

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Lycanthrope

Date of first publication: 1938

Author: Eden Phillpotts (1862-1960)

Date first posted: August 22 2012

Date last updated: August 22 2012

Faded Page eBook #20120828

This eBook was produced by: Barbara Watson, Mary Meehan, Mark Akrigg & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

LYCANTHROPE

The Mystery of Sir William Wolf

By EDEN PHILLPOTTS

NEW YORK 1938
The Macmillan Company

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AMERICAN BOOK STRATFORD PRESS, INC., NEW YORK

Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE BLOW FALLS	1
II JOHN MALFROY	15
III FLEETING PEACE	32
IV THE PROPHECY	43
V THE BLOOD	58
VI THE SCENT	78
VII THE SOUND	97
VIII EXIT BOB MEADOWS	117
IX THE SPOOR	134
X "NEARER AND NEARER—LOUDER YET"	148
XI IN THE HANGERS	165
XII WOLF MEETS WOLF	190
XIII PETTIGREW UNRAVELS	213
XIV PETTIGREW PROCEEDS	230
XV PETTIGREW CONCLUDES	247

LYCANTHROPE

The Mystery of Sir William Wolf

CHAPTER ONE

The Blow Falls

The blood in a man's veins may determine his destiny and, by the nature of things, come between him and his native bent, predisposition, or those deep-rooted impulses proper to character. They alone are free who suffer from no proscription, or yoke forged for them by the accidents of heredity. A prince must follow his appointed path, even though it should lead to a throne; and in lesser degree the well-born are often called to face existence hemmed about with conditions for which they were not responsible, but to which the usages of caste demand that they submit.

A young, slim, rufous lad wandered amid the ruins of the Parthenon and, sitting presently within the shade of a great pillar, mopped his red head and looked up into the sapphire, Grecian sky. But though he adored this solemn temple in its ruined magnificence and turned his steps here daily, William Wolf's mind had centred upon himself for the moment and he pursued a futile train of thought, contrasting the existence good to him with that predetermined and inevitable. His own complexity of character left him no choice. He had been trained from childhood to anticipate the demands of wealth and long descent; but while every native instinct shrank from succession to these conditions, yet they shared the young man's quality with a sense of duty, and a conscience morbidly awake to all that his duty must demand.

By nature he had been fitted to the life of literature. He loved history and mysticism. He aspired to creative work and the telling of stories from the past. He relished the challenge from vanished times and often dreamed of adventures with his pen amid the visions of the Golden Age. Greece drew him and he had willingly spent his existence upon that precious soil. But his own future barred the way: he would not learn to write, because he knew that any promise of success must master him and confound his loyalties. None the less, until called to drink the cup of destiny, William Wolf loitered in the world of old romance and beheld, as Moses from Pisgah, the Land of Promise, that he might never enter.

No power denied his dreaming, however, and he had ever been a great dreamer. Sitting now upon a fallen stone of that marble miracle, he reconstructed the Parthenon of Ictinus, a fane lifted upon the venerable foundations of one older still. He rebuilt the ruins, set up the walls, lifted the gorgeous frieze with its Panathenaic processions in all their marvellous beauty. He had studied them deeply and often in the British Museum: those youths and maidens, the cattle for sacrifice, the priests and lawgivers, the flute-players and dancers. He added the colours that of old belonged to them and the glittering pageant lived again in his vision. Next he set up the metopes and their mythical battles; and then he saw the mighty pediments to East and West. He returned their heads to 'Theseus' and 'The Fates'; he dreamed of those masterpieces that art of man has never again created; and lastly he lifted up the chryselephantine image of Athena Parthenos herself, saw her reigning in gold and ivory glory, and thought of Phideas, the mighty man who made her.

Young Wolf knew his history and understood that the Parthenon was a focus of festival rather than worship. He pictured its stores of treasure and he saw the victors from the games assembling to receive their golden chaplets and prizes, as it were from the hand of the goddess herself. He beheld the surging people, heard the trumpets, smelled the odour of the incense rising in blue clouds to the upper air. And then his dreams were broken and a man's voice at his elbow banished them.

"Beg pardon, sir, but you said you were coming up here. A telegram, so I fetched along, thinking you'd best to get it and not knowing when you'd be back at the hotel."

Bob Meadows was William Wolf's valet. He had waited on his master at Oxford and, when William went down, entered his service. A close understanding and regard obtained between them, and Bob, who was two years the elder, rejoiced in his job and thought himself a fortunate man; while William appreciated the other's gifts and held him dearer than a servant. They suited each other and while Meadows exhausted his ingenuity in adding to young Wolf's comfort and convenience, William never lacked appreciation or stinted praise. The valet was practical and trustworthy, not wanting in his own ideals, and he held his master's friendship as more than his share of the good things that life had to offer him.

"Sit down, Bob," said the dreamer. "You've spoiled a very fine feat of imagination, as telegrams are apt to do in my experience."

Meadows took a seat on the grass and mopped his head. He had come quickly.

The telegram was decisive, as Wolf announced after he had read it.

"Must get home at once," he said. "Trouble."

He handed the message to his man.

"Sir Porteus very dangerously ill. Telephoning to-morrow morning. Telford."

Meadows made a rational comment.

"If you catch the night express, sir, you'll be well on your way. You'll lose twelve hours if you wait till to-morrow."

"It's a point," admitted the other. "If the governor's going, twelve hours might make all the difference; but Telford wouldn't arrange for a long-distance call like this unless there were reasons. I may miss something important by starting to-night."

"Very good, sir."

Wolf rose and sighed.

"Something tells me the blow has fallen, Bob."

"Hope for the best, sir. Sir Porteus is grand stuff. He'll fight for his life."

They descended together and Meadows made a suggestion.

"How would it be if you was to charter a 'plane and fly, sir?"

"No, Bob. Unless I hear to the contrary to-morrow and learn that speed is vital, I shall not do that. And speed is not vital; otherwise my cousin would have worded the telegram differently. I think my father is dead. In any case we will go home to-morrow. If he has gone—"

He broke off and neither spoke again until the hotel was reached.

All preparations for departure were made that night, and while Meadows packed, his master went into the moonlight with his thoughts.

Though not in truth a knight, since baronets are not knights unless they have been knighted, the young man entertained lofty ideals of chivalry, a high sense of honour and keen consciousness of the obligations consequent on his estate. He had followed in his father's steps on all questions pertaining to his ancient status, save in the particular of the military spirit; but while General Sir Porteus Wolf held Army, or Navy, the only seemly callings for inheritors of rank and title, his son possessed a different bent of mind. William had been to Eton and Oxford, taken a respectable degree in History and consorted with the serious type of students and thinkers. A disappointment to his father in one particular, he satisfied him well enough in most others, for he promised to respect the traditions of his race, and if no distinctions could be predicted for an only son naturally reserved, scholarly and shy, Sir Porteus felt that Stormbury would be in safe hands along with all it stood for; and he hoped that he might live to welcome and inspire a grandson gifted to restore the line and reanimate its ancient lustre on the rolls of the fighting services. His ambition proved not destined of fulfilment. William Wolf was still a bachelor when came this bad news, and the inner conviction along with it that duty must soon call him to the helm of his inheritance. He shrank from power, or the exercise of power, but he was long schooled to the demand and, while loving Stormbury little enough, admitted its stern claims upon him.

Lastly it may be noted that, amid the complex of qualities he had developed in early manhood, there was something that belonged to himself alone, for William revealed strong tendencies to the mysterious side of life and thought, as an educated man he kept superstitions in bounds, he had yet unconsciously made this tendency manifest and displayed to the few remaining members of his race a curious preoccupation with the world of the occult. Such as were interested in him guessed that the phase would pass, unknowing of the imminent and unaccountable events soon destined to feed it.

At eleven o'clock on the following morning young Wolf listened to the voice of his cousin, Telford Wolf, speaking from England and learned that his parent was dead. Sir Porteus had risen very early on the previous day and ridden to a meet of hounds. He hunted still, though seventy-five years of age, and declined to take friendly hints that his grip was gone. Cub-hunting he had ever esteemed a joyous branch of sport and now, under the great oaken hangers of Stormbury but a mile from home, the old baronet took a toss in the mire of a water-course and his horse had come down upon him. He

lived for some hours, then died without regaining consciousness.

"You can say he didn't suffer a pang, Bill," whispered the far-away voice. "He went as I've often heard him say he wanted to go. You'll be back in three days, or four at most. They've fixed to-morrow for the inquest and Saturday for the funeral if that will suit you; or would you rather it was later?"

"Saturday will be all right," answered the listener. "I shall start to-day."

"I'll keep the obituary notices for you. They've published a photograph of Uncle Porteus in *The Times* this morning."

"Thank you, old man. Carry on and do all the right things. Good-bye."

Then he rang off and went to seek Meadows.

"Father's gone, Bob," he said. "Cub-hunting in the hanger. He came down, with his horse on him, and passed a few hours later."

"I'm sorry indeed, Sir William," answered the other. "You can catch the midday express if you mind to."

"No. I'll go at midnight. I can't hurry and there's no need. Funeral isn't till Saturday. I'm going to the Parthenon for an hour or two—just to collect my scattered senses, Bob."

"A very big thing, Sir William—a very tremendous thing for you. Shall I fetch up and call you come presently? If you once get thinking, you'll forget all about the time."

"Look for me at half-past one. I must say 'good-bye' to a few people I suppose."

"There's Mr. Boyd—this will be a cruel stroke to him, Sir William."

"By Jove, I forgot him. And don't call me 'Sir William' any more. I suppose you'll have to now, but not yet. I'll go right away and see Boyd. Glad you reminded me. Hotel Olympia. Call a taxi."

It happened that the Rev. Fortescue Boyd, rector of Stormbury, was taking a holiday in Greece, and since the relations between him and the departed lord of the manor had ever been of the closest, it was certain the news must prove no small shock. William, however, knew Mr. Boyd very intimately and stood on the closest terms of friendship with him. As a child, before he went to his first preparatory school, the reverend gentleman had devoted many hours of his own leisure to William's education. He was a scholar, something of an antiquary and devoted to his flock, his little parish church and his modest circle of activities and interests. Sir Porteus and he had been lifelong friends and, of all his neighbours, the dead man was wont to esteem Fortescue Boyd the highest. They had fought in the Great War together, after which Boyd took Orders and when opportunity offered, accepted the living of Stormbury. Both were widowers at this time and each had one child only.

William thought upon the clergyman's daughter now and remembered with relief that she was with him.

"This is going to knock the old boy about," he reflected. "It's so sudden; but he knew, as I always did, that it was likely to happen this way. Lucky Alma's with him. She'll steer him home all right. She may even dissuade him from coming."

But when they met, he found that the daughter of Stormbury's vicar harboured no thought but to return.

Alma Boyd was as tall as Sir William himself and of a sturdier build. She was a flaxen girl with a determined, frank face and regular features—grey-eyed, steadfast and comely but not beautiful. William had known her all her life and was six years older than she. But at twenty the girl always felt herself the elder. They were very close friends and admired each other heartily, yet no element of romance tintured their brotherly and sisterly regard. Alma would often tell William that he was a helpless idiot and ought to find a wife and do as his father wished; while he would retort with the promise that when she found a husband, then he might also seek a partner.

He told them of his loss and both were greatly distressed. The clergyman sat down and turned very pale under his tan; the girl, seeing his emotion, showed anxiety for him. There were quickly tears in her eyes which she wiped away, then rang for a waiter and told him to bring her father some brandy. They consoled with the young man and Alma spoke for them both, because it was some little time before the elder could find his voice. Always apt to take colour from the

influences about him, young Wolf began to feel a sorrow he had not yet felt. For a while he forgot himself in memory of his father, and when he left them, his mind played on the career of a veteran parent—a great soldier and a man of distinguished quality.

Mr. Boyd declared his intention of returning at once to England, that he might take the funeral, and Alma agreed with him. It was understood that all would travel by the same train; then William went on his way and found himself the better for their sorrow. It had wakened his own spirit and brought some consolation.

"Dear, dear Bill, I'm so sorry for you"—thus Alma had spoken when he left her. And William's moral sense rebuked him. 'She wouldn't be sorry for me if she knew I was so sorry for myself,' he reflected. And then his thoughts turned upon the dead man and he experienced normal, human grief. For he had failed his father in vital directions, fallen far short of the old soldier's ideals, yet received from him nothing but patience, sympathy and affection.

He sat under the Parthenon presently and looked out upon the city beneath him. Having confessed to himself the disappointment that he must have been to the dead, William strove to dwell on a happier side of their relation and remembered that in some things he had satisfied Sir Porteus. He felt that a debt was owing to his father and burned with resolution to pay it. 'At least I'll follow in his footsteps as far as Stormbury is concerned,' thought the young man, 'and if he can watch from the other side of his grave, he shall see the old traditions held sacred and his rule maintained as long as the law of the land and the British Constitution last. And if we crash and the last shadows of feudal times are swept away by the next government, he'll be taken from the evil to come and the change won't hurt me as it would have hurt him.'

He grew tired presently and his mind turned to trifles. One trivial idea consoled him. Though a red man and, as such, unique in his family, William worthily maintained the family features which were marked and distinguished by ugliness. His father had often told him that there had never been a handsome Wolf in the history of the clan, and the family portraits at Stormbury supported this assurance. The women it seemed were presentable, but the men were of an unprepossessing exterior. The Wolf nose and the Wolf ear persisted from generation to generation, even as the Courtenay nose was said to do. An authentic Wolf displayed a long and pointed nose together with exceedingly prominent ears, and William, in addition to his carrot-red locks and ginger eyebrows, did not lack for the family excrescences. They had called him 'the Bat' at Eton, and when his father heard his nickname, he laughed and said that history repeated itself, for he also was called 'the Bat,' in his time.

William's mother had ever condoned her son's ugliness, however, for his eyes in the maternal opinion were quite beautiful. 'You forget the rest of his precious face when you look into his eyes'—so Lady Wolf maintained. They were of an agate colour, gentle and lustrous; and they revealed no little of the young man's quality in their misty depths. Nor was his mouth forbidding. He shaved clean and his lips were well formed, his teeth perfect. William's brow was high yet not very broad; his chin was his own, well modelled but lacking the assertion and strength of his race.

That night he started for home with Meadows. The Boyds were in the same train and they met from time to time on the course of the journey and took the final stage together. On a bright October evening they arrived at Honiton in East Devon, where waited motor-cars to bring them through autumnal woods, pastures, orchards and cultivated lands to Stormbury. An old car and an old driver conveyed the vicar and his daughter quickly away; while there waited for William Wolf a more elaborate equipage. Telford Wolf had driven to meet him, and presently Meadows took the wheel while the cousins sat together behind him.

Telford was able to tell of the Coroner's inquest. Several people had witnessed the accident and Dr. Peters, the local physician and an old friend of Sir Porteus, declared that after the first shock, the dead man could have felt and known nothing.

William and Telford Wolf were near of an age and had always enjoyed a community of tastes and interests that kept them close friends. The situation of the family on the death of its head can be very briefly recorded since few remained to mention. A clan once numerous was now reduced by accident of chance to small numbers. Outlying branches and connections there were, but the main line ran thin. Sir Porteus and a brother, one year younger than himself, had been the sole representatives of the past generation. Both married, and while William was sole issue of his father, Telford Wolf had also happened to be an only son. His mother he could not remember, for she died while he was yet a little child; but Captain George Wolf, his father, married again and a stepmother had brought up the lad.

Between George Wolf and Sir Porteus was ever maintained the closest affection, and after his brother had fallen in the Great War, Sir Porteus looked to it that all should be well with his sister-in-law and her stepson. He had known Daphne Wolf long before she entered the family, for she was a close friend of his own wife, and at Stormbury George Wolf first met her. After her husband's death, Daphne and young Telford came at Lady Wolf's desire to live at Stormbury dower-house—a considerable dwelling that stood but a mile from the manor. At first a temporary arrangement, it had become permanent, for after the long illness and death of Lady Wolf, Sir Porteus was insistent that Daphne should not go. She had belonged to the district all her life and felt well pleased to remain, minister to her stepson and be a second mother to William also. A country woman, she loved the life of the hamlet, its duties and interests. She was fond of both young men, but rated William higher than her husband's son, for there was that in his helplessness that drew her more than the efficiency of Telford. Sir Porteus had always admitted his nephew's capability but found himself doomed to disappointment in that quarter also, for the young man was an artist to his finger-tips—a craftsman and creator, whose bent lay in making things. He had gone abroad sometimes with William, to study masterpieces and pursue his passion; but for the most part Telford was content to live and work at home. His stepmother had built him a studio near the dower-house, and here he laboured at his achievements and clamoured for the tools or machines they demanded. Mrs. Wolf had been called to wear his earliest efforts of self-expression and fill her drawing-room with others; while, at twenty-five, the ambitious youth held his first 'one-man' show in London, receiving some measure of praise for his enamels and jewels, his book-bindings and trinkets. He was always after something new and, at the time of his uncle's death, had been trying hard to squeeze a cheque out of the old man and start a little pottery.

Thus then they had stood, the four of them; and now Sir Porteus was sped and Sir William about to reign over Stormbury; while Daphne Wolf prepared to help him, as far as a woman might, and cordially trusted that he would presently find a helpmate in his lonely splendour.

Through his own acres and under his own great forest came William to his home, where Mrs. Wolf was waiting to receive him. The hum and stir and business of a rich man's passing engulfed him. A thousand minor questions awaited his decision; many presented themselves for a moment to him. Stormbury had ever regarded him as something of a shadow; but now the case was altered and interest in the new dispensation grew. A foretaste of his burdens weighed heavy upon William that night and he retired weary enough in mind and body. Physically he had always been of tough and healthy constitution; but he was light built and incapable of any tremendous efforts—athletic, though not an athlete.

Now a family mausoleum opened for the last time and Sir Porteus joined his ancestors.

"After I am buried," he had said to William, "the place will be full, and you and your descendants, if you ever find energy and love to create them, must lie henceforth under the grass outside with our good neighbours."

To this suggestion the young man readily agreed.

"Nothing will suit me better, Father," he answered; and when the coffin of Sir Porteus, fashioned of Stormbury oak, lay beside his wife, the great vault was closed for ever upon half a hundred receptacles of human dust.

Many old soldiers, of whom William had heard but never seen, attended the funeral and it proceeded with such pomps and dignities as met the case. Then peace returned and the hamlet went on its immemorial way.

CHAPTER TWO

John Malfroy

The ceremonial gates of Stormbury were seldom opened. They led, by a wide grass avenue, between red-woods and other conifers to the southern front of the manor, and rose in two massive pediments between which hung gates of scrolled iron brought by a former baronet from Italy. On each of the supporting pillars sat a wolf, also the work of an Italian artist. They were carved of grey marble in a realistic fashion and taken from the family coat of arms. On the coat, indeed, the wolves stalked one above the other—twain wolves passant—but here the monsters were separated and each from his lofty perch looked down, with bared teeth, alert and alive, upon the passer-by. Neither lichen nor moss was permitted to adorn them and for a hundred years they had preserved their formidable and threatening animation. Between his wolves Sir Porteus had passed, upon a wain from the home farm to the grave, amid a sorrowing company, and now the gates were shut again and those who came and went from the mansion proceeded by other ways. But a little side entrance existed and through this on a November day, William and his cousin, Telford, entered and strolled up to the house. A month had passed since the funeral and life was settling down in familiar fashion, but certain vital changes confronted the heir and his father's land-agent now desired to retire. He and his father and grandfather before him had fulfilled their traditional task, but there was none of the family left to succeed Michael Forrester, and the fact had been welcomed by William for personal reasons. Had a Forrester existed to follow in succession, the work had gone to him as a matter of course, but Michael, now an old man, was childless and the place would soon remain to fill.

"I'm going to get John Malfroy," said William to his cousin. "I always intended to do something for him sooner or later and here's the chance."

Telford demurred.

"I remember him when he came here on a visit, and I know he's about your only friend besides myself," he said.

"You have nothing against him?"

"Nothing in the world. I took to the chap. He's powerful and has character and a grip on life. A bit of an opportunist I'd say, though none the worse for that. But a land agent's job in a place like this is a pretty big order. Stormbury's not the sort of estate for anybody to learn his work in. You want an expert and a man of pretty extensive experience. He liked the country and he's a sportsman and a shrewd, dominant sort of chap; but would he know enough?"

"He'd pick it up very quickly. He has great powers of management and control. In Russia he's already one of their leading men in a big mine. One can't be dead sure yet if he'll come, but I think he will. He's devoted to me and I am, as you know, devoted to him. It was always my hope to get him here one day. As to the work, he'll have Forrester at his elbow and old Michael will 'put him wise,' as they say. Malfroy's a brainy chap as well as a muscular one. I want him and that's a fact. I should be much the happier for his companionship."

"Then I hope he'll come," said Telford, "and I also hope that Forrester will stick on for six months, or a year. There's always such a lot of difficulty in a huge place like this when a very rich man drops out."

"Father looked ahead and knew what was coming to him. It was one of his jokes that it would soon be impossible to pay for the luxury of being an Englishman. 'The ghouls will have more than half a million of money out of me when I drop,' he often told me. Five years ago he made me a present of two hundred thousand pounds. He had to live for three years afterwards, himself, however, before it came to be mine."

Telford regarded his cousin respectfully.

"Never heard that!" he said. "I suppose you haven't spent a bean?"

William did not reply and they returned to the subject of John Malfroy. The friendship had arisen out of two opposite natures as friendships are apt to do. To the well-born lad when at Eton, his fellow-student had presented just those qualities that he himself lacked, and lacking, most admired. John was a big-boned, exceedingly powerful boy and excelled at games. Moreover, he possessed an element of assurance and self-confidence so vital to success in any field. He was tough and knew not fear, yet a good sportsman and never seen to use his exceptional strength unfairly—the type

of boy who becomes a hero without any trouble on his own part. When, therefore, young Wolf, who was junior at Eton to Malfroy, found John friendly and even disposed to chum, he swiftly joined the ranks of his admirers. The elder knew that 'Bat' was going to be a baronet and a rich man some day, and the fact did not lessen his good-will; but boys are seldom concerned very deeply with the main chance and John's friendship could not be called wholly mercenary. The attraction of opposites influenced him too. He was handsome, while William had no claim to good looks; he was tremendously strong with a natural bent for athletics, while William, though energetic, lacked the weight and toughness to excel. But Malfroy found him agreeable and interesting. They were in the same form, for John's learning fell considerably short of his powers in the playing-fields. He had plenty of brains, but not the sort that advance scholarship, and William could help his hero in 'prep' and felt proud to do so.

But it was the youngster's attitude to life that chiefly interested Malfroy. He came of plebeian stock himself and Wolf opened a new angle of vision for him. This made the elder jealous and sometimes exasperated him, for it seemed easy to take William's line in William's circumstances. If you are born to roll in money, then noble sentiments are easily supported; but John's father was a self-made man and had fought his way to wealth. His outlook on life, as revealed to his son, differed very widely from that of young Wolf, and the boys often argued about it. The elder had been taught to value money for itself; the younger to regard it as an eternal obligation and trust: the difference between earning and inheriting.

They had gone to Oxford together and then trouble descended upon Malfroy. His father, a stock-broker, failed in business and destroyed himself, leaving a wife and two children ruined and disgraced; while, in reach of his coveted 'blue,' John was called to leave college and face reality. The blow had been severe, for it fell without warning; but whatever such a shock may have wrought in the texture of the young man's conviction, he did not go down under it. Native courage served him in good stead and he set about the unexpected business of earning his living and looking after a mother and sister now dependent upon him. It did not lie in William's power to help him immediately, but their friendship was close woven and Malfroy knew that his misfortune had not shaken it. There existed henceforth an understanding between them that, when opportunity arose, John might count upon some permanent occupation, probably at his friend's home. Meantime they did not lose touch with each other. Friends of his father found work for Malfroy and obtained a minor clerkship in business. An Oil Company afforded the opening, and he addressed himself to his work with such determination and attention to detail that he was sent to Russia eighteen months after his apprenticeship. With his energies thus pent and the sport he loved reduced to narrowest dimensions, John abandoned it and concentrated on his present task. He devoted his wits to the difficult business of learning Russian. Meanwhile he also learned the significance of poverty and acquired a respect and desire for money that the rich can never know.

There was always William Wolf in the background and, while pouring his energies into the present, a more congenial and affluent future promised. John loved the country and the life of a countryman with its element of varied sport and open air, and his devotion to William did not abate. He had spent a holiday at Stormbury and could see himself happy enough in such surroundings; but what as yet he could not see was the possibility of work commensurate with his immense energies, or worth the money it was his ambition to earn. William he found looked at life with other eyes and other values. His destiny was to pay for service and his training had always been not to waste money, or pay for things more than they were worth. The young men had actually argued this point when William spent a month in Siberia and marked Malfroy's strength of character and power of controlling labour. He had praised these gifts and spoken of their promise for John's future, revealing a doubt whether his wish for the elder's companionship was ever likely to be gratified.

For five years Malfroy had worked and waited in Russia, and now the challenge was about to come to him. William saw the problem and guessed at a difficulty while he spoke to Telford.

The cousins proceeded on their way and stopped a moment to admire a herd of fallow deer making delicious colour where they stood in drifts of russet brake fern. Then William spoke and returned to his friend.

"I'm not really hopeful he'll come," he said. "He's cut out for the command of men and might rise to be a merchant prince himself some day. He has the gifts and he only wants all that money can command. John is a realist and the supreme power that money can't command, lies outside his scope."

"Money's no object to you in any case," replied Telford. "You can buy him if you feel you'll get your money's worth in friendship and all that sort of thing."

"I might; but there's another side. He's not the sort of chap that would be satisfied with big money alone—at least I don't think so. He's ambitious and, of course, there can be no outlet or hope for ambition as a land agent. One has to think of what's right too. I shouldn't be justified in paying him much more than a proper salary just for my own satisfaction and the pleasure of having him under my roof."

"You ought to have thought of that before you wrote," said Telford.

"I know—just an impulsive thing you might expect from me. Money's a trust. I'm going to spend some and I'm going to save some by doing things I might easily pay another to do for me. But I've written to Malfroy and offered him the post now. He can but decline it. He'll have heard of father's death and expect to get news from me. It was a compact."

"He'll want to know the salary, of course. What's he getting in his business?"

"Three hundred a year and certain privileges; but the prospects are the point. He believes in the future of Soviet Russia, and meantime stomachs a good deal more than you or I could."

"Well, you can offer him more than that. What shall you suggest if it turns on a question of cash? Friendship may help to influence him. He thought a lot of you."

"That makes it the more difficult. I don't want to be selfish and it would be no act of real friendship to come between Johnny and his career. But it would be wrong to pay my land agent a fancy salary."

Telford laughed.

"You're a morbid bloke," he said. "There's nothing wrong in giving your first friend an annual Christmas present of cash if you want to, and letting him know behind the scenes that he can always count upon it. If Malfroy's a realist as you say, there ought to be no difficulty. I liked him. He has got what you and I have not—guts and the power to make money. As a poor man myself I understood him perhaps better than it is possible for you to do."

William was concerned.

"I don't like to hear you say you're poor, old chap. What is poverty exactly?" he asked.

"A relative term," answered the other. "I'm poor from your point of view surely?"

"Sir Porteus left Aunt Daphne five thousand."

"Yes: he didn't leave me anything."

"I rather wondered why he didn't. But if you have any ideas, or need anything in your workshop, or want to travel, do tell me, old man. You and I are alone in the world in a manner of speaking and we've got a lot in common."

"Thank you, Bill. I won't forget. Perhaps I'll ask you to finance another 'one-man' show for me next year."

"Gladly. You're making some jolly fine things," answered his cousin. "I wish I could make something. But I always knew there wouldn't be time."

"And what are you going to do to save some precious money?" asked the other.

"I'm going to do spade work in the library. I'm going to spend my leisure there. The whole mass wants attention. It's chaos at present. A year's work for a skilled librarian. Tons of stuff, utterly worthless inside and out, and valuable books muddled up with rubbish—enough to make old Sir Walter Wolf turn in the family mausoleum. By doing the work myself I shall save five hundred pounds, Telford."

"Thrifty devil!"

The southern front of William's home now lay ahead of them and he looked up at it without pleasure.

"What a hideous pile it is!" he said.

"Not your fault. Our ancestors couldn't let it alone," answered Telford.

In truth the mass of muddled architecture that was Stormbury mansion had little to commend it. The original old fortified manor, which ancient engravings showed as a shapely and massive dwelling, was swallowed up in eighteenth-century additions added thereto by energetic and tasteless possessors. The great main entrance and forecourt lay to the east, and over this William's grandfather had erected the final outrage and lifted a huge portico of pseudo-Italian fashion. Young Wolf alluded to it now.

"That abortion over the big doors is the last straw," he grumbled. "I hope the wretch who made it has gone like Mulciber, to build in hell. Sometimes I think I'll pull it down, but the governor always liked it, so no doubt the horror must stop there."

"If you once begin tinkering you'll never stop," warned his cousin. "Better leave it alone and boast that you live in the ugliest house in England."

They went to luncheon presently and as yet the Victorian traditions, strictly preserved by Sir Porteus, were maintained. The table, though portly enough, seemed but a spot in a vast dining-room that gave through six windows upon the south and was hung with a hundred portraits of the family, good, bad and indifferent. The late baronet in his war-paint appeared at full length over a lofty bronze and marble mantelpiece. Herkomer had painted him with customary gusto; but his uniform and medals rather obscured the sharp-nosed, proud little warrior who peered out of them. Two liveried footmen and a grey-headed butler waited upon the table, but Bob Meadows tended William, who always liked him behind his chair at lunch and dinner.

Alone again with their coffee, they returned to John Malfroy.

"Father liked him, you may remember," began William. "Johnny's the sort of definite, determined chap that father did like. And he liked his courtesy and tact. Tact was always John's strong suit."

"What I admired," replied Telford, "was the man's cleverness. Clever people are often singularly lacking in tact and all that you and I understand by fine feeling. Stupid people are often distinguished by very fine feeling, and that makes you forgive them for being idiots. But Malfroy's clever—uncommonly able in fact. He has a grasp and knows his own mind. A bit of an opportunist as I said—all his sort are; but if he does come, he'll have your people eating out of his hand in six months."

"He's very just," said William. "In sport he was always scrupulously fair. Of course he's seen the hard side of life since then and he can be bitter sometimes. I think Russia has made him rather inclined to advanced socialism. He might hate our archaic atmosphere, but so do I for that matter. We should make changes and move with the times."

"When he asks you what you're going to pay, what shall you tell him?"

"He'll live with me—that was always determined—and, of course, he'll have everything he wants—horses or cars to go about and the governor's old study for business. My study's going to be upstairs opening out of my bedroom. I like it up there in the west wing. I shall say a thousand a year and leave it at that."

"Absurd screw for a land agent; still you can't expect him to come for less."

"I hope I'm not doing wrong," said William. "Somehow I feel he'd be a tower of strength. No doubt selfishness is at the bottom of it."

Time showed that he was to have his way. Malfroy did write to learn particulars of his salary and agreed that it was good enough. He despatched a grateful letter, declaring his good pleasure at the thought of living with William and being of some practical service to him. He hoped and believed that they were going to pull well together. 'I'd like to share your palatial diggings till you get a wife, old boy,' he wrote, 'and then, if you're not tired of me, I must start an establishment of my own. To be frank I'm divided in mind between the impulse to make a pile, which lies in my power, and the very great privilege of sharing your existence and returning to the joys of the country. But, seeing that one can only live one's life once, I'm well content to take the substance of the job you've got to offer and let the shadow of a fortune in time to come go hang. We're young yet and maybe in another generation there will be no fortunes left, or means of making them; for great constitutional changes are in the air and a shrewd east wind blows from Russia with gathering impetus over the rest of Europe.'

William was elated and when his cousin heard the news, he, too, showed satisfaction.

"If he does you good and makes you take a cheerfuller conceit of yourself, Bill, then he'll find none but friends here," he said. "He looks ahead—he would. He guesses you'll marry some day and I hope he guesses right. Probably he'll do the same, if he can find a girl with tons of money. He protests that your society will be all the fortune he wants—rather unctuous that, but we shall see. Did he meet the Boyds when he was here? I forget. Alma might fall for him."

William flushed. He felt the warmth rise to his cheek and wondered at it, as we often wonder at some sudden message from our 'unconscious' which conveys no direct meaning at its impact.

"I don't know that I should like that much," he said.

"They wouldn't ask you, Bill. It isn't very likely, come to think of it. Only one sees they'd make rather a fine pair—both striking animals. But Alma's got nothing, so I hope she won't feel any attraction, for he'd disappoint her."

Alone that night William asked himself the cause for his aversion at Telford's jest, but found an explanation readily enough. It was a mistaken one, yet satisfied him. He determined that the thought of John Malfroy being separated from him by marriage had awakened this passing uneasiness. For marriage must certainly separate them and end their bachelor friendship to some extent. Malfroy might well marry and would be in a position to do so. William himself regarded marriage as an event of the future—a duty among his other obligations. But he troubled no more as to that, feeling the business of matrimony still happily remote. He distrusted it, but only as those distrust it who have not loved.

In six weeks John Malfroy arrived and his friend found him unchanged save in minor particulars.

"I've burned my boats, Bill," he said, "and very well pleased to do so. They rather hated me for going and told me I was chucking a great career, but that's tripe. There are no great careers for commerce in Russia. There can be no great, individual careers in a nation like that except political careers, and I hate politics. The big men there think all the English are congenital idiots. They only take our money seriously and find we're easily milked. I've got no use for 'five-year' Muscovite plans myself, and remember the Lena Gold Field."

"Glad you hate them," declared William. "It's a hereditary instinct with my family to do so. Wolfs have fought them and helped to lick them—may have to again some day."

John Malfroy in his thirtieth year was a fine, Saxon specimen of a man—tall and very perfectly proportioned with a deep chest and long legs. The set of his head was upright, his blue eyes surveyed steadily. He had one little action that hinted at vanity, for unconsciously he drew himself up when among other tall men and liked to feel his six feet, three inches generally topped them. Immense self-confidence characterized him, but he was possessed of good sense also and never asserted himself when ignorant of the subject in hand. His clean-shaven, florid face was genial and his expression wide-awake and receptive. His mouth was hard and his chin heavy. Though courteous and considerate and generally alive to other points of view than his own, he showed a patient art—remarkable in a young man—to compromise, together with acute appreciation of the things that really mattered. Thus, while appearing to concede, he would often manage to retain details that were vital to his own purpose. John's voice was deep and he spoke slowly. Students of character recognized reserves of power in him and a gift for diplomacy. He did not carry his heart upon his sleeve, yet displayed a genial and cordial manner with all classes. He was a good listener, yet stupid people might have often discerned a far-away look in his eyes that showed, while he heard what they were saying, he attached not the least importance to it. That, however, was a subtlety which stupid people would have been the last to observe.

Young Malfroy's self-estimate was summed up in a generality he would often utter concerning sport. 'A good big 'un is always better than a good little 'un,' he liked to say; and when he said it he was thinking of himself.

The friends rejoiced at meeting again and from the time of Malfroy's arrival William appeared to develop some return to cheerfulness. John knew him well and always asserted of him that he was too modest of his fine qualities and would not take himself seriously enough. He lectured William on the first night of his arrival.

"I always told you that you were heading for an inferiority complex, old lad," he said. "I've warned you, knowing what was in store for you. And now you're up against it, and if anybody was ever fitted with the natural gifts and ancestry and all the rest of it to run Stormbury, then you're the man. Look at me. If a thick-headed, commonplace fellow like me can have a good conceit of himself, then how much the more should you? Your little finger's cleverer than all my wits put together."

"Oh no it isn't, Johnny, and nobody knows that better than you. And if I didn't know it, you wouldn't be here. You're going to run Stormbury. Years ago I thought of the possibility, so you can guess what I felt, when I heard you thought it good enough."

"I'm going to see if I can do what you want; and I shall know damned soon if I can't. Or, if I don't grasp it, there will be plenty of neighbours to give me a hint. A land agent's all right; but I'm not a machine and the human element has got to count for success or failure. All the same you're going to run Stormbury—as your father ran it in the main no doubt, with a little allowance for the laws of evolution. And if I'm anybody, Bill, you're going to get more out of it than the rather insipid satisfaction of doing your duty. That's a poor-spirited ambition for a man in your position. All your forbears had their own particular tastes and the luck to be able to gratify them. So have you; and I hope you'll go on getting pleasure out of your own hobbies—art and history and all that."

"Like you to think of those things, old chap."

"Naturally I do. Your happiness means a good bit to me. So does my own for that matter. I'm not going to kill myself with work even for you. I trust you to look after my happiness and let me hunt and shoot and play about, because you know I love those things. You'll have imagination enough to give me a good time; but it's the same here. I want you to take a big view of life and let your own interests get a chance. You always had an itch to write I remember. Well, why not? You try your luck, Bill, and write a book."

The other shook his head.

"Sporting of you, Johnny; but you're always sporting. No, I shan't write—too late. You've got to learn to write, and Stormbury would always be coming between. As you say, what sport we've got is yours. The governor only cared for hunting and I never wanted to shoot, but the keepers will bless you if you stock our neglected covers. So will plenty of other men."

"I'm a learner, but I picked up a good deal about game in Russia."

They talked far into the night and next morning John Malfroy went to see the retiring agent and begin his work.

He said very little concerning it at first, but devoted himself to William and created that sense of satisfaction and assurance he always awakened. It was typical of young Wolf that he often sought the opinions of those whom he esteemed and was not seldom tempted to change his own mind after hearing them. None had ever changed his mind concerning Malfroy, for the admiration of boyhood was now become an enduring thing and he felt the power of the elder in a salutary fashion; but he longed to hear the opinion of others and took pains to do so after John was well in the saddle and had become acquainted with the life and the people of Stormbury. The newcomer and his attitude to the work was also a subject of profound interest, and he soon heard John telling a thousand aspects and possibilities of his inheritance that he had never thought upon.

Small details Malfroy swept away without wasting time in discussing them. His own requirements he assumed would be met instantly and incidental expenses never troubled him. He took large views and, having once grasped the agricultural and other resources of the estate, set about to mend them and enlarge them. He found a thousand channels of betterment and two dozen farmers for the most part on his side. With the exception of a few small properties, Stormbury village was part of the estate, and political changes at this season with various new enactments challenged the revenues.

One man spoke with no uncertain voice of Johnny from the first. Mr. Forrester was delighted with him and assured William that his successor had brought very exceptional ability to his task. "There's a man," said the old agent, "who would give a good account of himself in any company, Sir William. It's a privilege to work with him, and much that is very desirable I should have liked to do, but Sir Porteus failed to approve, will now with your permission be done, to immense advantage."

And on his side Malfroy praised the veteran.

"Jolly old bird," he said, "and clever as they make 'em. Stormbury's in his blood. He'll save me a tremendous lot of trouble and help me to put money in your purse, old chap. You've got a huge machine here full of power and promise; but it wants reconditioning, and that's going to be my job. Tightening up, more efficiency and resultant proceeds. The Devonshire predilection for the old paths and slackness in general is a bit of a libel. I find your folk quite as much alive

to the main chance as most other sensible people, after you've performed the operation of making them grasp it."

"You understand them already in a way I should have thought would take years," answered his friend. "They think the world of you, because you've got the art to see their side."

CHAPTER THREE

Fleeting Peace

The practical spirit of his friend supported Sir William under the demands that life had put upon him, and those of his immediate circle also helped the good work. His aunt cared for him and was always understanding and sympathetic; the vicar abounded in cheerful common sense; Alma fell in with his petition and gladly helped him at the self-imposed task of the library. The building that housed this mass of books was another excrescence on the manor. It jutted from the western wing, was lighted from above and contained some fifty or sixty thousand volumes, most of which had not been opened for at least a hundred years.

William was no bookman in the sense that his ancestor had been. The contents of any work was all that interested him and its extrinsic worth gave no pleasure. Telford Wolf on the contrary rejoiced in the ancient volumes for themselves alone, their value and their beauty. His cousin presented him with dozens which he bore away to his own workroom and studio. Thus William industriously proceeded with a heavy task that promised to occupy many months; while Alma helped him, and from time to time a secondhand bookseller descended upon Stormbury with expert knowledge and bore away venerable material, for which neither Mr. Boyd, nor anybody else found a use.

Sometimes the student grew tired of his library and would abandon it during a week or more for active, open-air life; sometimes he came across a book full of matter and concerned with his own favourite subjects; and then he would desert the rest and dwell with his find until he had learned all that it could teach him. Alma soon noted the direction of his taste and instinctively opposed it, for she felt the young man's predilections unlikely to bring him happiness.

"I hate witches and warlocks and necromancy and all the weird nonsense you gloat over, Bill," she said to him once. "Why can't you stick to your beautiful, sane Greeks and their sunshine and not wallow in this rubbish from the Dark Ages?"

But he shook his head.

"You mustn't feel like that," he said. "The Greeks had their mysteries too, and pretty awful some of them were. There is nothing more attractive to me, Alma, than to peer and peep into those hidden regions where man has lifted the veil of matter and stood face to face with the life that moves and operates for our good and evil, behind those dark curtains."

But the girl persisted in decrying this attitude, and the more resolutely because, with the wane of the year and the companionship that he had put upon her, there was growing in her heart something new and unrestful concerning him; and if the old brother and sister relation began to change, William himself shared the responsibility. With a sense of contrition he presently realized how much of Alma's time was claimed by him and the extent of her patience. Next he perceived that his hours with her were among the happiest that he knew; and then he began to share something of her own secret emotion. He regarded marriage as a duty, but since he did not yet love Alma, thought at first upon her as a fitting helpmate and little more. So viewed, William was able to debate the possibility with a level mind; yet presently, when his virgin senses quickened and he guessed that he was going to love her, nature asserted itself; he grew anxious and reflected on the problem from her angle of vision rather than his own. His desires waned under native pessimism and he told himself that all he had to offer of any worth were transparent advantages that could make no appeal to her. Stripped of accidental additions he was a poor thing indeed—so feared William—and unlikely to awaken honest affection in anybody—least of all Alma Boyd. He began to fret over the matter presently, and then came light upon it from an unexpected quarter.

Sitting in Telford's studio one morning and watching him at work on enamels, his cousin chaffed William about the vicar's daughter.

"Johnny tells me you are getting as thick as thieves with her," he said, "and for that matter I've marked it myself. You ought to watch out, old man, because, though Alma's only a common feature of the countryside to you, you are a pretty big noise to her. Malfroy thinks—"

But William cut him short and rose to go. He was aware that John Malfroy and Telford had become very good friends, for the former's realism appealed to the artist, who, like many artists, possessed a somewhat flinty heart for any interests other than his own; and he knew that, though art meant nothing to Johnny, other aspects of Telford's character and his

caustic humour attracted him; but it came as an unpleasant surprise that his friend should have spoken on such a subject to anybody but himself.

"I've no wish to hear what Malfroy thinks, or you either," declared William, "and I'll ask you, as I shall ask him, to mind your own business in future, old chap."

Telford whistled.

"Don't get up in the air, and don't go for half a minute, Bill," he said. "You've got this all wrong. My fault no doubt; but you mustn't blame Johnny, and I hope you won't blame me. God knows if any man ever had a pal worth having, you are the fortunate man. It's like this: I spoke to Malfroy; he never mentioned it to me—the last thing he'd have done; but when I alluded to Alma, he confessed that he had noticed it. He wasn't troubled about you, because you can do no wrong in his eyes, but he did feel your kindness and attention meant a lot to Alma, and he said that anybody could see she was devilish fond of you—not because you're what you are, but for yourself. Johnny was thinking of her, not you. He isn't in love with her or anything like that, but he's a humane sort of beggar and feels rather sorry for the woman because he's so tremendously attached to you himself."

William listened and was moved, for what he had heard pleased him.

"That alters the case," he said, "and I'm glad you told me—for more reasons than one."

"Don't mention it to Johnny, then. He'll only think I've been chattering like a washer-woman behind his back if you do," answered Telford, and his cousin, promising to be silent, departed.

But later on the same day, Telford, when speaking to his stepmother, told her all that had passed and interested her considerably.

"One rather expected he'd have married class, if ever he did marry at all," summed up the young man, "but he'll have a jolly sensible, wholesome wife in Alma, poor, dear chap. I believe she'll do him good."

Daphne Wolf reflected before making any reply.

"Our precious Bill is not a very profound student of human nature," she said at length, "but he knows enough to understand that class has nothing to do with a happy marriage. Success depends on deeper foundations, just as failure does. William's matrimonial prospects present attractive problems for the county, and I get numerous questions as to whom he may seem to favour, both from fathers and mothers of course."

"He'd never go into society; he hates it as much as I do," said Telford.

"He won't, and no girl who loves society could possibly attract him I think. All I tell friends is that, so far as I know, Bill is still heart-whole and much too busy to think about a wife. I can always add the exciting promise, however, that he intends to marry some day."

"He reckons it's his duty to the race," declared her stepson, "and since nobody on earth ever heard of him failing in what he believed to be his duty, he's sure to come to it sooner or later."

"And he might do a great deal worse than Alma. I never thought of her and I'm sure his father didn't. But she's a fine girl in body and mind. I always felt she took the place of a sister to William. But she might easily do more. One cannot see any great disabilities. She wouldn't marry a man whom she didn't love, and the position of Bill's wife wouldn't make the least appeal to her if he didn't himself, so we're quite safe there."

So spoke Mrs. Wolf, and Telford agreed with her.

"We can only wait their pleasure, stepmother," he said. "Alma's the strong-minded sort and may have the natural affection they often feel for a man with less character than themselves."

Daphne was doubtful.

"True enough," she answered, "but one hopes that, when it comes, he'll find marriage a pleasure as well as a duty. So far I can't imagine the girl who is going to make him fall in love; but he's so courteous and kind to every woman that he might

easily raise false hopes in one who sees very much of him."

"That's why I dared to whisper what Malfroy had noticed. As you say, it's hard to picture Bill in love, or the girl he'd be likely to fall for; but if such a woman exists and he finds her, she'll be fortunate."

"She will indeed, my dear."

Meantime the object of their regard had experienced emotions of a pleasant nature and approached to a state of unusual cheerfulness. That John Malfroy had been sufficiently subtle to make this discovery surprised him, for it was unlike his forthright friend to note the delicate nuances of a feminine mind. To think thus for Alma's feelings showed Johnny in a gentle light and moved William agreeably; but if what Malfroy suspected were true, then the other felt immense overpowering interest at the fact. He could hardly believe it and assured himself that John must be mistaken, but he longed to believe it and the possibility quickened his growing affection for Alma, since the knowledge that one is greatly esteemed by a fellow-creature must influence our mental attitude.

There followed a medley of sentiments for William, and next time Alma came to help him, she was puzzled at his altered mood. He was glum and silent and she did not know that his secret knowledge made him so. He would attend to the books, but began vague sentences and dropped them again before they had reached their point. He seemed shy of her—an attitude that amused Alma, but made her shy of him also. In truth the young man had made up his mind at last and fully intended to propose; but his defeatist soul still trembled at the possibility of rejection and a little longer he postponed the ordeal, telling himself that Alma evinced none of the alleged signs of interest, or tenderness, others had imagined.

Then came the annual audit dinner at 'The Wolf Arms' in Stormbury. It was an ancient house dedicated to the ruling race and over the great granite entrance, for a sign, there hung Sir William's coat:—two wolves trotting one above the other with formidable teeth and gilt claws on a field of weathered green. William took the chair and listened to old tenants saying kindly things about his father and hoping kindly things for himself. He returned their friendship with cordial assurances of his own, and it was left to Malfroy to talk business, indicate the grave nature of state exactions on the death of Sir Porteus and outline the need for patience and provenance from all under the strain of the times.

William had little guessed that this event would be the prologue to the happiest hour of his life, yet so it was, and when he left his people at their smoking concert and passed under his swinging wolves on the signboard at three of that afternoon, all he remembered was the advice of a homely old farmer, whose speech had won general applause. The veteran chose to be personal and expressed a hope that Sir William would soon take a wife. "And us all wants for you to fetch home a proper partner, Sir William," he had said, "—one of the good, old, trustable sort, same as Lady Wolf, your fine mother; and I much hope you'll turn your mind to it before I'm called away, because I'd feel a lot more easy if I knew the family was established for generations to come and the breed carrying on."

These sentiments persisted subconsciously in William's mind as he went to the vicarage, and they came to his tongue at a later moment. He had promised to drink tea with her father and see Alma's chrysanthemums after the audit dinner, but the evening came in early and dark, and Miss Boyd declared the flowers needed sunshine.

"You've missed their prime in any case," she said. "You haven't been here for an age."

"Why don't I like flowers better?" he asked. "Father and mother both cared for them as much as you do; but I can't get up much excitement about them."

"You're like Telford: you care much more for art than nature," she said.

"I suppose I do. But flowers are only nature's fireworks—here to-day and gone to-morrow—leaving a mess behind them—rather sad in a way."

Alma sighed.

"You turn everything into sadness, or weirdness, Bill. It's horrid of you."

"I've just come from a crowd of happy people, or so they seemed to be. They are decent and hide their hearts anyway—a lesson to a selfish, egotistic pig like me."

"You're not selfish. That's the last thing you could be—but—but——Oh, who am I to lecture you? It's like this: some

people say 'Yea' to life, as father and Mr. Malfroy and I do; and others are built always to say 'Nay' to life—as you do. But why do you? I often wonder. You have such a subtle sense of beauty, but you only seem to see and feel the sad side of beautiful things, never their glad, joyous side."

William always knew that when he did offer marriage, it would not be with deliberation, but upon some sudden impulse provided by accident of opportunity, or chance. To have planned the time, place and words had been impossible; but now he made a dash for it under the inspiration of Alma's last words and in half a minute found himself offering heart and hand.

"Don't think you haven't taught me that already—taught me by example—the surest way to teach," he answered. "A thousand thousand times I've seen you react to beautiful things, and be the more beautiful for them yourself if that was possible. And countless things have become more beautiful to me because they were beautiful to you. I often wondered, and now I know why. Happiness is an aura round you. You're the happiest being in my life, and I've come to feel and see the wisdom of such content as belongs to you; I've begun to understand in my thickheaded way what it has meant to have your patient and forgiving friendship all these years, and the rare, precious privilege I took so selfishly for granted. It's true: there's bitterness in all happiness for me—the bitterness of myself intruding into that alien atmosphere—but there was always that in you to banish the bitterness. Bitter things can't live in the air you breathe."

"Dear Bill, to make you happier would be a real joy to me," she answered.

"You can," he assured her. "You can this moment, Alma. And if you can't this moment, at any rate you won't keep me long in suspense. Will you marry me and carry on the good work and make me happy for evermore? There's not much to offer—only material for you to work on: I know that jolly well. None too promising material either; but it's all I've got to give in exchange for your glorious self. An obstinate, ugly, old-fashioned devil of a chap, not worthy of a second thought and quite prepared to hear you tell him so. But I love you; I want you. Donne opened my eyes and told me how terribly much I do want you. Donne's my favourite poet—about the only one I ever read. Plenty of beauty and plenty of bitterness and plenty of stark, staring truth in him. He tells a lover things that every lover must have felt but only one in a thousand known to put a name to. He says,

"Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is her book:

You can't get away from that. Love's got to face it."

He fell silent and Alma did not reply immediately, but he saw her answer in her eyes, put his arms round her and kissed her.

"Oh, Bill, when did it begin?" she asked. "When did we change and start loving each other?"

"As long as we never stop loving each other, that doesn't matter," he told her. "I shall be a whole-time job as they say. Do you really feel equal to it?"

"No, I don't feel in the least equal to it, but I dearly love the thought of trying," she promised.

They took their joy in the light-hearted modern manner, but it was real enough and their great adventure shone out of their eyes.

"Until to-day," said William, "chrysanthemums have bored me. Henceforth the Japanese will not hold them so sacred as I do."

Then appeared an impatient vicar shouting for his tea.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Prophecy

News of the betrothal created widespread interest through the little world of Stormbury and indeed beyond it. William's own circle of acquaintance from far and wide congratulated him upon his good fortune and he found the staff of the manor in great good spirits at his choice. Bob Meadows was able to explain the reason.

"They all know Miss Boyd for a proper good sort, Sir William," he said in private, "and couldn't wish for a kinder, more understanding lady, to reign over them. Butler and housekeeper's at one, and it ain't often you can say that. They were feared of their lives you'd pick some foreigner."

His aunt and cousin warmly supported the match and none pleased William in his praise of Alma so well as Telford, while Mrs. Wolf also extolled the vicar's daughter and declared her nephew to be a most fortunate man. She was genuinely delighted, while John Malfroy's bluff compliments also made appeal to both lovers.

"If ever a pair were built for double-harness, Alma," he told her, "it's you and Bill. You know a lot more about his downy tenants than he does, and I shall expect you to be on my side every time."

Mr. Boyd was well pleased, but he bargained for a long engagement.

"I decline to be left desolate," he assured William, "and you will need to exercise patience. There is none in our family to take Alma's place and I must have ample time to secure a female of mature age, Christian principles and ripe experience to watch over me. Until she is discovered I do not relinquish Alma."

But neither desired any haste and found their new relationship full of joy.

"We're quite happy enough to go on with," so Alma told her father. "It's lovely 'keeping company.' Bill's idea is to carry on till after the anniversary of his father's death, then marry and take me to Italy for ages."

"After Christmas I will begin my inquiries," promised the vicar, "and trust that Providence may smile upon the quest."

But many days were destined to pass before the reverend gentleman was troubled for himself. Fate brought a sudden glut of fantastic horrors into his peaceful existence and he was called to battle with evil beyond the power of religion to conquer, since the dreadful thing belonged apparently to a mind diseased and had no root in reality. It was Alma who undeceived him.

Meanwhile the lovers went their contented and busy way, wrestled with the library, rode together, sometimes alone and sometimes with Malfroy, and grew into a pure devotion which argued well for the future. Then fell a day when chance discovery of printed words threatened to part them for ever, and William, wandering in the forest as he was wont to do with book and pipe, emerged a haunted man.

Amid the low ranges of the Blackdown Hills, that extend from Eastern Devon northerly to Somersetshire, stood the mansion and estates of Stormbury, while to the north of the domain extended great hanging woods, that towered to the crest of the little elevation and ran for a mile beneath it. Through these oaken hangers extended a low cliff of ghost-grey shale that lit to rose and gold on a fine day-spring, or glimmered with fleeting silver in moonlight, but for the most part sulked austere and sad between its crown and footstool of ancient trees. Under this cliff, time-foundered woods spread out again until cultivated land hemmed in their vast borders.

A forest is always the altar of solemnities to a mind that can appreciate them; but there was something added in these dim legions of Stormbury. Beneath the great shelf and precipice of rock that clove their lichened ranks, an air mysterious and even sinister exerted some measure of influence on the least receptive spirit. Normal people found themselves uneasy in the atmosphere of such withered eld; while upon the more sensitive it exerted another challenge and either made them desire to be gone, or drew them against their own inclination by a force impossible to determine—the pull of repulsion. A woodman's path extended through the thickets beneath the cliff and the rocks were a haunt of fox and badger, rich in dens and holts. At one place a stream broke out of the boulders and babbled away to the river far beneath. Only at spring-time did a vernal wreath of golden green crown the hangers, and for a while it played its part in the pomp of the woods; but leaf fell early from these venerable giants; dead branches ascended above many of them thrusting

nakedly upward, and when the boughs were bare, their formidable ranks revealed death battling in the grey army and felling tree after tree.

The spirit of ruin has always a melancholy effect upon any average human mind, and whether it be the works of man or nature, destruction displayed upon them chills our hearts. This dreary region with its strange echoes from the precipice, its sense of abstraction, its pervasive skeletons and decay, its shadows, silences and loneliness, suggested that Stormbury hurst must lie under some sort of spell and for generations the bodeful quality of all this innocent region had persisted. The wives of gamekeepers and woodmen would threaten naughty children with the perils of the hanger. Youth instinctively avoided the place and the nuts and blackberries of autumn, the blackthorn haunts of early winter and the wood strawberries of spring were left to bird and beast. An ancient legend still endured and none of the folk for a moment questioned it. Here, in this tough fastness, torn from its secret lair, the last wolf in England had most certainly been slain, and many peasants still handed down a tradition that the brute's huge pelt continued to adorn a wall in Stormbury Manor. Some jesting game-keeper of old had gulled the credulous with this tale and thus the legend grew, though never any shred of reality existed to support it.

Telford Wolf, while admitting the curious atmosphere of the hangers and the aversion they created, not only in bucolic minds, endeavoured to explain the reason.

"Nature is responsible," he said. "She presents us with an anomaly and our wits always resent that. By some freak the queer lights, hoary trees dripping with fern and moss, the fat, bulging fungus-growths on the dead timber, the general petrification and putrefaction, all convey a feeling that we are not on the earth at all, but rapt away into some other planet, or buried fathoms deep under a tideless ocean. The silence is submarine. One would not be surprised to see strange fishes nosing about among the boughs of the trees in the eternal mist that haunts the place, or imagine invisible, unfriendly, cold-blooded creatures watching us out of lidless eyes. The very oaks in their hideous old age seem to have animal rather than clean, arboreal qualities. One guesses they might stretch down their huge arms and snatch us up and make a meal of us if they were hungry. There must be something in it, for not we alone experience this loathing. Only beasts of the night and vermin ever crawl about here; honest wild things never come either on wing or pad. Game bars the place. In fact the hangers want burning down and replanting."

As in many of artistic temperament, the delights of sport were not shared by William and its dangers distasteful. He had willingly enough faced danger in a vital cause, but physical peril as a part of amusement made no appeal to him. Nor did he love the hunting and killing of unconscious animals—a prejudice that promised to limit his popularity with rich and poor alike, since hunting and shooting bring work and wages to many thousands of men who depend upon field sport for a living, as well as delight to thousands more who pursue it for their first pleasure.

Not through these channels did the young man seek to mend certain personal defects, or banish deeply rooted instincts which he deplored and strove to conceal. With intense attraction towards the supernatural aspects of life, there went morbidity, and the morbid are always lacking in nerve. William knew that he was timid and took secret pains to conquer so undignified a weakness. He was and always had been conscious that he shared the ignorant, local dread of the hangers, while his father's death under the trees did not lessen this irrational prejudice. He supposed that some nursemaid in his infancy had planted the seed of fear. For this reason he chose to combat such a disability with direct action and so conquer it. He had lately spent many a lonely hour in the hangers—visiting them at dawn and noon and in the winter twilights—as a tonic and corrective. He was pleased with himself after these vigils and felt a strengthening of moral fibre as a result. Indeed, he considered himself cured of his weakness now; but he had to deal with the ineradicable ingredients of his own nature for which as yet reason's self could offer no cure.

William's innate superstition was now destined to receive a sudden, terrible stimulus, for tendencies and occult menaces that meant nothing but laughter to the average man, bulked swiftly into formidable proportions for him. Native credulity made its stealthy contribution. His scale of values laid him open to every ghostly enemy and he recognized the possibility of such unconquerable foes. His attitude to the spirit world left him vulnerable. He believed in the existence of disembodied intelligences and knew that many of these beings were both potent and malignant; metamorphosis he regarded as proven and outside the domain of myth; panic terror he had known from personal experience as a power of evil and a terrible opponent of the soul.

Now, on a mild and sunlit afternoon of mid-February, William went his way to the woods. Alma was from home stopping with friends in London, and he felt lonely and lacking without her. At a little croft on the fringes of the hurst stood a shed. It was the dwelling of the big white hunter that had fallen with Sir Porteus and brought him death. The

horse galloped to welcome the lumps of sugar William brought him, and he remembered how his father's favourite had mourned, gone off his food and doubtless wondered in his little mind why the master came to ride him no more.

"Perhaps the governor's ghost visits him sometimes and comforts him," thought William. "Just a sporting thing the kind old boy would do."

He settled into a familiar nook presently above the woodman's path through the forest, marked the low, mild sunshine bring paly gold to the cliffs and fret their frowning faces with a smile. Then he lighted his pipe, and brought a little book from the inside pocket of his overcoat. In the course of his explorations that morning he had come across it for the first time, and attracted by the title and challenge of age, brought it with him from his library. Worn calf-skin bound the little volume; it was called *Blackdown Legends* and the title page showed it to be more than a hundred and fifty years old. Book-worms had bored many pages, but the type was clear enough and William read some of the simple contents with interest; then came to a poem and he started to mark the odd name of it. 'Twilight of Wolf' it was called and it covered two pages of the book. Worms had eaten through them but left the letterpress unmarred.

Thus the student read, stared awhile motionless before him and then re-read.

TWILIGHT OF WOLF

Twain wolves they bear upon their Coat;
In Stormbury the last was slain;
Yet evening wolf is still their bane,
Summoned from phantom world remote
With steely fangs to tear that innocent scapegoat.

II

When red-polled son of Wolf shall reign,
Upon his carrot-fiery head
Old vengeance, due to evil dead,
With glut of terror, woe and pain
Must horribly descend in baleful hurricane.

III

Red-handed shall the red man be
With human blood upon his palm,
Wolf in his veins to breed alarm:
First portent of the mystery,
Propitiation dire, immutable decree.

IV

Through scent to sound destruction steals
Till, deep within the victim's ear,
Reverberate such notes of fear
His fainting, stricken spirit reels,
His heart knocks at his ribs; his blood to ice congeals.

V

Nearer and nearer, louder yet
Until there falls hibernal hour
When Death, at will of secret Power,
Descends to consummate the threat
And lupine teeth discharge that foul, ancestral debt.

Wolf shall meet wolf on New Year's Night
 In fatal tryst ordained of yore,
 And phantom wolf from forest hoar
 Incarnate leap with demon might
 Red wolf to slay, and purge the land of that doomed weight.

For an hour William sat quite motionless in bewildered amazement at these cumbrous rhymes; and then the inevitable happened and he perceived their implication. Another sort of mind had laughed at the absurd coincidence, as Johnny presently did when he heard about it; but William Wolf knew far more of his family history than could Malfroy, and for him the ancient farrago became increasingly laden with mysterious and personal significance. Only to a man of his eerie bent had the prophecy, if such it was, brought anything save entertainment by its aptness; but for him a gathering horror, that reason was impotent to dispel, waxed in his spirit.

The sunlight had sped and the hurst was sinking into familiar mists before the reader leapt up and went his way. For him, under present stress, the hanger had lost its power to chill his heart or waken dread. The greater had destroyed the less, and the archaic verses in the little book already resounded with gloomy portent. They were taken as real and vital to himself alone; the powers that had inspired them, at the hand of some human being long dead, had bided their hour, awaited his appearance on the stage of life, and now, in his secure hour with utmost happiness at hand, had opened this mouldering page from a past under his eyes at the appointed time. So poor Sir William began to think and feel, appropriating the horror to himself; and then awakened a natural desire to share his find with a fellow-creature and learn how indifferent and unthreatened beings might regard it. But before he reached the manor another aspect of this challenge made him hesitate. To whom should he apply? Was it just or fair to reveal his discovery to others? Were it not more courageous and worthy of wisdom to conceal what he had read, face the future single-handed and dree his weird like a man? At least, William told himself that he might wait and watch awhile. The prediction was complicated and embraced various phenomena before its dreadful end. If none of the things foretold overtook him, the rhymes might after all be nonsense—a screed to spare those who cared about him. There came a revulsion of feeling at this point and common sense struggled with him. He resolved to burn the book and stamp its memory out of his mind. But the event turned out otherwise. His emotion had left radical impress on the young man's face and his friend was quick to mark it. Malfroy waited for him at the tea-table and noted his pallor and evident suppressed concern. His habit of frequenting the hanger was known to Johnny though not the reason. He guessed that William's affinity with the weird drew him thither and had observed the results of these excursions to be good rather than bad; but now he expostulated.

"Damn it, Bill, why will you haunt that beastly place? It's rank foolery and not decent if you ask me. What's the matter? You can't hide it from me! What's put the wind up?"

So he asked and William hesitated before answering, for it was true that he could never conceal a mood from the other and indeed, seldom attempted to do so. Pride has no place in heartwhole friendship and Johnny's blunt questions came as a relief to a troubled mind.

"I've come across a very disquieting and startling thing, old man," said William.

"My pigeon or your own?"

"Nothing to do with you, but emphatically 'my pigeon' if there is any meaning in printed words."

"Often there is none. What have you been reading now?"

William fetched *Blackdown Legends*, which he had left in his overcoat, turned the pages and found the poem.

"Read that carefully, John, and be rational about it. Don't laugh and rot. This is no laughing matter," he said.

The land agent lifted his eyebrows, finished a slice of hot buttered toast, wiped his fingers on a big handkerchief and took the book. For some minutes there was silence while Malfroy read and William drank a cup of strong, black tea without milk. At last John handed the little book to its owner and spoke.

"You tell me to be rational, Bill, though that's never your own strong suit as you know, because you always say, and no

doubt believe, that human reason's a very doubtful guide. But at least you're sane. What the mischief is there in that drivell to make any sane man disquieted, or anything but bored?"

"Better read it again then, and perhaps you'll see the application. Strange that you should have missed it so completely, John. This prophecy must have been written more than a hundred and fifty years ago; but it abounds in the most massive evidence pointing to me."

"To you! This lump of horrors points to you! What on earth are you saying, or dreaming, Bill? For God's sake pull yourself together."

"I am quite composed and perfectly calm, old chap, and you must be the same," answered William.

"But where's the connection? How can this rhymers nightmare have anything more to do with you, or be taken more seriously than any other trash in the book?"

"I asked myself that, but the verses answer the question themselves. They are crude and harsh, as prophecies often are, yet they are not ambiguous. They meant nothing until I came into the world, but now they do mean something—something pretty sinister too."

"Why? Only because you are a red man. There may have been dozens of your ancestors who had red hair."

"Not one. My coloring is unique in the family. I learned that from my father, who was well up in the Wolfs for centuries. He said that no red Wolf is recorded. No portrait of any red Wolf exists. He declared that I was a *rara avis* in this particular and didn't think any the better of me for it."

"He'd never heard of this nonsense, then, or he would have been sure to bring it to your notice? Sir Porteus loved a joke I remember."

"We may take it that he'd not heard of it certainly," admitted the other. "This little folio was never opened in his time I should imagine."

"Examine the beastly thing," suggested John patiently. "Con it over, Bill, and see what the deuce it amounts to."

He took the book again.

"First mention of your coat of arms."

"Two wolves passant on ground vert," said Sir William.

"So much for that then; and next an allusion to the old yarn, about the last wolf in England being slain in Stormbury woods. Then we're told that an evening wolf is still the bane of your family. Why an 'evening' wolf? Why not a morning wolf, or a midnight one?"

"I cannot tell—yet," answered the other. "I'm going to read up everything that's recorded about wolves."

"I shouldn't," begged his friend. "Don't let this twaddle detain you for an hour. Ignore it. I believe there's all sorts of folklore and tripe written about wolves. I've seen the real thing and smelt the beggars in Russia, where they get fierce and reckless when they're starving in winter-time. They're much the same as savage Alsatian hounds and cowardly at that. Wolves are like most men: only brave in packs."

He turned again to the narrative.

"The idea seems to be that your family have done something pretty dire in the past and Nemesis is coming, in the shape of a wolf, to right the wrong, when 'red-polled baronet shall reign.' So much for that prediction. But a lot has got to happen first apparently. It looks as though you must commit murder, old boy, before the prophecy begins to work. If the ass who wrote this stuff was still alive, I should say 'find him and murder him by all means,' but as he wrote, you say, nearly two hundred years ago I'm afraid he's safe. Do you contemplate the assassination of anybody else?"

"Don't chaff, Johnny," urged the other. "It doesn't strike me as a laughing matter. There's something serious here."

"All right. I'll damned soon admit it's no laughing matter if you're going to let it get on your nerves," replied Malfroy.

"Let's push on with it. Human blood is upon your palm now and 'Wolf in your veins to breed alarm.' You share the blue blood of your venerable race all right, but it needn't put you into a blue funk, surely? Why should the wolf in your veins breed alarm, and be 'the first portent of the mystery and propitiation dire' and all the rest of it?"

"There is such a thing as lycanthropy," answered Sir William. "A doctor friend once told me a queer case in his knowledge. I don't want to make sense of this old rhyme, God knows; but I'm not going to assume there is no sense in it. My instinct assures me that there is."

The other shrugged his shoulders, but he began to show some anxiety.

"Let's try again then," he said. "What's the next part of the programme? This precious appeal is all to the senses you notice. First smell, then hearing. What you may expect to smell, or hear, exactly it doesn't say. You can't mistake the smell of a wolf anyway, and you can't mistake the howl of a wolf. Their queer ululation is like nothing else on earth. Dogs and foxes bark, but wolves howl. Anyway, you are not the man whose heart would knock at his ribs under any provocation I should hope, and I don't see your blood congealing to ice either."

"One can hardly imagine the terror that would rob one of action, or quell one's power of resistance," admitted William.

"I should think not. Before 'lupine teeth discharge your foul ancestral debt,' you'd have something to say about it, or I should."

"We must put the whole question on a spiritual basis and regard it so alone, my dear John. Something tells me that this is not a physical challenge. It belongs to the soul."

"It's pretty physical if you ask me," answered Malfroy. "Just a lot of ugly, silly, purely physical images that wouldn't terrify a modern ten-year-old. It's definite enough for anything. It even makes a 'date.' The end of the victim is timed for New Year's Night. Pity we don't know the year. Perhaps the fun's all over and this business happened centuries ago and the 'phantom wolf from forest hoar' polished off some unfortunate member of your family before you, or your father, or your grandfather was born?"

Sir William shook his head.

"Impossible. Such a thing would have been recorded. We have had industrious chroniclers in our family and our archives are pretty lengthy."

"Read 'em up then and see if they throw any light. Your cousin may know something."

"History doesn't interest him," answered the other, "but Aunt Daphne might have heard his father speak of the past. Uncle Thomas, the old bookman, may have been keen about the race."

Telford was in London making preparation for his 'one-man' show. He had written from time to time and reported the admiration declared by fellow-craftsmen for his achievements. 'They say the little tiara of seed pearls and emeralds is my masterpiece,' wrote Telford, 'and I hope you're going to buy it for Alma at your own price, Bill. But nobody should ever tell an artist that he has made his masterpiece. If we knew that we had done the best we ever can, or shall, then consider the flatness and fatuity of our future efforts! No—no, leave us our dreams and eternal hopes that the new creation is going to transcend all that went before. Let us handle our tools even after the hand is shaky and the eye grown dim, under undying conviction that the supreme thing is going to crown our work at last.'

CHAPTER FIVE

The Blood

At Malfroy's advice William made no secret of his strange discovery, for, as John told Daphne Wolf, the more who heard of it, the greater number would help to chaff him out of taking it seriously. His aunt could throw no light. She had not heard of any ancient infamy that stained the family records, and neither her husband nor Sir Porteus had ever spoken of any prophecy involving retribution on some future, red-headed member of the clan. She was the first to laugh at William, while, when he took his book to Fortescue Boyd, the clergyman showed some antiquarian interest. He was unfamiliar with the prediction and set no more store upon it than on any of the other legends in the volume; but when he discovered the young man's personal attitude in the matter, he wakened to a very real and painful attention. Indeed he rebuked William.

"To associate yourself with this ancient nonsense is quite unworthy of you, Bill," he said. "One grants a sort of absurd applicability, if you like to take it in a jesting spirit, but beyond that reason should have something to say. This is the twentieth century of Our Lord and Master, my dear William, and we must accept the fact that prophecy no longer obtains in our modern world and that necromancy is as dead as those who practised it. I know your predilections and regret them, but I should grieve to think that sorcery, or sortilege, or any possible traffic with supernatural and infernal powers would be admitted by you. Such a thing, I may tell you, must shock Alma horribly."

But William showed no immediate concern for his betrothed.

"Time will show, my dear friend," he answered. "I am not in the least unreasonable really, and history is far too full of amazing and verified examples for us to say that the gift of prediction is dead. Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings and ignorant and benighted persons truth has often come. If this means anything, then no power of man can alter the meaning, or oppose the inevitable. It may mean simply nothing, as you and Malfroy and Aunt Daphne believe. We shall soon see, because many events are foretold before the climax. If they do not happen, nothing happens; if they do, then we have got to face the fact that I am right and you are wrong."

"What can or should happen?" asked the vicar. "What in this world do you anticipate as likely to happen?"

"I do not say 'likely,'" answered William, "because, to our limited understanding, the earlier part of the prophecy appears as impossible of fulfilment as the rest of it. How should there be blood upon my hand? How can evil come through the ordinary, physical channels of scent and sound? The answer to that is, as I explained to Malfroy, that this thing must not be read literally at its face value, Vicar. The meaning lies deep below the surface of the ugly images the words convey, and only time will prove whether in truth they aim at me or no."

"And how long do you propose to let this incubus weigh on your mind, my dear boy?" asked his old tutor.

"I'm not letting it weigh," declared William. "If there is any vital meaning in it for me, that meaning will declare itself, whether I worry or whether I don't. You cannot adapt precautions or arm yourself against a thing like this any better than you can against earthquake or hurricane. The principalities and powers—good and bad—that decree our destinies are not influenced by puny attempts at prevision on our part. But it happens here that there is something definite to go upon as to time. An actual day and hour are named, and though no year is specified, I shall proceed on the assumption that this year—the year when the prophecy was put under my eyes—is the year in which I may regard it as affecting me."

The older man, much secretly concerned at William's attitude, felt a measure of relief.

"That's something," he said. "I can't pretend to feel much sympathy for you, Bill, and your theory of 'principalities and powers' potent to harm a good Christian, or any other good man, outrages me needless to say; but at least you limit your alarms to this year of grace and give me to understand that you will cease to believe in the mysterious wolf next New Year's Night?"

"If I survive next New Year's Night, I shall feel assured that this was no message for me," promised the other, and then he went his way leaving Mr. Boyd bewildered. He trusted that Alma might bring sense to bear on William and wrote her a very full account of the event now threatening to destroy all their peace; while William himself also despatched a lengthy communication, the result of which was to bring her home immediately. As her father, John Malfroy and Daphne

Wolf before her, Alma felt considerable surprise to learn the extent of her sweetheart's reaction to the ancient doggerel; but unlike them, she spent much time in considering the verses themselves. William had enclosed a copy, and there was much about them, removed from their setting and copied in his own hand, that puzzled her and cried for further interpretation. Her uneasiness abated, however, when she came home and read the original. It chimed with the rest of the contents of the little book and was not in substance more grotesque than much else that it contained. But Alma could not modify the young man's attitude, neither could Telford, when he came back to Stormbury, make much impression on his cousin. He strove to do so and openly shared the opinion of the rest, but behind the scenes, he displayed something of an artist's imagination, which the others lacked, and tried to show both Alma and John how such an extraordinary find was bound to influence William disagreeably.

"To us these rhymes are just wild nonsense like the rest," he said. "This book must have been compiled by some antiquary, who collected the tales from sources that were already moth-eaten with time before he found them. One cannot guess how old this legendary curse may be; but knowing Bill's love of the weird and queer side of things, we can easily guess what this might look like to him. I'm a Wolf myself, and I swear that if this had happened to me, realist though I am in some respects, I should have felt a bit staggered. It's so apt in a sort of way and so damnably definite."

"But how," asked his stepmother, "can nonsense written more than a hundred years before Bill was born affect him?"

"You see the answer to that in Bill himself," replied Telford. "The thing has affected him keenly, and allowing for his own peculiar nature and idiosyncrasy, it was bound to."

"Time alone will put it right," declared John. "As soon as time has passed and nothing happened, he'll probably calm down."

Alma, when she returned, was of the same opinion and strove with all her might to distract her lover's mind. In a measure she succeeded. They went to London presently, attended Telford's exhibition and bought his tiara; but she could not interest William for very long with other subjects than the prophecy, as he insisted on calling it, and the trend of his reflections began to alarm her, for they showed a sort of hallucination she had not imagined possible in an educated mind.

All that pertained to wolves became a prepossession and infatuation with William, and Fortescue Boyd, believing that it might lie in his power to lay the ghost, set about his task methodically and explained his plan to Alma.

"We must get this crotchet out of his head once and for all, approach it like reasonable beings, strip the mystery from it, exhaust the subject in a sane spirit and leave nothing more to be said or thought about it for him. This surely I can do. He will at least listen to me, and I shall leave no stone of the futile and unsavoury subject unturned."

His daughter, however, hoped not much from the suggestion. She now perceived, as Telford had already done, that the discovery must have struck with exceptional force on William; while love made her sympathetic and very patient. But she supported her father, and summer was in the air again when Mr. Boyd had completed his preparations to deliver what he fondly imagined a conclusive oration on the wolf. It remained for William to open his eyes at a later stage of the discussion that followed. Telford and Mrs. Wolf were from home at the time, but on a late June evening, Malfroy accompanied William to drink tea at the Vicarage and listen to Fortescue Boyd.

Her father had agreed with Alma that an element of mystery hung about the ancient rhymes; but the clergyman disliked mystery and felt unprepared to take much for granted outside the sacred boundaries of his faith. He entirely agreed with the biblical direction that witches, wizards and their kin were exceedingly undesirable—indeed, far better dead; and he declared as much after tea had ended and the visitors prepared to listen to him.

"The wolf," he began, "has won a very unenviable reputation in song and story, but I am not going to regale you with nonsense, or the mountain of fantastic folk-lore that has helped to create his sinister reputation. He always found himself cordially disliked by mankind, but has supported our aversion without the least difficulty. The ravening wolf is a favourite image in the Bible. The Scriptures take note of him, and for all that is cruel, voracious, bloody, nocturnal and undesirable your wolf stands as first exemplar. False teachers are wolves in sheep's clothing; the persecutors of the Church are wolves, and so on. John wondered why these verses tell us of an 'evening' wolf. The point is interesting and shows that the writer of them was conversant with holy writ. The prophets Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Zephaniah all speak of 'evening' wolves; and in the Septuagint we find the 'wolves of Arabia,' because, in Hebrew, 'Arab' signifies both 'Arabia' and 'the evening.' An evening wolf may be assumed to be hungry and, therefore, the more ferocious. Habakkuk

tells us how even the horses of the Chaldeans were fiercer than evening wolves.

"So much for that," continued the good man, warming to his work. "Now we will glance at a modern instance showing how the creature was and still is held obnoxious by all. A wolf's head has ever been the common name for a general enemy. In *The Times* of January the twelfth, 1870, a writer speaks of a *caput lupinum*—a sinner for whom no kind word could be spoken, or any sort of condonation be made. January was the 'wolf-monath,' the Saxon name for the period, because people stood more in peril from the pests at that time than any other. Famous blackguards and sea pirates have frequently won the nickname of 'Wolf.' The Wolf Duke of Gascony is an example—one of Charlemagne's knights whose favourite weapon was the gallows.

"But now for the facts of natural history, William. The wolf once roamed England as we know, and our ancestors tackled the difficult, necessary task of driving him out; but it was only after a long struggle that they succeeded in exterminating the beggar. Our insular position and native determination achieved this task; though other countries have been less fortunate and the wild wolf roams Europe still. John tells me that he has seen them, heard them, smelt them and often helped to slay them in Russia—their inveterate stronghold yet. But the British annals of wolf terminated about the year 1500, in the reign of the Seventh Henry. They are thought to have harboured in the Derbyshire Peak, the desolate Yorkshire wolds and in Scotland, until later times; while during Cromwell's day they evidently continued to be a curse in Ireland. Doubtful tradition indeed declares that not until 1766 were they wholly extirpated. The legend of the last wolf is epichorial: a story common to many districts; but I fear Stormbury can hardly claim to be in the running, though one may well imagine they were difficult to destroy in the fastnesses of your oaken hangers and precipices."

Mr. Boyd ceased and William spoke. It was clear that he felt some disappointment and regarded the vicar's disquisition but lightly.

"Surely the interesting thing about wolves is their place apart and the manner they have been woven into the supernatural," he said. "Such a mass of opinion and experience must have deep and solid foundations in truth. Take the were-wolf for example—the creature whose skin is invulnerable unless a bullet or dagger has been blessed in St. Hubert's chapel. A superstition no doubt, but common to this day in Brittany and Auvergne. We say a 'bug-bear,' the French speak of a 'bug-wolf.' In the fifteenth century a council of theologians convoked by Sigismund decided that were-wolves were a reality, and the classics are full of them—records written by great historians not easily deceived."

"But none the less mistaken, Bill," said Alma. "Those were the benighted days of a far past, when sorcerers were believed in. Science has knocked all that nonsense on the head ages ago."

"It is not nonsense, Alma, for nobody can deny the powers of ancient sorcery," he answered, "and if the past supports them, why not the present? Much happened and daily happens that we cannot explain and therefore must not dismiss as nonsense. Science itself teems with mysteries. Herodotus tells us that the Neuri had the power of assuming the shape of wolves once a year. Pliny reports how one of the family of Antæus was annually chosen by lot and transformed into a wolf, which shape he retained for nine years. St. Patrick turned Vereticus, King of Wales, into a wolf. Cambrensis says that Irishmen can easiest be changed to wolves. In Ossory there were authentic men-wolves. Lycaon, King of Arcadia, was transformed into a wolf for insulting Zeus."

His hearers stared aghast before this recital. They all knew the young man to be superstitious, but even Alma had not guessed till now that he could take such shadowy legends for truth.

She felt a chill hand on her heart to think that passing stress had led to this deterioration, and Malfroy bluntly voiced the general opinion.

"My dear old chap," he laughed. "You'll say Æsop's fables are true next!"

"When it comes to the Metamorphosis of Ovid, William, surely you draw the line?" asked Mr. Boyd.

But the young man was not abashed.

"You echo the modern scepticism, Padre," he answered, "and I don't quarrel with you, so you must not quarrel with me. I claim as much right to believe as you to question or deny. I have thought and read a very great deal about the subject since this prophecy appeared. Have you never heard of lycanthropy?"

"I've heard of it of course—as one of the rarest forms of human hallucination—a horrible disease, Bill."

"We are very fond of ascribing to disease what beats the doctors," replied William. "The subject is obscure no doubt and doctors are exceedingly vague and ignorant about it. A lycanthrope is a man who suffers from the conviction that he is going to turn into a wolf. A pretty hideous thought that; but a great many of the mysteries of nature appear hideous. We are too fond of thinking that anything strange, or any unusual opinions held by our neighbours, must be pathological. We are too prone to call people weak-minded, or even insane, when they say, or do, things contrary to our own convictions and habits of behaviour. The fact is that what we name lycanthropy exists, and though I never met a lycanthrope to my knowledge, I once had a long conversation with an alienist in France who had known several. They consulted him of their own freewill, and he used hypnotism and all the rest of it, doing what he might for them unavailingly. They had come and they had gone, worse than when they came—nearer, as I firmly believe, to their ultimate translation."

"What on earth do you mean by that?" asked Alma.

"I mean this," he answered. "I mean that those men disappeared. They vanished from the ranks of men, their fellow-creatures, Alma. They were here to-day and gone to-morrow. One was wealthy—an important person—and when he disappeared most strenuous search was made for him by skilled detectives; and there are no detectives like French ones."

"Well, what do you suppose became of him?" asked the vicar.

"I have my own opinion, and it seems both rational and seemly—though dreadful enough," answered William. "I should say that the awful hour of change came at last and the victim, finding himself sunk into the ranks of savage beasts—a man-wolf, or wolf-man for evermore—would act according to his character. If you, or I, were so treated by malignant forces beyond our ken, we might possibly rise to the horrible challenge and destroy ourselves; while another sort of man, clinging to dear life at any cost, even under these appalling conditions, would seek the new order of existence into which he had come and join the company of other wolves as soon as he was able to do so. That is where you might expect to find him. Does it not strike you as strange that wolves still swarm in Europe? despite the dead set made against them? But how if their ranks are augmented by men-wolves and the leaders of many a predatory pack have human brains in their heads?"

His hearers reacted after their kind and nothing but deep concern was visible in their eyes and manifest in their momentary silence when William ceased.

Malfroy spoke first, and rose as he did so. He strove to conceal dismay with banter.

"Come on home, Bill," he said, "and let me have a bath. I never ran into such a pack of sticky nonsense in my life."

John turned to Mr. Boyd.

"He's pulling our legs, sir, and he shan't pull mine a moment longer."

But his friend had been serious enough and, though the others pretended to agree with John, they knew it.

"Attend church next Sunday, William," urged the vicar, "and I will preach a sermon devoted to the general subject of ancient superstitions."

The clergyman had no mind to reprove his erring parishioner before Malfroy or anybody else; but he felt a private conversation demanded and for the moment desired to talk to Alma alone. Here promised a very ugly awakening for her. He felt the need of strong action, desired to see Telford Wolf and his stepmother, was moved to a talk with Dr. Peters. The local physician grew old, but he had attended both the mother and father of Sir William and brought the young man into the world.

"Be off—you and your wolves," he said smiling. "I must go and see the game-keeper's old father, Ned Stocker, who is dying. Ask Alma and me to dinner some night soon, Bill, and we will come and listen to the organ. Dear Sir Porteus cared little for music after your mother passed, but I'm glad that you have had the instrument put in thorough repair."

He spoke of a great, mechanical organ in the manor hall which had long fallen into disuse. William, however, remembered it in his childhood and, loving music, had seen to its restoration. The visitors departed and before setting out on his ministry, her father spoke to Alma.

"What do you think of that?" he asked.

She did not reply immediately and then in a small voice that indicated her past emotion, made answer.

"I think it is a very dreadful thing, Father. I could hardly believe my ears. One knew dear Bill was horribly superstitious; but I always felt it only a morbid streak in him that could be eradicated. I've seen a lot of him lately and, until this infernal book turned up, I thought he was going strong and getting rid of it. He's tackling Stormbury in a fine, rational sort of way and John Malfroy is going to be a tower of strength. He must help us now if he can. William will get no dreaming or dabbling in occult nonsense from him—or from me. He knows that I am absolutely free of imagination and he told me once that I always came as a sort of tonic to his thinking. And Telford told me the same. Men like Bill and his cousin are the better for rubbing shoulders with solid, everyday-minded people like you and me. Telford has his stepmother. But what Bill said to-night rather staggered me, because it was perfectly clear that he took it all so seriously. I've heard him dream about the past and bring up visions out of ancient history and put flesh on dry bones and breathe the breath of life into vanished things—all rather beautifully. It's a lovely gift that he's got. But to-night—I shivered to hear him. Is there really such a thing as lycanthropy?"

"I suppose there is such a thing, or there wouldn't be a name for it," replied her father. "If there is such a state, of course it's a fantastic survival from the past and one cannot imagine a normal, educated being developing it. I'll ask Peters. It may only be a queer figment of Bill's imagination, awakened by this wretched little book. But steps ought to be taken about it. Such illusions grow on a man if they are not checked. Often the trouble with these queer, mental twists is that they are not taken in time, because the patient does not recognize them for what they are."

"You frighten me," she answered, "and I never thought anything on earth could do that."

"Don't be frightened," he begged. "That won't serve him. It's good in a way that this mental possession has come out and confronted us. We must help him. At any rate I feel sure that you can. Brace him up, Alma; smother this dreadful nonsense out of him with common sense."

"But do see Dr. Peters."

He promised to do so at the first opportunity and then left her; while Alma turned again to the prophecy and re-read it with a new and dreadful interest. But the rough rhymes seemed more crude than usual and she fell to wondering what in the name of fortune they could contain to make any intelligent man take them seriously. Much else in the little book had interested and amused her far more; but Alma lacked not for perception and one curious fact persisted in her renewed study. She had no flair for literature and was indeed not much of a reader, but her senses sharpened before the gravity of this challenge and the danger threatening her lover's future and her own; she combed the little volume with all the concentration in her power and had made William leave it with her that she might do so. Until now no light had shone and only a vague sense arisen that the book concealed some secret evading them all; but to-night, her senses shocked to quickening by William's startling opinions, she advanced her studies somewhat. There appeared to her a sudden and shadowy suspicion that 'Twilight of Wolf' stood on a plane outside the rest of the legends and verses accompanying it. They were all akin, with like, old-fashioned phraseology—diction from a vanished age—but the prophecy seemed built on another formula and suggested a different attitude of mind, though whether it represented an earlier or later period was beyond her power to judge. The disparity she recognized, however, albeit it promised no sort of aid.

Meantime William and his friend returned to the manor and John made some attempts to rouse him without success. The younger fell silent and showed a desire to remain so, therefore Malfroy, familiar with his every mood, left him alone and they did not meet again until dinner, by which time William was himself.

The young men were used to spend their evenings in the billiards-room, for both enjoyed the game and there was not much to choose in their skill. Sometimes they played and sometimes sat and talked. To-night William would not play and John chatted about such subjects as he knew might distract him. He was always very interested in Russia and Malfroy spoke concerning it.

"I share your dread of the Bear up to a point," he said, "and see the danger it pleases our statesmanship to ignore. They were very frank to me before I cleared out. They respect the French mentality and the Latins also, but they laugh at us. They told me that in ten years France and Spain would be governed from Moscow, and Italy in five years, or less, after Mussolini was dead. They didn't say what would happen to Russia after Stalin is dead. Their object is to destroy religion root and branch as the foul upas tree poisoning all progress. As to England, they are quite content with the

situation. Our English Socialist and Labour leaders are what they call the 'death-watch beetles in the British oak'—slow and sure, to be relied upon to bring down the Empire presently. They count on another war, after which a ruined England will let the Soviet in, as a ruined Russia did. They know their friends are busy here, and the dole is playing into their hands."

William spoke.

"When faith perishes," he said, "man becomes an easy prey to his fellow-man. To make religion a crime is the Mark of the Beast and argues the advent of Anti-Christ—just as my prophecy predicts the twilight of my clan. But individuals and nations both should trust the faith of their fathers and face the new perils armed with the old and conquering weapons of the spirit. Victor Hugo says that man is a fallen angel who has never forgotten Heaven. No human dictators will ever make man forget heaven, even if they lead him in a contrary direction."

Malfroy approved these sentiments.

"I'm no defeatist," he answered, "and more are you at heart. I don't know much about religion myself, but I can't fail to see it working for good in England still. Conscience does mean something here. In our case it takes the form of making us good sportsmen. That's harmless anyway. In your case, Bill, conscience has always meant your duty, as opposed to your inclination; but you overdo it. I'd venture to bet that natural inclination may often be a much safer guide than a mother-taught conscience. Conscience can get out of order as quickly as the rest of us and be as damned a nuisance as a morbid liver. That shows it's not infallible."

They argued the point and presently went out of doors to stroll together upon the southern terrace. Dim radiance outlined the Blackdown Hills, heaved to the north behind Stormbury, and the summer night deepened clear and still.

The young men were alike in this, that neither needed much sleep. They usually sat up late at night long after the household had retired. Nor was any demand put on others, for William never wanted his valet after dinner and Bob Meadows generally went to bed soon after eleven.

To-night John kept away from any troublesome subjects and headed off William when he tended to resume them. A stable clock chimed twelve and far away, like an echo, the church clock answered it. Then estate questions occupied their conversation and they differed upon a point of figures, each persisting confidently that he was right. They went in again and William returned to the billiards-room while John visited his office. At present the old squire's study was devoted to Malfroy's needs, though he proposed to leave the manor after his friend married and occupy the old land-agent's little house, now empty. He returned shortly bearing an account book and found himself in the wrong.

"One to you, Bill," he said. "Sorry I contradicted you so positively."

"You were far more likely to be right than I, Johnny, but for once in a way I remembered," answered the other. Then they talked for another half-hour and the younger rose to go to bed. They seldom took formal leave, but William usually led the way upstairs and Malfroy followed. Upon the newels of the great staircase sat two wolves carved in Spanish chestnut. They were realistic creatures half as large as life, but they sat placidly upon their haunches with amiable expressions, and each supported an electric light upon his head. The massive, brazen balustrade of the stair was a feature of the manor house. It dated from 1760, while the elaborate, rococo plaster work of the walls was older still and the achievement of the Italian master, Franchini. William turned off the lights according to his rule and ascended through the darkness, while John took his volume back to the workroom. Then happened the strange and utterly unaccountable thing destined to be a red prelude for much to follow.

The flight ended on an immense gallery, where William had arranged his own suite of apartments complete in themselves; and now Malfroy, who had speedily followed him, was passing his friend's door upon his way to his own bedroom twenty yards further off when William called him. His voice sounded shaken and small and he stood in his study with his right hand lifted to an electric light. It was dyed crimson and shone wetly.

John jumped forward in great concern.

"What the deuce have you done?" he asked, and took the red palm into his own.

The other had turned pale, but he appeared quite collected.

"I've done nothing whatever," he answered. "I came straight upstairs, turned on the light and found my hand dripping."

"If you haven't cut yourself, what is it?"

"It's blood," replied the other calmly, "but not mine."

"If it's blood, it must be yours, Bill. Come and wash. You've run into something and jagged yourself."

They went together to William's bathroom and washed his hand carefully. The water turned red and William was going to run it off, but John stopped him.

"Leave that where it is until to-morrow. It ought to be examined. Chemists know one gore from another. It may not be human. The thing must be explained," he said.

There was not a scratch on William's hand and, while he dried it, the other asked him for particulars.

"There was no blood upon you when you left the billiards-room," he said, "yet you found it when you got here. What did you do on the way?"

"What I always do. Nothing else. I turned off the newel lights and came up as usual with my hand on the brass rail."

"There you are then! Some idiot went down with a bleeding hand and anointed the rail, and you ran your fingers through it in the dark."

"I don't think so, Bill. The servants never go that way—except Bob Meadows."

"Well, make sure anyway," begged John. He was rinsing a bottle and about to pour some of the red water into it for analysis. "Steer clear of the brass work as you go down and turn on the lights."

William obeyed, descended and lit up; but the great staircase and balustrade revealed no stain. Then Malfroy joined him and made intensive search without result.

"No clue there," he said. "It's one of those damned things that look impossible, like a conjuror's trick, till you know how it was done."

William shook his head.

"Don't you understand?" he asked. "I wish I didn't, Johnny—but I do well enough."

"Tell me then for the Lord's sake, Bill. Is it a practical joke for my benefit? If so it's unlike you to play one."

William had long since committed his rhymes to memory and now he quoted from them.

"Have you forgotten so completely?" he asked. "What was the first, definite line in the prophecy pointing at a material event? 'Red-handed shall the red man be with human blood upon his palm.' Those are the words—now literally fulfilled."

The elder stared.

"Keep a hand on yourself! Don't drag in that cursed rubbish," he said harshly. "Be a man, Bill, and trust your reason. Where blood has been shed, something, or somebody, must have lost it. Leave the morning to clear this up."

"I imagined a spiritual explanation," answered William, "not this gross, material one."

"Well, you can't have killed anybody up here, while my back was turned, old man. Unless it was Bob Meadows. We'll see if he's all right," declared John.

Meadows alone of the staff occupied a bedroom in the great gallery. He slept near William and a bell communicated with him. Malfroy rang and in two minutes the valet appeared. Bob was clad in cast-off raiment of his master's—pyjamas and a dressing-gown—for the young men happened to be almost exactly of the same size and build, an accident that contributed much to the latter's advantage, since William soon tired of his clothes.

Meadows had nothing to report and knew of no accident below stairs, so they sent him back to bed.

"I'll explain in the morning," said William. "I only wanted to know that you were all right, Bob."

Before the friends separated, the elder spoke again with kind intent; but he failed in tact and his advice marked the different attitude and outlook of the two men.

"There's something rum about this racket, Bill," said John, "so take my tip and lock your door to-night."

But the suggestion was not well received for William flushed and showed annoyance.

"A Wolf doesn't lock his door under his own roof," he answered. "What stuff do you think I'm made from?"

Johnny, however, only laughed.

"Sorry," he said, "I ought to have known better than suggest it I suppose."

Then William yielded instantly.

"All the point of view, dear chap. You were only thinking of my comfort. But in any case bolts and locks are of no service in a matter such as this. Things must be as they will when you are dealing with subjective forces beyond human control."

"There's nothing very subjective about a hand covered with fresh blood," answered the other. "Nothing particularly ghostly about that. Good night, anyway; but I'll tell you one thing: if you're too proud to probe mysteries and get to the bottom of them, I'm not. I'd fight all the devils in hell for you; but I've got to believe in such things first. I don't at present I assure you."

"You will, Johnny, before the end of this," promised William, and then they parted.

CHAPTER SIX

The Scent

Sir William made no secret of his curious adventure, but found none capable of throwing light upon it. One indeed there was who propounded a theory, though for sufficient reasons, it never came to the victim's ears.

Malfroy took his bottle to Dr. Peters, but the old practitioner was no chemist and sent the sample to London. Before he learned the result there came a conversation with Fortescue Boyd and the doctor admitted much concern. He listened to the amazing opinions for which William was responsible and cross-questioned the vicar closely. With others he had heard all about the prophecy and laughed over it, but he had not read it until now. Boyd brought the little book with him and Peters studied it thoughtfully. He pretended to no special knowledge of mental afflictions, declaring that few of Stormbury's population possessed sufficient intellect to become deranged.

"Bill was always a highly-strung, nervy youngster," he said, "and his mother used to worry about him because he slept so badly. A wolf—an imaginary wolf—was his bane in childhood, and his father's spartan remedy of no night-light and no answer to his cries was quite wrong. I altered all that. I made them keep him up a bit later and give him a good slice of seed cake and a drop of beer before he went to bed. The result was most satisfactory. But his predisposition to horrors never left him—just a morbid streak in the mind—and no doubt this amazingly apt rubbish has played upon his weakness."

They discussed William's ensanguined hand, concerning which he had told both Alma and her father, but Dr. Peters declined to advance any opinion upon it, until he had learned more.

"I have a theory," he said, "and I am afraid what you have just told me may tend to support it, but very earnestly I trust that I am wrong. Get Alma to talk sense to him and shake him up. If she could only make him hunt, or shoot, or fish, or interest himself in some wholesome, normal pursuits, much might be gained."

But William's sweetheart was already doing the best in her power to this good end. His recent grotesque parade of superstition had frightened her, and though nothing could shake such a woman's love or loyalty, she looked forward, with the first fear she had ever known, to the gathering gloom. William was positive that he had become the subject of some miraculous intervention; he associated his experience with the prophecy alone and declared the impossibility of explaining it in any other manner. He was obdurate and honestly puzzled that Alma and the rest could not see with his eyes.

"Be patient," he told her. "Wait for what must surely follow and you will understand that I am right."

Meantime Dr. Peters propounded a theory to Malfroy that the young man much resented. John had come to learn the result of the analysis and he heard that human blood was responsible. The doctor then spoke.

"So far as I can see only one possible solution of the mystery exists," he declared, "but I have kept it to myself, John, until this moment, and I beg that, at any rate for the present, you will not repeat it, for the implication must be terribly serious. As his first friend and confidant I tell you my fears. They did not spring to my mind instantly after I had heard about this blood-stained incident, but dawned upon me when Boyd consulted me concerning Bill's extraordinary statements at the vicarage."

"I was there with him and heard them," said Malfroy. "They didn't stagger me quite so much as the others, because I'd often heard Bill talk similar nonsense on other subjects. He's got queer theories and it doesn't do to chaff him too much. I know how far to go by experience, but even I put my foot into it and drop a brick sometimes."

"Exactly, but in the present very delicate situation you may be the chosen one to steady Sir William and save a most dangerous situation," proceeded the old physician. "A certain thing should be said to the man, and possibly it needs such a bond of heart-whole friendship and affection as that obtaining between you and him to say it. Failing you I must tax him myself, though frankly I hesitate to do so—not from cowardice, but for diplomatic reasons."

"Tax him? Tax Bill? What should I tax him with, Doctor?" asked the other. "This mess wasn't his fault."

"Listen and approach the subject from a common-sense angle, my good fellow. A definite event has to be explained—an

event involving human blood on a human hand. The only explanation so far offered is William's own, which we can dismiss as utterly untenable save to a mind—I will not say 'deranged,' but shaken and strained for the moment. Now this blood came from a human being: that is a cast-iron certainty, unless we are going to credit some unknown powers with creating a synthesis for Bill's downfall and our bewilderment. But exhaustive inquiry proves that nobody has lost a drop of blood at the manor by any accident of any kind. And what is left for us to assume? Only this: that Sir William, under the influence of this printed nonsense, has done what many mental patients are often discovered to do and bolstered up his assertions with secret activities to support them. In other words the blood was his—and for the obvious reason that it could not have been shed by anybody else."

John showed both concern and annoyance, for his feelings were not often hidden and his language was apt to be direct.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "that's as much as to tell me that my best friend on earth is weak-minded and ought to be in a lunatic asylum! Damn it, Doctor—you don't mean that? He has his queer opinions, as most of us have on one subject or another if we've got any brains at all, but Bill's an amazingly clever man and as shrewd and as well-balanced in most things as the best of us. It's monstrous to suggest he'd try to make his cursed prophecy come true by doing an insane thing like that. Don't you know him better after knowing him all his life?"

"No need to get hot, my dear boy, or to imagine that I am less awake to Sir William's good parts than yourself," replied the elder. "I care for him quite as much as you do, believe me. Oddity and even what they call 'obsession' may be quite a common symptom of a case and argue no real brain lesion or dementia. Bill is exceedingly sane for all practical purposes as you say, and we must help him to throw off this wretched incubus.

"I am still disposed to believe that I am right," he continued, "and you must bear with one who knows more about human ailments than you can, and help rather than hinder me."

Malfroy had calmed down. He sighed and regarded the doctor anxiously.

"Sorry if I was rude—only it rather touched me to hear what you thought. Of course I'll help and do anything in my power; but what can I do, Doctor?" he asked.

"I'll tell you. Grant for the moment the possibility that I may be right. This would mean that William must have inflicted a fairly severe cut upon himself somewhere and more blood flowed than you saw. If anything was soiled, his man would probably know it. Sound Meadows tactfully. You can do that."

"I can and I will when I get a chance, Doctor, but it would be no earthly use," answered the other. "If any such ghastly thing had happened, Bob would have been told to keep his mouth shut about it, and he would obey. He worships Bill, and Bill thinks all the world of him. He'd lie the hands round the clock if his master told him to—Bob would. I'll sound him, and I shall know in half a minute if he's telling me the truth."

"The truth is what we want," declared Dr. Peters, "because it would help us to serve William practically and show him his own danger. Use all your tact, John, and explain that to Meadows himself. He knows that you are his master's right hand and that you are only trying to get at the truth for Bill's sake, so impress that on him. Then I feel sure that if he did learn anything that night, or next morning, he would come out with it."

The younger went his way in some perturbation, but he kept his promise and made a point of meeting Bob privately two days later. Meadows loved the open air and at times of leisure often strolled beside a great lake half a mile from the manor, or angled for the coarse fish that abounded there. He rejoiced in this sport and William had long made him free to pursue it.

Meeting Bob here, the land agent gave him a cigarette, spoke of the fishing and presently turned to the matter in his thoughts. He was artful and let Meadows discuss the recent mystery while he listened, but the valet advanced no theory and suggested no concealments.

"Sir William tells me the blood was human blood, sir," he said, "but who the mischief did it come out of?"

"A poser, Bob. You found no traces anywhere else?"

"Only on the towel Sir William used after he'd washed himself clean again."

"You look after his linen and his clothes. Didn't find a speck on anything belonging to him?"

"Not a speck, Mr. Malfroy. I looked very close, too, on purpose, because when I heard tell, I felt sure Sir William's own blood had got on him somewhere. But not a drop. When I was shaving him next morning and hearing about it, I asked him if he had looked over himself close in his bath, to make sure he weren't scratched anywhere, and he said he had done that very thing."

Meadows spoke with the simple accents of truth.

"No doubt there's some simple reason hidden from us, sir," he said, "and it wouldn't matter two straws either way but for this beastly book that's got on Sir William's nerves."

"Quite right, Bob. You take this as any sane person must," answered Malfroy. "It's up to all of us to distract Sir William's mind and help him to forget this foolery. He thinks a deuce of a lot of you, and I hope you'll do your bit and oppose him as I do myself over his troubles."

But Meadows shook his head.

"It isn't for me to cross the master," he answered. "I haven't got the learning to do it, sir. He's awful in earnest. I once ventured to say that he didn't ought to take it lying down, so to speak, and all he said was that there were many dark things in nature hidden beyond our senses, and when they open out on one, we've got to take them lying down, because we can do no other. He asked me how I should act myself if there was a curse hanging over me and, of course, I could only say such things don't happen to respectable people."

John laughed and Meadows asked a question.

"Wouldn't you say that his young lady might be the one to put him right, sir? I was thinking on her and the store the master sets upon her. She could talk straighter to him than any other body could, and he wouldn't let no word from her pass unheeded."

"No doubt she's doing her best. Not much fun for her to find Sir William down in the mouth all the time. Some girls would get fed up and begin to think twice I guess. But not Miss Boyd. She'll stick to him through thick and thin: she's that sort. Does Sir William talk of his future, or suggest altering his plans?"

"No, sir. For the minute he's not looking no further ahead than his nose, so to call it. Marking time as they say and waiting to see if there's any more bad signs."

"There won't be—there can't be—unless—"

Malfroy's thoughts turned to Dr. Peters, but he did not utter them.

"Well, we must hope the storm has passed and nothing will happen to bring it back, Bob. This sort of thing is bad every way. All sorts of rumours and lies get about. You can't hide the fact from people that something's wrong with the works."

John went his way and soon after had the satisfaction of telling the doctor that he must be mistaken. But Peters still felt not wholly convinced.

"I trust you're right: we'll wait and see," he said. "No disrespect to Bill, but his very weakness opens the door to possible dangers. I've called upon him and advised him to go away for a week or two; but he has no intention of doing so. He didn't speak of the recent incident to me."

When Telford Wolf came home he discussed the matter with his stepmother, and she found, without much surprise, that his sympathies were with his cousin.

"At least I have the imagination to see how this must look to him," he told Mrs. Wolf. "You all seem so impatient with the poor chap, as if he was committing a crime. Belief is no more a crime than unbelief, or agnosticism, and if nobody can explain what happened on reasonable grounds, he is perfectly within his right to put a supernatural interpretation upon it. Alma and her father seem to think that Bill will get mental if anything else happens. So does Peters. But, as Malfroy says, 'What can happen?' If anything contrary to reason did happen, then it's enough to shake anybody's wits."

"Sympathize with him by all means. He'd expect you to do that," answered Daphne; "but don't pander to him, or admit the possibility of any evil forces or influences at work against him. That would be wicked just now. Keep him off the subject all you can, as I do."

"It's awfully bad for the place," he answered, "and I wish time would pass and let the business be forgotten. All the same, sceptic though I am about most things, I don't quite share the general opinion until time has passed. This has got hold of Bill in an extraordinary way. He's perfectly calm about it and quite himself in most moods; but you can't shake him that there's more in this than reason can understand, or explain. He has a sort of fatalistic conviction that something else is going to happen sooner or later."

"He's asking for it," declared Daphne. "He's subduing his mind into a receptive state open to any horrid thing. I never felt so miserable about him before. I keep up and speak hopefully to him and Alma; but she's awfully anxious too. It's worse for her than any of us. What does John Malfroy say to you?"

"Much what you do—not to humour him, or take his side seriously. Johnny reminded me that it's William's birthday next week and he's making him give a dinner-party for us and the Boyds."

Mrs. Wolf was pleased.

"A very happy thought," she said. "What can we give him between us, Telford?"

Under Malfroy's pressure his friend had agreed to celebrate his birthday, and all who came to dine strove to create a happy atmosphere. Nor did William make it difficult, for they found him in good spirits and he abstained from mentioning his troubles to anybody. They felt him to be more like himself, and he had awakened enthusiasm in the servants' hall by preserving an ancient custom of his father. When Sir Porteus celebrated his birthday, the staff gave a dance and invited their friends to it. There came the vicar and Alma to the manor with Daphne Wolf and her stepson, and Dr. Peters also attended. The talk waxed cheerful enough at table, though, when it concerned the estate, Malfroy struck a gloomy note. He had mastered the land laws by this time and coped also with the tremendous problems created in Stormbury at the late squire's passing. John was, in truth, more conservative than his employer, but he could seldom get William to show much interest in politics as they affected his pocket. Telford on the contrary felt these problems more challenging than most artists are wont to do.

"I've taken a bird's eye view now," said Malfroy to the doctor, "and extended my survey beyond Stormbury into the west country at large. Stormbury's not a fair sample of big estates, because it's always been backed up with tremendous wealth, which didn't originate here. But land improvement elsewhere—all round us and far beyond—is practically at a standstill. Or it would be truer to say going backward. In the last fifty years more than fifty million acres of Britain have gone out of cultivation, and heavy expenditure is demanded to save land falling derelict everywhere. Nearly every big landowner who dies adds so many thousand acres to the cheerful total, through no fault of his own, or his tenants, but because taxation demands it. Death duties send more men and women on the dole than our bright statesmen have ever stopped to consider. A master dies, and where he employed perhaps a hundred people, his successor, after paying the penalty set on death, finds that henceforth he can only employ twenty. You can't both send your money to the Exchequer and spend it locally in wages. It's a miserable scandal, for death duties are not even treated as the nation's savings. And you fellows all bleat about our genius of a Chancellor, who fritters away, as income, what any fairly intelligent man would at least endeavour to treat as capital."

"We may be frightened of dictators," added Telford, "but Mussolini is sound there. He doesn't rob the dead and decimate their estates in Italy. You talk of imaginary vampires and were-wolves, Bill, but the real ones are in the governments that stand for such brigandage."

William made no answer, but Dr. Peters put in a plea for the state. He was a staunch socialist, as the physicians of the poor are apt to be; while Mr. Boyd also aired his opinions. The vicar cherished a great theory for the welfare of the rising generation and maintained that all unemployed lads, on reaching dole age, should be given a choice between emigration and the army or navy.

"Thus," he declared, "we provide for their future self-respect, without which no trustworthy career can be hoped for any man."

When dinner was done William's party spent an hour in the music-room where his organ stood. Alma had brought him a

dozen rolls of Mozart's music adapted to the instrument, and William himself played the joyous master to his friends. To play automatic music gives some people the curious impression that they are themselves being clever, and when Telford and Dr. Peters applauded him, William was pleased.

A harvest moon shone in a clear sky and the night was mild when they strolled upon the terrace presently, and then the doctor took his leave, while a little later Mrs. Wolf and her stepson prepared to depart. Telford drove their little car and William spoke to him.

"You'll pass the lake, old man, so drive Alma and me to the old oak on the way. We want to prowling down and look at the water-lilies in the moonlight," he said.

All were quickly gone and Boyd and Malfroy waited for the lovers to return. John was well pleased at the success of the night.

"I haven't seen Bill in such good form for weeks, Vicar; he's like his old self again," he declared.

"We'll hope it's the turning-point," answered the elder. "I've been thinking about this pestilent charm, or cantrip, or whatever we may please to call it—for I refuse to dignify these wretched rhymes with the honoured name of prophecy—and I wondered if it would be seemly and justified by circumstances to plan a counter-charm, play a trick on the dear fellow and produce some evidence tending to show he was in error and fretting about himself over a mare's nest."

"It's an idea," admitted John. "Of course anything on earth would be well justified—any pious fraud you can imagine or invent, Vicar."

"I little like the thought of doing evil that good may come," confessed the clergyman, "but 'evil' is too strong a word perhaps. Peters was saying that the powers of suggestion and auto-suggestion can be very useful in combat with many forms of hallucination, and my idea is that if we could confront Sir William with some sort of matter—printed or otherwise—tending to throw doubt on his fears of this jargon about a wolf, it might do some good. The days of witches and wizards are past and I know of no wise woman in the parish who could be inspired to help us; but there might be the possibility of some innocent ruse calculated to relieve his mind."

"Try Telford," urged John. "There may be a lot in this, sir. It strikes me as jolly sound; but it's more in Telford's line than mine. He's an ingenious beggar and might hatch a forgery of some sort to hoodwink Bill. You could trust Telford with detail; but he'll need to be pretty deep, because if William ever found out that he was being swindled, he'd never forgive any of us."

"I see the danger and will try Telford as you suggest," answered the vicar. "In a sense Bill is being swindled at present remember, and if we can open his eyes to the nature of the swindle, even if it entails something unpleasantly like another, I am prepared to absolve our consciences—provided we all promise never to do such a thing again."

Then happened what made these incipient plots of no avail. Alma appeared hastening up the park drive with William beside her and their speed suggested that something unexpected had overtaken them. William was urgent when they arrived. He showed excitement, but no alarm.

"A mystery," he said, "but a fleeting mystery. Come down quickly to the lake, Johnny, and see if you can throw any light on it."

They followed him, and Alma told the story as they went back to the fringes of the sleeping water.

"We left them at the old oak and then strolled down to the lake," said Alma, "and then, just by the reed-maces at the edge of the water, we ran into the queerest possible scent—quite overpowering. I thought, and still think, it must be some gas given off by the mire at the edge of the water, but Bill says it isn't. He's never smelled it before and feels certain it's the scent of an animal."

"If you've never smelt it before, how can you feel certain it's animal, Bill?" asked Malfroy.

"It could only be fox in that case," declared the vicar. "An otter's scent is familiar to hounds, but I doubt if our noses could pick it up."

"It was no fox," answered William. "I know the vulpine odour well enough; and it was not the reek that comes up from

the lily ponds sometimes after a hot day. It was not anything vegetable either. It was a beast of some sort."

"Not imagination, old man?"

"No, Johnny. We both smelt it, though it may have gone by this time."

A strange odour still hung in the moony air, however, when they followed the road to water-side, and the others perceived it instantly. Fifty yards farther on, the drive passed through a gate, where rails extended that separated the deer park from the manor grounds, but the space where now they stood was open and clear of all cover save the dense clump of reed-mace at the water's edge.

"There's a tang in the air, certainly," said Boyd. "Not fox either—and yet it might be."

"No, sir, not fox—I can assure you of that," answered John.

Alma questioned him as to what it might be, but he did not answer her immediately. He exhibited puzzlement and wonder, stared round them, lifted his head and drew in deep breaths through his nostrils! Then bent down and scented the ground about them.

"What is it, John?" asked William. "If you know, as I think you do, please tell me at once."

The other rose, dusted his knees and peered intently about them.

"We can't do anything now," he said. "Come back and all keep together. You heard and saw nothing?"

"Nothing, but Aunt Daphne's car far off in the park. What is this odour, John? It's clear you know it."

The other brought out a handkerchief and mopped his face.

"I recognize what we've smelt, but the mystery is that we couldn't have smelt it," he answered. "Does anybody know if there's a travelling circus, or menagerie at Honiton?"

"They'll tell us at the house. What if there were?" asked William. "Do you want me to say what this odour means, John? Because I can."

"It means wolf," said Malfroy quietly. "To my nose that's what it means, and a very familiar stink too; but on the other hand, it can't be wolf unless wolf was there. That's why I asked about a menagerie. If a brute's escaped, we shall know to-morrow. But nature may be playing tricks with us, Bill. Vegetables can imitate animal smells."

The vicar supported this statement.

"Most true," he said. "There are plenty of carrion flowers whose one amusement seems to be to delude trusting insects."

Silence fell upon them as they returned, and once or twice William stood still to listen; but no sound broke the peace of the night.

A great depression had fallen on all of them and their thoughts turned to the young man, for they knew what must be in his mind. He said nothing but pressed Alma's hand when she put it into his. Then Boyd spoke and strove to make light of the matter.

"If some unhappy creature has escaped from its cage, let us hope it may enjoy its freedom before being captured and locked up again. A few hours in the moonlight will do it no harm."

"If it were really a wolf, what would it be likely to do, John?" asked Alma.

"Help itself to a fallow deer and have the night of its life," he replied; "but I can't believe it. There must be some new smeech coming up from the pond."

Then William spoke.

"If you'd like John to motor home with you and Alma, Vicar, he shall."

"My dear fellow, what nonsense! I'd back Alma to drive my trusty Austin through a pack of wolves," answered the clergyman. "But believe me this is only a curious, olfactory coincidence. Don't think of it again and, for God's sake, don't associate the incident with yourself."

Thus challenged William made reply.

"It is because I do, my friend, that I am perfectly calm as you see," he said. "There is nothing here to raise a shadow of alarm for anybody but myself. And I am long past any emotion of fear. I face the future and what it may hide as bravely as better men than I faced their fate in the War, and as thousands are daily doing. I only suggest that John should see you home for your own peace, not mine. If I felt uneasy I would make you spend the night here."

Alma spoke as they returned to the house.

"But we all smelt that strange scent, Bill. Doesn't that show it was real and not created for you alone? If there had been anything supernatural about it, then surely it—?"

"You are human, Alma," he answered, "and have your senses. I attach no importance to that. Senses are clearly spoken of in the prophecy. The attack is heralded by a challenge to everyday senses. What does it say?"

He quoted from the verses.

"'Through scent to sound destruction steals.' Could anything be plainer? That is why I waited and listened as we came home. I had thought to hear something and expected that we might all hear it."

"Be sure there was nothing that any of us could hear," answered Alma, but he still split hairs with her and spoke gently while doing so.

"You used the word 'supernatural' just now," he continued, "and too often I have done the same. But never again: I have thought all this out with myself in the light of what confronts me, and I know that nothing supernatural ever happened. The word merely serves as a cloak for our ignorance. All that can occur must lie within the scope of what we call Nature, otherwise it could not occur."

Malfroy raised a practical issue.

"Well, it's inside the bounds of Nature that a dangerous beast might escape from its cage," he said. "Such a thing has happened before and might again. Your people will all be going back to their homes in an hour from the dance. What about it, Bill?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, my dear chap. You can't see the inner meaning of this business and probably nothing but the sequel will ever make anyone see. That, to me, is one of the strangest facts about it. Nature has operated in a fashion to hide the truth from everybody but myself. Friendship cannot see it; affection cannot see it; devotion cannot see it; love cannot see it. But feel no fear for the folk, John. All are safe enough. There is no peril or bane abroad, under the harvest moon to-night. We may sleep in peace."

"Let us satisfy ourselves at least that no obvious explanation exists," begged Boyd. "Ring, William, and ask Meadows, or Thorpe, if there is a menagerie at Honiton. In that case—"

But the butler was able to declare positively that no such entertainment had visited the market town for several years.

"I mind one a good bit ago, Sir William, because I visit everything at Honiton and take pleasure in a wild beast show when the chance offers; but we've had nothing since Honiton Fair—nothing in the nature of a revel."

Malfroy left the room with Thorpe and issued some private directions, but did not give a reason.

"Is the head-keeper here to-night?" he asked.

"No, sir; but Spragge's dancing and so's Jack Black."

"Then tell one of them to call at the North Lodge and wake up Stocker, or leave a message with his wife if he's out. It's important. I want him here at half-past six sharp to-morrow morning; and tell him to bring his spaniel."

Ten minutes later the vicar, having drunk a mild whisky and soda, took his leave with Alma driving him, and William prepared to go to bed.

"Don't worry, dear old boy," he said, "and don't look at me as though you saw the hand of Fate upon my shoulder. If I can face futurity without flinching, maybe the gift of your own pluck under all circumstances has come from you to me."

"I'm brave for myself, Bill," answered the other, shaking his hand, "but it's not so easy to be brave for you living in this cursed atmosphere. You say that none of us see it. But isn't that because there is nothing to see? Would devotion and love and all the rest of it fail you if anything tangible existed for us to fight? I'd go through hell fire for you and you know it; but I can't go through the fire you've chosen so madly to light in your own brain."

"Realize that true word and be at peace, Johnny."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Sound

At six o'clock the head-keeper, with a big Clumber spaniel, waited in the fore-court of Stormbury for John Malfroy, and five minutes later, gun in hand, John arrived. William still slept and knew nothing of this enterprise, but his friend attributed it to him.

"Morning, George," he said. "Sorry to bring you up so early after a night on duty, but Sir William was rather keen that you and I should look into a queer happening last night. How's your father?"

"No better, no worse, sir. Just flickering out, like a candle that's come to the last drop of grease. But he suffers nought save weakness. The doctor looks to that."

George Stocker was a tough, grizzled man of five-and-fifty—a tower of strength to the land-agent. He highly approved of Malfroy and all his ways, for John was set upon extending the game possibilities of the estate. George spoke cheerfully of his pheasant broods and then learned the matter in hand.

"We're going down to the east end of the lake, because when he was pottering about there late last night after dinner, Sir William came up against a scent he couldn't put a name to. All he reckoned was that some animal must be responsible for it, and he came up and asked me to say what I thought. I went down with the vicar and we found the air pretty thick still, where the drive skirts the water."

John then gave a careful account of events and proceeded.

"By the accident of my own experience in Russia I could recognize the scent instantly; but you'll guess that I hesitated to do so, George, when I tell you what it was. You know that blasted thing the master's read in an old book has been rather on his nerves, and even Miss Boyd can't choke him off it, so when I smelt the unquestionable stink of wolf down there, I felt pretty sick. But I couldn't lie. Boyd and Sir William both knew it wasn't fox, and though some one suggested that it might be some sort of miasma or gas from the lake, I knew it couldn't be. And that's why I've brought you down—to see if you can spot anything, or if the dog can."

"I am much fearing the master will take that serious," said Stocker. "I was having a tell with Meadows a bit ago and he felt bad about Sir William and troubled for him, because he says he's got wolf on the brain—a very ill-convenient thing and contrary to reason. And Meadows says it's getting on his nerves also, and he don't like it."

"Nobody likes it. We're doing our best to shake him out of it, and we shall soon succeed no doubt. Sufficient for the day is the task thereof, George. What we have got to do is to see if there's any sign of a visitor last night."

"Would a right wolf kill a deer, sir?"

"There's no right wolf: they're all wrong uns from any human point of view. But a real wolf would make short work of our little chaps if he was hungry."

"How the mischief should a wild wolf harbour in Stormbury?" asked the keeper, and Johnny laughed.

"Ask me another, old man," he answered.

The lake smiled under the rising sun and a great flotilla of water-lilies, white and cream and crimson, began to open their petals in welcome. The black clubs of the reed mace glowed with rusty, inner fire; drifts of arundo canes, soon to be surmounted with the purple plumes of inflorescence, were making ready, and early coots and moorhens floated on the water. Their numbers were swiftly increased by the spaniel. He dearly loved the lake and soon dashed among the reeds to flush what winged creatures might be there. Birds scattered before him into open water; and then Stocker called him to heel. He came instantly, dripping and reluctant, but obedient.

The men set about a very thorough investigation of the scene and devoted special attention to the moist margins of the lake, where some signs of a trail might be supposed to appear if such existed; but nothing rewarded their search. Not a sign of any unusual visitor appeared and no pad-mark from anything larger than a water-vole was recorded by the mire.

George sent his dog into the reeds again, and the spaniel hunted industriously, only to return in half an hour somewhat cast down and puzzled at his failure. He had not given tongue or shown any uncommon excitement on his quest.

"Nought strange is lying hid there, else he'd have nosed it out," said the keeper. And his companion agreed with him.

"So I thought; but the smell was real enough, though I dare say after all it may have been only some exhalation from the water plants. I'll come down to-night and see if it's on the air again. Meantime keep your weather eye lifting, George, and don't stop to argue if you meet a strange beast in the woods. A wolf would naturally hide in the hangers by day where there's plenty of cover."

"I'll shoot him if I see him," promised Stocker. "A sizable beast round about so big as an Alsatian hound—eh, Mr. Malfroy?"

"That's right, and there are no Alsations in these parts to my knowledge, so you can't make any mistake," answered John. "But you're little likely to see anything. I wish I thought you would. If some escaped wolf was really in the place and you bowled him over, I'd pay you half a year's salary, George, because such a thing would calm Sir William's mind at once and bring him out of this spell that's got hold of him."

"I'll watch out myself, sir, and tip the others to do the same," promised Stocker.

They parted presently and while the keeper and his dog returned to their home, John went back to the manor. Meadows met him with a message.

"Sir William hasn't slept none too well he tells me, sir, and he won't fetch down to breakfast, so please don't wait for him. He'll count to see you at luncheon," said Bob.

John was concerned.

"How does he look? He doesn't feel bad, does he?" he asked.

"Oh no, sir—only tired."

"Take him up a good breakfast then, and see he eats it, Bob. He's told you about last night no doubt?"

"He has, sir. He's took it very serious, sir. Very queer thing it sounds to be."

"Only queer because for the moment we can't explain it," answered the other impatiently. "Our senses are not infallible and a man's nose can deceive him as easily as his eyes, or his ears. I was wrong last night and made an ass of myself, if you want to know. Tell Sir William that I was at the lake by sunrise this morning, with George Stocker and a gun-dog. We didn't leave a stone unturned and there wasn't a trace—not the faintest—of anything whatever. And the dog scented nothing new to him. Remind Sir William what a tracker the head game-keeper is. If there had been a grass-blade marked, he'd have spotted it."

Meadows promised to deliver the message and went his way; but, when the friends met after noon, William declared no special relief at the news.

"Like you to take such a lot of trouble, old chap," he said, "but if I had known what you were up to, I should have told you it was waste of time."

"I take all the blame for this set-back, Bill," began John, when they were alone after their meal. "You were going strong last night and like your old self. Then the whiff of some beastliness comes along and puts me in mind of the past; and instead of keeping my mouth shut, or lying, as any decent pal would have done, I blurt out that rot. I'm positive now there was nothing in it. If anything as big as a wolf had been out there last night, Stocker would have found the evidence."

"Don't worry, old boy, but try to see this with my eyes," replied William. "What is going to happen, as I said last night, is no doubt inside nature, but entirely outside your comprehension, or mine. By trying to bring it in line with experience, and so find the reason for it, you only vex yourself needlessly. A time may come when you will know the reason: I myself may live to know the reason. Light may shine out and secrets from the far past be revealed. You've read *Macbeth* and remember how the witches juggled with him and told him that until certain seemingly impossible things happened, he was safe. Our prophecy may be written to hide some great truth. There may be a mystery within a mystery—wheels

within wheels. My present instinct is not to take it literally until I know that I must."

"Well, that's something, Bill, and good news in a way," admitted the other. "You're sailing in water that's a bit too deep and too troubled for me; but if you honestly feel that you've got this rigmarole all wrong, why not wash it out and put it behind you altogether? Once you make the mental effort and say to yourself 'This fantastic drivel has nothing on earth to do with me, or any living man,' then surely you would be well on the way to clean up your mind."

"Don't be impatient, but bear with me a little longer," replied William. "The omen, as you say, may have no application to any living man. It certainly meant something once, no reasonable being can blame me for still thinking myself involved. However, time will soon show, and this I promise you, as I have promised Alma and Telford and myself: that if at the end of the year, I stand where now I stand—unscathed and uninjured—then I shall do as you advise and put this terrible experience behind me as the work of some malignant elemental powerless to make good his threat."

As though to prove that resignation, rather than fear, guided his future attitude, William chose this day for a vigil in the hanging woods and departed—to his favourite seat underneath the precipice—with a book soon after luncheon. Meantime John took his way to the dower-house, desiring to question Telford and Mrs. Wolf as to the previous night. He told them what had happened after their departure and troubled them both, but they could offer no suggestions.

"We drove Alma and Bill to the old oak and dropped them there," said Daphne. "They must have followed us by the main road to the lake, but, of course, we'd passed it long before they got there."

"You were fifty yards away at the gate, but you'd run through the place before that, where the road skirts the pond," explained John. "That's where I should have thought you might have picked the scent up."

Neither, however, had done so, and they listened with much regret to what followed. Young Wolf lamented Malfroy's line of action.

"You were mad to say that, even if you thought it," he declared. "Poor Bill was in such spirits and going so strong last night. Now he'll be like a bear with a sore head again."

"I know. I could have kicked myself afterwards. I'm a tactless ass sometimes, and always just when I want to exercise most tact," confessed Johnny. "Of course, I was all wrong. There's not a trace of anything there, or a whiff of scent for a dog to find. One would say it had been pure imagination but for the fact that all four of us got it."

He told them what William had promised after luncheon.

"There's consolation there," agreed Daphne. "Bill never broke his word in his life, and if he said that, he meant it. One can't suppose anything else is likely to happen to make him think this charm is still working."

"And there's Alma," said Telford. "It's pretty putrid for her. Does he ever speak of his marriage, Johnny?"

"Not much lately, and one can't venture to remind him of the plans they made."

"Alma would," declared Mrs. Wolf, "and if any change was agreed between them, I should have heard about it from her."

"At any rate Boyd assumes that they are to be married in November," Telford told them. "He was talking to me last night and he said that he believed it would make all the difference to Bill."

"I'm very much afraid, all the same, that this new mystery may do harm," feared Daphne Wolf. "Sir William's a man of honour, and so long as this dreadful bee's in his bonnet I don't believe he'll drag Alma in."

"If she's worth a damn she'll insist on it," said John. "Once married, she'd be at his elbow, always ready to distract him from his thoughts and fight for him, if there was anything to fight about."

"This may make a difference," answered Daphne. "Bill will think of everything as it affects Alma first; and if he told you to-day that he wasn't going to consider himself out of the wood till the end of the year, it's exceedingly likely that he'll tell her the same now. She can't very well oppose him if he takes that line."

"But she can chuck him," said Telford, "and I rather think she might if he wanted to wait for this foolery. Alma's a pretty

high-spirited girl and I confess I'm nearly as sorry for her as I am for Bill himself."

"God send she doesn't do that," answered John. "It would be the end of his show if she did. He's wrapped up in her and she certainly understands one side of him better even than I do."

"She'll be patient, John. She loves him with all her heart, or she'd never have accepted him," answered Daphne. "It's quite likely she'll agree gladly to wait for him till this cup is taken from his lips. If such a dreadful thing had overtaken me, that's what I should have felt was right to all concerned."

By a coincidence it happened that Mrs. Wolf's words were coming true even while she uttered them.

William sat with his book in the woods, read for half an hour and then closed the pages, lighted his pipe and concentrated on the paramount matter in his mind. Then, while his thoughts were upon her and the things he felt it his duty to say, Alma herself appeared on the woodman's path beneath him. She came from the manor, and her lover guessed that she had called to see him and learned from Meadows where he was most likely to be found. In the fading sunset she walked, under trees already growing sere, for the aged, hanger oaks, beneath their pall of rank ivy and grey lichens, began to lose vitality. They were the last timbers to burgeon in spring; the first to cast down their leaves at a whisper of autumn.

William watched his sweetheart awhile before she saw him, admired her swift-footed progress and reflected how different was her attitude to the hangers from his own. To her they brought no fear, no dread; to him they presented a theatre of malfeasance and evil promise still so real that he considered any lonely sojourn as a test of mental courage.

Alma stood to look up at a venerable, wild cherry tree, and as she did so a breeze touched its crown and sent a little cloud of crimson leaves tumbling about her.

"It looked as though drops of blood were falling on you," said William a minute later after they had met and kissed. "Somehow I wasn't a bit surprised to see you, darling. My thoughts were full of you and I was coming on to the vicarage presently."

"You should have come this morning, Bill. After last night you knew I should want to hear anything there might be to hear."

"There was nothing to tell, or you would have been the first to learn it after myself. Not a sign of anything at the lake, and John is positive now that he was mistaken."

"What could be more precious to me than that?" she asked, but he shook his head.

"Only Johnny's love for me made him lie about it this morning, dearest. He's not a man to make a mistake of that sort, and in his usual, direct fashion, he came out with the truth last night. But it does not surprise me that he could find no verification this morning. I should have been much more astonished if he had. This thing belongs to a dimension where our eyes are not educated to read the signs. I was coming to have a talk to-night; but let us talk now instead."

He plunged into just the subject concerning which his aunt had guessed he might be thinking.

"It's our wedding, Alma. I'm faced with a rather crushing problem just now, and rather a hideous difficulty. If you all saw with me, you would appreciate the challenge as I do; but since not one of you does, that's what makes it hideous."

The girl instantly guessed what was coming, but did not interrupt him.

"You'll say," he went on, "that if you are all against me, I am far more likely to be wrong than right. I know it and I'm thankful to know it. I cling to it, Alma, like the proverbial drowning man to a straw. But, on the other hand I may only too certainly be right, and if I should be, the consequences don't bear thinking about. You know how this must look to me—not for my own sake but yours. I've a conviction, lying far beyond faith or reason, that the web thickens and the future may hide something very tremendous for me; but only infernal selfishness would make me drag you into it and perhaps ruin your beloved life as a result."

"And what's the worth of my love," she asked, "if it can't be counted upon to share any shadow of sorrow or danger threatening you, William? If I believed that any awful thing was going to happen to you, I'd say this: that if you didn't marry now—quickly so that I might share the trouble—I wouldn't marry you at all. I swear that solemnly; but as I have

the strength of my convictions and am sure that God would never let such evils as you dread overtake you, I will agree to anything you wish."

"I'll come along to the vicarage for a cup of tea with you and your father," he said. "Then he shall know, too, and we'll hear what he thinks. Come back with me now to the manor and I'll drive you home."

"He won't be very much surprised after last night," she answered; and when half an hour later they joined Mr. Boyd, he confirmed her view.

William stated his purpose and the vicar commented on it.

"We are to understand, Bill, that for reasons which appear pretty massive to you, your marriage should be postponed until the storm has burst, or all threat of it is past?"

The young man bowed his head.

"For Alma's sake, my friend," he answered.

"But what if she should oppose you? What if she admits of no possible storm that she is not brave enough and strong enough to share? What, if in her opinion, she can find power and inspiration and heavenly support to fight and conquer the dark forces in which you so unhappily believe, but the very existence of which she denies?"

"It is idle to deny them," replied William. "Faith takes many shapes opposed to each other. We are all children gathering our little pebbles of knowledge on the strands of life; but we must not quarrel with the other children who are bound by nature to choose other pebbles than those that force themselves upon us. Be sure this was no happiness for me—to postpone marriage until next year, but I feel it to be a solemn duty after last night. Well I know what Alma would be to me in a time of trial, but I am now convinced that some sort of ordeal awaits me which it would be monstrous and cowardly to allow her to face. Love cries out against such a thought. You and she may be right, please God, and this omen may pass like a storm leaving no mark of disaster behind it. There may even be no omen at all save in my own brain and heart; but the evidence is too clear to brush it away as of no account. Reason declares it impossible not to connect the prophecy with me. You must at least not question my motives, however mistaken you believe them to be."

"The last thing I should do, my dear Bill, or any one else who knows you," answered Mr. Boyd. "What does Alma say?"

"I hated the idea when first I heard it," she declared. "But what Bill tells you must reconcile me. I long to fight the accursed thing side by side with him; but still more I long for him to be at peace and know there is nothing left to fight."

"You set a limit to your tribulations?" asked the clergyman.

"Yes, Vicar, I am convinced that this year will see their consummation."

"So be it then," said Boyd. "May these phantoms vanish when our church-bells welcome the next."

"Be assured they will," answered the other, "and with them much else, if you are right, as I pray you may be."

William took his leave ere long after a meeting for the next day had been planned, and when he was gone, Boyd listened to Alma. He quickly learned that her lover's changed purpose troubled her but little. Her concern was with the reason for it, and she prompted her father to say things that he had already thought, but thus far kept to himself.

"I don't question this," she said. "People will call it odd that we should change our plans, but as things are with him, it was pretty certain he would. It's natural that normal beings can't realize how terrific it seems to Bill. He firmly believes that he's up against something too horrible for words; but what if he is right and we are wrong? Nobody ever doubted his sanity and I don't doubt it now; yet given his peculiar weakness, this prediction, so clear and definite, might well tend to put a strain on his mind."

"You free me to speak," answered her father. "I am, I hope, no more bigoted than yourself, Alma, and the powers of evil I recognize as well as another. I do feel there is some very real cause of alarm afoot for William. Something is happening, some net is being spread for his mind if not his body—or so it seems to me. But how are we to guess at the nature of it, the object of it, or the agencies responsible for it? That there is any supernatural malignity involved—that Satan has been empowered to tempt William to his destruction—is nonsense. Our dear Bill is not made of the stout stuff

of Job. But that some unseen, unguessed activity is at work, may be just conceivable. If such a thing were in operation it must be human, however, and the suggestion of that only lands us in another absurdity."

Alma admitted the truth of these remarks.

"It can only be one thing or the other, all the same," she continued, "and if you feel as I do, that some influence outside William himself is working against him and perhaps using his own peculiar weaknesses for that purpose, then the problem becomes harder still. For where could such an unfriendly influence come from? What reason has he ever given to anybody to be his enemy, or breed mental misery and distress for him? Everybody in touch with him is devoted to him and his circle is small. We know them all intimately and all have nothing to gain but everything to lose by any quarrel with him. I've asked him myself if he ever had an enemy, or can imagine the existence of such a person, and he assured me it was not so. 'It takes two to make an enemy, just as it takes two to make a friend,' he said. 'I shouldn't know how to set about making an enemy.' And I don't believe he would."

"We all inevitably make enemies if we have any character," answered her father. "To be wealthy and well born is to have enemies, whatever your personal quality may happen to be. But all that is beside the question. This problem, as I see it, lies far too near ourselves to solve. His own little circle is true as steel to William and, for that reason, unable to judge the situation in its true perspective. In my opinion we should lay the problem before an independent mind, and I am already exercising myself as to whom one might go—of course in strictest confidence."

Alma approved but was doubtful.

"Not a specialist," she said. "Specialists always see everything in terms of their own subject. A doctor would, very naturally, put it down to mental trouble; a detective might suspect crime. You see that there is no real evidence to set before anybody, and the average, quick-witted man would probably be impatient and say everything we had to tell could be explained were we bright enough to see the reason."

Boyd pondered before making any reply.

"As to evidence, I am inclined to disagree with you," he said at length. "There certainly appears to be little enough, but one piece is solid—in fact, the corner-stone of the whole, shaky edifice. I am reminded of it by remarks of your own, my dear."

"What is that?" asked Alma, but he would not tell her.

"Let me think a little longer before I proceed to action," he said. "One must set one's course very carefully in a delicate business such as this before one attempts to take it. I hate secrecy and all subterranean things but coal, yet the need for secrecy appears evident. If evil is at work against Sir William, it must be fought in such a way that the evil-doers may not guess it has been discovered. But, needless to say, there will be no secrets from you. When I determine what to do, I shall invite your criticism before I do it. At present the question is whom to enlist—whom to interest—whose aid to seek. I admit your point about specialists; but none the less some sort of specialist is indicated, for the reason that a mind unused to investigating obscurities, or abnormal happenings would be no better fitted to solve the puzzle than ourselves."

But time passed; nothing occurred to disquiet William for some weeks, and it appeared that the vicar had as yet ventured no private steps on his behalf. After much persuasion Malfroy consented to take his long-delayed holiday. Again and again he postponed it—now for the hay harvest, now for the corn harvest, now for the shooting; but his friend insisted at last, and John, protesting against the need, departed to spend a fortnight with his mother and sister. Cattle especially interested him. He had made some valuable purchases for the home farm and was, so he promised, going to breed plenty of winners.

At his wish Telford Wolf agreed to spend a fortnight in the manor, for all felt that William had far better not be left alone with none to distract him. His cousin came willingly enough, though a commission demanded attention to his own work by day. Alma also spent plenty of time at the manor. William was busy in the library at this season and it seemed that he had recovered his peace of mind to a considerable extent. He appeared more cheerful and avoided the subjects she most disliked. He spoke of their marriage also, was lovely and even regretted their change of plans; but she upheld them.

"You were right and wise, Bill," she assured him. "Both father and I thought so and never really doubted it. My only disappointment was to feel that I should not be quite close to you as soon as I had hoped."

Mrs. Wolf saw much of her nephew at this time also and agreed with Alma that he was more like himself.

"Telford suits him in some ways better than any of us," declared Daphne. "There's a good streak of the artist in Bill, and they have art in common. Telford, for all his cynical tongue, is quite soft-hearted really, and he does feel for poor Bill in a way I cannot pretend to."

"Bill is very fond of him and admires his art and understands what he's after," explained Alma. "He says that Telford and Johnny appeal to two different sides of his nature and balance each other."

There came an autumn night when the cousins sat in the billiards-room after dinner and Telford spoke of his present work.

"I'm designing some stained glass for a memorial window," he said. "Rather interesting, but there are coats-of-arms that bother me—doubtful sort of beasts. Are you still keen about heraldry? You used to be."

"Yes—heraldry is woven into history and throws light on it sometimes. Fascinating rather. I came across a sound old copy of John Guillim's *Display* only a fortnight ago in the library. I couldn't stop reading it. I'll lend it to you."

"Does he write about beasts?"

"Very learnedly—the most attractive section of the book. There is every beast of any importance in coats-of-arms and every bird and fish and reptile, too, for that matter. As for animals he divides them in different ways—first whole-footed creatures, like elephants and horses and so on, then cloven-footed things—kine and deer and goats and sheep and swine. Ravenous beasts are 'multifida' as to their feet and have four or more claws—lions and leopards—bears, wolves, hyenas and such like—what he calls the 'ravening kind.' Lions were the most popular in heraldry always—the royal beast—and wolves the most rare. There are very few wolf coats except our own.

"Then," continued William, who loved to detail his knowledge in receptive ears, "we come to a gentler order, 'less fell and harmful,' as the old chronicler puts it. This includes dogs—the dogs of his day: greyhounds, talbots and so on. Also the fox, the ermine, the sable, the coney and the squirrel. Then he goes on to egg-laying things; and even the meanest insects are not omitted in blazon. You'll find ants and spiders galore—and scorpions and everything."

"Hold on!" cried Telford. "This is all Greek to me. I'm not after any normal creature. My present client sports three wyverns rampant and doesn't like his present wyverns much. He thinks I may unearth, or design, a beast more suited to a church window."

"There ought to be some scope there," admitted William quite seriously. "Of course Guillim knows all about wyverns. He wasn't Pursuivant at Arms for nothing. After his huge survey of all that runs and flies and swims and crawls, the gallant man comes to what he calls 'exorbitant creatures—much more prodigious than all the former.'"

"Wyverns included?" asked Telford.

"Certainly—all the monsters you ever heard of—dragons, griffons, cockatrices, rere-mice, harpies and wyverns. There's quite a handsome wyvern figured, with wings and a forked tongue and knotted tail."

His cousin applauded.

"Stout fellow! Bring him forth, Bill," he begged. "I shan't sleep till I've seen him face to face."

But then something happened that promised to banish sleep for both of them. It was nearly twelve o'clock when William rose to fetch the book, and as he did so strange sounds broke the silence of a dark and peaceful night. They first heard a low, fitful wail, like a signal from far off.

After William had opened the french windows, the noise came clearer. It rose and fell, swiftly intensified and reached its crescendo in a howl. Then all became silent again. It was impossible to judge whence it had reached them from the darkness and they could only guess at the direction. William held it to be a long distance away. Telford thought it might be nearer. He showed the more alarm and prayed his cousin to come in and shut the stout door: but William remained upon the terrace.

"Damn it, Bill, that was something alive," asserted Telford somewhat needlessly. "I never heard such a filthy, creepy

sound in my life."

"Shut up," answered William, "and let me listen."

The other returned to the billiards-room and again begged his cousin to come in, but he did not answer, and some few minutes later both heard the distant howling again. It had grown fainter and was evidently more remote.

"It has gone up to the hanging woods," said William.

"What's gone there?" asked Telford, but again the other did not reply.

No further sound reached them and, after five minutes had passed, the listener came in and shut and locked the window. Telford was drinking when he did so.

"What in Hades was that?" he said.

"Do you doubt? Do you forget? Let me remind you. 'From scent to sound destruction steals.' That is clear enough."

"But how could a phantom wolf howl, my dear chap? If it was a wolf—though we don't know that it was—it had a pair of lungs, or it couldn't have made that ghastly row."

"You forget," repeated William. "The phantom wolf is expressly spoken of as 'incarnate.'"

He was very pale but manifested no sign of fear, though Telford could not conceal the shock from which he suffered.

"One thing's wrong about the omen anyway," he said rather enviously. "It hasn't made your heart knock at your ribs, Bill. You stand up to it like a spartan apparently. I shouldn't be so brave. Is it the courage of despair, or don't you feel the cursed thing is real?"

"You have always comprehended the prophecy better than the rest, and understood what this must mean to me better than the rest," answered William. "That is because, in your heart, you well know it to be real. I have nothing to pit against it, but the traditions of our race. There is no room here either for hope or despair. Endurance alone remains and I shall endure to the end. Now, if you have finished your whisky, we'll go to bed."

"Would you like to wake up Meadows?" asked Telford, but the other declined.

"Wake up nobody," he said. "Time enough to inquire in the morning. It may well be that the sound was heard by game-keepers on night duty, but nobody else save ourselves."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Exit Bob Meadows

Morning brought an early visitor, and while William and his cousin were still at breakfast, he heard that the head game-keeper waited to see him. George was sent for and told his tale. He had heard the disquieting noises himself, but seen nothing.

"Not that I could have seen anything five yards off me," said Stocker, "though gifted to see as well in darkness as any man. But it was a pitch-black night, and when I heard the yelling first time I had to light a lucifer match to read my watch. I was on duty going the rounds, Sir William, and just fetching through the hangers on my way to the preserves when I heard the first yelp. That was a bit after midnight, and the noise came from the open land below the woods, or so it sounded to me. A good long way off, but clear to be heard because of the still night."

"That was the first time, and it would have been closer to the manor than to you. We heard it distinctly in the billiards-room," explained William.

George nodded.

"Then I located it about right, Sir William. But the second time the creature gave tongue, it was a tidy step nearer to me and farther off from you I expect. I judged, then, that it must be got to the fringe of the timber and making for the hangers. I was leaving them by that time, and I can't tell where it went after, for it didn't howl again—not in my hearing. I've took two dogs up at cock-light this morning and roamed around; but they didn't pick up no scent and I could mark no trace."

"What do you suppose it was, George?" asked Telford.

"I put that self-same question to Absolam, when I got to the preserves, Mr. Telford. He was on watch over the sleeping pheasants, though the darkness made 'em safe enough on their roosts last night. I always say: 'No moon, no poaching.' But Absolam had heard the row, though a long ways from it, and being a very good man for natural history, I asked him if he could give it a name. 'It's a new one to me,' I told the man. But he'd heard something near enough to swear by—or so he said. When he was on his holidays, he went to Whipsnade Zoological to see the wild beasts, and he said the timber wolves made just that fashion of noise. 'Not a bark like a fox, nor yet a laugh like a hyena, George, but just a long-drawn-out howl,' said Absolam to me. So what we heard last night was a wolf, if Absolam ain't a liar."

Nobody else had heard the sound and there came no news of it from the household; but while the keeper and Telford thought it might be wise to issue some precaution, William forbade such a course.

"Report if anything comes to your notice, Stocker," he said, "but I do not think that anything will be likely to. There is no general danger in these incidents and you need not make special efforts to explain them. I understand them, and that's enough."

Stocker went his way without more speech and Telford soon left the manor for his studio. He begged that his cousin would write and describe the incident to Malfroy, but William declined to do so.

"No need at all," he explained. "It's only you people, who refuse to understand, that are puzzled and worried. And John refuses to understand, being built that way. He'd only come rushing back before I want him and organizing a hunt, or some equally futile thing. And don't you write either, Telford. Plenty of time to tell him when he returns."

The other promised, but after going home gave Daphne Wolf a very full account of the event.

"The solemn truth is that I felt the thing more than Bill," he told her. "It's the first time I've had any personal experience rising out of his prophecy, so it came as rather a shock to me. I heard a wolf howl, where by rights one had no more reason to expect such a thing than the roar of a tiger, or the trumpeting of an elephant. I forgot all about his blessed omen and was utterly staggered; but Bill took it in his stride. You might have thought it was no more than the screech of a white owl. He certainly turned very pale, but he didn't lose his nerve for a minute that I could see."

"He has been expecting it," she answered, "—the one thing we were pinning our hope upon, because we naturally assumed it couldn't happen. He'd got over the scent and begun to believe, or at least hope, that it must have been

something capable of a natural explanation; but he won't get over this. It will make him more positive than ever he's the victim of some horror."

"There's no doubt," said Telford, "because others heard it beside Bill and me. It was Absolam—an underkeeper—who knocked my argument on the head. I kept on telling William that he had no grounds for assuming we'd heard a wolf, seeing we'd neither of us ever heard one before; but Absolam has heard them. He knew the sound. There's no doubt it was a wolf, though how the devil such a thing has harboured here all these weeks without giving itself away I can't imagine."

"The day may bring news," thought Daphne. "I hope he'll be careful until more is known."

Elsewhere Alma had come to the manor for a morning with the books; but William met her in the drive and they went for a walk instead of working. He told his story with a sort of gloomy satisfaction.

"We heard it and two keepers heard it, and one of them knew what it was, so now I hope my convictions will carry more weight," he said. "I have suspected all along that everybody thought the trouble was personal and mental, Alma. Personal it is, as I always maintained, but not mental."

She felt very deeply impressed, and her interest kept her silent so long after hearing the story that William wondered.

"Well, and what do you think now, darling?" he asked.

"It was just because I was thinking so hard that I forgot to speak, Bill. Of course, this amply justifies much that you have suffered of late. But I can't see all the way with you yet. I never will believe, and more will my father, that purely physical senses, like scent and the power to utter sounds, can belong to anything to be called a ghost. There, I do think you can't be right. But if, through some extraordinary accident, hidden from us, a wolf has got into Stormbury, or for reasons also hidden from us, a wolf has been deliberately brought here and set free, then a very different problem faces you—mysterious enough in all conscience, but not incapable of rational explanation."

"Who suggested that?" he asked.

"I thought of it myself," she said, "and what you say makes it all the more possible. We'll grant that what you heard means a live wolf, Bill. Then surely we stand on firmer ground, for given a live wolf, it must live. The keepers ought to be able to hunt it down or trap it, or shoot it. This new portent, as you feel it to be, may have no connection with the first. The wolf you heard last night may have escaped, from somewhere, in which case you'll quickly learn about it; but even if you get no news, there is still the other possibility—horrible and outrageous enough but inside reason. If only I could help you to face this on the safe ground of reason, dear Bill, I should be so thankful. There are plenty of good friends in the world who could aid you then; but none who can serve you, except in their prayers, while you refuse to give reason a chance."

"I would jump at any rational intervention," he answered, "just as a sufferer smitten with fatal sickness is willing to try any quack remedy when the doctors can serve him no more. Reason is often only such a quack medicine, Alma—a physic that many despairing spirits find useless to heal their torment and throw to the dogs accordingly."

"You might try it," she told him, but he shook his head.

"Why? Consider what you have just said—the material suggestions you make, dear love. You suggest an escaped wolf, or a wolf brought here and set free by human agency for my undoing. Can reason offer no better alternatives than that? No, no, Alma. But give me your prayers by all means: I'd hope more from them than your reason."

"You have them, by day and night, Bill, and I'll tell you something you also have: my faith and sure belief that they are going to be answered."

"That is the only wing for any prayer," he said, "the trust of the soul that prays it. As for me, I go forward, and my thoughts are concentrating now upon the nature of this visitant. They are very strange thoughts, Alma."

"Tell me."

"Not yet. I'm not sure where they may lead. A wolf, you reasonable people argue, can only be a wolf—a ferine beast of the forest inviting destruction and easy to destroy. But there is another method of regarding it—a vastly more terrific

approach. You say 'Let us find out if a wolf is missing.' But perhaps the true quest would be to learn whether a man or woman is missing."

He smiled and took her arm as he spoke, and Alma knew her efforts vain. A flood of words were upon her tongue, but she could not utter them.

"You mustn't say or think things like that, beloved," she implored. "It's wicked, Bill—I know it's wicked and playing into the hands of evil."

He changed the subject.

"Bob's down on his luck this morning. I tell him everything and rather admire the dogged pluck of the man. He's like Malfroy in a way—a rank materialist and wants to be fighting something, or somebody, on my behalf. Such people are lost when the opposing forces will not yield to direct attack and present no front at which they can batter. But Meadows is uneasy this morning—you might almost say he was showing the white feather. That's very unlike him."

"Very unlike him," agreed Alma, "but the bravest men physically are often weak before mysteries. To Bob your word is the law and the prophets always, and if you've given him to understand what you understand yourself—that nothing can be done for you by those who love you best, then it's natural that he should feel a bit cowed."

"Johnny's due back on Monday," he said. "I shan't write about this to him, and I told Telford not to do so. He'd only come tearing to me if he knew; but I shall be interested to hear what he thinks. There's no evading it and I hope now he may be more disposed to see my side."

"I know what he'll want," she answered. "He'll want to comb out the place and hunt the hangers and rout into every hole and cavern in the cliff."

"In all probability I should not permit it," he declared. "I have not decided as yet, but feel pretty sure."

Alma was right, for when the land agent returned and heard of William's experience he did not hesitate. They argued long, and the younger would not for some time consent to the proposed systematic hunt. Nor would he offer reasons. Behind his back, however, John had already given George Stocker very definite orders. The keeper on his own responsibility had directed his staff to carry guns and shoot at sight any big and dog-like animal that came within range.

Johnny kept close to William after his return and made him promise for friendship not to loiter in the hangers at dusk alone during the shortening days and until the hunt should be carried out.

"After all, it's only your hunch against everybody else," he said. "You think nothing can happen outside your blasted prophecy, and the end only concerns yourself; while I think, and every sensible person thinks, that now, since there's strong reason to believe in your wolf, we ought at least make some effort to bring it to bay. It may be a hundred miles away by now, or on the other hand, it may be lying here where the cover is good."

"I'd rather hoped you'd have looked at things from a different plane after this," said William, "but you're like the rest: can't see beyond the point of your material nose, old man. So let's be practical and try out your theory. You know that as soon as this happened Telford started a far-reaching inquiry. We did that before for that matter, after my birthday. And what came of it? Nothing. Telford has been buzzing round shouting 'wolf, wolf' to no purpose of course. Nobody keeps tame wolves as a hobby and therefore nobody has lost a tame wolf. If your theory was right, we should have no difficulty in tracing this thing, and the fact that we cannot logically proves your theory wrong. The sole alternative would be that somebody unknown has been at the trouble to bring a wolf here from abroad and set it free in Stormbury; and, as a materialist, I don't imagine you would admit that."

"Strange things happen," answered Malfroy, "but when you talk so, Bill, I'm bound to be with you more or less. Not to believe in your demons, but to feel the arguments for any wolf at all are very thin. We often hear strange sounds in the dead of night when we lie in bed, sounds quite impossible to explain, which leave no signs when morning comes, so why shouldn't we hear strange sounds out of doors the reason for which is beyond us?"

"You will probably hear the sound yourself presently," foretold William.

"Anyway, a hunt could do no harm, Bill. If it's a ghost, we can't hurt it, and if it's 'incarnate' as you say, then we can."

But the other declined to give permission.

"I am still in doubt for deep and pregnant reasons, John," he replied. "You may yet know them, but I hesitate to tell you or Alma, or anybody, because none of you would understand."

The event proved both young men more or less mistaken, however, for while they talked that night together, it seemed that lupine murder was being committed in the park. A herdsman found one of the little fallow deer mangled with its throat torn out in a fern brake.

"Proof positive at last," said Malfroy as he inspected the dead creature with his friend, George Stocker and others; but William made no immediate reply. He directed that the dead deer should be left undisturbed for the present and no attempt made to remove it until later in the day. Then, alone with John, he returned to the subject and left the other much bewildered.

"I had hoped that nothing of this sort would have happened," he said, "and that my personal convictions might be kept to myself. Even now they will be, so far as the staff's concerned, and they must naturally be mystified; but that can't be helped. You have got to know of course. You will want to get on with the hunt now and argue the quicker the better, but I decided last night, before this discovery was made, to institute no sort of hunt. Any such attempt would in my view be impious."

The elder stood still and stared.

"Now you actually know the brute's in striking distance?" he asked.

"I have always felt certain that it was in striking distance," answered William, "but had my grave doubts about attempting to strike. Now I doubt no more. In the first place it would be wrong to do so, and a lesser reason is that it would be utterly useless."

"At least we can try. You don't want the creature to go on living and tormenting you if we can run it down and kill it I imagine?"

"We can't kill it."

"That's damned nonsense, my dear chap. Things that can kill, can themselves be killed. Here's a venomous, flesh-and-blood beast that has destroyed a hind and made a meal of her. I don't know whether wolves come back to a kill like feline creatures, but at least I hope you'll let me watch near enough—"

"I forbid it, John. I definitely forbid it. You're busy now and so am I; but to-night I'll try and explain to you, and you must steel yourself to hear some deep and terrible things."

"That won't be any novelty," answered the elder glumly. "God knows where you're going to land your self and Stormbury over this racket."

When the day was done and the friends had gone as usual to the billiards-room, it was Malfroy who returned first to the subject. He lighted his pipe and looked into the fire by which they sat.

"Don't think I know nothing and care nothing," he said. "This business is ageing me and knocking the joy of life out of me, like everybody else here. I know a lot more about wolves than you can know, because I've seen them and shot them and lived in a land where they still continue to be a curse. The wolf is the symbol of death to man and beast over thousands of miles. The Russians regard him as their bitter, unrelenting enemy, and have so done since time immemorial. He stands for everything that is vile and bloody and foul, mentally and physically. To call a fellow-creature a wolf-man, or wolf-woman, is the direst insult you can pay them."

"Who knows how many there may be?" sighed William. "History is full enough of wolf-men, but you seldom read of an authentic wolf-woman."

"Listen to figures," continued John. "The real things are bad enough without making devils of them. It is estimated that there are a hundred and fifty thousand wolves in the Soviet Union, and they are ceaselessly hunted and slain with a price on their heads. They kill stock annually to the value of twenty million roubles—sheep, horses and cattle. They swarm in the Siberia, Orenburg, Voronezh and Kirof districts, and within fifty miles of Moscow and Leningrad. The toll of

children is immense. The grey wolf of White Russia is so like a dog that the poor kids are deceived until it is too late."

"You gave my orders, John?"

"Oh yes. George Stocker and another are going to keep watch by the deer, but it is understood they won't shoot anything that may turn up unless it attacks them."

"It won't do that. And now listen to me, though I rather despair of making you understand. Of course all you tell me about wolves is perfectly true, as far as it goes. There can be no doubt that they have been the chosen scourge of God and employed by Him as a punishment upon erring humanity: that is an admitted fact; but I am concerned here, with what is also natural—a process based on divine laws whose operation we have never discovered, and may never be permitted to discover—the terrible, secret laws of were-wolfery."

"Can you honestly cling to that stuff and still drag in God?" asked Malfroy.

"It is because I am honest that I do, my dear Johnny," replied William. "It would be utterly dishonest and unworthy of any intelligent person to try and explain lycanthropy away. You might as well try to explain away the marbles of the Parthenon, or the light of the sun. This thing is as old as recorded time and confronts a serious student in every epoch. Crowds of witnesses support it. There is no disputing such a proven certainty, and to me the queer fact is, not lycanthropy, but to find here, among those I know best in the world, quite half a dozen educated people all obstinate enough to disbelieve it and imagine a world-wide truth to be no better than a myth."

"Now," continued the young man, "I am coming to the point and going to answer your objections. A lycanthrope, John, is usually one who, by his own evil and abandoned nature, has earned his fate. But he may possibly be guiltless of evil himself and no more than a chosen instrument, or tool of some divine purpose. Many lycanthropes, after their discovery and before their execution by fire, have confessed their dreadful sentence to be just; but scores of the unhappy creatures have been caught and slain for wolfish crimes of which they were perhaps entirely innocent. Ignorance has been the mother of murder since the world began, and still continues to be; but I will not have the murder of a possible fellow-creature on my conscience; and if this being now among us is indeed a lycanthrope doing its Maker's will, then even an attempt to oppose it might be a fearful crime. In a word I believe that such a creature may be here—a sane, sentient, conscious thing that was once human and may even yet be restored to the ranks of humanity when its work is done. And so believing, I will allow no ignorant hand to be lifted against it."

Silence fell between them, and John's only comment was to shrug his shoulders and light his pipe, which had gone out. Then he asked a somewhat idle question, aware that serious argument with a fanatic must be vain.

"And what are these precious monsters like, Bill? What would you expect to see if you ran into them?" he inquired. But William regarded the question as entirely reasonable.

"I can visualize them pretty well," he declared, "and I have seen them vividly in dreams. It often strikes me as significant that I used to dream of wolves continuously in childhood. A lycanthrope would be neither all animal nor all human, John, but a being combining the physical and mental attributes of man and wolf. That is logical and to be expected from 'a hybrid of the material and immaterial,' as this metamorphosis has been aptly called. The lycanthrope has a lupine head with human eyes glaring out of it. They possess a human body and probably paws and claws for hands and feet. I conceive them as going on all fours when making speed, but prone to walk and stand upright in the fashion of a man, or great ape, at times. In his dreadful picture, 'Les Lupins,' the artist, Maurice Sands, so depicts a group of them holding moonlight converse under a churchyard wall."

"The Lord protect me from seeing them then," said John, "—and you too, Bill."

"You are little likely to, or anybody else save myself, Johnny," answered William. "But what must be, must be. You will have to grant that truism some day, though you seem to find the thought so complicated where I'm concerned."

"You'll make me believe in one thing if you carry on much longer at this gait, and that's possession—what they call 'demonic possession,' Bill," answered the other very seriously. "Only it's got another name nowadays," he added.

But William smiled and shook his head.

"I am not mad, most noble Johnny," he answered.

Morning brought news that the game-keepers had neither seen nor heard any unfamiliar sight or sound during their vigil, and Malfroy, who took his breakfast before William was down, paid an early visit to Dr. Peters, unknown to his friend. He told the story of his recent conversation and began with an apology.

"Last time I spoke to you about Bill, I was rude, Doctor," he said, "but now I begin to fear there is more in his trouble than I thought."

He related William's opinions and then asked a question.

"Is there really any such thing? If there is, then, of course, it's a deadly sort of mental trouble and only a reality in that connection."

"Lycanthropy, or wolf-madness, is a recognized condition," answered the old doctor, "and to be plain, it is a form of insanity as you say. The thing is a survival and very rare now, but in benighted days when it was more common, people set it down to evil spirits, as they did most madness. The physicians of those days describe the symptoms and prescribed ridiculous remedies. A lycanthrope suffered from extreme melancholia; he wasted and his eyes became ferocious, his habits bestial and repulsive. He developed what we call 'four-footed manners' in the West Country, and was believed to live a nocturnal life which took him for choice to the burying-ground and the company of the dead.

"Now Sir William makes no secret of his interest in all this sorcery," continued Peters. "He talks quite openly about the were-wolves, and certainly believes in their existence. He assures me that literature is full of them and quotes from his authors to prove it. He read me passages from English writers too—Webster and Ford and other gloomy classics that take these gentry for granted. But this you tell me is something new. I have not seen him lately. On the whole it is natural, however, that he should think like this. It is logical, in a crazy sort of way, that if he believed the unknown visitor was lycanthropic, he should assume that it has some remains of humanity about it, and therefore hesitate to destroy it. Because, as he has told me, these creatures under certain conditions, may be ultimately saved and return to human form."

"You wouldn't say that William himself was a lycanthrope?" asked Malfroy.

"Emphatically, no. Don't torture yourself with any such heart-rending thought, my dear Johnny. He believes in them, and consequently this wretched jingle of rhymes is badly on his nerves for the moment, but I apprehend complete recovery after the end of the year—I do indeed."

"Meantime we can do nothing?"

"Only distract his mind and leave him alone as little as possible."

"He's taken to dining in his room lately and not coming down again. Not often, but sometimes he will."

"Oppose him then and make a point of going up to smoke with him after dinner," advised the doctor. "I shall invite myself to dine next time I see him."

It was after lunch that Malfroy heard William's new trouble. Bob Meadows waited on his master as usual, and when they were alone and the meal ended, John learned that the valet had given notice.

"What the devil for?" he asked blankly. "How can he justify it? Where would the fool be without you?"

"I'm hurt in a way myself," admitted the other. "But perhaps not as surprised as everybody else is likely to be. I've always regarded Bob as a sort of *alter ego*—much more than a servant—and I'm afraid I may have given him more confidences than were good for him."

"If you've talked to him as you talked to me last night, I can understand he's got his tail down a bit; but to go! I'd never have imagined he'd show a yellow streak."

"Not that exactly," explained William. "I had it out with him of course. He's brave enough; but he's rather like you yourself, Johnny: the inaction has touched his nerves and he hates to be powerless to take up the cudgels for me. If he could put up a fight and risk personal danger, or try to kill something, or do any mortal deed to help me, he thankfully would; but an experience such as this casts him down and even makes him fear for his own wits. Not for peril to his body, mark you; but he has the normal human dread of any peril overtaking his mind. He feels that I am under the influence of the evil eye. He told me frankly that this impression gains ground in Stormbury; and what more natural if it is

so?"

"Something must be done and an effort made to keep him," declared John. "This bothers me a lot on your account, Bill, because you'd hate a new man messing about you just while this incubus is on your shoulders. At least he ought to stick it out till the end of the year, by which time these shadows will swallow themselves up and you'll soon be yourself again. I'll talk to Meadows myself and try to show him what an ass he is."

But William would not permit this.

"You cannot argue with a man who gives you notice," he answered. "His reason for going was all that concerned me, and I don't quarrel with it. Somebody will be the gainer because he's a splendid chap. He talked about the possibility of perhaps returning to me some day, but I told him that would never be. I must get a new man, for I can't do without one, but I won't make the mistake of turning him into a friend again."

At a later hour William visited at the vicarage and told Alma and her father of Bob's defection. They were very sorry for him but scarcely showed the surprise he had expected.

"He will live to regret it possibly," said Boyd, "but unless we know a man's motives, we cannot criticize his actions, Bill. I have a high opinion of Meadows. He comes to church on principle—a course much in his favour."

"It needed some tremendous impulse to make him leave you—I feel sure of that," said Alma. "He almost venerates you in his quiet way, Bill. And everybody will turn against him now and say he's a rotter to go away."

"Well, I can't keep him," he answered. "Sorry as I am to lose him. I must get another, and the sooner Bob goes, the better for his peace of mind, poor chap."

"Regarded as a valet," said the vicar, "no doubt he can be replaced, though he always seemed so much more. But there are no doubt as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. I may be able to help you there unless you have already determined on whom Bob's mantle is to fall."



CHAPTER NINE

The Spoor

More than a fortnight had passed and brought with it a new valet for William, but no further manifestation to disquiet him. Then came a morning in early November when Alma Boyd kept a promise and walked to the manor for luncheon. Work in the library had been suspended for a time, because William declared himself weary of handling books and anxious to read some for a change. He was in good spirits again since nothing further happened to depress him; but he had felt the loss of Meadows and still bewailed it. For the moment he devoted time to music instead of billiards; while Johnny, for whom the great organ meant noise and no more, would sit and listen, concealing the fact that he missed his game and was not a little bored.

Now Malfroy met Alma on her way, turned from his own and walked awhile beside her. They had not spoken for some time, and John was glad to report his friend as fairly cheerful, but much too quiet and self-absorbed.

"You do him more good than anybody, of course," he told her. "I can only keep a close eye upon him and be with him as much as possible; but one has to be tactful and not let him guess that I watch as closely as I do. He's very independent, and if he thought I was guarding him, or any such thing, he'd resent it."

The girl made no comment, but asked a question.

"How does he like his new valet, John?" she inquired.

"Too soon to say, and that reminds me, I meant to ask how the vicar knew about him, but never did. By chance, two days after Mr. Boyd mentioned him to Bill, I found his advertisement for a place in the *Morning Post*."

"So Bill told me. When father was last in London he saw Lord Branksome, who is a very old friend of his, and he mentioned that his man had left him, much to his regret. He said Mr. Callender was an invaluable person."

"I wrote for references to his lordship himself," answered John, "and he replied himself, and said that William would be lucky to get this chap for his body servant, so we'll hope the new man's going to change the luck."

"Why was he leaving?" she asked.

"I inquired as to that point. Only because Callender's doctor thought London doesn't suit the gentleman's health and advised him to get work in the country for the winter."

"Not an invalid I should hope?"

"Anything but—a big, powerful man in the prime of life with valet written large all over him. Says he gets a touch of asthma occasionally in London, but none in the country."

They spoke of William, and John hoped that the worst was probably past.

"If we can only get to the end of the year without any happenings," he said. "It seems impossible to imagine anything else can crop up to keep him in touch with his 'omen' as he calls it. On the law of averages there can hardly be any more of these coincidences; and if we once break his mind away, it oughtn't to return to them."

"What does he expect to happen next?" she asked. "It might help us to help him if we knew that. But I never mention the subject unless he does, and he hasn't spoken at all about it for several days now."

"He has to me, Alma. He rather likes to brood over the thing, word by word. He reckons that he ought to hear the creature howling again soon."

"Why?"

"Because of the words of the rhyme: 'Nearer and nearer, louder yet.' That's where he's got to in his opinion."

"Well, it can't howl any more if it's gone. My father feels pretty sure it must have, and so does George Stocker. He says it would have killed again by this time."

"The only argument against that is that we should have got in reports from elsewhere if it's still on the warpath. Bill has taken a metaphysical turn lately, which leaves me guessing of course, but seems to comfort him. He says that reality is hidden in a garment of unreality and that appearance is our substitute for reality, because reality lies outside man's mental endowment to recognize. By illusion we live: it is the air that our minds breathe, otherwise they would suffocate. And so on and so on. All the veriest tripe, poor dear chap, but I listen and try to pretend I understand."

"So long as it comforts him and keeps him calm," she said. "And it may not be 'tripe' as you call it, Johnny. If he could convince himself that there is nothing real about these appearances—that even the verses that started this spectral wolf were no more real than the rest of the legends and hob-goblin stories—much would be gained."

"I know that jolly well," he replied. "Reality is only what we choose to make real, and recognize and welcome as real. But who can be logical and true to himself? Too often what we decide to ignore as unreal, will prove its reality in a pretty staggering way and make us pay a heavy price for our mistake."

"Nobody has a greater respect for reality than I have," she assured him.

Then they parted and presently Alma found her sweetheart, curled up with a book and pipe, in his private sitting-room upstairs. He was re-reading a favourite work, Lucius Apuleius—his version of *The Golden Ass*. Sir William held Lucian's method of telling the world-famous tale far too frivolous, for there is nothing the mystic dislikes so cordially as the sceptic. But now he cast away his book, caressed her with delight and buried his long nose in the bunch of violets that she had brought him.

"To show you what the vicarage garden can do," she said. "You have none to touch them."

"It was your hand that touched them and made them perfect," he answered.

She spoke of Malfroy.

"Just met Johnny. He says you are growing metaphysical in your old age, Bill; and what does that mean exactly? Too much book-learning and not enough fresh air?"

He laughed at that.

"You can divide people into two classes only," he told her. "And you can divide nations in the same way—those who have reached to a metaphysical understanding of existence and those who have not. You may love the latter, but you can only respect the others."

"As long as you find it peaceful, Bill."

"Disconcerting at first, because it reveals the shaky foundation of what we have always thought real and solid and enduring, though certainly helpful to ultimate peace."

"Father and I are realists," she said, "but you must go on loving us, even though you can't respect us any more."

"He can be jolly metaphysical when he likes—so can you. A parson must needs be, because his business demands it, and Christianity is the most metaphysical religion that man has ever tried. But reality is merely a point of view. We see convictions animating our neighbours that mean nothing to us; and they watch and wonder, no doubt, to mark us running our little show on lines they think hopelessly mistaken."

She admitted this.

"That's why father says there can never be a real League of Nations," said Alma. "He admits that if our faith was universal and a reality in the true sense of the word, then the nations would have the same standards of action and the same philosophy of righteousness. But they have not. Religion is actually a barrier, because there are no differences so bitter as those that it creates, and the worst of all appear between sects that belong to the same faith. Good-will is impossible without agreement on principles."

"That's what makes the Indian question so hopeless," he answered. "That's why in Russia and Germany they are trying to banish all supernatural faith from the heart of the coming generations and give them national enthusiasm instead. Something stupendous will come of that. Meantime, as Boyd knows, the nations cannot frame any universal policy. There

is no moral standard of righteousness common to civilization, as Japan and Italy have recently shown us; and until there is, a League of Nations can only be a glowing example of another human illusion.

"We simply don't know enough to say that anything we receive through our senses is real," continued William, "and we know no other channels of perception. Rationalists and realists and all the rest of them have got to admit that; and it's a comforting thought—quite soothing if you've got a brain and no particular axe to grind which demands belief in something. I'll show you what I mean. There was a Chinese sage who had an interesting adventure in his sleep. He dreamed that he was a butterfly enjoying all the delights and delicacies of butterfly existence. But what happened to this sagacious person when he woke? A perfectly sound and logical conclusion, and for the rest of his life he went in doubt whether he was a man who had dreamed himself a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming it was a man. It was quite impossible to convince him either way."

"And what did he find particularly soothing about that?" asked Alma.

"The sense of non-importance—the large perspective," he answered "—the unreliability of data—the rents in that patchwork we call reality and clothe ourselves withal. Often, when looking back into memory, we ask ourselves if that really happened, or did we dream it. What after all does it matter?"

"Well, now tell me what I am going to have for lunch," she said. "But of course you wouldn't know."

"I haven't finished yet," he answered. "Listen to this and you'll see what I'm getting at. Last night I dreamed that I was a wolf. Don't let that trouble you. It isn't the first time and it didn't trouble me."

He chattered on, but she was not deceived and knew that behind a pretence of indifference he suffered new anxieties. As yet William had not dwelt on dreams, or associated his own person with the mysteries he felt to have overtaken him. His new suspicions, therefore, came as a painful surprise to Alma and she implored him to keep them to himself, or take them to some eminent physician in London. But he declined the suggestion.

"The future is not in my hands," he said, "and all the skill and science in the world cannot alter it. One stands, as it were, outside oneself and watches, as we watch an actor on the stage. To fight, or offer opposition to events long predicted, would be vain and undignified. And none can fight for me. It was the consciousness of that which drove away Bob Meadows and makes John Malfroy so savage and impatient. Of you all, Telford is the only one who begins to see the inevitability of the future. His attitude is just. I regard myself now as a human scapegoat—a victim under sentence for crimes of which he is innocent, though for which it may be just that he shall bear the burden and pay the price. Only so can those wicked actions be expiated and the criminals win to pardon and peace. Here, in fact, is something deeper than the tragedies of the Greeks and their dreadful dilemmas: in a sense the situation reflects the Divine Atonement itself. And that is why I try to face it with perfect resignation."

Alma gasped and stared at him unhappily. Then she steadied herself, put her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"Bless you, darling," she said. "That's all very fine; but where are the crimes? You know perfectly well that Telford went into the family archives and read the history of your people from the year one. Whatever they were, it is certain that a more law-abiding lot never pottered along doing their duty from generation to generation. They were badly broken at the Commonwealth, but they came up smiling again afterwards."

"It may well be that we shall never know of these secret infamies," he answered. "Most old races, such as mine, have pages that no chronicler guessed at. At any rate the omen is definite and must be based on facts known to him who wrote it. To deliberately invent a curse, in order that somebody as yet unborn shall suffer purely imaginary agonies, would argue the craft and senseless malignity of a devil."

"So it would," she admitted, "but I don't see why that theory should be less worthy of support than your own."

"No; the agents of this thing are certainly hidden from me, just as I was hidden from the writer of the prophecy, but we must not pretend that the writer was a fiend in human shape, Alma. Once doubt the source of this great affliction, or attribute it to the powers of evil, and I should find myself lacking any moral armour to wear, when I face it. I must believe that profound and subtle issues of divine purpose are involved, rather than that I am the plaything of elementals who know not God."

"They might not be so elemental," she answered thoughtfully. "For my part I'd much rather fight honest devils than take it

lying down. But if you can't see the possibility that you might find something to fight if you looked for it, of course none can help. Father frankly admits that there is a sinister spirit brooding over Stormbury. He feels it in the air. He is acutely conscious of it; but he quite refuses to admit anything pre-ordained or supernatural about it. He does believe some unknown forces may be at work; but he doesn't see heaven behind them by any means."

Alma broke off.

"Drop it, like a dear man, and come out into the air," she begged. "I want a big bunch of your arum lilies for the altar vases on Sunday, so let me pick them now."

He obeyed, but continued to dwell upon his mortal interests with an egotism that was new in him and marked as much as anything the abiding turmoil of his thoughts. Alma fell silent, though it meant some restraint for her to do so; but she was not listening to William's word-spinning: her thoughts had concentrated on something already spoken.

Conversation turned upon more normal subjects, while the girl picked a sheaf of arum lilies and Telford Wolf arrived for luncheon. He had finished his drawings and began to feel sure that the manufacturers of stained glass would fail him.

"One ought to do it all oneself," he said. "We've lost the art of making stained glass and you've only got to compare the mediæval masterpieces with modern stuff to see the gulf between. I'd go into it if I had time and money; and if you decide to put up a swell window to the memory of Uncle Porteus, Bill, you'd better let me work on it. Glass is about the only craft I haven't tried my hand at."

Alma and John supported the memorial window, but William still went in doubt. He argued now for another sort of monument on principle—a sum to be left to pious uses in his father's name. When lunch was over Johnny drove them to Telford's studio, and as they went the artist commented upon an incident.

"I see your new man waits upon you at meals, as Bob used to do," he said.

"He does," answered William, "and the fact shows in a way that he's human and not quite the robot I thought him at first. He's a gorgeous valet—almost too good to be true. Shaves exquisitely, has a memory of iron, and moves soundlessly. But the man behind the machine did not appear, and I began to think there could be nothing there beyond professional perfection. Now, however, he has shown a gleam of humanity."

"He looks like a bishop," said Alma.

"Many valets have a clerical cut," declared Telford, "and many bishops suggest classy menservants."

"What did Callender do to suggest human frailty?" asked Alma.

"They talk in the servants' hall and he heard all about poor Bob and what he used to do for me; so he asked if he might have the privilege of waiting on me at table too. I was surprised and rather touched, for it's extra work he was not expected to undertake. I said that he might if he liked and he was gratified."

"He waits beautifully," said Alma. "How does Thorpe like him?"

"Both Thorpe and Mrs. Budge think very highly of him. Thorpe says that he's a most superior man and has got a touch. When Thorpe tells you anybody has 'got a touch,' it means they satisfy him completely. Needless to say very few of us have got a touch here. But Callender appears to possess one. I really know nothing much about him yet, except that he's a bachelor. He's strong and takes tremendous walks and says the air is going to suit him."

They admired Telford's cartoons and hoped that his colour might be successfully re-produced. Then John went to work and, leaving the studio, William drove Alma to the parish church, where she set her lilies on the altar. They considered the windows together, and she told him that a lofty eastern window above his family pew was that which should be glorified; but she bade him think twice before giving such an important commission to Telford.

"He'd never forgive me if I didn't," said William. "He'd make it a personal slight and hate me for ever. You may say that hell has no fury like an artist scorned."

"Then do something else that he can't quarrel with," she said. "Time enough, I don't think you want a window anyway."

"Time enough if you are right; no time at all if I am," he answered. "Do you know that six little weeks will see us to the end of the year?"

"The most hateful year I ever lived, Bill. I'm longing to hear the bells toll it out and ring in the new one."

"They may toll out more than the old year, my beloved."

"No more of that," she begged. "I've had quite enough of that for one day. The dear old, patient bells aren't going to toll you out for many a long year, and when they do, they can toll me out too. As a matter of fact I'm feeling a great deal happier about you. Love makes some people anxious and miserable all the time; but not me. I love you so much, Bill, and take such utter joy in you, darling, that it would be contrary to nature for anything to part us."

"I like to hear you talk so," he said, "and why should you be wrong? If it were contrary to nature for lovers to part, we never could part or be parted. But unfortunately it isn't."

They drank tea at the vicarage presently and the debate on the window was renewed. Then William motored himself home, having enjoyed a brief measure of peace that fate swiftly destroyed.

Malfroy for once proved unusually self-centred and silent at dinner—so much so that when they were alone his friend asked him if anything had gone wrong.

William, though not a sportsman, chose from the first to respect paternal traditions. Hounds met at the manor from time to time and the fields received the usual hospitality, while shooting-parties were also given as of yore, and thanks to Johnny's initiative, the sport had much improved.

Now he answered William.

"I went to see Stocker about the Saturday shoot after I left you," he said, "and met him just coming to see me. There are two bits of news, and I should have attached no great importance to the first had it not been for the second. Absolam tells George that he heard the wolf last night round about two o'clock, and he judged its howling to come from the hangers. According to his report the brute gave tongue twice and then was silent. Well, I shouldn't have mentioned that, because Absolam is rather a nervy chap and might easily fancy he saw or heard something in the dead of night, especially now the wolf story is common property. But George Stocker went straight to the old wood as soon as he learned about it, and at noon to-day, when the light was good, he spotted what he swears is the clear and definite trail of some big beast. He finds deeply dented impressions of claws, and from their size and distance apart, he says the creature must be as big as a Great Dane. The spoor goes over a bit of mud at the side of that wet place where poor Sir Porteus fell, and the impressions show the thing was heading for the cliffs, where it might well have found a den of some sort in the holes there. Stocker had kept his spaniel off the tracks, so as not to foul them, but he laid her on to the last of them, where they end on hard ground, and thought she might pick up a scent. But she wasn't interested—scent cold by then no doubt."

"Did you go up?" asked William.

"No, Bill; it was turning dusk when I met George, and it would have been too dark to study anything by the time I got there. But he'd covered up the spoor very carefully, and I told him that we'd meet him there at ten to-morrow morning."

"Would you know if it were a wolf, John?"

"Not to swear to. I've seen plenty of their impressions on hard snow, but never examined them. They would be pretty much like those of a big dog I imagine. In fact, but for other circumstances, one would assume they were left by a fox-hound last time they met here; but Stocker says they are quite fresh."

William made no comment for some time. Then he spoke.

"It's not exactly what I expected," he said, "but there may be plenty of unexpected things hidden for me during the next few weeks."

John had been knocking the billiard-balls about to lighten the gravity of his story and now the other picked up a cue. The subject was dropped, but William showed its effect upon him by playing much below his form.

They visited the hangers next morning and Stocker uncovered his evidence. It consisted of heavy, clawed pad-marks to

the number of eight or ten set in pairs at a distance of some ten feet apart. Malfroy examined them very closely and pronounced them too large for any hound.

"I'd have said they were too large for a wolf also," he declared. "The grey wolves I know are not so big as deer hounds. There may be greater wolves, but I never heard of any. This creature was galloping and had a huge stride. He must have come up here at a tremendous pace."

"Have any of the deer suffered?" inquired William, but George reported no further loss in the park.

"'Twas the same beast no doubt," he said, "though he can't do nothing more against the herd."

"Where do you count it may be harbouring?" asked John; but the keeper could form no guess.

"I've worked over the cliff holes thrice," he answered, "along with the terriers and that cairn bitch, 'Biddy,' that won the 'Heart of Hell' cup for the old master three years ago. She worked as only she can work, and got out a dog badger so heavy again as herself; but she didn't run into no wolf, else she'd have died before she'd left him."

"The thing was heading over the hills and away we'll hope," said John. "Perhaps good riddance, Bill."

CHAPTER TEN

"Nearer and Nearer—Louder Yet"

Malfroy directed that the spoor should be carefully preserved, and during the business of the shooting party a few days later, after luncheon in the coverts, took two experienced guns to see it. They were hunters of big game and he desired their opinion. Neither could throw any light, however, and one of them indicated, to Johnny's annoyance, that more was known of the Stormbury mystery than he imagined.

"I've shot most things," he said, "but by all accounts, Malfroy, you're up against a were-wolf here, and that's big game off my beat."

Johnny protested and the sportsman explained.

"No need to be annoyed, my dear chap," he declared. "You can't keep a racy item of news like this under your hat. Everybody in the country knows that Sir William is up against some mysterious trouble. People will talk. They say he's got a bee in his bonnet about a wolf on the place, and give you chapter and verse for it. You can see for yourself he has something on his mind. I thought at lunch he looked a sick man. What's the snag? Surely he's too brainy a bird to believe in were-wolves?"

But John was not prepared to reveal his friend's tribulations.

"It's all rot," he answered, "and I hope you'll tell everybody who mentions the matter that it is all rot. Some rather peculiar coincidences have occurred, and Bill, being a keen student of the occult, sees more in them than you or I can. The fact that some strange brute seems to be harbouring here is rather odd, and I wanted to organize a hunt; but he won't let me. It's a wolf all right, but how the deuce it got here nobody can guess."

"I heard that Sir William himself knew all about it," replied the other; but Johnny denied this.

"Of course he doesn't. He merely associates it with something from the past. He is interested, but not in the least perturbed. For personal reasons Miss Boyd and he agreed to put off their wedding till the new year; but of course that had nothing to do with this visitor."

The second sportsman spoke then.

"There may be something in were-wolves all the same," he said. "I've heard many astounding things at the heart of Africa, and also seen some astounding things. There's a deuce of a lot to learn from the savages, because they live so much nearer to nature than we do, and see and feel and hear and smell far better than we can. High civilization knocks our senses to pieces—first blunts and finally destroys them; but the primitive people have exquisite perceptions and appreciate subtle phenomena far beyond our power to note at all very often. They sharpened my wits for me amazingly, and I saw various and rather horrible wonders that they took for granted, but did not attempt to explain."

"Don't talk to Bill about them, then," begged Malfroy. "He's a bit on the morbid side as you know, but here we all try to keep him off the subject. I believe myself that he'll be quite all right again after the new year."

When they returned to the rest of the party, however, their host had left them and gone home.

Time passed; the days grew very short and those who cared for William all desired that the end of the year would swiftly come and remove his weight of care. Mrs. Daphne Wolf drank tea with the Boyds on a night in early December, and they sought to cheer her, for she declared herself as unusually cast down.

"So is Telford," she said. "Telford is not particularly good to live with at present and he's not good for Bill either. He bluffs, but at the bottom of his stupid heart I believe he thinks there is something in his cousin's alarm. John Malfroy says that Telford always makes Bill worse, and wishes he would keep away from the manor till after the end of the year. They had a row about it, and Telford refused to be dictated to. He told John that his own line with William was mere senseless brutality and that it would be much better if he cleared out himself. I had to remind them that I was present."

"Perhaps they are both right," said Alma. "I doubt if either is doing Bill much good, however well they may mean. I can't

think, though, that a sceptic like Telford really believes in it."

"In a way he does. He feels that Bill is highly educated and naturally very clever and far-seeing about life in general. So he doesn't think this is altogether imaginary. He believes there may be something hidden behind it all and moving to a dénouement, though he hasn't the faintest idea what it is. Bill seems to be quite calm, which is a great thing. He is a Wolf anyway, and heredity will tell, be your environment what it may. He suspects that he might be called to depart this life pretty soon now, and he said to me that often there was nothing like death for clearing many things up. He told me, too, that he has never made a will yet and was waiting to do so till after he married; but now he has sent for his lawyer and is going to make one. I hope the dear fellow will soon be joyfully tearing it up again."

"I know he will," declared Alma. "But to hope is not enough. If I only hoped, I should very soon be as mad as Bill. Such things as this don't happen and can't happen and, therefore, never did happen. I do more than trust the future, as far as William is concerned, to save him from himself. I trust it to explain this dreadful thing and throw some light upon it, that he may come to understand and know the truth about it to the bottom. And when it does that, he may find himself trusting his God more and his fellow creatures rather less."

The girl spoke with emotion and Daphne showed herself a little startled.

"My gracious!" she said. "That's as good as to tell me you also think something is going to happen, Alma?"

But to this question there came no reply. Instead the vicar began to talk and, having nothing specially apposite to say, generalized.

"Modern tests of intelligence," he told Mrs. Wolf, "afford very remarkable and unexpected results. They may even occasionally be found to contradict each other. In Bill's case nobody can question his native intelligence and, being an only child, it was fostered and quickened as invariably happens. The only child has advantages and disadvantages as a result of his solitary state. But though his environment lacked brothers and sisters and may have introduced an unhealthy ingredient into his mind, there is nothing in his breeding on either side to account for it. Very clever people may sometimes fall victims to a delusion which their intellectual inferiors would laugh at. Pure intelligence—so it has been said—will easily fall into error and is just as likely to be interested in unsocial as beneficial subjects. A chess master, for example, possesses astounding intelligence and wastes it on a useless occupation. The genius of a great soldier is worse than wasted, if we agree that war must be for ever evil. But you cannot get away from the natural bent of any individual intelligence, of course, though a skilful teacher, if his own wits are keen enough, should be able to do much for any budding mind and start it in good, useful, intellectual habits, as we start the child's body in good physical habits. The people who think brilliantly, yet to no purpose whatever, are infinitely numerous.

"To return to dear William," continued Mr. Boyd, "you may be tempted to remind me, that he was committed to my charge with utmost confidence by a devoted father, who would have loved to see his own military gifts echoed by the boy. I did my best, quickly recognized that here was a delicate, highly-strung subject, and even perceived that inborn tendency to love mysterious things. But curious complications resulted in his youthful mind. It acted logically, though not so piously as one had the right to hope. He accepted the mysteries of our faith whole-heartedly, but failed to understand that to accept the mysteries of all other faiths was mere credulity and to be condemned. He believes a great deal too much, which in its way is as bad as believing too little. Such tolerance to heathen error is dangerous, if not actually unchristian."

"All of which may be true, my dear man, but doesn't help any of us to help Bill," replied Daphne. "Telford says that his mind stands on a razor-edge at present between sanity and dementia, and the question is how to tide him safely over the next few weeks. We have tried to get him away to Greece and complete distraction. So has Malfroy, but he declines to go. He says that this sequence of events belongs to Stormbury—at Stormbury they must be faced and endured. He is going on with his life and endeavouring to perform his duty, and can and will do no more."

"There, then, we must leave him in the Hand of his Maker," summed up the clergyman. "And I, for one, feel steadfast confidence that the Almighty, and not any evil spirit, will speak the last word in this harrowing matter. The devil is always bitter quick to find a weak spot in our armour and force his entry there. History shows Satan's servants skilled to cast down the mighty from their seats and confound the wise and prudent through their own errors of character; but God will never permit the enemies of righteousness to destroy a man of Sir William's quality and high principle. He was not called to succeed his ancestors that he might become an innocent victim in the hands of fiends. A new year will see this

horrible cup dashed from his lips—be sure of that—and let your faith support you."

"What do you think, Alma?" asked Mrs. Wolf, and the girl agreed with her father.

"Well, if you can both hope and trust a happy issue out of this affliction, the rest of us should try to do the same," said Daphne. "I don't fear for his life, as he most certainly does himself, but I do fear for his mind; and if that were unseated, a very ghastly tragedy lies before you and all of us, my dear."

"Believe father—do believe my father," begged Alma. "God never gave Bill his beautiful mind to take it away again."

With that the visitor left them, declaring herself comforted.

But three days later William's ordeal advanced another step to its ordained conclusion and that happened to strengthen his own convictions and end his temporary peace.

He and John had gone to dress for dinner at the end of the day and the land agent was full of prize cattle from the home farm, shortly to be sent to Honiton Christmas Show. At his wish William had visited the great beasts, praised their noble proportions and secretly mourned that in many cases their days were numbered. The night was clear and very dark as the young men went to their rooms. Then, five minutes later, an uproar rang fiercely out of the gloom beneath William's window. By chance he was speaking of personal matters at the time to his new attendant, for there was that in Callender's courtesy and obvious good sense to please his employer.

"You'll have heard some odd things in the servants' hall," he said, "and I am the last to blame a very valued staff for their natural uneasiness. But they must understand the situation correctly, strange though it is, and I have reason to believe that Thorpe and Mrs. Budge already do so. I am the apparent victim of ancestral omens of a very sinister character, James, and am trying to face them as becomes me; but these evils concern me alone: none under this roof, or anywhere else, need feel one shadow of alarm."

"I appreciate your confidence, Sir William," answered the other. "It's a case for minding our own business, sir, and hoping for the best for you. Night's often blackest before dawn, and I trust what you say about being an apparent victim won't come to anything real."

"Thank you, Callender," said William. "Perhaps some day I'll let you see the amazing, ancient document from which all these experiences spring. Have you any opinions concerning the dark and hidden side of Nature?"

Callender considered before making any reply.

"At my age," he said at length, "you get to pick and choose your words pretty careful, Sir William. I'm a great one for reading books and like science better than most subjects; but if there's one thing the history of science teaches you, it is the uncertainty and doubt that hangs over everything. Science itself is full of doubts. The facts of to-day are on the scrap-heap to-morrow. And same with every other sort of knowledge: it's all new lamps for old in everything touching social questions and government and state-craft and art and religion. And I'm what they call an agnostic about everything, Sir William. I come to every question with an open mind when I can do so; but my bent is not to believe too much nor to deny too much. So it follows I wouldn't turn down mysteries out of hand, just because the explanation of them was beyond me."

"A very proper attitude and I wish more people had the sense to take it," said William, "but the rarest thing on this earth is an open mind. Everybody claims to possess one, whereas the truth is, that, by the very nature of things, such a gift is denied. Education, experience, mental endowment, life itself denies it to us."

And then, before the other could make reply, came a horrible crescendo of sound rising to a long-drawn yell, then falling quite silent. William quivered as though he had been struck a blow, but recovered instantly, leapt to the window and tore aside the curtain that hung over it. The night was far too dark to show him anything, however, but once more from beneath rose a wolf's howl, echoing and slowly dying against the side of the house. Then all was silent.

"What does your agnosticism say to that?" asked William turning; but he found himself alone, for Callender had disappeared. He returned in a moment, however, breathing rather fast and spoke words which served to answer the unheard question just put to him.

"Beg pardon, Sir William; but I always keep my bedroom window open, sir, and if there's vampires or any such queer customers about, I thought I'd shut it pronto."

The younger man had sat down and was wiping a wet forehead.

"This is no vampire; it is a were-wolf," he said. "Do you keep an open mind about were-wolves?"

But Mr. Callender's attitude to the problem was not learned, for there came running feet in the gallery, and John Malfroy, already in a white shirt and black trousers, ran past William's open door and down the stairs to the hall. His friend followed and shouted as he went.

"Stop in, John! Do nothing! I forbid it!" he cried; but the other, moving with immense rapidity, was too quick for him and before he could descend, John had entered the gun-room on the left of the entrance, armed himself and left the house slamming the front door after him. The hall was full of servants but Malfroy had gone. William bade a footman follow him and tell him not to shoot; whereon the young fellow became conveniently deaf and disappeared to the dining-room.

Two minutes later came the roar of a gun from the outer darkness, and Callender observed that the shock of the explosion appeared to affect his master even more seriously than had the cry of the wolf. For William staggered, as though he himself had been hit, and his servant leapt to offer support. But help was not needed; the younger threw him off and hastening to the front door, flung it open and shouted into the darkness.

"What have you done, you madman?" he cried. "Obey me, and come in instantly, or never come in again! Who are you to thrust yourself into my affairs when I have ordered you not to do so?"

There came no answer, and the valet spoke.

"Go in, Sir William, and I'll find Mr. Malfroy. He's got excited, sir, and very like run off after the creature, but I lay I can bring him back."

Without waiting for any answer, Callender plunged into the night and disappeared. But five minutes later he returned again with Johnny and rejoined William upstairs, to set the young man's immediate anxiety at rest.

"It's all right and no harm done, Sir William," he said. "I met the gentleman coming back and told him you found yourself a good bit put about, and he granted you would be, but chanced that in the hope he might do something for you that would make you forgive him. He heard the wolf and knew it was right alongside the house, so he nipped into his boots and made a dash for the gun-room, hoping to get in a shot before it was off. He heard you forbid, but he was desperate and disobeyed. He meant well, I'd say, and he didn't hear your second command, to come in out of it—or so he says. He saw the brute's blazing eyes watching him from under the yew hedge on the top terrace—that's why he fired at pretty close range; but when he ran over, hoping to finish off the thing with the second barrel, if need be, there was nothing there."

"Thank God for that," answered the other. "I will speak to Malfroy at another time. Without a doubt he meant well enough, but he should have known better. I have instructed him already and must do so again. Say as little as you can about it yourself, James, and thank you for your help."

At dinner Malfroy was taciturn and sulky—a very unusual attitude for him; but William appeared to have recovered his peace of mind. He talked on commonplace subjects and made no allusion whatever to the incident of the night, much to the disappointment of those who waited upon them. Neither did John return to the matter; but when they had finished and they were alone, he spoke.

"I'll give the billiards-room a miss to-night and relieve you of my company, Bill," he said. "I know you're hating me good and hard, and I'm not loving you very much either. We can have a yarn to-morrow and you can issue your ultimatum. I don't want to get the sack to-night anyway."

"Don't talk to me in that tone of voice, John. It's grotesque," replied the other. "Come into the play-room and be a good chap and listen to me. There's nothing to wait for."

"As you like; but I tell you this; what I did was the right and sane thing to do, and any man calling himself your friend would have done the same; and I'd do it again to-morrow if the same thing were to happen."

"That's what you mustn't do, and what you ought not to have done to-night," answered the other, "because you well knew,

Johnny, that you were doing something I did not approve. You acted upon an impulse to which you should never have given way, and you hoped the result would prove you right and me wrong. Instead it has done just the opposite."

They sat together presently and William enjoyed a revenge of a sort, for he spoke words and declared a situation well calculated to appal any man who called himself his friend. He exhibited no excitement and revealed dreadful suspicions in his usual voice and customary choice of words; but the things that he spoke his listener had never heard before and they seemed to echo the death-knell of William's reason.

He began, however, temperately enough.

"First let me apologize to you, Johnny, for losing my temper," he said. "Nothing excuses that and I'm very sorry and beg you to forgive me. I don't condone it and nothing was gained by it; but for a moment I forgot myself faced with the horror of what you might do. You did not guess at the possibility of that ghastly thing happening, and what it was I'll tell you in a minute; but, by the will of our Creator, it did not happen, and if I'd given myself a moment to think, I should have known it would not be permitted to happen.

"Now listen to me, John, for the time has come when you must try to understand," continued William. "It is idle to intrude your own mistaken and outworn rationalism into this business. The world of thought tends more and more to return to the faith of our fathers, and the wave of materialism, rampant in the nineteenth century, has subsided. We are at a pause. Science has told us what may be expected on a physical basis and it can do no more for the moment. The end of the world depends on what may, or may not, happen to the sun. If it should ever become a new star—a *Stella nova*—and burst into enormously enhanced heat and glory, then earth vanishes from the Universe in a puff of fiery gas and we shall be dead probably before we know the reason; while if the sun pursues an uninterrupted course to extinction, our ultimate fate, or the end of such conscious beings as the future may create to succeed us, will be long-drawn-out before the earth grows too cold to support any living creature. In that case, since all known sources of heat will long be exhausted, we must suppose the gigantic, potential power of the atom will have been harnessed by the wit of generations to come and light and heat preserved to support them in some fashion."

"What the devil has all this to do with your troubles, Bill?" asked the listener moodily.

"I just want to show where we may appear to stand before the re-birth of the old wisdom," replied William. "I believe that we may soon see national, almost universal signs of the old wisdom, for in the realms of thought, the occult is coming into its own again. I feel that I myself may be an unwilling protagonist, whose pending sacrifice is destined to reawaken something of the old reverence for the world of the spirit—that world wherein is hidden the true destiny of our race, and not amid the futile guesses of science as some still imagine. There is that happening to me, my dear friend, which must bring humanity back to the old knowledge by a short cut, and arouse a new and ubiquitous interest in vital subjects that have fallen under eclipse. This is what is going to occur—is, indeed, already occurring here. The creature we heard to-night is no ordinary, wandering wolf liberated by unknown enemies, as you imagine and Telford tries to believe. It is a lycanthrope—the host of a being superior to itself—no mere 'revenant,' or departed spirit, but one still living who has taken this form—either from compulsion, as I think, or through evil magic deliberately practised that he may live a life of blood and abomination possible to a savage beast of prey, but impossible to a human being. Many such monsters of wickedness there have been, who, when captured in human shape and faced with the death penalty for their crimes, have actually confessed them and died penitent. But my were-wolf, so to call him, is of the first order. I believe that he is doing what he must and taking his place as principal actor in a drama planned from the beginning of time. He will accomplish his purpose and endure the task put upon him, just as I shall suffer what hidden powers have ordained for me."

Malfroy listened patiently, for the day had long passed when his friend might be laughed at.

"You really imagine a live man—somebody we know perhaps—is masquerading as a live wolf?" he asked.

"Not masquerading, but driven to take that shape, utter these preliminary warnings and chosen for this horrible task. You see now why I would not suffer the brute to be hunted or assaulted in any way. Were-wolves have been slain not seldom and found in the pangs of death to return to their human shape. When, therefore, I heard your gun go off, I conceived it as quite possible, that you had ignorantly taken a human life and discovered the dead body, not of a wolf, but a man. In this age of unbelief it might have gone hard with you to explain the matter."

But the other showed no great alarm.

"If I'd shot such a damned, God-forsaken creature," he said, "that's about the kindest thing I could have done for him."

"Which may be true, but is no part of your work," replied William. "No harm has been done, because these events are moving in a dimension where human powers cannot operate; but I have to tell you something now, John, that may well stagger you. A conviction grows in me that only on equal terms can I hope for any escape from my dilemma, and I begin to feel the approach of those equal terms."

"Equal terms with what?" asked Malfroy. "You can't get on equal terms with a lycanthrope, supposing any such abortion existed."

"I can—by becoming one myself. And there is that already moving deep in me that makes me think such a thing may soon happen. Now if it does, John, immense possibilities open before me. A lycanthrope myself, I should meet this being on an equality and possibly learn by intercourse with it much I can learn in no other way. Against that are the words of the prophecy, which speak definitely of my destruction. But something bids me hope rather than fear the effects of such a transformation. It might mean in my case, that I met death as a wolf and not as a man, so making literally true the words that 'Wolf shall meet Wolf.' But it may do more and throw light at the last moment by God's mercy. We may even be sent to save each other, John. Perhaps some neighbour—some harmless and familiar friend—will appear to me in lycanthropic guise and our salvation be won by a united effort!"

The elder rose and strode the room.

"Have some heart," he answered, "and try to guess what this horrible stuff must mean for me, not to mention many others. I warn you most solemnly, William, that you are playing with something far worse than fire. You are playing with your liberty and your future existence as a free man. What you've said to me to-night is enough to certify you."

"You may think so, Johnny; though what you think, or what anybody thinks, makes no matter to me now. But remember that you have listened to a confidence. None knows what I have told you and none must do so. If any attempt were made to interfere with my liberty, I should know that you alone were responsible for it."

"You need feel no fear as to that," replied Malfroy, regarding him with deep emotion. "You're the only person on this earth for whom I care two straws, and if you're bound for perdition as you seem to think, I shan't be far behind you."

"You mustn't feel like that, dear fellow. You have your life to live, whatever destiny may await mine," answered William. "And you won't find yourself forgotten should I pass over sooner than you think for. You mustn't let this tragic experience throw you out of your stride, John. Mephistopheles—Goethe's—says, 'Be self-possessed: that's the whole art of living.' And it's the whole art of dying too. People with old age creeping over them and unfolding its melancholy phenomena, have sometimes told me that they feel tempted to cut a loss and destroy themselves without suffering any further indignities, or becoming any greater nuisance to their fellow-creatures; but self-destruction is never justified on such grounds as those. Some people, however, might well turn to that escape if they felt the awful bonds of lycanthropy tightening about them."

"They surely might, and who would blame any poor wretch in such a fix? But it isn't so with you. Everything cries out against it. The danger comes from within, Bill, not from without," urged John, while the other reassured him.

"Have no fear that I shall take my own life," he answered. "If I stood alone in this mystery and no deeper issues were involved, I might be tempted to do so; but I am not alone. Others are concerned with my existence. Not only you people, who love me and suffer with me, but this nameless, howling thing whose fate may well be dependent on my own. No, I shall live out my life to the dregs and still go on hoping that means may be offered to preserve it."

Malfroy's only response was a deep sigh, and silence fell between them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In the Hangers

Those about Sir William received the latest manifestation according to their natures and knowledge. John respected the injunction set upon him and spoke no word, either to the Boyds or Daphne Wolf; but it appeared that Bill himself was not so particular, for a day or two later Telford returned home from the manor in a highly agitated condition and declared that he could endure no more.

"I'm not squeamish," he said, "but when you hear the head of your wretched family calmly tell you that there is reason to believe he is going to turn into a beast of prey, then you've got to draw the line. For God's sake don't breathe a word of this to Alma, or her father, or Malfroy, or anybody; but this last jolt has sent Bill clean off his rocker. I'm going to ask Peters to make some excuse to see him, and then I'm going to clear out for a time. I want to take my work to London and get among sane people."

"You can't desert him just now," said his stepmother; but Telford's mind was made up. He belonged to that order of artists who judge themselves to be wrought of choicer mud than other people, and prescribe their own rules of conduct accordingly.

"If I could be of any practical use to Bill, I'd stay," he assured her, "but I'm quite useless to him and merely going dotty myself. He ought to see an alienist, or some such person. I asked him—begged him—to come to town with me; but he declined; and the devil of it is you can't help feeling there's a horrible sort of sense in what he tells you."

Telford promised to return for the Christmas festivities and was soon gone, but not before he had seen Dr. Peters and begged him to visit William.

The doctor chanced to be attending a patient at the manor and took occasion to look the young man up without exciting suspicion. They had not met for some time, but Peters learned frequently from Fortescue Boyd, and Malfroy, how it fared with William.

Now the old physician was brought by Thorpe and received his usual affectionate welcome.

"Bring the doctor's special sherry, Thorpe. Since I've got him, I'm going to keep him for a while," said the young man, and then asked for the patient.

"Mrs. Budge is better and will soon recover her health. Too much roasted pheasant, Bill. She must restrain her appetite. And how's yourself?" inquired his friend.

"I'll tell you in a minute," answered the younger. "I've rather wanted to see you—for what you'll think a curious reason; but you're my body's father-confessor and won't let my question trouble you. As for the rest, apart from the strain upon my mind, my health is good."

"You're looking thin and far too fine-drawn. I wish you'd run away to the South for a bit and take Alma and the Vicar."

"We never run away," replied William, and ceased while the butler brought the wine. When Thorpe was gone he poured a glass and proceeded with the subject on his mind.

"I'll ask you something and tell you why afterwards," he said. "If I told you the object of the question first, it might unconsciously influence your answer. Look at me very closely, Doctor. Nobody knows my ugly face better than you do, or would quicker appreciate alterations in it. Be frank. Do you see any physical changes, or tendencies not to be expected from my present ordeal?"

Peters delayed and made no comment on the demand. He drank his sherry, poured himself a second glass, took off his pince-nez and brought a pair of spectacles from his pocket.

"Come and sit by the window, Bill," he said, and presently scrutinized the familiar features.

"You are grown too thin—considerably too thin—as I said just now," declared the old man at last, "and your eyes are not all I have known them—sunk a bit from their old brightness. That's nothing and will soon come right when you're

right yourself. For the rest you are just Bill Wolf as usual."

"No elongation of the nose, Doctor?"

"Good Lord, dear boy, isn't it long enough?"

"No change in the set of my ears?"

"I'm afraid not, Bill. The family ears and nose. If Alma can stand them, why worry?"

"I'm not worrying, but I'm conscious of subtle physical changes that may quickly become more marked and are in any case probably inevitable. I asked my new man, Callender, the same question a morning or two ago, but I did not tell him the reason as, of course, I am prepared to tell you. He proves a very capable man, not easy to know, naturally reserved, but intelligent and reflective. I trust him. He answered as you have just done, however, and perceived no difference in me. But his experience, as he pointed out, is confined to a few weeks only. Now can you spare me half an hour, or would you rather come another time?"

Dr. Peters, however, was prepared to stay and listen.

"Go ahead—if there's anything I can do, I thankfully will," he answered.

"John, as you are aware, is my second self and I hide nothing from him," began William. "He knows all there is to know, but can bring no comfort and lend no light owing to the quality of his own mind. It is incapable of breaking through that husk of scientific materialism common to our modern intelligence. You are different, and I have heard you reverence the wisdom of the past. Now, if we bring the knowledge and experience of the past to bear on this mysterious visitor, the mystery vanishes: otherwise we are left with no explanation. But grant frankly that the thing is a lycanthrope, or were-wolf, and we know where we stand. I come to you, then, for this purpose, Doctor. The were-wolf may change its shape by night only—a fact well attested—and since nobody is missing from our little population, that might be the reason why we cannot connect this monster as yet with any man or woman known to us. But the possibility remains. Conversely, this being in lupine shape may be the victim of supernormal powers and doomed to play this dreadful part at the will of Providence for reasons as yet hidden from us. In that case the visitor may have nothing to do with any of us, but come from the secret ranks of were-wolfery, for purposes soon to be learned. That is how I read the situation, basing my conviction on the prophecy. But there is a chance that the monster may be local, when in bodily shape, so I come to you."

Peters regarded him blankly, for he had not guessed at the advance of the young man's distemper.

"I don't know a were-wolf among my patients, if that's what you mean, Bill," he said.

"You wouldn't—not directly. The lycanthrope would not come to you even if it were innocent and desired the aid of fellow-men; but such a creature might have relations among us—a mother or father, brother or sister, a husband or wife—who could not fail to note the ravages of the infliction on anyone they loved. Dreadful physical signs are left by the ferocious excesses of the man-wolf, and those observing them might well bring their difficulties to you."

"No such thing has happened," said the doctor, "and I am perfectly prepared to give Stormbury and every man, woman and child in it a clean bill. But now I beg you'll listen to me, my dear boy, and I promise you I shall not try your patience as much as you've tried mine."

Peters finished his second glass of sherry and proceeded.

"Mind," he said, "I am speaking as your doctor now, and I'm going to speak quite plainly, William. You must get out of this mediæval rut and realize that we are no longer in the Dark Ages. We are going through a dark age of our own no doubt, as those who follow us will be quick to discover, but that is neither here nor there. Now the solemn truth about lycanthropy is this. There never was and never could be any such thing in the old, preposterous understanding of the word. What science means by it is an affection of the brain—a purely pathological condition in which the sufferer imagines that he has become something other than he was. It may be a wolf, or a bear, or an ape, and he will simulate these creatures—run on all fours and howl, roar, and try to hug people to death, climb trees and do other monkey tricks. Or his hallucination may lead him to suppose that he is some inert object—a table, a stone, a pane of glass, a poached egg—anything. In which case he will strive to behave as they may be supposed to do. Now, in a word, such a state is dementia, and you must look to yourself instantly, Bill, for before you know it, these incipient stages may develop. I don't

want to alarm you, but you have made me very alarmed."

William smiled.

"You see where my thoughts are tending, my friend," he answered, "but, believe me, the explanation you would rush to is unsound, though doubtless highly scientific. Much that happens every day and every hour is far beyond human knowledge to explain, or human ethics to condone. But I will not evade you by lifting myself on to a plane where you cannot follow. I am perfectly sane, or I should not suffer, as I am now called to suffer, by anticipation. The mad do not suffer from anticipation. We will be practical therefore and you shall tell me the meaning of this unseen thing, so obviously at my heels and probably so potent to destroy me in fullness of time. If not a true were-wolf, what is it? We have smelt it, heard it, beheld the impress of its claws. These facts are familiar to many others beside myself, and I alone, in the sight of the prophecy, read them correctly. What other interpretations can you put upon them?"

"I don't care twopence about them," replied the doctor. "There would seem to be some unfamiliar brute harbouring in the place, and since you forbid any attempt to capture it, the creature continues to go free. If I were a Justice of the Peace, William, I should issue an order for its destruction, because a brute that can kill a deer, could as easily kill a child. The forest folk are frightened and it is natural they should be. But that's your business, not mine. All that concerns me is yourself and your mental health, which clearly stand in great peril at this moment. I beg and pray you, therefore, to be amenable and pleasure me in this most serious matter."

"I would sooner pleasure you than most people, old friend," declared William, "so you must tell me what you would have me do, and if I hold it to be reasonable, of course it shall be done. There is one point in what you said last, however, that we can clear up before you speak again. You talk of the scare these things have occasioned, and forgive me for saying that you are quite as unreasonable as these foolish villagers who imagine an unknown peril is abroad threatening old and young alike. You share the hopeless, universal point of view and doubtless won't be shaken from it by anything that I can say. But I have let it be known that this strange visitor can be ignored. To harm others than myself is not its purpose and, in any case, would probably lie beyond its power. You and everybody else will understand these things better in a few brief weeks now for, whatever may lie in store for me at the appointed time, after that time is passed and I have met the creature, it will most certainly disappear from Stormbury for ever. Now tell me what you want me to do."

"I want you to tell Callender to pack your bag and come with me to London to-morrow. I implore you to do this, if only for your dead mother's sake. We will see Sir Hugh Trusham together and put ourselves in his hands. You shall drive me up if you like. Do this, dear lad, for the peace of us all. Or go alone if you would rather that I did not accompany you."

"You mention my mother, but you forget my father," answered the young man. "When was it known that a member of my family took his troubles to a mad doctor? If Sir Porteus were living, he would bid me face my destiny like a man wheresoever it might lead. Shall his son go snivelling to science—the science that too often evades its own problems by the cowardly expedient of signing up and imprisoning those who dare to differ from it on the sacred subject of the truth? I will not submit myself to such a perilous experiment, Peters—for you, or anybody."

The old man grew red.

"Then you may cease to regard me as your physician for a day longer, Sir William," he answered. "You stand in awful danger and, if you can actually bring yourself to treat me so, then I am powerless to help you any more."

"I stand in awful danger as you say," replied William, "but it is not a danger that can be evaded by consultation with a specialist."

"Let him be the judge of that."

"Emphatically not. Who is Trusham to read the meaning of these secrets? You scientists are all alike and I will have none of you. Words and drugs are no answer to the questions lying before me. But your mind, trained in the medical schools, cannot grasp that. Good-bye, Peters; and count me a friend as always, but a patient no more if you prefer it so."

The elder's reply was to shake hands very warmly, but he did not speak again, and so took his leave.

At a later hour, after noon, when leisure served, the physician called upon Boyd, and spoke of his experience to the vicar and his daughter. Both condoled with him, but neither felt great surprise to learn of the reverse.

"For my part," declared the priest, "I feel that until things are come to a climax with him, which will mercifully be soon now, you, like the rest of us, are powerless. He has the proverbial Wolf obstinacy, and possessed as he is at present with the conviction that he alone must be right and everybody else mistaken, to oppose him is only to make matters worse for him and even turn him from his friends."

"It is the climax of which you speak that I dread above all things," explained the other. "At present he is for practical purposes out of his right mind, as the fatalist is often too apt to become, and any violent or shocking dénouement would probably leave him a mental ruin beyond hope of restoration. More than that: it might actually end his life, though in view of the alternative, death might be the better thing. Can you not see the horrible dilemma, in which, as the one responsible for his health, I find myself?"

"We do indeed, Doctor," said Alma, "but there is another way of looking at it. What climax can be possible? What more can happen? William is safe enough at the manor, and though he refuses to alter his life in any respect, there are those who keep a watchful guard over him by night and day, though he does not know it."

"Malfroy will see to that," admitted Dr. Peters. "I do not fear for his body; but things may happen at any moment to destroy his mind—things against which we are powerless, Alma, because they would come from within—phantoms, visions, voices of his own imagination, spun from his own tottering intellect and awful as the spectres that a drunkard sees."

"The strength of prayer is as the strength of a thousand men, my dear Peters," said the vicar. "We approach this harrowing situation from different angles and I confess to a trust in the powers of Providence that for the moment you cannot feel."

"Heaven helps those who help themselves, Boyd," answered the old man, "and may be assumed to be still more solicitous for those who are trying to help others. To pray for people is easy; to set about trying to work for them—"

"I was going to say," continued Alma, "that good may come out of evil, dear Doctor; William has promised me faithfully that if New Year's Day dawns to find him alive and well, he will face life in a changed spirit. That is a tremendous promise and he will keep it, because he never broke his word in his life. We know that there can be no real climax for him, and I hope before the end of the year that he will know it himself."

"Keep in close touch with him then, and tell me from day to day if I can intervene to any useful purpose," he answered. "I have no desire to alarm you without reason; but there are grave evidences of mental disturbance. You must always remember the natural bent and bias to the weird and uncanny in William's make-up, and this weakness has been traded upon by the circumstances. He asked me some highly suspicious questions as to his personal appearance, which puzzled me at the time, but which, in the light of what he said afterwards, undoubtedly point to something like a brain lesion. He believes in myths long exploded and actually fancies himself a possible victim of the grossest sorcery. In a cultured and educated man, such evidence can only point to one thing."

"What can it point to?" asked the vicar; but Dr. Peters did not answer directly.

"I must think it out for myself," he said, "before I answer that question. One has to look back and review a series of incidents beginning with the first time the wolf—if it is a wolf—was heard."

Alma seemed to read his thoughts, and he guessed that William must have been more explicit with her than with himself.

"Others have wondered what you are wondering," she said, "but if you think a minute, Doctor, you'll see it couldn't be so. This dread of himself becoming a lycanthrope is quite a new thing. He didn't tell me about it, but he told John Malfroy, and Johnny told my father. You're thinking now if it was possible that Bill imitated a wolf for others to hear and is himself already what he fears he may become; but he had nothing to do with the howling. That is certain, because others were with him when he heard it. And when a keeper heard it in the hangers at two in the morning, William was certainly gone to bed. Then, when the thing yelled under his window the last time that it was heard, Callender was with him in his rooms, and he was dressing for dinner."

"You read my thoughts very cleverly, my dear, and to some extent set them at rest," confessed the old man. "We must only wait and watch. Be with him as much as you can manage and strive to occupy his mind."

"There's plenty to do that now, with all the Christmas preparations," she replied. "He won't drop any of our ancient

manners and customs and is planning to give the children and veterans an unusually good time."

Dr. Peters always cracked the same joke at every return of Christmas, and he made it now.

"The Saviour's Birthday never fails to over-work my profession," he said. "A sad commentary on how the child's poison may be the doctor's meat; but it's an ill wind that blows good to none."

"Bill's coming to tea to-night," Alma told him. "Is there anything particular that you would like us to say to him?"

"He'll probably tell you that I am an interfering old fool," replied the doctor, "but don't agree with him there. I shall have another dash at him in a day or two."

Peters departed, and towards evening William kept his promise and came to the vicarage for tea. But he made no mention of his visit from the physician. He seemed cheerful and confined his conversation to the parochial Christmas festivities.

"I want it to be a celebration especially for the old and the young," he said.

The vicar presently made mention of the new valet and trusted he was proving worthy of his good report; whereupon William praised not only Callender but Mr. Boyd himself.

"I never half thanked you for that kind turn," he answered. "I have been abominably self-centred and egotistical of late—a mean thing; but you understand the terrific strain upon me, though, like all the rest, unable to see the reason for it. Callender is an acquired taste and I am fast acquiring it. As a servant, he is the equal of Bob Meadows, and I can't give him higher praise than that. Some might think him even nearer perfection. But he shares another privilege with Bob: he is a gentleman. He has more brains than Meadows and a larger experience of life. A shrewd man and trustable. I've confided in him to some extent and feel my confidence not misplaced. In fact, though it hurt John and Telford when I told them so, and may hurt you, too, I find Callender more apt to grant the existence of mystery and the brooding watchfulness of unseen spirits in our terrestrial affairs than any of you. He is not, of course, cultured or highly educated, or he wouldn't be what he is, but he has a mind and sharpens it with books when he gets the chance. I've made him free of the library and he was much gratified."

Not until her father had left the lovers together did Alma talk of personal matters; but then she returned to something that William had said.

"When you think we're all against you, including myself, darling, you must try and remember the point of view. Heaven knows that nobody who loves you is against you. Father and John and Telford and Daphne and I would all give our lives to lift this nightmare off your mind; but the cruel thing for us, just as much as for you, is that we can't convince one another. You'll never make me believe that a man like you has been chosen to suffer the malignity of demons, or pay with his own precious life for shadowy crimes committed by dead men. And if you were not my beloved future husband I should still say so. How could any of us go on trusting in a righteous God if that happened to you?"

"We have to answer for the unjust and pay their debts every day of the week, and always did," he assured her. "By human standards that appears a pretty flagrant injustice no doubt, and if we visited the sins of the fathers on their children we should incur blame, though we don't blame Nature for doing it. But what does that show? Only that God's justice is far removed from our own. We are agreed that He can do no wrong and then, when utterly damnable things happen, as every daily paper reports—things that neither time nor eternity can ever atone for from our point of view—we must simply confess that the divine justice and mercy and eternal watchfulness claimed and asserted for Him can only be assumed under values and a code of ethics entirely beyond human power to comprehend. That is quite easy to me. The parsons are far too fond of telling us what God is doing and thinking and planning. But look into the Universe on a starry night, Alma, and ask yourself how Man, the creation of yesterday, the fleeting denizen of an infant world, should comprehend the purposes of such an architect, or dare to determine them."

"It is grotesque of course stated so," she admitted, "yet, after all, God did put brains into the heads of some of us, Bill, and teach us to know right from wrong. If a thing's dead wrong, then it couldn't be wrong only for us, but must be wrong for everybody, God included."

William, however, stoutly denied this generality and declared it to be quite unworthy of her.

"Take the lycanthrope—our Stormbury lycanthrope, now harbouring here upon its Maker's business with me," he said. "Consider the facts, Alma, and ask yourself how it is possible to reconcile them with a beneficent and fair-minded deity: that is using the adjectives as we understand them. I say nothing about myself, or the agonies of mind I have endured, or the fate that may await me; but consider this lycanthrope and strive, if you can, to picture the horrible sufferings, the despair, and the hideous daily dilemma of a conscious being shut up in that foul, lupine prison, called to look at life through a wild beast's eyes, endure life only through a wild beast's appetites and instincts."

"If the thing was a real wolf, it wouldn't worry about the domestic details of its life any more than any other wolf," replied Alma, "and that brings us round to the starting-point again. We don't believe in your lycanthrope, dear Bill. Not one of us puts a shadow of trust in him. We think whatever the creature is that seems to be harbouring here, it is having a perfectly good time from its own point of view, or else it wouldn't stop. And we are all perfectly certain that the poor brute has not the remotest idea it is worrying you so dreadfully when it howls now and again. Why, it may be only howling for joy, at having found such a lovely place to live in as the hangers! If, on the other hand, it is miserable and howling because it hates life, then, as Johnny has always argued, far the kindest thing to do would be to hunt it down and shoot it."

"Which only tends to show the gulf between your way of thinking and my knowledge," replied William.

"And explains what must seem to you such a lack of sympathy, darling Bill. Oh, if you could only grant that we are just as likely to be right as you are!"

"Yet you deny the possibility of me being right?"

"We must, in self-defence and for undying hope. If you are right, the lynch-pin's knocked out of our little wheel and nothing else matters. But if you could even tell yourself that we may be right, then you could find yourself gaining faith every day."

They argued together, but love was powerless to bridge the gulf that separated their standpoints on the vexed question, and William allowed his own tribulations to embitter his trust in man as a whole and prompt him in an unusually pessimistic direction.

"Every Christian must sometimes despair of the human future," he said on rising to go home, "and ask himself in the words of the poet, 'Lord, what is man, that Thou hast over-bought so much a thing of nought?'"

But Alma would have none of it and they parted with a kiss.

Some weeks later there happened James Callender's temporary departure from Stormbury. He asked for a couple of days, to see his brother, a soldier just returned home from long foreign service, and his master made no difficulty. William was, however, surprised to discover that he missed his valet when the man was gone. Callender's companionship unconsciously soothed him. He proved a good listener, and finding an open mind opposed to his own theories, the younger elaborated them. As yet he had preserved an impersonal attitude, but knowing himself and his troubles to be common talk, not only below stairs but on the countryside, William proposed, if possible, to convert Callender, in hope that he might offer a morsel of human support, where none as yet was forthcoming. Now the servant had returned, and William, confident of his native good sense, advanced along the path of personal friendship, revealed something of his own distress of mind and gave him the prophecy to read.

"Study that impartially, James," he said, "ask me to throw light on any problems it may present to you and consider if it can possibly apply to anybody but myself."

And the other had received the little, battered volume respectfully, promising to obey.

Now came the shortest day of the year in rough wind and heavily overcast skies. Telford Wolf was still in London, and Johnny occupied with the Honiton Cattle Show. Howling had again been heard from the forest by night, but not by the head-keeper himself. Indeed, George Stocker discountenanced this report and was inclined to believe that the visitor had departed for good and all.

The Boyds were coming to dinner and William had prepared a programme of music for them; but, when afternoon returned and the short day hurried to a close, his restless spirit chimed with the storm and he went out minded to enter the hangers.

They wakened no fear in him now and he often looked back to time that seemed far past, and marvelled how he should have taken pride in a lonely vigil among the trees. The greater had ministered to the less and he felt disposed to believe that his fate was bound up with the perishing oaks. There came intense desires sometimes to anticipate it and hurry the climax forward; and at such agonized intervals he would, when alone, boldly enter the darkest thickets of the hangers and pray that the end might come. Then he grew calm again and reminded himself that the time was already inexorably determined and no challenge from him potent to hasten it by one hour. The strain was often intolerable and a sense that none seemed capable of understanding, or supporting his convictions added to it. At such times invariably came an impulse to get into the open air as far from his fellow-creatures as might be.

Now, under hurrying clouds great with rain, he entered the forest and wandered through a loneliness grown familiar. He trod where the wolf had trodden and left the mark of its passing; he peered into the clefts of the cliff and wondered, not without pity, as to where the forlorn beast sheltered through the hours of the day. He pictured himself as similarly transformed and considered what he would do to live. The evening hour grew rapidly darker, and overhead the trees were shouting to the buffet of a southerly storm. The wind had waxed since morning and was now blowing a whole gale. His haggard timber creaked and groaned under the onset and William heard a crash and then another, where rotten boughs were brought low at last. The storm touched his spirit and he became thrilled and excited. Here was a moment well fitted to the horrible translation that he believed hung over him. As a man, he feared the rising fury of the storm, but clad in the pelt of a wolf, he would become part of the savage night and fear nothing.

One pale ribbon of lemon-tinted sky had persisted through the murk till now and gleamed wanly through the naked forest under Blackdown; but it was swallowed at last and, on its departure, darkness began swiftly to deepen. Then lightning unlocked the cisterns of the rain and with the first flash a deluge swept the hangers; while William welcomed the rage of the wind and the cold fingers of the storm upon his face. He stood in the midst and lifted his hands to the sky—a palpitating, frenzied, tortured thing amid the elemental riot—and he lifted his voice also and shouted aloud, though the riot above dimmed his utterance to the squeak of a shrew mouse in that mingled roar of sound.

"Come! Come and find a welcome," he cried. "I fear you no more. Finish with me and give me peace even if it shall be the peace of death!"

It seemed as though his challenge was to be met and the distraught lad's feeble defiance acknowledged, for an object moved at hand, separated itself from the amorphous gloom and came swiftly nearer. But no stealth marked its approach; head down it breasted the underwood—on two feet only, for no wolf-man but a fellow human-being, responded, and William was spared the agony of an apparent answer to his summons, since his back had been turned to the approaching figure. Now he leapt round at the sound of a level and flat but familiar voice, and his passion died.

"Lucky you shouted, Sir William, and luckier still I heard you, for in this racket your voice don't reach very far. By good chance I saw you set out, sir, and marked you'd taken no raincoat nor umbrella along with you. But I knew we were up against something fierce pretty soon and guessed you'd fetch over to the cliff in the wood. Your coat will save you, Sir William, but the umbrella's no use against this tremendous wind. And I'd clear out of this instant, if I was you, because the trees are coming down like skittles in an alley."

It was Callender himself, stoutly accoutred against the storm, and he helped William into a heavy coat as he spoke. The overwrought young man, still a little dazed, thanked him warmly enough, and the elder begged that his master would take his arm and permit himself to be piloted away.

"I come here for choice when I take my constitutional of an afternoon, Sir William," he said. "It's quiet and interesting, and a bit out of the common run of woods, I'd say."

"Its mysteries have culminated for me," answered William, "and in time to come my strange story, of which the last phase has yet to unfold, will doubtless be a part of it."

Callender proceeded cautiously.

"It ain't for me to be inquisitive," he said, "and such high matters are beyond my education, whether or no, but you were telling me that in your judgment a man-wolf, or some such varmint harboured here, and I thought you were very brave in that case, Sir William, to come up all alone."

"I feared it once, but fear it no longer," declared the other. "Under certain circumstances and given sufficient

provocation, James, the human mind transcends fear and becomes indifferent to physical perils. We must all die and we can only die once. The most awful and enduring dread for man has always concerned what he was going to, rather than what he was going from. I am saved that torment, being without free will to determine my present conduct; and, since free will is denied me, I cannot be condemned by a just God to the everlasting fires. Now it may well be that this lycanthrope is in a like case with myself and plays its part as a tool, altogether innocent, in the Hands of its Creator. Our inevitable meeting, as I see it now, accomplishes the will of One responsible for it, and because His Will cannot be evil, then we, His humble ministers, incur no blame, whatever may happen."

Callender did not attempt to argue upon so abstruse a matter.

"That was the word, Sir William—'lycanthrope'—and by a queer chance I hit upon it on a printed page not so long ago. Taking advantage of your kind permission to read the books in the library I helped myself to Lord Byron."

"Do you care for poetry then?"

"No, Sir William. I wouldn't say in honesty that I set any large store on poetry. You want to be educated up to a tidy high standard for that; but I see the book was written by a lord, and that aroused my interest. I've waited on a good few lords in my time, but never knew a single one that had any use for poetry. Sport, yes; and politics, yes; and newspapers, yes; and good works, yes; but poetry, no. And so to find a lord who had actually wrote a fat volume of rhymes on his own surprised me above a bit. I read a lot, and his lordship seems to have had the knack of stringing verses together as well as the next one. Poetry's all much of a muchness if you aren't trained to tell good from bad; but what I was going to say is that I come across that queer word, so it was made clear the gentleman had heard of them."

"Does Byron write of lycanthropy, and if so, where?" asked William.

"I forget exactly where; but I committed the lines to my memory," answered Callender. "I meant to tell you some time, Sir William, and then I thought you might count it too pushing."

"Never imagine anything of that sort, James. I welcome all opinions and value them."

The other quoted.

"Lord Byron didn't believe in 'em same as you believe in 'em; but yet he knew there was such things seemingly. He says:

"Lycanthropy
I comprehend, for without transformation,
Men becomes wolves on any slight occasion.

It was a long-winded yarn about Don Juan, now I come to think of it, Sir William. Bit of a lad he must have been."

"A clumsy rhyme and not true," declared the younger. "It is no slight occasion that transforms Man into beast."

But Callender confessed to a doubt.

"Tisn't for me to tell what I think, because what I think is no matter, sir; but if you was to ask me, I'd say there wasn't a lot of people hid in wolves, though a tidy lot of wolves hid in people. And another thought occurs to me, Sir William: that if I was an honest-to-goodness, straightforward wolf, I'd a lot sooner keep my own, respectable wolf nature than harbour the mucky soul of the average man."

William felt interested before this blunt reversal of his own values.

"It's an idea," he admitted. "I confess that notion had not occurred to me. You're a thinker, James."

The other made no reply, and his master asked a question.

"Have you had leisure to examine the prophecy in its direct bearing upon myself?" he inquired; and Callender replied somewhat vaguely.

"To tell truth, I'm the sort that goes through life with an open mind, Sir William. It don't take you far, and it don't help you to do much, as you will have marked for yourself. It's the men with shut minds that make history and get on with it, for

good or evil. You want the motive power of deep force and conviction behind you, if you are going to draw men after you and alter the map. But I'll say this: regarding your prophecy, Sir William, I've got a shut mind as to that myself."

"How do you read it then?"

Callender considered before stating his views and a furious buffet of the wind gave him time. William had taken the stronger man's arm and was conscious of its support where they now worked their way back in the teeth of the gale.

"As to my view, Sir William," responded Callender, when they were in the lee and had sighted home, "I wouldn't say that I've got it all clear in my mind as yet, and what I do think is a bit foggy. I was never up against anything like this before, of course, and prophecies are a bit out of my line of country. So you won't attach undue importance to my opinions, which are these. As I say, my mind's shut on the main question, Sir William, as to whether the prophecy aims at you. I'd say it does—every word of it—and I'd go so far as to swear it can only be meant for you, sir."

"You're the first person that even admits so much," replied William, "and I'm glad you find you can."

"But I'm much fearing that you won't be so glad to get my reasons," answered Callender, "because you'll say they ain't founded on anything stronger than your own reasons. There's a lot hid, and I'll make bold to ask you to keep my opinions to yourself, because I wouldn't like anybody here to think I presumed to meddle in such deep matters."

"Anything you may tell me is strictly private, James, and will go no further," promised William.

"It's like this then," continued the other. "We're agreed that this is meant for you, but I'd say we weren't agreed as to the source of it. In your belief, Sir William, this devilry against you was hatched in hell, or elsewhere, before you were born, or your father was born. Now I'd be inclined to say different: I'd say that you came first and the prophecy followed afterwards. That's just as fantastic—so you'll tell me—as your own theory; but the advantage of mine, Sir William, is that it may be capable of proof, and if it was proved that I had hit the right nail on the head, what a tower of moral strength for you! How such a discovery would alter the outlook and help you to face it, sir!"

William admitted so much, but the idea made no great appeal to him.

"In other words if this challenge came from earth, and not from heaven or hell, one would face it with greater equanimity," he said.

"Surely, Sir William; everything would look different then."

"It's easy to theorize, but when you consider the facts, James, you can but admit the massive evidence on my side rather than yours."

"You know best, Sir William, as to that, and I'm no arguer in any case," replied Callender humbly; "but I do beg you, for your peace of mind, to grant the strong likelihood. All you've had of the prophecy so far is earthy enough, remember. There wasn't anything that a wolf, let loose here by the hand of man, couldn't have managed on his own. You've smelled him and heard him and seen the mark of his claws in the mud; but that's all natural; and be it as it will, the idea that such a beast was brought by man looks a lot more likely to me than that he was sent by the devil."

"You must not associate the matter with the devil," answered William. "That is an assumption you are not justified in making."

"If a human man had anything to do with it, then he's working for the devil all right," replied Callender stoutly. "But I've said enough, Sir William, and my only hope was to help your peace of mind."

"And thank you gratefully for such a wish. I value it," responded the younger. "You are a friend, James, and as such I shall always regard you. The sequel to my mystery is near now and I am prepared to meet it. If you have other thoughts upon the subject, by all means bring them to me; but never discuss it with anybody else."

"And you'll do the like, Sir William," begged the valet. "I'd pray you to be very silent, and very hopeful too; but keep your hope hid. I'll get a hot bath ready pronto, sir."

They had reached the manor and went in together.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wolf Meets Wolf

Much argument behind the victim's back followed upon Telford's return. He found his cousin, so he declared, worse than when he left him, but no argument could shake William's determination to abide at Stormbury through the pending ordeal. He held that the blood in his veins demanded this course of action and refused to consider leaving his home, or changing his methods of life. In this decision the Boyds supported him, for Alma told Telford that opposition only fretted William's nerves needlessly and would never alter his purpose.

"After all," she said, "what is there for us to be alarmed about? We who love him know that he is labouring under a dreadful delusion and that no tragic horror will disturb his rest on New Year's Night. There is no real cause for any fear, unless you share his hallucination."

"That's the devil of it," he answered. "In grim honesty I can't join the rest of you on that easy-going basis. We artists have a sense more than other people, and I'm not going to say I feel completely happy about the future. John is like you. He thinks, as soon as the New Year comes in without any happenings, that Bill will turn over and go to sleep and wake up in the morning a new man. But I do not. I believe that the danger to his mind remains. He can't get over this infernal experience in five minutes. There's the reaction."

But Dr. Peters differed and declared that, once past the point of danger, all might be well. The vicar, too, was sanguine, though he deplored William's inclination to separate himself from his kind at this season and live very much alone. The fact troubled Malfroy seriously also, for it seemed that his friend was lifting cruel barriers between himself and those nearest and dearest to him. He kept to the seclusion of his private apartments much more closely than of old, and would often retire to them at an early hour of the day and not emerge again; while John was cast down and declared himself as quite unable to explain this phase.

"I'm the principal sufferer," he told Mrs. Wolf, "because, at this rate, our evenings together will soon become a thing of the past. He's gentle and thoughtful for me, as he always is, but he seems to be loosing the bonds that bind us together, and that shows my old power to help him and back him up is gone."

"We're all in the same box, my dear boy," Daphne assured him. "And in a way it was bound to happen when none of us could agree with him. After this wretched business is over, he'll take a new lease of life, and I hope find his mind shaking free from all these abominations. When Bill finds that you were right from the first and he was wrong, his first care will be to make it up to you."

"If he doesn't, I shall resign," answered the land-agent. "One can't go on living with him under these altered circumstances—not good enough."

She consoled him and guessed that he was growing too sensitive.

"You know what you are to him and all of us," said Daphne. "You must allow for the effects of this obsession. He is merely disappointed because you have always steadily opposed him."

"He cuts me out of everything," declared John. "Lord knows I never bring up the subject and talk of anything else on earth to interest him; but often, now, instead of going to play billiards after dinner, he tells me that he has some stiff reading to do and goes to his rooms; and sometimes his man brings a message at the last minute to say he won't be dining at all. Then I go up after dinner. But he doesn't like that and makes it clear that he'd rather be alone."

"You go out together?"

"Yes; he's always at his best after breakfast. He likes to go out; and he likes to talk about the future; but never his own future now. It's as if the man was taking a general leave and saying 'good-bye' to the whole show."

It happened that John, meeting Callender on his afternoon constitutional, took the opportunity for conversation, and the valet advanced his knowledge. Malfroy laughed to find James perambulating the hangers, for the day was dark and still and the ancient oaks brooded more gloomily than usual under their grey pall of lichens and fog.

"Cheerful hole to find you in," he said, and the other made a curious reply.

"It goes along with the bent of my mind, sir, if you take my meaning."

"It gets on most people's nerves in my experience. A chastening sort of spot. What's biting you, James, if I may ask?"

"Ask and welcome, sir. It's nothing personal to myself, because my small affairs are all in order, so to say, and I don't take no risks and haven't got any responsibilities to name. But it's the master: a nice gentleman if ever there was one, and so terrible under the weather. Excuse me for speaking, Mr. Malfroy. It ain't because I'm inquisitive I promise you, but only to throw light on my duty to Sir William. A valet's no more than a machine to most gentlemen, along with his toothbrush and other gadgets for comfort and convenience; and I've always respected that fact and done according; but Sir William's so full of the milk of human kindness that he takes a rather different view, and I wondered, in strict confidence, if there might be any madness in the family."

"Because he treats you like a human being and not a toothbrush?" asked Johnny, and the other smiled.

"Excuse my amusement, sir, because I grant it isn't a matter for amusement—far from it, in fact; but I wondered, on account of things that Sir William was pleased to say. Some weeks or more ago he came up here on the day of the big storm, and I chanced to see him start without any preparation against the weather. I knew that we were in for a proper deluge before night fell, and I knew where he was gone, for he's a lot addicted to this strange place, and I found him just in time. But the storm had got into his blood, sir, and he had took on a very fantastic habit of mind if I may say so. He's under a prophecy, Mr. Malfroy, or so he thinks. He had told me to read it before—a most unpleasant affair in a little book—but now he's gone one better, or one worse rather, and he tells me with a straight face, poor gentleman, that he's dead sure not only that a savage sort of fantastical wolf is after him, but that he's fast turning into a savage wolf himself!"

"That's bad and you ought to have let me, or somebody else, know sooner," answered John. "Since you have learned so much, I can tell you that we are all aware of the strain he is enduring over this accursed rhyme he's dug out from somewhere; but we're hoping that with the New Year he'll throw it off and get normal."

"You wouldn't say he ought to see a doctor, sir?"

"We've begged him to do so, but he won't. Dr. Peters has looked after him since he was a child and he feels it will be better to carry on and just watch over him closely till the date is passed. Then, when Sir William finds he's all right and the future clear, the doctor believes he will swiftly recover. If he doesn't, then something will have to be done. Meantime we can only keep close guard upon him. Be sure to do that, and tell me, or Mr. Telford, if you see any changes."

"He's terrible difficult to watch over," confessed Callender. "He hates what he calls being 'pried upon.' Not that I'm that sort. A prying valet's the limit and better dead I'd say. But to show you. Three nights since, Sir William suffered from a night-mare—a bad one seemingly. Round three of the morning it was, and I heard him hollering so as the gallery echoed. I sleep uncommon sound myself, but the noise woke me up and I rose and ran across to him and turned up the light in his room, and I told him it was all right and I'd fetch him a glass of wine and a biscuit. But he was very much annoyed and begged I'd mind my own business in future. He said 'It's bad enough to horrify myself without horrifying other people.' And then he told me to put out the light and be gone; which I did do without any more words, of course. In the morning he was just as usual and didn't mention the subject again."

"Do what you can without annoying him," directed John, "and tell me anything you may notice that seems important. But say nothing whatever to other servants."

Talk turned to William, should any two of his intimates happen to meet, and Alma listened to Telford on a day when he had just returned from lunching with his cousin.

"He's in pretty good form to-day," said the artist, "though it rather goes through me to see the look in his eyes. All hunted things have the same pathetic, heart-breaking expression, whether man or beast. He's counting on you for tea, Alma, and going to drive you home afterwards."

The girl, who was spending an hour with Daphne, asked a question.

"How does Callender seem to suit him?" she inquired. "I gather he has taken rather a liking to the man."

"More than a mere liking. In some queer way he finds Callender's company quite attractive. When John's not about at the right moment, he'll summon his valet and make him walk beside him. I've never heard the chap say anything very bright, and he can't be said to look very bright; but Bill thinks well of his intelligence and has confided in him apparently."

"'Confided in him,' Telford?"

"Yes—didn't he tell you? He's given Callender the prophecy to read and made him aware of what he thinks is going to happen. It was a score for me in a way, because Callender is on my side up to a point. Of course he knows that Bill's fears as to himself are bunkum and does what he can to calm his mind; but he does think the prophecy has got something to do with Bill, though he can't see the connection. I've always thought that myself, and argued against John and Peters and your father, who say it's rot. I think in some mysterious way it's bound up with William, and always did think so, but how beats me. Johnny, by the way, is getting rather jealous of Callender, I fancy. He can't understand Bill making a sort of friend of him. It seems absurd to talk of jealousy in an insensitive being like Johnny; but where William's concerned, he can be as jealous as the grave. I've had to watch out myself, because Bill always found me more sympathetic over his trouble than Malfroy could be. That was natural, since I have a deeper vision than Johnny and share something of Bill's nature. John's scorn and contempt for the spiritual values, as displayed over this business, couldn't fail to create a bit of a rift between them; but when I hinted at that and advised Malfroy to take a different line and not be so materialistic, he got very much up in the air and said it was better to speak the truth and try to strengthen Bill's mind, than whimper and yelp and pretend there might be something in this tomfoolery. He can be pretty insulting for all his breezy charm of manner when he likes—can Johnny. However, I didn't quarrel. I'm living in hope that another fortnight will see the end of this Witches' Sabbath."

"Anything we can do, or any opinion that can help dear William to greater hope is justified," declared Mrs. Wolf. "For my part I speak most positively to him and always take a religious line. I rate him soundly and tell him that he deliberately neglects to buckle on the armour of righteousness. He ought to go to church and read the lessons on Sunday morning, as Sir Porteus always did."

"His faith is not dead," replied Alma. "He will come back again very soon. My own faith tells me that Bill will be faithful again and make up for lost time next year. He'll grant this much in his quieter hours—that there may be an explanation of the prophecy hidden from us and some day to be revealed."

"He says that to quiet you down," answered Telford. "He's admitted to me that he may survive and even be permitted to understand the purpose of this awful experience; but he doesn't really believe it, and more do I. I can see the dear chap taking unobtrusive farewell of his life in all sorts of ways. It's killing work to watch him—worse for me than any of you, because you all believe his trouble is a chimera and will vanish into thin air with the New Year, while I'm far from believing any such thing."

"Then the less you see him the better, Telford," said Alma. "He wants all the tonic of hope that we can give him. He's human enough and welcomes hope. What on earth do you think is going to happen to him?"

"Nothing," answered Telford. "Nothing physical, that is. I no more suppose that he will meet the vagrant wolf in the manor house, or anywhere else, than I suppose he is on the verge of a lupine change into a wolf himself. Such things may have happened in the early morning of consciousness, before man lifted his hands from earth and stood upright; but only the evidence of my own eyes would satisfy me that they happen now. That's too horrible, and I should not want to live a day longer in a world where it could happen. But I'm thinking of William's mind, not his body. Reactions of great thankfulness may give you as deep a shock as sudden grief or fear. I'm thinking how it will be with him when he sees morning dawn on New Year's Day."

"Both Alma and her father are cheerful none-the-less," replied his stepmother. "The last people whom I should have expected to be; but they tend to hearten one. The vicar trusts in God, which is always so right and seemly, and Alma, too, feels that dear old Bill is safe in his Maker's Hands."

"I wish that I could share their optimism," he answered. "People go mad, and though it may be their Maker's will they should, that needn't prevent us from trying to keep them sane. Nothing has ever sent more unfortunate wretches out of their senses than religion, for that matter. But what do we do? We just wait and watch him going down the slippery slope!"

"You can't do anything for a man who is sane," said Mrs. Wolf; but Telford would not grant sanity to his cousin.

"It pleases you all to regard him so; but no alienist would," he declared. "When a man seriously suspects he is turning into a wild animal and assures you that he begins to be conscious of the change, then there's only one name for the poor devil. Malfroy said that and, of course, it's the line he was bound to take. On the other hand the only alternative would be that some forgotten law of nature, or at least one never recognized in modern times, was working in William and we are to be faced with some such a prodigy as old records report."

"That's to be insane indeed," sighed Mrs. Wolf. "But I thought Johnny was more sanguine about him yesterday."

"He professes to be. I can only hope everybody's right and he's going to weather it—his mind I mean."

"If I doubted that," said Alma, "I should be sad indeed, Telford; but we all have our own intuitions about my Bill, and though it may seem strange, I feel far more at peace about him than I used to feel."

"I'm thankful to hear it," he told her. "If you can say that out of your deep affection for him, my dear girl, then there should be something in it. But why do you? How can you?"

"Who can explain an intuition?" she asked in her turn; and, indeed, when Alma joined her sweetheart presently, there seemed no substantial grounds for her hope. William was in good physical health and made an excellent tea—a meal that he usually much enjoyed; but his words were wild and whirling. Malfroy left them together and then Alma advanced a plea. She saw William daily and never parted from him until their next meeting was arranged; while the young man himself counted upon his hours with her as the last great happiness that he was destined to know. He loved her steadfast note of hope, believing it to be genuine enough, though now that daily happened which made it more and more impossible for him to share it.

"I want you to give me a great joy, Bill, and come to Communion with me before breakfast," she begged. "That will be the most blessed and precious Christmas gift you can give me, darling, so please promise faithfully you will?"

But he shook his head.

"Not that, Alma. The time is past and that door closed for me. It may open again, but it seems little likely now. Look at me! Can a man with wolf-light in his eyes enter the Holy Places and kneel before the Altar of the Living God? I would not have touched this hideous subject, but you are one who must always have her reasons. And you are braver than any other woman. Look at me I say. You cannot in honesty deny the changes—the ravages creeping over what was once a man and so dear to you. Daily, hourly, they grow upon me. My expression is already inhuman; my ears grow longer, my nose sharper; my chin recedes; the hair of my head thickens and extends over my scalp to my neck and face; my hands are changing their shape."

The listener showed no fear, or loathing. She even smiled, though her heart beat fiercely and her cheek grew flushed. She took William's head between her hands and kissed him; then she stood and regarded him. None could ignore the distemper in his beautiful eyes, but only a suffering human soul brooded behind them.

"You are dreaming horrid dreams," she said, "and will soon awaken from them, never to dream again I hope. There is no wolf-light in your lovely brown eyes, Bill, whatever that may be, and I never saw your hair look tidier or shorter. Please, please come for my sake. I want you to come. I've prayed on my knees for you to come. You'll be the better and happier all day for coming, and so shall I if you do."

"You can see no change in my eyes, Alma?"

"None. I never see anything but love for me in them and I never want to."

"God knows what desires may conquer me soon," he answered. "Love may turn to something worse than hate before I shuffle off; but I need not poison your mind, darling. No good can come of that. It shall be as you wish; for love of you and for worship of you, I'll come."

And he kept his word.

The Boyds and Dr. Peters, who was a lonely man, dined with William on Christmas Day and his aunt and cousin were also of the party; but John Malfroy went home for a couple of nights to his mother and sister, who dwelt at Salisbury. The evening passed without incident and William proved cheerful and in good spirits. Perhaps only Alma and Telford

could judge the fierceness of the inner fire that consumed him now, but the doctor, who had not seen him for some length of time, felt satisfied that vitality sufficient belonged still to the young man and that he might be trusted.

"If anything in the nature of a horrible ordeal were in store for him, I should not hesitate to intervene and summon physicians to prevent it," he said to Telford, while William played his organ; "but as we well know no such thing can happen, I am backing the future and the consciousness that his troubles are of his own creation and will soon be a thing of the past. Once he accepts and realizes that, and with youth upon his side, the illusions should vanish like ghosts at cockcrow."

"But if anything did happen that night?" asked the other.

"In that case no man could speak for his reason, or even his life," replied Peters, and Telford explained the difficulties.

"The risk is negligible," he said, "because both John and his valet will be close at hand and awake all night; but nothing whatever can be done with Bill. He's always morbid over everything, and never more than over every detail of this tragedy. The night is to go on just as usual, and when I asked him to let me come up here and spend it with him, he flushed up as though I had insulted him. In fact, the poor beggar thought I had. 'If you've forgotten you are a Wolf,' he said, 'I have not, Telford.' And he jumped on John like a ton of bricks when he suggested various precautions."

Days slipped swiftly past, and William occupied himself with a sort of visitation. He called upon his tenants, sometimes with Malfroy, wished them a prosperous New Year, gave many of them little gifts and in certain cases, marking trouble, removed it with a friendly promise. It was clear that he won considerable contentment from these visits and regarded them as leave-takings.

Only to John did he speak concerning the future of the estate and regret the crushing imposts that might soon fall again upon it, but his friend rebuked him sternly.

"Stormbury has got to put up with fifty years of you yet—unless the 'Reds' get in and send you and your sort packing," he said.

Many behind the scenes conferred together in private on William's behalf, and among them Callender took a lone hand and tried very hard to inspire his master in one direction. They talked together on an evening when William was alone, and the valet, using some craft, spoke of a matter likely to arrest his interest. He had read not a few extravagant records on William's subject and at his wish, but was ever careful to express no contemptuous doubt upon them and discussed necromancy as the serious subject William held it to be. Callender had apparently discovered a loop-hole for hope in his studies and begged to be allowed to impart it.

"It's like this, Sir William," he began. "You'll have noticed that the were-wolves in your histories of 'em, all do pretty much the same things for a start. They ain't wolves all the time, but by day go about their business and carry on like respectable people. But to turn into these monsters, they all do the same thing. They anoint their bodies with some ointment from hell, and that changes 'em. And if that's the regulation process, I can't see how you are in any real danger; because you haven't got a drop of this devil's brew to my knowledge and wouldn't use it if you had."

William grew animated at once.

"Quite a good argument, Callender," he replied, "and I'm glad you raised it, because the answer may show the unique distinction of my peculiar case. You will find nothing to parallel it in the archives, for the reason, as I believe, there has never been a parallel, and I'm in almost certain course of making history whatever the sequel may be. My situation is no doubt gravid with deep meanings, and they will ultimately appear for all of you, even though I am not to learn them myself. As to the unguent of which you speak, I know all about that and the ingredients that go to make it. They lie within the reach of any man mad and wicked enough to bring them together for the purpose. But no temptation exists in that direction for me. The change, hourly creeping nearer now, is not of my own volition, but forced upon me by powers beyond any human strength to combat or resist."

"Then they are evil powers, Sir William, and ought to be fought according," ventured the valet. "You should listen to good advice for certain. Heaven helps those who help themselves, sir."

"No, James. These arguments have been urged upon me until I'm tired of hearing them. It has even been suggested by Mr. Malfroy that I turn tail, hide and absent myself till the time of consummation has passed; but such a course is unthinkable.

Does the captain leave the bridge until he has done all humanly possible to save his ship? The ship of Stormbury is in my keeping. Her peril may be my peril; her triumph may depend on my extinction, or I may be destined to triumph with her. There is, however, nothing for me but to endure the passage of events and lift no hand to change them. One cannot hide from Fate even if one would. I am no pacifist, but these things are not to be opposed: they must be suffered. They probably spring from a divine rather than an evil source. It seems probable that I am called vicariously to perish for ancient crimes long forgotten by men, but not by their Creator; and were that so, then, if I conspired to oppose His purpose, I should incur fresh guilt and condemn my race for ever. In a word, my dear fellow, if intervention there is to be, it must come from the Supreme Being Himself and no other. If these things are—'evil,' then He will not suffer them to triumph."

Callender admitted the force of this argument and had no more to say beyond confident assurance that evil they must be; but elsewhere and unknown to William, Johnny had hit on what seemed to him a promising idea and taken it to Dr. Peters in private.

"It's like this with Bill now," he told the elder. "He absolutely declines to do anything whatever for any of us about New Year's Night. He insists on following his rules in every particular and resents every suggestion to the contrary. That would be quite all right if he was normal and knew, like the rest of us, that nothing whatever was going to happen; but he firmly believes that something tremendous is going to happen—something that will make family history as the poor chap imagines. Left alone there, with his nerves strung to breaking-point in the dead of the night, every sound in the house, every whisper of the wind, every hoot of an owl will pile up the agony for him, so that by daylight his words may have come true and he will have made history by being the first member of the family to go cracked!"

"What can we do about it short of violence? In any case interference might provoke the worst," said Peters.

"We can do this, and it's rather a brainwave if you ask me," answered the other. "Just the opposite of violence, Doctor, and up to you. Oblivion! That's the idea. We've only got to slip Bill a strong opiate, or some such gadget in his dinner, or after it, and he'll go out like a baby and sleep like a top. And next morning, when Callender wakes him, he'll see the hand of Providence in the night's work, and will be quite right in doing so for that matter."

"By Jove, my lad! That's rather bright."

"Not even doing evil that good may come," argued Johnny, "but doing good that greater good may come. Give Bill a dreamless night of better rest than he's had for six months, and he wakes up from it, strengthened and invigorated, to face the tremendous discovery that he has been living all this time in a filthy dream, and that the dream is over."

"I have suggested sleeping-draughts," answered the doctor, "but he's always refused them, for the reason that nothing must come between him and destiny."

"I know. I've heard all that tripe a thousand times; but he won't know anything about the drug, while that fact isn't going to prevent your dope doing its work."

"It's a wonderful thought, Malfroy—a brainwave as you say, and I'm only rather astonished that I didn't think of it myself," confessed the old man.

"For your ear alone," continued John. "I'm beginning to feel there is more in this infernal business than we guess at, Doctor. Not witchcraft, or any foolery like that, but a deliberate attempt to trade on this jargon in the old book and shatter Bill's nerves for good and all. I haven't mentioned the idea even to Telford. Such a thought makes you suspicious of everybody who knows Bill, or comes within a mile of him; but it grows on me. There are too many queer coincidences; the prophecy has been followed out, step by step, too closely; and if I believed that any human being were responsible for some devilish piece of work against William, I'd never rest again till I'd found him and broken his neck."

Dr. Peters nodded.

"You'd feel like that: so would all of us," he answered; "but if that were so and some secret scoundrel had plotted to end Bill's life, in the event of success, the hangman would break his neck for him doubtless and save you the trouble. No, Johnny, despite the coincidences, I can hardly think we harbour a human wolf capable of such unutterable villainy, or that we should ever be able to pin such a blackguard crime upon any man who had known Sir William. But the sleeping-draught is practical. It can do no harm and may do a great deal of good. He would resent it fiercely, but I see no need

why he should ever know it. I will give you something as tasteless as possible, and you must contrive to get it into his coffee after dinner, or his wine if he doesn't drink coffee."

"He always takes coffee," said John, "but often goes without wine."

"Call for it to-morrow then. I had better not send it," replied Peters, "and be sure to get it into him. He'll be drowsy in twenty minutes and dead to the world in half an hour."

The last day of his ordeal came quickly enough and William prepared to follow the simple programme he had designed for it. He had abstracted himself more and more of late, but while doing so said many kind words to those who would fain have been with him. Callender more often accompanied him now when he walked or drove, and the valet declared himself uneasily conscious that John Malfroy resented the fact. He confessed his fears to Thorpe and Mrs. Budge, but both the butler and housekeeper thought highly of him and joined in assurances that he need feel no concern.

"Mr. Malfroy rubs him up the wrong way and don't show no patience with this here wolf, James," said Mrs. Budge, "whereas you, with your well-known art for keeping an open mind, let the poor gentleman run on and don't contradict him. It's idle to contradict them with a bee in their bonnets. But come New Year's Day, the evil eye will be took off for good: that's what Mr. Thorpe and me feel sure and Sir William himself hopes may happen. And then he'll go back to Mr. John again and marry and forget all his woes, please God."

Upon the last day of the year William walked with Malfroy for a while and then they lunched at the dower-house with his aunt and Telford. He was quiet and showed no emotion, but he could not hide the fact of deep anxiety. His thoughts wandered and Telford failed to interest him. He visited the artist's workshop, however, and praised a fine pot of pewter on which his cousin was engaged. At four o'clock came Callender with a car. He was driving his master to the vicarage, where William had promised to drink tea. The young man took a quick farewell of his relations and felt Daphne's tearful kiss to be a last 'good-bye,' although her words were brave. She spoke of coming to the manor early the next day for some flowers.

"I ought to go to the Watch Night Service," she said, "but I shall hold my own little service at home, Bill."

At the vicarage he met the usual welcome, and it was Fortescue Boyd, rather than William, who displayed unease and emotion. The young man preserved silence for the most part and, when he spoke, only discussed everyday matters. He appeared to be lost in thought sometimes, then suddenly came to himself with startled eyes and a nervous twitching of muscles. Soon fell the dusk and a scene of tense significance came to an end.

John was waiting for William's return, but he wanted the valet, not his friend. He watched from a door that opened into the hall, saw the familiar, bent, red head ascend the stair, the listless white hand upon the rail, the slow, tired feet drag upward. Then he beckoned to Callender.

"How is he? Has he kept up pretty well?" asked John; but the other could give no very good account of William. He was, indeed, on edge himself apparently and showed deep concern.

"He's very near all in, sir. Touch and go, I'd say. He's ordained to take his dinner upstairs to-night and don't want any company. I was to tell you."

"I thought he might. It's better so in a way, because you can doctor his coffee without being observed by Thorpe. Here's the stuff."

He brought a little phial of opalescent liquid from his pocket and handed it to Callender.

"Shake it before you pour it out," he said, "and keep a close look out on him afterwards. Try and get him to bed as soon after he's drunk it as you can. You look scared yourself. What has he said to put the wind up you?"

"Only lies, poor gentleman, but they were dreadful lies and gave me the creeps, Mr. Malfroy. Sir William thinks the change is coming to-night! He made me stop on the way home, while he listened, and he's sure the wolf was crying to him from the hangers to come, and come quickly. He said it was waiting for him there and mustn't be denied. I listened, but of course I heard nothing, and he was vexed with me when I said so. He rubbed it into me again that no watch must be kept over him in any sort of way to-night, and he thought as we should most likely find him sped in the morning. 'Look for me in the hangers,' he said. And I was wondering if you would like for me to ring up Dr. Peters on the quiet and get

him to stand by unknown to Sir William?"

John considered, then shook his head.

"No need. Peters has done his bit, and if you get the draught into Sir William, he's bound to sleep solidly till well into to-morrow. That's all that matters. When he's fairly off, you can leave him safely enough, and let me know in my room. I shall come up round about midnight. Once he's out everything will be all right."

So the intervening hours slipped by and, just after twelve o'clock, Callender knocked at John's door and reported that all was well.

"I couldn't say he'd got the lot, for he left a drop of his coffee to-night," he said. "But he's calm and sleeping quite quiet. So I left him."

"You can turn in now. And I believe his troubles are ended. And ours too. You'll be as thankful as any of us to see the light of day on him again, James."

"Thank you, Mr. Malfroy; and that's a true word, believe me, sir," replied the other.

One quarter of an hour later began a series of events which appeared to culminate in actual violation of nature. Watching ears and eyes must have accepted them, while experience and human reason had hastened to reject. Things utterly monstrous happened in quick succession before life returned to the normal and the phantoms of that frenzied five minutes had disappeared.

A shaded light burned in the great, upper corridor, for direction rather than illumination, and it stood on the main wall and burned all night; but after Malfroy was gone to his room and Callender had also retired, the dim radiance indicated no moving thing for several minutes. Meantime, from far distant on the windless but overcast air there came a thin tinkle of music, where Stormbury's little ring of bells welcomed the New Year cheerfully and told that the Watch Night devotions were at an end.

At this moment something moved in the corridor and a human figure emerged from Callender's apartment and proceeded silently beneath the hanging lamp and forward into the darkness of the passage beyond. It vanished and a few moments later a much bigger man appeared coming along the gallery in the opposite direction. He crept under the light, listened at the head of the great stairs and then stole silently to Callender's room. Whatever his intent, it was interrupted, for suddenly, from the direction in which he had come, a light blazed brightly out of a distant doorway and the big man, evidently amazed by an incident so unexpected, abandoned his purpose and hastened back again. A few moments later there echoed the thud of a shutting door and the light disappeared.

Following a hush, wherein the great house sank to sleep and silence, began faint noises below and an amorphous shadow like a black smudge appeared upon the stairway. It ascended step by step in animal shape, with animal caution, and there flickered a lambent ray of pale green about its feet. On all fours it crept, and when the light from the gallery fell upon it there was revealed a wolf-headed creature with open mouth, pricked ears, and eyes, not phosphorescent after the manner of wild beasts' eyes, but shining by steady inner illumination, like little lamps. The hair of the brute was a fulvous grey, turning to white upon the belly and dun upon the back. It fell not away to the lean flanks of a wolf behind, but rose, heavy and lumpish as an anthropoid ape. Very soft-footed and wary now, the creature crawled into the gallery and crouched motionless for a few moments under the shadow of a console, where none could see it. It appeared to shut its eyes, for the glimmer they cast about it suddenly went out. Emerging in a few moments it approached the door of William's bedroom, rose upon its hind-legs, stretched a paw and opened the door without a sound. Inside, with the door shut, the thing heard regular and loud breathing in absolute darkness, opened its eyes again, and by their light crawled once more upon all fours to William's bed. Then, with a low growl it leapt upon the sleeper. The eyes lit the pillow and threw a bright gleam upon the red head lying there; but it was the head of another wolf that blazed beneath the visitor's attack—a fiery, tawny monster lying on its back and shocked into ferocious life by its assailant. For a moment grey wolf and red glared upon each other; then the wakened monster hove its bulk out of the bedclothes, revealed a hide of flame, and extending long forepaws fastened them upon the grey wolf's throat. This creature's strength was greater far than that of the intruder, for it shook him like a rat, threw him off the bed to the ground, and then, still snarling and snapping its jaws, descended upon him. The burning eyes had gone out and the unequal battle swiftly ended, for the grey wolf uttered but one howl of agony and lay quite still.

As though this solitary and awful sound breaking upon the silence had been a signal, it was answered from the other side of the corridor by yet a louder. One pistol shot rang out and reverberated like thunder along the stone roof of the gallery. There followed a moment of peace in which the church bells still tinkled their greeting to a new year. Then the red wolf thrust its head from William's door, and hastened down the passage.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pettigrew Unravels

Nietzsche remarks that men are like spiders, each balanced at the centre of his own web, and whatever we may catch in them, it will only be something our webs are capable of catching. So much is true; but it often happens with men as with spiders, that though their webs were equal to holding the prey, some force from without after all intervenes and robs them of victory.

This occurred in the unusual case of the young Stormbury baronet, Sir William Wolf. That he was well and truly caught there can be no question, nor may anyone doubt that the web which caught him was superbly woven by acute and courageous scoundrels; but chance willed that a subtler mind entered the lists against these deft weavers and their ingenuity proved no match for his own. The whole battle of wits can be said to have taken place subterraneously. It was in truth a very dark business from start to finish; and one owes this much to the defeated forces: that at no time were they aware of opposition, or for a moment guessed that a secret intellect watched every move, its sole purpose being to confound them. Such, however, was their own distinguished craftsmanship and capable handling of their difficulties that it needed considerable skill to associate them with the problem at all. This wit by good fortune I happened to possess; but even so, only clues of the most nebulous character led me to my conclusions. One knew that one stood on the brink of a very considerable crime, and yet no criminal presented himself; at no turn or twist of the investigation was it possible to surprise the sinister activities of the enemy; in no cul-de-sac or blind alley could I corner him, or meet him face to face. And this was the more surprising because, from first to last, the opposition neither suspected me, nor entertained the remotest notion that I was more than I claimed to be. But armed at every point they pursued their invulnerable way, and only inanimate objects revealed the truth of them at last.

For myself the instructive factor of this curious business is its illustration of the eternal struggle between appearance and reality. No more startling example has yet challenged me, for to the onlooker it must appear that events confront him and proceed under his own eyes, which transcend human knowledge and proclaim the existence of active witchcraft, or wizardry in an uncommonly horrible form; whereas the simple truth of the matter was inevitable, for given the ingredients of such a cauldron, the brew could have been no other. Everything fell out in strict conformity with nature's laws; no fundamental principle of physics or psychology was broken. The miracle would have been if these things had not happened precisely as they did happen; and, but for the extremely tragic side of the business, for which I was responsible though not reprehensible, I should ever regard the case as among the most entertaining in my experience, since the contrast between seeming and being was never more uproariously displayed.

And now it is necessary to tell you all over again the story you have just read, from a new angle of vision; but for one moment, that your interest may not languish, I will talk of myself. Actions, however, speak louder than words and with action we shall immediately become concerned.

My name is Samuel Pettigrew. After leaving the University of Oxford, I became an actor and played many character parts, first in provincial repertory and then in London. But the mimic business of the stage had already begun to tire when accident took me off it. I knew, ere now, that the highest walks of the drama were denied me and that neither my physique, nor voice, nor temperament would ever support me in high tragedy. I was a comedian, and the humorous aspects of existence had ever been foremost in my outlook upon life. Then I played a detective in a most ingenious and popular entertainment, and having impersonated this astute officer for many months without a respite, abandoned the profession to become a private inquirer amid the real misdemeanours of my fellow-men. I had in truth outgrown the theatre and now sought drama where it was better played.

In that connection you may or may not have heard my name; but an old and faithful college companion cherished it still for the sake of our past together, and there came a day when I received a letter from the Reverend Fortescue Boyd. It covered a time-worn little volume and embraced an earnest appeal for assistance in peculiar and distressing circumstances. He told his story and begged that I would return the book as soon as conveniently possible. It appeared that the lord of the manor, who happened to be engaged to Boyd's only daughter, was much perturbed by what he regarded as a prophecy of doom, discovered in this venerable work; and, on reading the prediction, one could not fail to see the gentleman's reasons. But since this is the twentieth century, it appeared a case for his physician, or perhaps his spiritual adviser, if he possessed one. I considered the matter and had almost resolved to decline any intervention; but

my conscience denied so peremptory a measure. None understands the value of expert knowledge better than the expert, and since I was not a bookman myself in any sense, I felt it only just to submit the odd little tome to skilled investigation before returning it. The verses had told me nothing and appeared much on a par with the rest of the legendary matter it contained; but my thoughts ran to old Jack Sparrow, a second-hand bookseller who had long forgotten more about books than ever I knew. Him I had served to good purpose in the past, and felt sure he would pleasure me willingly enough; so I forwarded the work, explained the peculiar position and begged that he would examine it with special reference to the poem entitled 'Twilight of Wolf' and throw any light that his learning could discover. He acknowledged the book and, three days later, begged me to come and see him about it, but volunteered no information as to what he might have to impart. The fact that he wished to see me meant something, however, and I called upon him the next day after closing-time. He lived over his shop and made me welcome in a den rich with the aroma of Virginian tobacco.

Jack was an ancient man with a scrub of white beard, a high, rugged forehead and a mouth fallen in upon some few remaining teeth. His eyes were black and keen still; his wrinkled hands yet told of the beauty that once belonged to them.

He wasted no time, but having declared his satisfaction at being able to do me a good turn for the past, bade me sit down and began at once on the subject of *Blackdown Legends*.

"It's like this, Mr. Pettigrew," he began. "I've studied the book and I know the period. At a glance nothing is wrong with it, but books being to me life, I have developed a special sense about them—just as a doctor develops a special sense of diagnosis which becomes to him a second habit—an additional art that he only shares with his own kind. Your book wasn't well. Something was wrong with it. I missed certain qualities that such a book, if in a healthy state, never fails to possess. What was lacking? It took me but little time to discover the omissions. Books such as this of the date upon the title page invariably possess an index. It may occur before the letterpress or, more rarely, at the end of the volume; but to handle a book deprived of its index rendered me uncomfortable. Again, you shall never find a complete book that lacks one empty page—an end paper, or fly-leaf—between its completion and the binding, or cover. After the colophon, such a page shall invariably be found. Your little book, however, wants these inevitable things. Nor did investigation show that they had been cut out, though there was no sign of either.

"This puzzled me for a moment, but I need not have puzzled," proceeded Jack, "for a closer glance at the volume told me all that I needed to know and solved both problems. There it was, staring me in the face, just as it stared you in the face; and I don't think the better of you, Mr. Pettigrew, to find that you missed it."

I expressed humble apologies and he told me where I had failed of common intelligence.

"The pagination should have enlightened you," he said—"the numbering of the pages, Mr. Pettigrew. The pages of a book are numbered, alternatively in the right or left-hand corners at the top, or under the letterpress at the bottom. In this work they are numbered with very small numerals at the bottom. But what did I find on the sheet which gives us the poem? It is printed on two sides of a single page and the preceding page is numbered 164, while the subsequent page is numbered 165. How, then, were the pages of the poem numbered? They, too, were numbered 164 and 165! Needless to say this explains everything."

"Not so obviously as you imagine," I told him. "Not, at least, to me. Elucidate, boy."

Whereupon he did so.

"The index has gone, for the reason that your verses did not appear in it, and the fly-page at the end has disappeared because it was used as a vehicle for the verses. Thus both are explained. For other reasons, I had guessed at an interpolation, but was confuted by the fact that the poem, or prophecy, had been printed on precisely the same paper as the rest of the work and in similar type; but here was proof how it could be managed. In any case to procure similar type presented no difficulty, but similar paper had been almost impossible."

"The conclusion being," said I, "that somebody has taken this book to pieces, done as you suggest, for reasons hidden from us, and then bound it again in its present form, availing himself, or herself, of the final empty leaf and leaving out the index, because, as that did not contain 'Twilight of Wolf,' it would have given the show away?"

"Precisely," answered Jack Sparrow.

"You are more wonderful than I have long believed you to be," I returned; "and now, one last question. You spoke just

now of other reasons for suspecting the prophecy. What were they?"

"They are debatable and I may be wrong," he answered; "but if I am right, these ugly rhymes suggest a later—considerably later—period than the body of the book. About the prose papers there is a flavour of the past—a careful, stilted diction and a dim understanding of the dignity of language lost to-day; but the poem, though archaic in matter, is quite modern in manner. Moreover, the title is distinctly modern. 'Twilight' was not used in such a connection so long ago.

"As to my main point: that the verses never belonged to the book," he continued, "it is possible that you may be able to prove, or disprove it, if you feel any doubt. In fact, it is probable that you can. In the archives of the British Museum Library—that priceless storehouse—another copy is quite likely to exist, a copy in far better preservation than this one; and should you find it, Mr. Pettigrew, I will wager Lombard Street to a china orange, that it does not contain this bloodthirsty nonsense."

"To bet with you about a book, Jack, would be a folly that shall never be recorded of me," I promised him. "And such is my absolute confidence and trust that I shall not even attempt to find another copy at the B.M."

Then I left him, returned the *Legends* by registered post to Fortescue Boyd and informed the gentleman that he should hear again in twenty-four hours, begging him at the same time to mention my name to nobody.

In connection with what the vicar had already told me as to the effect of the prophecy on Sir William Wolf, the affair presented considerable matter for thought, and when upon the following day, I heard from Boyd again to the effect that the scent of a wolf had been picked up in the grounds of the manor by several people and actually verified by one, who was in a position to speak with certainty, my curiosity gained upon me. I despatched a list of crucial questions to my old friend and, upon receiving replies to them, determined to investigate. For it certainly appeared that something considerable might be involved.

I argued thus. The unknown, who had been at pains to mutilate the little book so deftly, must have had substantial cause for his craft. He might have done it much better by removing some other item of the book on two pages and substituting his own contribution, but still he had shown considerable skill and made a very tidy job of it. Moreover, according to Boyd's data, the verses argued intimate knowledge of the young baronet's appearance and peculiar bent of mind. Now only those with some solid reason for taking so much trouble could be expected to do so, and the age-long question of motive instantly arose. That was not far to seek upon the surface, but the obvious has a way of vanishing into thin air when relied upon, and at present there existed no particular reason to trust it more than usual. My preliminary questions elicited the fact that Sir William's present heir was his cousin—a young man of near his own age; and that he was a skilled artist, promised a link between him and the prophecy; but I also learned that he was among Sir William's closest friends and intimates—a trustworthy and hardworking fellow, who owed much to the baronet's good will and the kind support of his late uncle, Sir Porteus Wolf. To build any case upon him without further knowledge was therefore idle; but I had now reached a point when the desire to intrude was becoming strong, and presently I determined to do so.

For I had sensed something evil in the air of this business. As Sir William and his companions had smelled the aroma of wolf at midnight on his last birthday, so now did I experience the subtle tang of secret villainy—an odour offensive enough to honest nostrils, but not devoid of exhilarating and tonic qualities for the nose of such depraved beings as myself. For since we may take it that crime originates in the subconscious, any detective of crime should start there himself, welcome his emotions and seek, when possible, to view a problem from the mental standpoint and with the impulse of those who have set it for him. It is at any rate certain that, in my case, thoughts have often flashed, like lightning from the nether pit of my subconscious, that helped to illuminate the wickedness of other people. I suspected from the first an attempt to shatter young Wolf's morale and was presently to learn how the plot had triumphantly succeeded upon just such lines as my rascally, subterranean monitor suggested to me.

There is a human principle, or impulse, alike common to the sheep and goats among us; but whereas in the former case it may be said to work well enough, for the latter much peril attends it. I refer to that instinct which urges us, after some successful stroke, to repeat the same as soon as possible and try a triumphant technique once more. A perfectly laudable proceeding for most of us; but the criminal who seeks to repeat a former coup may often run grave risks and awaken suspicions tending to hamper his future progress. Belonging as I do to the stainless sheep, it lay in my power to try an opening gambit that had furnished admirable results on the occasion of Lord Branksome's domestic tribulations, and the situation at Stormbury happily enabled me to do so. My ambition has ever been to enter a case incognito and reach as

near as possible to the heart of it without declaring myself. To enter an environment in an innocent capacity is the safest disguise that any inquirer can assume, and if he possesses such gifts as may be necessary to deceive his new human surroundings, working thus at the core of the matter, he should attain results beyond the reach of any avowed and open investigator. Such was my procedure when I joined Lord Branksome as his new valet and personal attendant, with the result that his butler and his wife's elderly lady's maid, for many years regarded as vital pillars of the establishment, were proved responsible for the peculation of family jewels and other articles of considerable value. To simulate a manservant is easy enough in connection with your employer, but needs considerable histrionic ability in the servants' hall. Professional underlings are quick to notice any indications of unreality, and I shall always consider that hoodwinking Lord Branksome's butler and his companion in evil was among my more able achievements.

I designed, then, if it might be done, to enter Stormbury manor as Sir William's valet, and therefore summoned my old friend to a conference on the subject. Boyd came to London gladly enough and was gratified to find my interest awakened. I explained that absolute silence as to the truth was vital. Not a soul, including the sufferer, must know it. To this I attached supreme importance. In the case of Lord Branksome, he himself had known all about me and given his man notice in order that I might fill his place; but I did not desire this to happen again. Boyd saw no means of evading the necessity, so I showed him how it might be done.

"A good deal turns upon his present servant," I explained; and to the vicar's mind Bob Meadows himself presented the principal difficulty.

"He is a devoted young fellow and worships William," he told me, "and it would hardly be too much to say that Bill returns his affection. I cannot imagine them apart, or any conceivable circumstances under which William would tell Bob to leave him."

For my part I felt exceedingly glad to learn this.

"Nothing could be better," I answered, "for then the separation can be made without creating suspicion in the mind of anybody. Meadows himself must create the break, and prove to us that his worship of Sir William is genuine. You have told me how everybody, servants included, are only concerned to support their master and help the young man in his present anxieties; and doubtless Meadows is as loyal and keen as the rest. One cannot, of course, eliminate anybody from suspicion at this stage. I may find the enemy under Sir William's own roof, or far afield; or I may not find him at all; but in so far as his present valet is concerned, an opportunity to test the man's honesty is here. It seems impossible from what you tell me to imagine Meadows as a secret foe and I will trust him, since trust him I must. But I must see him first and, in order to do so, will come to Honiton and meet him by appointment. If, as a judge of character, I can take your view of him, I shall gladly do so and make clear the part he has to play. He will suffer pain no doubt, and give pain; but the means justify the end and he may live to see himself restored to favour."

Boyd agreed to this course and we considered what would follow. This I made clear. The vicar would know of an ideal man seeking a country situation and the credentials of 'James Callender' were safe with Lord Branksome, who, at my wish, was going to be very glad to give his late valet the most excellent testimonials possible. Moreover, Fortescue Boyd happened personally to know the peer and he would thus be able to play his part with the mildest of prevarications. Indeed, the large-minded vicar did not boggle at some temporary evasion of the exact truth, after I had convinced him that the situation appeared to demand it.

In due course I came by Southern Railway to the delightful little market town of Honiton, and Bob Meadows waited upon me at the Courtney Arms. Miss Boyd, who came and went frequently between her home and the manor, directed him secretly to come on Sir William's behalf, and he did so readily enough.

It is always harder to be sure of a perfectly honest man than a rascal, or so at least I have found it, even though honest men happily outnumber the rogues handsomely; but no doubt existed as to Bob. Veracity shone from him and none could question his devotion to his master, or his bitter concern at the present harrowing plight in which the young man found himself. Meadows was observant and intelligent. He helped. Placed at Sir William's elbow and in the enjoyment of unusual confidence, he gave a gloomy account of the unfortunate lad's mental distress and added his personal reaction to the atmosphere now enveloping them both.

"It's like this, sir," explained Bob. "You feel a new spirit's crept into the manor house. Where it was all free and open and pleasant, now it seems as if there was something, or somebody, moving round about Sir William—something so

quick and smart that you can't surprise it at work against him; and yet something so real that you feel you might run up against it round any corner. It don't seem just a matter of your nerves, or a creature of fancy exactly, but a live, wide-awake, ugly piece of work, out for evil to Sir William; and while he has got it fixed in his mind the trouble is going on four legs outside the house, I've got it fixed in mine that it must be going on two legs inside the house—that is if it's human. Of course, if it was a devil, then we couldn't say as to its legs, or arms, or anything about it; but I don't much bank on devils myself, and feel it's much more like to be a man, or woman, that's got it in for the master."

This was interesting and promised illumination; but now Bob ceased to be helpful. He spoke purely from a general intuition; of particular suspicion he had none. Indeed, he declared that not a shadow of ground existed for suspecting anybody.

"There's none at the manor, nor yet among his few friends, who would lift an unkind thought against him, let alone plan a wicked deed," he assured me, "and the better you know him, the more you're forced to like and respect him; and those that know him best, care for the gentleman most."

"And who are they, Meadows?" I inquired.

"First, Miss Boyd, that's going to marry him, and next Mr. Malfroy, his old friend, who's his land-agent now. Then his aunt, Mrs. Wolf, who lives near by at the dower-house, and his cousin, Mr. Telford Wolf, the lady's stepson. They are all nearest to him and in his constant company. And a few other folk of his own class come and go; but he's not a great one for friendships. Then there's Mr. Boyd and Dr. Peters—both a lot attached to him. And there's the staff of the manor—all trustworthy, straight people who think the world of him and are above suspicion. Everybody you can name is above suspicion, sir—not only because they are, but because they'd be mad to be anything else. There's not a soul in Stormbury who wouldn't suffer if harm overtook Sir William, or who would do him hurt against their own interests apart from what they feel for him."

"And it's that which makes you feel some unknown, creepy creature is at work, hidden from every eye, and yet strong enough to undermine Sir William and do all this mischief?" I asked.

"That's it, sir. Something that keeps out of sight, Lord knows how, and has got reasons for wanting to harm the master, Lord knows why. I fret and so do Mr. Telford and Mr. Malfroy. They'll speak to me about it, and they're much of my way of thinking; but the difficulty, as they point out, is to find any manner of motive to do evil against Sir William. If they could find anybody with a motive, then they might run him to ground; but you can't think of any living soul that's got so much as a grudge against the poor gentleman."

"And that's where I come in," I told him. "I trust you, Meadows, because it is very clear to me that I can; and first I want to impress upon you the enormous importance of the trust and the disasters that might follow if you broke it. Next I shall show how you may help your master."

"Just what I'm spoiling to do, sir, and I'll be thankful above any measure if you can show me how," he answered.

"Trust is the essential, Meadows," I explained, "and you must trust me as completely as I am going to trust you. Four people, including myself, know what is going to happen, and not another must. I wish the number were smaller, but that cannot be helped. Your part is to keep your mouth shut and not whisper a word to anybody."

"That's easy, sir, so long as I'm in the confidence of Sir William himself," declared Bob, but I hastened to assure him how this was the last thing he could expect to be.

"You must cease to enjoy both his confidence and his company, my dear fellow," I told him firmly. "For his own sake and for your natural loyalty, you will part from him for a time, and I shall now explain why a thought so painful to you must be turned into action. It often happens in this world that we best pull our weight and manifest our value, not in the way inclination points, but through distasteful and even painful service. That is the experience of every great man, and it will need to be your own. You are, in fact, up against a very distressing duty that is going to be misunderstood and win you anything but applause. You will, however, have your own clean conscience to support you, and when your fellow-servants tell you, perhaps, that you are a rat who leaves a sinking ship, you will be able to feel that your departure is in truth vital to the saving of the ship."

I then went into detail, explained who I was and how the circumstances happily enabled me to take his place, without

arousing any suspicion.

"The significance of this and the added powers such a standpoint furnishes, you cannot fail to see," I said. "Not even Sir William himself will know who I really am—an invaluable source of strength."

"How's Sir William going to sack me and make room for you sir, if he knows nothing about it?" he asked.

"He would never dream of sacking you, Meadows. Mr. Boyd has given me to understand that your master is deeply attached to you; and some day he will find out how deeply attached you are to him. Meantime, this cloud must come between you—for his salvation very possibly. You have got to give him notice, Meadows, and since he will most certainly demand reasons for such an unexpected stroke, you must be prepared with them. They are not going to redound to your credit, of course, but they will be definite and perfectly reasonable. In a word, you must get your tail down, my boy, indicate that the situation is shattering your nerve and insist on leaving at the earliest moment."

"What a filthy thing to do, sir!" cried Bob.

"Utterly filthy, and it will puzzle and doubtless infuriate everybody. But to bring happiness and increase the real welfare of other people is often a very difficult task, like most other things worth doing."

He yielded and faced it in a most manly spirit. Then, once he had agreed, the quality of the lad came out: and he forgot himself and the trying programme before him, but thought only of his master and Sir William's future comfort. He abounded in advice and I was able to reassure him there.

"This is not my first experience of your business," I told him. "I have been a valet before, Meadows, and may even be again. In time to come, if all should go well, I promise you that Sir William will not quarrel with me—at any rate on the score of my duty. I am a restful man by nature and very attentive to details. Nothing shall be forgotten that contributes to his comfort, and I am glad that he prefers to be shaved with the old-fashioned razors, because I always use them myself."

We parted the best of friends and Meadows, impressed with the gravity of the position, gave notice on the following day. That happened to add point to his speedy exodus, for the wolf was heard to howl again after dark and its existence definitely proved in many minds.

'James Callender' was subsequently engaged by Sir William, and my former employer congratulated the young man upon his choice when credentials were demanded. I have much the appearance of a respectable manservant, while their manners, customs and habits of attire are perfectly known to me and, indeed, differ but little from my own. Thus I entered the manor—another example of the gulf that may separate seeming from reality—for, with the exception of Boyd, his daughter and the vanished valet, none concerned had any knowledge of the truth. Few confidential inquirers, I should imagine, have operated in a field so free and unhampered.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pettigrew Proceeds

I took my modest place in the scheme of existence at Stormbury Manor, and the first thing that struck me was its efficiency and smooth working. That some fifteen to twenty domestics should be necessary to support a mansion and wait on one man was undemocratic and not in keeping with the times; but, under Thorpe, the butler, and Mrs. Budge, the housekeeper, everybody had plenty to do and good store of leisure also. The huge place was kept with the smartness of a battleship, and if many works of supererogation are admitted, their general effect increased the self-respect of those who performed them and made of the manor a rather distinguished establishment. The old servants carried on their traditions and handed them down to the rising generation; rare harmony obtained in such a hive and I swiftly found that one and all of the workers entertained very sincere regard for Sir William and hearty hopes that he would soon return to health and better spirits. Thorpe deprecated any discussion of the mystery that hung over his master, though naturally, when his back was turned, it formed the prime topic.

As for the young baronet himself, when he was presently pleased to accord me his friendship, I found that the state and ceremony surrounding him gave him neither pain nor pleasure. He had been brought up to it, but attached no importance to it save in one particular.

"The excuse for comparatively idle and superlatively wealthy men like myself, James," he said to me when our understanding had become advanced, "is that we make work and foster the spirit of industry among our betters. Such unprofitable drones as myself will soon be swept away, together with the last remnants of the feudal system for which they stand, but whether the world will find itself better and more contented under socialism and more ready to welcome the communism to which it leads, time alone can show. Man must have masters, and the dictatorship of the proletariat will produce an order of masters quite the reverse of those benevolent autocrats whom I regard as most desirable."

But it was some time before we reached those terms of intimacy that won me Sir William's confidence. I made a point of being very reserved at first and confining myself to my duties. The manner in which I performed them quickly won praise, for he was always generous of praise, swift to commend those who served him well and quick to forgive any error that came under his notice.

In truth I found him a very attractive young fellow and soon discovered myself to be as sorry for his misfortunes as everyone else. There was something attractive even in his strange physiognomy and one forgot his prominent and foxy nose, his prick ears and the fiery lustre of his hair when one looked into the man's remarkably beautiful eyes, or listened to his perfect intonation and choice of words. He spoke with the respect for language still to be remarked in cultured old men, but conspicuously absent from the conversation of most young ones.

Study of character was the first demand put upon me. I had, on the one side, the most difficult of all: Sir William himself; on the other, his small circle of intimates and his dependents, or those who looked to him for their living. Of these his land-agent, John Malfroy, was the most important, because not only did he fill a central place in the community of the manor, but enjoyed Sir William's dearest affection and closest confidences. They were old friends and the nature and length of their association I learned from Fortescue Boyd. Yet Malfroy proved the antithesis of his master, and out of their unlikeness this close amity had doubtless arisen, as often happens between man and man, or man and woman. He was a bluff, athletic, open-air type, immensely powerful and proud of his grand physique. In manner he proved blunt and direct. The indoor staff had little to do with him, but he was popular among them for his downright and forcible manners. He never intruded upon the duties of other people and his dry humour appealed to the household; while, when I extended my inquiries in my leisure time and became acquainted with the farm folk and foresters, none criticized him to his hurt. They all respected him as a tremendous worker, and while most agreed that he was stern and unyielding, I never heard any man declare him to be unjust. The people liked his manner and understood it. For my part such general judgment chimed with my own. There was an element of brusque sincerity about Malfroy and a definite and dictatorial method of speech that left one in no doubt. He knew his work and performed it scrupulously. He never argued in my hearing, but he never used his considerable powers with tyranny or unfairness. Probably he knew Sir William far too well to attempt any such thing, even had he been so inclined; but he was not. Under his somewhat rough and laconic procedure he appeared to conceal a heart kind enough, and more than one woman of the cottages praised him for consideration and sympathy. He was, however, very independent and I always felt that you could take him or leave him without being

likely to alter his opinion of you.

For his first friend and second self he displayed deepest affection, and one had imagined that no possible difference could ever arise between them. Sir William was always his chief thought, as I quickly discovered, and his only interest in myself for several weeks was to learn how I filled the bill. He showed great zeal for everything that could add to his friend's comfort, or distract him from his growing uneasiness; and when the rift began to appear between them, as presently it did, Malfroy suffered far the more acutely. He had himself to thank, however, for his friend's prepossession brought out the disparity between them, and the land-agent was apparently powerless to feel or show any sympathy with it. Insensibly his impatience and thinly veiled contempt chilled Sir William and, by a sort of instinct, he turned from his friend to his cousin, Telford Wolf, and ultimately to me, when I let a little of my understanding appear. But it was necessary to be most cautious in the matter, that I might neither awake my master's suspicion, nor John Malfroy's jealousy. He proved very tender where Sir William was concerned and hated any threat to his own ascendancy.

As for Telford, he was an artist who lived and worked close at hand. He dwelt with Mrs. Daphne Wolf, his stepmother, at the dower-house of the family; and the late Sir Porteus Wolf, his uncle, had allowed him an extensive studio in the grounds of his home, where he occupied himself in divers handicrafts and made many beautiful things. He and his cousin shared a common love of art and Telford appeared best to understand the baronet's dilemma and express most sympathy with him. He was a clever, agreeable young man and popular at Stormbury. Of slight physique, like Sir William, he possessed far more will power and that driving, sleepless energy—the endowment of all true artists, without which no great thing can be hoped from them.

My opportunities for this survey were of course very restricted, but I learned much behind the scenes from Thorpe at the manor, and from Boyd and his daughter at the vicarage. The butler took to me from the first and confided much of his fears, finding my kindly attitude to the master; but he had nothing of value to impart, while his suspicions only concerned young Wolf's mind and the strain now being put upon it. Nor could the vicar and Miss Boyd focus my doubt in any direction. They were utterly mystified by the past and fearful of the future, but unable to furnish any sort of clue upon which it was possible to implicate an individual. They discussed each and all of those brought into communication with the manor, and absolved them of either wish or power to do evil. And yet, like Bob Meadows, Alma Boyd felt strongly conscious of a sinister personality ever at her betrothed's elbow to his mental detriment and destruction—a force so alive and alert that she, too, wondered how she had not seen it with her eyes and at some time surprised it in action. Which sentiment, coming from Miss Boyd, who was a most frank and practical young woman, impressed me not a little, for she harboured no trace of superstition and never, through the darkest hours yet to come, for a moment believed that anything but natural forces were responsible for her sweetheart's sufferings.

"I can only tell myself that it is the dreadful books he reads which have made it possible for him to cling to his present opinions," she said. "A sort of morbid horror hangs about them and he breathes in their hateful atmosphere, and gets infected, and finds food in them for all his worst imaginings. If I could believe in such nonsense I should almost think that his necromancy had raised a demon that was never far away from William and never tired of tormenting him."

As a commentary on this opinion, I found her lover immersed in literature when returning to him on one occasion, and at a convenient moment discovered that he conned Dekker's *Witch of Edmonton*, a drama that I ventured to think more dull than horrible, hardly worthy of its place, either in English, or satanist literature—one of those worthless things that chance has preserved from the teeth of time.

It was the same story all round at the manor: nobody entertained the slightest suspicions of anybody else. The household proceeded orderly and happy, save for the cloud from above that hovered over it; there were no feuds of any note in the servants' hall and save for Jules Madoc, the chef, all belonged to Devon if not actually of the parish. He was a bachelor, and from time to time visited France and his relations in Auvergne, when taking his holiday. He possessed no supreme powers and explained to me that forty years of English cooking had put an extinguisher on native genius; but he was excellent company, of a humorous outlook and made the best Welsh rarebit that I ever tasted, or hope to taste.

Surprised, but not cast down by the somewhat unfruitful aspect of my problem, I considered the evidence and weighed its inevitable effect on a mind such as Sir William's. Every ray of light I kept to myself, and not until a much later date was even Boyd allowed to know anything but my business at Stormbury. Every detail was strictly preserved that nothing might reach any other ear. That a secret plot existed I never went in any doubt, but resolved from the first that equal secrecy should accompany my efforts to combat it.

What then did I know? I knew that the prophecy—so dreadfully taken to heart by Sir William—was a forgery, and the temptation to tell him so somewhat tried me; but even such a revelation of the truth must enable the unknown enemy to escape, and that was no part of my purpose, once he had been discovered.

I turned to the verses and those tangible evidences that supported them. They were a fabricated lie, but subsequent facts had backed up the falsehood and so far confirmed it. These were authentic happenings supported by the testimony of independent witnesses. I took them one by one and tried to see what natural explanations might be assumed.

First, then, was the human blood that had suddenly appeared upon Sir William's hand. On his way to bed, between the billiards-room and his apartments, his hand had appeared covered with gore. He had turned off the electric lights and touched nothing afterwards but the stair-rail, as he ascended; while a moment later the suffusion appeared plentifully upon his right hand. Only one source seemed possible, and having satisfied themselves that his hand itself was uninjured, Sir William followed by John Malfroy returned to the staircase and made close examination of the polished brass rail along which he had run his fingers. It was untarnished in any way. One point only occurred to me in this connection: I observed that Sir William invariably used the rail as he went up- and downstairs, and others doubtless were aware of this habit. But on this occasion it appeared out of the question that any trap could have been laid for him, since, when he came back in a few minutes to make inquiry, the rail was clean in every respect. Against that, however, one had to remember that an unknown might have set the trap and enjoyed ample leisure to remove every trace of it after the passing of Sir William and his friend and before their return to investigate.

Next, came the incident of the birthday, when, late at night, a strange and searching scent beside the lake had been detected by Sir William and Miss Boyd, admitted by the vicar and Dr. Peters, and recognized and named as to its origin by John Malfroy. Events had proceeded in the following order. Mrs. Daphne Wolf, taking leave after the birthday dinner-party with her stepson, conveyed Sir William and his betrothed to a point upon their way. Telford Wolf drove and dropped his cousin and Alma some distance from their destination, which was the lake, where they went to see the place under the harvest moon. Arrived, an unfamiliar odour, suggestive of an animal, immediately challenged them both and Sir William became alert at once. He would not let Miss Boyd stay by the lake alone, but returned with her, told of their experience and fetched the other men. The scent still hung heavy in the air, but only Malfroy could put a name to it, or had ever before encountered it. He knew it for wolf, and was familiar with it after many wolf-hunts in Russia. Next morning early, and without telling Sir William, he and the head-keeper went to water-side at dawn and made a systematic search for the visitor. Nothing, however, rewarded their efforts. The air was pure and not a trace of anything larger than a water-rat could be discovered. Then, after some interval of time, the howling of a wolf had been heard at night—first by Sir William and his cousin Telford as they sat together in the billiards-room after dinner, and later in the forest by game-keepers. Ample testimony was furnished as to this, but only Sir William's conviction existed to suggest that they had heard a wolf. At a later time, however, support for his belief was forthcoming—not from his land-agent, who was on holiday, but from an under-keeper, one who had visited Whipsnade and listened to the timber wolves segregated there.

Thus, supporting the prophecy, we had human blood upon the victim's hand (for analysis proved it to be so) followed by strong, lupine evidence, first of the nose, then of the ear. "Through scent to sound destruction steals," said the little book, and one observed how closely the unknown adversary kept its schedule and followed, step by step, the appointed path. There was something highly artificial about this to my thinking, and its remorseless sequence had a grave effect upon Sir William, increasing his depression and ministering to his unfortunate credulity.

I had weighed these things and, in the case of the odour and the wolfish riot by night, perceived possibilities; but as to the matter of the ensanguined hand, had so far failed of any explanation. I was carefully considering the companionship of Sir William at the time of each ordeal, and gathering some data therefrom, when there came a new manifestation, well in keeping apparently with the rest, yet not specially mentioned in the prophecy.

George Stocker, the head-keeper, reported nocturnal cries from the forest, and this time he was able to add something substantial, for, on visiting the disturbed region next day, he had discovered the tracks of a large and heavy animal, too big for a fox and differing entirely from those of a badger.

I was now settled in at Stormbury and had created a favourable impression not only with the indoor staff but among such outdoor men as I had met. Stocker was one of them and he proved a sane and sagacious fellow. I kept very carefully out of the excitement ensuing on this discovery, but at a later time, when it had cooled down, turned secret attention to it. The prints were carefully preserved in the wood, but all that one could learn concerning them, from Stocker and Sir William

himself, amounted to nothing. Only John Malfroy had ever seen the impressions of a wolf's paw, and that was upon Russian snow. He had, however, paid no nice attention to such things and would commit himself to no definite opinion, merely saying that the spoor in the hangers appeared to him larger and heavier than any he remembered to have seen.

The hangers, by the way, were forlorn and time-shattered woods beneath a crumbling precipice of stone. The only thing that appeared to be active and live therein was death, and a more repulsive and decaying concourse of rotting timber I never desire to see. Beneath the stricken oaks, perishing of parasites and old age, lay a tumble of boulders. It was the home of poisonous snakes and poisonous berries—a most forbidding, eerie region, shunned by the folk, naturally enough, yet possessing an unhealthy fascination for its owner.

Now touching footprints of every sort and kind, I am an expert. The subject always attracted me, for while no mystic myself, one must admit that the records of mysterious discoveries in this sort are full of extraordinary problems. Footprints have appeared on the recording face of earth in a manner impossible to explain, giving evidence of beings that are unknown, yet still active and ponderable, among solitary places whence no sort of life was ever observed. To take an instance: footprints of strange formation are reported at immense altitudes. Mr. Shipton, the Mount Everest climber, noted snow-prints at a height of sixteen thousand feet. They suggested the pads of an elephant, so huge were they; but their vast stride impressed him with the opinion that they could only belong to some two-footed monster. His porters were terrified, declaring the track to be that of the 'Snow Man'—a familiar ogre, whom none, however, had ever set eyes upon. Naked footprints, more resembling human, were also marked at a height of twenty thousand feet by Colonel Howard Bury, leader of the first Everest Expedition. Many similar mysteries occur and they had always attracted me; while in my personal experience, correct explanations of more commonplace enigmas have served to solve complicated questions and support the majesty of the law on several occasions.

Anon, first with George Stocker and then alone, I examined the evidence for some unusual mammal's presence at Stormbury; but while pretending to no great interest or knowledge with the keeper, I returned, when at leisure to do so, and lighted at last upon my first significant clue. It was, indeed, one of my great days, serving to show how every sort of knowledge may prove useful upon the track of that crafty, wild animal, man.

I had studied the wolf and other predatory creatures in my time with special reference to the ancestry of the dog, and this learning enabled me swiftly to perceive that no wolf was responsible for these footprints. It appeared at first sight that a large, four-footed brute had passed this way at a gallop, bound from the valley below to the shelter of some den or fastness in the cliffs. He was apparently going at a great pace and his paw-marks occurred in fours, where the fore-feet fell and the hind-feet followed, leaving their impression almost in those of the fore-feet. But the wolf does not gallop. He runs, moving his legs in a steady and tireless lope, or stride—so truly in the forward direction that the hinder feet keep almost exactly in the tracks of the corresponding fore-feet. He is the supreme and perfect exemplar of the trotting animal, and at this swift and easy gait, with his narrow shoulders and flat ribs, permitting his elbows to fit closely to his sides, can run down any other beast on four legs, or two, given the time to do so. An Alsatian hound exhibits these characteristics better than any dog—not because he has more wolf blood in him than others, but because breeders have been zealous to develop his limbs and frame so that he may thus move with the least expenditure of energy.

The unknown galloping brute, then, was no wolf, though it possessed the exaggerated, five-clawed pads of such an animal. I could think of nothing to create this trail, and turned to the spoor itself for any light. With a glass I examined it and soon made the strange discovery that each impression was exactly like its neighbour. Not only were the fore-feet precisely similar, but the hind-feet resembled them in every detail. A little bend in the third claw was repeated on each print, and other distinctive marks were alike repeated, so that one was faced with a wild animal whose four paws differed not by a hair each from the others!

Now it was safe enough to assume that no such animal existed, for such an assumption outraged nature and reason. It followed that I was looking at a fake; and if these impressions concealed a human purpose, so surely might the smell of a wolf and those ululations by night that had fallen on so many different ears. All these things had been thought out and planned before the prophecy was written, and for a moment I reflected with some admiration on the foresight evinced; but the unknown had done wiselier to stick to his original plan of action and not seek to embellish it. Here was a case where an extra touch of imagination might presently confound the hunter rather than the prey, for many a malefactor, in his ardour to plant false clues, has dropped a real one to his own undoing.

Now I stood on solid ground at last, with proof positive that an accomplished piece of rascality was proceeding to plan

—its purpose Sir William's destruction. The edifice had been built on character, than which there can be no sounder foundation, and his own idiosyncrasies were being exploited to bring about his downfall. But this crafty enterprise involved very intimate knowledge of Sir William and the power to mark from day to day how the plot proceeded in its reactions upon the victim. So far the unknown was doubtless satisfied, for the unhappy subject of his wiles had developed no will to escape from them, but accepted the situation as beyond any human understanding to oppose.

Now there were very few people at Stormbury capable of such ingenious malice as appeared to be hiding here, and none at all with whom as yet I could associate it; but at this point I knew the sinner did not come from outside. He must be very near, and even I, in my subordinate position, had probably seen him if not actually spoken with him. On the strength of this discovery, I again went over all the original manifestations and considered those present at the time of their occurrence.

John Malfroy alone was with or near Sir William when blood appeared, as it seemed from nowhere, upon his hand.

Everybody had smelled the scent that Malfroy alone knew to be wolf—save Telford and his stepmother. But they had passed that way in Mrs. Wolf's motor-car only a few minutes before.

At the first howling, Sir William and Telford were together—Malfroy was absent, taking a vacation with his mother and sister at Salisbury.

The second howling had only been heard by keepers in the small hours.

It was not, then, so much a case of who had been with Sir William at the time of these disturbances, as who had not. John Malfroy was not with him and had never heard the howling, if he spoke the truth. But he was a powerful, deep-chested man and might no doubt have played the wolf if on the spot to do so.

Then, while still in doubt of my next step and still keeping all knowledge closely to myself, there came the final explosion. I was waiting on Sir William before dinner a week later, when a hideous row beneath his window startled both of us. The riot set my wits working, while for a moment it robbed him of his. Here was an opportunity to learn whether John Malfroy might be implicated, and I took it. He should at this moment be in his own bedroom dressing for dinner. So I left the master hurriedly, ran up the gallery and prepared to burst into Malfroy's room. The door was locked, however, and no entrance possible. I listened but heard nothing, then sped back to Sir William, explaining that I had hastened away for a moment to shut my window. Two minutes later, after another howl from outside, the land-agent came running past our open door in a great state of excitement and bolted downstairs to get a gun and go out. Then there were high words, Sir William ordering him to stop in the house and Malfroy ignoring his direction. He plunged into the night and Sir William hastened down to the hall, leaving me for a moment alone. Now one thing was certain: if indeed Malfroy had played this trick he must possess means to do it. His bedroom window stood at least thirty feet above ground level, and to leave the room or return to it by that means meant a ladder, for the mansion wall was stark and bare. I tried his room again, therefore. This time he had left the door wide open behind him—a natural action in his haste. One has also to remember that no idea of surveillance could possibly occur to him. My first shot was successful, for opening a wardrobe near the window I found the tangled mass of a rope ladder pitched into the bottom of it. Then, hastening downstairs, I joined Sir William and a few moments later, after Malfroy's gun had fired, went out to seek him and bring him back.

The incident of the night closed for me when I returned with the hunter; but immense advances had been made and Malfroy was hooked, though as yet far from being landed. Fate, coy until now, served me well for awhile, and the link binding Telford Wolf and Sir William's first friend—a link as yet only in the region of surmise—was forged and presented to me by themselves.

It happened in this manner. The artist had come to luncheon and was with John Malfroy when I sought them, bringing a message from Sir William. It was not a good day with him. Indeed, he could be said to have enjoyed no good days since his last shock, and only now began to recover from it. He proposed to lunch alone in his apartments and sent me down that I might inform his cousin of the fact. The men were in the study, which at the time was Malfroy's office, and the door into the hall, doubtless unknown to them, had been left ajar. What they may have been saying previously I know not, but, just as I reached the door and was about to enter, Telford Wolf put a question to his companion.

"And how is rueful Rufus this morning?" he asked.

"Haven't seen him yet," answered Malfroy, "but his tail's hanging pretty low these days. He'll be easy meat by New Year's Night."

They laughed, and feeling it no moment to intrude, I went my way to the hall door, gulped a breath of fresh air, which I needed, and so returned with calm restored to deliver my message. Here was an exhilarating discovery in every way, for it opened the road to instant action and offered rich incentive to proceed. Their casual, cold-blooded words were pregnant with meaning; but they were also shattering, for they confounded certain estimates of character already formed and gave me a somewhat painful proof of my own faulty diagnosis. A proud man never likes to be indebted to anything, or anybody—luck included—and though it now appeared that one had to do with a brace of callous scoundrels working in company, I felt passing regret to confess good fortune rather than my own ability had presented me with the fact.

Sir William, after his ingenuous and simple fashion, would often speak openly to me now and tell me many things that I was glad to know. Of Malfroy he always discoursed with utmost admiration and regard. Especially he praised his great gifts of leadership; and after hearing from my master the land-agent's story, I had wondered that such a strong, dominant and evidently ambitious being should have consented to leave promising prospects in Russia for the obscurity and poor returns of his present occupation. Friendship seemed inadequate to account for such a sacrifice. But now all was clear and the secret motive at my service.

Telford Wolf, when the time came, would mightily reward Malfroy for his assistance, yet since that could not happen until he succeeded to his cousin's revenues and title, Sir William was about to be murdered under all our innocent eyes.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pettigrew Concludes

There was no denying that I had not so far shone in this matter, and I regarded my lapse somewhat pensively. I also learned from it. Here was a lesson never again to ignore the obvious and be too clever; but in this connection I quickly perceived that a far graver fault might be laid to my charge. I had failed as a student of character, and two unutterable scoundrels found it possible to deceive me as easily as everybody else. A brace of criminals had so comported themselves that the impression they were honest men grew up in my mind, while the obvious never entered into my calculation.

I considered Telford Wolf and John Malfroy in the light of this new knowledge and gave each due credit for his accomplishments. When you want the best possible acting, you must, of course, look to real life and not the stage for it; but here was acting that had deceived an experienced actor, one, moreover, fairly familiar with the tragedies of reality and the many moral disguises worn by those who play in them.

Telford Wolf always appeared to me as the typical artist. I had frequent occasion to hear his conversation, when waiting at table, and had marked the cynicism, egotism and insight that accompanied it. He could be rather brilliant at times; he was also selfish, vain and avid of praise after the manner of his kind; but I had noted no sign of personal insincerity and always observed real solicitude and affection in his attitude to Sir William. Telford appeared grateful for the many amiable actions his cousin had performed on his behalf and never hesitated to proclaim them; moreover, he showed a tender touch in his relations with his victim and I had actually seen tears spring to his eyes on hearing Sir William mention hopeless aspects of the tribulation under which he suffered. The artist never failed of sympathy, indeed, he showed more tolerance with his cousin's self-spun miseries than anybody else. I had also observed a look of fear upon Telford's face, together with other obvious suggestions that he did not wholly disbelieve the dreadful things now spoken as common-places by Sir William. For the rest he showed a frank and pleasant exterior to all, after the usual Wolf manner, and Stormbury liked him well enough.

Such was Telford—a very fine, natural actor; but Malfroy represented a less complex picture, only resembling the other in his palpable devotion to his friend. His art, too, was superb in this connection, never failing of delicate revelations, almost womanly in their thoughtful tenderness, and the more significant because the land-agent was by nature exceedingly masculine. Yet there did not lack signs of truth and compassion in him. He performed kindly actions and knew the meaning of justice. On one occasion, when moved as it seemed to jealousy by some special act of friendship from Sir William to myself, he spoke very harshly and contemptuously to me; yet, at the first opportunity, he apologized and begged me not to think of his words again.

He was impulsive and very active. He worked exceedingly hard and showed utmost impatience with those who did not do the same. Many both liked and respected him; indeed all respected him even if they did not like him; but he was utterly indifferent as to the opinion of other people, being concerned only to keep his status with Sir William; and when they drifted apart, John Malfroy, as it appeared both to me and Thorpe, could not conceal the anxiety and suffering that looked out of his stern eyes, or control the petulance arising from it. Yet this simulated tension looked inevitable, for the agent furnished a living picture of the honest man—blunt enough, yet forthright and trustworthy in act and deed. It would have been unnatural for John to show much patience with the unreal and hideous imaginations of his friend.

And these two blackguards were now engaged in the unspeakable task of slowly frightening a fellow-creature to death, of stopping his heart in some final, pitiless scene of horror, and so reaping the rich results of their ingenious crime. Far cleverer than the common poisoner, they aimed at the brain, rather than the body, using venom perfectly adapted to destroy this particular intellect, yet such that no autopsy, however subtle, could yield any sign. They probably guessed that Sir William would commit suicide: a failure of psychology on their part. I perceived then (so easy is it to be clever after the event) that Malfroy was such a man as Shakespeare drew, and nobody in my experience ever yet acted properly. I have seen Iago played many times by eminent practitioners, yet always as an obvious knave and never as an honest man. When among his fellow-creatures, however, he should always be the bluff, guileless, trustworthy soldier, innocent of any devilry whatsoever. But Malfroy was the real article. I remember, on the morning after the wolf had howled so realistically upon the terrace, that John came suddenly into the hall, when I was helping the master with his overcoat. The land-agent's horse awaited him, for he mostly rode about his business, only using a motor-bicycle when going far

afield. He carried a big parcel done up in brown paper, and well I knew that a rope-ladder was hidden there; but Sir William, interested at such an unusual sight, asked him what it contained. The elder looked uncomfortable, though he replied at once.

"Only some of my worn-out togs, Bill, for a down and out."

That was very typical of his masterly touch.

So there we stood: these two utterly damnable 'sons of dust and sorrow' were in league to destroy their benefactor and first friend. And I alone knew all about it. A solemn responsibility, yet not one that promised to lie beyond the scope of a powerful, fearless and experienced man. In truth I hoped for a moment to accomplish their downfall single-handed, but ultimately found assistants to be vital.

And now, at the risk of awakening impatience, I must for the last time traverse old ground so that no ragged ends remain behind us and the stage is clear. From where I now stood, the actors in each vanished scene could be identified easily enough; but it remained to understand how they had played their parts and created the illusions for which they were jointly responsible.

Sir William liked nothing better than to retrace every item of his tragedy. He forgot no detail and in the matter of the blooded hand had been most explicit. After dinner upon the night in question, Malfroy had raised a point on estate figures and been contradicted. He stuck to it that he was right and left the billiards-room for the study, which had been turned for the time being into his office. Presently he came back with the accounts, and it was quickly proved that Sir William's figures were correct. The hour being late, the young men went to bed soon afterwards. Sir William turned out the newel lights as usual, and ascended the stairs, but Malfroy delayed for the space of a minute, while he took his ledger back to the office. His friend had passed up and was out of sight before he followed him, to learn of what had happened and presently to descend again that the stair-rail might be examined. A simple hypothesis served now to explain everything. Malfroy had probably extracted blood from his own arm, or leg, before dinner in quantity sufficient for the purpose and, when he went for the account book, poured it from a phial upon the hand-rail, knowing that none would use the main stairs again that night save Sir William and himself. It would be invisible, because, before the baronet reached it, the lights had been extinguished. Then, swiftly following with the needful material after Sir William had ascended, Malfroy would wipe and cleanse the rail, leaving it unsullied when he and his companion returned to inspect it.

Next the odour at lake-side occupied me. Now from the days of the Chinese stink-pot in war, to our own, modern, chemical villainies of poison gas, it has always been easy enough to liberate an evil vapour in a given place, by destroying the vessel that contains it. This had been done upon Sir William's birthday night. A 'Rupert's drop,' or some other globule of fine glass, had clearly been broken to diffuse the aroma and itself vanish into glass dust beyond detection. Whence it came, what gas it may have contained, and who had manufactured it, I could not guess as yet, not knowing whether Telford's gifts extended to chemistry; but that he had used it was fairly obvious. He had doubtless conveyed his wolf-bomb in his car, ready for service when the chance arose, and though he could not have known that his cousin and Alma Boyd would go to the lake that night, their decision to do so offered the perfect opportunity for which he was prepared and waiting. Nothing indeed could have fallen out to better purpose. It was necessary for Telford to open the gate between the grounds and park for his motor-car, and therefore he must have stopped, alighted, and left the vehicle while he did so. These were actions that cannot have awakened any sort of suspicion in his stepmother, who was with him. He returns, walks behind his car and flings his missile up the road beside the lake, where the lovers cannot fail to meet the odour that its destruction has freed. Then he is off and away. As for the scent now diffused upon the air, there remains only Malfroy's word for its nature, since none of the subsequent party, save himself, had ever smelled wolf before.

When Telford sat with Sir William by night and they heard the first howling, John Malfroy was not at Stormbury to his friend's knowledge; but his mother's home lay no further off than Salisbury, and upon a motor-bicycle he could have run down after dark and returned again long before morning. As for the false spoor, either man might have laid it, but it was tolerably safe to assume that Telford had created the die, and Malfroy made the impressions.

Much work had certainly been needed to substantiate these guesses, and they were not such as to make the least appeal to a judge or jury; but they satisfied my instinct for tidying up a case as I proceeded. They mattered little enough for the moment, and there was no leisure in which to investigate the truth of them, for the year ran out fast, and if the enemy kept to their time-table, much more pressing matters instantly demanded my best wits.

Great temptation undoubtedly existed to tell Sir William the truth and relieve his mind in one direction, while terribly shocking it in another. Some inquirers might so have done and escaped further responsibility; but I could not contemplate this ignominious course. Both inclination and conscience set strongly against it, and one declined to ignore such an unusual combination. In any case my foothold with the master was not strong enough to risk it. Had I denounced this precious pair, Sir William might have set their outraged word above my own and sent me packing. I should for the moment have confounded their knavish tricks, but entirely failed to get either of them where I wanted them. One must allow for the personal factor also, since detectives are but human. I now found myself hating both Telford and his companion very heartily, and quite determined that no mistake of mine should prevent full measure of what ought to be coming to them.

They had been fortunate thus far and must have marvelled sometimes to note the manner in which Sir William had improved upon their original horrors. To see his morbid and erudite mind expand their primitive bugaboo into something semi-human and infinitely more hideous; to note how their poison permeated his spirit until it filled him with the dread and ultimate conviction of personal lycanthropy—these distressing phenomena and the obstinate attitude that made their victim refuse all aid must have filled them with the assurance of complete success.

And what was to be the next item in their programme? I consulted the prophecy and gathered that, unless any additions were designed, nothing more need be expected before the final assault on New Year's Night. For a moment now the luck veered to my side. Telford Wolf went to London and made it possible for me to inspect his studio—a thing that I had often desired to do. But until now this was impossible for he often slept there, and the windows of the dower-house overlooked the place, so that any glimpse of light might have been observed. I had visited Telford's workshop on one occasion only, when I had carried a note to him from his cousin and waited for a written answer. Nor was the visit uninformative, for interesting things abounded to give evidence of the artist's versatility; but what most impressed my observation was a little printing-press thrust into a dark corner with certain book-binding tools. Already I knew that the artist revelled in the book-binder's craft, and there were many rich examples of his skill at the manor.

He rather liked my evident admiration before the wonders of his studio, showed me a few beautiful achievements and bragged about them, for there was a spice of Benvenuto in the young man, and Cellini himself could not have been a bigger blackguard.

And now, with Telford out of the way, I left my bed at two in the morning on a rough and windy night, reached the sleeping studio and entered without difficulty by a window. Then, removing dirty shoes, I set to work on general principles, being before all else scrupulously careful to leave everything precisely as I found it. For an artist may be as careless and untidy as you please, but none is quicker to note any sign of intrusion on his domain. I confined myself to cupboards and out-of-the-way nooks, and what I expected to find was scarcely formulated in my own mind. I sought anything likely to throw light upon the future, and my prime discovery, in a locked Japanese cabinet, which I opened with professional keys, told me all that I needed to know and fascinated me not a little by the remarkable perfection of its workmanship. I gazed on a triumph of macabre art, worthy to crown the coming infamy; I held it in one gloved hand, and let my torchlight play upon it, then, having mastered the monstrosity, I returned it with exquisite exactness to its place and locked the cabinet again. The nature of this remarkable find and the story it told me were not in themselves surprising. Along such lines the pending tragedy must inevitably unfold; but the thing itself and the inspiration presently arising out of such a discovery must be reserved for their proper place. One minor curio can, however, be recorded. At the back of a cupboard hidden under various litter, I found the model of a great paw, the pads carved in soft wood and the claws made of metal with one bent talon in its place. It might seem strange that Telford should have preserved any such perilous example of his craft; but one had always to remember that the plotters proceeded in absolute ignorance of any eyes upon them; and the necessity to preserve that ignorance was never greater than now, for which reason I hesitated somewhat overlong before my next step. It clearly demanded accomplices—not one or two, but several—and the more who may share a secret, the less chance there is that it will be kept. My supporters, however, would prove trustworthy and, with the exception of the most important, need never know the full scope of my purpose until after the event. What I had to tell them was that I had discovered the secret enemy, not my plans for circumventing him. They must learn the vital thing; but only by gradual stages the actions I designed to defeat it.

With all clear in my mind I went to London, on the plea of meeting a long-absent brother; but in truth no such person existed, and my activities were quite otherwise engaged. I saw one now destined to be my general-in-chief, and his name was Bob Meadows; I also visited an old friend whom I had intimately known in thespian days, himself no mean artist and well endowed to undertake an important commission on my behalf. As for Bob, to him I made a clean breast of the

business, told him of the plot against his old master, astounded him with the names of those responsible for it, awoke furious indignation and won abundant joy when he heard my intentions and the character destined for him to play in them. He was keen, active-minded and intelligent, possessing exact knowledge of the theatre in which he must needs perform, and the part he would be called to play. He pleased me and left me confident that I had done well.

One little liked to leave Sir William, but I was absent no more than two nights and felt very sure that no danger threatened before the appointed time. On returning I wrote a letter to Fortescue Boyd, made an appointment with him at the vicarage when leisure offered and told him all that he and his daughter were now called to face. Everything they learned, save only those responsible for the coming outrage; but I accentuated the fact that Sir William's life was now in extreme danger.

"On no account must he be in the manor on New Year's Eve," I said; and when they told me that it would be impossible, without actual violence, to keep him out of it, I showed them how they were mistaken.

"You must leave the malcontents to me," I explained, "and, in exchange for that, I am trusting the care and protection of Sir William entirely to you. Now follow me very closely and stop me if I say a word that is not perfectly clear. On the night before his approaching ordeal, which is most certainly designed to be the occasion of his death, you will ask him here to drink tea with you and do your best to cheer and support him; but you will do much more than that, for he must not leave the vicarage again until the following morning. This end is going to be achieved without a shadow of suspicion on his part, or of force upon yours, by the simple method of putting a strong—probably a very strong—opiate in his tea. Its exact nature and power will be determined by Doctor Peters, whom I have yet to see, but the point is that it will swiftly render Sir William drowsy. He will become unconscious, sleep for twelve or fifteen hours and only waken when the full story is told and can be repeated. Five people need to be in this plot and five only; but those five must keep their wits about them. They are your two selves, the doctor, myself and Bob Meadows, the ex-valet."

They demanded the reason for Bob's inclusion and thus I was enabled to let my plans dawn upon them.

"You will see his invaluable part in a moment," I told them. "Upon the last day of the year, Sir William will leave the manor near four o'clock to come to you, and I shall drive him. He will be seen to depart and must emphatically be seen to return if suspicion is not to be aroused. Those engaged in this business well know his indomitable will and determination to go through with it to the bitter end. They are banking on that and shall not be disappointed. His clothes must certainly return to the manor with me; but somebody else will wear them. Who better than Bob, who is near Sir William's size and knows every detail of Sir William's actions and movements? What is going to happen at the other end, once Meadows is upstairs and safely in the seclusion of Sir William's apartments, you may leave to us. Meantime I will explain what happens here. At five o'clock precisely Miss Boyd goes to the vicarage front door, opens it and finds Bob Meadows waiting. She takes him, without a spoken word, up to your spare bed-room, where Sir William is going to spend the night, and presently, when his sleeping-draught has begun to do its work, she calls me from the kitchen, where I am drinking tea with your two maids. I join Sir William and with the aid of Meadows bring him upstairs. We undress him and put him to bed in the pyjamas that will be waiting for him, and ten minutes later, Bob is dressed in his master's outer garments, and off with me in the car to the manor. Needless to say that he will be wearing a carrot wig of the right shade for his brief appearance in public."

There was silence and then Miss Boyd asked a question.

"And afterwards?" she said.

"Afterwards Dr. Peters will join you, to see that all is well, and meantime Bob and I are likely to be busy at the manor. My purpose is to combine poetical and judicial justice. I shall provide the poetical element, while a judge and jury will have their own interesting problems to solve afterwards."

In this statement I erred, as shall appear, for unexpected incidents were destined to upset my calculations.

"What of Sir William when he wakes up?" asked Fortescue Boyd.

"He will find you and me beside him, and Miss Boyd in the background with a good breakfast waiting his pleasure. Then he must listen to a full, first-hand account from myself of what he has escaped. Early on the morning of January the first, Bob Meadows and I shall return here, and when the story is told, unless I miss my guess, his old valet is going to be taken back into favour, while Sir William will renew his youth and welcome the happiness awaiting him."

"Oh, Mr. Pettigrew, it sounds too good to be true," said Alma.

"'James Callender' to you, miss, if you please," I replied, "and nothing that can happen to you and Sir William will be too good for either of you."

I saw Peters the next day and perforce let him into the secret, greatly to his horror. He was generous in praise of my scheme, however; and there came an additional source of interest for him, when John Malfroy visited him and suggested a strong soporific for Sir William on New Year's Eve. The doctor had wit to praise Malfroy's happy thought, and when the time came he provided him with a harmless potion. The incident, however, furnished a happy example of honest John's exquisite technique.

Christmas found Sir William in pretty good form and it was pathetic to mark how the haunted young fellow strove to master his own misery by bringing happiness to others. Nobody had been forgotten in his little circle, and I speculated as to how his handsome gifts affected the minds of his cousin and his second self.

For my part I devoted the anxious days to cheering and heartening Sir William with the utmost tact at my disposal. He relied more and more upon me and drew a measure of comfort from my repeated assurance and conviction that all was going to be well and a triumphant issue of these mysteries lay in the near future.

"I ain't a hopeful man by nature, as I dare say you may have noticed, Sir William," I told him, "and I think very bad of them responsible for this business. I grant there's evil brewing against you, but I am positive sure it's man-made and not, so to say, devil-made. And that being so, I trust God Almighty with the case and know, as surely as I know I'm born, that He's got His Eye upon you and isn't going to let you down, Sir William."

After this fashion I often talked to him in private, and he liked me to do so. He had given up arguing and I never contradicted him when he returned to his delusions, but often ventured to air my own opinions. Their weakness for him lay in this, that try as he would, he could not think of enemies with reason for wishing him ill. The strain was very severe and I remember no shorter days with longer hours in them than those that marked the epact of that dying year; but Sir William bore up, for sheer pride of race as I believe, and the day came at last. He slept pretty soundly and rose in a calm and restrained mood, breakfasting with Malfroy and going afterwards to see his aunt. He had agreed to drink tea at the vicarage and the spare room awaited him.

I felt now that one could still scarcely be confident the young man was out of the wood, and even found myself doubting my own plan of action—an imbecile thing to do at this stage and stoutly resisted by common sense. But I did feel that, though his body was safe and the convulsion designed for his mind would never overtake it, yet shock enough must inevitably be faced. His belief in the nonsense of necromancy was going to suffer earthquake, and that would be much to the good; but what of his belief and trust in the sacred ties of friendship and of blood? To find his salvation must be a potent source of strength, while to lose Telford and John, under the dire stroke awaiting both, was to rob him of ancient loyalties and distress his mind to an extent impossible to predict.

The young man's fixed idea, like all so-called fixed ideas, was not in reality static, for no idea stands still. It is a living growth and must proceed dynamically to die, or bud, blossom and possibly bear fruit. Far from standing still, Sir William's idea had expanded, and finally plunged him into that perilous whirlpool whose vortex is madness. There were, however, qualities of great mental courage in him which made me confident that his ordeal would be surmounted safely; while the need for such an ordeal appeared in the extraordinary nature of the destruction planned against him, and the difficulty to take his enemies red-handed. They must be caught in the actual moment of action; or they might not be caught at all.

Now that I knew its purpose, every phase of the coming murder was as clear to my eyes as a printed page. Thanks to the discovery in Telford Wolf's studio, when I examined the contents of his oriental cabinet, I learned how the fulfilment of the prophecy was going to be accomplished, and by whom. There reposed the beautifully wrought 'phantom wolf from forest hoar,' designed to polish off Sir William. The hairy costume opened down the front and could be quickly assumed. It was made of grey fur with a lighted belly, and the tail stuck stiffly out of the rear. The mask of the monster had been set with horrent hair; its ears were laid back and the red mouth agape, well filled with pointed teeth. The eyes were of transparent green glass, and behind each of these lenses was set a little electric lamp controlled from below. In the neck of the mask I found eyelet holes through which the man who wore it would himself see what he was about. I put it on and perceived the perfection of the design. Telford's ingenuity could hardly have created a masterpiece more perfectly

adapted to its purpose. He had forgotten no essential. The paws of the creature were padded, clawed and made of fine leather to close round his cousin's throat, but leave no sign of any human hand. One definite detail the costume also told me. The dress was going to be worn by Telford himself: it would have been much too small for Malfroy.

So now I saw the murder committed by anticipation, and followed it in every particular that I might the better plot my own campaign.

After midnight the artist would appear, and before he himself retired, John was going to leave a window open for his entry. The billiards-room window might be counted upon as obviously best suited to the purpose. Arrived, Telford would don his motley and play his part. He was going to ascend to the gallery, presently enter Sir William's room and doubtless leap straight and sure upon him. For speed would be the essence of the business if necessary vital silence was to be maintained. They knew that well enough, and Telford's first act must be to get his paws on Sir William's throat, before a cry of terror could escape. If the victim slept, this might be easy, and Malfroy had planned that he should sleep and only waken to perish.

Thus the master was to die, and if terror did not kill him, then strangulation would certainly do so. His eyes blazing, the demon wolf would attack his prey, choke him and depart, while after he had resumed normal attire and vanished into the night, John might be expected to make his watchful rounds, fasten the french window beneath, then satisfy himself that Sir William was gone beyond succour. Morning would find the young man dead, and a horror-stricken Callender was going to break the news.

The manner in which I proposed to modify this project you have already learned, but out of my activities sprang a further inspiration which still gives me pleasure to recollect. Before reaching it, however, there are minor details to mention.

My plans turned on character. Telford Wolf, cynic though he professed to be, was not without his own streak of superstition, and remembering that nothing frightens us so dreadfully as the spectres we raise ourselves, I decided that in his case the punishment was going to fit the crime.

Hence my fleeting visit to London. The result reached me immediately after Christmas in the shape of a formidable and ferocious lupine mask and gauntlets with shaggy pelt made to measure. It extended to the waist only and fell far short of Telford's creation, though larger and even more revolting; but it lacked the electric eyes and it was carrot red—as sound and satisfying a nightmare as one could wish to see. Wolf was, in fact, going to meet wolf, according to plan. 'In fatal tryst ordained of yore.'

Thus we approached our climax, the opposing forces equally confident of mastery and the unhappy cause of such unusual warfare entirely ignorant of the battle to be fought over him. The evening came, and as I drove Sir William from his home, my speculations were concerned with the nature of his emotions when he returned to it. He was near peace and some restful hours of oblivion now, and I felt cheerful about him for he had come through the day quietly and well.

All was in readiness at the vicarage. At five o'clock Miss Boyd found Bob Meadows waiting and conveyed him upstairs. By the time she returned, Sir William, who had drunk his draught in his first cup of tea, began to complain of drowsiness and Boyd suggested that he should lie down and close his eyes for ten minutes. Alma added her entreaties, and with an incoherent apology the young man succumbed. He was soon in heavy sleep. Meantime, I had been called by Miss Boyd from my own tea, and now, with her father's help, carried the slumberer to a spare room where Meadows awaited us. Together we quickly had Sir William undressed and in bed. Bob then put on his old master's trousers, which were all that would be necessary. We adjusted his wig and in five minutes he had donned Sir William's overcoat, big purple muffler and Homburg hat. We were swiftly away and saw Dr. Peters entering the vicarage as we drove from it. An hour we spent out of sight in a by-lane, since it had been unnatural to return home earlier. Then we came back to the manor, and the brief ordeal for Bob was quickly over. He acquitted himself well, turned his head away from Thorpe and Malfroy, who were in the hall and went straight upstairs with every action and the dragging gait proper to Sir William. While still in sight he took off his Homburg hat and revealed for a moment his scarlet crown. Malfroy, however, was not looking at him. He signalled to me, and when I told him that he would have to dine alone, he expressed satisfaction and gave me the sleeping-draught.

"Slip it in his coffee," he said, "and get him off to bed early if he's inclined to go. Look me up before midnight in my room. Once he's asleep we're all right and can sleep ourselves."

So it was left, and nobody in that house, save myself, Malfroy and his accomplice ever set eyes on Meadows to

recognize him from start to finish. John learned the secret first, together with others yet more vital; but when he did, his fangs were drawn. Now Bob was safe, for nobody but myself ever entered Sir William's suite when he was in it, unless summoned to do so. Meadows found himself in the old, familiar surroundings, ate the excellent dinner that I brought him and listened to final plans.

"At some time after twelve o'clock Telford Wolf is going to turn up," I said, "and I shall look after him. Your job is the land-agent. He will probably lie low till Telford has been and gone, but we can take no risks. If he does anything it will be to look sharp after me. We mustn't frighten him or make him suspicious, but we must keep him at his own end of the passage and see that he stops there if possible."

I showed him where he could stand, concealed in an oriel window, near Malfroy's door after John had retired, and told him exactly what to do if he emerged again before my own task was completed. I also armed Bob, feeling his opponent might otherwise outmatch him.

"We'll hope he won't attempt a move before I'm ready," I said, "but if he does, it's up to you to stop him, Bob; and as he would make two of you, my revolver had better be on your side."

Meadows I well knew only hoped that a chance for justifiable manslaughter might come his way. He hated Malfroy with unspeakable bitterness now, but he was disciplined and self-controlled, and I trusted him to do no more than keep John out of the picture and preserve his own safety meanwhile.

About eleven I went down to Malfroy, who was reading in the billiards-room, told him that Sir William had gone to bed and though apparently very drowsy was not yet asleep.

"He told me to turn out his light, sir, and not come in again," I said, and Malfroy expressed his satisfaction.

"That's good news," he answered, "and we can turn in when we like. Good night, James."

I bade him a very good night and hoped that the New Year would cheer us all up. Then I left him.

The hours slipped by and the stage was set. At one end of the gallery the red wolf lay in Sir William's bed waiting for the grey wolf; at the other end, Bob kept watch over Malfroy, who had now retired. Then suddenly, before Meadows could intervene, John emerged from his quarters and slipped down the passage; but we were prepared for this action and knew how to arrest it, for it was essential to keep the enemies apart. Hearing a noise behind him and looking back, Malfroy found to his amazement that a light had sprung up in his room, and he turned instantly to learn the intruder. Meadows was of course responsible, and as the other entered, he shut the door upon him and took his place before it, pistol in hand.

The familiar figure of Bob doubtless startled Malfroy exceedingly, but it must have done far more than that, for to see him armed and in command at such a crucial moment meant absolute and utter destruction. No more sinister figure than that of Meadows could have confronted the agent in his secure hour; but, according to Bob, John kept his nerve, while showing infinite surprise, and asked the visitor what in thunder he was doing at Stormbury.

"Turned burglar?" inquired Malfroy, and my supporter afterwards related their conversation.

"I told him this, Mr. Pettigrew," declared Meadows. "I said I was no burglar, but in the manor house to help honest men catch two infernal rogues and lay 'em by the heels. 'And you know their names,' I said, 'and but for the blessing of God, them two men would be murderers to-night. But they won't be now. They'll go afore their fellow-men and do a tidy stretch for their beastly crime and their names will stink for evermore.'"

"I badly wanted him to come for me," continued Bob, "because that would have given me an excuse to drill a hole in the devil; and I warned him how I'd fire if he laid a finger on me. But he was quite quiet and I let go on him and told him how a deeper one than him, or Telford Wolf either, had nosed 'em out and got 'em where he wanted 'em. He was thinking his own thoughts, while I ran on, and not, paying much heed to what I said. Then an idea seemed to strike him and he interrupted me with a question, 'Where is Sir William at present, Meadows?' he asked, quite calm. And I told him he was out of reach of his claws for evermore. 'And if you think your dirty pal is doing him in at this moment,' I said, 'you're wrong again, because Telford Wolf's having an uglier surprise than what you are to-night.'"

Meantime, while Meadows in his direct fashion threw the light for Malfroy, there came the meeting of the wolves. About

the last thing that Telford had heard from his cousin concerned a swiftly approaching transformation, and now, as he entered and crept to the bed, jumped upon it and felt for Sir William's naked throat, no prone and defenceless relation awaited him, and his electric eyes revealed instead, a hideous, hirsute brute, bigger than himself, sitting up in bed with its huge paws ready to welcome him. And it was the red wolf's claws that beat down his own, met on his neck, shook him like a kitten and flung him to the floor. His electric eyes had gone out and happily for a few moments it was pitch dark, for, had I seen the creature lying quite senseless and inert, it might well have appeared that punishment had followed the crime too closely and actually accomplished upon him what Telford designed for another. His mind had reeled before a shock so unexpected and his heart, no doubt beating briskly enough already, was not proof against it. Nature had come to the rescue and pulled down the blind upon Telford, who was now in a dead faint. One half-strangled cry he gave, and I was just about to turn on the lights and inspect him, when there came an unpleasant surprise. A shot roared out and bellowed with penetrating echoes down the gallery, and I feared that Meadows had won the satisfaction he desired, so, damning the young man heartily, I hastened to join him.

Thus far you have already heard the passage of events from a slightly different standpoint; but now there followed the really interesting circumstances and the handling of an emergency that I have ever looked back upon with satisfaction. As I reached Malfroy's bedroom, Meadows emerged with the facts.

"I got him back, and then I dressed him down and let him hear where he'd landed himself," said Bob. "He sat quite still staring at his future and not heeding me. Then he said that he'd thank me to clear out and leave him, and knowing he couldn't escape, I did so—locking the door behind me. Then came that yell up the passage, and, a moment after, the sound of a shot from Malfroy's room. I opened the door again and peeped in to see what he was up to; but I thought I knew, and I was right: he's shot himself."

It was true enough, for John Malfroy had blown his brains out. Faced in this staggering fashion with failure, on the threshold of success, his schemes in ruins, his ingenuity wasted and his hopes of wealth all flown, he doubtless had looked upon the future, as Bob suggested, and seen the unsleeping contempt and loathing of his fellow-men. Life looked of no account now and there remained nothing of it worth an effort to preserve. Like the fabled scorpion therefore, when hemmed around with fire, he had turned his venom upon himself and perished. As his father had died before him, so died John Malfroy.

Now my purpose had been to keep both men under lock and key that night until the police secured warrants and came to remove them. I had planned a routine piece of work inspired by happy discovery of the contemplated crime; but with Malfroy's death I felt by instinct that immense new opportunities awaited me. It was clear that all manner of coming legal difficulties and complications might be escaped if I rose to the challenge. To dare beyond your strength may often prove well worth while and not argue such a futile action as it sounds. I so dared, and the hazard was justified, for two trustworthy men strengthened my hands and played the parts needful to create the necessary illusion.

Had we been free to proceed at our own time, no problem remained, but the house was full of people, and in a very few minutes Thorpe and other men were going to emerge from the service door opening upon the gallery. I instructed Meadows swiftly, after locking in the dead. His task was now to take Telford Wolf down to the billiards-room.

"Fasten yourselves in, then strip off his wolf-skin and get him back into his own clothes. Tell him, if he is conscious and can take it in, that he must obey you to the letter till Dr. Peters comes, and work quite silently."

That was the first step. We found Telford Wolf sitting on the floor, his mind a blank; but he understood us and went, with Bob's arm round him, downstairs. They had vanished unseen as the service door opened and footsteps hastened down the passage. I now hastened into Sir William's room and locked the door some thirty seconds before Thorpe reached it, knocked and called.

"Is all well, Sir William?" he asked.

"All's well here, Mr. Thorpe," I answered. "But not at the other end of the gallery. Mr. Malfroy's took his life, I'm fearing. Best go to see to him, and then ring up Dr. Peters. No call to do more till he comes, so Sir William says. I'll join you in a minute."

I was getting out of my red wolf while I talked to him, and when, with horrified murmurs, Thorpe and his body-guard of footmen had gone up the gallery, I popped out, reached my own room and made some additions to my attire. The butler rang up Dr. Peters and now I spoke with Thorpe for five minutes, after he had sent the rest of the staff back to their

rooms.

"Sir William hardly awakened at the sound of the explosion," I said, "for he took a strong dose to-night at the doctor's direction, and the sounder he sleeps, the better he'll be able to face to-morrow. In any case there's no need to disturb him. And the rest had best keep out of it too, or the coroner will want them all in the witness-box. After Doctor Peters has seen Mr. Malfroy and found him dead, then you can ask him to call at the police station and tell them what's happened. They will take charge to-morrow morning."

Thorpe agreed that this was the proper course and said that he would go and get dressed, while I undertook to let the doctor in should he arrive meantime. He kept me but five minutes for, as he said afterwards, he rather feared my programme might upset Telford Wolf. He had been prepared for a summons, therefore, and arrived swiftly. Then two things happened. I let Meadows know the car was come, and opened the front door immediately afterwards to let in Dr. Peters. He was informed of the situation and with refreshing good sense comprehended and approved of everything I now hoped to do. He learned all that had happened and what was now happening while I talked to him.

"At this minute," I said, "Bob is taking Telford from the billiards-room window round to your car and putting him inside. It will remain for you to bring him back to the dower-house and dump him in his studio if he is well enough to be left alone. How much he comprehends of the situation I cannot tell till I have seen Meadows again, but I directed Bob to speak straight to the little brute and explain exactly where he stands. You can do the same and let him know that if he obeys you in everything, then his fate will depend solely on what his cousin may decide, whereas if he makes the slightest difficulty, he will be in the hands of the police at once."

The admirable man fell in with my scheme and approved it.

"The sooner I see Malfroy and get away with Telford the better then," said he. "If this goes through and Sir William approves, the whole business, which threatened such infinite scandal and disturbance, may be reduced to the trifling dimensions of a coroner's inquest."

"My hope and desire for everybody's sake," I answered, "and that all may go well, there is one thing more. Here comes Thorpe. He will ask you to call upon the police as you go home and tell them what has happened. Promise to do so, but don't keep your promise until the morning. I must have a free hand till after dawn."

We were now ascending the stairs, upon the top of which Thorpe met Peters and took the lead, while I went down again, to find that Bob had got young Wolf into the doctor's car and was keeping guard over him.

"He came quiet," said Meadows. "He don't know from Adam what it's all about, but he do know that the only chance to save his skin is to obey orders."

"Leave him to me," I said, "and bolt upstairs to Sir William's rooms while Peters is with Thorpe at the other end of the passage."

He was gone like a hare, but only just in time, for the doctor's work occupied less than five minutes. Peters returned quickly with Thorpe, declared Malfroy to be quite dead and promised to let the police know of the tragedy.

"In any case you need not expect them till the morning," he told us, "and I shall return with them, and the police surgeon."

He then jumped into his car, where Telford crouched invisible, and drove away, while I sent Thorpe to bed.

"You've had a deuce of a dust up," I said, "and there's more in store when Sir William hears the news to-morrow. So you go and close your eyes for a bit if you can. I'll keep watch over both ends of the gallery till morning."

He was old and his nerves had been shaken, so he thankfully accepted the suggestion.

"Dr. Peters has took the key of the death chamber," explained Thorpe. "He's going to give it to the Superintendent, because he doesn't wish for anyone here to go in before the police arrive."

I praised the plan, and promising to return at an early hour, the butler went to bed.

When he was gone I cast my eye over the billiards-room, to see that Bob had left nothing there likely to challenge attention, and then locking the window, putting out the lights, and carrying the grey wolf-skin, joined him upstairs. All

had gone vastly well so far and it promised to look a question for Sir William and none else as to the extent of the future scandal. Malfroy was sped beyond reach of the law and there remained only to learn what his cousin might be pleased to do with Telford. For, once get Meadows safely out of the manor and Sir William safely back into it, then none there would know that the master had been absent all night, or that Meadows and the artist had been present.

So Bob put on the borrowed hat and coat and scarf and donned his carrot wig again for the last adventure. It was still dark at six o'clock, but the staff moved early, and going down I called a footman and bade him go to the garage and tell them to bring Sir William's usual run-about car.

"He's up," I said, "and wants to be at the vicarage at once, so as he can get back before the police come. I'll drive."

The car was quickly brought round, and directing the people in the hall to disappear, because Sir William was much moved and didn't want to see anybody, I steered Meadows down and out to the car. There were hidden eyes on him no doubt, but none near enough to recognize him behind his master's clothes. He went straight through the hall into the car, and then, leaving a message for Thorpe, who was not yet awake, I joined him and drove him away.

Sir William had enjoyed a night of peaceful slumber and we did not waken him until Dr. Peters arrived. I then conveyed Bob to Honiton and the good fellow vanished until his old place at Sir William's right hand was empty again. Dr. Peters had driven a hysterical and shattered Telford to his studio and then given him a sedative and made him lie down and sleep.

"It will remain for Sir William to decide what to do with the scoundrel," he said, "and if I know him, he will err on the side of mercy for the family's sake, if not the rascal's own. When Telford comes to his senses, he will know exactly where he stands; but he is not made of the stuff of Malfroy and far too fond of life on any terms, to take leave of it."

At nine o'clock he woke Sir William and stayed with him while I told the story of the night's work. Miss Boyd was also present. She sat beside her sweetheart and held his hand. On the whole he took it mighty well and I arranged the yarn so that his mind might be tuned to the climax before he came to it. But the story called for fortitude, as it was bound to do. I had robbed him of his forlorn lycanthrope—the creature that had companioned him so long—and also robbed him of one to whom he had given love and trust for many years. Against these losses he was able to balance his own salvation. At first, however, the situation proved too-many-sided for him to accept, in its clash of implications; but Alma strove to keep his mind on what, to her, was the paramount feature of it.

"Though such terrible things have happened, dear William," she said, "there is the future—calm and pure and at peace for you."

"No evil powers were ever concerned with your fate, save those that were born in the hearts of men, Sir William," I assured him, "and from greed and envy few born to your position can escape. Their temptation mastered these men, and their reward is just, as far as man may presume to say so."

"The sorrow I feel at the loss of my old friend is tempered by the fact that he was no friend and had planned to kill me," confessed the young man, "and as for the being of my imagination, which never in reality existed at all, I can feel nothing but thankfulness to know the truth. That is a more blessed discovery than any of you can possibly conceive and will bear precious fruit for my mind. What do you suggest as to the immediate future, Mr. Pettigrew?"

"Reticence," I answered. "A chance came last night to make reticence comparatively easy, and I took it. As we stand now, Sir William, the honour of your house and name can be entirely protected. None at the manor imagines that you did not sleep there last night, and when the coroner asks you questions, you have only to answer that, under the influence of a drug, you slumbered soundly and knew nothing until this morning. The real Meadows was only seen by the dead man and your cousin, Telford Wolf, while nobody, save ourselves and Dr. Peters, is aware that he was at Stormbury at all, or had anything to do with the matter. As for me, I must continue to wait upon you till after the inquest, where my evidence is important, and then you will be free to summon Meadows back again. Believe me, you owe him much."

"I have incurred many debts beyond my power to pay," answered Sir William, looking first at Miss Boyd, then at me and then at the vicar. "It will take time to measure what I owe you all, but you shall not find me ungrateful. Now I had better get up and go home."

He preserved an admirable calm by putting various aspects of the day's work out of his mind, and I soon had him dressed

and away.

The police arrived simultaneously at the manor and were in no apparent doubt as to what had happened. Sir William did not look upon the dead again and Malfroy's body was removed a few hours later. A coroner's jury recorded the verdict of 'felo-de-se' as his end, but no reason for the act ever reached the public.

His cousin wasted little time before seeing Telford Wolf. The man was sent for on the following day and drove immediately to hear his fate. The interview was brief and I learned the purport of it a little later.

"I have forgiven him and banished him, Mr. Pettigrew," said Sir William. "The condition of pardon is that he never shows his face in Stormbury again. In that case he remains free and unsuspected of evil. It might be argued that to let a potential murderer loose on the community is an unsocial act; but if we consider the circumstances and note that he worked under a will far stronger than his own, we may feel that he is little likely to be dangerous now. His nerve has gone and there is no doubt that his shock under your hands must have been terrific."

A day later the young man came into my room and regarded the grey wolf and the red lying side by side in perfect amity on my bed. It was the grey that attracted him most.

"Even so I imagined that dreadful embodiment," he said, "and even so that sorry scoundrel must have seen and created it. A great work of art, for art may operate like science, Mr. Pettigrew—entirely outside good or evil. It seems almost a pity to destroy this sinister masterpiece."

I had no intention of leaving either the grey wolf or the red one behind me, however. Both were packed up and sent off to London next morning, but Sir William never asked to see them again.

For me the conclusion of a case usually drops the curtain for ever upon those who played their various parts in the drama, and it was so with the Stormbury incidents; but for you, who knew the little company before I did, a note or two may be welcome.

Sir William pulled down Telford's studio and removed every trace of it after the artist had left for London and before he himself, accompanied by his wife, started to spend a lengthy honeymoon in Greece. Lady Wolf desired that I should attend the wedding, because she declared that a successful detective was invariably present on such occasions; but I pointed out that only as 'James Callender' would it be possible for me to come, and the sooner that individual should be forgotten at Stormbury the better. The truth was guarded closely enough and only one unsolved mystery ever troubled those who had known John Malfroy. That Sir William should begin to recover at the turn of the year surprised nobody, for the hope and belief of his people had ever been that he would do so; but why the land-agent committed suicide remains for most of them an enigma to this day. Thorpe and Mrs. Budge doubted not it was a love affair.

Fortescue Boyd writes that the wedded pair are exceedingly happy in Greece and that his beloved Bill has yielded to Alma's entreaties and is going to write a book. The air of Hellas already begins to sweeten his mind and, even before he left England, he confessed to the vicar that the achievements of necromancy were much overrated. Now he has apparently come to the conclusion that statecraft, handicraft and witchcraft have all been responsible for many rascally human activities, and he also very clearly perceives that his own weakness tempted his enemies to their crime. He fights his defect of character manfully, and presently it will be said of him that he who can forget is cured.

Bob Meadows has returned to his old master, but Boyd tells me that nothing will induce Alma to start a lady's maid. Having lived very happily all her life without such a luxury, she will continue to do so. A most intelligent, courageous, long-suffering and patient girl; and one ventures to hope that should a son and heir presently reward their union, the Wolf-cub will possess his mother's quality. Indirectly I have always felt sure that the lady was responsible for my own emoluments. I received a cheque for five thousand guineas on the day that 'James Callender' left Stormbury; but it is quite certain that nothing would have induced Sir William to rate his existence at that value, whereas Alma ever held him a pearl above all price. May she long continue to do so.

To return for a final moment to the black sheep, who are apt to be so much more seductive than the white; they traded skilfully on their knowledge of character, but not quite skilfully enough. Their psychology just failed and, with its failure,

lost them everything. I do not think for a moment that they meant actually to kill Sir William. Their purpose, founded on close knowledge, was to create an atmosphere of cumulative horror, in which he would be able to live no longer, and so kill himself. They probably counted on suicide to end his torment and bring their harvest; and it is instructive to note how Fate flattered their hopes, for when the victim began to dread his own approaching lupine apotheosis, they must have felt the end they banked upon was near. But their psychology just missed one vital factor in Sir William's moral constitution: his obstinacy. Obstinacy is usually a weakness; here, for once, it proved a source of strength, and they presently learned that no horrors or hideous anticipations were going to make him destroy himself. Either pride of race, or a martyr-like determination to drink his cup to the dregs, decided the young man to live; and it was this resolution on his part that had doubtless decided them to destroy him on the appointed night, if he did not perish of pure horror under the final challenge.

My young friend's obduracy thus saved the situation, and gave his enemies into my hands.

THE END

Transcriber's Note: Hyphen variations left as printed.

[The end of *Lycanthrope* by Eden Phillpotts]