

# THE PIRATE OF CLIVEDEN REACH.\*

BY GRANT ALLEN.

*Illustrated by H. G. BURGESS.*



WHEN news first reached me that a distinguished M.P. had been set upon and robbed by a well-dressed highwayman on the main stream of the Thames, just below Cliveden Woods, I confess I was more than half inclined, on the first blush of it, to treat the whole affair as a cock-and-bull story.

season. Moreover, the particular spot chosen for the extraordinary attempt seemed so very unlikely. Cliveden Reach is the most frequented stretch of water on the whole river; hundreds of holiday-makers pour down from London every day to Taplow or Maidenhead, so that the channel is alive with scullers and steam launches, for some five miles up stream, till a late hour in the

evening. I pooh-poohed the policeman who first told me the tale.

"Nonsense," I said; "the gentleman must have been dining at some riverside hotel, perhaps with casual or undesirable acquaintances, and, having had his pocket picked by them, or been diddled out of his money, he has invented this extremely improbable story to allay his wife's well-grounded suspicions." For, I am sorry to say, one cannot be High Constable of a riverside county for fifteen years and yet retain a child-like trust in the perfect goodness of human nature.

But when the Right Honourable Edward Symington himself, the respected member for the Plympton Boroughs, appeared before me and told his tale, I confess I was staggered.

Mr. Symington was not the sort of man, I took it, to be the victim of a delusion; nor did he look particularly gullible. Tall, thick-set, stoutly built, a typical hard-headed English squire, a good rider to hounds, a Conservative country member, he had the solidity and credibility which we always attribute to the honest, straightforward, unimaginative John Bull.



"He told his story with perfect frankness."

I had been High Constable of the county for fifteen years, and as my own place at Bray slopes down with its lawn to the river's edge, I know perfectly well how crowded is this part of the Thames with punts and rowing-boats during the whole summer

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He told his story with perfect frankness. He had been out on the river with a party of intimate friends, and had dined—he did not attempt to deny the fact of dining—at that well-conducted house, the Ferry Inn at Cookham. After dinner, about nine at night, on a fine early summer evening, he started in a Canadian canoe for Maidenhead. He was accustomed to manage a boat, and was a good sculler and paddler. Where the stream divides, he took the inner channel, under the Cliveden Woods; and there, just behind the island, he was surprised, as he passed, to see another canoe glide rapidly out in the gloom, and a man accost him threateningly.

“Fork out whatever you have in your purse! Quick; hand it over, this minute, or I shoot you!”

“What sort of man?” I asked, eyeing my informant hard.

Symington answered like a truthful person.

“I could hardly make out, as it was growing dusk, but he seemed to me tall with much black hair about his face—beard, moustache, and whiskers.”

“Armed?”

“Yes, certainly; armed with a revolver. He pointed it full at me and cried, ‘No hesitation, or I fire!’ He was bland, but peremptory.”

“He dared not have fired,” I said; “he would have aroused the neighbourhood.”

“I’m not so sure of that; it is lonely behind the islands, and the hour was late. I passed only one other boat all the way from Cookham. The river is crowded, I admit, Colonel, till eight or half-past, but as soon as it grows dark, not a soul is left on it.”

“And you gave him your purse?”

“Well, it was cowardly of me, I own; but what would you have? He was covering me with his revolver—I was quite unarmed; and remember, too, in a Canadian canoe, which is not the sort of place one would choose for a tussle. The least thing upsets one. Besides, I don’t swim; it’s the sole manly accomplishment I never acquired, having been brought up inland, far away from any river. When I went up to Oxford, I was either too old or too ashamed to learn, and I have never learned, so the rogue had me at his mercy.”

“How much money did your purse contain?”

“Oh, nothing to speak of; about seven pounds. But that’s not what I mind. It’s the principle of the thing—that a pirate

should be permitted to go about unchecked on the upper Thames with ‘Your money or your life!’ in this nineteenth century.”

I paused and reflected.

“Things of the sort *will* crop up,” I said, “in spite of all the pains one may take to prevent them. But nothing like this shall crop up again, I promise you. I will have the river properly patrolled and guarded.”

“You must,” he said warmly. “Such an outrage is a disgrace to our boasted civilisation. You must catch the rogue. Till he is imprisoned, Colonel Venables-Hughes, you have not fulfilled your duty to the community.”

As soon as he had gone, I asked my chief detective, who had been present during our interview, what he thought of Mr. Symington’s story. He stroked his smooth chin warily—a chief detective’s chin is always smooth, as he has to get himself up in so many disguises—and answered with great deliberation—

“His account has a ring of truth in it, sir. I should say, myself, he was probably robbed. Of course, a gentleman *may* give away money, and then desire to account for it; but Mr. Symington is not a very young gentleman, nor a very foolish one, and it’s the young ones and the foolish ones that trump up stories of such adventures. My impression is, we might watch the Reach carefully from the bank for a week or two.”

“Atkins,” I said, “we will watch it, but not from the bank. You’re the man to do it. You know the river well, and you can manage a boat. We must fight the fellow with his own weapons—if there is any fellow, which is far from certain. He uses a Canadian canoe. He’s right, of course; no boat is so noiseless; with none other can you see so well ahead exactly where you are going, and guide yourself so perfectly. You must have a Canadian canoe, pervade Cliveden Reach, and see whether any such outrage is attempted again.”

“It will be attempted again, sir,” Atkins said decisively; “you may count upon that. If the story’s true, the fellow will have learned that he can induce a strong and vigorous man, a Member of Parliament, and a good sculler, to deliver up his purse by just presenting a loaded revolver at his head. The process is simplicity itself. Is it likely he won’t try the same game on again, when he finds it so easy?”

We debated where we should post him. My own idea was that the robber, having tried Cliveden Reach once, would make his

second attempt somewhere near Marlow or Bisham, just to avoid our precautions. But Atkins said "No"; and Atkins's experience was worth much in such matters. The only reach where the fellow could be sure of catching somebody worth robbing, he said, was the most frequented piece of water. At Marlow or Bisham, after dark, he might wait for hours without seeing anyone; but on Cliveden Reach there was always a passer-by. Besides, he would need the cover of the reed beds. I agreed that Atkins was right, and made all arrangements for the canoe, as well as for a couple of policemen, with a double sculling skiff, to be in waiting close by whenever Atkins sprang his rattle.

The magistrates laughed at me. "D'you really suppose, Colonel," one of them said to me, "such things can happen in England to-day? I call it preposterous. Old Symington had had quite as much as was good for him, that's the long and the short of it. He lost his purse, and then invented this cock-and-bull story; or else he found some agreeable person who relieved him of his cash, and he wanted to explain the little mishap away. The tale's not worth investigating."

However, I went on with my plans and set Atkins to work. Eight days later I had the laugh over the magistrates.

Two young ladies, daughters of Mr. Talbot Evatt, the well-known stockbroker who has a house on the river near Quarry Woods, had gone down towards Taplow Bridge after dinner in a skiff, both of them pulling. About a quarter past nine they returned, and just as they neared the larger island, one of them said jokingly to the other, "I hope Mr. Symington's highwayman won't come out and catch us!" Even as she uttered the words, a Canadian canoe appeared before them, darting like an arrow out of a high reed bed. A man was in it, with very bushy black whiskers. He drew a revolver.

"Hush!" he said resolutely. "If either of you speak one word I will fire. Mind, I have six cartridges, and I can kill you both. Don't make the slightest noise. Take off your jewellery and your watches, and pull out your purses and hand them over to me. If you delay one second, I shoot! Sharp's the word. Fork over!"

The two girls were too terrified to do anything but obey. They pulled out their purses, stripped off their bracelets and rings, and handed them across to the expectant ruffian. He took them without a word.

"Now, mind," he said, "I go off, but I shall watch you from the reeds. If you give

any alarm till you reach Cookham, I fire! I'm a dead shot, and I promise you I won't miss you!"

He disappeared into the reeds. The girls, terrified for a moment, sculled on in silence. But as soon as they reached the more open part of the river, beyond the islands, they recovered their nerve a little and shouted aloud, "Help! help! Murder! murder! Robbers!" at the top of their voices. The Cliveden ferryman heard them, but before he could put out his boat, Atkins, who had been hidden a little further above in the reeds close by, came out with his canoe, crying, "What is the matter, ladies? I am a detective, and I have a couple of policemen here. Has anybody molested you?"

The girls told their story, and Atkins, with commendable speed, sprang his rattle and got his two policemen out from under shelter of the bank where they were waiting. Then he took one of the girls and a policeman down one side of the islands, while the other girl and the second policeman went down the other. In a quarter of an hour he had communicated with the lock-keepers above and below, and had gathered together half-a-dozen other men, with lights and boats, to make a cordon round the reed beds and the islands, while he and some few selected boatmen thoroughly searched them.

But the miscreant had escaped; their search was in vain. The only thing that a prolonged investigation of the spot next day could reveal was one of the bracelets dropped into the water near the point where the girls had been overhauled, as well as an object, much waterlogged, but bearing traces of having been made of coloured *papier mâché*, which Atkins believed to be a false nose worn by the pirate. That detail, however, the elder Miss Evatt distinctly denied, as she saw the man well for a moment in the moonlight, and could make out that his nose was quite small and regular.

This second outrage naturally roused a great deal of feeling on the river. Ladies had been accustomed to row about freely alone without fear of interruption, and the unpleasant discovery that they might be set upon and robbed caused a most disagreeable awakening for riverside households. Mr. Talbot Evatt himself offered a reward of five hundred pounds for whoever caught or exposed the robber, and the county added another five hundred. But for three or four weeks nothing further was heard, and it began to be believed that the matter had blown over.

At the end of that time, however, I received information of another and still more extraordinary outrage. Mrs. Reginald Wybrook, of Bourne End, is an old lady universally respected on the river. She plays the part of chief almoner to the district, being both wealthy and benevolent, and is often entrusted with the charities of other people.

One rainy afternoon, about six o'clock, this lady was returning by boat from Bray, rowed by her two nieces, both excellent oarswomen, when a curious episode happened.

whiskers raised his hand with a menacing gesture.

"Not a word," he said abruptly. "You know my business. If you hand me over that sixty pounds in gold, without any trouble, you can go on your way unmolested. Make a moment's delay, and I fire without mercy!"

Mrs. Wybrook, who is a determined old lady of the ancient school, an admiral's widow, answered promptly with great spirit, "I shall do nothing of the sort; I will not



"Make a moment's delay, and I fire without mercy!"

Mrs. Wybrook had called at Maidenhead on her way up from the Bray Hospital, where she had been visiting the inmates of that picturesque almshouse, and she had cashed a cheque at the bank for sixty pounds, as was her wont once a fortnight. She carried the amount in gold in a small canvas bag. The river was deserted, as it was raining heavily, and few boats had ventured out in the inhospitable weather. All at once, at the corner near the second island, a Canadian canoe shot swiftly across the stream, amid the blinding rain, and a man with black beard and

yield to the threats of a highwayman." But her youngest niece, Miss Gladys Wybrook, a timid Girton girl, snatched the bag of sovereigns from her aunt's hand and flung it frantically to the robber. He caught it in one hand, tossed it up in the air with careless glee like a ball, and recaptured it as it fell, lifted his hat politely, and darted back round the island again. As soon as he was gone the ladies raised a shout, but no one heard them. They had almost reached Cookham Lock before they came upon Atkins, paddling about quietly in the discharge of

his duty amid the torrents of rain which were still falling slantwise.

Atkins was half incredulous at first as to the possibility of the rascal having ventured to attack ladies in broad daylight and on the open river. "Seemed almost like hysteria, sir," he said to me afterwards, "especially as the young lady was so very much agitated." But he returned down stream with them, and soon satisfied himself as to the reality of their story by finding the man's revolver flung out on the bank just opposite the island. It was clear the robber had got rid of it in order to avoid suspicion in case he was overtaken. Looking down into the river close by again, Atkins also discovered the canvas bag, an incriminating object, at the bottom of the stream; there could be no doubt of its identity, as it had the banker's name printed on its side in legible letters.

Atkins was now convinced that the highwayman must have been calling at the bank at Maidenhead when the cheque was cashed (since he knew the amount), and must have hurried up the river surreptitiously in his canoe, creeping close under the trees, before Mrs. Wybrook's party. This gave the detective two good clues—first, the revolver, which was by a Birmingham maker; secondly, the point that the robber must have been seen at Maidenhead that evening. Atkins himself, most unfortunately, had spent the whole afternoon around the Cookham Lock, discussing probabilities and possible clues with the lock-keeper and his assistant.

I will not weary you with the accounts of the two or three subsequent outrages (detailed extensively in the daily papers), each taking place at the most unexpected time, and each, unfortunately, so well planned to take place in Atkins's absence, that that astute officer began to suspect either his policemen or the lock-keepers of being in league with the villain, and giving him notice when the detective was away on some other part of the river. It seemed now to be clear that we must take more active measures, and must patrol the whole district of the Thames between Bray and Marlow with a perfect cordon of policemen.

While I and my brother High Constable in the adjoining county were discussing the details of this scheme, so as to adjust the expenses between our respective ratepayers (for the opposite banks are here occupied by Bucks and Berks) an unexpected development occurred. I think I had best narrate it in the way it occurred to me at the moment.

Being anxious to watch for myself the possibilities of such episodes occurring in the evening, I had strolled out one night through the riverside path (private) that threads the grounds of Taplow Court and Cliveden. I had almost reached the first island near the marble steps, when I saw in the dusk a skiff rowed by two girls coming slowly towards me. As it reached the reed bed, I was aware of some commotion. Gazing through the gloom, I saw the very episode I was so anxious to see—a Canadian canoe glided suddenly and noiselessly across the bows of the row-boat. I rushed down to the bank to note what would happen. I could make out the pirate raising his hand with the revolver. I could hear him cry, "Halt, there! Your money!" Next instant the most unexpected incident took place. The girls, instead of screaming or turning away, rose up resolutely in the boat and seized the man with great pluck. One of them pointed a revolver in return, the other wrenched the weapon from the wretch's hand. Then I saw that the canoe was upset, and the assailant was struggling for his life in the water.

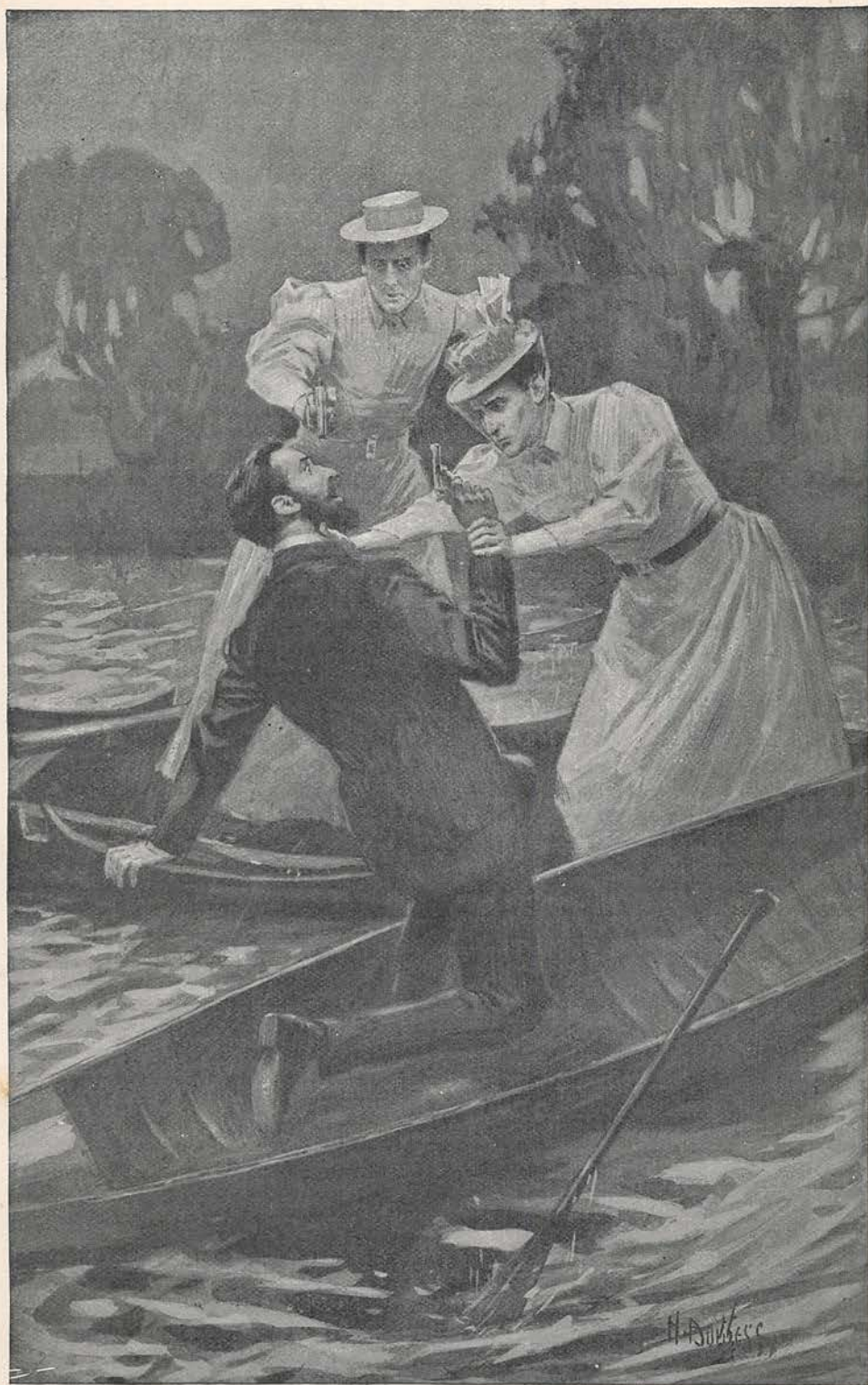
I pulled off my coat and boots, and swam across to help them secure him. As I approached, one of the girls called out to me in a very mannish voice, "Who are you?"

"Colonel Venables-Hughes," I answered, "High Constable of the county."

"Oh, it's you, Colonel, is it?" the voice answered, and I recognised it was a man's. Next moment I knew them—the two young Wybrooks, brothers of the nieces who had been caught before. They were dressed up as girls to deceive the pirate.

It was a capital ruse. But they had counted without their host; the rogue was too much for them. Taking advantage of the momentary diversion created by my arrival on the scene, he suddenly shook himself free, ducked under their arms with extraordinary address, and swam boldly landward. He tried to reach the Berkshire shore opposite.

"Head him, Colonel—head him!" Charlie Wybrook called out, seizing a scull and getting forward. I swam out again and headed him, but the fellow dived under the boat like a dab-chick, and came up near the bank. The two Wybrooks sculled on as fast as they could get their oars in. I struck after him for dear life, but that cunning rascal was again beforehand with us. He knew the bank well, and made down stream for a hard spot. I tried to land nearer and higher, and found myself entangled in mud and



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weeds. It took me half a minute to drag myself ashore with the assistance of the Wybrooks. By that time the pirate had made good his landing and was striking across the fields in the direction of the big white house known as the Fishery.

Charlie Wybrook leaped ashore and bolted after him. Charlie was a splendid runner; he won the 'Varsity quarter mile when he was an undergraduate at Oriel. As he landed he tore off his woman's hat and skirt, but he had still the bodice. Arthur ran diagonally across the field—also half man, half woman—so as to cut off the wretch's retreat by the further end in case he doubled.

As for me, I made for the opening by the footpath to Cookham. But the field, a low water-meadow, was intersected with ditches both deep and wide, and they hampered us greatly. We could see the pirate knew them all well, and was evidently acquainted with the little bridges here and there, for he never turned aside, but made straight in the dusk for them. Charlie Wybrook leaped the dykes, narrowly escaping a ducking. As for Arthur and myself, in the eagerness of the pursuit, we ran through them bodily.

But where was Atkins all this time? I drew my whistle twice and blew long and loud for him. Strange to say, ubiquitous as he had always seemed when danger lowered before, he did not now answer. I began to fear our prisoner would, after all, escape us. Still, Charlie was gaining on him now, when all at once he bolted for the garden gate of the Fishery. To his evident surprise he found it locked; he had not counted on that mishap, clearly. I could gather he was somebody who knew the ground well, for, the moment the gate failed him, he rushed madly up the outhouse where the coal is kept, and then up the roof of the house, like a cat or a monkey. Charlie Wybrook, never pausing, followed him as quickly as he himself had mounted. For a second there was a desperate struggle on the leads. The two men closed, then Charlie threw his man; but the rogue rose again unhurt, and twisting himself once more with surprising ease out of his captor's grasp, descended straight into my arms and Arthur's.

How we missed him I really don't know; but we did miss him. With extraordinary agility he ducked as he passed us and seemed to slip like an eel through our closing fingers.

"Give him chase, Arthur!" I cried. "Give him chase!" And at the same moment Charlie came scampering down the

sloping roof and joined us in the pursuit. For half a minute the pirate made as though he was going towards the corner by the footpath—the most natural mode of escape now the garden gate was locked, with its high and dangerous spikes—but his cunning and swiftness of resource were really marvellous. No sooner had he separated us, in our efforts to head him, than he suddenly and unexpectedly doubled back towards the river. I saw what he meant now; he was making for the boat again, he would put himself across, and escape up the hills on the Buckinghamshire side towards Taplow or Great Wycombe!

"Cut him off, Charlie, cut him off!" I shouted. "He's making for the skiff!"

But again we were almost too late. A ditch interposed in our path and stopped us. The man's tactics were masterly. I understood now why he had got off scot-free so often; he had a marvellously intimate knowledge of the country and its intricacies.

We made after him for the boat. He reached it before us. Jumping in, he seized the sculls. But Charlie was too quick for him. He followed, and wrested the blade with a jerk from the man's grasp. It was now too dark to see much, but Arthur and I followed him. We were all four in the boat, and clung hard to our prisoner. It was the most exciting hunt I have ever taken part in.

"If only Atkins were here!" I cried. "He would have handcuffs with him." As I spoke, that irrepressible creature bounded to his feet once more, as if I had stung him, half upset the boat, and sprang hastily overboard. I saw he was determined not to be caught, if he drowned for it. He swam like a water-rat. We rowed after him, and, finding all other means fail, Charlie Wybrook gave him a light tap on the head with his scull. That brought the man to reason. He let us come up with him and pull him out of the water, though struggling still as hard as he could struggle. But he was quite exhausted. His breath came and went, and he was in a state of collapse. At least, so I thought; though, after all the trouble he had given us, I deemed it best to take nothing for granted. He might be shamming, and might jump overboard again next moment if we relaxed our attention. For it was certain, at least, that our captured pirate was a man of immense resource and a most consummate acrobat.

"Search his pockets!" I said sternly. "He may have another revolver concealed

about him"; for Charlie Wybrook had snatched one away from him in the course of the first struggle, when the canoe went over.

Charlie did as I suggested, Arthur holding the man meanwhile, for he still made ineffectual attempts at resistance.

"This is odd," Charlie said at last. "The fellow has no more fire-arms, but, of all things on earth to come in handy at such a minute, he has—a pair of handcuffs!"

"Pass them over," I said, still as unsuspecting as a child. "What on earth can he want with them, though? However, 'tis the biter bit. We'll use them for himself, Charlie!"

We secured him at once. As soon as his wrists were fast, he gave up all for lost, and lay back resignedly in the bottom of the boat where I laid him. To make things doubly sure, however, we tied his feet with the rope at the bow—what we call the painter. I took the sculls and pulled, for I was cold after my ducking. The two young men, half laughing at their success, kept guard over their prisoner.

As for the baffled wretch, he sat with his head held down, his hands manacled, and his feet tied with the rope, the very picture of despair—wet, downcast, and speechless. He seemed thoroughly cowed. He never spoke a word till we reached Cookham Lock. Before we could tell the lockmen our story, however, one of the keepers came alongside with strange tidings which added to our complication.

"Heard the news, sir?" he called out, recognising me. "Mr. Symington's gone off his head; they've taken him to an asylum; it appears he never went on the river that day at all; it was all a delusion."

Our prisoner rocked himself to and fro and muttered in a tone which seemed somehow quite familiar to me, "All a delusion! Only a delusion!"

We hauled him out, still dripping, and held him tight till the constables could come up and take him in charge. He was wearing a false beard which he had kept through the race. I removed it and gazed at him. "Well, you know me now, Colonel," he said gruffly. I stood aghast. It was Atkins!

We had been employing him as a detective to detect himself. *He* was the Pirate of Cliveden Reach—he had committed all the outrages!

Before long the policemen came up and took possession of him. We marched him to the lock-up. It was a melancholy procession; every one of us knew him. As soon as the young Wybrooks had formally charged him, I held a few minutes' conversation alone with the prisoner.

"Atkins," I said, "we may as well be frank with one another. I need not caution

*you* about the use that may be made of anything you may say; but I ask you one question, as one who knows you, and not in my official capacity—*do you mean to plead guilty?*"

He hung his head doggedly. "Oh, it's all up now," he answered; "I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. I shall plead guilty to the lot, every blessed job, and throw myself on the judge's mercy. But it was *you* that did this thing! It was *you* that suggested it!"

"I?" I broke in, astonished. "How do you make that out, Atkins?"

He crossed his handcuffed hands between his legs with a gesture of despair and replied slowly—



"Well, you know me now, Colonel."



"By seeming to believe that old fool, Teddy Symington."

"Then you robbed Mr. Symington?" I exclaimed.

He looked up at me with a malicious grin.

"I've made a good business of this sort of job for years," he answered; "but it's all up now, and I may as well have done with it. I've worked many a good burglary or two in town, where nobody'd ever suspect a country detective; but it was *you* that set me on this. I'd never have thought of it. Robbed Mr. Symington! No, nobody ever robbed old Symington, don't you see. The moment he told his story, I could tell he was as mad as a hatter; and if it had been me who had had to manage it, the man I'd have called in would have been the divisional doctor. Old Symington took a fancy into his head he'd been robbed—robbed on Cliveden Reach—and what you said set me thinking. It hadn't been done; but it was easy enough to do. You paid for my canoe, and I got a light, collapsible one."

"Atkins," I said, drawing back, "I shall really have to remind you, after all, that anything you may say——"

He looked up at me angrily.

"Stow it, you old idiot!" he cried. "Do you think I'm telling you all this for anything except for my own reasons? You'd better listen. It'll help you in future in your official duties. I bought a canoe and I lurked about the river. I was there, as a detective, authorised to guard the place; and I could land on the private grounds, pretty well where I liked, and carry my collapsible canoe, folded, with me. I could run along the bank twice as fast with it under my arm as any two men could scull an ordinary row-boat. And I *did* run with it, too. I began with the Evatt girls; I knew they had good jewellery, and I got it all from them. First, I ran along the bank to the reed bed; there I got in again, and headed down stream, pulled my false whiskers off, and came to their aid with their bracelets in my pocket. It was as easy as pap; and it was *you* that showed it to me."

"Atkins," I said severely, "I decline to hear any more of this self-incriminating story. It isn't seemly."

He laughed a peculiar laugh.

"You'd better hear it out," he said; "you won't have another chance. Then there was that Wybrook woman. She told me a few days before that she supposed there wasn't any danger in coming back by daylight, for she always brought sixty pounds in gold every second Wednesday from the bank at Maidenhead. I told her not the least; and the rain coming on at the nick of time, I ran down the path with my canoe under my arm, stopped her and took it, chucked my revolver on shore where I could find it again, stuck the money into my pocket, and flung away the bag; and not one of you even thought of searching my pockets! You thought a detective could do no wrong. Oh, you're just about as fit to be High Constable of a county as I am fit to be Archbishop of Canterbury. And I wish to goodness I was. With fifteen thousand a year, no man has a temptation to be anything but virtuous."

I withdrew from the cell.

"Atkins," I said, with dignity, "this is a painful business. I can listen to no more. I feel I must leave you."

"All right, old man," he answered in a most insolent tone. "Don't you be afraid. I won't expose your incompetence."

Next morning, before breakfast, I was surprised to receive a visit from the keeper of the lock-up. His face was very grave.

"Well, Nicholson," I said, anticipating evil from his appearance, "what's the matter this morning?"

"This, sir," he answered. "Atkins has poisoned himself. We think he must have had prussic acid concealed about him. He left this note."

I took it and read it.

"Forgive a dying man one outburst of spleen; and don't be too hard on my wife and family."

It may be weak of me, but I will frankly confess it was I who obtained for Mrs. Atkins the post of matron to the Upper Downton Infirmary.