

"I STOOD AS ONE ALREADY DEAD."

(See page 14.)

## *The Brotherhood of the Seven Kings.*

BY L. T. MEADE AND ROBERT EUSTACE.

### VII.—THE IRON CIRCLET.



ADAME had left London, and my first wild hope was that she might not return; but this was quickly doomed to disappointment, for two months after the events related in the last story, as I was walking down Welbeck Street, I noticed that the blinds in her house were up, that there were fresh curtains to the windows, and that the place bore all the usual marks of habitation. With a sinking heart I was just commenting on this fact when I saw the hall door open, and a slender, dark-eyed young woman run down the steps. She glanced at me, raised her brows very slightly as if she recognised me, half paused as if about to speak, then changed her mind and walked rapidly just a few paces in front of me down the street. I had certainly never seen her before, and pitying her as in all probability one of Madame's victims, went on my own way.

In the course of the same afternoon I visited Dufroyer at his office. A glance at his face showed me that he had something to say. He drew me aside with a certain eagerness, and began to speak.

"I really believe," he cried, "that the tide has turned at last. Madame is so emboldened by her success that she is certain to do something foolish."

"She is back in town," I interrupted. "I passed her house this morning and——"

"She returned about a fortnight ago," interrupted Dufroyer. "Now, listen, Head, I have something to tell you. You know that for a long time Tyler's agents have been following Mme. Koluchy? It was only

yesterday morning that Tyler drew my attention to a matter which looks uncommonly suspicious. But read this advertisement for yourself."

As he spoke, Dufroyer handed me the *Times* of a week back. Under the heading "Situations Vacant," he pointed to the following words:—

WANTED a first-rate Bacteriologist to advise on a matter of a very private nature. Handsome remuneration to anyone possessing the necessary knowledge. Apply, in strict privacy, by letter only to K. K., 350, *Times* Office, E. C.



"A YOUNG WOMAN RAN DOWN THE STEPS."

I put the paper down.

"What is there suspicious about that?" I asked.

"At first sight one would think nothing," was the answer; "but Tyler is so alert that not a single thing escapes him now. The 'K. K.' first aroused his sense of inquiry."

"Katherine Koluchy!" I cried. "Surely, if this were an advertisement put in by Madame, she would not, knowing how she is wanted, use her own initials?"

"It seems scarcely likely," he answered, "but I will tell you exactly what has happened. On seeing the advertisement Tyler at once posted a man in the *Times* advertisement office, explaining his business to the clerks. Tyler's man was instructed how to proceed. About eleven o'clock on the morning after the advertisement was first published a person arrived, received two letters, and went away. Tyler's clerk immediately followed this man, who went straight to Mme. Koluchy's house. It was a lucky shot of Tyler's, and they are following up the scent closely. He has further discovered that they have engaged no less a person than the well-known bacteriologist, James Lockhart, to undertake this very mysterious business. His private laboratory is in Devonshire Street. The question now arises: What steps are we to take?"

"I see that you have an idea," I replied.

"Well, I have; or, rather, it is Tyler's—he suggests a bold step. He thinks that you and I ought to call on Lockhart. There is no question with regard to his position and knowledge. He has done more original work during the last two years in bacteriology than anyone else in the country, and if this terrible Brotherhood should worm some secret out of him on a plausible pretext, they may use it to deadly effect, making him the unsuspecting agent of a terrible crime. Knowing all that we do, Head, I think we are bound to see him."

I thought over Dufroyer's suggestion.

"I am puzzled to know what to say," was my reply. "Lockhart may not like our interfering."

"Very possibly; but, nevertheless, the duty of warning him remains the same."

"If you feel so, Dufroyer, I have no doubt you are right," I said. "When will you go to see Lockhart? I shall, of course, be willing to accompany you."

"I cannot look him up to-day, for I am unfortunately busy at the courts to the last moment; but I suggest that you and I go to his house to-morrow morning at ten."

"Very well," I answered; "I will meet you outside his door at that hour."

A few minutes later I left Dufroyer. Absorbed in anxious thought, I presently found myself in Piccadilly, and then in Bond Street. I walked on slowly—my thoughts were so anxious that they seemed to impede my movements.

Madame had returned. Once again she was at work on some hideous machination. Once again Dufroyer and I held our lives in our hands. Knowing the woman as I did, I could scarcely agree with Dufroyer that, emboldened by success, she was becoming less cautious. Never yet was she known to allow her vigilance to sleep, and not even in the hour of victory would it fail her. On the face of it, this very open advertisement looked queer, but surely there was more behind. Yes, we must warn Lockhart. He would resent our interfering, but what matter? He was a strong man in every sense of the word, and I rather wondered at Madame's selecting him to do her deadly work. I had seen him more than once during the last couple of years. His remarkable genius and the brilliancy of some of his lectures before the Royal Society returned vividly to my memory.

The hour was now between four and five. I suddenly remembered that I had promised to meet a man in some tea-rooms which had lately been opened in Bond Street. I found the right place, and walked down a long, narrow passage, which opened into a small courtyard surrounded by coffee and tea rooms of different descriptions. The seclusion and unexpected quiet of the place were refreshing; the soft notes of distant music took my steps upstairs to the first floor, and the next instant I had entered a tea-room, as still and peaceful as if London were miles away. Some girls, tastefully dressed and looking like ladies, were waiting on the visitors. I seated myself at a small table and waited for my friend. I looked at my watch—he was late. I resolved to wait for him for a few moments, but before many had passed, one of the young waitresses approached me with a telegram, asking if my name was Head. I replied in the affirmative, and tore it open. It was from my friend. He had suddenly been called out of town, and could not keep his appointment. I ordered tea for myself, and leaning back in my chair looked around me. The room was tastefully decorated with a certain aiming after simplicity, which produced a most inviting effect. My tea was brought on a small tray, and at the same time a

girl, very quietly dressed, took the place opposite to mine. My first glance caused me to look at her again. She was the dark-eyed girl whom I had seen that morning coming down Mme. Koluchy's steps. I observed that her eyes, larger than those of most Englishwomen, wore a strained expression; otherwise she was fresh and young-looking.

I poured out a cup of tea and was just raising it to my lips, when she suddenly bent forward.



"SHE SUDDENLY BENT FORWARD."

"I am addressing Mr. Norman Head, am I not?" she said, in a low, hurried voice.

I bowed coldly in acknowledgment.

"Forgive me," she said, again. "I know that you are very much surprised at my addressing you, but I must tell you the simple truth. I meant to speak to you this morning outside Mme. Koluchy's house, but I could not summon courage. It happened to be in Bond Street just now, and

saw you passing. You entered here, and I followed you. I know I have taken a very bold step, but I cannot rest until I tell you something: it is not a message of any sort, but it is a word of warning."

I made an impatient exclamation.

"If you have anything to say I must, of course, listen," I replied; "but, remember, you are a total stranger to me."

"I will tell you my name," she said, eagerly. "Valentia Ward. I am Mr. Lockhart's secretary. You know Mr. Lockhart,

of 205, Devonshire Street, do you not?"

"By name, well. You allude to the great bacteriologist?"

"Yes," she answered; "I have been his secretary for over a year. I work with him every morning in his laboratory. It is about him, and also about you, Mr. Head, that I want to speak."

"Well, say what you have to say as quickly as possible," I replied.

"I will do so. Bend forward a little, so that others may not overhear."

She poured herself out a cup of tea as she uttered the last words. Her hand shook slightly. It was a delicate and very small white hand, the blue veins showing under the skin.

"I happen to know," she continued, "no matter how or why, that you, Mr. Head, and a certain Mr. Dufrayer, a well-known criminal solicitor, intend to follow up an advertisement which appeared in the *Times* of this day week.

The advertisement was to the effect that a first-rate

bacteriologist was required to advise on a matter of a private nature. Mr. Dufrayer has learned, no matter how, that Mr. James Lockhart, of 205, Devonshire Street, has been appointed to undertake the work. It is your intention, and also Mr. Dufrayer's, to call upon him in order to warn him with regard to some hidden danger. Am I not right?"

"You must forgive me, but I cannot reply to your question."

She smiled very faintly.

"You are a wise man to guard your lips, but your face is my answer," she said. "Now I will tell you why I have ventured to speak to you. I want you to give up your intention of calling on Mr. Lockhart."

"And by what right do you, a complete stranger, interfere with my movements?"

"By the right of my superior knowledge," she answered, at once. "My reasons I cannot explain, but they are of the gravest character. You and your friend will implicate yourselves most seriously if you do what you intend to do. You will run into danger if you meddle in this matter. In giving you this warning I risk much myself, and I earnestly beseech of you to believe me and to attend to my words. Do not see Mr. Lockhart. Let the advertisement alone. By so doing you will circumvent—you will circumvent——" her lips trembled, fire shone in her big eyes, she rose to her feet.

"I can do no more," she said. "If you fail to understand me I am sorry, but I have at least performed a very painful and necessary duty."

She drew down her veil, went to a little table near the door, where an accountant sat, paid for her tea, and left the room.

I sat on where she had left me, feeling puzzled and shaken. The girl's face bore the impress of truth, and yet it seemed hard not to believe that she was one of Madame's agents. Had I not actually seen her coming down the steps of Madame's house? She seemed troubled when she spoke. When she pleaded with me, her voice shook with the extreme and passionate eagerness of her words. But all these signs might only be put on in order to pre-

vent an interference, which Madame, from long experience, had learned to dread.

When I met Dufrayer on the following morning outside Lockhart's house, I took his arm, and walked with him for a moment or two up and down the street. I then related briefly the incident of the day before. He listened to my words with marked attention.

"What do you think?" I said, when I had concluded.

"That beyond doubt the girl has been employed to warn you," was his reply. "Lockhart's danger is even greater than I was at first inclined to suspect. If he is not very careful he will find himself in a hornet's nest. Yes, we must warn him immediately. It is past ten—let us ring the bell; he will probably be at home."

In reply to our summons, we were told that Mr. Lockhart was within, and were shown at once into a private room next to his laboratory. He joined us almost immediately. His appearance was already well known to me, but when he entered the room I was struck once again by his remarkable personality. He was a tall and very heavily-built man, standing quite six feet, with broad shoulders and a jovial red face, as unlike the typical scientist as man could be. His manner

was bluff and hearty, and he had a merry smile, suggestive more of a country squire than of one who spent most of his time over culture plates.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, genially, extending his hand to me. "Your name, Mr. Head, is not unfamiliar to me; and if I remember aright, we were once antagonists in print in a discussion on Nitrifying Bacteria. I am afraid in the end I had to yield to your superior knowledge, but



"HE EXTENDED HIS HAND TO ME."

I should like now to show you a little thing which may change your views."

"Thank you," I answered, "but I have not called to discuss your work. May I introduce my friend, Mr. Dufrayer? He and I have come here this morning on a matter which we believe to be of the utmost importance. It is of a strictly private nature, and when you have heard what we have both got to say, you will, I am sure, pardon what must seem an unwarrantable *espionage*."

He raised his eyebrows, and looked from Dufrayer to me in some astonishment.

I drew a copy of the *Times* from my pocket and pointed to the advertisement. As I did so I noticed for the first time that the door between this room and the next was open, and at the same instant the distinct noise of breaking glass came to my ears.

"Pardon me a moment," said Lockhart; "my secretary is in the next room, and you would rather that no one overheard us. I will just go to her, and ask her to do some work in my study."

Still retaining the copy of the *Times* in his hand, he entered a large laboratory, where doubtless his own important discoveries were made.

"Ah! Miss Ward," he exclaimed, "so you have broken that culture tube. Well, never mind now; don't wait to pick up the fragments, I am particularly engaged. There are letters which I want you to copy in my study; you can go there until I send for you."

The light steps of a young woman were heard leaving the room; a door was opened at the further end and closed again softly. Lockhart returned to us.

"I am fortunate," he said, "in having secured as my secretary a most intelligent and clever girl, one in a thousand. At one time she thought of embracing the medical profession, and has studied bacteriology a little herself; but what possessed her to break a valuable culture tube now, is more than I can understand. Poor girl, she was quite white and trembling when I went into the room, and yet I am never harsh to her. Her name is Valentia Ward, a pretty creature, and a better secretary than any man I have ever come across. But there, gentlemen, you must pardon my alluding to my own private affairs. The loss of that culture tube has upset me a trifle, but I shall soon put matters right, and Miss Ward need not have looked so stricken. Now let us attend to business. You speak of an advertisement in this paper—where is it? Is it to-day's edition?"

"No, the edition of a week back," I

replied. "I have reason to know, Mr. Lockhart, that you have answered this advertisement. Pray glance your eye over it again—it is in your own interests that my friend and I have come here to-day."

"I fail to understand," said Lockhart, a trifle coldly.

"I will gladly explain," I said. "We have the strongest reasons for suspecting that these words were inserted by a well-known lady doctor called Mme. Koluchy."

"Still, I do not perceive your meaning," he replied. "Even granted that such is the case, may I ask what business this is of yours?"

"You certainly may. Our business is to warn you against any dealings with that woman."

"Indeed! But the lady in question is well known, and her scientific attainments are respected by every scientist in the kingdom. I think we must either close our present interview, or I must beg of you to give me a further explanation."

"As honourable men we can speak quite plainly," I replied. "However impossible it may seem to you, I am now prepared to tell you that Mme. Koluchy is the head of a gang, or secret society, whose head-quarters are at present in London. This society is perpetrating some of the most terrible crimes the century has known. I could mention half-a-dozen which would be familiar to you. Up till now Madame has eluded justice with a most remarkable ingenuity, but she cannot do so much longer. All my friend and I beg of you is to have nothing to do with her, and, beyond all other things, not to put into her hands or into the hands of any of her confederates one or more of the great secrets of bacteriology. You know as well as I do how omnipotent such powers would be in the hands of the unscrupulous."

While I was speaking Lockhart's red face became troubled. He wrinkled his forehead and knit his brows.

"What you have told me sounds almost incredible," he said, at last. "I suppose I ought to be obliged to you, but I scarcely know that I am. You have upset my confidence, and sown doubt where I must frankly say I had absolute faith. Since, however, you have spoken to me so frankly, it is but fair that I should tell you what I know of this matter. It is true that I did see that advertisement in the *Times*, and replied to it. Famous bacteriologist as I doubtless am, I am also a poor man. Pure science, as you know, Mr. Head, brings riches to none. I

answered the advertisement, and received almost immediately afterwards a letter from Mme. Koluchy asking me to call upon her at her house in Welbeck Street. She received me in her consulting-room, and put a few questions to me. I found her frank and agreeable, and there was nothing in the least sinister, either in her manner or in the disclosures which she was obliged to make to me. She soon perceived that I was admirably adapted to carry out her requirements, said that she would give me the work if I cared to undertake it, and on my promising to do so proceeded at once to business. I cannot divulge the nature of the research which I am about to make on her behalf, as I am under a solemn vow not to do so, but I can at least assure you that it is a perfectly honourable matter, and the pay—well, the pay is so good that I cannot afford to lose it. Mme. Koluchy is prepared to give me what may mean a small fortune. But I will tell you this, Mr. Head: if I find out that what you have just said is really the case, and I see the smallest likelihood of my information being used for dishonourable purposes, I shall withdraw."

"You cannot do more," I answered, "and I am much obliged to you for listening to us so patiently."

"I respect the honesty of your purpose," he said.

"May I also beg that you will regard what I have just said as strictly confidential?"

The ghost of a smile flitted across his face; it passed almost immediately.

"I will," he replied.

"It seems hard to press you still further," said Dufroyer, "but, short of abusing any confidence you may have made with Mme. Koluchy, would it be possible for you to keep us posted in what goes on?"

"I think I may promise that also, and, as a preliminary, I may as well say that I expect to leave town at a moment's notice on this very business. I do not know where I am going, for I have not yet received full instructions. It occurs to me, that if matters are really as serious as you think them to be, it would be as well for me to go, in order to make Mme. Koluchy show her hand."

"Yes," replied Dufroyer, "you are right there, Mr. Lockhart. The interests involved are so enormous that we shall only be able to defeat our enemies on their own ground; but if you happen to be going to a lonely part of the country, do not, I beg of you, go unarmed, and also communicate freely with Mr. Head or myself. You need have no

fear, as our agents and detectives will be ready and alert, and will follow you anywhere."

Again that almost imperceptible smile passed across his face. Certainly, to look at him, he did not appear to be a man to want much protection in case of a personal encounter. His huge frame towered above Dufroyer and myself as he rose and conducted us to the door.

"Well," said Dufroyer, when we got outside, "what do you think of it all? My own opinion is," he added, without waiting for me to speak, "that we shall have them this time. Madame has not conducted this matter with half of her usual acumen. Her successes have rendered her thoroughly contemptuous of us. Depend upon it, she will soon learn her lesson."

"And what about Miss Valentia Ward?" I cried. "From Lockhart's manner he seems to place absolute trust in her, and yet either there is grave mischief ahead, of which we know nothing, or the girl is in Madame's pay."

"I have not the slightest doubt which way the balance lies," said Dufroyer; "but Lockhart has been warned by us, and he is quite capable of looking after himself. We could not well betray Miss Ward. Having neglected her advice, we show her very plainly that we do not believe the cock-and-bull story she tried to tempt you with."

"And yet the girl looked as if she spoke the truth," I answered.

"Ah, Head, you were always influenced by a pretty face," said Dufroyer. "Had Miss Ward been old and wrinkled, you would have treated her cool attempt to impose upon you with the harshness it deserves."

"She was agitated and upset to-day, at any rate," I replied. "Beyond doubt, it was nervousness at suddenly hearing our voices which caused her to break that culture tube."

Dufroyer said nothing further, and I went to my own house.

All during the day which followed I could not get either Lockhart or his secretary out of my head, and more than once I congratulated myself upon having acted so promptly on Dufroyer's advice. Having opened Lockhart's eyes, it was scarcely likely that he would be hoodwinked now; and if Madame herself did not fall into our hands, in all probability some of her gang would.

Between four and five on the afternoon of that same day, to my great astonishment, Lockhart was shown into my laboratory. His fat face was redder than ever, and he was panting with excitement.

"Ah!" he said, when he saw me, "I hope I am in time. Get ready quickly, Mr. Head." He took out his handkerchief and began to mop his face.

"I have suddenly received orders to go down from Waterloo by the 5.10 to Lymington, in Hampshire, and to bring three broth cultures of a certain bacillus with me. I am to be met at Lymington by a boat. Beyond this I know nothing. During the day which has passed I have thought more than once of what you have told me, and I will confess that my suspicions are aroused. On receiving this sudden summons, it occurred to me that if you were to accompany me we could see for ourselves what the matter really means, and perhaps be able to frustrate Madame's plans. Can you manage to come? If so, we have not a single moment to lose—my cab is waiting at the door."

"By Jove! this looks really like business," I said; "but I ought to let Dufrayer know."

"You have no time to do so now. We can barely manage to get the train by going straight off. If we reach Waterloo in time, we can send your friend a telegram from there."

"True," I answered; "I will go with you at once."

Lockhart glanced impatiently at his watch. "It is more than half-past four," he said; "it will be a gallop to the station as it is."

I considered for a moment. There was no time to pack anything, and I dared not lose what might be the opportunity that I had so longed to meet. I ran upstairs, put on a Norfolk suit and travelling cap, and thrust a revolver into my pocket. I then joined my companion.

"Is there any chance of your being watched to see if you come down alone?" I said, as our cab dashed along the Marylebone Road.

Lockhart turned and stared at me without replying.

"I have not thought of that," he said, at last.

"It is a possible contingency," I answered. "I know the wariness of my enemy. Had we not better go down to Lymington in separate carriages? When we get there it will be dark, and we can start off together without being observed."

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"That would be a good plan," he replied. "I will go third-class, you can go first."

The clock pointed to eight minutes past five as we dashed up the incline to Waterloo. We rushed for our tickets, and just as the doors were being closed were running up the platform towards the train. As I flew past the third-class compartments to my own more luxurious carriage, I fancied I saw in one, marked "Ladies only," a face pressed against the window and watching me. It was the face of a woman with dark eyes. It appeared for a flash, and then disappeared behind a curtain. My heart sank with sick apprehension. If Valentin Ward were indeed following us to Lymington, there was no doubt whatever that she was one of Madame's accomplices. She knew that I had met Lockhart contrary to her warning, and was now, doubtless, hurrying to Yarmouth to reveal the truth to Madame.

The train sped on, and my thoughts continued to be both busy and anxious. The face with its dark eyes pursued me, turn



"IT WAS THE FACE OF A WOMAN."



where I would. I now regretted that a certain sense of honour had forbade my telling Lockhart of my suspicions that morning, and I determined to do so when we reached Lymington.

There was no change at Brockenhurst, and at half-past eight we drew up at Lymington Pier. Pulling the collar of my Norfolk jacket well up, and drawing down my cap over my eyes, I stepped out. Lockhart passed me, pushed slightly against me in doing so, and slipped a note into my hand. I glanced at this at once.

"Go in the boat to Yarmouth, and then on to Freshwater. I am coming over in a private boat," he wrote.

I looked up quickly. Already he was lost in the throng of passengers who had left the train. I had no opportunity to give him any warning; there was nothing for it but to obey his directions—take a ticket to Yarmouth and hasten on board. In a few moments I found myself steaming down the river and out into the Solent. The sun had set, and the moon would not rise for an hour or two. I stood on deck looking back at the lights of Lymington as they were reflected in the water. Suddenly I felt someone touch me. I looked round, and Miss Ward was by my side.

"You have disregarded my advice," she said; "you are in great danger. Don't land at Yarmouth. Take the return boat to Lymington."

Her voice was so earnest, and there was

such a ring of real distress in it, that, try as I would, I could scarcely treat her with the harshness which I thought her conduct deserved.

"You are a woman," I began, "but——"

"Oh, I know all that you think of me," she answered, "but the risk is too terrible, and my duty too plain, for any harsh judgment of yours to influence me. Go back, go back while there is time."

"I cannot understand you," I said. "You warn me of some vague danger, and yet you allow Lockhart, the man who employs you, to run into what, according to your own showing, is a trap for his destruction. How

can I respect you or believe your words when you act in such a manner?"

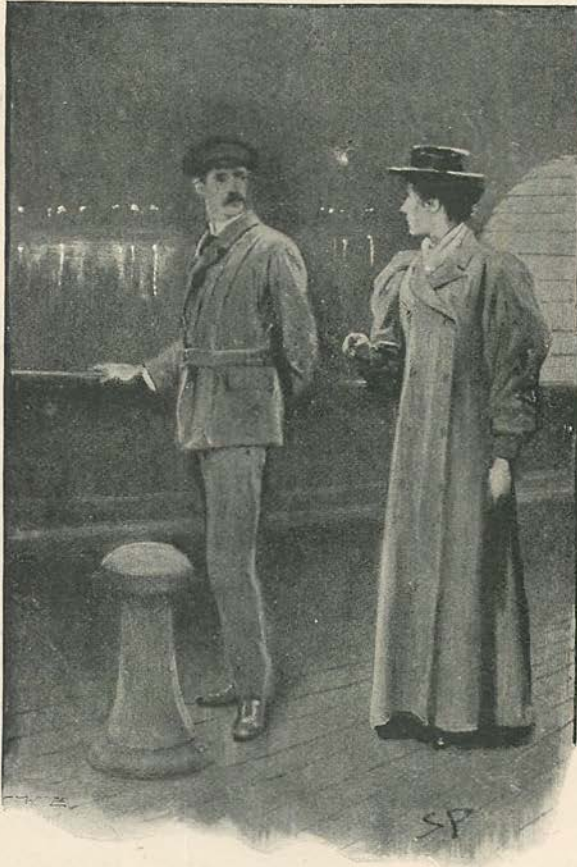
"I dare not tell you the whole truth," she answered. "I wish I had courage, but it means too much. Mr. Lockhart is in no danger; you are. Won't you go back—won't you be guided by me?"

"No," I said; "where he goes, I will go; his danger is mine also. Miss Ward, you are implicating yourself in the queerest way; you are showing me all too plainly that you are on the side of——"

"You think that I am Mme. K o l u c h y ' s agent?" she answered.

"Well, there is

only one way of saving you! I tried yesterday to do what I could; you would not be warned. When I heard your voice, and that of your friend, in Mr. Lockhart's dining-room this morning, my agitation was so great that I almost betrayed myself. On your behalf I have listened, and watched,



"MISS WARD WAS BY MY SIDE."

and acted the spy all day. You can scarcely realize what my awful position is. But, if you will not yield to my entreaties, I must tell you everything."

Just then, a friend whom I happened to know, and who lived at Yarmouth, came up, uttered an exclamation of astonishment, and drew me aside. He invited me to spend the night with him, but knowing that Lockhart expected me at Freshwater, I declined his invitation. I was glad of the interruption, and kept by his side until we reached the pier at Yarmouth. I then looked round for Miss Ward, but she had disappeared.

I now hoped that I had escaped her altogether. I took a carriage and drove to the hotel at Freshwater, where I intended staying until Lockhart communicated with me. I knew the place well, having spent many a summer holiday there in my young days. The hotel was nearly empty, the season not having yet begun, and I found myself the only occupant of the coffee-room. I ordered a hasty meal, and was just beginning to eat when a lady dressed in black entered the room and sat down at a distant table. A waiter came up and asked if she wanted anything. She ordered a cup of coffee, which was presently brought to her. I do not think she touched it. I saw her slowly stirring it with her teaspoon; she raised her eyes and encountered mine. She was Miss Ward. I perceived she had followed me. My dinner became instantly distasteful. I took up a paper and pretended to read. In a few moments a waiter brought me a note. I tore it open. It ran as follows:—

"I am staying here at a big house called the Towers, where the work is to be done. Come up path by cliff towards the golf links. Will meet you there. We can talk alone and arrange our plans. This is a matter of life and death."

I thrust the note into my coat-pocket and, raising my eyes, saw that Miss Ward had left her seat and come up to my table.

"You are to meet Mr. Lockhart on the path by the cliff towards the golf links?" she said, in an interrogative voice.

I made no reply.

"If you go I shall go also," she continued. "By so doing I put myself into the most deadly peril. Will not the thought of my danger influence you?"

"It is not necessary for you to go, and it is for me," I replied. "Miss Ward, I cannot understand your motive, nor why you persist in harassing me as you are

doing, but I can only act on my own judgment and as I think best. Leave me now to my fate, whatever it is. I have my work to do and must do it."

"Then it will be as I said," she answered. "You are imperilling your life and mine, but I have spoken—I can add no more."

She left the room, closing the door after her.

Making a great effort, I tried to banish her words and her strange persistency from my mind. I put on my hat and started off. I went down the lawn, crossed the little front parade, and began to ascend the pathway. I walked on for about half a mile, along the edge of the cliff, looking to right and left for Lockhart. My mind was torn with conflicting thoughts. Should I tell Lockhart about Miss Ward, or should I forbear? Was there by any possibility some truth in the wild words of this girl, who had followed me down to this lonely place on a quest of such evident peril? I had always prided myself on reading character well, and the straight glance of those dark and troubled eyes added now to my perplexity. She looked like one who was speaking the truth. Still, to believe her was impossible, for to believe her was to doubt Lockhart.

I walked on, wondering that he had not yet put in an appearance. I was now close to the golf links. Suddenly I heard to my right, and not a long way off, the sharp cry of a woman. It came on the night breeze, once, twice, then there was no further sound. I rushed in the direction from which the cry had come, and the next moment stumbled up against Lockhart. He spoke in an eager voice—there was a tremble in it.

"They have got me down here on some cock-and-bull idea of analyzing the water supply," he exclaimed.

"But," I interrupted, "did you not hear that cry, a woman in some sort of trouble—did you not hear it?"

"No, I can't say I did," he answered. "What is the matter with you, Head—you look quite overcome?"

"There was a sound just beyond you as if a woman was in trouble," I continued. "She cried out twice; are you certain you did not hear her?"

"Quite certain," he replied. "But let us listen for a moment. If we hear it again, we must of course go to the rescue."

We both stood still. The huge form of the bacteriologist was between me and the sea. Not a sound broke the stillness. The night was dark but quite calm, the moon had

not yet risen, only the distant roar of the waves came up to us as we listened.

"You mistook the cry of one of the numerous sea-birds about here for that of a woman," said Lockhart; "but, be it woman or not, I am afraid we have no time to attend to it any longer. Do you know that the tubes I brought with me have been stolen? But I was too clever for my foes, whoever they are. I suspected mischief, and threw the real culture away while we were crossing the Solent, and substituted plain broth in its stead. Now, what are we to do? This is a very ill-protected place, and I believe there is only one policeman."

"We must stay quiet until the morning," I answered, "and then get help from Newport. With our evidence they have not the ghost of a chance. But, Lockhart, I have something painful to tell you. Your secretary——"

"Valentia Ward! What do you mean? Oh, don't worry about her now—she is safe in London. We shall catch the whole gang by the first light, if we are wary."

We continued to walk on and to talk in low voices. Now and then I observed that Lockhart glanced behind him. It was evident to me that he was in a state of extreme nervous tension. As for me, I could not get that startled and anguished cry out of my ears. I wished now that I had insisted on making a more thorough search when I had first heard it.

Suddenly, as we walked, I caught sight of a low shed in a hollow. It was partly surrounded by broken-down trees.

"Let us make for that old golf-house," said Lockhart. "It has been long unoccupied; we shall be safe from any observation there, and can discuss our plans in quiet."

I instantly acquiesced. I had made up

my mind to tell Lockhart all about Miss Ward. I thought that I could do so best there.

We entered the dark shadow of the trees, and as we did so I detected a light between the chinks in the walls. I started back.

"Look!" I whispered, "the house is not unoccupied—they suspect us already. Let us go back."

"No time for that now," he answered, hardly breathing the words, they were uttered so low; "it is true there is someone there—someone you would like to meet."

Before I could move a step or utter a single cry he had flung me on the grass, his great hands clutched at my throat like a vice, and with all the weight of his huge body he knelt upon my chest and pinned me to the ground. The sudden violence of the attack, the awful conviction that Valentia Ward had indeed warned me of a terrible danger, and that I



"HE PINNED ME TO THE GROUND."

myself was the duped victim of some hideous plot, completely stunned me and paralyzed resistance. The cruel hands crushed my throat and light swam before my eyes. I felt dimly, without comprehending it, that my last hour had come. The earth seemed to recede away, and I remembered no more.

When I returned to consciousness I was lying on a rough deal table inside the shed.

I tried to move, but quickly discovered that I was both gagged and bound. By the dim light I could further see that I was surrounded by four men. They were all masked. Yes, at last I was in the clutch of the Brotherhood. As I watched, too stunned to realize all the awful meaning of the scene in which I found myself, another figure—also masked—slowly entered the room. It came forward and stood over me. My blood froze, for a pair of eyes of terrible power and Satanic beauty looked into mine. I had seen them before, and even through the disguise of the mask, I knew them. It was the voice of Mme. Koluchy herself that spoke. The words which now fell upon my ears I had heard from those same lips years ago in Naples.

“For a traitor to this Brotherhood there is but one penalty. Death!”

Then followed clear and concise the words of the sentence. They were spoken in Italian, but the last words were English.

“And neither earth nor sea shall hold his body, but it shall be rent asunder between them.”

A dead silence followed the uttering of this sentence. Without a word, two of the men lifted me in their arms and carried me out. One of them I felt certain by his size and bulk must be Lockhart himself.

The little procession moved slowly down the path to Compton Bay, just below. I now abandoned all hope. Mme. Koluchy had won, and I had lost. I had, indeed, been the victim of the cruellest and the most astute foe in the world. But Lockhart—Lockhart, whom I had trusted! His name was well known in the scientific world. All men sang his praises, for was he not by his recent discoveries one of the benefactors of the race; and yet—and yet—my dizzy brain almost turned at the thought—he was in reality one of Madame’s own satellites, a member of the Brotherhood of the Seven Kings. I saw, when too late, the whole deadly trap into which I had walked. The advertisement had been meant to arouse my attention. I had been inveigled down to Freshwater by means which only Mme. Koluchy could devise. Lockhart was my decoy. Why had I not listened to the words of the brave girl who had truly risked her life for me? That twice-repeated cry must have come from her lips. Without doubt, in trying to follow me she had been captured by our deadly enemy. Lockhart himself, in all probability, had done the deed. Had I not met him coming up the path in the

direction from which the cry had sounded? What ghastly doom was even now hanging over her head?

While my heart beat wildly in my ears, and my brain swam, and my eyes were dizzy, wild thoughts such as the above came and flashed before me. Then there came a dizzy moment when all was blank, and then again the cloud was lifted, and Madame’s sentence as she bent over me filled the entire horizon.

“Neither earth nor sea shall hold his body, but it shall be rent asunder between them,” she had said. Death awaited me beyond doubt, but I had yet to learn what a lingering death was to be mine.

We reached the sands, and I perceived lying at anchor within half a mile of the shore a small steam yacht. So this was the way Madame and her satellites had come here. Doubtless, when they had sealed the doom of their victims, they would sail away and never return. But where was the girl? She was certainly not in the old golf-house; what had they done with her?

I was lifted into a boat. Four men took the oars, and Madame Koluchy, still wearing her mask, sat in the stern and steered. Were we going to the yacht? No. The men pulled the boat rapidly along, beneath the white chalk cliffs that towered above us. It was high tide, and the water rose in crested waves against the face of the cliffs. Suddenly we headed sharply round, and the men, shipping their oars, shot the boat beneath an overhanging lip into one of the chalk caverns that abound along the coast. I knew that I was entering my tomb. One of the oarsmen now lit a torch, and I at once saw something floating on the water, which looked like some heavy balks of timber lashed together to form a sort of raft. From the roof of the cave a chain was dangling. At the end of the chain was an iron circlet.

Rapidly, and without a word, the ruffians seized me and placed me standing upright on the raft. They quickly lashed my feet to the heavy block of wood with a strong rope. Another man snapped the iron ring round my neck, and the next instant they had pushed the boat back out of the cave. As they did so, I distinctly heard Lockhart’s voice address Mme. Koluchy.

“The other boat is ready,” he said.

“How long will it float?” asked Madame.

“From two to three hours,” was the reply. “We shall lash her to the bottom, and——”

The boat turned the corner, and I lost the remainder of the sentence. For a moment

or two I thought of it, but the awful scene through which I had just passed confused my thoughts, and soon all feeling was concentrated on my own awful position.

My neck was fixed to the chain above, my feet to the timber in the sea below. The words of my terrible sentence burst upon me now with all their fiendish meaning. As the tide went down the whole weight of the raft would gradually drag my body from my head. The horror of such a fearful doom almost numbbed my faculties, and I stood as one already dead, being swayed up and down by the light swell that found its way into the cave.

The moon rose presently, and its pale beams struck across my dungeon with a weird light. The moon that ruled the tide was to be a witness of her own work that night. I wondered vaguely how long I had to live; but Lockhart must have given me a violent blow when he felled me to the ground, and I was still more or less stunned. Gradually, however, the cool air which blew into the cave revived me, and I was able more thoroughly to realize the position. I now perceived that the chain had at least two feet of slack. Thus the Brotherhood had arranged to prolong my tortures. Was there the most remote possibility of escape? I laughed to myself, a horrible laugh, as the hopelessness of the whole thing rushed over me. And yet there was a mad, passionate desire to make up to Miss Ward for my want of faith in her, which brought sudden fire to my heart and awoke each intellectual faculty to its fullest. She also was doomed. In what way and how, I had but the vaguest idea; but that her death was certain, I felt sure. If I could escape myself I might yet save her. To rescue her now seemed to be the one important thing left to me in the world. I could only manage it by setting myself free. My hands were lashed behind me, but not, I noticed, very tightly. This was, my conquerors knew, unnecessary, for even with them free I could neither, on account of the ring of iron which held my neck, bend down sufficiently far to release my feet, nor drag myself up by the chain, as my feet were secured to the raft, and the effort would be too tremendous—I should soon have to let go. I determined, however, to free my hands if I could, and at last, with great pain and difficulty, worked off the cords that bound my wrists. I then instantly removed the gag from my lips, and felt a momentary sense of freedom. I stretched out my hands im-

potently. Could they not in some way help me?

My long scientific training enabled me now to think clearly and consecutively. The knowledge that on my life another in all probability depended spurred each endeavour to the highest point. This much at least was obvious. I could not stop the tide, nor release the iron ring from my neck, nor free my feet from the raft; but there was one thing just possible. Could it by any means be done? I grew cold with excitement as the thought struck me. Could I by any known means connect the raft with the slack of the chain above my head, and so let this connection, instead of my body, take the strain as the tide sank? If I could manage this, it might give time for possible relief to come. Surely it seemed a hopeless task, for I could not reach down my hands to the raft. But still, I determined to make the effort, herculean though it was. It would at any rate be better than the inaction of slowly waiting my doom. Each second the tide was sinking—each second therefore would render my task harder, as it would diminish the slack of the chain.

I rapidly unbuckled the strong leather belt from my waist, and tried to stoop down sufficiently far to slip the end of the belt underneath the ropes that bound my feet. It was useless. At my utmost stretch I could not reach the ropes. But, stay, if only a big swell would come, I might just slip the belt through the rope. I crouched as low as I could, waiting and ready. The precious time sped on. Suddenly I felt the raft dip deeply. I rose up to save my neck, and as the next wave lifted the raft high I crouched quickly down again, and just managed to slip the strap under the rope and through the buckle before the swell subsided. It was touch and go, but I had done it.

To connect the belt to the chain above my head was the next thing to try. I had still the cord that had bound my hands. One end of this I now lashed securely to the slack of the chain, but when I had done so I found that it was not quite long enough to reach the belt. I tore my strong silk scarf from my neck and fastened it to the cord, and thus managed at last to bind cord and belt together. As I looked at the extraordinary rope which I had made for my deliverance my hope sank within me, for I felt certain that it was far too flimsy. The strain on it would become greater and greater each moment as the weight of the raft was thrown upon it. I seized the chain above my head with my hands, but I knew

well that directly the connection gave way I should not be able to bear the strain on my arms for more than a moment, and when I released them I should be instantly strangled.

The terrible time dragged on, and the tide sank steadily lower and lower. I saw the silk scarf stretch, and could hear the belt below creaking with the weight at each fall of the swell. In a few seconds I knew it must go, and then all would be over. I closed my eyes. My hour had come. Madame had indeed won, and I had lost. But what was that? What had happened?

There was a loud crack, and I was sprawling on the raft. One glance showed me what had taken place. The iron ring in the rock, which would have been amply strong enough to bear the strain of strangling me, had yielded to the combined weight of myself and the raft, which had been half drawn out of the water. The ring had been suddenly torn from the rock. It was indeed a miraculous deliverance, for I did not believe the extempore rope would have held another second. Yes, the worst danger was over, but I was still in an evil plight. I quickly unlashed my feet, and then, with the ring of iron round my neck and the chain attached, sprang on to a projecting ledge of rock at the mouth of the cave. I saw to my joy that the fall of the tide was now on my side, for it had left me a means of regaining the sandy bay.

Plunging and stumbling, sometimes neck deep in water, I at last reached the sands and fell down, trembling with exhaustion.

A dark bank of clouds had crept up and blotted out the moon. I struggled to my feet and looked out to sea. Where was Miss Ward? To go to her rescue now was my first and only duty. I gathered the long chain in my hand, and ran up the winding pathway to the summit of the cliff. My intention was to make my way with all possible speed across the Downs to Freshwater. I had gone about two hundred yards on the top of the cliff when I saw a man coming to meet me. I hurried up to him, and saw to my joy that he was one of the coastguards. I quickly told him my story,

pointing as I spoke to my dripping clothes and to the chain about my neck.

The man was aghast, and stared at me with absolute amazement and horror.

"Well, sir," he replied, "and you think the young lady is in a similar plight?"

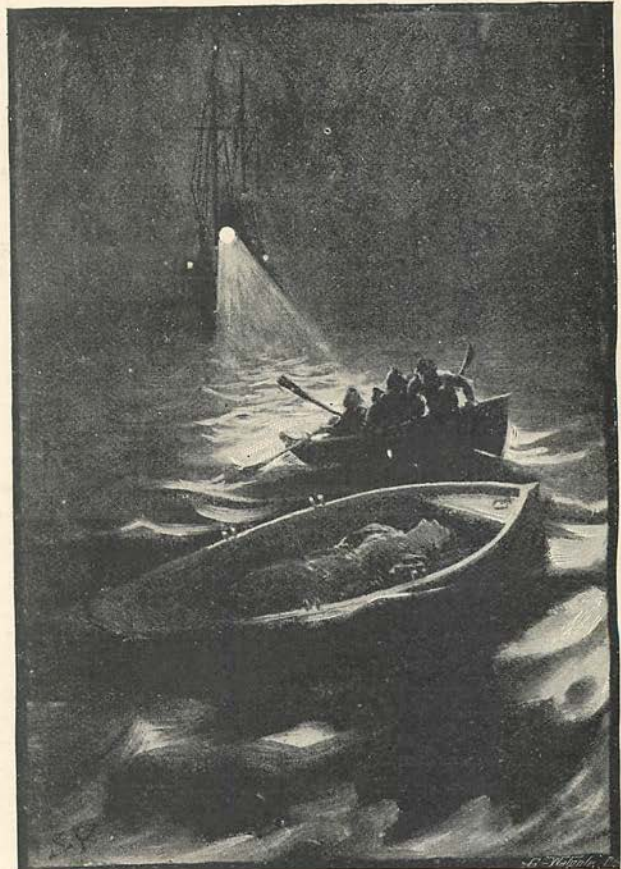
I told him what I had overheard Mme. Koluchy and Lockhart say.

"Then they have put her in a boat and allowed her to drift with the tide," said the man. "The tide is running out, and what wind there is is from the east. I have been a coastguard here for more than twenty years, but I'm blessed if ever I heard such a tale as this before."

"We must save her," I said. "What is the quickest way in which we can get a boat? If anything is to be done, there is not a moment to lose."

The man considered for a moment, without speaking.

"There's a gent down here for the summer," he said. "His name is Captain



"AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BOAT WAS THE MOTIONLESS FORM OF A WOMAN."

Oldham, and there's his yacht lying out yonder in the bay. Maybe he would let her go out again for such a thing as this. It's no use trying with a rowing boat. Captain Oldham has got a search-light on board, too."

"Is he on the yacht now?" I asked.

"Yes, sir; he's sleeping on board to-night, for he has only just come in from a cruise. The luck is on your side now."

"The very thing!" I cried. "Don't let us lose a single moment."

We ran down the road to the bay, and a few moments later my new friend and I were pulling rapidly out to Captain Oldham's yacht.

As we approached my companion hailed the man on watch, and the owner himself appeared as we scrambled up the ladder.

In the presence of the coastguard, I repeated my extraordinary story. The emphasis of my words, and the iron ring round my neck, carried conviction.

"And the girl risked her life for you?" said the old seaman, his eyes almost starting from his head, in his excitement.

"That she did," I replied, "and I treated her brutally—I refused to believe in her."

"And you have good cause to think they set her adrift in a leaky boat?"

"I fear so, and I want to search these waters without an instant's delay."

"It shall be done," he cried. "My God! I never heard of such devilish cruelty."

He turned, and shouted his orders to the astonished engineer and crew. All possible haste was made, and I tried to control my own growing impatience in getting the search-light ready. I saw, with satisfaction, that it was one of the latest Admiralty pattern, such as the steamers use in the Suez Canal. There was a powerful arc-light supplied from an accumulator. The moon had sunk and it was quite dark now, but with this light, not a speck on the sea would escape us within a radius of a mile.

I went forward, holding the light in its projecting apparatus, and in about ten minutes we were steaming out to sea. Regulating the apparatus with the hand-gear, I began to play the great light to and fro in front of us. Two of the crew stood beside me sharply on the look-out. We had already passed the Needles, but still there was nothing to be seen. Captain Oldham was at the

wheel, and he now turned the yacht's head more determinedly out to sea. Mile after mile we went, without success. A hopeless despair began to creep over me. If that girl died, I felt that I could never hold up my head again. Suddenly one of the men beside me sang out:—

"Skiff on the port beam, sir. Hard a starboard!"

The engine bell rang to "full speed," and in a short time I saw that we were quickly bearing down on what appeared to be an empty boat, aimlessly drifting with its gunwale nearly down to the water-line. What did it mean? Was the girl really in the boat? Were we in time to save her?

The yacht stopped, a boat was lowered, and the coastguard and I and two of the men pulled for all we were worth towards her.

Lying at the bottom of the boat was the motionless form of a woman. Her head was just above water, her eyes were shut; she looked like one dead. One glance at her face was sufficient to show me who she was. Was I in time to save her?

We quickly released the thongs which bound the poor girl, and lifted her into our boat. From there we brought her quickly to the yacht.

"Take the boat in tow," I cried to one of the men; "we may get some evidence from her that will help us."

This was quickly done, and we were soon steaming back to Freshwater Bay.

Alas! however, my worst fears were confirmed. I was too late. All that was possible was done, but Valentia Ward never recovered. The shock and exposure had killed her. Thus my efforts on her behalf had proved unavailing. She had risked and lost her life for mine.

I telegraphed to Dufrazer early on the following morning, and he arrived at Freshwater at noon. To him I told my extraordinary and awful adventure.

One of our first cares was to examine the boat. We then perceived what Madame's fiendish cruelty really meant. A hole had been made in the bottom in such a way that the boat would take several hours to sink. Thus Valentia was also to be the victim of a lingering death. The name of the yacht to which the boat belonged had been carefully scraped off the side, thus obliterating any chance of obtaining evidence against Madame.