

The
Kang-
He
Vase
J. S.
Fletcher

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by J. S. Fletcher

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THE KANG-HE VASE

This is the Story

Who murdered the man found roped to the gibbet on Gallows Tree Point? Who stole Miss Ellingham's famous Kang-He Vase? What was Uncle Joseph doing at Middlebourne? From the date that old scoundrel turned up, trouble began—murder, robbery, and abduction; trouble in which Ben Heckitt and Pepita played prominent and perilous parts.

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THE KANG-HE VASE

by

J. S. FLETCHER

Author of "The Cartwright Gardens Murder," etc.

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CHAPTER I

FOOTSTEPS AT MIDNIGHT

I suppose the first thing to be set down in this history of black crime (into which a good deal of mystery, and some amount of love-making, will have to be duly chronicled) is the fact that at about four o'clock of a certain Spring afternoon some ten years ago, Nellie Apps, who carried out the meagre mail of our neighbourhood, came to the garden gate of our house with something that we very rarely received—a telegram. I was sitting in the porch when she came, being downstairs that day for either the first or second time after an illness that had attacked me just before leaving school, and had put off the start of my career as articled clerk to Lawyer Philbrick in Kingshaven, and it was I who took the buff envelope from her. But it was no sooner in my hand than out of it; my sister Keziah, senior to me by twenty years, had heard the click of the latch and seen Nellie Apps from the parlour window, and she was through the hall and the front door and had the flimsy thing from my fingers before you could have counted two. And on the instant she was tearing open the envelope—but she spoke, quickly, before that business was finished.

“Ben!” she exclaimed, in her sharp, decisive fashion, “I shouldn’t wonder if Mrs. Hozier is taken bad!”

Mrs. Hozier was Keziah’s great friend; a fellow-villager, who had lately married and gone to live in Kingshaven. At my age—eighteen—I was supposed—by Keziah—not to know much of such matters, but I had an idea that Mr. and Mrs. Hozier were expecting the advent of what might be a son and heir, and failing that, at least a daughter, and a shrewd suspicion that this event had transpired, or was about to transpire, came over me as Keziah smoothed out the sheet which she drew from its cover. But Keziah gave me no precise information; her hawk eyes had read the message, and her long fingers had crumpled up the paper and thrust it into her pocket, all in a second. She turned swiftly on Nellie Apps, who stood amongst the hollyhocks, staring at her.

“You needn’t wait!” she said peremptorily. “There’s no answer.” Then, as Nellie went away down the path, Keziah turned again, in more leisurely fashion, on me in my easy chair.

“Ben!” she went on. “I’ll have to go to Kingshaven! And at once! I promised I’d go, and go I must! And I shall have to be away for the night, and maybe for some of to-morrow,” she continued. “I can trust you, Ben?”

“Trust me, Keziah?” I inquired, wonderingly. “What about?”

She looked round, as if afraid that the thrushes and blackbirds might hear us,

and she dropped her voice to a whisper—a reverential whisper.

“The family silver!” she said. “Never have I left it before! And if anything should happen to it——”

She paused, and I looked up at her tall, gaunt figure, amazed, even at my age, that a grown woman could be so wholly infatuated. The family silver was Keziah’s Old Man of the Sea: I doubt if ever a night of her life passed by which did not find her agitated with fear for the family silver’s safety: more than once, seeing her examination of locks, bolts, and bars, I had wished the family silver at the bottom of the creek. She talked of it as if its value were colossal; in sober truth it consisted of a silver teapot, a cream jug, and a sugar basin; six large and six small forks, six large and six small spoons, a dozen teaspoons and a couple of soup ladles. True, it had belonged to our great, or great-great grandmother, and Keziah affirmed that it had been made in the reign of Queen Anne; but even granting these facts, I saw no reason why our lives should be perpetually shadowed by the remembrance of its presence under our old roof. And I daresay I replied to Keziah rather drily and a little sneeringly.

“Not much chance of anything happening to it, I should think, Keziah!” said I. “You’ve taken good care of that!”

I referred to Keziah’s elaborate precautions for the safety of the family silver. It lay, swathed in multitudinous folds of soft paper and rolls of wash-leather, in an oak box, iron-cornered and double-locked, which was clamped down to the floor in Keziah’s bedroom, underneath her bed. The devil himself would have been hard put to it to get at that silver while Keziah was anywhere about, and up to now she always had been about, being one of those women who never take a holiday and would be utterly miserable if they did.

“I know—I know!” she agreed hastily. “Of course, one has to take great care when one’s in possession of family heirlooms like ours! But promise me, Ben, that you’ll not cross this threshold till I get back, and that you’ll keep both doors locked!”

“I can promise all that easy enough, Keziah,” said I, glancing at my wasted legs. “I don’t think I could walk to the end of the garden!”

“Oh, but you soon will do, Ben!” she answered, reassuringly. “You’re improving wonderfully, and this fine Spring weather’ll do you no end of good. You’re a deal stronger to-day than you were yesterday—I wouldn’t leave you if you weren’t, even for Mrs. Hozier. And you’ll manage, easy enough—you can get your own supper to-night and breakfast in the morning; you could even make shift to get your dinner to-morrow, if I’m not back in time. But—you’ll not leave the house, Ben?”

"You can bet on that, Keziah!" I assured her. "I shan't!"

"Then we'll have our tea, and I'll put things to rights, and then I'll make ready and catch the six o'clock train," she said. "I don't like going, Ben: I'm not one for leaving home at any time. But when you've promised a friend that you'll stand by at a time of trouble——"

"Is Mrs. Hozier in trouble, then?" I inquired.

"Well, you'll hear more about it when I'm back," replied Keziah. "Maybe it'll end up in rejoicing, but anyway, I've got to go. But tea first."

We had our tea, and Keziah, punctilious about such matters, washed up the tea-things and put them in their place, before attiring herself in her best clothes, in which, as she scarcely ever wore them, she looked strangely out of place. She fussed about a great deal before setting off, seeing to the fastenings of doors and windows, and giving me a pile of instructions and admonitions, from counsel as to what to do in case burglars came, to the importance of taking my medicine at the exact minute and in the precise quantity, and I was thankful when at last, with an umbrella in one hand and an old-fashioned reticule in the other, she finally marched off, in a great hurry, to catch the train to Mrs. Hozier. She was a good woman, my sister Keziah, but she had a lot more of Martha than of Mary in her composition, and the house seemed delightfully quiet when her queer bonnet had disappeared behind the garden hedge. That was a beautiful Spring evening, and I continued to sit in my easy chair in the jasmine-covered porch. I had books by me, and newspapers, but I looked at neither; there were things far better worth looking at in front of me. Our old house, in which, according to Keziah, at least nine generations of our family of Heckitt had been born and had died, stood, a quaint survival of other days, in the very centre of a semicircle of coast line that turned inward from high cliffs on the West to a long, shelving promontory on the East. The sea came up to within fifty yards of our garden; a mile out lay the bar, marked all day long by its line of white surf, indicated all night by a signal-light; beyond the bar stretched the wide expanse of the English Channel. Our village, Middlebourne, lay behind the house; a collection of straggling farmsteads and cottages, through which ran the great high-road from London to Kingshaven; as far as we were concerned there might not have been any village there at all, for we were well out of it; from our windows and our garden we could only see three objects which had any relation to human life, and as regards two of them, it was a relation of the far past. Almost before our gate there stretched out into the shining waters of the creek a spit of sand, at the seaward extremity of which was a group of black, smooth-topped rocks—on them stood a stout post or pillar of dark wood, clamped about with heavy iron bands, and riveted firmly to the rock by

iron supports; it had an arm projecting from it at its head, and from that swung an old lantern, which occasionally was lighted. But in the old days men had been hanged from that bar; pirates, smugglers, murderers, and then their bodies had swung in chains until the flesh dropped off on the surf-swept rocks beneath; hence the local name of the spit of sand and group of rocks—Gallowstree Point. A grisly, grim spot that, especially on moonlit nights!—and there was another, close by, scarcely less eerie, in the shape of the ruin of a tide-mill, long since disused, and now given over to the ravages of the rushing waters which had once turned its wheel. These things were of the dead, but there was a house of the living at the further end of the semicircular sweep of the creek. This was a solitary, ancient place, once a farmstead but now modernised into a private residence, known as Middlebourne Grange. It had the sea on one side, and a wide moat on the other three, and there was a high, solidly-built wall on all four sides, and within the wall a double line of high elms, fencing in and shading the house, and the only way into the place was by a bridge over the moat and through a door in the wall. It wore an air of seclusion and mystery, this moated and guarded house, and of its tenant at that time, a new-comer, none of us knew anything, except that she was a middle-aged woman named Miss Ellingham, who came from London, kept men-servants and three or four maids, and had staying with her a nephew, who was just about my own age, and of whom I was madly jealous at that time because I suspected him of casting sheep's eyes on my girl, Pepita.

Pepita was the daughter—and only child—of Captain Lucas Marigold, a retired mariner who lived in a smart little box of a place in the village. He had a nice, shady garden, with a tall mast in it, from which he flew flags, and an arbour, in the shelter of which he sipped his grog, smoked his pipe, and told sea-tales: a brown-faced, gnarled old chap, who, I think, had married late in life—anyway, he must have been getting on when Pepita came into the world. For Pepita, at the time of which I am writing, was only seventeen—and a very sweet seventeen, too. Her mother being a Spaniard, and Pepita having taken after her more than after Marigold, though he, no doubt, had been a good-looking man in his better time, Pepita was a beauty of the dark order—dark hair, dark eyes, rich colouring. And whoever says that boys of eighteen cannot fall in love lies in his throat!—I was eighteen just then, and I was madly in love with Pepita, and properly miserable about it. For Pepita was one of those damsels who was happiest when not one but half-a-dozen swains are silly about them, and there was scarce a youngster of our neighbourhood who had not begun being particular about his necktie and his socks, and the cut of his best clothes, and the proper parting of his hair, all because Pepita Marigold looked as if

you could eat her and die in sheer rapture of ecstasy at the first mouthful. Pepita came along as I sat there in the porch. She had been to see me two or three times during the last stage of my illness, but her last visit had taken place a good week previously, and I had tormented myself every day since in wondering what she was after—if she was boating with the parson's son, or birds' nesting with the squire's, or if Miss Ellingham's nephew, Bryce, had inveigled her into going a-fishing with him. But there were no signs of mental disquietude on Pepita's face: she looked as unconcerned and heart-whole as ever when, catching sight of me, she pushed open the garden gate and came up the path.

"Hello, Ben!" she exclaimed. "Out and about again?—hurrah!"

"Not much about, Pepita," I answered. "I haven't walked twenty yards so far—not been outside that hedge yet."

"Come, now!" she said. "Come down to the Point!—it'll do you good."

"Can't!" I replied. And I told her why—not forgetting Keziah's admonitions about the family silver. Pepita's big black eyes opened.

"Sakes!" she exclaimed. "You got to stop in that rambling old house all night through by just yourself, Ben? I'd be frightened to death!"

"Oh, that's nothing!" said I. "I don't mind. If I did hear anything, it would only be rats."

"Bad enough, too," she remarked. "What would you do, though, if robbers came? You ought to have a gun, like my old dad's. I reckon that would blow half-a-dozen robbers into mincemeat, once you let it off!"

"And me, too!" I said, visualising a certain blunderbuss which Captain Marigold kept hung on a rafter of his parlour. "No, I think I'd rather do without, Pepita. And there aren't any robbers round here, anyway."

"Well, ghosts, then, Ben," she insisted. "Ghosts! Seems to me this is just the place where you'd see a tidy lot." She craned her neck and looked up at the ivy-covered front of the old house. "Which is your room?" she went on. "That one, isn't it, over the porch? Well, now, I guess if you look out from your window, you can see Gallowstree Point and that old gibbet! Fancy that, now, on a moonlight night! If I saw it, I'd let out a scream that would lick any syren or fog-horn that ever sounded in the Channel!"

"You're a baby, Pepita!" said I, indulgently. "You forget that I'm a man!"

Instead of laughing at me, she studied me closely, with a sidelong glance from under her big hat.

"You've grown, Ben!" she said, suddenly. "You look like as if you were going to be a young man now instead of a boy! Sakes!—I guess you'll take to wearing a

tailed coat Sundays!”

“Ordered!” said I, proudly. “Members of the legal profession always wear tailed coats—it’s etiquette. And silk hats. Mine’s ordered, too. You wait till I’m better, and start going to the office at Kingshaven every morning!—guess you won’t know me!”

“Oh, yes, I shall, Ben, my boy!” she retorted, with the brutal candour of seventeen. “You haven’t got a snub nose or a heap of freckles and sandy hair for nothing! But I’m no end glad you’re better, old chap, and I’ll come and take you out—look out for me to-morrow, Ben, and we’ll have a nice walk.”

And then, with one of her ravishing smiles, Pepita was gone. The light of the day went with her—and I turned regretfully into the house, and after locking the front door, in religious observance of Keziah’s behests, lighted the lamp in the parlour. It was then, I think, that I began to realise that the house, as Pepita had been kind enough to remark, really was rambling and old, and that there was a certain amount of queerness about being left absolutely alone in it.

However, there were things to be done, and occupation of any sort is a relief in circumstances like these. I prepared my own supper, and having been brought up from infancy by Keziah (my mother had died before I left the cradle) I washed up cups, plates, and dishes after using them, and replaced each in its proper niche in the kitchen dresser—Keziah, a veritable martinet in all domestic matters, never allowed dirty things to be about, and she would never have slept if as much as a teaspoon had been left uncleaned overnight. All that done, I took my medicine, and sat down by what was left of the parlour fire to read. And the old house got quieter and quieter and quieter—you could feel the quiet. If Keziah had come home unexpectedly, I wouldn’t have minded if she’d talked for a solid hour about the family silver, and its hall-marks, and its history.

I got sick of that stillness by nine o’clock, and I went to bed. And being still weak after my illness, I soon fell asleep—dropping off suddenly. But I woke more suddenly—to hear two separate sounds. One was the sound of our old grandfather clock—it was striking midnight—twelve long, dull strokes. I didn’t mind that. But I did mind the other sound—the sound of footsteps, stealthy, but unmistakable. I sat up in bed, listening, and, I’m not ashamed to say, sweating with fear. And I sweated more than ever, and was more than ever afraid, when the footsteps stopped, at our porch.

CHAPTER II

UNCLE JOSEPH KREVIN

When you come to consider all the circumstances, you will not wonder that I was afraid. To begin with, I was weak, physically weak, from a long illness: there was not sufficient strength in me to grapple with a child. I was alone in a house which, despite all its bolts, bars, and window fastenings, could be broken into. It was an isolated house, too; the nearest cottage was a couple of hundred yards away. And who should come to it, at that time o' night, but some evil-disposed person? It was not Keziah, returning unexpectedly; Keziah would have thrown pebbles at my window and raised her voice. It wasn't Veller, the local policeman—the tramp of Veller's feet could have been heard a mile away. Whoever this man was, he had a soft tread, not as quiet as a cat's, to be sure, and yet velvety. And who was he, and what was he after? I had heard the footsteps distinctly on the last stretch of the path which led from the garden gate to the shelter of the porch. Now there was silence again; no doubt the man was examining the fastenings of the front door: I pictured him—having a vivid imagination in those days—bending down to the lock in the moonlight, fingering the handle, perhaps, considering what he might do to get in. But suddenly I heard him going away again. There was no doubt of it—he was retreating down the path. And at that I sprang out of my warm bed and, hurrying to the window, drew aside the blind and peered out into the night. There was a three-quarter moon in the sky, right over the creek, but owing, perhaps, to the heat of the previous afternoon and evening, there was a heavy white mist on the shore and the land, at its edge, and it circled about the trees and bushes in our garden. Still, I saw my midnight visitor; at least, I got a glimpse of him as he disappeared at the gate. He seemed to be a big man, broad of shoulder; maybe the mist made him look bigger than he was. And he went into the mist and was presently swallowed up in it, as he moved, slowly, in the direction of the spit of sand that ran down to Gallowstree Point.

I had some thought, then, of lighting a lamp, and setting it near the window of an upstairs room, so that this man, whoever he was, might know that the house was tenanted. But upon reflection I decided that he would probably take that as an invitation to come back. I did not want him back; before full daylight, at any rate. So I returned to my bed, and, of course, lay there wide awake and listening for a long time. I heard nothing save the faint lap of the waves on the beach and the occasional cry of a sea-bird. And at last I slept, and slept soundly, and when I woke, and went half-way down the stair to glance at the grandfather's clock, it was close on seven

and the blessed sun was high in the heavens and smiling cheerily over shore and sea.

There was no reason why I should get up; I could have lain in bed till noon if I had liked. But my strength and my spirits were coming back to me, and there was that in the fresh Spring morning which impelled me to action. So I got into some clothes, and lighted the kitchen fire, and put on the kettle, and as it wore towards eight undid the ponderous fastenings of the front door and looked out into the garden. And at once I had a surprise which was almost a shock. For there, on the left hand side of the bench which ran round the porch, lay a bag—a queer-looking, travel-worn bag, old-fashioned in make, the leather sorely rubbed, the metal clasps battered and rusted; altogether, a bag that had seen much service. It was the sort of bag that you could carry easily in your hand, and it was roughly tied about with a bit of common cord, in a fashion which suggested that the bag itself contained nothing that was valuable, and that anything was good enough as a fastening.

That my midnight visitor had set down this odd piece of luggage in the porch I had no more doubt than that it lay there before my eyes. I made no attempt to touch it, but I went into the porch and looked more closely at its exterior. There had been some initials painted on its side, in black, at one time, but they were now almost obliterated. And it had in past times borne many labels; there were traces of them all over it, back and front. But there was no recent label; nothing to show to whom it belonged, nor whence or by what route its owner had come there. Come he had, however, and straight to our door, as I made things out, and there had set down his bit of gear and gone away.

I was speculating with various whys and whats and whos when I heard a heavy and unmistakable tread on the pebbly road outside the garden. That was Veller, passing along to his cottage; he passed every morning. Presently he stuck his big round red face over the hedge and saw me and grinned—he was one of those men who smile perpetually.

“Morning, Master Ben!” said he. “Glad to see you out and around again!”

“Much obliged to you,” I answered. “But come here, Veller.”

He opened the garden gate and came up the path, his small eyes inquisitive. I silently pointed to the thing on the bench.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “Just so! I sees it—a bag! And what might it signify, now, Master Ben?”

“Veller!” said I. “You listen to me. My sister’s away; she had to go away last night to Kingshaven, to see Mrs. Hozier——”

He nodded understandingly, grinning more widely than ever, as if with great satisfaction.

"Ah!" he said, interrupting me. "Just so—exactly! I see Mr. Robinson last night as he come home on the last train from Kingshaven. Mrs. Hozier, now—her presented her good man with twinses yesterday. Afternoon it was, said Mr. Robinson—five o'clock. Which, when he called there, was doing well—all of 'em. Twinses!—a boy and a gel."

"Oh!" said I. "Well, anyway, that's where my sister went, so I was all alone in the house, all night, d'ye see, Veller? And about twelve o'clock I heard footsteps come up the path there. They paused here, in the porch. Then they went off. I jumped out of bed and saw a man leave the garden and go away towards Gallowstree Point. And this morning—just now, in fact—I found this bag here, where you see it. What d'you make of that, Veller?"

He scratched the lobe of his red right ear thoughtfully. "Well, to be sure, that's a main queer thing, Master Ben!" he answered. "You wasn't expecting anybody—a visitor, now?"

"No!" said I. "Nobody!"

"Seems like as if whoever this here bag belongs to knew his way about in these parts," he remarked ruminatively. "Here he comes, straight to the spot, puts down his luggage, and goes away! Whither?—and for what purpose? Ah!"

"That's just it!" I said. "Where's he gone? Will he come back? What would you do, now, if you were me, Veller?"

He consulted his ear again, and presently smiled as with a great inspiration.

"Just so!—exactly!" he answered. "Ah!—if it was me, Master Ben, I should get my braikfast! Let things bide till that was done with, so to speak. Leaving that there article where it is. 'Cause you never know what may be inside luggage of that complexion. Maybe this chap is a seafaring man. And—I've knowed seafaring men as carried queer goods in their gear! Snakes! I wouldn't open that there bag not for nothing—might be a rattle-sarpent in it! You get your braikfast, Master Ben, and if so be as this here mysterious mortal do turn up, and there's cause for what they call invoking the presence of the law—well, you knows where to find me!"

He became portentously solemn and dignified in pronouncing the last word, and we parted without spoiling its effect; he to his cottage, and I into the kitchen, to cook my breakfast. As was our custom, I left the front door wide open, and I had just got the bacon nicely sizzling in one pan, and the water for a couple of eggs near boiling point in another, when I heard steps advancing along the garden path. I popped my head out of the kitchen and looked down the hall . . . There was a man in the porch. He did not see me, for he was looking at the bag. So I took a good look at him. He was, I felt sure, the man I had seen from my window, at midnight: the set of his

shoulders seemed familiar. He was a big man, some five feet ten inches, I should say, in height, and broadly built, and his girth was accentuated by his loosely made suit of blue cloth. He wore a big slouch hat, and carried a queer-looking, un-English stick in his hand; there was a heavy gold cable chain across his waistcoat, and a gold pin in his neck-cloth; somehow, he gave the impression of being a solid, substantial man, financially. As for his face, which he presently turned in my direction, it was as big as his body, clean-shaven, pale-complexioned, flabby. There was a small nose in the middle of it, and two small, sly grey eyes, and a small, pursed-up mouth, but a big chin, and big jowl—my budding-lawyer instincts warned me that this was a man in dealing with whom it would be well to have all your wits about you.

I went towards him, and at sight of me he started. It was either a well-affected gesture, intended to deceive, or it was a genuine start of surprise; I found it difficult to decide which. And in making it he let out a little, indefinite sound—a sort of almost affectionate murmur. But I was short and sharp enough.

“Well?” I demanded. “What do you want?”

His answer was as remarkable as it was unpleasant. He suddenly shot out a big, flabby hand and grasped my chin and jaw, turning my face this way and that. It was all done in a second, and he spoke just as quickly.

“Aye!” he said, in a fat, unctuous voice. “To be sure! It will be. Unmistakably a Heckitt! Known him anywheres!”

“I am a Heckitt!” I declared, edging away from him. “Who are you?”

He nodded at me solemnly, three times, and, when he answered my question, his voice was fatter than ever.

“Your uncle, Joseph Krevin, my lad, that’s who I am!” he replied. “Your poor mother’s only brother Joe, what she was so fond of. You’ll have heard of me, no doubt?—from your sister Keziah.”

“Never!” protested I. “Never heard Keziah speak of you at any time!”

He looked highly pained at that. But a certain holy meekness spread itself as a cloak across the look of pain.

“Well, well!” he said. “Rellytives is—not always what they should be. But look you here, my lad—and this’ll show you that I know what I’m talking about. Inside the parlour there, on the left hand side as you go in, there’s an ancient bureau, and on top of that bureau there’s two family Bibles—one’s bound in black morocco, and t’other in red calf. And the black one is the Heckitt family Bible, and the red one is the Krevin. And in the Krevin you’ll find me—Joseph Krevin, and in both you’ll find your mother, Hannah Krevin as was, what married a Heckitt. Your father, Charles Heckitt. Uncle Joseph Krevin, I am—you can call me Uncle Joe for short, if you like

—and well Keziah knows me, whether she mentions me or not. And where is Keziah?—my Niece Keziah. What I ain't set eyes on for more years nor I can remember—a fine young woman, Keziah, and the handsomest in these parts when I was last hereabouts!”

He raised his voice considerably in the last sentence, as if hoping that Keziah would overhear this tribute to her charms, and his small eyes looked beyond me into the shadows of the hall. But I damped his ardour—or affectation of it.

“Keziah is not in at present,” I said, still keeping in the doorway. “I’m not quite sure when she will be in, either.”

“But you’re in, my lad!” he retorted sharply. “And I smells bacon—and coffee! Ain’t you going to welcome your Uncle Joe, what was your poor mother’s fav’rite? The Heckitts, as I remember them, was always given to hospitality, and——”

“Keziah doesn’t allow me to ask anybody in when she’s out,” I said. “But since you’re a relation——”

“Aye, there’s no doubt of that!” he interrupted quickly. “And, my lad,” he added, with a significant grimace, “not a poor one, neither!—as you may find, to your profit, some of these days. And what may your name be, now, for ’tis so long since I was this way that there are matters I’ve forgotten.”

I told him my name, asked him in, and put more bacon in the pan and added more eggs to those I was boiling for myself. He sat down near the kitchen fire and watched me, making remarks about his surroundings from time to time which showed me that he was familiar enough with them.

“There’s little changed in this old house, Nephew Ben,” he said, as he drew his chair to the table. “I says to myself as soon as ever I cast eyes on it that it was just the same as ever was!”

“That would be when you came to the porch last night?” I remarked, already curious about his movements. “I heard you!—and saw you, too!”

But the words were no sooner out of my lips than I realised that I was a bit too cocksure in my assertions. He put down his knife and fork with a gesture of surprise.

“Me?” he exclaimed. “No, my lad! You didn’t see me, nor hear me, neither, last night, at your porch! ’Cause why? I wasn’t there!”

“Isn’t that your bag outside in the porch?” I asked. “Surely!”

“My bag it is, and no other’s,” he asserted, gravely. “But not brought there by me, my lad. You see, I’d a bit of business with a man hereabouts. And when I come along from London and got out at the station, I gives that there bit of a bag to a man what had come along of me in the train for the last few miles and said he knew this part, to leave for me at Heckitt’s. That ’ud be the man you see.”

“Queer time for a man to come!” I said. “It was midnight!”

“Aye, well, it ’ud be past ten o’clock when I give him the bag,” he replied. “Late train, you see. No!—I wasn’t nowheres about here last night, Ben, my boy!—miles off! In the country. Seeing—ah!—an old friend o’ mine. And what may you be thinking of doing with yourself, my lad?—finished your schooling, no doubt, and ekally, no doubt, you’ll be a fine scholar?”

I gave him as much family news as I considered good for him, and then tried to extract some personal information about himself. But beyond ascertaining that he had knocked about the world a good deal and was for the present living somewhere in London, I learned very little of Uncle Joseph Krevin and his doings. He made a very good breakfast, and seemed to enjoy it, and when he had finally pushed aside his plate, drained his cup, and lighted his pipe, he went back to the chimney corner and became reminiscent. But all his reminiscences were of the family sort; he seemed to have the pedigrees of Krevins and Heckitts at his finger-ends, and if I tried to switch him off and to turn him into tracks more intimately concerned with his personal affairs he adroitly eluded me and went back. About himself and his adventures during the many years which had elapsed since his last visit to Middlebourne I squeezed nothing out of him.

Keziah came back from Kingshaven before dinner-time. She walked in on us unexpectedly, and she knew Uncle Joe Krevin at once, and at sight of him she looked as if somebody had just given her something very sour to bite at.

“So it’s you, is it?” she said. “After all these years?”

“Better late than never, Keziah,” he answered, almost humbly. “You see, I’d a bit of business in these parts, and I thought I’d look in. And no doubt you’ll give me a bed to-night, Keziah?—and you’ll be glad to hear I’ve made my fortune since them other days?”

Keziah did not say whether she would be glad to hear that or not—she said nothing, except to reply drily that she’d no doubt there would be a bed for our visitor, and a bite, too. And I noticed that she held very little converse with Uncle Joe: what talk they had was of the nature of his talk to me after breakfast. He was out, by himself, that afternoon, and again, for a couple of hours, late in the evening: when he came in after that second excursion he went straight to bed. And when he had gone, and his chamber door was shut, Keziah came close to my chair, and with a look of caution whispered.

“Ben!” she said. “Flesh and blood of ours he be!—but that’s the deepest and wickedest old scamp you ever saw!”

CHAPTER III

FIEND'S WORK

Uncle Joseph Krevin had been put in the best sleeping chamber, right over our heads, and though there was a good solid floor between him and us, I glanced at the ceiling, involuntarily, as if afraid that he might overhear his Niece Keziah's denunciation of him. And Keziah saw my gesture and dropped her tones still lower.

"Never heard word or seen sign of that man since you were born, Ben!" she went on. "And before that never heard a good word of him! He talks about our poor mother, and him being her fav'rite!—Lord save us! He was her fav'rite to this extent that she was the only one that stood by him! He was a bad 'un at all times; sly, deceitful, dishonest; he was in trouble with the coastguardsmen hereabouts, for he was mixed up in smuggling when but a lad—many's the time I've heard my mother talk of it. And his own father turned him out when he came to be a man grown, and after that he'd come back to these parts now and again, and never could one find out how he made his living, nor where he'd been, nor what he did, but I reckon whatever he did was black work, and done in dark places. And 'tis nineteen years, Ben, since I set eyes on him, and now he's back, and I'd like to know why! No good, I'll be bound!"

"He said he'd business hereabouts, Keziah," I remarked. "Business with some old friend of his."

"Business!" she exclaimed, with one of her characteristic sniffs. "Aye, I'll warrant him! Devil's business, if any! And what friends has he about here, I'd like to know? There isn't a Krevin left alive but him—your mother was the last. I can't think of a soul hereabouts that 'ud be glad to see him or would have anything to do with him!—Joe Krevin was far too well known all across the countryside in his younger days for them that knew him then to want to have truck with him now. He's come down here for no good, Ben, and I'll be truly thankful to see his big back turn out of that gate!"

"You wouldn't ask him to go away, Keziah?" I suggested.

Keziah smoothed out the folds of the black silk apron which she always wore of an evening, regarding them with her head on one side.

"Well, flesh and blood is flesh and blood, Ben," she answered, "and, after all, he belongs to our particular blend, doesn't he? You can't very well show the door to a man who's your own mother's brother, can you, however bad you believe him to be? We're half Krevins, ourselves—though we're not bad eggs, such as he is."

"He seems quiet and civil enough," said I. "And, in a way, a bit afraid of you,

Keziah. He's very humble and polite to you, anyway."

Keziah sniffed again.

"I'm afraid of a man like that when he comes extra-polite!" she said. "That's all put on! When a man of that sort gets soft-sawdery, Ben, you look out for yourself. I'd rather see a burglar with a dark lantern and a pistol in his hand than a man like that, all soft speech and sugary smiles—far rather! Joe Krevin's here in these parts for no good, and I hope to goodness he'll take himself off before another sun's down!"

"You don't think he's after the family silver, Keziah?" I suggested. "I suppose he knows about it?"

But for once in her life Keziah looked as if the family silver were a matter too contemptible to be mentioned in connection with Uncle Joseph Krevin. Her sniff deepened into a snort of something like derision.

"Family silver, lad!" she exclaimed. "No, indeed!—it'll be something more than a mere parcel of spoons and forks that's brought Joe Krevin hereabouts! But it's no use speculating, Ben, on what his game is—it's wearing on to eleven o'clock, and time we were in bed. I'll lock up."

She went out into the hall, and after winding up the grandfather's clock, passed on to the front door, and, as was her invariable custom, opened it and went out into the porch to see what sort of night it was and what signs there were for the morrow. I followed her. It was a very still night; there was scarce a breath of wind, and all the sound we heard was the faint lapping of the waves on the beach. The moon was high above us, over the creek, but there was a great deal of cloud about, and all along the shore and over the sea there was white mist; we could see neither the dark belt of trees about Middlebourne Grange, the headlands at the opposite end of the creek, nor the old gallows at the extremity of the sand-spit. But it was a shifting mist, that—while we watched, it shifted; swirling away above the flats of sea-pink and spear-grass, and curling round the edges of the coppices that here and there ran down between the village and the coast. Once upon a time, looking out of our windows, I had fancied those curling mists to be ghosts—the ghosts of the pirates and smugglers who had been hanged from the old gibbet. . . . We were turning out of the porch, where the scent of the jasmine hung thick and sweet on the night air, when the clinging silence was broken by a scream. It was a scream such as I had never heard before, have never heard since, and pray God I may never hear again!—the scream of a human being in awful fear—and, unmistakably, the scream of a man. It clove the air with the speed of a bullet; its echo came for a sickening second from the wall of our house, and then there was silence, and Keziah clutching at the pillar of the porch.

"Merciful Heavens, Ben!" she gasped. "What—what's that? Oh!——"

For the scream came again—shorter and more subdued this time; snapped off, as it were, as if some hand had clutched the throat and mouth from which it came, and choked it ere it rose to full strength. And then the silence was deeper than ever. But I heard my own heart beating, and I saw Keziah put her hand to her breast.

"Where was it?" she asked faintly.

"Down there—Gallowstree Point," I said. "What——"

"There!" she exclaimed. "Of all places! Ben!"

"Well?" I answered.

"There's—there's something going on down there!" she said. "I—I wonder if its—if its got to do with—with what we were talking about?"

I got an idea of what she meant, and half-turned towards the stair at the side of the hall.

"Shall I call him?" I asked.

"No!" she said. "No! But—we must see. Shut the door and come on!"

I pulled to the door of the house, and we crept down the garden, and out on the bit of coarse grass that lay between it and the sand. Suddenly Keziah gripped my arm and came to a sharp halt.

"Listen, Ben!" she whispered. "What's that? Oars!"

I, too, pulled myself up, and stood listening. I heard a sound, and at first took it to be no more than that of the tide lapping against the rocks. But presently I decided that she was right in her surmise. Somebody was pulling a boat away from the shore, a little to our left, between Gallowstree Point and Fliman's End; pulling steadily and swiftly; a single pair of oars, I fancied.

"Yes!" I said. "If only there was more moonlight——"

But just then another sort of light appeared. Round the corner of the narrow lane which led from the shore to the village came a blot of yellowy-red light, swinging to and fro, and near it we heard voices.

"Veller!" I exclaimed. "That's his bull's eye, Keziah! He's heard those screams, too, and he's got somebody with him."

We edged swiftly across the sand-hills towards Veller and his lantern, and, suddenly emerging into the circle of light which it threw, found ourselves confronting him and Captain Marigold. He, the Captain, it appeared, was on his way home from the house of a friend with whom he had been spending the evening, and foregathering with Veller in the village street, had stopped to talk for a moment or two; their peaceful conversation had been broken in upon by the screams.

"And if those weren't the cries of a poor mortal in his death agony, ma'am,"

declared Captain Marigold, “and being done to death in some devilish manner, then you may write me down a Dutchman, which I’m certainly not! You heard the cries, ma’am?”

“Twice!” answered Keziah. “And just now we heard oars—over there!” We all stopped, on the ridge of a rise of sandy turf, and listened, straining our eyes into the grey mist. But now we heard nothing; the sound of the oars had died away completely. And presently, Veller and his lantern going on in front, we went forward, slowly, and full of a certain fear, in the direction from which we had believed the cries to come.

It was Captain Marigold who first saw the horror on which we were all presently to stare and were never again to forget. Perhaps his eyes were sharper than ours; perhaps from his position at the policeman’s right hand gave him a better vantage point, but anyway, he saw before we did. And he let out a smothered exclamation that had nothing of carnalness or irreverence in it.

“God in Heaven!” he said, and almost fell back on Veller. “Look!”

We were by that time at the edge of the rocks on which the old gibbet was so firmly fixed, and there, right in the middle of the circle of light thrown by the lantern, stood the gibbet itself, black, sinister. And to it was tied up a man—a little, thin rat of a man; tied up by the throat. I saw at once how he had been tied; a coil of rope, new rope, was wound with relentless tightness round his neck and the iron-clamped post behind him; he had been garotted, strangled, anything you like to call it, and it needed but a glance to see that he was as dead as man can be. His head hung downward; his arms and hands fell limp against his sides; his legs dangled aimlessly towards the slimy rock. And when Veller moved to him and lifted his head, I saw that the tongue was sticking out of the mouth and that the eyes bulged horribly and, glazed though they were, were still wide open.

It was Captain Marigold, again, who spoke first. He darted forward by the policeman’s side, and seized the dead man’s right hand. “Warm!” he exclaimed. “Quite warm! The man hasn’t been dead many minutes! And you heard oars?”

He snatched the lantern out of Veller’s hand and swept the water with it in the direction which Keziah and I pointed out to him. But you might as well have tried to lighten midnight with a match—the lantern threw no more than a tiny patch of light on the creaming surf at our feet. We turned again to the gibbet and its awful burden. The two men produced knives and began to cut the cord by which the dead man had been strangled against the post.

“Look you well at this before we take him down, Miss Heckitt!” said Captain Marigold. “And you, too, boy!—your evidence’ll be wanted as to what you’ve

actually seen. Get it fixed in your recollection!”

“There’s no need for any special effort to do that, Captain Marigold!” answered my sister in her very quietest tones. “We’ve both got eyes in our heads, and we’ve seen enough already. But—this man?”

Neither Veller nor Captain Marigold had ever seen the dead man before. He was, as I have already said, a little man—a rat of a man, and dead though he was, and horribly murdered, I could not help thinking that he had all the appearance of a thorough bad lot. A mean, sly, ferretty face; a shock of red hair; shark-like teeth between evil lips—all these things I noted. And I noted, too, that across the left cheek, running from the corner of the eye to near the lip, there was a long, livid scar, as if the man had been at some time slashed across the face by a sword cut or had had a dagger thrust.

“You’re certain sure about hearing the sound of oars, Miss Heckitt?” asked Veller, suddenly. “You don’t make no doubt on it? Then this here poor feller must ha’ been brought in from sea by them as done this to him! He ain’t nobody belonging to these parts, and hasn’t been seen about the village, I’ll take my ’davy. I should ha’ heard on him if he’d been about here—looks like a foreigneerin’ feller, to me. Look at them earrings!”

The dead man had gold rings in his ears. And he had a gold chain across his waistcoat, and was carrying a good silver watch at the end of it, and wearing a good blue serge suit, and altogether he looked as if in life he had been in comfortable circumstances. Veller hastily examined some of his pockets and withdrew his hand, looking mystified.

“Money there!” he exclaimed. “Seems plenty o’ money, too. I don’t understand this, captain. He ain’t been robbed!”

“Bah!” said Captain Marigold, impatiently. “Do you think robbery’s the only motive for murder? Something deeper and darker than that in this, my lad! Hadn’t you better get the body up to the village and have a proper examination?”

“There’s folks coming,” answered Veller, nodding at two or three sparks of lights across the beach. “I thought others than us ’ud hear those screams. We’ll have to take him up to the *Merry Mariner*—that’s how the law stands, I reckon. Inquest’ll have to be there. And what evidence can anybody give, I’d like to know?”

“That remains to be seen,” observed Captain Marigold, drily. “Don’t interfere with his clothing any more now, Veller. Get him up to the inn, and send for a doctor, and get your inspector or sergeant, and then——”

Keziah and I went away as the village people came down to Gallowstree Point. One thought was uppermost in the minds of both of us. Had this awful and ghastly

murder any connection with the presence at Middlebourne of our relation, Uncle Joseph Krevin? And if so . . . but beyond that things became vague.

"If he's asleep—and I suspect he is—I'm going to wake him and tell him what's just happened, Ben!" exclaimed Keziah, suddenly, as we stumbled across the rough beach. "He's got to know!"

"Keziah!" I murmured, half afraid of my own voice. "Do—do you think he'd anything to do with—with that?"

"I don't know, Ben, I don't know!" she answered. "I wish to God I did know! But—he's here! And he was out this afternoon, and he was out this evening, after dark. Where? On what business? Whom did he see? And who's this strange man—murdered by men that row away as quickly as they came? Here's murder, black, foul, horrible, at our very door, Ben, and he's there—sleeping in our best bed!"

We went into the house, and Keziah marched straight up the stair. The light in the hall was still burning at full, and it shone broadly on Uncle Joseph Krevin's door. And in the silence we heard him snoring—a long, steady, deep bass of a snore.

Keziah knocked—once, twice, thrice. The snoring stopped at last, and she knocked again, more loudly. Then we heard movements and creakings, and Uncle Joseph Krevin's voice, demanding, sleepily, to know who was there?

"I'm here!" answered Keziah, peremptorily. "Come out! There's news for you!"

We heard more movements and tumblings; then the door opened and Uncle Joseph appeared, wondering and blinking. He wore a suit of gorgeously coloured pyjamas, and in that uncertain light looked twice as big as he really was.

"Anything the matter?" he asked. "Not a fire, I hope, my lass?"

"There'll be hell fire for somebody over it!" said Keziah, sharply. "No!—Murder! There's a man been murdered outside here—just now! A strange man! Now, is it anybody you're acquainted with—anybody you came to meet? I want to know."

I was watching Uncle Joseph closely, and I saw his big, flabby face grow pale, and a queer look came into his eyes. He stared from Keziah to me, moistening his lips. But before he could speak, I spoke.

"A little dark man, with gold rings in his ears, and a slash right across his left cheek," I began. "He——"

Before I could say a word more, he made a queer, gurgling sound in his throat and straightway collapsed in a heavy heap on the door mat.

CHAPTER IV

THE LADY OF THE GRANGE

We each got a hand under Uncle Joseph's fat arms, and with some difficulty pulled his heavy body into a sitting posture against the door-post. After some sighings and groanings he came round a little, rolled his eyes at us, and shaking his head, contrived to point a hand into the bedroom, towards his old travelling bag, which stood on a corner of the dressing-table.

"In bag!" he murmured faintly. "Bottle—brandy—glass."

I hurried into the room, opened the bag, found a large black bottle, and snatching up a tumbler from the washstand, went back to him.

"Pour it out!" he whispered. "Ready mixed—brandy and water—forced to keep it by me—case of—attacks like this."

He took a good swig of his medicine when I gave him the tumbler, and presently seemed to revive; certainly he looked at us with more assurance.

"Weak heart, Keziah!" he announced, apologetically. "Suffered from it for some time. Can't stand being woke up suddenly, nor yet startled. And—you gave me a shock!"

"Do you know anything of that man?" demanded Keziah. "You've heard him described—Ben described him! Come, now!"

He took another hearty pull at the brandy and water, got up from his undignified position, and shook his head.

"No!" he answered, suavely. "Oh, no, Keziah and Benjamin, I don't know the man you speak of!—how should I? A man with gold rings in his ears, and a scar across his left cheek, say you? Oh, no, I don't know any such person! How should I?—I ain't been in these parts for a many years, as you know."

"This man isn't of these parts," snapped Keziah. "He's as much a stranger as you are. And you were out twice yesterday and may have met him. Anyway, there's been murder done at my very door, and in the morning the police'll want to know a good deal that I can't tell them, whether you can or not! Come away, Ben, and get to your bed."

She stalked out of the room, leaving Uncle Joseph, glass in hand, leaning against the post of his bed, and I followed her. And presently I went to bed, and found it difficult to sleep—as soon as I had blown out my candle, I saw that awful sight again; the black gibbet-post, the rat of a man tied to it by his throat, his protruding tongue, his bulging eyes. I did sleep at last, and then I dreamt—horrible things. Dead men—Uncle Joseph—Veller—boats slipping away into darkness—lanterns dancing

in yellow fog—all sorts of perplexing and terrifying matters. And at last somebody was shaking my shoulder, and I started up, and there was Keziah at my bedside, and the sun streaming in at the windows.

“Nine o’clock, Ben, and time you’d your breakfast,” she said. “I let you sleep—I’ve been in twice before. And, Ben, he’s gone!”

I sat up in bed—no doubt with my mouth as wide open as my eyes.

“Uncle Joseph?” I exclaimed. “Left?”

“Gone when I got up, at six o’clock,” answered Keziah. “Bag and all! He’s as soft-footed as a cat, when he likes—always was, as I remember him, and that’s another bad sign in man or woman. Never you trust anybody, Ben, that walks about as if they wore velvet-soled slippers! Yes!—he was gone, and our back door left open.”

“He must have known of that five-forty train to Kingshaven,” I said musingly. “You aren’t sorry, Keziah?”

“I’d as soon have the Devil in my house as Joseph Krevin!” she answered. “That’s a fact, Ben! No, I’m glad to be rid of him. But there’ll be trouble. Of course it’s known that he’s been here—and now, in view of that murder, and his going off, secret, like this, things will be said, and we shall have the police nosing round. Well, I shall keep nothing back! But get up, Ben—I’ve a nice piece of fish for your breakfast.”

I got up, not so much because of the fish, though my appetite as a convalescent was keen enough, as from a desire to look out on the scene of last night’s horrors. I drew up my blind and opening the casements of the window leaned out and looked across the beach towards Gallowstree Point. It was a wonderfully beautiful morning, with a blue and cloudless sky, and floods of bright sunshine covering sea and land; the thrushes were singing gaily in our garden, and I could hear the larks in the corn-fields behind; I heard, too, the gentle lapping of the waves on the edge of the sands. And there, in the midst of all this Springtide freshness, stood the black gibbet, on its platform of black rock, and once more, with a shudder, I saw the man tied to it, as clearly as I had seen him in the light of Veller’s lantern. . . .

Veller himself came in while I was eating my breakfast. After his usual custom, he told us nothing until Keziah began to question him. And both he and Keziah had discussed the weather, and the state of their gardens, before they came to what they were both really thinking about.

“Any more news about last night?” asked Keziah at last.

Veller, sitting by the fire, with his large hands folded across the broadest part of his tunic, twiddled his thumbs and smiled widely. “Well, scarcely what you might term

news,” he answered. “We don’t know who the man is, nor where he comes from, nor what he was doing here. Seems like he was brought ashore. But nobody as I can come across see or hear of any vessel a-standing in to this part o’ the coast last evening. Mysterious affair!—uncommon. He had plenty o’ money on him, that man. Gold and silver money—matter o’ fifteen pound, all told. However, looking around that there old gibbet early this morning, one thing I did find as may be important.”

“What?” asked Keziah.

“Have it on me,” replied Veller. He unbuttoned one of the flap pockets of his tunic and produced a little parcel, done up in soft paper. “Have to be shown at the coroner’s ’quest, this will,” he continued. “You see what ’tis?—an old pocket-book. Been a good article once, but now worn. Two or three pockets in it—morrocy leather, I believe. But—empty!”

“No papers in it?” suggested Keziah.

“Not a single dockyment, ma’am! I found it,” he went on, putting his find carefully away, “at the foot of them rocks, beneath where we found *him*. Lying open, on the sand, as if somebody had thrown it away. Well!—maybe something’ll come o’ that. No telling!” Then, getting at last to what he had really come for, he asked quietly if Mr. Joseph Krevin had yet risen.

“Yes, and gone away, too!” answered Keziah. “He left early this morning.”

“Ah!” said Veller, rubbing his chin. “I hear he was a-visiting you, and was out and about a bit yesterday, and I wondered if he’d seen this here dead man in his pilgrimages?”

“No, he hadn’t, and knew nothing about him!” snapped Keziah. “We woke him out of his sleep last night to ask him that very question.”

“Ah!” repeated Veller. “Just so—exactly. That ’ud be Mr. Joseph’s little bag, no doubt, that Master Ben there drew my official notice to in the porch yesterday morning?”

“It was his bag,” said I.

“To be sure!” assented Veller. “Deposited there midnight, I think, Master Ben? Just so! And where might Mr. Joseph ha’ been between midnight and breakfast time?”

“Ben doesn’t know, Veller, and I don’t know!” said Keziah. “Nobody knows—here, anyway. Ask Joseph Krevin!”

Veller smiled more widely than ever and rolled his eyes from one to the other of us, as if all this was a highly amusing game.

“Aye, just so, to be sure, ma’am!” he said. “And where might Mr. Joseph abide when he’s to home, like?”

"We don't know that either," snapped Keziah. "We know nothing whatever about him, except that after nineteen years' absence he came here yesterday morning about eight, left this morning before five, and went out twice yesterday on business that he never mentioned to us. And when you've written all that down, Veller, as you no doubt will, you've got every scrap of evidence we can give you!"

"To be sure, ma'am!" said Veller, good-humouredly. "Well, 'tis a 'nation queer business, ain't it? Don't remember that I ever heard of a queerer." Then, rapidly turning to a more congenial subject, he added, "If so be as you're wanting a setting of eggs for that there old brown hen of yours, Miss Heckitt, my missus she have some rare good 'uns."

"Well, tell her to send them round," answered Keziah. "I can do with them." And as Veller, picking up his peaked cap, was moving off she stopped him with a question. "I suppose some of your lot will be coming down to Middlebourne about this?" she suggested. "Police from Kingshaven, eh?"

"Half-a-dozen in the village now, ma'am," replied Veller, cheerfully. "And newspaper fellers, too! And I hear the Chief saying something about getting down a Scotland Yard detective, too, as I come out."

"Well, I don't want any more policemen here!" declared Keziah. "I don't mind answering you, as a neighbour, Veller, but I want no more—I've told all we know. And as for those newspaper men, if any of 'em come here, I shall shut the door on 'em—I've no opinion of newspapers!—a lot o' trash!"

Veller promised to do what he could to keep us from molestation, and went away. I thought hard when he had gone and while I was finishing my breakfast. Having been destined, at my own wish, for the legal profession ever since I was twelve years of age, and sent by Keziah to Kingshaven Grammar School with that aim in view, I knew rather more than my sister did about the things we had just discussed, and I foresaw trouble and annoyance—over Uncle Joseph Krevin.

"Keziah!" I said. "I'm afraid it's not much good asking Veller to keep people away. People will come who won't be kept away!"

"An Englishman's house is his castle!" affirmed Keziah, stoutly.

"Not when the law wants to get in," said I. "I'm afraid the law will want to know a good deal about Uncle Joseph. Uncle Joseph, Keziah came here under highly suspicious circumstances. His movements while he was here were highly suspicious. The circumstances under which he left were highly suspicious. Honest and innocent men, Keziah, don't leave their relations' houses at five o'clock in the morning, without as much as a hasty farewell, nor——"

"As if I didn't know all that as well as you do, my lad!" broke in Keziah. "Don't

you start haranguing me!—you're not a judge yet, nor a lawyer neither. And I don't want to hear another word about Joseph Krevin! This is my day for cleaning out the best parlour, and I don't allow anybody or anything to come between me and my work. You put on your overcoat, and go for a bit of a walk in this nice sunshine—it'll do you good."

I took Keziah's advice, and after a while, when the morning had grown still warmer, went upstairs to get my best overcoat, preparatory to setting out for a stroll on the shore. The overcoat was kept in a wardrobe in the room in which Uncle Joseph Krevin had slept: I had to go in there to get it. And as I passed across the floor I chanced to see lying on the carpet near a chair at the side of the bed, on which chair, no doubt, Uncle Joseph had cast some of his clothing when he unrobed, a couple of small squares of paper, or of cardboard, half-hidden by the dimity valancing of the bedstead. I picked them up and found them to be cards, common things, cheaply printed. Each bore the same name and address—a surname, without prefix of Christian name or initial—*Crippe, Marine Store Dealer, Old Gravel Lane, E.*

I carried them downstairs and showed them to Keziah, who looked at them with a suspicious eye.

"That'll be a London address, Ben," she remarked. "Where all the wickedness comes from! But who Crippe may be, or why *he* was carrying Crippe's business tickets in his pocket goodness—or, as one should say, the devil!—only knows. Put 'em in the tea-caddy, my lad—they may come in for something, some time."

The tea-caddy, an ornamental affair, used as a receptacle for odds and ends, stood on the parlour sideboard. I put the cards in one of its compartments and then went out, leaving Keziah to her cleaning. That was only my second time of going abroad since my illness, and though I had a stout stick to aid my steps, I felt that I should not get very far, fine though the morning was and bracing as the light breezes, blown in from the sea, seemed to me. Still, I managed to wander round the semicircle of the beach until I got to near the wall of Middlebourne Grange. There I gave out, and was glad to sit down on a low balustrade that projected from the little bridge which crossed the moat. And I had scarcely perched myself on it when the door in the wall behind me opened and there came out a woman whom, though I had never seen her before, I immediately took to be the recently-arrived tenant of the Grange, Miss Ellingham. She caught sight of me, sitting there, and came forward, looking intently at me—and I, on my part, looked just as intently at her. There was reason—I had never seen anybody like her. She was a thinnish, spare woman, rather above medium height, and, I should say, somewhat older than Keziah, which would

make her about forty or forty-five. But it was her face and her dress which attracted me—the dress was a plain black affair, prim and straight, with nothing to relieve its plainness but a white collar and cuffs; the face, sharp, angular, every feature clear cut, was bleached almost as white as the linen, and in it, deep-set, were a pair of the blackest eyes I ever saw in man or woman. They seemed to burn you, those eyes, and if they fixed themselves on you once it was as if they were never to be taken off again.

Those eyes were on me now, and as their owner drew nearer, I felt as if I was being bewitched, or fascinated, or—something. But she spoke, and her voice was extraordinarily soft, gentle, soothing.

“I think you’re Ben Heckitt?” she said, her thin, straight lips curving into a smile that was as pleasing as her voice.

“Yes, ma’am,” said I.

“And you’re about again after your illness?” she went on. “But”—here she nodded knowingly at me, “not feeling over strong, eh?”

“I don’t feel very fit,” I answered. “This is about as far as I can walk, I think.”

“Weak about your legs, eh?” she suggested, with another smile. “And only too glad to sit down?—you see I know how you’re feeling. But I don’t think you ought to sit on that stone—you may get a chill. Come in with me, and I’ll find you something more comfortable to rest on.”

I suppose I did not realise it at the time, but this was one of those women whose orders you’ve just got to obey: I obeyed her, anyway, and rising, followed her through the door in the wall and into the grounds of the Grange. Oddly enough, though I had lived close by it all my life, I had never been in there before, and I was interested to see what a fine, romantic old place it was—an ancient, gabled old mansion set amidst fine trees and carefully-tended gardens. But I had little time to observe this—Miss Ellingham marched me across a lawn, into the house, and through a stone-walled entrance hall to a big room that looked south. She pointed to an easy chair, and then rang a bell at the side of the fireplace.

“I’m going to give you some medicine, Ben,” she said, with another of her smiles. “A glass of good old port and a biscuit. Do you like port?—most boys do.”

Before I could reply the door opened again, and there came into the room, gorgeous in his brilliant Eastern dress, a Hindu manservant.

CHAPTER V

THE C.I.D. MAN

I suppose Miss Ellingham saw my start of surprise and astonishment at sight of this unexpected apparition, for when the man had taken some order from her and relieved the room of his multi-coloured presence, she turned to me with a laugh.

"Something new for you, that, eh?" she said, "Never seen anything like that before, have you?"

"Not out of a picture, ma'am," said I.

"Oh, well, he's real enough, poor Mandhu Khan!" she remarked. "A very good and faithful servant!—I brought him with me from India, where I lived a great many years—most of my life, in fact. He feels the English climate, though, and so do I, up to now. We have to keep good fires going, in spite of the Spring warmth. But here's the port, and you shall have a glass—when I was young, and people had been ill, they always had port, and I don't see any reason why that custom should change, though most customs have changed, I'm sorry to say, since I left England."

The Hindu had come back with a tray on which was a decanter and glasses, and a jar of biscuits: Miss Ellingham helped me to one glass of port and herself to another, and putting the biscuits at my elbow bade me serve myself. She nodded smilingly at me over the rim of her glass.

"Here's wishing you a speedy return to your usual health, Ben Heckitt," she said. "The parson was telling me about you, yesterday. Your illness caught you on the very brink of a legal career, didn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," I answered. "I was just going to be articled to Mr. Philbrick, in Kingshaven. I've been intended for the law ever since I was twelve years old, ma'am. I've lost six months through my illness."

"Oh, well, you'll soon make that up!" she remarked cheerfully. "Got to be articled five years, haven't you? You see, I know something about it—my father was a famous London solicitor—attorneys they used to call them in those days. He made a big fortune out of the law—let's hope you will."

"Yes, ma'am—thank you," said I. "What branch of the profession did your father go in for, ma'am?"

She laughed at that, as if my obvious eagerness contrasted with some recollection.

"Oh, I'm afraid he was a dull and prosaic commercial lawyer, my father," she replied. "Conveyancing, and Companies, and all that sort of thing, you know. Which branch are you going in for?"

"I incline to criminal practice, ma'am," said I, with a grave assurance that she no doubt found amusing. "I've read a lot of criminal law and practice already. Mr. Philbrick, he's the best police-court practice in Kingshaven."

"Well, that's an interesting line!" she remarked, with another laugh. "More fun about police-courts than county-courts, no doubt. I suppose you're well up in what they call leading cases—murder trials and so on, eh? That's a deeply interesting _____"

Just then the door burst open, and in rushed Miss Ellingham's nephew, Bryce, evidently in a state of high excitement, followed by Pepita Marigold. Bryce was an aggressively healthy youngster, about my own age, whom I secretly hated because since his arrival at the Grange he was for ever persuading Pepita to go boating or fishing or birds-nesting with him, and so getting more of her company than I liked. But he was not thinking of Pepita just then; the blaze in his eyes rose out of sheer delight at something utterly unusual.

"Aunt Kittie!—Aunt Kittie!" he vociferated, at the top of his voice. "Have you heard?—do you know what's happened? There's been a murder!—a real, proper, awful murder, just close by—last night—a man! Captain Marigold——"

He broke off, suddenly catching sight of me, and his eyes grew as big as saucers, and his mouth opened wider and wider. Then he pointed straight at my face.

"Why!—why!—why!" he exclaimed. "*He* saw it!—you did see it, didn't you, Ben Heckitt? Pepita says——"

Pepita, too, was gazing at me as with an awful fascination, and I was quick to see that for that train at least Master Bryce would have to take a back seat. I was the man who knew!—the firsthand informant! I played up to the part, affecting an almost cynical indifference.

"Oh, yes!" I said, picking a crumb or two of biscuit off the table. "Oh, yes!—I was there! Yes!"

"Where?" demanded Miss Ellingham, looking from one to the other. "What is all this? A murder? A man murdered? What man? When? And why didn't you tell me, Ben?" she went on, turning in my direction. "We've not heard of it here!"

"I thought you'd know all about it, ma'am," I replied. "It's known all over the neighbourhood, I should think."

"No one has been out from here this morning," she said quickly. "Except Bryce. But tell me about it, Ben!—do I understand that you were *there*?—that you saw—whatever was done—you? Tell me!"

"Yes, tell, tell!" exclaimed Bryce, almost dancing in his eagerness. "Tell! Tell about the man you found, tied up to the gallows tree! Go on!"

I felt revived by that time, and the glass of old port helped me to be, if not eloquent, at any rate dramatic. I imagined myself appearing for the prosecution, and laying out a case, lucidly, and with fitting detail, before a judge and jury, or a bench full of magistrates. And while I addressed myself to Miss Ellingham, I was conscious that Bryce on one side of me, and Pepita on the other, was drinking in and gloating over all the horrors of the story in full exercise of their youthful appetite for the gruesome. But young as I was, I could see that it was not the horror, but the mystery of the thing that impressed my chief listener. Miss Ellingham listened with concentrated attention, evidently forming ideas of her own as I went on. When I concluded by telling what Veller had told Keziah and me that morning, about there being a likelihood of a Scotland Yard detective being sent for she shook her head.

"I don't see much of a clue for him to lay hold of," she remarked. "Well!—here's something for you to exercise your taste for criminal practice on, Ben! A strange, dark affair! And close to one's own door! It would seem——"

She paused there: a man had come into the room; a man who carried some silver things on a tray, and was quietly placing them on the sideboard. I had never seen him before; Miss Ellingham and her servants had arrived at the Grange during my illness. I took him for the butler—that was what he looked like in his grey trousers, black coat and vest, and neatly-tied neckcloth. He was a little, quiet-looking man, very prim, proper, precise, with a rather taking, thoughtful face, on either side of the otherwise clean-shaven expanse of which was a bit of dark whisker, and his movements, as he flitted from one end of the big sideboard to the other, were as quiet and subdued as his looks. Miss Ellingham turned in his direction.

"Carsie!" she said. "Have you heard of this murder?"

The man turned, deferentially, folding his hands: I remember noticing, somehow, what soft, white hands he had, and how they stood sharply defined against the dead black of his cutaway morning coat.

"I have just heard of it, ma'am," he answered in quiet, level accents. "From one of the tradesmen who called just now, ma'am—a mere outline."

"No further news since this morning?" asked Miss Ellingham. "No clue?"

"Not that I am aware of, ma'am," replied Carsie. "My informant, ma'am, inclined to the opinion—a generally prevalent opinion, I gathered—that the unfortunate victim was brought ashore from the sea."

"That's what I should think," said Miss Ellingham. "You heard the sound of oars, didn't you say, Ben?"

"Yes, ma'am—my sister and I both heard the sound of oars, as if a boat was being pulled away from the beach," I replied. "But we didn't see anything—there

was a pretty thick mist over the sea.”

“My informant, ma’am,” remarked Carsie, still busied with his silver at the sideboard, “told me that he had heard that towards dusk of the evening in question a strange vessel was seen just outside the bar. It is believed, he says, in the village that the dead man was brought ashore from her.”

“I suppose there’ll be an inquest,” said Miss Ellingham. “Perhaps things will come out at that.”

“The inquest, ma’am, is fixed for to-morrow afternoon, at three o’clock,” said the butler. “In the village schoolroom, ma’am.”

“Let’s go!—let’s go!” exclaimed Bryce. “I want to hear all about it! Shall we go, Aunt Kittie?”

Miss Ellingham made no definite reply—all the same, I saw her and Bryce amongst the general public when Keziah and I entered the schoolroom on the following afternoon. They were squeezed into a corner; Keziah and myself, having been notified that we had better be present, were placed more to the front of things. There were a lot of people there whom I did not know—solicitors who didn’t come from Kingshaven (I knew every Kingshaven solicitor by sight) and police officials, and men who looked very important and mysterious. And there was a young man, very smartly dressed, a boyish, pleasant-faced sort of fellow, who sat near the local police-inspector, and now and then engaged in conversation with him: I set him down as a clerk to some of the big-wigs, especially when I saw him from time to time make notes in a little black book.

But there was really very little to make notes about. The Coroner, old Mr. Voules, whom everybody in the district knew as an old-established legal practitioner in Kingshaven, said at the very beginning that this was a mystery which was not going to be solved in a hurry, and that they could do no more that day than take a little necessary evidence, and then adjourn for a week or two until more information was forthcoming. I gathered from this that Keziah and I were not going to learn any more than we already knew, but in that I was mistaken. Veller and Captain Marigold set forth the particulars of our finding of the murdered man, and Dr. Bellairs testified as to the cause of his death. But then came into the witness-box a man whom I did not know, and who gave his name as John Watson, manager of the Collingwood Hotel at Kingshaven. He was a middle-aged, rather surly looking man, and when the Coroner asked him if he had just been taken to see the dead body he replied with a tense affirmative, and in a tone which seemed to imply that he would have much preferred to have been elsewhere.

“Did you recognise him as a man you have seen lately?” asked Mr. Voules.

"Yes!" replied Watson. "He's a man who came to our hotel a few days ago."

"What day was that?"

"Monday. Last Monday afternoon."

Mr. Voules looked at his notes.

"Monday, eh?" he remarked. "Let me see?—the man was found tied to the gibbet-post late on—oh, yes, Tuesday night. Very good. So he came to your hotel, the Collingwood, in Kingshaven, on Monday afternoon. What time?"

"Tea-time! Five o'clock—or thereabouts."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"A stranger to you. Well, what did he want?"

"Wanted to book a room. Said he might be there one night or two nights. As he'd no luggage, I asked him for a deposit. He gave me a couple of pound notes. I noticed he'd a fine lot of money in his pocket."

"Is yours a cheap hotel?" inquired Mr. Voules.

"Moderate prices. It's really a commercial hotel. But we get other people."

"Did this man give you any name and address?"

"Yes. He signed the register book—the police have seen the entry. Name—Sol Cousins. Address—London."

"Well, what happened?"

"Nothing out of the common. He had his tea. He went out; came back about nine, had a bit of supper and went to his room. I saw him at breakfast next morning, and at intervals during the day—Tuesday. He seemed to be hanging about the place, as if he expected somebody. But I never saw him with anybody, and nobody made any inquiry at the office for him. About half-past six on Tuesday evening he came to me at the office window and said he was leaving and would settle up. There was change due to him out of his two pounds deposit. I gave it to him and he went away."

"That was the last you saw of him?"

"Yes—I saw no more of him, of course, after he walked out."

"And that was at half-past-six on Tuesday evening?"

"Just about that time."

Mr. Voules looked at his jury over the tops of his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"An important fact, gentlemen!" he remarked solemnly. "This man leaves a Kingshaven hotel at half-past six o'clock, alive and alert; within a few hours—five hours—he is found murdered—and in a very strange and horrible fashion!—on the beach at Middlebourne, nine miles away. A most extraordinary case!—you're

absolutely sure, Watson, that the man whose body you've just seen is the man you have been telling us about?"

"No doubt about that!" answered the witness, almost sneeringly. "I recognised him at once. I took particular stock of him while he was at our place!"

"Why, now?" inquired Mr. Voules.

"Because I didn't like his looks!" said Watson. "He was respectably dressed, and, as I said, had plenty of money about him, but I didn't like him."

He was about to leave the witness-box when the young man whom I have mentioned as sitting near the police-inspector whispered something in the inspector's ears—who half-rose from his seat, motioning the witness to wait.

"A question!" he said. "Did you take this man—from his speech—to be an Englishman or a foreigner?"

Watson gave his questioner a glance which signified his own complete assurance about the point raised.

"I took him for what he obviously was!" he answered. "An East-End Londoner!—and no very good class, either!"

Mr. Voules adjourned the inquest on that—for a fortnight. During that time, he remarked, the police would doubtless acquire more information, and perhaps the gentlemen of the Press—here he beamed benevolently on two or three men who had been scribbling away at a table beneath him—would give that assistance which . . .

Keziah bundled me out while the old coroner was still mumbling his platitudes—out and away before the rest of the folk could leave. She gave my arm a grip as we quitted the schoolroom.

"Ben!" she said. "They never called you or me!—and we haven't been asked a word about Joseph Krevin!"

"Well, aren't you glad, Keziah?" I answered. "You didn't want——"

"I don't like it, Ben!" she interrupted hastily. "I'd rather have been questioned straight out and been done with it than feel that the police are doing things behind one's back! They know about people, of course, and they'll follow it up. We shall have them at our door yet!"

Keziah was rarely wrong about anything: I think she was born shrewd. That very afternoon, as she and I were just sitting down to tea, a knock came at the door, and when I went to answer it, there in the porch stood the pleasant-faced, smart young man whom I had noticed at the inquest making occasional notes in a little black book. He bade me good-afternoon smilingly, asked for Miss Heckitt, and thrust into my hand a card whereon I read: *Edward Cherry, Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard, S.W.*

CHAPTER VI

THE CRAB AND LOBSTER INN.

I was so utterly amazed to find out that our visitor was a full-fledged Scotland Yard detective, having until then cherished a wholly fanciful and imaginary idea of the personalities of these sleuth-hounds, that for a moment I stood staring at him, in blank silence. But Keziah called from the parlour, to know who was there, and I hurried back and thrust the card before her. She uttered an exclamation of annoyance, and stalked out into the hall.

"Now, I told Veller——" she began. But at sight of the caller she checked herself. Keziah had certain weaknesses, and one of them, with which I was well enough acquainted, was for well-dressed and good-looking people. I saw her face change. "You don't mean to say that you're a policeman?" she exclaimed, incredulously. "A smart young gentleman like you!"

"I hope I'm not the less fitted for my job because of that, ma'am," replied our visitor, with a laugh of enjoyment at Keziah's bluntness. "I believe I've the pleasure of seeing Miss Heckitt—Miss Keziah Heckitt?"

"You can come in," said Keziah, motioning him to enter. "Perhaps you'll take a cup of tea?—it's all ready. Of course, I saw you at the inquest, but I never dreamed that you'd anything to do with the police. And as I was just going to say, I told Veller yesterday morning all I know, and all that Ben there knows, and I said that I wouldn't be bothered any more, nor with the newspaper men neither—especially them, a parcel of busy-bodies! But well I knew the police would come! However, sit you down—do you take milk and sugar?"

"Both, if you please, Miss Heckitt, and you're very kind," answered our visitor, taking the chair which I offered him. "But don't think that I'm going to bother you! As a matter of fact, I'm here to save you a lot of bother. You see, the local police—Veller, of course—told me what you'd already said, and I suggested to them that instead of putting you in the witness-box this afternoon, it would be far better if I just called and had a bit of quiet talk with you. Ladies, I know, don't care about going into witness-boxes."

"Well, I don't know that they'd have got anything much out of me if I had gone into the box," remarked Keziah. "As to finding that poor fellow, Captain Marigold and Veller saw as much as Ben and me did, and as to anything else—try a bit of that hot tea-cake, now!"

"It's the anything else, Miss Heckitt, that I called about," said the detective, helping himself. "And the anything else is—your uncle, Mr. Joseph Krevin. As I

understand matters, Mr. Krevin came down here, where he hadn't been seen for a great many years, and said that he'd a little private business with somebody hereabouts. Since yesterday morning the local police have been making inquiries all round the immediate district, and they can't find that Mr. Krevin called on anybody, saw anybody, did anything. Yet I believe he was twice away from your house during the day he spent here?"

"Out in the afternoon, and out again in the evening," asserted Keziah. "But we don't know where he went!"

"The notion is—or may be—that he came here to meet the dead man," said Cherry. "I gather that you don't know much about Mr. Krevin?—of late years."

"I know nothing!" declared Keziah. "Never set eyes on him—never heard tell of him for nineteen years till the other day. I don't know why he came here, mister, and I don't know what he did here, and I don't know where he went!"

"That's a queer thing, too," observed Cherry. "The local police spent a lot of time yesterday trying to find out where Mr. Krevin went when he left your house. They haven't heard a word of him! From the time he walked out of your garden—five o'clock in the morning, I understand——"

"I never said it was five o'clock," interrupted Keziah. "What I said was that he'd gone by five o'clock, at which hour, following my usual custom, I was up. He might ha' gone at three o'clock, or at two, or at one, for all I know. What I do know is, he'd gone! And good riddance!"

"You don't feel friendly to your relative, Miss Heckitt?" suggested Cherry, smiling. "Just so! I understand. Well, he went during the night. But—before that, you'd told him of what had happened?—of what you and your brother had seen?"

"We had, and a nice turn it gave him!" replied Keziah. She proceeded to tell of Uncle Joseph's seizure and of his denial of acquaintance with the murdered man. "But he may ha' known him, for all that!" she concluded. "First and last, flesh and blood of ours though he is, Joe Krevin's a bad 'un, mister! And I'll warrant me he was down in these parts for no good purpose."

"This is very excellent tea, ma'am," said our visitor. "May I trouble you for another cup? Well, mysteries are mysteries, Miss Heckitt, and all we can do is to keep finding one bit of the puzzle and fitting it into another, and—so on! Haven't found any bits of this, so far, though!" he added, with a grin. "Pretty well obscured, I think! Now, I hear that you all thought that you heard the sound of oars——"

"We did!" said I, breaking in for the first time. "There's no doubt about that! We heard them distinctly!"

"Close at hand?" he inquired, giving me a keen look.

Our tea-table was set in the wide window-place, from which there was a view of the whole expanse of the creek, and I turned, pointing out of the casements.

"You see the big black post set in the rocks down there, across the sands?" I said. "That's Gallowstree Point, where we found the man tied up. Then you see the chimneys and gables of the big house set in the trees, to the eastward?—that's Middlebourne Grange. And you see the promontory on this other, the west side, running out into the sea?—that's Fliman's End. Well, the boat that we heard was being pulled across there—it was between Gallowstree Point and Fliman's End: I should say half-way across. And it was a single pair of oars, too!"

He listened to me with great attention, nodding his head at each point I made, and following my finger as I indicated the various directions. But he made no comment on this information, and presently finishing his tea, he thanked Keziah again for her hospitality, promised that she should be kept out of things as far as possible, and said he must be going. Then as he picked up his hat he turned to us as with an after-thought.

"I suppose you don't know Mr. Joseph Krevin's address?" he asked. "It might be useful."

"No!" said Keziah, with emphasis. "We don't know his address—if he has one! My opinion is that he goes about, like somebody we needn't mention, seeking what he can devour! We've no idea where he can be heard of."

But a sudden recollection came to me.

"Keziah!" I exclaimed. "Those cards!"

Keziah remembered, too. She glanced at the tea-caddy.

"Oh, well!" she said. "You can give him those, Ben. But what use they'll be _____"

It seemed to me, when I had produced the cards and handed them over to Cherry, with an account of how and where I had found them, that they struck him as likely to be very useful. He put them in his pocket, said good-bye to Keziah, and went off. I walked down the garden with him, and when we were outside the porch he gave me a keen look.

"I've heard about you—from Veller," he said. "You're going in for the law, eh?"

"As soon as I'm all right again," I answered.

"This affair interests you?" he suggested. "Just so!—now, what do you make of it?"

I was flattered at being asked such a question by a man who, young as he seemed, was, after all, a genuine detective. He saw that I was—and he laughed, and gave me an encouraging nod.

"You're old enough to have an opinion!" he said. "Come, now?"

"Well, I think it's a very queer thing that it should happen just when Uncle Joseph Krevin was here!" I replied, after a moment's thought. "Besides, Uncle Joseph's movements were strange." I went on to tell him about the midnight visit, and the bag in the porch, and all the rest of it. "And where did he go when he went out—twice—that day he spent with us?" I concluded. "If we knew that——"

"I'm going to know!" he interrupted. "I'll tooth-comb this neighbourhood! He went—somewhere! He saw—somebody! All right!—we've got to find that out. No love lost, I think, between your sister and Uncle Joseph, eh?"

He laughed again, waved his hand and went off in the direction of Veller's cottage. We neither saw nor heard anything of him during the rest of that day, nor on the following morning either, until, just after dinner, he came up the garden and approached the open window of the parlour, at which I was sitting.

"How are you to-day?" he asked, leaning over the window-sill. "I just looked round to say that I'm going a few miles along the coast on a bit of business—got a car waiting up the lane. Would you like to come?"

"Aye, take him, mister!" said Keziah, who was close behind me. "A ride'll do him good. Put your overcoat on, now, Ben—it's cold work in those motors. Got any news?" she inquired of Cherry as I made myself ready. "Anything come out?"

"Nothing much, ma'am," replied the detective, smiling. "Slow and sure is the game! We live on hope, you know."

"Poor stuff to live on, too, very often!" said Keziah. "I see there's plenty about this affair in the newspapers this morning: them newspaper fellows is the boys to make a lot out of a little, to be sure! What beats me, considering all the fuss there's been about this, is that that dead man's friends don't come forward to claim him! What?"

"They may have good reasons for keeping quiet, ma'am," answered Cherry. "If there's a bad egg in a sitting, the best thing is to throw it away, you know. Perhaps this man's people aren't over anxious to acknowledge any relationship. But I've no doubt somebody will be coming forward who knows something about him."

I was ready then, and Cherry and I went off to a car which was waiting at the end of the lane. Once outside the garden gate he gave me a knowing look.

"I wasn't going to say anything before your sister," he said, "but I've heard of a bit of possible information, though I don't know of what value it may be. Look at this—it was sent to the police-inspector this morning, and he handed it over to me."

He gave me a sheet of coarse, cheap letter-paper on which a few lines were scrawled in watery ink by some hand which, obviously, was not at all accustomed to

the frequent use of a pen.

CRAB AND LOBSTER INN,
FISHAMPTON.

DEAR SIR,—Hearing about this matter at Middlebourne make bold to tell you that if you will call here any time convenient me being always in can tell you something as may have something to do with that but too long to write in a letter remaining yours truly

SARAH TAPPEN.

“I’ve an idea that the something to which Sarah Tappen refers has to do with your uncle,” said Cherry as I gave him back the letter. “That’s why I asked you to go with me—if we hear any description of such a man, you can tell if it fits him. Now where is this Fishampton?”

“Six or seven miles away, on the Kingshaven road,” said I. “It’s a queer little place, at the head of a creek. Tell the driver to go straight to the Crab and Lobster—he’ll know it. And that’s a queer place, too!”

Everybody knew the Crab and Lobster in our part of the country. It was one of the oldest houses in the neighbourhood: a ramshackle place, one side of which rose sheer out of the waters of Fishampton Creek, while the other fronted the high road from London to Kingshaven. It was a place to which people walked out from Kingshaven in summer, to go boating and fishing on the creek, or to have tea in the garden; a place, too, convenient for drovers and carters, and sure, at all times, of a good trade—not the house, it seemed to me, where secret meetings could be held, and I had the idea that if Uncle Joseph Krevin had been there there would be something secret about his visit. But Cherry and I had not been closeted with Mrs. Tappen, a little, sharp-eyed elderly woman, many minutes before I realised that we had hit a trail.

“I heard, of course, of this here murder business at Middlebourne”, said Mrs. Tappen, when she had assured herself of Cherry’s status as a policeman and seen her own letter produced as warrant and credentials, “and it struck me at once as there was something I could tell, but, as I remarked, too long to put in a letter. You see, I learned that this here unfortunate man what was done in so shameful, he was wearing gold rings in his ears and had a scar, an unusual one, on the left cheek. Very well, young man—that there person came to this house one afternoon about a fortnight ago!”

“Alone?” asked Cherry.

"No! He'd another man with him," replied the landlady. "I see 'em come—I happened to be at the front, buying some fish. They come along the road from Kingshaven—walking. The other man was a big, broadly built, clean-shaven fellow, well-dressed in a blue suit—they both wore blue suits—serge, you know, young man, like sea-going men affects for their best: I took particular notice of both of 'em. They turned in here, and went into the little parlour at the side of the bar—turned in there as if they knew it quite well, though I'm sure I'd never set eyes on either of 'em before, at least, it's not in my recollection that I ever had. But I think the big man must ha' been in here at some time or other, for I heard him remark to his mate that the old place wasn't noways altered."

"How long have you had this house, ma'am?" inquired Cherry.

"In a way of speaking, ever since I was born, young man," answered Mrs. Tappen. "I was born in it!—it was held by my father, and his father before him. I was an only child, d'ye see, and when I grew up I married Tappen—he'd come here as bar-man. Then my father died, and Tappen, he got the licence. And when Tappen died, six years ago, I got the licence. Oh, yes, you may say I've always had this house, or this house has always had me—I don't rightly know which! All the same, I couldn't call that big man to mind—still, he seemed to ha' been here before, and, as I say, he turned, quite natural-like, into that little parlour and sat himself down."

"Did they stay long?" inquired Cherry.

"Most of two hours," replied Mrs. Tappen. "The big man drank brandy and water; the man with the rings in his ears, rum. They talked together—with their heads close: from what I saw of 'em it seemed to be very confidential business. At last they went off, and I saw 'em go back by the same road—Kingshaven way."

"And that was the last, I suppose?" asked Cherry.

"No!" said Mrs. Tappen. "The big man came here again—last Monday. He walked in about four o'clock, and he asked at once if I remembered him being here a fortnight before with a friend, and if the friend had been in that day? I said I remembered him well enough, and that his friend had not been in, and at that he said he'd wait for him. He did wait, in the little parlour—he waited till well past six, but the other man never came. It seemed to me that the big man got fidgety; he was all right with his brandy-and-water and his pipe at first, but after a time he began to look out of the door, up and down the road, as if impatient. And in the end he went away, but he gave me a card on which he'd scribbled something, and asked me, if his friend came in that night, or next morning, or any time next day, to give it to him. But the man with the rings in his ears never came at all, and the card's there, where I put it, stuck in that looking-glass."

She took the card down from a mirror above the fire-place, and handed it to Cherry. I looked over his shoulder, and I knew then that we had been hearing of Uncle Joseph. It was another of the cards bearing the name of Crippe of Old Gravel Lane, and on the back was written a line in pencil—*To-morrow, afternoon or evening. S.S.*

CHAPTER VII

HIGH-WATER MARK

We left Mrs. Tappen and the Crab and Lobster soon after that, and went out to our car. But instead of getting into it, Cherry motioned me to walk along the road with him, and bade the driver follow us.

"Well?" he said, as we moved away. "And what do you make of all that, young fellow?—I saw you keeping your ears open!"

"I make of it that Uncle Joseph Krevin was here a fortnight ago with Sol Cousins, and that he came again, by himself, last Monday, expecting to meet Sol Cousins, and didn't meet him," I answered. "What else is there to make of it?"

"Just so—on the surface of things!" he remarked. "But Monday is the important matter! It was Monday night when Krevin came to your house, wasn't it?"

"Monday midnight," I said.

"Well, we'll have to find out where he was on Monday evening," he continued. "Between being here and turning up at your porch. It's an odd thing, putting everything together, that Cousins, being somewhere about—he was certainly at Kingshaven, at the Collingwood Hotel, on Monday night—didn't turn up here at the Crab and Lobster on Monday afternoon. And—where were those two to meet on Tuesday?—in accordance with this card?"

He had the card in his hand and kept glancing at the pencilled line on the back. I, too, glanced at it.

"Uncle Joseph was out twice on Tuesday," I remarked. "Once in the afternoon; once in the evening. Perhaps they did meet."

"If they did, it must have been at some place nearer to your house than this is," he observed. "This is a good seven miles from Middlebourne, and your Uncle Joseph couldn't have come—we won't say here to Mrs. Tappen's, for we know he didn't, but anywhere about here, within the time. There's communication by train and by motor-bus, is there?—yes, but we know that he was never seen on either—we should have heard of him in that respect by now. No!—if he met this man Sol Cousins, on Tuesday, it must have been at some quiet place near your house. Did they meet?"

"Is that very important?" I asked.

He gave me a half-whimsical look, and, pulling out pipe and pouch, began to smoke, keeping silence until the tobacco was in full blast. "In jobs like this, my lad, there isn't a detail that isn't important," he said, drily. "It's very often the apparently insignificant things that are of prime importance. I'd give a lot to know if Cousins and

Krevin met on Tuesday!—in accordance with the suggestion on this card.”

“Well,” said I, “if even small things are of importance, what do you make of one that seems very small. On that card is written *To-morrow, afternoon or evening. S.S.* What does *S.S.* signify?”

He glanced at the card again, almost with indifference.

“Oh!” he answered. “I take it that those are the initials of some name that Cousins knew Krevin by!—they’ve always some fancy names, sobriquets, aliases, these chaps! No doubt from what your sister says of him, Krevin had half-a-dozen: Cousins knew him as Sam Smith, or Silas Saunders, or Seth Simpson, or Simon Scott. See?”

“No, I don’t!” I retorted. “I think that *S.S.* are the initials of the name of some place, well known to both, where they were to meet. That’s what I think! Why should Krevin have signed any initials, assumed or otherwise, to his message?—Cousins would know well enough from whom the message came.”

He gave a start of surprise, laughed, almost gleefully, and clapped me on the shoulder.

“Good lad!—good lad!” he exclaimed. “It may be!—I’m an ass, Ben, not to have thought of it! And what places are there, hereabouts, now, whose names begin with *S*?”

“Two or three,” I answered. “There’s Summerstead, and Sheldrake, and Settlecroft—all in the neighbourhood.—And there’s another place, close by, South Stilbeach. There you are!—there’s *S.S.* for you!”

“Is that anywhere on our way back?” he asked.

“It could be made so,” I replied. “It’s between here and Middlebourne, but off the road—a quiet little place between the road and the sea.”

He turned and beckoned to the driver of our car, and we got in and went to South Stilbeach. It was a queer, out-of-the-way fishing village; a mere collection of huts and cottages, with a shabby beer-house fronting the beach. And we drew it blank—nobody there had seen or heard of any two such men as those we described.

We went homewards after that. And we were driving down the one street of our village, towards the garage from which Cherry had hired the car, when, as we passed Veller’s house, we heard ourselves hailed by more voices than one, and, turning, saw Veller hurrying out of his door, followed by Pepita Marigold and Bryce Ellingham, and all three in an evident state of high excitement. We stopped the car, got out, and met them in Veller’s garden. Pepita and Bryce were too full of something to be able to speak; Veller waved a big hand towards them as he strode

in front.

"These two," he said, with one of his widest grins, "has made what they call a discovery. May ha' something to do with this here job, and mayn't However, they come straight to me about it—just now."

Bryce Ellingham shoved himself forward.

"Of course, it's a discovery, and a most important one!" he exclaimed in his cock-sure fashion. "We came to find you about it, Mr. Cherry, but as you weren't about we told Veller, because in these things time's important, isn't it? Look at this, now!—if that isn't what you detectives call a clue, then I'd like to know what is!"

He suddenly held out his left hand, palm upwards, and there lying on its somewhat grubby expanse we saw a gold coin, in which a hole had been drilled, and to which, by the hole, a bit of broken chain was attached. And as soon as I set eyes on it, I let out an exclamation which I couldn't repress.

"Uncle Joseph's!" said I, close to Cherry's elbow. "His!" Neither Bryce Ellingham nor Pepita seemed to know exactly what I meant, but Cherry was quick to grasp the significance of my exclamation, and for the moment to divert attention from it. He took the coin out of Bryce's fingers and examined it, turning it over with special attention to the bit of broken chain.

"An American ten-dollar piece, eh?" he said. "Um!—very handsome coin, too! And where did you find this, young gentleman?"

"It was like this," replied Bryce, loftily. "Miss Marigold and I were walking along the bottom of the rocks there at Fliman's End. There's a sort of recess, something like a cave, there. I picked up the coin in that cave, lying amongst some sea-weed ____,"

"Look as if it had been there long?" interrupted Cherry. "Any sand on it?"

"No—it was just as it is now," replied Bryce. "Looked as if somebody dropped it recently and it had fallen or rolled amongst the sea-weed. But that's not all," he continued, growing more and more important. "There are foot-marks in that recess that I'm sure you ought to see. A man's—a big man's, too! And they lead straight across the sand: firm white sand it is there, and they're the only marks on it. We didn't stop to see where they went——"

"No, we hurried back to see you!" interrupted Pepita, obviously anxious to join in the game, "and as you weren't about we were persuading Veller to go back with us——"

"We'll all go," said Cherry. He looked at Veller and winked. "How near can we take the car to this point they're talking about?" he asked.

"Down to the end of the lane that runs past our house," said I. "Get in—I'll

show the driver where to go.”

The other four got into the car—I seated myself in front by the driver. As we moved off Cherry put his head over the low screen, close to my ear.

“Certain that coin is your uncle’s?” he asked, in a whisper.

“Dead certain!” said I. “I noticed it particularly the other day. It hung from his watch chain.”

He nodded and sank his voice still lower.

“All right!—but say no more about that when we get out,” he whispered. “Those two youngsters were too excited to understand what you said just now, and they’ll forget. And keep your eyes open when we see this place.”

The car took us to within a quarter of a mile of Fliman’s End—on leaving it we crossed a narrow field, and, coming out on the beach, followed the line of the cliffs till we came to the rocks. Those rocks made a great black pile, noticeable along the coast for a long way in both directions. There were several caves and recesses in them; that to which Bryce led us faced westward, away from our creek; there was a view from its mouth of all the long curving coast as far as Kingshaven in the hazy distance. And within it were ledges of worn rock, and at the foot of them masses of weed and of drift wood, blown in there by the high winds that often swept up Channel from the Atlantic.

“That’s where I picked it up!” exclaimed Bryce, pointing to a heap of sea-weed at the bottom of the cave. “Just there! And now you look at those big foot-marks! Lots of ’em here in the cave, and see, they go in a straight line down there!”

Cherry glanced round and seemed to get some idea.

“Stay where you are, all of you,” he said. “Just let me have a look round.”

He turned back by the way we had come, retracing his steps for some little distance, and I saw that he was looking for the counterparts of the marks Bryce Ellingham had pointed out in the cave. Presently he came back, and up to me and Veller.

“Those footprints are plain enough along there,” he said. “They’re those of a big, heavy-footed man who’s come along here by pretty much the same way that we did—from the end of that lane and across the field. But I’m not concerned with that so much—what I want to know is where does this track lead to?”

He pointed to the marks which led away from the cave, westward, and adjuring all of us to walk well on either side of them, began to trace them towards the sea. The sands thereabouts were white, dry, and firm, and the big foot-prints were plain enough. The man who made them had evidently walked straight down to the beach, turning to neither left nor right, as if to a definite point, with an equally definite object.

"Whereabouts is high-water mark?" inquired Cherry, suddenly.

Veller pointed a little ahead.

"You'll see where that is as soon as we come to where the sand changes colour," he answered. "At this time o' year, somewhere about half-way up beach."

"Just so!—and we shall find that these marks come to a sudden stop there!" said Cherry. "The man who made them has been taken off in a boat which came to this point to meet him, by previous arrangement. Here you are!—there they end!"

He nodded confidently at a definite line in the beach, marked by a thin tangle of weed and rubbish; the line to which the tide flowed is at high water. The foot-marks came right up to that in the dry white sand; beyond it, on the wet, hove beach there were none.

"Yes, that's it!" remarked Cherry, musingly, as we stood staring at the high-water-mark line and the wet sands beyond. "I see how it's been—here he came, and here he waited for the boat—now! well, let's have another glance at that cave."

We went back to the cave, and had a more careful look round it. And suddenly it was my privilege to make a discovery; fortunately, I made it when Bryce, Pepita, and Veller were at one end of the cave, and Cherry and myself at the other. In addition to the sea-weed and drift wood that lay heaped in the recesses, there was a lot of rubbish about, in there—folk from Kingshaven sometimes came along that coast, picnicing, and they left stuff about, newspapers, bottles, and the like. And I saw a bottle that had certainly not come from Kingshaven, a bottle that I recognised, and I picked it out from a corner into which it had been carelessly tossed, and held it up before Cherry.

"Another link!" I exclaimed triumphantly. "This, too, was Uncle Joseph Krevin's property!"

Cherry looked incredulous.

"One bottle's pretty much like another, Ben," he remarked. "I see a plain dark glass spirit bottle——"

"And I see the label on it!" said I, turning the bottle round so that he, too, could see what I meant. "This is the bottle Uncle Joseph had in his old bag—I told you I got it out at his bidding, when he turned faint on hearing about the murder? Look at the queer names on the label!—that's why I remember it."

He followed my pointing finger and nodded his acquiescence.

"I see!" he said. "Odd names, to be sure! Zetterquist & Vanderpant, Wine and Spirit Merchants, St. George Street, E. Oh, yes!—I think that's no local product. Come!—we're beginning to get a bit of knowledge about your Uncle Joseph's haunts. He has something to do with Crippe, who keeps a marine stores place in

Old Gravel Lane, and he buys his liquor, or has bought it, in St. George Street, which is fairly close by. We shall have to inquire about Uncle Joseph in those parts, Ben. But in the meantime——”

He gave me a warning wink, put the bottle in a deep pocket of his overcoat, and then, going across to the others, said that we'd be going back. On the way to the car he admonished Bryce Ellingham and Pepita to keep the news of this discovery to themselves, promising them at the same time that when the precise moment arrived for making it public, they should have the full and entire credit. When we reached the car he sent them and Veller forward in it: he and I walked up the lane towards our house.

“Ben!” he said, when we were alone. “I begin to see into some of your Uncle Joseph's little ways! There's no doubt that when he left your house in the night he came along to that cave we've just seen. There he finished his brandy, there he dropped this American ten-dollar gold piece, and there he waited till a boat came to take him off. Now all that—the waiting at that particular spot, anyway—presupposes cut and dried arrangement between Uncle Joseph and somebody hereabouts. Who is that somebody? That somebody was to be off Fliman's End at a certain time—high-water time, I think—on Wednesday morning, to take Uncle Joseph off—and, probably, Sol Cousins, too. He took off Uncle Joseph, but not Cousins, for Cousins had met his fate, and been murdered. Queer business, isn't it, Ben?—don't you wish you knew who murdered Cousins, and why? However, I want to have a look at the bedroom in your house in which Uncle Joseph slept—or didn't sleep, for I think he watched. By-the-bye, are you and your sister sound sleepers? For neither of you seem to have heard Uncle Joseph's movements!”

“I've thought of that,” said I. “Yes, I think we are, both, good sleepers. And you see, neither of us were very near Uncle Joseph's room. Our house, as you know, is a big, rambling old house—he was in the best bedroom; we were in another wing. And there are two staircases: he could slip downstairs by either. I think he went in the very middle of the night—when Keziah and I were both fast asleep.”

“Aye, well, I want to look round his room,” he repeated. “While I'm doing that, don't tell your sister anything of what's transpired. Let it wait a bit—in all these cases, there's no need to hurry. We'll do the hurry business when we've got fairly on the scent—let's pick that up first.”

Keziah made no opposition to his going upstairs, and I showed him to the best bedroom and left him. But I had scarcely got downstairs again when, greatly to our surprise, Miss Ellingham came to our door. She looked very grave, very serious, and she said without preface that she understood the Scotland Yard man was there, and

she asked to see him at once. Cherry heard her, and came down—direct, business-like.

“Yes?” he said. “You want me?”

“I want you!” replied Miss Ellingham, equally direct. “The fact is, I’ve just discovered that at some time since Monday afternoon, I’ve been robbed!—and of an article of immense value!”

CHAPTER VIII

THE KANG-HE VASE

Keziah was standing in the doorway of the parlour, behind me and Cherry, and as Miss Ellingham spoke I heard her let out a stifled exclamation which was not so much one of surprise as of assurance that what she had been expecting to hear was about to be told her. She moved aside, beckoning Miss Ellingham to enter. And Miss Ellingham, with a friendly nod, stepped in at once, and we all four turned into the parlour, where I made haste to hand our visitor a chair.

“Yes?” repeated Cherry. “You have been robbed?—and of something valuable—very valuable? Yes?”

He showed no surprise. He seemed, outwardly, as unconcerned and indifferent as if Miss Ellingham had uttered some platitude. He took a chair himself, opposite hers, and sat watching her, keenly. I could see, however, that her extraordinary presence impressed him as much as it had impressed me, and that already he was curious about her.

“Of very great value,” said Miss Ellingham. She glanced at Keziah and at me. “Ben I know already,” she continued, with a smile. “And Miss Heckitt will forgive me, I am sure, if I inflict my troubles upon her—the news of them will doubtless be all over the neighbourhood before——”

“That entirely depends, ma’am!” interrupted Cherry, sharply. “It depends upon what you tell me. I know enough of Miss Heckitt and her brother to know that they won’t tell anything they ought not to tell. But—what have you to tell? What is it you think you have been robbed of?”

“Think!” exclaimed Miss Ellingham. “It’s not a case of thinking, if by thinking you imply—but I had better tell you my story in plain words. This afternoon, about an hour ago, I opened a cupboard which forms part of an old-fashioned bureau in my drawing-room, and immediately saw that the principal object kept in it had disappeared. I made an inquiry or two amongst my servants, and then came out to find you, as I had heard there was a Scotland Yard man in the village.”

“What was this principal object?” asked Cherry.

“A Kang-he vase,” replied Miss Ellingham. “Worth—I don’t know how much!”

“And what is a Kang-he vase?” inquired Cherry, quietly. “Something ancient?”

“Chinese pottery,” answered Miss Ellingham. “It is stuff, pottery, you know, made by the old Chinese potters about—oh, four thousand years ago! Collectors of it, who of course can only be very wealthy people, will give any price for it. Even damaged—badly-damaged specimens will fetch an enormous price. An absolutely

perfect pair of Kang-he vases is, you may say, literally priceless, so I'm told. Of course, mine is merely one—not a pair. But I know that its worth—a great sum. A good many thousands of pounds, anyhow!”

“How big is this vase, ma'am?” asked Cherry. His manner had grown very business-like, and he put his questions rapidly. “Height?—width?”

“About twenty inches high, and ten across the top,” replied Miss Ellingham.

“When did you see it last?”

“Last Monday afternoon.”

“In the cupboard you mentioned just now?”

“Exactly! In that cupboard—in its usual place.

“Was the cupboard locked?—kept locked?”

“No!” replied Miss Ellingham, ruefully. “It wasn't! But, of course, I never dreamed of this—I had no idea that anybody—say servants, or about here—would know anything of the value of the vase. No!—the cupboard wasn't locked!”

“Nothing to do but open the door and take out the vase, eh?” observed Cherry. “Precisely! But I think it highly probable, Miss Ellingham, that other people than your servants and the folk about here may have heard of your vase. Now, how long have you had it, and where did you get it?”

“I'd better tell you its history,” said Miss Ellingham. “At least, as far as it's known to me. I may tell you that I am a duly qualified medical practitioner—and pretty well known in the scientific world, too, if it's worth while your knowing. Most of my work, however, has been done in India: I had fifteen years' experience there. Now, during my last year there, I was called in to see the favourite daughter of a very rich Parsee merchant. I needn't go into details, but I saved her life, undoubtedly—she had been given up by other doctors. Her father was almost extravagantly grateful to me, and in addition to forcing upon me a very generous fee for my services, he made me a present of this Kang-he vase. He had a wonderful collection of such things. This, of course, is an odd vase—one of a pair. If its fellow were in existence——”

“Perhaps it is, ma'am,” interrupted Cherry, with a glance at Miss Ellingham which seemed to puzzle her. “However—did many people know of your acquiring this very rare and valuable object?”

“A few people in Bombay knew,” replied Miss Ellingham. “Personal friends, you know.”

“Just so,” said Cherry. “But—when you came home to England? Did your possession of it get out here?”

“Well, yes, I suppose it did,” admitted Miss Ellingham. “Yes! Some little time

after I returned home and settled down here, at the Grange I was induced to give an interview to a representative of the *Lady's Circle*—you know, the illustrated weekly—who wanted to know all about my work in India. I allowed him to photograph my more important art treasures—things I had brought home—and amongst them of course was the Kang-he vase.”

“Just so!” remarked Cherry. “And no doubt you told the interviewer how you acquired the vase? Exactly!—so that a good many people were put in possession of the fact that you had it! For the *Lady's Circle*, I believe, has a very large circulation. By-the-bye, have you got a copy of the issue in which the interview and photographs appeared? Good!—I shall be obliged if you'll let me have it. And now, ma'am, if you please, I'll just walk round to your house with you, and you shall show me the cupboard and the drawing-room—and everything else.”

I gave Cherry's elbow a nudge and he was quick to catch the meaning of it.

“And, if I may, I'll bring Ben here with me,” he added. “Ben is by way of being my right-hand man just now, and he's seen one thing to-day that I failed to see, so he may be useful.”

“Oh, let Ben come by all means!” agreed Miss Ellingham. She stayed behind a moment to say a few word to Keziah; then joined Cherry and me in the garden. “I have been wondering, Mr. Cherry,” she observed, as we set out towards the Grange, “if this robbery has any connection with the affair that took place there—at Gallowstree Point—the other night—Tuesday night. What do you think?” Cherry laughed.

“I shall be very much surprised—when we've ironed everything out—if it hasn't, ma'am!” he answered. “I think it exceedingly likely.”

“That would seem to argue the existence of a scheme,” observed Miss Ellingham, meditatively. “A deeply-laid scheme, too!”

“Possibly of more than one scheme, ma'am,” assented Cherry. “It's certainly significant that at or about the time of your loss one man should be murdered and another effect a mysterious disappearance! But this vase of yours—I'm getting interested in that. I gathered from what you said just now that these things were usually made in pairs. How was it that the Parsee merchant you mentioned hadn't the fellow to the one he gave you?”

Miss Ellingham laughed—a little cynically.

“Ah!” she replied. “Grateful—pathetically grateful—as he was, I don't think he'd have given me the vase if he'd still possessed its fellow! But that, once in his possession, had been stolen, some years before.”

“Oh!” said Cherry. “Stolen?—um! Are these things—this Kang-he ware—

thought much of in their own country, now?"

"Thought much of!" exclaimed Miss Ellingham. "Bless your life and soul!—they're regarded there as something sacred! It's forbidden—by the Chinese Government—to take them out of the country. They are treasured in families for generation after generation. Lives have been lost in defence of them—yes, and in trying to get hold of them. I remember," she added, with a queer little laugh, "that when I was given my vase, and showed it to a friend of mine in Bombay, he said that he wouldn't have such a thing in his house for a fortune, and that I'd better not let any Chinaman know I'd got it! But—I'm not given to cultivating panics."

"And you reflected, doubtless, that you were coming home, to a country where people don't cut throats or break into houses for the sake of a bit of pottery!" observed Cherry. "Still, ma'am, there is one thing you forgot!"

"What?" asked Miss Ellingham.

"There are Chinamen in England!—plenty of 'em," replied Cherry. "And—you advertised your possession of this sacred object pretty well if you told its story to an interviewer and permitted photographs of it to appear in a widely-circulated journal!"

Miss Ellingham shook her head.

"I don't think Chinese laundry men and opium-den keepers in Limehouse are very likely to take in the *Lady's Circle*, Mr. Cherry," she observed. "No—I don't think my vase has been stolen by a Chinaman!"

"Chinamen have long arms!" said Cherry, with a knowing laugh. "I've heard of them stretching all the way from Peking to Piccadilly—and getting a tight hold at the end of the stretch, too, ma'am. However—no doubt much remains to be discovered!"

This profound remark, at which both my companions laughed, brought us to the door of the Grange. Carsie, the butler, chanced to be there as we entered, and Miss Ellingham at once turned to him.

"Heard anything, or discovered anything, Carsie?" she inquired.

"Nothing, ma'am," replied Carsie. "I have made every inquiry in and around the house, and have not succeeded in getting any information."

"Of what sort?" asked Cherry, sharply.

Carsie gave his questioner a quiet look.

"As to any strange person having been seen about between Monday noon and to-day," he replied, in his subdued level accents. "No such person has been noticed, by any of the servants, indoor or outdoor, during the daytime at any rate."

"And as to night, of course you can't say," remarked Cherry, off-handedly. He

turned away from the butler, and looked at Miss Ellingham. "I should like to see the drawing-room," he said.

Miss Ellingham led us to a big room at the far end of the house; a great, square room with windows looking east and west, and a French window looking south and opening on the walled garden which lay between the house and the sea. It was to my eyes a very fine and beautiful room, filled with picturesque furniture, and lavishly decorated with ornaments, water-colour drawings, and finely bound books in small cases. But Cherry gave no more than a glance at the general effect: his eyes turned straight to a bureau which stood on one side of the room and had in its upper part a small, square cupboard fronted by an elaborately carved door. Miss Ellingham, too, went straight to this cupboard and laid a hand on the door. And she had no sooner thrown it open and looked inside than she let out a sharp exclamation.

"Oh, really!" she said. "I—I never noticed that! I've been robbed of more than the Kang-he vase! My two little Hindu gods are gone! Dear me!—this——"

"I think you had better examine everything, ma'am," remarked Cherry. "You may find that still more has been stolen. But now just tell me about this cupboard—it has, I see, two shelves in it."

"Yes, and the Kang-he vase stood on that, and on the other, in the background, there were two quaint little figures, statuettes, of Hindu gods," said Miss Ellingham. "There were all three here on Monday afternoon——"

"And now they're not!" said Cherry, peering into the gloom of the cupboard. "Very well, ma'am!—now just let me have a look at things."

He was very speedy in what he did, and he reminded me, somehow, of a hound trying to pick up a scent. . . . He looked all over the bureau; he looked at the big, thick rug which lay before it, he looked over the carpet. Then he crossed the room, examined the French window, opened it, walked out, and disappeared in the garden. But within a few minutes he was back again in the drawing-room.

"I can show you exactly how your property was stolen, Miss Ellingham," he said, with an air of something very closely resembling cheerfulness. "To begin with, look at the fastening of your French window—a simple lock of the most elementary description, which any even half-trained cracksman would manipulate in two seconds with the greatest ease. Your burglar came in through that window, of course, and went straight to the cupboard in the bureau. He brought with him a bag, wherein to place the loot. The bag was fitted with those fine shavings that they use in crockery shops, to pack their wares in—here you are!—there are stray odds and ends of those shavings in this rug, strewed about amongst the long, rough hair of which it's made. You couldn't have a simpler case than this!—the man had nothing

to do but walk in, help himself, and go off by the way he came!”

“And yet,” observed Miss Ellingham, quietly, “Carsie assures me that there has never been any occasion on which he has not personally seen that that French window was locked at night and still locked when he examined it next morning.”

“Just so!” said Cherry, smiling. “But the thief probably turned the key in it again when he left, to make you think the robbery was effected from inside—by someone in your house. The instrument he used to turn the key one way, to admit him, could be used just as effectually to turn it the other—when he’d got what he wanted. Oh, a very easy burglary! But talking of people inside your house—are you sure of all your servants? Your butler, now? It’s best to be brutally plain, ma’am.”

“I had the highest references with Carsie,” replied Miss Ellingham. “I don’t think there’s the slightest doubt of his absolute honesty and respectability. As for my Hindu man-servant, Mandhu Khan, he has been in my service twelve years, and is devoted to me. As to the rest—well I don’t suppose my cook, nor my parlourmaid, nor my housemaids and scullery-maids, or the boy who cleans knives and boots or the two gardeners, or my chauffeur would, any one of them, covet what to them would look like nothing but an ornamental jar and a couple of little stone figures——”

“You never know however humble a catspaw mayn’t be useful to a clever and unscrupulous criminal, ma’am,” interrupted Cherry, with a laugh. “And there’s one thing you can make sure of in connection with your affair. This is no common theft! However—can you give me a copy of the *Lady’s Circle* in which the interview and pictures figure?”

Miss Ellingham found him the promised copy, and presently he and I went away. When we were out of the grounds he began to turn over the paper, and suddenly he laughed, cynically.

“Ben!” he said. “You’d think from her looks that the good lady we’ve just left was about as clever as they make ’em!—and so, no doubt, she is, in her own line. But she’s simple, my lad, she’s simple! Knowing all she does about the something-like-superstitious value attached by the Chinese to these Kang-he stuff, she goes and advertises her possession of a fine specimen of it—just look here, at these pictures! Photographs of the vase itself! Photographs of the cupboard in which the vase is kept—door open, showing vase! Photograph of the drawing-room, showing exact situation of bureau! Lord!—why, the thief had all his work done for him in advance!—he’d nothing to do but slip in and lay his hands on the thing!”

He left me, abruptly, at the end of our lane, and went off to his lodging muttering over the *Lady’s Circle* and its pictures of Miss Ellingham and her treasures. But late that night, when Keziah and I were thinking of going to bed, in he walked and

dropped into a chair between us, as we sat on either side of the parlour fire.

“Miss Heckitt!” he said, abruptly. “You know me, by now, I hope! I’ll take great care of him—but I must have what I want. And that’s that Ben should go to London with me, first thing to-morrow morning.”

CHAPTER IX

ODD JOB MAN

Although I was eighteen years of age, fancied myself, I believe, no little, and was about to enter on life as a full-fledged articled clerk, with a tailed coat and top-hat, I still regarded my sister Keziah with awe, as being head and autocrat of our family, and when Cherry flung out this exciting proposition, I turned on her as a small boy might turn on a stern head-master of whom a holiday is suddenly craved. And inwardly I quaked, for Keziah's always stern face grew dark with something closely resembling horror.

"London!" she exclaimed. "Him? And whatever for, mister? The very idea!"

"There are reasons, ma'am," answered Cherry. "I won't say State reasons, though they are almost of that nature. But—reasons! Police reasons, if you like."

"I don't want Ben mixing up with police," snapped Keziah, tartly. "I don't mind his going about a bit with you—you're in plain clothes, and look something like a gentleman, and you seem a very decent young fellow. But if it comes to uniforms _____"

"Ben will not associate with uniforms, ma'am," interrupted Cherry. "He'll just go with me on a quiet little trip, to-morrow morning, and I'll deliver him to you again, safe and sound, on Sunday evening. I want him!"

"And for what, pray?" demanded Keziah. "Let's be knowing that!"

"Well, if you will have it, he may be useful to me in tracing that uncle of yours, Mr. Joseph Krevin," replied Cherry. "He might—identify him. Let him come! The sooner Mr. Krevin's little mystery is cleared up, the better—for everybody, you included, ma'am," he added, with a significant look. "And—it won't cost you anything."

"Let me go, Keziah!" I pleaded.

"Oh, you'll be ready enough to go, my lad, I'll warrant!" exclaimed Keziah satirically. "You'd be off this instant, no doubt! But if you're strong enough to go trapesing about London you're strong enough to start lawyering at Mr. Philbricks—that'll be a deal better than running after good-for-naughts like Joseph Krevin. And you give one such short notice!" she went on, turning to Cherry. "How do you think I can get him ready to go voyaging all that way by to-morrow morning?"

"That way!—sixty miles!" said Cherry. "Lord save us, ma'am!—he isn't going to the North Pole! Ready?—what is there to do to make him ready? Nothing, I should think!"

"That's all you know!" retorted Keziah. "I shall have to get out his best clothes,

and air them—he's never had 'em on since his illness. And it's past ten o'clock—and you'd better go away, and let me get to work."

"Meet me at the station at a quarter-to-nine, Ben," said Cherry, making for the door. "I'll take every care of him, Miss Heckitt—and good-night!"

Keziah made no reply beyond a mumbled phrase or two—she was already opening and shutting the drawers of a great press wherein she kept our best garments in camphor and lavender. Presently she had my Sunday suit and clean linen on a clothes horse before the fire—and next morning when she hurried me off to the station as spick and span as if I had been going to a wedding I verily believe that she was secretly delighted that she had turned me out looking as important as the occasion demanded.

"And mind you don't get lost in those London streets!" she called to me as I opened the garden gate. "And if you do see your Uncle Joseph——"

But there, for once in her life, Keziah failed for words, and after shaking her head dismally, waved her hand, went in, and shut the door. And it was not out of ingratitude that I immediately put her out of my mind, which, to tell the truth, was seething with anticipations of adventure.

There was not much adventure to start with. Cherry had an armful of newspapers when I met him at the station, and he occupied himself during most of our two hours' journey in reading them, passing one after the other over to me as he finished each. Every paper was full of our affair—and to my astonishment I saw that the theft of the Kang-he vase was already reported. There was, to be sure, not so much about that, but there was a plenitude of stuff about the murder of Cousins, and its peculiarly grisly character, and no end of speculation and surmise. I remarked to Cherry that I had had no idea that we were all being so much written about, and he laughed.

"It's those inside the game who see least of it, Ben," said he. "The outsiders, the spectators, see most! This is a bit of fat for all these newspaper fellows—yards of good copy it gives 'em! And see how they theorise and speculate and suggest about it!—well, it all helps. The Press is a valuable adjunct to the police, and I've known cases in which an astute young reporter did better work than a trained detective. And that reminds me, my lad, that when we get to London Bridge, two friends of mine, belonging to the Department, are to meet me, and I shall want a bit of private talk with them—but that won't take long."

The two friends were awaiting us, evidently by arrangement, just outside the barrier. One was a young man, of about Cherry's own age; the other was a middle-aged man; both were very ordinary in appearance and might have been anything in

the clerk or tradesman way. Instead of looking the alert, keen-faced, sharp-eyed individuals that I had always fancied detectives to be, they seemed to be remarkably apathetic, unemotional, and casual in appearance. And as we walked across to the refreshment-room, towards which all three turned as if it were a matter of course that they should, they talked, somewhat lackadaisically, about the weather, and the eldest man remarked that if we didn't get rain soon, his kitchen garden at Golders Green was going to be a frost—which eventually he seemed to regard as the last thing in catastrophes. When we got into the refreshment-room, Cherry installed me at a table in a corner, with a glass of port to console me; he and the other two got together at a quiet spot of the bar, and with glasses in hand began to talk. And I, watching them closely, saw then that they were waking up and debating keenly enough whatever it was that Cherry first told them: there was a good deal of stroking of chins, and tapping of fingers, and exchange of nods and winks. Eventually all three seemed to come to some conclusion; the two strangers went away, once more looking unconcerned and apathetic, and Cherry came back to me.

"That's one bit of business done, Ben!" he said cheerfully. "Now come upstairs to the dining-room and we'll have some lunch. And then—we'll get on to our own special business, whatever luck we have with it!"

I was curious enough to know if he had learnt anything from the two men who had just gone away, but too shy to ask him. A few minutes later, however, when we had picked up our knives and forks, he suddenly leaned across the table to me.

"Ben!" he said. "Did you ever hear of your Uncle Joseph being in India?—or anywhere else in the East?"

"No!" I answered promptly. "Never! But then, I never heard anything of Uncle Joseph, till he turned up that morning. Keziah never talked of him, and, as you know, he'd been away from our parts nineteen years or so—never been near us."

"Um!—well, he'd be somewhere or other," he remarked. "And I'd very much like to know if that somewhere was in Eastern climes at any period. Curious gentleman altogether, your Uncle Joseph, and I wonder if we shall get any news of him in Old Gravel Lane?"

"Is that where we're going?" I asked.

"Precisely, Ben—where else?" he answered. "To begin with, at any rate. We're going to visit the establishment of Crippe, Marine Store dealer. Who Crippe may be we don't know. Perhaps he's Krevin—your Uncle Joseph. If he is, Ben, I don't think we shall find him. If he isn't, and there's a Crippe who really is Crippe, then we want to know why Krevin carried Crippe's cards in his pocket? Perhaps Crippe will tell us; perhaps he won't. This business, Ben, consists largely of the question-and-

answer system. Plenty of questions!—but getting satisfactory answers is the difficulty, and sometimes the very devil!”

We went off across London Bridge after a while, and turning left at the Monument walked by Eastcheap and the Tower into the region of the Docks. I had never been in that part of London before, my two previous excursions to the centre of things having been in the West End, in Keziah’s company, and amongst fashionable surroundings and fine shops, and I thought everything in this hitherto unexplored neighbourhood, very squalid and grimy. But old Gravel Lane was worse than any of its approaches—a narrow, gloomy street leading down to the river between black-walled buildings. It was a paradise now, said Cherry, to what it had been, but I failed to see anything paradisaical about it, and I felt considerable misgiving what at last, on a board obscured by dirt and age we saw the name *Crippe*.

“Here we are!” said Cherry. “And the gentleman does business on Saturday afternoons, and there, no doubt, he is!”

He pushed aside a half-open door, and there, standing in the middle of a place that was half shed and half shop, badly-lighted, and evil-smelling, we saw a man who wore all the airs of proprietorship. He was a little, sturdy man, with a round paunch and a big head—his paunch was gay with a fancy waistcoat, and his head half-buried in a big, brand-new Panama hat; a just-lighted cigar, half-a-foot long, stuck out of one corner of his clean-shaven lips. As for the rest of him, he had a goatee beard, very stiff and fiery red in hue, and he had shed his coat, and in his shirt sleeves—and with at least two aggressively bright diamond rings glittering on his dirty fingers—was industriously sorting and counting a pile of coarse canvas bags that lay on the floor at his feet. All round him were the things that you find in a marine store dealer’s place of business, in the background in a sort of tank, faced with glass, a young, thin-faced man sat writing at a desk.

Cherry advanced to the shirt-sleeved gentleman with interested politeness.

“Mr. Crippe?” he inquired.

The man finished counting his sacks—those he had in hand, at any rate—before he replied. And his reply was thrown over his shoulder.

“And two’s nine, and two’s eleven, and two’s thirteen,” he said. “Eight dozen, Jenkinson—thirteen as twelve. That’s me!—who are you?”

Cherry took out one of his professional cards, and Mr. Crippe’s hands being free by that time, he deigned to accept it, and, having first balanced a pair of gold-mounted pince-nez on his snub nose, to read it, he turned a sharp eye on both of us, passed me over with a mere glance, and settled on my companion.

“Well?—wha’ d’yer want?” he demanded. “Sharp, now!”

Cherry produced one of Mr. Crippe’s own cards.

“To ask a question about this,” he answered. “Two of your cards were left at a house on the South Coast by a man named Joseph Krevin. Do you know Krevin?”

“Yes! Know Joe Krevin well enough! What about him?”

“Is he in your employ?”

“No! Not in what you’d call a regular way, anyhow. He does a bit on commission—no salary. Job now and then. Carries my business cards, to be sure, and drops one where he sees a chance of doing a bit.”

“Have you seen him lately, Mr. Crippe?”

“Not for a fortnight or three weeks—no!”

“Can you give me his private address?”

“Can’t! Don’t know it. Don’t know anything about Joe Krevin’s private affairs. And what do you want him for?”

“He’s missing,” replied Cherry, diplomatically. “This young man is his nephew. His family want to trace him. And as we found your card in a house where he’d been——”

“Aye, well, I can’t help you!” interrupted Mr. Crippe, waving the be-diamonded fingers. “No notion whatever where he hangs out. Only comes in here, casual-like, now and again.”

Cherry glanced at the glass-fronted tank: he, like myself, had noticed that the clerk was listening for all he was worth.

“Perhaps your assistant——” he began.

“They might know at Zetterquist’s,” said the clerk. “That was his house of call round here—in St. George Street. Try the saloon parlour.”

We bade Mr. Crippe a good-afternoon; Mr. Crippe bade us nothing, and turned again to his canvas bags. We went out into the dismal street.

“Well, you see, Ben, we got some information, after all!” remarked Cherry, cheerfully. “We know more about Uncle Joseph now than we did five minutes ago. Uncle Joseph occasionally does a bit of business with and for Mr. Crippe. And if Mr. Crippe doesn’t know where Uncle Joseph pitches his little tent, perhaps Zetterquist’s do. Quite satisfactory, so far. And now for Zetterquist’s.”

He led me up Old Gravel Lane and round a corner into another more pretentious but still gloomy and squalid street. We had to look about a bit there, but eventually we found what we wanted. Zetterquist and Vanderpant turned out to be an old-fashioned wine and spirits vaults; there was a part where they seemed to do wholesale business, another where there were public bars, and yet a third evidently

reserved for superior customers. And into this we turned and found our way to a quaint old parlour, the walls of which were chiefly decorated with pictures and engravings of sailing ships, models of the same, and odds and ends that, judging from their character and appearance, had doubtless been brought there from far-off places. There were a few customers in the dark corners of this room, and as most of them wore blue serge suits, had deeply tanned complexions, and obviously preferred rum to any other liquor, I set them down as sea-faring parties from the neighbouring docks. Also there was in that room, which had a highly-seasoned atmosphere of spirits, lemons, and strong tobacco, a little bar in one corner, and behind it an elderly, highly-respectable person in an alpaca coat, who was industriously polishing glasses and seemed uncommonly surprised to see us. But he listened politely to Cherry's prefatory remarks, and was evidently quite interested in the professional card which he presented. He was interested, too, in me when he heard that I was Mr. Joseph Krevin's nephew.

"Yes, we know Mr. Krevin here," he said. "The fact is, he's a sort of traveller for our firm—on commission, you understand. Picks up an order here and there, and sends it on—I fancy he does that sort of thing for various other firms—not in our line, you know; other lines. General commission agent—that's his line of business. But he's not been in here, and we haven't heard anything of him, lately. Two or three weeks, I should say."

"What I particularly want is his private address," observed Cherry. "Can you give it?"

"I can!" replied the man behind the bar. "I shouldn't give it, you know, to anybody, but as you're what you are, and as he's missing, I will. It's 241 Calthorpe Street—that's off Gray's Inn Road."

Cherry remarked that he knew Calthorpe Street well enough, and after thanking our informant we left Zetterquist's and the company of sea-captains, and went away—to find an omnibus going towards Bloomsbury.

"Easy enough to strike Calthorpe Street, Ben," remarked Cherry. "A well-known lodging house street, that! But I doubt if we shall strike Uncle Joseph. However, we now know an extra bit more about him. Sort of odd-job man, he is. And odd-job men meet queer company, and get mixed up in queer things."

He was right in prophesying that we shouldn't strike Uncle Joseph. 241 Calthorpe Street, proved to be a dismal, shabby sort of house, and the landlady who opened the door to us was equally shabby and even more dismal. No, Mr. Krevin wasn't at home, and what's more hadn't been at home since last Monday morning, and she didn't know when he would be at home, for he was given to being away

many days at a time, sometimes. No, he hadn't lived there very long—some few months only—and she believed he'd just come from foreign parts when he came there. Yes, we could look at his room if we liked—it didn't matter—nothing seemed to matter, to her.

We went up to Uncle Joseph's room: a bed-sitting room, more comfortable than the exterior of the house would have led one to suppose. And in the moment of our entrance, Cherry's keen eyes struck on something. There was an addressed envelope that had come through the post lying on the table, and he picked it up with a sharp exclamation.

"Look at this, Ben!" he said. "See? The post-mark! *Middlebourne!*"

CHAPTER X

TOM SCRIPTURE

Before I had time to voice my surprise at seeing the familiar post-mark, Cherry had turned back the torn flap of the envelope and we both saw that it was empty. He thrust it into my hand with an exclamation of disappointment.

"Blank!" he muttered. "Nothing there! But still—the postmark! That's Middlebourne, right enough. And the handwriting—do you recognise it, Ben?"

"No!" I answered promptly. "I don't know it. But Nellie Apps and her mother, who keep the post office, might. Though there are two or three hundred people in Middlebourne, you know!"

"Aye!—and this mayn't have been written by any one of 'em, but by a stranger, there for the time being," he said. "All the same, here's the cover of a letter posted from Middlebourne to Mr. Joseph Krevin on a precise date—and that date, Ben, as you'll observe, was three days before Joseph Krevin turned up at your house! Very good—we must find out who sent that letter. It's not a common-place style of writing, either."

He put the envelope in his pocket, and began to look round. But there was little to see—so I thought. Uncle Joseph appeared to have few belongings. There was a goodly stock of clothes, linen, and the like in the drawers which Cherry opened and glanced into; there were a few books on a shelf, some old pipes and a cigar box or two on the mantelpiece, and a pile of papers and magazines on a side-table. But no private papers or letter lay about, and though there was a rickety writing-desk in one corner of the room there was nothing in or on it that gave us any indication of Uncle Joseph's doings or pursuits, other than a few more business cards of Mr. Crippe and a price-list bearing the name of Zetterquist & Vanderpant. On a shelf above it, however, stood some carved figures and ornaments, and Cherry pointed to them with a significant glance.

"I don't think there's much doubt that your mysterious relative has been in the East during those years in which his family never heard of him, Ben," he remarked. "Look at those things!—mementoes of his travels, I imagine. Indian ware, I believe—oh, yes, I think Uncle Joseph has smelled the East. And no doubt picked up some Eastern notions as to how things should be done!"

The pile of papers and magazines lay just by his hand, and he began to turn it over, apparently without aim. But suddenly he pulled out an illustrated journal with a coloured cover and held it towards me with a laugh.

"This is like the children's game where you get hot or get cold in searching for

something, Ben!” he said. “We’re getting hot! See this—the *Lady’s Circle*! And the very same issue as that in which the interview with Miss Ellingham appears! And—ho-ho!—look here, my boy!—what do you think of that?”

He spread the paper out before me, pointing triumphantly, and I saw at once what he meant. *The page on which the photographs of Miss Ellingham’s drawing-room and of the Kang-he vase appeared had been torn out!*

We looked at each other with a common instinct. And Cherry began to fold up the mutilated journal, preparatory to putting it in his pocket.

“Yes, that’s it, Ben, my boy!” he said, as if assenting to some proposition which I had just put into words, though as a matter of fact, I hadn’t spoken. “You’re right! Your Uncle Joseph has had some share in the theft of that Kang-he vase! We’re on the track, Ben! And we’ve done a very good afternoon’s work, and now we’ll knock off and go to my little flat, which isn’t very far away, and when we’ve had a wash and a tidy-up we’ll get a bit of dinner and go to a theatre or a music-hall—whichever and wherever you like! Oh, yes!—I think I’m beginning to see through the brick wall, Ben!”

I fancied that I was beginning to see through it myself, but I said nothing: if there was any thought in my head at all, it was of Keziah, and of what she, with all her notions about family honour and the like, would say if it were proved that Uncle Joseph Krevin was a thief. We went downstairs again; Cherry had a word or two with the dismal landlady; then he took me off to his flat, which, as he had said, was not far away, being, as a matter of fact, on the other side of Grays Inn Road, in Doughty Street, and in a house close by one in which, he assured me with great pride, Charles Dickens used to live. It was a very nice little bachelor flat, cosy and comfortable, and quite big enough, he said with a laugh, for a single man who could get his own breakfast ready and had all his other meals out. It was well fitted up, too, and there was a telephone there, and while we were washing and tidying ourselves preparatory to going out pleasuring, the telephone bell rang sharply. Cherry was at it some little time; when he returned to me in the bath-room he nodded at me as if to signify that he had some news.

“We’re getting on fine, Ben!” he said, cheerfully. “That was a ring-up from one of the men we met at London Bridge this morning. Didn’t I tell you that the work of the Press was a very valuable adjunct to the work of the police? Just so!—and the result of the announcement in this morning’s papers about Miss Ellingham’s loss has had a result already. A Mr. Spelwyn of Bedford Square—no great distance away—has been telephoning our headquarters this afternoon about it. He’s evidently an authority, an expert, and a collector, in the matter of that Chinese stuff, so of course

he'd be attracted by the news. And he's informed our department that if whoever has the affair in hand will call on him to-morrow morning, he'll give the caller some information. I've got the affair in hand!—so to-morrow morning, my boy, 321 Bedford Square, at eleven o'clock sharp! And I wonder what Mr. Spelwyn's got to tell!"

However, I think neither of us speculated much on that during the rest of that Saturday evening. Cherry took me to dinner at a Soho restaurant where there were all sorts of strange people to be seen, and then to a theatre—a rare treat for me, who had never seen anything but a pantomime or two at Kingshaven—and the novelty and excitement of these things drove the Middlebourne mysteries, Cousins, Uncle Joseph, the Kang-he vase, and all the rest of it clean out of my mind. But they revived next morning when Cherry and I, presenting ourselves at Bedford Square, were shown by a stolid-faced manservant into a library or study, wherein, ranged on shelves, or exhibited in cases, were quantities of pots and plates, as Keziah would have called them, which were doubtless as rare and valuable as they seemed to me odd and ugly.

Mr. Spelwyn, joining us presently, was a little, middle-aged, pleasant-mannered gentleman, with a twinkling eye. He seemed much interested in Cherry, whom he evidently considered very young for his job, and before he told us anything himself, he examined us very thoroughly as to Miss Ellingham, her vase, its history, its location in her drawing-room, and so on. He had not heard of the illustrated article in the *Lady's Circle*, and he sniffed, almost contemptuously, when Cherry, who carried Miss Ellingham's copy in his pocket, showed it to him.

"The woman was asking to be robbed!" he exclaimed. "There are a dozen men in London who would go for that vase after seeing these photographs and learning how insecurely it was kept, and how easily it could be got at! I wonder at Miss Ellingham, with her experience of the East! Preposterous!—to keep a treasure like that in an open cupboard in a drawing-room which the veriest tyro in house-breaking could so easily enter!"

"Do you know any one of the dozen men in London you refer to, sir?" inquired Cherry.

Mr. Spelwyn affected not to hear this direct question—anyway, he didn't answer it. Instead, he pointed to the interview with Miss Ellingham.

"The name of this ware is wrongly spelled there," he said. "It should be *K'ang-hsi*—instead of what it is."

"I'm afraid I'm not much concerned with the spelling, sir," remarked Cherry, laughing. "Chinese orthography——"

"Just so, just so!" said Mr. Spelwyn. "Well, I'd better tell you what I promised your people I would tell—I think, more than probably, it has something to do with this affair at Middlebourne Grange. You know, of course, that I am a collector of this sort of thing, and an expert in Chinese porcelain? Well, about, I think, three weeks ago I was waited on by a man who came to inquire if I cared to buy a genuine K'ang-hsi vase, and, if I did, what I would give for it? I asked him at once what he would ask for such a vase, and I knew by his answer that he knew what he was talking about—he wanted seven thousand pounds. So I made short work of him—I told him that if he had such a vase to offer, I should be glad to see it, and we could discuss the price and everything else when he placed it before me. He went off—and I never heard more of him."

"Will you describe that man, sir?" suggested Cherry.

"To be sure!—I took particular stock of him," replied Mr. Spelwyn. "A big, round-faced, clean-shaven man, very smooth-tongued, plausible, and polite in an old-fashioned way; well-dressed and prosperous-looking. I formed the opinion that he had at some time of his life seen something of the East. As I say, he never returned—and I have thought since that he may have called on me, knowing me to be an expert, just to hear what I had to say when he named seven thousand pounds as the price of the vase he spoke of."

"And you said nothing?" remarked Cherry.

"Nothing beyond what I have told you," replied Mr. Spelwyn.

We went away soon after that, and outside the house Cherry turned to me with a shake of his head.

"Ben, my friend!" he said. "That big, round-faced, clean-shaven man with the smooth tongue and polite manners is your Uncle Joseph! Seems so to me, anyhow, from your description of him. I wonder if he got hold of Miss Ellingham's vase that night he was away from your house—and if that man Cousins had anything to do with the actual theft? But—who strangled Cousins and tied him up to that old gibbet post? Nice tangle!—well, let's get some lunch, and then we'll take the afternoon train to Middlebourne and go on with our work there."

"The envelope?" I suggested.

"Exactly, Ben!" he assented. "We've got to find out whose handwriting it is that figures on that envelope. Uncle Joseph had some correspondent at Middlebourne—who was, or is, he? That's my next job, and the sooner I get to it the better."

But when we reached Middlebourne towards the end of that Sunday afternoon, we found a new development awaiting us. Veller saw us walking down the street and called us into his cottage. With his usual slowness of speech, he did no more than

invite us to be seated when we entered and himself sat down, too, spreading his big hands over his waistcoat, twiddling his thumbs, and grinning at us; his wife, in her Sunday best, was just making ready to go to her chapel down the street, and until she had departed and closed the door behind her, Veller continued to twiddle and to grin. But there was that in his grin which suggested things.

“Well?—you’ve got something to tell, Veller!” remarked Cherry. “The missis is off now—out with it!”

Veller grinned more widely than ever, glanced at the door, glanced at me, leaned forward, and sank his voice to a tone which indicated his sense of mystery.

“That there Tom Scripture!” he whispered. “‘Tis along of him!”

He nodded, once, twice, thrice after delivering himself of this, and Cherry stared from him to me, and back again.

“Who’s Tom Scripture?” he asked. “And what’s along of him?”

“He means Tom Scripture, the fisherman,” said I. “He lives down our lane. What about Tom, Veller?”

Veller summoned his wits.

“Tom Scripture,” he answered. “He come along home from the fishing banks yesterday—been out there, in the Channel, a matter of nights and days. And was in the Spotted Cow last night and heard the news o’ this affair at Gallowstree Point. And when he’d had a pint or two, or maybe three, said—so I’m informed—that he could say something about that there, and would when the right time and the right man came along! And no more—not then, anyhow.”

“Well?—haven’t you been at him?” asked Cherry.

“Went round this morning,” replied Veller. “I see him after his breakfast. He allowed he’d said what he was reported to have said. And would stand to it, too! But wouldn’t say nothing to me. ‘London police is my mark!’ he said. ‘I ain’t going to tell nothing to nobody but London police! Bring me a London police!’ he says, ‘and I’ll give him vallyble information. But no less!’ So I left him—till you came back. Him having heard there was a Scotland Yard man, though a young ’un, on the job, though far away for the time being, so to speak. And what it is that Tom Scripture can tell, I don’t know. But judging from his manner, I should say—something!”

Cherry jumped out of his chair.

“Come on!” he said. “Where’s this chap live?”

We found Tom Scripture leaning over the fence of his garden, in his Sunday garments, smoking his pipe. He was a tough-faced seafaring person, more given to silence than to speech, and he looked Cherry well over from top to toe before he

condescended to say anything—indeed, I think he was only moved to open his lips by the production of Cherry’s official card, which, being presented to him, he turned over and over in his great fingers as if it were a charm or a talisman. But he spoke, looking from one to the other of us, his three visitors. “This here it is, young man,” he said, waving his short pipe as if about to beat time with it. “You being a Scotland Yarder, though uncommon juvenile, but still one, and armed, as they say, with what they call credentials, and me not going to tell nothing to nobody but what is such, and no other, London police being, as you might say, more fitted to deal with these matters o’ life and death than country bobbies—and no disrespeck to you, Veller, what’s a friendly neighbour. But last Wednesday morning, before sunrise, I was a-going out with my boat, to the banks, for two or three days’ fishing, when, as I sails down the creek there towards the bar, I sees something what was unusual—uncommon so! The which was a man, a-standing as still as a graven image on them rocks at Fliman’s End!”

“How far were you away from him?” asked Cherry.

“A mile and a bit, maybe,” replied Scripture. “But I carries a good glass—a ship’s glass what I bought, a bargain, years ago, on the Hard, at Kingshaven. And I claps it to my eye and takes an observation. And I sees him plain—a big, fine-built man, in dark-coloured shore-clothes. He stands on them rocks, as if looking round; then he comes down and walks about a bit. And then I see something else—there was a boat drawed up on the beach, maybe fifty yards away, in front o’ the rocks. Now, I never heard of no stranger and no boat being there, at Fliman’s End, at that time of a morning! Take my solemn ’davy that there feller weren’t up to no good! And was summun as hasn’t nothing to do with these parts, neither.”

“You didn’t do anything—hail him, or anything of that sort?” suggested Cherry.

“Nothin’, master. Me and my son, young Tom, we see him and the boat, and takes a good look at ’em, and wonders, and goes about our own business,” answered Scripture. “But—that there man weren’t up to no good, I repeats! What call had he there, I asks you?”

Cherry said gravely that he’d think that very important question well over, and presently he and I went away to our house, so that he might redeem his promise to Keziah and deliver me up to her safe and sound. He appeared to be much more impressed by Scripture’s story than I was.

“Ben!” he said suddenly as we neared our garden-gate. “That sounds like your precious Uncle Joseph! A big, fine-built man in dark-coloured shore-clothes—eh? And this was not long after Uncle Joseph had quietly slipped out of your house. But Ben!—there’s a devil of a mystery in something that Scripture told us. Ben!—*what*

about the boat?”

CHAPTER XI

THE FISH BAG

For all my recent experiences, I was not yet up to the subtle workings of the detective mind, and when Cherry said this I turned and stared at him in blank wonder.

"The boat?" I exclaimed. "Why, what of it? And which boat, Mr. Cherry?"

"There's only one boat in question, my lad!" he answered. "The boat that Tom Scripture says he saw drawn up on the beach at Fliman's End. He saw a boat there, and he saw a man! Now we suppose—I suppose, anyhow!—the man to have been your strangely-behaving uncle, Mr. Joseph Krevin. I think Mr. Krevin went to Fliman's End, for purposes of his own, when he left your house during Tuesday night—that is, early on Wednesday morning. He left his Zellerquist & Vanderpant brandy bottle—empty, Ben!—there, anyway, in the cave. Yes—I feel sure Uncle Joseph was the big man in dark-coloured clothes whom Tom Scripture saw through his very good glass, bought, a bargain, on the Hard at Kingshaven. But, if he was—how did Uncle Joseph get the boat there?"

"Can't follow you!" I said. "I don't see what you mean!"

"You don't see why he shouldn't have a boat there?" he remarked, laughing. "But now let your mind go back to what we saw when we went there with Veller, and the boy and girl. We saw one set of footprints in the sand, Ben, the smooth, untouched sand, above high-water mark, and those prints led *from* the cave to the edge of the beach at that mark—to where the sands are no longer dry but wet from regular washing of the tides. *From* the cave, mind you! But nothing *to* the cave! Now supposing Uncle Joseph, when he left your house in the early morning, had appropriated somebody's boat here in the creek—there are plenty of small boats about, as we can see at this moment: there they are!—and had pulled himself round to Fliman's End, beaching his boat while he went up to the cave, there'd have been a track across those sands *to* the cave! But there wasn't! And that leads me to think—what I've thought all along," he concluded, with sudden abruptness. "Just that!"

"And that is—what?" I asked.

"That when Krevin left your house he went to Fliman's End to keep a previously-made appointment!" he answered sharply. "Cut-and-dried affair, my lad! Somebody came to meet him there—with a boat. Who?"

"Tom Scripture said nothing about seeing any man in the boat, or about it," said I. "If there'd been a man in charge of it——"

"Scripture mayn't have seen him—evidently didn't see him," he interrupted.

“The man may have been sitting in the boat, waiting until Krevin went down to him—he even may have been lying down in the boat, asleep. But that’s how I figure it, Ben—somebody took a boat to Fliman’s End that morning to meet Uncle Joseph and took Uncle Joseph away from Fliman’s End in that boat, and that somebody must have been a somebody belonging to these parts! That’s flat!—and again I say—who?”

“Supposing the boat had come off from a ship—outside the bar?” I suggested.

“I think not, Ben,” he answered. “Tom Scripture sailed his craft outside the bar, and if he’d seen any vessel hanging about there, he’d have told us. No!—it’s pretty much what I’ve been thinking all through—if Krevin and the dead man, Cousins, were fellow-conspirators in the Kang-he vase affair, as I’m sure they were, I think they’d a third accomplice. And who the devil he may be licks me altogether—so far—though he’s probably the man whose handwriting is on the envelope I’ve got! However, here we are at our place—and there’s your good sister, looking out for us.”

Keziah was at the door of our house, gazing along the lane, her hand shading the sun from her eyes. At sight of us, she retreated indoors, and when we presently walked in she was doing just what I knew she would be doing—making the tea. She gave us an admonitory look.

“You’re late!” she said. “You should have been here half an hour ago. I knew what time that London train came in, and how long it would take you to walk down from the station, and I had tea ready to the minute—all but making the tea. And I want mine—long past my regular hour!”

“It’s very kind of you to have tea ready at all, ma’am,” said Cherry. “We’d have hurried if we’d known, but we found some highly important business awaiting us, and had to attend to it. Well, here’s Ben, home again, safe and sound, and in the best of health and spirits, ma’am—and I hope we find you so?”

Keziah muttered something about having a deal to try her spirits, and bade us seat ourselves. She was very silent while we ate and drank, and she asked no questions about our trip to London, and as she was naturally inquisitive and liked to turn everybody’s mind inside out about such things, I felt sure that something had happened during my absence. But I knew better than to ask questions; Keziah had taught me from childhood that it is a foolish thing to hurry other folks’ cattle, and I waited, sure that whatever was on her mind would come out. And out it came, when Cherry had protested that he couldn’t eat another mouthful nor drink another drop, and came, too, in a flood.

“Then if you’ve both done, I’ll tell you something that’s been on my soul ever

since within an hour of you two going out of that door yesterday morning!" she exclaimed. "And a nice thing, too, for any respectable Christian woman as has always been proud of her family to have to keep to herself for a day and a night and a day beyond that! Such wickedness and goings on!—I marvel that some sinners has the impudence to show their brazen faces at honest people's doors, let alone ask to sleep in their beds!"

"What's the matter, ma'am?" inquired Cherry, quietly kicking me under the table. "You've evidently made some discovery?"

"And I should think I have made a discovery!" retorted Keziah, with one of her characteristic snorts. "And it's not so much what it is in itself as the discoveries that'll spring out of it! And in my best bedroom, too, of all places!—the very chamber in which my father and mother looked their last on this wicked world and went to a better—couldn't be worse, anyway!—and their father and mother, on the father's side, at least, before them, for that matter! Scandalous, I call it!"

"And the precise nature, ma'am?" asked Cherry, solicitously and at the same time giving me another sly kick. "Something that upset you, I'm afraid?"

"And who wouldn't have been upset?" demanded Keziah, almost fiercely. "Everybody in this neighbourhood knows that we Heckitts—and we've been in this house two hundred years, and in this parish for twice as long, as you may see from the gravestones in the churchyard—has always been of the highest respectability; there's naught common about us! And when I find things in my own best bedroom that suggests untold wickedness—but of course you don't understand what I'm talking about," she broke off impatiently. "You see, after Ben there had gone away yesterday morning, I decided I'd clear out that best bedroom; it hadn't been cleared out since *he*"—she spoke the personal pronoun with intense scorn and bitterness, and we both knew that she referred to Uncle Joseph Krevin—"since *he* slept in it! So when I'd done my various jobs down here, I went up and set to work. But I never did any work, for I hadn't been five minutes in that room before I discovered what I'm now going to show you—and you can draw your own conclusions from it!"

We followed Keziah upstairs to the best bedroom. I saw at once what preparations she had made for beginning a grand clean-up. The window curtains were looped; the valences were turned up round the bed; newspapers and dust-cloths were laid over the furniture; a sweeping-brush leaned against the wall, and a dust-pan lay at the end of the shaft, unused. But there everything had come to a sudden stop; whatever it was that Keziah had discovered, the discovery had taken all the heart out of her. And as she had a veritable passion for cleaning and dusting,

being what they call house-proud, I knew that Keziah must have received a pretty smart shock.

The dressing-table in that room was draped with figured muslin, spread over a glazed linen cover—I remember how it used to crackle if you kicked against it. It crackled now as Keziah went straight to and tipped it, revealing, underneath, as commonplace an article as you could think of—a bass-matting fish-basket! It was the sort of thing that you can see by the dozen, hanging in any fishmonger's shop, or thrown away, a cheap thing, soon done with, on refuse-heaps. I saw, too, as it lay there, a derelict object, where it had come from—there were black letters on its side: *Shardham, Fish, Game, & Poultry Dealer, Kingshaven*. And it was obviously empty.

“You look at that now!—take it in your hand!” exclaimed Keziah, indignantly. “The very idea of that being left in my best sleeping-chamber! Shameful!”

I think Cherry, who by that time was looking more puzzled than I had ever seen him during the course of these bewilderments, began to have some notion that there was either an infernal machine in the fish-bag, or that it contained some ancient crab or possibly defunct lobster whose presence would naturally be objectionable to any self-respecting housewife. Anyway, he approached the exhibit with diffidence, and took a hold of its looped handle gingerly, looking doubtfully at Keziah as he did so. But nothing exploded, and there was certainly no obnoxious odour—and his wonder grew greater.

“Yes, ma'am?” he said, innocently. “I see this bag—a fish-bag, evidently. It—it appears to be empty, ma'am!”

“Empty!” snorted Keziah. “Aye, I daresay—but not so empty as you'd think, young man! Now come!—didn't you show me the other night some bits of shavings—packing stuff—that you'd picked up on the carpet in Miss Ellingham's drawing-room? Of course you did!—I remember 'em. Now you look into that fish-bag!”

With a sudden gleam of intelligence Cherry drew the mouth of the bag open, and he and I looked inside. There, sticking to the rough sides of the matting, were, without doubt, bits, odds and ends, of shavings, the thin, wiry stuff that pots and glasses are packed in. He uttered an exclamation as he drew some loose ends out and laid them carefully on the smooth pediment of the mahogany-mounted mirror. But before he could do more, Keziah had her hand on his arm, twisting him round towards the old-fashioned four-poster bed.

“And look here!” she said, pointing to the floor, near the bedside. “There's more of that stuff—shreds of it, dropped on my carpet! And though I'm not a detective, I can put two and two together as well and as quickly as any man Jack of you! Those

shavings are identical with those that you brought away in your pocket-book from that drawing-room at the Grange! And when Joseph Krevin came in here that night on which he disappeared he had that vase with the foreign-eering name with him, in that fish-bag, packed in those shavings, and, as sure as my name's Keziah Heckitt, he transferred it to his own bag in this room, and threw the fish-bag under my dressing-table—a dishonest ne'er-do-good that he is! And if I'm not right, then three and four don't make seven—so there!”

Cherry had taken out his pocket-book. Silently he produced from it an envelope in which he had carefully stored the bits of stuff he had picked up on Miss Ellingham's drawing-room carpet, and compared its contents with the shavings gathered from our own, and from the fish-bag.

“Of course!” sniffed Keziah. “Anybody with half-an-eye could see they're identical! Joseph Krevin's had to do with the theft of that Chinese pot! And I'll warrant that that's the first time that this house was ever disgraced by having stolen property brought into it—shameful!”

Cherry remarked soothingly that no stigma would rest upon the house because of Uncle Joseph Krevin's evil doings, but Keziah refused to be comforted, and she stalked downstairs to wash up the tea-things.

Left alone in the best bedroom, Cherry and I looked at each other. “I think she put two and two together quite successfully, Ben!” he said. “There's not much doubt that Krevin brought the vase here when he came in that night. But that other man—Cousins! What part did he play? What was he doing at Gallowstree Point? Who murdered him? Was it one man—or two?”

“Could one man, with nobody to help him, have tied another up to a post, as he was tied?” I answered, conscious of a gruesome recollection of what Keziah and I had witnessed. “If you'd only seen it——”

“I know—I know!” he said. “Veller gave me one full description—Captain Marigold treated me to another. Yes, I suppose one man could—if he first got a rope round his victim's neck. But why? What was the motive? And I'm wondering, Ben, if that precious uncle of yours knew anything about that murder before you and your sister came back to tell him?”

He went over to the window, and, drawing the curtain aside, looked out on the creek and on Gallowstree Point. The creek was glowing in the last light of the weakening sun; it looked very peaceful and beautiful in the evening calm. But the rocky promontory at the Point was dark and forbidding as ever, and the old gallows-post, with its finger-like arm and the iron cage-lantern swinging from it, stood up against the white surf-line at the bar, a black and sinister patch on the quiet

scene.

"I don't know whether he did or not," I said. "All I know is that it gave him what Keziah calls a turn when we did tell him. He crumpled up!—and I had to get his brandy-bottle out of his bag."

"You opened the bag—yourself?" he asked quickly. "What was in it, Ben?—not the Kang-he vase, of course?—then."

"I saw all that was in it," I answered. "There was precious little. Some socks, handkerchiefs, a collar or two, and the brandy-bottle. He was wearing his pyjamas, and his brush and comb were on the dressing-table."

"Would there have been room in that bag, when he'd put those things in, for the vase as well—packed in shavings?" he inquired.

"Plenty!" said I. "It was a roomy bag—an old, well-worn one."

Cherry was collecting the shavings as he talked, and presently, having put the fish-bag in a drawer, we went downstairs, and after a word or two with Keziah, who was still in a state of high indignation at Uncle Joseph's temerity in using her best bedroom as a receptacle for stolen goods, we went out and up to the village, Cherry being intent on finding out if they knew anything at the post office of the handwriting on the envelope which we had found in the lodgings at Calthorpe Street. I posted him up, on the way, about the keeping of the post office. Mrs. Apps and her daughter Nellie kept it; they received and despatched all the telegrams, too; in fact, they did everything, and there was no one in the neighbourhood more likely to identify the handwriting of any inhabitant of Middlebourne. But neither Mrs. Apps nor Nellie, whom we found about to sit down to that very important meal, Sunday supper, recognised the writing which Cherry laid before them as that of any person known to them. It was not a common style of writing, however, but, rather, of a peculiar nature, and both mother and daughter considered it for some time as if it awoke some recollection in them.

"If I've ever seen that writing before, mister," said Mrs. Apps at length, "it's been on a telegram. Somehow, I've a notion that I have seen it, but when I couldn't say. And if I have, that's where it's been."

"You don't send many telegrams from here, do you?" asked Cherry.

"A good many more than anybody would think," replied Mrs. Apps. "You see, this telegraph office serves three villages. And nowadays you'd be surprised how those motorists call in and send telegrams—you see, we're on the roadside, and it's handy for them: we've a lot of telegraphic business that way."

"Well, you keep your telegrams, don't you?" suggested Cherry. "Just so—can't you look them over, and see if you've got any in a handwriting resembling that?"

Mrs. Apps promised that she would do this, and we left the envelope with her and went away. Outside the Apps' cottage we parted—Cherry to go to his lodgings at the village inn, and I to repair homeward, where Keziah was no doubt waiting to catechise me about London. However, I was not to come under her catechetical powers just then: as I walked down our lane I saw Miss Ellingham's butler, Carsie, coming along on the other side, as if returning from a Sunday evening stroll. He was very prim and proper in his attire, and he wore a silk hat and primrose-coloured kid gloves. And at sight of me he hesitated for a moment, and then came across the roadway, plainly desirous of speech.

CHAPTER XII

THE PINK AND MAUVE PYJAMAS

I should have been hard put to it to explain the exact why-and-wherefore, but I was conscious of a feeling as regards Carsie that I didn't like him. It was little I had ever seen of him, to be sure—twice or thrice at the Grange, in his mistress's presence, and now and then in the village street—but there was something in his soft gait and his subdued manner of talking that made me think of things, animals, that slink. However, there was nothing slinking in his present approach; he came up confidently enough, and his first words were almost affectionate in their tone.

"Good-evening, Mr. Ben!" he said. "A nice evening, sir! Glad to see you out and about again—this summer air will do you good after your long spell indoors."

I thanked him for his politeness, and stood looking at him, a bit awkwardly, and secretly wishing that he would go on his way. But he seemed inclined to linger, and, more than that, to talk.

"Any more news about these extraordinary mysteries, Mr. Ben?" he asked, with a glance which was plainly intended to suggest that whatever conversation might ensue was to be regarded as strictly confidential. "We hear next to nothing across there at the Grange—you're more in the thick of things down here by the village."

"I know of nothing very definite," I answered.

He nodded, and began making holes in the turf at our feet with the ferrule of his neatly-rolled umbrella.

"Well, it's as queer a business as ever I heard of in my life, Mr. Ben!" he remarked. "And I've seen a bit of the world—and some out-of-the-way bits, too! Of course, what most interests me is the burglary—that, I suppose, is what the police would call it—at our place. To be sure—between you and me, you know—I think my mistress laid herself open to that! If that Chinese vase is worth all that she now says it is—why, it was practically inviting burglars to come and take it when she let its picture and its situation in our drawing-room be advertised in a paper! There'll be swell mobsmen in London, no doubt, that specialise in that sort of thing. Of course, I never had the least idea that the vase was in any way valuable—no more than any other old ornament of its sort! Seems remarkable, Mr. Ben, that a bit of a thing like that should be worth—thousands of pounds, I understand?"

"It's because of its rarity," I answered. "I don't suppose there are many like it, in England, anyhow."

"Just so—I suppose that's it," he assented. "I've no knowledge of that sort of thing myself. But those two little images, now, that went at the same time, Mr. Ben?"

Do you think—you'll have had opportunities of hearing things that I haven't—do you think, now, that they'd be worth anything? Anything handsome, I mean, of course."

"Can't say, Mr. Carsie," I replied. "I've no means of knowing."

He nodded again, as if fully accepting my statement, and went on punching holes in the turf.

"Just so—just so!" he said. "Well, it's an odd thing, Mr. Ben, and perhaps what should be called a coincidence, that those little images—ugly things they are, too!—had only been there in that cabinet cupboard a day or two when they were stolen! I saw the mistress put them there myself. She was dusting out that cabinet one day when I was in the drawing-room, and she says, all of a sudden, 'That shelf would do with something more on it, I think, Carsie,' she says. 'And I believe I've got the very things locked up somewhere.' And she went out of the room and presently came back with those two images, and put them in the cabinet, one on each side that Chinese vase. 'That looks better,' she said, as if she admired the effect. Couldn't see it myself, you know, Mr. Ben!—foul and loathsome objects I call those figures, one of 'em particularly."

"I never saw them," said I, seeing him pause for my opinion.

"Well, they're not in accordance with what you may style English taste," he continued. "One of 'em—why, it had ever so many heads and arms—a monstrosity, I call it! And t'other had some animal's head instead of a human being's! But there's no accounting for taste, and of course the mistress has lived in India, and she's used to seeing such objects, no doubt. However, there was a queer thing happened that day she put those images in the open cabinet, Mr. Ben. I chanced to go into the drawing-room that afternoon while the mistress was playing lawn-tennis with young Mr. Bryce in the garden, and lo! and behold, there was that Indian fellow, Mandhu Khan, a-worshipping of those images! Fact, Mr. Ben! Anyway, he was bending down in front of 'em, making queer motions with his hands and arms; it gave me quite a turn! Made me think of a line of Mr. Kipling's poetry, which I'm partial to—

The 'eathen in 'is blindness bows down to wood an 'stone

—it fairly did, Mr. Ben! And in an English drawing-room, too!—things with as many heads as one of these three-headed calves you read about in the papers!"

He shook his own head and its smart silk hat sorrowfully, as if Miss Ellingham's taste in heathen images was not in keeping with the best traditions—and then suddenly tapped my arm with an extended forefinger.

"But I'll tell you what I think, Mr. Ben!" he exclaimed. "I think the whole thing

has been the work of a smart London gang, and that that man who was found scragged at the gallows there was one of 'em! I think they quarrelled over their loot, as they call it, and two of 'em did for the third. And what may the police be thinking about it, Mr. Ben—you'll have heard things, no doubt?"

Fortunately for me, Keziah came to our garden gate just then, and loudly demanded my presence at the supper-table, and with a hasty remark to the butler that I didn't know what the official police mind was on the subject, I made my excuses and left him. And after supper I went early to bed, being tired with my adventures, and if I dreamed that night it was rather of the wonders of London than of Chinese vases and Indian images. But these came back to me next morning, and I was puzzling my head about them as I lounged the time away—I was still regarded as a convalescent—on the beach in front of our house when Pepita Marigold came along.

Pepita, who spent most of her time running wild out of doors, was as unconcerned and gay of heart as ever. But I wasn't—I had a crow to pull with her. And I tried to look at her as a severe judge might look at a criminal arraigned before him in the dock. Unfortunately, Pepita was one of those people at whom you can't look in that way—for very long at any rate. She came up to where I sat on the edge of a turned-up boat and dropped down beside me as if it were the most natural thing in the world that we should sit side by side.

"Hello, Ben!" she exclaimed. "I wondered if I'd find you about. You've been to London, haven't you, Ben—come along, tell all about it!"

But I made an effort to preserve my severity of countenance.

"Pepita!" I said. "I've got something to say to you! Didn't you promise me you'd be my girl, Pepita? You know you did!"

She gave me a half-demure, half-roguish glance out of her eye-corners, from under her thick eyelashes, and whether of set purpose or not, moved her slim figure appreciably nearer on the edge of the boat.

"Well, I haven't said I'm not, Ben, have I?" she answered in a wheedling voice. "Don't be horrid!—tell about London!"

"No!" I said firmly, "You've been going about with Bryce Ellingham, Pepita! And I'm not going to have my girl going about with anybody! If you knew anything about the law, Pepita, you'd know that a verbal contract——"

She slipped her hand inside my arm and gave it a squeeze.

"Oh, Ben!" she murmured. "I don't know anything at all about verbal contracts, and I don't care two pins about Bryce Ellingham—he's a mere kid!—and I do want to know about London and what you did there. Don't be a beast, Ben, and I'll be

your girl more than ever! Let's go for a nice walk somewhere—be good, now!"

There was no resisting Pepita when her eyes got to work and her voice became cooing, and I fell an immediate victim and let her lead me off. We went across the fields towards Wreddlesham, a place, half-town, half-village, that lay on the coast to the east of Middlebourne, some two miles from Middlebourne Grange. It got its name from a little river, the Wreddle, that came down from the hills, some distance inland, and after many windings ran into the sea between two cliff-like promontories, beneath the eastern one of which Wreddlesham itself lay, a queer, ramshackle collection of old houses and cottages grouped about an ancient church and a ruinous tide-mill. Once upon a time Wreddlesham had been of some importance, but it had gradually fallen into decay, and now looked as hopeless and forlorn as any scarecrow of the fields: its trade had gone, half its houses were empty, and it was a rare thing to see a vessel tied up to either of its slowly-rotting wharves.

Our walk through the meadows—which proved entirely satisfactory, and re-established a proper understanding between us on the subject of my strict proprietorship of her charms—brought Pepita and myself out on the western of the two cliffs between which the Wreddle ran into the sea. There were two or three cottages on that cliff, fishermen's cottages, and we sat down on the turf near one, in the full blaze of the sun and sweep of the wind. And we had not been sitting there five minutes before I saw something that made me jump to my feet with a suddenness that startled Pepita into following my example.

"What is it?" she exclaimed.

I laid a hand on her shoulder and turned her towards one of the cottages—an isolated building near the edge of the cliff. On a wide expanse of headland at its side a quantity of washing was hung out on lines to dry: the various articles flapped loudly in the breeze.

"Pepita!" said I, in my most solemn tones. "Do you see that?"

"See what?" she asked. "Washing? Of course I do! What about it?"

"Pepita!" I continued, still more gravely. "If I show you something, you'll just keep the knowledge of it to yourself till I give you leave to speak! Washing—yes! But what sort of washing? Now, Pepita, look there—follow my finger! Do you see a suit of pyjamas in pink and mauve stripes?—a very grand suit? You do? Very well, Pepita!—as sure as I'm a living man, that's Uncle Joseph Krevin's!"

Pepita let out a gasp of astonishment. She knew pretty nearly everything about Uncle Joseph and his doings at Middlebourne, and I had told her during our walk as much as I thought it good for her to know about our discoveries concerning him in London.

"Are—are you sure, Ben?" she asked in almost awe-stricken tones. "His?"

"Dead certain!" I declared. "His! Those are the very things he was wearing when Keziah and I went up to his room to tell him about the murder. Pink—and—mauve stripes! I know 'em!"

"But—I daresay there are a lot of pink-and-mauve pyjamas about," she remarked. "You see them in the shops at Kingshaven."

"Yes, and you see blue and white, and red and yellow, and green and scarlet, and all sorts of colours!" said I. "But those are Uncle Joseph Krevin's, as sure as I'm a living man! And I'm going a bit nearer to have a look at them—they might have his name, or at any rate his initials, on them. Come along!"

We stole nearer the lines on which the washing was hung out; eventually we got close to the garments in which I took such interest. And I let out an exclamation which was meant to indicate a sense of triumph.

"There, what did I tell you!" I said, pointing to a label inside the waistband. "Look at that!"

Pepita looked, and shook her head.

"I don't see that that proves anything," she remarked. "It says, *Remnant, Outfitter, Southampton Row, London*. Well—what's that?"

"You don't draw conclusions as I do, Pepita," said I. "Of course, you can't be expected to—you haven't had the experience. And you don't know London. Now if you did, you'd know that Calthorpe Street, where Uncle Joseph lodges, is within a few minutes' walk of Southampton Row. See? Oh, it's as plain as that flag-staff! But—where is Uncle Joseph, that his pyjamas should be flopping about here?"

A woman came out of the cottage close by. She carried a big wicker basket, and was evidently going to collect the things already dried. She came along the line, gathering them in, until she was close to us—we had by that time perched ourselves on a convenient mass of rock that cropped out from the surf. She was a good-natured looking woman, a fisherman's wife, I thought, and I bade her good-day in order to get into conversation with her.

"A grand morning for drying clothes!" I remarked as she busied herself. "Just the right sort of wind."

"Oh, they're dry in no time, a morning like this," she answered. "What with the wind and the sun, they're no trouble at all."

I pointed my stick at the pyjamas, which she was just then taking down and laying away in her basket.

"Bit of finery, there!" I said jokingly. "You could see them a mile off!"

"Aye, they're pretty gay!" she assented, laughingly. "They belong to a London

gentleman, those, that's stopping at the Shooting Star—I do a bit o' washing for folks that they have there now and then. Of course, some gentlemen likes these new-fangled things, and some likes the old-fashioned night-gown—it's all a question of taste."

I agreed with her, and presently, her basket filled, she went back to her cottage. I turned on Pepita.

"Did you hear that?" I exclaimed. "They belong to a London gentleman, stopping at the Shooting Star! Pepita!—that London gentleman is my undesirable relative, Uncle Joseph Krevin! Sure and certain!"

Pepita looked at me with admiring eyes.

"Ben!" she said. "Why don't you go in for being a detective? I think you'd be an awful good hand! And it's a lot more exciting than sitting in a law office."

"No!" I answered sternly. "Don't you tempt me, Pepita! I daresay I'd do awfully well as a detective; I'm beginning to learn a lot about it, and how it's done. But I've been destined for the Law ever since I was twelve years old, and I'm going to have a career in it, Pepita—never you fear! Still, there's no harm in doing a bit of detective work now and then, and I'm going to do a bit now. Come on, to the edge of the cliff."

Pepita followed me to where the promontory sank sheer down to the ravine through which the little river ran to the sea. Below us, on the other bank, lay Wreddlesham, dead-alive as a decaying place can be. But I looked little at its red roofs and grey walls; all my attention was given to the Shooting Star, a big, rambling old inn that stood between the Eastern Wharf and the village. It had once been a house of some importance, but it was quiet enough now, and from where we stood, looking down on it, there was not a sign of life to be seen about it, save for a dog that lay basking in the sunlight before its front door.

"Pepita!" I said, suddenly. "I'm going into that Shooting Star, to see if I can see or hear of Uncle Joseph! Come on!—You can look round the wharf while I go in. I'll get a glass of ale and keep my eyes open while I'm drinking it."

"You don't think there's any danger, Ben?" she asked, as we began to descend the cliff. "You're all alone, you know."

"You have to run risks at this business," I replied loftily. "I'm not afraid of running one now. And I'm pretty cute, you know, Pepita."

We crossed the Wredde by an old wooden bridge at the top of the little harbour, and strolled down to the wharf in front of the inn as if we were mere loafers, idling about. And after a while, leaving Pepita seated on a pile of old planks near an ancient hulk left high and dry on the beach, I went off to the Shooting Star.

There was a door just within its big, empty hall labelled *Bar Parlour*; I pushed it open and stuck my inquisitive head into the opening.

CHAPTER XIII

THE RESULT OF VAINGLORY

The room was empty—empty of human presence, anyway. I saw at the first glance that it was a shabby, faded place, in keeping with all that one could see of the house itself, from the outside. The matting on the floor was worn and in holes; the furniture was qualified for a second-hand shop; here and there the wall-paper hung in ribbons. There was a bar on one side, and some shelves behind it, but neither showed much evidence of trade: the stock of bottles on the shelves was negligible. Nevertheless, there was an aroma of stale beer and inferior spirits, mingled with the smell of rank tobacco, and a couple of recently-used glasses on the counter showed that somebody had been in the room not long before.

I went in and looked round more narrowly, intent on discovering any possible sign of Uncle Joseph Krevin's temporary residence in this derelict hostelry. And before I had been across the threshold a moment I found one; an unmistakable one, too. There was a shabby writing-table in one of the windows, and on its ledge I saw a tobacco pipe which I knew to be Uncle Joseph's property—I had seen him smoking it at our house. It was a pipe of peculiar shape, with a square instead of a rounded bowl, and it had a silver-perforated top to it. I picked it up—the bowl was faintly warm. I judged from that—putting two and two together in the approved detective fashion—that my precious kinsman was somewhere about. But as I laid the pipe back in its place I made a second discovery, and I saw at once that it was equally important with the first—Cherry, perhaps, might have considered it more important. There was a cheap, uncorked bottle of ink on the dusty writing table, and a much-corroded steel pen near it, and on a loose sheet of ancient blotting-paper, an envelope, addressed to some wine-and-spirit firm. It needed but a glance at it to assure me that the handwriting was identical with that which I had seen on the envelope found in Uncle Joseph's lodgings in Calthorpe Street. There was no doubt about that!—I was as certain of it as if I had had the two envelopes before me, side by side.

I think it was at that particular point that I said farewell to common sense and calm judgment. What I ought to have done was to go quietly away and tell Cherry of my discoveries. But I was young and impulsive and anxious to distinguish myself—perhaps I wanted to show Pepita how very clever I was. I think I had a notion of bringing the whole thing to a dramatic climax there and then by my own unaided efforts. And instead of following Keziah's oft-repeated advice to count twenty before deciding on any important step, I rushed on my fate, beginning the rush by

going out again to the front of the inn and beckoning Pepita to come to me at the door. Pepita came, diffident, wide-eyed, wondering.

“What is it, Ben?” she demanded. “You look as if you’d found something!”

“I have!” said I, in a whisper intended to convey a world of meaning. “Something that’ll surprise you—and everybody. Look here!—just do as I tell you. There’s nobody about—come inside with me, and keep your ears and eyes open, and you’ll see what happens. Come on!”

She looked at the unpromising frontage of the place with evident disfavour.

“Doesn’t look very nice, Ben,” she objected. “If the people are as dirty as the house——”

“Never mind!” said I. “You’ll be all right; I’ll see to that! And it’ll be better than a play! Follow me, now.”

I led her to the room which I had just left, and pointing her to the cleanest of the old chairs, knocked loudly on the counter of the bar. I knocked, still louder, three or four times, and got no answer. Then, just as I was thinking of exploring more of the house, a door at the back of the bar opened, and a man stood before us.

I took this man for the landlord, whose name, Charles Getch, I had already noticed on the signboard outside. He was not a nice-looking man. To begin with, there was something sinister about his face; to end with, he had a curious cast in his left eye. He was a big man, as big as Uncle Joseph, but more muscular; a man, I thought, of great strength. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, high above his elbow, and I noticed what powerful arms he possessed; it flashed across my mind that he had been, perhaps, a pugilist in his day. And there was nothing polite or welcoming about his manner; instead, he gave me a cold look and as coldly demanded what he could do for me.

“You can give me a bottle of Bass and another of lemonade, if you please,” I said. “I’ve knocked about a dozen times!”

“More or less—less, I think,” he answered, coolly. “I heard you, my lad!—but I was otherwise occupied just then.”

I saw that I should get no advantage in any exchange of words with this man, and it nettled me. And as soon as I had got my beer and I had given Pepita the lemonade, I let off my heavy artillery in what I hoped would be a crushing broadside.

“Mr. Krevin in?” I demanded, laying down half-a-crown. “Mr. Joseph Krevin?”

He gave me a quick, inquiring glance as he picked up the coin, and his reply came sharp as my question.

“Nobody of that name here, young fellow!” he answered. “Don’t know the name!”

He threw down my change, as if in defiance, and, turning away from me, searched for a clean glass and got himself a drink from a bottle which, I noticed, he kept apart from the other small stock. That done, he thrust his hands in his trousers pockets and, leaning against the door from which he had recently emerged, stared at me.

"I think Mr. Krevin is here," said I. "In fact, I know he is! That's his pipe, lying on the table, and I've just seen his pyjamas, sent from here to be washed at the cottage on the cliff. And if you want to know more, I'm his nephew, and I want to see him—particularly!"

The man's face was changing, swiftly, all the time I was speaking. When I mentioned and pointed to the pipe he frowned; when I spoke of the pyjamas his eyes grew dark, as with sudden anger and vexation. But as soon as I mentioned my relationship his face cleared in a queer, quick, mysterious fashion, and his manner became almost bland and his tongue silky soft.

"Oh!—you mean the gentleman from London that's doing a bit of fishing hereabouts?" he said. "Well, now, you might think it strange, but I'd never got his name—right, at any rate. Oh?—and you're his nephew, eh? And what might your name be, now?"

"If he's about, tell him that Mr. Heckitt would like to see him," I replied, loftily. "He'll understand."

He muttered something about believing the gentleman might be in the garden, or fishing on the river bank at the back, and opening the door behind him, went off. I turned to Pepita.

"There, you see!" said I. "Nothing like insistence—and directness! And I shall adopt the same tone with Uncle Joseph, and ask him, straight out, what he's doing here?"

But Pepita shook her head. Somehow, she seemed much less confident about things than I was.

"Ben!" she whispered, after a glance at the door through which the landlord had vanished. "Ben!—don't you think it's a very queer thing that your uncle should be here at all?"

I didn't grasp her meaning, and looked an inquiry.

"Within a couple of miles of Middlebourne, where the police have been inquiring about his doings for some days?" she went on. "And you and Mr. Cherry looking for him, too! And this is a public-house, isn't it? Men must go in and out of here, every day—and how is it nobody's seen him?"

"Seems odd, certainly," I agreed. "But, then, Middlebourne people don't come

this way; there's nothing to cross the river for. And you heard the landlord say he didn't know his name—properly, at any rate. And again—he may be hiding here.”

“If he is,” said Pepita, “then that man who's just gone out knows about it, and is in some secret with him. Be careful, Ben—why not go outside?”

“Outside?” I asked. “Why outside?”

“So that we can run away if—well, if there's any sign of bother, or anything of that sort,” she replied. “Supposing—supposing your uncle doesn't want you to know he's here, and is angry because you've come—eh?”

“I'm not afraid of his anger,” I declared. “I've got the law behind me, Pepita! You don't know how powerful the law is! When a man's backed by the law——”

But before I could enlarge on this topic the landlord re-appeared. This time he came in by the door which led to the hall. He smiled at us—and I'm not sure that his smile was not worse than his scowl. “Come this way,” he said invitingly. “He'll be with you in a minute—quite a surprise, he says, to have a call. If you and the young lady'll follow me——”

We followed him, innocently enough. I remember glancing through the open front door as we passed it, and seeing the bright sunlight lying broad-spread on the wharf outside, and shining on the dancing river and the sea beyond; it would have been well for us if we had damned Uncle Joseph heartily and left him and his host to their devices and turned and fled while we had the chance! I think Pepita had this in mind, but she owned a certain quality, wholly feminine, of passive acquiescence in male projects, and she followed obediently—as I did, too. And Getch went ahead . . . down a long, vault-like passage.

It was, as I think I have said, a big house; a real old-fashioned place that once upon a time, in the days when Wreddelesham was a port of importance, had doubtless done a great trade. We turned and twisted a good deal in following our guide, and if I had preserved a ha'porth of common sense I should have gathered an idea of danger from more than one thing. We passed many rooms, the doors of which were open. But we did not see a single soul about the place, nor did we hear the sound of a human voice; the big house was strangely silent and solitary. Once I had a notion of going no further, but the idea of confronting Uncle Joseph in dramatic fashion drove it away. And suddenly, at the end of a little passage which broke off from a bigger one, our guide threw open the door of a room and stood aside with a wave of his hand.

“Join you in a minute!” he said, fixing his queer eye on us. “Make yourselves at home!”

We walked into the room; he closed the door on us. I fancied—it may have

been only fancy—that I heard him laugh as he did so. But there was no fancy about the next sound. It was that of a key turning in the lock—and it was followed the next instant by another—a bolt driven home into its staple.

And the next thing was a cry from Pepita—Pepita, trembling, and with one of her little brown hands clutching my arm.

“Ben! Oh, Ben! They’ve trapped us!”

That sobered me—as if a bucketful of ice-cold water had been thrown in my face. My grand notions of a dramatic climax went as a fluff of thistledown goes in the wind, and I suddenly saw what an arrant fool I was. Yet I put out a hand, mechanically, and tried the door—fast enough that door was, and ramshackle though a lot of the other fittings of the house seemed, it was solid as granite. I heard my heart beating as I turned to Pepita.

“Don’t be frightened!” I said, feeling myself more afraid than I had ever felt in my life. “It—it can’t last! He—they—perhaps they’ve locked us in while Uncle Joseph gets away, and in any case——”

“What, Ben?” she asked nervously as I paused in sheer perplexity. “What?”

“They can’t lock us up here for ever!” I asserted. “We shall be missed——”

“But nobody saw us come here!” she interrupted. “There wasn’t a soul about when we came on the wharf outside—don’t you remember?”

I remembered only too well. That outer bit of Wreddlesham was deserted enough, and I couldn’t call to mind that we had seen a living soul since leaving the washing woman on the cliff. And she had retreated into her cottage before we turned away, and probably had no idea as to the direction we had afterwards taken. But I wasn’t going to remind Pepita of that.

“It’s impossible!” said I, endeavouring to answer what I took to be her meaning. “People can’t be got rid of this way in these days! We shall soon be missed and looked for. Your father—and Keziah—and Cherry—and everybody——”

“It might take them days and days to find us,” she said. “Oh, Ben, is there no way of getting out?”

I had been looking round as we talked. The room into which Getch had ushered us was a fair-sized one, fitted up as a bed-sitting-room; that is, it contained a suite of old-fashioned furniture and had in one corner a queer old four-poster bed. But it had only one door and one window; the door I knew to be fast. And the window was fast, too; screwed down, I found on examining it, and fitted on its outside with thin but sufficiently strong bars of iron. The panes of glass in the casements were small; if I smashed one to fragments the aperture was not big enough to creep through. And there was no way of attracting the attention of folk without, for immediately in front

of the window, at about a yard-and-a-half's distance, rose a high blank wall of grey stone, evidently the back of some barn, or stable, or warehouse.

"There's nothing for it but to wait," I said. "And it's all my fault! I never dreamed of this, Pepita!"

"Oh, never mind, Ben!" she answered quickly. "It's perhaps as you say—they've locked us up while they get away, and they'll send somebody to let us out. But how long will that be?"

I knew no more than she did on that point. But my brain had been at work while I examined our surroundings, and I now knew a few things which I certainly hadn't known when we came, light-hearted and unsuspecting, across the river to fall into this booby-trap. One was that Uncle Joseph Krevin was in hiding here, and had probably been here ever since the night he left our house. Another was that Getch, the landlord (concerning whom I had been cudgelling my brains, with the result that I remembered having heard of him as a newcomer in our parts, who had only recently taken over the licence of this house) was an associate of Uncle Joseph's, and possibly a sharer in his misdeeds. And a third, which came to me in a sudden flash of illumination, was that the Shooting Star was the mysterious S.S. of the pencilled card which Uncle Joseph had left with the landlady of the Crab and Lobster at Fishampton to be handed to Sol Cousins. Joseph Krevin—Sol Cousins—Charles Getch—that, no doubt, was the triumvirate. And we were safe in the clutches of at any rate two of them. For I had no doubt whatever that Uncle Joseph was under the roof of this half-deserted inn.

The time dragged by, slowly. Because of the high wall in front of the window, the light was bad in that room. Neither Pepita nor I had a watch, and we did not know how the day was going. But judging by the time whereat we had entered the place, it must have been well past noon when we heard the bolt outside withdrawn, the key turned. The door was opened, just enough to admit a hard-faced, dour-looking woman who carried a tray: she had set it down on the table and was out of the room again before I could do anything: the door was re-locked and re-bolted.

"Anyway, we're not to starve!" I said, trying to cheer up Pepita with a laugh. "Here's enough to eat and drink, at all events!"

The tray was well laden with food, plain, but good. And being young and hungry we ate and drank and tried to fancy it was a picnic. But then came the afternoon, and more weary waiting. We talked and talked—until we could talk no longer. And it must have been very near the first approach of evening when the door opened again and the sinister looking landlord came in, followed immediately by the big bulk and smug countenance of Uncle Joseph Krevin.

CHAPTER XIV

UNDER EXAMINATION

My first instinct, immediately followed out, was to spring to my feet in an attitude of readiness; my second, acted on in the same movement, to plant myself in front of Pepita. And at that, Uncle Joseph Krevin, for reasons best known to himself, held up a fat, disapproving hand.

"I'm surprised at you, Nephew Benjamin, acting as if there was any likelihood of harm coming to a young lady while I'm present!" he said, in his most sanctimonious manner. "And sorry I am that the pretty miss should be put to any inconvenience, such as this here unfortunate state o' things! But all that comes through you, Benjamin, a-poking of your nose into matters as doesn't concern you!"

I was boiling with rage, all the fiercer because I had a shrewd idea that it was utterly ineffectual, and I maintained my ground, keeping Pepita in her chair behind me. And I dared to be as impudent as I could.

"That's all rot!" I retorted. "And you look here!—both of you! If you don't let us walk out of this house, and at once, you'll both find yourselves in a hole! You're liable to prosecution now, and——"

But Uncle Joseph once more held up the fat hand.

"I wouldn't excite myself, if I were you, Benjamin," he interrupted. "Excitement's bad for anybody, and I can't allow it to myself, consequent upon my weak heart. And there's no occasion for it, neither. All that me and Mr. Getch wants is a little private conversation, and it rests with you, Benjamin, to make it of a friendly natur'. Me and Mr. Getch don't want to have no words with you, I'm sure—we're kindly-natured men, I think, and disposed to treat them fair as treats us fair. And I should suggest, Benjamin, that you resume your seat, and prove yourself amenable to what we'll call the present circumstances."

"The present circumstances are that you've locked up Miss Marigold and myself against our wills and are liable to severe punishment for it!" said I. "And you'll get it! Do you think we've no friends, and that they won't track us? We shall have been looked for ever since noon, and——"

Again a wave of the fat hand and the unctuous voice—Uncle Joseph was evidently cock-sure about the safety of his own situation. "I wouldn't worrit myself about them things if I was you, Benjamin," he said. "You're as safe here—and the young lady—as we are from interruption. It'll be a long time before any notion gets abroad that you're where you are or anybody comes seeking you at the *Shooting Star*—and if they did, they'd go away no wiser than when they came! You wasn't

seen to come here by anybody, Nephew Benjamin, and 'cepting me and Mr. Getch and the lady what brought you your dinners, there's nobody knows you are here. And I should advise you to make the best of the sittywation and be friendly. Friendly!—that's all we want."

"Are you going to let us out?" I demanded.

Uncle Joseph made no very immediate reply. Instead, he took a chair—the best and biggest chair in the room—and plumping himself into it settled his big figure comfortably, and, placing his hands on his pudgy knees, looked at us in turn. As for the landlord, he leaned against the door, his hands in his pockets, watching. It seemed a long time before Uncle Joseph spoke.

"That's one o' them questions as is difficult to answer, Benjamin," he said at last, after chewing the proposition well over. "You'd ought to know as one intended for the law that these is questions to which it's uncommon difficult to give a plain affirmtyve or an ekally plain neggytive to. I can conceive the difficulty myself, for if I happened to be put in a witness-box——"

"You'll find yourself in something else than a witness-box, if you go on!" I broke in, rudely, and of set purpose. "There's another spot—the dock! That's more likely to be your destination—on the way to something still more impossible to escape from!"

I felt a tug at my coat, and Pepita spoke gently.

"Don't, Ben!" she murmured. "There's no need——"

"Thank you, missie!" said Uncle Joseph. "There is no need, as you kindly say, and glad I am to find that Benjamin has somebody at his elbow to admonish him. It doesn't become young men to show violence to their elders, especially when those elders is rellytives—brothers o' their own mother, too!"

"Who's showing violence!" I exclaimed. "If anybody's had any violence shown to them, it's us! You——"

"Oh, no, Nephew Benjamin, I think not!" remonstrated Uncle Joseph. "No, Benjamin, I really couldn't allow that suggestion in Mr. Getch's presence. Mr. Getch, I'm sure, wouldn't harm a canary bird, let alone a young lady and gentleman——"

"Never laid a finger on 'em!" muttered Getch. "Not me!"

"And sent you in a handsome dinner, I'm told," continued Uncle Joseph reproachfully. "Same as him and me had ourselves!—no, Benjamin, considering as how you come here like an enemy, a-poking your nose into matters which don't concern you, I think you've been treated uncommon well—I do, indeed, and I'm sure missie there'll agree with me."

"You leave Miss Marigold alone!" said I. "What do you want?"

Uncle Joseph nodded and rubbed his hands. "That's the first sensible remark we've heard you make, Benjamin!" he said. "That's more like it! And as I said before, and now repeats, all we want is friendliness. Friendly answers, Benjamin, to friendly questions."

"Such as—what?" I demanded.

"Well, such as—what did you come here for?" he asked. "Come, now!"

"To see you—as I told him," I answered, pointing at Getch.

But Uncle Joseph's head wagged.

"You ain't so fond of me as all that, Nephew Benjamin!" he said, sorrowfully. "You and Keziah, you wasn't pleased to see your blood-relation, I'm afraid. No, Benjamin, I think you didn't come here for *that*!"

"Leastways, not altogether!" remarked Getch, with a sardonic laugh.

"Oh, no!"

"Not altogether, as Mr. Getch kindly remarks," added Uncle Joseph. "I think you came to see if I was here, Benjamin, along of having rekernised garments of mine a-hanging on the cliff."

"What if I did?" said I.

"Then I'm afraid, Benjamin, that, having ascertained I was here, you'd have straightway gone back to Middlebourne and told it that I was!" he retorted. "And that wouldn't have suited my plans."

"I daresay!" I exclaimed scornfully. "I can quite believe that! Well, perhaps I should. You know as well as I do that you're under suspicion."

"I could say a good deal about that, Benjamin; I could say much about that!" he remarked, solemnly. "Every man knows his own business best, and them that's most suspected is oft-times most innocent. Now, of what am I suspected, Nephew Benjamin? I ask you?—friendly!"

I hesitated a while, watching him, and wondering. I felt sure by that time that no personal violence was likely to be offered to Pepita or myself, and that these two were probably detaining us in order to get information, or until such time as they could get safely away. And hastily summing up the situation, I decided on a policy of frankness—it seemed to me that it would pay, that if I put my cards on the table I should stand a good chance of seeing Uncle Joseph's hand. And thereafter it would be a case of whose wits were sharpest. . . .

"You're suspected of knowing something about the murder of that man Cousins, and of the theft of Miss Ellingham's Chinese vase!" I said suddenly. "That's what!"

He drew his hands back from his knee-caps, and began slowly rubbing them to and fro on his big legs.

"Dear, dear!" he said. "And supposing I did know what we'll call something about them matters, Benjamin?"—he paused a second or two at that, regarding me with a sidelong glance—"Something, I say, not partiklerising how much—what right does that give the police to look for me?"

"They want to know what you know," I answered.

"Uncommon kind of 'em, I'm sure!" he said, with a flash of humour. "Like them, too!—always a-wanting somebody else to do their work for 'em. They've no imagination, them police fellers, Benjamin!—as you'll find out, long before you're Lord Chancellor. Now you know, Benjamin, for all that you, or Veller, or that young Scotland Yard chap knows, I might be—eh?"

"What?" I asked, as he paused on a shy glance. "What?"

"I might be on the very same game that they're on!" he said. "Come, now!"

I started, staring at him.

"You aren't a detective!" I exclaimed.

He gave me an almost contemptuous look which developed into a certain hardening about eyes and lips.

"You don't know what I am, my lad!" he retorted, in a different tone. "You know nothing! But now then"—and here he began to speak as if he were a bullying cross-examiner, and I a witness at his mercy—"You tell me! What's that young Cherry found out about me? And let me tell you, my lad—for we are blood relations, when all's said and done!—you be candid with me, and I'll be candid with you, and don't you forget that at a word from me Getch here can keep you and the young lady locked up, and at a word he can let you go!—eh?"

Here indeed was a sudden and surprising change! But I resolved to stick to my plan—I would let him see what a hole he was in.

"Cherry knows a lot!" I answered. "He knows, to begin with, that you and Cousins met at the Crab and Lobster, at Fishampton."

"Oh!" he said. "It's a lot to know, that! And—what else?"

"And that you left cards in our best bedroom with the name of Crippe, Marine Store Dealer of Old Gravel Lane, London, on them," I continued. "He's seen Crippe."

"Wouldn't get much out of Crippe, neither!" he muttered.

"But you left your brandy bottle in the cave at Fliman's End," I went on. "And there was a name on the label—Zetterquist & Vanderpant, St. George Street. Cherry saw them—and he got something there!"

"What?" he demanded.

"The address of your lodgings in Calthorpe Street," I replied, watching him

narrowly.

“Aye?” he said, almost unconcernedly. “And went there?”

“He went there—and he’d good luck there, too!” said I, scarcely able to keep a note of triumph out of my voice.

“Good luck, eh, Benjamin?” he said. “And what might it be, now?”

“He’d two finds,” I replied. “He found a copy of the *Lady’s Circle* amongst your papers, from which you’d torn out the page on which there’s a picture of Miss Ellingham’s Chinese vase. He also found an envelope lying on your table, the post-mark of which was Middlebourne.”

I was looking for him to exchange glances with Getch at that. But they didn’t exchange as much as the flutter of an eyelash: they seemed quite unconcerned. And Uncle Joseph’s voice became cooing again.

“Aye, Benjamin, aye!—and what more did this clever young man find out?” he asked.

“Nothing more then,” I answered.

“No?” he said. “Ah! Anything anywhere else—in this damning chain of evidence?”

I was puzzled by Uncle Joseph’s manner, by then. There was something behind all this at which I couldn’t guess. But I thought to floor him with my reserve blow.

“I daresay you’ve heard the name of Mr. Spelwyn—the famous collector?” I said, keeping an eye on him. “Spelwyn—expert in this China rare stuff.”

“It’s not unfamiliar, Benjamin,” he answered. “I’ve heard of a many things and people—in London and elsewhere.”

“Spelwyn says you called on him and offered him a Kang-he vase,” I said slowly, watching the effect. “He told Cherry so! You!”

I saw a curious smile break out about the corners of his lips. But it didn’t spread. He composed his features immediately, and his manner changed once again—to a combination of unctuousness and facetiousness.

“Well, now, that *is* news!” he said slowly. “Deary-me-to-day!—I thought we should get at something in time. So I called on Mr. Spelwyn and offered to sell him a—what might it be termed?—a Kang-he vase, did I? Oh!—ah! Well, Benjamin, one lives, and one learns! Just so!”

“Didn’t you?” I asked.

He made no answer. Instead, he rose from his chair and looked at Getch.

“I think, Mr. Getch, it’s time these young people had a dish of tea sent in to them,” he said. “And a trifle of that nice cake of your housekeeper’s. And meanwhile you and me can do a bit of reflecting on what we’ve heard. So——”

He made for the door, and Getch's hand went to it. I spoke—sharply.

"What about us?" I demanded. "You promised! And this girl——"

"There's no harm'll come to the girl, Benjamin, and none to you," said Uncle Joseph over his shoulder. "You shall have your teas—while me and Mr. Getch has ours and does a spell of meditating. Afterwards . . ."

They were out of the door and it was locked and bolted again within a minute, and there was nothing to do but wait upon their pleasure. And oddly enough, just then I remembered that once, when I was a little chap, Keziah had taken me to the Zoological Gardens, where I had been much impressed by the captive wild beasts, walking, walking, walking round the iron-barred cages out of which, poor devils! they couldn't get—I felt as I think they must have felt, at that moment. And I think I swore—softly, but definitely.

"Yes," remarked Pepita, "exactly!—but I say, Ben, it's no use slanging that fat old scamp, you know! That's not the way to get round him. Why don't you have a go at him with his own weapons, Ben?"

"Because I'm not skilled in the use of 'em!" I retorted, sulkily. "I'm not up to slyness, and subterfuge, and lying, and all the rest of it! What I say is—damn him, and Getch too!"

"I thought you were going to be a lawyer, Ben," she said. "You needn't lie, and you needn't be sly, but you can be—what do they call it?—diplomatic."

"How are you to be diplomatic with that old devil?" I demanded. "He's as full of cunning as the sea's full of water!"

"All the same," she went on, "if he comes again, I should try to get round him. For oh, Ben, suppose—suppose they kept us here all night, and all to-morrow——"

"They—or he—promised that no harm should come to you, Pepita," I said. "And I can't believe they'll keep us here much longer. I think they'll let us go when it gets dark."

"It's getting dark now," she remarked, glancing round the gloomy room. "Whatever shall we do if they leave us without light, Ben? I'd be frightened—frightened!"

But just then the hard-faced woman was admitted quickly, and as quickly let out again. She brought us tea—plenty of good things, too—and she left a lamp on the tray. We ate and drank, and Pepita, remarking that Uncle Joseph had some creditable points in him and would evidently not allow us to starve, ended up by expressing a pious hope that his and Getch's meditations would prove favourable to us, and result in our speedy release.

"As I said—perhaps when it's dark," I remarked. "Under the darkness——"

I glanced towards the window as I spoke, and my tongue was suddenly checked. There, peering in from outside through the glass of a lower pane, his face seen clearly in the light of the lamp, his eyes staring straight at me, was Miss Ellingham's Hindu servant, Mandhu Khan!

CHAPTER XV

MELSIE ISLAND

I almost upset the tea-things and the table in the dart that I made for that window. The suddenness of my rush there checked the scream on Pepita's lips; she twisted sharply round in her chair, and I knew that she was just in time to see, too. But quick as I was, the face had gone by the time I reached the casement; in what I could see of the narrow space between me and the blank wall opposite, there was nothing. I slewed round again to Pepita, who had half-risen from the table, staring.

"You saw?" I exclaimed. "Didn't you?"

"I saw!" she answered. "That brown-faced man at the Grange—looking in! Oh, Ben!—what was he wanting?"

"To see what he could!" said I. "Spying round! Pepita!—you can bet your life that chap's on the hunt for Uncle Joseph! That's it!—sure as fate!"

"Shall you tell them?" she asked, nodding at the door.

But I had already thought of that. I began to see chances, excellent chances, arising out of this episode.

"Not one word!" said I. "We'll keep that to ourselves. I'm not afraid of Mandhu Khan—Miss Ellingham says he's a very faithful and dependable servant. Do you know what I think?—I think that Mandhu Khan is on the track of Uncle Joseph. They're awfully clever, these chaps, I'm told—see things that we don't, and are skilled in tracing people, and I should say Mandhu Khan has taken up the search for his mistress's stolen property, and he's got an idea that Uncle Joseph Krevin has got it, and is lying doggo here at the Shooting Star. So he comes and peeps in at the window! See?"

"Do you think he'll tell—tell people at Middlebourne, I mean—that he's seen us, Ben?" she asked.

"Sure and certain, Pepita!" I declared. "Lucky thing for us that he came peeping round! Of course, he'll tell! But look here!—if these chaps come back, as they're sure to when they've meditated, as Uncle Joseph styled it, not a word about that face at the window! We'll keep that to ourselves. And for anything we know, there may be others round about—Cherry, for instance. One thing's certain, anyhow—if that Hindu chap knows that Uncle Joseph is in this house he'll hang on to it and him like glue—bet your stars!"

My assurances seemed to revive Pepita's spirits—though, to do her full justice, she had never shown anything but steady resolve to go through with things—and we sat down again and finished our tea, each of us keeping an eye on the window.

However, we saw no more of Mandhu Khan's brown face and big eyes. Nothing happened; the evening wore on; nobody came; it looked as if we were condemned to imprisonment for the night. And at last, after many nods and yawns, Pepita began to show signs of weariness.

"Ben!" she said suddenly. "I'm sleepy—it's long past my bed-time. I can't keep awake!—can't! What shall we do, Ben?"

"You must lie down and go to sleep," I declared, firmly. "Nothing else for it! And you can be sure of this—I shan't sleep! I'll keep watch. Come on now!—you're quite safe, and you'll be asleep in two minutes."

She hesitated a while, then, with a smile of utter sleepiness, she went over to the bed in the corner and lay down. As for me, I dragged a big chair right in front of the door and took my place in it.

"Good-night, now, Pepita!" I said, in very grandfatherly fashion. "Don't worry—and go to sleep! I shouldn't wonder if we find the door open in the morning—it's my opinion these chaps will make themselves scarce in the night."

She made no answer for a time: then she spoke, in a whisper.

"Won't you kiss me good night, Ben?" she said. "I'd feel safer, I think, if you did—somehow!"

I went over and kissed her and she lifted her arms and put them round my neck.

"I'm your girl now, aren't I, Ben?" she whispered. "Oh, Ben!—if they come back, don't go running any risks! I know you're as brave as a lion, but——"

At that very minute we heard the bolt withdrawn outside, and I started away from her, and she jumped hastily from the bed, with a startled exclamation.

"They're here now!" she said. "Ben!—be careful!"

The key turned; the door opened. And there stood Getch. He was in sea-going clothes and sea-boots and had an oil-skin hat pulled close over his face.

"Now, my lad," he said in a domineering tone that roused my temper, "come on!—and the girl, too! Follow me—or walk in front. Lively, now!"

"No!" I said, motioning Pepita to keep behind me. "Not till I know where we're going!"

He came a step or two into the room, and he left the door wide.

"Look here, young fellow-my-lad!" he said in a lower voice and more insolent tone. "You just listen to me! You ain't dealing with Joe Krevin at this minute, though you'll see plenty of him presently—you're dealing with me! You and the girl come on at once, and do as you're told, or I'll put you through it in a fashion you won't like, and carry the girl off whether she likes it or not! D'ye hear that—and d'ye see this?" he went on, raising his right arm and hand. "If I give you one real good 'un with that,

my lad, you'll drop off to a sort of sleep that'll keep you quiet enough for a good while—and you'll wonder if an earthquake hit you when you wake! Now, come on!”

I felt Pepita's hand on my arm and knew what its pressure meant.

“Where?” I asked. “Is it safe—for her?”

“Don't you ask questions, my young cockeril!” he sneered. “You heard what your uncle said before he left you. No harm to either as long as you do what you're told. And damned soft stuff to give you, in my opinion!—if I'd had my way I'd ha' wrung your young neck and chucked you in the tideway hours ago. March, now!”

He stood aside in the doorway, and motioned us into the passage. We went—silently. It was dark there, but Getch picked up a lantern which had been standing on the floor, with its face turned to the wall, and presently guided us forward, through what seemed to be a labyrinth of cellars and windings until at last I saw a grey aperture in front and felt a breath of sea air blowing towards us. And suddenly he turned out his light, and, passing through an open doorway, we found ourselves on a narrow quay at the side of the river and saw dimly perceptible things in the shine of stars and faint gleam of a waning moon.

And the first thing was a boat, at our feet, and in it a cloaked and much obscured figure, big and bulky, sitting in the stern, surrounded by what seemed to be a number of bundles, boxes, or packages. Uncle Joseph, no doubt!—but the next instant we heard his voice, in a faint whisper.

“Give the young lady this here coat,” he said. “It'll protect her!—and as for you, Benjamin, you must make shift with one o' these rugs—the night's not so cold as all that, and we aren't facing a long voyage. Help her in, Benjamin!”

But with the coat in my hands which he flung to me I made a last appeal.

“Look here!” I said. “I don't mind what happens to me, but you surely aren't going to carry off a young girl, at night, in this way? Just think——”

“We've been doing a deal o' thinking, Benjamin,” he interrupted, in a whisper. “Me and Mr. Getch has thought and thought—and we're a-doing what we consider best and kindest for all parties. There's no harm'll come to the young lady, Benjamin, while she's in my charge, nor to you, neither, if you behave yourself—at worst, it's only a bit of temp'ry inconvenience. So be a good lad, and behave friendly!”

“But——” I began.

Getch cut short what I was going to say by unceremoniously thrusting me headlong into the boat, whither Pepita hastened to follow me, before he could lay hands on her. He jumped in himself then and seized the oars; a few strokes from his powerful arms and we were out in the river and heading for the bar at its mouth and

the open sea beyond. And I judged then that it was now very late at night, for as the little town became dimly visible there was not a light to be seen in any of its windows. As for the house we had just left, it stood black and forbidding against the chalk cliffs beyond. Nobody said anything for a while. Uncle Joseph remained at the tiller, humped up like a bale of goods; Pepita and I, side by side, and holding each other's hands, cowered near him, amidst the packages: Getch was busy with his oars. He was a powerful hand at that job; within a few minutes he had us over the bar and out into the sea; he made still better progress there, for the dark waters were calm as a millpond. And once outside the bar and well off the land, I looked about me, especially in front, in the endeavour to fix our destination. My idea, at first, was that they were going off to some ship, but I gave that up at once, for the visibility was good and as far as I could see there was no ship anywhere in sight—certainly not one with her necessary lights burning. For a time I was doubtful, but when Uncle Joseph continued to steer us straight ahead of the river mouth, I knew at last where we were going. And that was Melsie Island.

I began to get a clearer notion of the situation when I had decided on that. Melsie was a small island which, as near as I could reckon, lay right opposite the rocks and caves of Fliman's End, at a distance of from two and a half to three miles. It was about three-quarters of a mile in length, and half-a-mile wide; a wild, rocky, barren place, over the outer edges of which one could see the waves dashing in bad weather, and on which nobody lived. And it was seldom that anybody ever went to it from the mainland; there was nothing to go for. I had been on it once, when I was out with Tom Scripture in his boat; he had put into one of its coves for some reason or other and I and his son had raced over the grim rocks and deserted stretches of sand while he remained on the beach. But once upon a time folks had lived on the island—monks, in the old, far-off days. There had been a famous religious house there—Melsie Abbey; you could see the ruins of it from our creek, and I, of course, had explored them when I was roaming about with Tom Scripture's boy. They were considerable, but they consisted chiefly of roofless walls and fallen masses of masonry; still, there was one part which, I had noticed on my inspection, was still in very fair preservation and could easily have been made habitable, and that was the main tower, which the last Abbot of Melsie had only just finished building when he and his brethren were turned adrift on the world. And now, as I thought over my recollections of it, I knew that Melsie Abbey and its surroundings would afford fine chances for a man who wanted to hide himself, and I had no doubt whatever that we were bound thither.

In this surmise I was correct enough. After he had pulled a mile or so from the

mouth of the river, Getch stepped a mast and set a small sail, and there being a nice breeze blowing from land, we bowled merrily away in the direction of the island, and before long saw its dark bulk showing ahead. All this time our two captors preserved a strict and gloomy silence; indeed, they neither exchanged a word between themselves nor spoke to us until we were close on our destination. Then Getch made some remark to Uncle Joseph about trying the old landing-place, and after commanding me to give a hand with the sail, he took the tiller himself and steered the boat into a sort of passage between high black rocks, finally bringing us alongside a quay which I have no doubt had been artificially fashioned in the monastic days for the convenience of the inhabitants.

It was quiet enough on that island; there was, indeed, a sense of death like quietness on it, and I think that both Pepita and myself stepped ashore feeling as if we were about to be immured in a tomb. But Getch gave us no time for these or any other thoughts; now that we were landed, he seemed to assert himself as chief authority and began to order us all about, Uncle Joseph included. We had to help in unloading the boat, and then in carrying the various packages, and, just as I had expected, Getch directed us to take them up to the tower in the ruins; we made two or three journeys before we had cleared everything. They were not heavy packages—I guessed, and rightly, that they contained food and drink. But there were also plenty of rugs, cushions, old coats, and the like; Uncle Joseph carried most of these, and when we had got up the last of the parcels he flung an armful towards me.

“You must just do what you can to make the young lady a bit of a nest, Benjamin,” he said in his suavest tones. “It’s not what you might call a boo-dwaw, this, but we must make the best of circumstances, and, fortunately, the night’s warm and this here chamber is dry. And in the morning we’ll see what we can do to make ourselves a bit more comfortable.”

We were in a lower room of the tower, and Getch had lighted a lantern, by the light of which, small as its gleam was in that cavernous space, we could see to do things. I made a couch for Pepita in the cleanest corner I could find, and persuaded her to lie down. And I’ll say this for Uncle Joseph—he was kindly and considerate enough to her, suggesting that she might like something to eat and ordering me to see what I could find for her. But Pepita wanted nothing—except that I should stay near her. And stay near her I did, making shift as well as I could with a couple of horse-rugs, and I was thankful that within a few minutes she was fast asleep. I, myself, would gladly have slept, for very weariness, but I was too anxious and uneasy. Somehow, I felt that we had little to fear from Uncle Joseph, who, however deep and villainous he might be, did not seem inclined to cruelty, but I had no such

assurance about Getch, who, I felt sure, would have no compunction about wringing our necks to save his own. And sitting near Pepita's improvised couch, with my back to the wall, I watched him, wondering all the time if we were going to be under his surveillance, and for how long. There was no sign of his going away then. He had so disposed the lantern that its light could not penetrate through any aperture in the walls, of which, to be sure, there were not many and what there were lay high above our heads, and he and Uncle Joseph sat near it, talking in low tones. Getch had opened a bottle of spirits and broached a cask of water; I watched them drinking and smoking for some time. They were very quiet and quite orderly; from their attitude and behaviour they might have been discussing some peaceful domestic question. And suddenly, without knowing that I was on the verge of it, I dropped headlong into the abyss of sleep. When I woke again, just as suddenly, there was no sign of Getch. The morning sun was shining through the leadless window-places high up in the eastern wall, and I heard the crying of sea-birds and chatter of choughs, hovering around the parapet of the tower. Pepita was still fast asleep in her corner; her face, rosy-pink, half-buried in the crook of her arm; her breath coming softly and regularly. And over in his corner, half-buried in rugs and wrappings, his big bulk propped up against the angle of the wall, Uncle Joseph was asleep, too—asleep and snoring gently. His hands were clasped across his stomach; his mouth was half-open. And there, near him, was the lantern, extinguished, and the spirit-bottle, and the empty glasses—but no Getch.

I got quietly to my feet, stiff and aching from the hardness of my couch, and looked about me. In the gloom of the night I had not been able to get any very accurate idea of the exact nature of the things we had brought up from the boat. But I now saw that, whatever the reason of this flight to the island might be, Uncle Joseph was well provisioned. There was a great deal of canned stuff, meats, fruits; there was bread sufficient to last for several days; there were two cases of bottled beer and half-a-dozen bottles of spirits; it occasioned me a good deal of disquietude to see all this, for it seemed to argue that we might be kept in captivity for some time. Nor was I much comforted when I also saw tea, coffee, and sugar, and found a couple of square tins filled with cakes—these doubtless would be welcome to Pepita, but they, too, foreshadowed a longer residence on that island than I desired.

But it was something to be free of Getch. Relieved of his presence, I might possibly circumvent Uncle Joseph and contrive to signal some passing vessel. Unfortunately, as I knew from lifelong experience of that coast, vessels scarcely ever came near Melsie Island—still, there might be a chance. I went out to have a look round. And anxious to be absolutely certain about Getch, I first directed my steps to

the landing place amongst the rocks, to see if his boat was still there. It wasn't—and I knew then that he had gone in the night, and that we three had the island to ourselves.

CHAPTER XVI

THE BROWN HAND

That was a summer morning of great beauty, by land and sea, and under any circumstances, I should have rejoiced in my surroundings. The sun was already well up in a cloudless sky, the deep blue of which was reflected in the lightly dancing waves all round me—dancing under the gentle stirrings of a soft wind that blew shoreward from the south and drove the surface waters to a long ripple of white against the dark outline of the mainland, three miles away. The atmosphere was peculiarly clear, and I could see all the places along the coast, and pick out the bolder features of the island hills: as I stood there, gazing shoreward, I could have named a dozen such features, from the grey tower of our own parish church at Middlebourne to the great grove of beech on Belconbury Beacon, fifteen miles away to the eastward, and to the high buildings and tall ships' masts in the docks at Kingshaven, half that distance to the West. But close as all these things looked in that pellucid morning air, I felt that for all practical purposes Pepita and I—for the time being, at any rate—were as far off them as if we had been in some island of the Pacific. There were reasons for that feeling, and good ones, due to the peculiar nature of the coast in our neighbourhood. For some distance from the shore line the sea thereabouts was very shallow; the shallow waters extended for many miles into the Channel. And Kingshaven itself could only be entered by a passage running far away from Melsie Island, while our own light craft at Middlebourne and Wreddlesham, coming out from thence to the fishing grounds, could only get in or out by another equally remote on the other side. Melsie Island, in short, was out of the way of craft of any sort: from any of the big ships going into Kingshaven, or coming out of it, it would look like a speck on the water; to the fishing boats, passing it at some considerable distance on its eastern side, it had no significance. If it had not been for its absolute remoteness from any sea-route it would certainly have had a warning light, if not a permanent light-house on it; it had neither, for the reason that there was no likelihood whatever of any ship, big or little, getting so much out of its course as to come anywhere near it. And so I knew that there was small chance of anybody coming to rescue Pepita and myself from this strangely-brought-about imprisonment. As far as I knew, nobody knew that Getch had brought us here, though it might be that our departure from the Shooting Star, in company with Uncle Joseph, had been witnessed by Mandhu Khan. But on that we could not count—and there was always the possibility that the Hindu man-servant was in league with Uncle Joseph and Getch, and had come spying at our prison-window on their

behalf, just to see what we were doing. We could count on nothing. No doubt Captain Marigold was actively on the search for his daughter, and I was sure that Keziah would not let her tongue rest in demanding me—I felt, too, that Cherry would bestir himself in seeking for both. But who would dream of our having been carried off to this place? There we were—straight in front of their noses!—and, as I have said, we might as well have been in Samoa.

But why had we been brought there at all?—that was the question which had been forcing itself upon me from the moment in which Getch bundled me, unceremoniously, into his boat. On the mere surface of things, it did not seem very difficult to get an answer to this question. Whether he had actually stolen it or not, there was no doubt whatever—in my mind, anyway—that my precious kinsman, Uncle Joseph Krevin, was in possession of the Kang-he vase, nor that the rascally landlord of the Shooting Star was his accomplice. It seemed to me, putting together the various things of which I was aware, that the whole business worked itself out something like this—Uncle Joseph, the murdered man, Cousins, and Getch were accomplices in the plot to rob Miss Ellingham of her exceedingly valuable piece of Chinese vase, for their own profit. Probably Cousins effected the actual theft, and handed over the vase to Uncle Joseph in the fish-bag found by Keziah under our best bedroom dressing-table: Uncle Joseph, in the privacy of that sacred chamber, transferred the loot to his own venerable brown bag. Meanwhile, down there at Gallowstree Point, Cousins was murdered—why and by whom Heaven only knew! But Keziah and I told Uncle Joseph that Cousins was murdered—and Uncle Joseph cleared out, bag and all. I thought—piecing the bits together in my mental review—that he went away to Fliman's End, and was there, in the grey morning, taken off in a boat by Getch, and carried across the creek, past the scene of the murder and Middlebourne Grange, to the Shooting Star at Wreddlesham. No doubt he thought he could get away from Wreddlesham during that day, or on the succeeding night—no doubt, too, he and his host found that he couldn't, every neighbouring railway station and bus route being watched. So at the Shooting Star he remained, snug and safe—until Pepita and I walked in. He was safe no longer, then—and so Getch had conveyed him here, to Melsie Island, and us with him. But . . . how did he expect to escape from the island, and when?

I was not re-assured about our prospects of escape when, presently, I went back to the tower. Pepita, who seemed to have a genius for sound slumber under any conditions, was still fast asleep in her corner. But Uncle Joseph was wide awake, and when I entered, was looking about him, regarding the various packages with a speculative eye. He nodded at me, in quite friendly fashion.

"I hope you've passed a comfortable night, Benjamin?" he remarked. "The young lady, I see, is still in the land of Nod, as they call it. As for me, I've slept in a many better places, and in a many worse. I think, if I were you, Benjamin, my lad, I should see about getting ready a bit o' something to eat."

He nodded at the boxes and cases we had carried ashore, and it was when I began to investigate their contents that I felt doubts about the term, long or short, of our detention on the island. We were certainly provisioned for some time; there was enough stuff, eatable and drinkable, to last the three of us for at any rate several days: indeed, it appeared to me that somebody, Uncle Joseph, or Getch, or the two of them combined, or the iron-faced housekeeper-woman at the Shooting Star, had exercised a good deal of care and forethought in furnishing our commissariat department. And there was not only the stuff to eat, but the materials wherewith to cook it—spirit-stoves, kettles, frying-pans, and the like: Uncle Joseph seemed to take a deep interest in all of them.

"I think I should advise one o' them cold tongues this morning, Benjamin," he said, thoughtfully. "They're toothsome and tender, ready for table, and easy opened: we can try something more ambitious another time, as we get accustomed to fending for ourselves. You're no doubt of a domesticated turn, Benjamin?"

I gave that question the go-by, though I proceeded, being hungry, to get breakfast ready.

"How long do you suppose, or am I to understand, that we're going to have to fend for ourselves?" I asked. "I should like to know."

"I couldn't say, Benjamin," he answered meekly. "I've no idea! It depends on circumstances, you see, and you're no doubt well aware, youthful though you are, that circumstances is queer things—we can't always control 'em."

"I certainly can't control mine!" I retorted, as I lighted the spirit-stove, and filled the kettle from a keg of water which had come with the other goods. "Or I shouldn't have been here!"

"Well, well, and I shouldn't either, if I could control mine, Benjamin!" he said. "Leastways, my present unfort'nate ones. But a deal of experience of life, Benjamin, has taught me that similar experience'll doubtless teach you—that circumstances was made to make the best of. There's excellent coffee in that tin, Benjamin, and milk and sugar somewheres, and we shan't have to eat with our fingers, neither. I'll sniff the morning air outside a bit while you make the repast ready."

He got up from his improvised but quite comfortable couch, and moved off to the open doorway. And I saw then that he had made a pillow of his old brown bag—the bag which had been deposited in our porch at midnight, at the very beginning

of all these happenings. He had slept on it; no doubt to keep it close to him, and he kept it close to him now, for he carried it under his left arm. Through the open doorway I saw him standing with it, there closely held, as he stood on the platform of rocky land outside the tower, looking from one point of the compass to another; he continued to hold it there all the time he stood or strolled about there, and he had it still folded in his arm when he came back. And I said to myself on seeing this that I was quite willing to lay any odds, however extravagant in figure, that packed within that beastly old bag was the Kang-he vase!

I got breakfast ready, taking care that it was a good one, and awoke Pepita. Once fairly awake and realising the situation, she seemed disposed to take the whole thing as not a bad joke and the breakfast as a picnic, and her light-heartedness was uncommonly welcome. She began to help me in laying things out—but presently she seemed to remember something, and looked round with another expression in her face.

“Ben!” she whispered. “I see your fat old uncle out there—but where’s the man from the inn—the bad man?”

I was cynically amused at her differentiation between Uncle Joseph and Getch; my own opinion was that if it came to a question of essence and quality there was precious little of choice.

“He’s hopped it, Pepita!” said I. “Gone in the night, I think; anyway, he’d gone when I woke. We’re alone with my respected uncle.”

“I don’t mind him, Ben,” she remarked. “I don’t think he’s such a bad sort. But that other man frightened me. Have you found out what they brought us here for, Ben?”

“No!” said I. “But I know what I think, and I’ll tell you after. Look here!—you take a tip from me, Pepita. Just behave as if you were taking all this as a sort of picnic, and don’t show any fear of the old chap outside there—I shan’t! We’ve got to stick it out in his company, and we may as well fall in with his idea that we should be friendly. After all, we’re not going to starve, and Uncle Joseph won’t cut our throats—at least, I think not—and we’re bound to be rescued, so we may as well make the best of it.”

“Oh, I’m all right, Ben!” she agreed, cheerfully. “And I’m not afraid of Uncle Joseph—not I! I could get round him, Ben—if I wanted!”

There was no need for her to play any tricks of that sort. Uncle Joseph, presently returning, lured, no doubt, by the pleasant aroma of the hot coffee, was as bland and polite to her as if she had been a princess and he a courtier. He congratulated her on her bright eyes and rosy cheeks, and treated me to a solemn

disquisition on the virtues of early retirement and early rising. At breakfast he gave Pepita the best slices of the tongue and the cream off the milk, and commanded me to open a jar of raspberry jam—young ladies, he observed, were partial to sweet things, and as we had one in our company we must treat her according. Jailer or no jailer, Uncle Joseph was exceedingly complaisant, and reminded me of nothing so much as a Sunday School Superintendent, presiding over a treat to the best boys and girls. And if he had any anxiety about his situation, it certainly had no effect on his appetite, for he ate and drank with gusto.

This strange meal came to an end, and while Uncle Joseph—who said grace devoutly, as if quite accustomed to such ritual, as I have no doubt he was—filled and lighted his pipe, Pepita and I, in our rôle of faithful attendants, began to clear up the things. But there arose a difficulty.

“Where are we going to find water to wash up with?” said I. “We can’t go on using what’s in that keg: it’ll be done in no time. And for that matter, where are we going to get drinking water when this is finished?”

I looked at Uncle Joseph, as if he were an authority, and he nodded in ready response.

“Just so, Benjamin,” he replied. “Water is what we cannot do without. But I made inquiry on that there point. Of Mr. Getch, of course. Mr. Getch is a clever man, Benjamin—a man of ideas! Mr. Getch pointed out that once upon a time this here island was tenanted by monks. This very tower, as we’re a-sitting in, is the tower of their church. Monks, Benjamin, is men. Where men lives, there must be water—that’s how Mr. Getch argued it, and I take it to ha’ been very clever of him. There’ll be water somewheres on this island, Benjamin—must be, ’cause o’ the monks!”

“It’s three hundred and fifty years, at least, since there were any monks here!” I exclaimed, furbishing up my recollections of history. “Nearer four hundred if anything, and I don’t think anybody’s ever lived here since. If they had a well, or a spring, how do you suppose we can find it?”

“I don’t think that’ll be a very difficult job, Benjamin,” he answered calmly. “Them monks would have their dwelling-places close to the church—I suppose they’re represented in the ruins that lies about all round this here tower. And the water’ll not be far off. It might be a little fresh-water stream, a-tinkling down to the sea. Now, I should suggest that you and missie there should go and look for it—it’ll be a nice okkypation for you this fine morning, and if you linger on the way to do a bit o’ love-making, well, there’s no hurry that I know of. The washing-up can wait.”

We were not slow to take his hint, and, armed with a can and a kettle, we set off

on our quest. But before we had reached the door of the tower he called us back, hailing me by name, in a somewhat different tone; a note of admonition had come into his voice.

“Of course, Benjamin,” he said, when we turned to him where he sat, solemnly smoking, the old bag at his side, “of course you’ll understand that you aren’t to do nothing to attract attention to this here island? No waving of pocket-handkerchiefs, nor lighting of fires, nor nothing of that sort, Benjamin—such can’t be permitted, and I take your word of honour in advance that it won’t be done. You must bide easy, you and missie there, till the hour of our release comes—we might ha’ been in far worse predicaments than this, Benjamin, I assure you! For we have food and drink, and you’ll no doubt find water for domestic purposes, and what more can anybody desire? I’ve been worse lodged than this, in my time, Benjamin, more than once—oh, yes, I have indeed!”

He waved us away, as if there was no more to be said about it, and we went—reduced, for the time being, to silence by his humbugging unctuousness. We stopped out some time, too, and made a thorough examination of our more immediate surroundings, and found that in one matter Uncle Joseph had been a good prophet—there was a clear stream of good water at the back of the ruins, running from high ground to the sea, through a fern-clad ravine. Eventually we filled our vessels from it and went back to the tower—and the first thing I noticed was that Uncle Joseph was moving about, putting our goods ship-shape, and that the old brown bag had completely disappeared. I knew then that he had sent us out on purpose. He wanted to hide the brown bag. He had doubtless buried it, somewhere in the undergrowth outside the ruins, or amongst the masses of fallen masonry which lay around the tower. Anyway, we saw it no more—and for the rest of the time he went about freely, sometimes climbing the still usable stair to the head of the tower, sometimes strolling in and out of the ruins. The day wore on; we ate and drank, and did everything and nothing. Night came again; at Uncle Joseph’s request I helped him to rig up a sort of door out of planks and logs that lay about. At last we all retired, as on the previous night—to our corners. I was last to sleep, and first to wake, and when I woke it was with a sudden consciousness that something was wrong. The grey light was just beginning to steal into the tower, and by it I saw a brown hand and long, sinewy brown arm thrust through a hole in our rude door, feeling, groping. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

THE STOVE-IN BOAT

I let out a shout that might have been heard far out at sea—so I thought at the time—and at the sound the brown hand vanished and Uncle Joseph started in his corner. And as I shouted I made a dash for the door, not out of any bravery, you may be certain, but from sheer fright. The hand and arm had gone, of course, by the time I got there, and I thought I heard a faint movement outside, amongst the shrubs and undergrowth which obscured the entrance to the tower. But it was gone on the instant, and all was quiet again, and looking through the gap in the planks into which the arm had been thrust I could see nothing—nothing, that is, of our visitor. All the same, I knew he was close by, waiting, watching, and I had a very good notion as to his identity.

“What’s that, Benjamin?” asked Uncle Joseph from his corner. “What’re you doing at the door?”

I glanced towards the pile of cushions and rugs in which Pepita had made her nest. All was motionless there; she was still sound asleep. I went quietly across to Uncle Joseph, who was now sitting up, with wide-awake anxiety shown clearly on his big face.

“You haven’t heard anything, Benjamin?” he asked.

“Heard and seen!” I answered in a whisper, bending down to him. “I saw a man’s hand and arm, thrust through that hole, feeling at the props we’d stuck up against the door, inside. I shouted, and they vanished—I heard a sound of somebody going away, amongst the bushes.”

“A man’s hand!” he exclaimed. “Deary me, Benjamin——”

“Listen!” I said, still whispering. “It’s worse than you think. It was a brown man—a brown hand and arm! And I’m certain I know whose—that Hindu chap at Miss Ellingham’s! He came and looked in at the window of the room I was locked up in at the Shooting Star—that night, after dusk. I saw him plainly then—in the lamplight.”

I was watching Uncle Joseph narrowly as I spoke, and I saw that my information hit him hard. His big face grew anxious and his forehead knotted, and the bit of colour he had went altogether.

“That Hindu!” he said in a low voice. “Looked in on you at Getch’s! When—when you and the girl was locked up there, in that back room? Lord ha’ mercy!—why didn’t you tell us?”

“Why should I?” I retorted. “I thought he’d maybe been sent there by you and

Getch. Besides, I thought, too, that if he hadn't and was on his own business, he'd let Middlebourne people know that we were then at Getch's, and we should get away from you. But there he was!"

"And you think it's him that's here now?" he asked quickly. "The same man?"

"Yes, I do!" said I. "It was a brown man who stuck his arm through there, and he's a brown man. He's after—you, I should think!"

His face paled still more at the suggestion, and he rose, slowly, to his feet. And to my surprise, for he was not the sort of man that I should have suspected of carrying such things, he twisted his right hand round to the back of his hip, and after some fumbling there brought it back again, gripping a remarkably business-like automatic pistol.

"I don't hold with the promiskus use o' these here things, Benjamin," he remarked, handling his weapon in a way that assured me he knew all about it, "but at times like these, when one's likely to come across bad characters and desperate men, one's got to be prepared, and this here gun may come in handy yet, though I hope I shan't be compelled to make use of it. However, here it is"—he dropped it, as if carelessly, into the right-hand outer pocket of his loosely fitting jacket—"and you think the man went away amongst the shrubs, Benjamin?"

"I heard sounds in that direction, as if he did," I answered.

"Just so!" he murmured. "Like as not he would, when he found that he was observed. Now I'll tell you what to do, Benjamin—for we must take what precautions we can. Go you up that old stairway! There's holes in the tower walls, here and there—keep hid yourself, but see if you can make out anything, anywhere around these ruins, or on what you can see of the island. And I'll keep an eye on that door—I'm a very fair shot, Benjamin, wi' one o' these implements, if occasion arises. Which I hope it mayn't, for everybody's sake!"

I left him and climbed the stairway. This, like the rest of the tower, was in a very fair condition; there was no difficulty in reaching the leaded roof. And neglecting Uncle Joseph's advice to look through the holes in the walls, on my way, I made straight to the top, and hiding as much of myself as I could behind the low parapet at the head of the tower, looked over in an endeavour to locate somebody or something. This was not as fine a morning as the first had been; there was a good deal of mist over the sea, the shore, three miles away, was entirely hidden from my view, and on the island itself there were banks of white vapour lying over the scrub and sand. Out of one of these, at some little distance from the ruins, I saw emerge, suddenly, the figure of a man; a moment later I had no doubt that it was that of the Hindu. He was going away from us. And not only that, but he was marching steadily

ahead, as if with a purpose and towards some definite objective. This seemed to be in a part of the island into which I had not penetrated; a part lying in the westward, and terminating in a great group of high, black rocks. I watched him going towards there for some time, and saw that he showed no signs of turning on his tracks or deviating to right or left. And at that, seized with a sudden idea, I hurried down the stair again, to find Uncle Joseph smoking his pipe, his eye on the barricaded door.

"You've seen him, Benjamin, I perceive," he observed as I approached. "I see by your face you've seen him! Is it the man you supposed—that Hindu man?"

"Yes!" I answered. "He's alone, and he's walking, pretty fast, right away to the other end of the island. And—I want to get out!"

He looked at me with a glance that was half-suspicious.

"Why?" he demanded.

"I want to find out if he's alone," I said. "Come on! help me to move these boards! You can move them back when I've gone. Come! it's as much in your interest as in mine. If he's by himself, we can tackle him—if he's others with him, we'd better know of it."

He muttered something about danger, but he helped me to move aside the improvised door, and presently I slipped out, admonishing him to take care of Pepita if she awoke. I heard him replacing the logs; nothing, I knew, would induce him to risk his own safety, and while he was safe, Pepita would be safe. And I anticipated no immediate risk; Mandhu Khan, I felt sure, had ascertained our whereabouts, and had gone away for the time being. He would come back!—but in the meantime I wanted to know something, and that was if he had come to the island in a boat, and if the boat was in the narrow channel at which we had landed; I had overheard Getch remark to Uncle Joseph that, on that side at any rate, there was no other landing-place.

This channel, a deep cut between gradually shelving rocks, lay to the eastward of the tower, in the exactly opposite direction to that in which I had seen the Hindu setting his face. I made my way to it through the curling mists, and was presently alongside it. And I had not walked half-way along it before I saw a boat—and at the mere glimpse of it knew that while we slept in the tower something had gone on down here, a quarter of a mile off, that had probably ended in bloodshed and perhaps another murder.

For the boat was Getch's!—the very boat in which he had brought us away from the Shooting Star. And it was not on the water; it lay, sunk, in the water, several feet below the surface, on a white, sandy-shining bottom. It had been sunk, where it was, not only by having the plug pulled out, but by the simple process of smashing in

three or four of the planks in its lower parts.

Getch's boat, sunk, smashed! And where was Getch?

I felt absolutely certain that Getch, after I had fallen asleep on the first night of our captivity, had returned home to his inn at Wreddelesham: Uncle Joseph, indeed, had said as much. But here was his boat!—obviously, then, Getch had come back to the island. Probably Mandhu Khan had come with him. But, if so, where was Getch, and why had the boat been wilfully made of no use? I saw at once, having been used to boats all my life, that it would need the services of a shipwright to mend it. And if Getch was on the island, with Mandhu Khan, how were they going to get away from it? And why should they destroy the boat?—that question forced itself on me again and yet again. I could think of no reason.

I made a careful cast-round at the landing-place, to see if I could discover anything else. But there was nothing—no signs of any struggle, no evidence that Getch or the Hindu had been there. The water above and in the submerged boat was clear as spring water, and I could see right down into it; there was nothing in the boat but the splinters and wreckage of the smashed planking and a hatchet, thrown carelessly aside when the damage had been done.

And presently, wondering more than ever, I went slowly back to the tower, seeing and hearing nothing unusual on the way, and having gained admittance told my tale to Uncle Joseph.

I thought he was going to faint when he at last understood the meaning of what I told him. He turned deadly white and swayed ominously, and I had to dose him with brandy—even then it was some minutes, and then only with great difficulty, before he could speak.

“Ben!” he said, shortening my name to something less formal in his agitation. “Ben, my lad—this is serious! There's trouble ahead, Ben!—black, wicked trouble! You didn't know it, but I was expecting of Getch during the night. He was to come back. And——”

“Look here!” said I, interrupting him without ceremony. “You just tell me this! Did Getch go away that night we came here?”

“He did, Ben, my lad, oh, he did!” he asserted. “Oh, there's no doubt about that, Ben. He had to—reasons, there were. But he was to come back this last night—in the night. And you're sure that's his boat?”

“Dead certain!” said I. “He must have come. But I want to know more. Why was he to come? To fetch us away?”

He hesitated a bit, but he was obviously getting into a condition in which he would tell anything. And suddenly he spoke.

"Well, I'll tell you, Ben," he said. "I'll tell you, for we're in the same boat, and it was this here way, you see. It's necessary, Ben, for me—and for Getch, too—to get away from these parts very quietly. And Getch arranged for a friend of his, the master of a vessel, now coming up Channel from a Western port, to stand in here for us, to-day or to-morrow, and take us off, d'ye see? That——"

"What about us?" I asked, pointing towards Pepita.

"We were going to put you off, and send you safe home, first port we touched," he answered. "You'd ha' come to no harm, Ben. I told you from the first you'd come to no harm, neither you nor the girl, if you'd be friendly. We should ha' landed you—most likely at Newhaven."

"We're likely to come to harm now," I said serenely. "That Hindu chap is up to something! And if Getch came back to the island, where is Getch? I'm about sick of all this devilry!—there'll be more murder done, if it hasn't been done already! How do we know that it hasn't?"

I spoke sharply, even masterfully, for I saw that he was badly shaken, and inclined to take refuge behind me if it came to it. He paled again at my suggestion.

"Oh, I hope not, Ben!" he said. "I hope not!—I think not. Getch'll turn up—he may be hiding somewheres—away from that Hindu. Yes, I think Getch'll creep in here before long—quiet and secret."

I was more inclined to damn Getch than to welcome him, but I didn't say so. Instead, I began to get breakfast ready. Uncle Joseph took another pull at his brandy bottle, and then settled down to keep an eye on the door, his automatic pistol ready to hand.

Presently Pepita awoke, and came over to help me; I contrived to whisper to her that there was something afoot and that I would tell her afterwards what it was. We breakfasted in more or less of silence: Uncle Joseph's spirits seemed to have left him; he had no smiles or jokes for Pepita, and though I saw no perceptible lessening in his appetite for food and drink, I noticed that for every mouthful he took he gave two glances towards our improvised door, as if he expected to see the brown hand thrust through it again. When breakfast was over and Pepita and I were beginning our domestic tasks, he drew me aside.

"Benjamin!" he whispered solemnly. "I don't want to do anything to alarm the girl—she's only a young thing, and it isn't her fault she's been brought here, to be sure—but this here is a very serious business, Benjamin. I don't like what I hear about that brown man!—not at all. If he looked in at that window at Getch's——"

"As he certainly did!" said I.

"Just so!—and if that was him you saw this morning," he went on, "he's up to no

good, Benjamin! He's come to this here island after—something!"

"What's the use of talking all round it?" said I, sharply. "Of course he's here after something! He's after you!"

"Well, well!" he remarked, paling a bit about his gills. "And it may be so, Benjamin, but again, I've reasons for thinking that it mayn't: good reasons, too. Anyhow, Benjamin, he's no cause for enmity against you, nor for interfering with you, has he? He wouldn't be like to do you any injury, if you met?"

"He's no cause for anything against me!" I retorted. "Why should he have?"

"That's exactly what I'm thinking, Benjamin," he said, gravely. "And I'll tell you what I want you to do. I want you to go out—you can take the girl with you—and see if you can find out anything. Is he alone? Is there them with him that I've no wish to encounter——"

"Who might they be?" I demanded, suspiciously.

"Well, never mind!" he said. "But I would like some information, as to how matters stands. I don't think you'd come to any harm, Benjamin, if you went out and looked round and saw how the land lay—what?"

"Supposing anybody comes and attacks you?" I suggested, I fear with not a little malice. "What then?"

He tapped the pocket in which the automatic pistol lay handy, and he gave me a cool wink that was like opening another window into his character.

"There's a deal of cold lead in this bit of a gun, Benjamin!" he remarked. "And as I've said previous, I'm not a bad hand at straight shooting. I think I shall be safe, Benjamin—and you, too."

I was by no means averse to going. Anything was better than stopping mewed up in that fusty old tower. And I, too, wanted to know—and I was certainly not afraid of encountering Mandhu Khan. So, not knowing how long we might be out, or if we should return at all, I made up a parcel of food, and bidding Pepita come with me, left the tower and Uncle Joseph, and heard him barricading the door more strongly than ever as soon as we had crossed the threshold.

And then Pepita wanted to know all about it, and I told her.

"There's no doubt that Mandhu Khan is on the island," I concluded. "But whether he's alone, or has others with him, is more than I know. What's more important, to my thinking, is—is Getch here? And if he is, why hasn't he come to the tower?"

I had that question answered within the next few minutes. We had unconsciously turned our steps towards the northern beach of the island, near the landing-place. And as we rounded the corner of a jutting rock, we suddenly came across Getch.

He was lying face upwards on a patch of white sand, and from the corner of his left ear to the middle of his throat there was a great gash of scarlet that was rapidly blackening in the glaring sunlight.

CHAPTER XVIII

THIS TIME, THE KNIFE!

If I had not seen what I did when we found Sol Cousins tied by his neck to the old gibbet at Gallowstree Point, I should have been sickened beyond possibility of thought or action by the sight that now confronted me from that patch of sunlit sand. But the Cousins affair, I suppose, had hardened me, and my first impulse on seeing Getch's dead body and the blackening gash in his throat was to start forward and get nearer to him, intent on further discovery. Not so, however, with Pepita, who, catching sight of the horror at the same time that I did, first let out a scream that went echoing away among the rocks, and then turned and sped along the beach like a thing possessed. I had to run after her, to seize her, to hold her forcibly; she struggled in my grasp; the sight, I saw, had utterly unnerved her.

"For God's sake, don't scream again, Pepita!" I entreated. "If that Hindu heard you, he'd be on our tracks—don't! There's no danger if——"

"It's—it's not that!" she gasped. "It's—what we saw!" She covered her eyes with her hands, shuddering. "Oh, Ben!" she went on. "Can't—can't we get away somewhere, anywhere, from all this? Can't we do something to attract attention? I didn't mind being there in the tower so much, but if there's going to be murder——"

"We will try—only don't let's do anything to attract attention here," I said. "That Hindu chap's somewhere on the island, and the worst of it is we don't know that he mayn't have other men with him. Anyway, he, or they, have killed Getch. And I must find out more about that. Be brave, Pepita!—look here, sit down there a bit, while I go back for a few minutes. I shan't be out of your sight, and I promise you I won't be long, and then we'll see what we can do about making a signal of some sort. Come now!"

I persuaded her to sit down on a ledge of rock at the foot of the cliffs, and after remaining by her until she grew calmer went back to the dead man. For I wanted—it was necessary—to know as much as I could about him and his fate. Much as I had disliked Getch in life, I disliked him still more in death—there was a fierce, angry scowl on his distorted features, and his eyes, half-open, were malignant, glazed and lifeless though they were. But I touched him, hand and cheek; both were stone cold, and I came to the conclusion that he had been dead some hours. Looking about me, I formed the opinion that his assailant had sprung upon him, probably in the dark hours, from behind an adjacent rock—the place seemed to have been well chosen, and all the circumstances suggested preconceived design. I began to wonder then if Getch and Mandhu Khan had come together to the island, and—it was not the first

time I had thought of this particular thing—if the Hindu had been in league with Uncle Joseph and Getch all along. However, there would be plenty of time to speculate on that later on; just then I wanted to know all I could about Getch. And much as I loathed the job, I felt in his pockets, and all I found there was a pretty considerable sum of money, chiefly in gold, and an automatic pistol, brand-new, similar in appearance and presumably of the same make as that which Uncle Joseph had produced.

I put the money back, and the pistol in my own pocket, after ascertaining that it was fully loaded. Then, having first covered the dead man with sea-weed, and heaped heavy stones upon it, so that his temporary wrappings should not be disturbed, I returned to Pepita. She had got over her sudden fright by that time, and I saw at once when she jumped from her seat and came to meet me that she was going to face things.

“I’m sorry I behaved like that, Ben!” she said, contritely. “It was only because I was taken aback. I’ll be braver in future—only, what are we going to do? Did you find out anything?”

“Nothing! except that he’d a lot of money on him, and a pistol,” I answered. “I’ve got the pistol—it may be of use, but all the money in the world would be none, to us. I’ve thought of what we’ll do. For one thing, we won’t go back to the tower—yet awhile at any rate. We’ve got plenty to eat with us, and we’ll stay out, and watch. But we’ll do more. Let’s go up to the top of the island, and see if we can’t get enough dry stuff together to make a big bonfire. Then, to-night, when darkness falls, I’ll set a light to it, and maybe the blaze will attract somebody on the mainland. It’s worth trying, anyhow.”

We turned inland, up a sort of gully or ravine that fell to the beach from the high ground which ran, like a backbone, from east to west of the island. It terminated in a deep, amphitheatre-like hollow, half-a-mile distant from the beach,—facing Middlebourne, which we could see quite plainly now that the sun had dispersed the early morning mists. There was a great deal of dwarf oak there, much of it dead; gaunt branches lay about in the bracken and heather. And nearly at the top of the hollow, shielded from the uplands above, and from east and west winds by the overhanging lip of the ridge, was a plateau of rocky soil—the very place whereon to erect a beacon-fire. We set to work at once on that, laying a foundation of heather and bracken, and on that a superstructure of the skeleton-like oak which lay all around us, and, from its stripped and time-whitened condition, had probably so lain for many a long year. There was so much provender of this sort that eventually we raised a pile of considerable height which, judging from my juvenile recollections of

bonfires, would burn for several hours and throw up a fine body of flame. At last, the sun being then pretty well directly over us, we ceased from our labour, and, climbing higher up the sides of the hollow, sat down in a sheltered nook to eat and rest—and we had not been there ten minutes and I had scarcely swallowed two mouthfuls, when, for the third time that morning, I saw the Hindu. It was fortunate for us that in order to get out of the glare of the sun, which at that hour of the day was at its fiercest, we had crept into a fissure in the surrounding rocks, before which rose a screen of bushes. We were accordingly quite sheltered from observation, but, the same being loosely fashioned, we ourselves could see over a wide prospect through its various interstices. It was then I saw Mandhu Khan: he suddenly appeared, far down below us, on the landward edge of the beach, alone. And he stood there, in plain, full view for some minutes, shading his eyes and looking out to sea, as if he sought for signs of the coming of some small craft. He no longer wore the coloured garments in which I had first seen him at Middlebourne Grange, but his suit of dark clothes was brightened by a gaily-tinted turban; there was enough scarlet in it to make it easy to follow. And on the instant I decided to track him—there was far more comfort to be got in doing a bit of hunting oneself than in being hunted.

I laid a hand on Pepita's arm and gave her a warning glance. "Don't move—don't cry out!" I whispered. "Keep quiet—and look down there—through those boughs. Do you see him?—the Hindu!"

She looked, and, in spite of herself, made a little sound of dismay.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Suppose—suppose he sees us!"

I was not afraid of that; we were securely hidden. But I was afraid lest Mandhu Khan should see the great pile of stuff we had got together for our signal fire. But he never looked in our direction. His gaze was fixed on the sea all the time he stood beneath us, and when at last he moved it was to go straight onward, towards the east. I was quick to observe, however, that instead of keeping along the line of the sands he took one slightly above the low cliffs, going upward, to the interior of the island. And I knew that if he continued in that direction he would before long come to the old ruins and the tower, wherein Uncle Joseph, I supposed, still sat, nursing his pistol and filled with strange fears.

"Pepita!" I whispered, as the scarlet of the turban vanished amongst the trees. "I'm going to see where that chap's going! Be a good girl and stay hidden here—you'll be all right, and I shall be all right, too—I can easily track him and I can dodge him, as well, if it comes to it. He's making for the tower, I'm certain!—and I want to know if he gets in."

"But are you sure it'll be safe, Ben?" she asked, anxiously. "Suppose he hears

you amongst the trees? It must have been he who killed Getch, and he'd very likely kill you if——”

“He shan't get the chance!” I assured her. “I won't run into any danger. I can easily track him by his turban, and if I see any sign of his turning and coming my way I'll make myself scarce, jolly quick! You keep snug in here—don't leave this spot for anything.”

I could see that she was little disposed to let me go, but I was so keenly anxious to know if Mandhu Khan was going to the tower, and if he got in, and if Uncle Joseph opened fire on him, that, leaving her and my scarcely-tasted lunch, I slipped out of our shelter and stole away amongst the undergrowth in the direction taken by my quarry. It was not difficult work to keep him in sight, for beyond the hollow the trees and bushes nearer the shore dwindled away and finally ceased, and his further path was through nothing more protecting than heather and gorse, amidst which his tall, lithe figure was plainly discernible. But up there, on top of the ridge, where I was, there was a long, thick strip of fir through which I could pass unobserved from below; it made an effectual screen for my movements until I was at a point immediately above the ruins and the tower; of the tower I could see everything except the side in which was the barricaded doorway. And I traced the scarlet of the Hindu's head-gear right up to there; it came steadily on across the broken ground, through the outlying parts of the ruins, and at last to the tower. There it vanished round the angle of the side which I could not see; the Hindu, without doubt, was once more at the game at which I had caught him playing in the faint light of the dawn.

I fully expected to hear the crack of Uncle Joseph's automatic pistol as the next event in this series of developments. But I heard nothing so warlike—instead there was only the chattering of the jackdaws about the parapet of the tower. There were a great many jackdaws round about these ruins; I had disturbed them myself when I climbed to the leads early that morning, and now they seemed to be disturbed again. Presently, and greatly to my amazement, I understood why. Suddenly, above the upper edging of the head of the tower, appeared a speck of scarlet! I knew then that Mandhu Khan had found the doorway at the base free to him, and had entered and looked round, and encountering none to say him nay, had climbed the stair from floor to floor until at last he had emerged into the sunlight. And there, within the minute, I saw him plainly, his tall figure clearly outlined against the sea beyond, as he slowly turned, looking about him from one point of the compass to another.

This puzzled me more than anything that had happened during that day; more than the first appearance of Mandhu Khan at daybreak; far more than the discovery

of Getch's dead body. Murder, indeed, seemed the sort of thing one had got to expect, and as I had already seen the Hindu at the window of the Shooting Star, I was not surprised to know that he had made his way from the mainland to Melsie Island. But I did not understand his evidently-unobstructed progress from the bottom to the top of the tower. It surely meant that Uncle Joseph was no longer there—and that meant that Uncle Joseph had fled, forsaking his stores of food and liquor and his comparative safety (certainly, nobody could have got into that tower while he sat facing its doorway with a pistol in his hand!) for gradual starvation and precarious wandering. But if he had fled, where had he gone? Had the vessel of which he had spoken to me arrived off the island during the morning, unseen of Pepita and myself, busied with our own labour, and had he escaped to it? From my present position amongst the fir-trees I could only command the sea on the north side of the island, the side looking towards the mainland; there, east or west, as usual, there was not a sail in sight. But I did not know what there might not be to the southward, and I noticed that it was in that direction that Mandhu Khan was steadily gazing.

The scarlet patch and the slim black figure beneath it suddenly vanished, and I knew that the Hindu was descending the stair. I waited, still watching, for some little time, expecting to see him appear again round one of the angles of the tower. But he made no immediate appearance; evidently he was occupying himself somehow in our quarters at the base. And I was just deciding to go back to Pepita, who, I knew, would be growing more and more anxious, when something occurred that made me stop where I was, staring harder than ever at the things beneath me. That was a sudden out-pouring of smoke from one of the embrasures in the lower storey of the tower. It shot out sharply, gathered volume, and continued to pour itself into the clear air and to circle up and around the grey walls in steady, increasing fashion: I realised then that the Hindu, for some reason of his own, had set fire to the things he had found in the basement of the building and that behind those stout walls they were blazing merrily.

I suddenly caught sight of him again. He was going away—but in another direction. This time he went due south. In order to follow his movements, I had to pass through the covert of fir in which I had sheltered and to emerge on open ground at the other side. There were great boulders there, however, cropping out of the heather, and I hid myself behind one and watched the scarlet patch, thankful that its vividness made its wearer so easy to track. And just as in the morning he had marched steadily towards the western point of the island, so now he went steadily towards the middle point of its southern coast, which, of course, faced the Channel. I had no concern but for him, his whereabouts, and his destination at first, but when I

had assured myself that he was going clear away, I looked towards the point for which he seemed to be making. And there, at a distance of perhaps a mile from the land, I saw a ship riding at anchor in a glass-smooth sea. Having been born and bred in a coast village, where there was always a certain amount of sea-trade going on, I knew something about ships, and I saw at once that this was a tramp-steamer of small size and tonnage, which would no doubt carry a captain, a mate, and a crew of three or four men. She had a flag flying from her fore-mast, but there being no wind, it drooped listlessly, straight down, and I could therefore make nothing of it. But somehow or other, probably from the general aspect of the thing, I got the idea into my mind that this was a foreign craft, possibly French—I had seen vessels of her sort once or twice at Wreddlesham, where there was some slight trade with the ports of Northern France. However, I was not particularly concerned with that; what did concern me was the question—was this the ship that Uncle Joseph had spoken of, that was to carry us off and land me and Pepita at some up-Channel port, possibly at Newhaven? And if so, had Uncle Joseph, unknown to me, some fairly accurate notion as to when she would arrive off Melsie Island, and had he gone off to the south beach to be in readiness for her? And out of these questions arose a third—was the deep old scoundrel already on board and safe from the Hindu (who I was dead certain was after him) and was the steamer waiting for him to make some signal of his presence? In that case was he somewhere down there on the beach, hiding until a boat's crew came to take him off? And, if he was, would he and the Hindu meet? For the scarlet patch was still in sight, advancing steadily towards a point on the shore exactly opposite the stretch of placid sea wherein the strange vessel lay motionless.

I was turning away, intending to hurry back to Pepita with my news, when the stillness of the island was broken by the sharp crack of a firearm, down on the beach which I had been watching. The sound came thin, but plain: in the next instant it was followed by the discharge of a small gun, fired, as I saw quite discernibly, from the deck of the steamer.

CHAPTER XIX

BROKEN CHINA

I took this to be an exchange of signals between somebody—presumably Uncle Joseph—on the shore and the people on the ketch, and anxious though I was to get back to Pepita, I stayed where I was, conscious of the importance of watching. I could see everything very well from my boulder; there was first an undulating piece of heather-clad, rocky ground on which I had traced the Hindu by his scarlet patch; then the edge-line of the cliffs; beyond that, in perspective, lay a good, wide piece of white sand terminating in the deep blue of the placid sea. I fully expected to see Uncle Joseph's substantial figure appear on this stretch of sand: I felt quite certain that it was he who had fired his automatic pistol as a signal to the steamer, that he was ready to be taken off the island. But no such figure appeared. And that of the Hindu vanished. Five—ten—twenty minutes went by—perhaps thirty—and I saw nothing of what I had expected to see. And suddenly, in the covert of fir behind me, I heard the coo, coo, coo-coo of a wood-pigeon . . . once, twice.

That, at any rate, was what most folk would have called it. But I knew, well enough, that no wood-pigeon was there. That was Pepita; it was one of her accomplishments to imitate the wood-pigeon's note: another was to whistle like a blackbird. I ran back to the shelter of the trees; there she was, hidden in a screen of undergrowth, her eyes eager and appealing.

"I couldn't wait any longer, Ben!" she whispered. "It was awful, being there all alone! And I've been very careful, coming along. And I know something's happening—what were you watching, from behind that rock?"

We were safe enough up there, and there was no possibility of being observed from the shore: I beckoned her to come out of the covert and join me on the bit of open ground.

"Did you hear a gun fired half an hour ago?" I asked her. "You did!—well, it was fired from the deck of that vessel out there—I saw the puff of smoke. And that was in response to a shot which, I'm certain, came from Uncle Joseph's pistol. He's down there, somewhere. I guess they'll send a boat to take the old scoundrel off! He's done us, Pepita, and left us! He must have known that that steamer was coming here to-day, but he's taken good care that we shan't get away in it. However, he'll find there's the devil to settle accounts with before he can get away himself!—or else I'm vastly mistaken!"

"How, Ben?" she asked.

I pointed down-hill to the spot at which I had last seen the scarlet patch.

"Mandhu Khan's down there!" I answered. "I watched him all the way from the tower. He's disappeared now, but he's there, or around there, right enough, and I reckon he'll give Uncle Joseph a nasty five minutes if he comes across him. Mandhu Khan means business, Pepita, though what on earth he's after I can't make out. But he's set the tower on fire, and I suppose all the stores of eatables and drinkables are burned to cinder by this time. So we're without food!"

"There's some left in that cave we were sitting in," she said. "And surely somebody will come to seek us, Ben, if we put a light to our bonfire: they're sure to see it at Middlebourne!"

"Yes, but the devil of that is that these people will see it, too," I answered, nodding at the steamer. "And if they're friends of Uncle Joseph and Getch, they're no companions for us! And Mandhu Khan will see it, as well—and Mandhu Khan may have his reasons for wanting to silence me as effectually as, I'm sure, he silenced Getch last night; so we're in a fix, then!"

"Don't!" she said, with a little shudder. "What have you done that he should _____"

"I don't know what Getch had done, either, that Mandhu Khan should—do what he did!" I retorted. "But it's no use bothering one's brains about that!—the thing at present is—what's going to happen on the beach there? There's that vessel, whatever she may be, and wherever from, and wherever to—and somewhere about the shore is Uncle Joseph, and somewhere near him is the Hindu—and I wish we could see the lot at closer quarters . . . if we could do so in safety!"

We crossed over to the big boulder, and, leaning across the top, continued to watch. Some time passed; nothing happened. Then Pepita, sharper-eyed than I was, made a little sound and touched my arm.

"Ben!" she whispered. "Look!—there's a boat coming ashore!"

And, before I saw it, she added, "One—two—three men in it."

I had been giving more attention to the land than to the sea; I wanted to make out the whereabouts of Uncle Joseph and of the prowling Hindu, who, I knew well enough, was stalking him. But I followed Pepita's pointing finger and saw the boat—as she said, there were three men in it, two rowing, the third steering. They were making for a point immediately in front of the cliffs from which I had heard the first shot ring out, and, pulling rapidly, they were not long before they ran their craft into shallow water. They jumped out then, and drew it up on the smooth sand; evidently they were going to wait for an expected passenger. Two of the men sat down on the thwarts and began to smoke; the third man, who carried some long, slender dark object in the crook of his arm, stood by, staring up and along the cliffs. Every

moment I expected to see Uncle Joseph's unwieldy form go down to them, and I think Pepita had some idea of what was in my thoughts, for she suddenly spoke.

"Ben!" she said. "If your uncle goes off with those men, we shall be left! And that brown man will still be on the island! Wouldn't it be better to run down there and make them take us off, too?"

"Make is a good word!" said I, more ruefully than scornfully. "You can't make people do what they're resolved they won't do, Pepita!—unless you've got the whip hand of them, and I'm afraid I haven't, even with this pistol in my pocket: there are too many of 'em down there for me to tackle. The fact is, Uncle Joseph has slipped us—cheated us, damn him!—he doesn't want us to be taken off, yet awhile. It's his own safety he's thinking about—he doesn't care a hang about ours! And yet ——"

"What?" she asked, as I paused, laughing grimly at a notion that was in my mind. "Why do you laugh?"

"I'm laughing because I'm wondering if Mandhu Khan is holding up Uncle Joseph somewhere down there!" I answered. "You see, he doesn't go down to those fellows—they're still hanging about, waiting, and evidently watching. For all that Uncle Joseph has an automatic on him, he's an arrant coward, and maybe he's hidden somewhere amongst the rocks or cliffs, sweating with fear, because the Hindu's between him and his means of escape! I hope he is!—I hope——"

"One of the men's going up the beach," she said, interrupting me. "Perhaps it's to meet somebody."

This was the man who carried something in the crook of his arm. He had left his companions and was strolling towards the cliffs. Presently the line of the headlands hid him from us. We watched for some time, expecting him to re-appear, in company with Uncle Joseph. But there was no such re-appearance. And evidently the men at the boat did not expect one—just then, at any rate. One of them stretched himself on the sands in the shadow of the boat, and seemed to settle into sleep: the other got into the boat itself and curled up in the stern. And of the man who had dropped out of sight under the cliffs we saw no more, nor did we see any sign of human presence on the headlands, nor a gleam of the scarlet patch in the rough, broken moorland between them and ourselves.

The cliffs and the beach below were at least three-quarters of a mile from the boulder behind which we were keeping watch, and as all the live folk we knew to be on the island were down there, it struck me that now was the time to take a look at the tower and see what was going on, and if the fire had burnt itself out and done much damage. We drew back cautiously to the shelter of the covert, and made our

way through it and across the heather on the other side to the old ruins. There were still thin wisps of smoke circling out of the embrasures of the tower, and the jackdaws were still chattering excitedly above its parapet, but I saw at once that the worst of the fire was well over and that no appreciable damage had been done to the stout old walls. And before ever we reached the doorway, now freed of the timber which Uncle Joseph and I had so laboriously piled within it, I began to get another notion, which was that I had been mistaken, perhaps, in setting down Mandhu Khan as the incendiary. It now seemed to me that it was more in keeping with my cunning old kinsman's line of action than with the Hindu's; possibly, knowing that the steamer was due that afternoon, he had set a light to the place before leaving it, so that Pepita and I should have no food, and might, ere help came to us (for it was long odds against any search party coming to Melsie Island) utterly starve to death. And when I reached the doorway and looked in at the blackened cavity of the basement wherein we had passed the first stages of our imprisonment, I was practically convinced of Uncle Joseph's guilt, and cursed him more willingly than ever. For the fire had only half done its work, after all, when seen at close quarters, and there was clear evidence of intentional arson. The various boxes and casks, all of light wood, which we had brought from the Shooting Star had been dragged together in a heap; whatever was readily combustible about the place had been piled above them; the timbers which we had used as a defence for the doorway had been arranged on top. And reckoning up the situation as nearly as I could, I came to the conclusion that when the Hindu arrived at the tower on his second visit—overlooked by me from the edge of the covert above—*Uncle Joseph was still there*, hidden in some cranny or dark corner (there were no end of both), and that when Mandhu Khan went up the stairway, prospecting, he hastily fired his pile and cleared out, making his escape through the bushes on the side which I could not see.

As I stood there in the doorway, staring at the blackened mass, about which the grey smoke still crept fitfully, I hastily thought over various puzzling features of the recent developments in this affair. Who killed Getch? Did the man who killed Getch also smash up Getch's boat? Or was Getch killed by one man, and the boat stove in by another? In any case, what was the object in rendering the boat unfit for use? Was it to trap Getch and Uncle Joseph?—to keep them prisoners on the island? If so, then I could think of no one responsible for the boat-smashing but Mandhu Khan: he, too, I felt sure, had knifed Getch. It seemed to me—my wits were certainly something moythered, with one thing and another, but still sufficiently clear to put two and two together—that Mandhu Khan had followed Getch to the island, laid in wait for him, probably during the night, and murdered him, and had afterwards

smashed the boat so that Uncle Joseph couldn't escape in it. What precise object Mandhu Khan had in view in doing all this I could not exactly determine—probably it was the recovery of the Kang-he vase. But the train of thought led to one point—Mandhu Khan, having come to the island, must have come in a boat, and as he was still on the island that boat must be somewhere about. Now, supposing . . . I drew Pepita away from the tower amongst the trees and shrubs north of the ruins, and wagged a forefinger at her.

"Look here, Pepita!" said I. "You listen! We're going to escape!"

She made a little clicking sound with her tongue, it denoted joyful surprise. But her eyes were incredulous.

"Oh, Ben, don't I jolly well wish we could!" she exclaimed. "But how?"

"What I really mean, of course, is that we're going to try to escape," I continued. "We may succeed—and we mayn't. But we can try. Listen!—somewhere or other that Hindu chap must have a boat. Probably it's at the west end of the island—he doubtless landed there, because I believe there's a deepish channel runs past the spit of land at that end, and he'd most likely come along that channel. Now we know where he is just now!"

"But do we?" she asked, sceptically.

"Dead certain! He's after Uncle Joseph, on the other side. Bet your boots he'll not take his eyes off him, once he's spotted him! My notion is that Uncle Joseph is in some hole or other down there, and that Mandhu Khan is watching him, as a terrier watches a rat-hole. While Mandhu Khan is busy is the time to steal his boat! Now look here!—let's get back to the ridge, up above there. That covert of fir that we were in just now runs nearly the whole length of the island. We'll get into it again, and you'll take one side of it and I'll take the other. We must use the utmost caution in going along, keeping a wary outlook, and taking our time until we get to the far end. Then, if we've seen nobody and heard nothing, we must risk a drop down to the shore and see if we can discover the boat—there must be a boat! And if there is—as of course there is!—and Mandhu Khan's anywhere about—well, I shall have to use this pistol! We must get away, Pepita!"

I saw that the idea of force upset her nerves again, and she shook her head and gave me a wistful look.

"I don't mind the first part of the plan a bit, Ben," she answered. "I've done that sort of thing for fun, and I can do it in earnest. But I don't want it to lead to any more—murder! Don't get into any position——"

"We'll get into no position unless I know it's safe," I assured her. "Haven't I got you to consider?—first of all! But we must do what we can—we've next to no food,

and we're much too near desperate men. Let's try what I propose—however, before we do that, let's have a glance across at the mainland, to see if there's any sign of help coming from that way—I guess there won't be, though!" I added, bitterly. "They don't seem to have thought of Melsie Island!"

"Why haven't they?" she asked. "Right in front of them, and only three miles away!"

"That's just it!" I said. "It's because it's right under their very noses, and close to, that they never have thought of it! And yet—how close we are—and how far off!"

We had gone forward to the edge of the trees on the north side of the island, and there, on the further edge of the three miles of sea lay the shore on which we so much desired to set our feet again. It looked so very near in the afternoon light!—we could see a score of familiar objects—hills, woods, spires, roofs. But between us and the mainland there was not a single sail to be seen; not one dark speck betokening the presence of a fishing or a pleasure boat—we were as much alone and cut off from help as ever.

We were turning away, feeling very sad and downcast, when a low droning sound struck my ear, and looking up I saw an aeroplane, its canvas shining in the sun, coming along from the eastward. It was flying due west, and at a great height, and I judged it to be following a line that would carry it about half-way between us and the mainland, and though I thought it highly improbable that its occupant could see two such insignificant specks as ourselves, I resolved on trying to attract his attention.

"Come out in the open and wave, Pepita!" I shouted, careless for the moment as to whether anybody was near or not. "Throw your arms about!—dance!—kick!—do anything! If only that chap would see us and come down, or tell what he's seen when he lands——"

We did all we could to attract the airman's notice, waving arms, handkerchiefs, boughs of trees, gesticulating frenziedly, frantically. But he made no response; his machine droned along and disappeared in the west, and presently we turned back into the undergrowth—to do what we could for ourselves.

"Yet he may have seen us, after all," said Pepita. "We don't know!"

"No reliance on that!" said I. "Now we're going to try for that boat! If we find it, then it shall go hard if we don't get away in it. Skinned eyes and sharpened ears, Pepita! that's the ticket!"

In order to reach the covert on the summit of the ridge we had to re-cross the ruins of the old abbey. And as we picked our way through them, amongst beds of

nettles and thistles and rank grass and unchecked growth, I suddenly became aware of a mass of newly-fallen masonry broken from a low wall on my left hand. Newly-fallen! I instantly stepped up to it and looked over. There was a broad ditch or dry moat on the other side; a pile of grey stones, recently dislodged, had fallen into it. And there amongst these stones I saw Uncle Joseph's old bag, and shavings such as I had seen in the fish-bag in our best bedchamber, and some broken pieces of white china, and I knew, before ever I climbed down to examine them more closely, that here were the shattered fragments of Miss Ellingham's Kang-he vase!

CHAPTER XX

THE SOFT-HEARTED MARINER

Pepita had followed me to the gap in the wall, and she saw the things below as soon as I did, and turned on me with a world of surmise in her eyes.

“Ben!” she exclaimed. “What on earth does that mean? That’s the old bag that your uncle carried up from the boat, and that he was so careful about! Thrown away!”

“I know what it means!” said I. “The old scamp has had an accident at this spot. Fallen over the wall in climbing over—that’s it. Look there!—the stones are newly disturbed. He’s evidently come this way from the tower, and meant to cross the moat into the wood on the other side. And he must have slipped, or his weight was too much for the wall—you see how crumbly it is?—and over he went, and I guess he fell on his precious bag. Well! he must weigh seventeen or eighteen stone! But, Pepita, do you see that broken china? I reckon that’s Miss Ellingham’s vase, that all the row’s been about. Smashed!”

“Do you think it is, Ben?” she said wonderingly. “To be sure, I can see queer figures and patterns on it. But why has he left it, and the bag, too?”

“Come over,” I said, beginning to climb the gap. “Steady, now! we don’t want the whole lot down. We must know more about this—it’s important.”

I helped her to climb the wall and down into the moat, and we began to pick up the pieces of broken chinaware from the weeds and grass in which they lay. And from this moment onwards I began to get more and more bewildered and puzzled: the mystery of Cousins’ murder, and the stealing of the Kang-he vase, and Uncle Joseph’s possession of it, and our own kidnapping, and the Getch affair, and the presence on the island of Mandhu Khan, seemed to take on more amazing and baffling features than ever. This, without a doubt, was the vase of which I had heard so much, which I understood to be worth a—to me—immense amount of money, and here it lay, thrown aside like a bit of cheap earthenware! And it was not so badly damaged, after all; true, it was broken into some five or six pieces, but they were clean breaks, and the edges fitted; I had often seen Keziah mend old china which was much more in need of repair than that. However, there it was, cast aside, and there were shavings, of the same sort that I had seen in our spare bedchamber, and there was the bag. And, looking towards the wood, I saw where Uncle Joseph, who was large-footed, had trodden down the thick, long grass as he made his way from the scene of his fall into shelter and safety.

While I was examining the vase and its one-time wrappings, Pepita was looking

round about, and she suddenly let out an exclamation that drew me to her side.

"Ben!" she said sharply. "What's this? And—that?"

She had picked up a queer-looking object from amongst the rank weeds, and now she pointed her other hand to something close by. I saw at once what those things were—they were the broken halves of one of those images which Miss Ellingham had missed after losing the Kang-he vase—the little Indian gods. I remembered what Carsie, the butler, had told me about them when he stopped to talk to me the Sunday night Cherry and I returned from London—"Foul and loathsome objects, I call those figures, one of 'em particularly . . . why, it had ever so many heads and arms—a monstrosity!—and t'other had some animal's head instead of a human being's!" So Carsie had said—and here, indeed, was the many-headed, many-armed thing, in two pieces. And suddenly, glancing around me, I saw the other—a thing with a beast's head—lying close by . . . and it also was broken in two.

One by one I carefully examined these images. They were fashioned of some sort of stuff the like of which I had never seen: I could not make out if it was stone, or marble, or an artificial product. It seemed softish to the touch; anyway, you could scrape it with your finger-nail, indenting it easily. One figure—that which Pepita had found—was broken in jagged fashion, as if from a fall; the other appeared to me to have been deliberately broken, or cut—I fancied I could detect the marks of a knife-blade. But in each there was a similar and curious feature. Each contained a hollow space, rounded and smoothed, big enough in both cases to hold something as big, say, as a blackbird's egg. But if there had been anything in these hollows a careful search in the grass and weeds round about failed to reveal it to us.

This puzzled me even more than the throwing away of the Kang-he vase. But I refrained from saying anything of my amazement and my speculations to Pepita. Instead, I carefully put together the pieces of the vase and the broken halves of the idols, wrapped them all up in the shavings, bundled the lot into the old bag, and hid that behind a clump of thick ivy at the foot of the wall.

"That's safe enough!" said I. "We shall know where to find it, if need be, in days to come. And now let's see about that other matter—the boat, if there is one. But of course there is, and we must try to——"

I came to a dead stop there, and as my tongue checked itself, Pepita gave a sharp, startled cry and made a grasp at my left arm. Instinctively, my right hand shot into my side pocket and drew the automatic pistol which I had taken from Getch's dead body. Hand and pistol rose in the air—there, right before us, between us and the wood, stood a man who carried a shot-gun in the crook of his elbow.

He was a medium-sized, stoutly-built, brown-skinned, brown-bearded man, a seafaring man every bit of him, in sea-going garments and sea-boots—a middle-aged man, amiable of expression, and in spite of my threatening attitude, mild of eye. He stared as I raised my pistol, shook his head, and smiled faintly.

“No need for that, young master!” he said quickly. “No harm intended to anybody—by me, anyhow. See!”

He dropped his shot-gun to the grass at his side as he spoke, and moved away from within reach of it as if wishing to prove the truth of his word by corroborative action. And again he smiled.

“What’s it all about?” he asked. “Seems to me there’s strange things afoot, on this here island! Have a care with that gun o’ yours, young man!—they’re ticklish things to play with!”

I dropped the automatic pistol into my pocket, and drew a deep breath—I think of intense relief.

“Strange things!” I exclaimed. “I should think there are strange things!—stranger than you’d think. You’re from that steamer, on the south side, aren’t you? Will you tell me—this girl and I are all alone here—what you came ashore for?”

Staring steadily first at Pepita and then at me, he slowly took a pipe and tobacco pouch from his pockets and leisurely filled the one from the other. He took his time, too, about applying a match to the tobacco, and it was not until he had it in full blast and had blown out a blue cloud of it that he spoke.

“Ah, just so!” he answered. “And what might you be a-doing of, yourselves, now? For I’ll swear you didn’t come here on no picnic party!”

I hesitated. But not for long—something told me that whoever he was, and whatever his trade, he was a man you could speak to with candour.

“I’ll tell you!” I replied suddenly. “We were kidnapped!”

He showed no surprise. Instead, he nodded two or three times, as a man nods who has just heard something that he expected to hear. “From the mainland?” he asked, abruptly.

“If you want to know, from a house called the Shooting Star, at Wreddlesham,” I replied, watching him narrowly. “That is on the mainland.”

Again he nodded—with still more evidence of comprehension.

“Aye!” he said quietly. “Just so! Then I expect you poked your nose—or maybe fell accidental—into a situation where your presence wasn’t desirable?—just so!”

“That’s about it,” I answered. “All the same——”

“Carried off so that you couldn’t split, eh?” he interrupted, with a grin. “To be sure! I see! And from the Shooting Star? Then you’ll know Getch?”

I gave him a look which had a meaning in it that he didn't take.

"Yes!" I said.

"And may be you'll know a friend—sort of partner of his—called Krevin?" he went on. "A fat man?"

"I know him!" I replied.

"Do you know where they are now?" he inquired. "I make it that Getch carried you out here, and I've no doubt Krevin was with him. Now where is Getch?"

I heard Pepita catch her breath at my side, and I pressed the arm which she had slipped through mine when the stranger appeared.

"I'll tell you!" I answered. "He's on the beach, about thirty or forty yards away, down there, the other side of those ruins—dead!"

Not the slightest sign of surprise came from him: he only looked at me a little more closely, and repeated my last word, inquiringly. "Dead?"

"Knifed!" I replied. "It must have been during last night. I found him this morning. Cold, then."

He continued to look at me for a minute or so; then he nodded.

"Aye!" he said, ruminatively. "Just so! Well, as regards Getch, now, it's the kind of news that them who knew him would never be surprised—Getch being the sort of man he was—to be hearing 'most any time. Dead?—um! But Krevin? Where's he? For I reckon he'd be with you."

"I don't know where he is," I said. "He was in that tower this morning: we left him there. He sent us out to look for a brown man that's got on the island somehow and that's after him!"

"After him?" he said. "A brown man?"

"A Hindu," I answered. "It may have been he that killed Getch—I don't know. Anyway, Krevin's made off from that tower, and I believe the Hindu chap's stalking him. I thought Krevin was down on the south shore somewhere—I heard what I believed to be a shot from his pistol down there, some time ago."

"We heard that, aboard our vessel," he remarked. "And we came off. But we've heard nothing, and seen nothing."

"I think he's hiding in some hole or other, and the Hindu's spotted him and is watching him," I said. "The Hindu went down that way. I watched him go across the heather—he's a patch of bright scarlet in his turban and he was easy to trace by that."

"What's this Hindu fellow after Krevin for?" he inquired. "And why should he kill Getch?"

"I don't know," I replied. "It's all part of a mass of mystery! What I know is that

Krevin wants to get away from here, and that he told me Getch had arranged for a vessel to put in here to take him off. That'll be yours, I suppose?"

He made no answer to this. For awhile he seemed to be thinking deeply. Suddenly he looked from one to the other of us.

"Where might you young people belong to, when you're at home?" he asked. "Somewheres on the mainland, these parts?"

"Middlebourne—right opposite this island," I answered. "Do you know it?"

"Never been there in my life!" he said. "But I've heard of it. In the newspapers, of late, though I haven't seen one of 'em for some days. 'Twas there they found a man—Sol Cousins by name—tied up to an old gibbet-post, wasn't it?"

"Yes!" I assented.

"Think that had anything to do with all this?" he asked, meaningly. "All this Hindu chap business, and Getch being knifed, and you kidnapped, and so on—what?"

"I should say it's everything to do with it," I replied. "All of a piece!"

He ruminated a little over that, and then moved towards his shotgun, as if he meant to pick it up.

"Well, I ain't a-going to get myself mixed up in things o' that sort, young master," he said. "I put in to this here island in consequence of a letter what I got from Getch at a certain port I was in, down Channel, a-purpose to give a passage to Krevin, and maybe to Getch. And as Getch is dead, and Krevin's having a brown-faced man a-hunting of him, I shall just go my ways! I can stand a good deal, but being a plain man I dislikes mysteries, and I can't abide murder!"

"You won't leave this girl and me to be murdered, will you?" I exclaimed. "Come, now!"

He stopped on the instant.

"Do you think there's the danger of it?" he asked. "Honest?"

"I think there's great danger of it—or, at any rate, of other trouble," I answered. "Just see how we're situated! Nobody ever comes to this island——"

"I know that, well enough!" he murmured. "You're right there."

"Our friends don't seem to have the least notion that we're here," I continued. "We're utterly defenceless——"

"Not with that gun of yours!" he interrupted.

"I might be caught unawares," I said. "And, anyway, we've no food. Getch and Krevin brought food and liquor with us to the tower, but either Krevin or the Hindu set fire to the stores this afternoon and everything's burnt. We're absolutely helpless! Look here!—can't you take us off in your steamer? Look at this girl!—just think
——"

He looked at Pepita. And Pepita looked at him. She did more—she held out her hands and turned on the full battery of her dark eyes.

“Do, please, take us away!” she said in her most enticing tones. “Please!”

I could see that he was touched. He nodded at her—appreciatively.

“Aye, aye, missie!” he said. “Just so, to be sure! And I ain’t unwilling—I’m a soft-hearted man, I am, and always had that nature, and oft suffered from it. But the thing is—how to do it?”

“How?” I exclaimed. “Why, there can’t be any difficulty about that! Couldn’t you take us off and put us ashore at Kingshaven——”

He gave me a look which indicated a lot.

“No, I couldn’t!” he said, promptly. “Not by no means!”

“Well, any port along Channel—either way,” I suggested.

“Not at present,” he answered. “Not—convenient!”

But I was not going to give up.

“Well, couldn’t you take us—whichever way you like, east or west—and put us off in a boat, on the coast somewhere?” I pleaded.

“We’d make our way home—never fear!”

“Do!” urged Pepita. “Please!”

He took off his cap and scratched his head for awhile. Then he put his cap on again.

“You see!” he said. “There’s my mates! I’m nominally skipper—but it’s a partnership affair. And we’re on a special voyage—not to these parts at all. And I don’t suppose you young people carry money—and you couldn’t very well send money when you got to your friends, because circumstances is such that I couldn’t give you any address, d’ye see?—and, well, my mates—not me, ’cause, as I say, I’m soft-hearted, uncommon——”

A sudden notion shot into my brain—an inspiration. With a whispered word of re-assurance to her, I slipped Pepita’s hand out of my arm, and motioning the soft-hearted one to follow me, walked to the end of the moat.

“Look here!” I whispered to him. “Not a word to my young lady, but I’ll tell you something, to be kept a dead secret between you and me—for ever! I found Getch’s body, and I covered it with sea-weed and laid stones on that—you’ll find it if you go straight down there on to the shore; it’s in a corner of some tall black rocks. And Getch’s pockets are full of gold! Sovereigns, you understand? There must be a couple of hundred pounds’ worth, I should think. So is it a bargain, and a secret?”

“Not another word, young master!” he murmured. “I take your meaning! Right!

—straight ahead, is it?”

He went quickly away towards the shore, and with a signal to Pepita to stay where she was, I waited for him. He came back within ten minutes, and as he drew near me, he gave me a highly satisfied nod, and slapped various parts of his garments.

“That’s all right, master!” he said quietly. “Now you come along of me!”

CHAPTER XXI

I HEAR STRANGE THINGS

We went willingly with this man. There was something about him—his quiet smile, the slightly humorous twinkle of his eye, a certain knowingness in his manner—that inspired confidence in both of us; we felt sure that he spoke truth when he declared himself to be soft-hearted. Moreover, as for myself, I felt that he and I were now sharers in a deed, and joint-keepers of a secret, for I had helped him to appropriate the gold in Getch's pockets. I suppose it was a very wrong thing to do!—but I have never experienced any prick of conscience about it, up to now, and I don't believe I ever shall! I had Pepita to think of, and our new friend had hinted that his partners would wish to be remembered; in plain words, to be squared—and there was the money, by which, no doubt, Getch himself had not come over honestly, and it was far better to benefit living folk by it than to leave it there with the dead. And I was truly thankful that I had thought of it as a means of salvation—now, we should get away from the island.

But when we had crossed the covert and faced the open moorland which lay between its edge and the south shore, I had a sudden pang of fear, that made me turn quickly to our companion.

"I say!" I exclaimed. "Supposing—supposing we meet Krevin?"

I had not told our friend that Krevin was my kinsman, and I wasn't going to tell him—I saw no need: I preferred to leave that matter alone. He nodded, as if he understood what I was after.

"Aye, just so!" he responded. "Exactly! but I'd thought of that. Likely to be somewheres about, down this part, you think?"

"Somewhere," said I. "And, according to what he told me, he's expecting you to take him off. What if he meets us, down here?"

"He'll be disappointed!" he answered, quietly. "I ain't going to have any truck with Krevin—after what I've learnt—and seen, especially seen. Business—such as I might have done—and expected to do—with him and Getch, is one thing, but murder and the like o' that is another. I ain't going to have no Krevin's aboard my ship—now! What I've promised to do, young master, I will do!—and that's to put you and the young lady ashore on the mainland, safe and sound. And look here!" he continued, as we came to a rise in the undulating surface of the moor, from which there was a wide prospect of the Channel and of the mainland. "We'd best to take an observation from this bit of a height and consider where the likeliest place would be. You'll understand that I don't want to go near no ports, nor nowhere where

there's much sea-trade, or—coastguardsmen?"

"What do you propose, then?" I asked. "It's for you to say."

"What I propose is this here," he replied. "We'll steam out into the Channel and cruise about a bit—anywheres—up or down—east or west—till after night falls. Then we'll run in to some convenient point, and we'll land you and missie in a boat. But what point? You'll be knowing this coast?"

"Every inch of it!" said I. "From beyond Wreddlesham to Kingshaven."

I motioned him to turn northward, and stretched a hand towards the west. "Do you see that point running into the sea across there?" I asked. "And the bit of a village half-way along it? That's Summerstead—three miles from our own village. If you could put us ashore there——"

"How near could we get in?" he asked. "Do you know the channels?"

"Yes, well enough!" said I. "I can pilot you in—to within half-a-mile of the beach. Deep water!"

"Then that's settled!" he agreed. "Summerstead Point it is—after dusk. And you'll be within three miles of your house? How'll you manage that?"

"We can get a horse and trap at Summerstead," I answered. "And even if we couldn't, we could walk!—anything to get on the mainland!"

"You'll be there, right enough," he observed, reassuringly. "And now let's see if my mates have heard or seen anything of Krevin."

We went down to the south beach and to the boat. One of its guardians was fast asleep; the other was smoking his pipe. He had neither seen anybody nor heard anybody; he stared at Pepita and myself with considerable curiosity; so, too, did the sleeper, when awakened. And our man took both aside and began a whispered conversation with them: I made a pretty good guess at its subject.

"Do you think we shall be safe with these men, Ben?" asked Pepita. "I don't mean with the man we've come along with, but the others?"

I knew what she meant. The other two were decidedly picturesque—and just as decidedly unprepossessing. They would have been vastly improved by some acquaintance with soap and water and a visit to a barber—in each case the hair and beard had not been cut or trimmed for a long time. As to their garb, they looked as if they had been left on a reef or rock in mid-ocean for many months, without needle or thread: still, I scarcely shared in Pepita's whispered opinion that they looked like pirates.

"More like castaways, I think," I murmured. "Anyway, we must take our chance. If only we can get ashore on the mainland——"

The three men came towards us; our friend motioning us into the boat, and the

others making ready to put off to the steamer.

"That's all right!" the first man whispered to me as he followed us and took the tiller. "Good notion, that of yours, telling me about that little matter that lay in Getch's pockets!—there's a deal of persuasion in a bit of money, young master, and 'twas lucky for you that Getch left home with his pockets well lined. And don't you or the young lady have any fear!—you'll be well done to aboard my ship."

He was as good as his word as regarded that, and as soon as we had boarded the steamer and she had moved off from the island, making for mid-Channel, he gave us some tea, and produced what he could in the way of delicacies, suitable, as he put it, for the occasion—they consisted mainly of a variety of jams and of a peculiarly rich and heavy plumcake, to which, he said, his men were uncommon partial. Before this meal was over Pepita was half-asleep, worn out by the toil and exposure of our long day. I made a couch for her in the shadow of the deck-house, of cushions, rugs, and blankets, and within a few minutes she was slumbering soundly. I sat by her, resolved under any circumstances to keep awake, though I was tired out myself—and near me, smoking his pipe, sat the soft-hearted man, to whom the sight of Pepita, sleeping, seemed to bring sentimental memories.

"Uncommon pretty young maiden, that, master!" he murmured, pointing the stem of his pipe at Pepita's dark tresses. "I have a girl of my own about that age, away down in the west. And certain sure I am I wouldn't like to ha' found her in the fix you two was in when I come across you this afternoon! Though exactly why you was there is not, of course, within my knowledge."

In view of what he was doing for us, I told him as much of our story and of what had led up to our capture at the Shooting Star as I wished him, or thought it wise for him, to know, and he listened gravely, and at the end shook his head.

"Born and bred in these parts, I take it, you was?" he inquired. "Aye, well, and so I daresay you've heard, more than once, that there's still a bit of free trade going on here and there?"

"Do you mean smuggling?" I asked.

"Aye, well, that name'll do as well as another," he answered. "'Tain't a name as I'd use myself; still, I reckon there's nothing in names. But you've heard of it?"

"I've heard it said there's a bit of contraband trade still done, here and there," I answered. "Nothing like there used to be, of course!"

"No!" he said. "Fine times they did have, all along here, in the good old days, to be sure! There was a man I met—a man what reads books, and is inclined to poetical language when he's had a glass or two—said me some poetry about them times one day, not so long ago, in a bar-parlour Dorset coast way. Let's see how it

went—he said it that often that it sort o’ stuck in my mem’ry. This way it was—

*Five and twenty ponies,
Trotting through the dark—
Brandy for the Parson,
Baccy for the Clerk;*

*Laces for a lady; letters for a Spy,
And watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen go by!*

So it ran, and brave words, too, and rare old times them was, I reckon, young master, when they used to tell the childer to turn their faces to the wall o’ fine nights so’s they couldn’t see the free-traders wi’ their goods ride past going inland from the sea! All gone and done with, like a many other good things! Still, there’s a bit done nowadays—and Getch and Krevin was amongst them as done it!”

He was getting away from sentimental reminiscence to stern fact now, and I nodded in silence, listening eagerly for more.

“Krevin!” he went on, musingly. “I ha’ known Krevin a many years! He was a main bad ’un, Krevin! The sort o’ man, you understand, as was clever at engineering things—very often keeping his-self in the background. Didn’t operate much this part o’ the world, though—his work was mainly on the East Coast—in them Essex marshes, though now and then he was Dorset way. There was a time when he wasn’t in England at all—he’d experience of India, and Burma, and China, had that man. And ’tis my belief, master, as he engineered for Getch to take that public-house at Wreddlesham—Getch, he was a Cornish native by rights. Them two, I think, was going to do trade about here—and now, of course, I reckon they’re done. Getch, anyway!”

I remained silent for awhile; then I plumped him with a question—for I was certain that he knew more than he had let out, and I hoped he might be drawn.

“Who do you suppose killed Getch?” I asked.

He gave me a quiet, conscious look, and lowered his voice.

“Between you and me and the post,” he answered, “I make no doubt that Krevin killed Getch! And I don’t think there’s any doubt that Getch and Krevin killed Cousins! Oh, yes!”

That made me stare—and he saw my surprise and went on.

“Last port I was in—which was night before last—I read all the newspapers I could get hold of about that Gallowstree Point affair,” he said. “I make it that Krevin, who was an ingenious man, mind you, engineered things to get hold o’ that Chinese gim-crack of the lady’s, knowing such things is worth—well, no end of money—and

took Getch in with him, and between 'em they got Sol Cousins to do the actual stealing. For why?—Cousins was an uncommon clever cracksman! He——”

“Did you know him?” I asked. “Personally?”

“Spoken to the man a time or two,” he replied. “Seen him—many a time. I see him get five years, one time, at Exeter Assizes. Many years since that—he’s been put away since then, more than once. But I do know that he was used by Krevin—for various jobs. And, as I say, I reckon that in this last affair, when he’d done his job, Krevin and Getch done him in—just as Krevin’s done in Getch. And, of course, Krevin’ll get done in himself—if that Hindu chap as you spoke of hasn’t done him in already! And that reminds me—when you and missie here gets safe ashore, you’ll tell the police that Krevin’s on yonder island, and all about it?”

“I ought to!” I answered, not quite knowing what he wanted me to say.

“I’ve no objection, young master,” he remarked coolly. “Tell 'em, and welcome! But I relies on you to say no more about me than that I was a kind-hearted man whose steamer was a-passing that island, on its way from Chalport to Booloyne, and that seeing your signals o’ distress I stopped, took you off, treated you good, and put you ashore—’nough said, then, I think, master?”

“Quite enough, and I’ll say it!” said I. “I shan’t say anything about your calling there to meet Getch and Krevin.”

“No, I wouldn’t!” he remarked, almost indifferently. “’Twouldn’t do no good. And I may tell you that though I shouldn’t ha’ minded doing a bit o’ business with either on 'em, I shouldn’t ha’ taken either aboard! I went ashore with that there gun in my arm so as to be able to talk straight, if need be. A bit o’ business, even if it is free-trading, is all right. But when it comes to murder and such-like——”

He shook his head, and presently left me. It was now drawing towards evening, and we were well out into the Channel, and there we continued to steam slowly and aimlessly until dusk fell, and darkness began to come on, and the coast gradually faded from sight. We went about then, making for the spit of land near Summerstead, and I had to act as pilot and show them where the channel lay—I had often been across those waters with one or other of the Middlebourne fishermen, and I knew them well enough. And just before ten o’clock, at which time, as far as I could make out, it was about forty-eight hours since Pepita and I were carried away from the Shooting Star, we were set down on the mainland again, and, bidding a hasty whispered farewell to our recent companions, hurried along the beach towards the neighbouring village.

Most of the houses in Summerstead were in darkness, but there were lights in the windows of the one I wanted—the Mermaid Inn. I knew the landlord there, Jim

Perrin; he owned a horse and trap. We burst in on him as he was about to fasten up his doors and windows for the night, and at sight of me he dropped a bunch of keys and let out a gasp of astonishment.

“God bless my life and soul!” he exclaimed. “That’s never you, Master Ben! And Miss Marigold! I hope you’re safe and sound?—there’s been a nice to-do about you two, all along the coast, and inland as well!”

“Perrin!” I said, disregarding all that. “We want to be driven to Middlebourne as soon as possible! You’ve got a horse and dog-cart, haven’t you? It’s important—we must see the police——”

He caught at my meaning instantly, and hurried into his kitchen, where I heard him giving orders to the potman. And just as quickly he was back again, and pouring out his news, first looking us well over with intense curiosity.

“Well, you don’t seem much the worse for wherever you’ve been!” he remarked. “But I can assure you there’s been a fine hue-and-cry in all directions: I’ve been over to Middlebourne this afternoon and heard a lot about it. Queer goings-on in that region, Master Ben! When you and Miss Pepita there didn’t land home two days ago, they thought you must ha’ taken a boat out and got drowned—but all the boats was accounted for. There was a deal of searching for you that night, all round; then things got complicated, like, for that butler of Miss Ellingham’s, Carsie, came to the police and reported that their Indian man—Mandhu something—had disappeared, and, of course, everybody mixed up his disappearance with yours. And in the morning that detective chap, Cherry, went over to Northbourne Manor and got Major Cottam to bring those bloodhounds of his, and they put ’em on to your track—yours and Miss Pepita’s—gave ’em some of your clothes to smell, I did hear, and so—right away!”

“Was it right away, though?” I asked. “Did they track us?”

“Oh, I believe they did—but you’ll know better than I do,” he answered. “Anyway, they crossed the fields and over the headlands and the river to Wredlesham, and there they made for the front door of the Shooting Star. And the front door was fast, and the back door was fast, and the side door was fast—not a soul about the place! It’s been broken into since then, but there was nobody there—all deserted, d’ye see? And since then the police has been doing this, that, and t’other—searching high and low, and telegraphing and telephoning, and looking everywhere!”

“Except in the right direction!” said I, bitterly. “They haven’t paid much attention to that!”

“And where may it have been?” he asked inquisitively. “For unless you’ve been

up in the clouds, or far out at sea——”

“I’ll tell you as we go along,” I answered. “The great thing is to get to Middlebourne—and to the police! There’s work for them—where we came from!”

He drove us to Middlebourne himself, urging his horse faster when he had heard what I thought fit to tell him. And as we reached the middle of the village we were aware of a great commotion going on down at the shore, where there was a flare of lamps and a babel of voices, and towards this Perrin turned his horse’s head.

CHAPTER XXII

THE SCARLET PATCH

It seemed to me that everybody in Middlebourne was down there on the beach; certainly all the people most concerned with Pepita and myself were there—Keziah, Captain Marigold, Cherry, Veller, Miss Ellingham, with Bryce at her heels and Carsie not far away. Tom Scripture and his lad, and perhaps more interesting and significant than any of them, just then at any rate, Major Cottam and his two bloodhounds. And there were all the fishermen in the place; they, under Tom Scripture's directions, were fitting out a big boat by the light of glaring naphtha lamps. But they, like all the rest, crowded around us as we tumbled out of Perrin's trap, and for some minutes they all talked together, pouring out questions innumerable and confusing us beyond chance of intelligent reply. I turned hopelessly from one to another, and Miss Ellingham, who had the trick of commanding attention, raised her voice.

"Let the lad speak!" she exclaimed. "How can he get in a word if you're all crowding on him in that way! Where have you been, Ben, you and Pepita?—and where have you sprung from now?"

I looked from the eager faces about me into the darkness beyond and pointed in the direction of our recent prison.

"We've come from Melsie Island!" I said. "Got away through the kindness of a man who came near it with his steamer this afternoon. We were kidnapped at the Shooting Star by Getch and Krevin" (I wasn't going to call him Uncle Joseph any longer, after the events of that day!) "and carried off to the island two nights ago. And listen, because you must do something—quick! Getch is dead!—murdered!—and Krevin's somewhere on the island still, and he's armed. And Mandhu Khan's there, too—I believe he's after Krevin, or Krevin's after him—I don't know which, but I guess there'll be more murder if you don't get across there, though very likely there's been more murder done already. And your vase is there, Miss Ellingham, and your Indian images, and they're all smashed to pieces, and I've collected the pieces and hidden them. And that's all—except to add that I think some of you might have come across there to search for us before now!—you don't know what we've gone through!"

I threw some indignation and bitterness into those last words, and I got a murmur of sympathetic assent from the fringe of the crowd, and a backing-up from one of the fishermen, who turned looks of contempt on the principals.

"What did I tell 'ee?" he vociferated triumphantly. "Didn't I say as how they med be found across to Melsie Island?—didn't I say 'twas a likely spot?—and didn't ye

all turn up your noses at the notion, and say there was nothen there to goo for? Didn't I——”

But Cherry had got hold of my elbow and was drawing me aside, and Captain Marigold had got Pepita away and was questioning her.

“Why did those two kidnap you, Ben?” asked Cherry. “Put it in a word or two—we must get a straight line about things!”

“Because we dropped on Krevin at the Shooting Star,” I answered. “Tracked him there! Then, of course, they locked us up, and afterwards, at night, they carried us off to the island—that’s why!”

“And the stolen things?—the vase and the images?—they had them?” he suggested.

“Krevin had them—has had them all along,” I said. “They went to the island, he and Getch, so they could get away with them. But Krevin’s had an accident with them to-day—fell over a wall, and smashed the lot. Still, the pieces are there. Hidden—by me. And there’s some mystery about those images, and it’s my belief Mandhu Khan is there because of it.”

“He didn’t go with you?—he’s not in league with Krevin?” he asked.

“He didn’t come there with us—I don’t know what his relations are with Krevin,” I replied. “I believe he’s tracking Krevin. I think he’s a boat somewhere on the island, and he’ll probably get off in it, if you aren’t quick across. Why were you starting out now?”

“We got a message, not long since, from an airman,” he answered. “He’d flown along the coast line this afternoon, to Calmouth, and in passing Melsie Island he saw two figures waving to him——”

“That was Pepita and me,” I said.

“Evidently! And after landing at Calmouth he read the account of your disappearance in the Kingshaven evening papers, so he put two and two together and telephoned to the police here,” continued Cherry. “But now—you say Getch is dead?—murdered! Who murdered him?”

“Oh, I don’t know!” I exclaimed. “I’m fed up with that sort of thing and getting callous about it! Either Krevin or Mandhu Khan murdered him—early this morning, I think. And I guess that by this time either Krevin’ll have settled the Hindu, or the Hindu’ll have settled him—and you’d better get off there if you want to do things!”

“We’re going at once,” he said, “and you’ll come with us, of course. Major Cottam’s going to take his bloodhounds. Now listen—is there anything there, any garments, belongings, or so on, of Krevin’s or Mandhu Khan’s that he can put the hounds on to?”

"There are some things of Krevin's, and some rugs he lay on, in an old tower there," I answered, remembering that these things had been untouched by the fire. "I don't know of anything belonging to Mandhu Khan."

He muttered something about Krevin being the man he wanted, and went off to Major Cottam. Miss Ellingham, who, with Carsie and Keziah, had been listening to the conversation between us, turned on me.

"What did you really see of Mandhu Khan, Ben?" she asked anxiously. "I can't think that he's associated with all this murder business! Tell me!"

I told her all I knew of the Hindu. And what I told her seemed to relieve her a good deal. She nodded at Carsie.

"I think I begin to see through it!—as regards Mandhu Khan," she said. "If Carsie had only told me that he once saw Mandhu Khan worshipping those images _____"

"Bowing and scraping before them, ma'am, he most certainly was," interrupted Carsie, respectfully. "Same as if they were live things, ma'am!—made me feel uncomfortable to see him!"

"Yes, well, if I'd known that, I should have either given them to him, outright, or removed them," continued Miss Ellingham. "I daresay Mandhu Khan recognised them as sacred things, and I feel sure that having found out, somehow, that Krevin had stolen them, or become possessed of them, he's tracked Krevin in order to regain them. They're certainly of no intrinsic value—as the Kang-he vase is."

I thought of the curious cavities in the broken images—and kept my tongue quiet, on that point. But on another I spoke.

"Do you know where you got those images, Miss Ellingham?" I asked.

"Oh, yes!" she answered, readily—and carelessly. "They were given me, like lots of things I have, by a patient of mine, in India. They'd once belonged to some great Indian prince—rajah or Maharajah. But I'm sure they're of no value in themselves—it's a superstitious reverence that Mandhu Khan has for them."

Cherry called me just then: the boat and its crew were ready. As I started forward to join them, Keziah, wonderfully silent for her up to that point, gripped my elbow.

"Here's your best overcoat, Ben," she whispered. "When I heard they were going to seek for you, I brought it down. And Ben!—there's a packet of sandwiches in one pocket and a drop of good port wine in a bottle in another—and Ben, if you come across *him* over there, tell him from me that if he ever dares to darken our door again——"

She shook her head, as if mere words were insufficient to express her feelings as

regards Uncle Joseph, and I, leaving Pepita in charge of her father, after having openly kissed her right in front of Bryce Ellingham (which episode afforded me huge satisfaction and delight) hastened into the boat: a moment later, we were shoved off by a score of brawny fellows, who doubtless wished they were going with us. But we had a quite sufficient force—Veller and his sergeant, Cherry, Major Cottam and his hounds, Tom Scripture, and three or four fishermen, one of whom was a man whose small boat had disappeared the previous night, and who was anxious to see if it had been stolen by Mandhu Khan, who, of course, must have had some means of crossing over to the island.

I got Cherry into a corner of the stern, away from the rest, when we were fairly under way, and told him more than I had told before, and especially about my discovery of the broken articles.

“Miss Ellingham,” I remarked, “said just now that those Indian images aren’t of any value in themselves, and that Mandhu Khan has only gone after them because they’re probably sacred objects to him. But how does she know that? Perhaps they’re of more value than she thinks? Anyway, there’s one feature about both that’s queer—at least, I thought so. They’re not hollow, but in each, now that they’re broken, there’s a cavity. It’s as if the cavities had held some small objects. And I’m sure from what I saw that while one of the images had been broken when Krevin fell over the wall, on his bag, the other had been deliberately cut in two with a knife! It’s softish stuff those images are made of.”

“Odd!” murmured Cherry. “How big are these cavities?”

“Big enough to hold—well, say a thrush’s egg,” I replied. “Smoothed out, too. I’m certain they’ve held something or other. But you’ll see for yourself when we reach the island—I hid the bag, where I can lay hands on it, any time.”

It was nearing midnight when Tom Scripture and his mates brought us up on the north beach—not very far away from the old landing-stage at which, forty-eight hours before, Pepita and I had arrived with Getch and Krevin. Once ashore, we held a conference, in which I, as the one man of knowledge and experience, figured pretty prominently. I pointed out to the rest that as far as I knew, Krevin and the Hindu were still on the island; that Krevin was certainly, and Mandhu Khan probably, in possession of firearms, and that each, if still bent on mischief, was in a position to hold us at a disadvantage while the darkness lasted. Eventually we decided to do nothing in the way of search until dawn broke—but in the meantime, leaving a couple of armed fishermen in charge of the boat, I took my companions to the rocks by which Getch’s dead body lay, and stood by while some of them examined it. I had said nothing to Cherry about the gold which had once been in

Getch's pockets, and I was not going to—it had served an excellent purpose, that gold, and the fact of its existence was going to be a secret for ever between me and the friendly skipper. And nobody asked any questions as to whether, at my first discovery of him, I had found anything on Getch: the only observation made about him was one by Major Cottam, who had had experience of India and the East in his time, and remarked to Cherry that Getch's death wound looked to him as if it had been made with some particular sort of knife carried by a certain tribe or sect of Hindus.

Cherry was puzzled about Mandhu Khan, and as he and I sat on the beach, a little apart from the others, waiting for the dawn, he made me tell him, over again, about the coming of the Hindu to the window of our prison at the Shooting Star, and about my first knowledge of his presence on the island.

"I daresay there's a good deal in Miss Ellingham's notion that Mandhu Khan has been after those images because of a superstitious reverence for them," he remarked. "But that doesn't explain everything. If Mandhu Khan killed Getch—which seems uncommonly likely—was it because he thought Getch might have the images on him?"

"Can't think of any other reason," I answered. "Nor of any other for his tracking Krevin—as he certainly was doing."

"And you think it was Mandhu Khan who made Getch's boat useless?" he asked.

"Who else?" I said with conviction. "Getch wouldn't make a hole in his own boat! And Krevin wouldn't, either—he might have wanted it. It must have been Mandhu Khan's work, that—and he must have a boat himself, at the far end of the island—how else would he get here or get away again?"

"Oh, there's no doubt he stole a boat from Middlebourne last night," said Cherry. "One disappeared, anyway, and he must have got it."

"And he's probably away again in it, by this time," I said. "There was nothing to stop him!"

"Except Krevin!" he remarked. "Don't forget Krevin! You say Krevin had an automatic pistol on him? However—we'll get those bloodhounds to work, soon as it's light."

The dawn came at last—right across the expanse of grey water that stretched between us and the mainland, north-east of the island. And as the first gleams of morning increased in strength above the edge of the island hills we stirred into action, going up to the tower first, in order to put the bloodhounds on the scent of Uncle Joseph Krevin. I was weary enough as the result of my adventure during what was

practically a continuous stretch of three nights and days, but I confess I felt a thrill of excitement at the notion of a man-hunt. And when, the hounds having been introduced to certain articles of Krevin's ownership, still remaining in the tower, they made a line out-door again and towards the ruins of the old abbey, I woke up to the joyful possibility of seeing the hypocritical old villain tracked down by these creatures, whose big, solemn-looking heads, red eyes, and formidable bulk would, I know, strike terror to his heart.

The hounds went slowly, but with sure readiness, across the spaces amongst the masses of fallen masonry and through the ruins until they came to the gap in the wall above the moat whereat I had made my discovery the previous afternoon. They went over that, and into the dip below, across that, after a little hesitancy, and then into the covert beyond. And having heard from Major Cottam that it is in the nature of these uncanny animals to work slowly, and feeling sure that we should not lose touch with them, I drew Cherry back when the others went on, and led him to the spot whereat I had secreted the old bag. And there, being by ourselves, I took out the pieces of the Kang-he vase and the broken images and laid them on the bank before him. He paid no attention to the remains of the vase, beyond to remark that he supposed they could be put together again, but he looked long and carefully at the other things.

"Those holes look as if they'd been made on purpose, Ben," he remarked thoughtfully. "It isn't as if they were caused by a sudden cooling of the figures when they were fashioned. Seems to me as if there'd been something in these holes—as if the images were merely, well, shall we say receptacles for the something? But this much is evident—that particular figure has been broken accidentally, no doubt, when the vase was, but this hasn't! This has been cut in two, partly, at any rate, with a strong knife—not over keen-edged."

"That's what I thought," I said. "The marks are plain."

"Well, and that helps us to reconstruct things," he continued. "Let's put it this way—to get out of the way of the Hindu, Krevin takes his bag, containing the Kang-he vase and the two images, and sets off from the tower. Getting over the wall of this moat, he has a fall, and, being a clumsily built man, comes down on his bag, and smashes its contents. He opens the bag, to ascertain the extent of the damage, and he finds that the vase is broken, and one of the images—*one*, mind you, not the other! But in a cavity in the one that's broken he finds something that he never expected to find—something rare—something valuable—and he immediately partly cuts, partly breaks open, the other image, and finds—probably its counterpart! What it is, what these things are, we don't know, but they satisfy him so much that

he pockets them, chucks the broken vase, the images, and the bag aside as of no further interest or value to him, and goes on his way! Now let's see if the hounds are still on his track!"

We went up through the covert. When we emerged on the other side, hounds and men were still going steadily ahead. They were half-way across the moorland by that time, progressing towards the cliffs that overlooked the south beach: we went after them.

"This is the very way by which I saw the Hindu go yesterday afternoon," I remarked, as we crossed the undulating surface. "He was good to follow. He'd got English clothes on, but he was wearing his turban, and it has a good-sized patch of bright scarlet in it."

"Scarlet's a very noticeable colour," said Cherry, nodding. "You can see it a mile off! I've often thought what asses they were in the old days to make soldiers wear _____"

He suddenly paused, clutching my arm and pointing to something in a deep gully on our right. And, following the direction of his fingers, I saw the very thing we were talking about—a patch of scarlet, bright and glowing, in the heather, thirty yards away. Without another word, but exchanging significant glances, we crept gently and slowly towards this scarlet patch. We moved, but it was motionless. And suddenly Cherry moved more quickly, and I after him, and presently we found ourselves standing by the Hindu, who lay on his back, his hands clutching at his breast, his lips slightly parted, and his eyes, open but glazed, staring straight upwards at the morning sky.

CHAPTER XXIII

FAMILY HONOUR

The bloodhounds, their owner, and the men following them had swept on before us, on another line of route, to a point overlooking the headlands and the beach. But there they had turned, and now they were coming back in our direction. There were many great boulders of grey limestone or granite outcropping from the heather at that point, and at one of these, big and broad enough to conceal a man, they came to a momentary halt, some fifteen yards away from us. Cherry and I exchanged glances: the same thought had occurred to both, simultaneously.

“It was from behind that rock that Krevin shot this poor fellow!” said Cherry. “He must have seen Mandhu Khan tracking him, turned in his own tracks, came back there, and intercepted him. Anyhow, here he is—all up with him, whatever he was after!”

He motioned Major Cottam and the others to come to us; presently we were all grouped round the dead man, staring thoughtfully at him. Then Cherry and the two policemen began to examine him: he had been shot clean through the heart, they said, and must have died instantaneously. And at that my memory went back to the events of the previous afternoon, and I decided that the shot which I had heard from this part of the island, and had then taken for a signal to the steamer, had been nothing of the sort—that, without doubt, was the shot which killed Mandhu Khan: however wily he might be, Krevin had been too cunning for him, and from being the hunted had become the hunter.

There was nothing on the Hindu's dead body that gave us any clue—to anything. He had a little money, in silver and copper; there was also, in a queer little box, a supply of some stuff which Major Cottam, learned in such matters, declared to be opium. But he had no weapons—no revolver, no knife. And once more the question came up—who killed Getch? It was no use speculating and debating on that, however; the immediate necessity was to go on with the search for Krevin, and leaving the fishermen to see about removing Mandhu Khan's body to the north beach, the rest of us went after the bloodhounds, which, while we examined the Hindu and his surroundings, had been kept back behind the big rock from the cover of which Krevin had no doubt fired on his victim.

The bloodhounds went on their slow, steady, assured way—it gave me a feeling of uncanniness to watch them work. They went from the rock back again to the headlands, but in a slightly different direction: this made Cherry remark to me, in an aside that it showed that Krevin, having shot Mandhu Khan, made no attempt to go

near his dead body, but immediately sheered off, probably bent on saving himself by securing the Hindu's boat. And certainly, judging by the doings of the bloodhounds, he made for the sea, following a track along the cliffs for some distance, but keeping steadily to the valleys and gullies which lay between its edge and the middle, more elevated, part of the island. Once the bloodhounds seemed somewhat at fault, and hesitated, but here their extraordinary sagacity was quickly manifested; they came back slowly and carefully along their original track, and picked up the scent again, and went on in another direction. And eventually, without further break, they took us to the far western point of Melsie Island, and down a rugged path in the side of the cliffs to a stretch of fine white sand that lay beneath, and thence to a tiny cove, set deep in the rocks, and then on its smooth flooring we saw the marks of the place whereat a boat had rested and from which it had been dragged down to the surf. And at the edge of the water that stage of the man-hunt came to an abrupt end. The bloodhounds whimpered and cried restlessly a little—but Uncle Joseph Krevin had set forth on a voyage in which they could not follow. None of us had any doubt as to what had happened. He had circumvented the Hindu, shot him dead, made for his boat, and got away in it. Knowing his wiliness, his cunning, his ready adaptability to circumstances as I did, I might have been excused for suggesting that in spite of the evidence he was still somewhere on the island. But I could not doubt the sagacity of the bloodhounds—he was gone! The only question that arose in my mind was—when did he go? We had been all about these waters in the soft-hearted man's vessel all the previous later afternoon and during the whole of the light hours of the evening that followed, and, for reasons of their own, the men on the steamer had kept an unusually sharp look-out. But we had never sighted anything in the shape of craft—big or little—from the time Pepita and I went on board to that in which we were set ashore near Summerstead. I could only conclude that for reasons of his own Uncle Joseph Krevin had laid low in that cove until after dark and had then dragged the boat down to the sea, pushed off, and gone away under cover of the night.

But my companions, especially the seafarers, were discussing another question. With them it was not *when* but *where*! Where had he gone?—or, rather, where had he intended or hoped to go? We knew that he had got away in the boat which Mandhu Khan had stolen from the beach at Middlebourne; knew, at any rate, as far as anybody could know anything. Now that boat was a very small one, a mere skiff, of the sort used on our coasts for going out from shore to the larger fishing boats lying at anchor in the roadways; a bit of a thing propelled by oars, and without mast or sail. He would have to pull himself—and he was a big, heavy man, not, one would think, used to violent exercise, and, therefore, incapable of rowing any great

distance, even in a smooth sea. (I could have added to these conclusions another—that as he suffered from some sort of heart affection, he was not very likely to make much progress—but I said nothing, preferring, for various reasons, to hold my tongue.) Accordingly, argued somebody, it was not likely that he would try to cross to France, that was unthinkable; the French coast, at its nearest point, was seventy to eighty miles distant. Some thought he would make for Kingshaven, landing in the darkness on some lonely part of the beach outside the town, and trusting to luck to get away from the big, busy port by rail. But others, going on the lines that he escaped from Melsie Island by night, argued that he would make for the nearest point on the mainland and that he would be helped by the incoming tide to get there: once there, they said, he could strike inland, covered by the darkness, reach some adjacent line of railway and get away by an early morning train to London.

The nearest point of land to that outlying corner of Melsie Island was Fliman's End. There was excellent landing there; the country beyond was of a nature that would afford good cover for a fugitive, and without touching any village or hamlet, it was possible for anybody well acquainted with the neighbourhood to get away unobserved from the shore at that point to a line of railway several miles inland. For Fliman's End, therefore, we determined to make, and hurried back to our own boat on the north beach. We left Mandhu Khan's dead body in a niche of the rocks, side by side with Getch—the police authorities, said Veller and his sergeant, would have to come over specially to see *them*! But Cherry and I went back to the moat and fetched the bag and its contents of smashed vase and broken images—and set sail again still wondering about the mystery of the idols in pursuit of which the unfortunate Hindu had evidently sacrificed his life.

It was a bright and beautiful summer morning, that, and there was a smart breeze blowing off the sea that carried us rapidly towards Fliman's End, four miles away. We were about half-way over, and just then crossing a stretch of water known to the local fishermen as Middlebourne Moorings when one of our company, keeping a look out forward, sighted something floating on the sea, which something, when we got closer to it, proved to be an oar. Now we had, on board, the owner of the boat taken away from the beach at Middlebourne on the night of Mandhu Khan's disappearance, and he immediately recognised this oar as his property: his name, in fact, was branded on it. And we had not sailed much further when we were aware of a black speck about a mile away, between us and Fliman's End. That turned out to be the missing boat, dancing lightly and aimlessly on the waves. But it was an empty boat . . . and whatever the rest of my companions thought, I knew then that retribution had fallen on Uncle Joseph Krevin. And before ever we reached it and

the men hauled it alongside, I had settled and adopted my own theory as to what had happened. The exertion of pulling even a small craft through a smooth sea had been too much for a man who suffered from a weak heart, and he had collapsed and fallen overboard, possibly in an endeavour to save the oar which had slipped from his hand as faintness overcame him. Anyway, there was no Uncle Joseph Krevin there. But there was his coat . . . familiar enough to me. It lay, neatly folded and bundled, in the stern: evidently he had taken it off and laid it aside before taking up the oars. It was handed over the side to Cherry, and Cherry immediately began to search the pockets. He took out of them a miscellaneous collection of things, and paid no particular attention to any, until he came to a pocket-book, an old, much worn thing of strong leather, tied about with a length of whip-cord. There was something bulky in that, and we all held our breath while he got it out—a piece of wash-leather, out of the folds of which there presently rolled into his palm, their facets flashing in wondrous brilliance as the rays of the morning sun caught them, a couple of marvellous diamonds—of a fire and quality, said Major Cottam, five minutes later, such as he had never seen in all his experience in lands where diamonds are common as walnuts. And though we said nothing, I think Cherry and I knew exactly, and at the same moment, where those diamonds sprang from. They had been concealed in Miss Ellingham's images!—and when Krevin fell and broke one image the first diamond was revealed to him. Then he purposely cut and broke the other image, and found the second diamond, and knew, that if he had lost one prize in smashing the Kang-he vase, his accident had yielded him a veritable Golconda.

We carried the diamonds to Miss Ellingham, and thereupon arose all manner of speculations. But they did not concern me, and Keziah turned up her nose at them. We were only interested just then in Uncle Joseph Krevin. Nothing more was heard of him. His body was never recovered. Eventually, for legal purposes, his death was presumed. But dead though he was, and lying deep in Middlebourne Moorings, he caused us some trouble. For the old sinner left money behind him, and as we were next-of-kin we had to administer his estate, and the money came to us. Keziah would have none of it. We gave it, every penny, to the local charitable institutions—all but some twenty or thirty pounds. That Keziah ear-marked for a certain purpose. After all, she said, Uncle Joseph had not been really proved guilty of the crimes alleged against him, and he might be more or less or quite innocent of them; in her opinion that brown-faced Mandy Kann man, as she called him, was just as likely to have cut Getch's throat as Krevin was, and if Krevin did shoot Mandy Kann it might have been in self-defence—who could say? And anyway, Uncle Joseph, when all

was said and done, was a Krevin, and related by marriage to the Heckitts, and if he couldn't be buried with his forefathers he could at any rate have a proper memorial monument amongst theirs in Middlebourne churchyard, where two or three score of Krevinses and Heckitts were already commemorated. So the monument rose, and Keziah, after a great deal of searching of Holy Scripture, made the mason carve on it a text, or, rather, the reference to a text—Isaiah lvii. 20. She said that it would do a lot of people a heap of good to turn to that text in their family Bibles, and to meditate on it.

Pepita and I were married in Middlebourne Church some five years later, when I had served my articles, passed my examinations, and become a duly admitted limb of the Law. All the folk of the neighbourhood came to see us married, and the churchyard was packed with well-wishers who stared so much at us—we were said to be a very good-looking couple, for Pepita was more charming than ever, and I had improved as I grew older—that we became shy, and scarcely knew which way to look. But you may be sure we did not turn our eyes on Uncle Joseph's marble cenotaph: Pepita and I had known quite enough of Uncle Joseph Krevin in real life.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The Kang-He Vase* by J. S. (Joseph Smith) Fletcher]