The Millionaire Mystery

THE DETECTIVE CLUB

FERGUS HUME

Peter Haining

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«HarperCollins»

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The Millionaire Mystery / P. Haining — «HarperCollins»,

Fergus Hume was renowned as the bestselling mystery writer of Victorian times after his first book, The Mystery of a Hansom Cab, broke all records. In 1901 he returned to form with this ingenious tale, selected to represent Hume's prolific output by Collins' Detective Club panel in 1930.Cicero Gramp was, according to himself, a 'professor of elocution and eloquence' – to anyone else he was no more than an engaging and extremely craft vagabond. Hence it was that he found himself awakened from his sleep in the corner of the churchyard, the cheapest available lodging, by men's voices at an hour past midnight. Two dark figures silhouetted for an instant against the white mausoleum where lay the body of the millionaire Richard Marlow. Then the turning of a key in the iron door of the vault. Silence. Two figures moving back into the night carrying a sinister burden – what Gramp guessed was the body of Marlow. But when a search was made in the vault, Marlow's coffin was found shut, and not empty: only the body in it was not Marlow's but that of another man – murdered! And that is only the first puzzle in The Millionaire Mystery . . .

Содержание

‘THE DETECTIVE STORY CLUB is a clearing house for the best detective and mystery stories chosen for you by a select committee of experts. Only the most ingenious crime stories will be published under the THE DETECTIVE STORY CLUB imprint. A special distinguishing stamp appears on the wrapper and title page of every THE DETECTIVE STORY CLUB book—the Man with the Gun. Always look for the Man with the Gun when buying a Crime book.’

Wm. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1929

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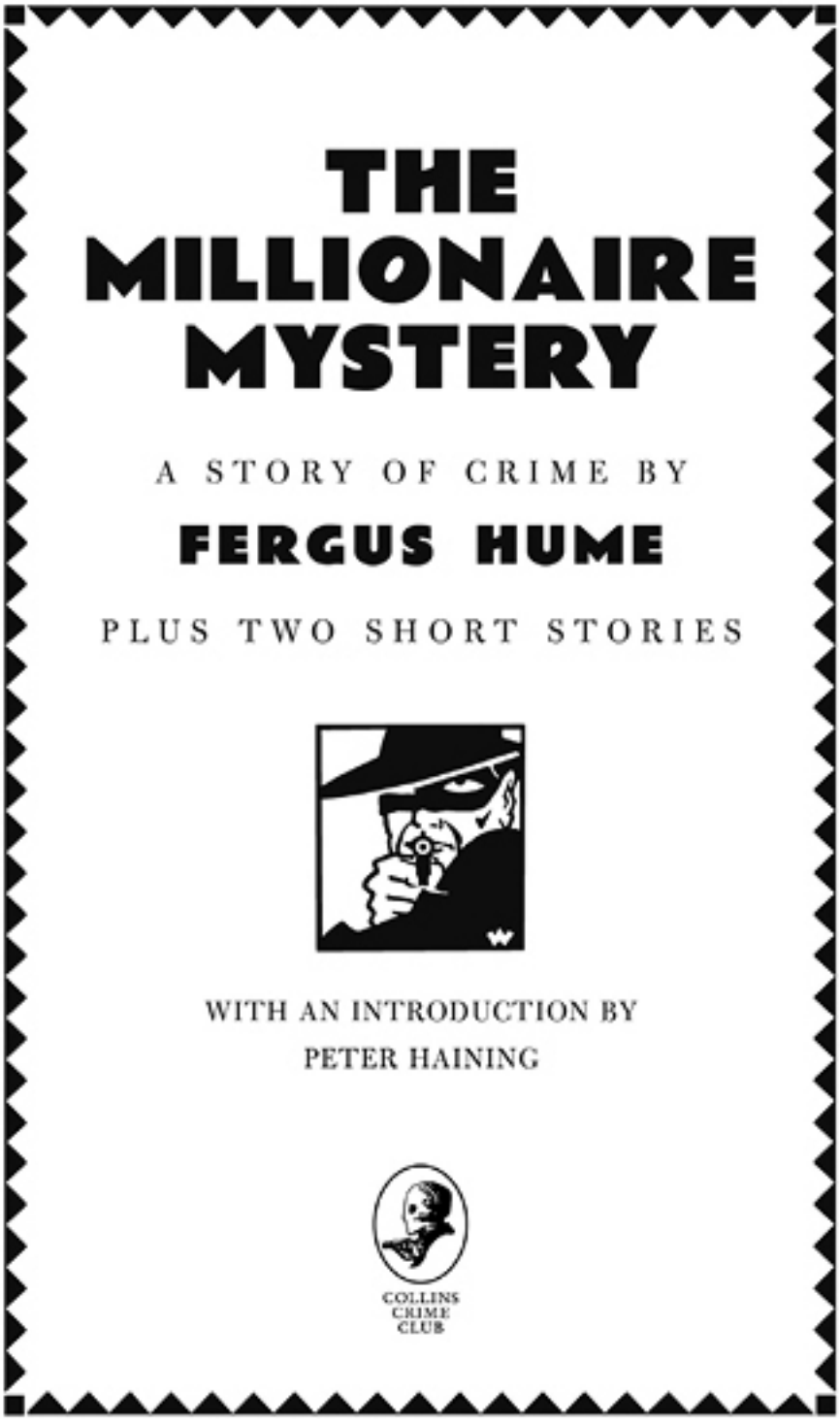

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INTRODUCTION

The growth of the railways in Britain, from the 1850s on, gave rise to the success of Victorian books of sensation. Coinciding with a shift from handmade books to machine-made paper and mass-produced bookbindings which dramatically reduced the costs, books became attractive with their two-, three- or four-colour illustrations—principally yellow but sometimes replaced by green, blue or grey—and their handy, pocket-sized format made them ideal for travellers, just like their descendants: today's paperbacks. Railway bookstalls were springing up at all the big stations, and those of W. H. Smith & Son in the south and John Menzies in the north were soon piled high with books and posters declaring, 'YELLOW-BACKS—High Quality Reading Only Two Shillings'. The books varied in length from 256 to 420 pages and offered customers a full-length novel or numerous short stories to while away their hours of travel. Although naturally enough the early titles from the publishers were cheap editions of the classic authors such as Jane Austen, Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Captain Marryat, Samuel Richardson and Sir Walter Scott, the 'yellow-backs' were not slow to include crime, mystery and detection stories. Among the early successes were the Chatto & Windus reprints of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) and *A Rogues' Life* (1870), and *The Masked Venus* (1866) by the American soldier-turned-storyteller Richard Henry Savage. The rights for Savage's book were purchased from America by Routledge, whose 'Railway Library', claiming to be 'The Cheapest Books Ever Published', began in 1848 and published some 1,200 titles over more than 50 years, making the company's fortune. The cover illustration for this and many other Routledge titles was by Walter Crane, who later provided the artwork for another popular title, Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery & Imagination*, in 1919.

A typical example of the publishing phenomenon of cheap fiction that took the British reading public by storm in the 1860s were the books featuring Mary Paschal, 'one of the much-dreaded, but little-known people called Female Detectives'. A dark-haired beauty with arching eyebrows and ever-alert eyes, she made her debut as the first lady crime fighter in Britain in the pages of *Experiences of a Lady Detective* published in 1861. The book, with its predominantly yellow illustration on strawboard covered by glazed paper, epitomized the 'yellow-back era', named after the unmistakable characteristic of the books (also dubbed 'mustard-plaster novels'), and tales of crime and mystery now became major elements of this incredible success story.

The author of *Experiences of a Lady Detective* was given as 'Anonyma' and the publisher, George Vickers of London, implied in the book and advertising that the 'experiences' had been written by the heroine herself. Just as the yellow covers were used to identify these inexpensive works, so the idea that the texts were written by real detectives was used to enhance their appeal. Whether Mary Paschal had any basis in fact or not, she is undoubtedly a worthy pioneer of crime fiction, and sold so well that in 1864 Vickers issued a second volume, *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, in which the intrepid heroine described tackling a further cross-section of rogues and villains, not to mention bringing about the downfall of a prominent Member of Parliament who had been using his position to pervert the course of justice and amass a fortune.

The picture of the criminal fraternity that Anonyma's titles offered readers was very different from the subject of the two books credited with starting the 'yellow-back era'. These were a culinary guide, *Letters Left at the Pastry Cooks* by Horace Mayhew, and *Money: How To Get, How To Keep, and How To Use It*, both issued in April 1853 by a London firm, Ingram, Cooke & Co. The two books with their eye-catching, illustrated covers were in stark contrast to the plain cloth or leather-bound volumes of the time. They were aimed unashamedly at providing inexpensive reading for the masses, and it was the pioneer 'self-help' title, *Money*, with its vivid yellow covers, that gave the entire series its name and established the format that other publishers were soon following. The major players in this area of publishing would soon prove to be Vickers, George Routledge & Sons, Chatto & Windus

and Ward Lock; the latter would become even more famous for publishing the first Sherlock Holmes case, 'A Study in Scarlet', in 1887.

Far and away the single most popular crime 'yellow-back' was *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, a novel originally published in Melbourne, Australia, by the author, Fergus Hume (1859–1932), at his own expense. There is, in fact, probably no more unlikely success story in the history of crime fiction publishing than this tale of a brutal crime in which the identity of the killer is actually given away in the preface! Hume had been born in England to Glaswegian parents, but emigrated with his family to Dunedin in New Zealand, and Fergus was educated at the High School there. He afterwards passed through the university of Otago with distinction and qualified as a barrister in 1885. Rather than go into legal practice, he sailed to Victoria, finding work for three years as a law clerk in Melbourne while attempting to further his ambitions as a playwright. In an attempt to augment his income, he asked a local bookseller what kind of book sold best. Hume wrote later, 'He replied that the detective sales of Émile Gaboriau had a large sale; and as, at this time, I had never heard of this author, I bought all his works and determined to write a book of the same class containing a mystery, murder and a description of the low life of Melbourne.'

Unable to find a publisher for *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, Hume decided to publish the book himself and just about covered his costs on the first printing. One purchaser of the book, however, was an Englishman who evidently had an eye for a commercial prospect. He promptly bought the rights from the author for just £50, set up 'The Hansom Cab Publishing Company' in London, and launched the book on to the nation's railway bookstalls. With its simple yellow cover and illustration of a hansom cab, it rapidly sold 350,000 copies, a figure which was doubled when the story was reprinted in America. By the end of the century, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* had also been translated into twelve foreign languages.

Hume, who was still in Australia while all this was happening, scraped together enough money for a fare to England and arrived in London to find his book everywhere and his name on everyone's lips. It should have made him wealthy, but having sold the copyright he was not entitled to another penny. Disappointed but not downhearted, Hume settled in Essex and in the years that followed tried desperately to repeat his success, writing over 100 more novels—including *Madame Midas* (1888), *For the Defense* (aka *The Devil-Stick*, 1898) and the optimistically entitled *The Mystery of a Motor Cab* (1908)—but none achieved anything like the popularity of the first book. Today, in most histories of crime fiction, Hume is dismissed as a hack whose books are unreadable and whose most famous story was 'tedious from start to finish'. Yet *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* outsold the works of Poe, Collins and even Conan Doyle for years, and more copies were bought in its 'yellow-back' format than any other title. Furthermore, the original 1886 Melbourne edition printed by Kemp & Boyce has the distinction today of being one of the rarest books in the world—only two copies are known to exist.

Given Hume's renown, it was probably inevitable that the publishers of William Collins' Detective Story Club should include him in their classic crime series, choosing to license *The Millionaire Mystery*, originally published in 1901 when yellow-backs were taking their last bow. This was how their Editor introduced the reissue in 1930:

Since the publication of *The Mystery of the Hansom Cab* in 1887 [sic] Fergus Hume has written steadily and today he has to his credit a list of books which even in its length has few equals and certainly is unique so far as maintenance of literary standard is concerned. He is one of the pioneers of the present group of detective writers of the thriller variety and he will remain one of the best if only for such tales as *The Harlequin Opal* [1893], *The Dwarf's Chamber* [1896], *The Bishop's Secret* [1900], and the present book—*The Millionaire Mystery*.

This story is very typical of the author and for that reason alone it cannot afford to be neglected by the connoisseur of crime fiction. But as a mystery tale, its entertainment value alone makes it a book to be read. Fergus Hume has woven throughout the murder-plot a delightful love story which he introduces amid the thrills much in the way that Shakespeare introduces the hall-porter in *Macbeth*—

to ‘heighten’ the tragedy. Perhaps the one thing about the novel, other than the actual plot itself, that you will never forget, is the character of Cicero Gramp. In his portrayal of this vagabond elocutionist, the author has rivalled Dickens himself, to whose literary style, incidentally, his bears a marked resemblance.

In reading *The Millionaire Mystery* you will be convinced that ‘it is impossible not to be thrilled’ by someone whose popularity at the moment may be less than one we can think of, but whose high place in Detective Fiction can never be taken from him.

PETER HAINING

2002

CHAPTER I
A MIDNIGHT SURPRISE

STEERING his course by a tapering spire notched in the eye of the sunset, a tramp slouched along the Heathton Road. From the western sky a flood of crimson light poured over the dusty white highway, which led straightly across the moor. To right and left, acres of sear coarse herbage rolled towards the distant hills, now black against the flaming horizon. In the quivering air gnats danced and flickered; the earth panted with the thirst of a lengthy drought, and the sky arched itself over the heat of a fiery furnace.

For many hours the tramp had held on steadily in the pitiless glare of the mid-June sun, and now that he saw ahead of him the spire and house-roofs and encircling trees of the village whither he was bound, a sigh of relief burst from him.

To ease his aching feet he sat down beside a mouldering millstone and wiped his beaded brow with a red bandana. He did not swear, which was singular in a tramp.

Apparently he had but recently joined the cadging profession, for about him there lingered an air of respectability and the marks of a prosperity not wholly decayed. He was stout, rubicund of countenance, and he wheezed like a sick grampus. Watery grey eyes and a strawberry nose revealed the seasoned toper; thick lips and a slack mouth the sensualist. As a begging friar of mediaeval times he would have been altogether admirable; as a modern tramp he was out of the picture.

Clothed in a broadcloth frock-coat considerably the worse for wear, he wore—oddly enough for a tramp—gaiters over his gouty-looking boots. His black gloves were darned at the finger-tips, and his battered silk hat had been ironed and brushed with sedulous care. This rook-like plumage was now plentifully sprinkled with the white dust of travel. His gait, in spite of his blistered feet, was dignified, and his manners were imposing.

The road was lonely, likewise the heath. There was no one in sight, not even a returning ploughman; but the recumbent wayfarer could hear, mellowed by distance, the bells of homing cows. Beasts as they were, he envied them. They at least had a place to sleep in for the night; he was without a home, without even the necessary money to procure shelter. Luckily it was summer-time, dry and warm. Also the tramp affected the philosopher.

'This,' he remarked, eyeing a sixpence extracted from the knotted corner of his handkerchief, 'is a drink—two drinks if I take beer, which is gouty. But it is not a meal nor a bed. No! one drink, and a morsel of bread-and-cheese. But the bed! Ah!' He stared at the coin with a sigh, as though he hoped it would swell into a shilling. It did not, and he sighed again. 'Shall I have good luck in this place?' cried he. 'Heads I shall, tails I shan't.' The coin spun and fell heads. 'Ha!' said the tramp, getting on to his feet, 'this must be seen to. I fly to good fortune on willing feet,' and he resumed his trudging.

A quarter of an hour brought him to the encircling wood. He passed beyond pine and larch and elm into a cosy little village with one street. This was broken in the centre by an expanse of green turf surrounded by red-roofed houses, amongst them—as he saw from the swinging sign—a public-house, called, quaintly enough, the Good Samaritan.

'Scriptural,' said the stranger—'possibly charitable. Let us see.' He strode forward into the taproom.

In the oiliest of tones he inquired for the landlord. But in this case, it appeared, there was no landlord, for a vixenish little woman, lean as a cricket and as shrill, bounced out with the information that she, Mrs Timber, was the landlady. Her husband, she snapped out, was dead. To the tramp this hostess appeared less promising than the seductive sign, and he quailed somewhat at the sight of her. However, with a brazen assurance born of habit, he put a bold face on it, peremptorily demanding bread, cheese, and ale. The request for a bed he left in abeyance, for besides the vixenish Mrs Timber

there hovered around a stalwart pot-boy, whose rolled-up sleeves revealed a biceps both admirable and formidable.

'Bread, cheese, and ale,' repeated the landlady, with a sharp glance at her guest's clerical dress, 'for this. And who may you be, sir?' she asked, with a world of sarcasm expended on the 'sir.'

'My name is Cicero Gramp. I am a professor of elocution and eloquence.'

'Ho! A play-actor?' Mrs Timber became more disdainful than ever.

'Not at all; I am not on the boards. I recite to the best families. The Bishop of Idlechester has complimented me on my—'

'Here's the bread-and-cheese,' interrupted the landlady, 'likewise the beer. Sixpence!'

Very reluctantly Mr Gramp produced his last remaining coin. She dropped it into a capacious pocket, and retired without vouchsafing him another word. Cicero, somewhat discouraged by this reception, congratulated himself that the night was fine for out-of-door slumber. He ensconced himself in a corner with his frugal supper, and listened to the chatter going on around him. It appeared to be concerned with the funeral of a local magnate. Despite the prophecy of the coin, now in Mrs Timber's pocket, Cicero failed to see how he could extract good fortune out of his present position. However, he listened; some chance word might mean money.

'Ah! 'tis a fine dry airy vault,' said a lean man who proved to be a stonemason. 'Never built a finer, I didn't, nor my mates neither. An' Muster Marlow'll have it all to 'isself.'

'Such a situation!' croaked another. 'Bang opposite the Lady Chapel! An' the view from that there vault! I don't know as any corp 'ud require a finer.'

'Mr Marlow'll be lonely by himself,' sighed a buxom woman; 'there's room for twenty coffins, an' only one in the vault. 'T'ain't natural-like.'

'Well,' chimed in the village schoolmaster, ''twill soon fill. There's Miss Marlow.'

'Dratted nonsense!' cried Mrs Timber, making a dash into the company with a tankard of beer in each hand. 'Miss Sophy'll marry Mr Thorold, won't she? An' he, as the Squire of Heathton, 'as a family vault, ain't he? She'll sleep beside him as his wife, lawfully begotten.'

'The Thorolds' vault is crowded,' objected the stonemason. 'Why, there's three-hundred-year dead folk there! A very old gentry lot, the Thorolds.'

'Older than your Marlows!' snapped Mrs Timber. 'Who was he afore he came to take the Moat House five year ago? Came from nowhere—a tree without a root.'

The schoolmaster contradicted.

'Nay, he came from Africa, I know—from Mashonaland, which is said to be the Ophir of King Solomon. And Mr Marlow was a millionaire!'

'Much good his money'll do him now,' groaned the buxom woman, who was a Dissenter. 'Ah! Dives in torment.'

'You've no call to say that, Mrs Berry. Mr Marlow wasn't a bad man.'

'He was charitable, I don't deny, an' went to church regular,' assented Mrs Berry; 'but he died awful sudden. Seems like a judgment for something he'd done.'

'He died quietly,' said the schoolmaster. 'Dr Warrender told me all about it—a kind of fit at ten o'clock last Thursday, and on Friday night he passed away as a sleeping child. He was not even sufficiently conscious to say good-bye to Miss Sophy.'

'Ah, poor girl! she's gone to the seaside with Miss Parsh to nurse her sorrow.'

'It will soon pass—soon pass,' observed the schoolmaster, waving his pipe. 'The young don't think much of death. Miss Sophy's rich, too—rich as the Queen of Sheba, and she will marry Mr Thorold in a few months. Funeral knells will give way to wedding-bells, Mrs Berry.'

'Ah!' sighed Mrs Berry, feeling she was called upon for an appropriate sentiment; 'you may say so, Mr Stack. Such is life!'

Cicero, munching his bread-and-cheese, felt that his imposing personality was being neglected, and seized upon what he deemed his opportunity.

'If this company will permit,' he said, 'I propose now to give a recitation apropos of the present melancholy event. Need I say I refer to the lamented death of Mr Marlow?'

'I'll have no godless mumming here,' said Mrs Timber firmly. 'Besides, what do you know about Mr Marlow?'

Whereupon Cicero lied lustily to impress the bumpkins, basing his fiction upon such facts as his ears had enabled him to come by.

'Marlow!' he wailed, drawing forth his red bandana for effect. 'Did I not know him as I know myself? Were we not boys together till he went to Africa?'

'Perhaps you can tell us about Mr Marlow,' said the schoolmaster eagerly. 'None of us knows exactly who he was. He appeared here with his daughter some five years ago, and took the Moat House. He was rich, and people said he had made his riches in South Africa.'

'He did! he did!' said Cicero, deeply affected. 'Millions he was worth—millions! I came hither to see him, and I arrive to find the fond friend of my youth dead. Oh, Jonathan, my brother Jonathan!'

'His name was Richard,' said Mrs Timber suspiciously.

'I know it, I know it. I use the appellation Jonathan merely in illustration of the close friendship which was between us. I am David.'

'H'm!' snorted Mrs Timber, eyeing him closely, 'and who was Mr Marlow?'

This leading question perplexed Mr Gramp not a little, for he knew nothing about the man.

'What!' he cried, with simulated horror. 'Reveal the secrets of the dead? Never! never!'

'Secrets?' repeated the lean stonemason eagerly. 'Ah! I always thought Mr Marlow had 'em. He looked over his shoulder too often for my liking. An' there was a look on his face frequent which pointed, I may say, to a violent death.'

'Ah! say not that my friend Dick Marlow came to an untimely end.'

This outcry came from Cicero; it was answered by Mrs Timber.

'He died of a fit,' she said tartly, 'and that quietly enough, considering as Dr Warrender can testify. But now we've talked enough, an' I'm going to lock up; so get out, all of you!'

In a few minutes the taproom was cleared and the lights out. Cicero, greatly depressed, lingered in the porch, wondering how to circumvent the dragon.

'Well,' snapped that amiable beast, 'what are you waitin' for?'

'You couldn't give me a bed for the night?'

'Course I could, for a shillin'.'

'I haven't a shilling, I regret to say.'

'Then you'd best get one, or go without your bed,' replied the lady, and banged the door in his face.

Under this last indignity even Cicero's philosophy gave way, and he launched an ecclesiastic curse at the inhospitable inn.

Fortunately the weather was warm and tranquil. Not a breath of wind stirred the trees. The darkling earth was silent—silent as the watching stars. Even the sordid soul of the vagabond was stirred by the solemn majesty of the sky. He removed his battered hat and looked up.

'The heavens are telling the glory of God,' he said; but, not recollecting the rest of the text, he resumed his search for a resting-place.

It was now only between nine and ten o'clock, yet, as he wandered down the silent street, he could see no glimmer of a light in any window. His feet took him, half unconsciously as it were, by the path leading towards the tapering spire. He went on through a belt of pines which surrounded the church, and came suddenly upon the graveyard, populous with the forgotten dead—at least, he judged they were forgotten by the state of the tombstones.

On the hither side he came upon a circular chapel, with lance-shaped windows and marvellous decoration wrought in greystone on the outer walls. Some distance off rose a low wall, encircling the

graveyard, and beyond the belt of pines through which he had just passed stretched the league-long herbage of the moor. He guessed this must be the Lady Chapel.

Between the building and the low wall he noticed a large tomb of white marble, surmounted by a winged angel with a trumpet. 'Dick Marlow's tomb,' he surmised. Then he proceeded to walk round it as that of his own familiar friend, for he had already half persuaded himself into some such belief.

But he realized very soon that he had not come hither for sightseeing, for his limbs ached, and his feet burned, and his eyes were heavy with sleep. He rolled along towards a secluded corner, where the round of the Lady Chapel curved into the main wall of the church. There he found a grassy nook, warm and dry. He removed his gloves with great care, placed them in his silk hat, and then took off his boots and loosened his clothes. Finally he settled himself down amid the grass, put a hand up either coat-sleeve for warmth, and was soon wrapped in a sound slumber.

He slept on undisturbed until one o'clock, when—as say out-of-door observers—the earth turns in her slumber. This vagrant, feeling as it were the stir of Nature, turned too. A lowing of cows came from the moor beyond the pines. A breath of cool air swept through the branches, and the sombre boughs swayed like the plumes of a hearse. Across the face of the sky ran a shiver. He heard distinctly what he had not noticed before, the gush of running water. He roused himself and sat up alert, and strained his hearing. What was it he heard now? He listened and strained again. Voices surely! Men's voices!

There could be no mistake. Voices he heard, though he could not catch the words they said. A tremor shook his whole body. Then, curiosity getting the better of his fear, he wriggled forward flat on his stomach until he was in such a position that he could peer round the corner of the Lady Chapel. Here he saw a sight which scared him.

Against the white wall of the mausoleum bulked two figures, one tall, the other short. The shorter carried a lantern. They stood on the threshold of the iron door, and the tall man was listening. They were nearer now, so that he could hear their talk very plainly.

'All is quiet,' said the taller man. 'No one will suspect. We'll get him away easily.'

Then Cicero heard the key grate in the lock, saw the door open and the men disappear into the tomb. He was sick with terror, and was minded to make a clean bolt of it; but with the greatest effort he controlled his fears and remained. There might be money in this adventure.

In ten minutes the men came out carrying a dark form between them, as Cicero guessed, the dead body of Richard Marlow. They set down their burden, made fast the door, and took up again the sinister load. He saw them carry it towards the low stone wall. Over this they lifted it, climbed over themselves, and disappeared into the pine-woods.

Cicero waited until he could no longer hear the rustle of their progress; then he crept cautiously forward and tried the door of the tomb. It was fast locked.

'Resurrection-men! body-snatchers!' he moaned.

He felt shaken to his very soul by the ghastliness of the whole proceeding. Then suddenly the awkwardness of his own position, if by chance anyone should find him there, rushed in upon his mind, and, without so much as another glance, he made off as quickly as he could in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER II
THE HUT ON THE HEATH

'WELL, I'm glad it's all over,' said the footman, waving a cigar stolen from the box of his master. 'Funerals don't suit me.'

'Yet we must all 'ave one of our own some day,' said the cook, who was plainly under the influence of gin; 'an' that pore Miss Sophy—me 'art bleeds for 'er!'

'An' she with 'er millions,' growled a red-faced coachman. 'Wot rot!'

'Come now, John, you know Miss Sophy was fond of her father'—this from a sprightly housemaid, who was trimming a hat.

'I dunno why,' said John. 'Master was as cold as ice, an' as silent as 'arf a dozen graves.'

The scullery-maid shuddered, and spread out her grimy hands.

'Oh, Mr John, don't talk of graves, please! I've 'ad the nightmare over 'em.'

'Don't put on airs an' make out as 'ow you've got nerves, Cammelliar,' put in the cook tearfully. 'It's me as 'as 'em—I've a bundle of 'em—real shivers. Ah, well! we're cut down like green bay-trees, to be sure. Pass that bottle, Mr Thomas.'

This discussion took place in the kitchen of the Moat House. The heiress and Miss Parsh, the housekeeper, had departed for the seaside immediately after the funeral, and in the absence of control, the domestics were making merry. To be sure, Mr Marlow's old and trusted servant, Joe Brill, had been told off to keep them in order, but just at present his grief was greater than his sense of duty. He was busy now sorting papers in the library—hence the domestic chaos.

It was, in truth, a cheerful kitchen, more especially at the present moment, with the noonday sun streaming in through the open casements. A vast apartment with a vast fireplace of the baronial hall kind; brown oaken walls and raftered roof; snow-white dresser and huge deal table, and a floor of shining white tiles.

There was a moment's silence after the last unanswerable observation of the cook. It was broken by a voice at the open door—a voice which boomed like the drone of a bumble-bee.

'Peace be unto this house,' said the voice richly, 'and plenty be its portion.'

The women screeched, the men swore—since the funeral their nerves had not been quite in order—and all eyes turned towards the door. There, in the hot sunshine, stood an enormously fat old man, clothed in black, and perspiring profusely. It was, in fact, none other than Cicero Gramp, come in the guise of Autolycus to pick up news and unconsidered trifles. He smiled benignly, and raised his fat hand.

'Peace, maid-servants and men-servants,' said he, after the manner of Chadband. 'There is no need for alarm. I am a stranger, and you must take me in.'

'Who the devil are you?' queried the coachman.

'We want no tramps here,' growled the footman.

'I am no tramp,' said Cicero mildly, stepping into the kitchen. 'I am a professor of elocution and eloquence, and a friend of your late master's. He went up in the world, I dropped down. Now I come to him for assistance, and I find him occupying the narrow house; yes, my friends, Dick Marlow is as low as the worms whose prey he soon will be. *Pax vobiscum!*'

'Calls master "Dick",' said the footman.

'Sez 'e's an old friend,' murmured the cook.

They looked at each other, and the thought in every mind was the same. The servants were one and all anxious to hear the genesis of their late master, who had dropped into the Moat House, as from the skies, some five years before. Mrs Crammer, the cook, rose to the occasion with a curtsy.

'I'm sure, sir, I'm sorry the master ain't here to see you,' she said, polishing a chair with her apron. 'But as you says—or as I take it you means—'e's gone where we must all go. Take a seat, sir, and I'll tell Joe, who's in the library.'

'Joe—my old friend Joe!' said Cicero, sitting down like a mountain. 'Ah! the faithful fellow!'

This random remark brought forth information, which was Cicero's intention in making it.

'Faithful!' growled the coachman, 'an' why not? Joe Brill was paid higher nor any of us, he was; just as of living all his life with an iceberg deserved it!'

'Poor Dick *was* an iceberg!' sighed Cicero pensively. 'A cold, secretive man.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Crammer, wiping her eye, 'you may well say that. He 'ad secrets, I'm sure, and guilty ones, too!'

'We all have our skeletons, ma'am. But would you mind giving me something to eat and to drink? for I have walked a long way. I am too poor,' said Cicero, with a sweet smile, 'to ride, as in the days of my infancy, but *spero meliora*.'

'Talking about skeletons, sir,' said the footman when Mr Gramp's jaws were fully occupied, 'what about the master's?'

'Ah!' said Gramp profoundly. 'What indeed!'

'But whatever it is, it has to do with the West Indies,' said the man.

'Lor'!' exclaimed the housemaid, 'and how do you know that, Mr Thomas?'

'From observation, Jane, my dear,' Thomas smiled loftily. 'A week or two afore master had the fit as took him, I brought in a letter with the West Indy stamp. He turned white as chalk when he saw it, and tore it open afore I could get out of the room. I 'ad to fetch a glass of whisky. He was struck all of a 'eap—gaspin', faintin', and cussin' orful.'

'Did he show it to Miss Sophy?' asked Mrs Crammer.

'Not as I knows of. He kept his business to hisself,' replied Thomas.

Gramp was taking in all this with greedy ears.

'Ha!' he said, 'when you took in the letter, might you have looked at the postmark, my friend?'

With an access of colour, the footman admitted that he had been curious enough to do so.

'And the postmark was Kingston, Jamaica,' said he.

'It recalls my youth,' said Cicero. 'Ah! they were happy, happy days!'

'What was Mr Marlow, sir?'

'A planter of—of—rice,' hazarded Gramp. He knew that there were planters in the West Indies, but he was not quite sure what it was they planted. 'Rice—acres of it!'

'Well, he didn't make his money out of that, sir,' growled the coachman.

'No, he did not,' admitted the professor of elocution. 'He acquired his millions in Mashonaland—the Ophir of the Jews.'

This last piece of knowledge had been acquired from Slack, the schoolmaster.

'He was precious careful not to part with none of it,' said the footman.

'Except to Dr Warrender,' said the cook. 'The doctor was always screwing money out of him. Not that it was so much 'im as 'is wife. I can't abear that doctor's wife—a stuck-up peacock, I call her. She fairly ruined her husband in clothes. Miss Sophy didn't like her, neither.'

'Dick's child!' cried Gramp, who had by this time procured a cigar from the footman. 'Ah! is little Sophy still alive?'

He lighted the cigar and puffed luxuriously.

'Still alive!' echoed Mrs Crammer, 'and as pretty as a picture. Dark 'air, dark eyes—not a bit like 'er father.'

'No,' said Cicero, grasping the idea. 'Dick was fair when we were boys. I heard rumours that little Sophy was engaged—let me see—to a Mr Thorold.'

'Alan Thorold, Esquire,' corrected the coachman gruffly; 'one of the oldest families hereabouts, as lives at the Abbey farm. He's gone with her to the seaside.'

'To the seaside? Not to Brighton?'

'Nothin' of the sort—to Bournemouth, if you know where that is.'

'I know some things, my friend,' said Cicero mildly. 'It was Bournemouth I meant—not unlike Brighton, I think, since both names begin with a B. I know that Miss Marlow—dear little Sophy!—is staying at the Imperial Hotel, Bournemouth.'

'You're just wrong!' cried Thomas, falling into the trap; 'she is at the Soudan Hotel. I've got the address to send on letters.'

'Can I take them?' asked Gramp, rising. 'I am going to Bournemouth to see little Sophy and Mr Thorold. I shall tell them of your hospitality.'

Before the footman could reply to this generous offer, the page-boy of the establishment darted in much excited.

'Oh, here's a go!' he exclaimed. 'Dr Warrender's run away, an' the Quiet Gentleman's followed!'

'Wot d'ye mean, Billy?'

'Wot I say. The doctor ain't bin 'ome all night, nor all mornin', an' Mrs Warrender's in hysterics over him. Their 'ousemaid I met shoppin' tole me.'

The servants looked at one another. Here was more trouble, more excitement.

'And the Quiet Gentleman?' asked the cook with ghoulish interest.

'He's gone, too. Went out larst night, an' never come back. Mrs Marry thinks he's bin murdered.'

There was a babel of voices and cries, but after a moment quiet was restored. Then Cicero placed his hand on the boy's head.

'My boy,' he said pompously, 'who is the Quiet Gentleman? Let us be clear upon the point of the Quiet Gentleman.'

'Don't you know, sir?' put in the eager cook. 'He's a mystery, 'aving bin staying at Mrs Marry's cottage, she a lone widder taking in boarders.'

'I'll give a week's notice!' sobbed the scullery-maid. 'These crimes is too much for me.'

'I didn't say the Quiet Gentleman 'ad been murdered,' said Billy, the page; 'but Mrs Marry only thinks so, cos 'e ain't come 'ome.'

'As like as not he's cold and stiff in some lonely grave!' groaned Mrs Crammer hopefully.

'The Quiet Gentleman,' said Cicero, bent upon acquiring further information—'tall, yellow-bearded, with a high forehead and a bald head?'

'Well, I never, sir!' cried Jane, the housemaid. 'If you ain't describing Dr Warrender! Did you know him, sir?'

Cicero was quite equal to the occasion.

'I knew him professionally. He attended me for a relaxed throat. I was *vox et praeterea nihil* until he cured me. But what was this mysterious gentleman like? Short, eh?'

'No; tall and thin, with a stoop. Long white hair, longer beard and black eyes like gimblets,' gabbled the cook. 'I met 'im arter dark one evenin', and I declare as 'is eyes were glow-worms. Ugh! They looked me through and through. I've never bin the same woman since.'

At this moment a raucous voice came from the inner doorway.

'What the devil's all this?' was the polite question.

Cicero turned, and saw a heavily-built man surveying the company in general, and himself in particular, anything but favourably. His face was a mahogany hue, and he had a veritable tangle of whiskers and hair. The whole cut of the man was distinctly nautical, his trousers being of the dungaree, and his pea-jacket plentifully sprinkled with brass buttons. In his ears he wore rings of gold, and his clenched fists hung by his side as though eager for any emergency, and 'the sooner the better'. That was how he impressed Cicero, who, in nowise fancying the expression on his face, edged towards the door.

'Oh, Joe!' shrieked the cook, 'wot a turn you give me! an' sich news as we've 'ad!'

'News?' said Joe uneasily, his eyes still on Cicero.

'Mrs Warrender's lost her husband, and the Quiet Gentleman's disappeared mysterious!'

'Rubbish! Get to your work, all of you!'

So saying, Joe drove the frightened crowd hither and thither to their respective duties, and Cicero, somewhat to his dismay, found himself alone with the buccaneer, as he had inwardly dubbed the newcomer.

'Who the devil are you?' asked Joe, advancing.

'Fellow,' replied Cicero, getting into the doorway, 'I am a friend of your late master. Cicero Gramp is my name. I came here to see Dick Marlow, but I find he's gone aloft.'

Joe turned pale, even through his tan.

'A friend of Mr Marlow,' he repeated hoarsely. 'That's a lie! I've been with him these thirty years, and I never saw you!'

'Not in Jamaica?' inquired Cicero sweetly.

'Jamaica? What do you mean?'

'What I wrote in that letter your master received before he died.'

'Oh, you liar! I know the man who wrote it.' Joe clenched his fists more tightly and swung forward. 'You're a rank impostor, and I'll hand you over to the police, lest I smash you completely!'

Cicero saw he had made a mistake, but he did not flinch. Hardihood alone could carry him through now.

'Do,' he said. 'I'm particularly anxious to see the police, Mr Joe Brill.'

'Who are you, in Heaven's name?' shouted Joe, much agitated. 'Do you come from him?'

'Perhaps I do,' answered Cicero, wondering to whom the 'him' might now refer.

'Then go back and tell him he's too late—too late, curse him! and you too, you lubber!'

'Very good.' Cicero stepped out into the hot sunshine. 'I'll deliver your message—for a sovereign.'

Joe Brill tugged at his whiskers, and cast an uneasy glance around. Evidently, he was by no means astute, and the present situation was rather too much for him. His sole idea, for some reason best known to himself, was to get rid of Cicero. With a groan, he plunged his huge fist into his pocket and pulled out a gold coin.

'Here, take it and go to hell!' he said, throwing it to Cicero.

'Mariner, *fata obstant*,' rolled Gramp in his deep voice.

Then he strode haughtily away. He looked round as he turned the corner of the house, and saw Joe clutching his iron-grey locks, still at the kitchen door.

So with a guinea in his pocket and a certain amount of knowledge which he hoped would bring him many more, Cicero departed, considerable uplifted. At the village grocery he bought bread, meat and a bottle of whisky, then he proceeded to shake the dust of Heathton off his feet. As he stepped out on to the moor he recalled the Latin words he had used, and he shuddered.

'Why did I say that?' he murmured. 'The words came into my head somehow. Just when Joe was talking of my employer, too! Who is my employer? What has he to do with all this? I'm all in the dark! So Dr Warrender's gone, and the Quiet Gentleman too. It must have been Dr Warrender who helped to steal Marlow's body. The description tallies exactly—tall, fair beard and bald. I wonder if t'other chap was the Quiet Gentleman? And what on earth could they want with the body? Anyway, the body's gone, and, as it's a millionaire corpse, I'll have some of its money or I'm a Dutchman!'

He stopped and placed his hand to his head.

'Bournemouth, Bournemouth!' he muttered. 'Ah, that's it—the Soudan Hotel, Bournemouth!'

It was now the middle of the afternoon, and, as he plodded on, the moor glowed like a furnace. No vestige of shade was there beneath which to rest, not even a tree or a bush. Then, a short distance up the road, he espied a hut. It seemed to be in ruins. It was a shepherd's hut, no doubt. The grass roof was torn, the door was broken, though closed, and the mud walls were crumbling. Impatient of any obstacle, he shoved his back against it and burst it open. It had been fastened with a piece

of rope. He fell in, headlong almost. But the gloom was grateful to him, though for the moment he could see but little.

When his eyes had become more accustomed to the half-light, the first object upon which they fell was a stiff human form stretched on the mud floor—a body with a handkerchief over the face. Yelling with terror, Cicero hurled himself out again.

'Marlow's body!' he gasped. 'They've put it here!'

With feverish haste he produced a corkscrew knife, and opened his whisky bottle. A fiery draught gave him courage. He ventured back into the hut and knelt down beside the body. Over the heart gaped an ugly wound, and the clothes were caked with blood. He gasped again.

'No fit this, but murder! Stabbed to the heart! And Joe—what does Joe know about this—and my employer? Lord!'

He snatched the handkerchief from the face, and fell back on his knees with another cry, this time of wonderment rather than of terror. He beheld the dead man's fair beard and bald head.

'Dr Warrender! And he was alive last night! This is murder indeed!'

Then his nerves gave way utterly, and he began to cry like a frightened child.

'Murder! Wilful and horrible murder!' wept the professor of elocution and eloquence.

CHAPTER III
AN ELEGANT EPISTLE

ON Bournemouth cliffs, where pine-trees cluster to the edge, sat an elderly spinster, knitting a homely stocking. She wore, in spite of the heat, a handsome cashmere shawl, pinned across her spare shoulders with a portrait brooch, and that hideous variety of Early Victorian head-gear known as the mushroom hat. From under this streamed a frizzy crop of grey curls, which framed a rosy, wrinkled face, brightened by twinkling eyes. These, sparkling as those of sweet seventeen, proved that their owner was still young in heart. This quaint survival of the last century knitted as assiduously as was possible under the circumstances, for at a discreet distance were two young people, towards whom she acted the part of chaperon. Doubtless such an office is somewhat out-of-date nowadays; but Miss Victoria Parsh would rather have died than have left a young girl alone in the company of a young man.

Yet she knew well enough that this young man was altogether above reproach, and, moreover, engaged by parental consent to the pretty girl to whom he was talking so earnestly. And no one could deny that Sophy Marlow was indeed charming. There was somewhat of the Andalusian about her. Not very tall, shaped delicately as a nymph, she well deserved Alan Thorold's name. He called her the 'Midnight Fairy', and, indeed, she looked like a brunette Titania. Her complexion was dark, and faintly flushed with red; her mouth and nose were exquisitely shaped, while her eyes were wells of liquid light—glorious Spanish orbs. About her, too, was that peculiar charm of personality which defies description.

Alan her lover was not tall, but uncommonly well-built and muscular, as fair as Sophy was dark —of that golden Saxon race which came before the Dane. Not that he could be called handsome. He was simply a clean, clear-skinned, well-groomed young Englishman, such as can be seen everywhere. Of a strong character, he exercised great control over his somewhat frivolous betrothed.

Miss Vicky, as the little spinster was usually called, cast romantic glances at the dark head and the fair one so close to one another. As a rule she would have been shocked at such a sight, but she knew how keenly Sophy grieved for the death of her father, and was only too willing that the girl should be comforted. And Miss Vicky occasionally touched the brooch, which contained the portrait of a red-coated officer. She also had lived in Arcady, but her Lieutenant had been shot in the Indian Mutiny, and Miss Vicky had left Arcady after a short sojourn, for a longer one in the work-a-day world. At once, she had lost her lover and her small income, and, like many another lonely woman, had had to turn to and work. But the memory of that short romance kept her heart young, hence her sympathy with this young couple.

'Poor dear father!' sighed Sophy, looking at the sea below, dotted with white sails. 'I can hardly believe he is gone. Only two weeks ago and he was so well, and now—oh! I was so fond of him! We were so happy together! He was cold to everyone else, but kindly to me! How could he have died so suddenly, Alan?'

'Well, of course, dear, a fit is always sudden. But try and bear up, Sophy dear. Don't give way like this. Be comforted.'

She looked up wistfully to the blue sky.

'At all events, he is at peace now,' she said, her lip quivering. 'I know he was often very unhappy, poor father! He used to sit for hours frowning and perplexed, as if there was something terrible on his mind.'

Alan's face was turned away now, and his brow was wrinkled. He seemed absorbed in thought, as though striving to elucidate some problem suggested by her words.

Wrapped up in her own sorrow, the girl did not notice his momentary preoccupation, but continued:

'He never said good-bye to me. Dr Warrender said he was insensible for so long before death that it was useless my seeing him. He kept me out of the room, so I only saw him—afterwards. I'll never forgive the doctor for it. It was cruel!'

She sobbed hysterically.

'Sophy,' said Alan suddenly, 'had your father any enemies?'

She looked round at him in astonishment.

'I don't know. I don't think so. Why should he? He was the kindest man in the world.'

'I am sure he was,' replied the young man warmly; 'but even the kindest may have enemies.'

'He might have made enemies in Africa,' she said gravely. 'It was there he made his money, and I suppose there are people mean enough to hate a man who is successful, especially if his success results in a fortune of some two millions. Father used to say he despised most people. That was why he lived so quietly at the Moat House.'

'It was particularly quiet till you came, Sophy.'

'I'm sure it was,' she replied, with the glimmer of a smile. 'Still, although *he* had not me, you had your profession.'

'Ah! my poor profession! I always regret having given it up.'

'Why did you?'

'You know, Sophy. I have told you a dozen times. I wanted to be a surgeon, but my father always objected to a Thorold being of service to his fellow-creatures. I could never understand why. The estate was not entailed, and by my father's will I was to lose it, or give up all hope of becoming a doctor. For my mother's sake I surrendered. But I would choose to be a struggling surgeon in London any day, if it were not for you, Sophy dear.'

'Horrid!' ejaculated Miss Marlow, elevating her nose. 'How can you enjoy cutting up people? But don't let us talk of these things; they remind me of poor dear father.'

'My dear, you really should not be so morbid. Death is only natural. It is not as though you had been with him all your life, instead of merely three years.'

'I know; but I loved him none the less for that. I often wonder why he was away so long.'

'He was making his fortune. He could not have taken you into the rough life he was leading in Africa. You were quite happy in your convent.'

'Quite,' she agreed, with conviction. 'I was sorry to leave it. The dear sisters were like mothers to me. I never knew my own mother. She died in Jamaica, father said, when I was only ten years old. He could not bear to remain in the West Indies after she died, so he brought me to England. While I was in the convent I saw him only now and again until I had finished my education. Then he took the Moat House—that was five years ago, and two years after that I came to live with him. That is all our history, Alan. But Joe Brill might know if he had any enemies.'

'Yes, he might. He lived thirty years with your father, didn't he? But he can keep his own counsel—no one better.'

'You are good at it too, Alan. Where were you last night? You did not come to see me.'

He moved uneasily. He had his own reasons for not wishing to give a direct answer.

'I went for a long walk—to—to—to think out one or two things. When I got back it was too late to see you.'

'What troubled you, Alan? You have looked very worried lately. I am sure you are in some trouble. Tell me, dear; I must share all your troubles.'

'My dearest, I am in no trouble'—he kissed her hand—'but I am your trustee, you know and it is no sinecure to have the management of two millions.'

'It's too much money,' she said. 'Let us dispose of some of it, then you need not be worried. Can I do what I like with it?'

'Most of it—there are certain legacies. I will tell you about them later.'

'I am afraid the estate will be troublesome to us, Alan. It's strange we should have so much money when we don't care about it. Now, there is Dr Warrender, working his life out for that silly extravagant wife of his!'

'He is very much in love with her, nevertheless.'

'I suppose that's why he works so hard. But she's a horrid woman, and cares not a snap of her fingers for him—not to speak of love! Love! why, she doesn't know the meaning of the word. We do!' And, bending over, Sophy kissed him.

Then promptly there came from Miss Parsh the reminder that it was time for tea.

'Very well, Vicky, I dare say Alan would like you to give him a cup,' replied Sophy.

'Frivolous as ever, Sophia! I give up a hope of forming your character—now!'

'Alan is doing that,' replied the girl.

In spite of her sorrow, Sophy became fairly cheerful on the way back to the hotel. Not so Alan. He was silent and thoughtful, and evidently meditating about the responsibilities of the Marlow estate. As they walked along the parade with their chaperon close behind, they came upon a crowd surrounding a fat man dressed in dingy black. He was reciting a poem, and his voice boomed out like a great organ. As they passed, Alan noticed that he darted a swift glance at them, and eyed Miss Marlow in a particularly curious manner. The recitation was just finished, and the hat was being sent round. Sophy, always kind-hearted, dropped in a shilling. The man chuckled.

'Thank you, lady,' said he; 'the first of many, I hope.'

Alan frowned, and drew his fiancée away. He took little heed of the remark at the time; but it occurred to him later when circumstances had arisen which laid more stress on its meaning.

Miss Vicky presided over the tea—a gentle feminine employment in which she excelled. She did most of the talking; for Sophy was silent, and Alan inclined to monosyllables. The good lady announced that she was anxious to return to Heathton.

'The house weighs on my mind,' said she, lifting her cup with the little finger curved. 'The servants are not to be trusted. I fear Mrs Crammer is addicted to ardent spirits. Thomas and Jane pay too much attention to one another. I feel a conviction that, during my absence, the bonds of authority will have loosened.'

'Joe,' said Alan, setting down his cup; 'Joe is a great disciplinarian.'

'On board a ship, no doubt,' assented Miss Vicky; 'but a rough sailor cannot possibly know how to control a household. Joseph is a fine, manly fellow, but boisterous—very boisterous. It needs my eye to make domestic matters go smoothly. When will you be ready to return, Sophy, my dear?'

'In a week—but Alan has suggested that we should go abroad.'

'What! and leave the servants to wilful waste and extravagance? My love!'—Miss Vicky raised her two mittened hands—'think of the bills!'

'There is plenty of money, Vicky.'

'No need there should be plenty of waste. No; if we go abroad, we must either shut up the house or let it.'

'To the Quiet Gentleman?' said Sophy, with a laugh.

Alan looked up suddenly.

'No, not to him. He is a mysterious person,' said Miss Vicky. 'I do not like such people, though I dare say it is only village gossip which credits him with a strange story.'

'Just so,' put in Alan. 'Don't trouble about him.'

Miss Vicky was still discussing the possibility of a trip abroad, when the waiter entered with a note for Sophy.

'It was delivered three hours ago,' said the man apologetically, 'and I quite forgot to bring it up. So many visitors, miss,' he added, with a sickly smile.

Sophy took the letter. The envelope was a thick creamy one, and the writing of the address elegant in the extreme.

'Who delivered it?' she asked.

'A fat man, miss, with a red face, and dressed in black.'

Alan's expression grew somewhat anxious.

'Surely that describes the man we saw reciting?'

'So it does.' Sophy eyed the letter dubiously. 'Had he a loud voice, Simmonds?'

'As big as a bell, miss, and he spoke beautiful: but he wasn't gentry, for all that,' finished Simmonds with conviction.

'You can go,' said Alan. Then he turned to Sophy, who was opening the envelope. 'Let me read that letter first,' he said.

'Why, Alan? There is no need. It is only a begging letter. Come and read it with me.'

He gave way, and looked over her shoulder at the elaborate writing.

'Miss' (it began),

'The undersigned, if handsomely remunerated, can give valuable information regarding the removal of the body of the late Richard Marlow from its dwelling in Heathton Churchyard. *Verbum dat sapienti!* Forward £100 to the undersigned at Dixon's Rents, Lambeth, and the information will be forthcoming. If the minions of the law are invoked the undersigned with vanish, and his information lost.

'Faithfully yours, Miss Sophia Marlow,

'CICERO GRAMP.'

As she comprehended the meaning of this extraordinary letter, Sophy became paler and paler. The intelligence that her father's body had been stolen was too much for her, and she fainted.

Thorold called loudly to Miss Vicky.

'Look after her,' he said, stuffing the letter into his pocket. 'I shall be back soon.'

'But what—what—?' began Miss Vicky.

She spoke to thin air. Alan was running at top speed along the parade in search of the fat man.

But all search was vain. Cicero, the astute, had vanished.

CHAPTER IV
ANOTHER SURPRISE

HEATHTON was only an hour's run by rail from Bournemouth, so that it was easy enough to get back on the same evening. On his return from his futile search for Cicero, Alan determined to go at once to the Moat House. He found Sophy recovered from her faint, and on hearing of his decision, she insisted upon accompanying him. She had told Miss Vicky the contents of the mysterious letter, and that lady agreed that they should leave as soon as their boxes could be packed.

'Don't talk to me, Alan!' cried Sophy, when her lover objected to this sudden move. 'It would drive me mad to stay here doing nothing, with that on my mind.'

'But, my dear girl, it may not be true.'

'If it is not, why should that man have written? Did you see him?'

'No. He has left the parade, and no one seems to know anything about him. It is quite likely that when he saw us returning to the hotel he cleared out. By this time I dare say he is on his way to London.'

'Did you see the police?' she asked anxiously.

'No,' said Alan, taking out the letter which had caused all this trouble; 'it would not be wise. Remember what he says here: If the police are called in he will vanish, and we shall lose the information he seems willing to supply.'

'I don't think that, Mr Thorold,' said Miss Vicky. 'This man evidently wants money, and is willing to tell the truth for the matter of a hundred pounds.'

'On account,' remarked Thorold grimly; 'as plain a case of blackmail as I ever heard of. Well, I suppose it is best to wait until we can communicate with this—what does he call himself?—Cicero Gramp, at Dixon's Rents, Lambeth. He can be arrested there, if necessary. What I want to do now is to find out if his story is true. To do this I must go at once to Heathton, see the Rector, and get the coffin opened.'

'I will come,' insisted Sophy. 'Oh, it is terrible to think that poor father was not allowed to rest quietly even in his grave.'

'Of course, it may not be true,' urged Alan again. 'I don't see how this tramp could have got to know of it.'

'Perhaps he helped to violate the secrets of the tomb?' suggested Miss Vicky.

'In that case he would hardly put himself within reach of the law,' Alan said, after a pause. 'Besides, if the vault had been broken into we should have heard of it from Joe.'

'Why should it be broken into, Alan? The key—'

'I have one key, and the Rector has the other. My key is in my desk at the Abbey Farm, and no doubt Phelps has his safe enough.'

'Your key may have been stolen.'

'It might have been,' admitted Alan. 'That is one reason why I am so anxious to get back tonight. We must find out also if the coffin is empty.'

'Yes, yes; let us go at once!' Sophy cried feverishly. 'I shall never rest until I learn the truth. Come, Vicky, let us pack. When can we leave, Alan?'

Thorold glanced at his watch.

'In half an hour,' he said. 'We can catch the half-past six train. Can you be ready?'

'Yes, yes!' cried she, and rushed out of the room.

Miss Vicky was about to follow, but Alan detained her.

'Give her a sedative or something,' he said, 'or she will be ill.'

'I will at once. Have a carriage at the door in a quarter of an hour, Mr Thorold. We can be ready by then. I suppose it is best she should go?'

'Much better than to leave her here. We must set her mind at rest. At this rate she will work herself into a fever.'

'But if this story should really be true?'

'I don't believe it for a moment,' replied Alan. But he was evidently uneasy, and could not disguise the feeling. 'Wait till we get to Heathton—wait,' and he hastily left the room.

Miss Vicky was surprised at his agitation, for hitherto she had credited Alan with a will strong enough to conceal his emotions. The old lady hurried away to the packing, and shook her head as she went.

Shortly they were settled in a first-class carriage on the way to Heathton. Sophy was suffering acutely, but did all in her power to hide her feelings, and, contrary to Alan's expectations, hardly a word was spoken about the strange letter, and the greater part of the journey was passed in silence. At Heathton he put Sophy and Miss Vicky into a fly.

'Drive at once to the Moat House,' he said. 'Tomorrow we shall consider what is to be done.'

'And you, Alan?'

'I am going to see Mr Phelps. He, if anyone, will know what value to put upon that letter. Try and sleep, Sophy. I shall see you in the morning.'

'Sleep?' echoed the poor girl, in a tone of anguish. 'I feel as though I should never sleep again!'

When they had driven away, Alan him took the nearest way to the Rectory. It was some way from the station, but Alan was a vigorous walker, and soon covered the distance. He arrived at the door with a beating heart and dry lips, feeling, he knew not why, that he was about to hear bad news. The grey-haired butler ushered him into his master's presence, and immediately the young man felt that his fears were confirmed. Phelps looked worried.

He was a plump little man, neat in his dress and cheerful in manner. He was a bachelor, and somewhat of a cynic. Alan had known him all his life, and could have found no better adviser in the dilemma in which he now found himself. Phelps came forward with outstretched hands.

'My dear boy, I am indeed glad! What good fairy sent you here? A glass of port? You look pale. I am delighted to see you. If you had not come I should have had to send for you.'

'What do you wish to see me about, sir? asked Alan.

'About the disappearance of these two people.'

'What two people?' asked the young man, suddenly alert. 'You forget that I have been away from Heathton for the last three days.'

'Of course, of course. Well, one is Brown, the stranger who stayed with Mrs Marry.'

'The Quiet Gentleman?'

'Yes. I heard them call him so in the village. A very doubtful character. He never came to church,' said the Rector sadly. 'However, it seems he has disappeared. Two nights ago—in fact, upon the evening of the day upon which poor Marlow's funeral took place, he left his lodgings for a walk. Since then,' added the Rector impressively, 'he has not returned.'

'In plain words, he has taken French leave,' said Thorold, filling his glass.

'Oh, I should not say that, Alan. He paid his weekly account the day before he vanished. He left his baggage behind him. No, I don't think he intended to run away. Mrs Marry says he was a good lodger, although she knew very little about him. However, he has gone, and his box remains. No one saw him after he left the village about eight o'clock. He was last seen by Giles Hale passing the church in the direction of the moor. Today we searched the moor, but could find no trace of him. Most mysterious,' finished the Rector, and took some port.

'Who is the other man?' asked Alan abruptly.

'Ah! Now you must be prepared for a shock, Alan. Dr Warrender!'

Thorold bounded out of his seat.

'Is he lost too?'

'Strangely enough, he is,' answered Phelps gravely. 'On the night of the funeral he went out at nine o'clock in the evening to see a patient. He never came back.'

'Who was the patient?'

'That is the strangest part of it. Brown, the Quiet Gentleman, was the patient. Mrs Warrender, who, as you may guess, is quite distracted, says that her husband told her so. Mrs Marry declares that the doctor called after nine, and found Brown was absent.'

'What happened then?' demanded Alan, who had been listening eagerly to this tale.

'Dr Warrender, according to Mrs Marry, asked in what direction her lodger had gone. She could not tell him, so, saying he would call again in an hour or so, he went. And, of course, he never returned.'

'Did Brown send for him?'

'Mrs Marry could not say. Certainly no message was sent through her.'

'Was Brown ill?'

'Not at all, according to his landlady. We have been searching for both Brown and Warrender, but have found no traces of either.'

'Humph!' said Thorold, after a pause. 'I wonder if they met and went away together?'

'My dear lad, where would they go to?' objected the Rector.

'I don't know; I can't say. The whole business is most mysterious.' Alan stopped, and looked sharply at Mr Phelps. 'Have you the key of the Marlow vault in your possession?'

'Yes, of course, locked in my safe. Your question is most extraordinary.'

The other smiled grimly.

'My explanation is more extraordinary still.' He took out Mr Gramp's letter and handed it to the Rector. 'What do you think of that, sir?'

'Most elegant calligraphy,' said the good man. 'Why, bless me!' He read on hurriedly, and finally dropped the letter with a bewildered air. 'Bless me, Alan!' he stammered. 'What—what—what—'

Thorold picked it up and smoothed it out on the table.

'You see, this man says the body has been stolen. Do you know if the door of the vault has been broken open?'

'No, no, certainly not!' cried the Rector, rising fussily. 'Come to my study, Alan; we must see if it is all right. It must be,' he added emphatically. 'The key of the safe is on my watch-chain. No one can open it. Oh dear! Bless me!'

He bustled out of the room, followed by Alan.

A search into the interior of the safe resulted in the production of the key.

'You see,' cried Phelps, waving it triumphantly, 'it is safe. The door could not have been opened with this. Now your key.'

'My key is in my desk at the Abbey Farm—locked up also,' said the young man hastily. 'I'll see about it tonight. In the meantime, sir, bring that key with you, and we will go into the vault.'

'What for?' demanded the Rector sharply. 'Why should we go there?'

'Can't you understand?' said Alan impatiently. 'I want to find out if this letter is true or false —if the body of Mr Marlow has been removed.'

'But I—I—can't!' gasped the Rector. 'I must apply to the Bishop for—'

'Nonsense, sir! We are not going to exhume the body. It's not like digging up a grave. All that is necessary is to look at the coffin resting in its niche. We can tell from the screws and general appearance if it has been tampered with.'

The clergyman sat down and wiped his bald head.

'I don't like it,' he said. 'I don't like it at all. Still, I don't suppose a look at the coffin can harm anyone. We'll go, Alan, we'll go; but I must take Jarks.'

'The sexton?'

'Yes. I want a witness—two witnesses; you are one, Jarks the other. It is a gruesome task that we have before us.' He shuddered again. 'I don't like it. Profanation!'

'If this letter is to be believed, the profanation has already been committed.'

'Cicero Gramp,' repeated Mr Phelps as they went out. 'Who is he?'

'A fat man—a tramp—a reciter. I saw him at Bournemouth. He delivered that letter at the hotel himself; the waiter described him, and as the creature is a perfect Falstaff, I recalled his face—I had seen him on the parade. I went at once to see if I could find him, but he was gone.'

'A fat man,' said the Rector. 'Humph! He was at the Good Samaritan the other night. I'll tell you about him later.'

The two trudged along in silence and knocked up Jarks, the sexton, on the way. They had no difficulty in rousing him. He came down at once with a lantern, and was much surprised to learn the errand of Rector and Squire.

'Want to have a look at Muster Marlow's vault,' said he in creaking tones. 'Well, it ain't a bad night for a visit, I do say. But quiet comp'ny, Muster Phelps and Muster Thorold, very quiet. What do ye want to see Muster Marlow for?'

'We want to see if his body is in the vault,' said Alan.

'Why, for sure it's there, sir. Muster Marlow don't go visiting.'

'I had a letter at Bournemouth, Jarks, to say the body had been stolen.'

Jarks stared.

'It ain't true!' he cried in a voice cracked with passion. 'It's casting mud on my 'arning my bread. I've bin sexton here fifty year, man and boy—I never had no corp as was stolen. They all lies comfortable arter my tucking them in. Only Gabriel's trump will wake 'em.'

By this time they were round the Lady Chapel, and within sight of the tomb. Phelps, too much agitated to speak, beckoned to Jarks to hold up the lantern, which he did, grumbling and muttering the while.

'I've buried hundreds of corps,' he growled, 'and not one of 'em's goed away. What 'ud they go for? I make 'em comfortable, I do.'

'Hold the light steady, Jarks,' said the Rector, whose own hand was just as unsteady. He could hardly get the key into the lock.

At last the door was open, and headed by Jarks, with the lantern, they entered. The cold, earthy smell, the charnel-house feeling shook the nerves of both men. Jarks, accustomed as he was to the presence of the dead, hobbled along without showing any emotion other than wrath, and triumphantly swung the lantern towards a niche wherein reposed a coffin.

'Ain't he there quite comfortable?' wheezed he. 'Don't I tell you they never goes from here? It's a lovely vault; no corp 'ud need a finer.'

'Wait a bit!' said Alan, stepping forward. 'Turn the light along the top of the coffin, Jarks. Hullo! the lid's loose!'

'An' unscrewed!' gasped the sexton. 'He's bin getting out.'

'Unscrewed—loose!' gasped the Rector in his turn. The poor man felt deadly sick. 'There must be some mistake.'

'No mistake,' said Alan, slipping back the lid. 'The body has been stolen.'

'No 't'ain't!' cried Jarks, showering the light on the interior of the coffin. 'There he is, quiet an'—why,' the old man broke off with a cry, 'the corp ain't in his winding-sheet!'

Phelps looked, Alan looked. The light shone on the face of the dead.

Phelps groaned.

'Merciful God!' he groaned, 'it is Dr Warrender's body!'

CHAPTER V
A NINE DAYS' WONDER

THERE was sensation enough and to spare in Heathton next morning. Jarks lost no time in spreading the news. He spent the greater part of the day in the taproom of the Good Samaritan, accepting tankards of beer and relating details of the discovery. Mrs Timber kept him as long as she could; for Jarks, possessed of intelligence regarding the loss of Mr Marlow's body, attracted customers. These, thirsty for news or drink, or both, flocked like sheep into the inn.

'To think that a corp of mine should be gone!' creaked he in his aged voice. 'Man and boy, I niver heard tell of such things—niver! Why Muster Marlow should go beats me—ay, that it does!'

'It doesn't beat me,' cried Mrs Timber in her most acidulated voice. 'I know who took the body.'

'That you don't!' contradicted Jarks incoherently; 'fur passon, he don't know, so I don't know as how you'd know, Mrs Timber.'

'It was that fat play-actor out of this very house,' snapped the landlady.

'And how can you prove that, Mrs Timber?' asked the sexton contemptuously.

'Why, he had no money for a bed, and he had to sleep in the open. I dare say he slept in the churchyard, and stole the body to sell it back again, it being well known as Miss Sophy's a Queen of Sheba for riches.'

'All very well,' said Slack the schoolmaster; 'but if he took away Mr Marlow's body, how did he put Dr Warrender's in its place? And how could he without the key of the vault?'

'No,' said the stonemason, 'he couldn't get into that there vault without a key. I built him myself, me and my mates. If that fat man put the doctor there, he must have killed him. There's a hole in his heart as you could put your fist in. It's murder!' cried the man, dashing his hand on the table, 'sacrilege and murder!'

It took a good many tankards of Mrs Timber's strong ale to wash down the sinister word 'murder'. Every point of the matter was discussed, but no one could arrive at any decision. Slack voiced the general sentiment when he rose to go.

'We must wait for the police,' said Slack.

But Alan Thorold was of the contrary opinion. He did not wish to wait for the police, or to have anything to do with the police. The difficulty was that he could not get the Rector to take this view, and the next morning Mr Phelps sent the village constable for the inspector at Burchester, the big market town twenty miles away across the heath. Meantime, at an early hour, Alan presented himself at the Moat House. He broke the news as gently as he could. Both Sophy and Miss Vicky were horrified.

'To think of such things taking place in a Christian graveyard!' cried the little woman, wringing her hands. 'Sacrilege and murder! It makes one believe in the existence of atheists and anarchists, and such-like dreadful people—it does, indeed!'

Contrary to Thorold's expectation, Sophy proved to be the more composed of the two. She neither wept nor fainted, but, very pale and very still, listened to all that he had to say. When he had finished, she had only one question to ask.

'Who did it?' she demanded in the calmest voice.

'I can't say—I don't know,' stammered Alan, taken aback by her attitude generally. 'We must find out. If your father had enemies—but even an enemy would have had no object in doing this.'

'What about the man in Bournemouth?'

'Cicero Gramp? I intend to go up to London tomorrow and see him. If he can tell the truth, it will be well worth the money he demands.'

'So I think, Alan. Can't you go today?'

He shook his head.

'There is so much to do here, Sophy. The Rector has gone to break the news of her husband's death to Mrs Warrender. And he has sent over to Burchester for the police. The inspector—Blair is his name—will be here at noon. I did not want the police brought into the matter, but Mr Phelps insisted.'

'Why did you not want to consult the police?'

'I am afraid if this vagabond gets wind that the law has intervened he may give us the slip. However, I shall go up to Dixon's Rents first thing in the morning, before the case gets into the papers.'

'Do you think this man Gramp has anything to do with the murder, and with the removing of poor father's body?'

'No, I don't,' replied Alan promptly. 'He would not dare to give evidence if he were. I hear that he was turned out of the Good Samaritan on the night of the funeral. It is likely enough that he saw the removal of the body, and possibly the murder. Naturally, such a creature as that wants to sell his information. He is a blackmailer, this man, but I don't credit him with murder or body-snatching.'

'Body-snatching!' cried Miss Vicky, who was dabbing her red eyes with eau-de-Cologne. 'Oh, the terrible word!'

'Alan,' said Sophy, after a pause, 'do you believe the man who took my father's body killed Dr Warrender?'

'I do. Warrender was out on that night, and might have come across the man carrying away the body, and the murder might have arisen out of that.'

'How do you know Dr Warrender was out?' cross-examined Sophy.

'Mrs Warrender told the Rector so. Warrender went to see the Quiet Gentleman, but not finding him in, said that he would return. He never did, and now we know the reason.'

'Why don't you make certain whether he saw the Quiet Gentleman?'

'Brown? That's impossible; he also has disappeared.'

'Who was he?'

'I don't know,' said Alan gloomily.

'Does anyone know?'

'Not to my knowledge. Perhaps the police may find out. Sophy, what is the matter?'

For the girl was clapping her hands and laughing hysterically.

'It was Brown who took my father's body and killed the doctor!' she cried. 'I am certain of it!'

'Why are you certain?'

'I feel it. I can't say why.'

'But your father did not know this man. I never heard him allude to the Quiet Gentleman.'

'I dare say not,' returned Sophy doggedly; 'but if the man had nothing to do with it, why should he disappear? And Dr Warrender went to see him. Oh! I am sure he is the guilty person. He might be an enemy of father's.'

'Sophia, your father did not know him,' put in Miss Vicky, who was listening open-mouthed to all this.

'Oh, I am not so sure of that!' cried the girl impatiently. 'If he did, Joe will know. Ring the bell for him.'

'Did Joe know the Quiet Gentleman?' Alan asked when he had rung.

'I do not think that Joseph did,' said Miss Vicky. 'He told me that he tried several times to speak to him, but got no reply.'

'I don't wonder at that,' replied the young man drily; 'the man was dumb.'

'Dumb?' echoed the ladies.

'Didn't you know? Ah, well, perhaps not. I didn't know myself until the Rector told me last night. Yes, he was dumb—that was why the village called him the Quiet Gentleman. Oh, here is Joe!'

'Joe,' said Sophy, going directly to the point, 'have you heard about—?'

'Yes, miss,' said Joe, interrupting to save her mentioning so painful a subject, 'I know, and if I find the swab as did it, I'll kill him.'

Joe said this in a quietly savage way, which made Miss Vicky shudder.

'Have you any idea who carried off the body, Joe?'

'No, sir, I have not—but,' added the man grimly, 'I'm going to look for him.'

The old maid shuddered again at the expression in his bloodshot eyes.

'"Vengeance is mine. I will repay, saith the Lord",' she put in severely.

'All werry good,' said Mr Brill, 'but I guess the Lord needs an instrument to carry out that text.' He spat on his hands and added slowly, 'I'm that instrument!'

'Had my father any enemies that you know of, Joe?'

'No, miss, not that I knowed of. He had rows, as a man should, had the Cap'n, but I don't know any swab as 'ud have stolen his corpse.'

'And murdered Dr Warrender,' said Alan, who was watching the man.

'As you say, sir,' replied the sailor calmly, 'and murdered Dr Warrender. No, I can't rightly call anyone to mind.'

'Did you know the Quiet Gentleman, Joe?'

'I did not, miss. Brown he called hisself—leastways, Mrs Marry told me so, for Brown had no tongue. I tried to pass the time o' day, meeting him friendly like on the road, but he only put his hand to his mouth and shook his white head. I don't know nothing about him.'

'Do you know a tramp named Cicero Gramp?' asked Alan, after a pause.

'Well, I did in a way.' Joe drew his huge hand across his mouth, and seemed to be considering his reply. 'In this way, sir. He comed here to the kitchen and put 'em all wrong with his lies. I kicked him out—leastways, I giv 'im something to take 'imself orf.'

'What did he come here for?'

Joe clenched his teeth and frowned dreadfully.

'I wish I knowed, I'd ha' broken his cocoanut!' said he. 'He was a liar, miss, savin' your presence. Said 'e knowed your father, the Cap'n, which,' said Joe slowly, 'was a d—d lie—beggin' your pardon, miss.'

'Said he knew my father?' echoed Sophy anxiously. 'What did he know about him?'

'Nothin',' replied Joe firmly. 'Make your mind easy, miss—nothin'.'

It seemed to Alan as though the old sailor wished to intimate that there really was something in Marlow's past which might be known, but that the tramp was ignorant of it. He evidently wanted to reassure the girl, yet Alan was well aware that Sophy knew practically nothing of her father's life. He resolved to try the effect of a surprise.

'Joe,' said he slowly, 'it was this tramp who told me the body had been stolen.'

Joe's hard, shiny hat, which he had been twisting nervously in his hands, fell to the ground. His face was a dark crimson when he stooped to pick it up, and he stammered:

'Hi, sir! that—that lubber. How did he know?'

'That I have to find out. He offers to sell the information for a hundred pounds.'

Joe rubbed his hands and looked ferocious.

'What I want to know, sir, is, where is the swab?'

'In London. I'm going up to see him tomorrow.'

'This afternoon,' put in Sophy sharply. 'You are going this afternoon, Alan.'

'Certainly, my dear,' Alan said promptly; 'I'll go this afternoon—if the police don't want me.'

'The police!' gasped Joe, shifting nervously from one leg to the other.

'Yes.' Alan darted a keen glance at him. 'Mr Phelps has sent for the police to investigate this murder of Dr Warrender.'

'Well, I hope they'll find him, sir,' said Joe, recovering his stolidity, 'for I make no doubt that the swab as killed the doctor carried off the Cap'n's body.'

'So I think, Joe, and I am going to London to find out from Cicero Gramp.'

'You'll find he'll tell you that the Quiet Gentleman killed Dr Warrender,' put in Sophy.

The old sailor choked, and looked at her with absolute terror.

'How do you know that, miss?' he asked.

'I only think so. The Quiet Gentleman has disappeared. Probably he killed the doctor, and then took my father's body.'

'It might be so, miss. If I find him—'

Joe repeated his former savage declaration, and Miss Vicky duly shuddered.

'Then you can't help us in any way, Joe?' said Alan, eyeing him thoughtfully.

'No, sir, I can't. I don't know who carried off the Cap'n, and I don't know who stabbed the doctor. If I did, I'd kill him. When you find him, sir, let me know.'

After which speech the old sailor again pulled his forelock, scraped his foot, and rolled out of the room. He appeared somewhat relieved to get away.

Alan did not quite know what to make of Joe. The man was so nervous that it seemed as though he knew something and was afraid of committing himself. On the other hand, this sailor was devoted to Sophy, and had been in Marlow's service for thirty years. It was only reasonable to conclude, therefore, that he would wish her to benefit by any knowledge he might possess. On the whole, Alan was perplexed, but he kept it to himself, determining, nevertheless, to keep an eye on Joe. When the door was closed, Sophy turned to Alan.

'Alan,' she said slowly, 'I love you dearly, as you know, and I wish to become your wife. But I swear by the memory of my father that until you find out who has done this wicked thing and bring the man to justice, I will not marry you!'

'Sophy!' cried Thorold entreatingly.

'I mean what I say,' repeated the girl, in a low, fierce voice. 'We must avenge my father. When the wretch is caught and hanged, then I'll marry you, Alan.'

'Sophia, a marriage under such circumstances—'

'Miss Parsh,' cried Sophy, turning on the meek old maid, 'do you think I can sit down tamely under this insult to the dead? My father's body has been carried off. It must be found again before I marry—before I can think of marriage, Alan.'

'Sophy is right,' cried Thorold, drawing the girl to him and kissing her. 'She is right, Miss Parsh. I swear also that I will devote my life to solving this mystery. Your father's body shall be brought back, Sophy, and the murderer of Dr Warrender shall hang. Good-bye, dear. Today I go to London. The first step towards the discovery of this crime will be to see Cicero Gramp. He may supply the clue.'

'Yes, yes. Bribe him; pay him anything, so long as you get at the truth.'

Alan kissed the girl again, and then left the room. Before he started, he intended to see the Rector and the local inspector of police. As he stepped out on to the road, he noticed Phelps coming along in the hot sunshine. The little parson was puffing and blowing and wiping his forehead.

'Alan! Alan!' he called out in short gasps as he came within speaking distance. 'She's gone! She's gone to—'

'She! Gone! Who's gone? Where?'

'Why, Mrs Warrender! She's disappeared. Oh, dear me; how terrible all this is! Whew!'

CHAPTER VI
THE MISSING KEY

SO excited was the little parson that Alan feared lest he should take a fit. The Good Samaritan was no great distance away, so thither he led him, into Mrs Timber's private parlour.

'Now, sir,' said Alan, when his old tutor seemed somewhat more composed, 'tell me all about Mrs Warrender.'

But before Mr Phelps could reply, the vixenish landlady made her appearance. She was highly honoured at seeing the Rector within her doors, and curtsied a hint for orders. And, in truth, the little clergyman, undone with excitement, was quite ready to stimulate his jaded nerves.

'Eh, Mrs Timber?' he said. 'Yes; you might get us a little Cognac, I think. Old; the best you have, Mrs Timber, and a jug of fresh-drawn water from the well, please. Alan?'

'I'll join you,' said young Thorold promptly.

He, too, felt that he was in nowise beyond reach of a little stimulant.

Silent for once in her life, Mrs Timber brought of her best, which, be it said, was passing good. Mr Phelps lost no time in brewing his measure and drank it down with gusto.

'That's good, Alan, my boy; very good,' said he, setting down the tumbler with a sigh of relief. 'God forgive me, I fear to think what my good brethren would say did they see their Rector in a public-house! though to be sure the Good Samaritan is a most respectable hostelry. But, Alan, why did you bring me here?'

'Indeed, sir, I feared you would be ill out there in the blazing sun. I did only what I thought wise. But about Mrs Warrender—you say she has disappeared?'

'Eh, yes.' Mr Phelps wiped his bald head vigorously. 'I went to break the news to her after you had gone to see Sophy, and I found she had left for London.'

'London? Why London?'

'That is just what I wanted to know, my dear Alan. It seems she received last night a letter which threw her into a state of great excitement. She was bad enough that way, as it was, the servant said; but this letter, it appears, drove her into a perfect frenzy.'

'Do you know what was in the letter?'

'I asked that—oh, trust me, Alan, to be precise about details—but the servant said she did not know. Mrs Warrender put it in her pocket. That spoke volumes from the servant's point of view. All night long, it appears, she was walking about the room using the most fearful language—God forgive her!—and this morning at eight o'clock she started off to catch the 9.30 express at the Junction.'

'And is she coming back?'

'That I don't know, my boy.'

Mr Phelps looked round cautiously and lowered his voice to a whisper.

'She took her jewels with her.'

'Her jewels?'

'Yes; she had a quantity of jewellery. She put all the money she could get from her husband into clothes and diamonds—a most extravagant woman, Alan. Well, she's gone, that's certain, jewels and all. She left no address, and said no word about returning. What do you think of it?'

'Upon my word, sir, I don't know what to think. The whole place has gone mad, it seems to me; the entire village is topsy-turvy. Marlow's body stolen, Warrender murdered, and his body placed in poor Marlow's coffin; and now here is Mrs Warrender cleared out significantly with her jewels; and the Quiet Gentleman—'

'Brown, the dumb man? What about him? I know he, too, has vanished; but what else?'

'I'm going to tell you, sir. The key of the vault—'

'Not your key, Alan?'

'Yes, my key, Mr Phelps; the Quiet Gentleman has it!'

'God bless me—that is, God forgive me, Alan, are you mad too?'

'No, sir, not yet; though I admit I'm fairly on the way, with all this. Tell me, do you know who this so-called Quiet Gentleman really is?'

'No, Alan, I don't. I spoke to him, but found he was dumb. Now he too is gone.'

'Yes, with Marlow's body on his hands, and Warrender's death on his soul!'

'You don't mean that! Are you sure?'

Mr Phelps was greatly agitated.

'I go only by circumstantial evidence, it is true. You know, of course, the funeral of Mr Marlow took place in the morning?'

'Yes, yes; and at two o'clock you took Sophy and Miss Parsh to Bournemouth.'

'I did. Well, about five o'clock, Brown—we'll call him that instead of the Quiet Gentleman, though I don't believe it really is his name—well, about that time Brown walked over to Abbey Farm. He brought a letter purporting to come from me to my housekeeper, Mrs Hester.'

'From you, Alan?'

'Yes, the letter was forged,' said Alan with emphasis. 'It directed Mrs Hester to allow Brown to remain at the farm until I returned. It was in my handwriting, and signed with my name. She knew nothing about Brown, save that he was staying at Mrs Marry's, and she thought it somewhat strange he should come to stop at the farm during my absence. But as the instructions in the letter were quite plain, and she knew my handwriting well—that shows how expert the forgery was—she gave Brown the run of the place. In the meantime she wrote to me at Bournemouth asking me if all was right, and enclosed the forged letter. Here it is!'

As he saw the handwriting, Mr Phelps started.

'Upon my word, Alan, I don't wonder Mrs Hester was deceived, especially when you consider her sight is not good! Why, I myself with my eyes should certainly take it for yours.' (Mr Phelps wore pince-nez, but nevertheless resented any aspersion on his optical powers.) 'But why on earth didn't she telegraph to you?'

'Well, you know how old-fashioned and conservative she is, sir. She makes out through the Scriptures—how, I cannot tell you—that the telegraph is a sinful institution. Therefore it is not to be wondered at that she trusted to the post. I got her letter only this morning as, of course, it followed me on from Bournemouth. Nevertheless, I knew about the loss of the key last night.'

'Ah! the loss of the key. Yes, go on, Alan.'

'Very well. Brown, being allowed to remain in my house, proceeded to make himself quite at home in the library. Mrs Hester, writing her letter—no easy task for her—took no further heed of him. He was in the room for quite an hour, and amused himself, it appears, in breaking open my desk. Having forced several of the drawers, he found at last the one he wanted—the one containing the key of the vault. Then he made all things beautifully smooth, so that Mrs Hester should not see they had been tampered with, and leaving a message that he would return to dinner, went out ostensibly for a walk. He returned, it appears, to his lodging, and left there again about nine o'clock in the evening. Since then nothing has been seen or heard of him.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.