

**THE
BECKONING HAND:**

The Gold Wulfric

**By
Grant Allen**

1887

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Beckoning Hand: The Gold Wulfric

Date of first publication: 1887

Author: Grant Allen

Date first posted: Feb. 10, 2015

Date last updated: Feb. 10, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150214

This ebook was produced by: David Edwards, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

THE GOLD WULFRIC.

PART I.

I.

There are only two gold coins of Wulfric of Mercia in existence anywhere. One of them is in the British Museum, and the other one is in my possession.

The most terrible incident in the whole course of my career is intimately connected with my first discovery of that gold Wulfric. It is not too much to say that my entire life has been deeply coloured by it, and I shall make no apology therefore for narrating the story in some little detail. I was stopping down at Lichfield for my summer holiday in July, 1879, when I happened one day accidentally to meet an old ploughman who told me he had got a lot of coins at home that he had ploughed up on what he called the "field of battle," a place I had already recognized as the site of the Mercian kings' wooden palace.

I went home with him at once in high glee, for I have been a collector of old English gold and silver coinage for several years, and I was in hopes that my friendly ploughman's find might contain something good in the way of Anglo-Saxon pennies or shillings, considering the very promising place in which he had unearthed it.

As it turned out, I was not mistaken. The little hoard, concealed within a rude piece of Anglo-Saxon pottery (now No. 127 in case LIX. at the South Kensington Museum), comprised a large number of common Frankish Merovingian coins (I beg Mr. Freeman's pardon for not calling them Merwings), together with two or three Kentish pennies of some rarity from the mints of Ethelbert at Canterbury and Dover. Amongst these minor treasures, however, my eye at once fell upon a single gold piece, obviously imitated from the imperial Roman aureus of the pretender Carausius, which I saw immediately must be an almost unique bit of money of the very greatest numismatic interest. I took it up and examined it carefully. A minute's inspection fully satisfied me that it was indeed a genuine mintage of Wulfric of Mercia, the like of which I had never before to my knowledge set eyes upon.

I immediately offered the old man five pounds down for the whole collection. He

closed with the offer forthwith in the most contented fashion, and I bought them and paid for them all upon the spot without further parley.

When I got back to my lodgings that evening I could do nothing but look at my gold Wulfric. I was charmed and delighted at the actual possession of so great a treasure, and was burning to take it up at once to the British Museum to see whether even in the national collection they had got another like it. So being by nature of an enthusiastic and impulsive disposition, I determined to go up to town the very next day, and try to track down the history of my Wulfric. "It'll be a good opportunity," I said to myself, "to kill two birds with one stone. Emily's people haven't gone out of town yet. I can call there in the morning, arrange to go to the theatre with them at night, and then drive at once to the Museum and see how much my find is worth."

Next morning I was off to town by an early train, and before one o'clock I had got to Emily's.

"Why, Harold," she cried, running down to meet me and kiss me in the passage (for she had seen me get out of my hansom from the drawing-room window), "how on earth is it that you're up in town to-day? I thought you were down at Lichfield still with your Oxford reading party."

"So I am," I answered, "officially at Lichfield; but I've come up to-day partly to see you, and partly on a piece of business about a new coin I've just got hold of."

"A coin!" Emily answered, pretending to pout. "Me and a coin! That's how you link us together mentally, is it? I declare, Harold, I shall be getting jealous of those coins of yours some day, I'm certain. You can't even come up to see me for a day, it seems, unless you've got some matter of a coin as well to bring you to London. Moral: never get engaged to a man with a fancy for collecting coins and medals."

"Oh, but this is really such a beauty, Emily," I cried enthusiastically. "Just look at it, now. Isn't it lovely? Do you notice the inscription—'Wulfric Rex!' I've never yet seen one anywhere else at all like it."

Emily took it in her hands carelessly. "I don't see any points about that coin in particular," she answered in her bantering fashion, "more than about any other old coin that you'd pick up anywhere."

That was all we said then about the matter. Subsequent events engrained the very words of that short conversation into the inmost substance of my brain with indelible fidelity. I shall never forget them to my dying moment.

I stopped about an hour altogether at Emily's, had lunch, and arranged that she and her mother should accompany me that evening to the Lyceum. Then I drove off to the British Museum, and asked for leave to examine the Anglo-Saxon coins of the Mercian period.

The superintendent, who knew me well enough by sight and repute as a responsible amateur collector, readily gave me permission to look at a drawerful of the earliest Mercian gold and silver coinage. I had brought one or two numismatic books with me, and I sat down to have a good look at those delightful cases.

After thoroughly examining the entire series and the documentary evidence, I came to the conclusion that there was just one other gold Wulfric in existence besides the one I kept in my pocket, and that was the beautiful and well-preserved example in the case before me. It was described in the last edition of Sir Theophilus Wroxton's "Northumbrian and Mercian Numismatist" as an absolutely unique gold coin of Wulfric of Mercia, in imitation of the well-known aureus of the false emperor Carausius. I turned to the catalogue to see the price at which it had been purchased by the nation. To my intense surprise I saw it entered at a hundred and fifty pounds.

I was perfectly delighted at my magnificent acquisition.

On comparing the two examples, however, I observed that, though both struck from the same die and apparently at the same mint (to judge by the letter), they differed slightly from one another in two minute accidental particulars. My coin, being of course merely stamped with a hammer and then cut to shape, after the fashion of the time, was rather more closely clipped round the edge than the Museum specimen; and it had also a slight dent on the obverse side, just below the W of Wulfric. In all other respects the two examples were of necessity absolutely identical.

I stood for a long time gazing at the case and examining the two duplicates with the deepest interest, while the Museum keeper (a man of the name of Mactavish, whom I had often seen before on previous visits) walked about within sight, as is the rule on all such occasions, and kept a sharp look-out that I did not attempt to meddle with any of the remaining coins or cases.

Unfortunately, as it turned out, I had not mentioned to the superintendent my own possession of a duplicate Wulfric; nor had I called Mactavish's attention to the fact that I had pulled a coin of my own for purposes of comparison out of my waistcoat pocket. To say the truth, I was inclined to be a little secretive as yet about my gold Wulfric, because until I had found out all that was known about it I did not want anybody else to be told of my discovery.

At last I had fully satisfied all my curiosity, and was just about to return the Museum Wulfric to its little round compartment in the neat case (having already replaced my own duplicate in my waistcoat pocket), when all at once, I can't say how, I gave a sudden start, and dropped the coin with a jerk unexpectedly upon the floor of the museum.

It rolled away out of sight in a second, and I stood appalled in an agony of distress and terror in the midst of the gallery.

Next moment I had hastily called Mactavish to my side, and got him to lock up the open drawer while we two went down on hands and knees and hunted through the length and breadth of the gallery for the lost Wulfric.

It was absolutely hopeless. Plain sailing as the thing seemed, we could see no trace of the missing coin from one end of the room to the other.

At last I leaned in a cold perspiration against the edge of one of the glass cabinets, and gave it up in despair with a sinking heart. "It's no use, Mactavish," I murmured desperately; "the thing's lost, and we shall never find it."

Mactavish looked me quietly in the face. "In that case, sir," he answered firmly, "by the rules of the Museum I must call the superintendent." He put his hand, with no undue violence, but in a strictly official manner, upon my right shoulder. Then he blew a whistle. "I'm sorry to be rude to you, sir," he went on, apologetically, "but by the rules of the Museum I can't take my hand off you till the superintendent gives me leave to release you."

Another keeper answered the whistle. "Send the superintendent," Mactavish said quietly. "A coin missing."

In a minute the superintendent was upon the spot. When Mactavish told him I had dropped the gold Wulfric of Mercia he shook his head very ominously. "This is a bad business, Mr. Tait," he said gloomily. "A unique coin, as you know, and one of the most valuable in the whole of our large Anglo-Saxon collection."

"Is there a mouse-hole anywhere," I cried in agony; "any place where it might have rolled down and got mislaid or concealed for the moment?"

The superintendent went down instantly on his own hands and knees, pulled up every piece of the cocoa-nut matting with minute deliberation, searched the whole place thoroughly from end to end, but found nothing. He spent nearly an hour on that thorough search; meanwhile Mactavish never for a moment relaxed his hold upon me.

At last the superintendent desisted from the search as quite hopeless, and approached me very politely.

"I'm extremely sorry, Mr. Tait," he said in the most courteous possible manner, "but by the rules of the Museum I am absolutely compelled either to search you for the coin or to give you into custody. It may, you know, have got caught somewhere about your person. No doubt you would prefer, of the two, that I should look in all your pockets and the folds of your clothing."

The position was terrible. I could stand it no longer.

“Mr. Harbourne,” I said, breaking out once more from head to foot into a cold sweat, “I must tell you the truth. I have brought a duplicate gold Wulfric here to-day to compare with the Museum specimen, and I have got it this very moment in my waistcoat pocket.”

The superintendent gazed back at me with a mingled look of incredulity and pity.

“My dear sir,” he answered very gently, “this is altogether a most unfortunate business, but I’m afraid I must ask you to let me look at the duplicate you speak of.”

I took it, trembling, out of my waistcoat pocket and handed it across to him without a word. The superintendent gazed at it for a moment in silence; then, in a tone of the profoundest commiseration, he said slowly, “Mr. Tait, I grieve to be obliged to contradict you. This is our own specimen of the gold Wulfric!”

The whole Museum whirled round me violently, and before I knew anything more I fainted.

II.

When I came to I found myself seated in the superintendent’s room, with a policeman standing quietly in the background.

As soon as I had fully recovered consciousness, the superintendent motioned the policeman out of the room for a while, and then gently forced me to swallow a brandy and soda.

“Mr. Tait,” he said compassionately, after an awkward pause, “you are a very young man indeed, and, I believe, hitherto of blameless character. Now, I should be very sorry to have to proceed to extremities against you. I know to what lengths, in a moment of weakness, the desire to possess a rare coin will often lead a connoisseur, under stress of exceptional temptation. I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind that you did really accidentally drop this coin; that you went down on your knees honestly intending to find it; that the accident suggested to you the ease with which you might pick it up and proceed to pocket it; that you yielded temporarily to that unfortunate impulse; and that by the time I arrived upon the scene you were already overcome with remorse and horror. I saw as much immediately in your very countenance. Nevertheless, I determined to give you the benefit of the doubt, and I searched over the whole place in the most thorough and conscientious manner. . . . As you know, I found nothing. . . . Mr. Tait, I cannot bear to have to deal harshly with you. I recognize the temptation and the agony of repentance that instantly followed it. Sir, I give you one chance. If you will retract the obviously false story that you just now told me, and confess that the coin I found in your pocket was in

fact, as I know it to be, the Museum specimen, I will forthwith dismiss the constable, and will never say another word to any one about the whole matter. I don't want to ruin you, but I can't, of course, be put off with a falsehood. Think the matter carefully over with yourself. Do you or do you not still adhere to that very improbable and incredible story?"

Horrified and terror-stricken as I was, I couldn't avoid feeling grateful to the superintendent for the evident kindness with which he was treating me. The tears rose at once into my eyes.

"Mr. Harbourne," I cried passionately, "you are very good, very generous. But you quite mistake the whole position. The story I told you was true, every word of it. I bought that gold Wulfric from a ploughman at Lichfield, and it is not absolutely identical with the Museum specimen which I dropped upon the floor. It is closer clipped round the edges, and it has a distinct dent upon the obverse side, just below the W of Wulfric."

The superintendent paused a second, and scanned my face very closely.

"Have you a knife or a file in your pocket?" he asked in a much sterner and more official tone.

"No," I replied, "neither—neither."

"You are sure?"

"Certain."

"Shall I search you myself, or shall I give you in custody?"

"Search me yourself," I answered confidently.

He put his hand quietly into my left-hand breast pocket, and to my utter horror and dismay drew forth, what I had up to that moment utterly forgotten, a pair of folding pocket nail-scissors, in a leather case, of course with a little file on either side.

My heart stood still within me.

"That is quite sufficient, Mr. Tait," the superintendent went on, severely. "Had you alleged that the Museum coin was smaller than your own imaginary one you might have been able to put in the facts as good evidence. But I see the exact contrary is the case. You have stooped to a disgraceful and unworthy subterfuge. This base deception aggravates your guilt. You have deliberately defaced a valuable specimen in order if possible to destroy its identity."

What could I say in return? I stammered and hesitated.

"Mr. Harbourne," I cried piteously, "the circumstances seem to look terribly against me. But, nevertheless, you are quite mistaken. The missing Wulfric will come to light sooner or later and prove me innocent."

He walked up and down the room once or twice irresolutely, and then he turned

round to me with a very fixed and determined aspect which fairly terrified me.

“Mr. Tait,” he said, “I am straining every point possible to save you, but you make it very difficult for me by your continued falsehood. I am doing quite wrong in being so lenient to you; I am proposing, in short, to compound a felony. But I cannot bear, without letting you have just one more chance, to give you in charge for a common robbery. I will let you have ten minutes to consider the matter; and I beseech you, I beg of you, I implore you to retract this absurd and despicable lie before it is too late for ever. Just consider that if you refuse I shall have to hand you over to the constable out there, and that the whole truth must come out in court, and must be blazoned forth to the entire world in every newspaper. The policeman is standing here by the door. I will leave you alone with your own thoughts for ten minutes.”

As he spoke he walked out gravely, and shut the door solemnly behind him. The clock on the chimney-piece pointed with its hands to twenty minutes past three.

It was an awful dilemma. I hardly knew how to act under it. On the one hand, if I admitted for the moment that I had tried to steal the coin, I could avoid all immediate unpleasant circumstances; and as it would be sure to turn up again in cleaning the Museum, I should be able at last to prove my innocence to Mr. Harbourne’s complete satisfaction. But, on the other hand, the lie—for it *was* a lie—stuck in my throat; I could not humble myself to say I had committed a mean and dirty action which I loathed with all the force and energy of my nature. No, no! come what would of it, I must stick by the truth, and trust to that to clear up everything.

But if the superintendent really insisted on giving me in charge, how very awkward to have to telegraph about it to Emily! Fancy saying to the girl you are in love with, “I can’t go with you to the theatre this evening, because I have been taken off to gaol on a charge of stealing a valuable coin from the British Museum.” It was too terrible!

Yet, after all, I thought to myself, if the worst comes to the worst, Emily will have faith enough in me to know it is ridiculous; and, indeed, the imputation could in any case only be temporary. As soon as the thing gets into court I could bring up the Lichfield ploughman to prove my possession of a gold Wulfric; and I could bring up Emily to prove that I had shown it to her that very morning. How lucky that I had happened to take it out and let her look at it! My case was, happily, as plain as a pikestaff. It was only momentarily that the weight of the evidence seemed so perversely to go against me.

Turning over all these various considerations in my mind with anxious hesitancy, the ten minutes managed to pass away almost before I had thoroughly realized the

deep gravity of the situation.

As the clock on the chimney-piece pointed to the half-hour, the door opened once more, and the superintendent entered solemnly. "Well, Mr. Tait," he said in an anxious voice, "have you made up your mind to make a clean breast of it? Do you now admit, after full deliberation, that you have endeavoured to steal and clip the gold Wulfric?"

"No," I answered firmly, "I do not admit it; and I will willingly go before a jury of my countrymen to prove my innocence."

"Then God help you, poor boy," the superintendent cried despondently. "I have done my best to save you, and you will not let me. Policeman, this is your prisoner. I give him in custody on a charge of stealing a gold coin, the property of the trustees of this Museum, valued at a hundred and seventy-five pounds sterling."

The policeman laid his hand upon my wrist. "You will have to go along with me to the station, sir," he said quietly.

Terrified and stunned as I was by the awfulness of the accusation, I could not forget or overlook the superintendent's evident reluctance and kindness. "Mr. Harbourne," I cried, "you have tried to do your best for me. I am grateful to you for it, in spite of your terrible mistake, and I shall yet be able to show you that I am innocent."

He shook his head gloomily. "I have done my duty," he said with a shudder. "I have never before had a more painful one. Policeman, I must ask you now to do yours."

III.

The police are always considerate to respectable-looking prisoners, and I had no difficulty in getting the sergeant in charge of the lock-up to telegraph for me to Emily, to say that I was detained by important business, which would prevent me taking her and her mother to the theatre that evening. But when I explained to him that my detention was merely temporary, and that I should be able to disprove the whole story as soon as I went before the magistrates, he winked most unpleasantly at the constable who had brought me in, and observed in a tone of vulgar sarcasm, "We have a good many gentlemen here who says the same, sir—don't we, Jim? but they don't always find it so easy as they expected when they stands up afore the beak to prove their statements."

I began to reflect that even a temporary prison is far from being a pleasant place for a man to stop in.

Next morning they took me up before the magistrate; and as the Museum authorities of course proved a *primâ facie* case against me, and as my solicitor advised me to reserve my defence, owing to the difficulty of getting up my witness from Lichfield in reasonable time, I was duly committed for trial at the next sessions of the Central Criminal Court.

I had often read before that people had been committed for trial, but till that moment I had no idea what a very unpleasant sensation it really is.

However, as I was a person of hitherto unblemished character, and wore a good coat made by a fashionable tailor, the magistrate decided to admit me to bail, if two sureties in five hundred pounds each were promptly forthcoming for the purpose. Luckily, I had no difficulty in finding friends who believed in my story; and as I felt sure the lost Wulfric would soon be found in cleaning the museum, I suffered perhaps a little less acutely than I might otherwise have done, owing to my profound confidence in the final triumph of the truth.

Nevertheless, as the case would be fully reported next morning in all the papers, I saw at once that I must go straight off and explain the matter without delay to Emily.

I will not dwell upon that painful interview. I will only say that Emily behaved as I of course knew she would behave. She was horrified and indignant at the dreadful accusation; and, woman like, she was very angry with the superintendent. "He ought to have taken your word for it, naturally, Harold," she cried through her tears. "But what a good thing, anyhow, that you happened to show the coin to me. I should recognize it anywhere among ten thousand."

"That's well, darling," I said, trying to kiss away her tears and cheer her up a little. "I haven't the slightest doubt that when the trial comes we shall be able triumphantly to vindicate me from this terrible, groundless accusation."

IV.

When the trial did actually come on, the Museum authorities began by proving their case against me in what seemed the most horribly damning fashion. The superintendent proved that on such and such a day, in such and such a case, he had seen a gold coin of Wulfric of Mercia, the property of the Museum. He and Mactavish detailed the circumstances under which the coin was lost. The superintendent explained how he had asked me to submit to a search, and how, to avoid that indignity, I had myself produced from my waistcoat-pocket a gold coin of Wulfric of Mercia, which I asserted to be a duplicate specimen, and my own

property. The counsel for the Crown proceeded thus with the examination:—

“Do you recognize the coin I now hand you?”

“I do.”

“What is it?”

“The unique gold coin of Wulfric of Mercia, belonging to the Museum.”

“You have absolutely no doubt as to its identity?”

“Absolutely none whatsoever.”

“Does it differ in any respect from the same coin as you previously saw it?”

“Yes. It has been clipped round the edge with a sharp instrument, and a slight dent has been made by pressure on the obverse side, just below the W of Wulfric.”

“Did you suspect the prisoner at the bar of having mutilated it?”

“I did, and I asked him whether he had a knife in his possession. He answered no. I then asked him whether he would submit to be searched for a knife. He consented, and on my looking in his pocket I found the pair of nail-scissors I now produce, with a small file on either side.”

“Do you believe the coin might have been clipped with those scissors?”

“I do. The gold is very soft, having little alloy in its composition; and it could easily be cut by a strong-wristed man with a knife or scissors.”

As I listened, I didn't wonder that the jury looked as if they already considered me guilty: but I smiled to myself when I thought how utterly Emily's and the ploughman's evidence would rebut this unworthy suspicion.

The next witness was the Museum cleaner. His evidence at first produced nothing fresh, but just at last, counsel set before him a paper, containing a few scraps of yellow metal, and asked him triumphantly whether he recognized them. He answered yes.

There was a profound silence. The court was interested and curious. I couldn't quite understand it all, but I felt a terrible sinking.

“What are they?” asked the hostile barrister.

“They are some fragments of gold which I found in shaking the cocoa-nut matting on the floor of gallery 27 the Saturday after the attempted theft.”

I felt as if a mine had unexpectedly been sprung beneath me. How on earth those fragments of soft gold could ever have got there I couldn't imagine; but I saw the damaging nature of this extraordinary and inexplicable coincidence in half a second.

My counsel cross-examined all the witnesses for the prosecution, but failed to elicit anything of any value from any one of them. On the contrary, his questions put to the metallurgist of the Mint, who was called to prove the quality of the gold, only brought out a very strong opinion to the effect that the clippings were essentially

similar in character to the metal composing the clipped Wulfric.

No wonder the jury seemed to think the case was going decidedly against me.

Then my counsel called his witnesses. I listened in the profoundest suspense and expectation.

The first witness was the ploughman from Lichfield. He was a well-meaning but very puzzle-headed old man, and he was evidently frightened at being confronted by so many clever wig-wearing barristers.

Nevertheless, my counsel managed to get the true story out of him at last with infinite patience, dexterity, and skill. The old man told us finally how he had found the coins and sold them to me for five pounds; and how one of them was of gold, with a queer head and goggle eyes pointed full face upon its surface.

When he had finished, the counsel for the Crown began his cross-examination. He handed the ploughman a gold coin. "Did you ever see that before?" he asked quietly.

"To be sure I did," the man answered, looking at it open-mouthed.

"What is it?"

"It's the bit I sold Mr. Tait there—the bit as I got out o' the old basin."

Counsel turned triumphantly to the judge. "My lord," he said, "this thing to which the witness swears is a gold piece of Ethelwulf of Wessex, by far the commonest and cheapest gold coin of the whole Anglo-Saxon period."

It was handed to the jury side by side with the Wulfric of Mercia; and the difference, as I knew myself, was in fact extremely noticeable. All that the old man could have observed in common between them must have been merely the archaic Anglo-Saxon character of the coinage.

As I heard that, I began to feel that it was really all over.

My counsel tried on the re-examination to shake the old man's faith in his identification, and to make him transfer his story to the Wulfric which he had actually sold me. But it was all in vain. The ploughman had clearly the dread of perjury for ever before his eyes, and wouldn't go back for any consideration upon his first sworn statement. "No, no, mister," he said over and over again in reply to my counsel's bland suggestion, "you ain't going to make me forswear myself for all your cleverness."

The next witness was Emily. She went into the box pale and red-eyed, but very confident. My counsel examined her admirably; and she stuck to her point with womanly persistence, that she had herself seen the clipped Wulfric, and no other coin, on the morning of the supposed theft. She knew it was so, because she distinctly remembered the inscription, "Wulfric Rex," and the peculiar way the staring

open eyes were represented with barbaric puerility.

Counsel for the Crown would only trouble the young lady with two questions. The first was a painful one, but it must be asked in the interests of justice. Were she and the prisoner at the bar engaged to be married to one another?

The answer came, slowly and timidly, "Yes."

Counsel drew a long breath, and looked her hard in the face. Could she read the inscription on that coin now produced?—handing her the Ethelwulf.

Great heavens! I saw at once the plot to disconcert her, but was utterly powerless to warn her against it.

Emily looked at it long and steadily. "No," she said at last, growing deadly pale and grasping the woodwork of the witness-box convulsively; "I don't know the character in which it is written."

Of course not: for the inscription was in the peculiar semi-runic Anglo-Saxon letters! She had never read the words "Wulfric Rex" either. I had read them to her, and she had carried them away vaguely in her mind, imagining no doubt that she herself had actually deciphered them.

There was a slight pause, and I felt my blood growing cold within me. Then the counsel for the Crown handed her again the genuine Wulfric, and asked her whether the letters upon it which she professed to have read were or were not similar to those of the Ethelwulf.

Instead of answering, Emily bent down her head between her hands, and burst suddenly into tears.

I was so much distressed at her terrible agitation that I forgot altogether for the moment my own perilous position, and I cried aloud, "My lord, my lord, will you not interpose to spare her any further questions?"

"I think," the judge said to the counsel for the Crown, "you might now permit the witness to stand down."

"I wish to re-examine, my lord," my counsel put in hastily.

"No," I said in his ear, "no. Whatever comes of it, not another question. I had far rather go to prison than let her suffer this inexpressible torture for a single minute longer."

Emily was led down, still crying bitterly, into the body of the court, and the rest of the proceedings went on uninterrupted.

The theory of the prosecution was a simple and plausible one. I had bought a common Anglo-Saxon coin, probably an Ethelwulf, valued at about twenty-two shillings, from the old Lichfield ploughman. I had thereupon conceived the fraudulent idea of pretending that I had a duplicate of the rare Wulfric. I had shown the

Ethelwulf, clipped in a particular fashion, to the lady whom I was engaged to marry. I had then defaced and altered the genuine Wulfric at the Museum into the same shape with the aid of my pocket nail-scissors. And I had finally made believe to drop the coin accidentally upon the floor, while I had really secreted it in my waistcoat pocket. The theory for the defence had broken down utterly. And then there was the damning fact of the gold scrapings found in the cocoa-nut matting of the British Museum, which was to me the one great inexplicable mystery in the whole otherwise comprehensible mystification.

I felt myself that the case did indeed look very black against me. But would a jury venture to convict me on such very doubtful evidence?

The jury retired to consider their verdict. I stood in suspense in the dock, with my heart loudly beating. Emily remained in the body of the court below, looking up at me tearfully and penitently.

After twenty minutes the jury retired.

“Guilty or not guilty?”

The foreman answered aloud, “Guilty.”

There was a piercing cry in the body of the court, and in a moment Emily was carried out half fainting and half hysterical.

The judge then calmly proceeded to pass sentence. He dwelt upon the enormity of my crime in one so well connected and so far removed from the dangers of mere vulgar temptations. He dwelt also upon the vandalism of which I had been guilty—myself a collector—in clipping and defacing a valuable and unique memorial of antiquity, the property of the nation. He did not wish to be severe upon a young man of hitherto blameless character; but the national collection must be secured against such a peculiarly insidious and cunning form of depredation. The sentence of the court was that I should be kept in—

Five years’ penal servitude.

Crushed and annihilated as I was, I had still strength to utter a single final word. “My lord,” I cried, “the missing Wulfric will yet be found, and will hereafter prove my perfect innocence.”

“Remove the prisoner,” said the judge, coldly.

They took me down to the courtyard unresisting, where the prison van was standing in waiting.

On the steps I saw Emily and her mother, both crying bitterly. They had been told the sentence already, and were waiting to take a last farewell of me.

“Oh, Harold!” Emily cried, flinging her arms around me wildly, “it’s all my fault! It’s my fault only! By my foolish stupidity I’ve lost your case. I’ve sent you to prison.

Oh, Harold, I can never forgive myself. I've sent you to prison. I've sent you to prison."

"Dearest," I said, "it won't be for long. I shall soon be free again. They'll find the Wulfric sooner or later, and then of course they'll let me out again."

"Harold," she cried, "oh, Harold, Harold, don't you see? Don't you understand? This is a plot against you. It isn't lost. It isn't lost. That would be nothing. It's stolen; it's stolen!"

A light burst in upon me suddenly, and I saw in a moment the full depth of the peril that surrounded me.

PART II.

I.

It was some time before I could sufficiently accustom myself to my new life in the Isle of Portland to be able to think clearly and distinctly about the terrible blow that had fallen upon me. In the midst of all the petty troubles and discomforts of prison existence, I had no leisure at first fully to realize the fact that I was a convicted felon with scarcely a hope—not of release; for that I cared little—but of rehabilitation.

Slowly, however, I began to grow habituated to the new hard life imposed upon me, and to think in my cell of the web of circumstance which had woven itself so irresistibly around me.

I had only one hope. Emily knew I was innocent. Emily suspected, like me, that the Wulfric had been stolen. Emily would do her best, I felt certain, to heap together fresh evidence, and unravel this mystery to its very bottom.

Meanwhile, I thanked Heaven for the hard mechanical daily toil of cutting stone in Portland prison. I was a strong athletic young fellow enough. I was glad now that I had always loved the river at Oxford; my arms were stout and muscular. I was able to take my part in the regular work of the gang to which I belonged. Had it been otherwise—had I been set down to some quiet sedentary occupation, as first-class misdemeanants often are, I should have worn my heart out soon with thinking perpetually of poor Emily's terrible trouble.

When I first came, the Deputy-Governor, knowing my case well (had there not been leaders about me in all the papers?), very kindly asked me whether I would wish to be given work in the book-keeping department, where many educated convicts were employed as clerks and assistants. But I begged particularly to be put

into an outdoor gang, where I might have to use my limbs constantly, and so keep my mind from eating itself up with perpetual thinking. The Deputy-Governor immediately consented, and gave me work in a quarrying gang, at the west end of the island, near Deadman's Bay on the edge of the Chesil.

For three months I worked hard at learning the trade of a quarryman, and succeeded far better than any of the other new hands who were set to learn at the same time with me. Their heart was not in it; mine was. Anything to escape that gnawing agony.

The other men in the gang were not agreeable or congenial companions. They taught me their established modes of intercommunication, and told me several facts about themselves, which did not tend to endear them to me. One of them, 1247, was put in for the manslaughter of his wife by kicking; he was a low-browed, brutal London drayman, and he occupied the next cell to mine, where he disturbed me much in my sleepless nights by his loud snoring. Another, a much slighter and more intelligent-looking man, was a skilled burglar, sentenced to fourteen years for "cracking a crib" in the neighbourhood of Hampstead. A third was a sailor, convicted of gross cruelty to a defenceless Lascar. They all told me the nature of their crimes with a brutal frankness which fairly surprised me; but when I explained to them in return that I had been put in upon a false accusation, they treated my remarks with a galling contempt that was absolutely unsupportable. After a short time I ceased to communicate with my fellow-prisoners in any way, and remained shut up with my own thoughts in utter isolation.

By-and-by I found that the other men in the same gang were beginning to dislike me strongly, and that some among them actually whispered to one another—what they seemed to consider a very strong point indeed against me—that I must really have been convicted by mistake, and that I was a regular stuck-up sneaking Methodist. They complained that I worked a great deal too hard, and so made the other felons seem lazy by comparison; and they also objected to my prompt obedience to our warder's commands, as tending to set up an exaggerated and impossible standard of discipline.

Between this warder and myself, on the other hand, there soon sprang up a feeling which I might almost describe as one of friendship. Though by the rules of the establishment we could not communicate with one another except upon matters of business, I liked him for his uniform courtesy, kindness, and forbearance; while I could easily see that he liked me in return, by contrast with the other men who were under his charge. He was one of those persons whom some experience of prisons then and since has led me to believe less rare than most people would imagine—men

in whom the dreary life of a prison warder, instead of engendering hardness of heart and cold unsympathetic sternness, has engendered a certain profound tenderness and melancholy of spirit. I grew quite fond of that one honest warder, among so many coarse and criminal faces; and I found, on the other hand, that my fellow-prisoners hated me all the more because, as they expressed it in their own disgusting jargon, I was sucking up to that confounded dog of a barker. It happened once, when I was left for a few minutes alone with the warder, that he made an attempt for a moment, contrary to regulations, to hold a little private conversation with me.

“1430,” he said in a low voice, hardly moving his lips, for fear of being overlooked, “what is your outside name?”

I answered quietly, without turning to look at him, “Harold Tait.”

He gave a little involuntary start. “What!” he cried. “Not him that took a coin from the British Museum?”

I bridled up angrily. “I did not take it,” I cried with all my soul. “I am innocent, and have been put in here by some terrible error.”

He was silent for half a second. Then he said musingly, “Sir, I believe you. You are speaking the truth. I will do all I can to make things easy for you.”

That was all he said then. But from that day forth he always spoke to me in private as “Sir,” and never again as “1430.”

An incident arose at last out of this condition of things which had a very important effect upon my future position.

One day, about three months after I was committed to prison, we were all told off as usual to work in a small quarry on the cliff-side overhanging the long expanse of pebbly beach known as the Chesil. I had reason to believe afterwards that a large open fishing boat lying upon the beach below at the moment had been placed there as part of a concerted scheme by the friends of the Hampstead burglar; and that it contained ordinary clothing for all the men in our gang, except myself only. The idea was evidently that the gang should overpower the warder, seize the boat, change their clothes instantly, taking turns about meanwhile with the navigation, and make straight off for the shore at Lulworth, where they could easily disperse without much chance of being re-captured. But of all this I was of course quite ignorant at the time, for they had not thought well to intrust their secret to the ears of the sneaking virtuous Methodist.

A few minutes after we arrived at the quarry, I was working with two other men at putting a blast in, when I happened to look round quite accidentally, and to my great horror, saw 1247, the brutal wife-kicker, standing behind with a huge block of stone in his hands, poised just above the warder’s head, in a threatening attitude.

The other men stood around waiting and watching. I had only just time to cry out in a tone of alarm, "Take care, warder, he'll murder you!" when the stone descended upon the warder's head, and he fell at once, bleeding and half senseless, upon the ground beside me. In a second, while he shrieked and struggled, the whole gang was pressing savagely and angrily around him.

There was no time to think or hesitate. Before I knew almost what I was doing, I had seized his gun and ammunition, and, standing over his prostrate body, I held the men at bay for a single moment. Then 1247 advanced threateningly, and tried to put his foot upon the fallen warder.

I didn't wait or reflect one solitary second. I drew the trigger, and fired full upon him. The bang sounded fiercely in my ears, and for a moment I could see nothing through the smoke of the rifle.

With a terrible shriek he fell in front of me, not dead, but seriously wounded.

"The boat, the boat," the others cried loudly. "Knock him down! Kill him! Take the boat, all of you."

At that moment the report of my shot had brought another warder hastily to the top of the quarry.

"Help, help!" I cried. "Come quick, and save us. These brutes are trying to murder our warder!"

The man rushed back to call for aid; but the way down the zigzag path was steep and tortuous, and it was some time before they could manage to get down and succour us.

Meanwhile the other convicts pressed savagely around us, trying to jump upon the warder's body and force their way past to the beach beneath us. I fired again, for the rifle was double-barrelled; but it was impossible to reload in such a tumult, so, after the next shot, which hit no one, I laid about me fiercely with the butt end of the gun, and succeeded in knocking down four of the savages, one after another. By that time the warders from above had safely reached us, and formed a circle of fixed bayonets around the rebellious prisoners.

"Thank God!" I cried, flinging down the rifle, and rushing up to the prostrate warder. "He is still alive. He is breathing! He is breathing!"

"Yes," he murmured in a faint voice, "I am alive, and I thank you for it. But for you, sir, these fellows here would certainly have murdered me."

"You are badly wounded yourself, 1430," one of the other warders said to me, as the rebels were rapidly secured and marched off sullenly back to prison. "Look, your own arm is bleeding fiercely."

Then for the first time I was aware that I was one mass of wounds from head to

foot, and that I was growing faint from loss of blood. In defending the fallen warder I had got punched and pummelled on every side, just the same as one used to get long ago in a bully at football when I was a boy at Rugby, only much more seriously.

The warders brought down seven stretchers: one for me; one for the wounded warder; one for 1247, whom I had shot; and four for the convicts whom I had knocked over with the butt end of the rifle. They carried us up on them, strongly guarded, in a long procession.

At the door of the infirmary the Governor met us. "1430," he said to me, in a very kind voice, "you have behaved most admirably. I saw you myself quite distinctly from my drawing-room windows. Your bravery and intrepidity are well deserving of the highest recognition."

"Sir," I answered, "I have only tried to do my duty. I couldn't stand by and see an innocent man murdered by such a pack of bloodthirsty ruffians."

The Governor turned aside a little surprised. "Who is 1430?" he asked quietly.

A subordinate, consulting a book, whispered my name and supposed crime to him confidentially. The Governor nodded twice, and seemed to be satisfied.

"Sir," the wounded warder said faintly from his stretcher, "1430 is an innocent man unjustly condemned, if ever there was one."

II.

On the Thursday week following, when my wounds were all getting well, the whole body of convicts was duly paraded at half-past eleven in front of the Governor's house.

The Governor came out, holding an official-looking paper in his right hand. "No. 1430," he said in a loud voice, "stand forward." And I stood forward.

"No. 1430, I have the pleasant duty of informing you, in face of all your fellow-prisoners, that your heroism and self-devotion in saving the life of Warder James Woollacott, when he was attacked and almost overpowered on the twentieth of this month by a gang of rebellious convicts, has been reported to Her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Home Department; and that on his recommendation Her Majesty has been graciously pleased to grant you a Free Pardon for the remainder of the time during which you were sentenced to penal servitude."

For a moment I felt quite stunned and speechless. I reeled on my feet so much that two of the warders jumped forward to support me. It was a great thing to have at least one's freedom. But in another minute the real meaning of the thing came clearer upon me, and I recoiled from the bare sound of those horrid words, a free

pardon. I didn't want to be pardoned like a convicted felon: I wanted to have my innocence proved before the eyes of all England. For my own sake, and still more for Emily's sake, rehabilitation was all I cared for.

"Sir," I said, touching my cap respectfully, and saluting the Governor according to our wonted prison discipline, "I am very greatly obliged to you for your kindness in having made this representation to the Home Secretary; but I feel compelled to say I cannot accept a free pardon. I am wholly guiltless of the crime of which I have been convicted; and I wish that instead of pardoning me the Home Secretary would give instructions to the detective police to make a thorough investigation of the case, with the object of proving my complete innocence. Till that is done, I prefer to remain an inmate of Portland Prison. What I wish is not pardon, but to be restored as an honest man to the society of my equals."

The Governor paused for a moment, and consulted quietly in an undertone with one or two of his subordinates. Then he turned to me with great kindness, and said in a loud voice, "No. 1430, I have no power any longer to detain you in this prison, even if I wished to do so, after you have once obtained Her Majesty's free pardon. My duty is to dismiss you at once, in accordance with the terms of this document. However, I will communicate the substance of your request to the Home Secretary, with whom such a petition, so made, will doubtless have the full weight that may rightly attach to it. You must now go with these warders, who will restore you your own clothes, and then formally set you at liberty. But if there is anything further you would wish to speak to me about, you can do so afterward in your private capacity as a free man at two o'clock in my own office."

I thanked him quietly and then withdrew. At two o'clock I duly presented myself in ordinary clothes at the Governor's office.

We had a long and confidential interview, in the course of which I was able to narrate to the Governor at full length all the facts of my strange story exactly as I have here detailed them. He listened to me with the greatest interest, checking and confirming my statements at length by reference to the file of papers brought to him by a clerk. When I had finished my whole story, he said to me quite simply, "Mr. Tait, it may be imprudent of me in my position and under such peculiar circumstances to say so, but I fully and unreservedly believe your statement. If anything that I can say or do can be of any assistance to you in proving your innocence, I shall be very happy indeed to exert all my influence in your favour."

I thanked him warmly with tears in my eyes.

"And there is one point in your story," he went on, "to which I, who have seen a good deal of such doubtful cases, attach the very highest importance. You say that

gold clippings, pronounced to be similar in character to the gold Wulfric, were found shortly after by a cleaner at the Museum on the cocoa-nut matting of the floor where the coin was examined by you?"

I nodded, blushing crimson. "That," I said, "seems to me the strangest and most damning circumstance against me in the whole story."

"Precisely," the Governor answered quietly. "And if what you say is the truth (as I believe it to be), it is also the circumstance which best gives us a cue to use against the real culprit. The person who stole the coin was too clever by half, or else not quite clever enough for his own protection. In manufacturing that last fatal piece of evidence against you he was also giving you a certain clue to his own identity."

"How so?" I asked, breathless.

"Why, don't you see? The thief must in all probability have been somebody connected with the Museum. He must have seen you comparing the Wulfric with your own coin. He must have picked it up and carried it off secretly at the moment you dropped it. He must have clipped the coin to manufacture further hostile evidence. And he must have dropped the clippings afterwards on the cocoa-nut matting in the same gallery on purpose in order to heighten the suspicion against you."

"You are right," I cried, brightening up at the luminous suggestion—"you are right, obviously. And there is only one man who could have seen and heard enough to carry out this abominable plot—Mactavish!"

"Well, find him out and prove the case against him, Mr. Tait," the Governor said warmly, "and if you send him here to us I can promise you that he will be well taken care of."

I bowed and thanked him, and was about to withdraw, but he held out his hand to me with perfect frankness.

"Mr. Tait," he said, "I can't let you go away so. Let me have your hand in token that you bear us no grudge for the way we have treated you during your unfortunate imprisonment, and that I, for my part, am absolutely satisfied of the truth of your statement."

III.

The moment I arrived in London I drove straight off without delay to Emily's. I had telegraphed beforehand that I had been granted a free pardon, but had not stopped to tell her why or under what conditions.

Emily met me in tears in the passage. "Harold! Harold!" she cried, flinging her

arms wildly around me. “Oh, my darling! my darling! how can I ever say it to you? Mamma says she won’t allow me to see you here any longer.”

It was a terrible blow, but I was not unprepared for it. How could I expect that poor, conventional, commonplace old lady to have any faith in me after all she had read about me in the newspapers?

“Emily,” I said, kissing her over and over again tenderly, “you must come out with me, then, this very minute, for I want to talk with you over matters of importance. Whether your mother wishes it or not, you must come out with me this very minute.”

Emily put on her bonnet hastily and walked out with me into the streets of London. It was growing dark, and the neighbourhood was a very quiet one; or else perhaps even my own Emily would have felt a little ashamed of walking about the streets of London with a man whose hair was still cropped short around his head like a common felon’s.

I told her all the story of my release, and Emily listened to it in profound silence.

“Harold!” she cried, “my darling Harold!” (when I told her the tale of my desperate battle over the fallen warder), “you are the bravest and best of men. I knew you would vindicate yourself sooner or later. What we have to do now is to show that Mactavish stole the Wulfric. I know he stole it; I read it at the trial in his clean-shaven villain’s face. I shall prove it still, and then you will be justified in the eyes of everybody.”

“But how can we manage to communicate meanwhile, darling?” I cried eagerly. “If your mother won’t allow you to see me, how are we ever to meet and consult about it?”

“There’s only one way, Harold—only one way; and as things now stand you mustn’t think it strange of me to propose it. Harold, you must marry me immediately, whether mamma will let us or not!”

“Emily!” I cried, “my own darling! your confidence and trust in me makes me I can’t tell you how proud and happy. That you should be willing to marry me even while I am under such a cloud as this gives me a greater proof of your love than anything else you could possibly do for me. But, darling, I am too proud to take you at your word. For your sake, Emily, I will never marry you until all the world has been compelled unreservedly to admit my innocence.”

Emily blushed and cried a little. “As you will, Harold, dearest,” she answered, trembling, “I can afford to wait for you. I know that in the end the truth will be established.”

IV.

A week or two later I was astonished one morning at receiving a visit in my London lodgings from the warder Woollacott, whose life I had been happily instrumental in saving at Portland Prison.

“Well, sir,” he said, grasping my hand warmly and gratefully, “you see I haven’t yet entirely recovered from that terrible morning. I shall bear the marks of it about me for the remainder of my lifetime. The Governor says I shall never again be fit for duty, so they’ve pensioned me off very honourable.”

I told him how pleased I was that he should have been liberally treated, and then we fell into conversation about myself and the means of re-establishing my perfect innocence.

“Sir,” said he, “I shall have plenty of leisure, and shall be comfortably off now. If there’s anything that I can do to be of service to you in the matter, I shall gladly do it. My time is entirely at your disposal.”

I thanked him warmly, but told him that the affair was already in the hands of the regular detectives, who had been set to work upon it by the Governor’s influence with the Home Secretary.

By-and-by I happened to mention confidentially to him my suspicions of the man Mactavish. An idea seemed to occur to the warder suddenly; but he said not a word to me about it at the time. A few days later, however, he came back to me quietly and said, in a confidential tone of voice, “Well, sir, I think we may still manage to square him.”

“Square who, Mr. Woollacott? I don’t understand you.”

“Why, Mactavish, sir. I found out he had a small house near the Museum, and his wife lets a lodging there for a single man. I’ve gone and taken the lodging, and I shall see whether in the course of time something or other doesn’t come out of it.”

I smiled and thanked him for his enthusiasm in my cause; but I confess I didn’t see how anything on earth of any use to me was likely to arise from this strange proceeding on his part.

V.

It was that same week, I believe, that I received two other unexpected visitors. They came together. One of them was the Superintendent of Coins at the British Museum; the other was the well-known antiquary and great authority upon the Anglo-Saxon coinage, Sir Theophilus Wraxton.

“Mr. Tait,” the superintendent began, not without some touch of natural

shamefacedness in his voice and manner, "I have reason to believe that I may possibly have been mistaken in my positive identification of the coin you showed me that day at the Museum as our own specimen of the gold Wulfric. If I *was* mistaken, then I have unintentionally done you a most grievous wrong; and for that wrong, should my suspicions turn out ill-founded, I shall owe you the deepest and most heartfelt apologies. But the only reparation I can possibly make you is the one I am doing to-day by bringing here my friend Sir Theophilus Wraxton. He has a communication of some importance to make to you; and if he is right, I can only beg your pardon most humbly for the error I have committed in what I believed to be the discharge of my duties."

"Sir," I answered, "I saw at the time you were the victim of a mistake, as I was the victim of a most unfortunate concurrence of circumstances; and I bear you no grudge whatsoever for the part you bore in subjecting me to what is really in itself a most unjust and unfounded suspicion. You only did what you believed to be your plain duty; and you did it with marked reluctance, and with every desire to leave me every possible loophole of escape from what you conceived as a momentary yielding to a vile temptation. But what is it that Sir Theophilus Wraxton wishes to tell me?"

"Well, my dear sir," the old gentleman began, warmly, "I haven't the slightest doubt in the world myself that you have been quite unwarrantably disbelieved about a plain matter of fact that ought at once to have been immediately apparent to anybody who knew anything in the world about the gold Anglo-Saxon coinage. No reflection in the world upon you, Harbourne, my dear friend—no reflection in the world upon you in the matter; but you must admit that you've been pig-headedly hasty in jumping to a conclusion, and ignorantly determined in sticking to it against better evidence. My dear sir, I haven't the very slightest doubt in the world that the coin now in the British Museum is *not* the one which I have seen there previously, and which I have figured in the third volume of my 'Early Northumbrian and Mercian Numismatist!' Quite otherwise; quite otherwise, I assure you."

"How do you recognize that it is different, sir?" I cried excitedly. "The two coins were struck at just the same mint from the same die, and I examined them closely together, and saw absolutely no difference between them, except the dent and the amount of the clipping."

"Quite true, quite true," the old gentleman replied with great deliberation. "But look here, sir. Here is the drawing I took of the Museum Wulfric fourteen years ago, for the third volume of my 'Northumbrian Numismatist.' That drawing was made with the aid of careful measurements, which you will find detailed in the text at page 230. Now, here again is the duplicate Wulfric—permit me to call it *your* Wulfric; and

if you will compare the two you'll find, I think, that though your Wulfric is a great deal smaller than the original one, taken as a whole, yet on one diameter, the diameter from the letter U in Wulfric to the letter R in Rex, it is nearly an eighth of an inch broader than the specimen I have there figured. Well, sir, you may cut as much as you like off a coin, and make it smaller; but hang me if by cutting away at it for all your lifetime you can make it an eighth of an inch broader anyhow, in any direction."

I looked immediately at the coin, the drawing, and the measurements in the book, and saw at a glance that Sir Theophilus was right.

"How on earth did you find it out?" I asked the bland old gentleman, breathlessly.

"Why, my dear sir, I remembered the old coin perfectly, having been so very particular in my drawing and measurement; and the moment I clapped eyes on the other one yesterday, I said to my good friend Harbourne, here: 'Harbourne,' said I, 'somebody's been changing your Wulfric in the case over yonder for another specimen.' 'Changing it!' said Harbourne: 'not a bit of it; clipping it, you mean.' 'No, no, my good fellow,' said I: 'do you suppose I don't know the same coin again when I see it, and at my time of life too? This is another coin, not the same one clipped. It's bigger across than the old one from there to there.' 'No, it isn't,' says he. 'But it is,' I answer. 'Just you look in my "Northumbrian and Mercian" and see if it isn't so.' 'You must be mistaken,' says Harbourne. 'If I am, I'll eat my head,' says I. Well, we get down the 'Numismatist' from the bookshelf then and there; and sure enough, it turns out just as I told him. Harbourne turned as white as a ghost, I can tell you, as soon as he discovered it. 'Why,' says he, 'I've sent a poor young fellow off to Portland Prison, only three or four months ago, for stealing that very Wulfric.' And then he told me all the story. 'Very well,' said I, 'then the only thing you've got to do is just to go and call on him to-morrow, and let him know that you've had it proved to you, fairly proved to you, that this is not the original Wulfric.'"

"Sir Theophilus," I said, "I'm much obliged to you. What you point out is by far the most important piece of evidence I've yet had to offer. Mr. Harbourne, have you kept the gold clippings that were found that morning on the cocoa-nut matting?"

"I have, Mr. Tait," the superintendent answered anxiously. "And Sir Theophilus and I have been trying to fit them upon the coin in the Museum shelves; and I am bound to admit I quite agree with him that they must have been cut off a specimen decidedly larger in one diameter and smaller in another than the existing one—in short, that they do not fit the clipped Wulfric now in the Museum."

It was just a fortnight later that I received quite unexpectedly a telegram from Rome directed to me at my London lodgings. I tore it open hastily; it was signed by Emily, and contained only these few words: "We have found the Museum Wulfric. The superintendent is coming over to identify and reclaim it. Can you manage to run across immediately with him?"

For a moment I was lost in astonishment, delight, and fear. How and why had Emily gone over to Rome? Who could she have with her to take care of her and assist her? How on earth had she tracked the missing coin to its distant hiding-place? It was all a profound mystery to me; and after my first outburst of joy and gratitude, I began to be afraid that Emily might have been misled by her eagerness and anxiety into following up the traces of the wrong coin.

However, I had no choice but to go to Rome and see the matter ended; and I went alone, wearing out my soul through that long journey with suspense and fear; for I had not managed to hit upon the superintendent, who, through his telegram being delivered a little the sooner, had caught a train six hours earlier than the one I went by.

As I arrived at the Central Station at Rome, I was met, to my surprise, by a perfect crowd of familiar faces. First, Emily herself rushed to me, kissed me, and assured me a hundred times over that it was all right, and that the missing coin was undoubtedly recovered. Then, the superintendent, more shamefaced than ever, and very grave, but with a certain moisture in his eyes, confirmed her statement by saying that he had got the real Museum Wulfric undoubtedly in his pocket. Then Sir Theophilus, who had actually come across with Lady Wraxton on purpose to take care of Emily, added his assurances and congratulations. Last of all, Woollacott, the warder, stepped up to me and said simply, "I'm glad, sir, that it was through me as it all came out so right and even."

"Tell me how it all happened," I cried, almost faint with joy, and still wondering whether my innocence had really been proved beyond all fear of cavil.

Then Woollacott began, and told me briefly the whole story. He had consulted with the superintendent and Sir Theophilus, without saying a word to me about it, and had kept a close watch upon all the letters that came for Mactavish. A rare Anglo-Saxon coin is not a chattel that one can easily get rid of every day; and Woollacott shrewdly gathered from what Sir Theophilus had told him that Mactavish (or whoever else had stolen the coin) would be likely to try to dispose of it as far away from England as possible, especially after all the comments that had been made on this particular Wulfric in the English newspapers. So he took every opportunity of intercepting the postman at the front door, and looking out for

envelopes with foreign postage stamps. At last one day a letter arrived for Mactavish with an Italian stamp and a cardinal's red hat stamped like a crest on the flap of the envelope. Woollacott was certain that things of that sort didn't come to Mactavish every day about his ordinary business. Braving the penalties for appropriating a letter, he took the liberty to open this suspicious communication, and found it was a note from Cardinal Trevelyan, the Pope's Chamberlain, and a well-known collector of antiquities referring to early Church history in England, and that it was in reply to an offer of Mactavish's to send the Cardinal for inspection a rare gold coin not otherwise specified. The Cardinal expressed his readiness to see the coin, and to pay a hundred and fifty pounds for it, if it proved to be rare and genuine as described. Woollacott felt certain that this communication must refer to the gold Wulfric. He therefore handed the letter to Mrs. Mactavish when the postman next came his rounds, and waited to see whether Mactavish any day afterwards went to the post to register a small box or packet. Meanwhile he communicated with Emily and the superintendent, being unwilling to buoy me up with a doubtful hope until he was quite sure that their plan had succeeded. The superintendent wrote immediately to the Cardinal, mentioning his suspicions, and received a reply to the effect that he expected a coin of Wulfric to be sent him shortly. Sir Theophilus, who had been greatly interested in the question of the coin, kindly offered to take Emily over to Rome, in order to get the crinating piece, as soon as it arrived, from Cardinal Trevelyan. That was, in turn, the story that they all told me, piece by piece, in the Central Station at Rome that eventful morning.

"And Mactavish?" I asked of the superintendent eagerly.

"Is in custody in London already," he answered somewhat sternly. "I had a warrant out against him before I left town on this journey."

At the trial the whole case was very clearly proved against him, and my innocence was fully established before the face of all my fellow-countrymen. A fortnight later my wife and I were among the rocks and woods at Ambleside; and when I returned to London, it was to take a place in the department of coins at the British Museum, which the superintendent begged of me to accept as some further proof in the eyes of everybody that the suspicion he had formed in the matter of the Wulfric was a most unfounded and wholly erroneous one. The coin itself I kept as a memento of a terrible experience; but I have given up collecting on my own account entirely, and am quite content nowadays to bear my share in guarding the national collection from other depredators of the class of Mactavish.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

Inconsistent use of hyphens and hyphenated words maintained.

Cover created for this ebook.

[The end of *The Beckoning Hand: The Gold Wulfric* by Grant Allen]