

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.]

XI.—THE SMALL HOUSE ON STEVEN'S HEATH.



AMONGST my numerous acquaintances was an old friend who lived on a somewhat remote part of a common situated between fourteen and sixteen miles out of London.

For the purpose of this strange story I shall call it Steven's Heath, although its real name is another. The common stretches for many miles in several directions, and although within a very short distance of the Metropolis, is as lonely as if it belonged to one of the Yorkshire moors. My friend was a retired officer in the Army—he had a great fancy for lonely places, and chose the neighbourhood of Steven's Heath with a due regard to its solitude when he arranged to build a house upon its borders. He was an old man of between sixty and seventy—his children had long ago left him, and he and his wife lived a very happy Darby and Joan existence in their pretty new house and extensive grounds. The air was of the purest and freshest, and I always enjoyed paying my friend a visit. It so happened that an illness of a trifling character called me to Clover Lodge towards the end of a certain October. Colonel Mathison would never consult any medical man but myself, and I found him nervous and excited when I went to visit him. After a careful examination I was able to reassure him with regard to his physical condition. My verdict instantly put him into the highest spirits, and he insisted on my remaining to dine with him and his wife. Mrs. Mathison took me for a walk round the grounds just before dinner.

"Your verdict about Edward has made him very happy," she said.

"If he follows my advice he will be all right within a week from now," was my reply.

"Yes, yes," she answered; then she added, with a sigh, "You admire this place very much, don't you, Dr. Halifax?"

"You have the finest air in the county," I said; "no one would imagine that you are so close to London."

"Ah, that is just it," she answered; "but for my part, fine as the air is, I should much prefer wintering in town—the fact is, I am fond of seeing my fellow-creatures, and except one or two old cronies, the Colonel

would rather spend his days in solitude. The fact of my being lonely is, however, a small reason, and it is not on that account that I am particularly anxious to go to a more civilized part of the country for the winter."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "I don't like the people I meet on this common."

"I daresay you do come across strange characters," I replied, "but surely they have nothing whatever to do with you?"

"Oh, I don't mean gypsies," she said. "I am not the least afraid of the ordinary gipsy; but of late, when out walking, I have met two or three very savage-looking men. It was only a fortnight ago that one of them, a man with dark eyes, a sweeping moustache, and very tawny complexion, suddenly started up in front of my path, and asked me, quite politely, what the hour was. Some sort of instinct told me not to take out my watch. I replied by guesswork, and the man did not say anything further. Now, his tone was quite gentlemanly, and his dress was that of a country squire—nevertheless, his manner, and the look on his face, terrified me so much that I returned to the Lodge trembling in every limb. The Colonel asked me what was the matter, and I told him. He naturally laughed at my fears, and, of course, I could not get him to see the affair at all in a serious light. In short, it needed to come face to face with that man to see anything serious in such a trivial incident—but the Colonel is an old man, doctor, and of a very fiery, irascible disposition, and if there were any danger——"

"Which of course there isn't," I interrupted, with a smile.

I looked hard at the little old lady as I spoke—she had evidently got a shock. I thought it was scarcely well for her to wander about this desolate common by herself.

"After all, it would be a very good thing for you to go to town for the winter," I said. "I will speak to Colonel Mathison on the subject after dinner. There is nothing serious the matter with him, but if he were close at hand I could look him up at intervals, and perhaps put him on a treatment which might



"SOME SORT OF INSTINCT TOLD ME NOT TO TAKE OUT MY WATCH."

prevent the recurrence of the attack which alarmed you both."

"I wish you would speak to him," she said, eagerly.

Soon afterwards we returned to the house. After dinner I broached the subject, but found the Colonel quite obdurate.

"Nonsense, nonsense," he said, "no towns for me. If Mary is nervous, and finds the place lonely at night, we can get in another man-servant, or the gardener can sleep in the house. As to my health, that is folly; I should die in a fortnight in your stuffy London, and when I am ill, and need your services, I know you won't refuse them to me, Halifax."

"That I won't," I replied, heartily.

There was nothing further to say, and soon afterwards I rose, remarking that it was time for me to catch my train.

"I will ring the bell for the trap to be brought round," said Colonel Mathison.

The servant answered the summons, and an order for the trap was given. In a moment the man re-appeared with a long face—the mare had suddenly gone lame and was unable to travel. Colonel Mathison was greatly upset, jumped from his chair, and began to excite himself in a very unnecessary manner. I went to the window and looked out. There was a moon, which would set within about an hour and a half—it would

give me plenty of light to walk to the station. The nearest way thither lay straight across the common about the distance of from three to four miles. I felt that I should enjoy the exercise.

"You must not give the matter a second thought," I said to my old friend. "I shall start at once, and walk to Haverling Station. The fact is, I shall like it, and there is plenty of moon to show me over the ground."

"But the common is so lonely," said Mrs. Mathison.

"All the better for me," I replied. "I like to be alone with Dame Nature now and then. But I have no time to spare. I will wish you both good-evening."

I left the house, holding my umbrella in one hand, and a bag which contained a few surgical instruments and a Burroughs and Wellcome medicine case in the other, and started on my long walk. The clock in the hall just struck eleven as I left—my train would arrive at Haverling at ten minutes to twelve. I should therefore do the walk comfortably in the time. The night was a perfect one, and the moon flooded the entire place with a soft silver radiance. The trees which were dispersed at intervals across the common cast huge shadows, but my path lay where the moonbeams fell in an uninterrupted line.

The air was crisp and bracing, with just a touch of frost in it. I was in particularly good spirits, and could not help feeling that Colonel Mathison was right in refusing to exchange this fragrant and perfect air for the close atmosphere of town. I had a certain sympathy also, however, for the wife, who had not the passion for the country which her husband possessed, and was evidently easily frightened. As to her meeting a rough-looking man with a fierce aspect on a common like this, nothing was more natural, and I did not give the matter a serious thought. I walked quickly forward, little

guessing what horror was lying directly in my own path.

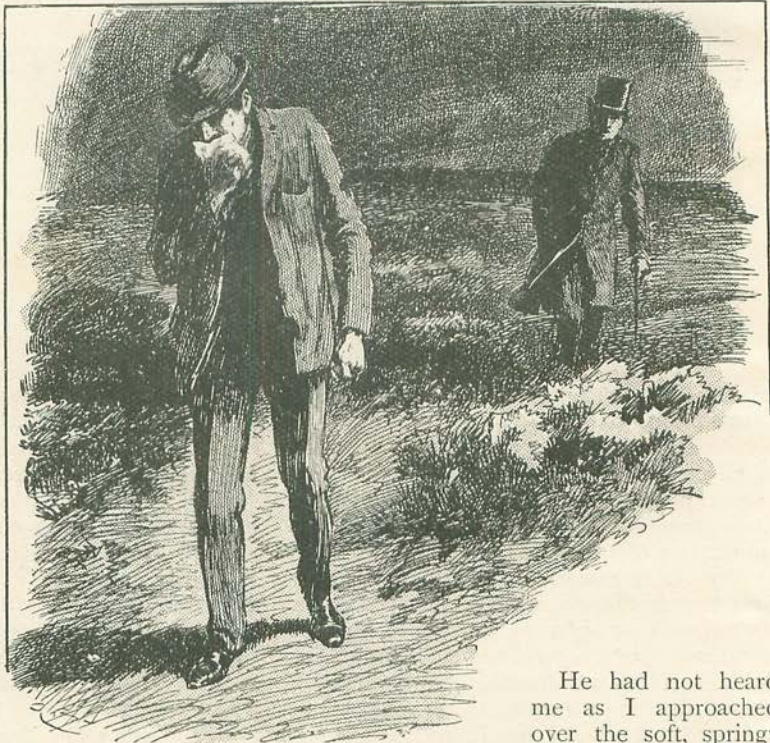
I have, in my long and varied experiences, turned some sharp corners and gone through more than one moment of peril, but the adventure which I am now about to describe I shall always look back upon as the high-water mark of my own personal suffering and deadly peril. The situation, in the very midst of our civilized England, the close vicinity to London, the apparently trivial beginning of the incident—only heightened the horror when it did occur; but I must hasten to tell my story.

I had gone about half-way across the common, and the moon was rapidly approaching the horizon—in a short time she would set, leaving the entire place in complete darkness. I hurried my footsteps, therefore, wishing to gain the high road before this took place. I must by this time have reached almost the centre of Steven's Heath—miles of undulating, broken land stretched to right and left of me.

A sensation of loneliness suddenly struck at my heart. I am not a coward, and was surprised at the sensation. The next moment, with a sigh of relief, I saw that I was not alone. A tall man, dressed in the garb of a country gentleman, was walking slowly in advance of me. He was evidently keeping to the same path over which I was travelling—a clump of trees must have hidden him from my sight until now; but now, owing to the peculiar position of the moon, I saw him with great distinctness. There was nothing remarkable in this sight, and I should soon have passed my fellow-traveller without a thought, had not my attention been arrested by his peculiar gait and manner. He walked slowly and with some pauses; he stooped a good

bit, and stopped from time to time to cough. His cough was wafted back to me on the evening breeze—it had a sound of great distress about it, and seemed to indicate that the man was in severe pain. When he coughed I further noticed that he took a handkerchief out of his pocket and pressed it to his lips. At once I felt an interest in him, and, hastening my footsteps, came up to his side.

"Forgive me," I said, abruptly, "you seem ill and in pain."



"AT ONCE I FELT AN INTEREST IN HIM."

He had not heard me as I approached over the soft, springy grass, and started violently when I suddenly

addressed him. He wore a soft felt hat, which was pushed rather far over his eyes, and now, from under his bent brows, two haggard, suffering, and very dark eyes peered restlessly at me.

"I am not well, I thank you, sir," he said, speaking with a cultivated accent; "but I am not far from home, and when I get there, I have not the least doubt that a little rest will restore me."

His words were uttered in jerks, and he had scarcely come to the end of his sentence before he coughed again, and immediately a quantity of blood poured out of his mouth.

"You are seriously ill," I said. "I am a doctor on my way to London. Can I do anything to assist you?"

"A doctor!" he exclaimed.

He pushed his hat away from his forehead, and gazed at me earnestly.

"Good heavens, this seems like a Providence," he muttered. "Do I understand you to say that you are a London doctor, sir?"

"I am," I replied.

He carried a stout stick, on which he suddenly leant heavily.

"The fact is," he said, abruptly, "I have met with a nasty accident; I am seriously hurt, and——"

He broke off to resume the painful coughing.

"Will you permit me to see you to your house?" I said.

"No," he replied; "that would not be wise. I am much obliged to you, but I would rather you did not see me home. Perhaps it might be possible for you to give me a little advice here."

"Scarcely," I said. "You are either wounded or have broken a blood-vessel. You must lie down, and be properly examined before anything can be done for your relief."

He coughed again.

"I—I thank you, sir, but I would rather go home alone," he repeated.

A fresh fit of coughing interrupted the words, and the red stream flowed from his lips.

"Come," I said, "you have met me unexpectedly; you must look upon it, as you have just remarked, as a Providence. You are not fit to go home alone. Accept my assistance, and regard yourself lucky to have met someone who can help you."

"There's my wife to consider," he said. "I—I can't speak much—my wife will feel it if anything happens to me. You can get away quickly after you have examined me, sir—yes, perhaps it is best."

"It is the only thing to do," I said. "Take my arm now, and pray speak as little as possible, or the bleeding will become worse. Just answer me one question, however. What do you believe to be the nature of your injury?"

"A bullet wound," he said, speaking now in gasps. "The villain has shot me in the lung, I believe."

His words were unexpected, and they startled me, but I had not a moment to think of myself.

"Lean on me," I said, in an authoritative voice, "and indicate from time to time with your finger the direction we are to take."

He was too weak and ill to expostulate further. I drew his hand through my arm, and we turned abruptly to the left.

Our way led us directly from the railway station. We soon reached a dingle, into which we descended. The man was now past speech, but at intervals he pointed out the direction which we were to take. We crossed the dingle, ascended a slight hill, found ourselves in a thicket of trees, and the next moment out again in the middle of a little clearing, in which a long, low, old-fashioned house stood. A faint light was shining out of the porch, which streamed direct on our path—the man gave a perceptible sigh of relief.

"Is that your house?" I asked.

He nodded. The next moment we were standing in the porch. A young woman, who evidently must have heard our footsteps, rushed out. She wore a white dress, and her hair fell in some disorder down her back.



"A YOUNG WOMAN RUSHED OUT."

"Oh, Ben!" she said, putting one arm round the man's neck, "how terrified I have been, and how late you are!"

She suddenly saw me, and started back with a stifled exclamation of alarm.

"Why have you brought this stranger home with you?" she asked of the injured man.

My patient was evidently making an effort to speak, which I saw in his present condition would be highly hazardous. I took the initiative, therefore, without delay.

"This gentleman is seriously hurt," I said.

"Pray do not question him at present. I happened to meet him on the common, and, seeing the state of his sufferings, volunteered my assistance. I am a doctor, and it is possible that I may be able to relieve him. Let me help you to take him to a bedroom immediately. We must get him to bed at once. I shall then examine him, and render what assistance lies in my power."

The girl did not speak for a moment or two, then, with a deft movement, she flashed the full light of the lantern upon my face. From me she looked earnestly at the deathly pale face of my companion.

"Ben," she said, "did you knowingly bring this gentleman here?"

He nodded and frowned at her. The expression of his face seemed to convey some sort of warning. She took the initiative at once—her manner changed, her nervousness vanished, she became self-controlled and calm.

"It was kind of you to see my husband home," she said to me. "If you will give him your arm, we will take him to his bedroom at once."

She set down her lantern as she spoke. A large paraffin lamp was burning in the hall. It had been turned low; she went to it and raised the light. Motioning me to follow her, she ascended some stairs, and in a moment or two we found ourselves in a good-sized bedroom, which opened on to a small landing. It did not take me long to get the sick man on the bed and partly undressed. I unfastened his cravat, and opened his shirt. A glance at his chest showed me that the hemorrhage was caused by a wound. The nature of the wound made it evident that it was caused by a revolver; most probably the bullet was now embedded in the left lung.

The full nature of the injury it was impossible for me to discover, but it was all too evident that the man's life was in a precarious state, and if something were not quickly done to stop the excessive hemorrhage, his life must be the forfeit. I quickly opened my medicine case, and without a moment's delay injected a dose of ergotine.

I directed the young woman to prepare cold bandages to lay over the man's chest, and having plugged up the wound, I turned my patient on his side, and told him quite plainly that his chance of recovery depended entirely on his lying perfectly still. When I spoke he fixed his eyes on my face—the expression of dumb anguish about them which painfully upset the young woman, who was standing close to him. She leant against the bed, trembling in every limb, and for an instant I feared that her self-control would

give way—but another glance showed me that she was made of sterner metal—she soon recovered herself, and as at that moment hurried footsteps were heard in the hall beneath, she suddenly drew herself up, and a watchful, alert look crept into her face. The steps came quickly along the passage, they bounded up the stairs, the room door was flung noisily open, and a tall man with broad shoulders and much muscular strength entered.

I could not help giving a very perceptible start when I looked at him. I have seen evil faces in my day, but I do not think I ever before beheld one so sinister, so absolutely devoid of all trace of goodness. His eyes were small, of piercing blackness, and closely set—his features were aquiline, but his mouth was flabby and nerveless, and the under lip was so large and protruding that even the heavy moustache which he wore could not effectually hide it. He marched quickly up to the bed, and stood looking down at the wounded man

without speaking; then his eyes caught sight of me, the angry colour flamed up all over his face, and a muttered oath dropped from his lips. The wounded man could not speak, but his eyes became painfully anxious in expression. The girl went up to the new arrival, and touched him on his shoulder.

"Leave the room, Hal," she said; "you see that Ben is very ill, and must not be disturbed. He has met with a bad accident—you doubtless know all about it; this gentleman met him on the road, and brought him home."

"I should have thought the gentleman



"HAL."

would have known better than to interfere," muttered the man called Hal; "we don't care to have strangers about this place."

He bit his lower lip as soon as he had spoken—I was watching him narrowly. I saw that he was a man of violent passions, which he had very little power of keeping under control. The young woman touched him again on the arm, and drew him aside to a distant part of the room. He bent his ear to her, and she began to speak in an eager whisper.

My patient again fixed his eyes on my face; he motioned me nearer with his hand. I bent over him.

"Get out of this as fast as you can," he murmured.

His hoarse whisper nearly cost him his life. A fresh and violent flow of hemorrhage set in. The wife, uttering a cry, rushed to her husband's side, and the other man left the room. I did all that I could to stop the fresh flow of blood, and after a time it ceased. The patient was now drowsy, and closed his eyes as if he wished to sleep.

When I saw that this was the case, I beckoned to the wife to follow me on to the landing.

"Is there any hope of saving him?" she asked, the moment we were alone.

"He is in very great danger," I said, "but if we can keep him alive during the night, it may be possible to extract the bullet to-morrow. He has had a bad wound, and in all probability the bullet is embedded in the left lung. The danger is that he may die of hemorrhage before anything can be done to extract the bullet. It is lucky that I happened to meet him."

"Lucky!" she repeated, gazing up at me, her eyes staring—"Heaven knows!"

She turned away, and taking a handkerchief out of her pocket, wiped some moisture from her forehead.

"Can you really do him any good, sir?" she asked; "for if not——" Her voice faltered; she was evidently putting a great constraint upon herself—"if not, sir, it may be best for you to go away at once."

"No," I said, "I will not do that. I have come here, and I will stay until the morning."

"Well, sir, if you will not go, let me take you downstairs and get you some refreshment."

She ran down a short flight of stairs, and I followed her. The flush of excitement had now mounted to her cheeks, replacing the extreme pallor which I had noticed ten minutes ago. She showed me into a well-

furnished dining-room, surprisingly large and solid for the appearance of the house. As soon as I entered, I saw that the ferocious-looking man who had come into the bedroom was standing on the hearth. He had changed his dress, which was in much disorder when I saw him last—his manner had also altered for the better. When he saw me, he came forward and moved a chair at right angles to the fire.

"Sit down," he said, "I am obliged to you for coming to our assistance. Is my brother badly hurt?"

"The wound is a very severe one," I replied.

"I thought so," he answered. "We were both together, and he must have slipped away from me in the dark—I have been all round the place waiting for him for nearly an hour—I guessed that he was hurt."

"I always knew something bad of this kind would take place," cried the wife, with passion.

"Keep your tongue between your teeth," said the man, with an ugly oath. "The fact is, sir," he continued, fixing his bloodshot eyes with a peculiar glance on my face, "Rachel, here, is nervous; the place is lonely, and there is no woman near to keep her company. Ben and I are a rough lot, and nothing will keep Ben out of mischief when his blood is up. He had a row with some fellows at a public-house not two miles from here, and this is the consequence. We are all Colonials, and, as you may know, sir, rough and ready is the word still, in most of the Colonies. We came to England two years ago, and took this cottage. We had a fancy to live a retired life. We heard that a chicken farm was a good speculation, and we started one—it gives us something to do, and the air of this common suits us. As to Rachel, she is always making the worst of things, but I suppose she does find the life somewhat tame."

"Tame!" cried the young woman, clasping her hands tightly together.

"Get the gentleman something to eat, Rachel, and then leave us," said Hal, in a blustering tone.

"Thank you," I answered, "but I do not wish for any refreshment."

"Well, at least, you'll have some wine," said Hal. "I have got a bottle of port which I can recommend—I'll go and fetch it at once. Come, Rachel, you can hold a light for me to the cellar."

He left the room immediately—his sister-in-law accompanying him. They paused in

the passage outside to exchange some words, but I could not hear anything they said. I went and stood by the hearth and looked around me. I considered the situation peculiar, but up to the present saw no cause for any special alarm as far as my own safety was concerned. The men were a lawless pair, and I did not believe the lame story offered to me about the revolver wound, but having undertaken the case, I had no intention of deserting my patient, and felt certain that I should be able to defend myself should occasion arise. The man and young woman were not long absent. They quickly returned to the room. The woman carried a tray, on which were some glasses and a box of biscuits. The man followed with a bottle of port. He drew the cork carefully, and put it undecanted on the tray.

"I'll go back to my husband now, sir," said the young woman, glancing at me.

"Do so," I replied; "and be sure you call me should my services be required.

grateful to you, sir, for the services you are rendering to me and mine."

Her eyes were very bright, so bright that tears did not seem to be far away. She paused again, with her hand resting on the table.

"Is there any chance of Ben's life?" she asked, suddenly.

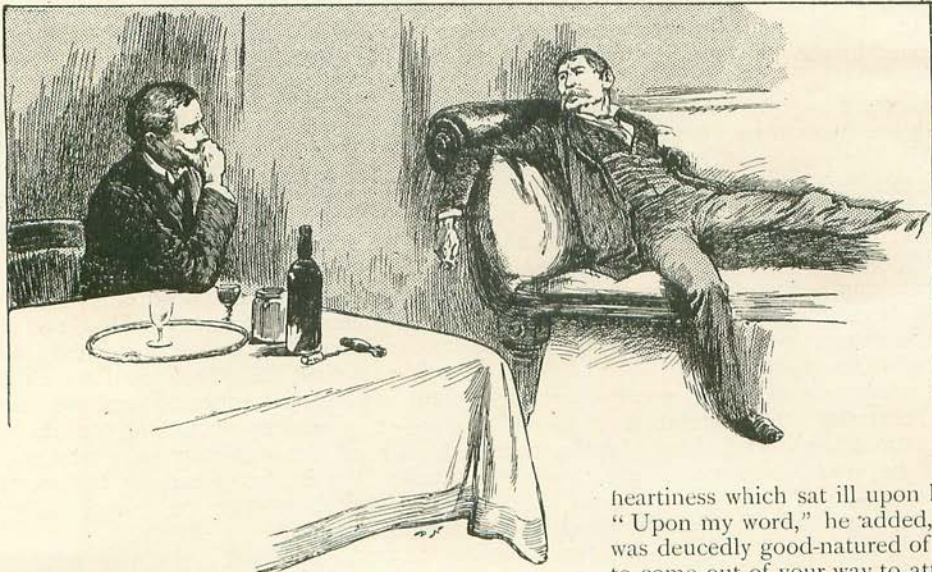
I had in reality very little hope, for the hemorrhage which had already taken place was of the most serious character, but I could not quench the longing in the young, eager eyes fixed on my face.

"Absolute quiet is the one and only chance of life," I said, emphatically.

"I understand," she said, nodding; "your directions shall be carried out to the letter." She left the room as she spoke.

When she had done this Randall flung himself on a large sofa at one side of the fire.

"Drink your wine, doctor, it will do you good," he said, with a sort of assumption of



"DRINK YOUR WINE, DOCTOR," HE SAID.

heartiness which sat ill upon him. "Upon my word," he added, "it was decidedly good-natured of you to come out of your way to attend to a stranger."

"Not at all," I replied, "if I can save the stranger's life; but I must tell you that I have very little hope of doing so."

"Good heavens!" he cried, in excitement, "do you think that my brother will die of his wound?"

"It is not only possible, but highly probable," I answered.

He swore a great oath, jumped up from his sofa, sat down again, and ground the heel of one big foot into the carpet.

Pray remember, the main thing is to keep the patient perfectly quiet, and under no provocation to allow him to speak."

She nodded. She had nearly reached the door when she turned and came quickly back.

"You will like to know our names," she said. "I am Mrs. Randall. My husband and this man are brothers—my husband is Ben, this man is called Hal. I am deeply

"This thing will upset Rachel," he said, after a pause; "she's awful spoons upon Ben—the fact is, he rescued her from some of the aborigines years ago in Australia; she grew up with us, and when she was old enough he married her."

"She appears to me little more than a child now," I said.

"Women marry young in Australia," was the brief reply. "Drink your wine, won't you?"

He had filled a glass with port wine before he sat down. I raised it now to my lips and sipped it. After doing so, I put the glass down quietly; I do not think a muscle of my face showed emotion, but I knew at once what had happened—the wine was heavily drugged. It was loaded with morphia. Randall's eager eyes were fixed greedily on my face. At that moment his sister-in-law called him. I jumped up, but he interrupted me.

"She wants me," he said. "I'll let you know if your services are required—finish your wine and help yourself to more."

He left the room, when I immediately walked to the window, flung it open, and dashed the contents of the wine-glass outside. I shut the window noiselessly again, and returned to my seat. I had scarcely done so when Randall re-appeared. I noticed that he glanced at my empty glass the moment he entered the room. A gleam of satisfaction lit up his swarthy face.

"It is all right," he said; "my brother is quiet—he is dozing off. Rachel is sitting with him. She wanted to ask me a question about the chickens—we send some to the London market almost daily."

"Do you make it pay?" I asked, quietly.

"I can't say that we do," he replied, "but why should I bother you with this? My brother and I have an income independent of the farm—we keep the chickens for the sake of occupation. The night is far advanced now, and I am dead-beat, if you are not. Shall I take you to a bedroom? If you are good-natured enough to spend the night here, you may as well have some rest until you are required."

I simulated a yawn with good effect, doing so with intention. I knew that if I had any chance of escape from the danger in which I undoubtedly was, I must quiet this man's suspicions. He must suppose that I had really swallowed the drugged wine.

"I am sleepy," I said, "and shall be glad to lie down; but don't take me to a bedroom. If you will permit me to have a stretch on that sofa, I shall do admirably."

"As you please," he said, with a careless nod. "The sofa is wide, and, as I can do nothing further, I will go to my room. You will find the wine on this table if you want any more. I will let Rachel know you are here, in case she may want you. Good-night."

He left the room, slamming the door behind him, and I heard his footsteps noisily and clumsily ascending the stairs. I stretched myself on the sofa, fearing that he might unexpectedly return. There was no manner of doubt now that I was in a most grave situation, and that my life might be the forfeit of what had appeared to me to be an act of common humanity. Who were these people—what was their occupation? They were undoubtedly not what they seemed—the chicken farm was in all probability a blind to cover enterprise of a widely different character. The story of the revolver-wound was, on the face of it, false. Why had the girl looked so terrified? Why had the wounded man asked me to go? Why had Hal favoured me with glances of such diabolical hatred? Above all, why was the wine drugged? When the house was perfectly quiet, I slipped off the sofa and approached the window. It was a large one, and occupied the greater part of the wall at one end of the room.

I had opened it with ease when I had flung the wine away, and now again it yielded to my touch. I threw it up without making the least noise, and bending forward was just preparing to put out my head to judge of the possibility of escape, when I started back with a voiceless exclamation. The window was effectually barred from without with a shutter composed of one solid piece of iron. I pressed my hand against it—it was firm as a rock. Half an hour ago this shutter had not been raised. By what noiseless method had it been slipped into its place? I closed the window again and went over to the door. I turned the handle—it turned, but did not yield. The door was locked. I was caught in a trap. What was to be done?

At that moment I heard a creak on the stairs, and the unmistakable sound of heavy footsteps. I instantly returned to the sofa, lay down at full length, and assumed as I well knew how the appearance and the breathing of a man suffering from morphia poison. I made my breath stertorous and quick. I assumed the attitude of the deepest slumber. My hearing was now preternaturally acute, and the walls of this queer house were thin. I heard the steps approaching the door. The lock was noiselessly turned,

the handle was moved, and the door opened a very little. I knew all this by my sensations, for I did not dare to raise an eyelid. There was plenty of light in the room—the fire was blazing merrily, and a big paraffin lamp shone with a large globe of light on the centre table. Beside the lamp lay the tray which contained the glasses and the bottle of drugged wine. I seemed to see everything, although my eyelids were tightly shut, and I lay slightly forward on my face, breathing loudly.

“Aye,” said Randall, coming up and bending over me, “he’s all right—he’s fast enough—as fast as a nail. Now, what’s the matter?” he continued, evidently addressing Mrs. Randall, and speaking in a growling whisper. “You don’t like this job, eh? There’s no use in your snivelling, it has got to be done. He’s fast, ain’t he? Come over here and have a good look at him.”

“I won’t look at him; you are the cruellest man that ever lived—you are a ruffian. I must speak to you alone—come with me at once; if you don’t, I’ll say what I have to say out here.”

“You may shout as loud as you please, you won’t wake him. I knew what I was about when I put the morphia into the wine; he’s fast. What’s up, girl? Now, none of your blarneying, and none of your passion, either. All our lives are in jeopardy, I tell you.”

“Be that as it may, you have got to let that gentleman go, Hal.”

“There are two words to that; but if you must interfere and give trouble, come out of this. He is fast, I am sure, but there is no saying what your muttering may do for him. He looks dead-beat, don’t he? It seems a pity to disturb him.”

The man uttered a low laugh, the horror of which almost curdled my blood.

“Come into the pantry,” he said,

re-addressing his companion; “he won’t hear us in there.”

They approached the door, walking on tip-toe; they closed it behind them, and I heard the key turn softly in the lock. If I had the faintest chance of escape, it was necessary for me to know if possible what fate was about to befall me. Where was the pantry? I opened my eyes now, and was immediately attracted by a gleam of light coming in a slanting direction through a window which I had not previously noticed. This window was high up in the wall, and was evidently used as a through light into another room. It had certainly not been illuminated when last I had examined the dining-room. Could it possibly belong to the pantry which Randall had alluded to? The sound of voices reached my ears. They were muffled, and I could not distinguish their tones, but at this instant I also perceived that the window in question was open at the bottom about two or three inches. If I could press my ear to

the wall just below the open window, I might hear what the pair were saying. The risk was great, for if Randall came back and found me it would be a fight for life, and he, of course, would be armed, whereas I had not even a walking-stick. I thought the situation over carefully,

and decided that it was better to die fighting than motionless. I further observed that there was a heavy poker in the fender. I seized it, mounted a chair, and pressing my ear just where I could not be seen, but also directly under the partly-open window,

I found to my relief that I was able to hear perfectly well. The first sound that reached me was that of a woman’s sob.

“You sha’n’t do it,” said Mrs. Randall. “I have borne with you too long. I know that Ben is bad, but I love him—he has always been kind to me—he is my husband—he never was an out-and-out bad ’un like you. You never had a heart. Now, listen; my mind is quite made



“I WAS ABLE TO HEAR PERFECTLY WELL.”

up—you shall not take the life of the man who came here to succour my husband.”

“Stop your snivelling,” was the harsh reply. “I tell you he must go. Ben must have been out of his mind to bring him here. I have no enmity against the man himself, but he was a fool to put himself into the lion’s den. He knows too much, and he must go. Don’t you understand me, girl? Haven’t you a grain of sense left? Well, I’ll tell you something. *Ben killed his man to-night*, and he’ll swing for it if we let that doctor escape. The thing was clumsily managed, and everything went wrong—the police came up just at the nick of time to ruin us, and Ben put a bullet into one—the whole thing will be in the papers to-morrow, and the doctor—curse him!—knows enough to swear away the life of that precious husband of yours. Now, for Heaven’s sake, stop crying—control yourself.”

“The doctor must be saved,” said the young woman. “You are saying all this to frighten me, but I won’t be frightened. Anyhow, come what may, I am not an out-and-out villain, and neither is Ben, and we can’t allow the life of the man who has been good to us to be sacrificed. You want to murder him, Hal, but I won’t let you. If you don’t promise to let the gentleman go, you have got me to answer to, and I’ll just tell you what I’ll do. I have Ben’s revolvers upstairs—oh, yes, I have hidden them, and you can’t get at them, but I will take them down to the doctor before you can prevent me, and tell him to fight for his life. You are a bit of a coward when all is said and done, you know you are, Hal.”

The man replied with an ugly oath. He must have taken the young woman by her shoulder as he spoke, for I heard her utter a faint scream.

“Don’t,” she said. “Let me go this minute; you are a coward to try to hurt a girl like me.”

“I could kill you if it comes to that,” was the reply. “I tell you I am desperate, and what is a man’s life, or a girl’s either, to me? My brother will swing if that doctor gets out of this. And, then, if I escape with penal servitude for life, I may consider myself lucky. I have no taste for penal servitude, so the doctor must go—and you, too, if you don’t submit.”

I heard Mrs. Randall laugh in reply.

“You think penal servitude is all you have to suffer,” she answered; “but I know things that may bring you in a worse fate. How would you like to be hung

up yourself? Perhaps you will, if I have the managing of things. Do you remember that old man on the common last winter and the purse of twenty sovereigns?—the purse had the man’s initials inside—you never could find it. Do you remember the search you made, and how I pretended to help you? Well, I had the purse all the time. I thought I might as well keep it—it might prove handy some day. I have it upstairs now. You see, I can turn Queen’s evidence any day and make it hot for you, and I will if you kill that doctor.”

Her words were evidently unexpected—they had weight with the ruffian. I could hear him shuffling about, and I could even distinguish the young woman’s quick, agitated breathing.

“I have got the key of the dining-room too,” she went on; “I slipped it out and put it in my pocket when you weren’t looking, so I can do what I said. If you try to wrest the key from me, I’ll rouse the house with my screams. You have drugged the doctor, but he is not dead yet.”

“He’ll never wake again,” said Hal, with a laugh; “you can’t save him, girl, even if you tried—I tell you he is done for. I put enough morphia into that one glass of port to finish two or three men. He is sound—sound as a bell; fast as a nail—dead to all intents and purposes—they never wake when they breathe as he is doing.”

“You are mistaken,” was the reply. “I watched him, too, and at the present moment he could be roused, I am convinced. Do you remember the man you drugged in Australia? I saw him die; he was far worse than this doctor.”

Hal swore another oath, and again tried to use personal violence on the girl. I knew this, because she evidently sprang away from him, and threw open the pantry door. A breath of fresh air which came in through the aperture in the window acquainted me with this fact.

“Now,” she said, “you have got to choose. You have no weapons on you at the present moment; I am nearest the door; I can lock you in in a twinkling, and fetch Ben’s revolvers. I will, if you don’t do what I wish. Spare that man’s life, and I’ll stick to you through thick and thin; but kill him, and I’ll give Queen’s evidence. I don’t believe Ben will recover, and I don’t care that for you. I am so sick of this horrible life that, so far as I am concerned, the sooner it is over the better. Remember, I have got the purse, and I can tell a lot.

Oh, I can make things look ugly for you, Hal, and before Heaven I will."

"All right," said the man, assuming a soothing tone, "do stop canting—you always were a tigress; I've told Ben over and over that you would sell us, and I was in the right; but I suppose I must yield to you now. I'll go in and wake the doctor presently. I was only pretending that I had given him such a lot of morphia. He'll wake when I shake him up. I'll get him to take an oath that he'll never tell of what occurred here to-night. He'll do it fast enough when he sees his precious life in jeopardy; but, remember, I only do this on one condition—you hand me over that purse."

"Can I trust you?" she asked.

"Yes, I know you, you cat, and I don't want to feel the scratch of your claws. Fetch the purse, and I'll do what you want."

Again I heard her quick breathing—the next moment she had turned and rushed upstairs. I stepped suddenly down from my dangerous eminence, and hiding the poker just under my body—for I did not for a moment believe the man's words, and meant to lose my life hard if I lost it at all—resumed the stertorous breathing and the apparently profound slumber of the morphia victim. I heard the girl's footsteps returning through the silent house. Then she went upstairs to where the wounded man lay. His room was evidently over the dining-room, for I heard her steps moving about overhead. There was an awful silence of ten minutes. During that time, I think I lived through the worst moments of my life. Each nerve was stretched to the utmost—each faculty was keenly on the alert; I felt more and more certain that my chance of escape was of the smallest—against an armed ruffian, I could do nothing. As long as I was alone in the room, I kept my eyes wide open, but a sudden and unexpected sound caused me to shut them quickly. I had seen a head protrude suddenly from out of the pantry window—it looked right down on me where I lay, and then softly and noiselessly withdrew. A moment later the door of the dining-room was opened, and I heard Randall's heavy footsteps as he approached my sofa.

"No humbug," he shouted, in a loud voice. "If you are awake, open your eyes and say so. Wake up, I say, if you can. I had my suspicions of you just now—open your eyes."

I did not respond; my head was sunk low,

my breathing was coming in longer and slower respirations than it had done when last the man bent over me. He put his hand roughly under my chin, raised my face and looked at me—then he removed his hand with an audible sigh of relief.

"He's all right," he said, aloud. "Lord, I got a fright just now—I fancied he looked at me when I thrust my head through that window, but I was mistaken—of course I was; he can't escape after that dose I gave him, and he drank the glass full—the glass was empty when I returned to the room. He's alive still, but not much more. I won't move him while he lives. If he dies like that fellow did in Australia it will be all over within an hour. Well, I have got the purse, and Rachel may do her worst now. I wonder what's keeping Jasper; I shall want him to help me move the body."

He began to pace up and down the room, not taking the least pains to keep quiet; he without doubt regarded me as practically dead.

"What a — fool Ben was," I heard him mutter, sitting down on the edge of the table; "but for me he'd have been in quod now; I told him not to fire that shot; he needn't have done it. Lord! what a fright the police got—it is as good as a play even to think of it. That big fellow went down like a ninepin. Ben shot him through the heart as clean as a whistle. How he had strength to give it back hot to Ben, is more than I can understand. But he is dead now, stone dead, and Ben will swing if I let this doctor go.

"If!" he exclaimed, bursting into another hoarse laugh; "why, he's quiet already; I do believe the chap is dead."

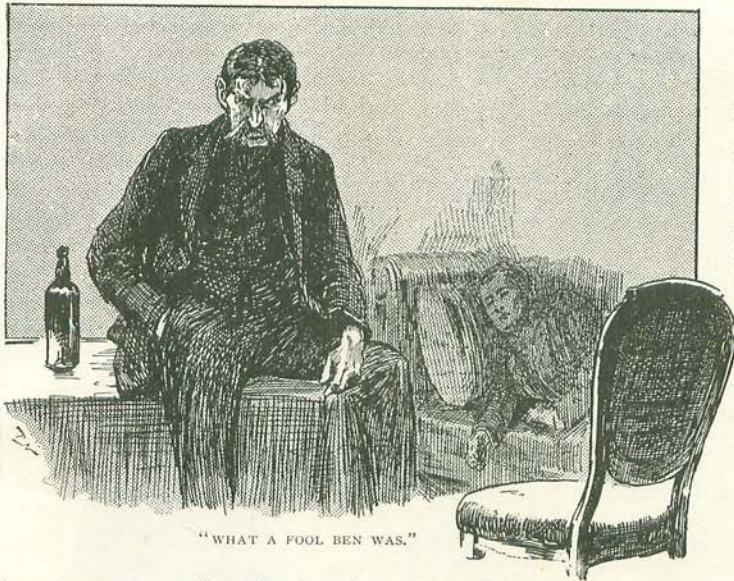
He again approached my side, pushed my head roughly round, and listened to my breathing. I had made it on purpose a little fainter, but it was still audible.

"He's going, just like the man did in the bush," muttered Randall. "Confound that Jasper, why isn't he in? I'll go to the door and listen for him—he ought to be back by now."

He left me—being so sure of his deadly work that he did not even trouble to shut the dining-room door. I felt the cold air coming in through the open hall door, and suddenly stood up.

"I won't feign sleep any more," I said to myself; "if I am quick I may be able to knock him senseless with this poker before he has time to fire at me."

I speculated whether I should follow the ruffian into the hall, but before I had time



"WHAT A FOOL BEN WAS."

to act, my overstrained hearing had detected hurried sounds in the chamber overhead—footsteps fled across the room, they rushed downstairs, and the young wife burst into the dining-room. I came to meet her—she showed no surprise—she was evidently past surprise at that supreme moment; agony, terror, and despair were detected on her features.

"Oh, doctor, you are awake," she cried; "that is good—I knew he hadn't given you enough of that horrid drug to kill you; but come upstairs at once—he is bleeding his life away. Come, you may save him if you are quick. Oh, I love him madly—whether he is bad or good! I love him with all my heart, and soul, and strength. He is dying, my darling. Come, doctor, come."

I followed her upstairs. As I did so, I glanced back at the open hall door. I expected to see it blocked by the huge figure of the ruffian, Randall, but he must have gone to meet his pal, for the coast was clear. A fierce temptation shook me for a moment. From the wife's account, the man upstairs was evidently dying. If the wound were bleeding to the extent she described, no human help could save him. If I left the house now I might escape. The temptation came and went. Life was sweet, but my duty called me to the succour of one *in extremis*. I entered the sick room and approached the bed—the patient was alive, but little more. Over his features had already stolen the grey hue of death. One of his hands was extended outside the bed-clothes—from his lips continued to pour the flood

of crimson life. I saw that the slightest attempt to move him, or even to administer remedies, would but accelerate the death which was waiting to claim him. I motioned to the wife to calm herself; she gave me a passionate glance of despair.

"Can't you do something?" she whispered.

"Nothing," I replied. "It would torture him to touch him—let him die in peace."

I took the patient's wrist between my thumb and finger—the pulse was scarcely perceptible; it came

in faint throbs at longer and longer intervals—the glazed eyes were partly open. The young wife flung herself on her knees by the side of the bed and pressed feverish kisses on the man's extended hand.

"Oh, take me with you, take me with you, Ben," she panted.

Her words roused him—he made a feeble last effort to move—to speak—fresh blood poured from his lips—in that final struggle his spirit fled. I bent forward and pressed down the lids over the staring eyes. As I did so, Mrs. Randall sprang up and faced me.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"His sufferings are over," I replied.

She pressed her hand to her forehead, as if she scarcely knew what she was doing.

"Try to keep calm," I said to her; "think of yourself—you are in danger."

"I know it," she said, "and so are you—listen, what is that?"

There was a noise downstairs. Heavy footsteps sounded through the little hall. I counted the steps—there were four.

"The man Jasper has returned," I said to the girl.

"Jasper," she said, in astonishment; "how do you know his name?"

"I heard your conversation with your brother-in-law," I replied. "He has no intention of sparing my life, and went a moment or two ago to fetch a man called Jasper. I heard him mutter to himself that he would require Jasper to remove my dead body. He has been false to you: he is not going to keep his word."

Her face could scarcely turn any paler, but her breath came quickly. She gasped and suddenly clutched at the neck of her white dress, as if it were strangling her slender throat.

"I might have known," she said, in a hoarse voice, "but I was distracted, and I had no time to think. Hal is more fiend than man; his word signifies less than nothing—I might have known."

She tugged again at her dress, and pressed her hand to her forehead.

"Let me think," she said.

I did not interrupt her. I was listening to the footsteps downstairs. For some reason they were quiet. The men had evidently not yet approached the dining-room. When they did so, and discovered my escape, all would undoubtedly be lost. They would make a sudden rush for the bedroom fully armed, and take no account of the man whom they supposed to be dying within the chamber.

During that moment's suspense, Mrs. Randall recovered her courage. She had been bending forward, something in the attitude of a broken reed; now she drew herself erect.

"I believe we shall manage them," she whispered; "anyhow, we'll try. My husband is dead, and I care nothing whatever for my life. You did what you could to save Ben, and I am your friend. Here is a case of revolvers."

As she spoke, she walked to the dressing-table, took up a case which lay upon it, and brought it forward.

"All the chambers are loaded," she said, handling the revolvers as she spoke; "take this and I will take the other. Now follow me: don't hesitate to fire if necessary."

"You had much better stay here," I said; "I believe I can fight my own way out with these fire-arms."

"You would not leave me to be butchered in cold blood?" she cried. "No, you can't manage them alone—there are two of them, and they are without scruple—I know them."

I said nothing further. My hearing, strained to the utmost, had detected the sound of the men's footsteps approaching the dining-room. I heard the door open and knew that they had entered the room. There was a full moment's pause, and then the bustling, eager, angry sound of incredulous and alarmed voices.

At that instant Mrs. Randall and I approached the head of the stairs. There was plenty of light in the hall, but where we stood was comparative shadow. Just as we reached the top of the last flight of stairs, the two ruffians, who had returned to the hall, looked up and caught sight of us. They both carried revolvers, but were evidently astonished



"THEY WERE EVIDENTLY ASTONISHED."

to see us also furnished with deadly weapons.

"Fire at once, if necessary," she whispered.

I saw her at the same moment cover Randall with her revolver.

"Hold!" he cried. "You've played me a dastardly trick, Rachel; you shall pay for this."

"Ben is dead, and my life is valueless," she replied. "Let this man leave the house immediately, or I'll blow your brains out."

The ruffian turned his ugly eyes full on my face.

"So you think you have done me," he said. As he spoke he backed a step into the hall. I covered him with my revolver. I saw him shrink, and his tone changed. "I see I must give you a chance," he cried.

"You may go if you take an oath. As you hope to meet your God, swear that you will never tell what has happened here to-night! You can go, if you swear it; but if you don't, before Heaven I swear——"

"Folly," cried the high-strained girl's voice at my side; "of course the doctor won't swear. You know perfectly well you haven't a leg to stand on. If you or Jasper attempt to raise your revolvers, we'll both fire."

Hal swerved again, and looked uneasy—his full, loose lower lip shook, but the man Jasper was of tougher metal.

"We must do for 'em both," he said. "Why should our lives be sacrificed to the whim of a minx?"

"Jove!—you're right," cried Hal.

I saw him raise his revolver—he aimed it full at my forehead. But before he could touch the trigger, a sharp report sounded through the house—the revolver fell from the man's right hand—his arm dropped—he gave a howl of agony—Rachel had shot him clean through the shoulder. At the same moment, I covered Jasper with my revolver.

His courage oozed out of him at the sight of Hal. "For God's sake don't fire, sir," he called out.

"Put your revolver down, Jasper, or I'll shoot you," shouted Rachel. He instantly complied.

"Now, doctor, you must get out of this at once," cried the excited woman. "Make way, Jasper; Hal, get out of the way."

She pushed past me, running down the stairs, and before either of the men could prevent her, picked up their revolvers.

"Come," she said to me, "we are safe now; they have got no others."

The next moment we found ourselves in the open air. She had been as cool and alert as possible during the whole of this brief and terrible scene, but now she trembled so violently, I thought she would have fainted.

"Don't worry about me," she panted; "I'll be all right in a moment. I never fired at a man before, and I nearly took his life—well, I would, before I'd have allowed him to touch a hair of your head. He is badly wounded, and there'll be no more courage in him for a day or two. As to Jasper, he is wretch enough to follow us, only he has no fire-arms—stay, he might remember Ben's old gun. Well, that's not worth considering. I'll see you to the edge of the common, doctor; come, let us get off quickly."

"I can go alone," I said, "you are not fit to walk."

"I am; it will do me good," she said. "Come."

She plunged suddenly to her right—we found ourselves in a thicket of trees and pursuing a winding path which I, alone, would never have discovered. We walked without articulating a single word for two to three miles. When we got to the edge of the common, Mrs. Randall paused abruptly.

"You are safe now," she said; "the railway station is not half a mile away, and that is the high road yonder."

"How am I to thank you?" I said.

"By not thanking me," she answered; "you did what you could for him. I tried to save you, but remember that my life is valueless."

"You have no right to say that—you are very young. Surely you can get yourself out of your present terrible predicament."

She shook her head.

"I don't know that I want to," she answered. Then she paused, and looked earnestly at me.

"You will, of course, give evidence against us?" she said.

I was not prepared to reply, and did not speak.

"Do not scruple to," she continued; "the life I lead is beyond endurance, and now that Ben is dead, I want to end it, one way or another."

"I think I can help you if you will let me," I said. "You will be in danger if you go back to the cottage. Let me try to get you into a place of safety."

"No," she said, "I am all right; I know how to manage them. I belong to the gang, and must take the rough with the smooth. Besides, my husband's body lies unburied, and I can kiss him again. Good-bye."

She turned as she spoke. The day was just beginning to break in the east, and I saw her white dress vanish amongst the furz-bushes and wild undergrowth of the common.

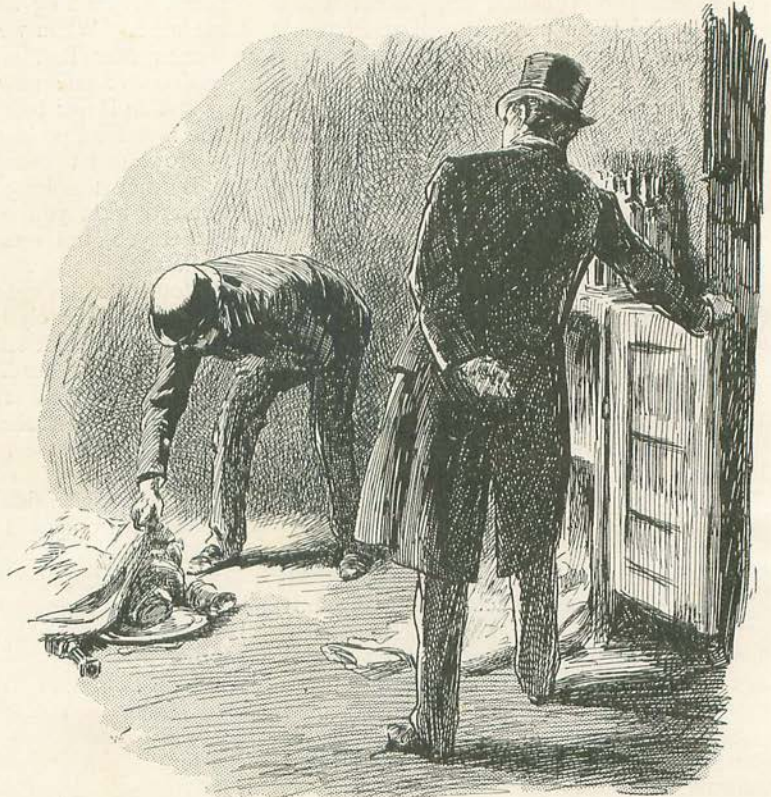
When I reached town, I sent a messenger to Scotland Yard to ask an inspector to call upon me. I had a sort of hope that I might be in time to save Mrs. Randall, for, notwithstanding her brave words, I dreaded the fate that would be hers if she were left to the tender mercies of ruffians like her brother-in-law and Jasper. My interview with the police inspector resulted in his going down that very morning to the cottage on Steven's Heath. News of a daring burglary and of the murder of a policeman had already got into the papers, and my evidence was

considered of the utmost value. In order to expedite matters, I accompanied the inspector to the scene of my last night's adventure.

The small house in which I had endured such long hours of agony looked calm and peaceful seen by the light of day. It was a rustic, pretty place; a few barn-door fowls strutted about; in a field near by were some downy chickens. Doubtless, the idea of the chicken farm was kept up as a sort of blind. On making inquiries, we found that the Randalls were known by their few neighbours as harmless, reserved sort of people, of the name of Austen; they had lived in the cottage for over two years; they had made no friends, and never until now had a breath of suspicion attached to them.

The cottage was two or three miles from any other dwelling, and beyond the fact that a young woman and two men lived there, the neighbours could give little information. The police and I passed now through the little porch and entered the hall, which was flooded with sunshine. The door stood wide open—a more peaceful spot could scarcely be imagined. It was almost impossible to connect so pretty a cottage with scenes of bloodshed and murder. I looked around me for any sign of Hal or Jasper, and still more anxiously for Mrs. Randall, but although we shouted and made a noise, no one appeared. Accompanied by the police I went upstairs. The dead man lay on the bed just where I had left him the night before—his eyes were closed, and someone had thrown a white sheet over him, but no sign of any human being was visible. The police and I searched the cottage from

cellar to attic. Not a trace of Jasper or Hal could we discover—not a trace either of Mrs. Randall. A quantity of stolen goods, plate, and other valuables were found in one of the cellars, as well as some almost priceless wine, which was afterwards



“PLATE AND OTHER VALUABLES WERE DISCOVERED.”

identified as the property of a gentleman who lived not far from my friends, the Mathisons.

For a long time large rewards were offered, and there was a hue and cry all over that part of the country for the three missing individuals—but from that day to now, no trace has been found of them. The dead man could tell no tales, and the living had vanished as completely as if they had never existed.

These things happened a few years ago, but even now, in the midst of my active life, I think at times of Mrs. Randall—of her youth, and of the horrible life which was hers. Is she still in the land of the living, or what has been her fate? I am not likely to be able to answer that question until the curtain is lifted.