

The GREEN DRAGON



J. Jefferson Farjeon

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THE GREEN DRAGON

By
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AUTHOR OF "The Master Criminal."

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CHAPTER ONE

A tramp, sitting by the roadside, heard the crash and the faint scream that accompanied it; but he took no particular notice, and his scornful, almost humorous apathy was the keynote of his condition. What was a crash or a scream to a ragged, down-at-heel fellow, with an empty flask by his side?

"Blimy," he reflected, "ain't I once seed a 'ole preseshun o' helefants go by, with pink bowler 'ats and walkin' sticks?" He scoffed. "These things ain't 'appenin'!"

Nevertheless, after a few minutes, he turned his head and stared up the lane from which the crash and the scream had come. Then he turned his head again, and stared down the lane in the opposite direction. His eyes reaped nothing, but on his ears fell a faint, leathery sound, as of an inn-sign creaking.

The sound was not continuous; intermittently, when a breeze rose and sighed through the air, it broke the stillness of the afternoon. And, suddenly, the tramp shivered.

For the moment, however, we are less interested in the tramp than in two young people who, a quarter-of-a-mile up the road, were more immediately connected with the crash and the scream.

One was a girl, to look at whom reminded one of sunlight, although just now the sunlight was under a cloud. The other was a young man, to look at whom was temporarily impossible because, besides being under a cloud, he was under a motor-car. He remained under the motor-car for five minutes during which the girl watched him anxiously.

"Well?" she queried, when at last he emerged.

"Afraid I'm beaten, Joyce," he replied, ruefully. "Something I don't know the name of has done something I can't make out, and two wheels are firmly embedded in the ditch."

"Why do they make ditches?" pouted the girl.

"No motorist knows," sighed the young man. "The only consolation, dear, is that we seem to have done almost as much damage to the telegraph pole as the telegraph pole has done to us. I confess, that pleases me."

"They did things better at Gretna Green," murmured the girl, after a pause.

"Well, I believe accidents happened, even at Gretna Green," he answered, "but I admit, old thing, we are in a bit of a mess. I say, Joyce—are you sorry you married me?"

"Goose," she retorted. "Of course I'm not! *That* makes up for everything."

"I congratulate myself!" he laughed. "I've held your love, dear, for three whole hours. I believe that's rather good for a modern husband."

They stared at the wrecked two-seater in which they had set out with such joyous daring in the morning, and which had been designed to put another fifty miles between them and possible pursuit before the evening. All around them lay soft, golden silence, unbroken save for an occasional, distant, rubbing sound, like metal grumbling for oil.

"What is it?" she asked, suddenly.

"Don't know," he answered. "Isn't there some bird or other that makes a noise like a nut?"

"Don't be funny, Jim! I'm serious. What do you suppose it is?"

"I haven't a notion, darling. But does it really matter?"

"I don't suppose so."

He looked at her curiously. "Joyce, you're not developing nerves, are you?" he challenged.

"No, I don't think so," she rejoined, smiling. "But—I'd better admit it since you and I have sworn never to keep the tiniest secret from each other—I *do* feel a bit queer."

"Hooray!" he exclaimed. "Not because you feel queer, but because you've admitted it! We're beginning well, you and I. Married three hours—still love each other—and no secrets yet! I'll admit something to *you*, in a minute."

"What?"

"No, yours first. Why are you feeling a bit queer, Joyce?"

She hesitated, then smiled suddenly.

"I'm foolish," she said. "I daresay I got shaken up just a little when we bumped into the telegraph pole. And, then, even the steadiest girl would be just a little ruffled by an elopement, wouldn't she, Jim?"

"Of course she would! Why, a funny little fellow runs up and down my spine every time I think of it—and I'm a man!"

"You are a silly, dear old thing!" she laughed. "Yes, I am glad I've married you!"

"Ditto. That's agreed. Let's get on to the 'but'."

"There isn't any but. Only—somehow or other—these lanes seem so quiet and lonely and, while you were under the car, one or two little things scared me."

"What sort of things?" he demanded. "Did you think you heard your guardian's Rolls Royce?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. But once I heard someone—a man—burst into laughter a little way down the lane—and he seemed to be talking to himself so oddly."

"Perhaps it was just an old tramp," suggested Jim, unconscious of the accuracy of his guess. "They often talk to themselves, those fellows—got nobody else to talk to, I suppose. Anyway, that wasn't anything to worry about. What else?"

"A blind man and his dog," she answered, almost shamefacedly.

She paused, while Jim raised an admonishing finger, and wagged it at her.

"Bottom of the class for courage, Mrs. Cresswell!" he exclaimed. "I say, doesn't that sound jolly—'Mrs. Cresswell'! But what on earth is wrong with a blind man and his dog, my child? You know, I think you really *are* developing nerves!"

"It almost seems like it," she admitted. "Wives get them, don't they? Anyhow, Jim, this blind man wasn't quite like an ordinary blind man. I heard his stick tapping along the road, and then the dog dashed up to me—ahead of him—and licked me. I put a new sixpence into its tin, for luck!"

"Well, that was a good omen."

"Ye-es. I meant it to be. But when I saw the blind man, he seemed somehow to wipe out the good omen. He—he gave me the creeps."

"Why, goose?"

"Don't know. He just did. Don't know why I love you. I just do. Anyway, that's all. And now, I'm ready to hear *your* confession."

"Ah, mine," murmured Jim, and frowned slightly. "Well, mine's nothing much either, but it's just a bit of a nuisance. I'm afraid I've crooked my leg a bit, Joyce."

"Jim!" she cried, and ran to him.

"Not serious," he assured her, quickly. "Honour bright. But I've an idea we will find that your husband has a slight limp, and that maybe his wife's waist will be useful to him as he hobbles to the nearest inn."

"Shoulder," she corrected, practically. "Now that someone else was in trouble, she felt her nerve returning. "Can you stand up? Let me see."

He experimented, and the result was fairly satisfactory. As he had said, he was not badly hurt, but the idea of a comfortable inn appealed to him as a necessity as well as a luxury, and they decided that their best course would be to seek the nearest establishment and put up there for the night.

“Oh, Jim!” she exclaimed, flushing a little. “I do hope it will be a lovely inn! I hope it will be the kind of inn—it ought to be—for us.”

“If it isn’t, we’ll make it so!” he replied, optimistically. “The immediate question before us is—shall we wait on the off-chance of getting a lift in this trafficless district, or shall we gather up our loins, and walk?”

“Can you walk?”

“I can hobble.”

“Poor Jim! I’ll tell you what. Let me go and find the inn, while you rest here, and then come back for you.”

He shook his head vigorously.

“I can’t decide whether that suggestion is more plucky or puerile,” he observed.

“But I’m not afraid any more.”

“Aren’t you? Well, I am! You don’t suppose, my dear, I’m going to let you wander through these lanes alone? Why, you might bump into your guardian’s Rolls Royce, if he’s really decided to come out on the war-path, or you might meet some more blind men and tramps—hullo!” he broke off, abruptly. “Talk of the devil! Here comes one!”

CHAPTER TWO

The tramp who approached was not a fearsome object, but he certainly was odd. He wore a broad grin—nothing else he wore was so complete—and he was chuckling to himself as though he were enjoying some private joke. But when his eyes fell on the young couple seated on a grassy mound by the crippled car, he sobered slightly, and ceased his chuckling.

He stared at them without apology, his expression changing from amusement to intense interest. In the distance, the inn-sign creaked its faint accompaniment.

“Good afternoon,” opened Jim, politely.

“‘Allo,” replied the tramp. “Wot’s ‘appened ‘ere?”

“Nothing extraordinary or unusual,” answered Jim, still pleasantly. “Just a common accident. Can you tell me if there’s any hotel near here?”

“‘Otel?” queried the tramp, and suddenly began to laugh again. “Oh, no!” he guffawed, and doubled up.

“What an odd creature!” whispered Joyce.

“Yes—he rather appeals to me,” Jim whispered back. “A bit of a comic.”

They waited patiently till the paroxysm was over, and then Jim repeated his question.

“Are we far from an inn?” he asked.

“I dunno,” answered the tramp. “I dunno nothin’. ‘Cos why, guv’nor?” He paused, and then bent forward, lowering his voice while imparting the great secret. “I’m drunk. And a man wot’s drunk, ‘e sees wot ain’t there.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Arsk a policeman.”

“Well, that’s capital logic,” smiled Jim, “but have you seen an inn that isn’t there? It may do for us. We’ll take the risk.”

“Yus, I ‘ave,” returned the tramp, solemnly, while Jim and Joyce studied him with increasing interest. “I seen it. And I seen *other* things wot ain’t there, too.”

“What other things?” demanded Jim, trying to make up his mind whether the ragamuffin should be taken seriously or not. Drunk he might be, but Jim had an odd conviction that there was rather more than the bottle behind the fellow’s attitude.

“Wot other things?” repeated the tramp. “Well, wot abart a dragon? I seen a dragon wot ain’t there. I seen a yellow eye wot ain’t there. ‘Cos why. Nex’ time I went, it was a *red* eye. That was enuff for me, *I* tell yer. And then I sees a blind man and his bloomin’ dawg, and I don’t believe *they* was there. And now I sees you and a busted car and a busted post—and, swipe me, I don’t b’leeve you ain’t there.” He made a gesture, as though to sweep the whole of Reality off the board. “Nothin’ ain’t there. ‘Cos why? I tell you, I’m drunk.”

“What *is* he talking about?” whispered Joyce.

“Whatever it is,” replied Jim, in a low voice, “I mean to find out.”

The tramp had squatted somewhat abruptly on the ground, and was now regarding his empty flask with humorous pathos. He unscrewed the top, inverted the flask, and shook it eloquently. Then, with a wink, he observed:

“Why, guv’nor, if I was ter see this full o’ whisky, I wouldn’t b’leeve it.”

“Nor would I, if it remained full,” responded Jim, “though I’ve an idea, my man, you’re not really half so drunk as you say you are.”

“I *am* drunk,” retorted the tramp, indignantly. There was a queer ring of apprehension in his indignation which Jim was quick to note. “There ain’t no other way of ‘splainin’ it.”

“Did you go to the inn to try and fill your flask?” asked Jim.

“Sherlock ‘omes,” answered the tramp.

“To the inn that isn’t there,” continued Jim. “That was an odd thing to do, wasn’t it?”

The tramp eyed his interrogator speculatively.

"P'r'aps," he conceded, and stared vaguely ahead of him.

A few uncommunicative moments went by. Joyce whispered that perhaps they had better be moving. Jim agreed, but wished to make sure first that they would move in the right direction. Turning to the tramp again, he tried a fresh tack.

"What about this dragon?" he queried.

"Green Dragon," said the tramp. "Nime o' the inn."

"Oh, I see." Jim threw Joyce a reassuring smile. That settled the dragon. "And what about its eye?"

"One minute it's yellere; next minit, it's red. Chinges its bloomin' colour. Like a chamlon."

"A what?"

"Wot I ses. Chamlon."

"He means chameleon," whispered Joyce.

"Yus, that's wot I ses, miss," nodded the tramp. "Chamlon."

Joyce managed to stifle a shriek of laughter, while Jim put another question.

"Just one thing more," he said, "and then we will leave you in peace. Which is the way to the Green Dragon?"

The tramp roused himself out of a lethargy that had begun to settle on him. The direct question stirred something in his muddy mind. Fate had long marked him down as one of its least resisting victims, and acceptance was his creed. Kicks or ha'pence—take 'em all, jog along, and keep smiling.

But, occasionally, there were flashes of revolt. One day, he had hit a bully who was frightening a child.

Silly idea! The child would probably grow up to be another bully, and meanwhile the bully had hit him back. Yes, very silly idea! Revolt had moved him, then, however, as now it moved him to attempt a vague protection of this nice young couple against an unknown menace.

"You goin' to the Green Dragon, guv'nor?" he enquired, blinking.

"Yes," answered Jim.

The tramp frowned, glanced at Joyce, and suddenly shook his head.

"Doncher," he advised.

"Nonsense! Why not?" retorted Jim. "There's our car. See for yourself. We've got to go somewhere!"

"But it's no good, guv'nor," mumbled the tramp. "Yer won't git in."

"We'll see about that!"

"Orl rite, then. *You* knows best." The tramp's tone was a trifle injured. "But ain't I tried twice? Fust time I banged and 'ollered. Nothin' doin'. But smoke was comin' out o' the chimbley. So I goes on bangin' and 'ollerin'—but if there was anybody inside, guv'nor, 'e was dead."

"More likely asleep," suggested Jim.

"More likely nothin'!" jeered the tramp. "Think my bangin' wouldn't 'ave waked 'im? Orf I goes, to 'ave a bit of a think. Along comes this blind man and 'is dawg. ' 'Allo, mate,' ses I. Not a word ses 'e. 'No good goin' to that inn, cooky,' I ses. Not a word. Seems as if 'e was deaf as well as blind."

"Well, maybe he was. Did he get into the place?"

"Dunno, guv'nor. I seen 'im when 'e comes back, and 'is bloomin' dawg tries to shave me with 'is tongue, but I wasn't 'avin' any. But when they've gorn, I thinks I'll 'ave one more try—'Never give up tryin', Alf,' I ses—and back *I* goes." He paused, and his eyes grew wide as he recalled the moment.

"Well?" asked Joyce. "What happened then?"

"I told yer, miss," muttered Alf. "That dragon on the sign. Its eye 'ad changed to red. I 'ooked it, proper! So you keep clear o' that place, I ses. 'Cos why? It's 'aunted."

"Rot!" exclaimed Jim. "What do you say, Joyce?"

"Second the motion," she assented. "Let's be moving, Jim. I suppose it's up that lane?"

"That's rite, Missie," nodded Alf. "That lane don't lead nowhere else. On'y, don't say arterwards as I didn't warn yer. If yer don't git in, wot's the use? And if yer does git in—" The proposition was too grave for etiquette. He spat. "—Gawd 'elp yer."

"Come on," whispered Joyce, as she slipped her arm round Jim. "Don't let's listen to him any more. The poor fellow's babbling. I'm for the inn, and a cup of tea."

"So am I," replied Jim, patting her hand as it came round his waist. "One, two, three!"

"'Corse," grunted the tramp, watching them rise, "if I'm drunk it don't matter. Then it's just funny. But — —"

He stopped abruptly, then emitted a roar of laughter. They looked at him, frowning, but he offered no explanation. He closed his eyes tight, opened them again, and then renewed his merriment.

Suddenly they followed his gaze, and turned. A Chinaman was standing in the middle of the road.

The Chinaman appeared to have dropped from the skies. No one had heard or seen him approach. He stood there, a calm and placid little figure, in no way disturbed by the emotion his sudden presence had evoked. It seemed to be a matter quite beyond the horizon of his interest, requiring neither his approbation nor his scorn. Politely and inscrutably, he waited till the tramp's hilarity had abated somewhat; then he turned to Jim and asked, in a thin, precise voice:

"To the Green Dragon?"

"Up that lane, I believe," answered Jim mechanically.

"Obliged," said the Chinaman, and disappeared in the direction indicated.

Joyce and Jim looked at each other, their determination slightly weakened. The tramp beamed. The Chinaman was just the final, convincing proof he needed, and he was happy again. Imagination—all imagination—except these two young people. A wave of sentiment passed through him, and he made one more effort to send them out of the nightmare.

"Go 'ome," he said.

"But this is perfectly ridiculous!" cried Joyce, almost angrily. "Jim—will you come along now? I'm simply aching for that cup of tea."

"It'll be China tea, miss," grinned the tramp.

"It can be any nationality it likes, I'm going to have it," she retorted, determinedly.

"Bravo!" Jim sang out, cheerily. "You're a brick, Joyce. Thank the Lord, I've married a girl with pluck! Give me a hand, dear. . . . That's splendid." On the point of departure he turned to the tramp. "You tell us to go home, why don't you go home yourself?"

"'Ome?" retorted the tramp. "Where's that?"

Soon they too had vanished up the lane, in the wake of the Chinaman. Alf, still squatting in the sunlight, and watching the shadows lengthen, grew contemplative.

He wondered whether the Chinaman would get into the inn. He wondered whether the nice young couple would get into the inn. And he wondered whether, if they succeeded, he might not succeed himself. "Three for luck," he muttered. It was the loneliness he did not like. This young couple would be company, and that cup of tea had sounded wonderfully good.

He rose. Perhaps it was not only the cup of tea that lured him. Perhaps, unknown to himself, Alf's heart had been touched, and he was rebelling against the possibility of a pretty English girl, with only a limping man to look after her, getting into any sort of trouble. In his

imagination, the most ragged of men will consider himself fit to champion the most beautiful of women. Alf had a soul, behind his grime and tatters.

Be these things as they may, he was about to form a rearguard when he suddenly paused and listened. The faint tap-tap of a blind man's stick was sounding in the distance.

"Lummy!" muttered the tramp. "It's that blind bloke comin' back."

He hesitated for a moment, rendered impotent by a conflict of emotions. Was he terrified or was he amused? Was he afraid or heroic? He held up his empty flask, as though it were a sort of mascot, while the tapping grew louder and louder. And then a shaggy black dog, with faithful, mournful eyes, loped into view.

The dog ran up to him, smelt him, looked up at him and stopped.

"Go away!" cried the tramp.

But the dog did not obey. It merely turned its head as though beckoning its master onwards. The next moment the blind man appeared.

"Go away," repeated the tramp. "I don't want yer. Either of yer. P'r'aps if yer carn't speak, yer can hear. Go away! Or that Chinaman'll git yer."

The blind man stiffened suddenly. Evidently he could hear. Abruptly he wheeled round, and was gone. The dog darted after him.

"Well, I'm blowed," muttered the tramp, and wiped his forehead.

CHAPTER THREE

From the spot where the little two-seater had ended its thrilling career, to the inn which, according to indications, offered scarcely less thrilling possibilities, was a mere half-mile walk; but half a mile to a man with a limp is a considerable distance, and the honeymoon couple broke their journey at a grassy knoll conveniently situated at the foot of a large oak.

"The wounded warrior will shortly recover," said Jim, as he lowered himself gingerly with Joyce's assistance, "but meanwhile the wound insists on having its little say. And why shouldn't it?"

"Poor old Jim," replied Joyce, sympathetically. "It *is* a shame."

"Not more on me than on you, my dear," he pointed out. "As far as I'm concerned I don't mind it a bit. I don't mind a blessed thing, now that the little gold band is firmly fixed on your finger."

"I wonder if you'll always feel like that, Jim?"

"I know I shall. They all say that, of course, but this johnnie means it. If that cheeky little bird weren't perking his eye at us, I'd kiss you to prove it."

"Shoo!" cried Joyce.

The bird flew away, and the proof materialised.

"Look here, Jim," suggested Joyce, "suppose I run on to the inn now—it must be quite close—and get some assistance?"

"No, you're the only assistance I need, Joyce," replied Jim firmly. "You and I are not going to lose sight of each other. I'll be ready to go on again in a couple of shakes . . . Hallo! What's the matter?"

She did not reply immediately. Screwing himself round, he watched her run to a gate that broke the adjacent hedge some six feet away. She looked over the gate, in both directions, then came back slowly.

"Green Dragon out for a trot?" blinked Jim.

"No—it was that Chinaman," answered Joyce frowning. "I heard a faint rustle—that made me turn—and then I got a glimpse of him in the field as he flashed by. And now—he's gone."

"Done the vanishing trick, eh? Well, so much the better. Which way did he go? Towards the inn, or away from it?"

"Away from it." She shuddered involuntarily. "Jim, I don't like that Chinaman a bit—"

"Chinaman? Excuse me, but what Chinaman?" interposed a bland voice from the opposite side of the road.

They turned abruptly. A figure, clad in a luminous grey suit, had emerged through a gap in the hedge—a figure with a mass of light, almost yellow hair, below which beamed a big, smooth-complexioned face. He looked like an overgrown boy, and he had an artist's outfit strapped on to his back.

For a moment or two, the occupants of the lane stared at each other. Then Jim exclaimed, suddenly:

"You seem interested. Do you know him?"

"Him? The Chinaman?" replied the artist, in a youthful treble. "Dear me, no! And I don't want to know him. To tell the truth I prefer a quiet life . . . My work . . . Disturbances . . . I hate them!" He smiled amiably, then frowned. "Are you hurt?"

"He's hurt his knee," complained Joyce, "so we're going to the inn."

"You mean—the inn round the corner there?" Joyce nodded, and the artist's frown grew. "Better try another one," muttered the artist.

"Why?" demanded Joyce. "Everybody's trying to put us off. We met a tramp who said it was haunted and that the eye on the sign changed colour—"

"What's that?" cried the artist, sharply. "Nonsense, the man must have been drunk! How could it change colour?"

"I don't know, and I don't care," growled Jim, beginning to rise. "Give me a hand, Joyce, will you? We'll be moving."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," exclaimed the artist. "I'm not sure that you're wise. Really, this is most extraordinary. And anyway, you won't get in. I've tried—there's no one there—"

"In that case we'll come away again," retorted Jim, none too graciously. The twinges in his leg were partly responsible for his irritability. "Good afternoon, sir."

"Not at all," responded the artist. "If you insist—I shall go with you. Three are better than two, if there's going to be any trouble. This Chinaman—sounds fishy, eh? And the dragon's eye—what colour did it change to?"

"Red," answered Jim.

The procession proceeded. Joyce slipped her arm round her husband's waist, and the artist formed a vague, half-hesitating rearguard. Ahead, round a bend in the lane, the sign of the Green Dragon beckoned them on with its grating, leathery voice.

Despite all her efforts at self-control, Joyce could not quell the sudden thumping of her heart as they reached the bend. Would the dragon's eye still be red? Would smoke still be issuing from the chimney? Would some new personality suddenly present itself? Would . . . ?

They rounded the bend. The inn came into view—old, rustic, and of great beauty. Outside swung the green dragon sign. Its eye was not red, but yellow. The door of the inn was wide open.

For several seconds the trio stared at the open inn door. If, in imagination, the door had loomed sinister, locked and barred, it appeared even more sinister in reality now it offered its secret to any passer by. What motive had caused the inn's inmate to reverse his policy and open the door? Where was he now? *Had* he opened the door or had it been opened by someone else from outside?

And the Dragon's eye—had the tramp been the victim of a drunken obsession, or had it really changed from yellow to red, and now from red back to yellow again?

"Well, staring won't advance us any," exclaimed Jim suddenly. "If anybody's watching us from a window, we must look a prime pack of idiots!"

He hobbled forward, Joyce springing quickly to his side, and the next moment was on the porch.

"Hallo!" he called. "Anyone at home?"

There was no response. Joyce tugged a bell, half-concealed by thick creepers, while the artist in the rear rubbed his nose and watched them. She rang three times but no one answered.

"Well, that's that," grunted Jim. "Let's go in."

They entered and found themselves in a large, pleasant room, of the kind one finds so often in plays but so rarely in reality. The windows, diamond paned, translated the waning sunlight into peaceful mellowness, and old furniture glinted comfortably from walls and corners. The floor was of red stone, the big expanses broken up by one or two rugs. A grandfather clock ticked solemnly and wisely by the window, and oak beams completed the old world atmosphere.

Despite the tension of the moment, Joyce could not quell a little gasp of delight. This was, indeed, the inn of her most romantic fancy, and if the sinister episodes through which it had been approached could have been wiped out, she would have been wholly, ideally contented.

Yet, so curiously are our comforts and discomforts interwoven, the very mystery investing the inn added inexplicably to its charm.

The stage was set for love or adventure, calm or tumult. The breath of each mingled here, waiting for expression. Even the green dragon outside was half fierce, half lovable, ready to frighten little children or, tamed by St. George, to lick their hands.

Evidently the bar of the inn was in another quarter. This was the dignified room withheld from common brawlers. One pictured swords here, affairs of honour, not of fists. And, though these are but the ghosts of our present story, more than one duel had indeed been fought in that chamber in the days when men quarrelled less subtly, and more than one beautiful girl, powdered and black-patched, had stood at the head of the wide, winding staircase and watched the flashing swords with fainting heart.

Joyce sensed these things, but Jim had no time for imaginative flights. He hurried across to a door and opened it, while the artist, who had followed them in, made his way to the foot of the curving stairway, and began to ascend.

"I'll examine the upper floor, while you explore the lower," he called.

"Right," nodded Jim.

"No—don't go, don't go," screamed Joyce, suddenly.

Both men stopped abruptly and followed her gaze. There was a sound of shuffling feet outside. The next moment, the tramp lurched into the room.

Always an extraordinary object, he looked now more extraordinary than ever. He was puffing with unusual speed, and the only reason why his collar was not soaked with perspiration was because he was not wearing one. Terror and incredulity fought for possession of his eyes.

On the point of delivering his news, he suddenly saw the artist and the incredulity won. He sat down promptly on the floor and laughed.

"Speak up, man!" shouted Jim. "What is it?"

"Jest wot I've sed orl along, guv'nor," replied the tramp. "It's the lickier." He pointed to the artist. "'Oo's that?"

"Who are you, my man, that's more to the point," retorted the artist.

"Oh, is it?" jeered the tramp. "Yus, I *don't* think! 'Cos why? I know 'oo I am. I'm Alf. But 'oo are you?" He waved his hand. "Loosinashun. Same as them two blokes wot I've just left—them's looshinashuns, too. Wot I ses is—"

"What two blokes?" cried Jim, sharply.

"—that I'm drunk," said the tramp. "Wot two blokes? Why, that blind feller, and the Chink. Killin' each other, they is. Gawd, if 'e'd reely bin blind, the Chink'd 'ave 'ad a knife in 'is back. But 'e turns when the Chink's about to jump on 'im, see, and dahn goes the Chink. But up 'e slips again—" The tramp scrambled suddenly to his feet, and stared at his audience. "My Gawd," he muttered, "if I ain't drunk, 'Eving 'elp us!"

"Keep steady, man, keep steady," warned Jim, with a glance at Joyce. She smiled back bravely. "Do you mean you really saw these two men fighting—?"

"Well, p'r'aps they was jest lovin' each other," replied Alf. "They was 'ugged close enuff. Lummy!" he cried, the next moment, as he leapt away from the door. "*Is* that anythin' comin' in 'ere, or *ain't* it?"

A shaggy shadow blotted out a patch of sunlight, and the blind man's dog loped into the room.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nothing could have been more uncanny than the appearance of the dog at that moment. It was the grim shadow cast before by some coming event.

The four people who stared at it suddenly transferred their gaze to the doorway through which it had entered. Would its master follow? And if so, upon what errand? Or—had the dog, during the last few minutes, become masterless?

Six seconds, that seemed like sixty, ticked away on the solemn grandfather clock. The sunlight glowed uninterrupted outside, and no second, larger blot intruded upon it. The dog, meanwhile, stood still, its mournful eyes roving from one to the other, its tail wagging halfheartedly. Then, the six seconds over, the animal made up its mind, ran to the door by which Jim was standing and, without raising its head, slipped through.

"Follow it," cried the artist, waking up suddenly.

But Jim did not need the instruction. He was already hobbling after the dog.

A short wide passage led to another narrower one, at right angles, and across the narrower passage was the kitchen. Into the kitchen—the door stood wide—loped the dog. The only occupant of the kitchen was a sleek black cat, which rose from its warm spot by the fire and arched its back lazily. The dog took no notice of the cat, ran vaguely round the kitchen table, stopped once to nose a bread knife on the floor and then ran out again.

A curious incident occurred in the passage. It was dark as well as narrow, and as Jim stooped to touch the dog, his hand met another hand, and he found himself staring into the eyes of the artist, whose head was on a level with his.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Jim. "Didn't notice you were here."

"Ah!" cried the artist, snatching thin air. "Stop him."

But the dog, increasing its pace abruptly, slipped by and returned to the parlour. The artist wheeled round, tripped, swore softly and set chase. When he reached the parlour, with Jim immediately behind him, the dog was on the second stair, its nuzzle poked inquiringly towards the upper landing. Sensing pursuit however, it turned its head, veered suddenly round, and darted out through the front door.

"We must catch it," shouted the artist, his light blue eyes alight with excitement. "We must catch it—you wait here!" And the next moment he too had disappeared.

"What an odd fellow!" commented Joyce, looking after him. "Why must we catch it? Why should he run after the dog like that?"

"Git 'is fat dahn," suggested the tramp.

"Well, he can go—we don't want him," observed Jim, with a perplexed frown. "Question is, what's the next step?"

Joyce regarded him with practical sympathy.

"From the look of you, my dear, I don't think you're capable of many more steps just at present," she said. "So I propose that we make the next step a cup of tea. What do you say?"

"It sounds delightful," admitted Jim. "But who's to get the tea?"

"I'll get it," answered Joyce. "Goodness, are we to die of thirst, just because a silly innkeeper has gone off for the day?" She forced herself to speak cheerfully, and Jim glanced at her with admiration. "Did you find the kitchen through there, Jim?"

"Yes, dear," he told her, "*and* a fire; *and* a cat; *and* some bread and butter on the table, already cut—"

"Then someone's been here just lately!" exclaimed Joyce, sharply.

"Looks jolly like it, old thing. Looks as though that someone had been rudely interrupted. You know, Joyce, I don't much like the idea of your rummaging about the kitchen alone, but I'm bothered if I can move for a minute or two."

"That's orl rite, guv'nor," said the tramp. "She ain't goin' to *be* alone. I'll look arter 'er and keep orf the nightmares."

"By jove, you're a bit of a sport!" exclaimed Jim.

"Yus, fancy a tramp workin'," replied Alf. "But then, as I ses, I ain't sober."

Perhaps the tramp was a bit of a sport, but, in the interests of truth, we must not write him down a hero. In his heart he was badly scared. He had never been so badly scared in the whole of his life, and he would have given all the wealth he possessed—and that was sevenpence—to be clear of the inn and all it stood for. But a tide, the source of which he could not fathom, had borne him thither, as it had borne the two nice young people with whom he had cast his lot, and in a world of horror, this inn, and this companionship, seemed his surest sanctuary.

Bad things were happening out there! He'd seen glimpses of them. Yes, better keep in with these nice young people. And maybe, he wouldn't mind doing them a bit of good himself, if the necessity arose . . .

He shambled into the kitchen, and stared with interest at the cat.

"Well, what's wrong with it?" demanded Joyce, busy among the tea-cups.

"Nothin', miss," answered the tramp. "That's wot I can't make aht!"

Joyce laughed. The tramp wondered what it must feel like to be born a gentleman and to court a girl with a laugh like that. Rather pleasant, he should think . . . He missed something she was saying.

"Eh? Wot's that?" he asked.

"I said, see if you can make out where the *bar* is," repeated Joyce. "That ought to be more in your line—oh, how *horrid* of me! I didn't mean that . . ."

"That's orl rite, miss," said the tramp. "I can smell 'em a mile off, like a fog."

"Oh, you are comical," smiled Joyce. "Do you know—I rather like you, Alfred! I thought, if you could find some brandy in the bar, we could have a tiny dash in our tea, and I rather think it might do us all good. I give you full authority for stealing—we'll pay for all we take."

"Stealin'?" murmured Alfred, and paused. He didn't like the word. Not to-day. "Say, miss," he muttered. "I 'ope that feller in there ain't got much oof on 'im?"

"Oof?" queried Joyce. "I suppose you mean money. Why?"

"Oh—I dunno," answered the tramp, and sought the bar.

A sudden fear made Joyce run back into the parlour. To her relief, she found Jim still seated in the chair into which he had sunk. He looked up suddenly and smiled, but she caught his previous frown.

"A kiss for your thoughts," she challenged.

"That would be cheating you," he answered. "I don't rate my thoughts so high."

"Very well. The more usual penny, Jim."

"I was thinking, Joyce, that our queer artistic friend ought to have returned by now. He's been gone quite a while."

"I know he has," she nodded. "But do we want him back? You said you didn't."

"Frankly, I don't. All the same, I'd give my boots to know why he hasn't."

"So should I. I mean, I wouldn't give yours—I'd give mine. Still, don't let's worry, dear. You know—Alfred may be just a *little* drunk, after all!"

"Well, I'd sooner have our tramp drunk than our artistic friend sober," laughed Jim. "Run away, my child. I long for a cup of the grateful and comforting!"

She went back into the kitchen, and he listened to the pleasant sounds of the boiling pot and the clinking crockery. Then, swearing at his impotence, he rose, and hobbled to the foot of

the staircase.

"I wonder what's up there?" he thought. "No one's been to see yet. Old Carlo wanted to." He paused in his reflection. "Yes, and so did our golden-locked artist. Each prevented the other, so to speak. Now, that's odd . . . though, of course, only a coincidence." He hobbled up three or four steps, and listened. The scraping of the inn sign, heard previously through the open front-door, suddenly drifted to him from the upper landing. It slithered down the staircase from a room the door of which, he noticed for the first time, was ajar. He concluded that the sign was probably just outside the window of this room, that the window was open, and that the sound drifted in.

This was a perfectly logical explanation of the altered acoustics; all the same, the incident gave him a turn. For, now, the creaking seemed to be saying to him: "Come up, come up, come up!" defining the actual spot to which it beckoned.

"I wonder if I could hobble up," he wondered. "Not sure that it's wise to sit having tea here without . . ."

He glanced towards the kitchen. From there came pleasanter sounds: water being poured from the kettle to the pot. He wasn't going to send Joyce up these stairs. He doubted whether the tramp, in his curious condition, would prove a useful investigator. Clearly, he himself was the person for the job—if only his leg . . .

"What are you doing?" demanded a voice behind him.

He had gained two more stairs, and now he sat down limply on one of them.

"Really, Joyce, I wish you'd knock or ring or something before you come in," he protested.

"Now, that's just what I didn't *want* to do," she retorted, running up to him. "I had an idea you were up to something, young man! Why didn't you stay still?"

"Oh, just thought I'd like to poke round a bit," he answered, allowing himself to be led back to his chair. "You and friend Alfred seem to be doing all the work."

"Sure it wasn't more than that, Jim? Did you—hear anything up there?" She looked at him shrewdly. "Don't keep anything back, old boy. Remember our vow—no secrets. We're partners in everything."

"You bet we are," he exclaimed. "And I'd tell you if I'd heard anything. No, I just wanted to explore that upper floor, that's all."

"Shall I run up?"

He caught her hand impulsively, in case she acted upon the suggestion. Now that she could not, he asked, half-teasingly:

"Want to?"

"Should simply loathe to," she smiled back, frankly. "But not because I think there's anything up there—just because I'm silly."

"Go back and bring in the tea," he commanded, releasing her. "I'll promise not to move till you return."

Alone again, Jim kept his promise, but not without difficulty. His eyes suddenly became riveted on a spot by the door. It was a small, darkish spot, previously undetected on account of its smallness and also because it had lain in shadow; now, however, the sun had worked round to it, and it formed a dull patch in a little pool of glowing amber.

"Stain of some sort," reflected Jim. "I wonder—whether that stain was there—an hour ago?"

His mind ran on. It ran on something like this:

"Obvious pointers, though God knows what they point to: deserted inn. Mysterious Chinaman. Mysterious blind man. Fighting, apparently, to the death. Visit of blind man's dog.

Interest in blind man's dog of mysterious artist. Green dragon, alleged to change the colour of its eye.

"Small pointers: tea half prepared in deserted inn. Bread-and-butter already cut. Bread knife on floor of kitchen, as though suddenly dropped. Door, ajar, on upper landing. Nothing in that, probably. Dark spot I am now looking at. Nothing in that, possibly. But, when I get up, I must examine it. Prolonged absence of the mysterious artist . . . Ah! Not so prolonged, after all. Here he comes!"

He raised his head suddenly. Outside, he could hear someone approaching. But—were these the artist's footsteps? The artist's footsteps were quick, almost jerky. These footsteps were swift, but smooth. And, suddenly, they paused.

"Who the devil—?" thought Jim.

"Here's the tea," sang out Joyce, entering briskly from the kitchen with a laden tray.

"Joyce!" whispered Jim quietly. "Keep your nerve—there's someone outside there."

Joyce kept her nerve. Laying down the tray, she called over her shoulder, while keeping her eyes fixed rigidly on the front doorway.

"Hurry up, Alfred. Bring the kettle in, will you?"

"Comin', miss," responded the tramp's hoarse voice. "But this 'ere blinkin' cat's gorn mad!"

As he spoke the cat flashed in from the kitchen, its hairs a-bristle, and sped up the staircase. Their eyes left the doorway for a moment to watch its flight, and when they turned their heads back again, the Chinaman stood blandly on the doorstep.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Chinaman did not make any immediate attempt to enter. His small, expressionless eyes travelled slowly round the room, pausing momentarily when their interest was arrested, while providing no clue to the nature of the interest. They paused at Jim; they paused at Joyce; they paused at the foot of the wide, curved stairway; they paused at the little patch of amber sunlight with its faint, dull stain. For quite a while they paused here. Then as a sound came from the kitchen passage, the Chinaman raised his eyes from the amber patch, and met the eyes of the tramp.

It was an interesting meeting, this, between East and West. The Chinaman's face remained unchanged, inscrutable. The tramp's face, on the other hand, changed very vastly. A certain anxiety regarding the contents of the kettle in his hand promptly evaporated, to be replaced by a joyous beaming.

"'Allo, cocky!" exclaimed the tramp. "Goin' ter' 'ave one with us?"

The tramp's voice broke the spell of silence. Jim shook himself and cried sharply:

"Well, what do you want?"

"'Ere, don't speak so loud," warned Alfred, with a wink. "'E'll vanish. Don't I know? 'Cos why? Once I seed a lot o' lizards dancin' together, but when I started ter swear at 'em, bing, they was gorn!"

"Be quiet, old chap!" muttered Jim, and turned again to the Chinaman. "Why don't you answer?"

The Chinaman blinked for a moment. Then his eyebrows went up, and he observed, in a high, thin treble:

"You zeen dog?"

"Blimy, that ain't nothink," chuckled Alfred. "We seed a Chink, too!"

"I wish you'd shut up," muttered Jim frowning. Addressing the Chinaman, he asked: "Dog? What sort of a dog to you mean? And what about it?"

But the Chinaman was not communicative. "Dog been here?" he inquired blandly.

"Answer my question, and then I may answer yours," retorted Jim.

"'Ere, 'ere," guffawed the tramp.

The Chinaman's eyebrows went up again. Then, shrugging his shoulders, he entered the room, and was half way across in a flash. He moved with incredible speed, but Joyce sprang forward to intercept him. She hardly knew why she did it. Her heart was thumping hard.

"You don't move another step till you tell us what you're up to!" she exclaimed.

The Chinaman stopped immediately, and fixed her with his beady eyes.

"This inn? Yours?" he inquired, with the faintest trace of a smile.

"No," stammered Joyce, feeling her authority weakening.

The Chinaman lowered his eyes to the table, and the preparations for tea. Alfred came to the rescue.

"The bloomin' innkeeper ain't 'ere, so we're 'elpin' ourselves, see? And we don't want none of yer hinterference. See?"

The Chinaman's face became expressionless again.

"Velly good," he said. "Me no interfere you. You no interfere me. Velly good."

He slipped to the kitchen passage and disappeared.

"Uncanny brute," commented Jim, frowning. "I don't like him a bit. But, after all, I expect he has as much right to be here as we have. Our authority to adopt a high hand might be questioned."

"I'm not so sure about that," responded Joyce. "When things aren't normal, you can't be expected to act normally."

"'Ere, 'ere," nodded the tramp.

"And that Chinaman's up to some mischief—I'm positive of it," she continued.

"'Ere, 'ere," nodded the tramp again.

"Well, let's suppose he is up to some mischief," answered Jim, keeping his eyes on the doorway through which the Chinaman had passed. "What sort of mischief is it? And how the devil are we to stop him?"

"Wot abart tippin' some o' this boilin' water over 'im when 'e comes back?" proposed the tramp. "That 'ud wike 'is fice up."

"Sh!" growled Jim. "Here's the blighter back again."

The Chinaman returned. Obviously, his search had been unsuccessful. He paid no attention to the watching trio, ignoring their presence utterly as he slipped to the stairway. Here he paused, listened, and stared at the upper landing.

"Go and 'ave a look," jeered the tramp. "But you won't find no dawg. More like yer'll find a 'ipperpottermus. Pink 'un, with yellor stripes."

The Chinaman turned his eyes on the tramp, and bored through him. It occurred to the tramp that possibly he was a little too talkative. He did not like the Chinaman's eyes. Or *were* they eyes? They were more like little points of black fire. A sudden panic seized him. He tried to raise the kettle, but his arm seemed pinned to his side. The eyes were pinning them there. Blimy! Was he afraid of a phantom . . . ?

"*And* mauve spots," he muttered defiantly.

The Chinaman removed his gaze from the tramp, and began to ascend the stairs. His movements were absolutely silent, and, had the watchers' eyes been closed, they would have been quite unaware of his presence. Half way up he paused, to listen again. The inn sign creaked its queer message. Then he completed his queer journey to the top, and disappeared through the door that was ajar.

He closed the door after him. Jim noticed, for the first time, that a small figure "5" was upon it. A thin streak of sunlight, penetrating some unseen window on the upper landing, picked the figure out.

Jim rose suddenly.

"What are you going to do?" whispered Joyce.

"Just want to see whether anybody else is outside," replied Jim.

His voice was unconvincing. Joyce took his arm firmly, and detained him.

"Jim," she said, quietly, "I've got a fair amount of pluck, but there's just one thing that can upset it. The feeling that you and I are not absolutely frank with each other—that we are keeping things back, and not sharing each other's thoughts. What—what are you *really* going to do?"

Jim took her hand, squeezed it, and sat down again.

"Right as usual, Mrs. Cresswell," he said. "My mistake, not trusting you. Promise I'll keep nothing back in future. And, to prove it—just go over to that little patch of sunlight by the front door, will you, and tell me if you see anything on the floor?"

She looked at him quickly, then turned and walked to the spot indicated. She bent down, and, despite all her efforts at self-control, gave a little gasp.

"'Ere! Wot's that?" muttered the tramp thickly.

He shuffled across the room, and Joyce stepped away as he reached the spot. Alfred's efforts at self-control were even less successful than hers.

"Gawd blimy, that's a blood-stine!" he exclaimed, and, rising hastily from his stooping posture, staggered against the wall.

"Well, keep your pecker up," said Jim coolly. "I rather thought it was."

The tramp made a fight.

"If this 'ere's the drink, guv'nor," he remarked, "swipe me, I'll sign the pledge tomorrow!"

"No dog," said a thin voice behind them.

The Chinaman had returned. No one had seen him descend the stairs. No one knew how long he had been there. Jim turned on him, angrily.

"I wish you'd cough or something, to let us know when you're coming!" he cried. "Anyway, now you are here, look at that mark on the floor. Know anything about it?"

The Chinaman glanced at the stain and shrugged his shoulders.

"No interest me," he said.

"But—do you see what it is?"

The Chinaman remained immovable.

"You see—it's a blood-stain," pursued Jim.

"No interest me," repeated the Chinaman. "Dog interest me. No upstairs."

"Of course it's not upstairs," snapped Jim. "It's not here at all."

"Obliged," answered the Chinaman and slid towards the door.

Jim knew that when the Chinaman departed, something deadening would be lifted from the atmosphere. The very presence of the Oriental had the effect of a nauseating drug. All the same, he rebelled against this easy, unsatisfactory exit, and he called out sharply:

"Wait a minute! I want to know a little more about this. Perhaps I already know more than you think."

The Chinaman paused on the threshold, and Jim took a chance shot.

"Where's the blind man?"

"Blind man?" queried the Chinaman.

"Yes. The blind man. The owner of the dog. It's no good pretending you don't know anything about him."

"You know blind man?" asked the Chinaman unemotionally.

"Perhaps I do and perhaps I don't," retorted Jim. "But *you* know him. You've had a quarrel with him. You were seen fighting with him. And afterwards the blind man's dog returned to this inn alone, and now you've come after the dog. Confound it, isn't that enough to make one a trifle curious?"

"Dog been here," said the Chinaman. "Thought so. You touch dog?"

"Wotcher take us for?" interposed Alfred. "Loonerticks?"

"No touch dog," said the Chinaman. "No ask questions." His eyes travelled to the stain on the floor, and he repeated slowly: "No touch dog."

The next moment he was gone.

There was a short silence. Then, suddenly, Joyce shivered.

"For goodness sake," she cried. "Let's have tea!"

"That's the first really sensible remark I've heard for ten minutes," responded Jim briskly. "Yes, tea's the next item on the programme. We need it, for afterwards, my darling, we've got to do some serious and furious thinking. Pull up a chair. And you too, Alfred. I reckon you belong to our little family party."

"Tha's rite, guv'nor," answered the tramp, "s'long as yer don't think three's a crahd?"

"In normal circumstances," smiled Jim, with a glance at Joyce, "I should consider three a confounded crowd to-day. But these aren't normal circumstances,—so perhaps the more the merrier. Eh, Joyce?"

"Rather," she agreed, already busy with the teapot. "I don't mind Alfred a bit. Take sugar, Alfred?"

On the point of saying “Yus,” Alfred changed his mind and merely nodded. Something had suddenly risen to his throat. Crumb, he expected. Or was it the idea of these two nice young people welcoming him to so important a tea-party? Him, a dirty tramp, who chewed crusts under a hedge! It wasn’t natural.

But then, nothing was natural! The whole thing was some idiotic absurdity. When you’d drunk too much or when you were dreaming, you raced from joy to horror and from horror back to joy. Didn’t he know? Why, he remembered once dreaming of a most wonderful girl,—something like this young lady, she was,—and golly, she was going to kiss him! And then a two-headed policeman had chased him over a burning mountain, till he hid in a cave and found the wonderful girl again. And *that* had all happened one summer evening in a ditch. Well, why wasn’t he in a ditch now? Of course he was. Here was this pretty young lady passing him a tea-cup and thin bread-and-butter that bent and wiggled if you didn’t hold it tight, and smiling at him as if she might be his sister, like. . . .

“There, I toljer it wouldn’t larst, Alf,” he reflected, as the pretty girl jumped to her feet, and the young man raised his head suddenly. “Up an’ dahn, up an’ dahn! Oo the ’ell’s that a-bangin’?”

“Jim!” cried Joyce, with her hand at her breast. “Someone’s in the house!”

“No, there ain’t, no, there ain’t,” chattered Alfred and tapped his forehead. “That ain’t no bangin’. You’ve gorn and put somethink in my tea!”

CHAPTER SIX

The knocking which the tramp believed to be imagination, but which Jim and Joyce recognised as grim reality, came faintly from the direction of the kitchen. It was muffled and spasmodic, as though someone were banging on a door. They listened for a few seconds, the honeymoon couple with tense eyes, the tramp with a beautiful beam of self-delusion; and while they listened, another faint sound fell upon their ears. The soft pat-pat of small feet coming down the stairs.

It was the black cat, returning from the upper landing.

“’Allo, Felix,” mumbled Alfred. “Come to join the ’appy fambly?”

The cat paused at the voice, stared with passive disapproval at the speaker, and then, deciding that the interruption was unimportant, completed the journey down the curving staircase.

The spell of the inn was upon Jim and Joyce. In other circumstances, they would have hurried immediately to discover the source of the knocking; but now they felt, as they afterwards confessed to each other, as though they were the mere puppets of Fate, which had brought them to this inn of strange happenings, and which would use them or not, as it willed. Were they actors in the drama, or spectators of it? They hardly knew. A sense of unreality was upon them. For the moment the initiative appeared to have passed into the cat.

The cat too heard the knocking. It looked towards the door that led to the kitchen quarters. This seemed to worry the tramp, who suddenly frowned and glared almost angrily at the animal. *He* was allowed to imagine things. He was privileged. He was drunk. But it complicated matters if others imagined things also!

“Fizz-z!” spluttered the tramp.

The cat arched its back swiftly and spat at him. The tramp jumped away quickly at this unexpected outburst of feline emotion.

“Orl rite, orl rite,” he grumbled. “Keep easy. I ain’t takin’ yer on!”

The cat turned again towards the door. The knocking had now ceased,—whether temporarily or permanently, who could say? Slowly the cat padded to the door. The door was closed, but the cat did not worry. It knew that somebody would open it and the time could be filled in with a good stretch.

“Come along,” said Jim, abruptly rousing himself. “Let’s follow it.”

“But can you?” asked Joyce.

“Got to,” he answered. “We must find out about that knocking, mustn’t we?”

“Yes, of course. But suppose I go. . . .”

“Both or none,” interrupted Jim.

“All right, dear,” she nodded. “I’m not pretending I want to go alone.”

“Better come along with you, ’adn’t I?” suggested Alfred, not too happy at the prospect of being left alone.

“Rather!” replied Jim. “You don’t suppose we’re going to leave you all by yourself among that bread-and-butter!”

Joyce assisted him up, and he hobbled to the door. Throwing it open, he exclaimed:

“Lead on, Pussy! You know the way.”

The cat gave another stretch, put its head to the ground and went forward. The trio followed. Now they were in the semi-darkness of the passage again, and Jim struck a match.

“Gloomy hole,” he muttered. “Hear anything, Joyce?”

“No, nothing.”

"Wonder why the noise has stopped."

"I can tell yer," chattered the tramp's voice in their rear. "There wasn't no noise!"

"Nonsense. . . ."

"'Majnashun!" insisted the tramp. "Wot abart orl goin' back and finishin' our tea?"

"You can finish it in that precious imagination of yours," retorted Jim grimly. "Hallo—where's that cat got to now?"

It had suddenly darted forward and was now in the kitchen. They quickened their pace and followed it round the table. The knife still lay on the floor. Joyce gave a little shiver and Jim regarded it curiously.

"Why didn't you pick it up, old thing, when you were cutting the bread-and-butter?" he asked.

"Too scared," answered Joyce, honestly. "Didn't want to touch it somehow, so I used another. Little idiot I am!"

"Darling little idiot," said Jim. "Come along,—the cat's gone into the scullery. . . ."

The scullery, when they entered it, looked like a blind alley. Jim's match had gone out, and, although a little dim light flickered through a high window, he had to strike another before they could discern more than the vague outlines of the room. The cat blinked up at them from the floor. It was squatting outside a cupboard door. "My mission is done," it appeared to say. "For goodness' sake, hurry along with yours, so that I can go to sleep again."

Jim advanced towards the cupboard gingerly.

"Are—are you going to open it?" gasped Joyce.

"Only thing to do, my child," replied Jim. "If there's nothing there, no harm will be done. And, if there is. . . ."

He did not finish the sentence. Why dilate on an unpleasant possibility that might not materialise? He was about to take hold of the handle when the tramp's hoarse voice detained him.

"If I was you, I'd give a shout fust, guv'nor," he suggested. "Cupboards are narsty things!"

"Good idea," agreed Jim, and raising his voice, he called:

"Hallo! Anybody in there?"

There was no response. "ANYBODY IN THERE?" he shouted more loudly still. Again, silence. He turned the handle.

The cupboard was locked.

The next moment Joyce gave a scream and Jim leaped back. His leg was still paining him, but for the moment he forgot it. A tremendous thumping had started up on the inside of the cupboard door. After the utter silence and unresponsiveness that had preceded it, the sound was peculiarly uncanny and oddly reminiscent of the final agony of a fish after it has lain still, apparently dead, in the bottom of a boat.

"For God's sake, where's the key?" cried Jim.

As he spoke, he saw it lying on the ground, where apparently it had fallen. He stooped down swiftly, grabbed it, inserted it in the door and turned it. A second later he had flung the door wide. A figure toppled into his arms.

"I 'ad a dream once," thought the tramp, "when a hogre chased me up a mountain. That wasn't nothin'."

"Help me, Joyce," muttered Jim, but she was already at his side. "A chair. Quick!"

The figure was that of an old woman, and, with a sob of relief, Joyce realised that she was not dead. She had collapsed through fright, but her eyes were open and she was staring about her in a sort of wild stupor. They lowered her to a chair, and while Jim supported her—needing support himself—Joyce ran quickly into the parlour and returned with a cup of tea.

"Drink this," she said.

The old woman, now slightly recovered, stared at her and then at the cup. Not until Joyce raised the cup to her lips did the trembling creature seem to comprehend. Then she clutched the cup and drank its contents greedily.

"That's the way!" exclaimed Jim, patting her shoulder. "And now tell us what's happened?"

The old woman made no response. She stared about her vacantly, as though she had not heard the question. Jim repeated it, but with no better result. He glanced at Joyce despairingly.

"I'll try," whispered Joyce. "She's been scared out of her wits." Approaching the old woman, she asked in a quiet kindly voice:

"How are you feeling now? We're your friends, you know. Can you tell us what's happened?"

The old woman stared back. Suddenly Jim gave an exclamation.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "She's deaf."

"Goodness! Poor thing, I believe she is," answered Joyce. "Oh dear! What are we to do?"

"Dumb's more like it," grumbled the tramp. "Why don't she say nuffink?"

"Because she can't speak, either," replied Jim gravely.

"She's a deaf mute, that's clear. Well, let's try her with a pencil and paper."

He took out his note-book, wrote on a blank page "Who locked you in that cupboard?" tore the sheet out and held it out to her.

She read the words and when she had taken them in, jumped up from her chair. Jim laid a restraining hand upon her shoulder, and tried to press his pencil into her hand. But her fingers were numb and had no strength. The pencil slid through them.

He took the sheet of paper and wrote underneath his first question, "Was it a blind man?"

The old woman shook her head faintly.

"Was it an artist?" wrote Jim. Again she shook her head. Alfred, peering over the writer's shoulder, gave a grunt of disgust at the next question: "Was it a tramp?" Possibly Jim only wrote it to get a little light relief into the situation. Quite obviously, it could not have been the tramp. The old woman corroborated this by once more shaking her head.

"Was it a Chinaman?" wrote Jim.

The old woman did not shake her head this time. She collapsed. Jim glanced at Joyce.

"We're getting on, by degrees," he said, grimly. "That damned Chink seems to have got through some pretty dubious work on his first visit to this inn. I only hope that locking an old woman in a cupboard is his worst offence. We've got to get in touch with the police somehow or other, that's clear."

"How can we?" replied Joyce. "*You* can't go. *I'm* not going to leave *you*. This old woman's helpless. That only leaves you, Alfred—"

"Yus, and a lot of use I'd be, I don't think!" retorted the tramp. "Fust, where's the p'lice stashun? *You* dunno. *I* dunno. Second, s'pose I *was* ter find it? Wot'd I tell 'em? Yer can't arrest an old woman wot's got locked in a cupboard, an' there ain't nobody else 'ere!" He grinned suddenly. "If I was ter tell 'em all I seen, sir, they'd lock me up fer drunk." He wagged his head. "Yus, and they'd be right. So they would. 'Cos why . . . ?"

He paused. A bell tinkled. They stared at each other and Jim gave a short laugh.

"You know, we've got to keep a hold on ourselves," he exclaimed to the company at large. "A bell is a most natural and ordinary thing. In fact, Joyce, I rather like that bell, don't you? It's so nice and normal. This person doesn't spring a surprise upon us. Whoever it is, it gives us the recognised, orthodox warning."

"It sounds like the back door bell," answered Joyce. "Shall—shall I go and open it?"

"Not alone, my child," responded Jim. "We'll go together. There it goes again. Come along!"

They retraced their way through the kitchen, and out into the passage that led to the back door. Alfred called after them: "Want any 'elp?" but received no reply. He heard their steps grow fainter, and he stared at the old woman, who appeared to have flopped forward on the table in a faint. He shivered.

"Funny thing," he thought. "I 'ates that there old party worse than the lot!"

He took a step towards her, then changed his mind, and tiptoed away into the kitchen. The cat was snuggled by the grate, asleep again. He passed out of the kitchen, and groped his way slowly along the dim passage that apparently led to the back door. There seemed to be a bend in it somewhere, for he could hear the nice young couple moving somewhere ahead of him, but he could not see them. . . .

Hallo! What was that? Someone was moving behind him. He turned quickly. He saw nothing. A queer anger gripped him. He told himself that it was the anger of a drunken man. . . . They got like that. Fortified by indignant emotion, he blundered back to the kitchen and the scullery. . . . The old woman was gone.

"Wot did I say?" he demanded, and sat down limply.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Often, in the middle of a storm, a strange, illogical moment will occur when one is reminded of forgotten joys and eternal peace. It may be a brilliant shaft of sunlight, temporarily illuminating a field of sodden corn, or an absurd patch of fairy blue peering at the distressed world through a jagged tear in the clouds; or it may be the sudden, almost uncanny stillness that marks the cyclone's centre. The storm is not arrested, but we are given a pledge that, although all may not be right with the world, all is right with the Universe, and in this good promise we are heartened to stand our buffeting.

Such a moment occurred to Joyce and Jim when, expecting heaven knew what, they unlocked and opened the back door of the Green Dragon. They did not expect the fearsome objects which Alfred was visualising in the scullery. "Three-headed goriller, I shouldn't wunner," he reflected. "I seen 'em afore!" But they certainly expected something alarming.

Instead, they saw a pretty, fair-haired child on the doorstep.

Her age was round about eleven, by the look of her, and although she was cleanly clad and her golden hair was smooth, she was obviously poor. Her black stockings bore the scars of many darns, and there was a big patch in her skirt. When she spoke, too, her accent proved to be of country origin.

"Hallo!" said Jim, since the child seemed momentarily tongue-tied. "What can we do for you?"

His genial tone drove away the child's timidity.

"If you please, sir," answered the child: "I want to see Mr. Bowles."

"Mr. Bowles?" repeated Jim, glancing at Joyce, and made a guess. "Do you mean the innkeeper here?"

"Yes, sir," nodded the child.

"Ah," said Jim, and scratched his nose perplexedly. "I don't believe Mr. Bowles is in, at the moment."

"Oh," murmured the child.

"What have you called about?" enquired Joyce.

The child hesitated. She responded with another question:

"Do you know, miss, when he will be back?"

"I wish we did!" thought Jim, while Joyce shook her head.

"No, we don't, dear," answered Joyce. "But if you tell us who you are, and what you've come about, I dare say we can help you."

"Thank you," smiled the child. "But I only want. . . I think I'd better wait."

This presented something of a problem. In the child's own interests, Jim decided, it would be better if she did not wait. The child misread his hesitation, and continued:

"It's all right, sir. I'll wait in the kitchen with Mrs. Gummet. . . ."

"Mrs. Gummet?" interposed Jim. "You mean the old lady who cooks?"

It was another correct guess.

"Yes, please," nodded the child. "I expect Mr. Bowles will be back soon."

"I'm sure he will be," said Jim. "But—well, as a matter of fact, Mrs. Gummet's not quite herself at this moment,—I mean, she's a little unwell. . . ."

"Oh, she often is," exclaimed the child. "I expect it's her tooth. But she never minds me." She paused. Jim still barred the way. "May I come in, please?"

"Just wait a minute, my dear," answered Joyce, and looked at Jim. "Shall I just run in and see how Mrs. Gummet is?"

"Good idea," agreed Jim. "And, while you're gone," he added, with a reassuring glance at the child, "I'm sure we can entertain each other." Joyce disappeared, and he ran on. "You know, I've a little sister who looks something like you. What's your name?"

"Janet Brown, sir," answered the child, readily.

"Janet. That's a pretty name. Well, here's a funny thing! Your name begins with a J, and so does mine—it's Jim—and so does that lady's—Joyce. We're three J's!" The child's lips parted and she laughed. Jim joined her. In this weird corner of the world, laughter was a refreshing and unusual experience. "But, though our names are something alike, I don't expect our ages are. I'm twenty-three. How old are you?"

"Nearly twelve, sir," she smiled.

"Ha! Then you've got to double yourself before you get up to me. And where do you live? Here in—?"

It suddenly occurred to Jim that he did not know to what village this lonely inn attached itself.

"I don't live here," replied the child. "I live in Trymton."

"Oh, Trymton. Let me see—where's that, now, now?"

"Two miles away, sir."

"Two miles!" Jim whistled. "And have you come all that way now?"

"Yes, sir."

"It must have been something important that brought you here, then." The child hesitated and Jim tried another tack. "Tell me, Janet, suppose Mr. Soles—"

"Bowles," corrected Janet, with a little giggle.

"My slip. Slip soles. Sounds like a fish." It was a shocking joke, but no one minded. "Bowles, of course. Well, then, suppose Mr. Bowles *doesn't* come back? What will you do?"

"But won't he?" asked Janet.

"Why shouldn't he?" retorted Jim, and suddenly wondered why Joyce was so long in returning. "Still, I love making up things, don't you? Suppose he *doesn't*? What'll you do?"

"I expect I'd have to give it to Mrs. Gummet," answered Janet, after a moment's reflection.

"It?" queried Jim, lightly. "It? Now, what is 'it'?"

A slight frown flitted across the child's face, but it was soon gone.

"A letter, sir," she replied.

"Oh, is that all?" cried Jim, feigning great disappointment, though as a matter of fact he discovered himself intensely interested. "A letter? Why, from the way you've been acting, I thought you were bringing him the King's crown, at least!" The child broke into laughter. "Most disappointing! I could cry! Now, tell me—why all this fuss about such a simple thing as a letter?"

Janet found it necessary to reinstate herself.

"It's a very important letter," she said. "Uncle said that I was to be sure and give it to Mr. Bowles."

"Oh, I see. And now, Mr. Bowles is out. That's very awkward." He turned his head and peered into the passage. "And Mrs. Gummet's not well." When *would* Joyce return? "Very awkward."

Janet became serious.

"Is Mrs. Gummet very ill, sir?"

"I don't know, Janet," he responded, frowning. "I'm rather afraid—she is. H'm—then what'll you do?"

The child looked perplexed. She stared at Jim intently, as though it were necessary to study him all over again. Evidently, he passed the test, for she exclaimed, at the end of the

scrutiny:

"If you're staying here, sir, perhaps you'll be seeing Mr. Bowles when he comes back."

"When Mr. Bowles comes back, I shall certainly see him," nodded Jim.

"Then I suppose I'd give you the letter, sir," she said. "If you'd be so good—"

"Ah!" cried Jim, in a voice of relief. Joyce was coming along the passage, with the tramp in her rear. "How's Mrs.—?" He stopped abruptly. Joyce's expression was grave.

"Not at all well," she replied, and, as she drew close, whispered, "she's gone."

"Whew!" muttered Jim, and a few seconds of silence passed while he absorbed this new development.

The child now showed her first signs of anxiety.

"Is anything the matter, sir?" she asked.

"I'm afraid there is," answered Jim, suddenly making up his mind. "Now listen to me, Janet. You've trusted *me*, and I'm going to trust *you*. I'm going to ask you to do something for me."

"Yes, I will," answered the child, eagerly.

"I'm going to write a note—no, not to your uncle! To—tell me—don't be frightened—is there a police-station at Trymton?"

The child's eyes opened wide, and he had to repeat the question.

"No, sir," then answered Janet. "Oh, dear! What's happened?"

"Nothing to be alarmed at," he said, lying blatantly. "But I want to get a note to the nearest police-station, all the same. Will you be a brave girl and take it for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Splendid. I knew you would." He turned to Joyce, who was watching him with approving eyes. It pleased her to find how this child had taken to him. "Janet and I are great pals by now, Joyce. I think it's because her name begins with J, like ours." Janet smiled faintly. "Now, if there's no police-station at Trymton, where you live—by the way, which direction is Trymton?"

"That," answered Janet, pointing. "It's along the cliff."

"I see. And it's two miles away. It ought to be called Trymton-Without-a-Police-Station! Where *is* the nearest police-station?"

"Endlesby, sir."

"Good. And how far's that?"

"I think that's three miles," reckoned the child. "It's three miles from Trymton, I know. I think it's the same from here."

"By jove, then, I'm sending you on rather a long walk, Janet."

"I don't mind, sir,—not if you want me to."

"Brick! The J's for ever! Anyway, you must not walk all the way home. Can you get a taxi—a motor-car—at Endlesby? Hire one, you know, at the station or anywhere?"

"Yes, sir—if—?"

"Never mind the 'if'!" he cried. "I'm looking after that." He dived into his pocket, and brought out a pound note. "That's for you, Janet,—for the taxi hack, and your trouble."

Janet's face lit up. A pound note! She decided she would walk her legs off rather than waste any of it on a taxi! But she'd have done it for nothing—of course, she would.

"Oh, my letter!" she exclaimed, suddenly.

"Ah, your letter," said Jim. "What are you going to do about that? Do you really want to wait?"

"No, sir," she decided. "You take it, please. Only be sure to give it to Mr. Bowles, won't you? It's very, very important, my uncle said."

Joyce had disappeared again. Now she re-appeared with a sheet of paper and an envelope. Jim quickly scribbled his note, showed it to Joyce, gained her approval, and slipped it into the envelope.

"There we are!" he cried, as he gave the note to the child. "And where's yours? Exchange is no robbery!" She handed him an envelope,—not quite such a clean one as his own. "Right! Now, off you go. First, to the police-station at Endlesby—then back home, and enjoy yourself. Oh, by the way, I make one rule about that pound note. I insist, I positively insist, that you spend some of it on bulls-eyes!"

"Oh, I *love* bulls-eyes!" she replied enthusiastically.

"Not more than I do," retorted Jim. "I could eat them all day long."

Bulls-eyes level all things. For an instant, they were both of an age.

"But I won't be able to give you any," said Janet, her face falling.

"But I shall think of you enjoying them," he answered, "and that will be nearly as good. Now run along, and don't worry, and my respects to your uncle!"

The child ran to the gate. There she turned.

"Good-bye!" she called.

"Good-bye!" they called back.

And the ray of sunshine disappeared.

"Now, tha's wot I calls a decent little kid," commented the tramp, staring after her. "Wouldn't 'ave minded one like that meself, so I wouldn't."

Round an angle of the wall, the inn-sign creaked. The end of it could be seen, swinging in the breeze. The tramp pointed to it suddenly.

"Wot colour was that there dragon's eye when we came into the inn?" he demanded.

"Yellow," answered Jim, "after you told us it was going to be red."

"Well, if it ain't red now," said the tramp, with a mirthless grin, "Alfred's colour-blind!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Janet began her walk to Endlesby in a state of mind in which anxiety and delight mingled most confusingly.

She was anxious for two good reasons. She had not strictly carried out her uncle's instructions, and she wondered what he would say when he found out that the very, very important note had not been delivered personally to Mr. Bowles. That was one reason. The other was bound up in her present mission. Something bad must have happened at the Green Dragon Inn, or they would never have sent her to the police-station. What was it? And where was Mr. Bowles? And what was the matter with Mrs. Gummet? It seemed rather more than a tooth!

The conquest which Jim had made over her was proved by her present journey and mental attitude. If she had not trusted him with a child's instinctive perception of what is good and what is evil, she would have found a way into the hotel some way or other—or else have run away from it in fright! She could not quite make out why she had acted as she had acted. It was certainly all very odd!

Her delight, of course, was due to the crisp pound note, now snuggling securely in her pocket beneath a pocket-handkerchief.

Perhaps, if her uncle were angry, the note would appease him. She could not hope that she would be allowed to retain it all. Five shillings, perhaps. Or ten, if her uncle were in a good humour. Anyway, she swore she would buy some bulls-eyes, and suck them to her kindly benefactor.

She had not gone very far—a mile, maybe—when a voice hailed her. She looked up, startled, for she had been deep in her bulls-eye thoughts.

"I say!" called the voice. "I wonder if you've seen a dog about here?"

The speaker was dressed in a light grey suit, and his hair was almost yellow. It was even lighter than hers. He looked rather like an artist—a very good-natured one—yes, he must be an artist, because he had an artist's outfit strapped on to his back. He had a big smooth face and blue eyes.

All these things the child noted, while she replied that she had not seen a dog. At least, she didn't think so.

"Don't think so, eh?" repeated the artist. "Well, now, what about thinking just a leetle bit harder, to make quite sure?"

Janet thought harder. She shook her head again. Yes, she was quite sure.

"At least—" she added, suddenly.

"Ah!" cried the artist, eagerly.

"I remember now—I'd forgotten—I did see a dog about two minutes ago, sir," said Janet.

"Ha! There! You see!" exclaimed the artist. "Where was it?"

"As I was passing that mill, sir," announced Janet, pointing back.

"Well, now! And what was it like?"

"It was a little white dog—"

"A little white dog?" burst out the artist. His tone was full of disappointment, and he almost glared at the child. "You're sure of that, now?"

"Yes, sir. Quite sure."

"But you were quite sure last time, you know. Are you sure it wasn't another sort—a black dog, for instance,—shaggy—with a tin round its neck?"

“Oh, no, sir. It was nothing like that. I only remember it because it suddenly ran at me, sir, and barked. Then I forgot about it again. I’m sure it was white.”

He looked so upset that she added sympathetically, “I’m sorry, sir. Have you lost one?”

“Yes—I have!”

It did not occur to her till afterwards as rather odd that the artist’s dog should have had a tin round its neck.

“Which way have you come?” asked the artist.

“From the Green Dragon, sir.”

“Eh?” The artist stared at her suddenly. “The Green Dragon? You mean the inn?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, bless my soul. That’s funny. I happen to have come from the Green Dragon myself.”

The artist’s tone was a little anxious, but he smiled most benignly. The fact that they had both come from the Green Dragon formed a point of common interest. Janet ventured to question.

“Do you know what’s happened there, sir?” she asked.

“Eh? Happened there?” jerked the artist. “Now, what makes you ask that, young lady?”

“I know something’s happened, sir. I—” She paused.

“Go on, go on,” encouraged the artist. “You—what? Why did you go there?”

“I went to take a letter, sir.”

“Oh. Who to? D’you mind my asking? Who to?”

“It was to Mr. Bowles. The innkeeper. Only he wasn’t in. So I thought I’d better give it to Mrs. Gummet—that’s the cook,—but she was ill. . . .”

“How do you know? Did you see her?”

“No, sir. I saw a gentleman and a lady. I don’t know who they were. But I think they were staying at the inn, and they said they’d give the letter to Mr. Bowles when he came in.”

“I see,” murmured the artist. “I see. Very kind of them. I’ve met them. I know them. Nice couple. Don’t you think so?”

“Oh, yes! I like them!” cried the child, warmed by this mutual appreciation. “The gentleman was very kind. He gave me a pound note.”

“A pound note?” exclaimed the artist. “Bless my soul, but that was wonderfully generous of him. Still, I’m not surprised,—not a bit surprised. He’s a nice young fellow,—one of the nicest young fellows I’ve ever met. But—tell me—what did he give you the pound for, eh?”

“It was funny,” smiled Janet. “After I’d given him my letter, he gave me one, too. I’m taking it now.”

“You mean, you’ve got it on you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good girl! It must have been rather an important letter, if he gave you a pound.”

“It is important, sir. It’s to the police.”

“The police? Good gracious!” cried the artist. He took a step closer to the child, and peered at her intently. Janet thought she had never before seen such blue eyes. They seemed all the bluer, because of his light yellow hair. “All this is very queer,” he went on, “and I expect you must be rather surprised that I should ask you so many questions. But, as I told you, I’ve been to the Green Dragon myself, and you’re quite right—something quite rum is up there—quite rum. I believe I can help a bit. I’m glad I met you. To tell you the truth,” he added, lowering his voice to a sepulchral whisper, “I’m just off to the police-station myself. I lost my dog on the way.”

A little shiver ran down Janet’s back. She had not been frightened with the other gentleman. But this gentleman was different. He was nice, too—oh, yes. But. . . .

"As I'm going to the police-station, I may as well take your note along with me," suggested the artist. "It will save you a walk."

"Thank you, sir," answered the child. "But, you see—I promised."

"Well, of course—as you like. But it will look rather silly, won't it, when we both turn up on the same errand?" He laughed. "I know what's happened. Your friend thought I was a long time, got anxious and thought something had happened to me. I was delayed by losing my dog, you see. But really, there's no necessity for you to deliver the note at all now,—only I'll take it along, so that your mind can be quite easy. Eh? How will that do?"

He held out his hand. The blue eyes burned into hers. Almost against her will, she took the letter out of her pocket, and gave it to him.

"The Superintendent, Police Station, Endlesby!" he read out.

"Endlesby,—that's right. Well, we're wasting time. I must be off."

Janet stared at him blankly. Now that the letter had passed out of her possession, she felt curiously ill at ease. It was the second note she had been given that afternoon to deliver, and in both cases she had failed to carry out her responsibility.

"Do tell me what's the matter, sir," was all she could think of to say.

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," answered the artist. "Nothing to worry about, my child. But, after all, why shouldn't I tell you? A thief got into the inn—that's all. You say Mr. Bowles was out? Well, he was after the thief, I expect. And Mrs. Gummet was upset. A lot of fuss about nothing. But I promised to inform the police, and so, I suppose, I must do it. Now are you satisfied?"

"Yes, thank you, sir," replied the child. Her voice was not very confident, though the story sounded quite reasonable.

"That's all right, then. Run along home, and don't worry. Good-bye!" But, just as he was about to depart, he suddenly paused. "There's one thing we didn't quite finish, my dear," he said. "About that letter—I mean, the one you took to the inn. It was for Mr. Bowles, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it will be given to him, of course! Don't worry. But who was it from?"

"It was from my uncle."

"Your uncle. And who may he be?"

"Mr. Thrasher — —"

"What?" cried the artist, his blue eyes bulging. "You mean Tom Thrasher, of Trymton?"

It was the child's turn now to be surprised.

"Do you know him, sir?" she asked.

"Well, I went out with him once in his boat. Bless my soul! Tom Thrasher!" He rubbed his nose hard. "And you're his little niece, eh? I didn't know he had one!"

"Perhaps you went out in his boat before I came to live with him," answered Janet. "You see, I've not been with him long."

"Yes, that explains it. So Tom Thrasher wrote a letter to Mr. Bowles—and our young friend at the Green Dragon has it. H'm—very interesting. Well—as I said—I must be off. Run along home. Good-bye—good-bye!"

He began to walk away rapidly, but the child called after him:

"That's not the way to Endlesby, sir!"

"Bless my soul, how silly of me!" cried the artist. "I was walking back to the inn!"

He turned round and strode in the opposite direction. The child watched him until he was out of sight.

And when he was out of sight, his pace slackened, and soon he stopped. Glancing around, and finding no one by, he took the letter Janet had given him out of his pocket, opened the envelope, and read the message.

“To the Superintendent, Police Station, Endlesby. Please send three or four men at once to the Green Dragon Inn, two miles from Trymton, if you think the following circumstances warrant it. We are travellers, and found the inn empty, as we thought. The innkeeper was absent. An old woman, whom we discovered locked in a cupboard, has now disappeared also. Queer people are abroad, and there is a blood-stain on the floor of the front parlour. I am sending this by a small child, because I am temporarily lame through an accident, and my wife cannot leave me—James Cresswell.”

The artist read the message through twice. Then he tore it up into small pieces, and dropped the pieces in a ditch.

“Landlord disappeared,” he mused. “Blood-stain on the floor. Old lady locked in a cupboard. H’m. . . . I wonder!”

Slowly and cautiously, he retraced his steps to the corner where he had left the child. She was not in sight. Nevertheless, he made quite certain of this before he ventured farther. Three roads met at this point, and a signpost identified them. The finger pointing up the road from which he had come said: “To Endlesby.” The finger pointing to the left said: “To Trymton.” The finger pointing straight ahead said: “To the Sea.” It was this road that led also to the Green Dragon Inn.

The artist took the road to the sea, unconscious of the fact that half a mile ahead of him, and travelling in the same direction, loped the blind man’s dog.

CHAPTER NINE

Jim and Joyce were “digging themselves in.” The tea things had been cleared away, and, as sole occupants of the Green Dragon, with the single addition of the tramp, who appeared under no burning desire to depart into the mysterious unknown outside, they considered they had a right to make themselves at home. They had even gone so far as to lock all the doors, and when the lawful proprietor returned, if he ever did return, he would have to ring.

“I wonder what he’ll say to us,” queried Joyce, as she drew the curtain across the diamond-paned window.

“Not more, believe me, than we’ll have to say to him,” responded Jim, grimly.

“Yes, but suppose some customers come along? Am I to turn myself into a barmaid?”

“You’d make a perfectly adorable barmaid,” commented Jim. “I’d drink myself to a standstill, just for the pleasure of watching you fill my glass— —”

“Don’t be silly,” she interposed, failing utterly to be cross. “I’m serious.”

“So am I,” he retorted. “I mean every word I say! Joyce, you’re gorgeous. That’s the one certain fact among all the thousand-and-one uncertain facts around us. This room looks as if it had been designed for pretty dames and damsels, and I’ll wager it’s never contained a prettier one than you— —”

“Oh, do be quiet!” she exclaimed.

“What, on our first evening?” he cried. “My darling, the day may come when you will long to hear me say such nice things. No—I beg your pardon. I’ll always say them. Thrice a day, after meals— —”

“To be taken with a grain of salt!” she laughed.

“And to be well shaken after taken! So that’s that, my charming barmaid. But don’t worry, Joyce—I don’t believe anyone ever comes to this inn for normal business. No—customers won’t worry us. It’s other sort of folk we’ve got to think about.”

She came to him and sat down by his side. The sun had now sunk below the hedges, and though its radiance still glowed in the sky and on the tallest trees outside, the ground was softly dimmed with evening shade. In the kitchen, the tramp could be heard putting away plates and cups.

“What a queer little household we are, Jim,—” she said. “You, me and Alfred! I suppose—we’re acting wisely?”

He took her hand and squeezed it.

“We are acting in the only way we *can* act,” he answered. “That, at least, is a restful thought. Let’s review the position, old thing, and then you can tell me if we could do anything else,—for the moment,—than stay here?”

“Go on,” she nodded. “I love thinking aloud!”

“And that’s what you and I will always do,—think aloud,” he responded. “Now, then. The first thing that holds us to this inn is my leg. It isn’t bad enough to make me howl. On the other hand, only my wonderful heroism— —”

“Boaster!” she pouted.

“—and my even more wonderful happiness— —”

“That’s better,” she smiled.

“—make me cheerful through its twinges. Speaking seriously, I *couldn’t* leave this inn to-night, unless you and Alfred carried me. And if you can tell me where you propose carrying me to, I give you leave to carry me there.”

“It’s quite true,” agreed Joyce. “There isn’t anywhere else we could go.”

"And then, there's another thing," went on Jim. "I've summoned the police. I take it that, when you invite a policeman to call, you ought to be at home to receive him."

"What will you tell them, when they come?"

"One, inn discovered locked. Two, inn door discovered open, and innkeeper absent. Three, old woman found in cupboard. Four, disappearance of old woman—"

"That's almost the queerest thing of the lot," interposed Joyce. "You know, while you were talking to that child, I looked *everywhere*!"

"Jolly plucky of you!"

"Not a bit! It had to be done. Both floors. And—oh, Jim, I didn't tell you! While I was looking—yes, even in the middle of all that—I found—our room!"

"Did you, darling?" he murmured.

She nodded, rosily.

"It's just divine!" she exclaimed. "All old oak, and beams, and the sweetest window looking right over the inn-sign. And it's so sweetly furnished. Look, dear, it's that room almost at the head of the stairs—No. 5."

"Ah!" murmured Jim; and wondered why an odd sensation flitted through him. Perhaps it was because No. 5 was the room through the open door of which he had heard the Green Dragon sign creaking. The door was closed now. Joyce had evidently shut it.

"You don't mind sleeping in a room with a winking green dragon below the window?" he asked suddenly.

"Not a bit. I simply love that dragon, even though he can't make up his mind what colour his eye ought to be. Do you know, Jim, I love this inn, too! That's queer, isn't it? I feel as if some great-great-great-grandmother must have been here once,—it's somehow familiar."

"My child," he warned her, "don't get psychic!"

"All right. I won't. But I can't make out why I'm not more frightened. Of course, really and truly and honestly, I'm frightened out of my life. If a mouse ran across the room at this moment, I should shriek. But—well, you know that silly expression, 'I'd go through heaven or hell with you'? They were just words before. Now, they're true. I don't mind *what* happens, so long as you and I stick together through it,—so long as we're not separated."

"Thereupon the wounded warrior gave her seventeen kisses upon her fair brow, and seventeen thousand upon her fairer lips—you don't mind my being an idiot, do you, Joyce?"—and proceeded with his interrupted list. "Four, as I have said, disappearance of old woman. Five, Ber-lood." Jim was not callous; he was being flippant by design. "Six, an alleged fight between a blind man and a Chinaman. Seven, mysterious behaviour of the blind man's dog. Eight, mysterious interest of Chinaman in dog. Nine, mysterious interest of an artist in said dog. Ten, protracted absence of said artist. Eleven, bread-knife on floor—"

"That's an easy one," interposed Joyce. "The old woman must have been cutting bread when somebody bounced upon her and locked her in the cupboard."

"I think you're right. We will dispose of No. Eleven, and substitute another. Eleven, the creaking, changing sign—the Dragon that began with a yellow eye, that changed it to red while the inn was closed up, that changed it to yellow again when the inn was opened, and that changed it to red again at some time or other after our arrival. Query, when?"

"Perhaps the old woman had something to do with it," suggested Joyce.

"I thought of that. But, somehow, I don't think she did. Don't ask me why. Can't say."

"You haven't stuck the tramp on your list," Joyce told him.

"What, our friend Alfred? Oh, he's all right! Much too innocent to go down. But there is *one* more thing."

He put his hand into his pocket, and brought out an envelope. "Twelve—to complete the dozen—important letter—very, very important letter, brought by child from her uncle to the

innkeeper who has disappeared. A letter that must be delivered. So important that the child walks two miles to deliver it. Query, again,—has this letter anything to do with items Nos. One to Eleven, either all of them, some of them, or one of them?”

He paused and they stared at the envelope speculatively. On the wall, the old grandfather clock solemnly ticked, “Why—not? Why—not? Why—not?”

“Further query,” murmured Jim. “If it *has* anything to do with all these strange happenings —(a) should we leave it unopened? (b) are we entitled to open it? (c) is it our bounden duty to open it? Even at the risk of breaking faith with a confiding and perfectly ripping child, who I hope by now is enjoying the bulls-eyes she deserves?”

He paused again. The envelope fascinated them. “Why—not? Why—not?” ticked the grandfather clock.

“The handwriting is bad,” commented Joyce, as she studied it.

“Are the contents worse?” asked Jim.

“I wonder!”

“So do I wonder!” Suddenly he dived his hand into his trouser-pocket, and brought out a penny. “Heads, I open it, tails, I don’t!” he called, and spun the coin in the air.

He caught the penny and examined it.

“Don’t I?” retorted Jim. “Who’d be guided by a mingy copper?” And he tore the envelope open.

Joyce found her heart beating a little faster. She watched him take a half-sheet of paper out of the envelope, and wondered whether the message it bore would ease or add to their responsibilities. She had spoken genuinely when she had expressed her affection for the inn, but equally genuine was her fear of it. The spirits of good and evil seemed to be fighting here for possession. Which would win?

“Read it out!” she exclaimed, suddenly. “No secrets!”

“Beg your pardon,” replied Jim, with an elegy in his tone. “Seems rather interesting. Listen:— ‘Expect Samuel Jones to-morrow midnight. Advise J. D. immedeate. Tell him Sister coming herself. Arrange meating one o’clock at the Green Dragon. Tide right for return at three. T. T.’”

The grandfather clock now changed its song to a confusing medley: “T—T, J—D, Tide—right, T—T.”

“Well,” observed Jim, after a short silence, “I can’t say that this puts us any the wiser. It only adds another mystery. Thirteen, who’s Samuel Jones? Fourteen, who’s J. D.? Fifteen, why is J. D.’s sister coming herself? Sixteen, what’s going to happen at the meeting here at 1 a. m. to-morrow night? Seventeen, where is J. D.’s sister coming from, and where is she going back to on the tide? And, eighteen, who’s T. T.?”

“T. T. would be the little girl’s uncle, wouldn’t it?” interposed Joyce.

“So it would, Mrs. Sherlock Holmes,” nodded Jim. “Go up one, while I go down one. I don’t quite know what I’ll say to the innkeeper, if he returns, but I’m glad I opened this letter, all the same. It’s double-Dutch to me, but it may help the police. Wonder how long they’ll be!”

Joyce suppressed a little shiver.

“I hope they won’t be very long,” she answered. “I want them just to come quickly and to go quickly, and to leave us in peace again.”

“That’s the idea,” he agreed absently, with his mind still on the note. “I say, Joyce, it would be interesting to be present at the 1 a. m. meeting, wouldn’t it? Picture them, whoever they are, in this room. It reminds me somehow, of Stevenson. They’ll arrive with the salt of the briny upon them. Samuel Jones may have a wooden leg, and J. D. may have a squint, but J. D.’s sister may be a queen of beauty—dark, and flashing eyes—though not a patch on

yours, which I see are beginning to flash too—and they may meet here, on this very spot, to discuss—whether a blind man’s dog shall be sold or turned into sausages!”

“Thank goodness, you ended it like that!” she gasped. “I was just about to shriek!”

“Don’t believe it,” he retorted. “When it comes to the real grim point, you’ve got more pluck than I have!”

And then, as though to test the matter, there came a sudden sound of something blundering against the door. Joyce clutched her husband’s arm.

“Jim!” she whispered. “Listen!”

“I am listening,” he whispered back. “‘Sh!”

The sound stopped. When it was resumed, it took the form of a definite scratching. Then, a moment later, the thing outside emitted a doleful, whimpering wail.

“Good Lord—it’s Carlo!” exclaimed Jim. “Let’s have him in! I dare say I could hobble across, but as it’s only the dog, perhaps?— —”

“Yes, yes, I’ll go,” cried Joyce, and ran quickly to the door.

“Bolt the door again afterwards,” Jim called. “We’re going to have a little interview with Carlo, and we don’t want to be disturbed.”

Joyce nodded and threw the door open, and the blind man’s dog stumbled in.

CHAPTER TEN

The dog seemed tired. Although its mournful eyes glowed brightly, its tongue hung out, and its breath came and went in short pants. It did not this time, as on the occasion of its previous visit, run round the room, but halted abruptly, gazing first at Joyce and then at Jim, as though trying to size them up.

"Now, then, Carlo?" asked Jim, while Joyce fastened the door. "What's all this about, eh?"

Carlo made no movement, but continued to regard its interrogator watchfully.

"He's thirsty," exclaimed Joyce. "I'll fetch a bowl of water."

"Right," answered Jim. "Carlo and I will have a little chat while you're gone." As Joyce slipped from the room, he called to the dog, ingratiatingly: "Come along, old chap, come along!"

But still the dog did not move, and when Joyce returned, with the bowl of water and the tramp hovering curiously in her rear, Jim had to report a failure.

"Put the bowl at my feet," he suggested. "That'll bring him!"

It did. As soon as the dog saw the bowl of water, it sprang forward, and, lowering its head, drank greedily.

"Doesn't it strike you as rather interesting, Joyce," observed Jim, "that here, at our feet, we have the very animal for which our friends the Chinaman and the artist are seeking?"

"It does," replied Joyce.

"And doesn't it strike you that it would be even more interesting," proceeded Jim, "if we knew *why* the Chinaman and the artist were seeking this dog?"

"Yes," nodded Joyce, again. "But we *don't* know, so that's that."

"I'm not at all sure that that is that," retorted Jim. "The dog has a tin round its neck. I'm rather curious about that tin. I wonder how much money's in it."

"There's sixpence, anyway," smiled Joyce. "Don't you remember, I put it in for luck?"

"Did yer, miss?" came the voice of the tramp. "Then I reckon it was a bad 'un!"

"Not so sure about that, either," said Jim, stroking the dog's neck. "Fill the bowl again, will you? He's still drinking hard, and I want to keep his mind well occupied."

The bowl was replenished. The dog continued to drink greedily. When, at last, it looked up, its tin no longer hung from its neck.

"You don't mind, do you?" asked Jim politely. "I'll let you have it back again in a minute. Now, how do you open the thing?"

"Shake it," said Joyce.

He shook it. The contents sounded substantial. Clearly, there was more than Joyce's sixpence in the tin. While he shook it, his thumb pressed against the side, and the lid flew up.

"Here we are!" he cried, as he poured the contents out into his hand. "Pennies galore—your sixpence, Joyce,—and—good God!"

He stopped abruptly, and stared in astonishment. A fiery red glow shot up from his palm. The tramp was the first to break the silence.

"Swipe me, guv'nor—never knowd a ruby growd that size afore!" he blinked. "Nor they does," he added, "when yer sober."

"By Jove—oo! That's at the bottom of it all, is it?" muttered Jim. "No wonder Carlo was in such request!"

"Did you ever see such a stone, Jim!" cried Joyce, between admiration and bewilderment. "Whatever are we to do with it?"

"Hand it to the police when they come, of course," he answered. "That's all we can do. But, my hat, Joyce,—I'm not very glad we've found this blessed thing!"

"You mean?"

"I mean, old thing, that local interest isn't likely to die down while this ruby's at large." He put the ruby quickly in his pocket, as though disliking the look of it, and then began replacing the coins in the tin. "We will take nothing," he observed, "that our blind beggar has come honestly by. Yes, even your own sixpence shall go back, Joyce. But the ruby must be held for enquiries."

He dropped the last coin in, closed the tin, and attached it again to the dog's collar.

"Beggin' yer pardon, sir," said the tramp, "but ain't yer better put that there ruby back, too?"

"Not on your life, Alfred!" answered Jim.

"But—well, guv'nor, it ain't safe ter 'ave it on yer," muttered the tramp. "That it ain't."

"What? Will you come along in the night and steal it from me?"

"Me? Nothin' doing! I'd sooner steal a live bomb, that I would. 'Sides, I ain't the stealin' sort,—leastways, not big things."

"Good! Then I've nothing to fear from you. I knew I hadn't."

"Not from me, guv'nor. But—them hothers?"

"The Chinaman and Co.?"

"Yus."

"But, look here, old chap," remonstrated Jim, "didn't you tell us there *wasn't* any Chinaman? You said it was all 'majinashun!"

The tramp hesitated. He did not appreciate this definite challenge. "G'arn—so 'tis!" he growled, and then nearly jumped out of his skin. The front door bell was ringing.

"And so's that 'majinashun!" he roared. "'Oo cares? Ain't I sed so orl along? 'Oo cares?" He strode to the door, and unbolted it. "Giant, ten foot tall, shouldn't wunner! Come in! Come in and 'ave a cup o' tea! Let in the 'ole menagerry!"

But it was no giant. The artist beamed from the doorway, half-apologetically.

"I thought I should never find my way back," he exclaimed. "I must apologise for being away so long. The fact is, I—" He stopped abruptly. His eyes fell on the dog.

"I wondered when you were going to look us up again," remarked Jim pleasantly, and feigning ignorance of the artist's interest in the dog. "We've had rather an exciting time since you left. We've had to send for the police."

It was a chance shot. It missed. The artist showed no discomposure. On the contrary, the allusion to the police seemed to steady and soothe him.

"That's the wisest thing you could do," he observed, approvingly. "We ought to have done it at the outset—of course, we ought."

"I rather hoped you'd go yourself," remarked Jim, frowning slightly. "But you disappeared in such a hurry —"

"I know I did," nodded the artist. "That dog there upset me. Expect I lost my head a bit. But who's gone for the police, eh? How did you manage that?"

"Oh, I managed to get hold of a messenger,—a little girl who was passing," answered Jim airily, uncertain how much to tell and how much to withhold. He wondered whether he had said too much already.

"A little girl?" exclaimed the artist. "This is not a very healthy corner for a little girl! Dear me, no! Now, what was she doing here?"

Jim decided on a censored version of the incident.

"She came with a note for the innkeeper," he responded, watching the artist covertly. "Of course, she couldn't deliver the note, since the innkeeper didn't happen to be in, but I advised

her not to wait, and packed her off to get help. So the police will probably turn up any minute now."

"Splendid! Excellent!" cried the artist, again baffling Jim with his enthusiasm. This enthusiasm did not fit into the rôle he had assigned to the artist. "The sooner the better. And I suppose this little girl gave you her letter to the innkeeper, eh?"

"As a matter of fact, she did," admitted Jim, growing more and more annoyed with himself, and conscious that he was fencing clumsily. "But it's a poor chance the innkeeper has of receiving it."

"You mean? Exactly. I suppose you don't know, by any chance, what's in this letter?"

"How should I?" almost snapped Jim.

"Exactly. Precisely. How should you?" murmured the artist, and fell into a silence.

He appeared to be thinking hard. He glanced at Jim, and then at the dog. Suddenly, Jim took the initiative.

"You never told me why you were so anxious to catch our canine friend," he said. "Well, here he is. What do you want to do with him?"

"Yes, how did he get here?" asked the artist, pulling himself together.

"On his four legs," answered Jim. "He scratched at the door just before you came along yourself. We gave him a drink, and were just wondering what on earth to do with him. Perhaps you can suggest something?"

"I can," nodded the artist. "Send him off again. He'll lead us somewhere. That's why I was so anxious not to lose sight of him when he made his last call. Follow that dog, and maybe we'll find the key to this mystery. He may lead us back to his master—or that queer Chinaman you spoke of, eh?"

"That's quite a scheme," responded Jim, looking at Joyce. "I never thought of it."

"Aha! I did!" cried the artist triumphantly. "That's one up to me!"

"And it's also up to you, I'm afraid, to carry it out," went on Jim. "I can't budge, and I'm not going to let Mrs. Cresswell go."

"Naturally not," said the artist, emphatically. "That would never do!"

"Shall we drive the dog out now, then—or are you too tired?" suggested Jim.

"Tired? Not a bit!" exclaimed the artist. "Drive it out now. I'll not lose sight of it this time—I'll stick to it like a leech! I'll open the door."

He trotted to the door as he spoke and threw it open. Then he stepped aside, while Jim gave the dog a gentle shove. The dog looked doubtful. The situation was not quite clear. But when the artist clapped his hands sharply, and, running to the creature, waved and gesticulated frantically, it dawned upon the dog that it would be better off outside, and it slipped swiftly from the room.

"Ha!" cried the artist, and followed it.

"Ha!" murmured Jim, as Joyce ran to the door and closed it.

They looked at each other. Joyce smiled, though anxiously, and the tramp frankly chortled.

"Yes, it has its humorous side," said Jim. "In a few minutes he will stop the dog and open the tin. I am afraid the one-and-elevenpence he will find there will not quite satisfy him."

"But he'll know we've got the ruby," answered Joyce, "and he'll come back again."

"I'm not sure of that," responded Jim. "He may not know. And he may not come back again. But if he *does* come back, my child, he will not get in. The next time we open that door, it will be to the police, and to nobody else. That I'm resolved on."

"Hooray!" exclaimed Joyce, with relief in her tone. "That's the most sensible thing you've decided yet!"

"I may be an ass," admitted Jim, modestly. "In fact, dear, I think I have been a bit of an ass over all this. But I have my bright moments."

And thus it fell out that, when a light tapping on the door occurred some ten minutes later, they listened to it, but made no response. Even when the tapping was repeated once, twice, thrice, they remained silent. But at each tap Joyce's grip tightened on her husband's arm.

The tapping ceased and the tapper's voice was heard outside the door.

"Velly clever," it said, in smooth, clear accents. "Yes, velly clever. Find nothing. Much swear. Velly angly."

There was a short silence. Joyce's fingers were now gripping Jim's arm so hard that they hurt; but both were unconscious of the fact. The voice purred on:

"No good man. Thief. Soon, he die. Velly sad. But, first, he come back. I know. He come back. I follow."

Another silence. Joyce could hear her heart beating. The tramp's face wore a frozen grin. Once more the voice spoke, and its last words were the most ominous of all:

"I follow him all time. I see him stop little girl. Bad man. Velly bad man. No one coming. No police. Velly bad man."

The voice died away. It was heard no more. Joyce laid her cheek against her husband's, and the tramp laughed hysterically.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"In plain and simple language," said Jim, breaking one of the most unpleasant silences he had ever endured, "we are in a state of siege. What about a smoke, while we discuss the situation?"

His quiet composed voice had a steadying effect. Joyce managed to summon up a little smile—a brave effort—and the tramp stopped opening and closing his eyes, and took a deep breath.

"In the last five minutes, the situation has changed," Jim resumed, when the comforting smoke of two cigarettes and an old clay pipe was doing its best to soothe jangled nerves, "and we won't gain anything by blinking facts. Before, we spoke of leaving. We were not *all* prisoners. Now, it seems, we are. Or, in other words, our only security lies within these walls."

"While we have the ruby, Jim," interposed Joyce. "If we didn't have that, no one would worry us."

"Tha' 's rite," agreed the tramp. "Wot abart givin' it up?"

"We're coming to that now," replied Jim. "We've got to decide whether we want to give it up."

The tramp lost his bearings for a moment.

"Wot!" he exclaimed, with popping eyes. "Yer means,—go shares?"

Despite herself, Joyce could not suppress a little giggle, while Jim blessed the tramp for his good work.

"No, you sublime idiot," he laughed. "*We're* not thieves. The question before us is, are we willing to return the ruby to thieves? And if so, to which particular one?"

"Oh, I see," nodded the tramp, growing wise. "If we gave the blarsted thing back, we'd be accomplices, like?"

"You've got the hang of it. Though I don't suppose the law would be hard on us. We've got our own skins to think of. Well, Joyce?"

She stuck out her chin, and he rejoiced to see it. Always an adorable chin, it had never seemed more adorable than at this moment.

"If you're thinking of me," she said, "I don't want to give it back! I'd simply hate myself afterwards!"

"Splendid!" cried Jim. "Every moment that passes, I'm gladder I married you! And what about you, Sir Alfred?"

"Me?" queried the tramp. "Well, I don't see as 'ow it makes much dif'rence ter me. I'm in a ditch, I am. It'll orl be hover soon. But, blimy, I wish some'un'd come along an' give me a kick!"

"Don't worry!" smiled Jim. "We'll all wake up presently. And meanwhile—bravo! I'm not anxious to give back this ruby, either, I'm dashed if I am, and since we're all agreed, we'll hang on to it—for a bit, anyway. But don't forget, Sir Alfred," he added, "you are your own master still. If at any time you want to cut and run—"

"Wot—go out there?" interrupted the tramp, amazed at the thought. "Not it, guv'nor! And night comin' on, too! I seen enuff hinside this room. Gawd knows wot I'd see if I was ter go out of it!"

"Do you suppose that was true, Jim, about the police not coming?" asked Joyce, anxiously.

"Little doubt of it," answered Jim. "It's clear that neither the artist chap nor the Chinaman want the police here. They're after the ruby, and after each other—and, as far as I can make out, they were both after the blind man."

“And now they’re after hus,” put in Alfred.

“Yes, but we won’t let ’em get us,” responded Jim. “If we can’t get out, they shan’t get in. In the morning, if help hasn’t arrived, we’ll try and get another message through somehow or other, but to-night it’s locked doors and windows, and we’d better see to that at once. Joyce, will you and Alfred make a thorough grand tour of the place? See that every window is securely fastened, draw every curtain, and have another look at the back doors. Let me know if any of the windows haven’t latches, or if there are any broken panes or anything—and give a shout if you meet any trouble.”

“Right,” said Joyce, rising. “I’d better take a lamp this time. It’s getting dark. You must have one here, too. I saw a couple in the kitchen.” She turned to the tramp. “Come along, Alfred. We’ll want your box of matches.”

The lamps were lit. Their cheerful glow was welcome. Then Joyce and Alfred began their tour of inspection, while Jim remained in the parlour, silently cursing his knee. He kept his ears alert, and heard their footsteps now growing softer, now growing louder, as they went into and out of rooms. He heard Joyce’s bright voice, too, and blessed her in his heart for her courage.

They needed courage, all of them. Somewhat to his shame, he realised that his own courage was largely kept up by an illogical assumption that the whole thing was a game. He was adopting the device of the child and the nightmare. Yet he knew that his fears were entirely on Joyce’s account. The thought that something bad might happen to her, and on this evening of her life above all others, was unbearable.

The angry guardian whose pursuit they had feared that morning, seemed now a very unterrifying mortal! He paled by comparison with their newly-acquired pursuers! . . .

Now he could not hear their footsteps any more. They were somewhere beyond the kitchen. Chafing at his inactivity, he rose and limped across the room. The curtains which had been drawn over the window were thin, cottage ones, but heavier curtains hung from a stout wooden rod, and he pulled these across. Now the evening was quite shut out! He limped to the door, pausing, just before he reached it, to look at the blood-stain. It was dull brown now. Time, already, was doing its work, taking the keen edge off poignant moments that were over, softening symbols of past agonies, and preparing the way for that ultimate obliteration which destroys both ugliness and beauty, and makes one wonder at the seeming importance of each during its brief spell of dominance!

“Why did the innkeeper come to this particular spot?” reflected Jim. “Perhaps there was a struggle. But there weren’t any signs of a struggle. And this spot isn’t in the line from the kitchen door to the front door. Perhaps he staggered here? But, if he was as bad as that, he surely couldn’t have staggered much further, and someone would have found him.”

He bent lower, and stared at the dull, significant patch.

“And here’s another thing,” his mind ran on. “If the innkeeper has had trouble, as seems obvious, and is still in possession of his senses, why hasn’t *he* sent for the police? Answer, he probably doesn’t want the police here any more than do the Chinaman or the artist. Or the blind man, for that matter, . . . or that deaf old woman . . .”

He left the spot and reached the front door. There were two bolts and a key. He saw that each performed its work. He found another tiny window, in an alcove, and he took a picture down from a wall to place before this, as there was no curtain. The picture, a large one, covered it entirely. It was a water colour, elaborately framed, of the inn.

The green dragon sign identified it, if nothing else did. It was a very bad picture. Jim noted that the dragon’s eye was yellow,—evidently its normal colour.

“What are you up to?” demanded a semi-stern voice behind him.

"If I can't do my whole bit, Joyce," he retorted, "I must do a little bit of my bit! Getting along all right?"

"Yes. This floor is as secure as a sardine-tin before it's been opened. We're going to do the top floor now, and then, I think, a light supper and bed!"

Jim hobbled back to his chair, and again they disappeared; and again he fretted uneasily till they returned and reported all well.

"Alfred and I did our work quite thoroughly, Jim," exclaimed Joyce. "We examined cupboards as well as doors and windows. Apart from mice, I think we may safely say that we three are alone in the house, and that nobody else can possibly get into it."

"But we might 'ave a pail o' boilin' water 'andy," suggested the tramp, "jest to pour over anybody's 'ead if 'e does!"

They supped in the kitchen. This lightened labour. Afterwards, they cleared away and washed up, and examined their remaining stores. They calculated that they had enough to withstand a siege of two or three days. There were eggs in plenty, and two or three loaves of bread. Milk would be a difficulty, unless . . .

"By Jove, the milkman must call!" exclaimed Jim suddenly. "We'll look out for him."

"E'll call rite enuff, if the Chink gets 'old of 'im," muttered the tramp, with doubtful humour.

When they returned to the parlour—they had lingered over their operations in the kitchen—the old grandfather clock had ticked itself to nine. Jim and Joyce looked at each other.

"Too early?" queried Jim.

"Not for me," answered Joyce, "after an exciting day like this, dear."

"Yus, early hours in the country," agreed the tramp, whimsically. "I wants to go ter sleep, tha' 's a fack, so's I can wake up agin proper!"

Joyce took up a lamp.

"Our room is No. 5," she smiled, as she put her free arm round Jim. "Yours, Alfred, is No. 3."

Alfred walked towards the kitchen lamp, which had been brought in for his use, but hesitated, with his hand on it.

"Arter all I'll stop dahn here for a bit," he said, changing his mind abruptly. "Thinks I'll 'ave another pipe."

"Righto! Sleep well," called Jim.

"Good-night," sang out Joyce.

"Sime to both on yer," replied the tramp, and watched them up the stairs.

He watched them reach the top and cross the strip of passage, and enter No. 5. He watched them disappear and he watched the door close.

"Well, I wouldn't 'ave chose that room, so I wouldn't," he thought. "But she'd set 'er 'eart on it. Not with that sign aswingin' below me winder—and the durned eye chinged ter yellin' agin! Chinged while we was goin' over the 'ouse, it did . . ."

He shivered. An odd sadness entered into him. At odd moments throughout his life, he had repined over his own lot, but now, hardened to the unkind kicks directed at his own person, he found himself repining objectively over the misfortunes of others. Fancy, them two lucky things, with this shadder over 'em! It wasn't fair, that it wasn't. No, he wouldn't go to bed. He'd stay down here, and see that everything was all right. Yes, that was what he would do. But, first, a little Dutch courage wouldn't come amiss. The trees were making uncomfortable sounds outside—nasty, uncomfortable sounds. He could hear them rubbing against each other . . . and the grandfather clock . . . nasty things, grandfather clocks, and that wind out there . . . nasty thing, wind, at night . . .

Yes, a little Dutch courage was what he wanted. And he knew where to find it, too. Not a bad thing, to be marooned in an inn, after all. The things he was seeing were too real. What he wanted, to grow happy again, was a Chinaman not with one head, but with two. Then he could laugh at it. Yes, of course, that was it. He hadn't laughed properly for quite a while. You know the sort of thing. Laughter that made the other fellow look silly. Not the kind that made *you* look silly! Just through that passage there, and into the bar . . . Alone in a bar! He'd never been alone in a bar before. . .

He took up the lamp, and stole quietly out of the parlour. And, as he did so, a hand as quietly groped at the window outside.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We have to record a sad episode in the history of Alfred, of No Address. For a tramp, he had led a good life—in fact, a remarkably good life. There is no purpose in concealing the fact that he was a bit of a puzzle to his fellows, one of whom had nicknamed him “Saint Alfred” when he refused to assist in a little bit of simple thievery; and, despite his natural indignation, the name had stuck. But even a good tramp has his weak moments, and we can find it in our hearts to be charitable to Alfred when he gave way to weakness at the Green Dragon Inn.

He found the bar, and, by the light of his lamp, observed that it was very liberally supplied with Dutch Courage. The Dutch Courage leered at him invitingly from sundry shelves, in the form of fat, comfortable bottles, with curving, comfortable labels.

“I’m the fellow you’re looking for, Alfred!” grinned one.

“No, try me,” grinned another. “If you do, you’ll feel like a prince, I promise!”

“Don’t listen to them,” grinned a third. “I’ve got such a flavour that I will make your inside purr with fragrant fire, while the muddiness of your mind will be replaced by an exalting clarity.”

“Do you want, not merely to see giants, but to slay them?” grinned a fourth. “Do you want to strike terror into all you meet? Do you want to ride up to the highest mountain, and then to soar up into the star-lit skies? Do you want to see the vision that has haunted you all your miserable life—the vision of beauty, of a woman’s smile, of eternal, mad warmth and comfort . . . ?”

Over the fourth bottle, Alfred’s trembling fingers closed. Ogres or beautiful women—he hardly cared which, so long as the sweet draughts brought forgetfulness. It would be fine to slay the ogres—yes! But, perhaps—half-ashamedly came the admission!—perhaps it would be finer to lie in the sweet embrace of beauty, and to discover peace on her warm bosom!

Poor Alfred. Alone with his fancies, seeking like many another lonely man to solidify them by unnatural processes, he drank. The liquor ran down his throat like liquid, scented fire. Occasionally, in his eagerness, he choked a little. Then, when the moment of delicious awkwardness was past, he would quickly raise his glass again, just to prove that the incident had raised no permanent obstruction in his throat.

Ghostly thought! An obstruction in his throat! Something that would prevent this generous, halcyon flow!

“’Sempty!” he murmured, almost tearfully, as he inverted the bottle and nothing dribbled out.

He reached for another bottle. Who cared? What a glorious adventure! But it seemed a long way off.

That was odd. He had believed it to be quite close. Hallo—it *was* quite close! His hand shot out, and the bottle ran away again.

“’Sfunny!” he pondered.

And he tried again. This time, he advanced his hand slowly and cautiously. The bottle was bobbing up and down, jumping towards him and then tripping away again. But Alfred was cute, Alfred was. The bottle would soon grow tired. It was growing tired already. By inches, the hand advanced. It lurched forward.

“Gotcher!” chuckled Alfred.

As a matter of fact, he had got a bottle two feet away from the one he had been aiming for; but any bottle was good enough.

Half-way through it, he lost interest in it. The world swam away from him. Peace came.

At first, it was a perfect peace. Existence held nothing. It became negative. But then, strange things began to flit about. And, first, it was a lovely lady, gracious and smiling, and astonishingly clean. The cleanliness itself did not astonish him. What astonished him, and filled him with a sort of dazzling joy, was the fact that so clean a person should take an interest in *him*. An interest beyond that of doling out pennies. A personal interest. Why, she was walking by his side, talking to him . . . She was holding his hand . . .

Who was she like? The eyes—they were frank and girlish. He had seen her before. Quite recently. Yes, only a few moments ago. Only, then, there had been some barrier between them. Was the barrier his own uncleanness . . . or some young man who seemed to have a prior claim . . .

Hallo! Alfred started violently. What was that? Another face rose before him. The sweet woman hurried away. Rousing himself, he tried to hurry after her, and in so doing, knocked over a bottle.

“Hi! Wait a minit!” he called, thickly.

But the woman wouldn’t wait. And here was this other face—huge, enormous, with bulging blue eyes.

“Shoo!” muttered Alfred.

He ran three thousand miles, and stopped suddenly to listen to his heart beating. Tick-tock. Was it his heart? Tick-tock. No, it wasn’t his heart. It was a clock. It was a grandfather clock. Tick-tock. And here was this terrific, elephantine face, still glowering at him.

“Go ’way,” said Alfred.

“Sh!” hissed the face.

“Go ’way!” repeated Alfred. “If yer don’, I’llitcher.”

A great hand appeared over his mouth. He frankly bit it. The operation proved effective, and was followed by a little squeal.

“Ah,” said Alfred. “*That’s* ’oo I em. Go ’way!”

He shut his eyes, and opened them again. The big, blue eyes still bulged at him. But there seemed to be four eyes. Or was it six? Alfred laughed.

“Shtop shtill,” he commanded, mirthfully, “I wansher count ’em.”

“Be quiet!” hissed the owner of the countless blue eyes, threateningly.

“Quiet yershelf,” retorted Alfred. “Don’ bob abart!”

The voice became more threatening.

“Raise your voice again, and you’ll get hurt!” it whispered, fiercely.

“’Fyer keepsh bobbin’ abart, get ’urt ’shelf,” returned Alfred.

“You’re drunk,” said the voice.

“’Corse I am,” agreed Alfred. “Helsh *you* wouldn’t be ’ere.”

The big hand shot out once more, and gripped his shoulder. The voice was right in his ear now, and boomed into his head like an explosion:

“Where is it?”

“Whereshwat?” answered Alfred.

“You know! Where is it?”

“’Go ’way!”

Something was shaking Alfred. He wriggled himself free. But the shaking had had an effect. His mind grew clearer.

Yes, of course, he knew what it was! The ruby. He must get to Room No. 5, and warn them. But how could he mount all those stairs? He glanced desperately at the upper landing, and at Room No. 5. The bulging blue eyes followed his gaze. The next moment, Alfred felt two strong arms around him.

He fought fiercely. Astonished and disappointed, he discovered that his strength was not as great as he had imagined. Those bottles had promised him great muscularity, and he had counted on them.

“Go ’way. Gitoff!” he mumbled.

But this antagonist would not go away or get off. The clouds rolled up again. The boyish face grew to the size of a house. It became so big that all his vision could compass was a bit of the nose. And even that was growing . . .

Alfred’s last vision before the clouds enveloped him was of a figure running swiftly up the staircase, pausing on the threshold of Room No. 5, and then slowly opening the door and creeping in. As the door closed on Room No. 5, so the door closed in his mind, and once more oblivion gripped him. But not for long. Alfred’s obsessions were not yet over.

Now, standing above him, was another figure. It was the figure of a Chinaman, twenty feet tall.

The Chinaman regarded him impassively for a few years, and then moved his head slightly. The head, by now, was about three miles off, yet the voice could be heard quite distinctly when it spoke.

“Up there?” said the Chinaman.

“I’ll ’it yer,” retorted Alfred. Or did he only think the words? He could not say.

“Up there?” repeated the Chinese giant.

Alfred tried to shake his head, but found himself nodding instead.

“Not come down yet?” went on the Chinaman.

This time, Alfred tried to nod his head, but found himself shaking it. The Chinaman’s bright, burning eyes drained him of all his will-power.

“One word, you die,” said the Chinaman. “You all die. Velly solly.”

It occurred to Alfred that the Chinaman meant it. He watched the Oriental cross the room, and open the thick curtains that concealed the window. A sudden draught of night air came through the window as the curtains parted; the window had been opened, or a pane broken. The Chinaman slipped behind the curtains, and they closed again.

“Won’t say a word, won’t I?” thought the tramp. “We’ll sheel!”

But, after all, what could he do? He racked his burning brain, and nothing occurred to him. If he could have moved, he would have returned to the bar, “though, ’corsh,” he reflected, “I drunk ’nuff ashtish ter make hup orl thesh devilsh!” He could not move, however. He felt as though the Chinaman were still boring him with his burning lamps even through the curtain.

A soft noise on the landing above him made him raise his eyes. The enormous man with the bulging blue eyes was slipping out of Room No. 5. But he seemed to have grown a good deal smaller. In fact, he was almost undersized now. And he looked anxious.

He paused on the landing for a considerable while, listening. Clearly, he was undecided, and this indecision interested the tramp, and gave him a queer sense of consolation. It was pleasant to feel that he was not the only person in the world who did not know what to do.

Presently, the figure on the landing began to descend the winding stairs. He showed the same caution on the stairs that he had shown on the landing. Half-way down he stopped and listened; then his eyes fell upon the tramp.

A lighted candle was standing on the parlour table. Alfred noticed this now for the first time. He had no notion whether he had lit it, or the man now descending the stairs, or the Chinaman behind the curtain. He only noticed it now because of the shadows it cast. The figure on the stairs completed its journey, paused again, and approached the tramp.

“Still here?” The blue eyes glowered ominously. “Why don’t you quit?”

Alfred did not reply.

“Seen anything?” came the next question, in a low whisper.

Alfred maintained his silent policy.

“Why don’t you answer, you fool?” hissed his questioner. “Have you seen anything—or anybody?”

“Yush—you,” muttered the tramp.

The blue eyes glared, but their owner decided to waste no more time. Looking swiftly around, he suddenly blew out the candle, darted to the door, unbolted and unlocked it, and threw it open. Then he slipped back into the shadows and waited.

The moon shone palely outside, illuminating the inn yard with its ghostly radiance. The figure behind the door waited a full minute, with hand raised, as though expecting something to enter. But nothing came. Creeping out of the shadows at last, the figure slipped out into the moonlight, and was gone.

The curtains parted silently, and the Chinaman slipped out after it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jim woke suddenly, with the sense that somebody was in the room, or had been. On the point of sitting bolt upright, he desisted. He desisted for two reasons. One was the regular, soft breathing that sounded so happily by his side; he did not wish to disturb that sweet serenity. The other was the pain in his leg.

For a few moments, as he detached himself mentally from that pain, he wondered whether the pain, and not a presence, had woken him up. He listened intently. Moonlight flooded outside the low window. A perfect night, this, for ghosts or fairies. The leathery creaking of the inn sign beneath the window spoke of a night breeze, and Jim found himself oddly contrasting the sound of the inn sign with the sound of Joyce breathing. “Creak-creak, creak-creak!” went the sign; sinister, fretful, messenger of grim, disturbing things. But Joyce’s soft breathing by his side—how sweetly that whispered, and with what wonderful promise of peace and joy!

“No mistake about it, Jim,” he reflected, “this life is a queer thing! Joy and terror stalk through it, side by side. God bless the joy!”

Slowly and tenderly, he stretched out his hand, to touch the joy, and assure himself of its reality. He felt Joyce’s firm, warm shoulder, and smiled over the absurd, comforting pleasure it gave him. Yes, the joy won every time . . .

Then a new sound fell upon his ears. Someone was laughing below.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!” came the laughter, thickly. “Bloomin’ funny! He, ha, ha, ha, ha!”

“Lord, it’s that tramp,” muttered Jim. “What the blazes is *he* up to?”

Had the tramp stolen into the room? Jim dismissed the thought almost as soon as it came to him. No—Alfred was faithful! But what was he doing down there, then? And what particular joke had tickled his sense of humour at this time of night?

“Perhaps he’s not been to bed yet,” thought Jim, recalling that Alfred had not followed them up when they had retired, but had lingered. “I wonder if the old fellow’s been enjoying himself in the bar!”

This, as we know, was a good guess; though whether the word “enjoyed” strictly hit the mark may be questioned.

The laughter continued. Or, was it laughter? Vocally, yes. Spiritually, perhaps no! There was little mirth in the sound, which rang with a jangle of false defiance—the defiance of the terrified child who tells himself, with fast beating heart, that *he’s* not afraid of ogres and Red Indians, not he!

“Hallo! What’s happening *now*?” wondered Jim.

Something had banged. Surely that was the front door below? It was. Alfred had closed it. In the sudden silence that followed the bang, Jim heard the big key turned. He sized matters up this way:

“Alfred stayed below. He’s beautifully drunk. He went out to get some fresh air—the mad fool! While he was outside, just below our window—*our* window, Joyce—*our* window!—he must have cackled or something. Up comes the sound, and wakes me up with the feeling . . . H’m.”

It was not very satisfactory. Still, he continued, needing an explanation for his comfort: “Of course. Quite so. That must have been it. Then in goes Alfred. Has a fit of hysterics, brought on by the sudden rush of night air on his fevered brow. Sees a five-headed chicken, very likely, and calls it ‘bloomin’ funny.’ Closes door, to keep five-headed chicken out. And here endeth the chapter. I’m going to sleep again!”

He was about to relax, when another thought came to him. He slid his hand carefully and quietly under his pillow. The next moment, all thought of sleep had departed.

“Good God!” he muttered. “It’s gone!”

He had placed the ruby under his pillow, for safety. It was no longer there.

Now Jim did some furious thinking. Someone *had* been in the room. Someone had stolen in, had bent over them while they slept—confound the intruder!—and had slipped the precious stone from under the pillow. Then he had made off with it . . . Yes, of course. That explained Alfred’s laughter. The dolt was playing his usual trick of trying to blame it all on his precious “majnashun!”

“I must go down and interview that chap,” thought Jim. But, for the second time, his impulse to move was thwarted, and for the same two reasons. His leg really was painful. And Joyce really was breathing so sweetly! And—a third reason came along—the thief would have got away by now, anyhow. And—a fourth reason—why the deuce should they bother themselves about somebody else’s stone? And—a fifth reason—it was jolly nice and warm in bed . . . jolly nice and warm. . . .

“Creak-creak, creak-creak!” went the Green Dragon sign.

“Ha, ha!” chattered Alfred.

Jim slept.

The moonlight vanished, and the sunlight streamed in at the window. Silver changed to amber.

“Good-morning,” whispered Joyce, opening her eyes.

“Good-morning,” answered Jim, his eyes already open.

“Dear,” said Joyce.

“Darling,” said Jim.

“Couple of idiots!” laughed Joyce, and sat up.

Her hair fell about her in joyous disorder. A streak of the amber sunlight caught it, and made it a thing of mad delight. Jim lay and watched it, and pitied all the other sunlight in the Universe that had not had the amazing good fortune to alight on Joyce’s hair.

“Stop staring, sir!” commanded Joyce, rosily.

“Never,” he retorted.

“But you mustn’t.”

“Pardon me, madam. A clergyman told me, only yesterday, that I might. ‘Will you?’ he said. ‘I will,’ I answered.”

“Oh, Jim, you are the nicest man I ever met!” she cried. “I simply love the way you make me laugh!” And, bending down suddenly, she kissed him. “But we’ve got to be serious, too, haven’t we? Yet how *can* one be serious, Jim! This room! Those oak beams! That lovely, lovely diamond-paned window, through which, I’m sure, generations of pretty heads have popped out to greet just such a morning as this— —”

“But none so pretty as yours!”

“Be quiet, sir! I’ll bet each pretty head had someone who would emphatically have denied your statement. Anyway, if we are going to live happily together, Jim, you must never interrupt me when I am beginning to get poetic. You’ve stopped my flow. I was talking of that lovely, lovely window. I was saying . . . Hallo! Did you get up in the night, Jim?”

“Eh? Get up?” he exclaimed. “No! Why?”

“Well you must have! Already, I’ve discovered a bad habit of yours—you walk in your sleep.”

“But I don’t!” he protested. “What’s all the excitement about, Joyce?”

"Well, do you remember," she replied, "*you* said last night that we'd have the window wide open, and *I* said, 'No, only just a crack,' and so we only had it open just a crack? Well, look now. It's wide open! Now, I call that a perfectly rotten trick to play on me, just when I was asleep and helpless!"

Jim looked at the window. It was open wide. His face became grave.

"Not guilty, old thing," he responded.

"Well, don't look so glum. I'm not really cross. The wind must have blown it open—no—it couldn't do that, could it?"

Jim did not reply for a moment or two. He regarded the wide open window thoughtfully, and then transferred his gaze to his wife.

"No, it couldn't," he responded. "In fact, it didn't. Joyce, I've got to tell you something. But, first—how did you sleep?"

"Like a top."

"Good. And, now — —"

"No, wait a moment!" she interposed. "I'll show you that even a woman can show consideration before curiosity. How did *you* sleep?"

"Middling," he laughed. "I had to keep on waking up, you know, to look at you."

"Of course. That's understood. But something *else* woke you up, too, didn't it?" she asked, shrewdly.

"It did."

"What?"

"Don't know. Can't say. But—don't faint, old girl—somebody's opened that window. And—the ruby's gone."

"The ruby's gone?" she cried.

"Absolutely and irrevocably gone," he answered, solemnly. "Walked off. Done a bunk. Vamoosed."

But she had to make sure, and she slid her hand under his pillow, and then under hers.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "It really *has* gone!"

"Course, it has," he said. "If we are going to live happily together, Joyce, you must learn to trust me first time — —"

"Don't mock!"

"Shall if I want to. Anyway, the ruby's gone, and what the jolly old devil are we going to do?"

She clapped her hands suddenly.

"I know what the jolly old devil *I'm* going to do!" she cried. "I'm going to get up and cook breakfast."

"Splendid idea," he approved. "Ditto, ditto."

"Not so fast, young man," she retorted holding him down with the tip of her ringed finger. "See that gold band? That means I've got to be honoured and obeyed. Or, if it doesn't, it ought to. How's your leg?"

"Still a bit obstreperous," he confessed.

"Very well, then. I've got a simply scrumptious idea. As your leg's bad, you shall have your breakfast in bed, and I'll be able to show you what a wonderful cook and housekeeper I am! Then I'll attend to your leg, and show you what a wonderful nurse I am — —"

"Nonsense," he exclaimed. "I'm all right."

But she insisted, and he found himself pleasantly overruled. One of her chief arguments was that, by having their breakfast up in the bedroom, they would be spared a little of the tramp's company.

"But don't you like Alfred?" asked Jim.

"I love Alfred," she replied, "but I wouldn't want the King himself bobbing about at our very first breakfast!"

"Well, leave the bedroom door open when you go," he said, "and be sure to yell good and hard if there's any trouble below. Oh, and here's another thing," he added. "I want an immediate report as to the condition of our Alfred. I didn't tell you—I heard him laughing to himself last night."

"Well, that won't frighten me," she retorted. "It's a little habit of Alfred's."

"Yes, but this time I rather think he's genuinely exceeded his liquid rations. If you come across him lying prone on the floor, don't be alarmed. His heart will be beating."

"What could alarm anybody, on a morning like this?" cried Joyce, as she jumped out of bed. "Do you think, Mr. Cresswell, that you're talking to a silly, nervous, unmarried little girl?"

She dressed quickly; and in ten minutes had left the room. Jim listened to her as she ran down the winding staircase, and he tried to visualise exactly what she would find in the parlour below.

She found the tramp. He was not prone. He was seated in a chair, smiling happily.

"Well, you seem contented," remarked Joyce.

"Abs'lutely," answered Alfred.

"How did you sleep?" she asked.

"Absolutely," replied Alfred.

Joyce smiled as she put her next question:

"Well, what are you doing here?"

"Keepin' out o' *there*," said the tramp, and jerked his thumb towards the kitchen.

"Why?"

"'Cos I seen 'nuff ghosts."

"Oh!" frowned Joyce. "And is a ghost—in *there*?"

"Yus, miss."

"Whose?"

"The Chink's."

"Nonsense!"

"'Corse it's nonsense. But go and 'ave a look!"

"I will," said Joyce: and went into the kitchen.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Across the kitchen table, the almond eyes of the Chinaman bored into hers. She gave a little gasp, but stood firm. Jim *hors de combat* upstairs, the tramp in no condition to assist, she realised that whatever defence were necessary against this uncanny Oriental—if defence were actually necessary—would be up to her.

And, simultaneously with this realisation, came another. Her defensive powers would be weakened if she showed panic. As an agitated, terrified creature, she would stand no chance against the quiet and purposeful little man who stood watching her with expressionless face. As a cool and collected girl, with her mind and her wits working, she might have some hope.

So the little gasp escaped her, and, apart from that, she gave no sign of the tumult within her breast.

She did not know how long they stood looking at each other. Probably, a matter of seconds only, though it seemed minutes. Then, just the suspicion of a smile flickered across the Chinaman's face—a faint, scarcely perceptible acknowledgment that something had pleased him.

"Close door," he said, in his thin, even voice.

"Why should I close the door?" replied Joyce, wondering while she said it that her first words should be upon such a trivial point.

Yet, perhaps, the point was not too trivial. It might not be physically wise to close the door, for one thing. For another, it might not be spiritually wise to yield to the Chinaman's will.

"And sit down," added the Chinaman.

The impudence of the fellow!

"Why should I sit down?" Joyce demanded.

But, suddenly, she walked to the door and closed it; and then, returning to the table, sat down on a chair beside it. She had strength, but part of her strength was an intuitive knowledge of her opponent. She knew that, in a real battle of wills—at this moment—the Chinaman would win. "At this moment," she repeated to herself, for comfort. He had caught her unprepared. Perhaps, in other circumstances, she might be able to match him. Meanwhile, she would adopt the political policy of conceding small points gracefully, and sticking to the big points like a bull-dog—if she could.

When you know you are going to lose a certain encounter, it is unwise to exaggerate its importance by fruitless opposition.

"Thank you," said the Chinaman, with a precise little bow. "Now I sit, too, and we talk. Velly sensible lady."

"If you don't mind, I'm not in the mood for compliments," retorted Joyce.

"No compliment," answered the Chinaman. "Velly good. Your friend upstairs?"

"Mr. Cresswell, my husband, is upstairs," said Joyce, "but I expect him downstairs any minute."

"Oh, no," observed the Chinaman, shaking his head solemnly. "He bad leg. No downstairs yet. Velly bad leg."

"All right," exclaimed Joyce, impatiently. Impatience was a nice, homely emotion, and she clasped it tight. "You can have it your own way. You seem to know all about it."

The Chinaman considered the statement. Again, he shook his head solemnly.

"Velly much," he said, "but not all. Red stone. Red eye. Where is it?"

This remark was enlightening. So the Chinaman did not know where the ruby was! Well—that was something! It was at least pleasant to feel that they were on an equality there. But—perhaps he did know? Perhaps he was bluffing her, for some unfathomable purpose. She stared hard into his eyes, and read—nothing.

Anyway, why should she answer his questions? She decided not to.

“Sorry,” she said, shrugging her shoulders, “but I’m not good at riddles. Never was.”

“Red stone. Where is it?” repeated the Chinaman, and suddenly his eyes became tiny black pin-points, piercing her.

“I won’t answer you,” she muttered.

“You have answered,” said the Chinaman, as his gaze relaxed, and again the suspicion of a smile flickered across his face.

This was ridiculous. If Joyce had been standing, she would have stamped her foot.

“What have I said?” she demanded.

“You do not know where red stone is,” responded the Chinaman. “Your eyes, they speak. You Western people—your eyes tell all your secrets. Obligated. Thank you. But a Chinaman, he says what he wants. No more.” His emotionless voice and expressionless face bore testimony to his words. As though interested in his theme, he went on: “I hate you? You know nothing. I kill you? Wait till the moment. I love you? I will hold you? You make a flame of me?” He touched his heart. “You know nothing. One day, yes. Time is big.”

His words chilled and fascinated her. She felt their reality. It was true—this queer little man, concealing the greatness that was undoubtedly in him, might despise or desire her. She had no means of telling which—until the cold point was on her throat, or the warm kisses on her lips.

She jumped up from her chair, determined to end the interview.

“Look here, all this doesn’t interest me a bit,” she exclaimed. “But if you can read me so well, why don’t you find out that I want you to go?”

The Chinaman made a deprecating gesture.

“Soon, I go. But—” He paused, and added, “Not far. Not far from red stone. You do not know where it is. Velly good. But your husband, perhaps he knows?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t!”

“Perhaps he knows, and not tell you?”

“That’s an idiotic idea!”

“Oh, no. Sensible idea! He thinks, perhaps, it safer you do not know. Velly good. Perhaps right. Time is big.”

“I think I can prove to you that he does not know where the ruby is,” said Joyce, quietly. “Listen. Last night, it was stolen from him. It was stolen from under his pillow. I thought, first—that you might have stolen it.”

“Stolen,” repeated the Chinaman, reflectively. “Stolen from you?” Joyce nodded. “The red stone was yours?”

“No, it wasn’t,” replied Joyce. “We found it—” She hesitated.

“I know where you found it,” observed the Chinaman. “The dog’s tin.”

“You know a jolly lot!” exclaimed Joyce. “Rather more than you should, I expect. Perhaps you know *who* stole the wretched thing from under my husband’s pillow—if it wasn’t you.”

“No, not me,” answered the Chinaman. “I have said.”

“Well, who was it?”

The Chinaman’s eyes became slits. They were fixed upon Joyce, but they seemed to see beyond. “I know,” he repeated, softly. “I followed him. He is asleep.” His eyes were almost invisible now. “Asleep. But he must wake. He was—too sly. The red stone is hidden. It is here

still. He will wake. And come back. Now? Later? To-night? To-night? Some time!" He nodded, with a queer, eerie sense of conviction. "Some time," he repeated.

"And—what will *you* do?" asked Joyce, suddenly.

"Oh, I come back, too." The Chinaman paused, and considered Joyce. Then he nodded again, precisely. "And I watch."

"You mean you're going to watch *us*?" exclaimed Joyce, with an unpleasant sensation that this was what he did mean.

"Yes," said the Chinaman.

Joyce burst forth. "Why?" she demanded. "We've got nothing to do with all this! I assure you, we don't want you poking around all day—"

The Chinaman held up a deprecating hand. He seemed spiritually to object to her tone, although facially he gave no indication. For an instant, his eyes went upwards, in the direction of the room where Jim was lying; his eyes moved, but not his head.

"He may know," he observed, softly.

"I tell you, he doesn't know. We neither of us know. And—"

"He may know—not tell you—save you worry," went on the Chinaman. "Or he may find red stone. So—I watch." He shrugged his shoulders, slightly, and almost apologetically. "No one leave this place all day. Obliged."

This was too much. Joyce's mouth opened.

"Do you mean to say," she gasped, "you propose to keep us prisoners here?"

"No one leave this place before—the artist return." He smiled as he used the word "artist." "You wait here. You friend upstairs—"

"My husband!"

"Your husband—bad leg. He cannot go. Velly good. You stay, too. Velly good. He, too." He inclined his head towards the parlour. "No one leave the inn."

"You are—I'm sure you'll forgive my plain speaking, in the circumstances—the most impertinent man I have ever met," cried Joyce, warmly. "And you needn't think that we will accept your ridiculous orders. We're going as soon as we want to—not sooner, or later—and we're going to send for the police."

"No police," said the Chinaman. "No tradesman. I send milkman away already. Innkeeper velly ill. Velly catching. No more tradesman call here."

"But suppose other people call here?" exclaimed Joyce. "Do you think we are going to keep silent? Just because you say so?"

"Velly few people call here. Any come—they stay. Little while. Not long."

"Suppose they won't stay? Suppose *we* won't stay? How will you make us?"

The Chinaman smiled, as though the question were childish.

"Many ways," he replied.

"I don't believe you. How will you stop *me*?"

"You?" He studied her a few seconds. "For you—sleep."

"I see," she responded, angrily. "You'll try one of your beastly Chinese tricks. Well, I advise you to be careful. This isn't China, you know. This is England, and I really don't know why I've stayed to listen to all your nonsense. I shall do exactly as I like, and you needn't think you can frighten me with your silly threats. And—look here—stop staring at me like that! It's rude. I don't like it! Do you hear?"

The Chinaman made no response, but was walking quietly to the door.

"Where are you going?" demanded Joyce. "Wait a minute. I want you to understand—"

The Chinaman had ceased to pay any attention to her. He reached the door, and slipped out.

“Come back!” cried Joyce. “I’ve not finished with you. I want to ask you some questions!” She ran to the door. Her brain was suddenly illuminated with activity, as though something that had been pressing on it were abruptly removed. “I say! Where are you? What have you done to the innkeeper? . . .”

The Chinaman was not in the passage. She reached the parlour. He was not there. The tramp stared back at her.

“Where is he?” she cried.

“’Oo?” asked the tramp.

“The Chinaman!”

“Wot—’ere?” Alfred shook his head, and beamed. “Well, I’m blowed, miss,” he chuckled. “Now, *you*’ve got ’em, too!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When Joyce entered the bedroom with the breakfast-tray, Jim noticed that she was flushed, but put it down to the business of preparing their first morning meal together, and to the anticipation of enjoying it. She did not disillusionise him, because she did not want the happy occasion marred. "That beastly Chinaman!" she thought. "I'm *not* going to let him spoil things!" And, be it said, she didn't.

Old married couples cannot forget the fears and inconveniences that invade them, but newly married couples have a certain amount of their interest already pledged. With very little determination, they can shut the external world out.

So Joyce shut the external world out from nine till ten, and dabbled in delicious nonsense. Even the inn sign fell into her mood, and creaked, "*Splen*-did day, *Jol*-ly fine, *Jol*-ly fine, *Splen*-did day!" instead of its usual gruesome message. The breakfasters might have been in an hotel at Maidenhead or Torquay, with utter independence and security outside their door, from their attitudes. No shadows were permitted to fall upon that wonderful, spotless breakfast-tray.

But afterwards, when the tray was set aside, and they sat smoking delicious after-breakfast cigarettes, Joyce became serious, and remarked that it was time for another conference.

"Certainly. By all means," said Jim, swiftly interpreting her tone. "Anything happened?"

"Yes."

"When? While you were downstairs?"

"Yes."

"What?"

He listened intently, while she related her interview with the Chinaman, and when she had finished, he looked at her with a puzzled frown.

"It really is a queer position, old thing," he observed. "Did you ever know anything like it? I'm going to get up in few minutes, but I certainly can't hobble far. I'm a sort of prisoner, anyway. Despite this, we are forbidden to leave the inn. And—there's any amount to do."

"I suppose there is," she answered. "But what *is* there to do? I mean, what would we do if no Chinaman existed?"

"We'd get into communication with the police. We'd have a shot at finding a garage where my old 'bus could be attended to. We'd tootle off for milk and supplies, when and as required. And, if we couldn't get the old 'bus into commission, we'd perhaps hire another car and continue our joyous journey along the coast—if my leg would allow it."

"Yes—I'd thought of all those things," nodded Joyce. "But, now that Li Hung Chang has told us not to budge, are we cut off from them?"

"What do you think?"

"What do *you*?"

"Cheat! I asked first. Tell me exactly how you feel about that Chinaman."

"He puzzles me—I don't know exactly what I feel," she responded, after a moment's reflection. "He ought to terrify me. At odd moments, he does. I sometimes wonder whether he exerts some influence over me that keeps me from screaming when I'm with him. Logically, one *ought* to scream. Oughtn't one?"

"Depends upon the one, Joyce," answered Jim. "You're just top-hole, you know."

"Now, then, I don't want your compliments, sir. I mean—yes, I do! I love them, really — —"

"Hooray! Then listen. You're the most gorgeous creature that ever breathed, your lips are so perfect—don't move them—that they give me violent palpitations every time I look at them, your eyes, my child—your eyes—"

"And your tongue, oh, your tongue!" she interposed. "Darling, I just love it, but we must be serious. Mustn't we?"

"Well, I suppose so," he sighed. "Go on about Li Hung Chang. He ought to make you scream, but he doesn't. Now, why?"

"Can't say," she replied. "Even when he was talking about the simply awful possibility that he might love me, I felt fascinated. No, I don't mean that. I mean—limp. Yes, that's it. He makes me feel limp, and I spend all my energy trying to unlimp myself."

"Well, go on unlimping yourself whenever you're with him," growled Jim. "Meanwhile, to get down to brass tacks, old thing, do you believe there's anything in his threats?"

She nodded gravely.

"I feel sure of it, Jim."

"You mean—" He paused, as though objecting to put the unpalatable truth into words; then plunged on, "You mean, you think he will do something—unpleasant—if any of us leave this inn?"

"Afraid I do." She added, "Unless we stop him."

"It'll be a risk, anyway, eh?"

"Seems like it."

"Very well," he pronounced. "Then one point is clear in all this muddle. *You* don't leave this inn without *my* permission! Hear that, Mrs. Cresswell? Right. Now, next—what's the fellow after?"

"The ruby, of course," she exclaimed.

"Just that?"

"I can't see what else."

"Nor can I. And yet, I have a funny feeling that his game isn't quite the same as the game of our artist. I may be wrong. Let's try and figure out the Chinaman's moves. He comes to the inn, to get the ruby. He doesn't get the ruby, but he does something to the innkeeper. He tackles the blind man—again, to get the ruby. Again, he doesn't get the ruby, and he does something to the blind man. We get the ruby. Before he can tackle us, somebody else does. The artist chap. So old Li Hung Chang tackles the artist. Once more, he doesn't get the ruby, and he does something to the artist."

"But he says the artist hasn't got the ruby," interposed Joyce.

"No—that artist seems to have been a wily bird," nodded Jim. "He stole the ruby from me, gathered the Chink was after him, and hid the ruby. He means to return. Li Hung Chang means to return. And, if they time their return at about 1 a. m. to-night, they are liable to meet Samuel Jones, and J. D., and J. D.'s sister."

There was a short silence.

"I wonder—where *we* shall be, at 1 a. m. to-night," mused Joyce.

"If we are still at this inn, as appears probable," answered Jim, "it isn't very likely we shall be sleeping peacefully in our beds! Question is—where do we *want* to be?"

"I should hate not to be here," exclaimed Joyce, suddenly. "Somehow—having got this far—it would be like running away."

"Just how I feel, old thing," answered Jim, patting her arm. "We can't budge, and we won't budge! Right. But, of course, we mustn't sit still, if there's anything we find we can do."

"What can we do?"

"Exactly. So we'll take the day quietly, and work our strength up for an interesting evening, eh? It's going to be quite a little family party. I shouldn't be surprised to find the

innkeeper there, and that old hag, and even the blind man.”

“And the little girl’s uncle, D. T. —”

“No, not quite as bad as that,” Jim corrected her, laughingly. “The initials of our friend the tramp ought to be D. T.! The little girl’s uncle was T. T.—hand me his note off the dressing-table, will you?”

“Where?” asked Joyce, looking towards the dressing-table.

“On that little shelf, by my collar—” He stopped abruptly, as he followed her gaze.

“It’s not there,” she said.

“No—so I see,” he murmured. “Do you think you moved it, by any chance?”

“Me moved it? I mean, I moved it? No, whichever it is!”

“Then someone’s taken it, old thing,” remarked Jim, slowly. “Someone who’s interested in this forthcoming meeting at 1 a. m.”

“The artist!” cried Joyce.

“Exactly, my dear Watson. The artist. What a fool I was, Joyce! I ought to have rolled that note up in a little ball, I expect, and swallowed it. Our painter of pictures—I wonder if he has ever painted a picture in his life!—has got hold of some information he evidently wanted through my carelessness. But why he wants it, and whether he was supposed to know it, are questions quite beyond me. Oh, Hades! That’s polite for Oh, Somewhere Else. I wish my leg were well! I wish I were Sherlock Holmes, or Detective Blake, or one of those clear-thinking Johnnies you never meet in real life! I tell you, Joyce, this inactivity is getting on my nerves!”

He made an impatient movement to jump out of bed, but Joyce laid a warning hand upon his shoulder, and he winced comically. For the next ten minutes, they indulged in hospital work. Then, with all the authority of a trained nurse, Joyce gave her patient permission to get up, provided he did so slowly and carefully, and performed no monkey tricks. She brought him a can of hot water, and lingered for a minute before leaving him again.

“Where did the hot water come from?” he asked.

“I couldn’t cook the breakfast without a fire, goose,” she answered.

He laughed. “Isn’t it odd,” he said, “that the first house you are set to run should not be a house at all, but an inn!”

“And I’ll bet I can run it, too,” she returned. “I’m learning all its nooks and corners. I know the tap that won’t work, and the cupboard-door that won’t close properly. I know where the boot-blackening is kept, and I’ve made an inventory of the larder’s resources. If the milkman is afraid to call, we can manage quite well without him, thank you! Plenty of Nestlé’s, in tins. *And* loaves of bread to carry us over a day or two. I’ve come to one conclusion, Jim.”

“What, my dear Watson?”

“Now, don’t overdo that Watson tack! Watson’s all right. I’ve come to the conclusion that the innkeeper doesn’t encourage tradesmen, and that we’re not likely to be bothered with many, even apart from Li Hung Chang’s intention to head them off. Larder’s full of tinned things. We could stand a siege. Why? Did the innkeeper expect one?”

“He seems to have had the hermit’s idea of preparing for solitude,” grunted Jim.

Joyce opened the door, but made one more remark before departing.

“Have you noticed,” she said, “that we keep on speaking of the innkeeper in the past tense?”

She went downstairs. The parlour was empty. A sudden fear assailed her.

“Alfred!” she cried. “Where are you?”

Receiving no reply, she ran quickly to the front-door, which was open.

“Alfred!” she called.

A ragged figure, halfway across the sunny patch between the inn and the entrance gate, paused and turned.

"It's orl right, miss," said the figure. "Dontcher worry."

"Come back!" she exclaimed.

Alfred hesitated, returned a few steps, and stopped again.

"Think I'm runnin' away?" he asked, lowering his voice to a hoarse whisper.

"No! Of course not," she answered. "But— —"

"Well, I ain't runnin' away," went on Alfred, in the same hoarse tone, and looking at her with peculiar earnestness. "But—cooped hup, that's wot you are—you and that gen'l'man. 'Tain't fair. And 'oo's afraid, any'ow? So, I ses ter meself, 'Alf, I ses, 'you're goin' fer the perlice.'"

"No—you musn't," gasped Joyce. "The—Chinaman!"

"There ain't no Chinaman," replied the tramp. "There ain't no nothink. Jest the same, miss, you better keep inside, you better. I'm goin' fer the perlice." He raised his voice suddenly, and roared, "If there's any blamed Chink arahnd 'ere, 'e'd better 'ook it. Alf's acomin'!"

The next moment he had wheeled round, with remarkable dexterity, and was out of the gate.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Let us follow the tramp. He is well worth following, for the most astonishing things happened to him. But let us first discover why the tramp left the Green Dragon Inn, where he appeared at least to have temporary security.

It may be a little difficult to get right inside the tramp's mind. He himself was not inside his mind, but seemed to be floating all around and about it. Physically and mentally confused, he had been rendered almost psychologically unintelligible by the buffetings and twistings of the last few hours (aided, as we know, by the generous contents of the bar): and precisely why he did this, or did not do that, was beyond his simple skill to explain.

Yet there were certain definite points which may be insisted on. Alfred spoke truly when he denied, to Joyce Cresswell, that he was running away. In the first place, he was not in the mood to run away. In the second place (which may partially have explained the first), where should he run to?

The world outside the inn was full of ghosts and spectres. What instinct of self-preservation could have summoned him to mix with them and attempt to fight his way through them?

Very well, then! Why was he slipping out of the gate? We do not cross a room without a motive, or sneeze without a reason. Alfred's motive was a queer, muddy insistence that something ought to be done, that something had got to be done, and that he was the only person left to do it. For himself, he might have been content to stay in the inn until he rotted. But there were these two nice young people. Yes, nice people. Nice to him, too, in some odd way. Reminding him of all sorts of ridiculous things. It was a shame—so it was. He'd fetch the police, or kill the Chink, or do *something*, so he would. Couldn't sit still all day, could one? Very well, then!

Thus, somewhat in the spirit in which he had once defended a child from a bully, and been severely punished afterwards for his quixotism, he reached the winding lane, and hurried round the first bend of it.

Here, he paused. He paused for a couple of very sound reasons. One, he had no definite plan of action. Two, although he was now out of Joyce's sight, he was quite sure that *someone* was looking at him.

He shivered; and then shook himself after shivering.

"'Oo's there?" he demanded, with virtuous indignation.

The only sound that answered him came from the inn. He turned for an instant, and shook his fist in the direction of the creaking sign.

"Shut up!" he snapped. "I've 'ad abart enuff o' you!" Then he turned round again, and once more addressed the empty lane. "Think I'm afraid, do yer!" he said. "Then yer don't know Alf. I 'ad a fight once, I did, with a lion with fifteen legs an' seventeen 'umps. Laid 'im flat, I did. Give 'im seventeen more 'umps, I did. Gr-r-rh! Wot's a silly Chink?"

The sound of his voice heartened him. He allowed five seconds to pass, and then exclaimed, in jerring tones,

"Yer may be 'ere, Chink, or yer mayn't be 'ere. But *I'm* 'ere, and doncher fergit it. And, if I meets you, I won't stop to ask the time—I'll jest give yer one between yer eyes—g'arn, they ain't eyes, they're jest slits—and—well, so I will." He struck the air, with force. "Like that! See? My uncle was a 'eavyweight."

He was about to continue along the road, when a very definite sound made him jump. The sound was merely the snapping of a twig, but it came from round the bend just ahead of him,

and it could not be ignored.

“Wunner if I ’adn’t better get acrost the fields?” thought Alfred.

There was an accommodating gap in the hedge on his right. Yes—that might be better. Quickly, almost convulsively, he slipped through it.

Now, for the moment, he felt more secure. The hedges were tall, and he was well concealed from whatever had made that sound in the lane. Not that he cared what it was. All the same, it might be as well to slip across this field to the next one, and then to take bearings. Yes—he would do that. Slip across the field . . . Get into the next one . . .

He got into the next one. Now, he was well away from the thing in the lane. He began to grow sulky with himself, and to wonder why he had run away from it, and there a new development occurred. He saw a figure wandering about. It was the artist.

“’Allo!” muttered Alfred, to himself. “*Now* wot ’ad I better do?”

The artist did not give him much choice. He looked up suddenly, and the eyes of the two men met. In a trice, the artist was beside the tramp, peering into his face.

“Mornin’,” said the tramp. “Nice day.”

“What are you doing here?” replied the artist.

“Well, I ain’t sowin’ turnips,” answered Alfred. “Come to that, wot are *you* doin’ of ’ere?”

“That’s not your business,” snapped the artist, tartly.

“Ah,” retorted the tramp. “But a pore feller’s business is heverybody’s business, I s’pose?”

They stared at each other, and suddenly it occurred to the tramp that he had no special desire to prolong the conversation. He made a movement to continue on his way, but the artist caught hold of his sleeve.

“Not so fast, my good fellow,” he exclaimed.

“’Oo’s fast?” growled the tramp. “I ain’t got no medal yet for the ’undred yards dash. Let go my arm!”

“In a minute. Where are you off to?”

Alfred felt his anger rising. The Chink froze him, but he could deal with this artist fellow.

“Where was *you* orf to, larst night?” he cried. “A nice gime! Comin’ in like that! And wotcher go hupstairs for? Yus, but I’ll bet that Chink—”

He stopped abruptly. The grasp on his arm had tightened convulsively.

“Ah—the Chinaman,” murmured the artist, in a queer voice. “He—you saw him?”

“Saw ’im?” jeered Alfred. “There ain’t nothin’ I *ain’t* seed!”

“Where? What was he doing?”

“’E was arter *you*!”

“After—me?” The artist blinked. Then he added, roughly, “What do you mean? When was he after me?”

“Lars’ night. And ’e’ll cop yer. Let go me arm, or I’ll ’oller.”

The artist relaxed his grip, but whether in response to the tramp’s urging or to some other cause the tramp did not know. Certainly, the artist looked very odd. So odd, that Alfred lingered for a second or two. The artist passed his hand across his forehead, in a half-dazed manner, closed his eyes, then opened them again. Alfred smiled.

“Yus, I does that, guv’nor,” he said, with a wink. “But it don’t seem ter get rid of ’em.”

“Eh?” jerked the artist.

“Mornin’,” said Alfred. “’Appy Christmas.”

He leapt away, as the artist’s hand shot out. But the artist was too quick for him. Once more, the tramp was captured.

“What are you going to do?” demanded the artist, who appeared to have shaken himself abruptly out of a trance.

"Wotcher mean, wot am I goin' ter do?" replied Alfred, becoming anxious again, and wriggling lustily. "I'm goin' fer the perlice."

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

"Won't I?"

Alfred was not a normally strong man, and poverty and privation had reduced even his normal heritage of strength, but we all have our moments, and this moment was certainly the tramp's—one of the god's unexpected and unaccountable gifts. He lurched hugely, and struck out blindly. His fist met a something not thin air, this time. Before the artist recovered from the blow, Alfred was halfway to a gate.

Then Alfred looked back. The artist was coming after him.

Strictly speaking, tramps do not run. They shuffle and clamber. But the shuffling and the clambering can cover a good deal of ground in quite a small space of time, when true necessity exists, and this race was a good one. The longer it lasted, the wilder it grew. Very soon, it lacked all sense of direction. Oats were negotiated, hedges dived through, a pond was skirted, and a brook was leapt. Where were they going? The tramp had no knowledge. All he knew was that a madman was after him, a madman who would most certainly kill him as soon as he stopped leaping and ducking and dodging, and that trees were flying backwards, and that, through it all, he could smell the sea.

The smell of the sea grew stronger. He had a queer feeling that, if once he could gain the sea, he would be safe. Probably, he decided, he would rush right into it, and wake up under a pump. Yes, that was the idea . . . Rush into the sea . . . Then wake up under a pump . . . Then, get a bit of breath back, and have a cup of tea . . . And tell someone, while he drank the tea, of the queer dream he had had, and the danger of drinking anything stronger than tea . . .

Yes, a very queer dream, indeed! Why, he'd dreamt that he was being chased by an artist, a big, fat fellow with nasty, fishy blue eyes, and, after he'd shaken the artist off—oh, yes, he'd shaken him off—he'd come to an odd, sandy, muddy sort of dip, with a rickety wooden bridge running over some water . . . The tide was high, and the water under the bridge was rushing into the sea . . . And, on the bridge, was the Chinaman . . . The Chink . . . looking at him . . .

Alfred stopped with a jerk. Ahead of him was the Chinaman. Behind, silence.

What was happening?

He had been telling all this to someone—hadn't he?—over a cup of tea. Hadn't he? Of course, he had. But—there was the Chinaman, as large as life. Possibly, a bit larger. And here was Alfred. And they were about to act the end of the incident.

"'Allo, funny-face," grinned Alfred.

The Chinaman looked back at him, blandly and unwinkingly.

"I sed, "'Allo, funny-face,"" repeated Alfred.

The Chinaman remained silent.

"Well—now we're sorter comin' to it, ain't we?" said Alfred.

The Chinaman's passivity goaded the tramp. An idea was floating into his mind. Where had it floated from? It was a terrible idea . . . Not at all the kind of idea he was used to. The bridge looked very narrow, and very rickety. The water under it possessed a comfortable depth. No, no! He musn't do it. Someone had put it into his mind. He wasn't responsible for it. Someone was forcing him to think of it, forcing him to move forward towards the bridge, and towards the Chinaman's quiet, watchful lamps.

"Anyway," muttered the tramp, as he went forward, "you ain't real—so it don't matter!"

But Alfred was uncomfortable. He was perspiring and felt weak. He didn't like it at all. It was all the more unpleasant because the Chinaman himself seemed to be drawing him forward—to have planted this unwilling, murderous impulse in him. He expected the Chinaman to move, to leap upon him. The Chinaman did not move. Alfred could not understand this. Nor

could he understand why he himself did not stop going forward. He did not want to go for the Chinaman. At least, not unless the Chinaman went for him first. Then, of course . . .

Was it his imagination, or did the Chinaman make a slight movement? He did not pause to enquire. He was on the bridge now, and he lurched towards the Chinaman. The Chinaman sank before him.

Alfred held his breath. A moment later, there was a significant splash.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

For a considerable while, Alfred searched for the body of the Chinaman; but he found no trace of it. The sea was rough, and the sand was soft and difficult. Moreover, there were inaccessible pools and gullies, and alarming currents at this spot where stream and ocean met. At last, therefore, he gave the hunt up, and squatted down on a bit of a grassy cliff to review the situation.

He fixed his eyes on the sea's horizon. It was unfortunate that he did not possess another pair of eyes at the back of his head.

"Now, then, let's see," he pondered, with a calmness that surprised him. "The Chink's gorn. That's a cert. Seemed as if 'e was gorn afore I touched 'im. Why didn't 'e put up a fight?" He paused, to consider the point. "Ah, but 'e was goin' for me, that's stright—'e was goin' fer me afore I 'it 'im, 'corse, it was self-defence. Tha' 's stright. Self-defence. Or—wot's wrong with suicide?"

He nodded to himself. He liked the idea of suicide. There was nothing wrong with suicide. It was a most pleasant and comforting idea.

Next, thought Alfred, what had he better do? The police? At the moment, the police did not sound so attractive. Still, there were those two young people at the inn. He couldn't leave them in the lurch, even though the Chinaman had been accounted for.

"'Cos there's that other feller," he reflected. "Blimy, I wish 'e was alongside the Chink. But 'e ain't. 'E's a loonertick, that's wot 'e is. A bloomin' loonertick. And then there's orl them hotherers—all them hother loonerticks. So I'd better be gettin' on, and the fust person I meets—"

A shadow fell upon him, and he looked up sharply. An elderly man, in a blue jersey and a grizzly beard, was staring at him.

"You look a bit blown," observed the blue jerseyed one; obviously, a fisherman. "Anything up?"

"Yus," replied Alfred.

"What?" asked the fisherman.

"Sky," answered Alfred.

The fisherman laughed.

"You might add prices, mate, if you take that line," he exclaimed. "What's up with *you*?"

"Me?"

"You."

"Ah," said Alfred.

There was a short silence. The fisherman was waiting for further enlightenment, and Alfred was wondering in what precise form to give it. All at once he rose, with the enquiry.

"Where's this lead to?"

He jerked his thumb along the shore.

"Trymton," answered the fisherman.

"'Ow far?"

"Mile, p'r'aps. A bit over."

"Ah! Perlice station there?"

"Perlice station!" exclaimed the fisherman, and whistled. "What do you want a police station for?"

"Orl right. Yer've got to 'ave it. There's going's on, mate. Over there." He jerked his thumb in the direction from which he had come. "Perlice job. So I'm goin' to tell 'em."

The fisherman regarded Alfred quizzically, and scratched his head.

"You're a bit mysterious, ain't you?" he asked. "Been havin' a bit?"

Alfred grinned suddenly.

"Nor 'arf," he replied. But the next moment he was serious again. "Jest the sime, I'm goin' for the perlice."

"I'll go along with you," suggested the fisherman. "There's a station at Trymton. But, look here, you've not told me yet—"

"Want yer marrer froze?" demanded the tramp.

He could not quite understand his reticence. He had intended to blurt out the whole story to the first person he met. And, now, here he was, hedging!

"Takes a lot to freeze my marrow," smiled the fisherman.

"Does it?"

"It does."

"Orl right. Would a loonertick do it? There's one about 'ere. Wot abart a blind man wot ain't blind, and a disappearin' innkeeper, and a disappearin' old woman, and—look 'ere—wot abart a Chink." He paused, and turned solemnly towards the bridge. "A Chink wot stood on that there bridge, lookin' dahn inter the water, 'e was, as much as ter say, 'Wunner wot it's like dahn there.'" Alfred paused again, and watched his companion narrowly. "Yus, that's wot 'e looks like. So, 'corse, up to 'im I runs quick, ter stop 'im, but I wasn't quick enuff. In 'e jumps, afore I can lay me 'ands on 'im—and there 'e is, mate, stickin' somewhere in the mud!"

"What!" exclaimed the fisherman. "You mean to tell me a Chinaman jumped off that bridge there?"

"That's right," nodded Alfred, solemnly. "Jumped orf, 'e did, afore I could get to 'im."

"And—you can't find the body?"

"That's right. 'E's stuck in the mud."

"Mud!" laughed the fisherman. "Sure it ain't moonshine?"

"No, I ain't sure," answered Alfred. "I ain't sure o' nothink."

"Well, here's an idea," suggested the fisherman. "Shall we have a look for your mysterious Chinaman?"

"*You* can look, if yer like," said Alfred. "But I'm sick o' lookin'. If I looks any more, I'll get drowned meself. And, when I gets drowned, I don't want it to be water, see?" He winked. "So I'm off fer the perlice."

So saying, he began to walk along the foreshore towards Trymton. The fisherman hesitated for a second, glanced at the bridge, and then overtook the tramp.

"I'll go with you," he remarked. "I don't fancy fishing for Chinamen."

The walk to Trymton was not a very genial affair. Alfred was glad to have a companion, but he was not at all happy in his mind, nor was he communicative, despite his companion's efforts to draw him out. That the fisherman's curiosity was natural did not affect the question. Alfred felt that he had said as much as was wise, and a story not strictly accurate should not be repeated too often. You may tell the truth ad infinitum, but lies should only be told once each.

"Doncher arsk no more questions," said Alfred, at last. "Wot I gotter say is fer the perlice."

"The police—ah," murmured the fisherman. "But what do you want the police to do?"

"'Ear wot I tells 'em, and hact accordin'."

"Well, then, how do you expect 'em to act?"

"Why, they'll go to the inn, o' corse—but, look 'ere, mate, didn't I jest say I wasn't answerin' no more questions? Well, that's right. I ain't. It's a perlice job, see, and the less yer knows, the better."

"All right—don't lose your wool," grunted the fisherman.

They walked along in silence. A few small cottages led to a few larger ones, and then to a few straggling streets that appeared to have lost themselves, to have wandered up to the sea's edge, and then to have stopped because they could go no further. Trymton, from an artist's point of view, had many virtues; but if Alfred expected to find it a centre of keen constabular activity, he was sadly disappointed.

Trymton was the kind of place where the village policeman, when you came across him, appears to have dropped down from another world by mistake.

"Where's the perlice stashun?" asked Alfred, pausing.

The fisherman hesitated. Then, "Up there," he said. "But it's some distance. What about a drink first?"

"Drink?" blinked the tramp, and suddenly pulled the lining out of his trousers-pockets.

"That don't matter," smiled the fisherman. "You come along with me."

An inn, pleasantly ordinary and unmysterious, reared its whitewashed bricks a dozen yards away. He glanced at it, but the fisherman shook his head.

"No, not there," he said. "I can give you something better at my place."

It sounded attractive. Still, Alfred demurred.

"Better go to the perlice fust," he muttered.

"Come—let the police wait a minute or two," urged the fisherman. "There can't be such a great hurry as all that."

Alfred frowned. The fisherman had taken hold of his arm, and was gently leading him on.

"I tell yer, I don't *want* a drink—leastways, not till I've seen the perlice," said Alfred.

"And I tell you, a drink is just what you *do* want," insisted the fisherman, refusing to relinquish his grip. "Why, look what you've been through! You need setting up, man, before you interview our local inspector. He's a pretty fierce character, our inspector—far better put a drop of courage inside you first."

He laughed, and continued to move forward, lugging the dubious tramp after him.

"Oh, all right," mumbled Alfred, accepting what appeared to be the inevitable. He couldn't quite make his companion out. "But, on'y one, mind . . . I never takes more'n one . . ."

They walked through the village. It came to an end, in order to oblige a low line of sand dunes, and then started again beyond, but only to the tune this time of three or four small cottages, dotted here and there without form or pattern. The fisherman lived at the end cottage, situated at some distance from the rest.

"Here we are," he exclaimed. "Now, in you go—and mind you don't bump your head."

The sun shone brightly on the whitewashed stones, making the interior look all the darker when the tramp entered. He found himself in a small, dim parlour. He felt oddly ill at ease—more ill at ease than he had ever felt in the company of Jim and Joyce, albeit their social station was considerably above that of his present host.

"'Allo—wot's that for, mate?" jerked Alfred, suddenly.

The fisherman had closed and locked the door.

"Folks often drop in at this time of the morning," winked the fisherman, as he pocketed the key, "and as I'm going to treat you to a drop of my very special, I don't want them poking their noses in. If they did, they'd pester me till I wouldn't have a drop left in a week!"

"Oh," said the tramp.

"Now, just wait here a minute, while I get the stuff," went on the fisherman. "Sit down, and make yourself at home."

"Oh," said the tramp.

The fisherman disappeared through another door. If the front door had not been locked, Alfred would have departed. Lor'lummy, was he getting 'em again?

He sat down, and blinked into the dimness. He started when he became conscious that someone was standing beside him. But it was not his host. It was a pretty little girl, with light golden locks.

“’Allo!” whispered Alfred. “Ain’t I seed you afore?”

“Why—yes,” answered the child. “Yesterday—at the inn. Did the police come?”

“Perlice,” repeated Alfred. Confusion hummed through his mind. “Perlice? . . . No, I’ve come for the perlice now . . .” Sudden recollection shot through him. “Yus, but didn’t you say that wasn’t no perlice stashun in Trymton?”

She nodded. “There isn’t. Only Endlesby—where I was going, you know, when— —”

Alfred bent forward and clutched her arm, as a clink of glasses sounded in the passage.

“’Oo’s that feller?” he asked, hoarsely.

“My uncle—Mr. Thrasher— —”

“Ah, run along, Janet, run along,” cried the fisherman, entering abruptly. “I hear the hens clucking—see if you can find an egg.”

The child disappeared, and Alfred rounded on his host.

“Look ’ere!” he exclaimed. “Wot made yer tell me there was a perlice stashun at Trymton, when there ain’t?”

“Oh,—I don’t know! P’r’aps I just wanted a bit of company,” laughed the fisherman, showing his teeth. “Try a drop of this?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Alfred looked at the glass that was held out to him. His first impulse was to dash it to the ground. But then it occurred to him that, in the interests of both himself and the young couple whom he had set out to help—*how* many years ago?—discretion might prove more serviceable than valour. Besides, even at the worst of times, it was a pity to waste good liquor.

So he allowed his first impulse to cool, and stared meanwhile, somewhat vapidly, at the proffered glass.

"Well?" said Mr. Thrasher.

Alfred had weakened his position by his hesitation. Vaguely, he realised this. Even while he wondered whether the stuff were doped, he prepared to take the glass.

"Toss it down," said Mr. Thrasher.

"Ain't so sure," replied Alfred. "I've 'ad a lot."

"Then as the song goes, a little bit more won't do you any harm!" laughed Mr. Thrasher.

"Think about it," muttered Alfred; and, taking the glass, he put it on the table.

"Well, if you aren't a queer one!" remarked Mr. Thrasher. "However, have it your own way, of course. Now, tell me. I want to hear your story properly—right from the start. When did you first strike the Green Dragon? And what's all this about the Dragon's eye?"

"That's for the perlice."

"Well, the police aren't here."

"No—wuss luck!"

"So it's no good worrying about them. But I may be able to help you—"

"Oh, yus! You 'elp a lot! Bringin' me 'ere, and lockin' me in!"

"Now, don't get excited," answered Mr. Thrasher, his eyes narrowing a little. "You must realise you've put up a pretty queer story, and I want to get to the bottom of it. Come along. Speak up." He bent forward a little, and put his big face close to the tramp's. "I'm going to have it, you know!"

"Oh, orl right, then," responded Alfred. "If you will 'ave it, you will 'ave it. Fust thing that 'appened, I was goin' along when up comes a feller ten foot 'igh. 'Alf,' 'e ses, 'wot's them up there?' So I looks up, and I sees two tables and a sideboard flyin' through the sky. Wings and all, they 'ad—"

"What the devil are you talking about?" demanded Mr. Thrasher.

"And, arter that," continued Alfred, "a tree turns into a frog, and barks at me."

"Will you stop that nonsense?" demanded the fisherman. "D'you think you're funny?"

"Come ter that, mate," retorted Alfred, "you ain't per'tackler comic yerself. But 'arf a mo'. 'Ere's something else. Then up comes a blinkin' fisherman with a mug like Gawd knows wot, and locks me in room, but I chucks me glass at 'im—"

The glass spun through the air, but Mr. Thrasher ducked, and it crashed against the wall. The next moment, Alfred felt himself gripped by hands of iron.

"I'll kick yer," he bawled.

"Fool!" snarled the fisherman.

"That's right, I am," answered the tramp, struggling lustily. "I oughter've knowd you was a wrong 'un, so I ought. Git orf of me! I never knowd such a world, that I didn't!"

But the fisherman was a tougher proposition, physically, than the artist. Alfred's struggles were vain. He felt himself being lifted from his feet, and it is very probable that, for a few moments, he discovered the bliss of real oblivion. When his senses began to disentangle themselves, he found that he was being carried unceremoniously up a narrow flight of stairs.

“’Ere, where yer takin’ me to?” he gasped.

His captor made no response. The upper landing was reached, a door was opened, and Alfred was rudely deposited on the floor.

“If you make a noise, or give any trouble,” said a rough voice above him, “I’ll put you to sleep properly. Grip on to that!”

Then he heard the door closed, and a key turned, and knew he was alone.

He did not move for several minutes. Why should he move? He couldn’t do anything, and it was fairly comfortable on the floor. He was not at all certain that, when he did move, the comfort would remain. He might discover bruises. Probably, he *would* discover bruises.

But, presently, he risked sitting up, and addressed the dimness of a small back bedroom.

“Wot I wants to know is,” he complained, “wot ’ave I *done*? Everybody’s goin’ for me. Fust, the artist chap. Then the Chink. Then this ’ere fisher feller. Wot ’ave I *done*?”

The only sin he had committed within the last twenty-four hours was the sin of the bottle. But, he argued, even that had been committed in self-defence. He had hoped, through its agency, to enter definitely and without question into the realms of Impossible Things. Well, had he done so? At the moment, he fearfully doubted it. A bump on his head was eloquent of Reality.

“It ain’t fair, that it ain’t,” he went on, addressing himself to a blackened bed-knob. “Knockin’ me abart! I likes a quiet life. Give me a pipe and a bit o’ cheese, and I don’t ask for no more. Leastways, not much. Can’t I ’ave that, without comin’ up agin people?”

The bed-knob did not reply. He rose, a little stiffly, and wandered round the room. The window, much too small to climb out of, was also too remote to climb up to. The door, he ascertained, was locked. He might shout, of course, but that would only bring the fisherman back. All he could do was to wait.

He sat down on the bed. His head drooped. A tramp can sleep anywhere . . .

“’Allo!” he muttered.

He sat up suddenly, and rubbed his eyes. What time was it? The light in the room was different. He must have dropped off. And something must have awakened him.

He listened. Yes, there was a sound outside the door. A sound, as of someone breathing, and moving softly. Alfred was wide awake now. He rose from the bed, and tiptoed towards the door.

Just before he reached it, the handle was turned gently, and the door was quietly pushed. It did not open, however. Alfred watched it, fascinated. Then a low whisper fell upon his ears.

“Is anybody—in there?” came the whisper.

Hope re-entered Alfred’s bosom as he whispered back.

“Yus! Unlock the door, for Gawd’s sake!”

“I wish I could,” whispered the voice outside. “But the key isn’t here. Don’t speak loudly. What’s happened?”

“Blessed if I know,” answered Alfred. “’Oo are you? The kid?”

“I’m Janet—yes.”

“Ah. Well, miss, if yer don’t mind my speakin’ frank, I don’t think much o’ yer taste in huncles! ’E’s locked me in ’ere!”

“What for?”

“Dunno. Where’s ’e now?”

“Out somewhere. On the beach, I think.”

“Wot time is it?”

“Three. I ought to be in school.”

“Then why ain’t yer?”

“’Cos I couldn’t stop, not with all this going on. He doesn’t know I’ve come back. I’ve played truant. You see—I thought—”

“Yer don’t mean, miss, yer come back—ter try an’ give me a ’and?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if yer ain’t a little ’eroine,” murmured Alfred. “Wot made yer do it, missie?”

“It was seeing him carry you upstairs. He told me he’d caught you trying to steal something—”

“*Did* ’e?”

“Yes. But I didn’t think you had. You see . . . Oh, please, what can I do? Quick!”

The question was puzzling. Alfred had not the qualifications of a general.

“Get me out o’ this,” he said.

“I can’t! Ought I to go and fetch someone?”

“’Oo could yer fetch?”

“I—I don’t know.”

“Well, ain’t there some’un in this ’ouse, ’sides you and ’im?”

“No.”

“’Oo cooks?”

“I do.”

“Wot about puttin’ a bit o’ rat-poison in ’is soup?”

Janet, perhaps happily, was too preoccupied to attend to this drastic suggestion. An idea had suddenly occurred to her.

“I know what I’ll do,” she exclaimed. “I’ll get all the keys I can, and see if one of them fits.”

“Ah, now, that’s a good idea, missie. You’re a quick ’un. But for Gawd’s sake, ’urry. I don’t wanter see that Uncle o’ yours never no more.”

“Yes, yes—I’ll be as quick as I can.”

She ran off, and the tramp put his ear to the keyhole. It was comforting to hear her running about downstairs, to listen to the sounds of keys being extracted from their rightful holes, and the chinks of them as they were dropped into a common pocket. Alfred was listening, also, for other possible sounds, not quite so comforting—the sounds of returning, heavy footsteps, of an angry voice, and perhaps a cuff and a little scream.

“Bit of orl right, that little missie,” he reflected, “but I don’t wanter get ’er into no trouble.”

He heard her coming back.

“Good on yer!” he called softly, through the keyhole.

“I’ve got all I could find,” panted Janet. “Oh, I do hope one of them fits!”

There were nine. She tried them all. They were all useless.

“Oh, dear!” came Janet’s tearful voice. “Oh, dear!”

Her distress made Alfred, for a few moments, forget his own.

“Don’t take on, missie,” said the tramp, soothingly. “It’ll be orl right. But, look ’ere—wot’s your uncle’s game? Wot’s ’ee up ter?”

“I don’t know.”

“’E’s a queer ’un! Is ’e good to yer?”

“N-no.”

“Then wot d’yer live ’ere for?”

“There’s nowhere else—now.”

“I see, missie. Then you gotter be careful.” He frowned. “’Arf a mo’. Got an idea. If ’ee finds wot you’ve been up to, ’e’ll lock you hup, too. Slip along, and just put orl them keys

back, quick as yer can. Don't you get 'is temper hup. Arter that, just lie low, like, and see if yer can't get the proper key orf 'im some'ow. But if yer can't— —"

"It's in his pocket, I should think," suggested the child. "Wouldn't you?"

"Yus. P'r'aps 'e'll get wet, and change 'is trahsers. Any'ow, jest keep yer eyes hopen. And, I say, missie."

"What?"

"Yer couldn't shove a bit o' cheese through the key-'ole, could yer?"

"Oh, dear! Haven't you had anything to eat?"

"No, missie. Board don't seem ter go with the lodging. P'r'aps— —"

A little gasp fell upon the tramp's ears. He heard Janet hurrying away. Down below was the sound of heavy footsteps.

Strange thoughts come to us at strange moments. A man within two minutes of death may recall a ladder up which he used to climb, when a boy, to pick apples; a cricketer, when all his mental energies should be concentrated on the hit that will bring him his first century, may think of an unposted letter; and Alfred, who ought to have been concerned at this moment only with those heavy, ominous footsteps, suddenly heard himself muttering,

"I s'pose that Chink's *really* dead?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

For several hours, Alfred ceases to interest us, although we may justly pause every now and again, if we have any feeling for him, to sympathise with him as he sits in the little back bedroom, and watches, somewhat fearfully, the meagre light gradually fading from the inaccessible window.

When darkness falls, we will meet him again; meanwhile, other matters of greater importance claim our attention.

We take temporary leave of the tramp, for instance, but we cannot yet leave Janet. Descending quickly to the parlour, she found her uncle frowning upon her.

Thrasher had just entered from the beach, and bore traces of it upon him. You could have written your name on the sand that adhered to his great sea-boots, and his clothing glistened with spray.

"Well, Janet," he said, grimly, "and what may *you* be doing here? Why aren't you at school?"

"I had a headache, uncle," answered the child.

"A headache, eh? H'm. And did your mistress give you leave to come away?"

"No, uncle. I—I didn't ask her."

"Why not?"

"You see, she mightn't have let me. I asked to be excused for a drink of water, and then I didn't go back. My head felt so funny, you see."

Janet did not like lying, even in a good cause, and it pleased her to realise that her head really *did* feel a little funny. It had felt funny ever since she had seen her uncle carrying the tramp upstairs.

Thrasher considered her explanation, and, from his glowering expression, clearly found it wanting.

"When your nose bleeds," he remarked, "it sometimes cures it to put a key down your back. But I never knew before that keys cured headaches."

"Oh," gasped Janet, and hung her head. The keys were harder to explain.

"It must be a very bad headache," went on her uncle, "because, I see, you have collected quite a lot of keys. I hope you're feeling better?"

The bantering tone awoke a little spark of rebellion in the child's breast.

"I didn't take the keys for my headache," she replied, flushing. "I took them because—because there's a man upstairs, and—and he wanted to get out."

"Ah, now we're getting to the truth," nodded her uncle, with ironical approval. "Yes, of course he wanted to get out. But, I told you, he was a thief. Thieves always want to get out, when they're caught. Don't you know that?"

"Are you *sure* he's a thief, uncle?"

"Of course, I'm sure!"

"What did he try to steal?"

"Never you mind! That's not your business."

"Well, I don't think he *is* a thief."

Her chin went up anxiously. It was a very little chin. Her uncle contemplated it.

"Oh! And why don't you think he's a thief, when I tell you he is?"

"I—I just don't."

"Oh! And p'r'aps it was because you didn't think he was a thief that you came home? And got hold of all those keys? Eh? Was it?"

“Yes!”

Cards were on the table. The fisherman stroked his beard thoughtfully. Janet, suddenly courageous, ran on:

“Even if he is a thief, I don’t see why you’ve locked him in a room, and not given him anything to eat. He’s awfully hungry. Let me take him up something, uncle. May I?”

“No, you mayn’t,” he snapped.

“Then what are you going to do with him?”

“It’s not your business what I do with him, I’ve told you! You’re getting very high and mighty ideas about yourself, aren’t you, young lady? But—if you want to know—I’m going to keep him up there till I hand him over to the police.”

An idea flashed into the child’s mind.

“Shall I go for the police?” she asked.

“No, thank you,” answered her uncle, with a laugh. “After yesterday, it’s plain to see you can’t be trusted to take messages. Drop this, Janet! D’you hear? Drop it, and don’t go meddling with matters you don’t understand.” He glanced at a clock on the mantelpiece. “I ought to pack you back to school, but it’s too late now. Put the keys back where they belong, and then make tea.”

He took a pipe down from a rack, sat down in the only comfortable chair in the room, and slowly filled the pipe. He appeared to be gazing out of the window, from which there was a view of pebbles and sea, but Janet felt that his eyes were never off her for more than a second at a time.

Having replaced the keys, she busied herself with the tea preparations; and, just before four, the meal was ready. As her uncle drew up his chair—or, rather, switched it round from the window to the table without getting out of it—she asked,

“Is *he* to have any?”

“No,” grunted her uncle.

“Why not?”

“Well—p’r’aps I’ll give him some later. There, put more milk in my cup. You’ve made it too strong, as usual. That’s better. And now, listen. You and I’ve got to have a little understanding.”

The child’s heart began to beat fast. They had had these little understandings before, and each one seemed to have made them understand each other less. Janet, as she stirred her cup, felt that this one was going to be the most difficult of the lot.

“You’ve been asking me questions,” began the fisherman. “Now I’m going to ask *you* some. When your mother died, was I the only person you had to turn to, or wasn’t I?”

“You were, uncle,” murmured Janet.

“And did you come to me, or didn’t you?”

“I came to you, uncle.”

“Very well, then. I didn’t ask you to come. But, when you did come, I never turned you away. No, I kept you, and made a place for you.” He waved his hand over the table. “This tea—and all this bread—and—butter—and your supper to-night—and your breakfast to-morrow morning. Who provides it? Do I? Or do you?”

“You do,” answered Janet, and wondered what would happen if she mentioned how hard she worked for it.

“Ah,” nodded Thrasher. “Then, we’re agreed, you owe me a *little* gratitude. And we may also be agreed that I know a little more about things than you do. And, that being the case, things you don’t understand, you’d better not pry into. No—wait a minute. I’ve not finished yet. Fill up my cup, and see you put enough milk in this time.”

He shoved it across the table. She replenished it silently.

"Now—although it's nothing to do with you, mind—there's something I *will* tell you," remarked Thrasher, after a short pause. "You went to the Green Dragon yesterday, didn't you, with a note? And you found things topsy turvy. Well, why shouldn't the man upstairs have had something to do with it?"

"I'm sure he hadn't," answered Janet.

"How are you sure?"

"I don't know, uncle. But I am."

"Bah! Why, you were sent for the police yourself —"

"But it wasn't anything to do with him," interposed the child, resolutely. "I tell you, uncle, I know it wasn't. You see, he was with these people —"

"Ah, and what do you know about *them*," burst out her uncle, suddenly thumping the table. "You're too easy, young lady! They were wrong 'uns, too. They wanted to get you out of the way. Now, let's get this straight. Trust me, and we shall live quiet. But go against me, or do anything behind my back again—like trying to let that rascal upstairs out—and I'll pack you out of my house and have no more to do with you." He thumped the table again, and the tea-cups rattled. "That's God's truth, and don't you forget it!"

He drained his cup, and rose from the table. Going to the door, he looked out towards the beach. Janet watched him, furtively. Her uncle always frightened her when he was roused. Once, he had struck her.

"There's things may happen to-night you won't understand," said Thrasher, in a low voice, with his back to her, "if you're fool enough to lie awake and . . ."

He stopped abruptly. A figure was passing. The figure of a policeman.

"*Now*," thought Janet, who had just caught a glimpse of the uniform through the window.

"Afternoon," said the policeman, pausing outside the door.

"Afternoon," replied Thrasher.

Hardly knowing why she did it, Janet suddenly grew very busy with the tea-things. Her uncle glanced back at her, and found her apparently absorbed with a tray.

"Bit of a mist coming up," commented the policeman. "That's bad for your trade, isn't it?"

"Ay," answered Thrasher. "But we have to take the rough with the smooth."

"If the man upstairs is a thief," thought Janet, "why doesn't Uncle speak about him?"

The policeman nodded, as he observed,

"That's right. And I expect you often get more rough than smooth. Speaking personal, I prefer a steady job, now—like mine."

"Ah, but I expect you get your bit of excitement sometimes, don't you?" responded the fisherman. "You have your rough and smooth, too?"

"That's right. But, just at present, it's a bit *too* smooth. That is, speaking personal. Things are a bit too quiet. Speaking personal."

"Well, it's good to be away from trouble."

"That's right. I'm not complainin'. I don't suppose *you've* got any trouble for me, now?"

"No—I've not," answered Thrasher, not too loudly, and with another little glance at his niece. She was still immensely busy. "We're quiet, honest folk, in Trymton."

"That's right. Can't say much more for Endlesby. Dull as ditchwater. Speaking personal. Not that I'm complainin', you understand. Afternoon."

"Afternoon," said the fisherman.

The policeman passed on.

"He's gone!" thought Janet, breathlessly. "And uncle never said anything . . ."

She glanced towards the door. Her uncle's bulky form still blocked the way. Quietly, she moved towards the passage that led to the back door, but her uncle turned quickly, and addressed her.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I was going to see if there are any more eggs,” replied Janet.

“Were you? Well, there’s time enough for that. Get those tea-things washed up first.”

“Yes, uncle.”

The parlour served as kitchen and pantry. She returned to the stove, and began to operate with the kettle.

“Hear me talking just now?” enquired her uncle, casually, as he watched her.

“No! Were you?”

“Yes.”

“Who was it?”

“Young Ashley. Tells me one of their cows has got milk-fever. He was just off to find the vet.”

“Oh,” thought Janet. “What a lie!”

But her face did not betray her thought.

“Hey! Careful with that kettle!” exclaimed her uncle. “You’ll have it over— —!”

The warning was too late. The kettle fell over on its side, and the boiling water flowed, sizzling, on to the hearth.

“Oh, quick, quick!” cried Janet. “Mop it up, uncle, mop it up! There’s a cloth! I’ll go and get some more—they’re hanging on the clothes-line.”

Thrasher lumbered forward, cursing her clumsiness, as she darted out into the passage. The clothes-line was in a field at the back, but she did not go to it. Instead, she turned aside swiftly, and ran hard after the policeman.

She hoped to catch up with him when she reached the corner, but her heart sank as she rounded the bend, and looked along the road. In the far distance, almost disappearing, was the constable—on a bicycle.

“Clever, aren’t you?” said her uncle’s voice behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It has been suggested that, had the tramp possessed a pair of eyes at the back of his head after his fruitless search for the Chinaman's body, he might have seen interesting things.

He would have learned, for instance, that he had outdistanced the pursuing artist, but had not shaken him off. He would have learned that the artist had crossed the bridge, and was keeping an eye on him. He might have deduced—and it would have been an accurate deduction—that the artist, before crossing the bridge, had witnessed the strange encounter on the bridge between the tramp and the Chinaman, and had seen the latter topple into the water.

And another interesting matter which Alfred would have learned, had he possessed that second useful pair of eyes, was that the fisherman who addressed him a few moments before the journey into Trymton had previously met and held a hurried conversation with the artist, with whom he appeared to be on terms of peculiar intimacy.

But Alfred did not know these things, and went off most obligingly with the fisherman, while the artist watched them, screened by marram grasses, and happy in the knowledge that the tramp would be kept under the strictest supervision.

When the tramp and the fisherman were out of sight, the artist walked slowly back to the rickety wooden bridge, and stared for several seconds into the unpleasant water flowing underneath. The flow widened inland, beyond the bridge, and followed several channels. On one bank was a small, stunted, dead wood; or, if the wood was not dead, it was dying fast. Some of the trees were drowning, upright, in the water. Others had frankly toppled in, and stretched out from the bank at ungainly angles. A body might easily be caught by one of these submerged limbs, and retained until some accident caused it to reveal its gruesome secret.

Here was one of the spots beneath which the body of the Chinaman might be lying at that moment.

"Well—he's gone, anyway," reflected the artist. "Sad—very sad!" Yet he could smile at the sadness. "And the tramp—he's gone, too. Ah, well! If only people would mind their own business!"

He left the bank of the water, and walked to the bridge. Half-way across it, he stopped, and, peering over, stared down into the stream. Then, still smiling, he regained the other side, and retraced his way across fields and through thickets in a spirit of contentment.

Presently, a faint sound reached him. It was the inn sign, creaking. When the inn itself came into sight, he sat on a tree stump, and regarded it thoughtfully.

He smoked a cigarette. Obviously, he was revolving some weighty matter in his mind. At last, he threw the cigarette-end away, and, having come to a decision, strolled up to the inn.

Apart from a bluish stream of smoke issuing from a chimney, there was no sign of life within. He tried the front door. It was locked.

"If the birds have flown," he mused, "the back door will be open."

He went round to the back. That, too, was locked.

"The birds have not flown," he concluded. "They are still inside. Just as well, perhaps. Just as well."

He went round to the front again, and stared up at the window above the inn sign—the window of Room No. 5, in which Joyce and Jim had slept. The window was closed. For all the attention he attracted, the inn might have been a tomb.

"Very silent little birds," thought the artist. "Just the same, I wager they've each got one eye cocked open. Very well—I'm in no hurry, at the moment."

To prove which, he turned away from the inn, and wandered out into the lane. He wandered quite an appreciable way along it. And, from his point of view, it was just as well he did. For, just beyond a point where the lane became a little more sociable and joined other lanes, he received a surprise.

A man was standing by the side of the road, thoughtfully regarding a battered object in a ditch.

He was an elderly man, and his clothes suggested a good bank balance, a theory which received further support from the smart two-seater from which he had evidently alighted, standing a little way off.

The elderly man looked up as the artist approached, and did not seem in a very good temper. The artist, however, smiled back, and then turned his own eyes upon the object in the ditch which the other had been studying.

"A nasty accident," commented the artist, stopping. "I hope it isn't your car?"

"It is not my car," replied the elderly man, frowning. "I—er—do you know anything about this accident?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, sir, I do," answered the artist, after a moment's reflection.

"Ah! Tell me!" cried the elderly man.

"You know the people then?" enquired the artist, raising his eyebrows at the other's emphatic interest.

"Do I know them!" exclaimed the elderly man, vigorously. "The occupants were a young man and a young lady. Do I know them!"

The artist smiled.

"Well, I'll take your word for it, of course," he remarked, "but your description isn't very definite. Two-seaters usually contain a young man and a young lady."

The elderly man's frown deepened. He was not in a mood for humour.

"I happen to be the young lady's guardian," he said, a little stiffly. "So, naturally, I am interested. You say you know something about the accident. Were they hurt?"

"No. Not at all."

"Well, that's one good thing," muttered the elderly man. "Though if they had been, it would have served—well, never mind that. When did the accident occur? This morning, eh?"

"No, yesterday. I happened to be by at the time. Exceedingly lucky young people, sir, exceedingly lucky. It's a wonder they weren't killed. Just look at the car—just look at it! Almost buried in the ditch—and that overhanging tree—why, I wonder you noticed it as you came by."

"Yes, yes," interposed the other, a little testily. "But what *happened*?" He glared at the artist, and tugged at his moustache. "That's what I want to know! Can you tell me where they are?"

"I'll tell you all I know, with pleasure," responded the artist, blandly. "I came upon them here, yesterday, at this spot. They were just picking themselves up. 'I hope you're not hurt?' I said. They examined themselves, and discovered that they were not. The car, however, as you see, was not so lucky. 'Can I do anything for you?' I asked. 'Yes, you can tell us the way to the nearest town,' said the young man—good-looking young man—very pretty girl, too—"

"Yes, yes! Go on!"

"I merely mention this for purposes of identity," murmured the artist. "But, after all, most young men who drive two-seaters are good-looking, and their companions are nearly always very pretty. Well, they asked me to direct them to the nearest town, and I did so—"

"Ah! Where was that?"

"Endlesby."

"Endlesby! Good! And how far is that?"

"Say three miles. But I'm not sure you'll find them there. They seemed anxious to push on, and said something about hiring another car at Endlesby and going on further. You see, it was quite early in the afternoon, quite early."

"Push on beyond Endlesby?" exclaimed the elderly man. "But, dash it, what about their car?"

He pointed, with an accusing finger, to the battered wreck in the ditch. The artist shrugged his shoulders.

"They seemed to be less concerned with that than with getting on," he answered. "I asked them about the car myself, and the young man said, 'Confound the car—let it rip!'"

"Ridiculous!"

"Quite so. I thought so at the time. But it wasn't my business. And probably they've made an arrangement with some garage along the road."

There was a short silence. The elderly man stared at the ruin, stared up the lane towards Endlesby, and then up the lane along which the artist had just come.

"So Endlesby's the nearest place, eh?" he growled.

"Yes," said the artist.

"H'm. Nowhere nearer? Three miles is a way to walk. No inn, or anything?"

"Not that I know of." In the distance, a faint, leathery sound answered the artist's assertion. If the elderly man heard it, it was not likely he would recognise it as a swinging inn sign. Still, for safety's sake, the artist added, "I saw them start up the road to Endlesby. Without doubt, sir, that's your direction."

"Much obliged," answered the elderly man. "You're probably right. Good day to you." On the point of returning to his own car, he added, "Oh, by the way, what would be the—er—most likely—hotel to enquire at in Endlesby?"

He seemed to have some tussle with the word "hotel," as though it hurt him.

"I can hardly say," replied the artist. "There are quite a number."

"H'm. You didn't recommend one, then?"

"No. You see, as I explained, they were probably only going to pass through the town."

"Thank you," grunted the elderly man. "Good day to you."

And, this time, he did depart. The artist watched him get into his car—a very fine car; nothing less, in fact, than a Rolls Royce—and start the engine. Then the car purred away, in the direction of Endlesby.

We will go to Endlesby, too. Joyce's guardian was there inside ten minutes. It did not occur to him to stop at the police station—why should it?—but he stopped at the first likely-looking hotel he reached, and jumped out.

He chose the hotel with some acumen. It was quite pleasantly picturesque, and, in Joyce's sentimental mood, he knew well that certain types of hotel were barred. This, the "Rose and Crown," was sufficiently pretty to have attracted the romantic mood.

He enquired at the office for a couple who, he believed, had arrived on the previous afternoon. No, not in a car, on foot. Yes, of course, a man and a lady! Ah, a couple *had* arrived? Ah! Might he see the register?

The register was brought to him. "Mr. and Mrs. Spaulding," he read. The writing looked like Jim Cresswell's, however. Disguised, naturally. And, if he had disguised his writing, why shouldn't he disguise his name, as well?

"Young couple?" asked Joyce's guardian.

"Yes, sir," answered the clerk. "Shall I send them your card?"

He hesitated, took out his card, on which was inscribed "Lionel Abingdon," and then put it away again.

"No, tell me where I can find them. In one of the general rooms, perhaps — —"

“Here they are, sir,” interposed the clerk.

“Uncle—we—we—” came a timid voice behind him. He swung round swiftly, and found himself staring into the eyes of a blushing, bashful, but totally unknown couple.

“Oh!” gasped the girl.

“I—we—er—that is beg your pardon, sir,” stammered the young man.

They disappeared precipitately, divided between confusion and relief. This difficult world is full of joy and trouble.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

While Mr. Lionel Abingdon was flustering two young people whom he did not know in the Rose and Crown, Endlesby, the two young people whom he did know, and for whom he was searching, were partaking of their simple and solitary lunch in the parlour of the Green Dragon, three miles away.

The doors were locked and bolted, and the window-curtains were drawn across the windows. "Why shouldn't we be comfy?" Joyce had said. "We don't want to feel that eyes are peering at us all day long!" Happily, the curtains were of an amber hue, and the sunlight, though softened, came through quite pleasantly and mellowly.

Only once, so far, had they peeped through the curtains. This was when the artist had tried the doors, an hour ago. They had thought, at first, that it might be Alfred. When they had found it was not, they adhered to their pre-arranged passive policy.

"I wish it had been Alfred," remarked Joyce, puckering her brows. "I don't in the least like thinking of him out there all alone!"

"Nor do I, old thing," answered Jim. "Still, what can we do? Somehow or other, I don't think Alfred will come to any harm."

"Logic—or optimism?" she challenged.

"A bit of both," he smiled. "You know, Joyce, I feel so happy sitting opposite to you like this that I can't feel worried. Even while that confounded artist fellow was poking around the doors, I felt almost as though he were just a stage character, sent to throw up our own real happiness!"

"I feel rather like that, too," she nodded. "Oh, Jim, if only happiness—our kind of happiness!—could last for ever! Just—this! Do you suppose there's any world in the Universe where it *does* last? Or aren't people ever good enough to deserve it?"

"My darling," he replied. "Lower your eyes for a little, because, until you do, I can't get on with this meat."

"They're down," she laughed. "Eat away! And let's hear your logical reason for believing that Alfred is all right."

"He's drunk."

"Doesn't that mean he's all wrong?"

"Spiritually, if you like. Though, even as to that, I'm not too sure. But, physically, a drunken man has a tremendous advantage. He can get through anything."

"He can get through beer, if that's what you mean," she retorted. "Anyway, see you don't ever get drunk, my man, for all its wonderful advantages!"

"I will not, my woman," he answered. "Even if my fellow beings scorn me for a prude."

"Darling old prudums—"

"Now, Joyce!" he exclaimed. "Don't start adding 'ums' to things, or I shall unmarried you!"

"All right, I'll wait a bit," she replied. "How's your foot?"

"I regret to say," he informed her, "that it is slightly better."

"Oh, dear!" she cried, interpreting him. "I hope it's not too much better?"

"No. I'm still nicely lame, thank you. But, if the improvement goes on, I'm wondering —"

"Whether you had better not trot out into the yard and get your neck sliced."

"Dearest!" he expostulated, with quite a definite shiver.

"I don't apologise," she retorted. "I made it horrible on purpose. To frighten you off it."

"I assure you, you've scared me stiff. But I don't really suppose—"

"Forgive me for interrupting you again," she said, "but haven't we got rather beyond the 'I don't really suppose' stage?"

"Perhaps we have," he admitted.

"I jolly well know we have! *You* didn't see that Chinaman this morning. You were snugly tucked in bed! And, you know, I only let you get up and hobble down here if you promised, truly, and faithfully, to be sensible. No fool heroism for me, please! My love for you is unshakeable, Jim, so you can cast off the pre-marriage heroics, and be just as comfy and nervous as you like."

"Nervous?" exclaimed Jim, reprovingly. "Who's nervous?"

"We are," responded Joyce, complacently.

"We're not!"

"We are! If you were to say 'Boo'! I'd scream, and if I were to drop my knife, you'd jump. Only the difference between us and just ordinary, commonplace people, is that we don't mind. Because, you see, if ever things get too bad, we've only got to kiss each other and make idiots of ourselves to set them right again."

"Right, as usual," answered Jim. "I say, Joyce—things are jolly bad at this moment. Let's apply the remedy."

So the meal continued, their danger mingled with delight.

"What's the afternoon programme?" asked Joyce, as the meal concluded. "Tennis, a matinee, or the pictures?"

"Well, I vote we save our money and stay indoors," suggested Jim. "Let's read and lounge and smoke, oh, and have a jolly old tea at four."

"Always thinking of your tummy!" she laughed. "Well, come and work for your living, and help me clear these things away . . . Oh, but I forgot. Your leg."

"Confound my leg," he cried. "It's not going to prevent my sharing in the halcyon joys of washing up!"

They spun the operation out till half-past two, and then returned to the parlour. There were a few books on a shelf, but the selection was not particularly appetising. There was a copy of "East Lynne," a volume of Burns, "Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book," "Enquire Within," "Forbes's Gazetteer, 1815," and some odd numbers of old magazines, mostly without their covers. Joyce, with a sigh, took out the volume of "East Lynne," while Jim watched her disappointedly.

"If you were a really good little wife," he commented, "you'd have chosen Mrs. Beeton. Now I, being a good little husband, will try and improve my knowledge of geography!"

He opened "Forbes's Gazetteer," and gave an exclamation as he glanced at the fly-leaf.

"What's up?" asked Joyce. "Discovered that London isn't in England, after all?"

"No. But here's a queer verse, scribbled in pencil." He read out:

"Green is nothing to trouble about
When it's mixed with yellow,
But when the red appears,
Well, then, it interests a fellow."

"Don't see anything to get excited about in that," observed Joyce. "The metre's a bit squiffy."

"Yes, but doesn't anything strike you, old girl? Green—dragon. Yellow—eye. Red—the colour the eye changes to! Now, then—am I such a fool?"

"No, Jim—that is interesting," admitted Joyce. "I wonder what it means. Anyway, thank goodness, the eye hasn't changed to-day. It's stayed yellow, so, if the poem is right, there's nothing to trouble about."

Jim hobbled to the window, drew the curtain aside a crack, and peeped out.

"Still yellow," he reported. "Hooray! Let's see if we find any further enlightenment on colour in the context. 'Green, a town of the district of Maine.' 'Green, a river of Kentucky, navigable for 150 miles, with salt springs and three ponds of bitumen.' — —"

"Green, two fearfully nice people who have got caught in an inn, and don't know how to get out again," interposed Joyce.

"By Jove, you're right," murmured Jim, ruefully. "I wonder if we're wise, wasting our time like this? There's going to be a sort of attack, isn't there? Shouldn't we prepare a plan of action, and improvise a few weapons?"

"No, thank you—no weapons," said Joyce decisively. "I read once that the man most likely to get shot was the man who carried a pistol. Let's keep to our reputation as a perfectly well-meaning couple, who don't want to harm anybody— —"

"But who are not going to stand any nonsense— —"

"—but who are determined not to use violence— —"

"—unless violence is used against *them*. My child, if anybody tries to hit me, I'm going to try to hit *them*. And if anybody gets in through that door, I'll welcome them with a poker. Read your sticky novel, my dear, while I sharpen the fire-arms!"

He spoke facetiously. All the same, as Joyce settled herself to read, he eyed the poker contemplatively, and was comforted by its pleasantly ample dimensions. The sunlight paled slightly as the afternoon wore on. A tiny smell of salt mist mingled with the air. Towards four o'clock, despite their attempts to become absorbed in their books—Jim had exchanged his *Gazetteer* for the coverless magazines—they frequently glanced at the clock. Meals are a wonderful antidote for restlessness, and tea, of all meals, is the antidote *par excellence*.

"Getting nervy, old thing?" asked Jim, sympathetically, as Joyce jumped up.

"A bit," she answered. "I think I'll put the kettle on."

"You know, the way we go on speaking the truth is wonderful," exclaimed Jim. "Most people would have said, 'Nervy? What an idea. What is there to be nervy about.'"

"Yes, well, don't exaggerate the truth," she retorted, as she gave the fire a poke. "I'm not prostrated. Cloth in that drawer, and spoons and knives in the next one. Will you lay the table, while I . . ."

She slipped out of the room, but suddenly slipped back again.

"Hallo—what is it?" he asked.

"Don't know, Jim. Thought I heard something."

"Where? In the kitchen?"

"No. Outside. Didn't you?"

"Can't say I did. Let's listen."

They remained silent for a few moments. Both of them jumped when the grandfather clock on the wall suddenly struck four.

"Silly children we are," gasped Joyce.

"Speak for yourself," murmured Jim, squeezing her arm. "I think you've got a touch of Alfred's 'majnashun' . . . No, you haven't! There is something moving out there . . . By Jove!" A pistol shot rang out. After that, silence.

"Joyce—I must go out, to find out what that was," exclaimed Jim, suddenly.

But she caught his arm, and held it firmly.

"That's just what you mustn't do, Jim," she whispered. "It might have been a trick—to get you to open the door!"

"So it might," he muttered. But for Joyce, however, he would probably have risked it. Then another thought occurred to him. "Or it might be the Chinaman and the artist, falling out."

“I jolly well hope it is,” said Joyce.

“Well, don’t let a trifle like that interrupt our tea,” remarked Jim. “I think I’ll go into the kitchen with you, though. Hallo—here comes the cat. We mustn’t forget his feline majesty’s saucer of milk.”

Ten minutes later, tea was prepared, and they sat down to enjoy its comfort. But, just as Joyce was melting the pot to pour out the first cup, she paused.

“There, again!” she gulped.

“Keep steady,” answered Jim, in a low voice, and rose swiftly to his feet.

The next moment, the bell was violently rung.

“Who’s there?” demanded Jim.

“For God’s sake, let me in!” cried a voice outside.

“Jim!” shrieked Joyce. “It’s Uncle Lionel!”

Jim, also, had recognised the voice. He was at the door and had it open in a flash. Joyce’s guardian staggered in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Quick as lightning, and before a word was spoken, Jim had the front door locked and bolted again. Then he turned and saw Joyce assisting her guardian to a chair.

It was a queer situation, and for a few moments no one knew how to handle it. Mr. Abingdon sat and panted, glaring in a state of dazed and tremulous anger at the red-tiled floor, over which the firelight gently flickered. Joyce, standing behind him "ready to catch him if he flopped," as she said afterwards, glanced at Jim to imply her helplessness; and Jim himself did not feel much more useful.

But suddenly, without knowing how, Jim got hold of the right point of view for the occasion.

"Of course, you're frightfully angry with us, sir," he said,— "and I dare say you've a right to be. But, in the circumstances, hadn't we better call a truce? Whatever attitude you now adopt will be entirely without prejudice—and because we've all got to join forces here against a common enemy won't mean that you've forgiven me."

It was a theatrical little speech, but it helped to ease matters. Mr. Abingdon stopped glaring at the red-tiled floor, and, moving round slowly in his chair, repeated the word, "Enemy?"

Jim nodded, while Mr. Abingdon, still puffing a little, studied his face. He was passing through a state of supreme bewilderment, and surely no man before him had ever been driven into an inn more astonishingly, or had been more astonished at what he discovered inside. Presently, these things would doubtless be explained. Meanwhile, he could only concentrate his effort towards regaining his breath, his dignity and his composure.

The atmosphere of the picturesque parlour helped him in this effort. It was pleasant and restful. The door, he saw, was locked. Good things were on the table, and a jovial fire burned in the ample grate. Moreover, although he was filled with righteous indignation against his two young companions—yes, by Gad, he was!—Jim's speech had shown some understanding, and he was not committed to express that indignation immediately. That being so, he found the young companionship in the particular circumstances not unpleasant.

"Well," he muttered, at last, "what the devil is all this about?"

"We're not quite sure, Mr. Abingdon," responded Jim, promptly, "but if you'll be good enough to tell us what's happened to *you*, we'll tell you what's happened to *us*. But first, sir,—are you hurt?"

"Hurt? No! Though God alone knows why I'm not!"

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Joyce. "We heard the pistol shot—but, of course, we didn't know it was at you. That is—if it was?"

"It was," replied her guardian. "Who on earth is that madman out there?"

"Big, boyish-looking fellow?" queried Jim. "With very light yellow hair—"

"Or a quiet, almond-eyed little Chinaman?" added Joyce, "with an expressionless voice —"

"Eh? What's that? Chinaman?" jerked Mr. Abingdon. "Heavens above, do lunatics *grow* here?"

"I believe they do," murmured Jim. "What about tea, sir, while we talk,—if there's no immediate danger?"

"No immediate danger!" cried Mr. Abingdon, but he turned his chair round to face the tea-table, all the same. "D'ye call a raving imbecile brandishing a pistol a haven of security?"

"How did you come to meet him, Uncle Lionel?" asked Joyce, as she produced a third cup.

"Yes, but wait a minute—let *me* do some questioning," retorted Mr. Abingdon. "I don't understand this! Isn't there an innkeeper or something?"

Jim and Joyce exchanged glances.

"No, sir," answered Jim. "We've the whole place to ourselves."

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Abingdon, incredulously. "You mean to tell me—there's not a soul here but ourselves?"

"Not a soul," Joyce assured him.

"Well, damme, I—eh? What's that?" he shouted.

"With the exception of Felix, uncle," smiled Joyce, as the black cat emerged from under the table.

"Confound the creature!" grumbled Mr. Abingdon, whose nerves were still shaky, and who never liked cats rubbing themselves against his legs at the best of times. Joyce handed him his cup, and he gulped the tea down. "Has the world gone mad, or what?"

"It has gone mad," answered Jim, solemnly, "quite mad. But do tell us your story, Mr. Abingdon, then we'll tell you ours—and you can advise us what to do."

Joyce pressed his foot appreciatively under the table. Jim's subtlety was not lost upon her.

"Very well, I will," said Mr. Abingdon, helping himself to a large slice of bread and butter, and eyeing the jam. "I won't tell you what I thought when I got home last night and found your note, Joyce—"

"I'd rather you didn't, dear," murmured Joyce.

"No. That will come later. But we're dealing at the moment with facts, not thoughts. I hoped, even then, that you would come back—couldn't believe that you'd carry out this damned folly—but you didn't come back, so I set off this morning in the hope of—of—"

"This morning was too late, Uncle Lionel," murmured Joyce again, and held out her ringed finger.

"I guessed it would be," retorted Mr. Abingdon, grimly. "I set out all the same. By myself. I didn't want people talking just yet. I made inquiries along the road, and—I take some credit for it—I tracked you to the spot where you had your accident. And, but for this—this madman, I'd have been with you some hours ago."

"What did the madman do?" inquired Jim.

"He came up while I was looking at your wrecked car. I always told you, you couldn't drive, Jim! How the devil did you—well, well, about that later. He came up and told me he'd seen the accident. He said he'd directed you to a place called Endlesby—"

"Oh, the wicked liar!" exclaimed Joyce. "He never did!"

"So I gathered," remarked Mr. Abingdon, dryly.

"I suppose he did it to get you out of the way, sir?" suggested Jim.

"Yes, but confound it all, why should he *want* to get me out of the way?" demanded Mr. Abingdon, rounding on Jim suddenly, and banging the table with his fist. "He didn't know me, I didn't know him. Did *you* put him up to it?"

"Good Lord, no," answered Jim emphatically. "That fellow and I are not on speaking terms!"

"Ah! Well, I had to ask that question. But I confess, I didn't imagine you'd prompted him—at least, not for long. He said you were probably going beyond Endlesby and so, after inquiring at all the hotels there, I went a bit beyond myself. But then I got thinking—it was a wild goose chase anyway—and I returned to Endlesby, where I had a bit of lunch and sat opposite a fellow who was so saturated with his own troubles that I hadn't a moment's peace. He'd had some confounded bit of jewellery stolen—well, what's the matter?"

"Did he say what the jewellery was?" interposed Jim, quickly.

"Eh? I don't know. A ruby, I think. I tried not to listen to the fellow—damme, what is all this about?"

"A ruby!" cried Joyce. "Jim—do you think—?"

"Let Mr. Abingdon finish his story, dear," said Jim quietly. "Then we'll all put our heads together."

"Mr. Abingdon will be delighted to finish his story, if you'll let him," barked that worthy. "After lunch, I went round all the garages, and found you hadn't been to any of them. By this time I was properly suspicious of our mad friend, I can tell you. It wasn't likely you'd pass through Endlesby without making some arrangement about your car, and I couldn't find a garage where you'd hired a fresh car, either. 'No,' I said to myself, 'there's some funny game on, and the spot where I'm most likely to find them is the spot where they had the accident.' So I motored back there, found the car still in the ditch and no one about."

"Then," continued Mr. Abingdon, "I began poking around. I walked across the lane, and suddenly there—listen!"

"What?" gasped Joyce.

"I don't hear anything," exclaimed Jim.

"Don't you? Then I do. Can't you hear the sign creaking outside?"

"Oh, *that*," sighed Joyce, relieved. "We've got so used to that we hardly notice it by now."

"Hm. P'r'aps not. But I noticed it. I heard it in the distance, and all at once it occurred to me that it might be an inn sign, although that madman had told me there was no inn hereabouts. I followed the sound, got near it—and then this fellow pounces out at me."

The recollection of the pounce was too much for Mr. Abingdon. He stopped and, frankly pulling out his pocket handkerchief, mopped his brow.

"Well—what then?" asked Jim.

"What then?" muttered Mr. Abingdon. "Well—I—I—you see, my boy, I didn't *know* what it was! It might have been a bull—or—anything, and then he looked so damned threatening—and it all happened so suddenly—that—well, I went back to my car—at least, to the place where I had left my car. But—" he paused. "It was gone!"

"Gone!" cried Joyce. "Perhaps you mistook the spot?"

"Your own car was too obvious a signpost," answered her guardian. "No, the car had gone. And then I got angry. I thought I saw the whole game. The rascal was a thief. Working with a partner, eh? That's what I thought. And I decided to return and have it out with him."

"Was that the only reason you returned, Uncle Lionel?" asked Joyce, curiously.

"Eh? What do you mean?" responded Mr. Abingdon, a little indignantly; but the indignation soon dissolved. "Well, I'm not quite sure. My nerves were a bit shaken. And—somehow—I had a queer feeling that the spot where I was standing was—unhealthy. Can't explain it; there it was. Something seemed to make me leave it. And then, too," he added, as though trying to explain matters to himself as well as to his hearers, "it occurred to me that this lunatic fellow, if he *had* taken the car, would be out of the way now, and I could get into the inn."

"Quite logical, sir," nodded Jim. "But he *wasn't* out of the way?"

"Lord, no! He came at me again, brandishing a revolver. I can't say exactly what happened. Expect I lost my head a bit—well—well, who wouldn't?" Mr. Abingdon glared at the teapot. "I don't even know if the blackguard fired at me, or in the air. Anyway, I managed to get away from him—mad, of course—you can't be reasonable with madmen, can you?—and hid behind a hedge. After a few minutes I heard nothing, so crept along to this inn—and found—you!"

There was a silence. No one spoke for a full minute. The cat rubbed against Joyce's skirt, reminding her of a neglected duty. She filled a saucer with milk and placed it on the floor.

“Uncle,” she said suddenly, “when that shot was fired, was the—madman between you and the inn?”

“Yes,” answered her guardian.

“Then why didn’t you go back?” she asked. “What made you come on here?”

Mr. Abingdon regarded her thoughtfully.

“I don’t really know, my dear,” he said slowly. “But do you know—it’s very odd—I don’t believe I *could* have gone back—not if I’d tried!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Having concluded his story, Mr. Lionel Abingdon demanded theirs. The recital took some time, and also made a deep impression; facts testified by the coldness of Mr. Abingdon's second tea when at last he applied his lips to it. Joyce poured him out another cup; even that was only lukewarm.

"But—this is nonsense!" cried the bewildered man, his eyes bulging.

"Our absent friend, Alfred, would agree with you," replied Jim. "But you have less excuse than he, because you've had nothing stronger than tea."

"What's to be the end of it?" gasped Mr. Abingdon.

"Heaven knows, sir," said Jim. "The question I ask is this. Is the end written down in the Book of Fate, or can we three, sitting here in this room, do anything to influence that end?"

"And if we can do anything," interposed Joyce, "the question I ask is—*what?*"

"Exactly," murmured Mr. Abingdon, blinking unhelpfully. "As you say, my dear. What?" He turned to Jim. "You mentioned at one point, my boy, that the tramp helped himself liberally to the contents of the bar. Without going to his lengths, I think—a little something might do us good."

Joyce jumped up.

"I'll go," she exclaimed. "I know where that little something is."

She slipped from the room. Jim watched her guardian with a half sympathetic, half amused expression. Was this the terrible pursuer they had feared when they had set out on their romantic adventure? How Mr. Lionel Abingdon had dwindled!

"I'll admit to you, Jim," said the dwindled one, "that I'm a bit shaken. I'm not used to this sort of thing, you know—"

"Well, I can't say that it comes within *my* everyday life," interposed Jim.

"No. Quite so. But—you're younger, eh? Why doesn't Joyce hurry up with that what-d'you-call-'ems? Devil of a time . . . The question is, as you say, what can we do?"

"Do you feel like going for the police?" inquired Jim.

"What? Go—out there?" retorted Mr. Abingdon. "You don't suppose I'm a second lunatic, do you?"

"It wouldn't be a pleasant trip," admitted Jim, smiling despite himself, "but we're up against alternatives."

"Exactly," nodded Mr. Abingdon. "And it seems to me that the only alternative, at this moment, is to stay where we are." He glanced round the room. Its atmosphere of mellow comfort accentuated this view. A wonderfully inviting arm chair stood in a corner. Mr. Abingdon was tired. He had missed his usual afternoon nap. "Yes, stay where we are," he repeated, and eyed the arm chair.

"Till 1 a. m.?" queried Jim grimly. "Till Mr. Samuel Jones appears, with J. D. and J. D.'s sister on his trail, and perhaps T. T.?"

"Eh?" jerked Mr. Abingdon, nervously.

"I think you're right, sir," Jim went on. "We'll have to stop. All the same—with no disrespect—I wish you'd been a couple of policemen!"

"I wish he'd been half a dozen," observed Joyce, entering with a bottle and glasses. "Here's something to cheer you up, uncle."

They watched her while she filled two glasses.

"Have a tot yourself, my girl," urged her guardian. "Do you good."

"I'm surprised at you!" she retorted, admonishingly. "After you've brought me up so carefully, too!"

"Yes—and look what my bringing up has brought you to!" he grumbled.

"Too ghastly, isn't it?" she exclaimed. "Married to *that*!"

She pointed to Jim. Mr. Abingdon gulped his pleasant medicine, and sighed.

"How you two manage to keep me cheerful beats me," he confessed; perhaps alcohol helped the confession. "Couple of damn fools, you are—but you've got some pluck."

"Joyce has—she's been perfect, sir," exclaimed Jim. "I'm not quite so happy about myself, though."

"Idiot!" snorted Joyce. "What could you do, with your leg?"

"It's getting better. Look!" He rose, and hobbled quite creditably. "Now that Mr. Abingdon's here to look after you, Joyce, I think I ought to try and make the police station myself."

"Bigger idiot!" said Joyce. "Do you *want* to make me a widow?"

"Be serious, Joyce—"

"I *am* serious! If you try to go out of that door, Mr. Cresswell, I'll hit you with a warming-pan. That's what wives do when they're angry, isn't it?"

"First find your warming-pan," grinned Jim.

"Oh, there must be dozens," she answered. "Old inns always swarm with them. Uncle, would you like to try your hand at washing up? I think it would do you good. Take your mind off, you know."

Mr. Abingdon looked at the armchair.

"In ten minutes, sir," smiled Jim, and winked at him. "You'll enjoy it all the more, after a bit of exercise."

The weary man hesitated. That wink had meant something. At the moment, he was more in a mood to be directed than to direct. He had no notion what the wink meant. Not the slightest. Perhaps nothing, after all. But ten minutes wasn't long. He would like a few words with Joyce alone . . .

"Coming?" asked Joyce, gathering up the tea things.

"Yes, my dear," answered Mr. Abingdon. "Of course. By all means. Everything's topsyturvy."

The wink had meant something. Jim wanted to be alone for those ten minutes.

"And now, by jove," he muttered, when they had gone into the kitchen, "I'm going to have a look at the weather!"

He stole softly to the front door. Softly he unbolted it, and turned the key. He opened the door.

A figure sat, smoking, on a bench across the entrance yard. It was the familiar figure of the artist. Something bright gleamed from the artist's lap.

"Don't move," purred the artist. "I was wanting a little chat."

"Were you?" answered Jim, quietly, with his eye on the bright gleam. "Well, I'm quite agreeable. What do you want to talk about?"

"Not cabbages and kings."

"That doesn't surprise me. You don't appear in a frivolous mood."

The artist nodded amiably.

"I'm not in a frivolous mood. I'm dead serious. So serious that this might go off, any moment if you stir."

"Well, I'm not stirring. But that's not to say I won't. Anyway, does it suit a skunk's purpose to make a noise with a pistol?"

"It's a risk, my dear sir. Yes, I admit it's a risk. But, occasionally—even skunks have to take risks. And *all* the skunks in the world, let me remind you, my dear sir, are not on the wrong side of the law."

"Granted," said Jim.

"And there are rabbits about here, besides skunks," pursued the artist. "If one heard a shot, now, one might think it was nothing more than the end of a rabbit."

"Well, so long as I'm not the rabbit, I won't worry," retorted Jim. "This conversation's getting quite interesting. Think I'll have a smoke."

"Don't move," the artist warned him again.

"Oh, shut up, and don't be melodramatic," growled Jim. "You know I'm not armed. Lord, if I were, you wouldn't be sitting there, I promise you!"

He took out his cigarette case, while the artist watched him closely.

"Come and have one?" suggested Jim.

"No, thanks," smiled the artist. "It occurs to me you may have a useful fist."

"I hope it will occur to you more forcibly, before long. I say, you know your limitations, don't you?"

"I owe half my success to that. One of my limitations is that I hate hurting people—and, even more, killing them."

"Oh! Then I'm safe, am I?" said Jim, shrewdly. "Despite that murderous-looking object you're nursing?"

"I said I owed half of my success to my limitations," the artist reminded him, blandly. "I owe the other half to forgetting my limitations when it's really necessary."

"I see. Carry on."

"Now, I don't want to hurt any of you," continued the artist. "But I must warn you that, in a few hours, the matter may not be entirely in my own hands. Therefore, here's some advice."

"Have you got a grandmother?"

"Grandmothers are not as receptive as I hope you'll be," returned the artist; but his blue eyes twinkled a little, and Jim suddenly exclaimed.

"I say—are you really as bad as you seem?"

The artist reflected before he replied. Then he said, fondling his weapon:

"I can be infinitely better than I seem, and infinitely worse. The only real trouble with me is that I like my own way." He tapped his revolver affectionately. "I simply must have it."

"Whereas, of course, most other people hate having theirs," observed Jim, acidly. "Let's hear your advice."

"You are aware, I take it," replied the artist, "that there will be—h'm—a little visitation to-night?"

"Oh, I'm quite aware of that," interposed Jim. "The party is to include Mr. Samuel Jones, J. D., J. D.'s sister, and possibly T. T. Will there be dancing?"

Jim's reply appeared to amuse the artist immensely. For an instant—but for an instant only—his blue eyes closed in merriment. Then they opened again wide, and beamed above the gleaming revolver. Recalling the picture afterwards, Jim remembered three points, forming a sort of queer, illogical triangle—the pistol's frowning gleam and the gleam of the smiling, too-bright blue eyes.

"Yes, there will be dancing, unless you do as I say," said the artist. "Your present bedroom is No. 5. Change it—for to-night only—to No. 1. And let the frightened old gentleman who has just joined you occupy No. 2. In these two rooms, I will guarantee safety after—say—10 p. m. No other spot on this earth will be healthy for you after that hour."

"Thanks for the advice," nodded Jim. "We sha'n't take it. Any more?"

"Yes. You continue to remain in the inn until you retire to Bedrooms Nos. 1 and 2."

“Mind telling me why?”

The artist laughed. “The dragon is green, my dear sir, but you are not! The police, or any outside interference, would interfere with my plans.”

“But someone’s gone for the police, you know,” said Jim.

“If you are thinking of the tramp, give up that hope,” responded the artist.

“My God—if you’ve hurt him— —!”

“I have not hurt him. Though he tried hard to hurt me. At this moment, he is, I confidently believe, securely locked in a room some miles from here. And he will not escape till the morning.”

“Perhaps you’ve accounted for the Chinaman, too, since you’re so clever?” asked Jim.

“The Chinaman is dead,” sighed the artist, sadly, “as I doubt not he deserves.” He raised his revolver. “Go in now, please, and do as I say. Believe me, my dear sir, there is no other path to safety—for you and yours. If you are not inside in five seconds, I will shoot you.”

“I shall stand here for ten,” replied Jim.

He did so. The artist did not shoot. Then he re-entered the inn, and relocked and rebolted the door.

“Whew!” he muttered.

He had not been back a minute before the others returned from the kitchen. Mr. Abingdon was greatly agitated.

“What’s the matter, sir?” asked Jim. “Have you broken a cup?”

“Don’t joke—don’t joke!” gasped Mr. Abingdon, as he sank into the armchair. “I’ve just had a glimpse for myself of your damned Chinaman, gliding by the pantry window!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"A quarter-to-ten," observed Joyce, glancing at the grandfather clock on the wall. "Anybody ready for bed?"

"Don't be funny," replied Jim.

"Well—I don't know! We've got the option, haven't we? We can retire to our nice little rooms—Nos. 1 and 2—like good little girls and boys, and stay there till the morning. And no one will hurt us, and we can go away again after breakfast."

"Of course, it's an idea," murmured Mr. Abingdon, rather sheepishly.

"The question is—is it the right idea?" answered Jim, as he came away from the window. "We should feel pretty small, wouldn't we?"

"Like half-a-farthing," nodded Joyce. "No—we can't do that."

"Then, in heaven's name, what *are* we going to do?" exclaimed Mr. Abingdon, testily.

The tension of the last few hours as they had crawled by, bringing darkness with them, had played havoc with his already frayed nerves.

"Hold the fort as long as we can, I should say," replied Jim, looking at Joyce. Joyce nodded vigorously.

"You mean," rasped Mr. Abingdon, "keep 'em out by force?"

"Rather, sir! We can't just take this lying down, can we?"

"And, anyway," added Joyce, "not opening the door when they knock isn't really keeping them out by force. If it is, servants are always doing it."

"Wait a moment!" exclaimed Jim, suddenly. "I've just thought of something! That confounded artist ordered us to retire to our rooms."

"He did."

"Then how did he propose to get in?"

Joyce reflected for a moment, then suggested, "By breaking a window, I expect. They'd prefer that, I should think, to having us let them in."

"They got in last night, apparently," grunted Mr. Abingdon, from his armchair.

"Quite true," nodded Jim. "But I've a sort of notion that our friend Alfred may have had a hand in that—an unconscious hand, you know. A fellow in his condition might easily go to a door to get a breath of fresh air, and come away again forgetting to lock it. He might also forget the whole incident afterwards."

"But we did find one window open," added Joyce. "No—two—our bedroom and the scullery."

"Are they locked now?" asked Mr. Abingdon, quickly.

"You bet," responded Jim. "If there's a window unlocked or a door unbolted, I'm a bachelor."

Joyce threw him a warning look, but her uncle was temporarily beyond such trifles.

"Our game is to keep them out as long as we can," continued Jim. "Passive resistance first, active resistance afterwards, if necessary. We may parley; it all depends, eh?"

"The precise object being?" demanded Mr. Abingdon.

"To gain time. We've several chances of relief yet."

"What a lovely optimist I've married," whispered Joyce. He squeezed her hand.

"What chances?" inquired Mr. Abingdon, hopelessly.

"Well, the tramp for one."

"But didn't the artist say that the tramp was somewhere locked in a room?" asked Joyce; for Jim had, of course, related his conversation with the artist.

"He did, but he also said the Chinaman was dead," Jim reminded her, "and Mr. Abingdon thinks he saw the Chinaman going by the pantry window. Our artistic friend may have been bluffing."

"Well, that tramp fellow seems a precious thin chance, anyway," muttered Mr. Abingdon. "Suppose he fails?"

"We know of one other man who's hunting for this place," said Jim.

"Do we?" exclaimed Joyce, while Mr. Abingdon looked at him quickly. "Who?"

"Why—the fellow who's lost the ruby."

"By jove, that's true," cried Mr. Abingdon, but his face fell almost immediately. "A precious chance *he's* got of tracing it to this spot."

"Well, you never know how these things work out," retorted Jim. "He may get a clue of some sort. Anyway, he must be in touch with the police. What sort of a man was he, Mr. Abingdon?"

"Tall. Colonial. Looked like a traveller—skin like leather."

"Sounds pretty useful. How did he come to lose the ruby?"

"I hardly listened to the fellow. Wanted to get on with my lunch," answered Mr. Abingdon. "Some story about having been bumped into outside the hotel yesterday. He couldn't remember who bumped into him, and only recalled the incident to-day, when he found his wallet gone. Carried the thing in his wallet. Damn silly of him. That's all I know."

"Well, it's quite enlightening," said Jim. "Let's piece it together. This colonial has the ruby; someone unknown—call him X—bumps into him—"

"The blind man," suggested Joyce.

"Not so sure, old thing. I suspect X passed it on to the blind man. Benevolent fellow, X. Slipped it into the dog's tin. Yes—we're getting the sequence. Blind man goes to inn with dog. *This* inn. Query: does he leave the ruby here? No, because—" He stopped abruptly and gave a sudden exclamation. "Look here, perhaps he *did* leave the ruby at the inn. Perhaps our artistic friend was to call for it—a sort of go-between or agent, you know, but the Chinaman called first—"

"That poem you found in the gazetteer," cried Joyce. "How did it run?"

Jim brought down the volume, and turned to it:

"Green is nothing to trouble about,
When it's mixed with yellow.
But when the red appears,
Well, then, it interests a fellow."

"Informative, if rotten," said Jim, as he replaced the volume. "Also, not very wise. Evidently Mr. Bowles, the innkeeper, imagines himself—quite wrongly—a bit of a poet."

"But how do you *know* the innkeeper wrote it?" asked Joyce.

"Because my other name is Sherlock Holmes," responded Jim. "I hoped you'd ask me that! It's the same writing as the innkeeper's signature, which appears in the other books. We're getting on. How's this? The innkeeper receives the ruby; the blind man departs; the innkeeper changes the dragon's eye from yellow to red, by some means or other as yet unknown, and *the fellow it interests* is our artist!"

"But Li Hung Chang arrives first—"

"Spirits the innkeeper away, shoves old hag in cupboard, and decamps with the jewel. Now we get a blank. How did the stone get back to the dog's tin?"

"Anyway, we know it *did* get back, for that's where we found it," remarked Joyce. "And we know that it's still here, and goodness knows how many people are coming here to-night to try and get it!"

"Let 'em fight it out for themselves," growled Mr. Abingdon suddenly, as the clock struck ten. "I'm going to bed."

"Which room will you occupy, uncle?" asked Joyce. "Numbers one and two are the safe ones."

"Which one are *you* going to have?" he parried, hesitating.

Jim and Joyce exchanged glances. The striking of the clock had reminded them of the significance of the hour. Jim suddenly went to the lamp and turned it down.

"Go up with your uncle, Joyce," he said quietly. "Light the candles in rooms 1 and 2, and then I'll put this lamp out."

"What's the idea?" she demanded, while Mr. Abingdon rose from his chair in frowning, uneasy inquiry.

"Well, whatever plan we decide on, it won't do any harm if whoever's outside *believes* we're going to obey orders," Jim explained. "That's why I want the lights to appear in our allotted rooms. As a matter of fact, I can't see why you two *shouldn't* get to bed. I'll just hang about here — —"

"Is the lad quite mad, uncle, do you think?" queried Joyce. "Oh, Jim, don't waste time."

"What do you mean, old thing?"

"Why, that I'm not going to let you sit here in the dark all by yourself."

"And I'm not going upstairs all by myself," added Mr. Abingdon, decisively. "That's a good idea about the lights, though, I'll go up with you and see to them, Joyce. Then we'll come down again and keep Jim company." He felt his muscle. "I dare say I can hit a bit, if I get excited."

A subtle change had come over Mr. Lionel Abingdon. He was conscious of it himself, and rather surprised at it. Did these two young upstarts imagine they had a corner in courage? Had the artist's nose been within reach of him at that moment, it would have been in serious danger.

"You're a brick, sir, upon my word you are," murmured Jim, approvingly. Mr. Abingdon was annoyed at the pleasure he felt. "I hope hitting won't be necessary, though. I'll make up the fire, so we can have a bit of light when the lamp's out, while you and Joyce see to the candles. By the time you come down I'll have a fine old blaze. We'll hold out as long as we can. But, if there's any real danger, you'll have to take Joyce into sanctuary, sir," he added to Mr. Abingdon, "if you have to drag her there by the scruff of her neck."

They went upstairs, and while they were away, Jim heaped wood and coal on the fire, and turned out the lamp. By the light of the fire he soon saw them creeping down the stairway again. Joyce looked quite cool and collected, and her guardian was making a brave effort to emulate her.

"The candles are alight," whispered Joyce, "and we are all assuredly getting to bed."

"Splendid," whispered Jim back.

"And I put the candles near the window," went on Joyce, "so they won't expect to see our shadows. I call that rather smart."

"Couldn't we move some furniture before the doors?" suggested Mr. Abingdon hoarsely.

"We ought to have thought of that before," answered Jim. "Afraid it's too late, now—it will make too much noise. But anyway, sir, the doors ought to stand. It's the windows I'm worried about."

"There are only two windows in this room," whispered Joyce, "and they've got to get into this room to reach our bedroom floor." Fortunately there was no other connection, the back part of the building being entirely cut off, and having a separate staircase. "If the front door and the passage door are locked and bolted, we've only the windows to watch."

Jim nodded, and gave a satisfied chuckle.

“Our chances shouldn’t be so bad, after all,” he said. “You at one window with a poker, Mr. Abingdon, and me at the other with another poker, and we ought to be able to damage four or five heads if they come poking through!”

“Heads? Eh? God bless me! Yes,” muttered Mr. Abingdon, gently perspiring.

“What about me?” asked Joyce. “Mustn’t I hit any heads?”

“Well, you might squeeze a few noses with the tongs,” responded Jim, and she stifled a little giggle. “But seriously, old thing, you’ll be useful standing by, and letting each one of us know what’s happening to the other, in the case of a double attack. The plan is to beat ’em off if we can. If we can’t, I’ll give the signal, and you and your uncle will retreat to Bedroom No. 1. I’ll follow you there. Then— —”

“Sh-h!” whispered Joyce.

Jim turned swiftly. A soft, grinding sound came from the main window. Mr. Abingdon clenched his teeth hard. The sound seemed to move in a circle. Jim recognised it, and was not surprised to hear it followed shortly by the crisp snap of glass being neatly removed.

All eyes were on the window. Slowly, a hand slipped through. It began to feel its way through the window latch. The next moment, Jim had darted forward and brought his poker heavily down upon the hand.

There was a shriek of pain, as the hand vanished.

“First blood to us,” muttered Jim, fiercely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The battle had begun. Hitherto, it had been mainly manœuvring, but now a definite act of war had been committed, bringing in its train the first flush of passion.

Outside in the darkness, someone was cursing. The ultimate object of the battle was swamped by the more immediate object of getting even with somebody else who had brought a heavy poker down on his hand. The first casualty is a great relief to the politician who no longer has to rely for support on dry and academic argument.

And inside, too, passion was beginning to evince itself. Jim was by no means a blood-thirsty individual, but a curious, primitive satisfaction purred through his veins as his poker met flesh, and a howl announced his victory. For many hours, his ego had suffered, forced to lie dormant. Now it raised itself up again, no longer humiliated.

"I bet he felt *that!*" he muttered.

"Well done," gasped Joyce, scarcely less pleased at the reinstatement of Jim's ego; for were they not one?

Mr. Abingdon blinked. He, also, discovered in himself a certain sense of gloating.

"If it was that confounded madman," he murmured, "*he* won't come back again."

But Jim had not lost touch with his logical sense, and did not overestimate the importance of his little victory.

"Don't be too sure of that," he said. "After all, we've done no more than scare the scout."

"What's that mean?" grunted Mr. Abingdon, uncomfortably.

"Why, the main army is yet to arrive," answered Jim. "The scout—otherwise our artist—otherwise your madman—got a little over-zealous, and, having been beautifully fooled by our candles upstairs, thought he would do some preparation work. That's how I size it up. Now he'll probably wait till 1 a. m."

Joyce nodded.

"Just the same," she said, shrewdly, "that scout, as you call him, has got *something* for his money."

"Yes, a sore hand," observed Mr. Abingdon, venomously.

"I don't mean that. I mean, he's surprised our little secret. We may as well keep the candles alight, I expect, but it won't deceive your main army, Jim, when it turns up."

"That's true it won't," admitted Jim. "Confound the fellow! It was the main army I *wanted* to surprise. Now he'll have some news for 'em. They'll be prepared for our disobedience."

"Never mind—we're prepared for them, too. What about that hole, Jim?"

"H'm! Nuisance, that. But I expect they can make more holes, if they want to. Anyway, it's not a big 'un, and I'll rig up something on the sill to block it up. What about a board, and some nails?"

In ten minutes, the window was patched. Then they continued their vigil. The time crawled by with terrible slowness, and it was a positive relief when the grandfather clock struck eleven, and, after another nerve-trying lapse, twelve.

"Only one more hour," muttered Jim.

"Hooray!" murmured Joyce.

Mr. Abingdon, having assisted heroically, now helped himself to a little tot.

A quarter-past twelve. Half-past twelve. Callous things, grandfather clocks. A wedding or a murder, it's all the same to them. A quarter-to-one . . .

"Someone's moving out there," whispered Mr. Abingdon, raising his hand quickly.

They listened. Soft footsteps approached the window, paused, and then crept away again.

"Our scout, making his final investigation," muttered Jim.

"Fifteen minutes more," murmured Joyce, and suddenly snuggled against her husband. "You'll—you'll be careful, Jimmy, won't you?"

"Shall we all retreat to our sanctuary?" asked Jim.

"N-no," gasped Joyce.

Mr. Abingdon took another tiny tot.

"Right. I'll be as careful as I can, then," promised Jim. "And you'll be off to the sanctuary the moment I tell you to—no disobeying orders, major!"

He squeezed her arm. Her return pressure almost hurt him. It was not entirely composed of affection. The soft steps were coming back again.

They reached the window, and stopped. A quiet voice came through.

"If anybody's in there," said the voice, "this is my last warning. I'm returning good for evil, and giving you another chance. After this, I won't be able to help you, even if I want to. It will be out of my hands. *Are* you there?"

No one spoke.

"For your sakes, I hope you're not. If you are, go to bed. Rooms 1 and 2. Don't be foolhardy. All this is nothing to do with you. Leave it alone. Or you may get hurt."

Mr. Abingdon sneezed.

"Fools!" said the voice.

And the footsteps crept away.

Mr. Abingdon muttered an apology. It was quite unnecessary. You may control a nation, but you cannot control a sneeze. And, after all, what did it matter?

Eight minutes to one.

"How many will there be?" whispered Mr. Abingdon, suddenly.

"The letter suggests four," answered Jim, trying to speak casually. "Samuel Jones, J. D., J. D.'s sister, and the writer, T. T. Whether our artist is included in the crowd, or is an extra, I can't say."

"If he isn't, that's five," said Joyce.

"Ch-chinaman makes six," muttered Mr. Abingdon.

"Yes, but the Chinaman's not—sh!"

"Eh?" Mr. Abingdon's heart missed a beat.

"Sh! They're coming! Can't you hear . . . ?"

In the distance, new steps were distinctly heard, accompanied by the low murmur of voices. They strained their ears, and two hands closed upon two pokers—one hand firmly, the other convulsively.

But the next moment, the pokers nearly fell out of their possessors' hands. The Green Dragon sign gave a sudden, solitary, and unmistakable creak.

"My God! What's that?" gasped Mr. Abingdon.

"Steady," muttered Jim. "It may have been—just a breeze."

The steps and voices grew closer. Soon, the steps continued, but the voices ceased. They were crossing the yard.

Mr. Abingdon tried to count the feet; but as he counted some fifty in his nervous state, he gave it up. Presently the steps, like the voices, ceased. Then one solitary pair of feet approached. The others were evidently keeping back.

"Not the artist," whispered Jim, quickly. "Someone else."

The footsteps were obviously not the artist's. They were light, though firm, and quite unhesitating. They stopped at the door, not the window, and the next instant there came a sharp, imperious knocking on the panel.

Joyce and her uncle looked at Jim. He shook his head, and raised his finger to his lips.

The knock was repeated.

"Let me in," called a voice.

A woman's voice, clear and commanding. The voice of one used to being obeyed. Again Jim shook his head. For the moment, he was adopting a passive policy.

"You are behaving very foolishly," resumed the voice, after a short pause. "Will you talk, then—or are you frightened rabbits?"

"We'll hear anything you care to say," answered Jim, suddenly.

He had not intended to parley, and was almost as surprised to hear himself speaking as were the others. Something in the tone, as well as in the words, of the unknown woman outside the door had forced the reply out of him.

"Good," said the voice outside. "Now we will get on better. Why are you trying to keep us out?"

"Why are you trying to get in?" retorted Jim.

"That is our business. And we *will* get in, you know." Her tone was confident. "That is why I tell you that you are wasting time. Does this inn belong to you?"

"I call that a useless question."

"No, it is not, for we are friends of the man to whom this inn *does* belong."

"Then why isn't he here to receive you?" demanded Jim, sarcastically.

"It is not our fault that he is not. Or his, I think. Anyway, the fact remains that he is not here, and I do not admit that your authority to occupy his inn is any greater than ours. We know Mr. Bowles. We are his friends, I tell you." The tone grew more imperious. "Are *you* his friends?"

"We've not yet had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Bowles," responded Jim, "and I'm doubtful whether any bosom friendship would result if we did meet him." Joyce suppressed an hysterical inclination to giggle. "But, how do I know *you're* his friends?"

"Let us in," retorted the voice outside, "and I will prove it to you."

"I'll do nothing of the sort," answered Jim, resolutely. "I shall only open the door to the police—who may be here at any moment."

"You refuse, then,— —?"

"I refuse absolutely. If you think I'm not in earnest, ask a certain light-haired, blue-eyed individual who is probably within a few feet of you at this moment. His right hand should show how much in earnest we are."

There was a short pause. Then the voice said, slowly, and almost reluctantly,

"We are in earnest, too. I am afraid you will also make that discovery very soon. You are very foolish."

The next moment, a blow resounded on the board that had been nailed across the window, and there was a splintering of glass.

Joyce could not suppress a little scream. Mr. Abingdon stood, irresolute. But Jim, with possibly more rashness than wisdom, strode to the window, poker raised.

"If anyone *wants* a cracked skull," he shouted, "let them come on!"

It was an unpolished, melodramatic statement, but it appeared to have some effect. The clock ticked away five silent seconds. Then the voice outside the door rang out, with a tinge of scorn,

"Would you treat my head like that, my bold friend?"

The suggestion nettled Jim, and while he replied he felt as though he were fighting polished steel with pig-iron.

"There's no need to discuss that," he said. "I am taking it that your head contains better sense."

"Look out!" cried Joyce.

A big stone smashed through the window, and something gleamed in the aperture. Without an instant's thought, Jim brought his poker down upon it. There was an angry shout, seemingly from some big, hoarse throat, and the gleaming thing slipped down—but, unfortunately, on the outside of the window. If Jim could have got hold of it, it would have been useful.

His heart was thumping loudly. It drowned the grandfather clock.

"This is fun!" he grinned, idiotically.

"Oh, lovely," muttered Mr. Abingdon.

Suddenly, a rift of sanity entered the nightmare.

"Joyce," said Jim. "Go and make yourself safe."

She hesitated. Then, somewhat to his secret surprise, she slipped swiftly away, and ran up the wide staircase.

But she did not seek the allotted sanctuary at the end of the landing. Bedroom Nos. 1 and 2 did not attract her. From Bedroom No. 5, however, she would be able to get a glimpse of the people below, and, perhaps, to hear their council. She opened the door, and slipped in.

As she did so, a hand was placed over her mouth, and a quiet voice whispered,

"No move! No cry! Obligated."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Joyce did not scream, or faint, but a sense of utter impotence descended upon her. She had entered the room full of vigour; now her mind was limp. The sudden presence of the Chinaman, the fact of it as well as the shock of it, paralysed her will-power, and she felt as though she were under the spell of some drug, through which Unreality grinned in hideous imitation of the Truth.

For a moment, indeed, she wondered whether she were not actually being drugged. The room seemed to reek with oriental scent. But this might merely be the potency of association; the Chinaman flitted ever in a world of grotesque fancies and Eastern mysticism.

At one moment, he loomed in Joyce's vision as a ruthless demon, blandly introducing one to regions of secret horror; while, at other moments, he merely represented a quaint, innocuous individual, with simple ideals beneath his cunning exterior. He was absurd, nonsensical, inexplicable—compelling.

"Make no sound—all well," chanted the Chinaman, in quiet, low accents. "Make sound—velly bad—velly sorry!"

She could not make a sound. She had lost the power. But, behind her physical impotence, she could still think; and she thought. "Shall I *try* to make a sound? Or shall I not?"

If she cried out—assuming that she could regain control of her vocal organs—what would be the result? This Chinaman would certainly do something, and do it quickly. Probably, at best, she would faint, and the others would come rushing up, quite unequipped to meet oriental strategy. Then, they, too, would be accounted for, and the Chinaman would turn his attention wholly to those outside . . .

The fact that the rest of the enemy were outside brought the wonder, "How did the Chinaman get inside?" Perhaps he had been inside all the while. Perhaps he had broken through another window. Suddenly, as this thought flashed through her, she glimpsed the top of the inn sign, just below the bedroom window. She recalled the solitary creak it had emitted a few minutes ago. *The Chinaman had climbed up it!*

His skill was uncanny. If only he were on their side! What *was* his side? He was not merely a thief, of that Joyce felt convinced . . . If only he could be *won* over to their side!

All at once, through the glazed maze of her thoughts, she recalled some words which the Chinaman had spoken to her that morning, during their strange interview in the kitchen; though whether she recalled the words through her own volition, or through some burning order of the lamp-like eyes now before her, she could not say:

"I hate you? You know nothing. I kill you? Wait till the moment. I love you? I will hold you? You make a flame of me? You know nothing. One day, yes. Time is big." . . .

The Chinaman took his hand away from her mouth. It may have been there five seconds, or five minutes. Outside the window—it was half-open—low murmurs sounded.

A faint smile illuminated the Chinaman's face. He appeared satisfied.

"Velly sensible girl, velly sensible," he said, softly. "No quarrel. Velly good. But, outside, velly wicked people. Velly wicked." The smile vanished, and a look of diabolical hatred replaced it for an instant. Then the face grew mask-like again, while the words droned on: "No good. Soon, they get big surprise. Oh, yes. They not know I am here." He inclined his head towards the door. "*They* not know, too. Only you know. Velly good. Come. No sound."

He slipped quietly towards the window, bending low as he went. The door was closed. Joyce could not remember having closed it herself. The Chinaman must have done so.

Probably it was locked. And Jim and her uncle had no reason to be immediately anxious about her, believing that she was safely ensconced in Bedroom No. 1 or 2.

Automatically, she followed the Chinaman to the window. The moon was up, and from behind a curtain one of the figures below could be clearly discerned. It was the large, flabby figure of the artist. The other figures were hidden from view by the jutting eaves of the roof.

"Bah!" came a low mutter. "Rush the place! What's the use of being squeamish?"

"Squeamish?" replied the artist, grimly. "Is that quite the right word? You've not yet met one of their pokers!"

"No, and *they've* not yet got one of our revolvers!" retorted the first speaker. He had a harsh, gruff voice.

The artist responded, in a slightly bantering tone. "That's not for want of trying on your part, Thrasher. You nearly had your revolver put out of commission just now."

"Yes, and why?" growled the other. "Because you let me go to the darned window alone! If you'd been with me —"

"Come, don't quarrel!" came the voice of a woman; Joyce recognised it as the voice which had addressed Jim through the door. She spoke sharply, though she kept her voice low. "Idiots! Thrasher's right—we'll have to smash into the place. If there's no other way."

"There isn't any other way," grunted the man referred to as Thrasher.

"I'm not so sure."

Then the voice grew lower, and the artist advanced a few steps towards the unseen woman, till the eaves cut him, too, out of the line of vision.

The Chinaman turned and looked at Joyce. Joyce stared back at him, and suddenly, hardly knowing why, flushed.

"Why are you looking at me like this?" she demanded.

Not till after she had spoken did she realise that this was her first utterance since entering the room. It was as though a ban upon speech had suddenly been lifted from her.

"Why not?" replied the Chinaman, unemotionally.

"What do you want?"

"I have said Red Stone."

"Is that—all?"

"You think, something else?" Joyce did not reply, and he repeated, "Answer, oblige."

"No, I don't think you want anything else," muttered Joyce, wishing she had remained silent. She was afraid of conversing with this creature, who read her thoughts, yet whose own thoughts were so unreadable.

"Tell me something," said Joyce suddenly. "What will you do, if I refuse to be what you call a sensible girl?"

"No refuse," responded the Chinaman, shaking his head slightly.

"Won't I? You don't know! Suppose I run to that door?"

"Door locked."

"Then suppose I scream?"

"No scream. They hear you outside."

"And downstairs, too."

"No matter, that. But no hear outside. Then, perhaps, they go away." He shrugged. "Who can say?"

"And you don't *want* them to go away?"

"No. They come for red stone. Red eye. They know where it is."

"But if, as you seem to think, it's in this room, they'll find you here before —"

"Oh, no. We hide behind curtain there." He pointed to a thick curtain hanging before a cupboard. "Hole in curtain. Quite easy. I see them. Then, when they find it—" Again the

sudden gleam of fury shot through his eye, and was gone. In horrible contrast, he smiled immediately afterwards. "Tired? Yes? Smell this —"

"No, no!" gasped Joyce, backing away from him. "I'll be sensible."

The Chinaman nodded, and, with maddening assurance, turned away from her, and fixed his eyes on the window.

Joyce looked at him, and then at the door. If it was locked, she could not force it open, and to cry out, she was convinced, would be useless. There was only one way to combat the Chinaman, and that was with strategy. Her mind worked furiously, and fruitlessly.

She turned again to the Chinaman. His eyes were still fastened on the window. His left hand hung by his side. Hooked on to one of his bent fingers was a key.

"He's tempting me," she thought.

But the key fascinated her. The Chinaman was motionless, appearing almost in a trance in his utter immovability. Perhaps, after all, even a Chinaman could make a mistake, and be taken off his guard!

She took a step towards him. He did not move.

Step by step, she drew nearer. Her hand was stretched out, and within a few inches of the key. If only she could slip it off, get out of the room, and lock him in! Her fingers drew closer still. They touched the key. The Chinaman made no movement.

Suppressing a gasp, she discovered the key in her hand. She turned swiftly, nearly deafened by her heart, and began to creep towards the door. She reached the door. With a trembling hand she raised the key to the lock.

"Key of cupboard," said the Chinaman.

"Oh, you beast!" she almost sobbed. "You—little Chinese devil!"

She flung the key back to him. He bent down, and picked it up.

"Obliged," he observed, calmly. "Not key of cupboard. Key of door." In a flash, he had slid to her side. "Next time, you pay big price. No more foolishness. No more talk. Understand?"

"You mean, you'll kill me?"

"Kill!" The word was spoken scornfully. "What is it? No. Bigger price. Much bigger price."

Something snapped in Joyce's brain, producing an odd, almost stoical calmness.

"I say," she said, in an ordinary, natural voice. "You are a dirty little worm, aren't you? Have you a God?"

Then something seemed to snap, also, in the Chinaman's brain.

A bright point gleamed at her throat. She closed her eyes.

But nothing happened; there was no deadly prick. When she opened her eyes, the Chinaman was at the window again, staring out fixedly.

She followed his gaze. A figure ran into her line of vision from under the eaves. It was a slight, girlish figure, and even in the intense poignancy of the moment, Joyce realised the grace and beauty of that form.

Angry voices shouted at it. A shot rang out. With a piercing cry, the figure sank to the ground.

Then the door below was flung open, and a moment later Jim had reached the figure, and was bending over it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

For a person in distress, the girl over whom Jim bent was unusually composed.

"Don't move," she said, quietly, holding him with her deep brown eyes almost as much as with her words. "Stay quite still for a moment. If you value your life."

Jim did not answer. For the moment, he had no words. He was feeling too angry with her, with the world, and with himself. The girl continued,

"I admire your bravery, but I'm a little disappointed in you, all the same. It was such an old trick, you know."

The cynical tone stung him into speech.

"Yes, it's an old trick that any man with a grain of decency in him will always fall to," he retorted, "and that any woman with a grain of decency in her will always refuse to play!"

"We have to use our wits against your strength," she answered calmly, as she rose from the ground; but she flushed slightly.

"Keep him covered, Jasper. He's a fool, but he looks a bit dangerous."

"He is damn dangerous," replied the artist. "I'll look after him. You'd better run in and see how Thrasher's getting along."

The girl nodded, and ran into the inn. Jim turned slowly, and met the eyes of the artist, and the gleam of his revolver.

"History repeats itself," grinned the artist.

"Not quite," replied Jim. "I notice you're holding your gun with your left hand this time."

"That's true," sighed the artist. "You're quite useful with a poker. Whoa—steady! Don't come any nearer. Don't forget, we're down to the bone, now."

"I suppose you're J. D.?" said Jim, shrugging his shoulders. "The J. D. mentioned in the innkeeper's note. She called you Jasper."

"I am J. D.," responded the artist. "And *she* is my sister."

"Well, probably neither of you had any choice," remarked Jim. "Would that ugly brute who's gone inside be the T. T. who wrote the note?"

"He was born Thrasher and christened Tom, so I expect he would be," answered the artist. "And now you know the happy little family."

"Except Samuel Jones. Where . . . Good Lord! What's that?" cried Jim suddenly, staring at the inn sign.

"What?" barked the artist sharply, and followed his gaze.

"That's an old trick too!" bellowed Jim, and the next instant was upon him.

The artist gave a cry, and his revolver fell from his hand as Jim sprang at him.

The suddenness of the attack gave Jim an advantage, but he was handicapped by his leg, which gave a sudden twinge under the abrupt strain that was put upon it. The artist, however, was also suffering from the burden of an injured hand, and for a second or two, as the two men swung and swayed in the moonlight, neither could establish any definite ascendancy.

Joyce, in the bedroom above, gathered dimly what was happening, and felt sick with impotence. She retained sufficient sense, however, to realise that, though impotent now, her moment of usefulness might come later if she did nothing to inflame the quiet little creature at her side. This creature had it in his immediate power to render her impotence complete,—of that she had no doubt. Despite the needs of the moment, she could do nothing but wait.

The artist, though large and somewhat flabby, possessed considerable strength, and fought with the zest of one who was very fully alive to the importance of the issue. Aided by the knowledge that noise was in his favour, whereas Jim required silence, he flung himself about

lustily, shouting and grunting as he tried to free himself from his adversary's grip. It was this shouting that snatched victory away from Jim just as he seemed in sight of it. He had now forced the artist to his knees and believed that in a moment he would have him flat, and would be able to gain the coveted revolver, which gleamed unconcernedly a few feet off. A sharp word, however, now fell upon his ears, sickening him.

"Let him go! I've got you covered!"

It was the girl's voice.

"All right—shoot!" panted Jim, and sent the artist to the ground.

"Don't make me," said the girl, quietly.

For a second, Jim hesitated. He was too breathless for generalship. In that moment, the artist rolled over like a barrel, and regained his revolver. From the cobbles, he directed it at Jim.

"All right out there?" shouted the fisherman's gruff voice, from within. "I've got the old man covered. Do you want me?"

"No—it's all right," answered the girl.

Jim scowled at her. He wished she had been some hideous hag. Her beauty incensed him.

"Why be lukewarm about it?" he demanded angrily, between his gasps. "It must be—most awfully inspiring, I should think—beating bare fists with revolvers."

"Whether it is, or isn't," she retorted, "some things are forced upon us."

"Exactly," gasped the artist, as he slowly rose, keeping his pistol aimed at Jim's heart all the while. "I told the dear fellow to keep out of our way . . . but he wouldn't. If we don't feel precisely inspired, at least we are saved humiliation! Suppose the revolvers had been beaten by the bare fists!"

"Here, how much longer are you going to stop out there talking?" shouted the gruff voice from within. "Let's get on with this, and quit!"

The girl stood aside from the door, and made a sign for Jim to enter. In order to save his dignity, he paused somewhat theatrically. And, after all, he excused himself, were not these people theatrical? Mad adventurers, who surely would never shoot to kill! If only that gruff fisherman were not of the party! Jim felt he might have dealt with this fat, blue-eyed fellow, and his beautiful, dark, absurd sister . . .

"I don't *like* killing," murmured the artist's voice behind him, as something pressed into his back, "but I think it only kind to remind you, in case you are under any delusions, that it can be done, and that we've a hell of a lot at stake!"

Jim shrugged his shoulders, counted five to himself, and then walked slowly back into the parlour.

The fire light was blazing merrily. It flickered over the outlines of Mr. Abingdon, sitting miserably in a chair, and of the fisherman, mounting guard over him.

The front-door closed. While Jim remained covered by the artist, the girl glanced round the room, moved to the lamp and lit it. The enemy were now in possession.

"Yes, you've a hell of a lot at stake," said Jim, suddenly. "Everything, bar honour."

"What about stopping his mouth?" suggested the fisherman.

"You'd better," replied Jim, looking at the girl. "It's the only thing you're really afraid of."

The girl, who had been glancing up the staircase, swung round swiftly, and advanced towards Jim.

"What makes you think I'm afraid of that?" she asked, gazing at him intently.

"I can see you are."

"How?"

"Lord! It's easy! By your looks, by your pose—you don't belong to the silly world you're walking in. You're not—cut out for it."

"Not cut out for it!" murmured the artist, and laughed.

"That's what I said! Not cut out for it," retorted Jim. "A slip of a girl — —"

"If you won't stop him, I will," shouted the fisherman, angrily. "Are we to stick here all night, while he prattles?"

But the girl intercepted his movement, and the imperiousness of her gesture, with the manner in which it was obeyed, was almost itself an answer to Jim's attempt to belittle her.

"No, wait," she said. "He interests me." She had turned to the fisherman. Now she turned back to Jim. "You've got me wrong, my friend. My world is no sillier than yours. So I'm a slip of a girl? Shall I tell you what you are?"

"Thanks."

"A silly little boy. Yes, a silly little boy, who can't stick to *his* world, and who gets his ears boxed when he pops his head out of it!" She stamped her foot suddenly. "Keep to your world, little boy. I'm quite satisfied with mine."

"That's a lie," answered Jim, refusing her the satisfaction of betraying how her words tingled.

She rounded on him furiously.

"It's *not* a lie!" she cried. "Your world threw me out. So I've thrown *it* out! Do you expect me to crawl back, and thank it for a mean little job that would hardly clothe me? Or I could make my body a man's slave, for the honour of sitting at his table! I hate your world, I despise it!"

"So it seems," murmured Jim. "I expect I was wrong about you. But ——" He paused.

"Go on!"

"Why trouble to tell *me* all this?"

The passion suddenly died from her face.

"I don't know," she said coldly, and turned to the artist, who had been watching her closely, with a slight frown, during her outburst. "You told me there was someone else, Jasper. I don't see her."

The artist referred the question on, by glancing at Jim and raising his eyebrows.

"Upstairs," answered Jim, laconically. "In the little sanctuary you so kindly placed at our disposal. And if anybody touches a hair of her head — —"

"Don't get excited," interposed the artist. "You may not realise it, dear boy, but we are people of honour."

"So—she's hiding," commented the girl, with a note of scorn.

"She's doing what I told her to do," snapped Jim, angrily. "Give her a sporting chance, and she'll match you for pluck, any day!"

"Very likely," nodded the girl. "Only I don't happen to think pluck waits for a sporting chance. Well, Jasper, we've wasted too much time. Go and get what we've come for. And then we'll go."

"Yes, but what about these two?" exclaimed the fisherman. "Shan't we tie them up first?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I say so!"

"At least, I suggest," cooed the artist, "that we march them into another room — —"

"I'm not leaving *this* room, thank you," interposed Jim, definitely. "That is, unless there's a bullet in me first."

Mr. Abingdon showed signs of uneasiness, and made his first contribution to the conversation.

"Don't you think, Jim, my boy?" he began, but Jim cut him short.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said, "but from where I am I can see the top of the staircase, and I can see if anyone going up those stairs turns towards Joyce's room. If they do that, there'll be murder—on one side or the other."

He spoke with fierce vehemence, and after studying him for a moment, the girl smiled faintly and nodded.

"Get on with it, Jasper," she said. "Thrasher and I will look after things down here."

"You bet we will," added Thrasher. "I'm not taking orders from anyone if I want to shoot."

The artist looked round the room, satisfied himself with its arrangement, stared at the wall by which he stood, felt it, and then swiftly slipped up the stairs. He did not turn towards the room in which Jim imagined Joyce to be, but went straight into Room No. 5.

Had he known that only half-a-minute earlier, the door he passed through had been locked on the inside, he would have hesitated. As it was, he entered confidently.

All was silent in the room. On the right, by the door, a large, tenantless four-poster. Against the wall, where the bed ended, a heavy curtain, presumably drawn across a cupboard. On the left, an old chest, and a wardrobe. In a corner, a small, three-cornered washstand. Ahead, a window, giving on to a sloping roof, beyond which the top of the sign faintly swung.

Portions of the room were illuminated by the moon's rays. But the heavy curtain was in deep shadow.

Quietly the artist advanced a few paces. Then, suddenly, he stopped and gazed out of the window. The next instant, he had turned out and was speeding from the room.

He was down the staircase in a flash, his face contorted like a thwarted beast's.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed the girl.

"Look out," he whispered hoarsely. "Two men are crossing the road outside!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

What of our tramp? We have left him too long in his little bedroom prison at Trymton, and his patient eyes now reach us with their reproach. "Don't forget me," they say. "You haven't done with me yet."

It is very true that we have not done with the tramp. But for him, indeed, the course of events would have run differently, and, perhaps, a trifle more smoothly. It would, at any rate, have culminated, in so far as Jim and Joyce were concerned, at an earlier moment, and in a less astonishing manner—though astonishing enough to satiate the average appetite for a sensation.

The tramp grew bored. It was only because we refused to share his boredom that we did not accompany him through the entire period of his imprisonment. But now we find him, no longer bored, starting out of an uneasy slumber at a sound.

Or was it, after all, a sound? He did not know. He did not know anything. Things that seemed were inextricably mixed up with things that were, and the dream from which he awoke was no more astonishing than the reality he was awakening to. He had merely dreamed that he was walking across a mountain range, treading from one spiked peak to another over chasms of purple fire. Compared with disappearing Chinamen and mad fishermen, this mountain journey was hardly worthy of comment. Indeed, it was infinitely pleasanter, and Alfred struggled against the returning grip of reality, as dreamers do, in the effort to continue his trip among the peaks. The points, as he trod on them tickled his feet quite deliciously, and the purple fire rose with comforting warmth—though, of course, one had to be careful not to slip . . .

"Oi!" shouted Alfred.

For he *had* slipped! Down he went, through a hundred years, till a faint sound at the bottom became more and more audible. A sound he'd heard a hundred years ago.

"Oi!" he shouted again, in sudden terror. "I'll bump yer!"

He sat up, with a jerk. Those wonderful peaks! Where were they? He looked up. The bedroom ceiling was so low that it almost hit him. He closed his eyes tightly, and muttered, "Now I'm on them mountains agin—yus, I am!" But the illusion was shattered. He opened his eyes, and there was the bedroom ceiling. And there, below him, were the sounds . . .

"'Allo!" thought Alfred, now properly awake. "Some'un's comin'!" He slipped his feet over the side of the bed, and sat up like a self-respecting mortal. "Wunner if it's a blinkin' waiter bringin' me a Carlton supper!"

Lord, he was hungry! This wasn't no way to treat prisoners, this wasn't! If that door opened, he'd tell whoever it was something, he would!

The sounds drew nearer. Alfred seized a broken chair. It felt rather good in his hands.

"Think I'll 'it 'im," he pondered. Then hunger overcame revenge. "No, I might miss 'im, and 'it a 'unk o' cheese and a glass o' beer instead!"

He put the chair down, not trusting himself with it, for the state of his stomach rendered him undependable. The steps came nearer. A sudden angry terror seized him.

"Gawd, I'll spoil yer mug when I sees it!" he roared through the door.

"Oh!" gasped a small voice.

It was only the nice little girl.

"Beg pardon, missie," called Alfred. "Didn't know it was you. But I'll go dippy if I don't git something hinside o' me."

He heard the pleasant sound of keys. Janet was having another shot. The tramp encouraged her.

"Gawd bless yer, missie," he said. "Reg'lar pal, you are. Where's the old 'un?"

"Gone away," answered Janet's small voice.

"Garn, is 'e," exclaimed Alfred. "Well, if that ain't the best bit of news since they relieved Mafeking!"

"Oh, dear, these keys won't fit," cried Janet, despairingly.

"Don't you give up 'ope," responded the tramp, "and *I* won't. Reg'lar pal, that's wot I ses. Stick to it, missie!"

An anxious minute went by. A little sob marked its fruitless termination.

"Never you mind," soothed the tramp. "I got an idea."

"Oh, have you?"

"Yus. It's all right, if the old 'un's gorn. Now, yer *sure* o' that?"

"Oh, yes."

"When did 'e go?"

"I don't know. Sometime ago, I think."

"Someday? That's a bit too long! Given 'im time ter come back agin, like."

"I don't—think—he's coming back at all," faltered Janet.

"Wot! Not comin' back at all? Yer mean—? Oh, well, then it don't matter 'ow much bloomin' noise we makes, does it?"

"No."

"All right, then. Git out o' the way, missie. 'Unger's goin' for the door!"

As he spoke, he hurled himself against the woodwork like a battering-ram, but the woodwork seemed to hurl itself back at him like a battering-ram. He rebounded, with a bump on his head.

"Oh, yer will 'ave it, will yer?" he bellowed, smarting and indignant.

He threw himself at the door again, and again the door won. The door ceased to be a door. It became a monster, to be conquered.

Alfred had never behaved like this before. It was a new Alfred—or, perhaps, a spark of an old Alfred, who had fought in a crusade. Many a crusader used his glory as an excuse to leave less worthy progeny behind him. Inflamed, the tramp made a third attack. Each time, both he and the door were harder than the last. It dawned upon him that if once he stopped, the door would win, and that he could only ride through it on his passion.

"Yer blinkin' bit of wood, yer!" he bawled, and, seizing the broken chair, he smashed it against the panel. The chair was no more, but the panel split. "Come on!" defied Alfred, and gripped a towel-horse. The towel-horse went the way of the chair and the split became a definite crack. Sweating from his labour and emotion, the tramp glared round, red-eyed, for some new weapon. He saw none. The door grinned at him. "Blast yer," almost sobbed Alfred, on his last wave of rage, "git out o' my way!" And once more he hurled his feeble, ill-nourished body at the thing.

There was a tearing split, and a little shriek. Alfred's head, and half his body, went through. Thus he hung, limp but victorious, while a little girl stared at the sudden appearance between terror and joy.

The sudden appearance began to laugh.

"Doncher be scared, missie," he gasped, between guffaws. "This ain't me. This ain't me. Nothin' ain't nothin'!"

In due course, Alfred heaved himself right through, and picked himself up from the floor.

"Well, I thort I'd bin through a lot in my life," he observed, "but if that don't beat it. Come on, missie. Can yer give me a bite o' something?"

"Yes. Yes!" she answered, gulping. "Come downstairs. There's some cheese and things."

By tacit understanding, they did not discuss the situation until Alfred's immediate needs had been attended to. Then, while he stored the cheese and things into the waiting void, they began to talk.

"We got a lot ter do, missie," said Alfred, helping himself, for a second time, from one of Tom Thrasher's most cherished bottles; and, it may be recorded, his conscience did not prick him in the least. "But, fust, I gotter git all this inside me. And you'd better 'ave a bit, too. Go on, now. Keep me comp'ny!"

"I'm not hungry," she replied, but she nibbled at a piece of bread-and-butter, and watched him with anxious eyes.

"The way I looks at it is this," continued Alfred, reflectively. "The more yer 'as ter stand, the more yer *can* stand. Now, two days ago, I'd 'ave run 'ollerin' from a tiger. But I wouldn't run now, not from two 'undred, no not even if none of 'em 'ad 'eads."

"Oh, don't!" cried Janet, shutting her eyes tight.

Alfred, looked at her sympathetically, and apologised.

"There, look at me, talking silly," he frowned. "Doncher pay no 'tenshun to me. I'm barmy. Let's 'ear wot's 'appened, and then I'll be orf. But wot's this about yer uncle not comin' back agin? I dunno wot yer mean by that?"

While Alfred ate, Janet told her little story. We ourselves know it up to the point where she saw the policeman disappearing on a bicycle, and her uncle's voice had intruded upon her bitter disappointment. Her uncle had brought her back, and had told her that if she went out again, he would thrash the life out of her.

"Go on!" exclaimed the tramp, so impressed that a substantial piece of cold meat, spiked on a fork, made a halt in mid-air. "'E never said that, did 'e?"

"Yes, he did," nodded Janet, hard. "I was awfully frightened."

"'Corse, you was! There's a feller, now! Wot 'appened arter that?"

"I stayed indoors, as he told me to, and he watched me nearly all the time. And even if he wasn't in the room, I felt he was seeing me. It was—horrid."

"I don't expeck 'e went out, did 'e?"

"Only just outside the front door, sometimes. He kept looking out to sea. And when it got evening, he told me to go to bed."

"Ah! Wanted yer out o' the way, like?"

"Yes, that's it."

"Did he lock you in?"

"No. But he kept poking his head in, to see if I was asleep, and so at last I pretended to be. He came and looked over me. And then I really did fall asleep, though I tried not to."

"Why, missie?"

"Well, don't you see, I knew he might go out some time, and I wanted to set you free."

"Well, I'm blowed," murmured Alfred. "I said you was a pal. So you are. Proper."

"He tried to make out you were bad, but I know you're *not*," answered the child, simply. "When I woke up—from really going to sleep, you know—I listened, and couldn't hear anything. I got up, and opened the door. There wasn't a sound, so I knew Uncle must be out, you see, for I knew he couldn't be in bed, 'cos he snores. Well—he *is* out! I've looked *everywhere*. And then, on the mantelpiece, by that clock—" Alfred glanced at the clock, and noticed that it was not far off midnight—"I found this."

She held a half sheet of paper out to him. He looked at it and waved it away.

"You read it, missus," he said, "I ain't been ter school lately."

She smiled, with a sudden sense of pride, and read:

“Janet. I think I’ve got a job. If I get it, I won’t be back for some time. Never mind if I was cross. You’ll be all right because you’re a good little worker, and anybody is pleased to get a good worker and pay for it. If the job’s as good as I think, I may be away a long time. If you’re good, I may send you a present. I’ve been after this job for some time. It’s just come. Your uncle, T. T.”

She stopped reading and looked at the tramp. For all her bravery, a sudden moisture crept into her eyes. The tramp, unused to handling emotion of this kind, stared at the ceiling.

“Then—you’re all alone, like, missie?” he observed. Receiving no reply, he brought his eyes down from the ceiling and saw her quickly wiping her eyes. He frowned. “I gotter go for the perlice,” he muttered. “Yus, that’s wot I’ve gotter do. But I don’t like leavin’ you ’ere all alone, missie, that I don’t.”

“Can’t I come with you?” she asked eagerly.

“’Corse yer can, if yer want ter,” murmured Alfred. “But—wot about the dark, an’ all that? Woncher be afraid?”

“Not so afraid as I’d be to stay here!” she exclaimed.

Alfred nodded.

“That’s right, missie,” he said. “Git yer coat and ’at on.” She jumped up. Alfred grinned. “Me and you, missie! Well, I’m blowed! Wot a lark!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

More than one strange thing had happened at the little sea village of Trymton after the last yellow lights had blinked out behind the bedroom blinds, but nothing more strange perhaps than the setting out of this oddly-assorted couple on their queer adventure.

In aspect, as in character, they were totally different. The tramp, to a nervous nocturnal wanderer, might well have been taken for a scarecrow enjoying a ghostly stretch after its day of patient immovability. His moonlight silhouette was blurred and ragged. Janet, on the other hand, was quaintly prim, for throughout her poverty she had been taught to bear herself with self-respect, and whatever her uncle had done to her during their brief association, he had not been able to reduce this admirable quality. Beyond these external differences, however, there were matters which bound Alfred and Janet together on this journey, giving them a pleasant sense of companionship.

For one thing, each had only a vague idea of what they were setting out to do, and whether, even if they did it, the perplexing problems of the world would be any nearer a solution. They were going for the police. Good. But what, exactly, were they going to tell the police? And what, exactly, might the police tell *them*, in return? Events beyond the police station were exceedingly hazy!

For another thing, each was homeless. The tramp had never known a home—or if he had, he could not remember it. It was too many miles back. Janet had always known a home, and the sudden evaporation of the protective roof was so bewildering that she hardly dared to think about it. She was thus more dependent upon the tramp, to whom a roofless condition was natural, than the tramp was upon her. And, while this responsibility, dimly sensed, tickled Alfred's vanity, it also awed him a little.

Yet another matter which held these two together was embedded in a circumstance more difficult to explain. They had discovered, subconsciously, that they did not jar on each other. They walked on the common ground of good intention, and could talk to each other without restraint. Harmony in life is largely a matter of finding those with whom one can strike a chord, and not a discord; and the proof that we are helping to create that harmony lies in our spiritual contentment.

For a little while they walked in silence. Having started from the farthest end of the village, they had to pass through the entire length of it, and though this was not a very considerable matter, they walked rather rapidly, with the object of putting the village quickly behind them. Each cottage might be an eye, which might suddenly assert itself and glare upon their enterprise. On the left, curling blackly on the shelving beach, ran the sea. In their present mood, it was not a friendly sea.

"We turn up here," whispered Janet, presently, when they were nearly clear of the village.

She indicated a road forking inland, on their right. The tramp looked along it, and hesitated.

"I came that way, miss," mumbled Alfred illogically, pointing to the road ahead of them—the road that continued more or less parallel with the sea.

"Yes, you would, you know. That goes back to the inn," answered Janet.

"Ah," said the tramp, and still hesitated. After a pause, during which the little girl looked at him curiously, he added, "I ain't sure, missie, just the same, that this ain't a better road for us."

"But aren't we going to Endlesby?" asked Janet.

"Yus. Tha's right."

"Well, then?"

"No, it ain't 'well, then,'" responded the tramp, shaking his head. "There's a chap up that road there,—leastways, I thinks there is;—and, some'ow, I'd rather not meet 'im."

"But—they wouldn't hurt us—would they?"

It was very late, and fears are easily roused in juvenile minds round about midnight.

"There's no knowin'," answered Alfred. "Not with things bein' wot they are. I don't like the look of 'em, tha's a fack."

Janet strained her eyes, stared up the road, and then turned to the tramp again.

"You know, I can't see anybody," she whispered.

"That's 'cos yer eyes ain't as good as mine, missie," retorted the tramp. "Wot I can't see, and wot I ain't seed, ain't worth seein'. That's a fack. 'Sides, missie—I got another reason fer wantin' ter go my way, if yer don't mind."

"What is it?"

"Tell yer presently, missie. I s'pose we *can* git ter Hendlesby this way, can't we?"

"Oh, yes. But it's longer."

"Well, let's tike it then, I ses. I got a reason, as I ses. Tell yer, presen'ly."

A dog ended their hesitation. It came bounding out of nowhere, yelping fiercely at the moon, and making them jump. Janet jumped quite a long way, but the tramp jumped farther still.

Their course decided, they proceeded quickly along it, while the dog, having found the moon unresponsive, bounded back into the nowhere from which it had come.

"Never did like dawgs," muttered the tramp, in self-defence. "They goes for yer legs."

"It made me jump, too," answered Janet rather breathlessly. "But I don't think it would have bitten us."

"Why not?"

"'Cos—" She hesitated, and glanced at Alfred sideways. "'Cos, you see—I don't think it was a *real* dog."

"Wot's that?" cried the tramp. "You're not agoin' ter tell me it 'ad two heads?"

"Three," responded Janet, solemnly.

"'Ere—come orf it," mumbled Alfred, uncomfortably. "Wotcher mean—three 'eads?" He was quite used to seeing things himself. He'd got bats in the belfry proper, he had. But he didn't want Janet to start seeing things, too. "Didn't seem ter me—the way you jumped—you 'ad time to count."

"I didn't," admitted Janet. "But I b'lieve it was Old Tags."

"Old Tags! 'Oo's 'e?"

"A haunted dog. A ghost—"

"G'arn!" interposed Alfred. "Doncher start thinkin' them silly things!"

"Well, I've heard it often, when I've been lying in bed. You see, it belonged to a very old man, a hundred years ago, an' he was murdered, an' he disappeared, and Old Tags was found there next day and they couldn't get him to move. You see, he loved his master, and thought if he stayed there he'd come back. So he stayed there for days and days, till he died, and now his ghost wanders about on moonlight nights, looking for his master."

"Reely," murmured Alfred.

"Yes. And if you stop him, he thinks you've killed his master, and bites you, and you die in ghastly agony."

"'Ere, 'ere," exclaimed Alfred. "You said 'e wouldn't bite!"

"Well, I forgot that part. They say that if Old Tags bites you, it's too awful to think about, and you go all stiff, and disappear, like the old man did. And when people *do* disappear—"

"Wot! *Do* they disappear?" demanded Alfred, stopping abruptly.

"There was someone disappeared some time ago, my uncle said. And they all said, 'That's Old Tags.' In the day-time, I think it's silly, but in the night, it's dif'rent, isn't it?" She gave a little shiver. "Besides, I know *lots* of people who believe in ghosts." She clutched his arm suddenly. "Oh! Look there!"

"Oi! Where?" cried Alfred, wheeling round.

Janet was staring into a deep moon shadow. Alfred stared with her.

"I—I dare say it was a mistake," she whispered. "I thought I saw two eyes looking out of the hedge. Oh, dear! Let's go on."

"Yus—come on," agreed Alfred, and they resumed their way.

He tried to forget Old Tags, but the attempt was not successful. More than once, he thought he heard a soft patter of feet behind him. Alone, he might have run, but with a little girl to champion, he could not do that. However scared St. George was of the dragon in his secret heart, he had to hold his ground.

"Yus, but why should he 'ave three 'eads?" demanded Alfred. "Don't seem reason'ble. Pal o' mine went to work once, and 'is master died, but 'e didn't sprout three 'eads. 'E only kep' ter the one—and nex' mornin' 'e sed *that* was more'n enuff!"

"Well, my uncle said he had three heads," answered Janet, "and that if I ever went out after dark, when Old Tags was about, I'd be eaten all up."

"Blimy!" expostulated Alfred. "I thort 'e sed you'd disappear!"

"Well, you would disappear, if a dog ate you, wouldn't you?" asked Janet.

"In a manner o' speakin', I s'pose yer would," confessed the tramp; and added, after a thoughtful pause, "seems ter me, missie, that bloomin' uncle o' yours didn't think anything o' tryin' to frighten yer."

Janet nodded emphatically.

"He was *horrid*," she said. "That I don't mind now. I'm not going back to him now,—I don't care *what* happens."

"Ah," said the tramp. "Tha's right."

So she didn't care what happened! Well, nor did he—much. But what was going to happen? However defiant one may appear, the future always holds a certain interest.

They did not speak again for several minutes. Their road straggled onwards, the hedges rustling on one side, and the sea whispering on the other. The moon slipped temporarily behind a cloud. It was not entirely on account of the darkness, however, that the tramp's steps began to grow slower.

"Why did you want to come this way?" asked Janet, suddenly. "You never told me."

"Well—there was Old Tags," answered Alfred, unconvincingly. "That dawg was on the other road wasn't 'e?"

"Yes."

"And yer said we could git ter Hendlesby this way."

"Yes. We turn off just over the bridge."

"Ah! The bridge," muttered Alfred. "Nearly there now—the bridge, I means—ain't we?"

"Just round the next bend, I think. Only it's so dark, you can't tell. O dear,—why *did* you want to come this way?"

"Becos, missie,—"

But before he got any further, a faint throbbing fell upon their ears. It came from the sea, and they instinctively turned their eyes towards the water.

"What's that?" exclaimed Janet.

"Couldn't be hairyplane, could it?" muttered the tramp. "Not at this time o' night."

They tried to pierce the darkness, but the sea was an impenetrable smudge. They stopped walking. The throbbing was growing louder. It was coming towards them. Then, suddenly, the

moon swam out of its cloud, and the impenetrable smudge became a dazzling sheet, on which, riding shorewards, was the outline of a boat.

Alfred slid into a ditch, and pulled Janet down after him. For the next few minutes, he reflected, it might be wiser to see than to be seen.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The ditch, by good fortune, was a roomy and comfortable one, as ditches go. It was undoubtedly roomy and comfortable compared with many other ditches the tramp had known. Indeed, it had once been a self-respecting trench, neatly dug by men not fit for foreign service, and although nature was now reclaiming it with her green, concealing fingers, the archaeologist of the future would one day rediscover it and exclaim:—"Here, at this spot, now occupied by nettles and brambles, British soldiers once occupied their posts to protect our shores against a possible German invasion."

But, despite his learning, the archaeologist would be ignorant of the fact that here, at this spot, a little girl and a ragged tramp once huddled, to watch the black shape of a boat grow larger on a sheet of speckled silver. Truly, archaeologists know very little, and nearly all the human history of the world is wiped from the page before the ink is dry!

The boat, which had a mast, but which was now propelled by an auxiliary engine, slowed up as it neared the shore. The throbbing ceased, and the head swung round.

"'Allo, she's stoppin'," whispered the tramp. "Wot's that for?"

"P'r'aps it can't get right in," Janet whispered back.

"P'r'aps I ain't sorry it can't," grunted the tramp. "*Now* wot?"

Janet caught hold of his arm.

"Look," she said.

"'Allo, lights,—" he frowned. "Seems as if she's signalling like." A light flashed from the side of the boat. "Give a bit ter know wot that means. Yus, but 'oo's she signalling to?"

"It—it must be—" began Janet, and stopped.

No wonder she stopped. The thought was not a pleasant one. The boat must be signalling to someone on shore—someone quite near them, watching it just as they were.

The light was extinguished suddenly. Then another boat—a smaller one—slipped out from the shore. It came abruptly into their line of vision, and was rowed by a single occupant.

"Reckernise 'im, missie?" asked Alfred.

"Yes," murmured Janet. "It's—my uncle."

"Ah! Thort I spotted 'is ugly mug. Wot's 'is gime? Of all the bloomin' . . . 'allo, 'e's goin' it, ain't 'e?"

"Yes."

"In a bit of a 'urry. Never did agree with 'urryin', I didn't. S'pose 'e's been waitin' all this time?"

"Yes. I saw him looking out towards the sea a lot this afternoon."

"Ah. Now we're gettin' it. That there boat's wot 'e's been alookin' for. Did yer say the bridge was near 'ere—that we was jest acomin' to it?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll bet that's where 'e's been 'idin'. 'Ad 'is boat hunder that there bridge, waitin' for them lights, see, and now off 'e goes. And I'll bet that's the last we'll see of 'im."

"You mean, you think he'll go off in the other boat?"

"Pline as a pikestaff, ain't it, missie? Yer uncle's a bad man, that's wot 'e is. 'E's done something shady, that's wot 'e's done. And—ah, now we're gettin' it—that's wot 'e locked me up in 'is bedroom for—didn't want me goin' for the p'leece. Pline as a pikestaff." He chuckled softly. "Good-bye, uncle! Good riddance! They're all agoin'. Good-bye, uncle! Good-bye, Chink!"

"Chink!" exclaimed Janet.

"Oi! Not so loud!" whispered Alfred.

"I'm sorry," repented Janet. "But what did you mean by Chink?"

"There 'e goes—'e's arf-way there. Chink? Why—"

Alfred stopped abruptly. Why worry his little charge with fresh horrors? The Chink was dead. No need to revive him. Let sleeping Chinks lie!

"Good-bye, Chink? Chink's money, ain't it?" he grinned, and Janet smiled back.

Ah, but if the Chink was dead, his influence was not. It was the Chink's influence which had drawn Alfred, very illogically, to avoid the shortest route to Endlesby, and to come round by the bridge. He wanted—he hardly knew what he wanted. But the bridge fascinated him. If he passed across it once more—well, he could just make *sure*. Sure of what? Why, that the Chink was dead. But, of course, the Chink was dead! Hadn't he, Alfred, seen the fellow drop into the water? Well, then!

Just the same, one sight of the Chinaman's dead body, floating stilly in some indentation of the creek, would be immensely comforting!

He turned his head at the thought and kept it turned.

"There—he's nearly got there now," whispered Janet.

"Eh?" muttered Alfred.

"What are you staring at?" Her voice, still obediently kept low, was startled.

"I thort—nothin'," said the tramp, and turned his head back again. "Yus—e's nearly there."

"Let's go on," suggested Janet.

But Alfred was in no hurry. He had a nasty feeling that the lane behind him was unhealthy. Better wait a few minutes. There was a lot to be said for a roomy, comfortable ditch.

"Doncher want ter see yer uncle off?" he asked, anxious to have the responsibility shared. "It order do yer a bit o' good ter see the last of 'im!"

Janet did not reply. Yes, she would be glad to see the last of her uncle. But, when he had gone, who would fill his place?

They watched the little boat skim the last silver lap to the big boat, till its black silhouette became lost in the larger silhouette, like a little chicken that loses itself under its mother. For a minute or two, nothing distinguishable happened. "Expeck the big 'un'll tow the little 'un," commented Alfred. But he was wrong. He rubbed his eyes as the little boat slipped into the silver carpet again, and began moving back towards the shore. Now, it had three figures in it.

"Lummy," grunted Alfred. "Wot's that orl abart?"

"Hadn't—hadn't we better run?" asked Janet, with a child's frankness. Adults often wish to run, but rarely say so.

"Yus," answered Alfred, but abruptly changed his mind.

"Arf a mo', missie," he said, as Janet made a convulsive movement. "P'r'aps we'd better stick 'ere for a bit longer."

"But suppose—"

"No, they won't spot us," Alfred assured her. "We're orl right in our little 'ole. But, if we moves out, and tries ter git acrost that there bridge—yus, *then* they'd spot us, don't you worry."

That was only one reason why the tramp decided not to make a run for it. He was sure now he'd heard some faint sound in the lane. Of course, it *might* be a hedgehog. Or a fox. Or a rabbit. But you never knew, did you?

The little boat drew nearer. They could hear the oars moving in the locks. Now the three figures began to grow distinct. Two of them were rowing; one, Tom Thrasher, and the other a lanky man. The third figure was undoubtedly a feminine one.

"Blimy," whispered Alfred. "Well, you ain't the only gal out to-night, missie!"

"What do you think they'll do?" asked Janet, smiling faintly.

"Dunno. But I got an idea. When they gits out o' sight, we'll nip along the ditch a bit. P'r'aps we'll 'ear wot they ses."

"All right. Only we mustn't make a noise."

"Not 'arf. Like cats . . . There they goes! 'Eave 'O! A couple more like that . . . Now they've gone, missie. Come along. We gotter move afore they lands, or they'll 'ear us."

They scrambled along as far as they dared towards the concealing bend in the lane, and then made their second halt. The hedge bent inland a little, following the contour of the shore, and from their new point they could see the boat again as it passed from the sea into the stream. Thrasher was now rowing alone, as there were currents and shallows to be avoided, and he was obviously the pilot of the party.

As the stream curved towards them, the boat at one moment seemed to be making straight for the ditch in which Alfred and Janet cowered. It was a nasty moment. But another bend carried the boat away again, and the watchers breathed more freely.

Twenty yards ahead of the boat lay the bridge. It looked even more fragile by moonlight than by daylight. Beyond it, the stream wound its silvery, eddying course, till it was lost among the turns and folds of the rising land. What lay up that stream? Blissful was Alfred's ignorance!

"Look—they're stopping," whispered Janet.

"Sh!" admonished Alfred.

He was right. Talking was now a danger. If they were near enough to hear others, others were near enough to hear them.

The boat drew up at a spot near the bridge, from which the lane could be climbed to. The three figures stepped out. Then Tom Thrasher spoke.

"We've got to go careful," he said. "This isn't going to be an easy job."

"You've lost your nerve," retorted the woman, scornfully. "Do you think a girl and a lame man can stand in our way?"

"Ah, but you forget," interposed the lanky man. "He says there's others about too."

"Yes, a Chinaman who's dead, and a tramp who's locked up in a room. They'll give us a lot of trouble, won't they?"

"They've given us enough already," growled Thrasher. "They've spirited Bowles away, ay, and Mrs. Gummet, and Jaggs —"

"But they haven't spirited *you* away, Tom Thrasher! And they haven't spirited me away. And they haven't spirited Bob away, or Jasper. Or our revolvers. Why isn't Jasper here to meet us?"

"He's keeping an eye on the inn, I expect," replied Thrasher. "Well, come along. See the boat's secure, Bob, and then we'll be off."

"Am I to come along with you?" asked the lanky fellow.

Thrasher looked at the woman, and the woman hesitated.

"Might bring him along," suggested Thrasher. "Not sure we oughtn't to leave someone with the boat, though."

"You think someone may still be about?" she enquired.

"I wouldn't say that. But—you never know. It's a risk. Someone might—" An exclamation escaped him. A sound, as of a stone dropping in the middle of the water, had fallen upon their ears.

"What was that?" asked the woman sharply.

"Don't know," muttered Thrasher. "Bit of gravel off the bridge, or something, p'r'aps." They searched around vaguely for a few seconds. "But that's what I mean—I think someone ought to mind that boat."

“All right,” nodded the woman. “You’d better stay, Bob. I don’t suppose you’ll be wanted, and we can let you know, if you are.”

“Right,” said Bob, appearing not displeased with the decision. “You’ll let me know. That’s right.”

He took out a pipe and began to fill it. Without any more words, Thrasher and the woman crossed the wooden bridge, and disappeared along the lane leading to the inn. Alfred and Janet looked at each other blankly.

“That’s fair done it,” whispered the tramp.

“Oh dear!” whispered Janet.

It was a predicament. While Bob stayed by the bridge—and he showed no disposition to move away from it—they could not advance, and even if they tried to go back the way they had come, they would probably be heard. The police looked a very, very long way off.

But a solution was approaching. It was approaching slowly, stealthily, and soundlessly; and suddenly Alfred brought his hand before his mouth. Only by this means did he stifle a yell of terror.

From a dark spot behind the complacently smoking Bob, not ten feet from his back, emerged the Chinaman.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Alfred, the tramp, did not commit many distinguished acts. This was proved by the fact that he was not a distinguished person. But few people enter life and make their exit therefrom without occasional bursts of glory. The fool contributes a wise remark to a debate, the weakling hits the giant on the nose, the tippler pours a bottle of champagne down the sink, and the moralist astounds himself by kissing a girl in the dark. Astounds himself, but possibly not the girl.

And now Alfred, the tramp, distinguished himself by an exhibition of generalship utterly foreign to his composition. A burning Fact and a burning Necessity flashed through his brain. The fact was that something terrible was going to happen; the necessity, that Janet should not know that it was happening.

It did not occur to him to interfere. Why should it? He had no interest in the welfare of Bob, and he certainly had no belief in his powers against the Chinaman. His one and only interest, at that moment, was Janet, and, as he turned to her, he prayed that his method of dealing with the situation would be assisted by the Chinaman's own silence.

Tapping Janet on the arm, he whispered hoarsely:

"Wot's that out there? Quick!"

Janet turned rapidly towards the sea, in which direction the tramp was pointing. She had not, so far, seen the Chinaman.

"Where?" she whispered back, so faintly that her companion could barely catch the words.

"There," answered Alfred, no more loudly. "Doncher move,—keep yer eye fixed . . . a light, ain't it?"

Janet obeyed the tramp's injunction and strained her eyes. She could see nothing. The tramp, too, strained his eyes. And he, too, could see nothing. He did not move his eyes from the sea's horizon for a full minute, and he was so tense that it did not occur to Janet to move her eyes, either.

At the end of the minute, however, she shook her head, and Alfred realised that he could hold the situation no longer. Not only was the magnetic bridge drawing Janet's gaze back to it, but his own curiosity was now too great an agony. What had happened by the bridge during the last sixty seconds? What was happening there now?

His heart missed a beat as he veered his head slowly back again. Janet was quicker, and he heard her gasp. "Now for it," thought the tramp, and stared.

There was no one by the bridge or on the bridge. His gaze met an empty scene.

"Where's he gone?" gulped Janet.

He? It should have been "They!" But Alfred refrained from saying so. He shook his head, and placing his hand on Janet's arm, to restrain any sudden movement on her part, he allowed two more minutes to go by.

Things were happening. Oh, that was certain! But of what those things were there came no sign.

At last, motioning Janet to remain where she was, he crawled slowly out of the ditch, and passed up and down the lane. He saw nothing. From his new position, the bridge itself was hidden. Wisdom left him and he shuffled along the short distance to the lane's angle. Having gained it, he could now see the bridge from the road. He could also see a portion of the boat below. That was all.

No—there was something else. Looking up the stream, there was a sudden quivering among some bushes on the bank. He shied to the side of the lane, expecting some

development, but again his expectations did not materialise.

He could not say how long he stood there, waiting and blinking. Perhaps his brain had stopped working for a little. But suddenly he remembered Janet, and returned to her.

"Well?" she asked.

"There ain't nothin'," he replied. "That feller's gorn."

"Do you suppose—?" She shuddered.

"Fallen in the water, missie?" the tramp finished for her. She nodded. "No, 'e ain't done that. We'd 'ave 'eard a splash."

"Oh, I know what he's done," she exclaimed, all at once. "How silly of us. He's gone after the others."

"Dessay yer right," responded Alfred, though he did not in reality dare say anything of the kind. But for the Chinaman, it would have been a simple explanation. "Tha's wot 'e's bin an' done. Gorn arter the hothers. 'Corse."

Janet thought hard.

"Do you know what I think *we'd* better do?" she said. "I think *we'd* better go another way."

"'Nother way," blinked the tramp. The notion had its point. But he added, "Didn't know there was one."

"Yes, there is. I'd forgotten it. It's shorter, really, only not so easy. You keep along the river, and cross by another bridge farther up."

Alfred considered the proposition. Yes, there was quite a good deal to commend it. Too many people were abroad for one's comfort, and this other road suggested a less populous route. The only trouble was that, when he had been by the bridge just now, he had seen that little movement among the bushes. But that *might* have been imagination, after all. The shorter the road, the better. Yes, they'd take it.

With the little girl now by his side, he proceeded once more along the short stretch to the bridge. Just before the bridge, a little track led down a few yards to the bank against which the boat was moored—the boat which no longer had a guard to watch it. An idea occurred to Alfred. He was rather prolific in ideas to-night.

"What are you thinking of?" demanded Janet, as the tramp stopped.

"That there boat," replied Alfred.

Janet stared down the little track. The end of the boat was just visible, bobbing up and down gently in the tide.

"What are you thinking about the boat, then?" she asked.

Alfred rubbed his nose thoughtfully, and then decided to commit himself.

"I was wonderin' what they'd do," he said, "if they was to come back and find the oars gorn."

"Oh!" exclaimed Janet.

"Put 'em out a bit, wouldn't it?" went on the tramp. "Mike 'em lose a bit o' time."

"Yes."

"And give the p'leece a bit more time to catch 'em. See wot I mean?"

"Yes."

"Orl right, then," pronounced Alfred, meeting no opposition. "Let's do it."

"Let's," agreed Janet. "Can you get down?"

Alfred grinned suddenly,

"Fellers like me, missie, can allus git dahn," he responded, as he began to descend the track. "It's the gittin' hup we ain't so good at."

The bank was a bit slippery and muddy, but it took him only a few seconds to reach the boat. Janet climbed down after him. There were four oars; also a small sail. Alfred stared at

them contemplatively.

“Quick,” urged Janet. “We *must* be quick! Those people — ”

“Tha’s right,” nodded the tramp. “We’ll git a move hon.”

He bent over the boat, and stretched towards the oars. His feet slipped on the bank, and he found himself suddenly arched over the boat’s side, while the boat began to slip away from the shore.

“Oi!” he cried, hoarsely. “Git ’old o’ me!”

Two small arms wound themselves round his legs. There was an agonising moment, while the fate of the Universe hung in the balance. Then, to Alfred’s relief, as Janet pulled, the boat slowly and unwillingly returned to the bank.

“Oh, do be careful!” gasped Janet’s voice, behind him.

“I ain’t no sailor, that’s a fack,” muttered Alfred. “Lummy, now I knows wot a Christmas cracker feels like!”

He rose to a normal position, steadied himself, and began all over again. This time, aided by experience and Janet, he achieved his object. The four oars, and also the sail, were safely brought on to the bank.

“Wot’ll we do with ’em?” he asked.

“Hide them,” answered Janet.

“Ah, that’s the ticket,” said the tramp. “You ’op up, missie, and find a plice, while I bring ’em inter the road, see?”

“All right,” she replied, and disappeared.

Both did their work quickly. By the time Alfred had brought the oars and the sail up to the road, Janet had completed her search, and was back again.

“There’s heaps of places,” she exclaimed. “I think we could hide them easily in that wood over there.”

“Lead hon,” muttered Alfred.

The wood was a tangled maze of trees and undergrowth. As Janet had said, there were heaps of places, and the place they selected was at the foot of an old oak, the lower portion of which was almost entirely obliterated by creepers and weeds. In a very short space of time, the oars and the sail were also obliterated.

“I reckon that’s a good bit o’ work,” commented Alfred, as they emerged from the wood. “And now we’d better ’urry our stumps.”

“Yes, come on,” answered Janet, breathless from her own exertions. “Oh, dear, I wonder if we can do any good!”

“We’re doin’ lots of good,” retorted the tramp, as they hastened along a small track that led upstream. “We orter git medals, you an’ me, I reckon.”

“Do you think they’d *really* use their pistols?” asked Janet.

“’Corse not,” said the tramp, unconvincingly. “Jest their tork, I reckon.” He chuckled. “Like ter see their fices, I would, when they gits back ter the boat, and no oars, and the p’leece be’ind ’em with the ’andcuffs!”

Then the tramp’s face grew solemn again. They were reaching the clump of foliage in which, unless his eyes had played a trick on him, he had seen a movement when he had first looked up the river from the bridge. His pace slackened, and Janet glanced at him anxiously.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Nothin’,” he replied, “On’y, we gotter be careful. Tha’s right, ain’t it?”

“Yes. But—you looked so funny!”

“Did I? Well, I was born that way.” They were passing the bushes. The tramp grinned, and increased his pace again.

“I like you,” said Janet, suddenly.

“G’arn!” retorted the tramp, confused by the compliment. “Come ter that, missie, *you’re* a bit of orl right.” Unused to sentiment, he hastily changed the topic. “’Ow fur to this hother bridge is it?”

“Not very far. Oh dear! Isn’t this path narrow? Be careful not to trip, won’t you?”

“Yus. We orter be ’igh steppers.” The foliage was closing in upon them. “’Allo! Wot’s that?”

He pointed to an old black wooden structure on their right, and a little way from their path. Janet shook her head. Telling her to keep on, the tramp swerved aside, mumbling that he would “jest ’ave a squint at it.”

Obviously, it was many a day since the barn-like structure had seen active service. It was a relic of past utility. But somehow or other it was still holding together, and the wooden door had a fairly stout appearance.

Moonlight streamed through its one window, which was half boarded up. On the ground near by, almost concealed in the long grasses, lay a bottomless pail. The tramp pulled the pail out of its bower of greenery, placed it inverted under the window, stood up perilously on the rim, and peered in at the window.

The next moment, he reeled, and fell on his back, bellowing. Janet turned, and came racing to his side.

“Oh! What’s happened?” she cried.

The tramp stared up at her glassily. Then he sat up suddenly, and Janet found him grinning at her.

“Wot’s ’appened?” he shouted. “Why, I’ve got the bloomin’ D.T.’s.”

And, caring not who should hear him, he flung loud defiant laughter through the valley.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Had Alfred been an ordinary tramp, he would have ceased from that moment to take interest in the affairs of anybody but himself. He would have laughed himself to madness, or performed that undignified but useful thing known as “a bunk.” It has been said, however, and also demonstrated, that Alfred did not always respond to orthodox rules, and to this fact Janet may well have owed her own reason.

For, after watching the tramp for a few seconds in gravest concern, wondering whether he were developing into some new terror of the night, she glanced at the barn and suddenly ran towards the window. And at this moment Alfred very abruptly ceased his hysterics, and jumped to his feet.

“Come away from there!” he cried. His voice arrested her, and she hesitated, in the act of re-adjusting the pail. “Come away!”

“But—?” began Janet.

“I tell yer, ye’re to come away,” shouted Alfred, and, lest she should disobey him, he stumbled forward and seized her by the arm.

“What did—you see—in there?” gasped Janet, as the tramp began to lead her resolutely back to the path.

“Nothin’,” answered Alfred. “Leastways—nothin’!”

The situation proved too much for Janet. She started to cry.

“All right, I’ll tell yer,” said Alfred desperately, though he would not really have told her for a thousand pennies—which, to him, possibly meant more than a thousand pounds to you. “It’s jest as I sed. Missie—I drinks too much.”

“You don’t seem to me that kind,” gulped Janet.

Unconsciously, Alfred emulated David Garrick.

“Not that kind?” he answered. “I tell yer, when I gits goin’, there’s nothing’ll stop me. Tha’s a fack. In some o’ the pubs I’m known as Awful Alfred, ’cos I drinks more’n any hother feller as hever lived, see, and—sees things. And wot knocked me over just now, missie, was becos’ I saw things.” That was true.

“But what did you see, please?”

“I sed I’d tell yer, and I will,” responded Alfred, walking quickly, and forcing Janet to do the same. “Ipperpottemus. On ’is ’ead. And on ’is four feet was four monkeys, dancin’ the ’orn-pipe.” He glanced at her sideways. “My Gawd, wouldn’t that knock *you* hover?”

Janet was silent. Her mind was too confused to answer, and Alfred’s mind was too confused to continue. If only he *had* seen an inverted hippopotamus!

He pretended to himself that he had. But the device would not work. What he actually had seen through that half-boarded window, in the shaft of yellow moonlight, was too vivid to be wiped out, and all he could do was to fall back upon his original device of admitting the circumstance, and attributing it to a deranged condition of his mind.

And, so staggering was this last spectacle he had beheld, he did regain a large measure of his early scepticism as he walked through the valley with his small companion. Watching him covertly, Janet herself was conscious of the change. A new look—new to her—was establishing itself in the tramp’s eye, and he began to walk almost jauntily. Once, he put his hand out for no apparent reason but to touch her shoulder. Several times, he faintly chuckled. She hoped he would not break out into hysterics again.

“Here’s the bridge,” she said, suddenly.

“Ah,” replied the tramp. “So that’s a bridge?”

He appeared to be tolerantly accepting some schoolboy's definition.

"Yes," went on Janet, finding words a relief from the preceding silence. "We turn to the right soon after we get over. Straight on's to the inn, but Endlesby's to the right."

"Endlesby," repeated the tramp, apathetically.

"Yes—the police, you know."

"That's right," Alfred reassured her. "The p'leece. And 'corse—they'll b'leeve orl the things we tell 'em!"

"Why won't they?" asked Janet.

"Ah," murmured the tramp. He alone knew that. They wouldn't believe the things because the things weren't true. The police themselves weren't true. Nor was Janet true. Nor was he true. Nor . . .

They crossed the bridge. The track on the other side ran vaguely for twenty yards, then widened, and became a little lane. Another twenty yards, and the lane widened into a triangular space, beyond which the lane continued on its way, while to the right ran another lane.

"That's to Endlesby," said Janet, indicating the lane on the right. "The one straight on's to the inn."

"Ah," replied the tramp; and paused.

Of course, nothing of this was real, but even a dream has its obligations. A dream runaway couple were at the inn. The dream runaway couple were in danger. Pistols and that. But there was also a dream little girl to think of. He'd like to do the right thing by her before he woke up. Pity to walk her into danger. And then, there was that nightmare behind him . . .

"I know what you're thinking," exclaimed the dream child, suddenly.

"What?" replied Alfred.

"You don't know which you ought to do. If you think you could help them at the inn, p'r'aps you'd better."

"Lot o' good I'd be," mused Alfred, and then rounded on her. "Silly talk, that! Wot'd you do, missie?"

"I'd go for the police."

"Wot! Alone?"

"Yes. You see, someone must. P'r'aps we'd better both go. Only, I just thought —"

"Yus, I see," nodded Alfred. "Plucked 'un, that's wot I said about you all along. Plucked 'un." He gazed up the lane that led to the inn. "Dunno wot I could do there. 'Corse, I might 'it some'un —"

He stopped abruptly. A figure came leaping into the triangular space.

"Lummy," murmured Alfred. "Some'un's 'atchin' 'em."

The figure had leapt from the lane leading to Endlesby. It paused for an instant only. It was like an insect that suddenly alights on a leaf, and is gone the next moment; or a grasshopper that suddenly hops into your vision, and then hops out again. Alfred winked, and the figure vanished.

Janet gasped; the tramp however was quite calm.

"That's a noo way o' doin' it," he observed placidly. "I ain't seed one o' them afore."

The show was not over. Another figure came bounding out of the lane, a well-built, lithe figure, but panting now from excessive exertion. He seized the tramp, and shook him fiercely.

"Oi, oi!" objected the tramp.

"Got you!" cried his captor, fiercely. "And, by God, if you haven't given me back my ruby in a brace of shakes, I'll squeeze —"

Two small fists thumped madly on his back. He broke off, turned sharply, still holding the tramp, stared at Janet, and then swung back to stare at the tramp.

"Say, where did you two leap from?" he demanded.

"We ain't lep' at all," retorted Alfred. "You was the one that lep'."

"Have you seen anyone else around here?" demanded the other, quickly. His accent stamped him as an Australian.

"Yus, we 'ave."

"Ah!" cried the Australian. "Which way did he go?"

"Dunno," said the tramp. "Up in the air, I think."

The Australian emitted a savage exclamation.

"You fool!" he shouted. "Can't you see this isn't a joke? I must catch him—he's got something of mine—stolen it—"

"Yus, a ruby," nodded Alfred. "Well, that bloke *'asn't* got it."

"Hell fire!" swore the Australian. "What do *you* know about it?"

"Clean up yer langwidge, and p'r'aps I'll tell yer," answered Alfred. "There's a lidy present."

"Well, well," barked the Australian, attempting to restrain himself. "Go on, go on!"

"You go hon fust," suggested Alfred. "Tell us 'oo yer are. Then I'll tell you where your blinkin' ruby is."

The Australian took out a pocket handkerchief, wiped his streaming forehead, and looked at the tramp hard. Removing his eyes from the tramp, he next turned his attention to Janet, and apparently he was impressed by the gravity of her countenance.

"Is this fellow having a game with me?" he asked Janet, jerking his head towards Alfred.

"No, sir, I'm sure he isn't," replied Janet.

"Very well." He turned back to the tramp. "I don't suppose you want a three volume novel, and I'm not going to give you one. But here's the facts. A ruby worth a lot—was stolen from me yesterday not three miles from here. Well, I'm searching for that man, and so are the police, but the police don't work overtime in your country, and it was left to me to find my man. I recognised him this evening, a mile outside Endlesby, and we've been playing hide and seek for hours. Then, just as I think I'm laying hands on him, I bump into you—and you have the coolness to tell me you know where my ruby is. Say, if that's true."

"'Ow do I know *you're* givin' me the truth?" asked the tramp.

"What the devil is it to you, if I am or if I'm not?" retorted the Australian, growing warm again. "Say, is it *your* ruby, anyway? If you know anything, shoot it up, or I'll—" He cooled down, suddenly and diplomatically, and smiled. "Ah, I see. I've got a sort of a thick skull, haven't I? Information's worth its price. Well, help me to get my ruby back, and I'm good for a twenty pound note."

"That settles it," thought Alfred. "This *is* a dream!"

He rubbed his nose, cleared his throat, and spat.

"Well, it's like this, see," he said, "and I ain't givin' you no three volume novel, neither. There's a inn not fur from 'ere. Green Dragon. Me and some folks 'appens to be in the inn tergether—never mind 'ows and wherefores—and along comes a blind man's dawg. Blind man's dawg." Alfred paused. Story-telling wasn't much in his line, and he hardly knew what *had* happened, now he came to think of it! "Well, an'ow," he resumed, "the ruby was in that there dawg's tin. Blind man must 'ave stole it—"

"My rascal's accomplice, perhaps!" interposed the Australian, eagerly.

"If yer like. An'ow, there's the stone, as I ses. Orl right." The tramp paused again. What had happened next? "Well, an'ow, there it was. Oh, yes. Arter that, along comes a chap in the night—arter lots of hother things 'ad 'appened—any amount of 'em—dragons changin' the colour of their eyes, and then an old woman—oh, my Gawd!—eh? Wot was I saying! Wot — —"

"Keep to it, keep to it," exclaimed the Australian, his eyes popping. "You said someone came in the night—"

"Oh, yus. So 'e did. But I don't know wot 'appened, exackly. 'E 'it me abart—oh yus! And then, see, I was drunk. That's right. Drunk. I'm drunk now. So, 'corse, I can't say wot 'appened. On'y I don't think 'e got it, 'cos now they've all gorn back agin to try and git it again—they and the gal from the boat—"

"Girl from the boat!" interrupted the Australian. "What the—"

"Yus—gal from the boat, see—and, well, any'ow, that's where they are now—"

"What! Now? *Now?*" shouted the Australian. "Say, you can't tell a yarn for nuts, but I get some of your meaning, just the same. Come along. I guess we'll go to your Green Dragon together. And, if you stick to me, I'll raise that twenty pound note to thirty."

Alfred hesitated. He'd employed so much initiative during the past few hours that he felt drained, and it would be rather pleasant to find himself under orders again. This Australian looked like a useful fellow. Anyway, he would be a help to the honeymoon couple. And, of course, thirty pounds was always thirty pounds, even in a dream . . .

"Yus, but wot about the police?" he exclaimed, suddenly.

"You go, you go," cried Janet. "It's best, isn't it? That'll be two of you to help them, you see."

"Jest wot I thort," nodded Alfred. "But wot about you, missie?"

"Me? Oh, I'll be all right," she responded. "I'll go for the police."

And the next moment she had turned, and was hurrying along the lane to Endlesby.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

"Hey! Wait a minute!" cried the Australian.

He was too late, however. Janet had disappeared, like a pretty moth flitting into a shadow from the moonlight. He hesitated, and regarded the tramp with something of his original suspicion.

"Yus, I've a nice fice, 'aven't I?" observed the tramp. "'Corse, if I'd 'ave knowed you was comin', I'd 'ave shaved."

"Oh, shut up," growled the Australian. "I'm not too sure about all this."

"Abart orl wot?"

"Your story. Say—have you got a pretty vivid imagination?"

"Yus. I can 'majin' hannything."

"So it seems. Of all the mad yarns I ever heard . . . You've been dreaming, my lad!"

"'Corse I 'ave. I ain't waked hup yet." He dropped his bantering tone, and grew momentarily solemn. "That ain't quite right, guv'nor. I keeps on wakin' hup, and then in walks another dream. Remember that little gal wot uster be 'ere?"

"Used to be here? What are you talking about? Do you mean that child who's just run off?"

"Now, *she* was a nice 'un. But, 'course, I'll never see 'er again. Then there was that fisher bloke, wot locked me in 'is room. 'E was a wrong 'un." The Australian, about to cut the tramp's meandering short, suddenly changed his policy, and studied him intently. This odd creature was mad, obviously, but illuminating truths can be gleaned even from a madman's ravings, if only one can piece them together. "Yus, 'e was a wrong 'un. But, 'course, we won't see 'im agin. Then there's hother dreams I've had I ain't goin' ter tork about. Pertick'ler—one." He paused, and shuddered. "'Corse, it's funny, if yer looks at it right." He grinned. "Yus. But I ain't goin' ter drink no more, that's a fack. When I comes out o' this little boat, guv'nor, it's lemonade for me till the end o' me lucky." He advanced to the Australian, who continued to watch him narrowly, and touched him. "*You* ain't sich a bad 'un. Seem sort o' steady, like. But 'corse, in a minit, I expeck *you'll* be poppin' orf. Bing! Blink. Woof! Orf pops one, and in pops another."

The Australian decided that he had had enough.

"Come, let's get to this inn," he exclaimed, impatiently, "it's along that lane, you say?"

"Ah, the inn," murmured Alfred. "The inn o' the changin' eye!"

The Australian swore under his breath. He was torn between the necessities of hurrying and of caution. At one moment, he was rushing along that lane, at another, he was for creeping up to it, forewarned and forearmed.

"Tell me about that changing eye," he barked. "Quick! What the devil's it all about?"

"Fust, it was yellor, see," said the tramp. "That was when I fust goes to the place, and can't git in. Then, when I goes again, it's red —"

"It? It?" exclaimed the Australian. "What? Where?"

"The eye of the green dragon on the sign, as I'm tellin' yer," answered Alfred. "Third time — he counted on his fingers — third time, when I goes with the 'oneymoon couple —"

"God!" thought the Australian. "Honeymoon couple? who are they?" But he said nothing.

"—it was yellor again. Orl right. But then, fourth time, when the old 'ag pops out o' the cupboard, then blimy if it ain't red agin. Get me? Orl right. Fifth time, when I leaves the inn this mornin', I sees it's yellor agin. 'Arf a mo' . . . Was it?" He closed his own eyes

thoughtfully, and opened them again. "Yus, I'm sure it was. It was yellor when I went orf this mornin', but I was so giddy I forgot to be surprised."

"Well, if it was yellow then, it will be yellow now," retorted the Australian. "As it was the *first* time you saw it. And as I'll wager it's been ever since. It's the colour of your eyes keep on changing, my son, and that's your trouble. You take my advice, and stick to your resolution to keep off the drink. There's some excuse for drinking in hot countries—the country I come from, and other countries I've been to—but there's no excuse *here*. Drink *hatches* things."

"Yus. It's 'atched you."

"It'll hatch something else, if you're not careful," said the Australian, grimly. "Now, step lively. No more talking. How far is the inn from here?"

"Dunno. But thort you sed there wasn't to be no more talkin'?"

"Quite right. My mistake. Heave along. And— —"

He stepped abruptly. A revolver shot cracked through the stillness of the night.

"There, that's wot I means, guv'nor," complained the tramp. "Can't git away from it."

The Australian stifled an exclamation.

"What was that?" he whispered.

"'En laying an egg," retorted Alfred.

"Idiot!"

"If yer like."

"Eh!"

They listened. The shot was not repeated. Alfred resumed.

"Wot we wants," he mused, to himself, "is a crisis. Then yer wakes up proper. I thort I'd got one when I looks in at that there winder, and sees—lummy, if that didn't wake me up, wot *will*? Look 'ere, guv'nor, I got an idea. 'Ere, come back!" The Australian was beginning to advance cautiously along the lane. "'Ere! I wancher. Tike out a knife, will yer, and start ter cut me hopen, see? Get me? It's a *crisis* I wants. That'd wake me . . ."

The Australian turned swiftly, and was at his side.

"That's right, that's right!" jabbered Alfred, as the Australian seized his shoulders.

"By heaven, I *will* cut you open, if you don't keep quiet and stop babbling— —"

"Well, I'm *makin'* yer to— —"

"Be quiet." Alfred felt himself violently shaken. He closed his eyes, in an orgy of hope, but when he opened them again, the Australian was still there. "I've had enough of your nonsense! You've not got me right! I reckon I can show you another side, if I want to. Do you hear?"

It was disappointing. The Australian was certainly becoming contorted, like nearly all the other characters in this nightmare, following the usual principle of beginning well and ending badly. Phantoms are merely normal things pulled temporarily out of shape. But, again, Alfred discovered that he was not being helped. The happy vanishing of the phantoms, for which he longed, was not occurring. He was gaining nothing by being shaken, and, in that case, he resented it.

"'Ands orf!" he muttered.

"Certainly—if you'll behave yourself!"

"G'arn! Oo *is* be'avin' *itself*? 'It me, or let go!"

The Australian let go, with a smothered oath, and turned back to the lane.

"You'd better stay where you are," said the Australian.

"Well, I ain't *goin'* to, see?" answered Alfred, beginning to follow him. "I'm goin' to get a crisis. Yus, and if I don't git one quick, I'll *make* one. 'Ow'd yer all like that?"

The procession proceeded—the procession of two. At first, the front half was separated from the back half by some ten yards, but gradually the gap lessened, as the front half

slackened speed and went more warily. Just as the tramp was drawing up alongside, the Australian stopped, and listened.

"I can hear something," he whispered.

It was an inn-sign, creaking, but the Australian did not immediately recognise the sound.

"What is it?" he muttered.

"'Arry Lauder," suggested the tramp.

The procession proceeded with caution. Suddenly the lane wriggled and widened, and the inn came into view.

They had approached the inn from the northern side, and were separated from it by a gate. The gate opened into an end of the inn yard, and at the farther end was the lane by which the tramp had first made the inn's acquaintance. Coming upon the inn from that quarter, the gate had appeared to mark the terminus of progress, giving no indication to the stranger of the concealed pathway beyond it—a pathway that broke up into a confusing network of tracks that could take one to Endlesby, or to Trymton, by either of the two wooden bridges.

From this new angle, the tramp noted another difference in the inn. It was no longer the dead thing it had once been. The front door was closed, but light glowed on both floors. It glimmered faintly from two adjacent windows almost above them, and brightly from the lower parlour window. The tramp noted that the window of the bedroom near the creaking sign was not illuminated.

The moonlight, however, told him what he was curious to know. The green dragon's eye was still yellow.

"There," he muttered, to his companion. "Yaller. Wot did I say?"

The Australian nodded. He was considering the position. Suddenly he pointed to the parlour window.

"Glass is broken," he whispered.

"Wot abart 'avin' a peep in?" proposed Alfred.

But the Australian put his hand quickly on his shoulder. He could hear voices—the sound of them, but not the words—and he was in no hurry. From their position by the gate, they could easily see if anybody left. Then the Australian could ask questions.

"Ain't yer goin' in?" enquired the tramp.

"Not yet," replied the Australian, and suddenly softened towards the tramp. After all, better make a friend of the fellow. "You and I are sticking together, aren't we?" he said. "Sorry if I was rough just now."

"Oh, one can forgit a little thing like that," observed the tramp, "for thirty pahnd!"

"That's right, my son. I might even make it thirty-five."

Alfred regarded him quizzically. "S'pose the blinkin' thing's *really* your'n?"

An odd look flashed into the Australian's eyes for an instant.

"Don't worry about *that*," he said. "I'm on the right side of the law."

"And, look 'ere," went on the tramp, "I on'y 'elp you, if you 'elp them 'oneymooners in there."

"I take it, they are also on the right side of the law?" asked the Australian.

"'Corse!"

"Then they've nothing to fear from me. Now, then—steady! What's up?"

"Gawd!" spluttered the tramp. "*Look at the eye!*"

The Australian glanced up sharply. Then he stared. The yellow eye was winking.

"Oi! This'll wake me," muttered Alfred.

"Good heavens!" gasped the Australian.

The dragon had stopped winking, and its eye was now red.

"'Corse," dithered Alfred. "A feller can always run."

But, no, that wouldn't be any good. When you ran, things only started running after you. And then you tripped, or found your legs couldn't move . . .

The Australian had leapt through the gate, and was swiftly crossing the yard.

"Oi!" gurgled Alfred, stumbling after him. "'Arf a mo', 'arf a mo'."

The crisis was beckoning to him. He must plunge into it, to gain his escape. He'd show them—he'd show them. Oi!

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

When the artist came bounding down the staircase with the news that two men were crossing the yard outside, the atmosphere in the inn parlour underwent an instant change. The aggressors, as they drank in this unwelcome development, presented startled faces, and were no longer assured of themselves. They had received a rude shock.

Jim swiftly realised this, and, glancing round the room, he sought desperately for means by which he could take advantage of the situation, and gain the upper hand. He felt like a man who had been abruptly and unexpectedly unbound. But, unfortunately, the girl's wits were as quick as his, and the revolver which had been lowered for an instant was quickly raised again.

"Don't move," she said, quietly. "It's dangerous."

"Oh, well," muttered Jim. "What's it matter, after all? You're cornered anyway, now, aren't you?"

"You think so?" She turned to her brother, who was sliding round the wall towards the door. "What are you going to do?"

The artist did not reply immediately. He had suddenly paused, on the spot by the door where the blood-stain was. A memory of this pause came to Jim afterwards, although at the time it did not seem to bear any special significance.

"I'm going to bolt the door," replied the artist, as he moved on again.

"And then?"

"Wait."

The girl nodded. "All the same, Jasper," she said, in a low voice, "we must have some plan. It may be wise to put our revolvers away for a little."

A knock came on the door. The artist hesitated.

"Put your revolvers away, I say," whispered the girl. "But have them ready."

"Who's there?" called the artist, and then in a whisper, added,

"Yes, but what about *them*?"

He jerked his head towards Jim and Mr. Abingdon, while a voice outside cried,

"Let us in!"

"You two can keep them covered through your pockets," responded the girl. "I'll do the talking."

"Damn," thought Jim.

"Let us in!" repeated the voice outside. "If you don't —"

"You don't expect us to open the door to strangers at this time of night," interposed the girl, raising her voice with feigned indignation. "What's the matter?"

"Open the door, and you'll hear."

"I won't open the door. This inn's closed. Go away."

"You won't —"

"Not until I know who you are, anyway."

There was a short pause. Then the voice outside said, more quietly,

"We heard a shot."

"Ah, so did we," responded the girl, quickly, "and that's why I'm not opening the door to strangers. It doesn't seem any too healthy out there. Go away, I tell you."

A new voice answered her.

"Well, we aren't goin' away, see?" it bawled. "We're the p'leece."

"Alfred!" thought Jim, and his heart gave a bound. "God bless him!"

"Yus, we're the p'leece," reiterated the tramp. "Fifty on us, so you ain't got no charnst. Open this 'ere door!"

The girl smiled faintly. So did the artist. But Jim's heart grew heavy again. He was quite certain that, had there been fifty policemen outside, or even one, the tramp would not have been allowed to act as spokesman.

"He's got hold of somebody, though," reflected Jim. "I wonder who it is?"

The others were wondering the same thing, but before any further questions could be asked the ill-used parlour window received further rough treatment, and a head appeared. The owner of the head surveyed the room for a second, and then remarked,

"Of course, I'll come through the window, if you like, but you'll find me in a better temper if I come through the door. Which'll it be?"

The answer came from an unexpected quarter.

"Let him in, let him in!" cried Mr. Abingdon. "You're cornered — —"

He stopped suddenly. Joe Thrasher's pocket became thoroughly ominous. But Mr. Abingdon's contribution to the debate had served some purpose.

"Ah, so you're not *all* against having me in," smiled the face at the window.

"We have one old lunatic amongst us, if that's what you mean," retorted the girl.

"Quite a wise old lunatic, I'm thinking. Seems to me the balance of power is changing, my fine lady. Say, are you going to open that door, or aren't you? I can be quite ugly when I choose."

"You need not assure me of that," she answered. "If we open the door, how many enter?"

"My friend informed you," laughed the Australian.

"That is why I hesitate. I'm afraid we couldn't accommodate fifty."

Then the girl did a bold thing. She walked up to the window, as though no menace existed there, and looked out. The Australian, thrown a little off his balance by her audacity, drew aside instinctively as she approached, allowing her thereby to achieve her object of scanning the yard outside.

Returning from the window, she made a sign to her brother.

"Open it?" he queried.

"Yes, there are only the two of them," she answered. "We'd better deal with them in here." The Australian was returning now to the door; dropping her voice she addressed Tom Thrasher, "If that old man interferes again, shoot him."

"Am I also to be shot?" demanded Jim, angrily.

"You'll neither of you be shot," she said, "because you will both think of the girl upstairs."

"Ah, my dear sister, I always did admire you," murmured the artist, as he opened the door. "A true Napoleon!"

The door swung wide, and the Australian and the tramp entered. The Australian did not waste any time in getting to business. He drew out a useful-looking revolver, and pointed it straight at the breast of the girl.

"Steady!" cried Jim, involuntarily.

"Thanks, but don't worry," answered the girl. "It won't go off."

"Don't be too sure of that," said the Australian. "When I said I could be ugly, I meant it."

"Perhaps we can be ugly, too," suggested the artist, but Jim noticed that he was perspiring slightly.

"I don't doubt it for a moment," retorted the Australian. "Only I happen to have my own little piece of ugliness handiest, and the slightest movement from any of you will put it in action."

"Let's cut the talk then, and get to the action," proposed the girl. "What have you come here for, breaking into an inn at this time of night?"

"Oh, say, drop that!" exclaimed the Australian. "It doesn't go down with me. I know a bit about you."

"What do you know?"

"Well, I'll tell you in a minute. But, first, I'll tell you something about myself, shall I? Now, then, you over in the corner there, don't fidget! Your lady will be safe so long as you keep still."

"Yes, for God's sake, keep still!" said Mr. Abingdon.

"You see, you think you've got it all your own way," pursued the Australian, "but you haven't. As I reckon it out, it's four to three—and one of the three a girl—with the first trick to me."

"I say, don't be too sure that it's four to three," interposed Jim, ignoring the personal risk entailed by his interruption. "I've no cause to love the lady you're covering, but, dash it all, a fellow's human, and if by chance you shot her, there's no knowing how I'd act."

"Nor me, neither," chimed in Alfred, suddenly shoving himself forward. "Look 'ere, I ain't goin' ter stand much more o' this, that I ain't —"

"Whoa, there!" frowned the Australian.

"G'arn! I've 'ad enuff. I wanten go 'ome. Wot are yer all standin' round for, like a lot o' bloomin' waxworks. That ain't no good! Sittin' on a bomb don't git yer no further. Let it bust —"

"Cool down a bit, Alfred," murmured Jim. "Things'll 'bust' in a minute, without your help!"

"Will they?" retorted Alfred, and stared round the room. "That's wot I'm wonderin'. If they don't, I will!" He swung round suddenly, and pointed an indignant finger at Thrasher. "You, hover there! Cheerful sort o' bloke, ain't yer? If I thort you was real, arter all you've done ter me, I'd—I'd 'it yer!" He faced the artist. Possibly he was allowed to run on because, after all, he was the most innocuous member of the company, and no one was free to devote physical attention to him. But, even apart from these considerations, Alfred was certainly becoming wound up. "Yus, and I'd 'it you, too," he exclaimed, to the artist. "But you ain't real. None of yer ain't real! No more'n wot I sees in the barn ain't real. No more'n the Chink ain't real. So, for Gawd's sake, 'url yerselves about and hexplode, the lot of yer —"

At the mention of the Chinaman, the Australian looked at Jim quickly.

"Chinaman!" he cried. "What the devil —"

A new twist was given to the situation. Everybody was conscious of it. For the first time, the Australian showed signs of wavering.

"What's this about a Chinaman?" he exclaimed, harshly. "You didn't mention him to me before?"

"Well, one can't remember *heverythink*," remarked Alfred, with fine scorn. "'E's somewhere abart 'ere, don't *you* —"

"No, he's not," jerked the artist, involuntarily.

"He's —"

Then, suddenly, the girl took command. With a swift, warning glance at her brother, she prevented him from finishing his sentence, and Jim, watching her, realised the stroke of genius. With quick intuition, the girl had realised, as Jim had himself, that the Chinaman weakened the Australian's position—how, was as yet unknown—and that it would be a tactical mistake to let the Australian think the Chinaman was dead. Of course, reflected Jim, the girl thought the Chinaman was dead. Her brother would have told her. But—was he dead? Jim had reason for doubt on the subject. The situation, he considered, was piquant.

He would have considered it more piquant had he known that the Chinaman was, at that moment, actually in the place—awaiting his moment in Bedroom No. 5.

“We’re wasting time,” cried the girl, “and I don’t much like standing here with a revolver pointing at my chest. You were going to tell us something about yourself, Mr. Colonial. Let’s hear it!”

She spoke sharply, and the Australian snapped his teeth.

“I can tell you that something in a very few sentences,” he flung back. “A pretty valuable stone of mine was stolen from me yesterday outside a hotel in Endlesby. It was passed on to some rascally blind man—you see, I’m wise—and now it’s been passed on to you. Give me my ruby back, and that’ll end it. But make a fuss, and there’ll be trouble.”

“How do you know the ruby’s here?” asked the girl.

“I know quite enough to bark on, my pretty lady!”

“Well, we’ll suppose it *is* here. How do you propose to get it?”

“Why, this way,” answered the Australian, and fired.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The shot was so sudden and unexpected, that, for a full second, no one moved. Not even the girl. Then, as the Australian laughed and levelled his smoking revolver again, the true position dawned, and dazed minds leapt into activity.

The Australian had fired wide on purpose. The smashed picture on the wall was merely his warning.

"Beginning to understand each other now, aren't we?" he observed. "I don't do that twice."

The girl's cheeks had paled, but she looked back at him unflinchingly, and her eyes were fire.

"You damned fool," she said.

"Oh! A fool, am I?"

"Yes. Suppose you *had* killed me? Do you think you would be alive yourself at this moment?"

Her quiet passion and her logic had their effect. The Australian glanced round the room.

"You're armed, too, then?"

"Naturally."

"I see. Pockets. But I don't notice I'm covered at this moment."

"You would be, if you shot me."

"Yes, but I *haven't* shot you," retorted the Australian. "Maybe I'm not such a poor boob as you think. You seem to be the leader of this show, and I've just given you an idea of what will happen to the leader if I don't get my way. If you're killed first, you'll be past knowing whether I'm killed afterwards."

"I say, aren't you a bit of a brute, you know?" suggested Jim.

"I don't happen to be in the company of gentle people, that's all," responded the Australian. "Now then, where's my ruby?"

"Yours?" queried the girl.

"Yes, mine, of course."

"Suppose you prove it's yours."

"Say, that's amusing, that is. If somebody picks my pocket of a shilling, have I got to prove how I earned the shilling before I ask the pickpocket to return it to me?"

The girl reflected for a moment. Then, with a faint smile, she said, "Yes, but suppose the pickpocket were a Chinaman?"

"Bah!" exclaimed the Australian. "I don't believe that story!"

"You mean, you don't *want* to believe it."

"I tell you, you can't frighten me with silly fairy tales—"

"Frighten you?" interposed the girl, seizing on the word. "Why should a Chinaman frighten you?"

The artist played up to her.

"The Chinaman succeeded in frightening *me*," he murmured, watching the Australian's face closely. "A nasty little chap. Ugh! And he'd be after that ruby like a dart if we chose to put him on to it."

The Australian frowned uneasily.

"Where is he now?" he demanded.

"Ah, then you admit his existence," purred the artist.

"Never mind what I admit. Where is he now?" cried the Australian.

"We give information in exchange for information," replied the girl. "We can tell you the two things you most want to know at this moment—where the Chinaman is, and where the ruby is. What do we get out of it?"

The Australian did not answer at once. A new turn seemed to have been given to his thoughts. While never relinquishing his attention from his revolver, he glanced again at the faces round the room, studying them swiftly, and sizing them up. Finally, his gaze rested on Jim, whom he addressed.

"I don't know where you stand in all this," he said, "but you look a pretty truthful sort of fellow. I've got something interesting to say; a sort of a proposal, may be. But first, let me hear *your* voice. What do *you* say about this Chinaman?"

Jim hesitated. Would he be advancing matters if he spoke? He saw the girl looking at him, and he knew that she was sending him a silent message. He was not to say that the Chinaman was dead. Well, why shouldn't he? Why should he assist this gang? He swore at himself for his hesitation, not realising that it was due to two very logical causes and one very human one.

The logical causes were his scepticism concerning the Australian's good faith, and the fact that, to the best of his belief, the Chinaman was *not* dead. The human cause was his disturbing admiration for the girl. She was a common thief, seeking to excuse her point of view by the thinnest logic—but she had wonderful pluck!

"What do I say?" answered Jim. "I don't really see why I should say anything. A Chinaman has certainly been hanging around here all day, if that's of any use to you."

"Ah! And have you gathered *why*?" demanded the Australian.

"Well, I rather gather he wants a ruby," replied Jim, dryly.

"H'm, quite a common complaint, isn't it?" added the artist. "Almost an epidemic, in fact. And oddly, I happen to be the only doctor in the whole of this wide, wide world who can put his finger on the little germ. So—what about the proposition?"

The Australian nodded.

"Right. Here it is. Get rid of that Chinaman, and we'll go fifty-fifty on the value of the stone."

This was too much for Jim. He turned on the Australian with an exclamation of disgust.

"By Jove!" he cried, indignantly. "Do you mean to say you're open to deal with thieves?"

"He may be a thief himself," suggested the girl, with a scornful twist to her lips.

"Yes, I'll wager he is! He's as bad as the rest of you—"

"Hey! Steady, there!" interposed the Australian. "Seems to me you're talking too much."

"If I had one of your confounded revolvers, I'd do a bit more than talking—"

"That's right, guv'nor," encouraged the tramp, waking out of his depression.

"Why, confound it," went on Jim, his heat rising, "what you're proposing now is absolute murder—!"

"That's right," agreed the tramp again. "Wot abart *hus* doin' a bit o' murderin'?"

"Our good-looking friend—" began the artist.

"I ain't yer friend," interposed Alfred.

"You did not note the adjective, or you would have understood that I was not referring to yourself," said the artist. "Our good-looking friend, backed by our unshorn one, is a true champion of lost causes, or of causes which he imagines to be lost. When my sister is threatened, he flies to protect her. When the Chinaman is threatened, he flies to protect *him*. I wonder, if I were threatened, how he would react?"

"For two pins," declared Alfred, "I'd stick one of 'em in your fat tummy, guv'nor, ter see 'ow *you'd* re-hact!"

The girl stamped her foot.

"Can't someone lock that fool away?" she demanded.

"Ah, who's to do it?" murmured the artist, looking at the Australian. "We seem to be in a sort of deadlock. If I move, St. George over there will be free to spring. If Thrasher moves, the old gentleman will be at large. And if you move, Mr. Colonial, my sister will immediately whip out her revolver and shoot you dead. Isn't that so? Was London traffic itself ever in worse plight?"

"Well, what do you suggest?" asked the Australian, suspiciously.

"A truce from this nasty volcano we are all sitting on."

"Can I trust you?"

"Sometimes we've got to trust a little, to gain a lot."

"Well, I'll tell you all one thing right now," interposed Jim, definitely. "You can't trust me. If you imagine I'm going to stand by, on parole, while you rough-handle that tramp, you're mistaken."

"Really, I think he *is* St. George," exclaimed the artist.

"Shut up," barked Jim, "or you'll find yourself the dragon."

"Dragon!" cried Alfred, and suddenly guffawed. "Lor' luvvaduck! I forgot to tell yer. The dragon's eye—it chinged again, while we was outside—chinged from red ter yellor—'ere! Git orf me! Git orf!"

The artist had sprung upon the tramp, and now had him grasped by the collar.

"I'm going to put this fellow in the kitchen," he shouted, to Jim, "and, if you budge an inch, I'll wing him."

"Doncher budge, guv'nor!" bellowed Alfred, unable to face the crisis now it was imminent.

Jim hesitated. For the moment, he was not covered. He could have sprung at one of the aggressors, in the hope of creating a useful chaos, but, even as the idea occurred to him, he realised that the fruits were too doubtful to be worth the risk. In the scene of confusion that would follow, the only certain thing was that Alfred would receive a bullet.

So, with an angry heart, he watched the tramp bundled out of the room and heard him thrust into the kitchen. There was an interval of five seconds between the artist's exit and re-entrance, but the arrangement of those who remained was too unfavourable, and his mind could evolve no scheme in that short period that seemed worth trying. When the artist was back, whatever chance he may have had was lost.

"There's one out of the way," remarked the artist, blandly. "Shall we do the same with the others, or not?"

"Not," answered the Australian, who had followed every movement of the artist, and was still following every movement. "We've not signed that little truce yet."

"What do you mean?" asked the artist, too innocently.

"I mean that I'm not quite the simpleton you take me for," retorted the Australian. "I don't mind that fool of a tramp going, but I reckon the balance of power is better preserved while the other two stay."

"You haven't their sympathy," the artist pointed out.

"Perhaps not. But you haven't, either," observed the Australian. "They keep you nicely busy. When a man's fighting by himself, a three-cornered contest has its uses."

The girl spoke.

"I thought you had made a proposition to us?" she said. "That looked like a partnership."

"I've yet to learn, young lady, that the proposition has been accepted. Is it accepted?"

The girl was about to reply, when she suddenly caught sight of Jim's face.

"What's the matter?" she asked, sharply.

"Nothing," answered Jim.

But a disturbing thought had come up on him—a thought he ought to have had before. Why hadn't Joyce appeared on the landing when she had heard the Australian's shot?

The girl turned slowly back to the Australian.

"Repeat your proposition," she added.

"Lay out that Chinaman," answered the Australian, "and it's fifty-fifty on the stone, and no questions asked."

The girl smiled.

"And why do you fear this Chinaman?"

"Because he's the devil incarnate."

"And you are so pleasant! He is only a devil incarnate, I suppose, to those who have the ruby?"

"That's a good guess."

"Then—once again—why?" The Australian hesitated. "Why?"

Jim thought: "She would love to tell him that—the Chink's dead. It would be a great moment for her. But, no, she must keep him dangling, to get his story. She's right. Of course. But, Oh, Lord, Oh, Lord, Oh, Lord! *What's* happened to Joyce?"

He glanced up covertly. In the shadow of the upper landing, grim and silent, stood the Chinaman.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

While the Chinaman listened imperturbably above, his presence known only to Jim who dared not raise his eyes again after the first momentary glance, the Australian told his story.

He told it briefly, for time was brief, and he was in no mood for elaboration; moreover, there were many incidents and aspects which, at the moment, he did not particularly wish to reveal. But this is the moment to reveal them to the reader, if the final stages of this strange adventure are to be understood and the driving motives appreciated. No other moment will be given to us.

So, while the Chinaman stands in the shadows, his eyes glowing with the veiled, inextinguishable light of the East; while the Australian's cynical voice drones below, weaving new history into a room already tenanted by countless ghosts; while Jim listens impatiently, and a beautiful girl listens intently, and a tramp locked in a kitchen wonders whether he could send the whole lot to Jericho by putting his head under a tap—we will ourselves journey farther than Jericho, to a certain spot in a desolate region of Southern China in which our Australian, Walter Jones, once found himself, with a fellow native of Sidney, Ted Finn.

Food was scarce, and so was money. In fact, after many days of wandering, the adventurers found their resources practically reduced to a solitary rifle. This rifle had been useful for the double purpose of stocking their larder and self-protection; for they were in a wild district where strangers were not particularly welcome.

"Can't you find something to shoot?" asked Jones, suddenly. Finn had the rifle. "I'm famished!"

"If it comes to the worst," replied Finn, with grim humour, "we might draw lots to see which shall shoot the other."

"Quit joking! Ah—what's that?"

Something black and green flashed by, and alighted a little way off.

"Magpie," said Finn. "No, thanks."

The bird cocked its bright eye, and watched them impudently. Its glossy tail stuck out like a fan.

"Got it," exclaimed Jones.

But his companion shook his head.

"Elephants or tigers, by all means. But no magpie for me—not in this God-forsaken country. Don't you know it's a bird of ill omen?"

"Rot!"

"It isn't rot. And you'd not think it rot if your parents had been Irish!" Finn smiled. "I tell you, if we were to shoot that bird, it would spell bad luck for us—and I reckon we've had about enough of that lately. The magpie is China's sacred bird. A man's been torn to bits for shooting one."

Jones frowned crossly. The magpie hopped a few feet nearer.

"Who's to tear us to bits, in this desert?" he growled.

"I can see a filthy mud-house jutting out from that hill," responded Finn. "We may be near a village. And who's to say they're not right, too? Why, I've heard that even in France and Germany it's supposed to be unlucky to kill a magpie—witches, and all that."

"Say, you're a bit mad, aren't you?"

"And then, you remember, the magpie was the only bird that didn't follow Noah into the Ark. And after the Crucifixion—"

"There! It's gone!"

“Good riddance. After the Crucifixion, all the other birds had the decency to turn black, in mourning, but not the magpie. A heathen of a bird! Besides,” he added, practically, “despite its last syllable, I don’t think I’d relish eating it.”

“I’d relish anything just now.”

“Then let’s see if we can get some bamboo-shoots in that village.”

“Ugh!”

“Better than dog, anyway — *or* magpie.”

The next moment there was another flash of black and green, and the speaker’s cap was nipped from his head. The bright-eyed magpie had returned, and was claiming a fine for the derogatory remarks made concerning it.

“Well, I’m dashed!” laughed Finn, staring.

“Fool, do you want to lose your cap?” cried Jones.

Finn hesitated, and Jones seized the gun out of his hand. Bang! The bird dropped like a stone, and the cap sailed down in its wake.

Jones ran to the spot. Finn stared after him, and shivered slightly. He had always been worried by premonitions. Perhaps it was the Irish in his blood.

“Fool, was I?” he thought. “I wonder?”

He followed his companion slowly. The magpie lay dead on the ground, the quick brightness of its eyes already glazed over. The cap, on the other hand, was none the worse for the incident. Sometimes, the inanimate scores.

“Pretty good shot,” observed Jones, bending over his prize. “There’s your cap.”

“Thanks,” answered Finn, apathetically.

Jones looked up sharply.

“Say, are you still worrying over your silly superstition?” he demanded.

Finn shrugged his shoulders, then bent down to pick up his cap. But he paused in the action. Something also had caught his eye. A pair of approaching feet.

“Cover that bird up,” he muttered quickly.

“Why?” asked Jones.

It was too late, in any case, for Finn’s purpose. The owner of the feet, a small, squat Chinaman, was already near them, gazing at the dead bird through his unpleasant slits. Then he gazed at the two figures by the bird. Then he swung round, and hurried away again towards the village.

“There you are!” exclaimed Finn, anxiously.

“Where am I?” retorted Jones. “That didn’t mean anything.”

All the same, he raised his rifle, and covered the retreating figure with it.

“Hey! Don’t do that!” cried Finn.

Jones lowered his rifle, and laughed.

“I may have my mad moments,” he remarked, “but I’m not quite a fool, you know. Say, these Chinamen are sort of flies, though, aren’t they. It’d be rather amusing, popping them off — if it didn’t lead to trouble. Well, come along. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To the village, of course.”

Finn looked doubtful.

“I tell you frankly, old chap, I didn’t like the look of that fellow.”

“What’s your suggestion, then? Drop your tail and run?”

“Oh, hell,” answered Finn. “P’r’aps you’re right, and I’m an idiot.”

The remark appeased Jones.

“I’ll meet you halfway, Ted,” he responded. “I’ll hide the bird in my pocket. Then no one will know of our crime.”

“Barring just one feller,” corrected Finn.

“Well, I wanted to shoot him,” grinned Jones, “but you wouldn’t let me.”

They walked on. The Chinaman had disappeared round the hill, and no one was in sight. On each side of their track was a stony, scarred land, almost bare of vegetation, grim and ungracious. The wall of the mud hut protruding from the hill told no story of joyous humanity. Even the straw roof had had its original colour weathered into submission, like a wife who begins her home singing, but whose song dies with her personality as the humdrum of the days swallow them up.

Just before they rounded the hill, Finn paused.

“What you want,” scoffed Jones, “is a meal.”

“Yes, I expect that’s it,” answered Finn.

They rounded the hill that stood as sentinel to the village. Ahead lay the village street. In configuration, it looked not unlike a street lined with haystacks, only the edifices were not as bright as haystacks, and had doors in them.

There were only a dozen of these huts, and each hut contained only one room, but a crowd of people collecting together in the middle of the road suggested that the dozen huts could accommodate a dozen dozen inhabitants, with sundry dogs and pigs added.

Finn stopped again, and, glancing at his companion, remarked,

“Well—*now* what about it?”

“They certainly seem excited,” admitted Jones.

“Excited! They’re buzzing like bees in a wind!”

“But not necessarily about us.”

“Then what the hell are they gesticulating towards us for?”

The crowd had turned. Arms waved wildly, and two or three figures detached themselves from the crowd, and began to move forward.

Until this moment, Jones had been frankly sceptical, but now the menace was too clear to ignore, and he realised that Finn had been right. Possibly he would have realised this earlier but for a certain bravado in his nature, and a fondness for taking risks; to remain passive now, however, would be to take too absurd a risk. Finn had already turned and started to run.

Raising his rifle, Jones fired deliberately in the heart of the crowd. Cries of fear and anger burst forth. The foremost figures stopped, and leapt aside, while a general bolt was made for the protective walls of the huts as Jones raised his rifle again.

But Jones did not fire a second time. He had succeeded in “closing the eyes” of the enemy, and he hoped that the suspension would keep the eyes closed for a few seconds longer. And in those few seconds he and Finn would put as big a distance as they could between themselves and that unwholesome village!

The two men had never run faster. The hill now temporarily hid them from view, but they must find more permanent cover in order to obtain their start. Jones had further blackened the case against them, and whatever may have been the original intentions of the mob, it was plain that the issue now was a life or death one.

“Over there,” panted Finn, as Jones drew up.

He was making for a hilly tract. On flat land, their case would have been hopeless. Not daring to look back, they raced over the hard, flinty ground, and increased their speed as a dull roar of voices suddenly poured over the hill that stood at the head of the village street.

Had they been seen? Neither man knew, or could afford the time to find out. They dived into a narrow valley, entered another that ran across it, and Finn rolled down a slope, the bumpiest slope he had ever encountered. But he was grateful. It assisted his progress, and led to further protective undulations.

They ran steadily for ten minutes. Then they stopped, and stared at each other, gasping. There was no sound but the sound of their breath.

“Narrow squeak,” panted Finn.

“We’re not out of it yet,” replied Jones.

“No—let’s get on.”

“Hear anything?”

“No.”

“God, I’m hungry!” exclaimed Jones.

Even in their extremity, Finn could not resist a jest.

“Like some magpie?” he asked.

Jones took the magpie out of his pocket, and hurled it from him. They watched it fall in a bunch of stubble, then turned to resume their journey.

But, as Jones had said, they were not out of it yet. A tall and portly Chinaman barred their way.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Jones's first impulse was to hurl himself upon the Chinaman, but Finn, whose instinct was more sensitively attuned, quickly laid a hand on his friend's sleeve.

"No—wait!" he muttered.

Possibly Jones would not have acted upon his first impulse in any case. The Chinaman, on closer scrutiny, did not look very antagonistic, despite his somewhat formidable size. He had large, well-filled cheeks, and the eyes above them, though watchful, had a certain placidity and quiet humour. It was not entirely Asiatic humour, moreover, or the Australians might not have recognised it. Then, too, his costume was rich and imposing, and his general atmosphere savoured little of the impulsive slayer.

The Chinaman was evidently a good business man, for he remained silent, impressively sure of his ground, and waited for the others to speak first. Jones could think of nothing to say, and it was Finn who, rather ineffectively, blurted out,

"Hallo—where did *you* spring from?"

The Chinaman smiled, laying back his head a little till his bulging cheeks almost hid his eyes.

"I did not spring," he answered, in excellent English. "It was you, rather, who sprang."

"What's that mean?" demanded Jones.

"It means, my very good friends, that the questions should be mine, not yours. Oh, yes. I think that is so."

And he smiled again, his eyes once more doing the disappearing act. He was absurd, yet with a curious stateliness. His humour was blended with the dignity of one who considers himself good, through ripe experience, and who is quite ready to be tolerant of the lesser qualities of others.

"Well, don't be too sure," retorted Jones, fingering his rifle meaningly. "This gun of mine gives me a certain advantage."

Finn glanced at his companion anxiously. That gun had done quite enough damage for one afternoon.

"Go slow," he murmured.

"Go slow—that is very good," nodded the big Chinaman, keeping his eyes upon Jones, with as much assurance as though he only had to press a button to blow him up. "It is foolish to hurry—always." He delivered this statement as applicable to the present instant and to the whole of creation. "What will be, will be. And that gun will not go off."

"You don't know that," said Jones, disturbed by a sense of inferiority.

"Do I not?" queried the Chinaman, blandly. "Oh, yes, I do. And so does your friend, who has allowed his hot blood to cool, and is therefore so much wiser. He uses his eyes, and our tempers should follow our eyes. That is very good philosophy, oh, yes."

It occurred to Jones that he, also, had better use his eyes. He gave a rapid glance behind him. There was no sign of the pursuers. But Finn had been glancing ahead, not behind, and ahead, by a little promontory, stole three or four figures, in round black hats, and with long sleeved capes of blue. Jones shifted his gaze and saw them.

"Trapped," he growled.

"Trapped?" repeated the Chinaman, raising his eyebrows. "You speak in riddles. But one riddle I will answer. It lies in that little clump. You are of the chivalrous race, and will not shoot me behind."

So saying, disdaining any protection of his person, he walked towards the stubble in which Jones had thrown the magpie.

“Shall I shoot him?” asked Jones.

“If you really want to die, yes,” answered Finn.

“But he’ll find the bird,” said Jones.

“What will be, will be,” quoted Finn, grimly; and added, “Anyway, he doesn’t seem to me a bad old sort.”

The Chinaman had reached the clump. Obviously, he had seen Jones’s action when the magpie had been thrown there. Stooping now he thrust his hand in and it came out holding the dead bird.

They watched him, anxiously. He regarded the bird for several seconds, and then slowly returned to the watchers.

“So,” he nodded, gravely. “A magpie. That is a pity.”

Finn caught at the word.

“Yes, that’s what *I* think,” he cried. “But, say, is that *all* you feel about it, mister?”

“The magpie is held in high esteem,” continued the Chinaman, paying no immediate attention to Finn’s interruption. “It may be foolish. But, if we dare to examine, is not all foolish, even to the love we express, and the food we eat?” Jones was about to interrupt him, but Finn threw him a warning glance. “So we must not examine. For to examine is to find ourselves as ignorant as the worm, as evil as the savage beast, and as ugly as the skinned toad. That will not do, my very good friends.” He brought his eyes full upon them. “We must cling to our poor illusions, and punish those who shatter them—or lose what little reason we have!”

“Then—you think we ought to be punished?” queried Finn, uncomfortably, while Jones fidgeted with his rifle. The four black-hatted men by the promontory had now become eight. “Just for a magpie?”

The Chinaman blinked solemnly, and then suddenly smiled.

“Perhaps this illusion of the magpie means less to me,” he said, “than the illusion that the lives of two fine young men are important.” His smile vanished, as suddenly as it had come, and he considered again. “Yet can I rule the Universe? It is a pity that this has happened. Punishment will come to you, if it must, for having killed this bird. Through me, maybe, if not through my hand. Here? Now? In a year—in some distant country? Who can say? The bird is killed. The All-seeing One will avenge it in His way.”

“Perhaps the All-Seeing One is an illusion,” suggested Jones.

“Then all the more must He preserve all other illusions,” answered the Chinaman, cryptically, “for without them will He not prove hollow? Oh, yes! That may be. But, where lies your danger? You were in flight.”

“See here, before we grow too confidential, can you assure us our danger doesn’t lie in front of us?” demanded Jones, pointing to the Chinamen by the promontory.

“They are my servants,” replied the Chinaman. “They think as I think.”

“And you think?”

“Oh, shut up!” barked Finn, suddenly. “We can’t make terms. Let’s do a bit of trusting.”

“You are the wise one, I see,” smiled the Chinaman. “Yes, it is good to trust. For, when that goes, it never returns.”

Finn coloured slightly. He was not good at receiving compliments.

“It’s like this,” he said, in a matter-of-fact voice. “We’re tired and hungry—not quite accountable for our acts.”

“We are always accountable for our acts,” corrected the Chinaman, quietly.

“Oh, very well, then. You can beat me at the words. Anyway, we thought of eating that bird, and then the cheeky thing had the impudence to fly off with my cap.” He grinned. The

Chinaman was smiling. "Yes, funny, wasn't it? So, pop goes the gun, and down comes the magpie. And if that's a hanging job, my name's Nebuchadnezzar!"

"So?" replied the Chinaman. "And someone found out what had been done?"

"Yes, some darned Chink spotted us," interposed Jones, not too happy that Finn should be the spokesman. Finn looked at him despairingly. Jones had no tact. "He ran back to his hole of a village—somewhere over in that direction—and, when we entered the village, he's spread the story, and the crowd rushed at us. Luckily I had my rifle—"

"Yes, but we didn't wait to use that," exclaimed Finn, lying boldly. "We turned and ran. Shook them off pretty well, too, but the Lord knows—"

The Chinaman held up his hand. He looked like a dog sniffing scent in the breeze.

"They are coming," he announced. "What will you do?"

"Make a fight of it," snarled Jones, fiercely. This man was fooling them. What idiots they'd been! Of course, he was simply holding them there . . .

"Unless you'll help us?" asked Finn, looking straight at the Chinaman.

"I will not quarrel with those who pursue you," answered the Chinaman, after a moment's reflection, "but I will help you. Oh, yes. It may be good. But you must do all I say, or I cannot. Is that agreed?"

"Yes!" cried Finn, and Jones nodded. He realised it was their only chance.

"That is wise. Lie down." The men hesitated, but he repeated the command sharply, and their wills snapped.

The next instant, they were prone, and the Chinaman had seized their gun.

"Close your eyes," came the quiet voice above them. "You are dead. I have killed you."

They closed their eyes obediently. The ensuing minutes were agony, but there was no alternative now but to endure the agony. A sensation pervaded them that other people were creeping up, and they gathered, rightly, that the Chinaman had summoned his servants. He must be a great man, this Chinaman, since he was obeyed without question. With a sickening sensation, Jones realised that the rifle was being lifted from his side. Then boots prodded him. He was about to jump up, but again the quiet voice whispered, "You are dead—or, without doubt, you will die."

Then voices were raised, fierce and stormy, and the big Chinaman's voice was the fiercest and stormiest of them all. For awhile, the prone men had no notion of what was happening. The anger seemed to be directed against them, and the high, metallic chatter was almost more than could be borne. If this anger were real, why were they allowed to simulate death? Why were they not killed, in actual fact? But perhaps the anger was *not* real? Perhaps this, too, was simulated?

There came a pattering of feet. Finn, lying almost on his face, took a big risk, and half opened one eye. Through the crack between two fingers he saw their original pursuers approaching.

The big Chinaman ran forward, and waved them away. He held up the bird, and appeared to pour forth a passion of grief. Finn could have sworn that he wept. Then the Chinaman returned to the spot where the men were lying, thrust out his foot, and rolled Finn over savagely.

The prodding recommenced.

"My God, I can't stand much more of this!" thought Finn.

He wondered how Jones was standing it. Then, all at once, he felt himself lifted roughly. He was swung on to a stalwart back.

"I wonder what would happen," thought Finn, "if I gave a war-whoop?"

"Stay dead," whispered a quiet voice in his ear.

The other voices continued to shriek and babble around him, on an ever-rising tide of lamentation and ferocity.

Finn felt the back he was hanging on move. He was being conveyed over the rough ground, and savage hands were beating him, and clawing at him. He had never realised how difficult it was to be dead before. He wondered how Jones was faring. Again, he was assailed with a mad desire to emit a war-whoop. He clenched his teeth hard . . .

“Hallo!” he thought. “Now I *am* dead!”

Something had pricked him, and he fainted.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

When Finn returned to life—in other words, to his earthly senses—he vaguely expected to find himself still jolting on somebody’s back. He was pleasantly surprised. A sensation of movement still prevailed, but it was a smooth, comfortable movement—a movement of gliding along water.

He recalled a river in the neighbourhood. They had crossed it that morning, and Jones had cursed it because he was thirsty and did not trust it. Now, the thing Jones had cursed was proving the channel of escape! Truly, Jones was a muddle-headed fellow, and had not got the hang of things at all.

Where was Jones? Finn adopted his familiar trick of opening one eye. A shape was lying two or three feet away. The shape was obviously Jones.

Finn’s eye revealed a little more than Jones’s shape, although the range of vision was strictly limited by his position—the position of a man who had been unceremoniously dumped down. It revealed a portion of an awning above them, and a glimpse of placid water where the awning ended. The placid water was a good way off, because Finn could not see the water near to; and from the motion of the boat, he gathered that he was in the stern, looking backwards over a course already traversed. Thus, neither his eye nor his mind could glimpse the future.

“Say—Walter!” he whispered.

“Hallo,” the bundle representing Jones whispered back.

Finn was relieved. It would have been nasty if the bundle had not replied to him.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Rotten, thank you,” answered Jones. “Reckon we’ve been doped or something.”

“Think you’re right. Anyway, we’re alive. That’s better luck than we might have had.”

“Is it?”

“Well, isn’t it?” Jones did not reply. “I see what you mean.”

“No, you don’t,” retorted Jones. “I don’t mean anything.”

Finn smiled to himself. Jones was afraid of admitting his fears.

“I’ll tell you one thing, old son,” said Finn. “We don’t know what’s ahead of us, but it won’t hurt if you keep a hand on that temper of yours.”

“Don’t worry. I will,” responded Jones.

Finn was relieved, and also a little surprised. He encouraged this change of heart.

“Good man!” he exclaimed. “I’d shake your hand, if I dared move. Yes, there’s no doubt about it, we’ve got to keep cool, both of us. Confound that darned magpie! It really seems as if there’s something in the superstition. I’ll have to buy a hat-guard.”

“Why don’t you dare move?” enquired Jones; though from his own still attitude, he did not seem anxious to move, either.

“Discipline,” replied Finn. “I’m under strict orders to be dead.”

“So am I.”

“Say, do you trust him?”

“If I remember rightly, it was you who began the game of trust.”

“All correct,” admitted Finn. “But what else was there to do? Chinks to the right of us, Chinks to the left of us, and this wily old rascal . . . Say what you like, we chose the only possible alternative.”

“P’r’aps you’re right.”

"Go on! You know I'm right. We wouldn't be talking now if you'd fired that gun. All the same, I'd like to know what his game is!" He paused. "Got any theory?"

"Not a darn. Have you?"

"Only one—and it's a bit thin."

"Let's hear it."

"Why, that we remind him of a long-lost brother, and he likes us."

Jones did smile this time. But the smile was of short duration. A figure was approaching. It was the figure of their large benefactor himself.

"English dogs," observed the Chinaman.

The voice was placid, but the words were disappointing.

"We're not English, we're Australian," retorted Finn.

"And we're not dogs," added Jones.

These replies appeared quite satisfactory to the Chinaman. His cheeks bulged upwards, and he smiled.

"I am angry with you," he said, still smiling. "This quiet voice of mine conceals the hidden fires in me. Oh, yes. My servants know it. But they do not know the words I utter. Therefore—I am not angry with you. Oh, no! Another illusion."

"I wish I could understand you," complained Jones, frowning.

The Chinaman protested.

"I am a child," he said.

"Well, I never understand children either!"

"And, I have just said, I am not angry."

"In that case, why have you doped us?"

"A prick, merely! Can you not guess?"

"Chinese riddles? No!"

"Ah, but this is no riddle. Let me hear, my very good friend, what you would do if someone were drowning, and you jumped in to save him? And then he struggled, and tried to pull you under in his mad desperation? What would you do?"

"Hit him on the head," answered Jones.

"That is good. You would hit him on the head. Then he would cease to struggle, and you could save him. So I had to make sure that you and your friend would not struggle. Or we should all—what is your expression?—be in the soup."

"By jove, that's right," exclaimed Finn. "I get you, now."

"You do, wise one?"

"Rather! In another second, I should have yelled the sky down."

"But you do not quite get me," interposed the Chinaman, "for you appear too friendly. You will do well to look a little frightened. Ha! *you toad!*"

The epithet was slung so suddenly and spitefully that both men started violently. But the Chinaman never stopped smiling.

"Must I *make* you play your parts, with anger and pricks?" he enquired, almost reproachfully. "My servants are watching."

"But what does that matter?" asked Jones, irritated by the confusing psychology of the position, but keeping his irritation under control. "They *are* your servants, aren't they?"

"But a few of all my servants," said the Chinaman grandly. "I have many more."

"Then does it matter what they think?"

"It is important," nodded the Chinaman. "Even the servant of a great man—such as I—is not always trustworthy. Those men would have killed you—for their illusion about the magpie. I saved you by another illusion—the illusion of my own anger. You heard my voice? Yes? Did I not seem to thirst for your blood? Did I not mourn the magpie—the little bird in

my hand—even more than they? And did I not want your bodies, to burn in everlasting fires? You were dead, yes, but I must have your bodies, too, or those others would find out that you were not dead. So my anger kept them at a distance. They know I would do all they wanted. I am a great man.” He paused. “I am Li Ho.”

“But they *didn’t* keep their distance,” exclaimed Jones, suspiciously. “They kicked us.”

“No, my servants kicked you,” corrected Li Ho. “At my command. They were in one game, but not in another. They, too, pretended you were dead. They think, also, that you are to die.”

“And are we?” enquired Finn.

“Only the magpie knows that,” responded Li Ho. “And he will not say just yet. Perhaps he has marked me out, too, for I have cast doubt upon his illusion.”

“And you have no illusions?” queried Jones.

Li Ho considered the question carefully.

“Some say that life itself is an illusion,” he replied.

“Beyond that, you have none?” pressed Jones.

Again Li Ho considered. Then, with a cynical light in his eye—the light of a cynicism that struck inwards as well as outwards—he said,

“Yes, I have one illusion. It is the illusion that I gain happiness through my great power. Li Ho is a great man. But Li Ho must be greater. Oh, yes, one day, Li Ho will be very great indeed—so great that he will not trouble to protect with his greatness two poor fools who think they have no illusions, and who therefore shoot at them.” He spoke quietly, yet something vibrated through him. Was this new emotion genuine, or, again, was it simulated? Neither of his hearers could say. “One day,” he continued, “my illusion will turn on me, and kill me. Such, alas, is this life! None escape. But we must clothe life. We cannot walk naked. We must leave Truth to tear off our clothes, to strip us of our very skins, and scatter our bones till the centre is found and we are proved to be nothing. But, I choose to be killed by a big illusion, oh, yes, the biggest I can find; and I will not be picked to pieces by a tiny magpie. From a great height shall I fall, and smash!”

Such talk exasperated Jones, but it stirred Finn oddly. Finn had imagination.

“They say Julius Cæsar tripped over a stone when he landed in Africa,” said Finn, “and fell on his nose. Perhaps even Li Ho may be tripped up by a magpie!”

Jones thought, “Now, he’s put his foot in it!”

But Jones was wrong. Li Ho suddenly looked at Finn with a new interest.

“You are right, wise one,” he nodded. “The ant I tread on is my equal, and the atom is the equal of the ant. But the ant must swell beyond the atom, and I must tread on the ant, or we should each go mad through our insignificance!”

So saying, he turned and left them. The two men eyed each other.

“He has got some game on,” muttered Jones. “I’m sure of it.”

“So am I,” replied Finn. “He’s an odd mixture, if ever there was one.”

“I wish I had an odd mixture to give him,” growled Jones venomously. “I’d get a bit of my own back.”

Finn did not quite take this view.

“He’s queer,” he admitted, “but let’s give the devil his due. We owe him our lives, don’t we? And I don’t mind paying him a bit of a price for mine.”

“Somewhat depends upon the price,” suggested Jones.

“Maybe it won’t be so much,” retorted Finn.

Food was brought to them. They had almost forgotten their hunger, and perhaps the drug had delayed its pangs. But now they remembered it, and fell upon their meal without

questioning its composition. Only when it was over did it occur to Finn to wonder what they had eaten.

“Remember that fellow in the anecdote,” he said, “who congratulated the Chinese waiter on the excellent quack-quack, and the waiter corrected him and told him it was bow-wow?”

Towards evening, the river banks grew a little less desolate, and Li Ho came to them again.

“Soon, we shall arrive,” he said. “But news travels fast. I fear there is still danger.”

“But, surely, you can end it?” frowned Jones.

“I must be even greater than I am, before I can perform miracles,” answered Li Ho. “But —yes, I might end it.”

“And you will?”

Li Ho smiled faintly at the eagerness of the question. Then he replied.

“There is a condition.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

"A condition?" queried Finn.

"I knew there'd be a catch in it," growled Jones.

Li Ho shook his head, as though to deny this imputation.

"Perhaps condition is not quite the word," he corrected himself. "Your language sometimes traps me."

"Nonsense—you speak it better than I do," retorted Finn. "Where did you pick it up?"

"I have been ten years in England," answered Li Ho. "It was there I learned many of the things I know—the folly of mankind, its mad beliefs, its reason for them. The Westerner must have power. He smashes himself on it. Well, I too am so built. Yes, that is so. And—my very good friends—what makes power?"

"Money," replied Jones, laconically.

"That is so," nodded the Chinaman.

"Well, if your condition is that we give you money," observed Jones, "there's nothing doing! Say, do you think we've got any sovereigns hidden in our shoes?"

"But you would like to have them, is that not so?" suggested Li Ho, and something in his voice made both men look at him sharply.

"Ah, my 'condition' I see, grows more pleasant! You discover that I think for all three of us."

"Well, go on," exclaimed Jones. "Let's hear."

"In ten minutes we shall reach my house," said Li Ho. "It is a large house—but one day it will be larger. I can hide you there, till you are found, or till one of my servants kills you. Or you can eat there, and bathe yourselves, and then go your way—but having no money, and the people searching for you everywhere, you will not go far. Or—" he paused, as an actor would pause before delivering his most important line,—“you can, if you like, go to the Temple of Buddha which lies a hundred miles along this river."

"That sounds interesting," commented Jones. "But how is Buddha going to help us?"

"Is it a sort of confessional stunt?" suggested Finn, with a touch of sarcasm. "Do we tell Buddha that we have shot a magpie, and does he forgive us?"

"Buddha will have no killing," answered Li Ho, throwing back his head to enjoy Finn's sarcasm. "Oh no. Buddha believes that life is a sad thing, yet we must not take life. Yes, you will find the space cleared before Buddha when you go to pray before him at that temple, for you must crush no ant or beetle on your pilgrimage. My very good friends, Buddhism is among the strongest of all illusions. But it satisfies many millions, who live their abject lives, hoping to be some finer person when next they are born, or fearing that next time they may be born something less worthy—a woman slave, a hen, a bamboo-shoot, or a pebble."

"*You're* not a Buddhist, then?" observed Jones.

"No," responded Li Ho, solemnly. "If I were, I would not urge you to go to the Temple of Buddha, because there would be one hundred and thirty-six hells to choose from for such as I, and the shortest 'term of imprisonment,' as your judges might say, is ten million years."

"Whew!" murmured Finn. "Ten million years in hell, without the option!"

"Oh, no,—the Buddhist has the option," said Li Ho. "He can refuse to kill, to steal, to lie, to drink, and to commit adultery. He can refuse to dance or to sing or to adorn himself. He can fast after the sun is high, he can refuse all money, he can avoid the comfortable couch, and never touch or even see a woman. Then he may die to live again in one of many heavens, for ten billion years at least. But—it is no use. At the end, he will be born all over again."

"Are you pulling our legs?" asked Jones. "Do Buddhists believe all that?"

"Do Christians believe they will sit in a Golden Kingdom on Friday, if they die on Thursday?" countered Li Ho, shrewdly. "It is enough, for most, to say they believe. But who shall know what his neighbour believes in his inmost heart?"

"Well, that's true," agreed Finn. "But why are you telling us all this?"

"Not to hear myself talk, though that is good," answered Li Ho. "I tell you because it will be bad for you both if you go to the Temple of Buddha without a knowledge of the people you will meet. You may treat them too lightly."

Finn suddenly laughed, implying his readiness to commit the fault he was being warned against.

"How would it matter?" he demanded. "A Buddhist will not take life. So we'd be safe!"

"The illusion of Buddhism is split up into a thousand lesser illusions," said Li Ho, who never seemed unprepared with an answer,— "and there is one man in this Temple of Buddha who believes that he would be serving Buddha to kill in his defence. One who was not a friend of Buddha need feel no shame to fear this man. And you would not be friends of Buddha."

"Well, that's mad," declared Finn. "Fancy killing a man in the service of a god that won't have killing!"

"It is done in every war," was the Chinaman's acid comment. "In the last war, did not one fight for peace? Or declare it so? But you are right. It is just another illusion."

Jones thumped his hand.

"For the Lord's sake, let's come to the point," he cried. "Trust a Chinaman for going the long way round! What do you want us to go to this Temple for? What will you gain by it? And what will we?"

The boat slowed up. They were drawing into a bank, not rough like those they had previously passed along, but trim and quaintly cultivated. It was, in fact, a large garden, with a big, queerly-roofed house standing some way back.

"Wait," said Li Ho.

This was evidently Li Ho's residence. It was as imposing as its owner, and even among its mass of Chinese characteristics, the building betrayed some originality of design, shining forth like the egotism of the despot who is not content merely with the fashion. The boat came to a halt. Figures jumped ashore. Li Ho himself left his prisoners, intimating to them that they were to remain where they were, and then disappearing up the garden.

Four Chinamen only remained on board, but the Australians noted that all four were armed.

"Shall we make a bolt for it?" suggested Jones.

"What sort of a bolt?" asked Finn. "It would be a bolt straight to one of those heavens or hells the old chap was speaking about."

"I can't make him out. One moment I find myself believing in him. The next, I don't. Is he a madman?"

"Far from it, I should say."

"Then what's he getting at?"

"We'll learn soon enough."

"You know," murmured Jones, "if you and I suddenly landed on those fellows, I believe we could knock 'em in the water and get their rifles."

"What would be the good of that? Even if we could?" demanded Finn.

Jones shrugged his shoulders. He knew it would be hopeless. And yet . . .

"Well, it might get us out of this current."

"What current?" exclaimed Finn, looking at him sharply.

"The current that has borne us on ever since I winged that damned bird. We seem to have got into a tide. Other people are directing our actions. *We're* not. I tell you, I want to do something—even if it's mad. Somehow, my initiative seems —"

"Glazed over," suggested Finn, as his companion paused.

"You've hit it," said Jones. "Glazed over. Like those things in aspic jelly."

"P'r'aps he's one of the things himself," murmured Finn. "P'r'aps we all are, really—all the time."

"Oh, hang Fatalism!" burst out Jones. "I hate China!"

"Steady, old chap," warned Finn. "Those brutes are looking at us."

Presently, down the trim garden that reminded one of a willow-pattern plate, re-appeared Li Ho. He made a sign to the four men who had been on guard, and they stepped off the boat as he stepped on to it.

"That's not so bad," muttered Jones. "It gives us a numerical advantage."

"You're thinking along the wrong lines," insisted Finn. "For the Lord's sake, be careful!"

Li Ho approached. He held something in his hand, but the something was concealed.

"In the Temple of Buddha," said the Chinaman, without preamble, "there is a remarkable figure of that very exalted person. I am sure the figure is not at all like the Buddha who died over two thousand years ago. If I am worshipped two thousand years hence, I shudder to think of what I may become in that passage of time! But this we can say of the Buddha in the temple. He has—wonderful eyes. Oh, yes. Very wonderful."

"What are they like?" enquired Finn, for Li Ho had paused.

"Not unlike these, my very good friends," answered Li Ho, and opened his hand.

In the large palm lay two enormous rubies.

"Whew!" murmured Jones, as both men stared. "You don't mean to say —?"

Li Ho watched them. He was interested in their emotions. The stones clearly were making a big impression upon them.

"Are these—the Buddha's eyes?" almost whispered Finn.

"What do you think they are worth?" asked Li Ho, his mouth wrinkling humorously.

"Ten thousand pounds," guessed Finn.

"Each," added Jones.

"A forty-carat ruby is worth more than double that," said Li Ho. "But these are worth—not much."

"Do you mean, you don't consider twenty thousand pounds much?"

"No," smiled Li Ho. "I mean that these are not rubies at all. They are merely chromium and aluminium. But—" he held them up, admiringly;—"have they not almost the glow of the pigeon's blood? Who should say they had not come from Upper Burma?"

"I don't know what you're driving at," replied Jones, but Finn was regarding the Chinaman with a peculiar expression that suggested quicker understanding. "I suppose an expert would know they were imitations."

"Ah, true! But would your expert trouble to climb up a large figure—the figure of a Buddha, perhaps—to examine the Buddha's eyes?"

And then Jones understood too. No one spoke for a full minute.

"One day," said Li Ho, "I will find two men to go to that temple for me, and to bring me back the Buddha's eyes. They are worth fifty thousand pounds,—but Buddha will see as well with my poor imitations. Oh, yes. And those two men—who would not know how to dispose of the rubies themselves and would only find them a burden—will return to me without doubt,—oh, yes, and each will receive five thousand pounds. And that will leave me forty thousand pounds, a small matter, no doubt, but quite useful to a man who bows to the illusion of power."

Still his hearers were silent.

"I return to my house. I have cast you into the water, with heavy stones round your necks. No one shall approach the spot for a week, till the spirit of the avenged magpie shall have flown back to heaven after its period of most unmannerly gloating. And you will slip away in the night, in the smaller boat that lies ahead of this, with revolvers, provisions, directions and Li Ho's blessing."

"Yes, but see here!" cried Jones suddenly. "What about this Chinaman fellow who guards the temple?"

"Leng Cheng?" murmured Li Ho, blandly. "He has one idea, one thought, one love. Buddha. The one man in the world I should fear to anger. Oh, yes. If he heard that Buddha's eyesight had been impaired, I should be grief-smitten. Do not doubt it."

"It's going to be a risk," muttered Jones.

"A great risk, oh, yes," nodded Li Ho. "But there is risk for you everywhere. Here is a risk with profit."

The two men glanced at each other.

"I'm game," exclaimed Jones.

"The tide carries us," said Finn.

CHAPTER FORTY

It was a dark, velvet night when the little boat that was destined to carry the two Australians into the very heart of their strange adventure slipped quietly away from the bank; but the sky was jewelled with stars, and before very long the moon would rise, to help them on their way.

At the moment, however, they were well content with the darkness. Owing to the forethought of Li Ho, who certainly had a genius for organisation, the grounds and the stream at the end of the garden were now haunted by the spirit of the dead magpie, and would therefore be studiously avoided by the superstitious household. "To see the ghost of a magpie gloating over its victims," Li Ho had said, with a humorous smile, "is no good sight for Chinese eyes, so you need fear no watchers at the windows." Nevertheless, the Australians conceived that even a superstitious Chinese servant might have his moments of daring, a quality which is often born of mere human curiosity; and in their anxiety, as they began to slip away, they felt as though every window in the silent house of Li Ho had a yellow face pressed against it.

"Clever idea, that magpie ghost story of Li Ho's," murmured Finn.

"But what fools they must be," replied Jones, "to believe it!"

A black shape shot above them, with a faint flutter of wings, blotting out the stars in its course. For all his contempt of those who believed in the magpie's ghost, Jones discovered that his forehead was damp.

"Ask me straight if I'm superstitious, and I'll say no," observed Finn. "Just the same, it won't harm us to keep respectful when we speak of that damned magpie. I mean, that magpie." He added, in a lower voice, "We're fools to speak at all!"

"Well, shut up, then," muttered Jones, whose nerves were in a pitiable state.

"Shut up yourself," murmured Finn. His nerves were not much better.

The black thing circled above them again. It would have pleased them had they known it was merely a crow. From the house, lights glimmered. They bent low in their boat, and kept well in the protection of the shore. Finn wondered what was going on in that house. Were they inhaling opium or reading books backwards, or playing strange games, or eating strange concoctions, or making strange love? Everything was strange. And perhaps the strangest thing of all was that he and Jones had permitted themselves to suffer all the strangeness. One should stay in one's own country.

They had now been slipping through the water for ten minutes. Caution, and the lack of sociability, kept them silent. But, as the boat went round a bend, Finn suddenly smiled at his companion through the darkness.

"Say, we've not got to quarrel, you and me," he said. "That'd be a pity."

"Oh, there's no likelihood of that," replied Jones, moodily.

"Well, I don't know. We've got to watch it. Our nerves aren't in good order, and nerves are the very devil. What we've got to hang on to, you and me, is this. In a bit of a while, we'll be out of all this, Jones, with five thousand pounds each in our pockets. What'll you do? I'll find a wife and go into business."

"You're a bit of an optimist, aren't you?" suggested Jones, but his tone was amiable enough. "We've got to find the five thousand pounds first."

"Oh, we'll do that all right," retorted Finn, confidently. "Old Li Ho's left nothing to chance."

"Well, let's go over it and see," said Jones. "God, what wouldn't I give for a pipe! There's nothing like tobacco to put eyes into your mind!"

"Like a whiff of Li Ho's special?" asked Finn, pointing to a locker.

"No thanks," smiled Jones. "We'll keep that for Buddha, or rather, Leng Cheng." He reflected. "This is the way of it, isn't it? We travel our hundred miles along this river. How long's that going to take us?"

"Three or four days," answered Finn.

"You mean, nights," corrected Jones, for they had decided to move at night, and lie concealed by day. "Say four. That means—let's see—this is Friday night, isn't it?"

Finn consulted a pocket calendar, on which they ticked off the days.

"That's right, Friday," he nodded. "Time to wash for the theatre."

"Friday. Then on Tuesday morning, say, we'll get to those cave dwellings."

"Tricky business, getting by them," said Finn.

"Yes. But they'll have nothing against us if they *do* see us. And we've got our rifles—"

"Which we'll use to save our lives, and for nothing less!"

"Agreed. All right, then, we get by those cave dwellings, and then we begin to look out. Three wooden bridges. Creek on the right. Go along the creek for two or three miles—as far as we can—and land on left bank. Mind our bearings, and travel north-east—"

"First hiding our boat if we can," put in Finn.

"Yes, but we've got to see that the boat isn't so well hidden that we won't be able to make a hurried departure if we want to. Travel north-east, as I said. Hilly country. Ten miles this time. And then—we reach the cave where Buddha is waiting for us."

"I wish Buddha was the only one who was waiting for us," remarked Finn. "I don't like the sound of that Leng Cheng fellow."

"Nor do I," answered Jones. "But, if he persists in staying in the cave, we'll give him a dose of Li Ho's mixture as you call it. And that will put him to sleep for a few hours, while we alter Buddha's sight."

There was a short silence. The river stretched long and straight before them, and the land beyond was low, so that the water appeared to lead to the horizon, and on the horizon appeared a slender curve of luminous yellow. The stream began to waken, though not as the sun wakened it. It shimmered with fancy rather than fact, with poetry rather than prose. Their route became a streak of silver light—with the moon as its goal.

"That's what we're after," said Finn suddenly.

"Eh? What?" answered Jones.

"The moon. The thing you reach for but never get."

"Oh! I thought you were the optimist of this little party!"

"Well, I'm optimistic, all right, but that moon just gave me the thought." He gazed about and stopped paddling for a few moments. "How do you size all this up, Walter?" he asked.

"Size it up? What do you mean?" exclaimed Jones, and then laughed. "I size it up in just one way."

"What's that?"

"Five thousand pounds."

"Ah, but I don't mean that. What I mean is—are we quite playing the game?"

"Of course we are," said Jones, definitely. "This isn't lawyers' country, and you don't suppose the Keeper of Buddha's temple paid fifty thousand pounds for Buddha's eyes, do you?"

"Well—that's not very likely," admitted Finn. "I never thought of that."

"Didn't you—wise one," laughed Jones. "In spite of Li Ho's preference for your intelligence, you see you haven't quite got a corner in brains. It's probable that these rubies

we're after have never been in the market yet. I expect they've been passed from thief to thief —murder done for 'em, most likely—till some religious fanatic, like our Leng Cheng, got hold of them and clapped them in his particular deity's eye sockets, as a mark of appreciation, and in the hope of reward hereafter. So don't *you* begin to have scruples, my son! We can leave those for the legal minds to wrangle about later on, when you and I have made our little pile."

"I dare say you're right," answered Finn, though not too happily. "It's all a game; a game from the word 'play' till you're bowled out. Li Ho knows that as well as anybody."

"Yes, and Li Ho knows how to arrange the pieces in the game, too," added Jones. "I've just had an idea about him."

"What is it?"

"Why—that he's put it across us, all right. I'll bet he's thinking us green for swallowing all his business. He *wanted* us to come on this trip, didn't he?"

"Sure."

"Well then—don't you suppose he exaggerated the danger if we *didn't* come? I don't believe for an instant that we couldn't have got clear, if he'd let us run loose from his garden. No one knew in his village—and no one cared. His servants would have obeyed him. No, he just engineered all this magpie bunkum—"

"Bunkum? Steady on!" interposed Finn. "Did it seem like bunkum when we were chased out of that village?"

"Bah! It was my silliness in firing that shot that made them really nasty. We acted guilty, that was the trouble. We could have quieted 'em but for that shot, I tell you. But old Li Ho spotted our foolishness, played upon it, and made it appear that this was our alternative."

"You may be right," answered Finn, reflecting on this aspect of their benefactor. "I expect he enjoys playing with people—gives him that sense of power he's after. All the same, Walter, he *could* have set his men upon us, if he'd wanted. And—without any other inducement—that five thousand pounds would have tempted us."

"H'm," grunted Jones, looking at his companion. "We've not got the five thousand pounds yet."

"No, but he'll give it to us."

"You're willing, then, to put yourself in that fellow's power again?"

Finn stared.

"You—you mean—?" he began.

"I mean *I'm* not a born fool, Ted, whatever you may be," said Jones, calmly, "and if I beat Leng Cheng, I'm darn well going to keep out of Li Ho's way."

Finn did not answer for some time. The boat slipped forward along the glittering path, and a mountain loomed on the horizon. Then he said quietly:

"Well—we'll see about that."

Jones did not appear to hear him. He was frowning into the water.

"Bit of a fool, after all, our Li Ho, to trust us like this," he said.

"Perhaps he had no alternative," responded Finn. "He probably knows Leng Cheng too well to try the game on himself. He's got to send somebody up this river—somebody not obviously connected with himself. I shouldn't imagine—somehow—we're the first."

And now they fell into a long silence. They were weary, but they had to keep on. The night hours were all too short, and although they could have travelled by day, they had decided that night travelling would minimise the chance of accidents. The fewer people they met, the better.

The river, no longer straight, bent like the back of an old man. It wound and curved. The moon rose higher. The only sounds were the dripping of their paddles, and the whispering of

the banks.

They met nothing. No village sprang up into view upon the banks. It was a lonely desolate country, offering little inducement to mankind to come and tame it, yet to Finn at least, it held a strange charm. But that, he argued, might have been due to the moon.

Towards morning the moon paled in the greyness of a new approaching day. They found a creek, with a convenient concealing curve, and after a meal—Li Ho had provided liberally for their needs—they slept. Then, when darkness fell again, they resumed their journey, first with only the stars to light them, and afterwards—as before—the moonlight.

So the journey proceeded. They slid by two villages, one with a few faint lights, the other almost entirely blackened out. Once, the river widened out into a lake, which took them an hour to cross. They had some difficulty in the darkness, to find the spot where the stream continued beyond, and lost their way in a young forest of sprouting things, to the indignation of a colony of birds. But such little mishaps do not turn back men lured on by the thoughts of riches.

Just before the sun rose on the Tuesday morning, as Jones had predicted, they found the tributary beyond the three wooden bridges, and, with quickening hearts, turned into it.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The hundred miles' journey along the silent river, despite its occasional moments of anxiety and tension, had been in the main peaceful, and had spun a dreamy spell around the two men; but now, as they entered a new stage in their adventures, their senses responded instinctively, and became very much alive. Two or three miles along this creek, and another ten beyond, were all that now separated them from the cave of Buddha, where two figures—one animate and the other inanimate—awaited, unconsciously, their coming.

The character of their journey, too, changed as soon as their little boat left the main stream and began to poke its daring, inquisitive nose up the narrower channel. The contours grew sterner and more rugged, great heights, that looked as though they had stood for thousands of years, began to appear on either side, and the undergrowth, no longer monotonous, became thick, varied, and full of mysterious riot.

The banks of the wider river had slept. The banks of the little river were awake and watchful. Finn wondered, as he turned his head and saw the wide river dwindle, first to a strip, then to a thin grey line, then—nothing—whether he would ever see it again.

Jones, on the other hand, did not turn. He kept his eyes glued on the banks ahead. They were now more than strangers in a strange land: they were intruders, spiritually, as well as geographically. There must be no slip.

"Now we're for it," muttered Finn. "This day week, we'll be millionaires, or dead."

"This day week, we'll be millionaires," retorted Jones, quietly. "At least a good many thousands of pounds on the way to it."

Finn was silent for a moment. Then he said, seriously:

"Look here, old man—hadn't we better clear the way a little—you and me—see just where we stand?"

"I know just where I stand," answered Jones. "I've told you."

"You mean, you really meant what you said about trying to keep the whole of the fortune?"

"No, you haven't got me quite right. I'm not going to try to keep it. I'm *going* to keep it."

"Have you thought of the risk—quite apart from anything else?"

"There isn't anything else, not in this God-forsaken country," remarked Jones. "Mind that tree trunk there. As for the risk, well, it's a risk either way, isn't it?"

"Of course, it's a risk either way," admitted Finn, frowning. "But, if there's a prairie fire on one side of you, you don't immediately drown yourself in the sea on the other side, without thinking. The risk is so great that we've *got* to think. I'll leave out talking about what's right or wrong at the moment. We'll stick to the risk."

"Yes, I'd leave out right and wrong, if I were you," agreed Jones cynically. "You won't find a single house or a single country that isn't prospering on a rotten foundation, if you dig down to it. Why, even you and I, Ted, are the result of man's ungovernable selfish passion!"

"That's fool's talk," grunted Finn. "But, as I said, I won't argue. It's the risk I'm discussing. And, since you and I are the only friends we have in several thousands of miles—well, hadn't we better make sure that we *keep* friends? And that we keep the friendship, also, of Li Ho. We may need him one day, pretty badly."

"Well, if *that* isn't fool's talk, put me back on the baby's bottle!" exclaimed Jones, with a laugh. "A pretty friend Li Ho's likely to be to us! What do you suppose he'll do, when we go back with the rubies like good little boys, and say: 'Here they are! Aren't we honest?'"

"Sell them, as he said he would, and give us what he promised," answered Finn. "When it comes to business transactions, you can always trust a Chinaman."

"Barring the particular Chinaman you happen to be dealing with," corrected Jones. "No, sir! Li Ho won't do that. He'll drown us, or stick a knife in us, or poison us—and bag the lot."

Finn's response, delivered with serious conviction after a moment's silence, made Jones look at him sharply.

"Well," said Finn, "*you* aren't going to bag the lot."

"Meaning?" frowned Jones.

"That ought to be simple," returned Finn. "Buddha has two eyes, hasn't he?"

"Oh—I see," exclaimed Jones, smiling now. "You want your share. One eye each, eh?"

"That's about the size of it," nodded Finn. "You can damn well do what you like with yours."

Partly because they had temporarily exhausted their subject, and partly because the narrowing stream demanded their attention, they ceased speaking. The grey morning was becoming white, and, high up on a prominence that loomed ahead of them, as they curved sharply round a bend, gleamed a little glow of light.

Winding up the stream, they saw the gleaming patch augment in size, till the whole height was bathed in morning radiance. It became a dazzling sheet, so dazzling that it was almost a relief when the stream curved away again, and the prominence lay behind them. But ahead now, through a break in the hills, rose the morning sun itself. The same thought occurred to the two men simultaneously.

"What about it?" asked Finn. "Are we going on through this daylight, or shall we lay up, as before?"

"I don't much fancy a ten mile tramp through this sort of country in the dark," answered Jones. "It's a bit different from being in a boat."

"That's right," agreed Finn. "Daylight's the lesser evil. But what's our yarn if we meet anybody?"

"Why trouble about a yarn?" responded Jones. "We're as likely to be understood by anybody we meet, as they are to be understood by us."

"Seems to me, you try and put a spoke in everything I suggest," grunted Finn. "Best to be prepared, isn't it? P'r'aps they won't be able to understand us—but we've got to *act* something or other, haven't we? Very well, then! Are we to act like a couple of people who have come to steal Buddha's eyes?"

"That's how we mean to act, in the end," grinned Jones. "But meanwhile, I agree, there's no harm in being mining engineers, who have lost their way." He added: "And who are getting hungry. Let's stop, and have a bite of something."

"Let's get to the end of this stream first," answered Finn. "Then we can take our bearings while we are eating."

"Who's putting his spoke in the wheel now?" asked Jones, smiling. "Well, keep her going. I dare say you're right."

The stream was steadily decreasing in size, and also in depth. The undergrowth on the banks now rose well above them, and one stroke of the paddle could easily carry their boat from one side to the other. Beyond this undergrowth were the tortuous cliffs and peaks, grimly indicating the trials that lay ahead of them on their ten miles' tramp.

"Pleasant prospect," murmured Finn.

"Yes, we're certainly working for whatever we're going to get," said Jones. "Hallo—steady!" Their boat scraped. "Say, in another minute, we'll have to get out and wade!"

A disturbing thought entered Finn's mind.

"How are we going to know the exact spot where we're to get out?" he asked. "As far as we can go—that was what Li Ho said. But people's ideas might vary on that point, now, for instance, those branches there—have we got to plunge through them?"

Jones's answer was to ply his paddle with sudden vigour. Both men ducked their heads as the boat swished through the obstruction. And, soon afterwards, Finn's doubts were set at rest. Round another bend the stream ran almost into nothing. The undergrowth met across it, and a huge rock made further progress impossible.

"Another stage over," sighed Finn. "We'll soon be on the last lap!"

He jumped ashore, at a spot where the undergrowth was thin and broken. Jones followed him. They found themselves in a small green dell. The great heights cupped them in. Somewhat anxiously, Finn brought out his compass.

"There's northwest," he said, pointing. "Well—it might be worse."

The direction lay between two peaks, and doubtless there was some sort of a valley path between. They returned to the boat and brought out their remaining eatables. From the rock that marked the end of the navigable river a little stream of clear water issued.

"That's a bit of good fortune," said Jones. "We can fill our bottles."

"Yes, but we must travel as light as we can," added Finn. "How long do you reckon this is going to take us?"

"That depends a little on Leng Cheng," answered Jones. "If he's not troublesome we ought to be back here some time to-morrow."

"Ah, that's a pretty big 'if'," commented Finn. "Well, we'll have to carry enough food for the journey — —"

"Why not take the lot?"

"Because, for one thing, we ought to travel light, as I said, and, for another, if we lose our paraphernalia by any chance, it won't harm having a bit of food waiting for us in the boat."

"You've really got some sense," exclaimed Jones, admiringly.

"I'm beginning to think I've got more sense than even you," replied Finn, grinning. "Suppose you parcel out the food, while I fill the bottles?"

They spent a profitable half-hour on the bank. In that short time, they had refreshed themselves, both by eating and bathing, had completed all preparations for their journey, and had shoved the boat under a roof of foliage which effectively concealed it from view. They left enough food in the boat to last them for three days—the length of the journey back to Li Ho's house, if they took it. They carried enough food for another three days. That should be ample. And, having drunk their fill from the spring, they replenished their water-bottles, and dismissed the traveller's greatest dread—the dread of thirst.

The morning was still young when they turned their faces towards the north-east, and although the way was not easy, they walked with relish after their three days and nights cooped in a small boat. A vague, indefinite path soon developed through a valley, and for two or three miles they made good progress. Then the valley rose, unable any longer to find a way through the crude undulations, and the men began a stiff ascent.

The ascent lasted an hour. At the top, confusing, argumentative slopes swept down into the next dip, only to quarrel upwards again beyond. There was no path now. Their only guide was their compass. Down they strode, and up they crawled. And so the day wore on.

At noon they rested. They were tired, and had not slept for eighteen hours. As far as they could calculate, they had covered seven miles, and only another three lay before them.

They were now on a sheltered height, and below them was a great valley, partially covered with forest. Somewhere in that valley, hidden from their sight, was the cave wherein Buddha's expensive eyes flashed.

"Not much more," grunted Jones. "I think we've earned an hour or two."

“Dead sure we have,” replied Finn, stretching himself on the ground. “Good-night.”

They slept for more than an hour or two. They might have slept all round the clock. But suddenly Finn sat up with a start.

“Hallo!” he exclaimed. “What . . . ?”

He broke off. A figure stood before him. A little, precise, sedate figure, quietly watching him with calm, expressionless eyes.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

For a second Finn stared at the little Chinaman, who was so close that his shadow fell across the Australian's knees. Then still a little bemused from his heavy sleep and this sudden apparition, he exclaimed:

"Hallo!"

Finn spoke in a loud voice, partly to give him back his sense of security, and partly to awaken Jones. Jones stirred but did not wake. The Chinaman did not reply.

"Don't suppose he can understand me," thought Finn, but he tried again. "I say, can you tell me how far it is to the nearest village?"

He again spoke loudly, as though volume would increase intelligibility, and this time his voice penetrated into Jones's dreams. Jones rolled over, and opened an eye. The Chinaman transferred his gaze at the movement.

"He *can't* understand," concluded Finn, and enquired, with a sudden grin: "How's your grandmother?"

"Dead," replied the Chinaman. "Obliged."

Finn's grin faded, and Jones sat bolt upright.

"Eh? What's that?" blinked Jones.

"My grandmother dead," answered the Chinaman. "I tell him."

Finn reddened slightly under his tan.

"Oh, so you understand our lingo?" he demanded. "I didn't know — —"

"Yes, speak English," nodded the Chinaman. "Your grandmother? She velly well?"

"Splendid," murmured Finn, glancing at Jones.

Jones glanced back, but he did not interfere yet. He was trying to get his bearings. Meanwhile the little Chinaman nodded again, and said:

"Velly glad. Velly glad. And you?"

"If you're enquiring about our own health," responded Finn, "there's nothing wrong with us, either. Only, you know, we've come a long way."

"It must be," returned the Chinaman, looking at their dusty clothes. "Tired?"

"Very. It's not very easy travelling over these mountains of yours."

"So you come over mountains?"

"That's right."

"Where you come from?"

Jones chipped in, at last.

"Where are we coming *to*, that's more to the point," he interposed.

The dawn of the Chinaman's first smile appeared on his lips. He turned to Jones, who had risen and was now on his feet, and observed, complacently:

"You tell me one, I tell you other."

It was rather an anxious moment. How much should they tell? Was it a good exchange? As Jones hesitated, Finn took up the rôle of spokesman again, and chanced it.

"We've come up the river," he said. "A long way—a hundred miles."

Jones was trying to make signs to him, but they were ineffective. The Chinaman was too watchful.

"Oh, the river?" queried the Chinaman, and pointed. "Over there?"

Finn nodded, and felt that perhaps he had been just a little hasty.

"You come alone?" proceeded the Chinaman.

"Yes."

In his mind, Jones cursed his companion, though he could not have said how he would have answered the question.

“How you come?”

“I say, you’re asking a lot of questions, aren’t you?” demanded Jones, trying to regain control of the conversation.

“How you come?” repeated the Chinaman.

“Well, you don’t expect we swam, do you?” said Finn. “How does one generally come along a river?”

“In a boat,” nodded the Chinaman. “You left your boat down there?”

“No, it’s in my knapsack,” answered Jones.

The little Chinaman turned his head, regarded Jones serenely, and then turned back to Finn.

“Your friend—he funny?” he remarked.

Jones now reddened slightly under his tan, while Finn, for the sake of future relationships, defended him.

“Oh, come now,” he urged, “you are asking a lot of questions, you know! And one can’t travel in a boat over mountains. Of course, we’ve left our boat in the river.”

“Obliged,” replied the Chinaman. “Someone might take boat back. But that not so. Presently, you go back to boat. Obligated. Why you come?”

Finn looked at Jones, almost appealingly. Jones’s mind had been busy during the last few seconds. Why had they come? He had expected this question. Was the story they had decided on the best one?

And, suddenly, Jones decided that it was not, and chose another.

“Well, I can soon tell you that,” he said. “But, before I do, I want to ask *you* a question or two. Now, you don’t mind, do you?”

“Ask,” observed the Chinaman, in a tone in no way committing himself to answer.

“Well, first thing—are you a Christian?”

The Chinaman raised his head a little, and, for the first time, appeared to take Jones seriously. Something live crept into his eyes, almost as though a match had been put to a laid fire.

“Why you ask that?” he enquired.

Now Jones hesitated. Jones was playing his part quite well—to make up for his poor beginning. He frowned, and shot an enquiring glance at Finn. Finn, quite at sea, pretended to be busy with a tickle on his nose.

“Oh, I expect we’ve got to risk it,” muttered Jones, still frowning. “Only—we’ve met Chinamen who *were* Christians, you know—and got into hot water with them—haven’t we, Ted?”

“Hot water?” queried the Chinaman.

“Yes. Into trouble. You see—just as some of you people believe in our religion, so some of our people believe in yours. Get me?”

“I see,” nodded the Chinaman. “Velly well. I no Christian. Christian God, He no good. He let his people kill.”

“Ah, and you wouldn’t do that?” exclaimed Jones, with a not wholly simulated eagerness.

“I kill?” He smiled. “Life—it is nothing! A moment. I kill for Buddha. For nothing else.”

Jones’s hope was dissipated.

“But Buddha doesn’t like killing at all,” he murmured, “so how could you kill, even for him?”

The Chinaman drew himself up. Although small, he now appeared, oddly, to have gained height.

"You hear," he said with simple dignity. "Christian man, he say he no kill. But Christian man kill a man who kill his wife, his child. Velly good. I say, like Christian man, I no kill. I no kill for wife or child. Only for Buddha." He paused, then repeated: "Only for Buddha. For Buddha, I kill all."

Jones's eye wandered from the Chinaman for a moment, and his hand touched his revolver pocket. It would be very simple to send this man post haste to his Nirvana! But Jones had shot a magpie, and that had given him quite enough trouble. So, instead of shooting the Chinaman, he affected to agree with him.

"You're right," he said. "And we're lucky to have fallen in with you. Now, I'll tell you about us—though I dare say you've already guessed it. We—my friend there and I—aren't Christians. We're sick of Christianity. We've had about enough of it."

"So?"

"Yes, we have. And what we're interested in is your Buddhism."

"So?" said the Chinaman again.

"How I'd like to wring his little neck!" thought Jones; but aloud he said: "Now, you've already taught us a bit more than we knew, and we're very much obliged to you. Why, the whole reason we've come along here—and this is the answer to all your questions—is to learn a bit more of your wonderful Buddha. We believe he's got the hang of things. Don't we, Ted? And, say, we've been told that there's a temple somewhere about here, but we got lost, and I expect it's a tremendous way off."

The Chinaman's face grew more interested. Jones ran on:

"What we'd really like is for you to direct us to this temple—they say it's a cave in a rock. The whole idea just appeals to us. We want to spread the religion a bit in our own country, you see—but we've got to get to the heart of it first, or the people at home won't believe us."

The Chinaman nodded.

"You heard of the temple—where?" he enquired.

"A man we met in a village a long way off," replied Jones, promptly. "We don't know his name, or anything about him, but he was the fellow who really fired us—though of course we'd thought of it before."

"That's right," said Finn, noticing Jones's eyes upon him. "We've read all the books."

"If you can't tell us where this temple is—though I expect you can," added Jones, "maybe you could direct us to a priest we've heard of—"

"No priests," interposed the Chinaman. "Every Buddhist his own priest."

"Eh? Oh, I'd forgotten that. Well, anyway, this man's name is Leng Cheng. Do you know him?"

"Oh, yes," nodded the Chinaman. "Leng Cheng—he live by temple. Spend all his time there."

"Do you mean, he never comes out of the temple?" asked Finn.

"Oh, yes. Sometimes. When he see strangers on the mountains. I am Leng Cheng."

"You Leng Cheng?" cried Jones. "Why, then—you can take us to the temple!"

"Oh, yes. Down there."

He pointed down into the valley.

"And, will you?" asked Jones.

The Chinaman looked down the valley. Then he turned, and looked in the opposite direction, towards the mountain peaks. He moved a little way off, and stood so motionless that they thought he had fallen into a trance. During this brief respite, Jones and Finn exchanged glances. Each noted that sweat had suddenly appeared on the other's brow.

Again, Jones's hand made a slight movement towards his revolver. The movement was instinctive rather than deliberate, and was so slight that it was hardly perceptible. But Finn

perceived it, and his hand went to *his* revolver.

“No—I’m not going to,” muttered Jones.

“Damn well don’t!” Finn muttered back. “We don’t know what’s waiting for us down in that valley!”

Jones nodded and looked at Finn quizzically.

“You must back me up in this, you know,” he said.

“Well, I am, aren’t I?” retorted Finn. “But it’s not easy to turn Buddhist all of a sudden!”

“Sh!” whispered Jones, as the Chinaman turned, and began to walk back to them.

He came back slowly, his eyes on the ground. When he reached the two men, he began to raise his eyes, but they halted at Jones’s feet. A little packet had slipped out of Jones’s knapsack, and lay on the ground.

It was the packet containing the two imitation rubies.

The Chinaman’s eyes bored into the parcel for a few seconds, then ascended to Jones’s face.

“Come,” he said. “I take you to Buddha’s temple.”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

They began the descent into the valley, and this last, short stage of their journey took on an entirely new character. The change was both psychological and physical.

Behind them, and far beyond the valley, as far as eye could reach, the country was remorseless and barren. It offered no invitation to man, suggested no reward for man's endeavour. But here, on their downward path, green things sprouted, the trees were gracious, and did not hold one off, the contours were more rounded, and a great white cliff, gleaming like a great white jewel below, was crowned with rich verdure.

But the psychological change was even more marked. The two men were now being led, and their will-power was weakening. Where Leng Cheng went, they would follow. When he stopped, they would stop. What he told them to do, they felt certain they would do. Not their will-power, but only the creation of some intolerable situation, would break them from their spell.

Leng Cheng, had he been asked to expound a theory, and had he consented, might have attributed whatever influences were abroad to Buddha. A Western mind, on the other hand, could have supplied plenty of lesser, more definite causes. When we first became acquainted with Jones and Finn, they had already suffered many privations, and the trials of the past few weeks were telling upon them heavily. Each healthy reaction was for a shorter period than the last, and was more easily disturbed. Their present rôles of potential Buddhists confused their minds. And those unpleasant moments when Leng Cheng had fixed his eyes upon the little packet containing Buddha's sham ones, had shaken them badly.

Of course there could be nothing in this incident! So each man assured himself a dozen times, on that downward march. All the same, they would have given much to have been able to wipe the incident out. It certainly added its contribution to their general uneasiness.

Half-way down the valley, Leng Cheng paused, and turned.

"Valley of Buddha," he announced, almost like a Cook's guide. "Buddha velly good to his people. Look!"

He spread his arms out, to embrace the fairness of the valley. Jones and Finn nodded, and stared around them solemnly.

"Buddha certainly looks after you here," commented Jones.

"Sort of a god, isn't he?" said Finn, vaguely.

"No god," replied Leng Cheng, shaking his head.

"Just Buddha."

"That's right," interposed Jones, studious to cover up any too great a display of ignorance. "But you pray to him don't you?"

"Yes. We pray." About to proceed, the Chinaman desisted, until a toad had hopped out of his path. "You been toad one day, perhaps. Perhaps not. One day, you be toad. Perhaps not."

"Well, I hope not," exclaimed Jones.

"Then no kill toad—no walk on him," responded Leng Cheng, resuming his way. "And pray before Buddha."

They were now nearly at the bottom. The white cliff had become several sizes larger, and a tiny black point had grown into a big hole. Assumedly, the entrance to a cave.

"I say," called Jones suddenly. "Is that where the old—is that Buddha's cave?"

If Leng Cheng heard, he did not answer. He continued walking at a steady pace. Possibly he considered an answer unnecessary, as he was heading direct for the hole.

On their left, through a little clearing, a cluster of low huts suddenly appeared. There were some thirty of them. Farther along the valley, considerably farther than the white cliff, was another smudge of huts. The valley appeared to be fairly well populated, yet they did not meet a soul. A hundred yards from the cliff, Jones ventured another question.

"Where are all the people?" he asked.

"They pray," answered Leng Cheng, without turning his head. "We pray, too."

Finn made a grimace at his partner.

"S'pose we've got to go through with it," he murmured. "Keep in a good temper for a bit."

"That's the idea," answered Jones. "But I'll be glad when we're through with it."

"Well, it can't be long now."

"No. And, in a couple of minutes, we're going to *see* the things we're after!"

They reached the entrance to the temple, and blinked in its brilliance. The sun blazed upon it, and there was no shadow save that in the entrance. The men noted, too, that there was no vegetation of any kind before the entrance, and they recalled the information, given to them by Li Ho, that Buddhists cleared the ground before their temples, so that their feet might crush no insects on their way to prayer.

Outside the entrance Leng Cheng stopped.

"Now you see Buddha," he said simply. "To know nothing—that is evil. Buddha knows everything. And now you see him."

He went in. They followed. The transition from brilliant light to utter darkness was bewildering, for the darkness seemed to rise up and strike them. Finn thought he would suffocate.

But—was the dark utter? Two pin-points of light shone through the blackness, two little holes in the cave, doubtless, a long way off. No, after all, they were not holes in the cave. A little daylight was coming from somewhere above. From a cleft in the roof, possibly. Those bright points, however, seemed to emit their own lustre, flashing deep rose, now red . . .

"By Jove!" murmured Finn. "Buddha's eyes!"

Instinctively he stepped closer to Jones. Jones, also, was staring at Buddha's eyes. He, like Finn, was a little awed at their mission. Had those eyes been lying on a Bond Street jeweller's tray, the task of filching them would have needed comparatively little nerve; but to filch them out of the sockets of that grim, shadowy figure to which they now gave such grotesque sight—that was a very different matter!

Their guide had stopped. Between them and the statue of Buddha, forty or fifty figures were squatting. Their hands were clasped in prayer, and they were motionless.

Leng Cheng turned his head slightly. The men understood what they were expected to do. They knelt down, and, as best they could, adopted the postures of the strange congregation. Leng Cheng knelt also.

And now came a period as trying as any they had suffered up till then. These Buddhists were in no hurry to leave, and, without permission, the Australians felt they could not do so. Moreover, the eyes of Buddha held them, claiming their attention both spiritually and materially. There was no practical incentive to leave the temple, yet both men were bitten with a longing to escape from it.

As once before, Finn felt a desire to shout, to make some demonstration: but, also as before, he realised the futility of any such procedure. Minutes dragged by. The minutes became hours. How long was this going on?

Leng Cheng, at their side, never turned to look at them, but they were sure he would have been conscious of the slightest movement either had made to depart. They were also sure that he would, by some means, have prevented their departure. Their limbs grew stiff, and their

minds numb. Once Finn almost laughed hysterically, as he pictured them back in Sydney, trying to convert Australia to Buddhism!

Presently—after two hours or six?—a figure rose, and slipped away. Finn sighed with relief. But his relief came too soon. One more figure left, but the rest remained. Evidently, there was no definite moment of conclusion, as there is at Christian worship.

More time rolled by. Then another figure melted away, then three figures. The tune of “*Ten Little Nigger Boys*” floated through Finn’s mind.

“Don’t these people have regular times for meals?” he wondered. “I don’t see why there shouldn’t be regularity, even in Buddhism!”

But the worshippers were departing more rapidly now. Six got up in a bunch, and the hearts of the two strangers in the temple rejoiced. Then three went, then a couple, then five. And, at last, the cave was clear of all save the two Australians and Leng Cheng.

“Now what’s going to happen?” wondered Finn.

Leng Cheng rose, and turned to them. This was his first sign of recognition since he had knelt down.

“Don’t you wait for us,” said Jones suddenly. His voice resounded hollowly through the cave. “We’d like to stay here, and pray some more.”

“Yes, we would,” agreed Finn, emphatically.

“So! You find Buddha good?” queried Leng Cheng.

“Some wonder!” replied Jones.

“How long you stay?” asked the Chinaman.

“Oh—another hour or two, at least,” answered Jones. “P’r’aps longer.”

“Velly good,” nodded Leng Cheng. “As long as you like.”

He walked a little way off, and sat down right under the statue of Buddha. Jones snapped his teeth in annoyance.

“What—are *you* going to stay too?” he demanded.

“I stay,” said Leng Cheng.

“But—it’s not necessary,” frowned Jones.

“Not for us, you know,” urged Finn.

“I stay,” said the Chinaman. “I stay all the time.”

They could not see his face, but they felt he was smiling through the darkness. The daylight that filtered from above was paling now, and soon it would be utterly dark.

“You pray, soon, I pray again with you.”

Jones swore softly under his breath. He was nonplussed. Finn tried a new tack.

“See here, Mr. Cheng,” he said, persuasively, “I know just how you feel, and it’s very nice, the way you’re looking after us. But me and my friend here are new to this game—don’t you see? We feel we’d get into touch with Buddha better if we prayed alone a little. Do you get what I mean?”

“Oh, yes,” nodded Leng Cheng. “But, just the same, no difference.”

“It mayn’t be different to you, but it is to us. We’re new, I tell you. We want to get right inside Buddha’s heart . . .”

“Get inside your heart,” replied Leng Cheng. “Then you get inside Buddha’s heart. Pray now. Soon we pray together.”

Jones tugged Finn’s coat, and they walked a little way off.

“This is no good,” he whispered. “He’s too wide awake.”

“Yes, confound him,” answered Finn. “Bet he’s watching us hard at this moment. What had we better do?”

“Quit.”

“What?”

“Only for an hour or two. Then we’ll come back—to pray if he’s awake, and to—do something else if he’s asleep.”

“Right,” nodded Finn. “I could do with a breath of fresh air.”

They moved to go, but a figure suddenly glided ahead of them. Leng Cheng had exchanged his place beneath the statue for the cave exit. They saw his queer little form silhouetted against the dying day outside.

“Hey! What did you do that for?” cried Jones.

“For Buddha,” answered the Chinaman.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

"Steady, there—steady!" shouted Finn, as Jones, in a sudden fury, raised his revolver.

"He no shoot," said Leng Cheng placidly. "Too much noise. Bring everyone here velly quick."

"Don't be too sure I won't shoot!" answered Jones, angrily. "What's the idea? Are you trying to imprison us?"

The Chinaman made a deprecating gesture.

"You asked to come here," he said. "I bring you here. If you learn from Buddha, you stay longer with Buddha. Little time, no good."

He delivered this statement of the case in a thin, precise voice which suggested that there could be no further argument.

"I see what you mean," replied Finn, shoving Jones back. "But you've not got this right, you know. We want to stay here, but we also want a little air."

Leng Cheng remained adamant.

"Buddha give you plenty air in a little while," he observed. "But, now, Buddha very serious. Buddha think you a sham. So you must stay and pray to Buddha. Velly solly."

Jones was about to offer further protests, but Finn took hold of his arm and began to pull him away.

"Well, we'll think about it," Finn said. "We're not made quite the same as you, you must remember, and can't get the hang of your ways all at once. We'll have a chat, my friend and me. We surely don't want to offend Buddha."

He lugged Jones off, leading him to a far end of the cave. Here, Jones rounded on him angrily.

"Why the devil do you interfere with everything I say and do?" he asked, in a fierce, low voice.

"I'll tell you, if you want to know," answered Finn, quietly. "It's because you let me. You're frightened of your own rashness! And, look here—you're *right* to be afraid."

Jones sulked, knowing Finn's words to be true.

"Why, you could have rushed that chap, as easy as winking," continued Finn. "We may have to do so yet. But you didn't. Not because I stopped you. Because—" he paused "—because you were *afraid* to."

"And you weren't, I suppose?" suggested Jones, sarcastically.

"That's where you're wrong again," retorted Finn. "I'm as scared of that feller as you are. That's why we've got to have a little chat before we go any further."

"Well, go on," said Jones. "No harm in talking, any way. What's your idea of the position?"

"I've got two ideas—and how we act depends upon which idea is right. Old Cheng wants to keep us here because he really thinks we will make his precious Buddha angry if we don't humiliate ourselves before him. *Or*—he wants to keep us here because he suspects our game."

"How should he suspect our game?" asked Jones.

"Ah, there we can only guess," answered Finn, with a frown. "But we don't know how long he was standing over us on the mountain before we woke up. He might have been there quite a while."

"He might. What of it?"

"That little packet of yours might have rolled out of your knapsack before he arrived. And—he might have examined it."

Jones swore.

"I never thought of that," he muttered. "The sly devil! You mean he may have brought us here—and is just testing us."

"Exactly. And it's because of that possibility," returned Finn, "that I wanted this little chat with you. If he is testing us, we'll beat him at his own game. Cheat the Chinese at slyness, eh? I look at it this way. He's got no positive evidence against us yet. Well, we won't give him any—not until *we* choose the moment, that is. We'll go and kneel before Buddha. We'll be very sorry for our naughtiness. Then we'll stay in this blasted hole with Leng Cheng till he goes to sleep. And, if he won't go to sleep, we'll put him to sleep. Quietly. No shooting. No killing. Li Ho's method. But first, we've got to win Leng Cheng over again."

Jones revolved these suggestions in his mind. He could think of none better. Once they left the cave, they might not be able to re-enter it; and, while they were in it, they must retain Leng Cheng's confidence until they were ready to get out of it for good. Yes, that was obvious.

"Well," asked Finn, "am I right, or not?"

"You're right," said Jones. "Let's go and humiliate ourselves."

They returned to the Chinaman. He did not appear to be taking any notice of them, but they guessed he was watching them closely.

Jones, as the principal aggressor, had to pose as the principal penitent. He hated the rôle, but had enough sense to perform it to the best of his ability.

"See here," he said, "we're sorry. We've had our chat, and I'm sorry I lost my temper."

"Tell Buddha," replied Leng Cheng.

"Oh, yes—I'm going to," responded Jones, his voice quiet, but his heart furious. "Only I thought I'd tell you first. And if Buddhism is all me and my friend think it is, it won't be hard on two travellers who are tired and hungry—and also who don't quite understand your ways yet."

"That's right," agreed Finn. "We've got a lot to learn."

"Buddha will teach you," remarked the Chinaman. "I servant of Buddha."

On the point of turning towards the statue—the statue which they hated yet coveted—Jones suddenly asked:

"Say, aren't you going to pray with us?"

"Soon, I pray," nodded Leng Cheng. "You kneel, and no move. Pray one hour. Pray all the time. Then perhaps Buddha forgive you."

Feeling like whipped schoolboys, they walked to the foot of the statue, and knelt down. Their attitudes were devout, but their thoughts were evil. Did Buddha's eyes see them as they knelt there? They certainly were conscious of Buddha's eyes!

This hour they found worse than the preceding hours. Then they had prayed in company, and felt more like spectators than actors. Now, the stage was empty but for them. They were the actors, with Buddha and Leng Cheng as their audience.

"If ever I had any real leanings towards Buddhism," thought Jones, "this will cure me!"

"I wonder what sort of a chap this Buddha really was," thought Finn. "P'r'aps he was a real good 'un. I don't like this much. But we've got to go through with it now—of course, we have—and afterwards, with my five thousand pounds, I'll start a little business, and marry, and cut all this sort of thing out. Yes, and I'll go to Church, so I will. Many a good churchgoer hasn't begun too well. Why, they say Napoleon's buried in some wonderful tomb, and we all know what he was, and Nelson didn't stick to his wife—that's one thing I swear I'll do—yes, I'll go to Church regularly, and I'll see that my children go, too—"

A queer, disturbing vision flashed into his mind. He saw himself in Church, with a pretty wife and a pew full of children, and just ahead of them were two Chinamen, pretending to pray, but with their covetous eyes on the Church ornaments . . .

"If I had a big hammer," thought Jones, "nothing would give me greater satisfaction, Mr. Buddha, than to hammer your face in."

"Ah, but that's a bit different, isn't it?" thought Finn, trying to dismiss his uncomfortable vision.

"Only, of course, I'd look after your eyes for you," went on Jones.

The reflections of both men were momentarily disturbed by the sensation of a presence immediately behind them.

"My God!" thought Finn, quite unconscious of his anachronism. "Here comes that damned Chink!"

"Yes, and I'd like to smash you, too, my friend," thought Jones.

"I wonder if that chap can pierce my thoughts through the back of my head?" reflected Finn. "I'm done if he can! Wonderful Buddha, splendid Buddha, oh, how I love thee, Buddha, great and wonderful Buddha!"

"What's that ass mumbling," thought Jones. "I reckon he's going dotty."

The daylight had now faded utterly, and there was no light at all. Even Buddha's eyes were blotted out. A new, disturbing thought came to the men. How, without illumination, were they going to operate?

Presently, this wonder was answered. They were conscious of a faint glow above them. It was, at first, unexplainable. It was as though someone had switched on an electric light which shone dimly through a heavily-frosted silver bulb. The glow grew. Glancing up covertly, Finn now saw a brilliant silver gleam high up on the cave wall. Then he understood. The moon was rising.

The light now increased steadily, though it never flooded the cave. It picked out points, for its unnatural brilliance, in obedience to the configuration of the concealed hole through which it entered. Presently, it picked out the face of Buddha.

"Here—let's get this over," thought Finn.

The sudden appearance of Buddha's face, ghastly white saving for the two gleaming points of deep-red fire, unnerved him more than anything else had done. He discovered himself clammy with perspiration.

Jones, by his side, felt little better. Subconsciously, his fingers moved towards his revolver. Then he stifled a gasp. It was gone.

Finn, trembling alert, sensed that something was wrong. He turned his head, and saw the position of Jones's hand. Suddenly, he felt his own pocket. His revolver was gone also.

For several minutes after their unwelcome discovery, neither of the men stirred a muscle. They knew now that Leng Cheng definitely mistrusted them, that he had mistrusted them all along, and that, while he had ostensibly been praying behind them, he had taken their weapons. Doubtless his creed would prevent him from using the weapons, though even on that point the men could not be sure. If Leng Cheng had it firmly fixed in his mind that an attack on Buddha was in project, he might adopt the military maxim that the best form of defence is attack. And he had the means wherewith to attack.

"Death or glory!" muttered Jones suddenly, and rose. His hand was now groping in another pocket, and with a pang of relief he assured himself that this pocket had not been tampered with. Since it was an inside waistcoat pocket, this was not so surprising.

"So you've taken our pistols," he said, quietly.

Finn was now on his feet, also, his heart beating rapidly.

"Yes—I take them," came a voice, from a dark corner.

"Well, you can keep them," answered Jones. "We're converted all right. We don't want them."

"So," came the voice from the dark corner.

“Yes, and to prove it, I’ll give you the only other murderous thing I’ve got on me—a bottle of poison. My pal and I were going to take it ourselves, if we fell into the hands of any Chinese torturers. *All* the Chinese haven’t your ideas, you know.”

“Velly true,” agreed Leng Cheng, and slipped out of the shadows.

“That’s right—keep me covered,” nodded Jones. “I’d rather you did—till we’ve proved ourselves.” He held out his hand with something in it. “If I move while you take this, or if my friend moves, shoot me. You’ve my full permission, and you’ll have Buddha’s blessing.”

Leng Cheng’s expressionless face entered a ray of moonlight. He advanced with incredible swiftness. In his right hand, the revolver was levelled at Jones’s heart. His left hand was stretched out to take what Jones was offering him.

Their hands met. Jones’s hand tightened for an instant over Leng Cheng’s. The Chinaman became stiff and rigid, as motionless as the statue of Buddha.

“Got him!” gasped Jones.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

"Now, then—quick's the game!" muttered Jones, who was holding the rigid form of the Chinaman, to prevent it from falling. "Come along—help me with this!"

"Where—where are you going to put him?" stammered Finn.

"On the ground. Anywhere," snapped Jones. "Hurry!"

Finn advanced a step, then hesitated.

"I suppose he's right off? Can't see us, or anything?"

"Of course he's right off. I pricked him properly. Still, there's no knowing how long the thing'll last, so p'r'aps we'd better stow him somewhere well out of the way."

"There's a corner over there," suggested Finn. "Even if he has got one eye open, he won't be able to spot us while we—"

"Shut up!" growled Jones, as they began to carry the Chinaman to the spot. "He may have one ear open!"

They sat Leng Cheng down in an angle of the rock, well away from the statue. He assumed a sitting position, with his eyes staring straight ahead of him.

"You don't suppose we've killed him, do you?" said Finn.

"No, I don't," answered Jones. "That stuff doesn't kill—so Li Ho told us. It can put you to sleep for a hell of a time, though."

"I don't want any killing," muttered Finn.

"Oh, come on!" cried Jones. "Let's get to it!"

They returned to the statue and stared up at it. It stood—or rather sat—on a raised platform of rock, its feet several inches above the men's heads. It was about double life-size. The glittering eyes were some fifteen feet above the ground.

"This isn't going to be an easy climb," commented Finn.

"Well, thank goodness, we've got the moon to help us," answered Jones. "But for that, we'd be dished . . . And the moonlight may go, before we know it!"

They started to clamber up the rock. Finn slipped down twice, Jones once. It took them two minutes to reach the platform.

"Any need for us both to climb up him?" queried Finn.

"Of course," replied Jones. "Don't be a fool! There are two eyes to work on, aren't there? Do you suppose they're going to drop out in our hands?"

"All right, all right, keep your wool on," frowned Finn. "I'll chip out the right eye, and you chip out the left." He gripped hold of the statue's knee before hauling himself up again. "Good thing he's got his arms bent—they'll make nice seats."

"Yes, it almost looks as though the old gentleman expected our coming," answered Jones. "Wait a bit—take one of these."

He fumbled in his pocket—again the inside waistcoat pocket—and produced one of the imitation rubies. In addition, each man was equipped with a small chisel, and some adhesive solution which, Li Ho had assured them, was so strong that it would even hold the East and the West together.

Buddha proved easier to climb than the rocky pedestal on which he was stationed. In a minute, both men had attained positions from which they could reach the coveted eyes. As their fingers touched them, each man received a thrill. The thrill of money madness.

"My God, we've got 'em," chuckled Jones, with the reckless greed of a child.

"I'm touching twenty-five thousand pounds," chattered Finn.

Possibly, for a brief second after that, both of them hesitated, but it was not for more than a second. As Jones had said a few minutes earlier, it was now death or glory, and man chooses the glory when he can, even if there is blood upon it, or if it stabs at the spirit. For a breathless spell the chisels worked. In the ears of the men who used them, they set up a terrific bombardment. Once or twice they stopped and glanced anxiously towards the entrance to the cave.

"Nice thing if we're heard," muttered Jones.

"Or if one of 'em takes it in his mind to come back to pray," added Finn.

"Hey! Stop that!" exclaimed Jones with a shudder.

They fell to their work again. The moonlight began to fade—and they had to climb down again. They worked feverishly.

"Got him!" gurgled Finn suddenly.

"Dead Heat," whispered Jones, hysterically. "Got mine too."

Into their pockets slipped the real rubies, and out came the sham ones. Li Ho's mucilage proved all he had promised. In less than sixty seconds after Buddha's old eyes had been removed, his new ones had been provided for him. He was not kept blind long.

"Well, I'm damned—who'll guess?" exclaimed Jones.

"Couldn't tell the difference," answered Finn. "Is yours in good and firm?"

"Yes. And yours?"

"Safe as houses. Come on—let's get down, and out of this. Moonlight'll be gone before we know it."

They were about to descend, when Finn gasped.

"Someone's coming!" he chattered.

In real terror, the men crouched low. They lay flat along the statue's bent arms, which, happily for them, were now in shadow. Only the upper half of the statue's face was illuminated.

A figure slipped into the cave. Without pausing it moved to the foot of the statue, and knelt down, with a bowed head.

"If he prays for more than two minutes," thought Finn, aghast, "I'm done, sure! I can't hang on for more than that."

The worshipper stayed for half-an-hour. Every now and then, he cast up his eyes for an instant, and then cast them down again. These moments were moments of perfect agony for the intruders. Buddha showed a strange charity in concealing those who had despoiled him—a charity which the real Buddha might perhaps have shown to erring ones.

The agony ended at last. The silent worshipper rose, and left the cave as swiftly as he had entered it, with a serenity in his soul which contrasted significantly with the state of the souls he had so unconsciously disturbed.

"Whew!" mumbled Jones, when the figure had departed.

"I don't mind admitting," gasped Finn, "I'm dripping."

They slid down to the platform. "Well, there's one thing we've learned, anyway," said Jones, as he lowered himself from the final stage to the ground. "Buddha's new eyes have passed the test."

"Do you realise," remarked Finn, "that if that chap had come a minute earlier—Buddha would have had no eyes!"

They were on the floor of the cave again. Involuntary sighs of relief escaped them. They began to move towards the cave's exit.

"I say," whispered Finn, pausing. "Hadn't we better wait a few moments, just to be sure we've given that fellow outside a proper start?"

"Lord, are we *ever* going to get out?" exclaimed Jones. But he agreed with Finn. "And here's another thing we've forgotten," he exclaimed, abruptly.

"What's that?"

"Why—the pistols."

"Lord! So we have!"

Finn made a grimace. This meant another interview with Leng Cheng, and the prospect was not particularly pleasant. However, there was no alternative. It would be madness to depart without their pistols.

They found Leng Cheng sitting just as they had left him. He still stared stiffly in front of him, his eyes wide open; and even though they knew the eyes were unseeing, they kept out of his direct line of vision.

It was Jones who crept up to that now helpless form, and who took back their lost property. He handed one of the revolvers to Finn, and played speculatively with the other, staring at Leng Cheng the while as though turning something over in his mind.

"What's up, now?" demanded Finn. "Come along, for the Lord's sake!"

"I'm just wondering," replied Jones without moving.

"What are you wondering?"

"I'm wondering how soon that chap will wake up—and what he'll do when he does wake up?"

Finn made an impatient gesture.

"What's the good of guessing?" he barked. "He may think we've just hooked it."

"He may," agreed Jones. "And he may find out why we've hooked it."

"All the more reason for us to clear away, then, and quit any more talking," interposed Finn. "We want as many miles as possible between us and that chap when he *does* wake up."

"Ah, now you've said it," nodded Jones, his fingers twitching on his revolver. "Shall we let him wake up?"

Finn rounded on him promptly.

"We don't want any of that," he said, and there was a sudden gleam in his eye which Jones did not notice.

"I'll swear there's no other person on God's earth," Jones went on, "who has any chance of finding out what we've done. Shut Cheng's mouth—and what stands between us and a cool fifty thousand pounds?"

"I do," said Finn.

Jones swung around. It occurred to him that Finn was serious.

"What's against the idea?" he asked.

"What I've said all along—that I'm not standing for murder in cold blood," returned Finn. "We're quite deep enough, you and me. We don't want to get any deeper."

"A bit free with that word 'we,' aren't you?" suggested Jones. "Speak for yourself, man."

"I'm speaking for both of us," retorted Finn. "Don't you make any mistake this time. We're going to leave Leng Cheng where he is. We're going back to our boat. And we're going to hand these rubies to Li Ho. Then he'll give us our money, and help us out of the country —"

"Very pretty," interrupted Jones, "only it doesn't happen to be good enough for me. Stand away, there—I'm going to shoot that Chinaman!"

"You're not!" cried Finn. "Is *all* your sense gone? The shot'll wake the whole district!"

"Damn! I'd forgotten that again," said Jones. "All right, I'll throttle him. I tell you, we can't risk having Leng Cheng at our heels."

He slipped his revolver into his pocket. He knew that Finn would not dare to fire, either. He advanced towards the Chinaman . . .

“Hey—what are you at?” he shouted.

For Finn had thrown himself upon Jones, and was wrenching him away.

“Get off me, get off me!” gasped Jones.

He struggled furiously, but Finn was fighting with all his strength. The final flicker of good in him had spluttered into an uncontrollable flame. To his rage and astonishment, Jones discovered that he was being dragged farther and farther away from his intended victim, and nearer and nearer to the cave’s exit.

Humiliation was mixed with his rage. Something burst in his brain. He saw red. Hardly knowing what he did, Jones groped for his inner waistcoat pocket—an easy matter, since the waistcoat was ripped open. The next moment, he found himself hugging a rigid form.

He let the form go. It slithered against a wall. He stared at it.

Then, with a frenzied sob, he rushed out of the Temple of Buddha, and sped up into the mountains.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

“Well—and what happened after that?” asked the artist.

For the Australian had paused in his narrative, as though the memory of that moment when he had fled in sudden terror from Buddha’s cave were shaking him.

Indeed, although Jones told his story in far less detail than has been set down here, the telling of it stirred him no less than it stirred his hearers for, while it gripped them, they lacked the narrator’s power of revisualisation. In the parlour of the Green Dragon, Jones lived again that fearful, awe-inspiring journey, and whereas at first he confined himself to bare facts, he found himself dwelling afterwards on descriptions and emotions, uncannily ignorant that, only a few feet away from him, Leng Cheng himself was listening quietly to every word.

Jim Cresswell, alone of those below, knew that the Chinaman was listening. This knowledge had at first been hideously disturbing, but now he hugged it to him with a sort of fierce gloating. Heaven knew in what particular form retribution would shortly descend, but a sensation was creeping over Jim that this queer Buddhist, who held sacred even the lives of worms and toads, would recoil from injuring innocent people, even though he might consider it a temporary necessity to make their flesh creep!

By this reasoning, his fears for Joyce were to a large extent modified.

A subtle change, too, had come over the artist’s sister. She had listened intently to every word spoken by the Australian, and more than once Jim had turned to her, and had noted a gleam of physical horror and repugnance in her eye. She hardly moved; her senses remained alert, but that little gleam bore its significance and had its practical value.

“She doesn’t like that blighter,” thought Jim, with satisfaction. “I can’t place her at all—but she has a standard, and this Australian fellow’s fallen below it!”

At odd moments, Jim watched the others too. Thrasher followed the story greedily, and with a certain grudging respect. The artist, also, seemed impressed with Jones’s prowess—of which Jones himself made more than a little. Finn, in Jones’s version, figured somewhat inconspicuously, although the scene in the cave was described rather more faithfully than the rest. It was almost as though, when reaching this part of the story, Jones felt the Buddha’s presence too blatantly before him.

“Eh? What happened after that?” said Jones, in response to the artist’s question. “Well—it’s a queer thing—but I couldn’t say, exactly.”

“A bit dazed, eh?” suggested the artist.

“That’s it,” nodded Jones. “Seems like a blank till I found myself halfway up the mountain path—the path that damned Chink had led us down. Then I stopped. You see—”

He paused again.

“Yes, I see,” said the girl. “You thought of Finn.”

“You’ve got me.”

“You wondered perhaps what would happen when he came to—or whether Leng Cheng would come to first?”

“Ah,” muttered Jones, suddenly seeing himself in rather a heroic light. “You’ve got me, exactly. Finn had acted like a fool, I had to keep him quiet somehow or other, didn’t I? But I felt a bit sorry for him, and after collecting my wits a bit—I went back.”

“What—went back to that damned cave?” exclaimed Thrasher.

“Yes, sir. When it came to the point, I didn’t quite like leaving him there, you see.”

“Perhaps you didn’t quite like leaving Buddha’s other eye there, either,” shot out Jim.

The girl’s lip curled into a slight smile at this thrust, and Jones frowned.

"Think what you like—it don't matter to me," he retorted. "I'm not here on trial. Anyway, I found it impossible to get back. A fellow was hanging about—that last fellow I expect, who'd gone in to pray. A bit too risky. I had to turn round again and make tracks for the boat as fast as I could."

"Then you don't know what happened to Finn?" asked the girl.

"No, I don't know," answered Jones. "I'd have saved him, of course, if I could have, but there wasn't any chance. If he woke up first—well, God help Finn!"

"I think *I'd* have gone back to get that other ruby, no matter what the risk had been," remarked Thrasher. "Why, it was a fortune you let go!"

"P'r'aps! But I'd got *one* fortune, and that was costing me quite enough, thanks," answered Jones, with a touch of sarcasm. "It's easy enough for you to say what *you'd* have done. You see, you didn't happen to be there. You've not *seen* the Chink."

"Quite true, quite true," murmured the artist. "He hasn't, but I have, and I am quite convinced—oh, yes, quite convinced—that nothing on this earth would have induced *me* to go back to that cave."

"Well, go on," interposed the girl. "Whatever happened to Finn is over and done with now. Probably Leng Cheng came to first and settled him, or Finn would have been chasing you at this moment I should think, after the way you treated him."

Jones smiled, rather sourly.

"After the way I treated him, eh?" he returned. "You talk like a silly novice! Say, you don't seem to belong to this game at all!"

"Oh, she belongs to it all right," observed Jim, dryly, "but I expect there's such a thing as honour even among thieves."

"Oh, shut up, there," barked Jones. "We'll deal with you in a minute." He turned back to the girl. "Finn didn't chase me, anyhow. Probably because, as you suggest, he couldn't. But Leng Cheng chased me. My God, he did! If you want the plain truth of the matter, I've not had a day's peace since I first heard of these damned rubies—and that's why I'm willing to do a deal with you."

"You've seen Leng Cheng since, then?"

"Seen him? Well—I suppose I have! But he's so slippery that I've scarcely got more than a glimpse. He could be standing right next to you and you'd never know it. Why, he might even be in here now, and we none the wiser!"

"A most unpleasant suggestion, my dear sir, most unpleasant," murmured the artist. "If he were here, I would not be, I assure you. But what makes you think he followed you, since he concealed himself so well?"

"There's such a thing as knowledge without evidence," replied Jones, after a short pause. "I got back to the boat somehow or other, and slipped out of the stream just as quick as I could. I was never two inches away from my revolver. All the way along the river I had the feeling I was being followed, and when I left the river—I didn't go back to Li Ho, you can be quite sure—and began my god-forsaken trek across country . . . Oh, well, why talk about it?"

"It might have been your imagination?" suggested the girl.

"So I kept on telling myself. Very likely it was. But when I got back into civilisation all sorts of things happened . . . He seems to get other people to work for him . . . His methods beat me altogether. Five times the ruby was nearly stolen from me. Last week, I did actually see the hateful little creature. And then—*your* gang got busy—and there you have my story up to date!"

There was a silence. Suddenly the Australian's features tightened, and he repeated in a harsh, domineering voice:

"Yes, that's my story. And now I reckon you've sized up the kind of fellow you're dealing with. What's *your* story? Are we together—or not?"

"Oh, our story is quite interesting," answered the artist, with a glance at his sister. "Yes, quite interesting. But I don't think it should be told in present company."

"I might insist," said the Australian.

"Oh, that *would* be a pity," protested the artist. "And after we're going to love each other so nicely! Believe me, it won't help matters to go into precise details at the moment." He turned his eyes significantly towards Jim, and then rolled them back to the Australian. "But this much I may say here—for I imagine it's fairly common property. A certain blind man—so called—put us on to your ruby. He paid a fellow to relieve you of it, relieved the fellow of it himself and then brought it here—for disposal along our usual lines."

"Yes," he continued, "and our usual lines *would* have been followed but for your annoying friend, Leng Cheng—and also our young friend here, who's been somewhat of a trial to us." He jerked his head again towards Jim. "May I ask, by the way, whether that charming sleeping draught is still in your possession?"

"No—worse luck," admitted the Australian. "I dropped the injector in the cave when I left it in too much of a hurry."

"That was certainly foolish. Leng Cheng may have picked it up."

"Quite likely."

"More than likely," said the artist, slowly. "Listen, I'll tell you something. I found the ruby here last night—under our young friend's pillow—you see, he relieved *us* of it—and I'd have taken it away but for the belief that the Chinaman was after me. Oh, I can be quite wise, I assure you. Quite wise. I hid the ruby here, somewhere, and now we have come back for it. But after I left the inn last night I imagine I fell asleep rather abruptly for an hour or two—yes, I quite imagine it. And I further imagine that, if I had not been so wise, and had had the ruby on me, it would *not* have been on me when I awoke."

"Why, that was Leng Cheng, of course!" cried the Australian. "God! Then he *is* here!"

"Undoubtedly it was Leng Cheng," murmured the artist, with a glance at the others. "It becomes more and more evident, does it not, that we must all work together?"

The Australian nodded. Perspiration had suddenly gathered on his brow.

"That's what I've said," he nodded. "That's what I'm proposing. If we split up, there's not much chance for any of us."

The artist looked at his sister. Jim noted that, although she often remained silent for long periods, no actual decision appeared to be made without reference to her. "I have done my part," her brother's expression said, "now, please, clinch the matter."

The girl regarded Jones coolly.

"You suggest we shall share the value of the ruby?" she asked.

"That's it, my girl."

She ignored the familiarity.

"You will take one third?"

"No! Half!"

"But there are many of us. We offer you a third."

"Oh, all right. Let it go. Only, in return, you help me to get rid of Leng Cheng."

The girl smiled. "Leng Cheng is already dead," she said quietly. "Drowned. My brother saw him."

Jones stared at her. Relief swept into his face, followed swiftly by angry avarice.

"Then you've tricked me!" he shouted. "By God, I'll show you—"

His murderous intention was obvious. The moment for him of all or nothing had arrived, and Jim suddenly hurled himself forward to intercept the bullet that was aimed at the girl's

breast.

But the bullet was not fired. As the Australian raised his hand, a pointed, gleaming thing flashed through the air. His hand was pierced and the revolver dropped to the floor.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The change wrought by that flashing dagger was as sweeping as it was instantaneous. Something wholly incredible, wholly unbelievable had happened, yet no one had to look upwards to know the cause of it. The dagger was Leng Cheng's as surely as though his name had been written on it.

Jones did not even cry out. Instinctively, he clutched the dagger handle and pulled the blade out, but his eyes were glazed with a horror more than physical. They remained fixed on the girl, but they saw things beyond her.

The girl herself was utterly bewildered. Staring at Jones, who a second ago had meant to put a bullet through her, she read the truth in his expression and in his bleeding hand. Her brother, after one swift glance at the landing, from which the dagger had come, sat down very promptly in a chair, while Thrasher and Mr. Abingdon were too shaken to do anything but gasp. Mr. Abingdon confessed afterwards, that by this time his mind was so dazed that it would hardly have responded had the floor opened and swallowed them all.

And the tramp, locked in the kitchen, chose this moment to raise his voice and bawl defiantly:—

“'Oo's mindin' of wot 'appens?
It's orl a blinkin' gime.
And when yer hin yer coffin
Yer'll be there jest the sime!”

Jim alone kept cool, for he alone had been prepared. He had the wit to notice that Jones's revolver had slid towards him and to pick it up. Not that he imagined the mere possession of a revolver would be able to affect the issue, for Leng Cheng appeared to him like Fate, performing the unalterable will of Buddha, or of an outraged magpie. Still, a revolver is a very comfortable possession, and to obtain it could do no harm.

As he picked it up the silence was broken, and Leng Cheng addressed the company, his voice as emotionless and as precise as though he were discussing the most ordinary matters.

“Leng Cheng not dead,” he observed. “But velly good to make people think so. Oh, yes. He take little bath.”

Then the Australian found his voice. He looked up and choked:

“What have you done?”

Jim stared at the Australian. Was this the same man speaking? The question, too, was odd, for the Australian's hand bore testimony to what Leng Cheng had done.

But the Chinaman understood.

“Not velly much. Just a little,” he answered, blandly. “You quiet soon.”

The Australian looked dazed, and suddenly crumpled up. This seemed to upset the artist, who rose from his chair abruptly and whipped out a handkerchief. He bound it tightly round the Australian's hand, while Alfred's voice again rose from the kitchen:

“Let 'em orl come, orl the lot,
Orl the blinkin' 'orrer.
If they slice yer inter bits
We'll orl be dead ter-morrer.”

The Chinaman was in no hurry. Perhaps he, too, felt that Fate had given him this moment, and that he could therefore pause to contemplate it without risk. His very confidence was

disarming and uncanny, for he did not even trouble to turn when the door opened behind him and Joyce stepped out into the passage.

"Thank God!" murmured Jim. A burst of laughter came from the tramp in the kitchen. Jim almost joined him.

"Why," bawled the tramp, "if I was ter see a seal wearin' yeller stockin's, I'd say, 'Tha's orl right—keep 'em on'!"

And then suddenly the girl gripped herself. She swung round and, raising her head in a rather pathetic attempt to retain her dignity, exclaimed:

"Well, Mr. Cheng! When are you going to say something? We're not your puppets!"

"Aren't we?" murmured Jim.

The Chinaman gazed down at the girl, and a little gleam came into his eyes.

"All puppets," he said softly. "Some *velly* good, some bad. You not so *velly* bad."

"Thank you!" retorted the girl, ungraciously.

"Velly silly, oh, yes, but not *velly* bad. You no steal Buddha's eye. So—I give *you* Buddha's eye." He actually smiled. "Come here."

The girl stared at him. All the others were staring, too. What had happened to Leng Cheng all of a sudden? As though to assure the company that he was serious, he slipped his fingers into a pocket, brought out a brilliant, deep red stone and held it up.

"My God!" muttered Jones, and made an impulsive movement; but no one else stirred.

"You afraid?" asked the Chinaman, his gaze still on the girl.

"If she is, I'm not!" roared Thrasher, suddenly waking up.

"Be careful!" warned the Australian, faintly.

"Oh, I reckon I'll be careful, all right!" retorted Thrasher, as he ran towards the stairs. He was making a superhuman effort at self-mastery, and the others watched him almost pityingly. Jim covered him.

He lumbered up the stairs, and as he drew near the top, Leng Cheng slowly turned his head till their eyes met. The Chinaman held out his hand, with the ruby in it. Thrasher stretched out his—but it stopped in mid-air.

A vision had flashed into his mind—a vision of Jones and Leng Cheng clasping hands in Buddha's cave. Then, Leng Cheng had stiffened . . . Thrasher's legs weakened under him and he snatched his hand back, stumbling as he did so. He fell, and his heavy bulk rolled nearly to the bottom.

"'Allo! Anybody knockin'?" jeered Alfred, in the kitchen. "Come in!"

Thrasher's moment was over. He picked himself up, shame-faced and cursing, while the Chinaman turned back to the girl:

"I give it to you," said Leng Cheng. "No hurt you. You take it. Then go with your friends back to boat, *velly* quick."

"I say, do you really mean that?" asked the artist. "You're not—spoofing us? English for tricking, you know."

"Do as I say," responded Leng Cheng.

"And then we can go?"

"Oh, yes. I no keep you."

"All of us?"

"All her friends, yes. Mr. Jones—is not her friend. He stay. I finish with him. Come! Too much time gone by. Take Buddha's eye. No be afraid."

The girl suddenly laughed and turned to Jim. "Funny game, isn't it?" she said, and moved towards the stairs.

"Think twice!" exclaimed Jim.

"Why? Isn't everything topsy-turvy?" she answered. "You run out to help me and I trick you. I trick you, but you risk your life to save mine. Leng Cheng runs round the world after a ruby and, when he gets it, offers it to me. Why trouble? Why trouble about anything? Everything's upside down! Isn't that so, Mr. Cheng?"

She burst into laughter again, and was already halfway up the stairs.

"World velly queer place, oh, yes!" nodded the Chinaman. "And you not so velly bad."

She reached the top and, for the first time, saw Joyce standing behind the Chinaman. The eyes of the two girls met.

"Are you his wife?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Joyce.

"Rather nice for you, I should think," said the girl, "but look after him. He's a bit trusting." She turned towards Leng Cheng. "You're rather trusting, too, aren't you?"

"Sometimes," replied the Chinaman, simply.

He held the ruby out to her. Jim held his breath. She smiled and took it.

"Well, of course," thought Jim, as she came down stairs again, "I'm barmy!"

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she regained some of her old imperiousness, and addressed her brother and Thrasher.

"Come!" she cried. "Back to the boat! And quick!"

Thrasher obeyed promptly, and hurried to the door, but the artist hesitated.

"I suppose, we may take it, the ruby's not poisoned?" he asked.

"Not poisoned," Leng Cheng assured him, from above. "Do as she says. Go quick. Soon, police come."

"Quite so, quite so," murmured the artist; and, with a vast incredulous shrug, followed Thrasher out.

"I say!" exclaimed Jim, impulsively, as the girl was about to depart. "Why don't you chuck it?"

"Perhaps, one day, I will," she answered. "Meanwhile don't forget Mr. Cheng has given me quite a good character. He says I'm not so velly bad."

She disappeared. Jim stared after her, and suddenly felt a cheek against his own. Joyce had descended, and was hugging him.

"Yes, I want a lot of that," muttered Jim, "but we're not quite out of the wood yet, old thing."

"Oh, yes, we are, Jim!" she whispered. "Leng Cheng frightened me horribly at first—but I'm sure—inside—he's all right."

Leng Cheng was now descending the stairs himself, while a dazed figure, huddled in a corner, watched him fearfully. Jim swung round quickly.

"Look here!" he exclaimed. "I'm not over keen on that fellow there—he's a pretty big skunk. But—what are you going to do with him?"

The Chinaman stooped, and picked up the dagger, which lay on the ground as it had fallen when the Australian had wrenched it out.

"Did you hear what I said?" cried Jim, sharply. "I don't stand for murder, you know."

"Murder velly bad," said Leng Cheng, examining the dagger's point. "Buddha no like murder."

"Yes, yes, you talk about Buddha," answered Jim, "but—I don't quite understand you, even yet. You've given up Buddha's eye. I thought that was what you chased our friend here for. Were you simply out for revenge?"

"No, you no understand," nodded Leng Cheng. "I no give up Buddha's eye."

"Why, but we saw you!" Jim reminded him. "You gave it to that girl."

"Oh, no," responded Leng Cheng, blandly. "I no give her Buddha's eye."

"That's nonsense! You gave her—"

"Real eye, no! Sham eye, yes. Keep all quiet. We not want them here any longer. They go."

"Good lord!" murmured Jim, as light dawned.

"*She* knows," went on Leng Cheng. "She tell them later. But, now, she want to go, too. Best way. She velly sensible girl, oh, yes."

"Then where, in heaven's name, is the real eye?" demanded Jim.

The Chinaman did not answer immediately, but went to the wall—to the spot where they had found the small blood-stain. He pressed upon a panel, and, as he did so, the inn sign creaked faintly through the open door.

"Look Green Dragon," said Leng Cheng, making for the stairs. "Eye not yellow now. Eye red."

Jim ran out into the yard, Joyce and her guardian at his heels. Gazing up at the sign, they saw the dragon's large, curved eye-ball gleaming redly in the moonlight.

The surface was smooth and opaque, but a small hole was drilled right through it, and but for an obstruction they would have seen a pin-point of moonlight behind. The obstruction, however, prevented this, and the pin-point was like a spark of fire.

"By jove, so that's where it was hidden!" muttered Jim. "In the monster's eye! And that's why the artist slipped to the wall before he went up to fetch it—to open the eye!"

"It was then Leng Cheng found out where it was," whispered Joyce.

"Yes—of course. And after that the artist came flying back, when he saw Jones and the tramp—and switched the eye back to yellow again before he let them in—hallo, what's happening now?"

Leng Cheng appeared at the window above the dragon—the window of Bedroom No. 5. Swiftly, he crept out on to the wide, sloping ledge, till he reached the dragon, and bent over it. His hand descended into the head. When it came out again, the pin-point in the dragon's eye no longer glowed with ruby fire, but gleamed with the innocent radiance of the moon.

"And—to think!" murmured Joyce suddenly, pressing her husband's sleeve. "We slept last night with the hateful thing under our pillow!"

Fascinated, they stood there. Despite their emotions, they were mere onlookers. It was a bigger moment to Leng Cheng.

Soon he emerged from the inn. He was not alone. Walking ahead of him, as though in a trance, was the Australian, with the point of the Chinaman's dagger directed towards the back of his neck.

Neither of the two men paid any attention to the three watchers standing under the green dragon sign. They moved onwards through the moonlight into the shadows, and were lost.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Inspector Handley listened to the little girl's story, and then rubbed his nose.

"Queerest yarn I've ever heard in my life," he commented. "Without exception."

"You'll go at once, sir, won't you?" pleaded Janet. "It's all true!"

"Well, I don't expect you've made it all up out of your head," answered the inspector, and turned with a resigned expression to his assistant. "Looks as if we'll have to turn out, Groves."

"Yes, sir," nodded Groves. "Do you suppose this might have any connection with those two cars? They were found not above half-a-mile from that inn."

"Damaged car in a ditch, undamaged car in a field," mused the inspector. "Possibly. Yes, quite possibly. But, at the moment, I'm bothered if I can see what the connection can be."

"Perhaps there was an accident," suggested Janet, "and that was why the people had to put up at the inn—the first people, I mean."

"Well, that might explain the damaged car," agreed the inspector. "But it wouldn't explain an undamaged car that has been run into a field fifty yards off, for no ostensible reason!" He shook his head in perplexity. "Well, well, that's not our immediate problem. I'll take four men along with me, Groves. Arrange it, will you? And you'll stay in charge while I'm gone."

Groves nodded, somewhat disappointedly. The little girl's story sounded interesting, and he would like to have had a hand in its unravelling.

"Yes, and take charge of our little friend here, as well," added the inspector, smiling kindly at Janet. "See she's comfortable. P'r'aps she wouldn't mind a hot cup of tea, after her long walk!"

"Oh, thank you, sir," said Janet gratefully, and wished she'd had a father who was a policeman.

Half-an-hour after Janet had entered the police station at Endlesby, she watched a car containing the inspector and four constables depart for the Green Dragon Inn, and she breathed a little sigh of relief. She had now performed her part, and the weight of the world was lifted from her shoulders.

Groves looked at her for a few moments, sympathetically. Then he asked,

"Tell me, now—what did you think of that feller who had his ruby stolen from him?"

"I didn't like him," answered Janet, promptly.

"Nor did I," said Groves, "when he came round here to-day. Shouldn't be surprised to find that *he* was a bit of a wrong 'un. But that's quite confidential, mind, between you and me. Then that tramp, now. What's your opinion about *him*?"

"Oh, I'm sure he's *quite* honest," exclaimed Janet.

"How are you sure?"

"I could see it in his face."

"Didn't know one could ever see a tramp's face! Well, you may be right. Children generally are. But it's a rum case, isn't it? And I'd give a bit to know where the innkeeper's got to—and his old cook!"

"Perhaps they're back now," said Janet.

"P'r'aps they are. Has it ever struck you that a biggish inn like that should be run by only two people? Ah! Now let's hear what you've got to say about *that*?"

"I don't think they do much business," answered Janet. "That may be the reason."

"Right again!" smiled Groves. "They don't do much business. They can't do much business. The place is tucked away in a corner, as you might say. No one passes there. Not now. So where does the money come from? There you are now! Tell me *that*?"

Janet advanced another theory.

"The notes I take there from my uncle—they might be something to do with it."

"I expect they're a great deal to do with it," muttered Groves. "Well, we'll soon learn. Meanwhile, I'm forgetting my responsibilities."

And he ordered tea for two.

The car containing the inspector and the four constables made short work of the distance between Endlesby and the Green Dragon, although, to avoid a noisy approach, they stopped the engine two hundred yards from the inn and walked the last stretch. Lights were shining through the windows, and Inspector Handley frowned as he noticed that one of the lower windows was broken. Stationing two men in the yard, he advanced cautiously with the other two to the front door, and knocked.

"Who's there?" called a voice from within.

"The police," replied Handley, bluntly. "Open the door, or take the consequences."

The door was opened immediately, and a pleasant but weary looking young man stared out at them.

"Hallo! You're a bit late, but no matter," he observed. "I've been waiting for you all day."

"Maybe you have, sir, but we've only just had the invitation," answered Handley. "I am Inspector Handley —"

"And my name's Cresswell, and there's my wife, and there's my uncle-in-law, Mr. Abingdon, and there's Alfred. Now you know the whole of the happy family."

"I'm much obliged, I'm sure," remarked the inspector, "but I want to know a little more than that. Is the innkeeper here?"

"No."

"Is there anybody on the premises besides yourselves?"

"Not a soul. Oh, yes—a cat."

The inspector frowned slightly.

"I'm here on serious business, sir."

"And we've been *through* serious business," responded Jim unrepentantly. "In fact, inspector, the business we've been through has been so serious that we are all suffering now from reaction, and are a bit light-headed. You must forgive us. Will you ask questions, or shall I tell you a long, long story?"

"I'll ask questions," said the inspector. "The story'll keep, since you suggest it's a three-volume novel. Has a man been here who's lost a ruby?"

"He has!"

"And did he find the people who stole the ruby?"

"He did. And he also found the person from whom he stole the ruby! As I said before, inspector, you're a bit late, you really are."

"Perhaps you'd better tell the story, after all," suggested the inspector. "Unless you can put us on to a job that wants doing first? These people have been here, you say. Where are they *now*?"

"Heaven knows!" murmured Jim, and passed his hand across his forehead. "Where are they, Joyce?"

"Did they ever exist?" she exclaimed.

"'Corse not," interposed the tramp. "Wot I sed orl along, didn't I?"

The inspector was quite a patient man. He did not lose his temper. At this point he did suggest, however, that a little lucidity would be helpful, and he turned towards Mr. Abingdon. But Mr. Abingdon shook his head. He had no desire to act as spokesman.

Then Jim relented. He smiled apologetically at the inspector, and said,

"All right, listen. I'll do my best. The man who had the ruby stolen from him in Endlesby — name Jones — met the gang who stole it from him here, in this room, where the members of the gang were themselves meeting. That's clear, isn't it? Good! Matters were just coming to a head when a Chinaman turned up — —"

"A Chinaman!"

"Precisely. The ruby had been stolen by Jones from a Buddhist temple, and the Chinaman had been chasing Jones all over the world to get it back. That clear, too? Good. Well, now he's got it back and that's really all there is about it."

"I'm sorry I can't agree, sir," replied Handley. "Where have all these people got to?"

"The gang has fled."

"Where to?"

"Don't ask me!"

"Well — Jones — where's he?"

"The Chinaman is looking after him."

"Eh? What's that?" exclaimed the inspector, sharply. "You mean, they went off together?"

"Yes."

"How did they go?" asked the inspector, dryly. "Arm-in-arm?"

"No. Single file. Jones was leading, with the Chinaman's dagger tickling the back of his neck."

"Good heavens!" cried the inspector. "You mean to say — you let the Chinaman — —"

"I don't believe Jones will come to any harm. Really I don't. That may sound foolish to you, but it's a fact."

"If you'll forgive my blunt speaking, sir, I consider it confoundedly foolish!" barked the inspector. "Why didn't you interfere?"

Jim fought an almost uncontrollable impulse to laugh.

"Why didn't I interfere?" he repeated. "Well — perhaps I couldn't. Or perhaps I don't know why. There are some times, inspector, when although you're present at a big crisis, you only seem to be looking on at it — to be a spectator, without any right to interfere. Do you follow what I mean?"

"I wouldn't be of much use in the force if I did!"

"Oh, well, I don't care," frowned Jim. "We've done our best — all of us here — —"

"Yes, and you ought to be *grateful* to us," interposed Joyce, "instead of looking at us as though we were culprits."

"'Ear, 'ear," agreed the tramp.

"Why, we did everything we possibly could," went on Joyce, "and tried to get word to you before, and once we got hold of the ruby ourselves and slept with it under our pillow at enormous risk, and it was only when we found it was going back to where it belonged that we decided not to do any more, and, anyway, if you'd seen that Chinaman, you'd have found him a bit too much for you, too!"

"'Ear, 'ear!" said the tramp, again. "That's the way to tork to 'em!"

The inspector took it well.

"I expect you've had a pretty rough time of it, madam," he remarked, "and I'm sorry if I've been a little curt. But I've got to look into this. I've got to find that Chinaman — yes, and a few others. Let's hear about the innkeeper. When did *he* walk off?"

"I don't know," answered Jim. "He did it before we arrived."

"Well, I understand there's a cook. Where's *she*?"

A sudden burst of laughter came from the tramp.

"Fahnd 'er in a cupboard," he grinned. "Yus. And when we hopens the cupboard, aht she comes, and orf she pops be'ind our blinkin' backs. Ah! But *I* knows where she is!"

“What’s that? You do?” exclaimed the inspector, while the others stared at the tramp in astonishment.

“Yus. And I knows where the hinnkeeper is.”

“Alfred!” gasped Joyce.

“Yus. And I knows where the *blind feller* is. Yus. And I knows where that blinkin’ Orstralian’ll be in ’arf a mo’ — when the Chink’s done with ’im!”

“Where? Where?” cried Jim.

Alfred doubled up with mirth.

“In a cow-shed!” he gurgled. “That’s where! Orl of ’em. In a cow-shed. Dead!”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Five minutes before they reached the dilapidated barn, they caught a brief, unexpected glimpse of it from a little eminence.

The tramp, shuffling resignedly ahead of the party—he had not expected that he would be forced to turn out again that night—stopped abruptly as the barn came into view between a gap in the trees, and blinked at it across the valley. That barn, with its unpleasant associations, looked gruesome enough, its roof moon-lit and two sides bathed in deep moon-shadows, but it was not this alone that made the tramp pause. The barn door was swinging open, and two figures were darting out.

“Hallo!” muttered the inspector. “They don’t look like dead men!”

“I told you!” replied Jim, by his side. “We’ll find they’ve only had sleeping draughts—and there’s a couple of them who’ve come out of theirs already.”

“By jove—one’s the innkeeper!” exclaimed the inspector, as they hurried forward. “Can you spot who the other is?” he asked, eagerly. “Confound it—they’re going down the stream. We’ll never be able to head them off!”

“It’s the feller that gal’s party left be’ind to look arter the boat,” announced Alfred. “Hexpeck the Chink marched ’im there, tickling the back of ’is neck with ’is knife—that’s the way to make a chap ’urry, ain’t it?”

“I dare say,” grunted the inspector, and turned back to Jim. “It’s the way you say the Australian was marched off by that Chinaman.”

“And the way I imagine he marched the lot off,” nodded Jim. “Gave them a partial dose of his abominable mixture first, very likely, and completed the dose in the barn.”

“Well, we shall soon see,” answered the inspector, grimly. “For ways that are dark, you know the Chinese is peculiar!”

“Buddhist,” corrected Jim.

“Beg his pardon!” The inspector had, on their way, received some further particulars from Jim, and now possessed what he would have described as a fair working idea of the position. “Did Jones say anything about an antidote—you know—stuff that could bring ’em out of their sleep when the convenient moment arrived?”

“No, he didn’t,” replied Jim. “But I’ll give Leng Cheng credit for inventing one! He’s got what he wanted—his ruby—and it looks as though he’s letting his prisoners escape now.”

“Well, I wish he’d made it a few minutes later,” grumbled the inspector. “But, look here—if he’s letting them escape why did he trouble to take Jones to the barn—as we’re assuming he has done?”

“Ah, don’t ask me that,” replied Jim, frowning. “That beats me.”

Two of the constables had hurried on ahead, in response to the inspector’s order. They were to follow the fugitives, and to catch them if they could. The rest of the party, five in number (Mr. Abingdon and Joyce alone had remained at the inn), had also increased their pace, and when they came to the bridge the barn again came into view. Before it wandered a distracted old lady.

“The old cook!” exclaimed Jim. “So he got her, too!”

“Can’t quite make out his object,” admitted the inspector. “Go on and get hold of her, Harris.” The constable addressed darted forward. “Why should he box them all up like this?”

“He boxed everybody up,” answered Jim. “He knew he was definitely on the scent of the ruby—in fact, I believe at one time he actually had it—and he wasn’t going to let anyone connected with the affair get into touch with the outer world. If the thieves had been

frightened away, or if you fellows had been brought to the scene earlier, his chance would have been scotched.”

“Well done, Harris—he’s got her,” said the inspector. “Can’t say I consider her much of a prize. And—there’s the barn.” He lowered his voice, as he paused and stared at it. “Wonder what we’re going to find inside? Well—come on.”

The men advanced, with revolvers ready. It occurred to Jim that the inspector might not have been very wise in sending two of the constables ahead, on a wild goose chase. They would have been more useful here at this moment. Perhaps the inspector was thinking the same. He hesitated, then motioned to the constable who had just caught the deaf and dumb cook to let the tramp mount guard over her.

Excluding the tramp, who was regarded by the inspector as rather less useful than ornamental, there were only four representatives of law and order to face whatever awaited them inside the barn.

The stream rippled towards the sea on their right. On their left the grim barn rose, its great door swung open. They approached softly. Not a sound came from within.

“Why, of course!” thought Jim. “It’s empty! What geese we are—the others must have got out first!”

He began to advance less warily, but the inspector shot a warning glance at him. The inspector was taking no chances. He stopped, and listened. Then, making a sign to the others, and with his revolver raised, he ran swiftly into the barn. His companions were not a second behind him.

A strange sight greeted them. On the ground lay Jones, slumbering with wide open eyes as once he had put others to slumber, and by his side sat the blind man with his dog. But the blind man was not as we last saw him. His dark glasses were off, and he was contemplating Jones with eyes that palpably possessed sight.

He turned his head, as the four men darted towards him, but otherwise he made no movement. Submission and resignation were written upon him. He was a man who had come to the end.

The inspector, after a rapid glance around, looked at the squatting figure with a puzzled frown.

“The blind man,” Jim enlightened him. “So-called.”

“Ah!” said the inspector. “So that accounts for the lot, eh?”

“Caucasian, not Mongolian,” murmured Jim.

The bogus blind man smiled faintly.

“The Mongolian has gone,” he said. “Well—carry on.”

“Thank you, but I’ll carry on without your permission,” barked the inspector. “Suppose *you* carry on with your story?”

“To be used in evidence against me?” asked the bogus blind man, sarcastically.

“That’s highly probable,” answered the inspector, with no less sarcasm. He was glad to have something at last that he could get his teeth into. “Now,—then—get busy.”

The bogus blind man shrugged his shoulders.

“All right—might as well get it over,” he said. “Get out your book. The moonlight’s good. I stole a ruby.”

“Reckon we know that,” observed the inspector. “How did you work it?”

“Got wise to the fact that this fellow on the ground here had it, and arranged with a smart young chap I know—no, I’m not giving him away—to relieve him of it outside a hotel at Endlesby. The smart young fellow passes the ruby on to me, and I, a blind man, pass it on to my dog’s tin. And then, making use of an excellent and old-established organisation I’ve lately

heard of, I pass the ruby on to the innkeeper of the Green Dragon, who signals with the Green Dragon's eye that he has something good, and closes the inn to any other business."

"Oh, so that's how you managed it, eh?" exclaimed the inspector. "The inn was a receiving house, and when the innkeeper signalled, the secret agents got busy to waft the goods away to, shall we say, Belgium or Holland?"

"You've got it exactly," nodded the other. "I believe the scheme's been a big success, owing largely to a rather mysterious lady who works the continental end, but this was my first—and last—connection with it. You see, I've only been a blind man for quite a short while—quite a novice—just long enough to form an attachment with my dog."

He patted the dog, and the dog licked his hand. Jim looked at the odd fellow curiously.

"Well, go on," said the inspector. "What then?"

"Then the tragedy happened," proceeded the blind man. "The nasty, confounded tragedy. The innkeeper is not at home to visitors, of course, but a wretched Chinaman manages to get in, and takes the ruby from him."

"How did you find that out?" demanded the inspector.

"A chance remark, made to me by a tramp after I left, put me wise," answered the other. "So I was able to surprise the Chinaman, and to get the ruby back—yes, right back into this tin here." He tapped the dog's tin. "I got a bit of a scare when I thought I'd killed the Chinaman—I'm not fond of the killing game, that's a fact—but the disgusting fellow was only shamming to get me off my guard, and he soon turned the tables on me."

"Where did the fight take place? Here?"

"No. Nearer the inn. *And* I can't tell you exactly how I got here. The Chinaman sent me to sleep with some beastly stuff of his, and I seem to remember being walked here in a sort of dream. Anyhow—here I am, so there's no good arguing about it. What happened after the fight I can't say."

"Perhaps we can," retorted the inspector, with a glance at Jim. "Quite a good deal seems to have happened after that. But you can tell us, at least, what's happened just now—since you've woken up?"

The other passed his hand across his forehead, and stared contemplatively at the prone figure of Jones.

"Yes, I can tell you a bit." He spoke rather wearily. "There were some others here, too, I think. I was too muzzy to notice them, and when I came to, I only found this fellow here." He jerked his head towards Jones. "Did the Chinaman bring him here—give him to me as a sort of parting gift?"

"Looks like it! He's close enough to your feet! But what would he do that for?"

"I suppose the Chink's got the ruby?"

"Never you mind."

"That means he has. Anyway, it's clear he hasn't." He pointed to Jones. "P'r'aps the Chink shoved him here so that we could console each other. That would be quite a pretty little oriental idea, wouldn't it?"

A form suddenly appeared in the doorway. The inspector turned sharply, and found one of his own constables.

"Sorry—no luck, sir," reported the constable. "They got away."

"Well, what have you come back for?" demanded the inspector. "Couldn't you still be chasing them?"

"No, sir," replied the constable, stolidly. "They've gone out to sea."

"The devil they have!"

"Yes, sir. There were four or five of them, and they pushed off before we could get them."

"Why didn't you fire?"

“We’d had no instructions about that, sir.”

“Oh, very well. Stand by. We—hallo, there!” He turned back quickly towards Jones, who was stirring.

“I think he’s coming to,” said Jim. “We’d better cover him, eh? He’s a pretty tough customer.”

The inspector nodded, just as the Australian gave a sudden heave. He rolled round on his stomach. Then something fluttered through a rent in the roof.

It was an owl, and the sound appeared to attract Jones’s attention. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright.

“Magpie, eh?” he mumbled, dazedly. “Where’s the gun—I’ll shoot it.”

His eyes closed for a moment, then opened again. “Eh? What’s that?” he murmured. Then his eyes fell upon the figure sitting by his side. Perspiration dripped from his forehead as he tried to stagger to his feet.

“My God!” he shrieked. “*Finn!*”

CHAPTER FIFTY

Peace had settled upon the Green Dragon. Even the sign was quiet. In an armchair by the fire slumbered Mr. Abingdon, and although there was only one other armchair, it sufficed for Joyce and Jim. By the rules of the grandfather clock, they also should have been asleep, but they preferred to whisper together for a few minutes longer before waking Mr. Abingdon out of his doze and repairing to their room.

“Goodness—never give *me* a ruby, Jim!” murmured Joyce. “Diamonds and pearls, if you like—yes, heaps of them! But never a ruby!”

“I won’t, my dear,” answered Jim, “and that’s a promise no husband would mind making. I say, Joyce—you ought to have seen Jones’s face when he saw Finn! I thought, for a moment, he was going out of his mind.”

“Well, it *was* rather a face from the grave, wasn’t it?”

“No—a face from the cave.”

“Don’t be funny. Though that is rather good. I suppose Finn was dodging Jones all the time, just as Leng Cheng was?”

“Yes, but Finn didn’t know about Leng Cheng. He thought he was the only one chasing Jones round the world—and he also thought Jones had both the rubies.”

“Don’t understand that,” frowned Joyce. “He’d got one himself, hadn’t he?”

“No. And it was only in the barn just now that he learned that Jones didn’t go off with it.”

“Then who—oh—Leng Cheng, of course!”

“Yes, Leng Cheng, of course. Listen, this is what must have happened. Put yourself back into that cave for a moment, Joyce.”

“Don’t want to,” she retorted.

“You’ll be quite safe—I’ll hold you tight.”

“In that case, I won’t mind. Whoa! Not *too* tight!”

“Aren’t we idiots?”

“Speak for yourself.”

“I do, but that means you too now, Mrs. Cresswell. Is this about the right pressure? Good. Now then, back we go to that cave. And what do we see? Why, we see Leng Cheng coming to before Finn.”

“Yes, I can see him. Up he jumps— —”

“To Finn he creeps— —”

“Over him he bends— —”

“And about him he feels. He finds one ruby. But not the other. Jones has got the other. And now, my child, having peeped into Leng Cheng’s cave, let us peep a little deeper—into Leng Cheng’s mind.”

“Go on. What do you see in Leng Cheng’s mind?” asked Joyce.

“Why, this thought. Jones has gone off with one ruby. If Finn, when he wakes up, finds his own ruby gone, he will assume that Jones has *both* rubies— —”

“No, he’ll know that Leng Cheng has taken it, stupid,” interrupted Joyce.

“He won’t know,” retorted Jim, “if the subtle Leng Cheng goes back to his corner and pretends that he has never been out of his trance. *Then* Finn will certainly think Jones has both the stones. He couldn’t think otherwise. So back Leng Cheng goes, watches Finn, and when Finn wakes up, pretends to be still in his stupor.”

“How do you know?”

"That inspector fellow and I reconstructed it from the obvious evidence. Finn *hadn't* the second ruby. He *did* think Jones had it. Jones *didn't* have it. All these facts we learned in the barn. Ergo, Leng Cheng *must* have had it, and could only have been feigning when Finn examined him in the cave. Got it?"

"Yes, I think so," said Joyce, after a pause, "though I still don't see why Leng Cheng should want Finn to think Jones had that second ruby."

"Don't you? Ah—what it is to be married to a wise husband! Leng Cheng wanted to make sure that Finn would chase Jones. Don't you see? Finn would know Jones's haunts and plans, and would be a connecting link. Two men after Jones would be better than one, and Leng Cheng wanted to keep in the background as long as he could. Don't you remember Jones saying that Leng Cheng seemed to get other people to work for him?"

"Yes."

"Well, those 'other people' were Finn. It's quite possible, too," added Jim, reflectively gazing into the fire, "that Leng Cheng has a certain sense of poetic justice to him, and hoped to bring about just such a position as we discovered in the barn. He may even have thought—but I'm frankly guessing now—that Finn might do to Jones, in a spirit of revenge, what Leng Cheng could not do to Jones as a good Buddhist. For do you realise, old thing, that Leng Cheng, in spite of our fear of him, has not committed a single murder? He goes back to Buddha with both the missing eye and a clean slate."

Joyce was silent for a moment. Then she said, quite solemnly,

"You know, it's funny—but I've a sneaking regard for that wretched little Chinese horror."

"I don't think it's at all funny," answered Jim. "I have, too. He threatened us, and planted the fear of the Unknown into us, but he never put one of his threats into execution."

"I wonder if he would have?" murmured Joyce. "Once, he had his dagger at my throat." She shuddered. "If I'd screamed then, or done anything to upset his plans—would he have sacrificed me for Buddha?"

"That we'll never know, darling," replied Jim, with a sudden squeeze. "Don't let's think of it." A snore from the other armchair switched their thoughts into lighter channels. "Poor old Mr. Abingdon—he's had a bit of a day, too, hasn't he? Of course, it was Leng Cheng who moved his car into a field. Your uncle was getting too close to the inn to be safe away from it."

"What *didn't* Leng Cheng do?" exclaimed Joyce. "I suppose it was he who locked the poor old cook in the cupboard?"

"That's how Mr. Inspector and yours truly sized it up. I think I'll go into business with him. Listen. Chinaman gets into inn. Cook is a bit of trouble. No time for ceremony, so into a cupboard she's popped. The innkeeper himself makes more trouble, and seizes bread-knife. You remember we found it on the floor. But there was no blood on it. Leng Cheng probably pricked him with his dagger, and then flashed out with the innkeeper after him. But the innkeeper had the sense to press that panel over there to alter the dragon's red eye back to yellow—that explains the small blood stain at the spot where he'd been standing when he did that—and then out *he* staggers. I can imagine him rolling over presently and lying somewhere doped when we first came into this inn. The Chinaman must have 'removed' him later. Perhaps, if my leg hadn't been so bad, I'd have gone out and spotted him."

"Yes, for all his cleverness," observed Joyce, "Li Hung Chang had his slice of luck. Li Hung Chang! Doesn't it seem a long time since we used to call him that—and it was only yesterday!"

Jim nodded. "It's not a compliment, my darling, but we seem to have been married a year!"

She laughed. "Well, I don't care, I don't care—it's been a lovely year!"

"Oh, granted! Only I hope the year to follow will be even lovelier. I wonder where Leng Cheng is now?"

"Perhaps he is outside—listening . . . Jim! You'll drop me!"

"Yes, and you'll *deserve* to be dropped, if you say any more things like that. Listening outside! Good Lord! No, he's probably half way back to China by now—running lightly, so's not to hurt the ants."

"Oh, you darling idiot!" she giggled. "I do hope you'll always say nice foolish things."

"I'll promise, if you'll aid and abet me."

"Bargain! Yes, I expect Leng Cheng has already started on his return journey. And what about the others?"

"The artist, the innkeeper, Thrasher, and the artist's sister, are flying across the sea to the Continent. The poor old deaf-and-dumb lady, the inspector promised me, would be taken care of by her daughter, who I understand is an able-bodied girl of only eighty-three. If the law can saddle anything on Finn and Jones, those precious individuals will pay the penalty; but personally I can't quite see what the law *can* saddle on them, so they may be set free. Can you imprison a man for nearly getting away with a ruby? I haven't a legal mind."

"You can imprison a man for committing a breach of the peace," suggested Joyce, "and they've committed lots of breaches, I should think."

"By Jove, *you* have got a legal mind," observed Jim, admiringly. "The inspector and I will have to take you in with us. Meanwhile, though, we'll let the inspector worry over that problem for himself. Lord, Joyce, I can't stand listening to your uncle's snores much longer! What about going to bed? I think it's about time. Or have you any more questions to ask?"

"Yes, just one," answered Joyce. "I can't see why Finn pretended to be a blind man."

"He didn't want Jones to recognise him," responded Jim, promptly, "and it fitted into the innkeeper's scheme. Quite a good dodge, using a dog as a ruby-carrier. And the next?"

"Nothing more," said Joyce, rising. "Oh, yes, there is, though."

"Fire!"

"What about Janet?"

"The inspector is looking after her at the station."

"But what's going to happen to her to-morrow?"

"You mean to-day, but no matter. What's going to happen to her? Well, I suppose she'll go on living, won't she?"

"Silly! I'm serious. Her uncle's gone off — —"

"Oh, now I see what you mean," interposed Jim. "Why didn't you say so at once? Yes, I like her too. Jolly little kid. How about starting her at £20 a week, and every other Thursday? And now, darling, I really *must* wake your uncle up. Awake, he's quite nice, but asleep he's dreadful!"

They approached Mr. Abingdon, and gently shook him. He woke with a yell.

"I'm awfully sorry, sir," apologised Jim, "but we did it as softly as we could."

"Bless my soul," muttered Mr. Abingdon. "I thought you were the Chinese torturers. They were just about to drop me into a cauldron of molten lead."

Joyce threw her arms around him.

"Oh, uncle darling," she cried. "You're not cross with us really, are you?"

"Eh? Cross with you?" blinked Mr. Abingdon. "For waking me up like that?"

"No. For—marrying each other."

"Oh! *That*?" exclaimed Mr. Abingdon. "After all I've been through in the last twelve hours, I assure you, my dear, that's nothing!"

On their way upstairs, Jim suddenly paused.

“There’s one thing I *am* stuck over,” he exclaimed. “Who on earth was Samuel Jones? That note said he was expected, too.”

An hour later, Joyce ruthlessly woke him up to whisper, “Mightn’t it have been the name of their boat?”

We must not forget our tramp, or imagine that others had forgotten him. When he awoke next morning, under his familiar hedge, the sun was high, the sea was blue, and a bird was singing.

“Wot did I say?” he murmured, with a contented grin. “Majnashun!”

He rose from the ditch, and shuffled along the lane to the bend. There was the Green Dragon Inn, smiling peacefully in the sunshine, though no smoke came from it. Nothing could have looked less sinister, less terrifying.

“There y’are,” repeated the tramp. “Majnashun. Wot I sed.”

He turned his back upon the inn, and shuffled off. Presently he came to the cross-roads, and he peered at the spot where once he had dreamt of a wrecked car, and two young people and a Chinaman and a blind man. The spot now was empty. No car was there.

But just as he was about to turn away, his hand happened to slip into his pocket. It touched something unfamiliar. Anything in Alfred’s pocket was unfamiliar. He brought out an envelope.

On the envelope was written: “Just to prove that a magpie can bring good luck to *someone*.” And inside were five one-pound notes.

Alfred stared at the notes. Then he held them close to his eyes and stared at them. Then he held them at arm’s length and stared at them. And then he laughed derisively.

“G’arn!” he said, as he slipped the envelope back into his pocket. “‘Oo yer torking to? ‘Majnashun!”

[End of *The Green Dragon*, by J. Jefferson Farjeon]