

Stories from the Diary of a Doctor.

SECOND SERIES.

By L. T. MEADE AND CLIFFORD HALIFAX, M.D.

[These stories are written in collaboration with a medical man of large experience. Many are founded on fact, and all are within the region of practical medical science. Those stories which may convey an idea of the impossible are only a forecast of an early realization.]

III.—THE SILENT TONGUE.



It was a day in late October when I found myself in a train which was to convey me from Waterloo to Salisbury. I was on my way to pay a week's visit to my old friend and patient, General Romney. After retiring from active service he had bought a place in Wiltshire, and had repeatedly begged of me to come to see him there.

My multifarious duties, however, had hitherto made it impossible for me to visit High Court; but the present occasion was of such special moment that I determined to make a great effort to gratify my old friend, and do myself a pleasure at the same time.

I was to arrive at High Court on Thursday afternoon, and on the following Tuesday, Iris Romney, the General's beautiful and only daughter, was to be married to a young man of the name of Vane, a captain in the —th Lancers. I had known Iris from her childhood, and was prepared to congratulate her now on a most suitable match. From the letters which I had received from General Romney, Captain Vane was all that was desirable: an upright, good, honourable fellow. His position in society was well assured, and he had ample means.

"It is not only that Vane is all that her mother and I could desire," continued the General, in his last letter to me, "but there is another reason which makes this marriage a relief to our minds. Our poor Iris, whose beauty, as you know, is much above the average, has been persecuted for many months past by the unwelcome and, I may almost add, the

unscrupulous attentions of our next-door neighbour, the squire of this place, an ungentlemanly boor of the name of Ransome. The fellow won't take 'No' for an answer, and things have come to such a pass that Iris is quite afraid to go out alone, as Ransome is sure to waylay her, and renew his unwelcome protestations and demands. Indeed, were it not for this happy marriage, we should have been obliged, for our child's sake, to leave High Court."

I paid little heed to this part of my friend's letter when reading it, but it was destined to be brought very vividly before my mind later on.



"AN UNGENTLEMANLY BOOR OF THE NAME OF RANSOME."

I arrived at High Court about three o'clock in the afternoon, and found Iris standing in the square entrance-hall. She was surrounded by dogs, and was pulling on a pair of gauntlet gloves; she wore a hat, and was, evidently, in the act of going out. On hearing my steps, she turned quickly and came eagerly to meet me.

"Here you are," she exclaimed, holding out both her hands. "How nice! how delightful! Am I much altered, Dr. Halifax—would you recognise me?"

"Yes, I should recognise you," I answered, looking with admiration at the lovely girl. "You have changed, of course. How tall you are! You were only a child when I saw you last."

"I was fifteen," answered Iris; "the most troublesome monkey in

existence. Now I am eighteen—quite grown up. Well, it is a real pleasure to see you again. Let me take you to father: he has been talking of nothing but your arrival all day."

I accompanied Miss Romney to her

father's study. To her surprise it was empty.

"Where can father be?" she exclaimed. "He knew you would arrive about now. Perhaps he has gone to lie down—he has not been quite well. We won't disturb him, unless you particularly wish it, Dr. Halifax?"

"Certainly not," I replied.

"Mother is out—she had to go to Salisbury on business. May I have the pleasure of your society all to myself for a little? I am just going out to meet Captain Vane—will you come with me? I should much like to introduce him to you."

"And I should like to know him," I replied. "Let us come for a walk, by all means—there is nothing I should enjoy more."

We went out together. Miss Romney's step was full of the light spring of youth. She entertained me with many animated remarks, and took me to several points of interest in the beautiful grounds. From a place called "The Mound" we could see the long, evening shadows falling across Salisbury Plain; turning to our right we got a peep, in the dim distance, of the far-famed Cathedral.

"Yes, yes, it is all lovely," she cried, "and I am in the mood to enjoy it to-day—I am very happy. I do not mind telling you how happy I am, for you are such an old friend."

"You may be sure I rejoice to hear of your happiness," I replied. I looked at her as I spoke. She was standing at a little distance from me, very upright. The dogs had followed us, and a great mastiff stood near her. She rested her white hand on his head. Some rays from the evening sun sparkled in her hair, which was very bright in hue, and looked now like burnished gold. Her eyes, full of happiness, looked frankly into mine. They were lovely eyes, with a tender, womanly expression in them. I thought what a happy fellow Vane would be.

As we were standing together the silence was suddenly broken by the sharp report of a gun.

"Who can possibly be shooting in our grounds?" exclaimed Miss Romney.

"The report came from that copse," I answered her—"down there to our left. Perhaps Captain Vane is amusing himself having a shot or two."

"He did not take his gun with him," she answered; "I saw it in the hall as we passed through just now. No, I am afraid I guess who did fire the shot"; she paused suddenly, and a hot flush of annoyance swept over her

face. It passed almost as quickly as it came.

"There is David," she said, in a glad voice. "Do you see him? He is just coming up that path through the trees. Let us go to meet him."

We soon reached the bottom of the mound, and Captain Vane came quickly up to us. He was a tall, well-made man, of about twenty-eight years of age. His face was moulded in strong lines. He was somewhat dark in complexion, and had resolute eyes.

"David, this is our old friend, Doctor Halifax," said Miss Romney.

"I am glad to meet you," said Vane to me. He made one or two further remarks of an indifferent character.

We turned presently to go back to the house. We had only gone about half the distance when Iris uttered a horrified exclamation.

"What is that on your handkerchief?" she cried to her lover.

He had pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket. He looked at it when she spoke, started, and turned pale.

"I must apologize to you both," he exclaimed. "How stupid of me; I forgot all about it."

"Your handkerchief is all over blood. Have you hurt yourself?" asked Iris.

"No, not a bit of it!" He thrust the handkerchief out of sight. "The fact is simply this. That brute of a Ransome has been shooting round the premises this morning, and, like the cur he is, has only half done his work. This handkerchief is stained because I have been putting a pheasant out of his misery. It was a horrid sight. Don't let us talk about it any more."

"I had a premonition that Mr. Ransome was somewhere near," said Iris. "The mere thought of that man affects me disagreeably."

She shivered as she spoke. Vane looked at her, but did not reply. Their eyes met—he gave her a quick smile, but I could not help noticing that he looked pale and worried.

We reached the house, where Mrs. Romney came out to meet us. She gave me a hearty welcome, and asked me to go with her at once to her husband.

"The General is lying down in his study, Dr. Halifax, or he would come to you," she explained. "The fact is, he has not been well for some days, and just now I found him trembling violently, and scarcely able to stand. Oh, I do not think there is much the matter—he will be all right by-and-by, and

nothing will do him more good than a quiet chat with you."

I followed Mrs. Romney to the study. The General was lying on a sofa, but when we approached, he rose quickly, and came to meet us. He was a tall, largely-made man, somewhat full in habit, and with a fresh-coloured face. That face now was flushed, and his eyes looked suspiciously bright.

"Welcome," he exclaimed, holding out both his hands to me. "Here I am, and nothing whatever the matter with me. I had an attack of giddiness, but it has passed off. Has my wife been making out that I am an invalid, eh? Well, I never felt better in my life. It would be a shabby trick to play on you, Halifax, to bring you down here, and then give you doctoring work to do."

"I am always prepared for doctoring work," I answered, "but I am delighted to see you so fit, General."

"You can leave us now, Mary," said the General, turning to his wife, and giving her an affectionate glance. "The giddiness has quite passed, my love, and a chat with Halifax will do me more good than anything else."

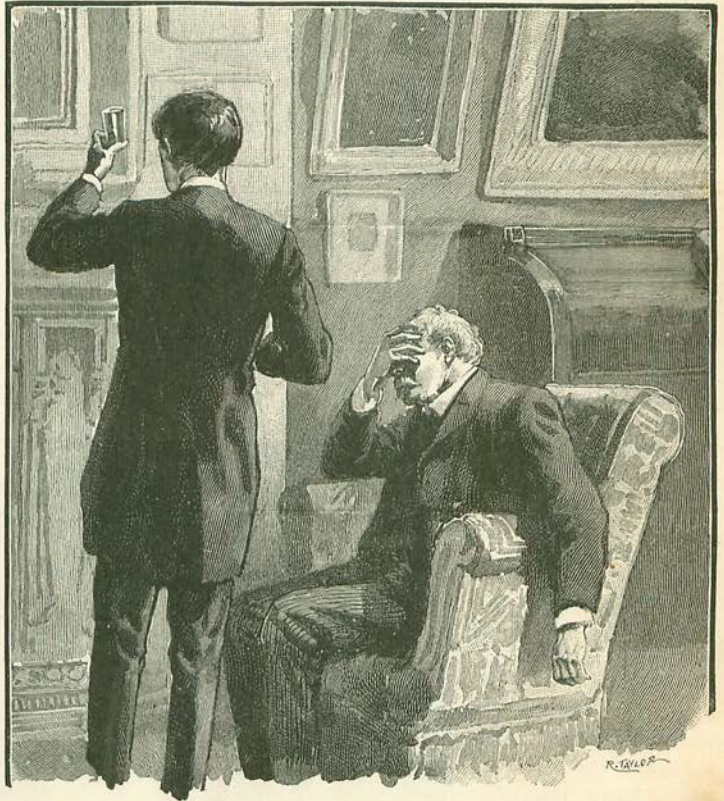
Mrs. Romney went immediately away. The moment she did so, the General sank into an arm-chair, and covered his eyes with one of his hands. I noticed that his big hand shook.

"The fact is," he said, in an altered tone, "I am *not* quite the thing. I did not want the wife to know, nor Iris, bless her. You are aware, or perhaps you are not, that there is to be a dance here to-night, Halifax—it would never do for an old chap like me to spoil sport. You have just come in the nick of time. Give me something to steady my nerves."

I prescribed a simple dose, the ingredients for which were fortunately close at hand. I mixed it, and General Romney took the glass from my hand and quickly drained off the contents.

"It takes a good bit out of a man to part with his only child," he said. "I consider myself, however, the luckiest father in existence. There never was a better fellow than Vane. You have seen him. What do you make of him, eh?"

"I have scarcely spoken two dozen words to Captain Vane," I said.



"I MIXED IT."

"What does that signify? You are a keen observer of character. What do you make of the lad?"

"I like what I have seen of him," I replied.

"I am delighted to hear you say that," exclaimed the General. "When I tell you that I consider Vane worthy of Iris, you will understand that I cannot give him higher praise. They are devoted to one another, and as happy as children. We shall have a gay time until the wedding is over. To-night

there is to be a dance ; to-morrow we go to the Sinclairs', for a farewell dinner ; the next day—but I need not recount all our gaieties to you, Halifax. Your dose has done me good—I feel as well as ever I did in my life at the present moment."

The General certainly looked more like himself. The violent colour on his face had subsided ; his eyes were still too excited, though, to please me, and I purposely led the conversation to every-day subjects.

There was a large dinner party at High Court that evening. This was to be followed by a dance, to which a number of guests had been invited.

Iris sat near me at dinner—she wore white, which suited her well. Her face was so vivacious, her hair so bright, the sparkle in her flashing eyes gave so much light and movement to her expression, that no vivid colour was needed to set off her remarkable beauty. Vane sat opposite to the bride-elect, and I found myself looking at him several times during dinner with much interest. He was on the whole the most silent of the party, and I guessed him to be a man of few words, but I felt certain by the thoughtful gleam in his eyes and the firm cut of his lips that he was one to be relied on and rested upon in the battle of life.

Immediately after dinner, the ladies went upstairs to re-arrange their dresses for the coming ball, and General Romney motioned me up to his end of the table. He resumed the conversation we had had before dinner, and assured me several times in a low voice that the medicine I had given him had completely removed the nervous attack from which he had been suffering when I first saw him.

"Not that I have been at all the thing for some time," he added ; "but we'll talk of my ailments when the ball is over. Nothing must interfere with Iris's bridal ball, bless her."

We did not stay long over wine, and I presently found myself standing in the great central hall. A footman came up to place some fresh logs on the glowing fire. As he did so he glanced at me once or twice in a queer, nervous sort of manner. Suddenly he looked behind him, found that we were alone, and said, in a hurried, eager voice :—

"You are the doctor from London, ain't you, sir?"

"Yes," I answered, in some surprise.

"Might I speak to you for a moment, sir? I have something to say—something that must be told. Might I see you by yourself, doctor—I won't keep you a minute?"

"Certainly," I replied ; "say what you have got to say at once."

The man's manner alarmed me, he was shaking all over.

"On this night, of all nights," he said. "Twill upset the General, for certain. Oh, sir, what is to be done?"

"If you will tell me what the news is, I can, perhaps, answer your question," I replied. "Now, pull yourself together, man, and tell me what is the matter."

The man stood up.

"It's a tragedy," he began, "and has happened, so to speak, at our gates. It's this :



"MIGHT I SPEAK TO YOU FOR A MOMENT?"

Squire Ransome was found dead in the copse at the back of the house, not an hour ago. He was lying on his face and hands with his skull smashed in, and his gun lying by his side. They have took him home, and they say there's to be a warrant took out immediately for the arrest of the murderer. Who could have done it? I wouldn't have the General know this for £500."

Some people came into the hall; I turned quickly to the man.

"Hush," I said, in a peremptory voice; "keep your information to yourself for the present. If this thing is kept from the family until after the ball, so much the better. You were right to tell me, and we must trust that nothing will be known here until to-morrow."

The man nodded and walked away. Vane approached me at that moment, and taking my arm led me to the ball-room.

"The band has just struck up," he said. "Iris and I are going to open the ball, as a matter of course, but no doubt she will want you to be her partner in one or two dances later on."

"I hope she will," I replied.

"There she is; let us go to her," said Vane.

We walked up a long and splendidly decorated ball-room. Iris was standing beside her father and mother, near the principal entrance. They were busily engaged receiving guest after guest, who arrived continuously. In a few moments the great room was full of animated couples whirling round to the music of a splendid string band, which had been brought from London for the occasion. Vane and Iris opened the dance together. All eyes followed the graceful pair as they flew round in the giddy mazes of the waltz. Iris's face looked so animated, and there was such a flashing brilliancy about her eyes, that I began to compare her to her quaint name, and to think that she had some of the many lights of the rainbow, in its shifting, changing colours, about her.

One dance was quickly followed by another. General Romney and his wife still stood near the entrance. I noticed to my dismay that the deep, crimson flush which had somewhat alarmed me in the General's appearance before dinner had again returned. He was a man of full habit, and I did not like the glittering light in his eyes. I sincerely hoped, for every reason, that the terrible tragedy which had taken place in the copse before dinner would not reach his ears until the evening's amusement was over.

Vol. ix.—43.

For a time I stood rather apart from the gay and brilliant throng. Iris had promised to give me one or two dances, but our turn had not come yet.

As I stood and waited, I recalled the sound I had heard when I stood with Miss Romney on the mound. "At that moment, in all probability, the murder was being committed," I said to myself. "But, no, that could not have been the case, for the unfortunate Squire was found with his skull broken in; he could not have come by his death from a gunshot wound."

At that moment Miss Romney made her way to my side.

"Ours is the next dance," she said, looking into my face, "but——" she hesitated.

"What is it?" I asked, smiling at her.

"I am tired, I do not want to dance," she said. "Shall we sit this waltz out? Will you come with me to the conservatory, it is so hot here?"

"With pleasure," I replied.

She put her slim hand on my arm, and we left the ball-room. We had to cross the great hall to reach a large conservatory at the further end.

"I am anxious to have a talk with you," said the young girl, almost in a whisper, as we pushed our way through the throngs of guests. "I have known you since I was a child, and I am anxious——"

We had almost reached the conservatory now, but before we entered, Iris Romney turned and faced me.

"Dr. Halifax," she said, "is my father well?"

I was about to answer her, when a commotion behind caused us both to turn our heads. A man who was neither a guest nor a servant had pushed his way into the hall. He was a dark man, plainly dressed. Two of the powdered footmen had come up and were speaking to him. They seemed to be expostulating with him, and he appeared to be resisting them. One of the servants put his hand on the man's arm; he pushed him impatiently aside, and came farther into the hall.

The guests were everywhere—in the hall, on the stairs, trooping in and out of the ball-room. They all stood still now, as if moved by a common impulse. Every eye was fixed on the stranger. I suddenly felt that the moment had come for me to interfere. I cannot say what premonition seized me, but I knew beyond the possibility of doubt that that strange, queer-looking man had pushed his way into this festive scene on some terrible errand.

"Pardon me," I said to Iris, "I will just go and speak to that fellow, and be back with you in a minute."

"What can the man want?" exclaimed Iris.

"I will tell you in a moment," I said; "pray stay where you are."

To my annoyance, I found that she was following me.

The servant, Henry by name, who had given me the news of Ransome's death, came eagerly up when he saw me approaching.

"I am glad you are here, Dr. Halifax," he said. "Perhaps you can get Constable Morris to go away. I keep on telling him that he can come back later on."

The footman spoke in a hoarse whisper; agitation had paled his face; he clutched hold of my coat in a sort of nervous frenzy.

"Keep quiet," I said to him, sharply—then I turned to the policeman: "If you have any business here, you had better come into this room," I said.

The room in question was a small smoking-room, the door of which happened to stand open.

"Yes, sir, it would be best," said the man, in a perfectly civil tone. He stepped across the hall immediately—I followed him—Miss Romney did the same.

"Had you not better go away?" I said to her.

"No," she answered, "I prefer to stay and hear the matter out. Why, this is Constable Morris—I know him perfectly well. What do you want here to-night, Morris? You see we are all busy; if you have anything important to say, we can see you at any hour you like to arrange in the morning."

"I must do my work to-night, miss," he answered. "I'd rather cut off my right hand than give you pain, miss," he continued—"but, there, business is business. A constable's life ain't none too pleasant at times—no, that it ain't."

Here he drew himself up and, taking a red pocket-handkerchief out of

his pocket, wiped the moisture from his brow. His eyes travelled quickly from Iris, in her white dress, to me and then back again to Iris.

"Sir," he said, addressing himself to me, "can't you get Miss Romney to leave the room?"

"I'm afraid I can't," I replied.

"Well, I suppose I must go on with the whole black business afore the young lady. If the thing is done quickly, there's no call for anyone to know, except the family. I beg a thousand pardons for coming into the hall as I've done, but I could not get a servant to hear me in the back premises. My colleague is outside with the trap, and we can take the young gent away as quiet as possible, and no one need know. Lor! it's sure to turn out a big mistake, but duty is duty."

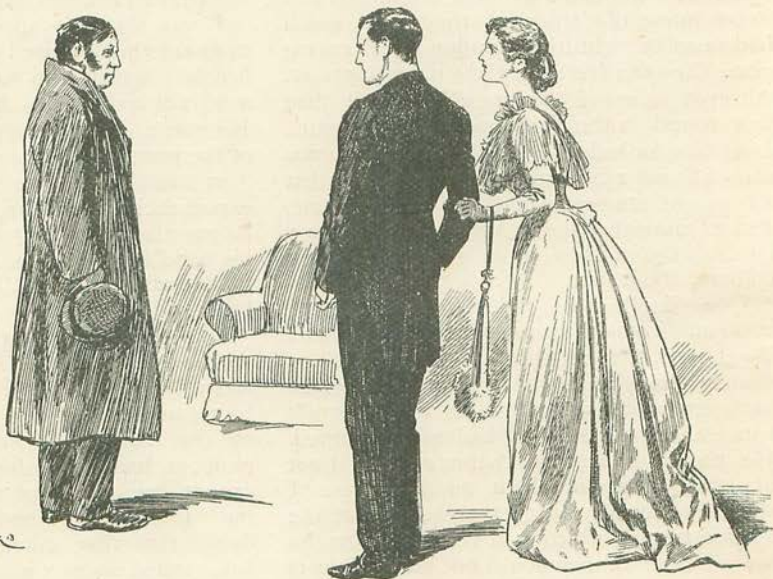
"What gentleman do you want to take away?" asked Iris, going up and standing opposite to the man. "Is it one of our guests?—which?"

"God Almighty knows, miss, that I don't want to trouble you."

"Speak out, man," I said. "Tell us your business, good or bad, immediately. Can't you see that this suspense is very bad for Miss Romney?"

The man glanced at Iris, but immediately looked down again.

"Well, sir," he said, addressing himself to me, "it's an ugly job, but here is the long and short of it. There has been a murder committed in these grounds. Squire Ransome, of Ransome Heights, was found



"SPEAK OUT, MAN," I SAID.

dead in the copse not three hundred yards from the house. The gamekeeper here and a labourer from the village found him and gave the alarm. He was took home, and I hold a warrant now for the arrest of Captain David Vane on a charge of having murdered him."

"On a charge of what?" said Iris. She had been very pale—as white as death, until the man had finally delivered himself of his cruel errand—then a great wave of brilliant colour flooded her face, and restored the dancing light to her eyes.

"This is such utter folly, that I am not even afraid about it," she said. "Oblige me, Dr. Halifax, by remaining with this man for a few minutes while I go to fetch David. It needs but a word or two to clear him of this monstrous charge."

She drew herself up to her full stately height, and left the room with the air of a queen.

Morris looked after her with a red face and troubled eyes.

"Ef you'll believe me, sir," he said, "I'd rayther than five hundred pounds that I was out of this job—it's a bad business altogether"—here he shook his head ominously.

The constable had scarcely said the words before Iris returned, accompanied by Vane.

"What is all this about?" said Vane. He looked full at the man, then at me.

Iris must have prepared him. He came into the room holding her hand. As he stood and faced the police-constable, he still kept it in a tight grip.

"Is it true," he said, "that I am charged with murder; and that you have a warrant to arrest me?"

"Are you Captain Vane, sir?"

"Yes."

"Then that is what I've got to do, I am sorry to say, sir. I've a trap outside, and my colleague is there, and the best thing we can do is to go off quietly at once. If you'll give me your word as you'll not try to escape, Captain Vane, I won't use the handcuffs. It's only to look at you, sir, to know that you're a gent of your word."

"Had you not better leave us, Iris?" said Vane, looking down for the first time at the girl's white face.

"No, I'll see it out to the end," she answered. "But can't you say something, David? Can't you clear yourself? Can't you put this dreadful thing straight?"

"I can and will, dearest," he replied, in a low tone; "but I'm afraid I must go with this man to-night."

"There's no help for it, sir. The warrant must be carried out. The inquest is to be held at the poor gentleman's own place to-morrow, and, as sure as sure, you'll be cleared; but now it's my duty to take you with me, Captain Vane."

"Cheer up, Iris," said Vane. "It is sure to be all right." He gave her a smile with his eyes. It was a queer, strong sort of smile, and it never reached his lips.

For the first time poor Iris broke down—she gave a low, heart-broken sob, and covered her face with her trembling hands.

"Take care of her," said Vane to me. "Keep it up if you can until the dance is over, and, above all things, try to conceal this horrid business from General Romney until after the guests have gone."

Here he turned to the policeman.

"I am ready to accompany you," he said.

"Will you allow me to fetch my overcoat?"

"I'm afraid, sir, it's my duty not to let you out of my sight—perhaps the other gentleman would bring the coat."

"No, I'll fetch it," said Iris, recovering herself like a flash. "Yes, I wish to fetch it—I know where it is."

She ran out of the room, but had scarcely done so when the door was suddenly flung open and General Romney, holding one hand to his head and stretching the other out before him as though he were groping blindly in the dark, tottered into our midst.

"What in the name of Heaven is all this about?" he exclaimed. "Vane, what are you doing here? Is not that man Constable Morris? Morris, what is your business in my house at this hour?"

Iris had now returned with the coat. She gave it to Vane, who began to put it on, and then went up to her father.

"Come away, father, do," she said.

"Folly, Iris," he replied; "keep your hand off me. I am not a baby to be coerced in this style. Ah, Halifax, so you are here, too! Now, what's the mischief? Vane, can't you speak? Are you all struck dumb?"

"It's a bad business, sir," said the policeman. "I've a warrant here to arrest this young gentleman, Captain David Vane, on a charge of murder."

"A charge of *murder*?" shouted the General.

"Yes, sir. Squire Ransome has been found in the copse close to this house with his skull knocked in, and there's circumstantial evidence of a grave nature which points to Captain Vane as his murderer. It is my business to arrest him, and——"



"GENERAL ROMNEY TOTTERED."

"And I will come with you," said Vane. He turned to the General as he spoke. "I beg of you, General," he said, "to take Iris away from here. This matter is very horrible, but it can have only one termination. I am innocent, and my innocence can be easily proved. In all probability I shall be back here to-morrow, none the worse for this experience. Think of Iris, General, and for Heaven's sake take her out of this."

Iris tried again to lay her hand on her father's arm.

He shook her off as if she had struck him. His red face was no longer red—it was purple. The veins stood out in great knots on his neck and temples.

"You are charged with murder?" he said, turning to his future son-in-law. "And you have come here to arrest him," he continued, facing about and staring at the policeman—"then let me—" he broke off abruptly. A groan came from his lips, he stretched out both hands wildly as though to clutch at something.

"My God, I am blind and deaf!" he panted. "There is a roaring of water in my ears, I—" He stumbled forward, and fell in an unconscious heap on the floor.

The confusion which followed can scarcely be described. It was my duty to attend to General Romney. I knelt by him, raised his

head, loosened his collar and necktie, and desired someone to fetch Mrs. Romney. Figures kept passing to and fro. I knelt on by the side of the unconscious man. Presently Mrs. Romney came hurrying in. Two or three footmen also appeared. We raised General Romney with great care, and carried him through the hall full of guests, up the broad staircase, and into his own spacious bedroom on the first floor. There he was undressed and laid in his bed. There was no doubt with regard to the nature of his illness. General Romney had been smitten down with a severe attack of paralysis. I asked Mrs. Romney to send for the family physician, Dr. Haynes. He arrived on the scene in an incredibly short space of time. We had a hurried consultation over the case. Dr. Haynes arranged to sit up for the night with the unconscious man, and then for the first time I had a moment to think of others. What had become of Vane? Where was Iris?

Absorbed in anxiety about them, I ran hastily downstairs. The lights were still burning all over the house, but every guest had vanished: the place wore a neglected aspect. Some flowers were scattered about on the marble floor of the great hall. The fire on the hearth was reduced to ashes. All the doors leading into the hall stood open.

A girl in a white dress stood motionless by the empty hearth. Two or three dogs crouched at her feet. On hearing my steps she raised her head with a start. Her face, which had been dull and almost vacant in expression, lit up into full light. She sprang to meet me and stretched out her hands.

"I'm so glad you have come," she exclaimed. "How is father?"

"I am sorry to say he is very ill," I replied. "He is suffering from a severe stroke of paralysis."

Iris put her hand to her forehead.

"Is he in danger, Dr. Halifax?" she asked.

"I would rather not give any opinion about him to-night," I replied.

"I ought to be with him," she said. "I will go to him in a moment—after—after I have spoken to you."

"You cannot possibly do him any good by going to him now," I replied. "He is quite unconscious, and would not know you. He knows no one. Your mother is with him, and also Dr. Haynes. He wants for nothing at the present moment—nothing, I mean, that man can do. His life is in Higher Hands.

All we have to do is patiently to await results. Now, do you know that it is past two o'clock? You ought to be in bed."

Iris shuddered.

"I could not sleep if I went," she said. "Dr. Halifax, I want to tell you something."

"What is that?" I asked.

She looked full up at me—her eyes were bright again.

"Do you know why I fetched David's overcoat?" she said.

"I cannot say—you probably knew where it was to be found."

"I did—but I had another reason. I wanted to take the handkerchief away."

"What handkerchief?" I asked, in some astonishment.

"Have you such a short memory?" she asked, looking at me with a puzzled expression. "Don't you remember the handkerchief which David pulled out of his pocket this afternoon as we were coming up the avenue? It was blood-stained. Don't you recall the circumstances?"

"Yes," I replied, gravely, "I do—I had forgotten it when you first spoke of a handkerchief."

"Well, I remembered it," she replied; "it flashed suddenly across my memory when David asked for his coat. I knew that the handkerchief would be found there, and that they would use the blood-stains against him. That was why I was in such a hurry to fetch it. I removed the handkerchief and——"

"Yes," I said, when she paused, "and what did you do with it?"

"I burnt it—here, on this hearth. *That* horrible witness is, at least, reduced to ashes. Why, what is the matter, Dr. Halifax? How grave you look."

I felt grave. I knew that Iris had done wrong in burning the handkerchief. It might have been an important witness in *favour* of the accused. There was no use, however, in adding to her misery now.

"I wish you would go to bed," I said. "You are looking very ill."

She did not reply at once; she kept staring at me—her quick intuition read disapproval on my face.

"Have I done wrong?" she exclaimed, in a voice of terror.

"I sincerely hope not," I answered, as soothingly as I could speak. "Perhaps nothing will be said about the handkerchief."

"But why are you so grave? Are you not glad that it is gone?"

I gave her a quick glance—she was the sort of girl who could bear the truth.

"You acted with natural, but mistaken, impulse," I said. "It would have been possible to prove that the stains on the handkerchief were caused by pheasant's blood, which differs in essential particulars from man's—but doubtless," I continued, raising my voice to a cheerful key, "the monstrous charge against Captain Vane will be shattered without the least difficulty at the examination before the magistrate to-morrow morning."

"David is the noblest fellow in the world," said Iris, with shining eyes. "But," she added, suddenly, and as if the words were wrung from her, "he *did* hate Mr. Ransome, and he had good cause."

The next day Vane was brought before a magistrate at Salisbury. General Romney was lying in a prostrate condition, and Haynes decided to remain with him until the nurse from London arrived. I was, therefore, free to accompany Mrs. Romney and Iris to the police-court at Salisbury. I have no space here to go into full particulars of the examination. The case against Vane was as follows:—

His dislike to Ransome was well known. On the day of the murder Vane had gone out early—during the time of his absence Ransome undoubtedly met his death. This fact alone could not have incriminated the young man, but, unfortunately, he had been seen by two labourers, returning from their work, having high words with Ransome. Ransome was seated on the gate in the fence which divided General Romney's grounds from those of Ransome Heights. When the labourers passed, Ransome was using excited words, and Vane was replying to them with a degree of heat and intemperance quite foreign to his usual character. The men lingered near as long as they decently could, but seeing that Ransome noticed them they slunk off. They had reached the road and were walking rapidly towards their homes, when they heard a shot fired. They remarked on the circumstance to each other, and wondered, as they expressed it, "if the young gents were up to mischief." That evening, on repairing to the village tap-room, the first news that reached them was that of the murder of Squire Ransome. On their evidence a warrant was taken out for the arrest of Vane.

The magistrate listened gravely to all that was said, and then stated that there was no course open to him but to remand Captain Vane until the result of the coroner's inquest was known.

As Mrs. Romney, poor Iris, and I were

leaving the police-court, the lawyer who was employed in Vane's defence, one of the leading men in his profession at Salisbury, came up and asked to speak to me alone. I conducted the ladies to their carriage, and then went into a small room with him.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"This is a grave business," he replied. "Of course, I hope to get my client off, but I must own that circumstantial evidence points strongly against him. His own story is as follows: He frankly admits that he quarrelled with Ransome yesterday. He was walking across a field in General Romney's grounds when he came across a wounded pheasant lying on the path. He took his handkerchief out and strangled the bird. While doing so he heard a loud, mocking laugh, and looking up he saw Ransome astride of the gate in the fence. Vane called out to him with, as he acknowledged, considerable temper in his tones. His words were as follows:—

"'I should think, if you are cad enough to shoot another man's game, you would at least have the decency to kill it, and not leave it maimed.'

"He says that he finished this speech by flinging the pheasant at Ransome's feet.

"The Squire got into a towering passion, and broke immediately into a volley of oaths. Vane says that Ransome took good care to drag in Miss Romney's name in the most offensive manner.

"He acknowledged that he had some difficulty in keeping himself in control, and presently thought the most prudent course was to turn on his heel and walk away. He had only gone a little distance when he heard the report of a gun. He says he thought nothing of the circumstance beyond concluding that Ransome was continuing his sport. This is his tale," concluded the lawyer, "and a very lame one it will appear if there is no testimony to support it. Vane speaks of having stained his handkerchief with the pheasant's blood. He says he left it in his overcoat. Now, I cannot find it there. Would it be possible, Dr. Halifax, for you to get it for me?"

"I am afraid not," I replied, gravely.

I then told Mr. Selwyn of poor Iris's rash act of the previous night.

The lawyer looked very grave.

"What mad creatures women are," he said, after a pause. "The mere fact of the handkerchief being destroyed will incriminate the unfortunate young man."

We spoke together for a little longer, and then I was obliged to leave Selwyn to accompany Mrs. Romney and Iris to High Court.

I made a strong effort for their sakes to overcome the gloomy forebodings which seized me, and resolved that Iris should hear nothing more of her own rash act, unless circumstances made it impossible to keep it from her.

In the course of the afternoon, a



"HE SAW RANSOME ASTRIDE OF THE GATE IN THE FENCE."

messenger from Ransome Heights brought me a brief note to say that the coroner had returned a verdict of wilful murder against Captain David Vane. I can scarcely explain the emotion which overcame me when I read this brief note. I crushed it in my hand, pushed it into my pocket, and went out for a long walk.

That evening I was sitting alone in General Romney's study, when my thoughts were interrupted by a message from Mrs. Romney desiring my presence in the sick room.

I went upstairs at once. The General was lying on his back, breathing stertorously; the flush on his face was not so marked as it had been when first the seizure had taken him; his lips were slightly open, and occasionally he moved his eyelids very faintly.

"He has looked at me once or twice," said Mrs. Romney, who was standing by the bedside; "and," she added, "his eyes have had a question in them."

"He doubtless has much he wants to tell you," I said, in a soothing voice. "This is a good sign of his returning intelligence."

"But I fear you do not think well of him, Dr. Halifax."

"The case is a very grave one," I replied.

Mrs. Romney was silent for a moment—then she laid her hand on my arm and drew me to a distant part of the room.

"Do you think," she said, looking full up at me as she spoke—"do you think that my husband knows anything of the murder?"

Her words startled me.

"How could he?" I answered. "General Romney has not been out for some days——"

"That is true," she replied, "he has not been well—not quite himself. Still, what does the strange, anguished look in his eyes mean? Oh, I know he wants to tell me something very badly. See, doctor, his eyes are open now. Come to him: he would beckon us if he could."

I approached the bed where the stricken man lay. He gazed at me fixedly—his eyes were bloodshot and dull; nevertheless, beneath the dulness, beneath the ebbing powers of life, I thought I caught a glimpse of a tortured soul. The look in the General's eyes startled me. I laid my hand gently over them to close them.

"Do not think—sleep," I said to him.

Perhaps he did not understand me—perhaps he did.

Soon afterwards I left the room. I returned once more to the study. My mind was now filled by a very anxious thought. Suppose Mrs. Romney was right? Suppose

the dying man did know some fact which might clear David Vane? The feeling that this might possibly be so, and the knowledge also that the dull brain would in all probability never have the power of expressing its thoughts again—that the man who was so soon to leave the world would most likely carry his secret in darkness and silence to his long home—gave me a feeling of intense pain. I felt absolutely powerless to do anything in the matter, and in order to while away the wretched moments, I looked around me to see if I could find something to read.

The General was not a reading man, and, with the exception of a few sporting journals, there were no books to be found in his study. I was about to leave the room to seek for some literature further a-field, when a cabinet of old-fashioned make, which occupied a niche in one corner, attracted my attention. The cabinet was of oak, old, and beautifully carved; it had doors which could be shut or opened by the turning of brass handles. It was possible that I might find something to read in this cabinet. I went to it and opened the doors. I saw at a glance that it did not contain what I had come to seek. Some guns, one or two rusty pistols, a few old files and bottles, were scattered about on the different shelves; but what particularly attracted my attention was a battered-looking hat, which seemed from the way it had been pushed in on the top of bottles and various other débris, to have found a hasty hiding-place in the cabinet. I took it into my hands and looked at it—at first without any special interest. Then the faint smell of singeing attracted my attention. I held the hat between me and the light, and noticed that it had been considerably injured. On close examination I saw that it had been shot through. There were holes apparent in the crown; one round hole about the size of a shilling, and three or four smaller ones. These holes must have been caused by a charge of shot. For what possible reason had anyone made a shooting target of the old hat?

I put it back again in its place, shut the cabinet doors, and returned to my place by the fireside. I felt excited, and no longer cared to divert my thoughts by reading. Why was the hat in the cabinet, and why had it been riddled with shot?

"Suppose," I said to myself, "General Romney really knows all about this affair—and suppose Vane is hanged for it."

I began to think hard. I had scarcely

time, however, to arrange my thoughts before the study door was opened, and Iris came in. There were red rims round her eyes as if she had been crying—otherwise she was quite calm. I looked at her attentively, and it occurred to me that she might help me to throw light on the mystery which was now occupying all my thoughts.

"Sit down," I said to her; "I want to talk to you about your father."

"How is he?" she asked.

"Very ill indeed," I replied.

Her face grew a shade paler.

"Is he dying?" she asked of me.

"I have grave fears for him," I answered; "but you know the old saying, that 'while there is life there is hope.' It is important that I should know the symptoms which preceded this sudden attack, and it has occurred to me that you can possibly help me. What did your father do, for instance, yesterday?"

Iris's brow contracted with a certain impatience.

"My father has not been well for some days," she said.

"He spent yesterday as he has spent most days lately, in his study."

"He did not go out, then?"

"Go out!—no, he has not been out for a fortnight."

"Are you certain on that point?" I asked.

"Yes—what do you mean? Even if he did go out, it does not greatly matter, does it? But I know that he did not."

"In the state he was in," I said, "exercise would have been extremely injurious to him, and if he took it, it might have hastened the attack."

"He was not out, Dr. Halifax," said Iris, "and," she continued, eagerly, "it so happens that I can prove it. Father would never stir

a yard without a certain old hat which he had a fancy for. That hat has been hanging in the hall for the last fortnight. I will fetch it for you."

"Do," I said; "I am sorry to trouble you, but it is important that I should know if the attack was in any way caused by unwonted exercise."



"THERE WERE HOLES APPARENT IN THE CROWN."

Iris quickly left the room; she came back in a moment with empty hands.

"The hat is not there," she exclaimed. "It was on the stand yesterday morning. I saw it; perhaps one of the servants has removed it."

"Is this it?" I asked, going suddenly to the cabinet, flinging it open, and producing the hat. I held it high, for I did not wish Iris to notice the holes made by the shot.

She came eagerly to my side.

"That is certainly the hat," she replied. "I wonder why father hid it in the cabinet?"

"Finding the hat here points to the conclusion that he went out yesterday," I said. "He perhaps put it in this cabinet to avoid the

trouble of returning it to its place in the hall."

"Perhaps so," replied Iris. "And you think he injured himself by going out?"

"He certainly did," I said, in a grave voice.

I did not add any more. My suspicions were confirmed.

"You are looking tired," I said to Iris. "You had better go to bed. Rest assured that I mean to take this matter up, but you mustn't question me. If I fail, I fail, but I may succeed. Go to bed and sleep. Rest in the knowledge that I will do my best."

Iris suddenly seized my hand.

"You are good, you comfort me," she said; "you strengthen me."

She ran out of the room.

I sat down again by the fire. I was now concentrating my thoughts on one object, and one only. Having clearly made up my mind that General Romney possessed a secret, it was my mission to restore to him the power of divuiging it. How could I do that?

The General was suffering from embolism—there was little doubt, also, that there was progressive paralysis of the brain. The case was a bad one, and under ordinary circumstances the doomed man would go down into his grave in unbroken silence. In this case the silence must be broken. How?

Suddenly, an idea came to me—the shadow of a hope possessed me. Thin and poor as this hope was, I determined to act upon it. I went up to General Romney's bedroom. Haynes was there, seated by the bedside; a trained nurse, who had arrived from town, was also present, and Mrs. Romney was lying on a sofa in a distant part of the room. The General lay as motionless as of old. I went over and sat by the bedside—the pallor was deepening over the sick man's face, the shadow of death was on it; his eyes, however, were wide open: they looked at me now, full of speech, but of speech which I had no power to interpret. I took his hand in mine, and felt his pulse, it was weak and fluttering; I bent down and listened to his breathing, then I asked Haynes to come into the next room for a moment.

"What do you think of the case?" I said to him.

"Quite hopeless," he answered. "I do not think our patient will be alive in the morning."

"He is certainly very ill," I replied. "His respiratory centres are affected, out of proportion to the severity of the attack of paralysis; in short, even if the hemorrhage on the brain does not proceed, he is likely to die of asphyxia."

"I have noticed the affection of the lungs," said Haynes. "Can nothing be done to relieve the breathing?"

"I am inclined to try the inhalation of oxygen gas," I answered. "I propose that we send immediately to Salisbury for some bags of the gas, and give it to the patient to inhale."

Haynes looked at me in doubtful surprise. "Where so much is wrong," he said, "what is the use of trying what may only prolong life to cause further suffering? The patient is almost unconscious."

"He is not unconscious," I replied. "He knows us. Have you not noticed the expression in his eyes?"

Vol. ix.—44.

"I have," said Haynes. "To tell the truth, I do not like their look. They give me a sense of being haunted."

"The inhalation of the gas can do no harm," I said, almost cheerfully. "I am quite aware that it is not usually tried in such cases, but I have a special reason for wishing not to leave a stone unturned to give the General a chance of even partial revivment. Now, can we get a messenger to go to Salisbury at once?"

Haynes looked dubious and disturbed.

"I will go, if anybody must," he answered; "but in addition to not feeling sanguine as to the success of your remedy, I am quite certain that we cannot get the oxygen gas in Salisbury."

"We'll make it, then," I replied. "Such a trivial obstacle must not baffle us at a crucial moment like the present. Will you go for me immediately to Salisbury, Haynes, and get two nitrous oxide bags from any dentist you happen to know? Then get from the chemist a retort and a spirit-lamp, some chlorate of potash, some peroxide of manganese, some caustic potash, some rubber tubing, and two big glass jars. Bring these back with you as fast as ever you can. I believe in the remedy, but there is not a moment to lose in preparing the oxygen gas."

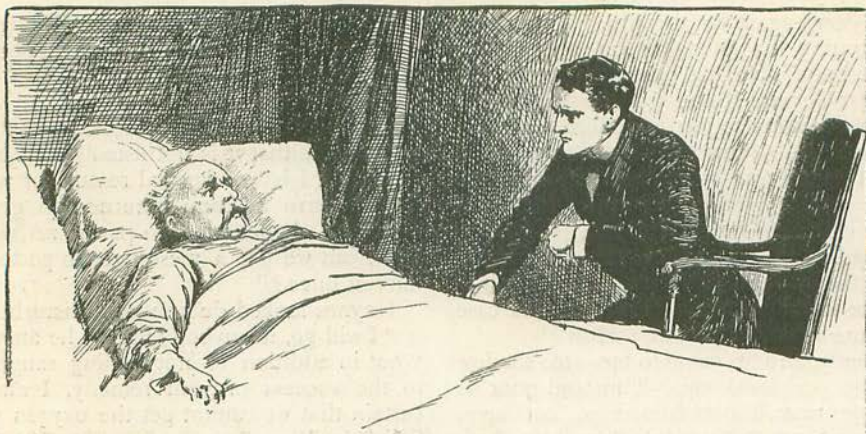
Haynes left me, and I returned to the sick room. I shall not soon forget those weary hours of watching. I knew that with all possible speed Haynes would not be back with the necessary materials for preparing the gas under a couple of hours. Meanwhile, the patient's strength was ebbing fast. Any moment that fluttering pulse might cease. I administered restoratives at intervals, and held the limp hand in mine. Shortly before Haynes returned, Mrs. Romney stirred on her sofa, rose, and motioned to me to follow her into the next room. When I did so, she spoke, eagerly.

"How is my husband?" she asked.

I looked at her.

"You must know the truth," I said. "You are brave—you will bear up—General Romney is dying—nothing can be done to save his life, but I have sent to Salisbury for a special remedy which will, in all probability, relieve the breathing, and it is quite possible give him the opportunity of communicating to us that thought which haunts his dying bed."

"Yes, yes, he wants to tell us something," said Mrs. Romney. She turned white, and trembled so excessively that I made her sit down on the nearest chair.



"THE PATIENT'S STRENGTH WAS EBBING FAST."

At this moment I heard steps on the stairs, and Haynes arrived with all the necessary materials for making the gas.

There was not a moment to waste. I got the apparatus quickly into order, mixed the chemicals, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the bag slowly fill with pure oxygen gas. Haynes and I then hurried into the sick room. I directed the nurse to place a lamp in such a position that the light should fall on the patient. My object now was to revive him—in short, to untie, if possible, that silent tongue. Mrs. Romney followed me into the room. The gas was quickly applied, and the effect of even the first few whiffs was marvellous. The death-like pallor on the sick man's face left it. The returning colour first stole into the tips of the ears, then to the lips, then the eyes grew bright. The General heaved a deep sigh, as though an awful weight had been lifted from him. I removed the rubber tubing which I had introduced into one of his nostrils, and noticed the quick, strong respirations which now proceeded from the relieved lungs. This relief did not last long; but when I administered the gas again, the effect was in every way satisfactory. At the third application General Romney sat up in bed. His mouth twitched, he tried to speak, but no intelligible words would come to him. He was now, however, fully conscious, and I knew that the moment had arrived for me to speak to him.

"I want to tell you something, General," I said. "Captain David Vane——"

"Oh, don't, I beg of you," interrupted Mrs. Romney.

I pushed her aside.

"Do not interrupt me," I said; "look at his face."

That face was, indeed, eloquent with suppressed speech. The General moved his arms impatiently. I turned to him and began to speak again in a low, distinct voice.

"Captain David Vane," I said, "has been arrested for the murder of Mr. Ransome, of Ransome Heights. It is very probable that a verdict of wilful murder may be returned against him, unless you, General Romney, you who are a dying man, can throw light on the mystery."

His face worked; a hopeless jumble of unintelligible sounds proceeded from his lips.

I held the gas again to his nostrils and he revived. Making an effort, he suddenly threw out his right arm and hand and pointed with one finger to some writing materials which lay on a table not far distant. I went to the table, secured blotting-pad and paper and a sharply pointed pencil. I brought them back with me, placed the pencil in the dying hand, and supported the old man in such a way that he was able to write without much difficulty.

"Quick," I whispered to him, "a life depends on what you want to say."

His fingers immediately began to move across the paper. I looked over his shoulders as he wrote.

These were the words which I read:—

"David Vane is innocent. I am the person who killed Thomas Ransome. This is how the deed was done. On the day you arrived I went out, contrary to my doctor's advice, for a short walk. I went into the copse. I saw Ransome sitting on the fence which divides his property from ours. He was in the act of aiming at a pheasant in my copse when I saw him. I called to him in a loud voice to abstain. I called him what he was—a scoundrel. He raised his eyes—

looked at me and burst out laughing. I saw that he was the worse for drink. I came close up to him.

"'It isn't pheasants alone I have come to knock down,' he said, with a jeer. 'I'm looking for bigger game.'

"The next instant I heard a noise and felt some heat. The fellow had presented his gun at me at near quarters. I closed with him, and we had a terrible tussle. I seized the gun, and gave him one blow on the head—only one. I thought I had stunned him—he rolled into the ditch and lay quiet. I came back to the house and saw that the full charge of the gun had entered my hat. I regarded my life as a miracle, and put the hat away—not to alarm my family. I felt ill and shaken—I had been unwell for some time. I had no idea that I had killed Ransome. You came in and gave me a restorative, and I felt better. I was in the ball-room receiving my visitors when someone rushed up and told me that Ransome was dead, and that a police-officer had arrived for the purpose of arresting Vane. I ran, as if the Evil One were behind me, to find Vane, and tell the truth. Before I could do so, I was stricken down."

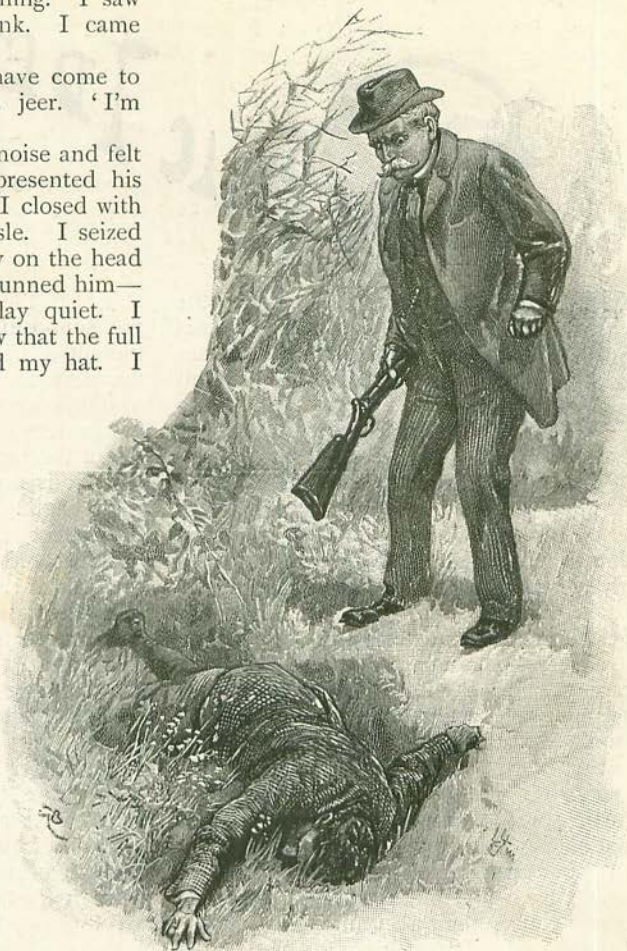
Having written so far, the General paused. The pencil fluttered out of his feeble fingers. I applied the gas once again—his respiration grew easier, but I saw that the last flicker of strength was leaving him, and that soon even the revivifying gas would fail in its effects.

"For God's sake, rouse yourself, General," I cried to him. "Sign the statement you have just made. Sign it quickly."

Haynes, Mrs. Romney, and the nurse were all standing round—the General took the pencil in his hand.

"Sign, sign," I said.

I held him up, and he managed with the last flicker of strength to put his name in full at the bottom of the paper. I handed the paper to Mrs. Romney, with an expressive look. She took it and laid it on the table. I put General Romney once more back on his pillows.



"I THOUGHT I HAD STUNNED HIM."

"You have done bravely," I said to him. "This paper will completely clear Vane. Your girl will be happy yet—you may die in peace."

He looked up at me, and I saw that the question and the agony had left his dying eyes for ever. Iris was hurriedly sent for, but before she arrived the old man was unconscious. She sat by his side, and took his hand in hers. As she sat so, I read over to her the words which her father had just put on paper. She burst into tears, and fell forward on his breast.

Perhaps he knew she was there, for the eyelids seemed to flutter, but gradually and surely the laboured breath quieted down, and before the morning dawned General Romney died.