the entire conversation which her mother had held with Polwin on the previous night.

Miss Quinton’s face grew more and more severe as she heard about her brother-in-law’s African life, and Forde nodded at intervals with a satisfied air.

Dericka, her blue eyes fastened on the swiftly moving lips of the whispering girl, alone showed no sign of emotion. Then the story was finished. Forde pushed back his chair.

‘You can return home, Mrs. Bowring,’ he said softly, ‘resting assured that neither Mr. Polwin nor your mother, nor anyone else, will hear what you have told us.’

‘And will you do anything to help mother?’ faltered the doll.

‘Later on, no doubt. At present we must all keep silence so as to give Polwin enough rope to hang himself.’

‘Do you think he is guilty?’ asked Dericka swiftly.

Forde answered evasively: ‘I cannot say as yet, I must wait. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bowring, go home and say nothing.’

Jenny nodded faintly, and gathering her cloak around her took her leave. She looked very frail and ill as she walked down the avenue, but the three left behind had more to think about than Mrs. Bowring’s health, and looked at one another.

‘Will you see Polwin?’ asked Miss Trevick, reading Forde’s face.

‘Not just now, but it will be as well to learn what he is doing.’

Dericka rang the bell and asked if the steward was in the house. It appeared that Polwin had been there to breakfast, but had gone to the quarries on business.

‘He took the master’s motor-bicycle,’ said the servant respectfully.

‘Well?’ asked Miss Quinton when the door closed and the trio were again alone; ‘what is to be done?’

‘Dericka and I will go to Miss Stretton’s studio,’ said Forde unexpectedly.

‘Why, Oswald?’

‘Because Miss Stretton will guide us to the mining-shaft wherein your father is hidden.’

‘But the letter said that Anak would guide us.’

‘Ah,’ said the barrister, vexedly, ‘I wish I had seen that letter. I am sure from what Mrs. Bowring said that Anak knows nothing about the matter, and, moreover, on account of his mother, he is your father’s enemy. The name, my dear Dericka, was not Anak but Anne; you have made a mistake.’

‘I might have done so,’ said Dericka, thoughtfully; ‘papa’s writing is none of the best. At all events, we might see Miss Stretton.’ And, having settled this, the two lovers left the house for the studio of the lady in question.

Anne was within, looking somewhat anxious and pale. When Forde explained about the missing letter her face cleared.

‘I am so glad,’ she said, clasping her hands; ‘I could not think where I had lost that letter. Did Anak read it?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Forde, recalling what Jenny had related.

‘Perhaps it will be better for Sir Hannibal to hide in another mine?’ murmured Miss Stretton, meditatively.

‘Then you know where papa is?’ said Dericka quickly.

‘Yes. He wrote to me from town, saying that he had been warned that a warrant was out against him and stating that he would have to hide until he could prepare his defence. I advised him to come here. He did so in disguise, and got out at Gwynne Station. I met him there and drove him in Mr. Penrith’s cart on to the moors. It was my idea that he should hide in the Pengelly mine.’

‘Oh!’ said Dericka quickly, ‘I know that mine. It is just near Mr. Penrith’s place, a mile or so beyond the quarries.’

‘Yes. If you go down the shaft and sing “Home, Sweet Home”, Sir Hannibal will call out, and then you will see him.’

““Home, Sweet Home”,’ echoed Forde, smiling in spite of his anxiety. ‘What an ironical song to sing.’

‘We had to choose some sort of signal,’ said Anne tartly, for she was worn out and short-tempered; ‘will you go yourselves, or shall I come with you?’

‘We shall go ourselves,’ said Miss Trevick after a moment’s hesitation, ‘and you, Miss Stretton, must lie down.’ She moved forward, then suddenly kissed Anne’s dark cheek. ‘I have been unjust to you,’ said Dericka frankly; ‘you have been, and are, my father’s best friend.’

‘Then you won’t dislike me any more?’ faltered Anne, rather touched by this action of so usually an undemonstrative girl.

‘No! And if papa marries you I think it will be the best thing for him. Good-bye, now. We can talk of these things later.’

Anne looked out of the window at the two as they walked down the narrow street, and turned away with a sigh. She was well satisfied that she had saved Sir Hannibal for the time being, and had gained the good graces of his daughter, but she felt tired out with the strain, and went immediately to bed. As she fell asleep she wondered what would be the outcome of all these things. ‘And I wonder,’ murmured Anne, yawning, ‘if I’ll marry Sir Hannibal after all?’

Meanwhile Forde, returning to the ‘King’s Arms’, secured the trap in which he had driven on the previous day to the quarries, and explained to Mrs. Tregar that he intended to take Miss Trevick for a drive on the moors.

Dericka did not like the curious way in which the landlady looked at her, as she felt certain it was simply because of the misfortune which had befallen her father. But Mrs. Tregar soon disabused her mind of this.

‘I’ve heard, dear Miss, that Morgan Bowring is married to Mrs. Krent’s daughter,’ said Mrs. Tregar beaming, ‘and I’m so glad for Mr. Forde’s sake and for yours.’

‘Thank you, Mrs. Tregar, but my father would never have insisted upon my marrying Morgan Bowring.’

‘I should think not, Miss, and you engaged to such a handsome young gentleman. When will the marriage take place, Miss?’

Dericka sighed. ‘I can’t say,’ she replied quietly; ‘we are in great trouble, Mrs. Tregar.’

‘Don’t take that to heart, Miss,’ entreated Mrs. Tregar. ‘Your pa will come out white as moor snow. Him guilty? I wouldn’t believe that,’ concluded the landlady stoutly, ‘if all the judges and jury in Great Britain said as much. There!’

While Dericka was thanking this sympathetic friend Forde came to say that the trap was waiting, and in a few minutes they drove away. Oswald had brought the driver, as it would be necessary to leave someone in charge of the vehicle while they went on the moors.

The day was fine after the rain, and the air breathed clean and fresh, especially when they came to the top of the hill overlooking St. Ewalds. The two said very little during the journey, since what they had to speak about was not meant for the driver’s ears, and an unguarded remark might reveal too much.

They drove past the scene of the murder, past the quarries, where the men were working hard, and rounded the curve behind which lay Penrith’s village and Manor House. The hamlet was of grey stone, severe-looking and bleak, and so suited to the grimness of the country that it appeared as though it was the work of Nature. The Penriths had been settled in these parts before the Flood, and both village and Manor House were called after their name.

Forde, informed by Miss Trevick, knew that the Pengelly mine was not very far up the hill, which hung above the winding road, and therefore instructed the driver to take the trap to the ‘Penrith Crest’, the sole public-house of the village. He and Dericka alighted on the road just under the hill, and choosing a sheep-track, climbed the steep, stony ascent, which was covered with bracken and wiry grass, and sown thickly with lumps of granite.

On the top there appeared a mighty cromlech, and here, somewhat out of breath, they halted for a few minutes.

‘There!’ said Dericka, pointing to a tall chimney some distance away.

Forde nodded, but wasting no words, since time was valuable, led the way down the slope of the hill to the depression, where the abandoned mining works littered the ground. They made their way amongst rubble and refuse, and under broken roofs, and between ruined outhouses. The gaping mouth of the mine yawned near the tall chimney, and on approaching the brink they saw a very perpendicular ladder going down into the depths.

Miss Trevick remembered that a few months before the mine had been reopened by a London speculator, who had drained the levels and readjusted the ladder; but since the work had proved unremunerative, he had abandoned the mine. Still, the depths were clear of water, and comparatively safe, and it was here that Sir Hannibal had found refuge.

‘How horrid!’ said Dericka, after she had imparted this information to her companion.

‘Let me go,’ suggested Forde; ‘you stop here.’

Dericka gave him one look of indignant surprise and replied by placing a dainty foot on the ladder. In a moment or so she disappeared, and Forde, admiring her courage, followed with due care.

Down and down the adventurers dropped into the humid gloom, carefully feeling their way as they approached the unknown. Oswald heard Dericka singing the inappropriate tune which was to be the signal to Sir Hannibal that friends were at hand. He guessed that she had reached the level wherein the baronet had taken up his abode like a troglodyte. Strangely enough, both had forgotten the necessity of taking

lanterns or candles, and found themselves involved in deepest gloom a considerable distance below the earth's surface.

Hand in hand they lingered at the foot of the long ladder which led to the upper world, and shivered in the damp atmosphere.

'What's to be done?' asked Dericka in a whisper, for the place was awesome in its loneliness.

'Sing again,' suggested the barrister; 'these long galleries carry sound for great distances.'

In a somewhat tremulous manner Miss Trevick lifted up a voice clear, sweet and true as that of a lark, and the silvery sound vibrated throughout the sullen depths. Minute after minute passed, and Forde was beginning to think that they had mistaken the mine when far away his quick eye caught the glimmer of a candle.

Seizing the girl's hand, he guided her towards the gleam, and they stumbled over trolley-rails laid down on the wet uneven ground. At times they had to stop in case they should knock their heads against the dripping roof. The gleam grew stronger and stronger, and once or twice disappeared. When this happened Dericka again sang a snatch of song, and the light reappeared.

Finally, at the end of the gallery, and within a circle of light, they saw the form of a man.

'Father!' called out Miss Trevick in her strong, young voice.

'At last,' Sir Hannibal called back, and in tremulous tones; 'oh, thank Heaven that you have come, Dericka.'

Chapter XVIII

A Discovery

Miss Trevick, still holding on to Forde, stretched out her hand to the baronet, who, grasping it firmly, drew her and the barrister round a curve in the gallery and led them some distance further on. Then he stepped off the trolley-lines, and, setting down the light on a deal box, illuminated three or four other candles, until there was quite a blaze of light. The visitors found themselves in a kind of niche which had been hollowed out of the live rock by former workers in the mine. The floor of this niche was slightly above the level of the gallery, and therefore was comparatively dry.

By the light of the candles Dericka saw a pile of dried bracken and grass in one corner, which, as she guessed, served her unfortunate father for a bed. There was also a box containing provisions, and a wood fire smouldered on the verge of the niche, where the smoke could ascend through the gallery. There were no seats, naturally, and the trio had to sit on the rocky ground, which, fortunately, was dry.

Having taken in these details of this cave of Adullam, Dericka looked at her father, and was surprised to see what a change there was in his appearance. Formerly he had been a well-preserved, elderly gentleman, handsome and haughty. Now he was worn and pale, white-haired, and unshaven. His shoulders were bowed, and his waxen face was wrinkled, while his eyes appeared dull and unintelligent.

Dericka was terribly shocked to see what a wreck the poor man had become, and gasped as she looked. Her emotions were too deep to find vent in mere words. Sir Hannibal guessed what she felt, and also he caught sight of the pained expression in Forde's eyes.

‘Yes,’ said Trevick bitterly, ‘you may well look startled, both of you. This is a change from the Dower House.’

‘A change that will not last long,’ said Forde with a brisk confidence he was far from feeling, ‘you will soon be back again, sir.’

‘Ah, that depends,’ said Trevick significantly.

‘Father!’ Dericka caught his hand convulsively; ‘you will never make me believe that you killed Mr. Bowring.’

‘No, dear; no.’ The baronet patted her hand and seemed pleased to hear her speak in this manner. ‘I am, of course, perfectly innocent, but I have enemies who will use all means to ruin me.’

‘But why, father?’

‘Ah!’ Sir Hannibal heaved a weary sigh; ‘that is a long story.’

‘And probably,’ remarked Forde quickly, ‘the very story we have come to hear, Sir Hannibal.’

The hunted man looked up quickly in his turn.

‘What’s that?’

‘Since you left Gwynne Station for London,’ went on the barrister, ‘we — that is, Dericka and myself — have heard strange things.’

‘About me?’ Trevick’s breath came quickly.

Forde nodded. ‘Yes; and about Polwin.’

‘Polwin — my steward?’

‘Yes,’ said Dericka pointedly; ‘about your steward, Samuel Krent.’

The baronet started, and squeezed his daughter’s hand so severely that she winced.

‘How do you know that Polwin’s name is Krent?’

‘Ah,’ said Dericka, mimicking her father’s former speech, ‘that is a long story.’

‘I don’t understand your tone, my child,’ said Sir Hannibal, trying to suppress his agitation.

‘We don’t understand one another,’ remarked Forde with a shrug. ‘It will be best that you should tell us everything.’

‘About what?’ asked the baronet, persistently obstinate.

‘About the Death’s Head, for one thing.’

‘I know nothing about that, Forde.’

‘What, not about Moolu and his —’

‘Who told you that?’ interrupted Trevick imperiously, and much agitated by the significant tone of the barrister.

‘Mrs. Bowring.’

‘Who is she? Bowring’s wife died years ago.’

‘I mean young Mrs. Bowring — Morgan’s wife.’

‘You know about that secret marriage, then,’ stammered Trevick.

Forde looked at him steadily.

‘You seem to have forgotten a great deal, Sir Hannibal,’ said he dryly; ‘of course we know. Do you remember some time ago, we —’

‘Yes, yes,’ Sir Hannibal interrupted again; ‘of course. The rumour was to be put about that I agreed to Dericka marrying Morgan, and then Mrs. Krent was to announce the former marriage. I know — I know; but, what with trouble and nervous fears, I forget much.’

‘Poor father,’ said Miss Trevick softly; ‘but we have not much time to remain here, father. Tell us all quickly, and we will see how you can come back to the Dower House.’

‘I cannot do that, Dericka. Things are too black against me.’

‘You must come, father; you must meet your accusers.’

‘Dericka, I dare not face that warrant. I was absent from the fete when Bowring was killed, but how can I prove that?’

‘Polwin can prove it,’ said Forde quickly.

‘Polwin won’t,’ said Sir Hannibal bitterly. ‘The man is a villain, and wants to ruin me. Why, I can’t say, seeing that he has received nothing but kindness at my hands.’

‘Many people resent kindness,’ said Forde, with a shrug, ‘and try to harm the person who has benefited them. But the position is this, Sir Hannibal; Polwin declares that after Miss Stretton left the fete with Mr. Penrith you went out on your motor-bicycle by the second road, which runs behind the hill. He — Polwin, that is — met you somewhere on the moors, and you asked him if he had seen Miss Stretton. He had not, as they had driven by the other road. Had you gone by that one, you would have caught them up. As it was, you gave the bicycle to Polwin and sent him on to Penrith Manor with a letter for Miss Stretton. Then you —’

‘Then I returned to St. Ewalds,’ continued Trevick quickly, ‘but not to the fete. Listen, Forde, and you, Dericka. I love Miss Stretton, I want to marry her. On the day of the fete had you not appeared I should have asked her to be my wife. But there was no time, and she went away with Penrith, who I knew was in love with her. I thought he might propose before I did and that I would lose Anne. I therefore wrote a hasty letter asking her to be my wife, and took my motor-bicycle, intending to catch her up and give her the letter.’

‘Was there any need of such a letter?’ asked Dericka pointedly. ‘You could have caught up Miss Stretton and proposed.’

‘What, when Penrith was there? How ridiculous you are, Dericka. I intended to slip the letter into her hand on some excuse and then return. Unfortunately I took the second road, whereas Penrith had driven home by the first road.’

‘Where the murder took place?’

‘Precisely. When I was on the second road, about opposite to this mine, I met Polwin coming across the hill from the quarries. I was tired, and asked him to take the motor-bicycle and follow up Miss Stretton. He consented. Then I walked home and strolled on the beach below the Manor House until dinner time.’

‘Why did you not return to the fete?’ asked Dericka.

The baronet’s pale cheek reddened.

‘I was in love, you see, Dericka, as I am now, and wished to think of the woman I loved. But you see I cannot prove an alibi, as no one to my knowledge saw me on the beach. Consequently, as Bowring, with whom I had quarrelled, was murdered at the time, I am in a dangerous position.’

‘Miss Stretton saw you on the bank near the granite mass which was afterwards heaved on to the road to smash Bowring’s motor.’

‘Forde!’ said the baronet, starting violently when the barrister made this speech. ‘Miss Stretton is my friend: she would not say that.’

‘Is it true, father?’

‘No, Dericka; on my soul it is not true. I acted as I said, and when Polwin went off on the motor I walked back to wander on the beach.’

Dericka looked at Forde, and he at her.

‘Strange!’ said the barrister, much puzzled. ‘I wonder, Sir Hannibal, if anyone was masquerading as you? Miss Stretton declares that she saw you.’

‘I don’t know who can or who did masquerade as me,’ said Trevick calmly, ‘but I assuredly was not near the scene of the murder at that time. But you had better tell me all you know, and then we may see light.’

‘I’ll tell you everything,’ said Forde, after a pause; ‘but in return you must be absolutely frank.’

‘I promise that. Go on.’

The barrister was obliged to be content with this curt promise, and therefore related all that had taken place since his arrival in St. Ewalds. He related the interview with Polwin, the visit of Morgan with the letter dropped by Miss Stretton in Anak’s hut, and finally detailed the strange story about Polwin, alias Krent, related by young Mrs. Bowring.

Trevick listened quietly, with his hand in that of his daughter, and did not interrupt until nearly the end of the story. Then his frequent interruptions showed how indignant he was. Finally, when Oswald had nearly, but not quite, concluded, his indignation took the form of words.

‘You have told quite enough,’ he said angrily; ‘Krent is my enemy.’

‘Oh,’ cried Dericka, ‘do you think that he killed Mr. Bowring?’

‘No,’ said Sir Hannibal sharply; ‘he and Bowring were hand in glove to ruin me. There is considerable truth in what Mrs. Krent says, and some truth in her husband’s story. Polwin, or Krent, or whatever he chooses to call himself, is a villain. He was in partnership with myself and Bowring in Africa, but we had to kick him out since he behaved so badly. He was always getting us into trouble with the natives.’

‘Is it true about the forged bills?’ asked Forde.

‘Perfectly true. But I never held them in terror over Bowring. I simply kept them so that he should not do me any harm. I don’t say that all the business I did over diamonds in Africa was altogether straight, but I was no worse than anyone else. Bowring knew everything, and frequently threatened to make use of his knowledge in St. Ewalds to ruin me. But I said that if he did I would prosecute him for forging the bills. The bills,’ repeated Sir Hannibal bitterly; ‘yes, Bowring forged them in an evil hour, and I obtained possession of them through Krent. Bowring was making all the money and had no need to forge; but he did it in order to bring off a big deal. I could not get the money from him, and consequently he became the millionaire, while I remained poor.’

‘But with the bills you could have got the money,’ suggested Forde.

‘No,’ said Trevick quietly. ‘I did not care about blackmail. I have done many wrong things, but not that, Forde.’

‘But if the money coming from sale of the diamonds was partly yours, Sir Hannibal, you should have received it.’

‘Quite so. When I was in Cape Town, and Bowring up in the Rand, he used my name by these forged bills to get money, and bought a lot of diamonds, intending to bolt. Through Krent, however —’

‘Call him Polwin, father; we will understand better.’

Sir Hannibal nodded and amended his statement.

‘Through Polwin I got hold of the bills and swore to prosecute Bowring should he try to clear out with the diamonds, half of which were rightfully mine. He agreed and stopped on. Then came the episode of the Death’s Head, and that to some extent placed me in his power.’

‘Father!’ cried Dericka, alarmed, ‘did you kill Moolu’s son?’

‘No. It was Bowring; but he and Polwin for their own ends put the blame on to me, and as the diamond which Moolu’s son possessed, and for which Bowring killed him, was in my possession, things looked black against me. Bowring gave me the diamond, and refused to take it back.’

‘Why did you not throw it away?’ asked Forde quickly.

‘My dear boy, the diamond was worth five thousand pounds and, moreover, my throwing it away would not have proved me innocent. Bowring fastened his own guilt on me, and Polwin was prepared to swear that I killed the Zulu. I left Africa almost as poor as I went out there, and settled in St. Ewalds. The rest of my life, Dericka, you know from personal observation.’

‘But surely Bowring gave you some money?’ said Forde, puzzled.

‘A little. I was in his power, as I tell you, as he was in mine. He could prove me guilty of murdering the Zulu, and I could prosecute him with the bills. And then’ — Sir Hannibal hesitated — ‘I may as well make a clean breast of it, Dericka. I sold Moolu’s diamond to keep things going here, so you see the chances were that had Bowring told his story I should have been proved guilty.’

‘How rash!’ sighed the girl, much disturbed by these unpleasant revelations; ‘but how did Mr. Bowring come to the Grange?’

‘I made him,’ said Trevick quickly and sharply; ‘things were at a deadlock, so I agreed to wait until Bowring’s death before getting back the money which should rightfully have been mine. In fact, to make him pay for what he had done, I insisted that he should leave me his whole fortune. He did so on the condition that Dericka should marry Morgan, but that condition was not embodied in the will. I made Bowring take the Grange so as to keep him under my own eye, and then Krent came home under the name of Polwin, and as he knew so much I had to engage him as my steward.’

‘But see here,’ said Forde, espying a flaw in the story, ‘Moolu believed that Bowring had killed his son.’

‘And Moolu was right,’ said Trevick bitterly; ‘he was cleverer than the white men, who believed me guilty. Oh, you need not look so surprised, Dericka,’ he added quickly; ‘there were certain suspicions against me, but with Bowring and Polwin people could prove nothing. But things were sufficiently unpleasant to make me leave Africa.’

There was a long pause, then Forde spoke.

‘The whole thing is very involved, Sir Hannibal, and although you are not free from blame, yet I for one believe you to be innocent. But this Death’s Head?’

‘I never knew that Polwin had it,’ said the baronet quickly, ‘and I quite believe that he would try to frighten Bowring with it. Moolu did tell Bowring that when he saw it three times he would die, and in Africa, to my knowledge, he saw it twice.’

‘Then it appears to me,’ said Forde slowly, ‘that as Polwin was the sole person who knew of the significance of the Death’s Head, and was the man who used it to prophecy Bowring’s death, that Polwin is the guilty party.’

Dericka shook her head.

‘No,’ she said, with great decision; ‘Polwin seemed puzzled as any of us over Mr. Bowring’s death according to what Jenny overheard. He might have used the Death’s Head to frighten Mr. Bowring, but I don’t see how he could have killed him.’

‘What do you think, Sir Hannibal?’ asked Forde, after reflection.

‘I agree with Dericka,’ said Trevick promptly. ‘Polwin had more use for Bowring alive than dead. While Bowring lived Polwin could, and did — as I happen to know — get money out of him.’

‘Can you suggest anyone who killed him?’

‘No; no more than I can suggest who masqueraded as myself.’

‘True,’ said Forde dryly, and rising, ‘for if you knew the masquerader you would know, as we should, who is the assassin. Well, Sir Hannibal, after hearing your story I agree with you that it will be best for you to remain here until such time as we can establish your innocence.’

‘But how is that to be done?’ asked Dericka, rising also.

‘Polwin is the person who can clear things up,’ said Forde, ‘and I intend to speak to him. Perhaps, Sir Hannibal, you can help us to force Polwin’s hand?’

The baronet shook his head.

‘No. I can say nothing against Polwin but what he can say something against me.’

‘See here,’ asked Forde sharply; ‘have you told us everything?’

‘Yes,’ said the baronet unhesitatingly. ‘I have been foolish, and perhaps even reckless, but I am not a criminal. Go away and think over things, then return and tell me what is best to be done. I am all right here; and, Dericka, bring me a bottle of port wine when you come again.’

With a heavy heart Dericka promised to do this, and the lovers took their way along the shaft and up the ladder again to the upper world.

‘Well?’ she asked Forde, when they were again descending the hill.

The young man shook his head. ‘I can make nothing of it at present,’ he declared, ‘and talk will only confuse us both further. Let us agree to leave the matter alone for a few days, Dericka, and then things may straighten themselves out.’

‘But my father?’

‘He will be all right where he is,’ said Forde, and no more was said for the time being.

And indeed next day they heard something which introduced a new element into the already mysterious case. The information came from no less a person than Mrs. Krent.

That good lady appeared at the Dower House late in the afternoon in a great state of perturbation, and asked to see Miss Trevick.

As luck would have it, Forde also was on the spot, paying his usual visit, and Mrs. Krent was ushered into the library, wherein the two lovers sat. Miss Quinton, feeling that two was company and three none, had gone out to pay a round of visits, so the lovers were quite alone. Dericka glanced nervously at Forde when she beheld the bulky form of Mrs. Krent.

‘I hope,’ said the housekeeper, throwing back her bonnet strings, and looking redder than ever, ‘that you, sir, and your young lady believe me when I say that I care nothing for money.’

‘Yes,’ said Forde signing that Dericka should be silent; ‘I think that is so, seeing how moderate your demands for money have been.’

‘Well, then,’ said Mrs. Krent, producing a blue envelope, ‘you could have knocked me down with a feather when I came across this,’ and she handed the document to Forde.

‘What is it?’ asked Dericka, while Forde opened the envelope.

‘My dear young lady, it’s a second will leaving everything to Morgan Bowring. Your father takes nothing, Morgan gets all.’

Chapter XIX

What Happened Next

Forde stopped opening the blue envelope when Mrs. Krent made this amazing announcement as to the new disposal of Bowring’s property, and, together with Dericka, stared at the messenger of ill tidings.

The stout, elderly housekeeper, who was still attired in the incongruous costume which she loved, fanned her red face with a flimsy handkerchief and arranged her dyed yellow curls under the juvenile bonnet. Blandly surveying the astonished lovers, she continued her monologue.

‘You could have knocked me down with a feather,’ she repeated, when she could get her breath, ‘when I came across that second will’— she nodded towards the blue envelope in Forde’s hand — ‘in a desk which was in Mr. Bowring’s room. I was just putting it tidy-like, and pulled out all the drawers to dust them, when in the top one on the right-hand side I saw the envelope: sealed, it was, and then found that Mr. Bowring had made a second will. There’s a note with it,’ added Mrs. Krent, gasping for breath. ‘If you read it, sir, you will see that Bowring’s repented leaving the money to Sir Hannibal, but says that he was compelled to do so. However, since he’s dead, nothing matters, and he wanted to show Sir Hannibal that he would not be trifled with. He asks me also to be a friend to Morgan, which I’m sure I am, seeing he’s married to my dear Jenny, though to be sure, Bowring never guessed that such was the case.’

Again she gasped, and this time, being really out of breath, held her clacking tongue for the moment. Dericka was wise enough to say nothing, and Forde silently took out the new will. It was written on a sheet of foolscap, and seemed legal enough, seeing that it was duly attested and witnessed. In this document, which was short and to the point, John Bowring had left the money to his son Morgan, but if was held in trust by Mrs. Krent, who was to receive one thousand a year for her trouble. In the note which was inside the will, and addressed to the housekeeper, Bowring wrote that Mrs. Krent was his only friend, that he was in the power of Sir Hannibal, and would have to leave the money to him or else face a law court on account of certain forged bills. He had made such a will in order to satisfy Trevick, but in the enclosed document — a later-executed testament — had left the money to his son, as was only right. There were a few expressions of satisfaction showing that Bowring was glad he had succeeded in cheating the baronet, and there the latter ended with the bold signature of the millionaire and two names of witnesses. These were badly written, and proved as Forde afterwards learned, to be those of two servants who worked at the Grange.

‘Well,’ said the young barrister, when he had made himself acquainted with this document and had replaced it in the blue envelope, ‘I must say this is a nice state of things.’

‘But no more than Sir Hannibal deserves,’ cried Mrs. Krent in a defensive manner. ‘He had no right to force Bowring to leave the money away from Morgan.’

‘Not all of it, perhaps,’ assented the young barrister, ‘but you must be aware, Mrs. Krent, that part of this sixty thousand a year belongs to Sir Hannibal Trevick.’

‘I don’t see that at all, sir,’ she retorted, ‘seeing that Bowring made every penny by the sweat of his brow.’

‘Humph! I rather think it was other people who sweated, Mrs. Krent.’

‘How do you know, sir?’

‘Because I happen to have seen Sir Hannibal.’

‘Then you know where he is, sir?’ asked Mrs. Krent suspiciously.

The young lawyer saw that he had made a mistake, and, colouring with vexation, held his tongue.

Dericka, who was watchful of his emotion, entered the breach and addressed herself to the stout house-keeper.

‘Mrs. Krent,’ she said, in a cold and icy tone, ‘you must be aware that my father is wrongly accused?’

‘If he did not murder Bowring, who did?’ snapped the other.

‘Ah, that is what we have to learn. But I can tell you with safety that my father is hiding, and that Mr. Forde and myself know where his hiding-place is.’

Mrs. Krent gave an odd cough. ‘I wonder you ain’t afraid to say this to me, Miss, seeing as I may tell the police.’

‘I don’t think you will,’ answered Dericka, fixing a steady gaze on the woman. ‘I said that I could tell you with safety.’

‘You’ve got no hold over me,’ retorted Mrs. Krent fiercely.

‘I may not have, but another person may be able to silence you.’

‘And that other person, if you please, Miss Trevick?’

‘Josiah Polwin.’

The colour ebbed from the fat cheeks of the housekeeper, and she turned as pale as a lily, glancing from one to the other in a state of scarcely concealed alarm. However, she made a bold attempt to foil the attack. ‘What has Mr. Polwin to do with me, Miss?’

‘Ah, you can best explain that.’

‘I can’t,’ said Mrs. Krent obstinately.

‘Then let me explain,’ said Forde, seeing what Dericka meant. ‘As Mr. Polwin, this man is nothing to you, but as Samuel Krent —’

The woman rose and flapped her hands helplessly. ‘Oh, what are you saying — why do you speak to me like this? My husband is dead.’

‘Under the name of Josiah Polwin,’ said Forde calmly.

‘It’s a lie.’

‘It is the truth, and you can prove it.’

‘Then I won’t.’

Forde rose, shrugged his shoulders, and slipped the blue envelope containing the new will into his breast-pocket. ‘Then there’s no more to be said,’ he remarked blandly.

‘Of course there ain’t,’ cried Mrs. Krent, reassured. ‘Give me back the will and let me go.’

‘No,’ said Forde steadily; ‘I’ll take this up to Mr. Gratton and see if it’s genuine.’

‘Genuine!’ The colour flushed Mrs. Krent’s cheeks. ‘Oh, Lord, sir, you don’t think Polwin — I mean —’

‘You mean Polwin right enough,’ said Dericka, noticing the slip, and taking advantage of it at once. ‘Mrs. Krent, we may as well understand one another before you leave this room.’

The big woman sat down with a thump and flapped her hands like a clumsy [?].

‘I’m sure I don’t know what to do,’ she whimpered. ‘I’m sure there’s been nothing but trouble since Bowring died. I never did care for money. Me and Morgan and Jenny can live well enough on the two thousand a year you promised me, Miss, so you can destroy the will and keep the rest.’

‘No,’ said Forde sternly. ‘If this will,’ he tapped his breast-pocket, ‘is genuine, the money will go to you in trust for Morgan.’

‘You would let the money go?’ asked Mrs. Krent, her little pig’s eyes opening to their widest. Such an action was beyond her system of ethics, and she collapsed.

‘Yes. Why should Miss Trevick or her father keep money which does not belong to them?’

‘But you said it did, sir?’

‘Half of it, not all. But if the will is genuine then Morgan will get everything and Sir Hannibal will lose what is rightfully his.’

‘What do you want me to do, sir?’ asked the housekeeper after a pause.

‘What do you wish to do yourself?’ demanded Forde quickly.

‘Well, sir, you and her — I mean that young lady — have been so kind to me when I hadn’t that second will, that I’m ready to place myself in your hands. I only want enough to be comfortable, and as this is a world of wickedness, sir, I hope you’ll be my friend and help me out of my many difficulties.’

‘About the money, Mrs. Krent?’

‘Yes, sir; and there it is,’ she cried, with a burst of emotion; ‘as soon as folks know that Morgan is rich they’ll come round trying to get money, and he’ll get beyond control. I’m sure it’s hard enough to manage him as it is, but if he, with his poor wits, thinks he is rich he’ll simply kick over the traces and leave me and my poor girl. I’m afraid — very much afraid.’

Mrs. Krent appeared to be genuine, for, so far as she knew, she possessed the whip hand, yet was willing to be guided by Forde.

Dericka softened somewhat at this, as she perceived that the housekeeper was really an honest woman. She therefore went to the door to be sure that no one was outside, then came back to the chair she occupied near Mrs. Krent, who by this time was shaking like a jelly. ‘Mrs. Krent, you husband —’

‘He’s dead — he’s dead —’

‘No! Listen. Mr. Forde and myself know everything.’ And Dericka related all that Jenny had overheard and told. ‘We want to be your friends,’ concluded Miss Trevick, ‘and as you have proved that you really have a good heart, Mr. Forde shall help you.’

Poor Mrs. Krent sat staring straight in front of her with two fat hands on her fat knees. When Dericka stopped speaking she heaved a portentous sigh.

‘All the help in the world won’t do much good against Samuel, Miss,’ she said sadly, ‘he’s a devil.’

‘There’s law in the land to restrain such devils,’ Forde reassured her; ‘don’t be afraid, Mrs. Krent, he’ll not trouble you.’

‘If you can get him out of my life, sir, I’ll go on my knees,’ cried the housekeeper vehemently. ‘For the moment I was vexed at Jenny telling you and betraying her mother, as it were, but now I see that it is the best thing that she could have done, although it would never have struck me, fool that I am. But now you know what a devil Polwin is, and that his real name is not Polwin, perhaps you’ll help?’

‘I promise you I will,’ said the lawyer, soothingly, ‘but you must be plain with me, Mrs. Krent.’

‘You have only to ask and to have, sir.’

‘Then tell me, when did you see Polwin last?’

‘No later than today. He came along this morning and said that Bowring had some papers of his connected with South Africa. I promised to send them to him and that is what took me to the desk to look. In looking I found the will.’

‘Ah,’ said Forde with satisfaction; ‘and was Mr. Polwin in the house by himself during the morning?’

‘No, sir. I wouldn’t let him enter. He stood at the door and talked in his devilish way. Why, sir?’

‘I thought that he might have hidden this will.’

‘Lord, sir, why should he do that? If Polwin — I’ll call him that, for I’ll never soil the name I bear by giving it to him, although it is his own — but I say, if Polwin had that will and knew that I had the management of the money he would have kept the will and bothered me to give him what he wanted. And tons of gold,’ added Mrs. Krent, fervently, ‘wouldn’t satisfy that beast.’

‘What are you thinking of, Oswald?’ asked Miss Trevick.

‘I’m wondering if Polwin had a finger in this pie. He might have hid the will in the desk and then sent Mrs. Krent to find it.’

‘You fancy that it may be a forgery?’

‘Well, yes! Of course, I don’t know Mr. Bowring’s signature, but —’

‘Oh, it’s Bowring’s name right enough,’ said Mrs. Krent wiping her inflamed face; ‘but I hope it is a forgery. I’d rather have the two thousand a year that young lady promised me and have done with the whole business. Anything rather than be persecuted by Polwin.’

‘Well,’ said Forde, after a pause, ‘I must see Mr. Gratton, who knows Bowring’s writing better than anyone else, and learn if the will is genuine. I’ll get him to come down here and see the two witnesses.’

‘They’re servants in the house,’ said Mrs. Krent, ‘but both of them gave notice a week ago. One was a man, and the other a woman, and they’ve got married since leaving the Grange.’

‘Humph! that looks dicky,’ said Forde, nodding. ‘I wouldn’t be at all surprised to find that Polwin had a finger in this pie.’ He paused, then turned to Mrs. Krent solemnly: ‘Have you any reason to believe that your husband shot Bowring?’

‘Lord save and preserve us!’ cried Mrs. Krent aghast, ‘how can I say, sir? Polwin’s fit for anything, but I’m bound to say that he seemed as puzzled as anyone else over the death.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘As sure as I’m sitting here wishing that I was a widow,’ cried the woman earnestly. ‘I’m not a wicked person: live and let live say I; but if I could put a rope round the neck of that wicked man I’d do it, cost what it might. Oh, Lord!’— Mrs. Krent again placed her hands on her knees and rocked — ‘to think of all that money coming to Morgan, who’s got no more sense than a babe of a month old. Polwin would get hold of him, and lead him to the Pit of Tophet. Mr. Forde, sir,’ she went on hysterically, ‘put that will in the fire and let me have the two thousand a year; I’ll say nothing.’

‘No, no, Mrs. Krent! I cannot commit a crime like that.’

‘If you don’t, there’s worse crimes will be committed,’ said the old woman bitterly; ‘you’re dealing with Satan himself, Mr. Forde, mark my words if you ain’t.’

There was silence for a few minutes, while Mrs. Krent rocked and moaned and shook her head, weeping the while like a very Niobe. Plainly she was terrified to death by Polwin, alias Krent, and would stick at nothing to get rid of him.

But the mystery was far from being unravelled, and to destroy the second will would only be to make things more complicated. Therefore Forde made up his mind to see Gratton and ask his opinion. If Sir Hannibal, or, rather, Dericka, was to lose the sixty thousand a year the loss would have to be borne. All Forde wished to do at the present moment was to establish the good name of Sir Hannibal Trevick and save him from the gallows — no easy task, owing to the difficulties of the case and the shady doings of the baronet in South Africa while a member of the firm.

Oswald felt that he would require time to think out things, and so spoke on this point to Mrs. Krent:

‘Go home,’ said he quietly; ‘go home and say nothing.’

‘But if Polwin asks about the will?’

‘If he hid the will he is too clever to do that,’ said Forde, quickly; ‘he’ll wait until it is proved. Knowing that you would find the will is contented to bide his time. Of course, I may be wrong about the man —’

Mrs. Krent rose, shaking her head half-blinded with tears.

‘It’s just the sort of thing he’d do, sir,’ she moaned, ‘and then when the money came to me for Morgan he’d ruin that poor lad and worry me into my grave. Oh, I’ll hold my tongue, sir, but will you speak to Polwin?’

‘No, no!’ said Dericka quickly; ‘that would put him on his guard. We must be silent until we can see our way. All Mrs. Krent has to do is to go home and say nothing.’

‘I’ll do that, Miss — I’ll be as dumb as a fish. But I know my health will give way with all this worry. I wish I’d the laundry again.’

‘By the way,’ asked Dericka, ‘did Morgan come home?’

‘Oh, yes, he came home, Miss; I knew that he would. He takes fits of wandering, but he always comes back. But I’ll get back to Jenny and hope for the best, expecting the worst. I’ll not sleep a wink this night. Oh, why didn’t I stick by the laundry and keep a quiet heart? Money don’t bring happiness. Oh, dear me!’

While Mrs. Krent was thus maundering on, Forde had an idea. It would be just as well, he thought, to see the desk in which the will had been found. Also, Polwin might come to the Grange on that night, and if confronted might give himself away. He whispered this to Dericka, who nodded assent, and then addressed himself to the crying housekeeper.

‘I’ll take you home, Mrs. Krent,’ said he in a kindly tone, ‘and if Polwin comes on the scene I’ll protect you.’

‘Oh, thank you, sir, a thousand times, but if he knows that you know —’

‘I’ll keep him in the dark as much as possible, Mrs. Krent. But if he does learn that we are acquainted with his little games, why we must beat him, that’s all.’

Mrs. Krent moaned and nodded, being too far gone to argue. She submitted to be led out of the room, and was hoisted into the trap a mere bundle of clothes. Knowing that Polwin was often at the Dower House, she shook and quaked at every shadow, and not until she and Forde, with the driver, were well on the way to the Grange did she recover sufficiently to speak. Then Forde stopped her, as she spoke too freely for safety, and the driver was all ears. For all both of them knew, he might be a creature of Polwin’s. Therefore they drove through the night in silence — and a very bad night it was, cold and with a gusty wind that almost tore them from their seats when they reached the high moors. However, Mrs. Krent was too bulky to be easily moved, and Oswald held on to the woodwork of the trap, so they managed to get along pretty well. But there was no moon, and the darkness was of the pit.

Suddenly they heard a rattle of horse’s hoofs, and past them tore a wild steed with a man on its back riding under whip and spur.

‘Save us,’ cried Mrs. Krent hysterically; ‘what’s wrong?’

There was no reply, and the rattling hoofs of the horse died away.

Forde thought that the man was probably on his way for a doctor, and was one of the dwellers in Penrith’s village. This explanation reassured Mrs. Krent, and she subsided into a kind of doze. On and on they crawled into the darkness for the horse was not very quick. At last they rounded the curve and came within view of the ancient Grange nestling amidst the gloom of the moors.

But these were not gloomy now. The old house was a mass of flames, and flared in the windy night, a gorgeous bonfire, telling of destruction and terror.

Chapter XX

A Terrible Night

Forde had a hard time to keep Mrs. Krent from throwing herself out of the trap when she saw the flaming Grange. Screaming out that Jenny would be burnt to death, that Polwin — only she used his name of Samuel — had fired the house, that she had lost her dear daughter, she strove again and again to hurl herself to the ground as the horse literally galloped up the avenue. By main force the young lawyer held her to her seat, and the driver whipped the animal hard, so as to arrive on the scene of disaster the sooner. The vehicle rocked from side to side as the maddened animal tore up towards the blazing mass and stopped short on the brilliantly-illuminated lawn so abruptly that Mrs. Krent and Forde with her was hurled to the ground.

The stout woman with wonderful agility picked herself up, and with outstretched arms ran open-mouthed and gasping towards the burning house.

‘Jenny; oh, my Jenny, where are you?’ she panted wildly.

‘Mother! mother!’ and Jenny, holding Morgan by the hand, ran out of the crowd of servants and quarrymen and labourers who were watching the fire. ‘I’m all right. The man has gone to St. Ewalds for the fire-engines.’ And then Forde recollected the racing horseman.

‘How did it happen — how did it happen?’ yelled Mrs. Krent.

‘I don’t know,’ faltered Jenny, who was white and trembling. ‘I was getting ready for dinner, and it was quite dark. Then I heard Morgan crying out that the place was on fire, and met him coming up the stairs.’

‘Yes! Yes! Yes!’ danced the idiot; ‘I saw the red fire, I saw it.’

‘Where?’ asked Mrs. Krent anxiously.

The man looked at her cunningly and continued to caper on the fire-lighted lawn. ‘I saw the red fire,’ he chaunted; ‘I saw it, I saw it burning — burning.’ And not another word could they get out of him.

In the meantime more and more people were gathered together in the grounds of the Grange. The mansion, being of granite, could not burn wholly to the ground, but it was being gutted as fast as possible by the fierce fire. The high wind still continuing fanned the blaze into roaring vigour, and sheets of flame stormed the darkness of the sky. From Penrith, from the quarries, from hamlets and solitary houses flocked the sparse dwellers of the moorland. Far and near the blaze reddened the gloomy heath, and seabirds screamed, hovering round the glare, apparently thinking it was a lighthouse on a gigantic scale.

Mrs. Krent stood helplessly on the lawn, wringing her fat hands.

‘Not a thing will be saved,’ she sobbed; ‘not a thing.’

But everybody, both men and women, and indeed children were trying their best to carry out articles from the burning house. The lawn was littered with chairs and tables, and couches, and draperies, and china, and glass, and pictures, and many other objects too numerous to mention.

Mrs. Krent, still sobbing, dropped on to a dainty Louis Quinze sofa with gilded framework, and sat there bemoaning the loss of all her worldly belongings. Nothing could be done to stop the flames until the arrival of the St. Ewalds brigade for there was no means of getting water rapidly enough on to the flaming mass. It is true that a line of labourers with buckets had been formed between a moorland stream near at hand and the terrace, but although the buckets passed rapidly from hand to hand, those who were trying to put out the fire by this means might as well have used a squirt.

‘Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!’ groaned Mrs. Krent, rocking on the sofa; ‘I was always afraid of fire. Jenny, you careless girl, why didn’t you see that the lamps and things were safe?’

‘They were all right when I went up to get dressed, mother.’

‘Where did the fire begin?’

‘In the drawing-room, I think. At least, that was in flames when I came down.’

‘The lamp might have upset, Jenny.’

‘Where was Morgan while you were dressing?’ asked Forde, who was standing by the housekeeper’s side regretting the loss of Dericka’s ancestral home.

‘In the drawing-room,’ said Jenny with hesitation.

‘Then he must have set it on fire,’ cried Forde promptly.

Mrs. Krent raised her voice to a scream. ‘Morgan! Did you light the fire?’ she asked coaxingly; ‘come tell nurse.’

‘I saw it blaze, I saw it red,’ chaunted the idiot, waving his hands over his head; ‘it was red, red — Polwin with the matches; oh, Polwin with the matches.’

‘What!’ cried Mrs. Krent, rising tremulously, ‘that wretch here? Oh, then I know that he did it — he did it.’

‘That is not true, ma’am,’ and the steward emerged from the crowd where he had been helping. He looked as meek and respectable as ever, and Forde found it hard to believe that he was the terrible person Mrs. Krent asserted him to be. ‘If you want to know the truth, ma’am,’ he continued, addressing the housekeeper respectfully, ‘it was that young man,’ and he pointed to Morgan, who was dancing fantastically to his shadow in the red light.

‘How can you tell that?’ whimpered Mrs. Krent, a bit reassured when she saw that Polwin had no intention of asserting himself in public.

‘I came to see you, ma’am’ — he cast a side look at Forde — ‘with a message from my young mistress, Miss Trevick. I rang and rang, but no one came to the door, so I went to the window of the drawing-room. I saw the lamps lighted, and also that young man,’ he again pointed to Morgan Bowring, ‘lighting matches and throwing them about. The better part of the room was already in a blaze. I broke in through the window and snatched the box out of his hand. That is why he keeps repeating “Polwin with the matches”. Then I gave the alarm.’

‘Morgan did that,’ cried Jenny, shrinking from the man.

Polwin turned on her like lightning. ‘Morgan ran up to tell you of the blaze,’ said he quietly, with a suspicion of a snarl in his voice, ‘but I gave the alarm to the servants — too late, however.’

‘Yes, that is right,’ said a respectable woman at Mrs. Krent’s elbow. ‘Mr. Polwin came running into the kitchen saying the drawing-room was afire. We all rushed in, but it was too late.’

‘Jane Trubby,’ cried Mrs. Krent, indignantly, ‘I gave you notice a few weeks ago. Why aren’t you with your wedded husband instead of coming into the house unbeknown to me?’

‘I came with my husband, ma’am,’ said Jane respectfully, and she introduced an elderly, shifty-eyed man, who rubbed his hands and cringed. At this moment the crash of a floor drew everyone forward, Mr. and Mrs. Trubby amongst the rest.

Polwin had slipped back again amidst the crowd and could be seen urging the bucket bearers to fresh exertions. Forde caught Mrs. Krent’s elbow as she lunged forward.

‘Who are Mr. and Mrs. Trubby?’ he asked, then, receiving no reply from the dazed woman, shook her; ‘are they the witnesses to the will?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Krent in a kind of parrot-screech and ramped forward into the thick of the mob.

‘Humph!’ said Forde to himself, and retiring a step before the fiery furnace which faced him, ‘the witnesses of the will stand up for Mr. Polwin. That looks bad. I believe it’s forged after all.’

Unexpectedly, while watching the frantic throng, he turned and saw Anne Stretton at his elbow. She looked very pale and ill. Beside her stood the sulky squire of Penrith Manor, who nodded gruffly to the young barrister.

‘How are you, Mr. Forde?’ said Miss Stretton calmly. ‘This is very terrible, is it not? Can nothing be saved?’

‘I fear not until the brigade arrives,’ said Forde, taken aback; ‘but pardon me, Miss Stretton, I thought you were in St. Ewalds.’

‘I came to Penrith Manor this evening to dinner and to stop the night at the request of Mrs. Penrith,’ said Anne quietly. ‘We saw the blaze, and came up to see what assistance we could give. Ralph, will you not help?’

‘I’m going to,’ said the squire sullenly, and loafed forward with his hands in his pockets. He was in evening dress, and a fine figure of a man, yet he looked like a veritable yokel as he stumbled into the midst of the helpers. When he was out of earshot Miss Stretton hurriedly whispered to the barrister:

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came to see Mrs. Krent on business.’

‘Does she know that Sir Hannibal is hiding —’

‘No. That is all safe. Hush! Miss Stretton, don’t say too much, there are eyes and ears everywhere,’ and he cast a significant look upon Polwin, who, mean and frowning, was slinking at the edge of the crowd, casting furtive glances at the pair. ‘Do you see that man? I believe he set fire to the place.’

‘Polwin? I know him; Sir Hannibal’s steward. He first started the rumour that Sir Hannibal was guilty.’

‘I rather think Mrs. Krent did that in her folly. However we must keep Sir Hannibal where he is until we can prove his innocence.’

‘Have you seen him?’

‘Yes, and so has Dericka.’

‘He told you everything?’

‘About what?’ asked Forde, on his guard.

Miss Stretton laughed. ‘Oh, you need not be suspicious of me,’ said she in an easy manner. ‘Sir Hannibal told me of all his dealing in Africa with Mr. Bowring and Mr. Krent.’

Forde started. ‘What do you know —’

‘I know that Polwin is Krent, masquerading as an angel. I know about the Death’s Head also.’

‘Sir Hannibal could not have told you that,’ cried Forde suddenly, ‘as he did not know it himself.’

‘I learned it from another source,’ said Anne quickly. ‘Do you see that man?’ She pointed to a gigantic figure looming against the flames. ‘He knows about the Death’s Head, and about Polwin also.’

‘Why, that’s Anak.’

‘Certainly.’

‘And Anak led the mob who wished to destroy the Dower House?’

‘Of course he did. Now, can you put two and two together?’

‘Ah,’ Forde looked quickly into Miss Stretton’s mocking face, ‘then you think that Anak has something to do with Polwin, and that Polwin is mixed up in this murder?’

‘I am quite certain of it,’ said Anne decisively. ‘Hush!’ and she sank her voice as the lean figure of Polwin glided close to them. ‘Oh,’ she added with a shudder, ‘do you think he overheard?’

‘I don’t know, and I don’t care.’

‘I do,’ murmured Anne, who again looked uncomfortable. ‘Polwin is a most dangerous man.’

‘He looks meek enough,’ muttered the barrister.

‘Ah, in his case appearances are deceptive.’

‘But how do you happen to know his real character?’

Anne Stretton was quite ready with a reply:

‘Sir Hannibal told me a lot, and then I have been watching Mr. Polwin of late. Of course, you know his real name is —’

‘Krent,’ finished Oswald; ‘yes, I know. I believe that Polwin, as he calls himself, is at the bottom of the whole affair.’

‘Yes,’ assented Miss Stretton; ‘and yet I did not see him —’

‘Where?’ asked Forde when she hesitated.

‘Never mind,’ replied Anne abruptly. ‘Later on I may tell you, and may ask for your assistance. I’ll tell you one thing now,’ she added, bringing her mouth close to his ear, ‘Sir Hannibal must leave that mine. It is not safe.’

‘Why, who knows where —’

‘Hush!’ She placed her finger on her lips as Polwin, in company with Anak, came near and sent stray glances in their direction. ‘Hark! That must be the fire engine.’

The interruption came very opportunely, for Polwin decidedly was suspicious of her conversation with Forde. Why he should be speaking so earnestly to Anak, with glances towards her, Anne could not think. But she learned that within a very short space of time. Meanwhile her attention, and, indeed, that of everyone was taken up with the fire engine and many traps from St. Ewalds, which dashed up in fine style. A hose was laid on the stream, the pumps were set to work, and in a few minutes a thick spurt of water was dashing against the almost red-hot walls of the doomed mansion. For doomed it was. There seemed to be very little chance of saving the ancestral home of the Trevicks.

‘All gone — all gone!’ moaned Mrs. Krent, who stood between Jenny and Morgan holding a hand of each; ‘I’m beggared in my old age.’

‘No, no,’ breathed Forde in her ear, ‘remember the will.’

‘Ah, that’s all very well, sir, but there’s things lost that can’t be replaced. Family photographs, and my mother’s silver teapot, to say nothing of Jenny’s toys, which I had hoped to keep for her children.’

Forde shuddered at this last remark when he looked on Morgan, who was dancing and gibbering in his excitement. It would be a sin, he thought, if Jenny became a mother.

Mrs. Krent continued to moan and wring her hands, Morgan to dance, and Jenny to stand like a statue.

At the edge of the group hovered Polwin, meek and demure, like an evil shadow. And near him lounged Anak, his eyes fastened, curiously enough, on Miss Stretton, who, however, seemed oblivious of his scrutiny.

Anne had been joined by a portly matron, well muffled up in furs against the cold of the night. A few words passed between them, and Anne pointed towards Mrs. Krent. The portly gentlewoman thereupon advanced and addressed the unfortunate housekeeper:

‘I am Mrs. Penrith, of the Manor,’ she said in a dignified but kindly voice, ‘and I wish you, my good woman and your daughter, to stop for the night, since your own home is burnt.’

‘Thank you kindly, ma’am,’ said poor Mrs. Krent, with her eyes fastened on the flaming mass; ‘I’ll come with pleasure, homeless and poor as I am. Oh, dear me, what a crash!’

The whole of the roof fell in as she spoke, and millions of sparks soared into the windy blackness. The brigade was doing no good with its one hose, although each member did his best. The house was completely gutted, and only the walls were left standing. Between them blazed and flamed and roared a great mass of fire. With the exception of the few articles scattered about the lawn, which had been saved earlier, all the splendours with which John Bowring had filled the house were things of the past. Oswald could not help regretting the loss of the fine old mansion. And as for Mrs. Krent, she appeared to move like one in a dream. At a word from Mrs. Penrith, Jenny led her mother down the avenue. Morgan followed, dancing as usual.

Polwin remained behind with Anak. Forde could not help thinking from the persistent way in which these two haunted the steps of Miss Stretton that they meant harm to the lady.

Shortly Ralph Penrith came out of the crowd round the fire engine, looking dirty and dishevelled with his exertions. But the exercise had done him good, along with the excitement. He did not look nearly so sulky as he had done, and appeared to be more amiable.

‘All’s gone,’ he growled, waving his hand towards the house; ‘I’m off to get a whisky and soda. Will you come, Forde?’

‘No, thank you. I’ll have to be getting back to St. Ewalds. I came to see Mrs. Krent, but she has gone at your mother’s invitation to the Manor along with her son-in-law and daughter.’

‘All the more reason that you should come,’ said Penrith briskly.

‘Yes, do come, Mr. Forde,’ urged Miss Stretton, and from the expression on her face he saw that she had an object in asking him.

While Forde hesitated the rain-clouds, which had gathered rapidly, discharged themselves of their ever-growing burden. Down came the rain as the wind died away, and in a few minutes the crowd was drenched. Consequently it melted rapidly away, since nothing cools the courage and enthusiasm of people like a good shower. And this was more than a shower, it was a fierce, tropical downpour, and speedily the blazing mass of the Grange was hissing savagely as water tried to quench the fire. The brigade gave over working, put the horses to the engine and rattled away, followed by the many people who had come out to see the sight. The lawn was rapidly deserted, and save for the still flickering flames fighting against the steady rain all signs of anything untoward vanished. Anne shivered and drew her cloak round her shoulders. She was moving away with Penrith and Forde, when Anak suddenly threw himself in her way.

‘Stop!’ cried the big man, ‘I’ve got summat to say.’

‘Then say it quickly,’ snarled Penrith, who had a short temper; ‘we can’t stop in the rain all night.’

‘Don’t you talk to me, you jack-a-dandy,’ bellowed Anak, and the few people remaining drew near to listen, ‘you’re as bad as she.’

‘What are you talking about, man?’ asked Anne, drawing herself up.

‘Ah, you know well enough what I’m talking about,’ said Anak. ‘I thought Sir Hannibal had killed master, but now I know —’

‘Stop!’ cried Forde, looking around for Polwin, who was nowhere to be seen; ‘are you bringing an accusation against Miss Stretton?’

‘Yes, I am, sir,’ said Anak, more respectfully, as he recognised the antagonist who had brought him to his knees, ‘and against Mr. Penrith, also. They’re both in it.’

Penrith took a step forward with clenched fists. ‘Take care, Carney.’

‘Take care yourself,’ said Anak, bluffly; ‘I say now, and I’d say it with my dying breath, that you and that lass,’ he pointed to Anne, who was standing straight, pale and defiant; ‘yes, you and she killed Mr. Bowring and laid the blame on Sir Hannibal.’

‘It’s a damned lie.’

‘It’s a damned truth,’ retorted Anak, ‘you’re the guilty ones. I saw you at the business myself.’

Chapter XXI

Anne’s Defence

After that amazing accusation there ensued a silence. The few people who remained stood open-mouthed, looking from Miss Stretton to Penrith and from him to Anak, the accuser. Forde did not know how much to believe, and could gather no intelligence at all from the set expression of Miss Stretton’s face.

Penrith growled and cursed and swore under his breath, but he seemed to be somewhat cowed. And in the silence that was deep could be heard the spluttering of the dying fire and the murmuring drench of the steady rain.

But the situation had to end somehow, and Forde rose to the occasion since no one else seemed to take the initiative.

‘We can’t stop here,’ he said sharply, offering his arm to the lady; ‘Miss Stretton, you come with me, and we will go to the Manor; Mr. Penrith can follow, and Carney.’

‘What do you want me for?’ asked Anak sulkily, and, as it seemed to Forde, looked round for a supporter, probably Polwin.

‘You must give your reasons for bringing this accusation. And you people,’ Forde turned to the gaping few, ‘can go home. Think nothing of what Carney says; it may not be true.’

‘It is true,’ roared the giant, clenching his fist.

‘It is a lie,’ growled Penrith again, ‘and,’ he also turned to the knot of watchers, ‘if I hear a single word against Miss Stretton or myself I’ll bring the scandal-monger into court. Come along, Forde, we’ll thrash this matter out.’

Those who remained shook their heads, and, despite Penrith’s threat, went to their several homes to discuss the matter. With Anne, the barrister took the path to Penrith Manor, and the young squire followed, with Anak slouching some yards behind him. For some time they walked on in silence, Anne clutching at Forde’s arm with the grip of a woman who is deeply moved. Presently, and strangely enough in so usually self-possessed a woman, her lips began to move, and she murmured to herself.

Forde, wishing to get to the bottom of things, had no compunction in listening.

‘I knew it would come to this,’ murmured Miss Stretton almost voicelessly, but Forde, keen-eared and observant, overheard.

‘Are you talking about the accusation?’ he asked softly.

Anne started.

‘What did I say?’ she asked. Then, when he told her, she nodded. ‘Yes. It’s just as well that things have come to this pass. I can now speak out.’

‘Then there is some truth in what Anak says?’

‘Yes and no. He saw — well, I will leave Mr. Penrith to explain.’

‘What has he got to do with it?’

‘Much, and yet nothing.’

‘You speak paradoxically.’

‘Everything connected with this murder case in paradoxical and mysterious, Mr. Forde.’ She paused and walked on more rapidly, almost dragging her companion after her, then spoke again. ‘I tell you one thing, Mr. Forde, when a man is in love he loses all sense of honour.’

‘Are you speaking of Penrith?’

‘Of whom else? The man worships me, and I— I can’t return his love, unfortunately for him, and for myself, too, perhaps. However, if I have been weak, I am now strong, and you will know all soon.’

‘I don’t think you have been weak seeing how you helped Sir Hannibal,’ said Forde quietly; ‘I presume I am right in saying that you warned him of the warrant and aided him to escape.’

‘Yes. I heard in St. Ewalds that Sir Hannibal was likely to be arrested, and knowing that he was innocent I wired to him that there was danger, and I advised him to meet me at Gwynne Station. He came, and then I took him to the Pengelly mine. He must leave that place of refuge now; there is a chance of his being found there.’

‘Who knows about it?’

Anne cast a glance over her shoulder. ‘Mr. Penrith.’

‘How did he find out?’

‘He followed me one day when I went to take food to Sir Hannibal.’

Forde turned this matter over in his own mind.

‘Miss Stretton,’ said he at length, ‘will you answer me one question?’

‘Yes, a dozen if you like. What is it?’

‘You believe Sir Hannibal to be innocent?’

‘I do.’

‘Yet you declared to me that you saw him on the bank and —’

‘And asked money in order to hold my tongue,’ she finished rapidly. ‘Quite so, and a nice opinion you must have had of me for, so to speak, attempting blackmail. But as you will learn shortly, Mr. Forde, I am, like the devil, not quite as black as I have painted myself.’

The lawyer heaved a weary sigh. ‘I don’t understand.’

Miss Stretton shrugged her shoulders as they halted before the porch of Penrith Manor. ‘I can explain briefly, Mr. Forde. I love Sir Hannibal with all my heart, and I am sticking at nothing to save him.’

‘Yet you practically accused him —’

‘To you, Mr. Forde, remember — to no one else, and it was necessary for me to do so for reasons which you will soon learn.’

At this moment Penrith, who was jealous of their prolonged conversation, came up behind them and walked into the porch. When the door was opened he addressed a few words to the servant, then turned to his three companions. ‘Come into the library,’ he said softly, ‘we shall be undisturbed there. No need to let my mother know of what this man says,’ he indicated Anak with his chin.

Forde obeyed in silence, but released his hold of Anne. She walked into the study through the door held open by her lover and sank into a chair near the fire, loosening her cloak with an air of weariness. Anak came in after Forde, heavy-footed, and sullen, taking off his cap with a degree of breeding scarcely to be expected from so lowly-born a man. Then Penrith closed the door and faced the quarryman with a dogged look in his eyes and with his bulldog jaw protruding dangerously.

‘Now, then, Carney,’ he said in his heavy voice, which sounded like that of a bear with a cold, ‘you can explain what you mean by bringing such an accusation against me and Miss Stretton.’

‘Oh, I’m only too glad,’ retorted Anak, leaning his huge form against the wall, and looking a fine animal, if somewhat bovine.

‘One moment before you begin,’ said Forde, looking up from his seat; ‘did not Polwin put you up to this?’

Anak started and looked quite taken aback. ‘I don’t see why you should say that, sir,’ he grumbled.

‘I believe that Polwin overheard what Miss Stretton was saying to me, Carney, and to get her into trouble made you accuse her at so very inopportune a moment.’

‘Why should Mr. Polwin wish to get the lady into trouble?’

‘Because Mr. Polwin, as you call him, is mixed up in this matter of the murder, and Miss Stretton — as Polwin thought from the few words he caught — knows more about him than he thinks safe. Polwin, to put it plainly, wishes to be first in the field with an accusation in case he should be accused himself.’

‘Do you say, then, Forde, that Polwin killed Mr. Bowring?’ asked Penrith.

‘I say nothing,’ rejoined the barrister swiftly, ‘because I am practically in the dark. Let Anak speak. Then Miss Stretton can explain.’

‘There is nothing for Miss Stretton to explain,’ snarled the squire, and stared at her steadily.

Anne looked up, her fine face white and drawn. ‘I shall tell everything I know, Ralph,’ she said quietly.

‘You know what will happen if you do?’ he warned her.

She bowed her head and turned to Anak. ‘Go on,’ she said steadily.

The big quarryman looked sheepish, and his eyes fell before those of the beautiful woman he threatened. Standing on one leg and then on the other, he twisted his cap in his hands, turning over a blade of grass in his mouth, as though he did not quite know how to begin. At length he burst out unexpectedly:

‘Well, then, it was Mr. Polwin who asked me to speak out,’ he declared defiantly. ‘I told Mr. Polwin what I saw, and he told me to hold my tongue till the time came to be free with my speech. While I was working at the fire he pointed out the lady and the squire, saying that now the two were together it would be the best time to say what they had been doing.’

‘Well,’ said Forde coldly, ‘and what have they been doing; murdering John Bowring?’

‘Oh, no, I can’t say that,’ said Anak gruffly; ‘I only saw them about the place just before the motor-car arrived.’

‘Perhaps you will explain more fully,’ said Forde icily. He felt sure that the big man was but the mouthpiece of Polwin, who was the arch-demon of the whole terrible business.

Anak gave his blade of grass another turn. ‘I was working at the quarry on that day,’ he said heavily, ‘and had to go to mother’s place to get some dynamite I’d left behind. I was coming down the path, and a mist was dropping over the moor. Just a stone-throw from the bank where the granite mass was I heard a crash —’

‘The mass falling?’ said Penrith, sarcastically.

‘Yes, though I didn’t know it at the time. You can leave it to an old quarryman like me to tell the sound of falling rocks. But I heard the crash and didn’t pay much attention to it, thinking it had to do with the quarry.’

‘The place of the fallen mass being in quite the contrary direction, my good man,’ said Anne coolly.

‘Well, Miss, it was misty, and sound does play some queer tricks on the moors, you know. I mistook the direction of the sound. Then I saw you, Miss, on the path: you brushed past me, and nearly touched me. You looked frightened.’

‘Did you see me also?’ asked Penrith scoffingly.

‘No, I didn’t — on the bank, I mean. But I followed the young lady, wondering what she was doing in the mist, and saw you running up to the cart on the road. Then she got in with you and you drove away. But you came back when you heard the shot.’

‘Ah!’ said Anne, suddenly looking up, ‘take a note of that, Mr. Forde. He declares that I upset the granite mass, but apparently does not think that I fired the shot which really killed Mr. Bowring.’

‘I don’t say you upset the granite,’ said Anak gruffly, ‘but the squire, here, did.’

‘You admitted that I was in the trap,’ said Penrith smartly.

‘No, I didn’t,’ rejoined the big man quickly; ‘I said that you were running up to the cart. You had run down, I take it, just before the young lady. I believe you did the business.’

Penrith shrugged his shoulder and turned to Forde.

‘Well, and what do you think of this?’ he asked politely.

‘I’ll wait to hear what Miss Stretton has to say before giving an opinion,’ said Oswald equally politely.

‘Miss Stretton has nothing to say,’ said Penrith masterfully.

‘Oh, yes, I have,’ said Anne sharply, ‘and the time has come to say it, Ralph. Please be silent,’ she added, waving her hand as he opened his mouth to speak again. ‘First I will dispose of this accusation of Carney’s.’ She turned to the quarryman, who was watching her intently. ‘You are both right and wrong,’ she said quietly. ‘Mr. Penrith was driving me to this place to stop the night with his mother; when we rounded the curve beyond where the murder took place I made him stop the dog-cart as I wished to climb the path and see your mother. I left Mr. Penrith in the dog-cart and went up alone. However, the mists came on, and I feared to lose the path, which is not very clear when you get right on the moor. I therefore changed my mind and came down. I did so the more willingly as I also heard the crash and thought that they were blasting at the quarry and that I might get hurt. I did not see you when I ran down the path, but I quite believe you when you say that I looked frightened. I was frightened because of what I took for the blasting, but which, as you say, was the granite mass being upset to smash up the car.’

‘Let me go on,’ said Penrith when she stopped for breath. ‘I let Miss Stretton go alone to Mrs. Carney’s as she wished to. But after a time, seeing the mist was coming on, I thought she might miss her way or grow afraid. I therefore tied the horse to a tree and went up the path. I saw her coming down, and ran back to the cart. We then got in after she had explained, and drove on. We heard the shot not many minutes later, and came back. Your accusation is all rubbish, Carney. Both Miss Stretton and myself are innocent; we had no reason to kill Bowring.’

‘Did you hear the crash of granite?’ asked Forde, while Anak looked more sheepish than ever at this clear explanation.

‘Yes,’ said Penrith, readily enough, ‘but I also thought it might be some blasting operations. I have often heard similar sounds when I drove past the quarries. But probably Carney is right. The motor-car of Bowring must have been seen coming up, since it was not so far behind us. Then the assassin upset the granite rock in time to smash up Bowring. Failing that, he pistolled him; and you will observe, Forde,’ added Penrith sneeringly, ‘that Mr. Carney, here, quite exonerates me from the shooting.’

Forde bowed and accepted the explanation, which was perfectly logical and to the point. Then he turned to the quarryman: ‘Well?’

Carney slouched towards the door. ‘I have nothing more to say, sir,’ he said sulkily; ‘I saw what I saw, and they’ve explained.’

‘Well, then, you can now explain to your friend, Mr. Polwin,’ said Forde sharply, ‘and, hark you, Carney, if you really believed Miss Stretton and Mr. Penrith guilty why did you lead the mob to storm the Dower House?’

‘I thought Mr. Penrith upset the granite,’ said Anak readily, ‘but that Sir Hannibal had fired the shot.’

‘You have no grounds for such belief,’ said the barrister coldly; ‘and now you can go. It will be better if you contradict this accusation to those people at the fire who overheard, else you will get into trouble.’

Anak nodded and hung his head. ‘I’ve made a fool of myself,’ he grunted.

‘Oh, no; Mr. Polwin has made a fool of you.’

The quarryman looked oddly at Forde as though about to say something, but finally changed his mind and tramped heavily out of the room.

Not until they heard the front door clang behind him did Penrith speak, and then addressed himself to Anne solicitously.

‘Will you not go to my mother now?’ he asked with the air of a protecting lover.

Anne rose and turned her back on him. ‘Mr. Forde,’ she said, very distinctly, ‘you have a trap here?’

‘Yes; I told it to come down to the Manor. It is at the gate.’

‘Will you drive me back to St. Ewalds?’

‘Willingly — but —’ Forde glanced at Penrith much puzzled.

That young man looked white and anxious.

‘Anne, what are you going to say?’ he demanded.

‘I am going to tell Mr. Forde what a gallant gentleman you are. And when I do, I shall leave this house for ever.’

Penrith advanced fiercely. ‘You hold your tongue,’ he said hoarsely.

‘Pardon, Mr. Penrith,’ said Forde, edging between them, ‘you are hustling Miss Stretton. Please stand back.’

‘In my own house?’

‘In your own house,’ said Oswald, bland but watchful, ‘where you should be more polite than in any other place.’

‘Anne!’ Penrith turned again to Miss Stretton, and his voice took on an imploring tone; ‘say nothing. I was mad at the time I spoke.’

‘At the time you threatened me,’ she said fiercely.

‘And I threaten you now,’ he cried savagely; ‘remember, I know who is in the Pengelly mine.’

‘Ah,’ cried Forde rapidly, ‘then hold your tongue.’

‘If she holds hers.’ He pointed to Anne.

‘I’ll speak out at all cost,’ cried the woman desperately; ‘I am weary of all this underhanded business, and I must right myself in Mr. Forde’s eyes. Listen!’

‘Go on, then,’ cried Penrith, flinging himself into a seat and gnawing his moustache; ‘but remember that your lover Sir Hannibal will be in gaol tomorrow for this.’

‘Better in gaol than at the mercy of such a cur as you,’ said Anne gathering her cloak round her fine figure. ‘Look at him, Mr. Forde; this gallant gentleman says that he loves me.’

‘And I do, I do.’

‘He loves me so greatly,’ she resumed with scorn, ‘that he jealously followed me to the Pengelly mine and learned, from listening, that Sir Hannibal was hidden there. When I returned here this gallant gentleman declared that if I did not state to you, who had charge of the case, that I had seen Sir Hannibal on the bank, and demand money to hold my tongue, that he would denounce his rival.’

‘Is this true?’ asked Forde, turning to the squire.

‘Yes,’ admitted Penrith, sulkily. ‘I am hard up. I want money and I want Anne, there. I could get both by frightening you about Trevick having been seen on the bank.’

‘And it is not true?’

‘No more true,’ said Miss Stretton steadily, ‘than it is that I wanted money to hold my tongue about a thing which I had never seen.’

‘Then what you said to Carney is true?’ asked Forde rejoicing.

‘Quite true. I did all that I stated to him, and Mr. Penrith, as you may have observed, endorsed my story to save his own skin. But neither he nor I saw Sir Hannibal. He made me say that under a threat of denouncing Sir Hannibal in order to get money.’

Forde looked at Penrith, who still gnawed his moustache, beaten, silent, and angry. Then he offered his arm to Miss Stretton.

‘Allow me to conduct you to the trap,’ he said ceremoniously.

Chapter XXII

The Red Skull

It will be remembered that the trap of which Forde spoke really belonged to Mrs. Krent. But the Grange having been burnt down, the driver was quite willing to return to St. Ewalds with Forde on the promise of a small sum. He should have obeyed no orders but those of his mistress, but the fire had demoralised all the domestics of the destroyed house. The man was waiting patiently enough when Forde, with Anne

Stretton on his arm, made his appearance through the big gates, which were surmounted by the Penrith crest.

Oswald drew Anne back as she was about to mount the trap.

‘Wait a bit,’ he called to the driver. ‘Miss Stretton,’ he added in a lower tone, ‘will you go by yourself to St. Ewalds?’

‘Yes. I know this boy who drives, and I am not afraid. But I thought that you were coming.’

‘No.’ He brought his mouth close to her ear: ‘Remember what our friend within threatened about Trevick? The mine will be searched tomorrow; I must go up and get him away to-night.’

‘Yes, yes. You are wise. But cannot I come also?’

‘No. You must think of yourself. Go back with the boy. I’ll return to St. Ewalds and see you tomorrow, when all is safe. Meanwhile you can tell everything to Miss Trevick.’

‘I’ll do so in the morning.’ She paused, reflected, then whispered, ‘Take Sir Hannibal to Tregeagle shaft, near the sea. He knows where it is, as we explored it one day when I was out sketching. It is rather a dangerous mine, as there is every chance that the ocean may break in because the crust is so thin. But he will be safe there. Ralph will not think of looking for him in such a place.’

‘But if it is dangerous,’ said Forde hesitating.

‘All the more reason for Sir Hannibal to go. No one, Ralph Penrith least of all, will think that he is hidden there. Besides, the sea has not broken in yet, and he will be safe enough there for a few days until we can get him out of the country.’

‘All right,’ assented the barrister, ‘but tell me, Miss Stretton, did Penrith really propose this infamous blackmail?’

‘Yes,’ she said earnestly; ‘I assure you that he is desperately hard up. He has made a fool of himself with wasting money, and is breaking his mother’s heart with his behaviour. He will have to sell the Manor, which is already mortgaged. He knew that the money was left to Sir Hannibal and thought to get it by the threat he made me use. And you can understand that I consented, since it was the only chance of saving Sir Hannibal.’

‘I understand. But why did you let me have so bad an opinion of you when by telling the truth —’

‘How could I tell the truth when you did not believe in me and were influenced by Miss Trevick in thinking that I was an adventuress, Mr. Forde? Now that she is willing that I should marry her father I feel that I must right myself in your eyes. I don’t wonder you thought badly of me. Ralph’s suggestion was infamous, but, as I say, I adopted it to prevent the worst coming to pass.’

‘Well, then, we’ll beat Mr. Penrith,’ said Forde grimly; ‘he’ll search the Pengelly mine tomorrow with the police only to find that his bird has flown. And I can’t say, Miss Stretton, how much I respect and admire you for the noble way in which you are behaving.’

‘Ah, I am in love with Sir Hannibal, remember,’ said Anne smiling faintly as Forde stooped in the gloom and kissed her hand; ‘and now, good-bye, I am quite worn out.’

‘No wonder,’ said Forde, helping her into the trap. Then he gave the boy a sovereign. ‘Take care of Miss Stretton, William,’ he said significantly. ‘Have you a carriage rug? — ah, yes’ — he wrapped it round Anne carefully. ‘Now, good-bye, Miss Stretton, and remember to tell Miss Trevick what I told you.’

‘Yes,’ said Anne in a tired voice, and then the trap drove slowly away into the darkness, leaving Forde wondering how he was to find a path over the dark moors, and on a desperately wet night, to the Adullam Cave of the poor fugitive, Sir Hannibal Trevick.

However, he thought it unwise to linger round the gate of Penrith Manor, as at any moment the squire, urged by the devil of unrest, might appear to see if Miss Stretton had really driven into St. Ewalds. But Oswald thought after some reflection that probably Penrith, to drown his disappointment and showing up, would indulge in deep drinking. Nevertheless he walked briskly away from the gate and up the ascending road which led on to the highway running to St. Ewalds. On coming out with Mrs. Krent he had taken the precaution of putting on a heavy overcoat, and not having changed for the evening, was in breeches and gaiters. Therefore he was fairly well prepared to face a midnight scramble amongst the streaming moors. And it was now quite twelve o’clock, since the fire had taken so long. He remembered that he had left the Dower House somewhere about five, and as he had not eaten anything since afternoon tea he felt most uncommonly hungry. However, it would not do to trouble about that when his future father-in-law’s liberty was at stake. So Forde, lighting his pipe to assuage the pangs of hunger, took his lonesome journey up amongst the dark hills. It was quite an adventure.

It was lucky for Forde that he was not a superstitious man, for when the rain stopped falling and a rising wind swept the sky sufficiently for a haggard moon to peer out, the scene around him was weird in the extreme. He had taken the way he knew best, which was the path by which he and Dericka had ascended to visit the mine.

It was a narrow sheep-walk winding deviously amongst the ferns and grass and bracken. The cold glimmer of the moon revealed monstrous forms crouched around in the soaking herbage. Forde knew that they were but stones, yet they looked misshapen and uncanny enough to be gnomes and kobolds and pixies watching angrily the human being who dared to invade their domain. A poet would have found much food for reflection in the half-seen, and perhaps would have been more than a trifle scared. But Oswald, not being poetical by nature, smoked on steadily and climbed the steep path without stopping. There is some use in being unimaginative after all.

Shortly — at least, Forde thought so as he took no count of time — the young man arrived at the cromlech, and saw, dark against the glimmering sky, the tall, slender column of the chimney. This was the landmark over the mine, and he knew that he had not far to go. Stumbling and groping his way — for a cloud was hiding the moon — he reached the ruins of the houses built above the mouth of the mine. Then he stood on the brink of that dark pit and prepared to descend. It was not a very pleasant thing to do, and required some courage, for Sir Hannibal, as he had been advised by Dericka, possessed a revolver with which to protect himself, and would not scruple to use it. However, for Dericka’s sake the venture had to be made, so the young man placed his feet on the wet rungs of the ladder and slowly dropped into the velvet darkness. To make sure that he would be recognised, and knowing that no stranger could possibly be within earshot in such a locality, Forde began to sing, very much out of tune, but with the best intentions, ‘Home, Sweet Home’, and wished that he was there with all his might. Indeed, when he reached the first level, where Sir Hannibal was lodged, he stopped to laugh quietly at the irony of the tune, for that struck him afresh. Then remembering a possible shock on coming upon a newly-awakened and terrified man, he began to sing loudly, and the baritone voice boomed heavily along the rabbit burrow which was called a gallery.

The signal was successful, for shortly he saw the usual star which showed that Sir Hannibal had rounded the curve with a candle. It gleamed like a yellow diamond in the gloom, and Forde shouted as loudly as did Achilles over the trench to scare the Trojans.

‘It is I, Forde,’ he cried at the top of his voice; ‘don’t be afraid,’ and then he went stumbling forward towards the gleam, barking his shins against projections from the walls and knocking his head against the low, rocky roof. Shortly he stumbled fair on Trevick.

‘Good heavens!’ gasped Sir Hannibal, whose face was grey with fear; ‘I have been frightened to death.’

‘Yet you might have guessed that I was a friend from the singing.’

‘Someone might have got hold of the signal,’ said Trevick, recovering his nerve somewhat, and leading the way to his den, ‘what are you doing here at this time of the night?’

‘I have much to tell you,’ said Forde, squatting on the grass bed from which Sir Hannibal had just risen, ‘but first give me some food, Trevick; I am starved to death.’

‘Here’s some bread and cheese and a flask of whisky.’

‘That will do. Hurrah! I haven’t had a bite for hours,’ and Forde fell to with an excellent appetite. ‘I’m fagged to death scrambling over those moors,’ he added with his mouth full, ‘and we have a long journey before us yet.’

Trevick had lighted a very excellent cigar, but it dropped from his nerveless fingers as his face paled. ‘What’s up now?’

‘Oh, it’s all right; don’t alarm yourself,’ said Forde soothingly; ‘but you’ll have to clear out of this place and take refuge in another mine. Penrith knows where you are, he followed Miss Stretton here, and threatens to give the show away tomorrow.’

‘Ah! He is my rival, I knew that he would harm me if he could,’ said Sir Hannibal, recovering his cigar, ‘but I don’t quite understand.’

‘You will shortly. Give me a match, I want to light my pipe. Oh, I have heaps and heaps of news for you. The Grange is burnt down.’

‘What!’ Trevick again started and stared. ‘Impossible!’

‘Not at all. It seems that Morgan Bowring was playing with fire and threw some matches about — at least, that is Polwin’s story. However, the old house is gone: nothing is left standing but four walls.’

‘Will my misfortunes never end?’ said Trevick desperately.

‘Yes, and soon. The darkest hour is before dawn, remember. And, after all, Trevick, you have won the love of a really good, clever woman.’

‘Are you speaking of Miss Stretton?’

‘I am. But I’d better tell you from the beginning,’ and then the young man related the visit of Mrs. Krent about the new will, detailed how he had come to be present at the fire, and finished with an account of the interview in Penrith’s library.

‘What do you think, Trevick?’ he asked when he had finished.

Sir Hannibal put his hands to his aching head. ‘I am quite bewildered, Forde. I don’t know what to say. But one thing is clear; I must get away.’

‘To the Tregeagle mine, near the shore. Miss Stretton advises that place,’ said Oswald rapidly.

Trevick drew back with a gasp. ‘It’s dangerous — the sea —’

‘Yes, yes!’ interrupted the other impatiently; ‘all the safer so far as your liberty is concerned. No one will think you are such a fool as to hide in so dangerous a place. We must get away before dawn. In the meantime, with your permission, I’ll take a short nap. Wake me about six o’clock and we’ll journey to the Land of Goshen.’

Sir Hannibal nodded, and the barrister, who was dropping with fatigue, threw himself full length on that grassy bed and closed his eyes. In less than five minutes his snores proclaimed that he was enjoying a thorough rest.

Trevick still smoked and sat by the smouldering fire upon which he had placed some fresh fuel. He thought of the whole miserable business in which he was involved, and after thinking everything well over he had to confess that his troubles were of his own making. Had he behaved well in South Africa he would not have got into Bowring’s clutches and thus have become the prey of the rascally Krent, alias Polwin. Certainly the money had come to him, but now even that was gone. ‘But I can’t believe that the second will is genuine,’ said Sir Hannibal half aloud, as he watched the dying embers; ‘it might be, though. Bowring was just the man to sell me in that way.’

He said something like this to Forde when, some few hours later, the two, climbing the shaft with bundles on their backs, stole across the moors in the reddening flush of dawn. The morning was clear, the sun shining after the rain, and the breaking light revealed the beauty and mystery of the wide moorlands. Overhead was a steel-hued sky flecked with still clouds, and eastward broke the glorious dawn like a freshly budding rose. But the two men had little time to watch the silent workings of Nature, as they wished to reach the Tregeagle mine by the shore before it grew much later. The quarrymen rose early to their work, and since they were inspired by Anak to believe Sir Hannibal guilty, he assuredly would meet with a short shrift from anyone he might chance upon. The two wayfarers therefore put their best legs foremost and hurried down to where the ocean gleamed rosy with the dawn-lights.

‘About that will,’ said Trevick, as their feet brushed away the heavy dew and they dropped steadily shoreward, ‘do you think it is genuine?’

‘No,’ said Forde briskly, for he felt much better after the rest and food. ‘In the first place Polwin has been dodging about the Grange and might have hidden it: in the second, the two witnesses are discharged servants who defended him last night, and therefore must be his instruments; and thirdly, Polwin knows that if Mrs. Krent is made the trustee for the money he can get what he wants out of her. If she hadn’t been made the trustee I might have thought the will genuine, but a clever man like Bowring would scarcely have chosen an illiterate woman for such a post. Polwin by appointing Mrs. Krent, his dearly beloved wife, has shown his hand rather too plainly.’

‘Still,’ said Trevick doubtfully, ‘it is just the sort of trick Bowring would have loved to play me.’

‘I dare say, and for all I know there may have been a genuine second will in the house. If so, it is destroyed, and this one will not stand water. I’ll show it to Gratton and take his opinion. You will have the money after all, Sir Hannibal.’

‘Dericka has it; I have given it to Dericka.’

‘Nonsense. Neither I nor Dericka need so much. When you are cleared of this charge you can come back and marry Miss Stretton and use the money to re-establish the family.’

‘I don’t deserve such good fortune,’ sighed the baronet penitently.

‘There,’ said Forde, somewhat mercilessly, ‘I quite agree with you. But I think, Trevick, that you have been punished for your follies, so I shall say no more. You may depend upon my doing my best to clear your character in every way. It is my opinion that everything lies with Polwin.’

‘I think so also,’ assented the baronet; ‘if you could bring Polwin to the Tregeagle mine I might make a bargain with him.’

Forde turned suddenly, with an approving look on his dark face.

‘That isn’t a bad idea,’ he said musingly; ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Only don’t let Polwin give me away.’

‘He’ll have to give himself away first,’ said the young man grimly; ‘here we are at the seashore, Trevick. You take the lead and show me where the mine is.’

Sir Hannibal nodded and went carefully down the slippery slope to where the black rocks frowned over the clear waters. On the verge he pointed to a square tower built of rubble, standing about thirty feet above sea-level.

‘Behind that is the mouth of the mine,’ he said.

Forde drew back. ‘I don’t wonder it is dangerous. Good heavens, it is on the very verge of the ocean!’

‘It is under the ocean itself,’ said Trevick dryly; ‘a rich mine, Forde, which had to be abandoned on account of the danger of working it. However, it will afford me a refuge for a time. Give me that other bundle and I’ll climb down.’

‘Shall I not come?’ asked Forde, unslinging the bundle of food and giving it to his companion.

‘No; you had better get back before there is a chance of anyone meeting you, so that no suspicion may be aroused. Good-bye!’ And without further words Trevick began to descend towards the grey tower. Forde watched him for a few minutes, then remembering that precious time was passing, he briskly turned on his heel and made for the uplands with all haste. Now that Sir Hannibal was safe and off his hands, at the worst he could say that he had come out for a morning walk to explain his presence on the moors.

He had intended to walk straight to St. Ewalds in order to advise Dericka of her father’s safety. But when he passed the quarries he heard a shout, and shortly Morgan came dancing towards him. The idiot had apparently been out all night also, as his clothes were damp and covered with bits of grass and bracken. He was not his usual merry self, for his eyes gleamed with anger, and he flourished his arms in a threatening manner. Forde placed himself on his guard when he saw this maniac rushing towards him, but Morgan’s intentions were quite pacific. He came up with a run, and eyed Oswald earnestly.

‘Why aren’t you at the Manor House?’ asked the barrister.

‘He would lock me up,’ babbled the idiot fiercely; ‘yes, I heard it last night. He would part me from Jenny: he would lock me up. But I know what to do. I have it — I have it — I have it.’

‘Have what?’ asked Forde wonderingly.

‘Come and see — in Mother Witch’s hut.’ And Morgan swarmed like a monkey up the steep path which led to Mrs. Carney’s abode.

Oswald followed, as he thought that from Morgan’s babblings he might learn something.

‘Who will lock you up?’ he asked the poor creature, ‘not Jenny?’

‘No, no! But that wicked man mother hates. Polwin — oh, yes, Polwin.’

‘I thought that you liked him, Morgan?’

‘I did. He was kind to Morgan: he gave Morgan toys, and gave him drink — when — when —’ He stopped, and an expression of cunning overspread his pale face. Then he began to scramble upward again. ‘But by it I can curse him, and Mother Witch can’t do ghostly things while Anak is with her. But today we will curse Polwin, and then he won’t lock me up. No! No! No!’

More convinced than ever that he was on the verge of discovering something, Forde climbed briskly after the insane man. In a short space of time he arrived at the small plateau before the humble hut of Mrs. Carney. The door was open, and into the house Morgan rushed, gibbering like a baboon. Forde, not knowing what he was about to do, waited outside. There was a sound of angry, shrill cries within, and then the idiot rushed out, followed by Anak’s mother, terribly angry and using extremely bad language.

‘With this we will curse him,’ cried the idiot, tossing a red object like a ball into the air, ‘his bones will waste — his brain will boil. He’ll be struck with evil things, and Morgan will dance and dance over his grave.’ He stopped and turned pompously towards the barrister. ‘I am Herodias’s daughter, and this is the head of John the Baptist,’ he said; ‘see how I dance,’ and he began to throw himself about in a mincing way. Quickening his steps, he grew excited and tossed about rapidly the red round object which looked like a football. This terrible performance was ended by the red ball rolling to Forde’s feet. Then the young man uttered a cry of amazement.

He saw before him the scarlet-hued, silver-crowned Death’s Head of Moolu’s son.

Chapter XXIII

Anak’s Mother

Forde stooped to pick up the red skull with mixed feelings. He wondered how it had come into possession of the idiot, and what strange thought in the madman’s brains led him to believe that Polwin could be cursed in connection with so weird an object. But as he touched the Death’s Head Morgan flung himself forward, and snatching it from him with a guttural cry, bounded on to a moderately high rock near the cabin with the leap of a cat, and sat there nursing the uncanny relic of humanity with a cunning and dangerous expression. Forde, taken by surprise, stared motionless.

‘Ah,’ said Mrs. Carney, tottering forward and mumbling as usual, ‘he’s fond of that, is Morgan: it’s like a doll to a lass.’

‘How did he obtain possession of it?’ asked the barrister; ‘it belonged to Polwin — it is connected with the murder.’

‘Polwin!’ repeated the old woman, squatting down on her hams like a savage; ‘he’s my son’s friend. I’ve never set eyes on him myself, but Hugh likes him.’

‘Anak, you mean?’

‘My son’s name is Hugh, as was his father’s before him,’ mumbled the crone, ‘though they do call him Anak from the size of him. Aye, there are giants in these days, though it’s after the Flood instead of before it. Not but what folk are marrying and drinking and sinning now, as they did then, young sir.’

‘You remember me, Mrs. Carney?’

‘Aye. You’re the young gentleman who knocked down Anak — if you will call him so. And clever you are to do that seeing how big he is, Mr. Forde. Well, well, there are worse sons than Anak, for he keeps his old mother like a queen, bless him.’

The idiot still moped and mowed on the rock, fondling the skull.

Oswald glanced from him to Mrs. Carney, and from that unsightly old creature to the miserable hut which she called home. Her notion of being kept like a queen was indeed sordid, and he wondered how she could endure so wretched an existence, especially as he discerned in her manner and speech, that which argued that she had not always occupied so lowly a condition. Forde involuntarily put a leading question to her:

‘What is your past, Mrs. Carney?’

The beldam looked up, and her black eyes, brilliant as those of a young girl, flashed angrily. Her face was wrinkled and yellow and not over-clean, her hair was white, her body was bowed, and her brown hands were like the claws of a bird — a vulture’s for choice. Also her nose and chin nearly met, and she looked exactly like the bad fairy of a child’s book. Yet in those eyes shone the fierce, free spirit of inextinguishable youth, and Forde would not have been surprised had she dropped her worn body like a ragged garment and shone out a nymph of grace. Those eyes should have been set as jewels in the face of a young and lovely woman. Now they sent out lightnings towards Forde because of his indiscreet question.

‘What’s my past got to do with you, young man?’

Oswald shrugged his shoulders. ‘Nothing; only you seem to have seen better days.’

‘Aye, that I have, but I don’t tell you anything about them,’ grumbled Mrs. Carney, and then, with the inconsistency of old age, she at once began to mumble out her life story. At first she spoke almost too softly for Forde to hear, so he waited until she warmed up before giving her his entire attention. Lighting his pipe, he sat down on a stone near the door of the hut and watched the squatting figure of the aged witch — for witch she was, if looks went for anything, as they assuredly did in the middle ages when an old woman was required to be tar-barrelled. Morgan, humming weird songs to himself, still played fantastically with his gruesome toy, and everywhere the earth was growing warm and bright under the influence of the newly-risen sun.

‘Aye, aye!’ muttered Mrs. Carney, plucking at the fringe of her ragged skirt. ‘I was pretty once: no girl prettier, but that Trevick man he made me hate everyone.’

‘Did he do you wrong?’ asked Forde softly, so as not to break the current of her thoughts.

‘He! No. No one ever did me wrong,’ cried the old hag, ‘I was too clever for them all. Sir Hannibal — drat the man for a false lover — he wanted me to run away with him. But I said marriage or nothing; yes, I said that — no wrongdoing for the prettiest girl in St. Ewalds, or out of it, for the matter of that. But he wouldn’t. Bless you, those Trevicks think a heap of themselves, and he looked on me as dirt. On me,’ cried Mrs. Carney, rising, and her voice leaping an octave, ‘me, who was a lady’s maid, and was well educated as a companion to gentry. Aye. I knew French at one time, and could play the piano and paint on velvet, and do things the like of which are never heard of nowadays. But Trevick left me to go to London, and never came back. Out of sight, out of mind with him. Oh, deary me.’ She hid her hands under her apron and stared at the glimpse of blue sea seen between the rocks, viewing probably in her mind’s eye the golden days of her distant youth.

Forde made no remark, knowing that she would recommence the story after a time, and anxious to hear all that she could say about herself.

‘Yes,’ went on the old woman, still gazing at the ocean, ‘he left me, did Trevick, but I wasn’t one to pine away for such as he. Oh, no, not at all. There were lots of them, and when Miss Gyles — she that I was companion to — got married, I could pick and choose a handsome man as well as she. And I did. I picked out the ugliest of the bunch. Lord knows why I did it,’ muttered the witch, rubbing her beaky nose; ‘he wasn’t tall nor fine-looking, and he wasn’t rich. I couldn’t get Trevick, but Bowring was willing to make me his wife, though I never could abear him. Nor Carney either, for the matter of that. But he got round me in his wheedling way and we were married. Then he left me to starve,’ said Mrs. Carney angrily, ‘with Hugh a babe at the breast.’

‘Where did he go?’ asked Forde idly.

‘Lord knows, young man. He disappeared like a drop of water over five and twenty years ago, if not more, and never have I set eyes on him since — no, never.’

‘He may be dead.’

‘Dead!’ echoed the hag with a screech; ‘men like Carney never die, I can tell you, young sir. Good men die, pretty babes die, strong wenches die, but the devil looks after his own, and Carney was the son of Old Nick, for all his wheedling and pious talk. Well, he’s gone’ — she flung her apron over her head, rocking to and fro in her grief — ‘and I’m left here like a bare stone on the hillside.’

Forde looked at the grey stone walls of the hut, with the moss and lichens growing in the cracks; at the thatched roof of dried grass and fern; at the small window and crazy door, and pitied the pair who dwelt there. Anak certainly could look after himself, and was strong enough to laugh at the weather when living in such a tumbledown house, but Mrs. Carney was frail and looked decidedly ill.

‘How did you come so low?’ asked the barrister.

Mrs. Carney tore the apron from her head and looked at him angrily as she stamped her foot.

‘Low!’ she screamed. ‘I’d have you know as I’d rather live here than in a palace. I’m free here, and I can work spells and everyone fears me for a witch.’

‘Oh, that’s rubbish,’ said Forde easily.

‘Oh, is it?’ — she looked at him malignantly — ‘well, you’ll see. Day and night have I cursed Carney, and he’ll surely be drawn back to me by the spell. Then I’ll stab him, and poison him, and crush him, and make him long for a death that won’t come until he has endured the pangs he made me endure. Oh,’ she shook her fist impotently at the calm sky, ‘I could tear him to bits, the beast, the wretch.’

‘What else could I do?’ inquired Mrs. Carney with a scowl; ‘I was left without a penny and with a babe. I tried to earn money, but those who were jealous of me kept me out of employment. Then I took to telling fortunes, and did a rare trade until the law turned me out of St. Ewalds years and years ago. I came here to be near the quarries, where Hugh could work, and I’ve lived here, sun and rain, wet and fine, these fifteen and more years.’

Forde rose, and putting his pipe into his pocket, yawned. It was about time that he started back to St. Ewalds, but before departing he wished to learn how the skull had come into the possession of the idiot. As a means of unloosening Mrs. Carney’s tongue regarding the doings of Morgan, with whom she seemed to be so well acquainted, and because he was truly hungry, he took half a sovereign from his pocket.

‘I’ll give you this, Mrs. Carney, for a breakfast.’

The witch grabbed it, bit it to see if the gold was genuine, and laughed as she tied it in a corner of her apron. ‘Ham and eggs,’ she said, walking towards the house; ‘Morgan, make a fire.’

Forde sat down again and watched the idiot, who readily obeyed the command. Morgan left the red skull carefully on the rock, and rapidly collected sticks and dried moss which he heaped between two stones on a blackened spot which had evidently been used before for the same purpose. Then Mrs. Carney made her appearance with a frying-pan and matches. In a few moments the fire was crackling merrily, and the frying-pan, filled with three eggs and several slices of bacon, was placed on the glowing mass. Morgan knelt beside it while Mrs. Carney tottered to and fro, bringing plates and cups and saucers and a teapot. The idiot thrust sticks into the fire, and clapped his hands with childish glee as the sparks scattered and the flame flickered.

‘Oh, pretty, pretty!’ cried Morgan, and his joy put an idea into the head of Forde.

‘Did you set fire to the Grange the other night?’ he asked.

Morgan looked cunning, and his face darkened.

‘Polwin,’ he said, and grated his strong, white teeth.

‘Oh, Polwin did?’

‘I never said that — I never said that — I never said that. Oh, I hate Polwin, I curse Polwin.’ He sprang to his feet, leaped for the skull, and muttered various spells over it with waving arms.

Mrs. Carney, quite unmoved, placed two eggs and some bacon on a plate and gave it to Forde, along with a cup of tea and a slice of bread.

Forde was glad of the hot food, for, strange to say, now that the sun was well above the horizon, the mists were lowering over the moorland, dropping even to the roof of the hut. In a wonderfully short space of time the whole small plateau upon which the hut was built seemed to be in cloudland. Sea and sky, rock and grass vanished, and Forde found himself isolated in white, damp vapour, through which could be distinctly seen the figure of Morgan gesticulating with the skull. Wondering how he was to find his way

down to the high road again, Forde made the best of a bad job, and devoured the hot food with great relish. It was well worth the half-sovereign.

Mrs. Carney did not seem at all astonished at the sudden shutting down of the white mists. 'It happens like this unexpectedly,' she said, squatting to drink a cup of tea. 'Morgan, child, come and eat.'

But the idiot paid no attention, being still taken up with his skull play, and very gruesome he looked through the veil of vapour.

'Have you known Morgan long?' asked Forde while eating.

'Aye, aye!' grumbled Mrs. Carney, who seemed to be enjoying the gossip and sipping her hot tea. 'Bowring came back from foreign parts and wished to give me a better house. But I stopped where I was, as everyone who wants their fortune told, and their friends cursed, knows where to find me. But he gave me money when he lived at Trevick's place.'

'It's burnt down,' said Forde quickly.

Mrs. Carney shook with malignant laughter. 'I put a spell on it,' she said spitefully; 'Trevick treated me badly.'

'Only because he did not marry you,' interrupted the barrister.

'And wasn't that enough, young sir? A woman scorned — that's what I was and what I am. Well, I put the spell on him, and he's wandering Lord knows where, but not far from the gallows I'm trying to draw him to. Yes, I am.'

'You!' Forde was startled, and for the first time it occurred to him that Mrs. Carney might have something to do with the crime. She peered over the edge of her saucer in an odd way, guessing, from his looks, what was in his mind.

'There's nothing the law can lay hold of me for,' said Mrs. Carney in her croaking voice; 'all the same, I laid the spell of trouble on Trevick, and trouble he had. I've laid the spell to bring him back to these moors where he courted me, and when he comes back I hang him — hang him — hang him!' and she thumped on the ground.

'But he didn't kill Bowring.'

'I know that,' was Mrs. Carney's unexpected answer, and given snappily.

'Then do you know who did?'

'Perhaps,' she retorted, winking an eye, 'but don't you ask questions and you'll be told no lies. Trevick will come back, and though he hides himself in the bowels of the earth I'll hunt him out to put a rope round his neck. Aye, that I shall.'

Forde felt nervous. What if this malignant woman guessed that Sir Hannibal really was hiding, as she put it, in the bowels of the earth? There would be small chance of the baronet's escape then. But he remarked how she had obviously declared that she knew who had actually murdered the millionaire, and cautiously proceeded to question her, hoping to get at the truth by roundabout means.

'How can you find him if he is hidden hereabouts?'

‘How? Why, Morgan, there, can find him. Morgan knows every mine and hole in the countryside, and has been down them all. Yes, even down that Tregeagle mine, which may be flooded at any moment.’

Oswald laid down his plate, feeling more anxious than ever, especially as she kept her black eyes fairly on his face. Then she gave him a clue to her knowledge.

‘I rise as early as most folk,’ said Mrs. Carney, ‘and I gather herbs for drams or love-philters in the dawn.’

‘What! Did you see —’

‘I saw what I saw, and I have only to say to Morgan, here, “Hunt me out Trevick that I may kill him,” and Morgan will. Oh, yes, the lad and I are great friends. His father let him come to me, and many a time have I sheltered him when his silly wife and her silly mother thought that he was lying out on the cold ground. Morgan will do what I tell him, you may be sure.’

‘But if Sir Hannibal is innocent —’ stammered Forde, startled.

‘What’s that to me? I hate him because he made a white-faced minx Lady Trevick instead of me. I can save him, but I won’t. He’ll hang as soon as he is found, and Morgan knows all the burrows.’

Hearing his name, the idiot leaped again from the rock and came to the fire with the skull. He dropped this into the blaze, and danced round it. ‘Curse it, Mother Witch, curse it, and then Polwin will burn and burn and burn.’

‘Why should I curse Polwin, my son’s friend?’ said Mrs. Carney; ‘he may be a good man, although I’ve never set eyes on him.’

‘He’s wicked.’ Morgan stamped his foot, clenched his fists and rolled his eyes. ‘He wants to shut me up with wicked people. Last night I heard him say to Jenny that I had set the house blazing and that I must be locked up. Oooh! oooh!’ He flung himself on the ground in a paroxysm of rage, tearing at the grass and biting it.

The old woman fished the skull out of the fire. ‘Don’t take on so, deary. He can’t shut you up; you didn’t fire the Grange.’

‘But I did — I did,’ shouted Morgan, sitting up considerably dishevelled. ‘Polwin came to the window and gave me matches to play with. Jenny never would give me matches because I used to strike them to see the pretty fire. And Polwin said that I could play with them, and I did, and then — oh, what a blaze it was!’ Morgan leaped to his feet clapping his hands, then suddenly stood stock still.

‘Is this the way to the quarry?’ asked a quiet voice from out of the mist, and Forde started to his feet.

So did Mrs. Carney. She turned grey, and gathered herself up in a shaky, nervous state. ‘That voice!’ she murmured, grasping the skull.

‘Can’t you answer?’ said the quiet voice in a rasping tone. ‘I want to see Hugh Carney — I’ve missed the way to the —’ Here the speaker appeared, slowly emerging from the white folds of the mist.

‘Polwin! Polwin!’ shrieked Morgan, and leaped for the door of the hut.

He stumbled on the threshold and there lay shaking and sobbing. Mrs. Carney, with the skull poised in her hand like a cricket ball, looked at the newcomer with the eyes of a Sphinx. And as soon as Polwin’s gaze

fell on the old woman he fell back a step and turned to flee. Forde stood dazed, not knowing what to make of the scene.

‘You have come back, Carney, have you?’ said the old woman slowly; ‘I knew the spell would draw you, villain and — Ah!’

Polwin made a dart into the mist. Mrs. Carney, his long-forsaken wife, flung the skull at him with so sure an aim that it hit him at the back of the neck. He stumbled and fell, and the next moment she was tearing at him like a bird of prey. In response to her yell Morgan also fell on the miserable man and scratched and bit freely. Forde ran to drag the pair off, but before he could reach them Polwin had flung both aside with desperate strength and disappeared into the mist.

‘Kill him, kill him!’ yelled Mrs. Carney. ‘Beast. Kill him! Boo! hoo!’

Chapter XXIV

A Thorough Rascal

With the sound of Mrs. Carney’s cries and curses in his ears Forde ran up the path after the fugitive, choosing at a venture the direction he had taken. In one moment he was swallowed up by the wet, clinging mist, which seemed to grow thicker and thicker as he stumbled upwards. It was imperative that he should catch Polwin, as he had a very shrewd idea that in Polwin he would find the assassin of Mr. Bowring. But if this was so, the thought struck him that Mrs. Carney would certainly have denounced the man she hated so, and from the few words which she had let drop Forde was certain that the old witch knew the truth. Then, again, he remembered that only this moment had Mrs. Carney learned that Polwin was her long-lost husband. Therefore, as she had plainly said to Morgan, there would have been no need to hang a man against whom she had no grudge.

Up and up climbed the barrister, keeping his ears alert for the slightest sound by which to trace the man. He rejoiced that the chance of bringing Polwin to book had thus come to pass, and hoped that by forcing the man to confess he would be enabled to save Sir Hannibal’s character and life. And he was certain that Polwin by this time was in deadly fear of his life, for not only was Forde on his track, but also Mrs. Carney would do her best to hound on Morgan to kill him, especially since Morgan already hated the steward. And Morgan Bowring, mad though he was, could be dangerous on account of that very madness.

The mist lay very densely on the hillside, and Forde could not see an inch before him. He was like an insect exploring a ball of cotton wool. The young man stumbled and fell and scratched his hand with brambles, and knocked his head against rocks, and mired his clothes by falling into marshy ground. And all the time, in spite of his vigilance, he could hear nothing of the man he was hunting. He was about to abandon the chase in despair when a miracle occurred.

The mist, it seemed, lay in swaths across the hills and the moors, and when he had reached a sufficient height he suddenly emerged into sunshine, with the blue sky overhead. Below lay the white sea of the fog hiding the valley, but up here, on the hilltop, everything was clear and calm and bright and warm. The hill, covered with heather and gorse and broom, bracken and ferns, mixed with long, wiry grasses, thrust itself upward from the milky mists. It was an island in the surrounding sea of vapour, and Forde felt even in his excitement that here he was quite isolated from the world. Then in the yellow radiance of the sun, which was shining strongly behind a lawny veil far down on the horizon, he saw a dark figure swiftly making for the cromlech on the hilltop, where, no doubt, there was a hiding-place. Without saying a word Forde put his will into his muscles and climbed up with wonderful rapidity.

Polwin saw him coming, and with a shout leaped deer-like from stone to stone, nearing his place of refuge with great speed. But Forde was at his heels, and when the cromlech was a stone-throw away he nearly touched him.

Polwin sprang up to the great Druidical monument, past it, and Forde followed, almost spent, but determined, even if he broke a blood vessel — which was not at all unlikely — to lay hold of the little villain. He raced past the cromlech and saw Polwin simply falling down the hillside, so out of breath he was, apparently making again for the friendly veil of the mist. Then all at once Polwin sat down — deliberately.

When the barrister came up with him he was pumped and purple in the face, yet nevertheless tried to appear cool. Puffing and blowing, the barrister stood over him.

‘Why — do — you — hunt — me?’ asked Polwin, panting heavily.

‘Because — I — want — to — get — at — the — truth,’ gasped Forde, and sat down plump beside his captive, as Polwin truly was. ‘Shut — up. I — want — to — get — my — breath,’ and again Forde puffed like a grampus.

For some minutes the two men sat side by side on the sunny hillside, trying to reduce the fevered beating of their several pulses.

Below, the mist slept like a lake surrounding the island of the hill, but in the blue sky they could hear, if not see, a lark pouring out his song of greeting to the sun, which was now emerging royally from the veiling fogs of the valley. Neither Morgan nor Mrs. Carney appeared to break the stillness with cries or curses, and the two men by tacit consent common to both waited in silence for a few minutes.

Polwin was the first to get his breath.

‘Why do you hunt me?’ he asked again, and breathing more easily.

‘That’s a long story,’ said Forde, more comfortable; ‘will you tell it to me or to your wife?’

‘Wife! What do you mean? I have no wife.’

‘Indeed! You have two, Mr. Polwin, alias Mr. Krent, alias Mr. Carney, and devil knows what alias besides.’

The little man did not even change colour — perhaps he could not, as his cheeks were already ruddy with the running. But he looked more meek than ever as he replied:

‘How can you prove that?’

‘Mrs. Krent can prove it, Mrs. Carney can prove it, Sir Hannibal Trevick can prove it.’

‘I don’t very well see how you can get at the last witness,’ said Polwin spitefully.

‘I dare say you don’t,’ said Forde, watchful of the man’s every action, for he guessed that Polwin was treacherous enough to knife him; ‘but Sir Hannibal is in these parts and you’re coming with me to see him.’

‘Trevick here!’ Polwin’s mean face lighted up with malignant joy; ‘ah, so much the better for the police.’

‘Oh, no, Mr. Polwin—Krent-Carney. It is you who will be arrested.’

‘And for what?’ inquired Polwin in a silky voice.

‘For the murder of John Bowring.’

‘You can’t prove that,’ and Polwin chuckled.

‘Yes, I can,’ said Forde, bluffing, ‘and I can prove also that you induced Morgan Bowring to set the Grange on fire. Also a charge of bigamy can be brought against you. Oh, there are plenty of reasons why you should be lodged in gaol.’

‘And suppose I decline to let myself be captured,’ said the man, who was beginning to lose his temper.

‘You are captured,’ said Forde swiftly, and before Polwin could see what was coming he flung himself forward. The next moment the two were rolling down the hillside and disappeared into the mist.

Then began an uncanny struggle. In the blinding white vapour they fought silently and viciously. Polwin scratched and bit like a woman, but Forde, making use of his ju-jitsu knowledge, managed to get the better of him, and avoided getting hurt. At last with an effort Polwin flung the young man aside, much in the same way as he had released himself from his wife, and made an attempt to run. Forde caught him by the ankle, and this time Polwin tumbled with a snarl, and with a long glittering knife in his hand. Forde struck at him between the eyes and grasped the wrist which held the weapon, but the blow missed, and Polwin got him down on his back. Silent, and savagely smiling, the steward made a jab at the prone man. Forde managed to swerve aside, and the knife came down flashing into the ground. As it did so Forde struck aside Polwin’s grip and felt the handle of the knife slip warmly into his own fingers. The steward with a snarl placed his left hand flat on the ground to tear himself away, and before he could take it up again Forde rolled over and pinned the hand to the ground. A scream of agony from the wounded man announced that the knife had gone clean through the back of the hand. Then Forde, disregarding Polwin’s whimpering, slipped from under him, and, still holding the knife, looked at his antagonist. By reason of that terrible knife Polwin could not struggle, and writhed there like a pinned cockchafer.

‘Take it out — take it out,’ he moaned, ‘I’ll tell you everything.’

‘No, you treacherous dog,’ panted Forde, glaring at him, ‘you’ll try this game on again with some other weapon.’

‘I have nothing — nothing else on me.’

Forde rose slowly and placed his foot on Polwin’s wrist, then carefully went through his pockets, while the steward cursed him like a prophet. Finding a revolver, he took charge of it, and then, pulling up the knife, he flung Polwin aside and sat down, pointing the weapon at his head, the knife, having done its useful work, being under him.

But there was no more fight in the steward. He bound up his wounded hand with his handkerchief and sullenly groaned with the pain. Below, in the mist, they heard the whimper of a human voice, and both men guessed that Morgan was hunting like a sleuth-hound for his enemy. Polwin for the first time turned craven.

‘Morgan Bowring! Don’t let him —’

In a flash Forde saw how the land lay. Polwin feared the madman, and the barrister took advantage of this to get him down to the Tregeagle mine to face Sir Hannibal.

‘Morgan,’ he said deliberately, ‘will kill you as soon as he sets eyes on you, and I dare say Mrs. Carney has armed him with a pistol or a knife. It is just the sort of thing she would do. In your condition, Mr. Polwin’— Forde glanced at the bleeding hand which the man was nursing in agony —‘I don’t think you’ll be able to fight a madman as you fought me.’

‘Don’t! Don’t!’ pleaded the steward, all his nerve gone; ‘I’m afraid of Morgan. He’s mad, and lunatics have such strength. Besides, you would not let him touch me, would you, Mr. Forde?’

‘Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see Morgan sticking or shooting you,’ said Oswald grimly, ‘for you are at the bottom of all this trouble.’

‘No, no!’

‘I say yes, yes! You killed Bowring, you put it about that Trevick was guilty, you fired the Grange, indirectly, of course; and you are the gentleman who forged that second will.’

‘It’s a lie.’

‘I can prove otherwise. However, I’ll give you your choice: Either you can stay here and I’ll send Morgan along to deal with you as he wants to —’

‘Oh!’ Polwin uttered a low cry, like a tormented animal. ‘No, not that.’

‘Or else,’ went on the barrister pitilessly, ‘you must come with me to the Tregeagle mine to explain your doings to Sir Hannibal.’

‘He’s there, is he?’ muttered the steward, getting on to his feet; ‘if I’d known that —’

‘You’d have put the police on his track?’

‘Why not? Bowring left him the money, which is rightfully mine.’

‘You liar! As if I hadn’t heard the truth from Mrs. Krent —’

‘My wife doesn’t know the truth.’

‘Mrs. Krent is not your wife, and Krent is not your name. You are Hugh Carney, who has committed bigamy, arson, murder and forgery. A pretty catalogue of crime to place before a jury, sir!’

‘I can defend myself,’ whimpered Polwin, and again below they heard the low, animal-like cries of the madman hunting for his prey.

‘I’ll give you a chance of defending yourself to Sir Hannibal. Get on!’ And driving Polwin before him like a sheep, Forde went down the hill. He did not know where he was, but deemed that by walking downward in any direction he would certainly strike the high road. And once there, he could get into the path for the Tregeagle mine. Another cry near at hand sent Polwin away with his captor readily enough. It was strange that so bold and dangerous a man should be so afraid of an idiot, whom he knew so well. But Morgan was more than an idiot now. He was a homicidal maniac, and Polwin’s threat that he should be locked up had made him determined to kill Polwin. All the same, Forde wondered at the abject fear displayed by the

villain. The sweat was pouring off the man's forehead and cheeks as they dropped downwards in the mists, Forde holding Polwin's arm in case he should escape.

Down and down they went amongst the briars and bracken and wet herbage, sometimes stumbling against a fence, or dropping into a ditch, or crashing against a huge granite stone. Finally, after half an hour, the mists grew thinner, and they came upon the high road. Across this the barrister guided his captive, and made him enter the stony track which led down to the grey tower of the Tregeagle mine. The air was quite clear here, but the band of mist still stretched between the sun and the earth. Above was fine weather, and below everything could be clearly seen, but the bank of mist stretched along the moors like a white cloud. And in that mist probably Morgan Bowring, hounded on by Mrs. Carney as one of the furies, was hunting.

Just as they dipped into the watercourse which did duty for a road to the mine a man came running up quickly in a lumbering way. He was Anak, who had emerged as they crossed the road from the quarries, which were close at hand.

'What's all this?' shouted the big man.

Polwin's eyes glittered, and he gave a wrench, as if to get away. But the next instant a revolver was at his ear and the barrister was speaking softly and rapidly:

'Make Anak go with us to the mine, you dog,' said Oswald savagely, 'or I'll blow your brains out.'

'All right,' muttered Polwin, 'only don't say that I'm his father.'

'Doesn't he know?'

'No. He might kill me else. His devil of a mother has made him hate me. See, here he comes running up.'

'What are you doing with Mr. Polwin?' asked Anak threatening; 'he is a friend of mine.'

'He is more than a friend, he is your father,' said Forde quickly.

Polwin gave a cry and tried to get away, but the barrister held fast to his shoulder, and he winced with the pain of his wounded hand.

'What!' cried Anak fiercely, 'are you my father, who deserted —'

'Shut up,' interrupted Forde sternly, 'and come with me to the Tregeagle mine, Carney. This man has to render an account of his actions.'

'To me,' cried Anak; 'I'll kill him.'

'There has been too much killing,' said Forde, forcing the steward down the watercourse, 'he has to explain himself to Trevick.'

'To Sir Hannibal? Is he in the Tregeagle —'

'Hold your tongue, Carney,' cried the barrister imperiously, 'and come with me. You have cherished wrong feelings against Sir Hannibal, as you will learn. All will be explained.'

'Yes,' said Polwin with a significant look at his son; 'all will be explained.'

The big man changed colour and seemed to be somewhat dazed over the sudden discovery which the barrister had thrust upon him. They were still near the high road, and Polwin would have begun to argue in the hope of escaping. At that moment down the bank and out of the mist came Morgan in full cry. He carried an axe in his hand and leaped across the road with a bellow of rage when he saw the steward.

‘Stop him!’ cried Polwin, with a scream like that of a woman, and went tearing down the road to the mine dragging Forde after him at top speed. He was terrified for his life, and no wonder. Morgan, with his glittering eyes and disordered raiment and axe, looked anything but a safe man to tackle.

But Anak, although he could not guess what all this was about, opened his mighty arms, and into them ran the madman, blind with rage. Leaving the two to struggle together, Polwin and Forde raced on and came to the slippery black rocks over the grey rubble tower. Down went the steward, scrambling like a cat. Oswald allowed him to go by himself, as he saw that the man, crazy with terror, certainly would seek shelter in the mine as the lesser of two evils.

Forde, holding on to the tough grass, went over the black rocks also, and in a wonderfully short space of time the pair were standing under the shadow of the tower.

‘I know the mine! Come along!’ gasped the steward, hurrying round the corner amongst the fallen stones; ‘follow, follow!’

Forde did so, when unexpectedly the steward rolled on to the rocks and would have slipped over to certain death but that the barrister caught him back in time. Polwin was gnashing his teeth with pain and weakness, for with his wounded hand and loss of blood and mad haste scrambling down the cliffs he was about spent.

‘Here!’ he said, setting his teeth and stripping off his coat, ‘tie your handkerchief tightly round my arm or I’ll lose too much blood.’

The barrister saw the necessity of this, since the man’s bandaged hand was covered with blood. He bound his handkerchief tightly as a ligature round Polwin’s left arm above the elbow, and then assisted him to put on his coat. All the time Polwin, still terror-struck, kept glancing at the cliffs, expecting every moment to see Morgan with the axe.

‘Let’s get down,’ he muttered, running towards a gaping hole. ‘This is one way, and the most difficult, into the mine. The other slopes upward — the gallery, I mean — to within ten feet of the perpendicular shaft; this is straight all the way down. Look!’

‘No,’ said Forde, suspecting that the treacherous little man would push him over; ‘you go first.’

Polwin, with a look of baffled hate, did so, and considering his almost useless left hand, and pain and a certain amount of weakness, he went downward at a perfectly miraculous rate of speed. The thought of Morgan lent fictitious strength to his muscles, for no ordinary man in such a condition could have reached the bottom of that dangerous shaft without being smashed. As Forde himself followed he wondered how it would be possible to get up again.

The ladder had vanished, and the two went down holding on by decayed beams and projecting stones and obtaining precarious foothold where the crumbling of the sides had left niches. Silent and determined, they dropped down and down, until the blue sky was but a radiant speck at the end of a long tube.

Finally they alighted, so to speak, on the earth of the first level, which ran directly towards and under the ocean. Polwin, strangely enough, seemed to know the way well, and plunged forward unhesitatingly. But

he did not get ahead of the barrister, who thought that it was time to put a check on this too great freedom. Seizing the man's arm, he readjusted the useful revolver to his ear.

'You know what you'll get if you try to escape?' he breathed hurriedly.

'That's all right,' snapped Polwin, dragging forward; 'I'm going in here only to willingly.'

'To escape Morgan Bowring?' sneered Oswald contemptuously.

'And to settle accounts with Trevick,' retorted the other.

There was evidently some devilment in the man's mind, but not seeing what mischief he could do with a revolver at his ear, Forde permitted him, under restraint, to lead the way.

On and on they crawled in those nightmare regions, the steward apparently seeing in the dark like a cat. At all events, he never mistook the way or stumbled, and Forde, by holding on, got forward fairly well. Then he bethought himself of the signal and sang 'Home, Sweet Home'.

Hardly had he got through a couple of lines when he heard a shout. A light appeared, then another, then a third, and the two men hurried towards this unexpected illumination.

'Here — over here, Forde,' cried Sir Hannibal loudly.

Still gripping his prisoner, the barrister stumbled onward, and when he came within the circle of triple lights, found himself facing not only Trevick, but Dericka and Miss Anne Stretton.

Chapter XXV

Disaster

The amazement of Forde at beholding the ladies was only equalled by the surprise of Sir Hannibal when he saw Polwin sullenly standing in the grip of the barrister.

'How did you come here?' he asked with nervous haste; 'what do you want of me?'

'Ask Mr. Forde that,' whined the steward in a fawning manner, belied by the ferocious glitter of his usually meek eyes; 'he made me come.'

Trevick faced round. 'Well?' he asked the young man apprehensively.

Forde did not reply immediately to the question. Forcing Polwin to his knees, he stood over him with the revolver, ready to fire should the man attempt to escape.

'Keep still,' said Oswald as the steward snapped and snarled like the mongrel dog he was. 'You want to settle accounts with Sir Hannibal; here he is, settle them.'

Trevick's knees shook under him, and he would have fallen but that Anne put her arm within his. Dericka was the first person to break a somewhat oppressive silence:

'Why did you bring this man here, Oswald?' she asked sharply.

‘I’ll explain, and so will he,’ said the barrister, ‘but first tell me how you come to be in the mine with Miss Stretton?’

‘I brought her early this morning,’ said Anne quickly. ‘When I reached St. Ewalds last night I went at once to the Dower House and found Miss Trevick waiting up for her father. I explained, and she came on this morning with me to see what could be done.’

‘But that awful shaft, how did you get down?’

‘We came by the other,’ explained Dericka swiftly; ‘it is only a little distance away from this very spot.’

‘But it is so difficult to get down.’

‘No,’ said Trevick, trying to appear cool; ‘the other shaft is both difficult and dangerous, but the one these girls came by is easy. A ten-foot ladder took them down to a slope which descends to this level. Miss Stretton and myself found this easy way one day when we explored the mine. There is no difficulty in getting either out or in, Forde. But if you —’

‘Then I hope Morgan won’t come that way,’ said Oswald to himself.

Dericka overheard. ‘What’s that you say?’ she asked.

‘Mrs. Carney told me that Morgan knows all the mines of this district, and therefore he must be aware of this second way, and will come by that probably,’ and he looked at the sullen Polwin, who shuddered with apprehension.

‘Why should Morgan come at all?’ asked Anne quickly.

‘Because he overheard Polwin, here, say last night to Mrs. Krent that he ought to be locked up for setting the Grange on fire. Morgan is terrified at the idea, and is mad enough to kill this man if he can get at him. We left him on the high road struggling with Anak, but if he escapes he will certainly come here, and then —’ Forde looked at Polwin again.

That individual spoke harshly and to the point. ‘In that case you had better let me settle accounts with Sir Hannibal, as you say, and then I can hide myself in the recesses of the mine before that madman arrives.’

‘Are you afraid of him?’ asked Dericka with contempt.

Polwin raised his wounded hand. ‘I can’t fight against a lunatic with an axe, hampered by this wound,’ he said coolly.

‘Who hurt you, Polwin?’ asked Trevick anxiously.

‘I did,’ said Forde readily, ‘but not before he had tried to stab me. Also,’ he flourished the revolver, ‘this weapon belongs to our friend. I took it from him and intend to use it against him unless he explains how he killed Bowring.’

‘What?’ cried all three in a breath; ‘did —’

‘No, I did not,’ said Polwin loudly, and would have struggled to his feet but that Forde’s hand on his shoulder kept him on his knees.

‘You did,’ said the barrister sternly; ‘Mrs. Carney — your wife — hinted as much, and —’

‘Oh,’ interrupted Sir Hannibal, ‘is Mrs. Carney aware of —’

Forde interrupted in his turn. ‘I believe she knows everything, and only held her tongue because she did not know until an hour or two ago that Polwin was her husband. But you knew it, Trevick?’

‘Yes,’ said Sir Hannibal, unsteadily, ‘I knew it, but I was forced to hold my tongue.’

‘And you’ll hold it still,’ threatened the steward, ‘else it will be the worse for you.’

‘There can be nothing worse than this, Polwin.’

‘Oh, yes; the gallows.’

‘Hold your tongue, you beast,’ said Oswald, giving him a shake as Dericka uttered a faint shriek; ‘now, then, tell the truth.’

‘It won’t be what you expect,’ snapped the steward; ‘I did not kill Bowring, though I had every reason to do so.’

‘Then who is the criminal?’

‘If I tell you and can prove the guilt will you let me go?’

‘Yes. You will only run into Morgan’s arms, and if he kills you so much the better, you grey rat.’

‘I think,’ said Anne Stretton, who had been listening intently, ‘that it will be best for Sir Hannibal to tell us of his relations to this man Polwin.’

‘His real name is Carney,’ said the baronet readily. ‘I knew him and Bowring when we were boys together. We met again in Africa, and there we formed a firm to buy diamonds. This man,’ he pointed to the heap at Forde’s feet, ‘cheated both Bowring and myself, so we kicked him out of the firm.’

‘I went on my own accord,’ said Polwin, ‘leaving you and Bowring to swindle.’

‘You were kicked out by Bowring for trying to blackmail him in connection with those forged bills.’

‘And they were forged?’

‘I don’t deny that,’ retorted Trevick quickly. ‘Bowring forged my name to do a deal and intended to swindle me; I said that I had signed the bills so that you should not make trouble. Then you went away and spread the report that Bowring killed Moolu’s son.’

‘You ought to have been glad of that,’ sneered the steward, ‘since you were the murderer.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ said Dericka, who was leaning against the wall.

‘Thank you, my dear,’ said her father mildly. ‘No, I was quite innocent. But this scoundrel spread a report about me also, and in order not to come into collision with the colonial authorities I was forced to return to England. Bowring, left behind, saw a chance of cheating me. Consequently, when he returned some years

later to England he was a millionaire while I was comparatively poor. However, when I threatened him he agreed to take the Grange and to leave me his money — or, rather, my share of it — by will.’

‘He gave you all,’ said Polwin sulkily, ‘and a third of it was mine by the terms of our partnership.’

‘You were not a partner then, Polwin; we had kicked you out. And the money was left on condition that Dericka married Morgan.’

‘You have not fulfilled that condition.’

‘I could not. In the first place it was not laid down in the will and I could have evaded it; in the second Mrs. Krent — your wife — said that Morgan had already married Jenny.’

‘Mrs. Carney is the man’s wife,’ said Forde quickly. ‘Mrs. Krent is really Mrs. Ward.’

‘Yes, I know that, Forde, and have known it all along, but this man made me hold my tongue, since he threatened to tell of my doings in South Africa.’

‘Your swindling,’ snapped Polwin triumphantly, ‘and when I go free I’ll tell how you smuggled diamonds.’

‘I was led into bad ways by you and Bowring,’ said Sir Hannibal in an angry tone; ‘all the business of the firm was shady. I don’t attempt to exculpate myself, Polwin, but Heaven knows that I have paid for my folly.’

‘It’s all over now, dear,’ whispered Anne softly; ‘say no more.’

‘Yes, I will,’ declared Sir Hannibal; ‘it is only right, Anne, that you should know the kind of man you have promised to marry. What our firm did in Africa won’t bear the light of day. I don’t think we were ever criminal, but we certainly sailed very near the wind.’

‘Not a criminal!’ scoffed the steward; ‘what about the murder of that Zulu for the big diamond you sold?’

‘Bowring killed him, as you well know,’ said Trevick immediately, ‘and Moolu knew also. It was Bowring that he threatened with the red skull, not me. But you chose to place the blame on me also for your own ends. However, there will be an end to all this. When I leave this mine I’ll give myself up and face the worst. I have sinned —; it is only right that I should be punished.’

‘When you leave this mine,’ said Forde determinedly, ‘you will know who killed Bowring and thus be absolutely free.’

‘And a pauper,’ cried Polwin; ‘what about that second will?’

‘A forgery by you,’ said the barrister quickly. ‘I have the will in my pocket at this moment. You got into the Grange and placed it in the desk and sent Mrs. Krent there to look therein for something on the chance that she would find it.’

‘It’s a true will.’

‘It is not. However, I’ll see Mr. and Mrs. Trubby, who are your witnesses, and we’ll soon see.’

‘Look here,’ whined the steward, seeing himself thwarted at every turn, ‘if I put things right will you give me five thousand a year and get me safely out of England?’

‘Yes,’ said Sir Hannibal quickly, but Forde stopped him.

‘No,’ said the barrister, ‘you’ll tell the truth about the will and the murder now, or else I’ll hand you over to Morgan.’

‘Go and get him, then,’ said Polwin impudently.

‘Dericka,’ said Oswald calmly, ‘go up to the ten-foot ladder and ascend. I dare say you’ll see Morgan and Anak on the cliffs. Go and —’

‘No, no!’ cried Polwin, rising with a shudder when he saw the girl move up the sloping way, ‘I’ll say what you like.’

‘Tell the truth, then.’

‘I know the truth,’ said Miss Stretton; ‘this man made Sir Hannibal hire him as steward with the intention of blackmailing him.’

‘He has done so,’ said Trevick despairingly, ‘and now —’

‘And now,’ said Anne, ‘he will do so no longer. You have suffered much, but peace is coming at last.’

‘With you as my dear wife,’ whispered the baronet.

Dericka shivered in the semi-darkness as she heard the grating and rolling of the pebbles on the ocean bed overhead.

‘Are we going to stop here all day?’ she asked imperiously; ‘why not take this man out of the mine, and then —’

‘No, no! I am afraid of Morgan,’ cried the steward grasping Forde’s arm convulsively. ‘Let me tell you all I know and then I can hide.’

‘Morgan knows the mine as well as you do,’ said Forde, shaking himself free; ‘you cannot escape him if he gets down here.’

‘Ah, but I can,’ said Polwin cunningly; ‘if I die, he dies also, and I don’t mind going in company,’ he sneered.

His livid face in the dim light was terrible, and the two women shivered at its malignity. Anxious to end the scene Forde shook the steward. ‘Tell everything from the beginning.’

‘There is no need,’ whimpered the man, sitting down and nursing his hand, which must have been very painful. ‘You know all about Africa, although Trevick hasn’t told you half the wicked things we did.’

‘You did,’ corrected Sir Hannibal; ‘you and Bowring. I want to know nothing save why you killed Bowring.’

‘I didn’t,’ contradicted Polwin sullenly, ‘although I wanted to.’

‘Why did you?’

‘Bowring kicked me out of the firm. He made the money and cheated me, as he did you, Trevick. I don’t see why you should be so very tender about his death. You would have killed him yourself: you said so in the library at the Dower House.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked Dericka quickly.

‘Miss Warry told me.’

‘When?’

‘Just after Trevick and Bowring came out of the library.’

‘Ah!’ said Sir Hannibal suddenly, ‘and then you placed the red skull in the fortune-telling tent?’

‘Yes. Miss Warry by telling me about the quarrel gave me an idea. When in Africa I fell in with Moolu, who was wild because he thought that you killed his son. He boiled down his son’s head and dyed it red and crowned it with silver, intending to work spells with it on you so that you might be miserable.’

‘Pooh!’ said Trevick with contempt; ‘and why didn’t he?’

‘Because I saved you,’ said the steward quickly; ‘I told Moolu that Bowring was guilty. Then Moolu sent a warning to Bowring that he would behold the skull of his victim, and that every time he saw it he would be in danger of death. On the third occasion he would surely die. Bowring was frightened and suffered like the devil.’

‘And how did the skull come into your possession?’ asked Anne.

‘Moolu gave it to me with a sum of money, and told me whenever I could to place it in Bowring’s room or office, or anywhere he could see it. I did so twice, and on each occasion Moolu managed to get Bowring shot at and stabbed slightly. I can tell you Bowring was in a great funk,’ added Polwin chuckling; ‘he started at every shadow, and did not dare to call his soul his own, owing to the suspense.’

‘What a brute you were to lend yourself to such a thing,’ said Dericka.

‘I was paid for it,’ retorted Polwin with barefaced impudence, ‘and I hated Bowring because he swindled me out of the money.’

‘Go on,’ said Forde, disgusted with the man’s manner; ‘when you put the skull in the tent you told Miss Warry what it meant?’

‘Yes, and I told her to prophesy that Bowring would die before he reached home.’

‘Then you did kill him?’

‘No, I did not.’

‘There is one flaw in your story, Mr. Polwin,’ said Forde after a moment’s reflection; ‘how came you to be in the house and able to deal with the skull when Sir Hannibal met you miles away, near the scene of the murder?’

‘I was not there,’ said Polwin quickly, ‘I was on the other side of the hill.’

‘True, but you had just to climb the hill in order to get to the scene and upset the stone.’

‘Quite so, but I never upset the stone. As to being in the vicinity, that is quite true. But I had a motor-bicycle as well as Trevick.’

‘I never knew that,’ said the baronet.

‘Of course you didn’t,’ sneered Polwin. ‘I kept that dark because it was necessary for me to get about the country rapidly and yet appear to be unable to do so. When anyone saw me on the machine I told him or her that it was yours. When you came towards me on your own I hid mine behind a stone, and then went on to Penrith Manor with that letter on yours.’

‘But why did you leave the Dower House after placing the skull in the tent?’ asked Forde, puzzled.

‘To fulfil Miss Warry’s prophecy,’ said Polwin brutally. ‘I never thought that Sir Hannibal would follow; but chance would have it so, and that was all the better for my schemes of entangling Trevick in the death business. I wanted to kill Bowring, knowing that he had left the money to Trevick!’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Bowring himself, as he guessed that I might try to kill him. He made a mistake telling me so much, as only when I knew that the money would go to you, Trevick, did I determine to get rid of Bowring. Our mutual friend, the millionaire,’ sneered the steward, ‘was a great fool at times in spite of his clever head for making money.’

‘Well, then,’ said Sir Hannibal, ‘it seems to me that you did intend to kill Bowring, and managed to do so.’

‘No. When you threatened him in the library with death Miss Warry told me. I made her promise to prophesy Bowring’s death, and then put the skull into the tent to warn him that he would die. Afterwards I took my motor, which I kept down the town, and went out to the quarries. I saw Anak, over whom I had great influence.’

‘In what way?’

‘Anak, as Bowring’s foreman, had embezzled some of the moneys with which he had to pay wages,’ said Polwin calmly. ‘He did not know that he was my son, and I did not dare to tell him, as I didn’t want that old witch on my tracks. As Polwin I kept out of her sight, and she never would have set eyes on my but for that cursed mischance of my losing my way in the mist this morning.’

‘Well, well!’ said Forde impatiently, ‘go on about Anak.’

‘I got hold of him and told him to upset the granite mass into the road after Penrith and Miss Stretton had passed so as to smash up Bowring’s car. When he went to his post I returned along the second road and met Sir Hannibal. Then, as I said, I concealed my own machine and went to Penrith Manor on his.’

Meanwhile Anak waited until he saw the motor of Bowring in sight, and then, placing a lever under the mass of granite, upset it on to the road.'

'Ah! Then he was returning to the quarry when I met him?' said Anne.

'Quite so. The work being done, there was no need for him to stop on the spot. You heard the crash, Miss Stretton: had you waited you would have heard the motor smash.'

'You beast!' said Forde with horror, 'you did intend to kill the man?'

'I admitted that I did,' said Polwin impatiently, 'but the man was only stunned. The shot killed him.'

'And who fired the shot?'

Polwin drew himself up and looked round with a chuckle. 'Ah, now you must be prepared for a surprise,' he said. 'Anak told me later who did that, for Anak went back to see the smash, instead of remaining at the quarries as I instructed him to do.'

'Yes, yes. But who fired the shot? Who killed Bowring?'

'His own son,' said Polwin calmly, 'Morgan!'

Chapter XXVI

The Deluge

'That is impossible,' said Forde decisively, while Sir Hannibal stared at the steward as though he had horns growing out of his head.

'It is the truth,' asserted Polwin with a weary look; 'why will you not believe me when I tell you the truth? Anak confessed to me that Morgan was at the quarries on that day, and had a revolver on him.'

'Where did a lunatic get such a dangerous weapon?'

'I gave it to him,' said Polwin calmly. 'Bowring, who was sick of his son's vagaries, threatened to lock him up. Morgan, who was always terrified at such an idea, told me. I frightened him still more with tales of how lunatics were treated.'

'Lying tales,' said Forde, frowning, 'since lunatics are treated with every care. You beast.'

'I had to get Morgan into a proper frame of mind to kill Bowring, as I thought it would save trouble. He had the revolver for quite a month, yet never used it. But he was always afraid lest he should be suddenly seized and taken to an asylum. On that day at the quarries he told Anak and Anak said that he could come with him and see his father killed.'

'Oh,' cried Dericka, shuddering, 'have these men any feelings!'

'Oh, bother!' said the steward; 'you make me tired. Let me finish the story, as I'm sick of all this. Well, then, Morgan saw the smash of the motor as he remained behind when Anak went back to the quarries. Seeing his father rise, he saw that he was not dead, so he leaped down the bank and shot him. Then he ran up and found that Anak had come back. Anak took the revolver from him and told him to be silent, lest he should be hanged. That's all!'

‘And quite enough,’ said Sir Hannibal, who was very pale, ‘does Mrs. Krent know of this?’

‘No; nor does young Mrs. Bowring. But I believe Mother Witch, as Morgan calls her, my precious first wife, knows. She held her peace for Morgan’s sake. But now that she knows I am her husband she will go to the police and tell the truth. I must get out of the country. But of one thing you may be sure, I’ll never be taken alive.’

Polwin shut his mouth and said no more. Forde turned to Sir Hannibal. ‘It seems to me, sir, that we can establish your innocence with the aid of Mrs. Carney. But it will be just as well to write down a statement in my pocket book and make this man sign it.’

Before Trevick could answer a cry was heard and then a wild shout. Polwin, with a whimper of fear, ran away into the darkness. All at once down the slope which led from the ten-foot ladder came Morgan waving his axe. His clothes had been torn in the scuffle with Anak, and his eyes glared with the light of madness.

Dericka and Anne both shrieked when they saw this madman rushing towards them.

After him lumbered Anak, shouting.

‘Hold him, hold him; he’s quite mad. He’s cut my arm with the axe; catch him, Mr. Forde.’

Morgan had foam on his lips and kept screeching like a wild cat. He dodged Anak as he came forward with his arms outstretched, and dashed out one of the candles.

‘Where’s Polwin — I want to kill Polwin! Let me chop him — let me — aaaah — aaaah —’ He gave a wild shriek as he felt himself again in Anak’s mighty grip. The two reeled against Anne, and she dropped her candle. There was only one left.

‘Dericka! Dericka! Come!’ cried Forde, grasping her hand; ‘lead me to this easy shaft and let us get out. Trevick —’

‘I’ll take Anne,’ said Sir Hannibal, whose candle was still giving light; ‘God help us all.’

And indeed there seemed to be much need for such help then. Here in the bowels of the earth, under the bed of the ocean, in almost complete darkness, and with a raving madman and murderer struggling with another criminal — as Anak truly was — the position was enough to unsettle the sanest human being.

Dericka did not lose her head. Grasping her lover’s hand she drew him swiftly up the slope on the way to the ten-foot ladder, whence they could easily regain the upper world. Sir Hannibal, holding the half-fainting Anne on his arm, tried to push past Anak and Morgan to go the same way, but they swayed from side to side and would not allow him to pass.

All at once they heard a noise like thunder, and a moment later Polwin came running out from the darkness towards the glimmer of the candle held by the baronet.

‘I’ve let the ocean in,’ he cried, ‘Morgan will drown, Morgan —’

The lunatic, hearing that hated voice, withdrew himself with a violent effort from Anak and threw himself like a wild beast of prey on the steward. At the same time a rush of water came through the levels from the back part of the mine. Without thinking, Trevick dragged Anne along the gallery which led to the shaft which was most difficult to climb. Noting his mistake, she wanted to turn back.

‘We can’t climb there — we can’t,’ she screamed, struggling.

‘We must — we must,’ panted the baronet, stumbling along over the uneven ground, which was now covered with salt water up to their ankles.

Polwin, screaming like a woman with terror, strove to get away from Morgan, and managed to grasp Anak’s arm. The giant, who had no desire to be drowned like a rat in a trap, shook him off. But Morgan, hearing the roar of the flood and feeling the water rising higher threw his arms round both men, shouting exultingly.

‘We’ll swim together in the water — we’ll swim — we’ll wash — Ha! Ha!’ His laughter echoed wildly through the galleries, and Anak swore, while his father wailed wildly, fighting all the time. A great wave came thundering through the level, and swept them along down the passage towards the flying forms of Sir Hannibal and Anne.

‘Leave me — leave me,’ cried Anne.

‘No! Courage! I’ll save you,’ gasped the baronet, and felt that he must risk all for this woman who risked so much for him. She stumbled and fell. He caught her in his arms, and with supernatural strength, as it seemed, waded waist deep in water to the shaft. Fortunately they were not far from it, and had just managed to get under the glimpse of daylight far overhead when wave after wave of the bitter incoming ocean came sweeping along the levels and past the shaft, filling that as they went along. And past them a writhing trio was carried, sucked down by the waters into the very depths of the mine. Morgan held father and son in a death grip, and Heaven only knows to what depths the bodies were sucked by the fierce power of the waves.

Sir Hannibal lifted Anne as high as he could. ‘Grasp that beam,’ he cried; ‘quick, quick, the water is gaining.’

With an effort of despair she stretched and swung herself on the decayed beam. Trevick followed, keeping as close to her as he could.

The water rose and rose with a sucking noise as though it wanted to drown them. By holding on to various projections and stone and beams the man and woman managed to float upward on the surface of the rising waters. Then, when nearly at the top, the water stopped rising, and the two clung to a great stone, expecting it every moment to give way.

Trevick shouted loudly. In a few minutes they saw two pale faces peering down. They were those of Forde and Dericka, and they could hear the girl cry aloud with joy.

‘We thought you were dead,’ she said gladly.

‘We will be soon. Help! help!’ gasped Sir Hannibal.

‘Wait — wait,’ shouted Forde, ‘there’s an old rusty chain dangling from the tower. Hold on!’

He ran away, and in ten minutes, which seemed like an eternity to the wretched pair, came back along with Dericka and a chain. Both the girl’s hands and those of her lover were bleeding from their efforts to detach the chain from a rusty old windlass. Forde let it down with the help of Dericka. Luckily it was not very heavy, and the links held fast. Anne caught at the chain, and, by holding on to the side of the shaft, was slowly drawn up. Then Sir Hannibal followed, and the two found themselves under the bright sky, saved from a most terrible death.

‘And the others?’ asked Dericka, trembling.

‘Dead!’ said Trevick solemnly.

Forde took off his cap. ‘I say what the judge says to a condemned prisoner,’ he said in a deep, slow voice — ‘God have mercy on their souls.’

* * * * *

Naturally there was great excitement when the whole story became known at St. Ewalds. Afterwards reporters came down and a full account was sent to the London papers. It was found impossible to empty the mine.

Apparently Polwin, alias Krent, alias Carney, knowing the weakness of the crust between the mine and the sea, had broken it through in the hope of drowning Morgan, who he feared, and his own son, Hugh, who might have witnessed against him as being implicated in the murder of John Bowring. But the idiot had fully revenged himself on the man who had caused him to kill his father and set fire to the Grange. Far in the bowels of the mine, deep in salt water, the three bodies rested, and the Tregeagle mine became a grave.

It was Mrs. Carney who exonerated the baronet. She came forward regardless that she might be arrested as an accomplice after the fact, and related her story. It seems that she had never met Polwin — in spite of the man’s statement to Oswald at the ‘King’s Arms’ — as he had always kept out of her way, until that fatal hour when he stumbled into her presence through having missed his way in the mist while seeking Anak. But the big quarryman had been forced through fear to confess to his mother that he had attempted the murder of Bowring, and that Morgan had really killed the millionaire. Far from being angry, Mrs. Carney commended her son for having got rid of a man she hated. But then Mrs. Carney hated everyone, although she could give no reason for doing so. The fact is, what with disappointment and a lonely life and a belief in her own powers of witchcraft, the woman’s mind had become unhinged. Her grievance against Sir Hannibal, as he proved, was entirely imaginary; and, indeed, since Bowring had been kind to her, she had no real reason to hate him. However, she thought she had, and so held her tongue. But hatred against the dead Polwin made her tell the truth, and Sir Hannibal, after being brought before a magistrate, was completely exonerated, and left the court, as the saying goes, without a stain on his character.

There was some talk of prosecuting Mrs. Carney, but the death of the quarryman finally completed the weakening of her mind. Instead of going to prison, she was placed in an asylum, and Trevick surrounded her with every comfort, as he reflected that only her testimony had saved his life.

It was certainly true that Polwin had confessed in the presence of Forde and Dericka and Anne. All the same, it was better that the final defence should come from an outsider. Mrs. Carney never recovered her wits, but died very shortly, after entering the asylum, cursing her husband, Bowring and Sir Hannibal with her last breath. The sole person she seemed to think kindly of was her son Anak, and it was his terrible death that finally unsettled her reason.

It had not been difficult to prove that the second will was a forgery. Mr. and Mrs. Trubby confessed under pressure that Polwin had forged the will and the name of the testator and had promised them three thousand pounds to go to America if they signed as witnesses. Forde caught the two as they were embarking, being sent post haste out of the country by uneasy consciences, and took them to Gratton. After they had made a signed deposition to the effect that the second will was forged, the lawyer let them go, and they departed without a penny for all their rascality. So the money remained with Dericka after all.

‘But we’ll divide it,’ said the girl, when Sir Hannibal was again free and restored to the good graces of his fellow-townsmen. — ‘You, papa, will take thirty thousand a year and marry Anne. Oswald and myself will take the rest, and —’

‘And become husband and wife,’ said Forde kissing her; ‘but what about Mrs. Krent, my dear?’

‘I’ll give Mrs. Krent and Jenny what they want — two thousand a year.’

‘Quite right, Dericka,’ said Sir Hannibal, with a trace of his old pompous manner; ‘you will give one thousand and I a similar amount.’

Great was the joy of poor Mrs. Krent and Jenny when they heard this. They were by the burning of the Grange homeless, and by the death of Bowring and Morgan friendless.

‘But it’s just as well, Miss,’ said the housekeeper, when everything was settled and she came to take leave of her benefactress; ‘we would have had to put poor Morgan in an asylum sooner or later, and then the poor creature would have died. I was fond of him.’

‘And so was I,’ said Jenny, who had been weeping. ‘If Morgan hadn’t been worried by his father and Mr. Polwin he would never have been so wicked.’

‘He’ll be judged differently to a sane person,’ said Dericka gently.

‘I’m sure I hope so,’ said Mrs. Krent; ‘however, he’s gone, and we haven’t even the satisfaction of burying him, seeing he’s in that dreadful mine. Oh, deary me, how awful it all has been.’

‘You have much to be thankful for, Mrs. Krent.’

‘Mrs. Ward, my dear; and that’s what I’m mainly thankful for. To think that such a terrible man will never bother me again is enough to send me crazy with joy. Jenny and me with our two thousand, thanks to you, dear Miss Trevick, will go to South Africa, and I dare say Jenny will marry again.’

‘Perhaps you will also, Mrs. Krent — I mean Mrs. Ward.’

‘Never, my dear; never,’ said the stout woman firmly. ‘I’ve had enough of men to last me for the rest of my life,’ and apparently she held to this, for although Jenny did marry, Mrs. Ward, formerly Mrs. Krent, continued to live single for the rest of her life. And that life, after all the storms Polwin had caused, was singularly peaceful.

Miss Warry was exposed for her lying prophecy, and might have been punished for knowing that Polwin intended to kill Bowring but that she fled to South America and changed her name.

Dericka always wondered how so meek a woman could have behaved so badly. But, then, it was the same with Miss Warry as it was with Mrs. Carney: both of them were women scorned, and all the world knows what Congreve said on that subject.

Later on Sir Hannibal married Anne Stretton, and he set about rebuilding the Grange. Dericka did not marry Forde for some months, as she wanted to see her father settled with Lady Trevick before leaving him. The trouble had done Sir Hannibal good, and he was sincerely repentant for all his shady doings in Africa. Needless to say, Anne made him a splendid wife, and even Miss Quinton was induced to change her opinion of the lady.

‘Yet, after all,’ said the new Lady Trevick, when she and Dericka were out watching the building of the new Grange, ‘I was an adventuress, you know, my dear.’

‘You are the best woman in the world,’ said Dericka, kissing her. ‘Few women would have done for my poor father what you have done.’

‘He saved my life, my dear.’

‘In order to gain the best wife in the world. By the way, Anne, what about Mr. Penrith?’

Lady Trevick coloured.

‘I think I treated him rather badly, my dear Dericka,’ she said in a low tone; ‘he has gone to America, and I hear that he is about to marry an heiress.’

‘In that case, when he consoles himself so quickly, I don’t think you need blame yourself very much,’ said Dericka dryly, ‘but here come papa and Oswald.’

Sir Hannibal, now looking quite his old self, came forward and greeted his wife with a smile. Then he carried her off to see about a new staircase upon which he wanted her opinion.

Left alone with Dericka, Oswald suddenly spoke.

‘Come down to the Tregeagle mine, Dericka.’

She drew back. ‘Why do you want to go to that horrid place?’

‘I’ll tell you when we get there.’

Dericka looked at him doubtfully, then curiosity got the better of her and she took his arm. They went down the high road and down the stony watercourse which led to the grey tower. It was a fine spring day, and Dericka enjoyed the walk. But she changed colour when she saw the scene of their misadventure, and drew back from the cliffs.

‘Oh, Oswald, to think that we might have been drowned had we not escaped by that easy shaft.’

‘As it was, your father and his wife were nearly drowned,’ said the barrister cheerfully; ‘come down, my dear.’

Still wondering, Dericka descended carefully. They looked into both shafts and found them pools of salt sea water. Then Oswald made Dericka sit down and went poking industriously amongst the rocks and grass. Finally he gave a cry of satisfaction, and came to Dericka bearing what looked like a red ball.

‘Oh,’ she said, turning pale and starting to her feet, ‘the Death’s Head! Where did you find it?’

‘In the herbage yonder, that is why I brought you down. I fancied that Morgan might have brought it down here when he left Mrs. Carney’s hut. I have searched several times, but without success. You have brought me good luck, dearest.’

‘And now?’ asked Dericka, eyeing the uncanny object with repulsion.

‘Now we’ll drop it into the mine,’ suiting the action to the word.

‘But why did you seek it at all?’ asked the girl, when the horrible scarlet, silver-crowned skull disappeared into the shaft.

‘We are to be married next week, my dear,’ he said seriously, ‘and I want every vestige of this terrible affair buried out of sight along with the bodies of those who worked so much ill.’

‘And then we’ll never speak of it any more,’ said Dericka hurriedly.

‘No.’ He pointed to the water in the shaft which had so nearly engulfed Sir Hannibal and Anne Stretton: ‘There is the last of the Death’s Head. We’ll never speak of it or talk of it again. But, after all, Dericka,’ he added, slipping his hand into hers, ‘it did bring us a certain amount of luck. We have thirty thousand a year, remember.’

‘We have each other,’ said Miss Trevick fondly, ‘but come away, Oswald; let us climb the cliff and leave the past behind us.’

They set their faces towards the future and climbed into the gay sunshine which was henceforth to gild their lives.

THE END

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